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Between East and West: controversies over the modernization of Hebrew culture in the works of Shaul Abdallah Yosef and Ariel Bension

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ABSTRACT

A tendency exists in Jewish historiography to associate Jewish modernization and Hebrew renaissance with Europe and Western culture. Europeanization and Westernization are emphasized as the focal points for Jewish cultural transformation. We take a different approach by shedding light on a number of centres where modern Jewish and Hebrew culture was created. This approach allows us to expand the perspective beyond the Eurocentric prism and instead emphasize movement – of people, knowledge, goods and capital – in real or symbolic spaces as key drivers for processes of transformation. We accordingly examine different pathways to the renewal of Hebrew and Jewish cultures at the turn of the twentieth century. We re-assess the research and literary work of Shaul Abdallah Yosef (1849–1906) and Ariel Bension (1880–1933) and their contesting interpretations of the modernization of Hebrew culture. Driven by both real and symbolic return to the “East,” the two formulated different political and cultural models for the modernization of Jewish and Hebrew culture. By doing so they challenged mainstream trends concerning modern European Jewish discourse that prevailed during the nineteenth century in the work of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (science of Judaism) movement, in Europe’s Hebrew *Haskalah* circles and later on in Palestine/Land of Israel.

Introduction

Jewish modernization and imperial logic

A number of new political principles appeared on the international scene at the turn of the twentieth century, the age of “new Imperialism” as Hannah Arendt called it, or the “age of empire,” to use Eric Hobsbawm’s terminology. A notable characteristic of this period was the symbiotic combination of the spread of capital, trade, and people within and between imperial spatial structures, together with accompanying processes of political and cultural modernization (Arendt 1951; Fieldhouse 1966; Said 1993). This organizing principle can also be found in the social transformations that took place during this period throughout the Jewish world, which to a large degree were moulded under imperialist patronage.

Our propositions depart from the hypothesis that there were many routes to Jewish modernization, which developed within different imperial settings including British, Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman. Informed by the reasoning of such scholars as Eisenstadt (2010), Alroey (2008) and Stein (2008), this approach allows us, in analysing Jewish modernization processes, to expand our perspective beyond the accepted focus on specific *spaces* (Europe, Palestine/Land of Israel¹) to emphasize, instead, *movement* – of people, knowledge, goods, and capital – in real or symbolic space being a key driver for these processes of transformation. Thus, for example, the migration of Jewish populations and capital from Europe to Palestine/Land of Israel or from the Russian Empire to America is linked to cultural and political Jewish transformations, as well as to symbolic movement between centres (Land of Israel/Spain/Europe) and periods (biblical/medieval/modern).

The renewal of Hebrew and Jewish culture in the second half of the nineteenth century was connected to the global trends of the time. Existing scholarship tends to tie the *Haskalah* and Hebrew renaissance to Europe and Western culture. Studies have mainly described the processes of Europeanization and Westernization of Jewish culture as the focal points of Jewish transformation (Shavit and Reinhartz 2010). The underlying assumption is that Jewish modernization began in Europe, and from there spread via the movement of capital, knowledge, and people. The transformation in the Jewish world in the official historiography rests on a monolithic and homogenous view of modernization.

Inspired by the work of Chakrabarty (2000) and Asad (1993) who critically analysed the “universalization processes” in Europe, we take a different approach by spotlighting a number of centres in which modern Jewish and Hebrew culture was created, focusing on various political and cultural contexts, mainly outside Europe. Looking at cultural and social reformations in different spatial locations allows us to examine different models of Jewish modernization which are not in thrall to the European prism or to the world view that informs it. Thus, for example, Arabic-speaking parts of the Ottoman Empire were home to processes of Jewish modernization and revival of Hebrew language and culture inspired by the revival of Arabic language and culture (the *Nahda*, the Arab renaissance, النهضة) and by the Ottoman political and cultural reformation (the *Tanzimat*). Arab-Jewish intellectuals active in Palestine/Land of Israel at the turn of the twentieth century were involved in both Arab and Hebrew renaissance movements (*Nahda* and *Haskalah*), and were also involved to varying degrees in the cultural and political Ottomanization process of that period (Levy 2007, 2013).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a centre of Jewish modernization developed in Southeast Asia, spurred by the eastward movement of Jews and by a reconnection to Judeo-Arabic language and culture. The foundations for this pathway were laid by the development of Baghdadi-Jewish trade network in ports and cities across India, China, and Burma, under the aegis of the British Empire. Although this modernization process had links to the imperial British political and economic interests, it appears to represent a dramatically different model from the one developing concurrently in Europe. These various modernist projects underway in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe were not unrelated to one another, but were formed within a dense array of relations, influences, and conflicts.

We wish to describe a complex matrix of the formation of the Jewish enlightenment and the Hebrew cultural renaissance, which contains multiple loci, and which is based

on the transfer of knowledge and ideas between Europe, the Ottoman Empire, Southeast Asia and North Africa (Tobi 2000; Tsur 2003, 2011). We explore this process within the different imperial contexts that enabled these connections, and within the cultural and political logics that have shaped models of Jewish modernization in different locations.

Shaul Abdallah Yosef (1849–1906) and Ariel Bension (1880–1933)

We study the research and literary work of Shaul Abdallah Yosef and Ariel Bension which embodied different political and cultural options for the modernization of Jewish and Hebrew culture. Driven by a real and symbolic return to the “East,” their models contrast with mainstream trends in nineteenth-century Jewish discourse, as in the work of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, in Hebrew *Haskalah* literature and in Palestine/Land of Israel. We examine the unique place of these two intellectuals as upholders of traditions and as both their protectors and re-inventors: Yosef in relation to Hebrew liturgical poetry written during the Golden Age in Spain, Bension in relation to the Sephardi kabbalistic tradition. Both identified their traditions as endangered, yet in response they not only proposed preservation models but also modernist models for cultural renewal based on those traditions.

