ADVANCING JEWISH THOUGHT

Mosaic

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EDITOR'S LETTER

This week in *Mosaic*

Jonathan Silver looks back at the week

OBSERVATIONS

A Religious Musical in Secular Tel Aviv

Traditional lines between the secular and religious populations are fading, particularly in the realms of music and art.

Podcast: Joshua Berman on Traveling to Biblical Egypt

A rabbi and Bible scholar joins us to talk about his trips to biblical Egypt, and about the role of Egypt in the Jewish imagination.

+ The best of the editors' picks of the week

Dear friends,

The Israel that is

On last week's podcast, I was joined by Elliott Abrams to discuss the reaction on the part of American Jews to the new Israeli government. There's still much to observe and analyze in that story, as there is much to observe and analyze in the actions of the new government itself. But I want to begin this letter by underscoring the extent to which American Jewish discontent is rooted in a vision of Israeli society that the current government supposedly fails to embody. The Israel that some of the government's critics support is a country that is more secular, more liberal, and more solicitous of European and American opinion than the burgeoning Israel that actually exists on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. For several years at *Mosaic*, we've been interrogating the Israel that liberals love—whether that love is born of nostalgic longing for an Israel that once existed but has now given way to something else, or whether that love is born of a mythological desire for an Israel that never was. Israel the actual country is more complex, more foreign, and a great deal more affecting than even the visions dancing like sugar plums in the American imagination.

Here is Matti Friedman in 2014 describing Israel as the Mizrahi nation, and here he is seven years later, in 2021, explaining how Americans project their own problems onto Israel. Here is Shany Mor describing how the American foreign-policy establishment has consistently misunderstood the region because it saw there reflections of itself. And, of course, there's this month's essay on how Hollywood has for decades distorted the Jewish state by presenting it as a tableau of American tastes and American fantasies about diplomacy and power.

Often music and art are leading indicators of cultural change, whereas politics and public affairs lag behind. So here is Yossi Klein Halevi describing how the earliest articulations of Zionist and Israeli music were inflected by European styles, and how, as national musical tastes developed and matured, Israeli music further embraced Mizrahi traditions. That's the overall context in which I encourage you to read Sarah Rindner's fascinating story this week about a performance of a musical called *Aluf ha-Olam* by the Orna Porat Theater in Tel Aviv. It is a review of the music of the singer- songwriter Hanan Ben-Ari, whose background and artistic inspirations hail from Iran, Afghanistan, and Hungary. Ben-Ari is religious and at home in the national-religious sector of Israeli society. And this religious musical of his catalogue is selling out show after show in secular Tel Aviv. Ben-Ari's music, Rinder writes,

although rooted deeply in the perspective of the religious-Zionist sector of society to which he belongs, has always appealed to a wide swath of the Israeli population, young and old, religious and secular, Sephardi and Ashkenazi, just as the play itself is attempting to do. The fact that an elite institution like Orna Porat is trying to appeal to a broad audience with a voice born and bred in Karnei Shomron rather than Tel Aviv, whose owner wears a yarmulke rather than a tattered Nirvana T-shirt, is certainly part of the continuously unfolding and ever-surprising Israeli national story.

The Israel that was

The rabbi and Bible professor Joshua Berman received an enticing invitation not long ago: one of the world's preeminent Egyptologists invited him to go on a tour of Egypt's biblical sites. And, despite Covid restrictions and the usual Egyptian political instability, he decided to go. The trip was transformational for him, so transformational that ever since he's been leading kosher tours of Egypt's biblical sites. On this week's podcast, we talk about what it's like to stroll through the markets of Cairo wearing a kippah and how his retracing the steps of the ancient Israelites illuminates his faith and his scholarly work.

From the archive

Today is International Holocaust Memorial Day, which commemorates the liberation of Auschwitz in 1945. Since then, there have been numerous theological attempts to confront the enormity of the Shoah, and though we're not likely to ever find them fully satisfying, the writing and witness of one such effort stands out.

Kalonymus Kalman Shapira was the rabbi of the Warsaw ghetto. His sermons from 1939-1942 were collected in a recently published book, and, in "The Buried, Raging Sermons of the Warsaw Ghetto Rabbi," the professor James Diamond describes them as "one of the most extraordinary achievements of 20th-century Jewish thought."

With every good wish,

Jonathan Silver
Editor
Mosaic

Israeli singer Hanan Ben Ari in Tel Aviv on December 7, 2021. Yossi Aloni/Flash90.

