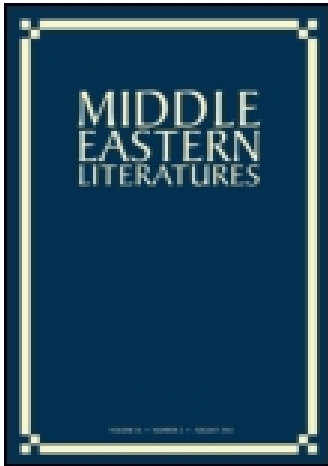


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The *Nahḍa* and the *Haskala*: A Comparative Reading of ‘Revival’ and ‘Reform’

LITAL LEVY

Abstract

This article compares the modern Hebrew and Arabic ‘renaissance’ movements (the *haskala* and the *nahḍa*) to argue that the *nahḍa* can and should be studied comparatively, and to illustrate some of the insights gained through a comparative reading of non-Western cultural modernity. Much as the *nahḍa* is often read as the formative moment of modern Arab identity, the *haskala* is viewed as the originary moment of Jewish modernity. Comparative analysis sheds light on the ideas and psychology of the two movements as well their progenitors’ similar historical experiences. In particular, the contribution of Arab Jewish intellectuals to the *haskala* and the *nahḍa* opens new vistas into intersections of modern Arabic and Hebrew thought, further eroding long-standing assumptions about the boundaries between Arab and Jewish cultures. The textual output of Arab Jews in Arabic and in Hebrew illuminates the cross-cultural circulation of ideas and tropes of ‘modernity’ and ‘enlightenment’ underlying both the *nahḍa* and the *haskala*. I use the comparison to underscore that the *nahḍa* was at one and the same time an Arab movement, part of a multilingual *regional* discourse, and one of many global ‘enlightenment’ discourses that emerged contemporaneously in the colonial and post-colonial world.

The *Nahḍa* in the World

‘So where were the Arabs and where are they now? Their golden age (*j̄l ādābihim al-dhahabī*) has passed and the generation of darkness reigns.’ So declared the Syro-Lebanese writer Buṭrus al-Bustānī, a progenitor of the *nahḍa*, in his 1859 *Khuṭbā fī ādāb al-‘arab* (Discourse on Arab Culture).¹ Within a few decades, both the theory of Arab ‘decline’ (*inhiṭāt*) and the metaphor of darkness would become defining features of *nahḍa* discourse. Around much the same time, Jewish intellectuals in Europe, Asia, and Africa were also lamenting the cultural degradation of their communities and depicting their own reform project, the Hebrew *haskala*, as a battle between darkness and light. For example, in 1863 the Prussian-based Hebrew newspaper *Ha-Magid* reported on the establishment of another Hebrew newspaper in Baghdad:

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In the city of Baghdad ... the publication of a Hebrew journal by our Jewish brothers has commenced and the first issue has just reached us ... A marvel it is to see that there too the light of civilization is breaking through to illuminate dark places.²

That metaphors of light and darkness suffuse both the modern Arabic and Hebrew revivals is no coincidence. Both were internally conflicted movements driven by intellectuals seeking answers to their societies' predicaments of powerlessness. Their allegories of waking from slumber or of light dispelling the darkness betray the direct influence of Enlightenment thought, which disseminated its teleological narratives of 'progress' throughout the globe and claimed that non-Western Europeans occupied a lower rung in the civilizational hierarchy. Across a vast spectrum of cultural contexts, non-Western European intellectuals simultaneously internalized and resisted this message while assimilating ideational tropes and rhetorical features of 'modernity,' 'enlightenment,' and 'revival.' As a result, most of the central topoi, rhetorical modes, and even psychological underpinnings of *nahḍa* discourse are modulated in different cultural settings throughout the global non-West and the European 'peripheries.' Read in this light, the *nahḍa* appears to be one of many non-Western projects of cultural and political modernity in sites such as China, Russia, Greece, and Bengal, where questions of culture, language, and social reform eventually evolved into anti-imperial or anti-colonial nationalism. Cultural particularities notwithstanding, all these movements exhibit striking parallels in epistemology and rhetoric. Cross-cultural comparison may thus reveal previously unrecognized connections between specific historical experiences as well as broader cultural patterns.

For example, the idea of failure, which echoes throughout *nahḍa* discourse, resonates across a wide spectrum of non-Western nationalisms and cultural movements, whose intellectuals were often profoundly conflicted about their cultural identity and their relationship to European thought.³ Other frequently recurring ideas and tropes include the following: a preoccupation with 'renaissance' or revival; a rhetorical division between the material, 'outer' forms of knowledge and technical mastery associated with the West versus the 'inner' (spiritual, religious, or cultural) knowledge of the home civilization (considered to be the essence of native identity); the dual attribution of cultural and political 'decline' to foreign intervention or control and to internal failings such as the betrayal of 'authentic' principles; and the 'naturalization' of European ideas of democracy or modernity by recoding them as part of an 'authentic' cultural past, often one in which political sovereignty and cultural achievement coalesced. All of these are found both in the *nahḍa* and numerous other non-Western 'renaissance' movements.

In this article, I compare the cases of the modern Hebrew and Arabic 'renaissance' movements to argue that the *nahḍa* can and should be studied comparatively, and to illustrate some of the insights gained through one selected comparative reading of non-Western cultural modernity. The Hebrew movement unfolded in two consecutive chapters known respectively as the *haskala* ('Enlightenment') and the *tehiya* ('renaissance' or 'revival'). Much as the *nahḍa* is often read as the formative moment for modern Arab identity, the *haskala* has typically been viewed as the originary moment of Jewish modernity. Comparative analysis sheds light on the ideas and psychology of the two movements as well as on the similar historical experiences of their progenitors. In particular, the contribution of Arab Jewish intellectuals to the *haskala* and the *nahḍa* opens new vistas into intersections of modern Arabic and Hebrew thought, further eroding long-standing assumptions the boundaries between the two cultures.⁴

