Some remarks on the Tenth Mahberet by Ya’aqov ben El’azar

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The Hebrew genre of the Maḥberet is based upon the Arabic Maqāma, starting with translations of Arabic maqāmāt by Yehudah al-Ḥarīzī into Hebrew and followed by the making of his own Arabic and Hebrew pieces of rhymed prose, called in Hebrew meliṣot or maḥbarot. One of the striking features of the traditional or classical maqāma in the sense of the Arabic authors al-Hamadhānī (968-1008), al-Ḥarīrī (1054-1122) and the Arabic and Hebrew author Yehudah al-Ḥarīzī (1165-1225)1 is the fact that there is a narrator who starts the story of a travel in his juvenile age during which he meets a companion, the protagonist, often a picaresque figure, whom he knows from former occasions, and tells us in every next maqāma he produces afterwards, a new adventure which he has experienced with that companion. However, some maqāmāt follow a more simplified pattern, and there we meet the narrator but sometimes other events take place without the well-known picaresque figure.

In the classical Hamadhānī-Ḥarīrī type there is no internal cohesion between the different adventures, the stories start every time anew, the heroes are not historic in the sense that they seem to enjoy a long youth or a long period of old age, their life cannot be reconstructed. The maqāmāt often have names of towns and places where narrator and protagonist happen to meet one another, but in the case of al-Ḥarīzī the title is often the subject which is treated in a particular maqāma. The protagonist is often a crook, who tries to deceive the multitudes for instance as a preacher in a mosque who exhorts them to give money for a pious purpose. Often the story is concluded by a little poem which says as a wise lesson of life that you have to cheat people because they all fool and defraud each other.

In the standard maqāma, as in all traditional Arabic narrations, there is no omniscient narrator, the narrator must have been a testimony of the event, so that the story can be considered as authentic, but the original chain of transmitters of early Arabic story telling is missing in the maqāma. Instead, the author of the maqāma stresses that narrator and protagonist are fictive. The author is not the hero himself. The Hebrew maqamist al-Ḥarīzī says in the

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1 As an early example of a Hebrew love maqāma we should not forget Neʿum Asher ben Yehudah by Shelomoh ibn Saqbel who lived in the 12th century, see A. Schippers in Hämeen-Anttila, Maqāma, p. 307; Schirmann, 1956, II, p. 555 [according to Schirmann based upon an undiscovered Arabic original]; Navarro Peiro 1988, pp. 98-99.
preface of his *Tahkemoni*: “All the words in this book, I laid them on the tongue of Heman ha-Ezraḥi (the name of the narrator means something like ‘faithful insider’) and of Ḥeber ha-Qeni (name which refers to an outsider amidst the people of Israel, see Judges 4: 11). I have created them and invented them, but none of them has existed in our time. All that I have mentioned in their name, has never been or happened, it is only fiction”.

The first passage of the *maqāma* often says that the narrator in his youth was travelling in search of learning. So Yehudah al-Ḥarīzī says for instance at the beginning of the eleventh gate of his *Tahkemoni*:\(^2\) “The fancies of my thought and the longings of my heart stirred me up to journey from the habitation of my dwelling to the beauteous land (Israel). Now I was swift as a gazelle upon the mountains of spices, chasing after every delightful satire and panting to hear every parable and riddle.

So I journeyed from Bethlehem in Judah. Now when I was in one of its cities and within one of the gates of her gates, loving its dust and the pasture of her gazelles, I beheld men gathering and from every corner come running. Now when I asked them about the business of their gathering and the reason of their running, they said to me that a wise man passed among them and encamped in their borders”.

The *mahberet* ends with the recognition of Ḥeber [apparently the wise man], after having heard his marvelous poems: ‘Said the Narrator: “Now when the people heard the marvels of his thought and the wonders of his meditations and the purity of his tongue, they carried him on hands and shoulders and they opened their hands to him, until they heaped upon him their many gifts and he wearied to give praise for their goodness. And when he journeyed from them, he invoked his peace upon them”.

