Saturday, January 26, 2013 Shvat 15, 5773

HAARETZ

When the lingua franca was Hebrew

Evidence from Medieval Europe reveals that Jews from different lands were comfortable using Hebrew both in prayer and in everyday life.

By Ephraim Shoham Steiner Jan.25, 2013 | 12:20 PM | 3

The inscription discovered by archaeologists in Cologne.

In the introduction to his lexicon “Mahberet He’arukh,” Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham Ibn Parhon, a 12th-century North African scholar who had immigrated to Italy, begged forgiveness from the readers for his heavy and clumsy Hebrew. He blames it on the difference in the knowledge of Hebrew between Islamic and Christian countries: “And I’ll appeal to the reader who finds a mistake or something forgotten or language that is not well explained, to judge me favorably. Because those who live here were not so accustomed to speaking the holy tongue, because all the places in the land of Ishmael [the lands of Islam] share the same language, and all the visitors who come to them are familiar with their language, so that they had no need to use the holy tongue or to be accustomed to it.

“But each of the Edomite [Christian] lands has a different language, and when visitors come to them they don’t understand what they are saying, and they had to speak to them in the holy tongue, and therefore are more accustomed to it.”

In an article by the late Prof. Y.M. Ta-Shma, a scholar of halakha (traditional Jewish law) in the Middle Ages, in the periodical Leshonenu (Our Language), Ibn Parhon is described as supporting a kind of "lingua franca Judaeorum" – a uniform language for the Jews, i.e., Hebrew – alongside other languages.

The Jews of northwestern Europe did in fact speak various languages at the time, including ancient Yiddish; a dialect of Old French spoken in northern France and
England called la'az (lit. "a foreign language") in the commentary of 11th-century scholar Rashi; Judeo-Provencal in southern France; and an ancient Italian dialect among the Jews of the Apennine peninsula.

The statement by Rabbi Shlomo, who during his travels met Jews from both Islamic and Christian countries, is important evidence of the language of the Jewish public sphere during his lifetime, 900 years ago. In the Islamic lands, Jewish public life was conducted in Arabic; the rabbis and halakhic authorities wrote their works about Torah, philosophy and other subjects in that language. In the Christian countries, on the other hand, Jewish public life was also conducted in Hebrew, the "international" language of the Jews of Christian Europe, as well as in other languages.

"Sefer Hasidim" – a pietistic sectarian compendium commonly attributed to Rabbi Yehuda ben Shmuel Hasid (=the pious) of Regensburg, Germany, from the late 12th and early 13th centuries that provides us with an account of the day-to-day religious life of medieval German Jews known as Hasidim – includes an enlightening illustrative story that reinforces the testimony of Rabbi Shlomo. The story, as is typical of such tales that were designed to convey an educational message, is fictional, but is embedded with realistic details so that it won't seem too far-fetched and thus fall on deaf ears.

The story describes a man, a Torah scholar, who found himself captive in a "distant land" and kept his Jewish identity a secret, pretending to be a fool. One day a group of Jews who were accompanying a Christian nobleman passed by where he was being held. The prisoner identified them because they were speaking the holy tongue, Hebrew, among themselves. He attracted their attention and in the end the group was able to redeem the "fool."

What is important for our purposes is his testimony, which takes it for granted that the passersby spoke Hebrew among themselves and to the captive.

Additional evidence of the use of Hebrew in the Christian countries can be found in a recent finding (December 2011) in an ongoing excavation in the heart of the old city of Cologne, Germany. In the Middle Ages, Cologne was one of the most important centers of Ashkenazi Jewry, a central commercial crossroads between Germany, the Low Countries and France and England. Therefore, in the city, and particularly in its Jewish quarter, there was lively traffic of Jewish visitors from the three, if not four, adjacent regions.

Cologne discoveries

In recent years, the local municipality and the State of North Rhine-Westphalia have been conducting excavations in the medieval Jewish quarter in the heart of Cologne's Alstadt (old city). Archaeologists, led by Dr. Sven Schutte, have discovered, among a host of new and fascinating finds, that beneath the synagogue – which was destroyed in riots in August 1349 – there are a few floors that can be dated to even earlier periods, including the remains of a public building that stood precisely on the site of the synagogue in the early ninth century. These may well be vestiges of the earliest synagogue north of the Alps, going back even earlier than the advent of the Jewish community of Ashkenaz, the French and north Italian Jews who settled in the middle Rhine urban centers of Mainz, Worms and Speyer in the early 10th century .

An equally impressive finding was discovered outside the synagogue, near the home of the wealthy Lyverman family, from the mid-13th to mid-14th centuries, which stood adjacent to the synagogue compound. (The archaeologists were able to attribute the house to this family thanks to the meticulous records preserved in the local parish of St. Lawrence, which listed the Jews' assets and their location as early as the 12th century. This ledger was eventually transferred to the Cologne municipal archive, where it has survived to the present day.)

Above the sealed window of the structure's ground floor, archaeologists found a monumental inscription in Hebrew, worded as follows: "This is the window through which excrement is removed." This surprising inscription was apparently designed to ensure that excrement from the cesspit located beneath the synagogue compound would be emptied out properly. To prevent the emptying of the pit via an opening in the synagogue perimeter that was part of that compound, a tunnel was dug to the adjacent plot of land. The plot was eventually built upon, and the Hebrew sign was posted above the window that served as the tunnel's exit.

In the medieval city, domestic garbage and waste were emptied into cesspits that were dug behind the house, or into channels where water flowed that washed out the filth. The location of these pits and responsibility for maintaining and emptying them were often a source of conflict among neighbors, which was documented in halakhic discussions, among other sources. Maintaining the sanctity of the synagogue compound is also very familiar from Talmudic discussions. Indeed, the Talmud prohibits reciting the Shema or praying in the presence of exposed excrement and in filthy areas; from here we learn, a fortiori, that such waste cannot be emptied via the synagogue compound.

What is surprising and interesting about the new finding from Cologne is the discovery of a Hebrew inscription, used for a mundane purpose, on the "seam" connecting three different realms: the Jewish public space (the street adjacent to the synagogue), the sacred space (the synagogue and its courtyard) and the private space (the home of the Lyverman family). The fact that such an inscription was engraved on stone means that whoever was entrusted with emptying the waste from the cesspit (either directly or by supervising others) would have been able to decipher the words and understand what was written – or that it was engraved there by those responsible for the sacred space, for their own purposes. It is doubtful whether such an inscription would have been engraved and situated in that location had it not been understood.

There is nothing new about the existence of Hebrew inscriptions from 12th-13th century Europe. Medieval Jewish cemeteries are filled with tombstones bearing ancient inscriptions in the holy language. In the cemetery of Worms on the middle Rhine, for example, there is such a gravestone dating to the late 11th century.

With respect to this subject, three thick volumes were recently published, edited by Prof. Simon Schwarzfuchs of Bar-Ilan University, Dr. Avraham Reiner of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and Prof. Carl-Heinz Mueller of the University of Wurzberg. These contain records of the findings of long-term research of about 1,500 Hebrew tombstones and tombstone fragments from the Jewish cemetery in Wurzberg, which served the community for about 200 years, from 1147 until its destruction during the Black Death pogroms in the mid-14th century.

The tombstones were discovered in 1987 in the walls and cellar of a medieval building in the city, which were constructed with reused stones from the Jewish cemetery. These tombstones, as well as the inscriptions from Cologne, attest to the fact that at least until the 13th century, Jews in Europe north of the Alps used Hebrew not only as the language of prayer, but possibly as a language in the public realm.

Ephraim Shoham-Steiner teaches Medieval Jewish history at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.