The *Haskala* and *Nahḍa* in Comparative Perspective

The histories of both the *haskala* and *nahḍa* are fundamentally narratives of how a certain people—Jewish or Arab—came to be ‘modern’ in their own eyes and the eyes of others. As Jaroslav Stetkevych has observed, the ‘not always logically transparent mixture of European Enlightenment and Romanticism constitutes the ideology and the psychology of both [Arabic and Hebrew movements].’⁵ In its broadest sense, *al-nahḍa al-‘arabiyya* refers to the activities of clusters of intellectuals throughout the Arab and Islamicate world who sought coherent responses to the military and technological ascent of Europe and to global modernity. The term *nahḍa* has been translated variously as ‘awakening,’ ‘renaissance,’ and ‘enlightenment.’⁶ Arab intellectuals began employing it in the mid-19th century, and by the century’s last decades journals were suffused with writings on *al-nahḍa* in its various manifestations (e.g. the revival of language and literature, the women’s ‘awakening,’ the rise of industry).⁷ The *haskala* (a Hebrew translation of *die Aufklärung*, the Enlightenment) is viewed as a progression of Enlightenment ideas from the circle of Moses Mendelssohn in Germany to a network of Jewish cultural circles in Eastern Europe.⁸ Emerging in late-18th-century Germany, by the 19th century it moved eastward into Galicia and then further east into Russia and Poland. The proponents of *haskala*, known as *maskilim*, promoted a dual agenda of Jewish acculturation to European society and modernization of Jewish life alongside the revival of Hebrew language and literature.⁹ The *haskala* sparked the production of a body of Hebrew literature—heavily didactic, written in a stilted neo-Biblical style—through which its authors promulgated their message of enlightenment to their benighted brethren and endeavored to reclaim classical Hebrew as the fulcrum of a new Jewish identity. Much of their writing was satirical and parodic, aimed at exposing corruption in the community and reforming (self-perceived) backwards practices. Their modernizing agenda promoted secular education and social reforms such as the eradication of youthful marriages arranged in childhood. Toward those ends, the *maskilim* produced a plethora of Hebrew journals (most of them short-lived), memoirs and biographies, travelogues, epistolary novels, adaptations of pre-modern belletristic genres (collections of proverbs, fables, biblically inspired dramas), poetry, and some early precursors of the novel. As the domain of the educated elite, Hebrew was never the language of the Yiddish-speaking European Jewish masses, nor was it almost ever taught to women. A symbiotic relationship thus developed in Europe between the Hebrew *haskala* and the Yiddish *haskole*, in which literature in Yiddish became an important medium for the modernization of the masses (including women).

The *nahḍa* was diffuse (particularly in its Islamic reform strand), linking intellectuals from throughout the Arabic-speaking world as well as the non-Arab Islamicate world. The *haskala*, while geographically diffuse, involved a tiny, radical vanguard within Europe’s Jewish minority.¹⁰ Whereas certain strands of the *nahḍa* fit the mold of an anti-colonial modernity project, the question of the Hebrew project’s relationship to global political and economic developments, particularly the colonial dimension, is far more ambiguous. The origins and development of the *nahḍa* were profoundly linked to the political circumstances of foreign rule and colonial domination, from the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt to the British colonization of Egypt nearly a century later, and to the Arab relationship with Istanbul throughout that long 19th century. In the Hebrew case, underpinning politics of revival were predicated mainly upon internal European political dynamics. The emergence of the Western nation-state inaugurated the long and uneven

process of granting European Jews legal and civil rights ('emancipation'), while eroding the traditional modes of self-governance and authority exercised by the *kehila* (the organized, autonomous, self-governing Jewish communal institutions). These factors, alongside the rise of the bourgeoisie, catalyzed the *haskala*, which responded to 'a great need for change emanating from within Jewish society' as a result of European modernity.¹¹ Colonial dynamics played a secondary role, primarily in the *haskala* in Asia and Africa. Nonetheless, both the *nahḍa* and the *haskala* would later become associated with nationalist politics, as will be discussed.

The periodization of the *nahḍa* is coeval with the *haskala* and *tehiya*, and indeed the Arabic and Hebrew movements moved through parallel stages of ideational development as their respective centers of gravity shifted from cultural to national revival (with a strong emphasis on the need for reform at every stage). Like the *haskala*, the *nahḍa* was far from a single coherent movement; for one, it was interregional, with networks of intellectuals and ideas that traversed the Ottoman Empire as the larger Islamicate world in Africa and Asia; and secondly, it comprised literature and science, religion and technology, and social and political thought. Moreover, the cultural and reformist streams overlapped, as iconic figures in the Islamic reform movement (e.g. Rashīd Riḍā) also published cultural journals, and luminaries of the literary arena (e.g. 'Abdallāh al-Nadīm) were also involved in religious reform. In fact, one of the characteristics of the reform movement in the *mashriq* (Levant) was that many of its proponents were not classically trained scholars ('*ulamā*'), but figures with various types of scholarly training, who were critical of the conservative religious establishment.¹² Furthermore, both the literary and religious reform strands of the *nahḍa* frequently invoked the concept of *aṣāla*, or authenticity, as an epistemological premise, seeking the recovery of an 'uncorrupted' past of early Islam.¹³ In the eyes of the literati and reformers, the legacy of the past had been corrupted, and as a consequence Arab culture and/or Islam was suffering from a state of decadence or decay (*inhiṭāt*) that needed to be reversed through the process of reform (*iṣlāḥ*).¹⁴

Nahḍa and *haskala* are thus markedly similar in their basic call for the reform of religious life, construed both as a return to 'authenticity' and as a means of reconciling religious precepts with the imperatives of modernity and enlightenment. Moreover, both occurred during a period when the unrivalled leadership and authority of the clergy (the Islamic '*ulamā*' and the Jewish rabbinate) were eroding. As a philosophy of power and governance, however, the two diverge. Responding to a long history of persecution, the *maskilim* heralded the Enlightenment as the answer to the Jewish condition. Through their program of cultural renewal, they sought acceptance into European society; it was only during the *tehiya* that the issue of Jewish sovereignty became a serious preoccupation. The *nahḍa*, on the other hand, was profoundly concerned with questions of power and self-determination from the outset. It sought explanations for Ottoman and Arab weakness and European ascendancy in the lessons of history, and found models of Arab greatness in the past, particularly in the periods of early Islam and the Abbasid Empire.

