READING JEWISH WOMEN
Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society

Iris Parush
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Translated by Saadya Sternberg

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Preface to the English Edition

This book, first published by Am Oved in Hebrew in early 2001, is now being presented to the English-reading public. The book contributes to the broad corpus of research dealing with the Jewish Enlightenment, while seeking to shed light on this dramatic chapter in Jewish history from new perspectives. Where most discussions of the Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskalah, treat the social changes of this time as having occurred through the labors of men alone, this book highlights the role played by women. Arguing against commonly held conceptions, I show that enlightenment ideas were spread in Jewish society not only by an elite of men, who wrote and read the canonical Hebrew literature, but also by a substantial population of literate women who read European masterpieces or popular literature in Yiddish. These women, whose numbers steadily grew during the nineteenth century, played a unique and significant role in disseminating the enlightenment spirit of modernization and secularization throughout Jewish society.

A central thesis of this book is the “benefit of marginality.” According to this thesis, in certain historical situations the marginalized space that a society allocates to its disparaged or neglected social groups provides these groups with degrees of freedom and latitude that—paradoxically—grant them non-negligible advantages over the preferred elites. Such a situation existed in nineteenth century Eastern European Jewish society, as its traditional religious institutions closely supervised the activities of men but left the marginalized space of women often clear of oversight. It was the very status of women as inferiors that allowed many to gain superior literacy skills and the freedom to read modern literature—something men were prohibited from doing. In this way, their very marginality is what gave women an advantage in traditional society’s encounter with modernity; and it is also what allowed women to function as significant agents of social change.

My interest in women’s reading in particular, and in the sociology of reading more generally, grew out of an extensive study of modern Hebrew’s literary canon and the ideological and poetical considerations that were decisive to its formation. This research, which yielded my book National Ideology and Literary Canon, led me to conclude that no deep or full understanding of canonization processes is possible if the constitution and history of the reading public is not taken into account. That shift in intellectual and scholarly orientation required
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me to abandon the “high road” of poetic, aesthetic, and ideological analysis of literary texts and to stray from the domains of literature and the history of ideas into the field of sociocultural history. This detour was linked, by its very nature, to a long line of deviations from “centers” to “margins,” which are reflected throughout this book as a whole. By this I mean a shift in focus from the society’s elites to its middle and broader classes; from the Jewish Enlightenment’s great thinkers to the anonymous carriers who spread its ideas in popular versions; from the creators of literature to its consumers; and from the active task of writing to the supposedly passive act of reading. This book’s focus, accordingly, is not on the reading habits of the elite’s thinkers, authors, critics, and intellectuals, although of course neither are these ignored. Instead, it aims to discover and describe the experiences of anonymous women who barely left behind a trace, and whose reading impressions—the impress of readings on their minds, and through them on society—have, thus far, been entirely absent from the history books. In this respect, this work shares an outlook and common goals with Jonathon Rose’s wonderful *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, published in 2001, just as the Hebrew edition of this book was coming off the press. The lines with which Rose opens his work apply equally well to my own: “This book addresses a question which, until recently, was considered unanswerable. It proposes to enter the mind of ordinary readers in history, to discover what they read and how they read it.”

Because quantitative data about the literacy of Jewish women in nineteenth century Eastern Europe is so scarce, and because we lack direct knowledge of women’s reading habits, developing the portraits of these readers required drawing heavily upon the period’s memoirs and autobiographies, most of which were written by men and depict their world. The need to retrieve the experiences and voices of women from texts written by men led to a refinement of special reading tactics, and chiefly to a reading of the memoirs literature “from the margins.” A reading of this kind does not focus on the literature’s deliberate themes, its central narratives, or main ideas, but rather, on the off-hand remarks and casual biographical details that slip into the descriptive tapestry without necessarily serving the author’s overt or declared intentions. In placing the women at center stage, then, this book puts into the limelight what in the source materials were only background items: marginalia in accounts of a life seen as beside the main affairs of the day.

As I read thus against the authorial grain through the vast literature of memoirs, images of the women in this society kept turning up—captivating figures that grew ever more diverse, rich, and precise as the reading continued. At the same time, a picture also emerged of a multilayered social structure with circuitous links between its parts. Thus, multiple connections were revealed between dominant belief systems and ideologies in the studied society and its typical family structures and gender roles; and ties were exposed
between the educational methods and institutions, gender identities, gender hierarchies, social ideals of masculine and feminine beauty, and gender differences in the freedom to read and think. Finally, revealed within this literature were the reading lives of the young religious men—the yeshiva students—as they underwent the torturous process of secularization, alongside their anonymous sisters who became, wittingly or not, agents of enlightenment and change.

For readers unfamiliar with the terms “Jewish Enlightenment” or Haskalah, a short explanation is in order. The movement known as the Haskalah originated in Germany in the 1770s, spread to Eastern Europe, and lasted until the early 1880s, that is, until the rise of the Jewish National Revival movement. Throughout its existence, the Haskalah was marked by the influence of the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn and the members of his circle, who introduced a scientific approach to the study of Judaism, Jewish literature, and the Hebrew language. Although the movement’s activity in Germany lasted for only a generation, its scholarly enterprise was to have enduring social and intellectual effects. As the center in Germany subsided, the movement migrated eastward and new centers of the Haskalah began to take root, at first in Galicia and later in Lithuania and other realms of the Russian “Pale of Settlement.” Each center of the Haskalah differed somewhat from the others in orientation, reflecting the variations in local culture and the changes that took place in both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds across the nineteenth century.

Although the movement for Jewish enlightenment has its roots in the “European Enlightenment” of the eighteenth century, it also differs from the latter in many respects, and the use of the term “Haskalah” or “Jewish Enlightenment” is meant to bring out these differences. Jews lived in Europe under special historical circumstances, dispersed in many countries, reviled as a minority and residing in closed communities within larger, often hostile, surroundings. The Jewish Enlightenment thus had differences in timing and emphasis—and even in subject matter and aims—from the general European Enlightenment. The Haskalah took upon itself the goals of advancing reforms in education and in Jewish life that brought it into frontal conflict with the Jewish religious orthodoxy, whose interest and objective it was to enforce a strict isolationism. Besides promoting study of secular topics, such as the sciences and the European languages, the Haskalah called for a return to a purist biblical Hebrew language and for use of this language to create a new, modern literature. This enterprise, which in effect amounted to the secularization of Hebrew, was perceived by the orthodoxy as an act of outright heresy. Other items on the maskilic agenda included modernization of dress styles, a shift to economically productive ways of life, and the civic integration of Jews within the surrounding culture and society. The demand of the Haskalah for
Jewish modernization and Europeanization also led to calls for religious reforms. All of these were taken as genuine threats by the orthodoxy, which regarded the Haskalah as certain to lead to apostasy and assimilation.

In effect, then, the Jewish Enlightenment period was one of momentous cultural strife, as Jewish society underwent the wrenching processes of secularization, modernization, and Europeanization. The battle over the literary canon was only one arena in this war, perhaps not even its most important one. The main battle for the soul of Jewish society was waged on the fronts of language, literacy, and education. Accordingly, some of the most crucial questions for understanding the history of this era turn on these battlefields. What was traditional, orthodox society’s literacy policy—how did it mete out reading skills, to whom, and to what ends? How did this policy abet the reproduction of the social order? How did the Haskalah movement manage to subvert the orthodoxy’s systems of supervision? How did the audiences for the new literature come into existence, and where did they acquire their reading skills in Hebrew and Yiddish? What classes and genders made up the reading audiences in Jewish society, and what kinds of literature were addressed to each? And finally—what was the influence assignable to reading on the processes of enlightenment and social change?

Taking a gender perspective to these questions allows new light to be shed on women’s role in the dynamics of the Jewish Enlightenment. Perhaps most important, an exploration of women’s marginalization serves to clarify not only how a society reproduces its social structures by creating marginal spaces, but also how marginal spaces form gaps in these structures—ultimately allowing change to occur.

Given the multidisciplinary nature of this work, there are several thematic, theoretical, and methodological contexts with which it may be associated. The book seeks to add to the rich literature dealing with the sociology of knowledge and the politics of literacy, and it engages topics from socio-linguistics and discourse analysis. At the same time, it is part of a growing corpus of socio-literary studies focusing on the history of the book, the history of reading and the history of the reading public. The socio-literary treatment of reading and its influences is linked in the present work also to the classical sociological themes of modernization and secularization.

Because it centers on the lives of reading women, this book also, of course, joins the significant corpus of scholarship concerned with the history of women and with women in history. Yet this book does not deal with women alone. All of its major questions—about literacy, reading influences, reading habits, gender roles, gender identity construction—are approached through a constant comparison of the state of affairs obtaining for men and for women. Moreover, the present work neither presumes nor confirms bipolar
or dichotomous models of gender hierarchy or of sociocultural functioning. To a large degree, it leads to quite opposite conclusions. One of the book's findings is that at least for nineteenth century Eastern European Jewish society, there is no room for dichotomous distinctions between the domestic, supposedly feminine sphere and the public, supposedly masculine sphere, just as no absolute dichotomy is to be found between “privileged males” and “marginalized females.” The picture is far more complex and must be treated as such.

Notwithstanding the affiliations of this work to these various lines of scholarship, I have hoped to retain a measure of accessibility and transparency for the book and its heroes and their language. Accordingly, I have elected not to emphasize the theoretical constructs and have avoided, as far as possible, using technical terms.

The book's multidisciplinary nature may be seen in its organizing scheme as well as in the internal structure of each chapter. Chapter One explains some of the book's fundamental assumptions and discusses the cultural, social, ideological, and linguistic contexts of the emergence of the Haskalah in Eastern Europe. This chapter does not discuss women readers directly; instead, it examines the relations between literacy and social control and between literacy and literature, providing concepts essential to understanding the role played by reading women in the modernization of Jewish society. Chapter Two examines the social and ideological underpinnings of the division of labor that typified the traditional Jewish family. It discusses the ideals of manhood and womanhood held in Jewish society and the changes that opened a “window of opportunity” for women, allowing them to actively influence the transformative processes of enlightenment. The next two chapters deal with women’s education: Chapter Three with traditional education, and Chapter Four with secular education. Together, these two chapters examine the special nature of the “woman’s space” and ground the book’s central thesis: that the marginalization of women in Jewish society of the period created certain advantages for them.

The three chapters that follow present the “reading-biographies” of a diverse gallery of readers, both male and female. Chapter Five, devoted to the reading-biographies of yeshiva students undergoing enlightenment, considers the motives that drove these young men to read, typical reading sequences, and the effects their reading had on the process through which they were formed as enlightened adults. The chapter’s purpose is to bring out the deep differences between the reading experiences of men and women. The women who read both Yiddish and European languages star in Chapters Six and Seven. At the core of these chapters are the reading-stories of quite a few impressive women who, despite the specificity of their portraits, represent broad
Preface to the English Edition

and diverse communities of women readers. The bookshelves of these women, the personal transformations effected by their readings, and their activities as agents of change and modernization are also treated here. The two final chapters deal with the complex and thorny topic of women’s penetration of the exclusive domain of men—the domain of the Hebrew language. The portraits drawn here of women who tried their hands at reading and writing in Hebrew serve as a point of departure for a two-fold inquiry: a probe of the causes which kept women excluded from language and literature of Hebrew, and an investigation of the shifts which later enabled their integration into its community of readers, speakers and writers.

I began my research into women’s reading in Eastern European Jewish society as part of a post-doctorate at Stanford University in California. I wish to thank the directors of the Jewish Studies Program at Stanford for the grant of the Koret Fellowship, which allowed me to lay the foundations of this research. I would like to offer my sincerest thanks to my husband Adi, my daughter Tamar, and my son-in-law Ido Shahar, who read the first draft of this book and contributed many important comments. Thanks are also due to Eli Shaltiel, who devotedly accompanied the Hebrew edition of the book through all stages of preparation, to Dina Horowitz and my daughter Tamar for their thoughtful final editing and close proofreading, and to Ilana Tahan from the British Library for her professional assistance. I am deeply grateful to the friends and colleagues who commented on an earlier draft or individual chapters: Ilana Krauzman Ben-Amos, Amir Ben-Porat, Menachem Brinker, Lewis Landa, Brakha Fishler and Hamutal Tzamir. I would also like to thank Immanuel Etkes, David Assaf, and Zeev Gries for their helpful comments on the Hebrew edition of the book.

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It is a pleasure to owe a debt of gratitude also to the artist Yosl Bergner, whose grandmother Hinde Bergner is one of this book's heroines, for the wonderful drawing that graces its cover.

Finally, I wish to thank my parents Greti and Victor Shem-Tov and my son, Ori, who followed the progress of this book with interest, support and sympathy.

I. P.
May 2003
Reading Jewish Women
Introduction
Reading Women and the Spirit of Jewish Enlightenment

The tale of the processes of secularization and modernization that overtook Jewish society in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe is the story of widening fissures in a traditional religious society, a society that struggled to conserve its ways of life and beliefs against the internal and external forces threatening to shatter it. Modern Hebrew literature played a central part in causing these fissures to widen, acting at once as the product and the accelerant of the shifts that were taking place in this period. Readers of Hebrew literature brought the modern ideas and values of Jewish Enlightenment—the Haskalah—to increasingly wider circles in Jewish society, and much evidence suggests that the encounter with modern Hebrew literature was indeed decisive in unsettling the world-view of traditional readers. For many, the encounter with this literature was an experience of overwhelming revelation, one that confronted them with the terrors of doubt, planted the germ of heresy in their hearts, and stoked the flames of their critique of traditional society.

Yehuda Leib Levin (YaHLeL, 1844–1925), for example, gives this account of the extended experience of reading that set into motion the painful process of losing his faith:

I read all the books—Hehalutz, Kin'at Emet, Bhinat Hakabbalah, Moreh Nevuchei Hazman, Maor Eynayim, and more and more such. I read—and the peace of my soul slipped away from me more and more, for to the extent that I began to see and discern to that degree doubts grew and raged in me, raising questions to which I had no answer [. . .] And only after reading many books and great turmoil from the inner struggles did things become clear to me, and my thought coalesced into that of the “maskilim” of those days [. . .] And then I came to hate the Talmud, it all seemed like the rock of Sisyphus meant to wear out flesh and soul for naught [. . .] At any rate, in my twenty first year, when I had become “free” in ideas and beliefs, I was full of bitterness and knew no peace of soul, believing myself an utter failure.1

Similarly, with a sharp pathos rarely to be seen in his polemical articles, Shalom Yaakov Abramovitch, a.k.a. Mendele the Bookseller (1835–1917),
describes the depths of the torment the yeshiva scholars experienced when they first began to read, and their desperate and futile attempts to hold on to their beliefs:

Let the many hasidim and many yeshiva dwellers confess it, that in their heart of hearts the battle had already been ignited between reason and nonsense, that their bones have known no rest from doubts and trepidations, ever since some choice words had been cast into their midst from the books of Israel, such as Kin’at Emmet, Hatzofeh, Bhinat Hadat, Hatorah Vehaphilosophia, Teudah Beisrael, and their like; let them admit if with every shred of strength they did not at first struggle to extract from themselves the sharpened arrowhead, as the wounded beast struggles to remove the lance from its heart, a lance which burrows deeper and deeper into them the more they try to shake it out!

These lines of the young Abramovitch, and those of many of his era, identify the study halls of the beit midrash as the scene of the encounter of the Jewish Enlightenment movement’s literature with its intended audience. The choice of location for this zone of encounter, actual or symbolic, as resting within the exclusively male halls of the beit midrash, effectively marks the scholarly elite as the chief targets of Hebrew maskilic writing, and conveys the impression that it alone bore the brunt of spreading the maskilic message to the broad Jewish public.

And scholarship of the Haskalah period tends likewise to confirm an impression that it was a narrow elite of Jewish intellectuals alone—the maskilim, a group consisting almost entirely of men—which did the work of spreading maskilic ideas. Such scholarship generally concentrates on the elite, which established the secular school systems for Jews, published the maskilic texts, and wrote the works trumpeting the Haskalah movement. It thus examines the evolution of maskilic institutions, the public activities of its leaders, and the opinions of its authors.\(^3\) One may affirm, accordingly, that the clear tendency in both the scholarship and source materials is to attribute the propagation of maskilic values through to the public at large to the efforts of men: to men who were the intended audience of the modern secular Hebrew texts—most of them yeshiva students in the process of becoming maskilim and a few of them pupils of the secular Jewish school system. Absent in these accounts is the place of the reading woman, and it is equally absent from accounts of how the new ways of thought were disseminated throughout the Jewish communities.\(^4\)

The absence of women from the tale of how the Haskalah was propagated in Jewish society is linked to, among other things, the fact that throughout the nineteenth century the language of Hebrew remained the exclusive domain of a narrow male elite. Only a handful of women read and wrote Hebrew: Hebrew literature was at its core a literature by and for males. The assumption that it was such literature, and it alone, through which the maskilic spirit was
**Introduction**

conveyed, is what leads to a conclusion that men alone had disseminated maskilic values and that this was a sphere in which women had no part.

Without denying that the maskilic enterprise was indeed advanced chiefly through the efforts of a male elite, and without mitigating in the least the importance of scholarship of its projects, institutions and authors, this book seeks to shift the focus from the elite to the margins of society. It seeks to describe the role played by women readers in widening the fissures within traditional society, and draws attention to the unique contributions women made to the dissemination of the new ways of thought in the society of their time. For any account of the transformative processes which overtook nineteenth-century Jewish society will be wanting if it does not make reference to the ordinary readers, those anonymous carriers of the maskilic spirit who were the missing link between the maskilic elite and the broad masses. In this group, women figure substantially.

It should be kept in mind that in Jewish society of the time, neither the creation of secular modern literature nor the cultivation of a reading audience for it were matters that could be taken for granted. These phenomena occurred in the face of the opposition and severe restrictions imposed by the orthodox religious community, which took steps to defend itself against the Haskalah literature in its various forms. Yet the rather severe restrictions that were applied to men were scarcely applied to women at all. Those women who had literacy skills—and they were far from few—enjoyed a liberty incomparably greater than the men’s in their choice of reading materials. Any attempt to discuss the reading audience—its composition, character, and expansion patterns—as carriers of modernity must thus make reference also to the activities of such women.

The reading public in nineteenth-century Jewish society was a diverse and stratified audience, and the literature this public read was equally diverse and layered. The literature included not only the works of the Hebrew maskilic canon but also Yiddish popular literature, Jewish literature written in European languages, and the European masterpieces. The range of literature available varied in character, language, respectability, and social status. Religious literature addressed to yeshiva students, for example, was quite different in kind from popular Yiddish literature aimed at the broad masses, chiefly at women. Thus, to properly understand how reading affected the secularization of Jewish society in the nineteenth century, one needs to consider not only the Hebrew Haskalah literature and constituent profiles of its reading public, but also the popular literature in Yiddish and non-Jewish languages, and its readers’ profiles.

Who were the readers to whom belles lettres and essays in the various languages were addressed? Which people were given the reading skills that granted them access to such literature? Where, how, and to what end were such skills granted? What reading populations were formed as a result? What books
were read by each population sector? How did each different reading audience influence the development of literary forms, and how did each kind of literature affect its readers’ perspectives and modes of life? A closer look at the entire literary complex with an eye to the reader’s social status and gender suggests that in Jewish society the carriers of the new ways of thought were not men alone—the declared and familiar readers of canonical Hebrew literature—but also women who read popular Yiddish texts, women who read European literature in European languages, and, by the end of the century, women who read Hebrew literature as well. In this book I shall argue that the social norms traditional society applied to women created the conditions that allowed an audience of readers of a special character to emerge. In the encounter with modernity, it was precisely women’s marginal status within traditional society that served them to advantage. The very marginality of women is what allowed, paradoxically, the creation of communities of literate women who themselves underwent, and then brought about, transformation.

**Institutional Rabbinic Oversight and the Uncontrolled Woman’s Space**

At the core of this book is a discussion of the interplay between literature and literacy. A fundamental assumption made here is that the level of literacy in a society, and the literacy policy administered within the society, has an enormous effect on the character of the literature produced within it. The approach to literacy that guides us here views literacy as a social phenomenon not restricted to the mere ability to read or write mechanically. In this approach, the significance of reading and writing skills is seen as dependent on the social and cultural context in which such skills are acquired and applied. Accordingly, the literacy policy present in a society may not be considered apart from other key social and cultural determinants—from the power structures, the social strata, the ideological and political struggles, and so forth.

A literacy policy is one of the tools by which a ruling class oversees its public and enforces its authority. Through control over the choice of language in which literacy skills are provided, and control over levels of literacy skills, the leadership can deny to the society as a whole or to groups within it access to realms of knowledge that might threaten its authority and world-view. The unequal distribution of literacy skills between groups and social classes or between the sexes functions similarly to entrench an existing social structure. For a literature is not created in a vacuum. It can authorize the existing order or challenge it, can accept the dominant ideologies or subvert them, but always it operates within the social and ideological framework in which its readers live, and it is thus affected by social forces even when not entirely determined by them.
An unequal distribution of literacy skills among social groups is typical of centralized societies with a strong, authoritarian leadership, yet it becomes especially noticeable when this leadership is threatened and attempts to defend itself against a competing or rival ideology. The issue of literacy is thus inextricably linked to the society’s power struggles, and in the battle between the orthodox—the haredim—and the maskilim in nineteenth-century Jewish Eastern Europe this was particularly evident. The leadership fought to maintain the isolationist character of traditional society, to preserve the existing order, and to secure its hegemony against the modernizing tendencies arising from both within the society and without. Control over literacy was a crucial factor in the rabbinic leadership’s struggle for survival. Indeed, during the culture wars between haredim and maskilim, the rabbinic establishment maintained tight controls over the systems of education, literacy, and information flow in an effort to conserve the social structure and to combat the Haskalah movement and its literature. The unequal distribution of literacy skills between men and women and between Talmud scholars and ordinary men was a means of maintaining the gender hierarchy and social strata that characterized traditional society, and it was the tool the rabbinic authority used in its efforts to seal off the society from the inroads made by modernity and maskilic ideas.

In Eastern European Jewish society, the traditional educational institutions limited the instruction of Hebrew and of Hebrew grammar. These institutions took steps, in fact, to create deliberate ignorance of the Hebrew language and to prevent most of the men who studied in its settings from gaining the literacy skills necessary for reading modern Hebrew literature. The more talented among these men, those destined to become rabbinic scholars, thoroughly studied rabbinical discourse; yet the majority learned to read Hebrew only mechanically—enough to fulfill devotional obligations and no more than that. Most men could read the Hebrew of the Bible and the siddur, the prayerbook, but could barely understand what they read. Women, by contrast, were not favored with a formal and obligatory framework of study. Those of them who did learn to read—and there were quite a few—did so, by and large, in informal settings in which they were taught to read Yiddish. The exclusion of women from Torah study maintained men’s dominance in ritual matters, and the absence of Hebrew instruction for both sexes sealed off, for most men and virtually all women, any avenues to modern Hebrew literature.

The maskilim, who tried to break through these authoritarian blockades and pave a road to their audience for their works, had no choice but to take into consideration the limitations of language and knowledge of their potential readership. The genres and linguistic usages the maskilim chose to employ, and the character and form of the literature itself, had to be continually adapted to the changing state of their readers’ literacy. Accordingly, a more thorough investigation of Haskalah literature requires examination not solely
of the place this literature has in the history of ideas or in Jewish history, or of developments in its poetic norms alone. Even a study of the relations between literary ideology and poetics is insufficient here. Alongside such research approaches, and in addition to them, what is called for is a thorough investigation of literacy policies as tools of social authority, and of the relations between literacy and literature, in Jewish society of the period. This approach requires a shift in focus: from the history of literature as a chapter in the history of ideas and from questions of evolving poetic norms, toward a history of the reading audience. This book, accordingly, considers literature from the angle of the social history of its constituent audience, studying the social and ideological structures that shaped the portraits of the readers and the profiles of the literature addressed to them. In consequence, it redirects the view from the elite who created the Haskalah literature to the ordinary readers who were its audience, and from canonical works to the popular literature aimed at social groups considered marginal in terms of class and gender.

At the heart of the book, then, are the women readers. It is not being claimed, however, that the existence of a large and robust class of female readers of Yiddish is a new discovery, and to be sure, the fact that there are hundreds of popular Yiddish novels is quite well known. Yet apart from isolated articles on the relation between Yiddish literature and its readership, this phenomenon has not received systematic or thorough treatment. The marginality both of Yiddish literature and of its female readership has left an impression that the phenomenon was of little consequence or had no significant effects. And still less attention has been paid to the female readers of European languages. Although the topic of Jewish women and European languages is not new either, in its full scope, in adequate detail, or with an eye to its influences, it has not yet been researched.

This book's attention to the reading women is not a product solely of academic interest in the gender aspects of the Jewish Enlightenment, nor does it spring from a feminist interest in women's reading experiences alone. Over and above these is the fact that these women were the people who opened gaps in the supervisory apparatus through which the rabbinic leadership controlled Jewish society in nineteenth century Eastern Europe. The rabbinic leadership sought to assure that the canonical cultural properties would remain under the exclusive control of men. Women were therefore denied by the traditional educational system any access to the literacy skills that could allow them access to the sacred texts. In this way the traditional society also absolved itself of the need to supervise what women were reading, as it assumed they could not so much as read the prohibited texts. Yet this policy of repression or discrimination, which marginalized women socially and marginalized their religious and spiritual life, was also the policy which gave them the space to be free and to set free. In this marginal space, unsupervised, women could study foreign
languages, could read nearly any text they wished to in Yiddish or European languages, and could take maximum advantage of their marginal status. Such activities, considered dangerous and actively prohibited for the men, were permitted to women, and those who were exposed to modern secular literature helped introduce the new ways of thought to sectors of the population that had actively sought to fend them off. We may conclude, therefore, that the literacy policy enforced in traditional Jewish society was an important component of the apparatus of control and oversight, but that for all its might this supervisory apparatus was unable to arrest the internal processes of change or to seal off the foreign influences. And that among various factors that undermined this control, women readers had a non-negligible part. It was in fact the women, those same people who were prohibited from studying Torah and who were expected to remain ignorant of almost any issue of spiritual consequence, who eluded the supervisory system entirely and who were able to act, wittingly or unwittingly, to subvert it.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, these women were joined by others who could read Hebrew. They too contributed, usually unwittingly, to the erosion of traditional society and to the trends of sociocultural renewal. But the fact that women were entirely unschooled in the Bible or in Hebrew had a severe and long-lasting effect on women’s ability to write in this language, an effect that was to endure for many generations. Reflecting this state of affairs are the harsh words Amalia Kahana-Carmon has for the forlorn section allocated to women’s writing in the “synagogue space” of Hebrew literature.  

Certain parallels may be drawn between the approach taken in the nineteenth century to women’s enlightenment and what is happening in today’s orthodox communities; yet one of the marked differences between the two periods has to do with the fact that today’s orthodox society learned its lessons from the “misguided education of girls” of the nineteenth century. Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the establishment of educational systems such as Beis Yaakov, haredi society acted to plug the gaps through which women in the nineteenth century had eluded the social and religious oversight apparatus. The change in attitude toward Torah instruction for girls, and the provision of secular education for girls in the framework of schools internal to the community and independent of the state, were an expression of this redeployment and of the tightened supervision of the instruction of women.

**Methodological Issues**

Investigation of the role played by women as readers in the nineteenth century and their effects on literature and society compels scrutiny of a range of issues
connected with women’s literacy: How did society regard the literacy of women? In what sorts of settings did women acquire their literacy skills? What degrees of cultural literacy were women allowed to achieve in these settings? Who were the women who were able to read, and in what languages? What kinds of literature did they read? How did the output of literary kinds adapt itself to meet their demand? What texts were addressed to women, and to what ends? What effects did the reading have on the female readership? What effects did these reading women have on their immediate environment and society at large?

Yet the historical scholarship of women’s literacy—the study of reading habits as well as reactions to the books read—is severely hampered by the inadequacy of primary sources and the paucity of existing research. Except for isolated studies, most historical scholarship of Jewish education in the nineteenth century concerns itself with the education of men; the topic of women is addressed in only a few words. Such scholarship generally maintains that the education of women had been neglected and that women on the whole remained ignorant. The failed marriages of several prominent maskilim to traditional women served to reinforce the impression that in Jewish society of the period most women lacked any formal instruction, and that broad gulfs separated the educated or scholarly men from the ignorant women, or the enlightened men from the conservative or unenlightened women. Yet even if this picture holds true for many women it is not true for all, and it is considerably distorted. The scant scholarship of women’s education may perhaps be attributed to the fact that most researchers have been concerned with Jewish education, and the Jewish education of women was indeed neglected. This does not, however, seem a sufficient justification for the extent of the research conducted. Whatever the causes for its neglect, the fact remains that scholarship in this field still has a long way to go.

As I have pointed out, the primary sources available to the scholar are inadequate. Statistical data on students in the various educational institutions occasionally appear in the Jewish chronicles from the period, but such data are episodic and partial, and in any case do not include a breakdown of pupils by sex or even a distinction between basic literacy and true reading and writing ability. Moreover, these statistical reports, besides being fragmentary, were published by either the maskilim or the Russian authorities, not by the rabbinic establishment. Most reports by “The Society for the Dissemination of Haskalah among Jews in the Land of Russia” or by the Russian authorities yield data on the educational systems under their supervision—in other words, the secular schools for Jews and the government schools for the general population. The figures for traditional schools, including heder, for girls, tend to be understated, as the traditional Jewish community often concealed such data from the authorities and interfered with the collection of statistics on its
pupils. Equally fragmentary and incomplete is the data describing private schools and informal instructional settings meant mainly for women, such as private tutors and Christian nannies. Such data as there is concerning literacy generally is based on the criterion of name-signing ability. Although not entirely irrelevant, clearly such a measure is at best of limited use for the questions that occupy us here. An ability to sign one’s name does not necessarily attest to an ability to read, and perhaps in some cases people are able to read without being able to sign their name. More to the point, literacy rates based on the signature criterion reveal nothing about the extent of cultural literacy skills, nor about the range of texts that literate people drew upon in the course of acquiring their reading comprehension abilities. Indeed, our topic cannot be reduced to the question of how many women could sign their names, nor even to the question of who could read. Our question is about the contexts in which literate women acquired their literacy and about what texts such women were able and allowed to read. In order to probe the use made of their literacy, one must ask about the educational settings in which they acquired their reading and writing skills, the goals for which they were granted such skills, the contents of their curricula, and other facets of the sociocultural context of literacy acquisition. The circumstances in which Jewish women in the nineteenth century achieved literacy were different from those in which Jewish men did, and therefore the forms of literacy they obtained likewise diverged.

A full description of women’s literacy instruction must, accordingly, rely on four kinds of source materials, over and above the statistical reports: (a) news articles on the topic of education that appeared in the various maskilic periodicals; (b) factual and “ethnographic” descriptions from the autobiographies and memoirs; (c) fiction from the period; (d) public statements by rabbis and representatives of the traditional community on issues pertaining to women’s education.

Reliance on these sources is problematic in many ways. The most pernicious difficulty is perhaps that of ideological distortion. The majority of the texts available to the scholar were composed by maskilim, whose accounts of traditional schooling were made with a critical eye—in line with the ideological, social, and political interests the Haskalah hoped to advance. Needless to say, the picture of reality that emerges from the writings of the haredi community’s representatives is similarly tainted by ideological bias or editorial zeal. As is often the case when facts are presented in the course of a bitter ideological debate, the reality depicted on either side of the divide is not free of distortion and manipulation.

The same holds true of the autobiographies and memoirs. The maskilic autobiographies were not written only to describe the life story of a single individual, any more than the maskilic memoirs were composed solely to
document the life of a society in metamorphosis. Both kinds of writing were
drafted to the service of maskilic ideology and they both contain attacks, often
ferocious ones, on traditional Jewish society. One way or the other, ideological
bias cannot have failed to influence the factual representations found in these
texts. The phenomenon is no less prevalent in memoirs written by opponents
of the Haskalah.\footnote{Reading Jewish Women page 20}

Apart from the problem of ideological distortion, common to all primary
sources, each class of source has its own special difficulties. For instance, the
use of fiction for the sake of enriching or confirming historical accounts is
problematic. Among literary scholars, postmodern thought has inspired a
growing tendency to doubt the very possibility of reconstituting the histor-
cal significance of the literary text; while at the same time one hears calls to
“return to history” in the spirit of the New Historicism, and to extract from
literary works the representations and images of reality embedded in them.\footnote{Reading Jewish Women page 21}

Doubts have arisen among historians, too, about the role of history in an era where rational belief in the ability to investigate the past “objectively” has come under intense, perhaps even fatal, attack. More and more historians, alongside anthropologists and cultural studies scholars, are tending to adopt postmodern postures—erasing the sharp distinction between
literature and history and speaking instead of the historicity of the text and the
textuality of history.\footnote{Reading Jewish Women page 22}

Then there is the opposite camp of historians, which argues in rebuttal that the referentiality of a literary text is of a fundamentally different nature than that of the historical document, yet nevertheless the literary text remains a potent tool for the description and interpretation of historical fact. But this is not the place to survey this issue in detail.\footnote{Reading Jewish Women page 23}

For our purposes it suffices to note that the use of literary works in this book
is not to be taken as putting literary works and historical documents on an
equal footing as regards mimetic or referential “truth,” nor does it mean that
both are being deemed equivalent in terms of narrative or “fiction.” In this
book we maintain the distinction between works of literature and autobiog-
ographical memoirs, and between these in turn and journalistic chronicles,
newspaper articles, and statistical reports. Literary material is used, but used
judiciously.\footnote{Reading Jewish Women page 24}

The literary works that this book will draw upon—mostly prose fiction
from the second half of the nineteenth century—contain a rich lode of ethn-
ographic data. Highly descriptive, they give a quite comprehensive picture
of Jewish communal life at the time, including its characters, income
sources, class stratification, status divisions, beliefs, and customs. But, again,
there is more than one reason to approach such depictions with vigilance.
First, these accounts all were written by maskilim, often in a critical or satir-
ical tone—itself grounds to suspect exaggeration or distortion. It may be as-
sumed that moral fervor and the ideology of social reform, nurtured by
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hopes of achieving a Jewish utopia, can affect not only what is described but also what is omitted in accounts of Jewish life. Second, factors of personal biography such as family lineage, social and class standing, regional origin, educational history, and background of marriage or divorce, can influence an author’s depiction of the surrounding world and especially the subject chosen as the focus of social critique. Third, considerations related to public reception—finding a publisher, raising funds from donors or the state authorities, and gaining access to a suspicious and hostile reading public—affect the politics of these texts and the nature of the decisions made within them. Fourth, the demands of artistry or of individual psychology, which, at least for important figures such as Mendele, could not always be squared with the other considerations noted here—these too leave their mark on the world that a work depicts.

Any reliance on literary accounts for the sake of reconstructing social reality is thus problematic without corroboration from extraliterary sources. And yet it does seem that literature is unique in combining a description of particular facts with the insightful depth encrypted in the allegorical, metaphorical, or symbolical dimensions that such particulars carry with them. This combination is one which no other source is able to provide.

Of the range of works of fiction, autobiography, or memoirs available to us, only a few were written by women. The vast majority of these texts was written by men, so that reliance on them for reconstructing the life of women also raises special difficulties. Not only is the treatment of women’s subjects approached in an offhand manner, as an afterthought, but the internal lives of the women also remain undisclosed by these texts. Moreover, the marginal place women have in most of the autobiographies and memoirs exacerbates the problem of generalizing from the particular, and perhaps atypical, case. The reader of these sources gets the impression that women from the Jewish “masses,” the “simple,” hard-working women, never merit any detailed description and are kept in their anonymous state, whereas those who are carefully depicted were impressive and outstanding women perhaps, but unrepresentative.

Given the near absence of autobiographies or memoirs written by women, the autobiography of Pauline Wengeroff (1833–1916), born in Bobruysk, stands out. Yet Pauline Wengeroff is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. Most documentation regarding women—their lives, education, intellectual development, and reading habits—appears within indirect accounts in which mothers and grandmothers are described by sons and grandsons, and sisters and cousins are described by family members. Women began to write autobiographies and memoirs only toward the end of the nineteenth century, and only then do the mothers and grandmothers, born in the 1840s and 1860s, begin to appear from a woman’s perspective. In most of the sources one can
perhaps find some information about the learnedness of the women mentioned, about their reading habits and even their perspectives, yet there is usually little in the way of detailed or intimate accounts or anything that expresses their inner world.\textsuperscript{30}

Any study of the reading habits of women, and any study of their expectations or tastes in reading, must therefore draw upon supporting sources, such as data from book sales, printers, and publishers; library circulation figures; and so forth. Another way that a picture of the female reader may be formed is by retrieving the image of the implied reader in the works expressly addressed to women.\textsuperscript{31}

Despite these considerable limitations, the sources that will serve us in this book reveal quite a bit about the lives of these women, including their education and reading habits. Notwithstanding the ideological bent, the lack of a female point of view, and the lack of a fair representation for the women of the masses, these sources reinforce each other on the whole and allow us to paint a sufficiently rich picture both of the atypical women and of the anonymous and “faceless” women who surrounded them.

Finally, it should be stressed that this book is concerned not with the entire female population but only with the set of women who were literate. These divide into three groups of women readers: (1) those who could read European languages; (2) those who read Yiddish; and (3) the small group who could read Hebrew. As I have noted, the latter group began to expand only toward the end of the nineteenth century. Though these groups overlap somewhat, on the whole they were distinct in educational level, intellectual ability, social status, and numerical size. The three groups influenced, each in its way, the kinds of literature produced, the evolving patterns of reading habits, and the expansion of the reading public within Jewish society. Whether they read the European classics, popular Yiddish novels or novels in Hebrew, these women readers functioned as conscious or unconscious agents of change in their society, disseminating the spirit of secularism and modernization throughout it.

In this book, the portraits of men and women readers—the accounts of their reading experiences and the bits and pieces of their daily lives—serve as resources for reconstructing the beliefs, opinions, and customs of these people and thus for characterizing the social reality of Eastern European Jews in the nineteenth century. I have chosen to cite most of these passages in their original form, often without abbreviation or ellipsis, for several reasons: first, to present the world and experiences of these readers with maximal transparency; second, because any attempt to transmit these accounts in my own words, or to emphasize individual details from the wealth of particulars every one of them contains, can only detract from the full picture I am seeking to convey; third, because the language of the quoted passages is part of their
special appeal, and the only way for a reader to taste the flavor of nineteenth-century Hebrew is to present them in the original (or in an adequate translation [tr.]); and, finally, because it serves to raise from anonymity a few of the women readers whose portraits were briefly scribbled into the margins of a memoir, and so to rescue them from oblivion.
Language, Literacy, and Literature as the Battleground of Haredim and Maskilim

For the “Spirit of the Times” may be found in the literary gristmills. — S. Y. Abramovitch

That women make up a high proportion of the readership for novels and belles lettres is a familiar enough phenomenon, scarcely unique to Jewish society in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, in Jewish society the phenomenon of women readers had a distinctive quality. This distinctiveness has to do with the social and cultural setting in which the community of women readers had to grow: squarely in the middle of an intense cultural battle between the maskilim—those advancing the Jewish Enlightenment movement or Haskalah—and a rabbinic leadership which did all it could to prevent Jewish society from gaining access to secular literature. As literature was the primary vehicle through which the Jewish enlightenment movement formulated its ideas, and as readers of Haskalah literature increasingly brought these ideas to farther reaches of Jewish society, the rabbinic establishment deemed this literature incendiary and did what it could to fight against its authors and its readers. Key battles in the war between maskilim and the orthodox religious—the haredim—were waged over control of the institutions of education, literacy, language, and literature. Efforts by the rabbinic leadership to maintain sociocultural control by supervising these fields severely hindered the creation of secular modern literature and checked the expansion of its reading audience. Authors of Haskalah literature, geared for their battle with the haredim, had no choice but to pave a road to their readers while taking into account the constraints and the obstacles set continually in their paths. To achieve their ends they had to identify cracks in the system of rabbinical oversight and widen them, had to continually seek new ways to infiltrate the sealed haredi perimeters, and had to employ any stratagem that could let them expand their circle of readers. One of these channels was the audience of women readers. The apparatus of oversight and control that the rabbinic lead-
ership wielded was designed for men, whereas women who could read Yiddish or European languages were left, intentionally or not, beyond its range.\(^4\)

This chapter describes the social and cultural milieu in which the groups of women readers came into being; it thus applies a socio-literary analysis to examine some of the central problems Haskalah literature was forced to confront. The principal position guiding investigation of these problems in this chapter is that the emergence of modern Hebrew literature is not to be considered in isolation, but in conjunction with the contemporary literature written in Yiddish and European languages.

**Haskalah Literature: A Single, Yet Multilingual, Socio-Literary Entity**

The compounded problems the maskilim had to face—social, ideological, linguistic, and literary\(^5\)—and the range of solutions they attempted, all reflect the fact that in order to realize the Haskalah’s aims, namely the modernization and Europeanization of Jewish society, the maskilim were forced to channel their literary efforts along multiple lines. Examination of the effects of such literature on the transformations that occurred in nineteenth-century Jewish society leads to the conclusion that literatures of quite various kinds, in terms of language and quality, joined together to alter their readers’ perspectives and values. To properly assess the relation between the multilingual Jewish literatures and the reading public, therefore, one must consider the writings in Hebrew, Yiddish, and European languages in view of their interrelations: studying any one in isolation can lead to distortions and misconceptions. This conclusion is one that accords well with the claim made by Dov Sadan in his seminal article, “Introductory Essay,” that one must view the Jewish literatures in the various languages as a single holistic unit. Yet the explanations upon which Sadan bases his claim, like the reasons for his demand to study modern Hebrew literature in relation to the currents antagonistic to it, the hasidic and mitnagdic movements, are predicated on assumptions fundamentally different from the ones guiding us here.

Sadan’s claim is based on his distinctive, essentialist approach to nationalism and Zionism. He opens his article by advancing a thesis according to which every manifestation of national spirit in creative works is part of a single organic totality whose currents “draw sustenance from beneath the surface expressions of opposition, from common hidden roots... merging ultimately into [the tree’s] single canopy.”\(^6\) Sadan has doubts about the power of “explicit motives” and “ideological causes” to explain, or even to rationalize away, most of the phenomenon he discusses,\(^7\) and he prefers to account for them through appeal to concepts of personal and collective psychology. Accordingly, he speaks of “a heritage of mentality and character, which acts
heavily, even decisively, both on the individualities of literary figures and on
their expressions\(^8\) and of unconscious “deep motivations”\(^9\) and “hidden
drives” which act “beyond ideology . . . above and below it,” to direct the peo-
ple, movements, and trends of modern literature.\(^10\) By this account, the indi-
vidual author has limited free will and is driven instead by greater forces.
These forces are identified with the historical heritage of Jewish values, with
nationalism, with literature, and with the Hebrew language; to all these Sadan
attributes “will,” “hope,” “aspiration,” a “secret desire” to attain the inner pur-
pose—the consummation of the Zionist vision of emigrating to the Land of
Israel and ingathering the exiles. It is in light of this vision that Sadan de-
scribes, explains, and evaluates the literature in Yiddish and non-Jewish lan-
guages, the revival of Hebrew, and the Jewish Enlightenment project:

[W]hen the obscure motives which were driving the major trends of Haskalah litera-
ture [to prepare Hebrew to serve day-to-day needs] became, upon the emergence of
the modern national movement, conscious factors, the objective of that drive revealed
itself to have been an advance recruitment to this battle—unseen on the horizons of
pioneers and followers; and all their exertion was revealed as laboring for the sake of a
reality which the laborers themselves did not believe in and never even imagined and
would have bitterly resented any whispered suggestion of. In other words, that very
goal and very project were revealed to have been unconscious preparations for the real-
ity we are today in the process of forging.\(^11\)

Sadan regards the maskilic effort to translate world literature into Hebrew
from the same point of view:

Likewise in the translation enterprise our language, as it were, prepared itself for a full
and complete existence, wholesome to it, and without levity we may aver that the lan-
guage, out of a deep sense of its posterity and repute, effected a sort of pioneering
movement and prepared itself for 
\textit{aliyah} to our land.\(^12\)

This approach also informs Sadan’s assessment of the quandary that the
authors of the modern literature faced over the language in which they
should write. The language options then available were the “eternal
tongue” (Hebrew); the “tongue of the time” (Yiddish); and the “tongue of
\textit{Laaz}” (any non-Jewish language, but typically Russian, Polish, German or
French). Sadan further subdivides the latter into the \textit{Laaz}, when a foreign
language is employed “for Jews and their needs only,” and the “alien tongue
of \textit{Nechar},” when a foreign language is employed for addressing a non-
Jewish audience, as a means of integration. For Sadan, an author’s quandary
over this choice is to be seen as the deep spiritual conflict he must suffer
when having to confront the temptations brandished by each of the “living
tongues.” Moreover, those authors who indeed settled this conflict in favor
of Hebrew did so, Sadan says, out of a deep instinctive urge and not on
ideological grounds:
Only such a person who was able to suppress within him the natural instinct, which actually is one of the marked instincts of our race, the instinct to direct action, and who could live in abstinence of this and function in a world of make-believe, never guessing, even dimly, that this imaginary world would in time become real, only such as he could withstand the seductions from without and within and could identify himself with this one small stone that the masons had dismissed, carving away until it had become as it has become today—the foundation stone. Indeed, an almost blunted sensibility is required, grounded in deepest instinct, unaffected by the moment, the hour, the surroundings, to be a seed of futures.13

Sadan’s “Introductory Essay” is thus based on an entire teleological philosophy of history. In his way of thinking, deep impersonal and unconscious motives upwelling from and acting upon the spirit of the nation are what drive a vast historic process of national revival, and every creative work expressing the national spirit plays a role in it one way or the other.14 In the study we are undertaking, by contrast, the claim that the full panoply of nineteenth-century Jewish literature in all its different languages must be considered together, arises instead from the need to represent a particular sociocultural reality at a particular moment in time. This enquiry makes no idealistic assumptions as to the existence of a national spirit that takes control of authors’ minds and directs their inscriptions. Nor does it downplay the significance or explanatory power of ideological motives, even if these alone are not always central. The influence of ideology on authorial decisions as to genre and language is treated here as one factor among many in the cultural complex forming the language, the literature, and the minds of readers.

At any rate, neither the issue of the ideas grappling with each other, nor that of nurturing roots, nor of the dialectical relations between currents in Judaism, is central to our discussion here. Our concern is not even with the thinking of the society’s elites, whether traditional or maskilic, but rather, with the portraits of individual readers and with group portraits of reading communities made up of ordinary human beings. These reading communities were shaped at one end under the influence of the social controls applied by the traditional leadership in its struggle against the maskilim, and at the other end under the influence of the strategies the maskilim themselves deployed. This study, accordingly, attempts to sketch the profiles of these reading audiences in terms of their social status, gender, language of literacy, education level, education type, and cultural universe; in terms of their associations, perspectives, desires, expectations, and reading habits; and with an eye to the different functions that reading served for different readers (or for the same reader), information about the actual books read, book sales and circulation data, and so forth. An investigation of this kind, which reads the cultural map from the margins to the center and not merely from the center to the margins, is what validates the claim that in scholarship of Haskalah literature, just as in
scholarship of this literature’s transformative influence on nineteenth-century Jewish society, one must keep in view both the literature in Hebrew and the literatures in Yiddish and European languages.

A further, no less relevant inference of the socio-literary approach to Haskalah literature is that studying the high, canonical literature alone while ignoring the popular literature can equally mislead or distort. Hebrew literature, Yiddish literature, and literature in the European languages were indeed unequal in the prestige they enjoyed and differently addressed their different target audiences, but for that very reason they were more effective in achieving their aims. For there can be no doubt that reading scientific literature, philosophy, or articles in Hebrew is not quite the same thing as reading fiction in this language; nor is reading fine Hebrew literature the same as reading the European classics; nor are any of these the same as reading literature in Yiddish, a literature considered to have been written for the broad masses, the lower classes. Yet the inescapable conclusion is that all these readings together contributed to the modernization and secularization of Jewish society. For it may be decisively affirmed that the persuasiveness of ideological, scientific, or philosophical arguments alone is not what brought about the transformation of Jewish society of that time. Maskilic ideas and modern ways of thinking filtered through to the broad masses not only via the narrow elite, which read scientific and canonical literature in Hebrew and the European languages, but also through the anonymous readers of Yiddish literature—a literature that was expressly described as (and by many was taken to be) marginal and meant mainly for women.

Haskalah Literature and the Rabbinic Leadership’s Systems of Social Control:
“Who Is Keeping the Enlightenment from Expanding”?

The literary criticism written by maskilim in the 1860s and 1870s is an important source for clarifying our central questions. Expressed within this criticism are the maskilim’s deliberations over the appropriate strategies to take in the struggle with the leaders of the religious establishment, thus indirectly revealing also these leaders’ modus operandi.

A good starting point for this discussion is S.Y. Abramovitch’s article, “If Our Heritage It Be, Let Us Receive It.” In this article, which fairly well represents the literary criticism from the period and nicely formulates the central issues on its agenda, Abramovitch attempts to respond to two questions: “Wherefore should Jews be the last to follow the lead of other peoples in the consummate virtues? And why is our literature not made mandatory and necessary for all of our nation?” Abramovitch explains that these two questions, which seem “at first glance, far removed from each other . . . are in
and that to answer them one must “survey the state of current Hebrew literature, the condition of the schools and the trained rabbis, and improvements to conditions for the Jews.” In the context of efforts to clarify “who is keeping the Haskalah from expanding” Abramovitch thus suggests that a close connection exists between the Haskalah literature’s failure to be accepted by its target audience and “the condition of the schools and trained rabbis,” and it is these institutions he blames for impeding the Haskalah’s expansion.

In the preface to his _Eye of Justice_, Abramovitch suggests that neither secular modern literature nor the reading public for it were formed in a smooth, natural process that could be left to unfold on its own, but rather, in a slow and arduous process and despite resistances arising from without and within. For, first, the composition and reading of literature were seen by the rabbinical leadership as illicit practices; second, the schools of the various sorts did not equip students with the literacy skills needed for reading modern secular literature; and third, Haskalah literature itself, for which Abramovitch reserves the brunt of his critique, suffered from a conformism and often avoided direct confrontation with the rabbinic leadership or paving roads to bypass its obstacles.

“*If Our Heritage It Be, Let Us Receive It*”

Abramovitch begins the book proper by sharply criticizing Haskalah literature’s dependence on authorities, or as he calls them, “avthoritates.” In his opinion, the reason it took the Haskalah so long to be accepted in Jewish Eastern Europe was that Haskalah literature failed to create for itself a public that could trust it and draw sustenance from it. This break between the literature and its potential audience was the result, in his opinion, of the fact that the maskilim were as dependent on traditional sources of authority as the traditionalists were, and consequently their literature lacked free critical thought, continued its undemocratic approach toward access to knowledge, and remained just as irrelevant as ever to the immediate problems of Jewish society. The refusal to shake off this reliance on traditional sources of authority was, for Abramovitch, the indication that maskilic literature was retrograde in nature, for a lack of free judgment and an antidemocratic approach to the dissemination of knowledge were the hallmarks of traditional societies:

From the beginning of time it has been the way of the wise of all peoples, to sequester the wisdoms and sciences from the public eye and to speak using hints and a specialized language, so that their words would be heard only by those initiated into the halls of reason, and not by the broad masses; doubtless they were forced to do so for well-known reasons, which need not be mentioned here.
But with the advent of the new era, writes Abramovitch, came a shift in the relation of the peoples of Europe toward the distribution of knowledge, and this shift is what drove them toward enlightenment and progress. These nations elected to make knowledge available to all and wrested control of knowledge and language from the hands of a small and privileged sect. The intentionally convoluted rhetoric meant only for the cognoscenti was exchanged for a straightforward language accessible to all, and popular scientific writing won itself a wide circulation:

In this century it appears that the intelligent persons [of Europe] have ceased to be a special sect and have been making great efforts to open the sealed gates of reason and to announce to all and sundry the news and innovations, gathered from the real world!\(^{21}\)

Yet in the Jewish world, things were otherwise. In this society, both rabbis and maskilim refused to follow in the footsteps of enlightening Europe and continued to use “avtoritates”:

And really you will find no nation, who makes itself so many avtoritates and sticks to them as much as the Jews do. Every author is sacred in the eyes of his own party, and no one may examine his statements critically, but must blindly take them as is and rely upon them. [...]. And if some author has been around for a few hundred years, then his antiquated statements are taken as grounds for controverting a new opinion! [...].—Till now, how weighty has been the virtue of precedence with us [...] as if time forever stood still and there was no development to life; [...] And till now the following epigram has been held to be true: “If the First Ones were as humans then we are as donkeys.”\(^{22}\)

In line with the adage, “If the First Ones were as humans then we are as donkeys,” the Jewish rabbis viewed themselves as vastly inferior to their ancestors, so that reliance on the ancient sages’ utterances became the sole basis of legitimacy. This approach to legitimation kept not only the broad masses from access to sources of knowledge but also kept the rabbinic elite from engaging in critical inquiry. What was ancient was sanctified, and the beliefs and opinions of the earliest speakers carried the validity of eternal truths.

For us, the relevant element in Abramovitch’s censure is that he directs his critiques not at traditional society alone but equally at the Haskalah’s authors. Indeed, Abramovitch argues that the procedures applied in traditional society for earning legitimacy were copied over verbatim by the maskilim—that they accepted both the authoritativeness of the rabbis from ancient times, with its retardant effects, and the sacredness of the texts handed down by them. Moreover, as will become clear later on, certain critics of Haskalah literature went further still and argued that this dependence on “avtoritates” was not merely a way to lend sanction to traditional literature but was also an acceptance of the authority of the present-day rabbinic leadership, which drew from the received texts its inspiration and its powers.
Rabbinic Ratifications—A Tool for Control over Literature and the Reading Public

The same year that Abramovitch published his *Eye of Justice*, Abraham Yaakov Papirna (1840–1919) published the book *Kankan Hadash Male Yashan* (New Decanter, Ancient Contents) and, like Abramovitch, he too railed against Has-kalah literature’s reliance on “avtoritates,” a reliance which in his view was the root of all ills plaguing such literature. Papirna did not settle for a general condemnation of the reliance on the authoritative, but chose instead to list its manifestations one by one and to detail the institutions in which it flourished. Among such manifestations Papirna stressed the *haskamah*, the practice of having ratifications by rabbis be published in the preface to each book—a clear indication, he thought, that the dependence on the authoritative involved obedience to rabbinic authority.

Papirna makes it clear that the practice of granting ratifications was one of the rabbinic leadership’s important mechanisms for conserving beliefs and reproducing the existing social order. The ratifications served simultaneously as a means of bringing texts to the censors and as a system for enforcing the censorship:

> When the auitoritat of the latter-day rabbis was in full force, every book lacking the stamp of one auitoritat or another was denied access to the community of Jewish texts. Therefore the miserable authors beat a path to the doors of the well-known rabbis to request their ratifications and official approvals.

Through the system of ratifications the rabbinic leadership held the reins over language, literature, and knowledge, and were able to mold the society and the culture to their form. That was why Papirna, like the rest of the radical Haskalah literary critics, condemned the Haskalah authors’ acquiescence to it. For Papirna, the need that Haskalah writers had for ratifications was proof positive of the rabbinical establishment’s supremacy. It was what allowed the leadership to maintain its controls over literature and society, and it functioned as both cause and symptom of the conformism that incapacitated mas-kilic writing.

It should be mentioned that economic duress also helped shore up the rabbis’ controls over texts and readers. The ratification process was closely linked to the ability to raise funds for publication. Writers who had a hard time financing publication of their books commonly sought funding from signatories (“prenumerants”), who paid for the work in advance. For the signatories to raise their funds, the writers required official approval and had to present a rabbinic ratification, recommending the book to one and all. Armed with such ratifications, the writers went themselves or sent third parties to seek out signatories from the various Jewish communities. Due to the lack
independent financing to cover costs of writing and printing, this system of fundraising via prenumerants was carried over from religious literature to modern literature. Just as religious literature required the approval of rabbis and notables before fundraising could commence, so did modern Hebrew literature.

The maskilim’s willingness to adopt these fundraising methods had a far-reaching impact on the character of their works, which on the whole had to be conformist if it was to earn a stamp of approval. A case in point is the affair surrounding publication of *The Voyage of Columbus or the Discovery of the New Land* by Campa, in Mordechai Aharon Gintzburg’s Hebrew translation.\(^{26}\) Even a maskilic author such as Gintzburg, whom Papirna regarded as one of his generation’s leading maskilic figures, was forced to court favor with well-known rabbis and to obtain their approval to have his translation published and win acceptability from his reading public.\(^{27}\) The whole affair is described in great detail by Shmuel Leib Tsitron, who found it “rather interesting as a significant historic document conveying the atmosphere current among Lithuanian Jewry of the time.”\(^{28}\) Tsitron relates that upon completing the translation in 1822, Gintzburg appealed to his father “to put in his own ratification and seek also ratifications from the leading Vilna rabbis.” Tsitron goes on to say that only after great effort was the father able to receive a ratification from the Gaon Rabbi Avraham Ebli HaPasvaly. About this he writes:

In those days it was nearly impossible to print and widely circulate any maskilic books which hadn’t the approval of some famous rabbi. [...] Only with such rabbinic ratifications could the writer-maskil of those days defend himself from the persecutions of the zealous and the claims of overstepping boundaries. Once Gintzburg had the ratification in his pocket he set about, as was customary in those days, to collect signatories for his book, and with the greatest of difficulties obtained only a fraction of the funds needed to cover the costs of printing.\(^{29}\)

In the end Gintzburg was forced to accept the donation of a friend who acted as a patron, and in gratitude Gintzburg dedicated the work to him. Yet the trials of publication did not cease there. As there were no Hebrew print shops in Vilna, Gintzburg was forced to “purchase, from his own pocket, Hebrew type-blocks in Rashi font—apparently for warding off the zealots’ ‘evil eye’ spell—which he later resold at a considerable loss to himself.”\(^{30}\) It is not impossible that Tsitron’s explanation of “warding off the zealots’ evil eye” hinted at the use of these type fonts as a subterfuge, meant to subdue readers’ suspicions and render the book “kosher” through the familiar and safe look of the fonts in which it was set to type.

Indeed, as the Gintzburg story suggests, the printing problems, the practice of signing prenumerants and the door-to-door sales by writers of their compositions only deepened the Haskalah authors’ dependence on the whims of
rabbis and patrons. A case in point showing the effects of such reliance on book contents is given by Israel Zinberg, where he discusses Hayim Haykl Horowitz of Uman, the German-to-Yiddish translator of *The Discovery of America*. Zinberg claims that Horowitz’s translation won the approval of the Magid of Zelba because it recast the entire premise of the original work: the humanistic or enlightenment motifs were stripped out and the book was given a Jewish and God-fearing cast. Abramovitch likewise asserts that the desire or need to earn legitimacy limited the Haskalah writers’ freedom, fostered ideological conservatism, and deflected them from their true ideals:

The love of received wisdoms is rooted in our writers also, to the degree where the value of each is estimated by the [quantity of] ratifications and approvals which he holds from the Great Ones and by the [extent of] identity of his opinions on all points with those of the famous. [...] And where there is ratification and avtoritate, there the idea of the heart of man is in dire straits; he may not freely develop and enlarge, and the literature may not gradually mature into its own proper form... Where the avtoritate rules the mind is servile...  

In summary, one may conclude that as a censorship tool the ratifications system was frequently an efficient device for delegitimizing fine literature, and often for delegitimizing secular, scientific, and philosophical literature as well. As traditional society’s attitude toward Haskalah literature ranged from suspicious hostility to outright and ruthless opposition, achieving legitimacy became an aim in itself for this literature. The incessant striving for rabbinic sanction and a dignified appearance were variously manifested in the writing, through the choice of language, content, and form—all means intended to ease suspicions and permit Haskalah literature to infiltrate sectors of society that feared and shunned the Haskalah movement. As Abramovitch affirms, however, this desire for legitimacy led modern Hebrew literature into a bind: if it did not display conformity to the accepted ways of thinking and writing in traditional society, a book stood little chance of earning ratification and in turn of being printed and read; yet if it did satisfy the traditional leadership, Haskalah literature could not speak in its own voice or fulfill its proper destiny.

**Literacy Policy and Rabbinic Control in Society and Literature**

As I have said, the system of ratifications was a censorship device directed at authors and their books as well as at readers. Yet the ratification system was not the only tool, or even the main one, used to control and supervise readers. The rabbinic leadership sought to determine not only which books could be printed and publicly distributed but also, and primarily, who would be able to read, what he would be able to read, and in which contexts the reading he was
trained for would occur. These objectives were achieved by means of the traditional school system's institutions and the literacy policy it enforced, a policy that fully reflected the social and religious ideology of the rabbinic leadership.

It is conventionally thought, for the most part quite rightly, that literacy rates in Jewish society had always been especially high. Nearly all males were taught the Hebrew alphabet at the traditional schools and could read Hebrew and Yiddish script; and the number of women who were taught the basics of reading at home or during their short stay in the heder for girls was also high, especially when compared to women's literacy rates in the surrounding non-Jewish society. Yet these figures, impressive as they may be, are not evidence of a comprehensive and equitable literacy policy.

"Literacy," it should be recalled, is a vague concept that covers a broad spectrum of reading and writing levels and skills; its range embraces basic literacy, indicated by the ability to sign one's name, effective literacy, characterized by a facility in writing, reading comprehension ability, and mastery of particular domains. To properly assess the factor of literacy rates and skill levels in examining a literature’s effects on a society, one must thus take into account not only rates of basic literacy, but also rates of effective literacy in the specific domains in which reading skills are called upon. And since the necessary literacy skills for understanding a talmudic text or a legal, scientific, or philosophical one are distinct from those needed for comprehending a poem or fine literature, the degree of literacy in a society must be assessed in terms of its level, the social context of literacy acquisition, and the social and cultural purposes the literacy was meant to serve. When the traditional school system and its literacy policy are viewed in light of these distinctions, one can discern the ideology that guided it and how instruction in reading served the aims of social control and reproduction of the existing social order. As we shall see, these considerations complicate the usual picture of the state of literacy—chiefly by undermining the presumption that equal provision of basic literacy skills necessarily implies that access to sources of knowledge was also provided equitably.

The picture that emerges from examination of the traditional school system in terms of the gender and status of its pupils, and from analysis of the instructional methods employed and the types and levels of literacy provided, is of a system that worked to reinforce the status of a narrow, scholarly elite. The people excluded from this elite, from the apex of the social hierarchy, were not women alone: most men were kept out, too. As I have noted, in Jewish society all men except those incapable of it were taught to read the Bible and the prayerbook; yet most men were taught to read mechanically—enough to allow them to fulfill their devotional obligations but no more. Many men could not understand what they read: few had anything like a full command of Hebrew, that is, the capacity to properly comprehend a passage of the Bible or of a modern Hebrew text. Those men discovered to have talents as religious
scholars were thoroughly trained primarily in rabbinic rhetoric, but the common men could on the whole read and understand only what was written in Yiddish. In any event, for our purposes what is significant is that the requirements for formal study in the traditional schools applied only to boys. Girls who learned to read—and large numbers of them did—were taught in non-obligatory settings, either by the rabbi’s wife in the heder for girls or by listening to the boys at study. These women, like the commoners among the men, could read and understand Yiddish.

Despite the appearance of equality resulting from having all men be taught to read, the educational system did not maintain literacy levels on an equal basis. It was not, for example, deemed necessary to provide everyone with the ability to read and comprehend Hebrew; indeed, doing so was considered undesirable and even dangerous. This is not the place, however, for a detailed discussion of traditional society’s attitude toward the Hebrew language. (That involved subject, with its multifarious causes and consequences, requires separate treatment; I have touched on it elsewhere.) The objective guiding the structure and curriculum of the educational system was to prepare the best students as quickly as possible for Talmud study while clearing out the unqualified. Yet this aim, which maintained the social strata dividing the scholarly elite from the broad masses, was not the traditional school system’s sole purpose. No less crucial was the need to forestall any possible access to bodies of knowledge viewed as dangerous, especially Hebrew grammar, Scripture, and Haskalah literature. For each of these were potential sources for challenging rabbinical authority and the validity of Jewish law.

Shmuel Leib Tsitron, in an article dedicated to Adam Hacohen’s labors to advance the Hebrew language, is unequivocal on this point:

Here we stand, at first glance, before a very curious sight. It is well known that amongst the Europeans it had been necessary to first completely overcome the might of the Catholic priesthood in order to allow the masses to be able to read the holy writings translated into a language they could understand, […] yet could such a scenario be possible also for the Jewish people? […] The rabbis and the haredim could not, of course, come out openly condemning those who struggled to publicly disseminate knowledge of Scripture and the Hebrew language. But the basic instinct of self-preservation, is what reaffirmed them in this battle. Their hearts told them that dissemination of knowledge of Hebrew as the innovators were seeking to do, was bound to sharpen, purify and polish Israelite thought, which would ultimately have the result that this purified and shining Jewish thought would revolt with tremendous might against the dry labyrinthine talmudism and the confined rabbinic scholasticism […] This was the point on which the war-seasoned rabbis rallied and they began to take arms against the members of the new church.

The autobiographical literature of the nineteenth century is full of tales of the hostility of traditional society toward the study of Hebrew and its grammar, and of the obstacles faced by those who tried to study Hebrew on their own.
Ahad Ha’am, for example, tells in his memoirs how he learned “the grammar of the Holy Tongue and the Bible”:

All in jumbles and patches, a fragment here, a fragment there, never with tutor or guide. Such studies were, however, viewed by the savages of those circles [Russian hasidic circles] not just as worthless, but as deathly dangerous poisons.\(^{52}\)

Given the antagonism toward Hebrew and the systematic avoidance of Hebrew instruction, it follows that the traditional school system did not offer instruction in European languages either. European literature and the foreign ideas introduced by its means were taken as genuine threats to the society’s values and beliefs, and it followed that for Jewish men, formal study of languages such as Russian, German, French, or Polish, even outside the traditional educational setting, was viewed as undesirable and dangerous.\(^{53}\) Nahum Meir Shaikevitch, a.k.a. Shomer (1846–1905), speaks of the hostility the Polish and Lithuanian Jews had for foreign languages and those who studied them, and intimates that those who learned foreign languages were suspected of heresy:

Who will believe the rumor that in all the lands of Lithuania and Poland wherein most residents were Jews it was rare indeed to find a Jewish man who spoke and understood the local tongue. For of all safeguards fathers protected their sons lest they learn the state language, and the youth who dared to study this language “unclean—depart” was called after him.\(^{54}\)

One may thus conclude that the literacy policy applied in traditional Jewish society was a tool in service of an openly conservative ideology.\(^{55}\) The unequal distribution of literacy skills and of “cultural capital” as a whole among the various social classes and among men and women, reflects what was at stake for the traditional leadership, which sought to maintain the class structure in Jewish society and to secure its isolation from the surrounding non-Jewish world.\(^{56}\) This policy allowed only a scholarly male elite to have access to sacred canonical texts, and it denied most of the traditional educational establishment’s pupils, whether men or women, the literacy skills needed to let them approach Hebrew literature on the one hand and non-Jewish literature on the other. It would not be exaggerating to say, accordingly, that the practice of granting ratifications was little more than a safety valve in the much more vast and more substantial social control apparatus wielded by the educational system. The link observed by Mendele in his article, “If Our Heritage It Be, Let Us Receive It,” between rabbis, schools, readers, Hebrew literature, and the delayed dissemination of Haskalah values in Jewish society, is thus connected with issues of social infrastructure which are much more entrenched than first appears.

What this account clearly suggests is that the development of a public that could read Hebrew presented difficulties no less formidable than the development of Hebrew literature itself. Small wonder that writers and critics of the
period complained they were failing to widen the narrow circle of their literary community, where the slight number of readers barely surpassed the slight number of writers. Abraham Uri Kovner (1842–1909) puts the matter succinctly when he states that in the 1860s “there are no readers amongst the Hebrews: the readers are writers and the writers readers.”

Only toward the 1880s were there signs of a breakthrough in this field, when the number of readers of Hebrew reached about 100,000, yet even then one repeatedly heard claims that these readers were a tiny minority within Jewish society, that they were limited in their cultural world and had substandard literary tastes. The complaints about the narrow readership for Hebrew literature were aimed also at its potential readers—those who had the needed skills for reading modern Hebrew literature yet continued to resist it. What was said about the majority of this potential audience was that it had not acquired reading habits, that it was uninterested in secular literature of any kind, and that it lacked the instinct for gratifying aesthetic needs through belles lettres. The sorry state of Haskalah literature and the poor state of its readers are described by writers and critics such as Abraham Yaakov Papirna, Mendele the Bookseller, David Frishman, and others as mutually reinforcing causes.

Yet this analysis of the literacy policy in the system of traditional education cannot be the whole picture. For while it may perhaps account for the difficulties that Hebrew Haskalah literature faced in broadening its readership and exposing Jewish society’s readers and writers to non-Jewish literature, it still fails to account for the difficulties that Yiddish literature confronted. Since the traditional school system trained large numbers of men to read Yiddish, and the number of women who learned to read Yiddish in informal settings was also not insubstantial, it would have been possible to propagate maskilic ideas to widening circles of the Jewish public much more easily in Yiddish than in any other language. Clearly, then, the road to the Yiddish reading public was not entirely free of obstacles either. These evidently stemmed from internal resistance by the maskilim themselves no less, and perhaps more so, than they did from direct conflict with the rabbinic establishment. In order to understand the nature of these difficulties one must survey the maskilim’s relationship with the Yiddish language, a relationship whose full dimensions cannot be seen without elucidation also of their attitudes toward the other language options at their disposal: Hebrew and Laaz.

The methods that the haredi establishment applied to oversee and control literature, literacy, language, and schooling demonstrate perhaps more than any-
thing else how extremely important they thought these fields were. The leaders of traditional society grasped, whether they were aware of it or not, that control over these areas gave them the leverage to substantially shape the cultural universe of their public and to instill the values and world-views that would perpetuate the social order. And yet, if control over language, literature, and literacy was an effective apparatus for achieving conservatism and social continuity, it also presented an unrivaled platform for social change. The maskilim, like the haredim, understood the significance of these fields and sought to turn the haredi weapons against them in their effort to subvert the rabbinic hegemony.

A glance at the maskilim’s writings shows how engrossed they were in linguistic issues, with their discussions centering on the problematics of the Hebrew language as well as those of Yiddish and Laaz. The Haskalah’s positions regarding each of these languages were formed in the course of blistering debates brimming with ideological charges and laden with deeply vested emotions. A detailed survey of these disputes is not possible here, but it is necessary for our purposes to sketch out the main trends in maskilic thinking on the issue of the choice of a language, in the context of the socio-linguistic reality of the times.

Jewish society in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe was a diglossic, or bilingual, and frequently multilingual society. Hebrew and Yiddish played largely complementary roles—a condition typical of diglossia—and both competed with Laaz, that is, with the state languages. A “half-dead” Hebrew functioned as the sacred and elevated linguistic organ. Haredim resisted using it for secular purposes; while the maskilim were divided over it. Some considered Hebrew—the ancient language of the Jews—a noble language unalloyed by foreign elements that alone could serve for fine literary composition; some thought writing in Hebrew could be justified only as a transitional phase to writing in Laaz; still others reviled this language and sought to have it entirely abandoned. Yiddish, on the other hand—unlike Hebrew, the province of a narrow elite—was a language everyone routinely spoke. Many maskilim viewed it as laggard and contemptible, a mongrel or hybrid tongue, unfit and unworthy for any sort of cultural or literary expression. They identified Yiddish, negatively, with the women’s sphere, with the kitchen and the marketplace, and this firmly entrenched image did little to dignify anything written in Yiddish, or its readers or its writers. The decision made by several authors to compose in Yiddish was controversial and came consistently accompanied by apologetic explanations. These writers presented writing in Yiddish as a transitory phase to writing in Laaz, or as a necessary evil for which the supreme national interest—that of educating women and the masses—was its primary justification.

In the background there were, as noted, the languages of Laaz—the European languages. Most maskilim felt that these could be of service as models,
and a few felt that mastery of these tongues was a goal that would be rewarded by civil and cultural integration into the surrounding society. According to these latter, writing in Hebrew and Yiddish was nothing more than a stage en route to Eurofication or russification. Yet preferring Laaz would mean cutting one’s ties to the culture of the past and blurring the national identity, consequences which many maskilim balked at. The threats of assimilation and absorption thus led some groups of maskilim to seek to shore up the national and cultural identity by means of the Hebrew language.

This ideological-linguistic dilemma over the proper and desirable language in which to compose literature involved not only the language options themselves but also the question of who was the audience being aimed at by the literatures in each language, and what objectives were being sought within each. Concerns such as these brought to the fore quite a few tensions and inner contradictions, as individual maskilim tried to square their attitudes of principle toward Hebrew, Yiddish, or Laaz with the necessary pragmatic considerations. The desire to infiltrate the yeshivas made even the Russophiles lean toward Hebrew writing, notwithstanding the fact that any text in Hebrew (with vowel marks, and grammatically correct to pure biblical standards) would be regarded warily by the yeshiva scholars, and for many would be incomprehensible. The assumption here was that the yeshiva students’ knowledge of Hebrew, however feeble, would be firmer than their proficiency in Laaz, and that the lofty status the Hebrew language possessed would encourage yeshiva students to at least grapple with the maskilic texts. Conversely, the desire to enlighten the masses argued for writing in Yiddish despite its debased, “feminine” status; while the desire to become full citizens and take part in the reigning culture, along with a sense of the relative inferiority of Hebrew and its literature, were reasons for writing in Laaz. Several statements by Kovner, Papirna, and Abramovitch, three of the great critics of Haskalah literature and pioneers of modern Hebrew literary criticism, may serve to illustrate how the authors shuttled between these conflicting positions.

Kovner, who set out as a Hebrew critic but quickly abandoned Hebrew for Russian, did not hesitate to auger the impending demise of both Hebrew and its literature. In an analysis of their troubled state within the Jewish society of his day, he writes,

In general I say that Hebrew literature which stands today on the precipice, shall fall never to rise again. Those standing still have long distanced themselves contemptuously from it, while those in motion cast it behind their backs as an unnecessary article. And let us not judge how far in the right these latter are. On these matters this is the context to mention the many complaints so often repeated in the periodicals, about junior maskilim who completed courses of study in the rabbinic academy, or who were taught in programs of higher education, that the Hebrew tongue is estranged from them: in my opinion, this is a good thing [...].
Using rhetoric no less biting, Kovner denies that the Hebrew language is in the least bit sacred. He poses the question, “What is the Hebrew Tongue in itself? Is it indeed ladylike?” To which he replies, “For it is no different than any language reconstituted from dead characters, lacking any sanctity.” In stripping the Hebrew language of the sacredness it had been invested with by, in his opinion, haredim and maskilim alike, each in their way, Kovner discloses the instrumentalist basis of his approach. In his opinion, there is no value in itself to the revitalization of Hebrew or to the construction of a modern literature in this language: only considerations of cost and benefit, based on the state of literacy in Jewish society, should determine what language it is proper and desirable to write in. When he issues his call to have a generation of readers be taught to read and enjoy scientific or intellectual writings, Kovner unhesitatingly asserts that these students should be able “equally to compose in the Hebrew Tongue and in the vernacular [Yiddish]: the former for the sake of those who comprehend the Hebrew Tongue, who know no other language and prefer not to read in the vernacular, even on subjects the most dignified; the latter for the broad masses, who lack knowledge of the Hebrew Tongue, who even when capable of reading its characters, are unable to decipher its words.”

By contrast with the position of the many Haskalah authors who plumed themselves on writing poetry for the greater glory of the Hebrew tongue, Kovner asserts that the enshrinement of Hebrew for its own sake should not be the objective of writing poetry. Worse: Kovner believes the costs of this approach outweigh its benefits:

Hebrew literature, while bringing no small benefit to the ones standing still, is causing much harm to those in motion. How many fine talents have gone to waste! How many days and years have been lost to so many on poems in the Hebrew Tongue, with their flavor of dream-spittle, on books of grammar lacking any value or method, on studies and calls for explanations and commentaries which are worthless one and all! And still the Hebrew Tongue has blinded their eyes and brought them hither. Truly great persons, who could have done much to aid the Hebrews, have squandered their most precious time on poems and rhetorical pieces lacking any concept, have built a false and sham discourse upon the Hebrew Tongue, and, deceived by the reverie that they are doing much to benefit their people, have erred in all their days. Moreover the little foxes use the Hebrew Tongue for private advantage [while claiming to] read it for its own salvation [. . .] And that you may know how destructive the Hebrew Tongue is to the minds of authors, I have only to cite the words of the autodidact H. Lerner [. . .] who in the preface to his book Moreh Halashon writes as follows: “Indeed all our labors are to glorify it (he means the Hebrew Tongue), whether through explanations or through poems [. . .] for upon the flag post of all there shall fly the language of Hebrew, all do admire and sanctify this ladylike one and all with a gift shall court her favor.”

Unlike Kovner, Papirna admired biblical Hebrew. The living language which had been in habitual use by the people of Israel in the remote past, that
is, when Israel was living in full freedom on its own land, presented, in his op-
inion, a model language worthy of emulation. At the same time, however,
Papirna believed that the stresses of exile had completely altered the character of Hebrew, shifting its focus from the real world and the present onto a spiri-
tualized, sanctified, illusory world with links to a mythological past and an es-
chatological future. Given the spiritual-religious quality that the diaspora had stamped on the Hebrew language, Papirna had doubts about how well this language could serve for modern life and literature; he even hinted at its inade-
quacy in comparison with the languages of European culture. This inner tension led Papirna to some paradoxical choices. In the 1860s he wrote his articles in Hebrew despite his deep reservations, and despite having determined that “books written in the Hebrew Tongue can have an effect on but the few.” Yet in the early 1870s he abandoned his efforts in the field of Hebrew literary criticism entirely, and he was not to return to them until the beginning of the twentieth century, with the publication of his famous articles on Tcherni-
chowsky’s poems.

As for Yiddish, Papirna’s approach was instrumentalist. Like Kovner, he too issued calls for composition of “intellectual and scholarly works in the vernacular” that would instruct the entire nation and not merely a narrow elite; yet he explained in addition that books in Yiddish would ultimately arouse in the people “a love for the national tongue.” In Papirna as in Kovner, there is no direct discussion of the qualities or stature of Yiddish; nor is there explicit evidence of his disparagement of it. Nevertheless, his pronouncements regarding Yiddish carry a clear apologetic note: Yiddish is represented as a tran-
sitional tongue, the very use of which was intended to bring about its demise and departure from the earth.

Abramovitch, too, gives a precise statement of the thorny linguistic issues the maskilim had to confront, and he, too, elects to handle them in a manner that is paradoxical. Early in his article, “If Our Heritage It Be, Let Us Receive It,” Abramovitch makes an impressive effort to champion Hebrew:

It is true that the Holy Tongue is not a spoken language, yet for all that it is not a dead language like the rest of the tongues of the ancient gentiles. […] Israel is still alive […] has not lost its posterity, living its life by virtue of its ancient Torah, the Law of life, she who grants spirit and breath to all the diaspora of Judah, making it a single people on the land. And if the Torah be the cause of our lives and our length of days on earth, it follows perforce, that it shall be the source of life for itself and for the Holy Language in which it was composed.—The language which embraces within it the people’s Torah and its laws […] the language which has been left us as the sole remnant of the heritage from the precious possessions of yore, left us as a lit candle before our head, that language through which our nation can see to the very rock from which it had been quarried […] that language in which thrice daily [the Jew] pours forth his prayer before the God of his forefathers and in which may be heard even the voice of the speaking God—such a language may not be like the dead nor may a people such as this harden its heart against loving it.
Sound now in the ears of a faithful Jew the poetry of [Isaiah] Ben Amotz, or a song of the pleasant psalmist, and his heart shall rejoice and his soul spring afire, like a Swiss shepherd upon hearing the flute and tunes of his homeland in a faraway place!

And for those who do not know I hereby open for him the book of the wise Franz Delitsche. This wise Christian [. . .] correctly demonstrates that the Hebrew Tongue has not died, that from the beginning of days to the present, she has forever renewed herself in a moult of youth.81

Abramovitch goes out of his way to praise Hebrew and justify its vitality, in all senses of the word, stressing the national and religious factors that highlight its cardinal virtues. The question this raises is how such statements fit with the russifist and instrumentalist stance Abramovitch maintains in the preface to the third volume of his Natural History. In this preface, alongside claims identical to those just cited, Abramovitch takes an expressly russifist line:

For we may be discerning enough to aid now our brethren only in our Holy Tongue, the one the many understand; only in the ancient tongue of their forefathers, in the tongue of their prophets and first sages: only with it indeed shall we seduce and succeed. After the passage of days I shall have no quarrel with you if you settle its fate as the fate of many grand and productive agents of the world, whom the heart forgets, once they have gratified our needs; yet for the moment she will serve us well to effect for our people the works of enlightenment. [. . .] Experience too confirms this, for many of the youth of Israel, and perhaps even many of you fine sirs, has this language awakened from the slumber of innocents [italics mine].82

There would seem to be a clear contradiction between Abramovitch’s statements in his article, “If Our Heritage It Be, Let Us Receive It,” and those in the preface to the third volume of Natural History. Yet closer reading suggests that Abramovitch’s statements in the article extolling the virtues of Hebrew are less unequivocal than it first appears, so that they do not necessarily conflict with his claims in Natural History. One readily perceives that Abramovitch’s case in defense of Hebrew is made within a polemical context and carries decidedly apologetic overtones. He makes extensive use of pointed rhetoric and enters various claims, some of which are at odds with others. The net effect is to make it hard to distinguish which of his expressions Abramovitch is uttering in his own voice and which are meant merely to sway his audience. For instance, Abramovitch sees fit to bolster the case in defense of Hebrew by drawing simultaneously on terms from the Jewish cultural discourse and on those from the dominant Christian culture. That is, he calls upon the nexus of religious and nationalist sentiments liable to affect the Jewish crowd, but at the same time suggests the analogy (which can only make us smile) by which a Jew resembles the “Swiss shepherd on hearing the flute and tunes of his homeland in a faraway place,” or rests his case on the weight of science in the form of Delitsche, the Christian translator of the New Testament to Hebrew. This marriage of strange bedfellows is a function of the different audiences Abramovitch is
seeking to reach and the political machination he summons up for the purpose. In effect, Abramovitch would like to press his case for Hebrew simultaneously before haredim who are wary of it and for maskilim who are dismissive of it, all without ignoring as well the watchful eye of the Russian authorities.\footnote{83}

Abramovitch’s choice to characterize Hebrew by the appellation “Holy Tongue,” specifically, is not conclusive evidence that he viewed this language as having a singularity or sanctity. For alongside descriptions meant to play on the religious and national sentiments of his Jewish constituency, descriptions that heighten feelings about which he believes there can be no disagreement between haredim and maskilim, Abramovitch takes care to back up his case for Hebrew by instrumentalist arguments as well. If he insists on the centrality of Hebrew to the religious life of the individual Jew and to the national history of the entire people, this is not only to stress the power of Hebrew to unify and yield national benefits, but also to persuade both the maskilim and the Russians that Hebrew is a crucial tool for the enlightenment of the Jews.

Yet these arguments about the benefits of national unification, benefits internal to Jewish society, stand in a certain tension—if not outright contradiction—with the arguments that the use of Hebrew would help make Jews better citizens in Russian society. Appealing to an image of the Jew yearning for his linguistic and physical homeland like the “Swiss shepherd” in exile, and enlisting scientific confirmation of the vitality of Hebrew from a Christian scholar, are ways of engaging the rhetoric of the russifist maskilim themselves and voicing their ambitions out loud. They highlight the common ground that exists between Jews and the enlightened peoples of the world, and suggest the special contribution Hebrew will make to a process whose culmination will be the full integration of Jews into the community of European culture. Arguments of this kind are not at all at odds with the manifestly russifist stance Abramovitch maintains in the preface to the third volume of *Natural History*, a stance according to which use of Hebrew is merely an effective means of preparing for the transition to the Russian language.

One may, accordingly, summarize by affirming that in his case for the defense of Hebrew language there is no conclusive evidence that in the 1860s and 1870s Abramovitch was not a russifist, just as there is no unequivocal evidence that he did endorse russifism. What the evidence does, however, suggest, is that in this period he was considering Hebrew and Yiddish not in view of their singular qualities but, rather, in terms of their utility for the aim of propagating the Haskalah. It should not be forgotten that Abramovitch had his novel, *Haavot Vehabanim (The Fathers and the Sons)*, published in 1867 in a Russian translation, and in these very same years he shifted to composition of literature in Yiddish. The shift to Yiddish, which required overcoming deep internal resistances, is described by Abramovitch as a necessary sacrifice justified on pragmatic grounds. In his opinion, the need to enlighten the people
through a language it is able to read and to fully understand overwhelmed both the attraction to the ancient and elevated language, the one that ennobled those who wrote in it, and the disgust with jargon, the degrading speech of the masses.

The Maskilim’s Attitude toward Laaz.

The attitude of the maskilim toward the state languages is also a complex subject requiring extensive, separate treatment. In this context we can only point out that the russifist maskilim did not view writing in Laaz merely as an educational medium, meant to provide the public with the technical skills to enable their civic integration into the dominant society, but also, and perhaps chiefly, as a means of demonstrating that the Jewish people was a cultured race, fit to share the cultural project of the larger society on a fully equal basis. The enterprise of composition in the dominant culture’s language, as distinct from passive knowledge of it or mere speech ability in such a language, was viewed as an important step toward this goal, for a composition in Laaz would simultaneously demonstrate full mastery of the reigning culture’s language and make a genuine contribution to its cultural capital.

An explicit and bold statement of this position is given by Kovner, who associated the benefit of writing in Laaz with what he viewed as the cost of writing in Hebrew:

This is what I said, the tongue of Hebrew (i.e., the mistaken conception of it most Jewish authors have come to believe in) has caused great injury to the Jews of recent times, even if it has also brought a partial benefit—for to speak truly, we have amongst us people of fine talents who can compete with the wisest and greatest of Europe; yet on what have these talents been wasted? On poems with eleven vowel-parts, on speculations on the Bible and interpretive froth [. . .] on vocabularies and the like, on numerologies and acrostics, to which they give the new name, “Philology.” . . . The Hebrew authors may not be faulted for being lackadasical: on the contrary they are drowning us in a flood of books; yet had these Hebrew authors labored in another literary field, by now there would have been no end to the immense benefit they could have brought to the human race as a whole and to the Hebrews in particular.84

These statements of Kovner nicely mark out the borders of agreement and difference in the attitudes the various maskilim took toward writing in Laaz. Many agreed with Kovner about the aims and importance of writing in the state tongue, and they published literary or critical compositions of their own in Laaz.85 Unlike Kovner, however, they did not rule out writing in Hebrew and did not present Hebrew and Laaz as mutually exclusive alternatives. The intense antipathy directed at Kovner, which set him outside the maskilic consensus of his day, was a reflection of the fears many maskilim had
of assimilation and of a complete severance of links to centuries of Jewish culture, language, and literature. The russifist maskilim’s mixed feelings about the language options available to them was especially noticeable in their views of Hebrew and Laaz. Their deliberations over which of these two languages to choose from led to some rather peculiar paradoxes. An author such as Yehuda Leib Gordon (YaLaG), for example, who held manifestly russifist views, devoted his best efforts and talents to Hebrew composition at a time that he believed this language was fated, or at least likely, to pass from this world. One may not fail to observe that the intellectual and emotional investment YaLaG made in his Hebrew compositions was entirely out of proportion with what ought to have followed from the russifist views he maintained. Explaining the behavior of YaLaG and others like him becomes difficult unless one supposes that it was driven by, among other things, spiritual inhibitions and irrational psychological factors. One is forced to the unavoidable conclusion that an irrational basis underwrote both the ideology of the Haskalah and its outward behavior—notwithstanding the conceit the maskilim had that they were advancing a rational, well-ordered, and worldly doctrine.

One might think, perhaps, that Jewish literature written in Laaz had advantages that could partially offset the ideological or emotional difficulties associated with it. Its intended audience was, after all, an enlightened Jewish public fluent in the State tongue, and, consequently, this literature was free of the oversight of the rabbis and of the need to answer its demands. Yet things were, in fact, otherwise. Knowing that Jewish literature in Russian would be read also by non-Jewish readers created a sort of self-censorship which took the place of rabbinic oversight. The tendency not to wash dirty linen in public, whether arising from overt societal demands or grounded in instinct, created a norm from which few writers dared depart. According to this norm, social critique that might expose Jewish shame to Gentile eyes had to be written in one of the Jewish languages, while a Jewish author writing in Laaz ought to mute his criticism and play the role of advocate for his people. Jewish literature in Russian came to serve as a sort of window dressing for Jewish society, so that this literature too was not able to free itself of the constraints of the complex state of Jewish reality.

A good illustration of this point is provided by Yehuda Leon Rosenthal, one of the founders of “The Society for the Dissemination of Enlightenment in Russia,” who advocates writing in Hebrew on the grounds of the need to keep the internal critique concealed from Russian eyes:

It is clear as the sun that the duty of our society is now to use our language and its literature, for they have primacy. And as, in these days, at a time where there are outbreaks of hostility, only in them may our wise men and our authors pour forth their hearts and argue and confess, so as to pass judgment on all that is happening around us
without restraint or gag: no foreigner will get involved, and thus the matters which only our brethren will understand can serve to encourage and goad us on to unify us in a true enlightenment.91

It would thus be no exaggeration to say that all the linguistic options available to the maskilim were in one way or another “impossible.” All presented insurmountable dilemmas, and all left room for solutions that were paradoxical at best.

