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HEBREW AND YIDDISH: ONE DOES NOT CHOOSE BETWEEN HIS FATHER AND HIS MOTHER

Abstract: Since Hebrew is a Semitic and thus consonantic language, the main difficulty for the Yiddish student who does not know the sacred language is how to decipher Hebrew words. But deciphering Hebrew also implies for the reader to be familiar with day-to-day Jewish life: the latter is rythmed by a whole range of traditional gestures which appear mostly in Hebrew. What is at stake is not only to explain the words' meaning but also to evoke a customs, a belief, a Talmudic sentence, a Biblical episode, a *midrash* or a *Hassidic* tale. That is to show the indefectible link existing between Yiddish, Hebrew and Jewish tradition. In this respect modern Hebrew literature exemplifies this reunification between Yiddish and Hebrew by authors such as Aharon Appelfeld. As far as in his early works, that is short sorties published in the sixties, Aharon Appelfeld makes his characters express themselves in Yiddish through Hebrew. In 2001 he eventually wrote a novel *One night after the other* where the main part is given to the Yiddish language and culture. The parts are thus inverted: the long despised Yiddish language is raised to the status of a Patriarch language, a sacred tongue, also able to guarantee the survival of the Jewish people.

Keywords: Hebrew language and literature; Yiddish language and literature; *mame loshn*; Jewish tradition; redemption; *nign*; transmission; language resurrection.

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ИВРИТ И ИДИШ. МЕЖДУ ОТЦОМ И МАТЕРЬЮ НЕ ВЫБИРАЮТ

Резюме: Поскольку иврит — семитский консонантный язык, основная сложность изучающих идиш, которые не владеют святым языком, заключается в расшифровке заимствований из иврита. Этот процесс связан с общей компетентностью читателя и знанием еврейской повседневности, которая наполнена

традиционными понятиями, часто выражаемыми через древнееврейские слова. Объясняя заимствования, приходится рассказывать также об обычаях, религиозных убеждениях, талмудическом праве, библейском тексте, мидрашах и хасидских сказках. Этот пример демонстрирует непосредственную связь между идишем, ивритом и еврейской традицией. В современной литературе на иврите данная связь наблюдается у таких авторов, как Аарон Апфельфельд. Уже в ранних работах, коротких историях, опубликованных в 1960-х гг., персонажи Аарона Апфельфельда говорят на иврите, через который «просвечивает» идиш. В 2001 г. он написал роман «Одна ночь за другой», где важное место занимает идиш — язык и культура. Здесь стороны поменялись местами: ранее презираемый идиш получил статус языка-патриарха, святого языка, гарантирующего выживание еврейского народа.

Ключевые слова: Иврит: язык и литература, идиш: язык и литература, *маме-лошн*, еврейская традиция, возрождение традиции, *нигун*, передача традиции, возрождение языка.

*«Hebrew and Yiddish are like two twin-sisters
living under one roof»*

Aharon Appelfeld

Can we speak of two opposite or even opposed languages?

Who could have imagined at the beginning of the 20th century, at the time of the Czernowitz Conference (1908) that Hebrew and Yiddish would make peace and go back to be the two intertwined languages they had been for centuries? Who could have foreseen that after so many bitter fights between the Zionists, supporters of the Hebrew revival and the Bundists, militants of Yiddish as an international Jewish language, writers, poets, linguists would build bridges between the two languages, creating anew the original bindings common to both languages?

Indeed at the peak of the Russian *Haskalah*, in the second half of the 19th century, one had witnessed the birth of Yiddish literature. Mendele Moicher Sforim, *der Zeyde*, the “grand-father” of this literature had dared to publish in this contemptible language, which had been so much decried by the Hebrew scholars of the Jewish Enlightenment. Having been considered for a long time as a hybrid and mixed idiom at the extreme opposite of the Hebrew noble spirit, Yiddish had reached the heights of fame thanks to Mendele, a writer whose reputation in Hebrew writing was already firmly established. Indeed Mendele had understood that the *Maskilim* would never succeed in reaching the Jewish Yiddish-speaking masses through Hebrew only. East European Jewish literature had to pass through Yiddish. Régine Robin underlines however that the great authors who had made of Yiddish a literary language were all Hebrew scholars, in love with Hebrew and attached to the

language¹. Besides they switched over easily from one language to the other. Thus Mendele writes his memoirs in Hebrew. In his novels he often mixes both languages. In *The Travels of Benjamin III / Masa'ot Binyamin Hashelishi*, many passages come first in Hebrew, and then in Yiddish. The repetition brings a comical effect, stressing the contrast between the epic grandiloquence, the sacred historical reference and the hero's miserable and humble condition.

