

Avigdor Kara's Appeal Reconsidered: A Transcription and English Translation of a Begging Letter Written by a Late Medieval Scholar From Prague^{*}

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Avigdor Kara (d. 1439) is perhaps the best-known figure of the late medieval Jewish community in Prague.² His tombstone is famous for being the oldest one surviving in the Old Town Cemetery and his role as a witness to the 1389 attack on the Jews of Prague and as the author of the commemorative elegy 'All the Afflictions' (*Et Kol ha-Telaah*), which was later incorporated into the liturgy of the Old Synagogue, is widely acknowledged. In recent years, renewed interest in Kara and his literary activities has contributed to a better understanding of his place in the late medieval Ashkenazic religious and intel-

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²Parts of the following discussion have previously been published in Czech in my article 'Několik poznámek k intelektuálnímu profilu Avigdora Kary' [Some Remarks on the Intellectual Profile of Avigdor Kara], in: Daniel Boušek – Magdalena Křížová – Pavel Sládek, eds., *Dvarim meatim: Studie pro Jiřinu Šedinovou*, Praha 2016, pp. 35–56. For a brief overview of Kara's life and work, see Leopold Zunz, *Literaturgeschichte der synagogalen Poesie*, Berlin 1865, pp. 373–374; Otto Muneles, *Epitaphs from the Ancient Jewish Cemetery in Prague*, Jerusalem 1988 (Hebrew, Czech), pp. 103–105; Arye Maimon – Mordechai Breuer – Yacov Guggenheim, eds., *Germania Judaica Band III 1350–1519, 2. Teilband* (hereinafter GJ III.2), Tübingen 1995, pp. 1126f.

lectual landscape.³ Kara's close personal ties and intellectual affinities to Yom Tov Lipman Mühlhausen (d. 1421) and Menahem Shalem (fl. ca 1413), his fellow members at the bet din in Prague, are often highlighted, as well as the possibility that he maintained contacts at the court of Wenceslas IV.⁴ The aim of this article is to contribute to this recent contextualization by presenting an updated transcription and a new English translation of a begging letter written by Avigdor Kara to the members of an unspecified Jewish community. In the letter, Kara, who introduces himself as a teacher of schoolchildren, describes his unfavourable financial situation and asks the addressees for material support. In the discussion preceding the transcription and translation, I examine how the letter, probably written in the wake of the 1389 attack on the Jews in Prague, contributes to a better appreciation of Kara's biography and intellectual profile. I also briefly discuss older editions of this document and explain the reasons for producing an updated transcription and translation. p. 32

According to his epitaph, Avigdor Kara was 'a man who understood pleasant song, / who studied the Torah in public and in private. / He was knowledge-

³For the most recent contributions, see Evina Steinová, 'All That Suffering': Hebrew Narratives about the Prague Easter Massacre of 1389 and Their Interaction with the Latin Material', in: Ondřej Bláha – Robert Dittmann – Lenka Uličná, eds., *Knaanic Language: Structure and Historical Background. Proceedings of a Conference Held in Prague on October 25–26, 2012*, Praha 2013, pp. 241–268; Tamás Visi, 'Plague, Persecution, and Philosophy: Avigdor Kara and the Consequences of the Black Death', in: Ephraim Shoham-Steiner, ed., *Intricate Interfaith Networks in the Middle Ages: Quotidian Jewish-Christian Contacts*, Turnhout 2016, pp. 85–117. For a discussion of the early modern reception of Kara's elegies, see Rachel L. Greenblatt, *To Tell Their Children: Jewish Communal Memory in Early Modern Prague*, Stanford 2013, pp. 120–126.

⁴On Mühlhausen and Shalem, see most recently Tamás Visi, 'The Emergence of Philosophy in Ashkenazic Contexts: The Case of Czech Lands in the Early Fifteenth Century', *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts*, 8 (2009), pp. 213–243; Milan Žonca, 'The "Imagined Communities" of Yom Tov Lipman Mühlhausen: Heresy and Communal Boundaries in Sefer Nizzahon', in: Christoph Cluse – Lukas Clemens, eds., *The Jews of Europe Around 1400: Disruption, Crisis, and Resilience*, Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 119–143. The legendary account of Kara's close relationship to Wenceslas IV can be found in the Hussite Chronicle (Gilgul Bnei Hushim) of Zalman of St Goar, a student of Rabbi Jacob Mölin. See Israel Jacob Yuval, 'Juden, Hussiten und Deutsche. Nach einer hebräischen Chronik', in: Alfred Haverkamp – Franz-Josef Ziwes, eds., *Juden in christlichen Umwelt während des späten Mittelalters*, Berlin 1992, pp. 59–102. Albrecht Hausmann has suggested that Kara may have had ties to the entourage of the royal vice-chancellor Sigismund Huler. See Albrecht Hausmann, 'Der "Ackermann aus Böhmen" und die Prager Juden um 1400', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur (PBB)*, 125 (2003), 2, pp. 292–323.

able in the Torah / in all the books of science and in the books of Scripture.⁵ If taken as a concise summary of Kara's intellectual characteristics that struck his contemporaries as most significant, this testimony seems to identify three main areas of Kara's scholarly profile: his activity as a poet, as a teacher, and as a student of the Bible and of non-halakhic disciplines. Indeed, Kara's interest in Hebrew grammar and the study of the Bible, Kabbalah, and philosophy marked him out from many members of the Ashkenazic rabbinic elite who focused primarily on Talmudic expertise.⁶ Tamás Visi has argued that this intellectual reorientation, reflected among other things in Kara's belief in special powers of Biblical verses to protect from physical harm, was a product of the changes to the Ashkenazic cultural landscape after 1349 attesting to a growing 'loss of confidence' in the tradition of rabbinic learning.⁷

The document discussed in this article provides further context for Visi's argument. It shows that in the early stages of his career, Avigdor Kara earned his living as a tutor of young children. Belonging to a profession that was perceived ambivalently in medieval Ashkenazic culture, Kara relied on his knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and of its language for sustenance. This fact helps explain the richness of Biblical imagery found in his literary and poetic work. At the same time, Kara's 'freelance' occupation made his economic situation more precarious and, perhaps, also stimulated his interest in 'exclusive', 'elitist' forms of non-halakhic knowledge, be it Maimonidean philosophy or Sephardic Kabbalah.⁸ Kara's profile thus seems to match that of a member of the medieval Ashkenazic 'secondary elite', a group of scholars with specific intellectual in-

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⁵O. Muneles, op.cit., p. 103.

⁶On rabbinic attitudes to Biblical study in Ashkenaz, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, 'On the Role of Bible Study in Medieval Ashkenaz', in: Barry D. Walfish, ed., *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*, I, Haifa 1993, pp. 151–166; Frank Talmage, 'Keep Your Sons from Scripture: The Bible in Medieval Jewish Scholarship and Spirituality', in: Clemens Thoma – Michael Wyschogrod, eds., *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretation*, New York 1987, pp. 81–101, esp. 84–93.

⁷T. Visi, 'Plague, Persecution, and Philosophy', pp. 90–93.

