Literary Innovation in Yiddish Sea Travel Narratives

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Literary Innovation in Yiddish Sea Travel Narratives, 1815–24

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Abstract  Sea travel was an influential literary genre in Europe in the eighteenth century, and this genre subsequently influenced enlightened and Hasidic Jewish circles. As a result, the genre of sea narratives assumed a significant role in the rise of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. This article considers the place of Yiddish sea narratives—adapted from Campe’s Reisebeschreibungen and in Hasidic writings—in the early nineteenth century. Both enlightened and Hasidic authors played a role in shaping modern Yiddish and Hebrew prose.

Introduction

I set sail with three captains: Columbus, Bontekoe, and the emperor’s daughter. Christopher Columbus needs no introduction; Captain Willem Ysbrantsz Bontekoe commanded a merchant ship, the New Hoom, for the Dutch East India Company in 1619; and this emperor’s daughter existed only in the fantasy tales of Rabbi Nahman ben Simḥa of Bratslav, representing a higher reality that is truer than our world of lies can bear.

These journeys from the beginning of the nineteenth century inspire many intriguing literary discoveries. For instance, they help us revisit conceptions of “peripheral” or “minor” literature at the same time as they show how enlightened authors expanded their readers’ worldview by describing travelers who went beyond Zion. On close examination, we find that several notable translations of narratives from German into Yiddish and Hebrew, and between Yiddish and Hebrew, were major events in literary and linguistic history. As I
will discuss at the end of this essay, in connection with the polysystem theory of Itamar Even-Zohar, the early modern period was a turning point when the process of translation radically transformed Jewish literature. This literary turn also moved Jewish literature toward textual referentiality in parallel with a sea change in popular conceptions: in 1800 many traditional Jews continued to hold a Zion-centered view of the world, whereas enlightened authors tried to broaden their horizons. This is a striking instance in which sweeping cultural changes are reflected in a pertinent literary genre.

This essay is about real-world sea travels, but mostly it is about “the story of the voyage” (Edwards 1994). I will analyze Yiddish translations of German literature for young adults, by Joachim Heinrich Campe, and their place in literary history. Also acknowledging the importance of Hasidic writers, I will focus on these texts:

1) Two Yiddish retellings of Columbus’s first cross-Atlantic journey by Khaikh Hurwitz and Mordechai Aharon Günzburg, published in 1817 and 1824, respectively: both are based on Campe’s frequently reprinted volume for young adults, Die Entdeckung von Amerika (The Discovery of America; 1782; originally published as Die Entdekkung von Amerika);

2) An anonymous, bilingual Hebrew/Yiddish account called Oniya so’ara (Storming Ship), which was published around 1815–18, adapted from one story in Campe’s 1788 volume for young adults, about Captain Bontekoe’s ill-fated voyage from the Netherlands to Indonesia; and

3) Nahman’s “Fun a meylekh un a keyser” (“Of a King and an Emperor”), narrated in Yiddish to his followers in 1806–7 and dictated to Nathan Sternharz, who translated it into Hebrew (“Mi-melekh ve-keisar”) and published it in Hebrew and Yiddish in the volume Sippurei ma’asiyot/ Sippurey mayses (Tales) in 1815.

1. Some analyses in this essay are based on my study “Translations from German in Yiddish Literary History,” which is due to appear in a volume about translation (Frieden forthcoming).
2. I have recently completed a book on the corpus of Jewish sea narratives, tentatively titled Beyond Zion: Sea Travel in Modern Jewish Literature. I am not the first literary scholar to reconsider this genre in Hebrew and Yiddish. Zohar Shavit (1988, 1992) published two seminal essays, including analysis of the Hebrew cannon of travel narratives. I have benefited from consulting with Rebecca Wolpe (2011) and referring to her outstanding dissertation on this subject.
3. Campe introduced hundreds of new German expressions and also tried to influence the standardization of German orthography. The first edition of his translation of William Robertson’s History of America, vol. 1 (1777) was titled Die Entdekkung von Amerika: Ein angehehmes und nützliches Lesbuch für Kinder und junge Leute (The Discovery of America: A Pleasant and Useful Reader for Children and Young Adults), vol. 1 (Campe 1781), but Campe changed the spelling to Entdeckung in most later editions; the first volume of his three-volume work was sometimes reprinted under the title Kolumbus.
Joachim Heinrich Campe and the Maskilim

Sea travel was an influential literary and cultural genre throughout Europe around 1800, and this was equally true among enlightened Jews. In 1807 Moshe Mendelsohn-Frankfurt published—at his own expense, in Altona, Germany—a Hebrew translation of the first volume of Campe’s Die Entdeckung von Amerika under the title Metziat ha-aretz ha-hadasha (Finding the New Land). The book sold poorly but launched a fleet of Jewish translations and adaptations—from German into Hebrew and Yiddish—based on Campe’s travel narratives for young adults, which set sail over the next eighteen years. As I have argued elsewhere (Frieden 2009), sea narratives in Hebrew exerted a powerful influence on the rise of modern Hebrew literature.

In the nineteenth century, Yiddish and Hebrew narrative traditions evolved together or in a competitive relationship. How does the role of sea narratives differ in Yiddish and Hebrew literary history? What did this genre contribute to Yiddish prose? Here I will examine four Yiddish sea narratives—all adapted from Campe’s Reisebeschreibungen—from the early nineteenth century. For a schematic overview of a dozen editions and reprints, consider table 1, which shows most of the early Hebrew, Yiddish, and Judeo-

4. There is a vast literature about sea narratives and their place in literary history. Among many other works, I recommend Adams 1980 [1962], 1983; and Cohen 2010.

5. Campe, a pedagogue, philologist, and philosemites, was highly respected by the maskilim in Berlin. He tutored the young Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt in Berlin and helped Johann Bernhard Basedow build the new Philanthropinum school in Dessau, briefly serving as its director in 1776–77. Subsequently Campe founded a similar school in Hamburg, and this institution directly influenced the Judische Freinschule (Jewish Free School) in Berlin, which was founded soon after, in 1778.