Hebrew words in Yiddish or the transmission of a tradition: mesirat ha-masoret

In 1832, Leopold Zunz, one of the founders of *Die Wissenschaft des Judentums* asks: "What would be Yiddish without Hebrew?" As a matter of fact the interaction between Hebrew words and medieval German is both oral and written. But inasmuch as Hebrew is a Semitic and thus consonant language, the main difficulty for the Yiddish student who does not know the holy language is how to decipher Hebrew words. This is the reason why for several years I have been teaching « Hebraisms in Yiddish language». The aim of this course is to help the Yiddish readers to identify words and expressions in Hebrew, as well as in Aramaic. But deciphering Hebrew also implies for the reader to be familiar with day-to-day Jewish life: the latter is punctuated by a whole range of traditional gestures which appear mostly in Hebrew. What is at stake is not only to explain the words' meaning but also to evoke a customs, a belief, a Talmudic sentence, a Biblical episode, a *midrash*² or a *Hassidic*³ tale. That is to show the indefectible link existing between Yiddish, Hebrew and Jewish tradition. Both languages go back to the same roots and feed each other. Mordechai Litvine, a translator of French poetry into Yiddish and a literary critic, often mentioned the paternal figure of Hebrew, the language of law and of severity, counterbalanced by Yiddish, *di mame loshn*, "the language of the mother", which is all tenderness and consolation. These bridges, these constant echoes between Yiddish and Hebrew through teaching lead to an intergenerational exchange, which is both moving and exciting.

As a teacher I can propose precious tools to my middle-aged students. These latter, as children, have often spoken Yiddish with their parents and thus can give me a wonderful and spontaneous feed back of their childhood language, which has been buried and locked within themselves. This gives way to a very special interaction between speakers of an exclusively oral mother tongue and their teacher who learnt this tongue in an academic way and masters it in reading and writing. As a child, I happen to have been surrounded by the music

¹ Robin, 49.

² *midrash*: early Jewish interpretation of or commentary on a Biblical text.

³ *hassidic*: from *hassidut*: Jewish mystical religious movement born in the South of Poland in the 1740's.

of Yiddish even though the transmission of the language was not a direct one. I have been immersed in a continuous “Yiddish-talk” and thus the language always embodied a kind of second *mame loshn*⁴, or rather *tate loshn*, “father tongue”, since Yiddish was my father’s mother tongue. The exchanges between teacher and students simultaneously arouse a common and shared memory, which is discovered and re-discovered by the transmission of knowledge, tradition, and Law by the students, or by the evocation of familiar expressions or a Yiddish accent heard in childhood by the teacher. All these intertwined elements mixed in a surprising symbiosis are echoing in order to re-create, or rather to perpetuate languages, traditions and cultures interlaced in a steady *continuum*.

Yiddish, as a redeeming language through Hebrew

Modern Hebrew literature exemplifies this reunification between Yiddish and Hebrew, and especially in Aharon Appelfeld’s work.

To Appelfeld Yiddish stands for a sensual language: “My grand-mother spoke Yiddish and her language sounded differently (than German) since it evoked always to me the smell of stewed prunes”⁵.

Yiddish embodies the vital connection between the generations of the East European Jewish world. Like Kafka, with whom he feels many affinities, the ancestors language is the real umbilical cord which links him back to Eastern Jews, *die Ostjuden*, who are the true guardians of an authentic Judaism. In his famous *Discourse on Yiddish*, Kafka writes:

“In order that Yiddish should be quite near to you, it is enough to think that [...] there are still active forces which enable you to understand Yiddish only by **feeling** it. [...] Once you are moved by Yiddish — because **Yiddish is everything, the word, the Hassidic nign**⁶ and the deep reality of this Jewish actor himself — you won’t be able to recognize the old peacefulness⁷.”

As if echoing these words, Appelfeld answers Kafka in one of his novels *Abyss / Timyon* which takes place at the beginning of the 20th century in Bucovina. The hero, Karl Hübner, recently converted to Catholicism, evokes his Yiddish-speaking parents, now deceased. They were born in a small Carpathian *shtetl* and had kept within themselves the spontaneous and vivid Yiddish of their origins, and thus in spite of their desire to assimilate the German-speaking milieu where they chose to live:

“Isn’t it wonderful? Not only their faces change, but even their language alter. The German language they speak in day-to-day life is suddenly banished, and another language, slightly alike, appears and comes to life in their

⁴ *mame loshn*: the language of the mother.

