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Jewish Preaching and the Language of Science: The Sermons of Azariah Figo

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Abstract

The age in which the preachers of the Italian ghettos delivered their sermons was also the great age of scientific discovery in Europe. Far removed both geographically and culturally from the cramped but ornate synagogues of Venice, Ferrara, or Mantua, Galileo peered through his famous telescope, Vesalius performed his revolutionary anatomical experiments, and Bacon and Descartes reflected deeply on the new methods of fathoming the natural world from their own distinctive perspectives. Beyond the walls ostensibly separating Jews from the social and cultural life of their Christian contemporaries, a revolution was taking place in astronomy, in physics, and in the life sciences. This revolution was accompanied by a thorough diffusion of scientific knowledge accelerated through printed books; by a dramatic re-evaluation of what constitutes knowledge and the authority it commands in European culture, and by a radical transformation in the ways human beings view the cosmos and their place within it.

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History | History of Religion | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Intellectual History | Jewish Studies | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

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David B. Ruderman

The age in which the preachers of the Italian ghettos delivered their sermons was also the great age of scientific discovery in Europe. Far removed both geographically and culturally from the cramped but ornate synagogues of Venice, Ferrara, or Mantua, Galileo peered through his famous telescope, Vesalius performed his revolutionary anatomical experiments, and Bacon and Descartes reflected deeply on the new methods of fathoming the natural world from their own distinctive perspectives. Beyond the walls ostensibly separating Jews from the social and cultural life of their Christian contemporaries, a revolution was taking place in astronomy, in physics, and in the life sciences. This revolution was accompanied by a thorough diffusion of scientific knowledge accelerated through printed books; by a dramatic re-evaluation of what constitutes knowledge and the authority it commands in European culture, and by a radical transformation in the ways human beings view the cosmos and their place within it.

Did the ghetto barriers successfully filter out that cultural ambiance of the Christian majority? Did they engender a Jewish disengagement, a retrenchment, and a growing estrangement from European cultural developments in general and from scientific developments in particular? I would argue that the Jewish inhabitants of the ghettos were not only aware of scientific advances in their era, their internal cultural world was deeply stimulated by it. Italian Jews read the same books as other educated people; they produced their own medical and scientific literature in Hebrew and other languages; they had personal contact with a highly educated and secularized converso emigré population recently settled in or near their already crowded neighborhoods; and most importantly,



Title page from Azariah Figo's *Bimah le-Itim* (Venice, 1653). Courtesy of the Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

they sent their most gifted sons to study at the famous medical schools of Padua and other Italian cities, and enthusiastically welcomed them on their return. Indeed, the interaction of medicine and science with Jewish culture was an important ingredient in defining the new cultural landscape of Jews living in Italy as well as in other areas of early modern Europe.³

No doubt the most intense interaction between Judaism and the new sciences was felt primarily by Jewish intellectuals, particularly rabbis and physicians. This situation fundamentally mirrored that of the Christian community, where science was nurtured essentially by political and Church leaders. To what extent, however, were scientific matters the concern of the many within the Jewish community rather than the few? The challenge of the cultural historian to measure a wider impact of ideas beyond the elite circles described by the extant sources is surely daunting. Our search through expository texts, scientific handbooks, biblical commentaries, and philosophical and kabbalistic writings suggests beyond a doubt a restricted reading public both sufficiently motivated and capable of reading and digesting such esoteric and complex materials. How many Hebrew readers could comprehend the long excursions on mathematics and astronomy in Joseph Delmedigo's *Elim*, or even the more simplified explanations of the heavens and the earth in David Gans's *Nehmad ve-Naim*? Even Tobias Cohen's or Jacob Zahalon's handbooks of contemporary medical practice, despite the intentions of the authors, could hardly be called "popular" compendia accessible to the "masses" in the same way that Dr. Spock's volumes on baby care are found in many households today. There is no evidence to suggest that such Hebrew textbooks were to be found readily in the libraries of many Jewish households.³

The voluminous literature of Jewish sermons preached in this era in every community might offer us the possibility of identifying a wider audience interested in scientific accomplishment. As Marc Saperstein has argued, "For scholars concerned with the development of Jewish thought, sermons containing philosophical or kabbalistic teachings removed from their technical sources and addressed to ordinary congregations provide a crucial means for measuring the impact of ideas not merely on a small circle of original minds but also on a whole community."³ The central place assigned questions of scientific import in the sermons of Christian preachers, especially in England, is well known and has allowed historians to draw distinct connections between the practitioners of science and both religious radicals and religious establishments.⁴ No such undertaking has ever been attempted with respect to Jewish sermons, a source still relatively untapped in general, as Saperstein's discussion makes abundantly clear.

