

PELLI, MOSHE, *The Age of Haskalah: Studies in Hebrew Literature of the Enlightenment in Germany*.

The pioneering contribution of the literature of the Hebrew Haskalah to the development of modern Hebrew literature is well known. However, contemporary scholars of Hebrew letters neglect the subject. Thus, it serves mainly as a source for the social, political and cultural history of the time and, as Moshe Pelli noted in his introduction, “. . . a literary analysis of forms, genres and trends in the Haskalah in toto is still wanting.” Nevertheless, Pelli’s book, *The Age of Haskalah*, is a welcome contribution to the intellectual history of the Hebrew Haskalah in Germany. It aims to examine “. . . the phenomenology of the Hebrew enlightenment, its goals, ideology and its significance.”

The book contains a collection of previously published articles which were edited and grouped so as to provide the reader with a comprehensive survey of the ideology of the Haskalah. The selection also gives a feeling for the evolution of the cultural and intellectual aspects of the Hebrew Haskalah in Germany. The book is divided into two parts. The first five chapters deal with broad topics of a general nature such as the impact of deism on the Hebrew literature of the Haskalah, intimations of religious reforms, the attitude of the *maskilim* toward the Talmud and the Hebrew language and the controversy over the first reformed temple. The last five chapters discuss the writings of Wessely, Gumpel Schnaber, Isaac Satanow, Saul Berlin and Isaac Euchel.

Pelli’s book is very detailed. However, in the chapter dealing with the impact of deism, in the reviewer’s opinion, the emphasis was somewhat misplaced. The chapter discusses in detail the principles of deism, and its attitude to Judaism. However, the difference between the so-called European deism and the Hebrew one, and the influence of the former on the Hebrew Haskalah are described only in a very general way. Also, in comparing the European deists and the Hebrew *maskilim*, Pelli emphasizes the similarities in their tactics of persuasion rather than the essence of their beliefs. The student of the Hebrew Haskalah who is interested in the Hebrew expressions of deistic opinions will find this aspect somewhat lacking. Pelli’s claim that the first *maskilim* both respected and supported the Talmud, should be more qualified. As Nachman Barash, one of the first *maskilim* rightly said, speaking respectfully about the sages does not necessarily imply a respect and acceptance of the teaching of the Talmud. The *maskilim*, being both pragmatic and didactic in their approach, could not afford to attack the most sacred literature of the masses, and still hope to influence them. However, while the real attitude of the *maskilim* to the Talmud is still an open issue, there is hardly any doubt that the first *maskilim* opposed the dominant position of the Talmud in the curriculum of Jewish education. Pelli’s argument that the first *maskilim* were the first true revivers of the Hebrew language is well taken. However, while their efforts in Germany were short lived, Ben Yehuda’s efforts in Eretz Israel had more permanent results.

Contending that “a study of the Hebrew Haskalah is a study of the Hebrew *maskilim* and their literary works” Pelli devotes five chapters to five early *maskilim*, emphasizing specific aspects of their contributions. For example, despite the fact that Wessely was regarded by his contemporaries as the proto

maskil, Pelli shows successfully that he was much more oriented toward tradition than toward the enlightenment. In the chapter on Saul Berlin, Pelli contends that “More than any of the Hebrew writers of the German Haskalah, Saul Berlin was instrumental in the decline of the religious and Halachic authority in Judaism.” This is a rather extreme statement, which could be debated, but the rest of the chapter portrays an interesting personality of a reformer, a parodist, a scholar and a polemicist, all in the same person. In this chapter, as well as in the others, Pelli’s broad knowledge of the subject is apparent. His book contains a very large number of references to both primary and secondary sources, and thus will be a very useful tool for the student of the Hebrew Haskalah.

Pelli himself concedes that “Haskalah, from its very beginning was both a literary and a social movement. . . It would be futile to attempt to understand the literary aspects of the Hebrew Enlightenment divorced from its social, cultural and religious aspects and milieu.” Nevertheless, Pelli decided to examine it “with the concomitant exclusion of political and social causes.” This contradiction is basically both the forte and the drawback of the book. The uninformed reader who would expect to find some general introduction which would present the social, political and economic background to the intellectual phenomenon would do better with another source. However, the specialist will find some interesting new insights and challenging new approaches to old questions.

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