

Abstract

Rabbi Shalom Shabazi, one of the greatest Yemenite poets, also known as Abba Shalom Shabazi, lived in the seventeenth century in south Yemen. Throughout the ages, the sages of Yemen appreciated his greatness in Torah, while his poetry earned him a central place among Yemenite Jewry. He is celebrated and admired among all the sages of Yemen.

I have recently acquired a private collection of manuscripts composed by Rabbi Shabazi. The main concern of this book is the detailing of this collection, which includes *piyyutim* and prayers that have yet to be published. However, since the great poet himself, his life and unique place among Yemenite Jewry, has yet to receive a thorough and comprehensive narration, an account pivotal to understanding the collection at hand, I have seen fit to chronicle the material known to us in the first two chapters of the book.

I begin the narrative of Rabbi Shabazi's life with the admiration he received after his death. Little is known about his life; his writings and poetry serve as our main source of information. He was born in 1619, and his ancestry includes Shalam ben Yosef ben Avigad ben Halfon. He had two sons and a daughter, the most famous of whom was Shimon, a poet and a *dayan*.

From time to time, a number of manuscripts have been discovered that include new *piyyutim* attributed to Rabbi Shabazi. There are currently 850 known poems composed by him, which comprise about a third of the entire poetic work from Yemen. He composed the majority of his *piyyutim*, which are of a religious nature, in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic.

Rabbi Shabazi lived through one of the most turbulent and difficult periods in the history of the Jews of Yemen. Rumors regarding Shabbetai Zevi's messianism began spreading among Yemenite Jewry in the years 1665-1667, as expressed in several of Rabbi Shabazi's poems. Jewish and Muslim sources indicate that the rumors surrounding Shabbetai Zevi led to an increased sense of security among the Jews of Yemen, to which the Muslims responded with a series of decrees intended to humiliate them.

In a document copied by Rabbi Shabazi, which is photocopied and presented here, there are twenty-two unpublished and unknown poems that he composed. In some of them, Rabbi Shabazi expresses the suffering of the Yemenite Jews as a result of the decrees that were imposed upon them during his time. The information in

these poems sheds light on the events of the period, enriching our knowledge of the subject. In his poetry, he describes the attacks on Jews, including the desecration of Torah scrolls and the Torah Ark, the destruction of synagogues and the humiliation of the sages, culminating in the expulsion of the Jews to Mawza. The settlement of Mawza is located in southwestern Yemen, by the Tihanah River on the Red Sea coast, and is known as an arid place. The deportation order was issued at the beginning of the month of *Elul* in the year 1678, and the expulsion began in 1679 and continued through 1680. The expulsion encompassed many communities throughout Yemen. In a different poem, Rabbi Shabazi recounts the extent of the expulsion, from Sa'dah in the north to the Shara'b district in the south, all the while emphasizing the despair and grief over the Jews of San'a. Rabbi Shabazi, who wandered with the exiles to Mawza, describes the hardships of the journey. He apparently survived the march, which he illustrates in vivid colors in his poetry.

From his poems, we bear witness to his greatness in Torah and secular subjects. His education encompassed a profound knowledge of the three languages – Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic – in which he wrote his works. Rabbi Shabazi's knowledge was not restricted to the Arabic language, but also covered the Arab world and Islam.

In addition, Rabbi Shabazi was one of the most prominent scholars of Yemen in the fields of Torah, philosophy, and Kabbalah. He wrote a number of essays, the most famous of which is his interpretation of the Torah *Hemdut Yamim*, in which he quotes *midrashim* and rabbinical literature, and interprets the weekly *Parsha*, with his own commentaries.

Regarding the pilgrimage to the graves of the righteous, it should be noted that there was no widespread phenomenon of visiting the graves of relatives, nor did Jews frequent the grave sites of the righteous, or dedicate a separate burial plot for them. The three most renowned tomb sites frequented by Yemenite Jews were those of sages who lived in the seventeenth century. These sages had to live under the arduous decrees that affected the Jews of Yemen, in which they were required to leave their places of residence and be exiled to Mawza. Two of the sages, Rabbi Salem Pinchas and Rabbi Yahya Halevy, were from San'a. They passed away on their way to Mawza near the city of San'a, and their grave sites were visited by those who lived in the immediate vicinity. The third, and most famous of the three, was Rabbi Shabazi, who wandered with the exiles from his residence in Taiz in southern Yemen. Jews from all over the country would come to frequent his grave site. From the paucity of information regarding pilgrimages to the grave sites of the righteous in Yemen, one can learn that this phenomenon among Yemenite Jews was very limited.

