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As an editor, I'm engaged constantly, in one way or another, in translation; so are all the writers — rabbis, academics, novelists, critics — in this issue. By translation, we mean a few different things: the act of rendering a work from one language to another — and the act of negotiating the relationship, rarely straightforward, between author and translator. It also means, as Joel Hecker writes, “transforming something from one state of being to another.”

This issue of *Sh'ma* includes a wide-ranging conversation between two writers — *Sh'ma* publisher Josh Rolnick and novelist Tova Mirvis — as they explore the magical transmutation of life into a page of fiction. Naomi Seidman looks at the domestic implications of an untranslatable Yiddish word. Mikhail Krutikov evaluates the literary career of a Russian Jew writing in Israel. Yehuda Kurtzer, Sara Hurwitz, and Barbara Mann take the temperature in a room of scholars and rabbis: How does the work of rabbis — who strive to translate religion and culture into sustainable and meaningful forces in our lives — resonate with the work of academics, who have an intrinsic interest in Judaism, but who have no interest, per se, in “meaning”? And, Or Rose sits us down at the table of his teacher, Arthur Green, as he and several colleagues translate for a contemporary audience the work of the Hasidic Maggid, Dov Baer.

As a people, Jews have experienced life in a multitude of languages and cultures. In this issue, and in the pages of *Sh'ma* every month, we translate the traditions and teachings of Judaism into a meaningful discourse for ourselves and the peoples around us —S.B.

The Fear of Getting it Wrong, the Sound of Getting it Right

TODD HASAK-LOWY

The moment I sat down as a translator, opened the book for which I was now responsible — Asaf Schurr's Hebrew novel *Motti* — and read the first sentence, I suddenly realized, with more than a bit of anxiety, that I had no idea what I was doing.

Now I was, as far as first-time translators go, at least theoretically qualified. I had to my name a doctorate in Hebrew literature and two published books of fiction. The languages, narrowly speaking, weren't the problem. But as I read and reread that first sentence, I became aware of how infinite was my task — not because this novel is particularly long (it isn't) or unusually complicated (it's not), but because each sentence presented dozens of opportunities for me to make the absolutely wrong decision.

I feared I would make the wrong decision because I believed that making the right decision was a clear impossibility. I was drawn to this text because I sensed Schurr had done something new in Hebrew — not necessary revolutionary, but something wonderfully distinct,

something I knew was distinct precisely because I couldn't define it as anything but different. I couldn't simply name or classify this distinctness and then move on. So my job as a translator was, I felt, to somehow render this distinctness in English, even though I didn't know what it was.

This distinctness was, obviously, linguistic in some sense, since his book was just that, a collection of words. The word “tone” might come closest to it, but it wasn't quite that either; it was something singular, located in the relationship among the words, the real-world things they appeared to point to, and the hesitant manner in which Schurr used them (the novel is full of strangely poignant hypotheticals and painfully sincere, self-conscious asides). Even after giving it much thought, I still only understood the novel's distinctness by the way it made me feel. Try translating such a feeling.

Nevertheless, thanks to the authority I assigned to the deadline in my international contract, I eventually started, forcing myself to string

Todd Hasak-Lowy is an associate professor of Hebrew language and literature at the University of Florida. His most recent works are *Captives*, a novel, and a short story collection, *The Task of This Translator*.

Joel Hecker is associate professor of Jewish mysticism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, Pa. He is the author of *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah*. Currently a visiting scholar at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Hecker is working on a translation and commentary of the Zohar's mystical homilies on the biblical books Song of Songs, Ruth, and Lamentations for *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Volume 11*.

together a series of English words that seemed a reasonable version of the Hebrew original.

Then, I got lucky. I always listen to music when I write or work. In the best of circumstances, the music I'm listening to should still be new to me, a piece I'm discovering as I discover whatever it is I'm discovering as I write (for instance, I wrote at least half of a novel while living inside Keith Jarrett's "The Köln Concert" for the better part of a year).

I had, almost on a whim, recently purchased a single-instrument recording of Philip Glass' "The Orphée Suite for Piano," performed by Paul Barnes. Like all of Glass' music, it's quite repetitive. Only in contrast to the often breakneck tempo and overpowering dynamics in much of Glass' compositions, this recording is restrained, gentle, yet emotionally powerful. And plainly beautiful. As I worked through Asaf's novel, I found myself returning to this recording again and again until I accepted the fact that there was no point in pretending I wanted to listen to anything else. By the time I reached the last third of the translation, which I finished in an insane hurry over the course of a couple of weeks, it seemed this music was playing inside the protagonist's apartment.

So how exactly did listening to this solo piano recording inform and even facilitate the actual process of translation? The answer begins with the fact that I'm certain this recording made me feel almost precisely what I felt when

I read Schurr's book. In other words, I had stumbled upon a sort of synesthetic correspondence between a work of literature and a piece of music. I still couldn't — and can't — fully name what I felt in either case, but now I felt it more clearly and more fully — I could feel it with the touch of a button. Better yet, the music, unlike the Hebrew novel, could be in two texts at once. I could read my English inside the same sonic space and know — by paying attention to the existence of various cross-medium harmonies and dissonances — whether or not I had captured the language and meter and tone in my translation.

The phrase "lost in translation" suggests, at least to me, a process that occurs not merely over time but across distance as well. During this act of translation, I often found myself feeling like a smuggler of sorts, transporting a massive, intricate, and fragile object in small, intricate, and fragile pieces through a subterranean tunnel. My time spent underground, in between Schurr's Hebrew and my reconstruction in English on the other side, was both unavoidable and taxing. I was certain I would damage the goods en route or simply forget how to put it all together once I got to the other side. But the music prevented either from happening, to the point that I knew I was doing justice to Schurr's novel well before I finished. Indeed, I was a bit sad when I finished. But I had some consolation: I could still listen to the music. 

Text, God, and Life in Translation

JOEL HECKER

In a legendary story from the talmudic tractate of Megillah (9a-b), 72 rabbis were sequestered by the command of King Ptolemy in order to produce a Greek translation of the Torah and, miraculously, they all produced the exact same translation. Even more remarkable, they had all received *ruach ha-kodesh*, divine inspiration, so that they all mistranslated certain passages for several specific reasons — to prevent theological misunderstandings, to eliminate apparent contradictions in the text, to preclude disrespect for the Torah, to ensure the dignity of Jewish leaders, and to avoid the ire of the Greek king.

For example, where the Torah says *Bereshit bara Elokim*, one might imagine that an unspoken subject had created *Elokim*, i.e., that God Himself was created (the Zohar actually

affirms that reading, but that's for another time). To avoid misunderstanding, they translated the line as if it read, "*Elokim bara bereshit*," i.e., "God created in the beginning." In another instance, accurately translated, the Torah says, "On the seventh day, God finished the work that He had been doing," but in order to clarify the puzzling impression this would give — i.e., that God was working on the seventh day until He stopped — the rabbis wrote that God finished his work on the sixth day.

Tractate *Soferim* (1:7) notes that the translation of the Torah into Greek is comparable to the worship of the golden calf. Why such a harsh assessment of the translator's craft? Is it because of the mistranslation wherein, over the course of history, what was first condemned was later celebrated? Or is it that this story

refers to something that is ultimately mundane, making a text readable to those ignorant of the source language? Is there a way to explain these two different attitudes toward translation? The Ptolemy story betrays a deep discomfort with translation absent divine intervention. We know that 72 translators would have produced 72 versions, none true to the original.

Three discreet ideas are included in the dictionary definition of translation: Most common is translating from one language to another — that is, broadening the readership. A second idea is to move a person or object from one place to another (the word has Latin origins signifying “bringing something across.” The final idea is to transform something from one state of being to another. I spoke recently about these three definitions — and more — at my son Razi’s bar mitzvah, where we celebrated his “translation” from the domain of childhood to that of incipient adulthood.

Translation, in part, is about boundaries — looking at something that ostensibly belongs to others, valuing it, and internalizing it. When we share some concept from our own expertise, oftentimes we must search for the words to explain it, moving the idea from an area of our own technical knowledge into a layperson’s language. In translating legal, medical, or academic language for people who are not trained in those areas, we simplify, risking distortion; we are accommodating others, not patronizing them, but rather respecting their difference. In all of these instances, we ask: How much do we accommodate? At what point is the person who is receiving the translation no longer in contact with the authenticity of the original? And what if we’re translating sacred texts? Are these just words to be relayed from language to language, or is there something

inexpressible that is lost?

