Chapter 7

MEDIAEVAL HEBREW

7.1 *Historical and geographical background*

It is not easy to establish precise boundaries for that stage of the Hebrew language generally known as Mediaeval Hebrew (MH). We have already said that RH stopped being used as a living vernacular around the end of the second century CE, surviving for several centuries, however, alongside Aramaic, as a literary language.[1] Although the transition to MH cannot be clearly defined, sometime during the sixth to seventh centuries and with the advent of Arab domination, there was a first movement towards the revitalization of Hebrew which may be considered as marking the beginnings of MH, even though the language remained deeply rooted in its past. This was the heyday of the Palestinian *paytanim*, liturgical poets who employed a highly idiosyncratic, prayerlike language pervaded by biblical allusion and neologism.[2] The same period sees the redaction of some late *midrashim* and the beginning of Masoretic activity.

The new vitality was limited to Hebrew as a literary language, but this does not mean that the language had disappeared entirely from daily use. Even though across the world Jewish communities tended to adopt the language of the host country for normal communication, they continued to pray and to read the Bible in Hebrew. This means as well that Hebrew must still have been

[1] See Rabin 1970, 324ff.

[2] However, the beginnings of *piyyuṭ* are to be found several centuries earlier, as shown by Ḥ. Schirmann (1953, 123).

taught in Jewish schools, and the testimonies of various mediaeval travellers show us that the use of the language in conversation had not ceased completely, as there were some communities, admittedly few in number, that used Hebrew in everyday life. We now possess a considerably greater quantity of financial documents written in Hebrew, including, for example, merchants' notes and papers concerning trade, taxation, and loans and other commercial transactions. From the same period there are also numerous Hebrew inscriptions, especially on gravestones.[3] Sending letters in Hebrew to people or communities in distant countries was a standard practice, and travellers from other countries arriving in a Jewish community would normally employ the language for purposes of communication. Although certain writers made efforts to 'revive' Hebrew, there are many indications that it had never completely died out as a spoken language.[4]

A new phase in the revival of Hebrew as a literary language began in the tenth century. Starting in the east, it very soon reached the western limits of the Islamic world, and, in particular, Andalusia. Advances in Arabic grammar which awoke interest in the philological study of Hebrew, as well as Karaite concentration on BH and Rabbanite efforts not to be outpaced, contributed to this linguistic renaissance.[5]

Thus, we see that MH was not simply an artificial, derivative continuation of such traditional genres as *piyyuṭ*, which had gained new strength in ninth-century Italy. The Hebrew used by the Jews of Al-Andalus developed a previously unknown vitality both in poetry – a new secular verse inspired by Arabic genres as well as a different brand of religious poetry – and in prose – philological studies, commentaries on Bible and Talmud, and works of a theological, philosophical, polemical, scientific, and medical nature. However, Hebrew was not the only language used in these

[3] See, for example, Cantera and Millás 1956.
[4] See Chomsky 1969, 206ff.
[5] See Allony 1973; 1974a; 1975; 1979; Roth 1983.

fields, as Jewish writers also employed Arabic, occasionally for poetry, but much more often in prose.

The overall picture is complex and lacks a single clear pattern of development. Closely connected with the historical and social milieu in which the literature was produced and the formation of a distinctive tradition which very soon imposed limits on the various genres, there is a more or less marked tendency for writers to fall back on the linguistic inheritance of BH and RH. Thus, they transform the senses of old words, create new ones by analogy, expand grammatical forms in order to adapt them to new requirements of expression, and accept some degree of modification of Hebrew under the influence of such languages as Arabic, Aramaic, Latin and other members of the Romance family, and German.

MH is not, properly speaking, a 'language' comparable to BH or RH. It did not possess sufficient vitality in daily life or even in literature to develop into a reasonably complete and homogeneous system. MH written works display many differences, but not enough to speak of different dialects. This is because MH was never a language in the full sense, but rather a revival of linguistic usages and traditions, developed according to each writer's judgement, depending on his particular social and cultural background, and in line with his own ideas about the language.

It is clear that throughout this revival a major rôle was played by the rise of philology, originating in the east and encouraged on the authority of Saadiah and other scholars from North Africa, which developed with incredible vigour in Andalusia in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that all the resulting studies were primarily concerned with BH and do not necessarily attempt to encourage the use of Hebrew as a living language, but rather to describe its grammar and vocabulary in the best way possible. Only passing reference is made to RH, and philologists do not usually discuss the revitalization of the language that was taking place before their eyes. It is not surprising, then, that these works are often written in Arabic, not

Hebrew. However, there were some powerful personalities, including Solomon ibn Gabirol, who felt a sort of divine calling impelling them to rescue their people from its blindness and to serve it with a tongue which spoke the worthiest of languages.[6]