No doubt, sermons still tell us less than we would like to know. The printed sermon is never identical with its initial oral form. We have little sense of who heard the sermon, how the congregation responded to it, and whether the preacher actually succeeded in communicating his message.⁵ Many printed sermons appear so convoluted and dense that one wonders how they could have been delivered in the first place, let alone understood by a laity, even a highly educated one.⁶ And in the case of scientific subjects, what preacher would be moved even to introduce such topics when he was exclusively preoccupied with religious and spiritual matters?

I propose to examine the sermons of one Italian Jewish preacher hardly known for his scientific interests or accomplishments. At first glance, he appears to be the most unlikely candidate to teach "science" in the course of his religious homilies. But precisely because he appears to be so unlikely, his sermons are intriguing. And if I can make a case for the penetration of scientific attitudes into the domain of his seemingly traditional and even "antirational" teachings, the likelihood of finding other candidates with similarly shared attitudes seems promising.

My candidate is Azariah Figo, or Picho, the rabbi of Pisa and later Venice who lived from 1579 to 1647, during the height of the era of the Italian ghetto. Figo is primarily known through his two major printed works: his commentary *Giddulei Terumah* (Venice, 1643), an extensive commentary on the *Sefer ha-Terumot* of Samuel Sardi (1185/90–1255/56), the first comprehensive code of Jewish law devoted exclusively to civil and commercial law; and his collection of sermons entitled *Binah le-Ittim*, printed in Venice in 1648, a year after his death, and subsequently republished some fifty times.⁷

In recent years, Figo's claim to fame as a preacher (at least, the academic kind) is due, to a large extent, to the sympathetic portrait Israel Bettan painted of him in his classic work on Jewish preachers.⁸ Bettan's choice of Figo among the hundreds of other preachers he might have chosen placed him immediately in the illustrious company of such luminaries as Isaac Arama, Jonathan Eybeshitz, and Figo's contemporary, Judah Moscato. But even without Bettan's stamp of approval, Figo undoubtedly commanded the attention of many readers of sermons, especially the Jews of Eastern Europe, where his volume was published on numerous occasions. Figo's sermons still evoke interest among traditional Jews, as evidenced by the attractive new edition published in Jerusalem as recently as 1989.⁹

Figo's image as a traditionalist preacher, antirationalist, and renouncer of "gentile wisdom" is certainly reinforced by Bettan's assessment of him as a man who "violently wrenched himself away from the intellectual pursuits of an earlier day and calmly retreated within the four ells of the

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law."¹⁰ Bettan's portrait is virtually the same as the earlier descriptions by Abba Apfelbaum and Israel Zinberg.¹¹ The latter even labeled Figo a typical preacher of the old Franco-German type who wished to know nothing of secular matters. Harry Rabinowicz offered a similar conclusion regarding the fundamentalist image of Figo: "[He] leaned toward a strict interpretation of Jewish law. He opposed the establishment of a theater in the ghetto of Venice and criticized the members of his community for usury, flaunting their wealth, internecine wrangling, laxity in ritual observances, and sexual irregularities."¹² And finally, Isaac Barzilai devotes an entire chapter to Figo in his book on antirationalism in Jewish thought, underscoring Figo's critique of rationalism as a danger to Jewish uniqueness and his consciousness of exile and longing for national redemption.¹³

