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## KONSEŽO A TOMAR

### A Haskalah Work in Judeo-Spanish

*Konsežo a tomar* (Advice to be taken) appeared in serialized installments in the Judeo-Spanish periodical, *Güerta de istorya* (The story orchard), which began publication in Vienna in 1864.<sup>1</sup> The anonymous author of this story (which is autobiographical) gives us a picture of the life of a religious Sephardic family of Istanbul, and echoes the theme of the Haskalah movement.

The author calls himself a victim of ignorance because his parents' religious fanaticism brought the family to financial ruin and caused him to enter a most unhappy marriage. It is an autobiography written with a purpose: to serve as an example of how a false attitude with regard to the meaning of Judaism, enshrined in the customs and beliefs of the Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire in the early part of the nineteenth century, destroyed the physical and mental health of the author, leaving him unfit to cope with life. His motivation, thus, is to awaken his brethren to the true meaning of their religion, and to the benefits to be derived from the study of modern languages and the physical sciences so that they will be spared the anguish he and his family had undergone.

In the introduction, the author expresses his intention to remain anonymous. "You are going to read the story," he says, "and what does it matter if the teller is called Mishael or Azaria."<sup>2</sup> He tells us, however, that the story will not deal with supernatural beings, such as Elijah the prophet or the devil; it is not to be a tale of demons or miraculous happenings, popular themes in the folklore of the Sephardim.<sup>3</sup>

I

The story takes place in Istanbul, then called Constantinople. From the events mentioned, we may surmise that the author is approximately thirty-five years old and that the year is about 1880. The first installment tells of his birth on a Sabbath eve and of the high expectations of his father that he will become the "light of Israel." The date of the birth was not recorded, as it was not the custom or the law at that time that births be registered with the government. The author describes some of the measures taken by his mother to ward off the evil spirits that mysteriously bring illness to children. He criticizes, for example, the custom of binding the hands and feet of children to their bodies, and blames this practice of swaddling infants for an illness he suffered at the age of five due to faulty circulation. His frailty and hypersensitivity were also a result of the fear of evil spirits commonly inculcated into the minds of children in order to discipline them. His entrance into the *meldar*, a religious school, was a great event celebrated by the family. He was envied by the other children because of the special attention he received from the rabbis who were well paid by his father, a high officer in the congregation. The family was wealthy, holding extensive mercantile interests, and also was descended from noted rabbis.

In the second installment the author confesses that he did not learn to read until he was ten.<sup>4</sup> His father had to hire a special tutor; apparently, the indulgence he received at school had a negative effect upon his ability to learn there. His *Bar Mitzvah* was a notable affair for the entire community because of the lavishness of the celebration. The rabbis praised the father and spoke with hope of the future glory of the son as a *moreh Torah*. When a guest at the event asked the boy a question about the *binyan* and the *shoresh* of a Hebrew verb that appeared in his portion of the Torah reading, the rabbis present considered the question impertinent, and called the one who asked it a rude, free-thinker of the ilk that attempted to open schools of the Alliance Israélite.<sup>5</sup> Boys were not taught the conjugation and root of Hebrew verbs because the knowledge of grammar was not

considered important.

Marriage arrangements were made immediately following the *Bar Mitzvah*. The qualifications for the ideal wife was that she know how to prepare stews, recite prayers from memory, and be able to read the *Meam Loez*, the great compendium of Biblical commentary begun in 1730 by Yacob Huli and continued by later scholars. Written in Judeo-Spanish, it was customary to read the *Meam Loez* on Sabbath afternoons. At fourteen, the author was engaged to the daughter of a rabbi. He received new clothes including a fez, and allowed his sideburns to grow long. During this period he lived a strictly religious life as ordained by the Torah and tradition, and studied the Talmud with private tutors at home. All of his actions were overseen by his parents.

One morning, when he was eighteen, the author fell in love with a girl he saw in a window of the house facing his room. If all the great poets of the world lent him their eloquence, he states, he would still not be able to describe his feelings for her. It became a daily ritual to look at her. And, she responded daily by gazing at him at the appointed hour. With this love affair, the author first realized his parents' tyranny, for he knows that he must marry the girl his parents have selected for him. He is in agony as the wedding arrangements are being made. Never will he be allowed to speak to the girl he loves. He is obliged to obey his parents because he is totally dependent upon them; he has no trade or profession. At nineteen, he is still a student.

After he marries, his wife suffers in childbirth. Holy books are brought into her room to ensure a safe delivery. Although happy to be a father, he is still in love with the girl in the window. His devotion lessens as do his studies resulting in his wife's disrespect for him.

