

## *The Attitude of the First Maskilim to the Hebrew Language*

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It is a truism that the revival of the Hebrew language in modern times is a product of late nineteenth-century Hebrew literature. Similarly, it is generally accepted as an unchallenged fact that Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was the "father of modern Hebrew language" and "the reviver of the language" (*meḥayyeh ha-Safah*). While it is not the intention of this study to debunk these contentions for the sake of discrediting either nineteenth-century Hebrew or Ben-Yehuda himself, it is undoubtedly true that a re-evaluation of the above assumptions is long overdue. The more one studies and delves into the *haskalah* literature in its inception, the more one comes to realise the important and vital role it played in the revival as well as the survival of the Jewish people, its culture and its ideas. No one is immune from personal bias, or – to use a milder expression – personal predilections, as any student of *haskalah* literature and Hebrew literature in general may discover while reading the pertinent works. Yet in light of the negative attitude that some scholars have manifested toward the *Haskalah* in general, a re-evaluation and re-examination are much to be desired.<sup>1</sup> The present writer's bias and predilections notwithstanding, the study in its defined boundaries will attempt to present an overall view of the subject at hand as enunciated by the Hebrew *maskilim* themselves, and it may serve to counter-balance other writings on the subject.

<sup>1</sup> A more balanced view can be found in the following writings: MOSES KLEINMAN, *Demuyyoth We-gomoth* (Paris and London, 1928), pp. 15, 18; GEZTEL KRESSEL, *Ivriḥ Ba-Ma'arav* (Tel Aviv, 1941), p. 22; Y. ŠEVI ZEHAVI, *Tenu'ath Ha-bitboleluth Be-yisra'el* (Tel Aviv, 1943), pp. 21, 32; ISAAC E. BARZILAY, "The Ideology of the Berlin Haskalah", *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, xxv (1956), pp. 26–27, 33; *idem*, "National and Anti-National Trends in the Berlin Haskalah", *Jewish Social Studies*, xxi (No. 3, July, 1959), pp. 167–179; JOSEPH KLAUSNER, *Historia Shel Ha-Sifrut Ha-ivriḥ Ha-ḥadashah*, i (Jerusalem, 1960); DANIEL BEN-NAHUM, *Be-ma'aleh Dorot* (Merḥavya, Israel, 1962), p. 15; SIMON FEDERBUSCH, *Ha-Lashon Ha-ivriḥ Be-yisra'el U-va-ammim* (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 193–197; DOV SADAN, "Lashon 'Ivriḥ Ḥayyah Li-gevuroḥ", *Ha-Do'ar*, xl (January 9, 1970), pp. 150–152.

This study is limited to the writings of the most important exponents of Hebrew *haskalah* literature, such as Naphtali Herz Wessely, Isaac Satanow, Mordecai Schnaber, and Yehudah Ben Ze'ev. Due to Moses Mendelssohn's role in the *Haskalah*, some of his Hebrew writings have been included too. In addition, the first few volumes of *Ha-Me'assef*, and of its forerunner *Qobeleth Musar*, were selected as well, although the latter had been a product of the 1750's.<sup>1</sup> It should be emphasised that the study has been limited to the last quarter of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

A great awareness of the deterioration of the Hebrew language during the *Galuth* is dominant in the early *haskalah* literature. As early as the mid-century, a writer in *Qobeleth Musar* laments the low state of the Hebrew language. He expresses his astonishment as to the reasons the Jews had forsaken the "holy tongue": "I have seen that our brethren the children of Israel had forsaken our holy tongue, and I was angered very much. I did not know how this calamity came about."<sup>3</sup> Typically, the Hebrew language for the anonymous writer in *Qobeleth Musar*,<sup>4</sup> is still "the holy tongue", and is to remain so for a while. As we shall see, the term is questioned later on, and secular interpretations are proposed by the *maskilim*. Similarly, one

<sup>1</sup> Regarding the dating of *Qobeleth Musar* see KLAUSNER, *Historia Shel Ha-Sifrut Ha-Ivrit*, i, p. 52; YISSAKHAR EDELSTEIN, "Ha-hibbur Qobeleth Musar", *Sefer Ha-yovel Li-meloth Hamishim Shanah Le-veith Midrash Ha-rabbanim Be-Budapest* (Budapest, 1928), p. 56; YA'AKOV TOURY, "Mi-ba'ayoth Qobeleth Musar", *Qirjath Sepher*, xliii (no. 2, 1968), pp. 279-284; *idem*, "Die Anfänge der jüdischen Zeitungswegens in Deutschland", *Bulletin des Leo Baeck Institut*, 1967, pp. 95-109; HERMANN M. Z. MEYER and J. TOURY, "Kohleth Musar, Berichtigungen, Ergänzungen", *ibid.*, 1968, pp. 48-65. It is important to note that similar trends regarding the Hebrew language are found in some rabbinic writings of that period which may signal the spirit of the forthcoming Hebrew *Haskalah*. See A. SHOHEF, *Beginnings of the Haskala among German Jewry* (Jerusalem, 1960), pp. 220-221, 235-237 (Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup> Ben Ze'ev and Pappenheim continued to write, and publish, into the beginning of the nineteenth century. A methodological note should be emphasised: this study deals with the primary sources only, and thus does not attempt to present a comprehensive summary of the secondary material on the social background (such as could be found in the works of SELMA STERN-TAEUBLER) or the education of the German Jews (MORDECAI ELIAV's work), important as these are.

<sup>3</sup> *Qobeleth Musar* (1750?), p. 2. The view that *Galuth* is the cause of the deterioration of the Hebrew language is shared also by an English *maskil*, Abraham Tang, in the second introduction to his translation into Hebrew of William Congréve's *Mourning Bride* (1768); see "'El 'Eyn Ha-Qore" ("For the Reader's Eye"), p. 5b. I should like to thank Prof. S. STEIN for drawing my attention to Tang's work and for providing me with a copy of the manuscript, which is in the Library of Jews' College.

