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Between Yiddish and Hebrew

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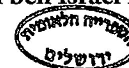

Brenner and Agnon Between Languages: Yiddish in Early Twentieth-century Hebrew Literature

Yael Chaver

The turn of the twentieth century was a moment of profound shift in Ashkenazi Jewish culture: a shift towards modernity and modern ideologies. This shift was often expressed in language choice. Many, if not most, of the Hebrew writers in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century created both in Hebrew, the traditional language of high religious culture that was being revived for secular use, and in Yiddish, the language in which a well-developed literature had already created models to copy as well as to challenge. The expressive capacities of Yiddish and Hebrew were different at this time. In Yiddish, which Max Weinreich terms a "fusion language," inserts from different linguistic sources are integral.[1] The resonances of the different language components remain explicit and audible within this "fusion," conferring fluidity of expression and flexibility of range and register. As Benjamin Harshav puts it, it is typical of Yiddish conversation "to borrow expressions from beyond the language border and to shift for a while from Yiddish proper to

pieces of discourse in other languages and back."[2] The different linguistic components can be set off against each other and "made to sparkle."[3] Yiddish was, of its very nature, a vernacular.

The flexibility of Yiddish as a fusion language freed its writers from subordination to the canonic style that hampered Hebrew writers at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond. The Hebrew of the time, in Itamar Even-Zohar's term, was a "deficient" polysystem, which lacked the capacity to perform colloquial functions.[4] The canonic nusah style of the time, largely based on the rabbinic Hebrew of the first centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE, was developed by S.Y. Abramovitch (Mendele Mokher Sfarim) in the 1880s, whose first Hebrew story was published in 1886. Abramovitch is best known for his Yiddish writing; he probably switched to Yiddish for lack of Hebrew readers. In addition to rabbinic Hebrew, the nusah also incorporated elements of later layers of Hebrew, such as the liturgy and rabbinical responsa, all many centuries old. The overarching goal of the nusah was "to say things in a native Hebrew way," in Robert Alter's phrasing.[5] But this style, which stemmed from centuries-old texts, placed constraints on Hebrew writers who were seeking adequate expression for new concerns, such as as alienation and estrangement from society. These concerns were the result of the massive social, cultural, and ideological changes that were occurring in Europe and elsewhere at the turn of the twentieth century.

This was also a time in which Jewish society and culture were embroiled in the turmoil of different ideologies, Jewish as well as non-Jewish. Two of the best known of the Jewish ideologies appropriated language as their emblem: the European Yiddishist movement, broadly speaking, espoused a type of Jewish cultural autonomy in Europe, and adopted Yiddish as its language. The other ideology was Zionism, which worked towards establishing an independent Jewish state in the traditional homeland of the Land of Israel (Eretz-Yisrael in Hebrew, Eretz-Yisroel in the Ashkenazi Yiddish pronunciation). Zionists believed

that a revived Hebrew should be the national language of the forming community. Thus, language choice was often a matter of ideology – or was understood to express an ideological affiliation even when this was not the case.[6] During the early decades of the twentieth century a Hebrew-Yiddish language war raged in the *yishuv*, the new Zionist community of Palestine, sometimes to the point of violence.[7] Yiddish was perceived as a real threat to the new Hebrew culture.

Yet many early Zionists, who were at least bilingual (and many of them were also fluent in Russian, Polish, German and other languages of their surroundings), struggled with the language issue. For Hebrew writers, this was a matter of crucial importance. Once Hebrew became identified with the aspirations of Zionism, Zionists were strongly encouraged to relinquish their mother tongues. But it was not easy, in some cases seemingly impossible, to give up the mother-tongue (literally *mame-loshn* in Yiddish) with its resonances of home and family and its established literary tradition. Writers felt that they should start creating in Hebrew, but the Hebrew of the time sounded artificial in vernacular use. It seemed ridiculous to use lofty scholarly style to describe the simplest everyday experience. Yiddish was the more natural, and therefore more comfortable, language to use. The traces of this conflict are clear in the Hebrew literary production of the first few decades of the century in the *yishuv*. No less interesting are the solutions that writers developed. As illustration, I present some linguistic practices of two of the masters of twentieth-century Hebrew literature in the *yishuv*: Yosef Haim Brenner and Shmuel Yosef Agnon.

