

## *Aaron Berechiah ben Moses of Modena: An Eminent Sixteenth–Seventeenth Century Italian Sage*

By: MARVIN J. HELLER



Bernard Picart, (1723)  
Sephardic Jews in Procession Round a Coffin<sup>1</sup>

He recognized it [Joseph's tunic] and he said, "My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph has surely been torn to bits!" Then Jacob rent his garments and placed sackcloth on his loins; he mourned for his son many days. All his sons and his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to comfort himself, and said "For I will go down to the grave mourning for my son." And his father bewailed him. (Genesis 37:33–35).

The king trembled. He ascended the upper chamber of the gateway and wept; and thus he said as he went: "My son, Absalom! My son, my son, Absalom! If only I could have died in your place! Absalom! My son, my son!" (II Samuel 19:1).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Jewish Encyclopedia*, III (New York: 1901–06), p. 433.

<sup>2</sup> Once again, I would like to express my appreciation to Eli Genauer for his comments and insights in reviewing this article.

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The loss of a son, a child, is an unimaginable tragedy. Judaism addresses the period of mourning, the attempt to comfort the mourner, in several ways. One way such tragedy is addressed is through prayer. Prayer, however, is not limited to periods of tragedy and/or trial but is a means of addressing the Divine. Both the mourners' needs and the subject of liturgy have been addressed in the works of R. Aaron Berechiah ben Moses of Modena, most notably *Ma'avar Yabbok* and *Seder Ashmoret ha-Boker*, both with kabbalistic content.

Jewish history is replete with scholars of repute and influence who are not well remembered outside of academic, scholarly, or rabbinic circles. One sage, whose works remain influential to this day although his name is not very well known, is R. Aaron Berechiah ben Moses of Modena. Aaron Berechiah's works, on prayer, liturgy, and especially on mourning, are basic, much reprinted titles.

R. Aaron Berechiah ben Moses of Modena (c. 1560–d. 1639) has been described as “an illuminating candle בוצינא דנהורא” (tractates *Ketubbot*, *Sanhedrin*, var. cit.) by Shimon Vanunu, who continues his entry on Aaron Berechiah, writing effusively that Aaron Berechiah was special in his generation, a generation of sages, exceedingly wise in both revealed and esoteric subjects, one of the leading rabbinic figures of Italy, a kabbalist, a pious and holy man. Member of a distinguished family, Aaron Berechiah's father was R. Moses ben Neḥemiah of Modena, his mother the daughter of R. Solomon Jacob Raphael, the family originally expellees from France.<sup>3</sup> Aaron Berechiah's maternal grandmother was the scholarly Fioretta of Modena, his brother-in-law Rabbi Yosef Yedidyah Krami (*Kanaf Renanim*).<sup>4</sup> Aaron Berechiah was, on his mother's side, a cousin of the renowned R. Leon (Judah Aryeh) Modena (1571–1648).

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<sup>3</sup> Shimon Vanunu, *Encyclopedia L'Chachmei Italia* (Jerusalem, 2018), pp. 109–10 [Hebrew].

<sup>4</sup> Cecil Roth informs that Aaron Berechiah was an offspring of Bathsheba or Fioretta of Modena, who reputedly regularly engaged in Hebrew and rabbinic studies, was familiar with the works of Maimonides, and “mapped out for herself a regular sequence of advanced study by week, and was considered to be largely responsible for the love of Jewish lore which distinguished her remarkable family.” Fioretta emigrated to the Land of Israel when elderly, where she died. (Cecil Roth, *The Jews in the Renaissance* (1959; reprint New York, 1965), pp. 51–52. Similarly, Susan Nanus writes Fioretta studied Bible, Talmud, and Zohar. She traveled from city to city seeking the best teachers for her grandson, whom she raised. Aaron Berechiah later stated that “It was incumbent upon him to give her the respect due to a rabbi.” (Susan Nanus, *Intro to Hasidut*, file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/The-Woman-Rebbe-Hannah-Rochel-Werbemacher.pdf), p. 2.

Most importantly, Aaron Berechiah was a pupil of R. Hillel of Modena (Hasid ha-Kaddosh) and of R. Menahem Azariah da Fano, and, with the latter, belonged to the Lurianic school of Kabbalah of R. Israel Sarug. It is reported that at the request of the *Hevrah Kaddisha* (Burial Society) of Mantua he instituted rites for them.<sup>5</sup> Gershon Scholem credits Aaron Berechiah, together with R. Samuel ben Elisha Portaleone, of making Italy into one of the foremost centers of Kabbalah. He did so, together with R. Moses Zacuto, by entering Kabbalistic motifs into the daily prayer book and inspiring special liturgies for a variety of occasions and rituals.<sup>6</sup> In c. 1604, Aaron Berechiah established a prayer-group in Modena called *Meire Shaḥar* (awakening the dawn).

We turn now to Aaron Berechiah's works. Yeshayahu Vinograd records four titles for Aaron Berechiah in the *Thesaurus of the Hebrew Book*, most notably *Ma'avar Yabbok*, for which he lists twenty editions. That number, however, is incomplete, as the *Thesaurus* only notes editions of books through 1863. In contrast, Ch. B. Friedberg, in his *Bet Eked Sepharim*, which covers the period 1474 through 1950, records twenty-two editions, comprised of *Ma'avar Yabbok* and *Kizur Ma'avar Yabbok*.<sup>7</sup> In this article we will address Aaron Berechiah's works in chronological order.

