

University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Aviva Ben-Ur

Spring June, 2015

“Kabbalistic Pharmacopeia: Wellbeing in the Atlantic Jewish World”

Aviva Ben-Ur, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/aviva_benur/18/



PROJECT MUSE®

Kabbalistic Pharmacopoeia: Well-Being in the Atlantic Jewish World

Aviva Ben-Ur

Jewish Quarterly Review, Volume 105, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp. 145-153 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: 10.1353/jqr.2015.0010



➔ For additional information about this article
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jqr/summary/v105/105.2.ben-ur.html>

Kabbalistic Pharmacopoeia: Well-Being in the Atlantic Jewish World

AVIVA BEN-UR

IN THE SUMMER OF 2013, the Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies of the University of Pennsylvania purchased, at auction in Jerusalem, an intriguing manuscript for the Arnold and Deanne Kaplan Collection of Early American Judaica. Bearing the lead title *Ta'alumot ḥokhmah*, the document appeared to the antique dealer to be the memoirs of Aron Henriques da Cunha, a Jewish doctor or pharmacist in Holland or the Caribbean Islands in the fifty years bracketing the turn of the nineteenth century (fig. 1). The catalog description refers to cures, amulets, kabbalistic recipes, and alchemy written in Spanish, Dutch, German, and Hebrew.

Now, as the document has begun to circulate among historians, it is clear that *Ta'alumot ḥokhmah*—The secrets of wisdom—is much more significant and complex than originally surmised. The manuscript was in fact composed over the course of 150 years in many different hands and lands, largely in Portuguese and Dutch, with significant portions in French and Italian, and a smattering of Spanish, English, German, and Yiddish. Most manifestly, it is a receipt book, a compendium of medical, culinary, and housekeeping recipes, sometimes mingled with kabbalistic directives.¹ It also falls within the genre of the “literature of ‘secrets,’” whose origins trace back to the pre-Christian rites and religions of southern Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, and whose content was magical and semi-medical.² In the Jewish community, the genre was

1. The Wellcome Library in London, one of the world's major resources for the study of medical history, houses several receipt books, most from the eighteenth century and authored by women, and many digitized and accessible via the library's website. I thank Brian W. Ogilvie for bringing this collection and the genre of receipt books to my attention.

2. Michael R. Best and Frank H. Brightman, eds., *The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus of the Virtues of Herbs, Stones and Certain Beasts, also A Book of the Marvels of the World* (New York, 1974), xxxix.

