

From Private Devotion to Communal Prayer: New Light on Abraham Maimonides' Synagogue Reforms

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The story of the prayer reforms instituted by Abraham Maimonides, son of the illustrious Moses Maimonides, is well-known. Expressing open admiration for Sufism, Abraham introduced into the synagogue kneeling, prostrations and other bodily postures similar to those practiced by Muslims. Abraham of course maintained that he was not appropriating foreign devices, but rather continuing ancient Jewish traditions. In a classic article published some six decades ago, Naphtali Wieder examined these elements of prayer performance and was able to show that, though undoubtedly present in ancient Jewish rites, they had long since fallen into desuetude. Therefore, there is no escaping the conclusion that Abraham was, in effect, transferring Muslim practices to the Jewish synagogue.¹

Wieder's analysis has gained wide acceptance, and justly so.² It is not my

- 1 Wieder's article, originally published in the journal *Melilah*, has been reprinted in the author's collected works, *The Formation of Jewish Liturgy in the East and the West*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem 1998), pp. 660–771. We refer to the page numbers in the original publication, which are displayed in the reprint as well. The relevant portions of Abraham's *Kifāyat al-'ābidīn* have since been published, accompanied by a translation into modern Hebrew, by Nissim Dana: Rabbi Abraham ben Moshe ben Maimon, *Sefer ha-Maspiq le'ovdei Hashem* (Ramat Gan, 1989). M.A. Friedman has shown that Abraham's reforms were part of a large and ambitious project to unify the different Jewish rites then practiced in Cairo. This included abolishing the independent and long-established traditions of the Palestinian rite, causing adherents of the latter to sue the political authorities for relief and eventually blocking Abraham's entire scheme. See his study, "A Controversy for the Sake of Heaven...", *Te'udah* 10 (1996), pp. 245–298 [Hebrew].
- 2 See Sh. Goldman, "An Appraisal of Naphtali Wieder's 'Islamic Influences upon Jewish Worship'", *Medieval Encounters* 5 (1999), pp. 11–16, who concludes that Wieder's work "has gained acceptance by the community of scholars."

intention here to challenge it. I would like only to suggest a minor modification, limited to the practice of bowing (*sujūd*, *hishtaḥawayah*).³ I shall argue that bowing had a place within Jewish worship (beyond, of course, the prostrations performed on the High Holy Days) in Abraham's day, and for several generations beforehand. However, it was not part of the communal prayer as performed in the synagogue.⁴ Instead, it was an important element of the private devotions practiced by Jews infused with a Sufi-style spirituality. This form of prayer can be traced back to the Judaeo-Arabic Andalusian culture of Abraham's ancestors. Seen in this light, Abraham's reform represents not a direct importation of Muslim custom, but rather a relocation of a private practice (which itself probably owed a great deal to Muslim praxis) to the public space of the synagogue.

A. Andalusian Sources

The chief evidence for our thesis comes from the earliest, and in some ways the most repercussive, work of Judaeo-Arabic spirituality, Bahya ibn Paquda's *Al-Hidāya 'ilā Farā'id al-Qulūb* (*Guidance towards the Duties of the Heart*), widely known under its Hebrew title (in the translation of Judah Ibn Tibbon), *Ḥovot ha-Levavot*.⁵ Almost nothing is known of Bahya's life, and his

- 3 As we shall see, one should really speak of prostrations (in the plural), as there exist more than one variant of the practice.
- 4 The problematic case of *nefilat appayim* (a silent supplication recited immediately after the *'amidah*) will be discussed below, with reference to the Genizah text published by Wieder. Suffice it to say at this point that Abraham does not view his project as an expansion of the practice, whatever it may be, instituted for *nefilat appayim*. I should also call attention to the prostrations practiced on public fast days, noted in PT *Avodah Zarah* 4:1; they are listed there among other customs that originated in Babylonia and were later carried over to the Land of Israel.
- 5 I shall refer here to the edition (published in Hebrew characters) and annotated translation of my late mentor, Rabbi Yosef Qafih (Kapah), *Torat Ḥovot ha-Levavot* (Jerusalem 1973). The most extensive study of the influence of *Ḥovot ha-Levavot* is certainly Aharon Mirsky, *From Duties of the Heart to Songs of the Heart: Jewish Philosophy and Ethics and Their*

literary legacy, beyond his guidebook, consists of some inspirational poetry. He is thought to have flourished in the second half of the eleventh century.

