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Elisha Ben Abuya, the Hebrew Faust: On the First Hebrew Translation of *Faust* Within the Setting of the *Maskilic* Change in Self-Perception

Abstract: The publication of Meir ha-Levi Letteris's translation-adaptation of Goethe's *Faust* into Hebrew in 1865 was a prominent event in the contemporary world of Hebrew literature. The translator chose the story of Talmudic sage Elisha Ben Abuya, charged with connotations of otherness, heresy and rebellion, as a framework for absorption of Goethe's tragedy. The translation-adaptation provoked a dispute among 19th century Maskilim about two pivotal questions of self-identification – their position relative to Jewish tradition and its canon of exemplary figures, and the role of European literature in the formation of a Hebrew literary canon. The essay argues that the polemics which erupted following the publication of the Hebrew *Faust* indicated a transition within Maskilic society from universalistic Enlightenment models of self-comprehension and identification to nationalistic particularistic ones.

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Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, the figure of Elisha Ben Abuya, the Talmudic *Aher* (The Other) who “cut the shoots” and rebelled against Rabbinic dogmas, was invoked by the *Maskilim*, writers and scholars of the *Haskala* movement, in their discussion of Judaism in modern time. The historical image of Ben Abuya in the Rabbinic literature brings with it a burden of otherness, heresy and rebellion. These qualities were charged with special significance by the *Maskilim*, who associated them with new issues concerning secularization, modernization and the formation of a national identity. One of the most interesting portrayals of Elisha Ben Abuya in the *Haskala* literature is his role as the Hebrew Faust, and the controversy which resulted from it. The polemic that ensued was both an indicator of the change evolving in *Maskilim* identity in its transition from a universalistic model of enlightenment to a particularistic one of nationalism, as well as a formative tool which enabled such a transformation.

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The publication of Meir ha-Levi (Max) Letteris's translation-adaptation (*Umdichtung*) of Goethe's *Faust* into Hebrew in 1865 was a prominent event in the contemporary world of Hebrew literature. The translator chose Talmudic Ben Abuya's story as a framework into which he "poured" Goethe's tragedy, abiding by the accepted Hebrew translation conventions practiced at that time. The translation, whose full title was *Ben Abuya – a poem of skittishness of Elisha Ben Abuya's life, who followed the path beyond his own comprehension by searching within his heart and losing himself to perdition and the corruption of Satan*¹ was greeted on its publication by a flood of enthusiasm. The incorporation of a German masterpiece was perceived as a stamp of maturity for Hebrew literature and as proof of a universal common denominator in Jewish and European Christian culture. Shortly afterwards, however, doubts were raised regarding the magnitude of Letteris's enterprise.² In 1867, twenty-five-year-old Peretz Smolenskin – Hebrew journalist, critic, novelist and future promulgator of the ideas of Jewish nationalism, published his critique, *Bikkoret Tehiye*,³ a malicious review which opened a front against the veteran poet and older generation of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars, the *Maskilic* establishment of the time. Smolenskin's attacks did not go unanswered, and the broad opposition to it included the radical Russian-Jewish positivist critic Abraham Uri Kovner⁴ and a group of moderate Central European scholars.⁵

At first, the debate regarding Letteris's translation centered around aesthetic issues. However, the polemic touched on the fears and anxieties of the *Maskilim* of the period, which focused on the critical question: "Judaism – Where To?" One of the central issues of emerging Jewish modern acculturated identities at the time was the tension between the universal and the particular, a tension that was reflected in the dispute surrounding the literary work. The world view encoded by Letteris in his allegorical portrayal of Ben Abuya and celebrated by moderate Central European *Maskilim*, presented a compromising, amorphous perception of Judaism. According to Letteris's model, the Orthodox, the moderate conservative *Haskala*, and the assimilated forms of Judaism co-existed, together with Christianity, within a single spiritual continuum based on the values of universal enlightenment. This view contrasted with the strictly

1 Meir Ha-Levi Letteris, *Ben-Abuya: Goethe's Faust: eine Tragödie in einer hebräischen Umdichtung* (Wien, 1865) [translation of the title is mine].

2 Yedaya Ha-Ivri Ish Volyni, "Bikkoret ne'emanah," [Reliable Criticism] *Ha-Karmel* VI, Ha-Sharon (1866), 70–72, 78–80, 95–96, 112, 127–128, 136.

3 Peretz Smolenskin, *Bikkoret tehiye* [Criticism Shall Be] (Odessa, 1867).

4 Abraham Uri Kovner, "Ruah be'er" [Spirit of the Well] in *Tseror peraḥim* (Odessa, 1868), 134–140.

5 Alexander Langbank (ed.), *Mishpat emet* [Truthful Judgment] (Wien, 1870).

binary dichotomy of Jews versus Gentiles – which was the underlying assumption of Peretz Smolenskin’s criticism.

I. The Acceptance of Goethe’s *Faust* and the Politics of Hebrew Translation

Goethe’s tragedy gained a canonical standing even before it was fully completed, a few months before the poet’s death in 1832.⁶ Since the first fragment was published in 1790, “Faust narratives” became the source of endless translations, adaptations and appropriations. Among them were the lithographs of Delacroix (1828), the compositions of Berlioz (1846 and 1828), Schumann (1853), Liszt (1857), Heine’s ballet scenario (1856), and the operas of Gounod (1859) and Boito (1868). In the Romantic Period, Faust was identified as the ultimate conveyor of Enlightenment values, the brave-hearted individualist unafraid to defy society and the religious establishment.⁷ Andre Dabezies has observed that toward the 1870s, especially among German commentators of Goethe’s work, Faust began to be idealized as the ultimate representation of German national character and the embodiment of the German spirit.⁸

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, during the days of Mendelssohn’s *Kohelet Musar*,⁹ translations (especially from German) were seen as part of a deliberate strategy adopted by the *Maskilim* to develop the field of Hebrew culture. The strategy was directed at attaining a number of objectives, among which were the speedy production of a substantial number of texts that accorded with the norms of “contemporary” literature, and genre and language experimentation prior to the production of independent and original Hebrew literary work.¹⁰ Since then and until the appearance of Letteris’s Hebrew *Faust*, during the course of over one hundred years of *Haskala*, the system of Hebrew translation refined itself, and alongside its functional objectives, educational and psychological considerations began to occupy a prominent place. Passages

⁶ On the acceptance of *Faust* see: Andre Dabezies, “Faust” in *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 431–441.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 433.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 435.

⁹ Gideon Toury, “Reishit ha-tirgum ha-moderni la-ivrit,” [The Beginning of Modern Translation into Hebrew] *Dapim la-meḥkar be-sifrut*, 11 (1998): 105–127, 106.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

of foreign literature were included in the Hebrew corpus to further certain values, and as an indication of its cultural maturity.

It is important to emphasize that various norms and conventions applied to early Hebraic translation, some of which do not necessarily correspond to our current notion of translation. According to Gideon Toury, “the borderline between original writing and translation tend[ed] to be rather obscure.”¹¹ In general, Toury discerns two contrasting approaches toward translation, one that “tend[s] to subscribe to the norms of source text” (adequacy oriented stance) and another oriented toward the acceptability of the text in the target culture.¹² In the case of Hebrew literature during the age of *Haskala*, “acceptability [was posited] as a major constraint on literary translation, to the almost complete forfeiture of translation adequacy.”¹³ According to these early conventions, some translations omitted or concealed the identity of the original text and the name of its author;¹⁴ many were indirect translations via a third language;¹⁵ and some presented only a fragment of the original piece.¹⁶ Another compelling particularity was the custom of creative adaptation, recasting the original in order to fit Hebrew linguistic, cultural and narrative patterns. Only philosophical or religious tractates were expected to be translated literally.¹⁷ According to Smolenskin, the translator of poetry and belles-lettres was expected “not to follow, as a beast follows the furrow, the spirit [of the original author], but to breathe into his creation a new spirit, suited to the spirit of the people for whom he performs the task [...] and the readers should not view this as a replica but as a new creation.”¹⁸ As we can see from the catalog of early Hebraic periodicals,¹⁹ the word *tirgum* (translation) was used predominantly in the context of religious texts, while the translations of belles-lettres were denoted as *ha’ataka* (copying or replicating). Letteris and his contemporaries defined his work in German as *Umdichtung* (paraphrase) and not *Übersetzung* (translation). However, in Hebrew literary criticism Letteris’s work was hailed as one of the most important milestones in the genesis of the Hebrew tradition of translation. The text would be referred to as a translation, despite being an adaptation or transposition.

