

Secular Hebrew and Esoteric Yiddish: The Fate of Their Modern Literatures

What accounted for the passion and bitterness that made the contention between Hebrew and Yiddish assume the proportions of a...

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Although occasional skirmishes still punctuate the armistice, it has been a long while since any large-scale action has taken place in the Yiddish-Hebrew war. Trading across the lines, not wholly interrupted even at the height of hostilities, is openly carried on now. Nor is it unusual to see soldiers from the opposing armies fraternizing in the trenches. Hardly a week passes without some learned, reverent mention of Yiddish in the literary supplements of the Israeli press, hardly a season without the appearance of Yiddish novels in Hebrew translation.

Histadrut, Israel's federation of labor, has been especially eager to reconcile the two language camps, perhaps because its supporters include American trade union leaders who are still committed in principle to upholding the Yiddishism of their old (and by how virtually outworn) Bundist creed. Whenever a Yiddish dignitary visits Israel, he is certain to be honored with a reception by Histadrut, which takes pains to insure a large turnout of the older Hebrew writers.

But the passions that once flared so intensely are not quite dead. A few of these bilingual receptions, both here and in Israel, have adjourned on verbal near-brawls because of some tactless remark casually dropped by hosts or visitors.

Those unfamiliar with the events leading up to the Hebrew-Yiddish war are often under the impression that the two literatures have been at one another's throats from the first, mainly for ideological reasons—modern Hebrew being a champion of Zionism, and Yiddish a defender of Dispersion (Galut) nationalism. The facts are rather more complicated. Modern Hebrew literature was a Johnny-come-lately to Zionism—indeed, some of its first practitioners not only believed in Galut, they believed in the Czar's Galut. And conversely, the early advocates of Yiddishism included a great many Zionists, a few of whom pioneered alongside David Ben Gurion in pre-1914 Palestine, and even then joined issue with him on the language question. Indeed, there was a time when the two literatures, springing from a common East European origin, were conducted as a single enterprise.

Mendele Mocher Seforim, the “grandfather” of Yiddish literature, was also a godfather of Hebrew; he helped shape the prose styles of both by casting his works first in one language and then translating them into the other. Sholom Aleichem and I. L. Peretz each wrote some Hebrew, and Chayim Nachman Bialik, who launched the modern Hebrew poetic renaissance, also tried his hand at Yiddish verse.

This complementary relation was made possible by the fact that the two languages were obverse sides of the same coin; one was the daily, the other the sacred, “Sabbath” tongue of East European Jewry. A writer with yeshiva background (that is, with an extensive Hebrew education) could easily work in both. However, shortly after the two languages became media of secular literatures, the Yiddish and Hebrew partnership began to break up. Yiddish writing emerged as the popular (“vulgar”) literature of the masses, while Hebrew served for the literature of an intellectual elite, and each began to acquire its own peculiarities.

Because of the diversity and size of its audience, Yiddish ranged over a wider terrain. Hebrew, as the lingua franca of those members of the Jewish intelligentsia who had already savored Emancipation without quite severing their umbilical connection with the mass of the people, worked a smaller thematic area more intensively. History has, ironically, reversed the status of the two languages in our own day: literary Yiddish is on the way to becoming an esoteric or pseudo-sacred tongue used only by a narrow circle of so-called weltliche (secular) intelligentsia, while Hebrew is embracing an ever wider, more worldly range of interests.

Everywhere we look we find evidence of the dramatic change in status of the two languages, especially since the establishment of the State of Israel. Much Hebrew literature from the time of Haskalah until about thirty years ago was filled with bitter lamentation for the plight of the Hebrew writer as a prophet without audience. By contrast, the Yiddish writer enjoyed a responsive public and had no reason to feel neglected or ignored. Today, Yiddish theoretically still has an audience of many millions, while the assured readership of Hebrew literature is only a fraction of the million Jews now constituting the Israeli nation; but these figures, however accurate, are deceptive and the truth is very much the other way around. Each literature now stands where the other once was. How did this reversal come about?

