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Hebrew Literature in Hungary in the Epoch of Haskalah

Conference paper – *Enlightenment (Haskalah) and its impact on Jewish life in Romania*
(Cluj-Napoca, October 22-24, 1996)

Published – *Studia Judaica*, VI (Cluj, 1997), pp. 169-176.

As the title of my paper indicates, the subject of my survey has crystallized through narrowing the material under study. First, I studied only the works written in Hebrew within the period of a few decades - although there were Jewish literary works in other languages. Some of the *Haskalah* authors, discussed here had written in German, too. We recognize that Jewish literature does not only exist in Hebrew; but I was limited to be able to handle the subject matter. Secondly, only works written in the spirit of *Haskalah* were included in the study.

The subject of the lecture - as it would be true in most cases after such a careful narrowing of the material - got slight scholarly attention so far. Posterity has allowed this literature to be forgotten. Only literature considered to be milestones in the history of Reform-Judaism or the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Jewish studies) has been preserved. As early as the second half of the 19th century the Jewish Enlightenment in Russia already posed the question: Why is it that the Hebrew literary attempts of the *Haskalah* did not create high quality literary achievements? On contrary, these works characterized as mediocre, highly pedantic and written in a stilted style.¹ In his answer to this question Eliezer Ben Yehuda emphasized the artificial nature of *Haskalah* literature. Hebrew literature "if it remains within the confines of a narrow intellectual elite, priding itself on its linguistic prowess and biblical scholarship, will ultimately be condemned to archaism and irrelevance."² According to another rather simplifying definition, *Haskalah* literature is a period of the history of Hebrew literature that has historical importance but lacks aesthetic value.

The problems of Hebrew Enlightenment in Hungary are really marginal compared to the events that took place in the main centers, in Germany and later in the Polish and Russian areas. It is understandable that in works on Jewish (or Hebrew) literary and cultural history the personalities and products of Hungarian *Haskalah* appear only as the mediators of important changes which took place in the centers. Their presentation generally lacks individual features

¹ Avineri, Slomo, *The Making of Modern Zionism*. New York: Basic Books, 1981. p. 84.

² Avineri, 1981, p. 86.

and the characteristics of local versions.³ Are there really such local characteristics of the Hungarian Haskalah? At the beginning of the formation of the modern Hungarian national culture and before the assimilation process of Jews living in Hungary - the common local features of the *Haskalah* in Hungary, if there are any, can hardly be ascribed to the influence of the Hungarian environment. This is in contrast to the Hebrew compositions written one or two generations later, which evidence patriotic enthusiasm and a reaction to national events - for example the poems written and translated by Simon Bacher.⁴

The period between 1820 and 1850 is called the 'Galician period' in the history of *Haskalah*.⁵ These dates are approximate - like any date regarding a period in the history of a thought or style. 1820 indicates the end of the Berlin Haskalah, the time by which the Hebrew language had become a second language or a language of secondary importance for German Jews. Orthodox Jews were no exception.⁶ After this Hebrew literature developed only in Eastern Europe. However, works had been written in the spirit of *Haskalah* long before 1820, from around the turn of the century, in the area of Galicia. The term "Galician area" when applied in literary history means by and large the territories of the Hapsburg Empire, i.e. Bohemia, Austria, Northern Italy and Hungary.

It is not by accident that all these countries are treated as a unit. At the end of the 18th century and in the first decades of the 19th century, when national cultures began to emerge and before the assimilation of the Jews, the Empire represented a cultural unity and a link for the Jews. Many enlightened authors came up with the idea that strengthening the patriotism towards the Hapsburg Empire could be a means to establish good relationships with the non-Jewish environment.

New ideas arrived to Hungary via Prague, which was one of the centers of Jewish studies at that time. The Jewish population of the city, its traditional institutions and even the Orthodox Chief Rabbi, Ezekiel Landau were open to new ideas coming from Berlin. While Landau (1713-1793) definitely opposed the Frankist Sect and the Ba'al Shem Tov's Hasidic

³ e.g. Waxman, M., *A History of Jewish Literature*, vol. III. New York, 1960.; Slouschz, N., *The Renaissance of Hebrew Literature (1743-1885)*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1909.; Klausner, J., *A modern héber irodalom története 1782-től napjainkig*. Budapest, é.n.

