

**JEWISH EDUCATION IN EASTERN EUROPE AT THE BEGINNING
OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY**

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The materials for a history of Jewish education during the Middle Ages, which M. Güdemann (*Quellenschriften zur Geschichte des Unterrichts und der Erziehung bei den deutschen Juden*, Berlin 1891) made the pioneer attempt to bring together, have now been gathered and made available by S. Assaf (*Mekorot letoldot hahinnuch belsrael*, 3 vols., Tel Aviv 1925-1936).¹ The present essay constitutes an attempt to utilize a portion, at least, of their rich collection (while we await the full-length account which Assaf's labors have made possible) in the reconstruction of a period in the progress of Jewish education which is of special interest and significance.

As Assaf points out in his Introduction to Volume One of his work (p. x), the decades preceding and following the turn of the seventeenth century in Eastern Europe (Poland, Bohemia, the eastern provinces of Germany, which formed a cultural unit) mark a period of greatest interest in the problems of education and consequently are distin-

guished by an unusually extensive literature on the subject. These decades witnessed the birth of an attempt at reform which did not hesitate to subject the educational system to a critical examination, castigate it unsparingly for its shortcomings, and suggest the fundamental principles which might raise the school to a higher level.

Part of the impetus for this revival of interest in education may be ascribed to the increased contacts with the South European Jewish communities that began to be felt toward the end of the sixteenth century. Young men journeyed to Italy to study medicine and returned home impressed by the high state of culture they had experienced among fellow-Jews there; Italian Jewish physicians came north to practice; a number of descendants of the exiles from Spain and Portugal found their way to the Polish cities. The effect of these contacts was widely felt, and thus the desire grew for an improved educational system. But the major influence must be seen in the activities of the famous R. Judah Löw b. Bezalel, who became the leader of the "reformers" and made of Prague the center of this movement.

The Protestant Reformation had stimulated unusual interest in educational problems throughout Northern Europe, and was responsible for the establishment of universities and schools, the expansion of the curriculum, the introduction of the vernacular, and the production of new texts. Though by the

¹ Güdemann collected only the source material relating to Ashkenazic Jewry up to the time of Mendelssohn, and translated it into German; in Part Two of his book he printed in the original pertinent extracts from communal codes and minute books, often from manuscript. His work is valuable, but necessarily incomplete; moreover, it includes material of a hortative, moralistic nature, which does not strictly belong in a source-book on education. Assaf, covering the period from the beginning of the Middle Ages until the Haskalah, has aimed at completeness, and we may say with confidence, has attained it as nearly as one man may expect to. He translates into Hebrew some Yiddish sources; the rest, of course, remains in the original. Volume I covers the Ashkenazic community, adding much new material to Güdemann's compilation. Volume II deals with the Jewries of Babylonia, Spain and Italy; Volume III, with those of Palestine and the East, Turkey, Saloniki, North Africa, as well as the Karaite communities. He promises that a new edition of Volume I, which has not yet appeared, will contain additional material not available in 1925, when it was first published. References to "Assaf" in the notes are to Vol I of his work.

beginning of the seventeenth century this activity was beginning to die down through a variety of causes (John Amos Comenius, one of the great figures in the history of education, was active in Moravia and Poland until his death in 1670) it was still vital enough to affect the centers of learning, of which Prague was among the foremost. Judah Löw was undoubtedly himself influenced by this movement, for he was in intimate contact with some of the leading spirits of the humanist revival, and could not but have been stimulated by the enlivened intellectual atmosphere that pervaded the city.

If his efforts did not produce an immediate or revolutionary change, it must be recognized that the socially and culturally backward Jewish communities of Poland were hardly prepared for educational reform; only those communities which had felt the impact of humanism during the preceding century, such as Prague, or, in the West, Amsterdam, welcomed it. Yet, through his associates and disciples, men like his brother Hayim, R. Ephraim Solomon of Lencziza, Isaiah Horowitz and members of his family, Moses Samson Bacharach and his son Jair Hayim, and others equally prominent, who continued his work, he exerted a certain influence upon the course of Jewish education long after his death.

The writings of these men and their contemporaries provide us with an uncommonly clear picture of the educational system, and make it possible for us to recreate the Jewish school of the period in all its details. It is true, of course, that much of our information comes from avowed critics of this school, and therefore places it in an unfavorable light, but it is significant that so many of the outstanding authorities, who were themselves trained under this system and knew it intimately, were in agreement as to its faults. Moreover, the additional and often corroborative evidence from non-polemical

sources, such as the regulations of various "Boards of Education" and the incidental allusions of a number of writers, leads us to believe that the complete picture is an accurate version of the early seventeenth-century school.

Pre-School Education

The education of the Jewish child began with its first gleam of understanding, as we have often been told. The atmosphere of the home, the daily routine of Jewish life with its blessings and ceremonies and customs, its Sabbath and holiday variations, necessarily acted as a strong educational influence. It was the duty of the parent to teach his child, at an early age, to participate in this life. But even more, there was a conscious effort to prepare the child for the formal schooling that he must soon undergo. The popularity of a variety of works dealing with the training of the young, usually written in the Yiddish vernacular, indicates the interest of parents in this phase of their responsibility to their children. One such book advises, for instance, that "when a child is still very young, even before he begins to speak, the father should teach him to kiss Hebrew books, so that he may become accustomed to respect them."¹* In another such work the parent is instructed to "teach his children to use Hebrew names for articles of clothing and utensils, so that they may become accustomed to the holy tongue."² Such advice is common, and was no doubt followed in most Jewish homes.

Girls

There was no provision for the formal education of girls; the sources make hardly any reference to them. Only boys were admitted into the schools, and what learning girls acquired came to them as a result of the training they

¹* *Lev Tov*, Assaf 75; cf. *Kesad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 94.

² *Brantspiegel*, Assaf 56 f.; an anonymous booklet, *Hinnuch Katan*, containing almost a thousand terms for articles in common use, with their German translation, for the use of parents in instructing their children, appeared in Cracow in 1640 and was frequently reprinted thereafter.

received at home in the observance of ritual laws, and such other informal instruction as their parents were inclined to give them.³ A Yiddish book of precepts popular at this time says, "Women need not study; that means they need not study Talmud, but the Bible and the ritual laws they should be taught."⁴ Home instruction in reading the Bible in a Yiddish version was fairly common. Yiddish books were intended primarily for the use of women, since most women did not know Hebrew. R. Shabbetai Horowitz, for instance, instructed his daughters and daughters-in-law, in his will, to read regularly a Yiddish version of the Pentateuch, and the Yiddish book of precepts, *Lev Tov*.⁵ Even he, scholar that he was, and concerned about the state of education at the time, did not consider it important that the women of his family should read Hebrew books. Most women did not know how to write. There were, of course, some exceptions to these generalizations; there were a few instances, among women, of accomplished scribes, and even of some few who had studied Talmud, but the very paucity of these exceptions indicates how unusual a phenomenon was a well-educated woman.⁶ The domain of women was the home, and for the duties of the home they were well trained; their few intellectual and religious needs were met by vernacular versions of the Bible and the prayer-book, and by various *Vrauen Bücher* of moral instruction.

