 RABAD OF
POSQUIÈRES

A TWELFTH-CENTURY
TALMUDIST 

ISADORE TWERSKY

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A Twelfth-Century Talmudist

Revised Edition

ISADORE TWERSKY

VARDA BOOKS

SKOKIE, ILLINOIS, USA

5761/2001

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This ebook has been published with permission of The Jewish Publication Society (Philadelphia). The printed book, which served as a basis for this book is catalogued by the Library of Congress thus:

Library of Congress catalog card number 79-88696
ISBN 0-8276-0123-9

New ISBN 1-59045-472-3 Library PDF

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Varda Books, 9001 Keating Avenue, Skokie, Illinois, USA

Prepared as an ebook by [Varda Graphics, Inc.](#)

TO
My Father and Mother

The dedication is now a memorial. My father (d. 26 Sivan, 5732) and my mother (d. 1 Tevet, 5737) of blessed memory, the beloved and revered Rebbe and Rebbitzen of Talne, left a legacy of goodness and kindness, piety, probity and wisdom. ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

PREFACE

Jewish intellectual history to the dawn of the nineteenth century is comparable to a fast-moving stream coursing through a complex network of tributaries and offshoots. The waters of the rivulets which poured into or eddied alongside the mainstream of Judaism were colored by a dazzling variety of cultural disciplines: philosophy and mysticism, rationalism and pietism, exegesis and commentary, poetry and belles-lettres, linguistics and grammar. They did not always flow evenly or simultaneously. At various times, the philosophic tributary swelled in certain areas while the mystical waters raged elsewhere; or the philosophic tributary changed its course, only to have its former bed occupied by mystical currents. Poetry and belles-lettres were like wadies: their waters might reach inundating proportions and they might dry up completely. The courses of these streams deserve to be—and, to a great extent, have been—charted, their ebbs and peaks registered, their force and calm measured; each of them left an imprint on the evolving Jewish intellect and spirit. The mainstream, however, was the *halakah* (Jewish Law)—its ever-expanding corpus of literature and its cumulative body of practice.

Yet, this position of undisputed centrality in history notwithstanding, it has not received a commensurate position in historiography. The following book on an outstanding medieval Talmudist, Rabad of Posquières, who lavishly enriched the major genres of halakic literature and perceptibly accelerated the development of a critico-conceptual method of halakic study, is offered as a modest contribution to this field of historical research. Rabad was a thoroughgoing Talmudist; his prolific literary output was characterized by a striking unity of form and content. In this study, I have attempted to treat Rabad primarily as an halakic scholar, relating other attributes and inter-

ests to this central characteristic. I hope that it will be found worthy of acceptance.

In presenting highly specialized halakic materials in English, I have tried to keep the book from becoming cumbersome and overtechnical without indulging in loose generalizations. Therefore, though I have only sometimes provided detailed illustrations and analyses of halakic problems, I have always aimed at giving full documentation of every general statement so that the interested reader will be able to check all the references. (Attention should be called to the list of abbreviations and the note on references printed at the end of the book.)

My appraisal of Rabad is clearly appreciative, perhaps excessively sympathetic. I trust that this is the result not of overexposure to medieval hyperbole but of an objective examination of the sources themselves. Rabad emerges from such an examination as an individual whose influence surpasses local bounds and temporal barriers.

I was fortunate to have enjoyed good will and encouragement from many quarters. Teachers, colleagues, and friends have been very helpful and I am grateful to all of them. I am especially indebted to Professor Harry A. Wolfson whose scholarship has excited me and friendship has warmed me over a period of many years. He supervised the progress of my work with his customary kindness and perceptive criticism and offered many suggestions concerning style, structure, and substance. He has done more for me than I can acknowledge. I am profoundly grateful to Professor Saul Lieberman for the sustained cordial interest which he has shown in my work and for letting me benefit so liberally from his vast knowledge. His careful reading of my manuscript led to some important additions and necessary modifications and enriched me greatly. It is a unique privilege to discuss problems of Jewish learning with him. My father-in-law, Rabbi Dr. Joseph Soloveitchik, combining keen professorial interest with great paternal devotion, placed his immense Talmudic erudition and penetrating observations at my disposal and I drew freely from them. His impact on my work—and life—is incalculable.

The friendship and intellectual companionship of Professor Frank M. Cross, chairman of the department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures at Harvard, have been very dear to me. If not for his friendly prodding and genuine interest, the manuscript might still be awaiting that elusive final touch.

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My wife helped immeasurably and contributed in many ways to the completion of this work. I appreciate the devoted assistance of Miss Carol Cross, who did a remarkable job in preparing the typescript. Her patience with a difficult manuscript was inexhaustible. The editorial staff of the Harvard University Press has been most cooperative; special thanks are due to Miss Ann Louise Coffin for her kind help in many technical and editorial matters. Publication of this book was made possible by the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation at Harvard, aided by a subvention from the Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation. Parts of Chapter VI appeared in the *Proceedings* of the American Academy of Jewish Research, 1957 and are used here with permission of the editors.

