
Heschel and Yiddish: A Struggle with Signification

Jeffrey Shandler

Columbia University

Translations of poems from *Der shem-hamefoyresh: mentsh*
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In his monumental *History of the Yiddish Language*, Max Weinreich notes that “up to the period of the Emancipation Jews in central and western Europe were attached to Yiddish not by a formulated ideology, but because it was their own indigenous possession.”¹ Yet with the emergence of a modern consciousness of Yiddish as a language — a phenomenon that post-dates what is generally considered to be the actual beginning of the language by some eight centuries — the significance of Yiddish could no longer be regarded as self-evident and became the subject of extensive discussion. Beyond merely voicing sentiments of the language as a reflection or embodiment of its eponymous Jewishness, this discussion has been integral to the process of defining a sense of self among Ashkenazim throughout the modern era.

This dynamic has variously embraced or spurned the language, and has dressed it in an assortment of guises. Early *maskilim* characterized Yiddish as the ultimate signifier of all that was irrational, unaesthetic and uncivilized about European Jewish life — a phenomenon that Dan Miron calls the “Language as Caliban”² — while later generations of political and cultural activists championed the language as a touchstone that defined, as nothing else could, Jewish

¹ Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble with Joshua A. Fishman (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), p. 280.

² See Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schocken, 1973), pp. 34–66.

folkhood or nationality. In their pursuit of a new sense of the meaning of Jewishness, all manner of scholars and popular writers have situated the language closer or farther away in relevance, higher or lower in stature, broader or narrower in scope, as they assigned it new significance. In the course of this process, Yiddish has been defined as a signifier of ideology (hasidism, secularism, Bundism, Marxism, Labor Zionism, Territorialism), class (the uneducated, the proletariat, the common man, women), territory (Ashkenaz, Eastern Europe, American urban enclaves, Soviet or South American agricultural utopias, diaspora, "Yiddishland"), world view (revolutionary, provincial, cosmopolitan), mode of discourse (humor, satire, sentiment, irony) and time (the future, the past).

Today, some fifty years after the devastation of its European cultural base, discussion of the significance of Yiddish seems, if anything, more extensive than ever. In his recent book *The Meaning of Yiddish*, Benjamin Harshav devotes a chapter to the study of Yiddish as "the carrier of a second level of social 'language,' a peculiar semiotics of Jewish communication," in which he states that

pronouncements by native speakers of Yiddish seem to attribute to the language a life of its own, a mentality, a set of values and attitudes, serving as a source of strength and frustration alike. Clearly, the nature of Yiddish as a vehicle of communication, as a repository of a whole semiotics of discourse and "world views" of its speakers is an essential part in the understanding of the language. Yiddish speakers have always felt that theirs is quite unlike any other language and provides them with a highly charged means of expression. . . . The fact that native speakers may assign such emotive qualities to the language, rather than seeing it as a neutral vehicle for communication, speaks for itself.³

Anita Norich, discussing the field of Yiddish literary studies in a recent article, writes that in some cases "Yiddish is no longer understood as a language composed of signifiers but is itself a sign of rupture and loss. To view it this way is to see it — perhaps to distance and dismiss it — as completely separate and framed, an entity that can be regarded with awe or amusement."⁴ These comments suggest that there are, among those who actively use Yiddish and those who study it at some distance, people who regard it as having

³ Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990) p. 8; pp. 89–91.

⁴ Anita Norich, "Yiddish Literary Studies," *Modern Judaism*, vol. 10, no. 3 (Oct. 1990), p. 298.

a second or “meta-” level of signification above and beyond its function as the equivalent of any other language. Moreover, the secondary level of signification is often considered to be of greater importance than the primary level of “neutral” communication, even though the meta-significance of Yiddish can be understood as sending contradictory messages, becoming a signifier of the distinctive vibrancy of a culture as well as of its decline or loss.

The issue of the “meaning” of Yiddish in the modern age is further complicated by the distinctive character of Jewish multilingualism. As literary critic Sh. Niger once observed, “one language has never been enough for the Jewish people.”⁵ Since the Babylonian Exile, traditional Jewish life has been internally bilingual, complementing *Loshn-koydesh* with various Jewish vernaculars, while extensive contact with non-Jewish neighbors has necessitated some degree of fluency in additional languages. As Max Weinreich notes, “the rise of a secular sector [among Ashkenazim] . . . changed not only the power relations between Yiddish and *Loshn-koydesh*, it has shaken the very foundations of Ashkenazic culture economy.”⁶ This complicated, rather than simplified, Ashkenazic multilingualism, by adding to the dynamic of internal multilingualism another modern Jewish vernacular, Modern Hebrew, and by making more extensive use of a broader palette of non-Jewish languages. In contrast to most of the modern Western world — where literary bilingualism is considered something of a remarkable anomaly and the product of a singular kind of cultural displacement (the paradigmatic writers being Vladimir Nabokov and Samuel Beckett)⁷ — modern Jewish writing was born among several generations of bi- or multilingual authors. Even well after the modern Jewish monolingualist ideologies — the Hebraism of many Zionists, the Yiddishism of various leftwing and secular Jews — consolidated in the early twentieth century, and Jewish authors

⁵ Samuel Niger, *Bilingualism in the History of Jewish Literature*, trans. Joshua A. Fogel (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1990), p. 11.

⁶ Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, p. 280.

⁷ For a discussion of literary bilingualism in modern Western literature, see Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the “First” Emigration* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1989).

became an established presence in mainstream Western literature in Europe and the Americas, important bilingual Jewish writers have continued to appear. These include authors who have changed their literary language as a result of geographic and cultural displacement — for example, such major post-Holocaust writers as Elias Canetti, Arthur Koestler, Jerzy Kosinski and Jurek Becker⁸ — or those who have done so as part of the development of their aesthetic mission, as in the case of Gabriel Preil.⁹

A modern Jewish multilingual author's choice of what language he or she writes in is thus not only of significance, but calls for an inquiry into the nature of its meaning. The issue is not only relevant to the formal analysis of individual works, but can, on a larger scale, shed light on the relationship of a single text to other works by the author or to his or her career as a whole; it can likewise illuminate one's understanding of the place of an author's work *vis-a-vis* those of colleagues and contemporaries, or to the greater dynamics of national and international linguistic and cultural phenomena.

All of these considerations apply to an examination of the Yiddish writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel. They are not only of interest as part of the multilingual oeuvre of a renowned Jewish scholar and philosopher, but also make an interesting case study in the meta-significance of the Yiddish language in modern Jewish culture. Heschel is widely admired as a gifted writer of movingly poetic prose. Edward Kaplan suggests that a consideration of Heschel's use of language is essential to understanding his philosophical and theological insights; the interpreter of Heschel must "experience intuitively the power and depth of his expressive prose in order to possess, as it were, the writer's own spiritual experience. Heschel's theory and use of poetic language brings us to the heart of his endeavor."¹⁰ Though it has yet to be subjected to extensive scholarly scrutiny, the fact of Heschel's literary multilingualism is widely admired, with special mention frequently made, though

⁸ For an analysis of the significance of language shift in the works of these writers, see Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1986), pp. 325–344.

⁹ See Yael S. Feldman, *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1986).

¹⁰ Edward K. Kaplan, "Heschel's Poetics of Religious Thinking," *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Exploring His Life and Thought*, ed. John C. Merkle (New York: Macmillan, 1985), p. 103.

usually only in passing, of his Yiddish works. In fact, relatively little of Heschel's output is in Yiddish; his best-known works of philosophy and scholarship were all either written in English or are best known in English-language versions, while other of his important scholarly efforts were originally written in German or Hebrew.¹¹ Nonetheless, Heschel is commonly thought of, both among Yiddishists and in other circles, as an *ohev-yidish* (lover of Yiddish).

Consider, for example, a short article by Yudl Mark entitled "Heshl un yidish" ("Heshl and Yiddish"). Originally delivered at Heschel's *shloshim*, it was published in a commemorative volume of *Conservative Judaism* issued the year after Heschel's death (he died at the age of sixty-five on 23 December 1972). Mark identifies Yiddish as being not only Heschel's mother tongue, but also his "*neshome-loshn*" (his "language of the soul.") Mark further observes that Heschel's major Yiddish works appear at strategic points in his career: his first published book is a volume of Yiddish poems, entitled *Der shem-hamefeyresh: mentsh* ("The Ineffable Name of God: Man"; 1933), and his last book is *Kotsk: in gerangl far emesdikeyt* ("Kotsk: The Struggle for Integrity"; 1973), the posthumously issued collection and analysis of the teachings of Menakhem Mendl, the Kotsker *rebe*. In between comes Heschel's first major postwar publication, his essay "Di mizrekh-eyropeishe tkufe in der yidisher geshikhte," first delivered at the YIVO Institute's annual conference in 1945, and eventually expanded into the well-known book *The Earth Is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in Eastern Europe* (1950). Mark cites this study of the inner life of Yiddish-speaking Jewry as the well-spring of Heschel's later philosophical works, *God in Search of Man* (1951) and *Man Is Not Alone* (1956), and asserts that the Yiddish language is fundamental to Heschel's philosophy: "The language in which he usually thought was Yiddish; it was the means by which he conducted his analyses."¹²

The place of the three major Yiddish works in the course of Heschel's life and career is indeed essential to their analysis, as it is

¹¹ For a bibliography of Heschel's writings through the mid-1960s, see Abraham J. Heschel, *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism from the Writings of Abraham J. Heschel*, ed. Fritz A. Rothschild (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 263–270.

¹² Yudl Mark, "Heshl un yidish," *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Yahrzeit Tribute; Conservative Judaism*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Fall 1973), p. 51.

to an examination of the “meta-” images of the language that they embody. The fruits of this analysis, however, challenge Mark’s notion of Yiddish as a constant fundament of Heschel’s career from beginning to end, suggesting that his relationship with Yiddish was both more changeable and more complex. What emerges from the analysis, while perhaps less comforting than the image of Heschel as a constant *ohev-yidish*, is not only more revealing of the author and his work, but also sheds light on the general dynamics of the “meaning” of Yiddish in the twentieth century.

Der shem-hamefoyresh: mentsh

Occasionally, when scholars write of Heschel’s verbal artistry, they note that his first book was a volume of Yiddish verse.¹³ The observation is usually little more than that — not surprising, since *Der shem-hamefoyresh: mentsh* is Heschel’s only such effort, and a copy of the book is very hard to find. Moreover, it is difficult to reconcile what one generally knows of secular Yiddish literature in interwar Europe with the author’s later scholarly and philosophical efforts — their respective aesthetics, subjects, themes and agendas seem to be essentially different.

Considerable lore surrounds this little book. It is rumored, on the one hand, that its rarity is in part due to Heschel himself having removed copies of the book from his friends’ and colleagues’ libraries. On the other hand, the poems are reputed to be something of a Heschel fountainhead, an encapsulation of all the major themes explored in his later works.¹⁴ And, since the author’s death, they are

¹³ See, e.g., Avraham Holtz, “Religion and the Arts in the Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel,” trans. Harlan J. Wechsler, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Yearzeit Tribute; Conservative Judaism*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Fall 1973), pp. 27–39; Feygl Mark, “Tsvishn Mezshbezsh un Kotsk,” *Di goldene keyt*, no. 82 (1974), p. 143; Samuel H. Dresner, “Heschel the Man,” *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Exploring His Life and Thought*, ed. John C. Merkle (New York: Macmillan, 1985), p. 4.

¹⁴ Conversation with Samuel Dresner, who also mentioned that Wolfe Kelman used to claim that much of Heschel’s later work was already alluded to in his poetry. Elsewhere Dresner notes that *Der shem-hamefoyresh: mentsh* was not listed in the bibliography of Heschel’s works that appears in the first edition of his *Between God and Man* (issued in 1959), but that it does appear in the 1965 edition (see note 11). See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov: Studies in Hasidism*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985), p. xxiv.

also occasionally invoked as examples of the author's ties to Yiddish culture.¹⁵

It is not within the scope of this essay to assess the content of these poems as harbingers of Heschel's subsequent philosophical output, nor will it attempt to explain why the author would (if indeed he did) try to obscure the existence of this work. These verses are clearly the efforts of a young writer; they have the exuberance, ambitiousness and occasional awkwardness of a new artist (Heschel would have been about twenty-six years old at the time of the volume's publication; some of the individual poems are indicated as having been written as early as the late 1920s).¹⁶ The literary quality of the poems varies, though for the reader today they are ultimately most interesting as a relic of an important Jewish scholar and philosopher's youthful experimenting in a genre that he subsequently abandoned. Moreover, while they constitute the major record of Heschel's early involvement in modern, secular Yiddish culture, these poems also provoke questions about the nature of his subsequent valuation of this aspect of Jewish creativity.

The sixty-six poems in *Der shem-hamefoyresh: mentsh* appear to be the culmination of several years of Heschel's efforts as a Yiddish poet. They are short works — only a few are more than a page long — and are arranged in six groupings of nine to thirteen poems each. Of these, the third group, "Tsu a froy in kholem," ("To a Woman in a Dream") offers ten love poems, and the fifth section, "Natur-pantomimen," ("Nature Pantomimes") includes a dozen rural and urban landscapes. The other four sections present poetry that grapples with a variety of spiritual questions, as their titles suggest: "Der mentsh is heylik" ("Man is Holy"), "Eydes-zogn" ("Bearing Witness"), "Tsvishn mir un velt" ("Between the World and Me") and "Tikunim" ("Reforms").

Heschel's romantic and nature verses may be something of a sur-

¹⁵ Consider, for example, the selection of five of these poems ("Got geyt mir nokh ume-tum," "Khoyves," "Got un mentsh," "Mayn lid," "Yingster bager") to be set to music by Lazar Weiner in 1974. The song cycle was commissioned and published by the Jewish Music Council of the National Jewish Welfare Board, in celebration of the 1974 Jewish Music Festival, "Our Yiddish Musical Heritage."

