Development of the TARYAG HaMitzvoth (613 commandments) in Jewish Philosophy Originating according to Rabbi Simli in the Midrash to the Asserot hadebrot (10 commandments or 10 utterances)

The history of the development of the TaRYaG mitzvoth [The number is known by a Hebrew mnemonic TaRYaG, T= 400, R=200, Y= 10, G= 3} , that the written torah contains 613 mitzvot, divine commandments stems and originates from the 10 commandments, asserot hadebrot, better translated as “10 utterances” corresponding to “10 Hebrew letters.”

The development of the enumeration of the 613 mitzvot spans from the Amoraic, Saboraic, Geonic, Rishonim, and Ahronim periods. In Makkot 23 b Rabbi Simlai, a 3rd century Amora, explained (Darash) 613 precepts were revealed unto Moses at Sinai, 365 prohibitive precepts, like the number of days of the solar year (CF. Tanchuma, ed. Buber, sec. Thetze, para. 2), and 48 positive precepts corresponding to the number of limbs in the human body. Midrash BaMidbar Rabbah (ch. 18) points out that 620 letters in the Decalogue refer to TaRYaG mitzvoth, the remaining seven ascribed to the 7 Noachide laws. Lists of the mitzvoth circulated in the Amoraic period known as Azharot meaning warnings [of negative commandments] poems read on Shavuot enumerating the commandments, which Elbogen (Encyclopedia Eshkol) suggests that the term was used for a type of Piyyut (poem prayer) because the numerical equivalent of Azharat is TaRYaG [Alef=1, Zayyin=7, Heh=5, Resh=200] . However the earliest well known list of the 613 commandments was made in the Geonic era known as the Halakhot Gedolot. Other lists in the Geonic period included the Sheiltot by R. Acha of Shabcha (680-752) , Chefez B. Tazliach, Shmuel b. Chofni. The Helakhot Gedolot included Rabbinic laws (derabbanan) among the 613 commandments. Zunz (Literatur Geschichte der Synagogalen Poesie (Berlin 1865, 4, 21) notes that before Saadya the Azharat Reshit is found in Pumpedita, and older than Azhara “Atta Hinchalta” of Sura placing them in the period of the Saboraim.

Maimonides composed a work known as the Sefer Hamitzvot where he put down a list of his classification of the 613 commandments, stemming from 14 roots upon which the enumeration of the commandments should be based upon in essence criticizing the Halakot Gedolot for including Rabbinic precepts among the 613 commandments and ascribing lists of Azharat to “poets” representing a beautifully rendered popularization of the Rabbinic quest to systematize the laws. In Maimonides view later Azharot found in Spain postdate the Halachot Gedolot and their errors are due to fidelity to the BeHag’s classification. Rav Saadya Gaon (882-942) who found the custom of reciting Atta Hinchaltah entrenched in his time and who is cited by Ibn Ezra, predates the Azharot tradition to before the BeHaG, and Luzzatto (preface to Machzor Italinai, p. 8,10,26) concludes that the Azharah tradition (Atta Hinchalta) antedates the Halachot Gedolot. Saadya also authored an Azharot in his Siddur , Anochi Esh Ochela” (I am a consuming fire) which group the TaRYaG under ten headings of the Decalogue and other famous Azharot such as Elijah Hazaken’s “Emeth Yehege Chikki” and R. Isaac Algerbeloni’s “Ayzeh Mekkom Binah” follow their own ordering principle. Numerous Azharot have been composed with
TaRYaG as their theme including ones following Maimonides enumeration such as that by Isaac Kimchi of Provence, Joshua Benveniste, and Rabbi David Vital’s Ketter Torah dividing the precepts in 18 groups. Maimonides asserts that the miztvot serve four purposes (1) Deot (correct notions), (2) Peulot (actions), (3) Middot (ethical characteristics), and (4) Dibbur (correct speech). Maimonides also provides a list of the TaRYaG in the Guide for the Perplexed (Pt. III, ch. 35-49).

