

Judeo-Arabic Popular Nonfiction in Morocco during the First Half of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

This article is a first-of-its-kind exploration of the vernacular Judeo-Arabic popular nonfiction printed in Morocco between the early twentieth century and the 1960s, in the form of single pages, pamphlets or small books. This literature provided readers with knowledge pertaining to Jewish law (halakha), ethics, culture, history, and Zionist ideology, in order to reinforce Jewish religious and national identity. I suggest here that vernacular-speaking literatures emerged in Morocco in the early twentieth century following interwoven, mutually influential processes. The four processes that precipitated vernacular Judeo-Arabic nonfiction in Morocco consist of (1) the opening of local Hebrew printing houses across Morocco's cities; (2) the emergence of new elites within Morocco's Jewish communities; (3) the rejection of the obligation to observe religious strictures, coupled with secularization processes; and (4) the advent of a Jewish national movement, i.e. Zionism.

Introduction

The Books

The Historic Intersection: Writing Elites, Printing, Secularization and Jewish Nationalism

Hebrew Printing at the Service of Judeo-Arabic Literature

A New Writing Elite: Maskilim Writing/Editing in Judeo-Arabic

Rejecting the Observance of the Commandments and the Counter-response of Judeo-Arabic Literature

Jewish Nationalism

Conclusion

Introduction

In 1919, Jacob Elkrief published *Hemed Bahurim* in Casablanca. It was the first book to be printed in Hebrew letters by the printing house *Imprimerie nouvelle*, established in the same year. Written in vernacular Judeo-Arabic, *Hemed Bahurim* comprised a selection of religious laws (*halakhot*) pertaining to Jewish daily life and the calendar, and some moral teachings.¹ Elkrief courted a wide sector of the community who were not proficient in Hebrew:

u-rit di bzaf d-nas fḥali ma ka yfhamu šay ktir f-lšon ha-qodeš. b-l-ḥaqq b-l'arabiyya ka yfhamu mliḥ. biha ruaḥ adonay nosesa bi. u-zm'at dinim ši min hna u-ši min hna. dinim di ka yḥdazu l-baḥurim bne gili u-b-lšan 'rabiyya fšihā. Izakot et harabbim. (Many a people have I seen who, like me, cannot understand a word of the holy tongue. On the other hand, they understand Arabic very well. The spirit of the Lord lifted a standard against me and I gathered laws from here and there. Laws that must be delivered in clear Arabic, so as to grant merit to the many).²

In 1927, Elkrief published a series of booklets entitled *Ha-Madrikh* (the guide), instilling morals in Judeo-Arabic. In one such book he explained that “u-‘mlnah b-lšon 'arabi u-bklam maxfut bas kul waḥid ykun 'andu tyempo bas yqrah” (We employed plain Arabic, so that anyone might find the time to read it).³

¹ Regarding the term Judeo-Arabic see for example: Benjamin Hary, “Judeo-Arabic in the Arabic-Speaking World,” in *Languages in Jewish Communities, Past and Present*, eds. Benjamin Hary and Sarah Bunin Benor (Boston-Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2018), 35-69; Norman A. Stillman, “Judeo-Arabic—History and Linguistic Description,” in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman A. Stillman (Leiden: Brill, 2010), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1878-9781-ejiw-COM-0012320>, accessed November 21, 2022.

² Jacob Elkrief, *Hemed Bahurim* (Casablanca: Imprimerie nouvelle Amar and Elbaz, 1919), 12.

³ Jacob Elkrief, *Ha-Madrikh* (Casablanca: Imprimerie nouvelle, 1927), 1.

These booklets published by Elkrief in Casablanca in the first two decades of the twentieth century are one instance of the nonfiction literary works that emerged across Jewish communities in Morocco's cities and continued to thrive until their massive immigration to Israel and elsewhere during the 1950s and 1960s. These works consist of a handful of pages, pamphlets or booklets, written in the Judeo-Arabic vernacular. These booklets courted the community's general public⁴ and provided readers with information on the halakha, ethics, culture, history and Zionist ideology, with the aim of strengthening religious and national Jewish identity and drawing a line between the Jewish community and its Muslim or Christian neighbors. The emergence of these works in Morocco in the early 1900s was contingent on several factors; it followed the historical intersection of a set of political, social, and cultural circumstances unique to Morocco's Jewry. This article claims that Judeo-Arabic nonfiction works developed in this community thanks to four intertwining processes: (1) the opening of the first printing houses in Morocco's cities in the early 1900s and the new readership that emerged following the locally-flavored books printed by them; (2) the rise of new elites, including the authors under study, who were attentive to community needs, against the demise of the old Jewish oligarchy; (3) the rising trend of rejecting the obligation to observe religious commandments, coupled with secularization processes unique to Jewries in Muslim countries; and (4) the emerging Jewish national consciousness, including Zionist activity.⁵

⁴ Not unique to Morocco, Judeo-Arabic popular nonfiction could also be found in other North-African Jewish communities. There has yet to be a study dedicated to each such community or a comprehensive study into all those communities. Yosef and Tsivia Tobi discuss one example of nonfiction literature in the chapter "Essays on Ideology and Propaganda" and further research is required. See Yosef Tobi and Tsivia Tobi, *Judeo-Arabic Literature in Tunisia, 1850-1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014). As of now, no study has been written on Judeo-Arabic nonfiction in Algeria. The extensive project of translating Hebrew literature into Judeo-Arabic by Rabbi Joseph Renassia from Constantine in the first half of the twentieth century has yet to be investigated. For more about the Rabbi, see Yossef Charvit, "Renassia, Joseph," *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman A. Stillman (Leiden: Brill, 2013), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1878-9781_ejiw_COM_0018340, accessed November 21, 2022.

⁵ Itamar Even-Zohar claims that one of the conditions for the crystallization of a translated work is a turning point, that is to say, a historical moment where established models are no longer relevant for a younger generation. Itamar Even-Zohar, "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem," *Poetics Today* 11, no.1 (1990): 45-51.

I shall start by putting the Judeo-Arabic nonfiction printed in Morocco in the broader context of printed literature in Jewish vernacular languages—Yiddish, Ladino and Judeo-Arabic, while comparing the different literatures written in each vernacular. I shall then move on to review the corpus of Judeo-Arabic nonfiction booklets and explain the methodology of my analysis. The main part of the essay will discuss the four processes intersecting at the historical crossroads of Judeo-Arabic nonfiction in Morocco, while drawing a comparison with similar processes experienced by the kingdom's majority Muslim society. Judeo-Arabic nonfiction works are very valuable for the nascent research into book history across Jewish communities in Muslim countries. Scholarship hitherto has rarely tapped into this printed literature, branding it as popular and of little literary merit compared with the literature written in Hebrew and European languages by elites for an elitist readership. Nevertheless, this nonfiction was key in the contexts in which it was created, read or translated; it served its authors as a conscious means to shape a new Jewish culture that would be up to par with the zeitgeist and circumstances of the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, the emergence of nonfiction allows us to look at a cluster of historic processes, that have hitherto been studied independently. This convergence offers a glimpse into historic phenomena that have yet to be researched, and may shed light on the lives of Jews from Muslim countries from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. The study of books holds the potential to reshape our understanding of Jewish society during the complex, turbulent transition to modernity.