11 Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins Pub., 1995), 132.

12 *Ibid.*, 56–57.

13 *Ibid.*, 131.

14 Toury, “Reishit ha-tirgum ha-moderni,” 112.

15 *Ibid.*, 114.

16 *Ibid.*, 116.

17 *Ibid.*, 108–109.

18 Smolenskin, *Bikkoret tehiye*, 16. [here and in all subsequent citations – translation mine]

19 http://jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI_heb/?action=tab&tab=search, accessed May 7, 2014.

The canonical status of Goethe's *Faust* in Western literature rendered it a challenging and highly desirable text for the scholars of the *Haskala*. On the one hand, the translation served an apologetic desire to shape the Hebrew language and prove it could convey the great German masterpiece. On the other hand, it was used to appropriate the image of Faust and produce its Hebrew equivalent, thereby declaring Jewish values and setting them on an equal footing with German and universal ones. One of the first attempts at a Hebrew analogy of Goethe's story can be found in Salomon Rapoport's Talmudic Dictionary *Erekh Milin*, published in 1852. There, amid descriptions of Ashmedai's (the Prince of Demons) adventures and his schemes against King Solomon, Rapoport writes:

The Germans too have such an extravagant story about a person called Faust versed in the secrets of nature and philosophy, and his evil demon Mephistopheles. The Great poet Goethe introduced him to us in a superb play – but, in my opinion, this story as told by our sages offers even a fresher and more forceful parable than that of the Germans.²⁰

Despite the arrogant assertion that all Western “inventions” already exist in an untainted and purified manner within Jewish culture, this reading is one of the first attempts to offer a Jewish alternative to Goethe's narrative, and pinpoints its importance for the *Maskilim* of the period.²¹ While “the words of our sages” may be more lucid and purer than the German story, to pour a Western masterpiece like *Faust* into the “golden cup of splendor”²² of our “holy tongue” is tantamount to positioning Hebrew *Maskilic* culture side by side with one of the leading enlightened cultures of the world. The arrogance of those who have “invented everything,” combined with the sense of inferiority of a persecuted min-

20 Salomon Judah Rapoport, *Erekh milin* [Value of Words] (Warsaw, 1852), 111.

21 In this context, it is worth mentioning that, according to different bibliographical sources, as early as 1849 Letteris had completed an original play *Pahad be-leilot shlomo* [Fear in the Nights of Solomon] (or *Pahad ba-leilot*) invoking the characters of King Solomon, Ashmedai and the queen of Sheba. For references see: Josef Klausner, *Historia shel ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-hadasha* [History of Modern Hebrew Literature], vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Aḥiasaf, 1952), 392. (Klausner relies on information from *Litteraturblatt des Orients* X [1850]: 635). The play was mentioned also in Simon Szanto, *Die Neuzeit*, May 6 (1864). (It appears also in the German section of *Mishpat emet*, 7). Since the location of the original manuscript of the drama is unknown, we can only speculate about a possible link between it, Rapoport's remark and Goethe's *Faust*. Is it possible that *Pahad be-leilot shlomo* was an early Letteris experiment with Faust's theme before he tackled the “real thing,” i. e., Goethe's tragedy? In any case, it is hard to overlook the common thematic interest in the affinity between sciences and wisdom and involvement with magical practices and evil forces, so integral to the narrative of the story about King Solomon and Ashmedai as well as to Goethe's *Faust*.

22 See Letteris' introduction to the translation: Meir Ha-Levi Letteris, *Ben-Abuya*, XI.

ority attempting to refine its culture and language was manifested in the pretension to translate *Faust* into the “holy tongue.” No one was better suited to this task than Meir Halevi Letteris, the poet and scholar brought up among the sages of Galician *Haskala*.

II. Portrait of Elisha Ben Abuya as the Hebrew Faust

Meir Halevi Letteris was born in 1800 to a family of printers in the Galician town of Zolkiev and was the first among the Jewish writers in Galicia to receive a proper European education.²³ At the age of eleven he met Nachman Krochmal, who was destined to have a great influence on his *Maskilic* upbringing. Letteris was regarded as a prominent poet of his time. By virtue of his translations of Racine’s plays *Athalie* and *Esther* he was referred to as the “Hebrew Racine” and received a token of honor for his book *Sagen aus dem Orient* from the Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austro-Hungary. His success was short-lived, however, and after 1849 he was plagued by financial and personal problems, which persisted until his death in 1871.²⁴

The translation of *Faust* should have been the peak of this aging poet’s career. He was sixty-five years old when the translation was published. Due to his professional qualifications, his mastery of the German language and his reputation as a Hebrew poet, there was no one better fitted to the task among *Maskilic* writers of the time than Letteris. In fact, Letteris only translated/adapted Part One of *Faust*, the section that relates to the seduction and the gradual moral decline of the hero. In order to put an end to his hero’s torments, Letteris added an epilogue in which he combined Goethe’s ending with the Talmudic tradition describing the death of Elisha Ben Abuya. Despite this deviation, Letteris’s translation corresponds closely to the source text. Jehuda Arie Klausner, who made a literary comparison between Goethe’s original and Letteris’s *Ben Abuya*, noted that the poet “merely changed the name of the hero from Faust to Ben Abuya, and apart from minor details did not alter his character or actions in any significant way.”²⁵ In itemizing the deviations from the original, Klausner

²³ Josef Klausner, *Historia shel ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-hadasha*, vol. 2, 374. See also Letteris’ autobiography: Meir Ha-Levi Letteris, *Zikaron ba-sefer* [Memory in the Book] (Wien, 1869).

²⁴ Josef Klausner, *Historia shel ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-hadasha*, vol. 2, 381–384, 390–391.

²⁵ Yehuda Arie Klausner, *Ben abuya ve-faust (hashva’ah sifrutit)* [Ben Abuya and Faust (Literary Comparison)] (Jerusalem, 1938), 12.

noted that there were prosodic incompatibilities and changes in the intonation of the hero's words. Faust's layers of hidden irony were replaced with Ben Abuya's lofty pathos. In addition, Letteris replaced and covered up Christian attributes and added explanatory comments to his hero's speeches, and at times shortened or condensed the dialog.

Elisha Ben Abuya's figure appears in the Rabbinical sources as both an authoritative reference on *Halakha* decrees,²⁶ and an active character in tales and legends.²⁷ The records on Ben Abuya are fragmentary and enigmatic, and generally address his alleged heresy. They indicate how legitimate pursuits in Judaism could lead to apostasy. According to Talmudic sources, Ben Abuya was a *Tanna* during the time of Rabbi Akiva, and a teacher of Rabbi Meir. Ben Abuya "cut the shoots" of the mystical *Pardes*, read heretical books, and cast doubt upon the judgment of God. These contradictions between Ben Abuya's canonical position as deliverer of religious laws and his fictional depiction as non-conformist rebel or disloyal heretic had to be reconciled by authors in the different incarnations of the character in literature and research. The written evidence, fragmented and contradictory, does not provide sufficient detail about Ben Abuya's life. Any narrative contingent on period, place and ideology²⁸ would have to fill in the missing gaps. The discrepancies in the stories about Ben Abuya, also called "the Other," have created enormous gaps and have led commentators to configure Elisha Ben Abuya according to their didactic or ideological inclinations. References to Ben Abuya in *Maskilic* literature appeared in discussions at rabbinical conferences on the nature of Jewish reform held during the 1830s and 1840s. Elisha Ben Abuya's figure was used by moderate and conservative *Maskilim* such as Solomon Judah Rapoport (ShIR) and Samuel David Luzzatto (ShaDaL), both of whom were opposed to sweeping and comprehensive reforms.²⁹ Seeking to disassociate themselves from the *Aher* (the Other), these writers interpreted the image of an assimilated Jew as a modern incarnation of Ben Abuya, thus highlighting the authoritative image of Rabbi Meir.

