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**The Zionist Transformation**

**From Nationalism’s Diminution to its Empowerment: The Role of Hebrew Literature’s Mediation to the Jewish-American Reader**

**From invisibility to tangible presence**

In 1991, literary scholar Robert Alter looked back upon the accomplishments of Hebrew literature in English translation from the 1960s onward and reviewed them with an air of considerable amazement. “The presence that Hebrew literature has achieved in English translation over the past two decades,” he observed with unabashed wonder, “constitutes one of the great literary success stories of our times.”[[1]](#endnote-2) According to Alter, the accelerated integration of Hebrew literature in English translation in America that began in the 1960s, peaked in the 80s when “it had become the most visible foreign literature in the United States after that of Latin America—actually more visible than French or German or Russian or Italian or the literatures of the Third World.”[[2]](#endnote-3) Alter’s views are not based on statistical data, and were possibly prompted, to a certain degree, by his own heartfelt wishes. A leading American literary scholar, critic, editor, and lecturer in academia, Alter was an active agent in the mediation of Hebrew literature in the United States during these decades. Nonetheless, there is much truth in his claim regarding the unique position that Hebrew literature obtained in the American literary scene from the 1960s onward.

The data collected in UNESCO’s Index Translationum project—which maps books translated around the globe—support Alter’s enthusiasm. Although Hebrew is not among the 100 most spoken languages in the world, according to Index Translationum, it is the sixth most translated language into English in the US. While following the five principal European languages (French, German, Spanish, Russian, and Italian, in that order), Hebrew precedes all other European languages, as well as important and widely spoken languages, such as Arabic, Japanese, and Chinese. According to Index Translationum, the US is also the largest consumer of Hebrew literature in translation, with 2,343 books translated from Hebrew published throughout the years up to 2008.[[3]](#endnote-4) The project's data, as was noted by recent scholarly critique, is open to more than one interpretation, and not without error. Yet, even if we regard its accuracy with caution, the Index duly demonstrates Hebrew’s disproportionate status in recent decades as a translated language and literature in America—certainly considering the scope of Hebrew readership worldwide, and modern Hebrew culture’s relatively modest standing in the global hierarchy of national cultures. In light of the traditional, deep-seated unreceptiveness of American literary market to import from foreign cultures, the presence of Hebrew literature within this market over many decades becomes all the more remarkable.

“The rise and rise” of translated Hebrew literature from the 1960s and 70s onward, as quipped by Alter, catches the eye not only when contrasted with other national literatures. It is also in comparison with how translated Hebrew literature fared in the US during the first half of the twentieth century, that we witness a dramatic shift. In 1937, as translator Israel M. Lask described with frustration in his foreword to S.Y. Agnon’s *The Bridal Canopy*, “the fact of the existence of a modern Hebrew literature is as near unknown [to the average English reader] as makes no difference.”[[4]](#endnote-6) During the first four decades of the twentieth century, a mere 36 translated Hebrew books were published in America; an average of less than one book annually. In contrast, during the 1970s, 147 such books were published—approximately four times the number in a quarter of the time.[[5]](#endnote-7)

What substantial shift could have transformed discouraged remarks such as Lask’s into Robert Alter’s more recent, confident claim? What is the background for the sheer difference in the volume and visibility of translation from Hebrew between its first lean decades of the twentieth century and later decades – and what can be learned from it? This chapter traces the historical transformation of the movement of literary text from Hebrew to English, Israel to America, in mid-twentieth century. It also outlines shifts in accompanying, but no less important, factors related to the increase in the scope of translation, such as the types of works that the American reader could have encountered, and the ideological context against which these works were positioned in 1950s literary debates. These, I argue, provide a useful point of reference for the intellectual dialogue, and ideological negotiation, embedded in translation processes of later decades as well. To better understand the transformations that transpired, however, we need first to return to the earlier decades of the twentieth century for a somewhat broader historical background. In their discussion of the American reception of Israeli literature from the 1960s onward, scholars such as Alan Mintz and Robert Alter noted the decisive significance of the *Jewish* socio-historical context in literary translation from Hebrew to English.[[6]](#endnote-8) But if, as rightfully acknowledged by Mintz and Alter, the existence of a culturally vibrant Jewish community in the US has provided a major impetus for the translation of Hebrew literature there, why were translations so scant during the first half of the twentieth century?

Let us first refute a few alternative explanations. It does not seem that we can explain the scarcity of translation in earlier decades in terms of a lower intensity of the Jewish cultural scene. The vitality of Jewish creation and activity in America in the early decades of the twentieth century, concentrated in ethnically homogenous urban enclaves, was arguably more distinguishable in its ‘Jewishness’ than in later decades. Neither can we assume that earlier translations from Hebrew were intended for a general audience, and that only from the second half of the century were they principally aimed at a Jewish readership. In fact, translation activity in the earlier decades was conducted mainly in Jewish ‘channels,’ like institutional Jewish publishers—perhaps more so than in later decades—and the assumption that Jewish readers were the natural audience for works translated from Hebrew was widespread during both halves of the twentieth century. Changes in America’s Jewish population also do not satisfactorily account for either the increase in translation from Hebrew or its relatively limited scope in the first half of the century. In contrast to the manifold increase in the number of translations between the 1940s and 1980s, the population growth of American Jews was far less dramatic—from 4.8 to 5.9 million, that is, an increase of just 20 percent, as opposed to a 70 percent growth in the general US population.[[7]](#endnote-9) Nor can we pin the sharp disparity in the scope of translation on changes in the volume of activity of institutional Jewish publishing in America. From the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, Jewish publishers in the US in fact experienced considerable growth—growth that was rooted in social and ideological motives no less than literary or commercial ones. Their motivation could be defined, in the words of Jonathan Sarna, as the consolidation of American Jews nationwide through a “common culture of print.”[[8]](#endnote-10) One might have expected such factors to encourage greater literary translation from Hebrew, yet such was not the case.

What therefore is the background, or at least a principal background, for the sweeping changes in the volume of translation and visibility of the translated works? The answer, to draw on translation sociologist Johan Heilbron’s terminology, lies first and foremost in changes in the social and ideological relations between the major “language groups” involved in the translation movement: (the Jews in) Israel and American Jewry.[[9]](#endnote-11) More specifically, and as has long been accepted by translation scholars, it is the dominant values in the target language culture that determine the manners in which a foreign literature is integrated into the local discourse[[10]](#endnote-12)—and the translation from Hebrew in America is no exception. While the translated works almost always originated in Israel, translation processes were shaped and determined mostly by cultural and ideological conventions in America. The explanation for the difference in translation trends between the two halves of the twentieth century is, therefore, predominantly grounded in American Jewry’s attitude toward Israel and the Zionist idea.