In section 1 we explore the works of Yosef against a broader context of the links between Hebrew poetry in Jewish communities in the Arab world, and the *Haskalah* and *Nahda* movements starting at the end of the nineteenth century. We also examine his discussions and disputes, through Hebrew periodicals and in direct correspondence with *Wissenschaft* scholars, about interpretative authority and the importance of the link between Arabic poetry and Hebrew poetry in translating and interpreting medieval Hebrew poetry.

In Section 2 we examine the works of Bension in the broader context of the debate about the essence of Hebrew literature, examining his ideas that this literature might be cast as entirely Eastern. We explore his attempts to use his grounding in midrashic and kabbalistic literature to create a new, Eastern genre of modern Hebrew literature. We also examine Bension’s model for Jewish Easternism in a Pan-Asiatic context, through his dialogue with the Indian-Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).

Yosef and Bension were both poets, writers and researchers. In each of these fields they tried to create alternatives to the European and Western “orientation” of the *Haskalah*, the *Wissenschaft* movement and the new Hebrew literature through discourse with these Western outputs, and by developing their own alternative expression of the Sephardi tradition, emphasizing its Hebrew–Arabic symbiosis and Judeo-Muslim link.

Hebrew–Arabic poetry and Jewish modernization in Shaul Abdallah Yosef’s work

Neo-classical trends in Arabic literature at the turn of the twentieth century, influenced by the growth of the *Nahda* movement, together with the *Haskalah* and the interest it invoked in Golden Age non-liturgical Hebrew poetry, provide the backdrop to Yosef’s attempts in Hong Kong, and of Dahud Semah (1902–1981) in Iraq and Palestine/Land of Israel, to renew the tradition of Sephardi non-liturgical poetry. Yosef’s interpretative work proposed an alternative to the interpretation of members of the *Wissenschaft*. It

was formed within the context of imperialist expansion, the development of Arab and Hebrew nationalism and their confrontation.

The encounter with modernity and the ensuing physical and cultural dislocation spurred many Jewish intellectuals to attempt to document and preserve Jewish culture and to present it in new contexts. The moment of communal and cultural crisis is also a moment of compilation and of renewed interpretation, addressing traditions or languages in danger of disappearance. It is not coincidental that Yosef, having emigrated from Baghdad to Hong Kong, wrote new commentaries on the poems of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (1075–1141) and Rabbi Moses ibn Ezra (1055–1140). Now in exile with a new language, he worked hard to safeguard his Arab-Jewish heritage and to bequeath it to future Jewish culture.

The works of the *Haskalah* also featured a return to medieval Spain/Andalusia, with the cultural legacy of the Jews of Spain offering a rich soil from which to develop the renewal of Jewish culture and identity. The *Wissenschaft*, which aimed to reinstate Judaism as a cultural and historical entity by means of research and a scientific approach, constituted one of the main centres for this renewed interest in the Sephardi legacy. Yet one of the movement's prominent elements was its justification of the affiliation of Jews to European culture and society (Schorsch 1989; Mendes-Flor 2010); at the heart of the work of *Wissenschaft* intellectuals was the premise that Jewish modernization processes were ineluctably bound to Western culture and to Europe (Schorsch 1989; Funkenstein 1991; Raz-Krakotzkin 1998; Brann and Sutcliffe 2004; Mendes-Flor 2010).

The interest in the Sephardi heritage shown by researchers and intellectuals spread among the second generation of the *Wissenschaft* scholars who emphasized the national and Hebrew dimensions of medieval Hebrew poetry (see also Zalkin 2000). Particular significance was accorded to the Hebrew works of the Jewish poets and philosophers of the period and to the national aspects they contained. Anthologies and new revised editions of the Jewish works of medieval Spain, Hebrew poetry and philosophy, were published and a corpus of scientific and interpretative research built up (Tobi 2000).

The compilation and annotation of Jewish writing in Spain was more established towards the end of the nineteenth century, as scientific societies focused on publishing scholarly editions of renowned Hebrew Spanish poets, as well as encouraging research and study of the field. The most prominent of these societies was *Mekitze nirdamim*, established in 1862, which published new scholarly editions of medieval Hebrew poetry (a process at the centre of Yosef's counter thesis, as discussed below). These societies were established by prominent *Wissenschaft* researchers and intellectuals including Abraham Berliner (1833–1915), Abraham Harkavy (1835–1919) and Shmuel David Luzzatto (1800–1865). Their research largely ignored the influence of Arabic language and culture that was very much part of the writings of the Jews in Spain (Drory 1988; Tobi 2000). While Jewish works (mainly poetry) were emphasized, Arabic works – especially in Judeo-Arabic dialects – were marginalized (see also Drory 1988; Schorsch 1989; Funkenstein 1991; Raz-Krakotzkin 1998; Tobi 2000). Even the great Jewish works originally composed in Judeo-Arabic, such as Yehuda Halevi's *Kuzari* or Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, were interpreted and studied mainly in Hebrew translation, with almost no attention paid to their Arabic originals (Tobi 2011).

