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THE *PIRKEI ABOT* OF REUBEN ELIYAHU ISRAEL

In the Spring of 1924, Reuben Eliyahu Israel, Chief Rabbi of the Island of Rhodes, published a Judeo-Spanish translation and commentary of *Pirkei Abot* aimed at bringing religious guidance to Spanish-speaking Sephardim throughout the world. Although heirs to a magnificent Jewish past, these Levantine Sephardim were in the process of losing their religious and intellectual culture.¹

Born in Rhodes in 1856, Reuben Eliyahu Israel was a descendant of an outstanding rabbinic family. Rabbi Moses Israel (c. 1670-1740), founder of this family in Rhodes, was considered one of the greatest rabbinic scholars of his day.² The Israel family produced rabbis and scholars in every generation up through the early twentieth century. Reuben Israel's life was characterized by humility and self-sacrifice. After serving as *Chazzan* and *Shochet* in Rhodes for eighteen years, he then served communities in Bulgaria and Roumania. He was the Chief Rabbi of the Sephardim in Craiova for twenty-four-and-a-half years. The last ten years of his life were spent in Rhodes where he died in 1932. In his lifetime he was held in high esteem not only by his fellow Jews but also by his non-Jewish neighbors.³

His life, however, had a tragic tinge to it. He and his wife were childless. In a moving, poignant poem, Israel pleads with God: "Do not leave me childless, I cannot endure it."⁴ Since God had granted him no children, his Judeo-Spanish translation of Psalms and Proverbs was written to serve as a substitute in order to perpetuate his name. The intense tragedy of this hope can be fully felt once we realize that the translation was never published.⁵

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Israel's small volume on *Pirkei Abot* sheds much light on his own personality and reflects the religious culture of his audience. It was no accident that Israel chose the *Pirkei Abot* as his subject matter. Aside from the advantage of having straightforward and uncomplicated moral lessons on which to expound, Israel could count on a ready-made audience for his work. It was a widespread custom among Sephardim to sing the *Pirkei Abot* in Judeo-Spanish during the weeks between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*.⁶ His only problem was to convince them to use his translation rather than others. To this end, Israel wrote a liberal translation with explanatory notes. Even a cursory comparison of Israel's work with the 1897 Vienna edition, for example, will reveal the superiority of his translation. His language is simple, while his notes are illuminating. Included at the end of his translation are commentaries on various passages and some maxims and poems. All in all, his volume contains the variety and depth that no previous edition of *Pirkei Abot* had.

Israel's writing is filled with love. He is as a father speaking to his children. Sometimes he is gentle, sometimes harsh, but he is always speaking with love. In his preface, he advises his readers that life must have a firm moral foundation. And to Rabbi Israel *Pirkei Abot* is an excellent teacher of proper behavior, improving both man and society.

They are mistaken who attribute the sufferings of life to circumstances and to the exigencies of time, and who say: "Now the world has become evil." No! The world is very good, the world is a paradise. It is we who make it bad, it is we who transform it into an inferno.⁷

In his commentaries, Israel does not offer learned and erudite explanations although he was perfectly capable of doing so. Rather, he interprets Mishnaic passages in light of the spiritual needs of his contemporary Sephardim. For example, in discussing Ben Bag Bag's famous statement about the Torah, "turn its pages and turn again and again, for all is in it" (Chapter 5, Mishnah 25), Israel attempts to instill his readers with curiosity to study the Torah. He does not bring Talmudic and Midrashic statements proving that the Torah contains all knowledge, as other commentators did. Instead, he lists the various books of

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the Bible, describing their literary genres, stressing the variety of subjects and styles.

Search and investigate in the Bible because all is in it; tales, allegory, rhetoric, enigmas, moral teachings, wisdom, knowledge, poetry, ideas, sayings, oratory, and praise—all produced and inspired by a divine source (p. 73).