¹⁶ The earliest of Heschel's published poems appears to be a short, untitled love poem that begins "Se zilbert zikh azoy loyter . . ." in *Varshever shriftn* (Warsaw: Literarn-klub baym farayn fun yidishe literatn un zshurnalistsn in Varshe, 1926–1927). For a discussion of Heschel's early poetry in greater detail, see Jeffrey Shandler, "Heschel's Yiddish verse: a portrait of the philosopher as a young poet," *Tikkun*, forthcoming.

prise for readers today, given the thematics of his later philosophical work, yet from an aesthetic perspective they are, on the whole, among the most successful poems in the collection. Typical of Heschel's poetry in general, they are often laced with mystical imagery. For example, the poem "Fun dayne hent" ("From Your Hands") joins the satisfaction of erotic curiosity with the undoing of otherworldly secrets:

From Your Hands

From the gentle bowl of your hands
 Let me drink rest and comfort —
 In the deepest silence of your voice
 Let me extinguish mysteries —

Ecstasies have burned my skin, my clothes.
 I go about in tatters, remote and light,
 And beg a thread of your silken voice
 To bind the wound of mysteries.

The world is wrapped in the invisible.
 All is here, in other-worldly guise.
 And, as a blind man fingers words,
 I want to read your face with my lips.

From the gentle bowl of your hands
 Let me drink rest and comfort —
 In the deepest silence of your voice
 Let me extinguish mysteries —¹⁷

The repetition of the first verse at the end of the poem (and this verse's own ritualistic inner repetition) is a device Heschel also employs in a number of other poems in the collection, giving them a prayer-like formality.

The "Nature Pantomimes" are similarly entwined with other-

¹⁷ Avrom Heshl, *Der shem-hamefoyresh: mentsh-lider*, (Warsaw: Farlag "indzl," 1933), p. 46.

worldly imagery. In these poetic descriptions of a forest, sea, park or urban boulevard, Heschel explores the natural world for those places in it where the supernatural is hidden, hinted at, or briefly realized. "Tamez oyf di felder" ("Tammuz in the Country") for example, moves from the natural (lindens, storks) to the Jewish supernatural (Evil Eye, dybbuk) by way of exotic orientalism (opium) over the course of its five short stanzas:

Tammuz in the Country

Well-fed lindens, like green storks,
Their beaks tucked under their feathers —
Stand on long, slender stilts
And preen, ruffle their feathers and wings.

Hot earth is opium for the feet.
Parched fields are warm-sweet,
They are fresh and smell as though
The world and they were just now created.

Everything lies in heat, in the bosom of the sun,
And sips the wind, the nectar of sweet space.
How good it is to drink this secret juice
And happily feast on a simple meal of grass.

A gentle rain — lightly, slyly at first —
Seemed to spit at the Evil Eye,
Then it thundered a shofar's blast, flooded and immersed
And drove the dybbuk of drunkenness from the earth.

Now the soul glitters silent, gentle joy.
The damp feet of reeds kiss the fields with thanks.
Soberly the field endows
The purest gentleness of the world.¹⁸

If the poems in the remaining four sections often prove more problematic artistically, they are nevertheless of greatest interest

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

intellectually, especially as tokens of young Heschel's spirituality. As some of their titles suggest — "Ikh un du" ("I and You"), "Bruder Got" ("Brother God"), "Tsum har fun tsayt in letster sho" ("To the Master of Time in the Final Hour") — they are often addressed by the poet to God. These cries of despair, exclamations of wonder, demands for answers appear to be literary experiments in realizing the dialogic relationship between the individual man and God as envisioned by Martin Buber in his seminal 1923 treatise *Ich und Du*.¹⁹ Though the extent of Buber's influence on his thinking does not seem to be explicitly acknowledged by Heschel, he did have contact with Buber in the 1930s, and was appointed by Buber to succeed him at the Jüdisches Lehrhaus in Frankfurt in 1937. Also similar to Buber is Heschel's neo-romantic approach to hasidism, manifest in several of the poems in this collection. In "In park" ("In the Park") for example, an animistic vision of the spiritual uplift provided by an encounter with the outdoors features a grove of trees anthropomorphized as a circle of dancing, feasting hasidim:

In the Park (from "Between the World and Me")

My sorrows gripped me
Between the table and the chair like a vise
So I ran off, a poor wretch,
And sat in the park — tired, worn out,
On the shoulders of a bench,
And I was so dusky,
So dusky . . .

Thin trees in a circle
Like emaciated cabalists
Stopping in the middle of their dance;
Like a penitent under the whip
A bench lay on all fours.

¹⁹ On the influence of Buber on Heschel, see Khayim Bez, "Martin Buber un Avrom-Yehoshua Heshl," *Di tsukunft*, vol. 80, no. 10 (1974), pp. 301–304; Steven J. Katz, "Abraham Joshua Heschel and Hasidism," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Spring 1980), pp. 82–104, and a response by Zanvel E. Klein, "Heschel as a Hasidic Scholar," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2 (Autumn 1981), pp. 200–202.

Nearby, humble trees agape
With windblown *shtraymlekh*,
And sometimes they bow and turn
And snatch the remnants of the *rebe's* feast in a breeze.

Snoring in a stupor
Lanky reeds whisper their secrets
As far as little houses that stand beyond the town,
Lonely as tombs in a graveyard.

Oh, modest little houses,
Windows big enough to poke your head inside
And say "Good morning" . . .
I'll lay my hands upon your eaves
And fondle them gently like the heads of babes.

A brazen little bird,
Quite mischievous, stands at my feet,
Cocks its head
And looks up, astonished, like a scholar
Bent over a difficult passage in Rambam:
"Hm, what's this,
On such a sunny day —
Melancholia?!"

A worm crawls onto my lap,
Naïvely wanting to comfort me.
A choir of grasses prays for my
Happiness above all.

Oh, sorrows spent
In the parks beyond the town!²⁰

The scholarly bird in this poem calls to mind Sh. Y. Abramovitsh's description in his novel *Fishke der krumer* ("Fishke the Cripple," 1869) of a magpie that looks from a distance as

²⁰ Avrom Heshl, *Der shem-hamefoyresh: mentsh*, pp. 59–60.

though it were praying, wrapped in a tallis. Heschel's evocation of the bird could be both a nod towards the patriarch of modern Yiddish literature and a deliberate transformation of one of his best-known images. What was ironic in the context of Abramovitsh's maskilic novel becomes playfully reverent in the spiritualized world of Heschel's poem.

Heschel essays a fair amount of artistic experimentation in these poems — free verse, various regular and irregular rhyme and metrical schemes, sound play, etc. — but this formal exploration is not always successfully harnessed to the poet's larger philosophical quest. Some of his most interesting poems are also the most awkward. For example, an anguished cry to God bursts out incongruously in the middle of what is perhaps the most ambitious poem in the collection, "Ruf durkh di nekht" ("Call Through the Nights"), an otherwise world-weary, modernist (automobiles, sine-waves), down-and-out (prostitutes, a drunk) portrait of the city at night:

Call Through the Nights

I

Tired houses sitting, dozing side by side,
 Silent, sickly people agonize inside,
 Living remnants stand on corners, staring out wide-eyed.
 For a dollar they'll give you a deal, a thrill, a ride.
 And a nation roams about, it laughs and says, "All right!"

Automobiles squeal, squeal . . .
 Subway trains pain, pain . . .
 From asylums they scream,
 "Someday will our dream
 Sow the seeds we desire,
 Or will it expire?"

Dead sidewalk salted with snow.
 Like the poorest prostitutes, the river shakes with cold.
 The skies weep in my breast, they sink and darken — No!
 And the wind calls out and moans, "Help!" as if God Himself
 would show.

Why won't You help — You? You?

II

I hear myself, like a clock ticking through a sleepless night,
Longing, lonely steps — on broken streets stricken with blight.
The streetlamp binds up yearning together with rays of light
Through weary, drowsy lashes.

Like a candle in a sweaty hand, my drunken brother weaves,
carouses,

And, as if he drove a flock of geese into the slaughterhouse,
With his feet he traces sine-waves on the pavement in a fevered
state of mind.

And perhaps he even longs for me, or home, or wants the love of all
mankind,

And courting danger, wants to smoke cigars beneath the street-
lamps' shine.

He barks a tune: "Lady Night has spat me out, before your very
eyes, eyes, eyes . . .

And so I'll go a-dancing with the little yellow flies, lies, flies, lies . . ."

Like sufferers in mid-scream, the world in sudden silence lies.

From wild pain a cabaret bursts out with merry cries.

And, in a tune, God overhears some poet or mystic's tearful sighs.

Winter, 1928/29²¹

What prompted Heschel to write and publish these poems, and why did he abandon Yiddish belles lettres after the appearance of this volume? While anything approaching a definitive answer to these questions does not seem possible — Heschel himself apparently never commented publicly on this chapter of his career — clues toward a partial, possible understanding can be found in both his poems and the context in which they were produced, as well as in Heschel's later remarks on his youth and on the nature of poetry.

Heschel's early literary efforts in Yiddish — which also include poems, stories and essays published in *Di ilustrirte vokh*, *Haynt*,

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

Varshaver shriftn and *Literarische bleter*²² — were published in the period from the mid-1920s through the early '30s — that is, during the years that he was a student in Vilna and a doctoral candidate at the University of Berlin and at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (he received his degree from the latter institute in the year that *Der shem-hamefoyresh: mentsh* was published), and prior to the publication of his first major scholarly works in German, *Maimonidies* (1935) and *Die Prophetie* (1936).²³ From this one might simply conclude that Heschel's Yiddish poems and prose were the efforts of a fervent youth, who dabbled in a hybrid of avant-garde literature penned in the language of home, before settling down to write modern Jewish scholarship in an appropriately scholarly language.

But Heschel's career did not travel a simple, direct route from East to West as charted by earlier generations of Polish *maskilim* and followed by later generations of Jewish scholars. Instead, he straddled the geographic and cultural divide between *Ostjuden* and *Westjuden* throughout the interwar decades. The scion of renowned *rebeyim* and a native of Warsaw, Heschel was nurtured by both modern urban culture and the provincial hasidic heritage of his elders, writing later that "I was born in Warsaw, Poland, but my cradle stood in Mezbizh . . . , where the Baal Shem Tov . . . lived during the last twenty years of his life."²⁴ As a young man in his teens, Heschel's cultural journey "west" began with a move in the opposite geographical direction, to Vilna. There he began his secular education and participated in gatherings of young Yiddish writers in the Yung-Vilne literary circle, before heading for Berlin.²⁵ While a student in Germany he wrote and published most of his

²² According to Khayim-Leyb Fuks, "Avrom-Yehoshua Heshl," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* (New York: CYCO, 1960), vol. 3, pp. 234–236. None of these are listed in the bibliography of Heschel's work in the 1965 edition of his *Between God and Man*.

²³ *Maimonidies: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1935); *Die Prophetie: Prace Komisji Orientalistycznej NR 22* (Cracow: Nakladem Polskiej Akademji Umiejtnosci, 1936). This chronology is based on information in Fritz A. Rothschild, "Abraham Joshua Heschel," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan/Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), vol. 8, pp. 425–427, and Fuks, "Avrom-Yehoshua Heshl."

²⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion For Truth* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1973), p. xiii.

²⁵ In his memoir of the early days of Yung-Vilne, Shloyme Belis recalls Heschel's association with the literary circle. See Shloyme Belis, "Bay di onheybn fun Yung-Vilne," *Di goldene kevnt*, no. 101 (1980), especially pp. 18–19.

early Yiddish works, and was involved in the publication of the *Berliner bleter far dikhtung un kunst*, a short-lived, Yiddish literary magazine created by the Berlin branch of the Mizrekh-yidisher Studentn-fareyn, an organization of young East European Jews living and studying in Germany.²⁶ And Poland was again Heschel's home during the year before the start of World War II, when he taught at the Warsaw Institute of Jewish Studies.

Likewise, Heschel's ideological course was anything but unidirectional. Though he had abandoned the hasidic way of life as a young man, the lore and ideals of hasidism continued to inspire his thinking and writing, albeit refracted through the prism of modern Western scholarship and art. His ongoing interest in hasidism and Jewish mysticism, which was as essential to his Yiddish poetry as it was to much of his later scholarly and philosophical writings, also set him apart from most of his contemporaries in the Yiddish literary world of interwar Europe, who by and large were ardent secularists.

An autobiographical reference in *Man's Quest for God*, one of Heschel's postwar philosophical works, suggests that the cosmopolitan life that he encountered as a student in Berlin proved at first overwhelming and (at least in retrospect) ultimately unsatisfying. Herein the author recalls his sense of frustration as he walks the streets of the city at twilight, wondering if he should "go to the new Max Reinhardt play or to a lecture about the theory of relativity." He notices that the sun has set, and begins to recite *ma'ariv*. As he does, a line from a poem by Goethe rings in his ear: "*Ueber allen Gipfeln ist Ruh'*/'O'er all the hilltops is quiet now." Judging the sentiment to be "pagan thinking," he Judaizes the line "*Ueber allen Gipfeln is God's love for man* —" before returning to his prayers.²⁷

The tension between Heschel's interests in modern secular poetics as well as in issues of spirituality is perhaps most succinctly

²⁶ The entire known run of *Berliner bleter far dikhtung un kunst* consists of four numbers, dated 1931–1932. Heschel's work appears only in the first issue (November 1931), which features the poems "Ikh un du," "Beyn-hashmoshes," "Vandlungen," "Noyt," and "Oreman" (pp. 9–12).

²⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), pp. 96–97. The code-switching from German to English in Heschel's account of his transformation of Goethe's "paganism" might be read as part of the Judaizing process, if one assumes that the English of the text represents a translation of Heschel's inner (and, therefore, as Yudel Mark suggests, Yiddish?) voice.

expressed in the title of his collection of Yiddish poems, which links the Yiddish word *mentsh* with the Loshn-koydesh term *shem-hamefoyresh*, a meta-name signifying the tetragrammaton, the distinctive or personal name of God. The name of God is unpronounceable, because it signifies a signified that is beyond complete comprehension — that is, the *shem-hamefoyresh* exists somewhere outside the limits of human language. The title may have been derived from a hasidic exercise in *gematria* that symbolically demonstrates the immanence of God by assigning equivalent numerical value (yet another level of significance) to the signifiers *mentsh* and *YHVH*.²⁸ It simultaneously suggests at the philosophical level that the search for the ineffable Divine is realized in the mortal, and at the linguistic level that the Jews' quest to comprehend and articulate the sacred is fulfilled in the vernacular of their East European masses. Thus, at the same time that it evokes the unattainable otherworldliness of God, *Der shem-hamefoyresh: mentsh* also has a "this-worldliness" about it, as if in defiance of the Tanna Abba Shaul, who declared that whoever attempts to pronounce the *shem-hamefoyresh* loses his share in the world to come (Sanhedrin 10: 1).

