

The Dybbukast

Season 3, Episode 6: "The Book of Tahkemoni"

Transcription

An actor reads from *The Book of Tahkemoni*:

That man who is wise, who is deeply clever, takes Wisdom for his guide and shield, his compass and his lever: Wisdom, who prospers his every endeavour, converses with him ever, and leaves him never.

...

Host Aaron Henne: Welcome to Episode Six of the third season of theatre dybbuk's *The Dybbukast*. I'm Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk. We're happy to present the fourth in our five-episode series in partnership with the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University.

In this episode, we'll be investigating *The Book of Tahkemoni*, a collection of stories written in Hebrew in the early 13th century, authored by Yehuda Alharizi who was born in Toledo, Spain in the middle of the 12th century. The book uses the structure of the Arabic literary form known as maqama.

You heard actor Bill Ratner read a selection from the book at the top. He will continue to read portions of it throughout the episode.

Dr. Jonathan Decter, the Edmond J. Safra Professor of Sephardic Studies, discusses the history of Jews in the region of *The Book's* creation and shares about the cultural influences and experiences present in Yehuda Alharizi's work.

And now, Season Three, Episode Six: "The Book of Tahkemoni."

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Dr. Jonathan Decter: Judah Alharizi, known in Hebrew as Yehuda Alharizi or in Arabic as Yaḥya ibn Sulaymān ibn Sha'ul Abū Zakariyyā al-Ḥarizī al-Yahūdī, was born in Toledo, around the year 1166. We don't have an exact date, but that's a pretty good guess. he's been known as an author for centuries, but it wasn't until the discovery of an entry

on him in an Arabic biographical dictionary written by someone named Al Mawsili, a Muslim author, that we knew more of the details about his biography.

In Al Mawsili's dictionary, we learn, for example, that he was born in the city of Toledo in Spain. We learn that he died in the city of Aleppo, in Syria in the year 1235. It tells us that he was of unusually great height. It tells us that he had difficulty growing a beard. It gives us a few details about his accent. It says that he spoke with a western – meaning from the western part of the Islamic world – accent, the maghribi accent from Spain or from North Africa.

Actor: *The word of Judah son of Solomon son of Alharizi of blessed memory: The lord has gifted me with a skilled tongue and lifted me above my kin that I might place within the Intellect's palm the gold of my thought, subtly wrought, long sought-after and too precious to be bought, that he might make thereof bands for princes' necks and dear companions' hands. Shine, then, my muse, while the downcast and the righteous light lamps from your holy cruse: bring joy and gladness, feasting and good days to the Jews!*

Jonathan: So he was born in Toledo, as I said. Toledo is about an hour south of Madrid if you travel by train now – it had originally been part of Islamic Spain. That is, Muslims were in control in Spain starting in the year 711, keeping various territories for many centuries.

But in the year 1086, Toledo actually changed hands, and it fell into the hands of the Christian kingdom of Castile. So when Alharizi was born there, around 1166, the city had been under Christian control for the better part of a century. Yet in many ways the city remained unchanged as it had been under Islamic rule: Arabic was still the dominant language of the city. Arabic would've been Alharizi's first and primary language. We don't know if he knew any romance dialect. He probably knew some, the forerunner of the Spanish language, but his main languages, of course, were Arabic and Hebrew.

He left us writings in both of those languages. He wrote a great deal in Hebrew, including the book we're talking about today, *The Book of Tahkemoni*. Sometime at the very, at the beginning of the 13th century, around the year 1208, we think, he left Spain and he went wandering the lands of the Islamic East.

Many Jews were migrating out of Spain at this time. Some went to the Christian worlds. But Alharizi like a number of other Jews went eastward. So he traveled as far as

Baghdad and then made his way back to Aleppo, where he wrote his final works and where he passed away.

Actor: *Egypt and Damascus vie to serve him; Zova, Assyria, Babylon admit that they in no way deserve him.*

Jonathan: Why did he leave Spain? A lot was changing in Spain in the 12th and the 13th centuries. I like to think of this as a period of intense transition. The Jews had thrived for many centuries under Islamic rule in Spain, so it's a period that's often referred to as the golden age of the Jews of Spain. And Alharizi lived a little bit after that time. And he probably looked back to that time as being superior to the age in which he himself lived.

