

The Jewish Reception of Josephus in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries in Eastern Europe

"One of the Greatest of the Ancient Scholars and Recorders of History":

The Image of Josephus Flavius in the Worldview of the Jewish Maskilim

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Theoretically the meaning of the workshop's title is clear: how Jews in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries accepted Josephus into the circles of their culture. But on second thought, some questions arise: why did Josephus need to be accepted? Is he a stranger to the Jewish culture? Some additional thought will clarify the issue. Josephus had two personae; this can be learnt to some extent, from his two different names: Joseph ben Matityahu or, more precisely, as he was known until the modern era, Josippon, and Titus Flavius Josephus. One name belongs to the Jews and the other belongs to the Christians. This workshop, it seems, deals with the latter.

There is more than one way to examine the image of Flavius Josephus in the Worldview of the Jewish Maskilim. In the light of Josephus' two personae I should like to suggest in this paper a perspective that is not necessarily the obvious one, - the perspective of the attitude to the Ancient Greek and Roman Culture. As I will argue, The Haskalah movement was the first to show the Jewish community that the Greco-Roman culture was the basis of European civilization. Acquaintance with the classical world, in this manner, contributes to acquaintance with contemporary Christian culture. Examining the reception of Josephus in comparison to the

reception of classical culture can show some parallels between those two processes, and help us understand the motivation and the practices of the Maskilim in building a new Jewish identity.

Among the various aspects that we can find in the Maskilim writings about the classical world, for instance philosophy, language or ancient history, one of the most interesting fields is the creation of a new pantheon of cultural heroes. The importance of the classic world is reflected not just in presenting classical figures such as Plato, Diogenes or Homer, but also in several important biographies of great Jewish persons. In some biographies, such as those of Moses Mendelssohn, Maimonides, or Azariah de' Rossi, the Maskilim writers chose to emphasize the connections between the Jewish persona and the classical culture. For example, the writers referred to the importance of the knowledge of foreign languages, especially Greek and Latin, in their heroes' life. The Haskalah movement's perception was that the ability to read Classical literature enabled those personae to become integrated with the gentiles surrounding them.

In this context, I will argue that Flavius Josephus was part of a new pantheon that was built by the Maskilim. However Josephus' figure constitutes for us a unique example, although a more complicated one, of the functions of the historic heroes in the Maskilim world. Where, for example, Maimonides was an integral component of the Jewish community and Diogenes the Greek philosopher was unknown to the Jewish community, Josephus, as I mentioned before, was not a total stranger and yet not totally familiar.

It seems that the Maskilim always sought ways to change the common images of their heroes in the Jewish community, and presented them in a new light. In order to insert

Maimonides into their own pantheon the Maskilim showed him less traditionally and more as a Man of the world. In contrast, in order to insert Diogenes into their pantheon, they emphasized his general morality and less his paganism. But with Josephus, in order to create the model they wanted, they had to keep his common Jewish image. The reception of Josephus, if so, was concentrated in his double personae: the familiar and the strange, the Jewish and the Christian. In other words, in order to accept Josephus the Maskilim needed to integrate him with Josippon.

Similar to other models Josephus was presented as a Jew who succeeded in reaching the apex of the culture then extant, thanks, among other reasons, to his excellent knowledge and understanding of Greco-Roman culture. But, in accordance with the complexity mentioned above, the Maskilim emphasized that he did all this while retaining his own Jewish identity.

Till the end of the 18th century the Maskilim published biographies of the majority of their Jewish historical heroes, for example Maimonides and Mendelssohn that were mentioned, or others such as Manasseh Ben Israel and Isaac Abravanel. Nevertheless there was no complete biography of Josephus in Hebrew till the second half of the 19th century. Josephus' appearance in the New Hebrew literature was somewhat similar to the appearance of the classical heroes of the Maskilim. Initially only his name was mentioned, then he was quoted generally and later more precisely. Succeeding this, his life story was published, again at first briefly and consequently more precisely. Ultimately his books were translated, first in adaptation and then fully.

However, in Ha'Measaf (the first Hebrew periodical) there is a biography of a man called Tabbai Ha'Hevroni (Tabbai of Hebron) which hints of the Haskalah Movement's approach toward Josephus at this early phase. This probably fictional story begins immediately after the

destruction of the Second Temple. The Roman legion soldiers discover Tabbai, a seven year old Jewish youngster, crying near his dead father. Titus arrives and starts speaking to him. At this stage the narrator tells us:

And the boy spoke Hebrew and Greek well, but in Latin he stuttered.