## I

We begin with *Seder Ashmoret ha-Boker*, supplicatory prayers to be said in the morning by the pious fraternity *Meire Shaḥar* (awakening the dawn) in Modena, referring to the practice of reciting prayers at an early hour. *Seder Ashmoret ha-Boker* was prepared for the use of this confraternity in Modena.<sup>8</sup>

First published in Mantua in the year “And you shall eat your fill and praise the name of the Lord your God **וְאָכַלְתֶּם אֶכּוֹל וּשְׂבֹעַ וְהִלַּלְתֶּם אֶת שֵׁם** אֱלֹהֵיכֶם (384 = 1624) [who has acted wondrously with you; and My people will not be shamed evermore]” (Joel 2:26). It was published as a duodecimo (12<sup>o</sup>: [32], 259 ff.) at the press of Judah Samuel di Perugia, in which

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Loeb Sossnitz, “Aaron Berechiah ben Moses ben Nehemiah of Modena,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (New York, 1901–06), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Gershon Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York, 1974), pp. 77, 193.

<sup>7</sup> Ch. B. Friedberg, *Bet Eked Sepharim* (Israel, n. d), mem 2702 [Hebrew]; Yeshayahu Vinograd, *Thesaurus of the Hebrew Book*, with annotations and bibliographical references, I (Jerusalem, 193–95), p. 185 [Hebrew].

<sup>8</sup> Shmuel Ashkenazi, “Aaron Berechiah ben Moses of Modena,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, v. 1 (Jerusalem, 2007), p. 217.

his son Joshua was foreman and Hananiah Marun ben Mordecai was chief printer.<sup>9</sup>



1624, *Seder Ashmoret ha-Boker*

Courtesy of the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad Ohel Yosef Yitzhak

The nature and purpose of *Seder Ashmoret ha-Boker* was addressed by A. Z. Idelsohn, who wrote that the custom of rising before dawn to recite songs and prayers was the custom of both Italian and Levantine Jews. Both communities published prose and poetic collections of supplications, of which he cites *Seder Ashmoret ha-Boker*, *Meire Shabar* as an example, stating that it is similar in content to *Tikkun Hatzot*.<sup>10</sup>

The title, *Ashmoret ha-Boker*, appears in two Biblical verses, “At the morning watch (*Ashmoret ha-Boker*), the Lord looked down upon the Egyptian army from a pillar of fire and cloud, and threw the Egyptian army into panic” (Exodus 14:24) and “The next day, Saul divided the troops into three columns; at the morning watch (*Ashmoret ha-Boker*) they entered the camp and struck down the Ammonites until the day grew hot. The survivors scattered; no two were left together” (I Samuel 11:1). The

<sup>9</sup> David Amram, *The Makers of Hebrew Books in Italy* (Philadelphia, 1909, reprint London, 1963), p. 336.

<sup>10</sup> A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development* (1932, reprint New York, 1995), p. 260. *Tikkun Hatzot* is a prayers service traditionally recited after midnight, expressing mourning and lamentation over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

phrase *Ashmoret ha-Boker* appears as many as thirty times in kabbalistic works, among them the Zohar.<sup>11</sup>

The title page has the heading Beit Aaron Berachiah, the title *Ashmoret ha-Boker*, and below it *Meire Shaḥar*. It informs that these prayers and supplications were said previously in the synagogue of Aaron Berechiah's father on 13 Ḥeshvan in the year “your king will come to you righteous מלכך יבא לך צדיק (377 = Monday, October 24, 1616) [and victorious is he . . .]” (Zechariah 9:9). It adds that praiseworthy material was added in the year “[He who sacrifices a thank offering honors Me, and to him who improves his way] I will show the salvation of God אראנו בישע אלקים (382 = 1622)” (Psalms 50:23). The patronage of Duke Ferdinando Gonzaga, the ruler of Mantua, is acknowledged, and below it is the de rigueur *Con licenza de' Superiori* — that is, official license to print.



1707, *Ashmoret ha-Boker*  
Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

The verso of the title page has verse in which the initial letters are an acronym, that is, they spell Aaron Berechiah אהרן ברכיה:

- אליך I called to You, O LORD; to my Lord I made appeal. (Psalms 30:9)
- הבינני Give me understanding, that I may observe Your teaching and keep it wholeheartedly. (Psalms 119:34)
- רחמיך Your mercies are great, O LORD; as is Your rule, preserve me. (Psalms 119:56)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.sefaria.org/texts>.