²⁶ Mishna *Avot*, 4:20; *Avot de rabbi nathan*, 40.

²⁷ Tosefta *Hagiga*, 2:3–4; JT *Hagiga* I (chap. 2:1; 77b); JT *Hagiga* II (ibid, 77b–c); BT *Hagiga* I (15a–b); BT *Hagiga* II (15b); BT *Kiddushin* (39b); BT *Hullin*, 142a; BT *Mo'ed katan*, 20a; *Shir hashirim rabba*, 1:4; *Kohelet rabba*, 7:18; *Kohelet zuta*, 7:8; *Ruth rabba*, 6:4; *Midrash Proverbs*, 6:20.

²⁸ For a review of narratives and research approaches regarding Ben Abuya's character, see: Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 21–36; Nurit Beeri, *Ya'azah le tarbut ra'ah* (Tel-Aviv: Yediot A'aronot, 2007), 7–31.

²⁹ Salomon Judah Rapoport, "Letter B, August 1830," in *Zikaron la-rishonim ve-la-aharonim* [Commemoration of the Earliest and the Latest], ed. Abraham Harkavi, vol. 2 (Vilna, 1881), 7, 15. Samuel David Luzzatto, *Igrot ShaDaL* [Letters of ShaDaL], (Przemysl, 1882), 599–601.

According to rabbinical sources, Ben Abuya's student, Rabbi Meir, preserved his own rabbinical authority and image within Jewish tradition despite his association with the heretical master. Rabbi Meir's relationship with Elisha Ben Abuya was presented in *Maskilic* writing as symbiotic, the two heroes fused into a single narrative structure.³⁰ Rabbi Meir served as an insulating mantle, transforming Ben Abuya's revolutionary ideas into topics that could at least be discussed among Jewish scholars. The *Maskilim's* attitude was based on a Talmudic article which justified the relationship between Ben Abuya and Rabbi Meir. "R. Meir found a pomegranate. He ate its flesh and cast away its husk."³¹ Thus, whoever dealt with Elisha Ben Abuya did so through Rabbi Meir, who lent him legitimacy. The *Maskilim* could channel empathy toward Rabbi Meir's honorable personage without being suspected of approving of Elisha Ben Abuya's dubious image.

One can discern a clear evolution of attitude toward Ben Abuya in Letteris's *Maskilic* predecessors – from explicit denunciation, as in the case of Rapoport and Luzzatto, to the desire to understand and explain his actions, albeit with reservations.³² What was Letteris's attitude regarding Ben Abuya? With whom did he identify? On the one hand, the poet made a point of mentioning the deviousness, sinfulness and arbitrariness of his hero's ways. On the other hand, portraying Elisha Ben Abuya as a leading literary figure of the European enlightenment cast him as a character of high regard and appeal.³³ In my opinion, Letteris sought to preserve the ambivalence of Elisha Ben Abuya in order to place him at the focal point of *Maskilic* identification. In order to preempt any objection to the valorization of his questionable hero, he provided *Maskilic*

30 For more on the specifics of the *Maskilic* approach to the portrayals of liminal characters, see: Svetlana Natkovich, "Ben abuya, spinoza ve-acosta: mi demuyot liminaliyot le giborei mo-fet shel ha-haskala, [Ben Abuya, Spinoza and Acosta: From Liminal Figures to Exemplary Models of the *Haskala*]," *Zehuyot* 2 (2012): 55–71.

31 BT *Hagiga* II (15b).

32 On the development of the *Maskilic* perceptions of Ben Abuya see: Svetlana Natkovich, *Elisha Ben Abuya ke-gibor ha-haskala* [Elisha Ben Abuya as the Hero of the *Haskala*], MA thesis, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (Beer-Sheva, 2006).

33 Moreover, it appears that, in the introduction, Letteris incorporated an allusion to the similarity between his biography and that of the historical Faust. This occurs in a footnote in which he mentions a dubious fact attributed to certain historians, namely that the Faust tradition began with Guttenberg's associate Füst, who was also one of the pioneers of the printing press (Letteris, 1865, IX). I believe that a possible trigger for mentioning this information could be Letteris' wish to identify himself with Faust through his own familial connection to pioneers of the printing press. His father received their surname as an expression of the family business – Letteris from the Latin "Litterae." (Klausner, *Historia shel ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-hadasha*, vol. 2, 371).

scholars of the time with an epilogue as a way of escaping direct identification with Ben Abuya/Faust. He structured the epilogue around the actions of Elisha's student, Nehorai (another name for Rabbi Meir in the sources), as an alternative point of identification. This dual equation enabled the poet to create both the possibility of identifying with the main character, as well as harboring misgivings toward him.

A possible key to understanding this equation is contained in the translator's preface. The author/publisher's appeal to the reader in the preface was an accepted convention of Jewish literature in general and of *Maskilic* tradition in particular. However, in the preface Letteris addresses not only the readers of his work, but also potential readers whom he disqualifies. He explicitly designates his book for the more "progressive" *Maskilim*. In his statement, he lists a number of conditions to which the reader of his work must adhere:

Hark me beloved reader! And pay attention to what I have to say. My book, Ben Abuya, is intended, first and foremost, for erudite people, who, apart from being well versed in our holy tongue, have accumulated great wisdom and a variety of theological, scientific and scholarly knowledge. It is to them that those who converse with one another in this work would speak, and particularly the characters Elisha Ben Abuya, Nehorai and Mephiteufel, who discuss the most sublime matters [...] that have never yet been conveyed through literature in our holy tongue. If someone who considers reading this book has never studied anything besides the Torah and religious writings, and is unfamiliar with the treasure of the wisdoms it contains, and its topic is as a closed book to him, I say to him: "Friend, I advise you, and may God be with you! Go forth, do not touch this work, it was not intended for a man like you."³⁴

Unlike the *Maskilic* tradition, which viewed literature as an agent of modernity within the backward ghetto environment, Letteris wrote only for a limited circle of intellectuals familiar with both European as well as rabbinical tradition. In labeling his work esoteric, he signaled to his selected audience that the code for deciphering his writings was to be found somewhere in the middle, between the canonical German exegesis of Goethe's *Faust*, and the rabbinical and *Maskilic* traditions regarding Elisha Ben Abuya. Those not well versed in these codes would fail to understand the work and its intricate meanings.

For the first time in the history of his representation, Elisha Ben Abuya was now positioned as the principal point of identification and at the same time characterized as an ambivalent and dubious figure. Prior to Letteris, the *Maskilim* had perceived Elisha as a tragic character, cast out of the circle of legitimate role models. It appears that Letteris devised a formula to circumvent the judg-

³⁴ Letteris, 1865, XIV.

mental and rigid approach that categorized characters as either positive or negative, fit either to be identified with or to be denounced. The standing of *Faust* in Western culture as a whole, and especially in German society, assisted Letteris in this endeavor. On the one hand, the accepted tradition of reading a text in its original language led the reader to identify with the hero of the tragedy. On the other hand, even the original text was encoded with a sufficient measure of ambivalence to leave room for reservation and even denunciation. This hermeneutic ambivalence encrypted in the tragedy's structure was compatible with the traditional attitude toward Elisha Ben Abuya in *Maskilic* circles. They could express misgivings while sympathizing and identifying indirectly with the character's postulates and actions.