SARAH RINDNER

JANUARY 23, 2023

About the author
Sarah Rindner is a writer and educator. She lives in Israel..

A Religious Musical in Secular Tel Aviv

Traditional lines between the secular and religious populations are fading, particularly in the realms of music and art.

This past Sukkot, a crowd of about 500 children, parents, and grandparents gathered in the Recanati Theater in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The audience was made up of affluent and mostly secular residents of north Tel Aviv and its suburbs—stylishly dressed, sipping lattes and organic juice sold at the trendy coffee shop nearby. To an outside observer, the scene would be almost indistinguishable from a family-oriented play or concert in Park Slope, Brooklyn. The content, however, was distinctly Israeli: a jukebox musical called *Aluf ha-Olam* (literally, "Champion of the World"), based on the songs of the religious Zionist singer Hanan Ben-Ari, written and performed by Israel's most prestigious children's dramatic company, the Orna Porat Theater. Tickets for *Aluf ha-Olam* are in high demand and sell out quickly, so I booked seats for me and my children several months in advance. One could sense from the anticipation in the theater that many others had done the same.

Hanan Ben-Ari is one of Israel's best-known musical performers, albeit without the international break-through appeal of peers like the religious music sensation Ishai Ribo. His strength is in his songwriting; catchy tunes, drawn from eclectic influences, and coherent, powerful lyrics that comment on personal, often spiritual, struggles. He is an unabashed product of the religious Zionist community, and a wholesome father of six who always sports a knit kippah. Raised in the settlement of Karnei Shomron, he is the nephew of the former Knesset member Michael Ben-Ari, who co-founded the political party Otzma Yehudit, now led by Itamar Ben-Gvir.

Hanan Ben-Ari's songs pay frequent homage to his Sephardi heritage, though in his music he describes himself more specifically as being of Persian, Afghan, and Hungarian descent. In a song called "Balance" he sings: "of all the diasporas whence I came/ You could make a continent." His 2015 breakout hit "Strawberries," which simultaneously laments and celebrates the difficulties of living in modern Israel, presents a mash-up of Mizraḥi beats and the classic Hebrew folk song "Thank You" by Uzi Hittman. A recent hit, "Hanania," is a tribute to his Afghan grandfather, a pious Jew who wears an outdated suit, only uses cash, always has liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) on his tongue, and in his very being is "more Zionist than Ben-Gurion."

Part of what makes Ben-Ari so accessible to a large cross-section of Israelis, both secular and religious, is his self-awareness. In "Wikipedia," perhaps his biggest hit, he enumerates the various stereotypes associated with each segment of Israeli society: "all leftists are traitors/ all Arabs are terrorists/ all Ḥaredim are thieves/ all settlers killed Yitzḥak Rabin," and then calls for less prejudice, and more respect for the individual:

Forget everything you know about me today

> I am not the "settler guy."
> I am not God's representative . . .
> I am not the bridge between sectors
> I wish the sectors would disappear.

Although this conclusion might seem banal, even cliched, to American ears, the song provoked criticism in some Orthodox circles for its seeming disregard for Jewish law and religious distinctiveness in favor of a kind of amorphous, borderless identity. Whatever the merits of such criticism, Ben-Ari's songs aren't religious so much because of their content as because they are permeated with Jewish sacred imagery. Take, for instance, his use in "Wikipedia" of the phrase *Or Ein-sof,* literally the Light of the Infinite One—a kabbalistic term for the radiance of God's unknowable essence: "I am everything/ I am nothing/ Infinite Light wrapped in a body/ don't put me in a cage."

Ben-Ari's penchant for infusing lyrics about universal topics with the language of the synagogue and yeshiva tends to obscure the boundaries between sacred and secular idioms. His 1980s-inspired feel-good ballad "Dream like Joseph," for instance, argues that every story in the Bible reflects some basic human experience: "everyone leaves his father's home/ everyone nearly sacrifices his child/ deep within is a little Sodom/ that he wishes to erase already/ and angels will rescue him."

Thus the prospect of translating Hanan Ben-Ari's music into an Israeli secular vernacular, as *Aluf ha-Olam* seeks to do, is daunting, and perplexing. It raises the question of whether Ben-Ari's biblicism and Jewish allusions are charming embellishments or so central to his work that they cannot be disentangled from it. But merely to ask this question is to acknowledge

that Israeli society's shared cultural touchstones appear to be growing more and more Jewish, and traditional lines between the secular and religious populations are fading, particularly in the realms of music and art.

