



The Puzzle of Rabbinic Identification at the End of Chapter Five in the Ladino Translations of *Pirke Avot*

El enigma de la identificación del rabino en el final del capítulo cinco en las traducciones en ladino de *Pirke Avot*

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Abstract

Pirke Avot known as the “Ethics of the Fathers”, a Mishnaic compendium of rabbinic sayings, is comprised of six chapters, which Sephardic Jews read one chapter a week with the Ladino translation on the Sabbaths between Pesah (Passover) and Shavu‘ot (Pentecost). The end of chapter five and chapter six were appended to this Mishna after 200 CE. The final paragraphs of chapter five list either three or four sages by their names, while one is referred to by *hu haya ‘omer* (‘he used to say’), translated as *él era dizién*. Because the order of the paragraphs varies in different Ladino editions, the identity of the Rabbi is unclear. The translation of Vienna 1857 adds to the confusion because the Hebrew text represents one order and the translation another. The article presents the paragraphs and the orders in which they occur in the various Ladino editions and concludes with the possible identity of the unnamed rabbi.

Keywords: Pirke Avot; Ladino translations, Rabbis’ names, paragraph order, identity.

Resumen

Pirke Avot, también conocido como «Ética de los padres», un compendio mishnaico de enseñanzas rabínicas, comprende seis capítulos. Los judíos sefardíes leen un capítulo por semana con su traducción al ladino en los sábados entre Pésaj (la Pascua judía) y Shavu‘ot (Pentecostés). El final del capítulo cinco y capítulo seis fueron anexados a esta Mishná después del año 200 de nuestra era. Los últimos párrafos del capítulo cinco enumeran tres o cuatro sabios por sus nombres, mientras a uno de ellos le llaman *hu haya ‘omer* (‘él solía decir’), traducido como *él era dizién*. Dado que el orden de los párrafos varía en las distintas ediciones en ladino, la identidad del rabino no está clara. La traducción de Viena de 1857 añade confusión porque el texto en hebreo incluye un orden distinto del orden de la traducción. El artículo presenta los párrafos y el orden en el que aparecen en las diversas ediciones en ladino y concluye con la posible identidad del rabino anónimo.

Palabras clave: Pirke Avot; traducciones en ladino; nombres de rabinos; orden de párrafos; identificación.

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שָׁמַי אֹמֵר, עֲשֵׂה תוֹרָתְךָ קְבֵעַ. אֲמֹר מְעַט וְעֲשֵׂה הַרְבֵּה, וְהָיִי מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסָבֶר
פְּנִים זְפוֹת (אבות א: טו)

Samai dizién, haz tu ley asituada, dize poco y haz mucho, y sée recibien a todo hombre con recibimiento de fases hermosas (Amsterdam 1664)

שמאי דיזיין אז טו ליי אסיטיגואדה, די פוקו אי אז מונגיו אי סיאידי ריסיבייין אה טודו
אומברי קון ריסיביימינטו די פ'אסיס אירמוזאס (ירושלים 1901)

Shamai says: Make your study of Torah a regular practice, say little and do much, and receive all men with cheerful countenance (Avot 1:15)
(translation adopted from Davis 1979)

1. INTRODUCTION

Pirke Avot ('Ethics of the Fathers'), a compendium of rabbinic sayings, is one of the most popular tractates of the Mishna. Dating from the Mishnaic period, the tractate is comprised of numerous wise proverbs, assertions regarding morality, and acclaim for the study of Jewish law. Pirke Avot differs from all other parts of the Mishna in that it does not incorporate any rules or instructions regarding how to lead a good Jewish life. The text was edited and developed throughout the Middle Ages until it eventually became the version that is familiar to us today (Sharvit, 2004: 11-17, 60-124; 2006: 15-37; Shinan, 2009).

The tractate is comprised of six chapters which together form four main sections:

1. Chapters 1-2:14: Sayings of Mishnaic Rabbis are listed chronologically, from the time of the people of *Keneset Hagedola* ('The Big Congregation') (i.e., the period of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Late Prophets) until the time of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi (circa 200 AD).
2. Chapters 2:15-4: Various collected sayings of the Rabbis.
3. Chapter 5 consists of three parts:
 - a. 5:1-15: Sayings which relate to things that are numbered, e.g., the world was established by ten sayings; there are four features in the students, etc.
 - b. 5:16-19: Contrasts between good and bad types of behaviors.
 - c. The final paragraphs, 5:20-23 are different from all the others and will be the focus of this paper.
4. Chapter 6 is a late addition to the five Mishnaic chapters comprised of collected sayings of Rabbis (Albeck, 1959: 247-351).