Yosef Haim Brenner (1881-1921) was born in Russia. He, too, began writing in both Yiddish and Hebrew. Brenner was the consummate individualist in his life as well as in his art. Although he firmly believed in Zionism as a means to social transformation, he did not subscribe to the exclusive use of Hebrew at the expense of Yiddish. Unlike some other Hebrew writers, Brenner did not consider Yiddish an inferior artistic medium. He considered Yiddish to be a major Jewish language,

with creative capacity the main criterion. After Brenner immigrated to Palestine in 1909, he wrote exclusively in Hebrew, yet never repudiated his close relationship with Yiddish. Though he restricted his Yiddish writing mainly to essays and reviews, he did self-translate several of his early stories into Yiddish. He was reviewing European and American Yiddish publications in the Hebrew press of Zionist Palestine until 1920, a year before his death.[8] Brenner was consistently true to his convictions, sometimes at the expense of his public image. He could be brutally critical and often pessimistic, but his intellectual and moral stature ensured his position as one of the most important intellectuals of the *yishuv*. His death at the hands of Arab rioters near Tel-Aviv in 1921, at age fourty, further enshrined him as a key public and literary figure, a stature that has only grown in the intervening decades.

Brenner strove to represent quotidian life and language in a modernist fashion that would be true both to prevailing literary trends and to the roughness of the Zionist community's forming culture. His prose is full of ellipses, unanswered questions, and sentences that trail off into nothing, often mirroring the internal conflicts of his characters. Brenner, the Zionist, openly expressed his ambivalence about language. He writes in 1908: "Hebrew ... should not become an object of worship and ritual ... it cannot become a fetish."[9] This position is expressed in much of his Hebrew fiction, sometimes explicitly.

His major novel of the *yishuv, Breakdown and Bereavement* (*Shekhol ve-khishalon*), was published in 1920. Early in the novel, he incorporates his view about Hebrew into the narrated monologue of the minor character Kahanovich. Kahanovich is describing a relationship between two members of the *yishuv*: a Sephardic woman whose cultural tradition deoes not include Yiddish, and an Ashkenazi, Yiddish-speaking, man. Both are depicted as speaking broken, stilted Hebrew. Kahanovich voices his own opinion of this form of communication: "The Sephardic woman, like all her female friends who are in touch with the Ashkenazi settlers, knows the Ashkenazi jargon very well..." Kahanovich's thoughts continue, in parentheses in the text: "(The fools abroad think that Hebrew predominates... What a fiction!)."[10] This quote exposes the truth behind the idealized view that everyone in the yishuv spoke Hebrew exclusively. The Sephardic woman, typically someone from a Mediterranean Jewish community, is described as completely comfortable with Yiddish; like Jews everywhere, many in Palestine spoke the local languages, Yiddish among them. Brenner's linguistic choice also exemplifies the Jewish internalization, common at the time, of the pejorative non-Jewish term *jargon* for Yiddish. This term implies that Yiddish is not a "true" language but rather a bastard construct. This internalization was carried over in the *yishuv*, in which it reflected the prevailing ideological attitude of Zionism.

In the interests of poetic effectiveness, Brenner often incorporates both translated and transliterated Yiddish (as well as other languages) in his prose. This is especially noticeable in his representations of speech, whether dialogue or reported speech. Brenner was not singular in this practice. He continues the traditional literary practices of the time. To this day, representations of Yiddish idioms, and idioms from other languages – especially English these days – are quite common in modern Hebrew. However, there is one process that is unique to Hebrew and Yiddish. Jordan Finkin puts it well in his recent book: "*Loshn-koydesh* [i.e., Hebraic-Aramaic derived] words pass through the Yiddish prism and refract back into modern Hebrew."[11] A word from the semantic domain of Jewish ritual and tradition becomes part of Yiddish over the centuries; in turn, it enters modern Hebrew with a meaning that may be different from its original *loshn-koydesh* meaning as well as from its meaning in Yiddish. Let me give a few examples from Brenner's work.