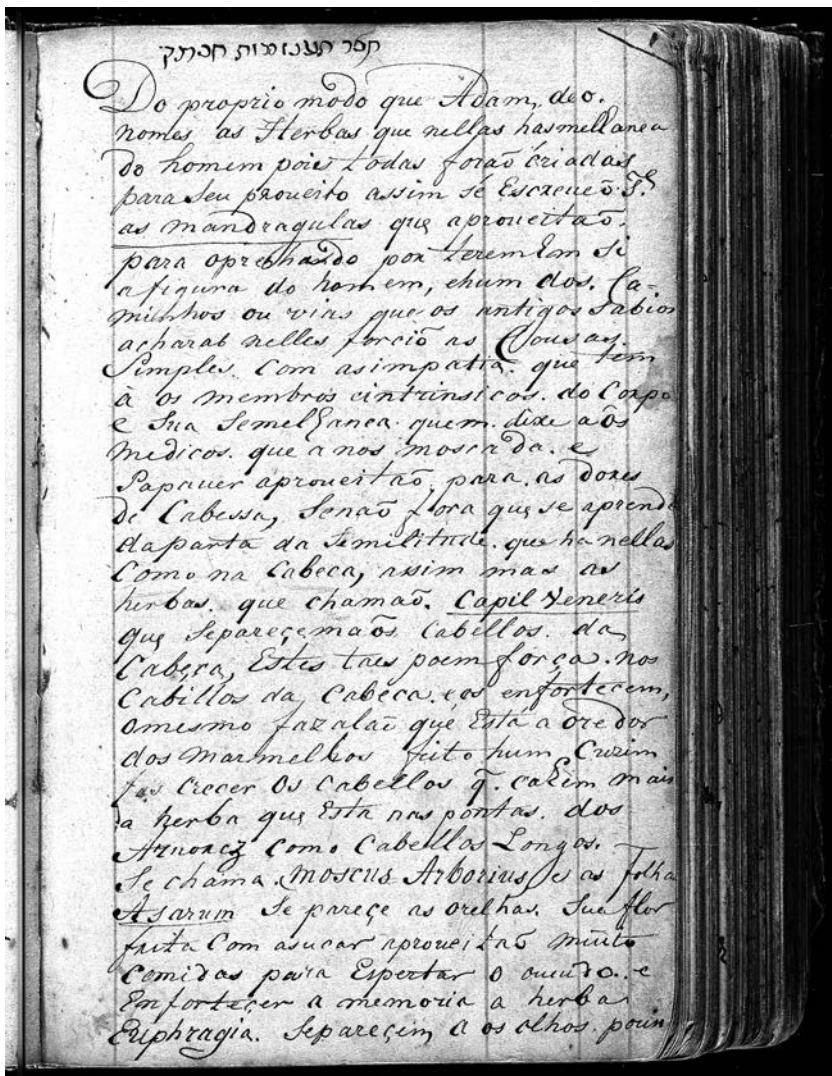


Figure 1. First page of *Ta'alumoth hokhmah*, Portuguese (ca. 18th c.). This and the other images here are courtesy of The Arnold and Deanne Kaplan Collection of Early American Judaica. Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania.

known as *sifre segulot* and often took the form of anonymous personal manuals containing medical remedies and charms, distilled from mid-rashic, kabbalistic, and medical sources.³ But because it is composed of

3. Hagit Matras, "Wholeness and Holiness in *Sifre Segulot*," *Koroth* 9 (1988): 98–99 and 104.

multiple juxtaposed layers of texts, *Ta'alumot ḥokhmah* also embodies the genres of memoir, family record book, scrapbook, merchant's guide, and folklore. This hodgepodge represents the transmission of knowledge within a single family that cultivated connections with various regions of the Western world. Collectively, the component parts of the text mark the major transitions that characterize the Atlantic Jewish era: conversion from Christianity to Judaism, migration from Europe to the New World, the shift from Peninsular mono- or bilingualism to multilingualism, and the confrontation of traditional Judaism with modern, secularized science. The manuscript is representative of Jews in the Atlantic world, a region where people, commodities, ideas, and technology were intensely exchanged among the four continents of North and South America, Europe, and Africa.

RECIPES FOR WELL-BEING

Ta'alumot ḥokhmah is constructed much like the successive strata of an archaeological site. The deepest layer (pp. 1–52) is written largely in Portuguese by a physician who signs only as J.C.A. He opens with a rather unoriginal discourse on the doctrine of signatures—the ancient idea, developed in the medieval and early modern periods, that the most obvious anatomical features of flowers and herbs indicate which parts of the human body they are intended to heal. The chamomile flower, for example, resembles a navel and is therefore good for all sorts of stomach pains.⁴ The *capil veneris* plant, which resembles hairs, ensures luscious locks, while the grains of the Josianus are reminiscent of teeth and, when cooked with vinegar or vermouth wine, provide dental fortification.⁵

The writer reveals nothing of his family or ancestors, but the language in which he writes, sprinkled with biblical and rabbinical allusions, clearly identifies him as a descendant of Portuguese New Christians who settled in one of the Protestant-ruled cities of northwestern Europe, likely Amsterdam. Unlike the memoirs of well-known New Christians such as Uriel da Costa or the founding fathers and mothers of colonial America's Jewish community, there are no testimonies of a decision to return to an open Jewish life followed by a harrowing escape from Inquisitorial authorities.⁶ Rather, J.C.A. discloses key moments in his intellectual awakening.

4. Arnold and Deanne Kaplan Collection of Early American Judaica, Library of the Herbert D. Katz Center of the University of Pennsylvania, "Memoirs of Aron Henriques da Cunha, Jewish doctor or pharmacist in Holland or the Caribbean Islands," 14.

