Neglected Origins of Modern Hebrew Prose: Hasidic and Maskilic Travel Narratives

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NEGLECTED ORIGINS OF MODERN HEBREW PROSE:
HASIDIC AND MASKILIC TRAVEL NARRATIVES

by

Ken Frieden

The emergence of modern Hebrew literature has too often been represented as a straight line from Enlightenment authors’ *meliza* to “Mendele’s *nusah*” in S. Y. Abramovitsh’s fiction.\(^2\) If we are to move beyond this one-dimensional geometry, we must add additional lines of development: from traditional rabbinic writing in postmishnaic Hebrew, branching out to hasidic narratives and parodies of hasidic Hebrew, and gradually leading toward a more vernacular Hebrew style. Once we have recognized the inadequacy of the older model, which culminates in hyperbolic claims for Abramovitsh’s short stories (1886–96), we can better appreciate the contributions of diverse authors such as R. Nathan (Nosn) Sternharz (1780–1845), Mendel Lefin (1749–1826), and their successors.

While conflicting ideologies of the Jewish Enlightenment and of Hasidism are reflected in many of their writings and in scholarship about them, the literary contributions of these writers have been undervalued and are seldom understood. Accepted wisdom in Hebrew literary history tells us that the *maskilim* favored a neobiblical style, which they considered to be “pure” (*lashon zah or zeha*); in contrast, the hasidim wrote a kind of “low Hebrew” or “folk Hebrew,” which many nonhasidic readers have scorned for the past two centuries because it was based on postbiblical Hebrew, included grammatical errors, and was tinged with

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1. The author thanks the Lady Davis Fellowship Trust, Hebrew University, and Syracuse University for their generous support of research in Jerusalem during 2007–2008, without which this paper could not have been written. I have benefited from conversations with Shmuel Werses, Ariel Hirschfeld, Naomi Seidman, Jonatan Meir, Vera Solomon, and Rebecca Wolpe, as well as from written exchanges with Nancy Sinkoff. I was privileged to take part in a yearlong research group, “Toward a New History of Hasidism,” organized by David Assaf and Moshe Rosman at Hebrew University’s Institute for Advanced Studies. Several participants offered helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper: Ada Rapoport-Albert, Gershon Bacon, Shmuel Feiner, Zvi Mark, Moshe Rosman, Shaul Stampafr, and Marcin Wodzinski. I would also like to thank the librarians at the Jewish National and University Library for their assistance while I was working with rare books and manuscripts in Jerusalem, and for granting permission to print the facsimile, transcription, and translation that are included in appendix II and appendix III.

Yiddish. This simplistic opposition has seldom been questioned, although some linguists have challenged the claim made by the maskilim that they were writing “pure” biblical Hebrew. Intellectual historians have emphasized the antihasidic polemics, and maskilic satires have been studied in depth, but other literary genres have been neglected. Moreover, not all maskilim embraced biblical Hebrew and meliza; Lefin, for example, favored mishnaic Hebrew.

The genre of travel narrative merits closer attention, and we can learn a great deal from Hebrew narratives of sea travel that were written and translated at the start of the nineteenth century. It is significant that, in spite of their...

3. In English, an outstanding literary history along these lines can be found in Robert Alter’s The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), especially chap. 1, “From Pastiche to Nusakh.” On “folk Hebrew” (’Ivrit ’amamit), Aharon Ben-Or (Orinovski) writes that “Perl points to it as a symbol of barbarism and ignorance, and we value it as the beginning of popular Hebrew, alive and natural.” See Aharon Ben-Or (Orinovski), Toldot ha-sifrut ha-’Ivrit ha-hadasha (Tel Aviv: Yizreel, 1966), 1:77; cf. Ken Frieden, “Joseph Perl’s Escape from Biblical Epigonism through Parody of Hasidic Writing,” AJ Review 29, no. 2 (2005): 265–82.

4. Chaim Rabin, for instance, notes that the language of the Haskalah was not as biblical as the maskilim claimed: “The ability to express nineteenth-century thought in Biblical Hebrew had been built up in a long process, going back to the early middle ages, in which each generation benefited from the discoveries of its predecessors. This process included the creation of compounds and new idioms to express concepts not found in the Bible, as well as changes in the meaning of Biblical words, which were thus fitted to fill gaps in the semantic spectrum. While the forms of the words were Biblical, the syntax of haskalah literature—except for the Biblical idiomatic phrases—is that of a European language.” See Chaim Rabin, “The Continuum of Modern Literary Hebrew,” in The Great Transition: The Recovery of the Lost Centers of Modern Hebrew Literature, ed. Glenda Abramson and Tudor Parfitt (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), 18.


6. Numerous scholars—such as Israel Weinlōs, Shmuel Werses, Khone Shmeruk, Dan Miron, Gershon Shaked, Moshe Pelli, Yehuda Friedlander, Jeremy Dauber, and Jonatan Meir—have written about Enlightenment satire in Hebrew and Yiddish prose, including studies of Aharon Halle-Wolfsohn, Joseph Perl, I. B. Levinsohn, S. Y. Abramovitch, and others.


ideological disparities, both hasidic and maskilic authors actively contributed to the evolution of this popular genre. R. Nathan was a pathbreaking author in his own right, apart from his role as R. Nahman of Bratslav’s scribe, and his 1815 account of R. Nahman’s pilgrimage to the Holy Land was a milestone of sorts in Hebrew literary history. In a different vein and across a cultural divide, Lefin’s translations from German (ca. 1815–23), based on Joachim Heinrich Campe’s stories of adventure at sea, are stylistically as significant as any original Hebrew prose of the time. While R. Nathan worked from oral Yiddish sources and Lefin translated from printed German texts, a kind of indirect dialogue took place between their Hebrew publications. This battle of books expressed contrary ideologies and the authors’ efforts to win over readers. Both writers contributed to the evolution of modern Hebrew narrative in ways that are seldom acknowledged by literary historians.

Alongside the well-known ideological encounters, then, literary skirmishes took place. From the standpoint of literary history, Lefin and R. Nathan were two leading figures in the intertextual battleground of early nineteenth-century Hebrew prose. Their competing narratives of sea voyage tested the authors’ ability and readiness to convey concrete descriptions of nature in Hebrew. At the same time, their travel literature conveyed attitudes toward natural science, geography, and the non-Jewish world.

In spite of obvious differences, Lefin and R. Nathan had much in common. Because R. Nathan was raised in an antihasidic family in Nemirov, his early Hebrew education may not have been so different from that of Lefin in Satanov. Neither was an original thinker in his own right; both responded to inspiration from other sources. The turning point for Lefin came when he met Moses Mendelssohn and his circle during a sojourn in Berlin in 1780–84, whereas R. Nathan’s life changed after he met R. Nahman in 1802. There was a wide gap between their goals, as between their intellectual and religious milieux, yet some of their literary means were similar.

As a basic premise, I assume the relevance of Harold Bloom’s ideas of intertextuality and literary influence, circling around the question, how do authors experience “the anxiety of influence” and attempt to achieve “strength” in relation to their precursors and contemporary rivals?9 Joseph Perl’s Megale temirin (1819), his posthumously published manuscripts, and his Bohen zadik (1838) show clearly that Perl was jealous of the success of hasidic works such as Shivhei ha-Besht.10 At the same time, R. Nathan read his opponents’ works, feared their criticisms, and directly attacked specific authors, usually without mentioning their names.

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It is also helpful to draw from Linda Hutcheon’s studies of parody. Hutcheon shows how parody, understood in its most general sense, functions in the form of “repetition with difference”: “A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony.”

Although ridiculing parody is not central to the narratives that are analyzed in this paper, it is possible to interpret some of these works—including translations and adaptations—as genre parodies. In some instances, they reappropriated the genre of travel narrative in ways that altered Hebrew and Yiddish literary history.

There are ample historical clues of possible connections between the Hebrew narratives of sea travel written by R. Nathan and Lefin. As Haim Liberman and Mendel Piekarz show, hasidic authors left compelling accounts of R. Nahman’s and R. Nathan’s meetings with maskilim in Uman. Before and after 1810, R. Nahman and R. Nathan met with Haikl Hurwitz (1749–1822) and his son Hirsh Ber Hurwitz (1785–1857). The most astonishing record of these meetings appears in Avraham Hazan’s Kokhevei ‘or. Hazan writes, for instance,

During the period in which these meetings occurred, sea travel accounts became a popular genre in Hebrew literature, and the Jewish community of Uman provided a direct link between maskilic and hasidic travel writing. In 1817, two years after


R. Nathan had printed his first account of R. Nahman’s pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Haikl Hurwitz published a Yiddish translation of Campe’s Die Entdeckung von Amerika.\(^{14}\) According to some unconfirmed accounts, Haikl Hurwitz’s son Hirsh Ber (later known at Cambridge University as Hermann Bernard) had translated Campe’s book into Hebrew around 1810.\(^{15}\)

Although the maskilim and the hasidim represented two opposing camps, they were well aware of each other’s actions. Khone Shmeruk and Shmuel Werses point to evidence that R. Nathan knew his opponents were reading and scrutinizing his writings. Not only does he caution his son to guard his letters “because they are forbidden to strangers, who make a mockery of truthful words,”\(^{16}\) but also the second edition of Sippurei ma’asiot corrects an error that Perl mocked in Megale temirin.\(^{17}\) A manuscript including omitted passages from the letters that were printed as ‘Alim le-trufa contains additional evidence of R. Nathan’s fear that his letters might be read by people outside the Bratslav community. He repeatedly urges his son to keep many things secret, and he asks him to send a special stamp to seal his letters.\(^{18}\) In one excised letter from

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15. Reyzn, “Campes ‘Antdekung fun America,’” 33, based on the memoirs of a Russian aristocrat (see the Russian Erveiskaia entsiklopediia: svod znаниi o evreištve i ego kulture v proshlom i nasstoischchem [St. Petersburg: Obschestva Dlia Nauchnykh Evreiskikh Izdaniii i Izd-vo Brokgauz-Efron, 1906–13], 6:848). Reyzn suggests, however, that the Russian memoirist confused Hebrew with Yiddish, and that it was Haikl Hurwitz (not his son) who had drafted his Yiddish translation by 1810. Another possibility is that there was a mix-up with the Hebrew translation Mezihat ha-arez ha-hadasha, trans. Moses Mendelsohn-Frankfurt (Altona: Bonn, 1807 [5567]).

16. Sefer ‘Alim le-trufa: mikhtevei Moharat (New York: Hasidei Breslov, 1976), 16, letter 11, dated Friday, Parshat Va-yigash (December 24, 1824). According to David Assaf, the letters from 1836–45 were edited by R. Nahman of Tcherin, while the letters from 1822–34 were edited by R. Nahman of Tulchin; they were first published in 1893 and 1896, respectively. See David Assaf, Breslov: bibliografiya mu’eret (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2000), 68, entry 228.

17. Landkarte (map) was confused with kronikes (chronicles) in the first edition of Sippurei ma’asiot, and Perl mocked this both in Megale temirin and in his posthumously published Ma’asiot ve-aggerot mi-zadikim amityvim u-me-anshei shlomeinu, ed. Khone Shmeruk and Shmuel Werses (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1970), 162 n. See Khone Shmeruk, “Dvarim kehaviatam u-dvarim she-bedimion bi-Megaleh temirin’ shel Yosef Perl,” in the collection of Shmeruk’s essays, Ha-kri’a la-nav’i: mekhkerei historia ve-sifrut, ed. Israel Bartal (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 1999), 144–55.

18. On p. 58a of the manuscript, an editor has excised the following sentences from R. Nathan’s letter:
1841, R. Nathan writes to R. Shmuel Weinberg, “For God’s sake, carefully warn anyone who is informed about this matter that he should conceal and hide the thing away, lest it become known to strangers, God forbid.” And at the end of a letter in 1841, R. Nathan asks his son to “hide these things away from the mockers.”