It is also interesting to note that in the stories (first- or second-hand accounts) of those who visited the tomb, there is a tendency to present vivid descriptions of the spring in the cave located near the tomb, whereas the tomb itself is hardly given a concrete description. In only a few testimonies does the grave merit any description at all. The British researcher Hugh Scott visited the tomb in December 1937, during

which visit he recounted the following: “We passed the tomb of a Jewish saint, Weli Shebazi. The actual grave, a whitewashed oblong with a little arch on top at one end, was surrounded by a rough stone wall, with a small, low one-roomed stone building opening into the enclosure.”

Those visiting the grave site from nearby places would frequent the locale, from time to time, without any prior organization. However, pilgrims from distant places, whose journeys required accommodation at intermediate stations, organized themselves in groups and prepared themselves for the journey ahead. Many of the Jews who came to the city of Taiz to visit the grave of Rabbi Shabazi, among them families, would stay in the village of Magraba, located at the edge of the city on the side of Mount Sabar, near the tomb, which was populated by Jews.

The spring near Rabbi Shabazi’s grave site, approximately a hundred meters away, was famous throughout Yemen as a place of healing. Patients from all over Yemen would visit to pray for a quick recovery, and some would remain by his grave site until they were healed. The visitors would attribute miraculous properties to the waters of the spring, and thus some used to drink from it or clean their wounds with it. There were others who swore that if they recovered, they would visit the grave site of Rabbi Shabazi, which would garner them the necessary strength and hope that they would recover from their illness. The patient would immerse in the *mikvah*, pray at the grave site, and then enter the *minshara*, which was a cave in the mountain near the site. Inside the cave was collected water, originating from the spring itself. The patient would wait until he noticed an object floating in the spring, such as a leaf, and then he would take it, store it in a box and use it as a talisman for healing. There are other reasons for the visiting the grave of Rabbi Shabazi: personal requests, prayers, success, and the fulfillment of the vows of healed patients. It should be noted that there were local Muslims who also visited the grave site to be cured, respecting the site and treating it as a holy place.

The Jews who lived in Taiz, where Rabbi Shabazi was buried, and the nearby communities, immigrated to Israel in the late 1940s; the Jews who remained mostly dwelled in northern Yemen – thus severing the connection between the grave site and those who held it dear. Since then, we have no reliable source or report on the condition of the grave site. In the 1990s, attempts were made to rehabilitate the tomb of Rabbi Shabazi, but without success, and in the years following the establishment of the State of Israel efforts were made by several organizations to transfer the bones of Rabbi Shabazi to Israel for burial.

I have dealt extensively with the aforementioned manuscript, which contains sixty pages, including twenty-two new *piyyutim* and prayers for throughout the year: *Pesach*, *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur*, *Succot*, and *Simchat Torah*. I have studied all the new *piyyutim*, which have been collected, and have added an introduction, *nikkud*, and references. In some of the *piyyutim* presented here, for the first time ever, Rabbi Shabazi describes the events of his time, as he did in other *piyyutim* that have already been published. Presenting these *piyyutim*, their content, and the discussion

surrounding them, contributes an additional layer of information regarding the events and time period in which Rabbi Shabazi lived – a particularly turbulent time in the history of Yemenite Jewry. Some of the *piyyutim* were composed in the wake of historical events that took place in Yemen during the expulsion to Mawza. In the title of one of the *piyyutim*, Rabbi Shabazi notes: “For the sons of Ishmael stripped the garments of a *Torah* scroll, and cast them naked with their king, and decreed against us or exiled us from the land before the end.” These *piyyutim* combine a lamentation for the fate of Yemenite Jews and the decrees against them, while seeking redemption and mercy. The edicts were expressed in light of the closing of synagogues and the desecration of *Torah* scrolls, as well as the humiliation of the Jews and their expulsion from their places of dwelling. The poet asks that God be merciful with his nation and redeem it, seeking retribution against His wrongdoers, and the release of His nation and a return to the ancestral homeland.

Other *piyyutim* from the collection are liturgical, discussing the need to beware of sins and the evil inclination and adhere to committing good deeds, reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked, a call for repentance and acceptance by God, repentance on *Yom Kippur* and to be written in the Book of Life, a prayer to God that He shall aid Israel, due to their prayers, study, and charity that they provide for the poor. Additionally, Rabbi Shabazi wishes that God will remember the people of Israel due to the rights of the forefathers, hear their prayers, and write them in the Book of Life, and a prayer for redemption with the coming of the Messiah. These *piyyutim*, which are published here for the first time, and whose purpose is prayer and turning to repentance, attest to the greatness of Rabbi Shabazi in Torah and the literature of Jewish philosophy, in which he excelled.

