Early Modern Culture and Haskalah—Reconsidering the Borderlines of Modern Jewish History

Simon Dubnow Institute International Conference 1–3 July 2006 in cooperation with the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, the Samuel Braun Chair for the History of the Jews in Prussia, Bar Ilan University, and the Center for Research on the History and Culture of Polish Jewry at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

The topical focus of this conference has emerged as a central question in recent research on the importance of the early modern period and the significance of the Haskalah associated with questions concerning the periodization of Jewish history. Dan Diner (Leipzig/Jerusalem), Director of the Simon Dubnow Institute, opened the conference with observations exploring the idea that periodization can function as a way to conceptualize history and as a process of historical thinking.

The first session, *Framing the Question*, was organized as a debate between David Ruderman and Shmuel Feiner. David Ruderman (Pennsylvania) argued that periodization schemes are critical in interpreting the past. He defined the period of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries as a specific cultural epoch in Jewish history—despite significant regional differences—with a trans-national Jewish culture in early modern Europe, a period distinct from the Middle Ages and also distinct from a modern age. The emergence of this period is distinguished from the Middle Ages through the knowledge explosion generated by the printing press and by the universities of early modern Europe, constant mobility, decline of rabbinic authority and the advent of the phenomenon of conversion and syncretism in Europe.

In the argumentation of Shmuel Feiner (Tel Aviv), the 18th century is the one in which many Jews in Europe moved into the modern age. The definition of the reality as a “new world” and the self-consciousness of the modern Jew are the crucial points. Afterwards the Maskilim gave the “new world” a meaning, while transforming it into program and ideology. In Feiner’s approach to modernity, the significant points are the discovery of historical difference and the production of the autonomous modern self.
The second session focused on **Secularisation—Theories and Tendencies.** Susanne Zepp (Leipzig) showed in her paper that systematic analyses of literary texts like the poem *Proverbios Morales* by Sem Tob de Carrión predate the early modern period and the Haskalah. Already in the early 14th century, Sem Tob de Carrión was encouraged to use knowledge guided by reason using language and poetic speech as a means for intellectual self-determination. The transition in literature of ideas and concepts from a religious context into a broader meaning deserves fuller probing research in order to understand the complexity of the concept of secularisation on the borderlines between the Middle Ages and the rise of modernity.

Andrea Schatz (Princeton) stated that if we understand secularisation as an act of separation between religious ‘language’ and a secular ‘idiom’, we will find a series of dichotomies: two orders of knowledge, two spheres of culture, two sets of institution, two opposed worlds constantly resisting each other. The metaphors in a religious context are about the borderlines between the Holy and Profane. They are transformed into a concept with the borderlines between Religious and Secular. Schatz exemplified this transformation process by the controversies between Shlomo Zalman Hanau and Jacob Emden regarding the sacredness of the Hebrew language.

Secularisation was also Todd Endelman’s (Michigan) main topic as a fourth form in the transformative process in Jewish modernity and the entry of Jews into Europe beside acculturation, integration and emancipation. While speaking about three kinds of secularisation, namely intellectual, political and behavioural, he focused on the last. This tendency of secularised behaviour was an increasingly more common doctrine in all Western societies due to migration and urbanization processes which weakened the hold of the traditional religious institutions.

The third session centered on **Italy and Sephardic Amsterdam: Roots of Jewish Modernity.** The paper of Adam Shear (Pittsburgh) looked again at an essay by Isaac Barzilay “The Italian and Berlin Haskalah”. Although most of Barzilay’s interpretations are no longer accepted by historians, he was one of the first Jewish historians to center analytical attention on the early modern period. Of special interest are the parallels in the cultural agenda of Renaissance Jews and the early Maskilim, less in the sense of a direct influence, but it is possible to view the early modern period as a time frame which prepared the