

CHAPTER SEVEN

MEDIEVAL HEBREW*

§254. It is generally assumed that MH died out as a spoken language at the end of the second century C.E. as was certainly the case in the Galilee, though possibly it lived on for some time in Judea. However, there is little doubt that around the fifth century C.E. H was not used anywhere as a spoken language, although it was still extensively employed in writing until it was revived three generations ago as a spoken language. Though technically dead for centuries, H continued to change. The original Palestinian phonetics, even of the sacred text of BH, not to mention that of MH could not be preserved throughout the various parts of the Diaspora in which each region created its own system of pronunciation.

Generally, H consonants and vowels were very much influenced by the local language. Only the Yemenite community was able to keep quite close to H as known to the Masoretes (see §373).

We are able to discuss some of the well-defined linguistic characteristics of several quasi-dialects of H which arose after the Mishnaic-Talmudic period. All the H "languages" which arose have one feature in common. While BH and MH were natural autonomic languages, each representing a stage of spoken H (with the possible exception of the H of the DSS, see above), all of the later strata of H represent a mixture of BH, MH, and other elements. Even the H of the Spanish poetry which strove to base itself linguistically on BH did not refrain entirely from using MH. Conversely, even though Maimonides states explicitly that his *Mishneh Torah* was written in MH, it nonetheless contains biblical and other elements.

This process of intermingling the two strata of H apparently began immediately after MH died out in the Galilee. When the Amora R. Yochanan

*According to I. Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, reprint New York 1969, p. 1, the Jewish Middle Ages lasted until the close of the eighteenth century.

(third century C.E.) heard other Amoraim intentionally substitute a BH form for MH (רְחָלִים ‘ewes’ instead of רַחֲלוֹת; מִסַּךְ instead of מִזֶּג ‘to mix wine with water’; Talmud Bavli Ḥullin 137b, Avoda Zara 58b) he upbraided them, declaring that these two languages were different (לְשׁוֹן תּוֹרָה לְעִצְמָהּ (לְשׁוֹן חֲכָמִים לְעִצְמָן [לְחֹרֵד]). However, since MH was dead and BH had greater authority, his opposition was futile.

Literature:

אפשטיין, מבוא, עמ' 282–283 (רחלים).

A. Medieval Hebrew as Spoken and Literary Language

I. Occasional Use as a Spoken Language

§255. To some extent H was employed as a spoken language even during the long period of the Exile. Jews traveling from East to West or migrating from country to country would converse with their fellow Jews in H. As Parḥon (twelfth century) puts it: “When travellers arrive in the Christian lands they do not understand the native Jews. That is why the latter are forced to converse in the Holy Tongue.” When a German rabbi, Isaiah Hurwitz, journeyed to Palestine by way of Syria he tells us that in Aleppo, “Their speech is the Holy Tongue; and, whenever I lectured there, I did so in the Holy Tongue likewise.” There is reason to believe that at the beginning of the present millennium H was employed to a certain extent as the language of instruction in Jewish schools in the Moslem countries. We hear about schools in Amsterdam in which certain classes were taught in H (1680). In Frankfurt and in other cities in Germany parents are admonished to see to it that the children speak H (1711). In tenth-century Palestine we hear about H being spoken in Tiberias; in Jerusalem in the fifteenth century, even non-Jewish travellers report this fact. The British Consul in Jerusalem, J. Finn mentions H as a vehicle of everyday speech (1854). Moses Montefiore (nineteenth century) also alludes to this fact.

In Yemen until very recently the Rabbi’s sermon was delivered in H. Talmud and Mishnah were taught in H and scholars sometimes conversed with one another in H.

Literature:

C. Roth, *Personalities and Events in Jewish History*, Philadelphia 1953, pp. 136ff.;

מ. איש-שלום, לתולדות הדבור העברי, קובץ ארשת,

ירושלים תש"ד, עמ' שפז;

ש.ד. גויטין, סדרי חינוך בימי הגאונים ובית הרמב"ם,

ירושלים תשכ"ב, עמ' קסג;

ש. מורג, העברית שבפי יהודי תימן, ירושלים 1963, עמ' ל.