The Kabbalists and the Hasidim were interested in translating from one form of being to another. If God spoke the world into being — and, after all, every day we say *ברוך שׂאמר והיה עולם*, blessed is the One who spoke and the world came to be — and if speech is not discontinuous with the speaker, rather emanating from the speaker’s own being, then, in some sense, the world is not merely a creation *by* God, but also a phenomenon emerging *from* God. As a result of these assumptions, the mystical tradition stresses the importance of drawing blessing down from the upper realms, translating it from the ethereal to the material, the spiritual to the concrete. Translation in these instances is crucial for the sustenance of the world and much of the Hasidic tradition, concerned about the profundity of the process, relegated it to the expertise of the rebbe, disbelieving that commoners could effect such transmutations.

In some of the non-exclusivist treatments of the subject, we learn that mizvot have a direct impact on divinity; eating is a rite that draws divine vitality within us, which we then restore back to God through prayer and Torah study. Thus, we translate the holiness that’s in the tefillin, in the Torah, in the matzah, into something accessible to our *neshamah*, our soul, every time we perform a commandment with holy intention. We are also translating ourselves into beings holier than we usually are, if not angelic or divine, perhaps one step closer.

I concluded the bar mitzvah speech by commenting that my children have made me translators: the act of parenting is perhaps the signal act of translation. It includes the attempt to communicate across a generation’s values, hopes, and dreams, reiterating and retranslating at every stage. 



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Translation without Representation

YEHUDA KURTZER

I learned from the great scholar of mysticism Joseph Dan an important insight about translation and its impact on Judaism and Christianity. The Hebrew Bible imagines itself as “the original,” the verbatim word of God delivered to Moses. As a result, much of Jewish mysticism involves a direct and unmediated encounter with the actual words of the text (whether or not the mystic focuses on the meaning of the words in question). In contrast,

the Christian scriptures — with the exception of a handful of words — represent the words of Christ mediated through the perspective of the Gospel writers and, thus, more importantly, through a translation into vernacular Greek. Christian mysticism, therefore, tends to involve activities and a focus extrinsic to the actual words of the Bible.

The act of translation involves mediation, a standing-in-between. Its impact lies not only in

Yehuda Kurtzer is president of Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, which bridges the academy and Jewish life with serious Jewish learning opportunities for change agents in the Jewish community. He has a doctorate in Jewish studies from Harvard University and he previously held the Bronfman Chair in Jewish Communal Innovation at Brandeis University.

what happens to the text, but, just as powerfully, in how those who receive the translation, those on the other side of the mediator, interact and relate to the text in its new form.

In the contemporary Jewish world, our treasury of scholars and intellectuals roughly divides into two professional classes: rabbis, inheritors of one strand of the Jewish intellectual tradition and of political responsibility, who possess a considerable set of professional responsibilities vis-à-vis the community; and

While some scholars are themselves rabbis by profession, and vice versa, the two professions make different — and substantial — demands on the mediation of knowledge.

scholars/academics. Scholars, whether employed in the academy or outside in related fields (journalism, think tank, etc.), have a more ambiguous relationship to “the community,” especially in contrast to their rabbinic colleagues. I suspect this existence of a lettered, literary, and yet functionally disconnected intellectual elite is a new problem for Jews, relatively speaking. The safe harbor of the academy, which one academic colleague described to me as her “sacred secular space,” has enabled Jewish intellectualism to thrive outside of whatever communal responsibility and impact might come with that knowledge. Then again, perhaps that distance has been critical to its success in the past quarter-century.

And yet these learned classes of Jews, divided between these two professional orbits, inevitably serve as mediators and translators of much of the same material. Be they housed separately, governed by different goals and rules, they are ultimately joint inheritors with joint ancestors; and perhaps we must acknowledge that they are intrinsically related. What rules should govern an unruly family reunion?

Let me offer two basic programmatic thoughts. First, let us acknowledge an often overlooked reality: Neither rabbis nor academics have the upper hand as *better* translators, nor is either group of scholars an exclusive possessor of unmediated truth. In fact, both professional scholars and rabbinic scholars constantly dance between the work of translation and the attempt to remain in the province of the original. Professional scholars attempt to encounter their material in an unmediated way; their work, however, involves constant translating of their understanding to students and readers. Rabbis mediate religious experience and the esoteric for their congregants, but in

the interest of creating authentic (read: unmediated) religious experience. In fact, these two professions thus involve opposite processes. Is translation a tool for understanding, enlightening, uncovering? Or is translation meant to push back against the mystique of the untranslated, to create access for all to the mystical and poetic? Either way, both rabbis and scholars live on the threshold of translation, and have much to gain from a mutual consciousness about what they share.

This point is obscured and complicated by the fact that we train rabbis in academic institutions, creating an imbalance wherein future professionals apprentice with masters whose craft they will explicitly not pursue. It is not difficult for scholars to see rabbis as inevitable translators of material they alone received only in translation, rather than inheritors of firsthand access to a shared body of material. I would venture that this is where imbalance and awkwardness are created in the rabbinic-academic exchange. Scholars become skeptical of “applied” practitioners; rabbis invariably see in the “applied” work this otherwise arcane material actually come to life and achieve its relevance. Of course, the two are deeply intertwined. If we found ways within the academy for “applied Jewish studies” not to be considered inferior to the allegedly “purer” form of the work, and if we prioritized in the rabbinate the importance of Jewish ideas and letters independent, sometimes, of what “works” in building Jewish identity, we might find ways in which these disciplines are not only interdependent but codependent.

Secondly, let’s acknowledge a major irony when we talk of translation. A huge gap exists between the translation we know through its over-metaphorization (kissing through glass, anyone?) and the actual work of translation, which is mundane, arcane, painstaking work. The metaphor is seductive while the work is actually laborious. A meaningful encounter between translators should not get lost in the myths we generate and perpetuate about the loftiness of the exercise; it must stay grounded in the recognition that on all sides of the page, this is difficult and serious work. While some scholars are themselves rabbis by profession, and vice versa, the two professions make different — and substantial — demands on the mediation of knowledge. Perhaps it is in the gravity of the task, the weightiness of responsibility that comes with bearing the weight of the tradition, that the clearest common ground can be found.



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The Geniza and Me

BARBARA MANN

My very first week teaching at the Jewish Theological Seminary (in 2004), a student approached me and asked if the class handout containing a poem by the modern Hebrew poet Haim Nachman Bialik should be placed in the *geniza*, where holy texts are stored or buried rather than discarded. True, the poem did contain allusions, even indirect quotations, of psalms, but it did not — to me at least — seem “*geniza*-worthy,” and I told the student so. The perplexed look on her face indicated that she was not quite sure how to resolve her professor’s seemingly blithe ability to dump a potentially sacred text into the garbage can and, I confess, I don’t know where that particular piece of paper eventually ended up.

The exchange remains for me emblematic of issues that arise when teaching Jewish studies in a non-Orthodox religious seminary. As a professor trained largely in the American academy, I obviously had some sort of authority and status as a mediator and translator (in Yehuda Kurtzer’s terms) of the canonical texts of modern Hebrew culture. At the same time, many of my students — whether enrolled in the rabbinical school or in an academic degree program (and often in both) — clearly possessed a relationship to the text that I did not; and so, inevitably, they often greeted the texts on their own terms. This turns out to be pretty much the way most people read — anything, anywhere. In fact, one of my goals as a teacher, perhaps sharpened by my experience at JTS, has become “simply” to alert students to their own prejudices as readers — and think through the meaning of this frame and also, inevitably, the possibility of other ways of reading.

Kurtzer suggests that rabbis and scholars may read texts differently, or with different ends in mind. And though this sounds intuitively true, it is also the case that rabbinical students are eager to plumb the messy particularities of modern Jewish texts, to revel in what Yosef Haim Brenner memorably called (in his appreciation of the great 19th-century Yiddish writer, S. Y. Abramovitch, aka Mendeleyev) their tendency toward “*ha’aracha atsmit*” (self-critique). At the same time, many of my students enrolled in “secular” degree programs approach the text with a profound sense of awe and wonder, realizing that no translation, no mediation, no

interpretation can ever fully explain how it is that the best words in the best order never fail to move us.

