

THE PROCESS OF MODERNISATION OF EASTERN SEPHARDI COMMUNITIES

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In traditional Judaism the present is seen as an attempt to perpetuate the ideals of the past; the latter serves as a model for the former. Up until the first half of the nineteenth century, the Sephardi communities of the Near East fit this model of traditional Jewish society. This is not to say that these communities remained static and immutable. On the contrary, the Sephardi communities, like any society, underwent constant change as each generation made its own contribution to the traditional heritage.

Change, however, is not synonymous with modernisation. Modernity must be understood as a specific type of civilisation which originated in Europe and spread throughout the world in various political, ideological, and economic forms.¹ Nor must the internal dynamics of non-Western societies be underestimated. In Europe, modernity was the fruit of endogenous evolution. Its spreading to other lands, on the other hand, took place only amid the antagonism between external forces and the forces at work within the traditional societies themselves. The reaction of traditional societies to the diffusion of modernity depended on several factors: (i) the level of relations with the West which developed in the countries where these societies, whether Muslim or Christian, were settled; and (ii) the position of strength of each country relative to the Western powers from which it borrowed most heavily during the modernisation process.

One type of relation between Western powers and the countries of the East was that of direct colonisation, as was the case with the Austro-Hungarian colonisation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Another type of relation was that of the nation-state, such as Bulgaria, which had a European orientation and borrowed certain characteristically European ideas, such as nationalism. In the Ottoman Empire, it was a question of semi-colonisation in economic terms. There were as many different sets of conditions as there were countries in a Near East which was looking more and more to the West. In Jewish societies, moreover, the influence of several particular modernising currents, which were reaching the Levant through Eastern Europe, could be felt. Among these currents were the Haskalah and those emanating from the second generation of 'Wissenschaft des Judentums' scholars active in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Through communication and exchange among the intellectual elite, such currents of ideas spread throughout the Jewish world in renewed forms.

In traditional Jewish societies, modernisation was not a passive process. The determination and action of local elites played a significant role. Bankers, financiers, and wealthy merchants who formed the economic elite found some of their own ideas and plans supported by those of certain intellectuals of the Haskalah.² The aspirations of these two groups converged. Mechanisms for change were taking shape in a Jewish bourgeoisie which was opening to the West. Not only did rich bankers encourage *maskilic* production; they also took the necessary steps to see that the projects of the Haskalah were carried out, as had been done in Eastern Europe, with the participation of the *maskilim*.

As these two elite groups were not always able to rely solely on their own resources, they turned to their Western counterparts for support. In such circumstances, modernisation became Westernisation and consequently had a French, or less often a German, character.³ Once again, the relation between the modernising efforts of Western European Jewries and the local community determined the nature of modernisation in a particular community. In many cases the modernising Jewries of the West played the role in the East which was filled in the West by the nation-state, which, in the name of uniformity, fought all corporate identities and sought to modernise its Jewish subjects through authoritarian means.⁴ Jewish leaders in Western Europe, while interpreting local reforms in light of their own experience, felt that direct intervention in the Jewries of Islam was a justifiable means of helping these communities adapt to new contexts and circumstances.

The next step in modernisation involved the establishment in the Eastern communities of institutions and organisations representing the opinions and ideals of various European Jewish groups. Among these

¹ See Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), chapter 1.

² Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry. A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), chapters 3 and 4.

³ Yitzchak Kerem, 'The Europeanization of the Sephardic Community of Salonika', in *From Iberia to Diaspora: Studies in Sephardic History and Culture*, ed. Yedida K. and Norman A. Stillman (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 58-74.

⁴ On the formation of the French Jacobin nation, see Pierre Rosanvallon, *L'État en France de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), pp. 100-110.

groups and organisations were the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), the Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden, and the World Zionist Organisation. Some of these participated in the French or German 'civilising mission' in the context of European imperialism of the period. This interventionism could not have been carried out without the complicity of the local elites in the Jewish communities of the Sephardi culture area in the East. These elites were predisposed to change and ready to join in the efforts of European Jews.

