1. **The Zionist Revolution**

**From Nationalism’s Diminution to its Empowerment through Hebrew Literature’s Mediation to the Jewish-American Reader**

**From invisibility to actual presence**

In 1991, intellectual and literary scholar Robert Alter looked back upon the accomplishments of Hebrew literature in English translation from the 1960s onward and reviewed them with considerable amazement. “The presence that Hebrew literature has achieved in English translation over the past two decades,” he claimed with unabashed wonder, “constitutes one of the great literary success stories of our times.”[[1]](#endnote-1) According to Alter, the accelerated process of the 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-2) Alter’s views are not based on statistical data, and, to a certain degree, are possibly prompted 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 US during these decades. Nonetheless, there is much truth in his claim regarding the unique position that Hebrew literature obtained in the American literary domain from the 1960s onward.

The data collected in the framework of UNESCO’s Index Translationum project—which maps books translated around the globe—support the sense of awe emanating from Alter’s words. In terms of the number of its speakers, Hebrew is not among the 100 most spoken languages in the world. However, in terms of its relative ranking among languages translated into English in the US, according to Index Translationum it is rated sixth—doubtless, a respectable position. While following the five principle 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 the largest importer of Hebrew literature in translation, with 2,343 books translated from Hebrew published throughout the years up to 2008.[[3]](#endnote-3) It is important to note, however, that the project’s data is not absolutely accurate and is open to more than one interpretation.[[4]](#endnote-4) But even if we regard its accuracy with caution, the data duly demonstrates Hebrew’s disproportionate status in recent decades as a translated language and literature in America, certainly in relation to the number of Hebrew readers around the world, and to Hebrew culture’s status among the different national cultures. In the American literary market—which traditionally is closed to the translation of foreign languages and literatures—Hebrew literature’s presence over many decades is particularly remarkable.

The accomplishment of the literary translation from Hebrew from the 1960s and 70s onward is evident not only when compared with other national literatures. In comparison with how translated Hebrew literature fared in the US during the first half of the twentieth century, we also witness a dramatic shift. The appearance of a book translated from Hebrew in 1937, as translator Israel M. Lask describes in his apologetic preface to S.Y. Agnon’s *The Bridal Canopy*, may have “....”[[5]](#endnote-5) During the first four decades of the twentieth century, 36 Hebrew books in translation were published in America; an average of less than one book annually. In contrast, during the 70s, 147 books were published—approximately four times the amount in a quarter of the time.[[6]](#endnote-6)

What caused the substantial shift from Lask’s discouraged remarks to Robert Alter’s reassuring claim? What is the background for the dramatic difference in translation between its first lean decades of the twentieth century and later decades? This chapter strives to trace the principle lines of developmentin the gradual transformation of the literary translation from Hebrew in the mid twentieth century. It will also outline shifts in accompanying, but no less important, factors related to the increase in the scope of translation, such as the type of works that the American reader could have encountered, and the ideological context against which these works were positioned in the literary discourse. To better understand the transformational tendencies in the translation, however, we need first to return to the earlier decades of the twentieth century as a somewhat broader historical background. Scholars, such as Alan Mintz, Nicholas De Lange, and Robert Alter, rightfully note the decisive significance of the *Jewish* socio-historical context in the translation from Hebrew to English from the 1960s onward.[[7]](#endnote-7) But if the existence of a vibrant community that maintained a Jewish cultural-spiritual life in the US is the main motivation for the translation of Hebrew literature there, why were translations so scant during the first half of the twentieth century?

We will first refute several alternative explanations. We cannot explain the limited scope of translations in the early decades of the twentieth century in terms of a decrease in the intensity of the cultural and spiritual life of America’s Jews. This cultural life was not only extremely vital during these years, but, according to several scholars, was also more distinctive in its Jewishness than in later decades. Moreover, we cannot assume that the translations were not designated for a Jewish audience in the first decades of the twentieth century, and that they were targeted at the Jewish community only from the second half of the century. Indeed, the promotion of translations in the earlier decades was conducted in distinctively Jewish ‘channels’ (such as Jewish institutions’ publishers), and was aimed, first and foremost, at a Jewish readership—perhaps even more so than in later decades. The assumption that the Jewish-American reader is the natural reader of works translated from Hebrew was widespread in newspapers and in the literary discourse during both the first and second halves of the twentieth century. Neither can we attribute the dramatic disparity in the scope of translation to demographic changes in American Jewry. In contrast to the hundreds of percent increase in the number of translations between the 1940s and 1980s, the increase in the number of American Jews was less dramatic—from 4.8 to 5.9 million, that is, only times 1.2 (while the growth in America’s general population was times 1.7.)[[8]](#endnote-8) It is clear therefore, that changes in the size of America’s Jewish population cannot satisfactorily account for either the increase in translation from Hebrew or its relatively limited scope in the first half of the century. Neither does it seem that the explanation, or at the very least, the principle explanation, is shifts in the scope of Jewish publishing in America. As mentioned in the preface, Jonathan Sarna pointed to a general growth in Jewish-American publishing in the decades between the end of the nineteenth century and the mid twentieth century, citing social and ideological motives no less than literary or commercial motives: “to forge the new center of Jewish culture and unite American Jewry into a nationwide community bound together by a common culture of print.”[[9]](#endnote-9) These motives may have seemingly encouraged literary translation from Hebrew.