I’m not sure, then, that rabbis and scholars necessarily read differently. But it is possible that we mean different things when we use the word “text.” One large difference, of course, concerns the status of *sifre kodesh*, or sacred books, and the ways in which we subject them to the tools of literary theory. But that, to my mind, is an old story, one whose specific trajectory may unfold

Good readers are aware of the mediated ways in which they encounter texts; the text is always, inevitably “translated” for the reader as much by the frame of the text itself as by the teacher who happens to be in the classroom. Or the *beit midrash*. Or the synagogue pulpit.

somewhat differently within a Jewish studies program located in a university setting and one set in the seminary world. At the same time, however, the idea of disinterested scholarship also seems a bygone fiction. That is, if we largely agree that everyone brings some sort of agenda to their reading practice — call it religious, political, or ideological — then scholars who deconstruct Bialik and rabbis who teach Psalms are not so very far apart. Or rather, Bialik and Psalms are found, in a sense, in the same Jewish bookcase, and discerning readers will note the gaps and continuities between the two.

Indeed, Brenner’s idea of “self criticism” is an essential form of Jewish culture, and it may include becoming a more self-reflective reader, interacting with the text in a way that potentially changes both the self (that is, one’s behavior) and the text. Good readers are always aware of the mediated ways in which they encounter texts; there is no such thing as a “naïve” reading, and the text is always, inevitably “translated” for the reader as much by the frame of the text itself as by the teacher who happens to be in the classroom. Or the *beit midrash*. Or the synagogue pulpit. Reading, in its essence, means paying attention to the frame, to the text’s particular qualities, which include its canonical rendering as *kodesh* or *chol*. An activity at the heart of both scholarship and rabbinic practice, reading is never a transparent process. It is always — in some sense — a translation.



Barbara Mann holds the Simon F. Fabian Chair in Hebrew Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where she also serves as an associate professor of Hebrew literature. She is the author of *A Place in History: Modernism, Tel Aviv and the Creation of Jewish Urban Space* and the co-editor in chief of *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*.



Prayer: Serving a Purpose

SARA HURWITZ

In 1783, Moses Mendelssohn translated the Torah into German and, in doing so, he unlocked a text previously inaccessible to all except those formally trained in the language and lore of the Jewish tradition. While many criticized Mendelssohn for allowing his readers to sidestep the laborious and didactic method of mastering the Hebrew language, he granted thousands of Jews entrée into the world of Torah, allowing them to imbibe the beautiful words and messages of Scripture. Significantly, Mendelssohn also paved the way for rabbis to begin sermonizing in the language of the land rather than the customary Yiddish or Hebrew.

Could my words adequately address the void this family now faced? My role as spiritual leader is to offer a sketch of a person's life through a lens of Torah. If this is done well, the Torah has infinite possibilities of providing comfort.

In Hebrew, a sermon is referred to as a *drasha*, which derives from the same root as *doresh*, to seek out. But who is the seeker? Abraham Joshua Heschel once bemoaned the fact that the sermon had become an end unto itself. He wrote about the massive gulf between sermons and prayer, and argued that sermons are meaningful only if they serve and inspire prayer: "Preaching is either an organic part of the act of prayer, or *hullin ba-azarah*, profanity in the domain of the sacred... The test of a true sermon is that it can be converted to prayer." (*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, edited by Susannah Heschel, p.117)

If a sermon is meant to complement or enhance prayer, which is a form of communion with God, then the sermon (scholarly or poetic) is meant to serve an edifying purpose: to elevate listeners from their discouraging spiritual inertia and inspire them to action, be it in their inner lives or in the world at large. Accordingly, the Torah that Mendelssohn translated is meant to be further translated and explicated by others — and others and yet others — so that its students can incorporate its unparalleled meaning into their lives. The text, then, which itself is a work of deep religious inspiration, is translated in order to inspire and edify.

At a recent funeral, I momentarily wondered

whether my rabbinic eulogy, given after family members had already expressed their grief, was necessary. Could my words adequately address the void this family now faced? And then I remembered that my role as spiritual leader is to offer a sketch of a person's life through a lens of Torah. If done well, the Torah has infinite possibilities of providing comfort.

Yehuda Kurtzer correctly asserts that rabbis "invariably see in the 'applied' work this otherwise arcane material actually come to life and achieve its relevance." And I have also witnessed — in my own congregation and elsewhere — scholars deploying their analytical abilities and plumbing the depths of their respective fields with a passion that is at once admirable and contagious, and that inspires others to leap forward in their search for religious truth and edification. I think it is here, in this passion, in a virtuous yearning to traverse the abyss that separates humanity from the divine, where common ground can be found. Rabbis and scholars who translate to inspire can transform our lives and communities. 

Discussion Guide

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. What is the relationship of translation to transmutation? To interpretation?
2. What role does listening play in the art of translation?
3. Translation allows for more people to access sacred texts and engage in Jewish learning. Does something get lost in the process? If so, what?
4. How is knowledge mediated by rabbis and scholars?
5. How does translation impact the global nature of Jewish life?

Rabba Sara Hurwitz is part of the rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York. She also serves as dean of Yeshivat Maharat, the first Orthodox school to confirm women as spiritual and halakhic leaders.

An Illusion of Seamlessness

Josh Rolnick: As a writer of fiction, do you think of your work, in the broadest sense, as translating — and why or why not?

Tova Mirvis: There is often the sense that fiction is translating life onto the page. When people read fiction, they often assume that the page is exactly as life is, but the writer always takes the language of life and shapes it into a novel or a story; it has a different shape than life itself has.

Josh Rolnick: Obviously, though, you must work to make the writing appear authentic.

Tova Mirvis: “Authentic” is a complicated question. Though fiction is made up, I use life as my raw material, beginning with a spark or snippet that comes from real life — and mix that with imaginative thinking. The magic of fiction is that it’s all made up and yet it feels real. As a writer, I can translate it for the page, the story. Life is not narrative; we create narrative out of our lives through recollection. Life is broader and messier and episodic.

Josh Rolnick: When I finished reading *The Outside World*, I felt very emotional. In the final scene, the family is finally together, yet they’re also individuals with different and competing trajectories; they have different doubts, different yearnings. I thought of my own life, my own yearnings, and how complicated it all is. How do you use a writer’s toolbox to translate the complexities of life into a work of fiction?

Tova Mirvis: That life is complicated is what moves me as a writer. I’m very interested in the outer presentation of the so-called orderly life, certainly in religious communities. It looks like everything lines up neatly, but the inner world is teeming with so many more complicated things. While structure enables me to think about character and dialogue and how I’m building my book, imposing it runs the risk of a rigid translation. We lose some of the loose ends, which are so much of what life is about. The characters travel an arc, even if it’s a broad arc, sometimes crisscrossing the book. Real people are traveling many arcs at once or we’re not changing, not moving. Imposing structure or shape runs the risk of simplifying because life is messier.

Josh Rolnick: In her book *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott writes: “When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths and even make us laugh

about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with or at least clapping along with the absurdity of life instead of being squashed by it over and over again.” I wonder if fiction can truly ever capture the absurdity of life, to use her phrase, or is there always some real separation — almost like a mechitzah — between lived experience and the words on the page?

That is the kind of mirror that I want to hold up; it is not an external mirror, but some kind of fantastical creation — an internal mirror where we see the mess of things that exists inside us.

Tova Mirvis: I often return to *Bird by Bird* to inspire my writing. Fiction at its best can capture some flickering moment of life. And then, when we read it on the page, reflected back at us, there is a moment when we find ourselves in a different place than where we are — we step out of ourselves to see ourselves in another character.

Josh Rolnick: Capturing a moment is ephemeral, but translating is very concrete — one language into another. Is there an ephemeral quality to this kind of translation?

Tova Mirvis: As a movie version of a book is always condensed, so is the novel version of life condensed. A novel rarely captures a character’s full inner-life experience. There would be a “too-much-ness”; so I think about how to grab a thought or image as a means of telling a fuller story.

Josh Rolnick: In *The Outside World*, Baruch and Tzippy are newlyweds and Baruch comes home after a long day of work at the grocery in Memphis and he’s talking about the meat and the chopped liver and they get under the covers and she pulls the covers over her head and makes a tent and says “hi” — creating an incredibly sweet moment of reconnection. And then you go back to their wedding night and the next four or five pages after that, we’re in another moment. You translate that authentic, wonderful newness of being a newlywed with just a line of dialogue, enabling a whole piece of the back story to unfold. Can you talk about how you know when to reveal and how you know when personal history becomes important to the front story?