So he seemed to struggle a great deal to find patronage, for example. So if you go back a couple of centuries and you look at poets like Judah Halevi, or you look at Moses ibn Ezra, or Solomon ibn Gabirol, these are the famous poets of the Andalusian School of Hebrew poetry. Each of these poets enjoyed patronage. In other words, there were people, men of power, Jewish men of power, and wealth, who supported them in their scholarly endeavors, including the composition of poetry. By Alharizi's time the system of patronage seems to have broken down a great deal.

Actor: *Now when I stood back from my canvas and its blazing palette, tasted my words so pleasing to the palate, from the Euphrates to the Nile I sought a patron's smile, a champion of Generosity's camp to lend my work his stamp.*

Jonathan: So Alharizi begins his professional career as a translator. Before he wrote any original works, we know that he was commissioned to write translations of works both by Muslim authors and by Jewish authors from the Arabic language into Hebrew. So the most famous of these would've been his translation of Maimonides work called *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Maimonides wrote that book in Arabic, or what we call Judeo-Arabic – that is the Arabic language written in Hebrew script, with some Hebrew interspersed.

But then he translated works by Galen. He translated a work by the Muslim Ali Ibn Ridwan. Works that there was clearly a taste for among Jewish readers, who couldn't access the work in the, in the Arabic, or in Galen's case, the Arabic translation of the original Greek.

And then at some point, word of a particular Arabic work, a fictional work by a Muslim author named Al Hariri Abasrah, had reached Al Andalus, had reached Spain, and it caught on like wildfire. This is a work written in the genre that we call the maqama.

The maqama is a kind of literary creation that was invented in the 10th century in Iraq, by a man named Badi al Zaman al Hamadani – that was a pen name, it simply means “the wonder of the age from the place, from the city of Hamdan.”

The maqama collection of Al Hariri, who was the next great author of the Arabic maqama after Badi al Zaman, was written in Iraq as well. And copies of it had made their way to Islamic Spain, where Muslims were absolutely infatuated with the work. It's written in this very, very high register of the Arabic language. He revels in using otherwise unknown vocabulary, very rare vocabulary items, really difficult grammatical structures. And Jews read this work as well, and they were also extremely impressed with it. And so it began to be a kind of challenge among Jews to try to write a Hebrew translation of it.

Actor: *Now as for al-Hariri's work, some rash souls set out to alter him to Hebrew but sore did falter, for they wore profane robes yet dared approach Song's altar. For all their fits and starts they captured rightly but one in fifty parts.*

Jonathan: Other Jewish authors tried to render it into Hebrew and they tried their hand at a single chapter or maybe two and failed dismally. But he, Alharizi, managed to translate the entire work. So there are 50 chapters to the work, and he translated all 50 of them, he tells us.

Actor: *For Spain's patrons, awed at this Arab's display, bade me render it in Hebrew for my fellows straightaway – and could I say them nay?*

Jonathan: After that he seems, at least the way he describes it in his Hebrew work, he came to regret in a sense, having done so. The way he puts it in his work, he, he quotes from the Song of Songs.

Actor: *Forgive me, Lord, I cried, for I am much to blame! Alas my name and my fathers' name, that I diverted the Bible's crystal brook to fructify a foreign book. I mistook my purpose. Look: I tended strangers' vineyards and my own forsook.*

Jonathan: Meaning I've tended the vineyard of Arabic writing, but I haven't tended my own vineyard, being writing in the Hebrew language. And so it's at that point that he

seems to have undertaken writing his own collection of Hebrew maqamat that he called *The Book of Tamemoni*.

Actor: *Hence I wrote this book to raise Hebrew's holy tower, to show the holy folk her suppleness and power, for they are now struck blind, they cannot find the gateway leading to her lush green shades, her gushing fountains, and her lark-filled glades.*

Jonathan: One of the theories behind the word maqama – It comes from a root meaning to stand. It also means station. It might be that somebody would stand up at a literary salon as it were, and tell a story of a certain sort that would draw on aspects of the Arabic language that made them very, very rich.

They have very predictable plot lines. Most commonly, they go something like this: there's a narrator and there's the character we call the protagonist, or sometimes we call him the anti-hero. And the narrator is traveling through the lands of the Islamic world.