6. Some of the extant Hebrew translations from this period are: Mendelsohn-Frankfurt’s Metziat ha-aretz ha-hadasha (Finding the New Land; 1807); Otniya so’ara, including translations into Hebrew and Yiddish (c. 1815–18; repr. 1823, 1825); Mendel Lefin’s Maseot ha-yamim (Sea Voyages; 1818), containing two separate translations from Campe; Günzburg’s Sefer glat ha-aretz ha-hadasha (Book of the Discovery of the New Land; 1823), 3 vols.; David Zamosc’s Robinzohn der jüngere: Eyn lehbeukl fr kinder (Robinson the Younger [or The New Robinson]: A Reader for Children; 1824), which (despite the deceptive Judeo-German title) is a Hebrew adaptation of Campe’s Robinson der Jüngere (Robinson the Younger or The New Robinson; 1779–80). Moshe Pelli (c.e., 1991) wrote some of the earliest scholarly essays on Hebrew travel narratives; Shavit’s two essays were already mentioned.

7. The earliest known Yiddish translations from Campe include the following: (1) The anonymous Otniya so’ara (c. 1815–18), Hebrew and Yiddish parallel texts, but the Yiddish version was not included in the 1823, 1825, or later Hebrew reprints. However, a Yiddish-only edition, Historie: Oder, fun shif tovkh, was published in Vilna in 1823. (2) Hurwitz, Tsofnas panekh, 3 vols. (1817). (3) Günzburg, Di entdeckung fun Amerika, 3 vols. (1824). (4) Yosef Vitlin, Robinzohn: Di gestukhtte fun Alter Leh (1851; some scholars claim that there was an earlier edition from the 1820s that has been lost). Preceding all of these Yiddish versions were two anonymous Judeo-German editions based on Campe’s Robinson der Jüngere and Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe: Historie oder zeltzene und wunderbarhe begebenheiten eines yungen see fahners (Anonymous 1784; German transliterated into Hebrew characters) and Historie fun den zeifhuler Robinzohn (Anonymous 1813).
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German versions of Campe’s sea narratives. In bold italics are three of the works I will discuss in the present context.

I combine several methodologies and call my synthesis Textual Referentialism—a fresh approach to texts, which emphasizes the interrelationship between their literariness and their reference to the world. Travel narratives challenge the boundaries of formalistic analysis when they insist on the real-world basis of the events they describe. Along these lines, a book I recently completed shows how studying the genre of sea narratives contributes to our understanding of Hebrew and Yiddish literary history before 1825. Continuing to pursue the implications of Textual Referentialism, this article turns to some of the parallel Yiddish narratives. From another methodological perspective, I am interested in how key words both reflect and influence literary and cultural history. Keeping in mind the specific language of sea travel, it is helpful to engage in a kind of modified Toposforschung. A linguistic approach and key word analysis, focusing on maritime vocabulary that was in the process of being developed, can provide new insights into literary and cultural trends.

Table 1 shows how popular the Hebrew and Yiddish translations from Campe were in the early nineteenth century. These and many later works from the nineteenth century are discussed by Rebecca Wolpe in her dissertation, “The Sea and Sea Voyage in Maskilic Literature” (2011). I have expanded the canon of Jewish sea narratives to include Hasidic literature of pilgrimage to the Land of Israel by sea and also Nahman’s allegorical fantasy tales that involve sea travel. The Yiddish versions of these tales add an oral-style, folksy element that was often lacking in maskilic writing.

There is an embarrassment of riches in the genre of Hebrew and Yiddish sea narratives, but at the same time, there are obstacles to deeper study. One pragmatic problem is that most of the known works, while popular and often reprinted in the nineteenth century, exist today in only one or two (often incomplete) copies. Referring back to the texts listed in table 1, for example, we should recognize that there is only one extant copy of Hurwitz’s three-volume Tsofnas paneakh (1817), at YIVO, and it is incomplete. Likewise, the National Library of Israel holds the only known extant copy of the Hebrew/Yiddish bilingual edition of Oniya so’ara (Anonymous c. 1815–18), missing the two opening pages. There was also a Yiddish-only edition of Oniya so’ara, titled Historye: Oder, fun shif’ brokh (Anonymous 1823a), which David

8. Toposforschung as proposed here considers a matrix of interrelated key words, such as those related to sea travel. Compare Blumenberg 1979. My first book (Frieden 1985) centered on the eighteenth-century watershed at the intersection of Latin genus and French genre. Current databases make it far more feasible to pursue the methodology of key word analysis, with far-reaching consequences.
G. Roskies studied in the National Library of Israel in the 1970s, before it was lost. The most important of the Hebrew works is Mendel Lefin’s *Mase’ot ha-yam*, but there is only one copy of the original 1818 edition, incomplete, and we must supplement it using the 1859 reprint. We might add a purported 1820s Yiddish edition of *Robinson: Di geshikhte fun Alter Leb*, often attributed to Yosef Vitlin, which was lost, with no known copies extant.

Like the Hebrew works adapted from Campe, but in different ways, several translated and adapted travel narratives played a major role in Yiddish literary history. Many maskilic authors, beginning with those in the circle of Mendelsohn-Frankfurt, were deeply influenced by Campe’s educational program. His many *Reisebeschreibungen* were addressed to young adults, whom he hoped to save from the pernicious influence of romantic novels. He specifically advised against “the reading of novels, as well as generally all books that aim only to arouse fantasy, imagination, and sentiments,” because of “their great harmfulness” (Campe 1788: 7). By providing impressionable readers with equally entertaining narratives about travel, Campe hoped to wean them away from fantasy literature; at the same time, he wanted to educate them about geography and other cultures in distant regions of the world.

During the 1780s, Campe’s books were best sellers in Germany; they made a deep impression on enlightened Jewish writers and were read by children at the Jüdische Freischule (Jewish Free School) in Berlin. As is evident from its

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9. See Roskies 1974. On January 26, 2014, Roskies shared with me the original notes he took in the National Library, in which he copied several passages from the 1823 Yiddish edition of *Historye: Oder, fun shif brokh*. The passages he quotes there show definitively that this was the Yiddish text of *Oniya so’ara*, probably based on the bilingual edition from about 1815–18.

