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J. A. Bimbaum

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TWO METHODS

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(see below)

I. Paleography: Manuscripts in Old Yiddish

The great libraries of Europe and America contain a considerable number of Old Yiddish manuscripts. These are valuable sources for research into the linguistics and phonology of Old Yiddish, literature in Old Yiddish, Ashkenazic biography, the history of Ashkenazic settlements, history of the halacha and paleography of the Ashkenazic type of the Hebrew script. Regrettably, only few have been published so that most of the material remains a hidden treasure.

In many cases a manuscript is of value to research only if it is known when and where it was penned; it is also sometimes necessary to know as much as possible about the scribe himself. In some manuscripts there is a colophon, a formal ending which contains this information, or at least part of it. But this is rare: either the scribe provided no colophon, or the end of the manuscript is missing. Hence the editor or the cataloguer has to determine the date and provenance of the manuscript. He can draw conclusions from a number of facts: the kind of writing material, the kind of paper used, watermarks (if any), the writing instrument, the ink, internal evidence. Conclusions based on these facts will only in rare cases lead to sufficiently precise dates. That, however, can be achieved by the paleographical method. In order to make use of it, the editor or cataloguer of a manuscript written in the Hebrew alphabet must know not only the language very well but the script, too.

Manuscripts written in the Square style will not be difficult to read but cursive or mashait writing presents, in general, various degrees of difficulty—and these are the styles in which very many, probably the great majority, of the manuscripts are written. Mashait is an old term which I have revived, in order to replace the nonsensical term "Rabbinic writing". I have, however, narrowed its meaning to make it more precise. It is a formal book hand developed from Cursive (see Birnbaum 1971: 189, 311). The old sense was "Non-Square", i.e., it included both cursive and mashait. However, in the case of the Ashkenazic script there is, to the practiced eye, at no period any great difficulty in reading cursive or mashait.

The Ashkenazic type is only one among many kinds of very varied form. Some differ so much from Ashkenazic as to be at first unrecognizable as being Hebrew scripts. The difference is not simply that between Ashkenazic and Sephardic, as one might imagine on the basis of the present ignorant and ridiculous usage by which all non-Ashkenazim, including Baghdadim, Bukharim, Temanim, etc., etc., are included in a single entity termed Sephardim. This misconception has made it possible to encounter a Jew whose ancestors, far from having seen Spain, never left Asia, yet who thinks he is a Sephardi!

As far as determining dates is concerned, Yiddish has a certain advantage when compared to Hebrew. Hebrew manuscripts are mostly written in Square or mashait style—rarely in cursive. Yiddish manuscripts, on the other hand, are mostly cursive, occasionally mashait, but never Square.

The title Manuscripts in Old Yiddish is subordinate to the title Paleography and belongs, therefore, on to the next line. There is sufficient space for this arrangement.
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style, I did not know its date but did know that it was, in fact, dated. I should, therefore, be able, to test the paleographical method. I examined each letter of the alphabet and arrived at a dating between near the end of the fourteenth century and the first quarter of the fifteenth. This resulted in a paleographical date of 1410. I then looked up the colophon: the year was 5153, i.e. 1393. The difference between the paleographical and the real date was, accordingly, only seventeen years—a perfectly satisfactory result.

Later in the same year, I made a further test and determined the paleographical date of British Library manuscript Add. 26919, written in Ashkenazic cursive, as 1553. On then referring to the colophon, I found the date to be 5309, i.e. 1549 (details of both experiments are to be found in Birnbaum 1971: 343–345).

The paleographical method is both natural and reliable if the eyes of the researchers—and preferably also their hands—are familiar with form, for paleography is concerned only with form: the form of writing, letters or other symbols. Anything else connected with writing, such as writing materials, their form (scrolls, codices), type of books, binding, etc., is beyond the purview of paleography.

It is most regrettable that today no one seems to specialize in research in Hebrew script during the three millennia of its existence. My own paleographical work has been only a beginning.

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II. Etymology: *davənən*

An unusually large number of etymologies have been proposed for Yiddish *davənən* 'pray (the established Jewish prayers)', a word used many times a day, every day of the year.

(1) *dafnən* from the Hebrew *daf*, which has the figurative meaning 'leaf of a book (= two pages)'. Because one turns the pages of a prayer book?/

(2) Lithuanian *davana*, Lettish *dovana* 'gift' "because *mínxə/minhə* which is the name of a prayer, originally meant in Hebrew 'gift'". How could the name of one prayer—and that, quantitatively speaking, the least important one—become the term for praying in general? And who in the last two thousand years would have thought of the original meaning 'offering' when he spoke, heard, wrote or read the name *tplt mnħh* 'afternoon prayer'?

(3) The English *dawn*. Because morning is the time of prayer? But normally the Jewish morning prayer is not said at dawn, and there are important prayers at other times of the day. The proposer evidently did not know the pronunciation of the word and took the *w* as the German *w*.

(4) Latin *devovere*. Because in prayer one devotes oneself to God?

(5) Latin *divinus*. Because prayer is a Godly affair?

(6) Arabic *dīwān* 'collection of poems'. Because a "prayer" consists of a collection of

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