Maguid Micharim (alt. Maguid micharim, Heb. 'The Preacher of Righteousness') was an Algerian newspaper in Judeo-Arabic that appeared in Oran during the years 1895 and 1896, possibly even later then that, edited and published by Eliyahu (Eli) Karsenty. Initially named Le Tétouanais (Fr. 'The Tétouanian'), it soon became Maguid Micharim, ultimately resuming its former name. The reason for these name changes was apparently due to issues of censorship and the constant threat posed by informants. At least on one occasion, the editor stated that he had been forced to cease printing due to controversies that had gripped the community (issue no. 11 from 1895). Appearing every Friday, the newspaper was sold in a number of locations in Oran and its environs, as well as in the capital city of Algiers.

The editor Eliyahu (Elie) Karsenty, owned a printing press in the city, and we know of at least two other newspapers edited and printed by him as early as the 1880s, both too in Judeo-Arabic: al-Wahrānī (Ar. 'The Oranite'), al-Maggid al-Wahrānī (Jud.-Ar. 'The Oranite Preacher'). The titles of Karsenty’s newspapers reflect the cultural impact of ha-Maggid (Heb. 'The Preacher'), the widespread and earliest weekly newspaper of the Hebrew Enlightenment (Haskalah) movement in Eastern Europe. Like its model and partial namesake, the Oranite Maguid Micharim, featured an editorial on its front page. Inside the reader would find information about the Jews of other localities in Algeria, about Jewish communities abroad—especially the Jews of Palestine—and news items of general interest concerning world events. The two last pages were devoted to selections of stories published in serial form, short pieces about unusual events or crimes, such as murder, natural disasters, or accidents, congratulatory notes on marriages and births, obituaries, as well as commercial advertisements.

We have no information regarding actual circulation. But despite its intended goal of reaching beyond its immediate urban environ, Maguid Micharim did not reach much further than the boundaries of Oran. Karsenty was the only regular contributor to the newspaper and only rarely did another writer substantially contributed. The newspaper frequently featured various noms de plume for the writers of its columns, since Karsenty was the author of all of them.

The personal and long column written by Karsenty, which usually commenced each issue of the paper, was characterised by a clear polemical tone, in which he tended to settle accounts with different individuals and groups in the local community. Although this period saw the outbreak of severe incidents of anti-Semitism in Algeria as a whole and in Oran specifically, Karsenty’s arrows were hardly aimed externally, at the non-Jewish anti-Semites, but rather internally at various figures in the Jewish community of Oran. Karsenty was aligned with its leader, Simon Kanouï (1842–1915), an important figure in the history of 19th century Algerian Jewry. The antagonists of the newspaper were Kanouï’s opponents—first and foremost, a group of Moroccan Jewish immigrants from the city of Tétouan. According to Karsenty, these Jews had arrived in Oran in an impoverished state, ultimately becoming successful; yet, instead of being grateful to the city’s native Jews, who had accepted them into their midst, they became condescending and sought to separate themselves from the
local population. Another adversary of the newspaper was the rabbi Moses Netter, brought from France in order to serve as the head of the Jewish religious council, known as the Jewish Consistory. Karsenty demonstrated a complete lack of esteem for Netter's religious authority, accused him of ignorance, lack of observance and corruption, calling for his removal.

In his main column, Karsenty frequently described the difficulties faced by the weaker strata of Oran's Jewish community. He appeared as a defender of the poor, railing against inequality and the exploitation of the town's poor, demanding the release of the income held by the city's charity fund and adamant about examining its expense accounts. Karsenty placed the responsibility for the communal crisis primarily upon the break-down of its traditional structure, as well as the weakening of its system of traditional Jewish education. According to him, the exploitation and the inequality that thrived in Oran were a direct result of the processes of secularisation and assimilation in Jewish society.

The newspaper Maguid Micharim was a typical product of the development of a Judæo-Arabic-language press in late 19th century North Africa. This means of communication was innovated by Jewish intellectuals, who, despite the colonial situation, clung to their original and native cultural orientation with its dual linguistic focus—Hebrew and Judæo-Arabic—as a path to modernisation. Karsenty is a typical example of this conservative élite. As an active member of the post Crémieux Decree (1870) generation, he found fit to issue a newspaper in the local Jewish Arabic dialect. His direct and popular writing style reflects, of course, the situation of the Jewish languages of Algeria during this time. There is no doubt that the constituent weight of Arabic, Hebrew, and French in the language of the Jews was changing in a dynamic and constant way and texts of the kind that this newspaper provide a heretofore absent window unto the Jewish linguistic situation in French Algeria. Karsenty, a social activist, who possessed an education and commanded traditional Jewish sources, local languages, Halakah, and Jewish traditions, does not stand out for writing is particularly sophisticated or of broad nature and breath. Nevertheless, from the pages of the issues of his newspaper, internal aspects of the lives of the Jews of Algeria, which until now were unavailable to researchers, can now be discerned.

Yossi Toledano (with contribution from Rabbi Eliyahu Marciano)

The Rediscovery of Maguid Micharim

Until about a year ago, it was thought that the issues of this newspaper had been lost. The collection of the issues presented here was in the possession of Rabbi Jacob Soffer, one of the noted Jewish Maskilim of Oran. When his descendants migrated to France, Rabbi Soffer's collection went with them. It eventually found its way into the hands of one of his descendants, Professor Jacques Soffer of Marseilles, who recently contacted our website 'Historical Jewish Press', and suggested generously to allow the collection to be scanned and uploaded to the website. Professor Jacques Soffer wishes to express here his gratitude to Professor Nicole Serfaty who was the first to notice the importance of this newspaper on her visit to his home in Marseille in June 2011. Without her help, Maguid Micharim would have not been rediscovered.

Allow us to use the case of Maguid Micharim in order to encourage you to look in your own homes and private libraries for similarly rare collections of yesterday's newspapers.

Enter Newspaper