Chapter 2

The Legacy of Sepharad between ‘*Ever* and *‘Arav*

The contradiction between the recurrent proclamations about a “pure” and objective science that is just a branch of science at large and has no purpose external to it—and the salient fact of the political role that this science played, sought to play, and was accepted by the public as its role to play. How strange, too, is this tableau of scholars whose entire oeuvre proves that they wished to create an active instrument in the Jews’ war for equal rights and even wielded this instrument day and night in debates; and for all that they close their eyes lest they see this main purpose too clearly and proclaim time and again that all they desire is learning for its own sake. It is this political purpose that corrupted the conclusions and the discussion of several important topics (Scholem, 1975: 387)

This quotation, taken from Gershom Scholem’s famous article “Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies,” illuminates the variegated relationship between the political discourse and the scientific discourse that underlies the development of Wissenschaft des Judentums and *hokhmat Yisrael,* Judaic Studies, as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe, and attests to the influence of the social and political status of European Jewry in this process. In his article, Scholem describes how Jewish scholars wielded the tools of scholarship to solve social and political problems, the tendency to apologetics that typified their research, and the contradictions embedded in their discourse. In his mordant language, Scholem describes how they tried to solve the Jewish Problem in Europe by giving Judaism [Jewishness?], as a dynamic and living framework, a decent burial: “The Jew wants to be liberated from himself, and Wissenschaft des Judentums serves him as a burial rite and a release from the yoke that rests on him. They will find relief for generations to come, the terrible game will end, the buffers that separate them from the living will be satisfied, and the past will be embalmed and interred. Sometimes you stand entranced before this ability to elevate phenomena and extricate facts from the thickets of their integratedness, to sort and launder and cleanse the past of the dust of the generations and from the defilement of the falsehoods and the lovely falseness of the legends—all of which for its final burial” (ibid. 391).

This important article, first published in 1945 and including, along with criticism of the way the Wissenschaft des Judentums had been configured, a scientific program for the future design of this discipline, has inspired many interpretations over the years.[[1]](#footnote-1) The symbiotic relationship between the development and shaping of Wissenschaft des Judentums and the processes of Jewish modernization may serve as a good point of departure for the discussion in this chapter, which centers on the disputes that surrounded the gathering, publication, research, and interpretation of Jewish poetry and philosophy in medieval Spain in the Jewish scientific discourse of the turn of the twentieth century.

I will examine these disputes from the point of view of two individuals: Saul Abdalla Joseph and Abraham Shalom Yehuda, who for decades waged a polemic with contemporary European Jewish thinkers and scholars who operated in Judaic Studies circles. These debates centered on diverse questions—stylistic, linguistic, methodological, and poetic—concerning the methods to use in gathering and interpreting the philosophical and poetic oeuvres of Jews in Muslim Spain/Andalus within the frame of the Jewish scientific and political discourse at the turn of the twentieth century. This polemic took shape against the background of the important role of the medieval Spanish legacy in the scientific shaping of Judaism and Jewish modernization among the Wissenschaft des Judentums circles in Europe.

The Return to the “Spanish [Sephardi?] Legacy” in the Modern Jewish Discourse

The legacy of Spain [Sepharad?], the Golden Age of Jewish art and philosophy in Muslim Spain, was focal in the discourse of Jews in the circles of the European Haskalah movement and, later, in the growth of Wissenschaft des Judentums and Judaic Studies.[[2]](#footnote-2) The cultural legacy of Spanish Jewry was fertile soil for the shaping of Jewishness as an autonomous historical and cultural entity using scientific research tools and reasoning. One of the most salient indicators of Judaic Studies, at least in its first generations, was the attempt to justify the Jews’ affiliation with European culture and society. Undergirding the doings of these Maskilim ["משכילים"—המעורבים בתנועת ההשכלה, או שמא מלומדים יהודים בכלל?] was the postulate of Jewish modernization as a process inseparably linked with Western culture and Europe (Mendes-Flohr, 2010; Schorsch, 1989; Heschel, 2012; Efron, 2016).

In the first stage, at the onset of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, the philosophical, poetic, and liturgical endeavors of medieval Spanish Jewry served as a source of inspiration and emulation for the Maskilim in Germany. The “Sephardi legacy,” as it was called in the writings of the time, was singled out as one of the pinnacles of Jewish history. The first of the Jewish historians, Heinrich Graetz, described Jewish history in medieval Spain as “the select era of Jewish history” that “led to the world of Judaism that existed in the Spanish Jewish commonwealth […] a region of intellectuals, giants of wisdom, rulers, divinely graced poets, philosophers. […] The works of their intellect carry the imprint of perfection” (quoted in Frenkel, 2002: 29). In the eyes of Graetz and other Jewish historians of his time, the Sephardi legacy symbolized the classical Jewish era in which a flourishing, rational, and universal Jewish culture developed. By translating and borrowing liturgical, political, and architectural models from the era of Muslim Spain (al-Andalus), the Jewish erudites tried to construct a Jewish cultural and intellectual foundation attuned to the spirit of Western culture (Funkenstein, 1991; Raz-Krakotzkin, 1998; Mendes-Flohr, 2010; Efron, 2016).

In the middle of the nineteenth century, selected portions of the intellectual and poetic oeuvre of Spanish Jewry were translated into German: the intellectual and philosophical works of Maimonides, Ibn Gabirol, and Sa’adia Gaon, and the Hebrew poetry of Judah Halevi and Moses ibn Ezra. The first scholars of Jewish artistic endeavor in Spain were the first generation of Judaic Studies that coalesced around the establishment of the Association for Judaic Studies in Germany. Scholars such as Moritz Steinschneider, Samuel David Luzzatto, Michael Yechiel Sachs, Judah Leb Duqes, Abraham Geiger, Heinrich Graetz, and Solomon Munk focused their studies on various aspects of the Jewish legacy in Sepharad, mostly through philological prisms, and directed the enterprise of translating these works into German and French (Schorsch, 1989; Efron, 2016). In their research, the “Sephardi legacy” was designed via the intersection of the language of European science and that of Jewish tradition in accordance with the spirit of modern Western culture. The historian Ismar Schorsch, probing the myth of Sephardi supremacy that evolved among Maskilim in Germany at the outset of the Haskalah, detected a paradoxical process in which Judaism was imagined as part of Western culture precisely by returning to al-Andalus (Schorsch, 2000).

Scholarship and intellectual interest in medieval Jewish literature gained breadth and depth among those of the second generation of Judaic Studies, which emerged mainly from Hebrew Haskalah circles across the Russian Empire at the turn of the twentieth century. These circles, evolving in local Jewish and imperial contexts, took on a slightly different shape from those of the Haskalah movement that emerged in Germany coevally even though they were closely interrelated. Unlike the first generation, which tried mainly to draw the Jewish output in Spain in the direction of the German world of science and culture, the second generation of scholars tended to underscore the national and Hebrew dimensions of this corpus.[[3]](#footnote-3) Within this frame, special emphasis was placed on the Hebrew works of the Jewish poets and philosophers of the time and the national aspects of these writings. Anthologies and new and revised editions of Jewish literature in medieval Spain—Hebrew poetry, philosophy, and thought—were published and a corpus of scientific and interpretive studies about it took shape (Schirmann, 1956, Tobi, 2000; Rosen & Yassif, 2002). The gathering and elucidation of the Sephardi corpus took on broader and more institutionalized dimensions toward the end of the nineteenth century. Scientific societies were established that focused, *inter alia*, on putting out revised and annotated editions of medieval Jewish works and promoting their research and study. The founders were prominent Jewish scholars and intellectuals who belonged to Judaic Studies circles in Europe, such as Abraham Berliner, Michael Sachs, Abraham Harkavy, and Samuel David Luzzatto, to name only a few. The most conspicuous society of this kind, in this context, was Mekitze Nirdamim, established in 1862 by several Judaic Studies-affiliated Maskilim. Basic texts from the literature of medieval Spanish Jewry were published within its ambit, such as Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed,* Judah Halevi’s *The Kuzari,* Abraham ibn Ezra’s *Sefer Ha’Ibbur* (A Treatise on the Calendar)*,* and Judah Halevi’s *Poems from the Dīwān,* among others.

In these published works, the ingrained Arabic poetic and linguistic aspects of Jewish poetry and thought in Spain were usually toned down. While the Hebrew corpus (mainly the poetic) was emphasized and underscored, that in Arabic (chiefly in Judeo-Arabic) was marginalized in research. Even the great Jewish works that originally had been written in Judeo-Arabic, such as Judah Halevi’s *The Kuzari* and Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed,* were usually interpreted and researched through their Hebrew translations, without reference to the Arabic original (Drori, 1988; Tobi, 2011).

This tendency, some historians and literary scholars claim, was part of a broader trend of distancing Judaism from the Eastern and Arab contexts that typified the Judaic Studies discourse from its outset. Also repressed was the Judeo-Spanish literary, philosophical, and poetic work that took shape in the Ottoman Empire and northern Africa in the centuries following the expulsion from Spain.[[4]](#footnote-4) These scholars tried to distance Judaism from its Oriental components, including the presence of Arabic language and culture in the Jewish cultural legacy of medieval Spain.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Polemic of Saul Abdalla Joseph and Abraham Shalom Yehuda

The status and value of Hebrew language and culture in the collection and interpretation of the thought and poetry of medieval Spain were central issues in the disputes that Saul Abdalla Joseph and Abraham Shalom Yehuda waged with the Jewish Maskilim [intellectuals?] and scholars. Their criticism was directed mainly at scholars and thinkers of their generation who were active in Judaic Studies and Hebrew language revival circles in Europe and Palestine. First, it is important to note that Joseph and Yehuda did not conduct this polemic together; these were two separate polemics that I examine within one frame in this chapter to lend sharper focus to the matrix of nexuses between Joseph’s and Yehuda’s arguments and the differences between them.

Saul Joseph’s polemic concerned the project of gathering, translating, and interpreting Sephardi Hebrew poetry that was led by Jewish scholars in Europe, foremost in the Mekitze Nirdamim society.[[6]](#footnote-6) Yehuda’s polemic was longer-lasting, spanning several disciplines in the greater area of Judaic Studies, and manifested in a variety of political and scholarly contexts. The two polemics are connected on many fronts: the critical rhetoric and the issues that surfaced in them, their structure, and the intellectual frameworks within which they took shape. There are also biographical contiguities between Joseph and Yehuda and in the unique blend of the worlds of content and the epistemological traditions that shaped their intellectual world.