**Literacy in Laaz and the European Canon**

For all the problems associated with writing Jewish literature in Laaz, the fact that an audience of readers of European literature already existed within Jewish society was of paramount importance. It should be recalled that neither the literature of Hebrew nor that of Yiddish was in a position to offer a modern literary canon to rival or even to compare with that of European literature. Indeed, the inferiority of secular Jewish literature in its various languages and the inferior state of its readership both were blamed on the fact that a literary inheritance of several generations did not exist—nothing that could have functioned as a living model in the minds of either authors or readers.92 Lacking a continuous history of its own, the inspiration of the European masterpieces was essential for the formation of modern Jewish literature whether in Hebrew, Yiddish, or Laaz. The belief that modern Hebrew literature was being blocked by traditional Jewish literature and that European literature ought to serve as an alternative poetic and aesthetic model was voiced in Papirna’s critique of those Hebrew authors whose “vast knowledge of the world’s languages and the modern literatures, did not help them properly recognize and appreciate the value and attributes of a poem, and who went off like bats in a chimney after their predecessors.”93 According to Papirna, mastery of world languages and literatures was a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for the revitalization of maskilic literature. This literature, which had difficulties extricating itself from dependence on the authority of traditional texts, had to replace the model presented by traditional Jewish literature with the one offered by the great European works.

The emergence of modern secular Jewish literature required, therefore, the infiltration of influences from European literature into the cultural space of traditional Jewish society. These influences required in turn the existence of a community of authors and readers with Laaz proficiency, a community that had been exposed to European culture and that had formed its literary tastes and expectations on the basis of the European canon. The fact that such a reading community did exist in isolationist Jewish society suggests that the literacy
policy we have been characterizing did not entirely succeed in impeding comprehension of the European languages, nor even in preventing infiltration of European influences through the readers. This community, moreover, was not a homogenous one, and this inquiry will give pride of place to the women readers within it. As I have suggested, it was women specifically who were the weak chink in the wall of isolationism that the system of traditional education, and its oversight apparatus, had erected.

In any event, if one is to more closely consider how secular, modern Jewish literature arose, and how a reading public with “good taste” developed for it, it will not suffice to elucidate the state of this audience’s literacy in Hebrew and in Yiddish alone. To give a full description of these developments in nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish society one must also take into account the state of readers’ literacy in languages such as Russian, German, Polish, and French. If one is to address the question of which sectors of Jewish society were provided with foreign-language training, and in which educational settings, one must examine not only the composition of pupils in the traditional schools and the curriculum applied there, but also the composition of pupils in each of the other educational systems and the curriculum applied in all. A broad spectrum of educational environments must be taken into account to round out the picture: state schools, public schools for Jews under state sponsorship, private schools, pensions, private tutors, and Christian nannies. Each of these educational settings was set up to serve a different population, and the pupils of each varied significantly in terms of social status, gender, parental ideology, and foreign-language training. The level of literacy in European languages achieved by self-instruction with the aid of dictionaries, for example, was entirely different than the level achieved through formal instruction in the Jewish secular schools; and both of these differed in turn from the levels of foreign-language literacy provided in the Christian schools.

The differences in the languages taught and the levels of literacy provided to pupils in the various school systems of nineteenth-century Jewish society was manifested also in the stratification of the reading public. For this audience was not a homogenous entity. Each of the languages had its particular, defined reading public, with the overlap among readers of Yiddish, Hebrew, and European languages a partial one at best. This internal segregation of the reading public had far-reaching ideological and sociological consequences, and it is important not to understate the significance of its effects on the range of types of literature that were produced and on the pathways by which the Haskalah was propagated.
Gender Roles and Women’s “Window of Opportunity”

In nineteenth-century Jewish Eastern Europe two patterns of social organization fueled the growth of a community of women readers of European languages: the first was the pattern of family income generation, in which women had the function of breadwinners; the second had to do with matrimonial practices. These social paradigms, which determined to a great extent the status that women held in traditional society, were not innovations. Well before the nineteenth century women played a substantial role as providers for their families, and matrimonial practices were not then greatly different, either. And yet, as I shall try to show, together with the modernization occurring in the surrounding society and the expansion of the Jewish Haskalah movement, the standing that women had in traditional society created—for certain women—especially fertile conditions for their encounter with foreign languages, classical literature, and the new modes of thought.

Breadwinning Women

Being patriarchal, traditional Jewish society—in official outlook at least—relegated women to the domestic sphere. The ideal of the woman it held in view was that of a wife who “looketh well to the ways of her household” (Proverbs 31: 27), and the passage from the Psalms, “the full glory of the king’s daughter lies within” (Psalms 45: 14), was often approvingly cited as an apt expression of this ideal of femininity. Men in this society were made responsible for ritual matters and for the realm of the spiritual, and the ideal of the male was that of the scholar bent over in study at the “tent of Torah.” Yet traditional society did
not everywhere insist that women satisfy this particular model of its ideal type. In practice, the model was traded in for that of a “woman of valor” (Proverbs 31: 10), that is, for an ideal of the woman breadwinner, who lets her husband devote all his time to the study of Torah and to fulfillment of his religious vocation. This exchange of ideals was manifested in social arrangements and practices that placed women in storefronts or in the market square and regularly exposed them to contact with the non-Jewish environment. Such social arrangements expressed the prioritization traditional society made of its values, including the value of its gender hierarchy. They reflected the preference for the spiritual over the material, the superiority of the male over the female, and the premium assigned to the religious destiny that men were born to fulfill. The power of the ideal expressed by the division of gender roles was such that it set behavioral norms that guided the society as a whole. Even if in practice not all men were Talmud scholars who had “Torah [as] their sole vocation,” even if most men earned an income and not all of their time was allocated to Torah study, the fact that the society strove to realize its ideal vision—in which men indeed would devote all their time to fulfilling their religious vocation—sufficed to establish behavioral norms that put the burden of income generation largely on the shoulders of women.

The patriarchal nature of this division of labor is self-evident. The heavy onus on women who had to both raise children and feed their families, the charging of women with cares for affairs of the material world while excluding them from the spiritual sphere—all these speak for themselves. Yet while the repressive nature of this gender hierarchy and all its ramifications may not be ignored, our aim in the present study is to mark out the degrees of freedom that these social paradigms nevertheless granted women in various realms—some of them predictable and others less so. Under the auspices of attitudes that belittled women’s value, and perhaps even as a result of such attitudes, women were able to acquire increasingly influential positions within the family and outside of it. A curious conjunction of weakness and strength, of inferiority from the perspective of Jewish society and advantage from the perspective of modern society’s values, opened a “window of opportunity” for certain groups of women, permitting them to learn foreign languages, to acquire a secular education, and to receive an exposure to modernity.

The phenomenon of women breadwinners in Eastern European Jewish society was not a nineteenth-century innovation, but in this period the phenomenon continued to flourish. According to the historian Jacob Katz, in the nineteenth century “this arrangement was the rule.” No doubt a contributing factor in this expansion was the severe economic duress in which Jewish society found itself, though duress alone could not have dictated this pattern of behavior. The growing factionalism of Jewish society also helped reinforce the long-developing trend toward a larger role for women in income provision.
As the battles between hasidim, mitnagdim, and maskilim intensified, the ultra-orthodox took defensive positions, tightening the supervision of men and increasing their load of doctrinal responsibilities. In the hasidic sector, where attendance at the courts of the tzaddik (hasidic rabbi) was viewed as a means of attaining religious perfection, men would commonly abandon their families and travel to courts of distant tzaddikim, sometimes for extended periods. In the mitnagdic sector, which regarded Hasidism’s attractions to the mystical with contempt, increasing importance was assigned to the commandment to study Torah. The weight of this mitzvah was deemed equal to that of all the others combined and men would thus strive to devote most if not all of their time to studying Torah. One may thus say that as the economic predicament of Eastern European Jews grew more acute, and as the men’s commitments to the tzaddik or to Torah study increased, so too grew the role of women in providing for their families. Most men did not altogether cease to function as breadwinners; nevertheless, in many families the primary wage-earners were the women.

Because Jewish society depended on its female breadwinners, it was considered an asset for a woman to have the language skills necessary for commercial purposes. Much of the evidence pertaining to the gender role division in Jewish society of the period suggests a tight correlation between the phenomenon of breadwinning women and the importance assigned to proficiency in foreign languages. In his memoirs, Nahum Meir Shaievitch, for example, describes thus the values from which Jewish society’s gender roles were derived:

In those days the Hebrews believed that the object of the life of every Hebrew man was to be immersed in the Torah and Talmud and that the duty of every Hebrew woman was to provide for her husband and her home; therefore the honest Jews kept their sons from acquiring any science or knowledge of trade and turned their countenances solely toward the Talmud; yet their daughters were taught to comprehend the tongue of the land and all necessary vocational sciences, to the end that they may be sufficiently wise to manage the affairs of their households and businesses.

Shomer’s observations suggest that women were granted instruction in secular topics and foreign languages so as to be able to perform their functions as breadwinners, and that this education at times surpassed that of the men in their families. Abraham Baer Gottlober (1811–1899) similarly relates in his memoirs that it was because of the breadwinner role Jewish society had conferred upon them that possession of language skills came to be considered an asset for a woman. Knowledge of foreign languages increased a girl’s value on the “matchmaking market,” according to Gottlober, and when the time for marrying drew near, match-makers often included language skills in their list of the prospective bride’s virtues:
In those days the matchmakers would set eyes upon a studious youth of honorable name, and they all would scribble in their notebooks and endless maidens would then surround him—these ones beauties, those the daughters of the wealthy, others from eminent families. And each day they would mutter in the ears of the father (within earshot of the son) that it was high time his son was betrothed, that none is her like for beauty in all the land, and she is fluent in Polish like water (Zi redt paylish vi a vaser); for Polish remained then, even after the Russian eagle had spread its wings all across the land, the state tongue; and as the incomes of Jews in those days were earned by their wives the women of valor, and the men sat closed in their homes or at the study halls engaged in Torah or worship, knowing the Polish language was a valued skill for the maidens of Israel, and even when men had after many days left the study of Torah and removed [...], this crown which would not fit to their heads, these men served merely as assistants to their wives in the shops, passing merchandise to them; and when the Polish squire would come to purchase an item they would fall silent or hide in the backroom, for they did not know the language, and the woman alone would conduct the business at hand.13

Like Shomer, who stresses the different education men and women received, Gottlober too elects to note that men lacked foreign language skills and that it therefore fell to women to give and take with the non-Jewish customers.14 Yet special attention should be given precisely to the details that Shomer does not dwell upon. Gottlober points out that those men for whom “Torah was their sole vocation” were not the only ones to depend on their wives for an income. He states clearly that even men who had ceased to spend time in the beit midrash continued to behave as dependents. Thus the breadwinning role women had assumed was one that affected behavioral norms throughout the society, sustaining the paradigm of gender role divisions in the family even in cases where no obligation or necessity required so doing.

More than a few passages from the memoirs confirm Gottlober’s and Shomer’s assertions. The nineteenth-century’s literature is full of portraits of shrewd and assertive women merchants, women who ran their businesses aggressively and whose foreign language skills helped them fulfill their roles. Mordechai Ben Hillel Hacohen, author of Kvar (Once), a book of memoirs, had a mother who was born in Brisk in the 1840s, set up shop there, “and drew upon her knowledge of the tongues of Polish and Russian; traveled to the great markets to buy the varied merchandise for her store, which grew and developed, and thus provided for her family.”15 And Yaakov Bukstein’s grandmother Sheva, who was a child in the 1830s and an adolescent during the reign of Alexander II, “was extremely shrewd in business and conducted commercial relations with the Polish gentlemen . . . [She] was worldly-wise and had a quick head for languages. Besides Yiddish she spoke also Polish, Russian and German,” at a time when grandfather Meir could correspond only in Yiddish. Bukstein relates that when the grandmother and grandfather had to deal with legal claims, it was the grandmother in particular who “was the brains behind the litigation and the commercial transactions.”16
Maskilic Critique of the Gender Role Reversal

The division of gender roles in the family was a core element in the maskilic critique of traditional society’s social order. A central charge of this critique was that skewed set of priorities in traditional society was encouraging and rewarding the inactivity of men—or, as the maskilim put it, their sloth. Shomer, for instance, doesn’t hesitate to describe his own father as a lazy bum, one of the work-haters from a prestigious family who lived at other people’s expense. He shows deep admiration for his mother’s initiative and disapproves of the standards in which traditional society assigned “indolent” scholars a high and privileged status:

My mother Hadassah was the most renowned of the women of Niesvizh for her knowledge of arithmetic and four languages: Yiddish, Russian, German, and Polish. Yet my father, raised on knees of Torah and Talmud, was a great scholar and very talented in clear writing in Hebrew but all practical topics or sciences were foreign to him. He was by nature a very lackadaisical man (nachleiger as we say), one of the study hall regulars with their hands in their pockets who despise all work and fail at every trade, one of the ones with a lineage created to live at the expense of parents or in-laws.17

Shomer presents his father and mother as opposites not only in terms of their productivity but also in terms of their learning. Where the mother’s proficiency is in foreign languages and knowledge of arithmetic, the father’s is confined to knowledge of Torah and Talmud. By Shomer’s maskilic standards the mother’s advantage over the father was two-fold, she being both more productive and more enlightened than he. In the unbalanced traditional society Shomer depicts, it is the woman who represents the optimally positioned figure.18

Mendele, using a sharply ironical epigram, likewise describes the prevalent attitude in Jewish society on the question of the division of gender roles: “The wife worships the husband and takes care of worldly affairs, and the husband worships the Lord and takes care of affairs of the world to come.”19 This formula pokes fun both at the preference for the spiritual and other-worldly over a productive life in this world and at the gender hierarchy that ensues from this preference. Mendele also makes use of the ambiguity of the term baal (husband or idol) to imply that the husband, supposedly master of the spiritual, is merely an idol, while the wife worshipping him as a god is merely being idolatrous.

In the maskilic writings, the reversal of gender roles, which placed the male in the confined realm of the home and the woman in the public realm of the market square, formed the subject of comedy and of satire. As part of the critique of values in traditional society, the male good-for-nothing or the “womanized” and passive male served as natural targets of raillery. Such a “feminine”
man and “masculine” woman are described by the author of *Once*. Although an autobiographical work, the maskilic bias in these memoirs is quite apparent and some of its stories have a notably satiric tone. Here is how the author tells the tale of the marriage and matrimonial life of his Uncle Shamai and Aunt Margalit, who were wed, according to custom, in an arranged marriage:

The bride was not consulted nor did the opinion of her mother, my grandmother, count for much; the wedding was settled on and was held.

And I have to admit, this marriage was not such a great blessing. He was always “under the heel of his wife,” and had no will or desire of his own. When Grandfather moved, with the whole household, to go to live in Mohilev, he was the sole yeshiva scholar in his wife’s parents’ home, and at times had to fear not only the dependence on his in-laws but also the possibility of divorce. He was a hasid in every way, far removed from the worldly cares of life, or from lightheaded gossip or youthful companionship […]. Grandfather tried to make a regular guy of this son-in-law of his, but to no avail. Once in a while Grandfather would try an experiment: “—Shamai, go to the State Bank to get change for a bill of 100.”

The scholar would scratch his hat. He knew that on the ground floor of the State Bank there was a soldier armed with a rifle to guard his target, and how could he risk his life by passing in front of him—who was going to tell the soldier what to do, what if he shot him and fatally wounded him? He would answer, imploring:

“By all means send someone, why does it have to be me.”

So Grandfather would send him someplace a little less “dangerous”—to the Post Office to buy stamps for this shipment—all to familiarize him, to get him some experience of the world. Shamai is too ashamed to turn down this chore as well, but in his heart he hesitates anyway: *Maybe*. Who knows, what the official in charge of selling the stamps may do? And then there’s this: *over there*, you have to take off both the hat and the yarmulke. And so—he takes the cash and off he goes, and in the courtyard finds me or some other kid and sends him off to the post and gives him a penny for his troubles. They constantly nagged him, it’s no good for a man to hide away in back and stay away from life and jump at every shadow. Nobody could ever make any difference. His sidelocks and beard always grew wild, he’d never known what a comb was, and the clothes he wore were never clean, for he was a true “hasid.” Though he’d sit in the woolen-goods store my aunt had, it would have been just as well if he hadn’t—he didn’t know the state language, and every non-Jewish man or woman terrified him. He would sit and peruse a book, and the customers did not address him nor he them. “Margalit will be right back,” he would console them.

The aunt was mistress of the house and of the shop, she ran the business, went to the trade fairs, to Moscow and Petersburg, she made sure there would be cash on hand to buy merchandise and pay bills; and although he, the husband, would write the letters and sign the orders; yet he wrote and signed not only at her knowledge and behest but also in her name: *Margalit wife of Shamai Aharoni.*

In this passage the author presses the figure of his Aunt Margalit into service of maskilic critique, using her to highlight the contradictions inherent in traditional society’s attitudes about the status of women. On the one hand this woman is not consulted and is married off against her will to a less-than-manly hasid, while on the other hand she is charged with all the “male” functions—she has to trade with the gentiles, travel to fairs, and provide for her
family. Yet the satiric potshots in this account are aimed mainly at the cowardly
and childish hasid, so that the passage may be viewed as joining the long line
of anti-hasidic satires wielded by the maskilim in their battle against Hasid-
ism. The feminization of the hasid-male may be readily seen as mocking
Hasidism in general, and his helplessness interpreted as a synecdoche for
Hasidism’s atrophied state. This, however, does not suffice to obscure the evi-
dent traces here of the maskilic critique of the values of the wider society as
well, values which led to what it saw as the feminization of the male. And
while one is right to suspect such satiric accounts of a certain exaggeration,
still, it would seem that as with satires more generally, what is distorted or ac-
centuated is often a familiar and prevalent paradigm, which in this case is the
division of gender roles in the family.

Although not all the male figures in this story resemble the hasid, the way
the author treats the division of gender roles here implies that the appearance
of patriarchy these other men provide is little more than a facade, that the pa-
triarchal structure is, in fact, on the point of collapse. The apprehensions felt
by maskilim over the decomposition of the patriarchal order is expressed also
in the ambivalence they displayed toward commanding and industrious
women. Alongside deeply appreciative descriptions of the women of valor
who raise their children and provide for their families, there are quite a few an-
tagonistic accounts that present the women breadwinners as “masculine,”
crass, and domineering, and sometimes as morally wanton.

One such negative image is personified by Serkele, the Yiddish comic hero-
ine of the play by that name. This comedy was composed by Shlomo Ettinger
in the mid-1820s and published posthumously in the 1860s. Serkele, who must
provide for her family, is the embodiment of the “masculine” woman: a sea-
soned and cunning merchant who does not flinch at acts of deceit and fraud,
becomes an accomplice to the forging of a will, and brings shame upon her
husband and associates. As befits a comedy, the drama ends with the triumph
of truth and justice—the fraud is exposed, the mask is torn from Serkele’s face,
and everyone around her breathes a sigh of relief.

About a century after the play was written and fifty years after it was pub-
lished, there appeared in Der Pinkes an article by A. Koppel on Shlomo Et-
tinger, his life and work. Koppel’s interpretation of Serkele attests to the fact
that the play was indeed regarded as a critique of the reversed gender roles and
the collapsing patriarchal order in Jewish society. Koppel declares at the outset
of his article that Serkele is a realistic comedy that faithfully depicts what he
terms the “matriarchic period” in the life of the Jews, a period during which
women filled the functions of men, men occupied the space of women, and
neither were located in the place nature had intended for them. Largely iden-
tifying with the critique of the reversed gender roles he attributes to Ettinger,
and believing that this warped social order had now departed from the earth,
Koppel asserts that Ettinger had succeeded, by clear artistic strokes, in depicting the abnormal aspects of Jewish life of his day. In Ettinger’s play, Serkele no sooner becomes a merchant than she begins to take on male mannerisms, losing all moral restraint and treating every means toward financial gain as permissible. Her frequent complaints about her waning powers and the women’s “weakness” she periodically displays are merely an artificial femininity she wields to conceal her schemes. Koppel goes further and affirms that Serkele is a true representation of the woman of her day—one so coarsened by the struggle for existence as to have lost her femininity, her innocence, and her modesty.

According to Koppel, Serkele’s husband, Reb Moshe Danzker, is portrayed somewhat more compassionately in the play as the victim of his domineering wife and her machinations. He hides in his wife’s shadow, is free of the cares of breadwinning, and acts the part of the fragile woman who treads softly about her home and is never heard from. He knows nothing of his wife’s business affairs except for the forged will, and unlike her, his conscience tortures him over it. Yet because he depends on his wife he can’t speak of it to her. Just as Serkele is taken by Koppel to represent the woman of her period, so Reb Moshe Danzker is seen as representing the man of his period. Koppel concludes his review of the Reb Danzker figure with the declaration: “Such were the men during our matriarchal stage.”

According to Koppel’s analysis, the collapse of the patriarchal system in Jewish society led to a vast decline in the morals of both women and the society as a whole. The positive characters in Ettinger’s maskilic play are, Koppel believes, the “feminine” figure of the gentle Hinde and the “masculine” figures of Reb Dovid, Serkele’s brother, and the student Markus Redlich. As Koppel sees it, Reb Dovid and Redlich represent the new modern males and the restoration of the lost male honor within the new maskilic social order.

The theme of deficient manliness in the maskilic critique and in the Zionist critique that followed became symbols for the deficiency of traditional Judaism and the deficiency of exilic Judaism. A discussion of the deeper significations of these images and symbols would lead us too far astray, yet it is worth noting that the gender metaphors and symbols used to describe the ills and afflictions of Jewish society were not divorced from reality: the images drew upon modes of life that were prevalent during that period. Images such as these grew out of the social reality and were not impositions upon it.

Most of the examples brought forward thus far have characterized the female breadwinners as women who had acquired something of an education, had mastered arithmetic and foreign languages, and used their learning to conduct their businesses. In certain cases it even appears that concerning a general or secular education, women of this kind were in a decidedly better position than their husbands who devoted themselves exclusively to the study of Torah. Yet it must be stressed once again that these examples are not being
presented to challenge claims about the high degree of analphabetism among women; nor, to be sure, are they being advanced to support a manifestly false proposition: that all women who bore the burden of providing for their families were well-educated or fluent in foreign languages. There are no grounds to doubt the validity of what is attested to by the autobiographies and memoirs: that the female breadwinners often were entirely uneducated. All these examples are being cited simply to show that there were many in traditional Jewish society who displayed considerable willingness to grant women a general education and foreign-language training, and that this willingness was associated with, among other things, women’s role as breadwinners. A consequence of this was the formation of groups of women who were able to read in the European languages—groups of considerable size, significance, and influence.

In rabbinical texts as well there is evidence that traditional society’s readiness to allow women to acquire a secular education was linked to their role as breadwinners. In the introduction to his Orkhot Hayim, Rabbi Gershon Hacohen Leiner points out the inherent hazards of granting girls a general learning, and warns about the laxity and facility with which traditional society is allowing its girls to acquire a secular education. Still, he declares unequivocally that this phenomenon is ineradicable, owing to traditional society’s reliance on the breadwinning women:

So with the matter of education of girls I have seen many who have unknowingly erred by letting their girls learn alien topics and who are deluded that from such studies of theirs they learn only to read and to acquire the language of the peoples for this matter [the provision of general education to girls] is necessary to our incomes and it is necessary for many girls of Israel who have to negotiate in business [. . .] Indeed one may not issue a decree on this for most of the public would be unable to obey it.26

Despite the fact that Rabbi Leiner believed there were manifest dangers associated with providing girls with a secular education, he resisted prohibiting such a practice through an explicit interdiction on the grounds that the bread-winning women are essential to society, and one does not issue edicts to which the public cannot abide.

Matrimonial Practices

The matrimonial practices in traditional Eastern European Jewish society likewise reflected the society’s values and its need to balance the claims of religion and of economics. In Jewish society people married at an extremely young age, usually shortly after puberty. Although over the course of the nineteenth century the average age of matrimony gradually rose, in the well-established
and eminent families the practice of marrying quite young continued. To assure that the young groom would be able to continue with his studies after his wedding, the custom was that the young couple would be provided for by the bride’s father, for a period set forth in the wedding contract’s “conditions.” The duration was usually fixed in accordance with the wealth of the father-in-law and the talents of the groom as a scholar. Unlike the convention followed in non-Jewish Eastern European society, in which matrimonial practices were patrilocal and the bride upon marriage went to live in her husband’s home, in Jewish society the typical pattern was usually matrilocal: after the wedding the young husband moved into the home of his wife and sat at the table with his parents-in-law.

As with the phenomenon of the breadwinning women, the matrimonial practices, for all their patriarchalism, granted women significant degrees of freedom and placed them in positions of power in their families. For, first, girls remained in the bosom of their family after the wedding at a time when boys had to detach themselves from their familial support structures and adjust to the trials of a new household. And second, the small difference in age between the boy-husband and the girl-wife, both of whom were entering adolescence, provided the wife with the advantage of the earlier maturation of girls.

In maskilic autobiographies, the experience of child-marriages is described from the male perspective. The early departure from the family home, the life in the company of a child-woman who matures before her husband, and the new existence under the probing eyes of an authoritarian mother-in-law who runs the family’s affairs—accounts such as these convey an experience of difficulty or even of trauma, and they underscore, among other things, the woman’s position of power.

A set of relationships of this kind is described by Moshe Leib Lilienblum (1843–1910) in his autobiographical Hat’ot Neurim. To make plain the wrong he sees in child-marriages, he takes care to state his exact age at marriage, noting that he was wed at the age of fifteen years and ten months to a bride aged thirteen years and four months. He views the calls of “mazal tov” (good luck) that greeted the couple at the end of the wedding ceremony through the bitter retrospective of his marital life:

Mazal tov to you, blood-groom sunk in misfortune and intense misery, mazal tov for a life full of despair and morbid airs; mazal tov for a tragic biography, which is merely the outcome of that same “mazal tov”!

Lilienblum blames his tragic biography not only on his marriage, but specifically on his mother-in-law:

No doubt the reader will have noticed that in these stories of mine the mother-in-law seems the active character and the father-in-law a minor figure. And so it is in fact: the
husband does not wear the pants (as the saying goes) in his household, but is subordinate to his wife.\textsuperscript{34}

It is my mother-in-law who is this biography’s creator, that is: of its tragic chapter. She took me out of my parental home and married her daughter to me when I was fifteen, and she, her daughter, thirteen, so that everyone would speak of her and the rapid wedding she engineered . . . It should surprise no one, if such a cursed woman was able to extend her dominion over an innocent fifteen year old boy such as I was then and embitter my life with her oaths and curses, with the coals that glowed in her mouth . . .\textsuperscript{35}

An account of an especially traumatic child-marriage experience is provided by Mordechai Aaron Gintzburg in his autobiographical \textit{Aviezer}. Ginzburg, who married at fourteen, describes how far he then was from being ripe for matrimony:

Friday the Fifth of the month of Adar came—and with it the end of my days of childhood! Yet my time was not the time of lovers, my labor was ah that of a man but my power only a boy’s—Fathers O my Fathers! Could you not see how you wronged the boy to put a man’s burden on his shoulders! Fourteen years old was I and never had my heart been tempted to gaze at a maiden, I knew not of the vast change to be made by adding a ‘fe’ to a ‘male’ on the script of a boy, more of a Talmud-spouting babe—and in my heart none of the desire which nature had forged in hearts of men to expose the conscience of daughters of their species, to kiss a pretty girl had no greater effect on me than the pleasure of kissing a handsome boy, and why is it you vainly finger nature forcing her to open her flower before its time! You destroy the premature fruit to squeeze out an unripe seed that will not germinate and can yield no fruit . . .\textsuperscript{36}

As his wedding approached, Gintzburg tearfully departed from his friends and his parents’ home and moved, as the custom was, to live with his in-laws. He was brought to the wedding canopy knowing nothing of what to expect. Using terse language he describes his failure on the wedding night:

And having told you from the outset that at that time my nature had not yet been woken to the craving for women there is no need to draw back for you the curtain on my bridal chamber and show you that as I went up Sunday night the Seventh of Adar to my wife’s bed for the nuptial eve in the very same state did I descend from it on the Eighth of Adar in the morning nor on the second night was I strengthened to become a man.\textsuperscript{37}

Gintzburg’s sense of loneliness and failure were augmented by the estrangement he felt at his in-laws:

Tuesday the Ninth of Adar I awoke in my wife’s arms and my spirit shook, for my heart feared the things my wife had whispered guilelessly in my ears as to the order in her father’s household which was as distant from that of my own father’s as heaven is from earth, I arose and with sullen face earnestly poured forth my prayer to God, drank the cattle’s drink blended with tears, and there ah O Lord! My father’s servants are loading up the carts to return home, my heart melted within me and my eyes became two fountains, bitterly I wept seventy times as much as I had cried upon leaving my native town.\textsuperscript{38}
Gintzburg describes the failed nuptial eve and the similar nights that followed with no reference to or suggestion of any shame or anxiety on the part of his wife. His perspective does much to emphasize the relative advantage held by his wife, who was not plucked from the bosom of her family and continued to have her parents for support. Presumably this difference, like that of the earlier maturation of girls, contributed to Gintzburg's formation of the image of himself as a “feminine male” and of his wife as a “masculine female”:

For nature switched hands the day she turned us out into the light of the world, to my wife she granted the gift of the man, a force and might and such speed that her love-fruit was ripened before its time, and at thirteen years of age she was already a calf trained to do the will of men, whereas myself nature rewarded with slowness and hesitancy, such that even at fourteen I was still a calf that had yet to learn to arouse a woman's desire through fleshly love, and so the mannish woman put to shame this womanish man in the ways of the world.39

From this point on his life at his in-laws, as Gintzburg tells it, was at the mercy of two hostile and demanding women who exercised over him a near-total dominion. Here, for example, is his account of the time his mother-in-law made him drink a nauseating concoction so as to make a man out of him:

And when she saw that so long as my bed was not fulfilled her daughter would not settle her love upon me, she had the idea to pour into me male potency by medicinal means, yet in her humble opinion did not consult doctors but rather wise women, who brightly discovered that the root of my halting powers was in some bewitched potion that an enemy of my in-laws had made me drink on my wedding day, and that I would never be able to properly get it up until I had removed the spell from within me.

This message from my mother-in-law was conveyed to me by one of my father-in-law's brothers whom she knew had the power to bend me to his will, and this man implored me to remove the spell from within me by a vomit-inducing herb which one wise woman had prepared.40

In a detailed and moving account Gintzburg goes on to describe how he gave in to his wife's entreaties, drank the potion, fell seriously ill and nearly met his end.41 Only when he went accompanied by his wife to visit at his parents' home did he begin to feel he was recovering a measure of male authority, and began to nurture hopes that the day would come when his lost honor might be restored: “And I told myself to pass from stronghold to stronghold higher and higher until I shall win dominion over she who dominates me.”42

The lesson Gintzburg draws from his own life story is that the early period of a marriage may well stigmatize a man through the utter failure of his masculinity, cast a pall on the marital relations, and create intense feelings of negative self-worth requiring many years to recover from. Gintzburg sees this difficulty as one of the main causes of the high rates of divorce in his society, and it is also in the background of his bitter attacks on the child-marriages:
This was the consequence of the child-marriages which were made the custom in Polish backwaters, therefore the manifold books of divorce in this land came to be piled high, despite the tears falling from the altar’s eyes upon them, and despite the priests tending the altar who did not like to see so many women unfitted for the priesthood—there is no counting the divorcées in this land, if you see two young women sitting in their father’s house you need not inquire whether the second sleeps in her first husband’s bosom—for one of them doubtless has had two men, and you can tell this from the indications, for if you ask one of the old people about some case, asking when did such-and-such happen? he will reply unintentionally that it occurred before my daughter’s first marriage.43

Ginzburg is not at all ignoring the misery of the divorced woman sitting in her father’s house with a babe at the breast, but rather than view such suffering as the product of the patriarchal order, he sees it as the product of such customs as the child-marriage, which were injurious to masculinity and to male authority. Ginzburg claims in effect that if the patriarchal order had not been neutralized by the child-marriages, women too would have enjoyed a balanced conjugal life.

Where Ginzburg and other maskilim criticize the strong and domineering women they are not defending traditional patriarchal structures from modernity. There is no yearning here for the patriarchy of traditional society or even a call to rehabilitate it, but only a craving for some other, healthier and more balanced society. Yet this utopian ambition was itself patriarchal: the maskilim had adopted the model of gender-role divisions present in bourgeois European society, and their ideal of the modern, well-ordered society was one in which the enlightened and educated man would have unchallenged authority. Such a society could, they thought, replace traditional society’s values for new ones, repair the damage caused by the gender role reversal and cure Jewish society of its ills.44

One might argue that it would be a mistake to draw, from accounts such as these which call for a restoration of the patriarchal order to its former glory, any broad conclusions about the status of women. Although descriptions such as those of Lilienblum, Ginzburg, and others present the experiences of men with a directness and emotional force that allows identification with the authors, they completely overlook the distress of the girl wedded in a child-marriage, the young bride married to an aging widower who must care for his children, or the wife burdened with the cares of providing for the family.45 Such arguments are not without foundation, and ought not to be dismissed outright. The dominant point of view of the maskilic autobiographies is indeed that of men, and it is hard to ignore the apprehensions at the collapse of patriarchy or the sense of threat at the powers women were amassing. Despite all this it is possible, and indeed appropriate, to learn from accounts written by men about the status women had in the family and in society. The experiences of women are not entirely absent even from the autobiographies and memoirs written by male maskilim. Shmaryahu Levin, for example, uses his mother’s
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perspective to voice the objection to child-marriages, declaring that about his father’s experiences he knows nothing:

For my mother Elka […] had reached fourteen years of age when she married my father Shmuel Hayim […] and he was one year older than her. Often my mother spoke of how exhausting her first year of marriage was. And not because, God forbid, she did not like her spouse, but because for a full year she was ashamed to look in my father’s eyes. Whether my father suffered the same fate—I have no idea. My mother often used to say, when she mulled over these memories: what a crime it is to marry children at such a tender age. “Cruelty to animals, it is,” she would say; for the days of hurried marriages had finally passed; “one should wait,” she adds, “until the bride is at least fifteen and the groom is at least sixteen.” My mother was not such a good merchant as to bargain for more than one additional year.46

Such accounts, which adopt a woman’s point of view, are rare. As I shall try to show, however, a woman’s voice can be extracted even from stories in which women’s lives are described only indirectly, and which contain no vivid confessions or intimate disclosures. Two accounts of marriage customs in Jewish society, both of which revolve around the figure of the badkhan (a jester of sorts and master of ceremonies at a wedding), may serve to illustrate the possibility of the retrieval of a woman’s voice: the richly detailed ethnographic account written by Gottlober, and a description from the autobiography of Buki Ben Yogli (Yehuda Leib Katzenelson, 1846–1917), who sketches a portrait of Reb Yonah the badkhan.

This is how Gottlober describes the preparation of the bride on her wedding day:

They make ready a chair in the middle of the house and she [the bride] sits on it, and weeping women surround her and muss her head and braid her hair and then they bring scissors and cut the braids one by one; and she sits like an ewe mute before her shearsers, she is silent and they are clucking, for the maidens of Israel did not know till now, that through shearing their hair the crown was being lifted from their heads […] Most considered their hair an unnecessary burden, and only one in a thousand secretly cried out her soul over the loss of her choicest jewels.

[…] Then the musicians begin to play mournful tunes and sad dirges to encourage the women to weep (though they quite easily rise to the occasion themselves, each having brought along a private heartache—this one hasn’t enough food, that one has trouble raising boys, a third forever has before her eyes the fist of her husband, who beats her mercilessly—in short everybody is ready to cry) and now the badkhan stands, for at this point he is the master of ceremonies, and he loudly announces: “Shhhaa!,” and straightaway the women raise their voices even more strongly. And the badkhan reads out his pointed barbs in rhyme [….] For example he might tell the bride: Today is your Judgement Day, better beg for mercy that you may escape suffering, And tonight will be like the [Shavuot holiday] Night of Watching, and your mate in age is a most handsome being, So cry out like a Ram’s horn in tears and harsh grieving, Ask God that you two be tied forever binding; So today may the maiden dance in joy and the youth go singing (and in the course of his speech he forgets that he began with bitter dirges and mourning and has suddenly shifted from sorrow to joy).47
In looking over this account it is hard not to be struck by the remoteness of Gottlober's observations of the bride on her wedding day. On the one hand he describes the young woman as a silenced ewe about to be shorn, and on the other he attributes to her and her female friends a willingness to surrender their hair on their wedding day that is almost joyous. It is hard, also, to ignore the condescending tone in the bit on the women who are always on the verge of tears. Yet when Gottlober relates how the badkhan's rhymes move the hardened women to weep, or when, for instance, he nonchalantly describes the distress of a battered wife who “forever has before her eyes the fist of her husband,” he exposes a slice of their worlds without having intended to do so. Furthermore, what Gottlober's descriptive manner tells of him is that his main interest in this passage is to set down an ethnographic record of certain customs. He is not out to analyze the social functions such customs serve and the role played here by the badkhan, for instance, eludes his view. The involved aspects of the badkhan's role in his relations to the women is a subject worthy of separate analysis, and this is not the place for it. In the present context we may only briefly note that this bemused account of the sustained dynamic between the badkhan and the women can teach us quite a bit about the social and psychological functions the badkhan filled, both in legitimizing a release of erotic and social tensions and in easing the anxiety of the bride. This description of the badkhan, who encourages the women to associate the bride's anguish with their own and to vent their emotions by their speech and their weeping, permits the recovery too of the voice of women from within it.

More perceptive and attentive to the voice of women is the account of Reb Yonah the badkhan and his song, which appears in Buki Ben Yogli's autobiography:

[Reb Yonah] would sing [his songs] in his soft voice and in the tune of the High Holidays, a low piercing melody that reached to the depths of the soul. [...] Like the deep glow of sighing embers, the murmured song cast light on the darkened life of the Hebrew maiden. Gloomy and dismal was the life of the Hebrew maid of sixty years ago; she as yet did not know herself, she had no ambition for improvement, she had yet to rebel against the chains of slavery that had entrapped her. Most girls could not read or write, yet the gentle spirit requires nourishment so she sang songs ... She sang whispering, secretly in her room ... Men must not hear her voice tonight—for a woman's voice too is carnal ...

In Buki Ben Yogli's account as well, the badkhan is supposed to be making jokes and is found singing the mournful melodies of the High Holidays. Yet, unlike Gottlober, Buki Ben Yogli describes the association between the badkhan and the women from a standpoint of deep empathy, asserting that the badkhan's tunes served the deep needs of the women for a song that would express their feelings and faintly illuminate the gloom of their existence. As the passage progresses the voice of Reb Yonah the badkhan merges with that of
the Hebrew maiden who “had yet to rebel against the chains of slavery,” yet sings her song “whispering, secretly in her room.” In effect, Buki Ben Yogli depicts the song of the badkhan as a song that gave the women voice, and it is unsurprising that from his words too the voice of women echoes forth.

Even if in the writings of maskilim the depictions of women do not reach the innermost recesses of their souls, these accounts are not entirely one-sided, and one may frequently retrieve a woman’s voice from them. This is so when the descriptions are of oppressed, despondent, or uneducated women and also when the accounts are of strong or authoritative women. It is equally important to stress that even if the accounts of the strong women often suffer from selective description, or attribute absurd powers to women, there is a social significance to the fact that the writers of maskilic autobiographies and the others sketching their memoirs felt the encounter with strong or industrious women so forcefully. On the one hand, these sources indicate that the conflicts of men with their wives or mothers-in-law were significant flashpoints for tensions within the Jewish family, but on the other hand, they suggest that the patriarchal ideal in Jewish society, according to which women were to have inferior status, was coming into conflict with women’s actual position in the family.  

A good illustration of the way this tension was experienced by one woman may be found in the autobiography of Puah Rakovsky (1865–1955), Lo Nichnati, where the author tells the story of her engagement, marriage, and divorce. In her account of these episodes in her life, Rakovsky vividly and movingly expresses not only the contrast between the marginal and oppressed status of women and their positions of power as breadwinners, but also the difficulties of puzzling through the unclear and ambiguous messages the society was issuing about her position as a woman. Rakovsky relates that when she was only thirteen her family had already begun to seek a suitable spouse for her, and before she was sixteen she was led, against her will, to the wedding canopy:

Besides being emotionally mature I was then, at thirteen or fourteen, well developed physically too, and my parents were already thinking of a match for me. They were convinced, of course, that this was the only way to cure me of my excessive appetite for learning and of my heretical thoughts simultaneously.  

[...] Grandfather’s second wife, an energetic and wise woman, was mainly worried about not harming our precious pedigree—and promptly found me a bridegroom from within the family, that is: with the same pedigree level. [...] The match met with my parents’ approval, and consent from the groom came immediately too; I was the only one that didn’t have a clue about the whole concoction being mixed for me. [...] On Friday afternoon Mother came home from town and delivered us the joyful news that tomorrow night, after the close of Sabbath, we were to travel to Brisk to arrange the “conditions.”  

It comes as no surprise that Puah Rakovsky, like the male maskilim of her era, condemns the custom of child-marriages and dwells on the helplessness of
a woman-child who has a premature matrimony forced upon her. Rakovsky describes her forced marriage as a human sacrifice, the primary effect of which was to fuel a deep crisis of trust between her and her parents:

I remember, as if it happened just now, how I told her:—Mom, what do you all want from me? I'm not interested in a bridegroom yet and I'm not traveling to arrange the “conditions.” Leave me alone! I have to study some more.

I started wailing and wouldn't stop crying until the following day. And how else could a Jewish girl who was not yet sixteen years old express her protest at this violation of her that her parents were committing—they who in their way had loved her honestly and truly. [. . .] My crying and wailing were of no avail. [. . .] Who back then ever paid attention to the trials of a Jewish girl, whose every sense tells her that her loyal parents are leading her to the slaughter?

What is especially relevant for our purposes is Rakovsky’s depiction of the extended emotional paralysis that gripped her for the entire period of her engagement and marriage:

In trying now to describe for myself my feelings during that year of engagement—I am brought to the conclusion that I was caught in a “state of hibernation,” a freezing of the soul. I couldn’t react to anything, it was as if it wasn’t me that things were happening to. And the closer the wedding date drew the greater was the apathy within me. I would answer everything with basically the same reply:

—Leave me alone. Do whatever you want. It doesn’t concern me.

I was stuck in this mood during the whole while that a special tailor sat in our house and sewed the expensive engagement clothing, and also when she measured the long-tailed wedding dress, made of white satin, and everyone in the household was stunned at my tall height and great beauty.

[. . .] The fact that I didn’t want the groom was well known in town, and on the day of the wedding they gossiped about it and laid bets that I surely would run off before reaching the canopy . . .

The wedding was celebrated by seven days of continuous parties and much rejoicing. My mood did not alter. I felt as if the wedding was taking place without me.

The day after the wedding ceremony a large wig was attached to my head, and in general all was done to me that they deemed proper for making a kosher daughter of Israel out of me. I didn’t respond to anything, it was as if all my senses were cast in stone.

[. . .] This period of my “family life” as it were, was the hardest period of my life, full of wretchedness and troubles. To this day I can’t understand what had caused this paralysis of my spirit, which had been rebellious from birth. Was it just that I was so young, or was the cause the sense of surrender felt by the daughters of Israel enslaved for generations?

Rakovsky does not know what name to give the “apathy” that overcame her. The dramatic shift in her personality—which had been, as she put it, rebellious from birth—she attributes to the child-marriages, or to an habituation brought on through a long sociocultural conditioning of Jewish girls, as if surrender were an inherited “female” condition. Yet the “state of hibernation” or the “frozen soul” that kept Rakovsky in its grasp did not prevent her from performing as a “woman of valor” who had to bear the weight of providing for her family:
After the “honeymoon” they [the parents] started to think about a “business.” After a little while we opened [... ] a warehouse for window-glass. [... ] The husband was, as I mentioned, a “silky” scholar, and in winter he mostly stayed at home; I had in any case become the “woman of valor,” the main merchant. But the “business” didn’t last long [... ] We lost in that “business” a fair portion of our dowry—and so terminated it. During this time I gave birth to a son; I was seventeen years and nine months old. We started looking again for new businesses [... ] It was decided that the husband would be a representative for some factories. [... ] Needless to say, when the customers started to appear, it wasn’t he who did the negotiating with them, but me.

Not too much time passed and I snapped out of the “hibernation” I had been sunk in. I began to understand that I was not in my right place and that I wouldn’t be able to go on living this life.

Though I found my husband nauseating, I bore him at the age of twenty a second child—a girl, and only then did I reach a real crisis. All of a sudden the spirit of rebellion rose up in me and I decided to end this situation. The moral and physical tortures which I suffered during this short period of my married life are indescribable—they were hellish. And yet I have to admit the truth and say that it wasn’t his fault. Any man I would have married at sixteen, I would have run away from when I reached twenty.56

Especially interesting is the association Rakovsky makes between her thirst for learning and the failure of her marriage, both from her perspective and from that of her husband:

I would like to add here that although during this short period of my miserable married life I managed, as said, to be a glass dealer, a woolen-goods agent, to give birth to two children and to take care of them myself—I still made an effort to hold on to the cultural assets I had acquired and not to fall behind intellectually. [... ] The husband never ceased to complain about this and would yell over and over: I wish you could vomit up everything you learnt, and that includes the Torah. He was sure that all his troubles resulted from my studies and learning.57

From the moment the idea of disbanding her marriage takes root, Rakovsky strives tirelessly to obtain a divorce and to achieve her independence. In the quest to realize her ambition she reaches the point of an open and thorough break with her husband and her parents. She succeeds in convincing them that so as to provide for her family she must acquire an education and learn a trade, yet at the same time is forced to pay the heavy price of separation from her children. In the end, Rakovsky leaves her children with her in-laws and sets out alone to get an education in the big city.58

There is no doubt that Puah Rakovsky was an exceptional and impressive woman, yet her life story up to age twenty, that is, up until she decided to take her fate into her own hands, was similar to that of many other girls of her class and era. This set of events, described in her memoirs with restraint, incisiveness, and sensitivity, give a forceful illustration of the tensions existing between positions of inferiority and advantage, between a powerlessness and the empowerment afforded by the status of being a breadwinner who has had some learning.
I have not set out here to sketch a comprehensive picture of the lives of women in Jewish society in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. My intention in this chapter has been to mark out the room for maneuvering that this society granted women though its array of matrimonial customs and its paradigmatic gender-role divisions, and to show that these societal patterns allowed a “window of opportunity” to open for women in all that concerns the acquisition of foreign languages and a secular education. Two main conclusions may be drawn on these matters. First, that matrimonial practices and the role of women as breadwinners placed a significant number of girls in positions of power in the family; and second, that broad sectors of Jewish society allowed girls to obtain a secular education and to study foreign languages, because this was knowledge considered advantageous for a woman to have. These two conclusions will form the basis of the argument I shall later advance, that the social paradigms of traditional society set the stage for the creation of an independent and influential public of reading women.
The Benefit of Marginality

Gender Differences in the Traditional Educational System

This simple creature, the tkhinah [supplication], begins not “From the secret of ages and wise men, and from study of the reason of the discerning”—but with plain and innocent words: [. . .] Here you will find neither “ZTVX WUTS” nor “AZ BT” [. . .] Yet there be mercy and tkhines here, a plaintive heart and sobbing soul [. . .] A speech of warmth and tenderness, a mother tongue and tongue of simple faith, a language near the heart and from the heart issuing. 1

—H. N. BIALIK

The Domestic Sphere and the Public Sphere

When parents sought a suitable match for their daughters they looked for a promising Torah scholar; whereas the matchmaker’s list of virtues of a well-qualified bride included proficiency in foreign languages and arithmetic. These criteria for selecting a spouse were evident in the “tests” the young men and women had to take prior to signing the marriage conditions. Gottlober, Lilienblum, Ahad Ha’am and many others tell of how they were summoned before their fathers-in-law to demonstrate their proficiency in Talmud. 2 Conversely, Hinde Bergner (1870–1942) reports in her memoirs that when prospective grooms arrived her mother asked her to “dress nicely and greet them, and get ready to be tested in Yiddish, Polish and German.” 3

Although “marriage tests” of this kind were in certain ways symbolic rituals, they do indicate sufficiently well what traditional society was demanding of its sons and daughters as they matured. For men, preparing for adult life and an honorable marriage involved acquiring proficiency in the Talmud, whereas for women preparation for adulthood and a fine match quite often involved acquiring fluency in foreign languages. It does not follow, however, that the system of traditional education discharged its responsibilities for preparing both its sons and its daughters with an equal measure of determination and dispatch. In many respects the opposite is true. The training of men to
fulfill their religious vocation, viewed as the primary if not the sole mission of the system of traditional schooling, was carried out by marshalling all available forces and resources toward an educational endeavor that was structured and efficient. By contrast, the training of women to fulfill their function was enabled primarily by means of inefficiencies in the traditional school system. Where men’s education reflected the manifest efforts of the rabbinical leadership to exercise absolute controls and to hermetically seal the society from foreign influences, the education of women transpired through gaps in this system of controls, in the region left abandoned by the oversight apparatus in consequence of women’s inferiority.

The system of traditional education took upon itself the task of upholding the patriarchal gender hierarchy. It worked to restore the balance that had supposedly been violated by the gender-role division in the world of practical affairs, a division that had placed men in the enclosed realm of the study hall and women in the public and exposed realm of the shop and marketplace. The educational system re-established the uncontested superiority of the men by shifting the gender axis of public and private from matters of economy and income to the realms that were, by its lights, truly important: Torah study and the spiritual life. In these realms, traditional Jewish society kept women confined to the private sphere of their homes or to the margins of the synagogue’s public space—to the Ezrat Nashim. Men, by contrast, were positioned in the public sphere—in the heder, at the yeshiva, in the study rooms and the main halls of the synagogue.

The gender hierarchy in ritual and spiritual life was secured through an unequal distribution of “linguistic capital” between men and women. In the traditional school system, care was taken to have the genders be clearly distinguished in terms of the language in which literacy skills were provided and the literacy skill levels granted, with the aim of preventing an equal access to traditional canonical texts or an equal division of “cultural capital.” As I have said, instruction in reading for men was meant to prepare them for engagement with canonical texts, chiefly the Talmud, whereas instruction in reading for women—for those to whom it was granted—was meant to block their access to these texts and to steer them toward the marginal literature that had been written for them. This differentiation of literacy skills between men and women effectively located each gender in a distinct religious-cultural sphere.

As Shaul Stampfer shows, a complete set of parallels was sustained between the religious and cultural functions served by the literacy granted in the male and the female spheres. Even so, the spheres were ranked in a hierarchical structure and were distinguishable in terms of the quality of the instruction in reading, the quality and status of the texts and the prestige with which the languages of the texts were regarded. Men were taught the Aleph-bet and acquired their literacy skills in the heder, in an institutionalized and obligatory
setting. By contrast, those women who were literate learned the Aleph-bet in temporary and non-obligatory settings, either from the Rabbi’s wife, by listening to the boys at study, or via private tutors. Men acquired an ability to read texts in Hebrew, whereas women who learned to read, learned to read Yiddish. The literacy of both men and women made the Torah accessible to them, but men actively studied Torah, while women read Bible stories in Yiddish out of the Tseina Ur’eina on their own. Study of Torah was a prestigious activity through which men fulfilled a religious obligation. Women, by contrast, read the Tseina Ur’eina as an optional act of devotion that was of a far lower status than Torah study.8 Most of the scholarly and religious activities of men were performed communally, in the public arena. Men learned the Pentateuch in groups in the formal setting of the heder, whereas women read the Tseina Ur’eina at home in their free hours. Similar differences between men and women applied also to prayers. Men prayed in Hebrew out of the prayerbook, for the most part communally in the synagogue; their prayers followed an established order of service and a set schedule. By contrast, women read the tkhines written for women—in Yiddish, in their homes, at any time, and choosing whichever book of tkhines they preferred and whatever individual supplication they were drawn to from within the book.9

However complete the functional parallels between the cultural spheres of women and of men may have been, the “feminine” sphere was not a mirror image of the “masculine” one but an inferior and faded variant of it. The differences between these spheres set the bounds of the religious sphere of women at the domestic space while positioning the sphere of men in the public space, and determined the gender hierarchy between women and men.

The traditional educational system thus equipped men and women with the skills most suitable for the social and religious destiny of each and placed both within the religious-cultural sphere for which each was intended. Yet it is no less important to see how the system ensured that the clear border between the two spheres and the genders would not be blurred or transgressed. Men were equipped by the school system with the literacy skills that promised them superiority and prestige; they therefore had neither cause nor incentive to cross the lines to the inferior sphere of women. Women, by contrast, were denied the skills that would have let them gain access to the prestigious male sphere, and were unable to cross over to this sphere even if they had so desired. In this way the educational system was able to simultaneously influence the gender-role division, the hierarchy of male and female, and the manner in which the genders were dissociated. The very body forms considered ideal for a man and a woman to possess grew out of values instilled by this system: the ideal male was the pale and delicate scholar who “pines away in Torah’s tent,” while the ideal female was the woman of affairs hale and hearty.10 How far the scholarly ideal affected ideals of bodily beauty for both males and females may
be inferred from, among other things, Mendele’s stories. Here is how Mendele describes Toybe-Sosi in his *Bayanim Halam*:

Toybe-Sosi is a stocky woman, healthy of flesh and broad. [...] She has a powerful gait, and you feel it when she presents the heel of her foot to the ground as she walks. [...] She is entirely uneducated, an untaught calf [...] and wails whenever she hears anything from the mouth of the Speaker-woman though she doesn’t know its meaning. And by contrast Sarah [Shloymele’s] mother is thin-fleshed, feeble and faint [...] her face is white as a ghost and her lips are thin. When she walks she looks as though she's floating, a spirit incorporeal. She’s a smart woman and learned, knows all sorts of *tkhines*, new ones as well as old, *tkhines* of the land of Israel and *tkhines* of Sarah Bas Tovim.11

Stampfer proposes a functionalist and harmonicist account to explain both the different treatment of the genders in the system of traditional education and the parallels between the spiritual spheres to which each were assigned. According to Stampfer, the function of the parallels was to minimize tensions and to allow social life to proceed harmoniously. In his way of thinking, the lack of any institutionalized framework for the education of women comparable to that which existed for men was an arrangement meant to prepare girls to fill their future roles and to accept their marginal status. The cultural sphere women were allotted served to compensate them for the costs that the educational system made them incur. In this sphere they were granted practices and texts that filled functions in their world comparable to those which study and prayer provided in the world of men. By these means, Stampfer believes, the system was able to bring women to identify with their gender roles and to reconcile themselves to their marginality, minimizing conflicts and aggravations as far as possible.

This functionalist, harmonicist account is not free of difficulties, for it implicitly assumes that the role division and the gender hierarchy existing in Jewish society in this period were crucial to its existence—that no alternative arrangement could have given a better solution to the society’s problems. Such a presupposition allows the functionalist-harmonicist account to be wielded to justify the gender hierarchy and the exclusion of women from the society’s cultural properties—even if this was not Stampfer’s intent. This account attributes paternalistic motives to the people who applied the discriminatory policy toward women—motives such as concern for the welfare of women, prevention of frustration, anger and suffering, and stabilizing or harmonizing the society as a whole. In a roundabout way, it shuts out consideration of other possibilities, less harmonistic or generous, which may have been behind the discrimination of women in the educational system.

There are further reasons to doubt the veracity of the harmonicist account. It is quite true, as Stampfer argues, that literacy rates among women were sub-
stantially higher than what studies such as Scharfstein’s and others suggest. Yet one cannot ignore the fact that many women, about half the female population and perhaps more, were illiterate—and none of these women could assuage their frustrations by reading *Tseina Ur’eina* or the *tkhines* for women. Had the policy makers in Jewish society truly intended to keep women from becoming aggrieved, they would have ensured that all women studied Yiddish and all were equipped with the skills to gain access to the texts meant for them. But this was not how Jewish society was arranged. Moreover, even if all women had been equipped with the literacy skills sufficient for reading the *tkhines* and the *Tseina Ur’eina*, it seems unlikely that this alone could have resolved the contradiction of being positioned in the public sphere for practical life while being excluded from the public sphere for spiritual life.¹²

A further reason the functionalistic-harmonistic explanation is hard to accept is that neither economic necessity nor some emergency of the times alone determined the gender-role division in Jewish society, nor would these have required that women be deprived of a formal education or of a share in the “cultural capital.” For the traditional school system was also involved in the construction of gender identities for the girls and boys in Jewish society. As Daniel Boyarin has shown in his scholarship, Torah study played a substantial role in the construction of male identity,¹³ whereas the gender identity of females was constructed through their exclusion from this realm.¹⁴ Research leading to similar conclusions, conducted by Yoram Bilu, suggests that learning to read the Hebrew letters was an important part of the process of male identity construction. In his analysis of the “shearing” rite, which usually attended the ceremony of entry to the heder, Bilu points out that in these rites of passage the boy is removed from his mother and introduced to the community of males through the act of cutting his hair, being taken off to the heder and symbolically eating the honey spread over the Hebrew Aleph-bet. Swallowing the honey, symbolically ingesting the sweetness of the Hebrew letters, ritually indicated the turning of the child into a man.¹⁵ This view of the heder entry rite is nicely corroborated by Shmaryahu Levin, who describes the eating of the honey spread over two pages of the Prayerbook and goes on to say:

When the party was over my father lifted me up, covered me thoroughly with a fringed prayer shawl and carried me on his shoulders all the way from our house to that of the *melamed*. Mother did not accompany us on our way, for the business of Torah study was for males alone.¹⁶

One may thus say that the substantial role played in the formation of male identity by reading the Hebrew characters and studying Torah made it necessary for women to be entirely absent from these realms. Indeed, this is how Shmaryahu Levin took it as well:

one line short
[The girls] did not study in the heder and learning Torah was not an obligation for them. The brother would see his sister as a different creature from another world. As if the natural differences their Creator stamped on them were not enough, along came the differences in education so as to enlarge and deepen the gulf.\textsuperscript{17}

Against this background, one can understand why Hebrew was seen to be an exclusively male language,\textsuperscript{18} and perhaps also why two sets of graphical letterforms for the Hebrew characters existed, with unique letterforms for women that differed from the ones used in texts addressed to men.\textsuperscript{19} Any invasion by women of the male regions of language and study was perceived to threaten the divide between the sexes, and any entry by men into the female realms of language and reading was seen as threatening their masculine identity. Thus, Buki Ben Yogli recounts that as a boy he worried that his passion for reading Yiddish would put his male identity in jeopardy. The joking tone of his anecdote does not belie its grain of truth:

I drew great consolation from the book \textit{Kav Hayashar} which I discovered on the bookshelf. This was a thick book in the size of a quarter folio printed in two decks: the upper deck in Hebrew and the lower deck in the Jewish language (Yiddish Taytsh). \textit{[...]} At first I read only the translation to the Jewish language; yet when one of my uncles berated me, that it is not seemly for a man to read in the Jewish language, meant only for women, I began with great efforts to climb from the lower deck to the upper deck. And the Lord blessed my efforts, for bit by bit I began to comprehend the Hebrew text as well.

In truth I must confess that for all my desire to be a man among men I did not succeed in abstaining entirely from the language of women.\textsuperscript{20}

The reversal of gender roles in the realm of practical life, so often complained about by the maskilim, was not perceived as threatening to traditional society, which was not bothered at all to have women be put in charge of matters of income. Yet their penetration of the realm of Torah study was seen by traditional society as a violation of the order of creation and as a genuine threat to the distinction between the sexes.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{The Advantage of Marginality}

The idea that Torah study was an exclusively male obligation and right was supported by an adage of Rabbi Eliezer, “He who teaches his daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity” (Talmud, Tractate Sotah 21b). This opaque adage was interpreted by many as forbidding the teaching of Torah to women, or at least as discouraging so doing. As it was put by YaLaG, who lambasted the shortcomings of women’s education in the traditional society of his day, women were being raised as “captives of war . . . For a girl studies Torah—promiscuity she learns!”\textsuperscript{22}
The different interpretations given to Rabbi Eliezer's saying, including those that did not take it as explicitly prohibiting teaching Torah to girls, reflected one degree or another of disdain for women and their intellectual capacities. Yet in this realm too, as in those previously discussed, the very inferiority of women within the gender hierarchy granted them a considerable degree of freedom. With nineteenth-century European Jewish society undergoing processes of secularization and modernization, the exclusion of women from Torah study and from the public religious sphere, and the redirection of them to “inferior” forms of study and reading, turned out to be a source of advantage and of empowerment.

As has already been noted, boys acquired their literacy skills communally, in the institutionalized and formal setting of the heder, whereas many of the girls who learned to read gained their reading ability privately or in the company of a relative or family member. Girls learned the Aleph-bet in voluntary and informal study frameworks from the rabbi’s wife in the heder for girls, from a private tutor or by patiently listening to the studies of the boys. Boys were required to spend the long school day in the heder while girls usually studied for shorter periods. In theory, differences such as these should have given boys the advantage, yet a glance at the notes about the heder studies, which the autobiographies of the period are full of, establishes that quite often things were otherwise. Many men describe their stay in the heder as a difficult and even traumatic experience. The physical conditions in the melamed’s filthy, unkempt and tiny apartment were, on the whole, ones of extreme and cramped poverty. Many of the melamdim were ignorant and rude, and they quite often conducted their rote instruction with the aid of blows and other forms of brutality.

A typical description of the experience of study in a heder is given by Buki Ben Yogli:

From the abyss of nothingness there now arises in my memory a low and narrow house full of smoke and poisonous vapors, with a large stove near the opening of the house voiding heat to the surroundings. [...] On the stove and on the bed by its side the family of the melamed swarms and rolls about—a choir of half naked children shoving and quarrelling—a long and thin woman with a man's face and eyes that drip fury. Between her knees she squeezes a very large goose; with one hand she grips its head and open beak and with the other she packs into it round balls of stuffing from the dish in front of her. [...] The melamed—a thin and black man with a long scraggy beard that twitches in synchrony with the leather strap in his hand, and with which he draws his pupil’s attention to his message. [...] I failed to rightly translate a passage from Rashi [...] and suddenly I sense the leather strap stinging my frail shoulders, once, once-twice, once-thrice. The melamed grew savage and showered on me a fever of curses and unspeakable invectives: Say, golem, “got bot geredt tsu Meyoshen mit harbe verter.” But aching intensely I had no spirit left and remained mute. [...] Yes, not for the first time I tasted the flavor of the melamed's strap. Every Friday at noon, before the melamed would send us home, he would honor all of us pupils without exception with
a set number of lashes [. . .], which lashes were given the special name “lashes of Erev Shabbes” (Fraytoghformats) [. . .] We thought these beatings were a sort of ancient religious custom, dating maybe from the days of Cain and Abel.25

In light of this account and the others like it, one may say that by contrast with the conditions of the boys’ study in the heder, the environment in which girls were taught to read was a comfortable one, free of pressures and anxieties.26 One consequence was that girls did not tend to associate learning to read with the experiences of shame and humiliation, which were the lot of quite a few boys. Furthermore, the shorter hours devoted to girls’ reading instruction were often used much more efficiently than the longer times devoted to it in the boys’ heder, and the reading abilities of girls did not fall beneath those of boys.27

Nor was the advantage girls had over boys confined to the conditions of learning alone: it was also manifested in the subject matter and other respects. If, for instance, one compares the instruction of boys and girls in reading in terms of results, one sees that the reading women had an advantage by the measure of the ability to read a modern secular literary text, even if their instruction had been geared toward reading texts deemed marginal or of lower prestige.

Importantly, while all boys learned to read Hebrew, the decisive majority were provided with a facility for mechanical reading alone, and not with the ability to comprehend a text. The primary purpose of the instruction of boys in the heder was to permit all males, and in particular those not destined to be scholars, to meet their religious obligations associated with reading the Torah and reciting prayers. Yet training that would result in a good comprehension of a Hebrew text, and of the Bible in particular, was considered to be undesirable or even dangerous. As I have noted, Ahad Ha’am relates in his memoirs how he had to learn the grammar of Hebrew and the Scripture on his own: these topics were considered “not merely worthless, but as deathly dangerous poisons.”28 Many men likewise describe their episode of self-instruction in Hebrew as a long and arduous process, involving great efforts and risk and mostly conducted in hiding.29 As I have tried to show elsewhere, the system of traditional education sought to create deliberate ignorance in the Hebrew language and deprived its pupils of the literacy skills needed for thoroughly understanding the Holy Tongue.30 This policy was reflected in the manner in which the Pentateuch was taught in the heder, which resulted in a state of affairs in which many heder pupils could not properly understand the biblical text. A short section of the heder time was devoted to study of the Bible, during which the emphasis was on learning the laws of the Book of Leviticus—the primary and chief object of study in the “Bible heder.”31 After graduating from the Bible heder students moved on to the “Talmud heder,” and with this,
for the most part, the period of formal instruction in Scripture came to an end. Furthermore, instruction in Scripture was conducted by reading a translation along with the verse in Hebrew, with the translation sometimes preceding the verse and sometimes following it. The words of the translation were sung to a tune that was repeated and memorized, but for various reasons the translation too was not always completely understood. The translation into Yiddish Taytsh (the ancient Yiddish appearing in the Bible translations printed for the masses) became canonical and the sacredness of the Hebrew text was transferred to it, such that any effort to introduce modifications or innovations was considered heretical. Yet because of the different Yiddish dialects in the different regions, and because of the antiquity of the canonical Yiddish translation, in many regions the text was imperfectly understood. Moreover, the translation method made the scriptural text harder to understand: Hebrew terms were translated one by one, in the order of their appearance in the Bible, without arranging them in a grammatical sequence that was comprehensible in the target language; and thus the “translated” reading hindered both understanding of the scriptural verse and the possibility of learning Hebrew through direct reading of the Bible.

A further barrier to comprehension of the scriptural text and its language was the nonsequential manner in which the Pentateuch was taught. Each week at heder, usually only on Thursday evenings and Fridays, the first section of that week’s Torah portion was taught; the following week, study commenced with the next week’s Torah portion without filling out the remainder left untaught from the previous week. This custom of skipping through the texts left gaps in the narrative continuity of the Pentateuch and kept students from recognizing the full narrative context of the weekly portion. It is worth stressing that even students of the more advanced yeshivas had trouble understanding the Bible and its language. YaLaG tells that even his yeshiva colleagues who had been in training since early infancy to be leading religious figures did not understand Scripture and could not read verses in the original. This was occasionally the source of embarrassment during their Talmud reading classes. Though the talmudic stories were full of "biblicisms" we used to skip past them in front of our rabbis or run through them in a single breath, yet when there was some tough unavoidable verse stuck in a legal passage it got caught like a bone in their throats.

Mendele, too, reports the same phenomenon:

Yet would anyone in those days teach his sons the Bible beyond the first fragment of the weekly portion? The fathers withheld from their children not only Logic [Higayon], but also Scripture, and those who studied it were suspected of heresy. The matter is most perplexing, and of the hundred and fifty excuses given for it not a one justly resolves this issue in Israel's favor. And while many will not believe this, yet thus it was in fact and thus—in our sins—it remains among many Jews even today. In the past the rabbis were not versed in the Bible and even today many rabbis do not understand
Scripture in the original. And nevertheless one must not question them, God forbid, doubtless they have reasons which the simple soul is incapable of refuting; and perhaps it is possible to be a certified expert in Torah and a teacher of teachers even without knowing a verse of the Holy Writings . . .

Unlike boys, the girls who were taught to read were taught Yiddish—that is, a living, spoken language which they routinely spoke and entirely understood. As a result, these girls had good text comprehension abilities and they read sympathetically and with pleasure. Their reading comprehension abilities gave them an advantage over the boys even in terms of familiarity with the tales of the Pentateuch. Unlike many of the boys, girls were able to read the stories of the Pentateuch in their entirety, accompanied by talmudic fables and Aggadot, out of the Tseina U’reina, and many knew these tales quite well. Buki Ben Yogli in his autobiography gives a revealing account of this difference between the girls and the boys in Jewish society, disclosing that only through the Tseina U’reina his grandmother read—that is, mediated by the woman’s presence and her books—was he able to fully experience the reading of the Pentateuch and to fill the gaps left by his heder education:

The Tseina U’reina really opened my eyes. As I noted above, in the heder I studied only discontinuous sections of the Five Books, with no relation or connection between them. Through the Tseina U’reina a complete and elaborate picture from the lives of our ancestors was disclosed to me, a picture seasoned with fine and wonderful Aggadot, which captured my heart.

Likewise with the tkhines—meant to be the inferior, “feminine” parallel for the prayers—women were subject to fewer strictures than were the men and enjoyed greater comprehension of the material they read. The prayers in the prayerbook are for the most part formulated in the plural—they speak in the name of all of Israel and on its behalf; whereas women’s tkhines are in the singular, and are marked by a tone of individuality and intimacy. Many tkhines go so far as to leave a space for the woman to insert her own name during their recital: so and so daughter of so and so. Women, unlike men, were not bound to an obligatory schedule of prayers, and they could pray in their homes whenever they felt the need. No less important is the fact that women were not bound to a fixed version of the prayer. The books of tkhines, partly composed or revised by women, were arranged in an order that suited the routines of the life of women, and they outbid each other in their degree of correspondence to the shifting vagaries of life. And women, who understood the words of these tkhines, were free to select for themselves those prayers which gave voice to their particular exigencies, apprehensions, and aspirations.

In contrast to the devotional act of prayer and study, which gives expression to religious life’s fixed and eternal dimension, reinforces ahistorical thinking, and diminishes the worth of transient material realities, the religious act
The Benefit of Marginality

The reading of *tkhines* was noted for its close links to concrete realities and to life experiences from the here-and-now. This point is well made in Shmuel Niger’s “Di Yidishe Literatur—Un Di Lezerin” (Yiddish Literature—and the Female Reader). Niger devotes much of his article to ways in which the *tkhines* closely reflected the lives of women and how their themes echoed women’s day-to-day experience. Alongside *tkhines*, which touch on the commandments compulsory for women (setting aside the levy on dough, lighting candles, abstinence during the menstrual cycle), the article lists *tkhines* for a successful pregnancy, an easy childbirth, a healthy newborn, health of children and grandchildren, remarriage of a widow, a good income, safe return of the husband from a voyage, and a life free of adversities and calamities. Niger points out the special literary style employed in the *tkhines*, which he terms the “feminine style,” and expands on the differences between the “masculine” prayers, perceived as being universal, cold, too severe and abstract for women, and the *tkhines* with their concrete phraseology. He draws attention to the intimate language employed in the *tkhines*, in which the deity is appealed to with the familial “du,” and he notes their literary foundations in lyrical and elegiac texts. Acerbically, Niger remarks that in the *tkhines* God has, as it were, become tender-hearted and “feminine,” and that the *tkhines* were meant not only to be recited in the women’s section of the synagogue, but also to be addressed to a “feminized” god (“vaybershn got”).

The cultural-religious sphere of women thus enabled them to form an attitude different than men’s toward the texts they read, an attitude in which the written word did not necessarily operate as a bearer of talmudic sophistry and exegesis, but could remain a transparent word denoting particular objects and concepts in the tangible and actual world. Against this background one may say that in many respects, the type of reading women were trained to conduct eased the transition they later underwent from reading religious literature for women to reading literature. Moreover, because men were placed in the public cultural sphere, their daily routines were under the constant and rigorous oversight of the surrounding society (the *melamed* and the pupils in the heder, the rabbis and supervisors in the yeshiva, the students and congregation in the beit midrash and synagogue), whereas the private domestic space of women was free of the examining eye. Hence, women had opportunities for reading diverse texts for pleasure, freely and intimately, at a time when men were forced to struggle for a chance to read in this way, and took great risks to realize them. To the tally of differences between the education of boys and girls one must add a further difference of great significance, one having to do with instruction in writing. The system of traditional education did not take it upon itself to provide boys with an ability to write. Boys did not learn the craft of writing for writing’s sake in Hebrew or in Yiddish, and of course they did not
learn to write in *Laaz* either. For girls, by contrast, writing instruction was quite an acceptable phenomenon. Girls learned to write from itinerant tutors, called “*shraybers,*” and those girls who wanted to learn to write would join this informal setting. Stampfer proposes a functionalist-utilitarian explanation of this state of affairs, according to which writing was not essential for men and one couldn’t justify devoting valuable instruction time for it, time that would be at the expense of the truly important subject, Torah study. Women, by contrast, were permitted to study writing since writing had a clear practical utility for them, and furthermore, since they had no obligation to study Torah, there was no “distraction from Torah.” In this context, Stampfer stresses that the women conducted writing exercises by copying out commercial and business letters, not by copying out authorized religious texts.

The claim that writing ability was not indispensable to men, along with the claim that time devoted to teaching writing was so substantial as to possibly take away from the precious time allocated in the heder for Torah study, are perplexing. One could have expected the contrary: that a society that puts such great importance on the written word would have devoted time and effort to provide writing skills to men—to the very population sector charged with the spiritual-religious sphere. It does not stand to reason that such a society should fail to provide literacy skills to men, on the grounds such skills are not indispensable. Moreover, had the rabbis desired to teach everyone to write, they could have skirted the problem of distraction from Torah in the heder by means of writing exercises involving copying out important religious texts. The astonishing fact that this was not the case invites critical examination, an inquiry into the deep power structures at the basis of this socio-ideological system. From such a critical standpoint the hypothesis might be advanced that it would have been perceived as dangerous to have allowed anyone who wished to do so to be able to write or even to copy religious texts. The avoidance of systematic and institutionalized provision of writing skills to all was therefore the product of policy, meant to determine not only who would read and what he would read but also who would write and what he would write. On this assumption, giving everyone instruction in writing (like granting skills in reading beyond the mechanical) would have been perceived to threaten the centralized authoritarian character of a sanctified tradition. It could well have deposited in the hands of the broad multitude a tool that would have gone completely out of control, permitting its possessors to practice the unwanted activity of creative and independent writing. It is appropriate therefore to inquire if it wasn’t in fact the need for socio-religious supervision and control that required that only certain individuals, generally from the elite, would be properly trained and qualified to engage in writing. In any event, the fact remains that traditional society accepted with understanding the instruction of women in writing. It would appear that the distinction between the sexes on
the question of instruction of writing derived from the perceptions of traditional society, which gave men an absolute priority. The importance of men is what caused them to be closely supervised, and it is behind also the more liberal approach the society took toward women. It is hard to rid oneself of the impression that in this realm, too, the inferiority of women is what gave them an advantage.

Of course, the suppositions raised here require thorough and extensive research, and this is not the place for it. What is chiefly important here is that those shraybers who taught the girls to read were among the vectors by which maskilic ideas were carried to the smaller towns, and the girls who learned from them the craft of writing were exposed to such ideas, among others. Ben-Zion Katz, born in 1876 in a small Lithuanian town, tells how the shraybers brought the Haskalah to his town:

As many of the town’s members were resettling in America, the girls in the town were made to learn to write Latin script, so as to be able to write English characters. The girls did not go to heder, and no school existed for them. One time an ex-yeshiva scholar who had decided to become a teacher came and instructed the girls, so they would know to write Yiddish and also English script. He brought with him maskilic books, and he also had an issue of the monthly Hashahar edited by Peretz Smolenskin; and so, drop by drop, the Haskalah penetrated my town.

55 Alexander Ziskind Rabinowitz similarly describes the “institution” of the shraybers and attributes to them the spread of the Haskalah into the smaller towns. Yet Rabinowitz, unlike Ben-Zion Katz, notes that boys who wanted to learn to write also turned to the shraybers to acquire such facility:

There was a further modest enough educational institution, the institute of the shraybers. These scribes were simple Jews, sometimes a trifle maskilic, but who acted like complete haredim and were noted for their fine handwriting, calligraphy. They would teach the boys and girls to read and to write Hebrew and Latin script [. . .] They were not at all esteemed in the eyes of the people, who treated them almost with contempt, but they had nothing against them either, as they recognized the value of being able to write script, to sign some paper or to read some note. The scribe would collect a group of male or female pupils together and give them lessons for a fee. When he finished teaching the boys and girls of the town to write, he would often move on to another town. [. . .] These miserable paupers were the first to bring the Haskalah amongst the people [. . .] Most had had little education, but a few among them were true maskilim and book learned, who provoked the youth to seek out knowledge.

56 One may summarize by saying that the pattern followed in Jewish society in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe was not one of a simple bipolar gender division between domestic and public spheres. Just as one may not assert definitively that the woman was placed in the domestic sphere, so one may not say she was definitively positioned in the public sphere. From the perspective of traditional society’s values, the reversed gender roles in practical affairs was
offset and balanced by a strict role division in the one realm that mattered to this society, that is, in the spiritual-religious realm. There a clear gender hierarchy was maintained, with men granted an unquestioned superiority. And yet, from the standpoint of modern society’s set of values, traditional society’s gender-role division broadcast to both sexes ambiguous messages of empowerment and weakness, inferiority and advantage. Not only did it fail to act to moderate conflict and assuage frustrations, it even exacerbated tensions for both men and women.  

The twinned aspect of the gender-role division in traditional Jewish society had paradoxical results. The supposedly inferior space allotted to women in both practical life and the life of culture and religion, a space meant to perpetuate their marginality, revealed itself as not merely a confining enclosure but also as room for productive maneuvering. The episode Rachel Feigenberg notes in her memoirs suggests that not only was women’s metaphoric or symbolic space left unsupervised because it was deemed inferior, but so was their physical space—the “women’s section” in the synagogue. Feigenberg relates that when some of the town maskilim tried to open a school in the town of Dubovo, “No one [. . .] wanted to rent out his house to this educational institution, and the popular expounders of Haskalah [. . .] were forced to hold the school lessons in the ‘women’s section’ of the old synagogue.”  

Without understating in the slightest the difficulties and hindrances that were the lot of many women, one cannot at the same time ignore the degree of freedom and the empowering resources that this realm of marginality granted many of them. The status of many women as breadwinners, along with the matrimonial practices, the attitude of traditional society toward the education of women, and the content and practices in the cultural sphere women occupied—all these supplied women with great advantages for the encounter with modernity. This space, contemptuously regarded and for the most part left unsupervised by traditional society, opened unexpected possibilities for many of the women—to utilize their skills in literacy and to influence their surroundings. More than a few women began to set in motion processes that were, from the perspective of traditional society, unexpected and undesirable.
Yet the maiden Mina is pleasant and well-mannered. Country girl though she is, she has all the qualities for which the girls of the hamlets are well regarded, for she was educated in Stanislav at the Pension and learned French and embroidery and piano tapping, until the country was torn out of her and you would never have known she is the daughter of a country Jew.¹

—s.y. agnon

He Who Teaches His Daughter Torah Is Teaching Her Promiscuity

As I have previously noted, in traditional Jewish society Torah study played a central role in the construction of male gender identity. This function of the act of study was one reason why women were excluded from it, yet paradoxically, that very exclusion made it easier for women to acquire the kind of education that could assist them in practical life. Rabbi Eliezer’s dictum, “He who teaches his daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity,” which many nineteenth-century haredim interpreted as specifically prohibiting Torah instruction for girls, created a climate that was convenient for providing women with a basic secular education. Since for girls, secular education would not cause “distraction from Torah,” such an education could be justified on the grounds that it was vital to women’s function as breadwinners. Presumably, Rabbi Eliezer’s dictum also gave an authorization of sorts for belittling women’s intellectual abilities, and largely stilled concerns about the effects an education would have on them.² The conviction that “dangerous” texts such as scientific or philosophical works were beyond the capacities of women, so that even if they read them they would not understand them, helped diminish apprehensions about the damage their reading might cause. In this climate, the secular education of girls passively or quietly became acceptable, even when the reasons parents had for granting such an education had nothing to do with preparing the daughter to run a business. Thus, for example, the custom adopted

“A Woman Prides Herself on Cooing and Prattling in French and German”
from European aristocracy, of having daughters be taught foreign languages and piano playing, usually did not meet with any special resistance, even though such an “aristocratic education” was in line with, among other things, the maskilic aim of substituting a “European” ideal of the woman for the one current in Jewish society, and thus of effecting a deeper social transformation than it perhaps at first appears. An interesting point in this context is that most descriptions by maskilim of girls who had been “aristocratically” educated carry tones of dismissiveness and condescension. What is especially evident is the maskilim’s distaste for the efforts of the upper-class families and the nouveau riche to award themselves the distinction of being enlightened and aristocratic on the basis of their daughter’s education. The dismissive tone was apparent in the stereotyped formula the maskilim commonly employed, in which, instead of speaking of a girl’s fluency in foreign languages one would refer to her ability to “coo,” “prattle” and “spout” French. Such derogatory qualifications make the facility the “aristocratic” girls had acquired seem superficial or spotty and the phenomenon as a whole more of showy effort at being fashionable than of any particular import. Nevertheless, it should be recalled that the maskilim themselves gave their daughters just such an education, and their trivialization of the phenomenon comes, perhaps unconsciously, despite their own efforts to establish the European-bourgeois ideal of the refined and sensitive aesthetic woman as an alternative to traditional Jewish society’s ideal of the woman. Perhaps the derisive tone expressed a fear that the enlightened girls might shake off their traditional obligations as females and cause the disintegration of their families; perhaps it expressed disgust at manifestations of “false enlightenment”; perhaps it was a way to vent criticism of the crass nouveau riche who were adopting the trappings of nobility and giving the Haskalah a bad name; perhaps it was a political ploy or feint meant to blunt haredi resistance to the education of girls; and perhaps all of these together were involved in the derisive tone. One way or the other, the efforts of the maskilim to trivialize the “aristocratic” education of girls does not imply that the phenomenon was indeed trivial, nor should one draw sweeping conclusions here as to the attitudes of maskilim toward the education of women in particular or toward modernity in general. Many maskilim knew perfectly well that not all women who studied foreign languages did so in order to “prattle on” with them fashionably, and that quite a few women who may have started out this way made good use of their facility later in life. In no way should one attribute to the maskilim lack of regard for the phenomenon of women possessing a secular education, or of the social potential it contained for advancing their own cause.

It was not by accident, therefore, that an attempt was made by maskilim in the 1850s to take advantage of Rabbi Eliezer’s dictum, “He who teaches his
daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity,” so as to persuade Jewish parents to grant their daughters a full secular education, and not merely to allow them to “prattle on in French.” In a shrewd, calculated interpretive maneuver, the maskilim inverted Rabbi Eliezer's dictum so as to extract an authorization permitting women to be taught all subjects it did not expressly prohibit, that is, all subjects except for Torah. Explicit evidence to this effect is cited by Menashe Margaliot in his *Dor Halaskalah Berusiah* (The Haskalah Era in Russia). Margaliot tells that in 1857, the Russian authorities appointed a committee of rabbis called the “Second Rabbinical Commission,” charging it with the task of resolving questions involving edicts of Jewish law and rabbinical activities. The Commission was asked, among other things, to propose strategies to the authorities by which the Jewish community could be persuaded to send its children to the schools; one of the requests directly concerned the Jewish schools for girls. Here, says Margaliot, the Commission proposed that Rabbi Eliezer's dictum be relied upon as a means of persuading Jews to grant their daughters a secular education:

The Commission recognizes that the education of women amongst the Jews, especially in the weaker populations, “is somewhat neglected.” And as this gives grounds for a reasonable judge to reflect, that an ill-founded idea has spread amongst the people that this state of affairs is necessary, the Commission deems it essential to inquire and seek whether something may be found in our Torah which by straightforward interpretation might overturn such errors as are associated with the education of girls.

The investigation on this matter centered mainly on the adage from the Mishnah (attributed to Rabbi Eliezer): He who teaches his daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity; and the members of the Commission using interpretive acuity argued that in the body of the text per se there was no prohibition for the Jew to teach his daughter subjects made essential to her by the times, and they further built their case with citations from the Torah and the Talmud and the Commentaries. And since it was on the basis of an inadequate understanding of this dictum that a faulty opinion had indeed spread amongst the people, the Commission deems it imperative:

A. To refer this resolution to the *magidim* [synagogue orators] so that they would give special sermons advocating education not just for boys but also for girls.

B. To announce that if they come to deliver a sermon they should speak of both boys and girls.

C. To instruct the rabbis and *magidim* to awaken the householders to make efforts that their daughters aged eleven or twelve should come to the synagogues on the Sabbath and holidays so they would see the arrangements of worship of the Lord and shall hear the sermons of the preachers.

Margaliot takes a dismissive view of the Commission’s decisions to press the rabbis and *magidim* into service for the cause of girls’ education, yet this account of the Commission’s deliberations is supporting evidence that in Jewish society at the time the prohibition against having girls be taught Torah was linked to a permission to have them be taught “subjects made essential to her by the times.” Moreover, the report also shows how the maskilim tried to
legitimize their program through reliance on traditional sources, in the customary Jewish manner. They worked to advance their cause using traditional perspectives and at times even traditional institutions.

Y. L. Gordon's efforts on behalf of girls' education likewise indicates how the maskilim tried to take advantage of the prevailing attitude in traditional society toward women's education. In 1866, in an address at the opening ceremony for the school for Jewish girls in Telshie—the second of the schools for girls he would administer—Gordon spoke of how the Jewish masses had rejected the Haskalah and were using all available measures to evade the various secular educational facilities. This hostility, however, applied, in his opinion, only to the education of boys. Boys were required to have an exclusively talmudic education; girls were under no such obligations, which is why Jewish parents did not hesitate to send their daughters to the secular schools.

YaLaG claims that in those regions without a secular school for girls, female illiteracy rates were high, but wherever there were such schools they were full to overflowing.

Later in his speech, YaLaG announces that the language of study in the school he was establishing would be Russian, and that by means of the instruction in Russian the school would help eradicate shoddy jargon, would bring Jewish society closer to Russian society and culture, and would demonstrate Jewish loyalty to the State of Russia. In this oration YaLaG thus expresses the Haskalah's ideological principles, which would serve as the defining guidelines for the school he would run. He makes no secret of his contempt for "jargon." In his opinion, the inwardly directed social goal of the educational reform was to have "shoddy jargon" be supplanted by the language of the dominant culture, thus removing the cultural stigma Jews had for speaking a "non-language." At the same time, he presents fluency in Russian as an outward-directed goal, meant to achieve the full integration of Jews into the dominant culture and society. Indeed, in the conclusion to his address YaLaG turns directly to the women and tells them it is their responsibility, as future mothers, to uproot jargon and to raise a new generation whose diction shall be the "pure language." YaLaG's address contains more than a hint to the effect that women were viewed as a loose chink in traditional society's isolationist armor, which YaLaG—as a maskil—would manipulate for his ends. By establishing schools for girls and administering them, YaLaG hoped to have the maskilic spirit infiltrate those sectors of the population that had been sealed from its ideas: he would use the "no man's land" left abandoned by the traditional educational system—the education of women.

For unlike the strictness which characterized the education of boys, the education of girls was marked by neglect on one side and manifest permissiveness on the other. In many respects these were two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, rates of illiteracy were vastly higher for women than
they were for men. The quite large number of women who learned to read Yiddish did so, as said, in voluntary settings, and numbers no less large remained illiterate. Many of the scholars who dwell on this illiteracy tend in this context to mention the institution of the magidah, the zogerke (woman speaker or prompter), as evidence of how extensive such illiteracy was. These scholars note that in many communities women had to make use of an “educated woman” who knew the Hebrew Aleph-bet and was able to point those nearby to the text of the prayer being read in the synagogue, or to read with them on their behalf. On the other hand, throughout the nineteenth century the number of women who learned foreign languages and acquired a secular education, whether in private educational settings or in the state schools, steadily grew.

Secular Studies for Women—A Gap in the Isolationist Haredi Wall

With the background supplied thus far, it comes as no surprise that daughters of maskilic fathers in urban and well-established families should have learned foreign languages from Christian nannies or private tutors. More interesting is the fact that this phenomenon was true for some haredim as well. Apparently, even in prominent haredi families there were girls who learned foreign languages with private tutors at home while their brothers were off, of course, studying at the yeshivas. In fact, in upper-class religious families girls stood a much higher chance than boys of receiving a modern education.\(^\text{16}\)

Thus, Yehiel Yeshaya Trunk (1887–1961) relates in his book *Polin, Zichronot Utmunot* (Poland, Memoirs and Scenes) how the daughters of the Kallischer Rebbe (1822–1889), a.k.a. “Hanefesh Haya” (the Living Soul) studied foreign languages in the home of their grandfather, Rabbi Yehoshua Kutner:

The daughters of the Kallischer Rebbe[... both were favored with an aristocratic education. Both knew Polish and German, read the works of Schiller and were versed in the great novels. In the home of Rabbi Yehoshuele Kutner—a place where the smell of books broke forth from the dusty cabinets into all the surrounding rooms and merged with the smell of groats that grandmother Priva prepared for meals—the aristocratic daughters would sometimes sit by the windows and read thick Polish or German novels, their eyes streaming tears, sighing at the passionate loves depicted in them. Rising from the courtyard below was the sound of the Talmud in sing-song from the beit midrash students, merging with the joyful clamor of the children of the poor at the municipal “Talmud Torah” school.\(^\text{17}\)

Intentional here is Trunk’s emphasis on the contrast between these worlds, the world of girls and the world of men, which existed side by side in the rabbi’s home. Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi likewise draws attention to the contradiction in the physical proximity of these worlds, so alien to each other. In her
memos describing a childhood she shared with her cousin Sarah Golobchik—daughter of a celebrated hasidic family from Chernobyl, Ukraine—Yanait Ben-Zvi tells how they both studied Russian right in the middle of the hasidic court. First she describes the beit midrash where the rebbe’s acolytes studied, and only then reveals that while the scholars were bent over their lecterns in Torah study, the girls were able to learn Russian without interruption.18

Girls of upper-class families studied foreign languages with nannies, teachers, or private tutors, while girls of less wealthy families were taught in the secular schools for girls. This trend began to appear in Poland in the third decade of the nineteenth century, with the establishment of the elementary schools for the members of the Mosaic faith in Warsaw. In an extensive study of such educational institutions, set up between 1818 and 1830, Sabina Levin describes the schools for girls and points out how unique they were in terms of administration, curriculum, and level of accomplishment.19 The schools for boys were administered under Jewish supervision and had to allocate hours of study to Jewish topics, whereas the schools for girls had no such supervision and the curriculum was entirely secular. So it was in the first private school for girls, established in 1819 and administered by Fredericka Eichenbaum, and so it was in the second school as well, established in 1826 and administered by Anna Waldenberg. The two were educated women and freethinkers, and both applied secular curricula in their schools.