In a seminal article, Shmuel Feiner moves beyond restating the familiar maskilic polemics. Instead, he turns the tables and shows how a hasidic writer such as R. Nathan studied and railed against maskilic ideas. Following Liberman and Piekarz, Feiner mentions the intriguing accounts of R. Nahman’s and R. Nathan’s meetings with maskilim in Uman. He then demonstrates that R. Nathan responded to the ideology of the Haskalah, specifically attacking works such as Shmuel Romanelli’s Masa ba-’arav. Although Romanelli was a Sephardic Jew living in Italy, he published his travel narrative in Berlin, at the press affiliated with the Jüdische Freischule (or Knabenschule, 1778–1825).

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I am grateful to Zvi Mark for loaning me a microfilm of a little-known manuscript of the letters, which is held by the Russian National Library (formerly the M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library) in St. Petersburg. Israel Zinberg discusses this manuscript in Di geshikhte fun der literatur bay Yidn, 8:247–49, first appendix. Taking a more favorable view than Shimon Dubnov, Zinberg refers to R. Nathan’s “flowing Hebrew” (248).

19. See the letter of Monday, Parshat Shemot, 1841, from Teplik, manuscript p. 59b, letter 14.

20. In the manuscript of R. Nathan’s correspondence, p. 63a at the end of letter 3, dated Wednesday, the 36th day of the Counting of the Omer (May 12), 1841. This letter was omitted by the editor (R. Nahman of Tcherin) between letters 323 and 324 in Alim le-trufa, 271.


22. Shmuel Romanelli of Mantua, Masa ba-’arav (Berlin: Ḥevrat ḥinukh ne’arim, 1792). In English, see Travail in an Arab Land, trans. Yedida K. Stillman and Norman A. Stillman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989). Romanelli’s title plays on the similarity between the word mas’a (with final ‘Aleph, “burden” or “travail”) and mas’a (with final ‘Ayin, “journey”), as noted by the Stillmans in their introduction.


24. For accounts of this school, see Joseph Gutmann, “Geschichte der Knabenschule der jüdischen Gemeinde in Berlin,” in Festschrift zur Feier des hundertjährigen Bestehens der Knabenschule der jüdischen Gemeinde in Berlin (Berlin, 1926); and Peter Dietrich and Uta Lohmann, “Daß die Kinder aller Confessionen sich kennen, ertragen und lieben lernen’: Die jüdische Freischule
This was also the press—Defus Hevrat Ḥinukh Ne’arim—that had published Lefin’s book *Mod’a le-vina* in 1789. R. Nathan expressed his rejection of the Berlin Jewish school in his *Likutei halakhot*, in which he referred to groups of “completely wicked and notorious people, who have made for themselves a Society for the Education of Youth [רVertexAttrib נופיסים מרוססים • הטש לשם חברה].”

One might even find evidence of a literary rivalry in the repeated choice of titles. For example, the name *Sefer ha-midot*—which appears as the title of a Yiddish book in the sixteenth century—was adopted by Isaac Satanov (1784, and used again for his book-length translation of Aristotle’s *Ethics* in 1790) and by Naftali Herz Wessely (1786, reprinted 1818–19). In 1811 and 1821, R. Nathan—or, previously, R. Nahman himself—recycled the title as a second name for *Sefer ha-alef-beit*. It is no coincidence that the books by Satanov and Wessely (like Romanelli’s and Lefin’s) were published by the Ḥinukh Ne’arim Press at the Jüdische Freischule. R. Nathan knew of Romanelli’s book from Berlin, as Feiner discusses, and he undoubtedly also knew of books published in Berlin under the title *Sefer ha-midot*. Maskilim and hasidim even fought over the title *Mase’ot ha-yam*, as the publication history shows: After Lefin’s book was published under this title in 1818 and 1823, R. Nathan’s account of R. Nahman’s journey to *‘eretz yisra’el*—originally called “Seder ha-nesi’a sho-lo *‘eretz yisra’el*” when it was included in *Sippurei ma’asiot* of 1815—was reprinted under the title *Mase’ot ha-yam* in 1846 and 1850. Lefin’s sea narratives

in Berlin zwischen 1778 und 1825,” in *Dialog zwischen den Kulturen: Erziehungshistorische und religionspädagogische Gesichtspunkte interkultureller Bildung*, ed. Ingrid Lohmann and Wolfram Weiße (Münster and New York: Waxmann, 1994), 37–47. Initiated by Moses Mendelssohn and his disciples, the *Knabenschule* came under the influence of Philanthropism at the start of the nineteenth century.


26. From about 1780 to 1820, the press called Ḥevrat hinukh ne’arim (Society for Education of Youth) published dozens of books in Hebrew and a smaller number in German. As Zohar Shavit points out, however, there was a far greater supply of than demand for Hebrew books in Berlin at this time. See Zohar Shavit, “From Friedländer’s Lesebuch to the Jewish Campe: The Beginning of Hebrew Children’s Literature in Germany,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 33 (1988): 385–415. After citing data on the number of pupils who attended the Berlin Jewish school, she refers to “the incredible discrepancy between the number of books and the number of their readers” (388).

27. R. Nathan’s first account of R. Nahman’s pilgrimage was published in a supplementary text consisting of twelve double-sided sheets, numbered separately, that was included under the running head “*Sippurei ma’asiot*” in *Sippurei ma’asiot* (Osterha or Mohilev?: n.p., 1815). Entitled “Seder ha-nesi’a sho-lo *‘eretz yisra’el*” (4b to 12b), this narrative forms the second part of the book that has frequently been reprinted as *Shivhei ha-Ran*. *Shivhei ha-Ran* was not, however, used as the title of a self-contained book until 1864. See Gershom Scholem, *Kuntras eileh ha-shemot: Sifrei Moharan z’il mi-Breslav ve-sifrei talmidav ve-talmidei talmidav* (Jerusalem, 1928), 34; and Assaf,
were then republished in 1854 and 1859, followed by reissues of R. Nathan’s *Mase’ot ha-yan* in the 1870s.

Hillel Levine prepared the groundwork for the current analysis when he uncovered Lefin’s concealed polemic against hasidim in *Heshbon nefesh* of 1808. According to Levine, “Lefin preferred the indirect attacks, and for this reason he does not identify the hasidim directly, by name, but instead uses a fairly systematic form of allusive denominations, such as shote and pet.”

Nineteenth-century hasidic authors seldom described the natural world in detail, as an end in itself; when nature does appear in hasidic narratives and commentaries, it is often ascribed spiritual or allegorical meaning. Hence, travel narratives fall into a contested area, on which I want to trace a particular arc. Starting in 1807, as Israel Bartal and Zohar Shavit show, the sea travel narrative became a popular genre among maskilic Hebrew authors. This was a belated response to widely distributed narratives of sea travel in eighteenth-century English and German literature. Hebrew sea narratives range from accounts of pilgrimages to the Holy Land to tales of adventure, discovery, and shipwreck.

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*Breslov,* 16. Nevertheless, Assaf points out that the title on the first page of *Magid sihot* (Zholkva, 1850) is “Shivhei ha-Ran” (15). “Seder ha-nesi’ah shel le-’erez yisra’el” was printed under the title *Mase’ot ha-yan* (Warsaw: Lebenzohn, 1850). In his memoirs, Avraham Gottlober mentions an edition from Yosefov, 1846, and the database of the Jewish National and University Library also lists an edition of *Mase’ot ha-yan* (Yosefov: Shapiro, 1846), but this copy of the book has apparently been lost. The title page of the 1846 edition of *Mase’ot ha-yan* is reproduced by Liberman in *Ohel Rahel*, 188.

28. Hillel Levine, “Bein hasidut le-haskalah: ‘al pulmus anti-hasidi musve,” in *Prakim be-toledot ha-arez. yisra‘el ha-nas* (18). Nevertheless, Assaf points out that the title on the first page of *Magid sihot* (Zholkva, 1850) is “Shivhei ha-Ran” (15). “Seder ha-nesi’ah shel le-’erez yisra’el” was printed under the title *Mase’ot ha-yan* (Warsaw: Lebenzohn, 1850). In his memoirs, Avraham Gottlober mentions an edition from Yosefov, 1846, and the database of the Jewish National and University Library also lists an edition of *Mase’ot ha-yan* (Yosefov: Shapiro, 1846), but this copy of the book has apparently been lost. The title page of the 1846 edition of *Mase’ot ha-yan* is reproduced by Liberman in *Ohel Rahel*, 188.


30. According to Maximillian E. Novak, as many as 100 editions of *Robinson Crusoe* appeared around 1800. See his “‘Looking with Wonder upon the Sea’: Defoe’s Maritime Fictions, *Robinson
Hasidic and Maskilic Travel Narratives

Because R. Nahman had traveled to Palestine in 1798–99, three years before R. Nathan met him, R. Nathan gathered oral history from other Bratslav hasidim—especially R. Nahman’s fellow traveler R. Shim’on—to document this pilgrimage.31 Virtually all of R. Nathan’s sources, including R. Nahman’s teachings and tales, were in Yiddish. Hence his work as R. Nahman’s scribe often began with the translation of an oral Yiddish narrative, which was charged with religious significance, into Hebrew. In contrast, maskilim translated many secular travel narratives from German literary sources.

As published by R. Nathan in 1815, the volume of R. Nahman’s Sippurei ma’asiot describes sea travels both in fantastic tales (especially tales 2 and 10) and in the appended description of R. Nahman’s pilgrimage to ‘erez yisra’el. Among the many surprising features of R. Nahman’s tales are descriptions of adventurous voyages, including accounts of pirates, cross-dressing, and one orgy on board.32 In the hagiographical Shivhei ha-Ran (not yet bearing this title, but already appearing in full form in 1815), moreover, R. Nathan introduced vivid Hebrew descriptions of sea travel. R. Nathan also wrote an account of his own stormy voyage to the Holy Land in 1822, part retrospective narrative and part in the form of a contemporary journal, included in the second part of the posthumously published autobiographical work Yemei Moharnat.33

Without a comprehensive history of Hebrew travel narratives, in the hasidic and maskilic accounts of sea travel it is still possible to find elements of an intertextual dialogue or literary struggle. At the end of Megale temirin, Perl mocks one of R. Nathan’s descriptions; Perl’s main accomplishment lay in the realm of parody—mimicking and caricaturing hasidic writing for satiric effect. Similarly, on the visual level, Lefin mimics the bilingual format of Sippurei ma’asiot (with Hebrew on top, Yiddish on the bottom of the page) in the first edition of his book ‘Onia so’arah.34 But Lefin reached for another

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32. R. Nahman, Sippurei ma’asiot, tale 2, “The King and the Emperor.”
33. R. Nathan Sternharz, Yemei Moharnat, pt. 1, ed. R. Nahman of Tcherin (Lemberg, 1876), and 2nd ed. (Lemberg, 1903); the description of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land was included in the subsequent edition, Yemei Moharnat, pt. 2, ed. Israel Heilprin (Jerusalem, 1904). The only detailed study of this book I have seen is by Marcus Moseley, Being for Myself Alone: Origins of Jewish Autobiography (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 312–32, which was based on his “Jewish Autobiography in Eastern Europe: The Pre-History of a Literary Genre” (PhD diss., Trinity College, Oxford, 1990), 398–426. Since Moseley wrote his chapter on R. Nathan, manuscripts in the Schocken Library have come to light that may contribute to a new understanding of this posthumously published book.
34. Because the initial pages are missing from the only known copy of the earliest edition of this book, it is especially difficult to date. Moreover, there is no absolute certainty that the author was Lefin. Sinkoff argues convincingly in favor of this attribution in Out of the Shtetl, chap. 4: “Evidence pointing to Lefin’s hand in Oniyyah so’arah was its (probable) publication in Zolkiew, where Masa’ot hayam
solution: With his sea narratives translated from Campe, Lefin charted a route to surpass the hasidic writers. Lefin countered the Bratslav literature by translating German travel narratives into equally effective and more grammatically correct Hebrew.

