

The Language in which God Created the World: The Poetry of Solomon de Piera

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Around the year 1395, don Vidal Abenlabi, the eldest son of the de la Cavallerías, among the noblest Jewish families of Aragon, sent a long letter to his mentor, Solomon ben Meshulam de Piera. The letter included Hebrew poems and rhyming prose interspersed with biblical quotations, as was customary at the time.¹ On the back of the sealed letter, in place of the recipient's address, was a poem expressing Vidal's yearnings for his friend:

Oh, letter! Go and stand before the throne of he
 who has mastered the mystery of God's word,
the champion before whom the poets bend their knees,
 before whom all bow from a distance,
the man whose dream of poetry is prophecy
 and whose dream inspires the poets.
Like a cloud, fly, poem of mine, to his presence;
 Watch the light of his face, his image, his figure!
Troubled by his absence, I tell you tearfully
 how happy you will be to see his beauty and allure!
If you don't know his name, ask for the ornament
 of his crown and his earring;
Ask for the sprout of the most beautiful songs,
 for the twin brother of his verses,

¹ Though in Moorish times poems were sometimes accompanied by texts in prose, this letter structure was a novelty, first found in correspondences by the talmudists and poets of Girona such as Rabbi Nissim and Rabbi Abraham ha-Levi (cf. L. A. Feldman, "Correspondences and Exchanges of Poems between ha-RaN [R. Nissim], Abraham ben Yitshaq ha-Levi, Don Yehudah bar Sheshet Crescas, and Ḥasday Crescas" [in Hebrew], *Kobez al yad*, vol. 7, Jerusalem 1968, pp. 127-160) and in the unpublished poems exchanged between Solomon de Piera and Solomon Abenlabi, patriarch of the de la Cavallerías, whom de Piera served until his death (Ms. JTSA, New York, Mic 8552, fol. 2v ff.). An improved version of this structure is found in almost all of de Piera's poetic correspondences with students and friends.

for the most glorious of princes, ask for Solomon,
may God grant him eternal wellbeing!²

These days, the man who mastered "the mystery of God's Word" is all but unknown, marginalized by Romanists, Hispanists, and scholars of Hebrew literature alike.³ Whether because of his conversion—de Piera was baptized near the end of his life⁴—or, more likely, because his poetry is unintelligible when so far removed from the socio-cultural Sephardic context in which it was written, de Piera's voice has been subdued to such an extent that much of his work has yet to be edited and what little has been published is in need of revision.⁵ His poetry is often described as "decadent," less innovative and varied than that of the Golden Age of Hebrew poetry in Spain, unreceptive to the new trends of his time, including Renaissance currents in Italian poetry (Immanuel the Roman's Hebrew sonnets⁶ —the first ones not written in Italian—were composed in the