The connection with Arabic culture is associated with the maturing of both Joseph and Yehuda in the Arabic-speaking domain, Baghdad and Jerusalem respectively, and with their lives in a Jewish community steeped in Judeo-Arab tradition. Both witnessed and participated in the modernization and revival of the Arabic language, literature, and poetry in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the development of education, thought, the press, and literature in Jewish communities in the Arab world. The reinvigoration of the Arabic language served as another source of inspiration and a platform for the renovation of the Hebrew language and literature in light of the Jewish-Muslim and Hebrew-Arabic past and present.

Additional epistemological traditions populated Abraham Shalom Yehuda’s intellectual world: the Orientalist philological tradition; the German language, in which he had received his academic training and published most of his studies; the European Judaic Studies and Wissenschaft des Judentums circles in which he was involved; the Sephardi rabbinical tradition; the Spanish [Sephardi?] Enlightenment [intellectual?] tradition, the revival of interest in Sephardi history and culture; and research activity at the University of Madrid. Even though he spent most of his adult life migrating from city to city (Heidelberg, Frankfurt, Berlin, Madrid, London, and New York), he was identified mainly with his native Palestinian identity and was known as a “Jerusalemite scholar.” Although a German Orientalist and philologist by training who was active mainly in European scientific circles, he often presented himself as a Sephardi Jew and an affiliate of the culture of the East, whose intellectual legacy was rooted in the Judeo-Arabic tradition.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Different and at times contradictory worlds intersected also in the figure of Saul Abdalla Joseph. Joseph strove to attract Baghdadi Jewish intellectual circles in the East to the universe of the Hebrew Haskalah in Europe; concurrently, he waged an acrid polemic with European Maskilim concerning the shaping of the (Sephardi) Jewish tradition. He was often identified as a “Baghdadi scholar” even though he had left that city at an early age and spent most of his life as a trader in the British colonies of India and in China. In his writings, he stressed his bond with the East and Judeo-Arabic culture, but in his commercial activity in Hong Kong he was a British subject who profited financially and politically from the economic and political patronage of the European empire.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The images that jelled in their personalities and their political and cultural peregrinations gave shape to their polemics, which were typified by cognitive and intellectual dynamism and not by rigid ideological and political systems. On top of these was the tendency to polemics that characterized both of them.

Along with their similarities, however, they were dissimilar in several important ways—for example, in their position on scientific discourse generally and the world of the Jewish and Hebrew Enlightenment in Europe particularly. Saul Joseph, as I show in greater detail below, was a Jewish trader on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, an autodidact specializing in classic Arabic literature and the Hebrew and Arabic poetry of medieval Spain who never acquired official rabbinical or scientific training. His contact with the Maskilim in Europe took place mainly through correspondence and critical articles that he published in the Hebrew press in Europe. His path was totally different from that of Yehuda, which began in the Hebrew Haskalah circles that evolved in the late nineteenth-century Jerusalem and continued with advanced studies in Semitic philology, stints at research institutes in Germany, and teaching at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Higher Institute for Judaic Studies) in Berlin and in the flagship research institutes of his time: Heidelberg, Frankfurt, Cambridge, and Oxford. Yehuda’s intellectual career more closely approximated that of most of his Judaic Studies contemporaries, with whom he and Saul Joseph sparred. Furthermore, unlike Joseph, who operated in a broad geographical expanse, Yehuda spent most of his life in Europe and maintained relations (sometimes complex) with large portions of the Judaic Studies scholars of the time. Thus, while Joseph operated far from the Haskalah circles in Europe and was estranged from them, Yehuda maintained a thick matrix of ties and relations with Jewish and Hebrew Haskalah centers throughout his career.

Outside this array of connections and intersections, the two polemicists in this chapter are linked mainly through the persona of David Yellin and his unique place in the polemic. A web of family, ideological, and intellectual strands connects Yellin with Joseph and Yehuda.[[9]](#footnote-9) Yellin was born into one of the first mixed (Ashkenazi-Sephardi) families in the Jewish Yishuv in Jerusalem. The family of his father, Yehoshua Yellin, had emigrated from Poland to Palestine whereas the family of his mother, Serah Yehuda, had settled in Jerusalem from Baghdad.[[10]](#footnote-10) Yellin was one of the most important and influential personalities in the Yishuv at the turn of the twentieth century: one of the revivers of the Hebrew language, one of the first Hebrew-language teachers who created a new method of study—Hebrew-in-Hebrew; one of the first teachers of Arabic language and culture in a Jewish school; and one of the first teachers of Sephardi poetry at the Hebrew University. He was Abraham Shalom Yehuda’s maternal cousin and maintained close relations with him all his life. He was also a distant relative of Joseph’s and corresponded with him for several years. Like Joseph and Yehuda, Yellin’s persona integrated diverse worlds, some aberrant on the Haskalah map of his era. As I show below in this chapter, however, Yellin’s place would change over the years as he worked his way into the Yishuv’s scientific and political establishment. This change would find expression, *inter alia,* in the manifestations of the Sephardi legacy in his discourse and in his role in the disputes that Joseph and Yehuda waged with European Jewish intellectuals.

The discussion in this chapter is divided into two main parts. The first focuses on Joseph’s polemic with European Jewish scholars as to the processes of investigation, collection, and interpretation of Sephardi poetry. The second part centers on embodiments of the Sephardi legacy in Yehuda’s discourse and in his polemic about its representation in the Jewish political and scientific discourse in various temporal and geographical junctures at the turn of the twentieth century.

Sephardi Poetry: Between Arabic Poetics and Hebrew Poetics

I found it correct to remark, however, that as a rule, whenever our brethren the men of Europe sought to interpret some words pertaining to us men of the East, they failed to go the root of the matters and merely judged and discussed from the point of view of their own circle (Saul Abdalla Joseph, Letter to Ya’afaz, January 27, 1896, quoted in Yellin, 1936: lxxii).

This quotation, taken from a letter from Saul Abdalla Joseph to Ya’afaz[[11]](#footnote-11) in 1896, is stunning in its sharp tenor and the precision of its diagnosis, which, in many senses, foreshadows the critical discourse that would appear on the political and academic scene only decades later. It is fascinating to see how closely the observation of Joseph, a Jewish trader from Baghdad on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, approximates Edward Said’s learned insights about a century later about Europe’s attitude toward the East.[[12]](#footnote-12) To avoid the trap of anachronism, however, it is important to read this quotation in its political, cultural, and social context: the turn of the twentieth century, in the very midst of Joseph’s years-long dispute with the Jewish Maskilim [intellectuals?].

The polemic lasted a decade and a half, from 1887 to 1902, in articles that Joseph published in the Hebrew newspaper *HaTsefira* and in his correspondence with contemporaneous Maskilim such as Nahum Sokolow, David Ginsburg, Abraham Berliner, Chaim Brody, and Abraham Harkavy. It was also expressed in two books that Joseph wrote, published in Vienna only some two decades after his death by Samuel Krauss: *Giv’at Saul* (1923) and *Mishbetset HaTarshish* (1926). These volumes were direct continuations of Joseph’s critique of the interpretive system presented in anthologies of the poetry of Judah Halevi and Moses ibn Ezra that appeared under the Mekitze Nirdamim imprint. In his two books, Joseph aggregated his notes and corrections on the collection and interpretation of Sephardi poetry in the Judaic Studies circles of his time and proposed an alternative interpretive model based largely on Arabic poetic theory and its poetic tradition.

Joseph’s critique transcended the interpretive and scholarly framework of Sephardi poetry and the limitations of literary interpretation; it touched upon broader political and cultural questions such as the place of the Sephardi legacy between Western/European and Eastern/Arab cultures; the role of Europe and Western culture in the modernization of Jewish culture; and the relation between a cultural legacy and its heirs.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It bears emphasis that the polemic was usually a one-way affair, formulated mainly by Joseph in the many articles and letters that he addressed to Jewish scholars and Maskilim in Europe—most of which went unanswered. Joseph’s aberrant place on the Hebrew Haskalah map of time was definitive in shaping his relationship with the Jewish Maskilim and their acceptance of his pungent criticism. His many articles in the Hebrew press received hardly any public response, and all that remains of his correspondence are copies of the letters that he sent out, to the exclusion of his addressees’ replies.

Biography in Motion

Saul Abdalla Joseph was born in Baghdad in 1849 and died in Hong Kong in 1906. The course of his life merged with the flow of Jews eastward from Baghdad to Southeast Asia and with the economic and cultural transformation that this movement brought about.[[14]](#footnote-14) He spent most of his adult life in the diasporic web that Baghdad Jews spun across India and China in the nineteenth century. At the age of eighteen, he left the city of his birth and, like other young Jews of his era, headed east in search of economic opportunities within the Baghdadi Jewish imperial trading network. As a relative of the Sassoon family (Flora, wife of David Sassoon, was his paternal aunt) he joined the David Sassoon and Sons Trading House, headquartered in Mumbai (Bombay).[[15]](#footnote-15) After attending the company’s schools, he involved himself in the company’s activity in the port cities of China. After several years at the Sassoon family’s trading house, he settled with his family in the British colony of Hong Kong and established his own trading house at the local exchange brokerage. By moving eastward, Joseph became a British subject instead of an Ottoman one, a status that facilitated his travels through the Empire and gave him legal and economic protection.[[16]](#footnote-16) In his training with David Sassoon and Sons, Joseph acquired, among other things, proficiency in English and Judeo-Arabic, the languages of the bureaucracy and of the members of the Iraqi financial network. Along with this training, he was an autodidact who specialized in Hebrew and Arabic language and literature and focused on Sephardi poetry. Within the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora network, Joseph was active in Jewish intellectual circles, mainly in the Jewish press that appeared in Arabic using Hebrew characters (Judeo-Arabic).[[17]](#footnote-17) Jewish intellectuals from all parts of the Iraqi diaspora in Southeast Asia, Baghdad, and Basra took part in these circles.

From his seat in Hong Kong, Joseph took an interest in the Hebrew Haskalah and Judaic Studies literature that was appearing in Europe, particularly that pertaining to Sephardi poetry. He subscribed regularly to several Hebrew newspapers that were published in Europe, belonged to several research associations (foremost Mekitze Nirdamim), and even urged intellectuals in the Baghdad Jewish diaspora to subscribe to Hebrew newspapers and join research associations.