The precursors of modern Hebrew literature, the early maskilim, Moses Mendelsohn and his disciples, were in a direct line of succession to the traditional rabbinical elite against whom first the Hasidim and then the Jewish socialists took up arms. The rabbinic anti-Hasid and the enlightened maskil had in common a reverence for rational faith, Jewish learning, and the civilized amenities. They also shared a belief in their own superiority to the untutored multitude. The maskilim, never questioning the

fundamental principles of religion, remained devout in the modern Orthodox sense. Only environmental differences account for the tragic schism between East European Orthodoxy and the German Haskalah.

Yiddish, on the other hand, was from the first assigned a low status. The Hebraists branded it a *shifchah*, a concubine like Hagar whom Abraham turned out into the desert at Sarah's command. Yiddish might serve and entertain, but it could never rule the household. It was a proper language for *techinot* (the prayers written for women) and *suchlike* sentimental supplications, but could not be expected to convey the loftinesses of Torah, or true knowledge.

The precursors of Yiddish literature were the later *magidim*, or itinerant preachers, the bearers of East European Jewry's social gospel, and the early Hasidic leaders, who were regarded by the rabbinate as instigators of an anti-intellectual revolt.

The allegories of the *magidim* and the Hasidic wonder-tale were addressed to the relatively uneducated lower classes—the innkeepers, artisans, and small shopkeepers; the learned *misnaged* dismissed them with contempt. In its secular forms, Yiddish literature spoke (sometimes with the voice of socialism) to still lower reaches of the population—the apprentices and domestics, the so-called proletariat of the Pale. Its focus, consequently, was on the concrete conditions of the people; its concern was not with the abstract status of the Jewish nation among all other nations—*Yisrael Ba-amim*—but with Jewry's intramural relations (and more often than not, its class relations). It did not judge Jewry as a whole and find it wanting, but accepted it as a world, indeed almost the world. It tendered its compassion to the humble even outside the Jewish community. And where Hebrew literature blamed the Jew of the Pale himself for his abject condition, drawing invidious comparisons between what he had been in ancient times and what he had now become, Yiddish literature, from the Hasidic tale through the *shund-roman* (the popular novels about mistreated domestics) to its fully mature works, celebrated the glory of the common man.

True to its rabbinic heritage, Hebrew literature was strong not on tales and stories but on essays. The polemics of the early *maskilim* gradually developed into a literature of national thought dealing with the problems first raised by the Emancipation, which haunt the Jewish intellectual to this day. the *raison d'être* of Jewish survival, rationalism versus faith, religious allegiance versus secular nationalism. With the possible exception of Ber Borochov's monumental socio-political writings in Yiddish, almost all the significant literature of Jewish nationalism and its important Zionist-socialist sub-section—the work of Peretz Smolen-skin, Ahad Ha-am, Micah Yosef Berditchev-sky, A. D. Gordon, Hugo Bergman, and Yehudah Kaufman—was produced in Hebrew. Most of these works can be loosely classified as religious

thought, in direct succession to the major Hebrew literary tradition. Yiddish nationalist writing, on the other hand, largely took the form of polemical tracts addressed to a mass audience, and with few exceptions concerned itself with prosaic material conditions, not high destiny. The movements it produced—Bundism, Folkism, and Territorialism—have all proved ephemeral, though they were espoused by distinguished minds. Moreover, unlike its Hebrew counterpart, Yiddish nationalist literature was almost wholly secular, thus diverging from the major tradition of Jewish literature.