I. SIPPUREI MA’ASIOT, SHIVHEI HA-RAN, AND MEGALE TEMIRIN

R. Nahman’s allegorical tales in Sippurei ma’asiot sometimes resemble folktales but probably have most in common with the parable (mashal) in rabbinic midrash (culminating in the Tale of a Jerusalemite).35 In keeping with the traditional rabbinic mashal or drash, R. Nahman’s oral storytelling makes the tales a vehicle for expressing religious ideas. The allegorical content of Sippurei ma’asiot usually relates to Lurianic kabbalistic ideas.36

R. Nahman’s stories, like many folktales, often lack specific names, dates, or places. In contrast to the generality of R. Nahman’s Sippurei ma’asiot, however, R. Nathan’s independently written Shivhei ha-Ran has the specificity of a spiritual biography. R. Nathan’s Hebrew in Shivhei ha-Ran is as graphic and descriptive as that of Shivhei ha-Ari (known in various late eighteenth-century editions) and Shivhei ha-Besht (published only months before Shivhei ha-Ran).

Even in the cases where R. Nahman narrated his stories orally, R. Nathan seems to have been responsible for most of the published Hebrew and Yiddish. Although the present study cannot dwell on the Yiddish text of Sippurei ma’asiot, it is worth noting that it shows the modernizing and Easternizing features characteristic of leading Yiddish stylists such as Eliezer Pavir, Mendel Lefin, and Haikl Hurwitz.37

The most obvious feature of R. Nathan’s narrative Hebrew is its simplicity, as it takes a form that emulates the oral style of R. Nahman’s Yiddish tales. His preferred vocabulary is narrow, and his phrases are usually short and paratactic. I say “phrases” rather than “sentences,” because the early editions of Bratslav

and Di genarte velt first appeared, its joint publication with one of the travelogues from Masa’ot hayam in the Vilna 1823 edition of that same title, its use of Slavic words in the Yiddish translation, and its being translated from the same source as those in Masa’ot hayam” (195–96 n. 106). Rebecca Wolpe notes that many of the terms that are explained in parentheses in Maseh ha-yam and ‘Onia so’ara are similar, “reinforcing the theory that this work also may be attributed to Lefin” (“The Sea Voyage Narrative,” 79).

35. Alternatively, “Jerusalem Tale.” See Ma’aseh Yerusalmi, ed. Yehuda Leib Zlotnik (Jerusalem: Israeli Institute of Folklore, 1947). In English, see “Tale of a Jerusalemite,” trans. David Stern and Avi Weinstein, in Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature, ed. David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 121–42. The editors wisely conclude their collection with a translation of R. Nahman’s “dream texts”—which were referred to as sippurim hadashim when they were first published in Hayei Moharan (1874).

36. In English, there are several commentaries that emphasize the allegorical interpretations. See Nahman of Bratslav, The Tales, ed. Arnold Band (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); and idem, Rabbi Nachman’s Stories, trans. Aryeh Kaplan (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1983).

writings (like those of Shivhei ha-Besht and many other books of the time) do not use commas or periods; instead, they contain something like a spaced “bullet” in the middle of lines.\footnote{Two autograph manuscripts from the Schocken Library show that when R. Nathan composed the first part of his memoir \textit{Yemei Nathan} (published in 1876 as \textit{Yemei Moharnat}), he used the same minimal punctuation. Because the published versions of Breslav writings often omit, alter, or expand the original punctuation markings, it is difficult to rely on them; in any case, it is clear that R. Nathan moved easily between run-on sentences and a choppy style consisting of short phrases.} Emulating printed texts of the Tanakh, they also use the double point that resembles a colon or \textit{sof pasuk} to show the end of a textual unit (not to say paragraph). Punctuation may seem to be a minor point, but the effect of hasidic Hebrew writing cannot be separated from its grammar and punctuation. For this reason, it is unfortunate that virtually all twentieth-century editions and translations imposed European grammar on these texts, which did not adhere to Western grammatical rules. In part because they were based on oral sources, R. Nahman’s narratives as conveyed by R. Nathan create a distinctive, oral-style impression. For example, a mixture of simple and run-on sentences breaks our expectations and gives an aura of spontaneity.

That the use of full Western punctuation was a novelty among Hebrew readers in the late eighteenth century is evident from an unusual passage contained in Lefin’s \textit{Mod’a le-vina}. At the end of this volume, which includes “Iggeret ha-ḥokhma” and a small part of “Sefer refu’at ha-‘am,” Lefin adds the following note:

For the benefit of the readers (and especially of medical books where it is suitable to be very precise) … we are presenting in the manner of cantillation signs: Two points like this (:) indicate a full stop, like \textit{sof pasuk} in the Holy Scriptures: One dot like this (·) indicates a smaller stop, like \textit{etnah.ta}: One dot and under it a small apostrophe like this (;) is smaller than the \textit{ethnah.ta} and similar to \textit{segol}: A crooked mark like this (,) is the smallest of all, and its force is like that of \textit{zakef katan}…\footnote{I thank Jonatan Meir for drawing my attention to this “Note” on punctuation, which I have quoted and translated in full in appendix I of this article. See Mendel Lefin, \textit{Mod’a le-vina}, pt. 1 (Berlin: Ḥevrat hinukh ne’arim, 1789), “He’ara,” placed at the end of the volume following the segment from \textit{Sefer refu’at ha-‘am}, unnumbered, prior to the table of contents. In \textit{Divrei zaddikim}, I. B. Levinsohn spoofs a hasid’s naïve perception of maskilic books, including short lines and unfamiliar punctuation marks that he calls \textit{pintelekh}. See \textit{Gilgulav shel Megale sod: kuntras divrei zaddikim le-Ribal ve-Yosef Perl}, ed. Jonatan Meir (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2004), 73–74. and Meir’s footnote 105.}

Western punctuation was so unfamiliar to some readers that it appeared necessary to explain it by reference to the Masoretic tropes.

The style of \textit{Shivhei ha-Besht} has been studied in some detail, with attention to its reliance on Yiddish words.\footnote{See Menashe Unger, “Yiddishe verter in \textit{Shivhei ha-Besht},” \textit{Yiddishe shprakh} 21 (1961): 65–73.} As Lewis Glinert states, in \textit{Shivhei ha-Besht}, “parataxis is considerably more common than in other pre-modern Hebrew genres, with particularly repetitive use of \textit{ve-}. This would appear to relate to the
oral or casual style of the prose, which is less inclined to vary and to avoid repetition.”41 The same holds true for many of R. Nahman’s tales and for the independent narratives by R. Nathan. The Hebrew style of R. Nathan has not, however, been analyzed in depth.42

In his second introduction to Sippurei ma’asiot, R. Nathan began a response to his critics. He apologizes for the coarse language (leshonot gasim) used in the stories. The editor of the 1850 edition explains the reason for this: R. Nahman “told the tales in the Yiddish [leshon Ashkenaz] used in our land,” and R. Nathan “translated them into the Holy Tongue and deliberately lowered himself to a simple language—in order that the matter would not be changed for a person reading them in the Holy Tongue [leshon ha-kodesh].”43 This suggests that the Yiddishized Hebrew is deliberate and intended to resemble the style of R. Nahman’s Yiddish storytelling.44 The preface to the second edition of Sippurei ma’asiot acknowledges the criticisms that had been leveled at its Hebrew, but its “low Hebrew” enabled R. Nathan the translator to remain as close as possible to R. Nathan’s own words.45

When R. Nathan translated from R. Nahman’s oral Yiddish, he retained Yiddish and Slavic words in the Hebrew text, including terms such as kretshme (inn), portreit (portrait), zump (swamp), hormates (cannon), katoves (jokes), komedies (comedies), umpit (storm), and matros (sailor).46 Perl mocked this practice and, to draw attention to it, at the end of Megale temirin included a glossary of foreign words used by his hasidic characters. R. Nathan also incorporated many Yiddishized Hebrew words and phrases (e.g., ḥokhmes, yishev ‘azmo [from er hot zikh meyashev geveyn], medabrim shidukhim, yesh rah.mones ‘alav, nafal haloshes, tolesh kvorim, leizones).47 In addition, he relied heavily on Hebrew words that had become established in Yiddish.48 Another sign of R. Nathan’s


43. Sippurei ma’asiot, second preface to the second edition, 2b. No publication data are available for this edition, which was published in about 1850. See also more recent editions, such as Sippurei ma’asiot (Jerusalem: Hasidei Breslov, 1979), xiv.


47. Verses points out numerous calques from Yiddish in tale 9 (“Of the Sophisticate and the Simple Man”) in his “Mi-lashon el lashon be-‘Sippurei ma’asiot’ shel R. Naḥman mi-Breslav,” esp. 35–37.

48. Ibid., 29.
A parallel to the Yiddish reflexive zikh often shows up in Hebrew as et 'azmo, a turn of phrase that seldom appears in Lefin’s Hebrew.50 For example, in a typical phrase of encouragement ascribed to R. Nahman in Likutei Moharan and elsewhere, R. Nathan writes that a person is forbidden from abandoning hope and despairing (today Israelis say lehiyya ‘esh, but R. Nathan writes leya ‘esh ‘azmo, based on the Yiddish zikh meyaesh zayn).51 Translating implicitly or explicitly from Yiddish, R. Nathan writes a Hebrew for Yiddish speakers, favoring Hebrew words that were already present in Yiddish.

I will focus on the second section of Shivhei ha-Ran, entitled “Seder ha-nesi’a shel le-’erez yisra’el.”52 Immediately we find a precise intertextual link between R. Nathan and Perl. Preserving the original absence of Western punctuation, I quote from the first description of a sea journey in R. Nathan’s narrative:

ובבואם לפסף התחלו כל על ים השותר • חקק במעת לעת הרשושות • פנינו
דวลת חנית רבים פרס • דוע שישלם פסק לעספסנים • והחרות להזדה דובר לרופ懋
המחת המסיס שלואו יילוד • יוה ברקוף הצמיח הזהות דוחל צלי • ויה הכול
מרעש הצרעים והצהובים שמראות גלות • מוחמת פס אלי • וברפער ליווBLEY גולם • ואחר ד’
ויין אפשר לשאתם ב 일을 ולמע.