In order to justify his positioning of Ben Abuya at the center of the work, Letteris took a number of precautionary measures. The first was the adoption of Western conventions in reading *Faust*, via which he could state that it was the Europeans who viewed the tragic hero, Faust, as an exemplary figure that embodied their values. It was thus not *Maskilic* heresy that enabled identification with Elisha Ben Abuya, but the appropriation of an acknowledged Western literary masterpiece that no one questioned or doubted. Letteris's second precautionary measure was the way he used Nehorai (another name for Rabbi Meir in the sources) and Mephiteufel as characters (who paralleled Goethe's Wagner and Mephistopheles). Whereas Mephiteufel bore the burden of guilt for the hero's sins, which in the plot is presented as the unavoidable result of divine intervention, Nehorai's (Rabbi Meir's) prayers in the epilogue allow Elisha to atone for those very same sins. Both characters, Nehorai and Mephiteufel, counteract the inherent ambivalence of Elisha's personage by dividing his conflicting characteristics between them.

Besides the epilogue with Nehorai as its central figure, there is another addition to the work which is not a direct translation of Goethe's text but an independent appendage, one solely involving Elisha Ben Abuya. This is Mephiteufel's role, which concludes the scene in which Ben Abuya agrees to give up his soul:

No longer shall you be called by the name Elisha
 For this shall be exchanged for a new name
 You have become an other man with my help
 Hence from today forth you shall be called *Aher* [the other]³⁵

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

While in Talmudic tradition Elisha was first named *Aher* by “Bat Kol” (the heavenly voice) – which represented the divinity, saying “return backsliding children apart from Elisha [*Aher*]”³⁶ – in Letteris’s work it is the representative of the forces of evil and damnation that are responsible for Elisha’s epithet. This is not a semantic modification, but the result of a revolution in *Maskilic* self-perception. The negative character defines Elisha as *Aher*, the “Other One,” while compared to Mephiteufel, being the “other” is not quite so damaging.

Compared to the changes in the portrayal of Mephistopheles, Letteris’s representation of Nehorai (as opposed to Goethe’s Wagner – his likeness in the original text) may be described as a total upheaval. On the one hand, Letteris adhered to Wagner’s depiction as Faust’s down-to-earth, dull, shallow and narrow-minded student (albeit in a moderated form);³⁷ on the other hand, the epilogue and Nehorai’s role as savior of Elisha Ben Abuya’s wayward soul contributed to the basic transformation in the perception of the character relative to the complex of figures in the tragedy.

Letteris’s epilogue was not written as a drama, but rather as an epic poem. A third-person, omniscient narrator gives an account of Ben Abuya’s life from his downfall to his tragic death without gaining absolution for his sins. In describing the smoke rising up from Ben Abuya’s grave, Letteris creates an apocalyptic image combining the pyrotechnics of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the story of Prometheus, and Talmudic metaphors.³⁸ Nehorai (Rabbi Meir) is the principal hero here. The text of his prayer for the redemption of Ben Abuya’s soul, derived from the Jerusalem Talmud,³⁹ occupies a significant part of this chapter, and his request for absolution relies on the divine source of Elisha’s wisdom and his biblical mastery. Nehorai spends an entire year in prayer and pleading until, in the scene inspired by Goethe’s work, the angels of heaven vanquish the angels of darkness in a battle around the grave of the *Aher*. The gates of heaven open and Na’ama (resembling Gretchen, Faust’s lover) raises “her beloved to the stars above.”⁴⁰ It is important to note that these images are revealed in the epilogue as they appeared to Nehorai in a dream. In this manner, Letteris sets up a new hierarchy in the moral portrayal of his heroes. It is not Ben Abuya who is the active, tormented character but, rather Nehorai, who as-

³⁶ JT *Hagiga* II; BT *Hagiga* II.

³⁷ While Goethe invoked negative epithets in describing Wagner as one of the “shallow minds that stick to must and mold” when they “dig with greedy hands for gold and yet are happy if they find a worm,” Letteris described him merely as being tactless and unspiritual (Letteris, 1865, 17).

³⁸ For the image of angels weaving the souls of the sinners, see Bavli, Shabath 152, 2.

³⁹ JT *Hagiga* II, (77).

⁴⁰ Meir Letteris, *Ben-Abuya*, 222.

sumes responsibility for the actions of his teacher, defending him before the heavenly powers.

Letteris's twofold formula positions Ben Abuya simultaneously as a liminal character at the center of the text, making it possible to identify with him, while keeping him, despite all his "backslides," within the framework of the legitimate Jewish community. This is made possible by Nehorai's devotion and loyalty. Due to the transition in genre from the translated text, structured as a play, to the epilogue, structured as an epic poem, a new level of narrative has been added in the form of the omniscient narrator, the authoritative voice that directs the reader's perception of poetic reality. The omniscient narrator is focalized through Nehorai's consciousness and he, in turn, observes the course of Ben Abuya's life in order to request Elisha's absolution. This twofold gaze retroactively supplies a pretext for his preoccupation and identification with Elisha Ben Abuya (for we perceive him via the gaze of the authoritative Rabbi Meir), and also positions the *Aher* within the broader perspective of the various factions in the Jewish community. It is not coincidence that the piece ends with a picture of the Israelites at Temple – the definitive state for any Jew, whether he identifies with Elisha Ben Abuya or not:

The whole nation is at temple with tears in their eyes
To the grace of God their hearts poured like water
Till in the heaven a rainbow shines
and on Elisha's grave a lily blooms.⁴¹

The final image presents us with an idyll that duplicates God's bond with Noah and the relationship between the Jewish community and the outstanding, rebellious individual. Elisha's grave and the idea of "the whole nation at Temple" have been merged into a harmonious unit worthy of the same Godly grace.

By appropriating Western patterns of *Faust's* reception and comprehension, and combining them with additions that reshape the images of Ben Abuya, Mephiteufel and Nehorai, Letteris structured his twofold formula to facilitate the status quo regarding Elisha Ben Abuya: to identify with Elisha Ben Abuya yet remain within the legitimate Jewish framework. Letteris's work may be read as an allegory of one of the essential conflicts of contemporary *Maskilic* existence. Letteris's instructions in his introduction guide the reader "whether to go right or to go left [in the interpretation of words] spoken by one or another character in this poem, especially by Elisah Ben Abuya, Mephiteufel and Nehorai."⁴² By

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴² As Letteris explains in a special footnote (p. 224), Mephiteufel's name, beyond its resemblance to Mephistopheles, derives from the synthesis of the names of two liminal Biblical fig-

doing so, he directs his audience toward a current, reality-orientated understanding of these three characters. The allegorical reading of the drama reveals the real-life segmentation of Jewish society. Elisha Ben Abuya could be seen as representing the leaders of assimilated Reform Jews (such as Geiger and Holdheim); whereas the conservative *Maskilim* (such as Rapoport or Zecharias Frankel), who preferred to talk about a “further development” in Judaism rather than its reform,⁴³ are represented by Rabbi Meir. Despite the semantic similarities between the objectives of both factions, the dispute between them was profound and fundamental. While Elisha (the radical reformer) followed in the enchanted footsteps of Christianity and universal enlightenment, his union with Rabbi Meir (the conservative) assured him of a seat in “Jacob’s Tent.” This made it possible to identify with every spiritual option that lay between Elisha Ben Abuya and Nehorai without going too far and losing legitimacy within the Jewish community. Nehorai’s role as a mediator who both observes and prays over the House of Israel makes it possible for such opposing factions as Jewish Orthodoxy and European assimilated Jewry to co-exist. Rabbi Meir’s mediation enables assimilated Jews to preserve their roots, while connecting orthodoxy to traditional Western knowledge and at the same time deterring them from withdrawing inward.

III. In Praise of Universalism – A First Critique of Letteris’ Translation

The initial reception of Letteris’s translation affirmed his strategy of selective readership, which he specified in the introduction to the text. The audience received his work with eagerness, enthusiasm and a flood of superlatives. Yehuda Arieħ Klauzner noted that in 1865 at least fourteen articles, notes, appraisals and letters were written on Letteris’s *Ben Abuya*.⁴⁴ Lectures were given honoring the work; the *Institute Imperial de France* dedicated a public conference to it; and the *Alliance Israelite Universelle* awarded a monetary prize to the poet for

ures – Aħitophel and Mephiboshet. It is important to mention that in *Maskilic* literature of that period, Aħitophel was considered a Christian (see Ya’akov Halevi, *Bikkoret ha-talmud* [Wien, 1863], 111). In this light, we can interpret Mephiteufel’s seduction as a seduction of Christianity and the Greek wisdom associated with it.