The spirit of the essay also dominated modern Hebrew poetry in its earliest stages, which coincided with the first phase of the Russian Haskalah (beginning of the 19th century). Couched in a hyperbolic rhetoric adapted from the prophets and the medieval piyutim (devotional hymns), this versifying, like the essays of the movement, aroused the wrath but never the contempt of Haskalah's rabbinic antagonists. Yet it was abstruse and recondite, holding itself aloof from the day-to-day concerns (not to mention the comprehension) of the ordinary Jew. Curiously enough, it took a pogrom to make Hebrew poetry turn its eyes with sympathy to the mass of Jews; in Bialik's famous Zionist poem on the Kishinev pogrom, *Ir Ha-Haregah* ("The City of Slaughter"), modern Hebrew verse blossoms into full maturity. This was a time when Jewish socialism could offer only a secular messianism, a future working class solidarity.

Bialik saw Kishinev as marking a solemn fusion of material condition and national destiny, with the historic Jew as a nimbus around the bleeding head of the living Jew. His call to Jewish pride to rise up in the face of Gentile savagery marked the end of Haskalah's habit of treating the Jews like muzhiks resisting the Light. The goy was made a horrible partner in the Jew's condition and the dialogue between conservative and enlightener raised to a higher level, being placed in the context of the ever recurring debate between those who saw the Jew as the object, and those who regarded him as the subject, of history. The poets who followed Bialik—as, for example, Saul Chernichovsky, whose emphasis on form earned him a reputation as a Hellenist, and Zalman Schneur, whose propensity for the sensuous got him the nickname "Pagan"—did not go back to treating the "unemancipated" Jew superciliously. They did, however, take up the Hellenist side in the ancient controversy.

This concentration on the single general theme of Jewish dignity-emancipation-sovereignty made Hebrew poetry appear parochial alongside its Yiddish counterpart, whose Catholicism can be ascribed to its very preoccupation with the material and social situation of the Jew. And as Yiddish poets moved westward with the tide of Jewish emigration, they extended their horizons to include life on several continents.

But the diverse literary origins of Yiddish verse account even more significantly for its broader scope. Until the First World War, Hebrew drew its poets, with few exceptions, from the narrow world of the yeshiva. The precursors of Yiddish poetry were an infinitely more colorful crew—the badchan (a kind of wedding entertainer) and the Purim shpieler (actor in the Purim pageant), the courtyard singer, and the

wine-cellar balladeer, the author of techinot, and also a goodly sprinkling of yeshiva bachurim. This broad cross-section was reflected in a variegated body of poetry such as Hebrew has only recently begun to match. Thus Yiddish verse had such exponents as Morris Rosenfeld, poet of social protest; Moshe Leib Halpern, social satirist; Yehoash, classicist and Yiddish translator of the Bible; the metaphysical Melech Ravich, whose long ballad on the Jew's ambivalence toward his own Jewishness has gone unnoticed even in Yiddish literary circles; the vanished Soviet Yiddish poet Izi Charik, laureate of the revolt of the Pale's lower depths; Itzik Manger, lyricist and parodist; and H. Leivick, a poet of Kafkaesque self-flagellation.

Asimilar disparity between Yiddish and Hebrew was even more evident in fiction. Yiddish fiction served a long apprenticeship before it acquired the status of a full-fledged literature. Its "folk" origins insured from the start that it would be rooted in the life of the ordinary Jew and that it would try to be entertaining as well as instructive. Yiddish being the daily tongue of East European Jewry, literary ability, and not formidable scholarly attainments, was alone required of one who aspired to write in it, and it could enlist the primitive and untutored talent as Hebrew could not. The result was a body of Yiddish fiction even more diversified than the poetry. Nor was this richness diminished when Yiddish fiction began to achieve intellectual respectability.

Mendele Mocher Seforim, Sholom Aleichem, and Peretz broadened the appeal of the Yiddish story without narrowing its base. Mendele, writing in both languages, gave Yiddish fiction standing among the educated Hebrew-reading elite. Sholom Aleichem's humor captivated all classes in the Pale. Peretz attracted the secularized, the later proponents of weltliche yiddishkeit.

