"*That* Yiddish Has Spoken to Me": Yiddish in Israeli Literature

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Abstract   This essay examines the ways in which Yiddish—as a language, a set of literary traditions and practices, and a "postvernacular"—operates within the context of Israeli, Hebrew-dominated literature. After establishing the subject's poetic, historical, and political framework, I present two examples of how Yiddish exerted a (largely unacknowledged) influence on Israeli literature. The first concerns the striking similarities and intersections between two literary groups active in Israel during the 1950s: a famous Hebrew group (Likrat) and a little-known Yiddish group (Yung Yisroel). The second example consists in the parallels and intertwined literary histories of two writers, Yossl Birshtein (who was a member of Yung Yisroel) and the Hebrew writer Ya'acov Shabtai, in order to demonstrate the presence of Yiddish in Shabtai's poetic work and to discover an untold story in the history of modern Hebrew literature.

On December 14, 1967, the poet Yehiel Perlmuter (1904–92), better known by his adopted Hebrew name Avot Yeshurun, gave an address titled "Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ta'aroch et ha-tfila" ("Hebrew Literature Will Recite the Prayer") on the occasion of receiving the Brenner Prize. In his speech, he said the following about his relations with Yiddish:

> *That* Yiddish has begun to come to you when you dream and when you are awake, because it became known to her that you are determined not to speak it, not to think in it and not to dream it—in times of sleep or in times of awareness.

> If you dream and speak in Yiddish, you must hurry up and translate everything you have been uttering into Hebrew, and only then can you go back to sleep. (Yeshurun 1995: 281)[1]

One can easily detect in Yeshurun's words a strong remorse that derives from the repression of Yiddish combined with his guilt over leaving his family behind in Poland, where they were exterminated in World War II. Yeshurun's description of the return of the repressed is poignant and palpable. Yiddish haunts the person who vows not even to dream in it, let alone to speak it or write it. But this repressed Yiddish not only haunts Yeshurun as a poet; it actually "speaks" to him, pleading not to forget "her":

> *That* Yiddish has spoken to me, *ben-aliya* [the son of immigration/the chosen one] in a voice of the *shekhinata de-galuta* [divine presence in exile]: "Why did you leave me" and with all the language of "for the sin which we have sinned." . . . This Yiddish, which sold hot doughnuts in Warsaw's streets in order to provide for a respected, half-paralyzed family member. . . . From very close, this Yiddish has radiated on me, without knowing that this radiation imprints its soul upon me. It became dark for her. You can still see the color of the walls. Now the royal Hebrew should go to sell hot falafel in the city Dizengoff in her [Yiddish] memory. (Ibid.)

In this address, Yeshurun expresses not only his despair over the loss of his mother tongue. He also suggests that his own poetic project is one of emancipating Yiddish, described here as a poor woman selling "hot doughnuts in Warsaw's streets," to support Hebrew, a "respected, but half-paralyzed" female relative. He calls for a kind of revenge, in which the "royal Hebrew"—now the official language of the State of Israel—needs to go and "sell hot falafel in the city Dizengoff"[2] in memory of Yiddish. This description of a tense, complex, and yet reciprocal "family relationship" between Yiddish and Hebrew is not just an idiosyncratic metaphor of Yeshurun (in Yiddish syntax) but an important key to understanding his avant-garde poetry. In a later interview, Helit Yeshurun asked her father about this 1967 address: "Does Hebrew come in memory of Yiddish?" Avot Yeshurun answered: "*My* Hebrew does. It must. It is the royal language of Eretz Israel . . . but it [Hebrew] also lives for the memory of Yiddish" (Yeshurun 1982: 98–99).

As far as we know, Yeshurun never published Yiddish poetry during his lifetime. However, his first written poem was, in fact, in Yiddish. "One day" he writes, "I strung together a long poem in Yiddish: *Di nevue in gezang* ('The

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Hebrew and Yiddish are mine.
2. Dizengoff is the name of the main thoroughfare in Tel Aviv, especially important during the 1950s and 1960s.

Prophecy in Song'). My eye fell on a ragged, lidless cardboard box belonging to my grandfather. Inside, there was a muddle of old receipts and papers—and the poem was swallowed up with them. The poem remained there" (Yeshurun 1995: 215). The Yiddish poem that Perlmuter wrote remained "there," in his Polish hometown, but he later interwove fragments of it into his Hebrew work, written in Palestine and in the early years of the State of Israel (Zoritte 1995: 28). By finding a variety of ways to incorporate Yiddish (as well as Arabic and Polish) into his Hebrew poetry, Yeshurun created a new poetic idiom that destabilized and revolutionized Israeli Hebrew poetry (Lachman 2000: 81–90).

Thus, what often seems to be a "poetics of difficulty" or "incomprehensibility" becomes much more comprehensible when we recognize the extent to which Yiddish is present in Yeshurun's poetry. It is found there not only on the lexical level (in countless words and expressions imported from Yiddish) but as one of the organizing principles of his poetics. As such, its effect ranges from the strange syntactic structure of the poetic sentence to the system of vocalization and orthography that looks strange in Hebrew, but makes much more sense in the Yiddish that constantly lurks behind it.[3] Instead of writing Yiddish, Yeshurun uses Yiddish in order to unsettle "royal Hebrew" and to express his poetic worldview. Within Yeshurun's Hebrew poetry, Yiddish is thus capable of making itself present in spite of its suppression, and even of destabilizing "royal Hebrew."

Yeshurun scholars such as Yochai Oppenheimer (1997), Lilach Lachman (2000), Michael Gluzman (2003), and Adriana Jacobs (2013) have identified and demonstrated the role of Yiddish in Yeshurun, but they presented his poetic and linguistic practice as a singular, idiosyncratic case. However, Yeshurun's poetry is not the only example in which Yiddish functions as an important, mainly submerged presence in Israeli literature.

Until fairly recently, Israeli literature was understood by most literary historians and critics as essentially monolingual, created exclusively in Hebrew. The transition from a society of Jewish immigrants to an Israeli culture was formulated time and again in terms of the Zionist ideal of the ingathering of exiles and the negation of the Diaspora.[4] Although the native tongue of the majority of Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated to Palestine from Eastern Europe was Yiddish, it is Yiddish that was considered—to use Yael

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3. For a discussion on how one language "looks" behind another in literary texts, see Sternberg 1981 as well as other articles in this special issue.

4. The historical and critical treatments of Israeli literature as synonymous with monolingual Hebrew are too numerous to quote here. In the realm of Israeli fiction, the most comprehensive account is Gershon Shaked's (1993, 1998) two volumes. For recent brief overviews of the way Israeli literature was read and understood, see Hever 1999; Shvarts 2000.

Chaver's (2004) apt term—"the language that must be forgotten" in the process of the making of Israeli national literature and culture. The efforts to replace Yiddish (as well as Russian, Polish, German, and other languages) with Hebrew during the prestate, "Yishuv" period (roughly 1880–1948) was part of a protracted "language war," resulting in Hebrew as the designated national language of Israel, while Yiddish was labeled as the language of Diaspora, destined to die. In recent decades, this assumption of a monolingual Israeli literature has been challenged,[5] but the role of Yiddish in Israeli literature has not yet received sufficient attention. In the early years of the state, Yiddish was indeed repressed, marginalized, and associated with exile, destruction, and death. However, I would argue that Yiddish has continued to be not only the mother tongue of large segments of the Israeli population, and of writers such as Avot Yeshurun, but also a language of literary and cultural creativity.[6] Further, despite everything, Yiddish exerted a strong, though unacknowledged, influence on Israeli Hebrew language, literature, and culture.

A number of scholars have explored how Yiddish interacted with other languages and literatures. Sander Gilman (1986: 200) shows how Yiddish functioned in western and central Europe as "the hidden language of the Jews." Naomi Seidman (2006) discussed Jewish translators from French into Yiddish after World War II (like her own father Hillel Seidman) as "double agents," working between the newly liberated French authorities and displaced European Jews, Holocaust survivors who found themselves in France. In Seidman's (ibid.: 4) case, the use of Yiddish became a powerful linguistic and cultural "weapon," capable of producing "the secret communication of a subjugated group." Hana Wirth-Nesher (2006) highlights the crucial yet largely submerged components and traces of Yiddish in American Jewish literature, written mainly in English. I propose to examine a parallel phenomenon in a very different cultural and ideological sphere, namely, the ways in which Yiddish—as a language and a set of literary traditions as well as what Jeffery Shandler (2008) has termed "postvernacular"[7]—has continued

5. The challenges have come mainly from scholars who emphasized the role of Arabic in Israeli Palestinian writers as well as in Israeli writers of Mizrahi origins (Hever 1999). Some attention has been directed recently to the role of German in the works of writers like Yehuda Amichai and Dan Pagis (Gold 2001).
6. On Yiddish in the early years of Israel, see Fishman and Fishman 1973; Rojanski 2004. Dan Miron (2004) emphasizes the "comic" employment and abuse of Yiddish in the early years of the State of Israel. See also my recent work on Yiddish writers in the 1950s and early 1960s (Pinsker 2007, 2013).
7. Shandler (2008: 4) makes the distinction between the language's primary mode of signification, that is, its role in communicating information (which shrank after the Holocaust with the huge decline of native speakers) and the secondary level of language, where symbolic signifi-

to operate within the context of the Israeli, Hebrew-dominated language, literature, and culture.