Bahya recommends bowing as a devotional practice on several occasions. His remarks are limited to personal, private devotions. Thus, for example, in the long dialogue between Intellect and Soul which comprises a substantial portion of Book Three, “*Iltizām Ṭā‘at Allāh* (Committing Oneself to Obeying God)”, Intellect points out that a servant of a worldly master would surely appease his lord by, *inter alia*, “performing many prostrations and bowings before him”; how much more so, then, ought we to do the same before our divine Lord.⁶

Perhaps the most important proof for my argument is found in the final book, “*Ṣidq al-maḥabba li-lāh* (True Love of God)”. Bahya introduces two supplications (*baqqashot*) which he himself composed. Both are appended to manuscripts and printings of his guidebook, and are also found in some prayer books and liturgical anthologies. We are especially interested in the specific instructions that Bahya provides concerning the bodily posture to be maintained: the supplicant ought to be “in a state of standing while bowing (*fī ḥāl wuqūf wa-sujud*) until the end, after which he shall stand erect (*yarfa‘u*) and say whatever *taḥannunim* he wishes.”⁷ As Rabbi Qafih explains, “standing while bowing” means that one stands, rather than kneels, and bows downwards. His interpretation, as we shall see, can be corroborated by another text that clearly distinguishes between bowing on one’s knees and bowing while standing.⁸

Influence on Hebrew Poetry in Medieval Spain (Jerusalem 1992) [Hebrew]. Each of the ten chapters in Mirsky’s book is named after the corresponding book in *Ḥovot ha-Levavot*, and in each of them Mirsky adduces Hebrew poems that, in his opinion, betray the influence of Bahya’s book. In many cases it seems to me that the devotional themes are far too common, and Mirsky’s case for literary influence is, at best, inconclusive. Nonetheless, he has made an important contribution in bringing together, as they ought to be, the Hebrew poems and Bahya’s guidebook.

6 *Torat Ḥovot ha-Levavot*, pp. 161–163.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 424.

8 *Ibid.*, note 55. Interestingly enough, this is the posture that the king must maintain during his recitation of the ‘*amidah*’; see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer* 5:10, based on BT Berakhot 34b.

Another version of Bahya's instructions, however, exhibits these instructions in the final clause: "...after which he shall *kneel* and say whatever *tahannunim* he wishes."⁹ Moreover, this is the reading reflected in Ibn Tibbon's translation. The difference in the Hebrew versions reflects the substitution of one letter for another, very similar letter in the Judaeo-Arabic original. Instead of *yarfa'u*, the text used by Ibn Tibbon had *yarka'u* (kneel); the variant is duly listed by Rabbi Qafih in his apparatus.¹⁰ I see no way to decide which of the two readings represents Bahya's original intention, nor is this of critical concern here. Suffice it to note that some readers of the book in Judaeo-Arabic, and all of the many readers of the translation and its derivatives, understood that they were to kneel as well as to "stand while bowing."¹¹

There can be no doubt, then, that Bahya instructs the reader to bow, and perhaps to kneel as well, while reciting his devotion. But where and when is this devotion to be said? Schirmann remarks that Bahya "does not fix the time and place for the prayer."¹² This is true. However, Bahya does state clearly that it is *tanafful* (supererogatory prayer); and, even though he also says immediately afterward that is appropriate "either at night or during the day," the context would seem to indicate that nocturnal recitation is to be preferred. In the passage immediately preceding, Bahya recommends fasting during the day and *tanafful* at night. He goes on to explain: even though daytime *tanafful* is also desirable, the conditions at night are much more conducive to its performance. These include physical conditions, such as being fed and rested, but also social, or rather asocial matters. One is alone, with no need or cause to converse

9 *Torat Hovot ha-Levavot* (Warsaw 1875, and often reprinted), part II, p. 162.

10 *Torat Hovot ha-Levavot*, p. 424, n. 43 to the Judaeo-Arabic, and cf. n. 55 to the Hebrew on the same page.

11 It is of course possible that readers understood Bahya not as Rabbi Qafih does with regard to "standing while bowing," but rather took Bahya's intention to be a series of postures — standing erect, kneeling, and full prostration — to be adopted one after another, much as in the poem of Judah ha-Levi to be discussed below.

12 J. Schirmann, *The History of Hebrew Poetry in Muslim Spain*, edited, supplemented and annotated by E. Fleischer (Jerusalem 1995) [Hebrew], p. 375.

with anyone; Bahya mentions in this connection *infirād* and *khalwa*, two Sufi terms expressing the solitude necessary for religious devotion.¹³ Immediately afterward he introduces his supplications. They are to be preceded by *zemirot* (unspecified psalms or hymns) and followed by Psalms 119 and 147–148. It seems nearly certain, then, that Bahya's supplication was meant primarily to be recited as the centerpiece of a nightly, solitary prayer vigil.

Here, then, is our first hard evidence that specific postures, including one or more forms of bowing, were prescribed for a private devotion. Bahya's instructions will also be useful in securing additional proof. Let us consider, for example, the very long *baqqashah* of Judah ha-Levi, *Avarekh et Adonay asher Ye'asani*. The influence of Bahya's *baqqashah* (and other liturgical poems, most notably Ibn Gabirol's *Keter Malkhut*) upon this opus has been duly noted. However, no one as far as I know has observed that, given this connection, ha-Levi's instructions concerning the posture to be adopted during the recitation of this *baqqashah* must be taken literally. Like Bahya, he offers the reader not just a text to be recited, but rather a full devotional performance in which the body too plays its part.

