

Eager to Belong

*A Palestinian Jew in Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam**

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Abstract

In the middle of the eighteenth-century, Mordechai Tama, a Jew from Hebron, left his hometown carrying a manuscript containing his grandfather's commentary on *Midrash Mekhilta*, with the aim of printing it in Amsterdam. That plan was unsuccessful, but once in Amsterdam, Tama did become a member of scholarly circles of the Portuguese-Jewish community. He absorbed that community's blend of Rabbinic learning and Spanish literary tastes and, in turn, was valued for his knowledge of Arabic. This article examines the encounter in Amsterdam between Western Sephardi and Levantine Jewish learned cultures by a close reading of the paratexts of the two books Tama produced in Amsterdam, published there in 1765: *Pe'er ha-Dor* (a Hebrew translation of the Responsa of Maimonides from a Judeo-Arabic manuscript that had belonged to Jacob Sasportas) and *Maskiyot Kesef*, a medieval glossary of homonyms by Solomon b. Meshullam Dapiera.

Keywords: Mordechai Tama, *Midrash Mekhilta*, Moses Maimonides, *Pe'er ha-Dor*, Judeo-Arabic to Hebrew translation, Amsterdam

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One day in the early 1760s, a young man from Hebron arrived in Amsterdam carrying a manuscript. The traveller's name was Mordechai Tama.¹ The manuscript was *Midrash Eliezer*, a commentary on *Midrash Mekhilta* that his late grandfather, Eliezer Nahum, had written in Jerusalem some twenty years earlier. Grandfather Eliezer was born in Adrianople (modern-day Edirne) and had spent his final decade in Jerusalem as Chief Rabbi before dying in 1745 at the age of eighty.² Tama had reason to be hopeful: For over a century, Amsterdam had been the world's most important centre for the printing of Jewish books, and in the Spring of 1762, a student of his grandfather's, Solomon Salem, had been appointed as *Hakham*, Rabbi of Amsterdam's Portuguese-Jewish community. In the event, Tama's mission failed; *Midrash Eliezer* was not published until the end of the twentieth century.³ Nonetheless, Tama's sojourn in Amsterdam – his participation in literary life and the world of editing, publishing and the business of the book – was one of remarkable achievements. In 1765, he published two major works: *Pe'er Hador*, an edition of Maimonides's responsa in Tama's own translation from Arabic into Hebrew, and *Maskiyot Kesef*, a glossary of homonyms by Solomon b. Meshullam Dapiera, a thirteenth- and fourteenth-century

¹ According to Mordechai Tama's and Clara del Sotto's marriage license (not the Jewish *ketubah*, but the secular 'notice of intent to marry', by which non-Protestants in early modern Holland registered their marriages with the municipal authorities), signed in Amsterdam in 1775, Tama was born in 1740. See Dave Verdooner and Harmen Snel, *Trouwen in Mokum, 1598-1811: Jewish Marriage in Amsterdam*, Vol. I (The Hague: Warray, 1991), 212. In the approbation to *Pe'er Hador* by R. Solomon Salem, chief rabbi of the Sephardi community of Amsterdam, the latter refers to Tama in Aramaic as *yaniq ve-hakim*, "young and clever," and describes his arrival in Amsterdam with the biblical words *akh yatso yatsa*, "was yet scarce gone out" (cf. Genesis 27:30—"Jacob was yet scarce gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting"). Two possibilities present themselves: either Tama arrived in Amsterdam at an early age (probably in his early twenties) and not long before 1765. See Moses Maimonides, *Pe'er Hador* (Amsterdam: Gerard Johan Janson in the house of Israel Mondovi, 1765), f. 6a. Alternately, if we read the expression "hardly had he left his home for Amsterdam than he...", his work on *Pe'er Hador* took place shortly after he arrived.

² See R. Haim Yosef David Azulay in the manuscript of his bio-bibliographic book *Shem ha-Gedolim*: "When he [R. Eliezer Nahum] was old, in the year 5495 (1735) he came to the holy city Jerusalem and was accepted as a chief rabbi and a head of a yeshiva. And he died old and full of days in the year 5505 (1745)." Azulay, *Shem ha-Gedolim*, A, JTSL Ms. 5387, 5a. Most of these details were omitted from the printed edition of the book. See Azulay, *Shem Ha-Gedolim* A, Livorno 1774, 10a. On R. Eliezer Nahum, see Meir Benayahu, "R. Eliezer Nahum, His History, His Status among the Sages of Turkey, and His Compositions," in Eliezer Nahum, *Commentary on Sifre* (Jerusalem: Yad HaRav Nissim, 1993), 5-64 [Hebrew].

³ Eliezer Nahum, *Commentary on Mekhilta* (Jerusalem: Yad HaRav Nissim, 1999) [Hebrew].

scholar in Spain.⁴ In this article, I examine Tama's attempts to integrate into the literary milieu of Amsterdam's Sephardi community, by closely studying these two publications, with special attention to their paratexts. I show that Tama's acceptance into these circles worked in two directions: on one hand, adopted his own work to the cultural taste and Iberian pride of Amsterdam's Sephardim; on the other, his very status as an Arabophone outsider there gave him a particularly valuable scholarly asset.