Israel frequently writes in similes and parables. Commenting on Rabbi Eliezer's statement, "be not lightly moved to anger" (Chapter 2, Mishnah 15), he warns:

Woe unto that house where the maid-servant takes the place of the mistress, and woe unto that man who permits his wrath to rule over the spirit of his conscience (p. 74).

In explaining the statement, "when you pray, make not your prayer a fixed form" (Chapter 2, Mishnah 18), he draws an extended parable. A man invited the king to his house for a specific time, but when the time of the appointment neared, the man found some other business he had to do in another place. He instructed his servants to treat the king properly. When the king came and found that the man had gone away, he was infuriated and left. Writes Rabbi Israel:

So it is with the heart, the source of wisdom and thought. It is the patron of the human house which is the body; the members of the body are its servants. Man asks God to receive a prayer which he prays with his heart; but if the heart goes, and is occupied on other thoughts, leaving in its place its servants—mouth, tongue, and lips—which make the prayer, he does an offense and disgrace to God. (p. 81).

In the same section, Israel laments the lack of meaningful prayer (*tefillah*) during services. Many people in Rhodes, due to their ignorance of Hebrew, could not understand the prayers and hence talked during services. Women especially were guilty of this. He observed the following:

On the one hand we see the women rushing to the synagogue so as not to miss the hour of prayer; and he who sees them believes that

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their hearts and souls overflow with faith and fear of God. But on entering the synagogue, they begin to chat one with the other (p. 83).

Consequently he called for a thorough Jewish education for girls and boys.⁸

Another important stylistic device in his writing is his use of rhetorical statements. For example, he opens one of his sections:

Sir! do you wish to fulfill your obligations towards your neighbor to bring him near even when he pushes you away? Give to him though he gives not to you (p. 78).

In another place he writes:

We are brothers, sons of one Father. Is it correct for a man to rejoice if his brother errs? . . . It is our obligation to search for a way to prove our neighbor innocent wherever possible. This is the wish of God, and furthermore, our own conscience dictates it (p. 88).

Following the lengthy section of commentaries is a section of poetry and moral sayings. Israel's poems are characterized by sensitivity, humility, and careful craftsmanship. Humor and irony are also evident. In a touching poem, "A Cradle Song of a Jewish Mother" (pp. 91-92), Israel portrays a Jewish mother explaining to her sleeping infant son what it means to be a Jew. She tells him that he is part of a persecuted people, that he will grow to know embarrassment and insult. She urges him to remember that he is "a child of an eternal people," and to hope for the coming of better days—for the ultimate redemption. The poem conveys a strong sense of pathos. The mother's words are mixed with guilt, shame, pride, and hope.

In a lighter poem, "Prayer of a Poor Philanthropist" (p. 93), Israel opens with lavish praise of God for having created so much perfection in the world. But then he complains: "So why did you create man, the chosen of creation, without perfection?" Israel tells God that he was given a sympathetic heart, but has no money to help the poor. The bitterness of the situation is worsened when Israel thinks of another man who is wealthy but stingy. The poem closes with this plea:

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I ask you: is this justice? Is this correct?
No one profits from his money or his hard heart!
So why did you give him both, my Father?
Either give me his wealth, or give him my heart?

This poem calls to mind other folk religious leaders, such as Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berdichev, who spoke to God frankly, much as a son might address his earthly father.

In a far more sobering poem, "Born to Die," Israel describes the course of human life (pp. 98-100). He opens with a forth-right couplet:

Man is created from matter. He must realize that in the end he will return to earth.

He then characterizes each period of life from early youth to old age, showing how useless life is unless it is lived morally. The only way one's life can have meaning is if he lives properly, educates his children, acts wisely.

He will die full of years and glory. All will bless his memory.

This theme—that one's life is futile unless it is moral—recurs throughout Israel's writings. In a series of maxims, he composes an essay, "The Human Law," in which he portrays man as a victim of time (pp. 107-109). Man's life fills a short space, with the oceans of eternity behind him and ahead of him.

