

Between *Haskalah* and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: Isacco Samuele Reggio's approach to History

Similarly to the *Haskalah*, the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* is currently undergoing a re-evaluation that aims at challenging the hitherto predominant Germano-centric model describing it. While other historians have long contested the paradigm (Endelman 1979; Malino & Sorkin 1990; Birnbaum & Katznelson 1995; Ruderman 2000; Hundert 2004, 2008; Grazi & Dagnino 2016), scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* are only now starting to adopt this shift in perspective. The assumption is that this model no longer suffices for our understanding of this movement and of Jewish modernity as a whole. This paper argues that an ideal subject to verify the validity of this view is the Italian Jewish intellectual Isacco Samuele Reggio (1784 – 1855), who seems to test the boundaries of both *Haskalah* and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Mirroring stances of both *Haskalah* and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Reggio proposed new critical, scientific approaches to the texts of Jewish tradition and advocated for a modernization of Jewish education, placing secular studies next to traditional Jewish subjects. This method became the core of the program of Padua's Rabbinical College. For these efforts, he has been labelled a typical *maskil*. This assessment of Reggio's cultural contribution to Jewish modernity, though acceptable, does not exhaust the dimension of his scholarship nor does it describe it in all its facets. One largely understudied aspect of Reggio's scholarship is his approach to History, despite the fact that already his contemporaries considered it to be one of his most relevant scholarly traits. By examining Reggio's stance towards the concept of History and its study within a curriculum in the Jewish Science, this paper wishes to contribute to a reassessment of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, proposing this particular Italian perspective as suggestive of dynamics different from those thus-far explored by scholarship on Jewish modernity. In fact, one common misconception is that maskilim somewhat looked down at the study of history. If this is true for some of them, this cannot be extended by default to all the followers of the Jewish Enlightenment. According to these misconceptions, the maskilim were not so eager to emphasize the importance of history in their strives for Jewish emancipation, if not in its pedagogical role. This false premise is perhaps also due to the longstanding idea that Moses Mendelssohn himself disliked history, based on his impatience with pure chronology, not with the philosophical concept of History, with capital H (or capital G, in his case, *Geschichte*) or with its importance for Jewish culture and Judaism. However, in a 2007 essay called "Moses Mendelssohn and the polemics of History", the late Jonathan Hess demonstrated how this view was actually a myth. At the same time, the predominant view, in this case correct, I believe, has been that Leopold Zunz and the early circles of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*

deemed history a fundamental discipline of a modern Science of Judaism, influenced as they were by German historicism and romanticism., This is the reason why a glimpse into Reggio's view of history will help us see how much of "Wissenschaft" and how much of Haskalah we can find in this Italian intellectual. In turn, this will help us blur the borders between these two categories in Jewish intellectual history.

I will illustrate Reggio's positive view of history through two of his lesser known works, perhaps because originally published in Italian, a not-often-accessible language for international scholars of Judaism: the first is *Strenna Israelitica*, a journal he himself founded in 1852 and edited, that was published in Gorizia in four yearly issues until 1855. The second is a work titled *Guida per l'istruzione della gioventù israelitica*, published in Gorizia in 1853, just two years before his death. As a matter of fact, this book was translated into English and published in London in 1855 (the year of Reggio's death), under the title *Guide for the Religious Instruction of Jewish Youth* by a certain MH Picciotto. After a short investigation, the translator turned out to be a Moses Haim Picciotto, of a well-known wealthy Sefardi family of merchants of Aleppo, Syria, which originated in Livorno in early-modern times and had a British branch by the 19th-century. One could speculate and further elaborate on the reasons why Reggio seemed an attractive character for this kind of Jewish family, or for Picciotto in particular. But this is a different story. The point is that this text contains an almost ignored comprehensive Jewish history and Reggio's interpretation of it. The merely historical narrative is but a section of the whole book. This entire work, however, is rich with Reggio's considerations on what we would call a philosophy of history. Curiously, Picciotto was not interested in the purely historical section of the book and decided to cut out that part entirely from his translation, basically without further explanations, except for a brief footnote, in which he claims that that section was "unnecessary to the general purposes of the present book". And he did that, in his own words, "with the sanction of the distinguished author himself".

