Two Perceptions of Change in Judeo-Spanish Rabbinic Literature

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Since all human experience is situated in time and space, the metamorphoses of their representations provide a convenient framework for studying the construction and transformation of societies and cultures. Indeed, Anthony Giddens included the disengagement of the relation between time and space and the subsequent «disembedding» of social systems among the four basic processes which constitute modernity.

The conquering of space in the era of the nation state, new techniques of transportation and political, economic, and cultural imperialism; the increasing pace of communication through new media like the telegraph and the sense of simultaneity; the shortening of distances regionally and worldwide: all profoundly transformed the space of experience and the horizon of expectation in the different cultures affected by these developments.

Whether the shortening of distances was real or imagined, whether the changes really affected the daily life of broad seg-

1 The transcription of the cited Judeo-Spanish texts follows the system adopted by Sefarad; proper names and book titles have been transcribed within the English text, however, according to a simplified system more intelligible to the English reader. I wish to thank those who read and commented on earlier versions of this paper: Professor Esther Benbassa (CNRS, Sorbonne, Paris), Dr. Javier Castaño (Universidad Complutense, Madrid), and Dr. Elena Romero (CSIC, Madrid). Dr. Iacob M. Hassán (CSIC), «véritable encyclopédie du sépharadisme» laboriously read the final draft and corrected the transcriptions. I am especially indebted to Professor Peter Schäfer (Freie Universität Berlin and Princeton University) for his support of my research. I am very grateful to Julie L. Scolnik (Madrid) who corrected my English.

2 Anthony GIDDENS, Consequences of Modernity (Stanford 1990).
ments of society or rather a few privileged sectors like international trade and banking is not at stake here. The notion of a communication revolution, however, forms part of a more general process culminating at the turn of the nineteenth century: "From around 1880 to the outbreak of World War I, a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space."

Building on a close reading of two references to the invention of the telegraph in the Ottoman Empire found in two Judeo-Spanish ethical treatises, this study tries to look at some general lines of perceptions of change as a manifestation of different understandings of time. We shall leave aside perceptions of space, the constructions and deconstructions of notions like home and diaspora, centre and periphery, etc., and focus on the present time understood as the difference of past and present and the notion of change (or non-change) generated by this difference.

Especially in times of transition, when hitherto unchallenged cultural universes undergo transformation from within or without, the patterns of representation of time provide much insight into how people succeed in assimilating change, which mechanisms they employ to ward off change or, by way of contrast, how they join in the process of producing change. This is true, I argue, for the study of the transformation of Sephardic society and culture in the nineteenth century as well.

Unlike the impact of bureaucratic reforms and the establishment


9 On the effects of new educational networks (e.g. the Alliance Israélite Universelle) on the Ottoman-Sephardic society, reactions to the revolution of communication and transport have not been studied in much detail. Neither has research focused on changing representations of time or perceptions of change—a subject which might contribute to our understanding of the profound transformation which Sephardic societies underwent in the period.

In the present study, we shall examine two approaches to time and change in rabbinic ethical literature written in Judeo-Spanish in the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire. In a first step, we are going to look at the daring interpretation given to the communication revolution by Yeuda Papo in his Ladino version of the *Pele Yo'ets* which had originally been written by his father Eli'ezar in Hebrew. Secondly, there is a brief, but telling reference to the telegraph in Binyamin Ben-Tsoni Rodeti's Sefer Ki Ze Kol ha-Adam. Finally, these two references to the telegraph shall be set in a larger perspective of the envisioning of change in Judeo-Spanish rabbinic ethical literature.

1. SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

First of all, it is necessary to ask what insights into social and cultural change can be expected from a study of rabbinic litera-


11 The major exception to the rule, though not for Judeo-Spanish literature, is Zvi ZOHAR, *Tradition and Change: Halakhic Responses of Middle Eastern Rabbis to Legal and Technological Change (Egypt and Syria, 1880-1920)* (Jerusalem 1995 [Hebrew]).

12 Forthcoming is, however, a study of the perceptions of time in German Jewry by Jacques Ehrenfreund.


12 Izmir 1884. Cf. Romero *Creación* p. 114. I use the copy at the CSIC library (henceforth cited as KA).
ture. Historians of premodern and modern Judaism have made use of rabbinic, mostly legal, literature, the most notable example being of course the pioneering work of the late Jacob Katz on the transformation of Central and Eastern European Judaism. A less obvious source (though Katz made use of it as well) is the rabbinic ethical, rather than legal, the musar literature, which David Sorkin has used to argue for an «early haskala» preparing the way of German Jewry's way into modernity.

While legal literature lends itself much easier to a socio-historical analysis, discussing as it does the application of legal norms in concrete circumstances, musar literature might disappoint the historian in search of things «new», in search of change. Ethical treatises usually present themselves as rather conservative and therefore call for a very close reading if we wish to learn about the author relating himself to developments occurring in the society in which he lives. Notwithstanding their conservative attire, however, musar literature has served throughout Jewish history precisely for the integration of new modes of thought into the mainstream of Judaism. This observation presented by Joseph Dan holds true, as I shall argue, for the Judeo-Spanish ethical literature of the nineteenth century as well.

Joseph Dan, as Joseph Dan has it, was a force that absorbed the revolutionary new ideas of philosophers, pietists, and mystics and turned them into a constructive and conservative ideology... the thesis should be presented that, as far as traditional, orthodox Judaism is concerned, what was true in the Middle Ages is even more so in the period starting in the seventeenth century. The role of ethical literature, especially mystical ethics, only increased during these centuries.

The integration of new ideas into the traditional universe belongs, then, to the very functions of ethical literature. A close reading of how individual musar authors relate their own time to past and future can hereby, as we shall see, serve as an indicator of how external change was integrated into the traditional universe. As one scholar recently defined it,

«Modernity» signifies the historical epoch in which, for an increasing majority of inhabitants in Europe and then other parts of the globe, an asymmetry between «hope» and «memory», or between the «horizon of expectation» and the «space of experience», becomes the fundamental condition of societal relationships. Experience is «present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered», whereas expectation is «the future made present» that «directs itself to the not-yet.» Before modernity, hope and memory worked in a rough balance. But after the seventeenth century, and then more forcefully after the French Revolution, industrialization, and the rise of territorial nation-states, hope disengaged from memory. Anticipation of the future worked without deferring primarily to the authority of remembrance. «Progress» came to signify this twin movement of an optimistic opening toward a future relatively unbound by experiential factors... 

