לקט

יִידישע שטודיעס הײַנט

Jiddistik heute

Yiddish Studies Today

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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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Asya Vaisman

"A is for the Almighty"

Transmitting Values through Contemporary Hasidic Children's Literature

קינדערלעך, לאָמיר לייענען,	Children, let's read,
פֿאַרשטיין וואָס די מעשׂה טוט מיינען,	Let's understand what the stories mean,
קינדערלעך, לאָמיר הערן,	Children, let's hear
ווי אַזוי גוטע יִידן צו ווערן!	How to become good Jews!

Thus reads the first stanza of the introductory poem in books from the לייענען און לערנען (Reading and Learning) series distributed by Kinder Shpiel (Children's Games) of Monsey, New York. These brightly-illustrated Yiddish books, sold in stores throughout Williamsburg and Borough Park, Brooklyn, serve the Hasidic communities in these neighborhoods. Yiddish is the vernacular for most of the Hasidic groups that live in these areas, and this series, along with several others, provides entertaining didactic materials for children growing up in an insular society.

Because of their desire to protect themselves from potentially harmful outside influences, Hasidim reject texts (in the broad sense of the word) written by non-religious Jews. Most communities disallow these works not only because they may communicate, as sociologist George Kranzler notes, "values, conduct and trends of the outside world, many of which are seen to contradict or violate the spirit or laws of the Torah and the Hasidic tradition," but also because of the contemporary Hasidic belief that an author's religious outlook is conveyed through any product of his or her creative expression, even if it is not overtly expressed in the composition itself.[1]

Thus, as other scholars, such as Miriam Isaacs and Ayala Fader, have noted, only culturally sanctioned, usually culture-internal sources are allowed, particularly for the younger generation, in order to protect them against unwanted influences.[2] With the rapid growth of Hasidic communities – many families have as many as twelve children – the need for these permitted materials is ever greater, and the quantity and variety of Hasidic children's books is correspondingly increasing.

1 Kranzler 1994: 73.

2 Isaacs 1998: 169f and Fader 2001: 262. Fader writes, "Especially in children's socialization contexts, secular texts are monitored and controlled by parents, rabbis, and teachers."

In addition to producing new works in Yiddish for children, book publishers also issue book series by non-Hasidic religious Jewish authors, translated into Yiddish from English or Hebrew, in order to keep up with demand. These translated works, while almost identical to Hasidic ones in content and subject matter, differ in their writing style, often incorporating more detail and complexity than the Hasidic works, and in their graphic portrayal of religious Jews. A possible reason for the former difference is that the non-Hasidic authors are likely to have a higher level of education and more exposure to secular literature than Hasidic authors, improving their literary abilities.

Because of the religious proscription against wasting time, or ביטול־זמן, the ultra-Orthodox children's books are never purely entertaining – each book contains a moral message, a lesson about performing מיצוות (commandments), obeying societal regulations, and trusting in God. These messages are reinforced throughout the text of the book and often spelled out in a poem at the end, a feature also common in fables. Hasidic children's books are thus different from secular ones not only in their 'kosher' content, such as the portrayal of only modestly-dressed females and the observant behavior of the characters, but also in their didactic intent.

A chapter from a recently published book of interviews with Hasidic women educators in Israel elaborates on the question of content, relating it to מושבֿ־לצים, a concept found in Psalms 1:1 that has been interpreted to signify an unproductive activity, one not related to Torah learning or performing commandments.[3] The educator links this concept to the idea of using materials only by religious authors, who would never create a work empty of content:[4]

> Moreinu HaGaon HaRav Nissim Karelitz, *shlita*, was asked if it is permitted to sing a song that is *reik mitochen* (lacking substantial content) and has nothing *posul* (forbidden) in it. Is this in the realm of *moshav leitzim* (a gathering of scoffers)? HaGaon, HaRav Nissim, *shlita*, answered that for boys this is certainly *moshav leitzim*. For girls, even if it isn't moshav leitzim, it is nevertheless not from our *mekoros* (sources), our *chareidi* sources. If it's not from our *mekoros*, then it is certainly not for us. We want to emphasize the point that writers must be *chareidim* (meticulously Torah-observant Jews) with pure *hashkofos* [perspectives]. What we bring to the students must be full of *yiras Shomayim* [fear of Heaven].

3 Among many other sources, see Šulḥān ʿārūkh, hilkhōt šabbāt 307:16, which states that non-Jewish literature is prohibited under מושבֿ־לצים.