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- 2 Hebrew text in Judit Targarona Borrás and Raymond P. Scheindlin, "Literary Correspondence between Vidal Benvenist ben Labi and Solomon ben Meshulam de Piera," *Revue des Études Juives* 160:1-2 (2001), pp. 85-86.
 - 3 Only S. Bernstein has edited a significant number of poems by Solomon de Piera (from 1936 to 1958), sometimes without notes due to the extremely adverse circumstances of his work, much of it undertaken during the Second World War. Other scholars who have written on the work of de Piera and his circle include M. Steinschneider, "Poeten und Polemiker in Nordspanien um 1400," *Ha-mazkir: Hebräische Bibliographie* XIV (1874), pp. 77-79, 95-99; XV (1875), pp. 54-60, 78-84, 107-111; XVI (1876), pp. 86-88; XVII (1877), pp. 129-131; H. Brody, *Beiträge zu Salomo da-Pieras Leben und Wirken*, Berlin 1893; and S. Samuel, "Der Dichter Salomo ben Meschullam Dapiera und die Frage seines Glaubenswechsels," *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 81 (1937), pp. 481-496. For more recent studies, see A. M. Habermann, "Letters from Solomon de Piera to Moses Abbas [in Hebrew], *Orzaar yehude Sefarad* 7 (1964), pp. 24-42; Dov Jarden, "Three New Poems of Honor and Friendship by Don Vidal Benvenist to Solomon de Piera" [in Hebrew], *Yerušalayim* 5-6 (1971/72), pp. 461-465; and T. Vardi, *The 'Group of Poets' in Saragossa: Secular Poetry* [in Hebrew], Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1996. A different editing approach is taken in Targarona Borrás and Scheindlin, note 2 above. See also my "El *Dīwān* de Šelomoh ben Mešul-lam de Piera: Estado de la cuestión," Judit Targarona Borrás and Angel Saenz Badillos (eds.), *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the 20th Century, Volume 1: Biblical, Rabbinical, and Medieval Studies*, Leiden 1999, pp. 541-551; "Carta inédita de Šeelomoh de Piera al Rab Abraham ben Yishaq ha-Levi. (TaMaK)," *Miscelánea de Estudios Arabes y Hebraicos* 49 (2000), pp. 169-193; and (with co-author A. Sáenz Badillos) "Poemas de Šelomoh de Piera a las bodas de Vidal Ben Benvenist y Vidal Benvenist Ben Labi," *Anuari de Filologia* 21, secció E, n° 8 (1998-99), pp.173-205.
 - 4 See Targarona Borrás, note 3 above, p. 544.
 - 5 Cf. Targarona Borrás and Scheindlin, note 2 above, p. 61.
 - 6 Edited by Dvora Bregman: see her *Šaršeret ha-zahav: ha-sonet ha-'Ivri le-dorotaw* [The Golden Chain: The Hebrew Sonnet through the Ages], Tel-Aviv 2000.

early fourteenth century, a full century before the sonnets written in Castilian by Juan de Villalpando and the Marquis of Santillana).⁷

De Piera and his so-called Circle of Poets did not wish to innovate, however. They stood not at the forefront of a new process, as in Italy, but at the conclusion of what is usually called the golden age of Hebrew poetry in Spain. Perfectly aware that their stay in Spain was nearing its end, their wish was to hold on to their past, to preserve their language, religion, culture, and Sephardic heritage. Their poems were an exercise in opposition, a final, desperate attempt to defend their identity.

Inspired by Lluys d'Averçó, a contemporary Catalan poet of about the same age who had expressed his need to write in his own tongue ("Car pus jo sóc català, no'm dech servir d'altre llenguatge sino del meu": "Because I am Catalan I need to use no language but my own"),⁸ de Piera once told a person who wanted to send him a letter in Romance that "one must, always and everywhere, express oneself in Hebrew" since "poetry should only be written in the language of the Torah."⁹

But that is not all. In de Piera's view, the Hebrew poet—like God—"gives language to the mute, putting the most sublime of languages in their pens."¹⁰ The poets derive their inspiration from Scripture, write their verses in the same language used by God "in the beginning," and can thus speak with God; as in biblical times, they—and only they—can be the intermediaries between God and his people. They are the prophets of their generation, the seers. "The words of your tongue," Solomon says to a friend, "are dream-words, the vision of prophets."¹¹ The Torah's language, the same language in which the poets compose their poems, is also in de Piera's view no less than the language with which God created the world.

The origin of language was not a controversial theme during the Middle Ages. In medieval times, as in antiquity, Christians, Muslims, and Jews generally considered language a divine gift: "Deus et mentis, et vocis, et linguae artifex,"

7 In Spain, we have to wait until the fifteenth century for the sonnets of Juan de Villalpando (1388-1458), found in the Cancionero of Estúñiga (compiled in Naples between 1460 and 1463), and the forty-two sonnets "to *italico mode*" of the Marquis of Santillana.

8 See Martin de Riquer, *Història de la Literatura Catalana*, vol. 2, Barcelona 1993, p. 64.

9 *Solomon ben Meshullam de Piera: Dīwān*, S. Bernstein (ed.), vol. 1, New York 1942, pp. 87-89, lines 41, 47.

10 *Tenu todah*. Ibid., lines 8-9.

