# Yiddish and the Transmission of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe

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*Sefer mides* (Book of Virtues), the first comprehensive ethical work published in Yiddish, appeared in Isny, Germany, in 1542, seven years after the first Yiddish book was printed.[1] Like its generic predecessors it was an adaptation of a Hebrew work; unlike them it was published first in Yiddish and only about four decades later in the original language and with a different title: *Sefer orhot zadikim* (The Ways of the Righteous). [2]

At the end of *Sefer mides* two pages are appended. They are relevant to the book but not to its contents and absolutely independent of the Hebrew original. The conventional opening formula honoring God Almighty is followed by the dedication of the book to "all women and maidens and first of all the noble and chaste Frau Morada, doctoress of the liberal art of medicine, now residing in Günzburg".[3] For all of them, says the writer, as well as for anyone who reads this book and has difficulty in doing so, the rules of reading Yiddish shall be clarified so that "he or she may work it out". He then proceeds to explain that *yud* designates *hirik* or *zeyre*, *alef* means *kamaz* or *patah*, *vav* stands for

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[1] The first Yiddish printed books appeared in Cracow in 1534–1535. Except for *Mirkevet hamishneh* – a concordance of the Bible also known as *Seyfer shel Reb Anshl* and intended for an addressee quite well versed in Hebrew, the rest – *Azhores noshim* (Admonitions for Women), and *Den muser un hanhoge* (Ethics and Behavior) as well as *Kaʿarat hakesef* (The Silver Plate) attached to it – are Yiddish versions of Hebrew ethical works, see Chone Shmeruk, *Yiddish Literature in Poland, Historical Studies and Perspectives* (Hebrew: *Sifrut yidish bePolin, Mehkarim ve'iyunim historiim*), Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1981, pp. 75–78, nos. 1–*4.

[2] For details see Jacob Elbaum, *Openness and Insularity, Late Sixteenth Century Jewish Literature in Poland and Ashkenaz* (In Hebrew: *Petihut vehistagrut, hayezirah haruhanit-hasifrutit bePolin uvearzot Ashkenaz beshilhei hameah hashesh-esre),* Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990, pp. 390–394.

[3] Although this lady's name seems to indicate an Italian origin, and her being mentioned by name among the other female addresses may well imply that she was the patroness of the author or the sponsoress of the publication, we do not know anything about her, not even whether she was Jewish or not.

*melofum* or *holam*, and *ayin* signifies *segol*. The Hebrew vowel points serve to illustrate the reading of diphthongs as well. Remarkably, the explanation clearly implies that the addressee of this book, male or female, is perfectly familiar with the names and meanings of the vowel points necessary for reading Hebrew, and that this previous knowledge is instrumental in learning how to read Yiddish, the spoken language which adopted the Hebrew alphabet but substituted the vowel points for actual vowels.

As we know, Hebrew reading skills are the first aim of the teaching program in *heder*. All the possible combinations of letters and vowel points are memorized aloud in a given order before being integrated into words read out from the prayer book. We do not know whether girls, like boys, acquired Hebrew reading ability in *heder* or did it at home,[4] but there is no doubt that the author of the mentioned rules takes this skill of his female potential readers for granted and uses it for teaching them, as well as his male addressees, a similar yet new skill. His rules are the only instance known to me of Hebrew being a vehicle to Yiddish, and the only mention of a way of teaching Jews how to read it.[5] In the early modern period and for many generations afterwards, no aspect of the Yiddish language was intentionally taught in *heder*, and no Yiddish text was read or studied there. Being the mother tongue of Ashkenazic Jews, Yiddish was, of course, the natural language of informal as well as of formal education, but not a subject of study.

In both institutions of formal education, the *heder* and the *yeshivah*, only Hebrew-Aramaic texts were used: *Siddur, Humash* and other selected sections of the Bible in the first instance, *Mishnah, Gemara* and their commentaries in the second, but no systematic teaching of the pertaining languages took place in either framework. In *heder* the *Siddur* functioned mainly as a reading exercise book and the text was neither

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[4] Very little is known about the education of Jewish girls in the Ashkenazic Diaspora in the early modern period. See Chava Turniansky, "Mejdlech in der altjidischer litertaur" (Yiddish), in: *Jidische Philologie, Festschrift für Erika Timm,* Herausgegeben von Walter Röll und Simon Neuberg, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1999, pp. *7–*20; idem, *Language, Education and Knowledge among Eastern European Jews,* (Hebrew: *Lashon, hinukh vehaskala bemizrah eyropa*), in the series: *Polin, The Jews of Eastern Europe: History and Culture* (Hebrew: *Polin, Prakim betoldot yehudey mizrah eyropa vetarbutam*) Unit 7, Ramat Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 1994, pp. 46–52.

