לקט

יִידישע שטודיעס הײַנט

Jiddistik heute

Yiddish Studies Today

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Jiddistik Edition & Forschung Yiddish Editions & Research יִידיש אויסגאַבעס אוּן פֿאָרשונג

Der vorliegende Sammelband לקט eröffnet eine neue Reihe wissenschaftlicher Studien zur Jiddistik sowie philologischer Editionen und Studienausgaben jiddischer Literatur. Jiddisch, Englisch und Deutsch stehen als Publikationssprachen gleichberechtigt nebeneinander.

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Yiddish Editions & Research

Herausgegeben von Marion Aptroot, Efrat Gal-Ed,
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Band 1

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Shlomo Berger

Religion, Culture, Literature

On Yehoyesh's Preface to His Yiddish Bible Translation

The publication of Yehoyesh's Bible translation in 1926 is certainly a prominent moment in modern Yiddish culture. The Yiddish reading public was offered a version of the Bible that could serve as an exemplary text of modern Yiddish secular literature and culture. The translation of this holy (or 'holy') text of Judaism could function as a storehouse of language conventions, a guidebook for questions of style, suggesting modes of usages which would enrich new and original Yiddish written texts and in general enhance the status of modern Yiddish. Essentially detached from overt religious connotations, Yehoyesh's Yiddish Bible is a literary masterpiece that could also have served as a base text of a Yiddish national literature.

1. Vernacular Bibles and Their Cultural Roles

Translations of the Bible have served as initiating texts of literatures and cultures in various European vernaculars. Indeed, in Protestant Europe translations of the Bible were important landmarks in the history of a language and its subsequent literature: Luther's Bible is a famous and celebrated focal point of German literature; the King James Bible is a celebrated moment of modern English letters, and the Dutch States' Bible is the official text of the Dutch Republic, its Protestant churches and Dutch letters. Once these translations appeared, it was as if God has spoken in German, English and Dutch. Hebrew remained important, if at all, only to theologians wishing to pursue an academic study of the Bible. In all cases, the Bible in the vernacular performed a dual function: it served both as the authoritative religious text of the local culture, and, later on, as an exemplum for a nascent literature in these vernaculars.[1]

The idea of exploiting the Bible as a founding text of Yiddish culture had already been expressed by Y. L. Peretz in his speech delivered at the 1908 Czernowitz conference.[2] He said:[3]

1 See Burke 2004: 102–106.
2 On the conference, see Fishman 2008: 384–385; Weiser and Fogel 2010.
3 Peretz's text was originally published in Nathan Birnboym's *Vokhnblat* 2 (Czernowitz

מיר ווילן אײַך דעריבער פֿאָרשלאָגן די איבערזעצונג פֿון אַלע ווירקלעכע קולטור־גיטער פֿון אונדזער גאָלדן־פֿרייַער פאַרגאַנגענהייט, איבער הויפּט פֿון דער ביבל.

I, therefore, want to propose the translation into Yiddish of all our cultural treasures from our free, golden past, primarily the translation into Yiddish of the Bible.

Peretz went on to declare:

און אין דער שפּראַך ווילן מיר אונדזער אוצר זאַמלען, אונדזער קולטור־באַשאַפֿן, אונדזער נשמה וויַטער ווועקן [...] אַזוי מוזן אין איר איבערגעטראָגן ווערן אונדזערע אַלטע קולטור־גיטער פֿון דער גרויסער פֿאַרגאַנגענהייט [...]

and in this language we want to assemble our treasures, to create our culture, to wake up our soul [...] and through her our old cultural achievements from the great past should be translated [...]

Subsequently, he also implied another chronology of modern Yiddish literature:

יִידיש הייבט זיך נישט אָן מיט אייַזיק מאיר דיק. דאָס חסידישע מעשׂהלע – דאָס איז דער ‚בראשׁית'. שבחי בעל שם און אַנדערע ווונדער־גע־שיכטן זענען פֿאָלקס־דיכטונגען, דער ערשטער פֿאָלקסדיכטער איז ר׳ נחמן פֿון בראַצלאַוו מיט זייַנע זיבן בעטלער.

