

בְּסוֹף מַעֲרָב:

(At the End of the West):

**Y.Y. Shvarts's American Yiddish Translations of Yehudah Halevi's Zionist Poetry**

by

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In his famous essay "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin writes that "Of all literary forms, [translation] is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birthpangs of its own."<sup>1</sup> This special process also has an added benefit for the scholar interested in the way texts are read over time. By examining a translation produced in a different time and place than the original text, the reader or scholar has the rare opportunity to observe the process of how a certain community of readers might have interpreted an older text and to uncover what that text really meant to them. This study will examine the American Yiddish poet Y. Y. Shvarts's Yiddish translations of the medieval Spanish-Hebrew poet Yehudah Halevi's poems concerning his voyage to the land of Israel, an examination that may reveal the translator's attitude toward the medieval poet's personal Zionism—and perhaps the attitude of his American Jewish readers as well.

The poetry of Yehudah Halevi (c. 1080-c.1140) shares many qualities with the work of other Hebrew poets of medieval Spain, including its use of rhythm and rhyme borrowed from Arabic poetics, the inclusion of both secular and religious themes within the poet's oeuvre, and the complex use of Biblical allusions. But one particular theme that shines more brightly in Yehudah Halevi's poetry than in that of any of his Golden Age predecessors is his Zionism, in an almost modern sense. Yehudah Halevi was a poet who not only dreamed, but acted on his dreams: while in his fifties, he abandoned his native Spain, leaving behind his daughter and grandson, and set sail for the land of Israel. As literary historians have put it, "Halevi knew of no contradiction between what *is* and what is only *longed for*"<sup>2</sup>; he saw redemption "not, like with other poets, [as] a refuge from suffering but an aim in itself. He negated the present and lived entirely in the

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1. Benjamin, Walter, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 73.
  2. Zinberg, Israel. *A History of Jewish Literature. Volume I: The Arabic-Spanish Period*, trans. Bernard Martin and Abba Hillel Silver (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1972), 84.

future”<sup>3</sup>—and the future that he lived in was a Zionist one, in which Jews could physically return to their homeland. Many of Yehudah Halevi’s poems were in fact written on his long and perilous voyage, and they reflect his intense passion for Zion. But how would such poems be read nearly a thousand years later, when a return to Zion was no longer a lone poet’s whim but a national movement—and how would they be read by Jews who, having been presented with the option of returning to the land of Israel, chose not to go?

Y.Y. Shvarts (1885-1971) was not a scholarly translator, nor did he claim to be. While his translations of poetry into Yiddish were extensive, he was also an original poet himself, in Yiddish. Born in a small town outside of Kovno in what is now Lithuania, Shvarts followed the path of so many Eastern European Jews at the turn of the century—from a traditional upbringing and education to a secular Jewish lifestyle, and from Eastern Europe to America. He arrived in New York at the age of 21, but left twelve years later to settle in Lexington, Kentucky. This was certainly an unusual choice for a Yiddish poet, but Shvarts was nonetheless able to build a literary career, which included publishing Yiddish translations of Shakespeare, Milton, and modern Hebrew poets, most notably Bialik.

In the realm of Jewish literature, however, Shvarts’s path was not only unusual, but also deeply problematic. While Shvarts left Lithuania at a time of mass Jewish migration, that migration was not exclusively to America. At the same time when many Jews were sailing into New York, others, in smaller numbers but taking up much more space in the ideological landscape of Jewish civilization, were making the far more difficult trip to Palestine. The mass migrations to America—beginning in the 1880s and continuing until a change in immigration laws in 1924—generally followed flash points of anti-Jewish violence in the Russian empire, and they therefore correspond loosely to

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3. Waxman, Meyer. *A History of Jewish Literature, Volume I*. (Cranbury, NJ: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 230.

the much smaller waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine known as First Aliyah and Second Aliyah. One might therefore regard those Jews who emigrated from Eastern Europe at this time as facing what would become a major choice for the future of modern Jewish life: Palestine or America? The path to Palestine was a road of great physical deprivation and danger, but those who chose it could at least feel that their choice had a higher purpose in the rebuilding of Jewish national identity. The path leading to America, on the other hand, promised far more material comfort, but also confronted Jews with the possibility of losing their Jewish heritage, both religious and cultural. Despite all the difficulties of Jewish life in Palestine, it was the new American Jews who ultimately faced the deep and troubling question: Why are we living in exile, if we do not need to be? It is the same question that Yehudah Halevi, living centuries earlier in another Diaspora community, faced himself. Unlike his later translator, he decided there was only one answer: to emigrate to Israel.