One important piece of information that appears to challenge this standard assessment of Figo's intellectual leanings is his close relationship with Leon Modena, the celebrated rabbi of Venice, the formidable critic of Kabbalah, the close colleague of the scientifically minded Simone Luzzatto and Joseph Delmedigo, and the rational expositor of Judaism among Christian intellectuals.¹⁴ Figo composed a sonnet to adorn Modena's Hebrew collection of sermons published in 1602 and Modena actually listed him among his students.¹⁵ Modena again enlisted him in 1624 to flatter his disciple Joseph Hamiz through poetry in celebration of Hamiz's graduation from the medical school of the University of Padua.¹⁶ Figo's participation in this event not only suggests his ongoing relationship with the older Modena but also points to his own identification with Modena's strongly felt commitment to the study of medicine and the sciences among Italian Jews. The fact that Figo never refers to the kabbalah in any of his sermons (unlike those of his contemporary Judah Moscato)¹⁷ also might suggest his tacit agreement with Modena's emphatic criticism of the place of mysticism in Jewish culture.¹⁸ Figo's aversion to the kabbalah also stands in sharp contrast to Joseph Hamiz's later passionate embrace of it, Modena's disapproval notwithstanding.

The scholarly characterizations of Figo's spiritual proclivities mentioned above are based on a reading of his sermons and especially on his introduction to *Giddulei Terumah*, where he wrote:

I went . . . after the vanity of a love of "the children of strangers," secular studies of various kinds. But immediately upon reaching the beginning of the harvests of the time of my adolescence [*ha-baharut*], the Redeemer had compassion on me . . . for the eyes of my ignorance were opened. . . so I beheld and recognized the shame of my youth whereby I had made the principal thing unimportant and the unimportant the principal thing. I was exceedingly ashamed that my hands were weakened from the essential words of the Torah, the study of the Gemarah and all related to it.¹⁹

By Figo's own account then, he had once involved himself in secular pursuits but soon realized their vanity and turned to the exclusive study of rabbinic sources. All of the historians mentioned above plainly accepted Figo's declaration at face value. They apparently never considered that such an acknowledgment may have constituted no more than a literary device in the sixteenth century and that such a standardized opening made good "political" sense in winning the favor of readers of an original commentary on a relatively unstudied legal text.²⁰ That traces of his earlier pursuits of the "children of strangers" were to be found in his later sermons was reluctantly acknowledged by both Bettan and Barzilay, particularly Figo's preoccupation with the problem of the essence and method of philosophy vis-à-vis Judaism, and his frequent use of medical analogies. Bettan even admitted that Figo's "grand renunciation" of his secular interests was made either too late or was not quite complete enough to affect the essential character of his preaching.²¹ Commenting on Bettan's description, Yosef Yerushalmi considered this inner contradiction an "oscillation between attraction and resistance to gentile wisdom" typical of other thinkers of his day.²²

Yet acknowledging the paradoxical co-existence of attraction and resistance to secular pursuits in the thought of a Jewish preacher is not the same thing as explaining it. To what degree Figo renounced his intellectual past and retreated into Talmudic studies remains an open question and invites a fresh reading of his sermons. Moreover, it behooves us to ask the questions of what actually constituted for him legitimate intellectual pursuits and what did not, what so offended him about certain rational involvements while he apparently approved of others, and how it is possible to understand Figo as a thoroughly stable and consistent religious thinker (as opposed to an oscillating one) with a clear pedagogic agenda for the Jewish constituency he served. In answering these queries about Figo's thinking, we are also offered the rare opportunity to characterize more broadly through his sermons the mental universe he shared with members of the Sephardic congregation of Venice who listened and may even have been moved to concur with the message of his skillfully presented homilies.

Let us begin our examination of Figo's sermons with one delivered in Venice on a Rosh ha-Shanah that happened to fall on the Sabbath. After quoting a midrashic passage about God's raising his voice on the New Year, he opens with the following remark:

The human being was given intelligence by [God] . . . who bestowed him with great strength . . . until He filled his heart on numerous occasions with the capacity to make artificial inventions analogous to the actions of nature. Because of the weakness of matter or the deficiency in its prepara-

tion . . . man tries to correct and replace it by some discovery or invention drawn from his intelligence to the point where he will not appreciate what is lacking in nature. We have indeed noticed weak-eyed persons who, out of a deficiency of the matter of their eyes, were unable to see at a distance or [even] close up and were thus very nearsighted. Yet human intelligence was capable of creating eyeglasses placed on the bridge of the nose which aid in magnifying the strength of vision for each person, depending on what he lacks, either a little or a lot. This was similarly the case for the eyeglass with the hollow reed [i.e. the telescope] of Rabban Gamaliel [where it is stated] in chapter 4 of Eruvin: "Whereby as soon as I looked, it was as if we were in the midst of the [Sabbath] boundary."²³

