Introduction

For almost four hundred years, since the first book was printed in Hebrew characters—Rashi’s commentary on the Pentateuch in Reggio di Calabria, Italy in 1475, nearly all Hebrew printing presses were located in European cities (Rome, Venice, Krakow, Prague, Amsterdam, Istanbul, Salonica, Izmir, Livorno, and Warsaw), where the Arabic language was not used by local Jewish communities. Some Hebrew books were printed in Spain and Portugal, prior to the expulsion of the Jews in 1492/96. In the sixteenth century, attempts to establish Hebrew printing presses in Arabic-speaking countries, namely in Fez (Morocco), Cairo and Safed (Palestine), were carried out by Jews from Spain, Italy, and Poland respectively. However, the production output of these printing presses, which survived for only a few years, was very small, not exceeding half a dozen books. In any case, none of them was in Judæo-Arabic (henceforth JA).

JA refers to the Arabic language, written—or, in our case, printed—with Hebrew characters, as was customary among Arabic speakers in Jewish communities of old, a custom already prevalent in pre-Islamic (Ǧāhilī) Arabia. JA was the main literary vehicle by which Jews, scholars as well as laymen, expressed themselves in mediaeval Arab lands, especially from the tenth to mid-thirteenth centuries. For reasons that do not fall within the scope of our present enquiry, the Jewish communities in Arab lands, save Yemen, almost totally abandoned Arabic as a literary, written language, and reverted to Hebrew, in particular, the scholarly writings of the rabbis. This, then, accounts for the lack of printed books published in JA until the mid-nineteenth century. Prior to this time, JA had been

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used in printed books solely by Christian scholars, from as early as the sixteenth century, for printing works of famous Jewish scholars, such as Saadia’s *tafsīr* (Arabic translation of the Hebrew Bible), for the polyglots, and for Maimonides. Moreover, owing to the absence of printing presses in Arab countries, the rabbis in those countries had no choice but to print their Hebrew books in European cities where there were Hebrew printing presses, mostly in Venice, Istanbul, Amsterdam, and Livorno. Considering the means of transport used at that time, this was not an easy task to accomplish, to say the least.

Even so, JA had never been used solely as a spoken language by the Jews in Arab lands, despite the fact that there existed many separate dialects of Arabic, some of which were mutually incomprehensible. Rather, it was also used for their limited liturgical needs, such as for writing poems and biblical translations recited in the synagogues. These texts were not printed but kept in manuscript form. At that time, nearly all folk literature of the different genres (e.g., tales, songs, proverbs, and riddles) was written in JA script, by and large as oral literature, and intended for very wide and diverse segments of society, more notably the lower social stratum, whose exposure to rabbinical Hebrew and/or canonic literature was rare and exceptional.

The Beginnings of JA Printing in North Africa

The penetration of European powers into North Africa (henceforth NA), in particular by France, which took control of Algeria in 1830, brought about social and cultural changes, as well as innovative ideas affecting the lifestyle of peoples in the region. Many of these ideas were directly influenced by the French and industrial revolutions. One of the most significant results of this process was the establishment of Hebrew printing presses in every NA country: Algiers (1853) and Oran (1856) in Algeria,