For Jewish perceptions of history, too, memory and hope were intimately related in the traditional universe, the biblical past being understood as an archetypical prefiguration of what was to be the messianic future. Nothing really new and different was to be expected from the immediate future, the territory of expectation cleary being mapped out by the biblical narrative and its


interpretative tradition 17. In this view, things obviously «happened», but they did not produce change in any significant sense and were not permitted to transform the patterns of the traditional universe. The openness of future would clearly be a result of the modern condition 18.

As shall become clear in this study, at least two different trends can be distinguished in the Judeo-Spanish rabbinic ethical literature, each coming to terms with social, cultural, and technological change in a different way. While Rodeti perpetuates the traditional vision and denies change, reading the present and future expectations through the biblical past, Papo does not only recognize change but even interprets it as progress.

We will not consider here legal or «pragmatic» responses to technological change. To take up the example which the author encourages traders not to invest all their capital in one product because of the risks involved, and not to store large quantities of one article and tells his readers: «Y que no se asfura sobre su especulación, que él la ordena con vapor y con telegarfo y le viene a él antes de otros» 19. In our present discussion, we shall turn to new representations of time caused by such technological inventions as well as cultural changes 20.

17 The most significant contributions to the study of Jewish historical consciousness in recent years are: Yosef Hayim YERUSHALMI, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle 1982), and Amos FUNKENSTEIN, Perceptions of Jewish History (Berkeley - Los Angeles 1993).
18 LIEBEN «The Futures» p. 151.
19 PY 2:107: ‘He should not trust his own speculation, because he orders [the merchandise] by steam ship and telegraph and it will reach him earlier than it will others’.

2. THE RAPPROCHEMENT OF RELIGIONS

The chapters of the Pêle Yo’ets are arranged alphabetically and present an organization of knowledge worth a separate discussion for itself 21. Under the title «ge’ula» (‘redemption’), we find a fascinating and surprising interpretation of the revolutionizing of communication in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century:

Al principio el olam era muy lejos de parte a parte en viaje de mar. En tiempo antiguo se espantaban de caminar por golfo, caminaban todos a orí de la mar y se les alargaba mucho los viajes. Salieron las cienias de viajar todo por los golfo y se les acortó los caminos y mancos físicos. Salió después las hojmot de los vapores que se arodé el olam enter en poco tiempo. Por tiera salió la carreta de fuego que arodé el olam entero en pocos días. Salió el telegrafa que arodé el olam entero en pocas horas. Se entiende que el rubaniyut es aní y es el acercamiento de las emunot según la cosa ya empezó a amosstrar punta [...].

Mosotros no puede ser que manquemos de nuestra Ley, que aní estamos encomendados que dijo el pasuc: Vešó tigre ú mimena [ Dt 4:2]. Las naciones no tienen hýyub de recibir nuestra Ley, que lo que se encomendaron en las siete mísvot que se encomendó Noá y ya las afirman. Deneque el acercamiento de las emunot tiene que ser en lo que las naciones cada vez van haciendo más dikat en la quedusá de nuestra Ley y en la quedusá de Yisra’el [...]. Y cuanto más va pujando esto, puede venir dèrej teba’ que se haga aumiento en los maluyot y que lo topen de justo de dar todas las fuerzas a la unía yisraelet por que tengan sus tieras y podestia. Y afeito esto no puede venir si no con que lo merecemos 22.

21 I discuss this issue in a forthcoming article on «Representations and Organization of Knowledge in the Judeo-Spanish Ethical Literature». The organization according to subject matter in alphabetic order itself is not new but follows the model established by Bahya ben Aser from thirteenth century Saragossa in his Kad ha-Qenah, published in Kive rabbenah Bahya, ed. Hayim Dov SHEVEL (Jerusalem 1970) pp. 17-151.
22 PY 1:150-151: ‘In the beginning, the different parts of the world were a long voyage’s distance from one another. In ancient times, one feared to travel by crossing the open sea, [people] travelled close to the seashore, and travelling took a lot of time. Then the sciences of navigation were invented, [making it possible] to travel by crossing the open sea and the routes became shorter and less risky. Subsequently, the science of the steam ship was invented and the entire world could be encompassed in a short time. On the mainland, the railway was invented and encompasses the world in a few days. The telegraph was invented and encompasses the entire world in a few hours. It is clear that spiritually it is the..."
In this passage, Papo gives the technological innovations of his time a meaning which makes use of traditional imagery but, at the same time, goes far beyond it. The «disembodement» of time and space, the world becoming «smaller» and its different parts getting closer to one another are seen as reflecting a development in the history of religions: they, too, come nearer one to another. Or, to be more precise: Presenting a counter-model to Jewish assimilation to others, namely to European ways of life which were invading the cities of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, Papo claims that the non-Jews have, with the passing of the ages, come nearer to the ideals of Judaism. They increasingly respect the holiness of Israel and the authority of their Law and of the rabbis.