Yiddish does not begin with Ayzik-Meyer Dik. The Hasidic tale, that is the 'Genesis.' The tales in praise of the Baal-Shem and other wonder-tales are folk poetry. The first folk poet is Reb Nakhmen of Bratslav with his seven beggars.

Peretz's arguments aimed at demonstrating the primary position of the Bible as a Jewish text, that Yiddish culture is a Jewish culture, and the fact that Orthodox tales told in Yiddish are part and parcel of any modern Yiddish culture.

How one should read the Bible when one does not believe in a revealed god anymore remains an open question. Intellectuals of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* suggested the subsuming of religion within a larger system of culture, where belief is only one aspect and never the only defining one and should be examined in historical terms and perspectives.[4] Another argument would insist that the Bible is a repository of ancient Jewish culture, a source of ideas and exemplary stories that can be reinterpreted in the modern world according to a contemporary

1908). I quote the text printed in YIVO's book on the conference (די ערשטע יִידישע שפּראַך־קאָנפֿערענץ: באַריכטן, דאָקומענטן און אָפּקלאַנגען פֿון דער טשערנאָוויצער קאָנפֿערענץ) published in Vilna 1931. On Peretz, Yiddish, and the conference, see also Schumacher-Brunhes 2010 and Caplan 2010.

4 See Schorsch 1994; Schulte 2003.

and progressive worldview. Indeed, editing דווקא, a Yiddish philosophical journal in Buenos Aires, the editor Shlomo Suskovich believed that it was a legitimate procedure because a rational modern Jew knows that biblical books consist of myths (which nobody is called upon to believe), but also contain philosophical ideas that are relevant for any modern Jew and were and still are essential to Western philosophy. Divorcing biblical stories from their religious connotations was a possible and even necessary act for a modern enlightened Jew. Moreover, Suskovich argued, this procedure would better serve the Bible, adding to the 'holy' book intellections that progressive modes of thinking could unveil.[5] The future of Jewish, *mutatis mutandis* Yiddish, culture also belongs to well-argued philosophy employing old religious ideas within a new and rational framework. Nothing is lost in modernity – on the contrary, everything gains a new and better philosophical understanding.

2. The Position of Yiddish as Language of High Literature and Culture

This claim also fits Joshua A. Fishman's appreciation of the Czernowitz conference.[6] While Suskovich is preoccupied with philosophy, the Yiddish sociolinguist argues that the conference's goal was the creation of a basis that would enhance Yiddish high-cultural enterprises. For centuries Yiddish operated as a vehicle of low literature, of folklore, a daily vernacular that did not aspire to challenge Hebrew's hegemonic position within the Jewish cultural polysystem.[7] The conference should have launched Yiddish in a new direction, toward conquering a position within the realm of high culture, thus enabling a modern Yiddish literature to occupy a position alongside Hebrew as a true vehicle of Jewish culture. The conference's success should have resulted in the transfer of Yiddish literature from low to high status and not necessarily in an increase in the numbers of Yiddish speaking people.

Whether he knew the article or not, Peretz's call in 1908 could not fully answer the criticism of Yiddish and its supporters as formulated by Aḥad Ha'am in his 1895 essay "The Language Quarrel."[8] The cultural Zionist scoffed at the Eastern European Yiddish intellectuals who refused

5 Repeated discussions of the matter are found in Suskovich's Yiddish articles about whether or not there is a Jewish philosophy, which appeared in the Journal *Davke*: Suskovich 1954: 289–308; 1957: 202–222; and 1974: 1–17 as well as in two of his Spanish articles: Suskovich 1988 and 1992. On *Davke*, see Berger 2007 and 2009.

