

©
Jakob M. Landau (Israel)

COMMENTS ON THE JEWISH PRESS IN ISTANBUL
THE HEBREW WEEKLY *HAMEVASSER*
(1909-1911)

The Jewish press of Istanbul has a long tradition. In the Ottoman Empire most Jewish newspapers appeared in Judeo-Spanish, increasingly using Turkish in the Republican era. A bibliography of Judeo-Spanish newspapers in the Ottoman Empire, prepared by M. D. Gaon and revised by Moshe Katan¹, lists no fewer than 45 Jewish periodicals issued in Istanbul between 1853 and 1967 — a remarkably high 15% out of a total of 300. The use of Judeo-Spanish (basically a Romance language written in Hebrew characters) is easy to explain: it was the most widespread and most accessible language of many Jewish communities in the Empire. This subject extends beyond the scope of my paper, however; hence I shall limit myself to brief remarks concerning two of these periodicals only.

a. In so far as I know, the first such periodical was *Or Israel: Gazeta di Kostandina*, subtitled *Gazeta de Israel*, also *Luz de Israel* (both *Or Israel* in Hebrew and *Luz de Israel* in Judeo-Spanish mean 'Light of Israel')². A weekly publication, initiated in Istanbul by Leon Hayim de Castro in 1853, it used Judeo-Spanish and some Hebrew. b. One of the longest-lived and possibly the most important of all Jewish periodicals in the Ottoman Empire was *El Tiempo* (i. e. *The Time*). It was published in Galata by David Fresco in Judeo-Spanish twice and sometimes thrice weekly between 19 September 1872 and 27 March 1930³. For almost sixty years it reflected Jewish life and views, with a strong emphasis on Istanbul and Turkey. These publications certainly merit detailed study.

As the scope of this article is narrower, however, I have preferred to limit myself to another Jewish periodical, *Hamevasser* (in Hebrew *The Herald of Good Tidings*), subtitled *Journal Hebdomadaire Hébraïque*. A weekly, it appeared in Hebrew in Galata from 21 December 1909⁴ to 3 December 1911 — a total of 93 issues (52 for the first year and 41 for the second). A complete set is available at the National Library in Jerusalem and a nearly complete one (the first 78 issues) at the Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, Jerusalem; other copies are rather difficult to find. *Hamevasser's* publisher was S. Hochberg; but its moving spirit was A. Hermoni, who wrote several of the editorials. The weekly proudly used a printing house entitled 'Imprimerie Jeune-Turc' — a name doubtlessly reflecting the euphoria following the Young Turk Revolution which took place one and a half year earlier.

Evidently, printing in Hebrew had been well-established by that time. Hebrew books had been printed in Istanbul since 1493 (apparently the first printing press in any language

¹ Gaon, M. D. (ed.). *Ha-Ittonut be-Ladino: Bibliyografiya shelosh me' ot ittonim* (Hebrew: *The Press in Judeo-Spanish: A Bibliography of 300 Newspapers*), revised by M. Katan. Jerusalem, 1965.

² *Ibidem*, p. 15, No 8.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 55, No 110.

⁴ See below: Appendix A and B.

in the Ottoman Empire), following the arrival of the Jews exiled from Spain a year earlier, who were generously granted refuge by the Turkish Sultans. It is well-known that Hebrew printing in the Ottoman Empire flourished during the sixteenth century, competing with the parallel Venetian enterprises. The former obviously comprised works in both Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish (which, as indicated previously, use the same characters). Abraham Ya'ari, who listed only Hebrew publications in his important catalogue⁵, discovered that 758 such items were published in Istanbul between 1493 and 1940. Of these, only one periodical, *Hamevasser*, was entirely in Hebrew⁶ (although several others, in Judeo-Spanish, had some Hebrew included). Each issue of the weekly comprised sixteen pages, measuring 26×18 cms. I shall attempt to consider some of *Hamevasser's* characteristics, through examining and evaluating its contents.