⁸Kara attempted to reconcile philosophy and Kabbalah in a treatise titled *Even Sapir* [*The Sapphire Stone*]. The text is now lost, but a summary of its contents is contained in one of his responsa. See Yehuda Hershkowitz, 'Kitvei R. Avigdor Kara' [The Writings of R. Avigdor Kara], *Yeshurun*, 30 (2014), pp. 53–86, esp. 73–75. Available on-line at <http://www.hebrewbooks.org/56832> (accessed 28/8/2019); Ephraim Kupfer, 'Li-demutah ha-tarbutit shel yahadut Ashkenaz ve-hakhmeiha ba-meot ha-14–15' [Concerning the Cultural Image of German Jewry and its Rabbis in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries], *Tarbiz*, 42 (1973), pp. 113–147, esp. 118f.

terests and emphases who were not necessarily involved in high-level halakhic studies.⁹ The existence of such a group is not exclusively a fourteenth-century phenomenon but it seems to have received clearer outlines after 1349, especially as a consequence of the institutionalization of the rabbinic office and the re-establishment of rabbinic ordination.¹⁰ The fact that Kara did eventually ascend to a position of authority in the Jewish community of Prague illustrates the degree to which non-halakhic knowledge permeated the perceptions of scholarly expertise and religious authority in the late Middle Ages. Finally, as we shall see, the information contained in Kara's letter may shed more light on broader questions, such as the situation of the Jewish community of Prague in the aftermath of the attack in 1389 and the mechanism of communal support for elementary education in late medieval Jewish communities in general.

The Letter, Its Author And Addressees

The letter presented below is found in a volume now located in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris.¹¹ The manuscript is written in a Sephardic hand and contains an incomplete text of the 'Commentary on the Torah' by the Provençal scholar Levi ben Gershom (RaLBaG, 1288–1344), composed in the late 1320s and early 1330s. The manuscript contains no colophon, but according to the electronic catalogue of the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts (IMHM), it can be dated to the fifteenth century. Avigdor Kara's letter is written at the beginning of the manuscript (fol. 2r) along with three other documents which likewise have no apparent connection to the manuscript's main subject.¹²

In his begging letter, Kara introduces himself as a schoolteacher who has sud- p. 34

⁹The main intellectual foci of secondary elites in Ashkenazic society were esotericism, Biblical and piyyut exegesis. See Ephraim Kanarfogel, *The Intellectual History and Rabbinic Culture of Medieval Ashkenaz*, Detroit 2012, pp. 21f.

¹⁰For a detailed discussion of this process, see Israel Jacob Yuval, *Hakhamim be-doram: Hamanhigut ha-ruhanit shel yehudei Germanyah be-shilhei yemei ha-beinayim* [Scholars in Their Time: The Religious Leadership of German Jewry in the Late Middle Ages], Jerusalem 1988.

¹¹Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms héb. 242 [IMHM scroll No. F 4268]. Digitized versions of the manuscript can be consulted at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9064863g/> (accessed 28/8/2019) and http://rosetta.nli.org.il/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE57097553 (accessed 28/8/2019).

¹²The documents on fols. 1v–2r were written in a different ink than the rest of the manuscript. Their handwriting is similar, but not identical to the handwriting of the remaining text. For further information on texts accompanying Kara's letter, see below.

denly lost his livelihood because the Jewish community in his place of residence is impoverished ‘and they can no longer sustain [him]’. Moreover, Kara claims he has been ‘imprisoned’ (*kalu*) and is unable to move to a different community, referring to a shared tax burden or a financial penalty that has been imposed on the members of the Jewish community. After consulting his pupils, who purportedly encouraged him to send out a letter to the surrounding Jewish communities, Kara decided to address ‘all the men and women whose hearts moved them in wisdom [...] to perform charity’ with a plea for financial support. To prove his knowledge of the Bible and literary skills (hence also his worthiness to receive charity), Kara includes in his letter sections written in rhymed prose consisting of a large number of Biblical quotations, as well as a poetic composition glorifying the profession of a *melamed*. He also notes that while some readers might not consider it appropriate for a schoolteacher to collect financial contributions, because the study of the Bible is of lower rank than the study of the Talmud, his appeal is motivated primarily by the care for his students and by the heavy burden of poverty. The plea for help is signed ‘the poor and lowly teacher of children, Avigdor’. The name of the author (‘Avigdor Kara’) is also highlighted in the poem in the form of an acrostic. Throughout the letter, Avigdor Kara skilfully follows the conventions of the genre – he refers to the unexpected and sudden nature of his impoverishment, stresses the sense of inappropriateness he feels at bringing forth his appeal and emphasizes the positive qualities that make him worthy of financial support.¹³

The position of a *melamed*, i.e. private teacher of young children, in the Ashkenazic society was insecure.¹⁴ Ashkenazic communities knew no organized system of elementary education and the process mostly depended on an individual arrangement between the father of the child and the tutor. In general, fathers provided some form of elementary education themselves, if possible. If they decided to hire a tutor, he would often be a young unmarried man. He would use school teaching as a temporary means to support himself during

¹³For a study of Jewish begging letters from the Cairo Genizah, see Mark R. Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt*, Princeton 2005. On the preferential treatment received by those (especially the members of the middle class) who fell into ‘conjunctural’ poverty (as opposed to ‘structural’ poverty) and on the associated literary strategies employed by the writers of begging letters, see *ibidem*, pp. 36–71.

¹⁴For an overview of the position of schoolteachers in medieval Ashkenazic society, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, *Jewish Education and Society in the High Middle Ages*, Detroit 1992, pp. 15–32; *idem*, ‘Schools and Education’, in: Robert Chazan, ed., *The Cambridge History of Judaism. Volume VI, The Middle Ages: The Christian World*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 393–415, esp. 403–409.

his studies and sometimes provide his services for board and lodging only. As a result, the occupation was often regarded as a domain of immigrants and ‘wayfarers’ and the social status of a *melamed* was clearly lower than that of full-time Talmudic students.¹⁵ A teacher was mostly hired only for one student, but he could also teach several students at once, either in his own home or in the local synagogue. However, even in such cases, the instruction was not organized and paid for by the Jewish community, but rather by the individual parents.¹⁶ It seems that this was also the arrangement referred to in Kara’s letter. As for the subject of study, according to Kanarfogel, ‘[w]e may assume that, at most, [the teachers usually] taught biblical reading, translation and basic interpretation, and perhaps rudiments of talmudic studies’.¹⁷ Allusions to Kara’s curriculum in the letter suggest that he focused not only on the weekly Torah portion, but also on the books of Prophets and Writings. In his poem, Kara explicitly mentions a ‘three-pronged fork’ used to goad his students – a reference to the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible. The fact that the students themselves suggested that Kara should write ‘an explanation or a novel interpretation of one verse or a [Torah] section (*ha-pasuk o ha-parashah ahat levaer o lehadash davar*)’ shows that his instruction is not limited to the grammatical level of the Hebrew text, but also includes an exegetical component. p. 35

Apart from the name of its author, the letter contains little specific information. Kara’s place of residence is not explicitly mentioned, and neither are the intended recipients of his writing. Kara recalls the support he has received from the ‘scholars of Austria’; he notes, however, that some of them he ‘[has not] met in person yet, but they took pity on [him] because of [his] reputation’.¹⁸ It seems, therefore, that he did not reside in Austria at the time of the writing of the letter. He also claims that he taught several students, some of whom had come to him ‘from afar’. Even if taken with a grain of salt as a rhetorical *topos*, this assertion suggests that Kara lived in a central community, large enough to make special arrangements for elementary education and to attract young students from the surrounding areas. Prague would be an obvious choice for a location fitting this description.

