

Sefer ha-Tappu'ah, The Book of the Apple: Aristotle Expresses an Interest in Jewish Concepts

By: MARVIN J. HELLER¹

Now it came to pass, when the Philosopher had ceased speaking these words, that his hands grew weak, the apple dropped from his hand, his face changed color, and he died. His disciples fell upon him and kissed him; and they lifted up their voices together and wept bitterly, exclaiming: May He Who gathers the souls of the “Lovers of Wisdom” gather unto Himself thy spirit, placing thee among His secret treasures, as it besemeth a perfect and upright man like thee!²

Sefer ha-Tappu'ah (Book of the Apple) is an unusual and thought-provoking work. Attributed to Aristotle, the noted Greek philosopher (fourth century B.C.E.), *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* is the reputed famed deathbed conversation between Aristotle and his friends and pupils, in which they engage in philosophical discussions, concluding with Aristotle's expressing a belief in Judaism and Jewish concepts. It was the opinion of Maimonides (Rambam, 1138–1204) that *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* is a pseudo-Aristotle, an opinion widely accepted today.³ *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* is modeled on Plato's

¹ I would like to express my appreciation to Eli Genauer for reading the article and his comments.

² Hermann Gollancz, *Translations from Hebrew and Aramaic* (London, 1908), p. 117. All quotes from *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* are from Gollancz's translation, pp. 91–117. That Maimonides was well versed in Aristotelian studies and philosophy is evident from numerous references and citations in Fred Rosner and Samuel S. Kottek, eds., *Moses Maimonides: Physician, Scientist, and Philosopher* (Northvale, NJ, 1993).

³ *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* is not the only pseudo-Aristotelian work. Charles B. Schmitt and Dilwyn Knox record ninety-six such titles in Latin in their *Pseudo-Aristoteles Latinus: A Guide to Latin Works Falsely Attributed to Aristotle Before 1500* (Warburg

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Phaedo and, outside of Jewish studies, is best known by its Latin title, *Liber de Pomo*. Nevertheless, as we shall see, it was, at one time, a popular and reasonably well known work in Jewish circles.

Originally written in Arabic in the 10th century as *Kitab al-Tuffaha*, although Greek too has been suggested as the original language, *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* was translated into Hebrew in about 1235 by R. Abraham ha-Levi ibn Ḥasdai. *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* was a text of considerable importance to several cultures in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. As Ioana Curut, referring to its Latin name, *Liber de Pomo*, informs that “*Liber de Pomo* is a privileged piece of work for at least three reasons. First of all, it circulated in at least four distinct medieval cultures: Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, and Latin.” The other reasons are that its attribution to Aristotle “elevated the status of the opuscle to that of a text worth being read and commented upon in the medieval centres of knowledge,” and lastly, that it was an important influence on Latin thought and influenced Christian dogma.⁴ Our interest is restricted to the Hebrew editions, our subject matter is bibliographic, that is, describing the various early editions through the eighteenth century and giving an overview of the contents of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah*.

R. Abraham ha-Levi ibn Ḥasdai (Ḥisdai, 13th century), resident in Barcelona, was responsible for the Hebrew translation and making *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* available to the Jewish community. A noted translator and poet, his other translations into Hebrew include Algazali's *Moznei Zedek*; Isaac ben Solomon Israeli's *Sefer ha-Yesodot*; Maimonides's *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* and *Iggeret Teiman*; and *Ben ha-Melekh ve-ha-Nazir*.⁵ Another ibn Ḥasdai translation is of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, an Indian romance, this in *maqama* form, that is, a narrative in rhymed prose. Ibn Ḥasdai was a stalwart adherent of

Institute Surveys and Texts, 1985). This obviously does not include pseudo-Aristotelian works in other languages, such as our *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah*. There is at least one bilingual Latin-Hebrew work in our period, *librum De pomo Aristotelis ... ex Arabica lingua in Ebraeo-rabbinicam translatum a Abraham Levita, nunc Latine versum ... altera ostendit Consensum kabbalisticorum cum philosophia academica & peripatetica dogmatum*, printed in Giessen (1706), 20 cm. [8], 96, 52 pp. (NLI call no. 8909=R).

⁴ Ioana Curut, “Ad eruditionem multorum. The Latin Version of the Book of the Apple (*Liber de Pomo*) as a Philosophical Protreptic,” *Philobiblon*, XXII, (1/2017), p. 22.

⁵ Mordechai Margalioth, ed., *Encyclopedia of Great Men in Israel*, I (Tel Aviv, 1986), cols. 55–56 [Hebrew]; for a discussion of several of these works, see Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, translated by Bernard Martin, 1 (Cleveland, 1972–78), pp. 191–93.