What therefore, is the background, or at the very least one of the principle backgrounds, for the sweeping changes in the scope of translation and its prominence? To draw on translation sociologist Johan Heilbron’s terms, the answer is first and foremost changes in the social relationships between the major “language groups” involved in the translation movement: (the Land of) Israel and American Jewry.[[10]](#endnote-10) Although the origin of the translated works was (almost always) in Israel, these shifts were formed and fixed mostly in the target culture. In recent decades, translation scholars have agreed that the dominant values in the target language culture are precisely those that define the manners in which the translated literature is integrated[[11]](#endnote-11)—and the translation from Hebrew in America is no exception. Thus, the explanation for the shift in translation trends between the two halves of the twentieth century is predominantly grounded in American Jewry’s attitude toward Israel and the Zionist idea.

I have already briefly mentioned American Jewry’s reserved attitude toward the Zionist project during the first decades of the twentieth century. Throughout those years, political Zionism was a controversial ideological position which for many in the Jewish-American establishment problematized the attempt to preserve the unity of American Jews in a time of internal division. We find indications of this not only in the political and religious discourse, which I mention in the preface, but also in the cultural and academic spheres; the spheres with which the literary discourse corresponds and of which it is part. Until the late 1930s, Hebrew language courses at American universities ignored Hebrew’s revival in the Land of Israel and taught ancient Hebrew dialects rather than modern Hebrew. Indeed, they forged a connection between Hebrew, and the Jewish nation and its history—unlike in previous centuries in which Hebrew studies in America were part of Protestant theological scholarship or philological research of Semite languages—however, they focused on ancient texts and events. During these years, there were hardly any university professors of modern Hebrew or courses that included works from modern Hebrew literature.[[12]](#endnote-12) The first comprehensive book in English on the revival of modern Hebrew language and literature, *Hebrew Reborn*, published in New York in 1930 by Judaism scholar Shalom Spiegel, is a good example. Although Spiegel held a more informed position than his peers, and viewed the pinnacle of modern Hebrew literature in the works of the Revival Generation and of authors and poets of the first Aliyot associated with the national awakening, he explicitly admitted that in *Hebrew Reborn* he chose to focus on authors of the Enlightenment because they were perceived as more important within the American learning and research establishment:

A popular approach made it necessary to present the *consensus omnium* even where I myself had gone on to other views. This is the case particularly in the first part of the book, where the true development of Hebrew letters seems to me to run aside from that movement of enlightenment which is accepted as the head and front of modern Hebrew literature.[[13]](#endnote-13)

This statement illustrates the significant influence that the Jewish-American intellectual discourse had on the way in which Hebrew literature was delivered to the American reader, even when the scholar, the author of the book himself, clearly disagrees with the principle tendencies in the discourse. To compare, in recent decades, not only have departments for Israel and Judaism Studies in universities throughout the US offered a variety of courses in modern Hebrew literature, but also a significant percentage of literary translations have been published by university publications, particularly from the 1980s forward.

