

Reuven Eliyahu Yisrael's
Traduksyon Livre
de las Poezias Ebraikas
de ROSH ha-SHANA i KIPPUR

5670
and the
Six Selihoth of the 5682 edition

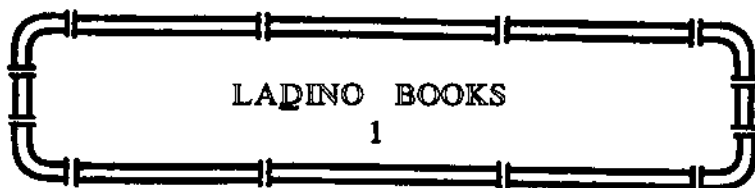
Text in Rashi Characters and in Transliteration

with an

Introduction

by

Rabbi Isaac Jerusalmi



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Ladino Books

With this series of about ten titles, I hope to publish enlarged and at times restored versions of Ladino books, along with their romanized transcriptions in a face to face format. These books will come from various parts of the Ladino speaking world, and will cover a wide range of Sephardic topics, with a concentration on the religious.

My thankful gratitude to the מקור חיים for the gift of those human minds who have reached the confines of computer knowledge. Their inventive talent has again stirred our fantasies. With the extraordinary versatility of this medium, almost overnight we are once more in touch with our "skilful scribe" genes. I sense that my dream to see these old texts in modern bookshelves might turn into a reality.

A la memorya de

Haribbi Shabbetay Amon

ke mos kantava קד מלי

INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that a major distinction between the Sephardic and the Ashkenazic liturgical traditions for the High Holydays (*Yamim Noraim*) and the Festivals (*Mo'adim*) lies in their divergent poetical insertions. In the former, Yannai, Eliezer ha-Kallir, the Kalonymites etc., to name just a few, dominate, while the later is saturated with Gabirol, the Ibn Ezra's, Halevi etc.¹ In language (*güfte*)² and musical execution (*beste*), these pieces are as different as night and day!

What is less widespread is the awareness that Sephardic *mahzorim*, and also *siddurim*, have for a long time featured Ladino translations of *piyyutim* not only 'for the eyes', i.e. for quick reference or perusal as the Hebrew text was being formally chanted to fulfill the liturgical tradition of the congregation, but also as valid substitutes for the real thing.³ As one whose childhood was molded by the learning and formal recitation of these *piyyutim*, I feel I am in a special position to evaluate and appreciate the work of Rabbi Reuben Eliyahu Israel, ר"ב, the author of this unusual Ladino translation.

I say unusual because from the outset mixed signals confront the reader. On the title page of the book the word *livre*⁴ (later *libre*), free figures prominently, a clear indication of what to expect. But the notion of a free translation in a liturgical setting was so innovative and bold that some backtracking became necessary. The

¹ see A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy*, (New York: Sacred Music Press, HUC-JIR, 1932), pp.215-248. Also H. Zimmels, *Ashkenazim and Sephardim*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp.124-135.

² The terms *güfte* and *beste* are extensively used in Turkish musicology to denote 'text' versus 'melody'.

³ In addition to numerous Ladino renditions found in several Hebrew prayerbooks, the special work of Yosef Yishak Alsheykh should be noted here. In a face to face Hebrew and Ladino format, his *סליחות* published in Vienna in 1865 comprises the *Selihoṭ* service in its entirety, including the *סדר התורה נדרים וקללות* etc. An enlarged and transliterated edition of this *mahzor* is in preparation.

⁴ The 5670 (1910) title has *livre*, that of the 5682 (1922) edition is *libre*. More problematic is the case of *livralos de el kastigo* found on p.54. It should be *liv[e]ralos / liberalos de el kastigo*, free them from chastisement. See also *ke me libraras* on page 33, changed to *livraras* in the 1922 edition. In the glossary, however, both spellings occur, *librar: ser livre* (p.61)!

first sentence in the *prefas* does just that. It states that these texts are *tradusidos tekstualmente del Ebreo*, textually translated from the Hebrew. And so we have a *free* translation; and yet, it is *textually* translated from the Hebrew!

