

*Dedicated to my beloved wife,
my lovely children,
and my wonderful grandchildren*

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Introduction

One of my most important lecturers at Bar-Ilan University, the late Prof. Yehuda Ratzabi, used to say that if he had been asked to name the five most important and influential Jews of all generations, he would have included among them R. Saadia Gaon.

Indeed, R. Saadia Gaon was unquestionably one of the most important if not *the* most important medieval Jewish thinker. He dealt with biblical exegesis, philosophy, grammar, poetry, prayer, and Halakha, and in many of these fields he is considered an innovator and a trailblazer, paving new paths for his followers. Proof of his status and centrality is not only the fact that many of the sages who lived after him cited from his writings—at times acknowledging these references and at times not—but also the fact that, even if they disagreed with him, they saw themselves compelled to relate to his views and grapple with them. Further evidence of this is the fact that he was called by the sages in later generations *rosh ha-medabrim be-khol maqom* [head speaker everywhere], a title that was originally given to Rabbi Yehuda, one of the greatest sages of the Mishnah.

R. Saadia Gaon was born in 882 CE in the village of Dilāz, in the district of Fayyūm, Upper Egypt. For reasons unknown he left his birthplace and set out for Babylonia, the center of Jewish creativity at that time. Between 915 and 920, R. Saadia Gaon lived in Tiberias, where he studied Torah with Eli ben Yehuda ha-Nazir (or, by his Arabic name, Abū Kathīr Yihyā ben Zakariyyā), who was a grammarian, philosopher, and one of the first to translate the Scriptures into Arabic. In the Land of Israel R. Saadia dealt with Scripture, the Masoretic text, grammar, and *piyyūt* (religious poetry), acquiring a broad knowledge in these fields. In 921 R. Saadia Gaon lived briefly in Aleppo, Syria, and in 922 he arrived in Baghdād, where he was appointed *rosh kallah*, one of the heads of the Pumbeditha academy (*yeshiva*).

R. Saadia Gaon's education and areas of interest were extremely wide, and they played a crucial role in the writing of his commentaries on Scriptures and in the formulation of their character. Even though he had been born and brought up in Egypt, which was not at the center of the world of Jewish culture, his journey to Babylonia took him through all the Jewish and Arabic centers of Torah and learning of his day. Not having been educated in Babylonia, he was not a typical student of the Babylonian academy, which was somewhat cut off from

the cultural and spiritual realities of the period. This in turn stunted growth and originality in rabbinical literature.

R. Saadia Gaon's talents and broad culture were expressed immediately upon his arrival in Babylonia. When he was an *alūf* at the academy of Pumbaditha, his main task was to teach Scriptures to the young students. It can be assumed that this was accompanied by related subjects, such as the *masorah*, the textual tradition, Hebrew grammar, and poetics. These studies had been neglected in Babylonia, and R. Saadia Gaon, who had studied them in Tiberias, was thus perfectly suited to teach them, and later also to author important works in these fields.

In 928 the exilarch, David ben Zakkai, appointed him *gaon*, head of the Academy of Sūra. He gathered around himself students of the academy who had moved to the competing academy, Pumbaditha, and restored Sura's previous standing.

In 932, following a sharp dispute between him and the exilarch, R. Saadia Gaon was obliged to abandon his position as *gaon* and to find shelter for four years. In 937 the two were reconciled and R. Saadia Gaon returned to his post. His later years passed peacefully and without controversy until he died in 942.

When R. Saadia achieved his goal, he could carry out his vision and lead the entire Jewish people in Babylonia, the Land of Israel, and the Diaspora. According to R. Saadia, the sages and righteous people bear responsibility for leading and guiding the people of Israel, but in each generation there is a single, unique sage who surpasses all others, and he is the genuine leader of the generation: "God will not withhold from his people a *talmid*—referring to a *talmid ḥakham*, a Torah scholar—in each generation who will teach and enlighten so that he may educate the people and they shall prosper at his hand." In another source, he clarifies:

The people will give thanks to their God for not withholding from them in each generation a person who has been enlightened by wisdom, as God promised to his people "As when juice is still found in a cluster of grapes and people say, 'Don't destroy it, there is still a blessing in it,' so will I do on behalf of my servants; I will not destroy them all" (Isaiah 65:8).

R. Saadia formulated this approach gradually, over the course of the years he served as *gaon* of Sūra. However, in my opinion, this approach began to take shape in R. Saadia's mind at an earlier stage, during the dispute with Aharon

Ben Meir regarding the Hebrew calendar, or even beforehand, when he wrote his early works against the Karaites before departing from Egypt, his land of origin.

