

# Printed Publications in the Hebrew Alphabet in Eretz-Israel, 1577-1923: Bibliographical, Cultural and Socio-Economic aspects/ Ester Kandelshein

## Abstract

The aim of this study is to learn about social, cultural, economic and bibliographical issues from the viewpoint of publications in the Hebrew alphabet. The study is divided into two sections: the first section begins from the 16<sup>th</sup> century (1577-1587) and the second covers renewal of printing activity after a break of some two hundred years, from 1832 up to 1923, when official bibliographical records began.

Historical research normally deals with an investigation of major events that influence the course of history at "macro" level, such as wars, revolutions or natural disasters, and refers to records documented by the leading echelons: leaders, senior military personnel, monarchs, ministers and others of similarly prominent status. Such research usually exposes primarily the culture of the higher social echelons. On many occasions this approach has resulted from a lack of available sources for cultural studies of the broader population. One means of expanding our knowledge of the culture of a general population is an examination of its reading and printing culture. Printed publications, including their bibliographical characteristics, are relevant at all social and cultural levels in any given society, and a bibliographical-statistical analysis of the body of printed works enables us to understand cultural and social processes at the "micro" level of everyday life and further expands research into that society's marginal populations.

Researchers of the "*livre et soci'ete*" school were the first to call attention to the importance of books in the political, social and cultural context, in order to gain an understanding of and analyze social, cultural and historical processes in previous societies. This method is based on a process whereby books are published and distributed in the society in question. Writers, publishers, printers, booksellers and readers are all equally active participants in the lifecycle of the

printed publication, and all of them are both influential and influenced at every stage by the economic, technological, social, political and cultural conditions prevalent at that time. From this process it is possible to draw data pertaining to the composition of the written text, the manner in which it was collated and the internal relationship between the different branches of literature. A quantitative analysis of such data using statistical analytical methods may contribute to the status of books in society and the extent of their influence on socio-cultural processes in that society.

This statistical approach to book research has already become accepted usage in general research but is not widely used in the study of Hebrew-language books. An examination of the bibliographical characteristics of the printed inventory enables us to define them by means of a comprehensive socio-cultural analysis, and thus sketch a socio-cultural outline of the Jewish population in Eretz Israel.

The goal of the present study was to examine the culture of reading and printing among the Jewish population of Eretz Israel in light of recent innovations in research methods. A meticulous examination of the bibliographical sources of printed matter aimed at a Jewish readership – lists, databases, library catalogs and so on – reveals 3,061 titles, in various editions, that were printed in the Hebrew alphabet and collated in a computerized data base. Six titles were printed in Safed during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and 2,500 titles in different editions, totaling 3,055 printed products, were printed between 1832 and 1923. An analysis of the data enables us to understand the socio-cultural processes and changes affecting the Jewish population against a background of changing economic and political circumstances.

An examination of the bibliographical characteristics of those items lies at the core of this study. The research is of an inter-disciplinary, bibliographical, historical and bibliometric nature, analyzing bibliographical data via statistical research methods that have long been accepted in the field of Social Sciences. This method provides answers to essential questions regarding research into publications printed in the Hebrew alphabet: What subjects did they cover? Was the literature sacred and/or secular? What was the ratio (proportionately) between the subjects? What were the most popular publications? How were historical events reflected in the printed inventory? Who were the writers? Who were the popular writers? What languages were printed in the Hebrew alphabet? What

format was used? Is there any correlation between format and subject? Who was the target readership? Were printed publications relevant to marginal populations in general and women in particular? Did women refer to the publications? Who were the printers? What economic climate did printers work in? Was printing a profitable business? What motivated the printers? Who financed printing and how? Was material printed only for the local market and/or also for export? Where were the centers of printing in Eretz Israel? Was printing centralized or decentralized? Did both religious and secular centers of printing exist? And so on and so forth...

Findings show that the subjects that occupied the world of printing at that period were: sacred literature (40.85%), leisure-related literature (16.01%), everyday affairs (13.91%), literature relating to the enlightenment of Jews in Europe (9.78%), journals and periodicals (6.06%), productivity (2.39%), education (2.03%), the revival of the Hebrew language (1.28%), reference literature (1.27%), popular and traditional beliefs and superstitions (1.18%), philosophical literature (0.95%), and miscellaneous (such as Jewish calendars, wall decorations and more) (4.39%). The most popular writings were in the field of sacred literature, most of them liturgical material: the *Passover Haggadah* (69 editions); *Psalms* (21 editions); *Masechet Avot* (16 editions)<sup>1</sup>; the *Sha'arei Dim'a* prayer book (13 editions); *Seder Zikhron Yerushalaim* prayer book (12 editions); *Song of Songs* (8 editions).