11 *Libbi 'aloz*, line 50. See J. Targarona Borrás and T. Vardi, "Literary Correspondence between Vidal Benvenist and Šelomoh ben Mešullam de Piera according to de Piera's Diwan: Critical Edition and Study," *Revue des Études Juives* 167:3-4 (2008), p. 465.

says Lactantius, a North African ecclesiastical writer (3rd-4th c.).¹² It was not until the nineteenth century that, in the Christian world, people began to accept that *wa-yomer 'Elohim* (Gen. 1:3) is chronologically prior to the creation of Adam, or that Gen. 2:19 ("the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would name them") does not conclusively establish that Adam's language was the product of divine revelation.¹³

In the Muslim world, doubts about the nature of language had been expressed even more boldly in the early Middle Ages. Linguist Abû l-Fath 'Uthmân ibn Jinnî (b. Mosul circa 932) tells us, for example, that he is not sure whether Arabic is the fruit of divine revelation or of mere human convention. His doubts were due to differences between his master, Abû Alî al-Fârisî, and another linguist, Abû l'Hasan al-Akhfash, on the proper interpretation of the Quran passage stating (with slight modification to Gen. 2:19) that "God taught Adam all the names" (2:31); whereas the former used it to argue for the divine origin of language, the latter found in it support for the view that language may be a matter of human convention. According to Abû l'Hasan al-Akhfash, "God taught Adam the names of all creatures in all languages, Arabic, Persian, Syrian, Hebrew, Greek etc. Adam and his sons spoke them all, but after people spread throughout the entire earth each took one of these languages and forgot the others..." Though doubt lingered in his mind, ibn Jinnî leaned towards his master's opinion, finding it more likely that language "was revealed by God."¹⁴

Unsaddled by any such doubts, Solomon de Piera went even further in his support of the divine origin thesis. As was customary in the Jewish world of his day, he based his view on the story of the Tower of Babel—"The whole world had one language and the same words" (Gen. 11:1); "Behold, the people [is] one and they have all one language" (Gen. 11:6)—but also probably on the commentary of the Targum Neofiti: "And all the inhabitants of the earth had one language, a common speech, and they chatted in the language of the sanctuary, since that was the language with which God had created the world in the beginning." The Hebrew language, de Piera thought, was not only the result of divine revelation or a gift from God to man, but also the *lingua primaeva*, the language God had

¹² *Divinae institutiones* 6:21; cited in F. W. Farrar, "On Language," Roy Harris (ed.), *The Origin of Language*, Bristol 1996, p. 42, n1.

¹³ Farrar, note 12 above, p. 47.

¹⁴ K. Versteegh, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought III: The Arabic Linguistic Tradition*, London and New York 1997, p. 101 f.

used to create the world, the mother of all languages,¹⁵ the language spoken by all mankind before God mixed up the languages and only the descendants of Eber retained the Hebrew tongue.

How these biblical passages were interpreted in the Andalusí tradition is evident from the following verses by Solomon ibn Gabirol:

You must know the excellence of the Hebrew language—
 It exceeds the tongue of all other peoples.
 Day after day, heaven's inhabitants praise it
 to the One who wears light as a cloak.
 It was, from the beginning, the language of all living souls
 until the foolish people were dispersed.
 The Lord mixed up their tongues, and only
 Eber's children maintained it.
 The Father of multitudes inherited it and bequeathed it to his children,
 who kept it through the generations.
 The exiled people did not neglect it in the Romance-speaking countries
 even while they were prisoners standing in shackles.
 The fire of the Torah was given in this language and with it
 the Prophets were sent to heal the weakened...¹⁶

Hebrew, of course, was also *leshon ha-qodesh*, 'the language of the sanctuary', 'the holy tongue',¹⁷ the only language in which man could speak with God.¹⁸ According to Nachmanides (13th c.), the great kabbalist of Girona,

Our rabbis call the language of the Torah "the holy language" because the words of the Torah, the prophecies and proverbs, were pronounced in

15 This was also the view of Abraham Abulafia (13th c.). See M. Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, Albany, NY 1989, p. 14.

