

# Video Clip: Dunash haLevi ben Labrat

## The Man Behind the Golden Age of Spain

Dunash haLevi ben Labrat was a poet, a grammarian who challenged much of Hebrew grammar, and a commentator on Biblical sources. Some of his riddles, poems, and commentaries have been uncovered in the Cairo Geniza. He is most well known as the presumed author of “Dror Yikra.”

### Suggested Implementation

1. History
  - a. Cairo Geniza
  - b. Golden Age of Spain

### Background

Born in the first half of the tenth century in Fez, Morocco, to what is presumably a Jewish Amazigh family, Dunash ben Labrat traveled to Baghdad in his youth in order to study with the greatest scholar of his day, Sa’adia Gaon. While still in Babylonia, Dunash adapted Arabic poetry’s quantitative meters to Hebrew and showed the results to his teacher. In response, Sa’adia Gaon offered up the distinctly ambiguous judgment: “Nothing like it has ever been seen in Israel.”

Hasdai ibn Shaprut, who lived in Cordoba, invited Dunash to Spain. Cordoba was then the center of culture and poetry in the Islamic world, and Hasdai endeavored to bring the best Jewish minds there. So, it seems Dunash was in Spain by age thirty, having brought with him the new poetics and all they implied. His Arabizing method caught on, despite his arrogant manner and his scorn for what he considered the provincial ways of the backward Spanish-Jewish literati he encountered in Andalusia. In Cordoba, Dunash met Menahem ben Saruq, also an important grammarian, though the two did not get along because of their many grammatical disputes as well as Menahem’s tough criticism of Sa’adia Gaon, Dunash’s mentor.

Though he was accused, among other things, of “destroying the holy tongue...by casting it into foreign meters,” and “bringing calamity upon his people,” sometime around the year 960, he displaced Menahem Ben Saruq as the reigning poet at Hasdai ibn Shaprut’s Jewish Cordovan court. Dunash’s liturgical poems were soon sung “in every town and city, / in every village and county,” according to a polemical poem by one of his students. His secular verse also gained many admirers and marked the beginning of a poetry tradition that would last for five centuries in Spain, and continue on after that in North Africa, the Land of Israel, Yemen, Turkey, Italy, and elsewhere. Due to a controversy about which we know almost nothing, Dunash eventually abandoned Spain, leaving behind a young wife and at least one small child. His wife, known only as the wife of Dunash, wrote at least one poem that has remained and was found in the Cairo Geniza, lamenting the longing for her husband. A quarrel with ibn Shaprut appears to have been behind his departure.

Most of Dunash’s works are presumed to be lost, and critical opinion of his thirteen extant poems and assorted fragments is mixed. Dunash died in Cordoba in 990. His innovations were major and lasting, and

he goes down in the annals of Hebrew literature as one of its greatest pioneers.<sup>1</sup> Shlomo ibn Gabirol praises Shmuel haNagid using Dunash as a reference: "O Samuel, dead is Ben Labrat and thou hast taken his place. Were he living, he would have to bow to thee" ("Shir Shelomoh," No. 54).

### Questions for Discussion

1. Read through "Dror Yikra." It has survived over a thousand years and is sung by Jews around the world in many tunes. What is the secret of its survival? What is the significance of the poem?
2. Dunash is known for his opposition – for standing up for what he understands to be truth and for his beliefs – even in the face of his teachers and mentors. How is this seen in Jewish tradition? How would it be seen today?

### Suggested Readings

"DUNASH BEN LABRAT: (mid-tenth century)". *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, pp. 23-26. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400827558.23>

José Martínez Delgado, 'Dunash ben Labrat ha-Levi', in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. by Norman A. Stillman and others (Leiden: Brill, 2010), s.v.

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