

The 19th century introduced an era of nationalism in Europe and the Balkans. The French invasions and the spread of their propaganda under Napoleon stimulated peoples to activate their dreams of independence from the Ottoman Turks and helped more ancient peoples to rise in revolt in order to resurrect their ancient states. The contribution of *Sepher Yosippon* to Balkan nationalism anticipated the rise of Zionism in Eastern Europe by a generation where it continued to serve the Jews well in their quest for nationalism.

The appearance of British imperialism in the eastern Mediterranean through the travels of Benjamin Disraeli which served him well when he became prime minister and the philanthropist Moses Montefiore whose largess to local communities, especially in Greece, paralleled his attempts to purchase Palestine from Mehmet Ali, the pasha of the Ottoman province of Egypt. His mission may well have been the source behind the messianic call for *bayyit shlishi* by Yehudah Alqala'i: *bayit shlishi berkhu et ha-shem be-`osher kemo she-amar Haggai*. Alqala'i too may have been influenced by the career of Rabbi Yehudah Bibas of Corfu. The latter was the scion of generations of scholars who served throughout the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to Safed. The anglophile Bibas pursued his studies, begun in Gibraltar and continued in Italy and perhaps even earned a degree there. As rabbi of Corfu he attempted to westernize the educational system which he emphasized in his meetings with Alqala'i and the Scottish missionaries Bonar and M'Cheyne who left us their important report, *Narrative and Mission of Inquiry to the Jews in 1839*. Bibas impressed each of these with his innovative ideas and was an important stimulus to the return to the ancestral homeland of youth educated in the modern manner that he had absorbed from his experiences in London and Italy.

Apparently Rabbi Bibas introduced these ideas to the Jews of Rumania who were cited as praising his efforts to introduce modern science and military experience in anticipation in preparation for a victorious return to the ancestral homeland in the land of Ottoman 'Palestine'. [Shabbtai Zvi had already called for an army of Jewish youth consisting of both genders to liberate the land of Israel.] Bibas stressed modern studies, which he called "the seven wisdoms or sciences ... such as music, astronomy, etc You must therefore lay aside the study of the law and take the medicine [since Jews are sick, ignorant and degraded] which is the sever wisdoms or sciences..." Rabbi Bibas was caught up in the fever of modernization that entered the Balkans in the wake of the French and Greek revolutions. His contemporary Rabbi Yehudah Alqala'i was also caught up in the two intertwining streams of revolution in the Balkans, that of the secular revolutions and that of the messianic excitement anticipating the year 1840.

While 1740 has been a messianic year primarily in the Sabbatian tradition of the Balkans, 1840 was to give rise to greater excitement that spread from England through the Balkans to India. While the pragmatic D'Israeli could not be listed among the messianists, yet his novels were concerned with the theme as well as the reestablishment of the Jewish nation in its ancestral homeland. In the 1830s he wrote a semi autobiography called *Contarini Fleming, a psychological Autobiography* (1832) and concurrently *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* [and] *The Rise of Iskander* (1833). The two books are quite opposite in their message. *Contarini Fleming* stresses "I am an Englishman. I have foreign roots, but do not be mistaken: I am of noble blood like you, and I will be a great statesman." *Alroy* stresses his superiority: "Know that my lineage is more ancient and more noble than any of you can imagine." And as *rosh hagolah* – as

D'Israeli denotes him! – *Alroy* wishes for a renewal of national redemption in the Land of Promise that Jews once controlled as their legacy and that he might be the national leader who would attain that redemption.

At the other end of the geographic spectrum, soon to come within the British orbit, there appeared in 1841 in Calcutta, a new edition of *Sepher Yosippon*, a book that I have argued in other circumstances is an aggressively nationalistic history of the Second Temple Period written in an incomparable Hebrew prose unmatched before the modern revival of Hebrew to which it contributed in its own way, e.g., Ben Yehudah. *Sepher Yosippon* is really the beginning of our Mediterranean journey and is one of the major vehicles alongside the Bible and its Rabbanite and Qaraite commentaries that provided a literary homeland for this dispersed nation. The verse of the Calcutta edition that designates the date is from Isaiah 11:11 – “On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant of his people (from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea)” and continues with a messianic vision of the peaceful ingathering of the exiles. Surely an apt verse for Elazar ben Mari Aharon Saadia Iraqi Hakohen ‘who hopes and seeks salvation from the the Living Lord’ to cite in the messianic expectation of the year 1840.