6 Fishman 1980.

7 On polysystem, see Even-Zohar 1990.

8 Aḥad Ha'am 1956.

to acknowledge the ongoing role and importance of Hebrew and the cultural assets latent in this language. Employing a full dose of irony, Aḥad Ha'am put words in the mouth of an imaginary Yiddishist:

יכולים אנו להתקיים כאומה מיוחדת גם בלי עזרת הקרן הלאומית העתיקה, ואין הדבר חסר אלא שנעקור מלבנו את 'הגאותנות האריסטו־קרטית' של אומה בת תרבות מימי עולם ונציין לעצמנו כאלו פתאום, לפני ארבע מאות שנה, צמחה אומתנו מאדמת פולין וליטא ולשון יהודית־אשכנזית בפיה. וכי מחוייבת אומה דוקא להביא כתב־יחס עד לתקופת הפירמידות של מצרים? ובכן, הרי לכם, בלי יגעה יתרה, בסיס חדש לקיומנו הלאומי: לשון לאומית! לשון החיה לא בספרים, כי אם בפי העם. ואם נקדיש כל כוחנו לזו, לסלסלה ולרוממה ולהַגדיל רכושה הספרותי, – נגיע ברבות הימים לברוא בה 'קרן לאומית' חדשה ומחודשת, שתפרנסנו בכבוד וברוח, תחת העצמות היבשות, שהורישו לנו 'העברים' ללקקן עד סוף כל הדורות

We can go on and exist as a special nation without the assistance of the old national capital. We just have to uproot from our hearts this 'aristocratic pride' of an ancient nation, and picture ourselves as a nation that suddenly, four hundred years ago, arose in Poland and Lithuania while speaking the Jewish Ashkenazi language. Should a nation indeed present a genealogy going back to the age of the Pyramids in Egypt? Here, without too much trouble, a new basis for our national existence [is born]: a national language! It is a language that does not live in books but is spoken by the people. And if we dedicate all our efforts to this one, praising it, lifting it up and augmenting its literary assets, in the years to come we will be able to create it as a new and renewed 'national capital' which will nourish our honor and spirit instead of the dry bones that the 'Hebrews' left us to lick our fingers unto the end of time.

Peretz wanted to translate the nation's treasures and make them an integral part of modern Yiddish culture, and on the face of it he answered Aḥad Ha'am's criticism. But, in fact, he did not. Aḥad Ha'am did not believe in translation. Firstly, why translate at all, when Jews should read the Bible in Hebrew? Secondly, he did not believe that translations would be able to safeguard old Jewish treasures. Translating into Yiddish and subsequently forgetting the Hebrew would, at best, produce a second-rate culture. Even if spoken by millions, a spoken vernacular cannot produce (high) culture of its own accord. Moreover, Eastern European Ashkenazi history did not originate in Yiddish; Hebrew had been and still remained the basis of this Ashkenazi culture.[9] Throughout the centuries Ashkenazi culture was bilingual,[10] and according to

9 Hebrew as an identity marker: Myhill 2004: 13–57, 126–141.
10 Turniansky 1994: esp. 81–87.

Aḥad Ha'am the new modern Jewish culture should be monolingual and adopt Hebrew as its sole linguistic instrument.[11] Opting for a new modern bilingualism that would include the use of Yiddish alongside a modern European vernacular would dilute the Jewish nature of Yiddish culture.

Aḥad Ha'am was no Orthodox Jew and therefore he aimed his darts at the language question and not questions of belief. In fact, he shared Peretz', Yehoyesh's, and Suskovich's efforts to create a modern secular Jewish culture. Still, it would be too easy to do away with Aḥad Ha'am's criticism as reflecting merely a Zionist point of view. Aḥad Ha'am felt that Yiddish could not simply be compared to German, English or Dutch. Yiddish was an internal Jewish linguistic instrument, and the distance between Hebrew and Yiddish culture was far smaller than that between Latin and the European vernaculars. Indeed, the proximity between Hebrew and Yiddish could be interpreted as problematic for the Ashkenazi vernacular. The continuous employment of Hebrew (beginning with usage of the Hebrew alphabet) might have been responsible for hindering the development of a Yiddish (high) culture, and neglecting the holy tongue in which its cultural treasures were written might "dejudaize" Yiddish and allow it to turn into a sterile vernacular that would never be able to create any (high) culture.