The dating of the letter, however, is less clear. The authors of the entry on Prague in *Germania Judaica* suggest that Kara’s Bettelbrief may reflect the de-

¹⁵E. Kanarfogel, *Jewish Education*, pp. 29f. See also M. R. Cohen, op. cit., p. 74.

¹⁶E. Kanarfogel, ‘Schools and Education’, pp. 405f.

¹⁷*Ibidem*, p. 408.

¹⁸See below, pp. 43, 45.

teriorating financial situation of the local Jewish community after a special tax was imposed on the Jews in 1414–1415.¹⁹ However, I have not been able to find evidence for increased taxation of the Jews in Prague in these years. Kara's claim in the letter that his students had 'fled because of the persecutors', as well as references to 'unfortunate events [which] have seized [his] gate' and to 'a war' in which he was involved 'with fear and trembling', clearly suggest that the impoverishment of his community was caused by a violent incident. Moreover, Kara explicitly mentions 'the suffering that befell' his local community. The Hebrew formulation (*ha-telaah she-avrah aleynu*) seems to allude to (or perhaps anticipate) Kara's famous selihah titled *Et Kol ha-Telaah*, which commemorates the attack of 1389 in Prague. It seems, therefore, more reasonable to assume that the letter was written earlier, namely shortly after the attack on the local Jewish community in spring 1389.²⁰

Moreover, Kara's claim that he was unable to leave town in order to earn his livelihood elsewhere also squares well with the information available on the immediate aftermath of the events of 1389. According to a royal command executed by the vice-chancellor Sigismund Huler and issued on Easter Monday 19 April 1389, all the Jews who survived the attack were to be arrested and held in captivity along with their possessions, apparently to ensure their security.²¹ The imprisonment of the Jews is mentioned also in the different versions of a Latin parodic account of the attack titled *Passio Iudeorum Pragensium*, along with the fact that the King punished the city for the attack by imposing a high fine.²² The length of the imprisonment is not known. No-

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¹⁹GJ III.2, p. 1142, n. 213.

²⁰For a recent overview of available information on the attack with extensive bibliography, see Evina Steinová, 'Passio Iudeorum Pragensium: Tatsachen und Fiktionen über das Pogrom im Jahr 1389', in: Helmut Teufel – Pavel Kocman – Milan Řepa, eds., *'Avigdor, Benesch, Gitl': Juden in Böhmen, Mähren und Schlesien im Mittelalter*, Essen 2016, pp. 159–186. For my recent attempt to place the attack within the context of Prague's contemporary religious scene, see Milan Žonca, "...And Order Was Upset": Easter, the Eucharist, and the Jews of Prague, 1389', in: Jonathan Adams – Cordelia Heß, eds., *The Medieval Roots of Antisemitism: Continuities and Discontinuities from the Middle Ages to the Present Day*, New York – London 2018, pp. 287–305.

²¹František Palacký, *Über Formelbücher, zunächst in Bezug auf böhmische Geschichte*, 2 Vols., Prag 1842–1847, Vol. 2 (1847), pp. 150f. (19 April 1389). On the reliability of this source, see Karel Hruza, 'Anno domini 1385 do burden die iuden ... gevangen. Die vorweggenommene Wirkung skandalöser Urkunden König Wenzels (IV.)', in: Karel Hruza – Paul Herold, eds., *Wege zur Urkunde, Wege der Urkunde, Wege der Forschung: Beiträge zur europäischen Diplomatik des Mittelalters*, Wien 2005, pp. 117–167, esp. 132–134.

²²E. Steinová, 'Passio Iudeorum Pragensium', p. 175. For an English translation of the *Passio*,

tably, Kara's close friend Menahem ben Jacob Shalem also claimed that on one occasion he had spent 'eighteen weeks in a fortified tower, eating only dry bread'.²³ Unfortunately, it cannot be determined whether he referred to the same incident. Kara's claim that the community members 'share each other's obligations under oath' may be a hint that, despite the fact that the Jews were originally apprehended for their own protection, they were later required to provide a special payment in order to be released. Given the fact that the arrest of the Jews was to be executed by the municipal authorities, it is possible that the survivors of the attack were eventually forced to contribute to the fines imposed by the King on the city as a punishment for the very attack that had devastated their community. However, it is likewise possible that the fine or the payment for release was exacted from the Jews by the royal chancery.²⁴

The identification of the incident referred to in the letter with the violence of 1389 needs to face one objection. Perhaps Kara, who died in 1439 – that is fifty years after the attack – was too young in 1389 to produce a begging letter of the sort presented here? It is true that Kara claimed he was 'unable to multiply poetic phrases as [he had been] accustomed from [his] youth' and he even referred to the communities where he had dwelled previously.²⁵ He also indicated that his own teacher was no longer alive. All this would seem to suggest that Kara was already a mature man. However, as we shall see below, in 1389 Kara already used the title *haver*, which was reserved for Talmudic students and scholars without rabbinic ordination.²⁶ It seems probable that Kara was in his late twenties at the time of the attack on the Jews of Prague, p. 37

see Barbara Newman, *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred*, Notre Dame 2013, pp. 264–271.

²³The Bodleian Library in Oxford, Ms Opp. 585, fols. 23r–v.

²⁴It should be noted that according to a source known as *Chronicon Viennense*, the Jews in Prague and Moravia were apprehended also in 1396; however, we possess no further information on this arrest. K. Hruza, op. cit., p. 137.

²⁵Kara's poetic activity has been well-noted. For a list of his poetic compositions, see Israel Davidson, *Thesaurus of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry*, 4 Vols., New York 1924–1938 (Hebrew), Vol. IV (1938), p. 347. According to *Gilgul Bnei Hushim*, Kara composed poems and hymns in Hebrew, German, and Czech language proclaiming the superiority of the Jewish faith. See I. J. Yuval, 'Juden, Hussiten und Deutsche', p. 96. This legend could reflect the popularity of Kara's poetic summary of the thirteen principles of Jewish faith by Maimonides, titled *Ehad, Yahid u-Meyuhad El*. See also Frank Talmage, 'Angels, Anthems, and Anathemas: Aspects of Popular Religion in Fourteenth-Century Bohemian Judaism', *Jewish History*, 6 (1992), 1/2, pp. 13–20, esp. 16–19.