The editorial of the first issue of *Hamevasser*, entitled "Our aim"⁷, established the weekly's policy, which declared loyalty to the Turks but also upheld preservation of Jewish identity; cooperation with the official efforts in spreading the Turkish language, but simultaneously fostering Hebrew language, culture and education; informing the Jews in the Ottoman Empire of events occurring among Jews elsewhere, but also serving abroad as a mirror of Jewish life in the Empire; and disseminating information regarding general developments in the Empire of interest to all Jews. Many of the articles which followed in the various issues were published with these objectives in mind, as the following examples indicate.

News and articles in *Hamevasser* apparently concentrated on three main foci: issues regarding Turkish and other Jews; the affairs of the Ottoman Empire; and the interrelation of the previous two spheres.

A. JEWISH ISSUES

The weekly included frequent letters from and reports about Jewish communities throughout the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere, as well as articles on various topics, some of which repeatedly recurring. Strong emphasis was placed on the question of Jewish immigration into the Ottoman Empire⁸, Jewish education and the character of the Rabbinical seminary in Istanbul⁹, elections to the Rabbinate and other Jewish bodies in the Istanbul community¹⁰, the Rabbinate in the Ottoman Empire (in which *Hamevasser* assessed its great power in both spiritual and secular matters)¹¹, particularly in Jerusalem and Salonica¹². Some attention was devoted to conflicts within the Jewish community in Istanbul and the relations of Ashkenazi Jews there with the *Hahambaşılık*¹³. More space was allotted to Jewish personalities, such as the *Hahambaşı* Hayim Nahum Efendi and his activities: his visits to Salonica and Edirne¹⁴, his trip to Izmir, Palestine and Egypt¹⁵ and so forth. Several monographic articles discussed other eminent Jews in the Ottoman Empire, past and present, such as Behor Itzhak Carmona of Istanbul¹⁶, Rabbi Abraham Danon of Edirne and Istanbul¹⁷, Abraham de Camondo of Istanbul¹⁸, Dr. David Marcus¹⁹ and others. Numerous

⁵ Ya'ari, A. *Ha-Defus ha-Ivri be-Qushta* (Hebrew Printing in Istanbul). Jerusalem, 1967.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 257, No 657.

⁷ *Hamevasser*, I, No 1, 1-3.

⁸ *Ibidem*, I, No 6, 81-84; No 7, 100-102; No 9, 129-130; No 20, p. 309; No 46, 665-666; II, No 2, p. 13.

⁹ *Ibidem*, I, 525-527; II, No 38, 448-449.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, I, No 37, 559-561.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, I, No 35-36, 552-554; No 38, p. 369; No 47, p. 677; No 48, 691-692; II, No 10, 109-110; No 12, 133-137; No 19-20; 219-212; No 21, No 257-258.

¹² *Ibidem*, II, No 4, 37-38; No 5, 49-51; No 19-20, 228-229.

¹³ *Ibidem*, I, No 50, 713-716; No 41, 729-730; II, No 5, 51-53; No 18, 208-208.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, I, No 19, 300-301.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, I, No 24, p. 381; No 26, 409-410; No 27, 429-430; No 30, 472-473.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, I, No 41, 646-647; No 45, 659-660.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, I, No 48, 694-695.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, II, No 5, 58-59.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, II, No 41 — the entire issue.

events in Jewish life, in the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere were mentioned, duly praised or criticized, as the case may be; a laudatory report about the Jewish theatre in Istanbul²⁰ is among the most interesting of these articles.

B. OTTOMAN AFFAIRS

Hamevasser offered its readers a fairly wide range of news about the Ottoman Empire, regular political surveys (often based on the Turkish press) and an analysis of current events, usually expressing strong identification with general Ottoman interests. For obvious reasons, it focused chiefly on Istanbul. An emotional article reported the fire at the Parliament House, along with historical notes on the building²¹. Others commented on relations between the two Houses of Parliament in Istanbul²², the parties in that Parliament²³, the Macedonian Question²⁴, Turkey and its neighbours²⁵, the new regime in Turkey and religious leaders²⁶, inauguration of the new session of the Ottoman Parliament²⁷, the Grand Vizir's programmatic speech²⁸, other Government and Parliamentary news²⁹, and the economy of Turkey — past and present³⁰. Personalities discussed included the Grand Vizir Hakkı Paşa³¹. A public proclamation by the Salonica Congress of the Committee of Union and Progress concerning the various nationalities was translated and reported. *Hamevasser* commented: "Long live the union and fraternity between the Turkish and Jewish nations!"³² and then discussed relations between the Committee and the Ottoman Government³³. Particular attention was devoted to Ottoman education and literature presented with considerable empathy. Articles discussed higher education in Turkey³⁴, the impact of modern Turkish education and literature on the Young Turks³⁵, the poetry of Abdülhamid Hakkı³⁶ and Celâl Sahir³⁷, and Turkish humour³⁸. Translations into Hebrew included the stories of Hüseyin Cahid³⁹ as well as *Kirksual kitabı*⁴⁰.