1.1. Ladino traditions

It is traditional for Sephardic Jews to read one chapter of *Pirke Avot* on the Sabbath every week between *Pesaḥ* (Passover) and *Shavu'ot* (Pentecost) and translate each paragraph into their native mother tongue. There are seven weeks between *Pesaḥ* and *Shavu'ot*, so that reading each of the six chapters of *Pirke Avot* once a week fits exactly into this timeframe. Ashkenazi Jews generally study *Pirke Avot* between Passover and Rosh Hashanah.

Ever since the Middle Ages, *Pirke Avot* has been translated into both Spanish and Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish calque-type language. We have remnants of a few hand-written translations from 15th Century Spain all written using Latin letters: Gutwirth (1989) discovered a fragment of Chapter 4 in the Cairo Genizah (Ms. T-A AS 209.256). Lazar (1993: 63-81) included an edition of *Pirke Avot* from the University Library of Salamanca in his book *Séfer Tešubáh* (Ms. 2015. See also Márquez Villanueva, 2006). Sáinz de la Maza (2013) analyzed a complete version of *Pirke Avot* found at the National Library of Madrid (Ms. 5644). Based on grammatical and lexical analysis, it is apparent that they are clearly free translations of the original Hebrew text, translated into the Peninsular Spanish of the 15th Century, probably done by or for Conversos (New Christians, converted Jews).

Ladino translations of *Pirke Avot* continued to be published by the descendants of the Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. A linguistic classification of over forty Ladino translations of *Pirke Avot* dating from between 1552 and 1959, distinguish between western and eastern versions. The western ones were printed in Ferrara (1552), Amsterdam (1612-1867, ×8), Florence (1736, 1749), Livorno (1856-1947, ×8), London (1731), Pisa (1822), and Venice (1601-1706, ×7). The eastern ones were published in Belgrade (1815-1904, ×3), Izmir (1879), Jerusalem (1901), New York (1954, a copy of Vienna 1897), Salonika (1800-1929, ×13), Tel Aviv (1959, a copy of Vienna 1897), and Vienna (1857-1897, ×3) (Schwarzwald, 1989; Cohen, 2021: 61-66).

Although several of the Ladino translations from Italy and all of those originating from Amsterdam and London were published using Latin letters, most of the translations were printed in Hebrew letters, usually in square vocalized characters, and rarely in Rashi script or in non-vocalized Hebrew letters. The research also does not include free translations of the original text into Spanish or Judeo-Spanish, as these differ considerably from traditional calque Ladino translations.

Among the Cairo Genizah treasures now located in Cambridge, Dov Cohen discovered a considerable number of pages of *Pirke Avot*; some of the pages are from a single translated version of the text originating from Ya'abets print house in Salonika which can be dated to circa 1570. A careful analysis of these pages also revealed that this version of *Pirke Avot* was

the basis for the first Ladino translation of the text published in Venice in 1601 using Hebrew letters (Schwarzwald & Cohen, 2020).

The example given at the beginning of this paper demonstrates the special features of Ladino versions of Pirke Avot: it is a word-for-word translation from Hebrew. Differences in translation style are fully dependent on place and time of publication: the translations from Italy, Amsterdam and London are closer to standard Spanish whereas those from the former Ottoman Empire reflect Judeo-Spanish; later translations display more spoken language influences (Schwarzwald, 1999). The use of Hebrew words differs greatly between translations, e.g., *decipulos* vs. *talmidim* ('students'), as is also the case with expressions, e.g., *el mundo el vinién* vs. *el mundo el venidero* ('the afterlife'), and grammatical forms, e.g., *nuestro* vs. *muestro* ('our'), *viniste* vs. *vinites~vinistes* ('you came'), *postrero* vs. *prostrero* ('last one'), *mucho* vs. *muncho* ('a lot'), etc. A detailed analysis of the Ladino translations can be found in my book *The Ladino Translations of Pirke Aboth* (Schwarzwald, 1989).