[5] An isolated recommendation to teach the *heder* pupils the written characters of their spoken language *(w*hich employed a different typeface from the Hebrew) in order to read, and even write, Yiddish, appears in the minute book of the *Hevrah kadisha talmud torah* of Cracow 1550– 1638 (see Elhanan Reiner, "The Jewish Community of Cracow, Documents and Introductions", in: *Kroke–Kazimierz–Cracow, Studies in the History of Cracow Jewry* (Hebrew: *Kroke–Kazshimyeszsh–Krakov, Mehkarim betoldot yehudey krakov*), Elhanan Reiner (ed.), Tel Aviv University 2001, p. 312, No. 6.

fully explained nor systematically translated. Having learned to read it, the pupil was equipped to perform his prayer duties at home and in the synagogue. The criticism this provoked – based on the precept that "prayer needs intention" and intention requires understanding – as well as the suggestions made that the text be at least explained literally, or that prayers be first taught during two or three years in Yiddish, do not seem to have had any practical effect on the curriculum. As a result, even those children that completed their *heder* education did not understand the prayers they recite in the synagogue, and for most of them this situation did not change later on in life.

The study of the *Humash*, performed regularly by way of oral word for word precise translation into Yiddish, may have provided the young student with some knowledge of biblical Hebrew, but did not enable him to understand the language of the text he studied, let alone texts written in *loshn-koydesh*, the mixed Hebrew-Aramaic rabbinical language of later times. In the *yeshive* too the studied text was read aloud in the original language and then explained, commented and discussed in Yiddish.

The absence from the curriculum of any systematic study of the language of the literary sources was often – and many times quite harshly – criticized, but criticism did not lead to reform. One melamed in Poznan, who had introduced the teaching of Hebrew grammar in his *heder* with excellent results, published a little manual entitled *Sefer em hayeled* (The Child's Mother)[6] in the first edition (Prague 1597) and *Luah hadikduk* (Grammar-Table) in the second (Cracow 1598). The manual was highly recommended by two of the major contemporary rabbinical authorities, the Maharal of Prague and R. Mordekhai Yofe, who appears to have witnessed the accomplishment. The Italian experience of this *melamed*, R. Yosef ben Elhanan Heilprun, may explain his innovative initiative. The methods of instruction among the Italian and Sefardic Jews he had encountered in Italy were quite different from those of the Ashkenazim, who admired them mainly, but not only, for the inclusion of the systematic teaching of Hebrew in the regular curriculum. However, the admired example was not followed and the mentioned grammar manual was not reprinted. Its fate was shared by other grammars of Hebrew intended either for the adult reader or for the *melamed* and his pupils in the *heder*[7] as well as by other sporadic publications that offered some

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[6] See Irene E. Zwiep (below, note 7), pp. 170–173; Chone Shmeruk (above, note 1), pp. 97–98; No. 37; Elbaum (above, note 2), p. 34.

[7] See the comprehensive and detailed research by Irene E. Zwiep, "Adding the Reader's Voice: Early-modern Ashkenazi Grammars of Hebrew", *Science in Context*, 20 (2007), pp. 163–195.

kind of solution to the problem, such as the small and compact Hebrew-Yiddish dictionary *Hinukh katan* (Tuition of the Minor),[8] which encouraged parents to use it for teaching their little children two or three Hebrew words every day, or the synopses of Hebrew grammar appended to several Hebrew-Yiddish glossaries to the Bible.[9] The use of manuals of these kinds seems to have remained limited, stemming from the personal interest of the adult and, at an earlier age – stimulated by the initiative of the parents, the curiosity of the young or the determination of individual inventive *melamdim*.

However, there is no doubt that a certain, even considerable, knowledge of *loshn-koydesh* was acquired during the *heder* and *yeshive* years, and that the longer the pupil attended those institutions, the more he could achieve. Moreover, numerous Hebrew-Aramaic words, expressions and quotations were part and parcel of the regular Yiddish speech.[10] But in order to master the language sufficiently to understand the various kinds of Jewish sources – from the ancient scriptures to contemporary rabbinical literature – much effort, devotion and autodidactic diligence was needed, and even more was necessary to engage in creative writing in the acquired language. Those who achieved these skills did not owe them to their formal education but to their willpower, talent and perseverance which also determined the degree of knowledge they reached. All the others did not attain the necessary language proficiency to understand a Hebrew book and had in fact been taught to read a language they did not – or did not fully – comprehend. We may assume that this group was a majority consisting of most, if not all, of the women, all the children and adolescents of both genders, and a considerable number of adult males in the Jewish population of the Yiddish speaking area, which in the early modern period included Germany, Bohemia and Moravia, Poland-Lithuania, Northern Italy (only until the beginning of the seventeenth century), the Netherlands (only from the mid-seventeenth century on), and several locations within the Ottoman Empire.