Sabina Levin notes that these schools for girls differed from the public schools for boys in the degree of cooperation they maintained with the community, a feature which manifested itself, in her opinion, in their accomplishments as well. In contrast with the accusatory and censorious reports the supervisors wrote about the elementary schools for boys, the review of one of the schools for girls gets a glowing recommendation. According to this report,

Outstanding in the line of schools for children of the Mosaic Faith is the school for girls, which has been removed from the oversight of the old religious community and placed under the supervision of the local school districts. In this school there are 150 girls studying in three classes, and already there are signs of its future utility.20

In 1828 the school for girls again won a positive appraisal from the supervisors: “The School for Girls of the Mosaic Faith is not inferior to the finest of the public elementary schools.”21 These reports suggest that the success of the schools for girls could be attributed to the governmental supervision of their administration, while the failure of the schools for boys resulted from the failed oversight of the Jewish community. Yet Sabina Levin does not accept this explanation; she believes that the causes of this phenomenon lie deeper:

Such statements may sound indeed like a hymn of praise, yet they are also warnings: Here the Jewish supervision of the school for boys has not filled its duties and has
failed. [...] It sufficed that the school for girls was taken out of Jewish hands, and look at the achievements it could boast! Yet this was not the entire truth. There were other reasons too for the success of these two schools for girls. [...] One must recall that the work in these two schools was conducted in much quieter conditions than in the schools for boys. The struggle [in Jewish society] over the elementary schools focused mainly on the elementary schools for boys of the various types. They were the main target of feuds and attacks from various quarters. They were the flashpoints for the confrontation between the different Jewish trends and streams. The struggle was over the consciousness of the boys, not over the consciousness of girls, because boys alone had a value in the Jewish public life.

These public schools for girls could implement their study curriculum in line with governmental goals and could conduct fruitful didactical-educational activities in quiet conditions and using experienced teachers. There was no struggle in them over the religious-Jewish subjects, because such subjects were not obligatory, as is known, for girls.

In her explanatory remarks, Levin insists that the haredim regarded the state-established secular educational system for Jews as a system designed to assimilate them, and that they did all they could to undermine it. These suspicions of the government’s intent, which were not unfounded, were expressed through the range of tactics the haredim employed to sabotage the secular schools for Jews. Fathers refused to enroll their sons in such schools, and in periods when they were pressured into doing so, they haggled over the curriculum and over appointments of teachers, administrators, and supervisors. Likewise, they prevented their sons from regularly attending the schools, especially during final examinations, and made sure they could not properly graduate. As Levin notes, none of these tactics was applied to the schools for girls. For girls, the secular curriculum was usually accepted without any special resistance; there were few quarrels over administrators or supervisors, and for those girls who enrolled the overall trend was one of continuity, numerical stability and regular attendance. Zvi Scharfstein also comments on the very same phenomenon. As part of his extensive portrayal of the history of Jewish education in Poland, he notes that in 1824, after attempts to establish a school for boys in Lodz failed, the government established a school for girls “and succeeded at this because parents did not supervise girls.” In the first year, he continues, several hundred girls of poor families had enrolled, and following this feat, at the request of the wealthier families of Lodz a private school was also opened.

It is no accident that it was in Poland that the first signs of this phenomenon appeared. The geographical proximity to Germany, which exposed Polish Jewry to the influences of the Berlin Haskalah, and the efforts of the Polish authorities to enlighten the Jews by establishing a public school system, both contributed to the new appearance of schools for Jewish girls. Yet this phenomenon was not unique to Polish Jewry, nor did it disappear with Poland’s annexation by Russia.
The Russian maskilim too were drawn by the Berlin Haskalah’s model; they even went so far as to enlist German Jews to help them set up a secular school system for Russian Jews. In the 1840s, Russia was caught up in a period of social reforms, as part of which the Ministry for National Education in Russia under Ovarov’s leadership joined the maskilim’s initiative and invited Jewish experts from Germany, led by Dr. Max Lillienthal, to advise and assist in establishing secular schools for Jewish children. The stated goal of the Russian Ministry for National Education was to Russify and assimilate the Jewish population, yet that was not enough to discourage the Russian maskilim from enthusiastically supporting this endeavor of the authorities. Initially, at least, the maskilim largely believed that the intent of the Russian administration was to enlighten the Jews, and they joined the propaganda campaign promoting secular education. Haredi society, by contrast, sharply opposed the establishment of secular schools and was quite suspicious of the government’s intent. Pitched battles were fought and rifts were formed in Jewish society over the issue of secular schools, with haredi groups working to defeat the efforts of the maskilim and of the authorities using all the methods and tactics just described. The traditional Jewish community kept its children from attending these schools, taking the air out of Lillienthal’s mission and all subsequent efforts in the 1840s to set up a system of secular education for Russian Jews.

Standing out against this largely troubled background is the success of two schools in Odessa: one for boys, established in 1826, and the other for girls, established in 1835. Yet the success of these schools had to do with the unique and relatively liberal character of the Odessa community, which was perhaps why in Vilna, the city that between 1830 and 1850 had become one of the strongholds of the Haskalah movement, the maskilim elected instead to depart from the Odessa model and to establish the school for girls first (in 1830) prior to opening the school for boys (in 1841). Simeon Krieze, who reports these facts in his comprehensive “Jewish Schools in the Russian Language in Czarist Russia,” likewise believes that the different approaches taken by the two communities is not accidental. According to Krieze, this decision of the Vilna maskilim sheds light both on the attitude Jewish society took toward girls’ education and on the “difficulty of educational modernization in a city with a rooted Jewish tradition.” To explain himself, Krieze goes on to say:

The Haskalah movement chose the path of least resistance and established a school for girls. Since girls were under no obligations to study Torah, the resistance to establishing a school for girls was smaller than that which a school for boys would have raised. In Vilna this was especially true, as the mitnagdim were less opposed to the Haskalah than they were to the hasidim. Yet it was precisely there that the argument that schooling causes distraction from Torah carried the most weight, for Torah was studied especially widely in this town. [...] This argument did not apply to girls, however, so that it was relatively easy to establish a modern school for them.
The maskilim continued to promote the creation of a secular school system even after they were disabused of belief in the purity of motives on the part of the Russian authorities. As a result of their efforts, in Russia too a system of secular education gradually developed, one erected on maskilic guidelines and offering a modern alternative to traditional Jewish education. Until 1860, however, secular schooling for Russia’s Jews remained the privilege of only a thin and narrow band of maskilim.  

The seventh decade of the nineteenth century marked a turning point in the history of Jewish education in Russia. In the context of the reforms carried out during the reign of Alexander II, the maskilim intensified their efforts, fired with the belief that an historic shift in the attitude of the authorities toward the Jews was unfolding before their eyes. “The Society for the Dissemination of Haskalah among Jews in the Land of Russia” participated in efforts to establish a school system and contributed to its success. In the Jewish public, the climate created was one of somewhat greater tolerance for secular education, and the project began to gain momentum. By 1860, the scale of the secular school system for Jews had substantially advanced over what it had been for the previous two decades, and from the 1860s onward secular education only continued to expand. 

Notwithstanding the new climate of this period, however, the battles between maskilim and haredim raged on as fiercely as ever. Leading maskilic authors and literary critics such as Papirna, Gottlober, Mapu, and YaLaG earned a living as administrators or teachers of secular schools for Jews, and in the persistent conflict with the religious leadership were subjected to fierce attacks and condemnations. The haredim, for their part, continued to employ all the means at their disposal to incapacitate the secular schools and prevent their sons from enrolling in them. 

An interesting practice, reminiscent of how Jewish families dealt with the conscription of a son into the army, illustrates not only the depth of the hostility traditional society felt toward the secular schooling of boys and how it defended itself from it, but also the extent of the internal rifts in Jewish society. Several memoirs and autobiographies contain accounts of a practice of “ransomming” boys forced to go to school by sending instead an orphan or the son of a poor widow. Reports also tell of a practice of sending the “unsuccessful” sons to the schools, that is, the obstinate and unruly “marginal youths” whom traditional society had given up trying to turn into Torah scholars and whom it considered “savages.” One such case is described by Sarah Feyge Faner (1855–1937) in her Mizichromot Yeimei Talduti, where she portrays in detail events of the town of Dienburg (Dvinsk) between the years 1862 and 1871. Owing to the interest in this book of memoirs, written in Hebrew by a woman, and given the wealth of detail in its portrayal of daily life as well as the incisiveness of its social critique, extended passages from her book will be cited here verbatim.
The author begins by describing how boys were “drafted” to the state schools in the 1860s, noting how the school principals collaborated with the authorities who obliged every family to send at least one son to a school:

In those days the principals of the schools received an order from the Minister of Education requiring every father who has more than one son to send at least one of his sons to learn at the Gymnasia school. And thus the principal of the Gymnasia at Dvinsk, and the Mayor, Egelshtrom, and a writer from the Councils went and took along the late Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Rabinowitz—for he was a great maskil and lover of enlightenment—and the four of them set out to acquire souls to educate. And a few individuals, scenting a whiff of the odor of freedom and arriving from other towns where the Haskalah had begun to blossom, joined with them, but the majority, and especially the Hasidim, kept their sons from all of this and hid their sons; if a man had three sons he told him he had one and that he was needed for his business.

After the narrator tells how the haredim, and the hasidim in particular, evaded the public schools, she turns to an account of one wealthy man who was forced to sign a consent to send his son to school:

And they arrived at the home of Reb Yeruham Zalman Gordon and found his sons, some five of them, sitting studying with the melamed, and they inquired whether they understood any languages, and when they replied in the negative the principal told their father, that by the decree of the Minister of Education he must at the very least give up one of his sons to go to the Gymnasia. And he was unable to refuse them and signed by his hand that over the next three months he would train one of his sons in the essential knowledge requirements which were then minimal and afterward would send him to the Gymnasia. Thus indeed, a great sacrifice was made that day by the noble Gordon in signing a writ to send one of his boys to the Gymnasia; for once signed, he could not retract.

Yet the narrator “calms” the readers and explains that so noble a man as he would never send his son to a school. Her account incidentally shows up the haredi community’s suspicions of government intentions to convert their sons to Christianity, as well as how it ostracized those families which did send a son to be educated:

However, honorable readers, Heaven forbid you should suspect righteous persons, that one such as he and in those days would have sent a son to the sacrifice, as the Gymnasia was then called, to have him be turned into a shiler or a shkovent as the masses then called such a boy, a great stain he was on an honored family. The Lord forever bestows on those who revere Him the extra insight to know and reason from cause to consequence. And he sent and called for the woman Feyge Hafwelnkern […] and he spoke unto her, Hear me Feyge and do not be enraged by me, if your husband was alive or your son had taken a righteous path shame on me that I had even considered such a thing. But everyone knows and you yourself know that your son Beshke is a lost and dissipate boy, that there is not a house in the whole street whose panes have not been smashed by your son’s fist, Torah study he does not desire and what shall become of him? Therefore put him in my care, I will clothe him, feed him, give him drink and satisfy all his wants, I shall be a father to him and he shall be a son to me, he shall even
bear his [my?] name, all he must do is go to study in the Gymnasia and you shall see how good things are for your son from now on.

But I must ask you Reb Yeruham Zalman, will they not force him to convert? said Feyge, tears streaming from her eyes.

Heavens, Heaven forbid, never in this world, all they want is for him to study in the Gymnasia, and I may not send my son there for apart from the sons I have three girls, and with a son gone to the Gymnasia no honorable family will then want to marry into ours [...]

And thus she left the house of Gordon with a torn and bitter heart, that the Lord had cast upon her such afflictions to the degree she would have to give up her boy as ransom for the noble and pedigreed son, and send him to study in the Gymnasia. And upon coming home she disclosed to her son what had happened with the nobleman in broken phrases, expecting him to cry as she did, yet when the boy heard of Gordon’s desire he jumped and frolicked like a sheep from joy.39

A tone of light irony begins to appear in the narrator’s tale, revealing her reservations at the subterfuge the nobleman employs to “save” his son, and his efforts to have a poor widow’s boy be the “ransom” for his own. The story’s conclusion discloses Faner’s own views on the inevitable triumph of enlightenment:

Three months passed [...] Beshke wore a suit instead of his city clothes, then for the first time set out in the uniform of a Gymnasia student with the golden buttons which shone from afar, and he gloried in and was proud of these [...] He was indeed a handsome and intelligent boy, yet being a fatherless orphan had known no discipline; if a man taunted him he would respond with a stone, and in his pranks picked quarrels with everyone and everyone quarreled with him, his mother called him a savage and in the street he was called the town billy-goat Feyge’s kid—yet now he acquired a new name: *shkovent, shiler*; and his mother complained always in the ears of her acquaintances how miserable she has been since her husband died, for had her man been alive her son would not now be going to the Gymnasia. Yet after two years she discovered that it was not to her chagrin but to her delight that her son was going to school, for he studied with great concentration, and all the teachers of the school loved him greatly, and upon completing the sixth grade he received 60 silver shekels and an expensive book as a gift. And the few maskilim that lived then welcomed him; Dr. Nathanson spoke well of him in the home of a maskil and he took him to tutor his own two boys in preparation for the Gymnasia, and paid him in full, and with that money he supported his mother [...] Year after year he steadily advanced; he paid the tuition for the Gymnasia and was sent to the Capitol, and by the account of many rose to the rank of “government advisor” [...] 40

The narrator does not leave the tale of the nobleman and the widow’s son without drawing a moral. In her conclusion she again stresses that most boys
who were drawn to the Haskalah in the 1860s were outcasts and impoverished youths. By her account, the class tensions in Jewish society were closely linked to the appeal the Haskalah held for the children of the poor. These rebellious and indigent children turned to the secular schools first and foremost as an act of protest and revenge: in protest against the way they were being exploited and oppressed, against social injustice and the alienation of the wealthy nobility toward the destitute youth; and in revenge against the yeshiva directors who treated them with contempt, limited their freedom, and actively or passively upheld a tyrannical social order:

Who in any case made up the majority of those who first attended the Gymnasia? Marginal boys raised without morals or manners, or yeshiva students who had thrown off the yoke of the yeshiva and slavery and with it the Torah as well, and full of rage and fury at the wealthy and the householders—who did not give them enough to eat, though there were plenty of people employed there, the mistress of the house by herself, the maid by herself, and the yeshiva director at their head, who often waited like a bear waiting in ambush, fearing the boy would come to a bad end. And when these people adopted the Haskalah it was in their eyes as a rod of revenge, to strike back against those who had attacked and persecuted them in the name and might of the Torah, as for example: it would be deemed an act of mercy if we took such a one as this, who eats without ritually washing his hands beforehand, and hand him over to the army to substitute for the son of the nobleman or the son of the God-fearing, etc. etc.41

The practice of sending orphans and troublemakers to the secular schools is mentioned, as noted, in other autobiographies and memoirs as well. Thus, for instance, Buki Ben Yogli relates that after he was orphaned from his father, his stepfather sought to have him enroll in the government school which had then opened in Homel, as he was hard-pressed to pay the tuition for the heder.42 And in his memoirs, Mordechai Ben Hillel Hacohen tells that the wealthy people in the small settlements and hamlets, “especially those who gave up believing their rude and simpleton sons could be Torah scholars, sought ‘maskilim’ instructors for them from the district towns who would change their unruly sons from the village or the hamlet into men of the world, that is, teach them the Seven Wisdoms.”43 In documentary sources from a later period, there are accounts of sons not blessed with capacities for Torah scholarship being given a secular education as a spin-off of the education given to girls. Thus, for instance, in a depiction of the town of Justinograd Sokolievka at the end of the nineteenth century, we are told:

In those days Russian teachers began to appear in town. They were looking to give private lessons, and at first found female students, girls who were not under obligations to study Torah in the heder. Later they were joined by boys who had “graduated” the heder and were not blessed with abilities to study in the beit midrash. And the whole household would study. Each one would sit in his corner and learn by heart the works of Russian poets, the rules of grammar or rules of arithmetic.44
All these testimonials indicate that the haredim did whatever they could to delegitimize the secular education of boys. When forced to by the circumstances the haredim preferred to “sacrifice” to the Haskalah the “marginal youth”—“savages who pick quarrels with everyone and whom everyone quarrels with” (Genesis 17:12). Yet in all that concerns the education of girls, things were entirely different. Girls were not stigmatized for studying secular subjects, and it was even the girls of established and wealthy families who led the way for their poorer sisters into the secular schools.

The 1860s and the Women’s Education Movement

The decade of the 1860s marked a turning point not only for the education of Jews in general but also for the education of women. Some of the prominent Haskalah authors and critics, such as Papirna, Abramovitch and YaLaG, conveyed in their writings how important they thought women’s education was to society and called for energetic and enterprising initiatives to educate women and to raise their status. Both the public debate over women’s social status as well as the practical efforts to educate them drew upon the discussions held by the Russian radicals over the “woman’s question”; yet it is doubtful whether such an influence alone can account for the maskilim’s work on women’s behalf. There are clear indications that prominent maskilic figures explicitly sought to take advantage of women as agents who would spread the spirit of modernity and enlightenment into the broad masses.

In his book *Kankan Hadash Male Yashan* (1867), in the context of an attack on the opaque and over-stylized language the period’s writers used to deliberately preclude the readership of women, Papirna argues extensively in favor of women’s education, sharply condemning the tactics used to keep them from reading and gaining access to knowledge. As an illustration of such deliberate exclusion, Papirna quotes at length from a passage in Rabbi Yosef Cohen Tzedek’s commentary on Maimonides, where Cohen Tzedek justifies opaque writing as a necessary means of keeping women from the knowledge meant strictly for men:

Of these too our hearts are pained: of these the brazen following: Of a virgin married. What girls are there: the girl engaged, the girl seduced, prepubescent, menopausal, wombless, wood-struck, faithless, awaiting levirate marriage; released from levirate marriage, girl running unhatted and wild-haired, widowed, widow with dowry, widowed from a high priest, betrothal-widow, [... ] the daughter’s co-wife in a levirate marriage, the woman miscarrying [... ] Negroid girls, all hybrids, all that renders unclean, infant girls, the androgynous (forgot to mention: of crushed or injured testicle) and the she-male at heart, the woman divorced. Shall these read about matters at the summit of the cosmos founded upon substrates of wisdom and keystones of reason? What have you to do with them? Let them go on with their miserable life, let them
wind spools, lick off bowls, let them bake whatever it is they bake, cook whatever they cook, clean house, diaper their offspring (whose offspring—the prepubescent, the post-menopausal, the wombless? Or the she-male and androgynous beings? Perhaps he means each respectively: the she-male and androgynous creatures should wind their spools, and the levirate wife diaper her offspring.) Let them go on gabbing about cocks and hens, ducks and quail and fish—we’re not about to take orders from them.  

Papirna interweaves his ironic bits of commentary to highlight not only the scope of Rabbi Y. Cohen Tzedeck’s contempt and misogyny, but also to show the absurdity and perversity of this approach. Later, Papirna shifts to more explicit critique:

And is this really something to mourn over, that a she-male or androgynous or a divorced woman may learn things founded on substrates of wisdom and keystones of reason? But please let’s leave all clawing to the clowns and ask in earnest: will not every enlightened person who loves his fellow man be thoroughly revolted at the sight of individuals so sunk in darkness as these, perched atop literature’s mountain and holding keys to the education of the people of Israel?—And these are the people who hand down rulings and edicts, who keep our daughters from being taught things founded on substrates of wisdom and keystones of reason, sending them instead to lick from bowls—at a time when only through the education of women—can we hope to truly educate all the people...

Papirna is explicit about this: “only through the education of women—can we hope to truly educate all the people”; and as behooves such an approach he goes on to suggest practical ideas on how women might be better educated, ideas that include greater efforts to compose secular Yiddish literature:

And would that there be found such people to compose and translate words of reason and knowledge for the masses in the vernacular, such as is done by H. Abramovitch, Dik, Gordon and Gottlober. They can arouse the love for the language of the state and for Haskalah in general, for such books have a great influence on the entire nation, while the books of the Hebrew tongue influence only a minority, those who have already read and reflected much or little.

As these declarations of Papirna clearly indicate, the call for action on behalf of women’s education was based not solely on moral arguments but on utilitarian ones as well. Papirna does not demand that women be educated only so that their rights and status would be equal to those of men, but rather, emphasizes the benefits that will accrue to the society as a whole from the education of women. Whether Papirna exaggerated the influence he thought women can have on their children, or whether he believed, as did YaLaG, that through women one could reach sectors of the haredi community that could not be infiltrated via the men, there is no doubt that he believed that women can and must be important agents of maskilic ideas.

In the mid-1860s, Abramovitch began to compose literature in Yiddish, and among his reasons for shifting from the prestigious Hebrew to the inferior
vernacular, he lists the necessity of enlightening the broad masses, chiefly the women. His far-reaching “What Are We” (1875), which may be viewed as a manifesto of sorts of Jewish humanism, is largely devoted to a critical survey of women’s status in traditional Jewish society. His “Driven Leaf,” which bears the subtitle inspired by Nicolai Chernyshevsky, “What Is to be Done,” speaks of the importance of educating women and composing literature for them:

The Daughters of Israel, who make up half the nation, in general are commanded to Remember and Uphold all the things essential to reforming morals and to improving our condition—for they too like us men are obliged by the commandments of enlightenment and perfection which the Times elicit and the Right Mind decrees upon them. How then may we ignore this entire wide mass of people, and be false to our souls by writing only for the few and leaving the majority aside?

These debates of principle on the question of the status and education of women had also practical implications. Efforts on behalf of the cause of women’s education began to gain momentum. A. Z. Rabinowitz, in a comprehensive article on the history of education and enlightenment of Jews in Russia, makes special note of the movement for women’s education that arose in Russia in the 1860s. Rabinowitz runs through the list of private schools for women that were established during these years; they included schools in Mohilev and Kishinev.

In a description of a school for girls in Kishinev, which appeared in a column in Hamelitz in 1863, the reporter stresses the girls’ academic achievements and the school’s modern European character. Especially important here is the sharp contrast that the writer draws between the environments of the schools for boys and for girls:

And of all these I was gladdened by the European spirit which breezes through this house and the growing shoots of the times which give such a pleasant aroma to all who enter it. In wide chambers, clean and pure, far from the clamor of the street or the clangor of the town, the girls, dressed in European garb, sit listening to lectures given in right and proper order. There are no shouts of a cruel beiffer [teacher’s aide] honking rudely like an ostrich in the desert with a voice like chariot thunder, there are no sounds of a girl crying when she can’t understand a melamed who doesn’t know his right hand from his left and curses her and her mother or slaps her sharply in front of all her friends; the voice is rather of an enlightened and understanding teacher, speaking about clear and exciting subjects, the sound is of a girl speaking to her teacher who gently guides her to disclose what she has learned and what she has understood—that is what I hear!

Moreover, the writer shows considerable awareness of the effect that women with an education can have on their immediate surroundings, and ultimately on the society at large. He declares in his conclusion that those girls will teach “also their sons and daughters, who shall learn to understand and
know and enlighten and will not be like the blind groping in the darkness; and of the girls’ school it shall be said: from this house came forth Knowledge, and the Word of Enlightenment from its departments.\textsuperscript{56}

Although the secular school system for girls continually expanded from the 1860s onward, this system knew, as did secular education in general, its ups and downs. The statistics cited by Krieze in his article suggest that during this entire period the government schools for girls suffered from budgetary crises, and that these had serious effects on the number and social class of the girls who could enroll. When most of the secular schools open to girls were private institutions, those who enjoyed their services were predominantly girls from wealthy families; and although in the upper class more girls than boys received a modern education, in the middle class more boys than girls did, and in the lower class only negligible numbers of girls received such an education.\textsuperscript{57} As the state schools increased in number and size, however, so too grew the number of poor girls who received a secular education. A close and detailed look at the state of the secular education of girls, taking into account regional differences, the various types of schools and the different periods, yields a multifaceted picture. The picture differs from the mistaken impression that all girls who studied foreign languages or who were granted a secular education (even a basic secular education) were daughters of maskilim, or of wealthy urbanites, who sent their daughters to study so as to be fashionable or to improve their chances on the matchmaking market. Instead, up until 1873, the elementary state schools in the smaller towns, where the curriculum was basic indeed, served the children of the poor specifically. The schools for language and writing,\textsuperscript{58} which likewise followed a basic curriculum, also served girls from poorer-class families, as tuition there was free.\textsuperscript{59} In the Jewish agricultural villages where there was a state school, Jewish student enrollment was higher than the general population average, and in places female students considerably outnumbered males.\textsuperscript{60} Despite the neglected secular education of lower-class girls, already by the 1860s certain schools were required to accept a minimum quota of poor girls, and orphans stood an even better chance of receiving a secular education than did their poorer sisters.\textsuperscript{61} Moreover, around the 1880s interest grew in the education of girls from lower classes, and efforts to support them during their studies intensified.\textsuperscript{62} During this period, the schools established for low-income girls had Russian language instruction as part of the curriculum, and while there was a widespread opinion that what such girls needed was not a general secular but vocational training, the girls themselves expressed an interest in secular instruction, both for its own sake and as a means of preparing for a profession in midwifery, nursing and so forth.\textsuperscript{63}

It should also be noted that in the 1860s, some Jewish girls did attend Christian schools. In a formal report from 1865 on the private schools for Jewish girls, the report writer draws attention to this fact and cites as an example
the town of Kovno, where thirty Jewish girls studied in a Christian Gymnasia for girls. Mordechai Ben Hillel Hacohen also reports that Jewish girls, including girls from haredi families, often attended private Christian schools for girls. In his book Once he describes the curriculum, which contained no Jewish subjects, and stresses the girls’ desire to continue their education at the Gymnasia. Especially interesting are the final words of the section on this issue, where the narrator with his customary grace relates that these girls were more scholarly and better trained to read literature than were the boys. The latter indeed tried their wits at reading yet they found it difficult to comprehend what they read:

The girls had almost no obligations for Jewish subjects. [...] Instead the parents allowed their daughters, almost without any particular objection, to attend the private schools founded by enlightened Jewish women from Kurlandia as well as by Christian women. The curriculum of these schools was largely geared to the level of matriculation at the Progymnasia, and there were girls who, upon completing the obligatory studies at the private schools, would enroll in a women’s Gymnasia to continue their studies there, with the proviso, of course, that they wouldn’t have to write on the Sabbath. Yet few parents objected to this. On the contrary, many of the parents of upstanding families, even from the extreme haredim, like my uncle Shimon Aharon, admitted to the need that their daughters be knowledgeable in French and music. This is how the girls came to be better educated, better able to understand the books they read, and thus also more advanced intellectually than the boys, whose main occupation was Talmud and who had to steal away, to “catch as catch can” some general facts, in a fragmentary and inadequate manner, and who might read this or that book the contents of which they would barely understand. [My emphasis.] 65

The elementary school education given to girls in the 1860s and 1870s began to show effects in the 1880s. During these years many girls flocked to the Gymnasia schools, and the number of women seeking a higher education also steadily increased. Reports by “The Society for the Dissemination of Haskalah among Jews in the Land of Russia” indicate that there was a great surge in the 1880s in the number of women who appealed to the Society for higher education scholarships to study nursery, midwifery, and school-teaching. The Society, which was hard-pressed to finance these many requests for assistance from its operating budget, decided to set up a special fund to help women acquire a higher education. 67

The number of Jewish girls who attended the Gymnasia schools also steadily grew, and their proficiency in Russian became legendary. In his review of the russification of Russia’s Jews, Yehuda Slutsky discusses the role of women in this process and cites the following report from Voskhod:

[The Gymnasia for girls in Kovno] has graduated in the past fifteen years so many students who have adopted the Russian language as their own, to the point where they aroused the fury of the Poles, who complained that ten Moraviots could not “Russify” Kovno so much as these Jewish girls who fill the air here with their Russian speech. 68
During this period a further circumstance provided girls with an advantage over boys. In 1887, quota legislation was passed limiting the number of Jews who could enroll in high school, yet this law did not apply to girls; so that Jewish girls continued to flock to the Russian and Polish Gymnasia schools en masse.\(^6\) Even during the periods when girls’ enrollment at various state educational institutions was restricted, girls still had a certain access to foreign-language instruction, since quite a few were educated in private pensions or by private tutors.\(^7\)

A similar picture emerges from a 1902 report of “The Society for the Dissemination of Haskalah among Jews in the Land of Russia” on the schools it supervised. The author of this report affirms that up to 1902, the Society had for the most part given assistance to the schools in the large cities, “and especially schools for girls.” Later on, the author adds that owing to the lack of private schools for boys, boys have not been able to learn foreign languages:

Yet apart from the Talmud Torah schools [for boys] the Committee aided schools for girls in a very fair way, on the whole even in the small towns. But someone who looks at the budget may ask: On what basis are the beneficiaries women? Why are there so many private schools for girls listed as compared to the private schools for boys? No doubt, the Talmud Torah schools are not substitutes for the private schools, for middle-class people do not send their sons to the Talmud Torah schools, and in the small towns there are no state schools so where may boys study and speak the state language?\(^8\)

The author, who draws attention to the damage being caused by the lack of private schools for boys, searches for an explanation of this phenomenon and decides that “in our opinion it is because we have female teachers and not male teachers.”\(^9\) And it is true that already by the 1870s there were signs of a substantial swelling in the number of women teachers,\(^10\) whose numbers continued to rise through the rest of the century.\(^11\)

Despite the difference between groups of women in terms of the availability of a secular education—a difference due to variations in socioeconomic status, place of residence, and the types of educational settings locally available—throughout the nineteenth century, two stable trends provided women with an advantage over men. The first trend reflects the fact that while in the haredi community there was sustained resistance throughout the century to granting a secular education to boys, such resistance was rare in the case of girls.\(^12\) Both when haredi opposition to secular schooling was at its most strident and effective, and when this opposition waned, the chances that girls from a haredi family would study foreign languages and receive a secular education were vastly higher than those of boys from similar families. One of the source texts indicative of this extended trend is the chronicle by Yehuda Leib Smolensky, published in *Hashahar* in 1874, titled “Masa Berusiah” (Travels in Russia). In this sketch the author tells of a visit to Bialystok, writing that
A secular school for boys where they can learn the essential studies and languages still does not exist here! [. . .] Of the school which the government established we do not speak, for all the Jewish youth in all the land turned their backs on it from the day it was founded to this day and it therefore never took hold, except that for girls such schools were established and if you visit their homes here and listen to the study it is just as in the enlightened countries; and even for the daughters of the hasidim the strap has been loosened. [My emphasis.]76

The second trend, which has not received sufficient emphasis, is especially important for the central claim being advanced here. So far as systematic study of foreign languages was concerned, girls who received a secular education enjoyed a considerable advantage over the boys enrolled at the various secular schools, an advantage sustained throughout the nineteenth century. This advantage was mainly the result of the curricular differences applied in the schools for boys and for girls, and these did not vary significantly throughout the century.77

The Secular Schools: Gender Differences and the Benefits of Women’s Marginality

In all that concerns Jewish topics, the maskilim continued to follow the pattern of divergent education for boys and for girls that traditional society had employed. Whether they did so for pragmatic reasons or whether it reflected their own perspectives, in practice the traditional patterns of gender distinction were copied over to the secular schools of the various types. Where the curriculum for boys had a substantial proportion of instructional hours devoted to Jewish topics, the curriculum for girls either did not include Jewish topics at all or offered them only to a minimal extent.

In Russia, up until the late 1850s Talmud was taught in most secular schools for boys; Hebrew, grammar, and Bible were taught in them all. More than half the course hours in the secular schools for boys were assigned to Jewish topics, while in the girls’ curricula most study hours were devoted to French, German, and Russian, and except for one or two hours for what was called “God’s Law”—a form of catechism—only secular topics were taught.78

Thus, for example, according to an 1860 report by Y. Tshitron on the schools for girls in Odessa, established twenty-five years earlier, the curricula included classes in God’s law, Russian, German, French, Russian History, Geography, Calligraphy, and Handicrafts.79 A report by N. Liakub on the private school for girls in Simferopol shows a curricula that includes Russian, French, German, Music, Handicrafts and Religion.80 In Vilna and Kovno, the girl’s schools for language and writing, where tuition was low and the curriculum basic, all religious subjects were stripped from the list of courses.81
These differences between the curricula of boys and of girls in all that concerns Jewish subjects were not unique to the first half of the nineteenth century, the period when opposition to secular education was fierce and effective. Even in the 1860s, the 1880s, and at the end of the century, an inverse relation held between the many instructional hours devoted to Jewish topics in the boys’ curricula and the few hours allotted these subjects in the girls’ curricula.

Similarly, in many schools the curricula for girls emphasized foreign-language instruction from the outset; from the 1860s and 1880s this emphasis was the outcome of, among other things, demand by the girls themselves.

The point here is not to reassert the claim, so often repeated in the scholarship, about the neglected Jewish education of girls. What matters is that the patterns of social behavior that required women to be excluded from Torah study created advantages not only for the girls in the closely religious households who had private tutors for language and literature, but also for the girls who attended the secular schools. These girls did not have to study Jewish subjects, so their curriculum left them many more hours for systematic and effective study of foreign languages.

Thus, for example, in a March 1864 report on the schools in Minsk sent to “The Society for the Dissemination of Haskalah among Jews in the Land of Russia,” R. Minor compares the achievements of the schools for girls to those of the schools for boys. According to this report, in the schools for boys Jewish studies were taught—Bible, grammar, Maimonides, and “Hayei Adam”—but at a low instructional level. Few students had properly mastered Russian; the rest have some proficiency yet “have little knowledge of the grammar of any of the languages.” Minor concludes his report on the schools for boys with the assessment that “in the present circumstances their benefit is not worth the cost.” By contrast, Minor takes care to note that matters were different in the school for girls he visited. There, the girls in the higher grades are solidly proficient in Russian, the result of the numerous instructional hours devoted to study of the language:

[The girls] study the reigning language five times a week in each grade, and consequently the girls’ comprehension of the Russian language is quite good, and this is a great advantage which the girls have over the boys at the school for the first rank, for the girls in the final grade understand Russian and its grammar very well [. . .] yet as to the Law of Faith they know nothing, for in addition to the fact that scant time is devoted to such subjects, the teachers teaching them also do not entirely understand them [. . .].

Minor concludes his assessment of the school for girls with the note: “in general this school will bring a not inconsiderable benefit to our community here.”

Rabbi Minor’s remarks here are not atypical. Other reports also confirm that women had not only technical abilities to read and understand Russian and its grammar, but especially well-developed reading comprehension and
writing abilities. A formal report by School Supervisor Postel on the twenty-six schools for girls established in Russia in 1859 states that in most schools, girls in the final grade can read Russian freely and accurately and can summarize the content of the texts they read orally and in writing. They are able to derive words etymologically and logically and can use good orthography to write out their answers. Likewise, the girls are able to recite poetry with much expression and sentiment. The Secular Education of Women

In Postel's report, the girls’ Russian language proficiency is assessed by a range of measures that give us information not only about the subjects, methods, and texts used for Russian instruction in schools such as these, but also about the social context of such schooling. As I have noted, these factors are of primary significance for understanding what kind of literacy these girls were given and what purposes it was meant to serve. One can, for instance, definitively assert that the objective of this instruction was not limited to providing pupils with mere mechanical reading ability, passive reading comprehension ability, or speech and writing facilities adequate for daily commerce alone; but that it aspired, rather, to put in place a solid cultural infrastructure and to create literacy skills that would enable creative employment of the language in its high and correct form. The reports by Postel and Rabbi Minor reveal that Russian instruction in the girls’ schools was carried out specifically by instruction in grammar through rote memorization of canonical Russian poetry. The stipulation that Russia’s poetic masterpieces be studied by heart, during a crucial formative period in the girls’ development, indicates that the aim was to indelibly stamp Russian literature upon their young minds as a cultural asset with which they could intimately identify. The requirement that the poetry be declaimed “with expression and sentiment” and that the literary content be summarized orally and in writing, indicates that the objective was to engage the girls’ emotional capacities, to sharpen their faculties of reciting and discussion of texts, to enhance their reading comprehension and nurture their expressive abilities. But more than any of these, using canonical Russian poetry as the grammatical standard attests to a desire to provide pupils with an understanding of the language in its pure and high form—as distinct from the language as it was spoken. One may infer that the aim was to have the girls be enriched by the linguistic and cultural capital that had been the heritage of the Russian intelligentsia. Girls were indeed required, in the context of their formal secular education, to write compositions on authors and works of high literature. Mordechai Ben Hillel Hacohen tells in his memoirs of one Gymnasium student whose father used to marvel at her compositions in Russian “On Pushkin’s poetry” or “On the Heroes in the works of Lermontov.” This exposure of the girls to Russian language and its literature in an educational framework free of Jewish studies could scarcely have failed to cause the girls to single out Russian culture as their own.
Jewish girls who studied in the Christian Gymnasia schools underwent similar or perhaps more intense experiences. An indirect indication of what kind of experience this was for these girls may be gained from the memoirs of Ksennia, a young Christian woman who joined the revolutionary movement in Czarist Russia and later in life bound her fate to that of the Jewish people and joined Kibbutz Naan. Ksennia tells of how she was accepted to the Gymnasia after taking strict entrance examinations, which the Jewish girls also had to pass; later she tells more about her classes and her encounter with the Jewish girls:

In a number of courses they have put us together with a “parallel class”—made up almost entirely of Jewish girls—while in our class there was not a single one. Indeed, on the whole the composition was very mixed: Russians, Armenians, Karaites, Jews, Tatars. I liked three of the girls: Marusia Zilber, Mania Berman, Masha Kleiman. From Fifth grade on we are joined by the parallel fifth grade class. Finally there are no obstacles to fraternizing with Mania, Masha and Marusia! We—the youngest in the class—are a tight set, we study together, read […] and already dream of future “work”; we are all in a storm over the question of the lack of rights for Jews, the condition of women; we have conversations on Christianity and Judaism, on the “terrors” of life.

Ksennia further relates in her memoirs that the methods of dry rote learning applied in the Russian Gymnasia made her and her friends irate and despondent:

Everything we repeat by rote, by rote every thing, starting with geography and ending with mathematics and pedagogy; it’s so strange, that they force us to learn math by rote.

Sometimes Marusia cries and I tell her: “Believe me, it needs to be done even harder, maybe drier.”

Yet Ksennia describes as a pleasurable experience nothing less than her “classical studies,” conducted by translating the Odyssey into Russian: “We’re translating the Odyssey—this is the best subject of all.”

According to Ksennia, in her eighth and final year at the Gymnasia only eight of the twenty-four students were Russians. The other girls were Jews, Karaites, Tatars, and Germans. In this year, she relates, the rote learning came to an end, and the students themselves were allowed to select the subjects in which they wanted to specialize. Ksennia chose Russian language, geography and history, adding:

In this year we—Mania Berman, Marusia Zilber, Masha Kleiman and I—are reading a great deal; how many riddles there are awaiting a solution!

The most important books for me that year were: Buckle’s History of Civilization, Spencer’s Sociology, and Darwin’s Origin of Species.

One may assume that these texts and the other books that affected Ksennia in her youth had a similar influence on the Jewish girls. One may further
assume that by the time they graduated from the Russian Gymnasia, with the
strict instructional methods applied there, the Jewish girls’ proficiency in Rus-
sian was not a whit inferior to Ksennia’s.

Women—“Educated and Ignorant”

Both the scholarship and the various source documents from the nineteenth
century in which the state of women’s education is addressed may be said to
show signs of a “mixed trend.” On the one hand, anyone seeking to demon-
strate that Jewish women in the nineteenth century were sunk in ignorance can
find sources on which to base his claim. On the other hand, just as many other
sources will confirm the assertion that in the nineteenth century a “window of
opportunity” opened for women, and that groups of women existed who en-
joyed clear advantages over men in all that concerns foreign-language training
and acquiring a secular education. These claims, which seem to contradict
each other, are in fact two faces of a single reality, one in which a large group
of women who could not read or write lived side by side with an ever-
expanding group of women who received a basic or advanced secular educa-
and were fluent in the European languages.

The two faces of this reality are described in an 1880 editorial published in
the Russian-language Jewish newspaper *Russkii evrei*. This editorial, which is
not free of maskilic bias, summarizes the main trends that were emerging in
women’s education and ventures an explanation of their causes. According to
the editorial, traditional society considered it dangerous to grant women an
education, and it therefore excluded them from Torah study and relegated
them to the kitchen and to light trade, while men were preoccupied with
Torah study and sometimes idleness for its own sake. These women nourished
their spirits, according to the author, on a shoddy jargonized literature that
was intellectually and morally substandard. As a result, the women grew crass,
ignorant, mentally shallow and sunk in their gossip over trivial affairs. They
became a hub for dark fanaticisms, and required “speakers” and at times even a
man to help them recite their prayers in the women’s section. In their favor, it
may be said that they engaged in charitable projects, yet even such philan-
thropic activity was neither institutionalized nor organized.

And yet, the author goes on to say, bit by bit the isolationist walls of Jewish
society began to crumble. Whether for reasons of imitation or otherwise,
upper-class Jews began to educate their daughters to be salon-women; these
girls began to wear dresses in the latest fashions and studied French, German,
and piano playing, while the boys in these families continued to be taught by
various religious instructors, without rational approach or method. The
writer stresses that for an extended period women alone received a European
education, as such an education was considered dangerous for the men, and that in many families these two educational methods dwelled peacefully side by side. In a later stage, the girls from the upper-class families were joined by those from the middle class. Many studied in schools, at the Gymnasia, and even at higher education programs for women (these functioned as a substitute for and parallel to the universities, which would remain closed to them until 1917). Nevertheless, the writer points out, nothing had been done for the women of the poorer class: most of these were left unschooled and this was causing great moral and intellectual injury both to them and to the society as a whole—for which reason the author concludes his editorial with an urgent call to establish educational institutions for low-income girls.

The statistical data comparing the literacy rates of women to those of men at the end of the nineteenth century is similarly mixed. On the one hand, the number of boys enrolled at the secular schools of the various types was substantially larger than the number of girls at such schools, and literacy rates in Russian for Jewish males were much higher than those for females. Thus, for example, the 1897 census shows that 42.9 percent of Jewish males over age ten could read Russian, while only 22.5 percent of Jewish females in this age group could. A similar picture emerges from the data in a survey of 664 of the 820 Jewish schools in the Russian empire in 1899. Of the 50,773 students enrolled, 16,546 were girls and 34,227 boys. Some 60 percent of the girls were enrolled in private schools, whereas most of the boys attended schools maintained by various public organizations.

A similar gap in literacy rates for men and women appears in statistician Yaakov Leshchinsky’s earliest survey, data for which were collected in 1898 and first published in 1903, in an article titled “The Statistics of One Small Town.” Leshchinsky’s data suggest that female illiteracy rates in the town studied were quite high, and that nearly half the women—47 percent to 49 percent—were completely illiterate, as compared to a 19 percent illiteracy rate among the men.

Leshchinsky’s findings, however, also confirm the claim that those women who did receive a secular education enjoyed a clear qualitative advantage in everything having to do with foreign-language proficiency. Data comparison of the educational levels of the literate men and literate women reveals that among the men who were able to read (i.e., 81 percent of all males) only 19 percent had private tutors or a private school education and foreign-language instruction. The remainder, that is, 81 percent of the literate males, studied at the heder and Talmud Torah schools; of these, 90 percent could not understand the Hebrew of the prayerbook—though they could read it—and had no foreign language proficiency. Conversely, those girls who attended schools or unofficial heders—between 51 percent and 53 percent of all literate girls, an
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impressive amount by itself—all knew how to read and write in three languages: Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian.104

The importance to us of Leshchinsky’s survey—however local, limited in scope, and unsophisticated it may be—is that it allows us to draw conclusions about the quality of the literacy and not merely its extent. Leshchinsky’s findings let us sort the data by language of literacy, and his statistics on the different instructional settings teach us about the internal variations associated with gender, type of literacy, and literacy levels. This is not true of the government statistics from the censuses taken at the turn of the century. Literacy, for the 1897 Russian census, was quite broadly defined: anyone declaring himself able to read105 was counted as literate.106 Similarly, United States immigration data from 1914 on literacy rates for Jewish immigrants do not use measures that are fine enough to allow an assessment of women’s literacy.107

The quantitative measure of literacy rates is inadequate and even potentially misleading. Not only is the criterion of name-signing ability irrelevant as a measure of literacy in this context, but so is the stricter criterion of some reasonable reading and writing facility. Two episodes from the autobiography of Ahad Ha’am, one describing how he learned foreign languages and another how his younger sisters did so, illustrate this point.

In a passage marked by a strong anti-hasidic sentiment, Ahad Ha’am relates how as a child he was not allowed to study Laaz or even to look at a letterform in a foreign language. He consequently resolved to teach himself Russian and German, yet even by the age of twenty he did not consider himself competent to read serious literature in these languages:

My parents did not see any need to teach me anything except for Talmud and Poshim [Verdicts of Jewish Law]. The Russian alphabet I learned when I was eight years old, by the shop signs in my native town [. . . ] In one of the heders a few boys studied with me whose fathers were also Hasidim, but from the “simple class,” Hasidim of the masses; and they accordingly saw fit to have their sons be taught in the heder also how to write Russian, so as to be able to sign their names when needed for their businesses. [. . . ] But I, who was from a prestigious family line, was forbidden not only to learn to write Russian but even to look at the letterforms. For with their own ears my father and mother had heard from one of the great tzaddikim, that the form of an alien letter contaminates the eyes. Yet the shop signs did not give me peace and with all my heart I desired to know how these letters combine and what are the names that emerge from them. So I tempted my mates and they taught me this wonderful alphabet [. . . ] and immediately I began [. . . ] to read and notice every sign I encountered on my way from the heder to my father’s house. [. . . ] In this manner, or somewhat like it, I learned later on to read basic terms from the two languages mentioned [Russian and German] which sufficed me only for light reading albeit for proper comprehension this was inadequate, and so I was forced to begin this study, when I was twenty.108

Applying a diametrically opposed approach to the education of girls, Ahad Ha’am’s father took in a tutor to teach his younger sisters Russian and secular
subjects. The tutor hired for the purpose was none other than Reuven Asher Braudes, the radical maskil and author of *Hadat Vehahayim* [Religion and Life], in person:

I had two sisters who were younger than me, for whom my father, as was the custom among hasidim, saw necessary to provide something of a secular education. To this end he once brought a tutor [. . .] a Lithuanian, whom I did not then know by his nom de plume. Later on I discovered that he was the revolutionary author—"The Reformer"—Reuven Asher Braudes (author of *Hadat Vehahayim*, which raised quite a storm in its day). [. . .] Yet, for some reason, I no longer remember what, Braudes left us [. . .] and my father brought in another tutor [. . .] This person remained in my parents' household a long while and taught my sisters Russian and Hebrew and other topics as well.¹⁰⁹

No doubt any statistical census would have included both Ahad Ha’am and his sisters in the category of those who knew Russian, and rightly so; yet it is unlikely that any data of this kind could have been so discriminating as to differentiate between the types and levels of literacy Ahad Ha’am and his sisters had when they were young. What Ahad Ha’am’s autobiographical report suggests is that so far as preparedness to read literature was concerned, there was a vast difference between the boys who learned foreign languages at a relatively advanced age, by themselves and with the aid of dictionaries, and the girls who had received systematic training in these languages and already while quite young were reading the finest literature of the period.¹¹⁰

Anyone hoping to trace the influence the reading women had on the transformation of Jewish society may learn from this episode, and from the similar ones discussed below, that the comparison between men and women on this point is not to be reduced to a quantitative comparison of how many men and how many women were enrolled in secular schools. Qualitative aspects must also be taken into account, and the analysis must take stock of the difference in the type of literacy gained by the girls in haredi families who received a secular instruction and the literacy of their brothers who were attending traditional schools. As I have pointed out, the available statistics are not fine enough to permit making the necessary qualitative comparisons, yet autobiographical accounts like Ahad Ha’am’s help fill out the picture. The statistical data do reveal that even if toward the end of the nineteenth century there were, in absolute numbers, fewer women than men who knew European languages, this number was neither negligible nor insignificant. Nor do the numbers alone indicate how influential the reading women were, as the marginal place in society that these women occupied created special opportunities and pathways for their influence. It is the combination of these factors that holds the key to understanding the unique role played by women as agents of change in Jewish society.
5

The Reading-Biography of Men

Great indeed is the might of the taste of first reading, when a man reads to find his place in the world, when a youth raises his eyes to a book there to seek aid.¹
—Y. H. BRENNER

And after he had spoken with me . . . his words were as oil to my bones, they lit mine eyes and I almost became another man.²
—ABRAHAM BAER GOTTLLOBER

The reading public for secular literature in Jewish society in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe was a diverse population, which divided into three main groups: readers of Hebrew, readers of Yiddish, and readers of European languages. These groups were distinguishable from each other not only by the language and character of the works they each read but also by their gender, education, and socioeconomic status.³ The different languages used by these groups of readers was mainly the outcome of educational differences based on gender, and it was one expression of the gender hierarchy in Jewish society. Nearly all Hebrew readers were men who had had a yeshiva education.⁴ The superior status of the spiritual world, the prestige of the education these readers received, and the high regard the maskilim had for the Hebrew language combined to establish the elitist status of the Hebrew readers. By contrast, the group of Yiddish readers and the group of European-language readers both contained a high proportion of women and were associated with varying degrees of prestige. Yiddish readers, partly women and partly unschooled men, were at the lower end of the scale. The status of women as inferiors and the limited education of the men who joined them combined to reinforce the already poor standing this audience of readers had. European-language readers, by contrast, had a more varied reputation. On the one hand this group drew a definite prestige from the fact that the women and men within it had enjoyed a secular education, were solidly proficient in the “living” cultural languages, and had been exposed to the finest European literature. On the other hand, their education was often viewed as phony and superficial.⁵

Naturally, these groups overlapped to a certain degree. Male readers of Hebrew works were joined by a tiny minority of women who also read such
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literature; and the group of Yiddish readers also included Hebrew-reading men who were not complete “ignoramuses.” The same was true of many of the Laaz-readers, both men and women, who occasionally read a “second-rate” Yiddish text. Yet despite the partial overlap, each of these reading audiences had clearly distinguishable traits.

The particular features marking each group of readers are quite noticeable in the reading-biographies, scattered evenly among the autobiographies and memoirs of the period. A glance at how individuals characterize their experiences of reading, as documented in this literature, reveals that the reading-biographies of men were entirely different than those of women. It is a difference that takes many forms, including the sequences of books read, the contexts and circumstances in which reading took place, the purposes of the reading, and the effects it had. The divergence between men and women in these realms is evident not only where the reading populations were distinguished by gender and where one had clear dominance—as between Hebrew and Yiddish—but also in the mixed group among European-language readers. Nevertheless, or perhaps for that very reason, each class of readers influenced the processes of secularization and modernization of Jewish society in a different way. In order to delineate profiles for the reading women and to suggest what kinds of influence they had, a prior examination of the reading patterns of the men is in order. This chapter therefore attempts to broadly sketch out the typical reading-biographies of men, who were the chief audience for literature written in Hebrew. These reading-biographies will then provide a basis against which the reading-biographies of women may be compared. The discussion of the reading-biographies of men is drawn from a representative sampling of notes of typical yeshiva students and scholars undergoing enlightenment, as documented in the autobiographies and memoirs of writers, leading intellectuals, and ordinary people. Since the purpose of this enquiry is not to elucidate the effect reading had on these writers’ intellectual development or philosophy, the reading-biographies for their entire lives is not encompassed in it. Instead, this chapter analyzes reading attributes and processes only for the period the writers themselves characterize as having been formative in their lives, that is, in their youth, the stage when reading was central to their process of enlightenment. A comprehensive analysis of men’s reading-biographies could be the basis of an entirely separate book.

Reading as a Rite of Passage

One of the goals of maskilic autobiography was to describe the bildung—the process that formed the writer as an enlightened maskil—and to “faithfully retrace the stages of his intellectual development.” It is no surprise, then, that
The autobiographers document their readings in such impressive detail. And yet, despite the writers’ declared intention of documenting an experience that was individual and personal, comparison of the reading-biographies of many and diverse writers reveals a substantial degree of similarity between them. In the majority of the autobiographies, maturation is described as a spiritual and intellectual process closely bound up with reading. This process takes place side by side with the institutionalized, traditional maturation events and rites of passage, such as preparation for the bar mitzvah and the ceremony itself (which writers tend not to dwell on) and the events of the engagement and marriage (which usually are given marked emphasis). Furthermore, most of the autobiographies point out the considerable tension between these public and private processes, which pulled in opposite directions.

Unlike the religious rites that were conducted at the father’s will and instigation and that, in short order, inducted the boy into the society of adult males, the maturation connected with the reading process lasted a long while and nearly always brought the boy into conflict with the authority of the father, the grandfather, and the rabbi. In nearly all the autobiographies this process is described as occurring under the auspices of a “tutor”—a maskil considered a heretic, someone the society avoided having ties with, or at least would keep its sons from coming into contact with. Often this tutor was an adult relative; sometimes he was a familiar household guest, occasionally a friend or a Talmud teacher who had grown enlightened, or perhaps he was a doctor or an itinerant bookseller. In all cases the person concerned was a character of dubious presence within society—that is, one who lived with one foot in the traditional world and one in the alien and threatening world of the Haskalah. His nebulous social position and liminal identity were what allowed him to play the role of go-between, of guide and a man of vision. Fluent as he was in the discourse and perspectives of the two antagonistic worlds, he knew how to speak to the boy’s heart in his own language, and it was this ability that enabled the tutor to secretly provide the boy with forbidden books, to encourage him to think critically, and to spread open before him the gates of intellect and science.

The account of the doctor who served as tutor for Mordechai Aharon Ginzburg illustrates, by its extremity, the liminal quality of the figure of the tutor:

For all the good deeds he performed among his brethren he was notorious as an evil and dangerous man in the eyes of all the religious zealots, he was an abhorrence for the Jews as a man who had no God, and even for the Christian zealots he was a defilement; the elders who knew him, tell that being born of Jewish seed he converted to Christianity after being excommunicated by the rabbis of his era and some said he was a shaman and astrologist who indulged in Satanism for profit; and the town maskilim said of him that he holds the stone of wisdom in his hands which turns the lesser metals into gold, and the high tower seven stories tall one atop the other which he built by his
home, was according to the opinion of the former a residence for ghosts and spirits, and according to the latter a crucible for gold—and what shall I tell what shall I speak more of the nonsense which the masses poured forth on this sage! He was really a philosopher and a master of much knowledge, his wealth derived from the science of medicine which enriches its possessors, and the tower he built was for stargazing as he investigated both the secrets of alchemy and the science of metaphysics and was fluent in the Holy Tongue and studied also the works of the Kabbalah, and was thus as a gold-maker, and had a bad name in their eyes—and I shall not be remiss if I speculate that he belonged to the sect of Shabbetai Zvi which had been forced to convert to Christianity—for the Zohar was well beloved [. . . ] by that man [. . . ] His memory is very dear to me, in truth I am not grateful to him for having lightened my naturally heavy steps [. . . ] but rather for the conversations on science and morals which he often used to hold with me when he found my heart open to him [. . . ] And he encouraged me to abandon my research into ethereal subjects irrelevant to me—and to study matters which engage the mind; he was a guide to me, a soul healer, from the first day I went to his home until the day he died the other year, and I was drawn after him and glad to hear Torah from his mouth ever with ardent desire.12

The process of reading as maturation thus faces outward, isolating the boy from traditional society’s adolescent males, and leading toward a community of male maskilim engaged in combat with it. In this sequence, the encounter with the agent-tutor is a turning point, as it marks the commencement of the spiritual journey to beyond the horizons of traditional society.

The narrative format through which the story of the reading process is constructed is reminiscent of initiation practices in religious cults, as indoctrination by esoteric knowledge was involved. The process is reminiscent also of the metamorphosis that takes place while in the throes of religious conversions or repentances. First, the agent-tutor, with missionary zeal, carefully selects his pupil and exposes him gradually to knowledge that is new and disturbing; next, the pupil begins to read the books supplied by his tutor on his own and in secret, undergoing a period of shocks, skepticisms, and torments; finally, the pupil is caught in the spell of the new knowledge, achieves a sort of “revelation” or “illumination,” in consequence of which a transformation is effected in his perspectives and modes of life.13

This plot outline, with each of its characteristic phases, serves to construe the reading-story and reading impressions found in YaHLeL’s autobiography Zikaron Besefet. In a pithy and concise passage, YaHLeL describes the encounter with the agent-tutor, his liminality, the reading process and the changes these all wrought:

And here there came to me Israel Meyer Wolman, who was collecting material for the publication of his “The Stars” [. . . ] and asked me to contribute some of my poems [. . . ] which he would publish in his literary periodical. I cannot describe my trepidations and anxieties [. . . ] I am the student versed in the Six Tractates of the Mishnah, the sashed and gabardined hasidic scholar wearing phylacteries in the mode of Rabbenu Tam, shall I associate with aliens, with “maskilim,” “heretics”! Yet Wolman tempted me by the smoothness of his speech and said, that there was a certain sage who very much wanted
me to visit him [. . .] and when I asked the name of this sage and he replied it was David Luria, I stopped short, for David Luria [. . .] was known to be the “town heretic,” and his name was abhorred and reviled. [. . .] In his house people sat bareheaded, in his house people drank “Sabbath tea,” and it is said that in his house people drank on the fast of the 17th of Tammuz. And such a man is summoning me to visit him—me, the hasid, devout and God-fearing [. . .] And that night Wolman led me on a path and brought me to Luria’s house. [. . .] He sung my praises, and while he was speaking a man entered, tall, stocky, and with full beard; he was Shmuel Nachman [. . .] rumored to be one of the “drifters” and “freethinkers,” though in dress he was as orthodox as all the instructors. [. . .] He spoke to me about the Talmud and his method and tried to make me understand that the authors of the Talmud, for all their wisdom and intelligence, were not at all infused with Divine Revelation and they too were capable of error, as is attested by the common talmudic word “beduta” [fabrication] [. . .] He also spoke of the convoluted writings and peculiar commentaries grounded in ignorance of the language in the Bible. To all his words I jeered, once I observed this person before me was a “heretic.” [. . .] But upon returning home [. . .] I took up the Talmud tractate I had been studying, and found that without meaning to I now stumbled after almost every step [. . .] I felt that the words of the heretic had taken root within me [. . .] and much as I goaded my heart to keep out all the alien thoughts, thus more and more was I frightened by evil suspicions. [. . .] Yet Shmuel Nachman and Luria found me some books to read and these illumined my eyes. I read—and the peace of my soul slipped away from me more and more [. . .] And only after reading many books and great turmoil from the inner struggles did things become clear to me, and my thought coalesced into that of the “maskilim” of those days [. . .] And then I came to hate the Talmud, it all seemed like the rock of Sisyphus meant to wear out flesh and soul for naught [. . .] At any rate, in my twenty-first year, when I had become “free” in ideas and beliefs, I was full of bitterness and knew no peace of soul, believing myself an utter failure. And like all the maskilim I blamed the Talmud which, as I thought then, was alone the bane of my existence.14

It must be confessed that this version of the reading-story and reading-impressions is immeasurably more structured, compressed, and sequential than those appearing in most maskilic autobiographies. In most cases, accounts of individual readings appear scattered among various other life episodes, and the basic organizing structure that gives them the unity and continuity of a story is not immediately apparent. Yet if one isolates the accounts of reading from their immediate narrative contexts, nearly all the autobiographies contain a reading-story made up of all the elements condensed in YahLeL’s succinct account.

Less structured than YahLeL’s story, but very much like it in content, is Hayim Tchernowitz’s autobiographical account of his encounter with books and the Haskalah. Here, too, the portrait sketched of the agent-tutor is of a man on the borderline between traditional society and the maskilic world, and here again the tutor’s operating methods and influence on the narrator are described:

This Avraham Hirshl was a heretic with a taste for it who thought it a good deed to knock a scholarly boy off the straight path. He liked especially to chase after the good boys from the beit midrash to teach them the “heretic’s Torah” with scholarly asperity
as if it were a Commandment. I too fell in his net and he took me under the wings of his apostasy and illumined my eyes with several chapters of the Theory of Evolution. [...] In practice he was observant and kept the Commandments like the rest of the religious Jews; yet in opinions, he was free. [...] My grandfather [...] did not put him out with both hands because he “kept a face to the Torah,” still, he warned me away from him. But he would chase after me and draw me aside and commune with me in private, for as the saying goes, “stolen waters are sweet,” until my ear became like a funnel for each and every one of his words. 

The extensive space allotted to the experience of the encounter with the tutor in the literary works of the period attests to the frequency and the importance this event had in the life of the enlightening yeshiva student. In Braudes’s novel Hadat Vehahayim, for example, in which the hero, Shmuel, is apparently modeled on Lilienblum, the encounter with the tutor is at center stage. Shmuel meets his tutor Shraga at a decisive moment in his life, and Shraga serves as a sort of “spiritual father” who gives him books to read and introduces him to, among other things, the secrets of maskilic literature. Braudes elects to emphasize that Shraga approaches Shmuel with the calculated caution of a missionary or religious repentant-advocate. He first offers his Hebrew books in a non-committal fashion—“if you’d like, I’ll leave these with you so you can read them when you have a chance”—and only then gives the pupil some carefully selected books, designed to “open his eyes” without arousing fears or resistance:

The first two books Shraga gave Shmuel were Alfei Menashe by the Gaon Rabbi Menashe of Elia and Teudah Beisrael by the sage Rabbi Isaac Baer Levinsohn. Shraga was very shrewd in selecting these to be the first to open the eyes of this youth, who was considered a “prodigy.” Both are written in a clear language which made it easier for him to comprehend; neither allowed anything to cross its lips which might suggest apostasy to Shmuel and might distract him from reading the texts; both quote extensively from the Talmud to support their statements [...] and each of these two books have a power to arouse in the heart of those who study them, a will and desire to know; they give him his first concept of life and of wisdom.

As said, except for isolated cases, maskilic literature was read in secret. Contact with the agent-tutor had a secretive and subversive quality and the fact of reading was cause for conflict with the father, the grandfather or the yeshiva rabbis. Those yeshiva students and enlightening scholars who did read the forbidden literature out of a sense of mission or revolutionary zeal encountered a severe and hostile apparatus of oversight, which only increased their rebelliousness. One of many descriptions of the taste of forbidden reading appears in the memoirs of Shlomo Zaltzman, who depicts the period of his studies in the Mir Yeshiva as follows:

In the Mir Yeshiva too there were already then freethinking boys, “innovators,” who sought [...] to introduce a modernizing spirit to within the shaky walls of the beit
midrash. Smolenskin and Gordon had an enormous influence on many such "innovators," who could justly be called these authors' students. The books would pass from hand to hand, but in utmost secrecy, so that the evil eye of the supervisor should not God forbid be cast upon them. This was "illegal" literature. And the yeshiva administrators, especially the zealous supervisors, started to pay frequent visits to the boys' rooms [. . .] They were looking especially for extraneous books (sfarim hitzoniyim), they conducted day searches and night searches. Such a search by the "black police" of the supervisors [. . .] reached our room too one night, and needless to say, they found there a huge store of forbidden and "illegal" literature, but when they noticed that my friend was of a wealthy family and not dependent on the graces of the yeshiva, the administrators contented themselves with merely confiscating the books.24

Yet the sense of mission and rebellion that Zaltzman notes, or what Tchernowitz describes with the phrase "stolen waters are sweet," was not the first emotion to be aroused.25 Almost always there was a preceding phase of shock and distressing doubts, the effect of an endless shuttling between contrary positions. A moving account of the emotional and intellectual torture characterizing this period is set forth by Lilienblum in his *Hat'ot Neurim*:

I didn't know how to draw conclusions on my own, I could not think of being original in the manner of the famous Jewish sages, whom I deemed important. In no way did I wish to be a "heretic" and whenever a doubt was raised in my heart as to the truth of some matter mentioned in the Talmud, I sought some authority from the great ones of Israel to rely upon; and since I could not find such an authority I forced my brain to believe. [. . .] All the organs of my brain were endlessly acting to resolve the questions, which weighed on their bearer; yet before I ever gave myself a final verdict on some matter—I went through endless changes of heart.26

Lilienblum goes on to say that when his doubts became too strong he tried to dive ever deeper in the "depths of argumentation" and into standard rabbinic texts, so as to recover and reaffirm his faith: "I already had the books Noda Biyehudah, Tshuvot Rabbi Akiva Iger Vehidushav, some bits of the Hatam Sofer, the Amudei Or and such like, into which I delved so as to root from my heart the trace of doubt, which gnawed at my flesh."27

It was not just intellectuals and writers of the top rank such as Lilienblum and Ahad Ha'am who describe a period of reading full of misgivings and doubts.28 Similar feelings are expressed also by the ordinary authors of memoirs who recount the processes of their intellectual development.29 Thus, for instance, Eliyahu Eliezer Friedman writes in his memoirs:

I sought to find spiritual or mental satisfaction. Then I began to study the Works of Enquiry—the philosophy of the scholars of the Middle Ages. I studied the Kuzari, the Akedah, the Ikarim, Moreh Nevuchim, Sefer Hanadada, Or Hashem, Ner Hashem, and others. But I did not find in them that which my soul sought. [. . .] I felt myself evil, the pain of my soul grew still greater for I felt that my innocence had been stained. The questions and doubts of the inquirers found a place in my heart but the answers and solutions were feeble. I felt, that a chasm had been cut under the foundation of faith in
my heart, the innocent, solid faith, that the hand of man had not touched [. . .] I was miserable. [. . .] The thoughts, questions and doubts churned, churned in my heart.30

The phase of doubts and afflictions such as the one Friedman describes does not skip over Shmuel, Braudes’s hero in Hadat Vehahayim. Stunned and dismayed in the face of what seems to him the collapse of his spiritual world, he bitterly charges his tutor Shraga:

You said you would open my eyes, would illuminate the darkness of the path in which I walk [. . .] but what have you given me?—A dismal enough world, a world into which I arrived with no purpose, and from which I shall depart forever suspended in a multitude of unresolved questions; all my days of study and the facts I know are a fraud, my force has been spent on chaos and nothingness . . . Hey, friend and master! Do you know what you stole from me?—My whole world . . . 31

Yet after further debate and discussion between Shmuel and his tutor, Shmuel changes his tune. He begins to learn German and Russian from his tutor, goes on to passionately read books and earns the “illumination” which transforms him. Shmuel “did not cease to read also the Jewish sages whenever he could, and thus bit by bit Shmuel shifted from the tent of Torah—Talmud and Poskim—and became another man.”32 This account by Braudes, simplistic as it may be, is reminiscent of Gottlober, who uses the very same terms to describe the change that transpired in him when he began to learn from his tutor the grammar of the Hebrew language:

And so it was after Weizner had spoken to me with counsels and patience, and had made me comprehend all I needed for understanding and being adept in the ways of reasoning, then his words were as oil to my bones, they lit mine eyes and I almost became another man. 33

Gottlober undergoes something similar when he encounters the maskilic author Yosef Perl in person. He again uses these same words to describe his emotions, recovering the sense of revelation and transformation he had experienced in his youth:

Upon leaving the meeting with that exalted person I became a different man, a new spirit entered me and grasped me by the locks of my head and raised me aloft—as once in my childhood I was borne upon wings of imagination when for the first time I discovered the book Tsohar Hateivah and was informed that there existed in this world the subject of grammar.34

In a fundamentally similar manner, though using much less lofty language, Buki Ben Yogli too describes the process he underwent beginning with the encounter with his tutor, continuing through the first reading of maskilic works, and culminating in the experience of revelation and change. This time, the
tutor is R. Yehuda Ben R. Yehiel, the synagogue beadle, a man “gossiped
about, for his vast treasury of books included also extraneous books.” The bea-
dle takes a special interest in him for his “assiduity” and offers him the Kochva
Deshavit by Rabbi Hayim Zelig Slonimsky to read in his library. This is how
Buki Ben Yogli describes the sequence of events from that moment on:

When I came to his house the next day, he brought me to his collection of books. Two
wide chambers with their walls covered entirely in attractive wooden cabinets full of
books stretching from floor to ceiling [. . .] Reb Yehuda showed me one other open
cabinet and told me in front of his servant: Here you will find the book you are seek-
ing. You may come to this room any hour you have free from your studies and may
read here to your heart’s content. [. . .] With great effort I found the book Kochva Des-
shavit and right next to it, much to my amazement, Teudah Beisrael by Isaac Baer Levin-
sohn. I had heard of this author. It was said of him that he, cursed be his name, was the
leading heretic of his day, that his books preached conversion to the children of Israel,
heaven forbid, and that in many towns this book was publicly burned in a chamber in
the synagogue . . . I wonder, how can a man so religious and God-fearing as Reb
Yehuda keep in his home a book written by a heretic. [. . .] No, no, this book I shall not
read, why should I endanger my mind? But I shall attempt to read the preface, to know
what the book’s aims are. [. . .] I read and was amazed. [. . .] My desire to read the book
grew in my heart from moment to moment, yet I managed to overcome it. [. . .] I re-
turned Teudah Beisrael to its place and began to read Kochva Deshavit. But oh, this little
book cast a great and terrible storm in my heart. This little book laid waste my world to
its foundations, my spiritual and material world combined . . .

You young readers [. . .] it’s all the same to you if the sun revolves around the earth
or the earth around the sun,—you can’t imagine my state of mind, after reading the lit-
tle book by Slonimsky. I was distraught and in shock for days on end. [. . .] And it was
not only sadness and despair that held me down, for a violent struggle had been incited
in my heart.35

After the crisis of thoughts, which the book Kochva Deshavit had wrought in my
heart, Teudah Beisrael did not arouse any storm; on the contrary, the more I read it, the
more it calmed me, and so the storm of my soul abated. I discovered that my love for
the holy writings, which I had always read in hiding, will not be considered a sin; that
knowledge and wisdom are both gifts of God, and as the one wife does not abraid the
other, so no one in Israel ought to abstain from the extraneous wisdoms either. And as
in this matter the sages of the other nations are more advanced than the sages of Israel,
one must also not abstain from the study of foreign languages. [. . .] And so the book
Teudah Beisrael was as a balm for the wounds of my heart, and I therefore also appre-
ciated it greatly.37

It seems on the face of things that Buki Ben Yogli, unlike Gottlober, does
not invoke the rhetoric of “illumination.” In his memoirs he describes the impact of
his reading Levinsohn’s Teudah Beisrael using the nomenclature of
therapy—“like a balm for the wounds of my heart”—and not with the language of
leaving darkness into a bright light. Yet closer examination of Buki Ben
Yogli’s words suggests that the “therapeutic event” itself has as its core a recog-
nition of psychological, religious, and intellectual import not unlike what
Gottlober characterizes as an experience of illumination. From a religious and
intellectual point of view, the common basis of these experiences is a sort of deistic recognition, within which faith and enlightenment appear as mutually supportive, or at least, there comes to seem to be no conflict between belief in God and the commandments of mind or scientific occupation. Like Gottlober, who reads the *Milot Habigyan* of Maimonides and discovers “how [man] may weigh in the scales of his thoughts and words and rightly judge each and every matter!” so Buki Ben Yogli reads *Teudah Beisrael* and discovers that “no man in Israel . . . should abstain from the extraneous wisdoms.” The expressions of deism that mark the moments of revelation or illumination of many Jews undergoing enlightenment ground the basis of the analogy here between illumination and therapy. Recognition of the importance of individual intellectual enquiry is what legitimated maskilic literature for its readers, and it too is what purged them of the sense of sin that accompanied it.

This aspect of the experience of illumination or revelation is present also in Ginzburg, who attests that his reading of Mendelsohn’s commentary on Ecclesiastes—the *Biur*—produced a shift in his intellectual life:

The book of Ecclesiastes which first breathed into me the spirit of enquiry, taught me that it is not considered a sin if a man inquires wisely about the matters which arise in his spirit from time to time, not that he may ever trust his mind to issue practical edicts based on his opinion God forbid, he must hold to faith and never lose its grasp, by its word he lives and by its word he raises hand and foot, and such enquiry will be his pleasant sport, by which he shall sharpen his mind and strengthen his sentiments, the thought is free like a desert-taught wild creature; but the act is bound strictly to the very altar-corners of the Torah.

From these statements it appears that the change in Ginzburg caused by having read Mendelsohn’s *Biur* was restricted to a legitimization of intellectual inquiry, and went no further. Even after reading the book Ginzburg continued to refuse to grant reason the role of arbiter on issues of faith. Yet for him it sufficed that the psychological resistances that stood in his way were cleared to warrant describing the reading of Ecclesiastes with the commentary as an experience of revelation.

In summary, then, most of the reading-stories of the enlightening scholars are ranged on a similar plan. Whether the encounter with the liminal figure of the “tutor” is short and casual, or whether this figure accompanies the scholar for an extended period, this encounter marks a turning point in the life of the developing maskil. Following it a further encounter takes place—the encounter with the book that produces “illumination.” With the illumination event, the obstacles that had stood in the young man’s path lose their potency and a tempestuous process of reading commences, a self-education process that culminates in the full formation of the man’s identity as a maskil and an enlightened adult.
The extent of uniformity displayed in the format of the reading-stories is noticeable also in the accounts of the motives and aims of the reading. Both those plagued with doubts before the encounter with their tutor, as well as those seized with trepidations as a result of the encounter, looked toward reading as a means of relieving distressing anxieties. All, without exception, attest that they read out of an intellectual and spiritual need to answer theological, philosophical and moral questions. Ginzburg, whose inner quarrels between the rational and irrational had began already in his youth, lists the questions that disquieted him one by one: “What am I, what is my purpose, what will become of me after I am gone, what is the purpose of every human?” If man’s purpose in this life is to secure him a place in the world to come, “who told us this?” And “what means of reform is there [in the world to come] for the millions of small children who die without ever having known themselves?” What is the relation between body and soul, “the senses in themselves what are they? . . . And the soul, what is she?” And finally, “what is Time? . . . and what is the broad Universe? Who set it in motion, when did it begin to enforce its laws?”

Theological and philosophical questions impelled Tchernowitz too to seek answers in books. Like Ginzburg he was preoccupied with “the main questions, like the very reality of God, the secret of Creation, the afterlife and suchlike,” and like him he too was torn between his inclinations to both the rational and the irrational. When his mystic inclinations held sway Tchernowitz would turn to books of Kabbalah and morals, and even took part in the seances that the yeshiva students held from time to time:

Sometimes we, the boys at the beit midrash, would get into all sorts of experiments in magic, like putting hands on the table and focusing all our thoughts on the table until the table would start to shake and almost dance and even respond to our questions by thumping. Even though we knew that this was forbidden by Jewish law, for it was considered witchcraft, still we engaged in it out of mystic enthrallment.

Yet when Tchernowitz was overtaken by “rational rule” and “dismissed” his mystical inclinations, he would turn to the philosophers from the Middle Ages, who also left him with disturbing questions.

This torturous stage of the in-between, which none of the yeshiva students and enlightening scholars was able to evade, was usually characterized by nonsystematic reading of many types of literature. In retrospect, and taking a sharply critical perspective, Lilienblum summarizes this period as one of skepticism and hollowness, “drunkenness” and “chaos.”
Amongst us Children of Israel [. . .] the adults for the most part read nothing, and all the periodicals and new books, which have nothing scientific in them, are read by youths, and moreover each boy reads all that comes to hand: today he reads a book called *Misterei Paris* [Paris Mysteries]; tomorrow, *Moreh Nevuchei Hazman*; on the third day *Kadmoniot Israel*; on the fourth, criticism; on the fifth, some such science text as *Sulam Hateva*; on the sixth, the book *Torat Al-Mavet*; on the seventh, some old journal in Hebrew; on the eighth—*Ayit Tzavua*; on the ninth—bits of Hebrew periodicals; on the tenth—works of poetry, and once again fine rhetoric, philosophy and poetry, and then he starts the whole cycle over, until his brain gets muddled, and he no longer knows what it is he is after in his enlightenment and where he is headed. And moreover he is full always of leaps and inner turmoil. 49

A glance at the reading-biographies confirms Lilienblum’s essential claims. Traces of eclectic reading are clearly noticeable in the reading-stories of all the maskilim. Buki Ben Yogli, for example, says that the first books he read were “small homiletics . . . *Tsidab Laderech, Orkhot Hayim, Shaarei Tshuvah, Mesilat Yesharim*, and so forth.” 50 Later, one after the other, he read all the books he found at random from a bookseller who visited his town: *Layesharim Teshilah* by Rabbi Moshe Hayim Lutzato, *Harisot Beitar* by Kalman Shulman, *Kiryat Sefer* and *Dvir* by Gintzburg, “as well as a small book titled *Darchei Hakheshbon*. “51 At about age fifteen he discovered at a relative’s house Mapu’s novel *Ahavat Zion*, 52 and after a while he read in his tutor’s house Hayim Zelig Slonimsky’s *Kodiva Deshvat* and RJBaL’s *Teudah Beisrael*. 53 At the same time or thereabouts he could not make up his mind between hasidism and the Haskalah and he began to read, all at once, the maskilic favorites Reggio and ShaDaL—*Hachmei Israel Shebehzut La’aretz*—the hasidic *Tania* and the first part of *Misterei Paris* by Eugene Sei in Kalman Shulman’s translation. 54

Eclecticism strongly marks Tchernowitz’s reading-story as well. Yet by contrast with Buki Ben Yogli, Tchernowitz sorted the variety of books he read, both by subject matter and by how “kosher” they were to the surrounding society’s eyes. This sorting, which the adult narrator makes in retrospect, reveals the inner logic that guided the reading of the boy undergoing enlightenment: it stresses the role each class of book played in the enlightenment process, and suggests that what seems at first to be complete chaos was nothing other than a slow and steady process of secularization.

As we shall try to show, the process of reading that fed the process of secularization began under the auspices, and at times at the inspiration, of permitted readings of traditional and “kosher” literature. It was marked by hesitant and stolen shifts from reading aggadic and talmudic interpretive literature and texts of Kabbalah and Jewish morals, to reading fanciful maskilic literature in the belles lettres mode; from reading the literature of Jewish law and the responsa of the rabbis of Ashkenaz, to reading the philosophical and exegetical “literature of enquiry” of the Sephardic thinkers of the Middle Ages and the Jewish moralists; from reading traditional historical chronicles to reading
modern historical scholarship, and from all of these together to reading scientific tracts: of mathematics, geography, astronomy, biology, and so forth. In these short and hesitant leaps “out of bounds,” the scholars undergoing enlightenment learned of the existence of other voices in Jewish thought and of the achievements in culture and science of the world’s other peoples; and they began to examine the verities their teachers had passed to them in the light of alternative traditions and conceptions.

Tchernowitz’s story of reading and enlightenment gives a good illustration of the transitions described here and documents the actual books with which they were associated. His story begins with an account of the chance encounter with the works of Naftali Hertz Wessely and Mapu, that is, with the Jewish belles lettres tradition with its links to both the historic past (Shirei Tiferet and Ahavat Zion) and to Jewish life in the present (Ayit Tzavua). Later, Tchernowitz turns to a description of the shift from reading the traditional and “kosher” historical chronicles he found in his grandfather’s house (Sefer Hadorot, Zemach David, Shem Hagdolim, Tosiphon, and so on) to reading translated historical novels such as Enek Ha’arazim by Grace Aguilar and more scholarly histories such as Divrei Yemei Olam and Toldot Hayehudim by Kalman Shulman or Graetz’s Divrei Ha’arefim in the translation by Shaul Pinchas Rabinowitz (ShaPaR). Included in this list of historical tracts, and not accidentally, is Simshon Bloch Halevi’s Shvilei Olam. This book, like the rest of the texts dealing with the geography of the planet and the modes of life of its inhabitants, was viewed as belonging to the category of works of history.

Finally, Tchernowitz describes the transition from “study of talmudic argumentation and sophistry” as in Shev Shmaata and Kzot Ha’ochshen, Urim Vetchup, Mahaneh Ephraim, and other books of this kind, to reading the “literature of enquiry” of the Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages. In this context, Tchernowitz stresses that he began his entry to the realm of the “literature of enquiry” of the Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages. In this context, Tchernowitz stresses that he began his entry to the realm of the “literature of enquiry” of the Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages. In this context, Tchernowitz stresses that he began his entry to the realm of the “literature of enquiry” of the Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages. In this context, Tchernowitz stresses that he began his entry to the realm of the “literature of enquiry” of the Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages.
encounter with the forbidden maskilic literature, and tells of reading *Gan Na’ul* by Wessely and a guilt-ridden reading of Erter’s *Hatzofeh Leveit Israel*. Later, again like Tchernowitz, Ahad Ha’am documents the shift from reading traditional chronicles (*Yuhasin, Shevet Yehudah, Seder Hadorot, Koreh Hadorot, Zemach David, Yosiphon* and their like) to reading both the fanciful and the more reputable histories by maskilic authors, such as *Divrei Yemei Olam*, on the one hand, and *Harisot Beitar*, on the other. And finally, Ahad Ha’am tells how he too gradually exchanged his books of Jewish law and talmudic argumentation for works of science and intellectual criticism, and how he entered the Sephardi “halls of philosophy” with their forbidden books under the aegis of a “kosher” book such as *Akedat Titzbuk*, which even the hasidim deemed permissible to read.

This is not the place for a detailed bibliographic treatment of the books that appear in Tchernowitz’s and Ahad Ha’am’s reading lists. It suffices here to indicate the considerable similarity between these lists, and to try to learn from them how the reading process became a process of enlightenment and secularization. Such an examination of the reading lists and the reading-impressions suggests that even when the first maskilic literature encountered was belletristic, this was not what the writers consider as having initiated the enlightenment process. Such initiation is mostly ascribed to the texts of Jewish philosophical and exegetical literature written in Spain during the Middle Ages and to the scholarly historical works of the maskilim.

Tchernowitz and Ahad Ha’am, like many other maskilim, place the reading of the works of the Middle Ages philosophers at the core of the enlightenment process. In their memoirs they describe this literature as having been decisive for their intellectual development, and they emphasize, each in his way, the role it played in shaping their mature world-views. The contribution made by readings of the works of the Middle Ages philosophers to the process of enlightenment is usually described not only from the retrospective standpoint of the adult maskil, but also through the excited and innocent standpoint of the adolescent boy, for whom this literature still carried the taste of forbidden reading. Ahad Ha’am, for instance, speaks this way when he reviews his early readings and tells of his fierce passion for the “books of the Spaniards.” In his remarks he dwells on the allure of the clarity of thought and expression in these books, and marvels at their daring theological speculation—a speculation characteristic, in his opinion, of the Sephardic thinkers of the Middle Ages. To this literature, which seemed to him the complete opposite equally of talmudic argumentation and of mysticism, Ahad Ha’am attributes his “becoming addicted to secular studies.” Yet its influence was, in fact, rather more extensive. One may affirm definitively that the “books of the Spaniards” were what made Ahad Ha’am first aware of the multiplicity of voices in Jewish thought, set before him a model of rationalist philosophy,
pointed to a way in which faith and intellect could be unified, and above all, legitimized the development of a religious philosophy that diverged from the path his teachers had taken:

[Among authors of] the period of the Middle Ages [...] I was especially influenced by Maimonides and his successors in later times, in that they are drawn to the general sciences, and by those who attempt to unify “the Torah with Philosophy,” such as YsSHAy (Reggio). Of [authors of] newer periods I was especially taken by RaMBE-MaN (Mendelssohn), ShaDaL, RaNaK, Geiger (Abraham) and their like.67

For all my reading of philosophy texts, my teachers sought to distance me from books or parts of books dealing with the question of the existence of God. In this connection, there were hasidim who related that the Rabbi of Ruzhin forbade reading the Moreh Nevuchim [Maimonides’ Guide to the Perplexed] in the chapters which deal with this topic. [...] Yet on the whole I would read with greater passion the books of religious philosophy from the Middle Ages, so far as one could obtain them where I lived. And they were what launched in me the inclination to think abstractly on every topic, especially on religious matters.68

Tchernowitz too dwells in his memoirs on the formative and lasting influence of the literature of wisdom and enquiry from the Middle Ages. According to him, spurred on by such literature he began to “belittle slightly the prayers,” and the hints he found in the discussions of Ibn Ezra, including “the question of the completion of the Torah,” set the foundation for his adult perspectives. “These hints,” says Tchernowitz, “troubled me for many years until I began to deal with Bible criticism—and then these hints became explicit and the skepticisms permissible.”69

Yet it was not the reading of the philosophical and exegetical literature of the Middle Ages alone that filled a central function in the enlightenment process. No less important was the role played in this process by reading history books. One of the first to give this fact expression was Ginzburg in his Aviezer. In a revealing passage, touching in its innocence, he tells how he used to go up to his father’s “book collection” to read the “books of the history of the ages,” and how he grafted the act of reading in these books upon his play with walnuts and pebbles.70 Like Tchernowitz and Ahad Ha’am, Ginzburg too began his involvement with history by reading the traditional chronicles including Tosiphon, Zemach David, She’erit Israel, Shevet Yehudah, and Shalshelet Hakabbalah. Yet unlike them, he declares that as soon as he read the “kosher” literature he found in his father’s home, his outlook on his town and its inhabitants shifted, taking on a relativistic tinge:

My eyes lit up and I saw that my native town was a small and placid point in the immense rushing universe, that there were cities larger than the one I was born in, houses fuller of wisdom than my father’s house, people endowed with greater knowledge and might and technology—and all in all my eyes opened like Adam’s when he took the Tree of Knowledge to his bosom, and the universe stood before me gowned in all her bridal splendor.71
The relative importance Ahad Ha’am ascribes to reading historical literature is a reflection of how far this literature had grown between Ginzburg’s time and his own. Ahad Ha’am’s descriptions indicate that the shift from reading traditional chronicles to reading maskilic historiographies had been intermediated by the historical novels, especially those in Kalman Shulman’s translation:

I was greatly drawn to historical tracts, and all the Hebrew chronicles too were found in our library (Seder Hadorot, Koreh Hadorot, Zemach David, Shevet Yehudah and many others). The Shem Hagdolim by HIDA I knew almost by heart [. . .] Of the authors whose books I read first, the main one was Rabbi Kalman Shulman, for he had the approval of my father, who also liked to read Shulman’s Divrei Temei Olam and other books. Also the first stories I read it seems to me were Shulman’s Misterei Paris and Harisot Beitar, and I shed many a tear on the pages of these books. Now the custom is to scoff at Shulman and his works, but I wonder if there is another author whose books brought so much benefit to the youth of the last generation.72 [. . .] I learned so much from his books, and feel in my heart a deep gratitude for all he gave me at the outset of my development.73

This testimony of Ahad Ha’am is neither unique nor unusual. Buki Ben Yogli also traces a reading process that began with traditional historical literature, continued with the historical novels, and concluded with the scholarly maskilic histories, and he too locates Shulman’s historical novels as the first place he encountered the Haskalah:

The booksellers began bit by bit to include maskilic books too in their assortment [. . .] The first book of this kind that came to my hand was the story Harisot Beitar by Kalman Shulman. Because of the tales from the Talmud and Midrash which the author cites in the book’s preface, I could not for a single moment have any doubts as to the veracity of the story, just as I could not think that the tales in the Books of Samuel and Kings were all fictional. [. . .] I could not wait for the prayers to be over so that I could run home and read Harisot Beitar.74

The description of the first encounter with maskilic historical literature, like that of the encounter with the novels in Kalman Shulman’s translation, appears in the reading-biographies of numerous enlightening yeshiva scholars.75 By most accounts, the readings of traditional histories awakened strong desires for acquaintance with the past and provided legitimation and a cover of sorts for reading the maskilic historical novels. Moreover, most of the writers who say that reading the historical novels was decisive for their intellectual development tend to defend Shulman against his critics and instead speak highly of him.76 As we have seen, Ahad Ha’am does not shrink from declaring that Shulman’s translation project substantially aided the propagation of the Haskalah. E. E. Friedman adds to these praises and says that “possibly the benefit Shulman brought to Hebrew literature, in disseminating it among the people of that generation, was greater than that of the dozens of scientists we had then.”77 Buki Ben Yogli goes further still and declares that
Shulman’s controversial translation of *Misterei Paris* by Eugene Sei made a contribution to Jewish enlightenment greater even than *Teudah Beisrael* by RIBaL and *Moreh Nevuchei Hazman* by Nachman Krochmal—both tremendously influential texts:

[The appearance of *Misterei Paris*] was a very considerable event in the history of the Haskalah in Bobruysk. Critics later wondered how such a fine author as Kalman Shulman could so debase himself as to translate a French novel of the degenerate sort as *Misterei Paris*. The critics forgot that this novel in its day suited the tastes of readers not just in France, but also throughout Europe. In any case, I can attest that the story *Misterei Paris* in its capacity for drawing the heart of the reader won even more souls for the Haskalah than did *Teudah Beisrael* and *Moreh Nevuchei Hazman* by Nachman Krochmal.78

Most of those who extol Shulman do not bother to explain what it was that made his contribution more substantial than that of writers and thinkers such as RIBaL and Krochmal or that of the various maskilic scientific texts. The writers who do offer explanations tend to emphasize the role his translations played in helping uplift the language of Hebrew, both by bolstering the link to the biblical past and by broadening the audience for Hebrew among the yeshiva students.79 M. Ben Ami, for example, notes in praise of Shulman that in the beit midrash and the yeshiva, students would “gulp down” his translations like the first fruits of the season and “were astounded by *Misterei Paris* to the point of oblivion.”80 He accounts for Shulman’s immense popularity by noting the exciting plots and the pure biblical language:

The Hebrew readers of those days would get especially thrilled by Shulman’s soft and pleasant biblical Hebrew, which perhaps is slightly inferior to Mapu’s, although Mapu’s style is noted for excessive equanimity and scant emotionality. Shulman’s language captivated the young readers’ souls by the allure of its beauty, aroused in their hearts a powerful love of our Hebrew language, and above all returned them to the Bible and the Prophets, which had been neglected to a considerable degree for no small time.81

Yet Shulman’s contribution to his readers’ enlightenment process did not end there. No less important is the fact that most of the exciting novels Shulman translated were works of history, that is, novels that readied the ground for transforming the traditional-religious perception of the past with the maskilic-rationalistic view. The fascinating plots, the respectability projected by the Hebrew language, and the image of moderation Shulman had as a person—he behaved and was taken as an orthodox Jew in every way—allowed his novels to pave a road toward reading literature in general and toward reading maskilic scholarly historiography in particular.82 Yet it ought also be noted that the dazzling success of his translations gave Shulman a reputation of primacy in an enterprise in which he was not the lone worker. In fact, his works were only one part of an ever-increasing corpus of original and translated historical
literature,83 all of which served a similar function.84 By most accounts, the historical novels of Mapu, *Ahavat Zion* and *Ashmat Shomron*, as well as other historical works in translation, such as A. S. Friedberg’s *Emek Ha’arazim*, by Grace Aguilar, or Rashi Fuenn’s *Yako‘v Tirado*, by Ludwig Philipson, played a part in encouraging readers to turn to the more rigorous maskilic historical works to gain knowledge of the past.85

A sense of the immense secularizing potential of the various types of maskilic history literature can perhaps be gained by very briefly comparing how history was approached in the religious mode and in the maskilic one. The traditional-religious approach granted absolutely no legitimacy to study of the history of the world’s nations or to scholarship of Jewish history for its own sake. Study of Jewish history was sanctioned only in so far as it could be pressed into service to corroborate theological verities possessing an ahistorical validity.86 Indeed, this approach to history left its stamp on the traditional historical chronicles: those concerned with the lineal inheritance of Jewish law and tradition and with the sequence of sages demonstrated the continuous authority of the oral tradition; those depicting the lives of the famous figures set forth models of faith and moral conduct; while those relating the fabulous and miraculous in the events of the past gave proof of the course of Divine Providence in the world.87

The maskilim, of course, took a different view of the past. They promoted a radical shift in how history was to be conceived, causing the field to be extracted from the exclusive jurisdiction of religious thought. This shift was manifest in the new insistence on a rigorous chronology in which events are assigned an order corresponding to their actual dates of occurrence; in the new view of the human as an autonomous agent who decides and acts within history; and in the new attention paid to world history alongside Jewish history. The maskilic histories thus expressed the maskilim’s efforts to apply the rules of rational enquiry to historical discourse and to offer an evidential and persuasive alternative to the theological accounts of the traditional historical chronicles.88

Keeping these differences between religious and maskilic historiography in mind, one can scarcely exaggerate the extent of the secularizing effect in the shift from reading traditional to maskilic histories. The extreme importance those who were becoming maskilim assigned to their reading and study of history, Jewish and general, was based, among other things, on awareness of the significance of these differences.89 Yet it needs to be noted that history, geography, and the sciences were seen as interrelated studies, and that the secularizing effect of reading was generally attributed to an accumulation of knowledge in all these departments taken together. This is clearly evident from the fact that the autobiographers tend to stress the proximity in time and interest between reading historical novels and the awakening of a desire for wider
knowledge of the sciences and for acquaintance with all the “extraneous wis-
doms.” In most cases readings of books of geography, astronomy, and biol-
ogy followed closely on readings in history books, and the knowledge gath-
ered from all these fields together is what beckoned the readers onward to new
horizons.

