Ladino Transitions

View PDF

Dr. Lehmann is Associate Professor of History and Jewish Studies at Indiana University. He is author of an informative volume “Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottomon Sephardic Culture,” published by Indiana University Press, 2005, as well as of other scholarly works. This article appears in issue 13 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Ladino Transitions:

Vernacular Religious Literature and the Modernization of Ottoman Jewry[1]

By Matthias B. Lehmann

One of the earliest newspapers that appeared in Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language of the Ottoman Jews, was *Sha‘arei Mizrah* (later known as *Puertas de Oriente*), published in the port city of Izmir since the mid-1840s. In one of its first issues, *Sha‘arei Mizrah* expressed clearly the educational agenda of the nascent Ladino press: the editor thanked the Ottoman authorities for having granted permission for the newspaper to be published and declared with much confidence that this must have been due to Sultan Abdülhamid’s desire to see his subjects progress and be educated. “Being aware that the benefits of printing are such that we can learn about every aspect of science, just like the most civilized nations of Europe,” the authorities had granted their support to the publication of this new Ladino journal, and its editor expressed his hope that “thus we will be able to prosper in everything” and will become “worthy subjects of such a gracious and just sovereign.” These phrases represent the themes that set the agenda for the political and cultural changes in Ottoman Sephardic society promoted by the secular Judeo-Spanish press throughout the second half of the nineteenth century: Ottoman patriotism, the desire for a regained prosperity through modern education, and the rhetoric of “civilizational progress” inspired by Western, European culture.

After timid beginnings in the 1840s, the newspapers in Ladino flourished from the 1860s onwards and were the most important vehicle in spreading the politics of westernization and modernization among the Sephardic communities of Turkey and the Balkans. Secular genres in Ladino literature such as the novel, adapted from Western (in particular French) literature, developed in the framework of a growing Judeo-Spanish public sphere. Historians have pointed out the significance of these secular genres of Ladino literature and in particular of the new Judeo-Spanish newspapers for the modernization of Ottoman Jewry in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. As a force of change and modernization, they reinforced the effect of two other agents of change: the political-legal reforms adopted by the Ottoman state, the *tanzimat* of the nineteenth century; and the influence of the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle, which advanced its own westernizing agenda through a network of schools that it opened throughout the Ottoman Empire. In fact, if the direct reach of the Alliance was limited to a small, westernizing elite, the writers of Ladino literature and Ladino newspapers were broadcasting its ideal of modernization through westernization to an ever increasing audience of Ottoman Jews.

If, however, we want to understand the beginnings of the modern transformation of Ottoman Jewry—its "genealogy of modernity"—then we need to go back to the beginnings of Ladino literature in the eighteenth century. If the combined effect of *tanzimat*, the Alliance schools, and a secular Ladino public sphere profoundly transformed Ottoman Jewry in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, this transformation was only possible because the rise of a vernacular Judeo-Spanish literature beginning in the eighteenth century had prepared the ground. This early stage of Ladino literature has attracted surprisingly little attention among historians who still tend to privilege the external forces, imperial-governmental or European, in their accounts of Ottoman Jewish transitions in the modern age. In those accounts, Ottoman Jews mostly *responded* to change, but they didn't contribute to it. In particular, the Ottoman rabbis are usually seen as a rather passive force, steeped in their traditionalism, and responding to developments around them but never quite being part of the story. In spite of themselves, however, these rabbis had laid the foundations for the subsequent flourishing of Ladino print culture, and thus, the traditional leadership contributed, in spite of itself, to the rise of modern Sephardic culture, including its more secular manifestations.

When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, some of the exiles appeared in Ottoman cities soon after, as early as the summer of 1492 in the case of Constantinople. The first Spanish-Jewish immigrants were followed by subsequent waves of Sephardic immigration, some of whom arrived by

way of Italy or North Africa in the course of the sixteenth century, then by *conversos* who had been forced to convert to Christianity in Spain (1492) or in Portugal (in 1497) and left the Iberian peninsula in a constant trickle of emigration throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Spanish Jews brought with them their religious-cultural traditions and, given their demographic predominance in many parts of the Ottoman Empire, soon established their primacy over the local, mostly Greek-speaking Jews. They also brought with them their own language, Castilian Spanish, which morphed into a distinct form of Judeo-Spanish—the vernacular language of the Ottoman Sephardim also called Ladino. Their influence was such that Judeo-Spanish became *the* Jewish language in the Balkans and in Asia Minor, and it persisted as a distinct language of the Sephardic community even in places where the immigrants encountered a strong Arabic-speaking Jewish community, for example in Aleppo or in Jerusalem. As a matter of fact, in spite of the promotion of French literacy in the Alliance schools and the commitment to educate the Jewish public in Turkish which was professed by many Ottoman Jewish intellectuals, still at the turn of the twentieth century some 85 percent of Jews in Turkey declared that Ladino was their first language.