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[8] Printed in Cracow 1640, see Shmeruk (above, note 1), p. 111, No. 54.

[9] See for instance in the Prague 1612 and 1669 editions of the glossary *Be'er Mosheh* by Mosheh Shertels (first edition: Prague 1605). A synopsis of Hebrew grammar appears as well at the beginning of the above mentioned *Mirkevet hamishneh*.

[10] See, for example, Erika Timm, "Glikl's Language" (Hebrew: *Leshonah shel Glikl*), in: *Glikl, Memoires 1691–1719*, (Hebrew: *Glikl, Zikhronot 1691–1719*), Edited and translated from the Yiddish by Chava Turniansky, Jerusalem, The Zalman Shazar Center and the Ben-Zion Dinur Center, 2006, pp. 64–70 of the Introduction; Chava Turniansky, "Der loshn-koydesh-komponent in Glikls verk vi an eydes oyf ir bildung" (Yiddish), *Röllwagenbüchlein*, *Festschrift für Walther Röll zum 65. Geburtstag*, Herausgegeben von Jurgen Jaehrling, Uwe Mewes und Erika Timm, Tübingen 2002, pp. 433–441.

Together with all the rest, this significant part of the population was coached through the common stages of informal and formal education in Yiddish, which was until the *Haskalah* period the only naturally spoken language of all the Jews throughout the Ashkenazi Diaspora regardless of gender, age, social, cultural or economic status. Thus, there is no wonder that this vernacular, which everybody understood and most knew how to read, was the only available means to promote, enrich and renew the Jewish knowledge of those unable to acquire it directly from the original sources. As the author of the *Brantshpigl* (The Burning Mirror), one of the most renowned and popular Yiddish books of ethics, explains at the beginning of the third chapter: "This book was written in Yiddish for women and for men who are like women because they are not able to learn[11] much. When Sabbath or a festival arrive they will read it and then they will be able to understand what they are reading, for our books are written in *loshn-koydesh* and occasionally quote a *pilpul* from the Gemara which is impossible for them to understand. I am therefore writing this in Yiddish for women and men like me, who are not able to read and fully understand the books in *loshn-koydesh* […]. I have taken pity on them and am writing in Yiddish so that they, too, will know what Man is, for what purpose he was created, in what respect the people of Israel are superior to other nations, and what the reward is of God-fearers and those who serve Him with love".[12]

These women and men "who are like women" for they do not know *loshn-koydesh* were the principal addressees of Yiddish literature, the greatest part of which was, at least until late in the eighteenth century, intensely involved in the transmission of Jewish knowledge from the linguistically restrictive corpus which kept on growing and developing.

In order to engage in any transmission activity of this kind at least a good knowledge of *loshn-koydesh* was necessary, but in most cases substantial familiarity with the Hebrew-Aramaic sources and at times even great erudition was required. It is therefore the learned, mainly members of the secondary intellectual elite, that undertook the mission of mediating between the Hebrew corpus and the Yiddish reader. The remarkable knowledge and expert discussion of the Hebrew sources evident in most of these Yiddish works, allow us to assume that their authors could have not less successfully engaged in Hebrew literary activity. Some of them

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[11] In contemporary Yiddish, *lernen* means Torah study based on the Hebrew texts.
[12] See: Mosheh Henokhs Yerushalmi Altshuler, *Brantshpigl*, Prague 1620, p. 12b (first edition: Cracow 1596).

actually did,[13] indicating thereby that their decision to write in Yiddish was not a result of lack of competence in Hebrew, but rather a matter of choice and intention: to enlighten the Yiddish reading public. This aim – among others – must as well have motivated those authors that produced Hebrew and Yiddish versions of one and the same work.[14] The idea these authors had of their addressee's capability to comprehend and learn, combined with their conception of his or her intellectual, spiritual and behavioural needs and duties dictated the selection of segments from the Hebrew corpus to be transmitted, and determined the methods of transmission.