The following pages deal, in a necessarily succinct way, with different examples of how Yiddish exerts its influence on Israeli literature. The second section examines the striking similarities and intersections between two self-conscious literary groups active in Israel in the 1950s: the famous Hebrew group (Likrat) and the little-known Yiddish group (Yung Yisroel). I argue that these two literary groups need to be understood as essentially two branches of a multilingual Israeli literary system, where certain figures serve as bridging agents between Yiddish and Hebrew. The third section traces the parallels and intertwined literary histories of two writers, one Yiddish and the other Hebrew—Yossl Birshtein (who was part of Yung Yisroel) and Ya'acov Shabtai, respectively—in order to demonstrate the strong, if hidden, presence of Yiddish in Shabtai and to provide an untold chapter in Israeli literary history.

Israeli (Neo)Modernist Poetry between Hebrew and Yiddish, Likrat and Yung Yisroel

In virtually every historical account of Hebrew literature, the revolution brought about by the poets of Dor ha-medinah (the Statehood Generation) is regarded as the defining moment in Israeli modernism.[8] Statehood Generation poets like Natan Zach, Yehuda Amichai, and David Avidan, so we are told, favored free verse and internal rhyme, plain language, a prosaic and subdued tone, and a focus on the daily lives of ordinary people, in order to express the specific life experience of the individual.[9] The explicit poetics of the Statehood Generation was formulated by Zach (1959, 1966a, 1966b), who became its chief spokesman, in a series of influential articles and manifestos he published between 1959 and 1966.

This poetic revolution began with the rise of a small group (or circle) which was established around 1952 and called itself Likrat (Towards). The group's founding members were students at Hebrew University, among them Zach (Zaitelbach), Moshe Dor (Klebanov), Aryeh Sivan (Bumshteyn), and Binyamin Hrushovski (Harshav). Soon, poets like Amichai, Avidan, and

cance is carried by the language apart from the semantic content of utterances: "Privileging of the secondary level of signification of Yiddish over its primary level constitutes a distinctive mode of engagement with the language that I term postvernacular Yiddish."

8. This section of the essay is part of an ongoing research project undertaken with Chana Kronfeld, in collaboration and independently, over the past few years.

9. For a historical account of the poetry of the Statehood Generation, see Shaked 1988; Weissbrod 2002.

Moshe Ben-Shaul as well as researchers (later important scholars) like Gershon Shaked were part of the group. Likrat published four issues of a journal, *Likrat* (the first two in a homemade mimeographed edition of forty copies), and a modest anthology of poems, *Bi-shlosha* (*Three*) by Dor, Sivan, and Zach. The group also established a publishing house (also named Likrat) that managed to publish three volumes of poetry, including Amichai's first volume. Although Likrat was active for only two years, between 1952 and 1954, its importance outreached its short life, because it served as the foundation of the Israeli Hebrew modernism (or neo-modernism) of the Statehood Generation (Dor 1979; Levin 1984).

During this same period, another group was established, made up of Yiddish writers who called themselves Yung Yisroel (Young Israel). The largely unknown story of Yung Yisroel began in 1951, a few years after a number of young Yiddish writers (or aspiring writers), mostly survivors of the Holocaust, emigrated from Europe to the State of Israel as refugees. Some of them settled in kibbutzim, while others made their homes in cities such as Tel Aviv or Haifa. Their first collective publication appeared in a special section of the newly established Yiddish journal *Di Goldene Keyt* (the *Golden Chain*), edited by Avrom Sutzkever, who was older than the members of the group and already well known around the world as a Yiddish poet. This special section, titled "Fun der yunger yidishe literatur in Yisroel" ("From the Young Yiddish Literature in Israel") included texts by Rivka Basman, Avrom Rintzler, Moyshe Yungman, Birshtein, Shlomo Vorzoger, Zvi Eizenman, and H. Binyomin (the Yiddish pen-name of Binyamin Hrushovski/Harshav) (Sutzkever 1951). These writers were also the core members who established the group Yung Yisroel in an inaugural meeting that took place in Kibbutz Yagur on October 26, 1951. Rukhl Fishman, who immigrated to Israel from the United States, joined the group; other, older immigrant Yiddish writers such as Mendel Mann, Leib Rokhman, and Malasha Mali refrained from participating in the group's meetings but contributed to its publications. After another collective publication in a special section of *Di Goldene Keyt* (1952), this time under the name Yung Yisroel, they established their own journal (*Yung Yisroel*, 1954–57) and their publishing house (also called Yung Yisroel), which issued seven books of Yiddish poetry and prose between 1954 and 1966.[10]

On the surface, there was nothing that the Hebrew and the Yiddish groups shared besides the fact that they were active around the same years. Moreover, while Yung Yisroel remained virtually unknown outside the small

10. Until recently, the only study of the Yung Yisroel group, its literature, and its activities was Roskies 1973–76. My two recent articles, Pinsker 2007 and 2013, are dedicated to the group's history and reception.

circles of Yiddish readers in Israel and around the world,[11] some members of Likrat have been among the most central and well-known Israeli poets to this day. And yet, a closer examination reveals some surprising similarities between the literary and artistic directions of the two groups. Indeed, there was much interaction and cross-fertilization between them. Moreover, both were inspired by Yiddish modernist groups of the first half of the twentieth century (such as Inzikh in New York and Yung Vilne in Vilnius) who served as important, but largely submerged, poetic models.[12]

Both journals—*Likrat* and *Yung Yisroel*—described themselves on their respective issue covers as being *chad-pe'ami* or *einmolike* (published one time only), in spite of the fact that they were issued a number of times. This emphasis on the temporary and transitory as a declaration of independence and disregard for longevity has a long tradition in international modernism (the so-called little magazine),[13] but it was especially strong in Yiddish modernism in Europe and America (with journals such as *Khalyastre*, *Albatross*, *Shriftn*) and even in Palestine during the Yishuv period.[14] Both journals were edited collectively by some members of the group who served as an "editorial committee," although, in fact, both journals had actual "editors in chief." In the case of Yung Yisroel, it was Rinztler, and for Likrat, it was Hrushovski and Zach.

There are other similarities between the Hebrew and Yiddish journals. The volumes of the journal *Yung Yisroel* included not only poetry, prose, and critical essays by members of the group but also graphic art by Yossl Bergner and Ya'acov Shteiner. This combination of visual art and literature represents another example of the ways Yung Yisroel followed the model set by modernist Yiddish publications in Europe and America, where major artists like Marc Chagall, Henryk Berlewi, El Lissitzki, and Ben Shan contributed works to the journals. In a short-lived Yiddish journal such as *Albatross* (published in Warsaw and Berlin between 1921 and 1923), the integration of poetic, essayistic, visual, and typographic values was achieved by the juxtaposition of the literature of the expressionist Khalyastre (the Gang) group—Uri Zvi Greenberg, Peretz Markish, Melekh Ravitch, and others—with graphic art by Berlewi and Mark Schwartz (Lipsker 1995).