10. Starting with 1851, Vitlin’s *Robinson*—based on Campe’s adaptation of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*—was reprinted several times, with variations. There is no watertight proof that an early printing from the 1820s existed (and if it did, we do not know how similar it was to the 1851 text); so, for now, it is not clear that Vitlin’s work was written early enough to belong in the early nineteenth-century Yiddish canon. Although these Yiddish narratives of sea travel were popular, several known texts have disappeared; others have probably been lost, and even their titles have been forgotten. If only a single copy of the original editions of *Oniya so’ara*, Hurwitz’s *Tsafios punehk*, and Lefin’s *Mase’ot ha-yam* are extant, what other sea narratives may have been published in Yiddish and Hebrew but shipwrecked on the reefs of history?

11. In Campe’s (1788: 7) original: “Das Lesen der Romane, so wie überhaupt solcher Bücher, welche nur darauf abziewen, die Phantasie, die Einbildungskraft und die Empfundungen anzuregen, aus voller Ueberzeugung von ihrer groben Schadelichkeit.” Here, as elsewhere throughout this essay, all translations from German, Yiddish, and Hebrew into English are my own.

12. On Campe’s opinions regarding the educational value of travel narratives, compare Blamières 2009: 34.

13. See Isaac Marcus Jost’s recollections from the early nineteenth century: “Je weiter wir im Deutschen vorrückten, gab er uns Campe’s Kinderbibliothek und andere Jugendschriften in die Hand” (As we progressed further in German, he handed us Campe’s Library for Children and other writings for young adults) (quoted in Lohman et al. 2001, 21324). In 2013, Wolpe
many translations into Hebrew and Yiddish, Campe’s work appealed to early maskilim in Germany and to moderate maskilim in Galicia and Ukraine.

Although Campe generally wrote for young adults, the Hebrew and Yiddish versions of his works were not always designated as children’s literature. The Hebrew title pages of books by Mendelsohn-Frankfurt (1807), Günzburg (1823), and David Zamosc (1824) do advertise them as being suitable reading for young people—mainly boys, who received Hebrew education in the early nineteenth century. Yiddish editions, in contrast, would normally have been intended for women, children, and simple folk (amkha), who could not read Hebrew.

Since the publication of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, narratives of sea travel have most often represented a predominantly male society, and they have frequently been associated with boys’ literature. This whole gender issue requires further analysis: since the rise of the novel, as we know, certain cultural clichés have linked girls to novels of sentiment and romance, while boys were expected to read more worldly fare, like tales of sea travel.14

Another aspect of the travelogue in Jewish literature is the connection—or rather, the contrast—to narratives of pilgrimage to the Land of Israel. From medieval times to the modern period, European Hebrew writers produced dozens of accounts of voyages to Palestine.15 Unlike the maskilic literature that was translated from German, these Hebrew texts usually told of journeys undertaken by Yiddish speakers. Following centuries of Hebrew travel narratives, an important Hasidic, hagiographic literature about pilgrims (’olei regei) to the Land of Israel began to appear in 1815, with Sternharz’s (1815) account of Nahman’s journey in 1798–99. The parallel Yiddish versions of Nahman’s fantastic tales—some of them about sea travel—made them accessible to less educated readers, including women and children.

Juxtaposing Hasidic narratives of pilgrimage with early maskilic literature might be a controversial step among Hebrew literary historians. One Israeli scholar took me to task a few years ago when juxtaposing the two corpora, arguing that there was direct competition between them. Yet beyond the verbal and thematic echoes in their writings, there is biographical evidence that Nahman and other Hasidim in Uman socialized with Hurwitz, the author of a seminal translation of Campe into Yiddish (Frieden 2009: esp. 6–10).

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15. See, for many examples, Ya’ari 1948; in English, see Adler 1987.
I think that scholars of Yiddish are more attuned than Hebrew critics to the importance of Hasidic writing, because of their orientation to so-called low genres or folk literature. An example would be studies of Shvitei ha-Besht (In Praise of the Ba' al Shem Tov): to understand this Hebrew text, it is helpful to think in Yiddish. Often a Hebrew phrase is best understood as a calque that is based on a familiar Yiddish expression.

I now examine the maskilic sea narratives translated from Campe. I will then turn briefly to Nahman’s sea narratives (tales 2 and 10), which according to the current consensus were originally told in Yiddish, then translated by Sternharz into Hebrew, and then translated back into Yiddish. Women play a prominent role in Nahman’s tales; in these stories, however, the lost princesses and the exiled emperors’ daughters may be read as figures representing the Shekhina.

Khaikl Hurwitz’s Tsofnas paneakh and Mordechai Aharon Günzburg’s Di entdekung fun Amerika

Because of Campe’s popularity among educated Jewish authors, some of his works were repeatedly translated into Hebrew and Yiddish. Translations of the three-volume Die Entdeckung von Amerika, for example, appeared in two independent Hebrew versions (1807, 1823) and two independent Yiddish versions (1817, 1824). A careful comparison of these competing translations enables us to understand their authors’ distinctive stylistics and ideologies. In the present context, Yiddish works by Hurwitz and Günzburg enable us to appreciate issues that had arisen before the modern Yiddish literary tradition was firmly established.

Hurwitz was born about 1750, lived in Uman, and traveled widely as a businessman until his death in 1822. He was a descendant of R. Isaiah Ha-levi Hurwitz, the renowned author of Shnei luchos ha-brit (Two Tablets of the Covenant), an ethical and mystical work that influenced the Hasidic movement. It is intriguing to learn from late Hasidic sources that Khaikl Hurwitz and his son played chess with Nahman in 1810. His son later attempted to open a modern Jewish school in Uman, which failed. Hurwitz’s Tsofnas paneakh

16. Similarly, Menahem Perry (1968, 1981) discussed the implicit, submerged presence of Yiddish expressions in S. Y. Abramovitch’s (Mendele’s) Hebrew translation of Kitur mase’ot Binyamin ha-shlishi (The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third; 1896). For example, Perry (1968: 93) refers to Abramovitch’s phrase feren in bok aveyn (duping someone), which is literalized in the plot when the antiheroes are taken to the bathhouse.