C. INTERRELATION OF JEWISH AND OTTOMAN VIEWPOINTS

The above discussion of Ottoman affairs was relatively simple when straightforward in nature, such as the passionate call for liberty in the Orient⁴¹ or the expression of unequivocal support for the Ottoman Empire in the Turko-Italian War⁴². The same relatively simple solutions applied to *Hamevasser's* editorial policy when dealing with strictly Jewish matters. Some topics became increasingly delicate, however, especially when dealing with issues which could be viewed differently from the Turkish and the Jewish perspectives. Obviously, such issues could not always be avoided by a periodical which considered itself loyal to the Ottoman Empire but simultaneously sympathetic to Jewish nationalist sentiment,

²⁰ Ibidem, II, No 10, p. 120.

²¹ Ibidem, I, No 4, 59-60.

²² Ibidem, I, No 8, 123-124.

²³ Ibidem, I, No 9, p. 139.

²⁴ Ibidem, I, No 10, 154-155.

²⁵ Ibidem, I, No 11, 169-170.

²⁶ Ibidem, I, No, 32, 494-496.

²⁷ Ibidem, I, No 44, p. 641.

²⁸ Ibidem, I, No 5, 75-76.

²⁹ Ibidem, II, No 17, 193-194; No 25-26, 310-311.

³⁰ Ibidem, II, No 25-26, 307-309.

³¹ Ibidem, I, No 2, p. 30.

³² Ibidem, I, No 45, 653-654.

³³ Ibidem, I, No 46, 673-674.

³⁴ Ibidem, II, No 19-20, 227-228; No 21, 260-261; No 22, 275-276; No 23, 288-289; No 24, 301-302.

³⁵ Ibidem, I, No 31, 479-481.

³⁶ Ibidem, II, No 15, 172-174.

³⁷ Ibidem, No 16, 184-185.

³⁸ Ibidem, II, No 25-26, 318-319; No 27, 333-334; No 28-29, 349-350; No 30, 358-360.

³⁹ Ibidem, I, No 33, 311-312; No 40, p. 606.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, II, No 35-36, 424-427; No 38, 454-455; No 39, 467-468.

⁴¹ Ibidem, I, No 5, 65-66.

⁴² Ibidem, II, No 37, p 435; No 38, 447-48.

i. e. Zionism. The way adopted by *Hamevasser* was to emphasize the debt of all Ottoman Jews to the Young Turks. Thus, an article on the Jewish press in Turkey in the first issue⁴³ did not merely record that at the time there were nine Jewish newspapers in Izmir, six in Istanbul, six in Salonica, two in Philippopoli, and one each in Jerusalem and Sofia, but also attempted to characterize them: most solely reported news as many Jews in these communities could read Judeo-Spanish only. They had little interest in literature and did not dare to publish articles at all, fearing Abdül Hamid's tyranny; this situation, it was argued, had changed after the Young Turk Revolution with the enthusiastically uncensored writing of articles. To this one might add: *Sapienti docet*.