<sup>4</sup> On the question whether Mendelssohn wrote the whole or part of *Qobeleth Musar* see the studies mentioned in note 2, *supra*, and GRAETZ, *Divrey Yemey Ha-Yehudim*, ix (Warsaw [1904]), p. 13.

notes that the question remained unanswered. The *maskilim* of the last quarter of the eighteenth century, however, are not content merely to state the low ebb of the Hebrew language; they are already looking for reasons. It is quite clear that the writers of the Hebrew periodical consider the alleviating of the problems of the Hebrew language as one of their stated goals.<sup>1</sup> Some thirty years later, the editors of *Ha-Me'assef* adopt a similar objective: to spread the knowledge of Hebrew among the Jews.<sup>2</sup>

That this awareness of the state of the Hebrew language is a result of European enlightenment is obvious to anyone who has studied the various writings of the *maskilim* carefully. The feeling that new times had arrived in Europe, and that wisdom and knowledge had become dominant among the enlightened peoples of the continent, prevails in the *haskalah* literature.<sup>3</sup> These enunciations also serve as a contrast and as a lever in order to help introduce the Jews to modern times through the revival of their language. As the editors of *Ha-Me'assef* see it, "the era of knowledge has arrived in all the nations; day and night they would not stop to teach their children [both] language and book. And we, why should we sit idle?"<sup>4</sup> As early as 1771, a Hebrew *maskil*, Mordecai Schnaber, at that time in London, resorts to the same argument: "The nations around us, far and near, would not cease and would not rest making books without an end. Everyone speaks and creates [composes, writes] in the language of his people so as to broaden it; and why should we be deprived of the inheritance of our forefathers by forsaking our holy tongue? But indeed we are lazy. . . ."<sup>5</sup> This well-educated *maskil*, a physician by profession, and one of the first advocates of introducing the Jews to secular knowledge, lashes out against them with an original argument: even non-Jews know Hebrew better than the Jews themselves. Schnaber accentuates his argument with the well-known phrase "*u-mah yo'meru ha-Goyim*" (what would the nations – or, non-Jews – say?), which plays on the national pride of his readers, and is indicative of the growing dependence of contemporary Jewry on the values and the opinions of the surrounding culture.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Qobeleth Musar*, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Nahal Ha-Besor* (1783), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13, and p. 11. See also: *Ha-Me'assef* (1784), p. 111; *ibid.* (1786), pp. 68, 131; *ibid.* (1790), p. 301; Isaac Saṭanow, *Mishley 'Asaf*, ii (Berlin, 1792), p. 10a.

<sup>4</sup> *Nahal Ha-Besor*, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Mordecai Schnaber, *Ma'amar Ha-Torah We-ha-hokhmah* (London, 1771), p. 5. Cf. my study *Mordecai Gumpel Schnaber: The First Religious Reformer of the Hebrew Haskalah in Germany* (Beer Sheva, 1972), to appear in *J.Q.R.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Simultaneously with the extraneous arguments, the *maskilim* use an argument from within, dwelling – for contrast – on the glorious status of the Hebrew language in the distant past – as attested in the Bible, its poetry and prophecy.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, by so doing, the hebraists display their pride in the Hebrew language, and their deep belief that its glory could be restored. Indeed it is this unmistakable belief that underlies almost all of their literary as well as social activities, as I shall endeavour to point out.

Their attempts to explain the reasons for the deterioration of the Hebrew language reflect, to my mind, their collective thinking with regard to the steps that should be taken in order to revive both the Hebrew language and its culture as well as the Jewish people. It is safe to assume that while stating the reasons for the deterioration of Hebrew the *maskilim* also start planning their strategy of Enlightenment. Their explanations may be divided into historical explanations and contemporary ones.

Most of the *maskilim* see in the *Galuth* the prime reason for the neglect of the Hebrew language by the Jews.<sup>2</sup> In their exile the Jews began to speak other languages thus forgetting their own language. Yehudah Ben Ze'ev, a writer and grammarian, is of the opinion that whatever happened to other ancient languages occurred also to the Hebrew tongue, the latter being the oldest of all languages. Hebrew deteriorated, according to him, because it ceased to be spoken, thus becoming a dead language. By contrast, Western languages are spoken, are alive, and as a result are developing and improving.<sup>3</sup> Isaac Saṭanow goes one step further, stating that although the main reason for the low ebb of Hebrew is the exile, Hebrew did continue to develop, but rather negatively. Responsible for the negative development of Hebrew are the *payyetanim*—medieval liturgical writers – who disregarded all grammatical rules in coining new words for their *piyyuṭim*.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the target of Schnaber is the

<sup>1</sup> *Nahal Ha-Besor*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ha-Me'assef* (1783–1784), p. 31 (Eliyyahu Morpurgo); Isaac Saṭanow, *Sefer Ha-Middoth* (Berlin, 1784), p. 88b.

<sup>3</sup> Yehudah Ben Ze'ev, *Oṣar Ha-Sborashim* (Vienna, 1807), introduction, p. 12. The idea that Hebrew is the oldest of all languages is by no means new. See *Kuzari*, IV, 13 (Saṭanow's edition, Berlin, 1795, p. 70b).