Upon arriving in Amsterdam to publish the 190-page *Midrash Eliezer*, Tama approached his objective in two parallel ways. First, he had a broadsheet printed for circulation, containing a specimen page and a call for funding, specifying the readers he had in mind and proposing that they subscribe to the edition, paying the sum of five florins in advance (figure 1).⁵

The words of Mordechai are addressed to you, exceptionally fine gentlemen, clutchers of Torah and supporters of its students. Let it be known that some days ago I set out from my abode, our bastion, the city of Hebron, may it speedily be rebuilt, to publish a book written by my master and grandfather, the distinguished and exceptional sage of the Sanhedrin, chief rabbi and yeshiva head in the holy city of Jerusalem, may it be speedily rebuilt, our esteemed

⁴ On the title page of *Pe'er Hador*, Tama mentions his attempt to publish *Midrash Eliezer* as the purpose of his trip to Amsterdam. The attempt to publish *Midrash Eliezer* must have preceded the publishing projects of 1765. It also stands to reason that if *Pe'er Hador* had been published before his attempt to publish *Midrash Eliezer*, Tama would have mentioned it as part of his marketing efforts. This is also the chronology described in R. Solomon Salem's approbation. See *Pe'er Hador*, f. 6a.

⁵ The two printed pages are still bound with the manuscript, see Eliezer Nahum, *Midrash Eliezer*, Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS), Ms. 5535. This seems to be identical to the manuscript of *Midrash Eliezer* (bound with Tama's broadsheet) auctioned in Amsterdam in May 1870, apparently from the library of Jacob de Raphael Jessurun Cardozo, hazan and secretary of Amsterdam's Portuguese-Jewish community. See Frederik Muller, *Catalog einer werthvollen Sammlung hebräischer und jüdischer Bücher und Handschriften* (Amsterdam: F. Muller, 1870), 53. Portuguese Jews in the Dutch Republic had pioneered the financing of publication by subscription in the mid-seventeenth century. See Peter van Rooden and Jan Wim Wesselius, "Two Early Cases of Publication by Subscription in Holland and Germany: Jacob Abendana's *Mikhlah Yophi* (1661) and David Cohen de Lara's *Keter Kehunna* (1668)," *Quaerendo* 16, no. 2 (1986), 110–130. On the eighteenth-century context in general, see Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775–1800* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1979), 287–294, and, for Jewish books in particular, see Zeev Gries, *The Book in the Jewish World, 1700–1900* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), 22–23, 144; and Avriel Bar-Levav, "Between Library Awareness and the Jewish Republic of Letters", in *Libraries and Book Collections*, eds. Yosef Kaplan and Moshe Sluhovsky, (Jerusalem: Shazar, 2006), 217–218 [in Hebrew].

teacher and rabbi Eliezer Nahum of holy and blessed memory, author of the widely renowned [commentary] *Hazon Nahum* on the Orders of *Kedoshim* and *Taharot*. You have all seen how this man negotiates in a place where the flames of our holy rabbis in each and every generation flare. Rabbi Eliezer's teachings are concise in quantity but high in quality. And now, today, I have brought this similar book *Midrash Eliezer* on *Midrash Mekhilta*, which abounds with profound argumentation [...] plunges into mighty waters, [and] circles and proceeds on the sea of the Talmud's endless waters. The task, however, is too vast and lengthy to carry out and the expenses of publishing are so great that, in fact, I cannot afford to do the work without aid and assistance from our impeccable brethren whose hearts prompt them to subscribe. Anyone who, with God's abundant help, signs herewith will remit the sum of five florins for this work of Torah and read it all the days of his life so that his days may be long.⁶