Such an optimistic reading of history can be found throughout many different passages in the Pele Yo’ets. To Papo, if the exile has become easier to bear, it is because the ideals of Judaism have spread across the world 33. Here, however, Papo gives his argu-

32 Cf. PY 1:139f.: «El galut se alivió del rob de las partes del ‘olam y la razón es con el dicho que dijé hajamim que no hay enemistad en el mundo como la enemistad de la Ley. Que en tiempo antiguo la enemistad de la Ley estaba cavada en los corazones de las naciones sobre la umá yisraeli. Esto cavaba el galut fuerte y los heberot y los gerusimí terribles que pasaron en la umá yisraeli. Y agora que se van muchiquando las ciencias y se va acercando el 1900 al punto de la verdad, ya están atadas todas las naciones que muestra Ley es santa y dada a mosáot en monte de Sinaí y que la nación yisraeli es el pueblo escogido del Criador, nada no hay encubierto de ellos. En tiempos antiguos todas las naciones servían ídolos y hacían muchas cosas negras, fens y estrafas. Ellos propios se fueron alejando de sus caminos y se fueron acercando a nuestra Ley, de conocer que hay Dios en los cielos y cuantas cosas buenas que hay en nuestra Ley». 'The diaspora has become easier to bear in most parts of the world and it is right what the sages said that there is no hatred in the world like the hatred of the Law. In ancient times, the hatred of the Law was engraved in the hearts of the nations against the Jewish people. This caused the hardship of diaspora, the persecutions and the awful expulsions which came to pass to the Jewish people. Now, that knowledge multiplies and the world is approaching to the moment of truth, the nations consent that our Law is holy, and was given to us on Mount Sinai, and that the Jewish people are the people chosen by the Creator, nothing being hidden from them. In ancient times, all the nations served idols and committed many bad, evil and strange things. They themselves moved away from their [evil] ways and came closer to our Law, to recognize that there is [one] God in the heavens and so many good things that are in our Law'.

33 PY 2:203.

34 PY 1:205f.

To remain in the Ottoman context, consider for example Eliyahu Capsali’s historiographical account of the Ottoman conquests in the Near East which he gave a messianic meaning as a step towards redemption. What seems significant here is that Papo recognized one of the major processes of the emerging modern society—the communication revolution of the nineteenth century, the «disembodiment» of time and space—as something positive and gives it a religious meaning as harbinger of redemption.

But let us return to the brief passage cited above. The text contains more than a superficial reading suggests. Technological change is seen as a metaphor for a development on the spiritual level, the approximation of religions. Papo states that such an approximation should not take on the form of the Jews acculturating to others but, quite to the contrary, to remain true to their own tradition and to wait for these others to come nearer to the ideals of Judaism.

He thereby argues that those who call for an acculturation of Jewish tradition to the patterns set by nineteenth century European culture are quite wrong in their understanding of the changes occurring around them. The Jews have to remain faithful to the old ways more than ever precisely because their mission in the world has been so successful and has to be carried on.

This argument reminds us of West European maskilim who wished to give religious legitimation to Jewish emancipation in the modern nation states while refuting assimilation by insisting on the «monotheistic mission» of Judaism.

This interpretation of change is a polemic response against some «others» labelled «apikorosim» (utilizing the rabbinic term for practically anyone expressing diverging ideas) or «philosophers», against the Westernizers among the Sephardim who see the changes as a challenge calling for imitating the European nations:

[...] se topan alguna gente que los sonbaya el yeher hará y les dije que en nuestros tiempos se muchugaron las cerdas en el

29 Sorkin Transformation pp. 103f.
30 Encyclopaedia Judaica s.v. «Apikoros».
lenging the rabbinic authority. They call for an individualization of knowledge, allowing the individual Jew to define his or her personal stand with regard to the traditional heritage—even to the point of questioning its basic assumptions.

For Papo, this predictably amounts to questioning the entire rabbinic universe tout court. In the passage on the impact of steam ships and telegraphs we have seen, however, that for him something else is at stake. While defending tradition, he affirms and praises change, and it might indeed finally lead to redemption, if only the Jews remain faithful to their Law at this critical point of God’s history with His people.

3. THE SPIRITUAL TELEGRAPH: A VISION OF PROGRESS

Let us turn now to take a look at how Yeuda Papo argues his case for the importance of the Law and the commandments. He carries his argument against the «Epicureans» further, namely that the Law is beyond what human intellect can grasp, and contrasts the «spiritual» (or holy, for that matter) with everything mundane or material and associates human intellect with the material. Then, he again employs the metaphor of the telegraph which, according to his understanding, is a material symbol of what takes place on the spiritual plane:

En esto que dijimos que de la Ley y de la misvat se hacen secretos grandes en los mundos de ariba, se quiere entender cómo en el punto que se hace la misvat o que se melta en la Ley o que se dice la teifla, cómo en aquel punto alcanza la obra suya en los mundos altos que es cuántos años de días de camino.

32 See in this context the remarks in PY 1:75-77, defining who is considered an «Epicurean».

33 Which is nothing short of inverting the view of philosophical musar as in Bahya Ibn Paquda’s Hovot ha-levavot, a «classics» of ethical literature. Bahya distinguishes «physical commandments» from the «duties of the hearts», the former including prayer, fasting, charity, study of Torah, phylacteries, etc., while the latter ones, more important, amount to true knowledge of God which can be achieved through «reason», assisted by Scripture and rabbinic tradition. Bahya Ibn Paquda, Hovot ha-levavot, introduction (ed. Vilna 1913, pp. 9-49); originally written in 11th century Spain and first published in Hebrew 1490 in Naples, there appeared partial or full Latin translations by Yosef Pirmón in Istanbul 1569 and Venice 1712, by Yisrael B. Hayim in Vienna 1822, and by Selomo Uziel in Istanbul, 1898. Cf. ROMERO Creación p. 112.

Ma la respuesta es muy barata. Que la fuerza del ruhaniyut es muy terrible, más de lo que alcanza nuestro meollo y afilá en el gašmiyut se ve diferencia grande de más gašmi a manco gašmi: los pies que son muy gašmiyim, en una hora no pueden caminar más que una hora de camino. El oyir que es más ruhani, en pocos puntos se oye la voz afilá de lugar lejos de cuantas horas de camino, como cuando echan el tiro y cuando sale el trueno. La vista que es más ruhani del oyir, se ve antes de lo que se oye y la preba es que la voz del tiro y la voz del trueno se oye después que se ve el relámpago y la llama del tiro, afilá que salen en un punto, ma la vista aconanta el oyir. Y todo esto es en gašmiyut, cuánto más en el ruhaniyut, que ya dijimos que la Ley y las mîvot está la punta de ellas en nuestra mano, no quiere dicho que súbito que se maneja la punta de abajo, se maneja y hace su obra en los mundos de ariba.