During his student days in Berlin Heschel also witnessed the Nazis' rise to power. His apprehension of the dire consequences that Nazism held for European Jewish culture may have also contributed to his abandonment of a career as a Yiddish poet. At least once, however, his experiences of Nazi anti-Semitism provoked a poetic response. On 10 May 1933 the Warsaw Yiddish daily *Haynt* published a selection of literary reactions to the public burning of books by Jewish and radical authors in German cities. Among the responses to "Hitler's auto-da-fé" was the poem "In tog fun has" ("On the Day of Hate"), printed under the pseudonym "Itsik":

On the Day of Hate

On the Sabbath day
 At ten o'clock a mud-brown mass of coats
 Punched backs, signs, thresholds.
 Guard rose up, like huge, silent snakes,

²⁸ See Samuel Dresner's introduction to Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, p. x, n. 2.

At every entry — full of venom, larger than life,
Choking throats at the door of a degraded nation,
The mob spitting laughter on all who go inside.

Citizens, in mansions or in humble houses, stand
Like lepers behind evil, poisoned grates.
Window panes ooze and fester, bound with bloody placards.
Every wall a bandaged scar,
Every sign smeared with pain, with hate.

Gut-yontef, Germans, master race!
You hallow hatred on this day, sacred to your pious minions.
The people are a drum, struck with yellow-greenish tones,
Slashed with years of envy and desire.
A screaming finger points at it all: "I give you gifts and good fortune!"
The heart of the mob races and robs. Everything is stolen ten-thousand times over.

Hunger screams for the long knives.
The street — volcanic hate.
Every mouth a blind knot of curses,
Their lusty gestures even madder than their eyes.
Around eager gallows, the mob cries:
"Judah is the world's disease!
The wrath of dogs is too good for them.
Jew judges are traitors, filled with dark corruption,
Jew pharmacists pour poison, germs into their cures.
Usurers and leeches all —
Throw their children out of school,
Their homeless out of orphanages, their sick out of hospitals!"

Holy is Israel's humiliation!
A hand, drunk with the blood of men disgraced,
Paints slaps of red and rage.
The crowd watches at every window.
Faces are stamped with a screaming mark of shame.
The Jews' house is raped, abandoned, an open latrine.
The hand spits a blazing Star of David on every pane.

Like sacred drapes on desecrated arks
Facades of Jewish houses glow —
The *shem-hameforesh*, light-and-dark,
“Itsik” burns in every window.

Yellow spots flutter on pitch-black signs of shame.
Scraps of parchment, stripped of words, glow like fiery window-
panes.
Onto a holy sheepskin a fiery hand spills unseen writings.
Before all nations and ages, a prophecy arises.

I know: God now sees through my eyes.
My every limb draws in this evil pain.
Shudders erupt from my hair and lashes.
My breath glows! My eyes seethe!
I am all but consumed by the fire of my rage!
But suddenly I am gripped by a glowing verse.
I write God’s *tefillin* with the blood of our disgrace
“I believe in God and believe in Jews!”

**

O, Shepherd of Shepherds on the Sabbath at dusk!
The blood of the disgraced cries hotter
Than the blood of the slain.
Forever will I bear the wounds of my memory.
We cannot burn our pain
In a fire of hate,
Nor can we cool our woes
In ashes of revenge.

The shame pains us
More deeply than the throes of death.
We can sooner forgive destruction wrought of anger
Than destruction wrought of scorn.
We are as old as God
And shed more tears for You than for ourselves,
So weep, *shehinah*, for us as well . . .

Somewhere the sky rends its clothes in mourning.
Our pent up tears

Could flood the world.
 Yet we weep, we weep silence.
 But know this, you drunkards, leeches of the soul:
 We cannot merely forgive and sigh,
 But will also be a whirlwind in the coming night
 And chase this day of uprising from our mind —
 The beast will be choked in the grip of its own bite!

God of our ancestors and prophets,
 O, heal and hallow us in this our life!²⁹

This poem, perhaps one of the last Heschel ever wrote, not only records the author's responses to Nazi acts of anti-Semitism, but also demonstrates his artistic and philosophical confrontation with the limits of poetry. Longer than any of the poems in *Der shem-hamefoyresh: mentsh*, "In tog fun has" is an ambitious, somewhat unwieldy effort. Like "Ruf durkh di nekht," it evinces Heschel's unresolved struggles between an attraction to secular modernist poetics and an impulse to engage with the divine. The first half is dominated by images of violence and degradation. Fragmentary, brutal and kaleidoscopic, they are reminiscent of motifs in leading avant-garde Yiddish poets' earlier responses to the upheaval and bloodshed of World War I, the Russian Revolution and their aftermath, such as Yankev Glatshteyn's "1919," Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's "A Nakht" ("A Night," 1916–19) and Perets Markish's "Di kupe" ("The Heap," 1921).

Although "In tog fun has" is not included in *Der shem-hame-*

²⁹ *Haynt*, 10 May 1933, p. 3. The poem's author is listed in the paper as "Itsik," and an editorial note identifies him as "a world renowned German Jewish author, whose books were among those . . . burned in German cities." This would appear to suggest that the author is someone other than Heschel, but the poem has been identified elsewhere as his. "In tog fun has" was reprinted in *25 yor Yung-Vilne: zaml-heft far literatur un kunst* (New York: Nusakh Vilne, 1955), a hectograph anthology of works by writers and artists associated with Yung-Vilne, compiled by Leyzer Ran. The poem is identified in the anthology as being by Heschel; according to Ran, Heschel gave him the poem for publication in the anthology (the 1955 version features several slight changes in the text and corrections of typographical errors). The use of the pseudonym and the misleading identification of the poet might be explained, at least in part, by the fact that *Haynt* was published in Warsaw, Heschel's hometown. The pseudonym "Itsik" is identified with Heschel in Berl Kahan, *Leksikon fun yidish-shraybers* (New York, 1986), col. 577.

foyresh: mentsh, which was published later that year,³⁰ it, too, invokes the unspeakable name of God. Appearing at the poem's midpoint, the *shem-hamefoyresh* is not realized as a universal *mentsh*, but becomes a Yiddish-speaking Jew's name, burning in the midst of a desecrated synagogue. As it is also the author's pseudonym, "Itsik" calls to mind both the biblical child of Abraham as a metonymy for all of the patriarch's descendants, as well as the persona of the poet as the brainchild of Abraham Heschel.

Following this image, however, "In tog fun has" turns from expressionistic images of rage and horror to a range of rhetorical responses to the brutal humiliation — ventings of shame and grief, philosophical deliberations, an affirmation of faith and a final plea for divine salvation. Thus, the poet's fractured attempt to respond to the Nazis' immolation of Jewish and modernist texts with a "glowing verse" becomes, in the end, an abandonment of worldly poetry and an invocation of prayer and prophecy.

Eventually, Heschel more fully expressed the philosophical impulses behind his Yiddish verses in other genres and in other languages. Indeed, part of the answer to the question of why Heschel abandoned Yiddish poetry may be found in one of his major scholarly works, *The Prophets* (1962), an expanded, English-language version of his 1936 monograph *Die Prophetie*. One section of this study addresses the analogy of biblical prophecy to secular poetry, one of several such comparisons (prophecy as ecstasy, as psychosis) that Heschel explores and ultimately rejects as means of understanding the distinctive nature of the ancient Hebrew prophets' inspiration. Heschel begins his analysis of the analogy of poetic and prophetic inspiration by tracing the history of this concept, from ancient writers such as Philo and Longinus to Herder and Eichhorn in the nineteenth century. Heschel sees this conceptualization as having in effect paved the way for the modern notion of substituting an "aesthetic appreciation" of biblical literature for a "theological approach." Though this has proved to have enduring appeal for non-traditional, anti-rationalist readings of the Bible in

³⁰ *Der shem-hamefoyresh: mentsh* appears to have been published late in 1933. Two poems from the volume, "Ruf durkh nekht" [sic] and "Ovntn in shtot," were published in the 10 November 1933 issue of *Literarische bleter* (no. 45 [496], p. 714), where the volume is identified as "having recently been published in Warsaw."

the modern age, Heschel notes that it contradicts traditional commentaries that stress a non-aesthetic valuation of Scripture:

Raba expounded [in Sotah, 35b]: "Why was David punished? Because he called words of Torah songs, as it is said: 'Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage' (Ps. 119: 54). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Him: 'Words of Torah, of which it is written (Prov. 23: 6): When your eyes light upon it, it is gone (the Torah is beyond human comprehension), you call songs! . . . ' In opposition to the view that the book of Daniel and possibly the Torah were mere literature, the assertion was made [in *Genesis Rabba*, 85, 2] that the sequence of the chapters in the book of Daniel is intentionally "disarranged so that it might not be said that the narrative is mere poetry, and that all might know that it was composed under divine inspiration."³¹

Heschel himself writes, "the intention [of prophecy] is more important than the impression. [The prophet's] purpose is not to elaborate his views artistically, but to set them forth effectively. His primary concern is the message rather than the form."

Citing descriptions of inspiration from authors and other creative artists ranging from Democritus on Homer to Freud on Leonardo — and including Hesiod, Blake, Dickens, Goethe, Mozart, Nietzsche, Poe, Rodin — Heschel teases out his understanding of the difference between poetic (that is, secular) inspiration and prophetic inspiration. Whereas these various artists describe inspiration in vague and negative language (that is, they are essentially ignorant of what inspires them or how), "in contrast," Heschel writes, "the prophetic act takes place in clear self-consciousness." The artist is passive in states of aesthetic inspiration — "A common phrase among poets is, 'It came to me.' In their descriptions, the neuter pronoun of the third person prevails," Heschel writes. However, he continues,

the inspiration of the prophet is distinguished, not only by an awareness of its source and of a will to impart the content of inspiration, but also by the coherence of the inspired messages as a whole (with their constant implication of earlier communications), by the awareness of being a link in the chain of the prophets who preceded him, and by the continuity which links the revelations he receives one to another. The words that come to him form a coherence of closely related revelations, all reflecting the illumination and the sense of mission shed by the call. There is both a thematic and a personal unity of experience.³²

³¹ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962), p. 369.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 388; pp. 388–389.

Perhaps, then, Heschel came to the conclusion during his student days in Berlin, when he was at work on the original study of the prophets, that poetry was not the proper medium for the intellectual, creative and moral message that he was striving to articulate, nor was secular Yiddish culture the right context in which to deliver it. In Buberian terms, Heschel seems to have found that he could not achieve a true "I-thou" dialogic relationship in poetry, finding the poet to be limited to a reactive, "I-it" relation with his inspiration, without ever knowing what that "it" is. The secular nature of the agenda of most of his fellow Yiddish literati — their interest in formal experimentation, especially in poetry, and their commitment to transforming the traditional vernacular of East European Jewry into a language of cosmopolitan modernism — could not be reconciled with Heschel's understanding of the proper agenda of the Jewish prophet. The political ferment of Nazi Germany in the early 1930s may have not merely demonstrated the limits of poetry in the face of brutal destruction, but might also have prompted Heschel — as it did many others — to turn for a response to the rise in anti-Semitism away from the secular and towards the spiritual. Indeed, his Yiddish verse ultimately presents the reader with a portrait of young Heschel as not so much a struggling poet as a struggling prophet.³³

Fifteen years after the appearance of Heschel's book of modern Yiddish poetry, what seem to be his last published words on the subject appeared on the other side of the Atlantic — and on the other side of the vast breach in Jewish life left during the Second World War. These remarks appeared in his 1948 review for *Der yidisher kemfer*, a Labor Zionist weekly, of a two-volume collection of Yiddish poems by Aaron Zeitlin, written both before and after the war, that had been published the previous year.³⁴ Of Heschel's literary contemporaries in interwar Poland, Zeitlin is perhaps the most prominent of a few Yiddish authors to draw similarly on his

³³ In a recent article, Eliezer Schweid argues that Heschel, Buber and other twentieth century Jewish figures present in their writings a distinctive kind of prophetic mysticism which, unlike classical Jewish mystical traditions, is "based on a direct revivalistic interpretation of the Bible," and which conceives of the mystical experience as being "a this-worldly Divine experience." See his "'Mistika n'vuit' b'hagut ha-yehudit shel ha-me'ah ha-esrim," *Da'at*, no. 29 (Summer 1992), pp. 83–106.

³⁴ Arn Tseytlin, *Gezamlte lider* (New York: Farlag "matones," 1947).

devotion to Jewish religious and mystical tradition as inspiration for his secular Yiddish writings.³⁵ This review of Zeitlin's collected verse might therefore be read in part as an oblique consideration of Heschel's choice to foresake his own career as a poet, a contemplation of the road not taken.

Heschel's review begins with an outpouring of grief over the recent, overwhelming devastation of East European Jewry — quite unlike the more muted, ameliorating reflections on this loss that appear in *The Earth Is the Lord's* or its various earlier versions. This is followed with an expression of frustration at the inadequacy, even unseemliness, of language and of conventional literature in response to the tragedy:

The ocean's roar resounds from afar; there is no escaping it. Our misfortune is as huge as God. We confuse this roaring with cheap noisemakers. It is a waste of talk [Yiddish: *an aveyre di reydl*], it will bring us no happiness (even saying these words is foolish). Now every day is Tisha b'Av, and yet — we put on Purim plays! . . .
What is the task of a Yiddish poet in our time? Is it to ameliorate the death of millions with new poems? "Now even screams are lies, even tears are only literature. . . ." Aaron Zeitlin has designated himself "as a final *oy* from a Jew burnt at Treblinka."

Thus, the critic praises a section of Zeitlin's poem "A kholem fun nokh Maydanek," wrought out of dactylic trimeter lists of diminutive names ("Blimeshi, Toybeshi, Rivele, / Leyenyu, Feygenyu, Perele, . . ."), as "a poem . . . that is not literature, but 'an *oy*.'"³⁶

The review continues with a rueful denunciation of prewar Jewish modernism and its aesthetic goals, which repudiated traditional culture:

Whosoever opens his eyes and looks at the fruits that we have reaped [in the last three or four generations] knows that we went off in a direction that led to our spiritual downfall, that we fell under the burden of false convictions of which we'd once boasted so. Didn't we, for example, make too much of a commotion over literature, over world literature? Didn't we corrupt our pure, Jewish youth [Yiddish: *koshere yugnt*] by convincing them that in art lay perfection and salvation?³⁷

³⁵ Zavel Klein suggests that Hillel Zeitlin, the poet's father, may have been an important influence on Heschel during his years in Warsaw. See Klein, "Heschel as a Hasidic Scholar," pp. 201–202.

³⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Nokh Maydanek (vegn Arn Tsaytlins naye lider)," *Yidisher kemfer*, vol. 29, no. 771 (1 October 1948), pp. 28–29; p. 29.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29. Note Heschel's use of Yiddish idioms rooted in the lexicon of traditional culture (*aveyre*, *Tisha b'Av*, *koshere yugnt*) to underscore his attack on modernism.

Yet Heschel has nothing but praise for Zeitlin and his verse. He distinguishes the poet as one of the few current writers fluent in traditional East European Jewish culture, who embodies its spirit; for Zeitlin, "spiritual matters are no less concrete and real than forms and colors." Moreover, the poet is "the expression of a new orientation. . . . He reminds his generation, 'We must be prophets, we must become reporters.'" Indeed, Heschel praises Zeitlin's poetics as spiritual and instinctual; like that of the prophets, it is artlessly connected to traditional sources of inspiration:

In our modern literature, Aaron Zeitlin is one of the few individuals in whom thoughts of Jewish mysticism have become a part of his inner essence, an element of his imagination, with which he approaches life, from which he forms his poetical vessels The *sefirot* of the Kabbalah are as intelligible to him as modern sociology is to others.³⁸

By the time these words were published, Heschel was established in America, recognized as an important new voice in modern Jewish scholarship, and he had published the first versions of his own elegy for East European Jewry.

The "East European Jew" texts

As he abandoned Yiddish poetry, Heschel pursued a career in the arena of *Wissenschaft*. His early *Wissenschaft* was German, the language and scholarly tradition in which he was trained in Berlin and Frankfurt. At the beginning of World War II Heschel, like many other scholars, was forced to embark abruptly on a different and unanticipated life course. He left his teaching post in Warsaw for England and the following year moved on to the United States, teaching philosophy and rabbinics at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati from 1940 to 1945. In 1945 Heschel left Ohio for the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where he remained on the faculty until his death. Thus, Heschel's postwar career was set in a venue different — geographically, academically and linguistically — from his prewar endeavors.

1945 was also the year in which Heschel returned to writing in Yiddish, producing what would become, albeit in a different incarnation, the most famous of his "Yiddish" works. On 7 January of that year, at the nineteenth Annual YIVO Conference in New York,

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29; p. 29; pp. 29–30.

he delivered an essay entitled "Di mizrekh-eyropeishe tkufe in der yidisher geshikhte" ("The Eastern European Era in Jewish History"). In one form or another, this may be Heschel's most frequently published work. The essay was first printed in the March – April 1945 volume of *YIVO-bleter*; the following year an expanded version was issued in booklet form, again in Yiddish, by Schocken Books, under the title *Der mizrekh-eyropeisher yid*. Also in 1946 an English translation of the original YIVO essay appeared in the inaugural volume of the *YIVO Annual for Jewish Social Science*.³⁹ This version of the essay has been reissued more than once, including in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg's anthology *Voices from the Yiddish* (1975) and Deborah Dash Moore's *East European Jews in Two Worlds* (1990);⁴⁰ a shortened version of it also appears under the title "The Inner World of the Polish Jew" in *Polish Jews: A Pictorial Record*, a volume of photographs by Roman Vishniac, first published by Schocken in 1947. Finally, Heschel reworked and expanded the essay as a short book in English, entitled *The Earth Is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in Eastern Europe*, first published in 1950 by Henry Schuman.

The original essay was written by Heschel while he was still teaching in Cincinnati, although at that time the author was in almost daily contact with Max Weinreich, the Research Director of YIVO, discussing the work on the telephone.⁴¹ The Yiddish style of the essay appears to reflect Weinreich's influence. Consider, for example, this sentence from the opening paragraph:

*Biz tsum nayntsntn yorhundert shteln tsunoyf ale ashkenazishe yidn vos voynen in dem shetakh tsvishn dem Rayn un dem Dnyeper, tsvishn dem baltishn un shvartsn yam vi oykh etleke shkhey-nesdike medines a kulturel aynhaytlekhe grupe.*⁴²

All Ashkenazic Jews in the areas bounded by the Rhine and the Dnieper, the Baltic and the Black Seas, and in some neighboring states as well, comprised up to the nineteenth century a culturally uniform group.⁴³

³⁹ The English translation of "The Eastern European Era in Jewish History" is uncredited in the *YIVO Annual for Jewish Social Science*, though Shlomo Noble, the volume's editor, is listed as responsible for most of the translations therein; when the essay was reprinted in Howe and Greenberg, the translation was credited to Heschel.

⁴⁰ Heschel's essay was also translated into Hebrew by Yehudah Yaari, as "Ha-Yehudi shel Mizrah Eropa," *Luah ha-Aretz 1947–48* (Tel Aviv: Haim, 1947), pp. 98–124.

⁴¹ Conversation with Beatrice Weinreich.

⁴² Avrom-Yehoshua Heshl, "Di mizrekh-eyropeishe tkufe in der yidisher geshikhte," *YIVO-bleter*, vol. 25, no. 2 (March–April 1945), p. 163.

⁴³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Eastern European Era in Jewish History," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, no. 1 (1946), p. 86.

It not only exemplifies the erudite stylistics of Weinreich's scholarly Yiddish, with its penchant for Loshn-koydesh terms and fusion words like *shkheynesdik*, but also evokes a geographical portrait of Ashkenaz that is particularly Weinreichian.

Indeed, the title and opening sentences of the essay give the reader a sense that what follows will conform, more or less, with the secular scholarly ideology of YIVO. But with its next paragraph the text takes a surprising, sharp turn away from the agenda, if not the discourse, of YIVO's secular Jewish scholarship:

The attempted appraisal of the Eastern European era is in the perspective of history; thus, events that loomed important only in recent years are considered in the aspect of their importance for the entire period, which extended over eight hundred years. Our task is to characterize those traits that, in our opinion, express the essence of the era; adventitious traits we must perforce ignore. Neither shall we attempt to analyse the causes that led to the assumption of its particular physiognomy by the era under consideration. That problem requires a special study. Nor shall we describe the various accomplishments of the era, such as the development of the Yiddish language, the rise of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the spread of Hassidism, Haskalah, the revival of the Hebrew language, the modern Hebrew and Yiddish literatures, Zionism, Jewish socialism, the establishment of new centers, the rebuilding of Palestine, the various attempts to modernize Jewish life and to adapt it to changing conditions.⁴⁴

Thus, despite (or rather, precisely because) the title of his essay promises an exercise in history, Heschel employs an extended litotes to erase much of what one might well expect to be on the agenda of an historical overview of East European Jewry, especially one offered in the setting of YIVO. The text that follows is not, in fact, history, but is rather, as the author says, his personal distillation of "the essence of the era," an idiosyncratic appraisal of its "historical value."⁴⁵ This essence and the evaluation of it that Heschel offers not only flout the agenda of the scholars he was addressing, but constitute a radical transformation of the author's own complicated experiences in the world of East European Jewry.

This transformation is wrought through an interrelated system of rhetorical tropes running throughout the essay, which may be characterized as follows:

1. *Spiritualization*: This is the fundamental trope of the essay. The essence of East European Jewish culture, according to Heschel, is its

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

religious traditions, epitomized by hasidism (this despite the fact that, within the 800-year era that he claims to address, it is something of a late arrival). Modern, secular Jewish life is barely mentioned, and is primarily treated as being “adventitious” (Yiddish: *tofldik*). In articulating his criteria for appraising the historical value of East European Jewry, Heschel echoes sentiments expressed in both his study of the ancient Hebrew prophets and his review of Zeitlin’s poetry regarding the distinctions between prophecy and secular art:

The pattern of life of a people is more important than the pattern of its art. What counts most is not expression, but existence itself, the source of expression. The key to the source of creativity lies in the will to cling to spirituality, to be close to refinement, and not merely in the ability of expression. Creativity comes from responsive merging with infinite reality, not from an ambition to say something.⁴⁶

The trope of spiritualization dominates the following tropes, although not without a considerable amount of tension, sometimes contradiction, among them. Thus, juxtaposed against the devaluation of artistic expression, cited above, is a rhetorical trope of aestheticization.

2. *Aestheticization*: Unlike many prewar descriptions of East European Jewish life that call attention to its physical plainness or ugliness or its material poverty, which are then often linked to notions of the culture as intellectually backward, spiritually decadent or aesthetically deformed, Heschel’s essay frequently describes East European Jewish culture in metaphors of physical beauty, albeit a beauty that is artless, ethereal or primieval. For example, when comparing Ashkenazic and Sephardic cultures, he writes, “Sephardic literature is like classical architecture, Ashkenazic literature, like a painting by Rembrandt, profound and full of mystery. . . . Sephardic literature is like a cultivated park; Ashkenazic, like an ancient forest.”⁴⁷ Even the character of East European Jewish spirituality is articulated in the discourse of visual or audial art. For example, Heschel writes in a section that praises *pilpul*:

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Ideas are like precious stones. The thought animating them brings out a wealth of nuances and distinctions, as the ray of light passing through a prism produces the colors of the spectrum. Upon rotation, the multiform ideas emanate a light that changes in accordance with the direction in which they are placed against the light of reason. The alluring gracefulness, the variety of polished ideas, enlighten the intellect and dazzle the eye. The concepts become dynamic; they give forth colors and meanings that at first thought seem to have no connection with one another.⁴⁸

By choosing to sing its aesthetic praises, Heschel defies the convention of regarding *pilpul* as a paradigmatic object of scorn — a commonplace among *maskilim* since Mendelssohn and modern Jewish historians since Grätz, who understood it as epitomizing the deformed mind of the tradition-bound Jew.⁴⁹

3. *Folklorization*: Complementing the trope of aestheticization, in turn, is one of folklorization. The life of East European Jewry is implicitly conceptualized as an archetypal folk culture — timeless, uniform, isolated, organic, communal. Aspects of Ashkenazic cultural creativity that defy this model are either dismissed as “adventitious” *vis-a-vis* the “essential” culture or are folklorized and absorbed into the folk model. Thus, while the existence of “the modern Yiddish and Hebrew literatures” is all but ignored, certain texts are occasionally cited or alluded to in the course of the essay. Although the sources are sometimes footnoted in the printed text, the fact that these words or images come from the pen of Abramovitsh or Peretz is not mentioned in the body of the essay; moreover, they are treated not as literature, but as folklore, as is the following reference to the praying bird in *Fishke der krumer*:

Even the landscape is judaized. During the penitential season the fish in the streams tremble; on Lag b’Omer . . . the trees rejoice. The spirit of a Jewish festival is felt even by the domestic and wild animals. The nightingale sings with a choir. And a magpie on a branch appears in the distance “as if wrapped in a small white *tallis* . . . bowing in supplication.”⁵⁰

4. *Beatification*: On the other hand, East European Jewish folk culture is discussed throughout the text in language that beatifies the

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴⁹ See Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, pp. 90–94.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91. The excerpt is credited in a footnote in the *YIVO Annual* translation; another version of the excerpt, printed in quotes, appears in *The Earth is the Lord’s* without citation, and the bird (Yiddish: *soroke*) is rendered as “crow,” rather than “magpie.”

quotidian. For example, the cultural traditions of *kheyder* and *kest* are invoked as testimony of a people so steeped in piety that they routinely transcend the travails of worldly existence — an approach that flies in the face of the mandate of YIVO's secular, social scientific approach to collecting and studying folklore:

School children are referred to as "sacred sheep," and a mother's pet name for her little boy is "mayn tsadikl" (my little saint). Hence, one is ready to sell all household belongings to pay tuition. Women work all their lives to enable their husbands to devote themselves to study. One shares his last morsel of food with a Yeshiva *bokher*. And when the melancholy sweet tone of Talmudic study penetrates the poor alleys, exhausted Jews on their pallets are delighted, for they feel they have a share in that study. Unable to devote themselves to study because of economic exigencies, they draw comfort from the thought of supporting the students. The ambition of every Jew is to have a son-in-law a scholar. Nowadays we speak disparagingly of the institution of *kest* (supporting a son-in-law). But what institution has done more to promote the spiritual development of large numbers of people than *kest*?⁵¹

Again, Heschel defies convention by placing on a pedestal traditional cultural institutions that were routinely vilified in maskilic literature.

5. *Harmonization*: Similar to the essay's treatment of East European Jewish cultural creativity, social and ideological conflicts in Ashkenazic life are either ignored completely (for example, those between Jews and non-Jews, among social classes within the East European Jewish community, among sects of hasidim, or among the factions within the highly divided modern political and cultural movements) or, when they are mentioned (such as the clashes between hasidim and *mitnagdim*, between traditionalists and *maskilim*, or between the generation of modernists and their forebears) they are subsumed under an overall cultural pattern of organic harmony and unity. The dynamics of history, both within and surrounding East European Jewry, are likewise all but ignored. The revolutionary character of early hasidism is not addressed, and the enormous disjunctures in modern Jewish life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, so widely described in contemporary Jewish literature and historiography, are smoothed over:

There arose the Haskalah, the Jewish socialist movement, Zionism, the Halutzim movement. How much of self-sacrifice, of love of Israel, and of the Sanctification of the Name

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 92–93.

are to be found in these modern Jews, in their will to suffer in order to help! The zeal of pious Jews was transmitted to their emancipated sons and grandsons. The fervor and yearning of Hassidim, the ascetic obstinacy of Kabbalists, the inexorable logic of Talmudists, . . . found their reincarnation in the supporters of the modern Jewish movements. . . . Even those who have abandoned tradition, even those whom the revolutionary impetus has carried to the antithesis of tradition, have not separated themselves, like the sects of previous days, but have remained within the fold. The powerful urge to redemption continued in them.⁵²

From the start, critical response to this text, in its various versions, has been effusive. Samuel Dresner called the original YIVO essay "an unforgettable eulogy;"⁵³ Feygl Mark labeled it "a Song of Songs,"⁵⁴ while Howe and Greenberg described it as a "rhapsodic celebration" and "sacred idyll."⁵⁵ Abraham Reisin praised the Yiddish version published by Schocken as "a kind of prophecy" and "a sacred text" (Yiddish: *a seyfer*).⁵⁶ Upon its first publication, *The Earth Is the Lord's* was hailed by its publisher, Henry Schuman, as "a literary monument of great beauty,"⁵⁷ and by Irving Kristol as an "elegy for a lost world."⁵⁸ In 1980 it was praised by Stephen Katz as "already a classic though only just a quarter of a century old."⁵⁹

As these comments indicate, the text has been valued for its lyrical and spiritual qualities rather than its historicity, as well as for its function as a kind of national eulogy. The context of the essay's original presentation is crucial to understanding its affective impact — delivered by a young scholar, who had fled Europe at the beginning of the war, speaking at the recently transplanted international headquarters of YIVO in New York; at a public event convened several months before the war's end, when the devastating extent of the toll that Nazism had taken on European Jewry was becoming more and more apparent to Jews in America. Moore describes the

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁵³ Dresner, "Heschel the Man," p. 11.