18. Hurwitz’s son fled from Uman, changed his name to Bernard Hermann, and eventually ended up as an instructor of Oriental languages at Cambridge University (see Reyza 1928: 809).
(Revealer of Secrets), based on Campe’s Die Entdeckung von Amerika (The Discovery of America), has been recognized for its contribution to the development of a modern Yiddish literary style. The book is freely adapted from its source, eliminating much of Campe’s moralistic commentary while intensifying the criticism of European colonization.¹⁹ Also, Hurwitz’s footnotes sometimes criticize contemporary Russia and its treatment of the Jews in the Pale of Settlement.²⁰

Stylistically, Hurwitz was—a long with Lefin—one of the earliest writers to use the spoken Yiddish dialect of Ukraine. But whereas Lefin’s best-known Yiddish works are Bible translations, Hurwitz had the good sense to choose something more prosaic. Part of the opposition to Lefin derived from his unfortunate decision to publish first (in Tarnopol, 1814) his highly colloquial Yiddish translation of Mishlei, the book of Proverbs. His unpublished Yiddish translation of Ecclesiastes was more compelling, because his language better reflects the world-weary tone of the original,²¹ but the damage had been done, and Lefin did not dare to print his other Tanakh translations during his lifetime.

Ber Shlosberg (1937: 553) assessed Hurwitz’s writing accurately: “The comparison to the original shows that Hurwitz always had the German text in front of him while writing. In spite of this, he did not let himself be led astray by the proximity of the two languages.” In other words, he was able to produce a reasonably accurate translation, using his ingenuity and originality as a Yiddish author, without emulating German locutions when a Yiddish expression was available.

Descriptive scenes often test a translator’s abilities. Compare Hurwitz with Campe in a description of shipwreck (table 2).²²

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¹⁹. It is not always clear whether we should attribute the criticism of colonial practices to Campe, to Hurwitz, or to both. It appears that Hurwitz expresses some criticism in his own voice and that he sympathizes with the plight of Native Americans from the standpoint of a Jew in czarist Russia.

²⁰. Articles by Pelli (1991) and Nancy Sinkoff (2001) allude to this analogy between Jews and natives. Sinkoff (ibid.: 93) writes of Lefin that “in the realm of metaphor, he appears to be comparing the ‘noble savages’ with east European Jewry and the British and their world with Western, non-Jewish culture.”

²¹. See Lefin’s Köhles, facsimile of the manuscript of Lefin’s Yiddish translation (Vilna: YIVO, 1930), and his Sefer Köhles im targon Yehudit u-viur, edited by Tzvi ha-Cohen Reich (Odessa: Belinson, 1873).

²². I quote from scans of the only known extant copy of Tsofnas panekh, found in the library of the YIVO Institute. The scans have now been made available online, while the original may be consulted at YIVO. Unfortunately, about half of the three-volume work has been lost from this one known copy. Before World War II, Zalman Reyzen (1933), Shlosberg (1937), and Israel Zinberg (1943: 267–75, 324–27) apparently had access to a more complete copy. Someday, I expect, another copy will be discovered in Russia or Ukraine.
Plötzlich erhielt es einen so gewaltigen Stoß, daß den erschrockenen Schiffsjungen das Steuer aus den Händen fuhr.

Durch das Geschrei desselben aufgeweckt, sprang Kolumbus auf das Verdek, sahe die Felsen, und merke bald, daß das Schiff auf einem derselben gestrandet wäre.

Alle geriethen in verzweifelnde Bestürzung: nur er allein behielt Gegenwart des Geistes genug, um zur Rettung des Schiffes, falls es noch gerettet werden könte, die nöthigen Verfügungen zu treffen. (Campe 1782, 1:122)
As indicated in bold, Hurwitz incorporates in his translation Slavic and Hebrew words: raptum, teykhef, ba[y] seykhil, spasxes, natafen. Without going into technical detail, we can follow the lead of Dov-Ber Kerler (1999: 259) and recognize these as signs of Hurwitz’s avant-garde technique: it anticipates the emergence of modern Eastern literary Yiddish, with an “increasing approximation of the written to the spoken language.” The presence of Slavic words, in particular, shows that Hurwitz builds upon the Yiddish spoken in his region, instead of relying on Western Yiddish or an imitation of literary German.

A brief look at other Yiddish translators of Campe only increases our respect for Hurwitz’s achievement. Günzburg (1795–1846) was a Lithuanian maskil who wrote a noted autobiography in Hebrew, Aviezer. He also translated Campe’s Entdeckung von Amerika twice, publishing a Hebrew version in 1823 and a Yiddish one in 1824. Although he may have tried to improve on Mendelsohn-Frankfurt’s version, his Hebrew is fairly typical of contemporary melitza, in that he overuses familiar biblical proof texts and often creates a pattern of inlaid quotations (shibbutz).

Because maskilim tended to emulate the Prussian sources they admired, several translators of Campe were influenced by German grammar and vocabulary. Israel Bartal (1990: 136) writes, for example, that Günzburg “saw German as a model for composition in Hebrew” and “saw the influence of German as a major factor in the expansion of Hebrew.” In one metaphorical passage, Günzburg described 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” (quoted in ibid.: 132). In this family, which seems to have been typical of highly educated Lithuanian Jews, the older generation was primarily literate in Hebrew, but when the younger generation wrote Hebrew, many of them were implicitly translating from German.