<sup>4</sup> Saṭanow, *Sefer Ha-Middoth*, p. 88b: 'אָז 'amedah mi-Ledeth wa-Tebi 'aqarah, 'akb lo 'aqarah mammasb ki'im 'asethab peri kashab boneyba banim zarim yaledu u-fayyetaneyba be'emiqu le-dabber sarab . . . binyaneyba baresu we-'avney mishqelotbeyba shiqqesu. . . ." ("then she stopped bearing and she became barren. However, not really barren, but she produced fruit of lies, her builders have born strange sons. And her

mediaeval Jewish philosophers who introduced foreign words into Hebrew while ignoring the existence of appropriate Hebrew terms which could have been used instead. He accuses them also of coining new words which have no linguistic foundations in Hebrew.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the *maskilim* present a few contemporary explanations regarding the status of Hebrew. The most popular of them is the argument that Judaeo-German, dubbed by the hebraists as *la'agey safab* (corrupt language),<sup>2</sup> is the cause of the deterioration of the Hebrew language. Most European Jews had had recourse to Yiddish, thus neglecting the study of Hebrew.<sup>3</sup> The tendencies to shy away from the *peshat*, i.e. the plain and non-homiletical interpretation of the biblical text based on common sense as well as on grammatical rules, are also regarded as leading to the neglect of the Hebrew language.<sup>4</sup> A notion that the Hebrew language has many shortcomings and deficiencies compared to other languages is believed by another *maskil* to be the cause for the low standing of Hebrew among the Jews.<sup>5</sup>

After the turn of the century, and following two decades of attempts to alleviate the situation, Ben Ze'ev is able to pinpoint a number of causes for the decline of Hebrew despite the activities of the *maskilim*. Basically it is the old-fashioned, disorganised and chaotic Jewish education that has led to the decline of the Hebrew language. The sudden change that took place in Jewish society had resulted in changes of values and goals which emphasised the practical and utilitarian aspects of life. Hebrew being of little practical

liturgical writers have dredged the depths of linguistic deviationism. . . . They have destroyed its constructions. They have abhorred its weighing-stones (i.e. metre)". It should be noted that in their eagerness to display the causes for the deterioration of the Hebrew language, the *maskilim* are sometimes not careful to distinguish between cause and effect. For other sources see my article "Intimations of Religious Reform in the German Hebrew Haskalah Literature", *Jewish Social Studies*, xxxii (no. 1, January, 1970), p. 9, note 36.

<sup>1</sup> Mordecai Schnaber, *Tokhabath Megillah* (Hamburg, 1784), f. 3a.

<sup>2</sup> *Ha-Me'assef* (1788), p. 84 (Isaac Saṭanow, under the disguise of his son's name, Shelomo); see p. 94, note 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* (1785), p. 33 (David Friedrichsfeld): Mendelssohn's negative attitude toward Yiddish can be discerned in his *Gesammelte Schriften*, v (Leipzig, 1844), pp. 604-605, and also in *Or Li-netivah* (Berlin, 1783), pp. 49-50. Cf. my book *Mosheh Mendelssohn: Be-kehavley Massoreth* (Tel Aviv, 1972), pp. 65-74, and SELMA STERN TAEUBLER, "The First Generation of Emancipated Jews", *Leo Baeck Year Book*, xv (1970), p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Naphtali Herz Wessely, "Rav Tuw Le-vev Yisra'el", *Divrey Shalom We'emeth*, ii (Berlin, 1782), ff. 17b-18a; *Ha-Me'assef* (1788), p. 84 (Isaac Saṭanow); Mendelssohn, *Or Li-netivah*, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Schnaber, *Tokhabath Megillah*, f. 8a.

value for a given student's business career – a matter of high importance among middle and upper-class German Jews – there was no necessity to study it, thus the Hebrew language declined. Ben Ze'ev also mentions the rabbis as one of the causes for the state of the language. By their continuous attempts to separate *Torah* from wisdom, *i.e.*, Judaism from secular knowledge, the traditionalist rabbis actually drove many people away from the Hebrew language and its culture.<sup>1</sup>

It is, I think, of the utmost importance to consider the above-mentioned explanations against the literary and social activities of the *maskilim*. Even a cursory examination would show that almost all of the stated reasons for the decline of Hebrew language became the explicit target of the Hebrew enlightenment in Germany. Whatever their attitude towards Jewish nationalism,<sup>2</sup> there is no doubt in my mind that they all came out against *Galuth*, seeing it as reflected in part by the low condition of the Jews and their culture among their environment, and by the deprivation of the Jews of their basic human rights. An elaboration of this theme, necessary though it is, goes beyond the scope of the present study. The very activities of the *maskilim* in Hebrew spell their desire that Hebrew should become a living language. Their attacks against the "corrupt" *piyyuṭim* are an integral part of the Hebrew *Haskalah*.<sup>3</sup> Purifying the language, too, has been advocated by the *maskilim*. Their negative attitude toward Yiddish is well known,<sup>4</sup> although some of them continue to express themselves in that language.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis on the *peshaṭ* in biblical exegesis is to be found in all their publications.<sup>6</sup> Their attempts to

<sup>1</sup> Ben Ze'ev, *'Oṣar Ha-Sborashim*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. BARZILAY, "National and Anti-National Trends in the Berlin Haskalah", *JSS*, pp. 165–192. See Euchel's criticism of *Galuth* in *Ha-Me'assef* (1784), p. 92; *ibid.* (1785), p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> Saul Berlin, *Besamim Rosh* (Berlin, 1793), *siman* 71, f. 28a; *Ha-Me'assef* (1786), pp. 205 ff.; *ibid.*, p. 48, J.B.L. (= Joel Brill's) critical review of Saṭanow's edition of *Seder Selihah* (Berlin, 1785); in his introduction, Saṭanow seems to be in disagreement with the rest of the *maskilim* regarding the *piyyuṭim*. He does, however, object to the "corrupt" *selihoth*. For later criticism of the *piyyuṭim* see: 'Amittai b. 'Avida' 'Ahiṣedeq (= David Caro), *Berith 'Emeth*, ii (Constantinople [Dessau], 1820), p. 112; Mendel Steinhart, *Divrey 'Iggereth* (Rödelheim, 1812), ff. 11a–b.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 87, note 3.

