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DAVID G. ROSKIES

*A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of
Yiddish Storytelling*

The Modern Reader of Yiddish Literature: From Nahman of Bratzlav to
Abraham Sutzkever

(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995)
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And I took in their sound and their sight.

ITZIK MANGER

There is no worse fate for a book, a writer, or an entire literature than to become acclaimed as representative of their native background. Lost in such laudatory verdicts are not only the distinct qualities of the creative work in its complex relation to historic reality, but generally also the complexity of that very reality which it is supposed to represent and illustrate. Rather than seek a challenge or revelation, the reader embarks on a guided tour of selected images whose 'meaning' seldom fails to confirm expectations. Yiddish literature, born of a tremendous desire by authors and readers alike to challenge and to meet challenge, has come to be perhaps uniquely susceptible to this tendency for wishful reading. Written by and for the 'millionaires of individuality', as Isaac Bashevis Singer called the Yiddish-speaking Jews, published in weekly instalments in dozens of competing newspapers and in impressive numbers of book copies, read and discussed everywhere from Kiev to New York, Yiddish literature yet saw its primary function shrink after the Holocaust. It became a mere make-believe repository of tradition, a storehouse of serviceable myths about the Old World, an attic full of humour samples and bedtime stories with pictures of fiddlers and not-too-scary dybbuks (souls of sinners that transmigrate into the body of a living person). Few have come to the rescue of Yiddish in the last several decades. Amid this small coterie of post-Holocaust Yiddishists, David Roskies deserves great praise for his magnificent work *A Bridge of Longing*, laced with learning and love.

'My book is all about loss and reinvention', writes Roskies in his preface. 'Its protagonists are modern Jewish revolutionaries, rebels and immigrants who tried to salvage for a nontraditional audience forms of the culture assumed to be traditional.' The loss, in this statement, and the emergence of non-traditional audiences in central and eastern Europe, may date as far back as the beginning of the nineteenth century to the impact of the Enlightenment, which began marginally enough but grew rapidly in both strength and scope. Even small chinks in the wall of Orthodoxy meant a profound transformation: the replacement of religion

with tradition as the base of a threatened unity. Thus, according to Roskies, from its very outset Yiddish literature faced the predicament of needing 'to address contemporary concerns in the language(s) of tradition'. He coined the phrase 'creative betrayal' for the conscious attempt of Yiddish literature to fashion new meanings out of familiar Jewish lore, biblical and aggadic, original and adapted.

Of course, in utilizing and transforming traditional Jewish sources, Jewish artists did not differ much from their German, Russian, and Polish—Romantic, then realist, and then modernist—contemporaries. They differed only in their lack of literary predecessors and of a historic nation-state to serve as a sphere of creation subversion. They had only traditional folk art from which to spring and to liberate from the strict bonds of religion and moralism, to 'fake' in order to make it together with their audience into the mainstream of European culture.

There was subversion at work beneath the pious façade of not a few Yiddish classics. I. L. Peretz's 'Kabbalists,' as we shall see, were a pair of starving, self-deluded communal free-loaders, while his 'Bontshe the Silent' turned the Jewish sacred legend of the hidden saint up on its head. Even Sholem Aleichem created in Tevye the Milkman a decidedly atypical Jew, who felt closest to God when out of doors and was endowed with far more wisdom and humanity than any rabbi or hasid in the rest of Sholem Aleichem's fiction.

But the major element of subversion, as Roskies demonstrates, involved a variety of narrative devices that would include the author in the tale: as a protagonist, a self-doubting collector of stories (who may also be the subject of the story), a devil's advocate or victim, or, as in several of I. B. Singer's stories, an apparently omniscient demon, although the omniscience later turns out to be mere pretence. This practice, too, began with the beginning of Yiddish stories, when Nahman of Bratslav, a great-grandson of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, shattered by the realization that his messianic prophecies remained unfulfilled and by the death of his only son, began telling stories. He borrowed their plots from Jewish and Slavic fables but reshaped them along the lines of his own life experience.

The next chapter of Roskies's book features Isaac Meir Dik of Vilna (Vilnius), who transformed lowbrow chapbooks, collections of romances and anecdotes read mostly by women, into hilarious satirical sketches performed for a similarly female audience by a seductive *magid*, who clearly served as the authorial alter ego. The chapters about Isaac Leib Peretz and Sholem Aleichem are a *tour de force* and reveal the superb art of both writers in inventing quasi-authentic voices, Peretz's mostly ironic, Aleichem's mostly mock-naïve. Although Roskies does not mention it, one wonders about the Yiddish writers' contributions to early twentieth-century modernism as one reads his summaries of such works as Peretz's 'Three Gifts', a bitter parable on the necessity and uselessness of martyrdom, and Aleichem's 'Baranovich Station', in which one Sholem Shachnah accidentally dons a train conductor's hat, looks in a mirror, and, mistaking himself for the gentile conductor, runs to the train to rouse his actual, Jewish self. In an essay on Bruno Schulz, 'The