Bartal (ibid.: 142) comments that Günzburg’s book “appears to have been the first Yiddish work by a Lithuanian maskil intended to disseminate popular scientific knowledge.” Günzburg was, however, more committed to Hebrew writing than to Yiddish. He published the Yiddish for the benefit of “those who can make no use of the beautiful Hebrew translation,” and he

23. I have modified the translation slightly, according to Günzburg’s (1863: 66) Aviezer. See also Marcus Moseley’s (2006: chap. 6) discussion of Günzburg.
24. As Bartal (1990: 136) writes, Günzburg “spoke of liberating Hebrew from the shackles of biblical syntax,” yet Günzburg’s (1823: 8) Hebrew translation of Campe’s Entdeckung von Amerika often follows familiar patterns, using several common biblical proof texts. In a storm and near shipwreck, “there was great panic among the sailors, and they called in a loud voice, We are lost! All of us are lost! [weiṭnau, kulanau ‘weiṭnau’].” This Hebrew emulates the use of standard biblical precedents by Mendelsohn-Frankfurt and others.
made the Yiddish version from his own Hebrew edition, creating a “pure, simple Yiddish-ṭayṭsh … without the mishmash of lōshn kodesh, Polish, Russian, Turkish words, which one otherwise mixes together in the Yiddish language” (Günzburg 1823: preface). This makes it clear that he deliberately avoided Eastern Yiddish because he considered an older, Western Yiddish-ṭayṭsh to be purer; he was confident that those who bought it would “find more teaching, utility, and pleasure in it than in the tasteless, untruthful, stories of the Thousand and One Nights” (ibid.). Günzburg published his book at Drukarni XX. Missionareów, the XX Missionary Press, a fact that “may perhaps tell us something about the difficulty of getting it printed in the Jewish community (even though the volume had the imprimatur of the Rabbi of Vilna)” (ibid.). The surprising choice of publisher is, nevertheless, relevant to the content of the book, because missionary activity is seldom far behind in the European sea explorations described by Campe.

One way to demonstrate Hurwitz’s accomplishment in 1817 is to compare his translation with the later Yiddish rendering by Günzburg. As we have seen, Günzburg was opposed to what we now call modern Eastern Yiddish, because he preferred what he considered to be an unadulterated, “pure, simple, Yiddish-ṭayṭsh” without the Hebrew and Slavic components. A first passage is interesting for both the linguistic and the ideological contrasts between Günzburg and Hurwitz (see Table 3).

Günzburg’s orthography and word choice are obviously closer to German, while Hurwitz uses Hebrew loanwords (nakhkes, be-sholem, simkhe), which show that he stays closer to idiomatic Yiddish usage than to literary German. Günzburg illustrates his preference for what he considered “pure” Yiddish-ṭayṭsh while showing a distance from typical Eastern Yiddish speech. At the same time, on the cultural plane, the two translators interpret Campe’s “crowd of curious listeners” (Menge neugieriger Zuhörer) in strikingly different ways—with Günzburg’s travelers imagining being honored by nobility and Hurwitz focusing on the happiness of returning to one’s family. Yiddish scholars need to study these texts in greater depth and then reconsider their place in Yiddish literary history.

Oniya so’ara

Someone in the maskilic circles of Galicia had the astute idea to translate Campe’s German version of Bontekoe’s sea narrative into Hebrew and

25. First paragraph of the unnumbered first page of the “Preface” (“For reyde”); compare Wolpe 2011: 123.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campe</th>
<th>Günzburg</th>
<th>Hurwitz</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Das vergnügte Schiffsvolk ist mit seinen Gedanken schon in Spanien; ist schon mitten unter einer Menge neugieriger Zuhörer, welche die Erzählung von den Wundern der neuen Welt in das lebhafteste Erstaunen setzt. (1782, 1:137)</td>
<td>איצטנדי זיינן זא דויטש לוסטינן און פא</td>
<td>יאש דע יא אאברען גאָפָּן אָּן די</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1824: 26) | פֶּּאָּן אָּ באָמֶר דער יולעם | פֶּּאָּן אָּ באָמֶר דער יולעם | פֶּּאָּן אָּ באָמֶר דער יולעם |
Yiddish. The earliest known copy of the bilingual Hebrew and Yiddish text lacks the opening pages, however, leaving room for speculation regarding its author, publisher, and date. Even its title is not entirely certain, because all we have on the extant copy is a running header that calls it *Oniya so’ara*. The now lost Yiddish version, formerly in the collection of Israel’s National Library, bore the title *Historie: Oder, fun shif brokh* (1823). A reprint of the Hebrew version, also published in Vilna, was called *Oniya so’ara* but also included the shorter of the two narratives from Lefin’s *Mase’ot ha-yam* (1818).

Campe’s adaptation of Bontekoe’s (1648 [1646]) Dutch original appeared in 1788, at the height of his popularity as an adapter of travel narratives for young adults. Translating Bontekoe presented special opportunities and challenges, because the Dutch was written by Bontekoe in a vernacular style, without literary pretensions. In turn, translating Campe’s 1788 adaptation of Bontekoe’s story gave the translator (or translators—because it is possible that the Hebrew and Yiddish versions were prepared by different writers) a chance to show what Hebrew and Yiddish could do. It is, in fact, quite plausible that the Hebrew and Yiddish versions were made by different people, given the difference in the implicit principles of translation. For the most part, the Yiddish translator kept close to Campe’s German text, yet at the same time he broke away from the old-fashioned Yiddish style that emulated literary German. The Hebrew translation expands certain sections by including some newly composed Hebrew prayers, for example, whereas Campe’s Bontekoe is pious without engaging in elaborate supplications.

One could call *Oniya so’ara* (*Storming Ship* or *Storm-Tossed Ship*; c. 1815–18) the Rosetta stone of modern Jewish literature. As the ancient Rosetta stone, with its parallel versions, helped scholars decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics, this German-Hebrew-Yiddish one offers a key to the possibilities of writing in Hebrew and Yiddish circa 1815. Working from Campe’s fluent and elegant German, the Hebrew and Yiddish translators created natural-sounding modern narratives. The vernacular Yiddish best captures the original’s col-

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26. Part of this section is taken from my analysis of *Oniya so’ara* in the introduction to a trilingual edition of *Oniya so’ara* that I am preparing with Marion Aprot. It is expected to include three parallel columns showing Campe’s original, the Yiddish translation, and the Hebrew translation.