The two movements also manifest similarities and differences in their relationship to language. Both *haskala* and *nahḍa* placed great emphasis on linguistic renewal and modernization. But at the time of the *haskala*, Hebrew had not yet been modernized as a vernacular; Jews throughout the world spoke Jewish languages (e.g. Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, Yiddish) and standard non-Jewish languages for their quotidian needs. By contrast, Arabic was historically characterized by its stratification into widely differentiated regional dialects and a shared classical (literary) idiom derived from the language of

the Qur'an and *turāth* (Islamic heritage or tradition). Although colloquial Arabic was long a medium of some forms of popular culture, and was utilized in drama and journalism during the *nahḍa*, historically it was not a language of scholarship or correspondence in the manner served by Judeo-Arabic; nor was it a sociolinguistic marker of ethnic and religious difference in the manner of all Jewish languages. For both Jewish and Islamicate civilizations, the language of text and liturgy (i.e. Hebrew or classical Arabic, respectively) were venerated while the vernacular was viewed as a corrupt jargon, not even a 'language' in the strict sense of the word.

One more important parallel between *nahḍa* and *haskala* concerns not their intrinsic qualities but the extrinsic applications of their histories toward political ends: both the *nahḍa* and the *haskala* inspired nationalistic historiographies.¹⁵ For example, George Antonius's influential 1938 book *The Arab Awakening*, while no longer accepted as the standard historical account of Arab nationalism, conflated cultural renaissance with national 'awakening.'¹⁶ Later works continue to posit the *nahḍa* as the wellspring of modern Arab selfhood.¹⁷ While *haskala* actually led to a gamut of competing ideological movements and parties, Zionist historiography has claimed *haskala* as its originary moment, and the founding works of modern Hebrew literary history were written largely in the service of the nation-building project.¹⁸ These works emphasize the epistemological shift from *haskala* to *tehiya* (lit. revival) that took place after the violent pogroms of the early 1880s discredited the *haskala*'s faith in the teleology of universal enlightenment. The modernizers' latent energies were rechanneled into the neo-romantic, proto-nationalist *tehiya*, which rejected the *haskala*'s emphasis on ecumenicism and acculturation in favor of Jewish nationhood. If the *haskala* drew its inspiration from the Enlightenment and responded to the need to reorder Jewish society in the wake of modernity, the *tehiya* followed 19th-century European nationalism with its ideology of peoplehood and of a national *geist*. In this second phase, Hebrew writers rebelled not only against the message of the *haskala* but also against its stylistic archaisms, and undertook the momentous task of recreating literary Hebrew as a supple, fully modern idiom.¹⁹ The literary *tehiya* eventually merged with political Zionism (which appeared on the scene somewhat later, in the 1890s)—wherein, according to the standard histories, it finds its ultimate fulfillment.²⁰

Forgotten 'Enlighteners': Arab Jews in the *Haskala* and *Nahḍa*

Who were the Arab Jewish 'enlighteners,' who were their respective audiences, and what were their major themes? In Arabic, a small group of acculturated laymen (and one laywoman) engaged *nahḍa* discourse as a vehicle of Jewish integration into an emerging interconfessional 'modern' class and also to debate the general shared concerns of Arab modernity, helping to shape this discourse in the process. They operated in cosmopolitan and multicultural milieus in Beirut, Cairo, and Jaffa. Their writing exhibits all of the typical rhetorical modes and tropes of the *nahḍa*. Most of their work, published in Beirut and Cairo, addressed a general Arabic readership and probably circulated within the *mashriq*; additionally, they produced a few Arabic language newspapers for Jewish readers. In the case of Hebrew, *rabbanim maskilim*—'enlightened' rabbis who were recognized religious authorities—situated themselves in the discourses of Jewish modernity *vis-à-vis* the European *haskala*. Their writings were intended for readers both in the Middle East and in Europe, and they often published in the European Hebrew press.

The *haskala's* temporal and spatial boundaries have been defined by the historians as encompassing around 120 years, from the 1770s to the 1890s (although its conventional end date is 1881), spanning European Jewish communities 'from London in the west, to Copenhagen in the north, to Vilna and St. Petersburg in the east.'²¹ But just how far eastward did the hunger for Hebrew modernity actually travel? If histories of the *nahḍa* have elided Arab Jews, the general histories of the *haskala* overlook the Hebrew renaissance in Asia and Africa, portraying it as a European Jewish movement rather than as a *global* Jewish phenomenon.²² This is despite the fact that there is a substantial body of research on the *haskala* in North Africa.²³ The conventional wisdom still holds that Middle Eastern Jewries only entered 'modernity' when, as one well-known scholar puts it, 'they were exposed to their Ashkenazi brethren in the State of Israel.'²⁴

During the last half of the 19th century, Jewish intellectuals throughout the vast territory stretching from Morocco in the West to Yemen, Persia, and India in the East formed *haskala*-style circles, printed their own newspapers and books in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic, and translated copiously between the two languages, cultivating a symbiotic literary diglossia comparable with that of Hebrew and Yiddish. Spurred by the dissemination of Hebrew books and periodicals from Europe and by the penetration of modernity through political and economic channels, and arguably also influenced by parallel developments in Arabic and Islamic cultures, Middle Eastern and North African Jews grappled with the same questions of cultural, national, and linguistic destiny as did their Ashkenazi counterparts, but as befitted their respective contexts.