Joseph was an outlier in the Hebrew Haskalah circles of his time. His biography and professional affiliations did not square with the characteristics of a contemporary Jewish Maskil. He did not belong to a recognized Jewish center and lacked a formal general or rabbinical education; therefore, he lacked the scientific authority that would admit him to the Jewish Haskalah discourse of his time.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Joseph’s initial correspondence with European Maskilim focused on technical issues related to arranging annual subscription payments and buying books. This connection, however, changed when he began to send lengthy and detailed letters to editors and publishers of the new collections of Sephardi poetry, offering detailed, lengthy, and stringently argued descriptions of all the defects, inaccuracies, and misinterpretations that he found in them. He sent dozens of letters to the scholars themselves and to the heads of the Mekitze Nirdamim society, which had published these books. In his letters, he offered intensive, focused, and detailed criticism based on deep and thorough familiarity with the texts and the Hebrew and Arabic bodies of knowledge of his time.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The contents of the letters leave no doubt about Joseph’s strong acquaintance with the Judaic Studies intellectuals and their research into the Jewish literature in Spain. In his letters, he references the studies of Moritz Steinschneider, Abraham Geiger, Samuel David Luzzatto, Solomon Judah Rapoport, and Sachs (Shneor), but he turns his main attention to the project of re-publishing Hebrew Sephardi poetry along with new glosses and commentaries—books such as Moses ibn Ezra’s *Sefer Ha’Anaq: HaTarshish,* edited and proofed by David Ginsburg in 1886 with new commentary and glosses; Judah Halevi’s *Dīwān*, containing a collection of his secular poems with notes and glosses and an introduction by Chaim Brody, published in 1894; and a collection of Judah Halevi’s poems published in 1892, gathered and edited by Abraham Harkavy.

Joseph’s correspondence with the Jewish Maskilim lasted nearly two decades. His main addressees were Nahum Sokolow, editor of the newspaper *HaTsefira* at the time; Abraham Berliner, one of the most prominent Judaic Studies scholars in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century and head of the Mekitze Nirdamim society; Abraham Harkavy, a scholar of the East and of Jewish history, particularly that of medieval Spain; Chaim Brody; and David Ginsburg, a Russian-Jewish philanthropist and scholar who focused on Sephardi poetry. Joseph’s correspondence with Brody, who by then had become the leading scholar of Sephardi poetry in Judaic Studies circles and was marked as Samuel David Luzzatto’s most eminent successor, epitomized the most pungent and personal controversy in the discipline.

Rabbi Chaim Brody, born in Hungary, published the *Dīwān* of Eleazar ben Jacob HaBavli; *Mahbarot Emanuel*; a collection of poems by Moses ibn Ezra; and the poems of Samuel HaNaggid. He also attempted to anthologize the complete *Dīwān* of Judah Halevi. Joseph delivered a lengthy response to Brody’s commentaries on Judah Halevi’s poems as soon as they were published and added numerous corrections to the interpretations of the poems. His main argument was that to interpret these poems and piyyutim one needs thorough familiarity with Arabic language and culture, and it is participation in that culture as it has continued from Judah Halevi’s time to the present, that allows readers to understand correctly what Halevi meant.

Brody wrote his dissertation on Judah Halevi’s poetry at the University of Berlin, labored to collect the entire corpus of all Sephardi poetry in Hebrew, which had been scattered in sundry manuscripts and archives, and added new glosses and interpretations of his own. His first project was a collection of all of Judah Halevi’s poetry that he published in several volumes by the Mekitze Nirdamim society. After the first volume appeared, Joseph sent Brody letters with hundreds of remarks and corrections relating to vowel diacritics, meter, rhyme, and the interpretive comments that had appeared in Brody’s edition. We do not know how Brody responded in his letters to Joseph, but in the second edition of the *Dīwān,* whichhe published several years later, he thanked Joseph for his remarks and corrections in the preface that he added to the book: “and the scholarly rabbi R. Saul Abdalla Joseph in Hong Kong (the land of the Chinese), who reviewed all the poems in the first volume with a keen eye and sent me his remarks, which I have cited in his name” (Brody, 1901: xv).

Brody did insert some of Joseph’s remarks and credit their author by name. Apparently, however, these corrections did not satisfy Joseph, who kept up his criticism with growing acidity at the cost of his relationship with Brody, as Samuel Krauss describes in his foreword to Joseph’s book: “And this found disfavor in R. Saul’s eyes and also writers’ jealousy appears to have touched him. Thus these longtime friends became each other’s enemies until R. Saul grew embittered in the heat of his strength and wrote this book, which is full of disputes with RHB [R. Chaim Brody] in all its segments” (Joseph, 1923: xviii). Joseph continued to send Brody lengthy and detailed letters for several years while corresponding with Berliner, Harkavy, and Ginsburg, but hardly received any replies from them.

Another medium that Joseph used as a platform for his criticism was the newspaper *HaTsefira,* published at that time in Warsaw and edited by Nahum Sokolow, in which he placed dozens of articles over the years. As mentione above, he first published articles in *HaTsefira* in 1887, most dealing with Sephardi poetry and his misgivings about the project of collection and interpretation under the leadership of the Judaic Studies intellectuals.[[20]](#footnote-20) His critiques crested in a series of articles that began in 1901, in which he sought, beyond his remarks and reservations about his contemporaries’ studies, to offer a new interpretive framework based on the *badi’* doctrine of Arabic poetry.

During his years of publishing articles in *HaTsefira,* however, Joseph was at the mercy of the editor *cum* gatekeeper and felt excluded and gagged. Yellin describes his frustration: “But the most disturbing thing was the attitude toward him: They dismissed his remarks inconsiderately, they did not answer his letters, they left his article aside more than a year until they published it, and he sat on tenterhooks and waited” (Yellin, 1936: lxxiv). Even when published, the articles were truncated; such was particularly the case in the last series of articles, which Joseph considered his crowning achievement. In late 1901, *HaTsefira* stopped publishing the articles. Joseph was hurt by the way his writings appeared—fragmented, far apart in time, and sloppily arranged—and the scant attention and response they received from scholars and readers. Thus, he wrote to the editor asking him to stop publishing them. From then, on he submitted no more articles to *HaTsefira.*

From then until his death in 1906, Joseph turned his main attention to writing the two manuscripts in which he offered an alternative interpretive framework for Sephardi poetry. They were published, as stated, some two decades after his death, ironically by European Jewish intellectuals affiliated with Judaic Studies.

The controversy took shape and form in various identifiable spatial and temporal foci. Spatially, it was modeled not only on European soil but also in Joseph’s milieu, Hong Kong, as part of the Baghdad Jewish diaspora. Temporally, it appeared and coalesced at two points:

1. in the decade and a half when Joseph published his articles in *HaTsefira* and corresponded with Judaic Studies scholars (1887–1901).
2. approximately two decades after Joseph’s death, when his writings were published under the scholarly patronage of Samuel Krauss in the 1920s and 1930s.

“Don’t Call Me *Hakham*”: Sephardi Poetry Between Scientific and Traditional Discourse

One of the constitutive principles of Judaic Studies is the border drawn in this discipline between tradition and scientific scholarship, distinguishing between knowledge belonging to the Jewish tradition and its multiple branches and configurations of scientific knowledge organized and diffused in accordance with an agreed-upon array of rules and definitions. Jewish Maskilim invoked this boundary to differentiate themselves from traditional Jewish scholars and to sort and hierarchize different types of knowledge about Jewish history and culture (Funkenstein, 1991; Schorsch, 2000; Mendes-Flohr, 2010).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Judaic Studies movement first appeared, the boundary between tradition and science had not yet solidified and there was freer movement between the domains. Most Jewish Maskilim had both rabbinical and academic training and operated on the seam between the two. Research into Sephardi poetry was shaped mainly in the settings of independent intellectual societies such as Mekitze Nirdamim and in the contemporary Hebrew press, as opposed to under institutional scientific auspices.[[21]](#footnote-21) At this stage, one may detect the development of what Foucault called “discourse societies,” “whose function is to circulate communication in a closed space, distributing them under nothing but strict rules” (Foucault, 1992). [להלן מקור לועזי] Michel Foucault, (1992). Troyano, Alberto González (trans.), *El orden del discurso.* Buenos Aires: Tusquets Editores.) These non-institutional systems applied an eclectic structure of rules and arrangements but imposed covert rituals and definitions that regulated the process of production and dissemination of knowledge.

In his very first letters and articles, Joseph addressed himself directly and indirectly to the covert mechanisms of exclusion and regulation that typified Judaic Studies circles at the time. In a letter to the editor of *HaTsefira,* he called attention to the unique writing rules that organized the paper’s discursive language and noted the aberrance of his writing as that of a person “not among the denizens of the Bet Midrash ‘who have a language all their own’ and cannot compose his thoughts in clear and crisp language that resonates easily in the ears of the Maskilim” (Joseph, “Letter to Nahum Sokolow,” January 28, 1888, quoted in Yellin, 1936: ixl).

Specifying language as a mechanism of exclusion, Joseph also pointed to “symbolic capital”— Haskalah honorifics—as a covert mechanism for the filtering of participants in the discourse. In his articles, he stresses the Haskalah sobriquets for the subjects of its criticism and presents them in a lengthy string of adjectives: “wise,” “reputed,” “erudite,” and so on. Concurrently, he emphasizes his lack of formal schooling and degrees; for example, in his letter to the editor of *HaTsefira,* he writes: “I do not want you to add the adjective *hakham* [wise/sage] to my name. My name is Saul; call me neither rabbi nor *hakham*” (ibid.: 19). At first glance, Joseph applies here a strategy of humility and respect for the Jewish Maskilim in Europe; his repeated use of this strategy and the way he phrases it, however, show that it is part of Joseph’s general criticism. By emphasizing his exceptionality among the dominant voices in the “discourse society,” he signifies the symbolic capital embodied in the adjective “Maskil” (enlightened one/intellectual) and its role in organizing the covert systems of exclusion that animate the Jewish scientific discourse. Reflected in Joseph’s argument, as I show below, is another barrier between him and the Maskilim: the distinction between those belonging to the Sephardic tradition and those not.

His critical articles are similar in structure: First, he proclaims his “lack of schooling” in contrast to his rivals’ broad education; only then does he launch into trenchant criticism of European Jewish scholars’ research into Sephardi poetry and points to a series of blunders and errors:

I have never been called a *hakham*; I am neither a *hakham* nor the son of a *hakham* but rather a member of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange from its founding day, and what has an officer in a stock exchange have to do with the Bet Midrash? Nor have I profited from my writings in the slightest. […] Thus indeed, it is unbecoming for *hakhamim* to make up things that never were about our poets and the poets of Ishmael and the customs shared by both camps. Only if it is as obvious to him as his sister should he say it, and even though I have little spare time I will not let that bother me; instead, I will present some conditions (ibid.: lv).