27. In connection with Yiddish literary history, Campe’s most relevant works are *Robinson der Jüngere, zur angenehmen und nützlichen Unterhaltung für Kinder* (1779–86); *Die Entdeckung von Amerika: Ein angenehmes und nütziges Lesebuch für Kinder und junge Lente* (1781–82); and “Wilhelm Isbrand Bontekoe’s merkwürdige Abenteuer auf einer Reise aus Holland nach Ostindien” (1788). During 1786–91, Campe translated and adapted nine volumes of travel narratives, the *Reisebeschreibungen*.

28. On the coarse style of Bontekoe’s original, see Geyl 1929. Probably influenced by earlier French and German translations, Campe’s version uses straightforward language, geared to young adults.
loquial fluency, while the heavily biblicized Hebrew suggests the elegance of Campe’s late eighteenth-century style.

The Yiddish of Oniya so’ara sounds even more “natural,” or colloquial, than the Hebrew. It draws on the spoken quality of modern Eastern Yiddish, and it is well suited to describing natural scenes. Yiddish was able to represent contemporary, spoken words in a completely believable way, while most dialogue written in Hebrew, at that time, tended to sound forced or archaic. The Yiddish is accurate, if a bit dayishmerish, adding only an intensifying “for God’s sake” (leman hashem):

כ признаי, אנו מספרים מארח עלינו נאה, אנו מספרים שלום שלום שלום ששלום (Anonymous c. 1815–18: 39).

The Hebrew rendering is vivid but shows a conceptual bias when it shifts God’s role to that of protective Providence, “and God will be with you” (ve-yehei ha-shem ‘inkhem):

כ擊 פי ה’ לאטריכים, ידך תﭒ適用 עליים, ידך תапр🤔 עליים, ידך תапрطو עליים, ידך תапрطو עליים (Anonymous c. 1815–18: 41).

Moreover, the Hebrew translator adds a familiar biblical phrase (Num. 17: 27), taken from the Israelites’ words to Moses while wandering in the desert, “hen gav’anu ‘avadnu, kulam ‘avadnu” (we perish, we are lost, all of us lost). This phrase had been used by many other travel narrators—such as Simlya ben Yehoshua in Ahavat Tzijon (1790) — to convey a scene of crisis at sea. In fact, it had already appeared at the beginning of the Bontekoe narrative (Anonymous 1823b: chap. 1). In contrast to the Yiddish, the Hebrew fluctuates between literal translation and melitzel. That is, while sometimes providing the literal sense of the original, the Hebrew often resorts to ready-made biblical expressions and quotations.

One revealing way to compare early Yiddish narratives is to look at their presentation of everyday speech. Hurwitz and the best Hasidic writers do this effectively, because they embrace the vernacular. The oral style makes per-

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29. The best examples of quasi-conversational Hebrew from the eighteenth century are probably not the philosophical dialogues that were published in the Berlin Haskalah journal Ha-ne‘asef. Aharon Halle Wolfsohn made impressive efforts to capture the cadences of dialogue in his play Kahut da’at ve-te‘zon’it (Fricidity and Hypocrisy; the Yiddish version was titled Leykhitzin un fremmelayt). Probably Wolfsohn’s success resulted from his having written the work first in Yiddish and later translating it into Hebrew. See Weinryb 1955; Wolfsohn 1977.

fect sense in the translation of Bontekoe’s narrative, which itself has an oral feel. Campe switches to direct quotation of Bontekoe’s words at the decisive moment of shipwreck. Following Campe, the Yiddish version in Oniya so’ara is a tour de force because of its graphic immediacy, creating an impression of oral discourse:

(Anonymous c. 1815–18: 17)

Readers of modern Yiddish will recognize incipient characteristics of the literary language as it crystallized later in the nineteenth century. At a time when popular Yiddish books like the Mayse bukh, Tsenene, and Teysent un eyne nakh (Thousand and One Nights) were dominated by Western Yiddish and imitations of literary German, this passage eschews most of the trappings of what was destined to become an archaic Yiddish style. Working from Campe’s German, the translator evidently chose not to emulate the German of his source. Moreover, he conveys the spontaneity of Bontekoe’s speech, aptly reproducing the captain’s state of mind during a shipwreck. As Campe saw fit to switch to first-person narrative at this point in the story, moreover, so the Yiddish translator of Campe tries to convey the impression of orality created by Bontekoe’s plain style.

Thus Oniya so’ara, even though (as the translation of a translation) it may superficially seem unoriginal, marked the beginning of a new era in Yiddish narrative. Although I no longer believe that Lefin wrote it, we may assume that it was written by another enlightened author in Galicia. The bilingual format is, however, unique among the extant travel narratives that were published by maskilim at this time. If we consider the bilingual Hebrew/Yiddish narratives of that period, it is noteworthy that what most resembles Oniya so’ara is the volume of Nahman’s tales, as published by Sternharz in 1815. When we move from Bontekoe’s story of survival to Nahman’s fantastic tales, however, we move from the reality of sea travel to a realm of Kabba-

Nahman of Bratzlav and Nathan Sternharz, *Sippurei ma`asiyot / Sipurey mayses*

Sternharz’s accomplishment, in recording Nahman’s tales in Hebrew and translating them into Yiddish, was incommensurate with that of the maskilic authors of *Tsafnas paneakh* and *Oniya so‘ara*. Hurwitz and the author of *Oniya so‘ara* combined the orality of modern, Eastern Yiddish speech with the literariness inspired by Campe’s German. Sternharz worked from the idiomatic Yiddish vernacular spoken by the rebbe while imbuing it with Hebrew words and the Kabbalistic allusions that they carried.