Maimonides’ classification list of the mitzvoth differs not only from the BeHaG but from Chefetz b. Yatziliach and other systems in enumeration the mitzvot, and Nachmanides took issue with Maimonides on a number of commandments, defending the BeHaG, and comments that Elijah will solve the matter of the proper enumeration. For example with regards to recitation of the Hallel Nachmanides, Duran, and Daniel HaBabli uphold the position of the BeHaG that recital is biblical while Rambam holds it is of rabbinic origin. Another difference between Maimonides and Nachmanides is that while the Rambam holds that several priestly gifts are particulars to the type of sacrifice, Nachmanides considers the separation of the heave offering, challah, first tithe, and poor tithe as miztvot distinct from the act of giving them to the priest.

Solomon ibn Gabirol (1361-1444) is the author of the most well known Azharot titled Sh’mor Libi Ma’aneh, based on the BeHaG [which Caplan interestingly notes S.Y. Agnon built on his experience while reading this Azharot designed for recitation of the first night of Shavuot]. Ibn Gabirol states, “And He will forgive the guilt (of popularizing the mitzvot in poetic form], and He will increase the strength. And He will bestow the wisdom to make mortals understand, which is understood by Duran and R. Menachem of Troyes [Machzor Bologna, pirush on Azharah} to reflect the poets well intentioned searchings in attempting to popularly enumerate the precepts, while relaying on the BeHaG. Nonetheless the Sefer-HaMitzvot of Maimonides represents the turning point and culmination of the study of the TaRYaG with the exception of the Sepher Yeraim by R. Eliezer of Metz, no TaRYaG work written after the 12th century fails to take cognizance of Rambam’s Sefer HaMitzvot. The Tosafists R. Moses of Coucy, pupil of R. Judah Sir Leon, and author a Sefer HaMitzvot Gadol, and R. Isaac of Corbeil, pupil of the MaHaRam of Rothenburg, and author of Sefer Mitzvot Kattan, originally titled Shiv’a Amudei Olam. While the 13th century Spain was dominated by the enumeration of R. Moses of Coucy the later centuries were much influenced by the TaRYaG of R. Aaron of Barcelona HaLevy [ReAH (Rabbi Aaron HaLevi)] author of Sefer HaChinuch. The flowering of Lurianic Kabbalah in Safed gives birth the the TaRYaG of R. Isaiah Horowitz, ordained by Yaakov Berab, who lists the precepts in the order they appear in the Torah divided into three parts: (1) Ner Mitzvah, (2) Torah Or, (#) Derekh Chayyim Tochachath Mussar, thereby mingling positive and negative precepts, who was followed by Shabbattai Cohen in the latter’s Poel Tzdek. Another work stemming from the mystical environment of Safed is the work titled, Charedim, by R. Eliezer Azkari (published in Venice in 1959).