Y ya dijimos en la letra de Guedal que el Šy’t quiere arecercer a todas las naciones en las emunot verdaderas y va descubriendo secretos de la natura, que de ello se toma enjemplo para reconoçer las verdades y por arecercer el meollo a conocer la fuerza del ruhaniyut. Mos amostraron de los cielos asemejante con la hoptim del telegraf que es gašmi: toca la una punta del tel, arodéa el mundo entero en pocas horas.

La Ley y las mîvot son telegraf ruhani, de suyo se entiende cuánto es su fuerza. Y este telegraf ruhani está mentado en el pasue que lo vido Ya’acov abino cuando se fue a Harán y durmio en el lugar del Bet hamicidás, vido en su esueño sulam mušab arsha ve-rošo maqüda’ hašamadás: es el telegraf ruhani 34.

34 PY 2:158-159: Having said that from the [observance of] the Law and the commandments great miracles are caused in the upper worlds, one has to understand how in the moment of the performance of a commandment or the studying of the Law or saying the prayer, it reaches in this very moment the upper worlds which are thousands of years away. But the answer is very easy: The power of the spiritual [ruhaniyut] is much more terrible than what we grasp with our intellect, and even with regard to the material [gašmiyut], one observes a great distinction between more and less material. The facts, which are very material, cannot walk in one hour more than one hour’s walking distance. Hearing is more spiritual, in a few moments one hears a sound even in a place at several hours’ distance, such as a shot or a thunder. Seeing is more spiritual than hearing, one sees before hearing [something], and the evidence is that one hears the sound of a shot or of a thunder after one sees the lightening or the fire, even though they are produced at the same moment, but seeing comes before hearing. And all this is with regard to the material. How much more so with regard to the spiritual, and we already said that [in the case of] the Law and the commandments, one end is in our hands and it goes without saying that when one moves the lower end, it moves instantly and causes its effect in the upper worlds. We already said in the chapter on
Papo presents here another audacious re-reading of the relation of time and space. His fascination with a diminishing distance of time and space parallels a more widespread sense of simultaneity current at the time and is translated into the traditional universe. The growing «disembodement» of the time-space relation is analogous with a growing spiritualization, an interpretation which allows him to see modernization as a religiously positive phenomenon, though dangerous for those who let themselves be misguided into assimilation. In reality, however, the experience of simultaneity as made possible by the telegraph should be understood as a representation of the synchronization of human and divine actions.

Papo sees the relation of God and the Jews as a dialogue. He assures his reader that study of the Law and observance of the divine commandments have an immediate effect on the upper worlds and on divine actions - of course a well-known kabbalistic reading of the mitzvot. This view is, then, the basis for Papo's optimistic evaluation of redemption being possible. In this passage, again, he speaks of the rapprochement of the different nations and religions towards Jewish monotheism and even claims that the telegraph is nothing less than a divine instrument serving as an illustration of such a spiritual development.

What, then, are the concrete developments which motivate Papo's optimism? At one point, Yeuda insists that his own times do in fact merit seeing the redemption of the Jews and the restoration to their homeland, with the condition that they observe the commandments and engage in repentance (tešuva). Among the factors he cites in support of his optimism, he includes in the first place innovations made during his time which make man's life «more tranquil» and «more secure». He then repeats his argument of the gentiles having taken over ideals of Judaism.

Significantly, additional factor is the publication of the Pele Yo'etz itself which would contribute to make rabbinic knowledge available to everyone so that ignorance of tradition is remedied. The progress in the Ottoman printing industry in general would cause a spread of rabbinic literature. Finally, the activities of the Alliance Israëlite are a positive factor, though it should advance the respect for and knowledge of religious tradition rather than propagating Western ideas.

All these factors — new modes of communication, scientific progress, and the author's own book — are merged into an image of a dawning new age of an accelerated movement towards a bright future. This age is characterized by the religious assimilation of other peoples to the ideals of Judaism (and not the other way around) and might indeed lead to redemption. Redemption, to be sure, is understood in «national» or «political» terms as the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in Palestine. All this amounts to a post-traditional mode of perceiving change and of understanding future.

Niklas Luhmann has differentiated between traditional and modern societies by arguing that there exists a relation between the increasing differentiation of social systems and an increasing dissociation of past and future. Modern societies are characterized by «futurization» — i.e., an increasingly open future. The term «open» has to be qualified: It means first of all that it is not preordained by a mythical, idealized past or past, idealizing revelations. «Open» means that a whole range of options (though not everything) becomes a possibility of selection. Future is a

35 Papo describes these developments in PY 2:199-204.
36 LUHMANN «The Future» p. 141.
horizon which is never reached or, as Luhmann says, it «cannot begin», because every selection, every realization of a future possibility leads to another range of future options.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, one has to point out some paradoxes, however. While in modern societies past and future become part of the same chronology and one causal line of historical development and traditional societies sometimes appear to have lived in an endless present 38, the dissociation of past and future has made very distant pasts and futures quite irrelevant to the present in modern societies 39, while the representations of precisely such distant (mythic) past and distant (utopic) future has determined much of the parameters of traditional presents.

With regard to «futurization», modern societies certainly did not only perceive the future as increasingly open but at the same time believed it possible and tried to control this openness. One has only to think of the defuturizing effects of statistic calculus with the growing interest in statistics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries 40. When we think of the Enlightenment or (early) nineteenth century optimism, moreover, though the future is open, there is still a strong sense of having arrived, as it were, at the future point of human evolution, being understood as bourgeois society 41.

How modern is Yeuda Papo's understanding of future? I propose to see here an example of transforming traditional conceptions of time, preserving certain elements of it while introducing new ideas as well. He significantly transforms the traditional view of a present which derived its meaning from the relation to an a-historical past and a utopian future when the present will return to the golden age of mythical past. For Papo, the future becomes an «open» future in the sense of a range of possibilities, one step emerging out of the next, not being predetermined and being continuous with the present, not interrupting historical time by divine intervention from «outside». God's acts do, indeed, correspond to human actions and thus are taken, by the simile of the «spiritual telegraph», into the time of present human existence.

