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The Power of Imagination. Miracles versus Rationality in the *Midrashim* in Ya‘aqov Chuli’s *Me-‘am Lo‘ez*

1 Introduction: General Characteristics of *Me-‘am Lo‘ez*

Me-‘am Lo‘ez is the most important series of religious–literary works written in Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), mediating between the written sources in the Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish (Ladino)¹ languages. It is a midrashic interpretation² of the Bible, compiled sequentially according to the order of the biblical verses. The commentary incorporates Midrash, *halakā* (Jewish law) and legends from the Mishnaic period until its own time, drawing on the work of rabbinical arbiters and teachers who were contemporaries of the authors. The sources incorporated in the work span some sixteen hundred years.

Me-‘am Lo‘ez is a collective work, penned by many authors. The initiator of the project, Rabbi Ya‘aqov Chuli,³ wrote the entire volume on Genesis and then got as far as the portion “*Tēruma*” in the Book of Exodus. Later writers continued his work.⁴

1 As Chuli himself uses the term “Ladino” for the name of the language, I also use it in this article. [In his work he also calls the language “Franko,” i.e., Western European language, a language of “Frankia” ‘Western Europe’ (cf. “Lo ke ize yo no es si no trezladar sus avlas de lashon akodesh en ladino [. . .]. Las avlas de este libro son trezladadas de Gemarā i Midrash, ke lo ke ay ay i en lashon akodesh lo trezladi aki en franko” ‘What I did is nothing more than to translate its words from the Holy Tongue into Ladino [. . .]. The words of this book are translated from the Talmud and Midrash, for what there is there in the Holy Tongue I translated here into Franko’ (Chuli 1730:[iv]b))—Editor’s Note.]

2 Homiletic interpretation.

3 This surname is traditionally written כולי/<kwly> and pronounced Hulí (i.e., [xu’li]).

4 Ya‘aqov Chuli, *Genesis* (Constantinople [“Kosta”] 1730); Ya‘aqov Chuli, *Exodus* to chap. 7 in the portion *Tēruma* (Constantinople 1733); Yiṣḥaq Bēkor Magriso, *Exodus*, from the middle of the portion *Tēruma* to the end of the book (Constantinople 1746); Yiṣḥaq Bēkor Magriso, *Leviticus* (Constantinople 1753); Yiṣḥaq Bēkor Magriso, *Numbers* (Constantinople 1764); Yiṣḥaq Argüeti, *Deuteronomy*, part 1 (Constantinople 1772), part 2 (Constantinople 1777); Raḥamim Mēnaḥem Mitrani, *Joshua* (Salonika 1851); Rēfa‘el Yiṣḥaq Me’ir Benveniste, *Ruth* (Salonika 1882); Yiṣḥaq Yēhuda Abba, *Isaiah* (Salonika 1892); Nissim Moše ‘Abud, *Ecclesiastes* (Jerusalem 1893); Ḥayyim Yiṣḥaq Sciaky, *Song of Songs* (Constantinople 1899). On the different editions of *Me-‘am Lo‘ez*, see Romeu Ferré (2000).

The work was written over the course of more than a century, between 1730 and 1899, and is the most comprehensive rabbinic anthology in the Sephardic culture. Chuli's commentary on the Book of Genesis alone rests upon more than two hundred sources. The work was conceived as a kind of popular encyclopedia, aimed at making Hebrew sources available to the Sephardic ethnic group in their own language: Ladino.

Chuli's goal was to write a book in Ladino that would include all the sources that might deepen familiarity with Judaism. Writing in the language of the members of his group made the material accessible equally to all of its literate members. In so doing, Chuli hoped to encourage all those without direct access to the Hebrew sources to adopt a religious lifestyle.

Although Chuli never completed his ambitious project, he did achieve his goal. To this day there is hardly a Sephardic home in Israel whose library lacks a copy of *Me'am Lo'ez*, either in its original language or in Shmuel Yerushalmi's Hebrew translation, which appeared in 1967–68. The latter made possible the dissemination of the book among other ethnic groups as well, such as Ashkenazic Jewry.