Trade Education

While there is no mention anywhere of boys receiving no formal schooling at all, undoubtedly a considerable number must have been forced to leave school at an early age to receive in-

struction in a trade. The assumption that all Jewish children received an extended education is erroneous. The general poverty of the Jewish masses made it necessary for many parents, despite the widespread desire to give children a thorough education, and the communal provision for the free education of poor children (which extended, however, only until the thirteenth year⁷), to call an early halt to the school careers of their young ones. Among the occupations of the Jews of Prague in the seventeenth century are included at least forty-three trades and handicrafts which required a fairly early apprenticeship.⁸

Most Jewish boys received at least an elementary education, until their thirteenth year. Those who were incapable of pursuing more intensive studies or whose parents could not maintain them after this age were expected to learn a trade or become domestics. Such a regulation is found in the set of rules adopted by the Cracow *Hebra Talmud Torah* in 1551.⁹ An addition to these rules in 1638 laments the fact that many boys after the completion of their schooling are wandering the streets, stealing and begging, and neglecting their religious duties, and requires that several members of the committee be specially delegated to show these boys the error of their ways, and to induce them to learn trades or become servants, and "if an artisan refuses to teach them his trade for nothing, he may be paid six zloty out of the treasury of the *Hebra Talmud Torah*."¹⁰ The community accepted the responsibility, as part of its educational activities, when the parent was remiss, of providing the boy with some occupational training. The Cracow regulation was probably typical of the practice in most Jewish communities.

³ Cf. Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, Phila. 1896, 340 ff.; *Brantspiegel*, Assaf 59 f.

⁴ *Sefer Hamiddot*, in M. Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens und der Cultur der abendländischen Juden*, Vol. III (Vienna 1888), 110.

⁵ Assaf, 69; cf. *Intro.* to Yiddish version of the Bible, Assaf 40.

⁶ See Abrahams, *loc. cit.*; Güdemann, *loc. cit.*; for instance, Havah, the granddaughter of Judah Löw, and also the mother of Moses Samson Bacharach, was widely renowned for her scholarly attainments.

⁷ Assaf 99.

⁸ Abrahams, *op. cit.*, 248.

⁹ Assaf 102.

¹⁰ Assaf 103.

Elementary Education Administration

Almost every community boasted a *Hebra Talmud Torah* whose duty it was to create a fund and provide means for the support of public schools for orphans and children of poor parents and of widows, and to supervise all schools, both public and private. The statutes of a number of such "Boards of Education" illustrate the comprehensiveness of their authority.¹¹

The officers of the *Hebra* were elected annually and were charged, in addition to formulating rules for the conduct and administration of schools, with specific duties, such as controlling the treasury, examining and licensing teachers, visiting the schools regularly and examining the pupils, adjudging disputes between teachers and between parents and teachers, assigning students to various homes for their meals (this applied in communities which maintained institutions of higher learning, *yeshivot*), etc. In Cracow only learned and honorable men over 36 were eligible to hold office. The income of the *Hebra* was derived from various sources: it laid claim to one-sixth of the Monday and Thursday contributions in the synagogues and other places of worship; donations specially solicited at circumcisions, weddings, and other such occasions; and one-tenth of the collections in the charity box known as the *matan baseter*, affixed at the door of every synagogue.

Teachers

Some communities regulated the licensing of teachers by requiring them to pass some form of examination, and a Nikolsburg *takkanah* limited the profession to those possessed of the *Haber* degree, but from the frequent criticism of teachers it would appear that almost anyone with a rudimentary training and a large enough group of friends or sympathizers could set up as a teacher. Since teachers were hired by the parents there was a good deal of competi-

tion for parental favor, and considerable transferring of pupils from one to another.¹² In Cracow it became necessary to forbid the acceptance of new pupils unless the father requested it of his own accord;¹³ and in several communities efforts were made to protect local *melamdim* from the competition of aliens.¹⁴

The regulations and practice concerning teachers' fees vary considerably.¹⁵ There is general agreement, however, that half the fee, or at least one-third, should be paid in advance at the beginning of a semester, and the balance at the end.¹⁶ Yet we hear frequent com-

¹² Assaf 143; *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 87, 91.

¹³ Assaf 101.

¹⁴ In Cracow (Assaf 99) native teachers were permitted to teach longer hours than strangers, for the same fee; in Nikolsburg (Assaf 140) no alien teachers of elementary grades were licensed at all, and only three of higher grades, and even these were permitted to conduct classes for only two consecutive years, after which they were required to absent themselves for two years before resuming their instruction; cf. also the regulations of the Lithuanian Vaad, Assaf 105; S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, N. Y. 1937, 111, 119.

¹⁵ It is very difficult to identify the coinage referred to in the sources, since the same Hebrew term is often used for various coins and various names for the same coin; besides, the history of European coins is in itself quite uncertain. One cannot therefore equate sums paid in Vienna, Nikolsburg, Prague and Cracow. I am indebted to Prof. S. W. Baron for assistance in interpreting the coinage; cf. also S. M. Dubnow, *Pinkes Medinat Lita*, Berlin 1925, p. 341.

Fees varied widely: in Cracow, regulations adopted in 1595 fixed the maximum tuition in Bible and Mishna at 6 zloty (*zehubim*) a semester per pupil, and in advanced Gemara at 8 (Assaf 99; confusion reigns even here, for on p. 98 we are given totally different figures: 4 zloty for Bible, 4½ *se'aim* [?] for Gemara); from Prague we learn that in 1619 a father is expending 21 "schock" a term for the education of his three sons, which would average 14 zloty per boy (a "schock" equalled 2 zloty) (Assaf 80); most informative is Morafschik's estimate that in Lublin (about 1635) the usual fee was between 20 and 30 zloty (Assaf 91), for he also informs us that the annual rental of a dwelling amounted to 40 to 50 zloty (Assaf 88). In Prague, in 1619, a teacher apprises us that he was receiving 16 *zehubim* from two pupils (Assaf 80), and in the same year a teacher in Vienna was getting 9 *zehubim* (perhaps florins, roughly equivalent to the zloty) a term per pupil (Assaf 78).

Perhaps the first Jewish teachers' union in history (or the first of which we have a record, at any rate) makes its appearance in Nikolsburg in 1691 (Assaf 143), when the teachers established a scale of fees (6 *zehubim* for Gemara, 3 reichsthaler for Bible, and 2 reichsthaler for reading, per pupil) which they bound themselves to maintain, each one taking an oath *not to accept less!* Moreover, they agreed that in a leap year they were to receive an extra sum for the intercalated month, and if a parent refused to pay this the pupil was to be discharged and no other teacher might accept him (Assaf 142).

It should also be noted that provision was made in Cracow (and probably elsewhere) for a lower tax-rate on teachers than on other members of the community (Assaf 291).

¹⁶ *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 92, 93, n. 1; Solomon Luria, in Gudemann, *Quellenschriften*, 50; cf. also Assaf 38. The Cracow regulations required that for the winter semester half the fee be paid by *Rosh Hodesh Shebat*, and for the summer semester by *Rosh Hodesh Ab* (Assaf 98, 99).

