

EARLY MODERN WORKSHOP: Jewish History Resources

Volume 9: Cross-Cultural Connections in the Early Modern Jewish World, Brown University, Providence, RI, February, 26-27, 2012

Real or Virtual Contact? Johannes Buxtorf's Reading of Jewish Literature

Joanna Weinberg, Oxford University

Introduction

Johann Buxtorf the elder (1564-1629), long-time professor of Hebrew at Basel, ethnographer, lexicographer, and textual critic, belongs to the category of the 'accepted' Hebraists and is usually regarded as one of the most distinguished Hebraists of the early modern period. Buxtorf's description -- or polemical ethnography (in Yaacov Deutsch's formulation) -- of Jewish life from cradle to grave, the *Synagoga Iudaica: das ist, Juden-Schul...* (1603) should be seen in the context of an emerging systematic empiricism which was led by curiosity, fuelled by the impact of humanism and also, not least, driven by a desire to control another faith. What is particularly striking about Buxtorf's effort at describing Jewish beliefs and ceremonies is the extent to which his reading of the whole gamut of Jewish literary production is reflected in this work. Buxtorf cast his critical eyes into every nook and cranny of Hebrew literature. Even his retrospective description of his sources for the book (which also gives of an account of how Jews aided him in his investigation by providing him with some of the books) in a letter of 1606 does not adequately convey the scope of his consumption of Jewish books.

This presentation will attempt to analyse how Buxtorf read Jewish books by examining one passage from the *Sefer ha-Hayyim* written by Hayyim ben Bezalel (Cracow, 1593), which Buxtorf chose to integrate into his polemical critique of Jewish allegiance to the Talmud in this opening chapter of the *Juden—Schul*. Hayyim ben Bezalel, fated to remain second fiddle to his brother, the Maharal of Prague, had his own battles to fight against both Jews and Christians. In the selected passage, Hayyim ben Bezalel defends the Talmud as a unique possession of the Jews and suggests a reason for the apparently 'bewildering Aggadot'.

By close scrutiny of both texts we consider how and why Hayyim ben Bezalel's plea for the Talmud engaged Buxtorf's attention and influenced the development of his argument?

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Chapter 1 of Johan Buxtorf's *Judenschul*

Translated by Joanna Weinberg, Oxford University

These rules which Christ himself reported, and others to which he referred are still in use and observed among the Jews and described in the Canon Law and Ordinances concerning spiritual matters and the religious life, and I shall devote a good part of this book to them. I will make clear how the Jews came to observe such commands of men rather than the commands of God right up to the present day, and have thereby abolished God's commands through their rules and thus fallen into this terrible state of disbelief and misunderstanding of God's word. The learned Mossche mikkotzi wrote a book explaining the six hundred and thirteen commandments which among the Jews is called *Sepher Mitzvos gadol*, the Great book of Commandments. He taught in the Jewish academy of Toledo, Spain, in 1236 A.D. where about twelve thousand Jews were living, as he himself writes in connection with the hundred and twelfth negative commandment. In his preface he writes as follows....

“And who can tell all the blemishes that render food forbidden, the difference between cooking milk and meat, the defilement caused by the dead, lepers, the rules about animals that died a natural death and [unclean] insects? What about the nature and characteristics of the Masorah, the vowel points and accents, the letters, some of which are suspended, some elevated above the word, some upside down etc. Who will tell us the correct interpretation of all these matters: it therefore follows indubitably that one has to have another explanation of the Written Law from where all this can be learned.”

So far we have followed the Rabbi.

This is exactly the way that the devil first seduced the Jews away from the true word of God and brought them- - in his usual masterly fashion-- to man's commandment. So securely did he attach them that neither Isaiah nor Christ nor anyone else has been able to drag them away until this very day. Then

where shall we find the true interpretation of the written law? The answer is surely not Wecker's *De secretis* or Smokehole's/Reuchlin's *De arte cabalistica*, much less in Marcolfus. We shall find it in the **holy Talmud** [my emphasis].