Avarekh is divided into different sections, each demarcated and bearing its own heading. Sections 5, 6, 9 and 10 are labeled 'bowing' (השתחויה); sections 7 and 12, 'kneeling' (כריעה); sections 8 and 13, 'standing' (עמידה); and section 14, 'falling on one's face' (נפילת אפים). In Brody's edition, the headings are displayed at the beginning of each section, where they belong, whereas Dov Jarden, the most recent editor, collected all of these instructions and placed them in the apparatus at the beginning of the *baqqashah*.¹⁴ Ezra Fleischer remarks that ha-Levi himself divided the piece into distinct sections "which

13 *Torat Hovot ha-Levavot*, p. 423.

14 H. Brody, *Dîwân des Abu-l-Hasân Jehuda ha-Levy*, vol. 4 (Berlin 1930), pp. 138–157; D. Jarden, *The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem 1978), pp. 132–141.

were given special names.”¹⁵ We argue that these are not just names, but definite instructions regarding bodily posture.

Ha-Levi’s *Avarekh* is generally included in the *seliḥot* (communal penitential prayers) that are said in the days leading up to Yom Kippur.¹⁶ However, it is not completely clear that this was the original intention of the author. We have recently published evidence that at least one Jew (from Morocco, presumably of the thirteenth or fourteenth century) recited *Keter Malkhut* — now and for some time part of many Yom Kippur rites — as a private, supererogatory devotion (*tanafful*) every Sabbath.¹⁷ As we have just seen, Bahya’s *baqqashah*, with its accompanying instructions regarding posture, is also called *tanafful*. It would seem that a private vigil would be the most natural setting for ha-Levi’s *baqqashah* as well.

One might readily object to this interpretation on the grounds of ha-Levi’s stern rejection of private devotion in his prose dialogue, the *Kuzari*. At the beginning of Book Three ha-Levi describes in detail the life and praxis of *al-muta’abbid*, his religious ideal of the servant of God. Ha-Levi indicates his negative stance toward private prayer or supererogatory devotions at the very end of 3:17.¹⁸ This prompts the Kuzari king to ask directly: doesn’t isolation facilitate clarity of thought?

In response, ha-Levi (speaking as usual through the *ḥaver*) launches into a long disquisition on the superiority of communal prayer. This line of thought in fact continues the point first made in 3:1, where ha-Levi acknowledges that the servant of God may sincerely crave private communion (*munājāh*) with God, held in seclusion (*khalwa*). This would take place in a night vigil (*qiyām*) during which *taḥannunim* and *baqqashot* are recited. However, ha-Levi avers, people simply cannot maintain the concentration needed for

15 Schirmann, *Hebrew Poetry in Muslim Spain*, p. 461 note 196.

16 I. Davidson, *Thesaurus of Medieval Hebrew Poetry*, vol. 1 (New York 1924), no. 354.

17 Y. T. Langermann, “A Judaeo-Arabic Paraphrase of Ibn Gabirol’s *Keter Malkhut*,” *Zutot* 2003 (Dordrecht 2004), pp. 28–33, at pp. 29–30.

18 Judah ha-Levi, *Kitāb al-Radd wa-’l-Dalīl fi ’l-Dīn al-Dhalīl*, eds. D. H. Baneth and H. Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem 1977), p. 106, last two lines.

such endeavors, and the secluded servant will inevitably be overwhelmed, despite his good intentions, by worries, aches, and passions.¹⁹ Therefore, the instructions concerning posture found later on in 3:5 must presumably relate to communal prayer, and the reference to *sujūd* found there as well must describe the bowing performed four times in the daily *'amidah* prayer.²⁰ In short, it seems that ha-Levi here rejects private vigils, and the forms of bowing that he recommends are the standard ones in post-Talmudic, rabbinic Jewish prayer services.

My reply is two-fold. First, we should apply here the general rule with regard to polemics: an author rails against practices or ideas that are current among his audience. The very fact that ha-Levi deems it necessary for the *haver* to be questioned head-on about solitary prayer, a literary device contrived for the sole purpose of inviting a robust response, is proof enough that Jews of ha-Levi's acquaintance practiced *tanafful* in a state of *khalwa*. It seems most likely that they performed the type of solitary night vigils recommended by Bahya.

My second reply is also simple, though its full argumentation would require a study of its own. The *Kuzari* embodies ha-Levi's rejection of the high Jewish culture of Andalusia. Since he himself had attained the pinnacles of that culture, it therefore represents ha-Levi's rejection of *his own past*. Given this state of affairs, it should not occasion surprise that in rejecting the recitation of *baqqashot*, at least in a private setting, ha-Levi is rejecting his own compositions and, perhaps, his own previous praxis. Indeed, his personal perspective bursts through at this point in the dialogue, when he remarks that new compositions give pleasure for only a few days, but soon lose their freshness; "and whatever the tongue has repeated, the soul does not respond to it, and she finds there neither pathos nor affection."²¹ Ha-Levi found that his

19 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

own creations quickly went stale, and this was one facet of his discovery that his previous praxis had been deficient.

