

TRUTH FROM ALL SOURCES

*Rabbi Elia Benamozegh's Case
for the Integration of Torah and Science*

RABBI ELIA BENAMOZEGH
(1823-1900)

Translated by
SIMON MONTAGU

THE SERUYA EDITION



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About *the Book*

This book presents Rabbi Elia Benamozegh's passionate defence of *Em LaMiqra*, his 19th century Torah commentary that wove together Torah study with the insights of science and worldly wisdom. While this work was celebrated by some Jewish communities, it was banned in others, with critics accusing him of mixing the sacred with the 'profane'. In his response letter, Rabbi Benamozegh not only vindicates his commentary but also upholds a deeply rooted Jewish tradition: the integration of Torah with universal knowledge. He asserts that truth - from all sources - strengthens and magnifies the sanctity of the Torah, continuing a legacy established by rabbinic sages throughout Jewish history.

About *Rabbi Elia Benamozegh*

Rabbi Elia Benamozegh was an Italian Rabbi, *Dayan*, and scholar who emerged from an esteemed Moroccan lineage. He was born in Livorno, Italy in 1823. His journey led him to become a Rabbi and a Professor of Theology at 23. He wrote prolifically on Judaism, philosophy, and beyond, across several languages. His intellectual rigour and commitment to integrating Torah and universal knowledge marked him as a pivotal figure in Jewish intellectual history, striving to advance a harmonious understanding of tradition and progress until his death in 1900.

About *the Translator*

Simon Montagu, originally from England, attended Oxford University and Jews' College (now LSJS). He moved to Israel in 1982 for a year of study in *yeshiva* and has remained there ever since, residing with his wife, four children, and three grandchildren. Following three decades in the software engineering field - working for the likes of IBM, Netscape, Mozilla, and others, where he notably contributed to the development of Hebrew and Arabic support for the Firefox web browser - he now pursues a career as a freelance editor and translator.

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I turn to you, gentlemen, who are like angels, or like priests who enter the divine presence; each one holy, skilled in wisdom and wise in artifice, distinguished Rabbis worth your weight in gold, who sit in judgement in the holy city of Jerusalem. May your light shine as the sun at its zenith!

I turn to you, the peaceful and faithful, in full strength and many in number, like drops of dew sent by God, the dignitaries of the holy city that was the site of God's temple, the precious dwellers in Zion, holy, pure, and mighty. This is a comprehensive reply to your esteemed communication in which you pleaded with me in pleasant tones and warm language, out of concern for my spiritual well-being. How true it is that Torah comes forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem! I will not conceal from you, gentlemen, that I was shocked by what I heard, and I have been uneasy, restless, and grieved, and have found no relief for my pain ever since I heard some reports of the attacks on me and on my book in Aleppo and Damascus. In both these cities people wrote harsh condemnations and diatribes against my book without listening to my response or attempting to correct me, as if I was corrupt beyond redemption. You have not acted in this way, but more like one seeking to find a lost sheep, heal its injuries and

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restore it to the fold. You may truly be called shepherds of the flock, whom God has not afflicted with a spirit of dizziness. You have stated four shortcomings in my work, and though your words were painful to me, the words of the wise are heard when spoken in a peaceful spirit, and deliverers have gone up on Mount Zion.

But I shall not sit in silence before you, gentlemen: I deeply desire to understand in detail the defects, faults and flaws of my book; to hear from you where I have gone wrong, and to understand what specific errors I have committed. As yet, I have neither seen nor heard this, neither from the learned sages of Aleppo and Damascus nor from your esteemed and valuable communication. I have only heard complaints and pointed accusations in general terms, without any detailed references to my errors. How am I to cleanse myself before my creator and before all the dwellers on earth if I do not know my faults? How am I to save my soul and not be turned back in oppression and confusion?

Nevertheless, I feel an obligation to respond respectfully and not back down completely, to consider the basis of your positions and defend myself from your accusations. However lengthy my response, it would be insufficient: forgive me for lacking the strength for a comprehensive reply, and accept the meagre offering of my wine, my oil and my grain that my abilities permit.

To begin with the case against me, I will list in order the principal accusations made by you and by the sages of Damascus and Aleppo:

1. Firstly, I erred by adulterating the sacred with the profane and making use of secular and foreign scholarship, which is opposed to and inferior to our monumental Jewish tradition.

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2. I erred by using this scholarship to interpret and explain the writings of Jewish prophets and sages.
3. I erred by assuming that ancient nations were aware of our beliefs and our Torah, and followed our commandments. It was even claimed that I had concluded that our teacher Moses learned from them.
4. Finally, I erred by daring to say that ancient nations and other contemporary religions had knowledge, as of a shaving from a diamond seen in a dream, of the pure and precious wisdom of Kabbalah.

I will reply to these complaints in order from first to last, and may God provide me with the words to respond.