Maimonides, defending the *Moreh Nevuchim*, communicating for that purpose with such sages as R. Judah ibn Alfakhar and R. Meir ha-Levi Abulafia, as well as community leaders who opposed that work.⁶

Sefer ha-Tappu'ah is not as well known today, perchance reflecting different cultural interests. As noted above, it has been translated into several languages, most notably Latin as *Liber de Pomo* (*Tractatus de Pomo et Morte incliti principis philosophorum Aristotilis*). This article, again primarily bibliographic in content, is intended to bring *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* to the attention of a wider public, describing the various Hebrew editions of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* through the eighteenth century and interspersed with examples of its text.

I

Stylistically in dialogue form, *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* has been described by Hermann Gollancz as a conversation between Aristotle and friends and disciples, on the immortality of the soul and, to a lesser extent, on the merits of philosophy and “the value of its study for the ends of investigating the Truth.”⁷

The text begins with ibn Hasdai’s introduction, in which he explains why he translated *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* into Hebrew. He writes,

When I reflected upon this book and its contents, composed by the Sages of Greece, I thought that it might be of service in the interests of our Faith to strengthen the hands of the weaklings among our people. By weaklings I mean those who meditate upon the words of the heretics, who aver that, after the dissolution of the body, man has no real existence, whereas, at his death, nothing remains. . . . It is for this reason that I have determined to translate this book from Arabic into Hebrew . . .⁸

Gollancz informs that the reason the book is so titled is due to the fact that Aristotle, conversing with his companions on his deathbed,

in his last moments, in order to sustain himself in this exhausting effort, is represented as holding in his hand (in place of the more usual smelling-flask) an apple, the scent of which refreshes him so that he is able to complete his task.⁹

⁶ “Ibn Hasdai, Abraham ben Samuel Ha-Levi,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 9 (2007), p. 679.

⁷ Gollancz, p. 5.

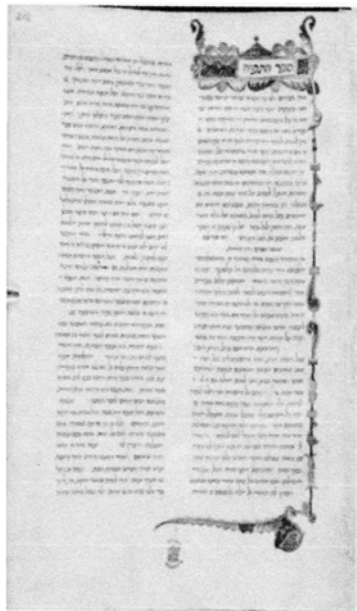
⁸ Gollancz, pp. 91–92.

⁹ Gollancz, pp. 5–6

II

Sefer ha-Tappu'ah was well recognized and more popular in the Middle Ages and Renaissance than at present. A number of manuscripts are extant today and, as with the majority of printed works, it was most often combined with other works. The earliest recorded copy of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* in the extensive list in the National Library of Israel (NLI) catalogue is held in the British Library, that is, a manuscript written in Viterbo in Tuscany, Italy, by R. Solomon Jeidah ben Moses of Rome. The colophon (117a) dates completion to 18 Kislev 5073 (Friday, November 11, 1272). *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* (below) is part of a 216 folio codex.

The text, described as a “collection of philosophical writings,” is in two columns, 40 lines to a page. The manuscript consists of several of Maimonides’s writings, among them his commentary on *Avot*, *Perek Helek*, and *Igeret Tebiyat ha-Metim*. Other authors represented are R. Solomon ibn Gabirol, R. Kalonymus ben Kalonymus ben Meir, as well as several other works by Aristotle.



1272, R. Shelomoh Yedidyah ben Mosheh of Rome
Courtesy of the British Library, Digitized Manuscripts, MS 14763

Sefer ha-Tappu'ah: When the way of truth was closed against those sages, and the path of equity hidden from these wise men of intellect and understanding, called in their own language Philosophers, the etymology of which expression is “lovers of wisdom,” they all assembled together at one and the same time, and agreed to explain and to cause men to understand which was the right way in which men should walk, so that he might live by it.

The second manuscript in the NLI listing, written in 1282, is part of the collection of the Casanatense Library, Rome, Italy. The scribe for this copy of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* was R. Abraham ben Yom Tov ha-Kohen who completed his work on Friday, Rosh Ḥodesh Ḥeshvan, 5044 (October 22, 1282). Here too, *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* is part of a much larger work, appearing on pp. 267–70. The text, also in two columns, is in square letters.