Thus, modernisation in the Sephardi world took on various forms. Several different modernisation movements underwent parallel developments. These movements were diversely interpreted by the Jewish communities according to the local history of each, and the conditions under which each had established contact with the West. This variety of interpretations came about in spite of the fact that, although diverse, these communities all shared a common culture and historical origin. There is yet another distinction to be made, although it is not an easy one, between the process of change within the communities and the influence of the models of more advanced societies upon this process.⁵

According to the local context and the possibilities it offered, the multiple processes of modernisation generated internal transformation in many directions, sometimes going beyond the initial premises of any one particular modernising movement.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, even before modernisation was imposed upon them, Sephardi Jewries in the Balkans and Asia Minor were looking to the West for renewal, especially through the intermediary of its intellectuals. The contemporary evolution of West European Jews had a significant influence on the process of renewal in the East, as is demonstrated by the literature and journalism of the period. When Sephardi Jews began to turn to the West, Hebrew letters were relegated to a position of secondary importance and reserved for scholars and religious circles, although the nineteenth century did see the production of a vast rabbinical literature. For the rank-and-file, Judeo-Spanish became the principal vehicle of modernisation. Significantly, this language also served to maintain a link with the Spanish past of the early immigrants of this area.

In the eighteenth century, the popularisation of rabbinical literature had maintained the vitality of the vernacular.⁶ This trend was begun in 1730 by Jacob ben Makhir Houlli with the publication of the first *Me'am Lo'ez* [From the speakers of a foreign tongue].⁷ Such publications flourished again in the nineteenth century, in the form of new editions of already published volumes, as well as original work. Houlli's book was followed by others, such as the *Koplas de Yosef Hasadik* [Verse of Joseph], 1732, and the *Maasiot del sinyor de Yakov Avinu* [Stories of the Patriarch Jacob], 1748 (re-edited in 1870), both works in verse.⁸

The translation of works addressing Jewish issues from Hebrew and other languages into Judeo-Spanish began as early as the first decade of the nineteenth century. This trend became stronger among the *maskilim*, encouraged by the influence of the second generation of the Wissenschaft des Judentums. Next to be translated were works of historiography. In fact, the passion for history of this period, not only Jewish history but also world history, represented both a certain secularisation and a desire to learn one's own history and origins before they were swept away in the wave of modernisation.

After the 1880s, imported modernisation gave a new impetus to the publication of historical works, biographies, collections of poetry, plays, doctrinal works, pedagogical texts in diverse disciplines, works on Ottoman law, sermons, and ritual prayers with poems in Judeo-Spanish. This mixture of translations and original works in the vernacular, borrowing as much from traditional as from secular literature, was a reflection of the complex evolution of Sephardi Judaism of that period.⁹ The Protestant mission based in Istanbul also contributed to the diffusion of Judeo-Spanish culture, both through the newspaper *El Manadero* [The Source] (1855–1858) and through Jewish and Christian religious works.

There followed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a wave of novels translated from French, Italian, Russian, and Hebrew, which continued until the 1930s. This literature, which included the best

⁵ C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 50.

⁶ On this issue, see the unpublished paper of Matthias Lehmann, 'Judeo-Spanish Rabbinic Ethical Literature in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries'. M. Lehmann is presently doing doctoral research on the same topic.

⁷ Michael Molho, *Meam Loez: Encyclopédie populaire du séphardisme levantin* (Salonika, 1945); Matthias Lehmann, 'Me'am Lo'ez. A Nineteenth-Century Midrash?' (unpublished paper).

⁸ Moïse Franco, *Essai sur l'histoire des Israélites de l'Empire ottoman*, re-ed. (Paris: Centre Isaac Abravanel, UISF, 1980).

