

Stanislawski, Michael. *For Whom Do I Toil? Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. 263 pp. \$35.00.

Michael Stanislawski's study of the poet Judah Leib Gordon (1830–1892) is part of a larger effort by a number of contemporary writers intent on assessing the inner development of the Russian-Jewish community in the years before World War I. In this, Stanislawski and his colleagues are departing from earlier approaches taken to the topic of nineteenth-century Russian Jewry.

Working a little more than one hundred years ago, the first writers interested in the experience of Russian Jewry focused, in the main, on Jewish victimization. While doing so, such writers did not pay much attention to the Jews other than as meek and passive objects of irrational and intolerant behavioral patterns. Condemning the assailants in the name of justice and fairness, these authors invariably sought not only to inform their readers of the plight of Russian Jewry, they also wished to stimulate public sympathy for the victims.

Subsequently, and perhaps as a reaction to this earlier literature, Jewish writers treated in bold and heroic terms the variety of Jewish responses that surfaced in the aftermath of the pogroms of 1881. Not only were the new Jewish nationalist and socialist ideologies explored closely, but the subsequent Jewish

activist movements, including even the mass emigration from the Empire to the West, were treated as the conscious expressions of a vibrant and thriving community eager to establish the bases for modern Jewish life.

In each instance, though, what was not treated was the character of modern Jewish thought as it had been developing in the Russian Empire before 1881, and even afterward, too. Because that Jewish integrationist and accommodationist ideology had failed to secure equality for the Jews of Russia, scholars treating the subject of Russian Jewry paid little attention to it.

Now, through his study of Gordon, Michael Stanislawski focuses our attention precisely on that ideology, especially as it came to be developed in Hebrew prose and poetry. Stanislawski reminds us that the overwhelming masses of Russia's Jews did not emigrate to America, did not become active revolutionaries, and did not support Jewish nationalist programs. Rather, most of them continued to adhere to the hope that Jewish emancipation would become a reality for them in Russia, too. Stanislawski chooses Gordon as the articulate representative of this point of view and assesses his creative efforts in this cultural biography in order to illuminate these views and to place them within the larger framework of Russian-Jewish communal history. Hence, while this study will be of interest to the student of modern Hebrew writing, it more appropriately belongs to the literature on Russian-Jewish intellectual history in the second half of the nineteenth century and to this new orientation in Russian-Jewish historiography.

Gordon was a poet, short-story writer and journalist-editor. He wrote in the Hebrew and Russian languages, and in the last years of his life he was even a translator (from German) for the Brockhaus-Efron *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*. Known by his acronym YALAG, Gordon was without doubt the most important and best known Hebrew poet of his day. As such, he was not one of those modernists calling for full Jewish acculturation, but was instead an advocate for a modern Jewish identity that would be at one and the same time fully modern and fully Jewish.

Through his very careful and meticulous analysis of Gordon's work, principally his poetry, Stanislawski delineates the liberal ideology of Jewish modernism. Basing themselves on German Enlightenment principles, especially the concept of *Bildung*, Gordon and his like-minded colleagues committed themselves to a program of Jewish modernization that stressed the need for educational, cultural, and even religious reform in order to prepare Russian Jews for the new world dawning around them. Thus, for such ideologues, a tension always existed between the extent to which internal transformations and accommodations could proceed without simultaneously undermining the fundamental bases of Jewish identity. That tension was succinctly captured by Gordon in his poem of 1863, "Awake My People," wherein he wrote his oft-quoted lines:

Be a man in the streets and a Jew at home  
A brother to your countryman and a servant to your king.

In focusing on Gordon, Stanislawski demonstrates how this tension developed over the years, and how Gordon's own views evolved both in response to his personal experiences, arrest and exile in 1879, as well as the conditions of

Russian Jewry which oscillated between the euphoric optimism of the 1860s and the dejected pessimism of the late 1880s.

While Stanislawski is clearly alert to Gordon's craftsmanship, his use of Hebrew Bible images and passages in his work in order to develop a bridge linking contemporary readers of Hebrew with its classical sources, he correctly treats Gordon's work from a programmatic rather than an esthetic perspective. Stanislawski focuses on ideas and arguments and not on meter and rhyme. In this, he is true to his stated intent of treating the overall cultural crisis confronting Russian Jewry and the manner by which the *maskilim*, the proponents of reform, responded to it. By using Gordon in this way, Stanislawski develops a clear presentation of the ideas that informed the Hebrew-based modernist movement as it surfaced in the nineteenth century among the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia. However, in writing a successful biography of Gordon, he has not really completed the task that he initially set for himself, that is, the delineation of reformist approaches to the crisis of Russian Jewry.

Part of the problem is methodological. By tying this project to Gordon's Hebrew-language publications, and by setting it up biographically, Stanislawski restricts his effort to Gordon and to the Hebrew Enlightenment. While Gordon certainly articulated themes clearly and his texts reflected the agonies confronting the liberal modernists, the necessity of treating him biographically stands in the way of a critical and systematic examination of the broader questions at issue. For instance, Stanislawski too often finds it necessary to review Gordon's exchanges with his critics, some of which were and some of which were not relevant to those larger issues.

Secondly, advocating a program of modernization that would lead to the emancipation of Russian Jewry was not restricted to writers working in the Hebrew language. In fact, Gordon was also a Russian writer and, as Stanislawski reminds us, a contributor to the Russian-language Jewish press, notably, the very important weekly, *Voskhod*. Since this study is addressed to illuminating the crisis of Russian Jewry and not just the crisis of Hebrew literature after 1881, more on the liberal and progressive movement as it developed through Russian letters could have been included here. In fact, Stanislawski does hint at such developments in his conclusion when he refers to more "realistic" dreams (p. 229). However, the focus on Gordon precludes his going down this road beyond the concluding hint.

In spite of these limitations, this is an important work in the new historiography of Russian Jewry. Michael Stanislawski is to be commended for his effort and for stimulating new thinking on issues that continue to deserve our attention.

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