<sup>5</sup> For example the plays, partially in Yiddish, by Isaac Euchel and Aaron Wolfsohn.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the *Be'ur*, in *Nethivoth Ha-Shalom*; Isaac Saṭanow's edition of the book of Job (Berlin, 1799), on the title page: *u-ve'uro . . . ke-fi ha-Pesbat ba-Nish'an li-gevul ha-Diqduq we-nishqaf'al peney hemsbekh ha-Kethuwim*; Mendelssohn's edition of *Megillath Qoheleth* (Berlin, 1770), title page: *'im be'ur qaser u-maspiq*

modernise Jewish education is the prime aspect of the *Haskalah*, while their endeavours to show the compatibility of Judaism and secular knowledge are abundant in their early writings. As the German *Haskalah* developed, one discerns a growing dissatisfaction with the rabbis who were blamed for keeping to the old order of Judaism, and for rejecting any attempt to modernise it.<sup>1</sup> The only item listed above which the *maskilim* did not combat is the emphasis on the utilitarian aspects of life, which was indeed one of the goals of *Haskalah*. However, they vehemently criticised those pseudo-*maskilim*, who borrowed certain slogans of the *Haskalah* without their contents and meaning.<sup>2</sup>

I think it is safe to conclude that the discussion of the decline of the Hebrew language by the *maskilim* is closely connected with their ideals of reviving the language as part of the revival of the Jews. The probe into the decline of Hebrew is often followed by an examination of the qualities of the language – a sort of soul-searching, in an attempt to find out whether there is anything inherent in Hebrew which might prevent its revival as a modern, viable language. It is important to note that nothing inherently wrong is found in Hebrew. What appeared to be deficiencies are explained by the *maskilim* as “our own deficiencies”, and not those of the language. The apparent impoverishment of the language in vocabulary is in effect our own impoverishment, since we do not know Hebrew well. This is the opinion of Yehudah Ben Ze’ev and Shelomo Pappenheim, both writers and grammarians.<sup>3</sup> To the former, it is inconceivable that “a divine language” [*lashon ’elobith*] could be deficient.<sup>4</sup> The lack of some tenses – their apparent limitation to three – is seen by Schnaber as reflecting the superiority of Hebrew and its pure state, rather than any form of deficiency.<sup>5</sup>

*la-havanath ha-Kathuv ’al pi peshuto le-tho’eleth ha-Talmidim* and p. [9]; Yehudah Ben Ze’ev, *Mavo ’el Miqra’ey Qodesh* (Vienna, 1810), introduction, p. [6]; so also in numerous places in *Ha-Me’assef*; in 1789–90 the editors started a new section, “*Be’ur Sifrey Qodesh*”.

<sup>1</sup> See my article mentioned in note 4 on pp. 86–7.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Aaron Wolfsohn’s play, published by BERNARD D. WEINRYB, “An Unknown Hebrew Play of the German Haskalah”, *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, xxiv (1955), pp. 165–170, 1–37 (Hebrew).

<sup>3</sup> Yehudah Ben Ze’ev, *Talmud Lesbon ’Ivri* (Vienna, 1827), introduction, f. 3a; Shelomo Pappenheim, *Yeri’oth Shelomo*, i (Dyhernfurth, 1783), introduction, f. 4a.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Ze’ev, *Talmud Lesbon ’Ivri*, p. 3a. “*Ha-Lashon ha-’eloqi*” is a term used in *Kuzari*, iv, 13 (Satanow’s edition, f. 70b).

<sup>5</sup> Schnaber, *Tokbahath Meghillah*, p. 8a.

Neither can Hebrew be criticised for having foreign words in it – thus being supposedly inferior to other languages; for whatever seems to us as foreign is actually of Hebrew origin, Hebrew being the mother of all languages.<sup>1</sup> Most exponents of Hebrew enlightenment regarded Hebrew as such, and as a result many of them are of the opinion that Hebrew even has superiority over the other languages.<sup>2</sup> Those who believe that Hebrew is the mother of all languages rely, of course, on the biblical account and the corresponding talmudic homiletics, which they do not question; so much so that some do not even deem it necessary to state the source of their contention. It goes without saying that being the mother of all languages, Hebrew is regarded even by those who do not say so as being superior to all its daughters. While some of the *maskilim* limit the superiority of Hebrew to the past only,<sup>3</sup> others would maintain its current superiority.<sup>4</sup> However, even those who take the former view allude to the potential superiority of Hebrew, once it is revived. As a matter of fact, some state clearly that their own writings are intended to show that Hebrew is self-sufficient.<sup>5</sup>

The attitude of the early *Haskalah* to Hebrew is manifested through a synonymous expression referring to the language. Almost all the *maskilim* still use the term “the holy tongue” (*leshon ha-Qodesh*) when speaking about Hebrew.<sup>6</sup> Although this is used as a conventional term, one may suppose that the first *maskilim* actually did regard

<sup>1</sup> Schnaber, *Tokhathath Meghillah*, p. 3b. A similar view had been expressed three years before by Tang in his introduction (see p. 84, note 3), ff. 6a-b.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Satanow, *Sefer Ha-bizayon* (Berlin, 1775), introduction; *idem*, *’Iggereth Beth Tefillah* (Berlin, 1773), f. 4b; *idem*, *Sefer Ha-Middoth*, f. 88a; Moses Mendelssohn, *Lesbon Ha-Zahav* (Berlin, 1783), title page.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Satanow, *Mishley ’Asaf*, i (Berlin, 1789), f. 43b, basing his argument on the multiplicity of synonyms to be found in biblical Hebrew as well as on the vivid description of the tabernacle. See also *Qobeleth Musar*, p. 2, Ben Ze’ev’s *’Ozar Ha-Shorashim*, p. 13, and Tang’s introduction, f. 4b. Cf. SHALOM SPIEGEL, “*Midrash Ha-Nirdafim Be-sifrutenu*”, *Leshonenu*, vii (1, 1935–1936), pp. 11–35.

<sup>4</sup> *Nahal Ha-Besor*, p. 12; *Ha-Me’assef* (1786), p. 132 (Eliyyahu Morpurgo).