And when they came to the ship and started to go on the Black Sea • immediately in the first day there was a great firtina that is a great storm • until the waves leaped onto the ship • and they were forced to be in a closed and sealed room because of the water so that it wouldn’t get in to them • And there were thunder and lightning and high winds without measure • and there was great fear from the sound of the thunder and the rain and the roar of the waves • and because of fear it was not possible to sleep at night and so on and after four days they came to Istanbul and sat on the shore.53

50. Cf. Zelig Kalmanovitch’s discussion of Yiddishized Hebrew, as parodied by Perl, contained in Yosef Perl’s Yiddish eshavim, ed. Israel Vaynlez (Vilna: IVYO, 1937), c–c. See also Shmuel Werses’s many relevant chapters and articles in his Sippur ve-shoresho: ’iyunim be-hitpathut ha-proza ha-’Ivrit (Ramat-Gan: Massada, 1971); idem, Mi-lashon el lashon: yezirot ve-gilguleihen be-sifruteinu (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996); and idem, ’Hakiza ’ami’: sifrut ha-haskala be-’idan ha-modernizazia (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001). See also “Mi-lashon el lashon: sameenei ha-nusa he-Yiddish shel Megale temirin’ me’et Yosef Perl,” Hulyor 3 (1996): 80.
52. For an important prior analysis of this text, comparing it to the account in Hayei Moharan, see Ada Rappoport, “Shnei mekorot le-te’ur nesi’ato shel R. Nahman mi-Breslov le-’erez-yisra’el,” Kiryat sefer 46 (1971): 147–53. See also Cunz, Die Fahrt des Rabbi Nachman. Cunz rightly observes that the four storm descriptions “are central to the literary structure” of Shivhei ha-Ran, and that the mortal danger presented by these storms sets the overarching narrative tone (291). His analysis is also useful for its juxtaposition of the parallel passages in Shivhei ha-Ran and Hayei Moharan.
53. Sippurei ma’asiot (Ostraha or Mohilev?: n.p., 1815), appended section with new numbering and subheading, “Seder ha-n’si’a shel le-’erez yisra’el,” 5a; in the modern edition Sefer Shivhei ha-Ran (Jerusalem: Agudat “Meshekh ha-nahal,” 1981), 22, sec. 9. I have preserved the original punctuation, which does not distinguish between commas and periods.
Run-on sentences add to the breathless effect of R. Nathan’s descriptions. Although he received the details secondhand, R. Nathan successfully evokes the intensity of the experience. Then, in what seems like an anticlimactic moment, four days suddenly pass and the travelers have arrived safely and are sitting on the shore in Istanbul.54

At the end of Megale temirin, Perl took R. Nathan’s third-person description and ascribed it to hasidic travelers who wrote while fleeing crimes and scandals.55 However, the parody cuts out much of the description—an abbreviation that causes the text to sound simplistic rather than intense:

בخارج על הספינה, והותלו לילה על ים בשחור, ו播שת ליגת הראשה, והז הוות fühル רוור, גזהל.

And we came on the ship, and we started to go on the Black Sea, and in the first day there was a great storm, until the waves leapt onto the ship, and there was great fear.56

This excerpt from the final letter, written by “The Travelers to the Holy Land” (no. 151), undoubtedly refers to the account in Shivhei ha-Ran. Apart from Perl’s omissions, an obvious difference is that the description purports to be a first-person plural narrative by the travelers themselves, while R. Nathan’s description is third-person narrative. Perl’s parody eliminates the charm and suspense of the original by paring it down to only the vaguest phrases.

Perl’s quasi-hasidic passage is distinctive for another reason as well. In most of the letters in Megale temirin, hasidic characters express their views and (according to the literary fiction) Ovadia’s footnotes document that the views expressed in the letters conform to existing hasidic sources. In this case, the quotation from R. Nathan occurs in the body of the text and is ascribed to the fictional hasidic characters. Perl uses and parodies the passage in the body of his text instead of merely citing it in his footnotes. Not only do the characters’ ideas follow hasidic traditions, but their description of sea travel also echoes R. Nathan’s. Thus, Perl parodies hasidic

54. One of the few studies of R. Nathan’s style can be found in Isaiah Rabinovitch’s “Darko shel R. Nahman mi-Breslov el Sippurei-ma’asiot shelo,” in Shoreshim u-magamot: le-behinat mekoroteiha shel ha-bikoret ha-ḥadashe ve-ḥiyunim be-darka shel ha-sifrut ha-‘Ivrit” (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1967), chap. 6. Rabinovitch notes an “internal tension that does not tolerate any punctuation marks” in R. Nathan’s narrative voice (165). His commentary is more expressive in the Yiddish version of this essay, “Reb Nahman Braslavers veg tsu zayne sippurey mayses,” Di goldene keyt 69–70 (1970): 175–76: “Here the narrative style is dynamic, artistic: it is so taut that it does not have any intervening pauses, just as if it were rushing to reach the fateful fact that ‘he [R. Nahman] wanted to see something and saw absolutely nothing.’”


writing while simultaneously satirizing hasidic behavior and their sea voyage (which has been transformed from a spiritual ascent into a flight from scandals).  

In a somewhat similar vein, the drafts that were posthumously published as *Ma’asiot ve-iggerot* contain a letter by Perl that purportedly was written by R. Nathan himself. This parody uses phrases taken directly from the introduction to *Likutei Moharan*. In addition to ridiculing R. Nathan’s language, Perl tries to show that he could do better by “completing” one tale (111–17) and writing a new tale about “The Lost Prince” (117–222). His narrative parodies in *Ma’asiot ve-iggerot* fall short, however, and there is no evidence that Perl ever tried to publish the work. Only when he fully embraced the epistolary form did Perl succeed in satirizing and parodying hasidic life and letters.

This ongoing intertextual battle between hasidim and *maskilim* may have been one impetus for Lefin’s decision to publish non-Jewish travel narratives. The broader cultural project of the Haskalah encouraged him to emulate German literary traditions. Hence, Lefin translated the narratives in *Mase’ot ha-yam* (1818) and *Oni’a so’ara* (ca. 1815–23) from three books for young readers by Campe using an effective Hebrew style: unpretentious, based on mishnaic Hebrew, following the grammar of modern European literature, and incorporating German or Yiddish words where necessary. The sentences are short and direct. Lefin’s prose has the clarity and directness of R. Nathan’s narratives even as he uses less Yiddishized grammar and a richer vocabulary. Before we look more closely at the interrelations between hasidic and maskilic travel writing, it is necessary to retrace some pertinent biblical sources, traditional rabbinic interpretations, and kabbalistic commentaries.

II. TRADITIONAL HEBREW SOURCES OF SEA NARRATIVES

To contextualize nineteenth-century Hebrew sea narratives, we need to understand the significance of Psalm 107 for hasidic and maskilic authors. References to this psalm are prominent in both R. Nathan’s and Lefin’s works. One of R. Nathan’s most graphic descriptions of a storm at sea is framed by quotations from this psalm. Moreover, Lefin refers to Psalm 107 at the beginning of his *Mase’ot ha-yam*.  

In the traditional text, the verses of Psalm 107:23–29 are set off by inverted Hebrew letter nuns, marking what appear to be cadenced poetic lines:

 пу́лъ хэ́м вэ́этин уш́ мошэма бэ́тим бэ́йтим
 во́йдэр хэ́м вэ́этин уш́ мошэма ву́ншола́й

57. Cohen, “Ha-ḥasidut ve-’erez yisra’el,” 337. Other instances of this kind of parody in *Megale temerin* are cited by Tova Cohen (ibid., 336–38).


59. Lefin uses the phrase “yordei ha-yam... be-’oniyot” on the title page of *Mase’ot ha-yam* (1818). The 1823 edition of *Onia so’ara* (Vilna: Menahém Mann, 1823)—which includes one of the two accounts in *Mase’ot ha-yam*—contains a translator’s note that refers to the psalm, and the 1859 edition quotes two lines from Psalm 107 on the verso of the title page. See Nancy Sinkoff, “Strategy and Ruse in the Haskalah of Mendel Lefin of Satanow,” in *New Perspectives on the Haskalah*, ed. Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001), 94–95.
Those who go down to the sea in ships, making it their trade in vast seas,
They have seen the works of the Lord and His wonders in the depths.
He speaks, and a storm wind arises and lifts up the waves.
They rise to the heavens and fall into the abyss, their souls melt away in calamity.
They circle and lurch like drunks, all of their wisdom is swallowed up.
They shout to the Lord in distress, and He removes them from their affliction.
The storm becomes silent and the waves become still.
And they rejoice.…  

Psalm 107 presents a storm at sea as an exemplary instance in which God’s power and goodness are revealed. The key verse for the overall theological message is repeated four times almost verbatim, with variation only in the final verb:

They shout to the Lord in distress, and He rescues/redeems/removes them from their affliction.61

The apparently simple notion that people are saved from danger when they cry out to God raises a contested issue: To what extent does petitionary prayer have the power to alter nature?

The surprising turn of verse 26, in the middle of a phrase, from physical description to a psychological dimension—“They rise to the heavens and fall into the abyss, their souls melt away in calamity [nafsham be-ra’a titmogeg]”—leaves room for an allegorical interpretation that was accepted by many hasidic readers. But the description is also sufficiently graphic to serve as a model for descriptions of actual sea travel. Although hasidic authors often referred to Psalm 107 as a prooftext showing the supernatural power of prayer, Lefin seems not to have followed this line of thinking.

Another strong biblical echo arises from R. Nathan’s use of the term ruah sa’ara. While this phrase occurs in Psalms 107 and 148, an equally important prooftext can be found in the book of Ezekiel. At the beginning of Ezekiel, the prophet gives his account of how “the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.”62 This is the start of the well-known passage that became the basis for

60. The translation is my own, influenced by Harold Fisch’s rendering in The Holy Scriptures (Jerusalem: Koren, 1983).


Merkava mysticism, a tradition central to the Zohar and its use by hasidic authors. The vision begins, “And I looked, and behold, a storm wind [ruaḥ sa’ara] came from the north.”

Hence ruaḥ sa’ara is a key phrase because it suggests a rationale for R. Nathan’s detailed descriptions of the storms in Shivhei ha-Ran, Ḥayeī Moharan, and Yemei Moharnat. These storms are not random and natural; they are the travelers’ significant encounters with God’s power, on their way to the Holy Land. In a sense, the storms are theophanies, for when a pilgrim survives a ruaḥ sa’ara, the outcome is regarded as a manifestation of God’s protective providence. While Campe and Lefin in some ways agree with R. Nahman’s and R. Nathan’s belief in Divine Providence (das Vorsehen or ha-hashgahā), salvation from storms at sea takes on allegorical meaning and has the aura of a mystical event in the narratives of R. Nathan. Accordingly, during R. Nahman’s return journey, a ruaḥ sa’ara strikes with such force that “the waves rose almost to the heavens”.

When R. Nahman expresses his confidence that the travelers will be saved, he echoes Moses leading the Israelites in their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea: “Israel was on the sea and did not drown,” he says, just before Passover arrives.

A way to oppose R. Nahman and R. Nathan was to work from a different textual tradition, and Lefin sometimes chooses to echo the Book of Jonah. In one translation, for example, he uses the unusual phrase ha-‘onai hishva lehishaver, alluding to the more naturalistic description of a storm—also sent by God—in Jonah 1:4. This phrase from Jonah may also be found in prehasidic Hebrew accounts of sea travel, suggesting that Lefin was writing out of another literary tradition.

