

VIII. MEDIAEVAL HEBREW PROSE

About the time of the Piyut writers, towards the end of the period when the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds were being compiled, the use of Hebrew as a living written language began to spread throughout the Western Diaspora: North Africa, Spain, Italy, France, and western Germany. We may suppose that the national spirit which suffuses the Piyutim was the main factor in bringing about the resumption of the active use of the national language. In all likelihood also the rise of Jewish trading activity along the France-Italy-Egypt-India trade route, which reached its zenith in the second half of the first millennium C.E., contributed to the revival. This trade not only raised the standard of life of the Jewish communities and gave them an appetite for cultural activities, but also facilitated the movement of ideas, of books, and of the emissaries of the *yeshivot* throughout the Diaspora.

The process extended over several centuries. We first become aware of the awakening interest in Hebrew in the countries closer to Palestine, but in the tenth century it also affected the most distant Jewish communities, namely, Spain and the successor states of the Frankish Empire in northern France and western Germany. Those two areas were soon to become important Jewish cultural centres in their own right.

The type of Hebrew which thus spread between 500 and 900 C.E. was, of course, the language of Mishnah and Piyut. In Spain, too, these types spread initially, but were soon replaced by the "modern" Biblical-type Hebrew revived through the efforts of R. Saadiah Gaon. This new trend did not reach "Ashkenaz,"¹

¹ Ashkenaz is the son of Gomer in Genesis 10:3. The Babylonian Talmud Yoma 10a, identifies Gomer as Germania, Since the Franks were

the area of the former Frankish Empire, for in the meantime the contacts between the Ashkenazi Jews and those of the Muslim east had become tenuous. Thus it could happen that for over two hundred years (900-1150) the knowledge of the Jews of Christian Europe of the cultural achievements of their co-religionists in Islamic countries was incomplete and lagged behind events, sometimes by a matter of generations. Poetry in Arabic metres only penetrated into "Ashkenaz" two generations after Rashi; the science of Hebrew grammar, that had been created in Spain, only became known to them much later, but most important of all, the Jews of north-western Europe only heard vague reports about the sciences and philosophy in which their Arabic-speaking brethren excelled.

The flourishing of the sciences among Jews in Muslim countries was closely bound up with their acceptance of Arabic as a main written language (as it was accepted also by the Christians in those lands). It appears probable that as early as the days of Saadiah Gaon (882-942) a considerable part of the Jewish middle class used Arabic, and it was for these that Saadiah found it necessary to translate parts of the Bible into Arabic. His translation still serves the Yemenite Jews alongside the Aramaic Targum. The language of trade among Jews was Arabic written in Hebrew characters, as we can see in many hundreds of letters preserved in the *Genizah* (chamber for storing unusable Hebrew written material) of the Great Karaite Synagogue in Cairo. Their command of the Arabic language opened for these Jews the treasures of Greek science, but recently translated into Arabic, and they themselves began to write about those subjects and to employ philosophy for bolstering the Jewish religion, starting with Saadiah in his "Beliefs and Opinions" and up to Maimonides's massive "Guide for the Perplexed." Thus the very same Jewish circles who cultivated poetry in Biblical Hebrew did not employ Hebrew for prose writing. For this reason they also felt no need to develop the means of expression of the

"sons" of the Germans, the name Ashkenaz could be applied to them and was intelligible to those who knew Midrash.

Hebrew language in order to enable it to deal with the new intellectual pursuits of their own time. On the contrary, the inability of (Biblical) Hebrew to express scientific ideas, or, as they put it, "the insufficiency of the language," served as an excuse for their unwillingness to give up Arabic.

While great Arabic prose written by Jews came into being in North Africa and Spain, the Ashkenazi Jews created a prose literature of their own, exclusively in Hebrew. This literature dealt with Biblical exegesis (Rashi) and religious and ethical matters, and was more popular in character. Much of it is still unpublished, and only in the last generation have we become fully aware of the greatness of its thought.²

The language of that literature was a continuation of that of the Mishnah and Midrash, with some admixture of words from Piyyut, Prayerbook, and Bible. The language is well represented in the writings of Rashi, the style artist and past master of pithy expression; but its most typical presentation is found in the "Book of the Pious," a collection of ethical tales compiled in southern Germany about 1200 C.E. In that book we have a language very far indeed from grammatical refinement and much influenced by the local German vernacular which the Jews spoke, but at the same time of great expressive force, and even possessed of a certain charm. It impresses us as a popular, living and lively Hebrew, on the way to crystallize into a totally new language, as were at the time all the vernaculars of Europe.

