

The Hebrew Language Popular Press in Europe and its Founders: M. L. Rodkinssohn and *Ha-Kol* (1876–1893)

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“Popularity” and “objectivity” were two notable goals in the “new” world journalism that developed in the United States and in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, reflecting the new ideals of its makers against the background of social changes taking place at the time.

The popular press wanted to gain new and wider publics from among those who previously had not been exposed to the printed news medium, whether because they did not know how to read and write, at least in the language in which newspapers were written, or because they preferred other media—the illustrated story, or live entertainment. The means used to conquer this public were in the main: lowering the price of newspapers; adapting their subjects to their frequency of publication and to the needs of the new target society, from the lower middle class to the popular working strata; satisfying the need for entertainment by adopting a story-like structure in their reports; printing popular novels as serials (in installments), and including sensational “marvelous” stories; stressing the human angle; simplifying style and language, even when treating complicated subjects; giving emphasis to illustration and “light” presentation. The aim was to reach the masses, although “popularity” did not necessarily conflict with “objectivity.”

The ideal of objectivity was expressed in the nineteenth century mainly by sticking to facts and eschewing values. Newspapers that adopted this informative model, that is, giving preference to information, often raw, over the story, wished to underline in this manner their singularity and to widen their circle of readers despite the advantage of the entertaining press. In other words, they wished to achieve a certain popularity by means of objectivity. However, as Michael Schudson¹ attests, this press was not necessarily more accurate than its peers. The genre was simply adapted to the potential readers. The paper’s objectivity could be expressed by providing a forum for different and opposing views (pluralism), or by refraining from taking up an ideological stance (neutrality), generally taking as a basis some

1 M. Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 88–91.

widely accepted norms of the target audience.² The Hebrew press in Europe was not isolated, in this respect, from world trends; this, despite the special situation of the Jewish community in Central and Eastern Europe. It was influenced by the social and cultural developments of the wider context. We could draw a parallel, for instance, between the efforts of the European Hebrew press to conquer the wider Yiddish-speaking public, a popular public par excellence, and the efforts made by the press mogul Pulitzer—himself a Jewish immigrant from Hungary—to capture the public of US immigrants in the 1880’s (many of them Jews coming from Eastern Europe), by giving them newspapers in an English language they could read.

In general, two periods can be distinguished in the development of the popular press in nineteenth-century Europe. The sixties and seventies saw the development of the popular low-priced press, the aim of which was to develop a readership and raise circulation. This era was characterized by the adoption of popular genres—feuilleton, stories of miracles and marvels—with the intent to forward certain educational aims by providing some basic information in an easily digested format, inviting the masses to participate in shaping their own lives.

The second era, characterized by the new popular press of the eighties and nineties (mainly following the American model), stressed the importance of the human angle and the entertainment component, pursuing sensationalism. It adopted new reportorial techniques which heightened the importance of the writer’s craft at the expense of the commentator, and of news at the expense of editorializing.

Nevertheless, this genre did not refrain from dealing with acute political issues, as the representative of the so-called masses. It is characterized by a clear distinction between the functions of publisher and editor, and an increased influence of the publisher on the content and direction of the paper, which became even stronger in the twentieth century.

The Hebrew press in Europe, which attained its modern form later than other presses (with the publication of the first Hebrew weekly *Ha-Magid*, in Lyck, Eastern Prussia, in 1856), operated as minority journalism under internal and external pressure, while conducting a permanent struggle to shape its language, and while directed at a public that itself suffered from the same limitations. In spite of all this, it succeeded in integrating the tendencies we have described. Of course, the “masses” of Hebrew readers for these newspapers (contrary to their peer audiences) numbered only a few thousand. The founders of the Hebrew language press came from a variety of cultural and ideological horizons. Whether men of letters, Enlightenment activists, traditionalists, orthodox, nationalists, or socialists, they found Hebrew better suited than local national languages or Jewish “jargons” to expressing their different ideas in a transnational Jewish public sphere. However, they failed to attain, at this stage,

2 According to Schudson, until World War I, American journalists “believed that facts are not human statements about the world, but aspects of the world itself”; *Discovering the News*, 6.

the large audience they needed and hoped for. They all looked for some avenue of “popularization,” but were divided on the means to reach that goal.

Ha-Kol, founded in 1876 in Koenigsberg, can be distinguished from its competitors as the leader in the first wave of the popular press for Hebrew readers. It is only natural that this paper was also the first to adopt a more frequent publication schedule than the others.

Ha-Kol was the first modern Hebrew newspaper to start appearing twice a week. Its competitor was *Ha-Mabit* of Vienna, which appeared for only one half year in 1878. Both appealed mostly to the Jewish masses in Russia and Poland, and took shape against the background of developing popular tendencies towards radicalization, socialism and nationalism. The literary context (itself inseparably linked to the Hebrew press of the nineteenth century), was one of developing social realism, among the harbingers of which was A. A. Kovner’s pamphlet of press critique, *Heker Davar* (“Finding the facts”).

The appearance of the new journalism in Hebrew coincided with the appearance of the new movement in Hebrew literature, which endorsed opening the Hebrew language to foreign influences and modernizing it, and which stressed the human-individual aspect of writing. “Objectivity” already constituted a trend and an important tool in this period. The appearance of the new press was, of course, subject to attack by the conservative moral majority, which itself was not sitting idly.