11. The literature produced by Yung Yisroel attracted much attention in Yiddish circles in the United States, Canada, South America, Europe, and Australia but very little in Israel. For an analysis of its reception, see Pinsker 2013.
12. See Kronfeld 2005, 2007; Pinsker 2007, 2013.
13. On "little magazines," see McKible 2002; Morrison 2001.
14. For a discussion of the short-lived Yiddish journals and "little magazines" in Europe and America, see Harshav 1990: 175–77. For a similar phenomenon in Palestine during the Yishuv period, see Chaver 2004: 121–24.
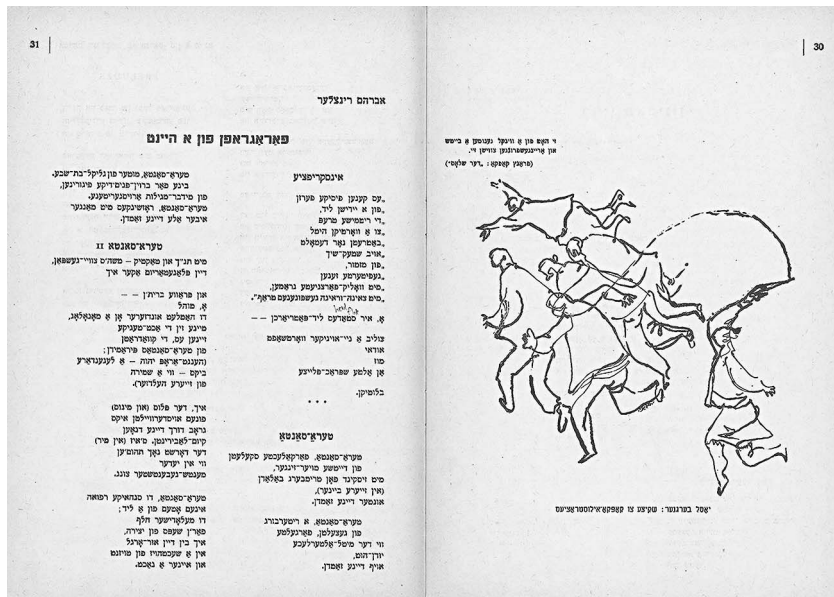
Figure 1   Yossl Bergner, illustration for Kafka and Rintzler's poems, *Yung Yisroel* (1954).

Following these models, Yung Yisroel invited Bergner—the son of Ravitch—to publish his illustrations for Franz Kafka's novel *The Castle* in the journal alongside Rintzler's modernist cycle of poems, "Paragrafen fun a haynt" ("Paragraphs from a Today"; 1954). Bergner's illustrations are unique in associating recognizable Jewish figures and motifs (the Jewish East European town) with Kafka's figures, towns, and castles (in which there is nothing recognizably Jewish). Likewise, Rintzler's iconoclastic poems break new paths by connecting traditional Jewish figures and texts—like the biblical Queen of Sheba, the *Tsene rene* (the Yiddish collection of biblical stories written for women in the seventeenth century but popular until the mid-twentieth century), Glückel of Hameln (the Jewish businesswoman and diarist, whose account of life in Yiddish provides an intimate picture of life in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries)—with philosophical questions and questions of linguistic and cultural identity in the here and now (as *haynt* [today] in the title of the cycle indicates).[15] This juxtaposition of literature and graphic art (and also criticism by members of Yung Yisroel) in the journal created new and unexpected links among the components, suggesting a modernistic whole larger than the sum of its parts. In

15. For an overview of Rintzler's poetry, see Pinsker 2009.

Figure 2   Marain Marinel, cover art for the first printed edition of *Likrat* (1953).

this way, Bergner's illustrations of Kafka's novel suddenly seem to comment on Rintzler's avant-garde poems and vice versa (figure 1).

With the same models in mind, Hrushovski and Zach brought to the journal *Likrat* a young refugee artist, Marain Marinel, who designed the surrealist cover art for the first printed edition (Dor 1979: 346) (figure 2).

The similarities between the two groups and their respective journals do not end here. They extend to the way the journals were edited and presented to the public and to the implicit and explicit poetics of the groups. This likeness can be seen in the manifestos, critical essays, and literary works that they published. It must be emphasized that both Likrat and Yung Yisroel were eclectic groups, without an official ideology or a uniform poetic credo. They instead attempted—each in its own way—to create something new, which would be different from existing models of the Hebrew and Yiddish

literatures of the time, in Israel and elsewhere. When Yung Yisroel was established in 1951, the modernist Yiddish poet Sutzkever (who was the "father figure" of the group and the link between them and European groups like Yung Vilne) suggested that there "shouldn't be any collective ideological or conceptual underpinning, but an artistic pluralism" (Yungman 1982: 62). The group accepted this position in adopting an anti-ideological stance and in its general avoidance of slogans. At the same time, members of the group published essays and manifestos based on speeches and conversations at the group meetings, which took place in 1951, 1954, and 1956. For example, in the first volume of *Yung Yisroel*, Yungman published an essay titled "Shtrikhen" ("Lines"), in which he considered the predicament of young Yiddish writers in their new land and what he called the *shotn* (shadows) that accompanied these writers in the post-Holocaust period. Yungman (1954: 35–36) suggested that, instead of ignoring these traumatic experiences, Yiddish writers should try to communicate them:

> Real art is bound to its spiritual and physical environment, and gives it expression. . . . We should focus on spiritual proximity [between immigrant Jews in Israel and Jews elsewhere] rather than on linguistic divisions [between Hebrew and Yiddish]. . . . In this spiritual proximity there is a new truth for Yiddish literature, especially in the last generation, when it grows in the shadow and sprouts between the falling walls, attempting to reach the light.

A different but complementary point of view—expressed in a very different style—appears in the essays ("antimanifestos")[16] of Rintzler and Birshtein. Rintzler's two-part essay, published in the second volume of the journal *Yung Yisroel* (1956), is titled "Randn" ("Margins"). It was clearly written in dialogue with the tradition of the great modernist Yiddish groups of the first half of the twentieth century. Its use of imagery and neologism and the combination of the poetic and the essayistic are all characteristic of the expressionist and *inzikhist* (in oneself, introspectivism) circles in Yiddish:

> What we need in order to preserve the breath of our language is no longer a matter that concerns the writer. The further development of our literature is not dependent on any cultural-political preconceptions or preconditions. No neo-national conceptions will affect its continuation. For us, language and literature must start to exist as two independent and separate territories. Yiddish literature doesn't need to be involved with the campaign for a better social position for its

16. Following the manifestos of modernist movements of the early twentieth century (the Futurist Manifesto and many expressionist manifestos), there arose a reaction, which produced what some scholars call "antimanifesto": the multiplicity of manifestos, their bombastic style, and their unified credo were criticized in the language and style of these manifestos (see Puchner 2006).

language, [a campaign] that goes together with a politics of language-renaissance [or revival]. This [campaign] will only slow down the development of literature itself and at the same time will cause it to spread its energies thin, with very problematic results. The metaphysics of miraculous language revival will add nothing and will not enrich in any way the functional value [*funktsionalen vert*] of our literature. (Rintzler 1956: 57)

This text applies the tradition of modernist manifestos of Yiddish avant-garde groups like Khalyestre (the expressionist Gang) and Inzikh (the Yiddish Introspectivism) to the new situation of Yiddish literature in Israel in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Using "territorial" imagery, Rintzler's (anti) manifesto calls for the autonomy of literature and insists that literature and language for communication exist as two different, if interdependent, domains. "If we need a living vocabulary" writes Rintzler, "we can find it in the written word [*vortshrift*], which can be the bastion of our literary language." Inversely, we must make "a sharp turn of a hundred and eighty degrees from our old embittered conceptions, and smash the archaic frames of the *loshn-mame-koydesh*" (a wordplay that combines two Yiddish expressions: *mame loshn*, "mother tongue," and *loshn-koydesh*, referring to Hebrew, or to Hebrew within Yiddish, as the "holy tongue"). This act, claims Rintzler (ibid.), will create "a free territory for a functional literature."

This (anti)manifesto, then, refuses to call for a common ideology and artistic credo and yet calls for a revolution in a way similar to the modernist manifestos. Its language and imagery served as a natural extension of Rintzler's avant-garde poetry. In a number of poems (for example, "Inskriptzia" ["Inscription"; 1954]), Rintzler sought to redefine in conceptual terms the relations between Yiddish as a *folkshprakh* (the language of the common people, of everyday communication) and Yiddish as a language of experimental modernist poetry. The poems and the essay were also a profound response to what Rintzler identified as a widening gap between Yiddish as a vernacular and the rise of what Shandler (2008) has recently called "postvernacular" literature and culture, namely, the fact that after World War II, Yiddish was becoming less a vehicle of communication and more a carrier of a symbolic meaning invested in it. In his avant-garde mode, Rintzler also endeavored to create a poetic strategy to deal with the problems of Yiddish language and literature (especially in Israel) after the Holocaust (problems with which Yungman and other members of the group were concerned).