Nahman told his tales orally in Yiddish, but scholars have debated whether they were first written down by Sternharz in Hebrew or Yiddish.³² Although this has sometimes appeared to be little more than a struggle between Hebraists and Yiddishists for Nahman’s tales, the consensus now is that the Hebrew version was written down first, while the Yiddish text was translated from the Hebrew. I have argued elsewhere (Frieden 2008) that Sternharz used a relatively “low” Hebrew, choosing a basic, Mishnaic vocabulary and emphasizing Hebrew words that were current in Yiddish. Placed below the Hebrew version, Sternharz’s parallel Yiddish text retains many of the Hebrew words, both those that were commonly used in Yiddish and others that were unusual. At the start of the first tale, for example, many words are shared by the two versions. Here I quote from the bilingual Bratslav edition of 1979, which alters spellings and adds diacritical marks to the Yiddish:

\[
\text{אַלְלִיּ קַאָל אֶזְיַדְוָן אָקָּלָל דָּאָרָּךְ קַעַמ קַאָּשְׁ וַעֲקַסְזְ וַעֲקַסְזְ דָּאָרָּךְ קַעַמ קַאָּשְׁ וַעֲקַסְזְ זָּאָּו אָלְיַדְוָן אָטְשֶּׁנְעָן}
\]

(\text{Nahman ben Simla of Bratslav 1979: 1})

We may be tempted to translate passages like this one into Yinglish, highlighting the words that are common in the Hebrew and Yiddish versions:

Once there was a meylekh [king]. The meylekh had six sons and one daughter. The daughter was very khoshe [important] to him and he would always mekhabe [that is, love] her and mesha 'ase'a [amused himself] a lot with her. . . . Once he became brogez [angry] with her . . . she went to her kheyder [room] [and then disappeared]. The king was very metza'er [sad]. (Ibid.)

In 2012, Naomi Seidman suggested in a private communication that I call this passage a hybrid language, to be distinguished from the general character of Yiddish as a “fusion language,” as discussed by Max Weinreich. On the other hand, when I talked about it at the Association for Jewish Studies conference (Chicago, 2012), Alan Astro called it “Yeshivish.” Which makes sense, precisely, because Nahman told his tales in his vernacular while constantly referring to the higher realm of Kabbalistic ideas.

Similarly, at the beginning of tale 6, the Hebrew and Yiddish versions share various words. Again I offer a rendering into Yinglish:

Once there was a meylekh [king] and the meylekh had a khokhem [wise man]. The meylekh said to the khokhem: be-asher [because, inasmuch as] there is a meylekh who khotem zikheh [signs his name] that he is a great gibor [hero] and an ish emes [man of truth] and an `anev [humble person]. (Nahman 1815: 25b)

These Hebraized Yiddish passages lift up the Yiddish, much as Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye exalts his speech with the help of Hebrew quotations, though for different reasons. In a sense, the bilingual book of Nahman’s tales blurs the boundary between Hebrew and Yiddish, because the Hebrew appears to follow Yiddish grammar and the Yiddish incorporates Hebrew. Like Nahman’s Master of Prayer in tale 12, who exalts the humble and humbles the exalted, Sternharz exalts (humble) Yiddish and debases (exalted) Hebrew. For this reason, in his preface to the second edition of Sippurei ma’asiyot / Sippurey mayses, Sternharz apologizes for the occasionally coarse language of the Hebrew. The editor of this 1850 edition, Nahman of Tcherin, adds that Sternharz—working from the oral Yiddish—“translated into the Holy Tongue and lowered himself intentionally to a simple language, in order that the matter would not be changed for one who reads them in the Holy Tongue, in accordance with what he [Nahman], of blessed memory, told in the language of Ashkenaz [Yiddish] that is customary among us” (Nahman ben Simha of Bratslav 1979: 14). The presence of coarse Hebrew is justified, then, by the goal of keeping it as close as possible to the spoken Yiddish original.

Instead of providing a fluent, self-sufficient Yiddish tale, Sternharz embeds Hebrew words that constantly remind the reader that the Yiddish parallel text refers to a Hebrew source; this diminishes the gap between loshn koydekh and mame-loshn. With the Hebrew “low” (as apologetically noted in the second
preface to the 1850 *Sippurei ma'asiyot*) and the Yiddish Hebraized, the languages are brought closer together.

For a closer look at the merger of Nahman’s storytelling and Sternharz’s written Yiddish style, and a return to the motif of sea travel, I cite a passage from tale 2 in the original orthography and minimal punctuation. This description of sea travel brings out a marked difference between Nahman’s writing and that of the Enlightenment authors discussed previously:

After that · they conferred and decided they would go out to sea · and they rented a ship · and went out to sea. · So they went on the sea. · After that they wanted to come to a shore.

In Nahman’s Yiddish storytelling, we find that the fantasy quality and allegorical emphasis take away from the concreteness of description. Although Nahman had experienced sea travel and storms at sea during his voyage to the Land of Israel in 1798–99, his narratives do little to evoke the graphic details of a ship or a storm. This may be understood ideologically, in relation to the Hasidic caution with regard to the natural world. For Nahman, describing the concrete scenes in detail seems unimportant, because their real significance is allegorical, that is, mystical.

The same may be said of a storm description in tale 10,

And he walked and walked until he came to the sea · He got onto a ship and went away on the sea · A great storm wind came along · and carried the ship away to a shore, where there was a *midbar* (that is, desert), and because of the great *umpit* [storm] the ship was smashed ·

The topos of sea travel reveals an unbridgeable rift between the worlds of maskilic and Hasidic writing. In his redaction of Nahman’s tales, Sternharz never represents vivid scenes of sailing or passing through storms. This contrasts with what Sternharz did in his Hebrew accounts of Nahman’s and his own pilgrimage to the Land of Israel. But even there, Sternharz seldom dwells at length upon natural scenes; the traveler’s response, culminating in fervent prayer, is more important. In Nahman’s tales and Sternharz’s pilgrimage narratives, storms at sea are always more than natural
phenomena. They epitomize the obstacles that pilgrims encounter in their struggle to reach the Holy Land, and overcoming such obstacles spiritually is the essence of the pilgrimage.