Language is one element of differentiation between cultures in a society under investigation, and in this case it provided a source of knowledge about two cultures that developed in tandem among the Jewish population: the culture of the elite and that of the common people. Hebrew, the language of communication in print, was the language of the narrower, educated classes. The marginal populations – women, the elderly, children, simple people and workers – needed printed matter in the language of their everyday lives, which comprised a variety of popular languages that were written in the Hebrew alphabet. There included Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Arabic and Aramaic. Assuming that financial considerations dictated the establishment of any printing house, printers would identify a potential readership and fulfill its specific requirements. Hence,

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<sup>1</sup> Mashechet Avot was classified as ethical literature, but it was customary to read it on the Sabbath between Passover and Succot at the time of Mincha.

the fact that any particular item was printed in a "jargon" in itself identifies the target public and enables us to learn something of that public's socio-cultural trends and reading preferences.

The principal contributing factor in the acquisition of reading skills among marginal populations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was sacred, and especially liturgical literature that was printed in popular languages: Yiddish (2.75%), Judeo-Arabic (2.66%), Ladino (2.48%) and, for the population of Bukharan origin, Judeo-Persian (6.03% of all sacred publications). Initially, the wider spread of reading among the weaker populations brought them closer to Jewish ceremonial life and gave them a sense of belonging to the community. At a later stage, familiarity with the printed word and its meaning facilitated their reading skills and promoted literacy, hence playing a significant role in the socializations process of marginal populations.

The Jewish population of Eretz Israel at this time was in the throes of a fundamental and prolonged social change, caused by ongoing immigration and against a background of economic and political changes resulting from changes in government. Nor was the Jewish public exempted from changes and transformations taking place throughout the world – in enlightenment, equality of rights, industrialization and primarily the process on the part of some of the population of distancing itself from the world of religion – and all of these were reflected in the quantity of printed publications available to them. The social, cultural and religious changes that took place during this period bore witness to the relationship between the different fields.

We found a current reference to changes in the Jewish legal system – *halakha and poskim* (5.38%) and *responsa* (2.36%) – in the debate about new issues characteristic of the modern age, such as the question of traveling by train on the Sabbath prior to laying railway tracks to Jerusalem. On the other hand, the increased protection of the Jewish population's interests by consular representation of the superpowers led to a diminished regard among that population for the value system of Jewish law, especially in civil and criminal matters, with a noticeable reduction in the output of printed publications in those fields.

The arrival of the superpowers in the country marked a new, modern era of development, one aspect of which, particularly noticeable as it affected printed matter, was Jewish enlightenment. Openness to enlightenment and progress

resulted from the fact that the first printers were influenced by these developments; they were worldly people with a background of European cultural education. It was this same openness that ultimately contributed to an opening up to the secular spirit which began to enter the country. New subjects appeared in print, such as those pertaining to secular leisure (16%), which replaced publications dealing with religious leisure – ethics (3.84%) and the literature of *Midrash and Agada* (1.57%). As the population's literacy level increased, ignorance decreased and subjects such as *popular beliefs and superstitions* diminished (1.18%).

With the arrival of a spirit of nationalism and ideological, secular immigration the social scene changed, and with it the cultural scene too. The immigration wave known as the Second Aliya – consisting largely of secular idealistic intellectuals – reinforced the demand for leisure-related literature. A group of writers set itself the goal of turning Eretz Israel into the focus of Jewish culture and attracted a readership for whom the Hebrew language was identified with Jewish culture as an integral part of the new nationalistic concept. A demand was created for Hebrew-language publications related to leisure activities, and this demand was fulfilled by a new supply of printed matter that enriched the body of Hebrew printed works with many original Hebrew (64%) and translated (36%) publications. As the Jewish public became more literate, and the literacy level of the lower echelons of society rose, so readers sought increasingly to read for their own pleasure: both *belles lettres* (85%) and popular books (7%). Demand arose from these levels of society and the printing houses responded accordingly. Leisure-related literature slowly began to occupy a larger segment within the total of printed works.

Education, nationalistic values, the revival of the Hebrew language and productivity – 15% of total print production – were at the center of the conflict between the "old" and the "new" among the country's Jewish population. Many printers in Jerusalem were educated people themselves and actively promoted such subjects. Books were printed in the fields of science (4.03%), geography (2.98%) and history (2.68%), all subjects identified with literature related to Jewish enlightenment. The aspiration to modernization, the introduction of nationalism and the desire to alter the image of Jews as lazy and lethargic motivated creative work in agriculture (53% of 'productivity'), commerce (19%)

and industry (13%). One of the better developed creative industries, which was also one of the first signs of productivity, was printing. Print-related professions included typesetters, mechanics, printers and press workers. Alongside them grew other professions too, such as illustrators, binders, booksellers, as well as importers of machines, typefaces, replacement parts and more.