In style and mode Yiddish fiction ranged from the playfully amusing to the savagely realistic. I. M. Weisenberg's work spawned a whole school of naturalists and masters of the argot like Oizer Warshavsky, Chayim Leib Fuks, and Fishl Bimko. And the effects of the political and social upheavals in Eastern Europe and of the migration to America were commemorated on an epic scale by Sholem Asch, David Bergelson, I. J. Singer, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and, within a smaller framework, by Leon Kobrin and A. Raboi.

But for all its variety, there is little concern with character in Yiddish fiction. Norman Podhoretz was not wholly wrong when he observed (in "Jewish Culture and the Intellectuals," Commentary, May 1955) that Yiddish writers, by and large, have dealt only peripherally with the individual. Yet this is not quite the

shortcoming he seems to think it. In the congested Pale, the individual had, literally, not enough room in which to become a complete and sovereign human being, and the world outside the Pale refused to grant him any autonomy and status apart from the group to which he belonged. Thus it was only natural that in the fiction produced by the writers of such a community the individual should possess importance only insofar as he exemplified, or departed from, the "folk" condition. This type of literature falls within the ancient and well-established tradition of Don Quixote.

Compared to Yiddish, early Hebrew fiction labored under great disadvantages. Unspoken for centuries and enshrined in the archaic piyutim and formalized exegetical writings, the Hebrew language was at first grotesque in its fumbling attempts to portray life in the concrete. Furthermore, fiction itself was regarded as an unmanly indulgence by a generation so steeped in Talmud that it could look upon even some of the sacred books that were short on Halachah (legal analysis and debate) and long on Aggadah (legend and story) as inferior fare. Early Haskalah fiction was melodramatic in conception and primitive in execution, with rabbinism and Hasidism standing for everything that was evil in Jewish life, and the Enlightenment and its followers representing absolute good. Even after it had left behind the parochialism of Haskalah, Hebrew fiction continued for a long time to deal with the central Haskalic theme of ignorance and obscurantism versus reason and enlightenment. But the struggle between the demands of tradition and those of secularism was now translated (as in Mordecai Z'ev Feierberg's *Whither*) from a social-intellectual contest in the public world, into a private psychological war within the hero himself. Enlightenment was no longer seen as release, but as agony. This theme of the Jew in limbo, at home neither in the goy-dominated world of Europe nor in the shtetl from which he fled, was most powerfully developed by Micah Joseph Berdichevsky (1865-1920), a brooding Nietzschean who, in his attempt to project the alienated Jew into a symbol of modern man, is a forerunner of Franz Kafka and Arthur Koestler.

The vitality of the Yiddish-speaking multitudes emerging into new freedom during the last two decades of the 19th and first decade of the 20th century was infectious, and Yiddish literature, like Hasidism, was essentially optimistic. Oversimplifying the causes of the depressed condition of the Jews of the Pale, Yiddish writing was hopeful about its amelioration. The isolated Hebrew writer, on the other hand, working in the austere tradition of Haskalah, brooded apprehensively over the fate of the Jew. Yiddish optimism generated Galut nationalism; Hebrew apprehensiveness led to a determinist Zionism.

But in retrospect it is clear that this picture had already undergone a change by the end of World War I, when the reversal of roles referred to above began to take place. The Soviet Yiddish writer, in best

Haskalah form, castigated what he called “the residues of reaction and superstition,” although for a quite different purpose. And the American Yiddish writer, shivering in the early evening chill of his alienation from the larger Jewish community, like the Haskalah writer of an earlier day, began to sulk and complain about the contemporary Jew, and to lament the absence of nachwuks (successors). Polish Yiddish literature, however, centered in a community still largely autonomous, continued as realistic interpreter of Jewish life.

