
Rethinking the American Jewish Experience

A Note on “One of the People”

Samuel Schafler

President Alfred Gottschalk in his instructive essay “Redefining Ahad Ha-Am: Israel and the Diaspora as Coexisting Centers of Jewish Life” (*American Jewish Archives*, April 1988) accurately describes Ahad Ha-Am’s tendency to attack his opponents with “critical barbs” and his role in launching the B’nai Moshe, which was designed to be, in Gottschalk’s words, “an elite intellectual group.”

Yet, notwithstanding this recognition of Ahad Ha-Am’s intellectual elitism, President Gottschalk surprisingly attributes Asher Ginsburg’s adoption of the term Ahad Ha-Am as his pen name to his modesty: “he always considered himself as just Ahad Ha-Am, “one of the people.”

That is the popular explanation of the choice of Ahad Ha-Am as Asher Ginsburg’s pen name. Its charm probably accounts for its widespread acceptance. The problem is that it is almost certainly not true.

The Hebrew phrase *ahad ha-am* is found in Genesis 26:10. It is used by Abimelech in rebuking Isaac, who had misled him into thinking that Rebekah was not his wife: “See what you have done to us. One of the people [*ahad ha-am*] might have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.”

To this, Rashi comments that *ahad* here does not mean “one” but rather “the singular one, the one who singled out.” Thus, Rashi explains, *ahad ha-am* refers to “the one who is singled out from the people, that is, the king.”

Asher Ginsburg was too learned a student of classical Hebrew texts for us to assume that he was unaware of Rashi’s comment. When he chose Ahad Ha-Am as his pen name, he did so with full knowledge that any Jew versed in the Bible and Rashi’s commentary would understand it in the light of Rashi’s explanation.

The austere and cerebral Asher Ginsburg was not a modest man. He was an elitist who proudly chose to be known as Ahad Ha-Am, the

singular one among the people.

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