In spite of the predominance of Ladino as a spoken language, few books were published in Judeo-Spanish before the eighteenth century. Those that were printed—Spanish Jews had introduced the printing press into the Ottoman Empire as early as 1493—were largely directed at former *conversos* who needed vernacular literature to facilitate their return to Judaism after having escaped the Inquisition. But these texts remained marginal in an Ottoman Jewish literature that continued to be written and published in Hebrew. One author who did write in Judeo-Spanish, including on secular topics, was Rabbi Moses Almosnino. In the 1560s, Almosnino was part of a Jewish mission from Salonika to the imperial government in Istanbul in order to negotiate more favorable economic conditions for his community. During the lengthy visit to the imperial capital, Almosnino wrote a short history of the Ottoman sultans and an extensive description of the city, all of it in the Judeo-Spanish language. His work was printed, in Latin characters—though outside the Empire, in 1638 in Madrid.

It was only in the second quarter of the eighteenth century that Ladino emerged as a language of literature. Credited with this development are primarily two figures, both living and working in the imperial capital Istanbul: Jacob Huli, who published the first volume of his encyclopedic Bible commentary, the *Me?am Lo?ez*, in 1730; and Abraham Asa, a prolific translator and author of literature in the Judeo-Spanish vernacular. Asa published the first complete Ladino translation of the Bible between 1739 and 1745, explaining the educational reasoning behind his monumental effort in the introduction to one of the volumes:

> David Qimhi [a medieval biblical exegete] explains that what sustained the Jews in their exile was their ceaseless study of the Bible. And Isaac Abrabanel [a leader of Spanish Jewry in 1492] says that the reason for the expulsion from Spain was that people did not study Scripture; while they had more than five thousand rabbis of universal fame, the masses did not read the Bible.

Since most people do not understand what they are reading when they recite the biblical text in Hebrew, Asa went on to say, "the printer Jonah [Ashkenazi] wanted … to print the Bible in Ladino, well translated [*bien ladinado*], and including Rashi's [classical biblical] commentary."

These remarks by Abraham Asa capture the educational ethos of a group of writers who I call the "vernacular rabbis." These rabbis responded to what they perceived as the cultural decline of Ottoman Jewry and to a much broader educational ideal that developed as a corollary of the Lurianic school of Jewish mysticism coming out of sixteenth century Ottoman Palestine. They were no longer content with a learned discourse limited to the rabbinic elite and remaining beyond the grasp of most Ottoman Jews. Instead, they developed an educational ideal which appealed to the Ottoman Jewish "masses." The fact that Asa explicitly acknowledged the role of Jonah Ashkenazi, the printer of many of his and numerous other Ladino works, further testifies to the close relation between an emerging group of scholars, printers, intellectuals, and rabbis who produced and disseminated a growing number of books in the vernacular language of the masses. In due course, Asa added translations from the Hebrew of the prayer book, a digest of rabbinic law, rabbinic ethical writings, and even a "History of the Ottoman Kings."

Jacob Huli, in turn, authored what became the first in a long series of biblical commentaries and a classic of Ladino letters in the eighteenth century and beyond. His monumental *Me?am Lo?ez* was a veritable encyclopedia of Jewish knowledge, intertwining information about Jewish religious law, moral teachings, entertaining stories, and instruction on a wide array of topics within what was ostensibly a Judeo-Spanish commentary on the Bible. Huli provided a vast anthology of rabbinic

tradition in an easily accessible, vernacular idiom, making it entertaining at the same time. In a similar vein, Asa produced an entire library of Jewish knowledge through his tireless translation efforts. Together, these authors (and others of their generation) gave shape to what became a new Ladino literature, which had not previously existed. What their works had in common, and what they shared with the secular and westernizing literature of modern Ladino writers in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, was that they wanted to educate and entertain. It has been said that *all* of Ladino literature was educational, whatever the literary format or genre, and thus, long after Huli's and Asa's ideal of a religious revival gave way to the secularizing ideal of Alliance-educated authors a century and a half later, the basic function of Ladino literature as an educational device addressed to a popular audience had not changed at all.