An interesting event takes place. His father returns from the Synagogue one Sabbath, highly indignant because the *gabay* failed to give him an aliyah. Though the *gabay* is a provider of a family of ten, the author's father and friends vow to make him suffer financially by influencing his employer to fire him. The author considers the vow a sin, especially since it has been made on the Sabbath, a day of peace. Moreover it was unjust, for it was motivated by vanity, and inflicted suffering on innocent chil-

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

dren for the deeds of their father. At great risk, he reproaches his father. The father becomes angry and insults him publicly.

### II

In the fourth installment, the author asks what sin he has committed to merit the tyranny he suffers. He begins to question Judaism and its sad, somber outlook on life. A Jew cannot love, cannot think freely, cannot enjoy anything of this life. Why are these things permitted to other people and not to Jews, not to him? Still, great sages have had respect for Judaism, so the fault must lie in what has been added to it by the ignorant. On his mother's pleading and his desire to make peace, he begs his father's forgiveness for the incident described above, but he has changed. He goes for a walk on a Sunday afternoon and observes people walking gaily. They are well dressed and hold their heads high. He sees two young men, whom he knows to be Jewish, handsomely attired in the uniform of the Imperial School of Medicine.<sup>6</sup> They converse in French, and their appearance is trim and fashionable. He compares himself to them. His whole life has been devoted to study, yet he knows no French or Turkish. He wears baggy trousers in the traditional style.

A year later, he chances to find a book by Abraham Mapu<sup>7</sup> and becomes inspired. Delving deeper into Jewish history and philosophy, he finds new beauty and truth in Jewish ideas and realizes his people's prosperity and success during two thousand years of exile is because of their knowledge. He asks himself, "From where did this idea come to our brethren that the study of science and languages are forbidden to Jews by their religion?" He is moved. He wants to do something to bring the Jews out of their ignorance. If he were only a rabbi, he could teach them the true spirit of Judaism. One day at the Yeshiva he defends the study of languages and philosophy and those who are trying to introduce new schools where modern civilization will be taught. This is reported to his father, but when his father comes to punish him, he stands his ground and declares the superiority of his ideas over those of his father and the rabbis of the Yeshiva. His father faints at this open rebellion, and when he re-

*Konsežo A Tomar — A Haskalah Work in Judeo-Spanish*

covers, he tells the family not to mention the incident, nor try to punish the son who has lost all shame. What would the neighbors say if they knew that his son harbored such ideas? His wife, believing that he has come under the influence of Protestant literature,<sup>8</sup> beats the children and sends them into his room so that his reading will be interrupted.

He falls seriously ill, and is unable to leave his bed. The girl across the way — who by now is married and like him unhappy — hears of his imminent death, and also falls ill. She dies believing in a Platonic kind of faith that they will be joined in Heaven. His brother comes to see him, and he advises him to learn a trade in order to provide for himself. His father sends for a doctor, whom the author compares to the doctor in Moliere's, *Le médecin malgré lui*. The doctor prescribes *flores*, which may have been a tea prepared of rose petals and honey, a remedy still common among some elderly Sephardim. (*Flores* brings down a fever by causing the patient to perspire profusely; also, it is probable that it contains vitamin C which is reputed to have therapeutic value. My mother also prepared *flores*, and I can attest to its salutary effect.) The neighbors helped by preparing "endulcos," home remedies which were applied along with the recitation of mystic formulae. Finally, a French physician is consulted who prescribes a regimen of rest and good hygiene.

The father suffers reverses in business, but still refuses to allow his sons to work or learn a trade. He buys bonds of Obligasyon General Alemana.<sup>9</sup> without informing his wife. In general, Sephardic women were kept ignorant of financial matters. The value of the bonds depreciates during the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. The father sells all he owns: property, stores, furniture, even his wife's jewels, in order to buy more bonds. His friends abandon him. The engagement of the author's sister is broken as the family can no longer afford a dowry. His mother and his wife view these misfortunes as acts of God. The family is now united in misery. The father comes to the author's bedside and admits his errors, his stubbornness and ignorance of the world.

A kind teacher gives the author's children shoes, clothing, and books so they can attend school. It is not a religious school,

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

but his father is too beaten to protest. The author recovers slightly and begins to earn money as a broker. He borrows books and begins the study of French along with his children. He finds reading a consolation and wishes his mother and sister knew how to read so they could take their minds off their plight. He reads to them the works of Judah Halevy and Maimonides, and accounts of Jewish history, especially of Spain and the Inquisition.

The family is becoming adjusted to its new circumstances when war breaks out once again, this time in the Balkans. Business comes to a complete standstill. The author's brother loses his job and joins the army. He is eventually killed in the war. The father falls gravely ill worrying about his son. On his deathbed, he blames himself for the death of his son and the illness of the author, and asks to be pardoned.