²⁶I. J. Yuval, *Scholars*, pp. 280f.

and therefore no longer a young student, but still not an established scholar. As we have seen, this was precisely the social stratum from which the teachers of young children were often recruited. In contrast, if Kara wrote the letter in 1414/1415, as suggested in *Germania Judaica*, he would have been in his late forties or early fifties. Given the fact that in 1413 he was already a member of the local *bet din*, his social status was clearly higher than what the style of the letter suggests.²⁷

The intended recipients of Kara's letter remain a matter of speculation. The fact that it was copied by a Sephardic scribe several decades after it had been composed shows that it eventually reached regions far removed from the place of its composition. Was Kara's plea addressed to the Jews who lived outside the Ashkenazic realm? In one of his responsa, Kara cites an anti-kabbalistic passage from a thirteenth-century polemical compendium titled *Milhemet Mitzvah* [*Commanded War*] written by Meir ben Simeon ha-Meili of Narbonne.²⁸ The fact that Kara had access to this rare Provençal text suggests working channels of communication and manuscript circulation between Prague and southern France.²⁹ Kara could have attempted to address scholars in Provence or Spain in the hope that they would be more sympathetic to his plight, especially given the fact that, unlike in Ashkenaz, elementary-level educational services were formally organized in Spain.³⁰ Appealing as this hypothesis may seem, the codicological context of Kara's letter suggests that the matter is not so clear-cut. On fol. 1v of the manuscript, a copy of a communal ruling against Jews seeking to pursue justice in Christian courts is included and mentions the community

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²⁷Kara's signature appears alongside those of Menahem ben Jacob Shalem and Yom Tov Lipman Mühlhausen in a divorce document signed in Prague and dated 21 May 1413. See formerly Montefiore Library, London, Ms 156 [IMHM scroll No. F 7306], fols. 71v–72r; Hartwig Hirschfeld, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Hebrew MSS. of the Montefiore Library*, London 1904, p. 45.

²⁸See Y. Hershkowitz, op. cit., pp. 74f. The text was published in an abridged form in Gershom Scholem, 'Teudah hadashah le-toldot reshit ha-kabbalah' [A New Document Concerning the Early History of Kabbalah], in: Jacob Fichman, ed., *Sefer Bialik*, Tel Aviv 1934, pp. 141–162, esp. 148–150. Kara mistakenly attributed the text to Meir's uncle Meshulam ben Moses of Béziers, a well-known Provençal halakhist.

²⁹*Milhemet Mitzvah* survives in a single manuscript (Biblioteca Palatina, Parma, Ms 2749). It is worthwhile to note that the study of philosophical texts pursued in Prague by Menahem ben Jacob Shalem and Yom Tov Lipman Mühlhausen (and possibly also by Solomon ben Judah ha-Nasi a generation earlier) also relied heavily on texts of Catalan/Provençal origin, such as the commentaries of Moses Narboni.

³⁰E. Kanarfogel, 'Schools and Education', p. 395.

in the town of Sint-Truiden in the ‘land of the Bishop of Liège’ as responsible for adjudicating the conflicts between Jews in the whole surrounding region.³¹ On the same folio, a paraphrase of a responsum by the tenth-century Moses ben Hanoch Gaon is included, perhaps taken from a later Ashkenazic halakhic collection *Or Zarua* [*Light is Sown*].³² Clearly, the scribe of the Paris manuscript copied material from various places of origin. Therefore, it cannot be proven that the letter was originally sent to Provence or Spain.

Kara’s later travels may be more indicative of the sort of contacts he maintained and shed some light on the possible addressees of his begging letter. After his release, Kara clearly spent some time away from Prague, in communities both to the east and to the west of the city. He lived in Regensburg, where he completed a treatise titled *Kodesh Hilulim* [*The Holy Offering of Praise*] either in 1402 or in 1409.³³ In this text, as well as in one of his *responsa*, he also notes that he had previously spent some time in ‘Russia’ and in Austria.³⁴ He is only attested back in Prague in 1413.³⁵ It is possible that Kara’s appeal was addressed to one of the larger communities in Germany.

Avigdor Kara As A Student And Teacher Of Hebrew

The letter discussed here reveals that, at the time of its writing, Avigdor Kara’s livelihood depended on his knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and its language. Let us now, therefore, examine Kara’s interest in Hebrew and Aramaic grammar in more detail, and on the basis of other surviving evidence. Kara wrote a short grammatical treatise titled *Midbar Sin* [*The Desert of Sin*], which survives in a single manuscript now in Olomouc.³⁶ In the treatise, which is based pri-

³¹Christoph Cluse, *Studien zur Geschichte der Juden in den mittelalterlichen Niederlanden*, Forschungen zur Geschichte der Juden, Abteilung A: Abhandlungen, 10, Hannover 2000, pp. 97–104. For a transcription and translation, see ibidem, pp. 382f.

³²The responsum concerns the limits of the authority of a bet din over a wife who denies having received a surety from a man who is not her husband. Cf. *Or Zarua*, Part 3, Piskei Bava Kama, No. 349.

³³T. Visi, ‘Plague, Persecution, and Philosophy’, pp. 110f.

³⁴E. Kupfer, ‘Li-demutah ha-tarbutit’, p. 119; Y. Hershkowitz, op. cit., p. 73.

³⁵See Footnote 27.

³⁶Vědecká knihovna v Olomouci [Research Library in Olomouc], Ms 27. On the manuscript, see Olga Sixtová, ‘Hebraica and Judaica at the Research Library in Olomouc’, *Judaica Bohemiae*, 45 (2010), pp. 71–87; Arthur Z. Schwarz, ‘Kod. 27 der Studienbibliothek in Olmütz’, *Soncino-Blätter*, 3 (1929), pp. 79–82, esp. 79f. The text was published under the title *Midbar Sin* by Abraham ben Yirmiyah of Simno (Frankfurt an der Oder, 1769) without

marily on David Kimhi's *Sefer ha-Shorashim* [*The Book of Roots*], he presents an overview of those Hebrew words in which shin and sin, two different phonemes of the letter shin distinguished only by the position of a diacritical dot, may be confused. In the introductory poem titled *Koli Ekra el-Kol Kore* [*I Shall Call Every Reader with My Voice*], which also contains the name 'Kara' in acrostic, Kara declares his commitment to assist his readers to navigate the dangerous waters of Hebrew pronunciation: 'I shall resolve the dispute [whether to read] shibbolet or sibbolet [cf. Jdg. 12:5–6], / circumcise the foreskin of the lips, / guide those who wander through the desert of Sin [cf. Ex. 16:1] and [instruct them whether] to turn to the right or to the left.'³⁷ The fact that Kara applied his knowledge of Hebrew grammar in Biblical exegesis is attested in Menahem ben Jacob Shalem's commentary on Chapter 30 of the Book of Proverbs, which he wrote at Kara's instigation.³⁸ Here, Menahem cites Avigdor Kara's interpretation of the Hebrew word *va-yerad*, which can be found in Prov. 30:4. According to Kara, this form is derived from the root *r-d-h* ('to scrape out'), not *γ-r-d* ('to descend').³⁹ p. 39

Kara also employed his knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic grammar in the halakhic sphere, namely in preparation of divorce documents. In fact, contemporary rabbinic authorities cite Kara exclusively in this context. Zalman Kohen of Nuremberg (d. 1444) in his halakhic collection *Sefer ha-Yeriah* [*The Book of the Parchment Sheet*] cites a responsum he had received from Avigdor Kara and his son Samuel concerning the correct feminine form of the Aramaic participle *mitkeri* [called, named], which appears in divorce documents.⁴⁰ Nathan of

attribution to Kara.

³⁷A. Z. Schwarz, op. cit., p. 79. I rely on Schwarz's transcription of the Hebrew text as I have not had the possibility to consult the manuscript itself.