Shvarts, however, was not an American Yiddish poet who bemoaned his own decision to cross the Atlantic or who yearned for his ancestral home, whether in Eastern Europe or metaphorically in the land of Israel. On the contrary, Shvarts's work on the whole celebrates America, pouring out its praises like libations on a new holy ground. It is telling that in his translating work from English to Yiddish, he is best known for his Yiddish translations of Walt Whitman, the American poet who most openly and unabashedly sang the praises of the young and ecstatic American nation—and the poet who perhaps influenced Shvarts's own poetry more than any other. Shvarts's own greatest poetic oeuvre is his long poem entitled "Kentucky." This epic work tells the story of a Jewish family's migration to Kentucky and, most strikingly, of how the family sets down permanent roots there, making it into their new homeland—or, as Shvarts states directly, "The New Land of Canaan."<sup>4</sup> The poem's attitude toward America as a new homeland for the Jews is certainly ambivalent. Beginning with the first Jewish

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4. Shvarts, Y.Y. *Kentoki: poem un idilyes* (New York: Yidish natsyonaler arbeter farband, 1948), 24.

ancestor to arrive in Kentucky (who is named Joshua, the same name as the Biblical figure who led the Israelites into the Promised Land), the poem chronicles three generations of a Jewish family, largely tracing their assimilation. Although many members of the family abandon their religion and culture, others retain some form of it. Most interestingly, one of them, a grandchild, finds his spirituality in becoming a farmer, an echo of the changes taking place in Jewish life in Palestine. Despite its ambivalence, the poem is nonetheless a celebration of the American landscape—large parts of it are devoted to descriptions of the rural scenery, as well as to the Jews' black and white non-Jewish neighbors—and of the Jewish place within that landscape. The poem's commitment, ultimately, is less to the Jewish community than it is to America itself.

In the case of Shvarts's Yiddish translations of Yehudah Halevi's Zionist poetry, then, we are dealing neither with a scholar-translator trying his best to place his own views aside (however successfully), nor with a poet-translator who sees himself as a "fellow traveler" on the original poet's aesthetic or ideological path. Instead, we are faced with a translator who does not attempt to present a scholarly translation of the poetry (as we shall see in Shvarts's own comments below), and who also, while he may sympathize with the Zionist idea, has in his own life chosen a very different path to a very different promised land. How many of Shvarts's Yehudah Halevi translations are real translations, and how many of them would be more accurately regarded as interpretations of Yehudah Halevi's poetry? A close examination of some of these translations may shed some light on that question, which ultimately is a much larger question: How much of a work of literature depends on the work of the author, and how much of it depends on who is reading it?

Like many Jews in the modern period who were and are drawn to medieval Hebrew poetry, Shvarts came to his interest in medieval Hebrew poetry through modern Hebrew poetry. The Hebrew poetry from the Golden Age in Spain enjoyed a revival of

interest during the Haskalah, when it was popularized by some of the earliest modern Hebrew writers, notably Ephraim David Luzzatto. In his preface to his 1931 Yiddish volume *Unzer Lid fun Shpaniye (Our Poetry from Spain)*, the collection examined here, which contains translations of the poets Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, Moshe Ibn Ezra, Yehudah Halevi and Yehudah Alharizi, Shvarts writes that a book of these poems “fell into his hands”<sup>5</sup>—a book he later identifies as Bialik’s and Ravnitsky’s edition of these works—and that he sought help in his translations from the commentaries of Luzzatto on these poems. What is noteworthy about this route to medieval Hebrew poetry is its anchor in secular Jewish nationalism. As one of the earliest modern Hebrew writers, Luzzatto was interested in Hebrew not as an affirmation of Jewish religious roots, but as a means of finding a new Jewish identity that had more to do with nationalism than with religion. Bialik’s own Hebrew poetry includes not only staunch secularist works such as “HaMatmid” but also a large oeuvre of works advocating Jewish nationalism; his work as a poet, in essence, is mainly about the rebirth of the Hebrew soul. The appeal of these medieval poems to these modern authors, ultimately, had less to do with their elegance as examples of a particular literary style—careful meters and rhyme schemes, as well as flowery imagery, borrowed from the Arabic poetics of the time—than it did with the simple fact that these literary works were written in Hebrew by Jews who consciously chose Hebrew as their literary language.

