Introduction

Moses Ben Joshua of Narbonne (c. 1300-1362 C.E.), also known as Maestro Vidal Bellsom (Blasom), was one of the foremost philosophers of his time. He was also a medical author and practising physician, who began his career in his native city Perpignan. Jewish physicians in 14th century Provence constituted as much as five percent of the Jewish working population. Jews treated Christians as well as their coreligionists, and often held the official position of municipal physician. Their services were particularly in demand during epidemics. In 1344, after he finished his commentary on Ibn Rushd’s ‘‘Epistle on the possibility of conjunction with the active intellect’’, Narboni fled Perpignan because of the turmoil that followed the conquest of the Kingdom of Majorca (the Balearic Islands and Roussillon) by the king of Aragon, Pedro IV. Subsequently Narboni led an itinerant life in northern Spain, residing and practicing medicine in several cities, such as Barcelona, Burgos, Cervera, Toledo and Soria. Jewish physicians were held in high esteem by the Christians in northern Spain; they were hired by municipal authorities to attend to the medical needs of the community and shared this responsibility with Christian practitioners, despite ecclesiastical prohibitions to the contrary. The tiny Jewish communities of northern

* I thank my friend Eric Pellow for proofreading the manuscript.
2 See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 13, col. 1260, art. ‘‘Provence’’ (B. Blumenkranz).
4 See Luis García-Ballester, ‘‘A marginal learned medical world: Jewish, Muslim and Christian medical practitioners and the use of Arabic medical sources in late medieval

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Spain supported a relatively large number of physicians. For instance, the Jewish community of Barcelona, with an estimated population of 1,200-1,500, counted eleven medical practitioners, while their Christian neighbours, nearly twenty times as numerous, supported only twenty-two. In Aragon, where the Jews were outnumbered three to one by Muslims, there were ten times as many Jewish as Muslim physicians. During his travels through northern Spain Narboni witnessed the impact of war and banditry on the Jewish community. In 1349, when the Jews were persecuted in the wake of the Black Death, he was forced to abandon his home in Cervera, leaving his library behind. In 1355, while residing in Toledo and engaged in the composition of a commentary on Maimonides’ Guide, Narboni experienced the ravages of pillage and plunder first hand. He then moved to Soria, where he completed his commentary in 1362.

Narboni wrote an important medical work, Sefer Orah Hayyim, which is extant in manuscript. This work has yet to be thoroughly studied; some aspects, such as the author’s autobiographical references, and the medical authorities which he cites were briefly treated by Steinschneider and Renan. In this article I will discuss Narboni’s implicit sources as well as his explicit quotations from ancient and medieval physicians in greater detail. I will also consider several hitherto neglected facets of the work, namely, medicine, regimen and education of children, magic, astrology, and philosophy.

Narboni’s medical compendium, composed in the year 1350, consists of six parts, each of which comprises several chapters. The first part,