4 "An Educator Involved in Yiddish Language Programs" 2006:147.

In this essay, I would like to look at a number of Yiddish books (both those written in Yiddish and those translated into Yiddish) for young Hasidic children aged two to seven. I will categorize these books by series, genre, and theme and analyze their content and style. The study of children's literature in Hasidic communities provides valuable insight into the means used to shape the worldview of the next generation of Hasidic Jews. As the Hasidim are becoming an increasingly significant component of the Jewish population in their respective countries, a process helped by the low birth and high intermarriage rate among less-observant Jews, it is important to consider their cultural products, particularly within the field of Yiddish, since Hasidic works constitute the majority of Yiddish language material being created today. This essay will examine the way books are used as a didactic tool to instill religious values such as faith and trust in God, to solidify traditional roles and ideals such as unconditionally obeying one's parents, and to create a self-contained world that provides a shield against the threatening influences of the outside secular society.

1. Stories of *Tsadikim*

The first genre explored in this essay, stories of *tsadikim* (righteous men), is somewhat different from the rest: it is the only genre that does not depict the contemporary everyday world of the children, and is instead set in an imagined pre-war Eastern Europe. There are countless books in this genre; in fact, there are entire series of books dedicated to this topic, such as אור עולם (Eternal Light), which includes, in addition to the Ba'al Shem Tov book mentioned below, books on the Seer of Lublin, on Elimelech of Lizhensk, and on the Ruzhiner Rebbe, among a total of sixty-four books.

Books in this category follow in the tradition of Hasidic hagiography, which has been a popular genre since the early 19th century. Each book presents a moralistic story in which a Jew runs into trouble, generally with non-Jews, and is ultimately saved, directly or indirectly, by the *tsadik*. In addition to providing the children with entertaining lessons, as the other genres do, the tsadik books also serve to set Hasidic religious practices in a historical context, legitimizing the authority of contemporary *Rebbes* by depicting their miracle-working predecessors. As the children read about great wonders worked by the founding fathers of Hasidism, they learn to take pride in their tradition and its roots.

The books are furthermore linked to the Hasidic past in their structure – most employ the traditional Hasidic form of telling a story within a story, a device used extensively by Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, among others. The book דער בעל שם טוב (The Ba'al Shem Tov), for example, starts out by describing the hardships of one impoverished but righteous man as he tries to arrange a marriage for his daughter with no money for her dowry or the wedding feast.[5] The Besht (short for Ba'al Shem Tov), to whom he goes for advice, tells him a story about a wealthy merchant who forgets his promise to God to give charity and suffers terrible consequences. The merchant happens to be present at this story-telling, recognizes himself as the protagonist, and instantly repents and gives charity in the form of funding the wedding of the poor man's daughter. This plot structure of using one story as the framework for another, with both linked in a common ending, appears both in traditional Hasidic storytelling from Eastern Europe and in Hasidic children's books today.

Another noteworthy feature of the *tsadikim* stories is their overly simplified depiction of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, which often represents the relationship between Jews and non-Jews through the use of stock characters. In these stories, the non-Jews are either dangerous villains out to do Jews harm or neutral law-enforcers who are responsible for removing the villains once God has intervened on the Jews' behalf, often through the medium of the *tsadik*. In The Ba'al Shem Tov, for instance, the aforementioned merchant encounters a thief in the forest who threatens to rob and kill him. Only after the merchant prays to God to save his life, promising to give ten percent of his earnings to charity if the prayer is answered, does the forest watchman make an appearance to drag the thief off to jail.

The portrayal of Eastern European Jews follows a similar binary delineation. There are the poverty-stricken Jews, who generally seem to be innately righteous and focused only on serving and trusting God, and the more wealthy Jews, who, while they are primarily honorable, are occasionally led astray by their riches. These simplistic portrayals reflect the way Hasidim have re-imagined their Eastern European past: the non-Jewish world is depicted as threatening and perilous to the Jews, and a life of poverty is romanticized as a vehicle for emphasizing the spiritual over the material. This latter lesson is particularly stressed by Hasidic educators to warn children against becoming too habituated to the relative comforts afforded Hasidim in America and thereby losing a more intense spirituality.

5 Hopkowitz n. d.

II. Hasidic Fundamentals

As mentioned above, all of the following categories of books portray the everyday reality of life for Hasidic children today, teaching them how best to function in their own society. These books include instructions on appropriate modes of behavior and practical examples of how to incorporate Jewish observance into everyday life. This essay will examine two books in particular: one that teaches children how to prepare for bedtime, and another that outlines the daily routine of די אידישע טאָכטער, the Jewish daughter.

