

8 THE YIDDISH SHEVET YEHUDAH: A STUDY IN THE "ASHKENIZATION" OF A SPANISH-JEWISH CLASSIC

Michael Stanislawski

In his masterful analysis of the accomplishments and limitations of sixteenth-century Jewish historiography, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi pointed out the paradoxical fate of Solomon Ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehudah*.¹ On the one hand, this "precociously sociological" history of Jewish suffering in general and the Spanish Expulsion in particular became the most popular and most often reprinted work of its kind. On the other hand, Ibn Verga's perspicacious and innovative sociopolitical analysis was seemingly ignored by his readers, who saw this book as merely one more diverting and morally uplifting chronicle of a divinely ordained *Leidensgeschichte*. This (mis)reading of *Shevet Yehudah*, Yerushalmi claimed, was already evident in the title page of the first edition of the book, published in Adrianople in 1553, and even more so "[b]y the time we come to the third edition, a Yiddish translation printed in Krakow in 1591 'for ordinary householders, men and women' (*far gemayne baale-batim, man un vayer*) we can see from the title-page that the *Shebet Yehudah* has been transmuted perceptually into a standard piece of edifying folk-literature."²

This essay attempts to delve beneath the surface of this last comment by examining in depth the 1591 Yiddish translation of *Shevet Yehudah*, a fascinating work never before studied in the historical literature.³ Indeed, even the usually precise and authoritative bibliographical surveys of early Yiddish books and of Jewish historiographical literature in any language have not sorted out the publication history of this and other Yiddish translations of Ibn Verga's classic work. The 1591 edition that I shall examine was the first translation into Yiddish of this book and was republished three more times in the next 130 years, in Amsterdam in 1648, in Sulzbach in 1700, and in Fürth in 1724. In addition, it served as the basis for the substantially different translations published in Amsterdam in 1700 and in Ostrog in 1810, versions that merit separate analyses.⁴

The central goal of this essay will not be bibliographic but will attempt to determine what exactly a "standard piece of edifying folk literature" might have been in the context of early modern Ashkenazic Jewry and how this particular work was so transformed. In the process, we shall be led directly into

unanticipated and uncharted byways of the thorny central problematic of this Festschrift, the tensions and contradictions of Jewish historiography and Jewish collective memory.

Before we begin, one short technical and one longer methodological observation seem in order. First, the following analysis assumes that the Hebrew text used as the source for the 1591 Yiddish translation of the *Shevet Yehudah* was either the 1553 first edition or the second edition, published in Sabbionetta in 1566–67 with the false imprint of Adrianople, and was not another, as yet unknown sixteenth-century printed edition or manuscript that might, in theory, have departed from the known text. As we shall see, our translation follows exactly the wording of the first edition, except for a large number of consistent and, I shall argue, highly significant omissions, emendations, and additions, which are not to be found in any of the extant Hebrew manuscripts, printed editions, or translations into Latin and Spanish that I have been able to examine.⁵ It thus seems methodologically plausible to assume the originality of our translator's changes and then to proceed to an analysis of the methods and intentions that underlay these changes.

On a different plane, I am keenly conscious of the fact that we are dealing here with the *popularization* of a Jewish historical work, not with an unmediated expression of Jewish folk literature or popular culture, not to speak of a Jewish *vox populi* or "collective memory." This distinction has often not been made in either the popular or the scholarly literature and certainly not in the scholarship on early modern Yiddish texts, which historically have been studied by two distinct and often mutually antagonistic camps: on the one hand, Yiddish (and usually Yiddishist) literary historians who sought to claim equal status and respect for Yiddish works aimed at the "folk," as opposed to Hebrew works meant for the "elite,"⁶ and on the other, students of the "popular religion" of Judaism, frequently motivated by the desire to historicize contemporary religious reforms, who mined the Yiddish materials for evidence of rituals and beliefs despised by the rabbis but foisted upon them from below—customs such as *kapparot* or *tashlikh* or even the canonized version of the Kol Nidre prayer itself.⁷ The former line of analysis was continued along far more sophisticated and less ideological lines in Jerusalem by scholars of Old Yiddish literature such as Khone Shmeruk and Hava Turniansky, who have produced excellent—indeed, sometimes dazzlingly erudite—studies of premodern Yiddish materials, primarily from a literary and bibliographical point of view.⁸ The latter "populist" approach has most recently been revived in connection with the spread of feminist theory and women's history in Jewish Studies, as *tekhines* and other Yiddish liturgical and practical texts are analyzed to reveal a "women's religion" in early modern Ashkenazic Judaism radically different from the official, elite religion articulated by the—obviously male—rabbinate.⁹

Without in the least disparaging any of these attempts and approaches, it is crucial to note that they are all based on a rather thin layer of documentary evidence, compounded by truly formidable methodological quandaries. For it is no

exaggeration to state that the vast majority of premodern Yiddish texts have never been subjected to any serious scholarly examination. To cite only one, though crucial, example: due to Shmeruk's efforts in particular, we finally have a reliable bibliography of the various Eastern European editions of the *Tsena U-Rena*—the famous “women's gloss” of the Bible, which must rank as the most influential and certainly the most widespread text in whatever it is that might be defined as Jewish popular culture or women's religion in the Ashkenazic realm. But we still lack a comprehensive study of the *contents* of this work—what it can teach us about the spiritual and literary universe of its author and possibly its readers and thus about a vital part of the Ashkenazic *mentalité* in the early modern era.¹⁰

Beyond this bibliographical morass lies an analytic abyss: the basic terms of any possible analysis of the contours and parameters of a “popular culture,” “popular religion,” or “folk memory” in Jewish society have never, to my knowledge, been rigorously addressed. To oversimplify matters considerably, but I hope not unfairly, the model of popular or folk culture adopted—if at times, unself-consciously—by most students of the Jews has been a variation on the standard understanding of Christian popular culture in the last half-century: a model that describes a minuscule clerical and aristocratic elite with its own high culture, religion, and textual tradition poised against the great mass of the peasant population, who lived in a folklore culture unaware of and uninterested in the debates and obsessions of the elite. In this view, a popular culture has been identified and heralded for the most part as the cultural or spiritual life of the dispossessed and downtrodden, the untutored and the unorthodox, and more recently, women as opposed to men.

