

ABBA MARI BEN MOSES ASTRUC OF LUNEL, *Minhat kena'ot* [A Jealous Offering],
copied by Mordechai ben Avigdor

In Hebrew, manuscript on paper

Sermide, Northern Italy, 6 Tammuz [5]218 [June 27, 1458]

ii + 162 + i folios (collation i⁸, ii⁴⁺¹, iii¹⁰, iv¹⁰⁺¹, v¹⁴⁺¹, vi¹⁰⁺², vii⁴, viii¹⁰, ix⁴, x¹⁰, xi⁴, xii¹⁰, xiii⁴, xiv¹⁰, xv⁴, xvi¹⁰, xvii⁴, xviii¹⁰, xix⁴, xx¹⁰⁺³), collation error in quire x due to modern binding (non-singletons in quire reversed and inverted; collation reads: ff. 150, 160, 159, 158, 157, 156, 155, 154, 153, 152, 151, 161, 162), on paper, single watermark (Briquet 2667, "basilisk," Ferrara, 1447, Ferrara, 1450, Mantua, 1450), medieval foliation in Hebrew in upper-left corners, early modern foliation in black ink in Arabic numerals in lower-left corner of text with lacunae (missing 4 leaves between ff. 23 and 24, new foliation at the top, from towards the end of ch. 22 until mid-ch. 25), modern foliation in pencil (cited), ruled in blind (justification 130 x 90 mm.), written in Italian semi-cursive script in brown ink in 25 long lines throughout, minor marginalia in hand of primary scribe, marginal manicules appear in first 10 folios, scattered marginalia in Hebrew in modern pencil throughout text, modern annotations in pencil in Hebrew on recto of second front flyleaf. One leaf missing at the beginning and ff. 24-27 lacking, very slight foxing throughout, minor soiling to first and final folios, worming on ff. 1-15, 51-61, 150-162, modern paper reinforced sewing as part of rebinding, otherwise text very clean. Bound in modern black buckram over cardboard, gilt ownership on spine, rubbed and peeling stamp catalogue on spine, pastedowns and flyleaves of modern heavy bonded paper, heavy browning to front and first rear flyleaf. Dimensions 223 x 154 mm.

One of six substantial manuscripts of a collection of letters and pamphlets related to the important medieval controversy over the philosophy of Maimonides, and one of only two in this small group that are dated and bear a colophon, in this case by a scribe who may also have been a wealthy Jewish patron in Mantua. The present manuscript differs significantly from the Pressburg *editio princeps* and also from two of the other manuscripts.

PROVENANCE

1. The colophon indicates that the manuscript was copied in Sermine (Sermide, in the province of Mantua) in 1458 by the scribe Mordechai ben Avigdor, who signed it as follows on f. 162: "This book, known as *Minbat kena'ot*, is done and finished. I, Mordechai, may my years be many and long, son of our honorable teacher Rabbi Avigdor, may the memory of the righteous be a blessing, copied it, and I completed it on 6 Tammuz [5]218 [June 27, 1458] here, in the city of Sermine [Sermide]." Watermarks of Ferrara and Mantua confirm this localization and date.
2. Solomon Joachim Halberstam (1832-1900), a wealthy Polish Jewish scholar and bibliophile who had acquired hundreds of valuable manuscripts from the libraries of Leopold Zunz (1794-1886) and Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865), came into possession of this manuscript and included it when cataloging his own personal collection. His shelf mark, MS 194, is stamped on the spine, on the pastedown of the upper board, and on ff. 1 and 162v and is written in pencil in Hebrew and English on the recto of the second front flyleaf.
3. The Judith Lady Montefiore College in Ramsgate, England, purchased 412 manuscripts from Halberstam's collection, including ours (shelf mark: MS 271). The transaction was carried out by Rabbi Moses Gaster (1856-1939), principal of the College between 1891

and 1896. The manuscript contains the library stamp of the institution, known in Hebrew as Yeshivat Ohel Mosheh vi-Yehudit, on the pastedown of the upper board.

4. Between 1898 and 2001, most of the Montefiore manuscripts, including ours, were placed on permanent loan at Jews' College in London. In 2001, they were returned to the Montefiore Endowment Committee.
5. In 2004, part of the Montefiore Collection, including our manuscript, was sold at auction by Sotheby's in New York (lot 228).