### III

The author falls ill again, and the family is forced to address itself to public charity. A rich man in the neighborhood sends the *shamash* to the author's home every Friday afternoon with a Sabbath meal. Another wealthy coreligionist opens a center to aid war refugees<sup>10</sup> and lends assistance to the author's family. The eldest son is sent to Paris to complete his education; a dowry is provided for the author's sister. The mother is grateful and now sees the benefits of a modern education. The author recovers and is able to support his family modestly. He finds an honest and industrious young man of some learning who will marry his sister. He worries, however, that he may die before his son returns from Paris. He writes the following testament to his son. It is the message of his story.

### TESTAMENT

1. Do not allow yourself to be influenced by forces outside of you. Free thought is the natural state of man, but do not be misled. Thought must be controlled by reason. You have, therefore, permission to criticize what I say, but not without sound reasoning.
2. A person needs religion in life. It is good for both body and soul

## *Konsežo A Tomar — A Haskalah Work in Judeo-Spanish*

to believe in one God. He is the remunerator of our merits. Without belief, man has no consolation, no hope. Do not be materialistic or deny God.

3. Occupy yourself with things from which you can profit. Learn the most necessary languages, mathematics, the laws of economics, etc. so that you will be sure of a means of support. When you are financially secure, you can then study other things, but they should always be positive studies — the natural sciences and the moral sciences.
4. Do not be self-centered. While developing yourself, help your companion to develop himself. When the body of mankind suffers, so do its members. The greatest good is to extend the education and work of mankind. Do not be like a cloud without rain. If you have a talent for writing, do not hoard this gift. Teach people to live properly. Teach hygienic measures. Hundreds of thousands of people die before their time for not knowing how to live: in their eating, going to bed, and getting up.
5. Also do good for your brethren in the Orient, for they are unfortunate. Speak, write, explain how the Torah and the Talmud do not demand that a Jew be a fatalist, beaten, sad, ignorant, lacking all knowledge of the world, lacking in sentiment, and having superstitious belief in vain creatures.
6. Give them to understand that Judaism asks of the Jew that he be a thinking person, alive, energetic, wise, and tolerant in religion. Try to take away its rags and dirty old clothes. Try to make them understand through books, newspaper articles, sermons, and other ways. Develop for them the principles of the illustrious wise men of the Talmud who sought the perfection of the race through free thought and science. Try to help them understand the Talmud.

It is of interest to compare this testament with the aims of the Alliance Israélite Universelle as outlined some years later by Jacques Bigart, the president of this organization, at a conference held in Paris on February 6, 1900. Translated from the French, they are as follows:

1. . . . to bring a ray of civilization from the West to the areas degenerated by centuries of oppression and ignorance
2. to help them [the people] find a means of subsistence by furnishing the elements of an elementary and rational education.
3. by opening their spirits to Western ideas, to destroy certain antiquated prejudices and superstitions which paralyze the activity and vigor of the communities.
4. to give to Jewish youth and consequently, to the entire Jewish population, a moral education even more than technical instruction,

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

to form, rather than superficial scholars, men [who will be] tolerant, good, devoted to their duties as citizens and as Jews . . . knowing how to reconcile, finally, the demands of modern life with the respect for ancient traditions.

### IV

There is a point of information in this novel that is of vital importance to students of Jewish history of this period. The author mentions reading the work of Abraham Mapu and the profound effect it had on his understanding of Judaism. This establishes a definite link between at least one Judeo-Spanish writer and the thought of an intellectual of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This movement, one of the founders of which was the great German Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, concerned itself with the need faced by European Jewry to come to grips with modern life, to break down the walls, social, political, and intellectual, of the ghetto and to permit the Jew to enter the mainstream of the cultural and economic advances of the nation in which he lived and Western civilization in general, and still maintain his identity as a Jew. The exponents of the Haskalah sought to achieve this aim through education and all literary media. They wrote in Hebrew, but also encouraged Jews to master the vernacular language and other modern languages as well. The Jews of France, England, and Holland, especially the ex-Marrano communities in these countries, were already assimilated to a great degree; it remained for the Jews of Germany, Poland, and Russia to achieve the liberated status of their brethren in Central and Eastern Europe. Thus the major writers of this movement came from these areas as well as Austria-Hungary. They established a Jewish press and wrote essays, poems, and novels. Abraham Mapu was one of the major novelists of this group and his first major novel, *The Love of Zion* (Vilna, 1853), depicting life in Israel in Biblical times, is considered by some a classic.<sup>11</sup> Mapu's third novel, *The Hypocrite*, deals with the problems faced by contemporary Jewish society and expounds the need for social and educational reforms.