It has been correctly pointed out that Jews in the Middle Ages held a variety of attitudes towards Hebrew.[7] Those who lived under Islam approached the issue very differently from those in Christian lands. The latter, although sometimes employing Romance languages, preferred Hebrew for their literary works, even though this was often only achieved by means of poor style, dubious morphology, and questionable syntax. Jews living under Islam, in contrast, had tended since the beginning of the tenth century to use Arabic for prose but Hebrew for poetry in an obvious attempt to distinguish this from contemporary Arabic poetry, written in the language of the Koran. This could have had an ideological basis, expressly stated by certain writers as an attempt to promote their own linguistic heritage, BH, as no less aesthetically pleasing than the language of the Koran. There was also a religious factor – a scrupulously orthodox Jew would have found it difficult to express his feelings in the sacred language of another religion. However, an additional important factor relates to the level of competence in Arabic itself – whereas authors and readers had no difficulty in writing and understanding standard Arabic prose, Arabic poetry, based much more closely on the language of the Koran, was considerably more demanding.

Many voices were raised throughout the Middle Ages in defence of the use of Hebrew. Among others, Saadiah, Solomon ibn Gabirol, Moses ibn Ezra, Judah al-Ḥarizi, Judah ibn Tibbon, and Profiaṭ Duran lamented in one way or another the abandonment of the language. Some connected it directly with the sad situation of the Jewish people in exile. At one point in his life, we find Maimonides regretting that he had written most of his

[6] Thus, in Ibn Gabirol's *Sefer ha-'Anak*, vv. 14–22. See Sáenz-Badillos 1980, 16.
[7] See Halkin 1963.

work in Arabic, perhaps because he had become increasingly aware that many European readers had no access to his works.[8] Nevertheless, when dealing with particular philosophical or scientific topics, most Jews living in Muslim countries resorted to Arabic (generally written with Hebrew characters),[9] which remained during this period the language of scholars, both Jewish and Muslim.

In Christian territories, certain translators, like those of the Ibn Tibbon family, who felt keenly the problem of using both languages, complained that Hebrew had an excessively limited vocabulary in comparison with Arabic. However, Al-Ḥarizi and Profiaṭ Duran countered by blaming the situation on the ignorance of those using the language. While the Jews of central Europe were taking great liberties with the rules of Hebrew grammar, authorities like Ibn Janaḥ and Moses and Abraham ibn Ezra exerted themselves in a variety of ways in order to recover the language in its full purity. The legitimacy of RH as a means of expression, on its own or mixed with BH, was doubted by the most extreme purists, although Ibn Janaḥ, like Tanḥum b. Joseph Yerushalmi and others, defended it.

The point at which MH ends is as uncertain as its beginnings. Setting aside the part played by some Jews in the Renaissance, Judaism as such, after the expulsion from Spain in 1492 and the difficulties experienced by Jewish communities elsewhere, did not undergo any significant major social or cultural changes until the second half of the eighteenth century. For many historians, the Jewish 'Middle Ages', and thus, in some sense, MH as well, did not end until then. It is only with the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) that genuine modernization begins, although in respect of language this was just as much tied to the past as was the Hasidic literature of the time.[10]

[8] See his letter to the Jewish community of Lunel in A. Lichtenberg, *Koveṣ teshuvot ha-RaMBaM we-iggerotaw* (Leipzig, 1859, repr. 1969), pp. 44 a–b. See Halkin 1963, 238f.
[9] See Baron 1958, 3ff.
[10] See Rabin 1973, 57ff.

MH spread as extensively as Jewish communities themselves, throughout the civilized world. With regard to MH literature, we should distinguish an eastern area which includes Palestine, Babylonia, and Egypt, a western area including North Africa and Spain, and a central European, or Ashkenazi, area from Italy to England and from France to eastern Europe.

The study of MH has only begun relatively recently. In the West, until the nineteenth century, primarily theological motives ensured an almost exclusive concentration on BH, and, occasionally, particularly among Jewish grammarians and lexicographers, on RH as well. From the middle of the last century, some basic works of mediaeval Hebrew literature started to appear in the West, along with a number of important studies on MH literary and linguistic features due to the labours of, for example, M. Sachs, W. Bacher, L. Zunz, J. Derenbourg, A. Neubauer, S.G. Stern, P. Kokowtzow, and M. Jastrow. The manuscripts of the Cairo Genizah, now housed in libraries throughout the world, have enormously increased our knowledge of this literature.

Even so, it still has to be said that the systematic and rigorous study of MH began only a few decades ago, and our present improved state of knowledge owes much to work undertaken in recent years in Israel and by Jewish scholars from other countries. Thus, we are still in the initial phase of a new discipline, where we lack as yet the necessary detailed studies of MH writers and works to develop a complete picture of the various linguistic forms which are included under the general name of MH.