It is important to note that the emergence of Ladino print culture (and the revival of Hebrew print) in the eighteenth century was not an isolated development. The same period also saw the emergence of Ottoman-Turkish print in Arabic script. Up to that point, Muslim jurists had rejected the use of print for Arabic or Turkish works. While Jews and later various Christian minorities had established their own printing presses in the Ottoman Empire before, it was only in the late 1720s that we find the timid beginnings of an Ottoman Turkish print culture. An emblematic figure in the advancement of printing in the Ottoman Empire was Ibrahim Müteferrika, who is also known as one of the first Ottoman diplomats to have advocated a new openness towards the West and the reformation of the Ottoman military on European models. In 1726, he submitted a treatise, "The Means of Printing," to the Grand Vizier and the leading Islamic authorities; after obtaining authorization to establish a press, he began operation a year later. None other than Jonah Ashkenazi, the Hebrew printer of Asa's Bible translation and Huli's *Me'am Lo'ez*, was among those credited with having helped Müteferrika establish his press. Ibrahim Müteferrika even applied to exempt his Jewish associate from the poll-tax, for he had, as he explained, "profited from the services of the Jew named Yuna [i.e., Jonah], who possesses all the important elements [needed for printing] …."

What exactly was the contribution of rabbinic literature in the Ladino vernacular to the subsequent transformation, or modernization, of Ottoman Jewry? It seems somewhat counterintuitive to attribute such an impact at all to a literature that emerged precisely to bolster traditional religious knowledge among Ottoman Jews, and there is no question that Ladino rabbinic literature continued to be a conservative effort aiming at the preservation of the existing religious and social order. One of the most important contributions of Judeo-Spanish literature for Ottoman Jewish culture, however, was

that it opened rabbinic literature to women—and, in fact, to all who did not belong to the educated elite. Women had been all but excluded from the traditional ideal of studying rabbinic tradition, but they were now discovered as a relevant reading audience by the vernacular rabbis. Initially, in the eighteenth century, women were still addressed in an indirect way. In one classic translated by Abraham Asa, a book called *Shevet Musar*, the author included women as a public to be instructed in Judaism, but not as a *reading* public: "The ignoramus who does not know to read," he wrote,

> should go on the Sabbath and festivals and at any time of the day to the study house to listen to words of Torah and *derekh erets* (proper deportment). And what he hears, he should tell his wife and the people of his household when he returns home in the evening.

The ordinary man attending the rabbis' studies at the *bet midrash* is thus understood as a broadcaster of the rabbis' educational message, taking it beyond the immediate audience of listeners and readers.
In the nineteenth century, the inclusion of women became more explicit. In the *Pele Yo'ets*, one of the most popular rabbinic works in Ladino of all time, Judah Papo (son of Rabbi Eliezer Papo who wrote the original *Pele Yo'ets* in Hebrew) spelled out an educational ideal that included a female *reading* public alongside his male readers. Thus he suggested the establishment of separate women's study groups:

> How good it is if women, friends and relatives, meet, one Sabbath at the home of one friend, and another Sabbath at another friend's home, and each group appoints a woman who can read and they spend the hour with [study]. One advantage is that they will look for ways to teach their daughters [how to read as well].

Significantly, Judah Papo encouraged women to learn how to read and write not only for the sake of religious study. He explicitly mentioned secular communication like reading and writing letters among the things women should be able to do. Other Sephardic rabbis who published vernacular books at the time also insisted on the importance of educating girls. Isaac Amarachi and Joseph Sason wrote, for example, that it is appropriate

> to teach the daughters the holy tongue [Hebrew] and the language of the country in which one lives, and teach them to understand the prayers they say, and writing and calculus, and then teach them a profession, because idleness leads to promiscuity.

Obviously not all women took advantage of the new possibilities opened up to them by vernacular rabbinic literature, just as not all men flocked to the study sessions or read the new volumes of Judeo-Spanish rabbinic writings. But reading and study were now increasingly stripped of their gender-

specific association with a male public sphere. Some rabbinic authors may very well have resisted this development, but they could not stop its far-reaching social consequences. By including women among the intended readers of their popular books, the authors of popular Ladino rabbinic literature paved the way for the emergence of a female reading public which would prove a most receptive audience for new, secular genres of Judeo-Spanish literature that began to flourish in the nineteenth century.

The vernacular rabbis did not only address a new reading audience, thus democratizing access to traditional Jewish knowledge and decentralizing rabbinic control over Ottoman Jewish reading culture. Over time, Ladino rabbinic literature also began to introduce new ideas, though it did so cautiously. By the late nineteenth century, however, the rabbis were increasingly forced to respond to new ideas promoted in the *secular* Ladino press and literature, for which they had helped prepare a reading public but which was now beyond their immediate control.

