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## RABBI ISAAC BAR SHESHET'S RESPONSUM CONCERNING THE STUDY OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY

### INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Isaac bar Sheshet Perfet (Ribash) was born in Barcelona in 1326.<sup>1</sup> He was educated in Barcelona and lived there until 1370 when, with other Jewish notables, he was arrested and imprisoned on false charges. Upon his release he moved to Saragossa, where he served as rabbi for fifteen years. In 1385 he moved to Valencia.

Following the anti-Jewish riots of 1391, Bar Sheshet fled to North Africa, settling in Algiers. He was soon involved in a heated dispute with Rabbi Shimon ben Zemah Duran (1361-1444) who questioned the validity of Ribash's government appointment as rabbi. The two were eventually reconciled and even served on the same court. Bar Sheshet died in Algiers in 1408. His tomb was the object of veneration by North African Jews for many centuries.

Rabbi Isaac bar Sheshet was the author of an important and influential volume of responsa (*She'elot U'Teshuvot Bar Sheshet*)<sup>2</sup> from which the following is taken. This responsum is important for the light it sheds on the attitudes of important halakhists on the philosophic speculations of the Jewish Aristotelians and that it reveals that, within fifty years of Ralbag's death, he was known both as a great scholar and as the author of a significantly heterodox philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we find that the two poles between which Ralbag's reputation was to vacillate for seven centuries were firmly established in the years immediately following his death. The following is my translation of Rabbi Isaac bar Sheshet's responsum concerning the study of Greek Philosophy.

### I

[If these books should be banned] with respect to their teachings, what is it that the old man indicated to them? Thus, it seems

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to me that to use Greek wisdom is to speak Greek riddles in an obscure way such that the masses wouldn't understand. Only those who studied them and were accustomed to those riddles [would understand]. This is similar to the following (*Eruvin* 35b):

When Rabbi's maid indulged in enigmatic speech she used to say this: "The ladle strikes against the jar; let the eagles fly to their nests," that is to say, the small vessel with which they drew wine from the barrel was banging on the bottom of the barrel because all the wine was used up and therefore let the students "fly" and go home, stopping the meal.

And so [*Eruvin* 35b], Rabbi Yosi ben Asiyan, when speaking enigmatically, used to say, "Prepare for me a bull in judgment on a poor mountain." That is to say, beets in mustard; the Aramaic of 'bull in judgment' is *Tor Din* [beets = *tardin*] and 'poor mountain' in Aramaic, translated into Hebrew is mustard [*chardal* = poor mountain; *chardal* = mustard]. Other examples of this type of speech are mentioned there. The sages called them 'language of wisdom,' as Scripture writes, "The words of the wise and their dark sayings" (*Proverbs* 1:6). Similar to this is what is mentioned in the first chapter of *Sanhedrin* (12a): "Was not a message sent to Raba: 'A couple [of scholars] have arrived from Rakkath who had been captured by an eagle [the Romans] . . .'" Riddles like these, when said in the Greek language are called Greek wisdom. This is what they forbade because of the event [concerning the siege of Jerusalem].

You asked: "What is the Greek wisdom from which one must keep away; does this refer to those world-famous books, the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*?"

ANSWER. We have learned (in *Sotah* 49b, *Baba Kama* 82b, and *Menahot* 64b) that the sages forbade the study of Greek wisdom because when Jerusalem was besieged its inhabitants used to lower over the wall each day a casket of golden dinars in return for which the besiegers would send up lambs for the regular sacrifices. There was an old man there who knew Greek wisdom and who indicated to the besiegers "that so long as they [the in-

habitants of Jerusalem] maintain the regular sacrifices, they will not be given over to you." They then sent up a pig [in place of the lambs]. At that time the rabbis said: "Cursed be the man who raises pigs or teaches his son Greek wisdom."

They ask there:

Is it so? Did not the master say, "Why use the Syrian language in *Eretz Yisrael* where either the Greek tongue or the holy language could be employed?" They answered: "Greek language is one thing and Greek wisdom is another."