Birshtein attempted to deal with similar issues in the essay "Askpekten" ("Aspects"). He writes:

> Our Yiddish poetry suffers from too many familiar moods that have lost, a long time ago, their personal quality and became a collective property. In just the same way, there are familiar overused rhymes, poetic and prosaic, which the inept writer and the one who becomes inept can emulate too easily. These familiar moods, emotions and poetic devices appear in almost all the poetry that was published in Yiddish. (Birshtein 1956: 54–55)

Both Rintzler and Birshtein wrote against the nationalist collectivist tendency in Israeli literature, which was created around the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the establishment of the State of Israel and which they followed closely. At the same time, they also wrote against the neoconservative tendencies of post-Holocaust Yiddish literature. They, like other members of Yung Yisroel, did not subscribe to any unified ideological or poetic credo but wanted to maintain a plurality of styles and ideas. Nevertheless, they were striving to fashion what I would term an "Israeli neo-modernist poetics" that was new, different, and in dialogue with the models of Yiddish modernist groups. It is evident that Yung Yisroel was searching for something that was very difficult to achieve in the context of the Israeli environment, whose reaction to Yiddish was a mixture of hostility and disregard. It was also a difficult task to reintroduce modernism to the landscape of post-Holocaust Yiddish literature (which was reduced substantially), which became much more conservative and was built, according to David Roskies (1995: 332), on two pillars: utopian faith and collective lamentation.

Interestingly, the anti-ideological and neo-modernist positions of Yung Yisroel are echoed in the Hebrew essays published in *Likrat*. Thus, deriding the "atmosphere of extreme and narrow-minded party-politics" in Israel in the early 1950s, the editors of *Likrat* renounced any unified poetic or ideological program:

> In this atmosphere we could not—neither did we want to—make an appearance with some new slogans. We came and said—Towards. Just Towards. Towards—no line, except for the one that underlines the name of the poem or the story we write. Towards—together, while highlighting the road itself, precisely because its end is unknown. Towards—without banners, without manifestoes, instead of "believe" we'll attempt to "understand." (*Likrat* 1952: 1)

Like the members of Yung Yisroel, Likrat's members were careful to distance themselves from the image of a unified literary collective: "Each one of us has his own creative ground, his own worldview, his own productive path, and his own devotion to this strange and wonderful thing called literature" (ibid.). This self-presentation was directed against the generational

manifesto of the so-called 1948 Generation,[17] which emphasized what its members had in common. But the writers of this essay in *Likrat* also note that their activity and their journal are the

> first attempt to bring together a group of writers whose fruits ripened after the War of Independence. . . . Our reality is no longer the exciting reality of the war years. Our reality is grey, faded, and austere. . . . [T]hat innocence, the youthful belief that we can "conquer the world" with our own might, has been replaced by skepticism, cynicism, and confusion. (Ibid.)

A number of scholars (Kronfeld 1996; Miron 1987; Tzamir 2006) have pointed out that this antipolitical and anti-ideological position of Likrat has, in fact, two targets: it goes against the poetics of the Moderna (the dominant group of Hebrew poets in the 1930s and 1940s, which included Avraham Shlonsky, Natan Alterman, and Leah Goldberg) as well as against the norms of the 1948 Generation. This "antimanifesto," along with the essay "`Ol`amo hapnimi shel meshorer ben tkufateno" ("The Inner World of a Contemporary Poet"; 1952) that Hrushovski published in the first volume of the journal, spelled out the poetic preferences and choices of the group. These preferences came to be identified, after the publication of Zach's (1955, 1960) first two books of poetry and his important critical essays, with the poetics of the Statehood Generation.

The combination of eclecticism, pluralism, and anticollectivism with an attempt to articulate a (neo)modernist poetics[18] is visible not only in essays and (anti)manifestos but also in the literary texts published in *Yung Yisroel* and in *Likrat*. In both journals, it is virtually impossible to find a single poetics that binds all the writers together. In the stories and poems of *Yung Yisroel* writers, we find the Israeli kibbutz with its sensual "sun over everything" (Fishman and Basman), as well as the sheep and its shepherds (Birshtein's story "Khonen the Pastor" [1952]); the *ma'abara* or "transit camp" (in stories by Eizenman and Birshtein); and the scorching hot desert of Sodom and the Negev (Binyomin, Avrom Karpinovitz, and Rintzler). We find Arabs and Bedouins (Birshtein's "Between the Olive Trees" [1954] and Eizenman's "The Woman from the Mountain" [1954]), and Jewish immigrants from Yemen (Eizenman's "A Courtyard in Jaffa" [1957]), Morocco (Yungman's

17. This expression refers to the writers who were born in what was then called Palestine and published their works in the 1940s and 1950s, focusing on the collective experience of state building and warfare.

18. I am using the term *neo-modernism* here because, after World War II, modernism in Europe, America, and elsewhere ran its course. In the context of Hebrew and Yiddish literature, modernism flourished in the first half of the twentieth century. Groups like Yung Yisroel and Likrat (or similar Yiddish literature groups in America) drew on the literature of earlier modernism.

cycle of poems "Moroccan Motifs" [1956]), and every corner of Eastern, central, and Western Europe and beyond. At the same time, figures and motifs from the distant and close Jewish European past appear within the Israeli landscape. Binyomin's poem "Shney in Yerusholaim" ("Snow in Jerusalem"; 1950) and Rintzler's poem "Terra Scanta" (1954) are prime examples of the ways in which Yiddish writers evoked the European physical and literary landscape within the radically different Israeli landscape. In "A mayse vegn nisim fun har-tov" ("A Story about Nissim from Har-Tov"; 1956) by Eizenman, a Sephardic man riding a donkey visits the narrator in his Warsaw courtyard. In this story, the use of the fantastic and of Yiddish folk motifs enables the narrator to create an effective fusion of the world of Jewish Warsaw with the fluid, even chaotic reality of the Israeli "transit camp" world in the late 1940s and the 1950s.

The poems and stories that appeared in *Likrat* by writers such as Zach, Dor, Hrushovski, Sivan, Amichai, and Yitzhak Livni were just as heterogeneous as the ones in *Yung Yisroel*. However, in all of them there is an attempt to describe an Israeli reality in a way that presents an alternative to the "socialist realism" that characterized much of the Hebrew literature produced by the writers of the 1948 Generation and the powerful influence exerted by the poetry of Alterman. Some stories by Livni and Sivan turned to surrealism, or to the fantastic, and focused on antiheroic characters from the margins of Israeli society (Levin 1984: 51–55). Some common poetic elements can be discerned in the poetry published in *Likrat*: toning down pathos and metaphoric language; creating a restrained, philosophical, and often ironic speaker; dealing with mundane everyday reality; moving toward "free verse" and various patterns of rhythm and prosody that were not common in Hebrew poetry in previous decades (Kronfeld 1996; Weissbrod 2002).

What emerged as the poetics of Likrat and the Statehood Generation in general became clearly articulated only later, in Zach's series of essays "Thoughts on the Poetry of Alterman," "Time and Rhythm in Bergson and Modern Poetry," and "The Literary Climate of the 1950s and 1960s," published between 1959 and 1966. The poetic revolution of the Statehood Generation has mostly been attributed to Zach's Anglo-American modernist models (T. S. Elliot and Ezra Pound) and his objection to the postsymbolist style of Alterman.[19] However, Rintzler and Birshtein's assault on a poetry that uses orderly rhyme, rhythmical scheme, and overloaded metaphor, together with their rejection of the link between familiar forms and familiar

19. For an overview of the critical reception of Zach, the Statehood Generation in general, and the presumed link to Anglo-American poetry, see Shaked 1988; Weissbrod 2002: 273–93.

national-ideological content, finds a clear parallel in the explicit and implicit poetics of Zach and other members of Likrat and the Statehood Generation.

How can we explain the similarities between the groups as well as what seems to be the impact of Yiddish modernism of the early twentieth century on the creation of Israeli neo-modernism in both Yiddish and Hebrew? The links are especially surprising in light of the near silence in Israel in the 1950s regarding the activities of Yung Yisroel and the hostility and apathy at the time toward Yiddish literature in general. When pondering the relations between the Hebrew and Yiddish groups, we must keep in mind that there was a convergence of motivations and of poetic temperaments between them, as well as the fact that both attempted to express their Israeli experience in ways that were different from existing models in their respective literatures. There were also certain figures within the groups who mediated between them. For example, there was the personal connection between Rintzler and Zach, who knew and respected each other. Moreover, Hrushovski (in his multiple personas of H. Binyomin/H. Binyamin) clearly served as a mediator and as a kind of secret agent of Yiddish in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s.

Members of Likrat like Dor have acknowledged the central role Hrushovski played. "His erudition," writes Dor (1979: 342), "amazed us and embarrassed us. He knew Russian, German, and needless to say, Yiddish. He knew the manifestos of the modernist schools by heart . . . and was considered the *urim ve-tumin* [the ultimate authority] on literary history."

