Rabbi David Messer Leon (1470-1526)

Rabbi David ben Yehuda Messer-Leon (□□□□□-□□□□□ □□□) was born in Venice, Italy, 1470. He was educated at Naples in the school of his father Yehuda "Messer" Leon. The name "Messer" is short from "mio serro" (My Sir, i.e., Lord) . This honorary title was given to Rabbi Yehuda Leon by the German Emperor Frederik III during the Emperor's visit to Italy.

In his father's school Rabbi David learned Tora and secular studies. Rabbi David received his Rabbinical ordination at the age of eighteen. He then studied in the university of Padua philosophy and medicine, and practiced as a physician. During this time, Rabbi David wrote to Rabbi Ya'akob Provenzali, a leader rabbinical figure in Italy, asking his opinion on the pursuing of secular studies. Rabbi Provenzali responded (This reply was published in Dibre Hakhamim of R. Eliezer Ashkenazi, 1849, 63-74) that each of the seven liberal arts—arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy, grammar, logic and rhetoric—was praised and appreciated by the Talmudic Rabbis. He encouraged Rabbi David to continue his secular education provided he remains mindful of the precedence and superiority of Tora study over all other intellectual pursuits.

In 1496 he moved to Salonica, Greece. In Salonica he wrote his most famous book (which was never published) 'en-haqore, "The eyes of the reader", a commentary on Maimonides' "Guide of Perplexed", defending this book against its critics who accused the book of being too influenced by Greek philosophy. Rabbi David contended that Maimonides actually upheld Judaism against Aristotelian philosophy, and showed that human reason without revelation is not sufficient to achieve the entire truth.

The reputation of Rabbi Messer's book spread. In 1498 he was called to serve as the rabbi of Avilona (today Velora, Albania) which was part of the Ottoman Empire. This community consisted at that time of three congregations each with its own Synagogue: Jews from Castilla, Jews from Catalonia and Jews who left Portugal in 1496. Dissensions between the three communities were not uncommon. Rabbi Leon officiated successively in the three synagogues on every third Saturday. He died in 1526.

His books

Rabbi David Messer Leon was a prolific writer, and produced works in various Jewish subjects as well as in many branches of secular science. Unfortunately only two of his books were published. We know about his other works from quotations from other authors.

Kebod Hakhamim His Response to a debate between the Sephardim, those who came from Castilla and Portugal, who questioned the authority of the Italian Rabbinical ordination. The Sephardim claimed that the official Rabbinical ordination was only applicable in Israel, therefore, outside Israel, it is not mandatory for a Jew to follow the authority of the local rabbis, particularly against their ancient practices. The Jews of Castilla were, in general, more lenient than the local Jews in many Halakhic issues and very often this caused divisions of the various congregations of Avilona. In his book, Rabbi David opposes the position of Castillian Jews and defended the authority of the local Rabbis. See this book HERE

Tehilla le-David Published by the author's grandson Aaron in Constantinople, 1577. It consist of three parts: (1) The excellence of the Divine Law and Moshe rabbenu; (2) The nature of faith in God's revelation, which is superior to speculative reasoning; (3) The principles of Jewish theology: the Divine attributes, Divine providence, free will, etc.;

He also wrote:

Magen David, on Greek philosophy, particularly on the ideas of Plato. Rabbi David considered Plato the greatest classic philosopher. Plato lived at the time of the prophet Jeremiah. Following an old Jewish tradition Rabbi David claimed that Jeremiah was Plato's teacher.

Abir Ya'aqob, a treatise on medicine and other sciences

Shebah haNashim , an explanation of Chapter 31 of Mishle, in praise of women.

We know the names of other works by Rabbi David Messer Leon: **Menorat ha-Zahab, Bet David, Kise David, Nefesh David** and **Nahal 'adanim.**