

# SOME RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES REFLECTED IN THE HEBREW NOVELS OF THE PERIOD OF ENLIGHTENMENT

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**M**ODERN Jewish history largely consists of a desperate attempt to catch up with Western European civilization, for in many respects the Jewish Middle Ages extend to the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The institution of the Ghetto in the middle of the sixteenth century resulted in a stagnation of Jewish life for some 250 vital years, during which the countries of Western Europe experienced an enormous expansion of horizons, both geographical and intellectual. From the end of the eighteenth century in Western Europe, and the middle of the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe, the Jewish people was faced with the formidable task of telescoping into a few decades a process of development which Western European countries had undergone slowly and painfully during two and a half centuries. Small wonder then, that Jewish life was thrown off balance. The unity of Jewry in the Middle Ages, so largely self-contained and soberly integrated, was shattered by the impact of the Modern World. A glittering panorama of fresh ideas and aspirations exerted a powerful attraction on successive generations of youth, so that many of the old ideals were all too rapidly abandoned in a search for the new and tantalizing values of the outside world. Enlightenment and emancipation gradually became the watchwords of large sections of the Jewish people, and if these concepts were not always compatible with traditional Judaism, then the latter had to be modified or re-interpreted to bridge the gap.

The struggle for civil rights and equality of opportunity found its first concrete expression in the writings of Moses Mendelssohn, and particularly in his *Jerusalem* (1783). In an

attempt to harmonize his Judaism with the rationalist philosophy he had imbibed from the *Aufklärung* on the one hand, and his patriotic aspirations on the other, Mendelssohn was compelled to define Judaism as a series of positive and negative injunctions untainted by any suspicion of dogma.<sup>1</sup> By arguing that Judaism leaves its adherents free to *believe* whatever reason and conscience dictate providing only that the practical commandments be observed, and by adopting the maxim "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's", Mendelssohn prepared the ground for a series of interpretations which were to empty Judaism of its national and social content. Yet so powerful were his own reputation and personal influence that almost a century was to pass before his ideas were seriously challenged from within the ranks of the exponents of enlightenment, who had hitherto regarded Mendelssohn as their spiritual ancestor.

In Germany itself attention was focused upon the problem of integrating the Jew into German society. Within the movement for religious reform, strenuously propagated by such thinkers as Abraham Geiger and Samuel Holdheim, the urgent desire to accommodate Judaism to the demands of loyal patriotism resulted in the abandonment of the Messianic ideal and the hope of miraculous redemption. But the elimination of the eschatological aspects of Judaism gave rise to another problem, which has continued in large measure to the present time, namely: In what form was the continuation of Jewish life to be envisaged? This problem was by no means confined to the movement advocating radical religious reform. The counter-reformation of the Conservative movement advocated, among others, by Leopold Zunz, Zachariah Frankel and Solomon Judah Rapoport, and the movement of Neo-orthodoxy as represented, for example, by Samuel David Luzzatto and Samson Raphael Hirsh, are characterized by an equal awareness of the changed conditions facing Judaism, which demanded a re-thinking of the traditional position. Each thinker in turn propounded his own solution to the problems facing Judaism, but the very variety of opinion only serves to emphasize the process

<sup>1</sup> See D. Patterson, "Moses Mendelssohn's Concept of Tolerance", *Between East and West* (London, 1958).

of fragmentation to which Judaism was subjected in the course of the nineteenth century. One positive factor did, however, emerge. The continuous search for precedent in ancient practice to bolster the variety of opinions successively proposed fostered a growing awareness of the national past, and strengthened the sense of historical continuity. Hence the paradox that a move originally designed to limit Judaism solely to its religious aspects eventually helped to prepare the ground for a nationalist revival.

In Eastern Europe the drive towards emancipation and enlightenment began rather later and proceeded far more slowly. The great majority of the Jews of Europe were concentrated in the Russian "Pale of Settlement" where very different conditions prevailed. There the density of settlement, the all-pervading intensity of Jewish life and the hostility of the Russian Government seriously impeded the propagation of such ideas in the first half of the nineteenth century. But in Eastern Europe, too, such writers as Nachman Krochmal and Isaac Baer Levinsohn<sup>1</sup> gave expression to their awareness of the new conditions facing Judaism. From their penetrating studies in Jewish history they succeeded in focusing attention upon many aspects of Judaism, particularly its dynamic qualities, which had been neglected or become fossilized in more recent times. No less than in the West, although in very different form, the exponents of enlightenment in Eastern Europe followed the dual tendencies of reform and increasing national consciousness.