A retrieval of the initial reading notes of readers who had yet to formulate
for themselves a defined point of view reveals hidden, almost unfelt processes
through which the knowledge of science and history was producing a shift in
their thought. These notes suggest that the revolution in thinking did not
manifest itself in an immediate adoption of maskilic attitudes but in faint dis-
locations in perspective on the immediate surroundings and on Jewish culture
as a whole. The new awareness of other cultures gained from geography
books such as Shvilei Olam and the information on the technological achieve-
ments of the world’s nations, gained from books like Koczva Deshavit—these
encouraged the readers to reassess the Jewish world with its customs and be-
liefs by new and comparative standards. A bold expression of such a reassess-
ment of Jewish culture is given by Buki Ben Yogli, who was greatly impressed,
as said, by Slonimsky’s Koczva Deshavit and RIBaL’s Teudah Beisrael:

The idea, that the thinkers of the nations of the world were more advanced than
the sages of Israel in the extraneous wisdoms, aroused a sense of shame in my heart mixed
also a little with a sense of envy. Till then I had thought, as all the beit midrash idlers
thought, that we Jews—really were a special nation among the peoples. We have, glory
to God, the Talmud, the Later Commentaries and the MaHaRShA, which sharpen the
brain; we have as well the wisdoms of the Kabbalah and Hasidism. And what do the
Goyim have? Nothing. True, they have plenty of books, but what is written in those
books? Tales of invented actions [. . .] And here I learned from the book Koczva De-
shavit that the Goyim had great innovators: Copernicus, Kepler, Herschel and very
many others. At first I took innocent comfort in the thought that the greatest genius
Isaac Newton was a Jew, but I was soon informed that this universal genius was an En-
GLISHman from birth and womb. From the book Teudah Beisrael I was informed, that in
other wisdoms as well the Goyim had earned themselves an eternally unforgettable
name. And not only this, but they even set their hands at the Holy Writings too to
interpret and explicate them, our own Holy Writings. And while we were sitting by the
stove straining our brains to find some twisted way to square the MaHaRShA’s disputes
with the Later Commentaries, those Goyim, the lame-brained, invented the steam en-
gine and the telegraph, which all the inhabitants of the globe and we Jews too use,
when a resolution of the MaHaRShA’s paradoxes gives satisfaction to ourselves alone
without bringing any benefit to our peers. Have we indeed turned from being the Cho-
sen People to a nation of laggards?

These notes by Buki Ben Yogli clearly indicate the nature of the seculariz-
ing effect that the philosophical, historical, and scientific literature had on its
readers. His doubts about the status of the Jews as the Chosen People seem to
him natural consequences of the comparison between Jews and other na-
tions—a comparison prompted by reading this literature.
When one examines the book titles mentioned in the various maskilic reading-biographies, it is hard not to ponder the meaning of the substantial similarity among them—for this uniformity can raise doubts as to how reliable the reading-stories are. One might, indeed, argue that such “formulaic” reading lists help the retrospective narrator construe his self-image as a maskil, and that as such it perhaps includes what he ought to have read and not necessarily what he actually did read. Yet there is more than one reason not to lend excessive weight to such a claim. First, the reading-stories of those undergoing enlightenment suggest that in many respects they truly did share a “common biography”—that the similarity in their life histories, and in particular in the manner in which they became exposed to maskilic books, accounts for the similarity in the reading lists. Second, there were not so many maskilic books in Hebrew available, so it was natural that every book that fell to their hands should have promptly taken the small community of readers by storm. Even the distribution modes of these books—they were sold by itinerant booksellers and then passed hand to hand—can account for much of the commonality in the reading lists. Yet even if the autobiographers did not read each of the books they mention, and even if their reading lists reflect images and conventions about which books a self-respecting maskil should have read in his youth, what is not diminished is the relevance of this data both as to the process of enlightenment and as to the contents of the maskilic canon.

*Transformative Books*

Given the considerable overlap in the reading lists from the various autobiographies, the diversity in the titles identified as having transformative powers is especially striking. As I shall try to show, readers differed from each other in their impressions of particular books, and the lists of the books said to have wrought a transformation or illumination in each is far from being uniform. Nevertheless, not all the variation in reading-impressions of different readers can be assigned to personal or subjective preference. Much of this variance may involve circumstantial factors: the generation gap, with bookshelf contents differing between the first generation of Eastern European Maskilim and the second and third generations; differences of geography and environment; the writer’s sectarian affiliation, which may have been hasidic or mitnagged; his socioeconomic status and the quality of his education; the arbitrariness of his encounter with a tutor or with Haskalah literature; the age at which the enlightenment process began, and so forth. To all these factors may be added subjective considerations including the writer’s personality, his individual tendencies, and the world-view by which his story is construed.
Gintzburg and Gottlober, both among the first Eastern European maskilim, name different books as having caused their experience of revelation, although the Berlin Haskalah stood them both as a model. Gintzburg grants the status of a revelatory experience to his reading of three books he says are by Moses Mendelssohn: Sefer Habrit [sic], Phaedo, and the Biur on Ecclesiastes. These books, says Gintzburg, nourished his soul, forged a new spirit within him, exposed him to "wonderful things" and infused in him the "first spirit of scholarship."97 Gottlober, by contrast, identifies the experience of true illumination with his reading of Shlomo Zalman Hacohen Hanau's grammar, Tsohar Hateivah. All the "kosher" books he had read up to then, so he says,98 including ones that had fascinated him, like Yosiphon, "were as naught and nonsense compared to this Tsohar Hateivah."99 Using language that is surprisingly ecstatic—for what is after all a book of grammar—Gottlober describes his first reading of this text:

I did not set it down from my hands until the lamp oil ran out and burnt away completely and left me covered in darkness, and then I reclined another hour and two yet sleep came not to mine eyes nor rest to mine brows, as the new knowledge I had gained left me no sleep, and when at last I had fallen into slumber surrounded was I round by [diphthongs and fricatives and virgules] which rose in dance before me till dawn.100

Equally surprising and excited is the language Gottlober uses to describe the encounter with Ben-Zeev's grammar, Talmud Leshon Ivri:

As I opened the book Talmud Leshon Ivri I seemed as if dreaming whilst awake. Like first fruits before summer I drank in his words which were sweet as honey in my mouth, and I put it not down until completing the entire first section.101

Doubtless it was something other than the grammar book's "fascinating plots" that aroused in Gottlober so great a storm of emotions. One may gather that the intense feelings Gottlober the boy experienced upon entering the secret and forbidden domains of grammar, merged in this description with the importance Gottlober the adult maskil assigned to the grammar of the Hebrew language. Such speculation is in order, for one must not dissociate the description here from its sociocultural context, in which students of Hebrew grammar were considered heretics and most of the maskilim were forced to study this subject alone and in secret.102 Nevertheless, one may not ascribe the slightest lack of truthfulness or sincerity to Gottlober’s emotional statements. It should be kept in mind that no one else ever presented the encounter with a book of grammar as an illumination,103 despite the fact that nearly all the maskilic autobiographies present the study of grammar as a central pillar of a maskilic education.104

Most maskilim saw grammatical knowledge as a linguistic instrument, enabling them to read the Bible and the Hebrew maskilic literature of the various
types with a high degree of comprehension. Gottlober, by contrast, viewed grammar as a discipline in itself, a model of logical precision and the gateway to development of rational method. Indeed, for Gottlober the illumination that the study of grammar yielded had to do not solely with its enabling “proper reading of the Bible” but also, and perhaps chiefly, with its demonstrations of “Theory of Logic”:

I learned from the book *Talmud Leshon Ivri* that there was a book called *Milot Hahigayon* by Maimonides. [. . .] And that this book teaches a man how to think, how to weigh in the mind’s balance his thoughts and statements and rightly judge of each and every matter!

Ben-Zeev’s grammar thus served Gottlober as an introduction of sorts to the study of logic. Thanks to it, he became aware of Maimonides’ *Milot Hahigayon* in Moses Mendelssohn’s commentary, and to the revered figure of Mendelssohn himself. Ginzburg’s and Gottlober’s successors were also deeply influenced by the Berlin Haskalah. They too read Mendelssohn’s *Biur* and the writings of his contemporaries, studied grammar from Shlomo Zalman Hacohen Hanau’s *Tsohar Hateivah* and Ben-Zeev’s *Talmud Leshon Ivri*; but naturally they also had at hand books not available to Ginzburg (born in Kovno District, 1795) and Gottlober (born in Volyn District, 1811) in their youth. The list of books considered pathbreaking contained also newer works, including those of Gottlober and Ginzburg themselves. Lilienblum, for instance, was deeply influenced by Ginzburg’s *Aviezer*, and Ahad Ha’am subscribed to *Haboker Or*, which Gottlober edited. It should also be recalled that the maskilim set out on separate paths. This was well put by Lilienblum in a letter to YaLaG, dated 7 December 1872 where he writes:

The word “Haskalah” is not sufficiently precise: [. . .] Abramovitch’s Haskalah is not the same as Tzweile’s; Fuenn’s Haskalah is not the same as the Haskalah of *Hamaggid*; Levanda’s Haskalah is not the same as Adam Hacohen’s Haskalah; your Haskalah is not the same as Mordechai Felungian’s; and mine not the same as Gottlober’s, and so forth.

The differences between the various maskilim and the various conceptions of the “Haskalah” are manifested also in the reading impressions. Moreover, the deeper and more detailed the account of the enlightenment process and the reading-story, the less sudden or focused is the description of the experience of discovery or illumination, and the longer and more diverse is the list of influential texts. Thus, for example, Lilienblum (born in 1843) and Ahad Ha’am (born in 1856), whose reading-stories are among the most detailed, decline to specify a single work as having revolutionized their spiritual lives.
For all that, maskilim who were young men in the 1860s and 1870s, as well as those who matured in the following decades, display a clear tendency to associate revelation or illumination with their readings of scientific books. Influenced by the Russian Positivism of Dmitri Pisarev’s school, and faced with the “flood of books on the natural sciences, with which they [the Russian intelligentsia] engorged the youth of that generation and the broad masses,” Haskalah literature in Hebrew began to seem feeble and irrelevant, as Buki Ben Yogli (born 1846) asserts:

Small books, which speak in praise of the Heaven-sent Haskalah: she shall roll away darkness into light, she shall shatter the chains of fanaticism binding us, she shall bring complete salvation to the people of Israel, etc. etc. [. . .] The little books only proselytized the Haskalah, but the Haskalah itself they did not show me. I sought the Haskalah in every book that came my way, sought her but could not find [. . .] The secret of the telegraph and the secret of the Haskalah joined to form one great riddle in my heart; to find the two in combination yearned my disconsolate and desolate soul.115

Indeed, E. E. Friedman (born 1857) associates his experience of revelation with reading natural history books, including Mosdei Eretz by Yosef Sheinhak and Sulam Hateva by Yosef Hertzberg, whereas Buki Ben Yogli assigns this status, as I mentioned, to the reading of Kochva Deshavit by Hayim Zelig Slonimsky.

Unlike Friedman, however, who attests that when he finished reading Mosdei Eretz his faith “clarified and crystalized in the crucible of inquiry and examination, regaining its powers,” Buki Ben Yogli experienced the reading of Kochva Deshavit as a genuine threat to his spiritual world.116 Once he discovered that the “Copernican Method” and the “Method of Maimonides” contradicted each other, his faith in the absolute trustworthiness of the ancient authors was shaken, and he decided he had to cast off their beliefs:

I felt in my soul, as if the earth was shaking under my feet and there was nowhere to stand. Who would vouch for me, that the First Ones were not wrong in many other things, and why was it I could not manage to explicate all that is troubling in their statements. They were mistaken: it was not I who was to blame . . .117

In these cases, as in many others, the account of the books that caused transformation is accompanied by a moral—as if the writers were eternally responding to the persistent talmudic query, mai ka mashma lan (what does this mean to tell us)? Yet when this moral is that faith has been strengthened, as with Friedman, and also when, as with Buki Ben Yogli, the moral is that faith will be unsettled—what is at play is a kind of “koshering” of the intense intellectual activity and legitimation of the engagement with the “extraneous wisdoms,” matters that at the time could scarcely be taken for granted.
The fact that satisfaction of the urge for knowledge was generally associated with forbidden reading often brings an element of drama to accounts of readings of scientific texts even when such texts are not characterized as transformative. Such an account is Ahad Ha’am’s description of his first encounter with Slonimsky’s *Tesodei Hochmat Hashiur*:

For at that time [...], the first book of arithmetic I studied (by myself, of course) was—*Tesodei Hochmat Hashiur* by RaHaZ Slonimsky, and this book I kept in a secret place (in the outhouse), which was where I studied it. Inside the house I could not spend time on such things, for fear of my father and the others around.118

Similar in tone is Ahad Ha’am’s account of having read Erter’s *Hatzofeh Leveit Israel*. Though he does not ascribe revelatory or illuminatory powers to this book, or to literature in general, the circumstances of the reading, which involved acting against the father’s clear prohibition, introduce a dramatic dimension to the tale of the encounter with Erter that often frames accounts of a revelatory experience:

By chance I learnt of the book of Erter’s titled *Hatzofeh*. I very much desired to see it and read it. But I didn’t know how it could be obtained. Once, one autumn day, there arrived at the village where we lived a traveling bookseller, as was customary then. I begin to search among his books [...], and suddenly I notice among them Erter’s *Hatzofeh*. What to do? [...] My heart would not allow me to return the book to the bookseller and pass up this opportunity which chance had sent my way. I struggled against the evil instinct, but in the end could not prevail, and bought the book. That was before nightfall; and when everyone went to sleep [...], I took out the book and read it all night long until I had finished it, and when the servant came in the early morning and fired up the oven, I threw the book in the flames and there was no sign anything had taken place.119

Before proceeding to discuss the role played by literature in the processes of enlightenment and secularization, I should stress that the purpose of the brief and rapid sampling set forth here has only been to show the logic in the lists of books said to have transformed the lives of readers, and to note the deflection toward science books, which occurred around the 1860s. No less important has been this initial and partial attempt to shed light on the maturation experiences of the readers and to draw out, to the extent possible within this book’s scope, the more personal or intimate side of the process of becoming a maskil.

**Belles Lettres, Hebrew, and the Secularization Process**

Belles lettres too was read by the men mostly in hiding, and it too carried the taste of “stolen waters.”120 For many, the initial and unsettling encounter with the Haskalah’s forbidden books was the encounter with literature. Yet this fact
notwithstanding, literature rarely is characterized in the reading notes as having been a factor in destabilizing the world-view of readers. Until about the 1880s, readers tended to regard the main effect of poetry and prose fiction as having more to do with its language than its contents. Several interrelated factors may explain this phenomenon. Perhaps the main one is the sharp distinction the maskilim made between reason and emotion or imagination and the clear priority they assigned to the rational. This element is brought out explicitly in the romanen debate, the quarrel over novels the maskilim had in the 1850s and 1860s. The arguments offered in the course of this debate that novels were causing moral degeneracy and that fiction involves prevarication were both, one way or the other, reflections of the preference for “reason” over “feeling.” Further factors that may account for the secondary regard for literature include the scholarly education the maskilim received and the nature of the distress and metaphysical doubt that drove their need to read. Be that as it may, in most cases the experience of reading a poem or a novel in the first stages of enlightenment is not described as one of revelation, and unlike readings of philosophical and scientific literature it is not presented as having delivered insights on the “really important” questions, that is, on questions of religion and science, belief and apostasy.

Those writers who do choose to highlight their emotional reactions to the first encounter with the novels of Shulman and Mapu, for example, usually do so apologetically, as if describing the follies and whims of youth from the mature distance of old age. This is the tone taken in most of the reading impressions of Shulman’s stories and Mapu’s Ahavat Zion. Ahad Ha’am speaks of the tears he shed in his youth over Shulman’s pages, and Lilienblum of how he read “Ahavat Zion and Ashmat Shomron or Harisot Beitar and Misterei Paris with tremendous excitement on the lectern,” books he in fact regarded as “hay and grist.”

In these reading impressions, and in the many others written in the same vein, the importance of the pleasurable sentiments produced by reading fine Hebrew literature is undeniable; yet for most readers such an experience was not perceived as being valuable for its own sake. In most of the reading-stories, the pleasure obtained from the reading is a means, implicit or explicit, of achieving useful further objectives such as forming reading habits for secular literature, encouraging intellectual curiosity, and broadening historical familiarity. Yet the most lofty virtue the readers assigned to literature was its presentation of a linguistic model and its elevation of the Hebrew language. Quite a few readers emphasize that reading literature, both poetry and prose, fostered their love of the Hebrew language and encouraged them to attempt composition of melitzot—rhetorical flourishes or poems in Hebrew. Gottlober relates that he used the poems of Wessely and RaMHaL as linguistic models for the melitzot he wrote as a young man, while Shomer writes
about the novels of Mapu and Shulman: “These books aroused in me the love of the melitzah and I resolved in my soul to study the Hebrew language thoroughly so that I would understand all the melitzot that were foreign to me.”\(^{128}\) Lilienblum too saw the Hebrew language as justifying the reading of novels: “the thought that I am a poet [melitz],” he recounts, “arouses in my breast a desire to read in books of melitzah . . . I began to borrow books from my acquaintances and read the books Harisot Beitar and Misterei Paris and the rest of the hay and grist.”\(^{129}\) Lilienblum justifies his reading of “inferior” literature on the grounds that it sharpens language skills, but he also admits to having been deeply impressed by MICHaL’s poetry. On the one hand he read the books in the outhouse like a sinner and believed that “no Jew should be allowed to keep heretic books like these in his home”; on the other, he consoled himself with the thought that such reading was polishing his Hebrew style: “My readings of these poems helped me bring into my heart the style of poetic diction.”\(^{130}\)

This sort of justification on linguistic-utilitarian grounds, implicit in many of the reading-impressions of literature, was a mirror image of the justification the authors would give of themselves when they came to write such literature. One need only glance at the prefaces and authorizations of the books of maskilic poetry to be persuaded that their authors viewed the contribution to the glory of the Hebrew language as their chief and abiding aim. As Kovner puts it: “The authors say in advance in the prefaces to all their books, that they are reviving the Holy Tongue, and by this imagine they are bringing great benefit to the nation.”\(^{131}\)

One of many examples of such prefaces is Adam Hacohen’s preface to the first edition of his Shirei Sfat Kodesh. This text opens with the tale of the abandonment of the Hebrew language by hard-hearted zealots, who refuse to teach it to their sons and persecute its lovers to destruction. It goes on to mention the precious few who risk their lives for the cause of redeeming Hebrew from its desolation, and concludes with the author dedicating his own poem to the glory of the Hebrew language:

And here I too your servant one of the minor figures among those, I too have performed I too shall bear I too shall suffer as they. [...] And seest thou that thy name is even invoked in its title, Shirei Sfat Kodesh, so as to say: it is from thee and by thine hand I have given it to you, for thy sake and thy glory I have done this. — I beseech thee Holy One Dwelling Above! Pray accept my meager offering [...] For of all worldly joys and pleasures of human desire, I chose myself none but thee alone; yet for thee my inards tremble all day long, and to thee my soul thirsts yea my flesh doth yearn.\(^{132}\)

Against the background of the hostility of traditional society toward the study of Hebrew, the sense of mission that moved Adam Hacohen to dedicate his poetry to it is perhaps understandable.\(^{133}\) Yet this does not mask the
apologetic elements in this preface and in others written to the same format. Beyond the explicit and declared goal—to revive the Hebrew language—one sees here an unwillingness to grant legitimacy to expressions of imagination or sentiment for their own sakes.

It would be a great mistake to believe, as did Abraham Uri Kovner for example, that by harnessing literature to the glory of the language, the literature would be kept from fulfilling its purposes or from being able to enlighten the broad public with useful information. The opposite is closer to the truth. Achieving full mastery of the Hebrew language and its grammar was at the very core of the process of becoming a maskil, and the linguistic model afforded by literature contributed no less to this process, and perhaps contributed more, than did any of its explicit messages. Many readers intuitively express this when they tell how affected they were by the purity of the poetic language, yet only isolated individuals give this idea an explicit and thoughtful expression. Among these few is Buki Ben Yogli, who attributes the secularizing power of Hebrew poetry to its language, rather than to its subject matter:

For naught did they blame the first maskilim, for having so much engaged in the grammar of the Hebrew Tongue. It was an important thing in its day that those men did, the value of which was appreciated neither by Kovner nor by his opponents. Possibly his opponents understood it, but suppressed it from their utterances. And indeed what was all that dread, what did the zealots have to fear from the maskilim of those days? Why did they fall upon them with such heated fury, after all did they not continue to observe all the customs practiced among the nation? Was it really because they wrote poems? But since when was it ever prohibited to publish poems? Moses our Rabbi, Deborah the Prophet, King David and each of the prophets all wrote poems. In the Middle Ages there were great Jewish poets, and no one condemned them. All the rabbis with grasp of the Torah wrote poems and no one condemned them. It was grammar which was the bane of the maskilim, grammar which undercut the edifice of the Oral Tradition as interpreted by the zealots; and in this matter they were quite justified, for indeed grammar weakened the rule of the Talmud over the nation. Whoever has even a slight knowledge of Talmud knows that the Oral Tradition, or as the Talmud puts it “the Halachah[,] uproots the Bible”.

Those who upheld the antiquities felt the danger wafting over the Talmud from grammar and they ostracized everyone involved with it.

According to Buki Ben Yogli, the haredim understood quite well what the Haskalah authors did not, or understood and sought to repress. The haredim were the ones who grasped the full impact of writing in pure biblical Hebrew, as they grasped that the secularizing powers of Hebrew literature were contained primarily in its language, that is, in the model of grammatical Hebrew it put forward. These assertions by Buki Ben Yogli are not directed solely at the manifest, self-evident effect that belles lettres had on its readers. He does not speak merely of the fact that it aroused a love of the Hebrew language and fostered study of it, or of the fact that knowledge of Hebrew gave readers exposure to maskilic literature with all its messages. Buki Ben Yogli’s statements
mainly address the deeper reasons why grammatical Hebrew had such powers to secularize, and the more subliminal ways it produced its effects. Examination of these subtler causes suggests that the secularizing power of the linguistic model set forth in fine Hebrew literature had less to do with its enablement of access to other works of literature in Hebrew and more to do, in fact, with the access it granted to scriptural language. Once a solid grasp of the Bible's language was obtained, recognition that the Jewish law was not literally interpreting biblical commandments invariably followed, and from there only a small step was required to question the entire basis of authority of Jewish law.\footnote{137}

Those readers who remark how impressed they were by the language in the works of fine literature may have been unconsciously pointing to these effects spelled out by Buki Ben Yogli. Yet whether or not this was what they had in mind, they evidently perceived in their earnest and forthright way that at the heart of the crucible of modern Hebrew literature stood the language. Indeed, the model presented by its poetry of a pure, grammatical, and biblical language was where much of the secularizing power of modern Hebrew literature was contained.\footnote{138}

Far-reaching shifts in attitudes toward belles lettres appear in the reading-impressions documented in notes from readers in the 1880s and 1890s. Alongside readers who still maintained a utilitarian-apologetic stance, such as Ahad Ha'am,\footnote{139} and treated reading literature as a pleasant yet inferior means of acquiring knowledge, arose readers such as David Frishman, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, and Yosef Hayim Brenner, who credit literature with having played a decisive, formative role in their lives. Frishman, for whom the imagination and emotions are sacred, credits his early reading of traditional legends with having substantially shaped his spiritual world.\footnote{140} Berdichevsky and Brenner, for their part, associate the “revelation experience” concept with reading “realistic” stories and novels, works that depicted Jewish life as it was and seemed to capture their inner souls. All three—Frisman as well as Berdichevsky and Brenner—began their enlightenment process by reading the same maskilic texts as their predecessors. Yet despite the many differences among them in age, social background, education, and literary preferences, the three share a recognition that maskilic literature had lost something of its relevance.

Berdichevsky came to sense the irrelevance of Haskalah literature once he had read Frishman's pamphlet *Tohu Vavohu*.\footnote{141} This pamphlet, a scathing critique of maskilic literature, led Berdichevsky to see that many of its authors so-called were nothing of the kind and that much of its output was not literature at all. Berdichevsky felt indebted to Frishman not only for having given him his first example of truly independent criticism but also for supplying him with the first image of what true literature might be. Of this moment of
illuminated, which shattered all at once his early innocence as a reader, Berdichevsky writes in a note dedicated to Frishman:

During the best days of the Haskalah, while I was still a youth of fifteen years and still endlessly “swallowing books,” one of my mates gave me a small volume to read which had a tremendous effect on me. Up to that time I was just an innocent reader, I read [...] and my ears were inclined to everything spoken or printed [...] And now my innocence dropped away suddenly all at once. [...] My eyes were opened to the knowledge [...] that not every one is suited for the crown of literature, even if he writes books; that of ten who rise to the altar nine are rejects [...] That very day I was converted over to criticism. [...] A spirit of triumph blew over me from this volume, as small as the palm of a human hand. The words struck my heart, not because of the negative phrases and derisive words, but rather because of the triumphant power in this writer and his justified invective. I shall not argue with you idle writers, vocabularists alone, authors without scent or taste; with a moralizer’s rod I shall chastise you [...] Frishman demands of our new literature: new life and immediate relations with life is what he was here to insist of the Jews and our authors. 

In a similar tone but in greater detail, Berdichevsky recalls his youthful impressions of reading in a note dedicated to Moshe Leib Lilienblum. He emotionally describes his intense sense of identification with the critique of “The Great Confession of Tslofhad Bar Hahushim,” and how frustrating he had found all Hebrew literature up until Hat’ot Neurim:

The days of Ahavat Zion and all the “Red Sky” poetry had passed; Bible exegesis and the dry natural science of Zvi Hacohen Rabinowitz no longer sufficed for us, and RIBaL with his direct research in Beit Yehudah and Teudah Beisrael ceased to be the man we were looking for ... The great confession of the doomed Tslofhad Bar Hahushim, the man who complains about his ancestors, complains about his rabbis [...] and complains about the written and the writer, those who darkened our life, drained out our youthful vitality and made non-persons of us—aroused us to feel the strain that is in our very souls, and awakened fierce yearnings and cravings, to be freed of our shackles and leave our long imprisonment. [...] These words were like a great vision for us, a vision which depicts and exposes to us eye to eye all the poverty current in our lives by the fault of fathers struck blind [...] These were not memories of yesteryear which were revealed to us, but our very own lives, our lives as they are we found in his words [...] The book Hat’ot Neurim is a bill of divorce which one age passes to the next, which it delivers to a new generation seeking for itself new paths—a generation shackled by the chains of an antique heritage.

Very similar is the way Brenner elects to describe his first experience of reading AZaR’s Be’efes Tikvah. Like Berdichevsky, Brenner begins by telling of his boredom and frustration with reading Mapu’s and Smolenskin’s maskilic novels; like him, Brenner expresses a yearning for literature that would give voice to Jewish life as it was and to his own life as well:

Here was the tale Be’efes Tikvah, one of AZaR’s first creations [...] I was a boy when I first read it, a mere beit midrash boy. I knew no other language. And in Hebrew—
Mapu’s *Ayit Tzavua* was alien and odd; Smolenskin’s *Hayerushah* boring to distraction; the stories of YaLaG, YaCNHaZ etc.—clever linguistic inventions, with which the soul cannot in the least slake its thirst. And those days—that was the beginning of the “New Trend” from the “Menachem the Author” school, when we first heard the word “Realism.” This theoretical term was incomprehensible to us, the yeshiva boys, but our fates foresaw that something truly new was being made here. The “penny stories,” which would launch straight out with “He” [. . .] Those little books were swallowed up like first fruits before summer. Such a description of real life “as it was,” even if it left the dirt in the cracks unexposed—that was a great step forward for the puny and rootless Hebrew Belle-Letttristic writing. [. . .] And once all those slender volumes from the “Ben Avigdor Press” came to an end (*di ben avigderlach*, as we affectionately used to call them), the ferocity of the thirst for reading grew unbearable . . .

These statements reflect the deep appreciation Brenner felt toward the “New Trend” authors for having paved the way toward realism in Hebrew literature, and also the “immense feelings of thankfulness” to AZaR for the “great service” his story performed at the time. But apart from these particular expressions of gratitude what one can clearly see is a stance that is prepared to ascribe primary formative powers to literary fiction. In the course of recollecting his first impressions of *Be’efes Tikvah* Brenner describes the flavor of “first readings” in general, and by “reading” he is evidently referring to reading literature: “Great indeed is the might of the taste of first reading, when a man reads to find his place in the world, when a youth raises his eyes to a book there to seek aid.”

**Yiddish and European Literature**

The place of Yiddish literature in the reading-biographies of men is a topic that calls for separate treatment. There is no doubt that all readers of Hebrew in Eastern European Jewish society were able to read Yiddish and it is hard to imagine that none or next to none read a thing in this language when they were young. The conspicuous absence of documentation of Yiddish readings from most of the reading-stories of the men who read Hebrew therefore calls for explanation. What may be called for here is “symptomatic reading”—mapping the voids rather than the explicit statements in the text.

As I shall try to show, the glaring absence of accounts of books in Yiddish from the reading-stories of most Hebrew-reading men suggests that not all they read in their youth is spelled out in these notes. The books the yeshiva student undergoing enlightenment had on his bookshelf were Hebrew books; books in Yiddish, even if they were read, were not on display. Indeed, the absence of Yiddish books from this shelf tells more of the view the maskilim took of this language than it does of the student’s reading process. The
maskilim’s complex attitude toward “jargon,” which ranged from secret advocacy to shame, hostility, and outright contempt, likely underwrote their repression or denial of their readings in Yiddish. On the whole, reading Yiddish was taken as a mark of boorishness, not as something an enlightened Jew should be proud of. In any event, the testimony of those few who did admit to reading Yiddish literature will have to do for representing the group at large.

It comes as no surprise that it falls to Y. D. Berkowitz, Sholem Aleichem’s son-in-law and the translator of his works into Hebrew, to confirm the essentials of this matter. In his memoirs on Sholem Aleichem and his contemporaries, Berkowitz tells how he secretly read the “books of Hebrew treyfe-upsal [filth and abomination] underneath the volume of the Talmud,” until he ran out of all the Hebrew books he could obtain. Afterward, he ironically describes his initial misgivings about readings in Yiddish:

“Jargon,” I knew, is a wonderful term, sort of a scientific definition, for the common Jewish language, the language of Ivri-taytsh, which the common folk and the women read. For a Talmud lad as was I, who had already scented the scent of the Haskalah and had filled his heart with visionary and contemplative matters, to descend from the heavens of Hebrew rhetoric to the language of the feeble tkhines—this resolution of my problematic situation was not to my liking. Yet because my maskilic guide speaks of this language with the honorary appellation of “jargon,” surely it must have something of value in it, and a lad such as me ought to estimate its quality. [...] I began with one of the novels of Shomer, which chanced my way first. I felt that this was a great descent on my part, yet even so I fell upon the novels of Shomer with a new hunger and swallowed them one after the other. Only to the yeshiva I did not bring them—I was ashamed in front of my friends [...].

The very few who admitted to reading Yiddish literature and ascribed some measure of influence to it included Gottlober, Shomer, Buki Ben Yogli, and Shmaryahu Levin. Gottlober, who in his memoirs included his impressions of Yiddish writers and their works and regarded their efforts highly, noticeably mentions the experience of reading Campa’s Columbus in the Yiddish translation by Hayim Haykl Horowitz. The popularity the book had with the female public—the fact that women shut their Tseina Ur’eina books, their tkhines, and even the Maaseh Bove, and had eyes only for Columbus—all this did not keep Gottlober from confessing how deep an impression the book had made on him:

When I was a little boy I was greatly impressed by him, and as time passed, after my marriage, when I had already read many books, even hasidic and HaBaD books, I received a copy of Columbus in Tchernichov and enjoyed rereading it. My imagination carried me along with Columbus to America; I was with him on the ship out at sea, I was amazed by the savage people in America, and even in my sleep these kept appearing before me.
Nor does Gottlober omit mention of Yiddish readings from his autobiographical Zichronot Miyemei Neurai, where the reading of Columbus figures highly in his account of the process of becoming a maskil:

Once my father brought me the book Columbus in the Jewish Ashkenazi language (jargon) and it filled all the chambers of my heart and lit up the night and planted a God-blessed seed in my heart's furrows, for by means of this book's tales the wisdom entered my heart to know the earth and the people dwelling upon it, whose names I had not heard until that very day.151

Shomer too lists his Yiddish reading as part of his reading-biography, and there is nothing astonishing in the fact. Shomer was one of the most intensively read of the popular Yiddish novel writers, and it is no surprise that he dwells on the act of reading in this language. Still, his testimony does raise a point worth noting, for Shomer remarks that his first and crucial encounter with traditional history books was with the Yiddish versions of Yosiphon and She'erit Israel.152 Given that these traditional chronicles were available in Yiddish translation, and given Shomer's explicit remarks here, one suspects that Shomer was not the only one to have read such books in “jargon.”153 This suspicion is reinforced when Buki Ben Yogli tells in his memoirs that his early and more forceful reading impressions are associated with reading his grandmother's Yiddish books, including books of fables and legends such as Centura Ventura, Maaseh Bove, and the bilingual Kav Hayashar. Like Gottlober and Shomer, Buki Ben Yogli does not play down his Yiddish reading, and he surpasses his predecessors in describing its influence as continuous—even if he is not especially proud of the fact:

The Kav Hayashar and Maaseh Bove I read once, twice and thrice, and the more I read them, the greater grew my imagination's capacity to ignite and to cross every border... To my shame I must confess, that this consuming habit became second nature to me, and I could not free myself of it until old age cast itself upon me. All my days I stood with one foot in the world of affairs and the other in the world of creation which I created for myself.154

One may, accordingly, conclude that while the reading-story of the Hebrew readers tends to downplay or entirely omit Yiddish readings, there is no evidence that this literature was not in fact ardently read, nor indeed evidence that it was read without effect. Nevertheless, even once Yiddish language had acquired writers of the stature of Mendele, Hebrew readers had a hard time changing their basic view of it. Shmaryahu Levin expresses this well when he describes the view he held of Yiddish from when he was a boy of bar mitzvah age until he became an adult:

My Teacher was persuaded, that I had to choose the art of literature, and again advised me not to train myself in Hebrew writing alone but also in the vernacular. To this end
he read with me the book of Mendele the Bookseller: Yudel [and] Haavrech Hashahor by Yaakov Dinessohn. These two books made a strong impression on me, and I even translated portions of them into Hebrew. Yet nonetheless the vernacular did not have enough in it to especially attract me. [. . .] Only after many days did I begin to write in this language. The fact is, that the vernacular as well as the Russian I learned afterward never quite entered my bones, as the Hebrew language did for me. [. . .] Besides, in those days the literature of the spoken Yiddish language was in its infancy; the days of its sudden and vast flowering came only later.155

The attitude that the maskilim-to-be took toward European languages was entirely different. Readings of Laaz literature, unlike those of Yiddish literature, receive extensive documentation in the reading-stories, and most writers take care to highlight the impressions and influences such literature made on them. A close examination of these reading-stories reveals that they too—like the reading-stories in the Hebrew language—share a common plan. Most writers, if not all, studied foreign languages at a relatively advanced age, when they were about twenty years old; and most reading-stories contain an account of the difficult and frustrating learning period. The enormous difficulty the men encountered in studying foreign languages is often brought out in the short background notes where the writers describe traditional society’s apprehensive and hostile attitude toward Laaz.156 Shmaryahu Levin, for example, claims in his memoirs that traditional society’s fears about foreign language instruction derived from its worries about the negative influence the teachers might have, especially the Jews among them, on the pupils:

As is known, more than they were concerned about the damaging influence of the foreign language, they feared for the tender souls from the teachers’ influence. And they were more worried about the Russian instructor who was Jewish than they were about a teacher who was not of the faith, for the first one is closer to the pupils and has a much greater influence on them. And indeed this apprehension which the parents had […] was not without foundation.157

The explanation Shmaryahu Levin offers for haredi suspicions of foreign language instruction for men is misplaced for many sectors of traditional society—which had quite a few further reasons to oppose Laaz. Nevertheless, Levin’s statements do suggest that most of the yeshiva students who were becoming maskilim did not learn foreign languages formally or systematically. The reading-biographies confirm that nearly all the maskilim-to-be studied foreign languages, mainly German and Russian, by themselves or with the aid of a friend; that nearly all did their learning out of dictionaries and nearly all studied in secret. The way Hayim Tchernowitz mastered Russian gives a fair picture of the path many of his contemporaries likewise took:

I had already begun studying Russian while still an adolescent, but then too not systematically or methodically. My first studies were simply based on a dictionary,
given to me by one fellow student, who later became my brother-in-law (whose name is Shmuel Refael Kissin) [. . .] It is he who advised me, that the simplest means of learning the Russian language is Mandelshtamm’s Russian-Yiddish dictionary, that is, to memorize the translations word for word. The Russian alphabet I had already learned earlier, based on the inscriptions in books where the censor’s permissions, the titles and the place and date of publication were written.158

E. E. Friedman too relates that he acquired his ability to read Russian “based on the censor’s inscription appearing on the [volume of the] Talmud,” while the “language of Ashkenaz” [that is, German] he “stole and acquired in sin” when he obtained the Bible in Mendelssohn’s translation.159 Similar tales are told by Ahad Ha’am, Israel Katzowitz, and many others.160

To all these there was in certain cases a further obstacle, a kind of cultural-psychological block, which made it difficult for the yeshiva student undergoing enlightenment to absorb the grammar of the Russian language. When Buki Ben Yogli describes his unsuccessful first attempts to study Russian with a friend he attributes his failure to a form of poor thinking, the product of his internalization of the technique of talmudic argumentation:

I, who was used from the yeshiva to the casuist-disputation style of study—to ask questions and to pose problems and complicate every simple matter—I could not free myself of disputation even when learning the grammar of Russian, and would pester my teacher, my mate, with questions and difficulties, until he could not find hands or feet with which to respond to them. For instance: He explains to me, that the relation of propinquity is termed in Russian [. . .] and immediately I rise and ask in talmudic style and talmudic singsong:—“accepted” [. . .] “suppose it is so termed” [. . .] “however” [. . .] “what does it tell us” [. . .] With questions of this kind I would surround my mate daily as in a viper’s lair, until he got fed up and in irritation said:—Enough. I see your brain is capable only of Talmud, there is no capacity left for Russian grammar whatsoever. All your efforts are wasted, the Russian language you will never know. That’s what he said and he closed his volume. Thus ceased my lessons in the Russian language.161

By most accounts it was not the study of foreign languages alone that was long and exhausting. Equally difficult were the first efforts to read in these languages. Katzowitz in his reading-story, when describing his first attempts to read Turgenev, depicts some of the frustrations shared by many of his contemporaries:

I took one of Turgenev’s books to read, for his name was always being mentioned with praise by my mates. To my sorrow the language was still foreign to me, and I detested reading without understanding the subject matter. I bought the Russian-Yiddish dictionary by Lifshitz—a better dictionary than this did not exist in those days. I now read and look up entries in the dictionary all the time—read a few pages, recite them a few times; and when I finish the whole book I read it all over again; the third time I could read it almost without the aid of the dictionary.162
From that point on Katzowitz begins to read Russian literature continuously. He does not conceal his pleasure in reading poetry and novels, yet shows a clear preference for the radical Russian critics:

I read with great pleasure the poets Lermontov and Pushkin, enjoy the books of Tolstoy, Turgenev, and such; yet felt the true joy when I began to read the books of Dubrolyubov, Chernyshevsky, Pisarev and such, for these books demand great reflection. The Talmud had made me used to engaging in study, and to asking “what does this mean to tell us?”

The process of Laaz-reading described by Katzowitz is sufficiently typical of the enlightening Jews of his generation. Many readers relate that with the achievement of proficiency in the foreign language they began a period of continuous and focused reading in their areas of interest. Yet while many mention in their reading notes the masterpieces of German and Russian literature, are astounded by Heine, Goethe, Schiller, Turgenev, Lermontov, Gogol, Pushkin, and Tolstoy, still, they tend to assign most significance to their readings of critical, philosophical, and scientific literature. Chernowitz emphasizes the deep impact made on him by the books of Darwin and Buckle (in Russian translation); Ahad Ha’am tells of his special interest in works of English, French, and German philosophy and of his special debt to John Locke and David Hume. Yet most common are the reading notes concerning the radical Russian critics: Dmitry Pisarev, Nikolai Dubrolyubov, and Nikolay Chernyshevsky. Ahad Ha’am testifies that “in those days the young men would thirstily drink in the words” of Pisarev, and that he himself was deeply influenced by him. “I believed then,” he says, “that my eyes lit up and that here was the ‘last word’ of human enlightenment which my soul had thirsted for.”

Of the effect Pisarev had on Lilienblum one may learn from, among other things, the fact that Lilienblum soon began to translate the Russian radical’s article on Chernyshevsky’s Mah Laasot? (What Is to Be Done?) Equally deep and long lasting was Russian radicalism’s influence on YaHLeL, who based his own socialist world-view on it. In a chapter titled “The Shift to Socialism” he writes:

I read all of Pisarev’s books, which had a powerful effect on me, completely uprooted all my previous beliefs and lit up my eyes with a new light. With a hungry soul I swallowed books of criticism by Belinski, Dubrolyubov, and others. [. . .] Night and day I poured over political economics from Adam Smith up to and including Marx [. . .] and was especially captivated by Chernyshevsky’s articles, whose style and thought I adopted as my own.

In most of the stories of foreign-language reading, the advanced age of the readers is apparent. Unlike the descriptions of the initial stages of reading
Hebrew Haskalah literature, there is little if anything in these accounts of anxieties, doubts and misgivings. On the contrary: in most cases what is remarkable in these stories is the decisive and focused approach taken to the act of reading; there is no trace of the hurried shuttling between traditional literature and maskilic literature. These aspects of the Laaz reading-stories suggest that this episode in men’s reading-biographies was not integral to the process that shaped their world as maskilim: it would perhaps be better described as the final phase of the process of becoming a maskil and the beginning of a new era in their lives.

In this chapter I have broadly sketched some of the defining features of the reading-biographies of the Hebrew-reading men. Yet the chapter’s main objective has been to provide a basis for comparing the reading-biographies of women to those of men. As I shall try to show, the reading-biographies of women differ from those of men in almost every conceivable measure. The differences manifest themselves not only in the language, purpose, and subject matter of the works they read, but also in the conditions and circumstances of the reading. Unlike the men, most women were not forced to read in hiding. The strict oversight applied to men was not applied to women, and as I have already said, most women could read nearly any text they cared to. In these circumstances women developed habits of reading that differed from those of men, and the function reading filled in their lives was different as well. Women had no need for a “tutor” to introduce them to fine European literature or to secular Yiddish maskilic literature; and their shift from traditional literature to secular literature was not, in general, a dramatic or traumatic affair. As a result of all of these factors, the manner in which the reading women became exposed to the Haskalah and to modernity, and the way in which they influenced their immediate surroundings and the society at large, was distinctive. The reading-biographies of women are what will occupy us for the next chapters.
“This Whole Trouble Is the Fault of the Little Story Books”

Women Who Read Yiddish

I know that it was the novels alone which took me from darkness to light, and it is them alone I must thank for having opened my eyes struck with blindness. —SHOMER

The reading-biography of women Yiddish readers was not the complex, convoluted or fragmented affair that it was for the men. Gradually and without much fanfare, popular maskilic literature in Yiddish began to be integrated into the traditional repertoire of books for women, and on the whole women could read such texts unhindered. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century the works read were mainly those by Ayzik Meyer Dik (1814–1893), and in later decades the literature consisted mainly of novels by Nahum Meir Shaikevitch (Shomer, 1846–1905). There were some women who in addition read maskilic popular science articles and other writings by canonical Yiddish authors.

When women read traditional literature composed specifically for them, they were not reading as a form of study, and the “woman’s space” allowed them to shift freely from traditional to secular texts—to stories, legends, and novels. The fact that women were the ones to bring about the shift in Jewish society from reading in its traditional sense to reading in its modern sense is borne out by a linguistic phenomenon observed by Shmuel Niger. Niger notes that the term “reading”—in Yiddish, leyenen—initially meant reading the Torah scroll, and when the term first came to acquire its modern sense of reading for pleasure, its denotation was restricted to reading “light women’s books or inferior texts or tales: Mother would read the Tseina Ur’eina; Sister would read “A Thousand and One Nights” or other such tales, while Father would study a page of Talmud or a chapter from the Mishnah.”

The gender-based differences applied in the traditional school system and the difference between the cultural zones of men and women became apparent
in the different attitudes men and women took toward the act of reading belles lettres. Women were the first ones to read novels privately and for their own pleasure, at a time when men approached such literature with the study techniques they had acquired at the yeshiva. Pauline Wengeroff provides a nice illustration of this in her memoirs, where she tells how the men would pair off to read Schiller’s works in singsong and out loud; how they would pose difficulties to each other and come up with solutions as if unraveling a page of the Talmud, and how they hunted out the secret meanings, which, surely, they thought, hid underneath the words.3

It was the reading of novels, especially novels composed in Yiddish—those which men denied as having been formative for their enlightenment process—that was at the focus of the reading-biographies of the women Yiddish readers. These readers took the crucial step into modernity and secularism via “marginal texts”—simplistic, sentimental and sensational works, gratifying mainly the needs of entertainment or escapism. There were quite a few women for whom reading of this sort was a transitional phase on toward reading “high” or canonical maskilic texts, and who began to view reading as a tool for self-education and intellectual growth. Yet even the many women who did not broaden the scope of their reading and remained in the area of illumination of popular literature alone, absorbed maskilic values from such literature and had exposure to the secular and modern world-views contained in it. Hence, retracing the constituent portraits of the Yiddish-reading women helps to bring out the role played by popular literature in the processes of secularization and modernization, and it shows how maskilic notions came to infiltrate the masses that were not exposed to works of science, philosophy, or canonical literature.

Women Readers—“Old” and “New”

The memoirs describing the life of Jews in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century are replete with portrayals of Yiddish-reading women. These portraits, of grandmothers, mothers, or sisters reading books, are usually sketched in rapid and economical strokes, the quick traces of an image etched in memory. Yet despite the compression marking most of them, they reveal quite a bit about the reading habits of women and about the functions reading served in their lives.

Among portraits of Yiddish readers one routinely finds accounts meant to represent the mother or grandmother as “learned,”4 that is, as a literate woman who functioned as a “speaker” (zogerke) and read prayers and traditional women’s literature out loud to her illiterate peers.5 By their nature, these portrayals are of women who read communally, either in the women’s
section in the synagogue or in their homes. Shmuel Kaufman relates in his memoirs how women would get together to read in a group on Tisha Be’Av, and he tells how he saw his “speaker” mother reading verses of lamentation out loud to her friends:

And once—I must have been seven—I came home early on the night of Tisha Be’Av [...] and found the large room in our apartment full of women, all of them sitting on the floor and surrounding my mother, she reading out loud, by the light of a single candle, crying out the tales of the Destruction of the Temple from her book, and they responding to her with cries and sighs. [...] I squeezed into a corner and listened to the tales which my mother read in all their awful glory, even the glow of her tears I absorbed, and for the first time knew who this person my mother was. To this day, sixty years later, this image appears when I recall my mother.6

Many have viewed the very institution of the woman “speaker” as evidence of the extent of illiteracy among women. The practice of communal reading has been understood and represented as one meant to compensate women for their ignorance, since attending to the “speaker” allowed women who could not read to take part in synagogue prayers to fulfill the religious duties associated with reading.7 Yet it does not follow that all such “speakers” came from the more educated or “higher” classes of society. Shlomo Zaltzman, for instance, says that they arose, rather, from the “Cossack” line—the “women’s militia,” with its battle-seasoned women toughened in the struggle for survival. Moreover, the group portrait of such women suggests that the institution of communal reading built communities of women as well as produced leaders for them—communities bonded by solidarity and mutual support, and leaders who would fight for the rights of their group:

The women of valor of that period, who were called “Cossacks,” were of various types and came from various walks of life. Some special inner force developed in a woman of this kind and raised her in a particular direction over and above her breeding. This power became a generative force and organized a group of women around her. In certain domains she displayed a phenomenal genius and remarkable talents for diverse forms of activity.

Such a woman was at one and the same time a housewife, the educator of her children, and above all, a breadwinner. She was in most cases a shopkeeper, spoke “Goyish” like a true Goy, figured balance sheets like a certified and seasoned accountant, and terrorized not only her husband and children but also any customer who tried to leave her shop without making a purchase, as well as the other male and female shopkeepers who it seemed to her were trying to compete with her. She would sit in her shop from dawn to dusk, in summer and winter, and sell, darn socks and even pluck feathers. Her mouth flowed with strange and terrible curses. Her talents, which could not develop in a pleasing direction, burst out through twisted pipes and found expression in the flood of her speech. She served as the central station for gossip, which too was the result of her need to eke out a living.8

And among these women, as among the men, there were “side-takers.” Such a woman of valor would sit like an iron wall to protect the women whose side she took. And heaven help any husband whose wife set loose against him such a “Cossack,” who
was ready to slice him like a fish. The protective instinct toward a woman abused by her
husband was, in her, especially well developed.

From this line of “Cossacks” came most of the prayer “speakers.” The whole group
of women listening to such a “speaker” made up her “side.” She not only goaded her
group of women to tears in the women’s section, she was also their protector and con-
soler. The same mouth that spewed curses on matters of income, was also the one that
poured out milk and honey for her female audience, to remove anguish from their
hearts.

The name of such a woman of valor would remain in the town’s memory for gener-
ations. There were grandchildren and great-grandchildren called by their relation to
her—the grandson of Feyge-Bashe, the grand-daughter of Treine—when it was
known that Feyge-Bashe and Treine were “Cossack” women.

A fascinating image of such a “Cossack” was the widow Tcherne, a woman
etched in Shmaryahu Levin’s memory. This woman used to take advantage of
her right to “obstruct Torah-reading” in the synagogue, and did so, most often,
for the sake of her comrades:

This routine of obstructing the Torah-reading was practiced well by the widow
Tcherne, and it is she who raised it to the level of an art, and moreover even surpassed
the men in this. It should be noted, that she seldom entered claims on her own behalf—
usually she argued for others—and the audience knew full well that this Tcherne was not
some woman from the marketplace and wasn’t about to be frightened by the arguments
and stratagems of the praying [men]: their threats were of no avail and they could not
remove her by force from the synagogue. Once Tcherne had obstructed the reading she
would not budge until she was promised her claim would be honored in full.

This time the widow Tcherne was using all the weapons in her arsenal—her sharp
and venomous tongue and her immense body. Never one to especially trust abstract jus-
tice, she stood and adopted special procedures for herself which she had refined for ob-
structing the prayer. When she had called the attention of the praying public to herself
by strong poundings on the platform, she jumped alertly (which did not correspond
well with her broad and thick body) toward the ark, placed herself on the stairs and it
was no longer possible to budge her from her site and open the ark. Like a wall she stood
in place, mighty and brave and not a man there was who would dare try to squeeze by
her, lest he might receive a gift of righteous measure from her hand [. . .] or especially
from her sharp tongue. She never employed totally pure language and she never took
pity on a man’s dignity, so long as she was fighting for truth and justice [. . .] And if she
should chance upon a matter that was just and kosher in purpose she was not satisfied to
sound out her claim merely once, but stood and poured forth all her fury on the leaders
of the community for all the evils ever done in Svislovitz from the beginning of time to
this day. And she would not budge from there until the town elders promised her justice
and that they would remedy the ill immediately after the Sabbath.10

Study of the portraits of the reading women suggests that the custom of
communal reading filled sociocultural functions beyond those associated with
the illiteracy of women, or even with community solidarity. Quite a few ac-
counts of communal reading are of women who read in the company of their
children and in this way drew them into their spiritual and religious world.
Special emphasis is given to the role played by women in telling stories from
the Bible, the Midrash, and the Aggadot—that portion of the Talmud that “the great rabbis didn’t pay attention to.”

Readings in the company of children figure prominently in accounts that portray reading-women, mainly because of the sharp impressions they left in the teller’s minds. Ahad Ha’am writes that one of three “fragments of memory” left from the era of his “first awakening of consciousness” is associated with his grandmother, who read out her books beside him:

And this too I remember: when my grandmother would read out in jargon the weekly Torah portion from the *Taytsh Humash* and the rest of the homiletics, I would love then to sit by her side, and she would read out loud, so that I too might hear, for I did not yet then know myself how to read.

Zvi Scharfstein too, when sketching his mother’s portrait, begins his story by describing the experience of shared reading, lingering on his impressions of the amazing tales he heard from her:

On Sabbath mornings, when the male members of the household had gone off to pray at the beit midrash, I the little one stayed at home; sometimes in the afternoon, when my father laid down to rest or paid a visit to the home of one of his friends—my mother would sit down at the table to read the *Tseina Ur’eina*. Sometimes there would be a neighbor or two who would enter and sit by my mother to hear the contents of the weekly portion. I too joined them, pressing against my mother, listening to her read in a voice which was almost a whisper. It seemed wonderful, stories drawn sometimes from a distant world, from the land of donkeys and camels, with curious affairs of the natives, who would buy human beings and sell them as slaves and female servants; and drawn sometimes from the life of the reality nearby and conducted in conversations very like the ones I would hear from the adults.

This stress on the women’s custom of reading communally is not evidence that they did not also read in private. More than a few narrators describe their mothers and grandmothers reading the *Tseina Ur’eina* or the women’s homiletics to themselves and wailing over the *tkhines* of Sarah Bat Tovim. Shmuel Kaufman, for example, who puts much emphasis on communal reading by women, also highlights his mother’s habit of reading alone: “More than once I heard her reading to herself, in a heart-rending tune, each and every Sabbath, from the *Tseina Ur’eina* and the *Kav Hayashar*.”

In all the portraits of reading-women thus far presented, the act of reading is described as serving a religious function. It was traditional literature for women that women read, and their reading was devotional: it let them honor a religious duty and it was a means by which they could give expression to their piety. In reading the weekly portions in *Tseina Ur’eina* together with fables from the Talmud and Midrash they fulfilled their obligations for Torah reading. The *tkhines* were their prayer books, and homiletic tracts like *Shevet Musar*, *Kav Hayashar*, and *Menorat Hamaor*, taught them to walk the straight
Books such as these struck fear into them with their tales of ghosts, other-worldly spirits, and the terrors of hell and preached reverence for God and observance of his commandments. Likewise, the custom of reading on Sabbath Eve and on holidays, when the men had gone off to the synagogue, points to the religious function filled by such reading, which shone with the special glow of the sanctified time.

It would seem, therefore, that for the entire course of the nineteenth century, most Yiddish reading women read traditional literature to fill a religious need. Unlike the men who were becoming maskilim, the women’s readings were not accompanied by religious doubts or skepticisms, but rather expressed their devotional purity and at times even outright religious zeal. Zaltzman, for example, contemplates the role played by the homiletics literature in reinforcing the zealotry of the women, who knew only the “tales of hellish infernos and afflictions”:

The small town woman would be quite strict in all matters of religion and would take care not to transgress anything by even a hair, if there was any threat of such, for fear she would heaven forbid in the roll of souls come to poverty and destitution, distress and hardship or transmigrate to another state of crawling or swarming insects or be shaken in the slingshot without being able to find tranquility for her soul for thousands of thousands and tens of thousands upon tens of thousands of years. She would observe, therefore, the 613 commandments in all their fine points and particulars; to leave a single hair of hers uncovered under her wig, or to expose a sleeve, or to transport on the Sabbath even her prayerbook, or to infringe the merest Jewish custom seemed to her like a violation of “Thou shall not kill.” To “swipe some sanctity”—that was an indescribable pleasure for her.

The maskilic critique of the women’s homiletics was centered on, among other things, the fact that it helped entrench superstitions and fostered women’s beliefs in demons, spirits, and so forth. But reading the traditional literature often had other effects. In certain cases it aroused vaguely “feminist” sentiments, as Shmaryahu Levin intimates, when he tells how his “speaker” mother would not eat on the Fast of Esther “and moreover took special pride in the fact that this fast was instituted thanks to and in honor of a woman.” Sometimes, reading the traditional literature aroused dissent or frustrations among “scholarly” women. Baruch Halevi Epstein relates that his “scholarly” Aunt Reyne Batyah, a rabbi’s wife and daughter of the Gaon Rabbi Yitzhak of Volozhin, sunk herself almost obsessively in the question of women’s exclusion from Torah study. She was extremely knowledgeable on the subject and held fierce debates with her nephew on the position of the rabbis and of Jewish law as regards women. Epstein tells how his aunt’s traditional literature reading was merely a desperate and futile attempt to find a religious sanction for women to be taught Torah:
And it was thus her custom to sit always near the winter oven in the dining room, even in summer, with a table in front of her loaded with various books: the Bible, Mishnah, Ein Yaakov, various Midrashic texts, Menorat Hamaor, Kav Hayshar, Zemach David, Shevet Yehudah, a few other books of this kind and Aggadic books, and all her thoughts and abiding interests with all her senses and emotions—are in the books, and her hand does not waver almost from them [. . .] More than once I heard her grousing and complaining [. . .] at the bitter fate and the narrow share women had in this world, for [. . .] they were denied obligations for the whole class of schedule-bound commandments, such as phylacteries, prayer shawls, tabernacles, palm branches and a great many others; and among the grudge-filled rumblings there would rise and burst forth a shrill complaint of bitter jealousy at the men who had won it all . . . But more than this she was concerned and ashamed about the debased honor of women and their diminished status owing to the fact that it was forbidden to have them be taught Torah.21

And once she called out with bitter feeling, with a feeling arising from deep discontent, and said to me: “Woe be it for us women, woe be our fate! Not only do the men sneer at our value in comparison with their own, but we are not even fit in their eyes to be treated [. . .] as if we walked on all fours!22

To prove her case Reyne Batyah hastily took up the Mishnah Tractate Seder Moed, and showed her young nephew that the rabbis of the Talmud “were not bothered” to have the laws concerning animals precede the laws concerning women, for they asked first “what is a beast allowed to carry [on the Sabbath]” and only afterward inquire “what is a woman allowed to carry.”23 Aunt Reyne Batyah’s furious protest carried subversive tones despite being religiously motivated, yet all this woman wished for was to study Torah like one of the men.

It would, however, be a mistake to suppose that the Yiddish readers’ bookshelf held only traditional literature, just as it would be a mistake to suppose that the function reading filled in their lives was an exclusively religious one. Buki Ben Yogli, for example, found among his grandmother’s homiletics and tzkhanes also “two story books in the Jewish language: Centura Ventura and Maaseh Bove.”24 These books, which awakened in him “the evil instinct for fairy tales,” he describes as follows:

The hero of the Centura Ventura story already knew to fly beneath the heavens well before the Zeppelins and aeroplanes had been born to the earth. He conducted his aerial journeys while riding on a very large bird which carried him over wild fields and forests, over valleys and mountains and over oceans and deserts. All the wonders he beheld on his journey, all the miracles and marvels that occurred, the pen does not suffice to write nor the mouth to relate. [. . .] The subject of the Maaseh Bove tale surely is known to all, and if they do not know it, then too they have not missed a thing. For surely it is a Goyish legend. What is told therein are tales of wars and bloodshed, and these matters are in any case not an issue for Jews . . .25

The special interest this description by Buki Ben Yogli has for us is that it highlights the difference between the reading habits of men, even the boys among them, and the reading habits of women. Evidently such non-Jewish
tales as *Maaseh Bove* and *Centura Ventura* could take a respectable place among the grandmother’s Jewish books, and her reading of the “fairy tales” was not thought to be capitulating to an evil instinct.\(^{26}\) Yet already in his boyhood Buki Ben Yogli knew he was not allowed to read fairy tales, and that when he actually read them he was succumbing to temptation.

The “woman’s space” that allowed fairy tales to be present on the grandmother’s bookshelf also enabled a change in the reading habits of the women who succeeded her. Quite a few Yiddish readers took advantage, consciously or not, of the liberty this space offered them, and shifted gradually and with utter ease from reading religious literature for women to reading fairy tales, and from there to reading novels, and onward to reading the maskilic periodicals. The shift in reading habits was enabled by not only the intimate nature of the domestic sphere, concealed from the eye of society, but also from the society’s tendency not to oversee women’s reading. As I have already noted, the contempt in which traditional society held women’s intellectual capacities was expressed in, among other things, the permissive attitude it displayed toward their reading habits. By contrast with the severe restrictions on men in all that concerned texts of “filth and abomination,” many women could read such literature almost without obstruction.

On his mother’s bookshelf, Shomer found “the tales of ‘A Thousand and One Nights’ in Jewish Ashkenazi language” \[that is, Yiddish\] and was forced to read the book in hiding lest he arouse the wrath of his mother and melamed.\(^ {27}\) Meanwhile the mother, like the majority of Yiddish readers, read the book avidly and didn’t view her act as any sort of daring breach. Not only did she purchase the book and bring it into her home, she even shared her reading impressions with the family:

> My mother very much liked to read out stories and every Sabbath and holiday recounted in the ears of her brothers and sisters vast and lengthy tales. From the moment she began to speak I could not take my eyes off her face. I swallowed every sound leaving her mouth, I was ready to give over my soul as ransom for each and every word and afterward could repeat everything I had heard without missing a single utterance.\(^ {28}\)

From this account one can learn something about how the change in the reading patterns of women occurred and what effect this change had on their immediate surroundings. The grandmothers’ *Centura Ventura* and *Maaseh Bore* began to be joined by secular books in Yiddish—translated from other languages, revised, or original works—and these books even made their way to the sacred realm of Sabbath eve readings. The passion women had for reading, and the freedom they were granted to pursue this passion, made it possible for secular literature to invade the realm of the sacred and to draw to itself a share of the glow of sanctity, or at least of the festive atmosphere.\(^ {29}\)
What further eased women’s ability to shift from reading sacred literature to reading secular literature in Yiddish was the similarity in tone between the two in the early days of Yiddish literature. Niger points out the close correspondence between the “feminine style” in Ayzik Meyer Dik’s works and the “feminine style” of the homiletics literature for women from the same period. According to Niger, despite Dik's expressed misgivings about traditional literature for women, he himself was its style’s inheritor—the style of the feminine Ivri-Taytsh—and many sentences of his works could have blended seamlessly into the women's homiletics of his day. Niger adds that secular Yiddish literature evolved gradually and naturally from Dik’s works through those of his student Shomer and on to Dinessohn’s works, an evolution that kept pace with the changes in the constituent portraits of the reading women. Dik’s output corresponded to the world of the old generation of women readers, whereas Shomer’s works were addressed to the “new readers.”

Niger illustrates these two types of readers’ portraits and the gap between them by citing two stories by Y. L. Peretz. Representing the “Old Reader” is the figure of “Sorele the Perfect” heroine of Shabbat Shehushbeta. Sorele, whose daughter has just married, passionately reads Tsieina Ur’eina and the women’s homiletics and believes in the factual existence of the world described therein. Sin and profanation are genuine terrors for her, and she demands strict religious observance and moral discipline from her daughter so that she might avoid having hell as her destiny:

And Sorele is indeed perfect. She knows the Tsieina Ur’eina by heart. She remembers every tale from Kav Hayashar, Reshit Hochmah and Nofet Tzufim; assisted by all the Holy books the pathways of Hell are as familiar to her as her hometown’s alleys; she knows all its nooks and crannies: where the bathhouses are with the evildoers soaking in boiling tar; where the kettles are, burning over a black fire with ghouls roasting souls on spits, like chickens, or among the coals, like potatoes . . . And she knows for which causes souls are roasted, for which hung, for which shaken like the palm-frond between heaven and earth, for which the skin is flayed . . .

For the contrasting portrait of the “new reader,” Niger draws on Peretz’s very short sketch, “The Reading Woman.” Here the reader is a young woman from an impoverished family facing the hardships of daily life, who finds refuge from her barren existence in a tempestuous love story. By the light of a candle, to the sound of her snoring parents and brother who sleep with her in the same room, she, the eldest daughter, reads a book:

Her red hair runs wild and scattered over her shoulder, down both sides of her greenish face—the clue that her diet consists chiefly of potatoes. Yet the hands tremble, the heart pounds, the large eyes burn and the bosom heaves and sinks like a wave . . .

Awesome is the book she is reading . . .

The fair lovers have parted . . . robbers have come . . . and behold the viper. Lo—the viper!
And the candle flickers, in a minute the candle will run out, and she will not know what ever became of the viper . . .

These two types of reading women cited in Peretz’s works help convey a sense of the transition women effected in the middle of the nineteenth century from reading communally to reading in private, from reading to meet religious obligations to reading for pleasure, and from reading sacred literature to reading fairy tales and the various kinds of sentimental and sensational novels.

*The Pact between Popular Yiddish Literature’s Authors and the Reading Women*

The changes in the portraits and reading habits of Yiddish readers began to be apparent around the 1860s. The transformations occurring in this period in women’s status and education were reflected also in the debates on “the Jewish women question,” carried in the pages of the Yiddish newspaper *Kol Mevaser* between 1862 and 1871. These debates, which had the active participation of reading and writing women, centered on the need to expand women’s education and on the importance of the female reading public to the Haskalah movement’s aims. Some of the debaters who made the case for writing in Yiddish argued that, among other things, while Yiddish was inferior as a language it was better for writing in than Russian or Hebrew as it does not arouse “suspicion and resistance in women who observe the tradition.” Indeed, the discourse conducted on and off the pages of *Kol Mevaser* in the 1860s helps clarify the circumstances and considerations that caused Yiddish authors to decide to target the female reading public and to come to view it as a significant tool for propagation of the Haskalah.

Yet the authors did not readily shift to Yiddish composition. The imagery they used to portray Hebrew, Yiddish, and their relations carried gender and sexual connotations. Hebrew was the exclusively “masculine” language and Yiddish the “feminine” and inferior one. A man who wrote in Yiddish and identified himself with this language and its female audience felt he was threatening his sexual identity seemed to be adopting a female identity. Something of this blurring of the gender boundaries associated with writing for women and in a woman’s language is unintentionally voiced by Shomer in his autobiography, when he is recollecting a distant childhood memory. Shomer tells the anecdote as a report of childhood follies, yet it is hard not to view it as a sort of “return of the repressed”:

There once passed before the window of our *melamed’s* house a bride and groom on the way to their wedding ceremony with many in-laws following after them, and I said then to my mate: when I grow up I’ll refuse to be a groom, I’ll only be a bride. All the boys couldn’t stop laughing and they pointed out to me that a boy could not become a
bride. Yet I did not believe what they said and once justified myself by arguing that every youth was given the choice of becoming either a bride or a groom, and every maiden was given the right to be a groom.  

Something similar in significance seems implicit in a remark Peretz Hirschbein (1880–1948) ascribes to Yehoshua Mezach (1834–1917), a Yiddish writer who, like Shomer, wrote hundreds of novels and fairy tales for women. Hirschbein relates that he met Mezach on the streets of Vilna and questioned him sarcastically:  

“Tell me please, Mister Mezach, for indeed you write Yiddish *tkhines* for women; and you are the one who wrote the *tkhines* of Sarah Bat Tovim; pray tell me, I do beseech you, when did she, I mean Sarah Bat Tovim, when did she live?”  

“I am Sarah Bat Tovim,” he replied with a cynical grin, winking impishly.  

And early in the anti-hasidic satire *Dos Poylishe Yingl*, by Joel Linetzky (1839–1901), the threat to the narrator’s masculine identity is likewise implicitly treated. The book starts out with a tale by the narrator, who listens in on a conversation between his parents while he is still an embryo in his mother’s womb. He hears his father tell his mother that despite the doctor’s insinuations she was about to give birth to a girl. For thus had the tzaddik prophesied, said the father, and thus one could count on it to be. Upon hearing these words the narrator-embryo is seized with a terrible panic: the tzaddik may yet cause a miracle to occur, may change his sex while he is still in his mother’s womb and have him turn out as a girl.  

A further hint of the authors’ struggle against the ill effects of Yiddish writing on a “masculine” sexual identity can be seen in the Yiddish writers’ practice of composing a poem in Hebrew for the frontispiece to their works. This convention, meant to demonstrate the writer’s competence as a proper and upstanding Hebrew author, functions equally as an affirmation of his masculine identity.  

Sexual metaphors serve Mendele as well for conveying his reticence toward writing in Yiddish, and he too wields his discourse in a way that reaffirms his masculinity. Using heavily allusive language, Mendele hints that he viewed his transition to Yiddish as the sexual sin of a man who spends his potency on an inferior and contemptible woman:  

And our authors, those lords of the tongue who said to our language, our Holy Tongue, let us be Masters, for what is to become of us and our people, glanced at the Jewess [Yiddish] with pride and contempt and greatly spurned her. And if there was one in town or two in the family who sometimes took stock of this accursed one and wrote a few small things, why then, they kept their words well cloaked and hid beneath their prayer-garments, lest their loins be glimpsed and their honor turned to shame. And how great therefore was my discomfiture when I discerned, that were I to stray with this stranger I should trade my dignity for disgrace, and then when I
heard of my infamy reported by my admirers the “friends of the Hebrew tongue,” my disgrace and ignominy [spread] among the Jews, for having passed my might to this foreign lady.\textsuperscript{42}

Even the fruitful shift to writing in Yiddish, in the 1860s, is described by Mendele in erotic terms that affirm his male potency:\textsuperscript{43} “From that time on my soul desired the Jewess and I took her as my permanent wife, I ‘hastened to have her provided with her perfumes and her portions’ and she became a graceful and beautiful matron and bore me many sons.”\textsuperscript{44}

Despite the numerous obstacles the Yiddish authors had to face, including that of addressing women in their “feminine” language, the decision to write in Yiddish was made—a calculated decision to win over the female reading public. Yosef Klauzner discloses a private conversation in which Mendele told him that the reason he shifted to Yiddish composition had to do with his desire to win the tribute of young women, who knew no other language:

I heard this directly from Mendele [. . .] An artist wants to be stroked by a girl of seventeen; but girls of seventeen who can read Hebrew did not then exist. Hebrew literature was then a literature for males alone. Both virgins and young women read simple Yiddish—and their applause is especially dear to a creator with the most poetic soul.\textsuperscript{45}

The humorous tone of these lines does not belie their grain of truth. Klauzner too thought “there was much honesty in this spontaneous confession,” and listed the attentions of the reading women as one of the reasons for Mendele’s shift from Hebrew to Yiddish.

One of the first maskilim to shift to Yiddish was Ayzik Meyer Dik: he too felt he was sulllying his pen by writing in this language; and he too felt the apologetic urge of self-justification.\textsuperscript{46} While his list of reasons for his shift includes the difficulties of composing in Hebrew and the glacial responses of critics, he also notes, importantly, the need to educate the women and broad masses who know neither Hebrew nor any language other than Yiddish:

The author in Hebrew, who is condemned to write in this abbreviated and deficient language which has already ceased to walk upon the earth, in a language its own people have rejected and whose features have been distorted through useless instructions and wasted explications, [must face critics] who wait like a bear in ambush for every latest book, rejoice over every error, trumpet the author as a thief on the pages of the periodicals and pass him back and forth under the rod of criticism till his hands weaken and he ceases to give birth, retreats [. . .] This I have seen since I began bringing to print everything I could write in the Hebrew language, and although I have sullied my pen I have told various tales composed in the language now spoken to our shame and disgrace by our people dwelling among the land (Lithuania, Poland, Russia). I wrote such for the benefit of the maidens of my people whose eyes are yet raised (to the Taytsh Pentateuch) which is written in a defective diction and contains expressions not fit to be heard by women and honest maidens; not so are my stories written in high style full of morals, clean of all matters sordid or disreputable, which will instruct girls in the
graceful laws to walk the straight path and to avoid all evil, wrapped every one in the antique garb which they so love, my people.\textsuperscript{47}

There is no doubt that a large share of Dik’s reading public consisted of women, as publisher Shlomo Shreberk attests in his memoirs: “The masses, and especially the women, would swallow his tales like first fruits before summer [. . .] A few of his stories in which love rejoices captivated the girls who would read his books through with bated breath.”\textsuperscript{48} Dik himself gave expression to this thought, when he plumed himself on the extensive sales of his books and the prices readers were willing to pay for them:

I wrote more than two hundred compositions in jargon [. . .], half of which were published; some were reprinted several times and the rest are still in print at the publishers, in Vilna, in Warsaw; and each printing run yields no less than six thousand exemplars, and for all that [many titles] cannot be easily found for they are pounced upon immediately, and some of them may not be traced as the tracks lead off to America, to Australia, to the Holy Land. In the Caucasus, in Paris, in England, a man who desires them will pay seven times their price.\textsuperscript{49}

By the concepts of the period the extent of Dik’s reading public was especially impressive. His success caused the publishing house of Rom Widow and Sons to purchase the rights to his works in 1865 and commit to paying him a monthly stipend in perpetuity. The managers hoped sales of Dik’s works would put them in the black and let them finance their grandiose ambitions for turning out an edition of the Talmud.\textsuperscript{50} The vast increase in Dik’s readership occurring around the 1860s was related to the potential he recognized in the female reading public and his decision to tap it. This decision involved broadening the range of literary genres and switching from compositions in the style of the old canon to the light secular fiction more suited, Dik believed, to women’s current tastes. It was no accident that so often in his works the narrator addresses the woman reader directly, openly and intimately: “Mayn Tayere Lëzerin” [My dear (female) reader].\textsuperscript{51}

Yet despite the rationale there is for addressing his female readers thus intimately, the constant use of “my dear reader” remains perplexing, as it suggests that male readers in the potential reading public were being deliberately jettisoned. It is hard to ignore the fact that an express and exclusive appeal to the audience of women could well make any men who read the text feel estranged, could cause them to feel they were peeking in on a place that wasn’t theirs or were caught doing something that didn’t accord with their dignity. If Dik did not want to abandon the male reader, as he himself says, the question to be asked is: why does he deem it necessary to distance the men from himself in this way and to openly and explicitly address the female audience?\textsuperscript{52} Or if this form of address was merely a literary convention inherited from traditional mass literature for women, why does Dik not elect to break with this
Why does he repeatedly remind his reader that he has entered a region of literature meant for feeble minds, and why does he only accentuate the "feminine" and inferior reputation Yiddish secular literature already had?

It seems to me that the answer to these questions has first and foremost to do with the status of Yiddish secular literature, which all sectors of Jewish society deemed illegitimate. On the one side stood traditional society, which treated all secular literature as "filth and abomination" and did not allow men to read or write any of it; and on the other side stood the maskilim, for whom reading or writing in Yiddish was not any sort of thing to be proud of. Against this background of a Yiddish secular literature delegitimized from all quarters, Dik's addressing the reading women public seems a brilliant ploy for earning legitimacy. For the maskilic set, addressing women in this language could be justified on the grounds that it was urgent they be enlightened by maskilic literature and—however inferior—this was the only language they knew. As for the traditionalists, at least the women there could be reached by virtue of their inferiority; and by means of the women one could break a path through to the male reading public as well. Paradoxically, it was just because Yiddish novels were stamped as marginal by being aimed at women that men could still peek at such books behind their backs and treat their actions as of no consequence. Men could always sheepishly excuse their reading by saying it was women who brought this trash home and it fell into their hands through no fault of their own. Explicit confirmation of such a conjecture is given by Mendele in his autobiographical Reshimot Letoldotai:

In my day the Yiddish language was an empty vessel, good for nothing except much ridiculous nonsense and fanciful froth made by anonymous seducers in an absurd dictionary; and the poor among the masses would read it without comprehension, while the rest of the nation, though they couldn't read or speak any other language, were ashamed to read in this one, lest their crime be publicly known, for it carried the stamp of boorishness. And if someone had succumbed to the temptation to read a Yiddish composition, he would joke to himself and tell himself the excuse: I am reading after-handedly "women's books," the follies of females, of the feeble-minded, for my amusement.

There are, indeed, quite a few accounts suggesting that despite their contempt for "inferior women's literature," men read it avidly through the twilight hours. Dik appreciated this fact and decided to penetrate the male readership by means of the women and under their auspices. Having the shelter of the women turned out to be essential for rendering the new kinds of literature, mainly novels, kosher and acceptable, as the range of Yiddish literary offerings broadened. The women readers thus supplied Dik and his successors with both a pretext and a conduit—one through which the range of literary kinds could be expanded, habits of reading artistic fiction nurtured, and the cloaked maskilic ideas it contained, propagated.
The creators of Yiddish popular literature expressed their qualms over the inferiority of their works also in their ambivalence toward their constituent audience, chiefly the women in it. Authors on the one hand often repeatedly apologized for writing in Yiddish and to a female audience, while on the other hand they cultivated their image of creators of works for women and enjoyed the affections that women returned to them. Many of their novels show clear signs of the pact forged with the reading woman. These novels suggest that the authors did not entirely disparage women's talents, but viewed women mainly as couriers who would bring their ideas to the men, the more important target audience.

This ambivalence toward women in general and toward the reading woman in particular is clearly expressed in Dik's *A Maskils Utopye*. In that book, Dik has his “dear reader” pose him questions to which he should like to offer his response—to her and to his other readers. If he is writing in Yiddish, is that because he can’t write in Hebrew? And if he addresses his books to women is that because “women are feeble-minded”? To these questions Dik replies with a firm “No.” He writes in Yiddish, he makes clear, because even among the scholars there are many who do not know Hebrew, and whoever seeks to appeal universally, as does he, to men and women, yeshiva students and “common” people alike, must write in this language. Dik’s “dear reader” form of address thus comes phrased with a supplementary apology and disclosure of his device. He asks her to forgive him for writing to her and for writing in Yiddish, yet at the same time tells her why it is she whom he must address. Either—or, he explains it to her. Either your husband (or brother in-law) is enlightened and worldly, in which case he is a maskil like myself and you have no need of “my babblings.” Or—he is an orthodox fanatic, a man from the bygone era who won’t tolerate opinions different from his own, in which case he will treat my books, like the rest of the Haskalah’s works, as “extraneous texts,” and will refuse to read them. Yet perhaps he will take my book into his hands after all; that would indicate he has developed some degree of tolerance. In such a case he will read on, and though perhaps he may sense certain misgivings he will be free to extract whatever good he finds in them, while disregarding the rest.  

Dik thus does not conceal the tactical aspect in his addressing of women, yet that does not mean he regarded women merely instrumentally. He is entirely serious about sharing his maskilic vision with his dear reader and sets out for her his picture of the future Jewish society. In one of the nine points of this vision, Dik comments that in the enlightened and perfected society women will return to filling traditional family roles and will cease to manage stalls, wander the markets, and bear the burden of earning an income. The fact that this maskilic vision is directed at women suggests that Dik viewed these readers as partners and agents for promoting his views throughout Jewish society. He “drafted” women to promulgate his ideas and informed them
that with the general change in the structure of Jewish society a change in their own status could likewise be looked forward to. With, as backdrop, the maskilic aspirations of recovering the patriarchal order and restoring to men their lost authority, it comes as no surprise that the enlightened society toward which Dik strives is built on the format of the European patriarchal bourgeoisie. This society, so Dik presaged to the women, will return them to their “natural” space, that is the domestic space, and redeem them not only from the “moral degeneracy” caused by having to work in the stall and the marketplace but also from over-education, which in his view estranges women from their families and from their “true” functions. As we shall see below, a similar conception—maskilic, bourgeois, and patriarchal—is prominent in Shomer’s novels as well. He too cultivates an ideal of a woman who is educated to the extent appropriate for a female and not more so, and for him too the model woman is one who manages household affairs with a refined European taste, devotes herself to her husband and family, and accepts the authority of a husband more enlightened and better educated than she.

It may, thus, be said that the gender politics of popular Yiddish literature was a convoluted and tactical affair, full of contradictory sentiments about its constituents, notably its female ones. Yet this literature nevertheless did much to popularize maskilic ideas and to propagate them among women and among Jewish society as a whole. Dik’s ability to win the hearts of his readers and to spread his maskilic messages so widely derived in the main from the conservative veneer with which his messages were coated. His first compositions, aimed at the “old reader,” made it through to her by means of their continuity in style, format, and subject matter with traditional popular literature. Dik’s intent in these early works was to supplant the homiletics, the tales about holy figures and the ancient *tkhines* with newer books, better suited to modern times and to maskilic ideas. Then, toward the 1860s, in synchrony with the shifts taking place in the character and dimensions of the reading public, especially the female public, Dik’s output began to diversify in terms of content and forms. It departed from forms modeled on the old traditional canon and began to incorporate maskilic genres as well—allegoric legends, didactic fables, historical tales seasoned with Aggadic motifs, ethnographic accounts, tales of adventure and voyages, satires, parodies, and sentimental novels faithfully patterned on the mold of romance. Most of these works were based on materials drawn from various sources, some Jewish and some European, which were then creatively reprocessed; but all were geared toward upholding morality, expanding knowledge, uprooting superstition, and disseminating moderate maskilic ideas.

The vast diversity in genre and theme that characterizes Dik’s writing in this period does not permit discussion in this context of the effects each genre had on the women readers. No doubt some of the influence on women involved
the maskilic themes that filtered through genres such as historical tales about a distant or exotic world or satirical accounts of a familiar and close reality. What is incontrovertible, however, is that by most reports from the period, Dik’s largest successes with the female public derived from his novels. It may, of course, be argued with some justice that such reports by men express stereotypes of the limited intellectual or spiritual horizons of women; but it is hard to dismiss the fact that these novels really were enormously popular among women readers. The great demand for the novels, and the attendant commercial success, were indeed among the factors that motivated Dik to include the kind of love stories in his repertoire that did not always live up to his didactic standards.

As David Roskies has shown, Dik’s oeuvre comprises love stories whose historical settings are meant to compensate for the somewhat questionable quality of the plots; exotic novels set in distant and fantastical lands, and novels of the “bourgeois exemplum” type, whose heroines come from the upper-middle classes of Jewish society. Women took center stage in these novels, and in the rich cast of characters drawn from every social class, a clear distinction was maintained between the Decent Women and the Sinners. The fortune tellers and prostitutes, women from the lowest levels of society, were seen as beyond redemption; servant girls were viewed as “captured innocents” of sorts whose fate might yet be altered, and the working women found in stalls, storefronts, and markets were largely considered to be women prone to a life of crime and sin. Contrasting with all of these were the women of the urban aristocracy, who served as a sort of model for the correct balance between innocent religious faith and modern enlightenment.

The array of sinful women in these novels was a reflection of Dik’s critique of the social order of traditional society. In his opinion, the gender-role reversal was to blame for the idleness of men and is what has forced women to earn a living in ways that have led to their moral decline. Yet it cannot really be said that Dik displays any special empathy for these women. Dik had an abhorrence of women who controlled their husbands, and of “over-educated” women who had abandoned their religion and their family obligations; every controlling and dominating woman is a travesty of the order of nature, a sort of hybrid, not quite man or woman.

Consequently, in both the type of women Dik presents and in his plot sequences, this maskilic, bourgeois, and paternalistic ethos is evident. The ideal woman is the one who is religiously faithful and obedient, who protects her sons from the rising tides of secularization; and it is the illiterate women, the lower class girls, who give in to their instinctual cravings. The ideal marriage is a marriage within one’s class. The appropriate match for a girl from an enlightened family is a maskil, and a daughter from the lower classes ought by rights to marry a man from the same state. To put it mildly, one may say that many of
the women’s images Dik proffers are not terribly flattering to women. They present women as creatures destined for sin, and when they do sin they earn their just punishments. By contrast, the model of the bourgeois woman who is educated “proportionately,” who lives a life of contentment and leisure with her enlightened husband, is advanced by Dik and meant to be regarded by his readers as the ideal worth striving toward.67

While Dik’s social vision was conservative in character, it is not as though his works were uncritical of traditional society, and when he condemned the marriage customs and the values on which they were based women could strongly identify with these charges. When he described the romantic plots and the hardships the lovers had to go through on the road to consummating their love, this helped legitimize romantic love, if only for couples from the same class. His attacks on marriages for money and of forced marriages between young women and older men could not have failed to arouse a sense of identification and protest in women. A story in which a woman marries an old man against her will, and later is seen eloping with a young lover, would have done its work regardless of the opinions the author or his readers may have held as to his characters’ sinfulness.68

Dik’s sentimental novels did much to prepare the ground for the appearance of Shomer.69 The two, each in his day, were the most admired and remembered women’s authors in the Yiddish-reading world. Yet by contrast with Dik, who primarily addressed the “old reading woman,” Shomer addressed the “new reading woman.” In terms of genre, Shomer’s output is less diverse than Dik’s, yet he too tried his hand at an assortment of literary styles: at short stories, novels, and plays for the Yiddish theater.70 Shomer’s short stories tended to be folklorist and moralistic; often they were humorous or satirical pieces. His novels included works of historical fiction, novels with plots set in various foreign countries and novels about Jewish life in the Pale of Settlement. The story lines of the novels were on the whole formulaic love affairs observing simple rules of reward and punishment; they concluded with the triumph of the good and the utter annihilation of the bad. Those set overseas opened for their readers a porthole onto remote lands, while those set in the readers’ immediate surroundings let them survey a rich gallery of familiar characters from the Jewish street.71 The plots usually centered around tempestuous love affairs seasoned with accounts of lovers smooching in the moonlight, complicated intrigues, failed marriages, and broken engagements. One of the formulas for these plots is that of the girl who hopes to marry a maskil but has been engaged to a yeshiva scholar by her parents; she openly confronts her father, threatens suicide, or runs off on her wedding day, then has a complicated and convoluted set of adventures involving much misery, madness, fits of fury and pangs of love, until she finally marries the man of her dreams. Another formula is that of the girl who falls into the clutches of a phony maskil,
runs away from her parents and marries him, gives birth to his child, struggles against poverty, and in the end returns shamefacedly to her parents’ protective embrace. A further plot line is that of the orphan girl whose deceitful relatives steal her property and who is left destitute until the lover-maskil appears to marry her. And so on and so forth—there are endless plots of this kind. In many of the novels the main plot is punctuated by digressions—which may be didactic lectures by the author, or secondary plots—with much in the way of reversals of fortune: tales of fraud, slanders, thefts, murders, imprisonments, passionate loves, scandalous runnings away and amazing encounters, here with hardened criminals, there with “angels of mercy.”

