

IX. THE PRE-MODERN PERIOD

In our chapter on "Hebrew in the Diaspora" we commented on the striking analogy between the use of Hebrew as a written language by medieval Jews and the employment of classical languages as written but not spoken idioms by other peoples in the same period. This situation, which is apparently characteristic of medieval society, gradually changed among the peoples of Europe from the 14th century onwards. In one country after another, the use of Latin was increasingly abandoned, and the spoken language introduced into ever new spheres of use. While thus being raised to the status of an official, written language, the spoken tongues underwent a change: they absorbed thousands of Latin words or formed new words which were exact translations of Latin ones, and their syntax, too, was deeply influenced by the involved and long-winded sentence structure of Latin as it was written in the Middle Ages. The advancement of the spoken language started in the west, in England and France, and thence spread eastwards and southwards, until it reached the Balkans in the 19th century. Many signs point to a close connection of this change in language habits with the rise of national states and the beginnings of nationalism in its modern sense, as also with the emergence of an industrial economy. This stands to reason, for the modern industrial state is in need of constant and efficient communication with its citizens, and general literacy is a necessary condition for industry, army, and the multifarious governmental bureaucracy. Be this as it may, a firm linkage emerged in Europe between nationalism and language; the national tongue became a central factor in the struggle of European nations for their national independence.

It is even possible to recognize certain stages in the process

by which the national languages achieved a separate identity, stages that appear in various countries at different times. One of these is a tremendous burst of savage creative energy, a kind of linguistic Baroque. This is represented most blatantly in the writings of Rabelais in France and in a less extreme form in those of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in England. This stage is everywhere followed by "classicism," a careful restriction of the vocabulary and syntactic structures of the language.

The Jews did not take part in this linguistic revolution, for several reasons. For one, in those very countries where the process began, there were no Jews at the time; they had been expelled in the 13th century. The vast majority of Jews lived in countries which were reached only late by the wave of nationalism and the idea of a national language. But even then the Jews could not very well adapt the idea of nationalism to their own purposes, being a minority scattered all over the place, and without any hope for a state of their own. As for changing their written Hebrew for the languages spoken by the Jews, this would have led to the loss of Jewish national unity, and in the countries of Western and Central Europe would perforce have removed an essential cultural barrier between Jew and non-Jew and led to assimilation, as indeed was the case from the 18th century onwards in every Jewish community that abandoned writing in Hebrew and began to conduct its cultural and religious life in the language of its host-nation. As it happened, the new national states assisted the forces working for Jewish self-preservation by imprisoning the Jews in ghettos and barring their access to scientific and cultural progress.¹

Yet, just as there were some short-lived outbursts of a messianic-nationalist spirit among Jews (Joseph Nassi, David Reubeni, the movement of Sabbethai Zevi), so there were some peculiarly Jewish reflections of the linguistic revolution, viz., the emergence of exclusively Jewish spoken, and to some extent written, languages. Until the end of the Middle Ages the Jews,

¹ For a discussion of this period, see Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1961).

whenever they migrated from one country to another, continued for one or two generations to speak in the language of their former home, but then adopted the language of their new host-country. Most Jews spoke the same language as their neighbours, though in a slightly different Jewish dialect containing Hebrew words. Now this changed. The German Jews who emigrated to Eastern Europe as a consequence of the riots accompanying the Black Death (1348-9) did not in due course adopt Polish or any of the other languages of their surroundings, but their German-Jewish speech developed into a separate language, Yiddish. Even the German Jews in Germany gradually dissociated themselves from the speech-forms of their surroundings, and there emerged an idiom now usually referred to as Western Yiddish. From the beginnings of printing, books were printed in this language (both in its western and eastern forms) mainly for women and the educationally underprivileged. Nor did the exiles from Spain adopt Turkish or Arabic, but continued to speak Spanish, which soon became a peculiarly Jewish idiom quite different from the Spanish of Spain or South America. In this, too, many books were printed. As the literature in these two languages was religious, and thus of high standard in spite of the popular tone, we may see it as a parallel to the penetration of spoken languages in the Christian world into the spheres of religion, science, and administration.² However, unlike Latin among Christians, Hebrew did not recede before the advance of the Jewish languages, and there developed a state of co-existence with mutual fertilization.