And he spoke and said to them: “Verily I am Ḥeber who fashions songs/ That make weary the souls that are jealous of him/I am quiet and at rest in my home but/ My satires travel to the East and the West!/ I have set them as polished arrows in Time/…”

In the Fifteenth gate, the poet describes how his narrator suffers the vicissitudes of Life. It goes as follows: “Heman, the Ezraḥite speaks: ‘In the days of my youth I had riches and wealth, strength and substance. Ah, I was rich, I had found wealth. Now there came a day that I saw merchants crossing over the sea. So I went down with them and joined up with them’”.

But then the balance of life is lost: “When we had come into the midst of the sea, the hand of the Lord touched us. There was a mighty tempest in the sea. Their waves lifted up their roaring. After great tribulation, we escaped and were delivered, but we had cast all our wealth in the midst of the sea. I went forth from the ship crushed and despondent, naked and stripped, a brother to sorrow and grief, like Jonah when he came forth from the belly of the fish.

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\(^2\) As far as al-Ḥarīz’s *Tahkemoni* is concerned, I quote here An English Translation by Victor Emanuel Reichert, Jerusalem 1965-1973 (I,II). In practice Volume I is concerned here.
Now when I came to the city, to my house, my friends came to comfort me. He sat beside me, and wept for what had befallen me”.

We see here two different approaches of the meeting of Heber, in Maḥberet eleven Heber is recognized because of his gift of the word and his poetry, in the fifteenth he is just coming to visit his friend who was the victim of a disaster.

Yaʿaqob ben Elʿazar’s maqāmāt are in principle according to the tradition of al-Ḥarīzī, but at times his maqāmāt are deviating from al-Ḥarīzī’s model. The first section of the Sefer ha-meshalim (“Book of Stories”) by Yaʿaqob ben Elʿazar which contain the first four chapters, consists of allegories, debates and competitions. Chapter I contains an allegory whose personae are the narrator, the soul and the heart. Chapter II is a discussion about the merits of poetry and prose, chapter III tells the rhetoric deeds of an extempore poet, and chapter IV is a dispute between the sword and the pen. The second section (the remaining six chapters) contains tales of love and adventure, such as the story of the lad Yashefeh [which means ‘jasper, precious stone’] and his two beloved women. Yaʿaqob ben Elʿazar retains the narrator who appears in the maqāmāt of other authors. Like al-Ḥarīzī, he starts his stories with a formula indicating the narrator (Neʿum Lemuʾel ben Itiʾel; “Tale of Lemuʾel ben Itiʾel”). In the love stories in the second section, there is also much of the Arabic type of the genre. Portrayed, for instance, are a slave market, palaces of magic beauty surrounded by splendid gardens, an infatuated lover who behaves like a fool, etc. There are elements that remind us of the Italian epics by Ariosto and Tasso, which also have female heroes and beautiful gardens. But one should not forget that Arabic folkloristic chivalry stories have female heroes, and in the love stories of the Arabian Nights there are many passive male lovers who are the love objects of female lovers who take the initiative. Likewise, Yashefeh was the love object of his two female lovers Yeffiyah [which means ‘very beautiful’] and Yemimah [which means ‘dove’], who fought over him in a duel. Schirmann underlined the extreme youth of the lovers (they were virtually children) and compares them with those in the French story Aucassin et Nicolette. The types of beloved and lover have nothing to do with the cruel lady who enjoys tormenting her lovers, which we find elsewhere in Arabic and European literature. On the contrary, in the Mesḥalim there are several cases of requited love, where the lady is as important and as active as a man, even dueling in order to gain possession of her beloved. The insolent women sometimes win the indolence and passiveness of the men, women having the principal role, as in several stories in the Arabian Nights.

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3 Yonah Dawid, Sippuré Ahabah.
5 Itiʾel, not Ittiʾel cf. Prov. 30: 1.
8 Schirmann 1956, II, p. 207.
The Maḥbarot by Yaʿaqov ben Elʿazar generally have in the beginning a travel episode, similar to the beginning of the maqāmāt by al-Hariri, al-Hamadhānī, and Yehudah al-Harizi.