Joseph straddles the border between the world of scientific scholarship, based on European Orientalist traditions, and the bodies of knowledge and traditions of poetics that he identifies as Judeo-Arabic traditions. His discourse moves between the rhetoric of scientific discourse, which seeks to reveal the truth, and emphasizing his place in the heart of the tradition as that which gives him a monopoly on the truth. The purpose of his criticism, he repeatedly states, is to defend the original intent of the poets of Sepharad and his main task is to uncover the errors and gaffes in the scholarship of those who purport to represent the scientific truth. In one of his articles, for example, Joseph urges his readers to test him on the basis of closeness to the truth, because only “From my love of our holy tongue and my penchant for the poetry of the Sephardim have I come through the gates of *HaTsefira* and I will not deny that it aggrieves me immensely to see strange mistakes and egregious misstatements, which no sage and expert can repair, slip into the lovely poems and the Arabs’ crisp turns of phrase” (Joseph, *HaTsefira,* December 26, 1888: 3).

The distinction between truth and falsehood, which Foucault presents as one of the regulating principles of discourse, becomes in Joseph’s critique a tool for criticism of the interpretations of the scholars of Sephardi poetry (Foucault, 1992). He therefore consistently asks his readers to test the “truthfulness” of his claims and cope with them based on their fealty to the source. Confronting the European Jewish scholars’ flawed commentaries and translations, he positions himself as a representative of the original tradition of Sephardi poetry:

I come to salvage the honor of our poets from their friends, admirers, and honorers, who inadvertently pin tastelessness on them and place withered, desiccated expressions in their mouths—words they had neither issued nor imagined […] and I, the youngest in my father’s home, protest against them openly and say with a calm and trusting heart that so long as they fail to fathom the words that our poets used, forever will they gaze with unilluminating light and the eyes of their intellects will be too myopic to bring forth the pleasant spectacle described in front of them in its wealth of colors from a mass of pictures taken from the world of action! (Joseph, *HaTsefira,* November 4, 1901: 2).

Joseph positions himself as the defender of the legacy of Sephardi poetry, proficient in Arabic and in Arabic poetics, against the scholars who interpret and shape it in an uneven and misleading way that disserves the truth. His place within the tradition allows him to represent the interpretive truth. Reflected here is an additional claim about the scholars’ role vis-à-vis Sephardi poetry as an important element in the processes of its shaping. Joseph stresses his position in the heart of the Sephardi-Jewish tradition and the Arab cultural sphere as key to a lucid and deep understanding of Sephardi poetry. In a personal letter to Abraham Berliner, in which he again notes the misstatements and misinterpretations in Brody’s book, he juxtaposes Brody’s method, based on studies and manuscripts, and his own interpretations, grounded in the *badi’* doctrine of Arabic poetry, embedded in the Judeo-Arabic tradition:

And now, if you wish to honor me and if you cherish the esteemed RHB [Rabbi Chaim Brody], author of the remarks on the *Dīwān,* show him this brief letter and remind him not to dispute my words. Whence did he understand? For it would not be considered wise on his part to answer before listening, for if he reads my words exactingly he will find them aimed at the crux of the truth. […] Had he treated me correctly, I would have eagerly apprised him of his many errors and misstatements. […] If he has an advantage over me, it is that he availed himself of various manuscripts and sundry books and also published books—I have none of these at all, just my intellect that guided me and told me to affirm what it has seen. But [my words] comport with a complete method and vigorous study that came to me from the measures of the new doctrine of poetry, *badi’,* that I gathered and grouped in my collections. If he does not accept my remarks, let him publish them verbatim […] (Joseph, “Letter to Abraham Berliner,” May 5, 1901, quoted in Yellin, 1936: lxix).

Writing again to Sokolow and pointing to misstatements that he found in David Ginsburg’s book about the poetry of Moses ibn Ezra, Joseph again explains the distinction between the milieu of European scientific knowledge and the Arab epistemic tradition in which he operates:

As for myself, heaven forfend that I should instruct anyone to accept my opinion in this matter, just that it is well and publicly known that one who amasses his knowledge from books bears no resemblance to one who acquires it throughout his life from the ways of life that stand before him in every direction he turns, or from common sayings among his people and from their customs in their length and breadth, and additionally, the two languages are as close as kin. In truth, I would not exaggerate if I said that there is hardly any verse in all the poems of the late Halevi and in the poems of RMBE [R. Moses ibn Ezra] in which we would not find a reflection in the poems of the Arabs or remedy and support in sayings common among them or in their ways of life and their history (Joseph, “Letter to Sokolow,” May 17, 1900, quoted in ibid: lxvi).

Joseph then explains how the scholars’ distance from Arab culture and their affiliation with European culture ties into the misstatements and errors that they introduce when researching Sephardi poetry:

I must add that I did not come to rummage in the muck of criticism or to speak contemptuously of these scholars; it is merely my ardent wish to show the natural difference that exists in this matter between the ways of our hearts and minds and the style of our language and reasoning, which tends by nature to the crisp and broad language of Arabia, and the ways of their hearts and minds and the style of their language and their reasoning, which tends by nature to European languages. I am well aware that my hand falls far short of producing a corrected article as I wish and will. […] If we take the book of commentary and produce an image of the structure of the knowledge and reasoning that our Hebrew brethren in the cities of Europe have acquired in this lovely vocation of Hebrew literature and observe it from the perspective of our Hebrew-Arabic gaze, we will have to admit that the esteemed author failed to shed light into the darkness of the poetic phrases […] and understand the hidden intentions, one after another, of these rhymes […] (Joseph, *HaTsefira,* November 5, 1901: 3).

Identifying the Judaic Studies scholars as operating within a European frame is a meaningful element in Joseph’s critique. The scholars’ aptitude in European languages and their Western scientific training renders a deep understanding of the secrets of Sephardi poetry out of their reach. Only scholars fluent in Arabic and rooted in the Judeo-Arabic tradition (like Joseph) can elucidate and interpret this poetry.

“European Glasses”: Between Europe and the East

Joseph was wont to draw binary distinctions between East and West. The legacy of Sephardi poetry, he stresses, developed within the culture of the East and reflected its values through and through. Concurrently, he emphasizes the European identity of the Judaic Studies scholars and its influence on their view of Sephardi poetry. Their analysis of this poetry misleads because they try to apply Western/European rules to an Eastern/Arabic tradition. Despite his many efforts to alert the scholars to this European bias, he feels that his exertions have failed:

I did everything I could to apprise the minds of our brethren the scholars of Ashkenaz that Hebrew-Arabic poems are not like Idumian [Western] ones. I admit sadly that I do not find [these scholars] wise and knowledgeable. […] If Rabbi Berliner and R. Abraham Harkavy usually defer to my words—that I wrote to them—even they are unable to take off their European glasses (Yellin, 1936: lxxiii).

Joseph’s rhetoric emphasizing the European identity of Judaic Studies scholars underscores their alienation from Sephardi poetry. In the continuation of his letter to David Yellin, he describes this directly and notes the scholars’ attempts to Westernize Sephardi poetry, namely, to adapt it to European culture by Westernizing its Eastern style. The scholars’ translation/interpretation, Joseph stresses, changes both the accent and the tone of the language:

I wrote my commentary for people my age. […] My commentary is an attempt by a Son of the West to interpret the words of an Eastern poet on the basis of the taste of “Westerners”! Everything he said teaches you that the late Rabbi Judah Halevi, the Sephardi, spoke with the accent of our brethren the Ashkenazim and delivered his parables and poetic expressions as Europeans would enunciate them. […] And if the Germans and the English and the French and the Russians have the authority to Germanize and Anglicize and Frenchify and Russify R. Halevi, how many Judah Halevis would you find in the market? (Joseph, “Letter to David Yellin, February 28, 1904, quoted in ibid., lxxiii).

The translation issue is central in Joseph’s critique. He sees the gathering and re-publication of Sephardi poetry in Hebrew as an act of cultural appropriation. If one may invoke a concept from translation theory, Joseph considers the collection and editing of Sephardi poetry a kind of “תרגום בולעני” of this poetic tradition, an act that lifts this poetry out of its native poetic and linguistic tradition and plants it in a European linguistic and poetic tradition that is alien to its essence. At its base, Joseph’s polemic relates to the shifting of this poetic tradition from the bilingual Hebrew-Arabic or Judeo-Arabic sphere into the Judeo-Christian European domain in which Judaic Studies operates. He likens the process of gathering and re-publishing Sephardi poetry to an act of translation and raises questions about the target language of the translation, its target culture, and the translator’s identity. Who is fit to produce this translation and which translation is correct?

In these remarks, he apparently alludes to the work of Chaim Brody on Judah Halevi’s poetry. Brody’s own remarks, in the introduction to his book, are interesting in this context because he addresses research into Sephardi poetry from the perspective of a Western scholar:

My commentary is an attempt by a Son of the West to interpret the words of an Eastern poet on the basis of the taste of Westerners. And I know myself that I have failed to shed light on all of R. Judah Halevi’s riddles and allusions, something that a Son of the West can hardly do at the present time even if he sees in his heart much wisdom and knowledge and has also studied the poems of the poets of Arabia and understands their words. Sometimes I said explicitly that I failed to get to the bottom of the poet’s views and often I remarked that my interpretation shudders in my hands and I set no store in it (Brody, 1901: xiv).

This pronouncement at the outset of his study includes issues that pertain, *inter alia,* to the scholars’ association with Western culture and their self-identity as part of that culture.

Joseph reveals the dominance of the European and Western mindset in the process of shaping and institutionalizing Sephardi poetry as a scholarly discipline and poses the question of the scholars’ (European) identity as a meaningful element. The scholar’s place in this sphere is an important element in the process of structuring and decoding the knowledge, as is the extent of the scholar’s familiarity with the bodies of knowledge. The “Europeanness” of the savants of Judaic Studies, he alleges, distances them from the cultural and linguistic context from which Sephardi poetry emerged; therefore, they cannot gauge its true nature. Below he expresses this in a letter to Abraham Berliner, head of the Mekitze Nirdamim society and one of the leading scholars in Judaic Studies circles:

My every pronouncement reflects what I know and what I discovered by reading about the topic. As I see it, just as we cannot understand the poems of Judah Leib Gordon unless we know how our European Jewish brethren lived, so is a European unable to understand the poems of the late R. J[udah] Halevi unless he first knows our ways of life and our thoughts, particularly in a place where new copyists as well as old ones declaimed and translated whatever occurred to them (Joseph, “Letter to Abraham Berliner,” May 5, 1901, quoted in Yellin, 1936: lxx).