The play *Aluf ha-Olam* centers on a high-school-age brother and sister who move to Tel Aviv from a quiet town in proletarian southern Israel after the death of their mother. Tom is an awkward musician who used to play in a Beatles cover band and now seeks to join a more sophisticated school ensemble under the guidance of an American-accented has-been rocker who wears flannel shirts and jeans. Shira is deaf and a talented poet who is constantly scribbling in her notebook. When Tom's bandmates cajole him to come up with original song lyrics and he cannot deliver, he takes Shira's poetry without permission and puts it to music. The results are iconic Hanan Ben-Ari hits like "Wikipedia" and "Aluf ha-Olam," which become the soundtrack of the play in ways that artfully reflect the plotline.

As with other productions of the Orna Porat Theater, the dialogue is engaging both for youth and their parents. While twelve-year-olds may not appreciate that the baby-boomer music teacher's platitudes—"every person is a diamond," "you just need to find your voice"—are being played for laughs, their parents will certainly chuckle. When one of Shira's classmates makes a patronizing effort to befriend her, she scribbles a note to him that says, "I may be deaf, but you're dumb" (likely an intentional allusion to the English pun). Yet over the course of the play, even the less-sympathetic characters are revealed to have emotional depth and virtuous qualities. Through its final moments of revelation and reconciliation between the siblings, the play deftly draws the audience into the inner lives of its protagonists.

As with many Israeli theater productions, sophisticated video projections are integrated into the scenery, giving it a depth beyond its otherwise minimalist, though meticulously outfitted, revolving set. Actors double up on roles, so that the American music teacher seamlessly transitions into Tom and Shira's grieving father. Most impressive and compelling by far is Shira's ability to communicate her thoughts to the audience without speech, through physical gestures, facial expressions, and the scattered responses of those of her family members who understand sign-language. In choosing to have Shira sign without subtitles or another character translating, the play makes a point about art's capacity to transcend language and cultural barriers. The audience becomes a participant in her own adolescent struggle to make sense of her emotions.

Aside from the lyrics of the Ben-Ari songs, the play's actual Jewish content is rather slim. Shira's nickname in sign-language is "Shir HaShirim" (Song of Songs). The two teenagers in one scene longingly reminisce about their mother's Shabbat cooking, though the conversation seems primarily like a way to introduce the Ben-Ari song "Mother if I Could": "Mother, if I could only/ cure the longing/ The memories still burn the brain/ Love did not win, neither did the spirit…" The original song connects these emotions

to the ancient yearning for the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem. But in the context of *Aluf ha-Olam*, it loses these biblical and national resonances, emphasizing instead how feelings of sorrow and loss can inspire artistic creativity. Yet a sensitive viewer may see this reimagining not as an abandonment of the lyrics' true meaning, but as an invitation to confront the significance of such divergences.

In general, children's theater has an outsize presence in Israel, no doubt a result of the enthusiasm for the stage brought by Central and East European immigrants during the early years of statehood, and embodied in the storied ha-Bimah and Cameri theaters. When the famed Israeli actress and German convert to Judaism Orna Porat (born Irene Klein) founded the children's theater that now bears her name in 1970, it was immediately afforded respect by the cultural establishment. Nowadays before national holidays, particularly Hanukkah, advertisements for children's productions taking place all over the country overrun periodicals. The Orna Porat Theater—responsible for producing *Aluf ha-Olam*—alone puts on twenty new plays every year, which, it reports, draw in an annual audience of 400,000, an impressive feat in a country as small as Israel. School- and pre-school-age children regularly board buses during school hours to enjoy any of the dozens of productions being staged at any given time, and community centers in towns and cities throughout Israel host them for both adults and children.

These plays usually present renditions of classic Hebrew stories like *Room for Rent* by Leah Goldberg, or revised and reimagined versions of international classics like *Aladdin* or the *Wizard of Oz*. But there have also been any number of original productions, such as *Aluf ha-Olam* or *Eli*, about the legendary Israeli spy Eli Cohen. There are also performances based on biblical stories and the Jewish holiday cycle.