Actor: *In spring I came to Egypt, Beauty's crown and ring*

Jonathan: And he would arrive at a certain city, and he would encounter someone. And he doesn't know who this person is. And quite often that person is presenting himself publicly as some sort of figure. That could be a seller of talismans. or an alchemist selling potions. It could be a beggar. It could be a master of rhetoric of any sort.

Actor: *Now amongst them was a greybeard who gathered scattered herds; with Rhetoric's magic he revived dead words*

Jonathan: And that character then tends to dupe people out of their money by the strength of his speech, by his literary talents, by speaking Arabic in a way that just caused people to turn over money.

Actor: *Our hearts melted like wax beneath the savant's light: we were like grasshoppers in our own eyes and so were we in his sight.*

Jonathan: That character would then walk off. At that moment, the narrator recognizes him. There's a, you know, fancy word in literary criticism called anagnorisis, right? Meaning recognition. It's known as the recognition scene. And he'd say, oh, suddenly I see that it's my old friend so-and-so.

Actor: *Hearing his song I placed him –*

Jonathan: The two of them then join together for a very brief moment. And then they part ways again, ready to go and meet up again in the next episode.

Actor: *Swiftly I embraced him and stayed him close, day after day, thinking to sweetly pass my years away firm at his side; but that, tight-fisted Time denied.*

Jonathan: I like to compare them sometimes to Star Trek episodes, right? You know, at the beginning of the episode that the Enterprise is traveling through space, they're gonna have some sort of encounter, and then at the end they're going to go off into space again for the next encounter to begin.

They don't follow any type of chronological order. They just follow the same basic plot line. In some episodes, the protagonist is old and the narrator is young. In another episode, the narrator can be old and the protagonist can be young. Sometimes he appears with a child, sometimes he has a wife. You know, there are all sorts of variations that we're supposed to take as a type of fictional premise.

Another important thing about the maqama in general, is that it's written in rhyming prose with poetry interspersed. So you find long passages in rhyme, and that rhyme can alternate. You can have a couple of lines followed by four lines with a different rhyme, and then the rhyme changes again, it can go on for three lines, seven lines, whatever. And then there are breaks where a poem is inserted, and that one is both in rhyme and in a very strict meter, following the meters of Arabic poetry. And people really enjoyed this kind of writing.

Actor: *And now, dear readers, all you who taste my art: if you find aught sour or tart, bid harsh judgement stand apart – let Judah's sin be not writ upon your heart.*

Jonathan: *The Book of Tahkemoni* takes its title from one of the soldiers in King David's entourage, who was of the tribe of Tahkemoni. What Alharizi seems to be conveying in this is military might on one level. In other words, this is a bold book. It is a brave book. It's a book that fights for a cause in a way.

Actor: *For this battle of honour I have mustered the language of visions – our father's speech, in fifty divisions.*

Jonathan: But even more central than that is the root, right? Tahkemoni comes to root "cha" from the same, the root *chacham*, which means wise or *chokma* means wisdom. So in the very title of the book, it has a resonance of might and wisdom.

In the case of the Hebrew *maqama*, there's almost a one-to-one correspondence where the learned reader, who was expected to basically have the Bible memorized and at his fingertips, would constantly hear echoes of the biblical language in the *maqamat*, in the *maqamas*. So that they would hear one text underneath another text.

Actor: *Then the Intellect seized a coal, touched my lips, and spoke my name; and my soul took flame. My word is yours, he called, my voice, your declaration; I ordain you poet of your nation.*

Jonathan: The narrator is named Heman Ha Ezrahi or Heman the Ezrahite. It's a name that comes up in the Bible a few times. There's an author of one of the Psalms named Heman the Ezrahite. Sometimes he's identified as a poet specifically. And so you can see why that would've been attractive to somebody like Alharizi.

And the protagonist he calls Hever Hakeini.

Actor: *Now here is my scheme: I set this work in the mouth of Heman the Ezrahite and Hever the Kenite of Zaananim – but know that they, their histories, all this delectation, are but a fabrication, the child of my imagination.*

Jonathan: He's called Hever, right? Which comes from a word meaning friend, essentially. But it also means to compose, to join together. So he's somebody who joins together bits of rhetoric that are coming from different places. He's a Kenite. He comes from the tribe of Cain. Cain was a wanderer. And the figure himself then, meaning the protagonist in Alharizi's book, is a wanderer himself. He's constantly traveling through the lands of the Near East.