⁵ Appelfeld, *Story of a life/ Sippur Hayim*, 100. (All the translations from Hebrew into English are mine)

⁶ *nign*: vocal Jewish religious song or tune sung by groups.

⁷ Kafka, 374.

mouths. To Karl, it is obvious that **this** is **their** real language, and only through it they are able to express the murmur of their hearts⁸.”

Appelfeld rejoins Kafka in his perception of Yiddish as a language intimately linked to senses and feelings. This is the language Appelfeld pays homage to. In the remote regions of Eastern Europe at the end of the 19th century, the only rallying point of salesmen, Zionist delegates, innkeepers and conscripts is the Yiddish language.

As far as in his early works, that is short stories published in the sixties, Appelfeld makes his characters speak in Yiddish through Hebrew. In *Frost on the Earth* (1965), an exhausted salesman ends up in a Jewish inn where he meets another Jew, a *shadkhn*, a matchmaker: *bi-leshon imkha hu sakh*: “he speaks to you in you’re mother-tongue = *mame loshn*”⁹, that is Yiddish. Appelfeld translated into Hebrew the well-known expression: *mame loshn*¹⁰. In the same short story, the writer evokes the difficult life conditions of these men: “The destructive time had not destroyed in them the mad nostalgia they had for a **Jewish word**, a **Jewish meal**, a burning stove¹¹.” Here the word “Jewish”, *yehudi*, is the Hebrew word for *Yiddish*. Appelfeld hints at the sensuality of the language that even permeates the taste of food.

Yiddish can also be the language of the *goyim*, the non-Jews, when those become the guardians of the Jewish memory: so it is with Katerina, the Ukrainian servant of the eponymous novel who is deeply attached to her Jewish employers. She learns Yiddish, saves the lives of their two sons during a pogrom, and when she gives birth to her own son, she calls him Benjamin and speaks to him in Yiddish. She is so happy to hear him say “Mummy” in Yiddish: “Yiddish was going to be his language¹²”, she says.

Aharon Appelfeld's ode to Yiddish composed in Hebrew

In 2001 Appelfeld eventually wrote a novel *One night after the other / Layla ve-od layla* where the main part is given to the Yiddish language and culture. It is a kind of ode in prose dedicated to Yiddish. The novel tells about a group of Yiddish-speaking artists living in a small boarding house in Jerusalem in the sixties. Their only purpose in life is to restore Yiddish as the redeeming language of the Jewish people. Yiddish is embodied through several characters, each of them representing a specific side of the Yiddish language and culture. The old *Yehezqel* incarnates the prophet of the language. In his mouth, Yiddish sounds as a prophetic language. *Zaydl* the poet is the spiritual

⁸ Appelfeld, *Abyss / Tymion*, 28. (Bold stresses are mine).

⁹ Appelfeld, *Frost on the Earth / Kefor 'al ha-arets*, 87.

¹⁰ Cf. p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Bold stresses are mine.

¹² Appelfeld, *Katerina*, 81.

leader of the group. To him, Yiddish is a holy language that has to be restored. There is also Hayim Levi, the historian, who is the living memory of the group. Shalom Shimer, the Tel-Avivian stands in awe of the Yiddish language, he is a *hared* of Yiddish. Kirtzl, the painter, draws words in Yiddish. Two characters embody the musical side: Yoel, the former Bundist, and Paula, the silent cello player. Nahman Gold, the lively librarian, considers Yiddish books as orphans that one has to protect and to keep from destruction. The feminine main character is the poetess Hana Rigler, who declaims Yiddish poetry all around the world.

The fervent love for Yiddish is closely linked to the ancestors and the Jewish sources and stands for the main thread of the novel. Manfred the narrator gets back to this subject again and again:

“At the beginning of the war, I lost my parents, but till this very day, I am still bound to them by many links. I am also bound to my grand parents with all my heart and my soul. My mother was the one who paved my way to faith. It is not easy for me to speak about it. She was not an observant Jew and did not keep the tradition, did not light candles on Shabbat, did not go to the synagogue, but her life was linked to the hidden side, the *nistar*¹³.”

This religious feeling linked to Yiddish emphasizes its being the language of the origins and that of redemption. Throughout the novel Yiddish is allegorized in several characters. As a dying language it is embodied through Yehezqel who is aware of his own approaching death but he resigns himself to the fact and even comforts his friends:

“Manfred, don’t worry, I assure you that our language is destined to come to life. I don’t know when, but the day is coming. There is a limit to oppression. The language is like the soul: it lives forever. Soon, people will go back to it fervently. [...] In the beginning the language will come back to life and immediately afterwards all that was linked to it: sounds, colours, smells, *shabbatot* and holidays, streets, and of course faith. Without faith in resurrection of the dead, there can’t be life¹⁴.”