Hasidic Yiddish narratives of travel seldom achieve the naturalism we expect from modern literature. Nahman’s religious sensibility suggests that the world of physical objects distracts us from the higher reality of the Kabbalistic sefirot, or emanations of the divine light, which permeate the world. This helps us to understand why descriptions of nature were infrequent in early nineteenth-century Yiddish writing. Moreover, Hasidic authors were engaged in a battle against the incursions of modern science and medicine, which fueled skepticism toward the mystical worldview. They were deliberately estranged from the natural world, providing the prototype for S. Y. Abramovitch’s satire of hapless travelers to the Holy Land in Küser masoos Binyumen ha-shlishi (Yiddish, 1878; Hebrew, 1896).

Conclusion: Translation in the Yiddish/Hebrew Polysystem

Why did the maskilim translate Campe’s travel narratives for young adults into Yiddish and Hebrew? And did these translations from German constitute a turning point in Yiddish and Hebrew literary history? There were obvious ideological reasons for translating these narratives. The choice of Campe by maskilic translators simultaneously expressed, first, admiration for the German Aufklärung; second, the didactic goals of teaching Hebrew and geography to Jewish children; and third, a certain measure of condescension toward adult readers.

Reflecting on the centrality of Campe’s German narratives in early modern Yiddish and Hebrew prose, it is helpful to consider more generally the role of translation in a “young literary tradition.” Itamar Even-Zohar (1990: 46–47) explained the circumstances under which “translated literature maintains a central position in the literary polysystem”:

When new literary models are emerging, translation is likely to become one of the means of elaborating the new repertory. Through the foreign works, features (both principles and elements) are introduced into the home literature which did not exist there before . . . a new (poetic) language, or compositional patterns and techniques.

In a helpful overview of this phenomenon, Even-Zohar (ibid.: 47) refers to three major cases: (a) when a polysystem has not yet crystallized, that is to say, when a literature is “young,” in the process of being established; (b) when a literature is either “peripheral” (within a large group of correlated literatures) or “weak” or both; and (c) when there are turning points, crises,
or literary vacuums in a literature. Taking the three points separately, this analysis may be applied to Yiddish writing around 1800 to 1825, when modern Yiddish literature was in its infancy; at that time, in relation to both Hebrew and German, the writers often perceived Yiddish as peripheral and weak; and there was a literary vacuum in the areas of children’s literature and travel literature. At this turning point, Nahman chose to link his stories to popular folktales, like those contained in Yiddish editions of the Thousand and One Nights, while the enlightened authors linked their stories to German sources, including nonfiction accounts of exploration, discovery, and heroic survival in adversity. Translation and adaptation enabled both groups to advance their causes while at the same time contributing to the emergence of modern Yiddish narrative.

On the choice of a source, Even-Zohar (ibid.: 66) writes that it “may be selected . . . because it is considered a model to emulate.” Later he refers to the situation of “interference” that arises “when a system is in need of items unavailable within itself” (ibid.: 69). One could say that Yiddish and Hebrew authors, while admiring German authors such as Campe, needed the genre of children’s literature, and so they imported it from German.

How should we understand the “weakness” of Yiddish writing around 1800, when the influence of translated German works became pivotal? And what explains the centrality of German models to Yiddish writers, early in the nineteenth century? To approach these issues, it helps to recall that the Polysystem group at Tel Aviv University sometimes calls early modern Hebrew and Yiddish literatures “deficient” or “dependent polysystems” (ibid.: 79ff.). As nature abhors a vacuum, so literary systems often correct imbalances by means of interlinguistic influences. Among the many aspects of Yiddish writing that were lacking was a clear distribution of social and cultural layers; enlightened Jews often thought of Yiddish as a debased “jargon” that was inadequate to meet the tasks set for a language of high culture. The outmoded tradition of mimicking literary German, in order to suggest a higher social level of speech, was no longer acceptable. Instead, such Germanized Yiddish had lost its prestige and—to speakers of modern Eastern Yiddish in the Pale of Settlement—was beginning to sound merely pompous and pretentious. Literary German of the eighteenth century, having established distinctive high and low registers, was able to represent

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33 Regarding the concept of a “weak” literature, Even-Zohar (1990: 79–83) notes, for example, that “in a weak situation, a system is unable to function by confining itself to its home repertoire only” (ibid.: 81). Based on the decisive, formative role of German writing in the early modern period of Hebrew and Yiddish narrative, a role which suggests that Hebrew and Yiddish literature found it difficult to advance based on their internal resources, these Jewish literary systems may be called “weak.”
social classes and signal its intended audience more clearly than was possible for Hebrew and Yiddish. The eighteenth-century Jewish practice of transferring popular German works into Judeo-German, as when the *Thousand and One Nights* appeared in Hebrew characters, was no longer perceived as viable.

The Yiddish authors I have discussed translated from source polysystems that were highly developed in several socially marked registers. Sea narratives were perhaps uniquely able to supply what was missing in a Jewish “deficient polysystem,” because they touched on worldwide realia, including ethnographic materials, which test the limits of any literary language. Such narratives also included a range of styles, from genres associated with scientific exploration to the “plain style” of captains’ logs, calling upon linguistic resources that had not yet been fully assimilated into modern Jewish literature. While Hebrew lacked a low, oral-style register, Yiddish lacked a suitable high register. That is, literary Yiddish had been dominated by imitations of Western Yiddish, in turn dependent on the evolving norms of literary High German. As modern Eastern Yiddish emerged, including new lexical items and grammatical forms, the literature of Yiddish both needed to reflect this new reality and develop a new high register that was closer to the spoken language than were the outmoded Judeo-German texts.

George Steiner (1998: 314) has written that “the translator invades, extracts, and brings home.” With reference to travel narratives, this is an especially suggestive metaphorical string: in the same way that the explorer may invade, extract, and bring home goods from a foreign land, so a pioneering translator may bring home literary goods from a foreign language. Steiner does not ultimately condone this approach to translation, but his image is applicable to Columbus’s obsessive search for gold—as described in Campe’s narrative that was repeatedly translated into Hebrew and Yiddish. And so it was around 1807 to 1824, when Jewish authors brought home travel narratives from the writings of Campe, that Yiddish and Hebrew entered a new phase as part of modern European writing. The continuity with prior Jewish writing was supplemented by intertextual relationships with non-Jewish writing from the surrounding cultures.34

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