The more liberal climate which prevailed in the first fifteen years following the accession of Czar Alexander II, and which allowed the Jews of Russia more economic freedom and wider educational facilities, emboldened the exponents of enlightenment to press their views with greater vigour. Following the lead set by the Russian literary critics of the "Positive" school during the sixties of the last century, the younger Jewish exponents of enlightenment embarked upon a serious campaign for the amelioration of social conditions—but in this instance as

<sup>1</sup> For a succinct outline of the attitude towards Judaism adopted by these thinkers and their younger contemporaries see Y. Halevi-Zweik, *Musag Ha-Yahaduth Bi-Tekuphath Ha-Haskalah* (Tel-Aviv, 1955).

applied to Jews. Their shafts were aimed primarily against the prevailing system of Jewish education and the economic occupations favoured by the Jews; but at the same time they felt convinced that religious reform constituted a necessary step in the struggle for enlightenment and emancipation. Admittedly the reforms advocated seem negligible in the light of the radical changes introduced by the Reform movement in Germany. Nevertheless they aroused a wave of indignant opposition from the orthodox.

This opposition was neither new nor unexpected. Indeed, an intense antipathy on the part of the orthodox towards any attempt to spread enlightenment in any form had manifested itself in Russia for more than half a century previously, and the comparatively few exponents of enlightenment had frequently suffered ostracism and sometimes persecution. The orthodox regarded the new trends with the greatest suspicion, believing—and not without reason—that the spread of enlightenment without emancipation could lead only to conversion. Now, however, the situation was aggravated by the great increase in strength on the part of the enlighteners, both numerically in consequence of the new access to the High School and University and also—deriving from a conviction that the Government was behind them—in morale. Their criticisms of the orthodox position became sharper and more outspoken and their demands for reform increasingly compelling. The orthodox, for their part, took up the cudgels with avidity, at the same time hardening still further an attitude already rigid, and determined to defend their position to the last.

Although destined to continue in virulent form for at least another decade, the battle for religious reform reached its climax in Lithuania between the years 1869-71. In great measure this proved to be a literary war, a veritable battle of the books, largely fought out in the pages of the Hebrew literary journals, the most influential organ available to Hebrew writers for the propagation of their ideas at that time. Principally through the pages of *Ha-Meliz* and the less radical *Ha-Maggidh* the reformers, notably M. L. Lilienblum and J. L. Gordon, hurled their broadsides against the orthodox citadels, while their opponents

thundered back replies mainly via their own special journal, *Ha-Lebanon*. The battle centring upon the question whether Judaism should be reformed to meet the demands of life was fought with virulence and passion, often degenerating into a series of scurrilous attacks, particularly on the part of the orthodox, against the writers of the opposing camp.<sup>1</sup>

The exponents of enlightenment did not, however, confine their attack to articles in the literary journals. They propagated their ideas in poems, in satirical dramas, and especially in the novel. For a period of some twenty years following the first skirmishes in this literary war echoes of the struggle resound throughout the pages of the Hebrew novel. The issues had, indeed, already been raised in Abraham Mapu's long novel of contemporary life entitled '*Ayit Zābhu'a* (The Hypocrite),<sup>2</sup> but Mapu's approach was cautious and restrained. During the period under review, 1868-88, the gloves are frequently removed, enabling the novelists to hammer their opponents unmercifully. Almost all the major novels of this period are largely, if not primarily, social in content. But even the minor and very obscure novels, despite their frequently fantastic plots and unreal settings, scarcely ever lack a sense of social responsibility, and lend their weight to the struggle against what their authors considered to be the abuses of their time.<sup>3</sup>

Most interesting, perhaps, of all these novels, in so far as it represents the most faithful portrayal of the battle at its height, is the novel by R. A. Braudes entitled *Religion and Life*.<sup>4</sup> In an important preface to the second edition of this work Braudes is careful to point out that the first term in the title of his work, namely *Dath*, does not signify faith or religion in its ordinary sense, but in the special connotation of Judaism as codified in the *Shulḥan 'Aruḥ* (the last great codification of Jewish law

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed study of this literary war see G. Katznelson, *Ha-Milhamah Ha-Siphuthith bein Ha-Haredhim We-ha-Maskilim* (Tel-Aviv, 1954).