With this stage set of the long tradition of the development of the codification of the TaRYaG, Rabbi Simon b. Zemach Duran (1361 Barcelona-1444 Algiers) let us consider the Tashbaz who reconciled the categorization of the TARYAG according to Rambam vs. the Ramban. Rabbi Duran left Aragon where he enjoyed a flourishing medical practice, penniless owing to the decrees of 1391 coming to occupy a
prominent position in North Africa. Duran was related by marriage to Nachmanides’ family (see genealogical table in Jonah b. Abraham of Gerona, A.T., Shrock, p. 19). Zohar Rakiah is noteworthy in four ways. Firstly it is written in the form of a commentary to the Azharah “Shemor Libbi Ma’aneh of ibn Gabirol so that “people who tremble for the word of the L-rd should study it [on Shavut] once a year.” Duran criticizes previous commentaries to this Azharah for their having mistakenly interpreted it according to Maimonides TaRYaG list. Since Gabirol followed the BeHaG Duran remains faithful to this fact, while still acknowledging the unquestionable authority of Rambam. Secondly while Duran employs Amamaisms throughout his Responsa, the Hebrew style of the Zohar HaRakia is simple and flows smoothly avoiding difficult forms of expression. Thirdly Duran’s work’s uniqueness is in the actual treatment of the precepts. Maimonides and Nachmanides opinions are treated briefly and the essential proofs and objections to each are given. Throughout clarity prevails, and Duran’s own respectful proofs or objections to Rambam and Ramban abound so that if Rambam is the thesis, Ramban the anti-thesis, Duran’s work is the Aufhebung. In a halakhic sense Duran is the Machria (Decisor) between Rambam and Ramban synthesizing his 2 great predecessors views, but rejecting both their opinions when he feels necessary so that the result is the most penetrating treatment of the TaRYaG. Thus Duran is forced to include 24 positive precepts and 18 prohibitions that appear in neither Rambam nor Ramban’s lists. Among these are the precepts “to accept proselytes”, “to keep far from falsehood”, and to “repay a creditor.” In a number of instances Duran put forth his own views of what should be counted as a commandment and what is not to be counted as a precept with regards to the predecessors Rambam and Ramban i.e. adds precepts to Rambam #32 & #157, & #216, has taharat hamet in place of no. 107 of Rambam, and replaces ten precepts of Rambam #237 with one: to judge righteously etc. Duran also includes #9 of Rambam in #8 of Rambam, has an additional prohibition on Rambam #72, , includes #104 and #105 the prohibitions in #102 and #103, has two prohibitions for Rambam #184, etc. Because of the unparalleled authority of Rambam’s Sefer HaMitzvot it would greatly help the novice reader to have in the work Maimonides’ formulation of the mitzvoth before them when contemplating the classification of mitzvoth. If one takes seriously Rashi’s comment that if we learn “Moshe Kibel Torah” the text does not say “ha-torah” which would imply only written torah but since it says “torah in general” this includes oral torah which is essential to the written and coterminous with it then we can see how the rabbis create castles, and palaces of commentary in every minute detail extrapolating to the furthest extent all 613 mitzvoth.

The 4rth distinguishing feature of the Zohar HaRakiah by Duran is its allusion to Daniel 12:3 that some will shine like the “brightness of the firmament” (Zohar harakiah) noting, “when a wise man lies down with his fathers, he leaves behind him a treasured and organized blessing: books that enlighten like the brilliance of the firmament and that extend peace like a river (Isa. 66:12). Thus the 4rth aspect of the Tashbaz’ TARYAG work is the mystical veiled language of its introduction, from a halakhist of the greatest renown.

Moses de Leon in Or Zarua (ms. Oxford, Uri 318, Sefer Harimon, ms. David Oppenheier, no. 731) was an “open” mystics who also wrote on the TaRyaG such as Ezra Hamekkubal followed by R. Menachem Rekanti, and Isaac Luria [Taamei HaMitzvot LeHa’Ari forming part 3 of Nof Etz Chayyim (Salonika 1852), Moses Cordovero [Taamei HaMitzvot, see Shem Hagedolim, pt. 11, no. 94 Metzudath David of Radbaz (Zalkowa, 5622). Indeed an entire section of the Zohar, the Reyah Mehmna (Faithful Shepherd) is devoted to enumeration of the TaRyaG offering a mystical interpretation of the precepts extending the concept underlying the gemarah that all 613 mitzvot stem from the decalogue but adding that Torat
HaSefirot (the law of divine grades) of 10 divinely emanated sefirot, attributes of G-d from His distant gardens/PaRDeS. All of the TaRYaG fit into one of the sefirot, a mystical ladder both from G-d to man and from man to G-d, linked to the Decalogue, whereby the performance of mitzvoth [gathering the sparks] and contemplation of them effect theurgically the cosmos, causing chain reactions throughout the hexagramatic achetecnotic of the sefirot representing G-d’s pleroma. Each mitzvah can be traced back via the root of the mitzvah in the Decalogue, in the spiritual ascent of the particular sefirah. Duran’s introduction is cognizant of the Kabbalistic mystery that the performance of a single mitzvah is linked with the TaRYaG mitzvoth, whereby the sefirot are dependent on each other. Ultimately Duran not only synthesized the classification of Rambam and Ramban, but reconciled the mystery between the exoteric (legal open meaning) and esoteric (hidden secrets).