Harshav's (2000: 5) own account is more anecdotal and conceals as much as it reveals:

> After the War of Independence, everybody was tired of "Zionism"—that ideological preaching of Zionist and Socialist ideas, in which, however, we still believed. Many came to study literature at the Hebrew University. . . . My uncle sent me from New York small cans of a new invention, Swiss "instant coffee," and a tiny Hebrew typewriter: Baby Hermes. A number of young poets congregated in my attic—Moshe Dor, Aryeh Sivan, then Natan Zeitelbach (Zach), and later on still others. . . . The first issue of *Likrat* appeared. I chose the material, edited and typed it on my Baby Hermes on waxed stencils. . . . We then sent copies to all the editorial boards of the Israeli newspapers, everybody attacked us (where is the "social realism?") and *Likrat* became a fact in the history of modern Hebrew poetry.

Ziva Ben-Porat (2001: 250) has pointed out that Harshav's emphasis on his practical contributions (coffee, typewriter, room) cannot obscure his function as editor of *Likrat* and member of Likrat. He was, as she writes, "the midwife at the birth of the leading poetry of the 1950s and 1960s, providing the younger poets with a vast repertoire of poetic models and much needed

editorial guidance." Other accounts describe Harshav's role as an "educa-tor," who taught the young poets of Likrat modernist poetry. But what did this literary education consist of? A partial answer can be found in the first volume of *Likrat* (1952), which featured a number of H. Binyamin's own Hebrew poems, including his translation of a Yiddish poem, "Ponim el ponim mit, almekhtiken" ("Face to Face with the Almighty," which was titled in Hebrew "With the God of the Desert in Sodom"), first published in the Yiddish journal *Di Goldene Keyt* as part of the journal featuring works by members of the Yung Yisroel group (1951). In the same volume of *Likrat*, Hrushovski published his aforementioned article on Dor, which spell-ed out for the first time some of the (Hebrew) group's anti-ideological poetic principles.

Of all the young members of Likrat, Hrushovski was the only one who had already published a book of poetry, in Yiddish, titled *Shtoybn* (*Dusts*; 1948). He was writing and publishing Yiddish poems in the early 1950s and was—at least initially, in the first years of the group—an important participant in Yung Yisroel. Poems which H. Binyomin had originally published in Yiddish were then published in Hebrew translation, under the name H. Binyamin, in both *Likrat* and *Achshav*. He was also instrumental in introducing Israeli read-ers and poets to Yiddish modernist poetry of the first half of the twentieth century. In the early sixties, he published his Hebrew translations of Yiddish poetry in three volumes: the works of Aron Glantz-Leyeles (1960), Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1961), and Sutzkever (1964). Some of these translations were made during the 1950s in collaboration with poets of Likrat like Sivan and Dor. He also participated in the editing and translation of an important volume of Yiddish writers from the Soviet Union, *A shpigl oyf a shteyn* (*A Mirror on a Stone*; 1964), and later published his translations of Yankev Glatshteyn. Hrushovski's first scholarly studies were devoted to the prosody of free verse in modernist Yiddish poetry: "On Free Rhythms in Modern Yiddish Poetry" (1954) and "On Free Rhythms in Modern Poetry" (1964).

The interactions between Yiddish modernism and Yiddish and Hebrew (neo)modernism in Israel and the mediatory role of some Yiddish writers of Yung Yisroel have been left unacknowledged for many years. As far as I know, the only critic who saw these connections and pointed them out—as early as 1960—was Dov Sadan, a professor of Yiddish and Hebrew literature at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In his essays and in his introductions to Hebrew translations of Yiddish poetry, he suggested that Hrushovski and other young Yiddish and Hebrew poets in Israel were, in fact, influenced by Yiddish modernists such as A. G. Leyeles and Glatshteyn (e.g., Sadan 1960: 20). Many years later, these links also began to resurface in Harshav's own writing. In a short essay on Amichai and Likrat published in 2007, Harshav

tells how his fellow members in Likrat (Dor, Sivan) helped him translate Yiddish poets like Halpern, Glatshteyn, and Leyeles into Hebrew. Moreover, in one of his introductions to an anthology of translated Yiddish poetry of the early twentieth century from New York, Harshav (2002: 75) writes that

> whoever reads these poems cannot shake off the sense of fundamental affinity to the poetry of the *Likrat* generation in Israel of the 1950s, especially to poets such as Nathan Zach, Aryeh Sivan, and Yehuda Amichai. They had to refight the same battles which the *Inzikhists* in New York had to fight in the 1910s in the field of poetics and the public reception of their poetry.

Harshav's reconstruction only hints at the extent to which Yiddish modernism of the interwar period in Europe and America, as well as the post–World War II (neo)modernism of Yung Yisroel, were important sources of influence. Their role in the creation of the Hebrew poetics of Likrat and the Statehood Generation in general was, until recently, largely hidden.

Flying over the Roofs of Tel Aviv: Yiddish and the Fiction of Yossl Birshtein and Ya'akov Shabtai

Ya'akov Shabtai, who died at the age of forty-seven in 1981, was a giant of Israeli literature and a cultural icon who came to represent both the mythological sabra (the children of the immigrants to Palestine, who were born and raised in the country and became the dominant force in Israeli politics and culture) and its demise in the 1970s and early 1980s. Shabtai began his literary career as a writer and translator of plays and lyrics, but he is best known as a writer of fiction, especially the two monumental novels *Zichron Dvarim* (*Past Continuous*; 1977) and the posthumously published *Sof Davar* (*Past Perfect*; 1984). Before these two celebrated novels, Shabtai wrote, between 1967 and 1972, short stories about his childhood and youth in Tel Aviv, collected and published under the title *Ha-dod Peretz Mamri* (*Uncle Peretz Takes Off*; 1972). Robert Alter (1987) was among the critics who saw, in hindsight, that these stories of Shabtai were breaking new paths not only thematically but also stylistically: "Their language" wrote Alter, "is supple, evocative, unstrained, free of formulaic mannerisms, and in touch with the immediacy of spoken Hebrew, while richly exploiting the resources of the modern literary language."[20] What Alter and most critics overlooked is the fact that Shabtai's fiction is intimately connected not only to the "immediacy of spoken Hebrew" but also to Yiddish language and literature. Traces of Yiddish, I

20. See also the reviews of Gavriel Zoran (1976); Gershon Shaked (1985); and Irving Howe (1985). For a comprehensive analysis, see Soker-Schwager 2007: 91–97.

contend, can be seen in the linguistic and thematic structures of the stories of "Uncle Peretz Takes Off" and, in fact, in Shabtai's entire literary oeuvre.

Shabtai being a native of Tel Aviv who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s, with a typical Labor Zionist upbringing, Yiddish was clearly *not* a language that he used for everyday communication. Nevertheless, Yiddish was spoken by his beloved grandmother, his mother, and many members of the Pomerantz and Sonneband families (like many others, his family changed its last name to a Hebrew one—Shabtai—after its immigration). Moreover, a careful examination of Shabtai's early work reveals that he was predisposed to Yiddish literature from the very beginning of his literary career. From the early 1960s onward, Shabtai translated into Hebrew many poems by Y. L. Peretz, Zalman Shneour, and Morris Rosenfeld as well as what is designated as "folk" Yiddish lyrics. He was especially drawn to the Yiddish poetry of Itzik Manger, whose popularity in Israel reached new heights in this period. Shabtai was one of the major Israeli disseminators of Manger, when he translated, with great success, many of his poems. Some of these poems were put to music by the Israeli musician Alexander (Sasha) Argov (Shabtai 1992: 47–91). Edna Shabtai, Ya'akov Shabtai's widow and herself a writer, collected and published these poems and lyrics. She claims that her late husband "fully identified" with Manger, whom he saw as "the restless troubadour of Jewish poetry" (ibid.: 189).

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Shabtai also translated a number of adapted plays by Sholem Aleichem, among them *Der oytser* (*The Treasure*) and *Stempenyu*, as well as Manger's *Hotsmakh Shpil* (*Hotzmach's Play*) and Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Yentl der yeshive bokher" ("Yentl the Yeshiva Boy"), which was published for the first time in the Israeli Yiddish journal *Di Goldene Keyt* (Singer 1963).[21] Shabtai's translations were used in successful productions of these Yiddish plays in the Habima and Kameri Theaters in Israel, which commissioned them. The translations are notable for their balance of precision and fluidity and for investing the Yiddish plays with the "freshness of Tel Aviv" (in the words of Yossi Izra'eli, the artistic director of the Habima Theater in the 1970s, quoted in Na'aman 1975).[22]

The impact of the translations of poetry and plays and of Shabtai's intense interest in Yiddish literature on his Hebrew work was not explored until recently, perhaps because of Shabtai's iconic status as a Hebrew Israeli writer. Shaked (1985: 127) once hinted at some interesting links between Sholem

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21. These translations were never published. They are housed in the Israeli Theater Archives at Tel Aviv University. A number of drafts of the translated plays can also be found in the Hebrew literature archive of the Katz Institute at Tel Aviv University. I would like to thank both archives and Edna Shabtai for their help and permission to use these materials.