<sup>2</sup> Pt. 1, Vilna, 1858; pt. 2, 1861; pt. 3, 1864. A second edition containing all five parts was published posthumously in Warsaw, 1869.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief survey of the relative importance of the novels of this period see D. Patterson, "Israel Weisbrem", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (January, 1959).

<sup>4</sup> *Ha-Dath We-ha-Hayyim*, Lemberg, 1876-7. The references in this article are to the second edition corrected by the author, Lemberg, 1885.

to become generally accepted). The significance of the title becomes immediately manifest. It was against what they considered to be the excessive stringencies of that code that the reformers had directed their stoutest shafts in the literary journals. Indeed the author declares specifically that he has chosen the novel form merely to make his chronicle of the events of those three years, when the struggle between "religion" and "life" engulfed the whole of Lithuanian Jewry, more palatable. Even more revealing is the author's preface to the third part of the novel, which was never completed. Here Braudes emphasizes that the purpose of literature is to increase the reader's awareness of life, and that he has couched his chronicle in novel form so that the reader may be enabled to review the events the more dispassionately. He proceeds to the remark that whereas in the first two parts of the novel he has allowed the plot to take the lion's share of his work, in the third part he intends to lay the main emphasis on his depiction of the actual struggle, so that the reader is warned of the many diversions from the story to be expected. Braudes's own standpoint may be gauged from the fact that he modelled the hero of his story, Samuel, on the above mentioned M. L. Lilienblum, one of the principal protagonists in the struggle for reform.

It is important to emphasize the fact that Braudes makes no criticism of religion as such. On the contrary his hero, Samuel, is himself a strictly orthodox and observant Jew endowed, moreover, with a deep sense of loyalty to his people and an ardent wish to devote his entire energies to their cause. The attack is levelled solely against a too stringent and over rigid interpretation of Rabbinical law, which the author believes does not accord with the dynamic principles of Judaism as they are reflected in the Talmud. For this reason the three issues which are selected to serve as examples in the course of the plot seem all the more peripheral to a religious controversy. But in each case the author is aiming at the alleviation of Jewish social misery, which stemmed primarily from the almost universal and crushing poverty of Jewish life in the "Pale of Settlement", aggravated by the extraordinary increase in population throughout the course of the nineteenth century.

The first example concerns the tendency of the local Rabbi to take the negative view in cases where the ritual fitness of an animal slaughtered for consumption is subject to the slightest shadow of doubt. The story opens with a complaint that the Rabbi has condemned three cows one after the other in a single day, even though the butcher argues that in his opinion, based on forty years of experience, the third is fit for consumption. As a result the whole townlet is left without food for the Sabbath, while the butcher sustains a ruinous loss. Next day in synagogue the butcher dramatically interrupts the service before the reading of the *Torah* to raise the point once again, and Samuel takes his side against the Rabbi, denouncing the latter's tyranny. Samuel proves his point from the Talmud, while the Rabbi supports his own case from the *Shulhan 'Arukh*. Meanwhile the congregation is astounded to find that two such authoritative works can contradict each other! The Rabbi, however, stands his ground, and accuses Samuel of heresy.<sup>1</sup>

The second example, too, is directed against the financial loss caused to the innocent victims of excessively rigid interpretation. A child dies in a house adjoining the courtyard of that occupied by Samuel's mother. As she and her neighbours have neglected to throw away all the water standing in their houses immediately after the death, all the food in their houses is pronounced unfit for consumption and, moreover, they are ordered to throw away all their cooking utensils and purchase new ones in their stead.<sup>2</sup> Once more Samuel attacks the decision on the basis of his own profound knowledge of the sources of Jewish law, and once more without success.