In a note to his Hebrew translation of the *Kuzari*, Rabbi Qafih points out that ha-Levi himself wrote liturgies for night vigils, a form of worship which, as we have seen, is rejected in the *Kuzari*.²² The young ha-Levi, before the sea change that finds expression in the *Kuzari*, was an adept of the sort of Sufi-style spirituality portrayed in *Hovot ha-Levavot*.²³ Therefore, I suggest, *Avarekh* was originally intended, and perhaps also performed, as a private devotion, prostrations and all.

One wonders whether the many proclamations in the first person of prostration found in the liturgy were cues for actual bodily performance, which, in view of the absence of prostration in the synagogue, would necessarily have been done in private. In some cases it would seem that this is a trope. For example, the concluding line in Abraham Ibn Ezra's evocative *El ehad bera'ani* begins, "I bow upon my face, and I spread out my hands." The absence there of any Sufi-style terminologies should not lead us astray; this poem is a most powerful expression of the spirituality that drove the Andalusian pietists. However, formally speaking this poem is a *reshut* for *nishmat*, and one does not bow during the recitation of that Sabbath prayer. On the other hand, Ibn Ezra's poem did migrate from its original (or at least formal) context to the *zemiroth* said at the family Sabbath table. Might it have been transformed into a private devotion as well?²⁴

22 *Sefer ha-Kuzari li-Rabbeinu Yehudah ha-Levi*, ed. and trans. Y. Qafih (Kiryat Ono 1997), p. 91 note 14, where the editor corrects Even-Shmuel's translation of *qiyām*. In support of the rendering "night vigil" one may also refer to the Qur'an, *sūrat al-muzzammil*, where *qiyām* as night vigil is the main theme of the chapter.

23 The strong impression Sufism made upon him is evident in the *Kuzari*, despite ha-Levi's change of heart; see D. Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi's Kuzari* (Albany 2000).

24 The most promising avenue of research would seem to be an investigation of the anthologies of private prayers that are found in many manuscripts; for a recent description of one such collection, MS Parma Palatina 1753, see B. Richler (ed.), *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma* (Jerusalem 2001), pp. 286–287.

B. Evidence from North Africa

What other evidence do we have, aside from that provided by the existence of so many *baqqashot* and *tehinot*, that Jews engaged in private devotions? The very fact that these devotions were meant to be recited in seclusion would seem to preclude there being any witnesses to the details of the accompanying postures. However, we do have one description of a Jewish *zāwiya*, or private chapel (literally ‘corner’ and a well-known Sufi institution). It comes from a Jewish Sufi text that is preserved incompletely in MS St. Petersburg RNL Hebrew-Arabic II 2499, and which I have discussed in several studies. Though I cannot date it precisely, the author mentions Maimonides as well as a contemporary of his, Joseph Ibn ‘Aqnin. Moreover, this text comes from the Maghreb, and thus furnishes rare testimony to the survival of Jewish Sufism in that part of the world, seemingly independently of Abraham Maimonides and the eastern Hasidim.²⁵

This description is the only one we have thus far of the private space that some Jews set aside for their devotions, paralleling or supplementing the public space of the synagogue.²⁶ The author mentions *rukū’*, which can mean either bowing or kneeling, as a part of the service. The room set aside has several functions. Notice that it is equally appropriate for pondering scientific (*‘ilmiyy*) questions as it is for reciting from the Torah or praying. Finally, we observe that some night vigils at least must have been carried out in the early morning, and thus served the purpose of putting the person in the proper frugal state of mind before going about his daily business. Here follows the account:

25 Y. T. Langermann, “A Judaeo-Arabic Candle Lighting Prayer,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 92 (2001), pp. 133–135; idem, “A Judaeo-Arabic Paraphrase,” cited above, note 17.

26 There is a hint of this in *Ḥovot ha-Levavot* 9:3, pp. 390–391. Speaking of the second, more moderate group of *zuhhād* (ascetics), Bahya observes that rather than fleeing to the wilderness, they set aside space for solitude (*khalwa*, *infirād*) in their homes. Bahya does not mention solitude in connection with the third, even more moderate group, whom he judges to be closest to the “mean” of the Law.

ומן אלמסתחב אן יכן לך פי דארך בית או פי ביתך זאוייה מעדה לדכר אללה ותלאוה אלכתאב ותודיה פרץ אלצלאה אן פאתך אלמסגד וקיאמך ללנאפלה פי אלליל פאדא דכלת צ'ארך אפתקדת גסמך מן אחתקארה ודכלת אלי דאלך אלמוצע ופיה כתאבך אן כנת דו כתאב ולא בוד לך מן ספר תורה ואן כתבתה בידך כאן אפצל או חומש או סדור או לוח מכתוב פיה מא תקרי אן כנת קד פרטת פתרכע בקול ואני ברוב חסדך וכו' ותקרי ולו פסוק ואחד או סטרין או הלכה או תנצ'ר מסאלה עלמיה אן כנת מן אהלה וחיניד תנתשר אלי אחואל אלדניא מעולא אן תקתצר פיהא עלי אלצ'רווי מן ג'דא או מעאש [8ב] ולבאס...