5. Ibid., 2.

6. Uriel da Costa, *Exemplar Humanae Vitae* (Specimen of human life), in *Confessions and Self-Portraits: 4600 Years of Autobiography*, ed. S. K. Padover (New York,

From childhood, he had always inclined toward medicine and surgery and used to experiment on his schoolmates, applying to them bandages he had purchased. When the renowned physician Benedicto de Castro (1597–1689), scion of a Portuguese Jewish family of Hamburg, arrived in Amsterdam in 1671, J.C.A. came under his tutelage and quickly convinced him that he would become a great doctor. Lacking stamina, J.C.A. opted not to pursue university studies, a plausible reason why his initials are not immediately identifiable.⁷ But Castro, J.C.A. claims, valued field experience over formal study and never ceased to support his young apprentice.

Subsequently, J.C.A. came under the influence of other physician luminaries, fellow Portuguese Jews Benjamin Musaphia and Isaac Orobio, both of whom he heard discourse in Amsterdam; from the latter he learned various remedies. J.C.A. continued his informal study in Saxony, Denmark, and Hanover, always interning under individuals “of much experience,” some of whom had practiced in the West Indies. That both Castro and Musaphia were ardent Sabbatians is in keeping with the kabbalistic philosophy that undergirds each layer of the manuscript. Apparently a native of Amsterdam, J.C.A. did not have the opportunity afforded New Christians in Spain and forewent the possibility of open Jews in cities such as Padua and Leiden, to pursue and excel in university medical studies. It is possible that his lack of university training gave J.C.A. free rein to develop his Jewish theology of healing, which was sustained by the successors who took up work on the manuscript after his death. The very title of the manuscript, *Ta’alumot ḥokhmah*, indicated only in the text’s first layer, is unmistakably kabbalistic and perhaps intended as a wink at Joseph Salomon Delmedigo’s book of the same name, first published in 1629. The title may even represent an acknowledgment of the early modern controversy about whether Kabbalah was ancient or valid, a point Delmedigo (1591–1655) left ambiguous and unresolved.⁸

The next layer of the text—the bulk of the manuscript—introduces a pronounced multilingualism and unbridled multivocality. Spanning some three hundred pages (pp. 52 onward), this new section is signaled by an abrupt change in handwriting (early modern to modern cursive) and language (Portuguese to Dutch, followed by interventions of French,

1957), 83–91; George White, *Statistics of the State of Georgia* (Savannah, Ga., 1849), 619–20.

7. Brian W. Ogilvie suggests that the “A” may represent the first letter of “Amsterdam,” an indication of the author’s nativity.

8. Yaacob Dweck, *The Scandal of Kabbalah: Leon Modena, Jewish Mysticism, Early Modern Venice* (Princeton, N.J., 2011), 83.