One wonders what a congregation of worshipers might have thought of so bizarre an opening for a sermon on the first day of the high holy days. But Figo apparently must have known and appreciated the mental universe of his audience, so he chose to begin with something familiar to them. He would introduce his lesson on Jewish religious values by espousing an ideal both he and his congregants apparently shared: that of the human mandate to replicate, to intervene, and to improve upon nature. The products of nature often appear deficient or unfinished; they invite human craftsmen and inventors to correct and improve God's handiwork. The examples of eyeglasses and the telescope (which Figo explicitly claims as an originally Jewish invention that long preceded the invention of Galileo) unambiguously place the rabbi's remarks in their seventeenth-century context of scientific invention and discovery, especially in the fields of optics and astronomy. By beginning in such an unconventional manner, Figo undoubtedly assumed that he would gain the attention of his audience more readily than by plunging into a more typical rabbinic discourse.

Figo pauses to illustrate his point about correcting inadequate vision with two illustrative biblical phrases.²⁴ But then he proceeds to enlarge upon his original insight: "One can draw analogies to other deficiencies like lameness and broken legs. Not only such cases but even that which is lacking from one's intelligence can be repaired as in the case of enhancing one's memory. One can make an effort to remember things as is well known from the invention of spatial memory [i.e. memory systems]."²⁵ He illustrates this invention by reference to Joseph's request to the cupbearer to remember him to Pharaoh (Genesis 40:14). According to Figo, Joseph asked him "to engrave the impression in his imagination . . . so that he will conceive and relate the thought of Joseph to that of some well-known object that often occurs to him. By visualizing the object, he will remember Joseph." Of course, the cupbearer "did not employ [the technique] of spatial memory on his behalf. Accordingly he forgot to mention him to Pharaoh."²⁶

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Where Figo is leading his curious listeners with this unusual slant on the familiar biblical story is now made clear:

It follows that if by natural means related to material things, a person can try to correct his deficiencies by substitutions, by exchanging one thing for another, what might one do regarding spiritual things and with matters related to the perfection of one's soul dependent on the fulfillment of the divine commandments? With the latter example, a person is obliged, in any respect, to make signs and inventions in order not to forget them, as in the case of *zizit*, about which it is stated: "And you shall see them and remember."²⁷

If the fringes on the prayer shawl can be perceived as a technique of enhancing memory, the need to create an artificial sign to remember the sound of the shofar on a Sabbath day when it cannot be sounded might logically follow: "God gave our hearts something to replace the sounds of the shofar on this holy day of Shabbat and Rosh Ha-Shanah . . . but the commandment was not completely abolished since the memory evoked by the biblical verses that speak about the shofar . . . are sufficient to cause an impression of replacement exemplifying the commandment of the sounding itself."²⁸

Such a strategy of stimulating his listeners to conjure up the memory of the sound of the shofar on a day when they needed to hear it but could not, might be dismissed as nothing more than a clever rhetorical device if not for the fact that this preacher was taking for granted what we should not take for granted. What was familiar to and what appealed to his congregation was the notion of human beings gaining mastery over the natural world. The process of illustrating this notion by reference to the manufacture of eyeglasses and telescopes, to the creation of artificial limbs and memory systems, and finally to *zizit* and the biblical passages that recall the sound of the shofar might appear to us a long and convoluted manner of making his point, but to the mind of Figo, he was teaching his Jewish message by appealing directly to the immediate cultural context of his listeners. He was not teaching contemporary science to his coreligionists; he rather assumed that this knowledge was a commonplace in their experience with the world around them. As any wise preacher would do, Figo appropriated that experience to make his point about the religious message of the Jewish holy day. To us, his assumptions about what his congregants knew and liked offer some sense of the impact "scientific" modes of thinking were having on rabbi and congregation alike.

Both Bettan and Barzilay have already noticed Figo's frequent employment of medical analogies to convey his spiritual message. Barzilay concluded that such references do not warrant the inference of an inti-

Sermon reflects knowledge of science in comm. Figo is teaching sci. know. being knowledge for religious pursuit

mate acquaintance with either science or philosophy; it should rather be attributed to "the impact of the spirit of the time."²⁹ Of course, as I already have argued, Figo's sermons do reveal a particular spirit or mentality, a scientific one, characteristic of the age in which he lived. But Figo's preoccupation with the functioning of the body and human illness in the light of his connection with Modena, Hamiz, and Padua might even suggest more: an informal or even formal contact with medical education. Be that as it may, it is apparent that he proudly displayed his medical knowledge and was fond of utilizing it when preaching.