In the introduction, I have touched on the indifference, if not hostility, toward Zionism in the American Jewish establishment in the first decades of the twentieth century. As late as the 1930s and even early 40s, political Zionism was seen as a controversial position, which for many problematized the attempt to preserve the unity of American Jews in a time of internal division. Such reservations were, however, not limited to the political and religious discourse mentioned in the Introduction, but were also ingrained, if somewhat differently, in the cultural and intellectual spheres; the spheres with which the literary discourse corresponds and of which it is part. In the left leaning Jewish

literary scene, the reluctance toward Zionism of the early decades of the twentieth century may have been particularly pronounced. The critical reception of an author of professed Zionist views such as Meyer Levin, for instance, was highly influenced by his politics. Time and again in the 1930s and 40s, Levin was “singled out for attack," in the words of Benno Weiser Varon, "because of his consistent pro-Zionism.”[[11]](#endnote-16) Anthologies of Jewish literature published in America during these years also reflected, in their selection of stories as well as editorial commentary, a certain disinterest, if not straightforward skepticism, toward the Zionist idea. Leo W. Schwarz, important anthology editor of the 1930s, made a point of proclaiming that it was Jewish literature, and not the Land of Israel, that was the Jewish people’s true homeland.[[12]](#endnote-17) And while there were exceptional titles on the Yishuv published during those years that had some influence, such as Horace Kallen’s *Frontiers of Hope* (1929), it is nonetheless clear that “to be a Zionist in the 1930s and 1940s,” in the words of *Tikkun* editor Michael Lerner, “was *not* to be a part of the American establishment.”[[13]](#endnote-19)

This historical background helps us understand not only the limited scope of literary translation from Hebrew during this early period, but also ideological aspects involved in the selection of titles for translation. Works of fiction translated from Hebrew and published in America during the first decades of the twentieth century were not only scarce – they also did not reflect the crystallizing Hebrew canon. While most Hebrew writers of the time were concerned with the challenges and experiences of life in the fledgling Yishuv, these themes rarely reached the Jewish-American readership. Whether glorifying the pioneers and their endeavors or presenting realistic and more pessimistic portrayals of life in Palestine,[[14]](#endnote-20) such works were not selected for translation. During these years, Yiddish literature, press, and theatre constituted the foundations and infrastructure of Jewish social life, particularly in New York, Chicago, and other Jewish urban centers. Yiddish culture’s double engagement with themes of New World assimilation and Old World nostalgia met the intellectual and recreational needs of the immigrant generation, and constituted a fairly self-sufficing social milieu.[[15]](#endnote-22) This environment did not seem to cultivate a need for translation (English or Yiddish) from Hebrew literature. Both popular and elitist Yiddish fiction affected local readers much more than literature anchored in the hardships of everyday life in the Yishuv, and grappling with the unsure implications of the Zionist endeavor.[[16]](#endnote-23)

The translation into English of S. Y. Agnon, how his work fared in America during these years, is indicative in this respect. Agnon, “dean of Hebrew letters,” who later became the only Israeli to win the Nobel Prize for Literature to date, had always been somewhat anomalous vis-à-vis the developing literary center in Palestine. From the 1910s through the 1930s, Agnon wrote both works that portrayed Jewish life in Europe (from Germany to Galicia, secular bourgeoisie to the piously poor), and allegorical stories with nationalist undercurrents, some of which were set in the Yishuv milieu. From this diverse repertoire—and while his reputation was already well-established in the 1920s and 30s—only one work, *The Bridal Canopy*, was published in America through the late-1940s. A deceptively naïve, broad-scope epic set against small-town Jewish life in early 1800s Galicia, the novel portrays Rabbi Yudel Hassid’s journey from one Jewish village to the next in search of bridegrooms and dowry for his daughters. Hailed as “*the* epic of the old village culture, and as *the* representation of the *shtetl* before its decline,” in the words of Baruch Hochman, the novel obviously had little to do with the Yishuv in Palestine, or with the contemporary questions of national identity. In fact, in the major nonprofit publisher of Jewish works of the time, the Jewish Publication Society of America, books harboring a Zionist orientation gave rise to significant discord among editors up to the 1940s.[[17]](#endnote-24) The press intervened, for instance, in compiling the collection of poems by American Zionist and pioneer to Palestine, Jessie Sampter.[[18]](#endnote-25) A fierce anti-Zionist at the time, editor Solomon Solis-Cohen was willing to publish the collection on condition that he would be given the right to select the poems – and, when he did, excluded those that dealt with pioneer life in Palestine or had any Zionist undertones. National Hebrew poet H. N. Bialik’s collection of short stories, *Aftergrowth and Other Stories*, did not pose a similar challenge for the Jewish Publication Society, which gladly released it in 1939, as the non-Zionists on the board of directors considered the stories “free of politics.”[[19]](#endnote-27) Another instance of the ideological underpinnings of literary mediation can be found in the English rendering of a Zionist parable by A. D. Gordon, the spiritual leader of Labor Zionism. Gordon’s piece was included in *Echoes of the Jewish Soul*, an anthology of modern Hebrew works published by Bloch Publishing Company in 1931 – the only text in the anthology with an underlying Zionist understanding of Jewish identity. The story, translated by anthology editor, Joseph Cooper Levine, was substantially modified on route to its American Jewish readers. In the original text, the narrator hurls harsh accusations at his readers in the diaspora:

The destruction [spreading throughout the Land of Israel] is the destruction of your soul, and the destroyer is the destroyer in your life, which you have lived in foreign countries and which have so far affixed themselves to you. [...] and if you should leave that life, which others have created, completely, just as you left their country and have come here to create a new life, your life—the embers will be revived and their flame rekindled, you will be revived, and your people and land will be revived.[[20]](#endnote-28)

In the translation, however, there is no trace of these lines; the English text was neatly ‘stitched’ around them.[[21]](#endnote-29) In Gordon’s text, there is no possibility of a spiritually authentic Jewish existence in a country that is not the Land of Israel, and the narrator implores diaspora Jews to immigrate to Palestine. Owing to the omission in translation, Gordon’s territorial position comes closer to Ahad Ha’am’s Cultural Zionism, which places more importance on the rejuvenation of Jewish spiritual life than on the resettlement of Palestine, as the entire segment becomes more palatable, and less politically disputable, for American Jewish readers.

The blurring of the Zionist orientation of a text as it was mediated from Hebrew to American discourse occasionally had another dimension; it entailed the obscuring, or universalization, of the source's (national) particularism. Abraham Mapu’s *Love of Zion*, published first in 1853 and in many editions since, is considered the first novel in the Hebrew language and a herald of the Zionist movement. Written in biblical Hebrew, and set in the days of King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah, the novel portrays life in ancient Israel from a romantic nationalist perspective. The novel had evoked in its readers “a strong sense of an ancient Jewish national home,” its influence noted by prominent Zionist leaders such as David Ben-Gurion. Shortly before the novel appeared in translation in New York in 1922, a new Hebrew edition was issued; thus, making the differences in the novel’s cross-cultural reception readily apparent. Hebrew reviews stressed Mapu’s role in nurturing Zionist consciousness, and described him as “the first among our nation’s modern visionaries who attained the essential secret of our nation and of the absolute unity between the nation, the language and the land.”[[22]](#endnote-30) The American circumstances of the novel’s publication and reception could not have been more different. The English translator was Pastor Benjamin Schapiro, a Jew who converted to Christianity and established a mission in Brooklyn dedicated to the conversion of Jews. The novel’s original title that expresses a longing for the Land of Israel, *Ahavat Zion* [Love of Zion], was rendered as *The Shepherd Prince*, a title bearing Christian connotations. The book was never published by a Jewish publishing house; in fact, Schapiro had to publish and distribute the book independently, a fact presumably not unrelated to his problematic personal history (from a Jewish institutional perspective). In the 1930s, the book was republished by Broadside, a Protestant religious publishing house. When the novel was reviewed in the *New York Times*, the (anonymous) critic completely ignored the novel's nationalist undertones and did not once mention the Zionist movement or the Yishuv in Palestine; tellingly, Mapu was hailed as the father of the ‘Jewish’—not the Hebrew or Zionist—novel.[[23]](#endnote-31) Neither did the reviewer indicate the applicability of the novel’s underlying nationalism to the Jewish political awakening of the time. The foreword to the Hebrew edition of the novel from 1918, as a point of comparison, stated that “the more recent events in our Hebrew world, the new and strong hope to return to the new Zion and establish our home there [...] have now enhanced and elevated the value of the first story in the Hebrew language.”[[24]](#endnote-32) Conversely, the *New York Times* critic described the translation first and foremost as bearing the potential to bring Jews and Christians closer together and to carry a universal message:

The translator is himself a Hebrew-Christian who, by this labor of loving scholarship, has shown a deep loyalty to the oracles of his ancestral faith. And what he has achieved will thus make a double appeal where such double appeal may contribute to unity of citizenship. The learning and genius of a great Hebrew author will enrich the mentality of old and young both in the synagogues and in the Christian churches.[[25]](#endnote-33)

This orientation, somewhat reminiscent of Reform Jewish thought of that period, is very far from the secular stance of political Zionism, that drew nationalist themes from Mapu’s novel. *New York Times* readers therefore encountered an interpretation of *Love of Zion*'s meanings and values that was highly different than that of contemporaneous Zionist readers.

A non-nationalist approach dictated the introduction of Hebrew literature to American audiences in the academic milieu as well. For one, until the late 1930s, the revival of the Hebrew language as a vernacular in Palestine was largely ignored in Hebrew courses at American universities: while Hebrew had by now become associated with the Jewish people and its history—in previous centuries, Hebrew studies were part of Protestant theological scholarship or philological research of Semite languages—ancient strata of the language were taught rather than modern Hebrew. Without tenured professors of modern Hebrew, modern Hebrew works were rarely included in course curriculum, or taught.[[26]](#endnote-34) The first comprehensive survey in English on modern Hebrew language and literature, *Hebrew Reborn*, published in New York in 1930 by professor of Medieval Judaism Shalom Spiegel, attests to the prevailing views of the time. More up-to-date in his modernist readings than his peers, as well as a passionate Zionist, Spiegel viewed the works of the 1880s-1920s Revival Generation and of writers of the first Aliyot preoccupied with the national awakening as the pinnacle of modern Hebrew literature. In *Hebrew Reborn*, however, he admitted to have focused on writers of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries, so as to cater to his readers' expectations

Even when the scholar himself may have disagreed with prevailing notions in the intellectual discourse, then, the American Jewish zeitgeist exerted a powerful influence on the way in which Hebrew literature was introduced to the American reader.[[27]](#endnote-36) By way of comparison, in recent decades, departments for Israel and Jewish Studies in universities throughout the US offer a wide variety of courses in contemporary Hebrew literature; in fact, a significant bulk of literary translation from Hebrew, mainly non-commercial literature that might otherwise have never been translated, has been published by university presses, especially since the 1980s.

American Jewish approaches to Zionism are relevant for understanding another aspect of Hebrew literature’s integration into early American discourse: the issue, explicitly or implicitly framed through critical reception, of cultural hierarchy in the Jewish world. The lukewarm review of Agnon’s *The Bridal Canopy* in the *New York Times* in February 1937, by critic Harold Strauss, is a case in point. In his review, Strauss proclaimed unequivocal hierarchy between Hebrew and Yiddish literatures:

Yiddish literature has developed spontaneously, and its brilliant history culminates in powerful and artistically sophisticated writers such as I. J. Singer and Sholem Asch. Hebrew literature, on the other hand, has been artificially fostered as the handmaiden to Zionism, and even though it can boast of two fine lyric poets, Bialik and Tschernichovsky, it nevertheless is still in its primitive stage, artistically as unsophisticated as “The romance of the rose” or “Morte d’Arthur.”[[28]](#endnote-37)

As a reader entirely dependent on English translation, Strauss could not have encountered the modernist achievements of Hebrew letters at the turn of the century. He thus conveyed a very partial portrait to his readers, and in turn, reinforced a general conception of Hebrew literature as inferior to Yiddish literature. Strauss’s views were a reflection of the era in which he lived. The scarcity of translations into English, and the non-representative nature of existing translations, created a wide gap between the original repertoire of Hebrew literature—and its American counterpart. In a *New York Times* also from the same year that announces the publication of Agnon’s novel, this gap, and Hebrew literature’s ensuing marginality on the local scene, are aptly demonstrated. “[Agnon] writes not in Modern Yiddish," the advertiser saw fit to note, “but in Hebrew, the language in which the Old Testament was originally written.”[[29]](#endnote-38) Anticipating readers to assume, if not specified otherwise, that a Jewish writer necessarily writes in Yiddish and not in Hebrew, the advertiser perhaps sought to promote sales by means of this ‘exotic’ detail. The advertisement echoes Israel Meir Lask’s cautionary in his foreword to the novel, that English readers are most likely unaware of the very existence of modern Hebrew literature.

In addition to the scant, unrepresentative translations of works that had some affinity to Yiddishist culture by Hebrew writers such as Judah Steinberg, then, it was the *lack* of translations of seminal Palestinian writers such as Y. H. Brenner, Haim Hazaz, Yehuda Yaari, and Yaacov Steinberg, that distanced Hebrew literature’s original repertoire from its parallel in America. The critical reception of the works that were translated, as well as a few rare manipulations in the translations themselves, further shaped the American acquaintance with Hebrew letters at the time. Hebrew literature, a cornerstone of the national and cultural resurgence in Palestine, was thus transformed and reincarnated, losing some of its most defining, Eretz-Israeli features and preoccupations, as it entered American Jewish discourse.

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In the introduction I briefly described the ‘Zionization’ process which American Jews began to experience in the mid twentieth century. WWII and the founding of the State of Israel fostered the dramatic change in the Jewish-American approaches to the Zionist idea. These were the years of the American Jewish public’s exhilaration over Israel’s struggle for independence—and later, for the new state. America’s long-time fascination with the Land of Israel, as Peter Grose and Moshe Davis argued, provided fruitful ground for its growing affinity with the new political and cultural life in the State of Israel. America’s Jews did not hesitate to lean more and more on Israel as a main source for their cultural identity.[[30]](#endnote-39) This fact was also manifest in the fields of criticism and publishing. As early as 1955, prominent critic Harold Ribalow called upon Jewish-American authors to dedicate efforts in their writing to the issue of Israel’s existence, and to provide creative expression for what he called “The Miracle of Israel.”[[31]](#endnote-40) Indeed, canonical Jewish-American prose, which had its golden age in the decades following WWII, would take heed of Ribalow’s recommendation, albeit many years later. Still, in other areas of the literary field, the situation was completely different. A landmark in commercial literature from this perspective was Leon Uris’s novel of 1958, *Exodus*—the biggest best-seller in America since *Gone with the Wind*—which popularized the Jewish state and instilled in American Jews a sweeping sense of collective pride “with power and effect,” Matthew Silver suggests, “that far surpassed any Zionist public relations effort that preceded it.”[[32]](#endnote-41) Dozens of reportages and memoirs about Israel, the majority of which were highly supportive, were published in America as early as the late 1940s, and during the 1950s and 1960s.[[33]](#endnote-42) In the decade following the Six-Day War, when Israel became a pillar of American Jewry’s communal identity, the Jewish Publication Society published more books about Israel, most of which were non-fiction, than about Jewish life in America; this amount exceeded that of books published on Jewish history—ancient, medieval, and modern combined.[[34]](#endnote-43)

