**Hebrew Readers' Perception of Olga Tokarczuk's *The Books of Jacob***

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While teaching at the University of Haifa in Israel about Jewish topics in Polish literature, I decided to discuss the novel in letters by Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, *Lejbe i Siora czyli listy dwóch kochanków* (*Levi and Sarah or The Jewish Lovers*) published in Polish in 1821 (in English in 1830).

Following the generally accepted Polish narrative on this work, I told my students about its unique place in the international literary world: in the first half of the nineteenth century, a well-known Polish author wrote a novel in which all the main characters are Jews; not a few minor characters, but a whole group of protagonists, positive and negative, presented in their own Jewish world. This novel was discussed in a similar way by a renowned Polish literary historian, the late prof. Władysław Panas.[[1]](#footnote-1)

One student, however, rejected this interpretation, and insisted that the author's attitude towards his heroes was antisemitic to the core. This student sensed pure hatred in the author’s descriptions of a group of Hasidim. There followed a stormy discussion, with attempts to contextualize contemporary antisemitism in the author’s time, and to explain Niemcewicz's attitude towards his protagonists. After going home, I felt puzzled by another question; not whether Niemcewicz was antisemitic, but why my student’s perception of the novel was so completely different from that of Professor Panas. I concluded that it was because ‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This quote comes from Roland Barthes's theory, which has evolved since its inception. Without delving into a detailed analysis of the development of thoughts about the role of the reader in a literary work, I will mention one derivative of Barthes's thought – Julia Kristeva's *intertextuality*, as described by Stanisław Fiszer:

According to Kristeva, each text is a ‘mosaic’ made up of other texts; in other words, its intertextuality lies in the fact that it draws from the texts written before it. Thus, the analysis of a literary text cannot be limited to considering it in isolation from other works.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Fiszer notes that scholars of French culture call this phenomenon a ‘library’ and refer it to both the writer and the reader. Each book takes on meaning according to what the reader has previously read; and vice versa: each book modifies the value/meaning of the reader’s ‘library’.[[4]](#footnote-4) The role of the reader of translated literature is even more complex. Brian James Baer mentions Stanley Fish[[5]](#footnote-5) ​​in his study of this subject, and perfectly synthesized a basis for further deliberations:

…. meaning is constructed within specific communities of readers. And although we commonly associate translated texts with travel across cultural boundaries – the word translate means ‘to carry over’ – they are read within a target culture […] This is a necessary starting point for any study of the reading of translated literature.[[6]](#footnote-7)

In this chapter, I present examples of interpretative shifts caused by such a ‘carrying over’ of the meaning of the literary work to the target culture. I discuss how the works of non-Jewish writers who address Jewish topics, particularly Jewish mysticism, can be understood differently by Hebrew-language readers. I use the term Hebrew-language reader to refer to someone who reads in the Hebrew language, who represents Jewish culture and is familiar with it, who knows recent Jewish history, and has an education in the humanities.

I will discuss the works of Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz’s *Levi and Sarah* (1821), Eliza Orzeszkowa’s *Meir Ezofowicz* (1879), Stanisław Vincenz’s *On the High Uplands* (1936-1971), Maciej Płaza’s *Golem* (2021), and finally Olga Tokarczuk’s *The Books of Jacob* (2014). Within this broad context, I will show possible perceptual difficulties for readers of such works translated into Hebrew.

From a contemporary perspective on Polish literature, the novels by Niemcewicz and Orzeszkowa are extremely didactic texts, written in the spirit of their epochs: the Enlightenment and Positivism. Both authors were deeply involved in the social and political problems of Poland, which, incidentally, did not exist on the map of Europe at that time. An element of the creative mission for both authors was a search for ways to integrate society and eliminate economic and cultural disparities, which they saw as one of the reasons underlying the collapse of the state. These authors dealt with various social groups in their works. In *Levi and Sarah* and *Meir Ezofowicz* they took it upon themselves to address Jewish topics. Although these two works belong to different epochs, they discuss the same issue. According to these authors, an uneducated, non-progressive society cannot develop, and stagnation means going backwards. For Niemcewicz and Orzeszkowa, Jewish communities isolated in their small towns and villages and often lacking close contact with the outside environment (the Polish environment, in these cases) inhibited their own development and that of the surrounding communities, perpetuated poverty and backwardness, and completely prevented any dialogue with the surrounding (presumably Polish) culture.