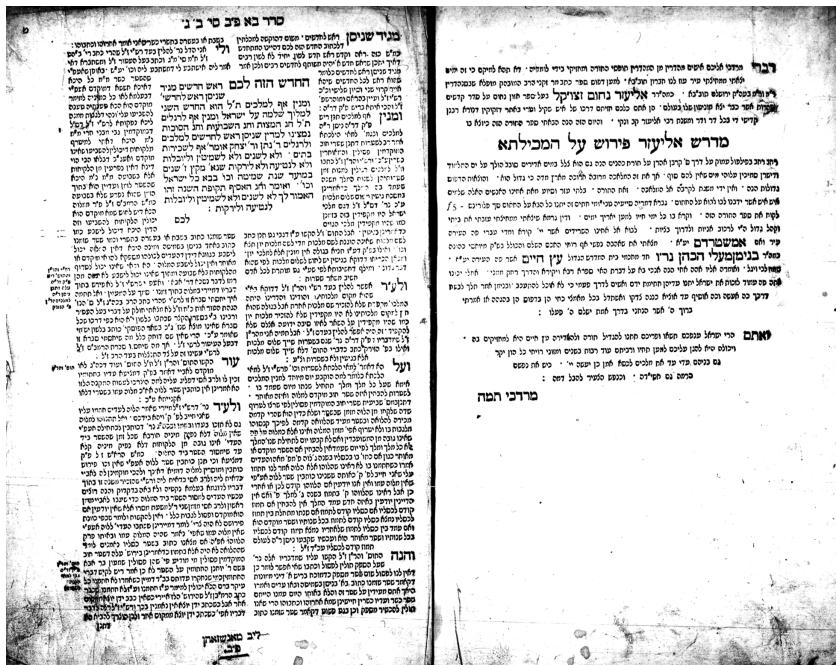


Figure 1: Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York City, Ms. 5535. *Eliezer Nahum*, *Midrash Eliezer*, bound with the promotional broadsheet *Mordechai Tama* had printed in his failed attempt to publish his grandfather's work. Reproduced courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

6 Eliezer Nahum, *Midrash Eliezer*, JTS, Ms. 5535 [I]. English translation from the Hebrew, here and throughout this article, are by the author unless otherwise noted.

Tama appeals to the “clutchers of Torah” and “supporters of its students” for financial assistance in publishing the manuscript in a way he evidently considers acceptable in this cultural world. Since they are “exceptionally fine gentlemen, clutchers of the Torah and supporters of its students”, he markets the work by describing its Torah virtues in the language of classical traditional literary conventions.

As his second marketing strategy, Tama turned to Rabbi Benjamin Acohen of Jerusalem, like Tama a Palestinian Jew residing in Amsterdam, who had agreed to proofread the manuscript and prepare it for printing.⁷ Immediately after presenting the sales pitch, Tama adds:

So it happened that I set out from my abode, left my home and a large community, may God protect it, to travel by sea and by land and reach our surviving brethren who have been called by God. As I wandered around in this mother-city of Amsterdam, may God give it a firm foundation, I found that which my soul and my wise, full, and all-embracing spirit had sought: an offspring of saints and a man of priestly lineage, our esteemed teacher Benjamin Meheli Acohen, may the Merciful One preserve and redeem him, one of the sages of the great *Ets Haim* Beit Midrash in this city, may God protect it. My heart rejoiced. I said to him, O my brother, I have come in the matter of this great and dear book and the way is far for me. Please, stand here, to grant merit to Israel, and they will affix their signatures; then I will leave because I cannot delay. May you go in peace, Benjamin said. So I shall until I place his righteousness before the public like a bright star and I will spare no effort in both printing and in proofing. Then I said, blessed be God who has guided me down the path of truth; may God remunerate him for what he has done.⁸

This description, too, abounds with literary conventions which evidently put his own rabbinic learning on display for a readership steeped in rabbinic tradition, to vouchsafe his credentials as he solicits investment in a book that has yet to be produced. Tama stresses not only Benjamin Meheli’s erudition and his affiliation with the famed *Ets Haim* Yeshiva

⁷ Benjamin Moshe son of Haim Shalom Meheli Acohen left Jerusalem and travelled to Western Europe as an emissary of the city of Tiberias. During the 1770s and 1780s, he published several books in Hamburg, The Hague, and Amsterdam. See Abraham Yaari, *Sheluhey Erez-Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1951), 517, 852 [in Hebrew].

⁸ Eliezer Nahum, *Midrash Eliezer*, JTSL, Ms. 5535, [1].

of Amsterdam, but also his own priestly descent.⁹ This is important: Benjamin Meheli was a young scholar at the time but had already become a teacher at the most important Jewish academy in the city. Like Tama, he was a Palestinian Jew who had come to Amsterdam and found his way into its most learned society. It is no surprise that Tama identified with Meheli and projected his own ambitions onto his career.¹⁰ Tama concludes by making another pitch, using similar terminology, to the imagined target readership of his book:

And you Jews, may your branch bear fruit [Ezekiel 36:8] to amplify and glorify Torah. It is a tree of life for those who support it [Proverbs 3:8]. May it protect you so that you may live and multiply many times over in years, in abundant food, and in all manner of wealth, and may your offspring be as eternal as kings on the throne., Amen, may God bring it about, each commensurate with the exaltedness of his soul and his piety. As a young person akin to nothingness, Mordechai Tama.¹¹

The specimen page that Tama printed is also meant to persuade a specific readership. He did not choose the first page of his grandfather's work, which begins with an explanation of the following Midrashic passage, to promote the book:

“The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt.” [From this] I hear that the word came to Moses and Aaron. But it [also] says, “And it was on the day God spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt,” [meaning that] the word came to Moses and not to Aaron.

⁹ Benjamin is mentioned in the ‘Vestiaria dos Talmidim’, a charity that collected money for the students of Ets Ḥaim, who received allowances from these funds for the purpose of buying clothing: SAA (Stadsarchief Amsterdam) 334, PJC 1190, 30. I thank Heide Warncke of the Ets Ḥaim library and Ton Tielen for their help. On the Ets Ḥaim students’ support system, see Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld, *Poverty and Welfare among the Portuguese Jews in Early Modern Amsterdam*, (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 98-99.