All the printed Ladino translations of Pirke Avot rely heavily on the original Hebrew text. In most of these cases, the Hebrew appears next to the translation, with only the Siddur Ferrara 1552 (Lazar, 1995) and its copy in Amsterdam (1612) being the exceptions to this rule. In general, a reading of the Hebrew text followed by the Ladino translation reveals them to be almost identical. Where there are discrepancies, these can be attributed to differences in versions of the Mishna itself, e.g., the correct version *Rebi Shime'on ben Menasia*, is given in some Hebrew translations as *Rebi Shime'on ben Yehuda* (Avot 6: 8; Albeck, 1959: 233; Schwarzwald, 1989: 72).

2. THE END OF CHAPTER FIVE

Because of the extremely close parallels between the original Hebrew and Ladino translations, it is unclear why the end of Chapter 5 has so many different versions. The article addresses two major issues:

- a) An additional paragraph is included only in a few translations; the order of the paragraphs is not consistent; the name of the Rabbi attributed to one of the paragraphs is unclear (2.1).
- b) The 1857 Vienna translation into Ladino is not an exact translation of the original Hebrew (2.2).

2.1. The final paragraphs

Below are the paragraphs which appear at the end of Chapter 5 as they usually occur in Modern Hebrew editions. The Ladino translation given here is from Amsterdam 1664; variations are provided in parentheses:

5:20: *Yehuda hijo de Temá dizién, see fuerte como tigre (el anyamere), y ligero como (la) águila, corredor (y corrien) como gámo (el corso), y barragan como (el) leon, para (por) hacer la voluntad (veluntad) de tu padre que en los cielos.* ('Yehudah ben Tema says: Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion to do the will of your Father in heaven'.)

Él era dizién, desvergonçado (dezvergüensozo) de fazes (fases), al (para) infierno (guehinam), y vergonçoso (vergüensozo) de fazes (fases), al (para) Gan-Heden (Gan Eden). Sea voluntad (veluntad) delante (delante) ti A.N.D (YY nuestro Dio) y Dio de nuestros (muestros) padres, que sea fraguada (fragues) casa del Santuario (el bet hamiqdash) ayna (en presa) en (de) nuestros (muestros) días, y dá nuestra (muestra) parte en tu Ley. ('He used to say: The arrogant is destined for the inferno, but the shamefaced is destined for the Garden of Eden. May it be Your will, God of our fathers, that *Bet HaMikdash* (the Temple) be rebuilt in our days and give us our portion in Your Torah'.)

5:21: *Él era dizién, de edad de cinco años al Texto (pasuq), de edad de diez años a la (para) Misna, de edad de treze (treçe), a (para) las encomendaças (mišvot), de edad de quince (quinze), al (para) Talmud (gemara), de edad de deziocho (diez y ocho), al (para) Thálamo (la hupa), de edad de veinte á (por) perseguir, de edad de treinta á (para) la fuerça, de edad de quarenta al (para) entendimiento, de edad de cincuenta al (para) consejo, de edad de sesenta a la vejez (caneza/veçez), de edad de setenta a la caneza, de edad de ochenta a (para) la barraganía, de edad de noventa al (para) encorvamiento (la fuesa), de edad de ciento, como si fuera muerto (muriera), y pasado (pasase) y baldado (se baldase) del mundo.* ('He used to say: at five years (the age is reached for the study of) the Scriptures; at ten (for the study of) the Mishna; at thirteen (for the fulfillment of) the mitzvot; at fifteen (for the study of) the Talmud; at eighteen for marriage; at twenty for pursuit; at thirty for physical strength; at forty for understanding; at fifty for (giving) counsel; at sixty (he attains) old age; at seventy fullness of years; at eighty (he attains spiritual) strength; at ninety he is bending over (the grave); at one hundred he is as if he were already dead and departed from the world'.)

5:22: *Hijo de Bag-Bag dizién, vuelve (trastorna) en ella y revuelve (trastorna) en ella, que todo en ella, y en (con) ella serás (verás), y envejécete (con ella), alégrate en ella, y de ella no te tires, que no a ti condición mejor (buena más) que ella.* ('Ben Bag-Bag says: deliberate over it (the study of Torah) again and again for everything is contained in it; and through it you will view (the truth); grow old and aged over it and do not depart from it, because there is nothing more excellent than it'.)