<sup>5</sup> *Qobeleth Musar*, p. 3: *W’e-ha-ivrim yabbi’u lir’oth ki nakhon leshonenu lekhol devar miqreb u-fega’, le-harim qol bi-vekhi, la-shir be-shirim ’al lev ha-semehim ’el gil ’o le-hokki’ah ba-sba’ar rishe’ey ’aref. we-yiqqehu musa[r] we-yin’amu ne’um leshon ha-ivri[m]*, *ibid.*, p. 15. The writer believes that it is possible to write in Hebrew on every subject. Although he admits the difficulty of translating European languages into Hebrew, he encourages his readers to undertake this most laborious task. Isaac Euchel, in the letters to his student published in *Ha-Me’assef* (1785), writes that he was encouraged to print the letters so as to show the possibility of speaking in Hebrew on any subject – *le-dabber bahh mi-kol befeš le-mi-Qatan we’ad gadol*.

<sup>6</sup> See for example *Nahal Ha-Besor*, pp. 1, 5, 8; *Ha-Me’assef* (1785), p. 159; *ibid.* (1786), p. 132, Mendelssohn, *’Or Li-netivah* p.[7]. Tang refers to Hebrew as “*leshonenu ha-qadosh*” – f. 4b of his introduction.



Hebrew as a *holy* language. However, one senses some hesitation regarding the holiness of the language in the attempts to explain the term. Mendelssohn, in his introduction to the interpretation and translation into German of the Pentateuch, which has an overall traditional tone, gives the customary explanation of “*leshon ha-Qodesh*”: it is a holy tongue because the Bible was written in it, God spoke in it to Adam, Cain, Noah and the holy fathers, to Moses and the prophets; He spoke the Ten Commandments in Hebrew, which is also the language used on the two tablets.<sup>1</sup> Naphtali Wessely explains it in like manner. However, he tries to define the word “holy” in the sense of *different, distinguished*. Hebrew is thus distinguished, according to this *maskil*, in that it is (or was) pure, without mistakes and confusion, as befitting a language created by God and not by any human being.<sup>2</sup> According to Wessely, this holiness, or uniqueness ceased with the Babylonian exile very much like the cessation of the sacredness of other institutions in Judaism (i.e., precepts which can be practised in the land of Israel only, or the cessation of prophecy).<sup>3</sup> Against the background of Wessely’s other writings it might be difficult to ascertain whether he is alluding to the secularisation of the Hebrew language or not.<sup>4</sup> I tend to think that Wessely did not have the secularisation of Hebrew in mind when he wrote the foregoing, if by secularisation we mean taking Hebrew completely out of the domain of the sacred.<sup>5</sup> We know, however, that Wessely did advocate the use of the language for purposes which were not strictly religious in nature.<sup>6</sup>

A few years later a writer in *Ha-me’assef* suggests that the Hebrew term “*leshon ha-Qodesh*” is not to be understood as though Hebrew is a holy tongue, but rather, that Hebrew is the tongue of holiness, that is to say, the tongue in which the holy *Torah* had been written.

<sup>1</sup> *’Or Li-netzivah*, p. 7. Cf. an earlier explanation of Shelomo Zalman Hanau in his *Sefer Yesod Ha-Niqqud* (Amsterdam, 1730), introduction, p. 3: *leshon she-Mal’akhey ha-Shareth mishtammeshin babb*. (“A language used by the ministering angels.”)

<sup>2</sup> Naphtali Herz Wessely, *Levanon* (Vienna, 1829), introduction, f. 21b; *idem*, *Mehaelel Re’a, Sefer Bereshith* (Offenbach, 1821), f. 19b.

<sup>3</sup> Wessely, *Mehallel Re’a*, f. 19b.

<sup>4</sup> See *Divrey Shalom We’emeth*, and my study *Naphtali Herz Wessely’s Attitude towards the Jewish Religion as a Mirror of a Generation in Transition (During the Early Period of Hebrew Haskalah in Germany)* (Beer Sheva, 1971), where I discuss this subject (to appear in 1974 in *Zeitschr. Rel. u. Geistesgeschichte*).

<sup>5</sup> *Mehallel Re’a* was published originally in 1778.

<sup>6</sup> *Divrey Shalom We’emeth*, i, f. [11a], to teach the students the obligations of the individual to his king as well as the teaching of ethics.

The word *ha-Qodesh* is not to be regarded as an epithet of "lashon".<sup>1</sup> Although the writer repeats what others had said before him with regard to the explanation of the term *leshon ha-Qodesh*, yet I think that the very dichotomy which he proposes signals the forthcoming change in attitude with regard to the Hebrew language.<sup>2</sup>

One notes some signs already in *Nahal Ha-Besor*, the prospectus of *Ha-Me'assef*, published in 1783. In their published letter to Wessely, the editors of the proposed journal spell out one of their goals, namely, to spread the knowledge of the holy tongue among "the people of God".<sup>3</sup> Although this programmatic announcement was limited in scope and probably reached a few hundred readers only,<sup>4</sup> yet as a beginning it is quite impressive. In his well-known response, Wessely advises the young hebraists among other things not to teach Hebrew as secular languages have been taught, which sounds like a quotation taken from the writings of Wessely's opponent, the traditionalist rabbi Yehezqel Landau of Prague.<sup>5</sup> His advice is clearer when he specifies that they should not spread knowledge of the language alone, but should teach the ancient sacred writings of the Jews. Thus the language is deemed as a tool for a better knowledge of Judaism.<sup>6</sup>

The argument of the *maskilim* for the obligation to know the Hebrew language lies mainly in the realms of the old order, or at least it so appears. They maintain that it is obligatory on adherents of the Hebrew faith to know its language. Without it, how can one

<sup>1</sup> *Ha-Me'assef* (1786), p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> To Mendelssohn (see p. 9, note 1), for example, there is no difference between "*leshon ha-Qodesh*" and "*lashon qadossh*"; both mean the holiness of the language. Once the dichotomy is made, as in the case at hand, its unquestionable purpose is to eliminate the halo of holiness from the language. It is typical of the methodology of the *maskilim* that the very same arguments used to fortify the traditional position, are used by them in order to destroy it.

