CHAPTER 14

Preaching to his Daughter: Jacob Anatoli’s *Goad for Students (Malmad ha-talmidim)*¹

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1 Introductory

*Goad for Students (Malmad ha-talmidim)* is an extensive thirteenth-century collection of Hebrew sermons written in Naples by the Arabic-to-Hebrew translator and early Maimonidean Jacob Anatoli (c. 1194–1256).² The title of the book seems intriguing given the nature of its contents. Why call a homiletic anthology *Goad for Students*? By asking this simple question, we see how the work begins to raise a number of interrelated issues of relevance to the field of medieval Jewish education—so many in fact that this essay will only be able to address a few. A link between title and contents of the *Malmad* is made easily enough, when we recognise the cornerstones of medieval Jewish “life-long learning” in the central Jewish practices of the weekly Torah reading and the Sabbath sermon. The *Malmad*’s main and probably only ordering principle is that of the *parashah*.

We know that the literary form which Anatoli chose for his *magnum opus* on exegesis, philosophy and ethics was born from practice to some extent only. He tells his readers that he preached on social occasions such as weddings.³ It is unclear how often he preached in a synagogue. It seems he preferred writing

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¹ During the many years we have known each other my *Doktorvater* Philip Alexander has been a constant inspiration, guide, and a wise friend. It is with fondness, admiration and a deep sense of gratitude that I offer this essay to him.

² In the absence of a critical edition of the *Malmad*, I have used the Hebrew printed edition Lyck 1866. For a part-translation, part-summary of the entire work one can resort to Luciana Pepi, *Anatoli Jaʿaqov / Il Pungolo dei discepoli (Malmad ha-talmidim): Il sapere di un ebreo e Federico II. Introduzione, traduzione e note* (Palermo: Officina di Studi Medievali, 2004). For studies of the *Malmad ha-talmidim* I am particularly indebted to the excellent work of Marc Saperstein, Luciana Pepi, Martin Gordon, and James Robinson (see references). All translations in this article are my own unless indicated differently. I wish to thank my colleague and friend Lucy McGuinness for correcting my English. Any errors are mine.

sermons to delivering them. He reports that some fellow Jews had criticised his sermons.

Intellectually speaking, to Anatoli Naples must have seemed a Jewish backwater in comparison with his native Provence. On more than one occasion he complains in the Malmad about the relative lack of spirituality and learning among his co-religionists. In Provence—a true hub of Jewish learning—he had studied Maimonides’s Guide for the Perplexed under the tutelage of Samuel ibn Tibbon, immediately upon its translation to Hebrew by the master himself. When Anatoli began writing the Malmad, he was moving in predominantly Christian circles for his job as a translator, thus having first-hand experience of the stimulating environment of the court of Frederick II.

A translator of classic texts on astronomy and logic by profession, Anatoli was at heart an exegete. It is worth pondering for a moment why the literary form of the sermon might have suited him so well. It might have been the most satisfying vehicle for him to organise and express his thoughts following his early exposure to the Guide. The sermon offers a lot of intellectual and expressive freedom to its creator. Less mechanical, systematic and dependent upon the base text than the Bible commentary, for example, the sermon allows its creator in principle to pick and choose themes and connect them, more or less loosely, to the weekly Torah reading and haftarah. Likewise, a preacher is free to choose a Psalm or any other biblical text as the main focal point for their sermon and then to show off their skill by artfully weaving references to the parashah into the text. Rather than composing a work of philosophy, he was interested in applying creatively in his own exegetical work some of the more

4 More specifically he identifies those as “some of my friends” on page 12 of the preface (כ研发中心). This has led Martin Gordon to assume them to be fellow rationalists “who objected not to the rationalist method as such, but to its exposure before the uninitiated.” See further Martin L. Gordon, “The Rationalism of Jacob Anatoli” (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1974), 52–53, 162–64 and Marc Saperstein, “Christians and Christianity in the Sermons of Jacob Anatoli,” Jewish History 6/1–2 (1992): 225–42, esp. 226, 237.

5 See 354–55 below.

6 They were related by family as well. Anatoli calls him his חתן or “son-in-law” in the Malmad. Menachem Kellner has suggested that Samuel was more likely his brother-in-law. Menachem Kellner, Torah in the Observatory: Gersonides, Maimonides, Song of Songs (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press), 259.

7 Cf. Gordon, Rationalism, 96–98. It must have taken Anatoli many years to complete the Malmad (c. 1235–1249). On 186b of the Malmad he mentions his age as being fifty-five. Gordon, Rationalism, 106.