⁴³ This is according to Michael Meyer, see: *German-Jewish History in Modern Times*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Meyer, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 141.

⁴⁴ Klausner, *Ben Abuya ve-faust*, 4.

his work.⁴⁵ All this began with the Galician-born writer Naphtali Keller, who declared before the book appeared in 1864:

This book, I believe [...] exceeds in quality all that has been written before by the poet [Meir Halevi Letteris]. It is no exaggeration to say that the quality of this book exceeds that of all books of poetry that have ever been written in the holy tongue since the end of the prophecy.⁴⁶

Another Galician author, Abraham Ber Gottlober, proved that it was possible to exaggerate even further by declaring that Letteris “in this work exceeded Goethe himself and were Goethe still among the living, I swear he would concur with me.”⁴⁷ Gottlober went even further by issuing practical instructions, a sort of ritual of proceedings, for reading the book (he recommended to read it twice, and when reading a second time, to compare it with Goethe’s original text).⁴⁸ The rabbinical scholar Joseph Cohen Tsedek implored his readers to purchase copies of *Ben Abuya* and other books by Letteris to appreciate the notion of “such Torah and such a reward.”⁴⁹

The critics were impressed by Letteris’s methods and his preference for innovative adaptation rather than literal translation. Austro-Hungarian Talmudic scholar Samuel Brill proudly declared that this poet’s work was not a translation/adaptation (*Umdichtung*), but a new work (*Neudichtung*).⁵⁰ His compatriot, the journalist and educator Simon Szanto, employed the metaphor of a building and its scaffolding.⁵¹ Naphtali Keller invoked the “Vision of the Dry Bones” (Ezekiel, 37), which Letteris “took for himself from Goethe, breathing into them the soul of the Hebrew tongue, attaching tendons and flesh and turning them into a new being.”⁵²

Contemporary critics addressed various aspects of the translations – from their linguistic singularity to the historical analogies between the Tanna period and the Protestant Reformation period, when most of the legends about Faust

⁴⁵ Ibid. See also in Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, German section, 15, 18f., 22f..

⁴⁶ Naphtali Keller in: Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, Hebrew section, 21.

⁴⁷ Abraham Gottlober, “Mikhtav bikkoret [Letter of Criticism],” *Ha-Maggid*, 5 (1865): 17f. See also in Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, Hebrew section, 16.

⁴⁸ Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, 11, 18.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁰ Jehiel Brill, “Eine Stimme aus Ungarn,” *Ben-Chananja*, 26, (1865). Refer also to Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, German section, 11.

⁵¹ Simon Szanto, “Ben-Abuya: Goethe’s Faust,” *Neuzeit*, 46, (1864). See also in Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, German section, 2.

⁵² Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, Hebrew section, 21.

were formed. For our purposes, however, two aspects of the *Maskilic* perception of the work are of particular importance – the way Elisha Ben Abuya was perceived by the *Maskilim*, and the way they grasped both the persona and role of Rabbi Meir within the tragedy's plot. With respect to the first, all were amazed by how well-suited Elisha Ben Abuya was to the substitute role of Faust.⁵³ Szanto was alone in suggesting other possible analogies to the story to be found in Jewish tradition (i. e., the story of King Solomon and Ashmedai, which Rapoport had referred to earlier) although he too concluded that Ben Abuya was the most legitimate and suitable option.⁵⁴ He also made a special point of favorably noting the manner in which Ben Abuya was represented as a character devoid of concrete features of the period during which he operated, and lacking characteristic identifiers of his social or national status. He stressed, with pride, that Ben Abuya was neither a doctor nor a professor, but a figure that represented humankind in general, beyond geography, religion or social class. It is evident that nationalistic interpretations influenced Szanto's criticism, and he rejected the nationalist tendencies that were beginning to evolve within German society. He preferred humanistic universalism and Letteris's "a-nationalistic" approach to the Germanic particularism manifested in the contemporary readings of Goethe's masterpiece.

Intruding on all this critical celebration of Letteris's *Ben Abuya* was the scornful tone adopted by certain critics regarding his portrayal of Rabbi Meir. Here too, Szanto was the first to express his reservations about placing the illustrious Tanna in the role of Faust's mediocre student:

We sincerely confess that in our opinion the substitution [of Wagner with Rabbi Meir] is a mistake that we wish to put right. Firstly, Goethe's Wagner is a dreary creep [*trockner Schleicher*] as referred to by Faust, and he is the exact opposite of a genius, a philistine who busies himself with insipid sagacities, and on no account perceives the true essence of phenomena [...]. Who could ever compare the brilliant and noble-spirited Rabbi Meir, the true historical Tanna to such a man. [...] If Letteris merely borrowed Rabbi Meir's name to represent this character, we justly ask ourselves why use such a noble name to depict the caricature of a sage?⁵⁵

⁵³ See Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, Hebrew section: Salomon Rapoport, "Mikhtav [Letter]," 9; Abraham Gotlober, "Mikhtav bikkoret," 18; Naphtali Keller, "Be-sefer bikkurim le-shnat 1865 [New Books for the Year 1865]," 21; Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, German section: Julius Fürst, "Urtheil des Dr. Julius Fürst," 12; M. E. Stern, "Ben Abuya: Goethe's Faust," 13; Bock, "Vorlesung über Ben Abujah," 16; S. Munk, Jacob Goldenthal, "Zwei Sendschreiben," 19–21.

⁵⁴ Simon Szanto, "Ben-Abuya: Goethe's Faust" in Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, German section, 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

Despite these trenchant questions, Szanto commended the epilogue, in which Rabbi Meir's image is restored as the savior of Ben Abuya's soul.⁵⁶ His teacher, Salomon Yehudah Rapoport, likewise expressed concern regarding Rabbi Meir's honor in an article written two years after Szanto's review. The greater part of Rapoport's article was devoted to clarifying the issue, but, unlike Szanto, he found a number of reasons to support Letteris's "disrespectful" portrayal of Rabbi Meir. The first two reasons pertained to accepted conventions of translation and the treatment of dramatic literature at the time. Rapoport argued that Letteris did not intend to tarnish Rabbi Meir's image, and that it was the rigid framework of Goethe's masterpiece that forced him to portray the hero in such an extreme and unfavorable light. Furthermore, according to Rapoport, the portrayal of a dramatic character, by its nature, deviates from the historical authenticity it deems to represent. The third reason for the restoration of Nehorai's reputation is worthy of careful attention:

Whereas you [i. e., Letteris] most ably corrected this distortion in the epilogue of your work, which you decided to add at the end of the book, thus enabling the honest reader [...] to judge for himself. So did I consider the apparently contradicting issues thus: when he first encountered Elisha Ben Abuya, Nehorai, then still a young scholar in need of further schooling, was surely reprimanded by his master for being reckless and wayward [...]. After his [Ben Abuya's] death, Rabbi Meir was already a great Sage [...] who was followed by all the tribes of Israel, and then he, in his righteousness, saves his master from the fires of hell [...]. Here, you [Letteris] recognized your own mistake [...] and wonderfully corrected it by extolling the honor of the holy Tanna.⁵⁷

Rapoport refers to the epilogue as a kind of Archimedean point of correct interpretational reference to the work, especially regarding the persona of Rabbi Meir. Maintaining Rabbi Meir's honor is of utmost importance, and Rapoport employs all his interpretive skills to sort out the contradictions surrounding the Rabbi's image. Rapoport and Szanto not only defended the image of an important and revered Talmudic scholar, but also a persona that was seen to represent scholarly sagacity and intellectual non-conformism, both in the Rabbinical *Responsa* and in the various *Maskilic* writings. Letteris's twofold formula en-

⁵⁶ Letteris himself responded in a special footnote to Szanto's criticism of his representation of the character of Nehorai. To prove his point, he focused on three aspects: 1) He attenuated Goethe's unflattering portrait of Wagner; 2) His translation was a dramatic work that did not need to comply with the terms of historical writing; 3) In his epilogue, he restored Nehorai's good reputation, dispelling any potentially negative impression implied in Goethe's original plot. Published in *Wiener Mittheilungen* 20 (1864). See also Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, German section, 4f. Rapoport later adopted Letteris' arguments in his defense of R. Meir's problematic image in the translation.