The future, the beginnings of which Yeuda sees in his contemporary world, is an open possibility and it is inscribed in historical processes. The topics are the traditional ones — namely, restoration of the Jews to their homeland — but this restoration will be achieved by political action of other peoples. Furthermore, Papo explains,

 [...] que puede ser que será como la sebará de Samuel, que su sebará es que no habrá ninguna diferencia de nuestro tiempo al tiempo del mašaḥ otro que los jüdisios no estaremos debajo del comando de las naciones 42.

For Papo, there will be no interruption in the flaw of time but revolutionarizing Israel's political condition. This view represents, probably being a long-term response to the crisis of Ottoman Jewry after the Sabbatean meltdown, a return to the stance of medieval Jewish rationalist thought, namely the Rambam 43. It departs from the dominant, non-rationalist view as it is expressed, for example, in Khulli's Me'am Lo'ez emphasizing that redemption will not be a natural event but will be brought about by divine intervention 44. The reclaiming of Maimonides the rationalist was, of course, an essential part of the haskalah project of transforming Jewish society 45.

38 This must not be understood as if traditional societies did not experience any change — but change and innovation were not, unlike in modern times, seen as something positive to be pursued. Rather, like in Rodet’s case which we shall see below, traditional authors tend to construct a fiction of endless continuity, interpreting change away.
40 LUHMANN «The Future» p. 141.
42 PY 2:205: [...] it is possible that [redemption] will be according to the opinion of Samuel for according to his opinion there will be no difference between our times and the times of the Messiah other than that we Jews will cease to be under the command of the gentiles.
43 Papo refers to BT-Bereshit 34b and BT-Sanhedrin 91b, which are taken by Maimonides as evidence for redemption as an event within the natural course of things: Mīna Tora, book I, Hilkha Tēshuva, 9. 2 and book XIV, Melakhim u-Milhamotchem, 12. 2. Both passages appear in Isadore TERSKYY, A Maimonides Reader (New York 1972) pp. 83 and 224.
44 Jacob KHULLI, Me'am Lo'ez Bereft, «Lekh lekhā», ch. 4 (ed. Izmir 1864, p. 105b): «... que sepa que la gueulā es regida de los cielos y no pense que es algún mírce» (I quote according to the edition printed by the same Rodeti whose Sefer KI Ze Kol ha-Adam we will discuss below).
This modern understanding of future allows Papo to perceive change as a fact and to ascribe it a positive function in the drama of religious history. Papo believes, in his manner, in progress:

[... ] que afilá que a la parencia parece que quando non se hizo la tehuba y ma’asim tobin en tiempo avante, cuan y más que non se viene a hacer en este tiempo. Y la verdad non es así, que muy cercano y colay es en este tiempo de hacernos buenos jidios. 46

Technological innovation and change mean the rapprochement of religions on a «spiritual» level and might lead to political actions in favour of the Jews. The movement towards this point is one of progress. Papo therefore does not decry his own time, as was usually the case in ethical rabbinic literature throughout the ages, as one of decline and moral decay – again exemplified in Khuli’s Me’am Lo’ez, where he states that «también que el séadíe que nace no puede ser tan sabio cuanto el primero, siendo vemos que el mundo va discrepando y la diferencia es mucha en cada tiempo de un dor a otro» 47. For Papo, in contrast, modern times have led the Jews closer to redemption, not farther away.

There have always been, of course, acute messianic expectations in Jewish history. Papo however, notwithstanding his optimism and belief in progress, still sees the eventual developments as open and far from predetermined. He maintains that whatever one might expect from the future is necessarily conjectural and – in contrast to others’ messianic speculations – he insists that even the interpretation of the Biblical verses with reference to redemption can never be certain 48. He presents a distinct and, I argue, «modern» vision of the messianic future as a future point of a continuous chronological and progressive development, his own time worthy of seeing redemption.

To sum up, the revolution of communication networks in the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire causes Yeuda Papo to articulate a new vision of a present future. Mundane and divine processes being perfectly synchronized, the phenomenon of temporal-spatial coming closer is interpreted as «actually» conveying the sense of a «spiritual» rapprochement between cultures. Modern changes are progress and lead towards an open but promising future.

4. NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN: HEZEKIAH AND THE TELEGRAPH

A very different reference to the technique of the telegraph is found in Binyamin Ben-Tsion Rodeti’s Sefer Ki Ze Kol ha-Adam. The second part of the book deals with the issues of illness and death. In one paragraph, Rodeti discusses in much detail the illness and cure of king Hezekiah as described in Is 38:1-39:8 49. The main issue of the text is the power of prayer in the hour of illness and threat of death. When Hezekiah’s prayer is heard and he is promised recovery, he asks for a divine sign proving that this is really true. The answer he is given, «and this is the sign for you from the Lord that the Lord will do what He has promised: I am going to make the shadow on the steps, which has descended on the dial of Ahaz because of the sun, recede ten steps...» (Is 38:7-8), prompts Rodeti to cite the midrashic commentary on the episode of Babylonian king Merodach’s message to Hezekiah 50.

[A] Merodaq ben Baladán estaba usado a comer a las 6 horas de el día y dormía hasta las 9. [B] Siendo que oyó el Syt la tefláh de Hizquiýahu y le respondió que le pújó 15 años, en aqué hora demandó Hizquiýahu señal del Syt cómo es verdad que le pújó 15 años. Y tenía que subir al Bet ha’ami nami [das]. Le respondió el Syt: «Vézah lejá haot (esta es la señal). Que te va volto el sol atrás diez escalones» 51, que en aqué hora era las diez del día y el sol está de parte de ma’arav, y yoltó el galgal de el sol a la

46 PY 2:199: ‘[...] even though it might appear that, if there has been no repentance and good deeds in earlier times, how much more so they cannot be expected in the present time. But in reality it is not like this, the time being near and appropriate to make of us good Jews’.