And here we find a strange paradox afoot. In their attempts to popularize these medieval Hebrew poems, Bialik and then Shvarts had to present these poems as timeless, context-less literature whose value lay in the quality of the poetry itself. Though he claimed to love Halevi’s poetry, Bialik nonetheless regarded Halevi’s reliance on Arabic poetic features as a weakness—even though most medievalists today regard these poets’ mastery of Arabic forms as perhaps their greatest strength. Shvarts’s desire to present

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5. Shvarts, Y.Y. Preface to *Unzer Lid fun Shpanye* (New York: Yidishe Kultur Gezelshaft, 1931), 7. Translation mine.

these works as universal Jewish poetry, without chaining it to context, rings even clearer in his preface to *Unzer Lid fun Shpanye*. After avowing his love for this poetry, Shvarts offers the following caveat:

I want to emphasize here that I am absolutely not concerned with offering a strictly scholarly, cultural-historical work. I have only sought out in the poets the eternal truth, the light, the stirrings and feelings which will never become old. Therefore, I have permitted myself to leave out that which is strange nowadays to the taste of modern people: the old, belabored styles, the extravagant, overblown hyperboles, which they [the poets] sapped up from Arabic poetics. I have sought out only the internal, the individual, fresh expression of the poet. It does not concern me if I have taken from Ibn Gabirol or Yehudah Halevi only the first twenty lines from a poem which in the original consists of a hundred lines or more, nor if I have begun a poem from the very middle because the first half is written to a friend or a patron and says nothing to us...<sup>6</sup>

Anyone with even a basic familiarity with Hebrew poetry from medieval Spain would know that if Shvarts is leaving out all the “old, belabored styles” and the “extravagant, overblown hyperboles,” he is really leaving out a lot. But what speaks even louder about his intentions is the final phrase in the passage above, explaining that he is leaving out that which “says nothing to us.” Shvarts says outright that he is not interested in translating the poems in order to provide a historical reference source. What he implies, however, is that these poems interest him only to the extent to which they “say something to us.” Obviously, poets usually write in the hopes of addressing an audience. But the “us” that Halevi might have had in mind, if he did have an audience in mind, was clearly not the same “us” that Shvarts was addressing with his translations. As a result, Halevi’s poems, in Shvarts’s translations, are truly in the eye of the beholder—and in the hand of the translator.

Yehudah Halevi’s best-known poem is probably “Libi BaMizrach” (“My Heart is in the East”), a poem that begins his cycle of poems concerning his own yearning for, and actual journey to, Zion—and for Shvarts’s collection, this poem provides the first hints of

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6. Ibid., 7-8.

what we may later consider a pattern in Shvarts's translations of these Zionist works. Below is the original poem with a fairly literal twentieth-century English translation,<sup>7</sup> followed by Y.Y. Shvarts's Yiddish version of it, along with a literal translation into English of the Yiddish version:

לְבִי בְּמִזְרַח וְאַנְכִי בְּסוֹף מַעֲרָב  
 אֵיךְ אֶמְעָמָה אֶת אֲשֶׁר-אֶכֶל וְאֵיךְ יַעֲרֵב  
 אֵיכָּה אֲשַׁלֵּם נְדָרַי וְאַסְרֵי בְּעוֹד  
 צִיּוֹן בְּחֶבֶל אֲדוֹם וְאֲנִי בְּכַבֵּל עֲרָב  
 יִקַּל בְּאֵינִי עֹזֵב כָּל-טוֹב סִפְרָד כְּמוֹ  
 יִקַּר בְּאֵינִי רְאוֹת עִפְרוֹת דְּבִיר נְחָרֵב:

My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west—  
 How can I find savor in food? How shall it be sweet to me?  
 How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet  
 Zion lieth beneath the fetter of Edom, and I in Arab chains?  
 A light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things of Spain—  
 Seeing how precious in mine eyes to behold the desolate sanctuary.<sup>8</sup>

מִיִּין הָאָרֶץ אֵיזוּ אֵין מִזְרַח  
 און אֵיךְ בִּין אֵין מַעֲרָב גַּעפֶּאָנְגַען—  
 ווי זאָל מיר לִיב זײַן דאָס לעבן,  
 און ווי זאָל מיר אײַננײַן?  
 ווי זאָל אֵיךְ האַלטן מײַן צוואַנג,  
 גײַן נאָך מײַן האַרצנס פֿאַרלאַנגען—  
 ס'איז ציּון אֵין גלוח בײַ אדום,  
 און אֵיךְ—אֵין די מורישע צוואַנגען.  
 ווי ביליק עס איז בײַ מיר שפּאַניע,  
 איר גליק און איר שמייכל—  
 אַזוי אֵיז מיר טײַער דער שטוב