<sup>3</sup> *Nahal Ha-Besor*, p. 5: *u-vibeyoth kol megammatbam we-hefsam le-barhiv da'ath leshonenu ha-Qadossh tokh'am ha-Shem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ha-Me'assef* (1783-1784), p. 16. The editors report that they had succeeded in securing about two hundred subscribers.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Yehezqel Landau, *Sela* "Al Masseketh Berakoth" (Sdilikow, 1832), f. 27b: *mi-Shum she-Limmud ha-Miqra' gam ha-'epiqoresim lomedim bi-shevil ha-Lashon kemo she-Lomedim she-'ar leshonoth*.

<sup>6</sup> *Nahal Ha-Besor*, p. 8: *'al tasimu gevulekhem be-limmud darekhey ha-Lashon le-vad le-dabber sahoth we-likhtov sahoth, ke-derekh she-Melammedim darekhey leshonoth shel hol, 'aval 'ad ha-Yam ha-Gadhol yam hokhmah ha-Torah yihyeh gevulekhem, she'al yedey da'ath ha-Lashon 'al mekhono tavinu la'am 'amaroth tchoroth she-Ba-Torah, u-devar qodsho she-Be-fi nevi'aw we-qabbalath 'emeth she-hayethah be-yad hakhmey ha-Mishnah we-ha-Talmud she-yesodathan be-hadrath qodusath ha-Lashon we-ha-Melishah ha-ne'edaroth ha-Qodesh*.

know the Torah and its commandments?<sup>1</sup> This statement is especially true, maintains Ben Ze'ev,<sup>2</sup> with regard to the Jewish religion and the Hebrew language, due to the interdependence of the two. The only two non-religious arguments came from Wessely and Ben Ze'ev, and both are rather weak. Wessely says that the beauty of speech, the correctness of the language and the purity of its idiom are intimately connected with wisdom and ethics.<sup>3</sup> Ben Ze'ev writes that a person who specialises in logic must know at least one language very well.<sup>4</sup> Even though both of them mean the Hebrew language, their arguments are in no way unique to Hebrew, and could have been applied to German.

A word of explanation is in place here. Although the religious arguments may be considered quite natural to the period and its *maskilim*, who are to be regarded as a generation in transition from the old order to the new, nevertheless, their public should be considered too. Most probably the *maskilim*, and especially the writers and editors of *Ha-Me'assef*, were aware that their readers were mostly traditionalist Jews, and they therefore geared their writings to them in a way that would appeal to their religious feelings. Against the background of their other writings, in which the *maskilim* attack the religious authority of the rabbis and demand some religious reform, one may conclude that the religious arguments in the context of promotion of the Hebrew language ought not to be taken at their face value.

It is abundantly clear that the Hebrew *maskilim* have as their goal, in addition to teaching the correct use of the language, also the broadening of it.<sup>5</sup> Although most of them advocate the use of biblical Hebrew only, there are some who suggest very strongly that mishnaic Hebrew is also a legitimate part of the modern language, and may be used. They are: Pappenheim, Isaac Saṭanow and one Ḥayyim Keslin of Berlin.<sup>6</sup> Saṭanow is quite liberal in his attitude

<sup>1</sup> Ben Ze'ev, *Talmud Leshon 'Ivri*, pp. 2b-3a; Wessely, *Divrey Shalom We'emeth*, i, p. 8b; *idem*, *Ha-Me'assef* (1785), p. 157; Schnaber, *Soleth Minḥab Belulah* ([Altona?], 1797), p. 35a: "One fulfills the obligation to study the *Torah* in the holy tongue only."

<sup>2</sup> Ben Ze'ev, *Yesodey Ha-Dath* (Vienna, 1823), first introduction, pp. 13-14 (my pagination): *u-ve-yo'ether be-dath 'ivriith, 'asher ba-Dath 'abuzab ba-Lashon, u-musageyha niqsharim be-millothbeyha. . .*

<sup>3</sup> *Divrey Shalom We'emeth*, i, p. 4b.

<sup>4</sup> *Talmud Leshon 'Ivri*, p. 2b.

<sup>5</sup> *Qobeleth Musar*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Pappenheim, *Yeri'oth Shelomoh*, i, introduction, p. 4b; *Ha-Me'assef* (1788), pp. 86-91 (Saṭanow); *ibid.* (1786), p. 53, 60 (Keslin).

towards innovations in Hebrew; unlike his fellow-*maskilim*, he is willing to accept well-established, ungrammatical innovations, as well as erroneous forms which would in the future be used by the masses.<sup>1</sup> In a long article bearing his son's name,<sup>2</sup> Saṭanow presents a good argument for coining new words so as to meet the necessities of modern times and their inventions and discoveries. New words and terms are to be coined in order that Hebrew should not be in the invidious position of having to borrow words from foreign languages.<sup>3</sup>

This is clearly an attempt to revive the Hebrew language. The *maskilim* state unequivocally that it is their intention to rejuvenate it.<sup>4</sup> Schnaber refers to modern Hebrew as "*leshon ha-Qodesh ha-hadhashab*",<sup>5</sup> the *new* holy tongue, while Wessely, as always rather ambivalent regarding the sacred and the secular, asks: Why should the holy tongue be a thing by itself and German be something by itself?<sup>6</sup> One wonders again whether Wessely means that Hebrew ought to be secularised; but even if he does not, a growing tendency towards secularisation of the holy tongue is indeed to be discerned in the contemporary Hebrew writings.