The revival of the Hebrew language and its acceptance as the nation's commonly spoken language represented one of the most dominant factors in producing a socio-cultural change in the Jewish population. The very fact of printing material in Hebrew meant that printers played a pivotal role in reviving the language and broadening its use from the sacred to the secular. The publication of journals and periodicals (6%) was also instrumental in accelerating the transition of Hebrew to the status of an everyday spoken language and changed the public's reading habits. The majority of printed press was secular (86%) and only a small portion was religious. These included journals that were news oriented (63%), literary (14%), religion oriented (9%), for children (8%) and humoristic (6%). The educational system produced a new generation of native Hebrew speakers, a new public that printers addressed. Some 63% of material that was classified as "revival of the Hebrew language" (8.82% of total enlightenment-related material), was defined as study material designated mainly for schoolchildren, and the majority of it was written by teachers. In the absence of sufficient text books suitable for the children's age group, education professionals were obliged to write or translate publications. Most of the text books that were printed at this time were on the subjects of sciences (37%), and the majority of those on mathematics (21%).

The establishment of printing in Israel was evident in everyday subjects, for which purpose printers provided printing services for public bodies, institutions and private individuals – an area that dealt in current affairs and encompassed many different fields. Everything that was written was current, in real time. Current affairs occupied the print industry from the material and existential aspects of life: organizations (23%), fund raising (19%), disputes (15%), ethnic communities and *kolelim* (14%), community institutions (8%), prominent figures (8%), daily events (7%) and politics (6%). Everyday socio-economic life is reflected in the printed works.

The price level of publications was relatively high by comparison with the daily earnings of workers. A Book of Psalms without interpretation published by Beck would cost a worker the equivalent of two days' pay. A Book of Psalms including interpretation would come to three days' pay or more. The appearance of new printing houses on the scene created competition and prices fell, but the cost of a book was still not a viable proposition for everyone. For a rabbi-teacher, *Darka shel Tora* was considered professional literature, yet acquiring it would cost him 6-26% of his monthly income. In 1891 a craftsman would have had to pay one and a half week's worth of wages in order to subscribe to the weekly *Chavatzet*, and for that reason it was not uncommon to take out only a quarterly subscription. In 1899 the price of *Kaftor Va'ferach* represented 67-125% of a worker's weekly wage. In 1901 the average cost of pamphlet in 8° format, with 16 pages, was one quarter of a worker's daily pay.

Printers took a number of steps to reduce prices: they produced abridged versions of popular books, used small formats, sold books in pamphlet form or with simple binding. Luntz's Guide to *Eretz Israel and Syria*, which went on sale in 1895 at a price of 2 Francs was then sold in an abridged version in 1914 at 0.5 Francs. The cheaper format, aiming at a wider readership, became very prevalent. Some 91.52% of liturgical literature was produced in small formats of 8°-32° as compared to the Responsa, which was largely printed in large format, 2° and 4° (65.38%), since this was aimed at a narrower, scholarly public for whom acquisition of the books was essential. Some 97.66% of leisure-related literature was in an 8°-32° format and only 2.34% in 2° and 4° format. It was usual to include binding costs in the purchase price. A really expensive book, such as Sherizli's *Zikhron Shayish* prayer book cost 80 grush in an unbound version in 1914, and 25% more for a bound prayer book.

The Second Aliya had a beneficial effect on the publication of books for Jewish readership. The immigrants wished to promote culture in Eretz Israel and they introduced a new type of 'publishing house', whereby books were published without being obligated to any particular printing house. A new intellectual class emerged that was thirsty for modern, secular culture and led a totally secular lifestyle. The old-style, conservative, religious lifestyle of the population of Jerusalem did not suit the new immigrants and their population concentrated in Jaffa. During the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in 1907, Jaffa's first printing

house was established by Aharon Etin, and by the end of the decade there were another two printing houses in Jaffa. As a secular town, Jaffa attracted publishers who favored mainly books written in secular modern Hebrew, both original and translated, and printing houses followed in their footsteps. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the nature of Jewish publishing changed from privately-owned businesses to public enterprises and those affiliated to political parties, which served as both publisher and printers.

The integration of print into the routine life of the general population made it possible to depict a social-cultural profile of the community and portray the developing culture of the age. Text, as part of the culture of the times, was not separate from its environment and reflected the influence of religious, cultural, social, economic, political and technological elements, all of which affected the process of creating that text and its entire lifecycle. In turn, it also had an influence on those elements. Print was one of most durable cultural components, with a reciprocal connection to the socialization process that the Jewish population was undergoing at the time. A statistical analysis of the bibliographical characteristics of printed works enables a study of this process.

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