- נַעֲנִיתִי** I am very much afflicted; O LORD, preserve me in accordance with Your word. (Psalms 119:107)
- בָּרוּךְ** Blessed are You, O LORD; train me in Your laws. (Psalms 119:12)
- רָאָה** I know from Your decrees of old that You have established them forever. (Psalms 119:153)
- כָּלֵתָהּ** I long for Your deliverance; I hope for Your word. (Psalms 119:81)
- יְהִי-נָא** May Your steadfast love comfort me in accordance with Your promise to Your servant. (Psalm 119:76)
- הַבִּינֵנִי** Give me understanding, that I may observe Your teaching and keep it wholeheartedly. (Psalms 119:34)

This is followed by two versified pages in praise of Aaron Berechiah by the printer Hananiah Marun, then very lengthy introductory pages titled *הערה מעירי שחר מעיר מודינה* (a remark on *Meire Shabar* from the city of Modena) beginning with a quote from the Zohar and describing the composition of *Ashmoret ha-Boker*, followed by several pages of verse, prayers to be said by someone who did not pray with the congregation, other prayers, *Kaddish* and *Kedushah*, to be said at various intervals of services, all set in rabbinic letters and unpaginated. The core of *Ashmoret ha-Boker* is foliated, the text set in square vocalized letters, excepting occasional brief instructions in rabbinic letters. The text is comprised of the order of prayers organized by day, followed by prayers for Shabbat, festivals, fast days, for the ill, weddings, *brit milah*, rain, concluding, in rabbinic letters, with additional entreaties.

A popular work, Friedberg records twelve editions of *Ashmoret ha-Boker*.<sup>12</sup> The next two printings, both in Amsterdam, were issued in the years “to behold the pleasantness of the Lord **לחזות בנועם ה'** (452 = 1692)” and “[One thing I ask of the LORD, only that do I seek: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life], to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD, [to frequent His temple] **לחזות בנועם ה'** (467 = 1707).” (Psalms 27:4). One unusual feature of both editions is the absence of Aaron Berechiah’s name; his name is neither on the title page nor elsewhere in either volume.

## II

Aaron Berechiah’s second published work, *Ma’avar Yabbok*, prayers for the ill and deceased, is his most prominent and best-known work. It too

<sup>12</sup> Friedberg, *Bet Eked Sepharim*, alef 2775.

was published in Mantua, in the year, “He shall receive a blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation שׁוֹׁ” (386 = 1626)” (Psalms 24:5), in quarto format (4<sup>o</sup>: 184, 74 ff.), also at the press of Judah Samuel di Perugia.

The title, *Ma'avar Yabbok*, refers to when the patriarch Jacob “passed over the ford Jabbok (*ma'avar Yabbok*)” (Genesis 32:23), understood here as the passage from one world to another. The title page states that:



1626, *Ma'avar Yabbok*, Mantua

Courtesy of the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad Ohel Yosef Yitzhak

In it he [Aaron] explains how a person should conduct himself in this world until the time comes of his accounting, lest, Heaven forefend, he will die without understanding and be found to have caused himself to perish. And he divided the work into four parts: *ma'amar* 1 *Sifteï Zeddik*; *ma'amar* 2 *Sifteï Emet*; *ma'amar* 3 *Sifteï Renanot*; and lastly, the most notable, *Atar Anan ha-Ketoret*, and in it are three types of discourses: part 1, the order of *Pitum Ketoret*; part 2, *Korban Ta'anit*; part 3, *Minḥat Aharon*. It concludes with sections from Biblical verses *Me-Pesukei Anakh*<sup>13</sup> . . . .

Here too the title page acknowledges the patronage of Duke Ferdinando Gonzaga, the ruler of Mantua, and has the de rigueur *Con licenȝa de' Superiori*, official license to print.

<sup>13</sup> *Anakh* is Aramaic for *Tanakh* and it stands for אורייתא, נביאי, כתובי. Courtesy of Eli Genauer.

The verso of the title page has Aaron Berechiah's introduction, verse from R. Gershon Kezigo, and the text. *Ma'avar Yabbok* is set in a single column in both rabbinic and square vocalized letters. It is comprised of the laws, customs, and etiquette relating to *bikur holim* (visiting the sick), the deceased, and mourners, with appropriate prayers for each occasion. It includes kabbalistic customs, prayers, and interpretations of funeral rites and beliefs. Aaron informs in the introduction that:

*Ma'avar Yabbok* is so titled to bring close and to offer with love and awe before the entire holy congregation, "among them young women beating tambourines" (Psalms 68:26). They will pass the way of an unsteady bridge from the world of permutation and destruction in which iniquities reach to heaven, to "bind with chains" (cf. Job 38:31) the ' Oneness, the ב blessing, and the ק holiness (= קב'), and with this you will offer "a meal offering of your first fruits" (Leviticus 2:14) and "pass over the **fjord Yabbok**" to wrestle with the Lord, every man his struggle, "until the breaking of the day" (Genesis 32:25) which is the resurrection, then not Jacob will his soul and body be called but only Israel.

Aaron Berechiah states his purpose in writing *Ma'avar Yabbok* in the introduction as:

I composed new ideas and different explanations... to offer them as an offering and as incense in love and in reverence before the holy congregations, in order that it will make a way in the midst of the shaking worlds,... a bridge from the world of change and destruction with its sinful heavenly condition to be joined with the 'pleasures of Unity, Blessing, and Holiness... and will pass the fjord of Yabok to wrestle with the Lord, a man of war, until the dawn, that is resurrection [within the context of this work the word should actually be translated as 'immortality' rather than 'resurrection'] for then our soul and body will no longer be called Jacob, but rather Israel, in that we will be a kingdom of priests and we will be worthy of seeing God face to face.