⁴ Bacher, W., Hrsg., *Hebräische Dichtungen von Simon Bacher*, I-II. Wien, 1894.

⁵ e.g. Jichaki, J., "Deoteihem shel sofrei ha-haskalah al ha-leshon ha-ivrit ve-darkeihem beharhavatah ve-hiddusah", *Leshoneinu*, XXXIV. (1970), p. 288.

⁶ Shavit, Yaakov, "A Duty too Heavy to Bear: Hebrew in the Berlin Haskalah, 1783-1819", in: Glinert, L., Ed., *Hebrew in Ashkenaz*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1993. p. 120.

trend because he considered them a deviation from traditional Judaism, he was initially attracted to the ideas of *Haskalah*. He supported the historic, grammatical and scientific books advertised by *maskilim* and only when the aggressive anti-rabbinical tendency gained strength and the radical pedagogical programs emerged he turned against the movement. Thus the educational institutions of Prague were able to transmit, spread and in a sense modify the ideas of *Haskalah*. To prove the importance of Prague we only need to list the names of great figures who spent time studying there: Salamon Löwishon from Mór, poet and scientist (1788-1821); Mózes Sámuel Neumann (1769-1831) and Baruch Schönfeld (1778-1853), both teachers who advocated the new ideas: they were authors mostly of scientific and pedagogical works; Moshe Kunitzer (1774-1837) who is known in the first place as the author of the first Hebrew drama written in Hungary; Izrael Wahrman (1755-1826) and his son Juda Wahrman (1793-1868), both rabbis in Pest.⁷

Apart from Jewish people born in Hungary and educated abroad Jewish teachers arriving from Bohemia and Moravia also played an important role in the spreading of new ideas in Hungary. (Similarly, Jews who emigrated to Hungary from these territories made up a significant section of the Jewish population in Hungary. For example Áron Chorin (1766-1844) or Lipót Lów (1811-1875) of the next generation were born in Moravia.)

Another important channel of *Haskalah* was the periodical *Ha-meassef* which was of importance to the whole generation. This was the first Hebrew periodical that existed for a longer period. It established a forum for the followers of *Haskalah* belonging to different trends and residing in various countries. The periodical, which was edited in Königsberg, later in Berlin and Breslau had regular readers and correspondents in Hungary. Subscription numbers never exceeded 300 and only a few subscribers were from Hungary. Salamon Rosenthal from Mór, Sámuel Bürger from Csenger, Lób Dukesz and Beer Oppenheimer from Pressburg or the above mentioned Salamon Löwishon were among the regular contributors.

In his work *The History of Jewish Literature* Ármin Kecskeméti⁸ declares Hebrew writings published in *Ha-meassef* and other volumes 'Europeanised Hebraism' since they followed European literary genres. There were epigrams (*mihtam*), idylls (*shir roi*), epic poems (*shir sippuri*), etc. Using these new genres had a double message. On one hand it introduced European aesthetic standards to the Jewish community that had so far been culturally secluded. On the other hand it proved to the 'outside world' that Hebrew language

⁷ Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, "The Development of Hebrew Poetry in Hungary", *Areshet IV* (Jerusalem, 1966).

⁸ Kecskeméti, Ármin, *A zsidó irodalom története*, II. Budapest, 1909, p. 221.

was viable and capable of serving as a vehicle to express old and modern ideas in a new format and also that Jewish cultural heritage could be integrated into the common culture of mankind.⁹

Drama as a genre appeared also at this time. Lacking traditions in Hebrew literature, it had to rely on examples outside of Hebrew literature. In the 18th century Hebrew drama started to develop in two major directions. The first one was the allegorical play, similar to the Christian morality play of the Middle Ages. Moshe Hayyim Luzatto's (1707-1747) *Layesharim tehillah* (Amsterdam, 1743) served as an example of this kind of play for generations. The other one was the Hebrew version of European plays on Biblical topics. Genuine works such as *Melukhat Shaul* (Wien, 1794) by Josef ha-Efrati Troplowitz (1770-1804) are rare exceptions.¹⁰

Three Hungarian authors of the beginning of the 19th century are known to have tried their hands on dramas. *Bat Jifhat* (Wien, 1805) a drama with a Biblical topic by Mózes Sámuel Neumann and *Beit Rabbi* by Moshe Kunitzer (Wien, 1805), a drama about Yehuda ha-Nasi (the editor of Mishna) could compete to be the first. Both were published in 1805, the month is unknown. Mordechai Popper from Neszmély adopted the story of Rabbi Akiba for stage. His drama was called *Pirkei Rabbi Akiba* (Wien, 1808). That the latter two authors chose rabbinical topics is quite surprising in view of the antecedents and it calls attention to an important characteristic feature.