In parallel with these publishing trends, we also find an increasing number of translations from Hebrew, an importation, so to say, of literary work from Israel. We can view the second translation of Agnon’s characteristically Zionist novella *In the Heart of the Seas*, which was published in English in 1948, as already marking the end of the pre-Zionist era in literary translation from Hebrew. The translated collection of stories by Yitzhak Shenhar, titled *Under the Fig Tree: Palestinian Stories* and published that same year, also reflects the transformation in the field of translation—as the choice of title indicates. The literary importation began, therefore, to rely on Jewish-American interest in Israel—an interest that would only intensify. During the 1950s, parallel with the increasing number of prose translation, three scholarly overviews of modern Hebrew literature in English were published.[[35]](#endnote-44) From the mid-1960s forward, “a powerful momentum built up in the transmission of Hebrew literature to readers of English”[[36]](#endnote-45) and was evident in the scope of translation in general, and particularly in literary translation. The number of translated works of fiction published in the 1970s (75) was four times the number published in the 1950s (18).[[37]](#endnote-46)

From the 1940s onward, the relative number of privately owned commercial presses among all American publishers issuing translations from Hebrew to English grew continuously. It is important to emphasize: the parallel decrease in the relative number of Jewish and Zionist institutional publishers does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest on the part of readers in the materials these publishers provided. On the contrary: the need for these publishers in the past—when institutional motivation was essential for the encouragement of translations from Hebrew—had already dwindled somewhat due to the growing interest in the translations among the general public.[[38]](#endnote-47) At the same time, the period between the publication of a Hebrew book’s first edition in Israel and its publication in translation, decreased. Unlike in previous decades, American publishers translated authors who had established their status in Hebrew literature at the time, or at the most, a decade earlier, and whose works appeared in English soon after they were published in Hebrew. Therefore, many of the prominent names in Hebrew literature not only became significant in real-time, but also occupied a stable position in the field of translated literature. In Robert Alter’s words, “several contemporary Hebrew writers have developed a real following in America [...] and there is considerable evidence [...] of a group of readers who eagerly follow these writers book after book.” Although not having achieved best-seller status, according to Alter, “their sales constitute[d] a respectable presence.”[[39]](#endnote-48)

The number of national anthologies published in these years provides further evidence of the growing Jewish-American curiosity regarding the reality of life and culture in Israel. To compare two representative decades, during the 1930s, seven anthologies were published, of which only one was of prose works; whereas in the 70s, most of the 25 anthologies published were of prose works.[[40]](#endnote-49) Moreover, the typical discourse surrounding these anthologies discloses the motives associated with their publication—motives that were not strictly literary. In his preface to the anthology *Firstfruits*, published in 1973 on the occasion of Israel’s 25th anniversary, Jewish-American author Chaim Potok likened the stories in the anthology to “deep probes into the psychic soil that supports the land and provides its people with their hopes and dreams and hungers and nightmares.”[[41]](#endnote-50) Such descriptions were quite typical of anthologies of translated Hebrew literature in America which were perceived as representing not only the national literature, but also, to some extent, the nation itself. In fact, this representative quality assigned to the anthologies was sometimes seen by critics as one of their most significant sources of strength.

Palpable evidence of this is the special attention granted during these years to Israeli stories included in general Jewish anthologies, compilations of works by Jewish authors from different language and cultural backgrounds. While in the 1930s, reviewers of Leo W. Schwarz’s weighty anthologies of Jewish literature did not take special interest in stories translated from Hebrew, critics of the anthologies’ new editions in the 50s expressed their desire for *more* such stories.[[42]](#endnote-51) A piece in the *Washington Post* from June 1953 compared the 1930s *Am Israel* anthology with its 1950s edition, and concluded that contrary to stories written in Yiddish, which in the past were perceived as mostly representing Jewish life and which now were part of a dying literature, the Hebrew stories were themselves the “present” and the “future.”[[43]](#endnote-52) As both a topic and theme, ‘Israeliness’ was perceived in itself as a work’s added value also in Glendy Dawedeit’s review from July 1956 of Leo W. Schwarz’s anthology *Feast of Leviathan*. Dawedeit took a special interest in the Israeli stories because “[while] not so much exceptional in quality as in content, [they] provid[e] a presumably authoritative picture of hardship and courage in the new nation.”[[44]](#endnote-53) The critic’s reservation as to the stories’ quality did not prevent her from admiring them—like other reviewers of the time—because the most important thing for her was their social and historical value as testimonies to the new nation. In a typical vein, critic Philip Rubin, in his review of Schwarz’s anthology in the *New York Times* from June 1956, concluded that “[i]t is in the Israeli section that the editor has established the book’s usefulness, has given it a *raison d’etre*.”[[45]](#endnote-54)

Concurrent with the growth in translation and the increasing interest in Israel as a literary topic, the types of works that the local reader began to encounter were gradually transformed. Unlike the first decades of the twentieth century, from the late 1940s through the 1950s, approximately half the books were already anchored in contemporary Israeli reality or expressed regard for the national awakening even though their stories were set temporally or geographically far from Israel. This does not mean that the works selected for translation were one-dimensional Zionist pamphlets—far from it. In the collection of short stories by Yitzhak Shenhar, *Under the Fig Tree: Stories from Palestine*, the dominant tone among the pioneer protagonists settling the land is one of melancholy and disappointment—both in themselves and the land. In his review in *Commentary*, New York intellectual Isaac Rosenfeld not only noted this disappointment as a prominent motif in Shenhar’s book, but was especially surprised by its centrality in the stories.[[46]](#endnote-55) David Maletz’s *Young Hearts*, which was published in English in 1950, portrays life in the kibbutz sympathetically, but without pathos, and does not spare descriptions of the inevitable hardships involved in a harshly collectivist lifestyle, which for the protagonist are accompanied with a sense of vacuity. *King of Flesh and Blood* of 1958 by Moshe Shamir, which describes the power struggles between brothers during the days of the Hasmonean dynasty, provided readers with a romantic illustration of the national Jewish consciousness’s consolidation by bolstering myths of heroism and determination. However, its explicit message is the Hasmonean dynasty’s downfall due to corruption and imperialist tendencies—an analogy to Israel of the 1950s.[[47]](#endnote-56) Several stories in the anthology *A Whole Loaf: Stories from Israel* of 1957—edited by Shalom Kahn, an American immigrant to Israel and professor of literature at Hebrew University—presented a rather complex picture of the consequences the Independence War had on Israeli reality. In Nathan Shaham and Aharon Megged’s stories, for instance, some of the most difficult effects the war had on the youngsters who fought in the war are described affably, and the characters do not have any real opportunity to be redeemed from their physical and mental handicaps. These stories were far from unreservedly adopting the principle of sacrifice for the sake of the nation.

There were however, works published during these years that articulated a deep commitment to the national ethos, and which often spared their readers the price claimed by both the war and Zionist settlement. In fact, the manner in which some of the works expressed this ethos was derived from the editors’ *selective* choices. Included in Yitzhak Shenhar’s 1956 anthology *Tehilla and Other Israeli Tales*, the short excerpt from Moshe Shamir’s *With His Own Hands* portrays a young Palmach soldier, Elik, at the moment he falls in love with a girl.[[48]](#endnote-57) Elik emphatically expresses his love for the Palestinian sand dunes, and immerses himself in the landscape, as expected of a Sabra from the Yishuv elite. The reader cannot infer Elik’s future death in one of the Independence War battles from this short section and is offered a very selective image of an Israeli myth—devoid of the ultimate sacrifice which often accompanies it.