We need only look closely at leading *haskala* journals such as *Ha-Magid* (The Speaker; 1856–1903) and *Ha-Tsfira* (The Dawn; Warsaw, 1862–1934) to discover that Middle Eastern writers contributed to the nascent Hebrew press from its outset. In 1856 *Ha-Magid*, the first widely-circulated Hebrew journal, was founded in the city of Lyck in Prussia, and only one year later, in 1857, it featured a detailed article on the execution of a Jewish community functionary in Tunis.²⁵ Throughout the latter half of the 19th century, articles and regular columns from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco appeared in *Ha-Magid* and its successor newspapers.²⁶ Various *haskala* circles appeared throughout North Africa, as well as at least one in Yemen²⁷ and another among Ottoman Jewry in Erdine.²⁸ Concurrently, Middle Eastern Jews established their own newspapers in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic in Calcutta, Baghdad, Jerusalem, and throughout North Africa.²⁹

Even as *maskilim* sought to reform Jewish life and society and create a new Hebrew literature, their Muslim, Christian, and Jewish counterparts in the Arab East were advocating strikingly similar ideas concerning the reformation of Arab society and Arabic cultural life. The historiographies of the *nahḍa* feature Syrian and Egyptian Christian and Muslim writers, with a lone Jewish figure: the famous Egyptian playwright, journalist, and agitator Ya'qūb Ṣannū', whose Jewishness is generally treated as an incidental factor.³⁰ The premise that Jews in the Arab and Ottoman worlds did not take part in modernizing cultural movements also informs the work of leading scholars of Middle Eastern Jewry, including Bernard Lewis and Norman Stillman.³¹ Ammiel Alcalay contested these assumptions in his groundbreaking 1993 book *After Jews and Arabs*, but it is only in recent years that a collective recovery effort of Modern Middle Eastern Jewish intellectual history has gained some traction.³²

Although Jewish modernity in the *maghrib* is much more widely studied than Jewish modernity in the *mashriq*, the latter is more relevant to my argument here.³³ Mediated largely through colonial contexts, Arab modernity writ large took on very different

forms and colors in the *maghrib*, which was then under direct French colonial rule, and in the *mashriq* (i.e. in British-occupied Egypt post-1882 and the 20th-century mandates in Greater Syria and Iraq). Many if not most Jewish intellectuals in both the *maghrib* and the *mashriq* were bilingual, if not trilingual; some published both in European languages (French or English) and in standard Arabic and/or Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic, while others published exclusively in European languages or in standard Arabic. But in the *maghrib*, aggressive French colonial policies propelled North African Jews and their fates toward French language and culture, whereas the notion of cultural 'Arabness' emerging in the *mashriq* was heavily language-based. Ethno-religious valences of Arabness also differed between *maghrib* and *mashriq* for the simple reason that in the *maghrib*, by the 12th century Jews came to constitute the region's sole indigenous religious minority. In the *mashriq*, 19th-century Christian intellectuals were among the first to provide inclusive articulations of Arabness; in the *maghrib*, there was no such model of non-Muslim Arabness available to indigenous Jews.³⁴ Finally, due to the issue of Berber identity, even the Arabness of Moroccan Muslims is itself highly contested.³⁵ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Jews in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria published newspapers in French, Judeo-Arabic, and Hebrew, and there are isolated examples of North Africa Jews publishing in Arabic. As Emily Gottreich has discussed, during the interwar period and the decades following, some Moroccan Jews expressed explicit identification with Moroccanness and the national project (if not necessarily in terms of Arabness). However, we do not see the extensive identification of Jews with the Arabic language and with local nationalisms that we find in 20th-century Cairo and Baghdad.

Despite scholarly assertions of Jewish disinterest in Arabic culture during the 19th-century *nahḍa*, there is ample evidence to the contrary. In their study of 19th-century Jewish contributions to Arabic theater, Shmuel Moreh and Philip Sadgrove enumerate some 18 other Egyptian, Syrian, and Tunisian Jewish writers of literary Arabic in the 19th century.³⁶ One only has to sift through the early volumes of Jurjī Zaydān's journal *al-Hilāl* (The Crescent, the *nahḍa* journal *par excellence*, founded in 1892) or *al-Muqataḥ* (The Selected, its main competitor, founded by Ya'qūb Ṣarraf and Fāris Nimr in 1875) to find Jewish writers contributing from the very beginning.³⁷ In fact, the term *nahḍa* appears in a Jewish context as early as 1890 when a Jewish newspaper called *Nahḍat Isrā'īl* (literally, 'the *nahḍa* of Israel,' or 'The Jewish Renaissance') was published in Egypt.³⁸ Before the midpoint of the 19th century, the earliest known printed Arabic play was published in 1847 by Abraham Daninos, an Algerian Jew.³⁹ By the 1880s, Jews were producing literary Arabic texts in Cairo and Beirut, and by the early years of the 20th century, in Palestine. They commented on the pressing issues of the day, ranging from linguistic and cultural revival to the Dreyfus affair to women's rights to Egyptian independence. It is thus less likely that Arab Jews were uninterested in politics, culture, and society that they were simply elided from the historical record of the *nahḍa* and the *haskala*, probably because their hybrid identities did not service the ideological metanarratives of Arab nationalism and Zionism.

Arab Jewish intellectuals in the Arabic cultural sphere included the aforementioned Ya'qūb Sannū' (Jacob Sanua, 1839–1912), often referred to by his *nom de plume* Abū Naḍḍāra; the Egyptian Karaite lawyer, scholar, and poet Murād Farag (1866–1956); the Beirut-born journalist, translator, and feminist Esther Azhari Moyal (1873–1948); her husband, the journalist and doctor Shim'on Moyal of Jaffa; their son 'Abdallah (Ovadia) Nadīm Moyal; and his contemporary Nissim Malūl (1892–1959), a