Both authors exhibited bias in their exaggeration of the group’s flaws, which they saw as negatively impacting the development of Polish Jews and preventing them from joining mainstream Polish culture in the nineteenth century. Orzeszkowa studied works on Jewish spirituality, and found it exceptional and admirable. She was brave enough to persevere in her work as a writer within a male-dominated world; dealing with an unpopular topic is even more admirable. Indeed, Orzeszkowa's studies of Jewish spirituality can clearly be seen in her book *Meir Ezofowicz*. Although her understanding of the basics of Jewish mysticism were misguided and harmful, the efforts she made in her work is still praiseworthy.

Niemcewicz deserves similar attention. The characters in his novel, Levi and Sarah, are naïve, and his dichotomous division of the Jewish world into the utterly evil and completely positive is overly strong. A Polish reader or literature historian may be delighted by the fact that a ‘Polish goy’ wrote a novel with Jewish heroes, and this does have significance in the literary world. However, it is difficult to expect a similar reception from a Hebrew-language reader. Compared to other readers, Hebrew-language readers’ ‘library’probably includes more books about hostile attitudes towards Jews in European countries over the centuries, discrimination against Jewish minorities, and the history of WWII and the Holocaust. Therefore, they will immediately notice references in *Levi and Sarah* to the openly anti-Jewish, racist narrative that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century.

So, is it appropriate to explain to a concerned student that Niemcewicz lived in a different time, and that his novel has nothing to do with twentieth-century anti-Semitism? Following Barthes’s theory about the ‘death of the author’ the answer is probably ‘no’.

A more recent twentieth-century novel by another ‘Polish goy’ Stanisław Vincenz, the four-volume work *On the High Uplands,* is about a fictitious world and culture in Eastern Carpathians during the nineteenth century, where various groups of mountain people – Hutsuls, Jews, Poles, Armenians – spoke different languages, prayed to many gods, professed different religions, and yet lived together in peace. This monumental work is full of Jewish mysticism and includes Hasidic stories based on original Hasidic texts, with sources found in *Shivchei HaBesht* and books by I.L. Peretz and Martin Buber. However, Vincenz changed other stories significantly, and even wrote original pieces that only had a Hasidic style or were inspired by Jewish mysticism. Vincenz studied Jewish spirituality, first-hand from rabbis of Carpathian villages as well as from books and research. The unusual mixture of images and quotes in his work created a utopian world based on primal ideals with sources in antiquity and Jewish thought. Many relate to the place of humble humanity in the miraculously created world. Contemporary Hebrew-language readers will undoubtedly find elements of their culture in this work of art, but will also notice it plays a specific role in Vincenz’s overall composition, a creation compiled from many elements, only one of which is Jewish.[[7]](#footnote-8)

In 2021, Maciej Płaza published the novel *Golem*, which was well received by the Polish public and was nominated for the prestigious Polish annual Nike Literary Award. Płaza used the Jewish traditional story of a golem, a creature with the form of a human but without a soul, which has sparked the imagination for centuries. The golem can be found in Hasidic legends, Yiddish literature, and even pop culture. Płaza recalled this character in order to immerse the reader in the world of the shtetl in Podolia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Kabbalistic and messianic themes are balanced with a realistic portrayal of Hasidic culture and customs. All this, including the legendary creature, takes on new life in this book. According to one of the many positive and enthusiastic reviews of the novel:

For the Jewish community, he (the golem) is an ideal listener, because local Jews can entrust him with their greatest secrets and complain about their loved ones […] As readers, thanks to these stories, we get a compendium of knowledge about Hasidic norms, customs, duties and prohibitions, and at the same time we learn how they restrict and harm the heroes.[[8]](#footnote-9)