So the way that Alahrizi is thinking of it is that he came from a place of eternal wandering. The protagonist seems to be from nowhere. So the narrator actually, he says explicitly that he came from Spain. That name Ezrahi, Ezrahite, that's the word, the modern word for citizen. It's because it's someone who rises, someone who rises from the soil. So he's from a specific place, but the protagonist, the anti-hero, he's from nowhere and everywhere, all at the same time.

Actor: *I am Hever the Kenite, singer supreme, sprung from Elon Zaananim. Often shall I meet you, indeed in every chapter greet you: be your petition large or small, I shall answer you before you call.*

Jonathan: And the book is about their constant encounters. I like to think that there's a little bit of the author in each of them, if you wanna try to identify Where is the authorial voice in the text? It's located somewhere between the two of them.

Actor: *The Mystery and History of the Hebrew Song of Spain*

Jonathan: This is from the third chapter. It's one of the more important chapters of the book. It's the chapter that we often call the chapter on the poets of Spain. And what's happening in the story is the following:

Heman al Ezrahi, he's been traveling, and he comes to Bavel. He comes to Babylonia, by which he means Iraq. And he comes upon a beautiful mansion.

Actor: *Now one day, after bobbing through the market like a ship gone astray, I gained entry to a mansion of one of the gentry, a palace azure and sunny, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

Jonathan: And he's invited to a meal and he comes into the mansion. He describes the architecture for a while, clearly talking about an Islamic style of architecture. He describes the beautiful garden within the home that's flourishing. And then he describes the other guests at this meal, and of course the food. Sitting at the table is this one person who's eating gluttonously and he's dressed in ragged clothing.

I'm gonna read to you from a very short section that's describing this gluttonous man sitting at the table.

Jonathan reads a passage from The Book of Tahkemoni in Hebrew.

You hear it sounds a lot like somebody sitting at a meal stuffing food into his face “ach ach ach” swallowing, right?

Actor: *Now I spied among this assemblage an aged guest, his eyes a falcon's searching for a nest, his arms snake-coiled, a predator who would not be foiled. What his swooping fingers found they slipped tightly round; then loud his teeth ground – better,*

pounded, for each tooth was a mallet. And what a hippopotamal palate: his lower jaw stretched endless as the Oral Law, even as he flung his tongue the hills of food among. Oh, all the king's tailors with all the king's leather could not tie those clickclacking jaws together!

Jonathan: He seems completely out of place. He has no manners, he has no etiquette, and everyone's just kind of vaguely tolerating him at the table.

Actor: *But for our good breeding, in our choler we would have seized him by the collar, hauled him to his feet, and flung him to the street.*

Jonathan: The other guests at the table start to talk about a very sophisticated subject matter as one might do at a dinner party. And of course, that is the Hebrew poetry of Spain. So they go through some of the great Hebrew poets of this bygone age. The period of the great poets of Judah Halevi and Moses Ibn Ezra, and Solomon ibn Gabirol has come to a close and they're just recounting their poetic achievements.

Actor: *Then, fuelled more by his engorgement than ours, we struck up a conversation on the power of those bright bells that through Spain's halls loud rung – bards of the Hebrew tongue.*

Jonathan: And all the while this man is sitting quietly, but also eating in a very unacceptable manner. And then at one point, the narrator talks to him. And, and this gluttonous man says, "Oh, pray, tell. What is it that everyone is talking about?" And the narrator says, they're talking about the great poets of Spain.

And then of course, this character turns out to be none other than the protagonist, Hever the Kenite. He basically says to all of these young men at this gathering, you don't know anything. I was there. I was there when these poets fought their pitched battles.

Actor: *Now these names you dandle, these secrets you would crudely handle, and thrust towards Wisdom's candle – I know each poet's sword and shield, am come this instant from their battlefield. In me they dwell, sensorial and incorporeal; I am their scroll, I am their living memorial. And now attend my narrative, that your souls might live.*

Jonathan: So then he goes on his own exposition about the great Hebrew poets of Spain. And of course, his monologue is extremely long, much more learned and written

in a much higher register of the Hebrew language. In other words, the person who's this crazy glutton at the table turns out to be the true intellectual who was the master of Hebrew poetry over everyone else.