The third example is far more germane to the plot and revolves upon the question of the *Yabham*.<sup>3</sup> Rachel, one of the heroines of the story, has recently become a widow. Her father-in-law, Todros, had divorced his first wife under pressure from her relatives some thirty years previously, and left her pregnant. Since that time he has become so degenerate a drunkard that he cannot even remember the village in which his first wife lived.

<sup>1</sup> *Ha-Dath We-ha-Hayyim*, pt. 1, ch. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pt. 2, ch. 6.

<sup>3</sup> See the *Mishnah*, *Yebhamoth*.

He is unaware whether she gave birth to a son or daughter, or whether the child is still alive. As the possibility exists, however, that the child is male and has survived, Rachel is refused permission to re-marry until her late husband's hypothetical step-brother has first waived his prior claim to her hand.<sup>1</sup> The unhappy plight of the unfortunate Rachel may well be imagined, and once more Samuel takes up the cause of the oppressed. It becomes obvious from these examples, however, that the type of reform envisaged in this novel constitutes anything but a radical attack on orthodox religion, but rather an attempt to purge it of what were considered excrescences quite out of line with its real spirit.

Braudes, indeed, devotes the first three chapters of the third part of his novel to an historical survey of the development of Judaism from the period of the Second Temple to his own times. He is at pains to point out how the different factions of Jewry have constantly oppressed each other, with the object of demonstrating how such persecution only serves to strengthen the opposing party. After outlining first the struggles between the Pharisees and Sadducees and then the Rabbinites and Karaites, Braudes proceeds to trace the steady increase in the number of ritual laws formulated in the Middle Ages and the parallel growth of the Kabbalah, both of which developments, in his opinion, served to oppress the Jewish people. Admittedly only a certain proportion of the Jews had to bear the yoke of the Kabbalah, while Rabbinical law weighed heavily upon the entire people. But whereas the latter embraced only the body, the Kabbalah dominated the mind, resulting in an even more rigorous servitude.

The real disaster for Israel, argues Braudes, occurred when Rabbinical dialectic became united with Kabbalah to form the *Shulhan 'Arukh*. The situation might well have been alleviated by the efforts of Menassah of Ilya on the one hand and Israel Ba 'al Shem Tob on the other ; but both were frustrated by the opposition of the Gaon Elijah of Vilna, who prevented Zalman of Ladi from uniting the two great divisions inside Jewry—the *Mithnaggedim* and the *Hasidim*. In Braudes's view the efforts

<sup>1</sup> *Ha-Dath We-ha-Hayyim*, pt. 2, ch. 2 ; pt. 3, ch. 11.



of the Gaon of Vilna have been responsible for the increasing intransigence of the orthodox Rabbis which he sees as leading to the total breakdown of Judaism. The Rabbis, therefore, are the principal opponents of the men who desire to cleanse the religion of its accumulated dross.

The hero, Samuel, echoes Braudes's views. In the many serious discussions on Judaism, which form so important an element in this novel, Samuel argues—and the difference of approach from that of Mendelssohn is worthy of note—that Judaism is composed of both beliefs and ordinances. The Oral Law was primarily concerned with the latter, and much of it, in consequence, was dependent upon time, place and circumstance. It was, therefore, in the nature of the Oral Law to modify the ordinances when the conditions of life so demanded. But with the destruction of the Second Temple the Oral Law came to an end. For the Mishnah and the Talmud represent not Oral Law but Written Law! The very act of writing it down deadened the spirit of the Oral Law. Hence the Rabbis have sanctified the dead word and neglected the living inspiration of Judaism.<sup>1</sup> In answer to the objection that once any relaxations of Rabbinical law are allowed the great majority of the Jews will proceed successively to abandon the law altogether, Samuel argues that such a view misjudges the character of the people. In Samuel's opinion the basis of reform must reside in a conformity between religion and life. The absence of that conformity is responsible for the fact that in the large cities religious transgression has become the rule.