The cultural irony is that in contemporary Israel, even Ladino speakers prefer the Hebrew translation of this work that was intended initially to make Hebrew sources available to an audience that could not read Hebrew. This proves adequately that Chuli was not merely a translator, as he himself claimed in his introduction:

No entendash ke son kozas inventadas de mi kavesa [. . .] Si no todo este livro es trazladado [. . .].⁵

Do not think these things were made up by me [. . .] Rather, this entire book is nothing but a translation.

The work's staying power in Hebrew attests to its value as an independent work, as well as to the author's literary creativity. Chuli incorporated his own personal interpretations and by turns condensed, expanded, and synthesized different sources, sometimes altering their form and meaning in the process. In so doing he made the tradition flexible and imparted his own take on it to his target audience. The perpetual tension between the desire to present a faithful version of the tradition and the creative impulse of the series' several authors makes the work a fascinating subject for in-depth study.

⁵ Chuli, Genesis (1730: Introduction). The texts in Ladino in Latin characters are from *Me'am Lo'ez* by David Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Pascual Recuero (1969, vol. 1, part 1, 452); to facilitate the reading I changed the spelling in Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero to the *Aki Yerushalayim* system, but I systematically retain their accent marks and correct the obvious errors.

Not merely a mediator between Hebrew and Ladino rabbinic writing, *Me'am Lo'ez* has also been a written source of orally-delivered sermons and tales.⁶ The stories it comprises have thus become a mediator between the written and oral literatures.

Chuli's volume on Genesis alone includes more than four hundred stories.

2 Miracle Stories

In this article, I wish to discuss a number of stories dealing with miracles from Ya'aqov Chuli's *Me'am Lo'ez* to Genesis and Exodus, so as to come to understand his approach to this issue, whose centrality and complexity in Jewish thought over the generations is indubitable.

A miracle is an extraordinary event in nature or history intended to express a religious message. Theologically, a miracle is considered an expression of divine intervention.

According to this definition, the concept of the miracle is paradoxical, since it concerns a phenomenon contravening the laws of nature yet stems from the deliberate, direct intervention of the Lord.

In line with the traditional approach, however, the laws of nature themselves are an act of God, so the question arises: Does God actually need to "abrogate" the laws he himself determined, to intervene and change the operations of nature to prove His ability? How can it be that the Holy One, blessed be He, would want to go against these laws, for that would damage the continuum of His will, creating a change of decision—a situation that does not befit the concept of divinity. Yet, belief in miracles is part of faith in an omnipotent God and it is shared by many religious faiths.

The complexity of the concept and the theological questions it raises find expression in Jewish Thought over time in different approaches and uncertainties about miracles (Klein 2000). Urbach (1969:81–102) in his book *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs* shows that one already sees an ambivalent attitude in rabbinic literature. Along with the belief in miracles, noticeable is a tendency to limit miraculous acts by perceiving them as included in advance within the act of Creation, so there is no violation of the operations of nature. Incorporated in this inclination toward limitation is the diminishing of the personality of the miracle worker. It is not man who performs the miracle. A miracle is the direct intervention of God in

⁶ For an example of an analysis of one of Chuli's stories in comparison to the Hebrew original and to oral versions deriving from it, see Alexander (1998:1–15).

the world at His will and His decision, or it may be a response to a person who is “*ba'al nes*” (one for whom a miracle happens) and then it occurs by virtue of prayer and appeal to God. This, in Urbach’s opinion, differentiates the miracle from magic and sorcery.⁷ The magician, in contrast to the *ba'al nes*, employs his own power to foist a change upon the world. So, for example, Ya‘aqov Chuli brings the story of Yosef of Yoqraṭ whose son decreed that the fig should produce its fruit. For that act Yosef cursed his son and caused his death.⁸

More recent studies attenuate the border separating magic from miracle.⁹

Rabba said: We do not rely on a miracle (Pesaḥim 64b), but Abbaya disagreed with him and said it is possible to depend on a miracle.

Ambivalence toward miracles is also noticeable in the approach of Rabbi Ya‘aqov Chuli. But he does not deal with the issue of the miracle as the notion of a change in the organization of nature in contrast to the idea that the miracles were determined beforehand by God so they constitute no change, but rather as the idea of belief in change in the organization of nature in contrast to a rational concept trying to explain miracles in the rational way.