¹¹ Cf. the statutes of Cracow, Assaf, 98 ff.; Lithuanian Vaad, 104 ff.; Posen, 114 ff.; Moravia, 134 ff.; Nikolsburg, 137 ff., etc.

plaint about the difficulty of collecting fees, and the rule in Cracow was that any boy whose tuition has not been paid as required may be dismissed, and may not be accepted as a pupil by any other teacher until the debt is paid, while the Nikolsburg statutes add the provision that the *shamash* may secure the aid of the police in collecting the debt, and that any teacher accepting such a pupil must make good the unpaid balance, and in addition may be placed under a *herem*. Besides, should a parent keep a child out of school after he has been properly enrolled, the fee for the entire semester must be paid nonetheless.¹⁷ Despite such regulations the teacher's income was uncertain and we may sympathize with Moses b. Aaron Morafschik when he bemoans the sad plight of the *melamed*, whose mind is occupied more with the pressing problem of paying his rent than with instructing his charges.¹⁸ Nor need we be surprised to learn that "all of them [the teachers] are concerned only with collecting their fees."¹⁹

The precariousness of the teacher's position and his dependence upon the good will of the parents of his pupils often led to attempts to curry favor that had an adverse effect on the training of the child. Unwarranted flattery of children before parents, and too rapid advancement in their studies was common. Teachers were obliged to accede to parents' wishes even against their better judgment, and the children, realizing this, often took advantage of the situation. Moses b. Aaron, himself a teacher and speaking, no doubt, from personal experience, complains that children become unmanageable when they hear their parents forbid the application of corporal punishment.²⁰

Teachers were naturally prejudiced in favor of sons of wealthy parents and

gave them more attention than was their due, to the disadvantage of the poorer boys. On the other hand, poor men were unable to employ the better teachers for their sons, and were obliged to hire anyone who could meet their purse.²¹

The Heder

Elementary instruction was dispensed in private schools, *hederim*,²² conducted by individual teachers. In some communities a distinction was made between the *melamed dardake*, who taught primary subjects to boys from five up to the age of about ten, and the *melamed gefat* (*Gemara*, *Perush Rashi*, *Tossafot*) who instructed boys from ten to thirteen in more advanced subjects, and teachers were required to work exclusively within their divisions. In most places, however, this distinction was not strictly maintained (since failure to secure a full class in one subject drove teachers to take on any available pupils) and we find men teaching all subjects to the tune of frequent and vociferous complaints on the part of the rabbinate.²³

The primary class was usually restricted to forty pupils, who were taught by the *melamed* with the assistance of two *belters* (*behelters*; the Talmudic term, *resh duchana*, is also used). A lesser assistant was employed to take the children to and from school, and to help in caring for them during the day. An advanced class was limited to twenty-five pupils; two assistant teachers were required here, too.²⁴ In some communities, where an effort was made to restrict teachers to specific grades, as in Nikolsburg, the number of pupils was determined according to a sliding scale: 20 in the primary grade, 16 in the Bible class, 10 in the elementary

¹⁷ *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 88, 91.

¹⁸ The term *heder* appears for the first time in 1619, according to Assaf 78.

¹⁹ Cracow regulations, Assaf 99; Nikolsburg, 142; *Kezad Seder Mishna*, 91. Teachers, or perhaps only *melamed gefat*, were also called *rabbanim*, Assaf 80.

²⁰ Cracow regulations, Assaf 101; cf. *Baba Batra* 21a.

¹⁷ Assaf 98, 99; 139, 140.

¹⁸ *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 88.

¹⁹ *Amude Shesh*, Assaf 62.

²⁰ *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 88, 94; *Amude Shesh*, 62; cf. p. 106.

Gemara class, and 8 in the advanced Gemara class. No assistants were required where the number of pupils was so small.²⁵

The school met usually in the home of the teacher. The classroom was often also kitchen, living room and bedroom; the teacher's family was continually underfoot; sometimes the mistress of the establishment carried on a little business of her own in the same room.²⁶ In short, the process of teaching was subject to the frequent distractions and disturbances of home life. Some communities maintained schools in the *Bet Hamidrash* or some other building set aside for this purpose, but these were intended primarily for the use of poor boys.²⁷

Hours of instruction were long. In Cracow native teachers of elementary subjects were permitted to conduct class twelve hours daily, aliens, only ten; teachers of advanced subjects were restricted to ten hours, aliens to eight.²⁸ The pupil spent the entire day at the home of his teacher, arriving there in winter one or two hours before day-break and remaining until time for *Maarib*. There were, however, several breaks in the day's schedule: At *Shaharit* time the teacher took his class to the synagogue, or else conducted a

private service at his home, after which the boys had breakfast. (Those living nearby went home for this meal.) Lessons were then resumed until 11, when an hour was granted for lunch. Between two and three came another free period.²⁹

During the winter some of the boys remained overnight at the teacher's home.³⁰ In fact, when boys studied at schools that were some distance from home they remained away throughout the week, returning home only over the Sabbath.³¹

The school year was divided into two semesters: the summer session lasting from Iyar to Tishri, the winter session from Heshvan to Nissan.³² One might think that the children were entitled to the few weeks of vacation time that fell to their lot between semesters (Nissan and Tishri), but the rabbinic leaders often inveighed against such a waste of time which could lead only to "play and foolish acts." R. Isaiah Horowitz considered the *ben hazmanim* freedom one of the worst faults of the educational system, and insisted that all times were suited and should be used for study.³³

Despite the long hours, the frequently unsavory and depressing environment, and the all too short vacations, we find no mention in any of the sources of the importance of providing for play and recreation during the day.³⁴ But we must not assume that school life was entirely devoid of opportunities for fun and relaxation. Besides the pranks and escapades that cannot be shut out of any school, there were the special holiday celebrations and games that were thoroughly exploited, the usual summer

²⁵ *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 89; *Nikolsburg takkanot*, Assaf 138. Alien teachers were restricted to six pupils, in the highest grade only, unless all the native teachers had their full complement, in which case the foreigners might also take eight, if they were available. If this rule was broken, the fees for pupils in excess of the permitted number were confiscated for the benefit of the *Hebra Kaddisha*. Two days after the beginning of the semester, and thereafter once each month, teachers were required to open their rolls to the inspection of the officers of the *Hebra T. T.* And if a teacher had his own son in his class he was to be included in the enrolment figures. In 1691 the teachers took an oath to observe this rule, since it was openly flouted, and subjected themselves to fine and excommunication if they broke it; cf. Assaf 142.

²⁶ *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 88.

²⁷ Cracow regulations, Assaf 101; cf. *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 92, where it is suggested that all communities establish public schools.

²⁸ Assaf 98, 99. Those who exceeded these hours were subject to a fine. A week in Iyar was appointed during which the officials examined the teachers' records to check up on their observance of this regulation. A *Nikolsburg takkanah* (Assaf 139) required each teacher to own a clock so that he could apportion his time fairly among his pupils and not overstay his allotted stint of hours, though Israel Isserlein (Assaf 32) apparently felt it was up to the pupils to provide the clock, or else rely upon the teacher's sense of time.

²⁹ Abrahams, op. cit., 350 f.

³⁰ *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 93; cf. resolution of the Lithuanian Vaad, Assaf 106.

³¹ *Privatbriefe*, Assaf 80; cf. *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 92.

³² The sources are explicit only in connection with the course of study at *yeshivot*, but apparently the same division was observed in the *hedarim*; there was some variation in the date of termination, but this applied in the *yeshivot*, to which students often came from a distance; cf. *Quellenschriften*, 72, n. 1, Assaf 41, 111, 134, 288.

³³ Judah Löw, Assaf 48; Isaiah Horowitz, Assaf 65 f.