⁹ Elena Romero, *El teatro de los sefardíes orientales*, 3 volumes (Madrid: CSIC, 1979); *La creación literaria en lengua sefardí* (Madrid: Mapfre, 1992); Yitzchak Kerem, 'Salonika: The Cultural Capital of Post-Expulsion Sephardic Jewry; Language, Music, Literature, and Theater', in *International Conference Judeo Español. The Evolution of a Culture*, ed. Raphael Gateno (Thessaloniki: Ets Ahaim Foundation, 1999), pp. 103–10. See also Abraham Ya'ari, *Catalogue of Judeo-Spanish Books in the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1934) (in Hebrew).

foreign works of the period, was published in newspapers in instalments, generally adapted and significantly abridged. These serial instalments were then bound and sold to the general public. They were extremely popular. 'Romance' novels, intended for women in particular, were also published. Western models thus found their way into the culture, first influencing women and then, through them, reaching families. Editors, writers, and journalists also translated the great authors of contemporary Hebrew literature into Judeo-Spanish. They similarly translated texts from Yiddish literature, such as those of Sholem Aleichem, Y. L. Peretz and Sholem Asch, thus establishing a link with the rest of the Jewish world.

This profusion of translations stifled local literary creation. The end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were not notable for the production of great original works. The authors and journalists, writers of original novels in Judeo-Spanish, could not compete with the novelists for whom they themselves were often translators. More emphasis was placed on the production of didactic works. Developments in modern teaching methods and theories made this type of work indispensable; it brought the most recent advances of the sciences to the people in a vulgarised form. Along with the prodigious growth of French in the Ottoman and Bulgarian cities, the publication of primers in Judeo-Spanish increased, while the learning of Hebrew continued to decline.

The role played by the press, both in disseminating the key ideas of modernity and in protecting traditional culture – at least the popular Judeo-Spanish version of that culture – cannot be disputed.¹⁰ The press underwent its most important development between 1870 and 1880. This period witnessed the production of solid, serious newspapers which were to continue to appear for a long time to come. There was, in this period, a proliferation of newspapers in Judeo-Spanish but only a few publications in French, in spite of the success that language enjoyed at the time.

Journalists such as Saadi Betzalel (Saadi Besalel) Halevy, his son Sam (Shemuel Saadi) Levy, Yehezkel Gabai, David Fresco, David Florentin, and David Elnecavé shaped this Jewry, each defending the ideology of the camp to which he belonged. Each acted as spokesman for the new current of ideas which was permeating the Jewish world, yet none of them ever denied their Jewishness or their cultural and historical patrimony.

The Haskalah movement played a role parallel to that of literature and the press, which were instruments of modernity and, at the same time, guardians, at least as concerns language, of a certain aspect of the traditional Jewish world. The Haskalah did not encounter the strong opposition that other sources of imported modernisation did. Introduced through Eastern Europe by Jewish intellectuals, the Haskalah movement was neither imposed from above nor truly institutionalised. Furthermore, it affected only a small number of people. The Sephardi *maskilim* came from traditionalist milieus, as did the originators of the movement in Western Europe and the majority of their Eastern European counterparts. There was not a variety of currents in the religious spheres of the Sephardi world comparable to that of the Ashkenazim (where there were *Hasidim*, the reformers, and the Orthodox), so no organised front was formed against the Haskalah. If the social credo of such *maskilim* as Yuda Nehama and Baruch Mitrani was modern education and 'productivisation', they nonetheless did not advocate assimilation or a move away from Judaism. The Haskalah did not develop assimilationist tendencies in the Sephardi culture area as had certain *maskilic* currents in Eastern Europe.

The second generation of the Wissenschaft des Judentums found in Abraham Danon, a *maskil* from Edirne, one of its best representatives in the Eastern Sephardi world. A student of Joseph Halevi, who brought the Haskalah to Edirne, Danon devoted himself to scientific and literary study. While working at the *bet din* [rabbinical court], he also contributed in large measure to the opening of the AIU school in his city. In 1879 he was among a group of young people who founded *Hevrat Shoharei Tushiah* [Society of the Friends of Practical Wisdom], also called *Dorshei ha-Haskalah* [Friends of the Haskalah].¹¹ This group was inspired by the desire for learning and the hope of bringing the Jews out of moral and material impoverishment. The organisation was devoted to the discussion of the Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish press and the popularisation of Jewish history and literature, drawing on the work of important scholars.