Cairo-educated native of Safad. Between the 1890s and 1950, Murād Farag published a few dozen books on legal topics as well as four volumes of original poetry in Arabic and one volume in Hebrew, *Ha-Kodshiyot*.⁴⁰ At the turn of the century he also wrote and edited a newspaper in standard Arabic for the Karaite community, *al-Tahdhīb* (Edification; 1901–1903).⁴¹ Esther Moyal, an intellectual far ahead of her time and a lifelong advocate of women’s rights, printed a newspaper for Egyptian women between 1899 and 1904, and later helped her husband Shim‘on run an Arabic-language newspaper in Jaffa. Moved by Zola’s pivotal role in the Dreyfus affair, in 1903 she published an Arabic-language biography of the French writer (some of whose novels she had previously translated into Arabic).⁴² In 1909, her husband Shim‘on published an Arabic-language introduction to and elucidation of the Talmud written for a mainstream Arab readership, which he had produced at the behest of Jurjī Zaydān.⁴³ Shim‘on Moyal was also a member of the Islamic reformer Muhammad ‘Abduh’s *Jām‘iyyāt al ta’lif wa-l-taqrīb* (Association of Friendship and Understanding) in Beirut.⁴⁴ Thus, although Jews comprised a small minority of voices in the *nahḍa* and had a limited effect on the movement as a whole, their participation in the movement belies the premise that the Jewish communities of the East were entirely unaffected and untouched by it. The contributions of Syrian and Egyptian Jewish intellectuals to Arabic journalism and drama attest to their explicit identification with the goals of the *nahḍa* project. Through their writings, they help create the interdenominational community of Arabic-speaking intellectuals engaged in an open-ended dialogue about knowledge and the world. In the 1920s, Baghdad emerged as a latecomer to the *nahḍa*, becoming another regional center of modern Arabic literary production, and in particular of *avant-garde* Arabic modernist poetry. During the interwar period, the torch of Jewish participation in modern Arabic letters was decisively passed from Cairo to Baghdad, where it was picked up by a bevy of young, idealistic Iraqi Jewish intellectuals; their short stories and cultural journals were at the vanguard of modern Iraqi print culture.⁴⁵ Along with their Iraqi and Egyptian Jewish counterparts in music and film,⁴⁶ this group represents the final and defining moment of the modern Arab Jewish experience.

Thematically, both the Hebrew and Arabic discourses of Arab Jewish intellectuals are underscored by transculturation (a term used to designate a process of cultural contact and transfer occurring within an asymmetrical power relationship, as distinct from the more neutral ‘interculturalism’ or ‘interculturality,’ which denote a meeting, crossing, or exchange between cultures).⁴⁷ Nowhere are the signs of transculturation more evident than in the writers’ efforts to delineate and articulate their own subjectivity, a process fraught with East–West tensions. In the *nahḍa*, the process of self-definition was played out as a negotiation between the demands of *aṣāla* (authenticity) and *ḥadātha* (modernity). Stephen Sheehi has demonstrated how Arab intellectuals in the 19th century internalized the European narrative of progress and translated it into a ‘nomenclature of reform’ that appears persistently and across confessional boundaries in modern Arabic letters.⁴⁸ Because modern knowledge was closely identified by Arab writers with Europe, Arab identity from the time of the *nahḍa* posits lack and a sense of otherness at the core of its subjectivity.⁴⁹ Arab Jews were members of a small minority group within a part of the world already beginning to view itself in minoritized terms. Borrowing Sheehi’s language, I argue that in Arab Jewish writing the struggle for subjective presence and authority was directed not only at the West but also at the dominant

groups within the *nahḍa* and *haskala* (Muslim and Christian Arabs and European Jews, respectively).

While none of the Jewish writers of Arabic denied their Jewishness, they selectively emphasized or downplayed it depending on their topic and audience. Jewishness could serve the author as a credential when he or she wrote on topics such as the blood libel accusations or Arabic translations of the Bible. Yet positioning oneself as a Jewish writer did not mean situating oneself as Other to the reader. Quite to the contrary, it is the *sameness* of Jewish writers' Arabic discourse in comparison with that of their Muslim and Christian peers that, from today's vantage point, is most meaningful. Jewish writers of Arabic, like their Muslim and Christian colleagues, expressed themselves using the cultural stock of the Arabic language, quoting freely from the Qur'an and from classical Arabic poetry. Their invocation of terms such as *al-umma al-isrā'īliyya* (the Israelite *umma*, an Islamic term for nation or people) and the interpolation of canonical Islamic texts within their prose suggest a naturalization of Jewish context into this discourse. But if the literature of the *nahḍa* uses a nomenclature that may appear naturalized, we ought also to remember that it was in fact new and highly intentional. Esther Moyal's deployment of a verse from the Qur'an within a secular text, as we find in her biography of Zola, can be viewed as a secularized move toward a *cultural* Islam, as a way of saying 'I am Jewish but my culture is Islamic'; while the deployment of the same verse within a text by a writer in the *salafīyya* would carry a different valence and imply a very different subtext.⁵⁰

Arab Jewish writers of Hebrew maintained a direct (if ambivalent) dialogue with European Jews. Their writing replicated the European *haskala's* negotiation of the Enlightenment but, in an ironic twist, identified the European *Jew* with the idea of 'Europe.' At the same time, their writing was informed by the tropes of authenticity and reform then being promulgated throughout the reaches of the Ottoman Empire through the *nahḍa*, resulting in what might be seen as a hybrid discourse. They were culturally steeped in the Jewish canon, and used the language of the Bible and rabbinic texts to articulate their self-perceived place in the world. This was a cultural idiom they shared with their European Jewish readers. Yet despite initial appearances of 'sameness,' their Hebrew writing often evinces more 'otherness' *vis-à-vis* their intended audience than we find in the discourse of their counterparts, the Jewish writers of Arabic. Arab Jewish *maskilim* consistently adopted an apologetic stance, defending their own claims to enlightenment and differentiating their own path to modernity from that of their 'European brethren.'⁵¹

Ultimately, however, the similarities between works of the two groups transcend the gulf of language or of cultural idiom. In both Hebrew and Arabic, their texts are suffused with the nomenclature of progress and modernity, and haunted by the specter of Europe—the primary difference being that in the Hebrew case, 'Europe' comes embodied in the liminal figure of the European Jew, who is, for the Middle Eastern Jewish writer, both 'self' and 'other.' Moreover, the 19th-century and 20th-century Hebrew writing in Iraq betrays an uncanny resemblance to the attitudes of the *nahḍa*, and in particular the *salafīyya*, whether in its discursive emphasis on cultural authenticity and religious renewal or in its conflicted stance toward European modernity.⁵²