⁵⁷ Salomon Rapoport in Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, Hebrew section, 10.

abled the representatives of each group and ideological sub-faction within the Jewish *Haskala* to find a basis of identification within the text – be it Julius Fürst, the academic from Leipzig who saw in Jewish spiritual values a strong Faustian basis of which Elisha Ben Abuya's figure was a typical representative,⁵⁸ or Solomon Rapoport, the honorary Rabbi of Prague, who preferred to focus on the authoritative persona of Rabbi Meir.

It is no coincidence that the emphasis on universalism reverberated in the early reviews of the translation. The greatest achievement of Letteris's work, according to his sympathetic contemporaries, was his ability to find the broadest common denominator in an effort to unify the crumbling Jewish camp, while shedding a narrow, particular identity and touching on the abstract humanistic foundation derived from ancient Jewish tradition.

IV. The Objection of Yedaya Ha-Ivri Ish Volyni (Solomon Mandelkern)

The compatibility of Letteris's *Ben Abuya* with the underlying agenda of the members of the Central European *Haskala* induced an over-enthusiastic acceptance of the book. If not for the admiring reviews of the book, the publication may not have caused such a stir and aroused such strong objections. Yedaya Ha-Ivri Ish Volyni,⁵⁹ who was the first to criticize the book (rather than praise it), declared that his misgivings had been generated by the work's enthusiastic reception, for which he sought to find justification in the translation. Despite his sarcastic tone, he praises the book and implores Letteris to incorporate his comments (for the most part grammatical, pertaining to the choice of words) in order to ensure his book's place as "a true gem among the scribes of Israel."⁶⁰ Apart from Yedaya's stylistic and grammatical misgivings, it is his conceptual comments that are of importance and interest. By contrast to Szanto's enthusiasm over the universalistic ambiguity of the work, Yedaya criticized Letteris

⁵⁸ Julius Fürst, "Urtheil des Dr. Julius Fürst," *Illustrierte Monatsheften für die Interessen des Judenthums* 1 (1866). See also Langbank, *Mischpat emet*. German section, 12.

⁵⁹ Pseudonym of Salomon Mandelkern. See Saul Chajes, *Thesaurus pseudonymorum quae in Litteraturaebraica et Judaeo-Germanica inveniuntur* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag), 146. When writing the article, twenty-one-year-old Mandelkern was a student at the Vilna Rabbinical Seminary and a protégé of Abraham Lebensohn. (Klausner, *Historia shel ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-ḥadasha*, vol. 5, 244).

⁶⁰ Yedaya Ha-Ivri Ish Volyni, "Bikkoret ne'emana," 136.

for not “elaborating the spirit of the period and place in which Elisha lived.”⁶¹ Even the epilogue, which he believed rectified the chronological and topographical vagueness, was plagued by anachronisms, confusing features from the Tanna period with parts of the original plot of *Faust*.

Here we come across an example of interpretive deviation from which we may learn something about the ethics and values of those participating in the discourse. Both Santzo, the enthusiast, and Yedaya, the detractor, were working with the same facts – the absence of concrete chronological, topographical and national identification within Letteris’s *Ben Abuya*. Whereas Santzo and the other members of the Central European *Wissenschaft des Judentums* saw in this de-historicization the embodiment of their universalistic *Weltanschauung*, Yedaya Ha-Ivri, who was educated at the Vilnius Rabbinical Seminary, viewed this as an aesthetic flaw and advocated the opposing approach of concretization and particularization. At a time when European commentators on *Faust* were beginning to identify the protagonist with the German national spirit, it was the Jewish German and Austro-Hungarian *Maskilim* who continued to adhere to the vision of enlightened universalism. While these Central European *Maskilim* were searching for meaning in the “intermediate zone” between the legacy of the Talmud and the traditional European reading of *Faust*, Yedaya Ha-Ivri demanded concrete identification and period authenticity in the portrayal of the Talmudic hero.

V. Kovner’s Utilitarian Approach

The Russian-Jewish militant positivist critic, Abraham Uri Kovner, brought to the discourse a third, utilitarian point of view. As far as Kovner was concerned, the importance of Letteris’s work stemmed from the absorption of a Western masterpiece like *Faust* into the bookshelves of Hebrew readers. In an article referring directly to Yedaya Ha-Ivri’s criticism, Kovner complained that the writer:

Didn’t pay attention to dear Letteris’s idea, which dressed *Ben Abuya* in the mantle of *Faust*, when the two are really analogous to each other; [the critic] didn’t consider the great benefit that those books would bring to our youth, instead he focused on grammatical mistakes, orthography etc., whereas we are indifferent to these grammatical particularities.⁶²

⁶¹ Ibid., 71.

⁶² Kovner’s initial criticism of the issue appeared in *Ha-Karmel* 25 (1867). See his works Abraham Uri Kovner, “Ruah haim [Spirit of Life],” in *Tseror peraḥim* (Odessa, 1868), 124.

It is important to note that contrary to his predecessors, who described the translated text as breathing life into the dry bones and placed particular emphasis on the acceptance of the work in the Hebrew culture, Kovner called attention to the “mantle of *Faust*.” He believed that aesthetic factors such as the style of the translation and its quality were secondary. To him the main importance of Letteris’s project was its role as a conduit of Western ideas into the minds of “our nation’s youth.” This utilitarian approach was clearly evident in a letter written by Kovner to Samuel Joseph Fuenn, editor of the journal *Ha-Karmel* published in Vilnius,⁶³ in response to Yedaya Ha-Ivri’s article.⁶⁴ Kovner believed in shaping Hebrew literature to the pattern of other national literatures, and that the translation of *Faust* was just another step toward the normalization of the Hebrew canon (assuming that the “norm” was to be comparable with Russian or English literature). In defending Letteris’s work, he stresses, first and foremost, the functional and educational importance of the translation. “Hebrew Literature is so poor and lacking in books such as *Faust*, that we should commend the very idea of translating it into Hebrew, as a book such as this will open up a new world of thought to the Israelite.”⁶⁵

Kovner sought to determine new standards for Hebrew literature and its critical discourse, and to this end adopted the positivist approach of the Russian critic Dmitry Pisarev. Like Pisarev, he evaluated each text for the efficiency of its ideas, irrespective of whether these came from scientific texts or fiction. The fervor of the new generation of *Maskilim* matched the anti-aesthetic, positivist criticism of the Russian left. When Jewish Central European critics referred to the Faustian spirit they were indicating a mythological and transcendental substance. When Kovner spoke of the new ideas in *Faust*, he was referring to positivist notions of efficiency and utilitarianism. However, European critics as well as Kovner also noted the universal and abstract basis of *Faust* as a world-renowned masterpiece, thereby affirming its equivalence to the story of Ben Abuya.

⁶³ Abraham Uri Kovner, 154/ 1527 °4, Archive of Samuel Joseph Fuenn, Department of Manuscripts and Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, The National Library of Israel. The letter to Fuenn is not dated, but its expanded version, which includes Kovner’s response to Smolenskin’s criticism, appeared in Abraham Uri Kovner, “Ruah be’er,” in *Tseror peraḥim* (Odessa, 1868), 134–140.

⁶⁴ Yedaya Ha-Ivri Ish Volyni, “Bikkoret ne’emana,” 28.

⁶⁵ Abraham Kovner, Archive of Samuel Joseph Fuenn.