3. Yehoyesh's Preface

Yehoyesh's preface to his integral Yiddish translation amounts to his אני מאמין, a declaration of his method, aims and ideas about Yiddish culture. The Yiddish poet attempted to formulate another equation, which would include Hebrew, Yiddish and Jewish culture and serve modern Yiddish secular culture as a whole.[12] Four points, however, should be mentioned at the outset.

First, the page-long preface (הקדמה) includes two footnotes at the bottom of the text. The first reveals that, in fact, the preface is a crude version of a text that was left unfinished at Yehoyesh's death. The text as it stands may have been only a work in progress, but nevertheless it was deemed publishable by the editors of the 1941 volume, Yehoyesh's widow and his son-in-law. Indeed, the Yehoyesh Bible's first two editions (1926 and 1938) are unprefaced. Moreover, both include only the Yiddish text, while the 1941 edition (in fact two editions) also includes

11 Bartal 1993: 141–150.

12 On the study of prefaces as literary texts with profound book-historical meaning, see Genette 1997 and Kinser 2004.

Yehoyes, *Heores tsum Tanakh* (1949)

the Bible's Hebrew Masoretic text. Thus, the 1941 edition is an ambitious project that deserved the translator's preface in whatever form.[13]

Second, the second footnote points out the fact that Yehoyesh left four volumes of notes and remarks on the process of translation, indicating problems he had confronted and choices he had made in translating. The editors promise to try to publish these volumes as well, and indeed they were later published, giving scholars of the Bible and translation theory a unique document to study. Together with the preface, they expose the project's authorial point of view.[14]

Third, in the course of his translation project, Yehoyesh published a Yiddish version of the book of Isaiah[15] and a volume including renditions of Job, Song of Songs, Ruth and Ecclesiastes (קהלת)[16] in 1910. In the preface to the first book, the Yiddish translator argues that because it is a word-by-word and accurate translation of the original, the Yiddish version can help the public to read the Hebrew biblical text. Thus, he actually repeats an old justification for the publication of Yiddish books from the sixteenth century on: a Yiddish text first and foremost has a utilitarian purpose. Thus, the traditional Ashkenazi Hebrew and Yiddish bilingualism is upheld. Moreover, Yehoyesh also argues that this translation of the biblical book can benefit readers of Yiddish who cannot follow the old and archaic Yiddish versions anymore (די אַלטמאָדישע יידיש־טײַטשע איבערזעצונגען). He is referring, of course, to the tradition of חומש־טײַטש,[17] a tradition that has been continuously employed in the חדר from the Middle Ages to the present day. Yehoyesh was apparently looking for potential readers from both groups: those who wanted to and could read the Bible in Hebrew, and those who do not read Hebrew anymore and also had problems reading חומש־טײַטש.[18]

Fourth, the design of the 1941 edition of Yehoyesh's Bible continues and espouses the bilingual tradition of Ashkenazi culture. The printed page consists of two text fields: one including the Yiddish translation, and the other comprising the original Hebrew text rendered according to the Masoretic tradition. Visually, the Hebrew text occupies a more

13 The first edition (1926/1927) was published in eight volumes. The first volume includes a page with the table of contents in Yiddish and a Hebrew and Yiddish list of the weekly portions. The 1938 edition (also called the פֿאָלקס־אויסגאַבע, in ten volumes) is identical to the first one. The 1941 edition includes both the original Hebrew text and the Yiddish translation of the Bible. It was printed twice: one edition was "specially printed for דער טאָג," and the other is an edition of the מאָרגן־זשורנאַל; both were Yiddish newspapers published in New York.