⁵⁴ Feygl Mark, "Tsvishn Mezshbezsh un Kotsk," p. 141.

⁵⁵ Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *Voices from the Yiddish* (New York: Schocken, 1975), p. 15; p. 65. In his *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), Howe describes *The Earth Is the Lord's* as a "historical rhapsody presenting the *shtetl* in ideal terms." (p. 687).

⁵⁶ Avrom Reyzin, "Literarische revyu," *Di feder: zaml-shrift far literatur, kunst un kritik*, 1949, p. 256.

⁵⁷ Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, p. 6.

⁵⁸ Irving Kristol, "Elegy for a Lost World," *Commentary*, vol. 9, no. 5 (May 1950), p. 490.

⁵⁹ Katz, "Abraham Joshua Heschel and Hasidism," p. 90.

event in her preface to *East European Jews in Two Worlds*: "When [Heschel] finished speaking, the audience of several thousands was moved to tears, and a spontaneous Kaddish was uttered by many who were committed secularists and nonbelievers."⁶⁰

The elegiac tone of the essay, with its tropes of cultural harmony, beauty and transcendence, no doubt proved an effective balm for its first audience, which had especially strong ties, intellectual as well as emotional, to the vanquished Old World. Heschel's discussion of Jewish life, not death, in Eastern Europe, must have come as a comfort, as would his elevation of the East European era to the status of a "Golden Age" (despite the inherent implications of subsequent decline and loss that such a label carries) and his suggestion that East European Ashkenazim had a purer, more original and unique Jewish culture than the Sephardim of Spain's Golden Age. Even Heschel's notion that East European Jewish culture teaches us that not only do Jews need God, but God also needs them, may have been an especially soothing image for this first audience, whatever their ideological convictions might have been, at a time when newspaper headlines and other reports suggested that European Jewry had been all but universally abandoned to its annihilation.

Nevertheless, a more dispassionate reading of Heschel's essay reveals that the smoothing, soothing trope of harmonization is riddled with competing and contradictory lines of rhetoric, as the author strives to straddle the gap between traditional culture and modernity, between faithful devotion and scientific scholarship. As demonstrated above, the essay's devaluation of secular art is repudiated by using the tropes of aesthetics to affirm the value of spirituality. Similarly, there is an appeal, on the one hand, to appreciate the spiritual Ashkenazic past in terms of secular humanist values. Thus, the previously cited paragraph from the discussion of *pilpul*, praising ideas as precious stones, ends, "This is no realistic thinking; but art, too, does not consist in imitating nature, nor is mathe-

⁶⁰ Deborah Dash Moore, ed., *East European Jews in Two Worlds* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University, 1990), p. viii. Significantly, Heschel's address opened the conference. According to Beatrice Weinreich, opening lectures at YIVO conferences were then usually of a broad, popular nature, rather than being works of advanced or esoteric scholarship; the general membership of the Institute attended these opening sessions in large numbers.

matics an imitation of something that already exists." Later on, Heschel analogizes scientific exactness to the zeal of piety:

To science every trifle is significant, and its votaries inquire diligently into the most intricate properties of matter. The pious Ashkenazic scholars investigated with similar passion the laws that should govern the Jew's conduct. The devotion and honesty invested in their work have their parallel in scientific research. . . . As the self-sacrificing devotion of the scientists seems torture to the debauchee, so the poetry of rigorism jars the ears of the cynic. But, it may be, [that] the question as to what benediction to pronounce upon a certain type of food . . . is as important as the determination of the melting point of a certain metal.⁶¹

On the other hand, the essay contains occasional oblique digs at secularism and at modern Jewish life. Again in his discussion of *pilpul*, Heschel writes, "It is easy to belittle such a mentality and to dub it unworldliness . . . [, but a] civilization that concentrates merely on the utilitarian is essentially not greatly different from barbarism." Near the end of the essay, he writes, "Shall we, Heaven forbid, be subject to the fate of Sephardic Jewry after the catastrophe of 1492: . . . magnificent synagogues and fossilized Jewishness? Shall we permit our people to be lost in the multitude?"⁶² While the former citation might be read as a dig at Communism, the latter appears to be a veiled, unflattering reference to modern American Jewry.⁶³

Reading the essay in the original Yiddish, one also senses a disparity between the formal, standardized "YIVO" Yiddish discourse of the essay and the essentially anti-YIVO agenda of its content. Here, as with Heschel's Yiddish poetry, the medium and the message are at odds. Again, this may be more easily observed now, as opposed to at the time of the essay's original presentation. In addition to the context described above, the delivery of the essay by a young refugee scholar in the language of YIVO, irrespective of its contents, may have then symbolized both linguistic and cultural continuity of modern Yiddish-speaking Jewry in the face of genocide. Although there is no explicit statement to that effect, the

⁶¹ Heschel, "The Eastern European Era in Jewish History," *YIVO Annual*, pp. 95; 95-96.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 94; 105.

⁶³ Cf. Heschel's comments on postwar American Jewish culture in his article, "The Two Great Traditions: The Sephardim and the Ashkenazim," *Commentary*, vol. 5, no. 5 (May 1948), p. 416-422; see also the discussion of the *Commentary* article in the conclusion of this essay, pp. [44-45].

return to writing in his native tongue at this time of personal crisis bound up with national tragedy doubtless had special meaning for the author himself as well.

In fact, Heschel appears to have responded implicitly to the conflict between medium and message in subsequent versions of the essay by moving the text away from YIVO and from Yiddish. The first substantial set of changes in the text comes with the Yiddish version issued by Schocken as *Der mizrekh-eyropeisher yid*, which is about a third longer than the original YIVO essay. Significantly, its title is different; no longer is the essay labeled a *geshikhte*; it is simply about "The East European Jew." A comparison of the opening sentence of the two versions evinces a shift away from identifying the work as secular scholarship and towards presenting it as an essay on spirituality; whereas the YIVO-bleter version begins, "Di bizaherike yidishe geshikhte . . .," the Schocken version begins, "Di gaystike hegemonye bay yidn . . ." ⁶⁴

One of the first additions to the text that one encounters in the Schocken version is of particular relevance to an analysis of Heschel's notion of the meta-significance of Yiddish. Like other expansions on the original essay, this eventually appears in *The Earth Is the Lord's*, the final English-language version of the essay:

Di mizrekh-eyropeishe yidn bashafn an eygn loshn. Geboyrn fun a rotsn masber tsu zayn, tsu fareynfakhn un fartaytshn di gvaldike kompleksn fun loshn-koydesh, fun tanakh un gemore — antshteyt vi fun zikh aleyk mame-loshn, a "shove-lekhol-nefesh," a shprakh on tseremonyes un on kuntsn, a shprakh oyf velkher "es redt zikh." Nito in ir keyn farplonterte vegn, keyn gefeferlekhe griber. Zi iz ful mit hertslekhkeyt un khokhme, mit pashtes un hartsikeyt fun gute mames. Es hot zikh in ir arayngesosn a sakh zaft fun der yidisher neshome. M'zagt in ir sheynkeyt un meynen meynt men gaystikeyt ("a sheyner yid"). M'zagt in ir gutskeyt un meynen meynt men heylikeyt ("a guter yid"). Oyf velkhn loshn kon men azoy shver zogn a lign Redt take Reb Nakhmen Bratsleaver zikh oys dos harts oyf taytsh far Hashem-yisborekh mit alerley taynes. ⁶⁵

Further, the East European Jews created their own language, Yiddish, which was born of a will to make intelligible, to explain and simplify the tremendous complexities of the

⁶⁴ Heshl, "Di mizrekh-eyropeishe tkufe in der yidisher geshikhte," *YIVO-bleter*, p. 163; Avrom-Yehoshua Heshl, *Der mizrekh-eyropeisher yid* (New York: Schocken, 1946), p. 5. Significantly, the opening sentence of the English-language translation of the essay in the *YIVO Annual* is more like the Schocken version than the YIVO-bleter version — "in the last thousand years the spiritual hegemony in Jewish life . . ." (*YIVO Annual* version, p. 86) — which, along with other such changes, not only suggests that Heschel did the translation himself, or at least assisted in its preparation, but also indicates that he was already envisioning a revised, English-language version of the work.

⁶⁵ Heshl, *Der mizrekh-eyropeisher yid* (Schocken), p. 9.

sacred literature. Thus there arose, as though spontaneously, a mother tongue, a direct expression of feeling, a mode of speech without ceremony or artifice, a language that speaks itself without taking devious paths, a tongue that has a maternal intimacy and warmth. In this language, you say "beauty" and mean "spirituality"; you say "kindness" and mean "holiness." Few languages can be spoken so simply and so directly; there are but few languages which lend themselves with such difficulty to falseness. No wonder that Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav would sometimes choose Yiddish to pour out his yearnings to God.⁶⁶

In the image of Yiddish that Heschel presents herein, the language has an inherent dependency on *Loshn-koydesh* for its existence, the former having been created to make sacred texts in the latter intelligible. In contrast to the language of holiness (which, according to lore, is divinely created) Yiddish is autochthonic. Yiddish is also portrayed as uncomplicated, unpretentious, emotional, nurturing, folkwise — values which are all linked in the text to images of the Jewish mother. At the same time, the language is inherently spiritual — simple adjectives such as "sheyn" and "gut" are imbued with holy significance — and even moral, for it is purportedly difficult to lie in Yiddish. (In light of semiologist Umberto Eco's notion that semiotic systems are anything "that can be used in order to lie," this would suggest that Yiddish verges on being, like the *shem-hamefoyresh*, beyond the limits of human language!)⁶⁷

Heschel's Yiddish style in the Schocken version also evinces a shift away from the original essay as it appears in *YIVO-bleter*. Although much of the scholarly level of language of the original is maintained in sections of the Schocken version that originally appeared in *YIVO-bleter*, additions such as the above-cited one are often, as this example indicates, in a folksier, less formal Yiddish, occasionally imitative of oral speech. (This disparity in levels of language is not carried over to the English of *The Earth Is the Lord's*, nor is a good deal of the cultural specificity of the Yiddish idiom.)

In 1947 a shortened, somewhat modified, version of the *YIVO Annual* translation of the essay appears as the preface to Vishniac's *Polish Jews: A Pictorial Record*, a volume of thirty-one black-and-

⁶⁶ Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, pp. 28–29.

⁶⁷ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1979), p. 7. Compare Heschel's beatification of Yiddish with Max Weinreich's notion of the language as ranked below *Loshn-koydesh* but above non-Jewish languages in the traditional Ashkenazic schema of levels of holiness; see "The Language of the Way of the SHaS" in his *History of the Yiddish Language*, pp. 175–246, *passim*.

white photographs taken in 1938 by the photographer in Cracow, Warsaw, Vilna, Munkacevo, Lublin, as well as small towns or villages in Carpathian Ruthenia. Although this version of the essay is retitled "The Inner World of the Polish Jew," it remains essentially unchanged from the *YIVO Annual* version, other than being considerably shortened to a little more than half the length of the original.⁶⁸ Thus, although token mention of a few Polish locales is made in the Vishniac version of the text, it offers no discussion of the distinctive character or internal diversity of Jewish life in the specific cities or regions depicted in the photographer's images, nor is there any discussion of the specific time — 1938 — in which they were taken. Despite its new title, the essay is still an overview of traditional East European Ashkenazic culture, focusing, as the new title does suggest, on its spiritual life.

This version of Heschel's essay is of particular interest in the context of this analysis as it is the first time that the text is published together with images that are the work of another individual in another medium.⁶⁹ Notes that appear on the back cover of the volume not only explain the subject and agenda of the photographs, but they imply how Heschel's essay is meant to be read in this context. Both images and text portray a culture that is isolated from others: "resisting influence of the outer world, these inbred Jewish communities adhered to traditional Jewish customs and values." They focus on the spiritual aspect of Jewish life, which transcended the material: "laboring under the burden of harsh poverty, the Jews yet succeeded in achieving a high degree of spiritual unity." The photographs mostly depict pious old men and young boys: "That [these] two age groups . . . predominate is not accidental. They were the two groups most involved in religious study." (Similarly, Heschel's essay assumes, in all its versions, a pious Jewish male to be the archetypal East European Jew.) The impact of modernity on this community is implicitly described in these notes as being not

⁶⁸ There is a colophon at the end of *Polish Jews: A Pictorial Record* that acknowledges the essay as "part of an address delivered at the Nineteenth Conference of the Yiddish Scientific Institute of New York, by whose permission the present version is printed."

⁶⁹ Interestingly, however, this is not the first time that Heschel's essay and Vishniac's photography were linked. Vishniac's images of Jewish life in the Carpathians were first exhibited by YIVO in conjunction with its 1945 annual conference, at which Heschel delivered the original version of the essay. See *Yedies fun YIVO*, no. 7 (February 1945), p. 7*.

merely “adventitious” (the language of the original YIVO essay), but as a “disintegrative force at work within the Jewish community.” Vishniac himself is cited as saying, “These pictures . . . were made without letting the subjects know of the presence of a camera. They represent real life completely unposed. And so today they have become documents of a lost epoch of a lost people.”⁷⁰ Similarly, Heschel’s essay, despite its rhetorical tension between tropes of artlessness and artfulness, is offered as a document, in which the subject of Polish Jewry plays a role innocent of the creative process involved in its documentation.

The most extensive changes in the essay come with its final incarnation, in book form, as *The Earth Is the Lord’s: The Inner World of the Jew in Eastern Europe*. Again the change in title is revealing. One step further away from the original essay’s nominal location within secular scholarship, the title is, like that of the Vishniac version of the essay, manifestly spiritual in focus (on the “Inner World”) and is, in addition, polemical in agenda, averring that “the Earth is the Lord’s.”⁷¹ In addition to expanding the organization of the original essay into a series of fifteen separate chapters, most of which focus on a different facet of traditional East European Jewish spirituality (e.g., Pilpul, Kabbalah, Hasidim, the “Thirty-Six Zaddikim”), there are new sections added, particularly at the book’s beginning and end. The volume’s third chapter, “The Two Great Traditions,” which contrasts the achievements and idioms of Ashkenaz and Sepharad, draws extensively on an article with the same title that Heschel wrote for *Commentary* in 1948.⁷² This article, in turn, incorporates some of the new material (such as the above-cited paragraph on Yiddish) that Heschel had written in 1946 for *Der mizrekh-eyropeisher yid*.