One very common *loshn-koydesh* word is *tachlit* or *tachles* in the Ashkenazi pronunciation. It is first found in late biblical Hebrew, in the book of Job (26:10, 28:3), where it is translated as "end." When *tachles* is used in a rhetorical question in Yiddish, it serves as the object of the sentence. The common Yiddish rhetorical question *vos vet zayn*

der tachles ("what will the end be?") can also mean "what's the purpose?", or "what's the point?". In *Breakdown and Bereavement*, Brenner renders this question by a combination of translation and transliteration, while preserving the Slavic interjection nu that entered Yiddish and has become part of modern Hebrew: *nu, vos vet zayn der tachles* becomes *nu... ma tehe ha-tachlit.*[12] The speaker, Shneurson, seeks secular knowledge in the Zionist *yishuv*, but soon realizes that studying is not a practical way of life. Shneurson's traditional Jewish question, *vos vet zayn der tachles*, is outwardly "modernized" as the Hebrew *ma tehe ha-tachlit*. Brenner's use of this Hebrew term refracted through the diasporic Yiddish (to apply Finkin's terms) enables Shneurson to voice a profound anxiety about the future of the Zionist enterprise. The second example, which appears later in the book, is similar, and expands on this idiom. Here, the speaker is nameless: a Russian Jew who sees no hope for himself in Palestine and plans to go to America: "What's the rationale, what's the end purpose here?" (*ma ha-seykhl, ma ha-tachlit kan*).[13] Here, too, the Hebrew term is mediated through Yiddish: it is a literal translation of the Yiddish *vos iz der seykhl, vos iz do der tachles*. Shneurson envisions his future as death through malaria. The Hebrew-Yiddish phrase signifies a complete loss of faith in Zionism and in the creation of a new Jewish community in Palestine. The minor characters who voice this existential-rhetorical question are clearly disillusioned with their life in the *yishuv*, and suffer from a modernist *angst* with a Jewish flavour.

When Brenner makes full use of the Hebrew-Yiddish-Hebrew progression, sometimes adding a Slavic element, he accurately represents colloquial speech. In the following example, the Slavic element serves to underscore the low social status as well as the poor education of the speaker. Chaim the stone-cutter has no learning and describes himself as "a simple man." He often interjects the common Hebraic-Slavic phrase poter-nu into his reported speech as he muses about the mysterious workings of God and man.[14] *Poter-nu* means, roughly, "there's no doubt" or "no question!" The Hebraic *poter*, pronounced in modern Hebrew

patur, is polysemic and can mean "free, exempt, definitely enough." The Yiddish phrase *poter-nu* employs poter in this last sense, "enough," together with the Slavic *nu* which means "well! now!" and implies some impatience. The entire phrase conveys a sense of fatalism, as in "that's the way it is," which Brenner apparently feels is typical of "simple men."

The common practice of transposing Yiddish syntax into Hebrew speech often occurs in Brenner's work. In a conversation among children, near the end of the novel, one child complains that the pain from another's blows brings her close to death. Another responds: "Why do you speak of death?...You might even die..."[15] A literal translation of the Hebrew here would be, "Why do you speak from death? One might even die" (*lama tedabri mi-mavet?... 'od efshar la-mut*). The Yiddish equivalent would be *farvos redstu fun toyt?... men ken nokh shtarbn*. The Yiddish syntactic underpinnings of this Hebrew remark are clear: the Yiddish preposition *fun* is translated literally as the Hebrew prefixed preposition *mi-* ("from"), the Yiddish *nokh* is translated as 'od ("still"), and the impersonal pronoun *men* is implied in the Hebrew impersonal statement, which does not require a pronoun: "*one* might even die."