The Jewish intellectual establishment’s objection to Zionism in the first decades of the twentieth century was articulated as well in the domestic Jewish literature written in English. The attitude toward a Jewish-American author such as Meyer Levin, for instance, was directly influenced by the Zionist views expressed in his writings. Difficulties in Levin’s reception in the 1930s, during which leftist anti-nationalist views were prevalent within the Jewish-American literary establishment, were largely caused by the fact that he was a professed Zionist.[[14]](#endnote-14) Jewish literature anthologies published in America during these years also reflected a certain reservation toward the Zionist idea, or, at the very least, toward political Zionism. A notable anthology editor in the 1930s, Leo V. Schwarz preceded thinkers, such as George Steiner and Harold Bloom, in describing Jewish literature—not Palestine or the Land of Israel—as the Jewish people’s true homeland.[[15]](#endnote-15) And even though unusual titles were published during those years, such as two non-fiction books supportive of the Zionist settlement in the Land of Israel, written in 1929 by American-Jewish and non-Jewish authors, Horace Kallen and Heinz Holmes, respectively, indeed, as *Tikun* journal’s editor Michael Lerner claims in his introduction to an anthology of Jewish cultural criticism, “to be a Zionist in the 1930s and 1940s was *not* to be a part of the American establishment” (original emphasis).[[16]](#endnote-16)

This historical background helps us understand not only the scope of literary translation from Hebrew during those early years, but also ideological aspects involved in the selection of works for translation. It becomes clear that fictional works translated from Hebrew and published in America during the first decades of the twentieth century were not only scarce, they also did not at all reflect the crystallizing Hebrew canon. While the central theme that concerned contemporary Hebrew writers was the way of life in the Jewish Yishuv in the Land of Israel, these works scarcely reached the Jewish-American reading audience. Whether glorifying the pioneers and their endeavors or presenting realistic and more pessimistic portrayals of real life in the Land of Israel,[[17]](#endnote-17) these books were not selected for translation. During these years, the Yiddish literature, press, and theatre in America, especially in New York, were American Jews’ major cultural base. The Yiddish culture, which dealt with assimilation on the one hand, and nostalgia for the shtetel, on the other, fulfilled the Jewish immigrants’ entertainment and intellectual needs, and provided them with a fairly closed social framework.[[18]](#endnote-18) It seems that this milieu did not leave any substantial room for Hebrew literature: principle themes in both ‘low’ and ‘high’ Yiddish literature, the new urban life in America, and the old life in East European villages, touched the hearts of local readers much more than literature anchored mostly in the difficulties of everyday life in the Yishuv in the Land of Israel and the consequences of the Zionist ideal.[[19]](#endnote-19)

The ‘fate’ that Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s works met during these years epitomizes this tendency. Agnon, 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 Hebrew literature. Throughout these years, Agnon wrote both works that portrayed the diasporic Jewish way of life in Eastern Europe and Germany, and stories and allegories with nationalist-Zionist undercurrents, some of which were set in the Yishuv milieu. From this diverse repertoire, American publications in this period chose to translate and publish only one work, *The Bridal Canopy*, a broad-scope epic on Jewish life in the old world and on shtetel culture before its collapse. The novel portrays Rabbi Yudel Hassid’s journey to Jewish villages and communities in Galicia in the early 1900s to collect money for matchmakers in the hope of finding bridegrooms for his daughters; he is clueless as to the contemporary nationalist way of life. Zionist oriented books gave rise to significant discord among editors at The Jewish Publication Society of America—the most prominent publishing house of the Jewish establishment up to the 1940s.[[20]](#endnote-20) The publication interfered, for instance, in compiling the works for a collection of poems by Jessie Sampter—a Zionist Jewish-American who immigrated to the Land of Israel where she worked.[[21]](#endnote-21) One of the publication’s editors, Solomon Solis-Cohen, who objected to Zionism at the time, was willing to publish the collection on condition that he would be given the right to select the poems. Solis-Cohen chose to exclude poems that dealt with Zionism and the settling of the Land of Israel. In contrast, there was no need for interference in the collection of Bialik’s stories, *Aftergrowth and Other Stories*, published by the same publication in 1939. Non-Zionists in the publication’s board of directors were happy to print the stories, which, in their view, were “free of politics.”[[22]](#endnote-22) In another rather rare case, ideological underpinnings in a Zionist parable by A. D. Gordon, the spiritual leader of Zionist Socialism, were substantially modified in the translation itself which appeared in an anthology of Hebrew works published by Bloch. In the Hebrew 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, when you have left their country and have come here to create a new life, your life—and the embers are rekindled and revived, and has become its flame once again, and you have returned and lived, in a place where your people and land live.[[23]](#endnote-23)

In the translation, however, there is no trace of these lines; the English text was ‘stitched’ around them.[[24]](#endnote-24) In the source text, there is no possibility of a full spiritual life in a country that is not the Land of Israel, and Gordon is imploring the diasporic Jews to immigrate to the Land of Israel. In the translation, Gordon’s territorial position comes close (following the omission) to spiritual Zionism according to Ahad Ha’am’s doctrine; the entire segment becomes more palatable for Jewish-American readers, whether they are pessimistic supporters of Zionism, objectors, or espouse the Zionism of cultural-spiritual revival.