The life of R. Saadia is a long journey aimed at serving as the *gaon* in Babylonia and leading the Jewish people. Furthermore, R. Saadia apparently saw himself as the nation's supreme leader, the true leader of the generation whose role was more important than that of other sages. As I will try to prove in chapter one, he considered himself as that special wise *talmid* whose job it is to lead the people of Israel, to guide it, to align its beliefs and opinions. He dedicated all his works, interpretive, philosophical, polemical, liturgical, and even linguistic, to this purpose.

In this book I will try to analyze R. Saadia's path to fulfilling this vision. Each of the six chapters of the book deals with a different aspect of the Gaon's literary and social activity, with the aim of showing how his entire enterprise is aimed at achieving one goal: leadership.

Chapter one, "The Leadership of R. Saadia Gaon," will describe and analyze R. Saadia's journey from Egypt, his birthplace, to Babylonia, the stations he passed through and how he prepared himself for the position for which he destined himself. Later in the chapter I will prove that he did indeed strive for leadership, overcoming obstacles along the way, and gained the coveted position, even though he was not a member of the pedigreed and wealthy families in Babylonia.

The chapter will also prove, through quotes from the works of R. Saadia himself, that he considered himself this unique and special *talmid* who was supposed to lead the generation, and that his disciples also saw in him the leader worthy of it.

In what follows, we will list the main goals of R. Saadia and describe and analyze the ways in which he tried to fulfill them.

Chapter two, "Polemic in R. Saadia's Work," will discuss one of the main ways R. Saadia adopted in his writing. A careful study of his works shows that he was extensively involved in polemics with Jews—Karaites and other heretics—and Gentiles in a broad spectrum of fields and subjects. Most authors relate in one way or another to their predecessors and may frequently disagree with them but, in R. Saadia's case, the inclination to polemic and controversy is particularly prominent. Often, the impression is that R. Saadia strived for disputes and that he exploited every opportunity to verbally confront opinions and beliefs he did not agree with.

In this chapter we'll review the polemics found in R. Saadia's writings and point to their centrality in his work. We will also attempt to show that R. Saadia adopted this style of writing because he considered it helpful in the central task he had set himself: to protect his contemporaries from mistaken and pernicious ideas and to shield them from dangerous beliefs and opinions.

In chapter three, "Education in the Writings of R. Saadia Gaon," we shall discuss the status of education in R. Saadia's works. The motives behind the works written by R. Saadia and the tendentious nature of his writings suggest that he used his literary enterprise as a means of achieving the main goals he had defined for his public endeavors, namely, eradicating ignorance and distorted ideas, and refuting the arguments of the heretics and the Karaite community, which he believed posed a threat to the very existence of the Jewish people and its faith in the teachings of the Torah.

The central place in Jewish studies is of course occupied by the Bible. R. Saadia regarded the Bible as "a book of education for the human beings," and therefore it contained all possible "methods of education."

In this his chapter we will discuss R. Saadia's introduction to his Arabic translation of the Torah, in which he described the Torah as an "educational tome." R. Saadia's explanation of the educational methods used by the Torah incorporates an explanation for why the biblical stories are part of the Torah at all. His unique approach to biblical stories stands out in comparison to the different approach of other thinkers and philosophers, such as Maimonides.

Chapter four, "R. Saadia's Translation of the Pentateuch," will be dedicated to his exegetical works. R. Saadia composed two kinds of commentaries on the Bible. The first, which is named "The Short Commentary," *Tafsīr*, is a translation of the biblical verses into Arabic, in which the Gaon takes the liberty to change the syntactic structure, add words or omit them, and so on. The second is called "The Long Commentary," *Sharḥ*, and in it R. Saadia discusses at length philological, philosophical, and Halakhic issues. It also contains polemics against Karaites and other Jewish heretics, and against Muslims and Christians.

In the long biblical commentaries of R. Saadia we may distinguish two types of writing, one comprehensively "exegetical" and the other "monographic." In the former type, exemplified by his commentary on the Pentateuch, R. Saadia comments on almost every verse and discusses the various areas of study for which the verses have served as scriptural support. In the "monographic" type,

such as the commentaries on the Books of Job and Psalms, he only comments on selected verses while giving expression to ideas and concepts that he has developed in the introduction to that commentary.

Despite the great importance of R. Saadia's *Tafsīr* of the Torah and despite its enormous impact on the generations of commentators who lived and worked after him, we do not currently have a proper edition of the *Tafsīr* that would include the information about the differences between its existing versions, as is customary. The preparation of a new critical edition, which will be based on as many sources as possible and on reliable texts (to the extent that the world's libraries permit), appears unavoidable.