The reader is immersed in the details of everyday life of the Jewish townspeople: work, study, prayer in the synagogue, rituals at the mikveh, and a Hasidic *tish*. We can assume that the information in the book is valuable to contemporary Polish readers, who unfortunately know little about Jewish culture and religion. However, if this book were to be translated into Hebrew, its readers would probably be bored with didactic descriptions of rituals and ordinary activities that are obvious to them, such as:

Yakov read from the card: the ninth of the year 3830. Tisha b'Av, date of the destruction of the Temple. The feast that commemorates it is the most mournful day of the year. Some have argued that the Messiah was born that day. [Kindle, loc. 160]

The first part of Płaza's book, in particular, would be unbearable for Hebrew- language readers. Its didactics would interrupt the flow of the story, since the information would be obvious to them. Would editing out the instructive parts of the novel allow Hebrew-language readers to appreciate the book’s many other values, such as the varied language, interesting plot twists, interpenetration of the sacred and profane, etc.? We have to wait for the translation to find out.

A translation of *The Books of Jacob* by Olga Tokarczuk into Hebrew is already available. It is difficult to discuss a work that has already been spoken and written about in so many languages. In Poland, the mega-novel by Tokarczuk is well known. After the author was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2018, and her works were translated into several languages, including Hebrew and English, there has been a slew of international literary meetings at reading clubs, universities, and press reviews at which *The Books of Jacob* is discussed. For example, in May 2022, Portland State University organized an academic meeting, accessible to the public on Zoom, with the participation of Professor Bożena Shallcross and Haim Watzman. That same month, Olga Tokarczuk was invited to Israel, where she gave talks, received honors, and attended meetings. During these meetings, her intriguing (and lengthy) novel *The Books of Jacob* was the most talked-about work. In this book, Tokarczuk tackles unusual subjects, such as Jews who are not entirely Jewish, and the history of Poland, which in no way resembles the Poland we know today or the one we know about from nineteenth-century literature.

In this next section, I will point out a few possible perceptual difficulties Hebrew-language readers may have with this book. The first and primary dilemma for a Hebrew-language reader educated in the humanities would be its genre, namely, whether it is a history book or a novel inspired by history. Tokarczuk deliberately wrote the work in a way that generates doubt. As noted by one of the first readers of this work, Przemysław Czapliński: ‘*The Books of Jacob* is a fictional and historical novel, kept in a realistic convention and referring to magical realism, a chronicle of the family and a panorama society. It is literature and more than literature*.*”[[9]](#footnote-10)

Elsewhere, the same reviewer noted:‘... everyone talks about Frank except the narrator. Nobody formulates a definitive explanation. Thanks to this, Frank remains a historical and full-fledged figure, and at the same time – completely unclear.’[[10]](#footnote-11)

This uncertainty as to whether it is an accurate portrayal of history or a deeply processed historical revision may disturb the Hebrew-language reader. For readers of other languages, the extraordinary hero, Jacob Frank, is picturesque and attractive in every respect. For a Hebrew-language reader affiliated with Jewish culture, Frank represents an unwanted page in Jewish history. Hebrew-language readers’ attitude to Frank’s movement would be especially critical because, as Czapliński noted: ‘Frank co-created the history of the Jewish diaspora, but (in these histories), he is treated like Luther in the Catholic Church – as the creator of the most dangerous split.’[[11]](#footnote-13)

Frank's mysticism is a taboo or tainted subject; somewhat embarrassing and therefore overlooked. This is emphasized by scholars who reviewed Tokarczuk’s book. Rachel Elior pointed out the fact that the topic of Frank was not well or objectively researched until recently:

The known facts related to Frank's character, which were wrapped up in trials under the auspices of the Catholic Church, were discussed in the research literature, until recently, by decisive judicial positions that were influenced by the rabbinical point of view alone.[[12]](#footnote-14)

In the Afterward that Jonatan Meir wrote for the Hebrew edition of *The Books of Jacob* he presented a brief history of research on Frank – a list of academic publications on Frank’s mysticism starting with works by Gershom through Elior to those by Paweł Maciejko. Meir pointed out that recent research presenting Frank from a more universal and global perspective is only familiar to a relatively small number of readers, mostly specialists in the field. Clearly, the negative perception of Frank according to the rabbinical viewpoint is more popular.