The blurring of the Zionist orientation in its transition from Hebrew to the American discourse often occurred simultaneously with the universalization of particular nationalist contents. 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, the novel portrays the Land of Israel in the days of King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah from a romantic nationalist perspective; and leaders in the Zionist movement, such as Ben Gurion, noted its great influence on them. Shortly before the novel appeared in translation in New York in 1922, it appeared in a new Hebrew edition in response to which Hebrew criticism stressed Mapu’s role in nurturing the Zionist awareness 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.”[[25]](#endnote-25) The circumstances of the novel’s translation and publication in America, as well as its critical reception, could not be more different. The American translator was Pastor Benjamin Shapiro, a Jew who converted to Christianity and established a mission in Brooklyn dedicated to the conversion of Jews. The novel’s title, *Love of Zion*, which in the source expresses a longing for the Land of Israel’s soil, was translated by him as *The Shepard Prince*, a title bearing Christian connotations. Shapiro was forced to publish and distribute the translation independently, a fact apparently related to his unique biography. The (anonymous) critique of the novel in the *New York Times* ignored its nationalist content and did not mention the Zionist movement or the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine. The word ‘Zionism’ did not appear in the piece, and the critic claimed that Mapu is considered the father of the ‘Jewish’—not the Hebrew or Zionist—novel.[[26]](#endnote-26) The critic also avoided addressing the relevance of the novel’s Jewish nationalist contents to those years. While the preface to a new Hebrew edition of the novel from 1918 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,”[[27]](#endnote-27) 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.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Obviously, this perception, which echoes something of the contemporary concept of Reform Judaism, was far from the political secular Zionist thought that drew nationalist themes from Mapu’s novel. The critique’s (Jewish)-American reader therefore encountered a completely different portrayal of *Love of Zion*’s meanings and values than that of contemporary Zionist readers.

The local disposition regarding Zionism is also relevant for the understanding of another aspect of Hebrew literature’s integration in the American discourse. Whether explicitly or implicitly, this aspect touched upon the issue of the cultural hierarchy in the Jewish world at the time. For example, in his reticent piece on Agnon’s *The Bridal Canopy* in the *New York Times* from 1937, critic Harold Strauss proclaimed an unequivocal hierarchy between Hebrew and Yiddish literature:

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.”[[29]](#endnote-29)

As a reader entirely dependent on English translation, Strauss could not have encountered the modernist accomplishments of the Revival Generation authors; thus, he conveyed partial and erroneous information to the newspaper’s readers, and in turn, reinforced the general perception of Hebrew literature as opposed to Yiddish literature. In so doing, Strauss reflected his era. The scarcity of translations into English, and the deficient promotion of existing translations, created a wide gap between Hebrew literature’s repertoire in its origin language and its repertoire in the American domain. A small advertisement in the *New York Times* also from 1937, announcing the publication of Agnon’s book, effectively demonstrates this disparity, and illustrates Hebrew literature’s marginality in the local discourse. The advertiser saw fit to note that “[Agnon] writes not in Modern Yiddish but in Hebrew, the language in which the Old Testament was originally written.”[[30]](#endnote-30) The advertiser anticipated that the readers would assume, if not otherwise noted, that a Jewish writer would necessarily write in Yiddish and not in Hebrew, and perhaps even sought to promote sales by means of this exotic detail. Translator Israel Meyer Lask’s point in his preface that the novel may surprise English readers who are most likely unaware of the existence of modern Hebrew literature, resounds in this advertisement. Indeed, beside the few works selected for translation that were grounded in the old Jewish life in Eastern Europe and written by Hebrew authors, such as Yehuda Y. Steinberg, the lack of translations during these years of works by influential authors, such as Y. H. Brenner, Haim Hazaz, Yehuda Yaari, and Yaacov Steinberg, widened the gap between the Hebrew literature’s repertoire in the source language and its repertoire in the target culture. Hebrew literature, a pillar of the national and cultural reawakening in the Land of Israel, was reincarnated as a far less nationalist and Land of Israel-esque version in its transition to the American literary field.