47 Me’am Lo’ez Bereit, “Haye Sara”, ed. 1 (ed. Lurin 1864, p. 154a): ‘... the righteous who is born cannot be as wise as the other who passed away, as we see that the world is constantly regressing and the difference between one generation and another is significant’.

48 PY 2:205.

49 KA 4b-7a.

50 Rodeti translates from Yalqut Shimoni, II Kings 20, 244. Cf. also Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana II,6; Shu ha’amim Rabba III,4,2; Zohar II,174b-175a; BT-Sanhedrin 96a; Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews (7 voles., Philadelphia 1947) vol. 4, pp. 275f. and 300. In the transcription, I divide the paragraphs as [A] through [E] in order to facilitate subsequent references.

51 I.e., the shadow on the sun dial of Ahaz: cf. Is 38. The SONCINO translation of the Talmud explains: ‘The return of the ten degrees is assumed to mean a prolongation of the day by ten hours, light having healing powers’.
parte de mizrah y parecía que era demanana y se hizo el día diez horas más grande. El sol se había hundido el día que murió Ahaz, que se escureció el día diez horas para que no lo endécharan, ahora se le aclaró a Hizkuyá su hijo (Raš'l, Yeša'tá 38 22).

[C] En este día de el nes de Hizkuyá que se echó a durmir Baladán como su usanza de cada día, y se despertó vido que estaba el sol de parte de mizrah, se le asemejó que durmió hasta el otro día demañana, y buscó a matar a sus esclavos cómo lo dejaron durmir este carar el día con la noche. Le respondieron los esclavos: «Muestro señor el rey, el día es que se alargó, que se voló al charc de la mañana y este nes lo hizo el Šy'ta a Hizkuyahu que lo melecinó de la haciura que estaba». Dijo el rey: «Un hombre como este estimado ¿y no le mando Šalom?». Le escribía una carta este nosisah: Šalom a el rey Hizkuyahu, Šalom a la ciudad de Yerusaláym, Šalom a el Dio grande».

[D] Nebujadnesar era el escribano de el rey, no se topó ahí cuando escribieron esta carta. Cuando vino les demandó: ¿Qué modo escribiste la carta?. Le respondieron aségan la copia dita. Les dijo a ellos: «Lo llamate Dio grande ¡y acolantás a escribirle Šalom a el esclavo antes de el amo! En primero calía que escriberaral "Šalom a el Dio grande" y "Šalom a Yerusaláym" y "Šalom a Hizkuyahu". Le dieron a él: «Muy bien dítles; va volta al coreo y escribe según queres». En lo que caminó 3 pasos, vino Gabriel y lo detuvo al coreo para que no caminara más Nebujadnesar. Y dijo rabi Yohanan que si no lo detenía Gabriel, no tenían tecum h[as] ve[šalom] Yisrael, que por el sajar que caminó 3 pasos le dijo el Šy'ta: Tú caminate 3 pasos por mí kobod; ¡hayeja!, quo yu qito de ti 3 reis grandes que podesten de un cabo de mundo hasta otro y estos son Nebujadnešar y Evil-Merodaj y Belšažar. Dijo el Šy'ta: «Umá por sajar de tres pasos que corió, tú tienes maravía que le paguf este carar, cuando yo pago el sajar a Abraham, Yisrâ'el y Ya'acov, que corieron delantre de mí como el caballo, "a[I] a[hát] k[amál] v[ēja-má]. Hasta aquí es su lasón.

[E] Que de este cuento de Merodaj se puede prebar que el telegraf ya estaba en el mundo -en kol hadâš-, siendo que Hizkuyá era en Yerusaláym y Merodaj en Babel, que tiene cuántos conaques

52 Rashi on Is 38.1.

This brief passage allows us to observe several aspects which would seem to be central to Rodeti’s outlook on time and his literary strategies which, in turn, are indicative of modern Judeo-Spanish rabbinical literature’s use of the classical rabbinic sources. He translates the midrashic passage from the Yalqot quite literally:

53 KA 6b–7a: ‘Merodakh ben Baladân used to eat at the 6th hour of the day and sleep till the 9th [hour]. When God heard Hezekiah’s prayer and answered him that he would grant him [another] 15 years, at that hour Hezekiah asked for a sign from God, that it is true that he would grant him [another] 15 years. He had to go up to the Holy Temple. God answered him: ‘This shall be the sign. I will turn the sun back by ten degrees, since at this hour it was the 10th [hour] and the sun stood in the West and He returned the sun to the East and it appeared as if it were still morning and the day was prolonged by ten hours. For the sun had been hidden on the day on which Ahaz died and the day darkened during ten hours lest they mourn him, now it was brightened for Hezekiah, his son. The day of the miracle of Hezekiah’s recovery, Baladân went to sleep as he used to every day and when he woke up, he saw that the sun stood in the East and thought that he had slept till the next day’s morning and wanted to have his servants executed because they let him sleep so much, day and night. The servants answered him: ‘Our lord, the king, the day was prolonged and the sun was returned to the morning [hour], and God did this miracle for Hezekiah whom he cured from his illness’. The king exclaimed: ‘A man so esteemed as [Hezekiah], and I do not send him regards? [So] he wrote him [Hezekiah] a letter as follows: ‘Peace upon king Hezekiah, peace upon the city of Jerusalem, peace upon the great God. Nebuchadnezzar was the king’s scribe [but] was not there when they wrote the letter. When he came, he asked them: “How did you write the letter?” They answered him as has been cited. He said to them: “You call Him “the great God” and have sent greetings to the servant [the king] before the lord [God]? You should have written first “peace upon the great God” and [then] “peace upon Jerusalem” and “peace upon Hezekiah”. They told him: “Very well have you spoken; go call the messenger back and write as you suggest”. When he had taken three steps, Gabriel came and stopped the messenger in order that Nebuchadnezzar should not go any further. Rabbi Yohanan said that, if Gabriel had not stopped him, Israel could not have been saved, for by virtue of the three steps he had taken, God told him: “You walked three steps for my honour, I surely will grant you three great kings from your offspring who will reign from one end of the world to the other, and they are Nebuchadnezzar, Evil-Merodakh, and Belshazzar”. God said: “If you wonder how I have paid him so much for the virtue of the three steps he ran, how much more so when I pay the virtue of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who run before me like a horse” [Till here is the quotation from the Yalqot]. From this story about Merodakh it can be proven that the telegraph was already in existence; there is nothing new: Hezekiah was in Jerusalem and Merodakh in Babylonia, and there are so many palaces on the way [in between], but he knew at this very hour [about Hezekiah’s recovery], as the verse says: At this time [ba-‘et ha-hi, Is 39:1] sent Merodakh etc.’.”
(A, C and D) and clearly indicates where the translation ends and what is his commentary (E). Though he inserts an expiatory paragraph (B), he does not introduce his remark that «the telegraph was already in existence» where it would have fitted — i.e., at the end of paragraph (C) and before introducing the second story about the wording of Merodakh’s letter to Hezekiah (D) — but prefers to respect the original passage in its entirety and only then feels free to add his own remark.