The author of this book has worked for many years to prepare a critical edition of R. Saadia's translation of the Torah, which will be based on dozens of manuscripts and printed sources. During this chapter we will present the basic guidelines for the preparation of the critical edition, including the manuscript that will be used as the main text, the manuscripts that will be used to highlight the readings appearing in other versions, and the degree of reliance on Yemeni and non-Yemeni sources.

As mentioned in chapter two, R. Saadia's works often contain polemics with other religions, especially with Islam. Chapter five, "Arabic, Islam, and Rhetoric in R. Saadia's Work," will be devoted to an examination of his attitude towards Arabic language and the Muslim religion.

There is no doubt that R. Saadia was indeed proficient in the literature of his time. It turns out that he was well versed in both practical Arabic grammar and theoretical linguistic thought, was well acquainted with Arabic poetry, and was also familiar with the interpretation of the Qur'an, or at least its fundamental principles. For this reason, there are many areas in which R. Saadia was influenced by Arabic language, literature, and culture. They encompass grammar and linguistics, interpretation and philosophy, prayer and custom, poetry and *piyyut*, and in fact all areas of R. Saadia's work. In this chapter we will discuss R. Saadia's use of Arabic contexts.

The influence of Arabic literature on R. Saadia is evident not only in the content of his writings, but also in their external form. This is true, for example, of the introductions that precede his commentaries on the Bible and his Halakhic, philosophical, and liturgical writings. There is also no doubt that R. Saadia was influenced by *adab* literature, which was intended to expand the education and linguistic knowledge of the Muslim intellectuals, especially those who were part of the government service or held public positions.

Many works of R. Saadia and other authors in the Middle Ages include sections of *adab* that were written under the direct, or indirect, influence of this Arab genre. In this chapter we will demonstrate the influence of *adab* literature on R. Saadia through his commentary on the verse תפוחי זהב במשכיות כסף דבר דבר על אפניו [A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in ornaments of silver] (Proverbs 25:11). In his long commentary on this verse, he makes ten observations on rhetoric and expression, which are an example of the influence of *adab* literature on him. A close comparison between these observations and some of the most important *adab* books leads to the conclusion that R. Saadia did not copy his observations from *adab* books but was influenced by them indirectly.

As a leader, one of R. Saadia's most important goals in his literary work was to encourage the people of Israel in its long exile, the end of which could not be seen, to strengthen its spirit and its faith in the future Messiah, who will redeem the people and return it to its land, as prophesied by the prophets of Israel. In addition to direct encouragement, R. Saadia mobilizes the history of the people of Israel, to draw from it lessons and encouragement regarding the future redemption. In this context, we shall prove in chapter six, "History, Consolation, and Messianic Future," that R. Saadia regards the commandment to chant *kriyat Shema* twice a day, morning and evening, as part of the divine desire to instill in the people of Israel the certainty that future redemption will come, that the prophecies of the prophets will be completely fulfilled, and even more. In addition, the commandment to remember the Exodus from Egypt at every opportunity, inscribed within many other Torah commandments, is an integral part of the desire to instill in the people of Israel the belief in future redemption and its necessity, to encourage the people in exile and comfort them.

In this context one must probably understand the special effort made by R. Saadia to prove that Daniel was a prophet. In his commentary on the book of Daniel and in many other places in his writings, R. Saadia Gaon invested substantial effort in proving that Daniel was a prophet and that his visions and dreams were prophecies, even though the book does not explicitly use this term. Our hypothesis is that one of R. Saadia's main goals in his writings was to raise the spirits of the people of Israel in exile and to boost its faith in its ultimate redemption. The emphasis made by R. Saadia on the prophetic aspects of the book of Daniel coincides with this goal, because it could have been more effectively achieved after proving that Daniel's visions were prophecies voiced publicly.

* * *

Over the years I have published many articles on R. Saadia, his works, leadership, and status among medieval sages and among sages in later generations, for example, among Yemeni commentators. Some of what is written in the six chapters of this book has previously been published in various journals, and some has never been published. Those parts that have already been published in the past have also been reedited and new sources have been added for their publication in this book.

I hope this book will help to shed further light on the extraordinary personality and works of Rabbi Saadia, the man who strived for leadership to help his people face the difficulties of exile, ignorance, and wrong beliefs and opinions, while encouraging anticipation of the coming redemption.