Then he answered in Greek...

[והנער דבר היטב לשון עברית ויונית, אך בלשון רומי הי' מגמגם. ויען ויאמר בלשון יוני...]

Afterward Titus took Tabbai to his own tent and then back to Rome with him:

He gave him to one of his friends, in order to bring him up and to teach him Roman language and literature... But with all his effort, Titus couldn't succeed in removing him from his Jewish religion, because the boy stood fast to his faith.¹

[ויתנהו שם לאחד מאוהביו לגדלו וללמדו לשון וספרי רומיים... אך בכל עמלו אשר עמל טיטוס להסירו מדת הישראלי, לא צלח בידו, כי הנער עמד באמונתו]

At the end of the story Tabbai uses his connection with the Roman senate to help the Jews in Alexandria against hostile locals.

As we can see, the fictional description of Tabbai's life is very similar to Josephus' real life. Therefore, in my opinion, we may assume that the character of Tabbai – which is depicted positively, indicates to us the positive attitude to Josephus. Furthermore, Tabbai's characteristics

¹ [Unknown], Tabbai Ha'Hevroni, *Ha'Measef*, 9 (1810), pp. 30-31.

– fluency in the classical languages, the friendship with Titus and the consistent loyalty to his people, become the most common Maskilic image of Josephus.

Indeed, Josephus' life is a fine example of the Maskilim's duality in integrating European and Jewish culture. On one hand Josephus was a famous historian in European culture since ancient times: the Christians and even the ancient pagans read his books. On the other hand he was a faithful Jew belonging to one of the elite families in Jerusalem and an important commander in the Jewish army. The description of Josephus in the 'Ha'Measef' as "One of the Greatest of the Ancient Scholars and Recorders of History"², combined with the fact that he "fought in the army, and he was a pious and God-fearing person"³ made him very close to the ideal of the New Jew, which the Maskilim wanted so much to create.

In the following years this image of Josephus became widespread and gradually was shaped into a new model, which was added to the Maskilim's available tools in their ideological struggle. In *Bikurei Ha'itim*, the successor of the *Ha'Measef* as the periodical of the Haskalah, we can find short notes similar to those in the *Ha'Measef* with somewhat more significance. For example, he is compared to Jeremiah and Isaac Abravanel.⁴ In other cases there are references and even short quotes from his books, and some writers lean on him to give credence to their arguments.⁵

² L, 'sicha' (conversation), *Ha'Measef*, 8 (1809), p. 226.

³ [Unknown], 'hazku yadayim rafot ve-birkayim koshlot ametsu' (Strengthen feeble hands and knees failed embrace), *Ha'Measef*, 4 (1788), p. 333.

⁴ Shalom hachohen, 'toldot ha'hacham don Isaac Abravanel' (the history of Don Isaac Abravanel), *Bikurei Ha'itim*, 1 (1820), p. 19.

⁵ Isaac Samuel Reggio, 'Sambation', *Bikurei Ha'itim*, 8 (1828), p. 50.

Additional progress in Josephus' acceptance was when Isaac Baer Levinsohn presented for the first time a short biography of him, in his seminal book *Te'uddah be-Yisrael* (1828). Levinsohn placed Josephus alongside other Jews who were proficient in foreign languages, such as Philo of Alexandria or Maimonides.⁶ He also added a long footnote describing Josephus' life. Here we can find for the first time the triple aspects of Josephus in unison: he was a priest, he was a commander in the army and he wrote famous books in Greek.

At the same time that the use of Josephus spread in the Hebrew culture, the reception of the classical culture proceeded. For instance, fragments of Cicero and Seneca's moral philosophy were published as part of Hebrew articles in the two platforms of Haskalah literature at that time, *Bikurei Ha'itim* and *Kerem Chemed*.⁷ Indeed those two phenomena – Josephus' reception and the classical culture reception were parallels throughout the 19th and the early 20th century, and were tied up to each other in several ways. On the one hand, while the classical world was increasingly admired by the Maskilim and more popular among the Hebrew readers, the classical persona of Josephus became more important. On the other hand, the more Josephus became part of the Hebrew Culture, the more his classical connection helped to introduce the Greco- Roman world to the Hebrew readers.