16 *Anaq*, lines 38-44. See Angel Sáenz-Badillos, "El 'Anaq, poema lingüístico de Šelomoh ibn Gabirol," *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos* 29:2 (1980), pp. 5-29; and A. Sáenz Badillos and J. Targarona Borrás, *Gramáticos hebreos de al-Andalus*. Filología y Biblia, Córdoba 1988, p. 13.

17 A. Sáenz-Badillos, *Historia de la Lengua Hebrea*, Sabadell 1988, p. 10. For the meaning of *leshon ha-qodesh*, see idem, "Philologists and Poets in Search of the Hebrew Language," R. Brann (ed.), *Languages of Power in Islamic Spain*, Bethesda 1994, pp. 65 ff.

18 This view, however, has been subject, to some disagreement: see Sáenz-Badillos, *Historia*, note 18 above, p. 10, n6; and especially Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, Oxford 1995, pp. 7-33.

Hebrew. The Holy One, Blessed be He, spoke in this language with His prophets... This was the language with which He created the world.¹⁹ That Hebrew is without doubt "the most perfect of languages" is repeated in the medieval texts many times. This idea was expressed as early as the tenth century by Menaḥem ben Saruq in the introduction to his *Majberet*:

With the help of the Creator of language I shall begin to follow the steps of the most cultivated language—to explain that most excellent of tongues, the summit of all beautiful expressions, a language refined in the crucible, more sublime than any of the tongues spoken by the other peoples upon Earth from the time the nations separated from one another, each with its own language...²⁰

Similar views were also expressed by Judah Halevi: Created by God, who then taught it to Adam, Hebrew "is without a doubt the most perfect of languages, because it is the most suitable to the nature of all beings." Halevi bases this claim on the admittedly difficult and ambiguous Gen. 2:19, which he interprets as saying that when God brought to Adam all living beings "to see what he would name them," Adam named them all "with their names," i.e., with the names that God had already assigned to each at the dawn of creation—an interpretation derived from *Sefer Yetzirah* ("Book of Creation"), according to which the *sefirot* and combinations of Hebrew letters in the mouth of God were at the origin of his creation of the world. This perfect identity between God's word and the world, between essence and existence, occurs only in Hebrew, making the Holy Language the most excellent of all tongues; it is why "the angels prefer it to all other languages."²¹

Convinced that he and his disciples were writing their poetry in this perfect language of the angels, de Piera wrote to a fellow poet:

The Angels have learnt your beautiful poems
to praise God in the high heavens and in His heights.²²

It is only from this perspective that the poetry of de Piera and his circle of poets

19 *Ramban (Nachmanides): Commentary on the Torah, Exodus*, Charles Chavel (trans. and ed.), New York 1973, p. 518 f. See also Saenz-Badillos, "Philologists and Poets", note 17 above, p. 65, n40.

20 See A. Sáenz-Badillos, "En torno al *Majberet* de Menahem ben Saruq." *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos* 25:2 (1976), pp. 30-31.

21 Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* IV, 25.

22 *Libbi aloz*, line 25. See Targarona Borrás and Vardi, note 11 above, p. 463.

can be understood. Unlike Umberto Eco, these poets did not need to "search for the perfect language"; they had Hebrew—though, in the late fourteenth century, they had yet to master it. Their goal was to regain it through their poetry. It was after the bloody events of 1391 which had decimated the Jewish communities of Spain that divine revelation, de Piera tells us, motivated him to devote himself entirely to the art of composing poetry:

For my sins, the Lord was angered against my children and the work of my hands. I experienced moments of bitter meditation, in which I said that I didn't desire the continuing passing of days. Then, the secrets of the times were revealed to me and they led me to know their mysterious ways; I chose your path...²³

The "secrets of the times" refers to the early Messianic restoration, the "age of love," to which de Piera alludes in one of his poems:²⁴