We will reproduce here the beginning passages of the seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth maḥberet.

The introduction of the seventh, which we just spoke of with Yashefeh as a protagonist, goes as follows: “It happened that when the kings were bereaved from their throne and the generals got rid of the command of their troops, that a noble knight was there whom Destiny had afflicted and whose name was Nemuʾel son of Barakhʾel. His town had the name of Ḥaṣar Susah [court of the mare], and the sons of the nobles were there object of derision, and he saw that Time worked out treacheries against the generous and set up against them the scoundrels. He felt an enormous sadness about that, but he was wise and intelligent. And he recited and sung a poem and complained against his Time, elevating his voice and saying:

‘O my destiny, why do you put noble people at the same level as wicked people?’,” etc.

And some lines further he recited the following poem to make up his mind:

“When a country oppresses you,
When your soul is curtailed in it
Escape then from it to another country
And fly away from this narrow place
Don’t say: ‘Where do I have to go?
Because, when I go, I will find hindrances on my way’.
Trust in the compassion of your Creator,
Perhaps the hands of your Maker fall short?”

In this Maḥberet we are confronted with some unusual characteristics. Although the contents are Arabic and oriental, this type misses the usual contrast between narrator and protagonist. Although the narrator is the same person as in the other maḥbarot, here he is not the traveler who begins an adventure: there are other persons who dominate the story. However, Yashefeh’s poem about “when the country oppresses you” is a poem that normally would fit within the collection of poems with life lessons, to which we are accustomed with the narrators and sometimes even protagonists of the maḥbarot.

The beginning passage of the Eighth Maḥberet goes as follows: “I wandered from the days of my youth through the outsides, going around in doing business, from people to people, and from [the people of] one kingdom to another people, staying at night in the desert as well as the forests, and in the palaces of the courts, as is the custom of the people that go on the way or go on the paths, being outside, as well as being in the streets, while at night I was sleeping on beds of ivory, while they were lying on [normal] beds, or hanging over their cribs, and at night there were reeds under their heads bound, and we passed the night naked without clothing, and in day time we marched tired and harmed of feet, without bread and water. And in this manner we met many
travelers of the ways, pleasant men and as well as chaotic ones losing their way, scoundrels as well as kings…”

This Eighth Ḫaḥberet was called by Schirmann “The Story of a Hypocritical Old Man”. Jonathan Decter characterizes the story as follows: “The story employs familiar motifs such as the hypocritical preacher of the maqāma and a scene of debauchery similar to scenarios in The Thousand and One Nights. Scholars have generally read the episode as an artifact of a lingering Judeo-Arabic symbiosis without situating the Arabic elements within the narrative as a whole”.9 The analysis by Decter wants to offer a new reading of this episode, drawing together a number of analytic methods treated in his book, including the significance of authorial voice. This is based upon Decter’s supposition that Lemu’el at the end of the story is not any more the participating narrator, who describes everything what he sees, but an omniscient narrator, who knows the story even if he did not participate in the events themselves. Also important for Decter is the relationship between the story and social realia of thirteenth-century Jewish culture. At the end of the discussion Decter suggests that Ben El’azar repudiated certain Andalusian social values and preferred a courtly model more closely associated with Christians than Muslims. The social message would be a protest against wine drinking of certain circles and having Arabic concubines: “It is well documented that some aristocratic Jews kept concubines, particularly Muslim concubines, in Christian Iberia; the practice was hotly debated among jurists such as Nahmanides and Ibn Adret in the thirteenth century”.