For centuries, Jews across the Diaspora experienced trilingualism, living with three languages: the everyday local language, the Jewish vernacular (Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic and others) that was also used for certain types of writing, and Hebrew—the holy tongue, reserved for liturgical and religious works.⁶ The

⁶ Regarding the Jewish language varieties see the new comprehensive study: Ofra Tirosh-Becker and Lutz Herausgeber Edzard, *Jewish Languages: Text Specimens, Grammatical, Lexical, and Cultural Sketches* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2021). On trilingualism see for example: Benjamin H. Hary, *Multiglossia in Judeo-Arabic, with an Edition, Translation and Grammatical Study of the Cairene Purim Scroll*, *Études sur le Judaïsme médiéval*, vol. 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

vernacular was their mother tongue, while Hebrew was an acquired language. Education at schools took place in the Jewish vernacular, while also teaching reading skills in the holy tongue. As the educational training and acquisition progressed, learners acquired further Hebrew reading skills and understanding of pertinent texts. Advanced learners went on to author Hebrew rabbinic literature. Nevertheless, Hebrew literacy was the preserve of a select rabbinic elite. Most men had a basic command of the holy tongue, allowing them, at best, to read or recite the prayers and weekly Torah portions. Virtually all women had no access to formal education and consequently, no command of Hebrew. In fact, the overwhelming majority of men in Jewish communities, and all the women—with few exceptions—could not read texts beyond the type mentioned above, and rabbinic literature was beyond their reach.⁷

This meant that different periods saw vernacular rabbinic printed literature develop across Jewish communities. Penned by learned rabbis for men and women illiterate in Hebrew, this literature unlocked traditional knowledge otherwise inaccessible to them. Zeev Gries points to a phenomenon he refers to as the awakening of the intelligentsia: vernacular literature earning a readership “that included people whose connection with the scholarly elite was, at best, tenuous.”⁸ Before rabbinic texts started being translated and printed in vernacular languages, rabbinic and Haskalah elites excluded such readers from this literature, which was written exclusively in Hebrew. Vernacular books, for the first time, prompted the masses to read and acquire knowledge that opened up their horizons.

The first vernacular-speaking Jewish literature was written in Yiddish. Vying for the general public (men and women alike), it started to appear irregularly by the mid-sixteenth century and turned into a steady stream of publications late into the same century. It was printed by turns in different centers across Europe: Poland,

⁷ Literature on the subject abounds. See Bernard Spolsky, *The Languages of the Jews: A Sociolinguistic History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Lily Kahn and Aaron D. Rubin, eds., *Handbook of Jewish Languages* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2016); Benjamin Hary and Sarah Bunin Benor, eds., *Languages in Jewish Communities, Past and Present* (Boston-Berlin: Walter De Gruyter Inc, 2018).

⁸ Zeev Gries, *The Book in the Jewish World, 1700-1900* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), 16.

northern Italy, Prague, Amsterdam and various German cities. By late eighteenth century, Yiddish rabbinic literature started to appear in print, comprising translations of the Old Testament, prayers, epic poetry on Biblical stories, *drash* (homiletics), ethics, halakha, tales and stories, and historical religious texts. This development was set against a feeling of crisis that had taken over Jewish society, and it aimed to educate readers on their duties, to spread knowledge of religious texts and instill fear of God and moral values. Its authors criticized the select circles of the rabbinical elite and strove to drive a far-reaching religious-social restorative change, individual as well as public.⁹ During the Haskalah period, printing centers moved from the west of Europe to the continent's east, where secular Yiddish literature started appearing, including fiction, poetry, nonfiction, journalism and more.¹⁰

The printing of Ladino literature started in sixteenth century, on a small scale, vying for wide sections of Jewish society in the Ottoman Empire, and flourished in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. During this period the printed literature was rabbinic, encompassing translations of the Old Testament, prayer books, ethical literature, kabbalah, philosophy, history, stories and tales, as well as anthologies of commandments in prose and rhyme. Ladino printed literature followed the spread of Hebrew printing across the Ottoman Empire and was inspired by Lurianic ideas among learned rabbis. The latter acknowledged the gap between the rabbinic elite and the masses in terms of acquaintance with the Jewish bookshelf and the precepts of Judaism, and sought to close it by publishing books in the vernacular.¹¹ The nineteenth century saw the development of Ladino secular literature, including journalism, fiction, plays, poetry and nonfiction; at the same time, rabbinic literature remained in print.¹²

⁹ For the varieties of Yiddish literature, see Jacob Elbaum, *Openness and Insularity in Late Sixteenth Century Jewish Literature in Poland and Ashkenaz* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 68-71 [Hebrew]. See the footnotes there.

¹⁰ See for example: Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

¹¹ Matthias B. Lehmann, *Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005).

¹² Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Making Jews Modern: the Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); Aron Rodrigue, "The

Judeo-Arabic printed literature, for the common people of the Jewish communities across the Middle East, emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Printing houses were established during this period in Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt, as well as in Jerusalem, Aleppo (Syria), Baghdad (Iraq), Calcutta and Bombay (India) and Aden (Yemen). These establishments published translations of Old Testament books and liturgical rituals for Jewish festivals, retellings of biblical stories, ethical and homiletical literature. Alongside translated rabbinic literature, Judeo-Arabic translations of European Hebrew Enlightenment texts were also published, including original and European literature translated into Hebrew. In addition, stories from Muslim Arab popular literature were also translated.¹³ The first half of the twentieth century saw social and political shifts that sidelined Judeo-Arabic, with Jewish authors in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and the Land of Israel/Palestine opting to write and publish in Standard Arabic. Nevertheless, rabbis and Maskilim (intellectuals) continued to publish their popular literature in Judeo-Arabic.¹⁴

The first printed texts of Judeo-Arabic popular rabbinic literature for the North African readership appeared in Livorno, Italy, several years before the establishment of local printing houses. From the mid-eighteenth century, Livorno was the main Jewish printing hub in the Mediterranean Basin. The city's Sephardi Jewish community included a North-African Diaspora, comprising families of merchants, which took part in establishing the local Hebrew printing houses. As of the mid-nineteenth century, printing houses started publishing North-African Judeo-Arabic rabbinic literature, in the respective authors' dialects.¹⁵ Kabbalist

Ottoman Diaspora: The Rise and Fall of Ladino Literary Culture," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 863-985.

¹³ Yitzhak Avishur, "The Folk Literature of the Jews of Iraq in Judeo-Arabic," *Pe'amim* 3 (1979): 83-90 [Hebrew]; Yitzhak Avishur, "Baghdadi Judeo-Arabic Books and Journals Printed in India," *Pe'amim* 52 (1992): 101-115 [Hebrew].

¹⁴ Philip Sadgrove and Shmuel Moreh, *Jewish Contributions to Nineteenth Century Arabic Theatre: Plays from Algeria and Syria, A Study and Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 17-31; Lital Levy, "The Nahda and the Haskala: A Comparative Reading of 'Revival' and 'Reform'," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 16 (2013): 300-316.

¹⁵ Francesca Bregoli, "Hebrew Printing in Eighteenth-Century Livorno: From Government Control to a Free Market," in *The Hebrew Book in Early Modern Italy*, eds. Joseph Hacker and Adam Shear (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 171-196.

and philosopher Elia Benamozegh, offspring of immigrants from Essaouira, Morocco, established a printing house where rabbinic literature was produced, including works by North-African sages. In addition to Hebrew rabbinic literature, Benamozegh published popular Judeo-Arabic rabbinic literature and made some short-lived efforts to publish Judeo-Arabic newspapers, for communities in Tunisia and Algeria.¹⁶ Rabbi Joseph Knafo of Essaouira printed several books in Judeo-Arabic at Benamozegh's printing press. Motivated by his pedagogic and social ideology, Knafo addressed the general public and was probably the first Moroccan sage to print popular rabbinic literature in Judeo-Arabic, before the introduction of printing houses in Morocco.¹⁷ The prohibitive costs meant that only a handful of authors could afford to print Judeo-Arabic books in Livorno, in limited editions and distribution.