³⁸Frank Talmage, 'Mi-kitvei R. Avigdor Kara ve-R. Menahem Shalem', in: Simon Rawidowicz – Alfred Abraham Greenbaum – Alfred L. Ivry, eds., *Thought and Action: Essays in Memory of Simon Rawidowicz on the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of His Death*, Haifa 1983 (Hebrew), pp. 43–51, esp. 46. Published in English under the title 'From the Writings of R. Avigdor Kara and R. Menahem Shalem', in: Barry Dov Walfish, ed., *Apples of Gold in Settings of Silver: Studies in Medieval Jewish Exegesis and Polemics*, Toronto 1999, pp. 386–399.

³⁹It is possible that Kara's explanation was motivated by polemical concerns, given the fact that the verse in question ('Who has ascended heaven and come down?') was often cited in Jewish-Christian debates. See David Berger, ed., *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, Philadelphia, PA 1979, No. 117 (Hebrew p. 77, English p. 129).

⁴⁰Joseph Buxbaum, ed., 'Sefer ha-Yeriah le-Maharzakh' [*The Book of the Parchment Sheet by the Maharzakh*], *Moriah*, 7 (1977), 4–5, pp. 2–23, esp. para. 39, p. 15. On Zalman Kohen,

Eger (d. 1435) cites Kara (along with Menahem Shalem and Yom Tov Lipman Mühlhausen) in a *responsum* discussing the correct orthography of the name of the month *iyar*.⁴¹ Eizik Tirna (d. after 1424) cites Avigdor Kara's view on the correct wording of the Amidah prayer on holidays, in which he also uses grammatical argumentation.⁴²

A final piece of evidence, one which brings together Kara's occupation of a *melamed* and his interest in Hebrew grammar, is contained in a manuscript located in the University Library in Cambridge.⁴³ The manuscript was copied in 1445 by a scribe named Joseph ben Oshayah and contains material with a possible connection to Prague: a commentary on the 'Guide of the Perplexed' by Solomon ben Judah ha-Nasi and several texts written by Yom Tov Lipman Mühlhausen.⁴⁴ The first two folios (1r–2r), however, contain a part of a thirteenth-century grammatical handbook, possibly of northern French origin, focusing on the conjugation of regular verbs and preserved in a number of manuscripts under the title *Mafteah shel Dikduk* [*The Key to Grammar*].⁴⁵ On the verso side of the second folio, the scribe copied a colophon from his model: p. 40

In the copy from which I have copied this book I found this inscription: 'I have copied this book from a manuscript of the haver Rabbi Avigdor Kara and on Saturday evening, nineteenth of Elul, [year] 148 of the sixth millennium [22 August 1388], I swore to him by God of Heavens that I would not let anyone in the world copy it for the next ten years to come without his permission. Peace be upon us and all Israel! Words of Menahem Barukh.'⁴⁶

It is not entirely clear to which 'book' included in the manuscript the colophon

see I. J. Yuval, *Scholars*, pp. 21–58.

⁴¹J. Buxbaum, op. cit., para. 38, p. 14. Cf. Bodleian Library in Oxford, Ms Opp. 302, fol. 5v.

⁴²Eizik Tirna, *Sefer ha-Minhagim* [The Book of Customs], ed. Shlomo Spitzer, Jerusalem 2000 (Hebrew), No. 58.

⁴³Cambridge University Library, Ms Add. 393 [IMHM scroll No. F 16311].

⁴⁴On the reception of Solomon's commentary in Prague, see E. Kupfer, 'Li-demutah ha-tarbutit', p. 117.

⁴⁵On this text, see Ilan Eldar, *Ha-balshanut ha-ivrit bi-yemei ha-beinayim: Tekstim u-mehkarim* [Hebrew Language Study in the Middle Ages: Texts and Studies], Jerusalem 2016, pp. 237–260.

⁴⁶Cambridge University Library, Ms Add. 393, fol. 2v.

originally referred, whether to the preceding *Mafteah shel Dikduk*, or to the following commentary of Solomon ben Judah. Kupfer argued that it was the latter and proposed that Avigdor Kara's desire to control the circulation of Solomon's commentary was motivated less by his concern with the dissemination of philosophical knowledge than by the financial difficulties he had been experiencing. In his opinion, the colophon reflects Kara's attempt to earn money by renting out manuscripts for copying.⁴⁷ I would suggest that Kara's economic motivations make even more sense if applied to the former possibility, namely that as a young *melamed*, Kara tried to control the dissemination of an introductory handbook to Hebrew grammar that could be used to create unwelcome competition. At the early stage of his career, Kara's livelihood depended on his linguistic expertise and on the willingness of his co-religionists to pay him for providing it. The colophon suggests that his economic position was unsteady already before the 1389 attack, which only exacerbated his financial difficulties.⁴⁸

The Edition of Kara's Letter

Avigdor Kara's plea first appeared in print on 20th December 1861 in the Hebrew weekly *Ha-Mevaser* [*The Announcer*], edited by the Lemberger maskil Joseph Kohn-Zedek (1827–1903).⁴⁹ The transcription was provided by Baer Goldberg (1800–1884), a Jewish scholar who prepared editions of a number of Hebrew manuscripts, especially from the libraries in Oxford and Paris.⁵⁰ The text of Kara's letter appeared under the title 'Do Not Say That the Earlier Days Were Better Than These'. In his introductory remarks, Goldberg contrasts Gentile rulers of the past, who oppressed the Jews, with the 'righteous' rulers

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⁴⁷Ephraim Kupfer, 'Sefer ha-berit u-khetavim aherim le-R. Yom Tov Lipman Milhoyzn (al pi ketav yad, ka-nireh yahid ba-olam)' [The Book of the Covenant and Other Writings by Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Mühlhausen (According to an Apparently Unique Manuscript)], *Sinai*, 56 (1965), pp. 330–343, esp. 331, n. 5.

⁴⁸Later in his life, Kara also engaged in moneylending. See the bond dated 1435 in O. Muneles, op. cit., p. 361.

⁴⁹Al tomar ha-yamim ha-rishonim hayu tovim me-eleh' [Do Not Say That the Earlier Days Were Better Than These], *Ha-Mevaser*, 1 (1861), Nos. 34–35, pp. 207f. On Kohn-Zedek's activities, see M. Weissberg, 'Josef Kohn-Zedek, der letzte neuhebräische Publizist der galizischen Haskala', *Monatschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 55 (1911), pp. 330–347. *Ha-Mevaser* was published in the printing house of Abraham Isaac Menkis.