The explanation of lunar and solar eclipses provides an interesting example of how the vernacular rabbis moved from representing traditional rabbinic ideas in Judeo-Spanish language, then cautiously introduced new ideas, and finally responded to the open challenge of rabbinic authority presented from the outside. Jacob Huli, in the *Me?am Lo?ez* of 1730, simply presented the classical astronomy of the rabbis as it was expressed in the Talmud. According to his explanation, the sun revolves around the earth; it is in the north during summer and in the south during the winter, which allows the earth to cool. (Elsewhere, Huli cited the slightly divergent opinions of two Talmudic rabbis and explains that the sun moves below the sky during the day and above the sky at night.) Writing in 1730, Huli was by no means defensive in his approach to Talmudic authority on scientific issues: if Ashkenazi rabbis in Central Europe (perhaps most prominently the Maharal of Prague) had found it necessary to grapple with the implications of a heliocentric model of the cosmos back in the seventeenth century, Huli was seemingly oblivious to contemporary astronomy. In any case, Huli was not interested in knowledge for its own sake but as a vehicle to promote observance of rabbinic law and piety. In Huli's understanding, eclipses did not require a scientific explanation because they constituted a divine warning and their real purpose was to teach a moral lesson. Thus, he asserted that an eclipse of the sun was a bad sign for the entire world and an eclipse of the moon a bad sign for the Jewish people. He also gave a rather odd list of four things that caused an eclipse of the sun, for example an occasion when a great sage has not been buried according to his rank, or the sin of sodomy. In other words, Jacob Huli did not discuss astronomy for its own sake. Natural phenomena interested him insofar as they carried a divine message (such as a call for repentance), but not as something that called for a scientific explanation.

Almost one hundred years later, with Ladino rabbinic literature entering its second golden age, the situation was markedly different. Two Salonikan authors, Amarachi and Sason, wrote popular rabbinic treatises in Ladino in which they perpetuated, on the one hand, the traditional message of rabbinic popular literature. But, on the other hand, they also chose to use their writing to educate and to enlighten their readers through exposing them to secular knowledge. Thus, for example, they pointed out the importance of smallpox vaccinations, noting that "more than a thousand children" had died in Salonika the previous year of smallpox. This would not have happened, they claimed, if everyone had listened to the rabbis, who had called for the smallpox vaccination of all children. The authors opposed popular misconceptions and ignorance, denouncing what they called old women's talk, which had led the uneducated masses to doubt the importance of vaccination. If rabbis previously had explained disasters such as this one as divine punishment for the sins of the community, Amarachi and Sason now offered a rational explanation, juxtaposing the enlightenment of the rabbis to the ignorance of the masses.

In Amarachi's and Sason's writing, secular knowledge and rabbinic knowledge do not compete but are presented as entirely compatible. They undertake to teach their Ladino-reading public some basic astronomy. In doing so, they confidently proclaim the traditional pre-Copernican, geocentric view, which also informed the *Me'am Lo'ez*:

> It is well known that the sun moves around the earth in twenty-four hours. When the sun is where we are, it is night for those who are in America, and when the sun is on America's side, it is night for us ….

They claim that the Talmudic sages and the *Zohar* had made it quite clear that the earth is round—*"una pelota"*—and they proudly conclude:

> Behold how great was the science of our ancient sages. They had already told us about something that appears to have been discovered by the scientists through their studies, and there is nothing which is not already written or hinted at in our holy Law.

What is interesting is the fact that Amarachi and Sason take most of their scientific explanations from a Hebrew work by a Lithuanian rabbi that had been published in 1797 (Pinhas Hurvitz' *Sefer ha-Berit*), translating several passages into Ladino. The Hebrew original, however, included an extensive discussion of Copernican versus rabbinic astronomy, and presented a long argument in defense of the traditional view as expressed in the Talmud. Huli, Amarachi and Sason were obviously aware of the conflict between rabbinic and scientific knowledge, yet they decided that it was irrelevant to their

readers and to their educational project. In the 1840s, it seems, Ottoman rabbis still had no need to compete with a non-traditional worldview that would have challenged the authority of Jewish tradition. Instead, they proclaimed that rabbinic and scientific knowledge were compatible and that rabbinic literature was, in fact, the best way to enlighten the masses. In adapting an Ashkenazi, Hebrew work wrestling with the tension between secular and rabbinic knowledge, they chose to omit all sign of controversy.