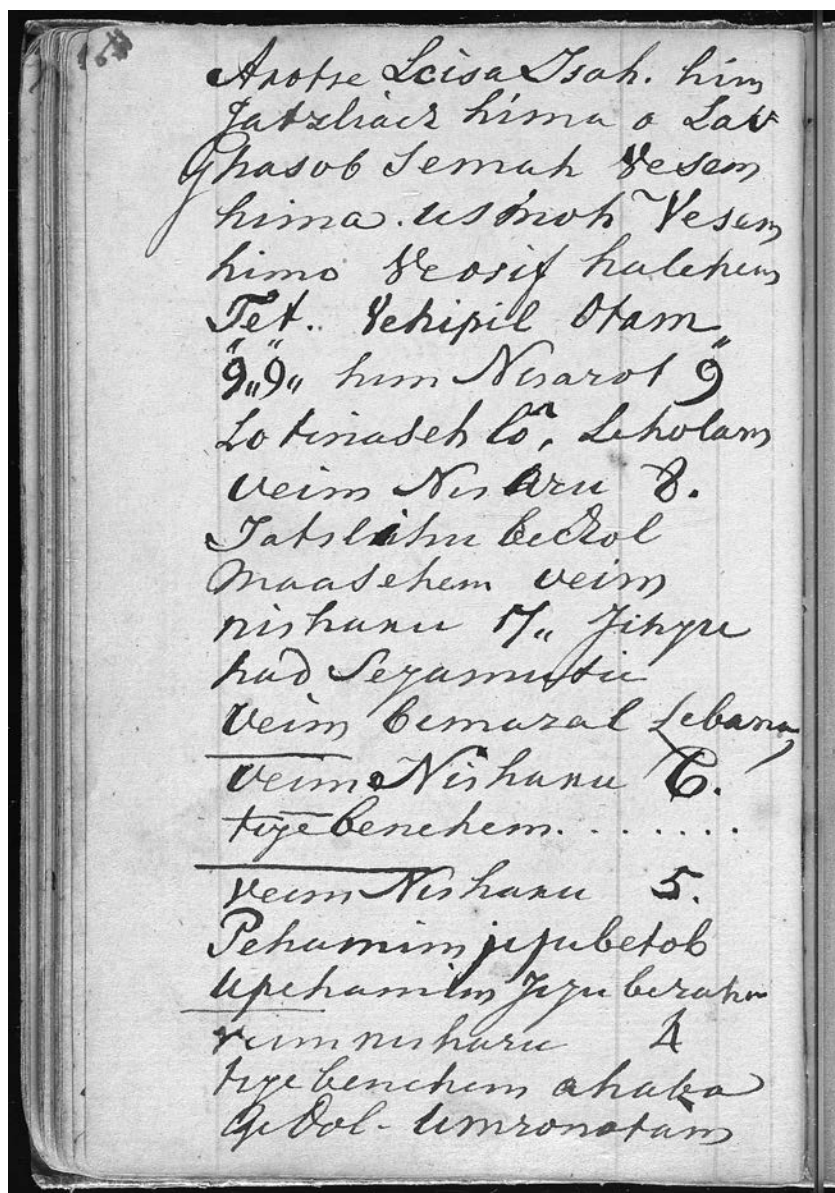


Figure 2. Method, by means of drawing lots, of divining whether a marriage to a woman will be auspicious or not. Portuguese-inflected Hebrew in Latin letters. *Ta'alumoth hokhmah*, p. 66.