The Faithful Messenger will rise to the Dwelling of Zion
and the sinners will be forgiven of their sins.
There they will rise, expiring the guilt for their
spells, because they betrayed the saints of poetry.
There, composers, musicians, and poets will possess
the Tabernacle, the Holy of Holies, with their songs.
They will tirelessly eat and be satiated with the fruit of their odes,
and will not exert themselves as mortals do!²⁵
We will go forward with those who know
language and raise themselves with a beautiful armor.
And in the dark and sad days of preparation for battle
when our enemies' horses gallop exultant,
We will return to the crown of poetry its previous grandeur
and the poets will be crowned with the diadem's flower.²⁶

Solomon de Piera was not unfamiliar with the cult of Latin and Romance poetry which flourished in his time. He witnessed the Floral Games and knew of the awards granted to poets. He was, however, certain of the superiority of the

²³ Targarona Borrás, note 3 above, p. 543.

²⁴ See Targarona Borrás and Scheindlin, note 2 above, pp. 92 and 121.

²⁵ See Maimonides, *Heleq*, *Sanhedrin* 10.

²⁶ The translation is mine, J.T.B. *Qolot Kele zimrah*, lines 100-106. Unpublished poem, cf. mss.: New York, JTSA, Mic 1488, ff. 5v-7V; 47v-51r; Oxford, 1984, ff. 151v-154v; Bodleian Library 2796, ff. 24v-27v; Cambridge University Library, Add 1016/7, ff. 36R-40v; Washington, Library of Congress, Deindard Collection 29. Heb 16, ff. 4V-10v.

Hebrew language and was convinced that the final triumph of his people was near at hand. Then, he proclaimed, the poets, like the priests and singers of the ancient Temple, would possess the language with which God created the world in all its glory. Until then, they must devote themselves entirely to the arduous task of returning to Hebrew "its former greatness."

The same pure language of scripture de Piera used in his poetry reappears in a prose text in which he tells a friend that his love for him is stronger than his absence: "the love of a true-hearted friend [Proverbs 22:11] for his comrade whom he has befriended [Judges 14:20] is like a tent peg stuck in solid ground [Isaiah 22:25] and is not moved by a wild wind [Psalms 55:9]. [...] The hearts of friends, whether traveling or encamping, moving or at rest, are together as one heart [Jeremiah 32:39 etc.], one soul [Leviticus 4:27 etc.], one language, one speech [cf. Genesis 11:1]."²⁷

Finally, here is how de Piera describes his relationship with poetry, which he identifies with Hebrew, the Torah, and the Jewish Religion:

True! Poetry has been the spouse of my youth,
she has guided me to old age.
Destiny ordered my pen to return
to poetry's crown its former glory;
To write the words in the verses of song
and God's expressions in the poems of those who signed the Covenant;
To write verses with the articulation of God's language.
My pen made the pact, accepted the work, and accomplished it:
I weighed on the scale the letters and words of the language,
I measured them on the balance of poetry.
I made of my Torah a beautiful maiden
garlanded with her lunettes.
Her laws and precepts are earrings
in her ears and rings on her right hand—
A beautiful girl who cheered the beloved's heart
with the wink of her eye and pupils.
Sometimes her eyes throw arrows of salvation;
other times, a sharp sword strikes.
This is the way God's religion honors him who observes her
and humiliates him who abandons her by slander.

²⁷ See Targarona Borrás and Scheindlin, note 2 above, pp. 92 and 121.

He who attains her will not die,
 nor will he live under her anger.
 What I want is to be faithful to her love
 as one who loves a beautiful and gracious fawn...²⁸

De Piera's desire was never to be satisfied. The childless death of the last monarch of the House of Barcelona (Martin I, d. 1410) and the ascension to the throne of Aragon of don Fernando de Antequera with his proselytizing quest, sustained by Papa Luna (Benedict XIII) and Vicente Ferrer, led to the Disputation of Tortosa, as a result of which de Piera, already in his seventies, was forced to receive the baptismal waters. The universe he had imagined and in which he had put all his hopes collapsed around him: it is on this basis that we must analyze and interpret his poetry.

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28 *Ke-sh nidham*: de Piera, note 9 above, p. 106, lines 67-78; H. Schirmann, *Hebrew Poetry in Spain and Provence* [in Hebrew], vol. 2, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv 1954-60, p. 568, lines 68 ff.