Principles of selection and methodology can easily be observed by comparing the original corpus with its Yiddish derivatives. The prayers (*Siddur, Mahzor, Slihot, Kinot*) and other 'oral' texts (such as *Birkat hamazon* and the Passover *Hagadah*) are objects of literal translation only. The books of the Bible are rendered in many and varied kinds of partial or full, simple or complex, literal translations or paraphrastic adaptations, with short explanations or extensive commentaries drawn mainly, but far not only, from Rashi. They may be adapted and re-worked into homiletic prose (like the *Tsene-rene*), structured into epic poetry (like the *Shmuel-bukh* and the *Melokhim-bukh*), or dramatized into a *purim-shpil*. From the *Mishnah* only *Pirkei avot* and from the *Talmud* only *Hilkhot derekh erez* are translated. However, multiple stor-ies from the *Talmud*, as well as from the *Midrash*, appear in Yiddish either separately, in small or large collections (such as the *Mayse-bukh*) or within other works, where they mingle with many Talmudic sayings, and innumerable Halakhic elements are blended into all genres involved in behavioural instruction. Translations and adaptations of Hebrew ethi-cal literature, from old to contemporary, abound in Yiddish alongside original compositions inspired and influenced by one or more works of this kind. The encyclopedic character of the most popular Yiddish books of morals – *Sefer lev tov* (Book of the Good Heart) by Yizhak ben Elyakum of Poznan (Prague 1620) and the above mentioned

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[13] So, for instance, R. Binyamin Aharon Selnik (or Slonik) of Grodno wrote in Yiddish his *Seder mizvot nashim* (Cracow 1577) and in Hebrew his Responsa *Masʿat Binyamin* (Cracow 1640); R. Yaʾakov ben Yizhak Ashkenazi of Janow, the author of the *Tsene-rene* and other Yiddish books, was also the author of a Hebrew halakhic work entitled *Shoresh Yaʾakov* (Cracow 1640),

[14] See Chava Turniansky, "Dual Language (Hebrew and Yiddish) Literature in Ash-kenaz – Characteristic Features" (Hebrew: "*Hayetsirah haduleshonit beAshkenaz – ka-vim leʾofya*"), *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Vol. IV, Jer-usalem 1980, pp. 85–99. The most popular among them is Zvi Hirsh Koidanover's *Sefer kav hayashar*, Frankfurt am Main 1705.

*Brantshpigl* – is clearly evident in that there seems to be no aspect of daily life for which they do not provide practical and spiritual guidance according to Jewish law and ethics. These *works* are joined in their didactic purposes by translated, adapted and updated *Minhogim* (books of customs) which, following the order of the yearly cycle, instruct the reader in whatever should be done at home and in the synagogue on the Sabbath, holidays and other occasions such as weddings, circumcisions, burials and periods of mourning. The bilingual *Bentsherl*, bearing the Hebrew title *Seder birkat hamazon,* provides not only the text and translation of the Grace after Meals, but all the necessary texts for all the ceremonies carried out at home throughout the year, the nature of their Yiddish translations clearly indicating their purpose: understanding only or active participation as well.[15] The *Frauenbüchlein* (Women's Booklet) or *Mitsves noshim* (Women's Commandments) focuses on women's three specific obligations but quite often addresses other functions and aspects of women's life, such as her prayers, her charity, how to deal with her spouse or how best to raise her children.[16]

Although this survey of the Yiddish corpus drawn from the Hebrew sources is incomplete, it is helpful in distinguishing certain guiding principles of selection and presentation. Thus, no substantial theoretical deliberations – philosophical, theological, mystical or ethical – enter the Yiddish corpus; almost no halakhic discussion processes are transmitted, and all ideological speculations are avoided. As a rule, only the results, the *untershte shures* of these preoccupations are rendered and often only their pragmatic teachings conveyed. Certain works or entire segments of the Hebrew corpus (such as philosophy and most elements of *Kabbalah*)[17] are regularly omitted because they are not considered

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[15] See idem, "The 'bentsherl' and the 'zemiroth' in Yiddish" (Hebrew: "*Habentsherl vehazmirot beyidish*"), *Alei Sefer*, 10 (1982), pp. 51–92.

[16] See Agnes Romer Segal, "Yiddish Works on Women's Commandments in the Sixteenth Century", *Studies in Yiddish Literature and Folklore,* Research Projects of the Institute of Jewish Studies, Monograph Series 7, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 1986, pp. 37–59; Edward Framm, *My Dear Daughter, Rabbi Benjamin Slonik and the Education of Jewish Women in Sixteenth Century Poland*, Cincinnati, The Hebrew Union College Press, 2007, especially Chapter 3.