Historians claim that this trend was part of a broader tendency to distance Judaism from the East, one that can be seen in *Wissenschaft* discourse from its very beginning

(Schorsch 1989; Anidjar 2007; Mendes-Flor 2010). These researchers aimed to move Judaism away from those Oriental elements it contained, including the presence of Arabic language and culture within the Jewish cultural heritage of medieval Spain (Raz-Krakotzkin 1998).

Shaul Abdallah Yosef

Yosef spent most of his adult life in the Baghdadi diaspora that spread across India and China during the nineteenth century. His life-story is bound up with the economic and cultural transitions and transformations that this movement entailed. Yosef's scholarship and personality have not yet been properly researched. In addition to articles about him published by David Yellin in 1936 and Moshe Gaon in 1938, the more recent studies analysing his writings and scholarship include only Hakak (2009), Tobi (2013), Tobi (2000), Ben-Yaakov (1985) and Evri (2014).

At age 18, Yosef left his birthplace Baghdad. Like many young Jews of his generation he travelled east in search of economic opportunities within the Baghdadi trade networks that spanned the eastern British Empire. As a relative of the famous Sassoon family – Flora, David Sassoon's wife was his father's sister – he joined the David Sassoon & Sons trading house, based in Bombay (Ben-Yaakov 1985), first studying in the firm's school network, and then being employed in its business in Chinese ports. After several years he settled with his family in the British colony of Hong Kong, where he established a brokerage house at the stock exchange. His migration also entailed becoming a British citizen, a status that facilitated his movement and activities throughout the British Empire and awarded him legal and economic protection. During his training and work at Sassoon & Sons, Yosef mastered English, adding it to his proficiency in Judeo-Arabic and literary Arabic, the languages used among members of the Baghdadi-Jewish network.

Alongside his business training, Yosef was an autodidact who studied Hebrew and Arabic language and literature, in particular the Jewish works of Muslim Spain. He published articles in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic in the Hebrew intellectual press and in the Judeo-Arabic weekly, *Perah*.² He conducted wide-ranging correspondence with Jewish intellectuals globally. The two books of commentary he wrote – a fierce critique of the Brody versions of Yehuda Halevi's poems,³ and a commentary on the poems of Moshe ibn Ezra⁴ – were published after his death by Shmuel Kraus (1866–1948) in Vienna. Similarly, a manuscript he had prepared for publication, *The Garden of Parables and Riddles by Tudros Abulafia*, was published posthumously by David Yellin (1863–1942).⁵ In addition to these works, Yosef wrote poems in the metres and genres of the Hebrew poetry of Spain, but most of them were only published posthumously (reprinted in Ben-Yaakov 1970).

Within the Baghdadi diaspora, Yosef was active in intellectual circles, in particular in the Judeo-Arabic newspapers *Perah* and *Maggid mesharim*, weeklies published in Calcutta in the 1880s and 1890s, and distributed chiefly throughout the Baghdadi diaspora in India, China, and Iraq (Ben-Yaakov 1985; Avisur 1992). These intellectual circles comprised Jews from the Baghdadi diaspora in Southeast Asia, Baghdad, Aleppo, and Basra (Hakak 2009). From his Hong Kong location, Yosef was greatly interested in the work of *Haskalah* circles in Europe, and was a member of some of their research associations, mainly the *Mekitze nirdamim* association (Yellin 1937).

In terms of his background and profession Yosef's profile was unusual within *Haskalah* circles, contrasting with the typical European Jewish intellectual. He did not belong to a recognized Jewish centre and had no formal higher education or rabbinical training. He thus lacked the scientific authority that permitted entry into *Haskalah* intellectual society. He also represented different, often contradictory, worlds. He worked to bring the Baghdadi Jewish intellectual circles closer to the world of *Haskalah*, while simultaneously disputing with European scholars about the foundations of the Sephardi heritage. He was often referred to as the *Hakham HaBaghdadi* (Baghdadi scholar), despite having left Baghdad at a young age and spending most of his life as trader in the British colonies. His writings emphasized his link to the East and Judeo-Arabic culture. These different strands of his identity, and his movement between different political and cultural locations, shaped his diffuse and dynamic position.

Debate over the poetic model of Spain's Hebrew poetry

Yosef expressed his opposition to the approach of European intellectuals in their interpretation of Spain's medieval Hebrew poetry across all forms of his work: as a literary critic in contemporary Hebrew periodicals (*Hatzfira*, *Maggid mesharim*) and the Judeo-Arabic periodicals (*Perah*), in his books of commentary on the poetry of Yehuda Halevi and Moshe ibn Ezra, as well as in his wide-ranging correspondence with various scholars. In a letter to Israel Iser Goldblum (1863–1925), dated 27 January 1896, Yosef writes:

I must point out that, whenever they attempt to interpret anything to do with us in the East, our European brethren have never explored the subject deeply, but instead simply discuss and judge from the comfort of their own perspective. (in Abulafia 1932–1936, part 2, 72, as quoted in Yellin 1937, 28)

Most of Yosef's disputes with *Wissenschaft* scholars about the poetry of Spain took place between 1887 and 1902, in both *Hatzfira* and personal correspondence with Nahum Sokolov, Chaim Brody, David Ginsburg, and Abraham Berliner (Tobi 2013; Evri 2014). For example, in "kol hasirim tahat hashir" (*Hatzfira* 245, 1901) Yosef wrote a fierce critique of Brody's commentary on the poems of Yehuda Halevi:

Had Rabbi Yehuda Halevi seen the interpretations and the distortions imposed by the new commentators on his poems, he would have cried out bitterly, saying: "Save me from my brother's hand, and from the hand of my loved ones deliver me." (quoted in Hakak 2009, 243)