A good example of Figo's use of medical analogies in preaching is offered in a sermon delivered on Shabbat Teshuvah. Figo opens by referring to the line in Jeremiah (3:14, 3:22): "Turn back O rebellious children, I will heal your afflictions."³⁰ The connection between repentance and healing in the verse and in a rabbinic elaboration on the verse offers Figo the appropriate opportunity to discant on the treatment of a sick patient. Following conventional Galenic therapy, Figo suggests two approaches to healing a person overtaken by the "the evil humour which sickens the body and brings a person to the danger of death": either by natural means "whereby he will fortify himself to fight with his illness and defeat it"; or by artificial means, that is, "evacuations and bloodletting and the like." Echoing his point in the sermon described above, he adds: "Thus a person will try by human industry to help nature and to gain what it lacks."³¹

The connection between healing the body and healing the soul is now made explicit: "This evacuation is none other than the essence of repentance that discharges and removes all sin and guilt and crime and restores a person to be healed." Just as there are two avenues of healing the body, there are likewise two avenues of repentance: "repentance from love whereby the strength of one's intelligence will grow by itself . . . or repentance out of fear which is truly an external healing."³²

Although artificial healing is licit, it is inferior to natural healing in at least three ways. In the first place, artificial remedies are uncertain, since the physician can only estimate the proper dosage to be offered the patient. It often occurs that he misdiagnoses his patient, evacuating insufficiently or excessively and subsequently causing more harm than good. Secondly, artificial remedies such as bloodletting weaken the body and diminish the patient's strength, for good humours are eliminated along with the evil one. Finally, artificial remedies are usually administered under coercion, often causing pain or other discomfort. In contrast, natural evacuation transpires pleasantly without undo agitation. All three advantages of natural healing correlate with the realm of the spirit. A repentance out of love is always superior to one gained through the fear of chastisements. Like the doctor who misdiagnoses his patient and

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causes him harm, a person might repent solely out of fear of his punishment while ignoring the sin which is the principal cause of his moral deficiency. Just as evacuation might cause the elimination of good humours along with the bad, so too the removal of a bad quality by external means might also encourage a person to distance himself from a good one. Finally, repentance out of love is never accompanied by the stress and inner turmoil accompanying repentance out of fear.³³

ant. incomplete Figó adds a fourth advantage of natural over artificial healing to complete his analogy, an advantage more significant than all the others. Healing dependent upon external drugs is usually not totally effective; the bad humour is not completely removed and the illness eventually returns. This is not the case for natural healing where the body is cured conclusively. The distinction between voluntary repentance and that effected under duress can also be correlated in this respect.³⁴

In other sermons, Figó similarly favors such comparisons between moral and medical therapy. In one place, he differentiates between an immoral person who can still repent with one whose condition is hopeless by drawing the analogy of the patient who still feels pain, even excruciating pain, and the one whose limb is dead, feels nothing, and whose condition is hopeless.³⁵ In another place, he enumerates four steps in maintaining a good regimen of health and demonstrates how the prevention of moral sin can virtually be described by the same prescriptions.³⁶ Once he compares the gradual increase of dosage to a sick patient to the gradual educational process of teaching Torah.³⁷ He even expresses his uncertainty about whether to make a funeral oration long or short by reference to an analogy of a doctor who finds contradictory symptoms in his patient, making his diagnosis extremely difficult.³⁸ [None of these analogies exhibits highly specialized knowledge of medicine or the biological sciences. They are simple and easy to comprehend, as they should be for the forum in which they were meant to be presented. They do reveal, however, an intimate sense of the actual practice of medicine, the authentic dilemmas the doctor daily faces, the uncertainty of his cures, the dangers and inadequacies of standard medical treatment. They suggest in their entirety the perspective of a person very close to the medical profession, one who fully appreciates the meaningful connection between the medical and rabbinic professions, indeed a physician who also happens to be a doctor, a most common coincidence within the Italian Jewish community Azariah Figó served.³⁹]

