

## *Haskalah Literature – Trends and Attitudes*

HEBREW LITERATURE will mark next year two major anniversaries in the annals of Haskalah in Germany. The first, and probably the more important, is the 200th anniversary of the publication of Naphtali Herz Wessely's *Divrey Shalom Ve-Emet* (Words of Peace and Truth). Published in 1872, this educational pamphlet by the acclaimed poet of early Haskalah in Germany heralds the advocacy of a new ideology of Hebrew Haskalah — though it is by no means altogether an innovation from an educational point of view. The second observance is the 150th anniversary of the birth of Isaac Satanow (1732), another major proponent of early Hebrew Enlightenment in Germany.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than dwell on each writer's contribution to the Hebrew Haskalah, I propose to make some observations on this literary movement of which they were a part. It is, I believe, appropriate to offer such an evaluation at this juncture, for the beginning of the 1980's marks two hundred years since the advent of the Hebrew Enlightenment movement in Germany which ushered in modern Hebrew letters. This assessment will point to some of the general features of Hebrew Haskalah and offer a number of insights into the nature, role and impact of the movement at its inception.

Haskalah represents the collective effort of Hebrew writers during the 18th and 19th centuries. These *maskilim* presented their literary works in a language which they sought to revive for a people they wished to rejuvenate. Their efforts can be reviewed according to three major areas of endeavor: a. Language and literature; b. Social and educational activities; and c. Ideological, cultural and religious trends.

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<sup>1</sup> On both Wessely and Satanow, see the respective chapters in my book *The Age of Haskalah* (Leiden, 1979).

From an historical perspective Haskalah can be said to have emerged on the European scene as a reaction to both external and internal forces. It was undoubtedly a Jewish response to European Enlightenment, yet it was definitely also an answer to a great need within the Jewish camp for some changes. It came in the wake of inner strifes within Jewish society resulting from messianic movements and a breakdown in the structure of the *kehilah*.

The ideas and ideals of Haskalah were neither purely innovative nor original. Borrowing from European Enlightenment on the one hand and from medieval Jewish philosophy on the other, its ideology may be characterized as eclectic. It had no systematized code, indeed no unified view. Its facets, factions and voices were many and varied.

This accounts for the difficulty in assessing it and for the pitfalls which confront students of its phenomenology. Still, the Hebrew Haskalah is distinguished by certain unique characteristics and typical trends and attitudes.

#### a. LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

In no other area of their Enlightenment endeavor did the *maskilim* face as difficult a task as in the area of language. In keeping with prevailing notions concerning the role of language in thought and its impact on morality, the *maskilim* rejected Yiddish, which they considered a "corrupted language," and set out to revive the Hebrew tongue. They attempted to reject the current rabbinic idiom and its careless grammatical usage. However, one must note that this was easier said than done. Many still resorted to the old rabbinic stylistic practices even when others had already begun to probe the realm of language and to produce grammatical and linguistic studies.<sup>2</sup>

Their first inclination was indeed toward the biblical idiom, which they considered to be the epitome of linguistic purity. However, while they could employ the biblical idiom in poetry

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<sup>2</sup> See ch. IV, "Revival of Hebrew and Revival of the People," in my book, *ibid.*, pp. 73-90. I cite an example of Joel Brill's writing which is patterned on rabbinic style on p. 89, note 73. On the *maskilim's* preoccupation with Hebrew grammar, see p. 73.

and in poetic drama, they just could not adapt it for philosophical or linguistic treatises, let alone for contemporary educational, scientific and social issues and ideas. Trained in the medieval works of Jewish philosophy and theology (as autodidacts, to be sure), the *maskilim's* natural inclination was to turn to medieval Hebrew for their non-belletristic writings.

Another form of medieval Hebrew writing, the *piyyut*, however, became the target of the Haskalah's criticism. The poetic licence on the basis of which the *paytanim* permitted themselves to coin new words, regardless of grammatical rules, was severely attacked by the *maskilim*.

The linguistic tension between biblical Hebrew, talmudic idiom and medieval usage continued to be felt throughout the Haskalah period. It was finally synthesized by Mendele Mokher Sefarim in the latter period of Hebrew Enlightenment. Using talmudic, midrashic and rabbinic Hebrew, Mendele was instrumental in shaping a natural style for modern language in Hebrew literature.