Degraded Reality', Artur Sandauer wrote that in modernist literature 'the question "in whose consciousness is a story taking place?" receives an ever evasive answer', with a resulting confusion of both subjective and objective reality. The same confusion happened in the visual arts (many of the great modernist painters were Jews or of Jewish descent, as were such key modernist thinkers as Bergson and Freud), and likewise in music and theatre. The degraded reality in the fiction of Schulz, Kafka, and Joseph and Henry Roth, those other creative betrayers, matches the ominous elusiveness of Peretz and Der Nister (Pinkhes Kahanovich, the 'high priest' of Yiddish modernism, author of stylistically refined and profoundly pessimistic allegories, whose affinity with Franz Kafka seems too striking to be entirely accidental). Only the Yiddish-speaking sidekick devil was lost in assimilation; the other characteristics remained.

Readers who, like myself, know next to nothing about Der Nister or Itzik Manger will be spellbound by the chapters describing them. The Romanian-born Manger, who lived in Warsaw between the two World wars, was highly admired for his nature poetry, but gained true fame after publishing a cycle of ballads casting contemporary characters in biblical plots. 'Manger's Bible folk were the people of the Humanistic Book', Roskies writes. In his translation of 'Hagar's Last Night in Abraham's House' we hear the peasant Hagar reflect:

How like the smoke of a chimney,
How like the smoke of a train
Is the love of a man, dear mother,
The love of any man.

Roskies is not a biographical critic, but the information he provides about the lives of the writers should inspire many a Jewish biographer. Der Nister's life itself forms a great allegory for the fate of the Jewish artist in the twentieth century. Born in Ukraine, he lived for some time in Berlin as one of the leaders of Yiddish avant-garde circles, but moved back to the Soviet Union, where high hopes for a Yiddish revival were soon crushed. His last story, 'Under a Fence', presents the confession of a former ascetic scholar who, seduced by the erotic and artistic allure of a circus, eventually finds himself facing condemnation by judges from both the spiritual and worldly courts in a double trial. Roskies unravels the story's web of meanings to find references to E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Devil's Elixir' and Heinrich Mann's 'Professor Unrat' (filmed with Marlene Dietrich as *Blue Angel*), and, more significantly, to Nahman of Bratslav. The creative betrayal thus comes full circle.

How well the Yiddish writings hold up depends on how much of their merits the reader can discern. One could argue that at least some of the Yiddish *chefs d'œuvre*, such as the best of Isaac Bashevis Singer's novels and stories, have merit enough to reach most interested readers. Singer wrote one of his most powerful stories in 1943, when the news of the Holocaust had finally begun to reach the

United States and was fuelling his rage against the shallow rationalism of the Jewish intelligentsia both in pre-war Poland and in wartime America. Satan narrates the story and persuades Zeidel, 'the greatest scholar in the whole province of Lublin', that there is no difference between truth and falsehood. Zeidel converts to Catholicism, pens a grand theological treatise, is elected pope in Rome, but is soon denounced and returns to his native Janów to end up a beggar, lying under a fence. When Satan mocks him at the gates to hell, Zeidel responds that if hell exists, so must God. 'Over Kant and Nietzsche,' Roskies writes, 'Zeidel reaches back to the negative theology of Lurianic Kabbalah.'

Yet our present-day scholar of Manhattan's Upper West Side has more to unveil. The motif of a Jewish pope has been an old *Mayse-buch* standard, retold by Isaac Meir Dik, with an elegant, handsome German *maskil* as the culprit, quite unlike Singer's scrappy Zeidel from backwoods Janów, 'where the whole notion of converting or defecting was a bad joke, a mean trick played by the devil'. And it does matter that there was a similar ending in Peretz's 'Monish', where the mocking devils meet in Monish their intellectual equal, a man possessed of free will based on knowledge. 'Alas', replies Singer, who set several of his stories from that period, which Roskies terms his artistic *annus mirabilis*, in Peretz's geographic territory of Tyshovets; and in scene after scene Singer depicts the terrible triumphs of the Evil One, never a clear victor in the fiction of Peretz, a kinder and gentler pessimist. Praised by critics for 'celebration of old tradition' (Peter Prescott), by Roskies for whimsical humour and marvellous storytelling, Isaac Bashevis Singer presents a fiercer art than many of his admirers can or want to see. Even more than he does for Peretz and Aleichem, Roskies rescues Singer from the sweet perils of fame, which, if left unchecked, condemns the bluntest achievement to what Witold Gombrowicz called *upupenie* ('making a fool of oneself').