³⁴ Cf. Gudemann, *Geschichte*, III, 239.

and winter pastimes, occasional excursions into the open, etc. The *belfer* proved especially useful at such times. It was he who carved the wooden swords for Tisha B'ab, and manufactured the flags for Simhat Torah and the *drehdlach* or *trendlach* for Hanukkah. In summer he taught the boys how to swim and in winter how to skate. Nor did they hesitate to call a certain figure on the ice the "Va Yomer David Run," because it was executed in the same position as is adopted in saying that prayer, with the head resting on the arm.⁸⁵ We may be certain that no opportunity for relieving the long, dull hours was permitted to escape.

The strong personal interest that teachers inevitably tended to take in their pupils, and the intimacies that developed between teacher and pupils offset considerably the stultifying effect of the environment and the hard regimen. Corporal punishment, while generally approved, was mildly if frequently administered. Fear of losing a paying pupil probably had more than a little influence here; besides, the authorities forbade severe punishment and a violent-tempered teacher was soon deprived of his license to teach.⁸⁶ In addition to his more formal duties, the teacher was charged with the responsibility of shaping the moral and religious habits of his charges, in consequence of his close and constant association with them. He had to see to it that they observed the various religious precepts, such as saying the blessings, attending services, making the responses, etc., and was supposed to teach them their manners and give them a certain amount of social polish. For these services, Moses Morafschik comments, perhaps wishfully, he may accept special fees or tips from the boys. Morafschik suggests that the teacher should be on guard lest the older boys

lead the younger ones astray, and that he should be especially watchful winter nights when two or three boys sleep in one bed; he should also prevent them from bringing things from home and carrying on trading enterprise; with one another.⁸⁷

Curriculum

Abrahams may perhaps be justified in his severe criticism of the scope and content of Jewish education when he says, "During the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Jews entirely lost the educational supremacy which they had previously enjoyed. During those centuries they were worse and not better taught than the rest of Europe, and the deterioration in educational method was accompanied by a diminution in the scope which Jewish culture embraced."⁸⁸ But it must be borne in mind that he is setting up the educational needs of a restricted ghetto existence against the new-found intellectual exuberance of Renaissance Europe. Jewish education was intended to fit the individual to live an intelligent, informed Jewish life, and that life had no contacts with the interests that were the basis of the extensive curriculum of the Spanish and Italian schools of an earlier period, upon which Abrahams bestows such glowing praise, or with those interests that were prompting intellectual stirrings in the contemporary non-Jewish world. The general cultural level in Eastern Europe was not so high, nor were social relations so intimate, as to stimulate the Jewish community. Yet, as we have noticed, acquaintance with the higher standards of southern Jewry did create a desire for a better educational system; nor was it sheer accident that Prague, the most cultured city in Eastern Europe, became the center of agitation for such improvement. But, in the main, the Jewry of Eastern Europe

⁸⁵ L. Ginzberg, *Students, Scholars and Saints*, Phila. 1928, 31 f.

⁸⁶ *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 93; Abrahams, op. cit., 349; Ginzberg, op. cit., 26.

⁸⁷ *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 93, 94; cf. also *Amude Shesh*, Assaf 62.

⁸⁸ Abrahams, op. cit., 340.

was outside the sphere of such influences.

Moreover, the inner autonomy of the Jewish community tended to define the scope of education, "enhancing not only the authority of the rabbi, but also that of the learned Talmudist and of every layman familiar with Jewish law. . . . An acquaintance with the vast and complicated Talmudic law was to a certain extent necessary even for the layman who occupied the office of an elder (*parnas*), or was in some way connected with the scheme of Jewish self-government. For the enactments of the Talmud regulated the inner life of the Polish Jews."³⁹ The Jewish educational system made up in intensiveness of study for the extensiveness of interest which it lacked. It was an expression of the Jewish needs of the time, and these needs it sought to fill.

According to the Cracow regulations of 1551 the curriculum of the *hederim* included the following subject matter: the alphabet, with vowels; reading the *siddur*; the Pentateuch with a Yiddish interpretation; the Pentateuch with Rashi; the order of the prayers; etiquette and good behavior; reading and writing in the vernacular; Hebrew grammar; arithmetic; Talmud with Rashi and *Tossafot*.⁴⁰ Grammar and arithmetic were considered secondary and were taught only incidentally to the other subjects, if at all. The meaning of numbers was taught together with the alphabet, and the elementary arithmetic functions soon became familiar through constant reference to them in the course of study. In like manner a rudimentary acquaintance with other sciences (but on the Talmudic rather than the contemporary level), such as astronomy, anatomy, etc., was necessary to an understanding of the law and was incidentally acquired.

³⁹ S. M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, Phila. 1916, I, 121 f.; also *ibid.* 126 f., *Jewish Encyclopedia*, XII, 20.

⁴⁰ Assaf 101.

The child entered the *heder* at the age of five. During his first year he learned the alphabet and acquired fluency in reading, through practice in reading the prayerbook and the weekly portion of the Torah. He continued on to translation of the weekly portion, then (sometimes) to study of the Mishna and finally to the Gemara. One of the primary aims of the "reformers" was to reintroduce the Mishnaic order of progression (*Abot* 5: 21) which would have a child begin study of the Bible at five years of age, of the Mishna at ten, and of Gemara at fifteen, though they were prepared to concede that at twelve or thirteen a boy might be ready for Gemara. In fact, many boys were already wading through pages of Gemara by the time they were eight or nine,⁴¹ and though the more enlightened rabbis inveighed against this they do not seem to have had much effect. R. Judah Löw was instrumental in bringing about a greater emphasis on the study of Mishna, but this did not seriously affect the predilection of most teachers (and the masses) for an early initiation in the Gemara.

Method

The students were divided into *kitot*, classes, according to their age and training. Though an attempt was made to restrict a teacher to one subject, there were usually several *kitot* in a *heder*, to each of which the teacher devoted a portion of his time, while his assistants helped the others. The complaint is frequently heard that the number of *kitot* is so large that the teacher can hardly find time to instruct each. As Morafschik wrote, "Every teacher has at least twenty boys, and among them there will be three or four studying Gemara with the commentaries, two or three beginning the study of Gemara, and another two or three learning Bible or Mishna, so that the teacher's head must be subdivided into four heads!" The various *kitot* usually sat about a

⁴¹ *Kesad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 89.

long table, and while the teacher was busy with one the others rehearsed their lessons aloud with a special chant for each of the different subjects.⁴²

The following quotation is illustrative of the general educational approach: "One should always teach a child in pleasant ways. First give him fruit, or sugar, or honey cake, and later small coins. Then he should be promised clothes as a present, always making the reward appropriate to his intelligence and his years. Then tell him, if he will study diligently he may expect a large dowry when he marries; and later he should be told that if he will study diligently he will be ordained and will officiate as a rabbi. He must be urged on until the boy himself realizes that he must study because it is the will of God."⁴³

Reading

In keeping with this counsel the boy was introduced to the school with considerable ceremony and giving of gifts, and it was a common custom for the teacher to throw sweets or a few coins on the alphabet chart from which the child received his first lessons, or to drop fruits into his lap, saying, "An angel has thrown this down for you because you were a good student."⁴⁴