Notwithstanding the lack of communication between the Jews of Christian Europe and those of Spain, some intellectual contacts began to be established around 1100, as a result of the conquest of part of Spain by Christian states, and probably in the wake of interest shown by Christian scholars in the scientific treasures preserved in Arabic books in that country. These scholars translated such books into Latin, with the help of Jews who provided them with an oral interpretation in Spanish, Catalan, or Provençal. One of those Jewish translators, Abraham bar Hayya

² See the Hebrew work by J. Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hassidism*, published by Mosad Bialik, Jerusalem 1968.

Savasorda ("Chief of Police") from Barcelona, wrote in Hebrew, in response to requests of southern French Jews, a number of books on mathematics, philosophy, and other subjects, and even an encyclopaedia of the sciences. He employed the Mishnaic Hebrew which the Jews of southern France used to write, and not the Biblical Hebrew customary in his native Spain. Since he was an Arabic speaker, and accustomed to write in that language, its influence can be felt in his style. He died before 1136. His contemporary, Abraham ibn Ezra (1092-1167), wandered throughout Europe, and wherever he went he spread the knowledge of Hebrew grammar, scientific Bible exegesis, philosophy, and mathematics, in an elegant style, but also in his case in the Mishnaic Hebrew of his readers.

In 1148 the Jews were expelled from Muslim Spain. On that occasion the family of Maimonides went to North Africa, and so did many others, but some emigrated to the South of France, where local Jews enthusiastically accepted those amongst them who were scholars, since their appetite for the Arab-Greek sciences had been whetted. There arose among the Spanish immigrants men who undertook the translation into Hebrew of whole books. The first was Judah ibn Tibbon, "the Father of Translators," and the first book to be translated was a mystical-philosophical treatise, *The Duties of the Heart*, by Bahya ibn Paquda. In a space of some 250 years well over a thousand books were translated by over 160 different translators, until in the end the Hebrew reader disposed of the largest quantity of available books amongst all peoples of Europe.

In the course of this translation activity, the Mishnaic-type Hebrew changed its character. The translators increasingly constructed their sentences on the model of Arabic sentence structure by exploiting certain possibilities of Hebrew grammar which did indeed exist before, but were rarely employed, and thus their Hebrew looks alien, in spite of the fact that only in rare instances does it stray from accepted grammatical rules. The translators created thousands of words, partly necessitated by scientific terminology, but in part due to imitation of Arabic ways of expression. In the end also authors of original Hebrew works took to

this style, which to us reads almost like a foreign language; however, if anyone wishes to acquaint himself with the thought of Judah Halevi or Maimonides, he has to get used to that form of language.³

In the wake of the translations, original Hebrew philosophical works, by Spanish and other Jews, began to make their appearance. Maimonides wrote 1170–80 in Egypt his great halakhic Code *Yad Hazaqah* in a Hebrew based on that of the Mishnah, and prefaced it with a philosophical chapter in which the influence of the style of the translators is clearly discernible. His son Abraham (1186–1237) still wrote a major ethical-philosophical treatise in Arabic. The philosophers who came after him, however, in Southern France and in Italy, such as Jacob Anatoli (1194–1246), Levi ben Gershom (Rabag, 1288–1344), Ḥasdai Crescas (1340–1410), and Joseph Albo (1380–1435) wrote exclusively in Hebrew, though it often resembled the language of the translations to such an extent as to be hardly distinguishable from them.

Side by side with this manner of writing Hebrew for scientific purposes, the Spanish emigrants in France and Italy went on writing poetry and artistic prose in pure Biblical Hebrew. The most impressive achievement in virtuosity in writing Biblical Hebrew was composed in this period by an emigrant writer in the South of France, who also worked as a translator: the *Tachkemoni* by Judah al-Harizi (1170–1230). Also in this they soon gained numerous disciples from among local Jews. The habit of writing poetry in Arabic metres and Biblical Hebrew penetrated even to Germany in this period.

For the first time since Hebrew had ceased to be spoken did one and the same Jewish community now employ simultaneously two types of Hebrew: Mishnaic Hebrew for prose and Biblical Hebrew for poetry. This practice, once established, remained in force, and was to have weighty consequences for the history of the language.

³ A translation of Judah Halevi's *Cuzari* into modern literary Hebrew by Judah Even-Shmuel (Kaufman) appeared at the end of 1972.