It is not surprising that this contact between Sephardic and

*Konsežo A Tomar — A Haskalah Work in Judeo-Spanish*

Ashkenazic writers should appear on the pages of *La guerta de Istorya*, for as has been previously mentioned, this magazine was published in Vienna. Sizeable communities of both groups of Jews lived in this cosmopolitan city, capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and to it were attracted Jews from its provinces, from Balkan areas as well as Galicia in southern Poland. Since German was the official language of the empire, Sephardic Jews were obliged to learn it, thus the works of German-Jewish writers became more accessible to them. The editor of *La guerta de Istorya*, David Ben Semo, was also acquainted with Yiddish and translated many stories from Yiddish for the magazine.

The Austrian philanthropist, Baron Hirsch, contributed heavily to the coffers of the Alliance and opened schools in the Ottoman Empire in which German was taught. Indeed, there is carry-over of ideas from those of the Haskalah to the principles of the Alliance whose founders included enlightened Sephardic Jews of the West, such as Montefiore and Cremieux, as well as Ashkenazic Jews living in France, among them Charles Netter and Max Nordau.

It is obvious from the strong views expressed in *Konsežo a tomar* that the author has interpreted the ambience in which he lived in light of the agitation for social and educational reforms stirring in Eastern Europe. The winds of change which transformed society and brought about the development of a great body of Jewish literature among the Ashkenazim also reached the Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire. When one pauses to consider the backwardness and ignorance in which the masses lived in Russia, Poland, the Balkans, and the Near East in the early nineteenth century, the Haskalah movement takes on a new perspective. The need for enlightenment was felt also by the non-Jews in these areas.

NOTES

1. "Periodicals," *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1904), IX, 621.
2. For the convenience of the reader, I have translated the Judeo-Spanish here and elsewhere in the article where the original is quoted.
3. An example of a tale of the supernatural cited by the author in the first chapter is as follows:

One day a young man, walking behind the wall of the synagogue, found

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

something on the ground. Bending down, he saw that it was a finger standing on end, and he heard a voice shouting for him to take the ring that he had on his finger and put it on the one that was on the ground. The young man did so, and the finger disappeared. Some years later, at the marriage ceremony of this same young man, the mirrors in the hall suddenly turned around and a young girl appeared wearing his ring, saying that he was already married to her.

For further discussion of the superstitious beliefs of the Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, see M. J. Benardete, *Hispanic Culture and Character of the Sephardic Jews*, (New York: Hispanic Institute, 1952), pp. 124-125.

4. The length of time taken by the author to learn to read is not as unusual as it sounds, considering that the teaching of the alphabet was drawn out over four distinct stages. For a description of the pedagogical method, see Michael Molho, *Usos y costumbres de los sefardies de Salónica*, (Madrid: Instituto Arias Montano, 1950), pp. 101-106.

5. The Damascus affair of 1840 brought to the attention of Western Jewry the need for education among their brethren in the Near East. This incident and similar acts of intolerance led to the establishment of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in 1860. This institution opened schools throughout the Ottoman Empire and North Africa in which the language of instruction was French. These schools met with much opposition at first, for it was feared by the rabbis and much of local populace that the religious ardor of the people would diminish as a result of the spread of the secular learning of the West.

6. The Imperial School of Medicine was established in 1827 by the Sultan, Mahmud II. It was open to non-Muslims, and the language of instruction was French. The foundation of this and other schools were part of the movement among Ottoman rulers to bring Western knowledge to the area.

7. Abraham Mapu (1808-1867) born in Kovno, Lithuania, is considered the first modern Hebrew novelist.

8. The Scotch Protestant Missionary Society opened schools in the Ottoman Empire. Some Sephardic families, especially the poorer ones permitted their children to attend because the schools provided the children with shoes, clothing, books, and food. Though converts were not made, the Society was successful in bringing some rudiments of education to the area. It published a translation of the Old Testament and also, the New Testament into Judeo-Spanish. One of the first Judeo-Spanish periodicals in Izmir was published by the Protestant mission, as were textbooks.

9. These may have been bonds of the German government.

10. The Sephardic Jews because of their allegiance to their Turkish rulers were often the target for reprisals by the rebellious nationalities of the Balkan peninsula.

11. Abraham Mapu's *Ahavat Zion* was subsequently translated into Judeo-Spanish by David Fresco. Yaari's *Catalogue of Judeo-Spanish Books in the National and University Library, Jerusalem*, indicates that the second edition of this translation was published in Salonica in 1894 by the Etz Hayim Society, a communal organization which operated schools and administered charity.