14 Yehoyesh 1949.

15 Yehoyesh 1910a.

16 Yehoyesh 1910b.

17 Noble 1943; Turniansky 2007.

18 See also discussion below.

dominant position on the printed page. As in many old Yiddish books, the Yiddish text surrounds the Hebrew and sends out the message that it is secondary to the Hebrew original. Of course one could argue that the page layout may be approached in two divergent ways, reflecting the producers' and the envisaged reader's points of view. While the first wished to demonstrate the primacy of this book's connection to the Hebrew text and expose the translator's knowledge of both Hebrew and Yiddish, so complete that he need not hesitate to submit his translation to the scrutiny of the expert reader,[19] the text's ordinary reader, on the other hand, may have ignored the Hebrew text altogether and concentrated on the rendition of the Bible in his/her vernacular.[20] It can be conjectured that the editors of the 1941 volume did not necessarily think in religious terms, but hoped to promote modern scholarly and high-literary ambitions.[21] To include the unfinished text of the translator's preface was, then, a desirable and justified move.

The ordinary reader may also have ignored Yehoyesh's preface altogether. This text could be deemed irrelevant. Still, because he had purchased a bilingual edition, the ordinary Yiddish reader was nevertheless continuously reminded that the Yiddish text was a version of the Bible given to Moses on Mount Sinai and written down in לשון־קודש. Therefore, the translator's preface was worthwhile to read and study.

Beginning with a defense justifying the reader's wish for a long and well-argued preface which he is not going to get,[22] Yehoyesh enumerates the arguments he is including in this short text: his *motives* (מאָ־טיוון) for engaging in the project, the *plan* (פּלאַן) he devised for it, the work's *purpose* (צוועק) and the *methods* (מעטאָד) he used. He declares that translating the Bible was always his major dream, and he fosters a

19 Indeed, in the printers' preface (Yehoyesh 1941: II–III) they claim that Yehoyesh's biggest dream was to publish his translation together with the Bible's Hebrew original text (תנ״ך־איבערזעצונג צוזאַמען מיטן פּנים […]). Moreover, they argue that the completion of this project also "closes a cycle of more than fifty years of work on the Bible by Yehoyesh and those who were engaged with both existing Yiddish editions (of 1926 and 1938) and the current edition."

20 Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to remember that the first two attempts to offer the Ashkenazi public an integral and straightforward Yiddish translation of the Bible (the Amsterdam Yiddish Bible translations by Blitz [1678] and Witzenhausen [1679]) were commercial flops. It is assumed that very few copies were sold because, among other things, neither edition included the original Hebrew text of the Bible; thus both editions became undesirable artifacts. Apparently even when Ashkenazim could not really understand the Hebrew text, they were still emotionally attached to Hebrew and wanted their Yiddish Bible to include the original text as well. On both Bible translations, see Aptroot 1990 and 1993, Timm 1993.

21 Later the edition was also supported by the publication of הערות צום תנ״ך (Yehoyesh 1949).

22 Although it is an unfinished text, the opening already demonstrates the rhetorical approach the translator employed to win his potential reader's good-will.

twofold love towards the project: love of the most beautiful and most human book of Jews and non-Jews alike,[23] and a love for the Yiddish language. Yehoyesh contends that each language needs a backbone (חוט־השדרה) that binds it together. Each language is constantly changing and its backbone helps it keep the form that makes it what it is: it is "eternity in the midst of temporality" (אייביקייט אין מיטן פֿון צײַטלעבקייט). Only a biblical style can serve as the Ashkenazi vernacular's backbone. Indeed, Yehoyesh confirms that the language earns new treasures and loses fading ones one after another, but if the language wishes to keep its hereditary honor (יִחוס) and does not want to commence its own history anew each morning,[24] its backbone serves as a safeguard. Still, if one aspires to turn the Bible into the authoritative text of Yiddish letters, it must be true to the original. The Yiddish Bible should neither add to the text nor remove the smallest fragment of the original. It is loyalty to the Hebrew text that creates the Yiddish biblical style.