Oh, how happy I am but to be these few days in glorious Mantua, in the midst of this holy community, and with the congregations of Italy.... I have seen there, in particular, how many of the people correct their past deeds, and how many make their crooked paths straight by taking care of the dead and participating as members in groups of *Gemilut Hasadim*. But also there are many of them who are not involved in Mishnah, Gemara, and Halakhah, and who are not engaged in every aspect of the great commandment of taking care of the dead. I recently overheard that the community desired that one



of its members undertake the task of arranging for them a prayer-book, so that they could join in song and prayer at the time of the going out of the soul. . . .<sup>14</sup>

As described on the title page, noted above, the text is in four parts, the final part subdivided into three additional sections, titled respectively 1) righteous lips שפתי צדק and comprised of 40 chapters; 2) truthful lips שפתי אמת, 37 chapters; 3) joyful lips שפתי רננות, 46 chapters; 4) part one, a thick cloud of incense עתר ענן הקטרת, 8 chapters; part two, sacrifice offering קרבן תענית 7 chapters; and part three Aaron Berechiah's s offering מנחת אהרן, 18 chapters, for a total of 156 chapters. As is certainly evident, the section headings do not clarify the work's subject matter.

A better description of *Ma'avar Yabbok*'s contents is to be found in Shabbetai ben Joseph Bass' (1641–1718) *Siftei Yeshenim* (Amsterdam, 1680), Bass being the author of the first bibliography of Hebrew books by a Jewish author.<sup>15</sup> Bass informs that *Siftei Zeddek* addresses visiting the ill, related prayers, *vidduyim* (confessions), as well as the prayers to be said at the time when the soul departs. *Siftei Emet* is concerned with the soul, also with the time of its departure, dressing the departed, and mourning. *Siftei Renanot* addresses the period after death and burial. *Pitum Ketoret* and the other sections address fasting, related learning, entreaties, and related kabbalistic subjects.<sup>16</sup>

The volume concludes with the order of prayers day by day and a detailed index of the contents by chapter.

An unusual subject addressed by *Ma'avar Yabbok*, given the book's primary matter, prayers for the ill and deceased, is that it addresses the practice of Veglia, the celebratory practices in Italy the night before circumcision. Elliott Horowitz writes that in *Ma'avar Yabbok* Aaron Berechiah “proposed a radical reform in the accepted practice.” He does

<sup>14</sup> The translation of the last two introductory paragraphs is from Steven A. Moss, *The Attitude Toward Sickness, Dying and Death as Expressed in the Liturgical Works Maavor Yabok and Sefer HaHayyim*. Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Master of Arts in Hebrew Literature Degree and Ordination. <https://www.jewish-funerals.org/the-attitude-toward-sickness-dying-and-death-as-expressed-in-the--and-sefer-hahayim-2/>, pp. 14, 19. Steven A. Moss was also the author of *Jewish Wisdom for Living and Dying: A Spiritual Journey Through the Prayers and Rituals of Maavor Yabok and Sefer HaHayyim*, (2022).

<sup>15</sup> Concerning Shabbetai Bass see Marvin J. Heller, “Bass, Shabbetai ben Joseph Meshorer,” *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, Gershon David Hundert, ed. (New Haven & London, 2008), pp. 129–30.

<sup>16</sup> Shabbetai Bass, *Siftei Yeshenim* (Amsterdam, 1680), p. 45 no. 235 [Hebrew].

so in the entry on the Biblical and Talmudic descriptions of the offering of incense in the Temple, “throwing cold water on the entire festive tradition of the Veglia which had developed in Italy, with local variations, over the centuries,” writing:

And also, on the night before a circumcision how beneficial it would be to recite it before the Chair of Elijah, together with the Psalms of David . . . as against those who spend the night in merrymaking, men and women . . . young and old. Go and observe what the custom was among those of earlier generations who did not interrupt their study for a moment on the night before a circumcision . . . as may be seen from the Zohar . . .<sup>17</sup>

*Ma'avar Yabbok* has been reprinted several times, beginning with a 1732 Amsterdam edition. Due to its detail, *Ma'avar Yabbok* was more often a manual for funeral societies than individuals, necessitating abridgments for the latter, several frequently reprinted. David Sclar writes that the reason for the many abridgments was that *Ma'avar Yabbok* “is heavily kabbalistic and a difficult book to grasp. It is not surprising then that it was reprinted in full only a handful of times over the next three centuries. Its influence, however, was profound. Abridged and translated versions appeared more than two dozen times over the next 250 years.... As the title page of one such work, *Sefer Divre Emet*, which was printed in Prague in 1805, explained: ‘the unabridged work was too large to carry around; hence, abridged editions in smaller format were necessary if the dying were not to be deprived of religious care.’”<sup>18</sup>

We look at several of those abridged works, several with the title *Kizur Ma'avar Yabbok*, but most otherwise titled. The first of the former group were printed in Prague (1682), Frankfurt on the Oder (1692), Sulzbach (1722), and Bad Homburg vor der Höhe (1740). Among the latter group are *Zikbron Aaron* (Prague, 1682) by R. Aaron ben Benjamin Porges; *Magen David* (Venice, 1696; Venice, 1704) by R. David Savivi of Siena; *Sefer Bik-kurim* (Venice, 1704) by R. Mordecai Hezekiah Bassani; and *Keri'ah Ne'em-anah* (Venice, 1715) by R. Samuel David Ottolengo. It is those last works, otherwise named, that we will consider for the abridgments of *Kizur Ma'avar Yabbok*.