While Ezekiel, Exodus, and Jonah provided some phrases, Psalm 107 exerted the strongest influence on modern Hebrew descriptions of sea travel. With reference to that Psalm, Nancy Sinkoff describes part of the ideological battle surrounding sea narratives in Hebrew. Hasidim often followed a kabbalistic interpretation of the psalm; according to her paraphrase, which is based on works by Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, Isaiah Tishby, and Joseph Dan, “the mystical interpretation of verses 23–26 glosses the verbs ‘descend’ and ‘ascend’ in the psalm to address the dilemma faced by human souls inextricably mired in

64. Ezekiel 1:4.
65. As Joseph Dan writes in Ha-sippur ha-hasidi (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), 187, “Bratslav hasidim saw in this journey, in every single chapter of it, a hidden mystical meaning.”
66. Shivhei ha-Ran, 9b in the 1815 edition (sec. 21 in editions after 1850). Waters reaching “the heart of the heavens” is an interesting transformation of the expected flames and smoke (from a ritual sacrifice) that reach the heavens.
67. Ibid.
68. Mendel Lefin, Sefer mase’ot ha-yam (Zholkva: Gerson Letteres, 1818), 1a; and Mase’ot ha-yam (Lemberg: D. H. Schrenzel, 1859), 3.
69. See, e.g., Avraham Ya’ari’s anthologies: Mase’ot ’erez yisra’el (Tel Aviv: Ha-histadrut ha-Zionit, 1946), 229; and Iggerot ’erez yisra’el (Ramat-Gan: Massada, 1971), 113, 228, 232.
Sinkoff argues that maskilim rejected this interpretive tradition, as is indicated by a parodic passage by Perl, which she quotes from the Perl Archive:

In my limited opinion, it seems that the interpretation of ‘they ascend to the Heavens, they go down again to the depths’ (Psalm 107:26) is that sometimes the tsadik descends to katnut [smallness]… in order to raise up the evil ones.71

This is Perl’s paraphrase of the mystical reading of Psalm 107, precisely the sort of hasidic view he attacks in Megale temirin. Sinkoff stresses the maskilic rejection of hasidic commentary:

While the Ba’al Shem Tov and his disciples used the psalm to encode the biblical text with the religious significance specific to hasidism and its leaders, Lefin cast it as an invitation for traditional Jews to gain a broader appreciation of the non-Jewish world, which he believed shared with them such fundamental beliefs as the concept of divine providence. He read the psalm literally, that is as a pashtan, using its lyrical biblical poetry to introduce his translations of two treacherous sea-journeys.72

In short, the hasidic tendency was to allegorize the psalm,73 while Lefin literalized its metaphor of sea travel in his Mase’ot ha-yam. Sinkoff discusses an introduction that Lefin wrote to his Mase’ot ha-yam, but that was not published: “In an introduction to Masaot hayam which remained in manuscript, Lefin informs his readers that he intended his translation to remind those who had fallen into dire straits, like the sailors of Campe’s tales, of God’s eternal vigilance.”74 This, however, is only part of the story. Even as Lefin emphasizes divine providence in his sea narratives, he also points to the importance of human ingenuity. As Sinkoff observes, one of Lefin’s key words is tahbula, which refers to a strategy, stratagem, ruse, or tactic. Possibly the most striking element of Lefin’s travel narratives, translated from Campe, is the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the sailors who survive a shipwreck.

Lefin expresses his distinctive ideological positions between the lines of his translated and adapted travel narratives. Sinkoff paraphrases a continuation of the pious ideology contained in his draft of the unpublished introduction: “He urged those who had been saved from danger to spread the story of their salvation as widely as possible.”75 But the beginning of Lefin’s unpublished “Translator’s

72. Ibid., 97.
73. Pertinent to this allegorical bent is R. Nahman’s interpretation of the verse, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you” (Isaiah 43:2), in Likutei Moharan, teaching 73 (Jerusalem: Ḥasidei Breslov, 1988), 89a.
75. Ibid.
Introduction to *Mase’ot ha-yam,* not quoted by Sinkoff, points in another direction:

A person should never expect that nature will change for him by means of a clear miracle, and a person should not despair when the sword hangs over his neck; instead he should prepare a plan [or tactic, *tahbola*], pray, and work always...76

Lefin uses the *hitpael* form in ‘al *yitya’esh,* instead of the Yiddishized reflexive form *leya’esh ‘azmo* that is found in R. Nathan’s writings. Apart from grammatical improvements of this kind, Lefin responded to hasidic texts on a broad scale, and in particular to the writings of R. Nathan. In contrast to typical maskilic *shibuz,* where biblical allusions and quotations predominate, sometimes a matrix of post-biblical literary relationships lies behind Lefin’s writing. The connection between his opening sentence and traditional commentaries brings out another dimension of the unpublished text.

Lefin’s phrase “a person should not despair when the sword hangs over his neck [‘אל ייטאה אפש חנה מבחר moleh ולא זוארו’]” echoes traditional commentaries.77

The basic prooftext is in the Babylonian Talmud:

> אפלי הריב היה מונחת על צואר הג ידים על י들도 עומר, מorgotו.

Even if a sharp sword hangs over a person’s neck, he should not deny himself [God’s] mercy.78

Quoting B. Berakhot 10a, Seforno writes, “Even if a sharp sword hangs over a person’s neck, he should not deny himself [God’s] mercy [‘אפילו הרבר מונחת על צואריו של אדם אלא ינדע עומר מ kaps ה’].”79 Lefin’s use of ‘al *yitya’esh* instead of ‘al *yimn’a ‘azmo* may be traced to R. Yona Gerondi’s commentary on Proverbs 14:32, in which he writes, “Even if a sword hangs over a person’s neck, he should not despair of [God’s] mercy [‘ﬀוי הרבר מונחת על צואריו של אדם אלא ינדע עומר מ kaps ה’].”80 The most striking precursor of Lefin’s text, however, is a passage in

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76. Joseph Perl Archive, Jewish National and University Library, folder 124, lines 1–2; underlining in the original. I thank Jonatan Meir and Avraham Weizal for their help in deciphering Lefin’s handwriting. A facsimile, a transcription, and a translation of the manuscript are contained in appendix II and appendix III of this article.

77. Judaica databases—such as the Bar-Ilan University Responsa Project and DBS Torah Treasures: The Computerized Torah Library—facilitate tracing intertextual connections of this kind. It is, however, always necessary to check the passages that have been found in more reliable print editions.

78. B. Berakhot 10a.


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Rabbenu Bahye, which includes the two key phrases (and also refers to Psalm 107):

ורם לא矮ך הל膑 יפ晶体 פיסרדו הנפשו... פיסרדו הגר ממותה על ערואר שול

And you must know that the power of prayer is so great that it can even change nature.... Even if a sword hangs over a person’s neck, he should not deny himself [God’s] mercy. 81

Lefin directly contradicts one aspect of this line of commentary, writing that people should not expect to be able to change nature by means of prayer. Although he accepts the notion of divine providence, he rejects the supernatural powers that are sometimes associated with prayer. This belief in the power of petitionary prayer is an example of the antiscientific, mystical thinking that became common in hasidic circles, and that Lefin opposed. His unpublished introduction to Mase’ot ha-yam therefore asserts that “a person should never expect nature to change for him by means of a clear miracle” and should rely on planning or tactics “when the sword hangs over his neck.” 82 Although Lefin echoes a line of gemara and medieval commentaries, he transforms his sources to create new meaning. 83 This rejection of hasidic belief in miracles was already present in Lefin’s early “Essai d’un plan de réforme” (1791–92), in which he attacks members of the “new sect” for their faith in miracles performed by their leaders. 84

As stated earlier, the biblical psalms influenced early modern descriptions of sea travel. In “Seder ha-nesi’a shelo le-’erez yisra’el,” R. Nathan uses Psalm 107 to frame the description and subsiding of a storm. This passage follows his earlier storm description that was parodied by Perl:

82. Mendel Lefin, “Translator’s Introduction to Mase’ot ha-yam,” manuscript at the Joseph Perl Archive, Jewish National and University Library, folder 124. See appendix II and appendix III at the end of this article.
83. In Out of the Shtetl, Sinkoff briefly discusses Lefin’s quotations from “the classical sayings of the Rabbinic Sages.” She writes that his citations “not only gave Lefin’s work a traditional imprimatur, but also expressed his ardent belief that there was nothing incompatible between a rationalized, renewed Judaism and the universal values common to all men” (165).
When they went onto the [Mediterranean] sea, there was a very great storm (which is called a very great *firtina*) and the ship was in great danger. They rose to the heavens and fell into the abyss. And not a person among them expected to be saved from death. And they all cried out to God. And one night was just like Yom Kippur, when everyone was weeping and confessing and begging forgiveness for their souls. And they said the Penitential Prayers and the rest of the prayers and supplications. And our Rebbe *z’t* was sitting and was silent. And some people began to ask him why he was silent in such a time of distress, and he didn’t reply. But the wife of the rabbi from the community of Hattin, who was educated and wept and cried out all night, also began to say things like this to him. Why was he silent? And it seems to me that he cursed her. And he said to her, If only all of you would also be silent, it would turn out well. And in this you shall be tested: if you will all be quiet, the sea will also be quiet before you. And that is what happened. They stopped crying out and became quiet. And then immediately when daylight came, *He made the storm become silent and the waves became still, and they rejoiced.*

The scene of prayer and salvation appropriates Psalm 107, framing the dramatic scene by citing biblical verses. R. Nathan’s narrative has this feature in common with maskilic *meliza*, a characteristic that stands apart from the straightforward, Yiddishized style of his usual Hebrew narrative prose.

What is the meaning of this incident for R. Nahman and R. Nathan? At odds with his fellow travelers’ expectations, R. Nahman does not cry out to God. Instead, he calls for silence. R. Nathan’s narrative asks us to believe that, in this instance, silence rather than outcry is the effective response. The climactic

85. Italics added to indicate two quotations from Psalms. From the appended section of *Sippurei ma’asiot*, “Seder ha-nesi’ah shel ha-yisra’el” (1815, new numbering, 6b), and *Sefer Shivhei ha-Ran* (Jerusalem: Meshekh ha-Nahal, 1981), 30. Compare the descriptions of sea voyages in *Sippurei ma’asiot*, tale 2 and tale 10; and see also *Likutei Moharan*, 12d.

Lacking sufficient storm terminology in Hebrew beyond the words *ruah sa’ara*, R. Nathan and R. Nahman have recourse to the word *firtina*. In modern Turkish, this word means “storm, gale, tempest, hurricane”; it could be etymologically related to the Greek word *φουρτούνα*, meaning “storm, rough sea.” In one of R. Nahman’s tales, the Hebrew text uses a rare meaning of a Yiddish word when a storm is called an *umpit* (*Sippurei ma’asiot*, 1815, 48a). See *Groyser verterbukh fun der Yiddisher shprakh*, ed. Yudl Mark (New York and Jerusalem: Yiddish Dictionary Committee, 1971), 3:1263, definition 6.

86. As Martin Cunz points out, R. Nahman’s words—as conveyed in R. Nathan’s Hebrew rendering—also draws phrases from Gen. 42:15 (“And in this you shall be tested [רָדְשָׁאָה יִבְאֵרָא אֶצֶכָּא],” and Jonah 1:12 (“the sea will be quiet before you [יִמְדוּ נַחֲמָא יִבְאֵרָא].” See Cunz, *Die Fahrt des Rabbi Nachman*, 310.
phrase “He made the storm become silent” refers to God in Psalm 107. In this passage, however, there is a hint that the powerful “he” who calmed the storm was R. Nahman. Crying out to God is not effective; only the silence that R. Nahman proposes leads to a diminution of the storm.

Also pertinent to Levin’s antimystical message is the sea narrative tradition reflected in B. Bava Batra 73b and R. Nahman’s commentary near the beginning of Likutei Moharan. This talmudic passage was essential to R. Nahman’s mystical thinking in that it presents Raba Bar bar Hana as a visionary traveler. Following a mishnaic passage regarding the sale of ships, the Gemara describes visions of sea creatures, which R. Nahman interprets allegorically. Along with the mystical reading of Psalm 107, then, Lefin also counters R. Nahman’s interpretation of the Raba Bar bar Hana passages.

III. HEBREW IN TRANSLATION FROM YIDDISH AND GERMAN

After Lefin published his Yiddish translation of Proverbs in 1814,88 a scandal emerged in Galicia’s maskilic circles. It was learned that Tuvia Feder had written and planned to publish a virulent attack on Lefin’s book in a satire called Kol mehazezim. According to Zalman Reyzn, Feder’s satire was suppressed by Lefin’s friends in Brody and not published until 1853, but in its wake, Lefin “did not have the courage to go further with his undertaking of a complete, new Yiddish translation of the Tanakh.”89 This debacle—together with R. Nathan’s publication of Shivhei ha-Ran at the end of Sippurei ma’asiot—may help to explain why Lefin suddenly turned to translating secular travel narratives into Hebrew in about 1815. He continued translating into Yiddish—assuming that the attribution of ‘Onia so’ara to Lefin is correct—but published no further translations from the Hebrew Bible.90 Moreover, his masterpiece in narrative translation is Mase’ot ha-yam (1818), his Hebrew rendering of one of the accounts from Campe’s twelve-volume Sammlung interessanter und durchgängig zweckmäßig abgefaßter Reisebeschreibungen für die Jugend (1786–93; hereafter referred to as Reisebeschreibungen.)