Even at this early stage in the rebirth of the Hebrew language, the *maskilim* point out their belief that the revival of Hebrew must coincide with revival of the Jewish people. It has to be stressed that they employ religious terminology for the rejuvenation of the Jews

<sup>1</sup> *Ha-Me'assef* (1788), pp. 88-89.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Saṭanow is alleged to have published some controversial writings under his son's name. See *Minḥath Biggurim* (Berlin, 1797). The editors of *Ha-Me'assef* testify that they have known Solomon Saṭanow-Schönemann as a very learned man, and as a doctor, yet they insist that he does not know Hebrew (*Ha-Me'assef* [1797], p. 396). Cf. GRAETZ, *Divrey Yemey Ha-Yehudim*, ix, p. 90; ISRAEL ZINBERG, *Toledoth Sifrut Yisra'el*, v (Tel Aviv, Merḥavhya, 1959), p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> *Ha-Me'assef* (1788), pp. 85-86.

<sup>4</sup> *Nahal Ha-Besor*, pp. 3-4; *Ha-Me'assef* (1783-4), p. 32 (Morpurgo); *ibid.*, p. 70; Schnaber, *Tokḥath Megillah*, f. 8b. Cf. the comments on punctuation in Hebrew in *Qobelet Musar*, p. 8, and the similar comments by Schnaber in *Ma'amar Ha-Torah We-ha-hokhmah*, f. 1a.

<sup>5</sup> *Ha-Me'assef* (1784), p. 183: *We'od yadi netuyab le-lammed 'eth beney yisra'el 'eth derekh leshon ha-Qodesh ha-hadashab.*

<sup>6</sup> *Divrey Shalom We'emeth*, i, ff. 13a-b: *maddu'a nihyeh be'eyneyhem ke-yonim ha-me'assefim we-ha-mehaggim, u-leshon ha-Qodesh 'inyan bifney 'asmo, u-leshon 'asbkenazgi 'inyan bifney 'asmo, zeh le-divrey qodesh ha-'emunah we-ha-Torah, we-zeh le-divrey ha-'alam be-'isqey massa' u-mattan u-minbegey beney ha-'adam u-le-hokhmah ha-Nimusiyyoth we-ha-Tiv'iyyoth we-ha-Limmudiyyoth* (i.e., social, natural and mathematical sciences). Cf. BARZILAY'S understanding of this passage in his article "National and Anti-National Trends in the Berlin Haskalah", p. 174 (see above, p. 83, n. 1).

which appears to be in the domain of God.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a strong nationalistic feeling involved even though we cannot expect a nineteenth-century type of nationalism in eighteenth-century writers who were a product of their times. Yet there is every indication that, regarding Hebrew, they mean the same thing as their nineteenth-century followers did.

Even with regard to Hebrew as a vernacular, the careful reader of this literature may find some hints that a few *maskilim* might indeed have thought of the forthcoming renaissance of Hebrew also in terms of a spoken language. "We shall speak in the presence of kings without shame", writes Schnaber in 1784.<sup>2</sup> In Saṭanow's *Divrey Rivoth*, the teacher advises the prince that knowing Hebrew is not enough, and that he should also learn to speak the language.<sup>3</sup> Wessely talks about Hebrew as a creative language; with the right sort of instruction by qualified teachers, one might see the day when a student would be stimulated creatively, and start writing Hebrew poetry.<sup>4</sup>

One aspect of the German *Haskalah* which is often misunderstood, I think, is used by some students of *Haskalah* to show the negative attitude of the *maskilim* towards the Hebrew language as well as towards Jewish nationalism. I refer to the attitude of the proponents of Hebrew enlightenment towards the German language, especially to the translation of the prayers and the scriptures into German. As I have pointed out elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> the *maskilim* did not see any dichotomy between the two languages. To them, the two went hand in hand.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the translation into German of Hebrew works would, according to the *maskilim*, bring readers, children and adults alike closer to Hebrew.<sup>7</sup> Inadequate translations of the Bible, as well as

<sup>1</sup> Saṭanow, *Sefer Ha-Middoth*, f. 88b: 'eyn labh le-hishsha'en ki 'im 'al 'aviba she-Ba-Shamayim. yishlah mi-Qodesh 'ezraibabh'eth yitten mi-Siyon yeshu'ath yisra'el. . . . *idem.*, *Mishley 'Asaf*, i, f. 43b. Ben Ze'ev, *Osar Ha-Sborashim*, introduction, p. 11: "We-yada'thi gam yada'thi ki lo tiyeh ba-Lashon 'od 'aharey noflabh 'im lo be-shuv 'adonai 'eth shevuth 'ammo."

<sup>2</sup> *Ha-Me'assef* (1784), p. 185: *u-nedabber bi-sefathenu ha-Berurah neged melakbim we-lo nevosh*. Admittedly, this might be just a figure of speech echoing *Ps.* cxix: 46; yet even if it is such, he does discuss the speaking of Hebrew. See also *Tokhabath Megillah*, f. 8b.

<sup>3</sup> *Divrey Rivoth*, ii (Berlin? 1793?), ff. 10b-11b: 'ad she-Yihyeh ragil 'al lesbonekha le-dabber saboth. . . .

<sup>4</sup> *Divrey Shalom We'emeth*, i, pp. 14b-15a.

<sup>5</sup> *Moshe Mendelssohn: Be-khavley Massoreth*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>6</sup> *Divrey Shalom We'emeth*, i, ff. 11b, 15b; *Ha-Me'assef* (1788), p. 141 (Euchel); cf. L. ZUNZ, *Ha-Derashoth Be-yisra'el* (Jerusalem, 1947), pp. 206-207.