3 The Story of Abram’s Miraculous Victory

As an example, we will analyze Chuli’s discussion of the story of Abram’s victory with a small force over the four kings (Gen 14). Chuli was attracted to stories; even though in his introduction he claims that they are not essential, he includes over 400 stories in his *Me‘am Lo‘ez* to Genesis alone. He also chose to present his position about miracles by offering two stories with opposite approaches to them.

“When Abram¹⁰ heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he mustered his retainers, born into his household, numbering three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan” (Gen 14:14).

The immediately-following verses (Gen 14:15–16) describe the swift battle and crushing defeat: “At night, he and his servants deployed against them and defeated them, and he pursued them [. . .] he brought back all the possessions; he also brought back his kinsman Lot and his possessions.”

Chuli begins with a description of the hesitation and insubordination on the part of the retainers against going out to a battle that seemed, from the outset,

⁷ On magic and sorcery in Rabbinic Literature, see, for example, Harari (2010).

⁸ For an analysis of this story as it appears in *Me‘am Lo‘ez*, see Landau (1981:35–50).

⁹ See, for example, the analysis of the stories about R. Ḥanina Ben Dosa by Hasan Rokem (2009:19–55).

¹⁰ Abram—before God changed his name to Abraham.

impossible to win; how could so few people best the four kings? Abram tries to convince them with words and a large monetary payment. But most of them return home, with only a few remaining with Abram. In this instance, Chuli increases the miracle by further reducing the number of Abram's fighters to very few (*unos kuantos*).

Abram overtook the captors in one night even though they were ten days distant from him. How? And here the miraculous intervention mechanism begins to act. Chuli intervenes with the voice of the "narrating authority" and expresses the reader's astonishment of how that could be. He explains: The characteristic of righteousness has no facet that will match the characteristic of speech, but, for each good deed one performs, an angel is created, and since Abram's characteristic of righteousness was great, a very powerful angel was created and he turned to God with the request that he help Abram. This irrational explanation apparently sounded rational to Chuli. A good deed cannot speak, but an angel surely can.

The battle became very easy for Abram. He did not even have need for a sword, but rather he took a handful of dust with a bit of straw and threw it on the foe. That dust turned into swords, and the straw became arrows and they killed the enemy.

I todas las flechas i espadas ke ivan arojando ditos kuarto reyes sovre Avram se azian tiera
[. .] ke kon un poko de tierra ke les arondjava Avram los mato a todos.

This was a miracle, and it involved a change in the laws of nature, dust and straw turning into weapons operating by themselves and killing the enemy—although at this stage Chuli does not mention the term "miracle".

4 The Story of Naḥum Iš Gamzu and the King

The dust's changing its essence naturally stimulated in Chuli an association with the story about Naḥum Iš Gamzu, for whom a similar miracle was performed, where dust turned into a weapon. In the story about Gamzu itself, there is reference to what happened to Abram. Here is the abstract of the story:

Naḥum Iš Gamzu, a second generation Tanna, was called "Gam Zu" since whatever happened to him, including harsh events, he would say, "This, too, is for the best" (Ta'anit 21a).

The Jews who wanted to send a gift to the king chose Naḥum to deliver it. As Chuli writes:

Todos se determinaron diziendo ke no avía mijor ke dito savio Nahum ish Gamzu, ke es un hasid ke siempre le azen *nisim de los sielos*. I así le entregaron una kasha yena de djoyas i piedras presyozas.¹¹

Nahum was considered by his contemporaries as a “*ba'al nes*”, so he was chosen for this dangerous task. But on his way, he spent the night in a village, where he was robbed.

A media noche vinieron dita djente i avrieron la kasha i tomaron lo ke avía en eya, i la incheron de tierra i la seraron.

Dito sinyor no tuvo avizo de eyo. [. . .]