VI. Smolenskin and the Beginning of National Criticism

There were two facets to Peretz Smolenskin's objection to Letteris's translation enterprise: his identification of the universal dimension of *Faust*, and the recognition of Elisha Ben Abuya as his comparable Jewish parallel. Until Smolenskin, criticism leveled at specific sections of Letteris's work was voiced within the context of great appreciation of the enterprise. Smolenskin broke with accepted traditions of *Maskilic* criticism and altogether rejected Letteris's text – both from the aesthetic and educational points of view. Smolenskin's contemporary rivals, as well as subsequent critics and biographers,⁶⁶ found the principal motivation for his fevered polemic in an inter-generational Oedipal struggle. It was difficult to ignore this facet of the dispute, especially in the context of the events surrounding the controversy. It is highly plausible that, in light of the atmosphere of spite that reigned in the *Maskilic* circles of the 1860s, Smolenskin felt that in order to be noticed a young critic must aggressively attack the leaders and authorities of the old school. It would have been hard to find a more fitting candidate than Meir Halevy Letteris. On the one hand, he was seen as a central pillar within the Galician *Haskala*; on the other, he enjoyed a rather dubious reputation, even among his followers. Smolenskin himself was aware of the tension between the generations. At the end of his article he demanded to be taken seriously and claimed his place, despite his young age, alongside the respected scholars he opposed. "It is my wish that the readers will deem this review to be important, and accept it as the critique of an ordinary experienced man with a long beard who is aware of public sentiment."⁶⁷

Oedipal motivations were indeed an important driving force behind Smolenskin's feverous contentions. However, those who focus only on this aspect ignore an ideological controversy that was fueling the dispute. Smolenskin's stance against Letteris's *Ben Abuya* was not merely a young man's arrogant provocation but also a principled, ideological objection. Instead of Letteris's and his colleagues' universalism, Smolenskin offered a proto-nationalist, segregated doctrine. He constructed the image of Elisha Ben Abuya as a militant *Maskil* fighting for national values. In insisting on the particularistic idiosyncrasy of

⁶⁶ Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, Hebrew section, 6; Ruben Breinin, *Peretz Ben Moshe Smolenskin* (Warsaw, 1896), 37; Gershon Bader, "Meir Ha-Levi Letteris," *Luah Ahiassaf* (1902): 446; Fishel Lahover, *Toldot ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-ḥadasha* [History of the Modern Hebrew Literature], vol. 2 (Tel-Aviv: Devir, 1929), 215.

⁶⁷ Smolenskin, *Bikkoret tehiye*, 16.

nations and cultures, he opposed the attempt to compare the liminal Talmudic persona with a hero from German culture.

Despite his desire to conduct an objective investigation, the discussion strayed into ideologically charged descriptions. Smolenskin saw Faust as a weak, lonely and passive figure whose “Christian learning habits” had led him to be seduced by Mephistopheles, who provoked his most earthly lust. Whereas Elisha Ben Abuya, in his opinion, was an independent figure in charge of his own fate, who had rebelled against the highest authority without breaching the limits of Jewish society in order to promote secular wisdom among the common people – an objective of Jewish *Haskala*. As far as Smolenskin was concerned, setting Elisha Ben Abuya within the framework of *Faust* constituted a gross insult, not only to Elisha’s image, but to the entire Jewish *Haskala* community that followed in his footsteps.

The scope of Smolenskin’s ambition is patently manifested in the content of this first article, in which he sought to encompass all fields of literary criticism and outline his personal belief system. He began with a general classification of literary works, identifying three genres: fiction, historical stories and legends. He maintained that to translate each category of texts an adequate formula must be found within the adopting culture that matched the genre and narrative structure of the original. In other words, in order to translate a legend one must find a matching legend; and in order to translate fiction, a matching fictional story must be found. But since, in his opinion, all nations differed in their spirit and legacy, only works of fiction could hope to find an adequate formula that fitted the adopting culture. Historical stories and legends, by virtue of their national uniqueness, are untranslatable in a manner true to Smolenskin’s doctrine.

Herein lay, in his opinion, the problems in translating *Faust*. Smolenskin identified Goethe’s drama with the German legend, whereas to him Ben Abuya was an historical figure. Since, according to his system, one could not substitute a legendary figure with an historical one, the notion of such a translation was to be rejected *a priori*.⁶⁸ Literal translation was, furthermore, of less value in Smolenskin’s eyes. “Even if he were to copy Faust and name Faust by him, it would be doubtful that this would please the Hebrews, for what have the He-

68 It is interesting to note that in the article, Smolenskin suggested alternative candidates for the role of Faust to future translators of the book. He was the third (after Rapoport and Szanto) to suggest the characters of King Solomon and Ashmedai. But he went further than this and also suggested the character of Shabtai Zevi. Smolenskin rejected Elisha since he was a historical rather than a mythical figure, as was Faust according to him, and therefore irreplaceable. Yet Smolenskin was quite prepared to accept Shabtai Zevi, a historical character who had lived only two hundred years earlier, as an appropriate equivalent for the role of the mythical (as he contended) Faust.

brews to do with the German Faust?”⁶⁹ Smolenskin surpassed himself later by advising the future Hebrew translator of *Faust* to “wash his hands” of the task because such a story “cannot add and will not add even the least benefit to Hebrew literature.”⁷⁰

Why did this renowned masterpiece so anger the young critic? Smolenskin, as did other Jewish critics, identified in Faust an ethos of Christian scholarliness. But contrary to other critics, he found in this the root of all evil. According to him, Western scholars devoted themselves to research and abstained from all the joys of life, which led them to become unsatisfied and easily seducible.⁷¹ He outlined the tradition which had nurtured this tendency and identified its origin in Catholic monasticism and its decline in the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Smolenskin believed that Goethe had written a didactic story intended to serve as a lesson regarding the dangers of this tradition. Nevertheless, he believed that the figure of Faust in the Hebrew language was superfluous and detrimental, “as this is neither the time nor the place, and the opinions of the Jews and the Germans are totally different.”⁷² Smolenskin believed that the cure for the widespread epidemic of Christian scholarliness (which he compared to leprosy) was a combination of learning with political pragmatism and good manners. Smolenskin’s Elisha Ben Abuya was the pioneer and the popularizer of this integration between the spiritual and the earthly, and because of it he was excluded from the rabbinical canon. As opposed to Faust, whose downfall, according to Smolenskin, was the result of surrendering to temptation, Smolenskin’s Elisha Ben Abuya was a Promethean hero “cast outside the fence” of the Jewish community because of his rebellion against authority. Despite following the path of Mephistoles, Faust remained a man of faith, whereas “Ben Abuya did not worship idols.” Finally, whereas doubt was Faust’s constant companion, “at the heart of people like Ben Abuya doubt will not gnaw, but only the fire of zealotry [for their idea] will burn.”⁷³

All transgressions linked to Ben Abuya’s persona, according to Smolenskin, were the fruits of a negative public relations campaign undertaken by the elite rabbinical circle. He believed that the leaders of the Jewish community during the Tanna period had sought to restrict the access of the general public to Greek wisdom, and to secular life in general, in order to protect them from the temptations of idol worship. Therefore, Elisha Ben Abuya’s preoccupation with theolo-

69 Smolenskin, *Bikkoret tehiye*, 8.

70 *Ibid.*, 10.

71 *Ibid.*, 5.

72 *Ibid.*, 8.

73 *Ibid.*, 9.

gical doubts which he shared with simple people evoked strong opposition in rabbinical circles.⁷⁴ Yet despite his affection for Elisha, Smolenskin justified the actions that the sages of the Talmud took against him. The threat of spreading Greek wisdom in that period – the Greek way of life – was both concrete and existential. Drawing an historical parallel, Smolenskin determined that:

Now, in this generation, we are all clever, we are all wise, we are all knowledgeable in Greek Wisdom, we all speak to the young, prevailing upon them to leave the confines of the Beith-Midrash in order to earn a living with their bare hands; surely now we must not curse the name of Ben Abuya!⁷⁵

Smolenskin's approach was relativist. In his time, Elisha's actions were harmful and negative, whereas the same actions, in a different historical and cultural context, were accepted and valued. Smolenskin, therefore, was not able to accept the analogy of Faust, whom he saw as a detrimental character, with Elisha Ben Abuya, who was the model of a modern-day *Maskil*.