Tova Mirvis is the author of two novels, *The Ladies Auxiliary* and *The Outside World*. Her essays have appeared in various anthologies and newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Poets and Writers*, and her fiction has been broadcast on National Public Radio. She is a visiting scholar at the Brandeis Women’s Studies Research Center. She lives in Newton, Mass., with her husband and three children.

Josh Rolnick, a fiction writer, is the publisher of *Sh’m’a*. He has served as managing editor of *Moment* magazine and as editorial director of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Three of his stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and his most recent story, “Pulp and Paper,” appeared in the *Harvard Review*. Rolnick holds a master’s degree in fine arts from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. He lives in Akron, Ohio, with his wife and three children.

For a fuller version of this conversation, see www.shmadigital.com.

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What Jewish conversation would you like to have? Send suggestions for future Sh'ma topics to SBerrin@shma.com.

Tova Mirvis: It's finding the moment to reveal — knowing how far to go back, how to make a detour and then reconnect and re-enter the present-day moment. I always try to make it appear seamless, but while I am writing a scene, it feels like a puzzle; I'll have little pieces and sometimes my impulse is to put them in early on and then I sometimes feel like I should wait. Unlike life, a narrative requires that I move flashback moments around.

Josh Rolnick: In *The Outside World*, Naomi is sitting in shul and has something like a religious epiphany; she senses God close by. When Baruch is studying in yeshiva, he sees "the shadow of God peeking out from behind the words" — he, too, has a religious epiphany and "realizes that it was all true, it was true that God existed." If I ever try to write about anything spiritually stirring in my own life — even in a journal — it loses its ineffable transcendent quality. Is writing about God and religious fervor different from writing about love, fear, lust, or any other emotion?

Tova Mirvis: The difficulty about writing about God has to do with contemporary times and expectations — to write in ways where it's not moralistic or sappy. We're conditioned to satirize moments of epiphany rather than help our readers enter into the experience. We're conditioned to doubt a character's belief in God in a way that we don't doubt a character who loves another person.

Josh Rolnick: Your book offered an incredible lens into an Orthodox world that I know very little about intimately. Do you see yourself as a translator for different segments of the Jewish community — for a more secular person to learn about Orthodoxy or for someone in the Orthodox community to experience secular Judaism?

Tova Mirvis: That does happen, but I have mixed feelings about it. It's a world filled with detail and language and ritual, so as a writer — or translator — I'm responsible for those details. I also have to think about how to translate phrases or words that would be awkward to use in English and still sound authentic. And of course the novel is not intended as an educational primer on Orthodox Judaism. I'm interested in the people, the experiences, what a character feels like. Some in the Orthodox world become anxious that readers will think that all Orthodox Jews respond as these particular characters do.

Josh Rolnick: The process of writing about

lives is always so messy. It is almost the opposite of seamless — though that's the end result. How does an accurate translation of life ever evolve from that chaos?

Tova Mirvis: John Gardner said that fiction should be a continuous dream. But for the writer, it is the most interrupted, fractured dream of all. It is the illusion of seamlessness that we're after, but the writing process is never seamless. A writer knows where things have been moved around. I know that my current first chapter didn't used to be my first chapter — the multiple drafts live on for the writer.

Josh Rolnick: The author Richard Ford said that the ultimate purpose of fiction makes readers *feel* something. It is not just edifying, entertaining, or educational; it is emotional for the reader as well. The very best novels and stories change readers by opening windows into our selves. It doesn't have to be a grand epiphany. It could be something small like, wow, I really miss my sister. But we feel. Do you believe one of the jobs of fiction is to hold up a mirror so that we learn something about who we are?

Tova Mirvis: I am probably obsessed with this idea of outer presentations and inner truths that are hidden away — that we're not allowed to see what goes on inside the jungle of feelings inside people's lives. That is the kind of mirror that I want to hold up; it is not an external mirror, but some kind of fantastical creation — an internal mirror where we get to see the mess of things that exists inside us.

Josh Rolnick: Can you talk about reading experiences that have been translational for you?

Tova Mirvis: I went to a small Orthodox high school in Memphis, and there read a book called *Catholic Girls*, an anthology about going to a Catholic high school. It was so outside my world and yet revealed a great deal of similarity. It was an experience of translation — making text accessible to someone who speaks a different language. Those fictional works translated that Catholic world into my own language, into my own experience. My desire to write might have grown out of a recognition that writers create those experiences.

Josh Rolnick: Do you ever learn something about yourself when reading your own work?

Tova Mirvis: Sometimes I feel like I'm cannibalizing myself — using experiences or memories or uncomfortable pieces of myself. I tell myself that I am just giving it to a character; it is not really me. This yields the most fertile fiction.



Sholem Aleichem in Chinese?

IRENE EBER



A world without translated philosophical and literary works is unimaginable. Unable to learn the many languages in which the masterpieces of world literature have been and are written, we are dependent on translations. Without them, we would know little about the cultures beyond our circumspect lives.

My own interest in translating and translation was awakened many decades ago by an offhand remark of my then professor, Chen Shouyi, who asked if I knew that Yiddish fiction was translated into Chinese. I answered, incredulously: Why would Chinese writers translate Sholem Aleichem, Y.L. Peretz, or Solomon Libin? And how would a Chinese reader relate to their stories in the target language?

Reading these stories in the original Yiddish and then rereading them in Chinese, I realized, of course, that they had been translated from secondary languages — Esperanto or English. Most of those translations dated from the 1920s, the years when modern Chinese literature emerged, a literature in the spoken rather than classical language. Yiddish literature thus provided models for the new literature about the common people — workers, peddlers, shopkeepers — and fidelity to the original was hardly a concern. Moreover, Jews were one of the “weak and small peoples” (*roxiao minzu*), who would resonate with Chinese readers, a people who did not belong to the strong and exploiting powers.

Although Chinese translators rarely encountered Jews, the Jew did not remain entirely unknown. And while Chinese writers were translating Yiddish fiction, Yiddish writers were translating Chinese poetry and literary works. Like their counterparts in China, the Yiddish translators worked from intermediate languages. And they used translation — like the Chinese translators — as a window into another world; the Yiddishists were looking for a way to know the “other,” a bridge leading beyond their own lives.

Martin Buber was an important translator who brought Chinese thought and literature to German readers as early as 1910 and 1911. Moreover, he was the first to introduce Hebrew readers to Confucian writings by means of

translation after settling in Jerusalem in 1938.

Translating is complicated. While translators used to exercise great fidelity to the source work, attention has now shifted to the target text: how to evaluate a text in a new cultural environment. This, in turn, raises the question of a work’s afterlife or, in fact, the afterlives of an original text. Thus, we’re finding that classics are often in need of retranslation. Cultures and linguistic expressions change, and what was clear and acceptable at

How is a text so far removed in time and place transposed into another culture of another time? How is the human drama that infuses so many of the biblical stories conveyed? Translating can be understood as an interpretative art form, the product being both identical with and different from the original.