Or, writing in general about European Jewish commentators on the poetry of Spain, Yosef commented:

I have done all I can to enlighten our brethren, wise men of Ashkenaz, to the fact that Arab-Jewish poetry is not like European poetry ... While Rabbi Abraham Berliner and Rabbi Eliyahu Harkavy have generally conceded the points I have written to them, they remain incapable of removing their European spectacles from their eyes. (quoted in Yellin 1937)

Yosef's dispute with the *Wissenschaft's* European scholars transcended the boundaries of literary interpretation and touched on broader political and cultural questions. At its heart were issues such as the place of Europe in modernization processes in Jewish culture; the

relationship between Arabic and Hebrew languages and cultures; and the relationship between cultural heritage and those inheriting it. Yosef considered himself to be at an advantage in interpreting Hebrew poetry in Arab form due to his familiarity with classical Arabic literature. He felt that without this knowledge one could not discuss Spain's Hebrew poetry and emphasized the need to study Arabic literary rules [*al-Badi'*] to be able to interpret Spain's Hebrew poetry:

The new poetry called *al-Badi'* by the Arabs was introduced to the Hebrew language by our great poets in Spain, ... For the poets of those times were immensely zealous for our ancient language, and sought to revitalize it, to expand and broaden it, and to raise it up to the level of the living Arabic language. (quoted in Yellin 1937, 47)

Yosef's emphasis on the close relationship between Hebrew and Arabic and on the need for a good knowledge of Arabic to read Spain's Hebrew poetry properly echoes the words of Moshe Ibn Ezra (1055–1140) in his *Shirat Yisrael* (The poetry of Israel). In a "Letter to Sokolov," Yosef writes:

The two languages are as closely related as sisters. And in truth it would not be an exaggeration to say that there is almost no couplet in all the poems of Halevi and Ibn Ezra which does not have a model in the poetry of the Arabs, or some basis in their commonly recited turns of phrase, or in their histories. (quoted in Yellin 1937, 22)

In his criticism of *Wissenschaft* members who toiled over Hebrew but barely knew Arabic, Yosef pointed out the advantage of his being born in Baghdad and having Arabic as mother tongue, which made it easier for him to research the field despite being an autodidact: "I myself feel that in spite of this disadvantage in learning, I was aided instead by place and language, the place of my birth in Babel, and my mother tongue, Arabic" (quoted in Hakak 2009, 251). *Wissenschaft* scholars were failing, according to Yosef, because none knew "the ways of the Easterners, or understood their language and expressions without having lived among them and having closely observed their lives and practices" (quoted in Hakak 2009, 250). Yosef pointed out the link between the errors in the research of *Wissenschaft* scholars into the poetry of Spain, and their distance from Arabic culture:

If we look at the book of annotations in search of a picture of the knowledge and understanding acquired by our Hebrew brethren in Europe regarding this beautiful Hebrew literature, and observe it from our Hebrew-Arabic perspective, we will be forced to admit that the respected author has not succeeded in illuminating anything of what was written. (*Hatzfira*, 5 November 1901, p 3)

The identification of the *Wissenschaft* as being part of European culture was a key component of Yosef's critique. It is expressed in the contrasts he outlines between interpretations of Spain's poetry by European Jewish research and the Arab-Jewish interpretation he himself represents. In "Letter to David Yellin," Yosef writes:

By my word, this is an attempt by Westerners to interpret the words of an Eastern poet using a Western aesthetic! And from reading it you are given to understand that Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, the Sephardi, actually spoke with an Ashkenazi accent, and used European images and phrases ... And if the Germans and the English and the French and the Russians can Germanise and Anglify and Francify and Russify him, then what is left of Yehuda Halevi that makes him unique? (quoted in Yellin 1937, 15)

Yosef's dispute with *Wissenschaft* scholars and his passionate arguments over the nature of the poetry of Spain were conducted in the context of his work as trader at the Hong Kong stock exchange which has been ignored in existing studies of his work. Yet his approach to modernization was greatly influenced by his experiences as a member of the growing Baghdadi diaspora in Southeast Asia.

What is Eastern literature? Ariel Bension's project

Some of the Arab-Jewish intellectuals who became part of the new *Haskalah* circles at the turn of the twentieth century proposed alternatives to the European and Western-influenced models, putting forward Eastern cultural and poetic models. They believed that modern Hebrew literature should return to the East, and thus to its intimate relationship with Arabic. They viewed Hebrew as an Eastern language and most of its historical traditions as Eastern. With the symbolic and physical return of Hebrew literature to the Land of Israel, located in the East, Hebrew literature should be "*Mizrahi* [Eastern]." These ideas are also connected to the various views of these thinkers regarding Jewish nationalism, the growing division between Jews and Arabs, and the nascent Israeli culture and its affinities between East and West.

The concept of "*Mizrahi* literature" that they use is different from the meaning it acquired in Israeli culture in the second half of the twentieth century. The latter relates mainly to works of Jews from Arab, Muslim, and Ottoman countries, written in Hebrew in Israel, and distinguishes these from Hebrew works by Ashkenazi Jews which are referred to by the neutral term "Hebrew literature," without an (ethnic) qualifier, Eastern or Western. "*Mizrahi* literature" should be understood in its earlier context, employed by its creators to convey the idea that the rebirth of Hebrew culture (and Zionism) was essentially a return of the Jewish people to the East, including the Jews of Eastern and Western Europe, the Ashkenazim, who to some extent were viewed by non-Jewish Europeans as Eastern/Asian. This was an alternative to the ruling power of Hebrew literature and of Hebrew literary studies from the beginning of the *Haskalah* movement in the nineteenth century to the Zionist movement in the early twentieth century.