Large charts were inscribed with the letters of the alphabet, first in the usual order, and again in reverse order, both with and without vowels. The child was taught the name of the letter and its pronunciation. Various mnemonic devices occasionally served to enliven the lesson and to fix the letter in the memory, though they were probably mainly intended for moral instruction. These are some that were in use: *aleph bet* means learn wisdom (*alef binah*), *gimel dalet* means be kind to the poor (*gemol dalim*); the foot of the *gimel* is turned to the following letter, *dalet*, to

remind one to look for the poor to help them; the *shin* has three branches but no root to indicate that falsehood (*sheker*) never takes root; the *bet* has its mouth wide open, while the *peh* has its shut tight, the *kametz* is a *patach* with a beard, the *gimel* carries a purse at his side, the *dalet* has a short leg, the *aleph* is a man carrying a jar in his hand and another on his back, etc. When the letters were mastered the children were taught to put them together in syllables. The *siddur* was used as a text to acquire fluency in reading, and no attention was paid to the meaning of the prayers.⁴⁵

Bible

The study of the Pentateuch began with the book of Leviticus, on the theory that the law of Israel should come before the history of Israel, or as another view has it, because children, who are holy, should begin their education with the study of holy things.^{45*} After a part of this book had been read and translated attention was turned to the *Sidra*, as much as possible of which was studied each week, the entire *Sidra* rarely being covered. This procedure was repeated for several years, with the result that very few boys ever went completely through the Pentateuch, from beginning to end. Though this method of attack provided a direct relation between the school and adult community life (father went through the *Sidra* each week and mother read it in her *Teitsch Humash*; it was read in the synagogue, and the preacher used it as his text, etc.) it was open to serious criticism. As R. Judah Löw said, children acquire only a smattering of Biblical knowledge; each week they learn a bit of the *Parasha*, stop abruptly and study a bit of the next week's *Parasha*, and by the end of the year they have forgotten the beginning of their studies and learned nothing; and so the second

⁴² Cracow regulations, Assaf 99; *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 88, 87.

⁴³ *Lev Tov*, Assaf 75; cf. also *Brantspiegel*, Assaf 57 f., Ginzberg, op. cit., 31.

⁴⁴ *Abrahams*, op. cit., 348; Ginzberg, op. cit., 31 f.; see also *Brantspiegel*, Assaf 58, 59.

⁴⁵ Ginzberg, op. cit., 21 f.; *Torat Hayim*, Assaf 85; (cf. *Shabbat* 104a); *Introd. to siddur of Shabbetai Sofer*, Assaf 72.

^{45*} Cf. the discussion of this in Nathan Morris, *The Jewish School*, London 1937, pp. 89 ff.

year they start over again, and the third and fourth years, and never get anywhere. Or, as another writer put it, their study is worthless, for at best it is a study of the Hebrew language, and not of the Torah.⁴⁶ Despite the frequent criticism of this fragmentary learning, and the agitation for a course of study which should embrace the entire text of the Torah, with emphasis not alone upon words, but also upon sentence structure and the content of the various books, especially the legal matter, as an introduction to the Mishna, little change seems to have been effected. The practice of hurriedly re-reading the *Sidra* Fridays in the higher grades, "verse after verse, all together in a jumble," hardly made up for the inadequate instruction in the primary grades.⁴⁷

The Pentateuch was studied first with the aid of a Yiddish interpretation. One of the most popular was the book, *B'er Moshe*, by Moses b. Issachar Halevi Saertels, which was required by the Cracow regulations.⁴⁸ This was a word for word translation of the text. The following examples of its method may be of interest: ⁴⁹ *b'reshis*—in ershtens oder am anfang; *bara*—beshefnis; *veruah*—gemit oder nevuah; *merahefes*—schwebt, *yesh omrim er macht shweben dem kise hakavod*; *yehi rakia*—es sol sich shterken ein shpreitung; *lech lecho*—geh fun deiner tovah wegen; etc. This book depends upon Rashi throughout and was virtually an introduction to his commentary.

The next step was to take up Rashi's commentary itself, which was also translated into Yiddish, until the pupils were able to read it fluently. But it would seem that only too often the text itself was lost sight of in the undue attention accorded the commentary, so that R. Judah Löw was prepared to go

so far as to exclude Rashi altogether from the first years of Bible study.⁵⁰

The Prophetic and Hagiographic books were by no means considered as important as the Pentateuch, and were not studied systematically. After the pupil had been fairly well grounded in the weekly readings from the Torah, the *Haftarot* and the Five Scrolls were read during the appropriate weeks, with the aid of a Yiddish commentary (Saertels produced one, *Lekah Tob*, Prague 1604), in conjunction with the *Sidra*. The "reformers" inveighed against this neglect of the major portion of the Bible; some of them insisted that all of the Scriptures should be covered before the pupil was advanced, but others were content to have only the backward students continue in the study of the Prophets and Hagiographa, while their more advanced comrades moved on to another subject.⁵¹

Advanced students of the Bible were given doses of the Targum each week, but here too no effort was made, usually, to explore this subject thoroughly.

Mishna

This was a sore point in the curriculum. The ideal progression advocated by most writers was from Bible to a close study of the Mishna, commencing with those *masechtot* that had a practical application to contemporaneous Jewish life, and concluding with the more theoretical tractates. That this procedure was not common is amply evidenced by the many criticisms of this phase of Jewish education that were voiced. At most only a few *mishnayot* from several *masechtot* were read; usually the reading was limited to *Berachot*, with Obadiah Bertinoro's commentary. The strictures of R. Judah Löw, who centered most of his attack upon this point, maintaining that "the Mishna is the great foundation and iron pillar of all learning," and that a thor-

⁴⁶ *Gur Aryeh*, Assaf 46; *Amude Shesh*, 61 ff.; see also *Vave HaAmudim*, 70; *Kesad Seder Mishna*, 87, 89; *Joseph Omez*, 80.

⁴⁷ *Kesad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 87.

⁴⁸ Assaf 101.

⁴⁹ Assaf 61.

⁵⁰ Judah Löw, Assaf 46.

⁵¹ *Amude Shesh*, Assaf 62; Isaiah Horowitz, Assaf 65; his brother Jacob, Assaf 67 f.; and his son Sheftel, Assaf 70 f.

ough grounding in it should be a prerequisite to study of Gemara, were in general not received graciously by the small-town rabbis and heads of academies who supervised local instruction. But the attack was continued by his disciples and in time they succeeded in winning increased attention to Mishna in the schools, and even stimulated the organization of special adult study groups in this subject. It is interesting to notice that the Cracow curriculum of 1551 does not include Mishna as a separate subject, while in the *takkanot* of 1595 and later it is assumed that classes in Mishna are being conducted.

Children often went directly from Pentateuch to Gemara at the age of eight or nine, or in some cases even six and seven. No special effort was made to prepare for this peculiarly difficult study by selecting simpler *halachot* to start with. The pupils were precipitately plunged into the deep waters of the Talmud, and often had to get their first swimming lessons from such *masechtot* as *Erubin* and *Hullin*. The only concession made to their years was that a brief period was permitted to elapse before their "confusion," as more than one writer has it, was worse confounded by the intricacies of Rashi and the *Tossafot* and the pilpulistic method in general.⁵²

Gemara

At this stage in his school career, in those communities that required a differentiation between primary and advanced *hedarim*, the boy was transferred to another school. (He had probably moved about from school to school several times already.) More usually he remained with his old teacher. He was then about ten years old, or younger. In Cracow, before he could be advanced, the boy was expected to pass an examination given by a committee of the *Hebra Talmud Torah*.⁵³ This was probably the pro-

cedure in many communities, but often it was left to the *melamed* to determine when his pupil was ready for advancement.