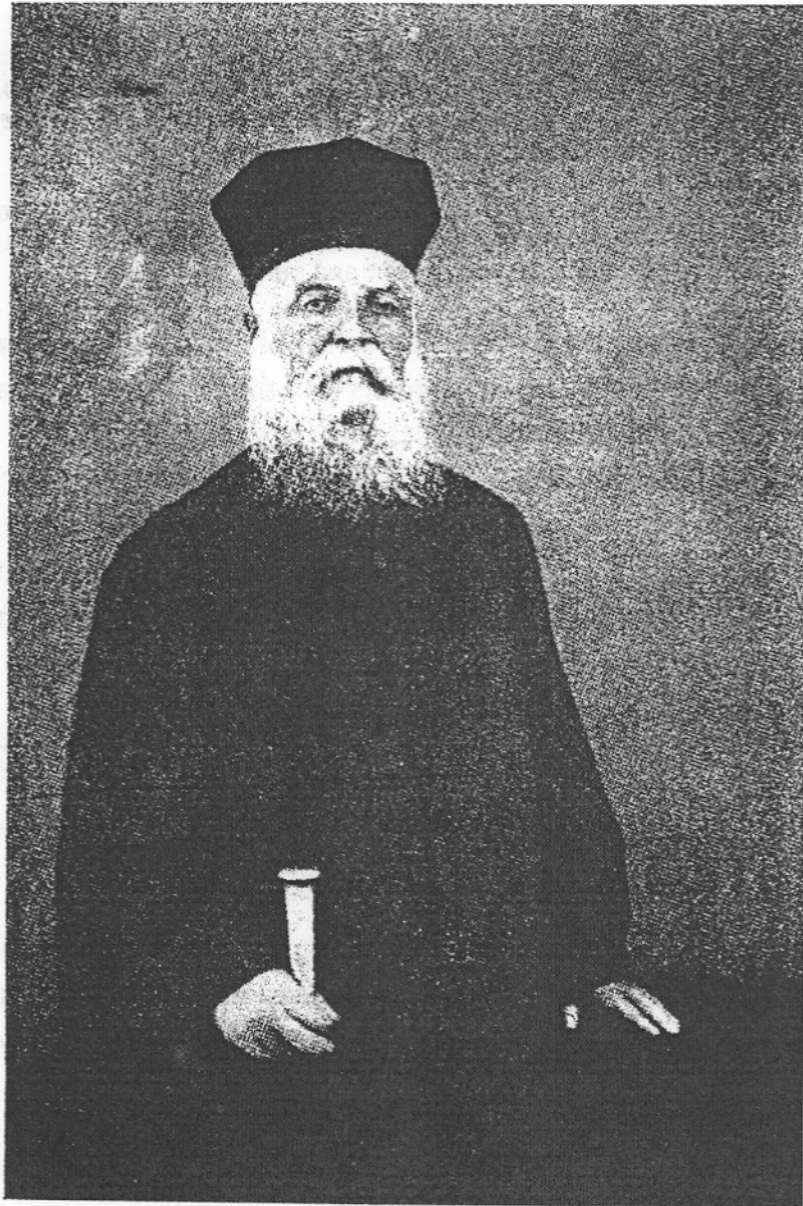
If asked to resolve this apparent contradiction, Rabbi Israel would probably defend his methodology along these lines. Except for an occasional periphrastic expression, his text certainly mirrors the contents of the poems he is translating. It is therefore *literal*. On the other hand, it is also *free* to the extent *he* felt free to replace old and worn-out Ladino words with crisper and more modern sounding French or Italian equivalents, whether these were hispanized renditions of words attested in the respective languages, or custom made by him. To help his unprepared readers, he even provided at the end of the 1910 edition a three page list (pp.60-62) of some two hundred new vocabulary items *para akeyos ke no los entyenden*, for those who do not understand them.