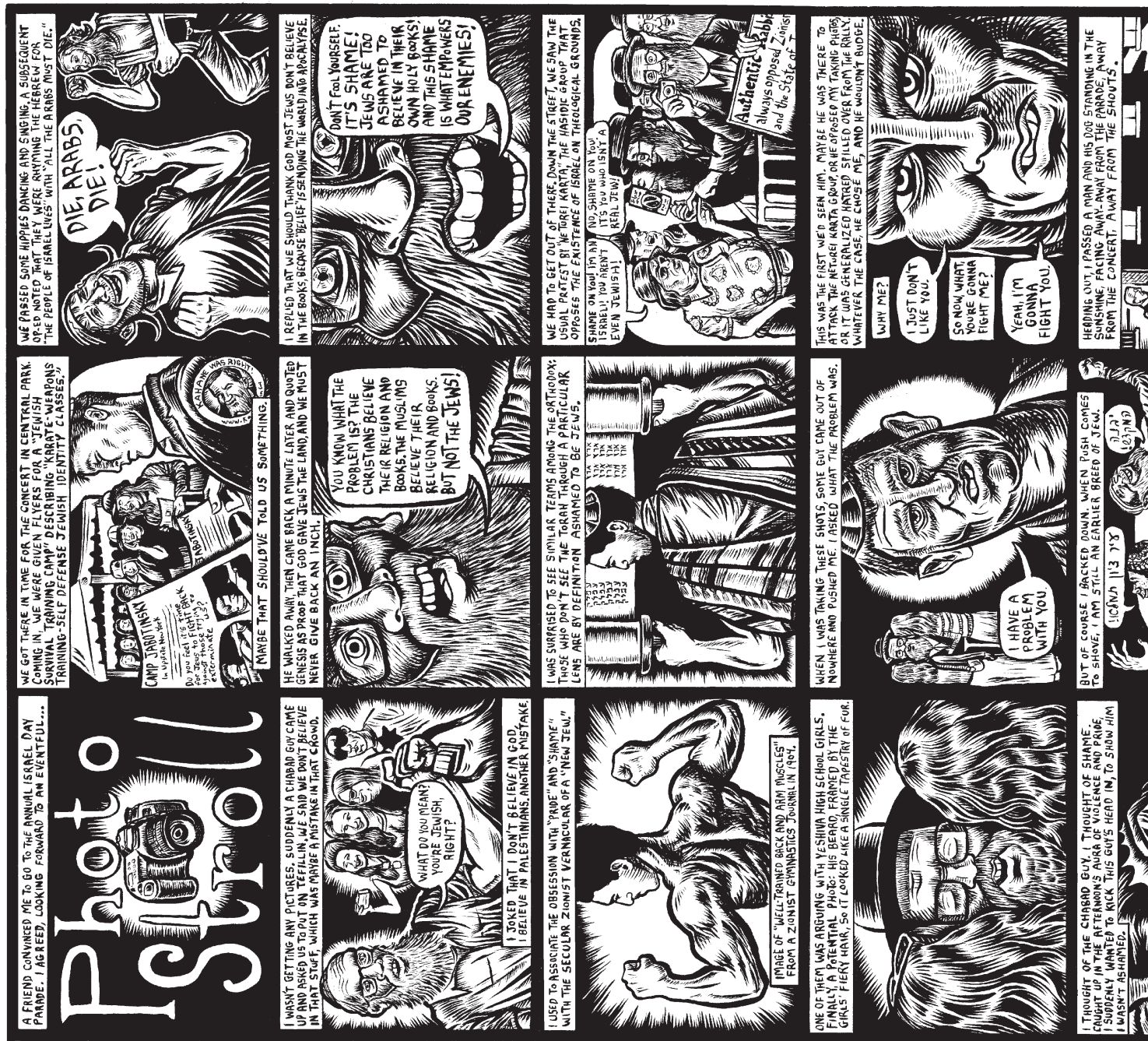
one time is surely not so at a later period. A work lives on precisely because it is translated and retranslated many times, as inevitable changes occur. For example, the first translation of the Tanakh into Chinese was published in 1874 and prepared by Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky (1831-1906), a Jew from Lithuania. Schereschewsky’s superb translation raises many questions: How is a text so far removed in time and place transposed into another culture of another time? How is the human drama that infuses so many of the biblical stories conveyed? How are the many poetic portions rendered? Translating can be understood, then, as an interpretative art form, the product being both identical with and different from the original. In the end, should a text be faithful to the original text? Should it be literally translated?

These are the questions that have inspired my work for the past 30-odd years as a translator; my task has been to serve both literary and intellectual history, to give new life to foreign works. Through translation, I hope to introduce readers to the peoples and cultures who inhabit the original text. Sometimes, when I translate Chinese poetry of long ago, I try to imagine the world of the poet where he wrote the poem. Similarly, I believe translators anywhere attempt to see the world in which the text began life before being able to imbue it with a new life of a different place and time.

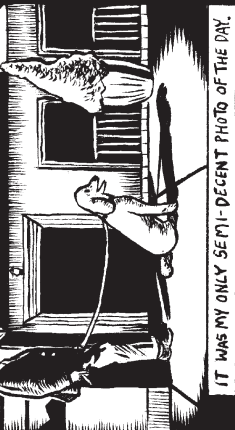


Irene Eber is the Louis Frieberg Professor of East Asian Studies (emerita) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The art on this page provides another medium to look at the work of a translator. Novelists translate life onto a page through words — creating plot, characters, motion. Painters use color, design, texture; musicians use sound, timing, rhythm. Graphic artists — like those on this page — combine some of the elements of a painter's palette and a writer's vocabulary. All artists use their imaginative spirit and a free-form sense of interpretation. Here are three answers to the question I posed: How do you translate your life into a comic strip?



Eli Valley
Photo Stroll
Originally published
in the Forward,
September 18, 2009 issue.



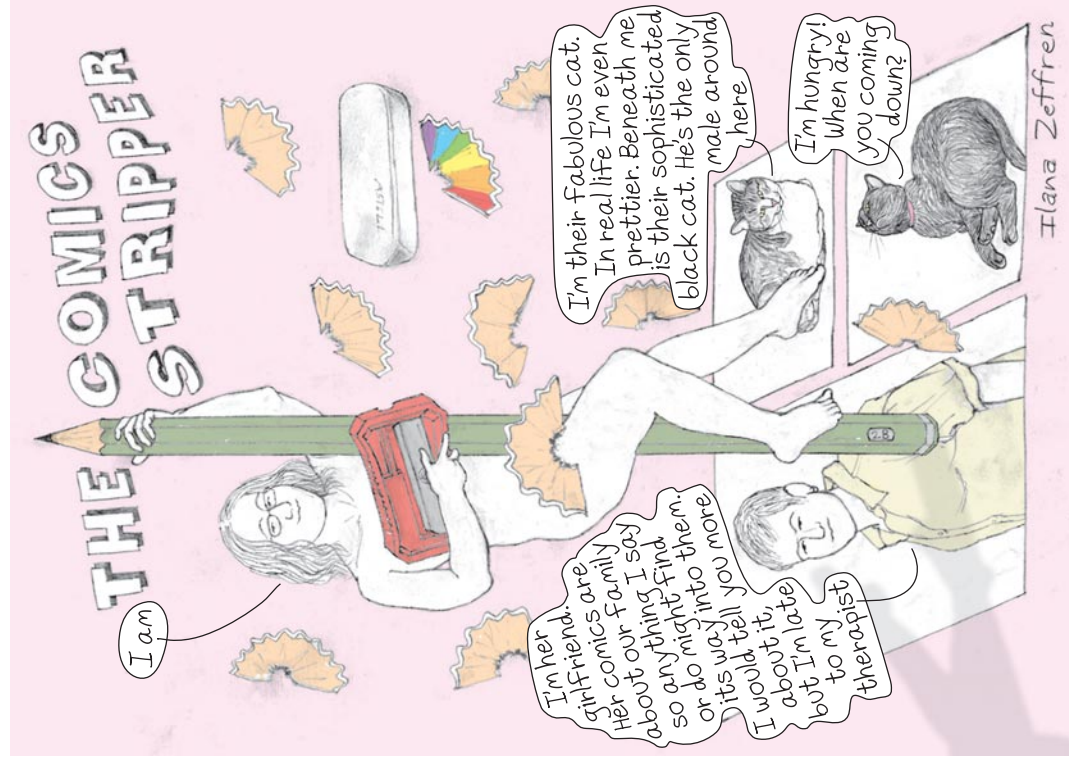
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Translation Rites



Corinne Pearlman
Translation Rites
2010 for Sh'ma

Ilana Zeffren
The Comics Stripper
2010 for Sh'ma



Another Voice: Letters on the Art of Translation

MAYA ARAD & ADRIANA X. JACOBS

Dear Adriana,

I'm Israeli, so let me be direct. Adriana, why did you choose to translate my novel *Another Place, A Foreign City* from Hebrew into English? Your work is wonderful — the excerpt published in the journal *Zeek* offers a sense of your translation, nuanced, fluid, entranced and entrancing — but how, and why, have you ever started imagining yourself doing this? What's more, why commit yourself to the duration of more than 300 stanzas?