¹⁰ According to his marriage license (Amsterdam, 1772), Benjamin was born in 1743. Thus, when Tama wrote these words, he was approximately twenty years of age. In the license, it is stated that Benjamin Cohen, born in Jerusalem, married Simcha Calo in 1772. Verdooner and Snel, *Trouw en Mokum*, 205. Benjamin’s ketuba confirms that the groom is indeed Benjamin Meheli Acohen, identifying him by his full name. See SAA 334, PJC 396, 182.

¹¹ Eliezer Nahum, *Midrash Eliezer*, JTSL, Ms. 5535, [I].

Indeed, this is the opening passage of *Midrash Mekhilta*.¹² For the specimen page, however, Tama chose a passage from Section 2:2, which appears in the manuscript on page 6a and begins by quoting the midrash: “This month is unto you the first of the months; it says that Nisan is the first of the months.”¹³ The quotation seems designed to evoke in any reader familiar with Rashi’s commentary the famous words with which Rashi begins his commentary on the Torah:

Rabbi Yitzhak said, should not the Torah have begun with “This month is unto you”, this being the first commandment given to the Jews? Wherefore does it start with “In the beginning”? It is because “[God] has shown his people the power of His works, giving them the lands of other nations” [Psalms, 111:6].¹⁴

By offering this particular passage as a specimen of the entire book, Tama appeals to a readership that acknowledges and appreciates Torah study and is committed to the world of the halakha. (After all, the head of the month is the first commandment given to the Israelites.) Thus, it should evoke an emotional associative response among the intended readers in favor of the book that they are asked to finance and purchase.

However many subscribers Tama managed to recruit (no record has survived), it was insufficient. Yet the failure in his first objective did not keep Tama from pursuing other publishing projects. Indeed, Tama made other, more successful inroads in Amsterdam’s Jewish literary circles. By studying the two works that Tama published in Amsterdam in 1765—*Pe’er Hador* and *Maskiyot Kesef*—with particular attention to the way the paratexts on the title page and the bilingual (Hebrew-Spanish) prefatory material frame the project of its edition, we find that during the interval between his failure to publish *Midrash Eliezer* and his successful publication of the two aforementioned works, Tama adopted the complex Judeo-Iberian culture that he had encountered in Amsterdam and fashioned his own scholarly persona to both fit in and demonstrate the value of his own expertise as an Arabophone Jew.

“I came to this country to publish a book written by my esteemed grandfather”, Tama emphasised on the title page of *Pe’er Hador*.¹⁵ Once in Amsterdam, a manuscript of Maimonides’ responsa suddenly came into his

¹² Ibid., 1b.

¹³ Ibid., 6b.

¹⁴ Rashi on Genesis 1:1.

¹⁵ Maimonides, *Pe’er Hador*, title page.

possession, and he undertook to translate and publish it: “And God merited me to translate it, which I did into my language, a facile language.”¹⁶ Signing his name, Tama also traces his lineage to his grandfather:

These are the words of this young man, akin to dust, Mordechai the son of my teacher, my father, the consummate and perfect sage, the esteemed teacher and mentor Isaac Tama of sainted and blessed memory, and the maternal grandson of the distinguished and exceptional sage of the Sanhedrin, the mentor and teacher Eliezer Nahum of sainted and blessed memory, author of *Hazon Nahum*, who was head of the rabbinical court and head of the yeshiva in Adrianopolis, may God protect it, and in his last days went up to live in the holy city of Jerusalem, may it be speedily rebuilt, and was received there as head of the rabbinical court, head of yeshiva, and teacher of justice.¹⁷

Tama also introduces Maimonides’s responsa, on the title page and in his two-page “Translator’s Introduction”, using traditional literary conventions, such as the midrashic expressions *hemda genuza*, a hidden delight,¹⁸ and *amon mekhuse*, a hidden wisdom to describe the rare book.¹⁹ Maimonides is “our great and illustrious rabbi”²⁰ who “sits and interprets”²¹ and “executes our judgment.”²² Tama uses the term *ha-ish Moshe*, “the man Moses”—an expression taken from Numbers 12:3—in reference to Moses Maimonides, thereby likening Maimonides to his namesake, the biblical Moses.²³ He depicts Jacob Sasportas, the owner of the manuscript,²⁴ as a “righteous”

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Yalkut Shimoni*, Korach, par. 17, to Numbers 16:3 (ed. Hayman and Shiloni, p. 328).

¹⁹ *Bereshit Rabba*, Bereshit, par. 1:1, to Genesis 1:1 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 1:1).

²⁰ Maimonides, *Pe’er Hador*; title page.