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From chapter 1 of *Johan Buxtorf's Judenschul*

Dieweil dann solche Auffsetze / die Christus daselbst vermeldet / und andere / darauff er gedeutet / noch heutiges tages bey den Juden breuchlich sind und gehalten werden / und in ihrem Jure Canonico und Ordnanßen / von Geistlichen sachen / und Frommen Leben / beschrieben seind / deren ich ein guten theil in disem Büch zu entdecken fürhabens bin / will ich weiter allhie anzeigen / auß was grund und ursachen sie darauff gerahten / daß sie auff solche Menschen-gebott mehr / dann auff Gottes Gebott gehalten haben / und noch heutiges tages halten / und also Gottes Gebott durch ihre Auffseße auffgehbt haben / und dadurch in gegenwärtigen greulichen Unglauben und mißverstand Göttliches worts gerahten sind?

Man lieset in der Hakdámah oder Vorrede des hochgelehrten Rabbi Mosche mikkórzi, (der ein Büch und Außlegung über die sechshundert und dreyzehn Gebott gemacht / welches bey den Juden Sepher mitzvos gádol Das groß Büch der Gebotten / genennet wird / und in Hispanien um Jahr Christi 1236, zu Toledo in der hohen Jüdischen Schül gelehrt hat da es in die zwölfftausend Juden zur selben zeit gehabt wie er selbst schreibt in dem hundert und zwölfften Verbott):

.....
 Und wer kann erzehlen alle die mängel an verbotenen Speisen den unterscheid in fleisch und milch kochen / veruntreinigung an den Todten / außsetzigen / abgefallenen und verstorbenen Vieh / Ungeziffer / etc. Item: die art und eygenschaftt der Masórah, der Puncten und Accenten / der Büchstaben / deren etliche auffgehenckt / oder über das wort hoch erhebt / etliche umbgekehrt / etc. Wer will uns aller dieser sachen rechte Außlegung sagen: folget derhalben unwidersprechlich / daß man ein andere Außlegung des geschriebenen Gesaßes haben müsse / darauß man solches lehre. Biß hieher auß ermeltem Rabbi.
 Diß ist das rechte mittel / dadurch der Teufel die Juden erstlich von dem rechten Wort Gottes verführet / und ganß meisterlich / nach seinem brauch / auff die Menschen-gebott getrieben / und so starck darauff gehefftet und bevestiget hat / daß weder Jesaias oder Christus / noch jemand anders / biß auff den heutigen Tag / sie darvon hat abtreiben

können. Wo findet man dann die rechte Außlegung des geschriebenen Gesaßes? Antwort / gewißlich im Wecker de Secretis nicht / noch auch im Rauchloch / Reuchlin solt ich sagen / de arte Cabalistica, viel minder im Marcolso: Sondern im heiligen Talmud findet man sie.

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...The Talmud is shown respect only by Israel and likewise, Israel is shown respect by the Blessed God only on account of the Oral Torah which is the most conspicuous and prominent sign that distinguishes Israel from the peoples ...That is why we are accustomed to conclude each tractate with the words 'our honour is upon you and your honour is upon us' [play on *hadran alakh vehadrakh alan*] Indeed, there is nobody who turns his mind to the Oral Torah – may it not be forgotten, God forbid -- apart from us, and that is why 'we are mindful of You' (*da'atan alakh*). Similarly, the Oral Torah is that which protects Israel and that is why it is called 'Gemara' which is shorthand for Gabriel, Michael, Raphael and Uriel. In other words, a divine angel is stationed in protective stance around the one who studies Gemara: Mishael on the right, Gabriel, on the left, Uriel in front and Raphael behind him and over his head the Shekhinah of God which which is crowned with the words of the sages- and this is what is meant by 'You are mindful of us' (*da'atakh alan*), i.e. your providential care is extended over us. And since Israel and the Oral Torah are two twin gazelles it is right that they should not be taken away from each other in this world nor in the world to come. And since the Talmud is only sufficiently loved and esteemed by keepers of Torah but not by those who lurk in street corners we acknowledge that our portion is among the keepers of Torah and not among those who lurk in street corners. We see that the first set of tablets which the blessed Lord wrote were broken and that only the other set of tablets which Moses wrote remained- this being an indication that the words of Torah will only come to fruition as a result of being written down by humans- I refer to the writing down of the Oral Torah - and it is only with regard to the second set of tablets that it was said, 'in order that it should be good for you' (Deut. 6, 3).