Kuando avrió el rey la kasha i vido ke era yena de tierra, resivió muncha ravia, diziendo:

—Burla me azen los djudiós, i del presente ke me mandan se preva ke no me estiman por nada.¹²

The king ordered the execution of Nahum Iš Gamzu. This was when the first miracle took place:

I así vino el sinyor de *Eliya Anaví*, zahur letov, i se asemejó komo uno de eyos i le disho al rey:

[. . .] puede ser ke esta tierra sea mijor ke djoyas, ke savrás kual mente tenemos sentido ke kuando Avram izo bataya kon Nimrod, toda su fuersa fue ke les arondjava un punyado de tierra kon samán i se azia espadas i felechas, i si esta tierra ke te mandaron los djudiós es de akeya, tienes ke deverles toda tu vida, ke mijor presente ke este no puede aver en el mundo.¹³

The great miracle is that the dust brought by Nahum Iš Gamzu turned into powerful weapons.

Al rey le plazyó dita avla i así tomó un punyado i lo mandó kon su djente a una sivdad ke avía mucho tiempo ke estava gerreando para tomarla, i no era bastante, porke la djente eran muy forsudos; i kon dita tierra los mató a todos.

I así le izo mucho kavod el rey a Nahum ish Gamzu i le incho dita kasha de dukados i kozas valutozas i lo mandó a su lugar kon muncha djente.

Dito Nahum Ish Gamzu a la tornada pasó por dito kazal i todos kedaron enkantados de verlo, porke entendían ke devía de ser matado. Le demandaron ke les dishiera ké modo de presente yevó al rey ke meresyó tanto kavod. [. . .] I así todos los del kazal fueron incheno kashas

¹¹ Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero (1969, vol. 1, part 1, 451).

¹² Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero (1969, vol. 1, part 1, 451).

¹³ Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero (1969, vol. 1, part 1, 451–452).

de dita tierra i se la yevaron por prezente, i siendo las verdad es ke era tierra, los mató el rey a todos.¹⁴

The villagers try to imitate Naḥum Iṣ Gamzu's deed, but the dust they bring was merely dust. In their stupidity, they received their punishment for having robbed Naḥum Iṣ Gamzu. This is a popular folk motif that appears also in Ladino oral literature and is called "copying the fool."¹⁵

At the conclusion of the story, Chuli returns to Abram and emphasizes the same miracle from the opposite direction: when the kings tried to fight against Abram their weapons turned to dust and straw. Chuli relies upon the description in Midrash Genesis Rabba (43:3–5), which is an expansion upon a verse in Isaiah:

"Who has roused a victor from the east, summoned him to his service? Has delivered up nations to him and trodden sovereigns down? Has rendered their swords *like* dust, their bows *like* wind-blown straw?" (Isa 41:2).

But in Isaiah the description is a metaphor; their swords are rendered *like* dust, their bows, *like* straw. While in the Midrash, and from there to Chuli, the metaphor has become reality. The weapons did, indeed, turn into dust and straw.

The general reading of the term *śedeq*, justice, as an abstract term: in the Midrash *śēdaqā*, righteousness turns into a personification, which prostrates itself before God and pleads for Abram, while in Chuli *śēdaqā* changes its essence and turns into an angel, and he turns to God.

Chuli explains that for the righteous the attribute of justice turns into the attribute of mercy, and vice versa, so the Lord intervenes and helps Abram.

Chuli feels that this explanation makes the event rational and understandable, "close to common sense."

karov al dá'at ke se entiendan kon meoyo [. . .], ke asegún los ma'asim ke aze el ombre resive su pago. I lo mezmó es esto, ke siendo Avram tsadik i hasid, aun ke le arondjavan espadas i felechas, no tuvo ningún peligro, i legabé de él eran estimados komo la tierra. Lo kual Nimrod i Kedorla'ómer, ke eran resha'im, ke kon un poko de tierra ke les arondjava Avram los mató a todos.¹⁶

This explanation, applying the characteristic of mercy to the righteous in contrast to applying the characteristic of justice to the wicked, attests to Chuli's need to give

¹⁴ Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero (1969, vol. 1, part 1, 452).

¹⁵ See, for example, the story of the hunchback and the demons, in which a hunchback in the bathhouse knows how to answer the questions of a demon and his hump disappears. His brother, who was jealous of him, tried to repeat the deed but did not know how to do it correctly and returned with two humps. See Alexander (2008:311, note 103).