For all their saturation with flights of fancy and the other exotic spices of the “housemaid’s novel,” these novels clearly tend to depict a recognizable reality. The world they portray is typically that of a traditional society undergoing vast changes, and the conflicts arising from a destabilization of values are what drive much of the course of their plots. These conflicts are structured as binary opposites, formulated in the terms central to the discourse of the day: old world/new world; Torah/science; yeshiva scholar/maskil; believer/heretic; arranged marriage/marriage for love; fathers/sons; rich/poor; good/evil.

Sometimes Shomer lets the story be told by a narrator who introduces himself as one of the beit midrash idlers, declaring his absolute loyalty to the values of the “old world.” This device allows Shomer to maintain a tension between the pro-maskilic course of the plot and the anti-maskilic rhetoric of the narrator. As a rule, both character and plot development reflect a clear maskilic stance: the bridegroom whom the parents have destined for their beautiful and educated daughter is diseased or blind in one eye and limps, or is an old geezer who has put five wives in the ground; the lover is a maskil, a lawyer or a doctor, handsome, clean-cut and well dressed. The sympathy of the reader naturally runs to the young woman and her beau. The narrator, by contrast, punctuates the story with conservative comments and seems to cast sideways glances at the more traditionalist reader. This arrangement occurs also in inverted form to the traditionalists: the narrator guilelessly speaks in praise of their righteousness, devoutness and propriety, yet as the plot advances it turns out that many of these people are frauds and thieves, adulterers and hypocrites. Through the contrast between the standpoints of author and narrator, traditional society comes to assume an ironic light, shows signs of being in fact in a process of breakdown. It is just because the novels are so Noticeably unsophisticated, the multitude of voices in them so crudely patched together, that the narrator’s comments are so comical. The narrator’s conformism and identification with traditionalism is subverted and supplanted by the author’s sharp social critique. And the critique is sharp indeed, and applies to almost every aspect of traditional society: the religious fundamentalism, the superstitions, the adultery in the guise of piety, the ignorance, the fraud, the
spying and informing, the conning of widows, the pimping, the class hatreds, and many other such affronts. Yet Shomer at the same time hurls indictments no less severe at the fake maskilim and the rabid assimilationists, any association with whom leads to calamity and ruin.

The critical light cast—implicitly or explicitly—on traditional society’s marriage practices and its stance toward love and Eros would have struck a chord with the audience of women readers, for the heroines in these books were usually individuals denied a freedom of choice: in these books women were victims, and women were the rebels. Although Shomer’s novels are not aimed at women readers alone, in many, the heroines and the female readers are treated as natural allies in denouncing the order of traditional society. In most novels a critical perspective is imputed to the heroine and to the implied reader, or the reader is encouraged to adopt such a point of view.

Shomer, like Dik, also fosters ideals that are maskilic, bourgeois, and patriarchal, and these sometimes lead to negligence or inconsistency in the plots of his stories. Thus, despite his condemnation of conventional betrothal practices, quite a few girls who defy their parents’ wills get punished for it. Often the evil deeds are the work of wicked women, and the difficulties blocking the path of the “right” coupling are put there by self-righteous stepmothers and other such hypocrites, crass women of the masses. Many of the educated heroines, by contrast, in battling for their love, earn the author’s enthusiastic empathy and adulation. Shomer’s daughter, Miriam, who recounts her first impressions of reading her father’s books, attributes much of their charm to the characters of the women described in them:

In my father’s novels what interested me was: first, the pretty tales, and second—the wonderful women described there. They are so beautiful with golden or coal-black hair falling over shoulders white as marble; their hands so graceful and thin; dressed in brightly colored silk outfits; they speak softly and pleasantly; and they walk about in gardens with pretty flowers. They have singsong names like: Bluma, Pearl, Rosalia etc. and all this won me over. How different it all was from my own surroundings! Neither flowers nor gardens! Most of the women I saw—common women with wigs, wearing dark skirts and speaking in a high-pitched, ear-splitting voice. No, my heart wandered after my father’s fair world with the gentle people and their hearts yearning for the noble and the beautiful. And I returned time after time to them.

An explicit expression of the pact with the female readers and its subversive nature may be found in Shomer’s lengthy Hebrew novel, Hanidachat. The life story of its heroine, Hannah, is nothing but a “feminine” reprise of the “masculine” bildungsroman or enlightenment-process tale. As in typical narratives about a man who becomes a maskil, Hannah begins her tale by recounting the process of reading and enlightenment she underwent, describing her journey toward clear-sightedness and illumination. Unlike the men in the bildungs novels, however, Hannah makes her way to the “light” in the female mode,
shifting from traditional literature to novels in Yiddish—that is, to novels by Dik and by Shomer himself:

I always liked to hear pretty stories; and upon hearing that our Holy Books (the Bible) contain pleasant and wonderful tales, I obtained a Bible translated into Yiddish, and read this translation, and eventually learned the entire history of my people from the day they broke forth from the womb of life until they returned from Babylon to rebuild their devastated country and the ruins of their Holy Temple destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon. The book of Yosiphon taught me the history of my people from the day they returned to their country until the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. And from the book She'erit Israel I learnt the troubles of my brethren in all the lands in which they are scattered. Whenever possible I kept seeking out pleasant stories written in our spoken language, until the Lord chanced before me the esteemed author AMaD [Ayzik Meyer Dik?], and many other novels that were brought out by the few capable and intelligent authors [Shomer?]. These books opened my eyes to see what the Lord asks of man, and how far have fallen those who harass my people’s ways; how the deceivers are deceiving Jacob the Wise and sinking his walkways in rules and customs founded only upon chaos and vanity.

Striking indeed is the effect which a well written and tasteful story has on the reader’s heart; [...] I know that it was the novels alone which took me from darkness to light, and it is them alone I must thank for having opened my eyes struck with blindness.

Shomer’s hundreds of sentimental and sensationalist novels were severely criticized by Shimon Dubnov, David Frishman, Sholem Aleichem, and others, who viewed his output as literature “based on the spirit of the masses,” and assailed him with unprecedented ferocity. Frishman, who made great efforts to safeguard Hebrew literature from the influence of “marginal literature” such as Shomer’s, lambasted Shomer’s Hebrew novel Hanidachat in a long and caustic review. In his “Letter on a Literary Matter,” addressed to a fictional, educated female companion, Frishman explains why a “feminine” novel modeled on the male enlightenment process is a contradiction in terms:

The author felt terribly jealous of Smolenskin and his tale Hatoeh Bedarchei Hahayim, and thus made efforts to imitate it. Where Smolenskin had chosen a male Toeh Bedarchei Hahayim, with the masculine “e,” this said author put a Toah Bedarchei Hahayim, the “a” making it feminine, and thus was his story formed. And yet, the nature of sex is such that a male is much more liable to be itinerant and to wander about the land, for such circumstances are more prevalent for a man than for a woman, so it would have been more appropriate and honest if the author had based tales of this nature on a male; yet Mr. Shaiketvitch could not himself too select his victim from among the men, for someone else had already done that; so of necessity he sought himself a helpmate from the women’s section.

Frishman thus considered Shomer’s novel to be a “feminized” version of Smolenskin’s Hatoeh Bedarchei Hahayim, and asserted that feminine experience does not endorse such a plot. It struck him as unconvincing to place a woman at the heart of such a novel, and he regarded parodization of the “masculine” enlightenment-process novel as an illegitimate act.
Frishman attacked Shomer out of concern for the status of Hebrew literature; Sholem Aleichem, for his part, attacked him so as to protect the reputation of Yiddish writing as a legitimate literature. Sholem Aleichem did what he could to decouple Yiddish literature from the tradition of the sentimental-intrigue novel and hence waged a bitter campaign against Shomer and his ilk. Yet Shomer's contemporaries paid little attention to these critics. His novels were avidly read, and many readers felt that these were the first novels to bring the Haskalah to the backwater towns, and were also “the first to introduce the topics of women’s progress.”

Even Shmuel Niger, one of Shomer's most vocal critics, did not ignore the role played by Yiddish writers, even the lesser ones, in educating the masses. In his opinion, “in the Haskalah days, for example, even awful books like Shomer's or Blaustein's most interesting novels, performed a certain function in the spiritual awakening of the youth.”

In those days everyone who wrote in the Yiddish tongue was needed, even authors of the type of Shomer and Blaustein [... ] when we today examine the matter historically we reach the conclusion that Yiddish literature could not have risen and developed without them. One had to familiarize the reading public with the secular literature of our day. Moreover: this reading public needed authors, who would come and add to its enlightenment and knowledge and make it more secular; yet such were not to be found at the time. In those days no one wrote except in Hebrew or in Russian.

In effect, Niger in these statements is expressing a certain recognition of the significance of popular Yiddish literature. In his opinion, the popular novels helped form habits of reading poetry and prose fiction and helped spread secular ways of thinking throughout Jewish society. Since the women readers made up a substantial portion of the Yiddish reading public, implicit in Niger's statements is confirmation that women had a substantial role in advancing the processes of secularization and modernization of Jewish society of the time.

“Liberated Territory”

The reading hours set by women for themselves, in private or in the company of their children, marked the boundaries of a kind of “liberated territory” in their world. Through their novel reading, these women were able to leap well beyond the bounds of their bleak daily existence. Yet alongside the Yiddish popular novels, sensational romances, and exotic intrigues the maskilic modes of thought embedded in this literature began to filter into their world. The memoirs from the nineteenth century are full of accounts telling of the profound effect that reading popular Yiddish novels was having on women.
Under its sway they slowly began to shift perspectives, becoming, at times unconsciously, accelerants of the changes taking place in contemporary Jewish society.

An instructive account of the influence such reading had on women and the shifts that occurred as a result is given by Yehiel Yeshaiya Trunk, who, in his *Polin, Zichronot Utmunot*, tells the life stories of several of his family members. Trunk’s opens his account with the reading-story of his grandmother Leah and continues with the stories of her daughter Itke and her two sons Yitzhak and Yosl. To supply the background to the grandmother’s fascinating reading-story, Trunk tells a little about her life as a girl. The grandmother, daughter of a “rabbinic and especially prestigious family,” married his grandfather, Melish the Hasid, almost when she was still a girl; but shortly after the wedding the grandfather suffered an attack of mental illness:

Grandfather’s character [. . .] was very strange and very complicated. Adding to it was the severe mental illness he was struck with in his first years when he had just married a wife, and from which he continued to suffer for several years. About the “eclipse of reason” years in Grandfather’s life no one spoke in our family. [. . .] It seems that Grandfather’s “night of eclipse” was a severe mental disease with many complications. At any rate—when he recovered, Grandfather was a completely healthy man [. . .] He would study much and drink much, on hasidic feasts and festive occasions. [. . .] Many of his manifestations of stubbornness were merely the remains of the above-mentioned lapse.\textsuperscript{83}

Though the grandfather recovered from his illness, for the grandmother the first period of their marriage was one of loneliness and anxiety, and she found refuge by reading the tales composed by the early maskilim:

Sixteen years old was my grandmother Leah when she became pregnant with my father. . . . She used to live in a small attic near the women’s section of the synagogue in Kutno. [. . .] Grandpa Melish, the companion since youth of Grandma Leah, spent his nights as well as his days in Vorka’s *shtibl*, cavorting with his hasidic mates [. . .] Grandma Leah used to sit long nights in her attic near the forlorn women’s section, utterly alone, scarcely more than a girl and already a pregnant woman. Great was her fear, for she knew well that at midnight crowds of dead women would gather in the adjacent women’s section to pray and recite *tkhines*.\textsuperscript{84}

Terrified, Grandma Leah could not undress or lay down to sleep. She would sit to the light of the taper and wait for her young husband to finally get back from the *shtibl*. Meanwhile, in the still of the night, by the minuscule light of the penny-candle, she grew used to reading Jewish fairy tales, which were the fairy tales written by the first maskilim. These books made a great impression on Grandma Leah, opened her eyes to see life as it was, and she took a critical view of many conventional matters. The maskilic Jewish fairy tales even determined the spiritual fate of the children born to Grandmother Leah in due course.\textsuperscript{84}

The description of the pregnant girl’s terrors of the dead women, who gathered nightly in the dim women’s section to recite *tkhines*, are not meant
merely to supply atmosphere or to allow mention of the homiletics she read. They serve as well to give palpable form to the beliefs she later abandoned at the influence of the early maskilic tales. Trunk is suggesting that both the grandmother’s perspectives and her reading habits changed as a result of reading the maskilic texts. In the course of her life the grandmother shifted from reading simple fairy tales for escapist purposes, to reading of a kind which fed her critical faculties and led her from a “dim” belief in superstitions toward a sober view of “life as it was.” Moreover, Trunk takes care to note that the transformations in his grandmother’s perspectives were fateful for the spiritual future of her children. Under his grandmother Leah’s protection and with her active help, her daughter Itke became a genuine maskilah and studied Polish and Hebrew “in utter secrecy” with Wolf Leib Lerer, “Kutno’s official apikores”:

Grandma Leah helped to keep her safe from inquisitive eyes. Grandma Leah well remembered her own days and nights in the forlorn attic by the women’s section in Kutno. [...] How many consoling hours did she find then thanks to the Yiddish fairy tales! The slender volumes of tales sheltered this lonely woman and planted secret yearnings in her heart. Grandma Leah looked at her only daughter, Aunt Itke, and secretly hoped that she, this Aunt Itkeh, would win at the game her mother had lost.

Aunt Itke’s literary tastes and intellectual needs already were entirely different from those of her mother:

She felt no inclination toward the Yiddish fairy tales that Grandma Leah used to read in secret. On the other hand, she was interested in the subject of grammar, and in the rationalist satire of the maskilim. [...] Thus, she began to belittle the Jewish stories which Grandma Leah was accustomed to. When Grandma Leah bought her Stempenyu by Sholem Aleichem and tried to read scenes out of Stempenyu’s wedding to Aunt Itke, to show her how Stempenyu captures everyone’s heart by his violin—Aunt Itke shrugs her shoulders, tells Grandma Leah that these are stories for women of the masses, for housemaids. It would be better if she would read to her mother scenes out of Mapu’s Ayit Tzavua. On the contrary: she, Grandma Leah, should see, even if only for curiosity’s sake, how the foes-of-light fundamentalists indeed govern all.

The conclusions the grandmother drew from her reading were influential not only for her daughter, Aunt Itke, but also for her sons, Yitzhak and Yosl. These sons, raised under the shadow of their father’s “uncompromising religious fundamentalism,” became exposed little by little to “the new secular winds which began to blow at home thanks to Grandma Leah and Aunt Itke”:

Sholem Aleichem’s Stempenyu and Mendele’s Fishke the Lame were Grandma Leah’s favorite books, books which touched her feminine heart and aroused in her longings from her early childhood. Their heroes’ loves—especially as expressed in Stempenyu—reminded Grandma Leah of the deep heart-rending love of Judaism of Vorka. Aunt Itke and her Hebrew books broke forth into the rabbinic home in antediluvian Kutno like mighty gales, tempests. The two brothers Yitzhak and Yosl [...] began to be
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Women Who Read Yiddish

swayed by external influences. What mainly impressed them was the tragically destined Aunt Itke. Out of human sight, Yitzhak would grab one of Aunt Itke's Hebrew books and turn its pages. He loved the acute, polished, debate of [talmudic] scholarship, yet little by little he was caught secretly peeking at Aunt Itke's books—he began to be charmed by scenes and ideas of a freer Jewish world, and likewise his heart throbbed with feelings of resentment and yearnings about the fineness of the world. He liked to peek—unlike Aunt Itke—also at Grandma Leah's Yiddish books, and once was so sunk in reading Stempenyu that he was late for a lecture by one of Kutno's sharpest scholars. Stempenyu's feelings, the feelings of that simple wandering musician, as wonderfully described by Sholem Aleichem, deeply influenced the sentimental Kutno prodigy and began to course within his blood. On the other hand Yosl, the youngest of Grandma Leah's sons, thoroughly shifted to Aunt Itke's side. Yosl never was known as a prodigy and never liked the Talmud. After Aunt Itke's engagement, when she became the main topic of conversation for Kutno's maskilim, Yosl began to fraternize with the maskilim, to bring books from Wolf Leib Lerer to Aunt Itke, and even to read himself out of those forbidden books. The Talmud became more and more hateful to him, and he looked up to his maskilic sister humbly and with much envy. From then on Yosl wanted nothing more than to be like her and surpass her in extremism. Aunt Itke began to teach him grammar and Yosl was content.

Among portraits of women readers found in the autobiographies and memoirs of the period quite a few figures of Grandmother Leah's type appear. What these women had in common was the gradual shift they were making from reading traditional religious literature to reading maskilic Yiddish literature, the widening gap between them and their husbands, and the pact they had forged with the younger and more rebellious generation, whose stance at times bordered on heresy.

One fascinating portrait of this kind is sketched out by Hayim Tchernowitz in his autobiography, in describing the figure of his mother:

My mother was another type entirely, the complete opposite of Father, to the point that it was hard to imagine how these two people, as far from each other as East is from West, could reside in the same domicile. She was educated and at times something of a skeptic. She was not an out and out heretic, heaven forbid, but pondered the paradoxes concerning God and His Messiah. How could God have committed such and such crimes? How can He be governing such a dishonest world? Rather like Job's complaints. And why are there thieves and cheats, liars, hypocrites who make themselves out to be devout, like so and so the hasid, who prays until midnight and won't look at women yet is an acknowledged thief and in his store deals discriminately and contains the seven vices in his heart, what a cheat and swindler and hypocrite he is. Yet my father would reply like this: Well, he's a thief in any case so what do you care whether he prays to God? Better a thief that prays than a thief that doesn't pray. Yet my mother's dissent wasn't constant, but rather episodic: at times she would get more religious and wear a wig like all devout women and would pray daily and read from the books of t'hines, and at times she would suddenly cast off the burden, remove the “paruk,” cease to pray and begin to talk about God and his Messiah. I didn't entirely understand her nature and her spiritual battle and the upheavals in her heart, or what caused them. For all these changes took place in my boyhood, when I was little, and by her final days she had reconciled with herself. Doubtless their marital relations had to do with it, as they
married her off almost against her will when she was a babe and when she grew up saw that she and her husband live in different worlds and did not have anything in common, yet she made peace with her fate, in the manner of the humble daughters of Israel who bear and suffer their sorrows in private.\footnote{89}

Tchernowitz declines to discuss the factors that may have led his mother to have “heretical thoughts,” nor does he clarify the causes of her “return to the faith.” Yet it is hard to ignore the fact that, for example, the removal of the wig was in those days a clear sign of protest against the status women had in traditional society.\footnote{90} It is not by chance, therefore, that Mordechai Kosover considers Tchernowitz’s mother to have been a woman “who behaved in the spirit of the times,”\footnote{91} and Zvi Scharfstein views her as a figure who fairly represents “the new type of [Jewish] woman,” both in her perspectives and in her reading habits.\footnote{92} Indeed, the narrative sequence in Tchernowitz’s text suggests that he sees a certain association between the extent of his mother’s learnedness and the heretical thoughts she had from time to time, for the next paragraph is devoted to his mother’s reading habits:

My mother used to read the 
\textit{mayse bichlech} of that time—Der [sic] \textit{Poylishe Yingl}, Der Schvartzer Yungermantshik, and all the Shomer books she could obtain. She also read the “Folks-Bibliotek” which came out then as a supplement to \textit{Hamelitz} [sic]. She even had a superficial knowledge of the Bible, especially of its stories, including all the talmudic legends which she knew about more from hearing than from reading them. Sometimes she would even repeat some saying of the talmudic sages verbatim, and in general had what was called “\textit{a mansbilsher kop}” [a man’s head].\footnote{93}

In many respects Tchernowitz’s mother emerges as an enigmatic figure, so that any attempts to ascribe her manifestations of “heresy” solely to her reading are likely to be superficial at best and, given her complexity, may well miss the mark. Yet Tchernowitz does take care to stress his mother’s fluency in talmudic legends and the Bible stories, which she presumably learned from reading \textit{Tseina Ur’eina} and the \textit{Humash Taytsh}. In his short and succinct narrative he outlines the road his mother took as she shifted from reading traditional literature for women to reading Yiddish novels, including not only Shomer’s “lesser” works but also novels such as \textit{Hane’ehavim Vehane’imim Oder Der Shvartzer yungermantshik} by Dinessohn and \textit{Dos Poylishe Yingl} by Linetsky, the author who competed with Mendele for the title of Father of legitimate Yiddish literature.\footnote{94} Also relevant here is that mother read issues of the \textit{Folks-Bibliotek}, the serial in which Sholem Aleichem published the best work of the Haskalah’s leading authors, from RIBaL, Tzweifle, and Gottlober, through YaLaG, Linetsky, and Shachkes and on to Mendele and Y. L. Peretz.\footnote{95}

Something of the extent of the interest Tchernowitz’s mother took in Haskalah literature and in widening its reading public may be gleaned from her conversations with little Shmuel, Tchernowitz’s Talmud instructor. This mel-
amed, whose maskilic perspectives were also manifest in his instructional methods, served also as “a sales agent, supposedly, of Hamelitz and the Folks-blät, as part of which he used to loan out various ‘little books.’”96 Tchernowitz relates that when he finished for the day with his teaching at the Talmud heder the melamed would run around the whole town collecting subscription-funds from his “clients,” gathering the newspapers they had read and supplying them with new ones [. . .] As soon as he came inside he would immediately ask for the book or paper to be handed over and would not trade words with anyone [. . .] except with my mother, who was his last big stop; with her he would review all the latest literary developments, ask whether he might get a new reader for the newspaper and who it was worth trying to talk to, etc.97

Maskilic literature reading also played a role in the “pact” the mother made with the town’s youngsters, who used to gather in her home on Sabbaths and read with her the publications that had arrived that week. With the protection of the mother, and behind the back of her husband—who would be sent off under one pretext or another to the synagogue—the “youths and maidens” felt able to behave “freely” with one another and even to disclose their heretical inclinations:

[My mother] was the center for the town’s youngsters and they would all beat a path to her door, for her house was the council for the wise and for the foolish and everyone would come to her with their heartaches to talk with her in private, and she would be consulted even about the young people’s love affairs. All was open and above board with her; she would even at times help get some romance going and would ease the parent’s objections. On Sabbath afternoons some youths and maidens would gather to read together the new “literature” that had arrived that week and to discuss the issues of the day so as to get nearer to each other. But my father was “persona non grata,” as the young people were bashful in front of him and didn't feel free and would whisper and hint amongst themselves—boys and girls separately, not everyone in one mixed group. They had to come up with clever ruses and stratagems, to get Father out of the house. They would have false messages sent to him from the beit midrash that he was wanted in the congregation to give a sermon or lecture on the weekly Torah portion, or they would make up some excuse or other [. . .] Sometimes the young people would use me and whisper to me, that I should ask Father to finish studying the weekly portion with me as I wasn’t able to complete it by myself [. . .] and even though I too would rather have chosen my mother’s company, so as to look like a good fellow for the guys I sacrificed myself for the general good and volunteered my free time for their sake [. . .] When Father left the house everyone breathed more freely. First of all the boys and girls would slowly inch nearer to each other and begin to speak in mixed groups. Sometimes when it was hot the debates reached a certain point and one of the boys would remove the hat from his head. He would first wave his hat beside his head from the heat, but little by little, as if he forgot to put it back, it would stay in his hand, and he would sit there bareheaded.98

Tchernowitz’s mother, like Trunk’s grandmother, was influenced by the literature she read and developed opinions that did not sit well with those of
traditional society. She manifested her differences not only by getting involved with the young people or by being ready to “help get some romance going and ease the parents’ objections,” but also by taking an independent stance in the town rabbinate’s politics:

Mother was also very active in public affairs, that is, in the politics of the rabbinate and all the disputes between supporters of the hasidim and the mitnagdim. She would conduct her own politics at times opposing even my grandfather. When there was an assembly in my elder’s house, some of the younger well-off yeshiva students would secretly steal to my mother’s house and privately discuss the same problems being dealt with “there,” that is at the elders,’ and she would sway them to her opinion, which as a rule was the opposite of that of the elders, and would send them back to the assembly charged with arguments and rebuttals, opposing the elder’s politics, so as to turn the tide. Everyone knew that Leah had a hand in the goings on but nobody could do anything against her. [. . .] It was admitted by all that she had a “man’s head.” My mother had literary talents too. Her letters, which she wrote to me and which I kept for a long time, were written in an excellent literary style. They were full of humor with such barbs and caricatures of people I had known from my childhood that by her letters I was able to preserve in memory the image of the township with all its details and particulars for many years after I had left my native city.99

The phenomena compressed into these revealing reading-stories from the lives of Grandmother Leah, Aunt Itke and Tchernowitz’s mother may be found as well in the flotsam of more fragmentary Yiddish readers’ stories that surfaces, in scraps and splinters, from throughout the memoirs literature of the period.

Alliance for Enlightenment

With or without their knowledge, many reading women became “agents of enlightenment.” Most were “passive agents” who operated unconsciously, at times even against their wills, to propagate the literature and messages of the Haskalah. A striking and representative example of an “enlightenment agent” of this type is Shomer’s mother. This woman battled with all her might against her son’s habit of reading “filth and abomination” literature.100 She kept accusing him in public of being a heretic and ignoramus to the point that his prospects of marrying into a decent family were damaged, and she even repeatedly threatened to tear up his accursed books.101 Yet this very same mother was the one who had brought secular Yiddish literature into her home, and it was she who first gave Shomer the taste for reading and writing fairy tales.

Appearing in the descriptions of daily life and the memoirs are also accounts of deliberate collaboration between a mother and daughter or between a grandmother and her grandchildren, carried on behind the backs of the
fathers and grandfathers. Shoshanah Lishansky describes one such episode in her memoirs:

They brought a teacher to Malin to teach the Jews to read and write Russian [. . .] Mother asked that we be sent too—me and my eldest sister—to go be taught by him. The grandmother agreed instantly, but Grandfather didn’t even want to hear about it, when mother tried to talk to him about it he grew furious and yelled: “Gevald! What is it we’ve come to, if the grandchildren of Reb Nahum study this filth and abomination!” [. . .] Mother requested that Reb Nahum’s name not be mentioned, sent us out of the house so we would not see them fight, and we ran to our friends to tell them about this studying business. In their houses too there had been discussions for several days about the new teacher, and all the mothers (as if they had spoken amongst themselves) were making the same arguments.\(^{102}\)

After certain entreaties the grandfather agrees to let his granddaughters go to this teacher for a limited period of “two units”: he deemed it enough for them to learn how to read a bill of sale and write out an address.

A little while later, Baruch Leyzer of Chernobyl arrived at Malin bearing a crate of books in Yiddish, Russian and Hebrew. This crate of books became our town’s first library. Anyone could obtain a book to read at home for the price of three Kopeiks per week; I and my sister signed up immediately, receiving the money to pay for it secretly from Grandmother and with the warning—don’t let Grandfather know, or even Mother! We gathered up in the attic, my sister and I, and sometimes another friend and maybe my niece Berele too. We sat there in the darkness and read together for many long hours, Stische the maid was in league with us and kept our secret. Once mother arranged our clothes in the closet and found hidden there Y. Dinessohn’s Even Nagaq. She read it and got very angry at us for reading such trash, she ripped the book up and threw it into the flames of the oven. [. . .] Grandmother gave us half a ruble to compensate the librarian for his losses.\(^{103}\)

Often, what began as “agency for enlightenment” voluntarily and with the mother’s cooperation, turned into a process that overstepped all bounds and ran amok. Trunk’s grandmother, for example, that same Grandmother Leah who encouraged her daughter Itke to read and to learn, took fright when she saw that her daughter had begun to read the Biur by Mendelssohn. By that stage, however, Itke’s reading was already well beyond her mother’s control:

Aunt Itke continued to quench her thirst for maskilic books, and at Wolf-Lerer’s began to study the Pentateuch with the Biur. When Grandma Leah heard that Aunt Itke was studying the Pentateuch with the “abomination-filth,” she was shocked. First of all it is against the law for a kosher daughter of Israel to be studying Torah, for the Torah was given at Mount Sinai only to males. Second, the name of Moses [Mendelssohn] of Dessau stirred up in Grandma Leah, from the time she had been raised in the courts of the famous hasidim, a terrible dread with connotations of worship of the demon Samael and of the Dark Side.\(^{104}\)

The first and deepest influence the Yiddish readers had on their children was not an intentional one, nor did it involve reading secular literature. It
began very early in the children's lives, in a communal setting, when the mothers included them in their readings of *Tseina U'reina* and the *Taytsh-Humash* and exposed them to the contents of marginal traditional literature. In this setting, which from the women's point of view was the context of honoring a religious commandment, mothers gave their children their first picture of the biblical tales as complete stories—those same stories that the traditional school system had deliberately shunted to the margins. Where in the heder, the Torah was read out dryly and fragmentarily, at home the sons heard from their mothers the Torah stories in their entirety, spiced with talmudic legends and fables that ignited their imaginations. Through these readings together, mothers engraved on the memories of their children experiences that frequently made a much more profound and lasting impression on them than did their study experiences in the heder. One of the more compelling accounts of an experience of this kind is supplied by Avraham Liesin, who gives a fair depiction not only of his lingering hunger for the mother's *Taytsh-Humash* but also of its inferior status in the father's eyes:

I craved to hear how my mother would chant festively and piously through the Torah portion in the *Taytsh-Humash*, while moving her fine and delicate fingers along the lines. Once when this was happening my father came and found me, while I, a boy of Talmud age, am standing and listening with a shining face to the wondrous fables of the women's book. He ridiculed me, and I, my face blushing from ear to ear, escape and flee. Yet a short while later I steal back and cling to the *Taytsh-Humash* and thirstily drink in the portion. This was such a habit, that once my mother was amazed to discover that I was entirely familiar with every page of her *Taytsh-Humash*.

The encounter with the marginal literature that had been meant for women laid the foundation for two of the central pillars of the maskilic enterprise. It established the basis for the love of the Bible, the return to which by the maskilim was considered an act of heresy; and it set the foundation for a love of Aggadah, seen as the inner inspiration from Jewish lore for the poetry and literature of the reviving Hebrew language.

Yet there was something ambivalent about the influence of this early childhood reading in the mother's company. On the one hand it fostered nationalist sentiments and awakened a love for Jewish traditions and culture, while on the other hand, in the context of the nineteenth century's cultural-spiritual atmosphere, it carried a subversive dimension. These readings by women, from the marginal side of traditional literature, exposed the boys to cultural codes that were being repressed and that hinted at the existence of an alternative to the scholarly legalist mode of thought in the Jewish tradition.

A telling confirmation of the gender connotations of these two opposed forms of thinking is given by Shmaryahu Levin, who in his memoirs identifies the Bible with the mother's tradition and the Talmud with the father's:
From my tenth year to my fourteenth it was the Talmud, to which five hours a day were given over, which was the main part of my studies. Some time later, little by little the power of the Bible over me faded, eventually ceasing to be the sole influence on my spiritual life. And the result of this was, that as a mature adult I relived the experiences of my childhood. Just as my mother had dominion of my heart and my father of my mind, so now the Bible took over my heart and emotions and the Talmud my brain and mind. The Bible—my mother, and my father—the Talmud.  

It is to their mothers that many of the maskilim attribute their introduction to "the world of imagination and emotion." The reading beside the mother—whether of traditional literature or of the "fairy tales" from the modern literature—is depicted as an experience that imprinted upon them a love for literature and a need to create it. These two cornerstones of modern Hebrew literature, Bible at one end and Aggadah on the other, were thus viewed as having been a maternal inheritance.

**The Demand for “Change of Values”—from Arranged Marriages to “Romantic Love”**

Most of the women readers of Yiddish did not actually try to breach the structures of traditional society, yet more than a few did try to question the social order. Quite a few of the reading women described in the memoirs displayed nonconformist tendencies and dared to give voice to their social critique. A typical figure of this kind is Shlomo Zaltzman’s mother, one of the few women in his town who knew how to read.  

“She had quite liberal opinions,” Zaltzman tells, “and battled against religious fundamentalism. According to the climate prevailing at that time she was thought faintly “heretical,” as she didn’t force her children to behave with out and out religiosity. She took a similar tone toward all the women with whom she came into contact.”

Ben-Zion Dinur also describes his mother as a smart and rebellious woman who knew how to beguile her sons with stories on Sabbath eves and often complained about social injustice:

Mother was naturally rebellious, and didn’t share the acceptance of inequity and the excuses for the current order which had become Father’s way of life; she was filled with resentment for the members of Father’s family who were rich, prestigious, aggressive, and whose scales of honesty left in her opinion something to be desired.

In their courtyard, in the Seventies, lived a group of Russian revolutionaries. How the spirit passed from these young revolutionaries on to Mother, I can’t say. But in my childhood she often used to tell us stories about this bunch, about the circumstances of their arrest, and their dedication. She was a very intelligent woman with a gift for storytelling, her stories used to fascinate us in our childhood. She was considered the
smartest woman in town. During the 1905 revolution they used to say: If Naomi had been just a little younger—she would herself have gone to the barricades; and if the revolution goes on much longer—there's no guarantee she won't.\textsuperscript{113}

When the family lost its property and the mother sunk into a depression the son attempted to console her by saying: “All that is most evil in this world—will be made better in the world to come.” To this the mother replied “whispering, as if talking to herself: ‘that idea was invented by the rich, so that the poor won't rise up against them.’”\textsuperscript{114}

A more extreme character was Peretz Hirschbein’s mother, born in the 1860s. After she passed away Hirschbein, in his aching eulogy of her, said:

My mother was not then yet fifty years old. She who held my hand and brought me into the world of God; and she who quite often would cast me into a sea of doubts. “And what is this, child, what’s all the fuss, when a man passes from this world?” For it is she who permitted me to eat on [the fasts of] Yom Kippur, on Tisha Be’Av. She too is who fostered in me doubts about the World-to-Come.\textsuperscript{115}

The objections women had to the social order of traditional society were manifested in various ways. Most of these were subtle and hushed; a few, outspoken and passionate. Yet each expression revealed in its way the fissures that were opening in traditional society, and each was a reflection of the conflict, latent or patent, between the woman and her parents or between the wife and her husband.

The most prominent forms of dissent were the removal of the wig, the refusal to accept engagements to yeshiva scholars, the demand to replace arranged marriages with ones based on love, and the demand for a secular education. Here is how Shlomo Zaltzman puts it in his memoirs:

In my youth I already saw in my town the beginnings of the crisis. Women had already begun to study, and when the new winds began to blow in the towns, the battle for the liberation of the woman burst forth in three directions. She revolted against wearing the wig; she battled for a secular education for Jewish girls; and she fought for a change in relations between young women and young men, so that a woman would be able to freely choose the man she wants and would not depend in this matter entirely on her parent's will.\textsuperscript{116}

It comes as no surprise that removal of the wig came to signify a woman’s rebellion against the traditional social order. Even Pauline Wengeroff, who describes traditional society with ardent nostalgia and great affection, is unable to conceal the humiliation involved in the marital ceremonies of head-shaving and donning the wig or scarf. In a chapter devoted to the wedding of her sister, Wengeroff relates:

The next morning the day began late. The bride remained in her room until my mother and elder sisters brought her a simple woman called a “gollerke,” armed with a huge
pair of shears. At my mother's command she took possession of the head of my poor sister, leaned it against her breast, and beneath her murderous shears one strand after another of the beautiful hair fell from my sister's head, as Jewish custom demands. In less than ten minutes the sheep was shorn. She was left only a little bit of hair over her forehead so she could brush it back. No trace of her own hair must show. Then she got a tight-fitting silk cap with a wide silken band over the forehead the same color as her hair. [. . .] A pretty, coquettish little cap was set on the bride's head, which made her look quite a bit older.

We sisters of the bride covered her face with a cloth of white silk and led her into the salon, where the gentlemen of the house and many guests were already assembled. Whoever wanted to see her face for the first time under the cap had to give a gift to charity. Even the bridegroom and the parents on both sides had to do this. Then various opinions were expressed about her changed appearance, and soon there was a cheerful argument in progress.\textsuperscript{117}

Wengeroff's nostalgia for the traditional society of her childhood does not prevent her from commiserating with her unhappy sister who had her hair entirely shorn off at the time of her wedding. Yet she describes the difficult and degrading portion of the ceremony calmly and even with a certain pride: here sits the bride with veil and headcovering, and the guests, the groom and his parents among them, must purchase their right to gaze at her by pledging alms for the poor. The factual language Wengeroff uses to describe the events and the disputes to which they gave rise is what gives the report as a whole its force. It is hard to imagine a more compelling and precise depiction of the impossible position into which the woman was placed by these customs of shaving and covering the head, when as the object of the male's gaze she had to lose her femininity and retain it at one and the same time.\textsuperscript{118}

It is entirely unsurprising, consequently, that many of the women who describe their mother's refusal to shave their heads do so in tones of admiration and respect. Such a note is clearly heard in Hannah Katzenelson-Nesher's recollection: "[Mother] would not agree to have her natural hair cut, and she refused to put a wig on her head by saying: A corpse on my head—by no means! Despite Grandfather Aharon's fury, Mother held her ground."\textsuperscript{119}

A still clearer and more striking link between novel reading and women's dissent became apparent when women began to reject arranged or forced marriages and turned away the Talmud prodigies their parents had arranged for them. Not without cause does Itzik Manger open his literary portrait of Dik with a tale about the great hue and cry surrounding "a maiden of obstinate mind" who refused to be engaged to that "fine vessel . . . a Torah prodigy and uprooter of mountains," whom her parents had selected for her; and not by chance does he have one of those present utter the following accusatory remarks, which put the blame squarely on the novels by Dik:

\begin{quote}
The world is being run by madmen [. . .] Hatchlings now teach old birds wisdom [. . .] I'm telling you the truth Reb Hayim, this whole trouble is the fault of the little story
\end{quote}
books which have landed on the earth. They ought to be burned, those little story books. Once a bookseller has entered a home, the house goes all into a hullabaloo, they pounce on his merchandise like it was grapes in the desert. The wives absolutely lick their fingers, lips kiss those volumes of fiction, my daughters are sure everything written inside is the Law of Moses (you'll pardon the analogy) and a man must do positively everything that's written in those little books, down to every last particular.\footnote{120}

Shlomo Zaltzman too associates the first signs of this phenomenon with the influence of the novels:

This was the period when the idea of “falling in love” was entirely unknown among the young. There wasn't much novel reading then and besides, girls would get married at a very young age. And if it happened that one out of a thousand was smitten by “love” and broached, as it were, the fence of modesty, why the entire environment would be in an uproar over it, and the lovers as usual would run off to America. And one such case indeed happened in my town. . . . The issue of “falling in love” was really a strange and bizarre business. My grandmother used to say: What is there to “love”? One can love stuffed dumplings or fried goose fat, but a maiden's love of a boy—what could it possibly mean?\footnote{121}

It is unlikely one will ever find reading impressions written by a woman that ascribe “revelation” or “illumination” to the act of reading a Shomer romance novel, or that blame women’s rejection of forced marriages exclusively on the novels. Most indications of the influence these books had on women emerge from men's reports or from the utterances of female characters within the literature—sources not without their element of condescension.\footnote{122} It is hard, for all that, to doubt the fact that the heroines in these novels, the ones who run off with the handsome, prominent maskil and are rewarded by marriage to him, would have captured the imaginations of a great many women and would have come to be ideals for them. As Dov Sadan has shown, stories of this kind became so common in Yiddish popular literature that a new term was coined—the “\textit{unmentsh}” or “non-man”—for a man whom a woman has refused to marry. Arguing on the basis of introductions to books by Shomer and Blaustein, authors of hundreds of Yiddish novels, Sadan explains this linguistic coinage and remarks: “And as to the matter of the non-man and hence beast, one ought in any case to mention that in the literature of the maskilim, and especially that of the pseudo-maskilim, the Yiddish appellation \textit{unmentsh} commonly denotes the anti-maskilic type, and is used still more typically in the context of a woman who has been engaged to such a creature against her will.”\footnote{123} What seems safe to assume, therefore, is that novel reading indeed fostered an ideal of romantic love and caused some of the audience of women readers to regard the unworldly yeshiva students with a disdainful eye.

The educated young women who refused to wed yeshiva scholars were not only expressing a wish to marry a modern man, someone with whom they
could have a language in common, but also an ambition to continue with their studies and to extend their childhood. Hinde Bergner gives this account of the panic that seized her when she learned of her parents’ plans to marry her off:

When I heard of Father’s decision and his desire to have me promptly engaged, I couldn’t block the tears which gagged my throat, and broke out in a loud wailing. I was then eleven years old, an age when I would still slip off invisibly to my friends and play “house.” While my father had made use of me for nearly all the years of my childhood for help in his commercial affairs, I still would borrow books in German and Polish, hiding so that my mother wouldn’t see, and read them at night in bed by a wick. And now, here it was all of a sudden, in a kind of panic—a wedding! I imagined my husband, with long beard and sidelocks, and myself in a wig instead of my pretty long blond curls, and I wrung my hands and wept ceaselessly over my lost dreams and my ideal of getting myself a better education and rising above my peers.¹²⁴

The desire for an education, the yearnings for romantic love and the adoption of the patriarchal bourgeois ideal advanced in the novels—all these brought more and more women to spurn the yeshiva students selected for them by parents and matchmakers. Yet most young women dared not make their protests in the open: most gave in to their parents’ wishes.

Trunk, for example, describes the affair of the engagement of his educated Aunt Itke as a genuine tragedy. Grandmother Leah, who had helped her acquire her learning, was afraid to speak to her of the intended betrothal and also “feared to tell my pious and stubborn grandfather . . . that such a masculine and obstinate girl would not readily enter under the wedding canopy with a boy whom the maskilim’s books describe as the very nightmare-image of ignorance.”¹²⁵ Trunk further relates that the grandmother prayed ceaselessly for the wedding to be called off and consoled herself with the thought that if it should go ahead and things did not turn out well—there is such a thing in the world as a divorce.¹²⁶ Upon hearing of the betrothal “Aunt Itke became utterly disoriented”:

She suddenly felt a strange apathy overtake her and abandoned herself to the course of events. Grandma Leah was shocked, that instead of resistance, Aunt Itke was silent and seemed heaven forbid to be sinking into a coma. She stayed persistently quiet and gazed at Grandma Leah with a dull stare, utterly lost. This strange silence frightened Grandma Leah.¹²⁷

When the groom and his family arrived, Aunt Itke did not emerge to greet them:

[She] sat in her room, mute, frightened. [. . .] All thoughts in her mind were in paralysis. She sat shrunken and apathetic. Through the closed door came the tumultuous strains of the zedonske-voleim and the cries of strange women. Aunt Itke could not imagine that any of this was somehow connected with her specifically. Yet before nightfall,
Grandma Leah quietly and timidly entered Aunt Itke’s room, and asked her, whispering, not to embarrass Grandfather Reb Meishl, to allow her to comb her unkempt hair and please would she put on her new holiday dress. Aunt Itke did not reply at all nor did she show any resistance. A short while later, Grandma Leah took her by the hand and led her out to the guests. Aunt Itke moved like a sleep-walker.128

Once the marriage ceremonies commenced and were carried through, Itke became a tragic heroine for her friends:

Her tragic fate […] turned her into one of the Haskalah’s saints in their battle against the foes-of-light fundamentalists. […] The entire set of Kutno’s maskilim who were congregated in a war council in Wolf-Lerer’s house […] began to treat Aunt Itke as if she was the next Peretz Smolenskin.129

Later, Trunk relates, Aunt Itke prepared to file for a divorce in Kutno.130

While Trunk tells of his Aunt Itke’s aversion to marrying a Talmud scholar, Mordechai Ben Hillel Hacohen tells of an educated woman who turned down a marriage for status and money. Her proud father sought to have her marry the town prince, “an unschooled man, with no Torah, no science and no worldliness,” and notwithstanding that she “rebell[ed] and begg[ed] her father not to hand her to this savage,” the father “crushed his pity and would not hear her entreaties.” The wedding took place and led promptly to the daughter’s divorce:

Immediately after the wedding the educated daughter rebelled against the man her father had chosen for her against her will; once married she had more freedom and her father could no longer force her to belong to a man she didn’t like. Scandals began to spread, those which not every sensitive soul can withstand, and the young governor soon found his hands and feet on slippery and winding slopes. The young woman received her bill of divorce and release. One of the talented authors in our town also took an interest in this event, which soon became the subject of a story published in an issue of Hashahar.

From that time on the father was not in such a hurry to satisfy his pride’s appetite for high-flown matchmaking. The rest of his daughters married people they chose themselves, and when the daughters told the father about their young men, he did not ask whether these betrothals were up to his stature and honor but would only tell his secretary: Send her a telegraph—she has my blessing.131

The daughter’s victory in Mordechai Ben Hillel Hacohen’s story signals the beginning of the shift that took place in marriage practices toward the end of the nineteenth century. Yet most of the period’s novels and memoirs tell rather of the tragedies of unhappy matches, of the daughter’s bitter tears on her wedding day, of the mortification of the groom and of scandalous flights of the bride from beneath the wedding canopy. The literary output in Hebrew too—written, as said, by men and for men—contains a rich gallery of female characters who turn down yeshiva scholars. Peretz Smolenskin’s stories portray educated women who have found themselves compromised by a marriage forced
upon them. Two such characters are, for example, Miriam and Bat Sheva from the novel *Gmul Yesharim*. In an emotional exchange between the two, Miriam complains to her friend Bat Sheva about the Hebrew parents who

In giving their daughters to men they forget that their daughters are living beings, who have a heart and will and are capable of choosing and despising, and who like prisoners of war are led to the house which the matchmaker has set up for them [...] I too have read books and many male and female lovers have seen, without it even once occurring to me that I would be like one of the miserable ones who are led like sheep to the slaughter to the altar—an eternal grave to their flowering spirit and to their life. [...] It was an unpardonable sin for my father to let me learn Polish and French and then tell me he is handing me to a lout and ignoramus.

Smolenskin has harsh words for the misery traditional society inflicts on its young people, those who are condemned to a life together when they reside in different worlds:

When a maiden who knows how to read and to speak languages, who was trained and raised on the fountains of knowledge, is handed to a fool who understands nothing of these and over her strong objections, the crime is indeed immense. Yet such a thing happens morning after morning and no one rises up against it.

The call by women to have arranged marriages be replaced by marriages of love and choice, a demand which the sentimental novels inspired and encouraged, was a call for a true shift in values. It should be kept in mind that the marriage institution was one of the most effective mechanisms for social control that traditional society had available. This was the institution through which the prestige of the rabbinate and the yeshiva students was upheld; it was the means by which wealth was rerouted to particular families; it was how the purity of lineages was maintained and how class stratification was conserved. The very existence and structure of traditional society depended on all of these arrangements, each of which was regulated by the marriage customs. Traditional society’s refusal to grant significance to premarital love and its attitude toward Eros in general were results of, among other things, its need to conserve the social order.

One can thus scarcely exaggerate the threat that the call for marriages of love posed to the foundations of traditional society. To destabilize the norms that upheld the marriage practices was to attack the most essential values of this society. Even the most famous authors of modern Hebrew literature dealt tirelessly with the themes of matches and marriages. Yet unlike literature in Hebrew, which addressed an exclusively male and maskilic elite, Yiddish sentimental and sensationalist literature reached women as well and could influence a much wider sector of the population. This literature, with its simplistic and crass idiom, turned its readers—which included “ordinary” and anonymous
women—into agents of subversive ideas that spread well beyond the confines of the maskilic elite. Through this literature, popularized versions of maskilic ideas awakened the instinct for secularization and modernization in the middle and lower classes of Jewish society—sectors of the population that Hebrew literature did not and could not have penetrated.

Yet it would be a mistake to suppose that it was traditional society alone that felt threatened by the shift in women's thinking and reading habits. The memoirs, novels, and periodicals of the period suggest that the maskilim too were deeply ambivalent about these developments. A combination of appreciation and contempt, encouragement and suspicion, condescension and jealousy may be found inter-mixed in the maskilim's attitudes towards the reading habits of women and their effects. On the one hand, the maskilim encouraged women to read and urged them to share their condemnation of arranged marriages and the other ills of traditional society; on the other hand, they were worried about just where this women's reading was leading. Hand in hand with the increase in the numbers of women who read popular literature came increasing calls by maskilim to limit women's education and tighten controls over their readings. The causes underlying such calls were many and various, and were not limited to fears of how “degenerate literature” in the form of Shomer's novels might affect women's reading tastes. Apparently such anxieties stemmed from, among other things, concerns over effects that reading was having on women's empowerment, which threatened even the patriarchal bourgeois vision of society that the maskilim themselves sought to advance. Smolenskin, for example, chillingly presaged a society in which women were more learned than men. In his opinion the overeducation of women was injurious to male authority, and the shifts it wrought in the balance of power between the sexes boded grave ills for the society:

And it is from the women that the evils here arise. Betimes in Israel a woman learned nothing and all her thought was to keep house and fill her functions at the stove and nurse the children, for Torah the rabbis forbade them to study and suddenly a new spirit reached the land and fathers began to give their daughters an education, for only from such would the young men choose, and the border was breached, and it became as of yore when the woman was like a beast in the desert, now she is here the wise one and the educated and looks contemptuously at her man, who is an ignoramus in her eyes, for indeed on the whole the girls study much more than the boys, and now the matter has become a national crisis, for now each maiden shall seek to show off her learning to gain a superior match, from rich to poor everyone will give their daughters leave to study as they will, and what shall be the end of it all? Only poverty and want.

Male authority was threatened not only by women's learnedness. No less threatening was their reading of novels, seen as a source of information on intimate topics, those traditional society would have preferred kept in the dark. When Gottlober, for instance, describes the distress of the boy-groom who
enters under the wedding canopy not knowing a thing about “a man’s way with a woman,” he blames it on the complete lack of sources from which he might learn about sexuality: “A boy of nine or ten already knows something about the rabbinic laws relating to finance and what is permitted and forbidden, and on the whole knows also about the laws of marriage and divorce, without knowing a thing about a man’s way with a woman (although the cleverer boys could figure things out).”

Gottlober believes that novel reading could have supplied the young groom with the necessary information and spared him some mortification. However, he adds, boys at that time had yet to begin reading novels:

The youth who could not read novels and the poetry of Loves and Lusts was unaware, that he had the Song of Songs spoken by God Almighty, the congregation of Israel conversing with the Divine Presence [Shekhinah], and all matters of fleshly love were before him like a sealed text; and all of a sudden, like a book that opens are the eyes of this girl, whom the Lord has sent him . . .

Thus implying that those who did read, fared better. Girls who read novels knew a thing or two about a man’s way with a woman and were more mature and prepared for life than the boys were. Gottlober may not have much to say about this, but it may be assumed that he regarded this improved preparedness of the woman for conjugal life as itself threatening to the young husband’s masculinity.

The maskilim considered the moral depravity they found in the “books of lusts and loves” to be especially worrisome where women were concerned. In their opinion, female sexuality and passion, if left completely beyond male control, threatened to cripple not only the social order but also the sexual life of upright families. A castration anxiety on the one hand and worries about societal mores on the other stoked the fears of women’s “uncontrollable instincts.” The calls by maskilim to limit the education of women and to increase supervision of their reading material was therefore the product not merely of concern for their literary tastes. It represented also a sense of loss of control over the degree of empowerment women were gaining, and anxieties about the outbreak of “dark anarchic forces” that might cripple the patriarchal order which the maskilim sought to engender.
“A Hebrew Maiden, Yet Acting Alien”

Women Who Read European Languages

Your countless songs, your melodies
From Zion have departed, turned thence your backs
Lovers' songs, lechers' tunes
Not for us are these. Sister, not for us!
Hey, Hebrew maiden
To us you are an alien!\(^1\)

—Y. L. Peretz

Women who read European languages arose from various sectors of Jewish society. Each sector had its own reasons for providing girls with foreign language instruction, yet the assumption that prevailed in all sectors was that it would be possible to limit women’s reading of Laaz to the purposes for which the instruction was originally provided. For upper-class haredi families, a foreign language education for girls was meant to mark social distinction. In effect it was a way of imitating the non-Jewish aristocracy, or, in Trunk’s words, of supplying girls with “the trappings of nobility.”\(^2\) In the lower classes, girls were sent to study foreign languages merely so as to be able to write out an address or to handle commercial negotiations, and nothing more. Mothers were for the most part convinced that “this sort of study poses no threat, God forbid, to the foundations of Jewish tradition” . . . while realizing that language proficiency is a demonstrated advantage for matchmaking purposes.\(^3\) Only among the maskilim could there be found parents for whom the provision of Laaz instruction to their daughters had longer-term social objectives as well. The maskilim sought to design family structures on the European bourgeois patriarchal model: they thus made efforts to train a new generation of mothers who could raise their children in the maskilic spirit, would teach their children to read and write in the European languages and would help them uproot “defective jargon” from the masses. This was also why the maski-
lim insisted that women must cultivate proper reading habits. They frowned on women’s habit of reading cheap Yiddish novels, and did what they could to train them to read proper and useful European literature.

Evidence for the maskilim’s attempts to cultivate a female European-language readership may be found in the reports of “The Society for the Dissemination of Haskalah Among Jews of the Land of Russia.” In March 1864, Y. L. Gordon appealed in writing to the Society and informed them that he was establishing “a library for Jewish girls.” Its purpose, he wrote, was to replace their reading of the morally degrading love stories, with beneficial and superior reading of books which raise moral standards; the profits of this establishment are negligible indeed [. . .] It has been my good fortune to amass several books in the language of German, which thirty girls are reading.  

Two months later YaLaG requested that the Society send him the “Jewish Russian-language newspaper Hashash [Rassvet], the reading of which will be beneficial to the girls.” The Society, which responded favorably, decided that it would make efforts “to support the library which he established on behalf of the women and shall attempt to keep him supplied with books and periodicals.”

The female audience for Laaz literature was not homogeneous: women from different social backgrounds were differently trained to read, and their reading progressed along different lines. Yet, as I shall try to show in this chapter, the supposition that the influence reading would have on the women could be controlled and that it would in no way threaten the social order, whether maskilic or traditional, proved to be false. By the end of the nineteenth century everyone, haredim, maskilim, Zionists, and anti-Zionists alike, had reached the conclusion that women’s reading of Laaz had run amok and that the influence it was having on society went well beyond the narrow confines imposed upon it in advance.

The customary practice in traditional society of allowing girls to act in ways prohibited to boys, and specifically of allowing girls to learn how to read and write in European languages, provided girls with a decided advantage over boys of the same age in all that concerns foreign-language proficiency. Girls systematically studied German, Russian, Polish, or French, and at a younger age than boys could read and comprehend the finest contemporary European literature. This superiority was particularly evident in the haredi families in which sons devoted all of their time to studying Torah and were largely prevented from learning or reading foreign languages. Quite often this relative advantage was sustained into adulthood as well. Thus, while Hayim Zelig Slnimsky was proficient in no foreign language, his wife was fluent in Polish, German, French, and Russian and it was she who gathered the scientific information that was translated and published in his newspaper Hatzfirah. Ahad
Ha'am at twenty was still struggling to achieve fluency in foreign languages while his younger sisters were learning Russian from private tutors and reading its finest works in this language. Mendele learned German and Russian only when he was about seventeen, from Gottlober's daughter, Rosalia. Less notable maskilim, too, often recount that their first efforts to learn Russian were often made with the assistance of women and at their instigation. Katzowitz, for example, tells that it was his female cousin who urged him to learn Russian and who volunteered to be his tutor. Later on, when he sought to prepare for the university, he again had the assistance of “a daughter of the wealthy, who devoted her time to the assistance of indigent students.”

Evidence as to the advantages which women had over men in all that concerns foreign language proficiency emerges also from the fragments of texts that appear in the letters and memoirs. Hinde Bergner, for example, takes pride in her superiority over her brother and succinctly notes: “when [my brother] Mordechai became engaged, he asked me to write his love letters for him to his fiance in Polish.” Mendele too, presumably trying to meet his fiance’s standards, wrote his first letters to her in Russian. He did, however, feel the need to apologize in his first letter to her and concedes that he was not sufficiently fluent in this language for romantic phraseology.

Laaz Reading and the “Innocent Encounter” with Modernity

In his book Polin, Zichronot Utmunot, Trunk draws several constituent portraits of Laaz-reading women who were raised in pre-eminent haredi families. He tells of the daughters of the Kallischer Rebbe, who “knew Polish and German, and used . . . to read thick Polish and German novels,” and gives an extensive account of the daughters of Reb Yaakov Engelman, one of Poland’s biggest timberland dealers. Reb Engelman “maintained a large beit midrash and ritual bath [mikveh] at his place. He hired the sharpest scholars to study Torah with his many sons,” yet “within the realm of this Torah world . . . there existed also another world, that of his many daughters,” says Trunk, who continues:

For sons, it is proper to have their necks always under the yoke of their melamdim, for the world would not be in ruins if it were not for time distracted from Torah, [. . .] yet daughters are freed of obligations for Torah study, [. . .] To that end Reb Yaakov maintained, apart from all the scholars and instructors on the estate, two or three male and female tutors for the girls, to give them polish and the trappings of nobility. Among these tutors there were several who later became famous in Poland’s Haskalah world. Yet no maskilic influence was noticeable in Reb Yaakov’s daughters. The tutors read Schiller and Mickiewicz with the girls and took them on walks in the fields far from the hasidic and scholarly tumult at Reb Yaakov’s estate. Far from this estate, Reb Yaakov Engelman’s daughters walked about, declaiming Schiller’s poetry out loud. But all this
lasted only until the wedding day. Once a girl came under the wedding canopy, she immediately was swept into the Jewish lifestyle [. . .] Schiller’s poetry evaporated along with the childhood years.15

In the course of describing Engelman’s daughters, Trunk incidentally gives a nice characterization of the woman’s realm that existed inside the haredi estate as a world within a world. A wealthy aristocracy, tinged with a thoughtless liberalism, allowed the family’s daughters to study *Laaz* in the open and to read the leading European literature at the same time that their brothers were busy studying Torah. The girls’ program of instruction and reading was treated as an alternative to idleness or as a youthful pastime, meant to be terminated immediately upon marriage. In the case of the Engelman daughters this indeed is what took place. They read “Schiller and Mickiewicz” in the company of their tutors but “no maskilic influence was noticeable” upon them. “They never showed the slightest signs of rebelling against their parents or their lifestyle, and after marriage as before it behaved like kosher Jewish daughters down to the letter. Their own children too they raised according to the strictest Yiddishkeyt.”16

The belief that foreign-language instruction was appropriate for girls, and could be confined to the childhood period without fear of leaving any subsequent traces, was common enough among the haredi aristocracy, as Mordechai Ben Hillel Hacohen also attests:

Many wealthy parents, even the extreme Haredim among them, such as my uncle Shimon Aharon, admitted the need that their daughters be knowledgeable in French and music. [. . .] Nonetheless, over and above all this was the accepted rule, that a woman’s education must not be carried past a definite boundary, viz., the Gymnasia school, or “all the seven grades”—as the fathers used to say and as the matchmakers used to scribble in their notebooks. There is no way that women could go beyond the Gymnasia—and what possible use could there be for such further study? And when?—She had already arrived at marrying age!17

Among the portraits of the *Laaz*-reading women there appear also pictures of women who did not cease to read foreign languages after they had married, yet whose faith was not compromised in the least. Such a woman was David Ettinger’s mother. Ettinger recounts in his memoirs: “I see in memory my mother may she rest in peace and her wonderfully noble figure; she knew by heart much of the Bible, including Wessely’s *Shirei Tiferet* and Schiller’s poetry in German; and at the same time would pray daily and observe even the slightest commandment.”18

Pauline Wengeroff too, it would seem, ought to be included within this group of aristocratic women—those who were taught foreign languages by professional teachers and began to read the best of European literature at an early age, yet went through life with their faith unperturbed. Yet as I shall try
to show, Wengeroff’s reading-story also papers over cracks; which in many other reading-stories were already widening into chasms.

Wengeroff, born in 1833, wrote her memoirs for her assimilated grandchildren from a standpoint of a deeply affectionate nostalgia for the traditional world of her childhood and a deeply felt grief over its destruction by modernity. Her reading-story is of a piece with her harmonistic portrayal of this lost world, and she does not mean at all to mark out any of the fissures that were developing within it. Like the aristocratic daughters of Reb Engelman, she too viewed her studies and reading as youthful pastimes that would be terminated upon her marriage.

And indeed, Wengeroff’s reading-story is not any dramatic tale of revelation and “enlightenment” but rather an account by an intelligent and inquisitive girl of her discovery of and enchantment with a world of imagination in which she could lose herself. Her tale opens with a description of reading the Yiddish books she found on the traditional women’s bookshelf. Lacking books written especially for children, these texts served as a children’s literature for her, and she read the stories in every book she could lay her hands on: *Gdulat Yosef*, *Bvere Mayse*, and other such legends and story books. The imaginative wealth of *A Thousand and One Nights* was especially fascinating to her; but, she says, such books gave her satisfaction only up to the age of eleven. Later *Robinson Crusoe* grew dear to her heart, and soon afterward, prompted by her studies at school, she was already reading Schiller, whose books she and her classmates quickly learned by heart.

Wengeroff’s reading-story progresses in this generally pleasant, natural, and unconflicted tone, yet in the episode involving reading Schiller’s poetry a different note is struck. In coming to speak of Schiller, Wengeroff sees fit to tell her grandchildren and her readers that she and her friends shared their admiration of his poetry with the young maskilim of those days. When trying to account to her readers for the secret of Schiller’s success among the young, she explains that his poems let an invigorating breeze enter the ghetto’s depressing atmosphere, and that everyone had been dumbstruck by their beauty. The young people were fascinated by what they saw as Schiller’s intellectual depth, idealism, and moral perspective, and a thorough acquaintance with his works came to be the hallmark of the enlightened Jew. Many authors attempted translations of his poems, and the young maskilim drew much of their knowledge of German from his poetry.¹⁹

As I have said, Pauline Wengeroff’s memoirs were written in light of the great crisis that occurred in her life when her husband and children assimilated. She views the world of her childhood and youth from the perspective of a woman whose world has been destroyed, of one who pines over the beauty of a society that is no longer. Yet the nostalgic air wafting over her story does not succeed in concealing the inner tensions posed by the encounter between
traditional society and modernity. As in other subjects, so in Wengeroff's reading-story the troubling aspects of this encounter are apparent between the lines. It is also no coincidence that Wengeroff’s tale of learning and reading is situated between the episode of her sister Eva’s marriage and the account of her own engagement; nor is the emphasis on her studiousness during this period an accident. The inner voice that whispered to her that her own marriage would soon be approaching was the voice that awakened in her a hunger for learning. The passion for reading that had taken hold before her marriage hints at her awareness of the “window of opportunity” about to close on her. On the surface she had come to terms with her impending marriage, yet one can hear in her words a repressed wish to add to her store of knowledge and to make the most of the remaining time. Similarly, when she comes to describe the encounter with Schiller’s poetry, Wengeroff tries to play down any sense of conflict but only ends up confirming it. If she emphasizes that her love of Schiller was something she shared with the young maskilim, it is to tell her grandchildren that there was another, more moderate and harmonistic alternative for the meeting of the two worlds. Yet in actuality, the Schiller-reading episode in Wengeroff’s story would better be characterized as her penetration of the “alien” world of these maskilim.

The presence of fine cracks in Wengeroff’s reading-story is consistent with her disapproving stance toward modernity, which was in many respects idiosyncratic. It is clear, nonetheless, that by contrast with what is reported of Engelman’s daughters, the influence her reading had upon her had not dissipated upon marriage. Wengeroff wrote her quite unusual book in German, the declared language of the Enlightenment, and her book shows that her first impressions of reading were etched deeply in her memory.

The fissures barely noticeable in Wengeroff’s account are expressed openly and explicitly when Hinde Bergner (born in 1870) comes to tell her reading-story. Bergner’s story also supplies a good illustration of how parents who had sought to give their daughters only a limited education lost control over what women were reading. Hinde Bergner, like Wengeroff, began by reading Yiddish fairy tales; she too learned German and Polish from private teachers and likewise quickly shifted to reading books in these languages. Her mother, whom she describes as “fanatically devout,” was unable to control her appetite for reading. She ordered her daughter not to read the German and Polish “filth and abomination” books and instructed her to read the Tseina Ur’eina instead, all to no avail. As soon as she completed her studies at the public school, her parents sought to engage her in the home business as well as in her father’s commercial ventures, yet she was unwilling. She made childish plans to escape to Yerozlov to continue her studies, but her runaway attempt failed, and at length her parents allowed her to continue her education by means of private tutors. At the time, Bergner says, she resolved that when she became a
mother she would never stand in her children’s way if they wanted an education. Later, she again demonstrated her objection to the traditional social order by refusing to wear a wig as a married woman. With great pride she tells that only once in her life, on the Sabbath following her wedding day, did she agree to go to synagogue wearing a wig, but not before she heard her mother sharply telling her that she was turning into a heretic and watched her begging tearfully not to shame her in public.

Yiddish and Laaz-reading and removal of the wig often appear paired in the depictions of the Laaz-readers. Here is how Jocheved Bat Rachel Tarshish describes her mother, Rachel Melichman:

My mother was an attractive woman, with her big gray eyes showing her worldly wisdom. Right after her marriage she threw out the wig covering her satin hair.—She was the ultimate authority in our household and in the family as a whole. During free hours she liked to read Yiddish novels and the Russian-language monthly Voskhod. She was a regular subscriber and also held on to back issues for many years, until the Ukrainian marauders scattered their pages across the town. Philanthropy was one of my mother’s several pursuits. She was a member of the committee for feeding impoverished young mothers, and gave “mercy gifts” to small shop owners. […] She also engaged in “bridal support” and visits to the sick.

Very many of the more anonymous Laaz readers were patterned on the same mold as Hinde Bergner and Rachel Melichman. These were women who maintained a traditional lifestyle in most respects and like Rachel Melichman were preoccupied with raising their families, running a shop, or doing volunteer work in the community’s traditional institutions. In general, these readers took an interest in novels from the Russian or Polish literary canon and often read the Jewish publications in Yiddish and Russian. Something of this passion for reading can be seen in the fact that in 1901, one-fourth of all readers in Odessa’s municipal library were Jewish women.

The receptiveness of such women to the currents of secularization and modernization was manifested in the removal of the wig, in the open and liberal views they expressed, in the reading habits they bequeathed to their children and mainly in the readiness to give their children a modern education. Like the Yiddish readers, they too often held more liberal views than their husbands, and the effects on their children were also generally noticeable. Indeed, this is how her children remembered Hinde Bergner:

In her youth my mother affected, as was common then, a certain snobbish assimilationism: she would call herself “Henrietta” rather than Hindezia, her Yiddish name. Yet when her sons became ardent Yiddish nationalists—unlike most of the branches of our large extended family, in which the entire younger generation became completely assimilated into Polish or German culture, with more than one instance of conversion—she was immediately and unreservedly convinced of the justice of their cause;
she even promptly grasped that the Yiddish language meant Yiddish and not Daytsh-merish, and began to write letters to her sons in this language and not in German or in Polish as before.32

“*The Educated Maidens, from Whose Bosom Books by Pisarev, Dubrolyubov and Chernyshevsky Drop*”

Alongside the “housewives” who made up many of the anonymous readers of European literature, another group of readers of a different sort began to emerge as early as the 1860s and 1870s. These readers included young women who had been exposed to radical Russian literature in their youth and were deeply affected by it. Though this was a much smaller group than the housewives, its influence was no less substantial.

Something of the quality of these readers can be gathered from Moshe Kamionsky’s memoirs, where he describes the women who were caught up in the wave of nihilism of the 1870s:

And the nihilists knew how to catch in their nets girls and women too, young Jewish ones. Many of our nation’s daughters [. . .] have been swept up in this movement. In it they found an answer to the women’s question, which was then being raised, as the movement’s members championed complete equality of rights for women and had decided that men had no right to govern them; a doctrine which offered relief to the oppressed women suffering in their wretched and desperate state. [. . .] Very soon just about all of them began to demand more liberties than necessary. There were endless gatherings of students and women, they read the forbidden books together and stolen waters were sweetened for everyone. There the women’s question would be resolved as easily as all the other social questions [. . .] It thus came as no surprise that the Hebrew maidens, who faced in their own homes enormous resistance to their newfound tendencies, would run away from home and strike out on their own, dedicating themselves to being midwives or school teachers among the populace. And little by little the belt was loosened. The laws of modesty and politeness were breached and their purity was suspended. Young Hebrew women slept in the student dormitories of the new movement, Jews or Christians together indiscriminately. The girls and young women were especially taken by the bold men who were preparing themselves for a “political act.”33

Kamionsky’s acid and patriarchal comments about the young women radicals do more than disclose his own opinions about them. There were many people who viewed women’s reading of Russian radicalism’s forbidden texts, unlike men’s reading of such works, as the source of complete heresy and as a genuine threat to the entire fabric of Jewish society. The view underwriting these criticisms is confirmed by other sources as well.

The striking figure of Esther Aharonson-Hurgin—a.k.a. “Ethel the rabbi’s daughter”—so elegantly depicted by S. L. Tshitron, also conveys something of
the atmosphere of the time among the educated women readers. What his depiction suggests is that radical Russian literature indeed held many young Jewish women in its thrall. Under its sway, these women developed a militant feminist consciousness and began to run away from home to acquire a higher education in “women’s professions”—in midwifery, nursing, pharmacy, and school-teaching.

Tsitron, unlike Kamionsky, gives a strongly sympathetic description of the young women radicals, clearing Ethel and her friends of any taint of immorality. Yet the allusions in his language suggest that in his opinion, too, women’s reading of radical Russian literature went hand in hand with their assimilationist and heretical tendencies. In describing the militancy of Ethel and her friends, Tsitron employs a locution reminiscent of the talmudic language in its account of the “other,” that is, of Elisha Ben Avuyah. Just as it was said of Elisha that “when he would rise from the study hall many heretic books would drop from his bosom” (Tractate Hagiga, 18b), Tsitron writes of Ethel and her friends that from their “bosoms books by Pisarev, Dubrolyubov and Chernyshevsky drop”:

And they began to include [Ethel] in the group of educated young women who were versed in Russian literature, those from whose bosoms books by Pisarev, Dubrolyubov and Chernyshevsky drop.

At that time—the middle seventies of the last century—there were many young Jewish women in Minsk, especially among the middle classes, who were affected by the socialist spirit, which in them was expressed by an intense and urgent desire to be self-supporting and independent. “Women, let us be like men! One law both for us and the stronger sex!” That was the slogan over which the Minskian socialist virgins fought in each household. And long and bitter was the battle between fathers and daughters in those days. The former could not comprehend in the least how a girl who had already reached a mature age and needed to be married so as to fulfill the will of a husband who was to govern her, how she could be independent and do as she pleased; and the latter refused to surrender and fiercely stood her ground. And the town was awash with rumors, each more devilish than the next: The daughter of so-and-so stole her father’s silver and gold utensils and ran off, nobody knows where; the daughter of thus-and-thus slipped off on her wedding day with all her dowry and jewelry and has disappeared without a trace. And they kept stretching it out to make a greater impression: the daughter of his-name’s daughter did not run off alone, but ran off with her lover; some even added the twist: with her Christian lover. After a while the flight of the Minskian maidens came to seem of epidemic proportions, to the point where there was not a home without a runaway daughter, the whole town was sunk, and even after it became known for absolutely certain that in no case did the runaways have anything to do with lovers, let alone Christian lovers, but were only pursuing some goal or purpose in life, and that the escaped maidens were sitting at study in a school for midwives at Mohilev or attending the dentistry program at Kharkov—even then the rumors didn’t die down, and in the hearts of the fathers the tempest raged and raged.34

The house of Ethel, the rabbi’s daughter, became a way station for the runaway girls:
Only a handful in town knew that there was a secret cabal of young maskilim, most of them Hebrew teachers, admirers of Lilienblum and Liebermann of Ha'emet, which was behind the runaway movement, or that “Ethel the rabbi's daughter” was the driving force in this circle. At the time she was the first and possibly the only one of Minsk's intellectual young women who earned a profitable and dignified income from her own labor and did not have to feed at her parents' table; she also lived in a residence by herself which kept her free of all guardianship dependencies material or spiritual from any quarter. This let her turn her residence into a council-house for the young men and women who sought to live based on new and modern principles. She took especial interest in the condition of the despondent girls, those whose homes with their “narrow-minded householder” parents had become too confining, and who yearned for freedom, light and the big world. The fate of these miserable friends of hers touched her heart, and it is what gave her the motivation to take the runaway movement under her wing. In her home they secretly arranged all the details of the escapes down to the smallest details, solved questions of time and place and marked out the road to their objective; there they prepared runaway kits with food, linens and such, and appointed “spy-guards” to accompany the girl to the first way station. Supervising over and conducting all of this was Ethel the rabbi’s daughter, and the runaways never suffered a single mishap at her hands.35

Of course, women weren’t the only ones who were reading radical Russian literature and subsequently attempting to run off in hopes of getting an education. Yet despite the manifest similarity between girl runaways and boy runaways in terms of motivation and the act itself, for girls the escape held a different significance, because for them running away required special daring. They were leaving behind families who viewed them not simply as heretical but also as morally degenerate, and their flight to the hostile city exposed them to palpable dangers. The living conditions of the “coursists,” as the female students of “higher courses” came to be known, were practically unbearable, and incredible determination was required to endure them.36 Many drew their extra resolve from the inspiration of the Russian women’s liberation movement and were motivated not only by a desire for social justice but by a will to improve their own conditions.

The “feminist” perspective of such women—feminist in the sociocultural context of the period—is nicely brought out by Tsigron in his account of a debate Ethel held with Peretz Smolenskin over the status of women. Of particular interest is the tactic Ethel employed in this debate. Even though her own perspectives had been formed by readings of Dubrolyubov, Pisarev, and Chernyshevsky among others, to build her case she does not draw on arguments from Chernyshevsky, but rather from John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and Henry Thomas Buckle.37 It is as if Ethel were obscuring her links to nihilism so as not to weaken her case in the debate with Smolenskin. Tsigron also makes an important clarification here, where he notes that this was the period before the rift between the socialists and the maskilim, when the socialists had yet to begin vilifying Hebrew and Hebrew literature.38 And if, earlier,
Tsitron’s account served to clear Ethel of the stain of moral degeneracy, his account here also clears her of the taint of being a “traitor to her people”:

And I also remember this episode, which in its day and for some time afterward served as material for discussions and debates in maskilic and authors’ circles in Minsk. This was in the early eighties. Arriving at Minsk then was Peretz Ben Moshe Smolenskin of Hashahar, to collect subscriptions for his Collected Works. The town maskilim held a fine reception for the great author and some of the more notable ones were of much assistance to him in gathering the subscriptions. These latter included “Ethel the rabbi’s daughter,” who was one of the regular subscribers to Hashahar and one of Smolenskin’s fans and enthusiasts. It was told at the time that what Ethel did on Smolenskin’s behalf in a few hours, the rest of the maskilim couldn’t do in the whole two weeks that the editor of Hashahar had stayed in Minsk. I must comment that in the period of which I speak, socialism was not yet, among the young Hebrew adherents of it, synonymous with deep hatred of the Hebrew language and its literature, as we see in our own times. Even those who were steeped in the doctrine of historical materialism were long-time readers of Hashahar without having been singed by its coals. The night before Smolenskin left Minsk, some of his admirers gathered to his hotel, Ethel among them. Over a cup of tea, those sitting at the table conducted a long and variously interesting discussion on questions of life and literature. Ethel took part in this conversation. In her comments she was able to shift the talk from topic to topic to reach the issue of the woman’s question. And here “the debtor found occasion to call in his debt.” She recalled to Smolenskin the sin of the Feuilletons in that he once published in his Hamabit an attack on women who do their utmost to obtain a place in society where they are alongside men instead of being their indentured servants. Using harsh rhetoric, she condemned the present social order that stole the liberty of the weak woman and enslaved her to one stronger than she. [Ethel] supported her case with quotes and maxims from Mill and Spencer mixed with verses from the Bible and passages from the talmudic sages. Along the way she also mentioned Smolenskin’s severe critique in Hashahar of the socialist monthly Ha’emet and defended Liebermann and his literary project. Smolenskin, who was also an excellent speaker and an extremely competent debater, tried to undercut his interlocutor by citing [traditional] laws concerning women and thus to beat back her arguments, but to no avail, as her claims were stronger. The next day the word spread through town from mouth to ear that little Ethel had bested the great Smolenskin.

Smolenskin’s stance toward women was patriarchal and conservative, and it drew its justification from a certain conception of social mores and of the national interest. In his writings, he expresses contempt for women’s desire for an education, casts aspersions about their supposed immorality, condemns them for being ignorant in Jewish matters, and worries about the future of a nation that must depend on mothers such as these for the upbringing of its youth:

And in this land all daughters of Israel will study and all will seek to be intellectual, all will speak in lofty phrases and will abandon innocent and modest manners, and even will take solace in the company of young men, and what shall be the end of all these women, who are mostly impoverished girls? For they will not know the duties of a woman who enters a covenant with a man and will not be able to manage their households and will not have the merciful Torah on their tongues when they teach their sons, but will instead be corrupt and corrupting, and shall be a tumescent
ignorance for the House of Israel [. . .] These daughters, who know not a thing of the teachings of Israel [. . .] with what shall they instruct their children? And what shall they demand of their children? Only to be like the Goyim lacking all judgment and reason, as indeed is the case now in this land; these educated women are the primal sins of our people driving it from its reason, increasing its poverty and bringing it to ruin.40

Ethel’s approach to the women’s question differed from Smolenskin’s not only in its radicalism, but also in the breadth of sources or sensibilities she drew upon to support her stance on questions of society, morals, culture, and nationhood. By contrast with Smolenskin, whose position was grounded in strong religious and national sentiments with close links to the perspectives of traditional Judaism, Ethel's approach indicated her incorporation of values of contemporary European thought. In order to beat Smolenskin at his own game she drew on sources from traditional Jewish literature, yet she also built her case using, as I said, Mill, Spencer, and Buckle.

Typical of the next generation of readers of this kind was Sarah Azariahu, born in 1873. Azariahu began her tutelage in Russian at her mother's initiative while she was still a child of seven, and the mother, who was a “very pious” woman, was faced with a “difficult spiritual conflict” as the town considered the tutor’s house to be a “heretics’ nest.”41 When she was about nine, Azariahu also began to learn German:

More than everything I liked to be by myself after the lesson [. . .] in one of the hidden nooks of the garden, and to sink into reading books, of which I had plenty in this house. At the end of two or three years of persistent study, after I had managed to acquire for myself the basics of Russian language and literature, and had similarly learned also German and French—I thirstily fell upon the “thick-bellied” Russian monthlies such as: Russkaia Misel, Russkie Bogatstvo, the Jewish monthly in Russian Voskhod, etc. [. . .] The atmosphere that reigned in the teacher's house had a tremendous influence on my development. It is what deepened in me the desire for an education. My period of stay in this house, sometimes for many hours on end, cast a great light and bliss on my joyless childhood.42

At the age of fourteen Sarah Azariahu moved with her parents to Dvinsk, but she decided to abandon her dreams of a Gymnasia education:

Here I could have continued my studies in the government Gymnasia which was open also to Jewish girls, had I not been blocked by a spiritual obstacle which I was unable to overcome. In my town a requirement was made that Jewish girls had to attend the Gymnasia on the Sabbath as well and to actively participate in all the studies. In those days [. . .] visits to the “field towns” of the “district” were considered to be violations of the Sabbath in public. Any such act on my part might also have been interpreted as my defamation of the memory of my revered grandfather. This concern settled matters. Deeply anguished, I gave up formal studies at the high school and resolved to complete my education by means of private teachers. For five or six years I continued to engage in this casual form of study.43
Azariahu’s decision not to continue her regular studies at the Gymnasia did not necessarily stem from religious concerns so much as from fears of desecrating the memory of her cherished grandfather. Her own perspectives, she says, had already been formed by then, under the tutelage of the Russian literature she read: “Like most of the Jewish youth of the ‘Haskalah’ generation in Russia I too was raised on Russian revolutionary literature, the beginnings of which are rooted in the mid-nineteenth century.” Stirred by this literature, Azariahu at an early age developed social sensitivities and a heightened consciousness of women’s issues:

From the dawn of my youth I began to form opinions mainly about two problems: A. The bitter fate of my wandering and persecuted people; B. The inferior status which the woman occupies in the family. [. . .] Of the unequal rights of the woman and her wretched state in the family and of the “special” laws, written and unwritten, which limited her rights, I learned by viewing the lives of broad sectors of our nation in every place I lived and by reading books in various languages. [. . .] Intuitively I reached the conclusion that the material independence of women was liable to raise her condition and substantially improve her state in the family.45

Haya Weizman-Lichtenstein too became gradually exposed to radical Russian literature. As a small child, she listened closely as her elder sister Miriam read her Russian literature and shed many a tear over the poems of Nadson and Nekrasov. She also had an ear for the social critique in the columns of the Russkiy evreii, which her sister read out devoutly.46 Once she had put her sister’s protective tutelage behind her, Weizman-Lichtenstein began to read the German and Russian masterpieces, yet she assigns the decisive influence on her life to her discovery of “forbidden Russian literature”:

I contacted a library in Pinsk and every week received a book and would gobble it up. Spielehagen and Auerbach, Gogol and Pushkin, Turgenev and Pisemsky and others filled my soul. From Berzinski [a student and teacher] I learned that forbidden literature existed which could not be obtained from the library. For the sake of our household affairs I would occasionally travel to Pinsk, and thanks to contacts this teacher had there the treasures of the “forbiddens” were opened to me: Chernyshevsky’s Mah Laasot?, Tsad Aharei Tsad, and suchlike. Sacred images of self-sacrifice for the general good filled my mind already then. I felt that my generation was destined for a life of great efforts toward a great and responsible task, and that one must study, read and comprehend the Jewish and the non-Jewish environment.47

The effects on the young women of reading radical literature were ripe with consequences for Jewish society. As I have said, these women battled vigorously for their rights to a higher education and a few found their way into higher education courses for women, which in those days were hives of revolutionaries.48 Women faced special difficulties in seeking to gain acceptance to these schools. To obtain a metropolitan residence permit a passport
was required, and for that they had to obtain authorization from their parents and from a relative in town declaring a willingness to take them in.\textsuperscript{49} The girls also had to pass strict entrance examinations requiring extensive preparation. As Sarah Azariahu attests in her memoirs, meeting these challenges demanded an unusual degree of readiness from the girls for risk and for sacrifice:

In all Russia’s expanse in those days there was not a single foothold in the state universities for the Russian woman, not to mention the Jewish woman. At the end of the nineteenth century a group of famous scientists holding progressive political and socialist views arose in Russia, and in Petersburg (Leningrad) they established higher schools for education for women alone. These institutions bore the name of their founders. The higher courses for women of Bestuichev and the higher courses of Lestagaft both were wide open even to Jewish women. These two higher education programs—sort of a university in miniature for women—were a major factor in the development of the Russian woman, and they are what elevated her into the political and social arena of Russian life. Such “fountains” of reason as these enticed also the young Jewish girls from the Pale of Settlement, whose hearts were drawn to training and preparation for a productive life. I too dreamt of warming to the light of these institutions of higher education for women. Yet in the path to realizing this dream innumerable obstacles were posed, the largest of which was—obtaining a residence permit in the state capital. [. . .] Despite all these obstacles I resolved in my heart to try my powers and to make an effort to get into courses of Lestagaft. To that end I traveled in early autumn 1900 to Petersburg. A few “night layovers” until I would be able to collect the necessary information, were promised me in advance by an acquaintance—a dentist—clearly, at a certain risk to my host. Yet such “deeds of mercy” were quite common among the studying youth.\textsuperscript{50}

Sarah Azariahu did not manage to overcome the obstacles set in her path. She was seized with a great panic one night when she came home late to her friend’s house. Suddenly she realized how dangerous her illegal stay in town was to them both, and this recognition made her abandon her plans of studying in Petersburg.\textsuperscript{51} Nor were conditions easy for the women who were able to withstand the rigors of the road and succeeded in being numbered among the “coursists.” In addition to the long hours of study and the difficult final examinations, the young women suffered from lack of sleep, and more than a few succumbed to hunger and disease. On this point, Ksennia’s experience as conveyed in her memoirs is revealing: In the course of her studies she took ill with malaria and anemia and had to be treated by a young doctor, “one of those Russian women, who had set out too early on the path of labor, science and independence. As she sat by my bed,” Ksennia goes on, “she told me: ‘had I been your mother, I would have tied you to my skirt and never let you out of my sight.’”\textsuperscript{52}

In spite of the coursists’ hard life, many Jewish women graduated from the higher education courses for women.\textsuperscript{53} In those days, the absolute numbers of
women who attended institutions for higher education was quite small, yet the number of Jewish women enrolled in them was high relative to their share in the population at large. More important for our discussion are the attributes distinguishing such women. Evidently, these female students were more physically and mentally estranged from their parents’ homes and traditions than were the males, as Eliyhu Tcherikover asserts about the women who joined the revolutionary movements:

The tragic aspect is much more striking with the female Jewish revolutionaries than with their male comrades; they had cut their ties with their background much more thoroughly. They really had broken completely with their families and from the Pale of Settlement. [. . .] The revolution changed the entire value system of the Jewish woman radical much more quickly, and one may say more deeply, than was the case with the men.

The women’s tendency toward a greater radicalism than the men was manifested in the large number of religious converts among women who joined revolutionary movements, as compared to their male counterparts:

This large-scale phenomenon attests to the fact that the feeling of having been torn away and broken off from the old family traditions was much more severe for the Jewish women than it was for the men. And when a daughter of Israel left her home and moved to the radical Russian camp, often their orthodox religious parents would sit shiva to mourn her . . .

Special attention is due as well to Tcherikover’s assertion that the women’s manifestations of independence and radicalism upset the traditional social order more than did similar manifestations among the men: “The revolution aroused in Jewish girls of ordinary families the burning desire for professional training and independence, and this shook the foundations of Jewish life much more severely than when the male intelligentsia had been aroused.”

The phenomenon of Jewish women joining the revolutionary movements from the 1870s until the twentieth century took place at the extremes of society. Only a handful of women went so far as to give their lives to the revolutionary cause. Yet the mere presence of such women suggests the existence of much broader sets of women who were affected by the messages of Russian literature, especially concerning the woman’s question. Haya Weizman-Lichtenstein makes a point of stressing how her sister was influenced by the poetry of Nikolai Chernyshevsky. What this emphasis suggests is that the campaign waged by Russian authors for the liberation of women and for women’s rights was part of the reason the reading-women were drawn to their works. This may explain also why in the novel Shtei Haktzavot Braudes elects to have a young woman reader, specifically, who holds the “Book of Poems by Nekrasov in Russian.”
The Laaz-Readers’ Reading Story—Interim Conclusion

Two types of women felt both the need and sufficient justification for putting their life stories into writing. One type included women such as Pauline Wengeroff and Hinde Bergner, who set themselves what may have seemed at first a modest goal: to tell their loved ones— their sons and grandsons—about their own lives and the lives of their families. The second type included women like Puah Rakovsky and Sarah Azariahu, who wanted everyone to share their life’s mission and to advance the cause of women. The reading-stories of the latter may seem to present a certain “feminine” parallel to the reading-stories of the “masculine” maskilic elite, as both describe how their social, cultural, and national consciousness was formed. For all that, the reading story of these women is not an enlightenment-process tale modeled on the same bildung format as the men’s. First, it is more an account of “empowerment” than a tale of initiation loaded with religious crises and upheavals; second, it is not as full of personal torments and misery as the male enlightenment-process story is; and third, the women do not tend to dwell extensively on the impression left on them by having read individual works. On the whole, the names of authors and the titles of books and periodicals mentioned in their reading-stories come to stand for types of literature more than they note impressions of particular books. Some of these references serve as a synecdoche of sorts for the masterpieces of Russian, Polish, or German prose and poetry as a whole; others denote an entire category of critical radical literature; and others still represent classes of Jewish and Russian publications. It is hard to escape the feeling that the women would have regarded any placing of their impressions and thoughts at the center as improper, that it would have caused them discomfort or embarrassment. Bergner’s sons relate that their mother used to read “for days on end” in three languages: Yiddish, Polish, and German, and that “somewhere in there, hidden in the books” they found “her notes and even poems written in blank verse,” yet none of this did she dare reveal in her memoirs. When she learned that her sons had seen her annotations “she blushed as shamefacedly as a child.”

Despite the compression and formulaic quality of the reading impressions found in these reading-stories, one can learn quite a bit from them about the sequences of books the Laaz-readers read and about the collective profile of various groups within the female reading public. Between the two poles noted thus far—the radical and militant readers at one end, and the “housewives” on the other—there was a large group of Gymnasia school students who were raised on Russian literature, who were fluent in German, French, or Polish and who were versed in the classics of the European literature of their day. Something of the biographies of these young women can be gleaned as well from
the school curricula and the educational methods applied in the Gymnasia schools of that period. As I have noted, the linguistic models used for language instruction were not those of correct speech or ordinary writing but, rather, those of the classic literary works, which the girls learned by heart, recited out loud to their friends in class, and wrote compositions about in Russian or Polish. It is hard to exaggerate how deep a stamp such a method of instruction can leave on its pupils. Masterpieces learned by heart during childhood and adolescence are not readily forgotten: these books become part of a cultural capital cherished for a lifetime. Furthermore, analyzing admired classical works and writing compositions about them could not have failed to have improved reading skills or to have deepened the influence of such reading. One may therefore conclude that the hundreds of women who annually graduated from the Gymnasia schools, which by the end of the century would have meant thousands of students—women who did not put their life stories to writing—are to be included among the silent majority of Laaz-readers. These women were thoroughly versed in the literature of their day, were influenced by it, and, in turn, had an influence on their surroundings.