It is not clear whether this edition *preceded* the messianic call for *bayit shlishi* by Yehudah Alqala’i or even the Damascus Blood Libel which was likely seen as a prelude to the pangs of the messiah. Alqala’i had already acknowledged the impact of his discussions with Rabbi Bibas in 1838 about the implications of the approaching date of 1840. He left a large body of broadsheets and treatises to record his efforts to stimulate a renewal of Jewish settlement based on a return to agriculture. He also indirectly referred to Montefiore’s philanthropic contributions, and perhaps also in the background is D’Israeli’s emphasis on Britain’s potential role on the redemption of the Jews to Palestine in his citation of *Yosippon* in his treatise *Mevasser Tov: bayit rishon berkhu et ha-shem be-hokhmah kemo he-amar Shlomo* and *bayit sheni berkhu et ha-shem bigvurah kemo she-amar ha-Yosippon*. Later in the 19th century *Sepher Yosippon* would become a staple source for the Sephardi teachers of the *meldar* in Bulgaria who made use of the 18th-century translation of the text into Judeo-Spanish and in the original Hebrew during the 20th century. Alqala’i’s prolific publication program gained him many supporters and followers. Even Theodore Hertzl’s grandfather became one of his more active adherents and that background, in addition to Theodore’s *heder* training, may have influenced Hertzl’s later forays into Zionism even before his experiences during the Dreyfus trial. It is clear that the continuing influence of *Sepher Yosippon* on Jewish intellectuals throughout the period of discussion – until World War I and even later – would be a factor in the emergence of Zionism both among the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim (the latter broadly defined to include all non Ashkenazi Jews) and later the literary and secular leaders of the Yishuv that would develop in Ottoman Palestine after the turn of the twentieth century.

The question for us then is – given the messianic excitement and expectation from Britain and France [the removal of Napoleon’s body to Paris in 1840 generated quite a stir as far as Poland among Chrisitans and Frankists and possibly Jews as well] through the Balkans and Eastern Europe and into the Middle East – how did it play out in the Jewish communities of the Balkans. This is not the forum to explore the Frankist elements in Polish nationalist circles and Jacob Frank’s earlier connections with qabbalists in Salonika, Istanbul, and Jerusalem. That story was explored briefly by Abraham Duker and others already sixty years ago and still needs to be further researched. We have two options: one is that of Bibas and Alqala’i who called for a

renewal of the Jewish people and their adoption of modern educational techniques and a return to agriculture in the ancestral home including study of the Hebrew language. The call of Alqala'i anticipates the later Zionist slogan 'livnot u-lehibanot bah'.

The other option was to wait for the messiah to appear, as did many of the Hasidim from Eastern Europe to the Land of Israel, save for a few rabbis who eschewed the messianic temptation and categorically denounced the messianic temptation – even if it were predicted in the Zohar. Even so recent work has explored the Hasidic emigration to Palestine in anticipation of the messianic year 1840. Apparently these few rabbis were correct in their denunciation since some, if not many, Jews did convert to Christianity in the wake of the failure of the messiah to appear on schedule. We do not hear of any mass conversions among the Sephardim of the Balkans however. It would be another half century before the Dreyfus affair catapulted Theodore Herzl into that role among the various factionalized Jewish world yearning for salvation on the eve of the turning of the millennium that so excited the Christian world.

Prior to the appearance of the Calcutta edition, there appeared two editions of *Sepher Yosippon* in English in New England [Worcester, Massachusetts in 1803 and Vermont in 1817], each somewhat anti-Jewish in its Christian interpretation of the fall of Jerusalem but signaling some kind of religious anticipation that would manifest in the Great Revival of the nineteenth century and in particular surrounding 1840. Whiston's translation of Josephus was continually reprinted.

Meanwhile Josephus was being reintroduced by Jewish scholars to Jewish readers, primarily the Wissenschaft des Judenthums through the multivolume history of Heinrich Graetz and the later translation (with commentary of course) by Shaul Rabinowitz [1879 - third printing beginning in 1890]. This Hebrew edition emphasized the quality of its Hebrew, its indebtedness to Zunz and Graetz for their research, and its influence since its appearance on the Jews of Russia and the East. Secular history was being taught and so Graetz (and Josephus) would parallel *mutatis mutandis* the influence of Mendelsohn's *Be'ur* on the acquisition of German among the yeshivah students. Already Dubnow was writing his massive history in Russian partly based on Graetz. The earlier translation of Josephus into Hebrew, already called for by the Vilna Gaon at the end of the eighteenth century, was useful for those East European savants who did not have Latin or Greek [Kalman Shulman, *Milhemeth hayehudim im haromaim*, Vilna, 1884, 1913; *kadmaniyoth hayehudim*, Vilna, 1864 and the *Vita* in 1959 (freely from the German)]. A Russian translation of Josephus was also available.