There is a similar process in the prophet Yehezqel’s vision of the valley of dry bones¹⁵: the resurrection is gradual: at first flesh and tendons, and by the end the divine spirit that brings bodies back to life. In the vision of the contemporary Yehezqel, the whole Jewish people who perished in Europe slowly comes to life throughout the language and thanks to faith which is the human parallel of God’s spirit. This new creation also reminds of the world creation through God’s words.

¹³ Appelfeld, *One night after the other / Laila ve-od laila*, 75.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Chapter 37, verses 1–14.

Zaydl is the poet of the group whose name — Grandpa in Yiddish — sounds as a tribute to Mendele Moycher Sforim, the “grand-father” of the Yiddish literature, as Sholem Aleychem put it, and the founder of both Yiddish and Hebrew modern prose. Like Mendele, Zaydl has to cope with hostile forces fiercely opposed to Yiddish. From the very beginning Zaydl proclaims the holiness of Yiddish. But this holiness gets a new meaning: the literary and artistic evenings that take place at the boarding-house become a holy deed: “Yiddish is a holy tongue and we have to take care of its purity. One distorted word might be harmful not only to the poem but to the soul which receives it¹⁶.”

In the same way as the Torah reader is not allowed to distort neither a word, nor a sound of the Holy Scripture, it is forbidden to distort Yiddish during the “service” of literary evenings. To Zaydl these evenings are a *tikkun hatsot*, the midnight reparation prayer, and Yiddish is *Torah min ha-shamayim*, Torah from the Heaven, but Yiddish has its opponents and the first of them is Mrs Pracht, the boarding-house landlady: “Yiddish is disgusting, it is not only a slovenly language, but it sounds miserably¹⁷.” Mrs Pracht is the embodiment of German assimilated Jews who loathe the *Ostjuden*, the East European Jews, and their language. Even though she admires Zaydl because he knows French and recites Baudelaire by heart, she condemns Yiddish in the same way as Ben Yehuda¹⁸ and his “crazy” friends were condemned when they dreamed of a Hebrew revival: “These people live in a world of dream, nothing will change them. They are blind, deaf and they live according to obsolete notions”¹⁹. But the loss of Yiddish is also regarded as a sin, similar to Abel’s murder by Cain. Hayim Levi, the historian who writes the *Yizker Buch*, the history of the Jews of his native town, and hints at this biblical episode: “Now our mother tongue **is crying out**²⁰ to us: we did not know how to love it, we neglected it and spoke of it badly²¹”. Like in *Genesis* 4:10 Yiddish is “crying out” to come back to life: “Your brother’s blood **is crying out** to me from the ground”. Moreover the allusion to Yom Kippur: “we spoke of it badly²²” emphasizes the feeling of guilt.

The group of Yiddish artists decides to found a committee for the Yiddish language, *Va’ad lema’an ha-lashon*, on the model of the Committee for the Hebrew language founded by Ben Yehuda. Kirtzl, the painter, claims that after the *Hurbm*, the destruction of the Jews, art can either scream or be silent.

¹⁶ Appelfeld, *One night...*, 124.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Eliezer Ben Yehuda was behind the revival of the Hebrew language by the end of the 19th century.

¹⁹ Appelfeld, *One night...*, 86.

²⁰ Bold stresses are mine.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *dibarnu dofi*: one of the famous formulas included in the long confession, *viduy*, of Yom Kippur, the Atonement Day.

One cannot create nor paint any form, because the figurative art has been exterminated together with its signification. Thus Kirtzl now draws words in Yiddish:

“Yiddish is both the form and the contents. Every Yiddish word is full of holiness, and if we succeed to make this holiness emerge from the words, we shall make the language revive. To redeem our language out of oblivion, this is our mission²³”.

The miraculous survival of Yiddish is due to its sanctity: according to the tradition, Hebrew letters have been given by God himself, and this tradition has been transmitted for generations through the Yiddish *nign*, the melody, which points out the hidden sense of the Bible. Music is a very important component of the Yiddish world: both words and music bear a divine strength within themselves. Yiddish is not only a holy language but it is also able to create a vanished world anew. The *nign*²⁴ is one of the key-words of the *hassidut*²⁵ and brings the evidence of God’s presence. In one of Appelfeld’s early short stories, *From Above Silence*, the narrator is learning tradition from an old blind man: From the darkness of his impenetrable eyes he pulls out the Biblical verses: how sweet to his ears are the commentaries in his **mother tongue**. The **nign** awakens his memory; without the **nign** he would remember nothing²⁶”. Thanks to the **nign** and to the language, that is Yiddish, the *mame-loshn*, the old blind man can pass the tradition on a man who has no memories. Thus the real blind man is the one immersed in oblivion whereas the old man has got the inner hidden light.

