

WHY MEDIEVAL HEBREW STUDIES?
SOME THOUGHTS ON STEFAN C. REIF'S INAUGURAL LECTURE (1999)

Starting point for the following considerations is Stefan Reif's erudite inaugural lecture *Why Medieval Hebrew Studies?*, originally delivered late 1999 on the occasion of his being appointed the first holder of the chair in Medieval Hebrew Studies in the University of Cambridge.¹ If the title of Reif's oration suggests a playful questioning of the importance of those studies, their disciplinary content and interdisciplinary potential, the actual text bears a rather more introductory and apologetic stamp. Rather than indulging in methodological speculation, Reif's aim was to justify the creation of a new Cambridge chair devoted to the study of something as 'exotic' and particular as medieval Jewish culture. In his own words, he intended 'to demonstrate (...) the degree to which many medieval Jewish sources are worthy of serious attention and can be intellectually stimulating, culturally inspiring, and academically challenging' (p. 49f.).

Needless to say, Reif succeeded very well in demonstrating the academic viability of his medieval sources, with the help of a colourful concatenation of texts which, according to the publisher's blurb, all testified to 'stunning theology, *super-rational* exegesis, and *surprisingly scientific* attitudes...' ² – no Dark Ages here! What is more important, however, is that throughout his learned account Reif does show himself aware of methodological problems pertaining to Jewish historiography in general (e.g., orientalism, the lachrymose approach of Jewish history) and to the medieval corpus in particular. It is his treatment of one such problem, that of historical periodization, which I think deserves some further reflection here.

While meditating upon the professorial title of 'Medieval Hebrew Studies' Reif critically examined its various constituents, devoting a

¹ S.C. Reif, *Why Medieval Hebrew Studies? An Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Cambridge in the School of Pythagoras, St John's College, on Thursday 11th November 1999* (Cambridge 2001).

² Emphasis mine.

lengthy section to the original conception of 'the Middle Ages' as the intellectually backward era between the two great cultures of Antiquity on the one hand and the Renaissance on the other. After concluding that this biased notion has been rightly rejected by most twentieth-century historians, he then pointed out that within the context of Hebrew and Jewish studies the concept was even more problematic. 'One could of course decline,' he ventured, 'to use it at all and partition Jewish intellectual history in a distinctly different manner' (p. 16). My heart leapt upon reading this suggestion, for I had been struggling with the dubious juxtaposition of the terms 'Jewish' and 'medieval' on many occasions. Being a relic from the times when Jewish scholars began to reconstruct their history with the help of European paradigms, the notion of 'a medieval period' has always been utterly foreign to the contents of Jewish history. To use it – at least that was my experience – could have serious consequences for the interpretation and evaluation of Jewish texts, genres, and authors, both medieval and (early-)modern.

Having different priorities, however, Reif continued by claiming that abandoning the concept, theoretically attractive though this might seem, would 'lead to all manner of confusion, driving unnecessary wedges between intellectual historians in different disciplines' (p. 16). He decided, if only for the sake of convenience, that one should postulate such a thing as 'the Jewish Middle Ages', quickly defined the period as the era between rabbinic antiquity and the rise of modern liberal thought *à la* Spinoza (p. 17), and embarked upon its cultural rehabilitation. He did not substantiate his use of the predicate 'modern', nor did he take into account the fact that present-day scholarship recognises numerous 'alternative paths to modernity'³ throughout the Jewish Diaspora. This newly recognised pluriformity not only rules out '*the* beginning of modernity' as '*the* end of *the* Middle Ages'. It also illustrates the fact that Jewish history, spread over the four corners of the world and complicated by continuous uprooting and migration, is governed by dynamics that ignore any clear-cut periodization. Or at the very least, its continuities and discontinuities defy the artificial boundaries that have been superimposed, perhaps only slightly more successfully, upon Western history.

³ The expression is borrowed from Y. Kaplan, 'An Alternative Path to Modernity', in idem, *An Alternative Path to Modernity. The Sephardi Diaspora in Western Europe*. Brill's Series in Jewish Studies 28 (Leiden 2000) 1-28.

It may be clear that, in bringing up the issue in the first place, Reif tacitly acknowledged the relevance of this – none too revolutionary – observation. Unfortunately the nature of his lecture forced him to opt for maximum clarity, and he had to ignore its implications. Within the framework of this little essay, however, we do have the opportunity to experiment and explore the possibility of abolishing the word ‘medieval’ from our analyses of ‘medieval’ Jewish texts. One way would be to apply Ockham’s famous razor technique: if Jewish historiography never had any intrinsic need for the concept of Middle Ages, why introduce it? What does it add to our understanding of the material in question if not false expectations and foreign criteria? I was struck by this dilemma when I was asked, earlier in 2001, to present a few thoughts on the ‘histories of Jewish literature’ that were compiled by various exponents of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.⁴ Needless to say these literary inventories all were emancipatory in character. By defining Jewish literature in the broadest sense and compiling exhaustive lists of its highlights, their authors succeeded in proving, to themselves as well as to their surroundings, that the Jews were a cultured nation. ‘Culture’ being defined in contemporary European terms, virtually all definitions and classifications in these monuments of Jewish literacy were derived from Western literary criteria.

In those early attempts, too, periodization must have been problematic. Yet one cannot escape the impression that in some cases scholars simply decided to let rhetoric prevail over historical plausibility. Witness, for example, the titles of Moritz Steinschneider’s *Jewish Literature of the eighth to the eighteenth centuries* (New York 1962²) or, many years later, of Eisig Silberschlag’s *From Renaissance to Renaissance. Hebrew Literature from 1492 to 1970* (New York 1973). The first volume of Israel Zinberg’s chronological *Geshikhte fun Literatur bay Yidn* (Vilna 1929, etc.) was devoted to the early Jewish Middle Ages, which according to Zinberg started when the anonymous rabbinic collective of late Antiquity was superseded by individual authors, and the idiosyncratic hermeneutics of the early rabbis finally was replaced by Western genres. In

⁴ Cf. my unpublished paper *From the History of Hebrew Literature to Jewish Literary History* (in Dutch), presented at the colloquium ‘May we, or may we not? On Literature and the Writing of its History’, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Institute of Culture and History, 2 February 2001.

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