[17] Between 1691 and 1711 the Yiddish reader was provided, for the first time in the history of Yiddish literature, with a series of comprehensive works (most of them printed in Frankfurt am Main) which drew mainly or abundantly on diverse kabbalistic sources. Here too the authors followed the rule: they removed the theoretic and abstract passages, omitted the intellectual speculations, avoided the arduous deliberations and the complicated ideas, and concentrated on the practical, concrete, simple and easily comprehensible elements, and primarily on those which were presented in appealing narratives.

suitable for all; others (mainly in the sphere of *Halakhah*) are left out
due to their degree of difficulty or the dangers involved in their possible
misunderstanding, still others are excluded simply because they are con-
sidered irrelevant or of no interest to the general public.

Though often more than one motive join together, the main abiding
reason for introducing a work from the Hebrew corpus into the Yiddish
body of knowledge is its capacity to provide the addressee with whatever
he or she is supposed to know and comprehend – to the mind of the
author – in order to act, live and behave as a good Jewish man or
woman should. "Everyone is committed to *talmud torah* – Hanokh
ben Yehuda wrote in 1708 – and should allocate times for study. And
whoever does not perfectly understand *loshn-koydesh* does not perform
this *mizvah* if he does not study *torah* in a language he understands, and
in this country in *loshn-ashkenazi*,[18] for the essential purpose of this
*mizvah* is to put into practice what has been learned, and especially
now that most of the *gufey-torah* (the basic laws of the *torah*) which
are transmitted to the simple folk have already been printed in *loshn-
ashkenaz*. And these are the books in which one has to be well versed:
*Lev tov, Mitsves noshim, Brantshpigl, Sefer hamusar* (The Book of Mor-
als)[19] and the like. Only after he is well versed in these, should he also
read *Tsene-rene*, *Esrim-ve'arba*, *Mahzor* and *Slihot* and his reward will be
great, but the latter are not as vital as the former."[20]

Three books of morals are, together with the widespread book on
women's commandments, given priority over renderings of the Bible
and certain prayers, clearly indicating the fundamental importance of
*kiyum mizvot* and moral behaviour. Other authors may express some-
what different views as does R. Yona Landsofer of Prague in 1710,
who also offers a classification of addressees: "One who is not a *lamdan*
but a *yode'a sefer* should learn and know all the *mizvoth* and be expert in
them and listen to the lessons of those who study *Mishnah*, *Mikra* and
*Shulhan arukh*. And if he lacks either the means or the ability to do so,
he should not refrain from studying many books printed in *loshn-ashke-
naz* such as the *Magid*[21] on *Humash*, *Nevi'im and Ktuvim*, the *Lev tov*

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[18] The common terms for Yiddish were *loshn Ashkenaz* (the language of Ashkenaz)
and *taytsh* (from *deutsch*, i. e. German). While both applied to Yiddish as well as to
German, *taytsh* was later on restricted to the language of translation from the Hebrew
sources.

[19] *Sefer hamusar* by R. Yehuda Khalats is a very well known Hebrew book of mor-
als. No Yiddish book of this kind is known by this name.

[20] See Simha Assaf, *Sources for the History of Jewish Education* (Hebrew: *Mekorot
letoldot hahinukh beisrael*), Vol. I, Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1954, p. 176.

[21] See Shmeruk (above, note 1), pp. 107–110. Nos. 51–52; Turninasky (below, note 23).

and the like."[22] Most of the central components of this Yiddish corpus maintain their status for many generations. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the *Brantshpigl* and the *Lev tov* are the most highly recommended Yiddish books; about twenty five editions of the latter appear during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *Bentsherl*, the *Minhogim*, *Mitsves noshim* and translations of the prayer books continue to instruct and enlighten the Yiddish public for long periods of time; the *Magid* and its successors cater even in the twentieth century to the study of the Bible in general and to the *mizvah* of learning the weekly portion in particular; about 300 editions, from the first printing – probably at the end of the sixteenth century – up to the Holocaust and even later, turn the *Tsene-rene*, a rendering in Yiddish of the Pentateuch, the *Megillot* and the *Haftarot* into the most popular Yiddish book ever.