For the language of the *payṭanim*, we rely on the listings of L. Zunz,[11] the embryonic dictionary of J. Kena'ani,[12] studies by M. Zulay, S. Lieberman, A. Mirsky, S. Spiegel, and most importantly in recent years, Y. Yahalom.[13] The language of Saadiah

[11] 1920 (1st ed., 1855), 116ff., 367ff.

[12] 1930–31.

[13] See Zulay 1936, etc.; Lieberman 1939; Spiegel 1963; Mirsky 1965–66; Yahalom 1974, etc., especially 1985.

has received the attention of, among others, C. Rabin, Z. Ben-Ḥayyim, S.L. Skoss, M. Zulay, and Y. Ṭovi.[14]

The language of the Jewish poets of Spain has been studied by, for example, B. Klar, S. Abramson, N. Allony, M. Medan, A. Mirsky, Ḥ. Schirmann, Y. Ratzabi, S. Spiegel, and Y. Ṭovi.[15] The language of translations from the Arabic was the subject of M.H. Goshen-Gottstein's 1951 doctoral thesis and other works.[16] Various studies by I. Efros, C. Rabin, G.B. Ṣarfatti, M.Z. Kaddari, A. Sáenz-Badillos,[17] and others have analysed the language of prose writings, in particular those of a scientific, philological, and mystical character. W. Bacher, D.H. Baneth, Y.A. Zeidmann, M.H. Goshen-Gottstein, and F.D. Fink are among those who have contributed to the study of the language of Maimonides.[18] The language of Rashi has been analysed by, for example, I. Avinery.[19] The *Sefer Ḥasidim* has been the subject of two doctoral theses, by M. Azar and S. Kogut, at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. A. Novel and C. Rabin have published various works on the language of Ashkenazi Jews.[20]

Also of importance are the many mediaeval inscriptions that have reached us. Limiting ourselves to Spain, after the initial work undertaken primarily by F. Fita, A.S. Yahuda, and M. Gaspar Remiro, F. Cantera and J.M. Millás finally brought to fruition a magnificent catalogue of a quite remarkable number of funerary and monumental texts, as well as short inscriptions written on, for example, seals and precious objects.[21]

[14] See Rabin 1943; Skoss 1942; 1952; Ben-Ḥayyim 1952–53a; Zulay 1964; Ṭovi 1982.

[15] See S. Abramson 1941–43; Allony 1941–43; 1960; 1974; 1976, etc.; Medan 1951; Mirsky 1952–53; Klar 1953–54; Schirmann 1954; 1965–66; 1979; Ratzabi 1956–57, etc; Spiegel 1974; Ṭovi 1972–73; 1982.

[16] Gottstein (Goshen-Gottstein) 1947; 1951; 1953a; Goshen-Gottstein 1957; 1961; 1968.

[17] See Efros 1926–27; 1929–30; Rabin 1943; 1945; Ṣarfatti 1968; Kaddari 1970; Sáenz-Badillos 1982; 1985.

[18] See Bacher 1903; 1914; Baneth 1935–36; 1952; Zeidmann 1943; Gottstein (Goshen-Gottstein) 1947; Fink 1980.

[19] 1940–60.

[20] See Novel 1958–59; Rabin 1968b.

[21] See Cantera and Millás 1956.

A broader view of the language is found in analyses of MH phonology, such as I. Garbell's article on the pronunciation of Hebrew in Spain,[22] vocabulary, for example, J. Klatzkin's dictionary,[23] and syntax, for example, C. Rabin's doctoral thesis.[24] An overall treatment of the language must remain a desideratum until many more detailed studies have been completed. There does exist a typewritten version of the classes of Prof. N. Allony in the University of Beer Sheba,[25] which, however, does not reflect the depth of his learning in the field of MH, as he never revised it with a view to publication. Meanwhile, E. Goldenberg's article in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* is the best available general description of MH.[26]

7.2 *The language of the* payṭanim

The Hebrew of the *payṭanim* may be regarded as a continuation of Palestinian RH, as used in public prayer. Early *piyyuṭ* originated and developed in the synagogues of Palestine as part of the *ḥazzan's* repertoire, offering him an opportunity for variety and innovation that was absent from the fixed format of traditional prayers and Bible readings.

From the time of L. Zunz,[27] it has been usual to describe the language of the *payṭanim* as a mixture of BH and RH, with the former predominating, although it also contains some characteristic new forms, usually coined by the *payṭanim* themselves. The resulting language was well-suited to a religious and highly nationalistic poetry which had many similarities to midrashic homily.

[22] Garbell 1954.
[23] Klatzkin 1928–33.
[24] Rabin 1943a.
[25] Allony 1974 (105 pages).
[26] E. Goldenberg 1971.
[27] 1920 (1st ed., 1855), 116ff.