Haskalah is thus to be credited with making a concerted effort to employ the Hebrew language for "modern" use, on a par with other modern languages and other modern literatures.

### LINGUISTIC EXPANSION

This was apparently the first major effort to search for ways to expand the Hebrew language so as to encompass all facets of Jewish life. One may go further and say that the Haskalah's experimentations with the Hebrew language were a necessary preliminary step to transforming literary language into a vernacular.

The dominant feature of the Haskalah's use of Hebrew was its attempt to utilize language not only for lofty purposes, but also for the ephemeral, the mundane and the immediate. Not only were matters related to the interpretation of sacred texts dealt with, but also everyday practical concerns: news, science, inventions, secular knowledge and useful information.<sup>3</sup>

Language thus served the purposes of Haskalah ideology,

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the various departments and items devoted to these matters in *Ha-Me'assef*, 1783–1797.

manifesting a this-worldly attitude, a mundane orientation. As developed by the *maskilim*, language was meant to serve as a practical vehicle of communication for understanding the condition of the Jewish individual against the background of his Jewish and non-Jewish society.

Haskalah literature thus initiated a long process, which was characterized by the continuous secularization of the Hebrew tongue and eventually led to our contemporary Hebrew letters. The use of the familiar idiom, taken from the sacred corpus of the Hebrew heritage, in modern contexts, assumed at first the form of *melizah*, or euphuism. This highly florid style, although artificial and inappropriate for everyday use, enabled the writer to make a multidimensional use of language. The subtleties of the Hebrew language were thus developed, reflecting thereby the very problem of the dual Jewish existence in a modern, secular world. The artistry of a writer in our century like S.J. Agnon, who employed Hebrew with such great sensitivity and subtlety, was in the rich tradition of such Haskalah writers as Saul Berlin, Joseph Perl and Isaac Erter.

### NEW LITERARY GENRES

In evaluating the literary merit of Haskalah writers, one may be somewhat disappointed in the achievements of the early Hebrew Enlightenment. While some of the writers attempted to formulate the 'poetics' of Haskalah, their actual contribution seems meager indeed, even when viewed in the light of their own aspirations. Nevertheless, there was a constant search for new literary genres and modes of expression. From European literature the Hebrew Haskalah borrowed certain styles. Satire was employed by Isaac Euchel and Saul Berlin in spite of Wessely's strictures in his *Nahal Ha-Besor*. The epistolary genre was introduced by such writers as Euchel and Joseph Perl. The drama, in various forms — from poetic to biblical drama — was experimented with. Even esoteric forms of literature, such as the Dialogue of the Dead, were emulated by Aaron Wolfssohn and other *maskilim*.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> Euchel's *Iggerot Meshulam* (Letters of Meshulam) and Perl's *Megaleh Temirin* (Revealer of Secrets). See my article "The Beginning of the Epistolary Genre in

novel as a literary form appeared in Hebrew literature only in mid-century, with the publication of Abraham Mapu's *Ahavat Zion*:

The Haskalah thus adhered to its ideology which sought to propel Jewish culture and Jewish literature into the mainstream of Western civilization. At the same time, it did not ignore its own unique Judaic heritage. We note a continuity of ethical works by modern Enlightenment writers. The time-honored title *Sefer Ha-Middot* (Book of Ethics), for example, was chosen by a number of Haskalah authors for their own books.<sup>5</sup> They experimented with existing styles of Jewish literature. This fact alone can perhaps explain the enormous effort made by Isaac Satanow to imitate the biblical style of wisdom literature in his *Mishley Asaf* (Proverbs of Asaf) series. These writings were said by Satanow to have been discovered as ancient manuscripts, to which he added his own commentary in the traditional exegetical style. Another experiment of his took the shape of the *Kuzari*. It was *Divrey Rivot* (Matters of Dispute), which was patterned after the medieval religious disputation between a king, who seeks to find the true religion, and representatives of different faiths. Needless to say, these neo-biblical and neo-medieval formats were saturated with modern enlightenment ideology.

Another writer, Saul Berlin, a traditionalist rabbi and a *maskil*, attempted a daring, and to some, a distasteful and dishonest endeavor by composing a new *Shulhan Arukh*. Entitled *Besamim Rosh*, this new halakhic book, which was attributed to the *Rosh*, Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, advocated a new approach to Jewish halakhah and some type of religious reform.