The Jerusalemite group

The Jerusalemite group formed around Avraham Shalom Yahuda (1877–1951) and David Yellin and also included Yosef Meyuchas (1868–1942) and Yitzhak Yehezkel Yahuda (1863–1941). It was active in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Palestine/Land of Israel and developed an alternative model to the dominant trend in Hebrew revival circles, which was based on a return to the Arab-Jewish Andalusian legacy (Yardeni 1969; Berlovitz 1998; Evri 2014, 2016). Describing these writers, scholars, and translators as "the Jerusalemite group" is problematic because this "localizes" a considerably broader project. Although most members were native Jerusalemites who lived and worked in the city, many moved on to other places, forming a broad ideology of Jewish nationalism and modern Jewish culture. The group saw the potential for an Arab-Jewish cultural partnership in the Land of Israel. Members pointed out "historical examples of Arab-Jewish cultural collaboration," and emphasized "Jewish poetry in medieval Arab centres ... poems of Israel in the land of Ishmael" (Berlovitz 1998, 100).

Similarly, the group's concept of modernization was not the dominant one of the new Hebrew literature, centred on European and Western culture. Meyuchas, for example, proposed Arabic as a basis for children's literature and popular literature, which were lacking in Hebrew (Bezalel 2008, 356).

As evident from Yosef's quotations (above) as well as from Yahuda (1946) and Yellin (1975), this Eastern programme was based on the link between Palestine's Sephardim and the Sephardi heritage of al-Andalus, featuring the former as bearers of the legacy of medieval Spain and as its ideal interpreters. Works by Jews of Golden Age Spain offered a Hebrew high culture born of an Arab-Jewish bond, which was relevant as a model for modern-day Palestine/Land of Israel, with its own Arab-Jewish character. The memory of Andalusia also featured in the Arabic *Nahda*, gaining prestige as a model of the glorious Arab past to which to return. Yahuda, for example, gave public lectures on Andalusia in Arabic in Jerusalem (Evri 2016).

Within the new Hebrew culture, linkages to Arab culture was a unique undertaking of the Jerusalemite Sephardi intellectuals. Towards the end of the Ottoman Empire, some of these intellectuals were members of both the Hebrew renaissance and the Arabic *Nahda*, at a time when the two were seen to be neither contradictory nor incompatible. The connections the Jerusalemite group proposed served as a model during the early decades of the twentieth century for other Jewish-Arab intellectuals such as Nissim Malul (1892–1959), Shimon Moyal (1866–1915), and Esther Moyal (1873–1946).

Ariel Bension

Ariel Bension Yehuda Levi was born in Jerusalem in 1880. His father was the kabbalist Rabbi Yehoshua Zion Halevi and his mother was of the Yahuda family. Bension studied in a Sephardi religious school and at the *Hesed El* and *Tiferet Yerushalayim* seminaries. He was familiar with the kabbalists of the *Beit El* seminary, of which his father was a member. He later travelled to Germany where he studied at four universities. He also attended the University of Berne in Switzerland, eventually completing a doctoral thesis on the Samaritans. In 1910 Bension returned to Palestine/Land of Israel, working as a teacher and a newspaper reporter. During 1913 he served as Chief Rabbi in Monastir, Macedonia. Bension attended the 11th Zionist Congress in Vienna in 1913, where he convened a special committee of Sephardi delegates which decided to call for a world conference of Sephardi Jews. In 1920 he returned to Palestine/Land of Israel and became active in the World Zionist Organization.

In the early 1920s Bension began a new chapter in his life, working as a representative of the United Israel Appeal (*Keren hayesod*) in many countries including Iraq, India, Indochina, Egypt, North Africa, Spain, and Portugal. Throughout this period, which lasted until his untimely death in 1933 in Paris, Bension stood out as a charismatic speaker who motivated Jewish communities to support the Zionist movement and the *yishuv* in Palestine/Land of Israel. He particularly influenced on Arabic-speaking Jewish communities (Iraq and North Africa) and among Sephardi communities in East Asia. Bension was an unusual figure in the United Israel Appeal and in the World Zionist Organization. He travelled to Jewish communities as a preacher whose ideological and educational sense of mission outweighed his mission as fundraiser (Gaon 1938; Tidhar 1959; Bezalel 2008). In his visits he presented a different picture of Zionism, based on a symbolic and actual

return to the East. He exhibited a similar approach in his literary works, research and journalism.

Bension produced two main literary compositions. *Hilula, or the Wedding Canopy of Death*, written in 1918, was published in translation to German in 1920 and printed in Hebrew in 1928. This book contained poems and prose. It was intended to be a prologue to *The Book of Rafael*, which would narrate the life of the last mystic in a dying Sephardi hasidic sect at the *Beit El* seminary.⁶ Bension's second book, *Sar Shalom Shar'abi*, was published in 1930. Rabbi Shalom Shar'abi, who lived in the eighteenth century, was the greatest of the *Beit El* kabbalists (Giller 2008). In this book Bension claimed that "a complete anthology of the legends of Shar'abi will be forthcoming in a special book," yet such work was never published. In 1932 Bension also published his study *The Zohar in Muslim and Christian Spain* in English (Bension 1930, 8).