Bridging the *Nahḍa* and the *Haskala*: Questions of Cross-Cultural Influence

In the only comparative essay on the *nahḍa* and the *haskala*, Jaroslav Stetkevych maintains that prior to the arrival of statist Zionism in the Middle East, 'despite some essential

analogies between the *Haskalah* and the *Nahḍah* [...] there had been no physical encounter of the two literatures. Only similar forces were operating at a great distance.’ For Stetkevych, the true confluence of the *nahḍa* and the *haskala* could only take place tragically and retrospectively, ‘in a whirlpool of cross-purposes’ generated by the Arab–Israeli conflict.⁵³ Yet is it not possible that the two movements had any productive encounters before the tragedy of the Arab–Israeli conflict? And could not Arab Jews have provided a bridge, however small, between the *nahḍa* and the *haskala*? Despite the abundance of overlapping themes, ideas, tropes, and metaphors between the two, there seems to be little explicit cross-referencing during this period; it was only later in the 20th century that Jewish newspapers in literary Arabic referred both to the Arabic *nahḍa* and to the Hebrew *haskala* in those very terms. Even so, a few examples of cultural cross-mediation of *nahḍa* and *haskala* might occasion a reconsideration of Stetkevych’s negative premise.

Certainly, there are cases of writers of Hebrew who read Arabic, and *vice versa*. While Baghdadi Jews were at the apex of a brief flowering of Hebrew prose in dialogue with the European *haskala*, Rabbi Shlomo Bekhor Husin, the paradigmatic Baghdadi *maskil*, taught religious studies at the Baghdad *Alliance Israélite Universelle* school—whose director, Isaac Luria, was among the first Baghdadis (of any denomination) to read *al-Muqataf*.⁵⁴ Similarly, in 1908 Ya‘qūb Ṣannū‘ listed Dov Fromkin, editor of the Jerusalem-based Hebrew newspaper *Havatsalet* (Lily; 1863–1911), as one of the subscribers to his many popular Arabic journals.⁵⁵ Another Palestinian Hebrew newspaper, ‘Eliezer Ben Yehuda’s *Ha-Tsvi* (The Deer, or Beauty, 1884) had an Arabic supplement prior to World War One.⁵⁶ In Cairo, Murād Farag reprinted information from the Prussian Hebrew newspaper *Ha-Tsfira* (The Dawn; Warsaw, 1862–1934) in his Arabic journal *al-Tahdhīb*.

In Beirut, the center of *nahḍa* activity in the Jewish community was *Tiferet yisra’el*, known in Arabic as *al-Madrassa al-Waṭaniyya al-Isrā’īliyya*, a school headed by a rabbi named Zaki Kuhin (whose son Salim also became an Arabic writer). Kuhin composed a number of Hebrew plays staged by students at the school in the late 1870s and early 1880s, while another teacher at the school by the name of Anton Shihaybar (most probably a Christian) staged Arabic plays of his own composition. One of these, a drama called ‘Dhabīḥat Ishāq’ (The sacrifice of Isaac), was presented in 1883 by the students of the Beirut *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. The play is based on the biblical theme of the binding of Isaac, but modernizes and adapts it to a *nahḍa*-themed context, in which Abraham, when put to the test, tells Isaac and Sarah that he is taking Isaac to a boarding school in another land where he can learn the modern sciences (*‘ulūm al-‘aṣr*); this indeed is the ‘sacrifice’ the parents must make in the exalted name of Progress.⁵⁷ Given the fact that the students and their audiences viewed and participated in modern drama in both languages, could the *nahḍa*, as experienced in and reshaped by this particular community, have been inflected not only with Jewishness but also with the influence of the modern Hebrew revival?

Finally, we can also briefly consider the reverse case: to what extent does Jewish culture or Hebrew language figure in the Arabic writing of non-Jewish intellectuals in the *nahḍa*? Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, while these writers may have been unaware of the parallel developments taking place in Hebrew culture, the exploration of Jewishness in the *nahḍa* played a distinct role in the quest for identity that underscored the movement as a whole. Beyond a drive for modern knowledge, the *nahḍa* was a collective search for a modern selfhood, a regional project of ‘re-imagining’ past and present

that was jointly undertaken by Christian, Muslim, and Jewish intellectuals. As an inter-communal effort, it was thus also a re-examination of longstanding perceptions of the Other. When exponents of the *nahḍa* sought to define their community in different ways (e.g. 'Eastern,' 'Ottoman,' 'Islamic,' 'Semitic,' 'Arab') and to inscribe it into modernity, the region's Jewish heritage offered them a certain usable past. This new interest in the history of Jews and Judaism, moreover, emerged concurrently with the presence of Jewish writers in the movement. For Jewish writers of Arabic, the *nahḍa* seemed to offer an unprecedented forum not only for self-expression or for integration into the larger Arabic-speaking community, but for an enlightened representation of Jewishness to an audience that had historically known little by way of fact and suspected much on the basis of rumor. The new investigation of topics such as ancient and biblical Jewish history, the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, and the Bible and Talmud by leading journals such as *al-Hilāl* and *al-Muqataḥ* reveals an objective and self-consciously 'scientific' curiosity about things Jewish that seems quite refreshing today, given the highly politicized and polemical nature of much contemporary Arabic writing on Jewish topics.⁵⁸ In their own way, however, *nahḍa*-era representations of the Jews and Judaism were also political. While Jewish themes were but a few of the many threads in the vast tapestry of knowledge being woven, they filled a specific function in its design. Against the backdrop of a profound reassessment of the collective identity of the peoples of the region, the rediscovery of Jewish history served as a useful bridge between the Middle East and Europe, antiquity and the present; and, most of all, as a way to stake a claim in the partnership of modernity.