Actor: *Now when this illuminate was through, our mouths filled with ash, and our hearts with rue, as Conscience called, Go to! Go to! For well we knew: all his pronouncements were true.*

Jonathan: There are a lot of chapters in the book that are simply there for their rhetorical enjoyment. They're there to display almost the pyrotechnics of the author's ability. And some of them are structured as debates. So you have the debate of day versus night.

Actor: *The Debate of Day and Night: Whose the Greater Might and Delight*

Jonathan: The debate of the pen and the sword.

Actor: *The Battle of Sword and Pen for Mastery of Men*

Jonathan: You have the debate of which is greater, the ant or the flea.

Actor: *A Descant on the Flea and the Ant*

Jonathan: They can be in kind of ridiculous topics, but they're executed with the utmost care on a literary level. Then there are chapters where he tries to emulate or maybe even outdo some of the things that he found in the Arabic maqamat. So for example, there's a chapter where he has two epistles in it.

Actor: *Of Verbal Show: Using and Refusing the Letter O*

Jonathan: In one of which every word has the letter "resh" and in the other of which no word has the letter "resh". And this is something that David Siegel did in his translation with one chapter that has the letter O in every word.

Actor: *Countrymen, hoist Song's torch, commanding stoneblind orbs, Behold! Hold out your coronals, took of Wisdom's hold, to your uncontested lord.*

Jonathan: And then the other epistle has no O's whatsoever. It's kinda like musical compositions that are written only for the black keys.

Actor: *Regard Israel's leader, her mighty and supernal cedar, Justice' planter and Virture's breeder, fairest tent amidst Israel's tents, lime waterside palms dripping rarest scents, an unfailing light, Evil's bane and Darkness' fright and his kinsmen's delight, beaming as the sun in his might.*

Jonathan: There's one episode, however, that's particularly rich with regard to its plot, and it's the 22nd chapter.

Actor: *Of Fate's Rack and the Zodiac*

Jonathan: And the story here is more involved. And in this story, Muslim Jewish difference is actually quite central to the plot line. And the story goes like this. The narrator is wandering and he encounters Hever the Kenite and Hever the Kenite is downtrodden, his face is sunken.

Actor: *Haveri/ my friend, what befell you?*

Jonathan: And he says, well, I basically just escaped by the skin of my teeth, and this is what happened.

Actor: *Yesterday I was with Hebrew friends. At the city's outskirts we saw a large mêlée, a swirling tide, men pushing in from every side. Curious, my Hebrew friends and I hurried toward this stir, this dusty blur, to find that an Arab savant had arrived at the city gate, an intimate, we were told, of stars and Fate, one who unrobed the future before it came, revealing mysteries that bore no name.*

Jonathan: And it's a wonderful section of the text where he goes through the signs of the zodiac, predicting the future for many people. He then takes a stick and he draws on the earth.

Actor: *Advancing into the crowd we saw the sage, an imposing figure advanced in age, a broad instrument in his hands and thereon a net of crisscrossed copper bands wherewith he gauged the circuits of the sun, when and where her race had begun, wherein she spun, where her course would run and when be done.*

Jonathan: He's collecting money by telling fortunes, essentially.

Actor: *When he had done answering – or, shall I say, guessing? – each man rewarded him according to his blessing.*

Jonathan: And so the Jews, they come up with a plan and they say, we're all gonna agree that we're gonna think about the same issue, and then we're gonna go talk to him and see if he can guess what we're thinking.

Actor: *Yes, they answered, let us confirm him or undo him by putting one question to him.*

Jonathan: And what they agree on, that their question is: when will the Messiah come? Moreover, when will the Messiah come and uproot this Muslim nation that dominates us and that subjugates us? In other words, this is a cheeky thing for them to be thinking about. but we're not gonna say who we are. We're not even gonna tell 'em that we're Jews. And so they go up to him and they say, can you guess our thought? And he ponders for a while and he does his stuff with drawing on the sand.