This preoccupation with some of the old formats and the heritage of past Jewish literature continued to be evidenced by Hebrew writers and pundits for some time. It is one indication that the Hebrew *maskilim* did not desire a complete break with the heritage of the past.

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Hebrew Enlightenment Literature in Germany," *Leo Baeck Year Book*, XXIV (1979), pp. 83–103.

<sup>5</sup> Such as: Isaac Satanow, *Sefer Ha-Middot* (Berlin, 1784), and N.H. Wessely, *Sefer Ha-Middot* (Berlin, 1785).

*LITERATURE AS MISSION*

Another characteristic of the first hundred years of modern Hebrew literary creativity is already evident at the beginning of German Haskalah. It is the awareness of the unique role and mission of Hebrew literature as an educational medium. Literature was viewed by the Hebrew *maskilim* as transcending its purpose of enhancing the sense of beauty and aesthetic enjoyment. Its role was to advocate the ideology of Haskalah and to promote its ideas. This literature, then, was a didactic one whose proponents had endowed it with a mission: to educate the people and to teach them in order to change the social, political and cultural status of the Jews in Europe.

The *maskilim* felt very strongly that the only thing that stood in the way of the achievement of equal rights in the non-Jewish world was the failure of the Jews to participate in the Enlightenment trends that had transformed Europe. They therefore attempted to introduce many changes via the medium of Hebrew literature in order to alleviate the Jewish problem in Europe.

This extra-literary concept of the role of Hebrew literature dominated the literary scene until the period of rebirth towards the end of the nineteenth century. Only through the efforts of such Hebrew critics as Abraham Uri Kovner and David Frishman did this basic concept of literature change. It was at times modified or discarded completely in favor of the aesthetic role of literature: literature for literature's sake. It should be noted that the appreciation of beauty was also promulgated by the *maskilim*. However, beauty was regarded by many to be related to the beneficial and was pursued by them for its extrinsic value.

*b. SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES*

In addition to the linguistic and literary aspects of the Haskalah period, one must consider some related components of the movement. The *maskilim's* pragmatic or even utilitarian concept of literature was accompanied by practical activities to promote their ideology.

As a reaction to the past treatment of the Haskalah by literary historians, there is now evidenced a tendency on the part of contemporary critics to regard literary activities in a social context as demeaning the role of literature itself. To apply this contempo-

rary value judgment to the Haskalah period, however, is to prevent us from grasping the complete scope of Hebrew Haskalah.

One should not interpret these comments as advocating the return to an historical and social analysis of Haskalah literature, but rather to a more balanced, and complete assessment. Such an evaluation should take into consideration not only current trends in modern criticism, but also the 18th- and 19th-century cultural and social views and concepts enunciated by the exponents of Haskalah itself.

In assessing the Haskalah phenomenology after two hundred years, we note a great and innovative achievement: the establishment of centers of literary activities. No longer do we face an individual writer who is completely isolated from his peers, but rather a group of individuals functioning both as individuals and as a group. At times they may have been isolated and geographically distant from each other; nevertheless, the established center united them. They appear to have had a common goal and to have shared similar literary concepts. Despite their differences, they continued to work together toward a common goal. This led to the somewhat "modern" character of Hebrew Haskalah: the establishment of a society for the promotion of the Hebrew language.

Such a center was first established in Koenigsberg in 1783, and later transferred to Berlin. The impact of the group, as such, was much more visible; its voice was much more powerful and its ideological arguments carried much more weight. Additional centers continued to flourish throughout the Haskalah period, both in Galicia and Russia, and greatly affected the dissemination of Haskalah ideology and the publication of its literature.

It should be noted that these centers, at times, formed a social framework, a super-*kehillah* structure, and sometimes even served as a substitute for it. In Berlin, the *maskilim* established, in addition to the above-mentioned society, also a printing shop, indeed a major tool for the dissemination of ideas.