In the eighth Maḥberet, Lemu’el, after the arrival at an unnamed city “whose inhabitants were wealthy and whose merchants were princes [sarīm]”, decides to stay, but the next day he awakes to find that the people are really “treacherous people, children of wrongdoing… their judges, judges of deceit, wolves of the steppe who leave no bone until morning”. Then Lemu’el suddenly hears the voice of an old man leaning on his staff, whom he takes to be a righteous and virtuous man. The man, named ʿAkhbor from Mount Ṭabar, has an outstanding physical characteristic: his enormous, but chaotic beard, which Lemu’el first perceives as a “beard of truth”. The people gather around ʿAkhbor, who is going to deliver an eloquent sermon in poetry and prose. He urges the people to lead a simple life, perform pious deeds, and give to charity. Under the impression of the sermon, the people contribute generously and give much money. Observing him from his hiding place, Lemu’el Ben Itiʾel follows ʿAkhbor to a palatial home. Lemu’el describes the opulent setting of the preacher’s home.

Decter comes with an interesting interpretation of this maḥberet, which we hinted at above, but he mentions at least Schirmann’s earlier interpretation: “Schirmann adduced the motif of the hypocritical preacher, the wine poems, the garden setting, and the link with The Thousand and One Nights as evidence for the influence of Arabic literature”. According to Decter, the closest

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9 Decter, pp. 164 ff.
parallel from Arabic literature is the first maqāma of al-Ḥarīrī’s collection, in which the protagonist swindles a mosque congregation with an eloquent sermon. In fact, Ḥarīrī’s first maqāma [the ṣanʿāʾiyya], as well as the twenty-eighth maqāma [the samarqandiyya] look very well the model of inspiration of Yaʿqov ben Elʿazar. In these cases the narrator follows the protagonist back to a cave and finds him luxuriating and drinking wine. The narrator mildly rebukes the protagonist, but the protagonist defends himself by blaming necessity and the cruelty of Fate for his behavior. The narrator does not counter the protagonist’s defense.

The Eighth Mahberet ends with Lemuʾel’s watching ‘Akhbor making love with his black maidservant, and Lemuʾel says to announce his action: “This is [a punishment] for all that prostitution!” and he then runs out from his hiding place, assaults the couple, and strips them bare. ‘Akhbor recites verses in his defense. Then takes place the beating to death of the protagonist ‘Akhbor by his four white maidservants. These four women several days after their killing of ‘Akhbor, go into the gardens, speaking about love and hoping to have four young men. “The suitors flirt with the maidens and seek their hands in marriage but are refused for lack of chivalrous grace”

“The suitors] quickly understood and each man took hold of his woman, They renewed their youth and [the women] leaned upon their lovers”. This is not only propaganda for chivalrous grace but also for monogamy, which need not necessarily to be due to the influence of Christian ideas but could also be influenced by those of Ibn Ḥazm or other Arabs.

The beginning passage of the ninth Mahberet 10 devoted to the love couple Sahar and Kimah [Moon and Pleiades] goes as follows:

“Lemuʾel ben Itiʾel said: ‘When autumn passed away and the days of its span had come to an end, the rain finished and went away for him, because it turned the neck of cold and winter, because summer caused severe sufferings on their skulls, and destroyed their foundations and threw down their bases and [people] thought about the beard as a piece of clothing and a cushion on his skin and the flesh of the child became warm, and the trees gave their fruits, and the ships were floating on the sea, there was a man from the sons of the notables, a man of the family of kings and his name was Ṣalmon from Gat Rimmon and he had a son whose name was Sahar and his face was covered with light and splendor and he fled away from him because [his father] had grieved and insulted him and he went to the sea of Yaffa. He found at the entrances of the sea, men who were fleeing from the multitude of women, he hired a ship for merchants who pass over the sea. However, the ship was nearly broken, because the sea tossed and trembled, because the floods lifted up their waves, and they cried to the stiller of the noise of the seas to still the noise of their waves, and they threw the vessels on the ship into the sea in order to make their weight lighter, and the people was crying and bitterly weeping and sighing’”.

