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      One of the most intriguing features of Andalusī Jewish culture is, according to Ross Brann, "a startling fusion of the sacred and profane [. . .] particularly in the manner the poets devoted themselves to the idea of beauty" (11). Hebrew poets of al-Andalus had two primary vehicles for expressing the idea of beauty: the Classical love poetry of the Arabic tradition, and the Biblical Hebrew love poetry of the Song of Songs.[1] This places the Song at the center of the most compelling cultural problem of Jewish Al-Andalus. Like Hebrew Andalusī culture, the Song itself is similarly torn between secular and sacred fields of meaning. It is a secular love poem of breathtaking beauty that has been historically interpreted as a religious allegory.

      The work of the Judeo-Spanish poet and exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. 1167 C.E.) featuring the language of the Song is perhaps the best showcase of the interplay between sacred and secular in Hebrew Andalusī literature. When it comes to the Song, Ibn Ezra literally wrote the book on it, a commentary that gives equal treatment to its literal and allegorical meanings.[2] He also made use of the language of the Song in many literary works of various genres. Through his work we are privileged with a unique glimpse into the beating heart of Hebrew Andalusī culture.

      Abraham Ibn Ezra lived from 1092-1167 CE. This places him at the end of the Golden Age of Andalusī Hebrew cultural production, and he is the last of the great Andalusī courtier-rabbis. He was born in Tudela, in Northern Spain and he lived in al-Andalus until 1140 CE, when the invasion of the less than tolerant Berber Almohads inspired him to take a trip to North Africa in search of better working conditions. The trip never ended, and led him to Italy, France, England, and back to France where he lived until his death (Weinberger 1-8).

      He was an incredibly active intellect and writer. While most recognized for his biblical commentaries, he also penned over one hundred books on medicine, astrology, mathematics, philosophy and linguistics. Finally, he was a prolific poet, and left behind a staggering collection of piyyutim, or religious poems, as well as secular poetry and the rhymed allegorical philosophical narrative Hayy ben Meqits ('Alive, Son of Awake') adapted from the Arabic Hayy ibn Yaqzān of Ibn Sīnā (b. 980 CE).[3]

      Abraham Ibn Ezra was a rationalist par excellence. In fact, he was so well known as such that he was condemned by his contemporary Nahmanides for favoring rationalist interpretations of the Bible over midrashic aggadot, traditional stories about biblical characters (Weinberger 10). This tendency of his is evident in his commentary on the Song, which breaks sharply with the previous traditional interpretations.

      The Song is perhaps the most commented book of the Bible, and certainly one of the most popular (Block 1). The greatest intellectual figures of the Middle Ages, Christian and Jew

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[1] Hereafter referred to as the Song. All translations of Hebrew texts are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[2] The commentary appears in the various editions of the traditional Mikra'ot Gedolot, a rescension of biblical text and commentaries. English translation is by Richard Block.

[3] This work should not be confused with the Hayy ibn Yaqzān of Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185), which expands and novelizes Ibn Sīnā's work, but also differs from it philosophically (Goichon). Weinberger notes that Ibn Ezra's Hebrew Hayy ben Meqits is couched in a more poetic idiom than Ibn Sīnā's Arabic original, laced with metaphorical figures (116).

alike, have tried their hand at interpreting the Song. The twelfth century Christian theologian Bernard of Clairvaux wrote over 80 sermons interpreting the Song. Fray Luis de León, an Augustinian priest, Professor of Hebrew Bible and poet living in sixteenth century Spain, was jailed for four years by the Inquisition for translating the Song from Hebrew into Spanish, and for insisting on the primacy of the Hebrew text over that of the Latin Vulgate (Blecua 11-15). Interpretation of the Song has long been fraught with conflict and overshadowed by prevailing religious doctrines---a veritable theological hot potato.

Jewish exegetes have traditionally interpreted the Song as an allegory of the relationship between God and Israel. Interpretations favoring the literal meaning of the Song have been regarded as unacceptable. In the Targum, or Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, the allegorical relationship is explained historically, beginning with Abraham, the first "beloved" of God. The highly influential tenth-century rabbi, Saadia Gaon (b. 992 CE) continues the historical allegorical interpretation, and Ibn Ezra follows suit (Block 4-5).

