

The Use of Hebrew for Secular Writing

Addendum by Dr. Raymond Scheindlin

A Jewish Doctor in Medieval Spain and His Demon: The Book of Delight by Joseph Ibn Zabara

In the tenth century, when Jews began writing Hebrew poetry on secular themes using Arabic models, there were objections mostly on the grounds of the religious propriety of writing about worldly pleasures at all, and about the propriety of the use of Arabic metrical patterns in Hebrew. We don't hear much about such objections after that until they were raised again by, of all people, Judah Halevi, one of the greatest poets. He wrote an enormous quantity of secular poetry in Arabic metrics, but in his *Kuzari* he asserts that doing this corrupts the Hebrew language, and he implies that secular poetry is altogether bad. Maimonides denounces secular love poetry, but he explicitly separates this question from the question of language; for him, love poetry is wrong whatever language it is written in, though it is a bit worse if in Hebrew. It doesn't seem that any of these objections got in the way of the creation of a large body of secular Hebrew poetry using Arabic meters.

When the focus of literary creativity shifted to prose, in the twelfth century, we don't hear any similar objections. The prose stories were justified as being designed for instruction, and the stories were explained as being there to exemplify moral teachings or to provide instruction and to keep the reader interested.

In the earlier period, Jews used Hebrew for poetry (secular and religious) and Arabic for just about everything else. With the retreat of Arabic culture from Spain, they wrote mostly in Hebrew, and did not replace Arabic with the languages of the Christian rulers (Latin for learned works, Galician for poetry, Castilian for ordinary prose, etc.). The reason for this is complicated and speculative. For Jews, Hebrew simply slipped in where Arabic had dominated; the tradition of secular Hebrew poetry was by now well established, and the new writing in prose was justified in the ways explained above.

A fascinating development is the work of Immanuel of Rome (12th-13th century) who wrote a collection of rhymed prose stories that are not just secular but often salacious. This became one of the most popular medieval Hebrew books ever written, especially after the invention of printing permitted its wide dissemination. There were serious objections by no less a religious authority than Joseph Karo (in the *Shulhan Arukh*), but it has survived happily till our own time.