In North Africa itself, Judeo-Arabic rabbinic literature started being printed from the mid-nineteenth century. The period saw the establishment of the first Hebrew printing houses in the big cities of Algeria and Tunisia. In neighboring Morocco, however, the first printing house was opened in Tangier in the late nineteenth century, in 1891, and it was not until the early twentieth century that a local literature in Judeo-Arabic developed in the kingdom. The Judeo-Arabic rabbinic literature encompassed Old Testament translations, Halakhic literature, biblical commentaries and books on ethics.¹⁸ At the same time, Judeo-Arabic fiction flourished, including translated classic Arabic books and literary works from the Hebrew Enlightenment and European literatures, particularly French. The translated literature was complemented by original Judeo-Arabic literature, which evolved at the time throughout North Africa and reached its apex in Tunisia. Joseph and Zivia Tobi's study traces the different literary genres that appeared in printed texts in Tunisia: *Piyyutim* (liturgical poems), *Malzūmāt* (satirical ballads), *Qinot* (laments), *Ghnāyāt* (songs), essays on ideology and propaganda, drama and

¹⁶ Clémence Boulouque, "An 'Interior Occident' and the Case for an Oriental Modernity: The Livornese Printing Press and the Mediterranean Publishing Networks of Elia Benamozegh (1823-1900)," *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no.2 (2018): 86-136.

¹⁷ Gabriel Abensour, "In Praise of the Multitude: Rabbi Yosef Knafo's Socially Conscious Work in Essaouira at the End of the Nineteenth Century," *Jewish Social Studies* 27, no.1 (2022): 115-149.

¹⁸ Robert Attal, "The Hebrew Press in the Maghreb," *Mashreq and Maghreb* 2 (1980): 121-129 [Hebrew].

the theater, *Ḥikāyāt* (stories) and Deeds of Righteous Men. Tobi and Tobi's study also cites nonfiction literature written in the region, but no discussion follows.¹⁹

Vernacular-speaking literatures, therefore, emerged gradually within the various Jewish communities: Yiddish in the late sixteenth century, Ladino in the second quarter of the eighteenth century and Judeo-Arabic in the mid-nineteenth century. Yiddish and Ladino literatures developed in two stages, distinguished by the time period, and the type of authors and content: from the late sixteenth century, rabbis published Yiddish popular rabbinic literature for the wider public, while it was only in the second quarter of the eighteenth century that a similar literature emerged in Ladino. Starting from the nineteenth century, Maskilim published secular literature in both dialects, alongside rabbinic literature. However, it was only in the mid-nineteenth century that Judeo-Arabic literature started to develop, encompassing rabbinic and secular texts, as well as a hybrid literature where elements of the two combined in response to shifts experienced by Jewish communities in Muslim countries. It was in the cities of Tunisia—Tunis, Djerba and Soussa—that the major printing houses were established and went on to print most of the fiction and nonfiction literature for North Africa's Jewish communities. The local printing houses in the cities of Morocco, Algeria, and Libya printed a distinct brand of literature, catering for the unique needs of each community. For example, the most popular genre to be printed in Morocco was poetry, *piyyut* and *kasida*, where the lion's share comprised religious poetry in Hebrew or secular poetry in Judeo-Arabic, rather than modern Hebrew poetry. The present discusses rabbinic and nonfiction literature that combines secular and rabbinic literature, all published in Judeo-Arabic in Morocco during the first half of the twentieth century.

¹⁹ Tobi and Tobi, *Judeo-Arabic Literature in Tunisia*.

The Books

Judeo-Arabic nonfiction in Morocco was printed in single page sheets, pamphlets and booklets. The essay discusses some such booklets.²⁰ Unlike single page sheets and pamphlets, which generally comprised only the text of the work, the booklets also included para-texts. A para-text is a text that accompanies another text, a secondary text to the book's core text. It includes a range of tools inserted at the beginning, conclusion and throughout the body of a book, in order to explain and manipulate the main text. The para-text contains the book's cover and opening pages, approvals and prefaces. It provides instructive testimonies that include information on the books, texts, authors, the target readership, and the circumstances that prompted the authors to write and publish the works; the para-texts lay out the author's ideological convictions. More broadly, they provide information on the political, social, and cultural reality in which the booklets were created.²¹ The information included in para-texts is important for another reason: to date, no manuscripts of Judeo-Arabic books printed in Morocco have been preserved or uncovered, nor have any systematic archives of the authors' personal papers been preserved that could shed light on the circumstances around the books' creation.

Jacob Elkrief's *Hemed Bahurim* (1919) was the first printed Hebrew booklet to appear in Casablanca. It comprised mainly a concise book of practical halakhot concerning prayers, charity, marriage etc., as well as Hebrew *piyyutim*. The two final pages of the book describe the work of Casablanca's *Magen David*. Starting out as a charity, after several years it was reorganized by its members as a society

²⁰ For a survey of the size and form of books, see: Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), 125-148. For an inventory of Judeo-Arabic nonfiction literature published in Morocco in single pages, pamphlets and booklets, see: Eliyahu Refael Marşiano, *The book of the sons of kings, that is the history of the Hebrew book in Morocco from 1517 to 1989* (Jerusalem: The Rasham Institute, 1989) [Hebrew].

²¹ For an exhaustive relevant study, see Shlomo Berger, *Producing Redemption in Amsterdam: Early Modern Yiddish Books in Paratextual Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

for disseminating the modern Hebrew language.²² Elkrief further published the series *Ha-Madrikh* (1927), thin booklets on morals, laws and *piyyutim*.²³

Baruch Assabag published booklets that largely covered halakhic laws and morals: *Minha Belula* (1937) includes laws that pertain to Jewish daily life, with an emphasis on prayer and laws related to blessings.²⁴ In his *Qorban Minha* (1939), laws pertaining to the Jewish calendar are laid out, including Shabbat, New Moon, fasts, Tishrei holidays, Hanukah and Purim.²⁵ *Minhat Moshe* (1945) picks up from the previous work, covering Passover and Shavuot laws.²⁶ The booklet also includes *Minhat Qenaot* (zeal offering), which includes laws related to women, such as *nidah* (the menstrual period), *hakhnasat kalah* (charity for brides' dowries) and *tevilah* (immersion in a mikveh). These four booklets by Rabbi Assabag may be seen as a single tutorial book that pools together the laws on Jewish daily life and the Jewish year, for men and women alike.

Toledot Ramba and Rashbi (1944) by Ihiel Bouskila is a historically-themed book that unfurls the life story and lays out the teachings of Tannaim Rabbi Meir b'al ha-nes and Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai.²⁷ Bouskila collected, edited and translated into Judeo-Arabic Talmudic sources associated with the two Tannaim. While the book arguably falls under the Tsaddikim (righteous men) Deeds' category, as defined by Tobi and Tobi, it was inspired by both the European Hebrew Enlightenment movement and the Zionist movement and is not predominantly hagiographical in spirit, but rather straddles hagiography and biography.²⁸ The book includes two different titles, in Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew.

Historiya d-l-yahud d-l-Maroc b-l'arabiyya mutarzama min l-fransiyya (1953) by Haim Nahmany is a partial translation of the book *Musulmans andalous et judéo-*

²² Elkrief, *Hemed*, 51-52.

²³ Elkrief, *Ha-Madrikh*.

²⁴ Baruch Assabag, *Minha Belula* (Casablanca: Imprimerie Razon, 1937).

²⁵ Baruch Assabag, *Qorban Minha* (Casablanca: Imprimerie Razon, 1939).

²⁶ Baruch Assabag, *Minhat Moshe* (Casablanca: Imprimerie Razon, 1945).

²⁷ Ihiel Bouskila, *Toledot Ramba and Rashbi* (Casablanca: Imprimerie Amar, 1944).