The *Tsene-rene* provides an excellent example of the modes and methods an author may apply in his work for the sake of his intended reader. These concern, on the one hand, his eclectic selection from the Hebrew corpus as a whole, and on the other, his selective drawing from each particular source. In the Pentateuch section of the *Tsene-rene* the discourses are based on a selection of versicles and topics from the weekly portion treated in an exegetical and at times homiletically inclined manner, drawing from numerous sources, primarily the *Midrash* (first of all *Bereshit Rabba*) and the Talmud, Rashi and his interpreters, and many other exegets with R. Bahya ben Asher ibn Halawa in the lead. This thirteenth century exegete interprets the Pentateuch in four ways: *pshat* (literal), *drash* (homiletical), *sekhel* (rational), and *sod* (according to the *Kabbalah*). The author of the *Tsene-rene* draws mainly on the *pshat*, he does not refrain from combining it with the *drash*, but clearly and carefully avoids the other two more sophisticated methods of interpretation.

Although the image of the addressee and his ability to comprehend, as well as the idea of how whatever he needs should be handed down to him may vary from one author to another, popularization is the name of the game. This operation begins with the mere transference of the selected text or texts, passages or excerpts from the Hebrew sources into the reader's vernacular, or, more precisely, into the Yiddish language he reads and understands. For although no formal coordinating body existed, the regional elements (Slavic, Italian, Dutch) that entered the spoken Yiddish in the diverse locations of the Ashkenazi Diaspora, were diligently excluded from the Yiddish printed books in order to make their contents comprehensible to all potential readers. A literary lan-

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[22] See Assaf (above, note 20), p. 179.

guage was thus created, which until the end of the eighteenth century systematically distanced itself from local usages and in this way maintained the link of all Yiddish speakers to one and the same body of literature. Only in the last decades of the eighteenth century, with the neglect of Yiddish by its West European speakers in favor of German, and the subsequent massive transition of Yiddish printing from West to East, the Eastern Yiddish variant became the language of all modern Yiddish writing.

Except for the literal Bible translations, which were clearly rejected by the public,[23] some similar translations of prayer books, and a few other texts, most Yiddish works, whether eclectic or not, put their selected Hebrew sources through a process of amplification in which additional explanations, repetition and rewording, simplification, itemization and exemplification play a most active role. The typical outcome of the processing of the Hebrew sources into Yiddish is a broad paraphrastic narrative interlaced with stories and exempla, proverbs and parables, the author's digressions and interpolations in the first person, his intimate appeals to the reader, and his allusions to actual reality. As a result of this "*fartaytshung un farbeserung*"[24] process, most of these Yiddish texts are not only easy to understand but often much more interesting, attractive and enjoyable than their sources. Poetic devices such as rhymed prose or stanzaic structures add to the appeal of quite a few Yiddish works – including translations and adaptations of the Bible – and numerous illustrations, mainly in the *Minhogim*, the *Bentsherl* and the *Tsene-rene* grant them charm and enlightening power.[25] It is indeed most probable that the alluring nature of these Yiddish books appealed not just to the Yiddish-only readership, but to the Hebrew readership as well.

Although each author chose his own approach to popularization according to his idea of the addressee's capabilities and needs, the growing Yiddish corpus as a whole attests to the authors' mainly positive appreciation of the public's intellectual potential and to their firm intention to broaden its horizons well beyond the basic necessary Jewish knowledge derived from the sacred and traditional Hebrew sources. Yiddish trans-

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[23] See Chava Turniansky, "Reception and Rejection of the Yiddish Renderings of the Bible" in Shlomo Berger (ed.), *The Bible in / and Yiddish,* Amsterdam 2007, pp. 7–20.

[24] *'Fartaytshn'* means 'to translate' (especially from Hebrew into Yiddish), 'to interpret', and 'farbesern' – 'to improve'

[25] See Chone Shmeruk, *The Illustrations in Yiddish Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Hebrew: *Ha'iyurim besifrey yidish bame'ot hatet-zayin–hayud-zayin*), Jerusalem: Akademon, 1986.

lations of Hebrew historiographies, such as *Yosipon* (1546), *Shevet Ye-huda* (1591, 1648, 1700), *Zemach David* (1698), and travelogues, such as Benjamin of Tudela's *Masa'ot* (1691, 1711), and Petahyah of Regensurg's *Sibuv haolam* (1736), provided the Yiddish reader with other kinds of knowledge, as did the translations and adaptations of certain additional genres, mainly hagiography and fables. The Yiddish reader was thus presented with a wide and varied corpus of formative as well as informative knowledge which catered for his Jewish instruction, education and enlightenment.