Among the most striking of these changes is found in the first chapter of *The Earth Is the Lord’s*, entitled “The Sigh.” In sharp contrast with the Weinreichian image of a geographic Jewish presence across Europe that appeared in the introductory paragraph of the original essay, Heschel now asserts that “the Jews in Eastern

⁷⁰ All citations from the back cover of the paperback edition of *Polish Jews: A Pictorial Record* (New York: Schocken, 1965). Despite the claim that Vishniac’s subjects were ignorant of the fact that they were being photographed, many of these pictures are portraits in which the subjects appear to be looking directly and consciously at the camera.

⁷¹ The title is taken from Psalms 24:1. See Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*, p. 177.

⁷² See note 63.

Europe lived more in time than in space." Throughout *The Earth Is the Lord's* geography is spiritualized, taking a cue from the book's title. For example:

The little Jewish communities in Eastern Europe were like sacred texts opened before the eyes of God so close were their houses or sorship to Mount Sinai. In the humble wooden synagogues, looking as if they were deliberately closing themselves off from the world, the Jews purified the souls that God had given them . . . ⁷³

In the opening chapter of the *The Earth Is the Lord's* the juxtaposition of time versus space is linked to parallel contrasts of spiritual versus material and internal versus external, suggesting that East European Jews led a uniquely and inherently more spiritual existence. Their lack of geopolitical enfranchisement and material wherewithal is understood as a cultural virtue, not a drawback:

Feelings, thoughts, are our own, while possessions are alien and often treacherous to the self. To be is more essential than to have. . . . While others have carried their piety, fervor, faith into magnificent songs of architecture, our ancestors had neither the skill nor the material necessity to produce comparable structures.⁷⁴

As with the original YIVO essay, there is still a tension in *The Earth Is the Lord's* between the devaluation of secular art and the use of an aestheticized discourse to sing the praises of this artless folk:

It is rarely given to an artist to convey their [i.e., the Jews of Eastern Europe] spirit in color and line. A *niggun*, a tune flowing in search of its own unattainable end; a story in which the soul surprises the mind; a *knaish*, the subtle shading of a thought, or a fervent gesture, which puts a situation, as it were, in God's quotation marks, is perhaps more suggestive of their essence. He was a unique type of man, the Jew in Eastern Europe, one whose habits and taste did not conform to classical standards of beauty, but who nevertheless was endowed with a wistful charm.

This is developed into the motif of the chapter's eponymous, essential "sigh":

There were many who did not trust words, and their deepest thoughts would find expression in a sigh. Sorrow was their second soul, and the vocabulary of their heart consisted of one sound: "Oy!" And when there was more than the heart could say, their eyes would silently bear witness . . . There was restrained mourning in their enthusiasm, profound sadness in their joy. Their authentic chants are consistently in the minor key. . . . But the Jews all sang: the student over the Talmud, the tailor while sewing a pair of trousers, the cobbler while mending tattered shoes, and the preacher while delivering a sermon.⁷⁵

⁷³ Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, p. 15, pp. 92–93.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15; pp. 16–17.

As music, gestures and sighs become the “essential” language of East European Jews, their actual means of daily discourse — Yiddish — implicitly disappears. In this chapter, as elsewhere in the book — Yiddish is, in effect, reduced to a few italicized words — here, *knaitsh* and *niggun*, later on, *rebbe*, *shtibl*, *kheyder*, *zaddik*, *schmorrers*. (In the *YIVO Annual* English-language translation of the original essay some of these Yiddish terms had been translated — for example, *kneytsh* was rendered as “kink.”) Ultimately, the language is distilled even further, down to the quintessential East European Jewish diphthong, *oy* — the same Yiddish “sigh” that Heschel quoted, in his review of Aaron Zeitlin’s poetry, from one of the poet’s verses to signify the idiomatic Jewishness and the artlessness of his postwar poems.

There is a significant difference between the relationship of the translation of Heschel’s essay in the *YIVO Annual* with the original Yiddish version and that of *The Earth Is the Lord’s* with its sources. The *YIVO Annual* version is presented as a wholesale translation of a pre-existing Yiddish text into an analogous modern language. Although *The Earth Is the Lord’s* is also an English-language text, largely based on earlier Yiddish versions, it stands on its own; Yiddish is no longer the language, direct or vicarious, of the discourse.⁷⁶ Instead, as the smattering of vestigial Yiddish words indicates, the language has become a sign of the Jewish past, along the lines of Norich’s argument cited earlier, to which the English-language discourse makes occasional, highly selective reference. Whereas the significance of Yiddish is not discussed in the original *YIVO* essay — delivered in that language, it is implicitly an “indigenous possession” of the essay’s subject, author and first audience — in *The Earth Is the Lord’s*, Yiddish is spoken about more extensively than it is spoken.

Linked to this difference between the two texts’ meta-images of Yiddish is an implicit assumption that the readership of *The Earth Is the Lord’s* possesses a different level of cultural literacy than that of

⁷⁶ A colophon at the end of the original edition of *The Earth Is the Lord’s* published by Henry Schuman makes no explicit mention of language, merely stating that “the main part of this essay was contained in a paper read at the annual conference of the Yiddish Scientific Institute in January 1945.” The colophon does not appear in the more recent Farrar Straus Giroux edition of the book, which otherwise duplicates the text, layout and illustrations of the Henry Schuman edition.

the original YIVO essays (whether in Yiddish or English translation). The distinction is manifest in the annotations that appear in the book. There are many more footnotes here than in the original essays and they offer the reader different information. Whereas some of the references to the works of Abramovitsh and Peretz go completely uncited in *The Earth Is the Lord's*, notes are added to explain Jewish ritual and cultural terms (such as *tefillin*, Litvak), translate and identify the titles of sacred texts (Shulhan Arukh, the Zohar), describe movements and people (the Musar movement, the Gaon of Vilna) and locate Biblical citations.

Further evidence that *The Earth Is the Lord's* was designed to address an audience distinct from that of the original YIVO essays is the fact that the book is profusely illustrated with "wood engravings" imitative of traditional woodcuts or copper engravings that sometimes illustrated editions of the *Tsene-rene*. These are the work of Ilya Schor, who also did similar illustrations for Heschel's book *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (1951) and Tamara Kahana's translation of Sholem Aleichem's *Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son* (1953). Schor's work appears throughout the book — on the verso facing the title page, at the beginning and end of each chapter. His larger illustrations include idealized scenes of *shtetl* life, placing the subject of each chapter in a charming, folkloric frame, while smaller decorations evoke traditional folk-art motifs, such as twin lions of Judah flanking the Ten Commandments and the symmetrical, curvilinear vegiforms that one often finds in East European Jewish ornamental paper-cuts. Schor's artwork also embodies some of the tension among the tropes of beatification, folklorization, aestheticization and spiritualization that continue to resonate in this final version of the original YIVO essay. For example, the illustration at the beginning of the book's final chapter, entitled "The Untold Story," presents five East European Jewish "types": a *sofer*, a *shohet*, a *ba'al-keri'ah* a coachman, and a *klezmer*.⁷⁷ They stand, dressed in appropriate costumes and holding their respective attributes (a quill pen and parchment scroll; a fowl and a slaughterer's knife; a torah scroll; a long whip; a fiddle), each in an ornamental frame, calling to mind the rows of jamb statues of saints in architectural niches that flank the portals of a Gothic cathedral.

⁷⁷ Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, p. 100.

The image echoes the text's beatification of East European Jewry, articulated in the visual idiom of Western art. Moreover, the ornamented display initials and ornaments at the end of each chapter parallel the text's scattered use of Yiddish words as a *folkstimlekh* adornment. These illustrations epitomize the transformation of Heschel's original YIVO essay from a eulogy in the linguistic guise of secular Jewish scholarship into a popular prose-poem with a comforting spiritual message, trimmed with visual and linguistic ornaments that are selectively evocative of a romanticized folk-past.

In the decades since its first publication, the final version of Heschel's portrait of East European Jewry has enjoyed a large, international, popular readership.⁷⁸ The book's pious, timeless, harmonious image of premodern Jewish life in Eastern Europe has played a seminal role in conceptualizing traditional Ashkenazic culture in the post-World War II era.⁷⁹ *The Earth Is the Lord's* also served as the cornerstone of Heschel's postwar career as the author of a series of popular philosophical treatises; as others have observed, its style and thematics prefigure such works as *The Sabbath*, *Man Is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man*.⁸⁰ Moreover, Heschel's image of East European Jewish culture as "a lost Eden" became the basis for his own distinctive "politics of nostalgia." According to Daniel Breslauer, this hallowed vision of the past as the translation of traditional moral imperatives into daily living became "the criterion by which contemporary political achievements are [to be] evaluated," informing Heschel's writings on political religion (notably his *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays in Applied Religion*, 1966) and his activism on behalf of civil rights, ecumenism and the movement against American intervention in Vietnam.⁸¹

⁷⁸ In addition to being most recently reissued by Farrar Straus Giroux, the volume has been translated into Spanish (*La Tierra es del Señor*, trans. Segisfredo Krebs [Buenos Aires: Editorial Candelabro, 1952]), French (chapters of it appear in *Les Bâisseurs du Temps*, trans. Georges Levitte [Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957]), Russian (*Zemlia gospodnia: vnutrenni mir evreev Vostochnoi Evropy* [Jerusalem: Biblioteka "Aliia," 1974]) and Hebrew (*Shamayim al ha-Aretz: al ha-Haim ha-Pnimi'im shel ha-Yehudi b'Mizrah Eropah*, trans. Pinchas H. Peli [Jerusalem: Mosad Abraham Joshua Heschel Hebrew Publication Committee, (197-)]).

⁷⁹ See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Ashkenaz: Intellectual History of Jewish Folklore and Ethnology* (Bloomington: Indiana University, forthcoming), in which she discusses the influence of *The Earth Is the Lord's* on Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski, the authors of *Life is With People* (1952), the landmark anthropological study of *shtetl* culture.

⁸⁰ See, e.g., Feygl Mark, "Tsvishn Mezshbezsh un Kotsk," p. 141; Yudl Mark, "Heshl un yidish," p. 50.

⁸¹ See S. Daniel Breslauer, "Abraham J. Heschel's Politics of Nostalgia," *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Spring 1980), pp. 307-313.

Kotsk

The original essay on East European Jewry that Heschel delivered at the YIVO conference in 1945 appears to have been the beginning of a period of his more-or-less regular association with the Institute that lasted into the next decade. Heschel also spoke at YIVO conferences in 1946, 1947, 1951, and 1957, and was one of those who eulogized Max Weinreich after his death in 1969. Heschel served for a while on YIVO's research commission and was appointed to the Board of Directors, then an essentially honorific body, some time around 1947. Starting in 1949, he directed a project sponsored by YIVO to collect hasidic lore from *rebeyim* and other European refugees who came to New York after the war.⁸² Some of the material gathered as a result of this effort, which appears to have lasted for about two to three years, is described in Heschel's article "Umbakante dokumentn tsu der geshikhte fun khsides" in the 1952 volume of *YIVO-bleter*; he also published an essay on Reb Pinkhes Koritser, an intimate of the Besht, in *YIVO-bleter* in 1949. These two articles are part of a larger corpus of scholarship that Heschel produced on the history and philosophy of hasidism during his post-war career.⁸³ Heschel's single largest work on hasidism did not appear in print until after his death at the end of 1972. The following year, Hamenorah Publishing House in Tel Aviv issued in two volumes his book *Kotsk: in gerangl far emesdikeyt*. Heschel's final major opus, as well as the last of his Yiddish texts, *Kotsk* is a hybrid work: it presents, in a series of short chapters, the teachings of Menakhem Mendl, the Kotsker *rebe* (1787–1859), along with information about his life and his disciples. In addition, the book reflects on the nature of the Kotsker *rebe's* philosophy, which Heschel problematizes by comparing it with both the teachings of the Besht and the writings of nineteenth-century Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kirkegaard, and discusses more generally the relevance of the Kotsker *rebe's* philosophy for modern times.

⁸² Documentation of this collecting effort, as well as descriptions of some of the materials gathered, are found in Hasidism Collection, YIVO Archives, RG 127. See also Avrom-Yehoshua Heshl, "Umbakante dokumentn tsu der geshikhte fun khsides: vegn dem khsides-arkhiv in YIVO," *YIVO-bleter*, vol. 36 (1952), pp. 113–115.

⁸³ Bibliographic information on Heschel's hasidic scholarship is included in Katz, "Abraham Joshua Heschel and Hasidism," and Klein, "Heschel as a Hasidic Scholar." See also Samuel Dresner's introduction to Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*.

In his introduction, Heschel offers various reasons for a book on the teachings of Menakhem Mendl of Kotsk, beginning with a statement of his personal connection to the subject:

The words of the Kotsker *rebe* have seethed in me all my life. Though I have not always agreed with them, I have always felt their powerful force. My course was not easy, but whenever I would think about the Kotsker *rebe* everything would become both more difficult and more easy.

As the book's subtitle suggests, Heschel conceptualizes his personal encounter with the Kotsker *rebe* as an embodiment of the larger challenge of the philosophical process. "Whoever lives with him," Heschel writes of Menakhem Mendl, "for an hour will no longer feel a sense of self-satisfaction."⁸⁴ Moreover, by juxtaposing Menakhem Mendl against the Besht and analogizing Kotsk with Kirkegaard, Heschel presents the *rebe's* life and teachings as a projection of his own intellectual struggles with both traditional hasidism and modern Western philosophy.