²⁸ Tobi and Tobi, *Judeo-Arabic Literature in Tunisia*, 323-240.

espagnols, published by David Abbou in 1952.²⁹ Abbou's book is divided in three sections: Moors in Spain, the history of Sephardi Jews and the history of Morocco's Jewry. Nahmany translated, but did not complete, the third section, while omitting the other two, as they did not directly concern the history of Moroccan Jewry. He complemented the book with treatises translated into Judeo-Arabic: a speech by Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum, one of the first Religious Zionist and Mizrahi movement thinkers, entitled "The Reasons Why a Jew Must Be a Zionist," from Nissenbaum's book, *Derushim ve-homer le-drash* (1902),³⁰ and assorted *Midrashim* on the Land of Israel from different Talmudic tracts and books of the Midrash, including *iyalqut Shim 'ni* and *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer*.

The authors tried to make this specialized knowledge manageable for lay readers by restructuring it: these were not literal translation of the originals, but rather an adaptation (through additions, omissions, editing) of the gist of the original text to the Judeo-Arabic vernacular, informed by the authors' ideology and modified to meet the readership's needs as perceived by the authors. The books consist of short chapters, each providing concise information, organized under a clear table of contents that allowed readers to find the different subjects. Providing no references to other sources or accurate citations, the books offer general statements instead. They also lack introductory surveys, halakhic or kabalistic explanations and theoretical or abstract discussions that may require previous information, with nothing but the requisite knowledge included.

The Historic Intersection: Writing Elites, Printing, Secularization and Jewish Nationalism

Outwardly, the authors declared their decision to write and edit literature in Judeo-Arabic or translate literature into this vernacular, because they knew that for the most part, the community could neither read nor understand Hebrew. In

²⁹ Haim Nahmany, *Historiya d-I-yahud d-I-Marocq b-l'arabiyya mutarzama min l-fransiyya* (Casablanca: Imprimerie Razon, 1953); David Abbou, *Musulmans andalous et judéo-espagnols* (Casablanca: Antar, 1953).

³⁰ Yitshak Nissenbaum, *Derushim ve-homer le-drash* (Vilnius: Hacefira, 1903).

the preface to his book, Nahmany writes that “Having realized that most of our people, a common folk like us, across cities and villages, would not obtain [the book] or find someone to read and translate it for them into Arabic, their spoken tongue, we deemed it our duty to seek Mr. David Abbou’s permission to translate this book from French into Arabic.”³¹ I nonetheless find the authors’ professed motivation, i.e., ignorance of Hebrew or French among the community’s majority, an insufficient explanation for their enterprise. After all, the majority of the community had had no proficiency in Hebrew for centuries and nevertheless, no Judeo-Arabic nonfiction books had been written before. I propose that printed Judeo-Arabic nonfiction works emerged in Morocco in the early twentieth century following interweaving, cross-influential processes: both local and global processes, as well as intra-community processes and others initiated by the Jewish Diaspora. Some of these processes occurred in both the Jewish community and the Muslim majority society in Morocco.

The four processes that precipitated Judeo-Arabic nonfiction in Morocco were the opening of local Hebrew printing houses across Morocco’s cities, the emergence of new elites among Morocco’s Jewish communities, secularization processes and in particular the rejection of the obligation to observe religious commandments, and the birth of a Jewish national movement, i.e. Zionism. The authors under study considered themselves mediators on a mission to generate religious *Tiqqun*—reparation, and/or to instill the ideas of Hebrew Enlightenment or the Jewish national movement.

Hebrew Printing at the Service of Judeo-Arabic Literature

From the second decade of the twentieth century the distribution of Judeo-Arabic nonfiction in Morocco was facilitated by the opening of local printing houses in several urban communities. Unlike Europe, Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa did not embrace printing in the fifteenth century for cultural,

³¹ Nahmany, *Historiya*, 7.

social, religious, and political reasons that are beyond the scope of this article.³² It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that the Sultan of Morocco approved the introduction of printing technology into his kingdom, due to the state's weakness vis-à-vis European powers. The first Arabic letters printing house opened in Fez in 1865, while others gradually followed in other cities. Muslim printing aimed to entrench religious faith, which meant that no general literature was printed. Only popular literature was produced, in three religiously-oriented fields: Sufi religious literature, popular religious law literature and political literature, which sought to reinforce Muslim identity and encourage religious war against the Christian foe from Europe. Hence, the birth of Moroccan Jewish printing culture in the twentieth century was not an isolated development; at the same time, Moroccan Arabic printing was also introduced, showing the same themes and genres.³³

As noted before, it was not until the nineteenth century that a Hebrew printing house was established in Morocco, setting aside a brief period in the sixteenth century, involving a family of exiles from Portugal. The first Hebrew-French printing house in Morocco was opened in 1891 in Tangier by Shlomo Benayoun, an immigrant from Oran, Algeria. As colonial rule gained hold, several Hebrew printing houses were founded in the urban Jewish hubs of Morocco, including Casablanca, Fez, Meknes, Marrakesh, Essaouira, Rabat Oujda and Tétouan.³⁴ They were established by local Jews who had worked in the branches of European printing houses in Morocco. The relative boom of Hebrew printing houses in Morocco in the colonial period points to the link between Hebrew printing and European printing. However, Jewish printing in Morocco was far from a passive instrument of European colonialism, as print technology was used by printers for various purposes. This boom further suggests that in pre-colonial times, under

³² For printing in the Ottoman Empire, see Ami Ayalon, *The Arabic Print Revolution: Cultural Production and Mass Readership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Ayalon reviews previous studies on the subject and explains the flaws in the explanations provided, or rather highlights the interpretations behind the explanations, while offering his own suggestions.

³³ Fawzi A. AbduIrazak, *The Kingdom of the Book: The History of Printing as an Agency of Change in Morocco between 1865 and 1912* (PhD diss., Boston University, 1990).

³⁴ Attal, "The Hebrew Press"; Marşiano, *Sefer b-nei melakhim*.

Muslim rule, Jews were probably forbidden from opening printing houses, or at the very least, conditions were not yet ripe.³⁵

The printing houses established in Morocco from the late nineteenth century changed attitudes towards the purpose of printing. For nearly 400 years, rabbis from Morocco had been printing their books in Jewish printing centers in different communities: Amsterdam, Livorno, Lwów, Vienna, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Tunisia.³⁶ Book printing outside Morocco meant expensive, at times dangerous, travel. Only a handful of Morocco's sages could afford the high expenditure and so, until the early twentieth century, a considerable portion of rabbis' tracts survived only in handwriting, while many were lost to natural disasters and political upheavals. Book printing before the arrival of local printing houses in Morocco was therefore perceived as an act of preservation in the face of oblivion and loss.³⁷ In addition, Morocco's rabbis sought to print, and in so doing distribute, their books among the small rabbinical elite in Muslim countries and Europe. As local printing houses opened, printing was repurposed and beside preserving and saving manuscripts, printing became a tool for mass distribution of literature, which Ami Ayalon defines, in the Muslim context of the Middle East, as the popularization of printing.³⁸ Rabat's rabbis, for example, in their approval of Assabag's *Minhat Qenaot*, highlight the role of printing in disseminating knowledge to the public at large: "Let all his precious books follow the same path into the printing press, to be distributed and enjoyed among the sons of Jacob and the people of Israel, so they delight in words of morals and reason."³⁹

Judeo-Arabic printing in the form of booklets and low-cost unlimited editions was the preserve of local printing houses. Printing houses outside Morocco aimed at the preservation of rabbinic literature by Morocco's sages through limited editions, and catered to the select rabbinic elite. Judeo-Arabic literature, on the

³⁵ Noam Sienna, *Making Jewish Books in North Africa, 1700-1900* (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2020), 168-187.

³⁶ Bregoli, "Hebrew Printing"; Sienna, *Making Jewish Books*, 117-167.