Conclusion

Through a cross-cultural reading of the themes and rhetorical practices of the Arabic *nahḍa* and the Hebrew *haskala-tehiya*, we can resituate the *nahḍa* in a comparative framework. This comparative approach is just as applicable to the study of any of the myriad cultures whose national histories were inaugurated by a modernizing 'revival.' Moreover, the moments of cultural interface between the *nahḍa* and the *haskala* that appear in the writings of Arab-Jewish intellectuals shed additional light on the potential for comparative study. Their textual output in both languages illuminates the cross-cultural circulation of ideas and tropes of 'modernity' and 'enlightenment' that informed the *nahḍa* and the *haskala* simultaneously. Ultimately, we may view the *nahḍa* through the prism of Arab modernity and its 'origins,' and examine features that distinguish it from its sister movements, while also relinquishing underlying assumptions of cultural singularity and particularism defined solely by linguistic borders. The *nahḍa* was at one and the same time an Arab movement, part of a multilingual *regional* discourse, and one of many global 'enlightenment' discourses that emerged contemporaneously in the colonial and postcolonial world.

Notes

1. In Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 36 (Sheehi's translation). As Sheehi explains, al-Bustānī (1819–1883), a foundational *nahḍa* thinker, tried to recuperate the history of Arab rationalist learning as exemplified during the 'Golden Age' of the Abbasid Empire in order to re-inscribe Arabs into universal history.
2. *Ha-Magid* 13, no. 22, cited in Hakak, *Nitsaney ha-yetsira*, 271.

3. For example, see Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 3; Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature*, 7–8; and Jusdanis, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture*, 105.
4. By ‘Arab Jew,’ I mean Jews who were born and came of age in the Arab world and whose first language was one or another of the Arabic dialects (including the variants of spoken Judeo-Arabic). For more on the problem of ‘Arab Jewish’ identity, see Gottreich, ‘Historicizing the Concept;’ Levy, ‘Historicizing the Concept;’ and Levy, ‘Jewish Writers in the Arab East.’
5. Stetkevych, ‘Confluence of Arabic and Hebrew Literature,’ 218.
6. From the root *n-h-d*, *nahḍa* literally means to ‘get up,’ ‘stand up,’ or ‘rise.’ Marilyn Booth translates *nahḍa* as ‘awakening’ and calls it ‘an intensive movement of intellectual self-searching on behalf of a variously defined larger community.’ Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied*, xxi. Many other writers avoid trying to define it. Albert Hourani never actually mentions the term *nahḍa* in his classic *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, considered the authoritative book on the subject. This, however, is because he focuses primarily on the movement’s reformist (rather than literary) aspect, a sphere whose overarching frame of reference was *iṣlāḥ* (reform) rather than *nahḍa*. See Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*.
7. As Nada Tomiche notes in her entry on *nahḍa* for the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Jurjī Zaydān (1861–1914) speaks of *nahḍa* in his monumental ‘Literary History of the Arabic Language’ and associates the term with the contribution of Western thought to the East. See Zaydān, *Tā’rīkh al-ādāb*; and Tomiche, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ‘Nahḍa.’
8. Feiner, ‘Towards a Historical Definition.’
9. Goldberg, *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries*, 23–24.
10. Kurzman, *Modernist Islam*.
11. Pelli, ‘How a Cultural Renaissance Preceded a National Renaissance,’ 92.
12. See Hamzah, ‘From ‘*Ilm* to *Sihafa*.’
13. Aziz al-Azmeh critiques the *aṣāla* discourse as essentializing, and sees the ideological trope of the *nahḍa* more as ‘one of ontological irredentism, it being the attempt to retrieve an essence that the vicissitudes of time and the designs of enemies, rather than change of any intrinsic nature, had caused to atrophy.’ al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, 43.
14. For a review of the nomenclature of reform in the *nahḍa*, see Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 25.
15. As Ilham Khury-Makdisi puts it: ‘one particularly influential historiographic trend has read the *nahḍa* as a precursor and maker of Arab nationalism.’ Khuri-Makdisi, ‘Levantine Trajectories,’ 8. Contesting this assumption, Khuri-Makdisi’s study ‘emphasizes the contingency of the *Nahḍa*’s nationalist “turn” and underlines its various aspects of contestation, including calls for social reform.’ *Ibid.*, 9. See also Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean*.
16. See Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks*, 6–11, for a succinct review of trends in the historiography of Arab nationalism, beginning with Antonius, of whom Kayali writes: ‘For more than two decades after it was published in 1938, this account of an awakening, or *nahḍa*, constituted the definitive history of the Arab nationalist movement.’ *Ibid.*, 6. Sheehi notes that Antonius’s book ‘has served as a catalyst for the revision of the historiography of Arabism’ and aptly suggests that its value ‘should be found not in its trustworthiness as a secondary source but in its eloquence and clarity as a primary source.’ Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 8–9.
17. Cf. Hourani, *Arabic Thought*; also Duri, *The Historical Formation of the Arab Nation*. Hourani’s work is now considered the standard work on the *nahḍa*; although it is not a comprehensive narrative and many scholars now consider it flawed, no one has produced a comprehensive counter-narrative. Stephen Sheehi’s aforementioned *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, while more limited in scope, offers a theoretical reading and critique of *nahḍa* discourse.
18. I refer here to the first two generations of historiographers of the *haskala*; for example, Yosef Klausner, H. N. Shapira, Baruch Kurzweil, Shim’on Halkin, and Pinhas Lahover.
19. Alter, *Modern Hebrew Literature*, 6–7 and 40–61.

