

Moshe Pelli. *Kinds of Genre in Haskalah Literature: Types and Topics*. Israel: Hakkibutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 1999. xxv (English), 357 pp. (Hebrew).

Moshe Pelli, one of the major scholars of Hebrew *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) literature in our time and one of the major contributors to Hebrew culture in America, presents in this book the fruits of his twenty-five years of study of the major genres in this literature. Previously published articles have been rewritten by Pelli for this book.

One tendency of *Haskalah* literature was to adopt Judaic genres, such as the fable and the religious disputation, which existed in earlier Hebrew literature before the *Haskalah* and were continued by the *Haskalah*. Another trend was to use as a model genres that prevailed in European literatures in order to revitalize Hebrew belles lettres. Pelli presents an overview and a detailed discussion of the unique features of each one of these genres in order to present *Haskalah* as a modern, European-like phenomenon.

Each of the ten chapters of the book is dedicated to one genre—biography, autobiography, utopia, satire, dialogues of the dead, fable, religious disputation, the epistolary story, the imaginary dialogue and the travelogue—though it is clear that several genres may be traced in a single literary work. These genres helped to promote the aims and ideology of the *Haskalah* and provided new modes of literary expression.

Two works of Isaac Euchel present the genre of **biography**: his biography of Mendelssohn, published as a book in 1789, and his biography of Isaac Abravanel. Mendelssohn is portrayed as a model of the ideal modern Jew, embodying *Haskalah* and Judaism. Abravanel, who achieved balance between Judaism and the culture around him, is also presented as an exemplary figure for the Maskilim. The genre of **autobiography** is represented by Mordechai Aharon Ginzburg's *Aviezer*, written in the 1820s and published in 1864. Ginzburg employs a variety of literary devices such as parables, epigrams, digressions, anecdotes and didactic allusions in his story, and strives for truth and criticism that will benefit the society.

The genre of **utopia** attracted the *Haskalah* writers who wanted to draw a new, ideal type of Jewish society; the utopian genre made it possible for them to portray it as if it actually existed. Euchel's "Igroth Meshulam" and Isaac Satanow's *Divre Rivot* represents this genre. "Igroth Meshulam" is an epistolary story, satire and utopia. Euchel viewed the limited observance of the Marranos in Spain, the aesthetic aspects of the Catholic worship services, and the progressive life of Italian Jews as utopian models for secular Jewish life and alternatives to traditional Judaism. Satanow's *Divre Rivot* portrays a utopian society in which the king's reforms of Jewish life change human relations, economy, education, and society; the changes resonate with the *Haskalah*'s ideals.

Pelli meticulously presents the **satiric** modes of Saul Berlin's 1794 *Ktav Yosher*, including its structure, figurative language, and secularization of sacred idioms, as well as its use of irony, sarcasm, invective, obscenity, hyperbole, incongruity, reductio ad absurdum, caricature, wit, and humor. *Ktav Yosher* was written in defense of Naphtali Herz Wessely's treatise on education and displays the degenerating state of the Jewish society. When Pelli analyzes Erter's satire "Gilgul

Nefesh” he also offers a re-evaluation of Erter’s literary achievements. In this work the protagonist undergoes transformations into nine human characters and eight animals, through which the author relates to the problems of Jewish life.

The **dialogues of the dead** genre was adopted by several *Haskalah* writers who were attracted to its dramatic debate and search for truth of historical and contemporary figures in the afterlife. Pelli analyzes the satiric dialogue of Aaron Wolfsohn’s “Sihah Ba-Eretz Ha-Hayyim,” published in 1794, and Tuvyah Feder’s *Qol Mehatzetzim*, published in 1853 and 1875. In Wolfsohn’s dialogues, the discussion is between Maimonides, Mendelssohn, and a Polish rabbi. Wolfsohn presents contemporary topics, especially the controversies between the *Haskalah* and its opponents. The participants in Feder’s dialogue are historical figures and major figures of the *Haskalah*, who attack Mendel Lefin’s translation of the Book of Proverbs into Yiddish. The choice of Yiddish rather than German seemed to Feder an act of disloyalty to the *Haskalah*’s dedication to high standards of culture.

The didactic nature of the **fable**, its entertaining aspect, its search for truth, and its compactness explain why *Haskalah* writers liked this genre. In his 1793 or 1794 *Divre Rivot*, Isaac Satanow adapted the style of **religious disputation** of Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari* and used various literary devices to achieve dramatic tension. The first **epistolary fiction** writing in modern Hebrew literature is Isaac Euchel’s “Igrot Meshulam,” published anonymously in the Hebrew monthly *Hameassef*. It includes various fictional letters with different opinions but supports the ideas of the *Haskalah*. Pelli disagrees with the opinion that Euchel’s work is a “free translation” of Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* and substantiates his view that the author of “Igrot Meshulam” is Euchel, who followed Montesquieu’s use of the epistolary genre but expressed his own personal experience.

The **imaginary dialogue** is illustrated by Baruch Jeitteles’ 1800 dialogue between the year 1800 and the year 1801. The speakers are the two years and they both attack the mystical Frankist sect. The genre of **travelogue**, which aims both to teach and to entertain, is represented by Shmuel Romanelli’s 1792 *Masa Ba-Arav*, a travelogue of the author’s journey to North Africa. Pelli presents the literary conventions of the *Haskalah* travelogue and the life of North African Jews from the *Haskalah* point of view.

While the kinds of genre in *Haskalah* literature are the focal point of Pelli’s book, they are far from being its only subject matter. Pelli presents major authors, major literary works, major problems, developments and aspirations of the *Haskalah*, using his immense knowledge of this literature. He passionately and skillfully advocates and highlights its achievements. His extensive bibliography (pp. 328–351) is useful. The cultural and literary parameters of his discussion are expansive. His way of disagreement with other scholars is amiable.

Pelli’s erudition and inquisitive mind are evidenced in each chapter. His analysis is artful. Pelli raises one important question after another and answers each. For example, of the fable he asks and answers the following: Why was the fable such a popular genre? What transformation did it undergo? How does the definition of the fable genre by *Haskalah* fabulists stand in comparison with their European counterparts? In what ways was the affinity of the *Haskalah*’s fable to

AJS Review

the classical Hebrew fable expressed? How should *Haskalah's* fables be classified? Were all the “original fables” original?

In his presentation of the unique attributes of each genre, Pelli applies literary theory, probes the affinity between the *Haskalah* genre and the European genre, and analyzes the literary qualities and merits and traits of each genre in *Haskalah* literature vis-à-vis its counterparts on the European scene. This is, in short, a most significant contribution to the research of *Haskalah* literature.

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