³⁷ Yigal S. Nizri, "Writing Against Loss: Moroccan Jewish Book Culture in a Time of Disaster," *Jewish Social Studies* 26, no.1 (2020): 91-100.

³⁸ Ayalon, *The Arabic Print*, 33.

³⁹ Assabag, *Belula*, 1.

contrary, had to be a mass literature, printed and distributed widely, if it was to exist at all. Through the printed word, it could rely on a widespread readership among the general public. It was only local printing that made the existence of a Judeo-Arabic literature practically possible. Elkrief, for example, writes in the preface of a *Ha-Madrikh* booklet that he intends to issue an affordable booklet every two weeks: such an enterprise would not have been possible with the printing houses outside Morocco.⁴⁰

A New Writing Elite: Maskilim Writing/Editing in Judeo-Arabic

In the mid-nineteenth century, new leadership groups started to come together in Morocco's urban communities, alongside the rabbinic elite, the *Nagid* and the community committee. Daniel Schroeter and Joseph Chetrit point to new elites in Morocco's coastal cities, following Jewish communities' encounters with European powers and their Jews. These were elites of overseas merchants who had received foreign diplomatic protection, alongside local representatives of international philanthropic Jewish organisations, like the Alliance Israélite Universelle or the Anglo-Jewish Association.⁴¹ Yaron Tsur and Hagar Hillel's study explores the new Jewish functionaries in Casablanca during the first half of the twentieth century, including Zionist activists, teachers and principals in the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the network of their alumni, alongside a pro-French or pro-Moroccan Jewish elite.⁴² In addition to these elites, and as part of them, one could find the authors in question. They did not hail from elite rabbinic families in Morocco, with their inherited titles, or from wealthy merchant families, both social groups that sought to perpetuate the circumstantially-established status-quo. The authors came from the lower or middle class and moved up the ranks of Jewish society to become leaders, while tapping into the new opportunities created in the early-twentieth century colonial

⁴⁰ Elkrief, *Ha-Madrikh*, 1.

⁴¹ Daniel J. Schroeter and Joseph Chetrit, "Emancipation and Its Discontents: Jews at the Formative Period of Colonial Rule in Morocco," *Jewish Social Studies* 13, no.1 (2006): 170-206.

⁴² Yaron Tsur and Hagar Hillel, *The Jews of Casablanca: Studies in the Modernization of the Political Elite in a Colonial Community* (Tel Aviv: Open University of Israel Press, 1995), 31-74 [Hebrew].

Morocco and the new educational and economic prospects that opened up mainly for the country's urban coastal communities.

At the turn of the nineteenth century though, the authors under study were schooled in traditional settings—from the *sla* (Morocco's *cheder*) to the yeshiva. Traditional Jewish education trained them as *talmidei hakhamim* (students of the sages) with the goal of proficiency in Jewish sources and in the moral values and demands of everyday religious practices. Their command of the sources' Hebrew language allowed them to read the Hebrew press and literature from Europe and the Land of Israel. Some of these authors received a secular education and studied foreign languages, mainly French, in non-formal educational setups: they could therefore read the press and literary books in a foreign language. This exposure to the press and to rabbinic and *Haskalah* literature in Hebrew, as well as to the press and literature in foreign languages, inspired their writing. They operated in traditional educational and public institutions and a strong link can be found between the subjects they explored as authors and their positions and public endeavors: as a community rabbi, Assabag propagated halakhic knowledge, while Elkrief, as a *talmid hakham*, popularized halakhic and moral knowledge; as Hebrew language proponents and Zionist activists, Nahmany and Bouskila disseminated Jewish topics—history, culture, and ideology.

These authors were not part of the Enlightenment circles operating in Morocco during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁴³ They shared some biographical characteristics with the Maskilim: they were based in coastal towns, they had elementary and advanced religious education, high proficiency in Hebrew and partial command of European languages. However, the Maskilim were born in the 1860s century and worked at the turn of the nineteenth century, a whole generation before the authors in question. Unlike the former, who were influenced by the Enlightenment movement, the latter were inspired by the Zionist movement at large, including the national Hebrew movement. Unlike the Maskilim, who published most of their writings in Hebrew newspapers based in

⁴³ Joseph Chetrit, "La haskala hébraïque dans le monde sepharade," in *Le monde sépharade*, vol. I. Histoire, ed. Shmuel Trigano (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), 745-809.

Europe, the authors discussed here printed their texts in Judeo-Arabic for a readership in Morocco. Nor did these authors belong to the westernized intellectual circles, whose members had been educated in French schools, and whose works were written in a European language, either French or Spanish, for a westernized and European readership.

The authors who wrote in Judeo-Arabic were part of an imagined community of *talmidei Hakhamim* and Maskilim of all the different communities of Israel throughout the ages, who composed and edited vernacular literature with the aim of making rabbinic and Haskalah literature accessible to the broad public of their communities. In the preface to his *Minha Belula*, Assabag cites the inspiration he derived from the books *Ya'arot Dvash* by Rav Jonathan Eybeschütz (eighteenth-century Poland) and *Pele Yo'etz*, by Rabbi Eliezer Papo (nineteenth century Ottoman Empire).⁴⁴ These two *talmidei hakhamim* translated books of halakha into their respective vernaculars, Yiddish and Ladino. In the opening of his book, Nahmany offers a translation of the introduction to *Derushim ve-homer le-drash* by his contemporary Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum, which elaborates on the importance of publishing books that can be read by the general public.⁴⁵ The authors from Morocco cite no inspiration from Muslim countries in general, particularly from their native country, because vernacular-speaking printed literature was a new phenomenon in the Muslim world. Nor do any of them cite translations by Rabbi Joseph Knafo. Probably, they were not familiar with him, as his enterprise was local, based in the city of Essaouira, while the distribution of his books in other Moroccan towns was limited.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, in the approval by Rabbi Moshe Meir Hai Elyakim, Casablanca's rabbi, of Assabag's *Minha Belula*, he goes back to the Middle Ages, noting that Assabag continues the translation tradition ushered in by Rabbi Saadia Gaon and Maimonides.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Assabag, *Belula*, 6.

⁴⁵ Nahmany, *Historiya*, 5-6.

⁴⁶ Abensour, "In Praise of the Multitude."

⁴⁷ Assabag, *Belula*, 3. Bar-Levav shows that Yiddish authors too made references to Maimonides's works in Judeo-Arabic to justify their translations. Bar-Levav, "Between the World of the Texts," 104.

The authors' status as a new elite hailing from the lower or middle class made them familiar with the spiritual and educational needs of their readers. Nahmany and Elkrief even positioned themselves as part of the readership, the masses, the beneficiaries of their books, rather than outside or above them. According to Elkrief, "Many people, like myself, are insufficiently proficient in the holy tongue,"⁴⁸ while Nahmany referred in his book to "the majority of our brethren, the masses like ourselves."⁴⁹ Their statements can arguably be read as hyperbolic platitudes: after all, unlike their target readership, the two were Maskilim with cultural capital, proficient in several languages. However, they did rise from the lower ranks of their community and were no strangers to them; they spoke and wrote in the vernacular, were conscious of the masses' needs and sought to carry out change with their books. In fact, these authors can be seen as bridges between different worlds of knowledge and sectors of the community.