Moreover, a new Yiddish Bible is not and should not be shaped following present language usage only, but must include the treasures of all the old Yiddish books (i. e., in Western and Old Yiddish): the idiomatic wealth of older translations (i. e., the חומש־טײַטש), ethical books (מוסר־ספֿרים), stories (מעשׂיות), sayings, idioms, jokes and the like. Thus, although adhering to modern norms of linguistic accuracy within the translation processes, the text nevertheless should not lack the sharpness, homeliness and traditionalism of the צאנה וראנה language.[25] A Yiddish Bible must help in fixing words and idioms that would otherwise disappear, words that the מלמד used in the חדר and which are now disappearing, along with the חדר itself. Yehoyesh envisaged his Yiddish rendition as performing the tasks of a glossary, a historical dictionary, and a thesaurus. Moreover, the Bible's language should be a synthesis of all spoken dialects, with each dialect contributing its own treasure to the Yiddish Bible. Thus, this Yiddish Bible may serve as the basis of a new common Yiddish high language. And, besides being a wonderful story, the Bible also has its own rhythm and music. which should be preserved and transferred in the process of "*faryidishung*" (פֿאַריידישונג).[26]

23 Thus he is pulling the Bible out of any overt Jewish religious environment.

24 This is an echo of Aḥad Ha'am's criticism on the supposed emergence of a Yiddish nation in Eastern Europe; see above.

25 Yehoyesh had no criticism of the book's subject(s) and intentions. Of course, he was interested in the book's language and style, which he apparently idealized. Indeed, Yehoyesh refused to accept any barriers between high and popular culture, or between scholarly and high literary ambitions and a feeling of הײַמישקייט.

26 Is פֿאַריידישונג ('yiddishizing') less than full-fledged translation and, thus, closer to the Hebrew original? Evidently, Yehoyesh wished to stress the continuous Jewish character of his Yiddish Bible and, consequently, the necessary contacts between Yiddish culture and Judaism.

The Yiddish Bible should become a manual for composition in both poetry and prose.

Several points in Yehoyesh's manifesto deserve elaboration. In the first place, it should be noted that the Bible does not seem to possess any obvious religious intellections in the translator's mind.[27] The Yiddish rendition of the Torah is not offered in order to deepen an Ashkenazi reader's knowledge of, let alone belief in, God's universe. Yehoyesh certainly respects the old and traditional society in which a *melamed*'s lesson in the חדר was meaningful and consequently important to preserve. But it is the *melamed*'s speech itself – the words and expressions he uses – and not the religious content of his lesson that is significant for the purposes of translation. Yehoyesh is not advocating any Orthodox way of life, and he does not locate the synagogue in the center of Jewish life; his approach is culturally oriented. The linguistic contacts between Hebrew and Yiddish, and between Old Yiddish and Modern Yiddish, are instruments that may safeguard Yiddish's Jewish essence.

Texts and their languages occupy a central position in Yehoyesh's intellectual and mental system. Jewish culture is understood within its historical framework, and therefore the translator's worldview is necessarily diasporic. Arnold Eisen claims that, outside the Land of Israel, the Torah in its broadest sense functioned as the Jewish territory, and *mutatis mutandis* this is also true for Jewish texts and books in Jewish languages.[28] Indeed, Yehoyesh aims to achieve a cultural unity within spatial and temporal Jewish life. If the Hebrew Bible is basically associated with Erets Yisroel, it is rewarding (even obligatory?) to strive to employ the biblical style in Yiddish as well and thus connect the center of Jewish consciousness with the peripheries of Jewish life in different Ashkenazi locations of dwelling. The Yiddish Bible may, then, earn a respectable position in the diasporic (metaphorical) territory. Therefore, Yiddish authors are also encouraged, and in fact compelled, to read and study old texts, become acquainted with their own language's history and, consequently, enrich their own contemporary culture. Yehoyesh the man of letters followed in Ber Borokhov's footsteps[29] and demanded that Yiddish-speaking intellectuals study literature written and published before Eastern European Ashkenazim launched a revolution and introduced the Modern Yiddish that conquered the Jewish world from

27 Nevertheless, because it included the Hebrew text and was proofread by a rabbi, the editors did add a title page mentioning the rabbi's name, thus insisting on the double nature (Hebrew-Yiddish) of the edition. This title page can be interpreted as a rabbinic approbation.