Sepher Yosippon received a new or renewed readership through the efforts of Micah Ben Gurion who drew from its rich drama after his turn to a literary form of Zionism. In a continuing output he introduced his Nietzschean based military heroes drawn from this antique source in contradistinction to the traditional pietistic Talmudic sages as taught by the rabbis. His major excursion in his powerful little story of discovery in *Derekh Rehokah* (1898) had considerable influence well into the twentieth century and paralleled the rise of secular Zionism. The short story summarizes Yosippon's marshal contents and ends with the effects upon the hero of the story:

“Again I fell on my face and wept.

“Everything passed before me as if in a vision, yet it was all so distant from me. I could hardly believe that these heroes and blood drenched altars belonged to us, to our ancestors; even though I knew well our history from then to the present. I felt no bond connecting these men to us, to my father's house, to all our neighbors. “One question rose in my gut: Why were there men

like that only then? Why only then did they fight, win, and pursue? This question both provoked and escaped me.”

The affinities of this story to Yehudah ibn Moskoni’s reaction to Yosippon are not insignificant despite the difference of five and a half centuries. The impression on Berdyscewski can be compared with the impact war reportage from Bulgaria made on Eliezer ben Yehudah in his famous dream. As he relates: “Then once again at midnight. After reading the paper for some hours and giving thought to the Bulgarians and their future liberation, suddenly, something like lightning flashed across my mind, and my thought flew from the Shipka Pass in the Balkans to the fords of the Jordan in Palestine and I heard an astonishing inner voice calling to me: *The restoration of Israel and its language on the land of its ancestors.*” But unlike Ben Yehudah who found his inspiration in a foreign nationalist awakening, Berdyscewski found his in a classic Jewish source studied by every *yeshivah bocher*.

1898 was a crucial year for Berdyscewski. His lack of success in producing a marketable novel in German, though significant, may not be the major reason for his return to Jewish sources. Rather, 1898 was rife with the excitement of Herzl’s Zionist program which called for a new activist solution to the Jewish problems in western and Eastern Europe. Berdyscewski however caught the essence of the problem as a psychological one. It was not so much in the rootlessness of the wandering Jew, but rather it was in his lack of respect which only heroes of *basar vedam* could supply. He had read Nietzsche and was so impressed by his thesis of power that it became a major theme in his writings, countering the Talmudic anchorite whom he parodied in his stories. Most scholars agree that Berdyscewski wrote autobiographically. Hence we should read his story *Derekh Rehokah* as a turning point in his career in which he completed the shift from a religious *maskil* to a nationalist *maskil*.

Now Berdyscewski entered the great encyclopedic and anthologizing tradition of late 19th-century European scholarship. He would collect the tales of Jewish heroes and write stories presenting his Hebrew and Germanophone audience with national heroism as a counter to the tales of piety and scholarship that permeated Jewish literature. In Yosippon he found a Jewish precedent for the Nietzschean ‘will to power’ that fired his imagination. As a result of this activity Berdyscewski quickly emerged as a major influence on the yeshivah-bound males who read Talmud, Socialism, and Zionism. Recent scholarship has rediscovered the pervasive effect of Berdyscewski on the great writers of 20th-century Hebrew from Y.H. Brenner to Amos Oz – each freely admitted his indebtedness to Berdyscewski – but also on the great leaders of the Second Aliyah like David Ben Gurion – he easily shifted his name from Gruen to Gurion after reading Yosippon – Berl Katznelson, and others. A perusal of Ben Gurion diary notes the appearance of many names derived from Yosippon. What Berdyscewski had done was to fire the cannon of Yosippon out of the canon of the yeshivah and into the public arena as the mythopoesia of national liberation. It is not insignificant that in 1899 he began to sign with his new nom de plume – Micha Bin Gorion, the pseudepigraphal (perhaps!) author of Yosippon: Yosef ha-Kohen Ben Gorion.

The influence of Berdyscewski and Yosippon upon both Hebrew literature and the Zionist movement during the 20th century is best left for the next workshop where their effects should be considered seminal for the history of the Yishuv and its culture. But for the beginning of the new movement which was too willing to compromise on the Land of Israel for redemption, the sharp retort of the Jews of the Pale – based on an ancestral messianic tradition in the liturgy and the

centrality of Yosippon in the original and through Bin Gorion's literary output – scotched the compromise attempt to substitute Uganda for Palestine.

So, while western Jews rediscovered Josephus through translations and Graetz (in German, Hebrew, and English) the reservoir of East European Jews continued their love of Yosippon and his amanuensis. Though the darling of scholars, Josephus in his pedantic and apologetic fashion could not stimulate the growing nationalist sentiment among the Jews in the Russian Empire, the majority of whom had a copy of *Sepher Yosippon* in their *aron hasepharim* as attested in their biographies.