Quite apart from the question of whether such a two-tiered approach is appropriate to the study of Christendom,¹¹ it is crucial to posit at the minimum that it is highly problematic in regard to the Jews. For despite the undeniably potent differences of wealth and status among them, the Jews lacked anything resembling either a peasantry, an aristocracy, or an ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹² Thus, the gap—social, economic, intellectual, spiritual—between the clergy and the laity and between the upper and lower classes is hardly self-evident and undoubtedly substantially narrower than that in any host Christian population. Further, the innate rabbinical distaste for discussions of dogmatic or doctrinal purity resulted in a line of demarcation between heterodox and canonized practice and beliefs that was, even at first glance, extraordinarily hazy and immensely complicated by the inexorably difficult and constantly shifting relations between *minhag*, *nohag*, and Halakhah (relations that, to say the least, have not yet been systematized by specialists in that subject). Finally, the search for a women's religion, culture, or spirituality imbedded within the extant Yiddish texts is now only beginning to grapple more substantively than has been done to date with the fact that the vast bulk of early modern Yiddish materials was written by men and intended both “for women and for untutored men” and sometimes primarily for the latter.¹³

In sum, it seems obvious that far more work has to be done both on the basic

texts themselves and on the methodological distinction between popularization and popular culture *à la juive* before we can engage in far-reaching generalizations about these texts, not to speak about an objectively defined “collective memory” implicit within them or discernible between their lines. In this light, the following analysis is based on no preconceptions about what constitutes “folk” versus “elite” Jewish culture, religion, memory, or mentality. It merely assumes that there was a difference—deliberately left undefined—between the Hebrew reading audience and the Yiddish and that our translator worked consciously and deliberately with this distinction in mind.

Unfortunately, we do not know who the translator of the 1591 Yiddish *Shevet Yehudah* was, and little can be discerned about him from the linguistic evidence of the translation itself. His Yiddish is simple and supple and utterly devoid of any Slavisms—not one word in the 246 pages of the translation could not be understood (on dialect grounds) by readers west of the Oder or south of the Carpathians. Given his frequent use of the pronoun *ets* for the second person plural and its objective and genitive forms, *enk* and *enkir*, it is unlikely that he was of Lithuanian or northern Polish origin, but he could have stemmed from virtually anywhere else in the Central or Eastern European Yiddish-speaking world.¹⁴ What is abundantly clear is that he had a firm and often subtle grasp of the Hebrew language (though he was forced to fudge some admittedly obscure passages in the original text.) At the same time and more remarkable perhaps, he understood the several Spanish terms retained in the Hebrew text, for example, rendering *brivia* as *esrim ve-arba* (i.e., the twenty-four, the colloquial Yiddish term for the Hebrew Bible) and *Allemagne* as *Ashkenaz*. On the other hand, he seemed not to understand the few hebraized Arabisms in the text, thus refraining from rendering into Yiddish the terms *Al-Koran* and *Al-Kahir*.

It is tempting, therefore, to speculate that his background might have been similar to that of the publisher of the work, about whom we know a good deal: Isaac ben Aaron Prossnitz. One of the most important Hebrew and Yiddish printers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Prossnitz was born in Prossnitz, Moravia, and from there moved to Venice, where he learned the art of Hebrew publishing. From there he went to Krakow, where in 1567 he was granted a privilege by King Sigismund Augustus II—in which he is called an “Italian Jew”—to remain in Poland for fifty years. Of the two hundred books published by Isaac Prossnitz, his sons, and grandsons over the next sixty years, seventy-three were in Yiddish and included both original works such as the *Krovets*, *Brantshpigel* and *Seyfer Mitsves Nashim* and many translations into the vernacular of liturgical works as well as the books of Samuel, Song of Songs, Psalms, Daniel, Esther, and Joshua, as well as the Ethics of the Fathers; Prossnitz's Hebrew productions included the Talmuds, the Zohar, the *Turim* and *Shulhan Arukh*, and the works of the great luminaries of Polish Jewry, including Moses Isserles, Solomon Luria, and Mordecai Jaffe.¹⁵

As Yerushalmi already noted, the title page of the 1591 Yiddish edition of the *Shevet Yehudah* is itself fascinating; in a modernized transcription, it reads:

Sefer Shevet Yehudah, voyl far taytsht gor kurtslekh darinen tsu layen far gemeyne balebatim manen un vayber men vert darinen gefinden vunderberlikhe geshikhtnis di gesheyn zayn unzer eltern in der goles un vi fil mol daz zi hobn mekadesh sheym shomayim gevezn. Oykh vert dos bukh besheyden in velkhn tsaytn un in velkhe lender dos alz iz gesheyn iz domit der mentsh vert zayn hertz dervekn tsu gots varakht hashem yis' be-rakhamov uvekhasodov hamerubim zol vaytr zayn folk bahitn fun ale pegoim roim un zol uns zendn den derloyzer moshiekh ben dovid bemecheyro beyameynu, aky"r.¹⁶

[*Shevet Yehudah*, translated well and in brief, so that it may be read by ordinary householders, men and women. One will find in it wonderful stories of what happened to our ancestors in Exile and how often they martyred themselves. The book also specifies in which times and in which countries this all happened, so that a man's heart will be roused to the fear of God. May the Blessed Lord in His infinite mercy and grace continue to shield His people from all evil calamities, and send us the redeemer, Messiah son of David, speedily and in our days. Amen, May it be His will.]¹⁷