By labeling Europe as the seat of a particularistic perspective that is neither universal nor objective, Joseph reveals additional options or different perspectives on the shaping of Sephardi poetry as a category of knowledge. In his critical book about Brody’s collections of Judah Halevi’s poetry, Joseph takes a reflexive stance on the various bodies of knowledge in relation to Sephardi poetry:

It is an illness that I have seen in those who interpret the word of R. Judah [Halevi] and [R. Moses ibn Ezra]: they do not judge [these poets’] turns of phrase from the correct Arabic line of vision that they do not thoroughly know; instead, they meander from their Ashkenazi line of vision and their reliance on non-Jewish German scholars. In this matter they rely on a shaky reed; it is a lengthy topic (Joseph, 1923: 222).

Sephardi Poetry, Arabic Language

Twined in the manifestations of Sephardi poetry between its European and Eastern representations in Joseph’s discourse is a flow among different traditions of knowledge. Joseph’s critique evokes representations of Sephardi poetry not only in respect of geographical place but also in terms of its place vis-à-vis the Arabic language. In a draft article that Yellin found in Joseph’s estate after the latter’s death, the importance of the Arabic language and culture in shaping Sephardi poetry is mentioned:

The Arabs’ language (and literature) is great and rich in its fresh poetry and oratory and in its pleasant and lovely words and proverbs, nobler in its splendor than the Hebrew of our great sages and poets (in whose honor we have conceit) in all fields of science and scholarship (for some time) generally, and in religious philosophy and poetry particularly; and the Golden Age was when Israel dwelled under Sali Khalifi, the sons of Fatma and Umayya in northern Africa and al-Andalus. (The Hebrew language expanded naturally, placidly, and contentedly, without being spoken.) Arabic became an open source, a wellspring whose waters never disappoint (for those among our poets who drew and enjoyed its waters fully) (quoted in Yellin, 1936: lxxxix).

Continuing in his article, Joseph stresses the need to study Arabic literary doctrine (*badi‘*) in order to investigate and interpret Hebrew Sephardi poetry:

Our great poets in Spain brought the new poetry, which the Arabs call *al-badi‘,* into an alliance with the Hebrew language, including its rules and minutiae, laws and theorems, grammar and exegesis, when these were at their outset. The measures by which this new theory is elucidated w fafdere also dispensed from secular urns into sacred ones and became full-fledged citizens […]. For the poets who lived in those days were immensely zealous for our old and tattered language and [sought] to rejuvenate it, enlarge it, broaden it, and set it above the vernacular (ibid., xc).

The emphasis on the proximity of Hebrew and Arabic and the need to master Arabic in order to produce or interpret Hebrew poetry in Spain is derived from the exegetic work of R. Moshe ibn Ezra in his book *Shirat Yisrael* (Ibn Ezra, 1975) and is fundamental to Joseph’s polemics with the European scholars. In his criticism of both the Orientalist-minded Jews in Europe and those of Judaic Studies in Europe who exerted themselves in their study of Hebrew but did not know Arabic, Joseph stresses that his advantage stems from having been born in Baghdad and having Arabic as his mother tongue, which facilitates his research even though he has been an autodidact for most of his life:

I neither studied science nor served as a religious scholar, but my soul craved the study of Hebrew, which is close to Arabic in almost all tendencies of its patterns. [It was my particular craving] to study the meaning of the poems of the Sephardim among our Hebrew brethren […]. I am aware that it is not due to my wisdom that I am sensitive to all the drawbacks of which I wrote above; it is only due to my birthplace in Babylonia, and the Arabic language; they were of assistance to me (Haqaq, 2003: 251).

From Joseph’s standpoint, the European scholars’ efforts fail because no one can know “the Easterners’ manners of living [and] understand their discursive ways unless one lives among them and follows the courses of their lives with keen eyes” (ibid.: 250).

Joseph considers Sephardi poetry inseparable from the Arab cultural legacy. Unlike studies that speak of “influences” of Arabic poetry and language on the shaping and development of Hebrew poetry in Spain, he presents Arabic and Hebrew poetry in Spain en bloc as part of a shared poetic tradition. This, he stresses, is why Sephardi Jews, who live in the heart of Arabic culture and poetry and are proficient in both languages, are better suited to spearhead the gathering, interpretation, and publication of Sephardi poetry.

By arguing this way, Joseph indirectly notes the nexus of his criticism of the exclusion of Arabic in the shaping of Sephardi poetry in the Jewish scientific discourse and the exclusion of Sephardi Jews, the products of Arabic culture, from this process. Joseph specifies proximity to or distance from Arabic as a formative criterion for research into Sephardi poetry: He and the Sephardi Jews reside at the core of Arabic culture and their intimate familiarity with the Arabic language and poetics is essential for understanding Sephardi poetry. The European Jewish scholars’ distance from these, in contrast, is the progenitor of their misinterpretations and mistranslations:

[…] Indeed, if the reader is among the Sons of the East, for whom the Arabic language is not foreign, asks in amazement who are these people who emerged from the loins of Judah, then the copyist was not careful enough to spell most of their names correctly. He even erred somewhat in a few places in regard to the celebrated poet “Shmuel,” known to the Jews as Ben Ido and to the Arabs as Ibn Aadiya. And further, when pouring from Arabic the grandeur of the so-called scholarly poetry into our holy tongue, he erred badly in seeing it […] for he totally strayed from the intention of the Arabic and on one occasion misstated the matter egregiously. Either way—nettles covered the face of this precious poem and its father and mother were unknown. Arabic said you won’t find them in me; and Hebrew said you won’t find them with me (Joseph, *HaTsefira,* December 26, 1888: 2).

In this quotation, one sees the straight line that Joseph draws from affinity for and proximity to Arabic and the quality of translation and interpretation of Sephardi poetry. His reasoning about what he considers the mistranslation and misinterpretation of Sephardi poetry is that the translator/interpreter is far from Arabic and its lengthy tradition, causing his translation from Arabic to Hebrew (or his copying and commenting on the poem in Hebrew) to lose the cadence, the style, and the meaning that reside in the Arabic cultural and linguistic context, which is so important for understanding this poetic tradition. Unlike such a translator, Joseph contends, a bilingual (Hebrew-Arabic) reader who is from the East and is no stranger to Arabic would easily detect this flaw.

Furthermore, Joseph’s writing exhibits a structural tension between the nearly obsessive demand for accurate translation and the multilingualism embodied in his intellectual world: the Arabic-Hebrew bilingualism that appears in his analysis, in the poetry that he writes, in the poetic models that he invokes, and in the multilingualism associated with his commercial work in Hong Kong, based on a mélange of English, Judeo-Arabic, and, to some extent, Chinese as well. In his articles and writings, Joseph mixes and matches several languages—English, Arabic, and Hebrew—and sometimes blurs the borders among them. This is particularly blatant in his conceptualization of Sephardi poetry as part of a bilingual Arabic-Hebrew linguistic and poetic bloc and in his opposition to the way Brody and others reduce (or translate) Sephardi poetry to a monolingual (Hebrew) phenomenon. He also reveals the music of the language and shows how the Hebrew of the Judeo-Arabic poets in al-Andalus underwent Europeanization. Addressing himself to the re-publishing of Sephardi poetry in the late nineteenth century, he shows how this process produces a quasi-translation into a European context and language that, to his taste, is in opposition to their affinity with the language, meter, and poetic models of Arabic.

Yellin points to two main fundamental elements of Joseph’s critical writing and interpretive work in which he “thinks he surpasses our European scholars.” First, Joseph “recognizes and knows the customs and ways of life of the Arabs among whom he lives; these matters are reflected in the Arabic poems that influenced the poets of Sepharad who, too, lived among them and were influenced by their poetry.” The second element is associated with Joseph’s knowledge of “the *badi‘* doctrine of Arabic phrasing and embellishments, on which basis we can truly know what they considered beautiful and embellishing in poetry and strived to introduce in their words; indeed, he was the first after RMBE [R. Moses ibn Ezra] who called this doctrine to the attention of scholars of Sephardi poetry, none of whom until then knew this doctrine and its details” (Yellin, 1936: c).

Continuing, Yellin claims that it is these components that power Joseph’s intensive study of Sephardi poetry. Joseph, he asserts, “was destined from womb and birth to deal with it: Sephardi poetry in its entirety rests on Arabic poetry, the Arabic spirit, and Arab life-customs, and to whom like him have all the recesses of the Arab culture been revealed? He knew the Arabic language and Arabic poetry; he grew up and spent most of his life among Arabs and alone fully captured everything that stemmed from this. But on the one hand, it is Westerners, of all people, who are dealing with this; they are unfit to do so because they lack his knowledge. And on the other hand, none of the Easteners, to whom this poetry is given naturally, is interested in it at all. […] [Joseph] remains the only one to whom the spirit of his life and the breath of his nostrils are pledged to this occupation. Yet all kinds of harassers rise up against him in his path. This poetry restored his soul whenever he had the leisure and rest” (Yellin, 1936: l).

According to Yellin’s analysis, Joseph represents the traditional interpretation of Sephardi poetry, defends it, and struggles to preserve it against the European Jewish scholars’ attempts to revise it and squeeze it into a Western scientific framework. One may, however, propose a different way of reading Joseph’s place and his critical interpretive point of departure: Instead of acting as the defender of a static, immobile Sephardi tradition, he presents an alternative modernistic project based on the Judeo-Arabic poetic legacy. Through this lens, he regards the study and revitalization of Sephardi poetry as being anchored in a venerable Judeo-Arabic tradition that endured in the Eastern communities after the expulsion from Spain. Thus, he proposes a modernistic model based not on disconnection and return but on innovation based on continuity.

Before I present Joseph’s modernistic teachings, however, I will describe the geographical and politico-cultural context in which they were shaped.

Saul Abdalla Joseph’s Place in the World of Jewish Modernization

Joseph conducted his dispute with the European Jewish scholars from Hong Kong, where, as stated, he was a broker on the local stock exchange.[[22]](#footnote-22) This place, resting at the heart of the Baghdadi Jewish network in Southeast Asia, saw the intersection of several processes of Jewish and imperial modernization that were typical of coeval modernizations elsewhere: (1) spatial movement of people, goods, and knowledge; (2) reorganization of the Jewish identity, way of life, and culture; (3) cooperation with imperial arrays of control and reasoning.

Joseph’s place in Hong Kong, under British imperial patronage, emerges in various and sometimes contradictory ways in his articles in *HaTsefira.* In his series of articles on the Jewish communities in China, he describes, among other matters, how the Baghdadi trade network in the British colony of Hong Kong came about as part of that city’s transformation into a British imperial entrepôt:

Since this land [Hong Kong] was annexed to the British Kingdom in 1842, it has grown like a flower. This mighty empire spread its wings over it and sheltered its inhabitants under its wing as a slave would his master. The great and enlightened nation, the nation of Britannia, has, in five and forty years, turned this parched land that was too lowly even for pirates, has become a great land humming with peoples, and today this little island is considered one of the greatest coastal states in the world! In 1886, its trade amounted to 40,000,000 pounds sterling and, unbelievably, 30 percent of this huge sum is in the hands of our fellow Jews (Joseph, *HaTsefira*, January 10, 1888).