Brenner's work reflects the social stratification of the *yishuv*. In traditional Jewish society, where scholarly learning was the most highly esteemed achievement, poorly educated laborers such as stone-cutters and cart-drivers were at the bottom of the heap. In *Breakdown and Bereavement*, a cart-driver, a *balegole*, is represented as actually speaking Yiddish, in a twist that literalizes a common Yiddish idiom. Impatient with the slow pace of his horses, he remarks to his passengers: "They want to make me a retired cart-driver," i.e., put me out of my job.[16] The Yiddish words he uses are oys balegole viln zey mikh makhn, which are a riff on the idiom *oys kapelyush-makher*, literally "a retired hat-maker." The idiom *oys kapelyush-makher* means "no longer an important person." Here, Brenner is slyly poking fun at the diasporic stratification of Jewish society that is carried over into the "new" Zionist society of the Land of Israel; as in Europe, cart-drivers are of no consequence, even though this

particular one considers himself important. The Hebrew readers of the time would have immediately recognized and appreciated this bilingual move.

Brenner used the ideological significance attached to language in order to critique Zionist ideology. Towards the end of the novel, a Sephardic woman born in Safed speaks a broken Yiddish with her friends.[17] However, Judeo-Spanish (commonly known as Ladino) would have been the language mostly widely spoken by Sephardic Jews. Brenner marks the Yiddish that the young woman is speaking in this scene by the same pejorative that we noted in an earlier example: this Sephardic woman, says the narrator, is speaking "Ashkenazi *zhargon*" with her companions. In this land, where a new modern Jewish community is developing, Zionist ideology has elevated Hebrew to the status of the language common to all Jews. Yet even the native Jewish residents are not comfortable expressing themselves in Hebrew. Undermining one stated goal of Zionist ideology, it is Yiddish that seems to be the *lingua franca*.

Brenner appreciated the fact that the *yishuv* was multilingual, like Jewish communities everywhere. Phrases from other languages used in the *yishuv*, such as Russian, German, French, English, and Turkish, are common in his work. The comprehensive four-volume edition of his *oeuvre*, published between 1978 and 1985, contains a total of 46 pages of translations and explanations of non-Hebrew words. When Brenner represents this multilingualism explicitly, he expresses his ambivalence about the future of the *yishuv* and its culture. It was such integrity that assured him of the place he occupies in *yishuv* culture to this day.

Let me turn now to the other Hebrew writer addressed in this paper, Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888-1970). Agnon is probably better known in the world than Brenner, thanks to the Nobel Prize in Literature that he won in 1966 (together with the poet Nelly Sachs). Agnon was born in what is now Ukraine. He, too, first started writing in Europe, in both Yiddish and Hebrew. After his immigration to Palestine in 1908 he switched to Hebrew exclusively, and over the decades produced some of the greatest works of Hebrew literature. Agnon and Brenner were acquainted with each other before either of them immigrated to Palestine. For some years Agnon was in close contact with Brenner, who was older and already established as a man of letters. However, the two followed different personal and poetic trajectories. Whereas Brenner never left Palestine after his immigration in 1909, Agnon moved to Germany in 1912 and remained there for twelve productive years, until a series of domestic catastrophes impelled him to return to Palestine. Agnon's original last name was Tchachkes, but after his first story "Agunot" was published in 1908 he adapted that title as the basis for a new Hebrew last name: Agnon. This was in line with the Zionist imperative to reinvent the diasporic self in the old-new homeland; it also echoed the modernist desire for innovation.

Of the two, Brenner had the more traditional education in a prestigious *yeshivah*, whereas Agnon had most of his schooling at home. However, Brenner was the more conscious modernist. Agnon remained true to centuries-old Jewish tradition in his style, though his work is infused with modern concerns. He drew extensively on post-biblical Jewish texts such as the Mishnah and the Talmud, as well as on other genres from later periods of Jewish history. His writing is complex and highly stylized, and seemed to have nothing to do with the speech patterns of ordinary people in everyday life. Many, if not most, native Hebrew speakers today have difficulty reading Agnon.

However, Hebrew purist that he was, Agnon was not oblivious to the actual usage of Yiddish in modern Hebrew. As Benjamin Harshav observes, in 1990: "Yiddish ways of expression have penetrated Israeli idiomatic speech and Israeli slang."[18] The presence of Yiddish as a subtext of Hebrew was even more overt in the early part of the twentieth century, when the majority of *yishuv* members were native Yiddish-speakers. Like Brenner, Agnon sometimes employs Hebrew translations of Yiddish colloquialisms that refract Hebrew terms, mainly in his dialogues. Such usage often serves distinct poetic purposes.