Meanwhile, Hebrew fiction, now being produced by writers who had emigrated to Palestine after the Russian Revolution, transformed itself from a censorious into an elegiac literature, nostalgically conjuring up that very life of East Europe which it had treated so harshly before. Thus until very recently, Hebrew fiction very much resembled the American Yiddish fiction of our own time in its idealization of the shtetl, and knew a similar estrangement from its potential audience. Though the men and women of the second and third aliyot (waves of immigration to Palestine) had renounced the Galut and all its works, the new Hebrew fiction set a halo of reverence around the shtetl. While the new pioneers were still disciples of Haskalah in a very basic sense, the new Hebrew writers were renouncing it altogether. The cry went up for a literature that would deal with the condition of Palestine’s pioneering Zionist society.

Only one major Hebrew novelist of that day could satisfy the demand—the other Hebrew writers had too little previous experience in dealing with life around them. The Socialist-Zionist utopianism and the Dostoevskian despair of Yosef Chayim Brenner, who was killed by Mufti pogromists in Jaffa in 1920, suited the mood of the second aliyah (the third, post-World War I aliyah found it somewhat too heavy). Several other novelists, notably Ever Ha-dani and Yehuda Ya-ari, also wrote about the pioneering society, but the two major Israeli novelists, Shmuel Ya-akov Agnon and Chayim Hazaz—although the latter was never a nos-talgist and sensed the moral disintegration of East European Jewish life—have only recently turned to writing about Israel’s restoration. (As for Hebrew poetry, it followed a somewhat different course. Bialik had set its pattern by joining high destiny and material condition. His successors advanced rather jauntily from the challenge of *Ir Ha-Haregah* to a celebration of Halutzic pioneering. Also, perhaps because of the very nature of poetry, Hebrew verse could reflect the new environment sooner than fiction.)

The reversal of the positions of Yiddish and Hebrew was completed by World War II, the destruction of East European Jewry being the final term in the process. Yiddish had always been the first language of the slaughtered communities, notwithstanding the encroachments of Polish and Russian. Except

perhaps in a few Latin American countries and in some parts of Israel, nothing like the Yiddish-speaking shtetl exists any longer—a whole society living out its life in Yiddish. The sad, inevitable result is that Yiddish literature today is out of touch with large areas of Jewish experience, as was modern Hebrew in its early period.

It took Hebrew fiction a long time to come to terms with the needs of its audience. By the 1940's, Hebrew had been a modern language for half a century, the speech of farm, factory, market place, and street, but its novelists and storytellers were still lost in reveries about the East European past. It was left to the sabras or native Israelis, to resolve this anomaly. The mid-1940's (and particularly the years after the War of Liberation) saw an avalanche of literary works by young natives, whose introduction of slang shocked the older writers as stylistic vandalism. Their subject matter was highly personal; they wrote what were virtually diaries of their days in the anti-British underground and in the Arab war. Plays by sabra writers were performed before packed houses, crowds flocked to hear them read from their writings, and their books went through many editions.

They were influenced largely by Hemingway, but their sensitivity to the moral dilemmas posed by war indicated a kinship (unconscious perhaps) with Brenner. Their elders, who had raised them to be free of the vacillations and misgivings of the Galut, were pleasantly surprised. For these young men and women were different from their forebears in a very essential way, and yet at bottom they were traditionally Jewish. In contrast to the stereotyped picture of the Jew of the Galut, they did not postpone and evade decisions, defer action, or talk endlessly instead of acting. Yet they were not immune to, and bore courageously, the agony of making necessarily imperfect moral decisions in the heat of very practical action.

Perhaps never before in all history has there been such a literature—written by men still in the front lines and passionately convinced of the rightness of their cause, yet self-searching, full of guilt, and crying out for penance. The most forceful exponent of this vein in sabra literature—its major vein—is S. Yizhar, a writer of slender output and impeccable style, a Rehovot school teacher and a former Mapai member of Knesset.