A less known contemporary of the Hebrew writers Yehuda Burla (1886–1969) and Yitzhak Shami (1888–1949), Bension continued the direction of Avraham Shalom Yahuda and David Yellin in their argument that Hebrew literature in Palestine/Land of Israel should be Eastern. He claimed that this change was underway in his time. In his 1912 article "To the False Prophets," Bension contrasted the literature created in Palestine/Land of Israel with that of Europe:

A new art form is coming into being in our land – the art of Hebrew musical composition. This is not the Western music of exile, forged in the destruction of our nation's soul; nor the Western Aryan music with its roots in the drunkenness of Dionysus. This is the natural Hebrew music whose origins lie in that wonderful harmony of the innocent Eastern soul, and which takes its rhythm from the lyre of David.

Bension assumed that the return to Hebrew and to Palestine/Land of Israel necessarily meant a return to the East for all Jews. His view of the East was romantic: innocent, natural and connected to biblical rhythms. In his own work he expressed the attempt to create an Eastern Hebrew literature, with a new form and a new rhythm. Unlike Bension, Burla, a Sephardi Hebrew writer, argued in his 1917 correspondence with David Avisar, that it would be impossible to found their new works on the Golden Age of Spain, now that Spinoza and Kant, Nietzsche and Goethe's Faust, all "assault our soul" (Bezalel 2008, 360). Writing about his attitude to Eastern and Western music, Burla explained: "We understand and feel all kinds of scales similar to the Hijazi Arabic one ... while we cannot comprehend the notes and chords of Beethoven," yet Burla also expressed hope that harmonic connections between East and West would be created.

Unlike Bension's discourse, Burla's was already split along ethnic lines between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in Palestine/Land of Israel. He does not ask whether modern Hebrew literature should be solely Eastern, solely Western, or a synthesis of the two; he asks instead, what works these young Sephardi writers should produce while assuming that Ashkenazi writers only produce Western Hebrew works. While for Bension the new Hebrew literature was unquestionably Eastern, Burla was wondering how Eastern writers ought to represent their Eastern community within the new Hebrew literature, which was Western by nature. The forms to be used were Western (the novel, the novella and the short story), and within these one could write about the East, employing a language that mediates between the two worlds, for example, one that includes phrases in Arabic and Judeo-Arabic, but being careful to translate them in footnotes for readers

unfamiliar with them.⁷ In contrast, Bension sought ways to produce new literary forms and shatter existing templates. His novels *Hilula* and *Sar Shalom Sharabi* are experimental, exploring different forms. This may be the reason they are quite short: for Bension, they were meant to be introductions to larger works he planned to write later, that is, *The Book of Rafael* and *The Legends of Sar Shalom*. Yet these were never published, possibly never written or developed beyond initial drafts, notwithstanding Bension's hints that they had been completed. In a sense, *Sar Shalom Sharabi* can be seen as a fulfilment of *The Book of Rafael*, dealing as it does with the kabbalistic *Beit El* seminary.

At the beginning of *Sar Shalom Sharabi*, Bension writes:

With these few pages, which reveal for the first time something of the special lives of the Sephardi hasidic sect in Jerusalem, that these things are not related second hand, nor drawn from other literary sources (there are almost none), but taken together largely form a picture of childhood memories, conversations, rumours, and oral traditions which I heard from within this *Beit El* group, in which I resided from my birth until the age of twenty.

With these words Bension confirms the primacy of his writings, their veracity and their origins in his own recollections and in his personal link to the events in *Beit El*. But he also relates that writing the book was, in part, a result of the distance that had grown between him and *Beit El*, and of his becoming a researcher:

Much later, with the perspective of distance, and having delved deeply into the mysterious lives of the mystic sects in Israel and among other nations, the analogy presented itself to me of its own accord, and with it appeared the images of those few members of that small group.

In this text Bension presents himself as someone rescuing an earlier way of life from oblivion by its transference onto the written page from its kabbalistic context and transforming it into modern literature. He juxtaposes the story of the *Beit El* kabbalists with the hasidic movement of Eastern Europe to which thousands were drawn, while also positioning his writing, which assembled stories of the righteous told in rabbinic language, as an Eastern alternative to the Ashkenazi hasidic literature:

Few know that this movement had a close sister movement that sprang up at a similar time, and in fact a few years earlier, born of the same parents the – Zohar and the Kabbala – and that this sister lived for many generations in Jerusalem, albeit without becoming a mass, popular movement.

Bension provides a historical and research context for the book, and in a scholarly footnote on the books of Sharabi he points out:

It is worth mentioning here the books of Rabbi Shalom Sharabi that have come down to us, *Nahar Shalom* and *Rehovot hanahar*, which hold a number of mystical revelations are for the knowledgeable. His books are based on the teachings of Ha'ari [Isaac Luria].

After providing historical and research context for the book, Bension (1930) describes the *Beit El* kabbalists:

Up we went to the uppermost level, seated there on benches where elders wrapped in white cloaks, woven from silk from the land of the sun, that flowed over their bodies; or dressed in soft woollen clothes of Kashmiri thread, and their heads adorned with woven Persian caps.

In these descriptions of clothing from remote locations, Bension echoes the romantic Orientalist writings about the East, religion and mysticism, which he knew well and which are also present in *Hilula*. He thus locates Jerusalem's Sephardi kabbalists within a broader Eastern context stretching from Palestine to Iran, India, and Japan. In some respects Bension echoes the pan-Asian vision of the Japanese intellectual Kakuzō (1903).