Ibn Ezra, undaunted by the sometimes dire consequences befalling those who dared take on the Song, produces a commentary that, apart from being a philological tour de force, may well have been viewed by his contemporaries as downright controversial. It is divided into three parts. The first deals with philological questions. The second treats the literal meaning of the Song as a poem about two lovers. The third explains the song according to the traditional historical allegory found in the Targum and commentary of Saʿadia Gaon. Although this tripartite exegetical method is Ibn Ezra's regular approach to any biblical text, it is noteworthy that he does not change it to accommodate the traditional ban on literal interpretation of the Song. In defiance of rabbinical tradition, he gives equal time to the literal and allegorical interpretations of the Song. This fact is significant, and is exemplary of the juxtaposition of sacred and secular so characteristic of the literature of the Andalusī courtier-rabbis. Just as the use of Biblical poetic language introduces the sacred into the realm of secular poetry, here the development of the secular meaning of the Song in Ibn Ezra's commentary puts the secular and the sacred on the same page for the first time in the Jewish exegetical tradition.

This juxtaposition of secular and sacred echoed what Judeo-Andalusī authors were doing in their poetry. In fact, the use of Biblical language by Judeo-Andalusī poets is quite common--- the Bible was, after all, their only source of poetic language, and it was not considered improper to use Biblical language per se in secular poetry (Brann 11-14; Drory, Models 173-77).[4] However, using the language of the Song in a way that does not take into account its traditional allegorical meaning could be viewed as objectionable from a religious point of view. It is ironic, then, that a rabbi as highly respected as Abraham Ibn Ezra should be guilty of abusing the language of the Hebrew Bible.

Ibn Ezra's exceptional intellectual talents enabled him to make use of the language of the Song in several ways. In each context, the language of the Song interacts differently with Ibn Ezra's own language. This interaction depends on the secular or sacred nature of the work, the extent to which the context reinforces or challenges traditional interpretations of the Song, and the extent to which the author weaves the language of the Song into the fabric of his own. The originality and variety of Ibn Ezra's use of the Song becomes clear after the most precursory investigation of his work, and the examples I put forth here are but a small sample of the intellectual romance between Ibn Ezra and the Song.

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[4] By secular, we mean poetry that does not directly treat religious themes or that is not written for liturgical purposes.

The first example is drawn from a panegyric, a poem in praise of an unnamed patron (Levin, Anthology 113-14). It is titled "To his Beloved." Samuel M. Stern maintains that it was written in imitation of a muwaššahah by Hispano-Arabic poet Ibn Quzmān (Harvey 186-87). The poem displays several tropes and figures characteristic of Arabic love poetry. The patron is compared to the sun, the favor of whose face shines upon the poet (line 3). The poet begs for mercy from the "arrows" shooting forth from the patron's eyes (line 5). The poet's eye is compared to a snare that traps him in the patron's beauty (line 17). Finally, the poet's very life hangs on a kind or cruel word from the patron (line 22). At the poem's close, Ibn Ezra skillfully intertwines language from the Song into that of the Andalusī Arabic kharja, or closing couplet:[5]

> The choice honey from your lips is sweet;
> It is God's work, unblemished.
> Your breath radiates the fragrance of apples.[6]
> My beloved, where have you eaten the apple?
> Come and say to me: ah! (trans. Weinberger 90)[7]

Here Ibn Ezra has taken the biblical image of the sweet breath of the beloved and used it in a purely physical description. While it is one thing to put Biblical language at the service of secular poetry, it is another to do so in a way which clearly favors a literal interpretation of the Song. It is yet another to poetically subordinate it to a colloquial Arabic love song. A contemporary analogy would be setting a highly literary poem to the tune of a Madonna song, and closing the poem with a couplet drawn directly from the song.

Therefore, in the space of two lines the Andalusī reader would find this text to resonate with the poetry of Ibn Quzmān and the commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra. It is also possible that the reader or listener would have been personally familiar with the song from which the kharja was taken---yet another intertextual enhancement. Members of Ibn Ezra's audience familiar with his commentary on the Song would have also recognized the allegorical meaning. In his commentary, Ibn Ezra writes that "the scent of your breath" "refers to the high priest who offers the burnt offerings and burns the incense (when Israel is reunited with God in Israel)" (trans. Block 191).

Another example of Ibn Ezra's use of the Song that maintains one foot in the secular and one in the sacred is found in Ibn Ezra's poem "In a lifetime."[8] The poem is a meditation on the stages of the life of man that was used in the Yom Kippur liturgy. It is somewhat pessimistic when compared to other poems of similar theme written by contemporaries. Nevertheless, one of the more positive images, that of the man of twenty, is taken directly from the Song:

> To the youth of twenty life is pleasant;
> He's fleet as a roe deer and romps the hills;[9]

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[5] A kharja is a couplet in vernacular (Mozarabic Romance or Andalusī Arabic) placed at the end of a muwaššahah, a strophic poem written in a literary language (Classical Arabic or Hebrew). The muwaššahah often resonates thematically with the kharja, but at the very least is linked to it mimetically by placing the couplet in the mouth of a character described in the poem. For a complete discussion of the genre, see Rosen.