²¹ Ibid, f. 13b.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ This Jacob Sasportas is the grandson of the anti-Sabbatian Rabbi Jacob Sasportas (c. 1610–1698), as he notes in his Spanish preface to Tama’s *Pe’er Hador*. See also Alfred Friemann’s introduction to *Moshe ben Maimon Responsa* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1934), XX. Verdooner and Snel, *Trouw en Mokum*, 104, record that Jacob Sasportas, the son of Abraham, married Ester Senior Coronel in 1733. The manuscript was already in the possession of the elder Sasportas, the father of Abraham. See Yaacob Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi: The Life of Jacob Sasportas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 164. The manuscript is now in the Royal Library in Copenhagen (The Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen, Denmark, shelf mark Ms. Sim. Jud.-Arab. 1). The name ‘mordechai tama’ in Latin letters, is written on the second unpaginated flyleaf and on f. 38r.

and “mild man”²⁵ who “has a wise heart”²⁶ “filled with the spirit of wisdom and Torah for its own sake” (*Torah li-shma*) and “one of the descendants of Hobab.”²⁷ Tama likens Sasportas’s home to Jerusalem, “For there God sent forth the blessing like dew from Mount Hermon.” (cf. Psalm 133:3).²⁸ Tama’s preface also invokes classical literary conventions when he thanks those who helped him with his work, e.g., “May the Lord remunerate him for his deed”²⁹ and “May God bestow blessing upon him.”³⁰ He then lists their virtues, including “righteous with all good characteristic features”,³¹ “trustful in God”,³² “guilelessly righteous”,³³ “as well expounded as Ben Azzai in the markets of Tiberias”,³⁴ and so on. Tama concludes his preface with a prayer:

Oh Lord! Please command your flock and your children to return to their country. May the city be rebuilt on its hill and may Israel be triumphant, and may the great light dominate. And may the Temple, our holy Temple, our pride, the secure homestead, a tent not to be transported, be built and perfected. And may we, Your people and Your inheritance, ascend the holy mountain, Zion the perfect.³⁵

Six pages in Spanish follow the title page, constituting public correspondence between the owner of the manuscript (Jacob Sasportas the younger) and Tama. In the text dedicated to Tama describing the translator’s and editor’s virtues under the title *Devidos Elogios con que se expressa una pequeña parte de los muchos que merece el Traductor desta obra* (“Words of praise and

²⁵ By using this term (*ish tam*), he likens the owner of the manuscript, Jacob Sasportas, to the biblical Jacob, who is reported as being “a mild man” (Genesis, 25:27).

²⁶ Maimonides, *Pe’er Hador*, title page.

²⁷ Ibid., 13b. The expression “one of the descendants of Ḥobab” denotes a person who is fond of the Torah, according to the Midrashic interpretation of the seven names of Jethro, Moses’s father-in-law. See *Shemot Rabba*, Yitro, par. 8, to Exodus 18:1 (ed. Romm, Vilna, 1:97) and elsewhere. Another interpretation of the name Ḥobab is “he who is beloved [*haviv*] by the Lord.” *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, par. Yitro, to Exodus 18:1 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, p. 189) and elsewhere.

²⁸ Maimonides, *Pe’er Hador*, title page.

²⁹ Ibid., Preface by the copyist and proof-reader, 14a.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. “Like Ben Azzai in the markets of Tiberias,” according to Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 29a, is an intellectually sharp person. See Rashi ad loc: “I am ready to sharply answer anyone who asks me, like Ben Azzai who expounded in the markets of Tiberias and no one in his time uprooted mountains as he did.”

³⁵ Ibid., preface by copyist and proof-reader, 14b.

glory that express a tiny fraction of the many praises that the translator of this work deserves'),³⁶ Sasportas presents Tama as someone whose skills and talent stand to his credit in translating Maimonides's responsa from Arabic into Hebrew. Tama's response, dedicated to Sasportas, follows.³⁷

Tama lamented on the title page that Arabic used to be a Jewish vernacular language, now largely forgotten in the West, and that he himself, a man from Hebron, held the key to hidden wisdom that was hidden precisely because the Jews of the West had forgotten their Arabic. For the younger Sasportas, grandson of an Arabophone Jew from Algeria, the sentiment was personal. He recounts that it had been his grandfather's dream to have the manuscript translated, but the community had lacked someone like Tama sufficiently fluent in Arabic to do so.³⁸

On the next three pages, Tama introduces the book and acknowledges those who assisted him in its preparation and publication. Like the Hebrew introduction of the book on the title page and in the Hebrew preface, the text dedicated to Sasportas presents the work to the readers. However, whereas in Hebrew Tama uses classical rabbinical literary conventions, as he had done when he tried to market his grandfather's book, in the Spanish text he tailors his description to the particular Spanish-Portuguese culture of Amsterdam's Sephardic *literati*, as familiar with Spanish Golden Age poetry and the culture of the European Enlightenment as with Rashi's commentary on the Talmud, if indeed not more so, and fiercely proud of the ostensible nobility and antiquity of Spanish Jewry.³⁹ In these dedicatory

³⁶ Ibid., III.