And those who scorn find an opportunity to place their scorn on ‘**this holy book**’ on account of the esoteric aggadot that it contains - apparently it would appear that they are not only not beneficial, but that are actually harmful. However, our rabbis of blessed memory already made an analogy in connection with this issue in chapter ‘*bameh madlikin*’ (Shabb. 31a). They compared it to a person who ordered his servant to bring a *kor* of wheat to the upper chamber which he duly did. He then told him to put a *kav* of *humtin* inside it which he refused to do. He said to him: ‘Then it would have been better had you not brought the wheat.’ For *humtin* is fine sand which does not cause plants to grow and yet, the fine sand is the only means by which the wheat is preserved. So, too, the produce of Torah is only preserved by means of the bewildering aggadot which tenses that their wisdom is concealed; for otherwise, the enemy would have already set his hand and tongue against the sages of blessed memory and turn their words into heresy – this was what was done with the written Torah-- with the consequence that nothing would be left which could distinguish us from all the nations; but now by means of the bewilderinng aggadot **this holy book** is despised in their eyes and they will therefore not transpose its words into their words. Consequently, these words are left in our hands in their integrity for the dogs cannot touch them, and through them it is shown that we alone are the people of the Lord and his flock.

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...ולפי שהתלמוד אינו מהודר רק אצל ישראל וכן ישראל אינו מהודר לפני השם יתברך רק בשביל התורה שבעל פה שהוא הסימן המובהק המבטיח הנבדיל בין ישראל לעמים... על כן אנו נוהגים לומר בכל סיום מסכת הדרן עלך והדרך עלן וגם אין מי שנותן דעתו על התורה שבבעל פה שלא תשכח חס ושלום רק אנו וזהו דעתן עלך. וכן התורה שבעל פה היא המגינה על ישראל ולכך נקראת גמרא שהוא ר"ת של גבריאל מיכאל רפאל אוריאל לומר כי העוסק בגמרא חונה מלאך ה' סביב לו להצילו מימינו מיכאל ומשמאלו גבריאל ומלפניו אוריאל ומאחריו רפאל ועל ראשו שכנת אל הכותר בדברי חכמים וזהו דעתך עלן כלומר השגחתך עלן והואיל וישראל והתורה שבעל פה הן שני תאמי צבייה ראוי שלא יתנשאו זה מזה לא בעלמא דין ולא בעלמא דאתי. ולהיות התלמוד אינו חביב ומהודר כל כך רק אצל בעלי התורה אבל לא אצל יושבי קרנות על כן אנו מודים ששם חלקנו מוישבי ב"ה ולא שם חלקנו מיושבי הקרנות. ואנו רואים שהלוחות הראשונים שכתבם השם יתברך נשתברו ולא נתקיימו רק הלוחות האחרונות שכתבם משה רמז שדברי תורה עתידים שאינם מתקיימים רק על ידי כתיבת בשר ודם הוא כתיבת תורה שבעל פה... והמלעיגים מצאו להם מקום להלעיג על **הספר הקדוש הזה** בשביל האגדות התמוהות הנמצאים בו שכלאורה נראה שלא די שלא יועילו רק יזיקו אבל כבר המשילו רבותינו זכרונם לברכה הדבר הזה בפרק במה מדליקון לאדם שצוה לעבדו להעלות לו כור של חיטין על העלייה וכן עשה. אחר כך אמר העלים בתוכו קב של חומטין אמר ליה לאו. אמר ליה מוטב שלא העלית וחומטין הוא עפר מקולל שאינה מגדלת צמחים ואפילו הכי אין החיטין נשמרים רק על ידי אותו עפר.

הכי נמי תבואתה של תורה אינה נשמרת רק על ידי איתם האגדות התמוהות שעל ידי כן הסתירו בהם את חכמתם שאלמלא כן כבר שלח האויב ידו ולשונו כדברי חכמים זכרונם לברכה להפוך את דבריהם למינות כדרך שעשה בתורה שבכתב ולא היה אם כן נשאר לפנינו שום דבר אשר בו נפלינו אנחנו מכל העמים אבל עכשיו על ידי האגדות התמוהות **הספר הקדוש** הוא בזוי בעיניהם מלהפוך דבריו לדבריהם. ובין כך ובין כך נשארו הדברים האלו בידינו על פי שלימותם שלא יפגעו בהם הכלבים ובהם יוודע כי אנחנו לבד עם ה' וצאן מרעיתו...