Isaac Barzilay has correctly pointed out Figó's constant emphasis on the dangers of rationalism and its corrosive character in undermining the Jewish community's faith in its unique revelation.⁴⁰ In a fully conventional way, Figó seeks to demonstrate the inadequacy of human reason in contrast to revealed truth on two counts: it is inaccessible to the major-

JEWISH PREACHING AND THE LANGUAGE OF SCIENCE

inadequacy of human reason must believe in

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ity of people and it lacks moral concern. In the first place, since only the few have the capacity to acquire natural knowledge, a belief in miracles and divine intervention in the natural order is necessary since miraculous occurrences impress the uninitiated more than does the mere uniformity and regularity of nature.⁴¹ And in the second place, the Gentile astronomer who searches the heavens does so merely to fulfill the needs of his intellectual appetite, not his moral or spiritual one.⁴² For the Jew who masters astronomy, his knowledge leads him to perform divine commandments and to serve his Creator. Such arguments suggest for Barzilai a fundamental antirationalism, what he perceives as part of a newly emerging mentality of a kind of "Jewish nationalism" in the late sixteenth century.⁴³

There is no doubt that Figo's utterances reflect an antagonism to philosophical speculation and a deep conviction in the superiority of the revealed wisdom of the Jewish sages (though not necessarily kabbalistic ones). But Barzilai's analysis remains deficient in ignoring the language and conceptual underpinnings of Figo's defense of Jewish revelation and in failing to appreciate the actual scientific context informing his criticisms of philosophy.

Figo's sermon on the second day of Shavuot offers a most convincing illustration of the preacher's underlying assumptions.⁴⁴ His theme is precisely the difference between the knowledge of the philosophers and the revelatory experience of Sinai. "It is well known," he writes, "that the sciences based on foundations of learning and built on rational assumptions are dangerous and unreliable since human intelligence is limited, small, and weak." It is liable to error and omission and lacks the assurance of complete truth. In contrast, "those things to which the senses and experience testify are truthful; no doubt will arise regarding them or fear of error or false knowledge. . . . Regarding the latter, the sage in Ecclesiastes [7:23] stated: 'All this I tested with wisdom: I thought I could fathom it but it eludes me.'" Figo interprets the line to mean that all that was acquired "through experience which I gained through the experiential faculty of knowledge" can be known truthfully. But "theoretical knowledge denuded of sensual knowledge is certainly far from me."⁴⁵ To a student of seventeenth-century culture, the distinction is a commonplace: that of the Scholastic philosopher versus that of the natural philosopher and the empiricist. One can only know the heavens and the earth by observation and experiment, not by theoretically constructing their apparent reality in the mind's imagination.

Science based on rationality = dangerous

Scholastic vs Naturalist (Pitt)

For Figo the epistemological basis of the new empiricism is equivalent to that of the Torah: "The Divine Wisdom [God] understood that the holy Torah would not be accepted by the Israelite nation on the basis of knowledge stemming from investigation and research . . . but rather with

things felt and familiar through seeing and hearing. . . . No man can acquire an idea except by way of the senses . . . the Torah gives strength and vitality to what the senses acquire."⁴⁶

Figo's argument regarding the superiority of the experiential knowledge of the Torah versus the theoretical and inevitably finite knowledge of the philosophers patently echoes Judah Halevi's medieval critique of Spanish Jewish philosophy and that of even earlier thinkers.⁴⁷ Equally unoriginal is his accompanying argument that while knowledge of the Torah is complete and stands on its own, that of the secular sciences requires mutual dependencies:

Someone cannot be an astronomer without prior knowledge of mechanics and mathematics, nor a doctor without prior knowledge of natural philosophy. Nor can a person acquire any knowledge unless he is accustomed to logic. . . . It happens that one [field] justifies and prepares for the other, for without the prior one, the latter would have no reality. But our Torah does not require any other wisdom nor any external knowledge for everything is in her; she guides and informs herself with her own conclusions, principles, and ideas.⁴⁸

