Rabbi Ya’aqob Yehuda León (1602-1675) and his translation of Tehilim

Today we will learn about Rabbi Ya’aqob Yehuda Leon. Born in 1602. Some say he was born in Hamburg, which at the time belonged to the Netherlands, and some say he was born in Coimbra, Portugal. We will follow this second opinion. His grandfather and great-grandfather came from the city of Leon, in Spain, where they practiced Judaism in secret. His father, Simaõ de Leão was born in Portugal. He was a trader in Tavarede and Buarcos, near Coimbra. His mother was Felipa de Fonseca. In 1605 his entire family fled Portugal and openly embraced Judaism once they came to the Netherlands. There Ya’aqob studied with a great Tora scholar Rabbi Isaac Uziel (died in 1622), which besides being a distinguished Talmudist, was a physician and an expert in diqduq, Hebrew grammar.

In 1628 he moved to Hamburg, to the Sephardic synagogue “Cardozo” to replace Rabbi Isaac Attias, who was the first rabbi of Hamburg, and who also a student of Rabbi Uziel. In 1635 he returned to Amsterdam as Hakham of one of the three Portuguese Jewish communities.

Nothing about this Rabbi is simple. His life and works are fascinating. Let’s start with his name. His original name was Ya’aqob (he wrote it “Yahacob”) Yehuda Leon, but he called himself and signed, “Yahacob Yehuda, Leon Hebreo” (“Hebreo”, Hebrew, means “Jew”). In many circles, he was known simply as “Leon Hebreo”. But in most encyclopedias his name is Ya’aqob Yehuda Leon “Templo”. Tomorrow we will explain why he was given this second surname.

One of the most important things he did was the vocalization of the Mishna, with Rabbi Menashe ben Israel . This was a monumental project, because as anyone familiar with Rabbinic literature knows, the Mishna was never vocalized. The vocalization of the text was received by tradition. In this case, these two Rabbis were students of the same eminent teacher Rabbi Isaac Uziel, who belonged to the uninterrupted chain of Sephardic Rabbis, whose tradition dates back to the

times of the Geonim.
We can see above an image of one page of that Mishna (If you zoom you can read some marginal notes in Spanish to explain some difficult words).
It appears that Rabbi Leon also translated the Mishna into the Spanish, along with Rabbi Menashe ben Israel, but I think that that Mishna is lost…. Something else that is lost are the illustrations made by Rabbi León to the Mishna. Let me explain: aside from being a great Talmudic scholar and an expert in grammar, Rabbi Leon was also an artist. His specialty was "heraldry", namely the design and manufacture of "coats of arms", something very fashionable in those days for noble families. Rabbi Leon then illustrated some texts of the Mishna, which obviously allowed a better understanding of the issues at hand. B'H tomorrow we will continue explaining how Rabbi Leon used his artistic talents for '*abodat haQodesh*.
Perhaps the most significant contribution made by Rabbi Leon for Spanish-speaking Jews was his translation of the Book of Tehilim. We live in privileged times. One of the privileges we have today as Yehudim is that we can now access from our computers, virtually all Tora books that have ever been published. Most of these books can be found in the website *"www.hebrewbooks.org"*and many others in "google books". In the latter server is where I found the book of Tehillim by Rabbi Leon. To my knowledge, this is the first Jewish translation of the Tehillim to Spanish (there were probably other translations to Ladino). He called this book KODESH HILULIM (Praises of Holiness). In this book Rabbi Leon does three things: 1. He translates literally the text of Tehilim from Hebrew into Castilian. 2. He paraphrases it, i.e., extends the translation to facilitate its understanding. 3. Writes a brief commentary on some words and ideas.
I will transcribe a few paragraphs for the reader who wants to practice reading old Spanish. (Please note that the ancient script of "s" looks very much like an "f").
On the cover, it says:
"Las Alabanzas de la Santidad, traducción de los Psalmos de DAVID por la misma phrasis y palabras del hebraico, ilustrada con su paraphrasis que facilita la inteligencia del texto y anotaciones de mucha doctrina , sacadas de los mas graves autores, dirigida al ilustrísimo señor Ishak Senior Teixeyra

residente de su majestad, la reina de Suedia, por el Haham Yaacob Yehuda, León Hebreo, autor de las obras del retrato del tabernáculo de Moseh, y del templo de Selomoh y de todas sus circunstancias, en Amsterdam, año 5431. “
“, Translation of the Psalms of David for the same syntax and words of Hebrew, illustrated with paraphrases to facilitate its understanding, with text and annotations of doctrines, drawn from the most serious authors, dedicated to the illustrious Mr. Ishak Senior Teixeyra [*son of Abraham senior Teixeyra, a nobleman and a famous Jewish philanthropist. Isaak was the ambassador of the Queen of Sweden, Christine, in Hamburg*] residents of her majesty, the queen of Suedia [*Sweden*], by Haham Yahacob Yehuda, Leon Hebreo, author of the Portrait of the tabernacle of Moseh and the temple of Selomoh, and all its circumstances, in Amsterdam, the year 5431 [*1670*]. “

To download Rabbi Leon’s Tehilim click here