As Miksa Grünwald proved in his *Jewish Biedermeier* this preference for rabbinical topics was a result of the fact that new ideas arrived via Prague, since the Talmudic elements that were rejected in Berlin found their way into (or rather found their way back into) Jewish Enlightenment in Prague and later became characteristic in Hungary.¹¹ Apart from the beginnings of Hebrew drama in Hungary another example of this is a work by Baruch Schönfeld (1778-1853) in which he rendered Talmudic legends in verse (*Anaph etz avoth*, Buda, 1841).

From a linguistic point of view, however, Hungarian authors followed the Berlin *Haskalah*: they rejected the trends of linguistic development of Mishnah, Midrash, Hebrew literature in Spain, new rabbinical literature and they returned to classical language. This meant for them a return to purity, to the ideal state of things, so that starting from there, they

⁹ Shavit, 1993, p. 116.

¹⁰ Huber, Lipót, *Drámai költészet és színház a zsidóknál*. Budapest, 1900.

¹¹ Grünwald, Miksa, *Zsidó biedermeier*. Budapest, 1937. p. 68.

could correct and detach the post-Biblical layers of the language which for them was connected with the notion of the Diaspora. This criticism of Talmudic language did not mean the rejection of the whole of the Talmud, as we have seen in the period of the Galician Haskalah where several writers tried to present the values of the Talmud. As Kunitzer put it in the preface to his drama *Beit Rabbi*, his aim was to earn respect for the Talmud from scholars of other nations who spoke Hebrew and from Jews who were ignorant of the Talmud. By introducing the *hakhamim* he intended to prove that they had a place and significance in the common history of mankind, that they could be measured with the scholars of "great and infinitely amazing peoples": "you will say, 'Israel hath not been forsaken' " (Jer. 51,5).¹²

It is customary to mention Pest-Buda and Pressburg as the centers of Haskalah in Hungary. The fact that Pressburg, which at the same time was a stronghold of Orthodoxy, became one of the centers of the Enlightenment indicates another crucial characteristic connected to my previous statements. As W. O. McCagg puts it in his *A History of Habsburg Jews*: "Regardless, the Jews of Hungary were talking to each other in mid-century in a way those of Galicia were not."¹³

We have to be careful with this kind of generalization. The split of the trends appears to be an unambiguous process only by subsequent simplification. We are able to form a more genuine picture concerning the attitudes of certain people only by employing much more subtle wording and detailed research. For example, it was natural to take sides with the reformers regarding certain issues such as education, and simultaneously to hold conservative views as far as everything else is concerned.¹⁴ It would be a mistake, though, to identify the followers of *Haskalah* with the radical religious reformers. Markus Nissa Weiss from Pest and Eliezer Liebermann from Homona are not outstanding figures of Hebrew literature in Hungary in the period of the *Haskalah*.¹⁵

The *Haskalah* movement gave initial impetus and models for the Hebrew poetry in Hungary.¹⁶ We can mention Baruch Schönfeld, Áron Chorin, Moshe Kunitzer, Miksa Emánuel Stern who all wrote poems, but the only poet of the period, in the word's literary sense, was Salamon Löwisohn (Lewisohn) (1788-1821). Among the Hebrew authors in Hungary only his works were able to achieve considerable artistic recognition in the history of

¹² Kunitzer, Moshe, *Maaseh hakhamin. Beit Rabbi*. Wien, 1805, amud 9.

¹³ McCagg, W.O., *A History of Habsburg Jews, 1670-1918*. Indiana Univ. Press, 1989., p. 129.

¹⁴ Katz, Jacob, *Out of the Ghetto. The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation 1770-1870*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973., p. 151.