³⁷ Ibid., VI. *Epistola dedicatoria del Traductor el ilustrisimo y magnifico señor Jacob Sasportas.*

³⁸ Tama's *Pe'er HaDor* was all the more valuable because before 1765, only 45 of Maimonides' responsa had been published; *Pe'er Hador* contained 138 hitherto unpublished responsa. For the place of Tama's *Pe'er Hador* in the editorial history of Maimonides's Responsa, see Maimonides, *She'elot veteshuvot haRambam*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 2016), 6-8 [in Hebrew]. For an example of awareness of the importance of translating from Arabic among Ashkenazim in 18th-century Amsterdam, see Avriel Bar-Levav, "Textual Intimacy and the Bond of Reading between the Expulsion from Spain and Amsterdam," in *Paths to Modernity: A Tribute to Yosef Kaplan*, eds. Avriel Bar-Levav, Claude B. Stuczynski and Michael Heyd (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2018), 159-164 [in Hebrew].

³⁹ On this topic, see i.a. José Faur, *In the Shadow of History: Jews and Conversos at the Dawn of Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Yosef Kaplan, *An Alternative Path to Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); idem., *From Christianity to Judaism: The Story of Isaac Orobio de Castro*, (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1989); Jonathan Israel, "Philosophy, Deism, and Early Jewish Enlightenment (1655-1740)," in *The Dutch Intersection: The Jews and the Netherlands in Modern History*, ed. Yosef Kaplan (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 173-201.

remarks, the terminology is less specifically Jewish and more universal. Instead of stressing his assistants' religious virtues and proximity to God, Tama emphasizes the author's "*lustre de la nobleza y el resplandor del ilustre de los merecimientos propios*" (lustre of nobility and personal virtues).⁴⁰ Instead of showering the author with traditional rabbinical accolades, Tama calls him "*ilustrísimo y magnífico señor*" (illustrious and magnificent sir).⁴¹ In the Hebrew introduction, the work is described as important because it is a rabbinical treatise; rabbinical terms such "a hidden delight" and "hidden educator" are used to drive the point home. In the Spanish, the halakhic work is described as "*científicas consultas y repuestas [sic]*" (scientific questions and answers).⁴² It deserves to be translated and published, Tama writes, not because it spreads the luster of Torah among the Jewish people but *para que el mundo lograse los resplandores rayos del Sol escondido debajo de las antipodas de una lengua extraña* (because it will privilege the world with "the splendor of beams from a hidden sun in the mystery of a foreign language" (that is, Arabic).⁴³

Maimonides, too, after being described in the Hebrew text as a giant in Torah, is depicted differently in Spanish. Now he is "*el mas famoso heroe*" (the most renowned hero), *el doctor*, and part of "*los más esclarecidos en la antigüedad en España*" (the most enlightened in the history of Spain).⁴⁴ These rhetorical differences reflect Tama's awareness of the cultural diversity of Amsterdam Jewish society and of his potential readership. Both, he realizes, are potential readers of the works that he publishes.

This insight left its imprints in the second work that he published in Amsterdam in 1765, *Maskiyot Kesef*.⁴⁵ Here Tama resorts to a genre outside the epitomic sphere of Torah and does so without knowing the author's identity. That is, he chooses to redact and publish the work not due to its author's virtues but through an understanding its literary value—either in

⁴⁰ Maimonides, *Pe'er Hador*, VII.

⁴¹ Ibid., VI.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., VII.

⁴⁴ Ibid., VII-VIII.

⁴⁵ It seems that *Pe'er Hador* was published first, because in the approbation to *Maskiyot Kesef*, written by the poet Abraham Bashan, Tama is described in these words: "His hands produced the translation of *Pe'er Hador*, which is the responsa of the great eagle Maimonides [...] and all the people at the gate and the elders praised it." S.a. [Solomon Dapiera], *Maskiyot Kesef* (Amsterdam: Gerard Johan Janson in the house of Israel Mondovi, 1765, 2a. For the year of publication of *Maskiyot Kesef*, see Meijer Marcus Roest, *Catalog der Hebraica und Judaica aus der L. Rosenthal'schen Bibliothek* (Amsterdam: B. M. Isræl, 1966), 1119.

his own eyes or, perhaps, in those the eyes of the Ibero-Jewish cultural circle in Amsterdam.⁴⁶

On the title page, Tama acknowledges the author's anonymity: "This book was found among the rabbinical collection and no one knows which of those holy men he was."⁴⁷ The strengths of the book lie in its contents: "It is a river emanating from Eden that waters all of those who thirst; golden waters emerge from its song of wisdom." The glossary allows any aspiring writer to enrich and fine-tune his diction and to distinguish among the various meanings of the homonyms:

For he whose spirit moves him to write, his hand will write a mighty, indefatigable, inexhaustible flow and his superb wording will go before him. For all dicta, a thing and its opposite were taught in the desert; there [God] placed it before him and interpreted its difficult essence.⁴⁸

To this valuable literary reference tool, Tama added an appendix: the last six pages of the book comprise the poetic correspondence between two medieval poets: Abraham Bedersi and Todros ben Joseph Halevi Abulafia.⁴⁹ Tama advertised their inclusion on the title page, too:

Furthermore, ancient words will follow as were written by one of the early ones, first among the speakers: our esteemed teacher and rabbi Abraham Badrashi [Bedersi, i.e. of Béziers] may his memory be a blessing for the life of the world to come, to the great rabbi, prince of the princes of the Levites, our esteemed teacher and rabbi Todros Halevi, may his memory be a blessing for the life of the world to come, a high official and prominent man in the Kingdom of Castille, to show the peoples and the mighty its beauty.⁵⁰

In a separate heading on the page at which this correspondence itself begins, Tama added his rationale for including them: "I saw [fit] here to

⁴⁶ On the book and on Tama's edition, which is only part of Dapiera's manuscript, see Aharon Maman, *Otzrot Lashon: The Hebrew Philology Manuscripts and Genizah Fragments in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America* (New York and Jerusalem: JTS, 2006), 213-214, 224-225 [in Hebrew].