Amarachi's and Sason's unapologetically traditional view should not obscure the novelty of their approach. While they avoided contrasting rabbinic and scientific knowledge, they did contrast rabbinic enlightenment with popular folk knowledge and they sought to include scientific explanations into the canon of vernacular literature. Thus, unlike Jacob Huli in the *Me'am Lo'ez*, Amarachi and Sason stripped the phenomenon of the eclipse of its ominous character. Instead, they told their readers not to be terrified, adding a rational, scientific explanation based on *Sefer ha-Berit*'s geocentric astronomy. The two Salonikan authors are thus a good example for the (certainly unconscious) revolutionary potential of Ladino rabbinic writing: they saw themselves as enlightening Ottoman Jews, appropriating scientific knowledge as compatible with rabbinic tradition and challenging what they identified as popular superstition.

A generation later, in the 1870s, the scene had changed quite dramatically. Judah Papo, in the widely-read *Pele Yo?ets*, at first sight continued in the mold of early Judeo-Spanish literature. He affirmed the traditional geocentric version of a stationary earth and the sun revolving around it. The decisive difference was that Judah Papo, writing less than thirty years after Amarachi and Sason, found it necessary to *defend* his view. What was taken as a truth self-evident to the intended reader in the 1840s, needed to be explained and justified when Papo published his *Pele Yo?ets* in the 1870s. Not only did he acknowledge that the traditional geocentric worldview of the rabbis was at odds with modern science, but he presented a lengthy polemic against those who relied on modern science instead of trusting the validity of rabbinic knowledge. Confronting a new kind of reader, Papo had now to contend with a secular, westernizing discourse promoted by the schools of the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle and the new Judeo-Spanish newspapers. The modern Sephardi intellectuals who were promoting Western education and were the enthusiastic editors of numerous Ladino journals and daily papers were making their own voice heard in a public sphere that hitherto had been dominated by the rabbis. They employed literary techniques first developed by the vernacular rabbis in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Like their predecessors, they wanted to educate, enlighten and entertain Ottoman Jews, and they did so by presenting a secular and Western worldview as an alternative to the

previously dominant rabbinic tradition.

Papo dismissed the assertions of non-Jewish scientists—in fact, unlike his predecessors, he made a clear distinction between Jewish, i.e., rabbinic, knowledge and non-Jewish, i.e., scientific or philosophical, knowledge. In the *Pele Yo?ets* he claimed that the non-Jewish scientists were not even certain of their own knowledge (and he uses this assertion to back up his claim that the readers of secular Ladino literature should return to the certainties offered by rabbinic tradition). "According to the theory of the ancients," he says,

> the sun revolved around the earth and the earth was stationary. In later generations, other philosophers discovered that the sun is stationary and the earth revolves around the sun. In later generations, yet other philosophers claimed that the sun is moving and the earth also. … And as it happened to the philosophers of earlier times, so it can happen to the philosophers of our day. This is to say, in the science of philosophy there is no basis and nothing is certain.

Nevertheless, it must be added, Judah Papo was ambivalent about secular knowledge and acknowledged the benefits of one of the main vehicles for the communication of this new knowledge, the newspapers. In the same *Pele Yo?ets* in which he denounced the follies of modern science, he also endorsed the usefulness of the Judeo-Spanish press for spreading knowledge among the masses. In doing so, he echoed the self-understanding of the editors of the Ottoman Ladino press.

In an article dedicated to the explanation of eclipses, the Istanbul-based newspaper *El Tiempo* (published in November 1873) challenged the traditional notion of considering them a bad omen, which had been the message in Huli's *Me?am Lo?ez*. If, in the traditional view, eclipses were ominous harbingers of disaster, divinely ordained signs warning of imminent punishment, then *El Tiempo* praised modern science as liberating people from such superstitions. In typical enlightenment rhetoric, the article affirmed: "[Science] liberates the people from darkness, it illuminates them by sending out the rays of its light and makes them feel the heavy weight of their cloak of ignorance …." The vernacular rabbis, writing in Ladino since the 1730s, could not have said it better—except that they would have substituted "rabbinic tradition" for "science." What Ladino literature, from its outset in the early eighteenth century to the flourishing of secular genres in the late nineteenth century, had in common was its didactic agenda. The vernacular rabbis in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries set out to educate the Ottoman Jews and enlighten them through reading. Once a new, Judeo-Spanish public sphere had been created, the modern intellectuals educated in the schools of the Alliance used this same public sphere to push their own educational agenda, contributing further to the fundamental transformation of Ottoman Jewry in the last half-century of the Empire's existence.

[1] This paper draws in part on material included in my book *Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture* (Bloomington, 2005), and appears here courtesy of Indiana University Press.