From the manuscript, I have copied the *Pesach Haggadah*, a photograph of which is presented in this book. I have discussed the important customs of the *Seder* and the practices of prayer that arise from passages in this collection. For each custom, I have illustrated the background, overview, and summary of its development, and finally, I note how Yemenite Jews currently maintain the custom. I compared the customs to two other sources, to the *tiklāl* (a Jewish Yemenite prayer book) that was copied by Rabbi Shabazi in 1677, and to the *tiklāl* written in the time and region of Rabbi Shabazi by one of his family members, Rabbi Yisrael Mashta, in 1642.

From the customs of the *Seder*, we learn about the traditions that were common during the time and place of Rabbi Shabazi. For example, regarding the blessing on the four cups during the *Seder* it is written that a blessing must be recited on each cup of the four cups in accordance with the custom of ancient Yemenite Jews, as is customary today among the Baladi and some of the Shāmī communities. Furthermore, an ancient custom of drinking a fifth cup is presented, a custom that has almost completely disappeared among Yemenite Jews. For the blessing on the *matzah* on the *Seder* night, it is commanded to bless only on the *matzah* and half that is left, as is the custom of the ancient Yemenite Jews, and still practiced among the Baladi.

The sections of the prayer that are presented in this volume are from the month of *Tishrei*: *Rosh Hashana*, *Yom Kippur*, *Succot*, and *Simchat Torah*. Rabbi Shabazi wrote instructions for the observance of the *Lulav* and accompanying customs, which can enlighten us regarding the traditions of his place and time. Moreover, I have added a discussion section for the *piyyutim* of *Simchat Torah* and *Seder Ha'avodah* of *Yom Kippur*. The discussion of these sources provides us with a broader picture regarding the traditions of the festivals of *Tishrei* in the time and region of Rabbi Shabazi. With regard to the *Ha'dasim* of the Four Species we learn that, the Jews of the Shara'b district used to add a non-kosher myrtle to the *Lulav* in accordance with the custom of ancient Yemenite Jews, a tradition still maintained by the Baladi and some of the Shāmī communities. Regarding the shaking of the Four Species, one can see the influence of Rabbi Yosef Karo on Rabbi Shabazi. The collection of the *Simchat Torah piyyutim* is very much in accord with the *piyyutim* that appear in Yemenite prayer books up to the eighteenth century, and the recitation of the *piyyutim* of *Simchat Torah* was done only after the morning prayers, which is in accordance with the ancient custom of Yemenite Jews. From the eighteenth to the twentieth century, additional *piyyutim* entered the prayer book of Yemenite Jewry, and from the nineteenth century there were some who recited the *piyyutim* after the evening prayers. The *Seder Ha'avodah* is different from what was brought by Rabbi Yahya Saleh in his *tiklāl Etz Chaim*, which teaches us about the ancient custom found in the collection of Rabbi Shabazi and the influence it had on publications during Rabbi Yahya Saleh's period. The evident conclusion is that, during the period and in the region of Rabbi Shabazi, the customs of the *Seder* and the prayer segments of the month of *Tishrei* were in accordance with ancient customs, as found in the *tiklāls* composed up to his time. In later generations, however, the region of Rabbi Shabazi was heavily impacted by the rulings of Rabbi Karo's *Shulchan Aruch* and of Kabbalistic teachings to a far greater degree than any other Yemenite community in the other regions and districts. Most of the manuscript copied by Rabbi Shabazi, whose photograph is presented in this book, contains *nikkud*, allowing for a better understanding of local pronunciation during his time.

In the last chapter, I dwell on matters of language in the writings of Rabbi Shabazi, where I discuss the form of pronunciation, such as the exchange between the *Holam* and *Tsere*, which was prevalent mainly in south Yemen where Rabbi Shabazi lived, and less so in other parts of Yemen. Conversely, the pronunciation of *Patah* and *Segol* is identical among Yemenite Jews, and is derived from a Babylonian tradition. Additionally, I have incorporated the explanation of numerous words found within the *piyyutim*, which Rabbi Shabazi interpreted in the manuscript, as they enrich our knowledge of the Jewish language in Yemen.

In the last part of the book, I chose to present to the reader the manuscript of the great poet Rabbi Shabazi, which can further expand our knowledge regarding the presented manuscript. There is no doubt that it will serve as fertile ground for future researchers from an array of subjects and disciplines.