It is desirable that you have in your dwelling a building, or in your house a corner that is set aside for invoking God (*li-dhikri 'llāhi*), reciting Scripture, carrying out the duty of prayer if missed in the synagogue (*masjid!*), and staying awake for supererogatory prayer at night. When you enter your home (?), you should first inspect your body with regard to its contemptuousness.²⁷ You then enter into that place. There your book is to be found, if you possess a book. You must have a Torah scroll — if you wrote it yourself, that is best — or a *humash* or a *siddur* or a slate (*lūh*) on which is written that which you shall recite, if you have slipped.²⁸ Then kneel [or bow; *fa-tarka'u*] while saying, *And I, with your great grace, etc.* [Psalms 5:8]. Read at least one verse, or two lines, or a *halakhah*, or else examine one of the scientific questions, if you are one of those people. Then you may turn to this-worldly affairs, with your mind made up that you will limit yourself therein only to the necessities of food, sustenance, or clothing.²⁹

To sum up thus far: we have examined some sources coming from Spain and

27 I believe that this is a euphemism for relieving oneself if necessary before entering the private chapel, just as one is supposed to do before beginning prayer. The Arabic is: *fa-'idhā dakhalta dāraka iftaqadata jismaka min ihtiqārihi*. I presume that by צ'ארך our author intends דארך.

28 That is to say, if you have forgotten the words. I owe this and several other useful suggestions to Robert Brody.

29 MS St. Petersburg, RNL Hebrew-Arabic II 2499, ff. 8a-b.

North Africa, Abraham Maimonides' ancestral homeland. We have found that for several centuries before Abraham's innovations, some Jews, very likely belonging to the upper crust of society, had practiced solitary supererogatory prayers, especially at night. Some set aside a special room or building for this purpose. Various sorts of bowing — bending from the waist, while either standing or kneeling — were prescribed parts of these private rituals. This praxis, and the pietism within which it developed, were part of the spiritual heritage of Abraham Maimonides. His father famously rejected the greater part of it; all the more reason, then, to conclude that these practices were well known to Abraham.³⁰

C. Eastern Sources

Let us now turn to some relevant texts issuing from the eastern Mediterranean. Two distinct matters will be brought into the discussion: detailed descriptions of prostrations found in a prayer book preserved in the Genizah; and notices of prostration by French Jews, some of whom relocated to the Holy Land. Each of these bears in some way upon sources cited by Wieder; we submit that they will strengthen the case that we have built in the first part of this article.

The first and probably most important of the three items to be discussed is the Genizah prayer book (of the Palestinian rite) now deposited at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, MS Heb. g. 2 (number 2700 in the Neubauer-Cowley catalogue).³¹ Wieder includes in his article a lengthy citation from

30 See the sustained criticism of Jews who adopt Sufi practices at the beginning of the fourth of Maimonides' "Eight Chapters". I attempt to situate this critique within Maimonides' evolving view of religion in my study, "On Some Passages Attributed to Maimonides," in E. Fleischer *et al.*, eds., *Me'ah She'arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky* (Jerusalem 2001), pp. 223–240 [Hebrew], esp. pp. 238–239; full references to additional relevant passages may be found there.

31 There is a typographical error in Wieder (n. 1 above), p. 13 n. 26, where the number 2709 is given.

this text.³² According to him, the passage cited furnishes evidence that Abraham Maimonides' reinstatement of prostration had spread to the Holy Land. Unfortunately, his analysis of the text is beset by two serious problems. First, had he begun his citation a few lines earlier, the context would have been clearer: the text on prostration follows immediately upon the instructions for taking three paces backwards at the end of the *'amidah* and, therefore, the whole discussion concerns the posture to be assumed during the recitation of *taḥannun*. This, as we shall see, is a topic unto itself. Second, Wieder says nothing about the date of the manuscript; or rather, he assumes, on the basis of his own conclusion that it concerns the prostrations instituted (or reinstated) by Abraham, that it must post-date Abraham's reform. However, the paleographic evidence fixes a date for the manuscript that is much earlier than the mid-thirteenth century. Thus the discussion there cannot be in response to any controversy supposedly set off by Abraham's actions.³³

Let me first cite the passage, beginning a few lines before Wieder's citation, after which I shall offer an alternative explanation (ff. 48a–49a):

וכשיגמר תפיל' יפסע שלוש פסיעות לאחריו ואומר שלום שלום שמאל וימין ואחר כך
אומ' רבון כל העולמים סלח לעוונותיי ולעוונות כל עמך ישראל ברחמים ככ' ה' שמעה
ה' סלחה הקשיבה כאדם שהציץ עליו אדוני' וכן ישתחוה במקום תפלתו וירגל צרכיו
לפני יוצרו ואלהיו וירבה סליחה ליולדיו ולכל ישראל ואם יקוד בעקידה לפני יוצרו
על צידו השמאלי וצריך שתהא רקתו השמאלית בארץ ושתי ידיו מוקפות תחת צידו
הימני וכן רגליו אבל ידו הימנית תהי תלויה ויהיה רבוץ כטלה העקוד לשחיטה כדי
שיזבח יצרו לפני יוצרו מנכני ערפו לפני בוראו ויזכור עקידתו שליצחק אבינו זה היא
עקידה אבל דרך כריעה ובריכה כגון אלן ניקדם כוריע על ברכיו ושתי ידיו פרושות
השמים ופניו תלויים זו היא דרך בריכה שנ' ויברך על ברכיו נגד כל קהל ישר' ויפרש

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 59–62.