Why this list? Rabbi Israel was caught up in a *Kulturkampf*. He lived at the center of a cultural upheaval with so many changes and so much variety confronting him. Born in the island of Rhodes to a famous rabbinic family,⁵ and educated there, Rabbi Israel spent most of his adult life as the rabbi of the Sepharadim of Krayova, a city located west of Bucharest in Romania. He eventually returned to Rhodes to become its last chief rabbi! In Krayova he was the rabbi-Hazzan of the *Komunidad Yisraelit-Sefaradit*. And Krayova is, in all probability, the key to understanding what prompted Rabbi Israel to start his project of a *free* translation. In this Sephardic but European synagogue most congregants did not understand Hebrew anymore, their religious experience during the High Holydays was next to none. Rabbi Israel's empathy with his flock is far-reaching, indeed:

eyos se keshan munchas vezes, i kon razon, por lo ke nuestras orasyones son dichas en lingua Ebreo, lingua ke eyos ignoran kompladamente; las orasyones de los Dias Santos, dizen eyos kon regreto, no nos azen ninguna empresyon, al kontraryo eyas nos azen anoyar dezgrasyadamente por ke semos ovligados de pasar munchas oras en el Templo a kantar i a meldar en una lingua ke nos es enteramente desconosida.

they often complain, and justifiably so, that our prayers are said in Hebrew, a language they ignore completely. The prayers for the High Holydays, they add with regret, leave us unimpressed, and are even terribly boring for us, as we find ourselves compelled to spend many hours in Temple singing or reading texts written in a language totally unknown to us.

⁵ see Dr. Simon Markus, *Toledot ha-Rabbanim le-Mishpahaṭ Yisrael me-Rodos*, (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1935).



Rabbi Reuven Eliyahu Yisrael
(1856-1932)

Short of a service fully conducted in the vernacular, Rabbi Israel thinks of two palliatives: First, the *piyyutim* should be recast in simpler and more modern language. That is his job. Second, cantors should spend less time displaying their talent on elaborate *kaddish*, *kedusha*, etc. chants which are repetitive and time consuming, in order

no menguar nada de estos ermosos piyyutim ke azen empresyonar nuestros korasones i muchas vezes nos azen versar lagrimas, i azen alsar nuestras almas verso el Alto, i nos ovligan a azer el egzamen de nuestra konsensya i de nuestras aksyones...

not to diminish anything from these beautiful *piyyutim* which leave their impression on our hearts and quite often cause us to shed tears, raising our souls towards the Most High, and compelling us to examine our conscience and our actions.

Strong statements from the pen of a traditional rabbi, as if the *kedusha*, the highest point of the liturgy, when the heavenly hosts and their earthly respondents are in consonance, were to be temporarily obfuscated.

Indeed, Rabbi Israel wishes to go for the jugular, so to speak. Nothing short of a complete substitution of the Hebrew texts with *his* new Ladino translation would make him happy. Cantors and laymen need not worry about *güfte/beste* dislocations, there are none. In every respect, his words conform to the old melodies. He assures them thus:

Yo me di grande pena en azyendo esta traduksyon a aplikar el kante en uzo onde nozotros en los byervos.

In making this translation, I went to great lengths to harmonize my words (*güfte*) with the traditional tunes (*beste*) used among us.

So, cantors -he would say- don't ever come to synagogue unprepared, but do rehearse as needed. Be short in certain routine areas, use *my* precise translations *en lenguaje entendivle*, in plain language. Also pay attention to the stress of *millel* and *millera*⁶ words, because

en esta epoka ke el sintimyento relidjyozo esta byen aflakado i floshe...el hazzan...aze grande koza,

in this period of rampant religious apathy.....a hazzan....can do great things!

⁶ This warning about correct stress makes sense only in the context of European melodies superimposed on Hebrew texts. Rabbi Israel must have dealt with more than a few of these in Krayova to be so insistent about it.

Rabbi Israel's Ladino

Because of their lower status, minorities everywhere tend to overcompensate by using a variety of defense mechanisms to make things more viable for them. If a certain custom is frowned upon by the host culture, they will tend to de-emphasize that custom, practically denying its existence.