אַ גוטע נאַכט (Good Night) begins with a step-by-step manual on getting ready for bed.[6] Each page is composed of a rhyming couplet describing a stage of preparation and an illustration of the activity. Regular bed-time routines that any American child would engage in, such as changing into pajamas and brushing teeth, are interspersed with religious rituals, such as kissing the mezuzah and reciting the *shema* prayer, with both these categories given seemingly equal weight. Furthermore, some of the neutral activities, such as washing hands, are rendered religious by the illustrations, in this case depicting a girl using a ritual washing cup at the sink.

A common thread that appears throughout all of these activities is the agency of the children: they are told that it is bedtime, and they immediately begin to clean up their toys and put away their clothes all on their own. In none of the illustrations in this section of the book is there a parental figure helping the children with their bedtime chores, tucking them in, or giving them a glass of warm milk, as parents in secular bedtime stories often do. In fact, the Hasidic mother is seen only once, washing dishes in the kitchen, as the children run up to her to wish her a good night before going back to their room to climb under the covers. These illustrations teach Hasidic children a very practical sort of responsibility: with an average of ten children per family, it would simply be physically impossible for the mother to help each of them at bedtime and clean up after all of them; thus they must learn to do as they are told quickly and independently.

Perhaps the most salient characteristic of *The Jewish Daughter* coloring book is the presence of specifically gendered activities that Hasidic girls are taught to engage in as part of their daily routine.[7] Much like אַ גוטע נאַכט, די אידישע טאָכטער illustrates step-by-step the daily actions, both religious and mundane, of an ideal Hasidic child – this time, specifically a girl. From morning to night, many of the activities

6 אַ גוטע נאַכט: 2007.

7 די אידישע טאָכטער n. d.

depicted are generic to any Hasidic youngster, such as saying a blessing before eating, going to school, and giving charity. This book takes particular care to demonstrate religious Jewish versions of habitual activities, for instance clearly marking the food products shown at meal times as kosher and חלבֿ־ישׂראל (conforming to a particularly stringent set of regulations regarding the preparation and consumption of kosher dairy products).

A number of the tasks portrayed, however, are exclusive to girls, such as learning to sew and helping the mother by playing with the younger children and cleaning the house. These instructions again serve the dual purpose of being practical for large families in which the mother needs her older children's help and of preparing girls for their future roles as mothers. *The Jewish Daughter* book is part of a series that includes a corresponding guide to being a Jewish boy, books about Jewish holidays, and stories from the Torah.

III. The Holy Sabbath

While the books mentioned in the previous section offer guidelines for going about one's weekday, the next category, *shabes* (Sabbath) books, teaches Hasidic children about the great significance of preparing for and observing the Sabbath. The *shabes* stories typically portray a family at various stages of preparation and celebration, such as cooking and cleaning, making *challah*, setting the table, lighting candles, and sitting down to the Sabbath meal. One such book is שבת, אונדזער חשובֿער גאַסט, (Shabes, Our Honored Guest).[8] This work uses an element found in other genres – telling a story within a story – to teach children not only how to prepare for *shabes*, but also why it is important to do so. After all the work had been done and the candles lit, one little girl asks the mother why it is necessary to work so hard to make everything look nice for the holy Sabbath.

In response, the mother tells an allegorical story about a king who goes to visit two villages in his kingdom. The residents of one of the villages worked very hard to get ready for the king's arrival, planting beautiful flowers, baking a large cake, and sweeping the streets, while residents of the other village did nothing. Upon arrival in the first village, the king was greatly pleased and bestowed generous gifts on the residents, while the second village was scorned and punished. It is the same with the Sabbath, the mother concludes: Jews who prepare for it suitably are rewarded with blessings in the coming week.

8 Sh. Kh. D. 2007.

One notable feature of this book is the style of the illustrations. The first, practical part of the book uses composite drawings, superimposing photographed images onto a painted background. For instance, in a drawing of a mother lighting Sabbath candles, the mother and children are hand-drawn, but the candlesticks and candles are photographs. The second part of the book, however – the allegory about the king – is entirely hand-drawn.

It can be posited that these different styles are employed to indicate to the children an element of reality in the portrayal of the Hasidic family, so that they can apply the actions of the children in the book to their own lives, whereas the story about the king is merely an allegory and is thus illustrated with no true-to-life elements. The agency of the Hasidic children is once again apparent on every page, as the kids volunteer to help and do certain aspects of the cleaning all on their own, and the composite pictures emphasize the importance of these duties in real life.