The book ends with a chapter on post-Holocaust Yiddish writers and poets, all of whom have been published in English only marginally. Their often incomplete, blurred testimonies about the Gehenna of the Holocaust deserve a separate book. I would love to read all seven volumes of Yehiel Yeshua Trunk's *The Storybook of my Life: Poland* (volume viii of *Polin* included excerpts), and a comprehensive, critical edition of the poetry and prose of Abraham Sutzkever, of whom Roskies writes, 'his categorical refusal to bow before the demise of Yiddish culture—contributed to the revival of a modern Yiddish storytelling legacy that might otherwise have been lost'. Finally, Roskies reviews some of the latest attempts to rekindle the 'lost art' in Israel and the United States, although he does not mention similar efforts undertaken in Budapest, Kraków, and Kiev, and at the Jewish writers' club at 13 Tłomackie Street in Warsaw, where so many of his protagonists used to hold court.

Perhaps David Roskies believes, however tentatively, in the miracle of revival. As a scholar and writer, he is a true heir to the restorative spirit of creative betrayal. His *Story of Stories*, beautifully designed by Gwen Frankfeldt and

adorned with fascinating reproductions of original illustrations by Jewish artists, constitutes what his closing sentence calls 'redemption enough for the People of the Lost Book'.

JOANNA ROSTROPOWICZ CLARK
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GERSHON C. BACON

*The Politics of Tradition: Agudas Yisrael in Poland,
1916–1936*

Studies of the Center for Research on the History and Culture of Polish
Jews at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

(Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1996)
pp. 32. ISBN 965-223-962-3

Agudas Yisrael was undoubtedly a very important component of both Jewish and gentile political life in Poland before 1939. Unfortunately, however, we know little about the history and ideology of this party, and most authors writing about inter-war Poland merely repeat the information and opinions expressed by contemporaries, who often represented rival political and ideological camps. Notable exceptions include Ezra Mendelsohn and Gershon C. Bacon.

Bacon presents the historiography of his subject in the first chapter of his book *The Politics of Tradition*, and stresses the lamentable lack of sources. I suspect, although with scant evidence, that the significant difference between the contemporary historian and even the most historically minded hasid's concepts of history and historical time further complicates the task of anyone approaching this subject. A historian is inclined to analyse changes in society and explore their reasons and consequences based on scrupulously established facts. A hasid explores history to find moral lessons and positive heroes to turn into models. A historian analyses changes over time; a hasidic scholar presents eternal values, and in the face of eternity individual and historical facts turn into modern midrash.

Bacon succeeded in discovering a process of historical changes going on behind the veil of moral stories and stereotypes as the hasidim went from linking their strict, conservative distancing of religion from current politics to forming a conservative but modern party engaged in the political life of the Polish republic while maintaining strict religious observance. While this party based its ideas and practice on the Torah and Talmud, it none the less took on contemporary practical questions.

Probably the most important merit of Bacon's book lies in its understanding

and explaining that the religious conservatism and tradition of Agudas Yisrael did not contradict an acceptance of contemporary ways of defending those values. The strength and significance of this party derived from its successful combination of these apparently contrasting elements.

The book is composed of ten chapters. After presenting historiography and sources in the first chapter, the author analyses, in the next eight chapters respectively, the prehistory of Agudas Yisrael, its ideology and structure, the activity of Po'alei Agudas Yisrael and Tse'irei Agudas Yisrael, the educational activity of Agudas Yisrael, and its participation in *kehilot* and in parliament and the municipalities. Chapters 7–9 are particularly interesting and important for the analysis of political life in Poland. The epilogue (chapter 10) exceeds the chronological limits of the title by presenting a general view of the attitudes and activity of the Agudas Yisrael, or, more precisely, of its individual members, during the Second World War, and of the role of the party in Israel.

The author analyses the changes affecting the party during the inter-war period and after, its internal differences and conflicts (relating at least in part to generational and class differences among members), and the role of rabbis as established ideological authorities and their differences from politicians. Altogether Bacon succeeds in creating a vivid picture of a political party trying to use modern means, including the press, parliamentary politics, and political alliances, to fight modern ideologies and to prevent changes in tradition. As I have said, from time to time Bacon indicates lack of information and sometimes even difficulties in establishing elementary facts. This opens the field for future scholars. Even if some of its opinions and hypotheses are not confirmed in the future, the book constitutes a major advance in the analysis of the political life of Poland between the two world wars.

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HAROLD B. SEGEL (ED.)

*Stranger in our Midst: Images of the Jews in
Polish Literature*

(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996)
pp. xv + 402. ISBN 0-8014-2865-3

A book examining Jewish characters and topics in Polish literature has long been needed to test the prevalent stereotype, which Segel captures in the second sentence of his preface to *Stranger in our Midst*: 'Widely regarded as notoriously anti-Semitic, the Poles seem hardly likely to have encompassed Jewish experience