We shall presently return in depth to what the translator meant by "in brief," but first it is important to note that this title page was in large measure not original, but a paraphrase of the original (pseudepigraphical?) introduction to the first Hebrew edition, attributed to the by-then-deceased Solomon Ibn Verga, who claimed that he based his tale on the litany of Jewish catastrophes and persecutions found at the end of "a book written by my wise master, Don Judah Ibn Verga," and he called on the Jews to repent to God, who would then forgive their sins and cause their sufferings to cease.¹⁸ The messianic ending of the Yiddish title page is not to be found in the Hebrew original—indeed, as Yerushalmi noted, "there is not a trace of messianism" in the entire book.¹⁹

But as we proceed beyond the title page, we observe that the Yiddish translation has yet another, longer introduction, which itself is a telling reworking of the title page of the Hebrew first edition, written either by the editor, Joseph Ibn Verga, or by the printer. As Yerushalmi put it, "this harbinger of the modern publisher's blurb" described the book in a technically accurate but utterly misleading way as a chronicle of Jewish suffering and persecution but also as a work that includes details on the blood libel, religious disputations, the ceremony of installing the exilarchs, the structure of the Temple and its inner precincts, the service of the high priest in his chamber before the Day of Atonement, and the Passover sacrifice.²⁰

To all this, the Yiddish translator added three interesting twists. First, he felt it necessary to claim that "this book includes many beautiful interpretations of difficult aggadot in the Talmud."²¹ Second, he instructed his audience: "If you read this work, you will find in it very important things; therefore, everyone should buy it in order to read it with his wife and children."²² Finally, after repeating once more most of the information in the Yiddish title page, he explained: "I have called this book *Shevet Yehudah*, awaiting that God, the Almighty will again establish the rule over us of the Kingdom of Judah via the Messiah, Son of David, who will be of the tribe of Judah."²³ The Hebrew original, however, explicitly explained the name of the book as alluding to the tribal origin of the ancient kings of Israel, as evidenced by the resonant proof text Isaiah 3:8: "Ah, Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen."

Even before we turn to the first chapter of the text, then, we can discern in this maze of introductions and prologues a preliminary glimpse of two crucial aspects of our translator's method, beyond his clarification of his primarily male intended audience: his concern that this book be read as part of and in line with the authoritative high culture of Ashkenazic Judaism (i.e., the talmudic tradition) and his willingness to replace historical references in the original text with his own glosses, expressing piety and faith in Providence and in the seamlessness of Jewish historical destiny.

We shall soon see the overriding importance of the first point, but the centrality of the second is evidenced in a startling fashion at the very start of the translation of the text proper of the *Shevet Yehudah*. The original Hebrew work consists of sixty-four numbered chapters followed by four unnumbered concluding narratives, without any table of contents or separate introductions to the individual chapters. To aid his readers through these often very dense narratives, the Yiddish translator added a short preface to each chapter, summarizing its contents. For the most part, these summaries are quite accurate, if banal; but chapter 1, a fictionalized account of the story of Anthony and Cleopatra and the Roman conquest of Jerusalem, is introduced with the following words: "In dizn ershtn perek vert dertseylt di urzakhl un urshprung fun den ershtn khurbn beys-hamikdosh."²⁴ (In this first chapter the cause and reason for the destruction of the First Temple are related.) Clearly, what seems to have happened is that the translator misapprehended the original Hebrew chapter heading, which read *hurban rishon*, "the first catastrophe" (i.e., the first catastrophe detailed in this book) to mean *hurban bayit rishon*, the destruction of the First Temple. More deeply, of course, this conflation of the events of 586 B.C.E. with those of the Roman conquest half a millennium later speaks volumes about the degree of the translator's knowledge of (or possibly interest in) the precise rendering of the Jewish past. It is telling to note that this confusion of Babylonia and Rome, Nebuchadnezzar and Augustus Caesar, would be retained in Yiddish versions of the *Shevet Yehudah* well into the modern era, even in its more punctilious and historically accurate editions.²⁵

What emerges quite quickly is that our translator has little interest, in general, in many of the details that define the historian's craft. He is extraordinarily careless with dates and numbers, usually getting them wrong; he omits virtually any description found in the original about other chronicles or historiographic accounts of the stories he is telling; and he freely engages in anachronisms such as translating ancient and medieval weapons and armaments as *biksn* (guns or rifles).²⁶

In the same vein, he often departs from a literal rendition of the Hebrew original to give his narrative a looser and at the same time freer style, fleshing out the human dramas of the stories he is retelling and often humanizing events of the ancient Judean or early modern Iberian past into present-day Eastern or Central European reality. At times, these transpositions of the Spanish (or Roman or Persian) contexts of the stories into the cultural and political orbit of Ashkenazic Jews are dexterous and even charming. Two examples (still from the first chapter) will make this point clear. First, the Hebrew describes Cleopatra

agreeing to marry Antonius, “but only on the condition that he divorce his first wife who was in Rome, and so he did” (*be-tenai sheyigaresh ishto ha-rishonah asher be-Romi, ve-khen asah*). The Yiddish gives the melodrama a rather more homey touch: “aleyn mit dizer untersheyd, daz er zolt zayn ersht vayb fartraybn, daz er zol zi paterin mit ayn get” — “with the condition that he should send away his first wife who was in Rome, that he should get rid of her with a get.” Second, we learn from the original that after the conquest of Jerusalem, “the Emperor appointed a great minister (*sar gadol*) to rule over the Jews, and returned to Rome in great glory,” rendered in Yiddish as: “un hot der shtot Yerusholayim gelozn ayn groysn hern tsu shtathalter anshtot der keyser der zolt geveltiken un regininen oyf di yudn in nomen des keyzers un azoy tsukh der keyser Augustus op fun der shtot Yerusholayim.” Thus, in one fell stroke the Roman governor of Jerusalem is transformed into an early modern Central European *Stadthalter* and Caesar is deprived of the glory of his triumphant return to Rome.²⁷