Bension's perception of Easternism can be related to Ottomanism, to European Orientalism, to the Arabic *Nahda* and Arab conceptions of the East (the *Mashreq*). Yet in a lecture Bension gave in Shanghai in 1924 in the presence of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) he chose to formulate "Mizrahiness" as pan-Asian:

And how happy I am to see gathered here members of all the peoples of Asia, believers in the Bible, the Quran, and the Upanishad-Vedas, Zoroastrians, students of the Tao, creators of the eternal faiths fixed for generations. (*Doar Hayom*, 25 May 1925)

Bension then links Tagore's poems and Jewish heritage:

Reading his poems, one finds oneself in the company of a new Psalmist, playing the same divine music that David plucked from the harp and the lyre. I particularly sensed this similarity between his poems and the Psalms when I read *Gitanjali* in Hebrew translation by author David Frischman. In this translation from Bengali to Hebrew – from one Eastern language to another – I felt that the soul of the original had been preserved. (*Doar Hayom*, 25 May 1925)

For Bension, Tagore's thought and poems were close to Jewish culture as outputs of Eastern culture, while European-Western culture was foreign:

Tagore's works reveal to us once more the precious pearls hidden in Eastern literature, and restore to us, Jews, the thoughts and ideas lost to us due to our long connection with an alien culture. (*Doar Hayom*, 25 May 1925)

In his lecture, Bension spoke of his relationship to Arab culture and of the close linkage between Arabic and Hebrew:

With wonder and deepest admiration we all stand for the culture of the Arabs: their language, literature, art, science, and philosophy; their marvellous Quran, which is a most valuable treasure of morality and democracy ... The Jewish and Arab people are like an ancient lyre waiting for the strumming of a divine player such as King David, so that its beautiful melodies might ring out once again. (*Doar Hayom*, 25 May 1925)

For both Yosef and Bension, affinity with Arab culture was connected to their growing up in an Arabic-speaking milieu – Baghdad and Jerusalem – and living in a Jewish community speaking Judeo-Arabic. (During Bension's adolescence in Jerusalem, Jews spoke Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, and Yiddish, while Hebrew was witnessing the first attempts to turn it into a spoken language). In the context of his efforts to modernize Hebrew literature, Yosef further deepened the affinity with Arab culture and literature in the context of the modernization of the Jewish communities of the Arab world. For his part, Bension connected through mysticism to the Arabic language, through the works of ibn 'Arabi (the Muslim-Andalusian mystic of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries); the works of ibn Tufail (a Muslim-Andalusian philosopher of the twelfth century); and through the similarity he discovered between their writings and the Zohar and Spanish-Jewish mysticism (in his 1932 book on the Zohar in Muslim Spain). An element common to Yosef and

Bension was their idealization of Muslim Spain-Sepharad-Andalus as a Hebrew–Arabic and Judeo-Muslim cultural model: for Yosef, through the Golden Age poetry and for Bension, through Spanish mysticism. Bension, moreover, identifies the three greatest works of Judaism as outgrowths of a particular Eastern geography: the Bible as a work of Judea, the Talmud as a work of Babylon, and the Zohar as a work of Spain (Bension 1932, 12).

In his books *Hilula, or the Bridal Canopy of Death* and *Sar Shalom Sharabi*, Bension aimed to realize the new, fully Eastern, form of art he had proposed for Palestine/Land of Israel and which he described in the article “To the False Prophets.” He did so in *Hilula* by combining prose and poetry and using the form of letters sent by Sultana to her nephew Yazid. In *Sar Shalom Sharabi*, Bension wove together tales of the Sages and the righteous with hagiographic literature, moving in genre between memoir and research of mysticism and Kabbalah, and between the devotional poetry of the *Piyyut* and the Zohar. All Bension’s writings were inspired by his aspiration to discover a Hebrew literary form linked to the East generally, and to Palestine/Land of Israel, specifically. Bension was, at the same time, influenced by German Orientalism and romanticism, and by attempts in different parts of the world to root new literature in existing traditions rather than in those of the West. A prominent case in point was of Rabindranath Tagore’s literary project. Bension shared the complex relationship with the West like Tagore’s as a writer of Bengali-Indian literature. Educated in Britain between the ages of 17 and 19, Tagore translated some of his own works into English, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, and travelled and lectured widely throughout the world.

Conclusion

This article has examined the work of Shaul Abdallah Yosef and Ariel Bension, each within his own creative context yet also within broader contexts that gave rise to common concerns. These included the multi-faceted context of modernist models in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Europe, as well as the various intellectual networks within which the two were active. We explored the possibilities proposed by these intellectuals in response to (i) the tendency of the European centre of Hebrew literature, and subsequently in Palestine/Israel as well, to define the new Hebrew literature as a process of Westernization and Europeanization and (ii) to the *Wissenschaft* approach in Europe and later also in Palestine/Land of Israel. We also highlighted the position within which Yosef and Bension often found themselves, that is, bearers of tradition rather than innovative researchers and writers.

The models proposed by both were born out of a relationship with, and sometimes opposition to, the dominance of Europe and Western culture in the discourse of Jewish intellectuals. Both Abdallah and Bension proposed a renewal of Hebrew culture through a real and symbolic movement Eastwards, as well as links with the Arabic language and Arab poetry and style. These ideas were rooted in the physical journeys of these two individuals and in their cultural location on the seam between West and East. Within this context, it is possible to read anew their research and literary activities as sites containing moments of controversy and opposition, yet also of creative and contemplative collaboration at a formative moment in the renewal and re-establishment of

modern Hebrew culture and literature. The review of their writings reveals unfamiliar poetic and analytical models, embodying conceptions pertaining to the affinity between Hebrew and Arabic, the link between Jewish modernization and Arab modernization, and the place of Jewish culture between East and West.