Assabag was not born into a family of rabbis, where the title was inherited; he was part of an emerging rabbinic elite in Morocco. Born and educated in Marrakesh, Assabag attended the Rabbi Avraham Azoulay Yeshiva, headed by Rabbi Mordechai Kurkus. Ordained as rabbi, he accepted a post in the coastal community of Safi, where he founded the *Etz Chaim* yeshiva. Aware of his community's spiritual needs, when he chose to write books in Judeo-Arabic he broke ranks with the rabbinic elite. In the preface to his *Minha Belula*, he explains the limitations of rabbinic texts: "The rabbis of our generation, God bless them, have composed some grand treatises, whether by homiletic exegeses or by casuistry and collations of laws, where any passerby might find delight and eat and live forever, and yet it is only sages and *talmidim* who can study them, while the masses are left in the dark, and the books are beyond their reach."⁵⁰ He therefore found it important to leave the rabbinic ivory tower, "step outside my framework and come hither, for I have seen some souls who pine for a homily, as all is not lost for the people of Israel, for it is only that their hand is shortened and they cannot grasp."⁵¹ Unlike the rabbinic elite, who wrote and published rabbinic literature in

⁴⁸ Elkrief, *Hemed*, 12.

⁴⁹ Nahmany, *Historiya*, 7.

⁵⁰ Assabag, *Belula*, 6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Hebrew, Assabag published books exclusively in Judeo-Arabic, and in fact made the choice of engaging in educational discourse with the wider public, while shunning all intellectual discourse with his peers.

The educational ideal of these Judeo-Arabic booklets established a standard that can be met by all, rather than an ideal level of knowledge only attainable by a handful. In the preface to his *Minha Belula*, Assabag explains that he chose to write in Judeo-Arabic for the “Israelite youth uninitiated in the light of Torah, so they may have a door to usher them into the light of the Torah and piety.” In other words, he followed educational considerations. Bouskila seeks to initiate learners into the light of religious Jewish culture by translating *Agaddah* literature from Hebrew into Judeo-Arabic, and “sow the lofty moral and human virtues in the heart of the Jewish readership and instill therein the love of the Torah and its language.”⁵² In the preface to the book, he seeks to counter opposition from the older target readership, who may claim to be too old to learn, with the story of Rabbi Akiva, who only embarked on his Torah studies after turning forty, to become a great sage with many disciples.

A key element in the authors’ educational ideology is the expansion of Jewish literacy’s reach beyond select elites and its spread into new ranks across the community. These authors sought to allow the wider public access to knowledge hitherto stored in books either in Hebrew or French, to be mediated by elite groups. Direct, unmediated reading facilitated learning religious or national contents, unassisted by mediators.⁵³ Nahmany specifically notes in the opening to his book that he translated it so that readers or listeners in Arabic did not have to rely on anyone else—“find someone to read and interpret it into Arabic, their spoken tongue.”⁵⁴ This ideal is amply reflected in Assabag’s prefaces to his books.

⁵² Bouskila, *Toledot*, 5.

⁵³ Avriel Bar-Levav claims that small books published in Yiddish “helped ‘little people’ and ‘little women’ to harness the ritual act themselves, independent of the Shaliach Tzibbur (master of congregation ceremonies) or the collective Siddur.” See Avriel Bar-Levav, “Solace of the Soul: Printed Prayers, Small Books and the Jewish Ritual Place,” in *The Way of the Book: A Tribute to Zeev Gries*, eds. Avriel Bar-Levav et al. (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing House, 2021), 299-314 [Hebrew].

⁵⁴ Nahmany, *Historiya*, 7.

He opens the preface to his *Minha Belula* with an allegory that aims to explain the exclusion of the masses in the Jewish communities from the treasures of Hebrew textual culture: a city's gatekeepers that reserve access to the vineyards and orchards, with their galore of fruit, for the rich, leaving the poor ones out: "And one of the poor did rise," elaborates Assabag, "and zealous for the Lord, he said why should the poor be deprived of this delight, consigned to collecting pittance from the homes of the generous, and he bought a mirror to be placed opposite the garden, for the miserable to stare and marvel and take joy at the sight inside the garden, if full or with a glimpse thereof."⁵⁵ This "one of the poor" is Assabag himself, as well as the other authors, whose books allow access, albeit vicarious, to the Jewish spiritual treasures that are the preserve of the elites, leaving the masses out. Assabag's action of expropriating knowledge from the rabbinic elite back to the people may have stirred opposition among Morocco's rabbinic class, in a similar way to the reception of vernacular rabbinic literature among rabbinic elites in other communities,⁵⁶ but I found no trace of it. On the contrary, the approvals extended by rabbis in the openings of his books point to their support of his knowledge-propagation project and attest that they deemed it vital to grant access to the masses to this religious knowledge, in an age that saw secularization processes become widespread.

Rejecting the Observance of the Commandments and the Counter-response of Judeo-Arabic Literature

The authors at the heart of this article all published their books in Atlantic coastal cities (particularly in Casablanca), which started to experience significant changes in the early twentieth century. As the French Protectorate came into force in 1912, Morocco's coastal towns enjoyed an economic surge, with a developing modern economy, including industry and agriculture. Casablanca became the economic hub of Morocco: from a small fishing village with a Muslim quarter and a small Jewish neighborhood, it turned into a modern port city with new residential

⁵⁵ Assabag, *Belula*, 6.

⁵⁶ On the rabbinic elite opposition to vernacular literature, see Bar-Levav, "Between the World of the Texts," 104-105; Lehmann, *Ladino*, 44-45; Abensour, "In Praise of the Multitude."

quarters and a bustling commercial center. Shops, workshops, entertainment venues, cafes, cinemas, and hotels opened in the city for the first time. Alongside the migration to Morocco, internal migration to coastal cities began, including massive immigration of Jews from central Moroccan cities and villages, particularly to Casablanca, in search of new economic opportunities. The Jewish community in Casablanca, numbering just 5,000 in the early twentieth century, boasted by the middle of the century about 80,000 people, making up almost a third of all Moroccan Jews.⁵⁷

The coastal cities, particularly Casablanca, saw the beginning of new trends of secularization, or rather a trend of rejecting “the yoke of the commandments.” The secularization process in Morocco, as in other Muslim countries, was unlike those experienced by Jewish communities in Europe, with no dichotomous distinction between orthodoxy and secularization. Among Jews of Muslim countries, secularization processes and their reception were more akin to those experienced by the majority Muslim society. In these countries, religion was a holistic concept, drawing on strong faith and grounded in a theologically-binding text; it was integral to society and politics. Individuals who adopted a secular lifestyle renounced strict observance, but not their faith in God or their ties to the religious, familial tradition and its fundamental beliefs. Scholars define secularism in Muslim countries as conservative or fluid, and their religion as moderated or modular.⁵⁸ Muslim countries harboured coexistent secular and religious Jewish cultures, with no signs of separatism, though with a call for *tiqqun*, restoration, by the rabbinic elite, who were losing traction. Rabbis introduced regulations, wrote halakha rulings to help tackle modern realities, and established religious

⁵⁷ Andre Adam, *Casablanca: Essai sur la transformation de la société marocaine au contact de l'Occident* (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1972).