28 Eisen 1986: 35–56.

29 Borokhov 1968.

the nineteenth century on.[30] Seemingly, Yehoyesh's mission was also to demonstrate the unity of Yiddish in diachronic terms. The language he used is the vernacular that emerged in the tenth century. The chasm introduced at the beginning of the nineteenth century between Old and Western Yiddish on the one hand and Eastern European and Modern Yiddish on the other represented a change, a development, a revolution within one and the same language. He wanted Yiddish to be based on biblical style. In fact, it is not easy to describe the sort of Yiddish Yehoyesh had in mind. We can only surmise that he wished Yiddish to be based on a linguistic foundation that he most probably would denote as 'classical': grammatically correct, replete with idiomatic forms, using a rich vocabulary that may occasionally be archaic but nonetheless befits high-literary projects, leaning towards a poetical style or a refined prose that displays the erudition of authors and readers alike.

Language, knowledge of one's own history, employing literary gems of the past – all are essential for a literature's life in any vernacular. The combination of the eternal existence of a literature's backbone and the temporal circumstances that necessarily bring change to any literary system is valid for Modern Yiddish as well. Moreover, the bond between Hebrew and Yiddish within the Jewish polysystem enables Yiddish not only to legitimize its position but also to excel. Indeed, Yehoyesh echoes ideas which were voiced before and after him by Bal-Makhshoves, Shmuel Niger and Dov Sadan, who believed that one can identify a single Jewish literature in two or more languages.[31] Dan Miron sees competition and antagonism between Yiddish and Hebrew (and Jewish literature composed in other non-Jewish languages), which drove both to higher levels of creativity. But even in this model of conflict, both languages cannot easily be separated from each other.[32]

Evidently, Yehoyesh is aspiring to come up with a Yiddish text that could serve as an example for high-literary projects in Modern Yiddish. He does not discard Old Yiddish forms that were (and still are) labeled as folkloristic, belonging to a low-cultural Ashkenazi sphere. He does not do away with religious writings or Yiddish dialects. He is advocating a synthesis of all the linguistic features of Yiddish throughout the ages as found in each and every genre of literature.[33] And because the Bible

30 Here again Aḥad Ha'am's criticism surfaces, as well as Peretz's chronology of modern Yiddish literature.

31 Bal-Makhshoves 1981 (the article was firstly published in פּעטראָגראַדער טאָגבלאַט in 1918); Niger 1941; Sadan 1949.

32 Miron 2010. Miron also takes these critics to task, showing their inability to notice that there is a Jewish literature written in English, French, German and other 'non-Jewish' languages, and that this literature is not intended only for a Jewish reading public.

33 Whether he in fact followed his own advice is another question: see, for instance, Rozental 1950; Rozental 1971.

is the Jewish text *par excellence*, it should be the base text for modern secular Yiddish literature as well.