⁵⁰For a brief summary of his life, see the article in Fred Skolnik – Michael Berenbaum, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica, Second Edition*, 22 Vols., Detroit 2007, Vol. 7, pp. 690f.

of his days, who supported Jewish emancipation. He begins by citing a saying found in the Talmudic tractate Sukah 52a:

‘In the future, God will bring the evil inclination and slaughter it in the presence of the righteous and in the presence of the wicked. For the righteous the evil inclination appears to them as a high mountain, and for the wicked it appears to them as a mere strand of hair. These weep and those weep. The righteous weep and say: How were we able to overcome so high a mountain? And the wicked weep and say: How were we unable to overcome this strand of hair?’ – Is there anyone who would not discern and understand in his heart that the righteous are the rulers of the nations in our days who proclaimed freedom for the people of Israel and decided that there shall be one law and one rule [for all] and that the house of Israel shall be equal to every other nation? They said: ‘How were we able to overcome so high a mountain that stood as an opponent to them,’ – that is the opponents of emancipation – and how the early rulers of the nations, who gave Israel forth as a flock for slaughter without them being guilty of violence. [...] Many of the sages of the nations in our days will acknowledge the sins of their fathers and say: ‘Our fathers sinned and perished, and we tolerated [their transgressions] and deserve great shame.’⁵¹

By presenting Avigdor Kara’s self-recounted story, Goldberg meant to underline the dire living conditions and the volatile legal status of medieval Jews in contrast to the recent emancipatory achievements. Moreover, Goldberg could apparently also sympathize with Avigdor Kara’s fate on a personal level, having grown up in poverty and earning his living as a private tutor at the early stages of his career. Despite his lack of formal knowledge, which made it difficult for him to find means of sustenance, Goldberg eventually succeeded in earning his living by copying and publishing Hebrew and Arabic texts from the manuscript collections in Oxford and Paris. By framing Kara’s story as a lesson of appreciation for the fruits of the Jewish emancipation, Goldberg seems to drive home the point that a talented scholar and writer like Kara (or indeed himself), one ‘who in his humility did not want to pursue greatness and Talmudic disputations (*pilpulim*), but rather taught the Torah and the Prophets p. 42 to schoolchildren like Rabbi Hiyya the Great’, could only find favourable con-

⁵¹‘Al tomar ha-yamim’, p. 207.

ditions in the modern era.⁵²

Unfortunately, despite Goldberg's best intentions, his transcription of Kara's letter is far from accurate. Numerous words and even whole lines of the text are missing, most notably in Kara's poem, which in Goldberg's transcription lacks the line beginning with the letter *dalet*.⁵³ Goldberg's transcription also does not contain references to the many Biblical quotations employed by Kara, making it difficult to decipher his allusions.

Moreover, Goldberg's edition does not accurately reflect the layout of the manuscript text. In the Paris copy, Kara's letter consists of three parts which appear in the following order. First, a supplication written in rhymed prose and composed mostly of Biblical quotations and allusions appears at the top of the folio. It is followed by practical instructions regarding the collection of contributions. This subsection, signed 'Avigdor', is not rhymed, and while it is separated from the preceding text by an indent, it is copied in one block with the rhymed supplication (1). The middle section of the folio is divided in two halves. On the inner (right-hand) side of the folio, the copyist placed the poem containing the name 'Avigdor Kara' in acrostic and praising the vocation of a schoolteacher (2). The copyist separated the poem from the following section by a curvy line. On the outer (left-hand) side of the folio, a brief exposition of Kara's motivations appears, framed as a discussion between him and his students (3). After an indent, the exposition is immediately followed by the main body of the appeal, which contains a description of Kara's situation and his defence against anticipated objections to providing financial support to a schoolteacher who does not study the Talmud. This last section is copied in one block and takes up the whole width of the remaining folio (4).

Goldberg rearranged the sections of the manuscript. His edition begins with Kara's debate with schoolchildren introduced by the words 'the teacher said' (*amar ha-melamed*) (3), which is followed by the main body of his appeal (4) and a rhymed supplication (1). Finally, as the culmination of Kara's exercise in persuasion, Goldberg places his poem at the end (2). Nowhere does Goldberg indicate that his transcription does not follow the order of sections in the manuscript. While his emendation may reflect a seemingly more logical arrangement of the sections, it is at odds with contemporary editorial practice

⁵²Ibidem, p. 207.

⁵³The fact that Goldberg's edition is 'korrekturbedürftig' was already noted in *GJ* III.2, p. 1144, n. 263.

and obscures the process of scribal transmission of the letter. Moreover, it is far from clear that the arrangement of text in the Paris copy does not reflect the original order of sections in Kara's letter. An introductory supplication (section 1) written in rhymed prose and including an authorization from regional authorities would not have been out of place at the beginning of a begging letter, followed by the main body of the appeal (sections 3 and 4). Goldberg seems to have been correct to place the poem (section 2) at the end, as it was apparently conceived as a separate embellishment placed outside of the linear order of the letter, perhaps on the margin of the original manuscript.

An improved edition of Kara's letter text was published by Yehuda Hershkowitz as an appendix to his 2014 article which appeared in the rabbinic journal *Yeshurun*.⁵⁴ Hershkowitz's transcription is clearly superior to Goldberg's version, correcting all its major corruptions. However, it still contains minor mistakes and, more importantly, does not highlight editorial emendations or (perhaps understandably for a rabbinic publication) contain a source apparatus. Kara's letter itself is not analysed and the author only briefly summarizes its contents.⁵⁵ I have therefore decided to append this article with a new edition of the text, produced independently of the earlier two versions, along with a new English translation.

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Transcription

Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Ms héb. 242, fol. 2r⁵⁶

שמעוני אחי ורעי וישמע אליכם השם [שופטים טז], דלא ידעתם כי איש אשר כמוני עני המצטרך אל יד העשיר ייטיב נגן ירבה שיר [ע"פ ישעיהו כג, טז], כי כן על ספר אגור מפורש תחנוני [ם] ידבר רש [משלי יח, כג]. ואיכבה אמתיק משלי? במגילת ספר כתוב [ב] עלי [תהלים מ, ח] והדאגה והמרי הסירו את הוד שירי. על כן קצרתי לחבר, עת לחשות ועת לדבר [קהלת ג, ז]. ומפני הזעם לבי נפעם, כי שבעתי נדודים [איוב ז, ד] מהיות עוד בנוקדים [עמוס א, א] ולשקול משקלות היתרות והמרובע [ים], כי נשכח כל השבע [בראשית מא, ל]. כי מאד תש כחי. מי יתנני השב רוחי [ע"פ איוב ט, יח], ברפואה או בלחישא, באשפר ואשישה [ע"פ שמואל ב, ו; דה"א טז, ג], במתנת יד מזומן? הנה טעמו כטעם מן. אך רע ומר חמת עכשוב [תהלים קמ, ד]. דוח' [ה] רעהו בלך ושוב. לכן הבינו צרי מגלעד [ע"פ ירמיהו ח, כב]

⁵⁴Y. Hershkowitz, op. cit., pp. 83f.

⁵⁵Ibidem, p. 59.

⁵⁶Punctuation as well as letters and references in single square brackets were added by the editor. Words deleted by the scribe are marked in double curly brackets.

ולחם לבב אנוש יסעד [תהלים קד,טו]. כי שכר עוזרי עוסקי ספר לא ימד ולא יספר [הושע ב,א].