[6] Song 7:9 - "the scent of your breath is like apples." Literally, "the scent in your mouth is like that of apples."

[7] That is, "so I may smell the scent of apple on your breath." In this and subsequent quotations I have rendered the language of the Song in underlined text.

[8] The title is Weinberger's translation.

[9] Song 2:8 "Behold, he comes leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills."

> He scorns reproof, he mocks his teacher's voice;
> The net of a beautiful girl keeps him in bonds.
> (trans. Weinberger 107-09; Levin, Religious Poems 542-45)

From hereon in, the subject of the poem goes downhill, as he is "entrapped" by a woman at thirty (lines 15-16), "shaken and humbled" at forty (line 19), and finally "he is thought of as dead" (line 39). Here the language of the Song is employed to describe a lost golden youth. It seems at first glance a carpe diem: that you (the reader) should enjoy the vigor of youth described in the Song while you can, before things start to go against you. However, when taken in the context of the Yom Kippur liturgy, it starts to sound more like a chastisement to not get carried away with the evanescent pleasures of youth. In any event, Ibn Ezra is not talking about the allegorical interpretation of the sound of the beloved leaping in the mountains. In his commentary he explains that this is the sound of God speaking to Moses on Mt. Sinai (trans. Block 108). Here Ibn Ezra uses the literal meaning of the Song in a secular poem that is used in a religious context.[10]

In the first example, we saw Ibn Ezra fuse the biblical language with that of the Andalusī muwaššahah. In his philosophical allegorical narrative Hayy ben Meqits, he blends the language of the Song with a different secular Arabic genre, the maqāma.[11] Hayy ben Meqits is loosely based on Ibn Sīnā 's Arabic work Hayy ibn Yaqzān, a narrative treatise (risāla) on the nature of human intelligence.[12] Hayy ben Meqits displays several salient traits of the maqāma genre, among them rhyming prose interspersed with poetry, the episodic journey undertaken by an autobiographical narrator, and in the example at hand, the encounter with a very well-spoken sage.

In the classical maqāma this encounter is with a shabbily dressed but uncannily eloquent man, in some cases, an older man. He bedazzles the narrator with his poetic virtuosity and then takes his all his money. Consequently the dopey narrator recognizes the swindler as his old companion whom he has not seen since . . . the last chapter. Ibn Ezra here inverts the trope of the false sage to turn him into a true sage, who does not take all of the narrator's money, but rather instructs him in the ways of rationalist philosophy. In the allegory, the sage represents the narrator Ibn Ezra's own intellect (Weinberger 114):

> I looked up and there, in the meadow, a sage strolled by. He praised the Lord, exalted, and gave thanks. He was regal; like the angels, majestic, unaltered by days or years. His eyes were like doves,[13] his temples like halves of a pomegranate.[14] His back was not stooped, his strength undiminished. His sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not

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[10] The poem is a secular poem in that it is not categorically devotional in that it does not address the relationship between man and God. The poem, in its exploration of a man's life cycle, muses on the vanity of worldly existence.

[11] The maqāma is a narrative genre written in rhymed prose interspersed with poetry. It was invented in Arabic by Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008), and cultivated in Spain in both Arabic and Hebrew through the thirteenth century. For a detailed definition and introduction to the maqāma, see Drory, "The maqāma."

[12] See Henry Corbin's introductory study and translation (138-179), and Levin's Hebrew translation (Hayy 89-99).

[13] "Your eyes are doves," (Song 1:15); "your eyes are doves behind your veil," (Song 4:1).

[14] "Your cheeks are like a piece of a pomegranate behind your veil," (Song 4:3, 6:7).

abated. <u>As if anointed with oil, he had the fragrance of a nard.</u> [15] <u>His speech was most sweet and he was altogether desirable</u>. (trans. Weinberger 112; Levin, <u>Hayy</u> 50)[16]

The sage is described using language that describes the Shulamite in the Song. He is compared to the dove, the pomegranate and nard, and his speech is seductively sweet. The play on the established figures of the <u>maqāma</u> genre and the erotic nature of the language calls into question the intended tone of the text: is Ibn Ezra mocking the <u>maqāma</u>, the Song, or both? Or is he simply entertaining the reader by shuffling the deck of literary contexts and dealing us a new hand? To the educated Andalusī reader, this text might call to mind a number of sources: the language of the Song and its allegorical interpretation, the figure of the false sage in the classical <u>maqāma</u>, or the seemingly sincere sage of Ibn Sīnā's <u>Hayy ibn Yaqzān</u>.