Ben Abuya's words are now upon all the *Maskilim*'s lips, who with a dry throat call upon their sleeping brothers in order to awaken them from their sleep, and stir them to physical labor. Could it then be possible that the souls of all the *Maskilim* will be condemned as was the soul of Faust?⁷⁶

While Smolenskin perceived a clear analogy between Elisha and the *Maskilim* of the period, he did not search for current analogies with other heroes in Goethe's tragedy or in the legends of *Ḥazal*. His ideological intentions, as well as his political outlook, were not explicit enough in his first review. His stance became clearer in his later references to the story of Ben Abuya,⁷⁷ and particularly in his approach to the figure of Rabbi Meir. The latter, who was generally heralded as a spiritual, tolerant and broad minded authority, was repeatedly condemned by Smolenskin throughout the 1870s as a dark, two-faced figure of the failed (in his eyes) tradition of universal enlightenment. The trend toward differentiation apparent in *Bikkoret Tehiye* was developed further in Smolenskin's later literary and polemical writings.

Ironically, it was Smolenskin's first review that completed the Copernican revolution of Elisha's introduction into the main discourse of Jewish *Haskala*. The revolution was initiated by the moderate *Maskilim*. It took decades of work

⁷⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁷ Peretz Smolenskin, "Petaḥ davar [Introduction]," in Abraham Krochmal, *Even ha-rosha* (Wien, 1871), 5; Peretz Smolenskin, "Am olam [Eternal People]," *Ha-Shaḥar* III (1872); Peretz Smolenskin, "Et lata'at [Time to Plant]," *Ha-Shaḥar* VI (1875).

and contemplation on the part of these Jewish scholars and authors to introduce Elisha Ben Abuya, the Talmudic *Aher*, into the field of discourse. It was done slowly, with great care, and with the assistance of the persona of Rabbi Meir. Letteris's translation was the climax of this process, presenting a complex formula in which the *Maskilim*'s radical intentions co-existed, under one roof, with conservative outlooks combined with the spirit of Western universal enlightenment. Smolenskin's criticism disturbed this balance, appropriating Elisha Ben Abuya from the moderate *Maskilim* and granting him new attributes. Smolenskin's Elisha Ben Abuya of *Bikkoret Tehiye* became a nationalist secular reformer, a man who had no doubts and was determined to realize his political agenda by enlightening the masses. Despite the great difference between him and Letteris's Elisha, the figure that Smolenskin created could not have existed were it not for the earlier attempts to deal with the Talmudic myth.

VII. Three Critical Approaches to *Ben Abuya*

Letteris's supporters who defended him against Smolenskin's attack did not regard the young critic as an ideological counterpart, but thought him an ignorant boor who was attempting to tackle issues too complex for his comprehension. Support for Letteris was expressed in two different ideological camps of Jewish *Haskala*, which shared a great regard for the values of universal enlightenment and saw in them the foundation for their spiritual work. The Central European liberal conservatives led by the Viennese scholar Alexander Langbank were at the one extreme. At the other stood Avraham Uri Kovner. Representing the positivist-materialists, Kovner was the first to reject Smolenskin's criticism.⁷⁸ He spoke enthusiastically about the spirit of freedom – a common denominator shared by Faust and Ben Abuya. According to him, this was the crucial foundation that justified the replacement of Faust with the *Aher* in the translation:

Even if the forms of portrayal of Faust and Ben Abuya's actions are different – we shouldn't pay attention to this, because the main issue here is the notion of the bitter conflict within a man's soul – and this conflict raged in the souls of both heroes. Faust drifted upon the wings of the spirit because of his inner conflict, and performed many unnatural deeds, and Ben Abuya detached himself from tradition for the same reason, transcending the restraints of laws and regulations, and began searching for the meaning of the inner essence of all things.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Kovner, *Tseror peraḥim*, 138–140.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

Alexander Langbank reacted to Smolenskin with all the heavy artillery at his disposal as editor of a bi-lingual (Hebrew/German) booklet, *Mishpat Emet*,⁸⁰ in which he included articles written by the leading figures of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. It should be noted that most of the articles published had been written independently of Smolenskin, and prior to his review of Letteris. In order to prove Smolenskin's inability to read properly and understand *Faust*, Langbank included an article from a German newspaper that listed a review of interpretations of Goethe's poem.⁸¹ Aside from this article, only Langbank's introduction at the beginning of the German and Hebrew sections and his review concluding the Hebrew section responded to Smolenskin's contentions directly. In referring to Smolenskin's comments, Langbank dedicated most of his article to the clarification of grammatical issues and the equivalence of Letteris's language with Goethe's original. In dealing with conceptual issues, Langbank divulged his Romantic premise regarding universal human nature, upon which he constructed his claims. Faust's sinful way was analogous, in his view, to Elisha Ben Abuya's process of "cutting the shoots."⁸²

Another element that supported Langbank's argument was the historical analogy between the ideological perplexities of the Tannaic period and the Reformation period in which the Faust story was formed. The Faustian spirit, which Smolenskin defined as solely characteristic of the German nation was, to Langbank, true for all of human kind and "all nations in unison shall take part equally, because this is the heritage of the human race from generation to generation."⁸³ In addition, Langbank objected to Smolenskin's attempt to restore the image of Elisha Ben Abuya and to elevate him to the level of an archetypal *Maskil*. In presenting his argument, Langbank emphasized the severity of Elisha's sins and thereby inadvertently revived the earlier, negative image of this liminal hero. In the heat of discussion, Langbank undermined the delicate status-quo that the moderate *Maskilim*, his peer group, had managed to create in presenting Ben Abuya as a suitable figure with which to identify. Nevertheless, the general impression gained from his booklet, which gathered all the scholarly knowledge and commendations regarding Letteris's work, cancelled out Langbank's lapse, safeguarding the existing status-quo.

By placing Rabbi Meir's authoritative persona at the forefront of the discourse, moderate *Maskilim* projected their universal, Promethean desires onto

⁸⁰ Langbank, *Mishpat emet*.

⁸¹ "Goethe's Faust in frommer Beleuchtung," *Presse* 8 (April 1869). See Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, German section, 27–30.

⁸² Langbank, *Mishpat emet*, Hebrew section, 31.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

the controversial and dubious figure of Ben Abuya.⁸⁴ Smolenskin likewise presented his Ben Abuya as a Promethean character, but of a very different kind. Whereas, according to Szanto, Ben Abuya was more worthy than Faust because he expressed more faithfully a universal yearning for the transcendent, Smolenskin's Elisha-Prometheus sought to spread his secular national doctrine only among the Jews. The participants in the *Ben Abuya* discourse represented three different ideological approaches: the liberal universalism of the moderate *Haskala*, Kovner's materialistic universalism, and Smolenskin's detailed national particularistic doctrine. Kovner quickly despaired of the Jewish *Haskala* and, shortly after his rebuttal of Smolenskin was published in 1868, ceased to participate in cultural Jewish affairs. In that same period, conservative *Maskilim* lost interest in Letteris's work and in the poet himself, who died in poverty in 1871. It was Smolenskin who would gain a central position in public Jewish life and within Hebrew literary circles. In 1869, the year in which Alexander Langbank wrote his fiery article attacking the young critic, he wrote an introductory piece celebrating the publication of *Ha-Shaḥar* – Smolenskin's⁸⁵ periodical that became the central mouthpiece for his particularistic nationalist views.

84 On the Promethean characteristics of Elisha Ben Abuya, see Jehuda Fridlander, "Ha-Rambam ve-Elisha Ben Abuya ke-arkhitipusim ba-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-ḥadasha [Rambam and Elisha Ben Abuya as Archetypes in Modern Hebrew Literature]," in *Bein historia le-sifrut*, ed. Shlomo Nash (Tel-Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-me'uhad, 1997), 271–282.

85 Alexander Langbank, "Mikhtav [Letter]," *Ha-Shaḥar* I (1869), 25f.