I have quoted at length in order to propose that Figo was more than a mere borrower of Halevi's classical anti-philosophical arguments. His description of the interrelatedness of all sciences betrays an unmistakable familiarity with them. He leaves the distinct impression that he knows what it takes to be an astronomer or a physician and that he had studied the fields he enumerates. More importantly, while he argues for the insufficiency of the sciences, he clearly does not dismiss their validity altogether. What he finds reprehensible is a knowledge lacking all empirical foundations, based solely on intellectual constructs, and arrogantly claiming to perceive of reality and of the truth. It is no mere coincidence that the language of "hearing and seeing" of the Torah and the rabbis was also the hallmark of his own era, the rallying cry of a Galileo or a Bacon or of other virtuosi. I would contend that he was fully aware of its seventeenth-century associations when he evoked it, and, more importantly, the convergence of its traditional and modern meanings resonated unmistakably in the ears of his listeners. By couching his advocacy of Torah learning in the contemporary language of experience and empiricism, he was clinching his argument for the relevance of Judaism in a way Halevi could never have achieved. In Halevi's time, such language was surely perceived as anti-intellectual, fundamentalist, and conservative. To an audience fully attuned to seeing and hearing rather than cogitating, his defence of Judaism surely must have sounded modern and up-to-date.

A succinct description of Azariah Figo's intellectual style based on a

correct reading of his sermons would thus emphasize a clear and consistent understanding of the relationship between Judaism and the larger cultural space he inhabited. Figo did not oscillate whimsically between rationalism and irrationalism, between Talmud study and that of the secular sciences. His sermons, written after his apparent renunciation of the sciences in the introduction to his halakhic commentary, betray a man supremely cognizant and confident of his knowledge of medicine and the sciences. They are unmistakably part of his universe of discourse and that of his congregants, and he boldly appropriates their conceptual framework in teaching Judaism. Figo surely deplored the useless speculations of philosophers of the old Scholastic style and particularly their pretensions to understand the world better than those who place their trust in divine revelation. But such criticism was not synonymous with antirationalism. For him and for those he addressed, the value of empiricism, a firm reliance on the senses, along with the human mandate to create and improve upon nature were to be taken for granted.

And Figo's position, a kind of "mitigated or constructive scepticism,"⁴⁹ was becoming extremely fashionable among Jews and Christians alike by the middle of the seventeenth century. In the new discourse of pious science as articulated by such luminaries as Mersenne and Gassendi,⁵⁰ science was no more than a hypothetical system based solely on experience and verified only through experience. It never claimed possession of absolute truth, only a mere description of the appearance of things, and subsequently it never competed with the sacred indubitable verities of divine revelation. By separating physics from Scholastic metaphysics, and by establishing a legitimate "division of labor" between the natural sciences and Judaism, Figo had located a formidable argument through which to defend intellectually the legitimacy of Jewish revelation in his day. By incorporating it skillfully into the rhetorical style of his public sermons, he had apparently discovered an effective strategy to project the compelling image of "a wise and discerning people"⁵¹ in the minds and hearts of his discriminating congregation.

NOTES

1. On this subject, see David B. Ruderman, "The Impact of Science on Jewish Culture and Society in Venice (With Special Reference to Graduates of Padua's Medical School)," *Gli ebrei e Venezia secoli XIV-XVIII*, ed. G. Cozzi (Milan, 1987), pp. 417-448, reprinted in David B. Ruderman, ed., *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* (New York, 1992); idem, *Science, Medicine, and Jewish Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Spiegel Lecture in European Jewish History (Tel Aviv, 1987); idem, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); idem, "The Lan-

guage of Science as the Language of Faith: An Aspect of Italian Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Festschrift in Honor of Shlomo Simonsohn*, forthcoming. I am presently preparing a book-length study on the place of medicine and the sciences in early modern Jewish culture. For a recent overview of the cultural setting of science in the Christian community, with up-to-date bibliographical references, see Margaret C. Jacob, *The Cultural Meaning of the Scientific Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1988).

2. All of these Hebrew works are discussed in Ruderman, *Science, Medicine, and Jewish Culture*, and idem, "The Impact of Science."

3. Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching 1200-1800: An Anthology* (New Haven, London, 1989), p. 1, and see his essay in this volume.

4. See, for example, Richard S. Westfall, *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, 1958); Margaret C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1976); Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine, and Reform* (London, 1975).

5. These issues are discussed by Saperstein in the introduction to his anthology (note 3), as well as throughout the essays in this volume.

6. This is especially the case for Figo's contemporary, Judah Moscato. See Moshe Idel's judgment on his corpus in his essay in this volume.

