

INTRODUCTION

One of the most influential rabbinical personalities of the medieval period was Rabbi Saadia Gaon (882-942 CE), head of the leading Talmudic Academy at Sura in Babylon, which had been founded by Rav (following Rabbenu Hakadosh), in 225 CE .

In his book “Sefer Ha-Galui“, Rabbi Saadia write that he belonged to the noble family of Shelah son of Yehudah the fourth son of Yacov, (Genesis, chapter 46, Verse 12), and counted among his ancestors Rabbi Hanina Ben Dosa (1st century CE). At the age of 33, he left his home at Fayyum in the Upper Egypt to study under the Torah scholars of Tiberias. In 923 CE he went to the rabbinical center of Torah in Babylon, joining the Talmudic academies of Pumbedita and Sura. He spent six months at the important Torah center in Aleppo, where he wrote his book “Ten Commitments in Judeo-Arabic [ABTIDA KALAMNA]” (i.e. Arabic written with Hebrew letters). To this day, this book is yearly read by Aleppo Jews on the holiday of Tu BiShvat.

In 928 CE, Rabbi Saadia Gaon succeeded Rabbi Yomtov Cahana Ben Ya’acov as head of the Sura rabbinical Talmudic academy. Under his leadership the academy entered upon a new period of brilliancy.

Among tens of works written by Rabbi Saadia Gaon is his commentary on the Torah [Pentatuch]. At that time, most of the Jewish people lived in Arab speaking countries, so this commentary, like all of his works, was written in Judeo-Arabic script (and also in Arabic letters), to be studied by all levels of the Jewish people.

One witness to the existence of this Torah's commentary in Arabic script is the well-known Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167 CE), who stated in his commentary on the book of Genesis, chapter 2 , Verse 11 : "...The Gaon has acted for the glory of God by translating the Torah into the language of the Ishmaelite and into their script, so that no one can say that the Hebrew Torah contains words that nobody understands." However, no manuscripts of Rabbi Saadia's commentary in Arabic script have survived.

The Rabbi Saadia Gaon's Torah commentary is the most faithful commentary ever written in the Arabic language. Over the last 15 centuries, no other Torah commentator in the Arabic language, except for Rabbi Saadia Gaon, has fulfilled (as minimum) two conditions for a faithful work: that he is Jewish, and that he has worked directly from the original Hebrew Torah text. Thus Rabbi Saadia Gaon's commentary set a standard of fidelity for all subsequent generations. The famous commentator Rashi (1040-1105 CE) in his commentary on Exodus (chapter 24, verse 12) referred to Rabbi Saadia Gaon as "Rabbenu [our teacher] Saadia."

The great kabbalist Rabbi Yosef Haim, the "Ben Ish Hay", (1834-1909 CE) praised Rabbi Saadia's commentary warmly in his Book of Halachot (Part 2 Parshat "Ki Tetze", Hilchot Talmud Torah, Item 25): "... And here in our town of Baghdad there is the commentary of Rabbi Saadia on the Torah in Arabic ... It includes many points very well clarified in the Arabic language ... and in order to understand the "precious diamonds" of this commentary...", and there he gives an example.

During the eleven centuries since the writing of the Rabbi Saadia's commentary, it has been studied widely, especially by Yemenite Jews, who have used the Judeo-Arabic version of the commentary in their daily learning.

The Judeo-Arabic Yemenite manuscripts' version of the commentary has been printed along with the text of the Torah, beginning with the Jerusalem edition of 1894 CE and continuing until today. Scholars worldwide have studied the variations in wording among the different manuscripts, comparing them mainly with the 1020-year-old manuscript written by Shmuel Ben Yaakov.

But during the last century all the Jews have left Yemen, and the Jews have also been driven out of the other Arabic-speaking countries, with the exception of Morocco. In our generation, only few Jews speak or understand literary Arabic, and it is certainly much harder to understand the Judeo-Arabic script. Thus the study of Rabbi Saadia Gaon's commentary has reached a very low point.

The Hassidic way of thinking considers that "every descent is for the sake of an ascent" -a seed planted in the ground has to decay in order for the new stalk to come up and produce an ear of grain. Thus, this new book is as a first step in preserving Rabbi Saadia Gaon's complete commentary on the Torah. We have painstakingly transcribed the Judeo-Arabic into Arabic script.

In this book, it is possible and easy, for the first time in 15 centuries, to read and learn the original commentary of Rabbi Saadia Gaon in standard Arabic characters. We intend in the future to translate faithfully Rabbi Saadia Gaon's commentary into many languages, allowing all to recognize the truth of the Hebrew Torah and to revere the Torah and the Jewish people, till the prophecy of Zephaniah (3:9) is fulfilled: "As for then, I will turn to all the nations, a pure language to call upon the name of God, to serve him all together as one."

Rabbi Yomtov Haim ben Ya'akov Daknish Hacoheh

Manager, Project Saadia Gaon