Ha-Kol (1876–1893)

Ha-Kol first appeared as a weekly, in 1876–1877, then twice a week from 4 January 1878 to 24 December 1878. In 1879 it again went back to a weekly schedule. The first issue was published in Koenigsberg, on 7 May 1876; the last issue of the first epoch was published in Berlin on 31 January, 1879. After a five-year hiatus, the paper resumed publication in Vienna from 10 December 1884–1885. *Ha-Kol* was published in New York from 29 March 1889–1890, with the last issue appearing in Chicago, 24 September 1893.

The middle seventies was a time of crisis for the Hebrew press, which did not fulfill the expectations of its public and did not gain a new public. This is usually attributed to its failure in dealing with the existential and ideological questions that faced Russian Jewry towards the end of the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) period: the increased anti-Semitism among intellectuals, the growth of the Socialist movement and the beginnings of nationalist ideology, the attempts to raise productivity, the attempted integration of the Jews into the national economy by encouraging their occupation in agriculture and industrial trades. On the international level, the war that broke out between Russia and Turkey brought about a thirst for information that was often blocked by government censorship. Existing newspapers did not deal

adequately with current problems, despite the ideological model they adopted. *Ha-Zefira* concentrated on the popularization of science, while *Ha-Levanon* represented an orthodox point of view. *Ha-Melitz* was closed for a time and *Ha-Shahar* appeared only once a month. According to one analysis,³ journalists, writers and publishers looked for ways to entice as many readers as possible.

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that, on the part of the readers, the crisis could be nothing other than a crisis of confidence. The *Haskalah* press created expectations about the liberalizations of Czar Alexander II, which were proven false. It encouraged Russian patriotism, and did not foresee the new political and social crisis with its accompanying outbreak of anti-Semitism. The problem was, therefore, not only that the new ideologies were ignored, but that weariness had begun to set in concerning the now outmoded ideologies and the ideological function of the press. There was also disappointment with the Russian press, because of its increasingly anti-Semitic outlook. There was a crying need for a new journalism in Hebrew. This was provided by an outsider, new to the business, who entered it and did not relinquish his involvement with the Hebrew press during the rest of his tempestuous life.

Michael Levy Rodkinssohn

Rodkinssohn was born in Dobrovno, Russia, in 1845, and died in New York on January 6, 1904. He was the brother of Israel Frumkin, editor of *Havatzelet* in Jerusalem. Rodkinssohn, also known by the initials RaZ, was raised as a *Hassid*, and after failing in business, he published books on Hassidism, the popular and charismatic religious movement that originated in Eastern Europe during the 18th century. Exchanging his Hassidic garb for the attire of a respectable German, according to the description of the poet ABaG, he went into business in Petersburg. According to his many detractors and enemies, who attacked him from a moral standpoint, he became embroiled in debts and criminal activities as a consequence of his involvement in the Petersburg stock exchange. Following a business proceeding involving illegal promissory notes, he was on the point of being arrested when he escaped from Russia's capital city and changed his name.⁴

In 1876, he came to Koenigsberg, the capital of Eastern Prussia, and there established *Ha-Kol*, which was directed at Russian Jews; he later started many other journals. The socialist writer Maurice Wintchewski (Ben Netz), who wrote for his paper, described him as a publisher for whom newspapers were "all his heart's desire," and who saw his function in a way that reminded him of a publisher in

3 S. L. Zitron, "Notes on the History of the Hebrew Press—*Ha-Kol*," *Ha-Olam* 17 (1927): 337 (Hebrew).

4 *Ibid.*

America at that time (where, in fact, he would eventually try his luck), lacking a sense of humor, quickly angered by those who attacked him:

Publishing was all he wanted to do, his whole ambition, his life's mission. To stand at the head of a newspaper was in his opinion akin to being a ruler over the people. There was in him no enthusiasm for worldly things, he was not devoutly religious, and he counted himself neither a follower of the Ba'al Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezer, c.1700–1760, founder of the Hassidic movement) nor of Karl Marx. He had no trace of nationalism or internationalism. Rodkinssohn couldn't understand the nature of any principle, either theoretically or practically. He had no fixed and explicit philosophy. He was eclectic without knowing the meaning of the word.⁵

In short, Rodkinssohn was a professional newspaper publisher, totally objective, a true new journalist capable, because of the qualities just described, of carrying out the attempt to produce a popular Hebrew newspaper.

“See how extraordinary,” writes Zitron,

that same person totally devoid of journalistic talent, who was incapable of writing correct Hebrew, within a short time gained for *Ha-Kol* a large number of readers, most of them in Russia, of course. It would be enough to leaf through his own articles in order to realize that this man is poor in knowledge and in education, that he has no moral foundation at all, and holds no firm principles, that his opinions change with the wind, and he moves from one camp to another, from one movement to the other. And yet, all this not only did not prevent him from increasing the number of his subscribers, but also from gathering around him the best Hebrew writers of his time.⁶

Zitron stresses that Rodkinssohn's accomplishment “has no other example in the history of the Hebrew press.”

A Newspaper Without a “Flag”

Instead of publishing a prospectus or a manifesto to announce the publication of the new newspaper, Rodkinssohn opted for publishing a sample paper—Probe Nummer (Test Issue)—displaying his modern commercial approach. He marketed the newspaper as a product, which was not to the liking of the esthetically fastidious (opponents accused him of “acting like a shopkeeper,” observes Zitron cynically).⁷

5 M. Wintschewski, “Michael Levy Rodkinssohn,” *Ha-Toren* 8 (1924): 590 (Hebrew). Translations in the paper are my own, unless otherwise noted.