We note two additional manuscripts, the first written in Chania (Greece) in 1382 by R. Abraham ben Moses on 23 Adar 5142 (Sunday, March 17, 1382). It was written, according to the colophon, on folio 108b for R. Shabbetai ha-Rofei. The second manuscript was written only five years later, in 1387, in Mistra, Greece, by the youth R. Solomon ben Moses Phanglo on 17 Sivan 5147 (Sunday, June 12, 1387), this in Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, England. *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* is on ff. 19b–23b.

These manuscripts, the first two written within a decade of each other, the second group a century later within five years of each other, are indicative of both the value attributed to *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah*, it being written several times within slightly more than a century, but also that it was not a primary work, it being included in each instance in collections of works and not as a leading entry. Numerous manuscripts of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* are extant, those recorded in the NLI catalogue being only a portion of them.

Sefer ha-Tappu'ah: Now there was a great and eminent sage, versed in all wisdom and knowledge, whose name was Aristotle. All the wise men of the time were wont to listen to his wisdom, and to gain instruction from him.

And when he was lying ill of his fatal disease, and his time came near to die, all the wise men assembled together and went to visit him in his illness. They found him holding an apple in hand, and this he was smelling: he was very weak in consequence of the force of the malady, and the pains of death made him very restless:

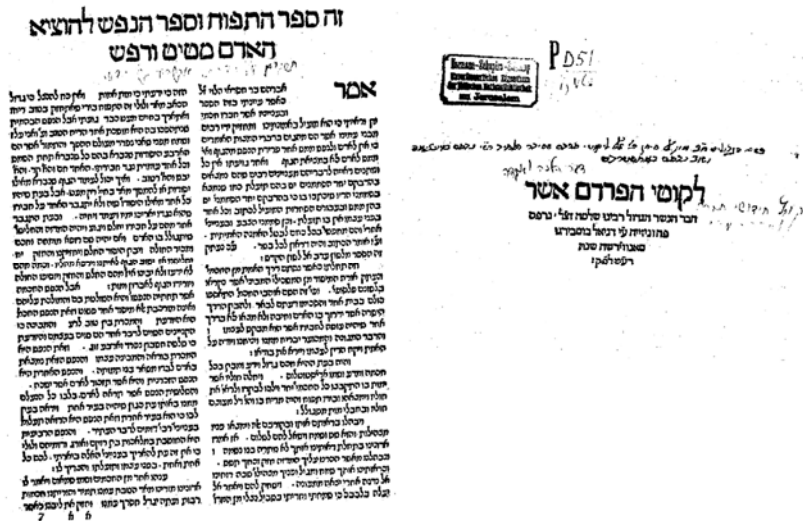
III

Turning to the printed editions, we see that *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* was also a relatively popular work in the Renaissance.

1519, Venice. The first printing of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* was in Venice in 1519 at the renowned press of Daniel Bomberg, printed as a quarto (4^o: 36ff.). It was included in *Likkutei ha-Pardes*, a collection of several works, most notably the collected *halakhot* and responsa attributed to Rashi (R. Solomon ben Isaac, 1040–1105).

The title page (below), typical of the Bomberg press at this time, brief and unadorned, makes no mention of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah*. Rashi's responsa concludes on 22a, followed by *Refuot ha-Ge'iyah le-hakham Rabbenu Judah [ben Solomon al] Harizi* (22b–23b); then *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* (24a–27a); *Sefer ha-Nefesh* (28a–32b), attributed to Galinus ha-Rofei, also translated from the Arabic by al-Harizi; the *Takkanot* of *Rabbenu Gershom* (33a–34b); *Mishlei I-Hakhamim ve-Ihidotam* ([34]); and *Aryeh Mesubach* (35a) by Berechiah ben Natronai ha-Nakdan, which is parable sixty-eight from his *Mishlei Shu'alim*.

Bomberg began to print in about 1515, some suggest even earlier, and was active for several decades. It is noteworthy, for our purposes, that *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah*, among the many other possibilities, was included in *Likkutei ha-Pardes*, an early Bomberg imprint. The text, excepting headers (below), is in rabbinic letters in two columns.



1519, *Likkutei ha-Pardes*
Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

Sefer ha-Tappu'ah: Now as regards the Intellectual faculties, which rule and guide us, and are not composed of the four elements, but of one simple element: of these there is the faculty which understands and recognizes the difference between good and evil, and grasps the axiom that things that are equal to the same thing are equal to one another. This is the faculty that understands that 3 is an odd number, and that 4 is even. It recognizes its Creator, and understands what He is: it is found in man alone, and in the rest of creation like him.