When it's not a national holiday, such performances, even the explicitly Jewish ones, are typically held on Shabbat. This makes it difficult for religiously observant children to attend, creating a feedback loop that encourages producers to gear their work toward a secular audience. Yet sometimes the loop is disrupted, as in the case of *Aluf ha-Olam*. Ben-Ari himself may have had a hard time finding a performance he could attend with his own children. But if secular pop-creations that riff on traditional religious culture—rather than the other way around—continue to gain traction, schedules might start to change.

Aluf ha-Olam was written by Liat Fishman Leni and Shlomit Arnon Bar-Lev, who together have composed numerous successful plays for both children and adults, ranging from popular works to more highbrow fare. One of their most recent plays, *Ba'alat ha-Bayit* ("The Landlady")—based on the 2014 novel of the same name by Noa Yadlin—examines the crisis of an elite, secular, Ashkenazi family. Its members are thrown into disar-

ray when they discover the financial misdeeds of the matriarch, who is the director of a left-wing pro-peace organization in Jerusalem. The play explores what happens when those who compulsively project political and moral superiority display unethical conduct themselves. It's also a subtle indictment of the once pre-eminent Israeli secular left, which is losing ground every day in both the political and cultural arenas. By contrast, *Aluf ha-Olam* offers a feel-good generic message that can appeal to secular and religious alike, but with an upbeat Mizraḥi-religious pop soundtrack. Taken together, the play about the bankruptcy of the old elite and the musical about the vibrancy of the Mizrahi, religious, and working-class culture that elite once turned up its nose at sum up the direction of Israeli society—and politics—in the 21st century.

One theme of *Aluf ha-Olam*, particularly apparent in the placement of a deaf character in the central role, is the question of how a single voice, even an unconventional one, may be harnessed to speak for something much larger than itself. Much in the same way, Ben-Ari's music, although rooted deeply in the perspective of the religious-Zionist sector of society to which he belongs, has always appealed to a wide swath of the Israeli population, young and old, religious and secular, Sephardi and Ashkenazi, just as the play itself is attempting to do. The fact that an elite institution like Orna Porat is trying to appeal to a broad audience with a voice born and bred in Karnei Shomron rather than Tel Aviv, whose owner wears a yarmulke rather than a tattered Nirvana T-shirt, is certainly part of the continuously unfolding and ever-surprising Israeli national story.

JOSHUA BERMAN AND TIKVAH PODCAST AT MOSAIC

JANUARY 27, 2023

About the authors

Joshua Berman is professor of Bible at Bar-Ilan University and the author most recently of *Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith* (Maggid).

A weekly podcast, produced in partnership with the Tikvah Fund, offering up the best thinking on Jewish thought and culture.

Podcast: Joshua Berman on Traveling to Biblical Egypt

A rabbi and Bible scholar joins us to talk about his trips to biblical Egypt, and about the role of Egypt in the Jewish imagination.

This Week's Guest: Joshua Berman

To understand the inner life of the biblical world, one must look to Egypt.

In the Hebrew Bible, it plays a role in the psyche of the Jews as the great other, the great alternative. Thus, when the Land of Israel suffers from famine, Egypt is a land of plenty. While the Land of Israel is subject to the limits and vicissitudes of nature, the Egyptian regime is dedicated to conquering nature and overcoming its cycles of plenty and poverty. And where the Land of Israel is full of shepherds wandering in the wilderness encountering God, Egypt, by contrast, is a teeming, tight, narrow imperial capital.

It's in Egypt, that the children of Israel begin to assume a national identity (or, at least the Egyptians think they do). Once freed from Egyptian bondage, they are haunted by memories of Egypt. And as they build their own nation in Israel, they become the anti-Egypt—in moral sensibility, in legal and constitutional structures, in theology.

This week, the podcast is joined by Joshua Berman, a rabbi, academic Bible scholar, and the author of several books, including, most recently, *Ani Maamin*, about biblical criticism, historical truth, and faith. Over the last year, Berman has been leading groups on an Exodus in reverse—on

tours back to Egypt to discover that country's biblical sites. Together with *Mosaic*'s editor Jonathan Silver, he talks about his journeys and reflects on how his engagement with Egypt has deepened his understanding of the formative texts of the Jewish people.