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10 Cf. Deeter, pp. 149 ff.
In the next passage the panic after the shipwreck is amply described. After the storm and the shipwreck, our hero finally comes to Ṣovah. He enters the city, where the girls and women are under the impression by his beauty. He enters by chance a palace, mistaking it for a synagogue, and is immediately detained by a pair of Ethiopian guards. When he recites an improvised poem in protest, the crowd is so impressed by his poetic skill that he is released. Kimah, the daughter of the king, hears his poem and falls in love with him. She then throws to him an apple inscribed with a poem of her own and gives him a hand kiss. Then Sahar is thrown out into the street, full of passion for Kimah. She sends a servant with a letter emphasizing her love for him. The servant leads him back to the palace where Sahar recites more poems of his love for Kimah. After making him pass through a series of moral tests and examinations of his poetic skill, Kimah reveals herself to him, asking him not to speak openly of their love. In the end there is a feast organized in the palace garden. But the father, the king, discovers the couple and wants to remove Sahar. In the end, however, the king allows them to marry, moved by laments of the young lovers. Shortly after the marriage, he dies of plague, so his crown is passed to Sahar and Kimah, who live happily ever after. In the questions posed by Kimah to Sahar, dominate values such as chastity and self-control for instance: not directly touching physically the beloved, and other courtly topics. Only sons of slaves yield immediately to their passions.

The tenth Maḥberet goes as follows in the beginning: ‘Lemuʾel ben Itiʾel said: “When the flowers became visible and the grenades were in bloom, and all the trees of the field were sprouting and the vineyards in buttons spread their fragrance, and the myrtles sent their aroma, and the flower plants filled the surface of the gardens as waters covering the sea and the time arrived of the wanderers of the paths and the travellers of the roads, and also the time that the kings went out: it was then in those days that I was a stranger in town, whose name was ʿAdʿada. I went out from it to the land of protection because I had seen amidst my town how sin and wickedness increased and anger rose up against the rod of wickedness and its nobles between the feet of their sins were a destiny and a frequently trodden place. And they trampled them and they were suffering and the earth was filled with indignation and the sinful was intriguing against the righteous while yesterday my people was standing up against an enemy.

I said to myself that I had seen the righteous and perfect leaving and going, o my soul, am I not looking for rest for you, which will be good for you? I will go from town to town wandering and from desert to desert, silent and void, being tired and feeling pain and moaning, walking and travelling from camp to camp, travelling until the extremities of the earth amidst men who are transgressing every law and despising every teaching”.

This looks like a normal maqāma or mahberet: the narrator normally is in his juvenile age and wants to go through the world because he wants to learn wisdom. So the poet/hero/narrator, Lemuʾel ben Itiʾel, leaves his country, a country full of sin, violence and bad habits to find a place of refuge far from the troubles of society. We have seen this motif in other maqāmāt too. On his
way to his new town he meets a troop of wolves, and adopts one whelp of them to raise and educate at home. He arrives at the gate of the town with the whelp in his arms and meets an orphan whom he takes to his home likewise. The orphan now gets the supervision of his house and its treasures, and the wolf takes care of the house against outside enemies. Amidst of this idyllic life the poet goes out to the field to look at the cattle accompanied by his two adopted companions.

Because the wolf’s whelp for the first time in his life meets tender lambs, he jumps upon them and devours them, when having to justify his behaviour before the owner, he says: “I could not do anything else except following my nature, because I am not worse than my forefathers, and went away”. The orphan who is in the company of wrong people, leaves also the house of his benefactor and returns to his roots namely the wrong and lazy people. The poet/hero is now very sadly impressed and despaired by the manners of the world and the behaviour of its creatures, and many philosophical rhymes follow. The narrator says with resignation: ‘I raised and exalted sons but they transgressed against me. From that day forward, I knew that the branch followed its root and sprig and that the son followed his people and seed.’

Decter mentions a similar anecdote from al-Jāḥiz’s al-Ḥayawān VII: 187: ‘A Bedouin acquired a young wolf and raised it, hoping that he would protect it and domesticate it and that it would become better to him than a dog. When it grew strong, it pounced upon one of his sheep and ate it. The Bedouin said: ‘You have eaten my sheep though I raised you among us. How could you have known that your father was a wolf!’