1562, Riva di Trento. The next edition of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* appeared as an appendage to R. Solomon ibn Gabirol's *Tikkun Middot ha-Nefesh* (The Improvement of the Moral Qualities) issued under the general title *Goren Nakhon*, that phrase appearing on the top of the page (below). Also included in the volume are R. Isaac ibn Honein's *Musrei Ha-Philosofim* (Maxims of the Philosophers). This edition of *Goren Nakhon* was published as a 19 cm. book; *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* is on ff. 24–28 ff. (should say 26–30). *Tikkun Middot ha-Nefesh* was translated into Hebrew from the Arabic by R. Judah ibn Tibbon (1167) and had been published previously in Constantinople (1550).

The Riva di Trento press, located in the Tyrol, was active for four years only, from 1558 to 1562, issuing about thirty-five titles. The press was operated by R. Joseph Ottolenghi and R. Jacob Marcaria, a *dayyan* on the *bet din* presided over by Ottolenghi. Unusual, particularly given the situation (persecution) of Hebrew books at that time in Italy, the Riva di Trento press operated under the patronage and protection of Cardinal Cristoforo Madruzzo (1512–78), the Cardinal of Trent. A scholar and supporter of learning, he had argued at the Council of Trent (1562) for leniency and moderation in condemning books.¹⁰

¹⁰ Concerning the Riva di Trento press see David Amram, *The Makers of Hebrew Books in Italy* (Philadelphia, 1909, reprint London, 1963), pp. 296–302; Joshua Bloch, "Hebrew Printing in Riva di Trento," in *Hebrew Printing and Bibliography* (New York, 1976), pp. 93–110.



1562, *Goren Nakhon*

Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

Sefer ha Tappu'ah: I would furthermore, ask you this question: - Do you know that death is but another name for the severance of the soul from the body?

And they replied: - Yes, we know it.

He continued: - You rejoice when you attain some scientific truth and take hold of it; you grieve when you are unable to gain and learn more wisdom. Is it not so? And they assented.

Then he said unto them: - If this be the case, do you not observe that it is not the body, of gross material, which sees and hears and understands, but that it does so only by virtue of the soul, which is united to it during the period of its existence?

1693, Frankfurt on the Oder. This edition of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* was printed in Frankfurt on the Oder at the press of Johann Christoph Beckman in a small octavo format (8^o: [6] ff.). It was published together with R. Isaac ben Solomon ibn Abi Sahula's *Meshal ha-Kadmoni*, a popular, profusely illustrated collection of moral fables. In this volume, *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* precedes the *Meshal ha-Kadmoni*, the larger of the two works. *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* is not foliated and is set in a single column in rabbinic type.

Beckman, professor of Greek language, history, and theology at the University of Frankfurt, operated a printing press from 1673. He obtained a license to publish Hebrew books, on May 1, 1675, renewed on June 1, 1682. Beckman actually began publishing Hebrew works in 1677, issuing

five varied small books that year. By 1693, Beckman found that his responsibilities at the university left him with insufficient time to manage the press. He therefore contracted with Michael Gottschalk, a local book-binder and book-dealer, to manage the printing-house, transferring all of the typographical equipment and material to Gottschalk. Among the works printed by Gottschalk is an edition of the Talmud (1697–99).



Sefer ha-Tappu'ah: Meshal ha-Kadmoni
Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

Sefer ha-Tappu'ah: Yes, all the stars together are but as servants appointed for a special purpose, to whom permission is not given to alter and vary, and whose movements and procedures are not dependent upon themselves or their own power; for it is in the upper sphere that restrains them in their course: and this power is resident in the first sphere; it comes from God, who formed and established things in His understanding. . . .

Now, mankind erred in this respect until there arose Noah, father of the wise men who excelled in the knowledge of the Creator; he perceived that all things must have a beginning and a head, that to Him belonged wisdom, a high degree of excellence and might.

IV

Our final imprints, two related editions, were both published in 1799, in Grodno and Vilna. They are, for bibliographic reasons, among the most interesting of the editions of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* discussed here, the relationship of the two articles being technically clear but otherwise unstated.

1799, Grodno. Grodno (Horodno), in Belorussia, is one of the oldest Jewish communities in Poland-Lithuania, dating to the fourteenth century. Hebrew printing in Grodno began in 1788 at the Royal press; a second press was established in 1793 by Barukh ben Joseph Romm, founder of the famed Romm press.