In 1882 the *Dorshei ha-Haskalah* created an apprenticeship and training programme, *ha-Pe'ulah* [Action], with the financial assistance of the AIU. Another goal of the *Dorshei ha-Haskalah* was to bring Ottoman Jewry into the European Wissenschaft movement. At one point, the group was involved

¹⁰ Moshe David Gaon, *The Judeo-Spanish Press: Bibliography* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1965) (in Hebrew).

¹¹ *Bulletin of the Society Dorshei ha-Haskalah* (Adrianople: Press of the State, 5649 (1889) (in Judeo-Spanish).

in the publication of a journal which was to encourage studies on Ottoman Jewry and report on the most recent research. It may be that even those who spoke in favour of modernisation feared that their traditional patrimony would be overshadowed through this rapprochement with the West. This realisation of a potential break with the past was in itself a sign of the modernity of which Danon had appointed himself spokesman. In 1888 the first issue of his journal was published, both in Hebrew under the title *Yosef Da'at* [Growth of Knowledge] and in Judeo-Spanish (also in 'Hebrew' characters), with the name *El Progreso* [Progress]. The journal survived only from March to December 1888, when it was suspended by the government. Danon was seeking to establish harmony between traditional learning and Western science. He called for the study of the texts of Maimonides and of languages other than Hebrew while maintaining the importance of a Hebrew language renaissance and of the preservation of the mother tongue, Judeo-Spanish. A scholar of international renown and founder of the Rabbinical Seminary of Turkey in 1891, Danon had much in common with the creators of the second generation of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

Other *maskilic* societies were formed in the Ottoman Empire. Since they were developing in parallel to imposed Westernisation and because of their particular objectives, these societies were soon transformed into centres for the strengthening of Jewish identity. It was not by chance that the *Kadima* [Forward] Society – founded in Salonika in 1899 by *talmidei hakhamim* [traditional scholars] who, after having studied in the yeshivot, undertook the study of French and secular subjects – joined with the Fédération sioniste de Grèce in 1918.¹² The goal of these societies was to cultivate Hebrew and create public interest in the language, to bring instruction to the masses through Hebrew, and to clarify and affirm religious faith through the development of Jewish studies. This programme carried out a revival of what these societies claimed was tradition while using methods inspired by the most recent developments among Western Jews.

These associations and the *maskilim* called for a certain kind of modernisation; at the same time they served to soften the shock of modernisation being imposed from the outside. They established a kind of bridge between modernity and Jewish nationalism. Although their impact on the Jewish community at large was not considerable, they contributed to the education of a new generation of intellectuals who, in their own way, brought about this passage. Work begun by the Haskalah and the second generation of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was continued by a whole succession of historians of Sephardi Jewry. They strove to record the histories of their communities and were equally inspired by the romanticism of a paradise lost. Among these historians, who were at once promoters of modernity and guardians of a past era, were Salomon Rosanès (1862–1938) from Bulgaria; Abraham Galanté (1873–1961), an intellectual from Istanbul; Joseph Nehama (1880–1971), director of one of the AIU schools in Salonika; and Michael Molho (1891–1964), also from Salonika. Other scholars set about documenting various aspects of Sephardi folklore, and the press followed the course set by the scholars.

Another movement within the varied responses to modernity took shape at the end of the nineteenth century among the Sephardi Jews of Bosnia in the context of emancipation in Central Europe. It was precisely in areas where conditions seemed most favourable for the development of modernisation that the 'Sephardist' movement was born. Although modernisation advocated the elimination of particularisms, particularism in its Sephardi form emerged as an alternative to the Ashkenazi environment and to the unification proposed by Zionism in representing a means of preserving Jewish identity against the wave of total assimilation. In 1898 there arose a group of Sephardi students in Vienna, among whom was Vita Hayon from Sarajevo, who was later to become the spiritual leader of the movement. After having been exposed to Western ideologies through their studies, this group created *La soysedad akademika de djudios espanyoles: Esperansa* [Academic Society of Spanish Jews: Hope].¹³ These students sought a way to effect an organisational and cultural awakening among Sephardi Jews in order that they might contribute to Judaism as a whole and, in so doing, protect their own historical and linguistic heritage.