I would not attempt to depict my feelings of love and gratitude toward my parents. The dedication is merely a token expression.

ISADORE TWERSKY

Harvard University
July 1961

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Rabad of Posquières

INTRODUCTION TO REVISED EDITION

 A retrospective-reflective approach to my book on Rabad evokes many strong impressions and varying assessments which vie for primacy in determining the contents of these present remarks. It seemed to me that if I were permitted to take a cue from the general medieval literary tradition which often accentuated the role of direct address or personal “appeal to the reader,” the following reminiscence would be the most appropriate point of departure for a succinct statement which *ex hypotheso* should be not only retrospective but also partially prospective. My study of Rabad developed out of a short-lived burst of youthful scholarly exuberance: I decided (more than twenty years ago) with great enthusiasm and a heightened sense of expectation to write an intellectual history of the Jews in southern France during the Middle Ages. I was convinced then—and still am—that such an investigation would be significant, suggestive, and repercussive, that it could be paradigmatic for the study and understanding of the development and atrophy of Jewish culture in specific foreign environments. Many years later, in a piece that turned out to be a combined review article and programmatic essay, I articulated the rationale which prompted my initial decision and which still sustains an abiding hope, God willing, to implement it.

Jewish history in southern France, often seen merely as an epicycle of the Spanish or northern French spheres of influence, invites scholarly attention both because of its intrinsic, substantive value as well as its self-transcending methodological relevance. On one hand, the chronological span of the period is rather clearly delimited and therefore sustains one’s hopes for a meaningful overview of or synoptic approach to the entire peri-

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od and, on the other, the cultural productivity is sufficiently impressive and comprehensive so as to present a colorful microcosm of medieval Jewish intellectual history. Independent literary and intellectual activity makes its appearance toward the middle of the eleventh century—with the works of R. Moses ha-Darshan of Narbonne—and continues uninterrupted, with vigor and intensity, until the beginning of the fourteenth century—with the works of R. Menahem ha-Me'iri of Perpignan. In the intervening centuries, there is a remarkable efflorescence of Jewish culture in Provence: rabbinics, philosophy, mysticism, ethics, exegesis, grammar and lexicography, poetry, and belles lettres are cultivated. Certain clearly defined indigenous trends reach maturation while there is an appropriation of new intellectual motifs and tendencies. There is hardly a facet of the total Jewish religious and intellectual experience that is not reflected—and all in a compact period of time. There are legists who enriched all the major genres of halakic literature and accelerated the development of a new, critico-comparative method of Talmudic study which was to become a mainstay of halakic thinking and writing. There are students of philosophy and philosophers and devotees of philosophy, as well as patrons and protagonists, who are responsible for preserving and transmitting the accumulated philosophic and scientific learning of Arabic-speaking Jewry as well as for interpreting it, disseminating it, and extending its frontiers. There are kabbalists who—at first haltingly and reservedly, then boldly and confidently—move mystical speculation and experience to the center of the stage: some of the oldest known kabbalistic texts were redacted or first circulated here and the earliest devotees of the new doctrines organized themselves in Provence at this time. Poets energetically ply their humanistic trade and enthusiastically vindicate it—producing rationales of the poetic art, articulating the consciousness of the artist, and defining his place in society. Exegetes make durable contributions to the field of Scriptural commentary and enlarge its scope by combining midrashic interpretation with philosophical allegory and philological insight. Polemicists and apologists marshal erudition and ingenuity in their defense of Judaism against persistent theological arraignments and social-economic attacks. (“Aspects of the Social and Cultural History of Provençal Jewry,” *Journal of World History*, XI (1968), 11–12.)

In any event, at the time, I turned to Rabad, my old “friend” from years of Talmud study, assuming that this pivotal personality would provide one sure, sturdy fulcrum: I thought that a quick review of the scholarly literature would round out my spotty acquaintance with his life and works and produce a micro-view of the state of research. This procedure, repeated a number of times with regard to other key fig-

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ures, would thus set the stage for preparation of the desired synthesis while also revealing the few glaring lacunae and prime desiderata. The chasm between my jaunty innocent expectation and the austere literary reality was immense; my enthusiasm was displaced by a sobriety which manifested itself in an overpowering awareness of the need for abundant monographic study and also the systematic publication of vast amounts of manuscript material in many areas. Rabad himself, a creative, colorful, controversial writer of astounding force and originality as well as versatility whose impact on Talmud study and the development of rabbinic literature was formative as well as formidable, had yet to be analyzed comprehensively; moreover, all his works had not even been published, and available printed works were often defective or incomplete. The fragmented scholarly reality was simultaneously a disappointment and a catalyst. I ended up substituting a full-length study of Rabad—perhaps the first such monograph on one of the leading *rishonim*, as pointed out to me by a colleague—for the projected polychromatic cultural history.