22. For a short analysis of the translations of the Yiddish plays and poetry, see Pinsker 2011.

Aleichem's monologues of the shtetl and Shabtai's fiction of Tel Aviv.[23] What Shaked and others did not explore is the fact that Shabtai learned much not only from Sholem Aleichem but also from other Yiddish writers, such as Manger and Singer, and from contemporary Israeli Yiddish writers — like Birshtein, who was engaged in a rewriting of Sholem Aleichem's narratives within a new Israeli Yiddish fiction. Shabtai met Birshtein and became close to him in the decade 1956–66, when Shabtai lived in Kibbutz Merhavia and Birshtein lived in Kibbutz Gvat (and later in Tivon and in the development town of Upper Nazareth).

Birshtein, we should remember, was among the original members of Yung Yisroel. With the gradual dispersal of the group in the late 1950s, and after the publication of his Yiddish kibbutz novel — *Oyf shmole troruaren* (*On Narrow Paths*; 1958) — Birshtein was searching for new paths. In stories like "Dervartung" ("Anticipation"; 1955), "Der briv" ("The Letter"; 1959), "A mayse mit a mantl fun a prints" ("A Tale of a Coat of a Prince"; 1967), and "Dubin un zayn bruder" ("Dubin and His Brother"; 1966–67), Birshtein wrote in a mode that made good use of a narrator who sounds like a maggid, a traditional Jewish storyteller. During these years, Birshtein also began to write what later became his second novel, *Der Zamler* (*The Collector*; 1979), a tragic-comic vision of a local bank as the great dream machine, greased by characters similar to Menakhem-Mendel, the protagonist of the classic novel by Sholem Aleichem.

In the mid-1960s, with the help of his friend the artist Bergner, Birshtein aligned himself with Nissim Aloni, a young man from south Tel Aviv, whose family came from the Balkans and who would become one of Israel's most important playwrights. Aloni, although he did not know Yiddish, was the first translator of Birshtein's Yiddish fiction into Hebrew. Birshtein recounts how he used to read his stories to Aloni in the original Yiddish and translate them (orally) into his newly acquired Hebrew, and Aloni rewrote them in a literary Hebrew.[24] The result was a fusion of Birshtein's Yiddish style of storytelling with a style reminiscent of Aloni's (1975) Hebrew stories about his childhood in south Tel Aviv, written in the 1950s and 1960s. Through this unusual collaboration, Birshtein found a new and appreciative Hebrew audience and was able to revisit the world of Yiddish at the heart of Israeli culture.[25]

23. Ruth Wisse finds echoes of Mendele Moykher Sforim (S. Y. Abramovich) in Shabtai. She writes about *Zikhron Dvarim*, "The novel, situated in [Shabtai's] native city, also betrays an exhaustion that is uncannily reminiscent of Abramovitch's work" (Wisse 2003: 338).
24. On the collaboration and translation, see Birshtein 1998.
25. For more on the fruitful relations between Birshtein and Aloni, see Pinsker forthcoming.

Aloni, Birshtein, and Bergner drew close to Shabtai around the time when the latter began to write and publish his first stories.[26] Some of Birshtein's stories were issued in a new Hebrew translation in the 1970 collection *Nesia'to ha-rishona shel Rolider* (*Rolider's First Journey*, dedicated to Aloni and his wife), published by Shabtai's father-in-law, David Ha-negbi, the editor of *Sifriat ha-poalim* at the time. Like the works of Sholem Aleichem, Singer, and Manger, the Yiddish (and Hebrew) stories of Birshtein supplied Shabtai with very useful models. While Shaked (1998: 375) has paid attention to the connections between Aloni and Shabtai, the relations between Birshtein's Yiddish stories and Shabtai remain mainly unexplored.[27]

Both Birshtein and Shabtai were concerned in their fiction with the continuities and ruptures in the experience of Israeli reality of East European Jewish immigrants. Both of them created in their stories and novellas a narrator who is a sensitive child or adolescent, from whose point of view we see the trials and tribulations of an extended family that traverses time and place. In Birshtein's stories, such as "The Letter," "A Tale of a Coat of a Prince," "Dubin and His Brother," and "Rolider's First Journey," this extended family comes to represent the Jewish story of immigration and disintegration in the twentieth century and the precarious Israeli present as suspended between irrecoverable loss and utopian redemption. Almost all of Shabtai's early stories are concerned with an extended family of parents, grandparents, and uncles—protagonists like Peretz, Shmuel, and Albert Weiss (Fink). Gavriel Zoran's (1976: 469–70) description of how the extended family functions in Shabtai's stories applies just as well to Birshtein's Yiddish stories of the 1960s:

> [Shabtai's] stories are populated with uncles and aunts, parents, grandfathers and grandmothers, and other relatives and neighbors. At the root of most stories, members of this extended family function in a certain pattern: the grandmother always represents a solid and moderate religious faith. The parents stand for the secularism of the labor movement. The uncles are always the "anti-norm"—they are peculiar, eccentric, and incomprehensible. The child is a sensitive and intro-spective "I."

Birshtein's Yiddish family stories clearly draw on the traditions of classical and modernist Yiddish literature (Novershtern 1992). Their application to

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26. Interview with Edna Shabati; see also Bergner 1996.
27. Menakhem Perry—the editor who published both Birshtein's and Shabtai's Hebrew stories in the journal *Siman Kri'a* in the 1970s—hints that the revolutionary style of Shabtai came out of the "overcoat" of Birshtein's stories. He quotes Shabtai as calling Birshtein's stories "the stream of consciousness of the memory," a designation that fits Shabtai's stories and novels very well (Birshtein 1989: back cover). Roskies (1995: 344) also suggested that Birshtein "did catch the eye of a still obscure Israeli author named Ya'acov Shabtai."

Israeli life creates a disorienting fictional world, in which the kibbutz and Israeli towns and cities are made parallel to Polish shtetls or to Australia (a "new" Jewish Diaspora). For example, in "A Tale of a Coat of a Prince," dedicated to Bergner, Birshtein resourcefully uses the coat of the grandfather to embody the dreams of East European Jewry and to chart its fate across several continents. Using short, action-filled sentences allows the grandson narrating after the grandfather's death a freedom to roam across time and space, as the coat did. "Copied" by the grandfather from an English princely coat, it was sent back and forth across the globe and among the members of the extended family. This coat metonymically stands for the thread of personal and collective Jewish memory that holds together this and many of Birshtein's stories (Roskies 1995: 333).

There are many similarities between the family stories of Shabtai and Birshtein. Though almost all of Shabtai's fiction is set in Tel Aviv, the urban setting is radically transformed in the context of the extended family of immigrants and refugees. This focus enables the literary representation of "what has been exiled from the Zionist discourse: the diaspora Jewish immigrants who were kept hidden behind the sabra's broad back" (Soker-Schwager 2006: 251). In these stories, Tel Aviv—known as "the first Hebrew City"—is portrayed as a place full of Jewish refugees from Europe who are desirous of a new life, but drenched with melancholy, dread, and disappointments; a place of dreamers and schemers, of irrevocable loss and endless hope for utopian redemption, a "native" city with its expanses of sand dunes and endless summers but also a heterogeneous city of immigrants and refugees. In Shabtai's polyphonic novel *Past Continuous*, subjectivity is fractured, and extended family relationships become more tragic and complex, as the protagonists are "lost sons who have not managed to forge lives of their own, and are ensnared in tortuous family ties made up of three generations of grandparents, parents, and children" (ibid.: 243).

Another dominant poetic practice that Birshtein and Shabtai share is their tendency to open their narratives with the death of the protagonist and work their way back and forth into the protagonist's life and the ways in which his death is remembered and experienced by family members. In "Der briv" ("The Letter"), Birshtein's (1969: 35) narrator starts with the sentence: "The letter that was sent to the Uncle came back without being opened, and on the envelope there was an additional word added in blue ink: 'Died.'" "A Tale of a Coat of a Prince" opens with the death of the grandfather: "The small grandmother wedged her fingers between her lips and couldn't say a word anymore. She was struck by strong pain, but she continued to sit and made a signal for me to call the grandfather. But grandfather died a long time ago.... During his lifetime, he used to walk away often. Once he went to

close the shutters and he traveled to London" (ibid.: 9). "Dubin and His Brother" begins with the funeral of the protagonist—the unnamed brother—and continues by moving back and forth through events in his life and through the complex intersections between Dubin, his mysterious brother, the narrator, and a host of other characters who shift in time and place among the Israeli kibbutz, Australia, and Poland. The novella "Rolider's First Journey" begins with the sentence: "When Rolider came back home permanently, he became sick, climbed on his bed, cried a little bit, and died" (Birshtein 1970: 9). Finally, Birshtein's (1979: 25) second novel, *Der Zamler* (*The Collector*) starts with the unforgettable sentence: "Shmuel Solomir died laughing in our bank."