After outlining the burdens accruing from the accumulated mass of ordinances relevant, for example, to the Passover, the Sabbath and the Dietary Laws, Samuel expressed the belief that the Rabbis are empowered to alter even the rulings of the Talmud itself, let alone the later accretions, when the conditions of life demand it. His prime concern is that Rabbinical severity is increasing the already dreadful poverty, and cites the sufferings that followed the widespread famine in Lithuania in that very year as a typical example.<sup>2</sup> This latter scene, where the hero's feelings are expressed in almost lyric vein, represents in large

<sup>1</sup> *Ha-Dath We-ha-Hayyim*, pt. 2, ch. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. G. Katznelson, *op. cit.* pp. 69 f.

measure the climax of the novel.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere in the Hebrew novels of this period is the case for religious reform argued with greater cogency and absolute conviction.

A little over a decade following the publication of *Religion and Life* Braudes published a second novel, also concerned with religious attitudes, under the title *The Two Extremes*.<sup>2</sup> By 1888, however, the ferocity of the struggle between the exponents of orthodox and reform Judaism as depicted in the earlier novel had largely worn itself out. Both factions viewed with horror the wholesale desertions from Judaism and the cold indifference to tradition displayed by such large sections of the new generation which characterized much of Jewish life in Russia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. *The Two Extremes*, which from the point of view of artistry is undoubtedly the most mature novel in Hebrew literature before the appearance of the works of Mendele Mokher Sepharim, contains a very different message.

This novel, which has something of the flavour of Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, depicts the strikingly different types of Jewish life obtaining in the great city of Odessa on the one hand, and a tiny Hasidic town symbolically named Sukkot (Tabernacles) on the other. The plot revolves upon the remarkable effect which each of these two entirely different environments can bring to bear upon an individual who has grown up in the other. Jewish life in Odessa is portrayed as highly cultured and urbane, polished and sophisticated—but cold and empty. Life in the small town, by contrast, is outwardly squalid and unprepossessing, with ignorance, bigotry and blind fanaticism rampant; and yet it is so rooted in tradition and so faithful to its own standards, that once the ugly exterior is pierced a warm, loyal and colourful society suddenly emerges.

Both environments furnish the novel with a hero, each of whom is accidentally brought into contact with the opposite milieu. In turn they succumb to the lure of a life which they have never known, and thereby provide the author with an opportunity to portray the virtues and vices of both worlds. Within the framework of his story Braudes castigates the emptiness

<sup>1</sup> *Ha-Dath We-ha-Hayyim*, pt. 2, ch. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Shetei Ha-Kezawoth* (Warsaw, 1888).

of Jewish life in the large Russian metropolis, its rootlessness, indifference to tradition and the frivolous habits of mind which it engenders. But while appreciating the warmth of Jewish family life in the small town, its piety and the idyllic calm which pervades its Sabbaths and Festivals, Braudes is equally at pains to lay bare its darker undercurrents of fanatical obscurantism, debasing superstitions and relentless persecution of all attempts in the direction of secular education. To Braudes the estranged exponent of enlightenment in the large city and the pious hypocrite in the small town are equally detestable. Indeed, the message unfolded in *The Two Extremes* is that religion and enlightenment must be combined in order to reach a middle way.<sup>1</sup> The best of both worlds must be carefully selected, and the unattractive and debased elements abandoned.

The *denouement* of the plot is engineered by a *deus ex machina* in the shape of an old long-lost grandfather from Vilna, who symbolizes in his own person a happy fusion of orthodox Judaism and secular enlightenment. This pleasing combination is presented to both heroes as a healthier subject for emulation than either of the two extremes which have captured their imagination hitherto. As the old man is, in addition, extraordinarily wealthy, not only is he able to solve the spiritual problems of his grandchildren—as both the heroes turn out to be—but he can also rescue them from their material dilemmas! But the issues are portrayed with far more conviction than the solution; and the reader is left with the impression that the remedy which Braudes offers may well succeed in individual cases, but is unlikely to meet with any widespread acceptance in the face of the forces of disintegration besetting Jewish life. The atmosphere even by that time was too heavily charged, while the pressures on the Jewish people, both external and internal, were too compelling for any counsel of moderation to win the day.