**Women Readers of Laaz—Their Influence, and the Maskilim's Response**

The very existence of women whose cultural world had been formed by European literature, and of independent and radical women, created a sort of continuous subversive presence within Jewish society. Yet the influence that women readers of European languages had on their surroundings was more than a matter of mere passive presence. In many cases the Laaz-readers played active roles as agents of change and modernization: they served as models for their brothers and sons, established new habits of reading, and pointed the way for a growing public of readers. Often, these young women brought books to the yeshiva students who were losing their faith or were the first to introduce the students to cultural institutions such as the theater, ballet, or opera.

Shaul Tchernichowsky relates that he learned Russian at the age of five from his mother's younger sister. This aunt, who had “decidedly liberal views,” used to send him books “from wherever she was” and routinely gave him alibis for his heretical behavior. Nahum Refalkes Nir used to read his older sister's books, and so became first aware of the literature of the Russian classical authors; he prided himself on having read Tolstoy's *Kreuzer Sonata*, which his sister had taken pains to conceal from him. Likewise, Ben-Zion Katz tells that when he was starting to drift away from the “rabbinic world,” he attended the opera for the first time in his life at a woman's instigation. Often, women made efforts to spread the Haskalah out of the declared ideological mission of
aiding the secularization and modernization of Jewish society. Rachel, the heroine of Braudes’s novel, *Hadat Vehahayim*, is patterned on this mold, giving Shmuel her books with the aim of “altering him.” These were for the most part Russian intellectual and philosophical texts dealing with questions of society, political science, natural science, and history, and they included works on radical Russian criticism, materialist philosophy, historical determinism, Darwin’s theory and so forth:

Rachel also brought her books with her from the town of Naharayim, new Russian books from that period, books that wax on about the general questions of life which were then in fashion, on general reforms of society, on questions of “the spoon and the fork,” of labor and money, of masses and officials, men and women, and many other questions of this type; also they delved into issues of faith and religion in general, here too they set out with the sharply critical spirit drawn from the treasure house of natural science—“Matter and Power,” Darwin’s theory of evolution, the methods of the philosophical materialists and the methods of the historical determinists in nature and history—all these came together then and put many things into their [. . .] books, which captivated the young people; Rachel too was well versed in them and dedicated to their words and ideas, and kept a selection of their books with her at all times.67

Quite a few stories of “agents” of this type appear in the autobiographical literature. Sarah Azariahu, for example, considered activities like Rachel’s to be a genuine mission. “I went to the dark cellars,” she tells, “to spread knowledge of the tongue of the land among the yeshiva boys, as I was convinced that knowledge of Russian was a vital necessity for any Jew dwelling in Russia.”68

Many yeshiva students who were taking their first steps toward losing their religion encountered women of Azariahu’s stripe and received assistance from them. Katz relates that it was women who tried to get him into the young socialists’ set and who first plied him with the forbidden socialist literature. Katz met these women in the religious household of Shmuel Feigenzohn (ShaFaN), who for many years served as the editor and manager of the Widow Rom publishing house:

In the Feigenzohn house I met also his daughters. They weren’t interested in Jewish issues, and their friends were young socialists and Bundists. The daughter of one of the Bundist leaders, Kremer, was studious and educated and sought to influence me to join their set. She gave me books to read on the French Revolution, including works from the underground press.69

A similar episode is described by A. Litvak in his memoirs. In a chapter titled “My First Steps” he recounts that when he was still halfway between being a yeshiva boy and a heretic, he met a yeshiva head’s daughters and through them was first made aware of radical literature and the Socialist Union groups70:

The yeshiva head’s daughters, as intelligent semi-educated girls, who had acquaintances among the externs and the students, were the first to join the socialist unions. One of
them, Feyge, who had an alert and active air, even achieved notoriety for a certain period. Their friends who worked together with them were socialists too: Hannah, Feyge “Rabotchi Narod,” Luba, as well as “Crew-cut Feyge.” [. . .] In general the yeshiva director’s house and daughters were well known to the Jewish socialists in Vilna in those days. What the yeshiva director himself thought of all this—I have no idea. It is impossible he was not at all aware of it. [. . .] Among the group that used to gather around the yeshiva director’s house, I was then the only one not yet to be drawn along in the current of the movement. I used to wander over there to get radical Russian books, to listen in on conversations, so long as people didn’t hide from me.71

On the whole, the women who joined the socialist movement or the nationalist movements in Jewish society are described in the memoirs of the end of the century favorably, as people whose efforts helped educate society and contributed to its secularization and modernization. Yet often the readers of novels in Laaz are described as assimilated women, women who had lost all ties to the Jewish world and threatened to lead it to catastrophe and annihilation. An extreme illustration of how such women were regarded as “agents of assimilation” may be seen in the “Daniel Havulson conversion affair,” as recorded within the memoir literature.72 This episode appears in the literature in various versions, yet in all versions, Havulson’s educated and assimilating wife comes off as being clearly at fault. In one version of the story, told by Ben-Zion Katz, an effort is made to clear Havulson himself of guilt and to blame his conversion entirely on his wife, who determinedly refused to allow her son to be circumcised:

Havulson, as a Jewish high official in the government, was accepted by the ministers and did not have a need to convert. But something happened when his first boy was born [. . .] There was a hemorrhage after the circumcision, and the boy was a step away from death. When the second son was born Havulson’s wife did not allow him by any means to be circumcised. According to the laws of those days one could not register a child without a religion, and the Jewish community refused to register him as a Jew as he was uncircumcised. There was no choice but to baptize him as a Christian. They did the same with the third child. In the Czarist days the priests would closely supervise Jewish children who were baptized as Christians by their parents, and ultimately they too converted so as to rid themselves of this supervision. Havulson’s wife was assimilated anyway, despite her being the daughter of the synagogue’s beadle, and it is she who persuaded him to convert too.73

Katz’s wish to entirely clear Havulson here comes at a considerable expense to Havulson’s character: Havulson turns out to have no opinion or will of his own. At the same time, Katz’s desire to incriminate the assimilating beadle’s daughter gives us a glimpse into the internal and external drama that was the context of the bold decision, and without meaning to, casts a light onto a fascinating aspect of her world.

Shmuel Tshitron, who wrote a thick tome on the Jewish converts of his day, tells a different story. According to Tshitron, Havulson was asked to convert by
order of the Czar and “he was much influenced by his educated wife the
daughter of a Cohen, who had been absorbing assimilationist tendencies
from her youth and never in her life had a thing to do with Jews. At her insti-
gation Havulson announced, without any indication of prior inner struggle
. . . that he was prepared to honor the Czar’s order . . . After a short period Ha-
vulson converted.”
74 Tsitron does not clear Havulson of all blame when he at-
tributes to him a conversion to Christianity with no signs of conflict from his
part. Yet all the same, Tsitron too, like Ben-Zion Katz, takes care to specify the
negative influence of Havulson’s wife.

What is important here is not the factors leading to Havulson’s conversion
as such, but rather, the depiction of educated women in the memoirs of the
period written by men. In this respect the portrayal of Havulson is typical and
representative. The maskilic Laaz-reading women were quite frequently de-
scribed as women who had betrayed their nation, had become alien to its heri-
tage, and were behaving as “agents of assimilation.” In many of the autobiog-
raphies written by men there appears some sort of story about a scandalous
elopement of an educated girl with her Gentile lover: in one version of this
plot outline, the girl responds to her parents’ entreaties and returns with hang-
ing head to her home and her people; 75 in its other version she leaves her na-
tion never to return and leads a bitter and miserable existence for all the rest of
her days. 76

The maskilic discourse on the “Jewish woman question,” which began to
take form in the 1860s, made a clear association between the phenomenon of
girls eloping with their Christian lovers and their habits of reading, in particu-
lar, their passion for novels in Laaz. This trend became especially evident in the
nationalist discourse at the end of the century. In effect, the link between
novel reading and assimilation came to be a hallmark of another type of “new
reading woman.” This reader is no longer the poor daughter from the indigent
family reading a Shomer novel to the light of a candle, but rather an educated
girl who reads novels by Turgenev, Gogol, and Tolstoy or the poetry of Nek-
rasov, Nadson, and Pushkin. Y. L. Peretz, in his story “Hanidachat,” clearly de-
lineates the portrait of such a “new reading woman.” 77

“Hanidachat”—“The Outcast Woman”—unfolds the tragic tale of Han-
nah, a passionate reader of novels, who runs off with her Christian lover on
the night of the Shavuot holiday, never to return. Hannah carefully selects the
date for her escape from her people and parents’ home, on the very night the
reception of the Torah is celebrated, so as to defiantly let her parents know
how alien their world is to her, how deeply estranged she feels from her ances-
tral tradition and from everything Jewish.

Hannah, whose aloof father never meddles with “domestic affairs,” is un-
willing to assist her mother in making preparations for the holiday. “She sits
by a window with a novel but does not read,” and “about her lips a scornful
smile plays." The estranged feelings are thus associated with the reading of novels. Novels are what arouse in her a yearning for a different life and they are what lead her into the dead end in which she is entrapped. She elopes with her Christian lover and hopes to find happiness and fulfillment in her life, yet "that life, to which she escaped, repulsed her, vomited her from within it. . . . Yet to return, she could not. . . . In the path of return stood the law, and also—two graves: of her father and of her mother . . . ."

Yet Hannah is not the lone hero of the story. The author chooses to tell Hannah's tale from the point of view of her haunted and tormented brother, and to focus the story on his soul-searching over his role in her departure to Christian ruination. Hence, the tale of the betrayal of "hanidachat," of the outcast woman, becomes the tale of her brother's guilt. Her tormented spirit does not let him rest, and every Shavuot night she returns in a vision to accuse him:

And I blame—she says furiously—I blame all you!

What did I know about your bloody fight with the others?
You knew about it; you studied in the heder. My books didn't tell me a thing about that . . . My life in your house was foreign; the fictional life of others, out of alien books . . .

Did I betray anything, did I renounce anything?
I only exchanged a saffron yellow halah loaf for sweet bread of another kind . . . Tales out of the Tseina Ur'eina, with books; tkhines, with novels!
The bit of green spread on the floor—with the plush green grass of the field and forest! . . .

That oppressive, strangling existence—I traded them in for sun and flowers, for happiness and love!

And if all this has been nothing but a dream, it is I who must bear my misery and anguish!

But I never betrayed all you; I didn't know and wasn't acquainted with you;

. . . The beautiful, the beloved, the lofty and upraised, the most supreme—this you all sealed off and kept inside yourselves, kept for men alone . . .

From me, from us who were drawn to life with all of our strength and blood, with all the energy of youth, from us you required—a butter cake, a yellow halah with saffron! It was you who rejected us."

Hannah's monologue is hallucinated. The accusation—the brother's own—is aimed at himself and at all the Jewish men he represents. It is the narrator who condemns the exclusion of women from the spiritual sphere of Jewish life, and it is he who is behind the complete rejection of the charge leveled at his sister for being a traitor to her people. The impression is thus bolstered that both the narrator and the implied author tend to think that men—those with the authority and those who determine the gender hierarchy in Jewish society—are the ones who bear responsibility for Hannah's fate. Hannah herself is described as a woman-child, a "babe captivated" by novels. Enthralled, she pursues her childish love and her romantic visions of a world of nature, greenery, and sensual fulfillment. The fictionalized world of the novels seems to her
real, and her life in her parental home “foreign and fictional.” Lacking a solid cultural or national identity, she escapes to another world, without really knowing where she is headed or what she is leaving behind.

Yet the author hasn’t spoken the last word on his hero. The final paragraph of the tale discloses a reluctance to pass judgment, slightly lessening the severity of the brother’s guilt: “Let Him deliver the verdict who is Supreme over all the peoples and their wars, over the bloodshed and strife that lasts from age to age.” This paragraph, ambiguous as to whether it is uttered by the author or by the hero, removes exclusive responsibility for the story’s events from resting with its hero, and shows Hannah and her brother to be victims of the ceaseless strife between human beings, between Jews and non-Jews, between haredim and maskilim, and, perhaps, between women and men.

Peretz’s story does not explicitly state what sort of books and novels motivated Hannah to replace her “oppressive, strangling existence . . . for sun and flowers, for happiness and love.” Presumably the “foreign books” she read were novels in *Laaz,* possibly the leading European works of her day. What the story does explicitly affirm is that Hannah exchanged the “tales from the Tseina Ur’eina—with books,” and the *tkhines* for women with novels; and that her reading of these books is what decided her fate. In this respect, the story gives a fairly accurate account of the ambivalent nature of the marginal space Jewish society had assigned to women. This space indeed dispossessed women of the cultural properties essential to the construction of their Jewish identity, yet it simultaneously provided them with the freedom to read whatever they cared to. Thus, in a Jewish house, growing up with a cold and aloof father and alongside a brother whose education solidly constructed his Jewish identity, Hannah lived a “life [that] was foreign; the fictional life of others, out of alien books.”

It would seem that the charge commonly made in the second half of the nineteenth century, that novel reading caused many women to convert from the faith, is overstated. Yet the fears of losing control over women’s reading were not baseless in the least. Even if novel reading alone is not what caused the “plague of conversions” among the women, it is hard to deny the fact that reading played a decisive role in opening women to modernity and to European culture, sometimes while also alienating them from their own religious and national heritage. These women influenced their surroundings and set into motion processes that were unexpected and undesirable, both from the point of view of traditional society and from the point of view of the maskilic elite.

“False Is This Asiatic Language and Vain Its Books”

The deep ambivalence characterizing the maskilim’s attitude toward female readers of sentimental Yiddish novels was much more pointedly and forcefully
expressed in their attitude toward women who read *Laaz*. On top of all the apprehensions about the destabilized gender hierarchy, the shift in the balance of power between the sexes and the disintegration of the patriarchal family structure, there were now fears of weakened national ties and of outright assimilation. These women were seen on the one hand as the crack in the haredi isolationist wall through which traditional society might peer out into an admirable world of European culture; but on the other hand, they were also perceived as a cleft within maskilic society, allowing gusts boding assimilation and extinction to blow into the Jewish world.

Concerns of this kind began to be apparent already in the 1860s, at the heyday of the maskilic campaign for women’s education, and came hand in hand with the maskilic initiatives to use women to promote acquaintance with foreign languages. Already then, the maskilim observed that women who studied foreign languages and read the European masterpieces were beginning to show signs of “cultural fastidiousness” and were taking on condescending airs toward their own nation’s language and literature. In 1863, when the young Shifra Eltzin sought to have *Hamelitz* publish a Hebrew letter and two translated fables she had written, Mendele warmly recommended to the editors that they publish this “one [woman] in a thousand,” who might serve as a model for her comrades, who spurn Hebrew and its literature:

> And this maiden shall be as a signal for the insurgents, who rebel against our holy language and retreat from this old mother of ours. Even the refined women and the delicate daughters who are mastering alien tongues will hear the voice of their sister, who is as learned as they, speaking in the language of her nation before all and sundry, and shall be ashamed of their thoughts. For a daughter of Israel finds it unseemly in these days to have even a single Hebrew word fall from her lips; false is this Asiatic language and vain its literature, a woman prides herself on cooing and prattling in French and German.

YaLaG too was astounded by the phenomenon of a young woman who knew Hebrew, and sought ways in which he might encourage and get to know her. In 1870 he wrote in a letter to Sirkin:

> Frazer tells me in your name that in Kiev lives a Hebrew woman, Shifra Eltsik by name, who knows also the Hebrew Tongue and is knowledgeable in every science. If this is so and if that woman pleases you pray tell me how her name is spelled and her address and I shall send her my *Shirei Yehuda*.

A month later, however, YaLaG had second thoughts, and wrote, “To the woman Shifra Eiges I shall not send my book as according to you she has cast aside Hebrew literature, and how shall she find in my poems things that please her now that she has turned her face to other languages and knowledge!”

Something of the conceited fastidiousness that YaLaG attributed to Shifra Eltzin, Frishman ascribes to the fictional female friend to whom he addresses
his literary reviews, the *Michtavim al Dvar Hasifrut*. This woman, who had read European literature and does not hold Hebrew literature in high regard, forces Frishman to continually come to the defense of the “feeble and forlorn” Hebrew literature:

You, my friend, who used to ceaselessly protest in your high and mighty castle, you who held your short and cute nose with your thin and white fingers every time I brought you to walk with me among the weak and flimsy tents we planted in our literature, so that the stench wouldn’t reach your nostrils. You, who used to hide all your years in museums and in the chambers where the fancier collections from the big towns were assembled […] you, who all your days used to read books by the choicest rhetoricians and visionaries and poets from the two edges of the world, you could not understand how anyone could grant the name of literature also to all the pranks of the scribblers and scrawlers who have been seen in our midst.86

Mendele and YaLaG thus take a dim view of the haughtiness displayed by the educated women toward their national culture, whereas Frishman has considerable sympathy for this attitude. He lets his fictional friend speak in one of his deepest and most authentic voices, and the apologetic words he sounds in her ears in defense of Hebrew literature seem merely a desperate attempt to fight off this internal voice.87 Yet one way or the other, these reactions are indications of the same phenomenon. Both Shifra Eltzin and Frishman’s fictional friend represent women who were fascinated by European literature, adopted its standards of literary evaluation, and disparaged Hebrew and its literature.

Mendele’s praise for the woman who knows Hebrew, YaLaG’s anger at the woman who turns her back on Hebrew literature, and Frishman’s attempt to defend such literature for all its weaknesses, all were nourished from the same source. Over and above the differences between them in period, perspective, and literary taste, these three authors and critics held basic assumptions in common, whether they were aware of it or not. YaLaG the russifist; Mendele, who until the mid-1880s wrote in Yiddish; and Frishman the anti-Zionist, who viewed artistic creation in Hebrew as the sole remaining hope for national revival, all assumed that at a time of decline in religious structures, the reviving literature of Hebrew was to inherit the role of religion in the task of preserving Jewish national existence.88 When women turned their backs on Hebrew and its literature this was taken not merely as dishonoring the authors, but as injuring the very foundations of nationhood.

The tendency to focus on women—those who had been seduced by the attractions of European culture and who now sought to belong to it—as the source of the dangers of assimilation and national extinction, comprised several factors that ought perhaps to be distinguished. One factor was a hard core of misogyny, manifested in the perception of women as light-headed and prone to sin— at once the causes and the effects of the outbreak of ills plaguing
the nation. In the context of this perception men are assigned a greater weakness and helplessness in their confrontation with the near-demonic forces attributed to women.

This attitude clearly emerges in the different responses of the maskilim to the conversions to Christianity of men and of women. The maskilic elite reacted, to be sure, furiously and with great hostility when those from its own ranks converted, and many did. Yet when a man converted, whether the goal was to advance his career or to marry a Christian woman, this was not spoken of as posing an existential threat to the society as a whole—which was how it was treated when women converted. The conversions of males, which in some instances included the very leaders of the Haskalah movement, were regarded as individual and distinct cases and were not taken as reflecting on the community as a whole. By contrast, the conversion to Christianity of anonymous women, of persons not in any sort of leadership position, was presented and perceived as a great feminine betrayal, one that had reached epidemic proportions and threatened to bring down the society as a whole. The male converts to Christianity were thus treated using concepts that let them be seen as individuals, while the female converts were vilified using general and stereotyping concepts. Time after time such women are presented as “girls easily seduced to abandon their people and to follow some blacksmith’s apprentice from among the Goyim.”

Yet some of the discussions about the estrangement of the girls from their national culture also reflected a clear-sighted recognition of the processes that were affecting women in the second half of the nineteenth century. This recognition led to some deep soul-searching and to a severe critique of the exclusion of women from Jewish studies, which had begun in traditional society and was then translated over to the maskilic sector.

These various factors together can be seen in a letter, dated 1888, sent by Y. L. Peretz to Sholem Aleichem:

Always the women are the first to assimilate and to adopt the ways of their Christian female counterparts. Every person has human needs, and if the needs of the Jewish soul are not fulfilled in our home she will learn them from others and by others. These women, who have always been obstacles and a trouble to us, we could easily turn to good use for our national project. It should be quite easy to speak with her, quite easy to teach her some good things and why not some history too. If every Jewish woman knew what her Jewishness consisted in, if she understood that she has many responsibilities over and above the Three Commandments [obligatory for women], then in the sentiment which will be bolstered within her she will find shelter and refuge from the evil thoughts in the nets of which she is caught daily. Consequently: It is utterly essential to have women be provided with articles on Jewish history. And as most readers are women—this is the main objective.

In this passage, the reason Peretz suggests for the need to educate women is not necessarily so as to raise them from their state of ignorance, but rather, to
have them learn the history of their people and construct their national identity. He stresses that “most readers are women” and demands that they be the focus of efforts to reinforce the national enterprise. Similar opinions began to appear also on the pages of the various periodicals in Hebrew and Laaz. When, in 1903, “The Society for the Dissemination of Haskalah Among Jews of the Land of Russia” published a report in which it announced that over the last few years it had principally assisted the schools for girls, the newspaper Hazman complained about the preferential treatment given to girls and about the neglect of secular education for boys:

But anyone who looks at the accounts will ask: On what basis are the beneficiaries women? Why are there so many private schools for girls listed as compared to the private schools for boys? No doubt, the Talmud Torah schools are not substitutes for the private schools, for people of the middle class do not send their sons to the Talmud Torah schools, and in the small towns there are no government schools: So where can boys learn and speak the State language?

The article’s author suggests that the discrimination in favor of girls and their more thorough proficiency in foreign languages is because “we have female teachers and no male teachers.” Yet near the publication date of this article, there also appeared in Hazman a letter to the editor penned by H. L. Zuta, an instructor. In it, Zuta affirms that these female teachers, however capable and dedicated they may be, are giving their students a foreign education:

And we do see excellent [female] teachers, who devote all their hearts to educating their people, who desire to reform its corrupting education—and behold their reform is complete: they give Israel a foreign education, an education unsuited to our nation, an education unknown to our fathers and grandfathers, and this must now indeed be the termination of the people of Israel. . . Will indeed this “disease of skepticism” not consume us entirely without us asking: “Is the people of Israel still alive, and if alive, will it continue to live in the future as well?”

In the two final decades of the nineteenth century, it was no longer possible to ignore the Laaz-reading women and the effects they were having on Jewish society. The marginal and inconsequential cultural space of women, which had existed casually both among haredim and among maskilim as a world within a world, won for itself a place in the public arena. The “alien” content of this space became the focus of critique, and the nature of women’s education became the object of soul-searching in all sectors of Jewish society.

From the haredi side, one reaction was given by Rabbi Gershon Henoch Hacohen Leiner, who elects to treat the question of the education of girls in a preface to the book Orkhot Hayim. In his opinion, the source of the evil descending upon the nation is to be found in the reading of morally degenerate stories, the corrupting effects of which are to be seen in the difficulties with matchmaking and in the negative influence of the readers on their husbands.
and children. Educated girls now despise and spurn yeshiva scholars; even if they do wed them they may well make their husbands stray from the straight path and spoil their children’s education:

So with the matter of education of girls I have seen many who have unknowingly erred by letting their girls learn alien topics and who are deluded that from such studies of theirs they learn only to read and to acquire the language of the peoples for this matter is necessary to our incomes and it is necessary for many girls of Israel who have to negotiate in business though in truth in this matter too he who believes in personal providence will not sense this, indeed one may not issue a decree on this for most of the public would not be able to obey it, yet I must comment to you, although the studies in reading and writing script are not harmful still the basis of most of the books taught are lightheaded and clownish degenerate tales and promiscuity and lewdness and well may you guess for yourselves the consequences if a daughter of Israel will learn for some years such matters for women have feeble minds as is well known, and moreover these are of the things which Talmud Tractate Psachim (112) calls the temptations: “and you will be tempted by such lightheadedness,” is it possible that the maiden will be content afterward to marry a Torah scholar as is commanded us by our rabbis of blessed memory for will she not scorn him in her heart, and even if she shall be his wife will she not incite him to incline his heart to stray from the true path, and as we have heard so have we seen such behavior every day awaken and pray arouse you and behold how much our Sages of blessed memory have cautioned us in Tractate Psachim (49). Forever should a man sell all he has and marry the daughter of a Torah scholar for if he dies or is exiled he is guaranteed his sons will be Torah scholars as she shall recollect the ways of her father to administer her sons on the path of the Torah. [. . .] Indeed if her father himself will raise her by teaching her follies and degenerate poetry and frivolity which will certainly divert her from the straight path, what shall it give and what shall it add if she will not trace her pathways from the stone of the sacred quarry and how shall she know to instruct her sons in the ways of propriety if these are contemptuous in her eyes after such fulfillment of her soul by alien thought, and if such is her treatment of a Torah scholar how much more so it will be for an ordinary person. Therefore people of heart heed me and pay attention to these words spoken justly to banish this appendage from you and every man who wishes to teach his daughter the tongue of nations this is the counsel advised, the full glory of a respectable man’s daughter lies within in his home under the shade of his roof and his supervision and he who teaches her thus shall remain faithful to God and to his King.

Rabbi Leiner’s critique is directed inward, at the haredi community. He demands of this community, of the “guardians of their faith,” that the education of women be supervised and constrained, and especially that women be kept from the “temptations,” that is from the novels that intrigue and entice. Conversely, Zvi Halevi Klop of the Lifshitz family directs the brunt of his criticism at the maskilim. In his opinion, the sudden and rapid shift of Jewish society from traditionalism to modernity has shaken it to its foundations, and this is what has caused the “extensive decline among us the people of Israel.” Lifshitz in his book compares the traditional to the modern woman and points out the superior virtues of the former: the modern woman, whose husband toils to provide for her, “sits with her girlfriends and deals . . . with the finer
points of the Laws of Toilette . . . reads books . . . filled with shame disgrace infamy and ignominy, odium and opprobrium”; while the traditional woman is busy earning a living and does not have time for such frivolity:

With the extra affection by which the women love the Torah [. . .] they shall be as merchant ships to bring bread home to their men. All they strive for and all their hope is that they themselves and their daughters shall be the wives of Torah scholars [. . .] Therefore they gird themselves up as men do their loins to provide for their husbands and in-laws and families, from the toil of their hands and the fruits of their industry.97

Lifshitz is especially critical of the maskilim for having adopted the gender-role division of the surrounding European society, a division that, in his opinion, has produced a self-indulgent individualism and has weakened the internal cohesion of traditional society. According to him, the supposedly “abnormal” and “inverted” division of roles in traditional society is preferable; there, each individual is assigned a definite function in society and the life of each particular is bound to the interest of the whole:

How strange is this inverted order to the laws of life and the customs of the land! Yet how good and how beneficial is this strange practice, not only for expanding Torah and multiplying those engrossed in it, but also for raising faithful shepherds for our nation’s sheep, so that it might not be a scattered flock each going his way after his own greed, his own pleasure, his own welfare as in our days.98

The traditional social order is presented by Lifshitz as the “natural,” proper and moral one. According to him, this order secures the rule of the leadership and promotes the general welfare over individual greed or self-interest. These statements suggest that Lifshitz viewed the placing of the burden of income provision on women as a tool for preserving social cohesion: women providers were too busy to have time for vanities, so they would not interfere with their children’s education and would not threaten the authority of the leadership.99 To lose control over women is, therefore, to lose control over society as a whole.

The poor state of women’s education on Jewish topics was worrisome also to sectors from the other side of the barricade, and voices expressing this concern were heard over the pages of the Russian-language Jewish newspapers. Most writers who expressed themselves on these platforms assumed that it was the educated girls in particular who were especially prone to assimilation. The assimilation of the salon women in Germany during the Berlin Haskalah cast its ominous pall over the new educated women, and it was viewed as setting a dangerous precedent. In order to guarantee that “Jewish girls stay Jewish,” calls were sounded in the Jewish newspapers to provide women with a solid education in Jewish topics and to deepen their national consciousness.100
The Hebrew newspapers too addressed the threatening precedent set by the women of the Berlin Haskalah, and Y. L. Cantor, for example, mentions it so as to warn of the “moral turpitude” of the educated and assimilating women of his day. Fear of conversions to Christianity by women became a central motif in the critique of the “shoddy education of girls,” and quite often charges of sexual abandon and national betrayal were interwoven. In 1897, the newspaper *Hamaggid* published a reaction to the high proportion of Christian conversions among Galician women, sounding a warning to readers who had been neglecting the Jewish education of their daughters:

According to the annual announcement which comes each time in official manner from the Catholic community to the Jewish community in our town, several of our brethren in Galicia convert from their faith to the reigning religion, perhaps thirty-five each year, nearly all of them rebellious girls from the small towns and villages who have run away from their parents and have come to our city to convert their faith. This is a sorrowful sight and it appears that its cause is the shoddy education of girls by our brethren, girls whose parents have not transmitted to them even a shred of Judaism. They are raised by nannies to speak the State language and from the age of six onwards go to the State school, where they fraternize with daughters of Christians and are disciplined in the Christian faith, and their parents do not hurry even to teach them the system of the Aleph-bet let alone the order of prayers, and therefore what they learn of Judaism is only what they hear about it from their teachers, who taunt them with the label: “You Jewess.” Although boys too are instructed to our dismay also without Torah and knowledge of Israel, yet this defect occurs only among the enlightened, whereas among the sons of the haredim even if they do go to school, still their parents let them study our language and religion in free hours and keep them from any opportunity to disgrace the Sabbath; but the girls they allow to do as they please and do not teach them even a thing of Judaism. And among the haredim there are a few who still hold to the dictum “He who teaches his daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity,” and fail to comprehend what is meant by the phrase, for indeed we are obligated to teach our Torah and our faith to our daughters as well, so that they may know that they are Daughters of Israel. So that they may know our history and our fathers’ history and to whom they belong, and they then shall not pass our daughters to Moloch, and Peace be on Israel.

It is worth noting that *Hamaggid* does not regard mixed marriages as the reason for the high proportion of conversions among the women. Nor is the cause the moral degeneracy of loose women; it is, rather, the shoddy Jewish education with which girls are equipped as compared to that provided to boys. Moreover, *Hamaggid* notes that all the boy converts came from maskilic and “enlightened” families, perhaps suggesting that some of the girl converts may have come from haredi families.

Many of the articles appearing in the Hebrew press on the subject of women converts routinely blame the haredim for failing to provide their daughters with any Torah education. An article of this kind, written in a caustic, anti-haredi tone, appeared in Frishman’s *Hador* in 1901. According to its author, the daughters of the haredim are more susceptible than anyone to
moral abandon and conversion, as they spurn and despise their Judaism. Ha-
redi girls are worse off in this respect than the daughters of the “enlightened,”
even though the latter don’t know a thing about Judaism and have taken on
Christian and antisemitic perspectives:

Who are the girls so easily seduced to leave their nation and follow some blacksmith’s
apprentice from among the Goyim? Only indeed the daughters of the fundamentalists.
[. . .] All who see the daughters of our fundamentalists (in Poland especially) and the
manner of their education, will stand shocked and dismayed at the sight. The daughter
learns everything, except for matters relating to Judaism. She knows Judaism only in its
most hideous form [. . .] without having had the national Hebrew sentiments aroused
in her heart; [. . .] and neither do our enlightened teach their daughters even the first
thing about Judaism. [. . .] I’ve often heard from the mouths of enlightened girls that
the commandment “love they neighbor as thyself” originated in another’s Bible. [. . .]
They all know that Titus was a good and just king and that the Jews despise education
and find beauty repulsive. They all know that the early Christians were “martyrs,” [. . .]
that the Jews had always been merchants, cheaters and usurers. And if someone tells
them that in the Middle Ages the Jews were more advanced than all the Goyim not
only in manners and morals but also in secular knowledge, they will look at him as if he
were a lying chauvinist. [. . .] And yet there is an advantage which the daughters of the
enlightened have over the educated daughters of the fundamentalists. [. . .] A child of
darkness or child of fundamentalism [. . .] turns into a complete Israel-hater, a
Judaism-hater, once she has had a few licks of “the Haskalah.” For in her parental home
she saw a savage Judaism, saw savage Jews, and the impressions of her childhood and
girlhood work like poison to her innards. She is also more liable to impropriety, as her
moral discipline is weak, and respect for mother and father she knows almost not at all.
For how shall her savage parents seem to the eyes of an educated girl such as she?104

As a supporter of the national revival movement, the article’s author has been
called upon to address the issue of the education of women mainly in terms of
its function within the revival movement. In his opinion, traditional Judaism
did not require the assistance of women because “Judaism was sufficiently
enshrouded by the ghetto’s mists.”105 Given the forced isolation of ghetto life, tra-
ditional society could allow itself to abandon women’s education, to place the
burden of income provision on women, and to put men in charge of the education of boys. But in the modern world “a nation surviving by a miracle” such as
the nation of Israel in exile is, must put its mothers in charge of national education,
“and if the housewife is unable or unwilling to awaken in her children’s heart a love of their Judaism, then we will not have children.”106

The author’s comparison of gender-role divisions in traditional society and
modern nationalist society presumes that in modern nationalist society
women are to be returned to the home—to their roles as mothers and wives. Hence, the education that women must be provided with is, in the author’s
view, primarily education for motherhood in a patriarchal bourgeois family:

And should we wish it—there is scope for our daughters to study to qualify for their
highest role, the role of Mother in Israel. [. . .] She does not need God forbid to
withdraw from her other pleasant occupations: from reading novels and books of philosophy and science, from piano playing, from dance, fancy dress balls, theaters, concerts etc. etc. She has time for it all. For what after all do I ask of her? Just two, three hours a day for Jewish studies.¹⁰⁷

One may, therefore, conclude that in the criticism the maskilic groups and the nationalists leveled at women’s education, one can hear expressions of a sense of loss of control over women—over their reading, their perspectives, and their moral behavior.¹⁰⁸ The calls to grant women a share of the cultural sphere of men and to teach them Hebrew and Judaism were, consequently, also part of an effort to bring their space under the supervision of men. Drafting women into the project of national revival meant appropriating women’s space and pressing it into service for the nation, while the women themselves were returned to the domestic sphere.

The effort to enlist women for the nationalist cause in their roles as mothers and educators was voiced also in a series of open letters to the women. Y. L. Katzenelson, a.k.a. Buki Ben Yogli, published “Letter to Daughters of Zion” in which he calls on women to correct the damage their elder sisters had caused. As he puts it, “when our nation awoke . . . to a lengthy recovery from its many wounds” the educated girls stood apart, and now it is incumbent on the young girls to return to their nation. “Hebrew mothers shall now give birth for us and female Hebrew teachers shall now educate for us a Hebrew generation, which shall be capable of withstanding all the gusts storming about us.”¹⁰⁹

Sholem Aleichem too appeals directly to the women. He aims his lines at the educated and assimilating girls, and tries to instill in them a sense of shame:

Daughters of Israel, educated girls, have all read Shakespeare, Goethe and Schiller, Pushkin and Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy and the rest of the authors of Russia and authors of foreign lands. But who has read our own poets: Yehuda Halevi, Ibn Gabirol, Levinsohn, Mapu, Ginzburg, Smolenskin, Gordon, Abramovitch, and all the rest of our Jewish authors?¹¹⁰

Those girls who find “jargon” repugnant, those who have assumed European names, are versed in European literature and find their own national culture alien, are called upon by Sholem Aleichem to join the Zionist cause and to raise their children in the nationalist line:

Your [women’s] task, of course, is to become familiar first of all with our own history, with our language (the Holy Tongue), with our literature; only then shall you comprehend who you are and cease to be ashamed of the Jewish word, of your Jewish name, of your Jewish “type”; you shall come then to realize that there is no disgrace in understanding words in jargon, that the name Rachel is no worse than Margarita, and that a Jewish nose is no more than a nose. . . . then indeed you shall be Daughters of Israel, our Sisters in Zion.¹¹¹
The severe condemnations of the “shoddy instruction” of women led to major reforms in the realm of women’s education. As in the maskilic propaganda campaign of the 1850s and 1860s, tendentious interpretations again began to be made of Rabbi Eliezer’s dictum, “He who teaches his daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity.” Yet where the maskilim of the mid-century had interpreted the dictum liberally—Torah instruction is perhaps forbidden but nothing is to keep parents from granting them a secular education—near the end of the century efforts were made to invert its sense completely. As Smolenskin put it: “Not only to sons of Israel but also to daughters of Israel must we teach Torah . . . for anyone who does not teach his daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity and contrary to the determinations made up until now through which the Torah was kept concealed from the eyes of girls.” In a similar vein, an editorial in Hazman attacks the views of those haredim who maintained that the Shulkhan Aruch and the Yoreh Deah prohibit “girls from learning the basics of Judaism and the national language.” The editorial insists that the opposite is the case: that “according to the Shulkhan Aruch it is essential that heder for girls be established.”

For “anyone teaching his daughter Torah is as if he teaches her promiscuity” refers only to the Oral Tradition [Talmud, etc.] and not to the written Torah; there is an explicit biblical verse that says “Commune the men and women” when [. . .] the Torah was to be read before the people.

The growing interest in the “question of women’s education” made the leaders, educators, and functionaries of the national revival movement begin to take serious stock of the situation. Consequently, initial preparations were made to reform the educational system and to establish “reformed heder,” which would, among other things, specially attend to the instruction of girls in Jewish subjects. In his book Maarechet Halimudim o Haheder Hametukan, the teacher Yaakov Ruderman devotes a special chapter to the topic of heder for girls. In this chapter, Ruderman addresses the moral degeneracy of the girls, demands that they be taught Hebrew by modern methods, and suggests ways in which they might be taught their cultural heritage and Hebrew literature:

Will not everyone with a sentient heart have his heart quiver within him upon seeing how his daughters run about the fringes of town like wild girls, girls wanton from lack of work or activity, from a shoddy education; will not everyone with a national feeling beating in his heart, explode within himself, upon seeing how our daughters—our future mothers—grow up lacking language or knowledge of our history; an ill having many consequences, for how shall we hope to see issuing from women such as these, so estranged from Judaism, women who desecrate and scorn the rock of which it is quarried and the pitted cavern of which it is hewed—good children, non-dissenting children, children who observe Commandments and know the Torah? In my own opinion, so long as we fail to make an effort to correct the bad education of our daughters we shall never reach our main goal of educating our children. There-
fore pray you awaken dear brothers, to seek counsel and make reforms for the sake of our young daughters. You must found a school, create reformed heders for their sake, in which we shall teach them our sacred language and extensive history, so that our daughters too shall be Hebrew women who know language and literature, and then shall all the children of Israel see that we are called by the name of God, and our conception and birth shall be sanctified.

In their curricula we shall strive—naturally—in every way to make them take pleasure in the literature by all manner of gaieties and delights; and so that their souls do not become exasperated with Jewish studies we must make efforts to have them acquire the ways of our language via modern methods [...] And they shall only be tasked further to know the books which speak of our nation’s history, and the annals of our ancestors [...] And what our Sages have said (Tractate Sotah, 20a), “anyone teaching his daughter Torah is as if he teaches her promiscuity,” was intended only to refer to the Torah in the Oral Tradition [...] but not to studying the language and the Torah which is ordered and a duty applying also to women to teach them and instruct them without any manner of doubt. 

Teaching women Hebrew and its literature was usually presented as part of a desperate effort to rescue the girls and the society as a whole from assimilation and moral abandon. Yet by the end of the century there began to be heard demands to teach girls Hebrew in order to rescue Hebrew literature from atrophy and extinction. In an article published in Frishman’s Hador, Yaakov Vital argues that the poor state of Hebrew literature derived from a severe shortage of readers, and that only when women came to join the Hebrew reading public would an “artistic literature be erected” and come to produce great authors:

Indeed one must lament the small number of Hebrew readers [...] yet even more so must one lament the fact that there are no female readers of Hebrew [...] and the lack of female readers causes great injury especially to fine Hebrew literature. No fine literature can achieve great heights without women readers; for the females are those who mainly read stories, poems etc., as they have free time and their hearts are more drawn to matters of imagination and poetry. Men—and especially our males who are merchants for the most part—are too preoccupied in their business concerns; they scarcely have time to glance at newspapers. This is why in every nation and language the greater number of readers of fine literature come from the “fairer sex.” And yet fine literature in Hebrew hardly has even a single quorum of female readers—and therefore hardly has any reading public. [...] In vain then do they cry and wail over the lack of fine literary talent in our literature. Just give us consumers and readers and we will give you literary artists! Yet at the present I am sure that even should there arise among us an artist of the caliber of Turgenev or Tolstoy, his books will rest peacefully on their sides, [...] And this depressing state will not change for the better until we have also female readers of Hebrew—then an invigorating spirit will enter the market for books, and then too great authors will arise among us.
Women Who Read European Languages

From Tseina Ur'eina to Pushkin, and from Gitl to Reyzele

Years had passed, and Reyzele returned to her old grandmother. A young woman yet in her maidenhood’s midst returned to her old nest. Though no longer gay as of yore, her eyes Deepened and grief-filled, struck silenced, she read Night and day, so long as the oil in her room’s lamp lasted. The old woman wishing so to comfort her Took the Pushkin out the bookcase, where it had been shut away, Handed it to Reyzele—and the maiden grimaced The old lady winced to see Pushkin so treated Felt shame for him, as if it was she who was stung With great tenderness returned the “abomination-filth” to the bookcase Alongside all her tkhines, the “prayerbook” and the “Tseina Ur’eina.”
—Shaul Tchernichowsky, “Levivot”

The tale of Grandmother Gitl and her granddaughter Reyzele, the heroine of Tchernichowsky’s idyll, “Levivot,” contains in succinct form the story of the female readers of Yiddish and Laaz literature in nineteenth-century Jewish society. The elderly and devout Gitl, who laments the “steady degradation” of each passing generation, and her granddaughter Reyzele, who sits in “a castle of Petrus and Paulus . . . imprisoned and awaiting trial,” represent the two communities of reading women which arose side by side and one after the other, and yet were as estranged from each other as belief is from unbelief. The account of the emergence and development of these communities is the account of how a volume of Pushkin’s “filth and abomination” poetry found its way into Grandmother Gitl’s bookcase, tucked between the Tseina Ur’eina and the Tkhines of Sarah Bat-Tovim. It is also the tale of the long road granddaughter Reyzele traveled, when she replaced Pushkin’s poetry with revolutionary Russian literature and then found herself “sitting in the hold.” The distance traversed by the communities of women readers over the course of the nineteenth century, from reading traditional literature to reading the European classics and from there to reading radical Russian literature, was immense. Their reading marked them deeply—and they in turn left their stamp on the surrounding society.

Converts and estranged girls from one end, and girls sitting in the “hold” on the other, became symbols of Jewish society’s secularization, and chiefly of the collapse of its national cohesion. The loss of control over women and the loss of control over social processes were seen by the maskilic and the nationalist Zionist elites as two sides of the same coin. The path toward social reform was therefore, in their opinion, closely linked to reforms in women’s education.

The invitation extended to women to share in those parts of the cultural capital that had previously been men’s private property—the language of Hebrew and traditional Jewish culture—was merely part of a broader effort to
restore to a male elite its control over women and over society as a whole. Yet for that very reason it was not an invitation to a full and equal partnership. As I shall try to show in the coming chapter, the attitude the elite displayed toward sharing its cultural properties with women was deeply ambivalent. For women, the road to a partnership in the language and literature of Hebrew was strewn with obstacles and hindrances.
“One in a Thousand”
Women and the Hebrew Language

Perhaps one in a thousand may envy me, and will plow he too the earth of the Hebrew language which weeds have covered over in these our days, and this indeed would be my recompense...¹

—MERKE ALTSHULER

In 1871 Yehuda Leib Gordon published his famous poem, “For Whom Do I Labor” out of a sense that, lacking a reading audience, he was perhaps the last of the Hebrew poets:

My parents—adhering to their Lord and nation
Commerce, Commandments, their life’s occupation
Reason revolts them, good taste never found
“Deathly is poetry, and rhetoric heathen!
“To lodge near a poet is strictly forbidden!”
Thus do they taunt us, viciously hound.

My brother maskilim erudite all
Cleave with weak paste to their tongue national
Old spool-winding grandma, they mock and they jeer:
“Leave you this language, its prime is long past
“Leave literature saltless, no flavor at last
“Leave, each to his country’s language we’ll steer.”

Ridiculed and persecuted by the orthodox religious world, abandoned by the russifist maskilim, YaLaG makes an emotional appeal to the women:

My sisters! you daughters of Zion perchance
May heartily hearken my poetry’s chants
In your God-blessed spirit a gentleness turns
Soul graceful, fine palate, heart warming within—
Although raised as captives of war, you have been
For “A girl studies Torah—promiscuity she learns!”²
YaLaG’s emotional appeal to the women isn’t some sort of romantic or poetic wish. Both the doubts and the hopes he expresses in his poem have a firm basis in the difficult social and cultural conditions of his day. The women with a passion for reading, those same devoted readers of Yiddish and European literature whom he saw all around him, would have broadened the audience for works in Hebrew and would have created a following of young readers of it—if only they knew the language. But as YaLaG asserts in his poem, traditional Jewish society barred women from study of Torah. Women were raised like “babes gentiles had captured,” and their exclusion also denied them access to Hebrew literature.

YaLaG’s censure of traditional society’s attitude toward women and their education, in this poem and in his well-known “Kotzo Shel Yod,” represented only a fraction of the maskilim’s pervasive and severe condemnation of traditional society. The maskilim were demanding a complete overhaul of the social order, and they invested the bulk of their industry in a broad educational effort designed to replace the system of traditional education with a system erected on modern, enlightened, and European guidelines. To that end they founded educational institutions, toiled over new curricula, established libraries, financially assisted the publication of textbooks, encouraged original writings and translation of works into Hebrew, and turned out periodicals in Hebrew and Yiddish. Yet this educational reform, far-reaching as it surely was, did not manifest itself in the instruction of women in either Jewish topics or in Hebrew. Here, the maskilim conserved traditional society’s behavioral patterns, copying over into their institutions the gender differences that had existed for many generations. Not only did they continue to bar women from studying Torah or Jewish topics, they even kept women from learning Hebrew and its grammar—the very core of a male maskilic education. This is how Puah Rakovsky, for example, describes the attitude enlightened parents took toward the education of their daughters, and what its consequences were:

Such was then, to our chagrin, the approach of Jewish parents, even the maskilim and the progressives among them—girls should not follow the curriculum of boys and still less are they to be taught the Holy Tongue, for “Anyone teaching his daughter Torah is as if he is teaching her promiscuity.” And what a high price have our people paid for that antiquated, atrophied and pointless idea. [. . .] Several thousand Jewish mothers could have been saved from the abyss of assimilation and by their means also the Jewish sons, now lost to our liberation movement because of the education of those mothers!

Even though by the 1860s the maskilim had already discovered, to their chagrin, that women Laaz readers were treating Hebrew and its literature with disdain, calls were not then heard to institutionalize Hebrew instruction for women. The maskilim encouraged women to learn Hebrew in informal
settings and did not withhold praise from the few girls who did so; yet when writing for women they chose to do so in women’s language, that is, in Yiddish, and did not consider the possibility of teaching them Hebrew in the educational institutions for women they had established. Only in the 1880s, with the emergence of the Hibat-Zion movement, did one begin to hear calls to have women be formally taught Hebrew and to have them be incorporated within the enterprise of national revival.

These phenomena were not accidental. The maskilim’s hopes of rehabilitating the injured manhood of the traditional Jewish male and of developing a bourgeois, “enlightened,” and “reformed” version of patriarchal society, were reflected in their adoption of the means traditional society had used to entrench its gender hierarchy. As in traditional society, so in maskilic society the divergent cultural spaces of men and of women were arranged so as to construe the identities of males and females differently, and to entrench the superiority of men.

“Let Young Jewish Men Look and Be Shamed”

It was thus a long and hard road women had to travel to reach the domains of the Hebrew language, a road littered with obstacles. Only a few, very unusual women mastered Hebrew before the 1880s. The letters and translations they set to writing, the small scraps of which appeared in the Hebrew publications, turned such women into models to be emulated or, alternatively, made them objects of curiosity. Usually, publication of these Hebrew writings were accompanied by praise and commendations, voiced either by the publisher who gave the female authors their platform or by the “mentors” under whose tutelage the compositions were brought to print. A quick glance at two such letters and at the accompanying remarks of publishers and patrons conveys a sense of the obstacles women had to overcome and suggests some of the consequences this state of affairs had for women’s writing in Hebrew.

There was usually a standard formula for recommending a woman’s writing. After the obligatory praise for this learned young woman who has amazed all and sundry through her knowledge of Hebrew, the editors castigate the young men for turning their backs on the Hebrew language. Typical of this formula are Gottlober’s remarks written to accompany Sarah Nowinsky’s letters in Hebrew:

The writer of these columns is a fair young woman, the gazelle of grace and the ibex of affection, who has yet to reach the fine age of eighteen [. . .] And this learned girl knows properly the languages of Russian, Polish, German, French, and Italian, and for two years now she has been studying Hebrew. [. . .] Well may the young men of Israel who have turned their backs on their ancestral tongue look and be ashamed; our
nation’s maskilim are to know that Sarah Nowinsky has left the boys in her debt and may they reward her from the fruits of her industry and in the gates sing praises of her work.  

These praises of Sarah Nowinsky are far from being unambiguous; they imply rather more than they declare. By presenting an adolescent girl who knows Hebrew as a model who puts young men to shame, Gottlober intimates that men have failed to guard their cultural property—that a comparatively weak and inferior rival has, with astonishing ease, captured their abandoned stronghold. That this girl Nowinsky and others like her have entered the domain of the Hebrew language ought to sound a warning bell; his gushing over how wonderful this girl is carries a threat: if you men do not hurry up and take proper possession of the assets of the Hebrew language it will become a domain for women, and as such may be disgraced. From Gottlober’s point of view, the primary objective in offering a platform to women who write in Hebrew is to alert men to their shameful state and to goad them to better conserve the linguistic capital that had thus far been exclusively theirs. Quite apart from this, Gottlober’s comments also suggest that the circumstances of women’s entry into the domain of Hebrew were marked by the decline of the glory of Hebrew. The Hebrew language had been neglected by its “natural” owners and its net worth as cultural capital had diminished. One may thus say, against this background, that the vacuum left by the male maskilim, when they abandoned Hebrew and turned toward Laaz, is what enabled women to penetrate a “realm which is not theirs.”

Yet even the expressions these women writers themselves use suggest that they considered themselves as trespassers, invading realms that were not rightly theirs. The posture they assume toward their primary audience, which from the nature of things consisted mainly of their male sponsors, is largely one of humility and self-deprecation. Whether they are aware of it or not, most of the women writers make apologies for writing in Hebrew and work to dispel any sense of threat men may feel about this invasion of their turf. Sarah Nowinsky, for example, tells her grandfather that her delay in replying to his letter was not caused by “laziness or lack of opportunity” but rather by a fear of shaming her brothers:

My heart tormented me for the shame of my dear brothers, who on seeing your pleasant letter to me shook their heads as if to say: our sister came along and took the blessing of our aging father. I therefore fell silent so as to give them a chance to write and to earn for themselves too a blessing: once having met my obligations to my brothers, I shall again return to the pleasure of conversing with you, dearest grandfather.

The biblical allusion in Nowinsky’s rhetoric is somewhat loaded: she compares her brothers to Esau, that is, to the sons of Edom, while likening herself
to Jacob—that is, to Israel. Moreover, Nowinsky suggests that her writing in Hebrew is an act that could be interpreted as an attempt to seize the status of first-born from her brothers.

In thus offering herself as “Israel,” Nowinsky inverts stereotypical attitudes current in both the maskilic and the nationalist discourse according to which the educated woman is typically characterized as estranged from her people. Nowinsky assumes the role of flag bearer of the national language and hints that the appellation of estranged or becoming-alien is perhaps better suited to her brothers. Yet at the same time, she is clearly aware of the subversive potential her writing in Hebrew contains, and she takes care to dispel its threatening aspects. She proudly informs her grandfather that only once she has met her obligations to her brothers and has upheld their filial primacy will she return to the joys of writing in Hebrew. The role Sarah Nowinsky has thus openly assumed is the very one Gottlober had assigned to her: of a girl who would challenge her brothers, who would goad them to write in Hebrew and to maintain their status as first-borns.

Yet once having neutralized the threat to her brothers, and once having carefully demarcated the limits of her invasion of their turf, Nowinsky goes on to explain to her grandfather what writing in Hebrew really means to a young Jewish woman of her kind. For Nowinsky, writing in Hebrew is first and foremost a way of taking maximal advantage of the shift that occurred in her era in the status of women:

Dearest grandfather: Thou dost know if thou hast not heard, that the first days have fallen and new days have risen to fill their place, in which justice and fairness are meted out not to men alone but to women as well, and the adage: “Anyone teaching his daughter Torah is as if he is teaching her promiscuity” has tumbled nevemore to rise along with all the prejudices and ancient edicts whose prime is long past; and the spirit of modernity has seized us too in its wings and demands learning and reason from women just as much as from men, and we must obey, if we wish to be numbered among the progressives, lest the men scorn and ridicule us and lest they nod their heads after us, they who hitherto alone plumed themselves on their reason and erudition, and if the meaning of my words is clear to you, you will no longer be surprised that I know the language of our people; for your granddaughter desires that her dignity be in unison with the community of the intellectual men who move with the times, or should I rather say: the intellectual women who move with the times.9

Sarah Nowinsky does not rest with a merely general claim as to her desire to utilize the available “window of opportunity” to seek an education and earn equality and recognition. She openly accounts for her move into the domains of Hebrew in terms of a desire to belong integrally to the national-cultural community, a community that hitherto had excluded women from it:

Your granddaughter too does desire [...] to champion the cause of the Hebrew language, which in men’s hands has nearly crumbled, and to show that we too have the
talent to discipline our souls to empowerment and to succeed at studies, as for us the glory of the language does not weigh too heavily and we too desire to make a reputation for ourselves among the purveyors of the Holy Tongue and to nobly sway among its fabled flag bearers, thus I too am with them, with it alone shall I faithfully grow even as I have loved my parents who have gloried in her flag.  

The abandonment of Hebrew by men, Nowinsky felt, created circumstances that were causing the interests of women and of the nationalists to converge. In this new state of affairs, women could improve their status by joining the male nationalist community, using Hebrew to do so. Yet this partnership by way of Hebrew was in fact a partnership in an abandoned community—one that had lost by then much of its luster, before it was to garner its genuine prestige.

Toward the 1880s a shift began to occur in the maskilim’s stance toward Hebrew instruction for women. Hebrew had failed to take root among male maskilim; the reading public for Hebrew literature had not widened; educated women were growing increasingly estranged from Judaism, and taken altogether these factors led to a recognition of the necessity of teaching women Hebrew. For all that, however, the idea of women writing in the Holy Tongue remained as problematic as ever. A letter written by Merke Altshuler, which appeared in 1880 in Gottlober’s Haboker Or, may serve as a case in point.

Altshuler begins her letter with praise for the “mentor” who encouraged her to learn Hebrew and gave her “access to those who spread light among the Jewish people.” She also thanks the editor Gottlober for having deemed her writings fit for publication and for making the platform of Haboker Or available to her. Like Sarah Nowinsky before her, Merke Altshuler too gives a justification for her writing in Hebrew that is predominantly nationalist in tone. Her desire to make her thoughts public arose, she says, from concern for her brothers in the nation: “Perhaps one in a thousand may envy me, and will plow he too the earth of the Hebrew language which weeds have covered over in these our days, and this indeed would be my recompense—for but this is my consolation, and it is all I do hope to pass on of all the bulk of my words.”

At first this sort of expression seems no more than the sort of conventional, ritualized formula women are obliged to repeat so as to earn their right to compose in Hebrew. Yet that is not entirely the case here. Defensively, or perhaps aggressively, Altshuler grapples in this letter with her very right to be a Hebrew “authoress”:

For what sort of heartless boor is it who claims that I am ambitious to attain honor and glory? Who is so myopic as to judge me that it is vanity I pursue, seek to have myself too be counted among the community of the nation’s intellectuals? And what is this great honor an author is thought to receive? [. . .] For an author stands before the
verdict of all and sundry, including babes sucking at the breast as well as the blind and sightless! And what of a Hebrew maiden such as myself who sits in a remote town, and has nothing to do with the clamor of the big city? And who could not have predicted what was in store for me: “shall a maiden too be counted among the authors?” “Shall even a female overtake a man, instructing him in reason, investigating words?” “For a women's wisdom is only in the spool; she knows nothing but to put on jewelry and pass a comb through the hairs of her head—!” These and suchlike criticisms have been hurled at me in arrogance and contempt, and I must confess I am not unaware of them myself; for it is not for the glory of authorship that a woman is praised, she is only ever honored for her beauty, grace and aplomb; and she may be wise as Solomon, and draw good taste and reason from the Seven Breezes of Refinement, yet if God denied her such charms, in vain shall she plume herself, in vain she shall try to make a name for herself, and indeed what a lie is this author's pen: wisdems what are they to her, and if only a merciful God would bless her with this gift of his [. . .] then all men will be drawn after her. Many are the ones who would court her love, and countless numbers would bestow favors upon her.13

Altshuler begins these remarks with an irate reply to her critics, in which she insists on a woman's right to be an author and to be counted among the “community of the nation's intellectuals.” She is at pains to reject the common charge that a woman who writes in Hebrew is merely chasing honors.14 Yet later, Altshuler confronts internal resistances as well. To be sure, she takes issue with common gender stereotypes that a woman's intelligence may not surpass a man's, or that for a woman to instruct a man in intellectual matters is to invade his territory; and she rails against an approach that values a woman only for her looks, allowing only a beautiful woman to be loved and desired. Yet at the same time, Altshuler discloses a real anxiety that her own intelligence and learning may be injuring her femininity, leaving her rejected and unwanted. Still, for all the internal and external resistances, she does not relinquish her hope of being numbered among the writers and readers of the Hebrew language. Altshuler concludes her letter with a description of the intimacy she feels toward Hebrew, comparing it to a plenteous mother who gives nourishment to her daughter:

When of Hebrew I think, she whose bosoms have suckled me pleasurably since I could say Father and Mother, I shall not desist from pouring forth all my spirit upon it, nor aught shall I fear, and if I may serve as a beacon for any of the rebellious sons who have left her to chase after the love of a foreigner, I shall be happiest in all the earth, and shall know that not in vain have I labored!15

In making the Hebrew language analogous to a capacious mother who gives sustenance and joy to her daughter while her sons “chase after the love of a foreigner,” Altshuler is upsetting a cardinal cultural assumption of Jewish society. She is rejecting the approach that sees Hebrew as the language of men, is shifting its basis from being a “paternal” to a “maternal” tongue, and is appropriating the language for herself and her women comrades.
The Reading-Biography of the Hebrew-Reading Woman in the Haskalah Period

Because only a very few women read Hebrew before the 1880s, it is not easy to reconstruct their reading-biographies for this period. Only a few women wrote down their impressions of what they had read, and in the memoirs of the men these early Hebrew-reading women are barely mentioned. The scant evidence that exists about such women is the basis of the presumption that so far as fine literature was concerned, women’s reading lists were similar to those of their male counterparts. Gottlober, for example, relates that during his visit to Vilna he met the wife of the maskil Yitzhak Goldman, a woman “who knows well the Hebrew Tongue besides her vast knowledge of Russian, Polish, German and French, and reads the Hebrew books like one of the nation’s great maskilim.” Another woman who read Hebrew books “like one of the maskilim” was Trunk’s Aunt Itke. Like most of the young men maskilim-to-be, Aunt Itke too studied grammar and the Biur in secret; like them, she read the canonical maskilic literature, and like them she was rewarded for her efforts by the experience of revelation and transformation. Much as the men did, Itke made her way toward the literature of Hebrew under the tutelage of a liminal figure—in her case, Wolf Leib Lerer, “Kutno’s official apikores”:

Not many days passed and behold Wolf-Leib Lerer found that his rabbinical student, the granddaughter of Rabbi Yehoshualeh Kutner, was ready for the most provocative and forbidden Haskalah books, works whose name alone would strike fear and dismay in the hearts of hasidim. When Wolf-Leib drew from his bookcase Hatoeh Bedarchei Hahayim and Kvurat Hamor by Peretz Smolenskin—Aunt Itke swallowed them within the passage of a single night. All night long she did not extinguish the small spirit lamp in her room, did not take off her clothes or lay down to sleep, but sat and read. A light broke open in the heart of Aunt Itke and her fists were clenched in fury. Open and exposed, the darkened world of the hasidim and the fundamentalists stood before her, rabbis who persecute maskilim like wolves hunting innocent sheep. [. . .] And so she continued from day to day. She already was able to write Hebrew correspondence by herself in the rhetorical style of Wolf-Leib. He had already given her issues of Hasha-har to read in her home. Aunt Itke did not like poems and preferred to read stories describing fundamentalist hasidim.

Trunk’s account of Aunt Itke’s reading-story is for all intents and purposes a male “enlightenment-process” story, and it comes as no surprise that both her personality and her appearance are described in his memoirs through the visual stereotypes that mark the yeshiva scholar undergoing enlightenment:

Aunt Itke was not pretty. She was thin, had a high scholar’s forehead and was slightly cross-eyed. She did not believe in feminine adornments. As her knowledge of the Holy Tongue increased so her femininity declined and she took on the male style of
the embittered maskil. [. . .] And while Grandmother Leah was braiding her locks, the young woman would mentally review difficult sections of grammar or read an issue of Hashahar.18

Maskilim who tried their hands at poetry began to show their output [. . .] to Aunt Itke as well. Aunt Itke would examine the proofs with a male strictness and her verdict was ten times as harsh and deadly as Wolf-Leib’s. Aunt Itke had no patience for sentimentality and would issue her critical opinions in an acid honesty [. . .] The reputation of this cross-eyed and unusual young woman began to spread through Kutno and the adjacent towns. Aunt Itke herself was almost unaware of her legendary status in Kutno and the surroundings; she was too sunk in her books. Besides the Biur she began to read Moreh Nevuchei Hazman by Nachman Krochmal. The spirit lamp at the bedside of the young woman made the nights longer and longer, and her scholarly forehead grew ever more pale and more serious.19

Yet the reading-biography of Aunt Itke, who according to Trunk underwent a decidedly “masculine” enlightenment process, is not typical of most women of the period. On the whole, the few women who learned Hebrew did so under the auspices of male members of their family and with the encouragement of relatives or acquaintances who displayed maskilic tendencies. As a result, although it was not common to have a woman be taught Hebrew, those girls who did learn Hebrew and read its literature did so, in general, without the same family conflicts and inner torments that were the lot of the male enlightening scholars. Contributing to this difference, perhaps, was the fact that women were not forbidden to read secular literature and that doing so was, for them, neither a novelty nor a transgression.

In some cases, the woman’s space, clear as it was of social supervision and open to foreign influences, was used for studying Hebrew and reading its literature behind the backs of parents. Even then, however, this took place “naturally,” not with feelings of sinfulness. A case in point showing how the protected and unsupervised woman’s space was used for Hebrew readings appears in the writings of Mordechai Ben Hillel Hacohen. Hacohen relates that a teacher who had stopped being religious told him just where and when he wrote on the Sabbath for the first time. It was, the teacher said, when his hasid father-in-law took him to serve as tutor for the tzaddik’s daughters:

I went with the girls like a brother and friend, and it is understood that no one even dared to oversee me or ask what I was doing there, as the daughters of the tzaddik were above all supervision, and there in the girls’ room I could do as I pleased and there I wrote on the Sabbath without objection.

—And the girls, the tzaddik’s daughters? I asked.
—They didn’t say a word. For they were my students. The younger one I taught, besides handwriting, also the Hebrew language, and she succeeded at her studies, and I also read to her the Haskalah books, love stories, Aviezer by Mordechai Aharon Ginzburg I read out to her . . .20
The few women who read Hebrew were, on the whole, more inclined to read novels. Pauline Wengeroff was familiar with Mapu’s *Ahavat Zion* and *Ayit Tzavua*, and recounts in her memoirs how she obtained these books;²¹ Dvorah Haefrati read *Ahavat Zion* and the works of Eugene Sei, and even wrote a comparison of the two in a letter she sent to Mapu;²² Sarah Nowinsky read *Misterei Paris* and wrote a response to it in a letter to her father;²³ and the translator-author Miriam Markel Mozessohn (1837–1920),²⁴ revered and admired in the authors’ circles of her day, read the manuscripts and works of the leading Hebrew authors and maintained a regular correspondence with YaLaG and other writers.²⁵

Unlike men, women who read Hebrew did not feel that reading modern Hebrew literature reflected any sort of rupture with the “ancestral heritage,” but, on the contrary, expressed their own reclamation of this heritage. The few reading-impressions women wrote with regard to modern Hebrew literature display a tendency toward moralistic judgments and evaluations of the literature in terms of its role in the construction of national identity. Haefrati’s comments on *Ahavat Zion*, for example, begin with an assessment of this book’s historical-nationalist import. She describes the immense pleasure the book caused her and expresses a deep sense of identification with the fate of her people, whose ancient and vital country was laid waste by the despoilers. Only afterward does Haefrati turn to critique, noting apologetically that “if I err, let me not be faulted, as it is with a girl’s insight that I see fit to comment on the matter of Tamar . . . ”²⁶

In stressing the woman’s viewpoint from which she assesses the novel, Haefrati is trying simultaneously to be self-effacing, diminishing the import of her criticism of Mapu, and to accentuate the uniqueness of her “feminine reading.” She sees fit to comment that from her point of view as a woman, the behavior of Tamar, the novel’s heroine, seems inappropriate or unconvincing: in her opinion “a proper young woman would not throw [a bouquet] over to the other side of the river.”²⁷ Likewise, the behavior of Amnon, who tells his friend that he rescued Tamar from a voracious lion, she finds inappropriate or unpersuasive, since “a man does not gloat in this way over his actions.” Finally, Haefrati is bothered by the expressions Mapu has Tamar utter, as they do not seem to her to reflect the actual state of Jewish existence. She considers Tamar’s remarks on the value-shift in marriage practices as having been meant to describe the current situation in Jewish society, and she does not believe this description is apt:

Tamar erred in her vision when she says “the evil time has passed, and fathers shall no longer sacrifice their sons to Moloch, nor their daughters to an idol of silver and gold.” Ah! what she imagined, is not the case in our own times, for this fine period has yet to dawn to our eyes, our feet are plagued still on windy mountains for the idol wrought in gold and silver reigns supreme in this evil time, which blows its raging winds upon us . . . ²⁸
Yet it is hard at the same time not to view such comments as reactions to the two central claims of maskilic discourse about women and the negative influence of novel reading on them. In criticizing the behavior of the novel’s characters, Haefrati shows that there are some women who are capable of reading a novel critically, who are not affected by literary heroines whose behavior is immoral or improper. And in commenting on the nationalist aspect of the novel, Haefrati demonstrates that there are some women readers of novels who do identify with their nation and have not rejected their heritage.

A focus on the nationalist content, combined with remonstrations against the immoral aspects of Hebrew literature, may be found also in Sarah Nowinsky’s comments on the Hebrew books her father sent her. Nowinsky begins her letter to her father by informing him that for some while she had been losing her attraction to the Hebrew language. She tells him that it is with mixed feelings that she corresponds with him in Hebrew, as she fears that Hebrew too will turn a “cold shoulder” to her. This abandonment would be caused, Nowinsky believes, by among other things the “shortage of good books, written in our people’s language.” The lack of decent books in Hebrew has convinced her that there was perhaps substance to the charges she had been hearing of late—that “the fate of all languages whose prime has past, is the fate of our own Hebrew language too.” Nowinsky goes on to severely scold the Hebrew authors for the extensive national damage their degenerate literature was causing:

As I read the new books you sent me, I came to recognize that the bearers of the flag of our language have corrupted their ways and they are to be blamed if its repute drags in the dust, for as flies of death spoil fine perfumes, so they make us disgusted with Hebrew literature and their words are poisonous to us.

Nowinsky reserves the brunt of her critique for the novel *Misterei Paris* in Shulman’s translation:

I read *Paris* from beginning to end and was astounded to see that a man, whom the Lord has blessed with a crisp and clear diction, with reason and intelligence, as can be seen from many places in this book of his, can speak also contrariwise and fail to separate the wheat from the chaff. Who would have believed, that in a book, written to instruct those in our nation who do not have access to foreign languages, that in such a book the author would dare to speak condescendingly of such a pure and righteous figure as Joseph, whom our sacred Torah presents as a model of congeniality filled with the spirit of grace—to say of such a man that he is a vile human? Or to favorably mention those of our nation in the lands of France and Germany, people who have already been corrupted (on matters of faith), have strayed from our forefathers’ path, have called the sons of foreigners “Our Brothers” and told alien faiths “you gave us birth”—and even present such as an example for the rest of our coreligionists, all this because of what? Because they bow before God only three times a year and not daily or on every Sabbath. And what shall I say of his making mockery of some of our leaders by saying, that the holiday “Hosha’ana Raba” would best be termed the festival of the insane. And if we too admit that the author is just on certain matters, yet do only members of
our nation behave frivolously, are there not customs of this sort in each and every nation? And given all the above, does it surprise you that such literature does not win us over? And shall it estrange from our hearts not only itself, but also the language in which it was written, the two together?29

Reading Nowinsky’s caustic remarks on Shulman’s translation, what is striking is how different her stance is from that of Shulman’s male eulogists, who ardently read Misterei Paris and claimed it made a crucial contribution to the revitalization of Hebrew and its literature.30 Nowinsky reveals an extreme sensitivity to the more submerged messages of that book, which to her seemed anti-Jewish and antireligious. She refuses to endorse ideas that carry even the faintest whiff of assimilation, and argues that such ideas cause readers to abhor not only the literature of Hebrew but equally the language in which it was composed.31

Clearly, these remarks by Haefrati and Nowinsky by themselves do not constitute a sufficient basis for general conclusions about how Hebrew literature affected all the women who read it prior to the 1880s. Yet if such remarks are considered along with letters women wrote on other topics, the overall impression given is that many of the women who had mastered Hebrew and attempted composition in it tended to accentuate their national loyalties.32 Evidently women sought in this manner to procure their rights to read and write in Hebrew, and at the same time to create a space in which their voices could be heard in the public nationalist discourse. Sheltered by a sense that the Hebrew language was steadily losing prestige in enlightened circles, and operating in the vacuum left by the russifists’ abandonment of Hebrew, women could reject charges about becoming estranged from their people while at the same time raise their public status.

As women began to enter the domains of Hebrew, a gap was apparent between the relatively easy road they had as readers and the difficult path they had to forge as writers. This disparity was not accidental. The maskilic elite drew a clear line between the act of reading and the act of writing as done by women. The act of reading—the supposedly passive absorption of works of literature in the domestic sphere—was warmly welcomed; while creative application by women of the Hebrew language, or any wish on their part to widely circulate their writings, was seen as threatening. As I shall try to show later on, this attitude did not change even after the 1880s.33

Women and Hebrew in the National Revival Period

The 1880s mark a shift in Hebrew literacy rates for women, and the gates of Hebrew literature begin to open to them. Zvi Scharfstein describes this shift as follows:
The times had changed. In my youth the girls of the wealthy classes and the householders used to study Russian with private tutors, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and they spoke Russian amongst themselves and with the boys. The Russian novel was commonly available and was read. People would for the most part read the books of the great poets and authors, Pushkin, Dostoyevski, and Tolstoy, and later on Gorky. From Jewish discourse they grew increasingly estranged.

All signs pointed toward estrangement and assimilation—until the days of Zionism came; a revolution then took place, although it did not encompass the entire youth.34

The gradual increase in the number of women readers of Hebrew is reflected also in remarks made by Miriam Merkel Mozessohn, in a preface to the third part of her translation of *The Jews of England*. In a “Note to the Readers,” dated 1895, Markel Mozessohn addresses the new women readers as well and dedicates her book to them—stressing that the language to which the book was translated is not solely the “language of Moses and the Prophets” but also “the language of Miriam, Deborah and Hannah”:

And another great matter mightily stirs my soul to approach this work, for earlier [in 1859, when the first part of the translation was published] I had sacrificed my first fruits only to my brothers, the sons of my people; yet since then the love of our language has so grown among our people, has succeeded and found its paths also into the hearts of my sisters the daughters of my people; and many of the gentle and virtuous daughters of Zion today read and write Hebrew with the pen of an able scribe and a proper language. This I heard and my heart so expanded in awe, that I must call praises to the Lord who in his mercy has not abandoned the language of Moses and the Prophets the language of Miriam Deborah and Hannah, the language full of youth and beauty over which hovers the crown of ages, our own splendor and our own genius to rival that of the nations.

Here again to you my gentle sisters I today dedicate my works, these residual fruits of my labors, and my reward shall be that you give it a glowing reception and forge with me the pact of welcome, and I shall give you the blessing in the name of the Lord.35

Hebrew instruction for girls after the 1880s slowly expanded. Puah Rakovsky, who administered several Hebrew institutions for girls in the course of her life, relates in her memoirs that in the Poland of the 1880s and 1890s Hebrew was still considered a matter for boys alone:

Jewish parents, even the Zionists among them, disparaged Hebrew instruction for girls. The religious set was opposed to the very idea of it, while the progressives, so-called, and the non-religious were mostly assimilationists. Girls mostly studied foreign languages, and they especially concentrated on Polish and its literature, but the Holy Tongue—so the fathers claimed—was a matter for boys and not for girls.36

Even though in Zionist circles too there was not much enthusiasm for teaching girls Hebrew, the newly awakened nationalist Zionist consciousness and the growing fears of the assimilation of women led to an increase in the
number of girls who began to be taught Hebrew. More and more parents sought to have their daughters educated in the “national spirit” and took pains to enroll them in appropriate educational facilities or to hire private tutors for them. A literary expression of an education of this sort may be seen in the portrayal of Tirtzah, heroine of Agnon’s *Bidmi Yameha*. Tirtzah is taught Hebrew in her home by a private teacher hired by her father. Yet the Hebrew education she receives, Tirtzah herself attests, is “masculine” in nature:

And my father appointed the tutor and he taught me grammar. For like the majority of the nation my father viewed grammar as the very symbol of Hebrew. Thus the tutor taught me *Talmud Lebhn Ivri*, the principles and the use of vowel marks and the commentary *Yitron La’adum*, till no spirit was left in me. Besides grammar, a babes’ *melamed* taught me the Pentateuch and prayers. For my father had given me a tutor for grammar, which the girls do not know, and the *melamed* to be taught all which they do know.

Unlike Tirtzah, however, who is thoroughly trained in Hebrew and is later even called upon to attempt speech in this language, most of the girls who were taught Hebrew did so alongside much more comprehensive and systematic instruction in foreign languages. Moreover, instruction in foreign languages usually preceded any instruction in Hebrew. Hayim Tchernowitz tells that his first love was “an educated girl” who, with her sister, knew Russian and Hebrew; Israel Katzowitz relates that his daughters studied Russian and Hebrew and made progress in their studies, including studies of the Bible; Ahad Ha’am discloses that his sisters learned Russian and Hebrew from Reuven Asher Braudes; Sarah Azariahu declares that besides studying Russian, French, and German, she learned Hebrew, Pentateuch, and First Prophets from a qualified *melamed*; and both Haya Weizman-Lichtenstein and Chava Shapira state that they went through a similar course of study. Conversely, Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar (1885–1975) stresses that unlike her brothers she commenced systematic study of Hebrew at a relatively advanced age:

In our home Jewish traditions were indeed observed but I was a girl not a boy. Accordingly, from first childhood I was sent to a school, which, although it was for Jewish girls was entirely conducted in Russian with nothing Jewish about it. Meanwhile my brothers were studying up to age fourteen and beyond with the town’s best Jewish instructors and teachers, and were sent to a Russian high school only once they had been well grounded in the Jewish faith and in their attitude to Judaism. I was a girl though, so was freed also of obligations to synagogue attendance and its associations, as well as of all the religious sentiments which derive from the synagogue.

For most of these girls, it was *Laaz* reading and not the reading of Hebrew literature that shaped their cultural world and social perspectives. Even women of a deeply nationalist Zionist consciousness, such as Sarah Azariahu, Haya Weizman-Lichtenstein and Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar, attribute the decisive formative influence on their perspectives to the Russian and German literature
they read during their adolescence. Thus, Haya Weizman-Lichtenstein tells of reading the Russian and German classics along with Chernyshevsky and the “forbidden Russian literature.” Sarah Azariahu relates that she too had been raised as a girl on Russian revolutionary literature, and only when she was twenty, when drawn “ineluctably” to the Hibat Zion movement, did she begin “to immerse herself” in the books of Ahad Ha’am, Pinsker, Lilienblum and others. Azariahu further relates that she was deeply affected by “Lilienblum’s booklet Tefiyat Am Israel, which was written in Russian.” Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar tells a similar story:

When I was five the melamed Meishken was hired for me, to teach me a half hour daily, until age ten, Ivri, Pentateuch, and Bible. Of all this study I can’t remember a single fine moment. [. . .] [Still,] something of these studies has remained with me; the Holy Tongue and Yiddish were not foreign to me thereafter, not even when I studied at the Gymnasia.

Yet at the same time Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar notes unequivocally: “My education began with the Russian book.”

The first book which I read with ideological passion, in which I lived in every line, every word, which I read over and over and which became for me the light of heroism, of noble sacrifice and tenderness, was a book dedicated to women. Our teacher brought this book, which wasn’t included in the curriculum, to class; she read out sections from it and lit up every heart that was capable of being lit. This was Nekrasov’s poem “Russian Women,” which was dedicated to the women of the Dekabristas.

In 1918 Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar was to write in her diary:

And despite every partition I feel separating me from Hebrew literature, despite my lack of assurance, which is more glaring and painful if I compare it to my assurance with foreign literature, my wish is to draw nearer to certain authors. To F. B. and G. [Fierberg, Brenner, Gnesin].

In 1938 Katzenelson-Shazar was again to say:

I began again to read Berdichevsky the essayist. There are pages that I swallow whole, quite as I read them in years past. How close it is—how essential! I have yet to have a relation such as this to a Hebrew author, only to the Russians and to Goethe. It seems to me that not even Brenner upset me so much in his day.

I noticed that I lived within Brenner when I was twenty-five, in Gnesin at thirty, and in Berdichevsky at thirty-five. There is some coincidence in all this, naturally.

Puah Rakovsky, who devoted her life to providing girls with a Hebrew and secular education and who was active in the Hibat Zion movement, does not describe her reading process in detail. She does not list the titles of books that had influenced her, from either the European or the Hebrew literature she read. Nevertheless, there are indications that she ascribed much more importance
than her friends did to the study of Hebrew and to Bible reading, which she had begun already in her childhood. She tells with special emphasis that alongside studying Russian and German she learned her Hebrew from the poet Menachem Mendel Dolitzky, and at age fifteen published in *Hatsfirah* a translation of Shimon Frug’s *Sfig*. Even when she tries to clarify for herself when and how she became a Zionist she repeatedly points to her early childhood education: “the heder, the Bible and later perhaps also the effects of the pogroms of 1881–82.” Yet for the very reason that Rakovsky ascribes such importance to learning Hebrew and the Bible it is striking that she does not list even a single author or work of Hebrew literature that influenced her in her youth. Yet it must also be remarked that Rakovsky wrote her Zionist autobiography in Yiddish, rather than in Hebrew; as did the Hebrew author Rachel Feigenberg.

Special attention too should be paid to the attitude these women took toward Yiddish. While Rachel Feigenberg tells in her autobiographical account that at an early age she read novels by Shomer, she does not assign a decisive formative role to this reading; similarly, Rachel Yanait tells of youthful readings in Yiddish, but the decisive influence on her development she ascribes to her readings in Russian. The other women writers too refrain, on the whole, from highlighting their readings of Yiddish literature or describing its influence on them. Hence, a certain similarity is apparent between the reading-stories of the Hebrew reading and writing women and the reading-stories of the enlightening men. Yet this parallel is a partial one at best. In the case of men, Hebrew acquisition was part of a process of secularization and enlightenment, a process in which their study of the grammar of biblical discourse played a central role. In the case of women, mastery of the Hebrew language was a means of asserting their identity as national-Zionists. Accordingly, the understatement of the relative weight of Yiddish readings in their reading-biographies would have served a different function for the two. For women, maskilic contempt for “jargon” was not at issue: if Hebrew is given emphasis, it is because of recognition of its importance to the enterprise of national revival.

The reading-stories of these women suggest that they felt at home in foreign languages, and especially in Russian and German literatures. Toward Yiddish they felt an intimacy which they elected to downplay, whereas toward Hebrew and its literature they felt some degree or other of estrangement. In her article “Nedudei Lashon,” Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar, who for many years could not shake off feelings of estrangement toward Hebrew and its literature, describes the transition from Yiddish to Hebrew as a conscious act of betrayal. “We were forced to betray jargon,” she says “though we paid for it as with any betrayal”: “Is not our Hebrew dead, spiritless, lacking the motions of
life; and aren’t we for the sake of the faint picturesqueness of our speech using foreign expressions, into which another spirit, not a Jewish one, has condensed its wisdom?  

For our purposes it is important that although the deep intimacy with Yiddish are at the core of Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar’s remarks in her article, she nonetheless repeats what she had written in her diary and gives explicit and unequivocal expression to her deep affiliation with European literature. Between these two poles—of Yiddish and Laaz—the painful oddity of Hebrew and its literature stands out. Katzenelson-Shazar believes many of her generation felt the same way: “The author must let readers discover what he has discovered, and for a certain group of readers everything must be entirely discoverable; such an attitude exists between good Jewish readers and the foreign literatures.”

The attitude displayed by Katzenelson-Shazar toward Hebrew and its literature differs entirely from the one expressed by Brenner, for example, when he declares that the Hebrew language helps the Hebrew author “clarify feelings and make them translucent” or when he affirms that “Hebrew is one of the languages with a greater hold on our soul . . . a language that we cannot expunge without also expunging our very selves.” Indeed, perhaps many of Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar’s contemporaries, especially the men among them, would not have found themselves in agreement with the unequivocal statements she advances in her article in the first person plural. Yet it would seem that the strong formulations that this author employs cover over feelings that quite a few women of her generation shared. Unlike the men who were becoming maskilim, who claimed that reading Hebrew literature, and in particular historical works in Hebrew, helped form their national consciousness, for many women readers of Hebrew one may say that it was not Hebrew and its literature that shaped their national consciousness, but rather their national awareness, which led them to the Hebrew language. The deep affiliation these readers felt for European literature and the alienation they felt, to varying degrees, toward Hebrew literature, could not have failed to affect those who did try their hands at writing Hebrew. The implications of all this for the writing and reception of female Hebrew authors and poets is a topic that requires, of course, separate treatment. But both those women who learned, read, and wrote Hebrew during the Haskalah period, as well as those who did so during the national revival period, were obliged to demonstrate their contributions to the discourse and effort of nationalism if they were to insist on their rights to use the Hebrew language and to obtain visibility and equality. There is, therefore, something at once of the symbolic and of the pathetic in the figure of Sarah Shapira, who had only two poems published in her lifetime, one of which was the nationalist ode, “Zion!”
“I Don’t Like ‘Holy Language Girls’”

At the end of the nineteenth century, at the outset of the effort to revive Hebrew as a spoken language, the male cultural elite’s control apparatus was again put into force and a reprise occurred in women’s reactions and patterns of behavior. Without a detailed examination of this subject here, I shall try to very briefly show that again, under these new circumstances men were ambivalent about women entering the domain of Hebrew; that Hebrew instruction for women was provided as a means of achieving broader ends, this time nationalist ones; and that this time too the unique features of the female realm were taken advantage of to advance such ends. Just as in the Haskalah period, so in the national revival period there was a recurrence of the phenomenon of educated women who sought to use their roles as agents of change to advance the social status of women.

The founders and leaders of the movement to revive Hebrew as a spoken language frequently complained about women being barred from study of Jewish topics and especially from Hebrew. The nationalist leadership, which viewed revival of the language as a crucial foundation for national renewal, had concluded that women had to be drafted to their cause in the defined and agreed role that the revival process assigned to them—the role of mothers who would educate their children to a love of their nation and its language. In the year 1889, with the founding of the “Clear Language Society” (Safah Brurah) in the Land of Israel, the Society’s program was articulated to define the “chief methods by which the Society shall achieve its goals.” The first article in this list of methods declares:

The Society shall hire women who know how to speak Hebrew [. . .] and they shall especially provide instruction in speaking the Hebrew language and also in writing and reading, to women and girls in every home desiring such. And also in the Maestras’ schoolhouses for girls, the Committee shall arrange matters so that it will not burden the students and they will not lose time from work, etc. The Society shall make efforts to find women capable of thus working in the rest of the towns of the Land as well, and shall make efforts too so that in the Talmud Torah schools and the remaining schools for boys and girls the pupils will study and become familiar with Hebrew speech.

There is no doubt that the Clear Language Society’s intention was to promote Hebrew speaking for boys and not just for girls. Nor is there any doubt that the central role the Society assigned to women was based on a supposition that Hebrew-speaking mothers would transmit Hebrew speech to their children in their homes, in the way women pass on the “mother tongue” to their children in all “normal” nations. Yet these were not the only reasons for placing women at the front lines of Hebrew language acquisition. In addition to
considerations of this kind, a further pragmatic consideration seems to have been the wish to take advantage of the special characteristics of the “woman’s zone,” with its marginality and lack of oversight. The Clear Language Society was not at all setting aside its goals of infiltrating the Talmud Torah schools and the boys’ educational institutions; it was quite explicit about its ambitions along these lines. Yet the main road—the “simple” and efficient means to reach the boys—was via the women, those who were mothers in the home or teachers in the schools. It would thus be no exaggeration to say that the Clear Language Society sought to use the women as “agents of change” wherever the social or cultural circumstances created difficulties for direct access to the men.

Among the anti-Hebrew revivalists, however, one heard expressions of reservation and even antagonism toward this effort; these, not coincidentally, often focused on the Hebrew-speaking women. David Averbach quotes Y. H. Ravnitzki as having said that “Mendele did not like Hebrew speech, and especially disliked hearing women speak Hebrew.” A similar tale is cited by Shimon Federbush:

It happened once that Mendele the Bookseller went for a walk on the Sabbath in Odessa, in the early days of the Clear Language Society’s activity. He was accompanied by a young man named Lubarsky, who urged him to step inside the club of that organization to hear a lecture. They entered the hall, which had some two hundred people in it, and saw a young woman on the stage giving a speech in Hebrew. After a short while Mendele turned to his companion and said, “Let’s go; I don’t like ‘Holy Language girls.’”

For people like Mendele or Frishman, who held that transforming Hebrew into a spoken language would ultimately cheapen it, or even, as David Averbach puts it, lead to “a vulgar linguistic prostitution,” these Hebrew-speaking women were the realization of their worst nightmares. We shall later return to the subtler factors that perhaps underpinned the anxiety over women’s invasions of the domain of Hebrew. Yet these remarks suggest that for several central authors, the attitude toward women’s entry into the domains of the Hebrew language had not much altered even during the national revival period.

For all the repugnance such authors felt toward Hebrew-speaking women, there were also intellectuals and Zionist leaders who did not cease to be amazed by women who could read and write in Hebrew. Puah Rakovsky affirms that in the 1880s and 1890s such women were still a rare sight, and that Zionist leaders and functionaries attempted to make use of them to establish hederim for girls and thus to spread knowledge of the Hebrew language. At the end of the 1880s, when the first branches of the Clear Language Society were established across Eastern Europe, women who knew Hebrew sought to advance their status through intensive activity along these lines. The number of women in
these organizations may have been much smaller than the number of men, but those who did participate worked to attain positions of influence.  

Puah Rakovsky’s educational labors are a paradigm case of how women’s interests and the nationalist interests served each other: the objective of nationalism made instruction in Hebrew for women legitimate, and instruction in Hebrew in turn raised the status of women and became the guiding edge of their activity as agents of social change. It is scarcely surprising that Rakovsky stresses how she infiltrated the devout hasidic sector by teaching its daughters Hebrew:

More than once it happened that one of the fathers from among the devout and the hasidim told me simply: “teach my daughter everything, just not the Holy Tongue.” Often I would buy the pupil her Hebrew textbooks with my own money, because the father would buy for his daughter all the textbooks except for—God forbid!—the Hebrew book.

Rakovsky took the same approach to reach the men. At the end of the 1880s, with the establishment of the “clear language” unions across Eastern Europe, Rakovsky held night classes in the schools under her administration in which the young men, “especially from hasidic” families, studied Hebrew. Evidently, women in this context were able to function as agents of change under the shelter of the physical and cultural space they were granted. A hint to this effect is supplied by Yaakov Aharoni, who includes a small and “marginal” detail in his story about a Hebrew school in Saratov: the place where the “Friends of Hebrew” organization established in his region used to meet was the women’s section of the synagogue.

Although an attempt was made, in this realm of Hebrew language dissemination, to again make use of the “abandoned” aspects of the woman’s space, it cannot really be said that here too the “advantage of marginality” model was at work. Women’s entry into the domains of Hebrew, unlike their entry into the realms of Yiddish and Laaz literature, was subject to continuous supervision in both the haredi and the Haskalah and nationalist sectors. The degree of freedom allotted to them was much narrower than it had been previously, and they were free to function and to derive “secondary benefits” from the marginality of their sphere only in the place, time, manner and degree that suited the needs of the Haskalah and later of the revival movement. Pervasive cultural, social, and psychological factors were at play to bar women from the language of Hebrew and its literature. These obstacles persisted even when the conditions arose calling for the full participation of women in the life of Hebrew culture in its renewal. Like every sociocultural exclusion, this one too had its discriminatory and repressive character, which was to leave its stamp on the place of women authors in Hebrew literature for many decades to come. An elucidation of the reasons for this exclusion is the topic of the next chapter.
The exclusion of women from the domains of Hebrew was not manifested solely in the prevention of their access to linguistic knowledge. No less significant was their debarment from traditional texts—an essential prerequisite for proper comprehension of Hebrew literature and for composition to the national revival period’s poetic norms. The question to be raised in this context is, why did important authors of the national revival period continue, as traditional society had before them, to resist the entry of women to the domains of Hebrew? As a way of responding to this question, in this chapter we shall examine David Frishman’s stance on the issue of women and the Hebrew language. The attitude held by Frishman, one of the era’s most prominent authors and critics, exemplifies the difficulties the new women readers and writers of Hebrew were facing throughout this period.