From this it would seem that those books are not included in this decree simply on the grounds of their having been written in the Greek language; the language was not forbidden. They were all fluent in it. On the contrary, it says (in *Megillah* 18a) that "the Greek vernacular is good for all peoples."

It was, however, especially permitted to the household of Rabban Gamaliel who had close relations with the royal government and therefore needed it. It was customary to speak in this way in the King's court so that not everyone would understand their secrets and confidences.

Rashi, may he rest in peace, however, understood "Greek wisdom" to mean hinting gestures [*Menachot* 64b, s.v. *Chokhmah Yevanit*]. It appears that by this he meant that they didn't utter anything but, rather, just gestured with their hands, fingers or other limbs. This is similar to what the Sages, of blessed memory wrote: "A dumb man [communicates by] gesture and [is communicated] to by gesture." And so, "as he marries by gesture, so he divorces by gesture."<sup>4</sup> They used to do this before kings, as is described in *Chagigah* (5b):

R. Joshua ben Hananiah was once at the court of Caesar. A certain unbeliever showed him by gestures: "A people whose Lord has turned His face from them." He showed him in reply: "His hand is stretched over us." Said Caesar to R. Joshua: "What did he show thee?" "A people whose Lord has turned His face from them. And I showed him: His hand is stretched over us." They then said to the heretic: "What didst thou show him?" "A people whose Lord has turned His face from them." "And what did he show thee?" "I don't know." Said they: "A man who does not understand what is being shown by gesture should not converse in signs before the king!" They led him forth and slew him.

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There too, Rashi, his memory a blessing, explains "gesture" as "hint" [s.v. *B'emahog*]. [On this interpretation] we must say that it was called Greek wisdom because the Greeks practiced it regularly or because a Greek author had written a book about it.

But I have a difficulty with this [interpretation]: Why did they say, with reference to that old man, that "he told them," when [on this interpretation] they should have written that "he gestured to them" since there was no speech there, only *remiza* [hint or gesture]? For this reason it is reasonable to understand Greek wisdom as I do above. It is possible, however, that this was also the opinion of Rashi, his memory a blessing, since obscure speech can also be called *remez*, as when the sages, their memory a blessing, wrote:

Where is there an indication [*remez*] in the Torah against such association? As it is said, "If thy brother, the son of thy mother . . . entice thee . . ."[Deuteronomy 13:7], (*Aboday Zarah* 36b).

So also in the first chapter of *Sanhedrin* (10a) and the first chapter of *Makkot* (2b): ". . . some allusion [*remez*] in the Torah for inflicting on *zommimim* witnesses a flogging as it is written, 'And they shall justify the righteous,' . . . [Deuteronomy 25:1]." Now, whether the [proper interpretation] of Greek wisdom be only gesture or obscure talk and riddles spoken in Greek, as I have interpreted it, it was forbidden only because of an event.

The famous books on physics are thus not included in this prohibition. It is still appropriate to refrain from [studying] them, in that they attempt to uproot the principles of our Holy Torah, especially the two fundamental pillars on which it rests, creation *ex nihilo* and Divine Providence over individual members of the human race.

These books bring out what they consider to be arguments and demonstrations proving the eternity of the world and proving that its [existence] follows necessarily from [the existence of] God, just as [the existence of] light follows necessarily from [the existence of] the sun and [the existence of shadow] follows

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necessarily from [the existence of] trees. [They also say] that God has no power to change a thing's nature, neither to lengthen a fly's wing, nor shorten an ant's leg, just as the sun has no power to alter the light which flows from it, nor the tree its shadow. They also [maintain] that God's Providence does not extend to anything below the sphere of the moon.

They also wrote in their books that perfect knowledge is attainable only through investigation, not through tradition. But we have received the truth that our Torah, which came to us at Sinai from the mouth of God, through the intermediation of the master of [all] the prophets, is perfect. It is superior to everything and all their investigations are null and void compared to it.