6 Zitron, “Notes,” 337.

7 Ibid.

On May 7th 1876, the Probe Nummer appeared. Its subtitle was: “Ha-Kol, the voice of Jacob walking in the vineyard of Lord of Hosts of the House of Yehudah, once a week will make known all that is seen and is happening all over the world, matters of wisdom and science, histories of famous people, traveler’s letters, pleasant stories, book reviews.” That is, right from the beginning, the paper’s appeal was premised on the pretentious promises typical of the popular press. The paper’s motto was: “Read wisdom and understanding will speak.” The Test Issue includes an argumentative article, or statement of principles entitled “Words of Truth and Peace.” In it, Rodkinsohn divides the Jewish people into three parties: Talmudists, *Hassidim* and *Maskilim* (members of the *Haskalah* movement), He condemned the last, and mainly the “enlightened” press, but not the *Haskalah* itself, even promising: “if the time comes when the *Haskalah* demands from us to look honestly at the human being without distinction of religion and opinion, we shall be ready!” That is, he used the paper as a platform for a call for objectivity and the recognition of a common denominator among the various facets of European Jewish society. The sharp and personal attacks on the *Haskalah* press appear to be a fight against competitors, and an attempt to profit from the general disappointment over the achievements of the *Haskalah*. Rodkinsohn’s attitude towards objectivity is illuminated by the answer he published in issue No. 1 of *Ha-Kol* (*Kol Anut*, “The Voice of Answers”) to the question raised by the writer R. Yehiel Michal Pines, who wanted to know what the “flag,” (or “banner”) of the new journal was. He replied: “The reader must dig into the contents, and what does the flag matter to him?”

The sections in the test issue offered for the reader’s attention are: “political issues,” “general news,” “matters of wisdom and science,” together with a warning or explanation that “religious exegesis has no place in *Ha-Kol*” (this, despite the fact that the issue includes a section entitled “Wisdom of the *Mishnah*”). The feuilleton, an indispensable part of popular journalism, printed “under the line” (that is, the line that separated the upper part of the page from the lower one in the early European press) with the title “The Sound of a Driven Leaf,” is devoted in this issue to a kind of satire about the youth drawn to the Socialist–Nihilist movement, and the fear they inspire in the common man.

Already in the test issue, it is obvious that Rodkinsohn attributes no particular importance to a “clean” Hebrew language. His own language is complicated, full of circumlocutions and quotations from the *Zohar* on the one hand, and of Yiddish idioms and solecisms on the other. The paper contains different levels of written language, according to the individual writer. The result is a popular stance towards language, according to which the use of spoken idioms is appropriate in order to attract readers who did not previously read Hebrew newspapers. This approach is also normal among popular publications in other languages (although Hebrew is at a lower level of development from the standpoint of the adaptation of the spoken language to the written medium). This was also the ideological position of the Socialists. Writers

identified with this sector would in fact write in *Ha-Kol* using a refined language, but did not oppose the publication of inferior levels of writing side by side with theirs. This approach, intended to attract as large a cross section of the public as possible, without assigning to the press the function of developing the Hebrew language together with its social function, was developed by A. S. Lieberman in his programmatic pamphlet announcing the appearance of the first socialist periodical in Hebrew *Ha-Emet* (*The Truth*, 1877). There, he points out that he will accept articles for his Hebrew publication “without paying attention to their language or its purity.”⁸

The first issue of *Ha-Kol* came out on 8 August 1876, and until *Rosh Hashanah*, the issues were sent to subscribers free of charge. This was done because in the meantime the paper’s competitors, *Ha-Magid* and *Ha-Levanon*, were busy “exposing” the “disreputable” moral character of the new journal’s editor. Many of those who paid Rodkinsohn on the basis of the sample issue requested the return of their money, which had been intended to finance the first issues. Rodkinsohn decided to advance the publication of the paper and announced at the head of the first issue: “Two months is too long a time for those who already went and paid us for the full year. . . . we have accepted their request and decided to bring out *Ha-Kol* from this time on.” The paper’s sections include news of the Koenigsberg Stock Exchange, poems (in a special section called “Voice of Poetry”), biographies of famous people, pleasant stories, travel letters, and obituaries. On the last page (page 8), the advertisements are concentrated.

As for the writing, it was mostly Rodkinsohn’s own, as was similarly the case in *Kol-La’am*, the Yiddish paper he published simultaneously. Like Alexander Zederbaum (editor of *Ha-Melitz*), he aimed to create a multilingual empire of popular journals, and perhaps to move readers from one language to the other.

The Hebrew paper had some distinguished writers, such as Mordechai Ben Hillel Hacohen and Yaacov Rabinovitch. Most of the rest were novice journalists or writers not accepted by other newspapers. The first issue opened with a section called “Facade of *Ha-Kol*,” a political article (probably translated from Russian) written by Rodkinsohn himself, dealing with the Balkan war in a strongly anti-Turkish vein. Rodkinsohn wanted in this way to earn the sympathy of the Russian censor, so that he would not make problems for the distribution of the paper among its widest public. After that came “Miscellaneous News,” two letters, “Matters of Wisdom and Science,” the first installment of a serial story translated from the German and dealing with miracles, and the paper’s feuilleton, written by Rodkinsohn under the pseudonym Joel Michael Kupperman (other fictitious names he used included Pelimo ben Alexander and “Shalmanezer”). The most notable tendency in the material, perhaps because no other alternative existed, was the drive to entertain and not to delve seriously into anything. The articles were superficial and full of errors,

8 A. S. Lieberman, *Ha-Emet* (Tel-Aviv: Publications of the Labour Archives, 1938), 3.

which awakened the contempt of the intellectuals, despite the interest they had in the newspaper. Rodkinsohn needed a professional editor; and to get a man who knew how to write well, he was ready to compromise.