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<sup>17</sup> Elliott Horowitz, “The Eve of Circumcision: A Chapter in the History of Jewish Nightlife,” in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David B. Ruderman (New York and London, 1992), pp. 562–63. The quote is from *Ma'avar Yabbok* 4:5 p. 121a.

<sup>18</sup> David Sclar, <https://www.jewish-funerals.org/translating-maavar-yabbok/>.

*Zikbron Aaron* is by R. Aaron ben Benjamin Porges, who served as rabbi in Prague in the seventeenth century. His only published work, *Zikbron Aaron*, is an introduction to *Kizur Ma'avar Yabbok*, and also includes recommendations for individuals suffering from venereal disease.<sup>19</sup> *Zikbron Aaron* was printed in quarto format (4<sup>0</sup>: 36ff) at the press of Benei Judah Bak, that is by Jacob and Joseph Bak, who succeeded their father, Judah Bak. Eight generations of that family printed Hebrew books in Prague from 1605 through 1696.



1682, *Zikbron Aaron*

Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

The title page of *Zikbron Aaron* has a subtitle that states that it is an introduction to *Kizur Ma'avar Yabbok* and then informs that it is selected samples from books in honor of the Holy One. Further on it states, “In it will be found a little on the greatness of the Holy One, creation of the world and man, pertaining to mankind, the grave, final accounting, Gehinnom, reward and punishment, this world and the world to come, body and soul, and at the end repentance.” At the bottom of the title page are two lines in which selected letters are emphasized, stating “God of spirits, a correct spirit // renew in me, from sin and error deliver me.” The initial letters of the first line, **אלקי הרוחות רוח נכון**, stand for the author’s name, Aaron; the second line gives the date of publication **תחדשני מחטא שגיא** (442 = 1682). The title page is followed by the introduction to *Zikbron Aaron*, and then the text of *Kizur Ma'avar Yabbok*.<sup>20</sup>

Our next three abridgments are by R. David Savivi of Siena, R. Mordecai Hezekiah Bassani, and R. Samuel David Ottolengo, all prominent Italian rabbis. These subject works were all printed in Venice by the

<sup>19</sup> Executive Committee of the Editorial Board., Schulim Ochser, “Porges (Porjes), Aaron B. Benjamin,” *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1901–06), v. 10, p. 131.

<sup>20</sup> Marvin J. Heller, *The Seventeenth Century Hebrew Book: An Abridged Thesaurus II* (Leiden/Boston, 2011), pp. 1308–09.

Bragadin press. That press, founded in 1550, began printing with Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* with the glosses of R. Meir ben Isaac Katzenellenbogen (Maharam, 1473–1565) of Padua. Contention over that work with the press of Marco Antonio Giustiniani resulted in the Talmud being burned in 1553, and further resulted in the cessation of Hebrew printing in Venice for approximately a decade. When Hebrew printing resumed in 1563, Bragadin was among the first to again publish Hebrew books. The Bragadin press would continue as one of Venice's leading Hebrew printshops, issuing Hebrew titles into the eighteenth century under several generations of Bragadins. Joshua Bloch writes that “the Bragadin press, that is, the house of Bragadin, represented the most famous Venetian press of the period.”<sup>21</sup>



1704, Magen David

Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

David Savivi, born in Salonica, author of *Magen David*, served as rabbi in several cities in Italy, and is best known for publishing *Toledot Adam* (Livorno, 1657), a volume of R. Solomon ibn Aderet's (Rashba, 1235–1310) responsa. This edition of *Magen David* was published as a 16 cm. work (55 ff.) in the year “[For GOD shall be our ruler, GOD shall be our

<sup>21</sup> Joshua Bloch, “Venetian Printers of Hebrew Books,” in *Hebrew Printing and Bibliography* by Charles Berlin (New York, 1976), p. 22.

monarch, GOD shall be our sovereign], and He shall deliver us **הוא יושיענו** (464 = 1704)” (Isaiah 33:22).

*Magen David* is not only a concise version of *Ma’avar Yabbok*, but in it Savivi adds ethical content.<sup>22</sup> The title page begins by informing that *Magen David* is useful and good for a person, “man goes to his eternal home [while the mourners go about the streets]” (Ecclesiastes 12:5), and other matters, as your eyes can see. Also credited are R. Samuel of Vienna and R. Emanuel Oppenheim for their support in its publication. *Magen David* was printed previously (Venice, 1696). It has not been republished.

We turn now to R. Mordecai Ḥezekiah ben Samuel Bassani’s (Marco in Italian; the name Ḥezekiah was added on the occasion of his last illness, c. 1632–1703), *Sefer Bikkurim*. Bassani was also an Italian rabbi and polemicist. In 1666, he became preacher to the Ashkenazi community of Verona, and in 1680 he became its rabbi; in 1695 he was appointed rabbi of the entire Verona community.