In his 1919 story "The Sand Hill" (*Giv'at ha-hol*), first published in Germany, the protagonist Hemdat, an aspiring writer (whom some critics consider to be representative of the young Agnon), meets an attractive young woman, Yael Hayut. Yael earns a meager living in Jaffa by knitting socks, and has come to Hemdat's room for tutoring in Hebrew. This fact, in itself, is indicative of the position of Hebrew in the early decades of the *yishuv*; not everyone was familiar with the language. The narrator soon informs us that Yael's parents had been wealthy, but that she is now the daughter of an impoverished man (*yored*).[19] The Hebrew term *yored mi-nekhasav* – literally, one who has descended from the heights of property owning, implying someone who was formerly wealthy and is now destitute – is abbreviated in Yiddish to *yoyred*. Agnon transposes the Yiddish abbreviation into Hebrew, knowing that it would be understood. This could only be done in a culture that was fully at home in both languages.

Hemdat immediately tries to assert his economic and social dominance over Yael. He does not need to assert his cultural dominance; this is assured *a priori* by his gender. In traditional Jewish culture, only male persons know Hebrew. Men are the keepers of learning, and the ones capable of teaching Hebrew. Yet Agnon is not content with this as the only role for Hemdat. As Hemdat makes coffee for his student, to whom he is strongly attracted, he asks the rhetorical question: "Am I not a respectable householder?" (*lo ba'al bayit hagun ani?*).[20] This is a Hebrew translation of the Yiddish *bin ikh nit kin laytishn balebos?*, a question that incorporates the Hebrew component *ba'al ha-bayit*, literally, "owner of the house." Agnon presents this original post-biblical Hebrew phrase, which became in Yiddish *balebos*. However, we are already familiar with the fact that a Hebrew term transmigrates through Yiddish and reappears in modern Hebrew. In traditional Ashkenazi Jewish culture *balebos* does not necessarily imply ownership of one's house. It can also mean "someone with good standing in the community." It is in this sense that the Hebrew-speaking Hemdat uses it. Hemdat is a struggling author who makes a living by giving private lessons. In using this phrase, he tries to present himself as a person of substance, and underscores his superiority by adding the Germanic *laytish*, respectable. A few lines further down, the narrator reiterates and further strengthens Hemdat's status by invoking his parents' social standing: "Hemdat is … the *son* of a Jewish householder" (*beno shel ba'al bayit mi-yisra'el*, Yiddish *a yidisher balebos*).[21] By using these phrases, Agnon illuminates the continued existence and importance of traditional social views in the *yishuv*. This is quite ironic, because all the young people in this story have come to Palestine to forge new lives for themselves, lives they hope will be very different from those of their parents. Yet their opinions of each other and themselves, as well as the reader's conclusions, are inescapably shaped by the homes and cultures they left behind. And, of course, the implications of these stereotypical terms were not lost on most Hebrew readers at the time.

A few pages later, Hemdat has an unwelcome encounter with a woman known only as Mrs. Hermaphrodite (*marat eilonit*). The term *eilonit* is used in the Talmud to denote a woman with masculine characteristics who is incapable of having children. Using Eilonit as the woman's last name is in rather simplistic opposition to Yael Hayut's last name: *hayut*, derived from the Hebrew root for "life," means "vitality." Eilonit joins Hemdat, who is thinking of Yael as he walks home, and insists on accompanying him to his room. Eilonit is everything that the passive Hemdat is not: she is physically large, and takes a masculine initiative as she grasps his arms and starts to dance with him. Hemdat feels revulsion and draws away. The narrator, describing Eilonit's initial encounter with Hemdat, uses the modern Hebrew *nitpela*, "attach oneself unpleasantly."[22] This is a direct translation of the Yiddish *tsugetshepet*, which the dictionary defines as "become a nuisance," used to denote any kind of unwelcome attention or presence. The term accurately depicts Hemdat's attitude towards Eilonit, as he continues to fantasize about Yael Hayut. The story ends as Yael Hayut passes by and ignores him, and

Hemdat comes down the sand dune alone.