A Platform for Socialists—and Others

The writer Eliahu Wolf Rabinovitch (OR), then a young student in Koenigsberg, an intellectual and a socialist, describes⁹ his first meeting with Rodkinsohn when the latter came to offer him the position of assistant editor at *Ha-Kol*. According to his testimony, he did not question Rodkinsohn about wages or work conditions, asking instead only a single question, “What is Ha-Kol’s political stand?”; to which Rodkinsohn answered, “Ha-Kol was founded to fight against the “Negalisten” (revolutionary nihilists). OR replied that by coming to him, he had “missed his target,” because OR himself was “half-Negalist.” Then came Rodkinsohn’s revealing answer: “All this does not make it worthwhile for me to cancel the deal. If you can’t fight against the Negalisten, go and fight for them.” This extreme expression of objectivity—or opportunism—made of his newspaper a platform for socialist writers. From the reader’s point of view, Rodkinsohn contributed in this way to freedom of expression, and reinforced the paper’s image as popular.

OR was charged with writing and translating a good part of the paper. He did this, at least, using good Hebrew, even if his articles were too superficial in the opinion of the critics. The goal at this stage was quantity at the expense of quality. The reports from abroad did not undergo editing and were not “improved” (an art at which David Gordon, and later Nahum Sokolow, were masters). It is thus possible to identify the articles written by the editors and this, from the historian’s point of view, is an advantage. The articles by correspondents, even those lacking experience, were printed almost without editing. Neither did the paper respect the sacred journalistic division into sections: interesting items of Jewish life could appear in the general politics section; science was not detached from everyday life, nor was religion. In this respect, *Ha-Kol* moved a long step forward towards present-day journalism, which has abandoned compartmentalization and hierarchy, letting the reader decide for himself what he wants to read based on article titles.

Nonetheless, the paper still kept the hierarchical structure of a book, implying to the reader that it should be perused from the beginning to the end—which actually made reading difficult. The reports from out of town were dispersed between the titled sections. Serial installments of long pieces were not printed consecutively. All this confusion underlined the entertainment and objectivity aspects of the paper. OR himself claimed that he was not interested in perfecting Hebrew journalism, nor in

9 E. W. Rabinovitch, “Thus We Write History,” *Ha-Olam* 52 (1927): 1022 (Hebrew).

“developing good taste.”¹⁰ He wanted to exploit the paper’s platform to advance his political ideas. Therefore, he agreed to perform the work piled upon him and did not argue with the editor. Thus, the features of popular journalism penetrated *Ha-Kol*, even if unintentionally.

Rodkinsohn engaged in protracted settlements of accounts with the editors of other papers, particularly Eliezer Lipman Zilberman (editor of *Ha-Magid*), to whom he dedicated several feuilletons written in the Kabbalistic language of the *Zohar*, full of terms in Aramaic, a language he had mastered fully. The section of questions and answers in his paper, “*Kol Anut*,” was a platform for unbridled attacks upon his critics, whose letters he did not hesitate to print in full, in order to justify his stinging answers. He also offended personalities considered ethical authorities who could not be touched, such as writer R. Yehiel Michal Pines. This considerably increased his paper’s circulation, because he catered to his readers’ thirst for gossip and sensationalism. When the Russian government censor, Yehoshua Steinberg, of Vilna, started erasing parts of his feuilletons, his readers in Russia asked him to send uncensored copies to them directly, in sealed envelopes, as was the usual practice of some Hebrew publishers outside of the Russian Empire. The growing popularity of *Ha-Kol* among its readers attracted other writers able to read correctly the situation. Such a man was Alexander Zederbaum—EreZ, an experienced journalist and publisher whose paper *Ha-Melitz* had, by 1873, ceased publication for five years. He published an article in one of the early issues of *Ha-Kol*, rather than in one of his former competitors, which were closer to his own concept of journalism. His article, “Reasons of the Heart,” he signed with the name Pili. His personal summing up of the current situation of the Jewish people in 1876 gave occasion, two years later, for one of the ugliest and most tempestuous disputes in the history of Hebrew journalism (see below).

The increase in the number of readers was still insufficient to pay for the paper’s publication, because Rodkinsohn had difficulty collecting subscription payments from his Russian agents. This is a well-known problem in the history of the distribution of the Hebrew press. After printing demands and threats in the paper itself without effect, he traveled to Russia by himself. He dismissed some agents and appointed instead mostly Hebrew teachers of rich families, for obvious reasons. In the course of his journey he also met readers and potential supporters among *Hassidim*, *Mitnagdim* and *Maskilim*, and he succeeded in convincing them all that this was their paper. He promised (and, as we have seen, he generally kept his promises, perhaps because he had no choice) that the paper would impose no censorship and make no cuts. According to Zitron’s quotations (which, we must assume, are conjectural):¹¹

10 Ibid.

11 Zitron, “Notes,” 418.

“I am yours and my paper is yours. Write in it whatever you want. I shall not touch your articles, since I am no Zederbaum, who snips out the opinions of writers much better than himself . . . but from this we’ll see if your town will help and purchase a number of subscriptions to *Ha-Kol*, and the money handed to me in advance. . . .”