Decter comments: ‘The theme also surfaces with an interesting variation in Syriac and Spanish sources, a wolf listens to a sermon but loses interest when a flock of sheep passes.’ Decter did not find a parallel story with a human child, but in the Gulistan or Garden of Roses by the Persian author Sheikh Muṣliḥu-l-Dīn Saʿdī (1209-1291) we find a robber’s story with a young robber who cannot adapt to honesty. Saʿdī wrote the book in the year 1258, that is later than that of Yaʿaqov ben Elʿazar who died probably in 1233, but probably the story had an antecedent which was already known in the Arabic Middle and Near East. The author of the Persian book mentions a robbers’ story which goes as follows: The warriors of the king want to eradicate the robbers from his kingdom. They went on expedition to execute this. The warriors tied the hands of every one of the robbers whom they had caught in an ambush, to his shoulders, and brought them in the morning to the court of the king, who ordered all of them to be slain. There happened to be a youth among them, the verdure on the rose-garden of whose cheek had begun to sprout. One of the viziers, having kissed the foot of the king’s throne and placed the face of intercession upon the ground, said: ‘This boy has not yet eaten any fruit from the garden of life and has not yet enjoyed the pleasures of youth. I hope

11 Decter 141 ff., see note 107.
12 Thanks to a suggestion done to me by Jaakko Hämeen Anttila (Helsinki), I searched in the Gulistan or Rose Garden by Sa’di, which I found translated by Edward Rehatsek, Capricorn, New York, 1964.
your majesty will generously and kindly confer an obligation upon your slave by sparing his life.’ The king, being displeased with this request, answered with some poems and the following prose:

‘It is preferable to extirpate the race and offspring of these people and better to dig up their roots and foundations, because it is not the part of wise men to extinguish fire and to leave burning coals or to kill a viper and leave its young ones’.

The vizier, heard these sentiments, approved of them nolens volens, praised the opinion of the king and said: ‘What my lord has uttered is the very truth itself because if the boy had been brought up in the company of those wicked men, he would have become one of themselves. But your slave hopes that he will, in the society of pious men, profit by education and will acquire the disposition of wise persons. Being yet a child, the rebellious and perverse temper of that band has not yet taken hold of his nature and there is a tradition of the prophet that every infant is born with an inclination for Islam but his parents make him a Jew, a Christian or a Majūsī.’

In short, the vizier brought up the boy delicately, with every comfort, and kept masters to educate him, till they had taught him to address persons in elegant language as well as to reply and he had acquired every accomplishment. One day the vizier hinted at his talents in the presence of the king, asserting that the instructions of wise men had taken effect upon the boy and had expelled his previous ignorance from his nature. The king smiled at these words and said:

‘At last a wolf’s whelp will be a wolf
Although he may grow up with a man.’

After two years had elapsed a band of robbers in the locality joined him, tied the knot of friendship and, when the opportunity presented itself, he killed the vizier with his son, took away untold wealth and succeeded to the position of his own father in the robber-cave where he established himself. The king, informed of the event, took the finger of amazement between his teeth and said:

‘How can a man fabricate a good sword of bad iron?
O sage, who is nobody becomes not somebody by education.
The rain, in the beneficence of whose nature there is no flaw,
Will cause tulips to grow in a garden and weeds in bad soil.
Saline earth will not produce hyacinths.
Throw not away thy seeds or work thereon.
To do good to wicked persons is like Doing evil to good men.’

As a conclusion of our findings about this maḥberet we emphasize that the tenth maḥberet of the Book of Tales by Yaʿaqov ben Elʿazar has an introductory passage which reminds us the earlier maqāmāt or maḥbarot of other au-
thors, but there is no protagonist like Ḥeber in al-Ḥarīzī’s *maḥbarot* of the *Taḥkemoni*. Also in the other *maḥbarot* by Yaqov ben Elʿazar which we dealt with, we saw the same narrator, Lemuʾ el ben Itiʾel, but every time with other protagonists. As sources of the contents of Yaqov ben Elʿazar’s *maḥbarot* many are of Arabic origin as is also the basic conception of *maqāma* and *maḥberet*: it would be difficult to find specific Christian sources.

**Bibliography**