Why is this text virtually unstudied up to now? One of the reasons is that it was originally published in Italian. The English translation did not bring much in terms of today's reception of Reggio, considering that, of course, the few scholars dealing with him concentrated on his Hebrew writings. The main reason, however, is that it is not per se a scientific text, with quotations, footnotes, sources and critical enquiry. But Reggio himself was absolutely aware of it and openly recognized it in the introduction:

I have not quoted authors who preceded me in the same field; I have not called up for investigation what of valuable or defective could be found in them; in short, I

have not instituted comparisons, scientific disquisitions, or critical examinations of the opinions of others.

This book was instead a rather maskilic operation: it was conceived as a sort of handbook for elementary school teachers of Judaism. So, yes, in Reggio's intention, it is a pedagogical work. However, it is not a text which simply explains how a proper Jewish education should also include elements of Jewish history, and so on. The content is itself a commented Jewish history in addition to what we could call a Jewish theology. As unscientific as it may be, its scholarly quality is not what interests us in this case, rather the fact itself that Reggio gives history such a high-ranking position in his views and educational plan. In other words, it becomes an important tool to investigate Reggio's view vis-à-vis history but also to reconstruct his thought in general in the last phase of his life. Hence the importance of this text.

In the introduction to this work, in fact, Reggio clarifies his intentions (I'm using Picciotto's English translation):

*(I here present) (...) a skeleton of the vast religious science (read theology), in which they may perceive at a glance the principal characteristic of Judaism, its various ramifications, subsidiary parts, and special tendencies; they may then easily discover and account for the multifarious phases, in which it **manifested itself** in the various epochs of the universal history of mankind*

Here history is at the center of Reggio's narrative. In a language reminiscent of Hegel, who was also a fundamental point of reference of Zunz and the first circle of the Wissenschaft des Judentums, Reggio places Jewish history in a universal context, that is, as a manifestation of a part within a whole, or in other words, as an unfolding of the Jewish spirit within the history of humanity, to use a more distinctive Hegelian terminology.

The same relation between Israel's role within universal history is later explained not so much as a form of particularism or predilection for the Jewish people, but rather as a more specific declination of the Noachide universal laws:

The mutual conditions (of the Covenant) established were, in substance, nothing else than the universal relations subsisting between God and every rational being, but expressed, with respect to Abraham's family, in more special and characteristic terms, under a form in which God promised Abraham that he would be particularly his God, his Protector, Guardian and Benefactor; and the Abrahamites, on their part, bound themselves to recognize Him alone as the Deity, to whom adoration and loyal obedience were due. Thus the covenant, which had been formerly

established in general terms with Noah, as the representative of all mankind, was afterwards confirmed in more specific terms to the Abrahamites, as those who were appointed to keep and to promote among mankind the fulfilment of the conditions of the said relation. Considering the Abrahamic covenant in this point of view, all objections of unreasonable exclusiveness and unjust predilection, which have been sometimes urged, must disappear.

Reggio decides of course to use a slightly apologetic tone, in a time in which most of the Jews in the Italian peninsula (with the exception of those in Piedmont) had not yet achieved civil equality, in order to avoid later accusation of arrogance and so on from his Catholic compatriots. However, what counts for our analysis, is his embedding the particular Jewish experience within a universal context, also concerning the historical role of the Jews. In this respect, Reggio did not say anything particularly original for his times. But it is interesting for us to read him in a Hegelian key and connect him indirectly to the first circles of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. After all, Reggio too had a positivistic and progressive view of History.

Abraham's vocation marks a luminous and highly interesting epoch in the history of humanity. It was the commencement of the execution of that plan of education of mankind, which (...) came to diffuse itself gradually and to acquire a progressive force among the various ramifications of the human family. (...) a wonderful tissue of events, as well in the physical as in the moral world, which went on preparing a slow but always progressive development of the human intelligence, and will go on to produce ultimately the full final accomplishment of the same primitive plan (...)