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Chapter One

The Leadership of R. Saadia Gaon

There are many ways to attain positions of leadership and authority. Some achieve them by chance and by surprise, as Saul did when he set out in search of donkeys and found kingship;¹ or Yehu ben Yehoshafat, who was anointed suddenly and without prior warning.² Others inherit leadership and authority from their fathers, like many of the kings of Judah and Israel. Some leaders, King David for example, accept the role with humility and without objection,³ while some refuse the exalted role offered to them and attempt to reject it, such as Moses,⁴ and even go so far as to physically distance themselves from the responsibilities being imposed upon them, as was the case with the prophet Jonah ben Amitai.⁵

In some cases, defiant action was necessary to maintain the family dynasty and prevent the crown from being passed on to a different candidate, as in the case of King Solomon.⁶ There are examples of special or irregular circumstances that resulted in the unexpected appointment of a leader, such as Yiftach the Gileadite;⁷ and other examples of leaders who were the most natural choice, such as Aharon the Priest, who was beloved by the entire nation.⁸

Even in modern times, there is no lack of examples of people who attained positions of authority because of their important lineage. Some take control

1 1 Samuel 9:3 etc.

2 2 Kings 9:2–6.

3 1 Samuel 16:13.

4 Exodus 3:11 etc.

5 Jonah 1:3.

6 2 Kings 1:5–49.

7 Judges 11:1–11.

8 Numbers 20:29.

by force and military coup, such as Jamāl `Abd al-Nāṣir in Egypt, others are selected as a compromise, following internal power struggles, such as Muḥammad Anuwar al-Sādāt in the same country a few years later, and still others are considered born leaders who were destined for greatness even from a young age.

Another type is those who persistently aspire for a position of public leadership throughout their lives, out of a profound sense of being the person God had destined to lead his people. R. Saadia Gaon is a prime example of the latter group. He was appointed *gaon*, dean of the Academy of Sūra⁹ in Babylonia, after aspiring for this role throughout his entire life. His personal history was rife with public service and attempts to achieve the highest possible position of leadership and authority, out of the conviction that this was the role God had destined for him during the unique times in which he lived. This chapter will describe the life journey taken by R. Saadia Gaon in his quest to become *gaon* and illustrate his undertakings and achievements once he realized his goal.¹⁰

R. Saadia ben Yosef is also known by his Arabic name, Sa`id ibn Yūsuf.¹¹ He was born in the village of Dilāz, in the district of Fayyūm in the western part of Upper Egypt, which is why he was known as al-Fayyūmi.¹² His opponents, the Karaites, claimed that his father was not a Torah scholar, but rather an idol worshiper who had been expelled from Egypt.¹³ However, Rav Shrīrā Gaon de-

9 The title *gaon* in Babylonia referred to the head of one of the two academies (*yeshivot*), Sura and Pumbeditha, and it is likely that it was an abbreviation of *rosh yeshivat geon Yaakov* [head of the academy, splendor of Jacob]. On the duties and role of the *geonim*, see, for example, S. Assaf, *The Era of the Gaons and Its Literature* (Jerusalem, 1977) [Heb]; Y. Brody, *Readings in Geonic Literature* (n.p., 1998); Z. Berger, "The *Geonim*," in *Leader and Leadership: Collection of Articles*, ed. I. Malchi and Z. Tzachor (Jerusalem, 1992), 143–163 [Heb].

10 See also H. Ben-Shammai, "The Exegetical and Philosophical Writings of Saadia Gaon: A Leader's Project," *Pe'amim* 54 (1993): 63–81 [Heb].

11 This is the name by which R. Saadia refers to himself in the acrostic in his Hebrew introduction to *Ha-Egron* (ed. N. Allony [Jerusalem, 1969], 156–160). Each letter in the acrostic appears twice at the beginning of the segments: "עֲדָ" / "עָל"; "סָפָר" / "דּוֹר"; "יָעַן" / "דְּרָכָה"; and so on.

12 His adversaries muddled this name, which refers to Fayyūm, his district of origin, and called him *Pithūmi*, referring to the city of slaves called Pitom mentioned in Exodus 1:11, to emphasize his seemingly inferior origin.

13 S. Schechter, *Saadyana—Geniza Fragments of Writings of R. Saadia Gaon and Others* (Cambridge, 1902), 20, 1:8. Even when approaching this tendentious and biased information from a prominent polemic source with caution, it is true that Yūsuf,

scribed R. Saadia as “Rav Saadia son of Rav Yosef,”¹⁴ a wording usually reserved for Torah scholars, thus refuting the Karaite claim that was apparently made merely to provoke controversy.