It is interesting to see how Joseph uses the British imperial narrative about the progress, prosperity, and order that the European power brought to the port city in Southeast Asia. He describes the development of Hong Kong through the prism of the European settlers and emphasizes their economic and commercial development. He even points proudly to the Baghdadi Jews’ large share in the colony’s trade.

Continuing, Joseph describes the social and legal status of the Hong Kong Jewish community, most of which is composed of Baghdadis, and their identity as part of the European settler population:

The material and moral situation of our brethren here, compared with all the inhabitants of this land is on the best side; it is a good place for kindness and charity, peace and quiet surround them, and their hand is established with everyone and everyone’s hand is with them. Most of them, like carrier pigeons, have not come here to settle for good but merely to sojourn and lay down to sleep in the manner of guests. Therefore, no more than five synagogues may be found here. [The Jews] in their ways of life tend toward and seek out full-fledged Europeans, and where matters relating to the laws of the land are concerned, they are altogether European by time and by custom, dear and respected in the eyes of the government and the people (ibid.).

It is interesting to read Joseph’s account against the background of his dispute with the European Jewish scholars and the way he positions himself as an offspring of Eastern culture who defends the Judeo-Arabic tradition against European scholars who are striving to Westernize it. With respect to the local imperial hierarchy in Hong Kong, Joseph positions himself and the Baghdad community as “full-fledged Europeans” in both legal and cultural terms. This conceptualization also reflects his own standing in the local imperial economic system, as a British subject who enjoyed a special legal status.[[23]](#footnote-23)

If so, the representation of Joseph as a man of the East who defends tradition against modernization does not reveal the whole picture; it does not even reflect the way Joseph represents himself in the dispute as a person totally outside, and even opposed to, the European and Western frame.

How can one explain this contradiction? The answer lies in the history and the imperial context of Southeast Asia generally and the Baghdad community particularly. In the coalescence of the Baghdadi diaspora, described at length in Chapter 1, two main processes crossed paths: Jewish modernization via movement eastward from Baghdad to Southeast Asia and connection with the Judeo-Arabic language and culture, along with Europeanization and assimilation into the imperial legal, economic, and social matrices. The Baghdadi diaspora not only maintained the Judeo-Arabic cultural and halakhic traditions (at least in its first founding generations), it renovated them. In Kolkata (Calcutta), for example, several Judeo-Arabic newspapers appeared in the late nineteenth century in which Jewish intellectuals from most Arab-Jewish communities in the Mediterranean countries took part. Dozens of Judeo-Arabic books were published at this time, some translated from other languages and others anthologizing and re-publishing folk and halachic literature. This integration of Europeanization processes and economic and political integration into the British Empire with the revival of Judeo-Arabic culture and literature reflected the world of the Baghdadi intellectuals of Joseph’s generation. These processes shaped his worldview and underpinned the nexus that he had created between the shaping of Sephardi poetry and an affinity for the Arabic language and culture. In his telling, therefore, instead of criticizing the gatekeeper of the traditional discourse against the scientific discourse, he critiques a framework for the shaping of Sephardi poetry as part of a track of comprehensive Jewish modernization.

Joseph did not live to construct a systematic program for the shaping of Sephardi poetry, and below I show that the political and cultural option embodied in his discourse in the dispute during his lifetime would be blurred and would almost totally disappear in its reappearance in the Jewish scientific discourse in the two decades after his death.

The Criticism that Became Institutional

Yellin dedicated his book *Torat HaShira HaSefaradit* (the doctrine of Sephardi poetry), published in 1940 and destined to become a basic text in scholarship on Sephardi poetry, to the memory of “the man who cherished the doctrine of Sephardi poetry and enunciated it day and night, the late Saul Abdalla Joseph. This book is dedicated [to him] with feelings of respect and appreciation” (Yellin, 1940). Behind this symbolic gesture was Yellin’s acknowledgment of the meaningful role that Joseph and his studies had played in Yellin’s integration into the scientific establishment. In the pages to follow, I examine Joseph’s dispute with the scholars of Judaic Studies as presented several decades after his death with the publication by Samuel Krauss and David Yellin of three manuscripts found in his estate. At this stage, the polemic was presented from the perspective of the publishers of the manuscripts, with Yellin playing an especially meaningful role in the process.

Joseph’s criticism of the place of Sephardi poetry in the studies of European Jewish scholars contemporary to him, expressed in dozens of letters and articles, hardly received a public response from its direct addressees at the time it was first published (with the exception of Brody, who related to some of Joseph’s comments and corrections in his studies). Therefore, the posthumous re-recognition that his writings received, precisely from those representing the circles that had ignored him in his life, was definitely unexpected.

The renewal of interest in Joseph’s writings came about in the early 1920s when his two sons handed over his estate to Yellin and to the historian and Talmudic scholar Professor Krauss, who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Vienna at this time. Krauss published two research books that Joseph had written, based on two manuscripts that the latter had left behind upon his death. In these works, Joseph presents new notes and interpretations of two books of Sephardi secular poetry that had been reprinted and edited by Mekitze Nirdamim—*HaTarshish* by Moses ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi’s *Dīwān*—that were central in his polemic with the scholars who published them. In response to these publications, Joseph inserted new interpretations and notes that he had corrected according to the frame that he wished to construct for Sephardi poetry in his articles in *HaTsefira*.

The editor and publisher of this volume, Krauss, emphasized in his foreword that the book is based on a fundamental dispute between Joseph and the authors and leading figures of Judaic Studies: “There is no ignoring the fact that the late Rabbi Saul Joseph set out to fight a great war with RHB [R. Dr. Chaim Brody] and almost all of his work is devoted to it” (Joseph, 1923: xviii). Furthermore, he even stresses the importance of this dispute for the development of knowledge about Sephardi poetry: “The controversy was ultimately useful to us because it gave birth to this important book” (ibid.).

The reappearance of Saul Joseph and his discourse about Sephardi poetry within the framework of the Jewish scientific discourse was dramatically different from its initial appearance in *HaTsefira.* At the center of the new discourse was the shaping of Joseph’s claims about Sephardi poetry in a Jewish scholarly discourse that has become more institutionalized and whose center of gravity had moved to the land of Israel/Palestine with the establishment of the Hebrew University.[[24]](#footnote-24) From this perspective, Joseph’s interpretation of Sephardi poetry was presented within the boundaries of the Jewish scientific discourse. His criticism of the Judaic Studies research project was soft-pedaled, cleansed of its broad political and cultural contexts, and presented as an integral link in the development of scientific research about Sephardi poetry, and not as a phenomenon that explains the shaping of this poetry on a different track.

In contrast to Joseph’s critical claims, which could be contained within scientific discourse once confined to literary interpretation, his person was usually presented as the opposite of that of the scientific scholar. Paradoxically, his claims could be accepted in the scientific discourse only when he was marked as a person whose knowledge and studies had been formed outside the limits of that very discourse. He was described (at first in the writings of Krauss and Yellin) as an erudite who had deep and thoroughgoing knowledge of Sephardi poetry but whose knowledge originated from his position in the world of tradition and not from systematic scientific investigation and study. Krauss, in his foreword to *Mishbetset HaTarshish,* writes: “Our comrade did not do his investigative duty; if he had had some books that came from the Western lands before him, he would have found his work easier to perform and he would have reached different conclusions from those that he wrote.” Immediately afterward, however, he circumscribed his remarks: “Obviously, his misdemeanor is not aggravated by sin because what has he, a trader who lives in Hong Kong, got to do with Western literature? We should be amazed by his demonstrable strength and not by what may have been left in ruin” (Krauss, 1926: x).

Krauss emphasizes Saul Joseph’s distance from Europe and his location in the heart of the East in order to highlight his remoteness from Western research literature and scientific bodies of knowledge. This being the case, Joseph’s knowledge of and studies on Sephardi poetry are confined to the traditional discourse.

It is interesting to consider Yellin’s role in this process, particularly in view of his biographical and ideological proximity to Joseph and their networked relationship. Their intellectual and ideological closeness originated, among other things, from a shared affiliation with the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora and their distant kinship.[[25]](#footnote-25) Their relationship by correspondence also influenced Yellin’s research on Sephardi poetry in many ways. Yellin, like Joseph, was broadly knowledgeable in Hebrew and Arabic literature as well as Sephardi poetry but lacked official rabbinical and scientific training. He published his first studies on Sephardi poetry in the East European Hebrew press, where he expressed similar if milder criticism than did Joseph about the research carried out in Judaic Studies. In his critiques, Yellin noted the European Jewish scholars’ deficient and incomplete commentaries, originating in their inadequate command of the Arabic language and culture. In his first article on the topic, published in 1887, he wrote:

Annotators of the words of our Sephardi poets have indeed arisen among our scholars, annotators whose honesty of understanding largely made up for the lack of deep and broad knowledge of Arabic literature that is needed to annotate such poems. Nearly all of them, however, took heed to annotate matters *ad loc* only, overlooking the various rhetorical rules that served as a guide for our poets with which to structure their pleasant words. The annotators have not explained them in detail to this day and their index is deficient (Yellin, 1975: 14).

In the same article, Yellin even describes how the European scholars fitted Sephardi poetry into new cultural frames and positioned it outside the time and culture of its creation.

Yellin belonged to the new class of Jewish Maskilim [intellectuals?] that had arisen in Jerusalem at the turn of the twentieth century in the aftermath of the encounter of modernization processes that were sweeping the city and mingling with massive Ottoman economic, political, and cultural modernization, all concurrent with the expansion of Jewish modernization that coincided with the spreading of European powers’ influence in the city. Like contemporaries who had been raised in joint Jewish-Arab Ottoman spheres, he identified, in the initial stages of his political and research career, deep acquaintance with the Arabic language and culture as a key to Jewish modernization. Therefore, he invested most of his intellectual energy in those years to building a Judeo-Arab cultural legacy as part of a broader redesign of modern Jewish culture (Yardeni, 1969; Berlovitz, 1996). The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the new political reasoning that emerged in Mandatory Palestine, however, changed Yellin’s discourse on the “Sephardi legacy” and the political options intrinsic to it.