<sup>7</sup> Shelomoh Dubno, *'Alim Li-therufah* (Amsterdam, 1778), pp. 6-7 (my pagina-

the teachers' ignorance of the German language, are two reasons for the failure of Jewish education and the low state of the Jews.<sup>1</sup> One *maskil* maintains that for the mastery of Hebrew, knowledge of at least another language is essential; so that German actually serves the cause of Hebrew.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, those *maskilim* who advocated praying in the vernacular were trying to remedy the religious situation which became acute at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> However, it should be stressed that the *maskilim* were not unaware of the fact that the knowledge of German would bring the Jews closer to German culture and the German people. Even an ardent hebraist like Wessely does not hesitate to articulate his belief that the lack of knowledge of German among the Jews created the gap between the Germans and the Jews.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, the period of the beginnings of modern Hebrew literature in Germany shows many indications that the early *maskilim* had in mind the revival of the Hebrew language as part of their attempt to revive and rejuvenate the Jewish people, its culture and its religion. Some of the aspects of "*tehiyyath ha-Safah*" which took place a hundred years later had already had their origins in the Hebrew *haskalah* literature in Germany. However, we must bear in mind that the period under study was different from the one following it. The *maskilim* were very much part of the old order, as well as of the new; there were a number of current social, cultural and religious forces which affected them. In their attempts to free themselves from the old way of life, they may have exaggerated in their demands for innovations. Yet many of them could not uproot themselves completely from the old order. Many of them attack the rabbinic style

tion); *Naḥal Ha-Besor*, p. 2; Wessely, *Mehallel Re'a*, ff. 20b-21a; *idem*, in *Ha-Me'assef* (1785), p. 159.

<sup>1</sup> See especially 'Or Li-nethivah and *Divrey Shalom We'emeth*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ha-Me'assef* (1786), p. 92: *ki mi zeb yeda' shubth leshon ha-Qodesh we-yavin ba-Miqra' u-va-Mishnah 'al buryo 'im 'eyn lo sbelemuth be-lashon 'aḥer (sic) zulatho* ('Amittai Ha-Shomeroni).

<sup>3</sup> See my article "The Methodology Employed by the Hebrew Reformers in the First Reform Temple Controversy (1818-1819)", *Studies in Jewish Bibliography, History, and Literature in Honor of I. Edward Kiev* (New York, 1971), and JAKOB J. PETUCHOWSKI'S *Prayerbook Reform in Europe* (New York, 1968). An attempt to advocate praying in the vernacular, i.e., Judaeo-German, had been made before, at the threshold of the *haskalah* period, by Aaron ben Samuel of Hergershausen, who used similar arguments. See: S. ASAF, *Meqoroth Le-tholedoth ha-hinnukh Be-yisrael*, i (Tel Aviv, 1925), pp. 173-176; and most recently the important study by SIEGFRIED STEIN, "Liebliche Tefillah", *Leo Baeck Year Book*, xv (1970), pp. 41-72.

<sup>4</sup> *Divrey Shalom We'emeth*, i, ff. 13b-14a.

of Hebrew; however, some of them are still writing in that very style itself.<sup>1</sup> The euphuism, *meliṣab*, for which *baskalah* literature has been criticised, must be considered against the background of European literature of the time, and *vis-à-vis* the attempt of the *maskilim* to form a style distinct from the old rabbinic style which they rejected.<sup>2</sup> To my mind, it is ironic that the origins of *meliṣab* are to be found in the rabbinic style which the *maskilim* were so eager to repudiate. True, some of their coined words and expressions are artificial, but so are some contemporary Hebrew neologisms; others, which have not been accepted into modern Hebrew, seem as good as ones in use, or even better.<sup>3</sup>

The last quarter of the eighteenth century saw an attempt to revive the Hebrew language in Germany. After the turn of the century, some of the *maskilim* look back to the two redeemers of Hebrew, Mendelssohn and Wessely, as well as to the other *maskilim*, and their activities, and wonder what has happened to the great hope that so suddenly vanished.<sup>4</sup> But this question, related to the sudden disappearance of Hebrew literature from Germany, is a subject meriting a separate study.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Joel Brill's letter to Aaron Wolfsohn published in *Ha-Me'assef* (1788), p. 25: *sbemen tov shem 'aharon 'oleh we-nodef 'al pi middothaw, la-'ish 'asher 'elleb lo 'anokhi nothen 'eth berithi sbalom.*

<sup>2</sup> Cf. ZUNZ, *Ha-Derasboth Be-yisra'el*, p. 207.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Wessely's translation into Hebrew of "gunpowder" (Schiesspulver in German) as *'avaq milhamab* (*war-powder*) instead of the accepted *'avaq serefab* (fire-powder), or *'avaq yeriyah* (shooting-powder) (*Divrey Sbalom We'emeth*, i, f. 7a).

<sup>4</sup> Ben Ze'ev, *Ozar Ha-Shorashim*, introduction, *we-ha-Maskilim bizhiru ke-zohar ha-raqi'a wa-Yafusu ha-Madda'im wa-Yarvivu 'eth ha-Lashon we-rabbu doverey saboth. we'immabem niḥqan darekhey ha-Limmud we-hinnukh ha-Banim. rabbah hayethabha-Tiqvah ha-Nishqafah la-Dor ha-bu . . . 'akh mi be'emin ki yihyeh ha-Mabazeh ha-zeh kemar'eh ha-Bazaq yuṣṣaq 'oro kemo rega' we-'apar ye'alem . . . ha-Me'assef ne'esaf we-hevratho nafasah u-fanah hadar ha-Lashon. zeh 'esrim shanah me'az ne'esaf ha-Ṣaddiq [Moses Mendelssohn] we-'ad 'atta, we-hinneb yaredah ha-Safab 'eser 'aloth mi-Ma'aloḥ 'asher 'aletbah biymey bayyaw. See also Isaac Euchel's summary of the situation around the turn of the century in MEIR LETTERIS' "Toledoth He-bakham R. Isaac Euchel Z.L.", *Ha-Me'assef*, 1784 (republished in Vienna, 1862), p. 46: *halefu yemey ha-'aravah, 'averu yemey ha-Berith 'asher hayu beyni u-veyn beney yisra'el, 'eth nir'u niṣṣeney ha-hokhmah wa-Tifrah leshon 'ever li-thebillah u-le-ibif'ereit . . . 'aha! . . . ma'asu bi-leshon 'avotheyhem, wa-Yashlikhba 'aparey gewam; gam 'othi shakhehu wa-Ya-'azevuni ke'ar'ar ba-'aravah.**