Mordechai Zalkin, *Modernizing Jewish Education in Nineteenth Century Eastern Europe. The School as the Shrine of the Jewish Enlightenment*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016. 192 p. ISBN 978-90-04-30820-6

Research on the theme of Jewish education is not new,¹ but the new book by Mordechai Zalkin about the initiatives by the Jewish intelligentsia, the *maskilim*, in the field of education is not only a topic that up till now has received less attention, his book also presents some original interpretations.

In the book, Zalkin aims to prove that those who portray the 19th-century Jewish community in Eastern Europe as conservative and closed are indeed wrong, as similar cultural changes took place in the community as those that were witnessed in non-Jewish communities. In addition, initiatives to modernise the education system emerged first in the Jewish community, while the Imperial Russian government only started considering similar ideas later (pp. 2–3).

Zalkin seeks to prove that the main tool for passing on the ideas of the Enlightenment to East European Jewish communities were not the traditional schools (*heder* and *talmud-torah*), literary or state-run schools, but the new educational institutions established by the *maskilim* (pp. 53–56, 60). Although his book is primarily about new initiatives in the field of education, he presents many new insights about traditional Jewish education. It is worth noting his observation that the longevity of the *heder* and *talmud-torah* was determined first of all by economic circumstances: in Jewish families, both parents were usually involved in some kind of business, meaning that they were rarely at home during the day, which was possible only because the children would be at the traditional Jewish schools. This economic situation explains why Jewish children were sent to school from such a young age, and why both boys and girls attended *heder*: ‘In effect, the *heder*, by its very existence, made it possible to maintain the normal operation of the local economy, and as long as this function was fulfilled reasonably, there was no urgent need to change the situation, despite the knowledge that the *heder* was not an effective educational institution’ (p. 35).

Nevertheless, the author devotes most attention to the new private schools established by the *maskilim*, of which there were not many in the

¹ It is worth noting the recently published book by S. Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century. Creating a Tradition of Learning* (Oxford, Portland, 2012).

first half of the 19th century, yet by the second half of the century their numbers had increased dramatically: in the 1880s, there were 66, while in the 1890s there were about 300 (p. 91). Zalkin's research shows very clearly the difference between traditional Jewish educational initiatives and those of the *maskilim*. In the first case, the education system tried to instil traditional religious values, and to transfer them from one generation to the next. The new system, meanwhile, was oriented towards raising an independent and reflective individual, who could adapt to changing circumstances. However, as Zalkin notes, secularism was not considered a value according to the East European *Haskalah*, making it fundamentally different to the *Haskalah* in West European Jewish communities (pp. 103–104). A new school curriculum was formed, taking into account this kind of world-view: Jewish boys and girls were taught Jewish studies (*Torah*, *Mishnah*, *musar* literature), languages (Russian, Hebrew, German, French), sciences (mathematics, physics), and humanities (history, geography, literature, rhetoric, p. 123). Particular attention was given to Hebrew, which is why the *maskilim* were criticised by both the traditional Jewish community, who viewed this as the secularisation of the holy language, and also by the radical *Haskalah* wing, who sought the assimilation of Jews into the Russian Empire (p. 127). The prestige of the Russian language grew in *maskilic* schools from the 1870s (p. 129).

Thus, according to Zalkin, the schools established by the *maskilim* became a central institution for *Haskalah* Jews in Eastern Europe, like the synagogue in the traditional Jewish community: 'In place of the synagogue in *maskilic* communities in Odessa and Vilna, Minsk and Bialystok, Grodno, and Kishinev, was the *maskilic* school' (p. 135). Teachers in these schools took on the respective role attributed to them: 'If the *maskilic* school served as a substitute Temple, as a place of learning for the *maskilic* community, they were its priests.'

In addition, we should note that the author not only mentions innovations in the education system, but also sometimes presents wider observations. He discusses claims that have become entrenched in historiography and the cultural memory, that the Jewish elite was actively involved in the life of the common folk. He states that the economic elite lived segregated in separate districts, established separate synagogues, and avoided the duties and obligations that the rest of the general community had to fulfil. That same class-based self-awareness, as Zalkin identifies it, was evident in the field of education. The rich hired separate teachers, *melamed*, so that their children would not have to attend the same *heder* as children from poorer families.

On the other hand, the reader might have wanted to see a broader context for the issues the author discusses. I think the book might have benefited from greater attention to how the Imperial Russian government impacted on the activities of the *maskilim*. Some attention is paid to this,

but not a great deal, and the author often bases his arguments on older literature. When he talks about the Statute Concerning the Organisation of the *Jews* of 1804, he rightly notes that the Jews were encouraged to attend general schools (p. 60), yet, as John D. Klier has noted, the government did not allocate any additional funds to support this initiative,² thus the move was mostly just declarative.

To end this review, I should also add that, although the book is serious research, and important to everyone interested in the history of East European Jews, at the same time it is written in a rather general style, making it easy to read.

Darius Staliūnas
Lithuanian Institute of History

² Дж. Д. Клиер, *Россия собирает своих евреев. Происхождение еврейского вопроса в России: 1772–1825* (Москва, Jerusalem, 2000), p. 227.