A case in point is a report I heard from an American social scientist who upon returning recently from Turkey claimed that by now Jews there had all but abandoned the custom of dowries. My sources, however, tell me that the exact opposite is true, that dowries now are more substantial than ever! Is there a villain in this situation? No, if one is looking for a person bent on misleading. The true villain is in the naive faith that takes automatically such statements at face value. What counts is not the statement itself, but the intention behind it.

Ladino has been described as an artificial language or a jargon, a hyphenated⁷ lingo or some cheap gibberish mouthed by the uneducated masses. If all it takes is a few *muchos*, instead of *munchos*, to deorbit from this vicious cycle and achieve respectability, so be it. And yet any Ladino speaker -and there is such a thing as a Ladino speaker- will assure you that not a single native will go for this substitution in daily conversation. Quite the opposite, he'll make fun of it! *Mucho* is admirably suited to impress the other side. It sends a message saying that we want respectability, we know what the other side is saying, and we'll tolerate it temporarily on this side, too.

Thus don't take every one of Rabbi Israel's words as if it were gushing forth from the mainstream of Ladino parlance. He may just be engaging in what could be called legitimate posturing. He is doing just that when

he prefers	<i>mizerikordya</i>	to	<i>piadad</i>
"	<i>preparar</i>	"	<i>aprontar</i>
"	<i>konkorso</i>	"	<i>ayuda</i>
"	<i>reparar</i>	"	<i>adovar</i>
"	<i>sufisyente</i>	"	<i>bastante</i>
"	<i>kondusela</i>	"	<i>yevala</i>
"	<i>aumentado</i>	"	<i>pujado</i>

⁷ Only people who have never read an entire Ladino book in their lives thrive in driving wedges between possible types of usage found in Ladino. By their standards, the King James version of the Bible which is a *calque* should not deserve being described as good English. Of course, the verdict of history is quite different.

" *espavoreser* " *espantar*

As always, in addition to clarity and understandability, one of his goals is the achievement of respectability *via* purportedly classy language. Here is a random list of some serious challenges to his Ladino:

- eterno*: I don't know why in addition to *eterno* (p.59), he uses *eterno* (p.10). Maybe he was carried away by Fr. *éternel*, thinking that the addition of a final *o* would make a fine Ladino word.
- modelo*: He always uses *modelo* (p.71) instead of *model*, probably based on Fr. *modèle*, with the same process of adding a final *o*. It. *modello* would have two *lamed's*. Hispanists will claim that *modelo* is nothing but Spanish. Yet, the identity here with Sp. *modelo* is purely coincidental.
- dias solemneles* (preface): Rabbi Israel somehow blocked off the Ladino *solemne*, and fell again in love with Fr. *solennel*. In Ladino *solemneles* is an intolerable hybrid, better left alone.
- vertudozo* (p.11): Having *vertuozo*, why use *vertud* as a basis for the rather heavy *vertudozo*?
- onipotensya* (p.15, p.60): Rabbi Israel slipped momentarily into Italian, even though elsewhere he does have *omnipotensya* (p.31).
- me espira* (p.24): Another slip into Italian. The proper Ladino form is *me enspira*.
- benevolensa, klemensa* (p.32) are Italian formations. They should be replaced with *benevolensya, klemensya*.
- altissimo* (p.29): Also from Italian. Due to Hebrew influence, superlatives of this type are not used in Ladino.
- vyolando tu enkomendansa* (p.36) sounds too French to be good. In a *Yom Kippur* confession, the cut and dry *vyoli!* (p.42) sounds awkward.
- mamparasyon* (p.62) is unnecessary in view of *mamparo*.
- enpovrese* (p.62) " " " " " *prove* and *enprovrese*
- rempushar* (p.1) " " " " " *pushar* and *repushar*.
- tradisyonal* (preface) is invariable in the feminine. *Tradisyonala* is to be avoided.
- en detalyo* is adverbial and invariable, *ni nombrar mis pekados en detalyos* (p.36) is wrong.