

THE WEAKENING OF THE PARENTS' HOME AND THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF OTHER KINSHIP RELATIONS IN EPISTOLARY  
HEBREW LITERATURE IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, alongside the development of Hebrew prose, dozens of booklets of sample letters (*igronim*) were published in Eastern Europe. The original objective of this literary genre, which originated in classic Greek and Roman literature and existed in Hebrew since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was to teach and develop the Hebrew language. Yet the literary pretension of the authors, mostly teachers with pedagogical aspiration imbued with the spirit of the Enlightenment, drove many of them to include in their booklets complete stories, inspired by the epistolary novels that were popular in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

A motif commonly found in the *igronim* is the story of a youth who leaves his parent's home in a remote village to go to a developed city in which he can study and advance. This transition entails the understanding that the parent's home, and in particular the personality of the father, are not able to satisfy the social and cultural needs of the youth. Such a perspective derives from the ideological criticism leveled against the conservatism of contemporary Jewish community, and apparently drew inspiration from literary depictions of the disintegration of the old order in European society. The *igronim* testify to geographical distance, inter-generational conflict, anxiety over changes in the life and social group of the son, anger and frustration on the part of the estranged father, and the son's unattainable aspiration to please the father. At times, the appearance of a step-mother exacerbates the estrangement. The tie to the parents' home becomes distant and murky, and is replaced by an attraction to other personalities – an uncle, a brother-in-law, an older brother, and/or enlightened friends. His cousins and their friends become the young man's new social circle, and sometimes he marries one of his cousins. Thus, a 'society of equals' replaces the patriarchal society, progressiveness replaces conservatism, and enlightenment replaces cultural obscurity.

The authors tried to devise plots that included metaphors for the processes of social and cultural change, while they simultaneously strove to make a living from the sale of their booklets to students of Hebrew. Their positions, voiced through heroes in a didactic and flowery Hebrew style, were written in the hope of targeting the interest of young readers and, at the same time, educating them in the spirit of the Enlightenment.