¹⁶ Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero (1969, vol. 1, part 1, 452).

a rational explanation “close to making sense” (H. “qarov al da‘at”), as he puts it, for the wondrous event of a miracle of the turning of swords to dust and vice versa.

But Chuli is still not comfortable with this and not satisfied with his own explanation. He adds another, different one that is essentially a psychological explanation, one that he feels is better than the elucidation about the miracle: “I segunda haluká me parese dezir en esto ke será mijor ke la primera, i es *ke el dimyón les izo pe‘ulá grande*.”¹⁷

That is, here there is no miracle changing the laws of nature but rather a natural response of the human mind when imagination and fear lead to disastrous results. In effect, Chuli is harking back to the biblical metaphor but in an opposite manner. In Isaiah the sword resembles dust, while the kings imagine that Abram’s dust is a sword.

5 The Story of Maimonides and the Poisons Competition

To prove the converse approach, which can be called psychological, Chuli provides a story about a competition in which Maimonides was forced to compete and which he won:¹⁸ “Moshé Bar Maymón mató al médiko del rey kon agua [. . .]. Ke ayamos ma‘asé en tiempo de Rabenu Moshé Bar Maymón, z”l, ke era médiko del rey.”¹⁹

The Gentile physician who is in competition with Maimonides and is jealous of his success suggests to the king to hold a competition of poisons to prove who is the greater doctor, the one who will succeed in preparing a fatal poison. Maimonides agrees but prepares an antidote in advance. When Maimonides’ turn comes, instead of a poison he has prepared sugar water, put it in a jar, placed the jar in a box, and wrapped the box in a number of scarves. He goes to the prison and takes with him a condemned prisoner so that he should drink this solution. The prisoner opens the box and dies.

¹⁷ Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero (1969, vol. 1, part 1, 452).

¹⁸ The story already appears in *Šalšelet ha-Qabbala* by Gēdalya Ibn Yahya (1587:20), and it is quite widespread in oral tradition to this day. For three different versions, see: Alexander and Romero (2004:106–114 and the notes there).

¹⁹ Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero (1969, vol. 1, part 1, 452).

When the king arrives:

Tomó Rabenu Moshé un dimaló i se tapó bien la nariz i la boka, i le disho al rey ke él iziera lo mezmó i ke se aleshara de su lugar para ke no resiviera el bafo de akel kaldo ke era muy danyozo, i izo ke akel ombre avriera el kutí kon su mano, ke si lo matava el guezmo poko inpedía, siendo ya meresía a muerte.

El dotor ke vido tantas ahanot, su miedo fue demazyado porke entendýo kon su da'at ke de gustarlo tenía de morirse. I ansí, antes de beber todo akel kaldo, arreventó.²⁰

Afterwards, Maimonides asks the king to taste from the drink that is simply sugar water and explains to the king what happened to the doctor: “pensó ke yo le tengo de dar una koza muy danyoza siete tantos ke la suya, i el *dimyón* le izo pe'ulá grande i lo mató.”²¹

Here Maimonides used a psychological ruse, the many steps in preparation of offering the poison: a box within a box wrapped in a number of scarves put the doctor's imagination into motion and the doctor died from his great fear.

It is especially fitting to ascribe this story to Maimonides the rationalist who understands the soul of man. Chuli projects the conclusion of the Maimonides' story to what occurred in Abram's war with the kings. The kings imagined that the dust Abram threw at them was a mightily powerful poisonous dust, and out of great fear, they fled.

Agora digo ke lo mezmó eran Nimrod i resto de los reyes, ke siendo vieron ke las armas ke arondjavan a Avram no le azían ningún danyo i kuando veían ke él les iva arondjando kon su mano akeya tierra se les asemejava ke devía de ser algún polvo muy venenozo, ke de su color se tenían de morir, i *akel dimyón los mató*.²²

Chuli uses the story to add a moral concerning dust—the Jews need to be as humble as dust. As Abram attested about himself, despite his greatness:

“I who am but dust and ashes” [Gen 18:27]. Unlike the Gentile kings who took pride in their power, Nebuchadnezzar said: “I will mount the back of a cloud” [Isa 14:24]; Hiram king of Tyre said, “I sit enthroned like a god” [Ezra 28:2]. So Abram was worthy of killing Gentiles with a bit of dust.