Gemara, with Rashi and *Tossafot*, constituted the core of the Jewish educational system. The preliminary foundation was laid only with an eye to mastering the intricacies of the Talmud, and upon this study was lavished most of the scholar's attention. The pride of a father was "to be able to boast that his youngster is an expert in *halacha* or *Tossafot* or *hilluk*—that he can with his pilpul 'draw an elephant through the eye of a needle.'"⁵⁴ This explains the haste with which Bible and Mishna were covered, in order the sooner to get to the Talmud. The criticism of some of the rabbis that this was faulty educational method, that boys so young could not grasp the difficult reasoning of the *halacha*, and that in any event their background was not up to the strain, was undoubtedly justified. As Judah Löw put it, "If a child began his studies several years later than he does, he could in a short while learn as much as under this method."⁵⁵

The Gemara was studied with the help of Rashi's commentary. When the student was considered sufficiently advanced he took up also the *Tossafot*, critical and explanatory glosses on the text of the Talmud. In addition, he studied the *Poskim*, abbreviations and condensations of the *halacha*.

The method employed was not one of simple translation and interpretation, but that of pilpul which had recently come into great favor. That this highly technical and involved method of discussing the Talmud was too much for the average boy we cannot doubt, nor is it surprising that Judah Löw comments, "They teach the boys to chirp like birds who sing and don't know what."⁵⁶

⁵² Cf. the sources cited in preceding note, and Judah Löw, *Assaf* 46, 50; *Intro. to Tossafot Yom Tob*, by Yom Tob Lippmann Heller; Cracow regulations, *Assaf* 99, 101.

⁵³ *Assaf* 103.

⁵⁴ *Amude Shesh*, *Assaf* 62.

⁵⁵ *Gur Aryeh*, *Assaf* 46.

⁵⁶ *Drush al HaTorah*, *Assaf* 48; see also *Gur Aryeh*, *Assaf* 46.

Grammar

The neglect of this subject, which was quite general, elicited the severest criticism from the "reformers." Hayim b. Bezalel, brother of Judah Löw, contrasted the lack of interest in or knowledge of Hebrew grammar on the part of Jews with the proficiency of Christians who had but recently undertaken its study, and charged his fellow-Jews with disgracing the entire Jewish people before these non-Jews. Another writer eloquently bemoaned the inability of Jews to read Hebrew correctly, which he ascribed to their inadequate grounding in this subject during their school days. Not content with mere diatribe, Judah Löw and Mordecai Jaffe induced a teacher in Prague to compose and publish one of the first grammatical texts for the instruction of children, *Em hayeled* (first printed in Prague in 1597, and promptly reprinted in Cracow in 1598); Hayim b. Bezalel himself also prepared a grammar for use in the schools.⁵⁷

In Cracow, where grammar was required as a separate subject, the school regulations specify these headings for study: past, present and future; singular and plural; second and third person; full, defective and doubled forms; and all roots and conjugations.⁵⁸ This skeleton outline was intended, of course, to include all the grammatical forms. The manner in which grammar was taught may be judged from these extracts from the booklet, *Em hayeled*,⁵⁹ intended, according to the author, for boys of about seven years of age. It contained elements of Hebrew and German grammar and consisted of a series of tables, the first of which, headed "Table of Prefixes, of which there are eleven," contained the following matter, confounding the definite article with prepo-

sitions and variations resulting from conjugation:

א — אשמור, אשמיר, אשמר, אראה, אכל.
 ב — בהר, בביתך, בהבליהם, ברהל,
 ה — האישי, האשה, השופט, הושב.

and concluded, "You should explain this to the pupil in this manner: ein aleph farn a vort macht eshmor, ich vil hitn; uvepatah macht ashmir, ich vil machn hitn," etc. The author advised that when a boy had mastered this table he be drilled in its application to the text of the Bible, "just as it is of no use to a boy to learn the alphabet if you do not also teach him to read from a book."

The second table was one of personal pronouns: "Second person, singular, du; third person, singular, er; individual, speaking of himself, ich; second person, plural, ihr;" etc., and ended, "You should explain this to the pupil in this manner: second person, singular—wenn mann ret mit einm der da shtet sagt mann 'du,' " etc.

Review

Moses Morafschik complains that a common fault of the schools was failure to repeat and review work done, either in class or out of it. When once a bit of study had been completed in class, the pupil never set eyes upon it again, unless by chance it happened to come up for discussion again much later. His suggestion was that *Rosh Hodesh* be set aside monthly for a review of the previous month's work. "Teachers should train their pupils to review constantly," he says, "instead of wasting all their time on pilpul which is forgotten the next day." The Cracow regulations include provision for payment for such review, and a *takkanah* of the Lithuanian Vaad in 1639 requires that each teacher institute a regular periodic review.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Cf. Assaf 44, 53, 65, 69 f., 73. Dr. I. B. Berkson has called my attention to the fact that a popular Latin grammar of the time was entitled "At the Mother's Knee," and may have influenced the choice of title in this case.

⁵⁸ Assaf 101.

⁵⁹ Assaf 52 ff.

⁶⁰ *Kezad Seder Mishna*, Assaf 87; cf. also 98, 99; 106.

The Yeshiba

At the age of thirteen or fourteen the boy was through with his primary education in the *heder*, and if he did not go to work either as a servant or as apprentice to an artisan, or in some commercial establishment, he usually continued his studies at a *yeshiba*.

The persecutions consequent upon the Black Death of 1348 had forced the closing of most of the academies and study houses for adults which had been part of every Jewish community in Germany. The great poverty and instability of Jewish life during the next two centuries made it impossible for these *yeshivot* to reopen and function normally; under such conditions the hard, but colorful vagabond life of the student, in search of education wherever he might find it, came into existence. After the Reformation, however, the social life of the Jews became more stable, the *yeshivot* were re-established, and the itinerant student gradually disappeared, though at the beginning of the seventeenth century some students still continued to drift from town to town.⁶¹

In the first quarter of the sixteenth century, Jacob Pollak, who had been rabbi of Prague, removed to Cracow, in Poland, which was becoming a center of Jewish settlement, and established there the first Polish *yeshiba*. This *yeshiba*, which was later presided over by Moses Isserles, had become in our period the most celebrated Talmudic academy in all of Europe, so that the mere fact that a man had studied there gave him high scholastic standing, and many young students from Germany crossed the border to drink from the Polish fountain of learning.⁶² Two private letters sent from Prague to Vienna in 1619 indicate the high repute of the Cracow school among German Jews. One of these letters mentions that a member of the family is studying in Cracow, while the other, from a father to his son, living in Vienna with his

father-in-law, asking him to return home and continue his studies, can find no higher recommendation for this course than to say, "And it will be as though you had travelled to Poland to study once more."⁶³

There were, however, excellent, though less noted, *yeshivot* in many communities, and the East-German student, if he were not intent on acquiring a Harvard accent, did not have to travel far from home for his academic education.

Life in the Yeshiba

The *yeshiba* student was accorded the title *Bahur*, which seems to have become his recognized due only since the fourteenth century, and lived a distinctive life. He was maintained by the *yeshiba* (supported entirely by the local community, for *meshulahim* were not then sent out to raise funds), which provided him with lodging in the house of the principal or in a special building, and a weekly stipend for ordinary expenses. In addition, the students were apportioned among the householders for their meals. A community of fifty families supported usually about thirty *bahurim*. The older students were expected to tutor the younger ones, and if they refused they might be deprived of their allowance from the *kuppah*.⁶⁴ The *Rosh Yeshiba*, or principal, was head of the student community, and his word was law in all matters.