We have touched on a story published in 1919, but Yiddish also suffuses much of Agnon's linguistic usage decades later, when the "language war" was long since over and Hebrew was the undisputed language of the community and its culture. His richly textured novella of 1948, "Iddo and Enam" (*Iddo ve-enam*), touches on surrealism in its use of scholarship on ancient civilizations, while also ridiculing certain aspects of such learning. Agnon's fiction could be quite opaque, lending itself to many – often conflicting – interpretations. While the novella is set in Jerusalem of the 1940s, all its characters, whose names ring non-Hebraic, seem more closely connected to places outside Palestine or to remote historical periods in unspecified, half-legendary locations. The traumatic events of the time in Europe and in Palestine are not openly referred to, yet they underlie the plot and its development.

The novella opens with two Germanic names, those of the characters Gerhard and Gerda Greifenbach. They have achieved the age-old Jewish goal of living in Jerusalem, yet are about to leave for a vacation in Europe. The times are unsettled in the city, and the anonymous first-person narrator agrees to look after their home while they are away and make sure that no one breaks in. Drinking tea, they talk about the possibilities of foreign travel. As the story begins, the narrator says, "we sat over a glass of tea and talked," (ישבנו על כוס תה) a loan translation from the Yiddish phrase *zitsn iber a gloz tey.*[23] A more normative Hebrew wording might be, simply, "we drank tea." The use of this Yiddish phrase at the outset of a story set in Jerusalem, the heart of the land of Israel, conveys a sense that diasporic culture, so reviled by Zionists, is alive and well in the midst of what is ostensibly a new Zionist community. Clearly, not everyone is a Zionist. Many German Jews, for example, fled to Palestine in the 1930s, as their only refuge. The Greifenbachs cling to their non-hebraic names; their social customs are a continuation of diasporic ones. Rather than embracing the passion of creating a new home for Jews, they feel they must travel abroad "in order to rest from the trouble of the Holy Land."[24] The tenor of the scene, in which they complain about a sense of diasporic insecurity in their own home, is foreshadowed by the act of sitting "over a glass of tea," a European Jewish setting *par excellence*, possibly derived from Russian custom. In western Europe, as we know, tea is served in cups, whereas in eastern Europe serving tea in glasses is more common. Obviously, the phrase does not imply a single glass; rather, it indicates a social occasion punctuated by tea-drinking.

Gerhard Greifenbach's name, especially his first name "Gerhard," leads us to assume he is from Germany and thus probably more assimilated into European culture than eastern European Jews. He is afraid that intruders will take over their home while they are away. He uses another loan translation from Yiddish when he says "...we are not even sure of the roof over our heads" (קורת גג שעל ראשינו).[25] This phrase does not literally refer to the roof. It originates in the Yiddish, *a dakh ibern kop*, "a roof over one's head," a phrase that implies the totality of a house, a place that answers the basic human need for dependable shelter. This Yiddish-based phrase in the context of a statement by a German Jew who has immigrated to Palestine in the hope of living securely among Jews, gestures towards the centuries-old fear of expulsion and displacement that is part of diasporic Jewish culture. Agnon here seems to express some doubt about the value of the Zionist community of Palestine as a safe haven and an ultimate home for all Jews. Having said that, it may be useful to remember the historical circumstances of the early 1940s: the Germans were in complete control of Europe, and their forces were sweeping eastward across North Africa. It seemed that nothing would be able to stop them from seizing the entire Middle East, including Palestine. Spirits in the Jewish *yishuv* were low, as people became more and more aware of the fate of their families in Europe and worried about their own fate. Doubts about the future of the Zionist project were therefore not unusual.