33 See E. Fleischer, *Eretz-Israel Prayer and Prayer Ritual as Portrayed in the Genizah Documents* (Jerusalem 1988) [Hebrew], p. 26 and especially notes 29–30. Though Fleischer cannot date the manuscript precisely, he is sure that it is earlier than the thirteenth century. Dr. Edna Engel of the Hebrew Palaeography Project confirmed the earlier date in a private communication; I thank her for her assistance.

כפיו השמים אבל כריעה עיקר היא לכל דבר שאין אין אדם כוריע בקומתו אינו יכול להשתחות ולא לברוך ולא לעקוד שנ' ויכרעו אפים ארצה על הריצפה ואומ' וככלתו להעלות כרעו המלך וכן קידה דרכה בראש ובקדקד אבל השתחויה ראש לכל התפילות ושם מ[ס]יים ככל דרך תפילה שהיא תחילה וסוף פעמים שהוא מזכירה תחילה באו נשת' ונב' וג' ופעמים שהוא מזכירה בסוף ויכרעו אפם ארצה על הרצפה וישתחו שכל השתחויה על הארץ היא בידים וברגלים ובאפים ובימות הראשונים לא היו משתחוים על הארץ אלא בבית המקדש או במקום שהוא מכוון לתפילה שכך פירשו חכמ' ואבן משכית לא תתנו בארצ' להשתחות עליה אבל היום שבטלה ריחה שלעבודה זרה מותר להשתחות במקום המיוחד לתפילה שנ' ויהי דויד בא עד הראש אשר השתחוה אין כתו' כן אלא אשר ישתחוה שם מקום מזומן לתפילה.

When he finishes the prayer, he takes three steps backwards. He says, *shalom, shalom*, left and right. Afterwards he says, *Lord of all the worlds, forgive my sins and the sins of your entire nation of Israel, with mercy, as it is said, God, Listen! God, Forgive! Listen, as does a man whose master observes him.* And so shall he bow down³⁴ in the place of his prayer, and make known his needs before his Creator and Lord. He begs abundant forgiveness for his parents and for all of Israel.

If he bows down in *'aqedah* before his Creator, it shall be on his left side. His left temple must be on the ground, his two hands wrapped under his right side, and so also his two feet. However, his right hand should hang free. He lies like a lamb, bound for slaughter, such that he sacrifices his impulse before his Creator. He subdues his neck before his Creator, remembering the binding (עקידתו) of our forefather Isaac.

This is *'aqedah*. However, the way of genuflection and kneeling (כריעה) is like a shepherd [giving his account]. He falls on his knees with his two hands spread before heaven, and his face hanging free. This is the way of kneeling (בריכה), as it says, *He knelt upon his knees before the entire congregation of Israel, and he spread his hands towards heaven* [II Chronicles 6:3]. However, bending (כריעה) is the basis of everything,

Here begins the citation *apud* Wieder; Wieder omits *we-khēn*, a key word linking the passage on prostration to the preceding discussion.

for if³⁵ one does not bend his full height, he is not able to bow (להשתחוות), nor to kneel, nor to do *'aqedah*, as it says, *they bent themselves with their faces to the ground* [II Chronicles 7:3], and it says, *and when he finished the sacrifice, the king [and all that were present with him] bent themselves* [II Chronicles 29:29].

So also bowing (קיידה) is done generally with the head. However, bowing is [at] the head of all prayers, and with it one finishes, as with all prayer, for it is the beginning and the end. Sometimes it is mentioned first: *come let us bow and bend ourselves etc.* [Psalms 95:6]; sometimes it is mentioned at the end: *they bent themselves with their faces to the ground on the pavement, and they bowed* [II Chronicles 7:3]. Every prostration on the ground is with the feet, the hands, and the face. In earlier times, they prostrated themselves only in the Temple, but not³⁶ in a place that is set aside for prayer. This is how the Sages interpreted [the verse], *do not set up a paved stone (even maskit) in your land, so as to prostrate yourselves upon it* [Leviticus 26:1]. However, today, when even the scent of idolatry has been abolished, it is permissible to prostrate oneself in a place set aside for prayer, from the verse: it does not say, *and David came to the head of the mountain, where he had prostrated himself*, but rather *where he [regularly] prostrates himself* [II Samuel 15:32] — a place set aside for prayer.