Though added at the end, however, Rodeti’s own commentary is meant to actually close the story and add a new perspective, which he achieves by finishing it with the reference phrase from the biblical text which opens the passage in the original text as given in the Yalqut. His brief remark, to be sure, gives the story an entirely new and surprising point which significantly contrasts with the telegraph as a metaphor as it had been used in the Pele Yo‘ets.

Rodeti’s is a fine example of the use of traditional sources in modern Judeo-Spanish rabbinic literature. His book continues the «anthological imagination» of the rabbinic textual tradition and, more specifically, continues the example of the Judeo-Spanish «classic», the Me‘am Lo‘ez. The collection and translation into Judeo-Spanish served its authors-compilators to transform and remould the original texts they wanted to present to a broad, Judeo-Spanish speaking public. As Louis Landau has shown for the case of Khuli’s Me‘am Lo‘ez on Genesis, the work could not be farther from being a simple «collection» of rabbinic source texts as its author claims in his introduction. Indeed, he quite freely introduces changes in the wording and structure of his sources.

Rodeti, however, seems more scrupulous in his treatment of the original text. He is audacious enough to give the text an entirely new turn by skillfully associating it with a contemporary issue, but he does not interrupt the narrative flow of the original text and adds his commentary, neatly marked as such, only after having given an accurate (though not necessarily «literal») translation of the passage from the Yalqut Sim‘oni. He believes that tradition can speak for itself and has eternally valid answers without needing to be reworked by him as compiler and translator.

The fact that Rodeti introduces his reference to the telegraph at this point is no coincidence, of course. The text from Isaiah itself (and its midrashic commentary cited by Rodeti) plays on different representations of time which is always dominated by God and never independent of divine will. Thus it is God who allotted fifteen more years of life to Hezekiah; it is God who miraculously makes the sun regress by ten degrees thus making the day longer; and earlier, when Sennacherib beleaguered Jerusalem, God had prolonged darkness and an angel killed Israel’s enemies (Is 37:36).

Paragraph (D) of the midrashic account translated by Rodeti furthermore is evidence of how he understands history: Power and powerlessness of Israel and the other nations (here, the Babylonian kings) are determined by God. In political history, the dynamics of reward and punishment are played out on a collective level, just as illness is explained in the frame of reward and punishment in an individual sense.

This divine command over time is reaffirmed by Rodeti in the face of modern changes in the time-space relation. Technological innovation thus should not be misunderstood as challenging the divine control of time and therefore of human experience. Scientific progress does not switch the biblical patterns of God directing and allotting time.

How is the reference to the telegraph inscribed in Rodeti’s exposition? Firstly, in the chapter dealing with illness and death, the issue is about personal experiences of time. New patterns of time brought about by technological or cultural change do not, for Rodeti, have any implications for the individual experiencing time; just as the world, so the individual is subject to the divine control over time. Moreover, the chapter is about prayer. As has been seen in Papo’s talk of the «spiritual telegraph», prayer as communication with God likewise could be linked, by the way of metaphor, to the communication revolution of their own time. Again, modern times do not change at all the ways man communicates with God in prayer.

To Rodeti, all that is relevant to human existence has already been said; all that is necessary to understand has already been explained. Actually, whatever seems like change has really always existed. Rodeti’s attitude thus conforms with medieval Jewish historiography among the characteristics of which Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has numbered its «[r]esistance to novelty in history» and tries to fit present events into the mold of past «prece-
dents» [36]. «For the rabbis», Yerushalmi held, «the Bible was not only a repository of past history, but a revealed pattern of the whole of history» [37].

Rodeti applies this attitude towards history to the situation of technological innovation. He insists that the telegraph was in existence in the times of Hezekiah—quite a remarkable supposition, the objective of which is to defy any possible inference of internal changes within the religious universe from outward, technological change. Rodeti thus takes up a position contrary to Papo: While both defend tradition against the challenges of modernity, Rodeti does not accept the very notion of change and argues that tradition has valid answers because everything is already anticipated in tradition. Papo, for his part, accepts the fact of change but reinterprets it as leading towards redemption in an optimistic vision of a progressively victorious tradition.

5. TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE PRESENT

Yeuda Papo’s Pele Yo’ets partakes, as it were, in a broader discourse on time which could be observed throughout at least the Western world in the decades around the turn of the century: «[T]he wireless and telephone, … simultaneity and the spatially expanded present, … the temporally thickened “spacious present”, and finally … the positive evaluation of the present … outline the distinctive experience of the present in this period» [38]. It would be out of place to construct Papo as a decidedly modern or «progressive» author. But if we see the dissociation of past and present, experience and expectation as constitutive of modern culture, Papo’s book represents important semantic changes in its evaluation of the present which comes to be seen as being inscribed in a history of progress. He expresses the expectation of the Jews’ redemption in historical time and reaches out to a present future, a future which is open and historical but not deferred to the traditional, non-present future of the world-to-come or messianic redemption.