88. Sefer Mishlet Shlomo (Tarnopol, 1814).


90. The first publication of ‘Onia so’ara (Zholkva?: n.p., 1815?) was bilingual, and there seems also to have been a Yiddish-only edition (no extant copy is known). Lefin’s next Bible translation was not published posthumously until half a century later: Menahem Mendel Lefin, Sefer Kohelot (Odessa: Belinson, 1873). For a thorough discussion of Lefin’s art of translation from Hebrew to Yiddish, see Roland Gruschka, Übersetzungswissenschaftliche Aspekte von Mendel Lefin Satanovers Bibelübersetzungen (Hamburg: Buske, 2006). An earlier study by Simha Katz, “Turgenei Tanakh mi’et Menahem Mendel mi-Satano,” including fragments from Lefin’s incomplete translations from Lamentations, Psalms, and Job, was published in Kiryat sefer 16 (1939–40): 114–33.
Hasidic and Maskilic Travel Narratives

From a literary perspective, it is worthwhile to examine the stylistic differences between R. Nathan’s Hebrew narratives and Lefin’s translated Hebrew versions. To do this, we need to acknowledge that most of R. Nathan’s Hebrew was also translated, implicitly or explicitly, from Yiddish. As a result, the vocabulary, grammar, and idiomatic expressions in his Hebrew are heavily Yiddishized. In his autobiographical *Yemei Moharnat*, R. Nathan describes his method of recording R. Nahman’s teachings in 1803:

And this was the manner of my writing before him. The Teaching [torah] that he spoke at a certain time, such as on the Shabbat before Hanukkah, he would afterward repeat when I was writing it down, saying it to me sentence by sentence. That is, he would speak a few phrases to me in Yiddish [leshon Ashkenaz], and I sat before him and wrote the things in Hebrew [leshon ha-kodesh] until I had finished writing the entire Teaching. And usually I read it back to him after I finished writing it.91

A basic difference between Lefin’s and R. Nathan’s Hebrew narratives, then, is that Lefin translated from (written) German, whereas R. Nathan translated from (oral) Yiddish.

In the early nineteenth century, modern literary models were available to maskilim for describing sea travel; eighteenth-century British and German travel literature provided an essential source. As Zohar Shavit demonstrates, early Hebrew children’s literature—including stories of sea travel—was heavily influenced by German-language children’s literature. She also notes that “the writer most translated into Hebrew at the time was Heinrich Joachim [sic] Campe, who was regarded by Jewish writers as the most important German writer for children of the Enlightenment.”92 Lefin participated in this trend when he published his accounts of sea journeys that were based on Campe’s travel descriptions.

This is an example of innovation by translation. As part of the maskilic tendency to emulate Prussian sources, Lefin was not alone in drawing from German. Israel Bartal writes, for example, that Mordechai Aaron Günzburg “saw the influence of German as a major factor in the expansion of Hebrew.”93 In one metaphorical passage, Günzburg describes the difference between him and his father: “I conceive German ideas and clothe them in the purity of the Holy Tongue, and he gives birth to his ideas in the lap of that language.”94 Lefin’s translations

94. Cited by Bartal, ibid., 132. I have modified the translation slightly from Mordechai Aaron Günzburg, Aviezer (Vilna, 1863), 66. See also Marcus Moseley’s discussion of Günzburg in chap. 6 of Being for Myself Alone.
of books by Campe inspired him to develop a more varied Hebrew prose style: sophisticated yet unpretentious, based on mishnaic Hebrew, but also incorporating Yiddish or German words where necessary. His short and direct sentences often simplify the German syntax. Inspired by Campe, Lefin wrote some of the most successful early narratives in modern Hebrew. Israel Zinberg astutely argues that “Lefin very successfully employed the rich treasures of the clear, pithy mishnaic Hebrew, and thereby his writing became fresh and vivid.”95 Joseph Klausner and other critics also regarded Lefin as an important Hebrew stylist who offered an alternative to maskilic meliza.96 Nevertheless, his narrative writings are unknown to most readers.

Lefin adapted Mase ‘ot ha-yam (1818) from Campe’s series, Reisebeschreibungen, Part 9.97 Campe’s adaptation was, in turn, based on a British travel report by George Keate, An Account of the Pelew Islands in the Western Part of the Pacific Ocean, and the Shipwreck of the Antelope, East-India Packet, There.98 Campe’s narrative contains a message of divine providence, at the same time that it praises the virtues of hard work, ingenuity, and perseverance. Even more importantly, perhaps, Campe provides concrete descriptions of sea travel and introduces the reader to an unspoiled, distant tribe.

By 1779–80, Campe had written an adaptation of Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, called Robinson der Jüngere, that was very popular and was translated into many languages, including Hebrew.99 Another frequently translated work by Campe was Die Entdeckung von Amerika (1782).100 Campe’s twelve-volume series of Reisebeschreibungen is openly didactic and aims to teach German youth while attracting their attention with adventure stories. His message is not original, and is linked to the social and educational ideals of the Philanthropist movement.

98. George Keate, An Account of the Pelew Islands in the Western Part of the Pacific Ocean, and the Shipwreck of the Antelope, East-India Packet, There (London, 1788).
100. See Shavit, “Literary Interference”; and Bartal, “Mordechai Aaron Günzburg.” 142. Shavit refers to Hebrew translations by Moshe Mendelssohn-Frankfurt (1807), Hermann Bernard (Hirsch Baer Hurwitz. 1810; no extant copy known; see n. 15 herein), Mordechai Aharon Günzburg (1823), and David Zamosc (1824).
Hasidic and Maskilic Travel Narratives

Because Campe’s work was translated into Hebrew as early as in 1807, Lefin clearly was not innovative in his choice of author to translate.101 It is also pertinent that Campe and Moses Mendelssohn shared a friendship, as did Mendelssohn and Lefin. Campe directly influenced the Haskalah; as Bartal shows, his works allowed authors such as Günzburg “to convey to his readers geographical and historical information in a moderate maskilic vein. The German author, moreover, was an intimate of Moses Mendelssohn, and in the maskilic consciousness was stamped as a proponent of the universal brotherhood of the enlightened intellectuals of all nations.”102

In the preface to volume 9 of the Reisebeschreibungen (1791), Campe explains his decision not to continue publication of his Paris Diary from volume 8. He comments that the public has been flooded with writings about France in the previous two years and that he does not want to contribute any more to this excess. He deliberately turns away from describing revolutionary developments in Paris, choosing instead to tell the story of a sea adventure that contains a conservative message. The maritime equivalent of revolution was mutiny, but Campe avoids that topic; instead, he shows a captain and crew who survive adversity by means of reason, ingenuity, and teamwork. He underplays the element of insubordination (and completely excludes any mention of desire or sexuality).

Accounts of sea voyages had been a popular genre for a century,103 and the lines between nonfiction and fiction were frequently blurred.104 Indeed, with Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719), sea adventure found a potent fictional expression. But 1790 was a red-letter date for writing about maritime events, for in this year “Lieutenant William Bligh miraculously returned to London and published A Narrative of the Mutiny on HMS Bounty.”105 This occurred soon after Campe’s English source was published in 1788.

In his introduction to volume 9 of the Reisebeschreibungen, Campe further explains how he understands the message of Captain Wilson’s travel narrative, as rendered by Keate.106 The encounter with Pacific Islanders in Palau—about 500 miles southeast of the Philippines—becomes the basis for a reflection on the “noble savage.” As one critic notes, “Keate’s Account is the most thoroughgoing and elaborate presentation of the noble savage in the literature of the South

101. See Shavit, “Literary Interference,” 42ff. She writes that “the close relations between the Jewish Haskalah and German Enlightenment movements made German children’s literature during the Enlightenment an ideal, if not the most desirable, model for imitation” (44–45).
105. Ibid., 172.
Seas.” But Campe takes the British source one step further: A comparison to the original volume shows that he expanded the description of the people of Palau as “noble savages.” In his introduction, for instance, Campe writes that the natives’ behavior “appears to justify completely our highest notions of the original goodness of human nature.” Moreover, it teaches that education is not necessarily at odds with virtuous simplicity. Campe states explicitly that this example supports the social goal of educating the lower classes.

One of Lefin’s stated motives for translating *Mase’ot ha-yam* was to prepare people to endure adversity without losing faith. In the unpublished manuscript of his introduction, he writes, “Whoever does not educate himself to gird up his loins in the days of his tranquility, does not have in him the strength to withstand a trial on a bad day.” In the midst of his many biblical and talmudic quotations, Lefin also inserts a universalistic message drawn from the commentary *Eliahu Raba*: “Whether gentile or Jew, whether slave or servant, the holy spirit rests on him in accordance with his deeds [ברצון המשה הודו והרווי עליה燚ל פנים].” By recounting the exemplary conduct of ordinary British sailors who survived shipwreck, Lefin prepares his readers for setbacks, emphasizing the virtues of “perseverance and wisdom.” For unknown reasons, Lefin’s introduction was not published.

His published translation from Campe thus begins without any introduction:

In the year 1783 in the month of Sivan, Captain Wilson—of the boat *Antelope*, loaded with about 600,000 pounds, and with a crew of about fifty men, including sixteen from the people of China—came to the city of Macao, and after three weeks they were ordered to return from there to his country, the land of England, by means of the South Sea. Immediately, from the start, this journey appeared difficult to them, subject to very dangerous hardships. Day by day a storm wind was awakened, with thunder and lightning and a great amount of rain, until the waves of the sea rose up with great fury and the ship was on the verge of breaking. The rainwater entered from above and the seawater from below until everything was wet, and the boat quaked and stormed until all of the animals and other living things around it were beaten and died.

107. Ibid., 99.
109. Ibid., 2.
112. Mendel Lefin, “Translator’s Introduction to *Mase’ot ha-yam*,” manuscript at the Joseph Perl Archive, Jewish National and University Library, folder 124, line 36. See appendix II and appendix III at the end of this article.
113. Mendel Lefin, *Sefer mase’ot ha-yam* (Zholkva: Gerson Letteres, 1818), 1a. This work contains Lefin’s adaptations of travel narratives by Captains Wilson and Hemskirk. There are few substantive differences between the original 1818 edition and the reprint *Mase’ot ha-yam* (Lemberg: D. H. Schrenzel, 1859); quotations are cited from the first edition by page and side a or b. Unfortunately,
Translating from German, Lefin turns away from the allegorized and biblicized sea narratives and instead describes an actual sea voyage with a real shipwreck:

This vivid description is a captivating narrative on its own terms, and it is not merely intended to convey a message or a mystical allegory. In contrast, as we have seen, R. Nathan’s account of a storm at sea culminates in R. Nahman’s suggestion that leads to the calming of the storm. In his introduction to Shivhei ha-Ran, R. Nathan writes that his purpose is not to tell of miraculous events but to teach musar. The events are significant for their exemplary character and for their portrayal of R. Nahman’s spiritual journey. Lefin’s graphic Hebrew description, in contrast, is a continuation of the maskilic emphasis on the importance of learning about nature and geography. This direction in his writing is evident in some of his earliest Hebrew writing, which was published in Ha-me’a’sef.