The Yiddish underpinnings of contemporaneous Hebrew usage in the yishuv are often clear in syntax and word choice, even in the work

of such a purist master as Agnon. We know very little about the narrator of *Iddo and Enam,* except that he is a friend of the Greifenbachs, but his represented thought and speech are rich in echoes of Yiddish. When the narrator, who has come to spend the night in the Greifenbachs' apartment, opens the door to an unexpected visitor, he muses, "From where did Gamzu [the visitor] know [*me-heichan yada Gamzu*] that I am in the Greifenbachs' home?"[26] The post-biblical interrogative "from where," *me-heichan,* is a loan translation from the Yiddish *fun vanen,* which can indicate a spatial location or a source of knowledge. The Yiddish equivalent of this question would be *fun vanen hot Gamzu gevust az ikh bin in der heym fun di grayfnbakhs?* A more conventional Hebrew question might open with "How did Gamzu..." (*eikh yada Gamzu...*). Later in the story, Gamzu reports that he is looking for his missing wife. Surprised, the narrator says, "I've heard that your wife never moves from her bed" (*lo zazah mi-mitatah*).[27] "Never moves from her bed" is a precise loan translation of the Yiddish *rirt zikh nit fun bet,* rather than a more elevated "literary" style Hebrew. Such style would use: l*o kamah mi-mitatah* (does not rise from her bed). The usage of a loan translation from Yiddish would be fairly typical of people who had come from the Yiddish-speaking culture of Europe.

Thus, even such a painstaking Hebrew writer as Agnon was not above incorporating Yiddish components into his complex prose when it suited his poetic ends. Traces of one's native tongue and native culture are retained beyond any logical reason and can be deployed at will, for poetic or other emphasis.

I would like to end with a few words about Yiddish in more recent Hebrew literature. Its presence has been palpable throughout the decades since Brenner and Agnon. Writing recently about the work of Ya'akov Shabtai, a major figure of mid-twentieth century Hebrew literature, Shachar Pinsker notes literal translations and other forms of representation of Yiddish.[28] Shabtai's most important works, written in the 1970s and 1980s, are set in Tel-Aviv, "the first Hebrew city," as it was

proudly termed in the 1920s. Yet Shabtai's linguistic practice illustrates the lingering presence of Yiddish, the diasporic language, in Israeli life and culture. Shabtai was not alone; Hebrew writers such as David Grossman and Aharon Megged, in the 1980s, include a significant Yiddish subtext as well as overt Yiddishisms. And in 2011, Mattan Hermoni's best-selling Israeli novel *Hebrew Publishing Company* deals with Yiddish culture in early twentieth-century New York. It is written in a style that purposely echoes Yiddish. It is telling that the novel was short-listed for Israel's most prestigious literary award, the Sapir Prize.

Clearly, Yiddish, the diasporic language that Zionists thought they had vanquished, is still present at various levels in the cultural baggage of Israeli writers. The process that began in the early days of the Zionist *yishuv* is far from over. And Israeli Hebrew literature, often unaware of its Yiddish subtext, continues to be enriched by it.

Notes

1 Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 29-30.
2 Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 28.
3 Ibid., p. 63.
4 Itamar Even-Zohar, "Aspects of the Hebrew-Yiddish Polysystem: A Case of a Multilingual Polysystem," *Poetics Today* 11.1 (1990), p. 125.
5 Robert Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988, p. 37.
6 Such was the case of David Fogel (1891-1944), a modernist writer who created in Hebrew exclusively, though he was not affiliated with Zionist ideology and did not emigrate to Palestine.
7 Yael Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten, The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001, pp. 1-45.
8 A different route, for example, was taken by the major poet Uri Tsvi Grinberg (1896-1981), who began writing fiery, expressionist Yiddish poetry in Europe, immigrated to Palestine in late 1923, and officially switched to Hebrew out of Zionist ideology. It is less well known that Grinberg went on writing in Yiddish as well; he published his Yiddish work exclusively in Europe; see Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten*, pp. 111-113.
9 Yosef Haim Brenner, *Collected Works*, vol. 3. Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985, p. 188.
10 Ibid., vol. 2 (1978), p. 1636.
11 Jordan D. Finkin, *A Rhetorical Conversation, Jewish Discourse in Modern Yiddish Literature*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010, p. 80.
12 Brenner, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, p. 1498.
13 Ibid., p. 1616.
14 Ibid., pp. 1547-1549.
15 Ibid., p. 1685.
16 Ibid., p. 1660.
17 Ibid., p. 1683.