**We care about translation because we care about history.
We need translation because we need the ironic distance
it provides. Israeli culture tends to be too “literal”
and too obsessed with its own state of being.**

This is, of course, a bit unfair to you. One could also ask the same of me. I am used to the puzzled question: Why write a novel in the *Onegin* stanza, with the same rhyme scheme — eight syllables, nine syllables, eight syllables, nine syllables, iambic meter, and fourteen lines in a row — that served as the vehicle of Russia's greatest masterpiece, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*? And I keep avoiding the question, usually just telling the same story: how I read *The Golden Gate* by Vikram Seth and felt that I wanted to do the same in Hebrew.

But the truth is, of course, there is no such thing as doing “the same as Vikram Seth in Hebrew.” His effort at a rambling romance in Pushkinian rhyme could be so lighthearted because English employs an expansive attitude: It's a conquering language; it has conquered Seth's native Calcutta and, through him, it “Englished” *Eugene Onegin* without any trace of the Russian.

But in Hebrew — I hope I managed to keep it lighthearted! Everything was so freighted — and who would ever have wanted to leave no trace of the Russian! My point was to acknowledge a sense of debt to our Russian legacy, from which Modern Hebrew literature emerged. I wanted to emulate Russia's greatest masterpiece, and to do so in meter and rhyme. This, of course, was a deliberate statement — which was how the book was read and received. It was a statement about our identity. I put the Russian, early 20th-century aspect of my heritage front and center, which necessarily meant

that I sequestered the English, late 20th-century aspect of my heritage. I took the side of Natan Alterman against Natan Zach: of classical form against free verse.

So, what inspired you to translate this novel — this peculiar Russian-Hebrew experiment — into your wonderful English?

— Maya

...

Dear Maya,

You ask how I imagined myself translating your novel and what inspired me to do so, questions that are, in my mind, mutually inclusive. I was not familiar with your work until I received the task of translating an excerpt for the journal *Zeek*. In addition to translating and writing about Hebrew poetry, I also write poetry, a fact that seems to be common among translators of poetry. Perhaps it is because of the wider range of choices that translating poetry involves that poetry translations tend to vary widely from one translator to another, sometimes becoming unrecognizable transformations of the original work.

I subscribe to Octavio Paz's assertion that “all writing is translation,” but I also hold that the reverse is true. The act of translation is very creative, and while experienced translators can pull from a cache of tools and strategies to render a text from one language to another quickly, an element of inspiration is vital to the task. Because of the sheer labor that goes into a literary translation, I have trouble undertaking projects that don't inspire me. There has to be something in it for me — and I'm not referring to money! For example, your novel adheres to a consistent prosody that requires tremendous flexibility on the part of my English. While translating your work, I read many sonnets as well as numerous English translations of *Onegin*, which enriched not only my translation but also my own writing and research.

My motivation for translating your novel is also grounded in my identification with your characters. I understand Orit's ambivalent relation to “Israeliness” as well as Jay's desire for it, though, on the surface, we share little in common. I am neither Israeli, Jewish, nor a native Hebrew speaker. But Orit's fascination with Jay, a Canadian *oleh*, and her task of defining “Israeli identity” resonated with me on a very personal level. I grew up “outside the Beltway,” surrounded by people — beginning with my Ecuadorian

Maya Arad grew up on Kibbutz Nahal-Oz, and has a doctorate in linguistics from University College, London. The author of five Hebrew novels, Arad is currently writer-in-residence at the Taube Center for Jewish studies at Stanford University.

Adriana X. Jacobs holds a doctorate in comparative literature. She is currently a visiting scholar at Columbia University's Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies. Her translations of contemporary Israeli poetry have appeared in *Zeek*, *Kriya*, and *Metamorphoses*.

mother — who were geographically, linguistically, and culturally dislocated to varying degrees. This dislocation always felt very natural to me — indeed, inseparable from my sense of home. I even remember anxiously questioning my identity in college and in the immediate years thereafter (not coincidentally, around the age of your characters). The pull toward new places and languages eventually brought me to the study of modern Hebrew literature, and it is here that I have settled, so to speak, for the better part of the past fifteen years. But I have had to create my own relation to Hebrew and Israel and have done so, in large part, through translation.

As an Israeli expatriate, the question of identity looms large in your own personal narrative and it is often highlighted in reviews of your work (not to mention how often it comes up in interviews). You live now in California and continue to write novels in Hebrew for an audience that resides primarily in Israel. Translation into other languages promises a larger audience for your work, but how much does this matter to you and to what extent is translation on your mind when you are writing? It intrigues me — though it doesn't surprise me — that the figure of the translator appears in your work. How much of that is a reflection or commentary on your authorship and your own “translated” identity?

— Adriana

• • •

Dear Adriana,

What do I expect from translating *Another Place, A Foreign City*? Indeed, what did I expect from publishing it? It took several weeks — the book languishing on the “poetry” shelves — before it hit the jackpot of critical recognition as a “novel” and its unlikely bestseller-dom. Now, I am confident that a bestseller, in English, it will not be. And so I do not look for a “wider” audience! Rather, I am attracted to your project of translation for the artistic problems it raises. You are spot-on, pointing to the role translation plays in my own work. I often think about *Ho!*, the journal edited by Dory Manor — who might be the foremost Hebrew poet of our generation — which expends much time and space to translation. Dory himself made his mark as Baudelaire's translator. Why this emphasis? We care about translation because we care about history. We need translation because we need the ironic distance it provides. Israeli culture tends to be too “literal,” too “direct,” and too obsessed with its own present state of being. It was against this background that my generation rebelled. You are

right that my work addresses identity — Israeli, Jewish; these are my themes. But bear in mind the irony in all of that, the sense that there is also something faintly absurd in all those Israeli obsessions. Identities are always clichés (they are, after all, what is supposed to make things *identical*). They make wonderful literary material — as a spoof or as an opportunity to expose the most contemporary flavor of philistinism. I am distant from Israel, in several ways.

So, I am there, in Israel, but not quite. Where do you want to take your translation — that is, what is your attitude toward place, and how do you wish to achieve that in your work as translator?

— Maya

I have no interest in creating a facsimile of your novel in English. This would presume that your “original” reader has a fixed identity that can be charted with certainty.

Dear Maya,

I remember the first issue of *Ho!* very well, particularly a section on English seafaring poems in Hebrew translation. You say that translation provides an “ironic distance,” but it strikes me that in your case, as well as that of many Israelis today, the distance is quite literal. At the end of *Another Place, A Foreign City*, you vividly describe Orit's departure from Israel as a state of suspension between Tel Aviv and Vancouver, her new home. This image recalls Leah Goldberg's famous poem “Pine,” with its iconic image of (Jewish) immigration: “Only migrating birds know/ as they hover between earth and sky/ this pain of the two homelands.”

I think of translation in similar terms. I have no interest in creating a facsimile of your novel in English. In other words, I am not invested in recreating for the English reader an experience akin to reading the work in the original. This would presume, first of all, that your “original” reader has a fixed identity that can be charted with certainty. As a translator, I bring my own cultural and linguistic baggage to the enterprise, and I am sure that this informs the way that I translate to some degree. In general, though, as I translate, my focus tends to rest primarily on my linguistic responsibilities — am I getting this word right? Do I fully understand an allusion (if I've managed to grasp it)? — to the extent that I sometimes forget to step back and see the bigger picture. This is why my translations often need to sit on a shelf for a while, or pass from one careful reader to the other. A little distance is also good for translation.

— Adriana

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Meet the *Makhatonim*: Understanding Ashkenazic Kinship

NAOMI SEIDMAN

Our fascination with the untranslatable is not so difficult to understand. The word or phrase without a linguistic equivalent is a powerful tool to illuminate what is distinctive in a language or culture. There are words and concepts — *chutzpah*, *kvetch* — whose untranslatability is evident to all, and others whose cultural distinctiveness is masked by the existence of a near-equivalent, a kind of cultural “false friend” — the term translators use to describe words in different languages that somehow mislead us into believing them to be equivalents (as in the French “*marcher*” and the English “march”).

The Yiddish term “*makhatonim*” is one such word. American Jews will confidently declare that the word means “in-laws,” but there is an important shade of difference that disappears in such easy translation. The term “in-law” primarily describes the relationship between an individual and the parents or siblings of his or her spouse; it is thus a “diagonal” kinship term.