In the short segment “Growing up” by Leah Goldberg that appears in the Israeli section of the Jewish anthology *Feast of Leviathan*, the narrator marvels at the rapid maturing of her young friend who now, at age seventeen and a half, has become a soldier; the text simulates the mythic Sabra character, and it is worth quoting some of its final lines in full:

He answers our questions unwillingly, with minimum words, in a way devoid of emotion. He knows all types of weapons well. ‘But I have never hit anybody.’ And after a long pause, ‘Thank god.’ Soon he will get up and leave, soon his mother’s merry look will sadden, soon I will begin talking in his absence on the usual topic: our young people...[[49]](#endnote-58)

These sentences recycle the mythic image of the ‘Sabra’ as a quiet, noble soldier unconditionally devoted to protecting the state. Goldberg was known as a member of the literary circle *Yachdav*, whose members were criticized for “their writing not being ‘Zionist’ enough because it does not openly depict life in Israel, and that the closeness they feel toward worldly culture is stronger than their affinity with Hebrew culture.”[[50]](#endnote-59) Against this background, the editor’s Zionist orientation is conspicuous in his selection of segments for translation, which comes at the cost of representing the authors in the anthology through their characteristic work.

What are we to understand from this mixed picture of Hebrew literature’s repertoire in English translation? Can one point to a widespread ideological bias in the selection of works for translation by publishers and editors? Broadly speaking, the answer seems to be, no: the works selected for translation in the 1950s did not notably distort the collective portrait of contemporary Hebrew literature. It is true that in the 1950s, works were written in Israel that problematized the national Israeli narrative more than those selected for translation (I will elaborate on this in the next chapter). Still, there were many works that were not selected for translation that embraced the national ethos with much more dedication and naiveté than those which were translated. In general, we cannot ascertain that the relative proportion of these two literary trajectories changed in the translated repertoire. It is further difficult to isolate the ideological considerations behind the selection of works for translation from other factors; protocols from most publishing houses are inexistent or unavailable, and factors whose level of influence are hard to estimate—commercial concerns, considerations of taste and aesthetics, personal preferences, copyright issues—may have played a decisive role in determining the nature of the repertoire in translation. One way or another, given that the boundaries of the Israeli repertoire were not traced anew dramatically in the transition to the American audience, the image that the American reader encountered in translated Hebrew fiction during the 1950s was often much more complex than that which we find in American prose about Israel of the time. American best-sellers with Zionist content and messages—Leon Uris’s *Exodus* (1958 ), and James Michener’s *The Source* (1965) particularly stand out—provided the reader with a popular representation of the Israeli struggle for independence or a sympathetic depiction of Jewish history as spanning from ancient times to the redemption in the founding of the State of Israel. These popular novels were preceded by a some thirty non-fiction works, including Pierre Van Paassen’s *Palestine: Land of Israel* of 1948, and Isidor Feinstein Stone’s *This is Israel* of 1949, which also produced a sympathetic and, at times, naïve portrayal of the Zionist narrative for the American reading audience.

Not only do these books exemplify prevalent approaches to Israel in contemporary American culture, they also help understand the patterns of mediation of Hebrew literature in mainstream American journalistic discourse. While the translated repertoire may not be indicative of an ideological ‘filter’ at the level of publishing, the literary critique mediating the works implied quite an distinct worldview, rendering nationalism the primary prism through which the American reader could understand Hebrew fiction. Newspaper reviews often produced a flatter, more one-dimensional portrayal of the Israeli national story than that depicted in Hebrew literature. Lauding what they perceived to be as expressions of national sentiment, critics positioned the framework of nationalism as an effective resource for good literature—in a more central manner than characteristic of the source literature. Reviews also drew an affinity between the national facet in Hebrew literature and dominant American myths, an affinity designed to draw the American reader closer to Israel and its culture. In short, Hebrew works were associated, quite unproblematically, with Israeli nationalism, and, in turn, Israeli nationalism was presented as bearing an affinity with American nationalism.

Let us first consider Alexander Ramati’s overview of Israeli literature published in the *New York Times* in May 1951 – perhaps the first in mainstream American press to offer a broad survey of contemporary Hebrew letters. A Jewish immigrant from Poland, Ramati was a *Time* magazine correspondent in Israel during WWII before returning to America, and author of a novel whose story takes place in Israel during the War of Independence. Reading the article, one cannot fail to sense Ramati’s appreciation for what he understood as the national underpinnings of the young Israeli literature. This appreciation for the ‘Sabra’ nationalism of the new generation of authors is matched by reverential adoration, typical of Ramati’s time, for their young age and experience in war. “They have grown up relatively without fear or discipline,” he writes with admiration, “and saw in their people’s uprising a decisive and dramatic element […] events were known first-hand and became a ‘usable present.’ Many of these young men had become, as Yigal Mossinsohn wrote, ‘man-killers before they had reached the age of patting the braids of girls.’”[[51]](#endnote-60) In presenting national struggle and realization as fruitful terrain and constructive sources of inspiration for the literary endeavor, Ramati’s words echo the critical discourse in Israel, which adopted the ‘Generation of the Land’ authors and strived to find in their work, in the words of Avner Holtzman, “an expression of the spiritual world of the ‘First Generation of Redemption’ that grew and was nurtured in the interwar period in accordance with the spirit of the Hebrew pioneering ideals of the Yishuv.”[[52]](#endnote-61) However, Ramati’s dramatic choice of words, and the quote he selected from Mossinsohn, rest no less on the mystification of Israel in mainstream American culture. The prominent images of Israel in the contemporary American non-fictional and fictional literature were mostly stereotypes and provided typically mythic ‘Sabra-esque’ and ‘masculine’ characteristics reminiscent of heroes in American Westerns.[[53]](#endnote-62) As Michelle Mart demonstrates, the representation of strong, justice-pursuing characters in these books also helped establish Israel’s status as America’s ally in her struggle against Soviet communism in the days of the Cold War.[[54]](#endnote-63) Thus, Ramati’s use of popular American imagery of Israel can also be seen as a way to draw his American readers closer to Hebrew literature and Israel—by employing the national common denominator.

Concurrent with these views is Ramati’s unconcealed contempt for Hebrew writers of the previous generation who, in his opinion, divert from the national paradigm. “The new vigor and drive [in Israeli letters] gained momentum by rejecting the ‘ghettoization’ of theme and viewpoint typical of the writers of the older generation […] before this literary reformation, Israeli literature was dominated mainly by writers who had come to Palestine from Eastern Europe, who lived pretty generally in the past and who continued to romanticize in their melancholy novels and poems the ghettos of Poland and the backward villages of the Ukraine.”[[55]](#endnote-64) However, this reference to a generational shift in Hebrew literature, which posits the rejection of ‘diasporic’ tendencies in Hebrew fiction as a new revelation, reflects a lack of knowledge about Hebrew literary culture in earlier decades. In fact, the ‘New Hebrew’ values, as well as topics associated with settlement in the Land of Israel, had already been setting the agenda in Hebrew letters for quite some decades.[[56]](#endnote-65) More than a precise account of literary trends, Ramati’s remarks point to the limited repertoire of Hebrew literature which he could have encountered in English—through the de-nationalizing filter of Jewish-American agents in previous decades. No less importantly, Ramati’s survey articulates a strong objection to nostalgic, Jewish isolationism—“ghettoization,” in his words—an objection that complements his disparaging depiction of the old diaspora’s backwardness. Regardless of whether Ramati is dealing here with contemporary Hebrew literature only, or if his words mask an indirect critique of American Yiddish literature and theatre, his belief in the need for Jewish integration, even universalism, is unmistakable and mirrors the spirit of the times. The publishing establishment in Israel, Ramati claims, must beware of falling into a trap of regionalism, to allow for young writers such as Moshe Shamir, Nathan Shaham, and Yigal Mossinsohn to continue to mark a desired paradigm for Hebrew literature—an opposite one to an isolating, local particularism.