Besides being a vehicle to Hebrew, a language the addressee knew how to read but did not understand, Yiddish was a vehicle to German, a language he understood but did not read. The associative link between the Latin characters and Christian priesthood resulted in their Jewish epithet, *galkhes*,[26] and in a strong common apprehension about them. As a result, a great majority of Ashkenazi Jews did not read Latin characters at least until late in the eighteenth century, when the first editions of Mendelssohn's German translation of the Bible were for their sake written and printed in Hebrew – and not in Latin – script. Although no exhaustive research on this issue has been published, the contributions to its elucidation that have been made affirm that this was the state of affairs until the end of the eighteenth century and even later.[27]

Those Jews who could read Latin script were mainly officials of the community in charge of its 'external affairs'. Some of them, stimulated by the interest of their fellow Jews in the literature of their Christian neighbors, provided them with proper transcriptions into Hebrew characters. Thus, several German courtly epics of chivalry were since the

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[26] This epithet comes from the Hebrew root גלח (to shave) from which the term *galakh* (Christian priest) derives owing to the priests' tonsura.

[27] See the chapters "The Readership of Mendelssohn's Bible Translations", and "The Yiddish Written Word in Nineteenth Century Germany" in Steven M. Lowenstein, *The Mechanics of Change, Essays in the Social History of German Jewry*, Atlanta, Georgia 1992; Khone Shmeruk, *Yiddish Literature: Aspects of Its History* (Hebrew: *Sifrut yidish: prakim letoldoteha,* Tel-Aviv University, 1978, pp. 25–26); (Yiddish version: *Prokim fun der yidisher literatur-geshikhte*, Tel Aviv: I. L. Peretz Publishing House, 1988, pp. 31–33). Two 18th century personalities attest in their autobiographies to the difficulties they met in finding a way to learn how to read the Latin script: In his *Megillat Sefer* (edited by Abraham Bik, Jerusalem 1979, pp. 125–126) Yakov Emden (1698–1776), relates how he, the son of the eminent Rabbi of Altona R. Zvi Hirsh Ashkenazi (Hakham Zvi), and a prominent figure in his own right, learned – "in secret" – to read Latin script from a young Christian servant. Some time later the well known philosopher Solomon Maimon (c. 1753–1800) describes how he achieved this goal by identifying the single Latin characters used in Hebrew books for enumerating the printing sheets (see Solomon Maimon, *An Autobiography*, New York: Schocken Books, 1947, p. 35).

fourteenth century made accessible to the Jewish reader. Most transcriptions of this kind faithfully followed the original, the mechanical act of transcribing being interrupted only in order to neutralize, judaize, debase or entirely omit obvious Christian motifs.[28] Just as harshly as the whole chivalric genre was criticized by authorities within Christian society for being false and vain, the transcription of chivalric tales into Hebrew characters, having gained popularity but were disapproved by of the spiritual leadership within Jewish society. Sophisticated Yiddish biblical epics appeared with the aim of rejecting and replacing them with meaningful epic poems based on Jewish sources.[29]

Transmission of any knowledge or factual information from German texts to the Yiddish reader – apart from booklets of popular medicine – before the end of the seventeenth century appears to have been quite limited. The earliest evident case I know of is a song about the public execution of the Fettmilch rebels in Frankfurt on Main in 1616. At least six detailed German accounts were printed immediately after that sensational event, but their Latin script seems to have made them inaccessible to the Jewish reader, who was surely as curious about the incident as anyone else. And it must have been on his behalf that Nahman Pukh, an official of the Jewish community of Prague, not only adapted one of these accounts into Yiddish but carefully transformed it into a so-called "historical" song *("historish" lid)*,[30] the traditional and long lasting Yiddish genre involved in the immediate diffusion of information about actual occurrences. In the other forty six "historical" songs – dealing with contemporary events in Germany, Holland, Poland, Lithuania, Bohemia or Moravia – that have come down to us from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, no drawing upon non-Jewish sources has yet been detected. Many of them were written by eye witnesses, some of them appeared in parallel Hebrew and Yiddish versions, and all of them aimed to keep the Jewish public informed about current events – fires and plagues, trials and executions, sufferings in time of siege and war, persecutions and expulsions, natural disasters and other calamities.

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[28] For a thorough analysis of this phenomenon and its results see Chone Shmeruk, "Can the Cambridge Manuscript Support the Spielmann Theory in Yiddish Literature?", *Studies in Yiddish Literature and Folklore*, Research Projects of the Institute of Jewish Studies, Monograph Series 7, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 1986, pp. 1–36.

[29] See Chava Turniansky, "On Old-Yiddish Biblical Epics"*, International Folklore Review*, Vol. 8 (1991), pp. 26–33 (especially p. 32).