7. The selection of an English translation to use in this context, of course, is itself fraught with problems. I have tried to minimize those problems by selecting a translation that does not use rhyme or meter and is therefore free to be more literal: Nina Salaman, trans., *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi*, ed. Heinrich Brody, 1924 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1952). The English is slightly archaic, but I believe this translation also provides a valuable comparison because of its relatively early date of publication, 1924—seven years before Shvarts's translations of the same poems appeared.

8. Hebrew and English from *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi*, trans. Nina Salaman, 2.



פונעם חרוב'ן היכל.<sup>9</sup>

My heart is in the east,  
And I am captive in the west—  
How shall life please me,  
And how shall it agree with me?  
How shall I keep my promise  
To go after my heart's desires  
When Zion is in exile from Edom,  
And I—in Moorish constraints?  
How cheap Spain is for me,  
Her joy and her smile—  
As dear as the dust is for me  
From the destroyed shrine.<sup>10</sup>

For the most part, Shvarts's rendering of this poem is fairly faithful, although his ability to be literal is limited by his decision to translate the poem (and in fact all of these poems) in rhyme. Yet there is nonetheless a conceptual difference between "Libi BaMizrach" and "Mayn Harts iz in Mizrekh"—one that may seem subtle, but that becomes more significant in light of Shvarts's other translations of Yehudah Halevi's poetry. In the poem's final two lines, the poet, in the Hebrew original, expresses what is to be the foundation for his journey from Spain to the land of Israel. Leaving Spain, he declares, wonderful though Spain may be, would be easy for him if it meant he would be able to see the ruins of the ancient Temple—and indeed, Yehudah Halevi did leave behind all the good things in Spain, including his daughter and grandchild, in order to make that pilgrimage. In the Yiddish version, Shvarts has retained the idea of the cheapness of Spain's pleasures and the dearness of the Temple's ruins. But the idea of actually *leaving* (Hebrew: 'azov) Spain does not appear, and neither does the idea of actually *seeing* (Hebrew: reot) the Temple's ruins—the two verbs which are essential to this poem's identity as a document of *active* Zionism, of the poet's refusal to settle for admiring Zion from afar.

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9. Y.Y. Shvarts, "Tsum Likhtikn Mizrekh" in *Unzer Lid fun Shpanye*, 253.

10. Translation mine.

The careful reader might justifiably call this nitpicking. After all, Shvarts constrained himself to writing a rhymed and fairly rhythmic translation, and it is possible that these omissions are products of the poet's attempt to squeeze his Yiddish version into these tight constraints. But this claim is harder to make in light of a similar discrepancy in the following poem, taken from Yehudah Halevi's cycle of poems about his actual, physical journey to the land of Israel, where again we find a significant diversion from the original poem in the final line:

הָבֵא מַבּוּל וְשֶׁם הַיָּבֵל חָרְבָה  
וְאִין לְרֵאוֹת פְּנֵי אֶרֶץ חָרְבָה  
וְאִין אָדָם וְאִין חַיָּה וְאִין עוֹף  
הַסֶּף הַכֹּל וְשָׁכְבוּ" מֵעֲצָבָה  
וּבְרֵאוֹת הַר וְשׁוֹחָה לִי עֲרָבָה  
וְאַשְׁגִּיחַ לְכָל-עֶבֶר וְאִין-כָּל  
אֶבֶל מִים וְשָׁמַיִם וְתַבָּה  
וְלוֹיִטָן בְּהַרְתִּיהוּ מְצוּלָה  
וְאַחֲשֵׁב כִּי תַהוֹם יִכְשֵׁב לְשִׁיבָה  
וְלֵב הַיָּם יִכְהַשׁ בְּאַנְיָה  
כְּאֵלוֹ הִיא בְּיַד-הַיָּם גְּנָבָה  
וְיָם יִזְעַף וְנַפְשִׁי תַעֲלוֹז כִּי  
אֵלֵי מִקְדָּשׁ אֵלְקִיָּה קָרְבָה:

Hath the flood come again and made the world a waste  
So that one cannot see the face of the dry land,  
And no man is there and no beast and no bird?  
Have they all come to an end and lain down in sorrow?  
To see even mountain or marsh would be a rest for me,  
And the desert itself would be sweet.