Yellin’s liminal position on the border of science and tradition, and his shuttling between the two, were typical of the Jewish scientific discourse in its pre-institutional phase. However, as the institutionalization of the Jewish scientific discourse proceeded, the demarcation lines between science and tradition thickened and his liminality and lack of official scientific authority became impediments to his inclusion in the new scientific discourse. Even though he published numerous research articles and books over the years and was a co-founder of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, his appointment to the academic faculty of the university was no simple matter and became possible only toward the end of his life, as Abraham Shalom Yehuda attests in his trenchant way:

Yellin, a native and prized product of the Land of Israel; Yellin, who suckled Hebrew with his mother’s milk and saw Hebrew culture as the mother’s mother of his culture and the foundation of all of his education; Yellin, who knew the Bible and the literature of the Golden Age in Spain better than did all those who affect and brag about German scientificism, which has bones and sinews but no living spirit; this Yellin had to wait for years and years until the high and mighty of [the Hebrew University] deigned in their kindness to allow him to be a “lecturer”; and he had to reach his seventies to be crowned with the title of Professor by the kindness of the faculty, among whom are full professors who could not reach his ankles and whose little finger was thicker than their hips (Yehuda, 1946: 243).

It is important to set Yellin’s interpretation of Joseph’s polemics in the context of his movement from the non-institutional research sphere into the institutionalized scientific domain, a transposition embodied in Joseph’s re-acceptance. By drawing a border between himself and Joseph in the configuration of the dispute, Yellin sought recognition as a scientific scholar in the institutionalized research circles of his time.

Yellin was the main leader of the process that re-admitted Joseph to the research discourse. Through his connections in the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora, he received a manuscript of Todros Abulafia’s poems from Joseph’s sons, edited it, and wrote commentaries on it. Yellin published this important manuscript in three parts over the course of the 1930s, including Joseph’s annotations and remarks. In addition, by means of Joseph’s private archive, which included copies of his correspondence with European Jewish scholars, he received articles, draft monographs, and other unpublished writings of Joseph. He used some of these materials in a lengthy and detailed article that he published about Joseph’s research and literary work, centering on his dispute with the Judaic Studies people.[[26]](#footnote-26) The article played an important role in Joseph’s re-admission to the world of scientific research into Sephardi poetry but, in my opinion, it was no less important in setting Yellin himself within the bounds of scientific research. In this article, while adopting Joseph’s research insights and arguments and emphasizing their proximity to his own insights, Yellin also emphasizes the boundary between his writing style and Joseph’s. Yellin separates the content of Joseph’s critique from the way it is presented and presents the main drawback of Joseph’s style: his inability to construct a comprehensive and systematic argument or “to arrange matters and elucidate each in accordance with a constant scheme,” for which reason “His strength was greater in individual comments, objections, and notes than in an inclusive and comprehensive outlook” (Yellin, 1936: xciii).

In contrast to Krauss’ account, Yellin wishes to distinguish between Joseph’s unofficial erudition and his unsystematic writing style. From his standpoint, Joseph’s disorderly and haphazard writing originates in his temperamental and emotional nature; this is how he tries to untie the bond between official schooling and scientific writing. Continuing in his article, Yellin alludes to the proximity between them and describes the broad knowledge of Judaic Studies that Joseph had acquired outside official schooling: “Saul Joseph was a white raven in his surroundings. He obtained his education and his broad knowledge of Judaic Studies, and particularly of Sephardi Hebrew poetry, not in schools but with his own remarkable talents.” Furthermore, despite “all his drawbacks where order, concentration, and brevity are concerned, he acted prodigiously to elucidate it” (Yellin, 1936: c).

Yellin uses numerous metaphors that attest to Joseph’s emotional bond with, and passion for, Sephardi poetry, both clashing with the scientific outlook that rests on the maintenance of distance between the scholar and the body of knowledge. By putting it this way, Yellin confines Joseph’s critique to the personal and private domain and attempts to defend it against external elements. The poetic and interpretive model that Joseph proposes for the investigation of Sephardi poetry and the implications of this model for his perception of the processes of the Jewish modernization are lacking in Yellin’s discussion.

At the core of Yellin’s claim about the connection of Joseph’s position within the tradition and his interpretation of Sephardi poetry is the border between traditional knowledge accumulated over years and transmitted by oral culture and in writing, and scientific knowledge set out in accordance with shared organizing rules. This border also separates Sephardiness signified as a category of knowledge from its being marked as a category of identity. This distinction emerges from the contrast of Joseph’s cultural and social world with the world of the Haskalah and Judaic Studies in which research into Sephardi poetry took shape:

Like one who suckles on parched soil, Saul Joseph set out from the Judaism that exists in the land of the Chinese. In a milieu of wealthy merchants who came from Babylonia (largely via India) and the salaried clerks who work for them grew an environment of guileless Jews, who observe the faith but in great majority are ignoramuses. [...] Whence came the spirit over this lonely man to take such an interest in Sephardi Hebrew poetry, to give historical matters such deep investigation, to become a writer for *HaTsefira* on medieval poetry and in publicistic articles about the Jews in China, and to exchange letters for many years with Sokolow, Berliner, Ginsburg, Ya’afaz, and others, apart from writing regularly for the weekly journal *HaPerah* in order to awaken the somnolent Jewry of the East to scientific research and Jewish knowledge? (Yellin, 1936: xlviii).

Yellin’s exaggerated description (not free of Orientalism) of the Eastern Jewish society where Joseph lived and wrote as somnolent, guileless, and poorly schooled signals more than Joseph’s foreignness in the eyes of the Jewish Enlightenment in Europe; it also signifies the distinction between Joseph and Yellin. The latter is closer than the former to the world of the Hebrew Haskalah and adheres to scientific writing practice with its rules and methods. The scientific border, however, is not the only lineation by which Yellin wishes to distinguish himself from Joseph. Throughout this article, Yellin stresses the importance of Joseph’s Eastern-Sephardi identity in shaping his dispute with the Judaic Studies scholars. He even describes, disapprovingly, Joseph’s abundant use of identitarian differentiation in the course of the dispute: “Since he seems almost incapable of writing anything without mentioning the differences between the sons of Europe and the men of the East, he concludes this letter of his with the following lines […]” (Yellin, 1936: lxiii). Similarly, as the article winds down and Yellin wishes to emphasize Joseph’s potential ability to shape research into Sephardi poetry, again he points to the formational ethnic aspect of his critical discourse: “If we add to this his traits: [his] overdone excitability and immense exaggeration, we can picture the torments of hell that he suffered. What a pity! For indeed, he was an important force and his work could have done much good toward understanding Sephardi poetry and its efflorescence had he been in a suitable environment and even among the ‘scholars of the Ashkenazim’ whom he despised” (Yellin, 1936: lxxiv).

At no point in his lengthy and detailed article does Yellin reveal his and Joseph’s kinship and his own Sephardi Jewish identity. Despite Yellin’s attempts to isolate himself from Joseph and the Sephardi Jewish identity, Abraham Shalom Yehuda, in an article that he published in Yellin’s memory, stressed the closeness that connected them and that shaped Yellin’s studies on Sephardi poetry:

Saul Abdalla Joseph’s commentaries on the poems of Judah Halevi and Moses ibn Ezra’s *Tarshish* in *Giv’at Saul* and *Mishbetset haTarshish,* like his remarks on the poems of Todros Abulafia, are witnesses to his profound knowledge and his penetrating and fruitful understanding of Sephardi poetry. Some sixty years ago, important articles already began to appear in *HaTsefira,* and the entire story of his feats in this field is written in Yellin’s forewords to the aforementioned *Dīwān* of Todros. Saul and David established a splendid sanctuary for the poets of Spain, one that will be to their everlasting glory and honor (Yehuda, 1946: 246–247).

Describing Yellin’s importance as a scholar of medieval Sephardi poetry, Yehuda delineates Joseph’s important and unique contribution to this field:

As Yellin already noted at the beginning of his book *Torat HaShira HaSefaradit,* it wasMoses ibn Ezra who first dealt with the discipline of the embellishments of Hebrew poetry in accordance with the spirit of Arabic poetry and from that time, some thousand years ago, to our days, only Saul Abdalla Joseph of Hong Kong turned his full attention to it. I must attest that he and my grandmother Dima-Reina, whom I mentioned above, were cousins. He was “a scholar from head to toe,” as one of his friends rightly said about him. Well versed in Sephardi literature and Arabic poetry, he salvaged important manuscripts from the library of our grandmother’s father, Farraj Hayyim, whose ancestors had taken them from Spain to Babylonia in the year of the expulsion, [5]252 [1492], among which is the *Dīwān* of Todros Abulafia, the only one in the world (Yehuda, 1946: 247).

Within Yellin’s association with Joseph, which spanned not only research but also kinship, also lies Yehuda’s own connection with both of them. In the same article, Yehuda describes his studies on Spanish poetry that complement and continue those of Yellin and Joseph.

The Sephardi Legacy in Motion: Germany, Palestine, and Spain

A war raged inside me regularly in those first days when I had com to Europe and a new world opened up before my eyes, a world that was foreign and strange to me in my youthful days. A terrible upheaval raged and stormed inside me with each passing day as I saw how far our paths were from those of Europe and how little our thinking had in common with that of the gentiles living there, and I greatly feared for my soul lest this change affect me badly and cause me to forget the past and belittle the value of the Eastern Hebrew education on which I had drawn in my early days. […] I feared that the external glitter of the Haskalah would blind my eyes so that I would not see its healthy and vital inner kernel, accept the good that it could do for me, and scatter the evil that it could bring into my insides. I feared all day that the thing that happened to many of the young of our city would befall me: being swept away in the current of evil waters while sinking like a lump from the land of our forefathers and drinking the poison cup of of ostensible enlightenment, denuded in both directions with neither Hebrew enlightenment nor European enlightenment, neither Eastern or Western, but rather an outer shell that covers its internal deficiencies and drawbacks from the front and, with its glitter, causes astonishment only in its master’s eyes, but in the eyes of those truly wise and enlightened it puts one to mockery, disgusts them, and leaves behind contempt instead of respect, conceit instead of caution, and stupidity instead of enlightenment (Yehuda, “Letter to David Yellin,” September 15, 1899).[[27]](#footnote-27)

This quotation is taken from a letter that Abraham Shalom Yehuda sent from where he was living in Germany to his cousin, David Yellin, in Jerusalem in late 1899, three years after the youthful Yehuda had migrated from Jerusalem to Europe and began his studies in the universities of Germany. The move from Jerusalem to Germany in those years, one presumes, was no simple step for a young man who left his community and his familiar surroundings and landed in an almost totally foreign place. Indeed, Yehuda’s own words indicate as much. By tracking the course of his life in Jerusalem, however, one may soften the impression that emerges from the foregoing quotation and cushion the contrast between his biography and the world of the European Enlightenment.