Not all American critics shared Ramati’s opinion on the dangers of regionalization threatening Hebrew literature. In April 1950, Leo Schwartzman of the *Southern Israelite* also marveled at the pioneering “verve and vigor” of contemporary Hebrew works, yet saw recent literary expression in Israel as meaningfully relevant to the Jewish world as a whole. Moreover, in Schwartzman’s view, “[contemporary Hebrew literature] seeks to interpret the soul of the world, even in moments when it bespeaks the most fervent conviction that Palestine is the ultimation [sic] salvation for Jewry.”[[57]](#endnote-66) Still, beyond the dispute of whether Hebrew literature indeed managed to deal with comprehensive-Jewish or even universal issues, Schwartzman and Ramati’s shared perception of the desired purpose of national literature becomes clear: they both see considerable value in national Jewish writing matched by a non-isolationist, universal tendency. Even in more ‘intimately’ Jewish venues than the *New York Times* such as Jewish periodicals, then, the added value of universal writing was emphasized. In fact, even when agents of Hebrew literature in America made an explicit address to a *Jewish* readership, they may have appealed to them by pointing to a broadly national, not necessarily Jewish, affinity among the two communities. A fine example is the following excerpt from Leo W. Schwarz’s preface to the “Israelian [sic] Fruit” section in his Jewish anthology *Feast of the Leviathan* from 1956:

If the reader is a Jewish boy or girl, he must have heard a great deal about an ancient dream that has come true in our days. I mean the birth of the new republic of Israel. There is much that is entirely different in the life of Jews who are building that new country, yet there is a good deal that is akin to our own history and life. Life in the Kvuzoth, the agricultural colonies and especially in the great plains and desert of the Negeb, is remindful of the adventures of the pioneers in the old Wild West. And the huge numbers of immigrants and settlers from all parts of the globe, struggling to bring civilization to rough country and fighting in their War of Independence, read like pages from our own history.[[58]](#endnote-67)

Schwarz’s reference to Israel as a “new republic” is quite deliberate: the affinity he delineates here between the Jewish-American reader and Israel is not contingent on religion or ethnicity but rather on civic nationalism. The kinship he presents is not derived from the particular roots common to both *communities*, but from historical circumstances common to both *nation-states*; this kinship, to a large extent, is not between Jews, but between Israelis (who happen to be Jews) and Americans (who also happen to be Jews). At the same time, the construction of this affinity helps Schwarz ascribe the American national ethos to the Jewish reader in contexts that were not traditionally embedded in American Jews’ collective memory—the fighting in America’s War of Independence, pioneering in the Western frontier, among others.[[59]](#endnote-68) It is not coincidental that the addition of “our own history,” which appears twice in three sentences, does not refer to (exclusively) Jewish, but to American, history.

It is also telling that, contrary to what one might expect in an editorial preface to a literary anthology, Schwarz does not go into detail about any stylistic or thematic features, and hardly refers to Hebrew literature as an artistic medium. The readers’ sympathy for Israel is, in a sense, more important to him than their appreciation for the literary works. “As in Bible days,” he evokes the Zionist ethos of Jewish continuity and the historic right over the Land, “the writers of Israel are telling their stories once more in the Hebrew language, and apart from the excitement of their tales you will discover in them engrossing people.”[[60]](#endnote-69) Reading Hebrew literature in translation is not presented as an opportunity to encounter some new literary expression, but rather as a means to become better acquainted with the Israeli people. It is framed, to a certain extent, as a way to express one’s Zionist commitment.

If Louis Binstock’s review of *Feast of Leviathan*, which appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* in July 1956, is any indication, then Schwarz knew his readership well. Binstock, Rabbi of the Temple Sholom congregation in Chicago, mentions two stories—one from the American section, the other from the Israeli—as the best in the anthology. The other two sections which contain mostly Jewish fables and romanticized vignettes of *shtetl* life, received no notice —a clear indication of the shifting interests in Jewish American discourse. The universal potential, or appeal, that Binstock ascribes to Israeli nationalism is evident in his description of Jesse Sempter’s story in the Israeli section:

In the other [story], an Israeli girl, about to commit suicide because of frustrated love, throws the poison bottle away when she suddenly catches a vision of a greater love. She cries: “He, too, loves Palestine! In the small land, we work for the same love. ... O my land, my land! You are myself, my body. Let them plow deep that the seeds may grow.” […] We can all, no matter what our country, our class, our color or creed, gather added strength and wisdom in the assimilation of their moral and ethical and spiritual implications.[[61]](#endnote-70)

Sampter’s story, which is simplistic in comparison with others in the anthology’s Israeli section, and certainly when compared with canonical Hebrew literature, is presented to the newspaper reader as the anthology’s quintessential work, and in turn, one that represents literature written in Israel. The values communicated in the story, which reflect an anachronistic and distorted treatment of the issue of the Zionist project, are presented to the reader as a ‘calling card’ of Hebrew literature. While Binstock’s review focuses, above all else, on nationalistic traits, he nonetheless depicts these traits as a source of inspiration that is not limited to a confined, ‘tribal’ sense of Jewish identity. The (particular) nationalism of Hebrew literature is reframed, and celebrated, as a resource for universal identity, an identity that transcends particularity, and can speak to the hearts of all American readers.

Of course, the ‘universalism’ of this national identity was highly contingent upon contemporary cultural and ideological norms. The American approach to Arab nationalism in public and diplomatic discourse of the time, as Michelle Mart shows, was largely unsympathetic, and patronizing, if not to say hostile; it was described as “false,” “blind,” and lacking “integrity”—especially when compared with Israel.[[62]](#endnote-71) In fact, literary debates on the few works translated from Hebrew that revolved around Mizrahi Jews also implied a cultural hierarchy between East and West, if not on the same scale as in American postwar approaches to Arab nationalism. The attempt to forge an affinity between the American reader and Israel through literature, and particularly by employing established American or biblical myths, often disclosed somewhat orientalist underlying thought patterns—a hierarchical order of cultivation. This is evident, for instance, in American reviews of Haim Hazaz’s novel *Mori Sa’id* published in translation in 1956. Against the background of WWII, the novel describes the poor and abject life in a Yemenite neighborhood in Jerusalem and portrays the community elders’ longing for Zion in a pungently ironic light. In his review of the novel in the *New York Times* from April 1956, journalist Hal Lehrman postulates a shared foundation for the Zionist project and the American settlement myth by drawing an analogy between the first Yemenite settlers in Israel and the Mayflower pilgrims. According to Lehrman, the Yemenites may have in recent years:

acquired sophistication from the radios and washing machines fromEurope. [Yet] Otherwise they entirely resemble their 40,000 kinsmen who have since descended by miraculous airlift upon the new state – “on eagle's wings”.... as the Scriptures promised. […] Of the multitude ofJewish nations who have thronged to Israel, none has excelled in piety and merriment as the colorful little folk from the distant Arab kingdom of Yemen, with their exquisitely chiseled faces, their ardor for the land of Abraham, lust for living and unlimited joy ofthe Lord. The distinguished Israeli novelist Hayim Hazaz has caught their juice and flavor.[[63]](#endnote-72)