11. Original has וְשָׁכְנָנוּ but Salaman amends this to וְשָׁכְבוּ" which follows from the allusion to Isaiah 50:11. See Salaman, 21.

But I look on every side and there is nothing  
 But only water and sky and ark,  
 And Leviathan making the abyss to boil,  
 So that one deemeth the deep to be hoary.  
 And the heart of the sea concealeth the ship  
 As though she were a stolen thing in the sea's hand.  
 And the sea rageth and my soul exulteth—  
 For to the sanctuary of her God she draweth near.<sup>12</sup>

האַט אַ מבול פאַרגאַסן די ערד--  
 און דאָס לעבן פאַרשוויינקט און צעשטערט?  
 נישט מענטש, נישט אַ חיה און עוף--  
 איז אויף אַלץ שוין געקומען אַ סוף?  
 ל'ביינק נאָך לאַנד--זאָל זיין באַרג, זאָל זיין טאָל  
 ס'וואָלט אַ וויסטעניש ליב זיין צומאָל.  
 ל'וואָרף מיין בליק אַרום זיך טריב און שווער--  
 זע נאָר שוף, זע נאָר הימל און מער.  
 עס צערודערט דער וואַלפיש דעם תהום--  
 הינטער אים זיט דער גרוי-ווייסער שטראָם.  
 און דער ים באַהאַלט גנביש דאָס שוף--  
 ס'וויל נישט אָפּגעבן אים שוין די טוף.  
 ס'צאָרנט ים--דאָס פול פרייד איז מיין זעל:  
 ס'טראַגט דאָס שוף צו מיין היימלאַנד מיך שנעל.<sup>13</sup>

Has a flood covered the earth—  
 And life flooded and destroyed?  
 No man is there, no beast or bird—  
 Has everything already come to an end?  
 I long for land—let there be a mountain, let there be a valley,  
 Even a wilderness would be agreeable.  
 I throw my glance about, gloomy and heavy,  
 I see only the ship, see only sky and more.  
 The depths are upset by the whale—  
 Behind him boils the gray-white storm.  
 The sea rages—yet my soul is full of joy  
 The ship is drawing me quickly toward my homeland.<sup>14</sup>

12. Yehudah Halevi, trans. Salaman, 21.

13. Shvarts, *Unzer Lid*, 264-265.

14. Translation mine.

Here we are no longer dealing with a translator struggling to meet requirements of rhyme or meter; the Yiddish word “heymland” (homeland) could easily have been replaced with the word used the previous poem, “heykhl” (shrine; i.e. the Temple), without altering meter or rhyme. Shvarts’s choice of “homeland” over a reference to the ancient Temple could be interpreted as a reflection of Shvarts’s own secularist leanings, but this seems less likely when one considers the amount of explicitly religious poetry he does choose to include in his anthology of medieval Hebrew poets (most notably the religious poems of Ibn Gabirol, which may have ruffled theological feathers in Ibn Gabirol’s time, but which sound to most modern readers like a deeply personal religious quest). But the choice of “homeland” doesn’t merely obscure the religious aspects of the poet’s journey. More directly, it also obscures the poet’s destination. Is the poet bound for Zion, or is he, as this Yiddish poem could conceivably suggest, merely bound for a homeland of a more generic type, simply somewhere more welcoming than the place he has left?

What is perhaps even more revealing than what Shvarts has omitted here, however, is what he has chosen to include. In the poem above, the imagery of the raging sea, and of the lone traveler bewildered by it, has been preserved with elegance and grace. And of all the poems in Yehudah Halevi’s *diwan*, which Shvarts only very selectively presents in his anthology, the group of poems he presents more completely than any others are the series of short works concerning Yehduah Halevi’s sea voyage to the land of Israel. These poems describe the landscape and perils of sea travel so vividly that the reader can truly sense the awe of the medieval voyager—the amazement not only in witnessing the unfathomable size of the sea, whose distant shores were far more distant than modern man can comprehend, but also the wonder of a man who has never seen the sea before and suddenly finds himself in the middle of it, for days and weeks on end with no land in sight.