When matters could be variously interpreted, it seems that *Hamevasser*, as a rule, wrote in a conciliatory spirit, always trying to highlight the positive approach. Thus, it translated and published an interview with Dr. Nazim Bey in the *Journal de Salonique*, commenting favourably on the Jews⁴⁴ while maintaining that Zionism was full of sympathy for Turkey⁴⁵. Hence the appeal to the Young Turks to support the Jewish national movement, Zionism⁴⁶. The weekly emphasized that Jewish members in the Ottoman Parliament had hardly been elected by Jews alone and thus might be considered as representing Ottoman rather than Jewish public opinion⁴⁷. Conversely, in an article on the national question *Hamevasser* considered the Young Turks as increasingly renouncing chauvinist tendencies and increasingly convinced that only reciprocal understanding among the Empire's communities would bring about progress⁴⁸. The implication is that the Renaissance of the Orient and the national movement of the Jews were interconnected⁴⁹. Such hopes apparently receded with the gradual official relinquishing of the policy of Ottomanism (*Hamevasser*, nonetheless, called for Ottomanism and Judaism instead of intensified Turkification⁵⁰). Thus, in an article on the new Education Law, the weekly supported the principle of Government supervision over all schools, which held that, even if this interfered with the national rights of minorities, it was inconceivable for anti-Turkish propaganda to be allowed in any school; the article warned, however, against interfering with the teachers⁵¹. The weekly indeed acknowledged the need for reforming Ottoman Jewish education and opted for a new type of school combining the study of new science with Jewish ideals, in harmony with Turkish interests — with the intention of training loyal Ottoman citizens⁵².

It is the language problem, however, which probably provides the most interesting arguments. *Hamevasser* argued eloquently that Zionism was not politically minded and certainly not anti-Turkish, deploring attacks on Zionism in the Ottoman Parliament⁵³ and in some newspapers, such as *Alemdar*⁵⁴. *Hamevasser* considered itself nationalist on the cultural level, fighting staunchly for the Hebrew language; after all, it was published in Hebrew and had to justify itself to its readers. Hence it preached the revival of Hebrew among the Jews in the Ottoman Empire⁵⁵ and appealed for adoption of Hebrew in lieu of Judeo-Spanish⁵⁶. *Hamevasser* even reported an interview with Emrullah Bey, the Minister of Education, who said he found Hebrew preferable to other foreign languages, as it was neutral in nature⁵⁷ (by which he probably meant that it was non-political). Nevertheless, the weekly

⁴³ Ibidem, I, No 1, 10-12.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, I, No 3, 43-45.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, I, No 2, 19-22.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, II, No 2, 17-18; No 5, p. 34.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, No 25, 387-389; No 26, 401-402.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, I, No 16-17, p. 267.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, I, No 52, 737-738; II, No 1, 1-2; No 2, 14-15; No 3, 25-26.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, I, No 24, p. 376.

⁵¹ Ibidem, II, No 2, 15-17; No 3, 27-28; No 4, 38-41.

⁵² Ibidem, II, No 6, 61-65; No 7-8, 76-78; No 9, 98-99.

⁵³ Ibidem, II, No 7-8, 73-76; No 9, 100-102; No 13-14, 146-148; No 15, 169-170; No 18, 205-207; No 19-20, 218-222; No 23, 280-281.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, II, No 35-36, 418-419, replying to *Alemdar*, No 42.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, I, No 3, 35-33 and subsequent issues.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, I, No 5, 67-68.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, I, No 11, p. 173.

was well-aware of the emphasis which the Ottoman Government and Turkish intelligentsia placed on Turkish; hence it could not avoid acknowledging the importance of Turkish-language study among all Ottoman Jews as a key to progress in the economic and political life of the new Turkey⁵⁸. As to the cardinal question of language selection, *Hamevasser* seemed to agree — at least by implication — with the view expressed by Dr. Nazım Bey in an interview, viz., that Hebrew is important to Jews for contacts with their brethren but that Turkish ought to be the language of instruction in all schools in the Ottoman Empire⁵⁹.

In summing up, one may say that the weekly *Hamevasser* is not merely an important source for the history of Ottoman Jewry (especially in Istanbul and other urban centres) as well as that of the Ottomans as a whole, considering its articles, reports, book-news and advertisements. Rather, it is also a very particular sort of periodical, due to its publication in Hebrew and the implications thereof. While all major Judeo-Spanish newspapers of the time, and most particularly *La Epoca* of Salonica, the above-mentioned *El Tiempo* of Istanbul and others identified completely with the overall policies of the Empire's leaders, *Hamevasser* was almost alone in preaching Jewish nationalism, albeit in a spirit which considered the common destiny of Jews and other Ottomans.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, 166-167.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, I, No 12, 190-191; see however II, No 27, 338-339.