Parallel with the adoption of the Zionist ethos that rests upon a biblical promise, Lehrman indirectly validates the idea that Americanism and Zionism share common roots. At the same time, his orientalist, patronizing presumptions, which attribute physical and sensual superiority, but cultural inferiority to the ‘East,’ are revealed. Such imagery, when applied in the Israeli context, did not only echo the underlying orientalism in Hebrew literature and culture; it was also emblematic of Jewish American letters, and American thought, at the time. The exoticization of the East coincided with American conceptions of religious hierarchy between West (and the Judeo-Christian tradition) and East (and Islam).[[64]](#endnote-73) In his essay “Literary Renaissance Nurtured in Israel” in the *Los Angeles Times* from December 1958, critic Alexander Holmes similarly compared the Yemenites with America’s first settlers. Holmes hailed Hazaz as “a founding father [...] of the new nationalist literature,” and explained that the author “went back to the Yemenites (a tribe sometimes called the ‘original Jews’) somewhat as an American seeker might try for truth by writing about the distant ancestors of the passengers of the Winthrop fleet.”[[65]](#endnote-74) Like Lehrman and Schwarz, Holmes aligned Israel’s first days with America’s early days, with the Yemenites cast in the role of the Puritan immigrants, led by John Winthrop, who landed on the New England coast in 1630. Most revealing for us, Holmes’ use of ‘nationalist’ as a depiction of Israeli literature, as among most other cultural agents of his time, carried positive connotations only. In this vein, he describes the national awakening in recent Hebrew literature as “something wonderful, even inevitable,” and tries to conceptualize it, for the benefit of his readers, in American terms:

Suppose that a talented school of creative young writers perceived with sorrow that the American star was sinking toward tragic eclipse. Further, suppose that these writers, in the surge of productive passion, fathered a renaissance that was stylistically, linguistically and emotionally related to historical documents and persons that had given us greatness in the first place. […] that we had writers to recapture the ancient Anglo-American genius which combined to provide for liberty under law, individualism with social restraint, rights of property under whether cottage or castle, and trial by a jury of peers, whether churls or earls.[[66]](#endnote-75)

Striving to draw the American reader closer to Hebrew literature by comparing Hebrew sources of inspiration to the writings of the American nation’s forefathers, Holmes in fact creates a primordial affinity between the two national entities. He seems to have no reservations about what he views as the nationalist devotion of literary expression, as may often be the case in journalistic discourse in ensuing decades. On the contrary, in his view, these are years of a literary renaissance precisely because the Israeli authors are resurrecting the old Hebrew sources in the spirit of the new nationalism. Like in other contemporary reviews, this view comes simultaneously with dramatic portrayal of the Hebrew authors’ biographical backgrounds: “men, from their 20s to their 60s, who shared experience in sorrow, danger, excitement,” some of whom—Holmes’ adds with unbridled admiration—“were outlaws during the British mandate, desert fighters against Arabs, members of the frontier farm collectives.”[[67]](#endnote-76) The image of the fearless, masculine ‘new Jew’ easily dovetails with the celebration of nationalism as a literary theme and resource.

Holmes does not stop here, and goes as far as bemoaning the lack of nationalist undercurrents in American literature, implying that it has a lot to learn from Hebrew literature in this regard:

Contrasts rather than comparisons arise when we look for modern American parallels. Our Lost Generation which followed the holocaust of World War I gave us sorrowing rebels – Hemingway, Dos Passos and others. The combat veterans of World War II have gloried in individual problems under stressful conditions and in promiscuous love-making. But we have not come up with **anything** approaching a school of nationalism that communicates the meaning and future of Americanism, its bloodlines, its creeds, its inmost desires.[[68]](#endnote-77)

Holmes’s perception of nationalism may reflect notions of American exceptionalism, promoted by historiography schools in America in the 1950s. It perhaps also mirrors the strains of conservative patriotism in postwar American culture, as Cold War tensions intensified, and yet the effect of the victory had not yet waned. More importantly for our purposes, it emphasizes the differences in how Hebrew literature had been introduced and contextualized in American public discourse through the 1950s. When we position Holmes’s review in the context of the relations between Israeli and American Jewries, and set it against the first decades of the century, the review effectively demonstrates the transformation that occurred in Hebrew literature’s mediation to, and reception by, the American reader. Positing the new generation of authors in Israel as a nationalist literary school worthy of imitation constitutes a striking counterpart to Harold Strauss’s univocal dismissal, in his review of Agnon 20 years earlier, of modern Hebrew literature as a “handmaiden to Zionism.” In their varying references to Hebrew literature in the 1950s, American critics tended to celebrate nationalism as a *worthy* literary foundation—not to invalidate it as parochial. “The intense spirit of nationalism,” terms used by historian and literary critic Edmund Fuller, in a laudatory review in the *Chicago Tribune* from December 1958, to describe the source of Moshe Shamir’s *King of Flesh and Blood*’s literary prowess, usually carried highly positive connotations.[[69]](#endnote-78)

This transformation resonated, even if only slightly, also in changes made in the translations themselves. While in the early 1920s, the title of Abraham Mapu’s proto-Zionist novel was changed from *Ahavat Zion* [Love of Zion] to *Shepherd Prince*, in 1950, the name of David Maletz’s novel on kibbutz life was changed from *Circles* [ma’agalot] to *Young Hearts: A Novel of Modern Israel*.[[70]](#endnote-79) Maletz’s original lyrical title was transformed in translation to an enticing version that adopts the image of the State of Israel as fresh and daring, and reflects the American mystification of life in Israel. The subtitle positions the novel as a way to become familiar with the State of Israel and reflects the publisher’s assumptions as to what the readers’ expectations from a novel translated from Hebrew would be. An interference in translation also appears in the following segment from the novel. Here, in response to an incident related to the 1936-1939 Arab Revolt, the kibbutz members go out to plow virgin land nearby the kibbutz, while fully aware that the Arabs from neighboring villages may launch an attack at them. When the protagonist Menachke asks to be included in the list of plowmen, his reasons are described as follows:

[He] had brooded so long over his imagined inferiority that now he had to prove his fitness to himself. It was not that he saw this as an opportunity for heroism. His desire was modest – to demonstrate to himself that he could face an enemy [~~on this patch, this land, with his own body and soul~~] **in defense of this land which he called his mother country**.[[71]](#endnote-80)

The somewhat restrained notions of the original passage (“this corner,” “this land”) were substituted in translation with a phrase filled with national pathos. The translation represents Menachke’s feelings and motives as more patriotic, and dramatic, than in the source text. Admittedly, such ‘nationalizing’ interventions were few, and we cannot infer from them the existence of translation norms or even the habitual practices of a single translator. More than the interventions accumulate to form a distinct feature of 1950s translation practices, they provide us with additional supportive evidence for some of the tendencies we have seen in the reception discourse.