We have learned in *Perek Chelek*:

The following have no share in the world to come: He who says that there is no [doctrine of] resurrection in the Torah, that the Torah is not from heaven, and the *Apikoros*. Rabbi Akiba says: also he who reads from the external books.

The *Gemara* explains [this to mean], books of the sectarians. Can there be books more sectarian than those which bring demonstrations and proofs to deny the principles of the Torah? And Rabbi Akiba did not say those who *believe* in the external books [have no share in the world to come] but even those who *read* them, lest they turn their ear to believe in what they say, as happened to Elisha Aher.<sup>5</sup> It is written in *Perek Ein Dorshin* (*Chagigah* 15b): "It was said about Elisha Aher that when he stood up in the House of Study, many sectarian books fell from his bosom."

Rabbi Samuel HaNagid, of blessed memory, asked Rabbi Hai Gaon, of blessed memory, if it is permitted to busy oneself with those sciences. The latter responded:

The purpose of the Mishnah and Talmud is to improve the body and direct human behavior. There is nothing better for Israel than the study of Torah. For the study of Torah will help him and others like him and help the masses. But he who turns his heart from this and busies himself with those matters will remove from himself Torah and fear of heaven and will be harmed by those [foreign] matters, for he will totally remove himself from the words of the Torah. In conse-

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quence of this removal his mind will become so confused that he will not even notice that he has abandoned praying. But those who devote themselves to Torah and the fear of God will turn out to direct the masses to a good end without complication; nor will they have any doubts about the Holy One, Blessed be He. If you see that these men who busy themselves with these studies tell you that they are a paved path, [the following of which] will guide them to understanding of the Creator, do not be tempted and be sure that they will disappoint you. You will not find fear of Heaven, fear of sin, zeal, modesty, purity, and holiness except among those who busy themselves with Mishnah and Talmud.

The Rashbah of blessed memory, wrote in one place that one ought not restrain those who are accustomed to study those sciences among themselves. He says:

The child delivered on the knees of the science of physics, seeing the proofs of Aristotle, . . . will certainly believe it and will deny fundamental principles [of Judaism]. If we try to answer him, he will certainly deny them.<sup>6</sup>

## II

One cannot bring proof here [to the effect that the study of Greek wisdom is permitted] from Maimonides, of blessed memory, since, before [he studied Greek wisdom] he learned all the Torah completely, halakhot, aggadot, Tosephta, Sifra and Sifre, and all of the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds as is apparent from his *Mishneh Torah*. He wrote the *Guide* in order to respond to the *Apikoros*,<sup>7</sup> to refute the demonstrations and arguments brought by the Philosopher [Aristotle] to demonstrate the eternity of the world and [to refute his teachings] concerning Providence. [He did this] because there were many Jews during his time who were perplexed about the principles of the Torah on account of what they had learned from [Greek] wisdom.

We can answer [the question about Maimonides] in the same way our sages, of blessed memory, answered a question about Rabbi Meir, about whom it was asked: "How could Rabbi Meir learn Torah from Aher's mouth?" They said: "Rabbi Meir found a verse and expounded it as follows: 'Incline thine ear, and hear

the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge' [Proverbs 22:17]. It does not say, 'unto their knowledge,' but 'unto my knowledge'; that is to say, they [the wise] were evil; and nonetheless it is said, 'Incline thine ear . . . ' They explained there: "In the one case Scripture refers to an adult, in the other to a child." That is to say, when the student is an adult it is permitted for him to retain the fine flour and reject the refuse, as they said there, "Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate; he ate the fruit within it, and the peel he threw away."<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, our teacher Rabbi Moses bar Maimon, of blessed memory, quoted this verse, "Incline thine ear . . . " at the beginning of his *Guide*. Despite this, he did not escape from being drawn slightly after [Greek Wisdom] in a number of his proofs, as in the case of the Zarephite woman,<sup>9</sup> and with the revelation at Sinai. Perhaps his intention [in giving these rationalistic explanations] was [guided by the fact] that he could not bring these men back from one extreme [that of disbelief] to another [that of traditional belief in miracles]. He therefore explained a few things from the Torah for them in ways agreeing with philosophy. And even this he wrote by way of obscure hints. [An example of this form of rationalistic explanation is his claim that] Abraham our Father, peace upon him, saw the angels in a prophetic vision.<sup>10</sup> Nachmanides replied to this in his commentary to the Torah section "Vayera."<sup>11</sup>

