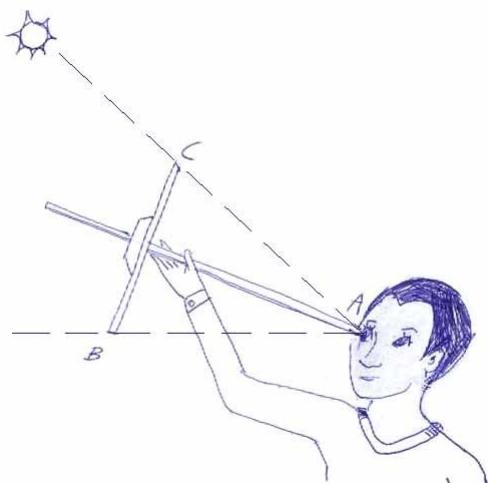


Homework for the class on Medieval Hebrew

Introduction to Hebrew Linguistics

T. Biro

Levi ben Gerson (1288-1344), also known as *Gersonides* (his Latinate name) or the *RaLBaG* (the typical rabbinic acronym of his name “Rabbi Levi Ben Gershon”), living in Southern France, was one of the most important Jewish philosophers and Bible commentators in the late Middle Ages. Additionally, he is also seen as the most significant medieval Jewish astronomers beside *Maimonides* (the *RaMBaM*, 1138-1204). Unlike most of his Muslim, Christian and Jewish contemporaries, he did not only focus on theoretical computations and astronomical models of the world, but he also carried out observations. His most famous contribution to (practical) astronomy was the invention of the *Jacob’s staff* (in Dutch: *Jakobsstaf*).



(<http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jakobsstaf>)

The Jacob’s staff consists of two pieces. By moving the smaller piece, one can measure the angle between two stars (planets, the Moon or the Sun), or the distance (the “height”) of a celestial body from the horizon. Then, one reads the position of the smaller piece along the longer piece, and so you can compute the angular distance or height in question. This instrument became especially important in navigation during the 16th and 17th century.

The name “Jacob’s staff” is usually understood as referring to the fact that the inventor of the instrument was a Jew. (“Jacob” standing for a Jew.) The year 2009 was the “International Year for Astronomy”, and so the Israeli post issued a stamp in honour of Gersonides/RaLBaG, one of the most

important Jewish astronomers. The stamp refers to Jacob's staff as מטה יעקב. Obviously, you would say. But is it really so obvious?

Bernard Goldstein is the doyen of scholars of medieval Jewish astronomy. He published several books and articles on Levi ben Gerson. In a recent article of his, he traces the name of the object across centuries. The article shows that the name of an object in Israeli Hebrew may be an extremely recent innovation, even if the object itself was invented by a Jewish scholar centuries ago, described for the first time in Hebrew, etc. The article illustrates the intellectual, scientific, cultural and technical interaction in Europe in the late Middle Ages and early modern times, and the way this interaction is reflected in language. The article also shows the wealth of knowledge required to scholarly trace a research question as simple as the name of an object.

The article is available here:

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aleph_historical_studies_in_science_and_judaism/toc/ale.11.2.html
or <http://www.birot.hu/courses/2012-introhb/readings/Aleph11.2.Goldstein.pdf>.

Assignment: Read the article. Then, summarize in a few sentences the long journey behind the simple expression מטה יעקב on the Israeli stamp. When (and why, how – according to the article) was the Latin expression *baculus Jacob* created, and when (and how) did it reach Israeli Hebrew?