But these examples may convey an incorrect impression—that this Yiddish version of *Shevet Yehudah* is merely an early modern adumbration, as it were, of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century tradition of Yiddish “improvements and embellishments” of the classics, as in the infamous *Der meylekh Lir, farbesert un farshenert* (King Lear, Improved and Embellished). However, as I hope to demonstrate, this is not the case, for we are dealing here with a much more historically pregnant phenomenon, in that our translator slyly but substantially transformed a classic of Spanish-Jewish historiography and the Sephardic weltanschauung into a radically different sort of work, redolent of and appropriate to his time, place, and audience. He accomplished this by both omission and commission, introducing into the text serious additions and elaborations as well as very tellingly omitting crucial and central chunks of the original narrative.

For the sake of clarity and brevity, I shall summarize these additions, emendations, and excisions under seven rubrics:

1. *Interjection of Divine Providence and retribution*: As has long been noted, one of the most important aspects of Ibn Verga’s historiography was his analysis of the “natural causes” of anti-Semitism in general and the Spanish Expulsion in particular, his insistence on the economic and social rather than theological bases of Christians’ hatred of the Jews. Whether or not one subscribes to Baer’s characterization of Ibn Verga’s views as radically secular, humanist or Averroist, his conscious avoidance of the traditional theological explanations of the fate of the Jews among the nations is striking.²⁸ As if to redress this problem, the Yiddish translator consistently interpolated phrases such as “with God’s help” or “by God’s decree” into the text, attempting thereby to restore the centrality of Providence and divine intent to the march of history in general and Jewish history in particular.²⁹ Frequently, this required more elaborate editorial intervention: for example, chapter 8 of *Shevet Yehudah* is the story of an apparently fictional blood libel in the town of Ecija in Andalucia, at the end of which the innocence of the accused Jew is revealed, the perpetrators are killed by the king, and the land returns to its former peace and quiet.³⁰ The Yiddish ending, however, adds: “un di

yudn varn mit gots hilf beshirmt fun den zakhn” (and the Jews were, with God’s help, protected from such things).³¹

More elaborate is the Yiddish translator’s invention of punishments for those who attacked the Jews and their Law; witness the end of chapter 20, Ibn Verga’s transposition to France of the background of the expulsion of the Jews from England, the conversion to Judaism of the confessor of the queen, a Dominican who had fallen in love with a Jewish maiden and therefore joined her faith. Ibn Verga’s account ends with the (philosemitic) king finally acceding to the demands of his wife and squires, ordering the burning of those Jews responsible for the conversion of the priest and the expulsion from his realm of all Jews within three months, “since they did not want to give them time to gather their money and their property.”³² The Yiddish translator was reluctant to let matters rest with this lugubrious note and thus ends the chapter with the following addendum: “Der nokh vardn di eydim krank shverlekh un bekenten daz zi hetn falsh eydes gezagt un shtarbn un der kenig dershrok un shtarb” (thereafter, the witnesses [i.e., those who testified against the Jews] became seriously ill, recognized that they had given false testimony, and died, and the king was shocked and died).³³

2. *Interjection of sins of the Jews*: Similarly, in order putatively to mute the book’s theological heterodoxy, the translator frequently interpolated the traditional acronym *b’ah”r—be’avonotenu harabim* (because of our sins)—into contexts where he found it religiously necessary. At times, the addition of the acronym alone was not sufficient, and he was compelled quite literally to spell out the traditional, providential, interpretation of catastrophe occurring as punishment for the sins of the Jews. Thus, to cite for the last time an example from the story of the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in the first chapter of the book, the Hebrew original recounts Augustus’s decision finally to attack and brutally sack Jerusalem, and his consequent self-justification to God that “it was the Jews who brought this upon themselves”—meaning clearly in the original their rebellion against Rome and assassination of the imperial governor of Jerusalem.³⁴ For the Yiddish translator, however, the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple had to have been caused by the sins of the Jews, not their military obduracy, and so he added: “ulivsof var zayn hant groyskraftik un bezvang di shtot Yerusholayim un brakht um beavoynes fun yehudim fil cyn folk az zand in mer, lesoyf daz dos beavoynes harabim geshokh” (at the end, his hand became strong and he attacked the city Jerusalem and killed because of the sins of the Jews as many people as sand in the sea, in the end this happened because of [the Jews’] many sins).³⁵

3. *Censorship of nontheologically prescribed sins of the Jews*: At the same time, however, our translator was acutely sensitive to the underbelly of any causal attribution of disaster to the Jews’ own misdeeds—the charges against the Jews adduced by their mortal enemies, as opposed to God. Such claims are cited, analyzed, and most often disputed throughout *Shevet Yehudah*, usually by means of the literary device of the fictional dialogue, in which different characters evince different positions on the acts and faults of the Jews. Given the centrality of the discussion of these matters in the book, our translator could hardly have omitted

these charges entirely from his text. But wherever it seems that credence is given to these charges by the Jews themselves or by their defenders, or when the translator can do so without interrupting the narrative flow, he excises these allegations from his text. Three examples will demonstrate this important point:

(a) Chapter 7 of *Shevet Yehudah* is an extremely long fictional dispute between a philosemitic King Alfonso and a learned Christian sage named Thomas. Rather early on in this dialogue, the king cites an unnamed monk who preached that it is wrong to compare Jews to dogs rather than pigs, for when one dog is hit, all the other dogs rush to bite his attacker; whereas when one pig is smitten and cries out in pain, all the other pigs join in the wailing. "And so it is if a Jew comes to a church and steals the chalice, immediately all the other Jews rush to save him."³⁶ In the Yiddish version, the theft of the chalice—so close to the charge of desecration of the host—is pointedly omitted; we simply read: "The Jews are like that too, when one Jew does something for which he is then blamed, all the other Jews rush to defend him."³⁷

(b) In the already cited Ecija blood-libel story in chapter 8, the accusers propose to the king that the Jew be tortured, since under duress "he will confess and we will learn the truth, for the Jew will say that he killed [the Christian] and ate his blood."³⁸ Even though the king immediately rejects this proposal, since he had sworn never to use torture to extract any testimony from a Jew, the very notion that a Jew might confess to the blood libel was censored by our translator from his edition, simply by leaving out the words "and ate his blood."³⁹

(c) Similarly, at the end of this story, the servant boy who reveals the plot against the Jews by his master testifies that he heard the latter say: "These Jews who did what they did to our Savior, their blood is upon them, and the kings who tolerate them do so only for their own benefit, because of the taxes."⁴⁰ The Yiddish simply excises the reference to the Crucifixion and leaves the master with the purely economic explanation that the kings tolerate the Jews because they "hobn gelt fun dem yudn."⁴¹

4. *The problem of usury*: More germane to Ibn Verga and problematic for our translator is the issue of Jewish money-lending, interest rates, and the rabbinic justifications and injunctions in this regard. For throughout his work, Ibn Verga repeatedly has his characters—again both philo- and antisemitic—emphasize the crucial economic causes of Jew-hatred, including the Jews' flaunting of their wealth, their elaborate clothes and feasts, and their lending money at high interest rates to Gentiles. In a typical passage, the scholar Thomas explains:

I have never seen a person of understanding who hates the Jews; it is only the common folk who hate them, and for this there is a reason. First—since the Jew is haughty and always wishes to lord it over [the Gentiles] and they do not think of themselves as exiles and servants pushed from nation to nation but, on the contrary, always wish to appear as nobles and ministers, and therefore the common folk is jealous of them. . . . When the Jews came to Your Majesty's realm, they did so as slaves, as exiles dressed in rags, but it took only a few years for them to don expensive clothes. . . . Therefore they are attacked and there are those who call for their expulsion from the kingdom. . . . And a second cause of their hatred is that when the Jews came to Your Majesty's kingdom they were poor and the

Christians rich, and now it is the opposite, since the Jew is smart and full of guile to achieve his goal, and they became rich because of the interest they charge, and Your Majesty can see that three-quarters of the lands and properties in Spain are in the hands of the Jews, and all this because of the heavy interest they charge.⁴²

The Yiddish translator simply omits any mention of interest in this speech, retaining the charges of haughtiness and luxury but not that of usury.⁴³

But such minor snipping is not sufficient, for two pages later the king accedes to Thomas's advice that the Jews be compelled to return the lands they acquired through money-lending, that they be forbidden to wear silk, and that they be ordered to wear red badges marking them as Jews. All this the Yiddish translator retains, but he feels compelled to excise the more problematic next chunk of text, in which the king confesses that he is shocked that the Jews' law permits them "theft in the guise of usury."⁴⁴ Thomas assures him that the Bible permitted them no such thing, that this is a misreading of the Scriptures for the Jews' own benefit. Deuteronomy 23:21 reads: "You may deduct interest from loans to foreigners"—where foreigners means those who do not believe in any faith; and "[y]ou may not deduct interest from loans to your brethren" applies to Christians as well, since "we and the Jews are brothers, as the Prophet says 'Are not Esau and Jacob brothers' and they have acknowledged this fraternity by saying 'Thus say your brethren Israel.'" The king replies that this interpretation is very far from that which he heard from a sect of Egyptian Jews who interpret "foreigner" to mean Jews as well, and "your brethren" to mean literally your brothers by birth.

Exactly why this innovative exegesis on a crucial aspect of Christian-Jewish tension is included by Ibn Verga is subject to debate, but our Yiddish translator cannot tolerate such a heterodox *derash* and omits this whole passage from his text.

5. *Defense of Talmud and rabbinic Judaism*: Far more broadly, any discussion in the Hebrew *Shevet Yehudah* that contains similar attacks on the rabbis and their interpretation of the Law is censored in the Yiddish translation, and more, is often completely turned on its head in inventive defense of the rabbis themselves. Thus, in between the above-cited discussions of usury, the king interjects that he has been outraged by the fact that Jews refuse to eat with Christians; and if a Jew finds an insect in his wine he will simply remove it and drink the wine, but if a Gentile touches the wine, the Jews will declare it unpotable, since they believe that "we are an unclean nation." Thomas replies that the Jews are not to blame for this but "the Talmudists," who misinterpreted the scriptural prohibition on drinking wine used in pagan religious rites "before the coming of Jesus" to apply to any wine touched by Gentiles at any time. To this the king replies: "You say the blame is with the Talmudists, but I say that it is with those who heed their words." All this is rendered in the Yiddish as follows:

Di yehudim hobn keyn shuld derin den di Toyre zogt un farbot in zelkhn vayn . . . al di vayn di do verin gotn zu velkhn dinst oysershalbn iber irer heylikn shtot yerusholayim oyf di oyfir di zol un farbotn zayn tu trinken. . . . Zogt der meylek: atsint iz mir visig daz di yehudim in zakhn des vayn nebn irer toyre kumen.⁴⁵

[The Jews are not to blame for this, since their Torah prohibits such wine. . . . All wines that were used as sacrifices to other gods in the holy Jerusalem are forbidden to them. . . . Says the King: now I understand that the Jews are following their Torah in regard to wine.]