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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 attitude toward 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 curiosity about 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.[[31]](#endnote-31) 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 expressions to what he called “The Miracle of Israel.”[[32]](#endnote-32) 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 significant 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 and Zionist sentiment or, in Matthew Silver’s words: “with power and effect that far surpassed any Zionist public relations effort that preceded it.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Dozens of reportages and memoirs about Israel, the majority of which were highly supportive, were written in English and published in America as early as the late 1940s, and during the 50s and 60s.[[34]](#endnote-34) In the decade following the Six Day War, when Israel became a pillar in 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.[[35]](#endnote-35)

In parallel with these publishing trends, we also find an increasing number of translations from Hebrew; or the importation, so to say, of original works “Made in 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 non-fiction books on modern Hebrew literature in English were published.[[36]](#endnote-36) From the mid-1960s forward, “a powerful momentum built up in the transmission of Hebrew literature to readers of English”[[37]](#endnote-37) was evident in the scope of translation in general, and particularly in literary translation. The number of translated books in the literary field published in the 1970s (75) was four times more than the amount published in the 1950s (18).[[38]](#endnote-38)

From the 1940s onward, the relative number of privately owned commercial publishing houses 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.[[39]](#endnote-39) 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 the past, 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.”[[40]](#endnote-40)

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.[[41]](#endnote-41) Moreover, the 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.”[[42]](#endnote-42) Such representations were quite typical of anthologies of translated Hebrew literature in America which were perceived as representing not only the national literature, but also the nation itself. In fact, this quality of the anthologies is mentioned in the journalistic discourse 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, which compiled works by Jewish authors from different language and cultural backgrounds. While in the 1930s reviewers of Leo W. Schwartz’s weighty Jewish anthologies did not take special interest in stories translated from Hebrew, during the 1950s, several critics reviewing new editions of such anthologies wrote that they would like *more* such stories.[[43]](#endnote-43) A piece in the *Washington Post* from 1953 compared the 1930s edition of the *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 are part of a dying literature, the Hebrew stories are themselves the “present” and the “future.”[[44]](#endnote-44) As both a topic and theme, ‘Israeliness’ was perceived in itself as a work’s added value also in Glendy Dawedeit’s review from 1956 of Leo W. Schwartz’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.”[[45]](#endnote-45) The critic’s reservation as to the stories’ quality did not prevent her from sympathizing with them—like other reviews 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 Schwartz’s anthology in the *New York Times* in 1957, concluded that “It is in the Israeli section that the editor has established the book’s usefulness, has given it a *raison d’etre*.”[[46]](#endnote-46)

Concurrent with the growth in translation and the increasing interest in Israel as a literary topic, one of the quintessential changes that the ‘Zionist transformation’ brought about in the translation of Hebrew literature in America involved the types of works that the local reader began to encounter. Unlike the first decades of the twentieth century, at the end of the 1940s and throughout the 50s, approximately half the books were already anchored in the 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 works translated in these years 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 pioneering heroes settling the land is a tone 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.[[47]](#endnote-47) 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 this harsh collective lifestyle, which for the hero 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 do to corruption and imperialist tendencies—an analogy to Israel of the 1950s.[[48]](#endnote-48) Several stories in the anthology *A Whole Loaf: Stories from Israel* of 1957—edited by Shalom Kahn, an American Oleh 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 adopting the principle of sacrifice for the sake of the nation unconditionally.

There were however, works published during these years that articulated a deep obligation 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. The section “First Kiss” in Moshe Shamir’s *With His Own Hands*—which was included in the anthology *Tehilla and Other Israeli Tales*, edited by Yitzhak Shenhar in 1956—portrays a young Palmach soldier, Elik, at the moment he falls in love with a girl.[[49]](#endnote-49) In the section selected for translation, Elik describes his love of the sand dunes and nature to which he devotes himself completely, 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 the Israeli myth of self-realization 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 worthwhile to quotes several of its last sentences: “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...”[[50]](#endnote-50)