²⁰ Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero (1969, vol. 1, part 1, 453–454).

²¹ Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero (1969, vol. 1, part 1, 454).

²² Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero (1969, vol. 1, part 1, 454).

6 The Story of R. Sheshet the Blind and the Heretic

The same structure of a double explanation, one miraculous and the other rational, is also found in the story Chuli brings about Rav Sheshet. The story occurs in the framework of the fourteenth miracle out of forty that were performed for Israel, according to Chuli, at the time of the giving of the Torah. The context is the utter silence that fell upon the world at the time of the revelation of the Torah. That was how Rav Sheshet *sagi nahor* ('the blind') knew that the King was passing by, because of the prevailing silence.

But a heretic mocked Rav Sheshet who went out to see the King passing even though he was blind. Chuli describes Rav Sheshet's sharp response: "I se le izo nes a rav Shéshet ke se le avriyeron sus ojos i lo miró a el min i lo izo gal shel 'atsamot. I ay ken dize ke sus haverim le arankaron los ojos del min."²³

The story is based on the talmudic text (Berakot 58a), where the heretic is defined as a Sadducee, and there is no description of a miracle restoring sight to Rav Sheshet but "Rav Sheshet trained his eyes on him and he became a heap of bones." This, too, is a miracle, for how could a blind man look at someone who insulted him, thereby killing him. To that the Maharsha²⁴ added in his commentary to the talmudic story another plot layer explaining Rav Sheshet's ability: "A miracle was performed for Rav Sheshet and his eyes were opened so that he cast his eyes upon him, thereby punishing him."

Chuli chose to embed the Maharsha's explanation into the body of the story he is presenting.

This is, to be sure, a miraculous addition but actually limits the greater miracle of a blind person looking and killing through sight. Alongside the miraculous explanation, a totally different rational one appears that changes the plot of the story. According to this explanation, it is not Rav Sheshet who killed the mocking heretic but his friends who attacked the heretic and gouged out his eyes as a kind of measure for measure²⁵ punishment, one who mocked the blind turned into a blind person himself. In this case, the rational explanation is not part of the commentary on the plot as we saw in the analysis of the previous story but rather a change in the plot.

²³ Yaakov Chuli, Exodus, chapter 3, commentary on the verse: "God spoke all these words" (Exod 20:1), the fourteenth miracle.

²⁴ R. Shmuel Eidels (1555–1631), a famous commentator of the Talmud.

²⁵ Nedarim 32:1. The punishment is according to (measures) the deed.

7 The Miracle of the Sucklings and the Embryos

In describing two foundation events in the history of the Jewish people—the splitting of the Red Sea and the giving of the Torah—Chuli explicitly writes about the occurrence of miracles and even increases and enumerates many miracles. Nonetheless, his uncertainties about miracles peek through the lines.

In the description of the parting of the Red Sea, Chuli enumerates the fifty miracles that occurred for the children of Israel.²⁶ The fiftieth miracle, in Chuli's opinion, is the greatest of all those that preceded it. Following what was related in the Talmud (Soṭa 30b–31a), Chuli cites his description of the miracle, as he sees it, with the sucklings and embryos giving forth song. Sucklings released their mothers' nipple and broke out in song. In their mother's stomachs, the embryos received a great light that became a shining mirror and they began to sing. R. Levi describes an even greater miracle; the embryos left their mothers' womb in order to recite songs and after finishing them returned to their place.²⁷

8 Chuli's Concepts of Miracles

Chuli suggests that even greater miracles than the miracle of the sucklings and the embryos are the miracles related to inanimate objects and animals, since embryos are destined to begin to speak and sing but these are not essential characteristics of inanimate objects, such as Moses' staff that turned into the snake, or of Balaam's ass which opened its mouth and began to speak. Chuli immediately offers a rational explanation that many things that belong to the arrangements of nature and even to daily life seem in contexts of time and place to be miracles and wonders. For instance, in a city that is not on the seaside and whose inhabitants have never seen an ocean or fish, if a person were to come and tell them that there is a place in which a great deal of water is gathered, containing life forms that live in the water, the townsmen would not believe him and would consider him a liar since he is relating things that are against nature. This applies to all that occurs in the world, since once we are used to things they are no longer astonishing or amazing. We learn from this that one should not be amazed by miraculous acts since it may be that we simply do not understand the explanation for them. This is the neutrali-

²⁶ Nedarim 32:1.