Few details are known of his childhood and young adulthood. However, we do know that he married, bore children, and taught students before departing from Egypt.¹⁵ In 902, at age twenty, he penned the first edition of his work, *Egron*,¹⁶ and apparently his first polemic work, *Al-Radd ‘ala Anān* [The Refutation of Anan] as well. At the time, he apparently corresponded with the well-known Jewish philosopher and physician, R. Isaac Israeli ben Solomon of Cairo.

The exact year of R. Saadia’s departure from Egypt is unknown; however, most scholars agree that by 915 he was no longer in Egypt. The reasons for his departure are unclear as well. Some claim he left because of difficulties imposed by the regime or by the local Jewish community. He may have left with his father, who also departed around the same time.¹⁷ In my opinion, R. Saadia left Egypt because he believed he was destined to take the leadership of the Jewish world, which was centered in Babylonia.

R. Saadia’s destination was the Land of Israel, at the time a more important cultural center than Egypt, his own land of origin.¹⁸ According to renowned Muslim historian Abu al-Ḥasan ‘Alī al-Mas‘ūdī, R. Saadia studied in Israel in 915–921 under Abū Kathīr Yihyā ben Zakariyyā, also known as Al-Kātib al-Tabbarānī [the Scribe¹⁹ of Tiberias], whom scholars associate with Eli ben

R. Saadia’s father, did not spend his entire life in Egypt, as it is known that he died in Jaffa.

- 14 *Igeret Rav Shrīrā Gaon*, ed. B. M. Levin (Haifa, 1921), 117, ll. 11–12 (the French rite).
- 15 Later, after being appointed *gaon*, R. Saadia maintained contact with these students, sent them letters, and implored upon them to tighten their ties with him and with the *geonim* in Babylon.
- 16 As he indicated himself in his introduction to the first edition of *Ha-Egron* (159) and to the second edition (153).
- 17 See various sources in A. Dotan, *The Dawn of Hebrew Linguistics: The Book of Elegance of the Language of the Hebrews by Saadia Gaon* (Jerusalem, 1997), vol. 1, 18 [Heb].
- 18 H. Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works* (Philadelphia, 1921), 43.
- 19 Note that the meaning of the title “scribe” in the Land of Israel at the time was reserved for those who dealt with Scripture and *mesora*. See Dotan, *The Dawn of Hebrew Linguistics*, 34.

Yehudah ha-Nazīr,²⁰ a grammarian and philosopher. However, this association has not been unequivocally proven.²¹

Under this teacher and the other *ba`alei masorah* of Tiberias and liturgists of the Land of Israel, R. Saadia mastered the art of liturgy and linguistics. Al-Mas'ūdi listed Abu Kathīr as one of the Jews who translated the Scripture into Arabic,²² and therefore it is likely that R. Saadia learned the ancient exegesis traditions of the Land of Israel from him. As Dotan hypothesizes, it is possible Abu Kathīr inspired R. Saadia to translate the Bible.²³

For reasons unknown, R. Saadia left Tiberias and settled in Babylonia. He might have been drawn to the Talmud and academies of Babylonia, or he might have been disillusioned by the sages of Israel.²⁴ I believe that Tiberias was no more than one stage in his journey towards fulfilling his ultimate goal of leading the Jewish world. R. Saadia had originally left Egypt in order to reach the largest and most important center of Jewish culture and leadership, namely, the home of the *geonim*. His goal of becoming the leader of the Jewish nation could be realized only by attaining the position of *gaon* in Babylonia.

In 921, R. Saadia stopped briefly in Aleppo, in northern Syria, en route to Babylonia. He reached Baghdad in the summer of 921 and was appointed *rosh*

20 This sage is mentioned, for example, by D. Qimchi [Radaq], *Sefer Michlol* (ed. I. Rittenberg [Jerusalem, 1866, repr. 1966], 72).

21 Dotan, *The Dawn of Hebrew Linguistics*, 19. According to Dotan, if we accept Malter's hypothesis that Al-Mas'ūdi had met with R. Saadia in Tiberias in 926, and if we accept the hypothesis that R. Saadia did not counter Ben-Meir in the dispute about the calendar (see below) while he resided in the Land of Israel, we must assume that R. Saadia traveled from Egypt to Babylonia, then spent several years in the Land of Israel, and then returned to Babylonia in 926. See also S. W. Baron, "Saadia's Communal Activities," in *Saadia Anniversary Volume*, ed. B. Cohen (New York, 1943), 24–25, who says that R. Saadia first traveled to Babylonia before spending several years in Israel; however, in Baron's opinion, he returned to Babylonia before 921.