Towards the middle of the 19th century Josephus' books became a regular reference in Hebrew essays about Eretz Israel and Jewish history. Nachman Krochmal and Joseph Schwarz, for example, quote at length from "The Jewish War" and "The Jewish Antiquities". The natural

⁶ Isaac Baer Levinsohn, *Te'uddah be-Yisrael* (Testimony in Israel), Vilnius & Grodno 1828, p. 44.

⁷ [Unknown], '*drush la'naar ha'mashlim shlosh esre shana*' (homiletic literature to a boy who completes thirteen years), *Bikurei Ha'itim*, 8 (1828), p. 115; Samson Bloch Ha'Levi, '*michtav Teth*' (letter 9), *Kerem Chemed*, 1(1833), pp. 24-26.

next step was publication of a full translation of one of Josephus' books. In the same way that we look at the reprinting of Maimonides' "The Guide for the Perplexed" in 1742 as a symbolic cultural turning point for Ashkenazi Jewry, we can look at the initial reprinting of Josephus' books as a pivotal point in his reception into the Hebrew culture.

In 1858 the publishing house of Hamagid reprinted an old translation by Shmuel Sholem of "Against Apion". This translation is found at the end of "Sefer Yuhasin" that was published in 1566 in Constantinople. In accordance with his triple image, Josephus was presented in the short preface to the translation as a priest from Jerusalem, a governor and a soldier. The publishers emphasize that even when he was situated in the king's palaces in Rome he never abandoned his humiliated nation and defended his people throughout his writings:

For this precious and supreme purpose, he wrote his books which even to this day are a source of enlightenment... In this book [Against Apion] we see the admired hero, a warrior in battle wielding weapons of holiness, the Jew who is loyal to his people and his God...⁸

[לתכלית היקר ונשגב הזה, חבר את ספריו המאירים עד היום...בו [בספר נגד אפיון]
אנו רואים הגבור הנערץ, לוחם מלחמת תנופה בנשקי קדש, בו אנו רואים את
היהודי הנאמן לאלהיו ועמו]

The Maskilim, thus, shaped "their Josephus" with full attention to his personality, returning again and again to his real life. His books about the Jews were held in high esteem, to a large extent based on the fact that he had been a successful writer among the non-Jews.

⁸ The publishers, 'ha'mahberet neged apion' (the notebook against apion), kadmut ha'yehudim neged apion (Antiquity of the Jews against apion), Lyck 1858, p. 1 [my numbered]

All the above shows that it in fact it was Josephus' life and persona that attracted the Maskilim, rather his books. It is not surprising then that the major project of Josephus' reception, Kalman Shulman's translations, which began one year later in 1859, opened with the publishing of Josephus' autobiography – after all his personal story was of prime importance in the Maskilim eyes. The opening page of this translation would appear to sum up the course of the Maskilic reception of Josephus:

A History of Josephus: the history of the anointed priest, Captain of the Jewish army, scion of the High Priests' lineage, and descendant from roots of the Hasmonean kings, the great writer and wonderful recorder, renowned supremely, named Joseph ben Matityahu from the holy city Jerusalem t.v.b.b (known as Josephus Flavius). This History he wrote in the Greek language, and it has been translated many times into European languages and now, for the first time, also into the Holy Language... by Kalman Shulman⁹

[תולדות יוסף: והוא תולדות הכהן המשיח ושר צבא היהודים, חטר מגזע הכהנים הגדולים, ונצר משרשי מלכי החשמונאים, הסופר הגדול והמוזכיר הנפלא הנודע למשגב בשם יוסף בן מתתיהו מעיר הקדושה ירושלים תוב"ב (המכונה יוזיפוס פלאוויוס). תולדותיו אלה כתבה ידו בלשון יון, ונעתקו פעמים רבות ללשונות עמי איירופא, ועתה בפעם הראשונה גם לשפת הקדש... על ידי קלמן שולמאן]

The presentation of the translation opens with the traditional image of Josephus, continues to describe his honorable place among the Gentiles and concludes with the Maskilic action:

⁹ Kalman Shulman, *toldot Yosef* (History of Joseph), Vilnius 1859, front page.