⁴⁷ Dapiera, *Maskiyot Kesef*, title page.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Jefim Schirmann, *The History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), 377-379, 469-484 [in Hebrew]. On the correspondence between them, see there, 472-473.

⁵⁰ Dapiera, *Maskiyot Kesef*, title page.

present an epistle written by Rabbi Abraham Badrashi, may his memory be a blessing, that I consider the embodiment of succinct eloquence. I placed it here because I consider it honest and correct.”⁵¹ In praising both Bedersi and Abulafia’s erudition and their poetic accomplishments, Tama spoke to the cultural values dear to the Spanish-Portuguese Jewish milieu he sought to join, for which the Sephardic legacy of rabbinic scholarship and secular poetry were questions of utmost communal pride.⁵² Therefore, although the two books that Tama published in Amsterdam in 1765 belong to different genres, both Maimonides’ responsa and the edition of Solomon Dapiera’s literary reference tool combined with the correspondence of medieval Iberian poets belong to the trend that Irene Zwiep calls the “literary archaeology” that marked the learned Jewish culture of 18th-century Amsterdam, in which “manuscripts of medieval Sephardi classics, which until then had been hidden in private collections, were now brought to the printing press in order to be saved from oblivion.”⁵³

The title page of *Maskiyot Kesef* already highlighted the word ‘CASTILE’ by setting it in bold and large square letters amid the Rashi-script, a para-textual appeal to the pride his host community felt in their Iberian heritage. Tama tailored his literary activities to the Sephardi circles he wished to join. On the last three pages of *Maskiyot Kesef*, Tama describes, in verse, under the title *Divrei Emet* (‘Words of Truth’) his first encounter with Amsterdam. Tama describes the city as “altogether beautiful and pleasing”, “the mother of cities, for it is the source of the bread of knowledge and the path of reason.” Then Tama switches to a description of Solomon Salem, rabbi of Amsterdam’s Portuguese-Jewish community:⁵⁴

As I looked on, I beheld a flame taking hold and spreading and a man standing within it: Rikha ve-bar Rikha [a king and son of a king, cf. Babylonian Talmud,

⁵¹ Ibid., 23b.

⁵² See Irene Zwiep, “Jewish Enlightenment Reconsidered: The Dutch Eighteenth Century,” in *Sepharad in Ashkenaz: Medieval Knowledge and Eighteenth-Century Enlightened Jewish Discourse*, eds. Resianne Fontaine, Andrea Schatz, and Irene Zwiep (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2007), 291-293; A. Van Der Heide, “Dutch Hebrew Poetry of the 17th Century,” in *Dutch Jewish History*, II, ed. Jozeph Michman (Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1989), 137-152.

⁵³ Zwiep, “Jewish Enlightenment Reconsidered,” 291-292.

⁵⁴ On R. Solomon Salem, a student of Tama’s grandfather, see Zvi Loker, “Rabbi Shlomo (Solomon) Salem—from Salonika to Amsterdam,” *Studies on the History of Dutch Jewry* V (Jerusalem: Institute for Research on Dutch Jewry, Hebrew University, 1988), 113-133 [in Hebrew].

Baba Batra 4a], his features like an angel of God, terribly awesome, and there was a mighty sceptre [cf. Jer. 47:17] and I was shocked and I flinched [...] Then I turned to the right and saw the leaders of the community calling me, and I pleaded with them and spoke to them, saying: If I have pleased you, you are all standing together today, please tell me the name of the man who is king unto me, to whom all run, from every town and region, and [tell me] if he is a dream vision and if he is one of the angels who dwell in the highest realm. Then all the people answered in unison and said, long live Solomon the king.⁵⁵

Continuing his vision, Tama's imagined interlocutors glorify R. Solomon Salem and his works. Tama, stricken with feelings of inferiority compared to their eloquence, is afraid to join the chorus of praise: "I fell speechless, unable to answer."⁵⁶ To Tama's aid appears a wondrous, angelic figure who encourages him to abandon his feelings of inferiority and unworthiness:

A spirit cast me aloft and hurled me under one of the bushes, in the meadow. And he found me, and he wondered as he saw me in silent amazement. He replied, asking me why I had gone into hiding to flee from them—Have you not seen that they were offering [sacrifices] and gift-offerings and libations? Wherever the wise cast their eyes, you, too, should do as they have done. [...] Now you, blessed one of God, rise and take for yourself a sheet.⁵⁷