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When we set the transformation in the American treatment of Hebrew literature in the 1950s in historical perspective, we must remember that these years were those in which the Jewish community in America became attached to Israel and the Zionist idea. For American Jews, these were also years of social and economic prosperity, of increasing departure from urban neighborhoods to suburbs, and of integration in the domain of American public life. William Herberg’s influential essay, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*—a milestone in American religious sociology, which anchored the understanding of mid-century American religion in ethnic cultural terms—was published in 1955. In time, it became symbolic of Judaism’s evolving into an ‘equal among equals’ with respect to the major religions in America, and of the successful assimilation of Jews into mainstream American society. The unprecedented momentum in the construction of synagogues in the public sphere, the founding of Jewish-oriented Brandeis University, and the meteoric ascent of Jewish-American literature in the national domain, are only a few of the many testimonies to the attempts—and growing success—of Jews to integrate into American society at large without relinquishing the particular contours of their communal identity. The patterns of mediation of translated Hebrew works in the Jewish-American discourse—especially, the frequent association of the young Israel with what America was at its beginning, and the predominantly national framework projected on Hebrew literature—were not by way of coincidental curiosity and should be read against the context of these social changes. During these years in which Jews felt increasingly at home in America, Hebrew literature, as an emblem of Israeli nationalism, served as both a resource for Jewish identity that preserves their proud distinctiveness, and as a legitimate way to establish their absolute appropriation of American national identity.

The understanding and framing of Hebrew literature through a largely nationalist prism did not, therefore, offer an isolationist Jewish identity in America. The ideological underpinnings of its critical reception in this decade rather echoed the Zionism of American thinkers such as Louis Brandeis, Horace Kallen and Mordecai Kaplan, who saw identification with Jewish nationalism in Palestine (and Israel) as a source of inspiration for American Jewish *integration*, and as a contribution to a multicultural, pluralistic American society. As Emily Katz has demonstrated with the postwar American Jewish absorption of Israeli music, art, and folk dance, and Matthew Silver with the reception of Leon Uris’s *Exodus*, agents of Hebrew literature in America in the 1950s also aspired to draw their readership closer to Israel by positing national American myths as common to both nations, and by drawing similarities between contemporary Israeli reality and the historical reality of America’s past. Thus, unlike previous decades, Hebrew literature transferred to American culture in the 1950s without shedding its national preoccupations – in the spirit of those years, there was nothing more natural for Jewish American critics than to nurture, and even amplify, a nationalist discourse.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the literary discourse began to gradually change, and throughout the ensuing decades more doubtful and critical voices were heard regarding the idea of a literature that draws its strength from nationalism. Observations in American discourse that identified and lauded nationalist qualities in Hebrew literature became rarer. Dominant voices on the American scene began to celebrate Israeli writers mainly for their *subverting* of accepted conventions of the Zionist narrative. This change of approach was boosted by the rise of influential new critics of Israeli letters on the American scene, such as Robert Alter in *Commentary*, but it was also increasingly felt in mainstream American press, such as the *New York Times*.

The reversal in American approaches to Hebrew literature was not, however, derived only from shifting perspectives in American public and intellectual discourse on (Israeli) nationalism. As we will see in the next chapter, it was stimulated to a large extent from the translation of new Israeli writers who dealt in more critical fashion than their predecessors with the charged ideological issues of the time—and, perhaps most importantly, from the publication of translated Hebrew works that undermined the image of a moral Israel, mainly in the context of the ongoing Israeli-Arab conflict. Nevertheless, during the ensuing decades of constant growth in the volume of translation, and alongside the shifts in the framing of Israeli works between the 1950s and the early 80s, the fundamental premise that crystallized during the American absorption of Hebrew literature in the 1950s remained the same: Jewish-American discourse continued to view the ‘Israeliness’ reflected in Hebrew literature as having a bearing on Jewish-American identity. This would manifest in different ways, and often require a subtler, and, at times, entirely different mediation from the reception trends of Hebrew literature in the 1950s. However, they continued to reflect the deep relevance of Hebrew literature, in the eyes of its American agents and reading audience, for American Jewish self-understanding and self-perception. Along the line stretching from Lask’s apologetic words in 1937, which lamented the fact that the American reader does not acknowledge the existence of modern Hebrew literature, to Alter’s assured remark from 1991 on the unprecedented success of translated Hebrew literature in America, the national context has continued to provide a most necessary point of reference for understanding the intellectual dialogue between the two Jewish communities embedded in translation.

Notes

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
5. The data is derived from Amit, *The Export of Israeli Culture – Formal Institutions’ Activities in Translating Literature from the Hebrew*, pp. 192-196; 221-291, in comparison with diagram no. 10 on page 64. This book deals with literary translation from Hebrew in the United States, therefore, contrary to Amit, in my calculations, I have not taken into account English translations published in Israel or England. These translations were not distributed in America in the same way as works published by American presses, did not receive the same kind of attention in newspapers, and were not accessible to the American reading audience to the extent that the works published in America were. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
6. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
7. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
8. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
9. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
10. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
11. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
12. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
13. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
14. For a comprehensive review of Hebrew literature of the period, see: Shaked, *Hebrew Prose*, Vol. 2, pp. 117-154 (check pages – there seems to be a mistake). According to Avner Holzman, the struggle between these two aspects “occurred in the soul of each of the authors more than between two rival groups of authors”; Holzman *Loves of Zion*, p. 178.

    I am referring here to translated works of fiction published by commercial and Jewish publishers, and not to non-fiction literature published by Zionist organizations. Topics not related to Israel were dominant in the translated prose works at least until the end of the 1930s and even until the mid-1940s. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
15. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
16. This cultural gap was reflected in American Jews’ rather indifferent approach to the quixotic efforts of the Tarbut Ivrit movement. As its name indicates, Tarbut Ivrit strived to sustain a lively, vigorous Hebrew culture on the American scene. The movement thrived briefly during WWI (when several leaders of the Yishuv moved temporarily to New York), as mainly evident in its Hebrew periodicals, yet it did not acquire many supporters and in the years following WWI it gradually disappeared from the cultural landscape. See: Mintz, *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects*, pp. 13-27. [reference to Hebrew-Yiddish translation] [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
17. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
18. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
19. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
20. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
21. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
22. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
23. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
24. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
25. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
26. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
27. Weingrad – anti-nationalism behind American preference for Haskalah writings. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
28. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
29. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
30. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
31. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
32. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
33. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
34. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
35. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
36. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
37. The data is based on the table in Amit, *The Export of Israeli Culture*, p. 62. My count includes prose and poetry anthologies, and does not include books for children and teens, or non-fiction works. The significance of literary translation among all translated works commenced as early as the end of the 1930s and early 1940s. In the ensuing decades, its absolute numbers continued to grow, while its proportionate rate increased and decreased slightly (usually a bit less than half the translated titles). [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
38. The decrease in the relative proportion of institutional Zionist and Jewish publishers in America did not indicate a decline in the *absolute* number of translations in these publications: the Jewish publishing houses translated more books each decade, but gradually constituted a smaller proportion of all translations from Hebrew to English. In general, the books published by privately owned commercial publishing houses were not different from those published by institutional publishers in terms of their topics, genres, or their stylistic accessibility. Still, the commercial publishers systematically published authors of high regard in the source culture. Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, Aharon Appelfeld, and David Grossman, for example, have always been published in America by commercial publishing houses. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
39. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
40. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
41. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
42. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
43. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
44. Glendy Dawedeit, *Washington Post*, 1956, July 1st, p. E6. The piece on David Maletz’s *Circles* published in *Commentary* also expresses admiration for the book even though it implicitly describes the writer as a poor author, due to the way in which the book illuminates Israeli reality in kibbutzim. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
45. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
46. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
47. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
48. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
49. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
50. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
51. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
52. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
53. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
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