TEXT

This codex is one of the few surviving copies of *Minbat kena'ot* (A Jealous Offering), a collection of letters and pamphlets concerning the controversy over the philosophical writings of Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) and the ban on the study of philosophy before the age of 25. Maimonides was by far the most important medieval Jewish philosopher, exercising considerable influence in both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. Even in his own day, his works were considered especially daring because he sought to interpret the Bible and the principles of Judaism in a rational, non-mystical manner. He based his ideas especially on Aristotle, Plato, and the neo-Platonists, as transmitted in the writings of Muslim thinkers, particularly Averroes and Avicenna. Jewish scholars in the centuries that followed fell into two camps, the Maimonideans and the anti-Maimonideans.

Minbat kena'ot was compiled by a vehement opponent of the teachings of Maimonides, the Provençal Rabbi Abba Mari ben Moses Astruc, who was born in Lunel toward the end of the thirteenth century and subsequently lived in Montpellier (1303). He held that, with its reliance on Aristotelian rationalism, the work of Maimonides threatened to undermine the authority of the Bible. Enlisting the aid of the famous Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham Adret of Barcelona (1235-1310), R. Abba Mari conducted a forceful propaganda campaign against Maimonides and succeeded in enacting a fifty-year ban on all those who studied science and metaphysics before their twenty-fifth birthday. After settling in Perpignan in 1306, R. Abba Mari assembled the letters connected with the controversy into book form and had copies made, forming the basis for the manuscript tradition.

The present manuscript is one of only six known substantial copies of *Minbat kena'ot* and one of only two with a dated colophon; it is also more comprehensive than the *editio princeps* (Pressburg, 1838). The other five manuscripts are: Vatican, Neofiti 12 (Provençal, ca. 1400-1410; 191ff.); Parma, Biblioteca Palatina Cod. Parm. 2782 (Sephardic, ca. 1415; 181ff.); London, David Sofer 110 (copied in Bologna and dated 1454-1455; 233ff.); Moscow, Russian State Library, Ms. Guenzburg 63 (Sephardic, 15th-16th centuries; 130ff.); and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Mich. 596 (Italian, 18th-19th centuries; 74ff.). There are also two premodern manuscripts that include excerpts from the work: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale héb. 970 (Byzantine, 15th century; 11ff.) and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Reggio 24 (Italian, 17th century; ~15ff.).

It is tempting to identify the scribe of our codex with a Jew of the same, rather obscure name, Mordechai ben Avigdor, who, in 1435, commissioned a lavishly illuminated manuscript of Rabbi Jacob ben Asher's (c. 1269-c. 1343) legal code, *Arba'ab turim*, copied in Mantua (now MS Vatican, Rossiana 555). Only a wealthy patron could have afforded such a deluxe volume. If the

patron in 1435 was indeed the same person as our scribe in 1458, then we must ask why someone of such considerable means would, at an advanced age, have copied over 160 folios by himself, when he certainly could have hired a scribe to do the work for him. No other person of the same name is known.

LITERATURE

Abba Mari ben Moses Astruc of Lunel. *Sefer minhat kena'ot*, ed. by Mordecai Bislichis, Pressburg, 1838.

Adret, Solomon ben Abraham. *Teshuvot ha-rashba*, ed. by Haim Z. Dimitrovsky, Jerusalem, 1990.

Ben-Shalom, Ram. "Communication and Propaganda between Provence and Spain: The Controversy over Extreme Allegorization (1303-1306)," in *Communication in the Jewish Diaspora: The Pre-modern World*, ed. by Sophia Menache, pp. 171-224, Leiden and New York, 1996.

Ben-Shalom, Ram. "The Ban Placed by the Community of Barcelona on the Study of Philosophy and Allegorical Preaching: A New Study," *Revue des Études Juives* 159,3-4 (2000), pp. 387-404.

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Halberstam, Solomon Joachim. *Kobelet shelomoh*, p. 27 (MS 194), Vienna, 1890.

Hirschfeld, Hartwig. *Descriptive Catalogue of the Hebrew Mss. of the Montefiore Library*, p. 87 (MS 271), London and New York, 1904.

Silver, Daniel Jeremy. *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy, 1180-1240*, Leiden, 1965.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Our MS (accessible from within the National Library of Israel)

http://rosetta.nli.org.il/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE11215825&_ga=2.26427327.321588528.1540093917-1988024230.1468801374

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