Braudes, of course, was neither the first nor the only novelist in this period to plead the middle way, although he does so with far greater skill than any of his contemporaries. Even such minor writers as J. I. Leinwand and B. I. Zobeizensky whose

<sup>1</sup> *Shetei Ha-Kezawoth* (Warsaw, 1888), pt. 4, chs. 44-6.

very ephemeral novels are replete with all the worst forms of melodramatic device and *cliché*, and whose fate has been a complete and well deserved oblivion, advocate this middle course in which traditional values are combined with enlightened views.<sup>1</sup> Zobeizensky, however, while opposed to any suggestion of irreligiosity, is also strongly in favour of reform.<sup>2</sup> The prolific writer of popular Yiddish novels, N. M. Sheikewitz, one of whose very few Hebrew novels falls within this period, is no less careful to defend the more positive aspects of the traditional religious approach,<sup>3</sup> and is equally scathing with regard to religious bigotry and the infringements of religious practice.<sup>4</sup>

One striking exception to the general respect for enlightenment even at the expense of certain aspects of orthodoxy exhibited in these novels may be found in a work by A. S. Rabinowitz entitled '*Al Ha-Perek*'.<sup>5</sup> Although in the course of time the negative results of the movement of enlightenment came to be more and more clearly recognized, and served as a target for the attack of many writers, especially P. Smolenskin, no other novel of this period adopts so constant and devastating an attitude in this respect.

'*Al Ha-Perek*' is the story of a "Rake's Progress". But the rake, in this instance, is represented by a young man whose early traditional piety and naïve sincerity are gradually corrupted by the forces of a pseudo-enlightenment which lead him ultimately to ruin. The novel makes a powerful onslaught against the various evils accruing from the teachings of enlightenment, each of which the hero suffers in succession. At the same time his changing attitudes and behaviour are constantly compared unfavourably with the orthodox traditional modes of thought he has abandoned. His rapid degeneration is emphasized by the steadfastness of the pious teacher, Judah, who answers the hero's argument that reform is necessary to bring religion into conform-

<sup>1</sup> See J. I. Leinwand, '*Oseh Mezimmoth*' (Lemberg, 1875-6), pt. 1, chs. 5 and 12; and B. I. Zobeizensky, '*Ahabath Zaddikim*' (Warsaw, 1881), pt. 1, ch. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pt. 2, ch. 21.

<sup>3</sup> '*Ha-Niddahath*' (Vilna, 1886), pt. 1, pp. 72 f.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pp. 52 f. and pt. 2, pp. 30 f.

<sup>5</sup> Warsaw, 1887.

ity with the demands of life by insisting that the real need is not for reform but rather for an increase in the knowledge of the *Torah*.<sup>1</sup>

The climax of the story is represented by the views which Daniel, an idealist, utters from his sick bed. Daniel is aware of the excrescences which have attached themselves to Judaism, but he is even more conscious of the follies perpetuated in the name of enlightenment and argues that it is Judaism as an entity in which the real virtues are to be sought. A complete appreciation of the ethical values residing in *Torah* however, can be acquired only from studying the sacred literature for its own sake and not with the view to earning a livelihood from it. Enlightenment, he admits, is important as a means of improving the economic conditions of the people and may even, perhaps, serve to purge the faith of certain tainted elements which have crept in. But it should never be regarded as a new ethical foundation for behaviour and belief, for only an authority that stands above criticism can perform that function. Meanwhile he is convinced of the paramount importance of observing all the ordinances.<sup>2</sup> As for a solution to the steady deterioration of the Jewish material position, Daniel argues that neither religious nor aesthetic theories can cope with a problem of such magnitude, and that he is in agreement with Peretz Smolenskin that only a return to the land of Israel can provide a remedy.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to an examination of the view advanced by Smolenskin which, after reform, constitutes the second major attitude to Judaism presented in the novels of this period, one further standpoint is worthy of note. Perhaps the most negative approach to traditional Judaism to be found in all these novels appears in S. J. Abramowitz's *Fathers and Sons*.<sup>4</sup> It is significant that this latter work ranks among the earliest of the novels chronologically. Although Abramowitz, too, on one occasion

<sup>1</sup> *Al Ha-Perek*, Warsaw, 1887, pp. 57 f.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 146 ff., and N.B. footnote in which the author states that after writing this section he has come across the same idea in an article by H. Oppenheim in *He-Asiph*, 1887, p. 260.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* and see below.