History's progressive advancement is here evident. But Reggio goes beyond a mere progressive unfolding of historical events. This progress is only made possible by the Jews' role as mediators between the universal laws and mankind, or better, as educators of mankind to such laws. The Jewish people becomes in a sense an indispensable tool for the achievement of this perfection.

In fact, this progressive advancement of History as a whole, can also be observed in its subset of Jewish History. Using a classic of Maskilic universalism, very common also in 19th-century approaches, Reggio places Galut within such progress, emphasizing the positive aspects of it over the negative ones (my translation):

The fall of the Temple and the loss of its civil existence did not mean the end of Israel's history, as it happened to all the Peoples of antiquity, which, having accomplished their mission ended up assimilating to their conquerors, thus

disappearing from the world's scene. In exile and in its dispersion in the remotest corners of the earth, it (Israel) had to continue its enterprise under different forms, as long as it found the suitable means to achieve this goal under strongly changed conditions.

History, however, is not the only element that helps us blur the borders between Reggio's Haskalah and Wissenschaft des Judentums. An element that strikes a scholar in this field is that tendentially Haskalah and Wissenschaft des Judentums have been dealt with, as if they were two separated compartments. Granted, this has not been spelled out explicitly, but the result is that scholarship has kept the two movements separated. In other words: Who says that a maskil cannot be also a proponent of the Wissenschaft des Judentums? Reggio, as an aware supporter of the Haskalah, does not deny, or actually gives it for granted, that what he does is real Science of Judaism. In 1852, on the first issue of the *Strenna Israelitica*, Reggio clearly stated the purposes of his journal:

[...] Thus, this periodical publication could prompt some learned men, or association of learned men, to create an organization among us that, by publicly discussing everything concerning our external cult, youth education and rearrangement of religious practices, would critically examine the main points of dogmatic theology, civil and literary history, biblical exegesis, antiquities studies, philology, legislature and anything that is included in the vast field of the Science of Judaism.

Therefore, Reggio wittingly places himself and his cultural/religious mission, particularly his strong suit of education and light reforms of the external cult, within the larger category of the Science of Judaism, the Wissenschaft des Judentums. He seems to give it for granted, that some of the elements that are considered by today's scholarship as typical Haskalah purposes (such as education and secular studies), can well fit within the Science of Judaism.

There is quite some evidence Reggio transcended the borders of "pure" rationalism, even more than he himself was willing to admit. One of the most examined aspects of 19th-century Jewish culture is a scholar's approach to Jewish history, as it rightly formed the center not only of the Science of Judaism but of that entire century, in a sense. Again, on the *Strenna Israelitica*, but on the third issue, in 1854, Reggio published an article of the well-known German intellectual Selig Cassel. This was the first time Yashar published a contribution of a different author from himself, giving a particular strength to the relevance of these words, reflecting Reggio's views

as well. Interestingly, this was shortly before Cassel converted to Christianity in 1855. The article was called “Summary of Jewish history” and started like this:

In all the different epochs of the history of the human kind, Israel’s destiny is extraordinary. Interests, loves, and passions of high relevance provide abundant material to the great drama, that we are called to represent throughout our entire existence.

Reggio makes these his own, not only indirectly by publishing this article on his but also explicitly in a footnote, where, among other things, he states that he is “happily” publishing this contribution.

In short, these are just a few examples taken from Reggio’s life and oeuvre. Conclusive and exhaustive results would require much more time. However, Yashar definitely appears to be an ideal character to test the boundaries of both Haskalah and Wissenschaft des Judentums. Here, I hope I offered some indicators and, especially, elements to open a scholarly discussion, around the opportunity to recalibrate our assessment of both movements, but of the Wissenschaft des Judentums in particular: a departure from the hitherto predominant Germano-centric approach, presenting a case from far away from Berlin, and a more nuanced definition of the intertwinements between the two movements.