⁵⁸ Avriel Bar-Levav, “Secularization and the Jews in Islamic Countries,” in *Secularism and Secularization: Interdisciplinary Studies*, ed. Yochi Fischer (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute Press, 2015), 170-196 [Hebrew]. Moshe Shokeid, “The Religiosity of Middle Eastern Jews,” in *The Sociology of Religion in Israel: Israeli Judais*, eds., Shlomo Deshen et al. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 213-238; For a general discussion on the phenomenon of secularization in Judaism and the need to characterize it according to the discussions within different communities, see the introduction of Ari Joskowicz and Ethan B. Katz, eds., *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

institutes to reinforce Torah studies, while maintaining an ongoing dialogue among themselves as well as with community committees and the regime.⁵⁹

Nonfiction in Judeo-Arabic was another tool fashioned by *talmidei hakhamim* and *Maskilim* to counter the secularization and religion renunciation trends. The authors and the authorities who approved their work reacted to these prevailing trends across the community. Rabbi Avraham Abuchatzeira wrote in his approval of *Hemed Bahurim* that “It is a marvellous work and wonder indeed that in our generations, many do break the law in iniquity.”⁶⁰ Assabag in turn elaborated on the secularization trend in the opening of his *Minha Belula*:

Surely the people are grass, incited by urges. Enticed by pleasure, they pin their salvation and wishes to the Zuz (Jewish coin). They turn their back, not their face, to the Torah. They became her enemies, exchanging her glory [...] and they heed to the vanity of their mouths and gather wind in their palms and believe in the falsehood, for their hands have found many pearls and they are wise in their own eyes, and what is wisdom to them and prudent in their own sight and have not the understanding of a man, and they fancy themselves to don the light of enlightenment as they do their clothes and find crooked all that was straight and draw after them the majority of youth, the lofty people of the land and its nobles, and they dim the splendor of wisdom to replace it with false wisdom, to cut the reins of morals and ditch the reins of honest morals [...].⁶¹

Assabag refers to some sections of Morocco’s society as “grass,” after Isaiah 40:7, where “grass” denotes the prophet’s dismay at the people’s low spiritual merit. Assabag likewise argues that the people are grass, having turned their backs on the

⁵⁹ For the rabbinic elite’s attitudes to secularization processes and the trend of rejecting the yoke of commandments in Muslim countries, see Zvi Zohar, “Sephardic Rabbinic Responses to Modernity: Some Central Characteristics,” in *Jews among Muslims: Communities in the Precolonial Middle East*, eds. Shlomo Deshen and Walter P. Zenner (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1996): 64-80; Avi Sagi and Zvi Zohar, *Circles of Jewish Identity: A Study in Halakhic Literature* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2000) [Hebrew].

⁶⁰ Elkrief, *Hemed*, 7.

⁶¹ Assabag, *Belula*, 5.

Torah in favor of lust, pleasures, and money. He cites general education, with which many sections of the community were enthralled: the majority of youth across social classes, both rich and poor. Elkrief, Nahmany, and Bouskila also cite the young as the target readership of their books and seek to strike them with their teachings while they are hot and malleable.⁶²

Secularization processes in Morocco gained pace from the early twentieth century, for internal and external reasons addressed by the authors in their books.⁶³ First, internal migration processes meant that leadership groups in the original communities had their authority undermined, along with the family setup. Over in the big cities, Jews interacted with western and eastern foreign cultures, in the cafes and through the press, literature, cinema, etc. The authors' prefaces offer examples of the trend: Bouskila notes that some sections of Jewish society read non-Jewish literature in Judeo-Arabic: "Many of our brethren enthusiastically, assiduously, pore over books in Arabic (in Hebrew alphabet) about the tales of the legendary knights and heroes."⁶⁴ Elkrief reveals a new leisure culture: young people out for day trips on the Sabbath, during hours previously dedicated to Torah study.⁶⁵ Moreover, the colonial rule had legal and social implications for individual Jews and the structure of the Jewish community: dwindling Jewish elites, integration in the job market, the colonial society and culture. These often meant breaking away from the community setup.⁶⁶ Finally, there was modern education—the Alliance Israélite Universelle, which would establish a Jewish education network across Jewish communities in Muslim countries, opened its first school in Tétouan, northern Morocco, in 1862. The network expanded over the years into most cities in Morocco and after World War II, gained a hold even in villages in the south of the kingdom. These schools shaped students' worldviews, with European—or more precisely, French—values, language, and

⁶² Elkrief, *Hemed*, 11; Nahmany, *Historiya*, 7; Bouskila, *Toledot*, 5.

⁶³ About the reasons for secularization in Muslim countries in general, see Bar-Levav, "Secularization."

⁶⁴ Bouskila, *Toledot*, 6.

⁶⁵ Elkrief, *Hemed*, 11.

⁶⁶ Schroeter and Chetrit, "Emancipation and Its Discontents."

culture, which meant rejecting the yoke of commandments and growing farther away from religious and national Jewish culture.⁶⁷

Jewish Nationalism

Some of the Judeo-Arabic literature printed in Morocco is tightly linked to the Jewish national consciousness and Zionist activities in the kingdom, that started in the early twentieth century. The first Zionist associations were founded in the cities of Essaouira, Tétouan, Safi, and Fez. These associations engaged in propaganda and fundraising for the various national funds. The Balfour Declaration in November 1917 led to a resumed expansion of Zionist activities in Morocco, venturing into many communities. The colonial regime took a negative approach to those associations and would not allow them to operate legally, as they viewed Zionism as a rival element that vied for the local Jewish minority's loyalty and generally strove to stem any national unionization, whether Jewish or Muslim. The associations therefore sheltered under the Zionist Federation of France and their activities were restricted to propaganda and fundraising, which meant a small presence in the public sphere.

In late 1923, Jonathan Thursz, an immigrant from England, established a Zionist cell of local activists in Casablanca, and fund-raised for Shekel, Keren Hayesod and the Jewish National Fund, while also running Zionist propaganda. A significant change in the situation of the Zionist organization in the country occurred with the National Conference of Morocco's Zionists in January 1936. The conference established a main organizational framework that represented the major urban communities and plotted a policy for a local Jewish organization: its institutions were elected and an action plan was laid out to collect money for the Jewish National Fund, Keren Hayesod and for the Shekel's trade, as well as for propaganda and Hebrew education. Zionist activities in Morocco, which started

⁶⁷ Michael M. Laskier, *The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Jewish Communities of Morocco, 1862-1962* (Albany, 1983); Aomar Boum, "Schooling in the Bled: Jewish Education and the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Southern Rural Morocco, 1830-1962," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 3, no.1 (2010): 1-24.

flourishing in the 1930s, were cut short by the second world war. In June 1946, the tradition was resumed and the annual conference of Morocco's Zionists took place in Casablanca with more than 50 representatives standing for thousands of members from ten major communities in the kingdom. Once the State of Israel was founded, a Zionist association was established in virtually every large or medium-sized community in Morocco.⁶⁸

The authors at the heart of this article were key elements of the Zionist activities in Casablanca. In 1919, Elkrief was a co-founder of the Zionist society of *Magen David* for the propagation of Hebrew language and culture, where he remained an active member until after the second world war. Nahmany was a member of the society's managing committee from the mid-1930s and following the second world war, established the *Hoveve ha-safa* society for the propagation of Hebrew. He also opened an informal Hebrew school in his own home. Nahmany identified with Religious Zionist convictions and became one of the Mizrahi movement's leaders in Morocco. Bouskila attended *Magen David's* school. After graduation, he taught at the *Em ha-banim* school and after the war headed *Magen David's* Hebrew club. The club hosted a weekly *'oneg Shabat* (Joy of the Sabbath) activity, combining talks and sing-alongs with Hebrew lessons and an annual literary competition. At the same time, Nahmany was a leader in Morocco's *Poale Zion* movement. Bouskila further served as co-founder of the Hebrew teachers' association after the war, an institution that sought to change Hebrew teachers' professional and economic status in Morocco.⁶⁹

Their books popularized knowledge on halakha, ethics, culture and history, while explaining their importance in terms of national reasons. The preface and back cover of Nahmany's book feature a key phrase that encapsulates his national conviction: "Just as it is every nation's duty to know its history and the history of

⁶⁸ Ample literature explores the Zionist movement in North Africa, particularly in Morocco. See for example: Michel Abitbol, "Zionist Activity in the Maghreb," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 21 (1981): 61-84; Michael M. Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Yaron Tsur, *A Torn Community: Moroccan Jews and Nationalism, 1943-1954* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2001) [Hebrew].