[30] See idem, "The Events in Frankfurt am Main (1612–1616) in Megillas Vints and in an Unknown Yiddish 'Historical' Song", in: Michael Graetz (ed.), *Schöpferische Momente des europäischen Judentums*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2000, pp. 121–137.

The authors – most of them functionaries in the community such as *melamdim*, scribes, preachers, beadles, and cantors – formulated their information in various kinds of stanzas or rhymed prose, and published their works in small, cheap booklets of four, eight or twelve pages, which in fact performed a function similar to that of the newspaper.

Although a familiarity with German and Dutch translations of the Bible is evident in the Yiddish Bible translations printed in Amsterdam in the late 1670s,[31] it seems that the first acknowledgement of texts in Latin characters as sources for a book in Yiddish appears in a practical manual on commerce and finances called *Tikun soharim vetikun hilufim,* written and printed in 1714 in Amsterdam, where soon afterwards the author of *Di beshraybung fun Shabtay Zvi* was drawing information from a Dutch source for his account of the Sabbatean movement, and where half a decade later another Jewish resident of the city wrote and published his *She'eyres Yisroel* (The Remains of Israel) a comprehensive historiographical work in Yiddish based on a large number of Jewish as well as non Jewish sources. But this was Amsterdam,[32] a cultural environment which differed in many ways from traditional Ashkenaz. The output of Yiddish works that originated in eighteenth-century Holland was intended – as all Yiddish books were – for the Yiddish public everywhere, and it certainly joined the corpus of knowledge offered to him. In 'traditional' Ashkenaz however, the drawing upon sources written in Latin characters seems to have become possible only in the wake of the Haskalah movement which, by stimulating the neglect of Yiddish in favor of German as well as the study of other languages, rendered this Yiddish mediation irrelevant. Even so, for the greater part of the Ashkenazi Jewish population, then residing in Eastern Europe, the Yiddish mediation continued to be relevant for a long period of time during which it was intensely involved in a constantly increasing transmission of knowledge derived from non-Jewish sources.

During the Early Modern period, a vast and variegated body of knowledge in Yiddish catered to the enlightenment of all the Ashkenazi Jews who did not – or not sufficiently – understand the language of the Hebrew sources. The learned – mainly members of the secondary intellectual elite – selected the items they thought fit for their intended audience, applied diverse methods of popularization to the contents and

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[31] See Marion Aptroot, *Bible Translation as Cultural Reform: The Amsterdam Yiddish Bibles (1678–1679)*, Dissertation, University of Oxford, 1989 (unpublished).

[32] See Chava Turniansky, "On Didactic Literature in Yiddish in Amsterdam (1699–1749)", (Hebrew: *Al sifrut didaktit beyidish beAmsterdam*), *Studies on the History of Dutch Jewry*, Vol. 4, Jerusalem 1984, pp. 163–177.

form of the selected material, and presented the addressee with a considerable variety of instructive and attractive works rendered in a language he understood. The concern for the Yiddish reader wherever he might be brought about the fixed literary language – which was carefully observed by the authors and followed by correctors and printers – that made possible the distribution of the same books throughout the Ashkenazi Diaspora. A broad publishing network allowed for the great mobility of works from their location of composition to the place of their printing, as well as from the place of their first printing to other printing locations for further editions.

It is possible that this remarkable enterprise, conceived and carried out by the learned for the sake of the more or less unlearned, was influenced by other concerns yet unexplored, such as lucrative interests or a class-conscious agenda dictating what the 'simple folk' should or should not know. However, the impressively rich and variegated body of knowledge that was presented to the Yiddish reader, the great care the numerous contributors to the corpus took in finding their way to his mind, taste and perceptive abilities, the attention they paid to his spiritual and practical needs, are clear evidence of a conscious and deliberate undertaking intended, first and foremost, in favor of the reader. Many works disclose the author's keen sense of mission, his devotion to the reader, his explicit intention to fight ignorance, and even his belief that the diffusion of knowledge among the unlearned is a contribution to society as a whole.

The Yiddish corpus instructed the simple folk in *yidishkayt un mentshlekhkayt* and granted them a wealth of knowledge and understanding. It may not have made the unlearned learned, but it did offer them, at the very least, a way out of ignorance, and provided them with the necessary tools to achieve a higher place in the scale of knowledge and even to become knowledgeable, conversant individuals. We may therefore assume that the Yiddish body of knowledge – by expanding the ground of common cultural communication – played a significant role in diminishing the gap between the learned and the unlearned, and by its distribution throughout the Ashkenazi Diaspora – contributed to the consolidation of a unified diasporic way of life and thought.