22 Abu Al-Ḥasan `Ali Al-Mas'ūdi, *Kitāb al-Tanbīh wal-`Ishrāf* (Leiden, 1894, repr. 1967), 113.

23 Dotan, *The Dawn of Hebrew Linguistics*, 19. According to Dotan, while R. Saadia resided in Tiberias, the vibrant heart of the *masorah* scholars, he composed his comprehensive work on the rules of Hebrew grammar entitled the *Book of Elegance of the Language of the Hebrews* (ibid., 37–38).

24 Ibid., 19.

kallah (chief lecturer)²⁵ at the academy of Pumbeditha, the larger and more prestigious of the two great Babylonian academies of those times.²⁶

In Babylonia, R. Saadia sided with the local *geonim* in their dispute with R. Aharon ben Meir, leader of the academy in Jerusalem,²⁷ who attempted to change the fixed calculations used to determine the dates of the holidays on the Jewish calendar. It appears that this controversy began no later than early 921, in the month of *Cheshvan* 4682, as it is unlikely that R. Saadia would have taken a stance against a *gaon* of the Land of Israel while he still lived there.²⁸ The controversy was based on an argument regarding the months of *Cheshvan* and *Kislev* of the year 4682 (late 921), which should have had thirty days each according to the rulings of the sages of Babylonia. However, ben Meir argued that they should be short months, that is, twenty-nine days each.²⁹ In fact, the roots of this controversy extended much deeper, and actually reflected a dispute over the authority to fix

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- 25 For a more detailed description of this position and others in the great academies of Babylonia, see also R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylon and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven, 1990), 54–66; and his *Readings in Geonic Literature*, 18–23.
- 26 Baron, “Saadia’s Communal Activities,” 45. However, according to Malter, R. Saadia was at the Sura Academy at the time. See Malter, *Saadia Gaon*, 90.
- 27 According to Moshe Gil, Meir, father of Aharon, was a *gaon* in the Land of Israel during the dispute, while his son, Aharon, was the leader of the party that opposed the sages of Babylonia. M. Gil, *A History of Palestine (634–1099)* (Tel Aviv, 1983), vol. 1, 462 [Heb].
- 28 Dotan, *The Dawn of Hebrew Linguistics*, 18. Also see Schechter, *Saadyana*, 25, which indicates that R. Saadia apparently led the dispute while he was in Babylonia.
- 29 For a detailed account of this controversy, see H. Y. Bornstein, *The Dispute of R. Saadia and Ben Meir* (Warsaw, 1904) [Heb]; M. D. Cassuto, “About What did Rav Saadia Gaon and Ben Meir Argue?” in *Rav Saadia Gaon*, ed. Y. L. Fishman (Maimon) (Jerusalem, 1943), 333–364 [Heb]; Y. Merzbach, “More about the Dispute between R. Saadia and Ben Meir,” *Sinai* 16 (1945): 236–241 [Heb]; A. Epstein, “The Dispute between Ben Meir and the Babylonian Academies,” in *Antiquities of the Jews: Studies and Notes*, ed. A. M. Haberman, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1956), 420–441 [Heb]; A. A. Lasker and D. J. Lasker, “642 Parts—More concerning the Saadia-Ben Meir Controversy,” *Tarbiz* 60 (1991): 119–128 [Heb]; R. Sar-Shalom, “The Dispute of R. Saadia Gaon and Ben Meir: The Controversy between Babylonia and the Land of Israel,” *Sinai* 111 (1993): 98–124 [Heb]; A. A. Lasker and D. J. Lasker, “More concerning the 642 Parts,” *Sinai* 113 (1994): 90–93 [Heb]; R. Sar-Shalom, “More on the Dispute of R. Saadia Gaon and Ben Meir,” *Sinai* 114 (1994): 91–93 [Heb]; A. Stern, “R. Saadia’s Method for Sanctifying the New Month,” *Thumim* 23 (2003): 287–297 [Heb]; and Sacha Stern, *The Jewish Calendar Controversy of 921/2 CE* (Leiden, 2019).

a Jewish calendar that would bind the entire Jewish Diaspora. Ben Meir believed that this was the exclusive jurisdiction of the Land of Israel and its scholars, while the Jewish leadership of Babylonia, including R. Saadia, insisted on their right to express an opinion on this fundamental and crucial issue.

When R. Saadia decided to stand by the sages of Babylonia, he turned the tide in their favor. The sages asked R. Saadia to put the story of the calendar controversy into writing, in a special essay called *Sefer ha-Zikkaron*, written in the form of a scroll and divided into verses with cantillation notes, to resemble the Scripture. The scroll was read publicly by the Jewish community that same year, during the month of *Elul*. Another essay by R. Saadia that described this debate was entitled *Sefer ha-Mo'adim* [Book of Holidays]. From this point on, R. Saadia became the greatest authority on the Jewish calendar, thus also reinforcing his status among the sages of Babylonia. During those years, he went on to write additional essays on Jewish law, as well as polemic works denouncing the Karaite community.