Rodkinsohn also took steps during this trip to make *Ha-Kol* a journalist’s newspaper. He offered positions as department editors to notable writers of the *Haskalah*, and succeeded in adding Gershon Joseph Brill (alias Job from Pinsk) to his stable of writers. Brill wrote mainly poems. Rodkinsohn also enlisted M. L. Lilienblum, but his greatest triumph in this visit was the recruitment of the giant of Yiddish letters, Shalom Yaacov Abramowitch, better known as Mendele Mocher Sefarim. This was an important step in his efforts to conquer a popular public that might, in consequence, turn to the Hebrew press. Mendele had been fired from his governmental teaching post because of a satire he had written. However, it appears that he was driven to accept Rodkinsohn’s offer not only by financial need, but also by his belief that the time had come for a popular Hebrew press. Unfortunately, his acceptance to write for *Ha-Kol* did not result in anything concrete. However, it produced an interesting document, an announcement signed by Mendele that appeared in issue 39, informing readers about the new partnership, which was to affect both Rodkinsohn’s Hebrew and the Yiddish papers. In this document, Mendele states that the present chapter in Jewish life creates the need for a popular Hebrew press with all its components:

The changes and many innovations that have occurred in the world in matters of politics and human rights, in production, trade, and in all branches of knowledge and industry, have greatly influence the Jewish people in our country. . . . In these days many of our people are anxious to receive counsel and news about anything useful and good for their lives. There is no excess of dreams and fancies and not such scorn as before. The different forces within us are becoming united, and the hearts of the people get closer together.

Mendele discerned, therefore, the downfall of ideologies, and the rise of practical circumstances that worked towards unification, and which created the need for a means of communication of a new kind: “I find this is an appropriate and suitable time to raise our voices in the Hebrew camp and speak to them through periodicals about different things, necessary to any man who loves life and likes to improve his everyday life.” The partnership was supposed to begin with the opening of the year 5638 (Fall of 1877). Mendele hoped to “improve these periodicals with greater enthusiasm than at first, and to conduct them in various articles, with the help of good and respectable writers close to me, as required by the times, so we shall find favor in the eyes of our people.” In other words, the aim was to publish a well done popular paper. At the end of this declaration appears a call that proves Mendele’s

practical sense (presumably, with the encouragement of Rodkinsohn and following his methods): “The subscription money for the year 5638 and writers’ contributions can be sent from now on to my name, at my address in Zytomir.” As the partnership was broken off before it started, it would be interesting to know whether Mendele did in fact receive money for subscriptions, and what became of it. The failure of the partnership brought about a drop in the number of readers of *Kol La’am*, which actually ceased publication for three months, but it hardly affected the success of *Ha-Kol*.

The second journalistic year lasted only four months, until the end of the year 1877 in the common calendar, because the agents complained that the lack of coordination with the common calendar was causing problems in the accounts. The first issue of 1878 was renumbered as the third volume, and for that year, also, the paper appeared twice per week.

For his part, OR devoted himself to what, according to his words, was his main reason for joining the editorial offices—spreading the word of the Hebrew socialist movement. This movement was to find a print organ for itself a short time later in Vienna that was to become part of the mythology of Hebrew culture: *Ha-Emet* (*The Truth*), the first ever socialist periodical in Hebrew.

Therefore, it is surprising to find in issues 36–37 of the year 1876, a critical article on *Ha-Emet* signed by EReZ (another of OR’s pseudonyms, which was obviously chosen to compromise Alexander Zederbaum, the usual “user” of this pseudonym); surprising, because its contents displace bread-and-butter questions in favor of issues of belief and nation, instead of making a bridge between them. However, he praises the paper’s language, its layout and its low price. OR’s critics saw in this a surrender to pressure from Rodkinsohn, who feared the competition. Furthermore, the same article also criticizes *Ha-Mabit*, the weekly published by Peretz Smolenskin, who wanted to compete directly with *Ha-Kol* by adopting a popular format but failed, despite the apparently better quality of his paper’s language and editing.

In his memoirs¹², OR himself gave a Machiavellian explanation of this article, likening it to Balaam’s curse (which turned into a blessing, as related in the Bible). The editor of *Ha-Emet*, A. S. Lieberman, had approached him on the matter of how to distribute the *Ha-Emet* manifesto, which was not allowed into Russia by the censors. OR had advised him to use newspapers appearing in Germany, writing an article critical enough to pass the Russian censors, which would at the same time inform readers of the contents of the new paper. This was the purpose of his critical article in *Ha-Kol*. OR also published in *Ha-Kol* his first openly socialist article, “The Question of Workers in the United States,” before quitting his journalistic job in order to continue his teaching career. He later became a Zionist activist.

However, the adoption of socialist writers was also one of Rodkinsohn’s

12 Rabinovitch, “Thus We Write History,” 1023.

expressed goals, not something forced upon him. *Ha-Emet*, despite its short life (3 issues) was snatched up, mainly by the young generation; its popularity was such that the first issue was printed three times. Rodkinsohn was interested in the former subscribers to *Ha-Emet* and wanted to attract young readers to his paper. He offered a platform to the socialists, beginning with OR and Ben Zion Novachovitz. This was his second chance, since the founding of *Ha-Kol*, to reach the level of popular journalism with really wide appeal, and he did not let it go by. Rodkinsohn prepared an additional foundation to absorb the refugees from *Ha-Emet*—in his new monthly, *Asefat Chakhamim* (“Meeting of Sages”), which would become the second socialist Hebrew periodical (1877–1878). Articles that interpreted current events from a Marxist standpoint were published with one eye on the censor and “buried” among other, innocuous materials. Socialists could be proud of their Trojan horses, but Rodkinsohn, personally far from Socialism, was primarily concerned to put into practice his pluralism and his ambition to create a popular and objective press.