7. A number of Figo's sermons were published in Samuel Aboab's *Devar Shemuel* (Venice, 1702).

8. Israel Bettan, *Studies in Jewish Preaching* (Cincinnati, 1939), pp. 227-272.

9. *Sefer Bimah le-Ittim* (Jerusalem, 1989), 2 vols. My citations below are from this volume. It is worth noting that among all the preachers in this volume, Figo was surely the most popular. While the more colorful and prolific Leon Modena published a single volume of sermons that was never reprinted after his death, Figo's own collection went through some fifty editions, as we have indicated. Such extraordinary popularity as a preacher, particularly among Eastern European Jews, surely requires a historical explanation. Part of the answer is obviously related to the elegant simplicity of Figo's style, the relevance of his ethical messages, and his effective affirmation of traditional Jewish concerns. Part of his effectiveness and popularity might also be due to the language of science he adduces in conveying his message. Surely, the message could have resonated among Eastern European congregations of the nineteenth century as well as among Italian ones in the seventeenth century.

10. Bettan, p. 228.

(11) Abba Apfelbaum, *Rabbi Azariah Ficcio [Fichio]* (Drohobycz, 1907); Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature* (Cincinnati, New York, 1974), vol. 4, pp. 175-177.

(12) Harry Rabinowicz, "Figo, Azariah," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 6, p. 1274. See also his *Portraits of Jewish Preachers* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 150-158.

13. Isaac Barzilay, *Between Reason and Faith: Anti-Rationalism in Italian Jewish Thought 1250-1650* (The Hague, Paris, 1967), pp. 192-209.

14. On Modena, see most recently, Mark Cohen, ed. and trans., *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah* (Princeton, 1988).

15. See Apfelbaum, pp. 87-91.
16. See Nehemiah S. Leibowitz, *Seridim Mikitvei ha-Philosof ha-Rofe ve-ha-Mekubbal R. Yosef Hamiz* (Jerusalem, 1937), pp. 50-51.
17. On the use of kabbalah among other contemporaries, see Elliott Horowitz's essay in this volume.
18. On Modena's attitude to the kabbalah, see Moshe Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in the Early 17th Century," *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 137-200. On the place of kabbalah in Moscato's sermons, see Idel's chapter in this volume.
19. Azariah Figo, *Sefer Giddulei Terumah* (Zolkiev, 1809), p. 3b.
20. Compare, for example, the introduction to Abraham Portaleone's *Shilte Gibburim* (Mantua, 1612), where he similarly acknowledges and renounces his youthful sins in studying the secular sciences. Yet any reader of his book will readily notice that this renunciation was hardly complete!
21. Bettan, p. 230.
22. Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto* (New York, 1971), pp. 373-374.
23. *Binah le-Ittim*, vol. 1, pp. 72-73. On the "telescope" of Rabban Gamaliel and Galileo, see Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science*, p. 98. Figo refers to Babylonian Talmud Eruvin, 43b.
24. *Binah le-Ittim*, p. 73.
25. *Ibid.* On memory systems in the sixteenth century, see Jonathan Spense, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricchi* (New York, 1987).
26. *Binah le-Ittim*, p. 73.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
29. Barzilay, p. 193.
30. *Binah le-Ittim*, p. 81.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-87.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
35. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 90-105.
36. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 105-124.
37. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 16-23.
38. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 388-397.
39. On this, see the references in note 1.
40. Barzilay, especially pp. 195-202.
41. See especially *Binah le-Ittim*, vol. 1, pp. 267-275.
42. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 110-127, especially 110-114.
43. Barzilay, p. 197.
44. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 85-94.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 88.
47. See, for example, Judah Halevi, *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*, bk. 2, pp. 56, 63-66; bk. 3, p. 53, bk. 4, pp. 24-25.

48. Ibid., p. 88.

49. The term is Richard Popkin's as discussed in his *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1979), chap. 7.

50. Besides Popkin's work cited above, see most recently Peter Dear, *Mersenne and the Learning of the Schools* (Ithaca, London, 1988), and Lynn Sumida Joy, *Gassendi the Atomist: Advocate of History in an Age of Science* (Cambridge, 1987). See Robert Bonfil's similar conclusions regarding Judah Del Bene in his essay in this volume.

51. See Deuteronomy 4:6.

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