¹⁵ Büchler, S., "A zsidó reform úttörői Magyarországon", *Magyar Zsidó Szemle*, 1900., p. 107-119.

¹⁶ Carmilly-Weiberger, Moshe, "A magyarországi héber költészet tematikája", *Évkönyv 1985-1991*, p. 318.

Hebrew literature. The short-lived poet and scholar from Mór worked at the famous Schmid publishing house in Vienna as a Hebrew proof-reader. His best known works are *Melitzat Yeshurun* [Biblical poetics] (Wien, 1816), *Beit ha-osef* (Wien, 1815) and *Siha be-olam ha-neshamot* studies on the Hebrew language (Prague, 1811), *Mehkerei Aretz* the geographical lexicon of the Holy Land in the age of the Bible (Wien, 1819).

As a consequence of the decree of Joseph II and the reforms in the German territories, education became a central issue for certain sections of Hungarian Jewry at the turn of the century. It is characteristic of this age that many works written in simple, easily intelligible Hebrew were published. These were either textbooks or popular educational works propagating sciences. These books had a double purpose. They were not merely aimed at presenting the factual knowledge of a given discipline (algebra, geometry, astronomy, geography, Hebrew grammar, etc.) but also at introducing and reinforcing the correct usage of Hebrew. I would like to mention a few examples: *Kelil ha-heshbon* (Berlin, 1796) [Algebra and Geometry] and *Mosdot tevel* (Wien, 1820) [Astronomy] by David Friesenhausen, *Parperoot le-hokhma* (Wien, 1814) [Geometry] by Jakab Schacherles, *Ha-kadur* (Wien, 1835) [Geography] by Mózes Sámuel Neumann, whom I have mentioned above, and *Otzar hayyim* (Prague, 1932) educational methodology by Zerach ben Meir.¹⁷

The use of Hebrew for "external" disciplines is an expression of the cultural - intellectual ideology which believes in the compatibility of the so called "foreign ideas" (science, metaphysics) with the Torah, with the system of the Jewish religion. Hebrew became a device of modernization and the language of communication and culture in almost all fields of writing. Readers were able to get information about the world around them in Hebrew from the new Hebrew periodicals and from the numerous scientific and literary adaptations. To be able to fulfill the requirements of the new roles expected from the language, its renewal became necessary. Paradoxically, one of the most important elements of this renewal was the turning back to classical Hebrew.

Language reform, or rather the conscious cultivation of the language was a theme constantly present in the literature of the age. For example, there were debates in the columns of *Ha-meassef* regarding the proper Hebrew name of certain concepts of the modern world such as meridian, continent, barometer, etc.¹⁸ Löwisohn, Juda Wahrman, Mózes Neumann published theoretical works concerning the Hebrew language, the logical foundation of

¹⁷ Further examples: Venetianer, Lajos, *A magyar zsidóság története*. Budapest, 1986., p. 124-129 and Jichaki, 1971, p. 57.

grammar, the aesthetics of language, etc. *Mikhtevei ivrit* (Wien, 1815) the "Model book of Correspondence" written by Neumann proved to be the most popular practical work. It was published several times and it was both enlarged and revised thanks to its continuous popularity.

The question of language cultivation takes us to another thematic unit about which I would like to say a few words in the final part of this study. That is the topic of Judaic studies or Jewish scholarship. Some important and noted works were published in Hungary in this field. Some of them preceded the school hallmarked by the names of N. Krochmal, S.J. Rappaport, L. Zunz, M.H. Luzatto. I would like to refer again to the works of Löwisohn about Biblical geography and analysis of the language of the Mishnah, and we can mention the biography of Yehuda ha-Nasi by Kunitzer, too. This work, which was published as the introduction to *Beit Rabbi*, was a pioneering work in the field of modern historical research in 1805.¹⁹ We can state that in spite of taking into consideration all its weaknesses.

Obviously, these are not the most outstanding achievements of Hungarian Jewry in this field, but the study of those works would exceed the chronological and language limitations of this paper.

¹⁸ Jichaki, 1971. p. 41.

¹⁹ Fahn, Reuven, "Ha-Rav Moshe Kunitz", *Resumot*, IV. (1926). p. 257.