Heschel's selection of Menakhem Mendl as the vehicle for articulating his own metaphysical struggle seems a deliberately provocative strategy — as opposed to, for example, opting to explore his personal connection to hasidism in light of his own lineage, which includes Dov Ber of Mezritsh, Levi Yitskhok of Berditshev and Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt. Nor does Heschel choose to problematize his intellectual struggle in terms of the more conventional juxtaposition of hasidism against the ideology of *mitnagdim* — in terms of, say, the Besht versus the Gaon of Vilna.⁸⁵ Indeed, few other *tsadikim* are both as prominent and as controversial in the scholarly literature on hasidism as the Kotsker *rebe*. Though Heschel himself hails Menakhem Mendl as "one of the outstanding and most original leaders of the hasidic movement"⁸⁶ in his rather lyrical article on the Kotsker *rebe* for the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, elsewhere in the modern scholarly literature on hasidism Menakhem

⁸⁴ Avrom-Yehoshua Heshl, *Kotsk: In gerangl far emesdikeyt* (Tel Aviv: Hamenorah, 1973), vol. 1, p. 7.

⁸⁵ According to Samuel Dresner, Heschel had, in fact, long planned to write a comprehensive study of the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples as his magnum opus on hasidism. See Dresner's introduction to Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, p. xxv, n. 29.

⁸⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Menahem Mendel of Kotsk," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan/Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), vol. 10, pp. 1222–1224.

Mendel is variously described as “far-famed and much hated,”⁸⁷ as a “well-known . . . tragic figure on the fringes of Polish Hasidism,”⁸⁸ and as “the most important of this group [i.e., Polish hasidim] and generally speaking one of the most remarkable personalities — not a ‘saint’, but a true spiritual leader — in Jewish religious history.”⁸⁹

Menakhem Mendl of Kotsk is considered a key figure in defining the distinctive hasidism of those Polish Jews of the early nineteenth century who were disciples of Jacob Isaac ben Asher of Przysucha (Pshiskha) or one of the subsequent generations of *rebeyim* of his school.⁹⁰ Kotsk is generally associated with a trend in this school of hasidism that is rational in style rather than ecstatic, emphasizing traditional rabbinic scholarship over the study of mysticism, and placing special attention on the individual as opposed to the community, the elite as opposed to the masses. This markedly different approach to hasidism also deemphasized the centrality of the charismatic *tsadik* to the pursuit of spirituality.

Menakhem Mendl’s controversial personality and career have been presented by other modern writers to a popular readership. Joseph Opatoshu sets a portion of his 1921 novel *In poylishe velder* (“In Polish Woods”) in the court of the Kotsker *rebe*, while Elie Wiesel devotes the final chapter of *Souls on Fire*, his retelling of the lore of various *rebeyim*, to the life and teachings of Menakhem Mendl. Both writers seem primarily interested in the Kotsker *rebe* as a compellingly dramatic personality. In Opatoshu’s novel, Menakhem Mendl’s fierce, tortured, brooding presence plays an important role in the author’s portrayal of Polish Jewry’s spiritual

⁸⁷ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters* (New York: Schocken, 1961), p. 270.

⁸⁸ Joseph Weiss, “A Late Utopia of Religious Freedom,” *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, ed. David Goldstein (London: Oxford University, 1985), p. 209.

⁸⁹ Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1961), p. 345.

⁹⁰ Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica, once a disciple of Menakhem Mendl, represents the most extreme example of the antinomianist tendencies of the Pshiskha hasidim. For a discussion of the relationship between Menakhem Mendl of Kotsk and Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica and its significance in the larger context of Polish hasidism, see Morris M. Faierstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven: The Teachings of Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica* (New York: Yeshiva University/Hoboken: KTAV, 1989), as well as “A Late Jewish Utopia of Religious Freedom” in Joseph Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Mysticism*, pp. 209–248.

fall from the seemingly primordial grace of their naïve, symbiotic relationship with the forests of Poland. Wiesel, whose book on Hasidism appeared at about the same time as Heschel's *Kotzk*, exploits the scandal and mystery surrounding the Kotsker *rebe*'s notorious retreat from public life twenty years before his death as grist for melodramatic storytelling:

Somewhere in Central Europe, beyond the horizon, between Warsaw and Lublin, there was once upon a time a small village whose name made people dream and shiver: Kotzk.

The year is 1839.

It is winter. And snowing. Nestling close to one another, huts and cabins slowly vanish into the soundless night. The sky hangs low over deserted streets. The village is holding its breath; seen from outside, it is a ghost village

Something out of the ordinary happened in Kotzk that night: something incomprehensible, unspeakable. Hasidim refer to it still today, but only in carefully shrouded terms and only among themselves. Some of them speak of it as an eclipse, others as of an ailment of obscure origins. Some suggest that on that evening the Rebbe chose, for reasons known to him alone, to surprise heaven and earth by refusing to serve as their link and justification. . . . [That night ended when] the Rebbe fainted and had to be carried to his quarters. Where he remained twenty years. Until his death.⁹¹

These works have an agenda that is not only distinct from traditional apologetic accounts of the life of Menakhem Mendl, such as Pinkhas Zelig Gliksman's *Der Kotsker rebe*,⁹² but also differs from Heschel's focus, from a modern scholarly perspective, on the teachings of Kotzk and on Menakhem Mendl as symbolic of a philosophical attitude.

⁹¹ Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 228–230. In an "Author's Note" that appears at the end of the book, Wiesel extends thanks "to Professor Abraham J. Heschel . . . for sharing with me his own insight on Mendl of Kotzk." (p. 277) See "Appendix: The Friday Night Incident in Kotzk: History of a Legend" in Faierstein's *All Is in the Hands of Heaven* (pp. 89–97) for a further discussion of various representations of the Kotsker *rebe* in hasidic lore and literature.

⁹² Pinkhas Zelig Gliksman, *Der Kotsker rebe: zayn opshtam, zayn lebn, zayne rebeyim, zayne khaveyrim, zayn shite in toyre un khsides, zayne kinder un kinds-kinder* (Lodz: I. Landau, 1938). In his introduction, Gliksman writes: "I wrote this book in Yiddish — although I am not used to writing Yiddish; usually I write in Hebrew — because I have seen that a great many of the Jewish masses have been misinformed about the the *rebe* and his hasidim. They still believe the old attacks against Kotzk, which are based on untruths, and the false legends about Kotzk that were once spread in order to prejudice people against hasidism in general." (p. 6)

In the introduction to *Kotsk* Heschel also discusses his reason for writing it in Yiddish — a language in which he had not published a book-length work since *Der shem-hamefeyresh: mentsh* — explaining the instrumental role of the language in his agenda.⁹³ According to Heschel, part of the struggle inherent in the encounter with the Kotsker *rebe's* teachings is a linguistic issue:

One of the strengths of the Kotsker *rebe* was his powerful facility for formulating his thoughts quickly, sharply and brightly. Some of his *diburim*, which have been preserved in the way that he said them — in Yiddish — demonstrate his extraordinary craft.

The problem is that most of those who recorded Reb Mendele's *diburim* in their books translated them into Loshn-koydesh. And seldom in Jewish history has the ability to translate something into proper Loshn-koydesh been so weak as it was in the scholarly circles in Poland in the last generations. As a result, some of these *diburim* . . . have been rendered completely unintelligible. In my youth I heard a great many of these *diburim* as oral teaching [Yiddish: *vi toyre-shebalpe*] in Yiddish, therefore it is often possible for me to understand their unclear formulation.⁹⁴

In *Kotsk*, then, Yiddish signifies orality — not the histrionics of Wiesel's simulated story-telling, but the spiritual imminence and authenticity of the traditional hasidic world of Heschel's youth. This recalls the author's image of Yiddish as the "*knaitsh*" and "*niggun*," the sigh and song of East European Jewry evoked in *The Earth Is the Lord's*. Some of the titles of chapters in *Kotsk* illustrate how Heschel strives to exploit colloquial Yiddish idioms to evoke a sense of intimacy: "Der terets iz gor a kashe," "Emes ligt in dr'erd," "Nishkoshe iz oykh gut krank," "Gelt, fe!"⁹⁵

⁹³ The linguistic connection between Heschel's first and last book, though not mentioned by the author himself, has been noted frequently elsewhere, including in the prefatory comments of Pinchas H. Peli, the editor of *Hamenorah*, that appear at the opening of volume I of *Kotsk* (p. 5).

⁹⁴ Heshl, *Kotsk*, vol. I, p. 7. A similar problem with the limits of the translatability of Yiddish is expressed elsewhere at about the same time, albeit in a very different venue. The introduction to Irving Howe and Ruth R. Wisse's anthology *The Best of Sholom Aleichem* (New York: New Republic Books, 1979) expresses similar frustration at confronting the daunting challenges of translating the cultural specificity of this master of early modern Yiddish literature, also thought of as being ingenious in his use of the language's orality. This contrasts sharply with the agenda of earlier postwar translations of Sholem Aleichem, which emphasize the value of translation as a bridge across the cultural abyss of World War II. See Jeffrey Shandler, "Reading Sholem Aleichem From Left to Right," *YIVO Annual*, no. 20 (1991), pp. 305–332.

⁹⁵ These might be translated as "The answer is really a question," "Truth lies buried in the ground," "All right' can also be 'quite sick,'" and "Money? Ugh!"

This self-consciously naïve image of Yiddish is instrumental in enabling the author to evade a host of methodological issues that modern scholarship would be quick to raise regarding an exercise such as *Kotsk*.⁹⁶ The creation of an anthology of hasidic *diburim*, with their distinctive, complex history of oral and written transmission, prompts questions about the problems of translation and code-switching — not merely a matter of moving from Yiddish to Loshn-koydesh and back again, but also from oral to written to “written-in-the-oral” language.⁹⁷ Also problematic are Heschel’s multiple criteria for determining the authenticity of the *diburim*, which obscure the distinctions among attributions to Menakhem Mendl, his disciples and fellow travelers, and the school of Kotsker hasidism as it developed over generations:

Certain *diburim* that are repeated to this day as being from the Kotsker *rebe* are also attributed to other *rebeyim* . . . These all carry a fiery sharpness that is characteristic of the Kotsk school. To limit ourselves only to those *diburim*, which we are completely sure originated with the Kotsker *rebe*, is possible. But then we must renounce hundreds of *diburim* that are attributed to him and bear the distinctive imprint of his personality. When we write in this book about the Kotsker *rebe*, we speak about his personality and his school, as they are reflected in the tradition of Kotsker hasidim and in the opinion of those who were spiritually close to the hasidism of Kotsk.⁹⁸

Yet another critical issue is Heschel’s recontextualizing of the source material — not only placing the various *diburim* that he has culled from diverse hasidic sources into a composite publication, but also juxtaposing them with secular and non-Jewish material, such as the comparisons to Kierkegaard.

Heschel’s electing to write this book in Yiddish calls to mind Simon Dubnov’s decision to compose his history of hasidism in Hebrew rather than Russian, the language in which he wrote most

⁹⁶ Cf. the critical analysis of Buber’s writings on hasidism, e.g., Gershom G. Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism,” *The Jewish Expression*, ed. Judah Goldin (New Haven: Yale University, 1976), pp. 397–418.

⁹⁷ Hasidim themselves have recognized the problems inherent in translating the lore of *rebeyim*. See, e.g., the citation from *Teshu’ot Hen* by R. Gedaliah of Linitz (Berdichev, 1816), as cited in Dresner’s introduction to Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, p. xiii, n. 10.

⁹⁸ Heshl, *Kotsk*, vol. I, pp. 9–10. For discussion of the question of the authenticity of *diburim* attributed to the Kotsker *rebe*, see the following articles by Jacob S. Levinger, “Amarot otentiyot shel ha-rabi mi-Kotsk,” *Tarbiz*, vol. 55, no. 1 (October–December 1985), pp. 109–135; Torato shel ha-rabi mi-Kotsk l’or ha-amarot ha-m’uhasot lo al y’dei nekhdos Rav Shmuel mi-Sokhotshov,” *Tarbiz*, vol. 55, no. 3 (April–June 1986), pp. 413–431.

of his scholarly works.⁹⁹ Dubnov's choice was, to some extent, a practical one — most of the documentary materials he had collected for the study were in Hebrew — and was also ideologically motivated, prompted by his exchange on the language question with Hebraist Ahad Ha'am.¹⁰⁰ Heschel's choice of Yiddish is likewise a response both to the issue of the language of his primary sources and to a concern about the symbolic value of discourse. But whereas Dubnov's choice is prompted in part by a desire to promote modern Hebrew as a language of scholarship, Heschel opts for Yiddish as a means of breaching the distance inherent in modern scholarship, as well as using his native language as a vehicle for expressing a personal connection to his subject and articulating the struggle of coming to terms with it. If Menakhem Mendl of Kotsk functions in this work as a symbol of that struggle's thorny, daunting nature, Yiddish plays a complementary role of rooting the struggle in a discourse understood as organically connected to hasidism. (Perhaps this is what Yudl Mark meant when he called Yiddish Heschel's *neshome-loshn*, the instrument of his analysis).

An understanding of *Kotsk* as offering Heschel's final image of the meta-significance of Yiddish is complicated by the fact that this work also appears, in altered form, in another language. The same year that *Kotsk* was published, Farrar Straus Giroux issued an English-language version of the work, under the title *A Passion for Truth*. This single volume contains about half the number of chapters as there are in the Yiddish version; most of the chapters in *A Passion for Truth* appear to be translations or adaptations of chapters in *Kotsk*, while some are partially, others completely, new. More attention is given in the English-language version to the comparison with Kierkegaard, whereas the Yiddish book has a considerable number of chapters on the Kotsker *rebe*'s disciples that do not appear in *A Passion for Truth*. Moreover, the content and discursive structure of chapters on the same subject, even those with equiva-

⁹⁹ Shimon Dubnov, *Toldot ha-Hasidut* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1930–1931). German and Yiddish translations were published more-or-less simultaneously.

¹⁰⁰ See Sophie Dubnov-Erich, *The Life and Work of S.M. Dubnov: Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish History*, trans. Judith Vowles (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1991), p. 195.

lent titles, differ significantly between *Kotsk* and *A Passion for Truth*.

Consider, for example, a comparison of the chapter "Gelt, fe!" in *Kotsk* with "Money, Pfui!" in *A Passion for Truth*. Their respective first paragraphs are virtually identical in sentiment:

Dem Kotsker rebn hot gearht vos mentshn zenen far-ton tog un nakht in niskher. A mentsh darf arbetn oyf khies, dos farshteyt zikh, ober farvos zol harts un moyekh lign in oylem-haze? "Yegiye kapeykho ki tokhel ashreykho vetov lekho" (Tilim 128:2) — di mi fun dayne hent az du est, voyl iz tsu dir, un gut iz tsu dir. Harts un moyekh darf men opgebn far avoydes haboyre. Di hent zoln ton un der kop zol zayn in himl.¹⁰¹

It upset the Kotzker that people were passionately engrossed in business activities. A person must work for a livelihood, but why should the mind and heart submit to the amassing of profits? "You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands. You shall be happy and it shall be well with you," says the Psalmist (128: 2). The hands should be used in making a living, but one's head should be in Heaven.¹⁰²

The Yiddish version, however, creates a subtle interplay between traditional oral scholarship in Ashkenaz and modern Yiddish literature — invoking the conventional internal bilingualism of *lernen* by presenting a citation from scripture first in Loshn-koydesh, then in translation in the vernacular, yet doing so with a nod towards modernity by using Yehoash's translation of the Bible into modern, literary Yiddish as the gloss. The translation of the text is then followed by two of the Kotsker *rebe's diburim* as commentaries.