Prominent in Lefin’s translation is the element of divine providence. While Campe admires members of the ship’s crew for their ingenuity and perseverance, he also sees God’s supporting hand in their survival. For this reason, it is interesting to look more closely at Campe’s translation of Captain Wilson’s speech to his crew, in which the captain advises them that “they could not count on any means of salvation, other than those which they find in themselves.” This statement of self-reliance seems to have been a bit too extreme for Lefin, who added, “Apart from salvation from above [milvad ha-teshu’ah mi-marom], you cannot count on...”
any help except that which is in your own hearts and in the exertions of your hands.\textsuperscript{118}

Because of the dominant, universalist ideology of the Enlightenment, the particularity of separate religions never becomes an issue. In one passage, Campe describes Christian prayer:

In the evening of this fortunately passed day, the Captain called the entire crew into the largest tent, in order to express the thanks of their moved hearts—in a collective prayer to the Creator of their existence, who had kept them alive until then. Never was there a more heartfelt and intimate prayer to God. At the end of this pious act it was established that in the future, every Sunday evening, it would be repeated.\textsuperscript{119}

This is Lefin’s rendering:

유리בערבאסףרבנהבאלכלאמשיהבנוזלسبقאתולימ scramlundיסיולנדלאכדידערטודלה
לשמחתהלילוחאשדערותךהםכהלבוקטסשזרעלונ Xperia,ילאושהםשנפהותר,קפל
עליתנוהלוחיןכםכלבולדאראשיממידום,ultimoיתוהןמקושרוםולفحصאטר.

And in the evening the Captain gathered all of the people in the largest of the tents, in order to pray a short prayer giving thanks to Providence from Above, which had helped them until then, and to beg for His mercy in the future; after they finished it, they agreed to commune thus every Sunday, and from that day they were bound together as one person.\textsuperscript{120}

Lefin emphasizes how the social effect of prayer strengthens the bond among members of the crew. All religious sentiments are merged; the writer does not note denominational differences. In contrast, R. Nathan’s accounts are limited almost entirely to Jews. Lefin includes Campe’s extensive passages about the natives’ customs and religion,\textsuperscript{121} although he strengthens the flow of the narrative by moving these parts to the end of the book.\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{118} Lefin, \textit{Mase’ot ha-yam}, p. 1b. Writing for a readership not limited to youth, Lefin excises Campe’s patronizing addresses to his young audience. For example, Lefin omits another long digression by Campe on Providence (\textit{die Vorsehung}; Campe, \textit{Reisebeschreibungen}, pt. 9, pp. 29–30). According to Campe, it was no coincidence that Captain Wilson brought aboard a Malaysian servant; nor was it an accident that, about a year earlier, another Malaysian had arrived at the island as the result of a different shipwreck. By these means, God enabled the British to communicate with the islanders with the help of interpreters. Campe comments, “Thus Providence guides the events of the world and the fate of people through its invisible hand, so that in the end everything leads to some intended, beneficial goal…. It is well for us that, in our own blindness toward what the future will bring, our fate stands under such a wise and well-meaning direction” (30). Although he does repeatedly affirm the role of providence, Lefin omits this passage.

\textsuperscript{119} Campe, \textit{Reisebeschreibungen}, pt. 9, p. 81.

\textsuperscript{120} Lefin, \textit{Mase’ot ha-yam}, chap. 5, p. 11b.

\textsuperscript{121} When the British are preparing to leave, one of the sailors decides that he wants to remain on the island. Captain Wilson gives him advice before they depart, including this sentence: “In particular he recommended to him not to give up his religious practices, and also to celebrate a Sabbath \textit{[Sabbath]} or a Sunday” (Campe, \textit{Reisebeschreibungen}, pt. 9, p. 222). Lefin omits this sentence (\textit{Mase’ot ha-yam}, chap. 15, p. 31b).

\textsuperscript{122} As noted by Rebecca Wolpe in “The Sea Voyage Narrative,” 75–76.
From the standpoint of literary history, Lefin’s most significant contribution might be his efforts to convey dialogue. For example, when the ship is endangered early in Campe’s *Reisebeschreibung von Wilhelm Isbrand Bonteku’s merkwürdige Abentheuer auf einer Reise aus Holland nach Ostindien*, the sailors cry out simply, “Wir sinken! Wir sinken!” But in *Onia so’ara*, Lefin expands Campe’s version, imagining the sailors in extremity saying, “Behold, we’re finished, we’re lost, all of us lost, we’re sunk, we’re sunk.”

Through repetition, Lefin suggests a chorus of voices and the pathos of trying to come to terms with imminent death. At the same time, he quotes the first part of this phrase from the complaint of the Israelites in the desert: “Behold, we’re finished, we’re lost, all of us lost.” He thus succeeds in using a biblical phrase yet making it sound modern.

### IV. God in Nature?

Near the end of R. Nahman’s extraordinary tale 6, “Of the Humble King,” the hidden king disappears while being praised because of his humility. In R. Nahman’s tales, kings often appear to represent God, but the vanishing act of tale 6 is unique. To explain how this is effected, the narrator in R. Nahman’s story alludes to a talmudic passage about God, saying that “in the place of His greatness, there is His humility.” As Zvi Mark notes, this phrase derives from the passage in B. Megillah 31a, “In every place where you find the might of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility.”

Decades earlier, in an introductory passage prefacing his accounts of nature in *Ha-me’asef*, Lefin also quoted this passage from tractate B. Megillah (but without mentioning its talmudic source). Lefin takes the allusion in a very different direction:


124. *’Onia so’ara* (Vilna: Menahem Mann, 1823), 2. The title page is missing from the only extant copy of the bilingual edition; it is sometimes cited as having been published in Zholkva in 1815, but the date is not known.

125. Numbers 17:27.

126. Lefin was not the first Hebrew-language travel writer to incorporate this phrase in the description of a storm at sea. A precursor was Simha ben Yehoshua of Zalożce. See Avraham Ya’ari, *Mase’ot ‘erez yisra’el* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Histadrut ha-Zionit, 1946), 395.

127. For an excellent discussion of this passage and tale, see Zvi Mark, *Mistika ve-shiga’on be-yeẓirat R. Nahman mi-Breslav* (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘Oved, 2003), 359f.
And thus it is explained in natural science that God, may He be exalted, formed all of Creation with his power. (A) That it is like a shining mirror to reveal His perfection: There you find His greatness [gedulato] in the place of His humility; where His wisdom and His dominion are, there are His mercy and compassion toward His creatures. And so on, and so on, without end. (B) And from this it has been said that there are two purposes in the intention of the Creation. To reveal His perfection; and to perfect His creations.

Lefin anticipates R. Nahman’s use of the talmudic quotation when he substitutes the reference to God’s “greatness” (gedulato) for the original “might” (gevurato). Yet Lefin and R. Nahman interpret this passage in radically different ways. The notion of a shining mirror, in which nature reflects God, is rejected by R. Nahman in “Of the Humble King.” Instead of a homology or resemblance between God and the world, in R. Nahman’s allegory, there is a break or discontinuity because the truthful king is surrounded by a kingdom of lies. In many passages, R. Nahman and R. Nathan flatly reject the God-in-nature concept.

Whereas R. Nahman represents the material world as degraded and falling short of imitatio Dei, Lefin expresses his sense of the perfection of nature. For this reason, in one of his early articles, he chose to describe the astonishing orderliness of a beehive. Thirty years later, his translated account from Campe described Pacific Islanders in a kind of natural state, a state that conforms to the notion of the “noble savage” associated with Rousseau.

For R. Nahman and R. Nathan, the opposite of simple faith was philosophy or sophisticated inquiry (hakirot or, in the Ashkenazic pronunciation, hakires). Feiner gives many examples from R. Nathan’s writings—including Makhni’a zeidim and Kin’at H’zeva’ot, two anonymously published works that have not been absolutely identified as his—to illustrate this. According to Feiner, in Likutei halakhot R. Nathan “expresses total scorn for the natural sciences.” Feiner points out that maskilim such as Shimon Bloch and Perl “recommended the study of the

128. Mendel Lefin, “Mikhtavim shonim,” Ha-me’asef 5 (1789): 83. Reprinted verbatim in Lefin’s Mod’a le-vina (Berlin: Hevrat Hinukh Ne’arim, 1789), “Igeret ha-hokhma,” sec. 15, 2b. Original punctuation retained, in which the colon (:) is often used to end a paragraph and the bullet (•) is often used for a period. Hebrew printers employed by both maskilic authors and hasidic authors commonly used the bullet where European languages used periods.

129. Lefin, R. Nahman, and R. Nathan could have received the modified version of this phrase from many sources, such as Rabbenu Bahya (commentary on Deuteronomy 10:18), or from the traditional Ashkenazic Mozei Shabbat prayers, as Zvi Mark pointed out to me.


131. In the second appendix to his Hasidut Breslov, Mendel Piekarz compares similar passages in works by R. Nathan and argues that he did write Kin’at H’zeva’ot.

sciences in general, and of the natural sciences in particular.”

In *Zir ne’eman*, a supplement to his *Luah ha-shana* of 1814–15, Perl alludes to Psalm 19:

> The Creator is exalted above our vision and our other senses, because He is holy and not visible to all living things, and so the Heavens and the Earth are full of his deeds, and they tell his honor and greatness.

Feiner adds that, for Perl, “science is therefore a first tool in the ascent to recognize the hidden God, distant unto Himself.” In rejecting the natural sciences, R. Nathan seems to have responded directly to Perl in referring to “their calendars [luhot shelahem], which they put together in their schools.”

R. Nathan also polemicized against Romanelli, the author of the travel narrative *Mas’a be-’arav*, who defended the sciences and philosophy. In one of his published letters to his friend Shmuel Weinberg, R. Nathan discusses R. Nahman’s views, writing, “His intention was not, God forbid, to know the natural world in accordance with the wisdom of the philosophers [mehakrim] like Aristotle and Plato, may their names be blotted out.”

Some critics had mocked a passage on *da’at* in Sefer *ha-midot* (Sefer ha-alef beit, part 2), and R. Nathan sets the record straight: “His only intention was to know the secret of nature, whence comes its root in the letters of the Torah and in their combinations.”

R. Nathan penned vivid accounts of R. Nahman’s and of his own journey to ‘erez yisra’el. But R. Nathan never described nature for its own sake, an undertaking that he might have seen as a step in the direction of idol worship. R. Nahman’s travels were worth telling, in R. Nathan’s worldview, because of their deeper significance. For example, R. Nahman emphasized that before he could “ascend” and reach the Holy Land, he had to experience a descent into smallness (*katnut*); as part of this process, he exposed himself to humiliation and mockery during his stay in Istanbul. In essence, along with all of the concrete scenes of travel, *Shivhei ha-Ran* remains a hagiography.

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134. Cited by Feiner, ibid.
135. Ibid., 108. Perl created the *Israelitische Freischule* under the influence of the Jüdische Freischule in Berlin. His admiration for the Berlin Haskalah was so great that, in his fiction, he sometimes refers to his home town Tarnopol as “Berlain.” Sinkoff discusses Perl’s activities, including his creation of the Israelite Free School in Tarnopol—the first modern Jewish school in Galicia—in her book *Out of the Shtetl*, 225–37. According to some scholars, Lefin was more critical than Perl of the Berlin Haskalah and *Ha-me’afof;* nevertheless, he did publish in that journal and at the Ḥimukh Ne’arim Press in 1789.
136. Sefer *’alim le-trafa: mikhtevei Moharnat* (New York: Hasidei Breslov, 1976), 176, letter of Wednesday, the 25th day of the counting the Omer (April 27, 1836). The manuscript version (11b) shows no significant passages that were excised from this letter.
137. Ibid.
Lefin’s innovation or advance beyond hasidic Hebrew writing was not just that he literalized where they allegorized. He transcended the emphasis of the Berlin Haskalah on “pure” biblical Hebrew and provided a new interpretation of what “pure” Hebrew could be. The title pages of his books announced that they were written “in our pure and beautiful Holy Tongue [lashonenu ha-kadosha ha-zaha ve-yafeifla],”139 “in a simple and clean mishnaic language [lashon ha-Mishna ha-kala ve-ha-nekia],”140 or “in a pure and simple language [be-lashon zaḥ ve kal].”141 Lefin was able to write a clear narrative Hebrew, based heavily on mishnaic Hebrew but also including biblical and postbiblical allusions. While Lefin was not an original thinker or author of Hebrew fiction, he was an original Hebrew writer.142 He also showed that *maskilim* could match and outdo hasidim in the realm of Hebrew narrative. Hasidic narratives focused on spiritual events, ascent, and pilgrimage. In contrast, Lefin’s translated narratives emphasized human ingenuity and the wider world, including an appreciation of distant cultures. Expanding far beyond a worldview that places Jews and Zion at its center, Lefin published sea narratives that broaden horizons, and he adapted German travel books to support his ideals. In place of narratives that offer hasidic praises of the Rebbe, or that describe Jewish pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Lefin praises unpretentious sea travelers who work together to overcome adversity. R. Nathan’s disinterest in landscapes and local populations is countered by Lefin’s colorful descriptions of distant places and people.