IV. A Clean Body Is a Clean Soul

Another theme that recurs in children's literature is the importance of cleanliness. Books on this topic draw on the paradigms of agency and practicality already discussed with relation to other genres. דער ניַיער חיימל (The New Khayim [Chaim]), for example, is a story of a boy who is initially very dirty and messy, but who learns that a Jewish soul cannot function properly and perform the commandments when the body is dirty.[9] As soon as Khayim's mother explains this concept to him, he instantly reforms, taking care to wash himself and to keep his things clean and tidy from that day forth.

In addition to emphasizing the concept that it is important to keep oneself clean and be responsible for one's things (since the mother is busy with running the house), this book also reveals that until children learn better, their bad behavior is not a cause for concern, but as soon as a lesson is taught, they are expected to integrate it fully. Geared towards a younger audience, the books in the cleanliness genre do not teach the same commandment-oriented lessons that stories for older children do. With the parental suggestion that the book is suitable for children „2 און העבער" (2 years and up), the story provides its young readers with a fundamental principle – in this case, cleanliness – upon which to build before undertaking the more specific tasks detailed in other genres.

9 Sh. Kh. D. 2005.

v. Faith in God

While the last book that will be discussed, אין זכות פֿון תּהלים (Merited by the Psalms), brings together within it many of the elements previously mentioned, its primary theme is the significance of trust in God.[10] At the beginning of the book, a Hasidic family is preparing for the Sabbath, and the children help with the cleaning without being asked. The mother goes off to the grocery store with the youngest child to shop for *shabes* essentials. While at the store, the small child asks for a certain kind of candy, but the mother refuses, saying that the brand has an unsuitable kosher certification. When the mother has her back turned, the child reaches for the candy anyway and falls face-down onto the ground, taking the shopping cart down with him. Already at this early stage of the story, a lesson is taught: honoring one's father and mother is extremely important, and not obeying this commandment can lead to grave negative consequences.

This, however, is not the main lesson of the story, as the child is still too young to have known better, much like Khayim, who didn't know to wash his face until his mother explained it to him. When the other siblings hear ambulance sirens, they immediately start to say psalms to pray for the health of the injured person, even though they do not know for whom the ambulances were called. Because of this great good deed, God answers their prayers, and their brother returns home in time for *shabes* with only a scratch on his forehead. A song at the end of the story provides the moral and the lesson: Jews must thank God profoundly for giving them the great gift of prayer.

Merited by the Psalms stands out in comparison to the other texts for the level of conflict and distress it portrays. Yet for all of the duress of an outside world portrayed as random and violent, the book's ultimate lesson is that Jews, no matter their age, can influence the outcome of events through their faith and special relationship with the Divine. The power of prayer is directed at an anonymous victim, demonstrating the selfless and altruistic nature to which children should aspire and which is valued in Hasidic society. This act of charitableness does have its limits, however, as the ambulances that the children see are clearly marked, in Yiddish, as vehicles from the הצלה service, an internal Jewish rescue and relief organization. This detail maintains the strict borders around their insular community.

10 R. B. I. 2007.

VI. Conclusion

To conclude, it appears that there are two main categories of Hasidic children's books: those that teach children about the history of their group and their people, which include both stories from the Torah and stories of *Tsadikim*, and those that teach children practical lessons about how best to get along in their society, both ritually and practically. In the latter category, children learn by example how to be good Jews, which includes taking responsibility from an early age, both taking care of themselves and helping their mothers, whether in cleaning up their room or cooking for *shabes*.

The children in the stories are portrayed as distinctly different from adults – before they learn the appropriate way to behave, they are first allowed to make mistakes, to follow their יצר־הרע, their evil inclination, by reaching for a non-kosher candy or playing in the mud, since they do not yet know any better. Once a parent teaches them their lesson, however, they are expected to obey and promptly learn to act properly. The books are meant to teach children how to follow specific commandments and the value of following commandments in general, as the "Reading and Learning" series mentioned above demonstrates in the first stanza of its concluding poem:

קינדערלעך, קינדערלעך, לאָמיר הערן,	Children, children, let's hear,
וועלכע מיצוות האָט איר זיך געלערנט	Which commandments have you learned
אויפֿצופֿירן אויף אַ שיינעם אופֿן?	To perform in a nice manner?

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