The year was divided into two semesters: the summer term lasted from

⁶¹ *Privatbriefe*, Assaf 78, 79. A synod meeting in Frankfurt in 1603 decreed that "the authorization as *haber* given any person by a Rabbi outside of Germany shall not be considered valid" (L. Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages*, N. Y. 1924, p. 260). This was probably intended to counteract the popularity of the Polish *yeshivot*, for Poland was the likeliest place of study "outside of Germany."

⁶² *Privatbriefe*, Assaf 78; *Yeven Mezullah*, Assaf 110. A large number of the resolutions of the Lithuanian Vaad relating to educational matters had to do with the problem of maintaining the students; apparently the communities under its jurisdiction were not so affluent as the Polish communities and therefore, despite constant prodding, sought in one way or another to lighten the burden of the *bahurim* on their purse and board, cf. Assaf 105 ff. But the Chmelnicki uprising of 1648-1649 and the subsequent civil warfare and economic crisis reduced Polish Jewry to impoverishment, and brought an end to the almost ideal conditions described by Nathan Hanover in his *Yeven Mezullah*.

⁶¹ *J. E.*, II, 444 f.; cf. Assaf 73.

⁶² *J. E.*, XII, 596; cf. also Dubnow, op. cit., I, 122 ff.

the first of Iyar to the fifteenth of Ab, the winter term from the first of Heshvan to the fifteenth of Tebet; the intervals were devoted to private study. Instruction was by lecture and there was no restriction on the size of the class, beyond the ability of the community to support it. The class met in the morning. The *Rosh Yeshiba* sat on a chair and the students stood around him. They had prepared the *halacha* of the day in advance, and asked the *Rosh Yeshiba* to explain the difficult passages. When he had done so to their satisfaction, he discussed a *hilluk*, a pilpulistic review of the *halacha* in detail. This lasted until noon, or a little later, after which the *bahurim* were free to prepare the next day's *halacha*.

Every *Rosh Yeshiba* had a *shamash* whose business it was to see to it that the students attended strictly to their studies. Every Thursday the *gabbai* examined them; the student who failed to pass this examination was chastised with a rod by the *shamash*, or sternly reproved in the presence of his fellow-students.

During the first part of the semester, namely, from the first of Iyar to Shevuot, and from the first of Heshvan to Hanukkah, the studies consisted of one page of Gemara (the Babylonian) with Rashi and *Tossafot* daily. This was called one *halacha*. The Talmud was studied in the order of the *Sedarim*. The second half of the term was devoted to a study of Alfasi and other *Poskim*, particularly the four volumes of the *Turim* with commentaries. A few weeks before the term expired the best students were permitted to deliver a discourse, to get practice in the art of formulating a *hilluk*. On the last days of the term a general review of the term's work took place.

When the semester was over the students left to continue their studies elsewhere or they travelled with the *Rosh Yeshiba* to the fairs, where they attended local *yeshivot* while the fair was

in progress. These were occasions for making many marriage engagements, and the best students were usually selected, on the recommendation of the *Rosh Yeshiba*. The promise made to the child when he first entered the *heder* was not broken, for the amount of dowry offered varied with the student's knowledge of Talmud and his skill in delivering a *hilluk*.⁶⁵

Upon completion of the *yeshiba* course the title *Haber* (the baccalaureate) or *Morenu* (corresponding to the Doctorate), usually reserved for married men, and required for the rabbinic, was conferred upon the *Bahur*.⁶⁶ Not all graduates entered the rabbinate by any means (Nathan Hanover boasted that "in a community of fifty heads of families, there would be among them twenty entitled to be called *Morenu* or *Haber*"), many preferring to enter business, or to live on the bounty of the wealthy father-in-law they had won by diligence in their studies.

Method

Pilpul is a method of study which leads to a comprehension of the subject under discussion by penetrating into its essence and by adopting clear distinctions and a strict differentiation of concepts. A sentence or maxim is critically examined, and all its possible meanings and applications determined. It is then compared intensively with another sentence or sentences harmonizing with or contradicting it, agreements and differences are examined, and subtle shades of meaning determined, with the ultimate aim to harmonize conflicts and discover new significances.⁶⁷

Another method of Talmudic study is the traditional, which comprises a summing up, collecting, arranging and preserving of the *halacha*.

⁶⁵ *Yeven Mezullah*, Assaf 110 ff. and *J. E.*, XII, 596 f.; cf. also note 32 above.

⁶⁶ Cf. *J. E.*, VI, 121, and IX, 16. According to Israel Isserlein (*Assaf* 32), "Older *bahurim* who still devote themselves to study should be treated with respect . . . even to the extent of according them the title *Haber* when they are called up to the Torah."

⁶⁷ Cf. *J. E.*, X, 39 ff. for an extended discussion of pilpul; also *Assaf* 131 ff., 66.

In the post-Talmudic period the traditional method of study was quite generally followed, and many authorities disdained the use of pilpul. The Tossafists re-introduced a simple form of pilpul. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the study of Talmud became weak and shallow, and memorizing and technical knowledge took the place of minute analysis. But about the middle of the fifteenth century new life was infused into the study of the Talmud by the re-introduction of the pilpulistic methods, which laid greater stress on the clever interpretation of the text than on a study of its halachic results. This method of detailed analysis, often leading to hair-splitting and strained deductions, originated in Poland and Germany and was cultivated by many rabbis. A rabbi's real importance came to be judged according to his skill in pilpul.

About the beginning of the sixteenth century a still further development in the pilpulistic method took place, largely through the influence of R. Jacob Pollak, whom we have mentioned as the founder of the Cracow *yeshiba*. This change led to a degeneration of pilpul into mere sophistry; it was no longer regarded as a means of arriving at the correct sense of a Talmudic passage and of critically examining a decision as to its soundness, but as an end in itself to sharpen the minds of the pupils. More stress was laid on a display of cleverness than on an investigation of the truth; riddles were often given to the pupils to be solved, and questions were asked which were manifestly absurd but for which a clever pupil might find an answer.

This new form of pilpul, which was universally employed in our period in the schools, was pursued especially under two forms:

1. The *derashah*: two apparently widely divergent halachic themes were shown to have a logical connection by means of ingenious and artificial inter-

pretations and explanations, but in such a way that the connective thread between them appeared only at the end.

2. The *hilluk* (analysis, dissection): an apparently homogeneous theme was dissected into several parts, apparently conflicting, and then re-combined by an ingenious process into an artistic whole.

Treatises following this method in both forms were called *hiddushim*, because the most familiar subjects were made to appear in a new light. Various methods of developing *derashot* and *hillukim* were perfected in different schools, among the more important of which were the methods of Cracow, Regensburg and Nuremberg, and the techniques came to be named after the city where they originated.

In contrast to the glowing account of the high state of scholarship in the Polish *yeshivot* and communities left us by Nathan Hanover we have the vehement protests of the leading authorities of the period against this degenerate pilpulistic method. With one voice they bitterly condemned its shallowness and ineffectiveness, and agreed that, though the academies be crowded and the students eager to learn, they gained little from their studies but an unorganized and inadequate acquaintance with Jewish law, a faulty and misleading approach to it, and a wholly false sense of values. The "reformers" would have liked to see a restoration of the earlier pilpul of the Tossafists, a simple critical exegesis.