⁶⁹ About the authors' Zionist activities, see *A Torn Community*.

its forefathers, so must we know our history and the history of our forefathers.”⁷⁰ Albeit acknowledging the importance of the past, for Nahmany, teaching history was not driven by theological and religious motives, but rather grounded in the will to enlighten the wider public and forge a Jewish national identity by revealing the Jewish people’s past and charting the Jewish continuum over generations. Constructing a shared past, Nahmany incorporated propaganda materials in the second part of his book, advocating for the Zionist movement and the importance of making aliyah. As noted before, he translated into Judeo-Arabic parts of the speech by Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenbaum, one of the first thinkers of Religious Zionism and the Mizrahi movement, entitled “The Reasons Why a Jew Must Be a Zionist,” included in his *Derushim ve-homer le-drash* (1902).⁷¹ The choice of this text goes back to Nahmany’s identification with Mizrahi ideologies, as well as with the religious language and values woven into Nissenbaum’s essay. He further translated a collection of *Midrashim* on the Land and its settlement, the love of the Land and its Torah, from different Talmudic treatises and *Midrashim* books. Nahmany clearly wrapped up traditional texts in Zionist propaganda, while employing a religious language, familiar to his readership, to advocate for the Land of Israel and aliyah.

In his *Hemed Bahurim*, Elkrief describes the Magen David’s mission of spreading the knowledge of Hebrew, as part of which he published the book. His text forges an unbreakable link between Hebrew and the national idea, by employing religious language. Elkrief translated the national message into a religious language and terminology, so that readers might grasp and accept the new ideas. Accordingly, Hebrew figures as the “holy tongue,” while the necessity of a single language for the Jewish collective draws on Hebrew sources as “the precious tongue of our fathers, the holy prophets, and ourselves,” alongside a quote from the Book of Esther and another one from the sages: “There is no nation without language.”⁷² Elkrief’s spatial perception was not community-based; it was neither about Casablanca nor Morocco, but drew on the entire Jewish Diaspora. The Jewish People were dispersed across the nations, speaking different tongues,

⁷⁰ Nahmany, *Historiya*, 7.

⁷¹ Nissenbaum, *Derushim*.

⁷² Elkrief, *Hemed*, 51-52.

therefore it was necessary for Hebrew to serve as a linguistic, cultural inter-community bridge. Aware of the Zionist activities and the rise of the Hebrew language and culture in Europe and the Land of Israel, Elkrief called upon his community to join the movement's ranks.

Bouskila sought to forge a national Jewish identity and instill knowledge of Hebrew through exposure to the spiritual and cultural treasures of Judaism. In the preface to his book, he calls upon Judeo-Arabic readers to learn Hebrew, so that they may read literature of all times. He deemed the book a gateway to spiritual richness that the reader might expand by delving into the Jewish bookshelf in Hebrew. He enlists Rabbi Meir b'al ha-nes: "Whoever occupies himself with the Torah for its own sake, merits many things; not only that but he is worth the whole world. He is called beloved friend; one that loves God; one that loves humankind; one that gladdens God; one that gladdens humankind." He then adds: "And if my booklet serves to spark in our brethren the Sons of Israel the desire and passion to learn the Hebrew language and Torah, this shall be my reward, for this is my sole purpose."⁷³ By means of Judeo-Arabic literature, Bouskila sought to encourage Hebrew learning. He incorporated an essay in his book, "A Word for Hebrew Teachers in Rabat and Sale," where he expounded his ideological and national-pedagogic views and expressed his appreciation of the Hebrew he had heard spoken by students at *Bate Midrash* seminaries in Rabat and Sale, stressing the importance of venturing into audiences other than yeshiva and Talmud Torah students, or groups whom he thought disregarded their national language, including the men, women and youth who attended Alliance Israélite Universelle schools and swore by French.⁷⁴

Conclusion

The article is a first of its kind exploration of the Judeo-Arabic popular nonfiction printed in Morocco between the early twentieth century and the 1960s in the form

⁷³ Bouskila, *Toledot*, 6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-10.

of single pages, pamphlets or small books. This literature provided readers with knowledge pertaining to the halakha, ethics, culture, history, and Zionist ideology, so as to strengthen religious Jewish identity and national identity. The beginning of this literature in early twentieth century Morocco followed the convergence of four historic processes: the opening of the first printing houses opening in Morocco in the early twentieth century, which allowed to print locally-flavored books and generated a new readership; the rise of new elites (including the authors studied here) who were attuned to the needs of their community, set against the dwindling old Jewish oligarchy; the growing trends of rejecting the yoke of commandments and the secularization processes, both unique to Jewries in Muslim countries; and the emergence of a nationalist Jewish consciousness, including Zionist activities.

The development of this popular, vernacular, Judeo-Arabic literature can be seen as an attempt to articulate a vision of modernity in a distinctly Moroccan form. Lucette Valensi's study offers an overview of multiple Jewish modernities across North Africa, including a variety of cultural programs that were in evidence from the nineteenth century: the adoption of Western cultural components, modified to accommodate local cultures; participation in the Hebrew Haskalah movement and later the Jewish national movement, including the new Hebrew culture; the shaping of an Orthodox Jewish culture, inspired by interactions with other Jewish communities; and the creation of a new Judeo-Arabic written culture in literature and journalism, inspired by Muslim Arab, Eastern and Western European Jewish cultures.⁷⁵

This last trajectory of modernity also includes the nonfiction published in Morocco early in the twentieth century. A distinct sector of the Jewish community in Morocco experienced modernization processes in Judeo-Arabic, marked by a religious and nationalistic Jewish orientation. This trajectory of modernity coincides with the conclusions of Daniel Schroeter, who has shown that Jews in Muslim countries continued to observe the commandments and uphold

⁷⁵ See Valensi's comprehensive article: Lucette Valensi, "Multicultural Visions: The Cultural Tapestry of the Jews of North Africa," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Sejocken Books, 2002), 887-931.

community and family values even as they underwent processes of modernization.⁷⁶

The authors who published nonfiction literature in Morocco during the first half of the twentieth century were of Jewish, religious and nationalist dispositions. With their books, they sought to disseminate religious and nationalist ideas, in order to erect walls around the community. In their works they struck a synergy between religion and Zionism, which meant religion brought readers who had been spared modernization processes closer to the modern Zionist movement. Zionism had no interest in undermining Judaism as a parameter of national affiliation. Anthony Smith associates Zionism with a rather uncommon brand of nationalism—diasporic nationalism. The uniqueness of this type of nationalism lies in its emergence among diasporic minorities, while its main purpose is to generate a return movement to the diasporic people's land of origin. The essential link between the return movement and the destination of this migration is usually provided by religion, which points to the chosen territory. Thus a strong affinity is established between religion on the one hand and nationalism on the other, as shaped by the authors in their books, with the purpose of influencing their readership.⁷⁷

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⁷⁶ Daniel Schroeter, "A Different Road to Modernity: Jewish Identity in the Arab World," in *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity*, ed. Howard Wettstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 150-163.

⁷⁷ Anthony D. Smith, "Introduction: The Formation of Nationalist Movements," in *Nationalist Movements*, ed. Anthony D. Smith (London: Macmillan, 1976), 12-13. Yaron Tsur, "The Religious Factor in the Encounter between Zionism and the Rural Atlas Jews," in *Zionism and Religion*, eds. Shmuel Almog, Jehuda Reinharz, and Anita Shapira (Hanover: Brandeis University Press 1998), 312-329.

Visual and literary images of Jews from Muslim countries in their native lands and in Israel.

His first book, *The Hebrew Culture in Morocco*, explores the Attitudes of Moroccan Jewry toward the Hebrew language and the building of Hebrew culture during the colonial period (1912-1956). Currently he is working on a monograph tentatively titled: The development and modernization of a Jewish polyglot book culture in twentieth century Morocco.

Keywords: Morocco, Books, Printing Press, Secularization, Nationalism

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