   All of the language here is used in the literal sense, as the allegorical meanings are either absent in the commentary or completely irrelevant to the context. However, one could assert that here Ibn Ezra is suggesting a new allegory for the meaning of the Song: that of the relationship between himself and his own intellect, embodied by the sage. He is proposing, in effect, a love affair with his own mind.

    There are, however, instances when Ibn Ezra makes use of the Song in accordance with the traditional allegorical meaning. Even in such cases, he finds a way to put his creative stamp on the allusion and make it his own. In the poem "I am perfect, beautiful, but still in the hands of Shamma," Ibn Ezra extends the historical metaphor to contemporary al-Andalus:

> I am <u>perfect</u>,[17] with beautiful hair,[18] but still in the hands of Shamma.
> But your wrath <u>has scorched me</u>,[19] crushed me, burnt me.
> Remember, beloved, your covenant!
> Your love is wondrous to me [. . .] (Levin, <u>Religious Poems</u> 1, 81)

Here the Shulamite, representing the Congregation of Israel, symbolizes the European Jewish Diaspora. "Shamma" refers to Christianity, and is a reference to the descendants of Esau (Genesis 36:13). So, "in the hands of Shamma" means living within Christianity. Following the allegory, this fate would have befallen Israel as a punishment for serving foreign gods. The next line "and the wrath that has scorched me..." is glossed in the commentary, where Ibn Ezra likens the "wrath" or "heat of the sun" that scorches the Shulamite to the Israelites' captivity in Egypt (trans. Block 163). This is a fairly straightforward commentary: in the Song, the Shulamite was made to work in her brothers' vineyard, and as a result is sunburnt; in the allegory, the Israelites are made to work by the Egyptians, and are similarly sunburnt. In his commentary, Ibn Ezra explains that the sunburn is the effect of God's wrath against Israel for continuing to worship Egyptian gods after being set free from slavery. In the poem, however, Ibn Ezra is referring to European Jewry paying the spiritual price for living in Christian lands. None of the language in the poem is explicitly devotional; the only thing that keeps this poem from being purely secular is its reliance on the allegorical interpretation of the Song. The fact that only a sprinkling of

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[15] "Your anointing oils are fragrant, " (Song 1:3); "While the king was reclining at his table, my nard sent forth its fragrance," (Song 1:12).

[16] "His mouth is most sweet; and he is altogether lovely," (Song 5:16).

[17] "Open to me, me sister, my love, my dove, my <u>perfect</u> one," (Song 5:2).

[18] "Your eyes are doves behind your veil," (Song 4:1); "your temples are like a split pomegranate behind your veil," (Song 4:4, 6:7). His use here of the Hebrew <u>tsammah</u> for hair instead of veil (as it is used in the Song) also occurs in his commentary on the literal sense of the Song (trans. Block 117).

[19] "Gaze not upon me, for I am dark, because the sun has scorched me," (Song 1:6).

words from the Song would suffice to recall the allegory and qualify the poem as religious is testimony to the Song 's presence on the literary horizon of the audience.

Ibn Ezra also wrote piyyutim---religious poems---that explicitly treat the allegorical interpretation of the song (the relationship between God and Israel). When the language of the Song is used in this way, the effect is much less subtle. The result is more of a straightforward gloss on the Biblical text than an artfully rendered allusion. "O silver throated one, how beautiful are your words" is such a poem:

> O silver throated mountain goat, how beautiful are your words!
> You are above all in the wisdom of your books!
> I am black, the sun has scorched me,
> For I have transgressed statute and law.
> (Levin, Religious Poems 1: 217-219)

Here Ibn Ezra explains the allegory in the poem itself. Again, according to his commentary, the sunburn symbolizes God's anger at Israel for assimilating and not keeping his law.

Theologically speaking, this poem is probably the least controversial use of the Song --- one that is in keeping with the traditional allegorical interpretation and also written for liturgical use. A crowd of worshippers present in a synagogue for a major holiday would be on the average far less educated than a gathering of elite literati, and therefore the use of the explicit allegory. At the same time, one could reasonably expect the general audience to be familiar with the text of the Song, as it was read publicly in the Passover liturgy every year. While the effect is less elegant than keeping the allegory implicit (as in the last example), it is more openly didactic and appropriate to its context in the liturgy.

These remarks begin to scratch the surface of Ibn Ezra's love affair with the Song, and with these few examples one can see that the language of the Song is particularly suited to intertextual play linking biblical, exegetical, and poetic texts both sacred and secular. Abraham Ibn Ezra is a highly proficient agent of its language. In his work, this combination of Biblical text and Andalusī author yielded some of the most sophisticated intertextuality in Iberian literature. Such work is exemplary of the tension between sacred and secular that defined the poetic sensibility of the Andalusī Hebrew poets.

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