II. *Medieval Hebrew as a Literary Language*

§256. Of course these were exceptional cases.

"During the Middle Ages Jews used as their vernacular the language of the territory they lived in. But there was a significant divergence between those Jews living under Islam and those in Christian countries. In Christian lands where Latin was employed as a literary medium, H was the only literary language which the Jews could use. In the Arabic-speaking countries, on the other hand, where the vernacular was quite close to the literary language, Jews were inclined to write in Arabic. Even authors who spoke with grief and chagrin of the neglect of their own tongue, did not as a rule hesitate to resort to Arabic in their literary productions." (Halkin).

Poetry, however, was generally composed in H even in these countries, since as Halkin rightly points out: "Poetry among the Arabs served the purpose of displaying the beauties of their language... The finest example of style was believed by them... to exist in the Qur'ān.... Their [the Jews'] pride... impelled them to do for H as their neighbors did for their tongue."

But in Christian countries literary production was in H whether its topic was connected with the Bible, Mishnah or Talmud, or with secular subjects. Even contracts with Gentiles were at times drawn up in H as were the famous *Starrs* in England (eleventh–thirteenth centuries).

Literature:

A.S. Halkin, "The Medieval Attitude toward Hebrew", in A. Altman, ed., *Biblical and Other Studies*, Cambridge, Mass. 1963.

F. A. Lincoln, *The Starra*, Oxford 1939, pp. 1–7.

B. Developments in Hebrew Linguistics

§257. But before we proceed to describe the different H “dialects” of the Middle Ages, we should mention two very important developments which played a part in the transmission of H: 1) the invention of the vowel signs and 2) the rise and development of H linguistics.

I. *The Invention of Vowel Signs (Vocalization)*a. *The Need for Vowel Signs*

§258. The Phoenician alphabet, like nearly all the Semitic alphabets derived from it, was originally devised to indicate consonants only. Symbols employed to indicate vowels (namely *waw* and *yod*) occur very rarely, e.g., in Phoenician inscriptions, but are already widely used in the Bible. Yet in themselves they could not solve the problem of how to indicate the correct pronunciation for those who did not speak BH as a natural language. *Waw* served not only as a consonant (e.g., מָוֹת ‘death’), but could also indicate both long /o:/ and /u:/ e.g., שׂוֹר ‘ox’ and שׂוֹר ‘wall’, שֵׁלחַן ‘table’ and בֹּקֶר ‘morning’, while it was very rarely employed to indicate short vowels. The same holds true for *yod*, cf. עִיר ‘city’ and עִיר ‘city’; הַיִּכָּל ‘palace’, but שֵׁן ‘tooth’. There is practically no *mater lectionis* for [a] vowels. The problem became acute during the Second Temple period when on the one hand Aramaic was becoming dominant, and on the other, MH was replacing BH. To be sure, the writers of the DSS tried to solve the problem by extending the use of the *matres lectionis* to indicate short vowels, by adding *alef* (not extensively) in the middle of words, and by introducing new *matres lectionis*, and the authors of the Mishnah and the Talmud followed in their footsteps to a certain extent. Nonetheless, the existing symbols could not indicate all of the timbres, e.g., the difference between /u/-/o/, /i/-/e/. There is reason to believe that only a small number of professional readers were able to recite the Bible in the synagogue without interference from the colloquial languages, i.e., MH and Aramaic.

At the time of the Arab conquest in the eighth century, the Jews had to know three dead languages (BH, MH, and Aramaic) for religious purposes so that the use of vowel signs to indicate the timbres became imperative, and indeed this seems to be the reason for the invention of the vowel signs.