Translation played a central role in the reinvention of Hebrew as a modern literary language. R. Nathan developed something like oral-style Hebrew by emulating Yiddish; Lefin also worked from a living language, German, at the same time raising the level of grammar and cultural sophistication. At odds with the ethnocentric narratives of pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Lefin injected universalistic tales of adventure, adversity, and survival.143

In connection with R. Nathan’s and Lefin’s Hebrew narratives, I conclude that there was an indirect dialogue and debate between hasidic and maskilic authors such as R. Nathan and Lefin; their narratives of sea travel represent an important genre in the history of Hebrew literature, both stylistically and in their contents. The contributions of R. Nathan and Lefin to the history of modern

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139. *Onia so’ara* (Vilna: Menahem Mann, 1823).
140. *More nevukhim*, pt. 1, trans. Mendel Lefin (Zholkva: Saul Meyerhoffer, 1829); the same publisher printed R. Nathan’s *Likutei halakhot* in 1848!
141. *Mase’ot ha-yam* (Lemberg: Schrenzel, 1859). The title page of the 1818 edition does not include this line, however, which suggests that it was added by the publisher.
143. In “The Sea Voyage Narrative,” Rebecca Wolpe refers to Lefin’s “somewhat universalist attitude.” She cites his quotation in his unpublished introduction to *Mase’ot ha-yam*, “whether slave or servant, the holy spirit rests on him in accordance with his deeds [בִּין רַבָּא וּרְבָּא שְׁמֵחַ רֵיחַ ה’ שָׁבוּת לְעֵילוּ לְפָנָיו].” She then comments, “It is clear that Lefin sought to combine traditional Jewish attitudes and the praise of G-d with Enlightenment concepts of morality and universalism” (74).
Hebrew narrative are, in part, the result of their translations from Yiddish and German; working in translation from living languages, both R. Nathan and Lefin succeeded in writing a simpler and more readable Hebrew, which calqued contemporary vernaculars; one of the lasting accomplishments of R. Nathan and Lefin was their ability to write Hebrew in what sounds like an oral style, creating the illusion that spoken Hebrew existed in 1815–23. Whereas Perl parodied hasidic authors, Lefin outdid them by moving beyond tales of pilgrimage to 'erez yisra'el—expanding horizons and breaking the ethnocentrism of traditional Hebrew narratives. In a sense, Lefin’s translations from German were genre parodies that countered the genre of Hebrew narratives of pilgrimage.

The writings of Mendel Lefin and R. Nathan Sternharz directly influenced the course of modern Hebrew literature, as Perl’s antihasidic parodies were a conduit that carried “folk Hebrew” into the stream of secular Hebrew literature. In Megale temirin, Perl made a parody of hasidic letters by using them as the basis for an epistolary novel. At the same time, Lefin’s sea narratives helped create the context that made possible a new kind of mimesis in Hebrew. Influenced by Lefin’s translated narratives and by I. B. Levinson’s Divrei zadikim (1820–30), in Bohen zadik (1838), Perl showed that it was possible to create the illusion of an oral-style Hebrew that could convey spoken dialogue. Even Abramovitsh followed this tradition in Mase’ot Benjamin ha-shlishi (1878/1896), by parodying hasidic narratives of pilgrimage, while later authors such as I. L. Peretz and M. Y. Berdichevsky saw hasidic narrative as an alternative source of modern Hebrew literature.

Israeli Hebrew fiction and drama have also emerged under the star of translation, explicitly or implicitly, from European languages. From another perspective, then, hasidic and maskilic writing may be understood as more than a neglected origin of modern Hebrew narrative. Authors such as R. Nathan and Lefin anticipated the twentieth-century linguistic processes by which Israeli Hebrew emerged—adopting, adapting, and translating phrases from other languages.

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144. Liberman argues that it is more accurate to speak of “folk Hebrew” than of “hasidic Hebrew.” See his article (in Yiddish and Hebrew) “R. Nakhman Bratslaver un di Umaner maskilim,” 219.

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APPENDIX I

Mendel Lefin’s “Note” on Punctuation, from Mod’ a le-vina (1789)

For the benefit of the readers (and especially of medical books where it is suitable to be very precise), to make it easier to understand the true intent in each passage, we are presenting in the manner of cantillation signs: Two points like this (;) indicate a full stop, like sof pasuk in the Holy Scriptures: One dot like this (۰) indicates a smaller stop, like etnah.ta: One dot and under it a small apostrophe like this (;) is smaller than the ethnahta and similar to segol: A crooked mark like this (,) is the smallest of all, and its force is like that of zakef katan: A straight line and under it a point like this (!) indicates exaggeration or declaration: A cursive Dalet and under it a point like this (?) indicates questioning or wonderment:
APPENDIX II

Facsimile of Mendel Lefin’s “Translator’s Introduction to Mase’ot ha-yam”
APPENDIX III

This transcription preserves Lefin’s original punctuation; all footnotes and the translation have been provided by Ken Frieden. Although this is not a poetic text, to facilitate comparison with the facsimile in appendix II, we have retained the original line breaks in Lefin’s manuscript. Thanks to the Department of Manuscripts at the Jewish National and University Library for granting permission to publish this important text; thanks to Jonatan Meir and Avraham Weizal for their assistance in deciphering Lefin’s handwriting.

146. This transcription preserves Lefin’s original punctuation; all footnotes and the translation have been provided by Ken Frieden. Although this is not a poetic text, to facilitate comparison with the facsimile in appendix II, we have retained the original line breaks in Lefin’s manuscript. Thanks to the Department of Manuscripts at the Jewish National and University Library for granting permission to publish this important text; thanks to Jonatan Meir and Avraham Weizal for their assistance in deciphering Lefin’s handwriting.
Mendel Lefin, Unpublished Translator’s Introduction to *Sea Travels*¹⁵⁷

A person should never expect that nature will change for him by means of a clear miracle, and a person should not despair when the sword hangs over his neck;¹⁵⁸ instead he should prepare a plan, pray and work always—for a person is not made free of them except by his death, and he should trust that the Holy One, Blessed be He, will send a blessing on his deeds, in a manner that is hidden from the eye:

₅ And the rabbis taught that it is an uncommon thing that a person dares to be so confident of His goodness that he trusts in the miracle. For a person who is drunk with his troubles may forget God’s Providence, crossing his hands in his lap and losing all hope and expectation. Therefore, it is a commandment to visit one’s friend in adversity, even if it is not in one’s power to support him with advice and money or deeds, because in any case one can encourage him and strengthen his faith in God’s blessings—by means of moral words and his true consolation on the example of harsh occurrences from which his friends were ultimately saved when they did not lose hope of salvation:

And the person who has fallen into danger and been saved is obliged to give thanks and publicly tell of God’s salvation, in order to teach them morality and faith in God, praised be He, in times of trouble. And what’s more, sometimes one incidentally gives advice or teaches a plan of action regarding a similar situation:

₁⁵ And all of the people will bend their ears and hear, especially regarding events when several kinds of misfortune come in succession, and in which a person put his shoulder to the wheel and accepted them as wounds delivered by the loving, faithful God: Whether Heaven’s blessing will rest on him afterward by virtue of his being able to withstand them until they pass, or by his wisdom in finding

¹⁵⁷. Lefin’s quotations and allusions seem designed to indicate that this translated book of sea adventure is compatible with pious beliefs and suitable for traditional Jewish readers. Lefin goes beyond the typical maskilic shibutz (insertion of biblical quotations) by extending his quotations into postbiblical sources such as Mishnah (‘Avot), Gemara (B. Berakhot, B. Yoma, B. Megilla, B. Tamid), and medieval commentaries (Seforno, Yona Gerondi, Rabbenu Bahye). In the notes that follow, all talmudic citations refer to the Babylonian Talmud.

a refuge from them: And even if he did not find refuge from them, but perished with faith in God’s assistance,

coming from here to a world that is all delight and comfort: For either this way or that, a person is obliged
to receive a good example from other people like him, with a measure of patience and spiritual calm—
such that all of the winds do not move his soul from its place. As it is written,

“Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, and will never be moved for all eternity,”\(^\text{159}\) and it is said,

“Better to go to a house of mourning….”\(^\text{160}\)

And indeed it is not enough to bend one’s ear to stories of victory that have occurred before us;

instead one should chase after and exalt, always speaking of the deeds of such people, whoever they are,
to listen to them from their mouths or from their writings. As the sages said, “Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone.”\(^\text{161}\)

And they said, “Whether Gentile or Jew, whether slave or servant, the holy spirit rests on him
in accordance with his deeds.”\(^\text{162}\) And doubtless it was also about those heroes with their sufferings, the teachers of war
from their youths, [that it is said] “The one who comes to purify is supported.”\(^\text{163}\)

But do not believe [those who say], “I did not toil, and I found.”\(^\text{164}\)

Whoever does not educate himself to gird up his loins in the days of his tranquility, does not have in him the strength to withstand a trial on a bad day: But he will lose
his strength immediately, from the beginning, sit idle, and reflect on His qualities blessed be He; he gives himself up to wailing and curses and is lost in his wickedness, God forbid:

For the good of our brethren, the Children of Israel, these Travels have now been translated into our language, in order
to awaken the soul of the reader to train himself in this precious quality: In order that he will see from this
to what lengths the force of perseverance and wisdom go—foreseeing the consequences\(^\text{165}\) with which God has graced human beings—toward withstanding tremendous and enduring dangers, of cold and heat and hunger,

\(^{159}\) Psalm 125:1.
\(^{160}\) [“…than to go to a house of feasting.”] Ecclesiastes 7:2.
\(^{161}\) M. ‘Avoṭ 4:1.
\(^{162}\) Eliahu ben Shlomo Zalman, Eliahu Raba (Prague: Sommer, 1812), chap. 10.
\(^{163}\) B. Yoma’ 38b.
\(^{164}\) B. Megillah 6b.
\(^{165}\) B. Tamid 32a.
thirst, wild animals, bandits, and severe illnesses. And after he awakens to be aware in this regard, about all that happens to people in this world, he will find that these are everyday events, when heroes of strength take shelter in God’s blessing and are all saved, while fear overtakes sinners. As it is written, “For the righteous person falls seven times and stands up, while the wicked” fall at once.”\(^{166}\)

And from that time on, he [the reader] will put his mind to collecting memories of events like this, one by one to guard in his heart, and they will become weapons, ready to hand, to protect people from breakdowns, consoling them with events that have occurred even in their days and in their cities, before their eyes. And to the extent that he adorns himself, he is made more capable of adorning others, for just as he is a speaker of truth in his mouth and heart, so do his words touch the depths of the heart:

But by virtue of this there will come to him the blessing of the lost, to be saved from all evil and temptation, As it is written, “Many are the sufferings of the wicked, but the person who trusts in the Lord will be surrounded by mercy.”\(^{167}\)

\(^{166}\) Proverbs 24:16.
\(^{167}\) Psalm 32:10.