Makhatonim, by contrast, are the parents of both spouses, and it is their “horizontal” relationship — between the parents of the bride and the parents of the groom — that is the primary significance of the term. The traditional Jewish community of Eastern Europe considered this an important kinship term, indeed, and the loss of its equivalent in English, in the New World, marks a cultural deficit.

The untranslatability of the term alerts us to two radically different conceptualizations of marriage. It is true that both systems revolve around a couple, the apparent heart and — by definition — the pivot of a marriage. The contemporary American system recognizes, of course, that a husband and wife have parents, and recognizes that one spouse will have some relationship with the parents of the other spouse. Folklore offers stories about the relationship that connects a husband and his mother-in-law, stories that are often rich in aggressive humor and ambivalent tension. The mother-in-law interferes, judges, prefigures her daughter’s aging; she functions as the “diagonal” in an otherwise balanced scene.

The traditional marriage of the Jews of Eastern Europe encloses the married couple in a larger web, constructing relationships beyond

the couple. The term *makhatonim* reveals how the relationship works structurally rather than affectively. Families, in their connection through the marriage of their children, have a relationship shaped by a set of conventions and obligations that comprise a third space, a degree of connection “beyond” either the biological or sexual. It’s almost as if the marriage of the children works backward (to a previous generation) as well as forward (to grandchildren) to create family. The relationship is certainly not only semantic: In the traditional world, parents played a far greater role — if not the sole role — in choosing a mate for their children and negotiating the dowry and support of the young couple. Newlyweds often lived with one of the families in the first years of marriage (in a system known, untranslatably, as *kest*). I do not mean to suggest that this was an idyllic or functional system. Jewish literature is filled with outrage against the deafness of parents to the desires of their children, against a system that put young bridegrooms at the mercy of cruel mothers-in-law (the young couple ordinarily moved in with the bride’s parents) and burdened adolescents of both genders with sexual and marital obligations.

Makhatonim, then, were not so much “lost” as thrown overboard, deliberately or as a side effect of other choices: the right to choose a mate, delay marriage, and live independently in a very mobile society. Is there a price to pay for these freedoms? Are we better off “alone” in our marriages, within the compass of sentiment and children, to the exclusion of a wider sense of family? Perhaps, after all, romantic choice is a heavier burden than that of an arranged, early marriage, or at least one in which the marital relationship was “distributed” among the generations.

Even my question here recapitulates our cultural focus on the couple. What is lost in our romantic isolation is lost, above all, for the older generation. Among the tragedies of Tevye’s old age — exile, the death of his wife, a daughter’s apostasy, a son-in-law’s incarceration, another daughter’s widowhood — is one that is nearly invisible, a side effect of his daughters’ romantic choices: Tevye, at the end, has sons-in-law, but he has no *makhatonim*. Beyond his daughters, the world holds only strangers.



Naomi Seidman is Koret Professor of Jewish Culture and director of the Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. Her most recent book, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation*, appeared in 2006.

Around the Maggid's Table: Translating Black Letters and White Spaces

OR N. ROSE

Over the past several months, I have had the pleasure of engaging in a new translation project with my teacher and colleagues. Arthur Green, Ebn Leader, Ariel Mayse, and I have been meeting weekly to study and translate the homiletic teachings of Rabbi Dov Baer (d. 1772), the Maggid of Mezeritch, and several of his leading disciples. The Maggid was one of the chief architects of the Hasidic movement, and his students, including Rabbis Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, Elimelekh of Lizensk, and Shneur Zalman of Liadi, played a major role in the development of Hasidism in its formative stage.

We chose to translate the *d'rashot* (sermons) of these pioneering teachers because of their exegetical creativity, psychological sensitivity, and spiritual insight. These rabbis were not only gifted intellectuals but also dedicated community leaders. Our vision of Jewish life and thought and our own work as rabbis have been greatly influenced by these figures. As we seek to help renew the Jewish tradition in our age, we turn back to these revivalists from another age and engage with them in conversation across space and time.

The goal of our project is to provide a broad readership — including those who cannot easily access these texts in the original — with a meaningful source for study and contemplation. The volume will also include the original Hebrew texts. The book is organized according to the weekly Torah portions and Jewish calendar, with four or five teachings in each section. We have structured the volume this way so that it can serve both as an in-depth introduction to early Hasidism and as a resource for Shabbat and festivals.

While we find many of the texts inspirational and instructive, others are challenging and even disturbing — including teachings on the theurgic powers of the rebbe, the role of women in Jewish life, and the spiritual status of non-Jews. Though we struggle with some of these teachings, to exclude them from the volume would be irresponsible, as we are trying to facilitate a genuine meeting between the Hasidic masters and our readers. What we have attempted to do is to let the rebbes (Hasidic masters) speak for themselves while offering our own personal responses — including criticism

— in brief comments following each text.

To help readers gain a fuller understanding of the worlds of Hasidic life and thought, we will also include an extensive introduction to the book in which we discuss the social and political contexts in which the teachers lived and worked, as well as significant intellectual and religious influences on them.

We hope this volume will help to enrich conversations about the complexity of translating the ideas and values of our Hasidic forebears into contemporary life.

Among the many translation questions we have been discussing is how best to communicate some of the cultural resonances imbedded in the words before us. When, for example, is it important to consider how the rebbe may have said a phrase in Yiddish (the language of Hasidic preaching) before it was written down in Hebrew (the language of publication)? When does a Hebrew or Aramaic term carry with it an established rabbinic or mystical meaning, and when is the preacher introducing a new interpretation? When does a word shift meaning based on the context of a homily? In brief, how can we translate both the black letters and the white spaces on the page, knowing that some things will be lost in translation?

We have designed our project such that each of us is primarily responsible for one Hasidic book from the Maggid's circle. Every week, we take turns reading our translations and comments, inviting our study partners to critique our work. While there is always some anxiety about sharing our efforts, we are all close friends and colleagues who trust one another to offer constructive feedback.

Of course, there are disagreements and moments of tension. Most times, we work by consensus; other times, we defer to our teacher or let the person translating a particular text have the final word. Challenging as this work can be, we remain committed to it because we find the teachings of this mystical circle powerful and we want to share these sources with others. It is our hope that this volume will help to enrich the current renaissance of Jewish mysticism, including conversation about the promise and complexity of translating the ideas and values of our Hasidic forebears into contemporary life.

Rabbi Or N. Rose, a member of the Sh'ma Advisory Committee, is associate dean and director of informal education at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College. He is the co-editor of *Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life: Classical Texts, Contemporary Reflections* (Jewish Lights).

Memory Is Inseparable from Imagination

MIKHAIL KRUTIKOV

The literary career of Alexander Goldstein, who lived from 1957 to 2006, was unusual in many respects. Though born in Tallinn on the Baltic coast, Goldstein grew up in the cosmopolitan and multicultural city of Baku on the Caspian Sea. While these cities are now capitals of independent states, Estonia and Azerbaijan, in Goldstein's lifetime they represented two extreme poles of the Soviet empire, west and east. This dichotomy runs through the core of Goldstein's thinking and imagination. He envisions himself as a mediator between the two worlds, and in this respect, Israel — more precisely, Tel Aviv — became his natural home.

He envisioned Russian culture as decentralized and diasporic, a kind of virtual textual reality with no clear divisions among the original and the translation, the old and the new, the local and the global.

What might seem surprising is that he achieved recognition and fame in Russia after his immigration to Israel. To understand Goldstein's unique position in Russian culture, one has to keep in mind that he never physically lived in Russia proper, and his immigration to Israel was in some sense a move from one corner of the Russian speaking cultural universe to another. No less important is his perception of Baku and Tel Aviv as cosmopolitan European seaport cities in the midst of the Islamic world of the Middle East.

Having graduated with a degree in Russian literature from the University of Baku, Goldstein found employment in the local Russian press, writing reports and articles about the life of the Soviet Azerbaijan. The collapse of the Soviet Union, which was partly initiated by the bloody war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorny Karabakh, was accompanied by violent anti-Armenian pogroms across Azerbaijan, and left the Russian-speaking Jews of Baku with little choice but to emigrate — even though Jews were not the target of those pogroms. The outburst of ethnic violence left a powerful impression on Goldstein, and the problem of cohabitation of Muslims, Christians, and Jews remained central to his writing.