Like Birshtein, Shabtai's stories and novels often begin with the death of a protagonist, so that the narrative then works its way backwards, not in a linear way but in a complex web of memory and storytelling. "Adoshem," the first story of the collection *Uncle Peretz Takes Off*, thus starts with the death of the grandfather, while the last story "Histalkut" ("Departure") ends with the death of the grandmother. The novel *Past Continuous* focuses on the nine months between the death of Goldman's father and his son's suicide: "Goldman's father died on the first of April, whereas Goldman himself committed suicide on the first of January" (Shabtai 1977: 7). The story "Adinut achat be-acheret" ("True Tenderness") starts with the sentence: "Elisheva Guppius was not at home when her husband died. It was the eve of the first of May, and she was out of town at a May Day" (Shabtai 1972: 27). The opening of *Sof Davar* (*Past Perfect*) is no less focused on death: "At the age of forty-two, shortly after Sukkoth, Meir was gripped by the fear of death—a fear that took hold of him as soon as he had acknowledged the fact that death was a real and integral part of his life, which had already passed its peak, and that he was moving swiftly and surely toward it on a route that allowed for no digressions" (Shabtai 1984: 6).

These similar openings in Shabtai and Birshtein are parallel to the way Yiddish is present within the stories of both authors. Beginning with death creates a narrative that seems to be moving between the living past and a present that is suspended between a prevailing sense of imminent death and a utopian desire (Lelchuk 1985). The setting of most of Shabtai's fiction is Tel Aviv during the time between the 1940s and the 1970s, while the fiction of Birshtein moves frantically among the Polish town, Australia, the Israeli kibbutz or town, and—in his stories of the 1980s and 1990s—the city of Jerusalem. However, both Shabtai and Birshtein produce on us a discontinuous and disorienting sense of time and place: it signals a transition from a Zionist vision to a heterotopic space and time that views modern Israel and

much of Jewish history in the twentieth century as fundamentally fragmented and conflictual.

Death in Birshtein and Shabtai is also connected with an undercurrent of the transcendental. Uncle Peretz's taking off like a bird from a roof in Tel Aviv is partly a terrible suicide and partly an assertion of his freedom and his utopian belief in redemption and the possibility of restoration. Both Birshtein and Shabtai create a kind of secular narrative that is rife with a tension between heterotopia and utopia, between nostalgia for a lost past and an insistence on maintaining the dream and the possibility of utopian redemption. Both of them create this utopian horizon by resisting the Israeli-Zionist activist ethos, by focusing on dreamers and schemers who fail and yet continue to hold on to a dream. In order to sustain this tension, their fiction hovers between hyperrealistic and fantastic modes of narration. Thus, Birshtein's Grandfather, who roams the globe with a copied princely coat (whose "master-plan" he obtains by speaking Yiddish on the bus with an English prince!), is in many ways analogous to Uncle Fink in Shabtai's story "Namer Havarvurot" ("Spotted Tiger"), who travels across continents with his dream of creating a circus in Tel Aviv.

The insistence on the fundamental possibility of redemption is a major characteristic of Birshtein's and Shabtai's poetics. In Shabtai, this insistence is revealed in the allegorical play with the word *geula* (meaning "redemption" but also the first name of a female protagonist) in "Uncle Peretz Takes Off," then in Shmuel's passion to build the "ultimate house" and Fink's plan for the Tel Aviv circus. It continues with the sense of redemption on which Uncle Lazar harps in *Past Continuous* and ends with fantastic apocalypse in the final chapter of *Past Perfect* (Soker-Schwager 2006: 272).

The emphasis on the possibility of revealing redemption within the mundane in Birshtein's Yiddish (and Hebrew) stories is clearly related to the particular ways in which apocalyptic and messianic elements appear in modern, secular Yiddish literature (Novershtern 2003). In Shabtai's Hebrew fiction, however, the dialogue with modern Yiddish literature is often concealed. At some significant moments in the text, Yiddish lurks behind Shabtai's Hebrew narrative: the narrator then either quotes it (by inserting Yiddish words or phrases in the original or in Hebrew translation) or signals the use of Yiddish to the reader. At these moments, we often find a thematization of Yiddish as a language of the diasporic Jewish past that somehow continues to live in the Israeli present.[28]

28. For an insightful analysis of deterritorialization of language in Shabtai's fiction, see Soker-Shwarger 2007: 58, 224–29.

Most of the stories in the collection *Uncle Peretz Takes Off* contain these moments. Yiddish is associated here with the grandparents and with the mysterious and peculiar uncles, who continue to think, read, and speak in Yiddish. For the child-narrator in several of the stories, the Yiddish of the grandparents stands for a Diaspora Judaism and a traditional religion that is simultaneously a relic of the past and a continuing utopian horizon. In the opening story, "Adoshem," when the Yiddish-speaking grandfather insists that the resistant narrator-grandson will prepare for his bar mitzvah ceremony, he does it in Yiddish: "He would lie in wait in the hall and suddenly grab my neck with his gnarled fingers. He would pull me to his chair, trapping me in the vise of his legs, covering my head with his hand, yelling in Yiddish: 'Pray, goy [Gentile], pray'" (Shabtai 1972: 9). The reluctant child recites the traditional morning prayer, in a mixture of Yiddish, *loshn-koydesh*, and Hebrew: "Moideanilefoneykho melekhaivokoyam shehekhozarthobinshmosi bekhmlorabo leminoseykho seilo" (ibid.).

In the short story "Histalkut" ("Departure"), the grandmother's Yiddish speech is linked to "something strange and foreign" that seems to the narrator as if it "belonged to another century." The sense of distant time is linked to the remote East European towns, "whose peculiar names fell so naturally from Grandmother's lips, together with the names of vanished relatives and kinsmen, of rabbis, Emperors and *gvirim* [men of influence in the community]" (ibid.: 170). But through the grandmother's Yiddish stories and songs and through the domestic objects, this remoteness can nevertheless retain a sense of familiar intimacy. Like the grandfather's coat in Birshtein's story, here "the pillow, quilt and mattress," which had been "brought from Poland in carts and trains and ship," serve the grandmother "here" the same way they served her "there" (ibid.: 165).

Most of the overt Yiddish words and expressions in the story belong to written Yiddish. In addition to *Davar*, the newspaper of Labor Zionism, the grandmother reads the American Yiddish newspaper *Der Amerikaner*. Side by side with the Hebrew *sidur* (prayer book), she reads the traditional Yiddish book of women, the *Tsene rene*: "In the early evening she would say her prayer from the brown *sidur*, whose pages were the same color as her face. Afterward she would sit in the heavy armchair and read *Tsene rene*" (ibid.: 166). The mixture of *Davar* and the *Amerikaner*, the *sidur* and the *Tsene rene* in the story creates a defamiliarization of languages, places, and cultures, which have not usually been associated with one another in Israel.

It is not only the grandmother's Yiddish *reading* that is rendered beautifully in the story but also her *writing*. The grandmother's handwritten Yiddish note, embedded into the narrator's Hebrew at the end of the story, is displayed in a way that shows the simultaneous similarity and difference

between Hebrew and Yiddish and between the cultures associated with these languages. The narrator flips through his grandmother's old Hebrew prayer book and notices that she has written in it in Yiddish:

16טאָג אין תמוז—יאָהר צייט פין טאַטע ז''ל

10טאָג אין אלול—יאָהר צייט פין די מאמע ז''ל

יום ד' בחנוכה—יאהר צייט פין אהרון ז''ל

Yortsayt fin tate z"l—16 tog in Tammuz
Yortsayt fin mame z"l—10 tog in Elul
Yortsayt fin Aron z"l—4th day of Khanuke.

I strained my memory to remember *yom mota* [the date of her death], but all I could remember was that it was a cold, cloudy day.

(Ibid.: 172)

The narrator reads the Yiddish (a Polish dialect of it) and easily understands that his grandmother has recorded the anniversaries of the deaths of her parents and her son in the traditional way of East European Jews. These dates enhance, rather than detract from, the appeal of the written record as a site of memory that connects the grandmother not only to her own father, mother, and other close relatives but also to the Jewish past. The narrating grandson contrasts this traditional record keeping with his own recollection. It the context of the story, it is clear that he cannot remember the date of her death, nor can he find any appropriate verbal way to mark his grandmother's death (in Yiddish or in Hebrew), and compensates for it with his impression of the "cold, cloudy day," which is strongly etched in his memory. The simultaneous difference and similarity between the grandmother's language and the narrator's is emphasized by his use of the phrase *yom mota* (the date of her death) as a Hebrew parallel to the grandmother's Yiddish term *Yortsayt* (anniversary of a person's death). Of course, the grandson's impressionistic memory, contrasting with the traditional way of record keeping, relates to much more than the weather on that particular day. It signals the melancholy produced by the disappearance of the beloved Grandmother: she represents for the narrator the generation of East European immigrants, who were able to maintain a sense of continuity and integrity and a moderate, open-minded religiosity in the face of their painful uprooting.