<sup>4</sup> *Ha-Aboth We-ha-Banim* (Odessa, 1868). The novel is satirized by Rabinowitz in *Al Ha-Perek*, *op. cit.* pp. 51 f.

argues for the middle path as outlined above,<sup>1</sup> the main emphasis of his novel lies in a biting attack upon all the darker sides of the traditional Jewish life of his time, namely its obscurantism, its excessive stringency, its hypocritical fanaticism and harsh bigotry. Although a common feature in almost all these novels, Abramowitz's satire against Hasidism is particularly virulent.<sup>2</sup> This attitude is all the more surprising because his later writings, published under the pseudonym of Mendele Mokher Sepharim, are characterized by a depth of understanding of Jewish life and an intense sympathy towards its sorrows unrivalled in contemporary Hebrew literature. It was Mendele who first perceived in its fullest sense that the root of Israel's problems in the "Pale of Settlement" lay in the grinding poverty of the vast majority of the population. It was Mendele, too, who finally renounced all factionalism to demonstrate the inner light of Judaism lurking beneath the repellent exterior it had assumed.<sup>3</sup> In *Fathers and Sons*, however, there are few traces of this later understanding. Apart from a rather stereotyped appreciation of the national past,<sup>4</sup> the only passage of real interest in this respect is that in which the author discourses on the strange riddle of Israel's transformation from weekday shabbiness to a sudden splendour on Sabbaths and Festivals.<sup>5</sup>

The most important novelist of these years, however, is Peretz Smolenskin, whose six novels<sup>6</sup> cover sixteen of the twenty years under consideration. One of the keenest thinkers of his time, Smolenskin kept his fingers closely on the pulse of Jewish life, shrewdly basing his conclusions on the lessons of experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that his writings present a variety of views ranging over the whole field of Judaism. Smolenskin

<sup>1</sup> *Ha-Aboth We-ha Banim*, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> It is surpassed only in the novels of P. Smolenskin and B. I. Zobeizensky.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. his story "Be-Yeshibhah shel Ma'lah U-bhe-Yeshibhah shel Matṭah".

<sup>4</sup> *Ha-Aboth We-ha Banim*, pp. 120 f.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 123 f. This idea was later developed in the splendid allegory entitled *Susathi*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ha-To'eh be-Darkhei ha-Hayyim*, 1868-70; *Simhath Haneph*, 1872; *Keburath Hamor*, 1874; *Ga'on We-Shebher*, 1874; *Gemul Yesharim*, 1876; *Ha-Yerushah*, 1878-84. These novels were first published in serial form in Smolenskin's journal, *Ha-Shahar*. The references in the following notes are to later and more easily accessible editions.

had himself passed through all the stages of Jewish intellectual development current in his time. Following the first naïve adherence to enlightenment as the panacea for all Jewish misfortunes, he experienced first a feeling of disillusionment and then a profound conviction of the utter bankruptcy of all such views before finally reaching the conclusion that only a revival of Jewish nationalism could ensure the continuance of Judaism. The reflections of these different attitudes are scattered throughout his novels. Both the major factions within orthodox Jewry—the *Mithnaggedim* and the *Hasidim*—are subjected to a searching scrutiny, and while the latter are made to serve as the prime target for his biting satire, neither party escapes the lash of his invective. All the abuses of Jewish life already referred to are time and again subjected to a withering criticism. Indeed so dark are the colours painted by Smolenskin that on more than one occasion even he, himself, seems shocked by his own virulence, and gives the reader to understand that the picture is after all not quite so black as it might appear from his descriptions.<sup>1</sup>

But at the same time he is no less aware of the positive values of traditional Judaism and its institutions, and frequently portrays its pious and even saintly aspects—the charm of its Sabbaths, the significance of its Festivals, its profound respect for traditional scholarship and the importance of its spiritual and ethical truths. If the novels contain numerous examples of wicked hypocrites masquerading beneath the guise of pious orthodoxy, they are no less replete with the renegade disciples of a false enlightenment, whom Smolenskin depicts with an even more withering contempt.