²⁷ See Yerushalmi's translation of *Me'am Lo'ez* for Exodus (1967:349–351). As Gonzalo Maeso and Pascual Recuero did not transliterate *Me'am Lo'ez* for Exodus I used for this story an English adaptation of Yerushalmi's Hebrew translation.

zation of the concept of miracle: what seems like a miracle is actually not one but belongs to natural workings with which we are unfamiliar.

Chuli sees the need to convince his readers after the description of the miracles, “clearly, we must believe that all we have said is true.” Such an explanation is necessary only where there is an opposite approach about miracles. Obviously, Chuli is debating here with part of his educated readers, those who are attracted by philosophy. Chuli attacks them fiercely: “Those cursed philosophers who believe only what their eyes see and understand what they think. The Holy One, blessed be He, is capable of performing miracles that counter nature, and one should not trust “to understand [solely] through empirical knowledge.” “There is no need to ask how such a thing could be. As we saw with Saul, who suddenly became a prophet, and the members of his generation were amazed and said: ‘Is also Saul among the prophets?’” When Chuli describes these miracles, he feels the necessity to explain why the miracle is a miracle, in what way does it exceed the natural way.

For the thirtieth miracle Chuli explains: “In the way of the world, if water freezes and then the air heats up, it melts slowly, while in the [Red] Sea the water melted immediately and covered Egypt.” In the next miracle, the thirty-first, Chuli expounds: “The nature of the sea is that its waters are gathered within its borders” “While in this case, wherever the Egyptian fled to, the water would chase after him and drown him.” From the explanations and urging one gains a sense that Chuli is not comfortable with the description of miracles.

9 Why Mount Sinai Was Chosen as the Site for the Giving of the Torah

A similar feeling also arises from the description of a long list of miracles that happened at the time of the giving of the Torah—a total of 40 miracles.²⁸

The second miracle, for example, refers to the story explaining why it was precisely Mount Sinai, described as a small, modest mountain, that was chosen as the site for the giving of the Torah. Other mountains competed among themselves for the right of seniority, each mountain wanted the Torah to be revealed on it.²⁹ As a result of the story in *Midrash Genesis Rabba* (99:1), Chuli, too, tells about Tabor and Carmel, which were tall mountains, so they thought they should be supreme.

²⁸ See Yerushalmi's translation of *Midraš Me-'am Lo'ez* for Exodus (1967:492–511).

²⁹ This competition is a common folk motif, as for example, when the cities of Israel compete among themselves as to where Maimonides will be buried. See Alexander and Romero (2004:282–283).

The miracle is that they were uprooted from their locations and stood before God in Sinai, even if for that Carmel had to cross the sea. Now, Chuli gives a lengthy explanation of the reasons for which the Holy One, blessed be He, rejected this proposal. That is, the focus of the discussion shifts from the miracle of uprooting the mountains to the moralistic commentary, which is the one important to Chuli and does not appear at all in the story of Genesis Rabba. This exegesis diverts attention from the miracle to the ethical moral of the story.

These taller mountains sinned through their pride, which runs counter to the teachings of the Torah. The Torah student should behave humbly. Moreover, the mountains came forward in haste, while arguing with each other. They came to seek honor and chased after it, and to that end, they argued with one another like the improper behavior in the synagogue when men fight over buying *mitzvot* (the right to perform religious acts) through competing to add money to the synagogue's income through higher bidding. People should not pursue honor and not argue because of it. Another reason for rejecting these mountains: to keep far away from the customs of the non-Jews who used to conduct idol worship on high mountain tops.