Saudi Arabia Isn't What It Used to Be

JANUARY 23, 2023
From John Hannah at *Foreign Policy*

Surveying the major changes that the Saudi kingdom has been undergoing in the past few years, **John Hannah** urges American policymakers to find ways to support the country's progress. Instead, he writes, they have become too fixated on specific misdeeds to appreciate what's happening:

> By all means, press Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and the Saudis on the need to limit the worst excesses of a political system that, after all, remains an absolute monarchy, especially when it comes to the all-too-frequent mistreatment of dual U.S.-Saudi nationals. Don't back away from the role that human rights and democratic values have long played in U.S. foreign policy. Just don't let it blind you to the unprecedented and historic process of economic, social, cultural, and religious liberalization that is transforming one of the world's most important midsized powers. It's a transformation that promises to benefit not just tens of millions of Saudis (especially the more than 60 percent of the population under age thirty-five) but also Middle East security and U.S. national interests more broadly.
>
> Less than a decade ago, my main impressions on visiting the kingdom were of a sullen, bleak, and xenophobic populace of unproductive subjects, living off unearned government largesse, foreign labor, and a steady diet of religious intolerance. Fast forward several years, and there's a palpable sense in Riyadh of dynamism, energy, and future possibility. The private sector is expanding; young people—especially women—are entering the workplace in record numbers, starting businesses, and being held accountable for their performance. The country is opening itself to the rest of the world in terms of tourists, commerce, and cultural influence in ways never before seen.
>
> Over the past five years, Mohammad bin Salman has . . . incarcerated radical clerics preaching violence. Extremist madrassas, both at home and abroad, have been defunded. Any Saudi support to foreign mosques and organizations must now be approved by host governments.
>
> [T]he Saudi crackdown on extremism has also been accompanied by one of the world's most ambitious programs of domestic reform as well as a historic new willingness to support the normalization of relations with Israel. Add it all up, and it makes the growing chorus of voices that appear single-mindedly focused on shunning, punishing, and (however inadvertently) driving the Saudis into the arms of Washington's most dangerous great-power adversaries not just shortsighted but harmful.

Discovering the Bible's Interconnected Narratives

JANUARY 24, 2023
From Alastair Roberts at *Good Faith Effort*

The opening verse of the book of Esther states that the Persian king Ahasuerus ruled over an empire of 127 provinces. The number 127 occurs in only one other place in the Hebrew Bible: it is the age at which Sarah dies. To **Alastair Roberts**, this small detail invites readers to see various similarities between the matriarch and the book's titular heroine. Likewise, the story of David has numerous parallels to that of Jacob, a comparison that, Roberts argues, can illuminate the story's complex political message. Although Roberts is a Protestant theologian and scholar, his method of reading the Bible by examining similarities among its passages has much in common with the approaches of ancient, medieval, and modern rabbis. In conversation with Rabbi Ari Lamm, he investigates some of these readings. (Audio, 78 minutes.)

Through Evangelism and Settlements, Iran Is Remaking Syria in Its Image

JANUARY 24, 2023
From Rauf Baker at
Middle East Quarterly

Since the 1970s, Syria's ruling Alawite minority—adherents of a syncretistic faith considered by many Islamic scholars not to be Muslim at all—have sought with some success to have their religion considered a branch of Shiism. Receiving recognition as such from Shiite religious authorities has helped pave the way for closer relations with Iran. Tehran, under the circumstances of the Syrian civil war, has gone a step further, trying to establish a significant Shiite presence in the war-torn country. **Rauf Baker** writes:

> To achieve their ambitious goals, the Iranians adopted a two-pronged strategy: converting Sunni Muslims to Shiism and settling Shiites from neighboring countries throughout Syria. The campaign focused on middle-class and poor Sunnis in different regions across the country, particularly in areas deemed of strategic and demographic importance to Tehran. Contrary to popular belief, it is easier to convert a Sunni to [mainstream, Iranian] Shiism than an Alawite.
>
> Tehran's military entrenchment in Syria during the civil-war years has been highly conducive to its dogged hegemonic quest and the revenge it seeks against Sunnis on historical grounds. It enabled the Islamic Republic to tighten its grip over Iraq, to transform Hizballah into Lebanon's effective master, to establish a land corridor between the Iranian border and the Mediterranean Sea, and to intensify the military threat to Israel and Jordan both by deploying [its] forces and associated Shiite militias in southern Syria and by giving Hizballah the ability to wreak havoc on Israel's population centers and national infrastructure.
>
> What makes these achievements all the more significant, and potentially far more enduring, is the attendant transformation of Syria's sociocultural character through a mixture of Shiification activities (e.g., establishment of shrines and institutions, initiation of Shiite practices, conversion to Shiism), humanitarian aid, and settlement of foreign Shiites in deserted localities across Syria. And while this strategy coincides with the Assad regime's short-term desire to ensure its survival (hence the string of laws and decrees aimed at barring Syrian refugees' return), it gives Tehran ever-growing grassroots support that may enable it to keep the regime subservient to its wishes.
>
> A bleak prognosis indeed, for just as the mayhem and devastation occasioned by the war enabled the Iranian entrenchment in Syria, so Tehran may cynically deem the continuation of the conflict as the most desirable scenario in the foreseeable future.