"The whole instruction at the *yeshiba* reduces itself to mental gymnastics and empty argumentation called *hilluk*," wrote Ephraim Solomon, of Lencziza, in disgust.⁶⁸ "It is dreadful to think that some venerable rabbi, presiding over a *yeshiba*, in his anxiety to discover and communicate to others some new interpretation, should offer a perverted explanation of the Talmud, though he himself and everyone else be fully aware that the true meaning is different. Can

⁶⁸ Assaf 63.

it be God's will that we should sharpen our minds by fallacies and sophistries, wasting our time and teaching pupils to do likewise? And all this for the mere ambition of passing for a great scholar! . . . I myself have often argued with the Talmudic scholars of our time to do away with the method of instruction called *hilluk*, without success. . . . But the *bahurim* themselves realize what great harm this method does them, for one who cannot hold up his end in the discussion is looked down upon and is practically forced to lay aside his studies, though he might prove to be one of the best if Bible, Mishna, Talmud, and the Codes were properly studied."

Moses Samson Bacharach vividly describes the confusion and competition between students at the *yeshiba*, each seeking to advance a new and more sophistic line of reasoning before his opponent has finished elucidating his, and before either really comprehends the subject matter.⁶⁹

Judah Löw was not even prepared to admit that pilpul sharpens the mind; on the contrary, he would have it that pilpul twists and dulls the mind. It is more profitable, he said, to learn carpentry or to play chess in order to sharpen the mind; one does not, at least, pervert the truth. And again, he writes, our neglect of real education in Torah is due to the desire to sharpen oneself in pilpul, which is foolishness, and of no value to young people. If they had a proper education, by the time they marry they would at least be familiar with several tractates of the Talmud; as it is, they know nothing. Apropos the popularity of study of *Tossafot* in place of the text of the Talmud, he comments, "If we were to advise a father that he have his son taught the *halacha* itself, and let the *Tossafot* go for a while, he would consider it as though we were suggesting that his son be taught nothing at all, for the father is interested only in his son's acquiring a reputation as an ex-

pert in pilpul."⁷⁰ Isaiah Horowitz expresses the wish that *hillukim* had never come into the world, and bemoans his own waste of time on them, adding eloquently, "I have sinned, I have transgressed, I have done wrong!"⁷¹

However, despite such frequently repeated protests, this method of pilpul remained popular with most teachers and rabbis, who had been trained in it and had achieved their positions through proficiency in it, and were therefore reluctant to admit its faults and to modify it. It has predominated in Talmudic study until recent times.

Other Subjects

While Kabbalah was not a regular study in the *yeshivot*, it was no doubt surreptitiously, and sometimes with the aid of the teachers, indulged in. The complaint of one writer that young scholars study Kabbalah without proper grounding in the Talmud is evidence of this.⁷² Indeed, Isaiah Horowitz, one of the leading Kabbalists of the period, suggests that after one has filled himself with Bible, Mishna and Talmud, he should turn to a study of the Kabbalah, for, "Whoever is not familiar with this science wanders eternally in darkness." For this study two things are required, he says: "An understanding heart, full

⁶⁹ Assaf 47, 50.

⁷⁰ Assaf 65 f.; cf. also Isserlein's view, Assaf 32. It is of interest to note here Prof. Ginzberg's apologia (op. cit., 64, 65): "The principle underlying the study of the Talmud in Poland was 'non multa sed multum' not quantity but quality. Whatever was studied was searched out in every detail, while with the Sephardim the thing that signified was the extent of the field covered. For the Sephardim learning was a matter of sentiment, for the Polish Jew it was an intellectual occupation. . . . The protest made by a number of prominent Polish scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries against the dominant practice (pilpul) in the study of the Talmud, was justified from the point of view of sentiment. The dialectic method gradually secularized Jewish religious knowledge. . . . It is incorrect to think of the Yeshiva as a religious school, as it is generally assumed to be. It was more, it was the institution for general Jewish education." One may doubt that this protest was prompted altogether by "sentiment"; there would seem to have been considerably more justification for it, from a purely pedagogic point of view, than Prof. Ginzberg is willing to accord it. That it did succeed in breeding scholars may be ascribed, not to its inherent qualities, but to the unstinting time and devotion with which the student applied himself to it, until well on into manhood. At the least, it must be said that it was a highly uneconomical method of instruction, as Judah Löw did not fail to point out.

⁷² Güdemann, *Quellenschriften*, 103.

⁶⁹ Assaf 124 f.; cf. also 129 f.

of the fear and love of God, and a careful investigation of the *Zohar*." ⁷³

The same Isaiah Horowitz comments that the study of philosophy is forbidden by ancient and more recent authorities and one should avoid it. This applies also to the sciences of the *goyim*, he says. On the other hand, a relative of his, in an introduction to a commentary on Maimonides' *Shemoneh Perakim* which he had prepared, complains that the *bahurim* are not interested in philosophy. That is why he has gone to great pains to provide a short, simple commentary for them. "I shall consider myself amply rewarded," he concludes, "if from now on the *bahur* need not wait until vacation time to learn something of the *Shemoneh Perakim* from his teacher, as has been the custom for so many years. . . ." ⁷⁴ Philosophy was not a formal course of study in the *yeshivot*, but on the side, it was frequently studied, and in many communities private study groups in the *More Nebuchim* and other such works existed.

A similar attitude prevailed with regard to the secular sciences. Judah Löw, though he did not advocate their introduction in the curriculum, recognized their value, for "secular learning, like Torah, comes from God"; and again, emphatically, "Of course it is permitted to teach the physical

sciences." ⁷⁵ Despite the absence of such formal studies in the academies highly educated Jews were to be met with. One such, R. Mendl Manoah, informs us that he was interested in, studied, and wrote treatises on the Bible, the *Turim*, the Talmud, grammar, geometry, astronomy, philosophy, and astrology—quite a varied intellectual equipment was his. ⁷⁶ And David Gans, a pupil of Judah Löw, composed books on history, mathematics, astronomy, geography, while another of his pupils, the author of *Tossafot Yom Tob*, was interested in astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy. As Prof. Ginzberg says, "The educational system of the Ashkenazim was laid out on Jewish lines exclusively, not because they objected to secular knowledge on principle, but because in Christian countries education of any kind was clerical, and, of course, inaccessible to the Jew. . . . Among the Ashkenazim Jewish studies offered the sole and only field for the manifestation of their mental activity." ⁷⁷ When the opportunity offered Jews did not disdain the pursuit of other studies as well.

The completion of the *yeshiba* course of studies did not put an end to Jewish education. Most men continued learning, and the adult study group was a common feature of communal life. Private study was also strongly urged, and extensively indulged in. But this is beyond the scope of this paper, and here we shall stop.

⁷³ Isaiah Horowitz, *Assaf* 67; cf. also his brother, Jacob's opinion, *Assaf* 69.

⁷⁴ *Assaf* 67, 65, 288 ff.; cf. also Solomon Luria's letter to Moses Isserles, *Assaf* 40, and Jair Hayim Bacharach, *Assaf* 127.

⁷⁵ *Netivot Olam*, *Assaf* 51 f.

⁷⁶ *Assaf* 41 ff.

⁷⁷ Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, 66.

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