Many Sephardi intellectuals participated in this association. What began as a cultural movement eventually became an ideological movement. The Sephardim envisioned the development of a Zionism in diaspora; their goal was to carry out their work both in the diaspora and in Palestine. The Zionists of Zagreb, dominant in the movement, were opposed to this idea. In 1925 at the second Sephardi World Conference, organised in Vienna, the representatives from Yugoslavia decided to create a Fédération

¹² Archives de l'Alliance israélite universelle, Grèce I.G. 3, J. Nehama, 13 January 1903.

¹³ Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), pp. 147–51.

Sépharade whose centre was originally intended to be established in Jerusalem, but which was finally located in Paris. There began a considerable conflict between those who held to the Sephardist proposition and the Zionists, who had tried to unite Sephardim and Ashkenazim under the same banner. The Sephardim from Belgrade created their own branch of the Fédération, which was concerned not only with cultural issues in the diaspora but also with the improvement of the status of the Sephardim in Palestine. The violent polemic between the Zionists and the Sephardists, known as the 'Sarajevo dispute', continued until 1928. The Sephardist ideology, however, hardly influenced the next generation of Sephardim.

The modernisation of states and that of these Eastern Jewish communities were necessarily different processes, for there were different issues at stake among the ethnic-religious minority groups. The modernisation of European Jews had taken place within the state as part of a natural internal development, the process reaching completion there where it had begun. As has been observed, there were many differences between that kind of internal modernisation and one which was exported to other societies.

In the Sephardi culture area, modernisation was imposed upon the Jewish populations, who were perceived, first at all, as a religious minority. There is no doubt that this perception bound the Jews to their condition of Jewishness. They could not aspire to assimilation; when they did so aspire, they failed. Furthermore, even within the limits of the Sephardi communities it is difficult to generalise about the effects of the modernisation process, for circumstances varied considerably from one region to another. Where nation-states were involved, Jewish members of the state had no sooner been assimilated than they began to consider new developments and possibilities in the Jewish world, in particular, nationalism and Zionism.

In cases where modernisation was of an assimilationist tendency, the same obstacles were met. Assimilation, when it existed, involved only certain regions and appeared only late in the process of modernisation. In the Ottoman Empire, the AIU wanted the Jews to be integrated into the societies in which they lived. By teaching French to the Jews and by inculcating Western values in them, the AIU impeded their integration through a paradox which is of the very essence of this type of modernisation. The AIU, in fact, cultivated Jewish particularism in spite of itself, contrary to the ideology inherent in the modernisation process.

Zionism, also imported, became a stumbling block to integration through its strengthening of Jewish identity.¹⁴ Even the intensive 'Bulgarianisation' carried out in Bulgaria did not lead to assimilation; Zionism caused it to change course. In Yugoslavia, which represents a case similar to Bulgaria but in which the AIU was not involved, the development of Zionism was not as spectacular as in Bulgaria. The Sephardim developed a Sephardist movement which was to reinforce Jewish identity, in a certain measure, and offered an alternative to Zionism. In Greece, on the other hand, Zionism succeeded in gaining strength.

In sum, there was neither a single model of modernisation nor a single modernisation process in the Eastern Sephardi world. Responses to modernisation were, in their turn, multiple. Imposed modernisation was thwarted by a number of those concerned. Modernisation was a source of conflict; unsuccessful in completely supplanting tradition, it had to adapt tradition to a new context instead, and was unable to reach the masses except through an alliance with tradition. When it was divorced from tradition, modernisation was used only as a means to an end by certain elites seeking to take over community leadership. So it was that the Sephardim remained for a long time in a position between what could be called a declining tradition and a still fragile modernity.

¹⁴ On Zionism, see chapter 4 of Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*.