Many more examples could be adduced to demonstrate this point, but a final one will suffice—on another central node of Christian-Jewish tension over the millennia, the crucial issue of whether or not the Talmud contains overtly anti-Christian material. Thus, in Ibn Verga's version of the expulsion of Jews from France the king finally accedes to the demands of the queen and her advisers when the latter protest, "How can Our Lord tolerate their contempt for Jesus? And this in your very own land and state! And it is written in their Talmudists' book that Jesus was condemned, etc."⁴⁶ This citation of the Talmud the Yiddish translator simply omits.⁴⁷

6. *Omission of Christian miracles and claims of supersession*: It is fascinating to observe that our translator's defense of rabbinic Judaism does not require him to excise from his text references to any of the cardinal doctrines of Christianity such as the Virgin Birth, the Immaculate Conception, the Trinity, or the essential claim that Jesus was the Messiah. Nor is our translator troubled by the long discussions in our text about Plato and Aristotle and frequent citations from their philosophical works. But in addition to the omissions and additions already mentioned, the Yiddish translator does at times feel compelled to tamper with his text when it includes sensitive testimony of contemporary miracles in the Christian world or references to the doctrine of the supersession of Jewish Law by the coming of Christ.

Thus, chapter 6, the story of the Shepherds' Massacres of 1321, begins in the original with two versions of a widely believed miracle: In the first, a boy has a vision of a dove who appears on his shoulder or head, and when he reaches out for it, it turns into a beautiful young maiden, who anoints him a shepherd to lead a crusade against the Muslims; and as a sign her words are inscribed on his arms. In the second, the sign of the cross appears on his arm. In a subtle sleight of hand, our translator retains the first version of the miracle but omits the second.

A similar tiny but meaningful omission occurs near the start of the Alfonso-Thomas dialogue in chapter 7, in which the friar is dismayed that the king is surprised by the Jews' survival through the ages, since God has mercy on all His creatures and does not want any of them to perish, not even an ant or a fly, and "all the more so the Jews, bearers of a faith even if superseded, whom God brought near to Him in days of yore, and today suffer a bitter exile in order to preserve what they think is the will of God."⁴⁸ The words "even if superseded" do not appear in the Yiddish translation, thus radically changing the whole point of the text.

7. *Omission of tales of the conversion of the Jews*: All the above-cited omissions, additions, and inventive transformations of the text of the *Shevet Yehudah* on the part of an Ashkenazic popularizer are revealing, but they pale in comparison to his most frequent, most daring, and most historically evocative editorial decision:

his censorship of virtually every reference in this long chronicle of Jewish suffering and persecution to the conversion of Jews to Christianity, either voluntarily or by force. Occasionally, he retained truncated tales of the forced conversion of Jews in antiquity or to Islam, but he strenuously and self-consciously attempted to expunge from his text every single reference to the central reality of early modern Sephardic Jewry as a whole and of Solomon Ibn Verga himself, the voluntary and involuntary baptism of large chunks of Iberian Jewry.

The first hint of this remarkable revision of Jewish history occurs in the second chapter of *Shevet Yehudah*, the fictional account of a mass conversion of the Jews "in the time of Ben Sira" in which "30,000 Jews left the faith of Moses, and those martyrs who resisted were burned."⁴⁹ The Yiddish translation retains the story but leaves out the figure 30,000, merely relating that *fil* (i.e., many) Jews were converted.⁵⁰ By the very next chapter, however, we are in Spain in 1146-47 and hence closer to home, and thus the sentence "after much distress, many communities left the Law of Moses" is completely excised, though the end of the story in which the Jews return to Judaism is—quite illogically—retained. Perhaps conscious of the need for greater care, two chapters later, the translator emends the tale of the Shepherds' Massacre by omitting the baptism of the Jews of Toulouse, necessitating a wholesale reorganization of the subsequent text. Similarly, the end of chapter 9, the tale of the suffering of the Jews under the Visigoth King Sisibut in 613 is transformed by the censorship of the words "the majority of the communities of Spain left their faith"; instead, the leaders of the Jews are only imprisoned, "un helt zey gefangen lange tsayt, un dernokh daz der kenig shtarb das his men zey eyn; got zol uns vayer helfn" (and they were held in prison for a long time, and then the king died and they were released, May God spare us from now on).⁵¹

Very soon thereafter, however, the Yiddish translator encountered entire chapters devoted to tales of the mass conversion of the Jews, which could not be so conveniently edited down, and he therefore decided to omit them entirely. Thus, chapters 11, 15, 27, 33, 45, 46, 47, and 48 are totally excised from the Yiddish *Shevet Yehudah*, hiding from the Yiddish-reading Ashkenazic audience Ibn Verga's account of mass baptisms in (among others places) Savoy, Piedmont, Lombardy, and Monzon in Aragon and especially the detailed descriptions filling several chapters of the book relating to Spain in 1391 and 1412.

In the Yiddish *Shevet Yehudah* these events simply never happened; the Marano problem never existed: Jews in Spain and Portugal did indeed suffer and die as a result of the hatred of their enemies, but they did so in God's name, as holy martyrs of His promise of the chosenness and ultimate redemption of His people. They thus acted just like their Ashkenazic brethren in the north, preferring *kid-dush ha-shem* to the temporal solace of the baptismal font.

As if to hint at a more complex reality, our translator did retain one episode of recent conversion: chapter 56, the brief but chilling tale of a group of starving Spanish exiles arriving by boat on the shores of Italy, being refused entry to town after town, and finally disembarking at Genoa, where out of pure hunger and

desperation a group of Jewish youths took cover in a church and converted to Christianity in order to get some bread, as groups of Christians roamed through the streets "with the Crucifix in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other, saying to the young Jews: 'If you bow down to the Cross, here is bread!' and in this way many were converted and lost among the Gentiles."⁵² It is impossible to know how readers of the Yiddish translation could understand this isolated story, in addition to the several unexplained and unglossed references to *anusim* (Marranos) in the last chapters of the book.