In Tokarczuk’s book, as in history, the problem undoubtedly lies with Frank himself. Despite the controversy, his character was constructed in such a way that he was not easy to judge. Although a non-Hebrew-language reader may be ambivalent about Czapliński's opinion (quoted below), a reader from Jewish culture will have a strong and rather negative reaction. As Czapliński said:

... he was a religious poacher. He abandoned Judaism in favor of Sabbateanism. Then he converted to Islam. He converted from Islam to Catholicism. Perhaps he died Orthodox. He took a part of each faith, trying to make a coherent whole from the fragments.[[13]](#footnote-15)

However, Judaism cannot be abandoned so easily. According to the Jewish belief system, a person is a Jew by birth. As Paweł Maciejko noted, according to Jewish tradition, voluntary conversion by Jews to other religions has always been treated as a crime, tragedy, and failure. The forced conversion of Jews to other religions by non-Jews was considered to be the worst form of persecution.

As we know from history, hatred of Jacob Frank was so intense that his greatest adversary, Jacob Emden, considered his conversion a miracle. He even wrote a poem expressing his joy at the separation of the Frankists from the native Jews.[[14]](#footnote-16)

This may help explain why literary critic Beni Ziffer dedicated a long section in his review of *The Books of Jacob* to proving that its form represents ‘fantastic realism’[[15]](#footnote-17) and pointing out that Tokarczuk’s portrayal of Frank is too positive and unrealistic:

So much for the dry details about the life of Jacob Frank, who in the history of the people of Israel is perhaps no more than a curiosity, although a curiosity that has stimulated the imagination of many Kabbalah scholars and creators, Jews and non-Jews. However, Tokarczuk turned the familiar story on its head: she expropriated Jacob Frank from the Jewish story and turned him in her novel into a figure of a revolutionary, a man of the Enlightenment, whose luck ran afoul, and he was not born in France or England but in the most remote region of Europe, mentally and culturally much closer to the Ottoman East than to Europe of the Age of Enlightenment.[[16]](#footnote-18)

Having said that, Ziffer imagines a potential reader of Tokarczuk’s book:

To this end, let us picture a reader somewhere in the world, who browses the book without having a clue about the history of Christianity, or the histories of Jacob Frank and his predecessor Shabtai Zvi and the trail of influences they left behind. Is it possible to succeed in the novel even without knowing all of these? The answer is definitely yes. […] What will keep him [the reader – DBF] in constant tension here will be the compressed energy of the many happenings and turns, and the entry of more and more new and strange characters into the circle of his friends on Jacob Frank's journey. From the point of view of that reader, Jacob Frank will be seen as a complete and convincing fictional character even without the crutches of historical truth.[[17]](#footnote-19)

Despite Ziffer’s observations, a Hebrew-language reader would probably interpret the descriptions of Frank’s baptism and conversion from Judaism to Christianity according to a Jewish perspective, with a negative attitude towards the conversion.[[18]](#footnote-20) Paradoxically, Hebrew-language readers are the best prepared to read *The Books of Jacob*, because despite having instilled this rather negative attitude towards the character of Frank, they are not meeting him for the first time. In addition, they are familiar with things cited in the novel such as elements of Jewish mysticism, terms such as *tzimtzum* and *tikun,* sources such as *Mishna* and *Gemara*, or figures such as the Baal Shem Tov, so these do not require translation or explanation. Rather, the problem of over-didacticism may arise when the author instructs her public (though perhaps not as insistently as Maciej Płaza in *Golem*). For example:

Such a rectification, or *tikkun*, consisted of the holy man joining with the sinner’s soul, and step by step passing through all three of the soul’s different forms. First the *nefesh* of the holy one – his animal spirit – connected with the sinner’s *nefesh*, and then, when it became possible, *ruach* – the feelings and will of the holy one – joined with the sinner’s *ruach*, so that in the end, the holy one’s *neshama* – that divine aspect we all carry within ourselves – could join with the sinner’s *neshama*.[[19]](#footnote-21)

The Hebrew words *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshama* in the text fragment quoted above has an exotic and esoteric tone when written in Polish, English, or any language other than Hebrew. In Hebrew, this text is not particularly notable, because these words are used frequently in every day and religious language.

Moreover, Tokarczuk’s attempts to touch upon Jewish mysticism may cause a different problem for Hebrew-language readers. The conflict between the literary fiction and historical sources and facts may cause confusion. This was experienced by the consultants on Jewish mysticism for the book’s Hebrew edition. For example, while Jonatan Meir praised the author’s attempt to write a novel educating Polish readers by showing them a multicultural, multireligious community and presenting Jewish culture up close, he found the novel confusing:

Hebrew sources are only reflected indirectly, a translation of a translation. Therefore, reproducing the book and translating it into Hebrew was not a simple task at all, and required careful editing, a return to the Hebrew sources, and their integration into the text, without damaging the author's fluid language and the unique point of view she presents. In this context, a number of extraneous matters that arose from that linguistic and textual night were also corrected – until it can be said that in some ways the translation surpasses the original.[[20]](#footnote-22)

This special quality of the Hebrew translation was confirmed by the author during a meeting with Israeli readers at The Open University of Israel in Ra’anana on 19th of May 2022. Tokarczuk said that the translator of her novel into Hebrew, Miriam Borenstein, became an expert and adviser to translators of the book into other languages. As stressed by Elior, creating the Hebrew edition of the book involved a large team:

The author's critical feminist insights, and historical knowledge of Polish literature, add a new and enriching dimension to the discussion. The author and translator, the scientific editors, the proofreaders, and all the partners in the work on the book published by Carmel in Jerusalem, deserve praise for the great effort they invested in bringing this challenging work, which opens up a new discourse on old pressing problems, and provides unexpected points of view and knowledge to Hebrew readers interested in history and literature and in the complex interrelationships between them.[[21]](#footnote-23)

To summarize the perceptions of Tokarczuk’s book in Israel, Hebrew-language readers of *The Books of Jacob* are exceptional and perhaps more critical, with more sensitive eyes and ears, than any other readers. This can be seen, for example, in the online meeting mentioned earlier, at which the invited speakers represented both non-Hebrew-language readers (Polish and English speaker, Prof. Bożena Shellcross) and Hebrew-language readers (writer and translator, Haim Watzman). The former interpreted the novel in the context of Polish history and literature, and her review was extremely positive. The latter, Watzman, who represented Jewish culture, pointed out Tokarczuk's inaccuracies, and even said that she presented a ‘very shallow version of Kabbalah’.

Nevertheless, in the reviews in Israeli press and during the meetings with writers in Israel, one could detect gratitude and appreciation for a Polish writer dealing with such a deeply Jewish subject, and there was a sense of surprise, stemming from the complicated Polish-Jewish relations.