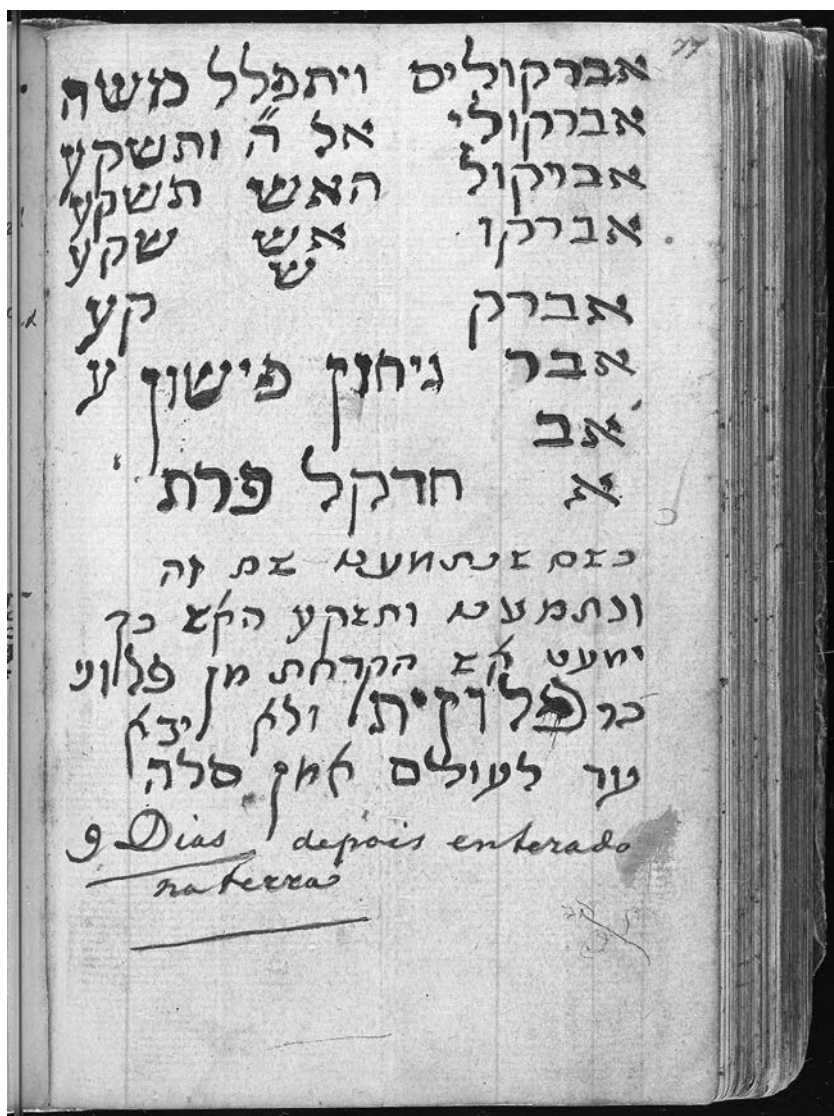


Figure 3. Kabbalistic formula for curing malaria. Hebrew and Portuguese. *Ta'alumoth hokhmah*, p. 87 (note faulty pagination at top right which reads p. 77).

Italian, German, Spanish, Yiddish, and Hebrew written in both traditional and Latin script) (fig. 2). There are prescriptions for accidents, disorders, and diseases, such as burns, fever, smallpox, diarrhea, weak eyes, rabid dog bites, scabies, shortness of breath, cramps, and scurvy

(fig. 3). Interspersed are recipes for amulets against physical harm and various lists for calculating days, including those auspicious for cameo writing. Included too is a Hebrew spell for the purpose of killing an enemy, a reminder of the sinister side of well-being.⁹ We read of the method to conserve meat in brine for export to the West, and—in French, of course—how to prepare lemon ice cream, apricot and prune marmalades, Chantillon cheese (actually a sort of citrus-infused whipped cream), and a healthy raspberry vinegar drink for summer. There are also practical household guidelines for making glass malleable; concocting shoe varnish, toothpaste, and mouthwash; polishing or melting silver; and preparing essential oils, glue, tints for dyeing, and ink—including the invisible kind, for concealing secrets. The variety of medical remedies, housekeeping solutions, and magical charms is dazzling and their juxtaposition jarring but very much in keeping with the unsystematic ordering of Enlightenment-era manuals, memoirs, and commonplace books. Another explanation for the diversity of ideas lies in both the handwriting and the languages, which shift unpredictably, suggesting that Amsterdam or Naarden, the cities where portions of the manuscript were definitely composed, hosted multiethnic Jewish communities and served as bustling meeting places for the exchange of ideas, technology, and diseases originating in the Americas, northwestern Europe, and east of the Atlantic orbit in Italy, Germany, and the East Indies. We might also imagine that the owner transported the manual with him as a *vade mecum*, anticipating contributions from colleagues and other healers he would encounter during his travels over sea and land.

PLACING THE TEXT

Clearly, *Ta'alumot hokhmah* was composed in a Dutch-speaking environment. Allusions to Dutch equivalents of Portuguese words characterize every layer of the document, though much more self-consciously in the section dating to the eighteenth century.¹⁰ Contrary to the antique dealer's description, it is unlikely that *Ta'alumot hokhmah* was composed in Curaçao. However, the text is sprinkled with allusions to the New World as well as the East Indies (Batavia) and it is clear that the major contributor to the document was a merchant who shipped goods to and from New York and the Caribbean, if he did not travel there himself. Caribbean products also characterize a number of the prescriptions, including

9. "Memoirs of Aron Henriques da Cunha," 67.

10. The Dutch (*framengo*) equivalent of *urtiqua* is given as *Brandnestelle*, a corruption of "brandnetels." Ibid., 4.

“Curaçao peals” (*Curaçao schillen*) as an essential ingredient in the “radical remedy” for a “cold fever.”¹¹ Well into the text is a list of shipping costs to New York and Suriname. The author seems to have had a correspondent in the latter Dutch colony who sent him shipments of sugar and coffee.¹²

The family record book layer of the text, discussed below, references the burial of family members in Ouderkerk, the location of the Portuguese Jewish cemetery lying just outside Amsterdam, as well as the 1794 purchase of the synagogue in Naarden by Amsterdam native Abraham Henriques.¹³ It may be that all of the authors of *Ta'alumot ḥokhmah* were based in what would become the Dutch Republic, but (like most Portuguese Jews) they likely had strong familial ties in the Caribbean and North America.