It is important and somewhat arresting to repeat, at the end, a bibliographic point mentioned at the start of this essay: that all of these excisions, emendations, and amendments found in the 1591 Krakow Yiddish *Shevet Yehudah* were retained in the republications of this translation in Amsterdam in 1648, Sulzbach in 1700, and Fürth in 1724. Well into the eighteenth century and possibly even beyond, Yiddish readers of this classic work of Spanish-Jewish historiography thus received a purified and expurgated version of Solomon Ibn Verga's work, in which any theological or exegetical heterodoxy was elided and Spanish Jewry was saved, if only retroactively, from the sin of apostasy.

Until the secrets of the dozens of as yet unstudied premodern Yiddish texts are revealed, it is impossible to know how typical this process, which I have here somewhat playfully termed "Ashkenization," was in the annals of early modern Jewish folk literature. But to be sure, the 1591 Yiddish *Shevet Yehudah* remains a remarkable example of how, in the words of Yitzhak Baer, this "book, in spite of its skepticism and bitterness, could become one of the most beautiful and widely read of folk books."⁵³

Notes

I am indebted to Rabbi Jerry Schwartzbart, Curator of Special Collections in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and to his staff, for their hospitality and assistance to me in the preparation of this essay.

1. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London, 1982), 57. As he indicates in the prologue to this book, the analysis of sixteenth-century Jewish historiography expands upon his earlier "Clio and the Jews: Reflections on Jewish Historiography in the Sixteenth Century," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, Jubilee Volume, 46–47 (1979–1980): 607–38.

2. *Ibid.*, 68–69. In this essay, I use the standard transliterated form of the title of this book, *Shevet Yehudah*, rather than the version with a *b* used by Yerushalmi.

3. For valuable though incomplete bibliographical data, see Moritz Steinschneider, "Jüdisch-Deutsche Literatur," *Serapeum* (Leipzig, 1848–1949), no. 281; *idem*, *Catalog Bodleiana*, 3:2393–96, no. 8; *idem*, *Die Geschichtsliteratur der Juden* (Frankfurt a.M., 1905), 79, no. 90; M. Wiener, *Das Buch Schevet Yehuda von R. Salomo Aben Verga* (Hannover, 1856; reprinted 1924), xv–xviii; Khone Shmeruk, "'Reshimah bibliografit shel defusei Folin be-yidish 'ad gezerat Ta'h ve-Ta't,'" in his *Sifrut Yidish be-Folin* (Jerusalem, 1991), 91, no. 1591. In addition, Professors John Efron and Elisheva Carlebach have brought to my attention Johannes Buxtorf's use of the Yiddish translation of *Shevet Yehudah* in his

polemical/scholarly works; see Stephen G. Burnett, "Distorted Mirror: Antonius Margaritha, Johann Buxdorf and Christian Ethnographies of Jews," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25 (2) (1994): 281, and *idem.*, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies* (Leiden, 1996), 120.

4. The 1648 Amsterdam, 1700 Sulzbach, and 1724 Fürth editions were reissues of the 1591 translation, with only very slight orthographic and lexical changes. In sharp contrast, the 1700 Amsterdam and 1810 Ostrog editions were independent works with different and differing treatments of the text, though they relied heavily on the 1591 translation. A totally different translation appeared in Hrubieszow in 1818, and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed many different Yiddish translations and reworkings of *Shevet Yehudah*, often with the subtitle *Tsukhruts Yehudah* or under the title *Nidhei Yisrael*; I have thus far examined five separate editions published in Vilna alone (and extant at the YIVO Institute in New York) — 1898, 1899, 1900, 1910, and 1913. Apart from incidental comments, this essay does not attempt an analysis of anything but the original 1591 edition; I hope to return to the later editions, and especially those published in tsarist Russia, in another context.

5. Beyond the first edition (Adrianople 1554) and the second edition (Sabionetta with the false imprint of Adrianople), both available in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York, I have examined the seminary's four manuscripts of *Shevet Yehudah* — MSS 3542, 3577, 35791, and 9100; the undated Salonika edition catalogued as RB 140:9; the Amsterdam 1655 edition; the 1651 Amsterdam translation into Latin under the title *Historiia Judaica*; the 1680 Amsterdam Latin translation entitled *Tribus Judae Salominis fil. Virgae*; the 1744 Amsterdam Spanish translation entitled *Ca vara de juda*; and the Hebrew editions of Zolkiew (1802), Vilna (1815), Warsaw (1841), Hannover (1855 and its reprint, 1924), Lemberg (1864) Lemberg (1874), Warsaw (1882), and Jerusalem (1928 and 1991), in addition to the scholarly version edited by Azriel Shochat with an introduction by Yitzhak Baer (Jerusalem, 1946).

6. See, e.g., Yisroel Zinberg, *Di geshikhte fun der literature bay yidn* (Buenos Aires, 1961), vol. 6; Sh. Niger, "Di yidische literatur un di lezerin," in his *Bleter geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur* (New York, 1959), 35–107; and Max Erik, "Bletlekh tsu der geshikhte fun der eleterer yidisher literatur un kultur," *Tsaytskrift* 1 (1926): 173–77.

7. See, for example, Solomon Frechhof, "Devotional Literature in the Vernacular," *CCAR Yearbook* 3 (1923): 375–415 and the literature cited in Herman Pollack, *Jewish Folkways in Germanic Lands, 1648–1806* (Cambridge, 1981), and Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (Philadelphia, 1961).