4. Yiddish: A Jewish Language!

In 1943 Isaac Bashevis Singer published two articles discussing the future of Yiddish literature. In one, he discussed Yiddish literature in Poland,[34] and in the other Yiddish in America.[35] The underlying message in both articles is pessimistic. For the future Nobel laureate, the possible divorce of Yiddish from Jewish culture could not but bring Modern Yiddish literature down. Discussing the Polish situation, Bashevis takes the innovators of Yiddish literature to task. They want to engage in high-literary experiments, but their readers come from elsewhere, from the shtetl and traditional life. Thus, if writers had operated within the Jewish tradition, they could have found a reading public. The language and subject matter should have been Jewish in essence. Bashevis has even greater difficulty foreseeing a future for a Yiddish literature in America, because the language does not possess a vocabulary capable of describing the new and modern world and giving it a meaning, a Jewish meaning. On the one hand, "words assume other idiomatic connotations. Others are completely forgotten, or appear only in particular categories and in disharmony with the original lexicon."[36] Moreover, "words and phrases are so tightly bound to the Old Country that, when used here, they appear not only to be imported from another land, but borrowed from a completely alien conceptual system."[37] Bashevis knows why this is happening: "There is a split, a division in the mindset of Yiddish prose writers who try to write about America. The graceful words have *too much* [sic!] tradition; the new ones are somewhat strange and tawdry and ungainly to boot."[38] American Yiddish authors write about Eastern Europe, the Old World, "not in order 'to escape reality' but because in these places and periods Jews spoke Yiddish, while here they speak either English or a jargon which no true writer can love – and where the word is not loved, it cannot be a source of creativity."[39] Bashevis is crude and blunt: "The idea that Yiddish literature – and indeed Yiddish culture – can be cosmopolitan, an equal among equals, was from the

34 Bashevis Singer, 1943b: 468–475, in English, Bashevis Singer 1995: 113–127; on both of Singer's essays, see Roskies 1995: 279–282.
35 Bashevis Singer 1943a: 2–13, in English, Bashevis Singer 1989: 5–11.
36 Bashevis Singer 1943a: 5.
37 Ibid.: 8.
38 Ibid.: 9.
39 Ibid.

beginning built upon misconceptions. The Jews who wanted to be one hundred percent cosmopolitan switched to other cultures and grew accustomed to foreign languages."[40] Thus, Bashevis concludes: "Yiddish is not yet about to leave us. It will continue for many more years to serve as a means of understanding our past (and occasionally our present). However, any attempt to push our language into the future is in vain."[41]

Bashevis actually shared Yehoyesh's vision about Yiddish language and letters. Both understood that Yiddish was alive and would continue as a Jewish language whose authors were well-versed in *loshn-koydesh* and Yiddish letters throughout the ages. Bashevis should have applauded Yehoyesh's Herculean deed, but he would also point out that Yehoyesh's preferred style of Yiddish would not fit a description of life in the New World, of modernity in general. Indeed, as Bashevis sums up in his article on Yiddish in America, a talented author relating the past is in fact telling a rewarding story about the present and maybe even the future. Yehoyesh is the optimistic poet translating the Bible for the benefit of the next generations; Bashevis is the pessimist prose author who ultimately searched for ways to penetrate the hearts of readers in foreign languages.

5. Epilogue

When launching his Bible-translation project, Yehoyesh was already a well-known poet and Yiddish already functioned as a language of high literature. Still, the poet aspired to establish (or re-establish) his position as a man of letters who had tackled the most profound text of Jewish culture; and for Yiddish letters, this Yiddish Bible served as a reaffirmation of its status as a Jewish language and its ability to be an instrument of Jewish high literature written in the Ashkenazi vernacular. The preface serves as a pamphlet that sets out Yehoyesh's targets, and as a renewed acknowledgement of Yiddish as a legitimate Ashkenazi language of literature. It is a manifesto that clearly attempted to tie up the necessary connection between Hebrew and Yiddish, and between Yiddish and Jewish culture, including its religious manifestations. Evidently, the modern poet worked within a recognized (even cherished?) sense of contradiction, wishing to be modern, secular, and progressive, and nevertheless feeling that Yiddish could not escape its religious Jewish past. Indeed, in translating the Bible and furnishing it

40 Ibid.: 10.
41 Ibid.: 11.

with a particular literary quality and essence, Yehoyesh performed an act of poetic betrayal that played its part in enhancing the level of Yiddish modern letters.

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