1. Stanisław Panas, *Pismo i rana. Szkice o problematyce żydowskiej w literaturze polskiej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo DABAR 1996), pp. 9 – 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, trans. by S. Heath, in *Image – Music – Text* (London: Fontana 1977), pp. 142-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stanislaw Fiszer, ‘Recepcja powieści oczyma francuskiego kulturoznawstwa’, *Powiesc dziś,* *Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika*, 2019, hal-02520207, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fiszer, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Stanley Fish, ‘Interpreting the Variorum’, in *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 147–174. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brian James Baer, ‘Translated Literature and the Role of the Reader’, in *A Companion to Translation Studies*, ed. by Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014), p. 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Excerpts from this extraordinary work translated into Hebrew by Marta Stankiewicz will be published in 2023 by Carmel Publishing House. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Sylwia Góra, ‘Wędrowny święty? O książce „Golem” Macieja Płazy’ (*Wandering Saint? About the Book "Golem" by Maciej Płaza)*, *Kultura Liberalna* 16 (2021), https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2021/04/20/wedrowny-swiety-o-ksiazce-golem-macieja-plazy/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Przemysław Czapliński, ‘Księgi Jakubowe, czyli dwieście lat samotności. Recenzja nowej książki Olgi Tokarczuk’ (‘*The Books of Jacob*, Two hundred Years of Solitude. Review of the new book by Olga Tokarczuk’), *Gazeta Wyborcza,* 21 October 2014, https://wyborcza.pl/7,75410,16835955,ksiegi-jakubowe-czyli-dwiescie-lat-samotnosci-recenzja-nowej.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Czapliński PAGE NUMBER? [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Czapliński PAGE NUMBER? [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
12. Rachel Elior, ‘Jacob Frank’s Book of the Words of the Lord: Mystical Automythography, Religious Nihilism and the Messianic Vision of Freedom as a Realization of Myth and Metaphor (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2018).

    Frank saw himself as a ‘third’ antinomian Messiah, and said that he came to abolish all books, all customs, and all laws, and promised his believers that he would free them from death, and bring them to eternal life. Two antinomian messiahs were known before him who influenced him: Shabti Zvi (1626-1676), who said in the seventeenth century that he came to abolish the ‘Torah of the Tree of Good and Evil’ and replace it with the ‘Torah of the Tree of Life’, and his successor, Bruchia Rousseau of Thessaloniki (1720-1677?), the leader of the ‘Dunma’, who announced the cancellation of all laws at the time of redemption. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
13. Czaplinski PAGE NUMBER? [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
14. Paweł Maciejko, *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement, 1755-1816* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
15. Benny Ziffer, ‘A false Messiah, A Writer of Truth, *The Books of Jacob*: A Wonderful Masterpiece That Does Not Fall Short of One Hundred Years of Solitude’ *Haaretz*, June 4, 2020. Ziffer wrote: ‘That's why I don't believe Tokarczuk when she vehemently denied in various interviews any connection to the style of fantastic realism. After all, it is impossible not to notice easily that she devotes herself to the style of phantasmagoric and surreal invention in the style of Marx. However, it must be admitted that she manages to stay true to the historical facts and be careful not to overplay them. This is immediately evident at the beginning of the book and the choice of Podolia as the starting point of the plot.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
16. Ziffer, PAGE NUMBER? [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
17. Ziffer PAGE NUMBER? [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
18. Ziffer, PAGE NUMBER? ‘That's when *The Book of the Way* begins, the third and central division of the novel, which covers the period when Jacob Frank returned from the Ottoman East to Poland at the head of a large congregation of believers. Here, the idea of combining the three religions – Jewish, Christian and Muslim – matures in him. “The first, Shabti, is the one who opened the way through Islam, and in his brotherhood (the Thessalonian successor, B.C.) he turned to Christianity... One must pass through Christianity as one passes through a river.” The path to the redemption of the Jewish people, he claims, must pass through Christianity: “One should turn to Christianity, make peace with Esau. We have to go into the darkness... because only in the darkness is redemption waiting for us.” A practical aspect is added: a Jew who is baptized into Christianity will be able to live as a human being, that is, as a free person.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
19. Olga Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob,* trans. by Jennifer Croft (New York: Penguin Random House, 2022), p. 792. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
20. Jonatan Meir, ‘Afterward’, in *Sifrei Yakov* *[The Books of Jacob]* by Olga Tokarczuk trans. by Miriam Borenstein (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishers, 2023), p. 701 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
21. Elior, PAGE NUMBER? [↑](#footnote-ref-23)