The treasures of the language are the books kept by the librarian Nahman Gold like a real treasure. His name also refers to the first verse of *Isaiah*, 40: 1: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people”: *Nahamu, nahamu ‘ami*, and links Yiddish literature once more to holy texts and prophecy. His library, that is his bedroom, being too small to contain all the Yiddish books he collected, Nahman Gold suggests his friends should take part also in the keeping of the literary treasure. His slogan: “Anyone who saves a Yiddish book is alike someone who saved a whole world²⁷”, sounds as a reminder of the Talmudic saying: “Anyone who saves a human soul is like someone who saves the whole world²⁸”. Nahman Gold is a kind of allegory of the Yiddish books: “**all hismight** is Yiddish books²⁹”, writes Appelfeld, *kol me ‘odo sfarim be-yiddish*. Here sounds the well-known

²³ Appelfeld, *One night...*, 127.

²⁴ Cf. *supra* p. 3.

²⁵ *hassidut*. Cf. *supra* p. 2.

²⁶ *From Above Silence / Mi-merom ha-dumiya*, 93. Bold stresses are mine.

²⁷ Appelfeld, *One night...*, 138.

²⁸ Mishna *Sanhedrin*, 4:5.

²⁹ Appelfeld, *Id.*

verse of the *Shema* prayer³⁰ in a somewhat different wording: “and thou shall love your Yiddish books with **all your might**”.

Yiddish books are orphans that one has to adopt. Each of them has got a *neshome*, a human soul, and the new generations have the duty to look after them as one would do for one’s own children. Nahman Gold eventually accuses his friends of idolatry: “another language, other books”. The “other” is the Hebrew language described here as the language of the “other”, *aher*, or *sitra ahra*, the Other Side, that is evil. Moreover the Biblical-like injunction: “Have mercy on your souls³¹” also refers to the Yiddish books’ souls, the heritage of European Jewry, each of which must receive its own “sanctuary”: Appelfeld writes *hey-chal*, and one can hear *yad va-shem*, “a place and a name³²”, or *miqdash me’at*, a “little sanctuary³³”. The books themselves come to life, “with tendons and flesh³⁴” and become the orphan children of the Jewish people. Thus the revival happens thanks to the redemption of the books and leads to a reunification between the creature — a child — and the object — a book. In fact a child and the book, family and learning, are the two main components of Judaism intertwined in the tradition and in the Talmudic saying: “The world stands on the mouth breath of little children learning Talmud³⁵”.

Last but not least appears Hanna Rigler, the absolute personification of language. Appelfeld calls her *ha-kohenet ha-gdola*, the great priestess. Describing her, the writer makes use of a vocabulary which reminds of *Genesis*: *ruah*, both “wind” and “spirit”, and *hefiha*, “made blow”. Rigler is a beautiful woman, that is Yiddish is a beautiful language. In Manfred’s dreams, she tells him:

“I am neither a princess, nor a king’s daughter. I am Yiddish. All my knights are Yiddish. I want to be beautiful in order to show how much Yiddish is beautiful. [...] Queen Esther saved her people. My mission is much more humble. I want to save our language, and therefore all the means are *kosher*³⁶.”

In conclusion, Aharon Appelfeld did succeed in linking Yiddish and Hebrew again by the use of a subtle network of Biblical, Talmudic and other Jewish-cultural references and, in a somewhat provocative way, in reversing the traditional roles of both languages. Thus Yiddish is consecrated as the holy language and as such becomes the language of redemption. The connection is skilfully

³⁰ *Shema* prayer: the oldest fixed daily prayer in Judaism recited morning and night since ancient times. It contains the following verse: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your Heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (*Dt.* 6:5). Bold stresses are mine.

³¹ It reminds of *Joel*, 2 :17 : “Lord have mercy on thy people”.

³² *Isaiah*, 56 :5.

³³ *Miqdash me’at* : little sanctuary : *Ezekiel* 11 :16.

³⁴ *Ezekiel*, 37 :8.

³⁵ Talmud *Shabbat* 119 b.

³⁶ Appelfeld, *One night...*, 179.

fulfilled by Appelfeld when both languages meet into one only purpose : reading, writing, dreaming, declaiming, playing and singing in Yiddish *davke*, none other than by means of Hebrew.

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