The first meeting with socialist intellectuals could not end without Rodkinsohn, scathing as usual, taking the opportunity to put them in their place on the issue of their longing for “pure” journalism. Zvi Hacoheh Sharschewski, in a letter to the editor, reviewed the history of the Hebrew press and expressed regret that in *Ha-Kol*, the youngest of them all, he and his radical friends were forced to read articles “boisterous and arrogant in their senility”; he complained that the magazines writers “deal with articles about matters of no importance and copies that are unnecessary and fill with them the journal, but not the heart of the reader.”

Sharschewski and his friends soon learned the advantages of the popular press and became Rodkinsohn’s defenders and supporters. Characteristically, Rodkinsohn printed the letter in full, replying ironically: “Please, my friend, try yourself to be a publisher for the Jews, and you’ll soon speak differently.” He then used the opportunity to mount a vicious attack, as was his wont, on *Ha-Shahar* and *Ha-Emet*, which were praised by Sharschewski.

The new stage in the fight to gain readers also involved a revolutionary change for the Hebrew press: abandoning the weekly frequency of publication in order to become as close as possible to a daily. *Ha-Kol* began to appear twice a week. The ban on distribution of *Ha-Magid* in Russia increased the demand for *Ha-Kol*, but Rodkinsohn needed a new assistant editor. *Kol Anut* was full of excuses for the mistakes and flaws in the paper’s composition, in proof-reading, and in editing. Rodkinsohn was busy with his duties as publisher. His frequent journeys, required for commercial negotiations, did not allow him to serve as editor in practice. Even though he would not release his grip on the reins, Rodkinsohn adopted the modern conception of the division of duties between publisher and editor, a division that was far from clear in the early Hebrew press, but which became one of the essential characteristics of the worldwide journalistic revolution. The new editor was Israel

Ephrat (YeFeT), who lacked literary pretensions and was satisfied, as a modern editor, with introducing order into the chaos.

In the last issue (15) of the second year, Rodkinsohn informed the readership that the frequency of publication would change from weekly to twice per week: “We have decided to offer *Ha-Kol* to our readers from now on, twice each week. It would make no difference to our readers whether or not they knew the reason for this change, but many of our readers will know that their requests and hopes have been fulfilled.” He did not make the change for the sake of profits, claimed Rodkinsohn, but for the general good. He noted, too, that the number of both writers and readers of the paper had grown; and in fact, with the start of the third year, the best writers of the young generation began contributing to *Ha-Kol*. Most of the new writers were close to socialism and knowledgeable about Russian literature (in contrast to the German influence exerted by the previous generation of *Maskilim*). They understood the importance, for a Hebrew writer looking for readers, of writing for a popular newspaper with a large circulation, and themselves brought about a further increase in the number of readers. The intellectual qualities of the publisher and the talent of the other writers could not deter them. Rodkinsohn did not renounce the inclusion of popular translations of scientific and travel books, and openly declares his policy: “I specifically state that as long as our voice is heard in the world, I shall also put in it trash, if only it can be useful and good for some of our people” (Third year, issue 28).

Nonetheless, the need to fill out two papers every week made him use material that he later regretted having printed. On the other hand, he did not hesitate to suspend in the middle a literary criticism that had already run through three issues, noting at the end of the last installment: “Will not be continued. In our opinion such a book does not deserve such a long review.” Stopping a series in the middle was a practice that Rodkinsohn enjoyed. Then again, he published numerous reports from outlying towns in Russia, particularly those that were important for the popular nature of the paper, such as local reports from places where his readers lived; such local reporting was also important for his relations with his agents, who were able to use the community stories in settling their own local accounts.

This was the environment in which the literary “stars” wrote. The first of them was M. L. Lilienblum. His most important article in *Ha-Kol* was “*Petah Tikva*” (Gate of Hope) (1878, issues 14–21, 23–27), in which he treats the question of introducing religious reforms on the occasion of the 1878 rabbinical assembly in Petersburg. He asked the respectable forum to pass resolutions in favor of reforms in matters of personal status, granting equal rights to women within the Jewish community as had been granted to Jews in general within the Russian Empire. In an editorial, Rodkinsohn informed the readers that because of Lilienblum’s article, *Haredim* (Orthodox Jews) had canceled their subscriptions. Despite the financial loss, however, he did not regret its publication, because “if we had not done so our conscience would have bothered us the rest of our life.” However, he himself wrote an article in which

he opposed Lilienblum's position. Another response to the controversy in the paper came from OR, who argued, like his companions in the socialist camp, that the time had come to abandon the debates concerning religion, because human life should no longer be based on it. This article was often quoted by the critics of *Ha-Kol*, not because of its contents, but because of the grammatical error in the title, "The Talent of Action" (where, in the Hebrew original, the masculine noun was coupled with a feminine adjective), which was not corrected for several issues.

Dr. Itzhak Kaminer, one of the senior writers at *Ha-Emet*, published articles, poems and poetic satires in *Ha-Kol*. In his essay "On Agriculture in Russia" (1879, issues 8–9, 11–13, 16–18, 23–26, 33), he came out against the plan of the editor of *Ha-Melitz*, Zederbaum, to establish a company to settle Russian Jews in agricultural areas in Russia. Apart from the writer's views on the subject, his opposition was also connected with a dispute that arose between Zederbaum and Rodkinsohn, to be described below.