Hebrew, too, went through the two stages which, as we said above, the spoken languages passed on their road to inheriting the place of Latin. In the 16th-17th centuries we witness in Hebrew a change that at first glance makes the impression of

² A kind of Jewish literary language also came into being in North Africa, where Jews wrote in colloquial Arabic. This was not customary among the Muslims, and we can therefore speak of a separate Jewish literary idiom. This one was, however, not based on a spoken language exclusively Jewish.

decay: incorrect grammar and syntax, unidiomatic expressions, and confusion of Hebrew and Talmudic Aramaic on the one hand, and on the other hand a rich variety of daring and involved allusions attesting an astonishing familiarity with the Biblical and Talmudic sources.³ Because of its cavalier attitude to grammar, this style has come in for severe criticism in our time, but it would be better to take it as the expression of a period of upheaval and ferment, in which the urge for decorativeness and clever tricks brought about a "breaking of the vessels"⁴ in language.

The classicist stage came to Hebrew in two versions, which in their duality and difference are a symbol of the changes in Jewish values that were yet to happen. In the 18th century the Haskalah (Enlightenment⁵) literature began in the West (Germany, Holland, Italy), and thence spread to Eastern Europe. Haskalah literature is characterized in its formal aspects by the adoption of European literary genres (Western-type poetry, essay, drama, the novel); in its themes by nostalgia for the Biblical period, with its beauty, its pristine purity and its national independence; and in its language by rigid self-restriction to Biblical Hebrew, zealous attention to grammar, and avoidance, as far as possible, even of combinations of words not pre-figured in the

³ It should be remembered that this was also a time when *Pilpul* flourished as a method of studying the Talmud, a method based on intensive study of the language of the sources and daring utilization of its hidden possibilities of meaning.

⁴ One of the central ideas of the Lurianic Kabbalah, belonging to the period discussed, which is offered as an explanation of the origin of sin and wickedness, and the difficulty of the good in extricating themselves from it.

⁵ The term "enlightenment" properly speaking covers only the initial phase which soon gave way to a more important romantic movement also subsumed under the name Haskalah. The history of Haskalah is covered by all works on the history of modern Hebrew literature; see however in particular S. Spiegel, *Hebrew Reborn* (New York and London, 1939), J. Klausner, *A History of Modern Hebrew Literature* (London, 1932), and S. Halkin, *Modern Hebrew Literature: Trends and Values* (New York, 1950).

sources. The imitation of the model of European classicism is obvious, and the Haskalah writers were fully aware of it.

It is not usual, on the other hand, to regard the Hassidic literature as classicist; it is commonly taken for a natural expression of popular spirit. But not only is it a fact that the Hassidic literature began at the same time as that of the Haskalah, but the Hassidic stories did not reach us in the form in which they were told by the Baal Shem Tov and his heirs, in Yiddish, but were written down in Hebrew, and it is to be assumed that in the process of their Hebrew formulation (from memory) they underwent stylistic elaboration. In contrast to the manner of the previous centuries, these stories exhibit outstanding stylistic self-restriction, which conceals more than it says, in a language which has measure and rhythm. For us it is easiest to observe the characteristics of this style through its re-creation by the genius of S.J. Agnon. Characteristically, those who know Agnon's writings admire their form no less than their content.⁶ In fact, thanks to Agnon and his influence on the younger generation of Israeli prose writers, the style of the Hassidic tales has at present the effect of a proper classical model.

Both Haskalah and Hassidic literature turn essentially backward, towards the past; to the extent that they endeavour to solve the problem of the Jew in their own time, they do so by directing his vision towards the values of the past and of eternity. Although it is customary to include Haskalah literature (but not its contemporary, Hassidic literature) in the term "Modern Hebrew literature," it cannot be said to have taken the decisive step towards direct contact with the image and problems of the present. The language of these two literatures is a language of the past, and not "Modern Hebrew"; to the emergence of the latter we shall turn in what follows.

⁶ This is also one of the main reasons why Agnon is almost as difficult to translate as poetry (where also form is paramount). However, Hassidic tales are also very difficult to translate, and their beauty became properly recognized in the outside world only through the *Nachdichtungen* of Martin Buber.