Literature:

For a similar account see S.W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*², vol. VII, Hebrew Language and Letters (High Middle Ages), New York, 1958, p. 4ff.

b. The Three Vocalization Systems

§259. The invention of the vocalization systems was apparently the work of the Masoretes of the second half of the first millennium C.E. Until the last century only the Tiberian or “oui” vocalization system was known, but during the last hundred years two additional systems were discovered, 1) the Babylonian, both simple and complex (originating in Mesopotamia), which was still in use in the Yemenite Jewish community until a few generations ago; 2) the Palestinian system, differing from the Tiberian and apparently abandoned very early. These two systems differ in the symbols used for the vowels, in the *dagesh*, etc. (the latter two systems employing supralinear signs), and also reflect different linguistic traditions. For example, the Babylonian system possesses only one symbol for both *pataḥ* and *segol*, as is reflected to this day in the Yemenite pronunciation.

Thanks to the invention of the vowel signs, every Jew was able to read the Biblical text whose reading was thereby stabilized. Although Mishnaic texts and Piyuṭim (see below) were very often vocalized, their vocalization was never standardized, and practically every manuscript followed its own rules.

Literature:

Bauer-Leander, *Hist. Gramm.*, p. 81–114;

Sh. Morag, *The Vocalization Systems of Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic*, 's-Gravenhage 1962, pp. 17–45;

מ. וויינר, ראשית ההברה האשכנזית וכו', לשוננו כז-כח (חשכ"ג-כ"ד) עמ' 231–230, 147–142

[A. Dotan, *EJ* 16, cols. 1404–61, esp. 1447–49. — E.G.]

II. *Pronunciation of Hebrew in Christian and Arab Countries*

§260. A discussion of the system of vocalization should be approached through a preliminary treatment of the pronunciation of Hebrew in the Diaspora from the beginning of the Middle Ages to the revival of the

Hebrew language. The geographical and historical aspects of this difficult subject still await systematic treatment. Until now only Medieval Spain has been studied, by the late I. Garbell. She concluded that in Moorish Spain the entire Hebrew sound system was adapted to that of (Moorish) Arabic. *Mutatis mutandis* this also holds true in the Christian countries where those H consonants which had no counterpart in the vernacular generally did not survive in H either. (Christian Spain, though, might have been something of an exception owing to its Moorish-Arabic neighbors, former domination, etc.) To be sure, there was certainly a tendency, as M. Weinreich points out, to preserve consonants in one form or another at least in the so-called “whole-Hebrew” (the reading in the synagogue, etc.), but doubtless this picture is generally correct.

Literature:

- I. Garbell, “The Pronunciation of Hebrew in Medieval Spain”, *Homenaje A. Millas Vallicrosa*, Barcelona 1954, p. 646;
 M. Weinreich, *op. cit.* (§259), p. 136.

a. Consonants

1. *Emphatics and Gutturals.* §261. It follows therefore, that the pronunciation of the emphatics /q, t/ in Christian countries merged with their non-emphatic counterparts /k, t/, while in the Moslem countries they survived thanks to their existence in Arabic. The same applies to /s/ which in Christian countries turned into /ts/, a phoneme absent in the Semitic languages except for Ethiopic. By the same token, the laryngals /ʕ, ʁ/ survived in the Moslem countries but disappeared in Christian lands despite apparent efforts to preserve the /ʕ/. In Europe towards the end of the Middle Ages we hear about the B^enē Xeth (an allusion to Gen. 23, 3) who pronounced the pharyngal /ħ/ as a velar [x], and the B^enē Heth who pronounced /ħ/ as [h]. According to Max Weinreich, the B^enē Xeth were Jews living in Slavic countries who, because of the Babylonian Renaissance (see below), tried to reintroduce the “original” pronunciation as /ħ/. Instead, they succeeded in introducing [x]. B^enē Heth were Jews who came from France and had to replace the pharyngal /ħ/ with the laryngal [h]. Survivals are found in Yiddish, e.g., the names Sīme, Simhe and Simxe all of which = סִמְחָה; the former reflecting the earlier Western pronunciation (and cf. above §28).

Literature:

Garbell, *op. cit.* (§260) *passim*;

M. Weinreich, *op. cit.* (§259), pp. 328ff.;

מ. וויינרייך, *לשונונו כג (חשי"ט)*, עמ' 85–101;

M. Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens und der Cultur der Juden in Deutschland*, Wien 1888, p. 75–77.