One of the first activities of the Society of Hebraists in Koenigsberg was to establish a modern ongoing journal to serve as a mouthpiece for Haskalah ideology. Without such an organ, the steady and widespread dissemination of ideas was impossible. One should not underestimate the significance of the establishment of *Ha-Me'assef* by the *maskilim* as marking the beginning of

some form of mass communication in modern Judaism. Emulating this journal, other periodicals issued in the 19th century continued to disseminate the ideology of Hebrew Enlightenment.

The first modest effort of the *maskilim* was followed by the launching of additional journals devoted to literature and Haskalah, as well as scholarly periodicals in the second quarter of the 19th century. The second half of the century saw the development of weekly publications, whose impact on the dissemination of Haskalah was of course much greater.

Another major instrument for transmitting Haskalah was also introduced by the early *maskilim* in Germany, and continued after them by subsequent adherents of the movement. It was evidenced by the enormous emphasis placed on publishing books: from Mendelssohn's *Bi'ur*, to Satanow's editions of *Job* and the *Kuzari*; and from Solomon Maimon's edition of Maimonides' *Guide* to original textbooks for the modern Jewish schools. Hundreds of volumes were published in Europe throughout the period, resulting in a flourishing of Jewish culture.

### c. IDEOLOGICAL, CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TRENDS

An assessment of Haskalah must also take into account certain trends and attitudes which may be said to have shaped the ideology as well as the practice of the movement. Such an assessment is not without its debatable issues, resulting from contradictory evaluations of the relation of Hebrew Haskalah to traditional Judaism.

Upon examining the activities of the *maskilim*, one is aware of the complexity of Hebrew Haskalah, and the difficulty in generalizing about it. Contrary to the popular view, it seems that a great number of the *maskilim* desired a synthesis between the old and the new, a renewal of the Jewish people based on traditional grounds. I believe that the majority of the Hebrew enlighteners exhibited complete faith in Judaism, the Jewish people and Jewish culture.

The Haskalah marks the end of passivity and the emergence of the will to bring about change, to fight for a certain ideology.

Externally, Hebrew Haskalah defended Judaism in the face of the onslaught of European Deism against all revealed, positive religions. It attempted to portray Judaism, in contrast to Chris-



tianity, as a rationalistic religion, a religion befitting the age of Enlightenment. Some of the Haskalah writings seem to be apologetic, to be sure; others, however, were motivated by deep pride in the Jewish heritage.

Internally, the Hebrew *maskilim* desired to create a dialogue with the traditionalist rabbis in order to introduce certain changes into Judaism in order to make it viable. They sought to shield Judaism and Jews from the social and cultural trends that were current in Europe in the period of Enlightenment. The end of passivity which characterized the ideology of Haskalah stemmed not only from the belief of the *maskilim* in the urgency of social emancipation for the Jew in Europe, but more importantly perhaps from their striving for cultural emancipation as well.

It appears as though the *maskilim* rejected *not* the exclusiveness of the Jews of their time but their seclusiveness. They wanted to create a modern synthesis of Jewish and Western culture, while retaining their unique Jewish identity. This by no means implied assimilation, as advocated by some of the more extreme German Jewish enlighteners. The Hebrew *maskilim* desired to free the Jews from their ghetto mentality, and to introduce them to the mainstream of European society and culture.

The Hebrew Haskalah envisioned a new social order in which the Jews were to be equal partners in European society, sharing actively in its affairs. The *maskilim* rejected the notion of Jewish anomaly resulting from a *galut* condition. They advocated broadening the horizons of the Jews, and removing the shackles of *galut* mentality, thus reawakening in the people a yearning for the glories of the past.

Consequently, it appears that the *maskilim* began to view the idea of *ge'ulah*, or redemption, in a more practical fashion. While not denying messianic hopes, the *maskilim* advocated an end to passivity in this regard as well. They channelled the Jews' yearning for redemption into the spheres of humanism. The hope of national redemption outside of the European continent, namely, the return of the Jews to Erez Yisrael, was an idea that was yet to come. The *maskilim* still endeavored to solve the Jewish problem within the European context.

The sum total of this change of attitude and demand for action was a self-scrutiny, a self-assessment on the part of the *maskilim*. It implied a critical approach to the heritage of the past coupled

with a search for a better future. The dominant outlook, then, shifted from concern with the past and preoccupation with its literature to the future.

It took much courage to demand an end to passivity, but also a great deal of naivete as well to believe that both the Jews as well as Europe were ready for this shift in values.