Ben-Netz (Novachovitz), the most extreme in his cosmopolitan views, published a series of articles on "The House of Representatives of the People in Germany" (1878, issues 57–59, 61–62, 66–67, 76–77) which, before being banned by the censors, served as a "Trojan horse," in Kaminer's phrase. He succeeded in introducing the new socialist ideology into the paper and to the readers in Russia, by describing the debates held in the German Parliament from a socialist point of view. He published reports from London, Paris and Copenhagen, as well as feuilletons signed with the name Yogli the Humanist, which satirized, among others, Smolenskin and Zederbaum. The sixteen installments of "The House of Representatives" raised circulation to a new record, so the publisher could be happy not only for the sake of the successful propaganda but also for the sake of the profits.¹³ Kaminer wrote to Rodkinsohn: "Dedicate your journal to things that are beneficial and needed in Israel, because the strength of *Ha-Kol* is great." (Third year, issue 29). However, counter to the assumptions behind Kaminer's statement, the "beneficial and needed" things for *Ha-Kol*'s mass audience (in Rodkinsohn's view) also included translations of stories about famous persons and spicy feuilletons that did not hesitate to delve, for instance, into Noah's sex life—not exactly subjects on the level of the social issues debated in "The Voice of the Driven Leaf."

Rodkinsohn praised his own success in an editorial under the title "Reflections at the Year's End" (Third year, issue 55). He blasted his competitors, pointing out the attempts made by his opponents to stop publication of his paper: "my haters and persecutors have multiplied . . . trying by all means to strangle my soul, so that I may not make my voice heard abroad." He reveals that letters had been sent from Warsaw and Vilna to the police in Koenigsberg, stating that "it was a shame for Germany to contain a person like myself."

13 Wintschewski, "Michael Levy Rodkinsohn," 58.

It soon became apparent that this was not a case of paranoia. Paradoxically, the storm that in the end led to the closure of *Ha-Kol* in its first version started with that same part of the article “Reflections . . .,” in which Rodkinsohn praised the paper’s writers and wished them to continue “coming to the aid of their people,” and supplying him with “live articles, that develop the soul and feed the mind.” In the list of writers he named Alexander Zederbaum, who in the meantime had restarted the publication of his paper *Ha-Melitz*, and gained the collaboration of writers such as Lilienblum, YeHaLeL and Sharschewski. Zederbaum sent Rodkinsohn a letter in response, complaining that when he had originally published his article in *Ha-Kol*, he had done so on the condition that “nobody should know that he was the writer,” and that, similarly in this case, he had not authorized publication of his name. In another announcement in his own paper, Zederbaum explained his participation in *Ha-Kol* by claiming that “he still did not know with whom he was dealing” (1878, issue 13). He had now come to consider writing for that paper an injury to his honor. In accordance with the press laws of Germany, Rodkinsohn published Zederbaum’s explanations and also the paragraph from *Ha-Melitz*, but he appended to them his own explanations and commentaries, most if not all of which cast aspersions on Zederbaum’s personality, and he cited condemnatory testimonies from other sources about him.

Zederbaum decided to wage war to the bitter end against his foe, and did not hesitate to take an unusual step (forbidden even by Jewish ethics). He gathered a full dossier about Rodkinsohn’s encounters with the law, from the time he had been a businessman in Russia; in order not to become a direct “informer,” he published the facts in the following manner: “it was not I who was honored by having my name printed in the official newspaper of 17 August 1875, number 177, [saying] that on the 19th of that month I would be judged in the first chamber of the regional Court of Law . . . for fraud and embezzlement. . . . Not on my account did the local Governor’s office (21 January 1876, document no. 12461) instruct the Vilna prosecutor to arrest me and bring me to trial.” All this covered a full page, printed in large letters.

Zederbaum’s action caused indignation among the Hebrew writers, radical and otherwise, who expressed their support for Rodkinsohn by multiplying their contributions to his paper, while at the same time boycotting *Ha-Melitz*. Lilienblum, YeHaLeL, Kaminer, Ben-Netz, OR and Sharschewski wrote regularly for *Ha-Kol*, and readers remained faithful to the paper.

An additional sin committed by Zederbaum was the article he published after the closure of *Ha-Emet*, in Vienna. In it, he attacked the paper’s editor, A. S. Lieberman, who had been arrested after the possibility had been raised that he be deported to Russia, where he was on the wanted list for revolutionary activities. Lieberman was released after a month, through the intervention of well-known Jewish writers, headed by Smolenskin. In *Ha-Melitz* (1878, issue 21), Zederbaum writes with satisfaction that the editor of the “periodical in Hebrew language written by the Nihilists for

Russian youth” will be deported, and that then “no mercy will be shown for his many and grievous crimes, . . . the use of fictitious names, incitement and so forth.”

In reply, Dr. Kaminer called for a boycott of *Ha-Melitz* and its editor: “Such a man is not one of us, and we must not associate with him. . . .” The appeal was heard, and the best writers abandoned *Ha-Melitz* and went over to *Ha-Kol*. The influence of the socialist writers on the paper was by now decisive. From time to time, for the sake of objectivity, Rodkinsohn took upon himself the obligation of expressing an opposing view, and he warned his readers during the fourth year that, “as publishers, we are obliged to show the bad things contained in nihilistic opinions, and to fight against them with all our strength.”

However, the opposition of rival writers and newspapers was stronger. According to Rodkinsohn, the journalist Ephraim Deinard (who would continue the fight against him when they were both in the United States) informed against him to the authorities, on Zederbaum’s initiative (1879, issues 36–37). The facts are that Rodkinsohn was arrested and held for three weeks, his home was searched, he fell ill, and the censor became more and more rigorous about the paper’s articles, clearly acting on instructions received from above.