Look to your right and to your left, and there is no one to explain, behind and before and there is no one to pronounce.

No one comprehends the workings of time, life and death.

Wisdom says: I do not understand it. Human intelligence says: I cannot reach it.

Israel resolves:

Therefore live on earth with faith and belief, because the mysteries of life are hidden from mortals. Take care to live as you are able, and confide in God, who is the source of light.

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In another vein, Israel offers his readers advice on how to understand and succeed with women. His many maxims about women (pp. 95-96) often contain clever language usage.

He who takes a wife in order to obtain her large dowry writes a divorce to his repose.

When poverty enters the door, love flies out the window.

Intelligence is the beauty of men and beauty is the intelligence of women.

Examine carefully the companion you choose, because the error is one minute but the remorse is a lifetime.

To cry or laugh at unimportant things is the habit of women.

Praise a woman's beauty in her presence, and she will forgive all your sins.

The treatment of such a "secular" subject in a rabbinical work reveals the life-style of Levantine Sephardic rabbis. They dealt with all aspects of life, not simply the "religious." They identified with their people in full and were concerned with anything that concerned their people. They did not consider it unusual to deal with subjects that rabbis from other traditions would not condescend to treat. Reuben Israel's cousin, Rabbi Nissim Israel of Rhodes, wrote a little volume (unpublished) in which he kept personal notes.⁹ This volume is a marvelous testament to the role of the Sephardic rabbi in the community. In addition to comments on the books of the Bible, Talmud, and Codes, Nissim Israel lists such information as how to interpret dreams, how to read astrological signs, how to cure various physical maladies. In short, the rabbi felt duty-bound to serve his people in any and all possible ways.

In attempting to bring moral guidance to his readers, Reuben Eliyahu Israel composed numerous maxims. These maxims reflect his genial, home-spun wisdom.

From a known and visible evil do not fear and do not lose your courage: from a hidden evil beware (p. 102).

It is shameful for one who has not obtained honor, but it is seven times shameful for one who has lost it (p. 110).

If you are offended without cause do not revolt much; because you know that you have been honored many times without merit (p. 110).

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In closing the volume, Israel presents two moral lessons couched in medical symbolism. He prescribes various drugs for moral undernourishment and for a society suffering from moral decadence. Israel, thus, uses a great many literary devices and styles in his short volume of *Pirkei Abot*.

It must be noted, in closing, that Reuben Eliyahu Israel's work still enjoys relative popularity among Judeo-Spanish-speaking Jews, providing enlightenment, entertainment, and religious stimulation. In a real sense, he is a symbol of the culture of Levantine Sephardim in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

NOTES

1. Mair Jose Benardete, *Hispanismo de los sefardies levantinos*, Madrid, 1963. See particularly chapters 4-7.
2. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai, *Shem Hagedolim*, Vol. 1, Warsaw, 1876, p. 95. In November, 1967, Ripley's *Believe It Or Not* featured Reuben Eliyahu Israel as "the twelfth descendant of the same family to serve as rabbi on the Island of Rhodes, Greece, a continuous succession of 232 years."
3. Simon Markus, *Toledot Harabbanim Lemishpahat Yisrael Merodos*, Jerusalem, 1935, p. 85. In the 1920's, King Victor Emanuel bestowed on him the title of Knight of the Crown of Italy.
4. Rahamim H. Y. Israel, *Ben Yamin*, Salonika, 1897, p. 172.
5. The manuscript, belonging to Mr. Morris N. Israel of Seattle, Washington, is presently in my possession.
6. This custom is still preserved in a number of Sephardic synagogues. I myself was raised in this custom as a member of Congregation Ezra Bessaroth of Seattle.
7. All page references in the text are to Reuben Eliyahu Israel, *Pirkei Abot*, Smyrna, 1924. Translations are my own.
8. For another statement about the ignorance of Hebrew, see R. E. Israel, *Traduccion Libri*, Livorno, 1931, p. 3.
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