For many of Shvarts’s Yiddish readers in America, this sort of imagery would

have had a particularly strong personal resonance. Many Jewish readers of Shvarts's generation would have instantly recognized that sense of loss and nervousness, not to mention the sense of awe and powerlessness of being on the open sea, from the dramatic journey to a new homeland that they themselves had lived through: the transatlantic crossing to America. The following passage from a 1917 novel of immigration by Abraham Cahan, the founder of the most popular American Yiddish newspaper, describes the experience:

Who can depict the feeling of desolation, homesickness, uncertainty, and anxiety with which an emigrant makes his first voyage across the ocean? I proved to be a good sailor, but the sea frightened me. [...] Day after day passes and all you see about you is an unbroken waste of water, an unrelieved, hopeless monotony of water. You know that a change will come, but this knowledge is confined to your brain. Your senses are skeptical. [...]<sup>15</sup>

While at sea, the immigrant character in the novel recites from the Psalms, in Biblical words that are echoed in Halevi's poem: "...this great and wide sea wherein are things creeping innumerable [...] There go the ships: there is that leviathan whom thou hast made to play therein."<sup>16</sup> And when he arrives in his new "homeland," he is as grateful to God as a pilgrim arriving in Jerusalem:

When the discoverers of America saw land at last they fell on their knees and a hymn of thanksgiving burst from their souls. The scene, which is one of the most thrilling in history, repeats itself in the heart of every immigrant as he comes in sight of the American shores.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of America as a new promised land, of course, is certainly not new. What is more interesting, however, is that a Yiddish reader like Shvarts might read Yehudah Halevi's poetry of his sea voyage to the promised land, in a medieval world so distant from his own, and find this specific element of resonance within it—and that this

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15. Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, 1917 (New York: Penguin, 1993), 85.

16. *Ibid.*, 86. Psalm 104:26.

17. *Ibid.*

highlighted element would be so apparent in translation.

This pattern of emphasis—accentuating the generic qualities of the voyage while obscuring its specific destination—continues almost throughout Shvarts's translations of Yehudah Halevi's voyage poetry. In another poem in the voyage series, for example, Yehudah Halevi writes:

אַלְקֵי אֵל הַשֶּׁבֶר מִשְׁבְּרֵי-יָם  
וְאֵל-תְּאֵמֶר לְצוֹלֵת יָם הַרְבִּי  
עַדִּי אֹרְחָה תְּסַדִּיק וְאֹרְחָה  
לְגַלֵּי יָם וְרוּחַ מְעַרְבֵי  
יִקְרְבוּ מְקוֹם עַל אֶתְהַבְתֶּךָ  
וּמַעְלֵי יִסִּירוּן עַל עַרְבֵי  
וְאִידָּ לֹא-יִתְמוּ לִי מִשְׁאַלּוֹתַי  
וּבְךָ אֶבְטַח וְאַתָּה הוּא עַרְבֵי:

My God, break not the breakers of the sea,  
Nor say Thou to the deep, 'Be dry',  
Until I thank Thy mercies, and I thank  
The waves of the sea and the wind of the west;  
Let them waft me to the place of the yoke of Thy love,  
And bear far from me the Arab yoke.  
And how shall my desires not find fulfilment,  
Seeing I trust in Thee, and Thou art pledged to me?<sup>18</sup>

In Shvarts's translation, we find the following:

אַ, גאַט, מאַך די טיפקייט ניט טרונקען,  
ניט שמיל-איין די ברויזענע אינדן--  
ביז כוועל פאַר דיין חסד דיר דאַנקען,  
די כוואַליעס און מערב'שע ווינטן.  
זיי טראַגן מיך שנעל צו מיין היימלאַנד,  
באַפרייען מיך פריי פון די צוואַנגען--  
אַז גאַט איז מיין שיצער און רעטער,  
איז וואָס האָב איך מער צו פאַרלאַנגען?<sup>19</sup>

18. Yehudah Halevi, trans. Salaman, 20.

19. Shvarts. 266.

O, God, do not make the depths dry,  
Nor quell the turbulent waves—  
Until I thank you for your kindness,  
The waves and the western winds.  
They draw me quickly to my homeland,  
Setting me free from constraints—  
That God is my protector and savior,  
What more did I desire?<sup>20</sup>