5:23: *Hijo de Hé-Hé dizién. Según (asegún) el trabajo (travaço) (ansi) el precio (premio).* ('Ben He-He says: the reward is according to the suffering'.)

5:23^a (=4:19): *Shemuel el pequeño dizién, en cayendo (cayer) tu enemigo no te alegres, y en su trompecer (ser entropesado/ entropesar) no se alegre (agoze) tu corazón, por que no (de cuándo) véa A[donay]. y enmalesca (pese/ pezara) en sus ojos (catares), y hará tornar de sobre el su furor (fulor).*

(‘Shemuel HaQatan says: Do not rejoice when your enemy falls and do not be glad in your heart when he stumbles lest God see it and be displeased and will divert His anger from him’ [Based on Proverbs 24:17]).

Four sages of the Mishna are mentioned by name: Yehuda ben Tema (*Yehuda hijo de Tema*), Ben Bag-Bag (*hijo de Bag-Bag*), Ben He-He (*hijo de Hé-Hé*), and Shemuel HaQatan (*Shemuel el pequeño*). However, the fifth sage is labeled in Hebrew as *hu haya ’omer*, and in Ladino as *él era dizién* (‘he used to say’).

Only the oldest Latin script and Hebrew script versions feature the paragraph about Shemuel HaQatan. None of the other translations include this at all in Chapter 5, but rather in Chapter 4. The oldest Latin script translations mention the names of the sages in the following order:

- (1) **Ferrara 1552, Amsterdam 1612:**
 5:20 Yehuda ben Tema
 5:22 Ben Bag-Bag
 5:23 Ben He-He
 5:21 Hu haya ’omer (*Él era dizién*)
 5:23^a Shemuel HaQatan

In contrast, the oldest Hebrew script translations of the text present the sage names in this order:

- (2) **Salonika 1570, Venice 1601**
 5:20 Yehuda ben Tema
 5:22 Ben Bag-Bag
 5:23 Ben He-He
 5:23^a Shemuel HaQatan
 5:21 Hu haya ’omer

Consequently, whereas old Latin script translations of Pirke Avot suggest that *él era dizién* refers to Ben He-He, early Hebrew script versions imply that this is referring to Shemuel HaQatan.

Although most translations of 5:20, list Yehuda ben Tema first, translations from Belgrade place *él era dizién* (5:21) in the first position:

- (3) **Belgrade (1815-1904, ×3)**
 5:21 Hu haya ’omer
 5:20 Yehuda ben Tema
 5:22 Ben Bag-Bag
 5:23 Ben He-He

In this case, the reason why no individual is cited is because in all the previous paragraphs of Chapter 5 the sayings are very unspecific. Examples of these are: “By ten utterances was the world created” (5:1), “Seven qualities characterize the clod and seven the wise” (5:7), “There are four types of students” (5:12), etc. The paragraph preceding 5:20 reads: “Whoever possesses these three qualities is among the disciples of our father Abraham; and three other qualities distinguish the disciples of the wicked Bilam”. General assertions regarding education and personal development are characteristic of Chapter 5 (see the classification presented above in the Introduction), and as such, the sayings given here are not attributed to any specific Rabbi.

All the western translations (excluding Ferrara 1552 and Amsterdam 1612, mentioned in (1)) in addition to a 1901 translation from Jerusalem attribute the saying to Ben He-He in the following order:

(4) **Other Western translations, Jerusalem 1901:**

- 5:20 Yehuda ben Tema
- 5:22 Ben Bag-Bag
- 5:23 Ben He-He
- 5:21 Hu haya 'omer

A few relatively new translations from Salonika, Vienna and Izmir attribute the saying to Yehuda Ben Tema (1884-1928, ×8). The Rabbis names in these editions appear in the following order:

(5) **Salonika and Vienna (1884-1928, ×8), Izmir (1879):**

- 5:20 Yehuda ben Tema
- 5:21 Hu haya 'omer
- 5:22 Ben Bag-Bag
- 5:23 Ben He-He

While all earlier translations from Salonika attribute the saying to Ben Bag-Bag, it should be noted that the sayings themselves are presented in a different order:

(6) **Salonika (1800, 1846):**

- 5:20 Yehuda ben Tema
- 5:22 Ben He-He
- 5:23 Ben Bag-Bag
- 5:21 Hu haya 'omer

(7) **Salonika (1863, 1868), Vienna (1894, 1897):**

- 5:20 Yehuda ben Tema
- 5:22 Ben Bag-Bag
- 5:21 Hu haya 'omer
- 5:23 Ben He-He

The conflicting order of paragraphs at the end of Chapter 5 are attested to in numerous manuscripts and printed Hebrew versions of the Mishna, as pointed out by Sharvit (2004: 214-217). Since these paragraphs were a late addition to the chapter, variations in paragraph order can be seen in early manuscripts and printed versions of the texts. These inconsistencies become even more pronounced in Ladino translations of the original Hebrew.

So then, who is mostly likely to have said: *De edad de cinco años, al Texto (pasuq)* etc.? The answer is either: Shemuel HaQatan according to the oldest Hebrew scripts (2), Ben He-He according to all western translations and the Jerusalem 1901 translation (1, 4), Ben Bag-Bag according to Salonika and Vienna translations (6, 7), Yehuda ben Tema according to the Salonika, Vienna, and Izmir translations (5), or an anonymous Rabbi according to the translations from Belgrade (3).

Research has determined that this paragraph (*berayta*) was appended to the fifth chapter of Pirke Avot around the time of the last Geonim in the middle of the 11th Century. It does not appear in any earlier manuscripts of the Mishna. Early Mishna commentators could not agree on who was responsible for this *berayta* and argued that it could have been either Yehuda Ben Tema or Shemuel HaQatan. In some sources however, it is specifically stated that the speaker is Shemuel HaQatan (Sharvit, 2006: 121-124), as this is the name given in the oldest Hebrew script versions of the text (see (2) above).

2.2. Vienna 1857

The only edition of Pirke Avot with Ladino translation that does not feature a consecutive translation of the original Hebrew text was published in Vienna in 1857 (see photocopy). The numbering orders of paragraphs along with that of the original text in this translation are given below:

| HEBREW TEXT | LADINO TRANSLATION |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 5:23 Yehuda ben Tema | 5:20 Él era dizién |
| 5:24 Ben Bag-Bag, Ben He-He | 5:21 Yehuda ijo de Tema |
| 5:25 Hu haya 'omer | 5:22 Ijo de Bag Bag |
| | 5:23 Ijo de He He |

Although the Hebrew text is identical to the order presented in most of the western translations, as documented in (4) above, the Ladino translation order of named Rabbis follows the Belgrade tradition, as shown in (3) above. Moreover, the editor even

acknowledges the discrepancy between the texts by commenting: *sof hapereq 'al semakh hamishna vehaha'ataqa 'al semakh 'aḥer* "The end of the chapter is based on the Mishna and the translation is based on another". The editor could have followed either of the two different translation approaches, but ultimately decided to place them next to each other. Why the editor made this choice is a puzzle to me, especially considering that for the entirety of the rest of this edition of *Pirke Avot* the translation is placed next or parallel to the Hebrew text.

3. CONCLUSION

This article deals with the discrepancy between translations of the paragraphs found at the end of Chapter 5 in *Pirke Avot* that were evidently added during the Middle Ages, some of which as early as the beginning of the second millennium. The order of the paragraphs varies between different editions of Ladino translations, raising the question as to the identity of the Rabbi who specifically discusses education and personal development. The variations in paragraph order and identity of the Rabbi whose name is not given are not only characteristic of these specific Ladino translations. Many old Hebrew manuscripts and printed texts question the identity of the unnamed Rabbi (Sharvit, 2004, 2006). In general, the consensus is that Shemuel HaQatan is more likely to be the anonymous Rabbi than Yehuda Ben Tema, as in the old Hebrew script versions presented in (2). Translations from the 17th Century onwards do not mention Shemuel HaQatan (who is already cited in Chapter 4:19) at all, thus prompting readers to wonder who the saying should be attributed to. Differences between the original Hebrew source text and the Ladino Vienna 1857 translation shows that the paragraph order was disputed by 19th Century Sephardic Jewish community members. This all leaves the researcher with several unanswered questions.

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Fig. 1: The end of chapter five in Vienna 1857