The Grodno edition, the fourth Hebrew printing of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah*, is recorded as a duodecimo (12^o: 16 pp.), the printer's name is lacking and the National Library of Israel catalogue states, concerning the Grodno edition, publisher unknown. The *Thesaurus of the Hebrew Book* records eleven Grodno titles for the period 1798–99, two only for the latter year. Of those eleven titles, four are attributed to Barukh ben Joseph Romm, the others have no attribution.¹¹ The National Library of Israel catalogue also only attributes four titles to the Romm press for this period. While it is not clear why the printer's name was omitted, there is no indication that the other books were printed by another press.



1799, Grodno
Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

¹¹ Yeshayahu Vinograd, *Thesaurus of the Hebrew Book. Listing of Books Printed in Hebrew Letters Since the Beginning of Printing circa 1469 through 1863*, I (Jerusalem, 1993–95), pp. 156–57 [Hebrew].

What makes this edition of particular interest is that an identical edition was published (issued) in the same year in Vilna, the sole difference being the title-pages. The title-page of that like edition gives the printer's name as Aryeh Leib ben Jehiel. In both editions the title-page is followed by the front matter of the corrector, R. Abraham ben Eliezer Lipman, and the forward of ibn Hasdai, and then the text. It is clear that the editions are physically identical, employing the same font and layout; the Vilna *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* was taken from Grodno and reissued with a new title-page in Vilna.

Sefer ha-Tappu'ah : After Noah there was born Abraham, the Elder, who was a greater sage than the rest, and he learnt and understood that all the men of his generation were lost in the web of their own errors and vanities. It was then that God tried him and commanded him to offer up to Him his especial son: and he did so, for his heart was so perfect with God; he yearned to understand His attributes, and to grasp the ideas that the sun and moon had a First Cause that gave them motion.

1799, Vilna. Vilna is known in Jewish tradition as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania (*Yerushalayim de-Lita*).” The city’s reputation stems from its yeshivot, being a center of Jewish learning, and from its prominent rabbis, most notably the Vilna Gaon (R. Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, 1720–1797). Jewish settlement in Vilna (Vilnius) dates to the fifteenth century, albeit in small numbers.



1799, Vilna

Courtesy of the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad Ohel Yosef Yitzhak

The first Hebrew press in that city dates to 1799 when the Romm press relocated a major portion of its printing press to Vilna from Grodno. As many as ten varied works are attributed to the Vilna press in its first year; among them a duodecimo (12^o: 16 pp.) edition of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah*.

Why would a press reprint a work published in the same year in a neighboring city, and that on a subject of limited interest, that is, a philosophical work? More likely, indeed most certainly, when the Romm press relocated much of its activity to Vilna they brought uncirculated sheets of their edition of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah*. Likely, they chose to add to their list of imprints in their new location. All that was required was to replace the title-page with a new title-page and then redistribute their copies.¹²

Sefer ha-Tappu'ah: It was consequently necessary for the Creator, blessed be He, to bring into existence the man of wisdom and understanding, so as to instruct the boorish, and to enlighten those who have not the sense to understand and know their Creator, nor to attain to the knowledge of anything but what they have learnt from their childhood, whether it be good or evil.

V

One year after our subject period concluded, that limited to editions of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* from the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century, another edition of that work was published in Frankfort on the Oder in 1800, this edition also with *Meshal ha-Kadmoni*. Six years later, in 1806, yet another edition appeared, this in Lunéville, with *Goren Nakbon*. *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* was published several times in the second half of the nineteenth century, including an 1872 Calcutta, India, edition (below) followed by an 1873 Lvov edition.

Later twentieth century editions, perhaps extant, were not noted. *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* has been a moderately popular work, appearing in both manuscript and printed editions. A philosophical work, not the most popular subject for most, it has been relatively successful. That relative success may be attributed to the fact that it is a small work, ascribed to the eminent Aristotle, well written, readable, and does speak to the interests of many, all this hopefully evident from the examples of its text included with this article.

¹² For a somewhat similar case of a work being circulated with a new title-page, see Marvin J. Heller, "An enigmatic pseudo-edition of *Barukh She'amar*" Seforim.blogspot.com (February 2, 2020).

The popularity of *Sefer ha-Tappu'ah* and the reasons for its acceptance in Jewish circles is evident from the passages quoted here. The views reputedly expressed by Aristotle are consistent with Jewish beliefs, indicating (suggesting) Aristotle's acceptance of Jewish theological concepts, articulated on his deathbed.

Sefer ha-Tappu'ah: Happy is the soul which has not been sullied by evil deeds, which has discerned its Creator and understood its Origin, and which returns to its habitation cheerfully and joyously after a strenuous life spent in noble deeds, and not after an existence spent in the enjoyment of low material aims!



1872, Calcutta
Courtesy of the National Library of Israel