Tama is convinced: "And I said, it is taught that the bashful does not learn. I, too, will not fear the masses and my mouth is like theirs and my hand is like theirs, and they will write of controversy." Immediately thereafter, Tama presents a poem of his own in honor of Solomon Salem, an octet beginning with the words *ahuva azamer / a'orer teḥina / ve-ḥayyim ve-shalom / le-harav le-mana* (Beloved one, I shall sing / I will express an entreaty / and life and peace / to the Rabbi as a portion) and in which each of the subsequent seven lines consist of these same words arranged in different order.⁵⁸ No sooner has Tama given this little demonstration his own poetic skill and rhetorical command, than an angel reproaches him:

You have added pain to pain, he said, because I had thought of you as one who knows and here I see that you are a deceiver, because I saw neither form nor

⁵⁵ Dapiera, *Maskiyot Kesef*, 26b.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 26b-27a.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 27a.

grandeur in your words, which are repetitive like a year in which [the month of] Adar is doubled, and you took eight roots and twirled them around, and made rough ground level, and said, I will come into them.⁵⁹

The angel then places worthy poetic utterances in Tama's mouth, whereupon the earth opens its mouth and responds with poetry of its own. After this, he reproves Tama again:

He said, had I not told you before that you know nothing? You will let your hand tug at a quill that is obstructed [i.e., you will hold only blocked-up quill pens that are unfit for writing]. All these words are far from Tama [a Hebrew pun on Tama's name: the term *Tama* means complete, finished, flawless]; what prompts you to resort to song and praise that will cause the trees of the forest to sing, to befriend the entire community and the elders at the gate so that they will sing? This way is so far from you; your tongue should cleave to the pen of a swift scribe [i.e., you should say only words produced by a scribe who writes quickly, i.e., a skilled one]. [Then] your opening words will spread light.⁶⁰

Tama's poetic self responds: "So I said, I will then sing the songs and praises of Solomon, may his God be with him."⁶¹ Finally, he concludes with a seventeen-line poem in honor R. Solomon Salem, of which the last lines are "May Solomon be as long-lived as the land / a prince and a pioneer in our midst."⁶²

In this fantastic and multi-layered set-piece, Tama crafts a persona for himself, an outsider who moves from self-doubt and silence to social acceptance and poetic accomplishment. By *mise-en-abîme*, he is also the author of the verses of those whose eloquence he cannot equal, and of the words by which his persona's verses are reproached. He is even the author of the song of the earth, the mouth of which "speaks with wisdom [cf. Prov. 31:26], fair as the moon, bright as the sun" [cf. Song of Songs 6:10]. It amounts to a complex and clever account of his arrival in Amsterdam, of the way the young man from Hebron was overwhelmed by this capital of culture, and of his desire to join its learned company, for his "mouth to become like their mouth, his hand like their hand." Moving back and forth between confessions of humility and performances of erudition and skill, Tama concludes

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 27a-27b.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

with a paean to R. Solomon Salem, even after the angel dismisses him as an ignoramus. It might be richly ironic for Tama to call a text so redolent with poetic deception *Divrei Emet*, but truth is not what it seems. In the title, Tama marked the word *Emet* ('Truth') with *gershayim*, the double apostrophe noting a Hebrew acronym. *Emet* (אֶת) here stands, in all likelihood, for *Anokhi Mordechai Tama* (אנכי מרדכי תמה), "I am Mordechai Tama." The truth lies concealed behind the poet's self-fashioned persona: he performs his worthiness of admission in the world he seeks to join, Amsterdam's community of rabbinic learning.⁶³ The closing poem converges with a six-line poem Tama composed for the title page, and his own verses frame the collection of writings by medieval Sephardi poets of the book in between.

The young man from Hebron's failure to publish his grandfather's Midrashic work did not prevent him from quickly learning the conventions and tastes of the cultural circle that he encountered. Tama's marriage into an Amsterdam Sephardi family⁶⁴ and his subsequent life in France, which lie beyond the purview of the present article, will attest to his success in the cultural integration to which he aspired.

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⁶³ Apart from the words of the imaginary "leaders of the community", the book includes, on its first pages, two poetic approbations by local poets—Abraham Bashan and Moses Raphael Hisquia da Vega; *ibid.*, 2a-2b. Poetic approbations of this kind were common in the Amsterdam literary milieu; Tama himself uses this method in a poem of his own that appears, among other poems by local poets, on the first pages of David Franco Mendes's play *Gemul Atalya*—giving further indication of Tama's integration into the local cultural circle. See: David Franco Mendes, *Gemul Atalya*, Amsterdam 1770. On the poetic approbations, see Jozeph Michman, "On 'Gemul Atalya' by David Franco Mendes," in *idem*, *Mikhmanei Yosef: Studies in the History and Literature of the Dutch Jews* (Jerusalem: Institute for Research on Dutch Jewry, Hebrew University, 1994), 465 [in Hebrew].

⁶⁴ Tama's marriage registration to Clara del Sotto (1775) appears in the community records; see note 1 above. On the del Sotto family in Amsterdam, see Daniel M. Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000), 252-258.

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