In a few years' time there came a noticeable slackening of sabra literary output and of the enthusiasm for it. Today, the young writers are engaged in a realistic, hard-headed search for causes. They reproach themselves for having been too self-centered in the past and for having written too privately; they

ascribe the success with the public of their previous work to topicality, and now say that relatively little of it can survive on its intrinsic merits. This self-criticism is perhaps too harsh, yet there is great truth in it. From early adolescence these writers were involved in youth movements, moving like wolf-packs through school, play, and underground units, which were then incorporated intact into the Israeli army. Even their most shattering experience, the War of Liberation, which brought them face to face with radically new situations, hardly confronted them with new kinds of people. They realize now that they must go beyond the limited range of their past experience and seek sustenance from different sections of the population. The new slogan is: study the new immigrants!

But good literature is not called forth by slogans, whether of the Russian kind demanding "socialist realism" or of the Life magazine kind recommending "optimistic" fiction. What these young writers are really searching for is some indigenous literary tradition on which they can draw. The disrepute into which Haskalah and militant Zionism had cast the Galut and the shtetl make it all the more difficult for the sabra writer to establish a rapport with the main streams of Jewish literature. A recent Israeli newspaper article, reiterating charges against Haskalah that are frequently heard in Israel today, called for the removal of its literature from school curricula. According to this article, the work of Haskalah's leading poet, Yehudah Leib Gordon, "although of questionable literary merit, [has had] a destructive influence on the attitude of our youth towards the religious and spiritual values of our people," and "all our well-intentioned efforts to perpetuate the values of the Golah can hardly persevere against [Mendele's] descriptions of . . . the multitudes of kabtzanim [paupers] and centers of kabtzanut."

The desperation of the younger sabra writers is demonstrated by the fact that one of them has recently gone so far as to suggest that Yiddish might offer instructive examples! The most daring and successful effort by a sabra writer to establish communication with Jewish literary tradition was made by Moshe Shamir, in his three most recent works: *Yad Chazakah*, a play named after Maimonides' major work and concerned, as Maimonides had been on occasion, with the problem of the "alien in our midst"; *Melech Basar Va-Dam*, a novel, and *Milchemet B'nei Or*, another play, both of which latter deal with the civil war in Has-monean Judea under Alexander Jannai.

All three works have obvious relevance to contemporary Israel. All three deal with periods, subjects, and personalities out of the Halachic-Midrashic, not Biblical past. Several years ago Ben Gurion advised Israeli writers to rely on the Bible for inspiration and to eschew the Midrashic literature of the Exilic era. Shamir is one sabra writer who has patently repudiated this counsel. Raised in Labor Zionist youth movements, caught up all his life in political activity of one kind or another, Shamir received little, if any,

formal schooling in the Talmudic and rabbinic literature on which his recent books draw. His earlier work was perhaps even slangier than most sabra writing, but his style in the latest novel and the two plays has an almost archaic quality (resembling Agnon's) appropriate to the literary idiom of the periods he is treating. Although traces of Marxist influence are visible here and there, his primary involvement is with theological and ethical problems—an incredible preoccupation for a member of Mapam.

Though Shamir's talents raise him above most of his contemporaries, the path he has followed is nevertheless typical of his generation's movement from "Palmach jive" to Midrashic stateliness, and from war stories to historical parables. But most significant is his simultaneous concern with the metaphysical and materialist motifs of history—a concern also shared by many others of his generation. This seems to indicate that the dichotomy between the Yiddish involvement with the material conditions of the masses and the Hebrew interest in Jewish destiny is being resolved. And, indeed, to unite the Yiddish and the Hebrew spirit by giving a new normalcy to Jewish life was the grand purpose of Zionism. Israeli literature is bound increasingly to reflect this union—as it must if it is to achieve lasting vitality.

Yet one final question remains. Might not Israeli literature become just another parochial, inconsequential, small people's literature? One can safely predict that it will defy this classification if it does nothing else. The very fact that Israeli writers are attempting to establish their succession to one of the most universal of all literary traditions insures against parochialism. One cannot imagine a literature based on the ancient Hebrew sources, and yet grappling with contemporary reality, as anything other than universal in interest, whether or not it succeeds in placing itself among the major literatures of the world.