2. *Sibilants*. §262. But perhaps the most interesting development was that of the *shin*. In Europe during the first millennium C.E., the /š/ was lacking in the Germanic and Romance languages and in Greek. Therefore in the H pronunciation of the Jews who spoke these languages /š/ was replaced by [s] (cf. Sabbath = שַׁבָּת). At the beginning of the second millennium C.E., /š/ arose in these languages thus enabling the Jews to revert to the original pronunciation (apparently also with the help of Jews from regions which had preserved the /š/).

Even later, French and German Jews kept the [s] pronunciation in many instances, and cf. the cases of [kaddis], [sabbat salom] and [sabesdiker losn] discussed above §23.

Literature:

See above §23.

b. Vowels

§263. Here, too, there are differences among various regions. For example, the Sephardim do not distinguish between *qameš gadol* and *pataḥ* (both = [a]), and between *ṣere* and *segol* (both = [e]). The /o:/ of the Ashkenazic communities mostly turned into a diphthong: [oi, au, ei] e.g., שׁוּמֵר 'guard' [šoiimer], [šauimer], [šeiimer]. The short /u/ in certain regions of Eastern Europe turned into [ü]; cf. סֻקֵּה [süke] or [i] — [sike] in Yiddish.

The most important development concerns the fate of the *qameš gadol*. As set forth above (§37) there is no doubt that this vowel was pronounced as a type of [o] by the Masoretes of Tiberias, and until a generation ago it was commonly thought that the parallel Ashkenazic pronunciation reflects the Masoretic one. But H. Yalon has shown that in Europe at the beginning of the second millennium C.E., the Ashkenazic communities pronounced the *qameš gadol* like the *pataḥ*, and that the change to the so-called Ashkenazic pronunciation began in the thirteenth, and came to an end in the fifteenth century. (Cf. also below §§465, 474.)

1. *Old Pronunciation Sometimes Preserved in Yiddish.* §264. A few words with the older pronunciation survived until today in Yiddish e.g., קלל — [klal] ‘rule’, מִשְׁנָיִוֹת — [mišnayot] ‘rules’, נֶפְשׁוֹת — [nefašot] ‘souls’. How are we to account for this change? H. Yalon believed that it was the outcome of a parallel process in the German dialects so that it was mere coincidence that the *qamaṣ gadol* came to be identical with that of the Masoretes and Yemenites. M. Weinreich is inclined to believe that it is the outcome of the “Babylonian Renaissance” during which scholars who came to Europe after the destruction of the Babylonian academies brought with them the Babylonian pronunciation of the *qameṣ*. However, it is not entirely clear how the *qameṣ* was pronounced in Babylonia.

Literature:

M. Weinreich, op. cit. (§259), pp. 140, 237–239, 244;

ח. ילון, קונטרסים לעניני הלשון העברית, א, ירושלים

תרצ"ז-תרצ"ח, עמ' 62-78;

[Sh. Morag, “Pronunciations of Hebrew”, *EJ* 13, cols. 1120–1143;

א. אדלר, מסורת הקריאה הקדם-אשכנזית, מהותה

והיסודות המשותפים לה ולמסורות ספרד,

E.G.] — עדה ולשון ד, ירושלים, תשל"ט.

C. Piyyuṭim and Poetry

§265. In Palestine around the middle of the first millennium C.E. a new genre of religious poetry arose — the Piyyuṭ (from the Greek *poiētēs*). The Piyyuṭ is a hymn added to the older liturgy. “This designation (Piyyuṭ) was not quite as descriptive of the peculiar nature of this poetry as its... synonym, *hazzanut*; that is compositions of synagogue readers” (Baron). The composition of Piyyuṭim spread from Palestine to the diaspora, reaching its peak during the end of the first half of the present millennium and continuing sporadically for several centuries. Although the recitation of Piyyuṭim played an important role in synagogue services, it also met with opposition, and was one of the targets of the nineteenth century reformers in Germany.

Literature:

S. Spiegel, “On Hebrew Medieval Poetry”, in L. Finkelstein, ed., *The Jews*³