1704, *Sefer Bikkurim*

Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

*Sefer Bikkurim*, prayers to be recited on visiting the sick and deathbed prayers, adapted from *Ma’avar Yabbok*, was written for the Bikkur Ḥolim fraternity of Verona, but later widely adopted. It was published in octavo format (8<sup>o</sup>: (17 cm.) 28 ff.) at the Bragadin press. The title page is dated Sunday 7 Tishrei, **התס"ה** without specifying whether it is the abbreviated [לפ"ק] or the full era [לפ"ג]. This date is misread by Friedberg as 1710, for

<sup>22</sup> Vanunu, *Encyclopedia L'Chachmei Italia*, p. 163.

7 Tishrei in the abbreviated [לפ"ק] era was a Wednesday. The correct reading is Sunday, October 5, 1704, that is, in the full era [ג' לפ"ק], ([5]465 = 1704).<sup>23</sup>

On the verso of the title page of *Sefer Bikkurim* is a brief statement of the *mitzvot* of *bikkurim* (visiting the ill) and the order of *vidui* (confession) to be recited at the time that the soul departs. The following page includes a quote from the Shelah ha-Kadosh (R. Isaiah Horowitz, 1565–1630) on *Pesahim* concerning the mitzvot of *gemilut hasadim* (acts of kindness and compassion) as well as entries in the text from his *Shenei Lulav ot Ha-Berit*. *Sefer Bikkurim* is comprised of the text to be recited at the above times in square vocalized letters and instructions and commentary by R. Bassani in rabbinic letters.

Bassani was also the author of treatises on divorce, titled *Mikhtav le-Hizkiyyah*; and on *halizah* (ceremony releasing a widow from levirate marriage), titled *Ma'amar Mordechai*, included by his great-grandson R. Menahem Navarra in his *Penei Yitzhak* (Verona, 1743). Bassani wrote a lengthy responsum on the relationship between the Ashkenazi community of Verona and the smaller Sephardi community there.<sup>24</sup> *Sefer Bikkurim* has been reprinted four times.<sup>25</sup>

R. Samuel David ben Jehiel Ottolengo (d. 1718), kabbalist and poet, author of *Keri'ah Ne'emanah*, was born in Casale Monferrato and studied under R. Moses Zacuto and R. Benjamin Cohen. He subsequently served as chief rabbi of Padua and later of Venice. In addition to *Keri'ah Ne'emanah*, Ottolengo also authored *Me'il Shemu'el* (Venice, 1705), an abridgment and index of the Shelah ha-Kadosh's *Shenei Lulav ot ha-Berit*, and a supplement to Moses Zacuto's *Tikkun Shovavim* (Venice, 1708) (the initial letters of the first six weekly portions of the Book of Exodus), founding a "*Malbish Arumim*" Society to assist the needy during those six weeks. He also

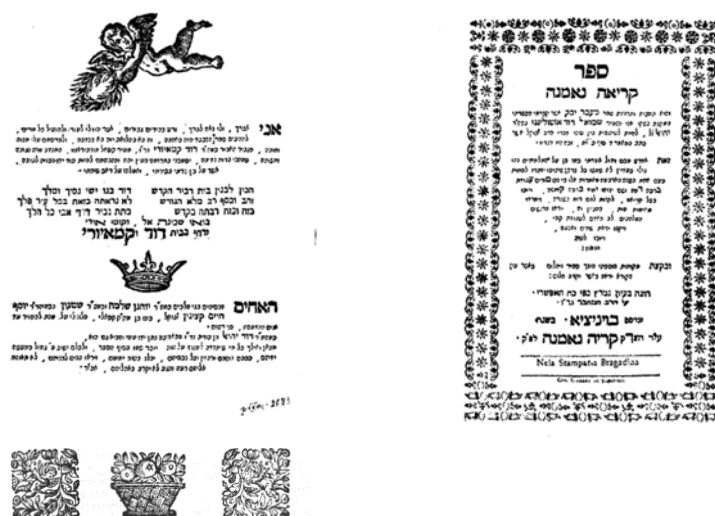
<sup>23</sup> Hebrew title pages often include the letters לפ"ק, or less frequently ג' לפ"ק, after a date, to distinguish between the abbreviated and full era. Dates given in the abbreviated form (לפ"ק) do not use the first digit to represent thousands (millennium). Conversely, the full form (ג' לפ"ק) utilizes the first digit to represent thousands. In computing a Hebrew date, it is important to know whether a date is for the full or abbreviated era, to determine whether a five is to be counted as five thousand or is to be included in the calculation of the date other than as thousands. The current millennium began in 1240, so that all subsequent secular dates are derived by adding that number to the Hebrew date, for example, 465 plus 1240 equals 1704. The result is only approximate, however, as the Hebrew year begins three to four months earlier than the secular year.

<sup>24</sup> Cecil Roth, "Bassani, Mordecai," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2007), vol. 3, p. 207.