Actor: *Then he drew on the sand myriad dots and signs and crisscrossed many lines. Once done these intricate designs he made many a calculation, lifting his astrolabe before his face and fixing the sun in its station; then, with lines for borders and partition, he fixed the ascending planet in its exact position until each star nearly fell from its berth to bow before him to the earth.*

Jonathan: And then he turns to them and he says, behold, I recognized that you were Jews.

Actor: *You be not of us nor do you the Nazarene embrace; no – you are of the accursed Jewish race.*

Jonathan: And so first of all, it suggests that had the astrologer not been an astrologer, he probably wouldn't have been able to pick them out as Jews. He says, I recognize that you were Jews, and the question on your mind is when will your Messiah come? and you expect to overthrow us, right?

Actor: *Sons of death, you would see our kingdom destroyed; you would hurl us to the void!*

Jonathan: At that moment, a mob gathers, clearly a Muslim mob and starts to beat them.

Actor: *After the old man had roundly disowned us, the entire congregation would have stoned us. They spat on us, hooted us, booted us, dragged us hands and feet through*

street after street until, battered and blood-spattered, we were flung at the gate of the city's magistrate.

Jonathan: And they're attacking them until a Muslim police officer essentially breaks up the mob and then takes the Jewish characters into custody, puts them in a cell, but for their own protection. In other words, he's doing this so that the mob will leave them alone.

Actor: *Now this righteous gentile, before whom we had been brought, could, at a glance, discern a man's most secret thought. At once, he took us to a private place and bade us tell him what had taken place – the which we did. Thereat he said, Peace be with you, do not fear: no harm shall come you here. He called loud to a servant, Put these sons of perversity under lock and key! And so we passed the night in prison. But shortly after the sun had risen and the crowd had long gone, he bade us travel on.*

Jonathan: They spend the night in jail, and then the next morning they go free. So this episode is very interesting on a number of levels. Some people have looked at it as a type of document about Muslim Jewish relations, right? So one, you can't distinguish Jews on the street from Muslims. Two, Jewish Muslim relations may be quite positive in general, but there's this kind of underlying tension that could erupt at any moment, right? If, if Jews are thinking too subversively, then they might be subject to a kind of a popular attack. At the same time, there's a system of governance in place that offers them protection, right? There's still a magistrate who comes and gives them physical safety, right?

So you can look at it on that level. It's also very interesting on a literary level. What happens in most episodes, as I've told you, Hever the Kenite is usually the person who's appearing in some kind of disguise in the public square. And that he's the one who's tricking everyone else. But in this particular story, suddenly the Jewish protagonist is rendered powerless, and it's the astrologer who's playing the role that you would usually expect Hever the Kenite to play.

Actor: *God in His clemency had sent an angel to set us free. And now that we have escaped that mob's wide jaws and raking claws, I say, Blessed be the Lord in Heaven above and on earth beneath, who gave us not as prey unto their teeth.*

Jonathan: When Alharizi went to the east, he sought out people with resources. and he dedicates this work multiple times. It's come down to us in a good number of different

copies that change in different ways. So if you go to the 46th chapter, that chapter recounts the travels of the protagonist.

Actor: *Of This and That Community Sung with Impunity*

Jonathan: It starts off simply with an encounter of the narrator and the protagonist.

Actor: *Thus spoke Heman the Ezrahite:*

A caravan of Ishmaelites met me one day as I made my way from Adinah to Elam. There, in the plain, in the tamarisks' shade, we stopped and stayed; and lo, who should greet our sight but Hever the Kenite, come to that very place to light my eyes and bright my face.

Jonathan: And what happens over and over again throughout that chapter is the protagonist says, I came to such and such a city, and these are the impressive figures whom I met there. And he praises them and he, he mentions 'em by name – these are real life human beings. And he talks about some of their qualities, be they intellectual, or their generosity, or their moral qualities, their knowledge of prayer or their knowledge of Torah, whatever it is.

Actor: *A notable community are the Ashkelonites, headed by Sa'adiah the Benjaminite, Wisdom's sure and steady light.*

Jonathan: And then he also lampoons people.

Actor: *Choosing randomly one rogue in vogue, I mention Barukh/Blessed the physician, scum come from Mount Eval, from a family of Belial who have turned their backs on God and bent their knees to Baal.*

Jonathan: And he had a sharp tongue, Alharizi had a really sharp tongue. And when he wanted to lay into somebody, he knew exactly how to do it.