FAMILY RECORD BOOK: IDENTIFYING THE AUTHORS

The third, latest, and most poignant layer of *Ta'alumot ḥokhmah*—a list of births, marriages, deaths, and notable family events—comes in the last dozen pages of the 380-page manuscript. It is not always clear who is writing, but the theme is often tragic. The first entry records the burial of “my son Jacob on July 13, 1807,” along with a list of internment costs, down to the measurement of the shroud. Perhaps the name was recycled, because another son named Jacob soon appears; he succumbed to severe measles after five days and died in 1817. A list of major illnesses, including measles and a variety of smallpox (*steen pokken*), follows, a grim commentary on the efficacy of nineteenth-century medicine. Abraham Henriquez Junior, born in the 1740s, recorded the birth of his premature daughter, born at seven months, who lived just a day. Subsequent children, born in 1782 and thereafter, probably survived the death of their father in 1800, as their demise is not noted. The winds of modernity blew most forcefully on Henriquez’s youngest child, Aron Henriquez da Cunha, born in 1784. In 1806, at the age of twenty-two, this youngest son changed his name to Augustin Henriquez Junior to commemorate the air balloon (*lugtbol*) that a man identified simply as “Augustin” successfully launched.¹⁴ This is no doubt Augustino Gerli (1744–1821), who had, along with his brother Charles and the Italian aeronaut Paolo Andreani, gained fame the year of Cunha’s birth for embarking on the

11. Ibid., 346. The *schillen* likely refer to the laraha citrus fruit famous on the island of Curaçao and first developed as a commodity in the nineteenth century.

12. Ibid., 324.

13. Ibid., 375.

14. Ibid., 376.

first balloon ascent in Italy, traveling a quarter of a mile in twenty minutes.¹⁵ Aron's name change may have been as much an expression of admiration for Gerli's historic achievements as gratitude for his not having crashed, as so many adventurers had in the past. Either way, the alteration indicates a cultural shift. According to Jewish tradition, a name change is permitted only in cases of serious illness, when a new name is adopted in order to confound the angel of death. Henriquez's identity transformation may be read as a statement that he was stepping away from his roots and toward the shared secular culture that first emerged on the cusp of Early Modernity as Europe's universities began to open their doors to Jews.

The aforementioned purchaser of the Naarden synagogue, Abraham Henriques, is better known from municipal records, which indicate that his acquisition of the house of worship automatically made him president (*parnas*) and treasurer (*penningmeester*). That same year (1794) he also purchased Naarden citizenship, which afforded him governing authority over all local Jews, Portuguese and High German (Ashkenazi) alike.¹⁶ Naarden's Jewish community became, in effect, Henriques's fiefdom. He served as *parnas-presidente* and remained owner of the synagogue until 1813, when he sold it to Abraham van David Teixeira de Mattos. Portuguese Jews officially maintained their stranglehold on the Jewish community until the late nineteenth century, even though the vast majority of Naarden's Jews had almost always been Ashkenazim.¹⁷

That the family record section was written in many hands suggests that *Ta'alumot hokbmah* was a receipt book handed down and perhaps consulted through the generations. Its preservation bespeaks the historic pride that Portuguese Jews took in their accomplished physicians, the conservative nature of Portuguese Judaism, and possibly the Portuguese Jewish tradition's role in retarding the inroads of modern science.¹⁸

15. "Balloons and Ballooning," *American Magazine* 3.1 (1877): 39.

16. Hendrik Henrichs, *De synagoge van Naarden, 1750–1955* (Amstelveen, 1982), 33.

17. *Ibid.*, 34.

18. On Portuguese Jewish pride, see David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (1995; Detroit, 2001), 309.