<sup>25</sup> Friedberg, *Bet Eked*, bet 1346.

authored responsa, novellae, *piyyutim*, and kabbalistic articles that remain in manuscript.<sup>26</sup>

*Keri'ah Ne'emanah* was published as a 21 cm. work (80 ff.) in the year “[I will restore your magistrates as of old, and your counselors as of yore. After that you shall be called] City of Righteousness, Faithful City עיר הצדק קריה נאמנה (475 = 1714)” (Isaiah 1:26). The text of the title page begins that it is an abridgement and *précis* of *Ma’avar Yabbok* “which I, Samuel David, shortened and made appropriate to be *totaphot* (phylacteries) between the eyes . . .” He informs that he has also made some additions. There are also approbations from Venetian rabbis.



1714, *Keri'ah Ne'emanah*  
Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

<sup>26</sup> “Ottolengo, Samuel David ben Jehiel,” *EJ*, vol. 15, p. 519.

The verso of the title page has a statement from R. David Camori, with a cherub at the top of the page and a crown towards the bottom. This is followed by Ottolengo's introduction in which he references *Ma'avar Yabbok* and informs that he has titled *Keri'ah Ne'emanah* to arouse the hearts of the knowledgeable, the young with the elderly, in a clear language, with lines of verse, so that they do not swallow their words like matzah and bitter herbs, but rather they should express themselves clearly. Towards the bottom of that page are three attractive small pieces, usually used as tail-pieces. The text follows. *Keri'ah Ne'emanah* has not been reprinted.<sup>27</sup>

An interesting aside is that *Ma'avar Yabbok* was preceded as a work for prayers for the ill and deceased by Leon Modena's *Zuri la-Nefesh* (*Balm for the Soul*, Venice, 1619). A small book, octavo in format (8<sup>o</sup>: 18 ff.), it too was printed at the Bragadin press. Avriel Bar-Lev describes it as "one of the less well-known achievements of the colorful rabbi Leon Modena . . . is that he inaugurated a new genre in Jewish literature." This genre is 'Jewish books for the sick and the dying' and it later flourished and included hundreds of titles." For a small work it was quite inclusive, including prayers, confessions, psalms, Biblical verses, and Grace after Meals to be recited in the mourners' home.<sup>28</sup>

Bar-Lev notes a second related work, even smaller, eight pages, titled *Balm; Tosefot Toveh*, its name suggesting that it is supplementary to Modena's *Balm*. While not dated, it appears to have been published soon after the former work. Was Modena's work successful? Bar-Lev writes that the tradition Modena inaugurated "certainly was, but its success belongs to his young nephew, Aaron Berachiah Modena . . . It became the classic Jewish book for the sick and the dying in the early modern period."<sup>29</sup> Bar-Lev is certainly correct; one reprint only is recorded for Modena's *Balm*, a Venice 1629 edition, in contrast to the many editions of *Ma'avar Yabbok* and its abridgments.<sup>30,31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Friedberg, *Bet Eked*, no *kaf* 1077.

<sup>28</sup> Another of Leon Modena's works of interest is *Sur me-Ra*. Concerning that book, see Marvin J. Heller, "Sur me-Ra: Leon (Judah Aryeh) Modena's Popular and Much Reprinted Treatise Against Gambling," *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* (Mainz, 2015), pp. 105–22, reprinted in *Essays on the Making of the Early Hebrew Book* (Brill: Leiden/Boston, 2021), pp. 225–55.

<sup>29</sup> Avriel Bar-Lev, "Leon Modena and the Invention of the Jewish Death Tradition" in *The Lion Shall Roar: Leon Modena and His World*, Robert Bonfil, ed., (Jerusalem, 2003), pp. 85–86, 97–101 [Hebrew/English].

<sup>30</sup> Friedberg, *Bet Eked*, *Tzaddi* 447.

<sup>31</sup> Another work dealing with issues of illness and death is Sylvie-Anne Goldberg, *Crossing the Jabbok: Illness and Death in Ashkenazi Judaism in Sixteenth- Through Nineteenth-Century Prague*, transl. Carol Cosman (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1997).





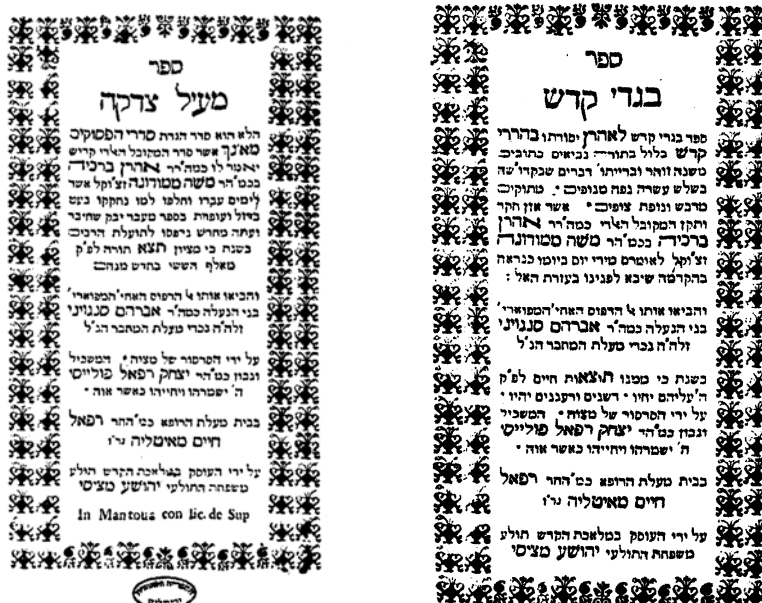
1619, *Zuri la-Nefesh*

Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

In contrast to *Zuri la-Nefesh*, reprinted once only and a single supplementary work, *Ma'avar Yabbok* consists, together with *Kizur Ma'avar Yabbok*, as noted above, of twenty-two editions, primarily abridgments, printed under various titles. Of those described in this article, *Zikhron Aaron* and *Sefer Bikkurim*, with the most reprints of this group, have each been reprinted four times. In contrast, *Keri'ah Ne'emanah* exists as a single printing, having never been republished.