8. Khone Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yiddish: Perakim le-toledoteha* (Tel Aviv, 1978); his *Sifrut Yiddish be-Folin* (Jerusalem, 1981); Hava Turniansky, "Ha-'bentsherl' ve-ha-zemirov be-yidish," *'Ale Sefer* 10 (1982): 51–92 and her *Sefer masah u-merivah* 387 (1627) (Jerusalem, 1985); Sarah Zfatman, *Ha-siporet be-yidish me-reishitah 'ad Shivhei ha-Besht* (1504–1814) (Jerusalem, 1985), and her "Mekor u-mekoriut be-'Mayse-Bikhl' ha-kadum be-yidish 'Mayse Vestindie' Prag 1665+ — mikreh mivhan," in *Ke-minhag Ashkenaz u-Folin, Sefer yovel le-Hone Shmeruk*, ed. Y. Bartal, H. Turniansky, and E. Mendelson (Jerusalem, 1993).

9. Chava Weissler, "The Traditional Piety of Ashkenazic Women," in *Jewish Spirituality from the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present*, ed. Arthur Green (New York, 1987), 245–75; *idem.*, "The Religion of Traditional Ashkenazic Women: Some Methodological Issues," *AJS Review* 12 (1987): 73–94; *idem.*, "For Women and for Men Who Are Like Women," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (fall 1989): 7–24.

10. See his "Di mizrekh-eyropeische nuskhoes fun der Tsenerene," in *For Max Weinreich on His Seventieth Birthday* (The Hague, 1964), 320–36; see the intriguing comments on this work by Julius Carlebach, "Family Structure and the Position of Jewish Women," in *Revolution and Evolution: 1848 in German-Jewish History*, ed. Werner E. Mosse et al. (Tübingen, 1981), 156–88.

11. On this enormous topic, see, *inter alia*, Rosalind Brooke and Christian Brooke,

Popular Religion in the Middle Ages (New York, 1983); Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1980); and perhaps most influential in America, Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971). For a critique of their approach, see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago, 1981), esp. 21–23; John Van Engen, “The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 519–52; and from yet another perspective, Thomas Kselman’s introduction to his *Belief in History* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1991), and Natalie Zemon Davis, “From ‘Popular Religion’ to ‘Religious Cultures,’” in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Stephen Ozment (St. Louis, 1982), 321–41.

12. This despite the success of Polish Jewry in creating the Vaad Arba Arazot, the Council of the Lands, the most extensive supracommunal agency in post-Gaonic Diaspora Jewish history. Yet the Vaad was essentially a lay organization without any halakhic authority. I am most indebted to my student, Professor Edward Fram, for his comments on this matter in an earlier discussion of this point.

13. See the revealing if problematic recent piece by Chava Weissler, “Women’s Studies and Women’s Prayers: Reconstructing the Religious History of Ashkenazic Women,” *Jewish Social Studies* (n.s.) 1 (Winter 1995): 28–47.

14. I am indebted to Professor Marvin Herzog for sharing this information with me.

15. See H. D. Friedberg, *Toledot ha-defus ha-ivri ve-Folanyah* (1950, pt. 2), 5–25, and Majer Balaban in *Soncino Blätter* 3 (1929/30): 9–11, 47–48. For the Yiddish works, see Khone Shmeruk, “Reshimah bibliografit shel defusei Folin be-yidish ‘ad gezerat Ta”h ve-Ta”t,” in his *Sifrut Yidish be-Folin* (Jerusalem, 1991), 75–116.

16. Shevet Yehudah (Krakow 1591), title page. Henceforth, all references to this translation will be abbreviated as Y, followed by the page number. All references to the Hebrew original will be to the scholarly edition, edited by Azriel Shochat with an introduction by Yitzhak Baer (Jerusalem, 1946), based on the first edition, and abbreviated below as S.

17. The English translation follows that of Yerushalmi (*Zakhor*, 69) with slight changes.

18. S:19.

19. *Zakhor*, 65.

20. *Ibid.*, 68. The title page was not reproduced in S.

21. “. . . shteyt in den sefer fil sheyne kavones oyf etlikhe herbe agodes oyz dem tal-mud.” Y:1b.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. Y:2a.

25. See the retention of this introduction to chapter 1 in the Amsterdam 1700 edition; here the chapter headings are presented as a table of contents at the end of the volume.

26. See, e.g., Y:3b, 26a; 27b.

27. Y:2 a and b.

28. See Yitzhak Baer, “He’arot hadashot le-sefer Shevet Yehudah,” *Tarbiz* 10 (1934–5): 152–79; Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 65, and his *The Lisbon Massacre of 1506 and the Royal Image in the Shebet Yehudah* (Cincinnati, 1976). For the most recent study of Ibn Verga, see Marianne Awerbuch, *Zwischen Hoffnung und Vernunft* (Berlin, 1985).

29. See, for example, Y:3b and 6a.

30. S:46–50.

31. Y:34a.

32. S:69.

33. Y:50b.

34. S:20. This is, to be sure, a fictionalized account of the actual events, loosely based on chap. 15 of the *Yosippon*. See the notes by Azriel Shochat to this chapter in S:167.

35. Y:3a.

36. S:30.

37. Y:13a.

38. S:39.

39. Y:32b.

40. S:50.

41. Y:33b.

42. S:31.

43. Y:15a.

44. S:32 — “ekh hitir lahem toratam gezel ke-inyan ha-ribit.”

45. Y:15b.

46. S:68; see the note to this point on p. 186 of S, and the reference to *Gittin* 57a.

47. Y:50a and b.

48. S:28.

49. S:20.

50. Y:3b.

51. Y:35b.

52. S:123; Y:104 a and b.

53. Yitzhak F. Baer, *Galut* (New York, 1947), 82. Baer was, of course, referring here to the original Hebrew version.