The Academy of Sura was in a state of decline at the time, after the majority of its students had abandoned it for the academy of Pumbeditha. In an attempt to keep Sura open, David ben Zakkai, the exilarch at the time, sought a great scholar who could serve as a counterweight for Rav Kohen Tzedek, dean of the academy of Pumbeditha. Appointing R. Saadia as dean of Sura was daring and unexpected, as, despite his scholarly knowledge and public demeanor, he was not of Babylonian origin and lacked the social connections typically required of a person of such exalted status.³⁰ His uncompromising personality was deemed problematic as well, as he was described later on as “a person who never feared another, and did not act graciously with others, because of the extent of his wisdom . . . and his fear of sin.”³¹ It can be assumed that his decision to side with the sages of Babylonia in the dispute over the calendar, his diverse literary achievements, his battle against the Karaites, heretics, and infidels, and his vast Torah knowledge were deciding factors in his appointment.³²

30 See also Brody, *Readings in Geonic Literature*, 20–21, about the process of appointing *geonim* and the considerations for their appointment.

31 A. Neubauer, *Medieval Jewish Chronicle*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1893), 80. R. Saadia's uncompromising confrontation with the exilarch several years later further supports this description.

32 For a wide-ranging analysis of what conditioned the character and education of R. Saadia Gaon, and which prepared him for a central role in the development of

Upon his appointment as *gaon* in the spring of 928 [4687], R. Saadia began one of his greatest enterprises, namely, maintaining contact with the Jewish communities throughout the Diaspora. He sent letters to communities in Spain, including those in Cordova, Elvira, and Lucina, and requested their support for his academy. He also sent letters to Egypt, his land of origin, and called upon the Jewish community there to maintain contact with him, send him their questions, and support his academy. This correspondence was part of his attempt to achieve recognition as leader of the entire Jewish world.

It seems that being appointed dean of the Academy of Sura was the realization of his lifelong goal, as many of the students who had left Sura now returned. However, the idyllic relations between R. Saadia and David ben Zakkai, the exilarch, were not long-lived. When R. Saadia refused to approve an inheritance that would have benefited the exilarch, though Rav Kohen Tzedek, dean of Pumbaditha, had already granted his approval, tension grew between them that ultimately severed their relations.³³ With the consent of the dean of Pumbaditha, ben Zakkai ostracized R. Saadia, dismissed him from his office, and appointed a new dean in his place.³⁴ R. Saadia, in turn, dismissed ben Zakkai from his office and appointed Yoshiyahu, David's brother, as the new exilarch.

R. Saadia prevailed until 932, when Al-Qāhir succeeded his predecessor as caliph (932–943), and R. Aharon Sarjado, R. Saadia's chief opponent,³⁵ used his

rabbinical literature in the Middle Ages, as well as contacts between Jewish and Arabic literature, see R. Drory, *The Beginning of the Contacts between Jewish and Arabic Literature in the Tenth Century* (Tel Aviv, 1988), 158–160 [Heb]; her *Models and Contacts—Arabic Literature and Its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture* (Leiden, 2000); R. Brody, *R. Saadia Gaon* (Jerusalem, 1967), 39–42 [Heb].

- 33 Brody, *Readings in Geonic Literature*, 19, and note 24. He hypothesizes that R. Saadia's attempts to intervene with the Muslim authorities via his affiliates, which was generally the responsibility of the exilarch, also contributed to the tension between R. Saadia and David ben Zakkai.
- 34 R. Shrira Gaon described R. Saadia's successor as follows: "He was young and a minor scholar in comparison with R. Saadia." About the story of the controversy between David ben Zakkai and R. Saadia, see also *Igeret Rav Shrirā Gaon*, 117, ll. 11–118, l. 13.
- 35 R. Aharon Sarjado was ultimately appointed dean of the Pumbaditha Academy. His hostility towards R. Saadia might have been caused by his personal aspiration to be appointed *gaon*. R. Abraham ben David (Ravad, Cordova, 1110–Toledo, 1180) wrote of R. Sarjado and his wealth, without hiding his criticism: "The seventh generation [of the sages of Pumbaditha] was R. Aharon ha-Cohen ben Sarjado, after the passing of R. Hanina [father of R. Shrirā Gaon, who died in 941, according to R. Abraham

vast wealth to influence the new caliph. R. Saadia was forced to relinquish his position and seek refuge for over four years. A reconciliation between R. Saadia and ben Zakkai finally took place in 937, and R. Saadia resumed the role of dean of Sura, although David ben Zakkai remained the exilarch and the dean who had replaced R. Saadia during his exile continued to receive a salary.