ראו נא רבותי, קהילות הקדש והיחידים, איך עזרוני רבותי ממרחקי[ם] בהסכמתם ובחתימת[ם], מחכמ[י] אושטריך, ומקצתם א[שר] לא ראיתי עד הנה, אך על פי השמועה חמלו עלי. ועתה שימו לבבכם לצאת בעקבותיהם, אתם קהילות הקדש, לחתום לי כתבי זה בקצת מליצה כדי לעורר לב יושבי סביבותיכם והיחידים. כי גדול שכר המעשה מן העושה [על פי בבלי, בבא בתרא, דף ט ע"א] כדדריש מן הפסוק והי[ה] מעשה הצדק[ה] שלו[ם] [ישיעהו לב,ז] וגו'. ושתקבצו לי מן הקופות והיחידים ומה שינתן יכתב בשפל [אולי צ"ל: בשפת; על פי שמות כו,ד] היריעה כדי להוציא שלוחי זה מן החשד. אני יחדתיו והאמנתי. ואתם ממונים בני מאמינים, תהי נא יד נדבתכם אלי אמונה כי פזורי רב. והנערים מתאספים אלי מקצוות הארץ ואין הקומץ משביע וכו' [בבלי, ברכות, דף ג ע"ב]. וכל אחד מכם יעורר את חבירו ואת רעהו על ככה. ודעו כי אין לי מן הקהלה פה מאומה, כי כבר ירדו מנכסיהם כידוע לרבים. ואל תקפצו ידיכם וחמלו על עניינכם [צ"ל: ענייכם]. ובגלל זה הש' יצליחכם בכל מעשיכם, ויוסף עליכם ככם אלף פעמים ויברך אתכם כאשר דבר [לכם] [דברים א,יא]. כה תפילת משרתיכם מצו[י]נכם הרש והנקלה מקרי דרדקאי אביגדור.

אמר המלמד: אחרי התלאה שעבר[ה] עלינו ישבתי כפעם בפעם ללמוד עם נערי. ואמצאם רובם ברחו להם מפני דוחק[ים] אז נאנחתי, וקצתם הרגישו בי ושאלוני על מה. ואשיבן על צרת הציבור והקהלה אשר אני גר בתוכה שירדו מנכסיהן עד לא יוכלו להספיק אותי ואתכם. ויענוני פה אחד: ומדוע אתה דל ככה ולמה תתראה [על פי בראשית מב,א]? שלח נא ביד תשלח [שמות ד,יג] אל הקהילות והנדיבים, אולי ירחמונו ויחיונו. ואען ואומר אליהם: הנה השיר אזל מפי והיום אין שירה מוצאת ותשורה אין להביא [על פי שמואל א ט,ז]. ובמה אתרצה להם? ויענו ויאמרו אלי: הפסוק או הפרשה אחת לבאר או לחדש דבר אולי יישר בעיניהם.

מרעות [צ"ל: מרעית] ישראל, ב"ב [=בעלי בתים?] קדושים, בניס לאביהם שבשמים, קהילות הקדש ומרנא [צ"ל: ומרנן] ורבנן[ן] ותלמידיהן ותלמידי תלמידיהן וכל מאן דעסקי[ן] [באורית' א] מאולא ורשות[א], יהיו נא לרצון אמרי פי [תהלים יט,טו] באין מכשול ודופי. אך להרבות במליצות כאשר הורגלתי מנעורי לא יכולתי כי מקרים נכרים אחזו שערי[ם] [ס] וסיבה הזמנית המריבה [צ"ל: האריכה] עלי מענית [על פי תהלים קכט,ג] וערכה עמי מלחמה בפחד ואימה. ועניינים מצירים המונעים ועוצרים קול מלהרים, אך למעט בדברים ולקצר בקשתי בלי להאריך תפילתי ואעפ"י [=ואף על פי] אולי תשמעו ותרצה. כי לפעמים אדם מתפלל תפילה קצרה ויוצא. ומעתה אדבר לפי תומי. שמעוני אחי ועמי, אנא נדיבי עמי, כל איש ואישה אשר נדב לבן [כך!] אותם [על פי שמות לה,בט] בחכמה לקרב אל מלאכת הקדש עבודת [הקדש] הצדקה לעשות אותה. חנונו חנונו כי רבים מתאספים עלינו לשמוע ממה שקבלתי ממורי ז"ל. והם תועים כי אך להשיבם ריקם לא יאות לי ולהם. ובכל המקומות שהייתי שמה הספיקוני בני הקהילות וכן עטיפה ג"כ, עד כי נגעה בנו מוסר השם ומידת דינו היישר, עד כי נתרוקנה הקהילה מכל וכל שלא יוכלו להספיקני עוד. ולא

עוד, אך כי עדיין אנחנו ערבים זה בזה ומושבעים ועומדים לבלתי צאת. ואני כלוא, לא אוכל לנסוע אל אחת מן הקהילות לגור כאשר אמצא להרויח סיפוקי. האמנה [צ"ל: האמנם] נבזה וחדל אישים [ישיעהו נג,ג] כמוני לא יאות לי לקבץ? כי ידעתי כי יחשב לי לחציפות ולעון, כי איניני כדי [צ"ל: כדאי]. אך הוא ראוי על מרביצי תלמוד תורה שהוא העיקר ומגדילים פילפולם. אך לא למלמדי המקרא כי היא מדה ואינה מדה [על פי בבלי, בבא מציעא דף לג ע"א] ואין מקבלין עליה שכר. ואולם אחרי זה שבתי אל לבי כי אני איש רש וכלוא ושתי סיבות מכריחות ומאלצות אותי לזה ולמלא את [כך] חיק הנערים הבאים ממרחקי' [ס] שלא אמנע טוב מבעליו [ע"פ משלי ג,כז]. וכבר למדונו רבותי אם אין גדיים אין תיישים, אם אין צאן אין רועים [על פי ירושלמי, סנהדרין, פרק י הל' ב; דף נא, ע"א]. גם עוני גדול מנשוא.

אגרת זאת, פתשגן לז, / פיו שחור על דף לבן
 בה מכתבי מפעל איש רש / מקרי דרדקי דורש טבן
 יעיר אזנם בלמודם / טרחם נושא, רב את ריבן [ע"פ ירמיהו נא,לו]
 גומלם חסד, אוהב אותם / אל התורה הוא מקריבן
 דתו נביאים עם הכתובים / לשלש קלשון הציב דרבן [ע"פ שמואל א יג,כא]
 ובשבט פיו הוא מוכיחן / מסיר סיגן גם את סובן
 רושם טובן וזכות נעדף / בהבל פיהן ובקול ניבן
 קרבו המתנדבים בעם / ובצדקה שמחו לבן
 ריח ניחוח יחשב / לכם מנח' [ה] עולת קרבן
 אמצו בנים למודי אל / הן תנוקות לבית רבן

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Translation

Listen to me, my brothers and colleagues, 'listen to me that God may listen to you!⁵⁷ – who do not know that a poor man like me, one who needs assistance from the wealthy, will play sweetly and make much music,⁵⁸ as it is explained about the Book of Agur: 'The poor man speaks beseechingly.'⁵⁹ How shall I make my proverbs sweet? 'I will bring a scroll recounting what befell me.'⁶⁰

⁵⁷Judg. 9:7. Biblical quotes in English are cited according to *The Jewish Publication Society Tanakh* translation (1985).

⁵⁸Cf. Isa. 23:16.

⁵⁹Prov. 18:23.

⁶⁰Ps. 40:8.

