Modernizing Jewish Education in Nineteenth Century Eastern Europe. The School as the Shrine of the Jewish Enlightenment

Mordechai Zalkin's work, published by Brill in 2016, is the English version of his book published in 2008 in Hebrew under the title *From ‘Heder’ to School: The Modernisation Process in 19th Century East European Jewish Education*. The book is a relatively short study of the ways in which the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) and its proponents (*maskilim*) attempted to modernise the education of Eastern European Jews (here limited geographically to the territories of Russia, particularly the Pale of Settlement). As Zalkin argues, the subject of education has usually remained on the margins of wider studies of *Haskalah*. His work offers a unique insight into the “formulation of *maskilic* educational thinking” (p. 1). Although the author is fully aware of all major debates taking place among the *maskilim*, he devotes only one section of the book (chapter 5) to the practical implementation of these ideas. Because of its brevity (the book is 192 pages long, with only about 160 pages of actual content), *Modernizing Jewish Education in Nineteenth Century Europe* requires a very good knowledge of the nuanced history of Jewish Enlightenment, since Zalkin does not even attempt to introduce neither historical nor ideological context, in which all the theoretical debates on the subject of Jewish education took place.

The first chapter serves as a very good introduction to the subject of Jewish education. By extensive use of contemporary sources, Zalkin paints a vivid picture of 19th century *heder* (traditional Jewish schools), explaining their role in Jewish society and the reasons behind the determination of the *maskilim* to transform them into places of modernity and enlightenment, focusing on “the ability of the individual to provide for himself, or herself, in a changing world” (p. 117). However, as the following parts of the book illustrate, the struggle against these well-established institutions was usually far from successful. The *maskilim* did not offer a complete abandonment of the traditional, religious education in favour of secularism, suggesting instead a mixture of old, but modernised, teaching and promoting of more useful skills. Perhaps the most significant was the difference in language. While traditional *heder*, because of their shtetl milieu, employed Yiddish and Hebrew (usually the Biblical Hebrew which allowed the students to understand Torah and Talmud), the new schools very often promoted the use of national languages such as Polish and Russian, at the same time giving the students the opportunity to learn German or even French. Although Zalkin claims that the struggle against the traditional *heder* lay at the very centre of the educational activities of *Haskalah*, he does not offer many
practical results of that struggle on a micro-level. The reader is left with only general information on the actual impact of the modernising movement on Jewish society, despite very strong claims that all educational actions of the maskilim led to the spread of Haskalah in Eastern Europe.

On a number of occasions, particularly in chapters 5 and 6, Zalkin stresses the unique, enlightened, and, indeed, modern approach to education expressed by the 19th century maskilim. For Haskalah, modernising education aimed at putting the child at the centre and "creating an educational space that was stimulating and productive" (p. 109) – something that, in their view, traditional heders would never achieve. Moreover, ideas put forward by the Jewish theoreticians suggested not only an overhaul of the existing educational system. By advocating universal education and offering opportunities to everyone, regardless of their talents and social position, this undertaking "was in effect a challenge hurled at the entire social hierarchy" (p. 113). While we can call Zalkin's analysis of theoretical debates on the issue of Jewish education a comprehensive one, the way in which he presents the movement's main theoreticians remains highly insufficient. He does not even provide short notes about the mentioned writers, by which the reader could identify them and get an insight into when exactly in the 19th century they lived.

This preoccupation with theory also means that references to practical sides of these modernisation developments are rather scarce. In most chapters, the author mentions only in passing (and once again, without any further details) modern institutions founded in Warsaw, Odessa or Riga, but fails to place them in the wider context of the theoretical narrative he presents. Chapter 6 offers the most in terms of details regarding the implementation of maskilim thought into practise. Despite the limits imposed on Jewish schools by Russian authorities (particularly in the latter half of the 19th century) and the opposition of the majority of local, traditional Jews, the newly established schools "had relatively extensive room to manoeuvre in order to realize their vision" (p. 124). However, it would still take some time until the creation of independent schools. Initially, the maskilim attempted "to alter the system of education, on the basis that it is preferable to reform an existing system of education rather than build an entirely new one" (p. 42). Needless to say, the limited success of this endeavour forced them to turn towards developing a completely new school system.

For the promoters of the new, enlightened system of education, it was a way of modernising the Jewish society as a whole, "the main gateway through which the modern age crossed into the dwellings of Jews throughout Eastern Europe, into the alleyways of poverty on the outskirts of Vilna and into the homes of the simple Jew in Minsk, Biaylistok [sic], and Mogilev" (p. 158). The author, however, remains very vague in his presentation of those involved in the process of modernisation. The presented examples show that many of them were wealthy, well-educated and enlightened individuals, usually basing their educational theories on the recent developments taking place in Germany and France. Yet, once again, the preoccupation with theory overshadows the practical and individual side of the story, leaving the reader only with a vague idea about the promoters of Haskalah. Zalkin's conclusion, similarly to his introduction, presents the whole modernising movement as unique and extremely successful. Strangely enough, the book lacks decisive information to support the main thesis of the success of the Haskalah movement's educational enterprises in Eastern Europe.

Modernizing Jewish Education in Nineteenth Century Europe is a book of considerable value to all researchers interested in the Jewish Enlightenment. However, a number of issues leave this study far from perfect. The
aforementioned brevity is one of them. Withholding any context, this book will appeal only to those already familiar with other studies devoted to *Haskalah* in Central and Eastern Europe (apart from occasional references, Zalkin does not offer any significant comparison of the differences between the groups working in those regions, each operating within completely different social and cultural milieus). More importantly, the structure of the book is very unclear; there is hardly any chronology in the chapters. Instead of presenting a stringent evolution of educational ideas from theory to practice, the author offers only a confusing mixture of theoretical and practical developments that took place across the 19th century. To this we can add a number of debatable claims, such as the alleged lessening of censorship in Russia in the 1860s (if anything, censorship increased in the wake of the January Uprising of 1863-4) or calling Warsaw and Odessa “peripheral communities”, while they were actually centres of Jewish life. Overall, the book promises more than it delivers, being an interesting, albeit seriously flawed contribution to our understanding of the Jewish Enlightenment and Jewish history in the 19th century.

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