Jewish Organizations Shouldn't Be Defending Anti-Semites

JANUARY 25, 2023
From Benjamin Kerstein at *JNS*

On December 12, a group of progressive Jewish groups issued an open letter opposing now-Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy's pledge to remove Congresswoman Ilhan Omar from the Foreign Affairs Committee due to, in the letter's words, "false accusations that she is anti-Semitic or anti-Israel." The signatories include radical organizations like Americans for Peace Now, but also the "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobby J Street, the Zionist youth group Habonim-Dror, and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism—the last being the activist wing of America's largest Jewish denomination. **Benjamin Kerstein** responds:

> The . . . assertion that the accusations against Omar are "false" is a lie. With the best will in the world, Omar's claims that American Jews buy control of Congress via their "Benjamins" and that support for Israel constitutes loyalty to a foreign country cannot be viewed as anything other than explicitly anti-Semitic.
>
> Omar has never repudiated or apologized for these statements. She clearly believes that she is merely speaking truth to power—which in this context can only be viewed as "Jewish" power. This is how all anti-Semites—of whatever political stripe—view themselves, and to claim that Omar has been falsely accused is, in effect, to endorse such attitudes as legitimate and defensible. The profession of Omar's innocence, in other words, is anti-Semitic in and of itself.
>
> [Omar's career] is the first step towards the legitimization and institutionalization of systemic anti-Semitism in the American political establishment. The battle against her is therefore an existential struggle for American Jews. The Reform leadership has now made it clear that not only will it refrain from this struggle, it will actively impede it. It has become, in other words, part of the problem.
>
> The Reform leadership has a right to fight for progressive values. It has a right to criticize Israeli policies should it so desire. It does not have the right to enable those who would.

Maimonides' Learned and Acerbic Provençal Critic

JANUARY 23, 2023
From Tamar Marvin at *Stories from Jewish History*

Best remembered today for his commentary on Moses Maimonides' code of Jewish law, Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquières (ca. 1125–1198)—known to posterity by the acronym Ra'avad—was one of the great talmudists of his day. Much of his extensive oeuvre appears to have been lost to the ravages of time, and several of his extant works remain little-studied, but he nonetheless left an enduring mark on the development of Jewish law. **Tamar Marvin** tells his story:

> Ra'avad was both shaped by medieval Provençal Jewish culture and a major influence on its trajectory. What Jews have traditionally called "Provence" refers to the whole swathe of land between the Pyrenees and Italy, approximately the southern third of present-day France, which in the Middle Ages was distinguished linguistically [from the neighboring regions]. It sits at the crossroads of Europe and has its own unique culture infused with both Ashkenazi and Sephardi ideas. For example, in the 12th century, when Ra'avad lived, Jewish Provence was a hotbed of kabbalistic thought even as it was nurturing the beginnings of what would become a proud rationalist philosophical tradition—all the while steeped in distinctive traditions of Torah scholarship made famous in the academies of Narbonne, Lunel, and Béziers.
>
> Since the first publication of Ra'avad's *hasagot* [critical glosses] to the Mishneh Torah in the 16th century, they have been a frequent accompaniment to Maimonides' code and the source of Ra'avad's reputation as a fiery traditionalist. Take for example the gloss on *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 6:14: . . . "On my life and mind! There is no great analysis here." In another gloss, he says of Maimonides: "This comes out of the mess he made of these things, confusing these and those and likening in his mind matters that are discrete and entirely distinct." His independence of mind is notable, but so too is the respect he gave to his younger contemporary by anticipating the magnitude of his impact and deciding to comment on his work.
>
> Though Rabbi Abraham himself wrote no kabbalistic works, he was clearly at the center of early centers of Kabbalah that bubbled up prominently in Provence, in interesting and creative ways, in the 12th century. Both of his sons, Rabbi David and especially Rabbi Isaac the Blind, were renowned Kabbalists whose thought and traditions were transmitted across the Pyrenees . . . in the following century.