Once again, we see evidence of a pattern of closely literal translations for verses pertaining to the voyage itself, accompanied by a blurring of the voyage's Zionist destination, not to mention an obscuring of the religious elements of that Zionist mission. As this example makes clear, however, the Yiddish translation does not shy away from Yehudah Halevi's religious imagery in and of itself. The poem above, in fact, recalls the sort of religious attitude that appears in the scene quoted earlier from the immigration novel; one could almost imagine it being recited by a Jewish immigrant approaching America's shores. But that may be exactly the point. What Shvarts brings out in these translations are those aspects of the poetry that appeal to him and his audience, a category that does not necessarily exclude religious imagery; although many Jewish immigrants to America reduced or abandoned their religious observance, most of those immigrants would be able to recall, perhaps even nostalgically, a time when it was a central part of their lives. The idea of worshipping God is not necessarily alienating to a largely secular American Yiddish audience. The idea that one cannot fully worship God without being in the true promised land, however, very well might be—especially at a point in history when a pilgrimage to Palestine, though still extremely difficult, would have been much easier than it had been in Yehudah Halevi's time.

A final example should illustrate what the translator has taken as his task. In yet another voyage poem, Yehudah Halevi again begins with praise to God for preserving him throughout the journey on the violent sea, and once more Shvarts's translation is

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20. Translation mine.

of Abraham to Avimelekh, a local ruler whose servants Abraham accuses of taking over a well that Abraham had dug. Abraham then forms a pact with Avimelekh, offering him seven ewes to “serve as a witness” (Hebrew “tehiyeh li le’aydah”) that Abraham had dug the well.<sup>23</sup> Yehudah Halevi’s poetry is generally rife with Biblical allusions, and his use of this phrase suggests a deeper commitment to the land where his ancestors not only dug wells, but in the case of Abraham, in fact purchased a burial plot as the very first piece of the Promised Land ever owned by the nation that Abraham began.<sup>24</sup> The twist that Shvarts puts on Yehudah Halevi’s words here by turning the poem’s voice toward God rather than land, however, is perhaps least surprising of all in light of Shvarts’s own poetry. In Shvarts’s epic poem “Kentucky,” Joshua, the poem’s ancestor figure, arrives in Kentucky a stranger without land, just as Abraham once arrived in Canaan. And if the parallel weren’t close enough, Shvarts’s character, too, makes his first purchase of land in Kentucky as a grave for his own dead child.<sup>25</sup> For Yehudah Halevi, Zion was a real place, a physical destination. For Shvarts and perhaps also his American readers, to paraphrase the Ba’al Shem Tov, Zion was where they let them in.

It is a commonplace to say that readers’ approaches to texts are shaped by their own experiences: it is remarkable, however, that the form of translation allows us to see just how that shaping may have occurred. The examples of Shvarts’s translations of Yehudah Halevi’s poetry presented here are only the tip of the iceberg, and they do not represent a full comparison between the poetry and its Yiddish translations by Shvarts and others. It would be unfair, and most likely inaccurate as well, to claim that Y.Y. Shvarts’s translations of Yehudah Halevi’s poetry were deliberately designed to obscure Yehudah Halevi’s religious or Zionist outlook, or to neutralize the poet’s experiences into a more generic mode of wandering that connected more closely with the American

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23. Genesis 21:30.

24. Genesis 23:4.

25. Shvarts, *Kentoki*. 36.



experience. But it would also be inaccurate to dismiss the discrepancies we have examined above as the arbitrary flaws of a faithful translator. They clearly are not. And while we have no right to claim that these discrepancies were motivated by a desire to change the poetry, we would nonetheless be justified in concluding that certain themes in Yehudah Halevi's poetry had less resonance for an American audience—in this case, Shvarts himself, and subsequently his readers—while other themes resonated more.

In his discussion of the translator's task, Walter Benjamin stops short of claiming that all texts must change in translation: the exception, he believes, is the text of the Bible, whose meaning transcends all languages.<sup>26</sup> This claim is a contentious one, but it mirrors the Jewish view of the Hebrew Bible as the one text, the ultimate text, on which all other texts are merely commentary. Jewish life throughout the ages is connected through the centrality of this text, as the poetry of Yehudah Halevi and even Y.Y. Shvarts reflects. But while the text of the Bible is central to all Jewish literature, it is still merely that—central, with spokes emerging from it and pointing in all directions. If nothing else, Shvarts's translations of Yehudah Halevi's poems offer us a lesson in reading texts, reminding us of the extent to which those spokes can stretch far and wide, from Canaan to New Canaan and back—and the extent to which any text, in any language, is subject to the reader's imagination.

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26. Benjamin, 82.