Frishman’s series, *Michtavim al Dvar Hasifrut*, published between 1887 and 1922, contains some of his most incisive literary criticism. He famously addresses the letters in this series to a fictional woman: David Frishman’s “well-known” companion. The decision to use this genre of “letters-to-a-female-friend” has been taken by scholars and literary critics as an expression of Frishman’s preference for employing a version of romantic literary convention, one through which he could display his literary tastes and inclinations. The common view of Frishman, which considers him to be an aesthete and a Romanticist, has been considerably reinforced by his decision to compose his literary criticism through this genre.

It must be conceded that this explanation is not far removed from the image that Frishman sought to construct for himself. Throughout his literary
career Frishman cultivated a self-image as the Romanticist, the man of passionate sentiments and refined tastes who displays his ardor to his fragile and delicate female companion. And the manner in which Frishman depicts his relations to his companion as well as the atmosphere he weaves about her certainly seems to confirm the view that this choice of letters-to-a-female-friend genre is a way of employing a romantic convention. “Pray return and come again to me,” Frishman tells his companion in one of his “letters,”

Take off the silk footwear you’re wearing, dear, come here and sit on my knees, and I will have my say like I used to, and you will open your sweet little ears and listen. Let me see: are they still red and clear, those ears, looking like roses? For the evening is mild and pure; a sacred silence envelops all; the tall and lofty mountains, cloaking us on all sides, bathe their heads in the heavenly blue which washes over them from above—and I have so much, so many things to tell your ears today!

Yet for all the romantic posturing toward his “friend,” Frishman clearly had more than just a literary convention in mind in choosing to employ this mode of address. The first of his “Letters on a Literary Matter,” published in 1887, is largely devoted to the question of the new women students of Hebrew. The choice of the “letters” genre is thus manifestly linked to the sociocultural circumstances in which Frishman worked as author and critic: conditions in which the audience for Hebrew literature, whose growth had been checked, was finally beginning to expand, drawing in women who had studied Hebrew, had read its literature and were attempting to speak the language. If Frishman addresses a Hebrew-reading woman friend, that is at least partly because such readers existed to be addressed.

What is perplexing, accordingly, is that in the middle of the first of the letters to a Hebrew-reading woman, there appears the following firm yet unexpected declaration: “The Hebrew Tongue—I have always said—is male apparel; and a man’s apparel must not on a woman be.” Frishman here is resolutely affirming the exclusive “masculinity” of the Hebrew language; but how is that to square with his decision to address his “Letters on a Literary Matter” to a Hebrew-reading woman? Further—what conception of language could possibly underpin such a declaration, and what connection does Frishman believe exists between a language and the sex of those who employ it?

Questions such as these are the focus of this discussion. The first part of our enquiry considers Frishman’s conception of language as it relates to his conception of Woman. The implications, psychological and sociocultural, of Frishman’s attitude toward language at one end and toward women at the other will be studied through an investigation of the opening section of the first of the “Letters on a Literary Matter,” written in 1887, as well as the letter Frishman dedicates to the work of the short-story author Chava Shapira, more than twenty years later (1908). The second part of our enquiry examines the
final section of the first of the “Letters.” Here, Frishman’s turn toward the reading women can be seen as a pragmatic decision made in an effort to cope with the severe difficulties facing contemporary Hebrew literature, notably the persistent gap between it and its potential readership.

“And We See That Our Grasp Is Empty—Such Is the Rule for Woman Too!”

Frishman begins his first “Letter on a Literary Matter” by expressing sharp opposition to the phenomenon of women studying Hebrew: “I will not withhold from you, my sweet friend, that I always objected to our sisters who are studying the Hebrew Tongue, never having believed that any exist who are capable of learning this language guilelessly and wholeheartedly, that pure have been the thoughts which brought her to such study.”

Frishman explains his opposition through a list of long-standing stereotypes about the essence, character and attributes of Woman:

Every last person knows this secret: that women love to ornament themselves and to make themselves pretty; the Hebrew Tongue is merely one more such ornament! Women love to know and announce how beautiful they are, and knowledge of our language is one of the things which brings them nearer this goal! Women like to be flirtatious—what in *Laaz* is called “coquette”—and here they are behaving like coquettes even with the little Hebrew language that they read!

This matter is not beautiful and I never found it attractive! The study of the Hebrew Tongue I have never thought as belonging to the natural kind called the beautiful, but only to the kind called the useful, and therefore it shall never dwell among or ever be suited to the “kind” [also the sex] whose power consists only in beauty and who of the useful one does not wish to comprehend and to feel!

Evidently for Frishman, men and women use language differently. Unlike men, who employ language for utilitarian purposes, women are the “sex” that refuses “to comprehend and to feel” the “utilitarian” one. If, accordingly, women study the Hebrew language it is not for its own sake but rather to adorn themselves, their entire purpose being to attract by this means the attentions of men.

To establish his case, Frishman gives a typically caustic description of a meeting that took place in the home of an acquaintance of his: a tale with a moral. During the talk amongst the men, conducted, as it happens, in Hebrew, Frishman had confidently assumed that the woman in the group did not understand a thing of what was said, and was not about to participate:

I knewest not that the evil was right in front of me neither did my heart inform me—how could I know therefore that she attends our language? What sign does the Lord place on the forehead of such a woman to let it be known that He has designated her and that we must discriminate between her and the remainder of the women He has
created in His vast beneficence? Shall an ellipsis or an exclamation mark be branded by God on such a face that all who find them may recognize them and may know to bow before them on bended knee?^{13}

The conversation, Frishman goes on to say, was about the “Kol Israel Haverim” Society,

And all of a sudden, this girl turns to me and says: “are you referring to the Kol Israel Haverim branch in Paris?” And she articulates the “b” [of the Hebrew “in”] with an active pause-vowel and the subsequent “P” [of Paris] as the [labial fricative] “F,” perfectly grammatically.—What I replied to her at that moment I no longer recall, yet I will always remember that this girl disgusted me with all her grammaticisms and pause vowels and [fricatives], and in my heart I cursed grammar and active pause vowels and [labiodentalized] “P”s, and also all the smart-alecky intellectual women and the “blue-stockings,” as they are called in Laaz, I reviled that moment.^{14}

The hypercorrection phenomenon, this particular woman’s failing, is a familiar enough occurrence. Socio-linguistic research suggests that it is especially common among groups seeking integration into a social status higher than their own and who consequently engage in excessive displays of mastery of that social group’s language.^{15} Yet this is not the interpretation Frishman supplies to the event at hand. In his opinion the phenomenon is the effect of “feminine nature,” a manifestation of the need for self-adornment, for preening.

Reading Frishman it is hard not to be astounded by the myopia that makes him treat hyper-correction as a uniquely female characteristic, just as it is hard not to be stunned at the extent of the contempt and rage he feels toward women who speak Hebrew.^{16} For a glance at the literary criticism of the period—including Frishman’s own—demonstrates that Jewish society had no shortage of men who could not speak Hebrew. Like many other critics of the period, Frishman devoted substantial space in his articles to corrections of authors’ grammatical errors and repeatedly complained about the small number of readers of Hebrew literature and their inadequate mastery of this language.^{17} These facts give grounds to suppose that the rage and contempt Frishman feels toward women who know Hebrew stem from another source. Indeed, most of the arguments he advances to justify his position lead into realms of which he himself is perhaps dubiously cognizant. Reading his declarations, one quickly discovers that the argument about women wishing to adorn themselves through knowledge of Hebrew is a subsidiary one, soon yielding to a new and more weighty argument. According to this new argument, a woman corrupts language by her very nature, which is elusive, chaotic, and rife with contradiction:

Since the ages of antiquity Woman has been an enigma to us; and the more we ponder and investigate the nature of her soul the more perplexed we shall grow. [ . . . ] Should some author come and write us a book on Woman, and point out every defect and
fault, every blemish and every taint and all manner of vices—then we shall believe him and shall know that it is truth he has uttered and honestly has he spoken to us. And should another come and write a book, he too, on Woman, and find in her every goodness and kindness and grace and high-mindedness and every pleasantness and refinement and all manner of virtues and qualities—then him too shall we believe for the moment, and shall know and sense in our soul that he has spoken truly.\textsuperscript{18}

Frishman, who sees Woman as contradiction incarnate, indifferently offers a poetic analogy to help clarify his meaning. In drawing his analogy he incidentally discloses subliminal aspects of the frustration, which is at the root of his attitude toward women:

Sometimes the sun rises and its sweet rays descend before us, to delight the heart and gladden the soul, and sometimes a whim inclines us to extend a hand and gather one ray in our palms, and well might we think we had gathered it, yet when we open our hand we see that our grasp is empty—so it is also with Woman.\textsuperscript{19}

In likening Woman to a ray of light, Frishman implies that behind the chaos and contradictions characteristic of the female constitution what lurks is Nullity. The ray of light, supposedly meant to gladden the heart of man, turns out to be Void—woman is likened to a naught, and the man who covets her may never keep her.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{“For the Two Sexes Truly Speak Two Different Languages”}

In the first of his “Letters on a Literary Matter,” Frishman endlessly ponders the connection between his concept of Woman and his concept of language. Only in 1908, over twenty years later, does he return to discuss this issue and to supply the missing link in his argument.

In the letter devoted to a collection of stories written by Chava Shapira, a young author who took the nom de plume “Em Kol Hai” (Mother of All Life), Frishman squarely deals with the topic of “the language of Woman.” The alleged basis for the questions he raises on this issue is the feminist declaration Shapira makes in the book’s preface:

Our literature has lacked the participation of the other half of humanity: that of the weaker sex. By entering this alien realm, my mightiest wish is that many members of my gender shall be aroused to follow in my footsteps. So long as these do not participate in it, our literature shall fall and shall lack a certain hue.

Each time we are amazed and astounded at the great talent of a “miracle-worker” who manages to “penetrate the woman’s heart,” we feel at the same time that an alien hand has touched us. We have our own world, our own afflications and yearnings, and at least in describing these we must take a part.

I know that I myself have yet to meet the standards I am setting for the author or authoress. This collection of vignettes is merely an attempt, the beginning of an
expression of the spirit of one of this sex, who has been compelled to leave the treatment of her “sorrows and joys, trials and longings” in the hands of others.

I am familiar and acquainted also with the obstacles and impediments placed intentionally, maliciously and unintentionally on the road of literature, and am aware of the meagerness and puniness of our literature in particular. Yet even all the ploys of the narrow-hearted among it will not have force enough to budge me from my place. This artistic discipline is my sole ambition and object.

And in now releasing this “Collection of Vignettes” for publication, I am fully confident that it will be received as an attempt of one who dares to stride upon untrodden fields.

Frishman takes the stance that Shapira is denying men not only the right to describe a woman, but also to criticize her work. Accordingly he refrains from dealing directly with her stories, which portray “types of women and women alone,” and insists that in order to “make the authoress comfortable” he leaves “even the criticizing of these stories to a woman, until such time as one comes along to write it.” After these short introductory statements, infuriating in their condescension, Frishman turns to the main subject, that is, the issue of language, advancing the hypothesis that communication between men and women is by its very nature impossible:

*The Language of Woman*—this is a unique department of philology, a department no professor has ever mastered. [. . .] For many years now I have been preoccupied by the following idea: [. . .] That the two sexes do indeed speak different languages, [. . .] that a word, which has a certain meaning for a man, in a woman’s mouth has sometimes an entirely different meaning, and a phrase, which uttered by a man signifies such and such, when uttered identically word for word by a woman, comes to signify something which is its diametric opposite. In theory the two are speaking the same language. He says “yes,” she says “yes”; yet when a woman says “yes” we do not know what this means [. . .] or whether the meaning which “yes” has in the forenoon is the same that it will have in the afternoon.

Frishman’s scornful and sarcastic tone toward women and their language is apparent also in the absurd examples he later piles on. During a meal, when a woman requests a glass from the man sitting beside her, he must not be astonished if, when he passes the glass to her she replies that “she never asked for it at all, and even the words that crossed her lips did not reach her consciousness and she is not in the least obliged to recollect them.” And if the man insists on “reminding her precisely what she said word for word,” he will be thought “a boor who is antagonizing her and trying to pick a quarrel—and in this too she shall be right. The words in themselves are of no importance, only the intention is.” In the Language of Woman “the word is never the true content of her thought.” Words do not serve to articulate her ratiocinations, but rather, they are the impenetrable veil she dons to screen her soul from prying eyes.

One may think that the concept of the Language of Woman as one meant for beauty or display and the concept of it as designed for modesty
and concealment contradict each other, but for Frishman they are two sides of the same coin: in both notions a woman works to obscure her ineluctable essence, and in both cases she is evading the accepted and conventional use of words: “A woman uses a word just as she uses a glance, the laughter on her lips, the perfume on her skin: all in a definite and precise manner, yet the definitions of all of these differ and depart from the customary meaning.”

Yet after the cloak of irony is removed from Frishman’s lines, it emerges that this is not mere jest. Frishman maintains that Woman’s elusive essence and her idiosyncratic usage of language are associated with a corruption and subversion of the very foundations of “men’s language.” In the beginning of his letter he indeed voices a wish that he might yet learn the Language of Woman, but this wish is presented in advance as rhetorical, doomed to failure from the outset. For the Language of Woman is one of chaos and lawlessness, has no commitments to truth; it thus is not a “language in the linguistic sense” and is not at all available to scrutiny. Unlike the language of men, which is transparent, in which each sign corresponds to an agreed-upon and univocal signified entity, the Language of Woman is an unruly idiom in which the very same signs correspond to an arbitrary and elusive collection of signifieds. The invasion by Woman of Man’s linguistic territory thus involves a rupturing of the agreed and transparent link between signifiers and signifieds and an introduction of anarchy into the well-policed domain of language. The enigmatic nature of Woman, as manifested in the indecipherability of her idiom, thus puts her language beyond the realm of Man, which Frishman identifies with the edges of rationality and of culture. This too, apparently, is the basis of his frustration: On the one hand, a woman is a realm of enchantment for a man, while on the other, he can know neither her nor her language.

“Man’s Apparel May Not on a Woman Be”

Given this general conception of cultural language as male, one may understand Frishman’s perspective on Hebrew and his definitive avowal in the first of “Letters on a Literary Matter”: “The Hebrew Tongue [. . .] is a male kli [Biblical kli, apparatus/armament/apparel], and man’s apparel [kli gever] may not on a woman be, for the day she takes to herself this apparel it ceases to be apparel and becomes a woman’s dress.” It is hard to resist the temptation to offer a psychological account of this formula here, to hear in it echoes of a castration anxiety in the face of Woman’s penetration of Man’s linguistic domains: “For on the day she takes to herself the apparatus it ceases to be apparatus and becomes a woman’s dress.”

Yet Frishman’s formulation also carries specific sociocultural connotations within the particular context of Jewish society and Jewish culture. The
inclination to dispossess women of the Hebrew language is an unexpected recapitulation of the approach that had been typical in traditional Jewish society. That this is inconsistent with Frishman’s generally critical stance toward traditional Jewish society’s social order is what reinforces an impression that the employment of the biblical idiom here is deliberate. “A man’s article (kli) may not on a woman be” (Deuteronomy 22:5). In its original meaning, this commandment was an order to have the sexes be clearly distinguished: a member of one sex is prohibited from dressing or behaving like one of the opposite sex or seeking to imitate it.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, in its original form, the commandment has nothing to do with language; but given the way Frishman takes the exclusively male character of Hebrew as constitutive of the division of genders, the scriptural verse comes to act as a proof-text, which sanctions not only traditional society’s approach toward the division of the sexes but also its policy as regards gender and language. And indeed Frishman too, like traditional society, sought to preserve the state of affairs in which women were denied access to the Hebrew language.

Yet while this similarity between Frishman’s stance and that of traditional Jewish society does exist, there is also a significant difference. Traditional Jewish society imposed limitations on the use of the Hebrew language: it permitted its application for sacred purposes alone. Women were not barred from this language on the basis of any specific prohibition, but rather as a byproduct of Jewish society’s enforcement of gender distinctions in all that concerns the religious vocations of men and women, and the consequent different education given to each.\textsuperscript{31} Men, as the ones bearing the burden of religious obligation and responsibilities for spiritual life, were granted access, if only of a limited kind, to Bible study and to the Hebrew needed for sacramental purposes; whereas women, who were responsible for material life, were prohibited from studying Torah and perforce also barred from the Hebrew language. Frishman, for his part, did not seek to limit the use of language but rather its users; he wanted men alone to be the ones to employ the Hebrew language. This is not a trivial difference. Modern Hebrew literature, which Frishman hoped would cure the Jewish people of its myriad ills, violated the traditional limitations on Hebrew use by its very existence. The secular purposes to which Hebrew was being applied were already secularizing the language, and as this process was of supreme significance for Frishman he could not simply adopt the traditional approach and limit Hebrew use in the narrow religious sense. Yet Frishman too viewed Hebrew literature as having a sacred aspect, in its inheritance of the role of religion in the task of national preservation and revival. Consequently, he too sought to maintain the sanctity and prestige of the literature through a functional separation from the language as spoken. He objected to the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, demanding that the
spoken and written or literary language be kept clearly isolated from each other. To preserve the virtues of Hebrew as a masculine, logical and orderly language, the qualities befitting a high cultural tongue, he had no choice but to impose limitations of the users of the language and defend it from invasions of female idiomatic chaos.

Evidently both Frishman and traditional society had an interest in preserving the diglossic character of Jewish society. Yet in traditional society the diglossia was conceived as user-oriented. A diglossia of this sort makes the “high language” and the “low language” available, in principle at least, to everyone’s use, and the choice of the appropriate language depends on the purpose for which it is applied—the high language being for sacred purposes and the low one for secular applications. Frishman, by contrast, conceives the diglossia as user-oriented, in other words, as a diglossia in which not everyone is entitled to use both languages, and the basis of appropriate use is set by the origins, status, education, or sex of the user. Women, for Frishman, should use only the low language, that is, Yiddish, whereas men may choose the language which best suits the purpose at hand—Hebrew for prayer or literature, Yiddish for mundane communication.

In any event, the social and linguistic outcome of both conceptions was the same. Control over the Holy Tongue or over the language of High Culture was kept in the hands of men, and the diglossia reflected a clear social hierarchy that was divided principally along gender lines. In both the traditional approach and in Frishman’s, man is the “master of language” who has dominion over knowledge and culture; for both, the democratization of language threatens culture and the order of society as a whole.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the system of traditional education did not train women for proficiency in Hebrew, and the system of secular education the maskilim founded did not stray from this path. Boys in the secular Jewish schools were taught Hebrew and various Jewish topics, while girls learned only the European languages and studied Jewish topics almost not at all. Under these circumstances, the Hebrew literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was primarily exclusivist in nature—written by and for men alone. Women were barred not only from the language of this literature but also from the modes of discourse prevalent in it. Masterly displays of proficiency, the clever adaptations of biblical phrases, citations or linguistic fragments, and the witty use of canonical references were all so much “men’s apparatus” that a woman was trained neither to understand nor to be able to take part in.

Curious confirmation of this point can be found in Lilienblum’s reaction to a critique by Miriam Markel Mozessohn, who had complained about the indecent phrases and risqué language he had employed in certain chapters of Hat’ot Neurim. In the letter in which he responds to her, Lilienblum writes:
Parush’s Reading Jewish Women

You indeed are a woman and your sentiments are pure, you cherish modesty and despise any utterance which it does not do the woman honor to hear—and lo, in perusing my book you discovered in it certain harsh expressions, seeming breaches of the moral code, and when these expressions of mine wounded your refined sensibilities you chastised me, charging me with being foul-mouthed—; therefore before I rise to receive your verdict, I will circumvent you by justifying myself to you for those words of mine. Know, O marvel of womankind! That all those peculiar expressions that appear in my writing—I did not draw them from my own heart, but rather from a corrupted source, from the accursed Kabbalah I drew them forth [...] And know also and never forget that you are one woman reading my book: will it be demanded of me that I watch my mouth and tongue before speakers of our Holy Tongue (to whom such expressions are not alien, but derive from the spirit of the ancient land) in a book which will be read by no dainty women other than yourself?41

Lilienblum’s works were, in content, language and modes of discourse, aimed at men alone. When writing, he, and the rest of the authors of Hebrew literature along with him, did not have female readers in mind.

Hebrew Literature and the Mother’s Song

Throughout his literary life, Frishman’s approach toward Hebrew and its literature was notably elitist. Yet for all his aristocratic inclinations and his contempt for the “masses,” it was with deep concern that he watched the dwindling of the number of readers of Hebrew. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when he began to write the “Letters” series, he had come to view modern Hebrew literature’s exclusivism as a genuine impediment to its progress. And as the coiner of the slogan “Art-National Revival,” he could only regard this exclusivism as an obstacle in the path of national revival as well.42 Frishman believed that only a great Hebrew literature could effectively bring about national revival: the lack of a broad and robust reading public thus boded ill for both Hebrew literature and the entire national revival enterprise.

Following a clear-sighted reassessment of the sociocultural conditions at the turn of the century, Frishman’s stance on the matter of women who study Hebrew began to shift; it is this shift that he announces in the first of “Letters on a Literary Matter.” If at its outset Frishman explains why he had previously believed Woman could have no part in the Hebrew language, near its end he makes a sharp turnabout and admits:

I was wrong! Once our sisters rise and learn the Hebrew language, then our literature shall be based on solid foundations, and then too we shall have hope! For then no longer shall I term “useful” the study of the Hebrew Tongue, but also shall I call it “beautiful”! Let our sisters come and study, study as much as they please, study at first for the sake of ornament and adornment alone, study not for its own sake, and out of the not-for-its-sake still achieve its sake; and the land shall fill with knowledge, and our sons and children shall study after us, for what are we yet lacking in our literature if not the slender and delicate hands of women who are able to tutor our sons? What do we
demand, if not that gentle mothers shall with their soft fingers plant in our sons’ hearts the love for our language and for the heritage of our nation.\textsuperscript{43}

Frishman has thus altered his stance toward the Hebrew-studying women chiefly out of concerns for what would happen to Hebrew, to literature, and to the nation if mothers instructing their children were unable to make them take pleasure in their people’s language and culture. Yet the role played by women in the process of language acquisition was not the sole reason for the change in his stance. No less important was his readiness to admit that while cultivating a generation of young readers for Hebrew literature women would also contribute to the development of imagination, sentiment, and literary taste. Here, too, Frishman pinned his hopes chiefly on women’s activities:

In the soft hearts of boys resourcefulness shall be formed only by merciful women. On the padding of the soft cradle the child lays and his ear hears a pleasant tune sung in a divine voice which he will never afterward forget; those pleasant sounds are forever etched on his heart. In hands is a child borne, on knees is he trained, and his ear is touched with the lyrical poem which his Hebrew mother sings to him in her language.\textsuperscript{44}

It is difficult to exaggerate the weight Frishman ascribes to the formative power of these early childhood experiences. Over and over in his writings he speaks of the child’s initial attraction to the realms of imagination opened to him by his mother and grandmother, as evidence there was life yet in the ailing Jewish soul, a soul which the tradition of scholarly sophistry had crippled to the point of genuine infirmity. According to Frishman, the childhood fantasies the mothers’ stories inspired were the emotional source that would nourish Hebrew poetry to a state of vigor, and they are what held out the hope that the younger generation would not abandon its people, its language, and its culture en masse.\textsuperscript{45}

So much for Frishman’s pragmatic reason for calling women to enter the domains of Hebrew. The question this raises is how he deals with the hazards necessarily entailed—how he dispels fears about the line between the sexes becoming blurred and the logical foundations of male language eroding away. A partial answer to this question may be found in a poem Frishman worked into the first of the “Letters on a Literary Matter,” near its end.\textsuperscript{46} This poem, which tells the story of the love affair and sad breakup of a ray of light and a rose, offers a certain resolution of the conflict between Frishman’s principled view of the “masculinity” of the Hebrew language and the pragmatic arguments advanced in favor of allowing women access to it.

The ray of light, representing in this case the man, descends from the heavens into a garden of flowers; through its love a rose is brought to bud. Daily the ray and the rose embrace, until a “bevy of gossip mongers” and “lip pursers” ignite the flames of groundless jealousy between them. Thereafter, the ray of light ceases to visit his love and the flower loses its petals and withers away.
On the one hand the poem celebrates the primacy of the ray of light: the rose is presented as his protege, the one who cannot exist without the ray’s noble attention. On the other hand, the song mourns the separation of the lovers and the withering of the rose. Evidently, despite the absolute dependence of the rose upon the ray of light, the happiness of the two requires that their love be mutual.

In the context of the letter, Frishman’s poem functions as a fable. In line with the moral of this fable Frishman concludes his letter with a call for cooperation between women and men in the erection of Hebrew literature: “And should it happen that our sisters and daughters shall rise to succor us and take the hoe together with us, then shall we be able to erect the building which shall be called ‘fine literature,’ for the benefit of us and our children!”

Yet so far as the ideology of language is concerned, the resolution this poem is offering is in fact more complex. Frishman incorporates this Hebrew poem into the letter so as to induce among women and their children a sort of fond nostalgia for the “lyrical poem” a Hebrew mother sings to her children in “her language.” This locution chosen by Frishman here suggests that he does not see Yiddish, the Mame Loshn, as a “mother tongue” in the sense of native language that mothers share with their sons, but rather, as the language of the “other”—as the rejected language of women. Stressing the lyricism of the mother’s song in Yiddish, by contrast, is meant to bring out an experience supposedly shared between mothers and sons as a sweet recollection. Frishman’s poem thus works to instantiate the soft lyricism of the maternal Yiddish lullaby and to demonstrate its reincarnation, or re-emergence, through the newly reviving poetry of Hebrew. It is this lyricism, therefore, that grants women their rights of passage through the gates of Hebrew language and literature. Frishman is not here consenting to female idiomatic chaos, but rather, hopes to have Hebrew literature be invigorated through this infusion of “feminine” lyricism.

Frishman concludes this letter with an emphatic tribute to his Hebrew-reading reader: “Were the rest of your sisters like you, my dearest, this glorious edifice would now be erect!”—the edifice of modern Hebrew literature, that is. Speaking with the beneficence of the light ray which brings a rose to flower, he responds to his friend’s request to discuss with her “as we once used to, the news of the latest published books,” adding, “And may the nation too hear as I converse with you.”

“In Your Language Was Grace Embodied”

The “Letters on a Literary Matter” series, which he began writing in 1887, contains Frishman’s response to what had become a pressing need. In it he calls
for a broadening of the basis of Hebrew literature and for a new and wider readership to be trained to it—one that now would contain both men and women. By including women in the intended audience for Hebrew literature Frishman hoped not only that the size of this public would increase but also that its expectations would shift, so as to accommodate the tastes and emotional range the women readers would bring to it. As he saw it, a shift in the readership’s tastes was bound to affect the content of the literature addressed to it, altering its very demeanor.

Frishman was not the only author or critic to pin high hopes on women’s entry into the literary community. Such wishes were expressed also by YaLaG, yet with a rationale quite different from that of Frishman. YaLaG took the view that the very status women occupied—outside the prevailing modes of Hebrew discourse and literature—is what would allow them to enrich Hebrew literature with qualities it was crucially lacking. A long tradition of talmudic sophistry had enslaved men’s minds and idioms to sacred writings, and their conformity with traditional rhetoric had severely stumped their literature; yet the thinking and idiom of women were not likewise beholden to scholarly sophistry or interpretive rhetoric. In one of his letters YaLaG puts his thoughts as follows:

All the writings in the Holy Tongue which I have had the opportunity to read by a woman’s hand were far superior in style and linguistic clarity than the writings by the hands of men. A woman writes with a feather quill; a man with a stylus of metal and lead. A woman writes in a simple style that guilelessly follows the language’s spirit, with none of those excessive rhetorical flourishes that jar on the refined soul, of the likes of which it is said, “with neither adornments nor cosmetics.” Not so with the men, many of whom prefer to multiply their words like sand and to sound tinkle bells causing the reader’s ears to cringe. The reason for this in my opinion is that the brains of girls have not been corrupted in youth in the lethal rooms of the heder and their honest minds have not been distorted by sermons and sophistries, so that their taste has survived and their scent has not gone awry.

YaLaG’s remarks here gainsay Frishman’s assertions as to the “masculine” attributes of language in general and of Hebrew in particular. An implication of the view taken by YaLaG—along with the other authors and critics who severely criticized the Haskalah’s melitzic verbiage, such as Kovner, Papirna, and Mendele—is that it is, indeed, men’s usage of Hebrew that best corresponds to the attributes Frishman lists as characterizing the idiom of women. According to these authors, contemporary Hebrew usage was still patterned on the traditional mold, in which the language was not oriented toward the world but rather toward the language and rhetoric of sacred texts. In this conception of language, the Hebrew word is the simultaneous bearer of a wide set of connotations—literal, allusive, interpretive, and mystical—and its most proper application is the interpretive-sermonizing one, in which a multitude
of relations subsist between the language’s signifiers and signifieds and in which links to signifieds remain elusive and obscure. Furthermore, according to these authors and critics, the ills of the maskilic melitzah were a product of the conformism of maskilic authors: the maskilim adopted the traditional conception of language and didn’t dare abandon its conventions. The traditional norms thus lived on in spirit in the maskilic authors’ interpretive-sermonizing applications of the Hebrew language: these writers also deliberately shrouded their words in ambiguity; they, too, consistently shunned mimetical transparency or tangible descriptions of concrete reality. To invoke Frishman’s concepts here, one may say of the approach to language employed by such authors that it was, indeed, the language of men, drilled on talmudic modes of discourse, which ruptured the conventional and univocal bond between signifiers and signifieds. Conversely, the Hebrew idiom of women—who had not acquired these modes of discourse through traditional schooling—possessed the attributes Frishman ascribes to the language of men. Women’s style in writing was notable for its transparency, for its “direct speech,” for an idiom that bolstered the conventional bond of signifiers to signifieds and avoided sophistry or excessive scriptural allusion.

Even though, like his predecessors, Frishman sharply criticizes the maskilic melitzah, nothing he says suggests that he would have acknowledged the ideas here being advanced. Moreover, neither he nor YaLaG or later writers took the position that Hebrew’s literary idiom was to be liberated entirely from scriptural references or from creative recasting of traditional sources. It was not the melitzah at its best that was the object of their critique, but rather, the piling on of scriptural verses for its own sake. One must not, therefore, overestimate the significance of commendations YaLaG issues regarding the Hebrew prose style of women.

A shred of a concession that a woman may properly employ the Hebrew language can perhaps be found even in Frishman, where he praises his fictional friend’s Hebrew style with the words, “In your language was grace embodied—the language of Hebrew, which you chose for writing to me in your last letter.” Yet it would seem that even such an utterance ought not to be assigned an undo weight. Frishman’s shift in attitude toward women who study Hebrew is an indication that he, like Papirna, Mendele, and YaLaG before him, came to realize that the cultural revolution of modern Hebrew literature was not about to stall at the threshold of the “women’s section.” Substantial pragmatic factors indeed prompted him to forge a “pact” with Hebrew-reading women, yet his ambivalent and patronizing attitudes toward women and their language remained, essentially, as they were.
Conclusion

This book seeks to add a further dimension to scholarship of the sociocultural aspects of the development of Hebrew Haskalah literature during the nineteenth century. A guiding assumption of the book is that consideration of the problems this literature had to overcome requires that its development not be treated merely as one chapter in the history of Jewish thought, nor as one chapter in the historical poetics of Hebrew literature alone. Even an analysis of the relations between ideology and poetics in this literature is insufficient. Alongside such approaches and in addition to them, what is called for is a thorough discussion of the social conditions of the emergence of Haskalah literature, and in particular, its relation to its reading audience. To clarify these matters I have dwelled in this book on the relations between literacy and literature in Jewish society of the period, redirecting the focus from the elite, which created the Haskalah literature, toward the readers, both men and women, who were its constituent audience; and I have examined the influence not only of canonical literature upon these readers but also of popular literature—those works meant for social groups deemed “marginal” in terms of class and gender.

The book’s heroines are the women readers, a set of women who grew up in the “margins” of Eastern European Jewish society in the middle of the culture wars between haredim and maskilim. The tale of the emergence, development, and influence of these women is not simply a chapter in the history of the development of a readership for secular literature in nineteenth-century Jewish society, but is also a chapter in the story of the processes of modernization and secularization this society underwent. Study of these processes from the point of view of the women readers—and not, as is done conventionally, from that of the male maskilic elite—casts a new light upon them.

The social and cultural conditions that enabled the group of women readers to emerge and to flourish stemmed from the gender hierarchy by which traditional society expressed its value priorities. The very institutions and practices designed to conserve the gender hierarchy and to keep women on the sidelines created the breaches in the system of oversight that allowed the
reading women to appear. The tale of the emergence of women readers suggests that women had an advantage over men in the transition to modernity—an “advantage of marginality.” The marginality of women granted them substantial degrees of freedom, opened “windows of opportunity” to them, and enabled them to function, wittingly or not, as agents of change and modernization.

The gender hierarchy was such that men, charged with guaranteeing the spiritual and religious existence of the society, had the superior status, while women, who were responsible for the world of affairs, had the inferior one. The hierarchy determined how roles were divided between men and women in the family, affected the society’s marriage practices, and was sustained through the traditional school system’s enforcement of gender differences in education. This school system, which was charged with the construction of distinct gender identities for men and for women, kept women from studying Torah. Women, in the realm of practical affairs, were given responsibilities for earning an income and were positioned in the public arenas of the storefront and marketplace; yet in all that concerns spiritual and religious life they were shunted off to the confined domestic sphere. Their roles as providers for their families built many women into strong or aggressive or extroverted figures and the gap between the status they held in practical life and their inferiority in the spiritual sphere became the source of tensions in the home and frustrations for both men and women. Yet their very inferiority in spiritual and religious life provided women with an advantage over men in realms that became significant during the transition to modernity. Their education and the content of their readings were less closely supervised, prohibitions enforced on the men were not applied to them, and they enjoyed other “benefits of marginality.” Educated or well-read women were thus well positioned to serve as agents for the dissemination of new ideas. This potential was not overlooked by the maskilim, who assigned much significance to the development of a secular educational system for girls as a means of spreading maskilic ideas to sectors of the haredi population that had been blocked to it.

Many women in Jewish society remained ignorant, but quite a few women learned to read Yiddish in informal settings and were free to decide what material they would read in this language. By contrast with the women who read Yiddish, a language they understood well, most men, although taught to read Hebrew in the heder, were able to read this language only mechanically: they knew enough Hebrew to fulfill their religious functions but not enough to understand a text of Scripture or of modern Hebrew literature; nor were they free in the choice of material they could read.

Women’s roles as breadwinners, which required their interaction with the Christian surroundings, inclined the society to a certain extent to allow them to study foreign languages and to gain a secular education. Traditional society's
Conclusion

attitude of disdain and permissiveness toward women, in effect two sides of the same coin, was expressed through its lack of serious efforts to oversee the literature that women read. Conversely, the study of foreign languages by men was considered as a threat, and men were prohibited from reading secular literature.

Alongside the female readers of Yiddish who arose within traditional Jewish society there emerged a group of women who studied European languages, either through private tutors or at secular schools. The great battles that the maskilim and haredim fought over secular Jewish education were conducted almost entirely over schools for boys: there was little real opposition to the many secular schools for girls that were established and administered. Accordingly, throughout the nineteenth century the number of girls attending the secular schools of the various types, or studying foreign languages from private tutors, steadily increased. At first most girls attending these schools came from wealthy families, but in time they were joined by girls from the middle and even from the lower classes. Girls’ enrollment at the Gymnasia schools increased steadily from the 1860s onward, and there was similar growth in the number of girls who sought entry to the higher education programs for women. In many of these establishments girls were taught to read fine European literature and in early youth they had already had exposure to the European masterpieces.

The “benefit of marginality” thus created conditions enabling two audiences of women readers to be formed: a Yiddish-reading public and a Laaz-reading public. These populations largely differed in education and class status, yet there was a certain overlap between them, as virtually all women readers of European languages also knew Yiddish and read its literature. Nor were the communities of women readers internally homogenous. The period’s memoirs literature, with its rich gallery of portraits of reading women, suggests that many types of readers arose in each of these communities, each reading different types of literature and each being differently influenced by their readings.

Within the Yiddish-reading public one may distinguish the “old women readers,” those who read traditional literature written for women, and the “new women readers,” who began to appear in mid-century and gradually shifted from reading traditional literature to reading sentimental novels and popular maskilic Yiddish literature. The maskilim recognized the potential in these new Yiddish-reading women and began to compose literature in this language despite the reservations, and at times repugnance, they felt toward it. Hundreds of romantic, sentimental, and sensationalist Yiddish novels, explicitly aimed at women, carried popularized versions of maskilic themes. The women readers provided the authors with a convenient pretext for writing in “jargon,” Yiddish’s supposedly misbegotten and contemptible idiom,
and also opened a channel to the husbands and sons, who would sneak looks at this literature behind women’s backs.

Women who read literature in European languages shared a different profile. Most of these were women who had mastered foreign languages at a very early age, and while quite young had begun to read the finest of European literature in Russian, German, Polish, and French. Some even abandoned the classical masterpieces for radical Russian literature and were drawn to the revolutionary ideas present in contemporary Russian society.

The reading-stories of the nineteenth century’s reading women were entirely different from those of the men. The disparity was manifest in the conditions within which reading took place, in the subjects of the reading materials, in the language, in the purpose of the reading, and in the function it served in the lives of readers. The reading-stories of men unfold the tale of their enlightenment and secularization as a process of induction and metamorphosis similar in nature to a religious conversion. Hebrew literature was generally quite significant in this process, with readers starting out with the “Literature of Inquiry” (the philosophy and commentary written in Spain in the Middle Ages), passing through the historical and scientific literature of the various sorts, and ending up with poetry and fiction. Since men were not allowed to read books of this kind, they did so in hiding, haltingly, with doubts and inner conflicts. Yiddish literature, even if they did read it, they deemed inferior, and they do not describe it as having wrought a transformation in their lives. Nor did reading European literature play a decisive role in the enlightenment of the men. Most of the yeshiva students and the young enlightening scholars who studied European languages did so at a relatively advanced age, in secret and alone. Most were exposed to European literature only when already far along in the process of enlightenment. Women, by contrast, were not forced to read in hiding, and their reading-story is one of development and growth more than it is one of metamorphosis and conversion. The shift women effected in the course of the century from reading traditional-religious literature intended for women, to reading the sentimental Yiddish novels and finally the European classics or radical Russian literature, was on the whole a “natural” transition, unaccompanied by the soul-searchings or sense of sin, which were the lot of the men.

The woman’s space, the zone within which women flourished and out of which they operated, was a sort of “no-man’s land,” clear of Judaism’s “burden of inheritance” and wide open to “alien” European influences. In this no-man’s land, diametrically opposed types of literature could be found side by side: traditional women’s literature; popular Yiddish novels—which the men, the maskilic male elite, disdained—and the European masterpieces, to which men were exposed only at a relatively advanced age. The list of books read by women did not, however, include the works that had induced the process of
enlightenment among the men. For instance, it did not include Mendelssohn’s *Biur*, Ben-Zeev’s *Talmud Leshon Irri*, Levinsohn’s *Teudah Beisrael*, or Krochmal’s *Moreh Neruchei Hazman*.

The “benefit of marginality” that women enjoyed, as detailed in the book’s initial chapters, seems to me especially important for understanding how secular literature developed in Eastern European Jewish society and the kinds of influence it had. The influence on women was manifested in a wide set of changed behaviors that included girls refusing marriage to rabbinic scholars; secret alliances being forged with younger family members to promote enlightenment and secular education; traditional social arrangements being called into question; heretical tendencies; girls running away from home to seek an education; radical and “feminist” social perspectives being adopted; and, in extreme cases, girls joining revolutionary movements.

The influence these women had on the society surrounding them was no less significant than the influence of the literature upon them, and it was clearly distinguishable from the men’s modes of influence. Women were effective through their own channels, in part because of the inferiority of their social status. The very fact that they functioned within the family circle, were not among the elite, and did not establish institutions meant that their societal influence took a form different from the men’s. The social space in which such readers functioned was located at or beyond the margins of the male maskilic elite’s institutional bodies. Within this space women were able to act spontaneously and directly as agents for maskilic, modern, and secular ways of thought, propagating these outward to their surroundings.

Female readers of European languages, who were commonly first in their families to be exposed to European language and culture, were often the ones to introduce the men in their households to the world of European classics and to secular modern culture. Nor were women who read romantic Yiddish literature any less influential than men who read canonical Hebrew literature. Central themes of the sentimental novels for women, such as the critique of traditional matchmaking practices in favor of the ideal of romantic love, had a subversive potential which should not be underestimated. The marriage institution was central to conservation of the class hierarchies in traditional Jewish society, to the preservation of the prestige of scholarliness, and to the society’s economic structure. Any injury to this institution thus confronted the society with a threat no less serious than the ones it faced from Darwin’s theory of evolution or from other books of science or of philosophy.

Arguably, the maskilim should have welcomed the influence of reading women, but this was not the case. The “chaotic” nature of the woman’s space and its heterogeneous and contradictory qualities soon made it a space that the maskilim too saw as menacing. The sense that “anarchic forces” threatened to burst forth from this region and bring down the society as a whole
was expressed in the discourse of the Haskalah and the nationalist movement. Both groups voiced their concern about women becoming overeducated and inducing assimilation and estrangement from Jewish nationhood. Concerns about the forces brewing in the woman's space, which had been and remained relatively free of a Jewish heritage, were also expressions of gender tensions and power struggles. This is not to say that this discourse was merely a veneer cloaking a crude battle of the sexes. No doubt many of the maskilim and nationalists truly sought a model by which Europeanism and Jewish culture might be integrated, and were genuinely torn between secularization's attractions and fears of spiritual and physical annihilation. Nevertheless, some of the gender images and symbols employed in the nationalist discourse reflect troubles or anxieties not obviously related to this quandary. The space of women seemed to threaten not only Jewish values, but also masculinity, the gender hierarchy, and the bourgeois patriarchal family structure that the maskilim and the nationalists hoped to entrench. Hence the worries about the novel-readers' "sexual immorality"; hence the concerns for the "rampant intellectualism" of Laaz-readers; hence too the stereotype of the educated female as the rabid assimilationist prone to run off with a Goy, with the merest blacksmith's apprentice. The nationalist discourse about women thus functioned as both a pretext for and means of appropriating the space of women and gaining mastery over it.

Fearful of these educated women who had "gone out of control," both the maskilim and the nationalists described them using a wide array of negative stereotypes. In the autobiographies, however, the individual portrayals of mothers, sisters, grandmothers, or rebellious friends are conveyed nearly always with expressions of deep sympathy and appreciation. From the perspective of the boys who were becoming maskilim and were abandoning traditional modes of life, these women were model figures who showed them how the society around them might be regarded critically and who helped give legitimacy to their doubts and aspirations. The openness, tolerance, or revolutionary zeal of such women provided the auspices, and at times even the outright support, for Jewish society in its leap into modernity.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century it was no longer possible to ignore the influence of the reading women upon society. The neglected Jewish education of girls was producing a growing trend in which girls identified with the dominant culture and treated it as their own. This identification was quite often manifested in expressions of disdain toward Hebrew literature and Jewish culture. The weakening of the national and religious ties of women who received a modern secular education became the focus of concern and critique both among the haredim and among the nationalists and Zionists. At the turn of the century widespread calls were thus heard urging reforms in
women’s education and insisting that they be more thoroughly trained in Jewish subjects.

Women were able to penetrate the realms of the Hebrew language, only late in the nineteenth century, when both Hebrew and its literature were clearly in a state of crisis and were being abandoned by men. In these circumstances, with the value of that particular cultural capital in decline, women sought to raise their standing by sharing with men the assets of the Hebrew language and the national culture. Animated by a faith that the task they were carrying out was of primary national significance, they began to “invade” the vacuum that men had left open. Yet this penetration of the Hebrew domains, and especially the realm of writing in this language, proved exceptionally difficult for women and required the overcoming of substantial obstacles, for women had been trained neither to read nor to write in Hebrew and lacked systematic education in Scripture or in the Hebrew literature from the various periods—proficiency in which was crucial to proper and worthy composition in this language. Hebrew’s status as a holy language, which marked it in advance as a language of men, and the identification of Hebrew literature as one written by and for men—these kept women excluded almost completely from the field of Hebrew prose composition. Often, the women who did attempt to write in Hebrew found that the act threatened their female identity.

The founders and formative figures of the movement for Jewish cultural revival were not quick to share the “male cultural capital” of the Hebrew language with women. Their attitudes toward women who spoke and wrote Hebrew were marked by a deep ambivalence. Only when circumstances forced them to the realization that the Hebrew-reading women were absolutely essential to the existence of a reading public for Hebrew literature did they display any readiness to allow women to enter their domain. Moreover, this readiness to share the capital of Hebrew with women was mainly a readiness to have women be passive consumers of the literature, not active producers of it.

The difficulties confronting women who sought to enter the domains of Hebrew language and literature were not only external in nature. Having been brought up on Yiddish and Laaz, and lacking a solid grounding in the Hebrew language and its literary sources, women felt much more at home in European literature. It was with Yiddish that these women felt on most intimate terms; Hebrew and its literature felt strange or odd to them to one degree or another. The national consciousness of these women had not been formed through the Hebrew language and its literature. Unlike the men, they chose the language and literature of Hebrew as a way of expressing their national identity despite the difficulties these presented to them.

As part of the “benefit of marginality” and the generally unsupervised nature of their realm, women had been permitted to study Yiddish and European
languages and to write in them. The same cannot be said for Hebrew and its literature. This was and remained the privileged domain of men. Only when the nationalist leadership appropriated the space women held for its own purposes and recruited women to the cause of national revival in the role of mothers and educators, were women invited to share in the cultural capital and in the Hebrew language. Even this, however, was not an invitation to a full and equal partnership. The long-standing exclusion of women from Torah study and from use of the Holy Tongue—the means by which female gender identity was constructed—was seen as a reflection of the “natural” order of things and was largely endorsed by rank and file maskilim as well as important authors such as Mendele and Frishman. Essentialist views as to women’s volatile nature, inscrutability, and chaotic speech gave these opinions a further dimension. Consciously or not, reflections such as these underpinned the presumption that creative employment of Hebrew by women would threaten its status as a language of high culture, or any sort of culture.

These attitudes had consequences that were not to disappear even after Hebrew had been revived as a spoken language used by both men and women. Nearly one hundred years after the commencement of the revival of Hebrew as a “living language,” when receiving the Bialik prize for 1994, the author Amalia Kahana-Carmon had hard words for the “chamber allotted” to women’s writing “in the synagogue space of Hebrew composition.”

Yet the phenomenon of the marginalization of women’s writing in the “synagogue” of modern Hebrew literature is not only the outcome of an approach that views the experience of women as insignificant within the collective national narrative. As I have tried to show in this book, this state of affairs has historical and cultural roots that run far deeper: its origins lay in the exclusion of women from the language of Hebrew itself.
Notes

Introduction

1. Yehuda Leib Levin (YaHLeL), Zichronot Vehegyonot [Memoirs and Essays] (Yehuda Slutsky, ed.), Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1968, pp. 44–45. For more on this topic see: ibid. 41, 43.

2. Shalom Yaakov Abramovitch, Ein Mishpat [Eye of Justice], Zhitomir, 1866, p. 26. See also, for example: Moshe Leib Lilienblum, Ktavim Otobiographim [Autobiographical Writings] 1, Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1970, p. 117.

3. For a current bibliographical survey of selected scholarship of the Haskalah movement in Eastern Europe see, for instance, Shmuel Feiner, “The Haskalah Movement in Eastern Europe—An Annotated Bibliographical Anthology” (in Hebrew), in: Immanuel Etkes, ed., Hadat Vehayahim [The East European Jewish Enlightenment], Zalman Shazar Center, Jerusalem, 1993, pp. 456–75. The anthology is sorted by the following topics: (1) general compositions and background literature; (2) writings by maskilim—compositions, articles and source materials; (3) the intellectual world of the Haskalah, its factions and struggles; (4) centers of the Haskalah movement; (5) institutions, means of dissemination and propaganda; and (6) studies relating to individual maskilim.

4. Atypical in this regard is Shmuel Feiner’s article, “The Modern Jewish Woman: A Test-Case in the Relationship between Haskalah and Modernity” (in Hebrew). Zion 58 (1993), pp. 453–99, which discusses the maskilim’s attitudes toward modern Jewish women. Feiner sees the phenomenon of educated women as an expression of modernity; he further remarks that “the ‘woman question’ was not merely a theoretical question but also a practical one” (p. 484). Yet Feiner’s focus is on the intellectual world of the maskilim and on their attitude toward modern women; he does not examine the phenomenon from the point of view of educated women, or consider their world and influence.

5. In this work the term “haredim” will refer to orthodox Jews in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. This sense of the term draws upon the period usage, and is an abbreviation of such descriptive phrases as Haharedim lidvar hashem [wary of the Word of God], Haharedim al datam [wary to safeguard their religion], Haredim al dvar emunatam [wary on the issue of their faith], Hayere'im vehaharedim hamedakdek kim bemitzvah [the the wary and fearful who are exacting in ritual], Haharedim ve'hayar'vim nimtne hador hayashan [the wary and fearful of the old generation], or simply, Haharedim ve'hayar'vim [the wary and fearful]. See, for instance, Mordechai Aharon Ginzburg, Aviezer, Vilna, 1864, p. 124; Shalom Yaakov Abramovitch, Sefer Toldot Ha'teva [Natural History] 3, Vilna, 1872, p. xxi; Peretz Smolenskin, “A Donkey’s Burial” (in Hebrew), Hashahar [The Dawn] 4 (1873), pp. 670, 724; Mordechai Ben Hillel Hacohen, Kvur [Once], Shitbel, Warsaw, 1923, p. 208; “Cracow (Rebellious Runaway Girls),” Hamaggid 6 (1897), no. 48, p. 195, and so on. As a rule, the term “haredim” did not carry a negative connotation, unlike other terms common in maskilic parlance such as kana'im [zealots or fundamentalists], mordei or [assailants of light], and their like. For a characterization of orthodoxy in Eastern Europe and its response to modernity


7. See, for example, Benjamin Harshav, “On the Nature of the Yiddish Language in Its Historical Contexts” (in Hebrew), Hasifrut 3–4, p. 10.


10. For an extensive treatment of this topic, see Iris Parush, “Another Look at the Life of the ‘Dead’ Hebrew Language” (in Hebrew), Alpayim [Two Thousand], 13 (1996), pp. 65–106; see also, Book History (in press); and see below chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5.


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18. Important steps in this direction were made by Shaul Stampler (op. cit.) and by Simon Krieze, who discusses the issue of girls’ education; see: Krieze, *Batei-Sefer Yehuadiyyim Basafah Harusit Berusiah Hatzarit* [Russian-Language Jewish Schools in Czarist Russia], Ph.D. thesis, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1994.


31. For an extensive treatment see Davidson, Revolution and the Word, pp. 5–14.

1. Language, Literacy, and Literature as the Battleground of Haredim and Maskilim

1. Shalom Yaakov Abramovitch, Eye of Justice, p. 15


3. Behind the broad usage of the concept “rabbinical leadership” lurks no assumption that this leadership formed a unified entity. What is implied, however, is that even if rabbis varied in their degree of hostility toward the maskilim, and even if some could be found who were prepared (under certain circumstances) to ratify books penned by maskilim, the overall trend was to react to the Haskalah’s growing power with an orthodox defensiveness.

4. Until the end of the nineteenth century, only a handful of women could read and write Hebrew; the reading public consisted mainly of readers of Yiddish and Laatz. By the end of the nineteenth century, a female Hebrew readership began to be formed as well. More complex still is the issue of women writers in Hebrew. These topics will be treated in Chapters 8 and 9.

5. Authors and critics of the National Revival period such as David Frishman, Yosef Klauzner, and Y. H. Brenner likewise pondered these questions. See Parush, National Ideology and Literary Canon, pp. 95–97, 239–40, 285–89. For the problem of bilingualism in Berdichevsky see Micha Yosef Bin-Garion (Berdichevsky), Shvab Velashon [Poetry and Language], Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1987, pp. 99–132.

7. Ibid., 14.

8. Ibid., 11.

9. Ibid., 12.

10. Ibid., 15.

11. Ibid., 18.

12. Ibid., 42.

13. Ibid., 25.

14. On the three main principles of Dov Sadan’s holistic approach see Dan Miron, “Dov Sadan: *En Route to Holism*” (in Hebrew), in *Im Lo Tiheye Yerushalayim* [If there is no Jerusalem], Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Tel Aviv, 1987, pp. 163–71.

15. The article “Im Kabbalah hi Nekabel” [If Our Heritage It Be, Let Us Receive It] was first published serially in *Hamelitz* [The Advocate], beginning with number 34 in its fifth year (1865) through number 10 in its sixth year (1866). It was reissued in *Eye of Justice* with minor alterations and omissions, and with a further article appended: “Puk Hazei Mai Ama Diber!” In this article Abramovitch responds to questions that the journal *Kiowlienin* posed the Jewish Enlightenment movement’s authors about methods for the Haskalah to propagate itself in Jewish society. The text thus shows marks of the complex politics resulting from having to appeal to two different audiences: the suspicious Jewish audience, and the Russian authorities. See Abramovitch, *Eye of Justice*, pp. 41–74.


18. Ibid., title page.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 42.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 6–7. All emphases in original unless otherwise stated.


24. Ibid., 22–23.

25. Typically the names of signatories were listed at the end of the books, as an honorific and to let the broad public learn of their role in having promulgated Torah scholarship among the Jews. For lists of signatories (prenumerants) see Berl Cohen, *Sefer Haprenumarentn* [The Book of Prenumerants], Di Bibliotek fun Yiddish-Teologishn Seminar in New York un “Ktav” Publishing, New York, 1973, pp. vii–ix.


27. In his book Papirna says of Mordechai Aharon Ginzburg, “There was one figure in our literature, Rabbi ReMAG, who detested rhetorical verbiage [melitzot] [. . .] and knew to value the idea over the language [. . .] he was truly a model and guide for the honorable authors that succeeded him.” See Papirna, *Collected Writings*, pp. 42–43.
28. Owing to what he felt was the historical significance of this phenomenon, Tsi-
tron reprinted the entire ratification verbatim in his book. See Tsitron, The Creators of
29. Ibid., 124–25.
30. Ibid., 126.
31. This is how Abramovitch describes it in Eye of Justice: “Among the Jews the
authors’ books are never sold at the commercial bookstores, as other nations do; in-
stead the authors by themselves beat paths to the donors’ doors, either before their
books are printed, to raise money and find signatories by hand, or after printing, to
publicly distribute them, in the course of which they reap much scorn from the people,
who hurl curses on them and upon their books” (Eye of Justice, p. 45). In an essay titled
“The Fate of Jewish Authors,” Ephraim Deinard describes the difficulty of publishing
books and spreading the Haskalah that authors faced as they tried to peddle their books
door to door: “The Hebrew booksellers, who were themselves mostly poor and few,
did not purchase the books from the authors and print them at their expense, and even
for already-printed books there were not many buyers, and the miserable author who
brought his work to the wealthy man, had to first check whether the patron could
understand Hebrew[...]. And after all this, many greeted the author with furious coun-
tenance [...]. And experience shows that an author who once in his life had this happen
to him never again returned to writing or publishing [...]. Under these conditions it
was impossible to expect anything much from Jewish books, and it is a miracle that we
have even the little produced thus far.” See Ephraim Deinard, Zichronot B’tzamim [Me-
32. See Israel Zinberg, Toldot Sifrut Israel (History of Jewish Literature) 5, Yosef
Shreberk and Sifriyat Hapoalim, Tel Aviv and Merhaviah 1959, pp. 278–79. For more
on this issue see: Abraham Baer Gottlober, “R. Hayk’l Horovitz,” Zichronot Umasaot
33. Abramovitch, Eye of Justice, pp. 7–8.
34. On the prohibition against reading fine secular literature, see, for example, Buki
Ben Yogli (Yehuda Leib Katznelson), Mah Sheru Einai Veshamnu Oznai [What My
Eyes Saw and My Ears Heard], Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1947, pp. 43–44. For a liter-
ary account of the opposition to reading secular literature, see Mendele Mocher Sfar-
rim, “Fathers and Sons” (in Hebrew), Kol Kitvei Mendele Mocher Sfarim [Collected
Writings of Mendele the Bookseller], Dvir, Tel Aviv, 1957, pp. 9–10.
35. The arguments cited by Mendele for why scientific literature and involvement
with it should be permissible suggest that he is confronting counter-arguments; see:
Abramovitch, Eye of Justice, pp. 64–65.
36. Such an attitude is described by YaLaG in his well-known poem, “For Whom
Do I Labor?”: “My parents—adhering to their Lord and nation/ Commerce, Com-
mandments, their life’s occupation/ Reason revolts them, good taste never found/
‘Deathly is poetry, and rhetoric heathen!/ To lodge near a poet is strictly forbidden!/’
Thus do they taunt us, viciously hound.” See: Yehuda Leib Gordon, Kol Kitvei Yehuda
Leib Gordon [Collected Writings of Yehuda Leib Gordon: Poetry], Dvir, Tel Aviv,
1957, p. 27.
37. Abramovitch, Eye of Justice, pp. 41–67; Shalom Yaakov Abramovitch, “Fore-
word” (in Hebrew), Natural History 1, Leipzig 1862, pp. xiii–xxii; “Forward” (in He-
brew), Natural History 2, Zhitomir, 1866, pp. i–x; “Time to Speak” (in Hebrew),
Natural History 3, Vienna, 1872, pp. xix–xxvii. For an analysis of this phenomenon
see Iris Parush and Brakha Fishler, “The Politics of Inserted Text” (in Hebrew), in
Rina Ben Shahar and Gideon Turi (eds.) Ivrit Safah Haya [Hebrew, A Living Lan-
guage] 2, the Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, Tel Aviv University Hakib-
38. For the topic of Hebrew printing houses in Russia, see Saul Ginzburg, “A History of Jewish Publishing Houses” (in Hebrew), *Ktavim Historiyim: Melavei Hayehudim Berusiah Bememshelet Hatzarim* [Historical Writings: Jewish Life in Czarist Russia], translated by Y. L. Baruch, Dvir, Tel Aviv, 1944, pp. 40–54. According to Ginzburg, in the course of the battle between hasidim, mitnagdim, and maskilim over control of the Hebrew printing houses, the Russian authorities were lobbied and people were informed upon or vilified. In 1836, the authorities decided to shut down all Hebrew presses but for two: the Rom printing house in Vilna and the Shapira Brothers printers in Zhitomir. Owing to the monopoly these two houses held over publication in Hebrew, prices for Hebrew texts rose considerably. “But there was an even worse consequence,” writes Ginzburg. “Because of the monopoly, the two printing houses achieved unrestricted dominion over all of Hebrew literature. Our authors already suffered quite substantial difficulties from the normal, state-imposed censorship; but that wasn’t enough, here they had to bear the burden of a further censorship, a *censorship of publishers* [. . .] for without their agreement no Yiddish work or book written in Hebrew would ever see the light of day. The Zhitomir printing house [. . .] would print nothing but hasidic literature and religious works. Publication of maskilic books and secular works in Zhitomir was entirely inconceivable. [. . .] The Vilna publishers were slightly more liberal than those of Zhitomir. Sometimes they would also print maskilic books, but only the more moderate and less extreme ones, as they were cautious not to cross swords with the hasidim or with the religious community in general” (ibid., 50–51; my italics). For more on the attitude of the Zhitomir press to maskilic literature see Papirna, “Zichronot Ushmuot” [Memoirs and Rumors], *Collected Writings*, pp. 314 fn.

39. A case in point illustrating how important was the context in which reading takes place involves the attitude traditional society took at that time toward reading the Bible. The traditional school system trained all males who were capable of it to read Scripture well enough to be able to fulfill their devotional obligations, but it was only in this context that Bible reading was permitted. Independent reading of Scripture during free hours was unacceptable, and those who persisted in doing so were suspected of heresy. See, for example, Shmuel Yosef Fuenn, *Safah Lane’emanim* [Language for the Faithful], Vilna 1881, p. 143; Eliezer Meir Lifshitz, “The Heder” (in Hebrew), *Hatkufah* 7 (1920), p. 321; Zvi Kasdai “Fragments of Memories” (in Hebrew). *Reshumot* 4 (1926), p. 221; Buki Ben Yogli, *What my Eyes Saw and my Ears Heard*, pp. 56–57. For a complete review of the causes and consequences of this phenomenon see Parush, “Another Look at the Life of the ‘Dead’ Hebrew Language,” pp. 65–106.

40. On the basis of a comparative analysis of data from several census surveys taken in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Joel Perlmann asserts that since nearly all males in Jewish society went to *heder* in their childhood for at least a short period, nearly all were able to sound out the Hebrew letters, to read the prayers, or link the Hebrew characters with the words of the prayer. Nevertheless, he adds that among these men there was a substantial minority who were unable to use this prayerbook-reading capacity even for the purpose of reading Yiddish written in the very same characters. See Joel Perlmann, “Russian Jewish Literacy in 1897: A Reanalysis of Census Data,” *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies* Division 2, Vol. 3, The World Union of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 1994, n. 3, pp. 28–29. For further data on literacy levels in Jewish society of the period see: Shaul Stampfer, “Literacy among East European Jewry in the Modern Period: Context, Background, and Implications” (in Hebrew) in Shmuel Almog (ed.), *Tmurot Bahistoriah Hayehudit Habudashah* [Transformation and Change in Modern Jewish History], Zalman Shazar Center, Jerusalem, 1988, pp. 459–70. And see, for example, Shaul Stampfer, “Heder Study, the Knowledge of Torah, and the Maintenance of Social Stratification in Traditional East European Society,” *Studies in Jewish Education* 3 (1988), pp. 271–89.
42. As said, the use of name-signing as a criterion for measuring literacy levels is problematic. Not all those who signed knew how to read or write, and not all those who could read could sign their names. For more on this topic see, for example, Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and Readership in Seventeenth-Century England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 19–44.
47. See also below, chapter 3.
48. For an in-depth treatment of this subject, examining causes and consequences, see Parush, “Another Look at the Life of the ‘Dead’ Hebrew Language,” pp. 65–105.
51. Ibid., 17.
52. Ahad Ha’am, *Pirkei Zichronot Veigrot* [Selected Memoirs and Correspondence], Beit Ahad Ha’am, Tel Aviv, 1931, pp. 1–2. See also Abraham Baer Gottlober, *Zichronot Miyemei Neurai* [Memoirs of My Childhood] (in Hebrew). In *Zichronot Umasaot* [Memoirs and Travels] 1, Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1976, pp. 75–81.
55. As Kaestle points out, literacy can serve to cultivate free or critical thinking but may also be a decidedly conservative tool. Discrimination between populations on the basis of ethnicity, class, or gender need not be manifested by a complete prevention of basic literacy skills. Often a society that widely grants basic reading abilities still discriminates between groups through differences in curricula, the intended use of literacy, and the application of literacy in a given sociocultural context. Literacy becomes a tool for liberation and advancement when it is provided with the aim of allowing the student to creatively apply the skills acquired, but it is a tool for enforcing sociocultural conformism when distributed selectively, or when granted to all but in ways meant to quash its creative application. See Kaestle, “The History of Literacy,” pp. 33–36.

The traditional education system resisted granting boys instruction in writing; this fact is perhaps further evidence of the attempt to prevent most students from creatively applying their literacy skills. This issue requires independent study; it is briefly treated below, Chapter 3.
56. This statement is based on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory about the “symbolic violence” applied in a school system serving the elite by conserving the existing social order. See Bourdieu and Pearson, Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture. One manifestation of such “symbolic violence” is the way “linguistic capital” is unequally distributed between different classes of a society. The unequal distribution of linguistic capital excludes entire classes from the circle of readers and writers and denies them a share in the “cultural capital.” See: Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power, Polity Press, Cambridge, U.K., 1991, pp. 43–116; 137–70. See also Chapter 3, note 5.

57. Abraham Uri Kovner, “Mendelssohn’s Era” (in Hebrew), Kol Kitvei Abraham Uri Kovner [Collected Writings of Abraham Uri Kovner], Mahbarot Lesifrut, Tel Aviv, 1947, p. 34.

58. Dan Miron, Bodedim Bemoadam [When Loners Come Together], Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1987, pp. 85–89.


60. See for example the manifesto David Frishman wrote for the periodical he edited: “Hador (Some Introductory Remarks)” (in Hebrew), Hador 1 (1901–1902), no. 1, p. 1.


63. For a distinction between diglossia and bilingualism see Joshua A. Fishman, “Bilingualism with and without Diglossia, Diglossia with and without Bilingualism,” Journal of Social Issues, 23 (1967), pp. 229–38. Fishman treats “diglossia” as a social concept denoting a diffusion of linguistic codes that serve complementary social functions. He treats bilingualism, by contrast, as an individual or psychological concept. Seen in light of this distinction, diglossia is to be studied through the fields of sociology and sociolinguistics, whereas bilingualism is a matter for the developing disciplines of psychology and psycholinguistics. One of the examples Fishman cites of a society in a state of diglossia and bilingualism is that of the male community in traditional Eastern European Jewish society. On the eve of World War I, Jewish men used Hebrew as a “high language” and Yiddish as a “low language”; in daily commerce with the surrounding local populations they increasingly employed the languages of these others. See Joshua A. Fishman, Language in Sociocultural Change, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, Calif., 1972, pp. 136–40; see also Joshua A. Fishman, “The Sociology of Yiddish,” in Never Say Die, Mouton Publishers, The Hague and Paris, 1981, pp. 1–21. Itamar Even-Zohar, “The Nature and Functionalization of the Language of Literature under Diglossia” (in Hebrew), Hasifrut 2 (1970), pp. 286–302.

64. On the functional approach to Hebrew, in which its use was limited to prayers and Torah study, and its replacement in the Haskalah by a secular, romantic approach that used Hebrew also for poetic purposes, see, for example, Immanuel Etkes, “The Question of the Forerunners of the Haskalah in Eastern Europe” (in Hebrew), Tarbiz, 57 (1988), p. 98.


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Russia] 1, Petersburg 1885, pp. 14–15. For more on the attitude of maskilim to Yiddish

67. See, for example, Papirna, New Decanter, Ancient Contents, pp. 50–51. In an article
on the Yiddish plays of Goldfadn, Papirna reviews the history of the attitude toward Yiddish,
and he notes that not only scholars but also “ordinary people” made efforts to write in the Holy Tongue,
whether they knew Hebrew or not. In his opinion, men were ashamed to write in Yiddish because it was a sign of boorishness. Papirna goes on to relate that both Michal Gordon and Gottlober wrote poems in Yiddish
which they did not publish because they were ashamed of publishing in “jargon.” By contrast, Ayzik Meyer Dik, and a few decades later also Abramovitch and Sholem Aleichem, published many works in Yiddish anonymously or pseudonymously. Papirna regards all of the above as indicative of the extent of revulsion at jargon. See: Abraham Yaakov Papirna, “The First Yiddish Drama and First Yiddish Performance—My Memoirs relating to A. Goldfadn 1840–1908” (in Yiddish), Der Pinkes, Vilner Farlag fun B. A. Klatzkin, 1913, p. 186.


69. On the use of Hebrew and Yiddish as a transitional phase and tool for russification,
see below, chapter 1, notes 73, 86–87.


72. Abramovitch, Eye of Justice, pp. 23–27.

73. Y. L. Binshtok relates that Mendele shifted to Yiddish in order to enlighten the masses, with the knowledge this would “diminish his honor.” See Yossi Sofer (Josef Klauzner), “Mendele’s Biography According to Y. L. Binshtok” (in Hebrew), Hashiloah 34 (1918), p. 27. Papirna favored Yiddish writing for purposes of russification. See: Papirna, New Decanter, Ancient Contents, p. 51. On the russifist views of authors such as Gottlober, Papirna, YaLaG and others see Israel Zinberg, A History of Jewish Literature 6, Yosef Shreberk and Sifriyat Hapoalim, Merhavia, Tel Aviv, 1960, pp. 96–100.


75. Ibid., 151.


82. Abramovitch, Natural History 3, p. xxxiv.

83. Abramovitch explicitly addresses these audiences further on; see, for example, Abramovitch, Eye of Justice, 23–27.

85. Abramovitch's *Fathers and Sons* was translated, as said, into Russian. Similarly, the Jewish newspapers in Russian regularly published works of literature, literary criticism, and diverse articles on contemporary issues; see Yehuda Slutsky, *Ha'itonut Hayehudit-Russit Bameah Hatsha-Esreh* [The Jewish-Russian Press in the Nineteenth Century], Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1970, pp. 95–101, 285–313.

86. On the fears that the russifists were weakening national ties; on Hebrew's significance as a means of conserving nationhood; and on condemnation of Kovner for having shifted to Russian composition, see, for example, Abraham Baer Gottlober, *Igeret Tzaar Baalei Hayim* [A Letter on the Cruelty to Animals], Zhitomir, 1868, pp. 10–11; and Shmuel Leib Tsitron, *Meorei Hapargod: Mumarim Bogdim Mitkhasidekim* [Behind the Curtain: Converts, Traitors and Renouncers], Vilna, 1924, pp. 86–87; Shmuel Tchernowitz, *Im Shlahar* [At Dawn], Hamadpis, Jerusalem, 1927, pp. 166–67.

87. YaLaG believed that Hebrew had died out as a spoken language thousands of years ago and that it was unsuited to modern life. In his opinion, the only solution for the languages problem was to have Russian Jews learn to speak Russian. Still, YaLaG claimed that russification would not keep Jews from remaining Jewish in their religion, just as their remaining religiously Jewish would not keep them from being Russian. See Michael Stanislavski, *For Whom Do I Toil?*, Oxford University Press., Oxford, 1988, p. 78. See also: Zinberg, *History of Jewish Literature* 6, p. 98.

88. According to Smolenskin, YaLaG held these opinions only for as long as he still resided in the "small and dark towns," but once he had moved to Petersburg and had met the assimilating Jews of the big cities, he recanted. In his view, in the big cities YaLaG "saw the enemy within, proud and ignorant, sneering at wisdom and their forefather's language, pluming themselves on their boorishness, who in showing contempt for their nation and faith and language believed they were accomplishing something great." Smolenskin attests that a similar process took place within himself too, and points to assimilationist threat in the ideas of the russifists. Cited by Breiman, "Introduction," *The Letters of Moshe Leib Lilienblum to Yehuda Leib Gordon*, pp. 23–23.

89. Sadan suggests a different account of the Haskalah authors' paradoxical decisions; see Dov Sadan, "Introductory Essay," (in Hebrew) in *Avrei Bedek* [Scrutiny Stones], pp. 14–15. See also the Introduction above.


92. In his book *Eye of Justice* Abramovitch seeks to present a "canon" of Jewish scientific works that would serve as a model for modern scientific literature in this language; see: Abramovitch, *Eye of Justice*, pp. 48–61. In the Foreword to *Natural History* Abramovitch makes a noticeable effort to point to the existence of an "internal" tradition of scientific literature, so as to provide legitimation for his book; see, for example, p. xvi. On the Haskalah opponents' negative attitude toward science see also Moshe Hacohen Proser, "Letters of Moshe Hacohen Proser to Y. L. Gordon" (in Hebrew), printed by S. Breiman, *He'avar* 11 (1964) p. 135 and n. 175. YaLaG laments the lack of a continuous tradition of belles lettres in Hebrew. In a general survey of Hebrew literature, published in Russian, YaLaG claims that since biblical times Jewish culture had not developed secular poetry worthy of the name, and works of poetry and secular literature were thought heretical. See Slutsky, *The Russian-Jewish Press*, pp. 97–98. A similar opinion was held by Papirna; see Parush, "The Criticism of Haskalah Rhetoric," pp. 228–30.

2. Gender Roles and Women’s “Window of Opportunity”

1. Mendele, “Bayamim Hahem” (in Hebrew) [In Those Days], *Collected Writings*, p. 298.


3. In “Bayamim Hahem” Mendele describes the practice of yeshiva students marrying “women of valor” as follows: “Customs agents, leaseholders and wealthy urbanites would take for their pretty and robust girls men from among the yeshiva students, outstanding scholars, faint and lightweight weaklings. These grooms, popularly called “silk-scholars,” ate at table with their in-laws, ate and drank and had children. And when the wheels of fortune turned and their source of influence and income was lost, the wives became women of valor: grocers, sales brokers, while the husbands were preoccupied with Torah and ritual. The women would provide for their husbands so as to receive in their future ‘world to come’ a share or a half or whatever was agreed on in their ‘conditions’ […] and so as to add to their savings account in the world to come, the doubly-adroit husband would leave his wife and children and exile himself to a place of Torah learning, would become an ascetic and labor at Torah!” Cf.: Mendele, “Bayamim Hahem,” *Collected Writings*, pp. 297–98.

Shlomo Zaltzman dedicates a whole chapter to the “women of valor,” called by the people “Cossacks.” See Shlomo Zaltzman, *Ayarati* [My Little Town], Massada, Tel Aviv, 1947, pp. 52–56.


11. For a striking illustration of a woman who worked twelve hours a day in a store even though her husband, who was not a Torah scholar, was involved in providing an
income, see Shmuel Kaufman, *Zichronot [Memoirs]*, Horzat Hamishpaha, Tel Aviv, 1955, p. 455. Kaufman’s sons relate that “when she [their mother] gained a house of her own and placed her neck under the yoke of breadwinning, bearing it shoulder to shoulder with Father, how pleased was she to hear Father’s voice as he awoke at dawn to his daily page of Talmud and to dedicate each Sabbath and Holiday to additional studies.” And see ibid., 439.


14. The rabbis were of the opinion that knowledge of the state language is hazardous for men as it is liable to lead to reading non-Jewish scientific works and to heresy; see, for example, Levin, *Social and Economic Values*, p. 34. Seen against this background, women’s fluency in foreign languages becomes doubly important. This issue will be treated in chapter 7.


18. On the centrality of demands that Jewish society be made more “productive” demands appearing both in the maskilic critique of traditional society and in the maskilic vision of the well-ordered society—see Levin, *Social and Economic Values*, pp. 7–10.


22. See, for example, Mendele the Bookseller, “Travels of Binyamin III” (in Hebrew), *Collected Writings*, pp. 63, 65–66, 71.

23. The same women are characterized with a great degree of empathy by author and literary critic Chava Shapira, who seeks to find echoes in Mendele of a similar empathic stance. See: Chava Shapira, “Types of Women in Mendele’s Stories,” (in Hebrew) *Hashiloah* 34 (1918), pp. 92–101.


29. In the lower classes women moved in at their husbands’ homes and were subject to their wills; among the clergy the couple sometimes joined the wife’s family; while women of the aristocratic class often were in a position similar to that of women in the lower classes, in that they too, despite their improved economic state, were entirely subject to their husbands’ will. See Barbara Engel Alpern, *Mothers and Daughters*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 8–10.

30. For a compelling account of a twelve-year-old girl—Kotik’s grandmother—who instructs her eleven-year-old husband and tries to make a man out of him, see *What I Have Seen*, p. 50–51.


32. A description that emphasizes the advantage the daughter had (even if unintended) in the framework of child-marriages may be found, for example, in the memoirs of Abraham Baer Gottlober, who at thirteen married a twelve-year-old bride. See: Gottlober, *Memoirs of My Childhood*, pp. 94–111; “A Mighty Tower Saves the King,” *Memoirs and Travels 2*, p. 128; “My Brother, My People,” ibid., 136–41.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 108.


37. Ibid., 77.

38. Ibid., 78.

39. Ibid., 90.

40. Ibid., 94–95.

41. Ibid., 97–104.

42. Ibid., 107. Ginzburg’s story is far from being the only case that suggests that in Eastern European Jewish society of the period a man’s domination of his wife was not to be taken for granted. Indications of such power struggles and battles of the sexes may be found in the folk beliefs and practices associated with the marriage ceremony as documented by contemporaries. Gottlober, for example, tells of the existence of a belief that whichever of the couple first treads on the other’s foot will be the dominant one later in life. A custom deriving from this belief was that under the marriage canopy, immediately after the ceremony “the bride steps with her heel on the groom’s foot, so that she will be the one to control him.” Gottlober, *Memoirs of My Childhood*, p. 104. Yechezkel Kotik also speaks of this custom in his memoirs and tells of a related one: “When we stood under the wedding canopy I felt that the bride was stepping on my foot, and it never occurred to me that this was deliberate. Immediately after the ceremony her family members rushed to carry her off and led her home, so that she would enter it first, before me. They very much believed those things, then. The bride or groom—whichever upon leaving the wedding canopy would first tread on the doorsill of the home, would have control over the other. Yet Aryeh Leib and the rest of my family, who weren’t the sort to give in easily, started running even faster so that I would be the one to go in first. The bride and her relatives weren’t prepared to give up ‘dominion’ and so a great race broke out, Heaven help us.” (Kotik, *What I Have Seen*, p. 327.)

A similar story appears also in the memoirs of Miriam Shomer Zunser, the daughter of Nahum Meir Shaikewitch (Shomer). In her book, she tells of the race between her mother, her father, and their family to the threshold of the inn where their marriage was being held, and she describes the big fight that broke out between her grandmother on her father’s side and her mother’s family over the grandmother’s refusal to accept the dominion of the bride who was younger than her son. According to Zunser, this fight was one of the causes of the strained relations between the two women. See Miriam Shomer Zunser, *Yesterday*, Stackpole Sons, New York, 1939,
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44. Israel Bartal reaches similar conclusions on the basis of an analysis of the attitudes of the maskilim to conjugal life and male-female relations; see Israel Bartal, “‘Potency’ and ‘Impotence’—between Tradition and Haskalah” (in Hebrew), in *Eros: Erusim Veisurim* [Sexuality and the Family in History], Israel Bartal and Ishaiah Gafni (eds.), Zalman Shazar Center, Jerusalem, 1998, pp. 225–227.


48. Despite the lack of sensitivity Gottlober shows in his account of the women’s experiences, it is not to be ignored that he condemns the custom in which the mother of the bride spreads open the blood-stained dress of her daughter before an assembly to prove she had been married a virgin. In his words, “like the blaze of the double-edged sword guarding the gates to the garden in Eden was this custom for many virgins.” Gottlober welcomes the gradual eradication of this custom following the girls’ rebellion against it; see Gottlober, p. 106.

49. This analysis of the interplay between the women and the *badkhan* is not to be seen as disregarding the fact that the wedding day was a day of fasting analogized to *Tov Kippur*—the Day of Judgment—nor does it disregard the traditional role of the *badkhan* in the “Bazetzn” song, which was to sing moralistic verses before the wedding ceremony (“Musar-zogn”) in the ears of the bride (and the groom!) and to thus encourage them to repent. See Ariela Krasney, *Habadkhan* [The Jester], Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 1998, pp. 17–20, 75–83, 127, 133–156, 166–168, 170–173, 197–198. For our purposes, the significance of accounts such as those of Gottlober and Buki Ben Yogli has to do with the manner in which these writers interpret the weeping of the women. From their commentary it appears that they thought both the bride and the women used this occasion to give voice to anxieties and difficulties not necessarily associated with the status of the wedding day as one of purification and repentance. On the weeping of women during the hair-cutting ceremony see Yitzhak Rivkind, “From the Notebook of a Cantor and a Jester” (in Hebrew), in *Minhah Leyehuda* [Judah’s Gift], Rabbi Kook Institute, Jerusalem, 1950, pp. 241–44.


51. For an illustration of the tension between a young groom and his mother-in-law, see, for example, Shaikevitch, *Shomer’s Poems and Memoirs*, p. 62. For more on this subject see Shmuel Werses, “The Autobiography in the Haskalah Period” (in Hebrew), in *Trends and Forms in Haskalah Literature*, pp. 249–260.

52. Puah Rakovsky, *Lo Niehnati* [I Didn’t Give In], David Kallai (tr.), Twersky, Tel Aviv, 1961, p. 22.

53. Ibid., 27–28.

54. Ibid., 29–30.

55. Ibid., 32–33.

56. Ibid., 33–35.

57. Ibid., 34–35.

58. Ibid., 46–60.
3. The Benefit of Marginality: Gender Differences in the Traditional Education System


2. See Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, pp. 92–93; Gottlober, Memoirs of My Childhood, pp. 84, 88, 91. For a moving account of “near failure” in such an examination see Kaufman, Memoirs, p. 33.

3. Hinde Bergner, Beleilot Hahoref Haarukim [In the Long Winter Nights] (Hebrew translation by Aryeh Aharoni), Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1982, pp. 30–31. It is worth noting that women were customarily tested also by having to unravel knotted spools of thread, so as to literally try their patience. See, for example, Zaltzman, My Little Town, pp. 66.

4. As Daniel Boyarin has shown, in Jewish society the exclusion of women from Torah study played the role that in other patriarchal cultures was served by their exclusion from economic activity. See Boyarin, Unheroic Conduct, pp. 153.

5. According to Pierre Bourdieu’s approach, other, immaterial forms of “capital” exist alongside economic and material assets: “cultural capital,” “symbolic capital” and “social capital.” Just as with economic capital, these other types of capital are “commerciable” and their possession endows their bearers with status, power, and profit. Cultural capital can be sustained in three forms: (A) in habits and practices of body and soul of long duration, those which become culturally ingrained and integral to the personality. (B) in cultural goods (e.g., artwork, books, dictionaries, machines). (C) in institutions, where recognition—academic or otherwise—objectifies and assigns value to a given society’s cultural capital. See Pierre Bourdieu, The Forms of Capital,” in John J. Richardson (ed.), Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education, Greenwood, New York 1986, pp. 243–48.

Mastery of the respected, classical, grammatical written language is a necessary prerequisite for access to cultural capital; it functions therefore as “linguistic capital.” Like cultural capital, it is unequally distributed in society. See John Guillory, Cultural Capital—The Problem of Literary Canon Formation, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, pp. viii–x, 55–71, 77–82.

Guillory stresses that the various forms of “cultural capital” are determined within the general framework of a defined social structure. These forms of capital and the value assigned to each are constantly subject both to confirmation and challenge.

In his opinion, the social framework has a variety of distinct groups contained within it, each having a different status in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, or nationality, and these groups tend to challenge the value the society conventionally assigns to the various types of “cultural capital.” See Guillory, Cultural Capital, pp. 59–61.

6. See also: Boyarin, Unheroic Conduct, p. 179.

7. In his article, “Gender Differentiation,” pp. 62–87, Stamppfer dwells on the differences between the education of boys and of girls in the traditional educational system. As will become clear below, where these differences are described, their import and implications are other, in my opinion, than Stamppfer suggests.

8. About the difference in prestige between “study” and “reading, Shmuel Niger says this: “‘Reading’ was of merely light and inferior women’s books or fairy tales: Mother read the Tsina U’reina [...] whereas Father would study a page of the Talmud or a chapter of Mishnah.” See Shmuel Niger, Habikoret Uvaayoteha [Criticism and Its Problems] (Hebrew translation by D. Linevski-Niv), Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1957, p. 9. See also below, Chapter 6.

9. In several articles, Chava Weissler compares men’s prayers to women’s tekines. See, for example, Chava Weissler, “Prayers in Yiddish and the Religious World of Ashkenazic
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In this context it is worth noting that even with regard to the donation of alms, men operated in the public sphere and women in the domestic one. Men gave their alms in the synagogue while women put coins in the alms-box in their homes. See Stampfer, “Gender Differentiation,” pp. 71–72.

In her book on her father, Sholem Aleichem, Marie Waife-Goldberg gives an indication of the contemporary ideal of “feminine” beauty in the course of depicting her grandmother: “Babushka I remember as an attractive woman, tall and slender, perhaps too thin for the tastes of those days, when plumpness was the mark of beauty.” See Marie Waife-Goldberg, Art Sholem Aleichem [My Father Sholem Aleichem] (Ruth Shapiro, tr.), Sifriyat Hapoalim, Merhavia and Tel Aviv, 1972, p. 57. See also Bergner, In the Long Winter Nights, p. 39. In the course of describing his brother’s bride, Shmuel Kaufman suggests what an ugly woman was in the concepts of the period; he describes her as “darkish, greenish and thin.” Cf. Kaufman, Memoirs, p. 17. Kaufman suggests a picture of the “masculine” ideal of beauty when describing his own appearance as a groom: “At the time I looked like a princely groom: my face was clear and pale (like all the youths studying Talmud, as Torah study enfeebles them), yet a rosy color plays across it; my earlocks were long and twisty” (p. 29). See also Yehiel Yeshaiha Trunk, Polin, Zichronot Utmunot [Poland, Memories and Scenes] (Ezra Fleischer, tr.), Sifriyat Hapoalim and Wainfer-Morgenstern Foundation, Merhavia, 1962, p. 52. Trunk tells also of a sturdily built Jew who felt uncomfortable with his gentle body and “was tormented by his gentle burliness as if he had been possessed by a Dybbuk, heaven forbid.” This boy envied the pale and sickly boys, and used to fast and make himself ill in an effort to resemble them; (see Trunk, Poland, Memories, pp. 115–16). A curious description of a yeshiva student embodying a mix of the “masculine” and “feminine” ideals of beauty is cited by Y. S. Weiss: “Alter the yeshiva boy [. . .] was then a youth of eighteen, with straw-colored [hair and] blue eyes, a white and delicate face and full red lips, like the lips of a beautiful girl, upon which constantly a light smile flickered gently.” Cf. Y. S. Weis (Yehoshem Halivni), Tiltulei Gever [Man’s Trials] (n.p.), Tel Aviv, 1931, p. 5.


12. Stampfer isn’t claiming that Jewish society was fully able to achieve the desired harmonistic balance and to entirely relieve the frustrations of its sons and daughters. He describes women who envied men’s education and were far from content with the female cultural sphere, just as he cites an example of a young man kept from learning to write, who envied the girls who were permitted to do so. See Stampfer, “Gender Differentiation,” pp. 75–76, as well as p. 65. For more on this topic, see below, Chapter 6.

13. See, for example, Boyarin, Unheroic Conduct, pp. 151–54.


15. Yoram Bilu, “From Circumcision to the Word: A Psycho-Cultural Analysis of the Construction of Male Identity through Childhood Rites in Orthodox Society,” (in
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17. Ibid., 68.
18. Chapter Nine, “Hebrew—Man's Apparatus or Woman's Apparel?,” is devoted to this topic.
21. This topic is extensively treated in Chapter 8. On how Hebrew vs. Yiddish are thought of as male vs. female, see also Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, p. 37; Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven*, pp. 1–39.
22. Yehuda Leib Gordon, “For Whom Do I Labor?” *Kol Kitvei Y. L. Gordon* [Collected Writings of Yehuda Leib Gordon (Poetry)], Dvir, Tel Aviv, 1957, p. 27.
24. An especially agonizing account of brutality in the heder appears in Yehuda Leib Levin’s autobiography, where he tells of how his brother died as a result of beatings received in the heder: “When I was four years old my older brother died, at the age of six. And this brother of mine did not die the way anyone dies, but rather was put to death by his instructor Reb Feibish, who got angry at my brother for his difficulty in following the instruction and slapped him once or twice on the cheek and as he continued to strike him his blood boiled more and more and he grabbed a wooden bar and struck my brother on his head, who then collapsed in a pool of blood and was brought from the heder to my parents’ house where he died two days later.” See YaHLeL, *Memoirs and Essays*, p. 37. Yechezkel Kotik likewise describes a death in the heder run by instructor “David the Scruffy,” who would “lift a child up high and angrily throw him down, till he would drop as dead.” Kotik also condemns the parents who allowed this instructor to keep his post. See Kotik, *What I Have Seen*, p. 130. These accounts by YaHLeL and Kotik are extreme in their severity. Yet writers like Shmuel Kaufman, who fondly collects his teacher Reb Hayim Yosl “of the laughing face,” also describe instances of severe brutality involving the other heder instructors. When he was fourteen, Kaufman was transferred to an instructor “who would beat anyone within reach of his hand and his stick […] and then would order the pupil to strip off his clothes and stand naked before him, striking his naked flesh until blood would flow.” See Kaufman, *Memoirs*, pp. 7, 20. One may say, accordingly, that many of the maskilim’s accounts of the heder stress the harsh conditions, the brutality, the boredom in rote instruction, the ignorance of the instructors. Cf. Gottlober, *Memoirs of my Childhood*, pp. 66–69. It should be noted that Zvi Hirsch Halevi Klop of the Lifshitz family, who takes a fundamentally anti-maskilic point of view in his *Memoirs*, also does not deny the existence of violence and brutality in the heder. On the one hand he affirms that “the charges against the hederes are overstated and not much child abuse occurs in them”; on the other hand, he claims that “in the Gymnasium too and in all the government-approved schools, pupils are reprimanded with rods.
[... ] And it should not be shocking therefore if in their heders too the instructors reprimand pupils with straps.” See Zvi Hirsch Halevi Klop of the Lifshitz family, *Midor Ledor* [From Era to Era], N. Sokolow Press, Warsaw, 1901, pp 63, 75. An attempt at a balanced account, apologetic at times, of heder education may be found in Eliezer Meir Lifshitz, “The Heder,” pp. 294–352.