Bension and Yosef should not be seen as bearers or preservers of traditions facing extinction; but instead as active participants in renewing and reformulating these traditions as both scholars and creators. As scholars, they proposed innovative models, Yosef in relation to Hebrew-Sephardi poetry, and Bension, to the Sephardi kabbalistic tradition. As creators, they introduced a series of aesthetic and poetic models: Yosef's regarding the place in modern literature of Spain's classical school of poetry, and of its translation from Arabic. Bension proposed an Eastern literary model, worthy of a place at the centre of the new Hebrew literature, that comprised poetry and prose while combining different genres such as Midrash, hagiography, and memoirs.

While Yosef's connections were mainly with intellectuals in Europe and in the Baghdadi diaspora, and only to a limited extent with Palestine/Land of Israel scholars (such as David Yellin), the native Jerusalemite Bension was in close contact with the Hebrew intellectual movement in Palestine, encompassing Sephardi scholars and younger local scholars (such as Itamar Ben Avi), Russian intellectuals, and the Sephardi kabbalists and religious scholars. Bension's later academic activity in Europe and his Zionist activism brought him into contact with German Orientalists and Zionist leaders. He was also in touch with Tagore. Whereas Yosef was active mainly in the context of the *Haskalah*, and did not relate meaningfully to the Jewish national question, the question of Jewish return to Palestine/Land of Israel and the place of Sephardim in it were pivotal to Bension's philosophy and literary writings.

Yosef wrote his literary works in Hebrew; his research and polemics in Hebrew and in Judeo-Arabic and his business dealings in English, while also reading literary Arabic. Bension wrote his literary works in Hebrew (translated into German), his research and polemics in Hebrew, German, and English (his book on the Zohar was also translated into Spanish); his research also addressed mystical works written in literary Arabic. Yosef operated outside established academic and rabbinical frameworks, while Bension was ordained as a rabbi, and completed his doctorate in Germany and Switzerland.

In their work, Yosef and Bension do not present a contradiction between tradition and modernization. Judeo-Arabic was used in the press for which Yosef wrote, and in business, as a language of modernization. Bension did not view Rabbinic Hebrew and modern Hebrew as contradictory or incompatible.

The re-examination of the models developed by Yosef and Bension permits us to escape the reduction of Hebrew literature to a monolingual project informed by Westernization and Europeanization. It also enables us to escape the reduction of "Mizrahiness" to a movement only framed within Jewish nationalism. Instead, Yosef and Bension can be placed within a landscape of multiple locations, loyalties and collectives, embodying broad and complex spatial contexts.

Revisiting these options provides an opportunity to reinstate systems for the study of medieval poetry and modern Hebrew literature that offer different logics in several respects: the separation in time (between the Middle Ages and the modern age); the separation in space (between West and East); and to the division between different frameworks of knowledge and discourse (Hebrew and Arabic literature; and Jewish thought

on kabbalistic writings). During the formative moment of the establishment of modern Hebrew literature and literary research – based altogether on binary distinctions between Hebrew and Arabic, Jews and Arabs, Jewish studies and Oriental studies, tradition and modernity, Europe and the East, and secular and religious literature – the discourse of Yosef and Bension embodied alternative directions for Hebrew culture and literature, based on the interactions and connections rather than on binary distinctions.

While in recent years research into the new Mizrahi Hebrew literature has grown, little of it has been dedicated to exploring its connections with the literary traditions of Jewish communities of the Arab, Muslim, and Ottoman worlds. Paradoxically, this study of Mizrahi Hebrew literature has often been confined to the national-Zionist period and to modern Hebrew language. We have attempted to challenge these divisions and the assumptions underlying them while wishing to propose a new perspective on the processes governing the formation of modern Hebrew literature and its interrelation with the new Mizrahi literature.

Notes

1. We are consciously using the formulation “Palestine/Land of Israel” when referring to the space/land. While some readers may find it clumsy, it is important for us to use both terms because this phrasing better represents the multiple affiliations to the land/space by various constituencies.
2. *Perah* was published as a Judeo-Arabic weekly in Calcutta at the end of the nineteenth century, and distributed throughout Iraqi-Jewish communities in India, China, and Iraq. See: Ben-Yaakov (1985); Avisur (1992).
3. His book *Givat Shaul*, which includes commentary on Yehuda Halevi, was published after his death by Shmuel Krauss, in 1923 in Vienna (Yosef 1923), in response to the *diwan* of Halevi edited by Chaim Brody and published by *Mektize nirdamim* (Berlin: 1894–1930, 1895, 1901).
4. *Mishbetzet hatarshish: A Book of Commentary on Sefer hatarshish* by Rabbi Moshe ibn Ezra, was published after its author’s death by Shmuel Krauss in Vienna in 1926; Baron David Ginsburg had printed *Sefer hatarshish* in 1886.
5. He discovered the *diwan* of Tudros ben Joseph Abulafia, *The Garden of Parables and Riddles*, and wrote a commentary on it. After Shaul Abdallah Yosef ‘s death, Yellin published the *diwan* together with the commentary (Abulafia 1932–1936).
6. Bension (1928).
7. For Burla’s attempt to deviate from this pattern in his later novel *The Journeys of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi*, and his writing in the *maqama* style, see Behar (2013)

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