20. Regarding the teleology of *haskala* and Zionism, see for example Band's summation of the positions of various historians of the *haskala*, most (if not all) of whom construe *haskala* as a necessary first step culminating in Zionism. Band, 'Beginnings of Modern Hebrew Literature,' 8–9 (my emphasis).
21. Feiner and Sorkin, *New Perspectives on the Haskalah*, 1.
22. Levy, 'Reorienting Hebrew Literary History.'
23. Feiner (a leading younger *haskala* historian) does note elsewhere that: '[the] branches of the east European Haskalah in some major North African communities are now being examined for the first time.' See Feiner, 'Towards a Historical Definition of the Haskalah,' 213. In this section, Feiner briefly considers some of the important characteristics of *haskala* in North Africa as well as the distinctive colonial context that helped shape them. He also touches on *haskala* in Jerusalem. *Ibid.*, 213–215. He does not, however, mention *haskala* elsewhere in the *mashriq*, or in India. Elsewhere in the chapter he notes that a literary network linking centers of *haskala* in Europe had 'by the end of the century extended to communities such as Salonika, Mogador, Tunis, Algiers, and Jerusalem.' *Ibid.*, 207.
24. For explicit representations of this viewpoint, see Meyer, 'When Does the Modern Period of Jewish History Begin?', 336; Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*, 4–5; and Gerber, 'Jews of North Africa and the Middle East,' 43.
25. Avrahami, 'Tehiyat ha-safa ha-'ivrit be-tunis,' 9–10.
26. *Ibid.*, 10; and Chetrit, 'Moderniyut le'umit mul moderniyut tsarfati.'
27. Halevi, 'Ha-meshamrim hevley shav,' 33. See also Goldberg, 'The Maskil and the Mequbbal.'
28. Benbassa, 'Process of Modernization,' 92–93.
29. For more on these newspapers and on Middle Eastern Hebrew writing, see Levy, 'Jewish Writers in the Arab East,' Chapter Five; and Levy, 'Reorienting Hebrew Literary History.'
30. Indeed, Jacob Landau writes: '[V]ery few Jews actively joined the Egyptian nationalist movement. A notable exception was Jacob (James) Sanua, a journalist, writer, and playwright, who worked throughout his life for the cause of Egyptian nationalism. His activities, however, had so little Jewish content that they lie outside the scope of this book.' Landau, *Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 12. The sole exception is in Moreh and Sadgrove, 'Jewish Contributions to Nineteenth-Century Arabic Theatre,' 17–31.
31. Norman Stillman notes that the Jews of the Arab world did not partake in the *nahḍa*, and were generally not uninterested in Arab cultural and intellectual life, calling Ya'qūb Ṣannū' a 'unique phenomenon.' Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, 32–33. See also Masters, *Christians and Jews*; and Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*.
32. See Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs*; and Behar and Benite, *Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought*. For some English-language recent works that help recontextualize Modern Middle Eastern Jewish intellectual history, see Levy, 'Edification between Sect and Nation;' Levy, 'Jewish Winters in the Arab East;' Levy, 'Historicizing the Concept;' Levy, 'Partitioned Pasts;' Levy, 'Reorientating Hebrew Literary History;' Bashkin, *New Babylonians*; and Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*.
33. There is an extensive body of literature on maskilic activity in North Africa, although much of it appears in Hebrew journals devoted to the study of Middle Eastern and North African Jewry (especially *Pe'amim* and *Mi-kedem u-mi-yam*), with a handful of others appearing in French-language and English-language journals and anthologies. For English-language chapters on North Africa, see Goldberg, *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries*. Yosef Tobi, 'The Flowering of Judeo-Arabic Literature' includes an extensive bibliography on the topic. See also Chetrit, 'Jewish Languages Enter the Modern Age.'
34. Gottreich, 'Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews,' 443.
35. *Ibid.*, 445.
36. Moreh and Sadgrove, *Jewish Contributions*, 29–31.
37. See Levy, 'Jewish Writers,' Chapters 2 and 3.
38. Moreh and Sadgrove, *Jewish Contributions*, 28.
39. *Ibid.*, 9.

40. Farag, *Dīwān Murād*; and Farag, *Ha-kodshiyot*.
41. For more on Farag and on his newspaper, see Levy, 'Edification Between Sect and Nation.'
42. Moyal, *Tā'rīkh ḥayāt Imīl Zūlā*. For more on Moyal, see Levy, 'Partitioned Pasts.'
43. Moyal, *al-Talmud*.
44. Ridā, *Tā'rīkh al-ustādh al-imām al-shaykh*; for more on the Association of Friendship and Understanding, see 819–829.
45. For example, Murād Mīkhā'īl, Mīr Baṣrī, Shalom Darwīsh, Ya'qūb Bilbul and Anwar Shā'ūl. See Berg, *Exile from Exile*, esp. 29–39; Snir, 'We Are Arabs Before We are Jews;' and Snir, *Araviyut, yahadut, tsiyonut*.
46. For example, the Kuwayti brothers, Salima Pasha (Murad), Dahud Husni, Togo Mizrahi, and Layla Murad.
47. For Mary Louise Pratt, transculturation is a phenomenon of the 'contact zone,' or the space of colonial encounters. See Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6.
48. Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 25; see Chapters 1–2. For Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, reform is *the* central and defining impetus of the *nahḍa*; her dissertation 'views the *Nahḍa* as primarily a conscious intellectual articulation, by thinkers belonging to a variety of categories, institutions and intellectual traditions, of the need to reform society.' Khuri-Makdisi, 'Levantine Trajectories,' 9. Yoav Di-Capua agrees: 'Whatever discussion took place on one level or another in literary salons, learned societies, welfare organizations, the burgeoning media, political clubs, colonial offices, Masonic lodges, and secret societies, it was driven by a social philosophy of progress whose mantra was reform, and it gradually replaced civilization with nation.' Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past*, 26.
49. Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 27 and 35.
50. See Moyal, *Tā'rīkh ḥayāt Imīl Zūlā*, 10–11.
51. See Levy, 'Jewish Writers in the Arab East,' Chapter 6, for a full analysis of this discourse, particularly in the writings of the Baghdadi *maskil* Shlomo Bekhor Husin.
52. This is also elaborated more fully in Levy, 'Jewish Writers in the Arab East,' Chapter 6.
53. Stetkevych's essay is a succinct and elegant comparison of the parallel development of modern Hebrew and Arabic literatures, highlighting the formal qualities of each; it does not elaborate on the *nahḍa* or *haskala* as ideological/political movements.
54. See Bashkin, 'Why Did Baghdadi Jews Stop Writing;' and L. M. Kenny, 'East versus West.'
55. Cited in Gendzier, *The Practical Visions*, 16.
56. Yehoshua, 'Skira 'al toldot ha-'itonut.'
57. Sadgrove, 'The Beirut Jewish Arab Theater;' and Moreh and Sadgrove, *Jewish Contributions*, 114–116.
58. For more on representations of Jewish themes in *nahḍa* discourse, see Levy, 'Jewish Writers in the Arab East,' Chapter 2.

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