Throughout the story, the narrator emphasizes the disparity between the grandmother's traditional language and conduct and that of the rest of the

family. During her lifetime the grandmother keeps separate the dishes for milk and meat and what are designated in Yiddish as פארווע (*parveh*) dishes ("neutral," that is, neither milk nor meat) (ibid.: 166). After she dies, the narrator reports, the family continues for some time to separate the dishes but eventually abandons the practice. All these traditional Jewish concepts and terms belong to the Yiddish discourse of the grandmother. But the discourse somehow continues to interpolate the memory and consciousness of the family, just as the "special Passover dishes" come to resemble, in the eyes of the narrator, "the goods of a pirate ship" (ibid.: 170–71), which infiltrate the Zionist social system. The association between Yiddish and East European Jewish culture is crystallized in this story. The portrayal of the past is an admiring one and is troubled by a sense that, when the grandmother dies, a great deal dies along with her.

But Yiddish is not limited to the generation of the grandparents. It appears in the discourse of the gallery of uncles and aunts in the book, who are also the living relic of the family's past, the "vanished grandmothers and grandfathers and uncles whose names we bore" (ibid.: 172). Uncles Peretz, Shmuel, and Fink enter the world of Tel Aviv's socialist Zionism as hailing from a different time and place. They are also prototypes of what Shabtai (1977: 212), in the novel *Zikhron Dvarim*, called the "redemption instinct." In the title story "Uncle Peretz Takes Off," the narrator doubts whether Peretz is really an uncle, because "he was a Communist," who believes in a world redemption: "Apart from my grandmother, everyone predicted that he would come to a bad end" (Shabtai 1972: 129). The narrator identifies the affinity between the two relatives, and the interaction between the Grandmother and Uncle Peretz is cast in a tragicomic tone. When Peretz tries to explain communist ideology to her, she says to him in Yiddish: "Leave off. Leave all that to the goyim. . . . Better you should enjoy yourself in your life. Go to the cinema" (ibid.: 178). The similarity between the traditional messianic belief of Yiddish-speaking Jews in East Europe and that of the Yiddish secular communism of the Bund—based on Vladimir Lenin and Karl Marx—is stressed throughout the story. Thus, the narrator underscores the tragicomic irony of the communist Uncle who refuses to believe in "Grandmother's God" and at the same time sings with enthusiasm in Yiddish the Hasidic melodies of traditional prayers like "Let the Temple Be Built" (ibid.: 135). It is clear that the narrator's sympathy is with the grandmother and not with Uncle Peretz, who, at the end of the story, takes off to the sky like a bird as an assertion of his freedom from the "rotten world" that he could not redeem: "For fourteen years Uncle Peretz devoted himself to redeeming the world, but the world remained corrupt as ever" (ibid.: 136).

In the story "Namer havarburot prati u matil eima" ("A Private and Very Awesome Leopard"), Yiddish plays an important role in the process of carnivalizing the Zionist project. The protagonist, Uncle Albert Weiss, known by his nickname "Fink," appears out of nowhere in the young State of Israel "four years after the War" (it is not explicit, but this is World War II, and Fink is probably a Holocaust survivor), with his extravagant plan to create the first circus in Tel Aviv: "Circus Universalis Ltd." (ibid.: 107–8). Soon after Uncle Fink arrives in Tel Aviv, he sits at the head of the table, under the portrait of Berl Katzenelson, with his cuffs "fastened with gold pins" and surrounded by "affectionate and tearful looks." While eating fish, he declares to his entire extended family in Yiddish that he is going to dine with *minister ha-finansim* (the finance minister) himself (ibid.: 108). In Shabtai's text, this Yiddish declaration is rendered in a mixture of Yiddish and Hebrew that creates a comic estrangement of the government minister and mocks him as a character worthy of *Yidishe melukhe* (Jewish kingdom). It is no wonder that the reaction of characters like Uncle Noah, committed to the activist Zionist ethos, to Fink's fantastic idea of establishing a circus in the first Hebrew City is "this is Junglerism." (The Hebrew expression זׁונגלריות, a Hebraization of the Yiddish זשאָנגליאַר—a "trickster"—captures perfectly the carnivalization of Zionism that Fink creates.) Fink insists that his circus is a natural continuation of Jewish history ("Bar-Kokhva on a lion," "Jews as clowns and circus artists") (ibid.: 149). This is at once a deflation of the utopian Zionist dream and a kind of affirmation of the lost "redemption instinct," which dreamers and schemers like Fink refuse to give up.

One of the most conspicuous examples of the way Yiddish functions within Shabtai's fiction comes at the end of "Ha-masa le-mauritzius" ("The Voyage to Mauritius"), the only story by Shabtai that begins in the East European shtetl (a fictional representation of Rypin, the town from which both the Sonneband and the Pomerantz families came) and ends in Tel Aviv. The story is loosely based on historical events in 1940, when the SS *Atlantic* attempted to bring Jewish refugees to the port of Haifa. They were deported by the British to the far-off island of Mauritius, where they lived for five years. Shabtai's voyage narrative seems to follow the paradigmatic Zionist plot of the journey from the "Diaspora" to Eretz Israel. In fact, not unlike the fiction of Birshtein, the story employs historical events in order to create a kind of an existentialist parable, which is also a commentary on the upheavals of Jewish history in the twentieth century (Burshtein 2003).

Shabtai's narrative follows the main protagonist, Chaim Baruch: first on his journey from the Polish town of R. to the city of Gdansk/Danzig, where he learns a craft and lives as a member of the Yiddishist Bund movement, then his ordeal as a refugee escaping the Nazis. Chaim Baruch is overtaken by

events that he is not able to control: "He had not intended setting up home in Danzig, and intended returning to the town of R. as soon as everything settled down again" (Shabtai 1972: 88). But in this era when the Jewish world is disintegrating, nothing stays the same, and Chaim Baruch's intentions are constantly disrupted. When he, with his wife and small children, finally gets used to the new urban environment of the big city, the Nazis conquer the city and "the War hits him" (ibid.: 85). Now he is a refugee on the ship bound for Palestine, but instead of turning his gaze forward, Chaim Baruch is haunted by "fleeting images of Danzig and the town of R." (ibid.: 86). When someone on the ship asks him about Eretz Israel, his response is one of "hostility and dread." The narrator reports that "the heat and the Hebrew frightened him, and he didn't know how he was going to make a living either. Once he said bluntly that rather than landing in Eretz-Israel, he would prefer to go on sailing like this to the end of time" (ibid.: 93). In some sense, this is exactly what happens to Chaim Baruch. He is destined to continue the Jewish journey forever. When he arrives in Palestine—of which he is so afraid—he is deported together with the entire "floating community" to the island of Mauritius, where he lives as if it were out of time and out of space for five years, in which he loses his wife and son to typhus. The historical story ended optimistically, with the second arrival of the refugees in Palestine, where those who survived the ordeal found a safe haven. But Shabtai's story does not end with any sense of arrival but with a continuation of the endless journey. When Chaim Baruch set foot in Palestine, he

> walked slowly down the ramp, with his daughter at his side. He was wearing a blue suit and his broad, lined face was tanned as the face of someone coming back from an ocean cruise. With his heavy gray moustache he might have been taken for a retired Greek sea captain. He turned to one of the officials and asked him in Yiddish to tell him how to get to his relatives in Tel Aviv. (Ibid.: 105)

Instead of a linear closure, the ending of the story creates a strong sense of disorientation. Who is this Chaim Baruch who arrives in Palestine? Surely he is not a pioneer or Zionist immigrant. From the point of view of those who look at him from "the land," he looks suspiciously like a "retired Greek sea captain," who arrives after a leisurely cruise in the ocean. Then, his Yiddish communication with the Zionist officials marks him, once again, as an East European Jew and as a refugee. The Yiddish request that comes at the very end of the story, to direct him to his relatives in Tel Aviv, underscores not only the identity of the "Hebrew City" as a heterogeneous and multilingual city of refugees but also the continuing, cyclical nature of a journey that does not end with the arrival in the Land of Israel. In a sense, Shabtai's fiction reflects the continuing journey of Yiddish in Hebrew literature.

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