Whoever is familiar with modern Jewish history will recall another Sephardic rabbi writing at the same time as the young Papo: Yehuda Alkala’i from Bosnia who had actually been studying with Eli’ezar Papo, author of the Hebrew Pele Yo’ets. When he published his booklet Sem’ut Yisrael in 1834, he proposed the creation of Jewish colonies in the Holy Land in order to actively advance redemption.

On the basis of kabbalistic speculations, Alkala’i was convinced that the year 5600 (1839/40) would be the year of the Jews’ redemption or [39], the year having passed without restoration to the Land of Israel, at least a decisive moment in the transition toward the final redemption. Fuelled by the upheavals of the 1840 Damascus «blood libel» and the diplomatic efforts of West European Jews (the mission of Crémiex and Montefiore to the Middle East) [40], Alkala’i propagated his program of «self-redemption», his reinterpretation of the ancient concept of tehitut (’repentance’) in its literal sense of ‘return’—return of the Jews to the Holy Land and its colonization [41].

Mark D. Angel has compared the activism of Yehuda Alkala’i with Eli’ezar Papo’s quietist and passive attitude to modernity as represented in the Hebrew Pele Yo’ets [42]. It certainly appears that the Ladino version of the Pele Yo’ets engages in a subtle never explicit polemic against Alkala’i’s activist approach. Yeuda Papo clearly argues that the return of the Jews to their homeland must

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[38] Kern Time and Space p. 87.
be the result of external political developments and refutes the
calculation of the messianic end of historic time 63. Alkalai’s and
Papo share, however, the awareness of change and a reevaluation of
the present. Both represent a view of present and future being part
of a progressive history moving toward national redemption in
historical time. Theirs is a present-oriented view of the future.

Papo’s and Alkalai’s viewpoint contrast with a second trend in
modern Judeo-Spanish rabbinic literature, represented here by
Ben-Tsion Rodeti. His vision is probably summed up well in a
story he tells in his Sefer Ki Ze Kol ha-Adam, though there is no
explicit reference to the troubled times of modern change but
rather to the troubled times of individual illness: There is a ship
captured in a terrible storm on the open sea. The passengers throw
the ballast into the water and try to save the ship from sinking.
One of them throws his talit overboard. «Could there be a worse
foolishness?», asks Rodeti: Not only that the talit does not weight
much; serving for prayer, it actually would be the only way of
salvation. The author then explains that in the same manner,
especially in times of illness, one should be praying and reading
the biblical and rabbinic texts he then includes in a Judeo-Spanish
translation in his book 64.

The simile could also be read as a response to the uneasy times
of modern transformation: In Rodeti’s view, one should certainly
not throw the traditional heritage, the divine commandments,
overboard. Rather, he affirms the importance of communication
with God—and that everything one has to know is actually already
included in the canon of traditional knowledge from biblical and
rabbinic literature passages from which he then sets out to scru-
pulously render into Ladino. His can be described as a «past-
oriented view of the future».

6. CONCLUSIONS

Though it is highly tenuous to establish general trends from the
two isolated examples seen here 65, Yeuda Papo’s and Ben-Tsion

63 PY 1:146.
64 KA 9b-10a.
65 The conclusions are drawn from a broader research in progress on the Judeo-
Spanish ethical literature and I hope to expand on the points suggested here in the
future.

Rodeti’s texts seem to represent two attitudes towards change in
the modern age among Eastern Sephardic rabbis. Both are
conservative in the sense of defending the traditional universe
against challenges from without and post-traditional in the sense of
their traditionalism being an ideologically motivated reaction to
alternative models; rabbinic authority is not something obvious
any more but has to be defended 66.

They construe different answers to the challenges of modernity,
however. While Papo embraces change as historical progress and
revalues the present with its sweeping transformation as
important—and positively so—, Rodeti prefers to read the present
through the utopian past of an untouched textual tradition. Rodeti’s «en kol hadas» clearly contrasts with Papo’s view of the
present as harbinger of better, but still historical, times.

The observations presented here allow us to move away from
the erroneous assumption that the Sephardic rabbis formed one
unified block in their reaction to the forces of modernization and
to understand their highly ambiguous view and multiple inter-
pretations of modern change.

66 On the difference between «traditional» and «conservative», cf. also Karl
Mannheim, «Das konservative Denken: Soziologische Beiträge zum Werden des
politisch-historischen Denkens in Deutschland», in Karl Mannheim, Wissenssozio-
RESUMEN

En este artículo analizo las referencias a la introducción del telegrafo en dos libros de musar del siglo XIX publicados en ladino: el Pele Yo'és, cuyo versión judeoespañola preparó Yeudá Papo, y el Séfer Ki ée kol haadam, de Ben-Šiyón Binyamin Rodeti. Los pasajes nos permiten estudiar cómo entendieron estos dos rabíos sefardíes el tiempo presente y el futuro, así como los cambios en un período de avances técnicos y transformaciones sociales como los que se produjeron en el Imperio Otomano del siglo XIX. Podemos distinguir dos tendencias. Mientras que el libro de Papo anuncia importantes transformaciones semánticas en el entendimiento del tiempo –aunque él mismo nunca sale del márgen de la tradición rabinica–, Ben-Šiyón Rodeti descarta que haya cambios y afirma que todo ya se ha dicho en la tradición literaria rabinica y que los tiempos actuales no cuestionan ni pueden cuestionar esta tradición.

SUMMARY

In this article, I analyze the brief references to the invention of the telegraph in Yeuda Papo’s Judeo-Spanish version of the Pele Yo’és and Ben Tsion Rodeti’s Sefer Ki Ze Kol ha-Adam, two Judeo-Spanish books of musar from the nineteenth century. These rather unlikely references permit us to study perceptions of present, future, and change held by two Sephardic rabbis from the Ottoman Empire in a period of accelerated technological progress and social transformation. Two different attitudes towards change can be described. While Papo’s work announces important transformations in the semantics of understanding time, without stepping outside rabbinic tradition itself, Ben Tsion Rodeti denies the very fact of change and affirms that everything that has to be known already is included once and for all in the rabbinic literary tradition.