10 Torah Versus Philosophy

Chuli concludes his enumeration of the miracles of the revelation of the Torah with a *dēraša* ('sermon') focusing on an attack on non-Jewish literature. He stresses how important it is to devote oneself to Torah studies and not waste time "reading books with stories of the world and historical issues or books of parables that cause people to be drawn to the vanities of the world and to avoid Torah study." "No one has permission to spend his days reading philosophy and all the books called extraneous works." Then Chuli brings as an example the letter written by the philosopher Aristotle before his death and sent to Alexander the Great, his student. In this letter, Aristotle expresses remorse for having dealt with philosophy, for the mistake by which he tried to explain everything through nature that is understood by the intellect. Today he would most likely burn all the books attributed to him. Aristotle reached this understanding as a result of his encounter with one of the Jewish sages who taught him the holy Torah. Chuli concludes: most of the things that people want to explain through nature so they will be understood by the intellect are false analyses. Most things are orchestrated by the Holy One, blessed be He, in a wondrous manner beyond the natural way. That is, Chuli himself gives contradictory explanations concerning miracles versus nature and rational explanations.

11 To Sum Up

Chuli's aim in writing his volumes of the *Me-'am Lo'ez*, as he formulates it in the introduction, is to bring Ladino speakers closer to the Jewish sources written in Hebrew and Aramaic. This general goal took into consideration a number of types of audiences: Ladino-speaking women and men who did not know how to read Hebrew, or did not know how to read any language, so they were unfamiliar with the sources. At the same time Chuli also addressed the educated audience who were drawn to foreign sources since they thought that the Jewish sources did not befit their intellectual approach (generalized as rationalism and science). Chuli's aim was to prove that the more the intellectuals sought "outside" sources and ideas, the more such ideas were in fact available at a higher level "internally", within Jewish culture.

These two different audiences were diametrically opposed: the popular audience, which Chuli terms "the masses of the people" (*hamon ha-'am*), was attracted by miracle stories, wonder stories, and magical acts. The educated public was drawn to rationality, to scientific innovation, and to a universalistic approach. I believe that the examples cited above demonstrate how Chuli tries to satisfy these divergent readers through applying different literary mechanisms:

- (a) Offering a story with miracles and wonders, while at the same time supplying a rational explanation, "akin to common sense", as he puts it.
- (b) Juxtaposing one story in a continuum with another. Chuli does this in his special way, which characterizes all his exegetical writing, which is interspersed with a plethora of stories. Here, too, Chuli exhibits two opposing approaches through contrasting stories.
- (c) Adding to the plot: the same story has two different plot endings, one miraculous and the other rational.
- (d) Situating the miracle as an explanation for a detailed moralistic *děraša* ('homiletic sermon') and shifting the focus from the miracle to the *děraša* and the values Chuli is attempting to impart to his readers.

Apparently, the ambivalent attitude to miracles that one discerns in Chuli's work is not only to satisfy two different types of readers but expresses the internal uncertainties of Chuli himself between belief in miracles and rationality. This duality is also given expression in the definition of the aims of the *Me-'am Lo'ez* as formulated in its introduction: "And in reading this book the intention is to come to know the greatness of the holy Torah." [. . .] "My purpose in this book is to clearly explain how each member of the Jewish people should behave according to the commandments of our holy Torah," [. . .] "to know through Judaism that all the laws were

clarified here.”³⁰ At the same time, as declared in his introduction, his goal was also to introduce notions “from world wisdom” to provide scientific explanations for various phenomena in nature and their formation, such as the sun, the moon and the stars.³¹

Chuli presents his rather complicated concepts and ideas about miracles (as he does through his entire book) in a simple language, understandable to everyone. He not only uses plentiful stories as examples but also his own style is if he himself were telling a story.³² He declares this attitude in his introduction: “*I azerlas a modo de kuento komo ke una persona lo va kontando.*”³³

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³⁰ Yerushalmi’s translation of *Me’am Lo’ez* for Exodus (1967:28).

³¹ Gaon (1938:307), entry R. Ya’aqov Chuli.

³² On Chuli’s style see Landau (1981:18–33).

³³ *Me’am Lo’ez* to Genesis (1730:Introduction).