This text documents an unusual posture, dubbed *'aqedah*, in which the supplicant mimics the posture of a lamb bound for slaughter. The key halakhic point is that only the left temple — but not the forehead — makes contact with the ground; therefore, the prohibition of *even maskit* (on which see below) does not apply. According to Wieder, this passage was written during the lively debate over prostration that was sparked by Abraham's reforms. Wieder is aware of the connection between the posture described as *'aqedah* and

35 See Wieder's note (253) for the explanation of וְאִם meaning "if".

36 My translation follows Wieder's emendation (in note 257א) of וְאִם to וְאִלּוּ.

nefilat appayim, “falling on one’s face”, the prayer (more commonly known nowadays as *tahannun*) said immediately after the three backward paces that complete the ‘*amidah*. Wieder’s analysis is as follows: *nefilat appayim* had at some time been performed just as the name indicates, i.e., as full prostration. However, even by the time of the Talmud, there are indications that the more moderate posture of leaning towards the left side had been substituted for complete prostration. The reinstatement of prostration, as the pietists intended, would naturally have led to the abolition of leaning, its substitute. However, the leaning posture had by then taken firm root, so the pietists, rather than trying to abolish it, filled it with new meaning and gestures, that is, the ‘*aqedah* mentioned in our text.

There is, however, a simpler and more economical explanation, which is in any case called for, since, as we have seen, this *siddur* antedates the controversies triggered by Abraham’s reforms. The passage, taken in its full context, refers specifically to *nefilat appayim* rather than to prayer in general. Thus it could very well be that the author is defending a vestige of the older, fuller prostration once practiced at this point in the service. The details given about the ‘*aqedah*, most notably the fact that it is the temple rather than the face that is pressed to the ground, were meant to answer the strongest objection to prostration, namely the prohibition of the “paved stone” (*even maskit*).³⁷ That prohibition pertains only to touching the ground with the forehead; if one takes care to touch only one temple, the prohibition ought not to apply. After dispensing with this technicality, the author adds that from his point of view, prostration in general is licit; there is however no indication in this *siddur* that it was practiced, beyond the peculiar form of *nefilat appayim* just described.

The instructions given in some of the earliest prayer manuals concerning

37 See Leviticus 26:1. Restrictions ostensibly intended to forestall even the remote possibility of violating this biblical injunction were, so it seems, the most readily available weapon at the disposal of those authorities who objected to prostration. Thus some Geonim prohibited prostration even where there is no stone floor, lest there be a stone buried underneath; see B. Lewin, *Otzar ha-Gaonim*, vol. 1, Tractate Berakhoth (Haifa 1928), p. 83.

the posture to be assumed during *nefilat appayim* are not uniform, and the possibility that some communities continued the Talmudic practice of full prostration cannot be ruled out completely.³⁸ Indeed, Maimonides recognizes full prostration as a legitimate option for *nefilat appayim*.³⁹ If my conjecture is correct, this text provides some evidence for the persistence of prostration, in at least one part of the daily service. Be that as it may, Abraham Maimonides does not make anything special of this. He simply subsumes the posture taken at *nefilat appayim* under the category of *sujūd al-talab* (bowing of supplication), one of several types of *sujūd* in his system.⁴⁰

D. Ashkenazi Parallels

Next we turn to the practices of Ashkenazic, specifically French Jews. Wieder cites a Genizah document published by Jacob Mann that describes the practice of three French Jews, residents of Acre and supporters of Abraham in a political controversy. This document describes R. Joseph ben Matatyah, R. Judah, and R. Samuel, “who kneel and fall on their faces, not to the side, and not [merely leaning], but on their knees, with their faces to the ground”.⁴¹ These three rabbis clearly knew and respected Abraham, and one must assume that they knew of Abraham’s reforms and endorsed them. However, we may suggest a different or supplementary background to their practice, which could remove

38 Sa’adya prescribes a posture which he describes as “half-kneeling, half sitting” (*Siddur R. Saadja Gaon*, eds. I. Davidson, S. Assaf, and B.I. Joel, 5th printing, Jerusalem 1985, p. 24); Solomon ben Nathan of Sijilmasa instructs one to kneel down upon the ground, while drawing up the knees (?) (*Siddur Rabbeinu Shlomo bei-rabbi Natan*, ed. S. Haggai, Jerusalem 1995; on the eastern provenance of this prayer book, see Sh. Zuker, “The Eastern Origin of the Siddur of R. Shlomo b”r Natan and its Mistaken Connection to North Africa,” *Kiryat Sefer* 62 (1992/93), pp. 737–746 [Hebrew]).

39 *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer* 5:14.

40 *Sefer ha-Maspiq*, ed. Dana, pp. 141–145, where Abraham takes up the issue of *even maskit* as well.

41 Wieder, p. 62, citing from J. Mann, *The Jews of Egypt and Palestine*, II, p. 371 n. 2. This document is now designated T-S K 15.108.

the exclamation point from Wieder's remark on the next page of his study: "The new conception found support even among rabbis from Christian lands!"