Page 15 of Zohar HaRakiah reads,

“There is another allusion to this due the the masters of Kabbalah, based on the 32 paths of wisdom, which Abraham, our patriarch, mentioned in his well-known book, Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Creation). When you multiply this by ten [the number of utterances] in the Decalogue, which also corresponds to the 10 sefirot [of the mystical theory], you have 230. Multiply this number by two, one corresponding to the quality of love and the other to that of awe, and it also corresponds to the commandment of “remember” (Ex. 20:8) and observe (Deut. 5:12) and also to the two qualities of divine justice. This makes 640. Now subtract that from 27 letters of the Hebrew alphabet [the 22 regular letters] plus [the final forms of] mem, nun, tzade, pe, kaph, there remains 613. For this reason the Torah begins with the letter bet and ends with the lamed [numerical values 2 and 30, respectively] to correspond with the 32 paths of wisdom.

The above passage is very concise and may require unpacking and elaboration for those not familiar with the unique language the Mikubalim. For example to identify Sefer Yetzirah vs. Rav Saadya’s work with this title and the GRA’s commentary, etc. explanation needed for understanding of what the Sefirot are as pleromatic emanations of Hashem’s Kingdom and manifestation is required in more details. The quote also requires a note explaining why the number 320 should be multiplied by 2 and what the author means by the quality of love and awe, which are very extensive and deep topics in Jewish mysticism. Understanding the Tashbaz’ esoteric remark also would need to incorporate the recent findings from the Cairo Geniza for instance numerous examples of the Azharot, poems of the TaRYaG read on Shavuot. The serious student must never take short cuts, and Torah is so deep that it requires great effort to decode according to the Rambam, and as ben Bag Bag says in P.A. “turn it turn it everything is in it.” For a tradition that commands “to meditate on it always”, “Talmud torah is equal to all the commandments,” “thou shalt make known to them the way in which they should walk, and the deed that they shall do” (Ex. 18:20), and “for it is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the peoples (Deut. 4:6)” etc. no one should suggest that learning is essay for according to a Talmudic dictum, lifum zarah agrah (according to the effort is the reward) and in fact G-d may very well be within consciousness of the details of such a halakhic and mystical work, as one Mikubal notes, “G-d is in the details.” May we all merit devotion to sleuthing to decode this encryption of the symphony of Hashem, as the Mikubal the Ramban notes, “the whole torah is an encryption of THE NAMES of HASHEM.” It is thorough the understanding of the names of Hashem troped in the Torah that we better understand the power of “the name” uttered by Moshe Rabbenu according to Rashi to kill the taskmaster, and so sacred a name that its utterance could only be pronounced once a year in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, by the Kohen Gadol performing the YK avodah. When we refer to “a shining name in Gan Eden” in Kail
Rachamim, let us consider the subtext in Sifrei Kabbalah for the power of the essence of Hashem’s holy names. With the name of Hashem, the weak can fell the strong, the humble can trump the arrogant, and the ruach Elokim can defeat belief in gashmias alone. David responds to Golidath’s great armor and physical might with the following:

45 Then said David to the Philistine: ‘Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a javelin; but I come to the name of the L-RD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast taunted.

According to some Mephorshim David like Moshe Rabbanu who killed the taskmaster with the utterance of the tetragrammaton, an act mystica, so too Dovid killed Goliath not with a small pebble that according to other opinions hit Goliath at the place were the Tzitz would rest on the Kohen Gadol’s forehead stating the name of Hashem, yod key vav Key, but David too killed Goliath by utterance of the tetragrammaton effecting a theurgic act of power, just as the harp above Dovid’s bed depicted in Ms. Berachot made magical mystical music when the midnight northern breeze played upon the strings.