The abridgments are relatively small works when compared to *Ma'avar Yabbok*; that work, as noted above, having been printed in quarto format (4<sup>o</sup>: 184, 74 ff.). The abridgments, as described above, range in size from an 8<sup>o</sup>:28ff. (*Sefer Bikkurim*) to *Keri'ah Ne'emanah* 21 cm. work (8<sup>o</sup> ff.). The attraction of the abridgment, according to David Sclar, is as the title page of *Sefer Divre Emet* states “the unabridged work was too large to carry around; hence, abridged editions in smaller format were necessary if the dying were not to be deprived of religious care.” At the end, all affirm the value of *Ma'avar Yabbok*.

### III



1731, *Me'il Zedakah*, Mantua

1731, *Bigdei Kodesh*



1748, *Me'il Zedakah*, Venice  
Courtesy of the National Library of Israel

The Mantua edition was printed at the press of the sons of Raphael Hayyim of Italy as an 18 cm. book, comprised of 58 ff. This edition is not

recorded by Ch. B. Friedberg in the *Bet Eked Sefarim* nor by Vinograd in the *Thesaurus*, nor is this printing noted in the encyclopedia entries on Aaron Berechiah. Friedberg does, however, record the Mantua edition in his *History of Hebrew Typography in Italy*, where he gives the printers as the sons of Raphael Isaac Hayyim of Italy. He writes that the activity of the brothers, who inherited the press from their father, was brief, passing as lightning in the night.<sup>32</sup> The Mantua edition of *Me'il Zedakah* is recorded and a copy reproduced in the National Library of Israel catalogue.<sup>33</sup> The Venice edition was published by the Bragadin press.

The title-page is followed by an approbation from R. David ben Ezriel Penzi, an introductory paragraph, and then the text, which is set in vocalized square letters. *Me'il Zedakah*, organized by the days of the week, are the verses to be said during prayers and study. Printed together with *Me'il Zedakah* is *Bigdei Kodesh*, beginning on 35a, with its own title page, and dated “[more than you safeguard anything, safeguard your heart] for from it are the sources of life **כי ממנו תוצאות חיים** (491 = 1731)” (Proverbs 4:23). It too is followed by an introduction and then its text, also on prayer and study.

#### IV

Aaron Berechiah was a prolific writer. He left a number of works after passing that are extant in manuscript. Joseph Loeb Sossnitz, in his article on Aaron Berechiah, notes several in addition to those published described above. Sossnitz writes:

Other works written by him are: A commentary on “Tikkune ha-Zohar.” . . . “Ibbur beKabbalah,” a work on the Cabala, consisting of four volumes: (a) “Shemen Mishat Kodesh” (The Oil of Holy Anointment), on the principles of the Cabala according to Moses Cordovero and Isaac Luria; (b) “Shemen Zait Zak” (The Pure Oil of the Olive), public addresses on the same subject; (c) “Shetil Poreah” (The Blossoming Plant), on the mysterious meaning of prayers and ceremonies; (d) “Imre Shefer” (Words of Beauty), and miscellaneous matter; this whole work was seen in manuscript by Azulai at Modena, and is found in parts in some libraries. “Magen Aharon”

<sup>32</sup> Ch. B. Friedberg, *History of Hebrew Typography in Italy, Spain-Portugal, Turkey and the Orient, from its beginning and formation about the year 1470* (Tel Aviv, 1956), p. 21 [Hebrew].

<sup>33</sup> [https://www.nli.org.il/en/books/NNL\\_ALEPH990041097400205171/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/en/books/NNL_ALEPH990041097400205171/NLI).

(Shield of Aaron), containing a compendium of Luria's works. This fertile writer is said to have been, like Joseph Caro, in constant communion with a spirit called the Maggid.<sup>34</sup>

Aaron Berechiah was a significant personality, who, although not well remembered today, served the Jewish community well in several ways, establishing a prayer group in Mantua, making Italy into one of the foremost centers of Kabbalah, and affecting Jewish rites of mourning to this day. His most influential work, *Ma'avar Yabbok*, on prayer, liturgy, and especially on mourning, has been reprinted in its original state and numerous abridgments over several centuries, influencing Jewish rituals of mourning to the present. An individual of significance and influence, his contribution to Jewish culture and liturgy should be well remembered by the Jewish community.



Johann C. G. Bodenschatz, *Carrying a Body to a Grave* (1748)<sup>35</sup>



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<sup>34</sup> Sossnitz, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> *Jewish Encyclopedia*, III, p. 434.