Rabbi Moses ben Jacob of Coucy, better known by the acronym of his book, the SaMaG (*Sefer Mitzvot Gadol*, *Great Book of Commandments*), hailed from northern France. However, it was only after a sojourn in Spain and a period of itinerant preaching — which, he said, was enjoined upon him by divine revelation — that he composed his magnum opus.⁴² In his discussion of the sixteenth positive commandment (according to his reckoning), he recommends this practice: "he [the penitent] should spend one hour each day on his knees, with his hands spread out towards heaven, and confess, and ask for mercy, so that God may assist him in his penitence. I have composed a special prayer (*baqqashah*) for this, and it is written down here..."⁴³

Moses' prayer is not found in the printed editions of his book that I have inspected. However, two different versions are found in collections of prayers. In one of them, the heading reads, "A Prayer Composed by the SaMaG; to be said while kneeling".⁴⁴ Y. Gilat, who published the poems, notes laconically, "A strange custom. Perhaps a foreign influence."⁴⁵ This "foreign influence" could, of course, be Christian practice. However, it might also be traced to Hispano-Jewish spirituality, of which Moses imbibed a healthy dose. He was a contemporary, and perhaps an acquaintance, of Jonah Gerondi, one of the great moralists of his age. It seems entirely possible, then, that Moses learned in Spain of the existence of private vigils which included bowings of some sort, and adopted these practices in his contribution to the genre of *baqqashot*.

It is also possible that the practice had spread even earlier to Provence and Ashkenaz, by way of translations and adaptations of *Hovot ha-Levavot*. *Hovot*

42 For biography, bibliography, and a conspectus of the book of commandments, see E.E. Urbach, *The Tosaphists: Their History, Writings and Methods* (Jerusalem 1968 [Hebrew]), pp. 384–395.

43 *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* (New York 1959), p. 7a.

44 This is reminiscent of the headings given by ha-Levi to his *baqqashah*, as noted above.

45 Y. Gilat, "Two Baqqashot by R. Moses of Coucy," *Tarbiz* 28 (1959), 54–58, at p. 56 n. 11 [Hebrew].

ha-Levavot was one of the very first works to be translated by the Ibn Tibbons, newly resettled in Provence after fleeing their native Granada. Judah Ibn Tibbon, at the behest of a certain Meshullam, prepared his Hebrew version around the year 1160; about the same time Joseph Kimhi also translated parts of the work. In addition, an abridged Hebrew version was prepared by Asher ben Shelamiah, an important Provencal talmudist whose mother was the daughter of the same Meshullam who commissioned Ibn Tibbon's translation. This second work, which carries the title *Ba'alei ha-Nefesh*, circulated very widely; over thirty manuscripts have been identified.⁴⁶ The abbreviated version transmits the same instructions, including those concerning kneeling, as are found in Ibn Tibbon's translation.⁴⁷ Thus the three rabbis of Acre — granted their close association with Abraham Maimonides — may have been well-prepared for the reintroduction of prostration into prayer by the very same Andalusian spirituality in which Abraham's pietism was rooted.⁴⁸

E. Conclusion

Finally, we ought to consider this passage from the "Chapters on Bliss" attributed to Moses Maimonides, describing the prayer of the devout: "He continues to sing pleasant tunes, softening himself and filling himself with tenderness, kneeling (*rāki'an*), bowing (*sājidan*), and crying."⁴⁹ If, as Moritz

46 See I. Ta-Shema, "The Abridgement of 'Hovot ha-Levavot' by R. Asher b"r Shelamya of Lunel," *'Aleï Sefer* 10 (1982), pp. 13–24 [Hebrew].

47 I consulted MS Parma Palatina 2764, f. 28b.

48 In this connection I would like to call attention to paragraph 115 in *Sefer ha-Pardes* (ed. H.Y. Ehrenreich, New York 1959, pp. 343–344), which prescribes rules for someone who "falls on his face in the synagogue, asking for mercy". Though this has generally been taken to refer to *nefilat appayim*, a fixed part of the prayer (see also the sources and parallels given by Ehrenreich in his note *ad loc.*), the peculiar language employed, especially the use of the singular (אדם שנופל על פניו בבית הכנסת לבקש רחמים), suggests to me that *ha-Pardes* may be talking about an individual, supererogatory prayer that was said in the synagogue.

49 *De Beatitudine Capita Duo R. Mosi Ben Maimon Adscripta*, eds. H.S. Davidowitz and D.H. Baneth (Jerusalem 1939), p. 7, ll. 9–12.

Steinschneider maintained throughout his illustrious career, this is an authentic Maimonidean treatise, then clearly Abraham's father eventually accepted the pietist practices of his native al-Andalus. Then, as we have proposed, Abraham undertook to transfer these practices to the public space of the synagogue. If, however, the treatise is a pseudepigraph, as the current consensus avers, it most likely emerged from the circle of Moses Maimonides' pietist descendants.⁵⁰ In that case, after a brief, controversial, and ultimately unsuccessful re-entry into the realm of communal prayer in the synagogue, prostration returned to the private space which the pious set aside for their devotions.

50 See the introduction in Davidowitz-Baneth for references to Steinschneider and the full array of evidence against the attribution to Maimonides.