Actor: *But his son Isaac God's patience hard assaults, amassing even more than his father's faults, until he bursts Sin's vaults – for he is high-nosed, foul-mouthed, and tight-fisted: snorting, fuming, and twisted, hoarding his ancestor's virtues like gold and adding thereto a thousandfold. He is an un-Jew, a one-man zoo with the foul of a sow and the brains of a cow, kind as a cat and clean as a rat, true as a fox and quick as an ox, brave as a hare, and sweet as a bear, brazen as a dog, lazy as a hog, witty as a donkey, shitty as a monkey, a baboon's double with a goat's stubble.*

Jonathan: What's been discovered is that in some versions of the work, a particular character might be lampooned, and in another version of the work, that same character is praised. And the question is what happens between the two versions? And so it's usually assumed that at first that person patronized him, in other words, supported his literary endeavors, and then they became misers. And his way of showing his dissatisfaction with these patrons was then to lampoon them in his writing.

It's conceivable that it went the other way around. It's possible that he lampooned somebody first and then in order to improve their public image, they'd have no choice but, but to patronize him. But we're, we're not certain about which one, which way went first. But it's really quite funny that he does that.

Actor: *Thence I went to Baghdad, that glorified nation, ever Wisdom's truest station. Today, however, it stands bereft: its elders have departed; only raw youths are left. The wheat is gone, the chaff stays on, Virtue has vanished without a trace, Vileness has seized her place; the lions are all dead and foxes roam the hills instead, fouling the ruins of Giving's hall and tower. I sought but found no vower; no, not one endower.*

Jonathan: But nonetheless he remained a wanderer. He remained itinerant. And it was probably still because he didn't find the patronage that he wanted, that the last things that we know about him were that he settled in Aleppo, working under the patronage of Muslim patrons. He writes poems in honor of members of the Royal Ayyubid family.

I think, in my view, Alharizi was trying to recreate something of that lost culture of Jewish life in Islamic Spain on the soil of the Islamic East. My feeling about his experience of Jewish culture in the Islamic East is kind of mixed. I talked to you about the third chapter in which he finds this group of Jewish intellectuals who talk about the Hebrew poetry of Islamic Spain. But he doesn't think that they're that sophisticated, right? That's why Hever Hakeini has to come in and really school them. So they're trying, but it's not as rich a place.

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Aaron: Thank you for listening to this episode of *The Dybbukast*, "The Book of Tahkemoni." The text featured in this episode was read by Bill Ratner. Thank you to Dr. Jonathan Decter for sharing his insights.

Our theme music is composed by Michael Skloff and produced by Sam K.S. Story editing was led by Julie Lockhart, with support from me, Aaron Henne. This episode was edited by Mark McClain Wilson.

Please visit us at theatredybbuk.org , where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode's explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk's work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website.

Selections from *The Book of Tahkemoni* were taken from the English translation by David Simha Segal.

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Actor: Now I have included in this work matter of all manner: anthems for Love's banner, riddles and saws, lore and laws, reflection, censure, the wayfarer's adventure, tales of times past or of death's blast, the grace of every season, the way of reason or treachery and treason, godly wrath and the penitent's path, the beloved's face and hot embrace, wooing and bedding and holy wedding – and divorce as well.

Yes, I tell of teetotallers and drinkers, of warriors and thinkers, spin takes of journeys, of kings and poets' tourneys, prayers and supplication, praise and protestation the rebuke of the wise and good fortune's demise, the role of Love's gazelles and the cool of desert wells, stint's harsh breeze and beggars' pleas, wind and water, sword and slaughter, harts' hunt and heart's want, travellers' treks and slippery decks and vessels' wrecks, slandering, pandering, and Youth's meandering, Nazirites' vows and drunken carouse, paramours, ills and cures, blockheads and boors, guile's school and the gulled fool, gibe and jeer and snub and sneer, song enchanted, wine discarded, witty invention, brazen contention – all this, that this book might be Song's manse and garden, wherein every seeker might sate his quest, every petitioner gain his behest: herein shall the weary rest. Then enter, all, my dazzling manor, each in his camp, each man beneath his banner.