Ben-Netz proposed at this juncture that Rodkinsohn return to the weekly format (1879, issue 49–50). “*Ha-Kol*,” he writes, “has become a living periodical, not a cemetery with pleasant tombstones, and not a large and imposing building, but the subscribers . . . these subscribers and readers are readers of the Hebrew language, lovers of the ‘Holy Tongue,’ and even more of their money.” In his opinion, then, the attempt to create a popular mass Hebrew press had failed. The Hebrew reader is still not sufficiently “popular.”

Rodkinsohn’s agents exploited the opportunity afforded by his imprisonment to hold back their remittance of payments to the paper. Rodkinsohn tried to enlist the aid of the readers, as he had enlisted the support of the writers (“A Cry for Help,” 1879, issue 41). The paper in any case was no longer appearing regularly twice a week; finally, with issue 51, he informed readers that the paper would again be a weekly “until the bad times pass.”

In 1880, Shimon Bernfeld began working as an assistant editor at *Ha-Kol*, but a short time later he moved from Koenigsberg to Lyck to work in the editorial offices of *Ha-Magid*. Rodkinsohn himself moved to Berlin, where the last issue of the year was published. Afterwards, he tried to improve his luck by changing the name of the paper in Berlin and in Hamburg (*Ha-Medaber*, *Ha-Hoze*).¹⁴ In 1885 *Ha-Kol* was restarted in Vienna. It concentrated on Jewish philosophy and carried almost no current news, although the paper’s motto remained the same: “accepting articles without distinction as to party or objective.” After Rodkinsohn’s emigration to the

14 *Ha-Medaber* was published in Berlin, in 1881; no. of issues not available. *Ha-Hoze* (21 issues) was published in Berlin, 1881 and in Hamburg, in 1882.

United States, the paper renewed publication in New York, for the years 1889–1890. Then it was probably published occasionally in New York and Chicago. The last known issue of *Ha-Kol* appeared in Chicago, on 24 September 1893.¹⁵

Conclusion

The pursuit of “popularity” is an evident tendency of the Hebrew press in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Europe.¹⁶ The limited numbers of the Hebrew-reading public was a central reason for this trend. Nevertheless, because the press arose to serve specific camps and ideologies in a period of transition and crisis in European Jewry, the Hebrew papers had a hard time releasing themselves from their ideological bonds, particularly in their main area of concentration, Eastern Europe.

The use of the Hebrew language involved an additional problem, which was the widespread perception that Hebrew, as a holy tongue made secular, was suitable only for “serious” subject matter and consequently demanded ideological content. The need to modernize and enrich the language, as well, constituted a heavy burden for journalists, who bore almost exclusive responsibility for the advancement and diffusion of secular Hebrew literature.

The new editors saw in journalistic objectivity the means to popularize their papers, though each followed a different road. *Ha-Kol*'s Rodkinsohn regarded objectivity as the result of pluralism, which led him to allow a place for writers of different camps. Thus, *Ha-Kol* served as the single journalistic platform in the news-based Hebrew press that was open to writers of the socialist movement, despite the fact that the editor himself came out of the Hassidic movement. As for its use of Hebrew, the attitude adopted by the paper was to let its contributors express themselves in the language and style they preferred, without attributing special importance to the “purity” of their language, its style, or the contribution of their writing to the advancement of the Hebrew language.

From the journalistic point of view, *Ha-Kol* adopted the entertainment-narrative model. Its objective was, first and foremost, to entertain the reader, using a narrative form for its reports, and granting within this context the greatest freedom of expression in the area of ideology.

The main competitor of *Ha-Kol* was the short-lived weekly put out by Peretz Smolenskin, *Ha-Mabit* (Vienna, 1878), founded as a weekly for the entire family by an editor well-known for his anti-clerical views. For him, objectivity meant abstaining from stressing his own well-known positions, and presenting only “neutral” material. The paper fulfilled pedagogical functions in its science section. It

15 Z. Brody-Zeldner, “Hebrew Newspapers in America,” *Ha-Doar* 12 (1934): 221.

16 See G. Kouts, *Studies in History of the Hebrew Press* (Tel-Aviv: Yaron Golan, 1999), 39–68 (Hebrew).

developed a narrative approach in this section and in others as well, and established the feuilleton as a legitimate genre for the Hebrew press. However, the editor, who had become accustomed to an elitist point of view in his monthly *Ha-Shahar*, had difficulty adapting himself to the new medium, from the standpoint of both his approach towards the public and his refusal to see in the paper a commercial product that needed to be marketed as such. In his own evaluation, the paper failed to reach its target public because it turned to the Jewish community of Russia instead of strengthening its base in Galicia, which was closer and more popular.

The failure of these two newspapers, and of the daily press that followed in their wake,¹⁷ signals the failure of the Hebrew press in Europe. Its advocates did not succeed in carrying out the transformation into a modern, popular press. In the twentieth century, this function fell mainly to the Yiddish press.

The ideological necessity of the development of a secular Hebrew language that began to be fulfilled by the nineteenth-century journalists made Palestine the logical breeding ground for the growth and development of twentieth-century Hebrew journalism in all its forms (as party organ, commercial enterprise, etc.). Hebrew rapidly came almost exclusively to represent the Zionist ideology. Thus, the failure of the European Hebrew press is connected with the appearance of the modern model of party journalism, and with the advent of the Zionist movement.

17 These were *Ha-Yom* (Saint Petersburg, 1886–1888); *Ha-Melitz* (Saint Petersburg; operated as a daily from 1886–1904); *Ha-Zefira* (Warsaw; daily from 1886–1906; 1910–1916; 1920–1921; 1926–1928; 1931).