The second paragraph of "Gelt, fe!" elaborates on Menakhem Mendl's avowed contempt for money, synthesizing *diburim* cited from various sources into a running text. The sources are listed in endnotes, which also indicate that some of the *diburim* were simply *geherht* — that is, heard by the author. The second paragraph of "Money, Pfui!" likewise continues its presentation of the Kotsker *rebe's* thoughts on the subject of wealth, but with differences in form as well as content. Rather than retelling *diburim* in a simulation of traditional oral study or sermonizing, the English version explains Menakhem Mendl's ideas in straightforward, albeit more remote, expository prose. And, whereas the English text emphasizes the more comforting, inspirational aspects of the Kotsker *rebe's* teaching ("Poverty released a person to go his way unobtrusively, uprightly, serenely, humanely."¹⁰³), the Yiddish text stresses

¹⁰¹ Heshl, *Kotsk*, vol. I, p. 231.

¹⁰² Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*, p. 176.

the challenge inherent in the encounter with Kotsk. For example, a series of rhetorical questions is used in the Yiddish version to simulate Menakhem Mendl's provocative, caustic style: "People have to find some means of sustaining themselves. But why do they have to fill their heads with business deals? Why don't they pay the same amount of attention to their souls? Is poverty the greatest tragedy?"¹⁰⁴

Both Yiddish and English chapters offer details of the Kotsker *rebe's* life in the course of presenting his teachings. Thus, "Money, Pfui!" introduces Menakhem Mendl's wealthy patroness, Temerl, in the course of a biographical portrait wrought out of discrete episodes of the *rebe's* years of living in poverty. She is identified as the wife of "the very wealthy Berek Zbitkower — and grandmother of Henri Bergson." Temerl is also mentioned in passing in "Gelt, fe!" where the same anecdotes about Menakhem Mendl's poverty are scattered throughout the text (and where one learns that they were culled from diverse sources). An endnote refers the reader who wants to know more about the *rebe's* patroness to Yankev Shatski's *Geshikhte fun yidn in Varshe* ("History of the Jews in Warsaw"), a YIVO publication (1947); no mention is made of grandson Henri.

Whereas the Yiddish chapter concludes with more examples of Menakhem Mendl's contempt for wealth, the English text shifts to a discussion of the application of these teachings to "an avowedly business society like ours,"¹⁰⁵ comparing the Kotsker *rebe's* insights with those of William James (in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902) and social historian R.H. Tawney (author of *The Acquisitive Society*, 1920).¹⁰⁶

Clearly, the two books are intended for different audiences, distinguished by more than language literacy. *Kotsk* addresses a reader who, like the author, straddles two cultural worlds — someone lit-

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹⁰⁴ Heshl, *Kotsk*, p. 231.

¹⁰⁵ Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*, p. 178; p. 178.

¹⁰⁶ In contrast to Heschel's portrayal, Raphael Mahler describes Menakhem Mendl as "making inordinate demands . . . upon his affluent supporters" and notes that he was "esteemed by his Hasidim as a counselor in business matters." See Raphael Mahler, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), pp. 273–274.

erate not only in Yiddish, but also to a considerable extent in hasidic culture, and at the same time knows who Kierkegaard is (or, at least, is open to finding out). Moreover, the reader of *Kotsk* is expected to appreciate Heschel's philosophical dilemma, and to engage in his *gerangl far emesdikeyt*, negotiating not only the gap between the Besht and Menakhem Mendl, but also that between traditional devotion and modern scepticism. The reader of *A Passion for Truth*, on the other hand, is assumed to have less literacy in traditional Jewish culture than the reader of *Kotsk*; the linguistic issue of Yiddish versus Loshn-koydesh has no place in the introduction to the English-language version, which instead focuses on Heschel's personal experience of the complementary teachings of the Kotsker *rebe* and the Besht. The change in title not only shifts the focus away from the Kotsker *rebe*, the less well-known and more challenging of the two hasidic sages, but trades the less comfortable image of groping after truth through *gerangl* for the more appealing notion of aspiring to truth through passion. The more extensive discussion in *A Passion for Truth* of Kirkegaard and the references to the Gospels, Henry George, William James and La Rochefoucauld, among others, suggest an appeal to a cosmopolitan, ecumenical readership. *A Passion for Truth* places hasidism in the context of modern Western philosophy, rather than focusing, as *Kotsk* does, on an internal dialectic between the teachings of two hasidic thinkers as a means of articulating the author's personal philosophical struggles. Thus, the different languages of discourse also signify the intellectual and cultural distinctions between two readerships. For the reader of *A Passion for Truth*, who is implicitly incapable of grasping the multifold historical and cultural context embodied by the Yiddish of *Kotsk*, the intellectual and spiritual rigors symbolized by the Kotsker *rebe* are tacitly deemed to be beyond the pale. As is the case with *The Earth Is the Lord's*, the move away from Yiddish in this last work of Heschel's is a move away from the complexities inherent in the author's own experience as a multilingual, multicultural Jew — that of a man who straddled the distances between *Ost-* and *Westjuden*, Old World and New, traditional devotion and modern *Wissenschaft*; a man whose life journey reached from his origins among Polish hasidim to the American Jewish religious academy, where he was renowned for his political activism and ecumenism as well as his inspirational writings.

Conclusion

Heschel's relationship with Yiddish was, apparently, far from simple or consistent; indeed, the course of his career demonstrates an ongoing struggle with its "meta-" level of meaning. Challenged by the turbulent course of Jewish modernism in the middle decades of the twentieth century, by his own migrations across geographic, cultural, linguistic and ideological boundaries, and by the abrupt and heinous devastation of European Jewry during World War II, Heschel struggled — as a multilingual author, a scholar, a public figure and a private individual — to connect his native language with some notion of its meta-significance.

At first, the dynamic of Heschel's notion of the secondary signification of Yiddish, as manifest in his three major works in the language, might seem to be one of rejection and reduction: rejection of Yiddish as both vehicle for and symbol of modern secular Jewish culture, and reduction of the language to a signifier of the traditional Jewish past, in effect selectively beatifying its secondary level of meaning, while erasing its primary level of signification as a daily language of a living, changing, diverse people — a vernacular that Heschel himself continued to speak throughout his life.

This is borne out in Yudel Mark's eulogy of Heschel, mentioned in the introduction of this essay, wherein Mark recalls Heschel's public comments on the occasion of the publication of Volume III of the *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language* in 1971. Heschel praised the endeavor, comparing it to Judah ha-Nasi's compilation of the Mishnah, and citing as examples of its value entries for such terms as *aveyley-tzion* ("Mourners of Zion," a medieval group that mourned the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem by abstaining from meat and wine) and *ovanto-delibo* (a rabbinical term, from Aramaic, for "intuition") or one on the symbolic meanings associated with the name *Odem* (Adam), its letters standing for the words *akhile, dire, malbesh, or ikh, du, mir*. Significantly, Heschel makes no mention of the fact that the first volumes of the dictionary also include such words as *atlet* (athlete), *abortnik* (abortionist) or *avangard* (avant garde); in praising the *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language*, Heschel ignores its agenda to document the language comprehensively, and in effect reduces it to a collection of individual artifacts of traditional culture, selectively preserved, whose value lies in their secondary, rather than primary, levels of signification.

However, the multiple versions of his two postwar "Yiddish" texts suggest that, in the postwar American context, Heschel simultaneously maintained different visions of the significance of Yiddish that were linked to distinct communities of potential readers. These were distinguished by their respective native languages — Yiddish versus English — each in turn associated with differences in cultural literacy and in age. The generational distinction is particularly clear in the difference between the two versions of Heschel's final opus. *Kotsk* may therefore be read in part as the aging author's personal *heshbon ha-nefesh*, an attempt at measuring and, if not reconciling, then at least straddling the disjunctures and disparities encountered in a review of his intellectual and spiritual life's journey. Thus, a return to the author's native language is crucial to the realization of this effort. Moreover, in order to realize its philosophical aims, *Kotsk* depends on the vibrance and elasticity of Yiddish as a modern Jewish language. It is implicit in the scope, structure and style of the book that its audience can read Shatski's *Geshikhte fun yidn in Varshe* as well as the tales of Nahman of Bratslav, discuss Kierkegaard as readily as *Kotsk*; moreover, it is assumed that the Yiddish reader values the language as the instrument of a distinctively East European Jewish spirit that is at once deeply rooted and widely expansive.

The loss of the primary significance of Yiddish and the reduction of cultural complexity inherent in the move from *Kotsk* to *A Passion for Truth* suggest that Heschel's approach to his English-language audience resembles that of a writer adapting an adult text for a child reader who, one assumes, cannot deal with textual ambiguities, ironies, intertextual allusions and other challenges, as can with an adult.¹⁰⁷ Thus, when *Kotsk* is considered alongside its contemporaneous yet differently configured English version, it appears to speak specifically to Heschel's aging cohorts who, in this light, seem to have no cultural heirs. As the author writes in his introduction to *Kotsk* (but not in *A Passion for Truth*), "I am the last of a generation, perhaps the last Jew from Warsaw, whose soul lives in Mezhbizh and whose mind lives in *Kotsk*."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ For a discussion of the relationship of texts for children vs. adults, see Zohar Shavit, "The Ambivalent Status of Texts: The Case of Children's Literature," *Poetics Today*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1980), pp. 75–86.

¹⁰⁸ Heshl, *Kotsk*, vol. I, p. 10.

Indeed, Heschel seems to have grappled with this crisis in cultural continuity throughout his postwar career. In his aforementioned 1948 article for *Commentary*, Heschel problematizes his discussion of the traditions of Ashkenaz versus Sepharad as part of “our endeavor to shape a cultural pattern for American Jewish life, [in which] we might do well to look for some orientation that will help us determine our position in the stream of Jewish history.” Heschel notes that the Sephardic tradition did not end with the expulsion from Spain in 1492, but that it has continued to influence Jewish culture, notably the German Jewish scholars who founded the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. They celebrated Sephardic culture as a Golden Age, “a happy blend of progress and traditionalism upon which they desired to model their own course,” and, Heschel argues, the Sephardic ideal continues to dominate much of the Jewish response to the challenges of modernity. However, he writes that

neo-Sephardic modes do not represent the spirit of our own generation. . . . We cannot afford to dispense with the *niggun*, the spontaneous note that rises from within, simply for the sake of acquiring solemnity and artificial decorum. . . . We still carry deeply rooted prejudices against the Ashkenazic heritage, particularly as it was developed in Eastern Europe. That prejudice has divided us and distorted our sense of values — it has also had tragic results. In our zeal to expand the scope of our intellectual endeavors we should beware lest we lose the sense of that which is our very essence.¹⁰⁹

This anxiety over the cultural estrangement of his contemporaries and over cultural drift and loss among future generations is consistent with Heschel’s reported increasing pessimism in later years — cited as explaining, for example, his attraction late in life to the rigors of Kotsk over the compassion of the Besht.¹¹⁰ This pessimism is also powerfully evident in Heschel’s review of Zeitlin’s Yiddish poetry, written in the same year as the *Commentary* essay, as well as in the last address Heschel delivered at a YIVO conference, in 1957. Responding then to the question of what YIVO’s task should be, he wrote,

What is the obligation of the present generation? It is first of all not to forget the ever-present danger of forgetting . . . Eastern Europe is being forgotten. But in forgetting Eastern

¹⁰⁹ Heschel, “The Two Great Traditions,” p. 416; p. 421; pp. 421–422.

¹¹⁰ See Bez, “Martin Buber un Avrom-Yehoshua Heshl,” p. 304; Katz, “Abraham Joshua Heschel and Hasidism,” p. 95ff.

Europe we dissipate our essence, our spirit and the sense of our experience. Once and for all we must state clearly and explicitly what we mean by the concept "Eastern Europe." Shall we place the accent on a thousand years of tradition or three generations of enlightenment? On an integral world or a few scattered islands of secularism? . . . However honest and sincere that rebellion was, one thing is now clear: In order to sustain spiritually the coming generations, the future of the Jewish people, we shall have to resort to the treasure of a thousand years of tradition. What is the task of YIVO now? To serve as a memory, to remember, to remind, and to study the world that we have lost. . . . The heritage of Eastern Europe can have meaning only if it is retained in union with that which is permanent and enduring. . . . [S]eparated from that source, the heritage will go out like a light. . . . The body of . . . an entire generation was destroyed by the barbarian. Shall we permit a second extinction of the spirit of Eastern Europe, the spirit of all generations?¹¹

An examination of Heschel's Yiddish works yields insights into the dynamics of a conceptualization of the meaning of Yiddish that is both idiosyncratic and national. By virtue of when he was born and where he lived, studied and worked, Heschel's personal history traces the course of East European Jewry through much of the twentieth century. For Heschel, coming-of-age coincided with the flourishing of Yiddish modernism in interbellum Poland, and the transitions of midlife were set against — and much shaped by — the massive loss and displacement of world war, genocide, and migration. He confronted old age at the same time that Jews, at home in postwar America, experienced the nation's divisive upheavals, and as Jews of East European heritage witnessed the full emergence of America and Israel as the new centers of world Jewish cultural life, while the locus of their cultural wellsprings came increasingly to be associated with memories and with a sense of loss. At each of these three critical moments in Heschel's life — and the life of modern Jewry — the author chose to turn away from other pursuits to write in Yiddish. The poetry of youthful discovery and questioning, the elegiac prose of middle age, paying homage to lost elders and their heritage, and the philosophy and intellectual stock-taking of old age are linked together by this choice. At the same time they are distinguished as milestones in the life of a man, a people, and a language, as each weathered the first seven decades of this turbulent century.

¹¹ *News of the YIVO*, no. 65 (March 1957), pp. 2*–3*.

Notes

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