Since then, we have seen a full-scale explosion of Provençal studies, particularly the publication of scores of rabbinic works—commentaries on the Talmud, *Hilkot ha-Rif* or *Mishneh Torah*, volumes of responses and mini-codes—or new, refined editions of works which, although in print, had been marred by errors or omissions and certainly lacked any apparatus of references, annotations or variant readings. R. Jonathan ha-Kohen of Lunel, R. Meshullam and his five sons, especially R. Aaron and R. Asher, R. Moses ha-Kohen, R. Abraham b. Nathan ha-Yarḥi, R. David b. Levi, R. Judah Lattes, R. Meshullam b. Moses, R. Meï'r ha-Kohen, R. Manoaḥ, R. David b. Samuel ha-Kokabi (d'Estella), and we should probably include also R. Menahem ha-Me'iri, have been resuscitated, escorted into the full light of history, and may now be confronted as real “live” authors. Moreover, many of Rabad's own works have been edited or reissued and his responsa collected. These publications often come in rapid, almost dizzying, succession and have yet to be carefully digested. In sum, *toratam shel ḥakme Provence*, hitherto known from random publications or stray citations in florilegia (*shiṭot*) and the works of later authors, has been opened up, inviting serious study and comparative evaluation: literary tendencies, genres, ideological commitment and methodological

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orientation, personal likes and dislikes, tradition and innovation (that is, halakic novelties in theory or practice), presence of extra-halakic components, reflection of social realities and historical contingencies, and cognate themes. So many diverse materials embedded in the spacious, sprawling edifice known as rabbinic literature need to be identified and analyzed. All this brings us so much closer to the possibility of producing the synthesis and, more immediately, of a complete, finely honed characterization and assessment of Rabad.

Similar work, from the vantage point of Rabad and Provençal studies, in the “Spanish background,” in the contemporary developments among French and German “neighbors” as well as the post-Rabad continuation and consolidation or qualification and variation of concerns and orientations is clearly of inestimable importance for our topic. New responsa collections of R. Isaac Alfasi or R. Joseph ibn Migas, volumes of additional Tosafot or commentaries from the school of Rashi and writings of R. Meir of Rothenburg, editions of the works of Naḥmanides and Rashba, codes and commentaries which relate to the *Mishneh Torah*, inevitably rivet attention upon themselves. They are indispensable for a balanced appreciation of Rabad. Sources concerning aggadah, Bible exegesis, liturgy, Kabbalah, philosophy, and polemics have also been printed. The conceptual matrix in which such central, often elusive phenomena as rationalism, moderate rationalism, antirationalism, and literalism are discussed is thus wider and firmer. The relation of halakah to these other areas may be investigated more fully while divergent schools of exegesis of the Bible and aggadah may be better understood. The complexities involved in the confrontation between Kabbalah and philosophy may be fathomed. To this cornucopia of unpublished sources should be added the scholarly studies that provide new facts, emphasize hitherto-unperceived connections, and indicate new perspectives emerging from shifts in thought and sensibility, augmented information, or refined methods of interpretation.

Students of Rabad must make a special effort to keep up with the ever-growing corpus of Maimonidean literature which, ex hypotheso, deals with Rabad who, as the first major (even though not thoroughly systematic) critic of the *Mishneh Torah*, could never be dissociated from Maimonides and his extraordinary code of law. (A clear statement to this effect was penned by Rabbi S. Zevin in his

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introduction to A. Hilbitz, *Li-leshonot ha-Rambam*, page 3.) From this point of view practically all rabbinic literature—commentaries, responsa, novellae, minor codes—is a potential contributor to a fuller understanding of Rabad's historical impact and sometimes of his original intent.

As a final note in this regard, we should underscore that all this tremendous progress notwithstanding, the agenda of unfinished, scholarly business with regard to Rabad himself is long and demanding. Systematic, annotated editions of Rabad's own major works (for example, all his hassagot, but especially on the *Mishneh Torah*, or his trail-blazing *Sifra* commentary) are still not available and remain scholarly desiderata. Here, too, incidentally, the literary fate of Rabad is often interwoven with Maimonides; the magnificent S. Frankel edition of Book III (*Zemanim*) of the *Mishneh Torah* includes the hassagot, with variants collected from the seven manuscripts. In addition, collection of the copious citations from his commentaries—for example, on *Berakot*, *Erubin*, or *Baba Mezi'a*—strewn throughout rabbinic literature would contribute decisively to the restoration and reconstruction of his oeuvre. I have dealt to some extent with Rabad as a commentator of the Talmud, directly, and of the Bible indirectly, but the abundant philological-exegetical material ensconced in his writing needs to be assembled and appraised. Exhaustive study of his works for evidence of change and continuity, the impact of Spanish and French developments (particularly the latter), systematic thematic analysis, comparison of his methods, interpretations, attitudes, and conclusions with those of other towering halakists of the high Middle Ages (the golden age of halakic creativity in western Europe)—these tasks still await completion.

Nevertheless, the terrain is less forbidding as a result of what has been accomplished in the last few decades, the directional signals are clear, and the hope is great. While I feel no need to succumb to any kind of historical revisionism, quite rampant these days, were I to rewrite this book now I would undertake to add some new dimensions to the analysis of Rabad's great oeuvre and to integrate new facts.

A few additional comments concerning the emphatic characterization of Rabad as a halakic scholar, a thoroughgoing Talmudist (see