translating the book into Hebrew supposedly from the Greek. In my opinion, this description of Josephus is very similar to the way the Maskilim wanted to see themselves. And truly the book ends with the final note of Shulman, describing Josephus as: “Maskil hero and honorable man”.¹⁰

In the following year Shulman published the first biography of Josephus in Hebrew in the periodical Ha’Karmel. In his long description of Josephus' life, Shulman suggests a fascinating comparison between the fall of Yodfat (Jotapata) and the fall of Troy:

And if that celebrated city which made its name among the stars, and that because of a beautiful woman who betrayed the friend of her youth, was made desolate and a wasteland forever, yet its name is still illustrious among the nations, and from Homer, the first poet of Greece to this day, were sung in its honor numerous sonnets, and songs of lament without limit; how can the glory of the city named Yodfat not be a thousand times greater...¹¹

[ואם העיר הַהֶלֶלָה ההיא אשר בין כוכבים שמה קנה!], ואשר בגלל אשת חן הבוגדת באלוף נעוריה, היתה לשמה! [! ותל עולם, ובכל זאת מהלל שמה בגוים, ומן האַמער ראש משוררי יון ועד היום הזה, הושר לכבודה שירי תהלה אין חקר, ושירי נהי אין מספר; איך לא יגדל ממנה אלף פעמים שם כבוד העיר יודפת...]

The parallels here are not only between the two cities and the heroes who defended them but it is also a parallel between the two writers who recounted the story of those cities: Josephus and Homer, who was at this time, as stated above, himself a writer in the process of reception into the

¹⁰ Ibid. 100.

¹¹ Kalman Shulman, ‘toldot yosef ben matitya hacoheh ha’ mashuah ha’ mchune Flavius Josephus (the history of the anointed priest Joseph ben Matityah known as Flavius Josephus), *Ha’carmel*, 12 (1860), p. 96.

Hebrew culture. In fact a year afterwards, in 1861, the first biography of Homer was published in Ha'Meliz.

In the following decades Josephus' works were translated in various ways. In 1868 "Against Apion" was printed in London, this time translated from the ancient Greek, but not as an independent book, but rather as a supplement to a book on astronomy. Shulman himself published two more translations of Josephus' books, and these continued to be printed, sometimes with new additions and comments. In 1884, for instance, a second edition of "The Wars of the Jews against the Romans" was published, this time with a new comprehensive preface by Shulman which emphasized more than ever that Josephus "read many books of Greek scholarship and books of their poets and philosophers".¹²

A further step in the reception of the classical culture commenced in the 1920s: For the first time, works from the Greco-Roman world were translated from the original languages into Hebrew in full, and were published as independent books. The writings of Anacreon, Plato and Sophocles, for example, were printed as part of the Stybel publishing house's influential project of translation. Simultaneously, as part of the same project, the works of Josephus were translated from ancient Greek by Jacob Naftali Simchoni and were published as independent books for the first time. In many senses, the dual process of reception that started in Ha'Measef was completed.

In 1885 Moshe Leib Lilienblum published his critique on Judah Leib Gordon's poetry. In his discussion of the poem 'Between Lions' Teeth' Lilienblum attacked Gordon's view that the

¹² Kalman Shulman, *milhamot ha'yehudim im ha'romaim* (The Wars of the Jews Against the Romans), Vilnius 1884 (second edition), p. 27.

rabbinic leadership was responsible for the failure of the revolt against the Roman Empire. Not the rabbis were to blame for the destruction of the second Temple, Lilienblum says, but rather, "Only the *assimilated Maskilim*, those that loved the Romans, and were proficient in Greek literature, like Josephus Flavius",¹³ were guilty of the destruction. My interest in Lilienblum's words is not in his national critique on Josephus but in his suggestion that there is a link between the Modern Maskilim, the Greco-Roman culture and Josephus. As I have tried to illustrate in this paper, this connection wasn't strange to the Maskilim. In fact, in many ways, they helped to create this connection and it assisted them in their struggle to change the borders of Jewish culture. For us, I hope, it has been revealing to discover some of the unfamiliar ways of the reception processes that constituted Maskilim lines of thought and their actions.

¹³ Moshe Leib Lilienblum, *'kol kitvey'* (Complete works) iii, Odessa, 1912, P. 61. Emphasis in the original.