CHAPTER TWO

THE FIRST WAVE (1550–1580):
ISSERLES, JAFFE, AND HOROWITZ

The Isserles School

The “first wave” of 16th-century Polish-Jewish philosophical learning may also be called the “Isserles school.” Between his installation as Rabbi of Cracow in 1549 and his death in 1572, Moses Isserles numbered among his students many future luminaries who would contribute to the spread of philosophical learning. Most notable among these were Mordecai Jaffe, Abraham Horowitz, David Gans, and Menahem David Ticktin. The works of these individuals demonstrate the awakening of serious new interest and appreciation of philosophy in a cultural milieu where this had been, if not altogether unknown, decidedly on the back burner.

I say not altogether unknown, because Ashkenazic Jewish rationalism has a prehistory (1350–1550) which centers on the episode of philosophic learning of the Prague circle of R. Yom Tov Lipmann Muelhausen. The scholars who have researched this matter debate whether the Muelhausen circle was a true precursor and significant contributing cause to the later 16th-century flowering, or a casual, isolated episode independent of the later developments. I see the two episodes, two centuries apart, as separate and distinct. Each was the after-effect of larger movements generated from Mediterranean culture. In the 1350s, it was newcomers from Provençal Jewry (itself in crisis)

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1 See Excursus at the end of this chapter for an extended discussion of the Kupfer thesis and the Muelhausen circle. Ephraim Kupfer and Lawrence Kaplan stress continuity of the 14th-century and 16th-century flowerings. Ben-Sasson saw them as independent. Joseph Davis’s view is intermediate, but closer to Ben-Sasson’s. See especially Ephraim Kupfer, op. cit., and Joseph M. Davis, R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller, Joseph b. Isaac Ha-Levi, and Rationalism in Ashkenazic Jewish Culture 1550–1650 (dissertation), Harvard, 1990. I am in basic agreement with Davis’s thesis: “The one-sentence generalization on the relation of medieval Ashkenazic Jews to medieval Jewish philosophy...is that it was foreign to them... The two-sentence generalization is that this is more true of certain periods in Ashkenazic culture than of others, and that it is not precisely true of any period after the first decades of the twelfth century.” (Davis, p. 8)
and Italy who brought their philosophical interests with them to Central Europe. In the 1550s it was Jewish refugees from the debacle of Iberian Jewry from one side, and the spread of Italian Renaissance humanism to the centers of Poland and the Holy Roman Empire—coupled with the 1551 printing of the Guide—that provided the intellectual opportunity which young Moses Isserles seized. In the 1570s, it was another wanderer from Mediterranean lands—the sexagenarian Eliezer Ashkenazi—who gave the Polish-Jewish renaissance a second wind by involving Maharal and Ephraim Luntshitz in philosophical debates. In all these instances, northern European Jewry had but slight momentum of philosophical interest on its own (due to weak institutional foundations), but was receptive to the repeated intellectual stimulation from Mediterranean sources. (For an extended discussion of this issue, see the excursus at the end of this chapter.)

Moses Isserles and the Maimonidean Revival

The chronology of Moses Isserles’s life and that of the Maimonidean revival in central Europe are so intertwined, that it is worth taking a close look at the two.

Moses Isserles was born in Cracow, some time between 1525 and 1530. He studied first at home, then in Lublin with R. Shalom Shakhna, who was the leading rabbi of Poland. His marriage to Shakhna’s daughter was a union of two of the most prestigious families in Poland. He returned to Cracow in 1549, already (though in his 20’s) a leading teacher and halakhic authority. The students he taught in Cracow in the next twenty-two years included many of the leaders of the Jewish-Polish philosophic renaissance, as we have observed.

Mordecai Jaffe was born around 1535 in Prague, and studied under Solomon Luria and Isserles before returning to Prague in 1553 as head of the yeshivah. In the introduction to his magnum opus The Royal Garment (Levush Malkhat), Jaffe would remark that his commentary on

1 It is a truism that throughout this period, philosophical studies were an extracurricular indulgence for Polish Jewish centers of learning, as opposed to Talmudic studies which had the place of honor in the curriculum. By contrast, regular curricular study of philosophy was the norm in Spanish and Italian Jewries. See Joseph Delmedigo’s extremely negative observations on the state of secular studies in Polish Jewry around 1620 below, Chapter 4, Note 1.