Rabbi Abraham ben David (Ravad) summarized the events that led to the controversy and its disturbing repercussions as follows, while clearly taking a stance in support of R. Saadia.

And then he [David ben Zakkai] sent out a message to the Land of Egypt and brought R. Saadia al-Fayyūmi from there and he became dean of the academy in Mata Meḥasya [Sura] for two years. After this time, a terrible dispute caused a clash between R. Saadia and David ben Zakkai the president, as exilarches were not people of integrity and would purchase their position from the kings like [dishonest] tax collectors. And David ben Zakkai sought a ruling, and the ruling was given unfairly and in his favor. He sent a message to R. Saadia asking him to carry out the ruling, and he [R. Saadia] refused. And he sent Zakkai, his son, a second time to convince R. Saadia and he said that if he does not respect the ruling, he [Zakkai, the son] would strike his head with a shoe. The students [of R. Saadia] were then infuriated and stood up as one to strike the son of the exilarch with their many shoes. He returned to his father, ashamed and humiliated. His father strengthened his position as king and gathered a large camp of people from the community, and R. Saadia formed a second camp from the community and appointed Yoshiyahu ben Zakkai as the new exilarch instead of David, his brother. Then David overpowered with the support of the regime and ousted his brother and sought to kill R. Saadia. R. Saadia hid for some seven years, and while in hiding authored all his works. R. Saadia was one of the influential people of Judea and a descendant of Shela, son of Judah, and of R. Hanina Ben Dosa. David ben Zakkai appointed R. Yoseph, son of R. Yaakov, son of R. Mordechai. Then David the exilarch and R. Saadia made peace. But nevertheless, R. Yoseph was not removed from his position and R. Saadia

ben David]. He was a great merchant and was promoted because of his wealth and not because he was worthy, and he died in 960.” Ravad, *Sefer ha-Kabbalah* (ed. Gershon Cohen [Philadelphia, 1967], 43, ll. 117–119). R. Shira Gaon described R. Sarjado as “very mighty and fearsome.” *Igeret Rav Shrīrā Gaon*, 120, l. 23–121, l. 1.

was not restored to his position as *gaon*. And R. Yoseph was the *gaon* for fourteen years. And then David ben Zakkai died.³⁶

R. Saadia's dedication and devotion to his literary enterprise, which was such an integral part of this leadership, became even more pronounced during the difficult years when he fled for his life from David ben Zakkai and wrote several of his most monumental works. One example is *Sefer ha-Galūi*, a work directed against the exilarch that addresses general matters as well, such as messianic calculations and prophecy. During this time, he also composed the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (*Sefer Emūnoth ve-De'oth*) and a commentary on the book of Daniel.

As noted, towards the end of his life, R. Saadia reconciled with David ben Zakkai, and even appointed ben Zakkai's son to succeed his father after his death in 940. R. Saadia spent his final years in relative peace and serenity and passed away in 942. Ravad described his final years as follows, and added his acclamation of R. Saadia's lifetime achievements:

R. Saadia passed away in the year 4702 at the age of fifty,³⁷ of the *mara shehora* [melancholia] after composing several works and doing great things for the people of Israel. He responded to questions about the heretics and the infidels, one of whom had fabricated Torah as he saw fit and R. Saadia testified to have seen teachers teaching these falsehoods to other children in books and on boards, until R. Saadia stopped them.

The other events of R. Saadia and the great things he did for the people of Israel have been written in the book *Sefer ha-Galūi* and in the letter he left for his son, R. Dosa, as written to R. Hasdai ben Yitzhak of blessed memory.³⁸ And after the death of R. Saadia, the academy in Mata Mehasya [Sura] began to decline until R. Joseph fled to al-Baṣrah and died there.³⁹

36 Ravad, *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*.

37 As a matter of fact, R. Saadia passed away in the year 942, at the age of sixty.

38 *Igeret R. Dosa*. R. Dosa was the son of R. Saadia. In his letter he recounts the history of his father's life and literary creativity. The *Igeret* itself was published in Jacob Mann, "A Fihrist of Sa'adya's Works," *J.Q.R.* (new series) 11 (1920–1921): 423–428. The absent segments from the beginning of the letter were completed by Alexander Scheiber. See A. Scheiber, *Genizah Studies* (Hildesheim, 1981), 69.

39 Ravad, *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*, 41, l. 81–42, l. 109.

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