Yehuda was born in Jerusalem in 1877 to a prosperous and locally well-known family. His father, Benjamin, was one of the sons of the Yehuda family that had migrated from Baghdad to Palestine in the middle of the nineteenth century with vast wealth due to the commercial activity of the branch of the family in Kolkata. His mother, Rebecca, was related on her father’s side to the Bergman family, which had migrated to Jerusalem from Frankfurt am Main in the early nineteenth century; on her mother’s side, she was related to the Farraj Hayyim family of Baghdad. In his childhood, Yehuda studied mostly with Jewish teachers in small groups; he studied foreign languages with private tutors. With the encouragement of his older brother, Isaac Ezekiel Judah—who was also his first Arabic teacher—he specialized from an early age in Arabic language and literature and its influence on Hebrew language and Jewish culture. He first tried his hand at scholarly writing as an adolescent, publishing two short scholarly books on Arabic literature in the pre-Islamic period and a considerable number of articles and translations in the Hebrew press of the time (mostly in Ben-Yehuda’s newspapers).[[28]](#footnote-28) His first book, *Qadmoniot Ha‘Aravim BiMe HaBa‘arut Asher Lifne Muhammad* (Antiquities of the Arabs in the days of ignorance that preceded Muhammad), was published in 1895; the second, *Nedive VeGibore ‘Arav* [Benefactors and heroes of Arabia], appeared in 1896. Yehuda was exposed to the Hebrew and Arabic intellectual circles that had formed in Jerusalem at the time, foremost those that were active in modernizing Jewish education and reviving the Hebrew language and culture. It should be borne in mind that Jerusalem was then at the peak of an urban-renewal project: new neighborhoods were being established; a torrent of European tourists, merchants, and scholars was visiting the city; European education systems were spreading, and diplomatic missions and literary and political associations were forming. In this climate, a local intellectual elite (Jewish, Arab, Ottoman, and European) composed of educators, journalists, officials, merchants, and scholars coalesced, exposing Yehuda to the European Enlightenment world in an encounter that appears to have influenced his decision to continue his studies in Germany. The British citizenship that he acquired through his grandfather’s association with the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora in Kolkata and his German roots via his mother’s family also seem to have facilitated his move to Europe.[[29]](#footnote-29)

This being the case, it would not be correct to sketch Judah’s move from Jerusalem to Germany in crude strokes that would suggest a total disconnect between the old world that he had left and the new one to which he was now exposed in Europe. A more complex map, with various continua that defy binary slicing, should be adopted instead. Equally, it would not be right to understate the power of his move from Jerusalem to Frankfurt and Heidelberg in the late nineteenth century.

Yehuda’s move to Europe and intersection with the world of German philological and Orientalist knowledge deeply influenced his intellectual universe and shaped its underlying political and scientific conceptualizations. No less important, however, was his encounter with Jewish Enlightenment circles in their various strata. It should be remembered that Yehuda moved to Germany in 1896 at the time of the early coalescence of the Zionist movement in Europe and the eve of the first Zionist Congress. German universities in those years were rendezvous points for young Jewish intellectuals who had come from various parts of Europe to acquire their schooling in prestigious German institutions and Jewish academies of higher studies. Many of them arrived from across the Russian Empire and the Germanic cultural domain in Central Europe. In his very first years at the university, Yehuda was involved in promoting Zionist ideas among Jewish students and was even chosen to represent the young Zionists of Frankfurt at the first Zionist Congress.[[30]](#footnote-30) Concurrently focusing on his academic studies, after completing a first degree at the universities of Heidelberg, Frankfurt, and Darmstadt, he wrote his dissertation at the University of Strasbourg, advised by one of the most important philologists of the time, Theodor Nöldeke. This combination of political and public involvement and scientific research would typify the continuation of his intellectual career as well.

Yehuda’s first years in Germany also saw the formation of the fraught relations that he would maintain later in life with various intellectual circles: participants in the Hebrew Haskalah and Judaic Studies, Zionist functionaries and leaders, and the German philological community (foremost the one that focused on Biblical Criticism). He felt a certain amount of connection and intimacy toward these three circles and involved himself in them to various extents. He did not truly integrate into any of them, despite the fact that in many senses they were the center of his intellectual world. This tension between belonging and foreignness found expression in his polemics with these circles throughout the course of his life.

Yehuda’s polemics over the interpretation and representation of the Sephardi legacy in Jewish scientific and political discourse also took shape in this context. The essence of his dispute evolved vis-à-vis the first two intellectual circles that I noted above—Judaic Studies and the leaders of the Zionist movement—and in two main strata: (1) the collection and study of Sephardi philosophical and poetic writings under the Judaic Studies umbrella; and (b) the Andalusian/Sephardi legacy as a political and cultural model for the restoration of the Jewish collective in Palestine and the systematization of relations with the Arab inhabitants of that country.

1. For elaboration on Scholem’s attitude toward Wissenschaft des Judentums, see Funkenstein, 1991, and Mendes-Flohr, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The term ‘Judaic Studies’, was coined in the nineteenth century in the service of Maskilic circles that used scientific research and writing tools to study and write about Jewish history. For further about it, see Eldad, 1972; Feiner, 1995; Shoresh, 2000, Mendes-Flohr, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the development of the Hebrew Haskalah in the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century, see Zalkin, 2000, and on comparing it with the Haskalah movement in Germany, see Feiner, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Examples are the tradition of the aggadot, the Romances, the piyyut tradition, and the works of Israel Najara in Eretz Israel [כאן לא שוכנעתי שיש להציג את א"י במונח "פלסטיין".]. See Behar, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For elaboration on this process, see Mendes-Flohr, 1984; Raz-Krakotzkin, 1998; Schorsch, 2000; Tobi, 2011, Anidjar, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mekitze Nirdamim was established in eastern Prussia as a Hebrew book publishing house in 1862, mainly for the publication of scientific editions of Hebrew manuscripts. In 1885, its headquarters moved to Berlin, where tis activities resumed under the headship of scholars such as Abraham Berliner, Abraham Harkavy, David Ginsburg, Chaim Brody, and others. Its main activity during those years was the publication of scientific editions of Hebrew-language Sephardi poetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For further on Abraham Shalom Yehuda’s intellectual world, see Behar & Ben Dor, 2014; Evri, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For an expanded discussion of Saul Abdalla Joseph, see Tobi, 2013; Evri & Behar, 20 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Joseph and Yehuda were distant relatives and both had family, economic, and cultural relations with the Baghdad Jewish diaspora. Although there is no evidence of the direct correspondence between them, Yehuda referred to Joseph on several occasions as an authority on research into Sephardi poetry and plainly was well acquainted with, and identified with, Joseph’s critical arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For further on David Yellin’s biography, see Elhanani, 1973; Haramati, 2000; Meitlis, 2009, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ya’afaz—a Maskil and scholar affiliated with Judaic Studies in Europe. His full name: Israel Isser Perah Zahav Goldblum. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Foremost in Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For further on the dispute, see Yellin, 1936; Hakak, 2003, Tobi, 2013. The focus in these studies is on the poetic and interpretive aspects of the controversy and less on its political and cultural contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Saul Abdalla Joseph and his studies still await comprehensive research but have been examined partly by Yellin, 1936; Gaon, 1938; Ben-Yaakov, 1985; Tobi, 2000, 2013; Hakak, 2003; Evri & Behar, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For further on the Sassoons, see Ben-Yaakov, 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. On the legal and civil status of members of the Baghdad diaspora in the British Empire, see Stein, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Mainly in the weeklies *Perah* and *Magid Mesharim,* printed in Kolkata in the 1880s and 1890s in Judeo-Arabic and distributed mainly across the Baghdad- Jewish diaspora in India, China, and Iraq. For further discussion, see Ben-Yaakov, 1986; Avishur, 1992; Hakak, 2003; Bashkin, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It is important to emphasize here that Joseph was exceptional among European Maskilim but represented a broader phenomenon of coeval Sephardi/Mizrahi intellectuals: the model of a Maskil anchored in Jewish and Arab traditions and immersed in Arab and Jewish modernization and renewal, who also maintained a dialogue with contemporary European intellectuals and scholars. One may find other examples of this model in Yisrael Sassoon of Aleppo, Shlomo Bechor Hutsin, Moshe Mizrahi of Baghdad, and others. See Hakak, 2005; Bashkin, 2012, Levy, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. We learn about Joseph’s letters to Jewish scholars at this time from David Yellin’s introduction about him, published in 1936. Yellin states that he received all of Joseph’s manuscripts, including copies of his copious correspondence with Judaic Studies scholars over the years (Yellin, 1936). Copies of the letters were not preserved; therefore, I base myself on the parts that Yellin published in his article. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Joseph published some seven articles in *HaTsefira,* focusing on his criticism of the translation, research, editing, and publication of Sephardi poetry. These articles appeared in multiple installments and spread over dozens of issues across some fourteen years. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For further on this process, see Schirmann, 1956, and Tobi, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Joseph’s activity as a trader in the British Empire has been totally overlooked in research about him and about his dispute with the European Jewish scholars. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. On the legal status of the Baghdad community in Southeast Asia, see Stein, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In regard to this process, see Schirmann, 1995, and Tobi, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. As stated, Yellin belonged to the Baghdad Jewish diaspora network through his mother’s family and maintained direct and indirect relations with its representatives in London and India. He was even a distant relative of Saul Joseph through the Yehuda family. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The article was published in a separate book that came out in a small number of copies in 1936 and in Column 3 of the manuscript *Gan HaMeshalim VeHaHidot: Osef Shire Todros ben Yehuda Abu Al-Afia*, published in 1937. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Yehuda and Yellin corresponded for decades, from Yehuda’s departure from Jerusalem in 1886 to Yellin’s death in 1941. The personal archives of the two men contain copies of hundreds of letters that were sent over the years; I used this correspondence in this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For further on Yehuda’s activity in Hebrew Enlightenment circles in Jerusalem, see Yardeni, 1969; Berlovitz, 1996; Evri, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The Yehudas were among the wealthy and powerful families in the Baghdadi Jewish community in Kolkata. Pursuant to the economic aid that they gave the British Empire in the Indian Rebellion of 1857, they (and the Sassoons) were granted British citizenship that was passed on to their kin in Jerusalem as well. For biographical details on the Yehuda family, see Gaon, 1938; Ben-Yaakov, 1980, 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. In the late 1940s, Yehuda published several articles about his participation in the Congress and his activity in Jewish student circles at the university at this time in the journal *Hed HaMizrah* (Yehuda, 1949). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)