Acutely conscious of the negative results accruing from an uncritical abandonment of Judaism in favour of an only half-digested secularism, Smolenskin turns savagely on the movement whose ideals had formerly been his own. Particularly in the fourth part of his long autobiographical novel *Ha-To'eh be-Darkhei ha-Hayyim* (*The Wanderer in the Paths of Life*) which contains some of the author's most serious views, Smolenskin launches a powerful attack upon the Berlin type of Enlightenment and especially its founder Moses Mendelssohn.<sup>2</sup> From

<sup>1</sup> See *Ha-To'eh be-Darkhei ha-Hayyim* (Warsaw, 1905), pt. 2, p. 64 and p. 266.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pt. 4, chs. 11 and 12.

many passages in Smolenskin's writing it becomes clear that he held Mendelssohn responsible for having stripped Judaism of its national elements, hence paving the way for the Jews of Germany to regard themselves as "Germans of the Mosaic Persuasion"—and similarly in the other lands whither Mendelssohn's ideas have spread.<sup>1</sup>

To Smolenskin the national and social aspects of Judaism were inextricably bound up with the religious element. There could be no separation of Judaism from the Jews as a people. By focusing attention on the individual Jew the movement of Enlightenment might well have succeeded in improving the conditions of certain Jews as isolated units, but it had done nothing to help the Jewish people as a whole.<sup>2</sup> The latter could be aided only by a revival of the national consciousness, to foster a spirit of integration with self-preservation as the goal.<sup>3</sup> But it was useless, Smolenskin argued, to look to the enlightened Jews of Western Europe for help in this direction. They had become too cold and indifferent, closing their eyes to the fact that the Jews are everywhere regarded as strangers. Moreover, conditions in Eastern Europe were entirely different, and made nonsense of the western ideas of enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

Israel, Smolenskin insists, is primarily a people of the spirit, and that single factor is the source of its eternity. That, too, is the reason why both the people and the language are holy. The real essence of Judaism lies in its conception of the unity and incorporeality of God. Hence religious reforms are conceivable in the practical sphere, and indeed there is a clear need to reform the power of the Rabbis.<sup>5</sup> The beliefs, however, must remain immutable. In this way Smolenskin's attitude to Judaism embraces the concepts of both practical reform and ardent

<sup>1</sup> Cf. especially Smolenskin's long essay 'Et le-Ṭa'ath (first published in *Ha-Shahar*, years 6, 8 and 9) in *Ma'amarim*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1925).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Ha-Yerushah* (Petersburg, 1898), pt. 2, ch. 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* ch. 14. Apart from Smolenskin and Rabinowitz, I. Weisbrem expresses strong national sentiments in his novel *Hā"y Aghoroth* (Eighteen Coins), Warsaw, 1888, pt. 1, pp. 124 f., where he advocates the practical colonization of Palestine in preference to the Messianism of the *Zaddikim*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Simḥath Haneph* (Warsaw, 1905), pp. 144 ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.



nationalism, thus forming a striking contrast to Moses Mendelssohn's approach.

One further aspect of these novels is worthy of note. Quite apart from the religious attitudes they reflect, they constitute a veritable treasure-house of information relative to the whole field of religious practice in the period under review. On the one hand they provide much evidence concerning the three major divisions inside Jewry in the nineteenth century—the *Mithnaggedim*, the *Hasidim* and the exponents of enlightenment (the *Maskilim*)—and the mental climate of their respective milieus. Adequate allowance, however, must be made for the deliberate exaggeration and caricature natural to tendentious literature. On the other hand they furnish a wealth of illuminating detail about the physical and material channels of religious life.

The reader is provided with intimate glimpses into the lives of choirboys, beadles, cantors and Rabbis, their functions and conditions of work, their stratagems and devices, as well as their significance in the overall framework of society. Again, he is taken behind the scenes of the three main institutions of Jewish spiritual life, the Synagogue, the *Hedher* and the *Yeshibhah*, and presented with an intimate and penetrating account of their strengths and weaknesses. He is led through the labyrinths of religious communal life, and shown the intricacies of administration, the means of enforcing discipline, the pattern of intrigue and the deep significance of the religious calendar. And finally he is introduced to a bewildering variety of superstition and folk-lore which throws much light upon the religious psychology of the time. These novels, in fact, for all their weaknesses, their literary inadequacies and didactic pedantries, yield considerable information concerning one of the most storm-tossed and strife-ridden periods of Jewish life, and one which has proved decisive for subsequent Jewish history.