Immigration to Israel was for Goldstein less of a cultural shock than for Russian-Jewish

intellectuals from Moscow or St. Petersburg. He found the bohemian atmosphere of South Tel Aviv congenial to the Baku of his youth, and soon carved for himself a niche in the burgeoning world of the Russian-language press. His weekly literary columns in the major Russian-Israeli weekly, *Vesti*, recently collected in a book entitled *In Memory of Pathos*, are written in an uncompromisingly cerebral style that seems hardly suitable for an immigrant paper. These essays, published in the late 1990s, are astonishing in their thematic diapason and erudition. Goldstein navigates with amazing ease and confidence among V. S. Naipaul and contemporary Russian philosophy, Isaiah Berlin and Bertolt Brecht. But his position vis-à-vis Russian culture was always on the outside; he once called the notion of unity among Russian cultures “unappetizing,” calling upon his colleagues, émigré writers, to “move as far as possible from the language metropolis” and cultivate their foreignness. He envisioned Russian culture as decentralized and diasporic, a kind of virtual textual reality with no clear divisions among the original and the translation, the old and the new, the local and the global.

Goldstein was the most cosmopolitan — and perhaps least “Israeli” — among Russian writers in Israel. While the details of Israeli life — particularly found in the poor neighborhoods of Tel Aviv, Lod, and Ashdod, which were populated by a motley mix of Jewish immigrants from the FSU and Arab countries, as well as migrant workers — often serve as a point of departure for his brilliant cultural associations, the idea of Zionism or Israel as a Jewish state seems of little interest to him. In this part of the world, where he happened to spend his adult life, “nations fight over primogeniture and miseries” and every nation takes a “savage pride in disaster.” In Baku, Goldstein learned that “There is no word more powerful than nation. ... It gave blood to the veins, semen to the scrotum, vision to the eye, and I am a voluntary debtor to its generosity.” He admits to once having a dream about “strolling, like a rootless vagabond in some Pax-Atlantic city, [...] and, opening a hotel door, to announce hastily my rootless name to the concierge. For half a century I wanted to wander from one hotel to another, making a

Mikhail Krutikov is an associate professor of Slavic languages and literatures at the University of Michigan and an associate professor at the university's Frankel Center for Judaic Studies. A columnist for the *Yiddish Forverts*, Krutikov holds a doctorate in Jewish literature from the Jewish Theological Seminary and a diploma in mathematics from Moscow State University. He is the author of *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity, 1905-1914* (2001) and *From Kabbalah to Class Struggle: Expressionism, Marxism, and Yiddish Literature in the Life and Work of Meir Wiener* (2010).

sour face when asked about roots: it has become irrelevant long ago.” (*Remember Famagusta*, pages 20-21) Then, ironically, he condemns this dream as a sin.

This passage (which defies all my attempts to translate it into English and convey adequately its intricate grammar and rich synonymic word play) has three different words for “rootless,” all of which were, incidentally, used in late Stalinist rhetoric to denounce the Jewish presence in Russian culture. Cosmopolitan at his very core, Goldstein nevertheless takes nationalism very seriously. Dissolving himself in the comfortable, post-nationalist Pax Atlantica would mean losing his own self, a fate that, he believed, befell Joseph Brodsky in America. In the obituary for Brodsky, Goldstein remarks: “He has long been in separation from that speech that was once so congenial to him.” (*In Memory of Pathos*, p. 83) For Goldstein, Brodsky the man has outlived Brodsky the poet.

Goldstein lived and died in literature. He

was finishing his last novel, *Quiet Fields*, literally in his last hours, breathing with the aid of an artificial respirator and refusing the morphine that would quiet his pain but blunt his consciousness. He achieved fame in Russia a few years before his death and won a few prestigious literary prizes. His books were published by the elitist NLO Press with introductions by prominent contemporary Russian writers. His works differ in themes and genres, but they all have in common an inimitable combination of arcane baroque style and precision of thought. Goldstein’s erudition was enormous, ranging from medieval Armenian and Persian poetry to contemporary American literature. He lived in the world of high culture, residing in squalid rented rooms near Tel Aviv’s bus station. He described his way of writing as “literature of existence,” meaning that the writer must bear full responsibility for his words. “I have become convinced that memory is inseparable from imagination.”

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Address all **editorial correspondence** to *Sh'ma*, P.O. Box 1368, Menlo Park, CA 94026, or E-mail: SBerrin@shma.com. Tel. 650-330-1545

Send all **subscription queries** and changes of address to *Sh'ma*, P.O. Box 439, Congers, NY 10920-0439. Telephone: 877-568-SHMA. E-mail: shma@cambeywest.com.

We welcome your **feedback**. Send to Josh Rolnick, Publisher, at Jrolnick@shma.com.

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Yehudah Mirsky, fellow at the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute

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Suggested Further Reading

- wordswithoutborders.org
- Haim Nachman Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment in Language: Five Essays* (Ibis Editions, 2000)
- Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (W. W. Norton & Company)
- Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (The Schocken Bible, Volume 1)
- Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (Penguin)
- Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (Dial Press)



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Sh'ma Ethics Sigi Ziering

This year, our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of immigration. Each month, an esteemed guest columnist wrestles with what Jewish texts and our tradition teach us about our neighbors and ourselves. Each month, we peer into the immigration debate raging in America; we'll also look into immigration issues and the lives of undocumented workers in Israel. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

Karen Paul-Stern is the Washington regional director of the New Israel Fund, as well as a development and fundraising consultant to progressive non-profit organizations. A writer, her work has appeared in *Lilith Magazine*, the *Washington Post*, *Red Wheelbarrow Literary Magazine*, *Scribblers on the Roof*, and *Washington Jewish Week*. She writes a weekly blog on the intersection of work and parenthood for *Current Mom*.

The Right to Be Israeli: Race in Israel

KAREN PAUL-STERN

The Ethiopian *aliyah* to Israel that began nearly 20 years ago has posed ethical problems for Israel like no other immigration wave. With more than 100,000 Ethiopians living in Israel today, some already second generation, the community continues to face numerous absorption and assimilation challenges. First, there is the very question of who is a Jew within the Ethiopian community itself. A number of Ethiopian immigrants are considered to be “Falash Mura,” or now-Christian Ethiopians who have an ancestry rooted in Judaism. Yet they came to Israel as part of a wave of Jewish immigration and, despite continuing questions about their lineage, they now live in Israel and deserve the same treatment as any other immigrant group.

This debate points to the most burning immigration question in Israel today: Who has the right to become an Israeli citizen? If one is not Jewish, no channel exists through which to become naturalized. As Israel transitions into a multicultural, multiracial society, this question may become one of the great issues of debate in Israel in the 21st century. While Israel has always been a democracy, the very concept of democracy may now be under siege.

“Who is a Jew” may soon become “who is an Israeli?” Israel’s Law of Return — which grants automatic citizenship to any Jew who wishes to live in Israel — is being questioned in the 21st century in ways never intended by Israel’s founders. Questions of immigration and citizenship extend beyond the Ethiopian community. Russian *olim*, foreign workers, and other immigrants, including Palestinians, all require clearly articulated policies.

Finally, the elephant in the room regarding the Ethiopian community is race. For the first

time in modern Israeli history, there has been an enormous influx of immigrants who stand out not just because they stumbled into a new country with new ways but because their skin is dark. It is black. They are foreign in Israel in a way that no one has been foreign before.

Racism in Israel today is often linked to the Jewish-Arab conflict. It is manifest at soccer games, where anti-Arab epithets are sometimes hurled onto the field by the mostly Jewish fan base.

But another form of racism exists in Israel today, one that more closely mirrors the racism that Americans recognize.

When an employer in Israel sits across the desk from an applicant who happens to be Ethiopian, does the employer see only a potential employee, or does he or she see a person with black skin? Why would three religious schools in Petach Tikvah refuse to accept Ethiopian students? How does Israel account for the enormous gaps in education and employment in the Ethiopian community nearly 20 years after the first large *aliyah*?

A new generation of Ethiopian children is already reaching adulthood in Israel. They did not grow up in refugee camps in the desert; they are modern and engaged, and they want to live their lives well and proudly in the country that claimed it wanted them.

They are forcing Israel to face questions of immigration that it has never before encountered. Who should be allowed to immigrate? Who is Israeli? And what is a country’s responsibility to a population that was brought to its shores because of a decades-old contract with its conscience, but for whom the questions of absorption and assimilation involve intractable questions of identity and skin color?