And the sage Rabbi Levi [ben Gershon] of blessed memory, a great Talmudist who wrote a fine commentary on the Torah and Prophets, followed in the footsteps of our teacher Rabbi Moses bar Maimon of blessed memory. But those sciences also turned his heart from the true path. He contradicted the opinions of our teacher Rabbi Moses, of blessed memory, in a number of matters. These include the issue of God's knowledge of future contingents,<sup>12</sup> the stopping of the sun for Joshua,<sup>13</sup> and the turning of the shadow [on the dial] back ten degrees,<sup>14</sup> about all of which he wrote things which it is forbidden to hear. In his book called *Wars of the Lord* he wrote [things which it is also forbidden to hear] about the immortality of the soul<sup>15</sup> and about the Providential punishment of the wicked in this world.<sup>16</sup>

Now let every man draw an inference *a fortiori* from this with

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regard to himself. The two kings could not keep their footing with respect to a number of matters. Their honor, however, remains undisturbed, for they were giants of the world. [Given this] how could we stand, we who have not seen the lights as they did? [Indeed] how many have we seen who have removed from themselves the yoke of prayer and who have severed the teachings of the Torah and the *mitzvot* from themselves because of the study of those sciences, just as Rabbenu Hai Gaon, of blessed memory, wrote in the responsum I copied above?

### NOTES

1. For a complete account of Bar Sheshet's life and writings, see Abraham M. Hershman, *Rabbi Isaac bar Sheshet Perfet and His Times* (New York, 1953).
2. Constantinople, 1546, and many subsequent editions.
3. Hershman (p. 220) dates this responsum to 1394-5. Ralbag (Rabbenu Levi ben Gershon or Gersonides), born in 1288, died in 1344. The standard source on his life and thought is Charles Touati, *La pensée philosophique et théologique de Gersonide* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1973). For extensive bibliographies of scholarly writings on Ralbag, see the footnotes to my essays, "Gersonides, Providence, and the Rabbinic Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. XLII, no. 4 (December, 1974), pp. 673-685 and "Maimonides and Gersonides on Mosaic Prophecy," forthcoming. Small parts of this responsum have been translated by Solomon Freehof, *A Treasury of Responsa* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962), pp. 72-77.
4. Cf. *Yebamot* 112b.
5. Emphasis added.
6. Cf. *Sanhedrin* 38b. The text here is corrupt. The ellipse denotes an omission of two unintelligible words.
7. A reference to *Aboth* II, 19.
8. *Hagigah* 15b.
9. Cf. *I Kings* 17:17-24 and *Guide of the Perplexed* I:42.
10. Cf. *Guide of the Perplexed*, I:4, and II:42.
11. Nachmanides, Commentary to *Genesis* XVIII:2.
12. Ralbag, *Milchamot Hashem* (Riva di Trento, 1569; Leipzig, 1866, and Berlin, 1923), Book III, chapter 5. See also, Norbert Samuelson, "Gersonides' Account of God's Knowledge of Particulars," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. X (October, 1972), pp. 399-416.
13. *Milchamot Hashem*, Book VI, part ii, chapter 12, and Commentary to *Joshua* X.



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14. *Ibid.* and Commentary to *II Kings* XX:10.
15. *Ibid.*, Book I, chapter 10.
16. *Ibid.*, Book IV. See also, J. David Bleich, *Providence in the Philosophy of Gersonides* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1973).