26. There were, in the heder, cases of brutality toward girls, but these were extremely rare. Hinde Bergner tells of an especially cruel instructor: “The girls too he would beat [...]. He would pull down his sleeve so as to cover his hand and would beat the girl on her skirt, on her behind. Not with the exposed hand and not on the exposed body.” Bergner tells about one time when this instructor beat his regular victim, the child Berl Kuperstein: “I can’t understand how parents, a mother and father, could let their child, their own flesh and blood, suffer so. [...] Each day the instructor would lay him across the desk, pull his shirt out from his pants—for the boy wore long trousers—dip the rod in salt water, and beat him so hard that even today, when I tell about it, tears come to my eyes. Often he would do a ‘combo’—that is, lay him down on the desk, pull up his shirt to the neck, stick in filthy rags, tie the shirt around the neck so that it would look like a hunchback, put a broomstick in his hand, smear the boy’s pretty pink face with charcoal, and leave him standing thus until nightfall, without food or drink. All the children believed that this boy, Berl Kuperstein, did nothing wrong. [...].” See Bergner, *In the Long Winter Nights*, p. 66.

27. See Stampfer, “Gender Differentiation,” p. 73.

28. Ahad Ha’am, *Pirkei Zichronot Veigrot* [Selected Memoirs and Correspondence]. Beit Ahad Ha’am, Tel Aviv, 1931, pp. 1–2. In an autobiographical letter to A. Luria, YaLaG relates that only when he reached fourteen years of age did he begin in secret to study reading and writing in foreign languages. Later in life he felt that he had to fill in the gap: “And I hurried to repair what others had corrupted and to complete that which they had left undone and I gathered my strength to thoroughly study the grammar of the Hebrew Tongue as well as the languages of Russian, Polish, German and French [...] all this alone, with none by my side, neither teacher nor master nor any sort of guide, and I wandered like a migratory bird.” Cf. Yehuda Leib Gordon, *Igrot Yehudah Leib Gordon* [Letters of Yehuda Leib Gordon] 1 (Yaakov Weisberg, ed.), Shulberg Bros. Press, Warsaw, 1894, Letter 44, p. 82.

29. Buki Ben Yogli, for instance, tells of his rebellion against “the wild idea of considering study of the Holy Scriptures as a sin and a heresy,” adding: “I never ceased from studying the Holy writings, and whatever I could not do openly I did in secret in my sister’s home.” Cf. *What My Eyes Saw and My Ears Heard*, pp. 56–57. Elyahu Eliezer Friedman provides a humorous anecdote in his memoirs illustrating the hostile attitude toward Bible and Hebrew: “My grandfather did not let us study Bible nor the Hebrew Tongue either. I recall one time after numerous entreaties my grandfather permitted me to study a ‘kosher’ grammar book: *Tsohar Hateivah*. And it happened that as I began to peruse the book a piece of a cigarette rolled out and came into my hands. My grandfather saw this and said, sin follows sin in train, you take hold of a grammar book and already have a cigarette in hand! Thus ended my studies in grammar.” Cf. Elyahu Eliezer Friedman, *Sefer Hazichronot* [Book of Memoirs], Tel Aviv, 1926, pp. 50–51. Friedman also says in this context: “As was customary at the time, my grandfather did not permit me to study Bible and grammar. When I once told him that ‘Still I have to know the Hebrew Tongue!’ he replied, and I quote, ‘You are going to be a Jewish Rabbi, and a great Rabbi has no need to know the Tongue of Hebrew’” (ibid., 103).
35. Yehuda Leib Gordon, Kol Kitvei Yehuda Leib Gordon: Prozah [Collected Writings of Yehuda Leib Gordon: Prose], Dvir, Tel Aviv, 1960, p. 275. In order to give a sense of how widespread the ignorance of grammar is in much of this country, even among some of its prominent figures, RIBaL relates a humorous incident concerning “one especially famous divine” who could not distinguish among genders in the language. In the Sabbath after Purim “after having abandoned the corporeal as was his wont, and entering a state of great ecstasy,” he sought to convey words of wisdom for his disciples and began by taking on an issue from the readings of the day, that is, from the Book of Esther, and said: ‘A great mystery have I found in this Book, although none of the interpreters or the recognized commentators has noticed it: Why is it that when the reference is to [King] Ahasuerus, it is written “vayomer” [and he said] with a Yod [a ‘y’], whereas in referring to [Queen] Esther it is written “vatomar” [and she said], with a Tav [a “t”]? (And great indeed is the wonder of it, for so it is throughout the Book!) And he said there were deep reasons for this which derived from secret knowledge yet he did not wish to disclose them to us as the present Age did not sufficiently merit it; however by way of hints he explained that the yud of vayomer and the tav of vatomar indicate the building of the Holy Temple which had stood tav plus yud years.” Relatedly, RIBaL adds: “And not long ago a fellow showed me the latest book of one divine who writes that whoever studies grammar is without a doubt a pimp, for reasons known to those with knowledge of secrets, so he said, and surely that divine had considerable knowledge of grammar and ought to be believed for no one is so wise as one who speaks from experience.” See Isaac Baer Levinsohn, Teudah Beisrael [Testimony in Israel], Warsaw, 1879, p. 22, n.2. Mendele weaves this same story into his Be’emek Habacha [Through the Vale of Tears]. This time Bentzie, one of the novel’s characters, suggests his resolution of this “mystery,” and when Rafael informs him that “vayomer is in the masculine form, vatomar in the feminine form,” Bentzie furiously retorts: “feminine form I know not of! Speech in the masculine and feminine is known only to Jewish criminals, a curse be upon them.” See Mendele, Collected Writings, p. 194.
37. Aharon Ben Shmuel in his collection of tkhines, and Yosef Ben Yakar in his translation of the prayerbook, affirmed that one is allowed and even commanded to pray in one’s mother tongue rather than in the Holy Tongue when this is not comprehended.
See Niger, *Yiddish Literature—and the Female Reader*, p. 111. On the hostile reaction of the rabbis who viewed granting such “permissions” to men as a “kind of reform,” see ibid., 95.

38. On the linguistic changes that rendered the Eastern European diction of the *Tzina Ur'eina* closer to the spoken language, see Chone Shmeruk, “Eastern European Versions of the *Tzina Ur'eina,*” (in Hebrew), *Sifrut Yiddish Bepolin* [Yiddish Literature in Poland, Historical Studies and Perspectives], Jerusalem, 1981, pp. 153–55, 158–59 and 162–64. The maskilim sought to take advantage of the popularity of the *Tzina Ur'eina* and of the fact that its language was understood by the masses. In the 1840s in Eastern Europe, maskilic versions began to appear that “purified” and “improved” the text to make it correspond to maskilic points of view; see *Yiddish Literature*, pp. 159–64. For an account of the revisions introduced to a manuscript of a Western European maskilic version of the *Tzina Ur'eina* and an analysis of the ideology behind the changes, see Chava Turniansky, “A Haskalah Interpretation of the *Tzina Ur'eina*” (in Hebrew), *Hasifrut* 2 (1971), pp. 835–41.


42. For a list of women composers of *tkhines* see Niger, “Yiddish Literature—and the Female Reader,” pp. 131–34. In her scholarship, Chava Weissler remarks on the difficulty of identifying the authors of the *tkhines*, as many *tkhines* were published anonymously. See “The Religion of Traditional Ashkenazic Women,” p. 73. According to Weissler, some of the *tkhines* that became popular in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were composed or revised by women. See Weissler, “Prayers in Yiddish,” p. 161. See also Chava Weissler, “Women’s Studies and Women’s Prayers: Reconstructing the Religious History of Ashkenazic Women,” *Jewish Social Studies* I (new series) (1995), p. 31. Weissler remarks that the collections of *tkhines* definitively known to have been written by women, such as those by Sarah Bat Tovim and by Sarah Rebecca Rachel Leah Horowitz, for example, contain richly autobiographical sections which deeply intensify the sense of intimacy they provide. See Chava Weissler, “‘For the Human Soul Is the Lamp of the Lord’: The *tkhine* for ‘Laying Wicks’ by Sarah bas Tovim,” *Polin* 10 (1997), pp. 40–49; Weissler, “The Traditional Piety,” p. 296, n. 5. About how popular these *tkhines* were, see Weissler, “Prayers in Yiddish,” p. 174.

43. Weissler shows in her scholarship that what characterized the Eastern European supplication anthologies was a limited repertoire of subjects on the one hand and a large number of individual voices on the other. In her opinion, because there were so many women writers of such *tkhines*, the heightened emphasis of issues that preoccupy women is discernible. Besides *tkhines* concerning holidays and commandments that apply to women, there are also *tkhines* dealing with earning a living and other topics of concern to women; see “Prayers in Yiddish,” pp. 168–69. On liberties the publishers took in altering the order of the *tkhines*, see Weissler, “For the Human Soul,” pp. 42–43. On “phony” *tkhines* written by maskilim, see Weissler, “The Traditional Piety,” p. 269; Stampfer, “Gender Differentiation,” p. 71.

44. Unlike Niger’s scholarship, Weissler’s work focuses on reconstructing the religious life and spiritual world of Eastern Europe’s traditional women by attempting to uncover in the *tkhines* evidence of the formation of a religious culture of women distinguishable from the popular religion, a culture that would have echoes of the religious world of the male elite. Weissler looks in the *tkhines* for practices or expressions of devotion or emotion that go beyond the private sphere of women and spill over into the
public sphere—as, for instance, in the measurement of graves in the public sphere of the graveyard and the formation of candles from the measurement wicks, or by pursuing the Kabbalist/mystical elements in those tkhines expressing Messianic yearnings. Consequently, Weissler dwells on links to mystical and Kabbalist texts, especially the Book of Zohar, in the tkhines of Sarah Bat Tovim and of Sarah Rebecca Rachel Leah Horowitz. Weissler also highlights Horowitz’s criticism of women’s tendency to pray for their own personal affairs rather than lamenting the exile of the Divine Presence [Shekhinah]. Unlike Weissler’s scholarship, our inquiry here concentrates on the tkhines’ mundane and prosaic aspects, such as the ones Niger presents in his article.

46. Ibid., 111.
47. Ibid., 125.
48. Ibid., 126.


50. Niger’s article supports this claim. Toward the end of the article Niger reviews the special bond between the reading women and Yiddish maskilic authors such as Dik and Shomer. Niger stresses the naturalness with which women shifted from reading religious devotional literature to reading secular and maskilic literature. See: Niger, “Yiddish Literature—and the Female Reader,” pp. 129–31.
51. This subject will be extensively explored in Chapter 5, “The Reading-Biography of Men.”

52. See for example, Kotik, What I Have Seen, p. 131, and ibid., n.134. Zvi Hirsch Halevi Klop of the Lifshitz family likewise writes, “The broad masses does not know how to write. […] And only in one house in ten may a writing implement be found”; see Klop Lifshitz, From Era to Era, p. 38. In a letter sent by Simhah Pinsker to Shmuel Yosef Fuenn (Summer 1855), Pinsker wrote: “A helper I have not even for copying out a few lines, for a youth familiar with the nature of Hebrew script is dear indeed in this town.” See Zalkin, The Jewish Enlightenment in Russia, p. 205.
55. Ben-Zion Katz, Al Itonim Va’anashim [Of Newspapers and People], Tcherik-over, Tel Aviv, 1983, p. 11. See also Zaltzman, My Little Town, pp. 51–52. On the notion that a girl’s ability to write is an asset for matchmaking purposes see Shlomo Zaltzman, Min He’avar [Out of the Past], printed by the author, Tel Aviv, 1944, p. 61.

57. See below, Chapters 6 and 7.

58. See: Rachel Feigenberg, *Megilat Dubovo* [Dubovo’s Scroll], Tel Aviv, 1940, p. 11.

4. “A Woman Prides Herself on Cooing and Prattling in French and German”: The Secular Education of Women


2. For interpretations that suggest “a certain intellectual inferiority of women” see Ellinson, *Women and the Mitzvot* 1, p. 149.

3. On the fashion that spread among the wealthy to teach girls French, music playing, and dance, on the advantage of a girl with such training on the “matchmaking market” and on the approach to girls’ education as ornament, see, for example, A. Zeidler, “Regarding Women’s Education” (in Russian), *Rassvet* 40 (1861), pp. 638–39; see also Krieze, *Russian-Language Jewish Schools*, pp. 117–18.

4. See: Shalom Yaakov Abramovitch, “To My Clever Comrades,” (in Hebrew), *Hamelitz* 3, no. 8 (1863), p. 120. The source of the negative connotations of the phrase “coo and prattle” is the Bible (Isaiah 8:19), the Talmud (Sotah 12:b), and Rashi’s commentary on the biblical passage: “The cooers and prattlers [...] is a derogatory expression, as they prattle like cranes and coo like pigeons, sounding noises from their throats without knowing what they say.”

5. YaLaG, for example, asked his friend Miriam Markel Mozesohn to help him find a tutor for his daughters: “She may be Jewish or Christian, Russian or a Russian-speaking German.” See Yehuda Leib Gordon, *Tzvor Igrot Yalag el Miryam Markel-Mozessohn* [Selected Letters by YaLaG to Miriam Markel-Mozesohn], Darom, Jerusalem, 1937, p. 16. YaLaG also addresses his friend Moshe Proser and tells him that he would be glad to hire a teacher for his daughters “if she knows how to teach the French language and Music [...] if she is fluent in Russian, if she herself raises daughters like those in the lands around and can train girls in proper morals and modesty and how to interact with others [...] she can be of the faith or not of the faith. See Yehuda Leib Gordon, *Letters of Yehuda Leib Gordon* 1, Letter 72, p. 134.

6. A. Zeidler, for example, is of this opinion. In his view upper-class girls study French and music playing so as to find a good match, just as they dress themselves up in fancy clothing and wear diamonds. In the end they neglect their children and make their husbands miserable. See Zeidler, “Regarding Women’s Education,” pp. 368–69.

7. One such newly rich person is described by Papirna as one Mr. N., who was graced by a visit from Mandelstam in the course of an effort to enlist the Jews to financially assist the rabbinical academy in Zhitomir. “This N. was what the French call a *parvenu*—a commoner who suddenly became rich, and whose newfound wealth transformed him into a ‘German’—viz., a figure enlightened by the aid of the barber’s razor and the tailor’s scissors.” [...] When Mandelstam beheld Mr. N’s fancy house and his expensive furniture, his daughters playing tunes on the piano, his sons wearing Gymnasia uniform, the gilt-edged albums with copies of the paintings in the Dresden gallery on his tabletop and busts of Schiller and Goethe on marble columns in the corners of his house—he imagined he was dealing with an enlightened man.” See Papirna, “Memoirs and Rumors,” (in Hebrew), *Collected Writings*, pp. 318–19.
8. Shmuel Feiner takes a different view. Feiner holds that the reservations the maskilim had about modern and educated women may serve as a case study illustrating their attitudes toward modernization in general; see Feiner, “The Modern Jewish Woman,” pp. 479–84. It should be noted that one must distinguish here between educated women who knew Hebrew and those who learned *Laaz*. The question of the attitude toward the women who knew Hebrew is different and more complex; it is taken up below in Chapters 8 and 9.

9. Margaliot characterizes such rabbis as “District rabbis [. . . ] trained in the government mold,” who were supposed to “implement what [the State] saw as positive in the civic life of the Jews, and therefore these rabbis had to wield the Jewish faith as a weapon for altering the condition of the Jewish people.” See Menashe Margaliot, *Dor Halhashalah Berusiah* [*The Haskalah Era in Russia*] (Y. S., tr.), Biblioteka Hed Hazman, Vilna, 1900, pp. 102–3. On the same subject see Azriel Shohat, “The Institution of State-Appointed Rabbis” (in Hebrew), Haifa University, Haifa, 1976; Immanuel Etkes, “‘Compulsory Enlightenment’ as a Crossroad in the History of the Haskalah Movement in Russia” (in Hebrew), *Zion* 43 (1978) pp. 264–313.

10. Margaliot, *The Haskalah Era in Russia*, pp. 105–7; Margaliot’s book is abridged and censored by the translator. The translator’s negative comments appearing throughout the book attribute to Margaliot excessive maskilic tendencies that prevent him from objectively treating the history of education. In the book, and in the passage from it cited here, Margaliot’s apologetic stance is very evident, typical of maskilic texts in Russian. Margaliot worries that the Russian authorities may draw negative conclusions about Jewish beliefs and laws; he takes care to stress that it was due to an incorrect understanding of Rabbi Eliezer’s dictum that the widespread, mistaken belief about girls’ education had taken hold.


13. Despite these statements by YaLaG, the haredim fought him over the establishment of the school for girls and spread rumors that he was preaching heresy and forcing his students to write on the Sabbath. This accusation had a special significance in the 1860s, given the agreement reached in this period between the Jews and the State authorities according to which Jews would not be obligated to write on the Sabbath. P. S. Marek, “The Struggle Between Two Educations.” From “The History of Jewish Enlightenment in Russia 1864–1873” (in Russian), *Perezhitei* 1 (1908), pp. 119–20. On the same subject see also Ben Hillel Hacohen, *Once*, pp. 207–8.

14. Some six years before the establishment of the school run by YaLaG, Avraham Yaakov Bruk-Brezovsky made the identical argument in an address on the occasion of the opening of a pension for Jewish girls in Kherson. Bruk claimed that, once fluent in Russian, educated girls would be able to uproot defective jargon; hence the special importance of educating girls. Nonetheless, Bruk also stresses the importance of girls studying to read and write in Hebrew and the importance of learning “God’s Law” (catechism) alongside secular topics including Russian, German, arithmetic, handwriting,
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and crafts. See “From the Speech Delivered by the Supervisor of the Jewish Girls Pension in Kherson, at the Ceremonial Session on 12 September of This Year” (in Russian), Sion 20 (1861), p. 321.


16. See also: Krieze, Russian-Language Jewish Schools, p. 118.


20. Ibid., 79.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.; see also Krieze, Russian-Language Jewish Schools, pp. 5, 23–24.

23. See, for example, Krieze, Russian-Language Jewish Schools, 43.

24. On the school for girls in Lodz, see Scharfstein, History of Jewish Education 1, p. 249.

25. Ibid., 261–86.


27. About this affair see, for example, Papirna, “Memoirs and Rumors,” Collected Writings, pp. 299–304. The detailed and recent findings in Krieze’s scholarship confirm that until the 1840s the maskilim had managed to establish only a very small number of secular schools for Jews in Russia. For the figures see: Krieze, Russian-Language Jewish Schools, pp. 15–23. See also: Margaliot, The Haskalah Era In Russia; Papirna, Collected Writings, p. 299–104; Katzenelson, Hamitomab Haisfruit Bein Habaredim Vehamaskilim, pp. 14–20; Proser, “Moshe Poser’s Letters to Y. L. Gordon,” p. 183, n.67.


29. Krieze, Russian-Language Jewish Schools, pp. 23–24. Krieze notes that the school for girls administered by S. Perl was, up to the 1840s, the sole modern school in Vilna; only in 1841 were two schools for boys established in Vilna, and these faced fierce resistance. See, for example, Krieze, p. 24.

30. See Zvi Halevi, Jewish Schools under Czarism and Communism, Springer Publishing Company, New York, 1976, pp. 8, 26. According to Halevi’s data, in 1865 throughout Russia there were 199 Jews in Russian schools, Gymnasiads and Pro-gymnasiads; in 1863 there were 95 pupils and in 1873 there were 2,362 students in high schools for boys. See Jewish Schools, p. 60.

31. For the various periods in the history of the Russian Jews and the different kinds of schools that served them see Levitats, The Jewish Community in Russia, p. 45–48. On the success of the schools for girls—as opposed to the disruptions in the schools for boys during the reign of Alexander II (1859–1873) — and on the methods used to sabotage the schools for boys, see Levitats, pp. 47, 50–53. On the same phenomenon in the years 1870–1881, see Scharfstein, History of Jewish Education A, p. 308; Rabinowitz, “History of the Education and Enlightenment,” p. 352.

32. See Simon Krieze, “Private Jewish Schools: A Factor of Russification or of Jewish Conservatism?” (in Hebrew), in Education and History, Rivka Feldhay and Immanuel Etkes (eds.), the Zalman Shazar Center, Jerusalem, 1999, p. 287. For statements favoring Alexander II see, for example, Abraha Baer Gottlober, “On the Question of
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Education” (in Hebrew), Hamelitz 1 (1860), pp. 502–5; Shalom Yaakov Abramovitch (untitled), Hamaggid 3 (1859), p. 174. Conversely, Shmuel Kaufman tells in his memoirs about strong charges made by a friend of his father’s “of the old generation” against Alexander II: “Alexander II, cursed be his name, for all his being a philosopher-king [. . .] was harsh and his decrees were harsher than his father’s, for he was like Laban the Aramite and Haman ben Hamdata, who tried to “uproot it all.” See Kaufman, Memoirs, p. 45.

35. According to Krieze’s research, in the 1860s in Gordno, for example, “The haredi circles in town were opposed not only to the school for boys but also the school for girls, yet while the school for boys was shut down the school for girls survived.” Krieze, Russian-Language Jewish Schools, p. 120. For more on the opposition to schools for boys see pp. 109–10 of the same work.
37. Ibid., 29.
38. Ibid.
41. Ibid., p. 32.
42. Buki Ben Yogli, What My Eyes Saw and My Ears Heard, pp. 28–43.
46. For the influence of debates over the “women’s question” conducted in Russian society on maskilim’s perspectives, see Feiner, “The Modern Jewish Woman,” pp. 467–73.
47. Papirna, Collected Writings, p. 50. Most of the “categories of female” in Rabbi Y. Cohen-Tzedek’s list are titles of the sections of the Talmud that deal with them.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., pp. 50–51.
50. This is not to say that Papirna did not take an interest in the advancement of women for their own sake. In 1901 he published an article in Hatzfarah titled, “For the Reform of Jewish Girls” (in Hebrew), in which he severely condemned the rabbinical attitude toward women and declared: “They are our own flesh and blood! And we must take care to make them happy, not to let them be robbed and plundered by criminals and cheats, who use them like dirt and drive them out of their right minds and right faith!” Papirna, “For the Reform of Jewish Girls,” Hatzfarah 28 (1901), pp. 279–81.
51. S. Perl also held that granting girls an education is a prerequisite for propagating the Haskalah among men. See Krieze, Russian-Language Jewish Schools, pp. 29–30. For more on this subject, see Parush, “The Criticism of Haskalah Rhetoric,” pp. 216–22.
53. Shalom Yaakov Abramovitch, “What Are We?” (in Hebrew), Hashahar 6 (1875), no. 9, pp. 464–85, 526–35
55. Rabinowitz, “The History of the Education and Enlightenment of Russian Jews,” p. 352. These schools and others established in the 1860s are mentioned in Postels’s formal report, which covers 26 private schools for Jewish girls. According to this report, published in Hakarmel, 83 girls were taught in the school administered by Funt; the school administered by Rakovchik had 92 girls. In Golobchinsky’s school in Gordin there were 113 girls (28 of whom received grants) and in Plonsky’s school in Bi-
alyštok there were 78 girls. Postels notes the difficult financial straits these schools were in, and the tuition rates and the levels of financial aid they were given, and concludes by extolling several of the schools for the girls’ high degree of proficiency in Russian. See Postels, “Private Jewish Girls’ Schools” (in Russian), Hakarmel Russian Supplement 5 (1866), no. 32, pp. 46–47.
57. Krieze, Russian-Language Jewish Schools, pp. 119–21. A typical example of complaints about the neglected education of poor girls may be found in a short article written by a woman, which appeared in the Russian newspaper Den (unsigned and untitled). The writer complains that Jewish society invests its efforts to educate impoverished boys and abandons the poor girls when it is they, the future mothers, who are most in need of vocational training. She describes the long work hours the poorer class women have to put in, women who waste their lives in the marketplace for lack of any professional training and who have to compete with each other over sales of rotten apples and pears and thus reduce their own profits. In her conclusion the writer calls for making special efforts to educate poor girls. See: Den 23 (1871), pp. 351–52.
58. According to P. S. Marek, these Jewish schools did not differ in the least from the schools designed to Russify the Christians in Poland. In 1864, eight such schools opened in Vilna, and one in Kovno. See P. S. Marek, “The Struggle between Two Edu-
cations,” pp. 103–43.
60. Ibid., 115.
61. Ibid., 120–23.
62. Many calls to take up the cause of educating girls of the poorer classes appear in the newspaper Russkiy Tvoir in the 1880s. E. Iampol’skaia, for instance, calls for dealing with the educational enterprise of the women of the “Jewish masses.” According to her, the women inhabit a darkened and fossilized world of fanaticism and superstitions, and there is an urgent need to establish seminaries to train women. See E. Iampol’skaia, “Women’s Education among the Jews” (in Russian), Russkiy evrei 20 (1880), cols. 780–81. M. G. Gershfeld also writes that many marriages break up among the Jewish masses because the men go to private or governmental schools and receive an education, while women are left in the instructional settings of traditional society. According to Gershfeld, this phenomenon is a serious obstacle in the road to russification, yet he also goes on to say that while boys are obligated to study Talmud and Bible, girls are learning how to speak with the gentiles, and nothing prevents them from attending secular schools. The problem, according to him, has to do with the shortage of schools for girls in the provinces and the shortage of educated Jewish women who would be prepared to teach in remote areas. As a solution Gershfeld recommends establishing seminaries for poor girls from the provinces, in the hope they would agree to return and teach in their places of birth. See M. G. Gershfeld, “On the Question of Women’s Education among the Jews” (in Russian), Russkiy evrei 6 (1880), cols. 203–7.
63. Krieze, *Russian-Language Jewish Schools*, pp. 123, 144, 148–54, 177. In the 1880s calls increased to provide vocational training to girls, mainly to poor girls. The charge repeatedly heard was that women in Jewish society were not employed in “women’s labor” but also had to carry the burden of breadwinning; yet that through lack of education or professional training they were compelled to work in light trade and inferior industries not remunerative enough to let them provide for their families honorably. Accordingly, funding was needed from philanthropic sources to finance an educational system for poor girls. See, for example, A. Press, “Some Words on Women’s Professional Education” (in Russian), *Russkii evrei* 16 (1881), cols. 609–11, and the editorial (in Russian), *Russkii evrei* 3 (1884), cols. 3–5.


70. For impressive data from 1898 on the state of women’s education in the Vilna and Kiev regions, for example, see Stampler, “Gender Differentiation,” p. 79. Stampler also cites interesting data about women’s education in Galicia, pp. 79–80.


72. Ibid., 2.


74. Krieze, p. 156. The growing number of teachers was linked to the growing number of women who obtained a higher education. That same period saw an increase also in the number of women in the medical professions (ibid.). For data on women who studied for the medical professions see also Y. M. Tcherikover, *Toldot Herrat Marbei Haskalah Betsred Beoretz Russiah* [History of the Society of For the Dissemination of Haskalah in the Land of Russia] 1, St. Petersburg, 1913, pp. 50–52.


84. Atypical in this regard in Stampfer’s study, “Gender Differentiation.” Stampfer disagrees with his predecessor and shows that despite the existence of a certain neglect in the education of girls in Jewish topics, allegations about the ignorance of women are greatly exaggerated. We will return to this important assertion below.
85. See above, Chapter 3.
87. Ibid.
89. On the function of the literary canon in consolidating and transmitting a linguistic standard, and on the social and cultural significance of acquisition of the standard language, see Guillory, Cultural Capital, pp. 3–82.
91. Ksennia’s intimacy with the Jewish girls who studied with her in the Christian Gymnasia in Simferopol makes her descriptions especially valuable and important, as detailed accounts of the educational and social experiences of Jewish girls in Christian schools are quite rare. Ksennia attests that as far as the curriculum, the textbooks, and the topics of interest were concerned, there was considerable similarity between her education and that of the Jewish girls, and thus one may infer from her own experiences what theirs were like. See Ksennia, Im Dori [With My Generation] (in Hebrew), Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Tel Aviv, 1957, pp. 100–5.
92. With My Generation, p. 102.
93. Ibid., 103–4.
94. Ibid., 114.
95. Ibid., 113.
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid., 118.
98. Ibid., 122.
100. For details and a data analysis by age group see: Krieze, Russian-Language Jewish Schools, 181–83. For a sorting of data and analysis by age and region—municipal and nonmunicipal—see Stampfer, Gender Differentiation, pp. 66–68.
104. Leshchinsky, “Statistics,” pp. 169–73. As to the criteria for determining literacy, Leshchinsky notes: “For our survey of those who know to read and write in three languages, Hebrew, Jargon, and Russian, we used the following criteria: for Hebrew competence we listed only those who understand what they read in a book and can write much or little in this language; for Jargon, we listed only those who could read; for Russian we included even those who can only sign their names in this language.” Using these measures, Leshchinsky found that the number of those competent in Hebrew was 277, or 10 percent of the Jewish population; those competent in Jargon numbered 1,028, or 39.8 percent of the population; and those competent in Russian
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numbered 878, or 33.9 percent of the population. About Hebrew knowledge among girls Leshchinsky says, “Only thanks to the work of the young Zionists does there exist a public school in which more than a hundred girls are enrolled [...] and nearly all of them, except students in the “beginners” class, were found to know how to read and write in all three languages. [...] Four years ago there was only one woman [in town] who could read Hebrew literature, and now the number of women who read Hebrew reaches 120.” Leshchinsky, “Statistics,” pp. 169–70.


107. In an address before the 11th World Congress for Jewish Studies (1993), Yoel Perlmann affirmed that scholarship of literacy of women in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe posed special difficulties, and thus that he was devoting his own research, for the time being, solely to questions related to male literacy. See Perlmann, “Russian Jewish Literacy,” p. 25.

Saul Stampfer’s study, which compiles the available statistical data, confirms the assertion about the complexity of this topic. One must also keep in mind that the statistics Stampfer cites do not distinguish between types and levels of literacy, and hence do not permit a qualitative assessment. Stampfer likewise notes the difficulty in determining literacy rates among women. See Stampfer, “Literacy among East European Jewry,” p. 493.

108. Ahad Ha’am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, pp. 3–4. Ahad Ha’am notes that it was “non-aristocratic circles” in particular that showed a readiness to have their sons be taught to write Russian, so as to enable writing out addresses for letters. The very same phenomenon is remarked by Kaufman: “A Jew like my father, who was already considered a bit enlightened, did not instruct his sons in Prophets and Scriptures, grammar and Russian but only, as they say ‘[a piece of] the prayerbook’ [...] We were taught no Russian except for the Russian script [...] and absolutely nothing more; for it is prohibited and inappropriate for people to carry such studies any further. [...]” See Kaufman, Memoirs, p. 19. These lines hint, apparently, at the curriculum of the Talmud Torah schools, which mainly served lower-class children and were regarded by society as charitable institutions. See Leshchinsky, “Statistics,” p. 172.

109. Ahad Ha’am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, pp. 65–66.

110. On self-instruction in Russian with the aid of a dictionary see Hayim Tchernowitz, Autobiography, pp. 80–81. See also Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, pp. 88, 128. It should be emphasized that many of the pre-eminent authors of Hebrew literature learned grammar, Hebrew and foreign languages at a relatively advanced age, at around twenty. YaLaG, for example, learned Hebrew and foreign languages at age seventeen and without the help of a teacher; so did Lilienblum. See S. L. Tsitron, The Creators of Modern Hebrew Literature 2, pp. 3, 6–7, 9, 115–19.

5. The Reading-Biography of Men


3. The class-stratification of Jewish society—whether created by family rank or level of wealth—was well reflected in the quality of the education granted to the children of each set and in the profiles of the reading audiences. This subject deserves separate treatment and goes beyond the purview of the present work.
4. Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Hebrew literature had an exclusively male, narrow, and select readership. For a discussion of women’s penetration of the circle of readers for Hebrew literature, see Chapters 8 and 9.


6. Throughout this chapter, the term “reading-biography” will denote the reading component of a human life: the list of books the person read, the subject matter, the contexts in which the reading took place, and so forth. The term “reading-story” will be used in contexts in which there is more stress on the construal of the reading-biography as a narrative; the term “reading impressions” will refer to reactions to or impressions of specific books or particular literary genres.


8. Ginzburg, for example, devotes a four-line paragraph to the event of his bar mitzvah: see Ginzburg, Aviezer, p. 57. Ahad Ha’am also is very brief about this: see Ahad Ha’am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, p. 84. Presumably the young age of marriage and close proximity in time of the bar mitzvah to the engagement and marriage ceremonies shifted some of the significance of reaching bar mitzvah age to the latter events.

9. See, for example, Ginzburg, Aviezer, pp. 34, 54–55, 63–64, 67–80; Gottlober, Memoirs of my Childhood, p. 86–94, 108–11; Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, pp. 98–99, 105–8; Ahad Ha’am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, pp. 52–53.

10. See, for example, M. L. Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, p. 110–12; Ahad Ha’am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, p. 45, 86; Israel Isser Katzowitz, Shishim Shnot Hayim [Sixty Years of Life], Dvir, Jerusalem, 1923, p. 124; Gottlober, Memoirs of My Childhood, pp. 80–81, 124–25, 226–27; Buki Ben Yogli, What My Eyes Saw and My Ears Heard, pp. 70–71; Tchernowitz, Autobiography, pp. 15–17, 78, 93–95; Friedman, Book of Memoirs, p. 52; Zaltzman, Out of the Past, p. 113–14; Ben-Zion Katz, On Newspapers and People, p. 15.

11. See, for example, the figure of Yosef Weizner as described by Gottlober in Memoirs of My Childhood, p. 79.


13. The terms “revelation” and “illumination,” which will be used interchangeably or side by side below, denote similar experiences that vary in their intensity.


16. In a letter Lilienblum wrote to Braudes about the latter’s Hadat Vehahayim [Religion and Life], he treats Shmuel, the novel’s main hero, as if he were modeled on himself. See Letter by Lilienblum to Braudes dated 21 March 1878, Autobiographical Writings 2, pp. 176–78.

17. Braudes’s Hadat Vehalayim was considered a radical maskilic novel. Tchernowitz relates that the bookseller took every precaution so that Tchernowitz would not fall prey to it. See Tchernowitz, Autobiography, p. 80.

18. See Gershon Shaked, “Introduction,” in Reuven Asher Braudes, Hadat Vehalayim 1 [Religion and Life] 1, Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1974, p. 25. It should be noted that the name “Shraga” which in Aramaic means “candle” or “lamp,” hints at the role Shraga was to play in Shmuel’s life.


21. Opposition to maskilic literature grew in the second half of the nineteenth century, an indication of the growing orthodox defensiveness toward the spread of the Haskalah. This fact can explain why Gottlober and Gintzburg encountered less opposition in their youth than did subsequent authors. Gottlober, for example, had his father's cooperation in obtaining Tashbetz Heinevah for his study of grammar, and when R. Yosef Weizner the maskil took the young Gottlober under his wing, the father did not stand in his way. See Gottlober, Memoirs of My Childhood, pp. 78–81. Still, even Gottlober does not take his father's "permissiveness" for granted: on telling his father about the intense impression made on him by meeting Yosef Perl, author of Megaleh Temirin, he was surprised and relieved to see that the look on his father's face "was not furious, he was not upset or downcast." See Gottlober, Memoirs, pp. 226–27. Gintzburg too describes his father as an enlightened man who did not stand in his way; see Gintzburg, Aviezer, pp. 66–67. Gintzburg relates that his father sent him to melamdim who knew grammar and Scripture (Aviezer, pp. 17, 25, 33) and that it was in his father's extensive library that Gintzburg first began to read Hebrew literature (p. 35). Lilienblum's experiences also confirm that as the Haskalah expanded the opposition to reading maskilic literature greatly intensified. In his Hat'ot Neurim he comments: "If my father had had the slightest knowledge of the Hebrew authors of those days, he would have struggled with all his might to further develop my knowledge of the Hebrew language and my poetic skills; if there had been Hebrew maskilim in my hometown he doubtless would have cautioned me not to follow in the path of the heretics; but my father, who knew neither about Hebrew maskilic writers or about the heresy of which they were suspected, paid no attention at all to what I did, and I went about my way: read books of Aggadah and wrote poetry." These remarks by Lilienblum also attest to the fact that the extent of opposition to those who were becoming maskilim varied according to their social surroundings. See Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, p. 86; Ben Hillel Hacohen, Once, pp. 64–65; Pelli Moshe, Bemaavakei Temurah [Struggle for Change], Milafim Universitaiyim Press, Tel Aviv, 1988, p. 38.

22. See, for example, Shaikewitz, Shomer's Poems and Memoirs, pp. 72–73, 83; Ahad Ha'am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, pp. 45, 80; Tchernowitz, Autobiography, p. 80; Friedman, Book of Memoirs, pp. 61, 86.

23. This episode appears in proximity to the description of Zaltzman's encounter with his tutor. This time the tutor is a maskil yeshiva student of whom the narrator relates: "If there are in the world faithful and devoted friends, good and honest persons, why he was one of them, and happy is he who encounters such a friend in the course of his life. [...] We were truly brothers. He had a great influence on me in every respect. He was the first youth who was free in matters of religion that I had seen then in my life, he was a maskil, with a wide-ranging knowledge, which he followed with great dedication"; see Zaltzman, Out of the Past, p. 113.


26. Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, p. 114.

27. Ibid., 118; see also: Gintzburg, Aviezer, pp. 123–24.

28. Ahad Ha'am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, p. 44.

29. See, for example, Tchernowitz, Autobiography, pp. 83–85; Zaltzman, Out of the Past, p. 114; Buki Ben Yogli, What My Eyes Saw and My Ears Heard, p. 72.


31. Braudes, Religion and Life 1, p. 89.

32. Religion and Life 1, p. 92.

34. Gottlober, p. 227. See also: Ginzburg, Aviezer, p. 34; Ahad Ha’am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, pp. 4–5.
36. Ibid., 73–74.
40. Gintzburg, Aviezer, p. 117.
41. Gintzburg tells how he had a hard time deciding “whose verdict would hold”—his father’s, “founded on Reason and the Mind,” or his melamed’s, “paved through and through with marvels and miracles. [. . .] One minute Mind compelled the power of Imagination to follow after it, and the next, Mind was swept along after Imagination.” See Gintzburg, Aviezer, p. 14.
42. Aviezer, p. 119.
43. Aviezer, p. 121.
44. Aviezer, pp. 122–23.
46. As Tchernowitz puts it: “Two opposing characteristics were running about inside me—as if I had two souls residing in my body—one mysticist and the other rationalist. This one pulls me here and that one pulls me there. In my deepest soul I tended toward mysticism and deep religious faith. I believed in personal Providence [. . .] I believed in angels good and bad, even in spirits flying about the world, influencing people, and at times I even believed in the souls of the dead floating out in space”; see Autobiography, p. 83.
47. Autobiography, p. 84.
49. Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 2, p. 129.
50. Buki Ben Yogli, What My Eyes Saw and My Ears Heard, p. 36.
51. Ibid., 42–45.
52. Ibid., 55–56.
53. Ibid., 71–72, 77.
54. Ibid., 76.
55. For clarification of the concepts “traditional history” and “maskilic history” see Shmuel Feiner, Haskalah Vehistoriah [Haskalah and History], Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, Jerusalem, 1995, pp. 11–104.
57. See Feiner, Haskalah and History, pp. 35, 39, 42.
59. Tchernowitz was warned not to read Maimonides’ Moreh Nevuchim [Guide to the Perplexed], and at this stage of his life resisted doing so; see Autobiography, p. 79, 81–82, 85. Lilienblum too relates that he avoided the Moreh Nevuchim fearing it would make a heretic of him. See Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, p. 108.
60. See Shaikevitch, Shomer’s Poems and Memoirs, p. 74; Friedman, Book of Memoirs, p. 105; Buki Ben Yogli, What My Eyes Saw and My Ears Heard, p. 160; Brenner, Writings 4, p. 1306; Zalkin, The Jewish Enlightenment in Russia, p. 126, n. 91.
62. See Ahad Ha’am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, pp. 44–45.
63. Ibid., 45, 82–83, 86.
64. Ibid., 52.
65. For more on this topic, see later in this chapter.
67. Ahad Ha’am, *Selected Memoirs and Correspondence*, pp. 83–84.
68. Ibid., 85.

70. In these lines, Ginzburg hints that reading books of history and geography was sometimes accepted as a legitimate activity when this was seen as entertainment and not as study for its own sake. For more on this topic see: Feiner, *Haskalah and History*, p. 39.
75. See, for example, Ahad Ha’am, *Selected Memoirs and Correspondence*, pp. 82–83, 86; Ginzburg, *Aviezer*, p. 35; Feiner, *Haskalah and History*, p. 43.
79. Micha Yosef Ha Cohen Lebensohn (MiChaL) dedicated a poem titled “Shir Tehilah” [Hymn of Praise] to Shulman and to his *Misterei Paris*. In this poem MiChaL presents Shulman as Ginzburg’s heir and successor in contributing to the Hebrew language. See Micha Yosef Lebensohn, “Hymn of Praise” (in Hebrew), in *Kinor Bat Tzion—Kol Shirei Adam Umichal* (Bat Zion’s Violin—Collected Poems of Adam and Michal), Vilna, 1893, pp. 68–70.
81. Ibid.
82. Friedman claims that Shulman “was notable among the other maskilim for his religiosity” and that “in spirit and in faith was orthodox in the full meaning of the word.” See Friedman, *Book of Memoirs*, p. 182. M. Ben Ami also notes that Shulman looked and behaved like a typical Lithuanian Jew, and that he was not “one of the type of those maskilim of ours, who spread such great terror among the conservatives hereabouts. His books could be found also in the homes of God-fearing Jews, except of course the extreme fundamentalists. If these books were not read by the fathers [...] they were willingly read by the sons, including many who were not swept up in the new currents”; see *Men of Our Era*, p. 146. See also Katz, *On Newspapers and People*, p. 15.
83. For a sorted list of books, circulation figures, and information on their contents, see Feiner, *Haskalah and History*, pp. 279–328.
84. In stressing Shulman’s importance we do not mean to ignore Mapu’s severe
critique of his translation of *Paris Mysteries*. About the dizzying success of *Paris*, of
which 2,000 copies were printed, Mapu has this to say: “For by the stupidity of a
thoughtless nation was Shulman enriched.” See Mapu, *Letters of Avraham Mapu*,
p. 24.

85. The most remembered and widely read of these books was Shulman’s series

86. *Haskalah and History*, p. 25.


88. *Haskalah and History*, pp. 21–104.

89. We do not mean by this to be ignoring other possible ideological motives for
the interest in history. These may include the strengthening national consciousness
through study of Jewish history, or the promotion of civil integration into the sur-
rounding society by promoting greater familiarity with Russian history.

90. Kovner, for example, does not distinguish between books of history and sci-
ence and Mapu’s historical novels; he attributes to all of them the same influence on
the process of becoming enlightened. Says Kovner: “there are certain authors who
really are extremely beneficial to the nation [. . .] such as Lebensohn on the history of
the Jewish sages, Soliminsky on geography and natural history, Mapu with his com-
prehensive picture of the life of the Hebrews, both of the one that has passed and de-
parted and of Hebrew life in the present”; see Kovner, *Collected Writings*, p. 211. See
also Dan Miron, *Bein Hazon Leemet* [From Romance to the Novel—Studies in the
Emergence of the Hebrew and Yiddish Novel in the Nineteenth Century], Bialik Insti-
tute, Jerusalem, 1979, p. 234, n. 71.

91. Buki Ben Yogli, *What My Eyes Saw and My Ears Heard*, p. 77. Compare Shaik-

92. On the hunger for acquiring books and the role of the booksellers in spreading
the Haskalah see, for example, Ginzburg, *Aviezer*, p. 129; Ahad Ha’am, *Selected Me-
moirs and Correspondence*, pp. 44–46; Tchernowitz, *Autobiography*, p. 80; Buki Ben
Yogli, *What My Eyes Saw and My Ears Heard*, pp. 36, 42–45. On a group of yeshiva
students and enlightening scholars who shared in the cost of a subscription to the maskilic
periodical *Hakarmel*, see Lilienblum, *Autobiographical Writings* 1, p. 119.

93. On the books in the library of a maskil, see Zalkin, *The Jewish Enlightenment in
Russia*, pp. 211, 216, 217.

94. For more on this topic, see later in this chapter.

95. For a breakdown by generation of maskilim, see Pelli, *Struggle for Change*, p. 36.

96. The term “sect” draws on a period usage. Mendele, for example, speaks of two
Jewish sects [. . .] the conservative sect, or those that hold on to antiquities,” and the
“sect of maskilim”; see Abramovitch, *Eye of Justice*, p. 53.

Aviezer, p. 135.

98. Among these books Gottlober lists *Shivhei Habesht*, *Shivhei Haari*, wills and tes-

taments, homiletics, sermons by hasidic tzaddikim and *Taipheron*. These seemed to him
“the sort of books that were permissible in a hasidic crowd, which is to say they con-
tained not an ounce of reason or knowledge.” See Gottlober, *Memoirs of My Childhood*,
pp. 75–76.

99. Ibid., 75.

100. Ibid., 77.

101. Ibid., 78.

102. For a thorough discussion of this topic, see Parush, “Another Look at the Life
of the ‘Dead’ Hebrew Language.”

103. See above, Chapters 1 and 3.
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104. See, for example, Gintzburg, Aviezer, pp. 16–17, 23, 24, 33; Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, p. 84; Friedman, Book of Memoirs, p. 59.

105. Shmaryahu Levin too was especially fond of grammar, describing it as “pure logic” or “the logic of language.” See: Levin, My Childhood, p. 224.


107. Ibid., p. 80.

108. The book explains the basic concepts of logic, Aristotelian for the most part.


110. In discussing Aviezer, Lilienblum writes: “The education received by M. A. Gintzburg which he treats in detail in his fine book Aviezer is the education received by most of the children of the district in which I was born, and it was also the education which I myself received.” At the same time Lilienblum mentions that he first became aware of the Haskalah when he read several issues of the periodical Hamaggid. See Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, pp. 84, 110, 121. The list of books read by Buki Ben Yogli includes Gintzburg’s Kiryat Sefer and Dvir, and Mordechai Perltsweig’s list, described in Buki Ben Yogli’s Memoirs, includes both Gintzburg’s and Gottlober’s books. See Buki Ben Yogli, What My Eyes Saw and My Ears Heard, pp. 45, 127.

111. Ahad Ha’am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, p. 45.

112. Moshe Leib Lilienblum, Letters of Moshe Leib Lilienblum to Tehuda Leib Gordon, p. 133.

113. On the drawn-out nature of the enlightenment process, see for example Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, pp. 114–15.


115. Ibid., 160.


117. Buki Ben Yogli, What My Eyes Saw and My Ears Heard, p. 75.

118. Ahad Ha’am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, p. 48.

119. Ibid., 44–45.

120. See, for example, Shaikewitch, Shomer’s Poems and Memoirs, pp. 72–73, 81; Tchernowitz, Autobiography, p. 80; Friedman, Book of Memoirs, pp. 61, 86; Bergner, In the Long Winter Nights, p. 72.

121. For this debate, see: Miron, From Romance to the Novel, pp. 231–39.

122. Dan Miron maintains that the arguments against artistic fiction drew upon the heritage of sentiments and suppositions associated with the battle against Hasidism. See From Romance to the Novel, p. 237.

123. Ahad Ha’am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, p. 86.

124. Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, p. 131.

125. Ibid., p. 121.

126. For some of the more prominent of these, as cited in Werses’ book, see Shmuel Werses, Hatargumim Leyiddish shel Ahavat Tzion Le’Avraham Mapu (Yiddish Translations of “Ahavat Zion” by Abraham Mapu), Academon, Jerusalem, 1989, pp. 10–22. See also Levin, My Childhood, p. 283; Simhah Ben-Zion, Kol Kitvei S. Ben-Zion [Collected Writings of S. Ben-Zion], 4th ed., Dvir, Tel Aviv (undated), p. xxviii.


130. Lilienblum, Autobiographical Writings 1, pp. 122–23, 131.


133. See Parush, “Another Look at the Life of the ‘Dead’ Hebrew Language.”


138. For an extended treatment of this topic see Parush, “Another Look at the Life of the ‘Dead’ Hebrew Language.”


140. See, for example, David Frishman, *Kol Kitvei David Frishman Umivhav Targumim* [Collected Writings and Selected Translations by David Frishman] 5, Merkaz, Warsaw, 1914, pp. 96–97. See also *Collected Writings*, pp. 76–78, 81–83.


145. Ibid., 1307.

146. Ibid.


151. Ibid., 77.

152. Shaikevitch, *Shomer’s Poems and Memoirs*, p. 34.


165. Ahad Ha’am, *Selected Memoirs and Correspondence*, p. 88.
166. Ahad Ha’am, *Selected Memoirs and Correspondence*, p. 4. See also: Katzowitz, *Sixty Years of Life*, p. 135.

6. “This Whole Trouble Is the Fault of the Little Story Books”: Women Who Read Yiddish

3. Wengeroff, *Memoiren einer Grossmutter II*, p. 30. In his *Fathers and Sons*, Mendele similarly describes the yeshiva students who read Schiller: “Under one of the trees sat the budding maskilim—several yeshiva students. One of them reads from the book in sing-song, pointing his finger and rocking his body as if engaging in Talmud study; his friends meanwhile attend to his voice.” See: Mendele, *Collected Writings*, p. 15.
4. In the concepts of the period, an “educated” or “learned” woman [*Ishah Maskelet*], was one who was able to read or write. Zvi Scharfstein notes that “the ‘learned’ women used to read special books for women in Yiddish. Each Sabbath, they would read out of the *Tseina Ur’eina* the Yiddish translation of the weekly Torah portion with its accompaniment of talmudic and midrashic legends. Sometimes, after performing this duty they would read some other Yiddish book.” See Scharfstein, *The Life of Eastern European Jews in Modern Times*, p. 134.
9. *My Little Town*, pp. 52–54. A ‘Cossack woman’ appears also in Mendele’s *Sefer Hakohanim*. Her husband “is known as Haya-Treyne’s Hayim-Hone because he is enslaved to his wife, while she who enslaves him is known as Haya-Treyne the Cossack.” See Mendele, *Collected Writings*, p. 106. For more about women breadwinners whose families were known by their names, see also Ayzik Meyer Dik, “Breadwinning Women” (in Hebrew), in *Rabbi Shmaayah Mevarech Ham moto Vesipurim Aherim* [Rabbi Shmaayah the Holiday’s Sanctifier and Other Stories] (Dov Sadan, tr.), Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1967, p. 133.
10. Levin, *My Childhood*, pp. 155–56. Before removing the Torah scroll from the Ark for the reading of the weekly portion, any member of the congregation in the synagogue had the right to announce a delay of the reading, and to announce his complaint to the whole community.
11. Kaufman, *Memoirs*, p. 455. See also: pp. 25, 30. Gottlober too dwells on this function of women's reading in the company of their children: “We all knew that there were a great many more books of wisdom and morals, and that editions of the Talmud and books of Midrash which had been copied into the vernacular were available to every woman. And on every Sabbath and holiday people gathered around the mother or the old grandmother, her daughters and granddaughters, who used to read out the topics of the day to them, telling them of the great and wondrous heavenly deeds, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses [. . .].” See Gottlober, “Travels in Russia [1864]” (in Hebrew), *Memoirs and Travels* 2, p. 165.

12. Ahad Ha'am, *Selected Memoirs and Correspondence*, p. 76.


16. On the contents of women’s traditional bookshelf, see, for example, Levin, *My Childhood*, p. 255.

17. See, for example, Zaltzman, *My Little Town*, p. 45. See also Ben Hillel Hacohen, *Once*, p. 108.

18. See, for example, Ben-Zion Dinur, *Beolam Sheshaka* [In a World That is Gone], Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1958, p. 21.


21. Baruch Halevi Epstein, *Mekor Baruch: Zichronotai Mehayei Hador Hakodem* [My Memories of Life in the Past Generation], H.I.L., New York, 1954, pp. 1949–50. It should be noted that the “learned” aunt is described as a “non-woman” or as a “masculine” woman because she did not fill her traditional role as breadwinner. Epstein takes care to stress that she devoted her time to study because “she was unable to manage the duties of the housewife or the breadwinning or food preparation, given her weakness and nervousness.” See ibid.


23. Ibid., 1954.

24. *Centura Ventura* is a translation to Yiddish of some of the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor. The *Bove Buch*, *Bore Maasseh or Bore Mayse*, originated in the Middle Ages as the tale of a British knight, Sir Bevis of Southampton, and his love for the fair Dru-sana. The Italian version of this story, produced in 1507, was set to Yiddish rhyme by Eliyahu Bachur (1486–1544); it was then titled the *Bove Buch*. In the eighteenth century the story was again revised and set to Yiddish prose; it then received the title *Maasshe Bove or Bobe Mayse*.


28. Ibid.

29. The invasion of secular literature into the realm of Sabbath Eve communal readings is reflected also in Haya Weizmann-Lichtenstein’s descriptive remarks. She tells that her older sister “used to prepare herself an interesting book, and would interrupt the tranquility from time to time with a quotation or a comment on the book. [. . .] And we, the little ones, used to sit around the table with a volume of the
Pentateuch in hand, so as not to seem different from the grown ups.” See Haya Weizmann-Lichtenstein, *Betzel Koratenu* [In the Shade of Our Roof], Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1948, p. 36.


32. Ibid.


37. Papirna remarks that because Yiddish was considered shameful, Yiddish authors resisted publishing the poems they wrote in this language. The Yiddish authors’ practice of publishing under a pseudonym or anonymously derived, in his opinion, from the same cause. See Papirna, “The First Yiddish Drama,” p. 187. On how Dik explains such anonymous writing see Ayzik Meyer Dik, “Foreword” (in Hebrew), *Mahazeh Mul Mahazeh* [Scene Against Scene], Warsaw, 1861 (unpaginated). On Mendele’s refusal to sign his name to his first creations in Yiddish, see Chone Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yiddish: Praktim Letoldtotelath* [Yiddish Literature: Aspects of Its History], Porter Institute of Poetics and Semiotics, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, 1978, pp. 280–81; Roskies, *Ayzik Meyer Dik*, pp. 104–5. On a range of manifestations of the Yiddish author’s apologetic attitude see Miron, *A Traveler Disguised*, p. 2–31.


39. Peretz Hirschbein, *Bemahallah Habayim* [In the Course of a Life] (Mordechai Halamish, tr.), Sifriyat Hapoalim, Merhavia and Tel Aviv, 1971, p. 17.


41. For further aspects of this subject see also: Kalman Marmur, “Al Shirei Shomer,” in Shaikevitch, *Shomer’s Poems and Memoirs*, p. 10.


43. Mendele’s first Yiddish work, “Dos Kleyne Mentshele” was published in 1864 in the periodical *Kol Mevaser* and later appeared in various editions. See Mendele, “Autobiographical Notes,” *Collected Writings*, p. 4.

44. Ibid., 5. See also Miron, *A Traveler Disguised*, p. 14.

46. Shlomo Ettinger, author of the play “Serkele,” preceded him; see above, Chapter 2.

47. Dik, “Forward,” Scene against Scene (unnumbered).

48. Shlomo Shreberk, Zichronot Hamotzi Laor Shreberk [Memoirs of Shreberk the Publisher], Shreberk, Tel Aviv, 1946, p. 104.


50. About Dik’s contract with the Widow Rom and Sons printing house see Shmuel Shraga Feigenzohn (ShaFaN the author), “History of the Rom Press” (in Hebrew), Yadovat Lita 1, Am Haseler Vagud Yotzei Lita Beisrael, Tel Aviv, 1959, pp. 269–302. See also Shreberk, Memoirs of Shreberk the Publisher, pp. 108–9. For Dik’s claims that he was not reimbursed see Dik, “Two Letters.”


52. In his “A Maskil’s Utopye,” discovered in manuscript form and published by Shmuel Niger, Dik explicitly tells his female “Dear Reader” that he wants to enlighten all sectors of Jewish society, not just the women, girls, and “common folk.” See Ayzik Meyer Dik, “A Maskil’s Utopye” (in Yiddish), YIVO Bleter, 36 (1952), p. 168. See also Roskies, Ayzik Meyer Dik, p. 120; and Shmuel Werses, “Ayzik Meyer Dik’s Yiddish Translation of Erter’s ‘Gilgul Nefesh’” (in Hebrew), Chulyot 2 (1994), pp. 31–34.


57. Ibid., 157–58.

58. See above, Chapter 2.


60. On Dik’s part in the dissemination of maskilic ideas see Shreberk, Memoirs of Shreberk the Publisher, pp. 10–12, 107–9; Dov Sadan, “Foreword,” in Ayzik Meyer Dik Rabbi Shmaayah, pp. 7–15, 196.

61. Roskies, Ayzik Meyer Dik, pp. 11–21; Dov Sadan notes that Dik is to be viewed in the context of his time and circle, with the relevant conceptions and perspectives that applied then and there. According to Sadan, Dik knew how to concoct “a maskilic program with a mass appeal,” earning himself by this blend “tens of thousands of readers, especially female ones, for whom he became the permanent supplier for their reading appetite.” See Sadan, “Foreword,” in Rabbi Shmaayah, p. 10.


63. Roskies, Ayzik Meyer Dik, pp. 183–238. For a bibliographic list of Dik’s writings see Roskies, pp. 287–100.


66. Ibid., 233.

68. On the plots of these stories see Roskies, *Ayezik Meyer Dik*, pp. 223–38. For a selection of stories by Dik in Dov Sadan’s Hebrew translation, see “Dik,” *Rabbi Shmaayaah*.


77. About Shomer’s Hebrew novels, Dov Sadan wrote: “Shomer also cultivated a plot in the garden of Hebrew creation and it too has been neglected. For not only is he, in this field, the equal of the finest Hebrew authors of his day; he even surpasses them in a number of special regards—descriptive vitality and linguistic flexibility.” See Sadan, *Threshold Stones* 1, p. 24.


84. Trunk, pp. 16–17.

85. Trunk, p. 224.

86. Trunk, pp. 224–25.

87. Trunk, p. 235


89. Tchernowitz, *Autobiography*, p. 27.

90. Jocheved Bat-Rachel Tarshish, who describes her mother as an authoritarian

94. See Miron, Sholem Aleichem, pp. 18–19, n.18.
95. On Sholem Aleichem’s guidelines as editor of the Folkbibliotek see Miron, Sholem Aleichem, p. 19.
97. Ibid., 13–14.
98. Ibid., p. 28.
99. Ibid., p. 29.
100. Shaiklevitch, Shomer’s Poems and Memoirs, p. 81. See also pp. 42–43.
101. Ibid., 83. See also 73.
103. Lishansky, p. 23.
106. See above, Chapter 3.
108. In his essay “Aggadah and Halachah” (in Hebrew), Bialik argued that “quite a few Jewish generations and sectors committed a grave sin in regard to Aggadah, by breaking the vital bond between it and them.” Bialik nevertheless condemned the authors of the national revival era who saw the Aggadah as the be all and end all: “We now have the privilege of being in an entirely Aggadic era, Aggadah in literature and Aggadah in life. The whole world is nothing but an Aggadah in an Aggadah.” See Bialik, “Aggadah and Halachah,” Collected Writings of H. N. Bialik, p. 213.
110. Zaltzman, Out of the Past, p. 22.
111. Out of the Past, p. 49.
113. Ibid., 18.
114. Ibid., 20.
115. Hirschbein, In the Course of a Life, p. 139.
117. Pauline Wengeroff, Rememberings, p. 104. Wengeroff relates that by the time of her marriage, the custom had become to provide the bride with a wig rather than a head covering with a ribbon resembling hair. See also Wengeroff, Memoiren einer Grossmutter II, p. 75. For the place of the shavis, an ornamented headscarf, in the Jewish woman’s life after the wedding, see Miron, From Romance to the Novel, pp. 179–81.
118. Curiously, in describing her marriage Wengeroff considers the trip to the ritual bath (in particular) as an especially traumatic experience. See Wengeroff, Memoiren einer Grossmutter, p. 70.
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119. Hannah Katzenelson-Nesher, *Ach Veachot* [Brother and Sister], Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1978, p. 14. Opposition to shaving the woman’s head and to donning a wig became symbolic for the enlightened male as well. Katzowitz, for example, takes pride in the fact that he asked his wife to remove her wig, to protest the haredim’s harassment of women who removed their wigs. See *Sixty Years of Life*, pp. 138–39. The subject of the wig was at the focus of public debate conducted on the pages of the periodicals of the time. See, for example, Gur-Aryeh, “Women’s Hair” (in Hebrew), *Hamelitz*, 8 (1868), pp. 47–50.

120. Manger, *Familiar Figures*, p. 43.


122. See, for example, Katzowitz, *Sixty Years of Life*, pp. 102–3.


134. Ibid.

135. See, for example, Manger’s remarks about Michal Gordon’s poem “Tzu Der Fraynd Leah,” in which Gordon calls on his student Leah and on women in general to follow their hearts and reject the matches for money or famous family lines that their parents arrange. See Manger, *Familiar Figures*, pp. 104–5.

136. The “benefit of marginality” was apparent also in matters of matchmaking. Members of the lower classes, maidservants and apprentices, had greater freedom to choose themselves a spouse than had members of the upper or rabbinic classes. See Knaani, *Studies in History of the Jewish Family*, pp. 60–61.

137. See, for example, Werses, “Women’s Voices in the Yiddish Weekly *Kol Mesvin*,” pp. 73–79.


139. For how the maskilim viewed the woman’s role in the family, see Bialè, *Eros and the Jews*, pp. 210–11.


142. Ibid., 94.

143. Katzowitz tells of a young woman who rejected his advances because he did not read novels and didn’t know what love was: “ ‘Do you love me?’ asked the girl laughing lightly, ‘for you have not read the books of lusts so what do you know about love?’ ” See: *Sixty Years of Life*, pp. 102–3.


145. See Bartal, “‘Potency’ and ‘Impotence’—between Tradition and Haskalah” (in Hebrew), pp. 231–37.
7. “A Hebrew Maiden, Yet Acting Alien”: Women Who Read European Languages

2. See Trunk, Polin, p. 96. See also Gottlober, “Travels in Russia” [1864], Memoirs and Travels 2, p. 164.
5. Ibid., 3.
6. As a rule, educated girls were taught more than one foreign language; see above, Chapter 4.
8. See above, Chapter 4.
12. Young educated women sought matches with men who knew Laaz. See, for example, Bergner, In the Long Winter Nights, p. 33. Pauline Wengeroff considered it very important that her husband should know German and taught him this language. See Wengeroff, Memoiren einer Grossmutter II, p. 97.
16. Ibid.
19. It was in school that Wengeroff first encountered Alexander Griboyedov’s books. Several of them moved her to tears, and there are passages she remembered by heart sixty-five years later. See Wengeroff, Memoiren einer Grossmutter II, pp. 30–33.
20. See above, Chapter 6.
22. Tchernowitz, for example, notes that he learned German before learning Russian, having inherited a hatred of Russian from his grandfather. According to him, “German literature (and not Russian) was considered Haskalah.” See Tchernowitz, Autobiography, p. 80.
24. Ibid., pp. 70–71. Bergner’s sister, Leytse, whose “large pockets were always full of newspapers,” also read Yiddish periodicals and novels and could write well in Polish and German; see ibid., 78.
27. Ibid., 92–93.
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29. Saul Tchernichowsky’s mother was also of this type. For her reading-story see: Saul Tchernichowsky, “An Autobiography of Sorts” (in Hebrew), in Shaul Tchernichowsky Mekkarim Veteudot [Shaul Tchernichowsky Studies and Documents], Boaz Arpali (ed.), Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 50–51.

30. The figures were given by D. A. Landman to the Historical Literary Union of the “Association of Jewish Haskalah Disseminators in the Land of Russia”; see: D. A. Landman, “In Our Country” (in Hebrew), Hamelitz (1901), no. 87, dated 22 April 1901.

31. Katzowitz, for example, relates that his wife was more “liberal in her opinions” than he and therefore he requested that she refrain from “reading books in Russian on the Sabbath.” Later on, Katzowitz’s daughter married a Russian revolutionary. See Katzowitz, Sixty Years of Life, pp. 118–19, 228–30.


35. Ibid., 126.


37. On the secularizing effect of reading Darwin, Spencer and Buckle, see Ksennia, With My Generation, pp. 109, 122–23.

38. For more about this, see also Ben Hillel Hacohen, Once, pp. 206–7.


41. Sarah Azariahu, Pirkei Hayim [Autobiography], Newman, Tel Aviv, 1948, p. 8. It is important to note that Sarah Azariahu learned and read Hebrew as well. See below, Chapter 8.

42. Azaryahu, Autobiography, p. 9. This reading of the Russian monthlies was something both the Jewish youth and the Russian radical youth had in common. Cf. Ksennia, With My Generation, pp. 99.


44. Ibid., 12.

45. Ibid.

46. Weizmann-Lichtenstein, In the Shade of Our Roof, pp. 36, 55.

47. Ibid., 56.

48. See: Eliyahu Tcherikover, Yehudim Beitot Malapechah [Jews in Revolutionary Times], Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1957, pp. 205–7. Hannah Epstein, who actively participated in the Russian revolutionary movement, enrolled in 1869 at a medical school for women in Petersburg and was the first Jewish woman to study in a Russian institution of higher education. See Tcherikover, p. 226. Toward 1900, most of the Jewish “coursists” were members of the social-democratic movement. See Katz, On Newspapers and People, p. 32. In this context it should be noted that the family and biographic background of Eva Broido, who was active in the Russian revolutionary movement between 1898 and 1917, were not much different from those of Sarah Azariahu or Esther Hurgin and her friends. See Eva Broido, Memoirs of a Revolutionary, Oxford University Press, New York, 1967, pp. 2–9. Compare with the reading story and imprison-

49. See, for example, Yanait Ben-Zvi, “A Portrait of a Girl from a Small Town in the Ukraine—Sarah Golobchik Marchevsky,” p. 122.


54. Ibid., 276. In 1896, 112 of 526 female doctors in Russia were Jewish; see Slutsky, The Russian-Jewish Press, p. 320, n. 69. In 1902, thirteen of the eighteen women who studied pharmacology in Petersburg were Jewish, whereas in 1910, 58 of 85 of the women studying this topic were Jewish; see Conroy Mary Schaeffer, “Women Pharmacists in Russia before World War I,” in Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union, Linda Edmondson (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 52–54. In the 1870s, the number of Jewish students studying medicine was quite high, higher by far than their numbers among the general population; see: Engel Alpern, Mothers and Daughters, pp. 158–69, 166–67. On the flood of students from Russia and Poland to schools in Switzerland see also Azaryahu, Autobiography, pp. 43–45.


56. Tcherikover, Jews in Revolutionary Times, p. 206.

57. Ibid. On the turmoil the girl runaways aroused see also Ben Hillel Hacohen, Once, p. 207.

58. Katzowitz relates that his son in law—a son and grandson of celebrated rabbis—joined the revolutionary movement, and that his sisters-in-law were arrested several times on account of their activities. Katzowitz’s daughter was also arrested on suspicion of revolutionary activities; see: Katzowitz, Sixty Years of Life, pp. 228–31. A portrait of a woman who held revolutionary views is drawn by Zaltzman as well; see: Zaltzman, Out of the Past, p. 139–40.


61. Reuven Asher Braudes, Shtei Haktzavot [The Two Extremes], Warsaw 1888, p. 103. For further aspects of this issue see Ben-Ami Feingold, “Literature and Books as a Subject in Maskilic Prose” (in Hebrew), Meuharot Yerushalayim Beisfest Ivrit 5 (1986), p. 85.


63. See above, Chapter 4.


70. Litvak, *What There Was*, p. 45.
71. Ibid., 49–50.
72. In 1867 Havulson was elected to be a committee member of “The Society for the Dissemination of Haskalah among the Jews in the Land of Russia.” Slutsky claims that it was peculiar that a convert was elected to the committee. According to him, Havulson converted “not for reasons of faith of the heart but so as to receive the Chair of Semitic Languages at Petersburg University.” See: Slutsky, *The Russian-Jewish Press*, p. 81.
78. Ibid., 166.
79. Ibid., 167–68.
80. Ibid., 168–69.
81. Ibid., 169.
88. Ibid., 55–58.
90. See S. L. Tsiyron, *Behind the Curtain: Converts, Traitors and Renouncers*.
92. A letter by Y. L. Peretz to Sholem Aleichem dated 18 July 1888; *Collected Writings of Y. L. Peretz* vol. 10, p. 221.
93. (untitled), *Hazman* 1 (1903), no. 40, pp. 1–2.
96. Lifshitz, *From Era to Era*, p. 15.
97. Ibid., 103. Lifshitz does not shrink from using remarks made by the convert Daniel Havulson in *Hatshfira*, 1888, no. 48. According to Lifshitz, Havulson asserted that he prefers the traditional wife, who reads the *Tseina Ur’eina* and *Menorat Hammaor*, over the modern woman, “who turns night into day in the houses of play and dancing” and reads degenerate literature; see Lifshitz, *From Era to Era*, pp. 102–3.
98. Ibid.


102. In Cracow, between 1887 and 1900, 120 men and 159 women converted. For more on this topic see Meir Bossak, “Cracow Jews in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century” (in Hebrew), in Aryeh Bauminger, Meir Bossak and Nathan Michael Gelber (eds.), *Sefer Cracow* [The Cracow Book], Rabbi Kook Institute, Jerusalem, 1959, p. 109.


105. Ibid., 5.

106. Ibid., 6.

107. Ibid., 7.

108. Among the causes of prostitution in the lower classes of Jewish society (especially in Vilna), the writer lists the “Jargonish literature of a certain type.” As he puts it, “the American novels, and especially the disgusting scenes they put up on the Jargonish theater, deeply subverted the morals of the masses, and the debauchery displayed for all in the novels and the theatrical spectacles casts its pall on the daughters of our masses, erasing from them any sentiment of shame or modesty.” See A., “In Russia—On Chastity” (in Hebrew), *Hador* 1 (1901), no. 24, pp. 4–6.


110. Sholem Aleichem, “To Our Sisters in Zion: A Few Words to the Daughters of Israel,” in *Jewish Authors*, p. 367. The letter was written in 1898.

111. Ibid., 368–369.

112. For a critique of women’s education see also Gottlober, “Travels in Russia [1864],” *Memoirs and Travels* 2, pp. 164–65.


114. (untitled), *Hazman* 1 (1903), no. 12, pp. 1–2.


8. “One in a Thousand”: Women and the Hebrew Language


7. A comment signed by the publisher (Abraham Baer Gottlober), *Haboker Or* 2 (1877), p. 155. In 1880 Gottlober again published a letter by Sarah Nowinsky; he then
wrote: “It means much to me to see the daughters of Israel trying their hands at authorship at a time when many of the new generation have given it a bill of divorce; this honorable woman should serve them as a model and let them learn their lesson from her.” See: Gottlober, Haboker Or 4 (1880), p. 1065 (fn.). Compare these remarks to those of S. Y. Abramovitch on the compositions of Shifra Eltzin, above in Chapter 7.


10. Ibid., 155.


12. Ibid., 218.

13. Ibid.

14. On charges of this nature made by David Frishman, see below, Chapter 9.


22. Verses, pp. 33–34. For other women who read Ahavat Zion see Verses, pp. 34–35.


25. See, for example, Gordon, Collected Letters by YaLaG to Miriam Markel-Mozessohn.


27. Ibid. See also Verses, “Yiddish Translations of Ahavat Zion,” p. 33.


30. See above, Chapter 5.

31. Miriam Markel Mozessohn, who read Lilienblum’s Ha'ot Neurim, criticized him for “the strange elements in his book” that are not appropriate for the Holy Tongue. See below, Chapter 9.

32. Women who contributed their own writings to the Yiddish periodicals also tended to accentuate their national loyalties. For more about this point see Verses, “Women’s Voices in the Yiddish Weekly Kol Menner,” pp. 53–82.

33. See below, Chapter 9.

34. Scharfstein, The Life of Eastern European Jews, pp. 149–50. According to statistician Yaakov Leshchinsky, the Hebrew proficiency of girls was a mark of the rise in power of the Zionist movement. As he puts it, “only thanks to the work of the young Zionists does a public school exist in which more than a hundred girls are taught […] It is a fact known to all the town’s residents, that four years ago only one woman read Hebrew literature, and now the number of women who read Hebrew (including the junior readers) reaches 120. Thanks to the public school, fathers are beginning to have their daughters be taught by private tutors as well.” See Leshchinsky, “Statistics of One Small Town,” pp. 170–73. See also Lifshitz, “The Heder,” p. 347.

36. Rakovsky, I Didn’t Give In, p. 62.

37. On the great surge that began around 1900 in the number of women who studied Hebrew, see Leshchinsky, “Statistics of One Small Town,” p. 170; see also note 34 above.

38. Rakovsky attests that “with the growth of the Hibat Zion movement, and later with the emergence of political Zionism, the number of schoolgirls from Zionist homes grew, and in later years there was practically no Zionist home in Warsaw (from the middle class) without daughters studying in my Gymnasia.” See Rakovsky, I Didn’t Give In, p. 65.


40. Ibid., 25.


43. Ahad Ha’am, Selected Memoirs and Correspondence, p. 61.


45. Weizmann-Lichtenstein, In the Shade of Our Roof, p. 55; Moshe Ungerfeld, “Dr. Chava Shapiro” Hapo’el Hatzair (1968), no. 25, p. 20. See also Muki Zur and Michal Ha-gteti, “On Rachel Shazar’s Diaries,” in Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar, Adam Kno Shelu [The Person as She Was], Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1989, p. 12. Itah Yelin, daughter of Rabbi Yehiel Michal Pines, was taught at a pension. About her education, see Itah Yelin, Letse’etzai [To My Offspring], Jerusalem, 1938, pp. 9, 12. About the education of Rachel Feigenberg, see Feigenberg, The Childhood Years, pp. 32–33. Dvorah Baron had a different and unusual education. Her thorough Hebrew training in early childhood preceded her Gymnasia education. This may help explain Baron’s development and reception. See Nurit Govrin, Parshiyot Mukdamot [Early Stories], Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1988, pp. 24–40.


47. Weizmann-Lichtenstein, In the Shade of Our Roof, p. 56.


50. Ibid., 38.

51. Ibid., 12.


54. Rakovsky, I Didn’t Give In, p. 17.

55. Rakovsky, p. 23.

56. Rakovsky, p. 60.
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57. Rakovsky mentions YaLaG’s poem “Kotzo Shel Yod” when she describes the difficult state of the Jewish woman in traditional society, yet this poem is not mentioned within her reading-story (see p. 20).
58. See Rachel Feigenberg, The Childhood Years.
62. Ibid., 75.
63. Brenner, Writings 4, p. 1240.
64. Brenner, Writings 3, pp. 742–43. See also: Parush, National Ideology and Literary Canon, pp. 284–89.
65. A different position is taken by Sadan, who does not accept the use Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar makes here of the first-person plural. In his opinion, the writer represents herself alone, not the members of her generation or even the women among them. Nonetheless, Sadan regards the feelings and attitudes held by Katzenelson-Shazar as voicing her protest against the exclusion of women from the traditional assets of Jewish culture. According to Sadan, Katzenelson-Shazar sought to “restore to women the losses incurred over all the generations, to reverse the edict which had made the Chosen People a people of men and the Kingdom of Priests a kingdom of men; and it is this sentiment which churns and percolates within her and drives all her work and activity.” See Dov Sadan, “Hebrew Woman,” Bein Din Leheshbon, [Between Judgment and Account], Dvir, Tel Aviv, 1963, p. 368. On Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar’s ultimate decision in favor of the cultural-Zionist world view see Miron, Founding Mothers, Stepisters, pp. 251–53.
66. Ibid., pp. 11–151, and especially pp. 86–88.
70. On the haredim’s objections to speech in Hebrew see Shmuel Eisenstadt, Sfatenu Haivrit Hehaya [Our Living Hebrew Language], Tumah, Tel Aviv, 1967, pp. 41–44. On Hebrew-speaking women see Eisenstadt, p. 41.
73. See Averbach, “The Pogroms and the Revival of the Hebrew language,” p. 30. For Frishman’s stance on this point see below Chapter 9.
74. Rakovsky, I Didn’t Give In, p. 54.
76. Rakovsky, I Didn’t Give In, p. 65.
77. Rakovsky, pp. 3–63.
78. Rakovsky, pp. 67.
9. Hebrew—Man’s Apparatus or Woman’s Apparel?

1. These lines by YaLaG were initially meant for a “ratification” to appear in the preface to Miriam Markel Mozessohn’s book. Mozessohn decided to omit this section of the haskamah in which YaLaG speaks of an equality between men and women. See Collected Letters to YaLaG to Miriam Markel-Mozessohn, pp. 11–12, and see also p. 11, n. 20.

2. On, for example, Mendele’s reservations, see above, Chapter 8.


4. See for example Frishman’s articles on Mendele the Bookseller, Frishman, Collected Writings 1, pp. 70–89; on Y. L. Peretz, ibid., 90–127; on H. N. Bialik, ibid., 180–89.

5. Shalom Kremer, Frishman Hamevaker [Frishman As Critic], Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1984, p. 56; Dan Miron, When Loners Come Together (in Hebrew), pp. 25–27; Menucha Gilboa, Bein Realism Leromantica [Between Realism and Romanticism], Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Tel Aviv, 1975.


7. Frishman, Collected Writings 1, p. 39.

8. With the rise in power of the Zionist movement, increasing numbers of women studied Hebrew. See above, Chapter 8.


10. Frishman, Collected Writings 1, p. 7.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 8.

13. Ibid.


16. It is interesting to compare Frishman’s anecdote to a similar story apocryphally attributed to Bialik. According to this story, Bialik met a man who enunciated “Paris”
with a labial fricative (an “F”—as “F”aris), and Bialik replied, also with a labial fricative, “what a ‘F’otz ['f’enis].”

17. For reviews in which Frishman corrected the grammatical mistakes of authors see, for example, his critique of Y. L. Peretz’s poem “Ha’ugav,” Collected Writings 1, p. 104; his critique of the “new trend writers,” ibid., 184; and his critique of the language used by Erez (Alexander Zederbaum), editor of Hamelitz, Collected Writings 2, p. 76. On Frishman’s complaints about lack of knowledge of Hebrew among authors and readers see Yehuda Leib Kantor, “David Frishman,” Collected Writings 17, p. 24. Yosef Klauzner also comments on this: “The numerous errors found in the Hebrew books prove definitively that our authors simply do not know Hebrew grammar . . . Do you hear, dear readers! Hebrew authors simply do not know Hebrew grammar! Would you believe it?” See Yosef Klauzner, “The Hebrew Tongue—A Living Language,” Otzar Hasefrut [The Treasure of Literature] 5 (1896), p. 86. On the lack of a reading audience see Miron, When Loners Come Together, pp. 31–93.

18. Frishman, Collected Writings 1, p. 9.
19. Ibid.

22. Frishman, Collected Writings 1, p. 190.
23. Ibid., 191–92.
24. Ibid., 193.
25. Ibid., 194.
26. Ibid., 193.
27. Ibid., 192.
28. For more on the wish to comprehend the language of Woman, see Frishman, Collected Writings 1, pp. 190–94.
29. Collected Writings 1, p. 8.
32. On Frishman’s support for this separation see Frishman, Collected Writings 2, p. 64.
33. At root, Frishman’s stance on this topic was the maskilic one. Compare Israel Bartal, “From Traditional Bilingualism to National Monolingualism” (in Hebrew), Shvat 15 (1992), pp. 183–93.
35. It is worth stating once more that male proficiency in the Hebrew language was very limited. See Stampler, “What Did ‘Knowing Hebrew’ Mean in Eastern Europe?,” pp. 129–40; Parush, “Another Look at the Life of the ‘Dead’ Hebrew Language.”
36. The distinction between the two types of diglossia may give rise to the impression that a use-oriented diglossic linguistic system can not be a reflection of social inequality, and that only a user-oriented diglossia allows the relations of master and subject to be expressed in an unequal society. The case under consideration shows such a supposition to be false. For more on this subject see Britto, *Diglossia*, pp. 37–45.

37. Frishman expresses his unequivocal opposition to the democratization of the Hebrew language in his remarks on Ben-Yehuda’s enterprise; see Frishman, *Collected Writings* 2, p. 64. For more on this topic see Parush, *National Ideology and Literary Canon*, pp. 96–100. On traditional society’s objections to the democratization of the language and on diglossia as a means of preserving the existing social order see Parush, “The Criticism of Haskalah Rhetoric,” pp. 216–22, 233–39.

38. See above, Chapter 4.

39. Yosef Klauzner, for example, asserted that “Hebrew literature was then a literature for men alone,” and that Mendele wanted his literature to appeal to women as well. See Klauzner, *History of Modern Hebrew Literature* 6, p. 388.


43. Frishman, *Collected Writings* 1, p. 10.

44. Ibid.


The poem is included in Frishman’s collected poems, *Collected Writings* 6, pp. 20–21.

47. Frishman, *Collected Writings* 1, p. 11.

48. The period term *shrei higayon* refers to lyrical poetry.

49. For a view of the “mother-tongue” as the language of the “other” in certain feminist psychoanalytical approaches, see S. N. Garner, C. Kahane, and M. Sprengnether (eds.), *The (M)other Tongue*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1985. For a critical treatment of these topics see Jane Gallop, “Reading the Mother Tongue,” *Around 1981, Academic Feminist Literary Theory*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 57–66. With these approaches in mind, one may say that the distinction between Hebrew, as a language of men, and Yiddish, as a language of women, had complex and ramifying gender significations. On the one hand, the Hebrew language played a role in construing male gender identity by clearly demarking male separation from the mother tongue (Yiddish)—the chaotic language of the other ((M)other). On the other hand, the “feminine” Yiddish was the language which men spoke when studying the canonical, “masculine” Hebrew texts. For more on this topic see Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, p. 37.

50. Frishman writes about his attitude to Yiddish in a letter to Sholem Aleichem dated 1888: “I am not one of the authors of Jargon and I do not wish to graze in this field.” See David Frishman, *Igrot David Frishman* [Correspondence of David Frishman] (A. R. Malachi, ed.), Lily Frishman publisher, New York, 1927, p. 121. Yet in 1895 Frishman declared that he had recanted his opposition to Jargon: “Childish, it was childish of me to think the spoken language a non-language and its literature a non-literature and its authors as non-authors, to whom it does not dignify a man to deal with.” See Frishman, *Collected Writings* 1, p. 70.

51. Ibid., 10–11.
Notes to Pages 238–48

52. Ibid., 11–12.
53. At the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when women joined the readership for Hebrew it was seen as a sign of the great success of the national revival movement. This view was not shared by Frishman. In a letter from the editor, published in Hador in its first year, he ridicules those who regard the female Hebrew readership as a proof of the success of Zionism: “We have nationalism, we have revival, all now read, the girls begin to read, a new continent of readers we have, we are like every nation.” See Frishman, Hador 1 (1901–1902), no. 50, p. 11. For more on this issue see Miron, When Loners Come Together, pp. 25–26, n. 7.
54. A letter from YaLaG to “Mrs. Sheine Wolf” of Gordno,” 26 November 1881; see Gordon, Letters of Tel-Aviv, part 2, letter 203, p. 3. A similar distinction between women’s style and men’s style was put forward by YaLaG when he responded in his diaries to the Hebrew letters of the “maiden from Tsaritsin”: “A second letter from the maiden . . . from Tsaritsin [ . . . ] and the girl is truly learned and knows the Hebrew Tongue, but there is a melamed in her home and he is the one who corrects or edits her letters in the Holy Language. [ . . . ] I will not deny that to me too it seems that the letters of the girl [show] that “the hand of Israel [i.e., a male] is in it,” as she employs the language of the Sages, which girls cannot know as they are not taught Talmud.” See Gordon, Collected Writings, p. 325.
55. See, for example, Kovner, “Investigation” (in Hebrew), Collected Writings, p. 7–22; Papirna, New Decanter, Ancient Contents: Collected Writings, pp. 24–33, 36–49. On Mendele’s conception of language see below, n. 57.
57. On Mendele’s objection to the scholarly-interpretive use of Hebrew and his approach to the creation of an alternative linguistic conception see Fishler and Parush, “Between ‘Written Scripture’ and ‘Spoken Scripture’ in the Writings of Mendele Mokher Seforim,” pp. 253–82.
58. See Miron, From Romance to the Novel, pp. 32–34.
59. Frishman, Collected Writings 1, p. 7.
60. Although Frishman supported Chaya Shapira and published her first story, “Shoshanim,” in Hador, which he edited, he did not conceal his reservations about her; see Frishman, Collected Writings 1, pp. 190–95. By contrast, Frishman went out of his way to extol the female author Eliza Orzheshkova; see Collected Writings 2, pp. 140–43, as well as the poetry of Rosa Luxembourg; see Frishman, Seven New Letters on Literary Matters, pp. 180. Nevertheless, what Frishman wrote about George Eliot reveals his considerable skepticism about women’s talents or about the femininity of talented women. In this connection it is worth comparing Frishman’s remarks in the preface to his translation of Daniel Deronda (Warsaw, 1893), p. 3–6, to those in his essay “Herbert Spencer and George Eliot,” Collected Writings 4, pp. 216–24.

Conclusion

Glossary

**Aggadah (pl. aggadot):** Talmudic legends, homiletic expositions of the Bible, stories, folklore, anecdotes, or maxims, the content of which is not considered to be legally binding.

**Apikores:** Heretic.

**Ashkenaz:** Name generally applied in medieval rabbinical literature to Germany.

**Ashkenazi (pl. Ashkenazim):** German or West-, Central-, or Eastern-European Jews; as contrasted with Sephardim.

**Badkhan:** Jester and master of ceremonies, particularly at traditional Jewish weddings.

**Bar Mitzvah:** Ceremony marking the initiation of a Jewish boy at the age of thirteen into adulthood and full religious obligation.

**Beduta:** Fabrication, prevarication.

**Beit Midrash:** School for higher rabbinic learning; often attached to or used as a synagogue.

**Belfer:** Instructor’s aid in a heder.

**Bove Buch (Bove Maaseh):** The Middle Ages tales of the English knight Sir Bevis of Southampton translated into Yiddish.

**Centura Ventura:** A translation to Yiddish of some of the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor.

**Drashah:** Sermon, exposition of a sacred text.

**Evil eye:** Malicious force associated with the demonic.

**Ezrat Nashim:** The women’s section in the synagogue, usually attached but separate from the main congregation hall.

**Goy:** Non-Jew.

**Haftarah:** A portion from the prophets read after the reading from the Torah on Sabbath.

**Haskamah:** Ratification by an authority of a new book, printed in its opening pages.

**Halachah:** Traditional Jewish law.

**Haredi:** Devout Jew; in modern parlance, ultraorthodox.

**Haredim:** Jewish religious orthodoxy.

**Hasid (pl. Hasidim):** Adherent of the mystically oriented Jewish religious sect of Hasidism.

**Hasidism:** Mystically oriented religious movement originating with Rabbi Israel Ba’al Shem Tov in the mid-eighteenth century.

**Haskalah:** “Jewish Enlightenment”; movement for spreading modern secular European culture among Jews, c. 1750–1880; an adherent is a Maskil (pl. Maskilim).

**Hazan:** Cantor who intones the liturgy and leads the prayers in the synagogue.

**Heder:** Lit. “room”; religious elementary school, generally for boys.

**Humash:** Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible.

**Kabbalah:** The Jewish mystical tradition.
Glossary

Kli: Article, armament, garment.
Kosher: Ritually fit for consumption; legitimate; religiously approved.
Laaz: Non-Jewish languages.
Maggid: Popular preacher.
Maskil (pl. Maskilim): Adherent of the Haskalah; Jewish Enlightenment figure.
Mazel tov: Good luck.
Melamed: Instructor in traditional elementary Jewish school.
Melitz: Poet, rhetorician of Hebrew biblicisms.
Melitzah: In Middle Ages, elegant poetic style; in modern usage, florid style using biblical or talmudic phraseology.
Midrash: An interpretation of the Bible, different from its literal meaning.
Mikveh: Ritual bath.
Mishnah: Earliest codification of Jewish law.
Mitnaged (pl. Mitnagdim): Orthodox rationalist mainly from Lithuania and White Russia, opponent of Hasidism.
Mitzvah: Biblical or rabbinic injunction; applied also to good or charitable deeds.
Mai ka mashma lan: What does this mean to tell us.
Pale of Settlement: Twenty-five provinces of czarist Russia where Jews were permitted permanent residence.
Pilpul: Clever (or seemingly pointless) talmudic or legalist dialectics.
Poskim: Renderers of verdicts in Jewish Law.
Reb, Rebbe: Yiddish form for rabbi; applied generally to a teacher or hasidic rabbi.
Rebbetzin: Rabbi's wife.
Shrayber: Tutor of penmanship.
Sepharadi: Spanish Jew or descendent thereof (often Middle Eastern); contrasts with Ashkenazi.
Shekhinah: Divine Presence.
Shtetl: Jewish small-town community in Eastern Europe.
Shtibl: Small prayer house.
Siddur: Prayerbook.
Talmud: Compendium of discussions on the Mishnah by scholars and jurists in the Babylonian and Jerusalem academies over a period of several centuries; canonized in the early sixth century.
Talmud Torah: Jewish religious public elementary school.
Taytsh: Old Yiddish.
Tiflut: Promiscuity.
Tisha Be'Av: Ninth of the month of Av; fast day commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples.
Tkhnah: Lit. “supplication”; Yiddish-language prayers intended especially for women.
Torah: The Pentateuch; also the entire body of traditional Jewish teaching and literature.
Treyfe-upsul: “Filth and abomination.”
Trefah: Food that is not Kosher.
Tseeina Ur’eina: An exegetical reading in Yiddish of the Pentateuch, the haftarot, and the five scrolls, used primarily by women.
**Glossary**

**Tzaddik:** Hasidic rabbi or leader; person outstanding for his faith and piety.

**Yeshiva:** Jewish traditional academy devoted primarily to study of the Talmud and rabbinic literature.

**Yosiphon:** A Hebrew history of the Jews based on Josephus Flavius. The book has been translated into Yiddish.

**Zogerke:** Reciter; woman prompter in synagogue.
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