Anxiety and unrest have taken away the splendour from my songs. My writing is brief because [there is] ‘a time for silence and a time for speaking’.⁶¹ My heart is racing because of wrath, for ‘I am sated with tossings’.⁶² I am no longer among the shepherds,⁶³ composing complex verses in four lines, because ‘all the abundance was forgotten’.⁶⁴ My strength has become very weak. Who will let me catch my breath?⁶⁵ [Who will help me by offering] a medicine or an incantation, a cake made in a pan and a raisin cake?⁶⁶ Or by offering a ready hand which tastes like manna? The ‘poison of spider’⁶⁷ is evil and bitter, pushing one’s neighbour here and there. Therefore, bring balm from Gilead⁶⁸ and ‘bread that sustains man’s life’.⁶⁹ For the reward of people helping those who occupy themselves with the Book ‘cannot be measured or counted’.⁷⁰

Behold, my masters, holy communities and individuals, how my teachers from afar, scholars of Austria, helped me by agreeing and signing [this document]. Some of them I haven’t met in person yet, but they took pity on me because of my reputation. Now, holy communities, please take heed, follow in their footsteps and sign for me this document, written with a little bit of poetry, to arouse the hearts of those who dwell in your vicinity and on their own. For one who causes others to perform [a meritorious act] receives greater reward than one who performs [that act himself].⁷¹ This can be deduced from the verse: ‘And the causing of righteousness shall be peace’ etc.⁷² Please collect [donations] for me from communal funds and from private donors. Whatever is given shall be written on the edge of the scroll⁷³ to protect my messenger from suspicion. I have appointed him and put my trust in him. Men in charge, sons of the believers, lend me your charitable hand, for my misery is great. Young men come to me from all corners of the land, but ‘a handful [of food]

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⁶¹Eccles. 3:7.

⁶²Job 7:4.

⁶³Cf. Amos 1:1.

⁶⁴Gen. 41:30.

⁶⁵Cf. Job 9:18.

⁶⁶Cf. 2 Sam. 6:19; 1 Chron. 16:3.

⁶⁷Ps. 140:4.

⁶⁸Cf. Jer. 8:22.

⁶⁹Ps. 104:15.

⁷⁰Hos. 2:1.

⁷¹Cf. bBB 9a.

⁷²Isa. 32:17.

⁷³Cf. Ex. 26:4.

does not satisfy a lion'.⁷⁴ May each of you serve as an inspiration for his friends and neighbours regarding this [matter]. Know that I do not receive anything from the local community, because they have been impoverished, as is known to many. Do not be close-fisted and have mercy on your poor. For this may the Lord give you success in your deeds, 'increase your numbers a thousandfold, and bless you as He promised you'.⁷⁵ Such is the prayer of your distinguished servant, the poor and lowly teacher of children Avigdor.

The teacher said: After the suffering that befell us, I once sat down with the boys to study. And I realized that most of them had fled because of the persecutors, so I sighed. Some of them noticed it and asked me why. I told them: 'Because of the misfortune of the community in the midst of which I live. Their wealth decreased so that they are no longer able to sustain both me and you.' They replied in one voice: 'Why are you so helpless? What are you waiting for?'⁷⁶ 'Appoint an agent'⁷⁷ [and send him] to [other] communities and to generous people, perhaps they will take pity on us and provide sustenance for us.' I answered: 'Behold, the song departed from my lips, poetry can no longer be found these days and there is nothing we can bring [them] as a present.'⁷⁸ How shall I make my [plea] agreeable to them?' They replied to me: 'Perhaps they would enjoy an explanation or a novel interpretation of one verse or a [Torah] section.'

The flock of Israel, holy heads of households, sons of your father in Heaven, holy communities, our masters, teachers and their students and the students of their students, all you who study the Scripture from the beginning and with permission, 'may the words of my mouth be acceptable to you',⁷⁹ without a stumbling block or a blemish! I am unable to multiply poetic phrases as I have been accustomed from my youth, because unfortunate events have seized my gate. A temporary turn of events made a long furrow on me⁸⁰ and led a war against me, with fear and trembling. What happened is distressing, it holds me back and prevents [me] from raising [my] voice. I should not reduce my words and shorten my plea without lengthening my prayer. Nevertheless, per-

⁷⁴bBer 3b.

⁷⁵Deut. 1:11.

⁷⁶Cf. Gen. 42:1.

⁷⁷Ex. 4:13.

⁷⁸Cf. 1 Sam. 9:7.

⁷⁹Ps. 19:15.

⁸⁰Cf. Ps. 129:3.

haps you will listen [to it] and find it pleasing. For sometimes a man only prays a short prayer and fulfils [his obligation]. From now on I shall speak without blame. 'Hear me, my brothers, my people!'⁸¹ Benefactors among my people, 'all the men and women whose hearts moved them'⁸² in wisdom to approach 'the tasks of the sanctuary',⁸³ to perform charity! Please, have mercy, have mercy, for many [students] gather to me in order to listen to what I have received from my teacher of blessed memory. They wander here and there, but it would not be proper for me and for you to send them back empty-handed. In all the places where I dwelled, local communities provided me with sustenance and clothing, until we were touched by the chastisement of the Lord and by the attribute of his righteous judgement, so that the community was completely emptied out and they can no longer sustain me. We share each other's obligations under oath and are held without the possibility of leaving. I am imprisoned and unable to travel to another community where I could earn a living. Is it really not appropriate for someone 'despised, shunned by men'⁸⁴ like me to go around begging? I know it will be considered an audacity and a transgression, for I am not worthy [to receive contributions], unlike those who study the Oral Torah, which is the root [of study], and who augment their dialectic. However, it is not [considered appropriate for] those who teach the Scripture, for it is [considered] 'a merit and not a merit' [to study the Scripture]⁸⁵ and they do not receive salary for it. Nevertheless, after [considering] this, I told to myself that I am a poor and imprisoned man and that I am forced to [do this] for two reasons: to fill the bosom of the boys who come to me from afar, so that I do not deny 'good from the one who deserves it'.⁸⁶ My teachers have taught me that if there are no goats, there will be no rams, and if there is no flock, there will be no shepherds.⁸⁷ Also, my poverty is unbearable.

This epistle, this writing / speaks through a black mouth on a white page. It contains my letter, a work of a poor man, / a teacher of children who seeks their good.

He brings instruction to their ears / he supports their labour, upholds their

⁸¹1 Chron. 28:2.

⁸²Ex. 35:29.

⁸³Ex. 36:4.

⁸⁴Isa. 53:3.

⁸⁵bBM 33a.

⁸⁶Prov. 3:27.

⁸⁷Cf. San 51a.

cause.⁸⁸ He is kind to them, he loves them, / he brings them closer to the Torah. Prophets and Writings are his law / he goads [the students] with a three-pronged fork.⁸⁹

He admonishes them with the rod of his mouth, / he removes their dross and chaff. He writes down what is good for them and merit is gathered in excess / through the breath of their mouths and the voice of their sayings.

Benefactors among the people, approach! / Cheer up their hearts through charity. It will be considered a pleasing odour, / a gift from you and a sacrifice. Encourage the sons in the divine study, / they are the children of Bet Raban.

⁸⁸Cf. Jer. 51:36.

⁸⁹Cf. 1 Sam. 13:21.