CHAPTER ONE

TIFERET BAHURIM: A READING PROPOSAL

1a. The Title

The title of the work, Tiferet Bahurim, attests to its starting point: a positive presentation of youth and of the years preceding marriage as a period that can be associated with tiferet [glory] and praise. This approach implies considerable cultural change, attesting to the positive potential of these years, no trivial issue in a culture where a negative stereotype marks the years preceding full adulthood, and youth constitutes grounds for denying communal positions and for diminished personal honor.¹ The phrase tiferet bahurim appears in the biblical verse: “The glory of young men [tiferet bahurim] is their strength, and the beauty of old men is the grey head” (Proverbs 20:29). The innovation lies in the use of a phrase describing young men through a parallel with old men (“the beauty of old men”). This verse may be explained in two contradictory ways—either as praising young men who have merited an honorable place beside their elders, or as scorning them because of the claim that old age is naturally beautiful whereas the only positive feature of youngsters and youth (“their strength”) is physical power (violence? instincts?). In Rabbinic literature and in medieval commentaries, the comparison between the two age groups indeed led to derogatory formulations concerning young age vis-à-vis adults, old men, patresfamilias, and righteous men (adult righteous men obviously).²


² This trend is evident in Pirke Avot [Ethics of the Fathers] 6:8, which deals with the ascent of righteous and elderly men, referring to Proverbs 17:7, “Children’s children are the crown of old men, and the glory of children are their fathers,” and to Isaiah 24:23, “…and before his elders will be his glory.” See also Yalkut Shimoni on Psalms, # 841, s.v. tefilah le-Moshe, and on Proverbs, # 956, s.v. nefesh anel amelah. Following Pirke Avot 6:8 and the midrash, see also Rashi and Gersonides on Proverbs 20:29, s.v. tiferet bahurim. By contrast, see Ibn Ezra ad locum, who sees this verse as a description involving no value judgment.
Among the early modern period’s later commentators, however, some refrain from presenting young age through the prism of a generalized and hostile value judgment. They claim this age is indeed worthy of “tiferet,” also because it is a time period offering a unique opportunity that will not return in later years. The positive aspect of this age in Italian Jewish communities will emerge in the discussion below.

1b. The Manuscript

*Tiferet Bahurim* is available in manuscript in the Bodleian Library, catalogued as Reggio 33. A general description of the manuscript appears in Adolf Neubauer’s book:

*Tiferet Bahurim*: Ethical rules for a young man who intends to marry, by Pinhas Barukh bar Paltiyah Monselice, born at Ferrara in the year 5436 = 1675. There are also prayers of his and the author of *Ashmoret ha-Boker*. He quotes in the preface a commentary on *Pirkei Shirah* by his grandfather.

A microfilmed version of the complete manuscript is available at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts (IMHM) of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, film # 22442. So far, the computerized catalogue of this department does not include further details about the manuscript, its content, its author, or any other information. The manuscript includes only this work, which is made up of several minor works (see below, section 2), all by the same author.

Neubauer’s mention of 1675 as the date of Monselice’s birthday is definitely wrong. As I note below (section 1c), the evidence about the Monselice family shows that Pinhas Barukh was not born in the second half of the seventeenth century, but in the first. Hence, the year 5435

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3 Commentators on *Pirke Avot* from the early modern period [Moshe Almosnino in *Piske Moshe*, and Yosef Alashkar in *Markevet ha-Misnah*, in their exegesis of Proverbs 6:8] emphasize the physical strength of young men as opposed to the weakness of the elderly, or present the important task that faces youth—overcoming temptation.

4 In a different cultural context of place and time, the expression “tiferet bahurim” was used to denote the possibilities that open up at this age. See Mordechai Breuer, *Oholei Torah (The Tent of Torah): The Yeshivah—Its Structure and History* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2004), 422–423, on the “Tiferet Bahurim” youth group in Azriel Hildesheimer’s yeshiva in Hungary at the end of the nineteenth century, aiming to foster the Hebrew language.