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.”[[51]](#endnote-51) 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 involved situation of the translated Hebrew literature’s repertoire in the American literary field? Can one point to an ideological sieve in selecting works for translation by publishers and editors that reflects comprehensive translation norms? From a broad perspective, the answer seems to be, no: the publishers and editors’ choices of works for translation in the 1950s did not produce a particularly distorted portrait of contemporary Hebrew literature. It is true that in the 50s, works were written in Israel that problematized the national Israeli narrative more than those selected for translation (I will elaborate on the moral aspect of this issue in the next chapter). Still there were many works that were not selected for translation that adopted the national ethos with more dedication and naivete than those which were translated. In general, we cannot ascertain that the relative number of such works changed in the repertoire of the translated literature. One way or another, it is difficult to isolate the ideological factors behind the selection of works for translation from the other factors, which, after all, determined the translated repertoire; protocols from the majority of publishing houses are inexistent or unavailable, and factors whose level of influence are hard to estimate—including commercial concerns, considerations of taste and personal preferences, arbitrary factors related to copy rights—may have played a decisive role in determining the nature of the repertoire in translation. Thus, given that the boundaries of the literary repertoire were not traced anew in the transition to the American audience, the image that the American reader encountered in the novels and stories that were translated from Hebrew during these years, seems more complex than that which we find in the original American prose about Israel of the time. American best-sellers with Zionist content and messages—such as Leon Uris’s *Exodus* from 1958, and James Michener’s *The Source* from 1965—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 an American non-fiction literature, including Pierre Van Paassen’s *Palestine: Land of Israel* of 1948, and Isidor Feinstein Stone’s *This is Israel* of 1949, as well as approximately 30 additional non-fiction books in the first years following the establishment of the state, which too produced a sympathetic and often naïve portrait of Zionism for the American reading audience.

Not only do these ‘locally-produced’ books exemplify the attitude toward Israel in the contemporary American culture, they also help understand the patterns of mediation of Hebrew literature in the 1950s in the local journalistic discourse, and in editors’ prefaces to anthologies. While the literary repertoire in translation did not represent the original literary repertoire in a distorted manner, and does not indicate a Jewish-American ‘filter’ of distinctive biases at the level of publishing, it was in fact the journalistic discourse that mediated the works to the readers which expressed quite an ideological worldview. This mediation had numerous principle aspects with one common vein: they all rendered nationalism the primary prism through which the American reader of the time could understand Hebrew literature. The American critical discourse often produced a smoother, one-dimensional portrayal of the Israeli national narrative than that depicted in Hebrew literature. Critics largely supported expressions of nationalism in the literature, and nationalism as strength and a source of literary power—motifs which had seemed to acquire a more central position in the American discourse than they had in the source literature. Critiques also generated 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 Israeli nationalism was presented as bearing an affinity with American nationalism.

We will first look at Alexander Ramati’s article published in the *New York Times* in May 1951 under the heading “A Literary Letter from Israel”—perhaps the first article in mainstream American journalism to broadly survey Israeli literature. Ramati, a Polish Jew who emigrated to America, 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 the national underpinnings in 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 in an admiring tone, “and saw in their people’s uprising a decisive and dramatic element.” In fact, the materials of national struggle and realization are presented as fruitful terrain and constructive inspiration for the literary endeavor: “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.’”[[52]](#endnote-52) Ramati’s words echo the critical discourse in Israel, which adopted the ‘Generation of the Land’ authors and strived to find in their work “an expression of the spiritual world of the ‘first generation of the redemption’ that grew and was nurtured in the spirit of the Yishuv’s Hebrew pioneering ideals between the two World Wars.”[[53]](#endnote-53) However, Ramati’s dramatic choice of words, and the quote he selected from Mossinsohn, rest no less on America’s mystification of Israel in those years. 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.[[54]](#endnote-54) As Michell Mart demonstrates, the representation of strong, justice-pursuing characters in these books also helped establish Israel’s status as America’s friend in her struggle against Soviet communism in the days of the Cold War.[[55]](#endnote-55) Thus, we can also view Ramati’s use of popular American images when referring to Israel, as a way to draw the American reader closer to Hebrew literature and Israel—by employing the national common denominator.

Concurrent with these views, is Ramati’s blatant contempt for Hebrew writers of the previous generation who, in his opinion, divert from the nation paradigm. “The new vigor and drive [in Israeli letters] gained momentum by rejecting of ‘ghettoization’ of theme and viewpoint typical of the writers of the older generation,” he writes, adding, in a ridiculing tone, that “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.”[[56]](#endnote-56) This reference to the generational shift in Hebrew literature, which presumes that the rejection of ‘diasporic’ content in Hebrew literature marks a new revelation, reflects a lack of knowledge about Israel and Hebrew literature in earlier decades. In effect, the ‘new Israelite’ values, and topics associated with settlement in the Land of Israel, had already characterized and dictated the mainstream schools in Hebrew literature for several decades.[[57]](#endnote-57) More than offering 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 criticism reflects a clear repugnance toward a nostalgic and isolationist Jewish position, toward “ghettoization,” a repugnance that complements his disparaging claims regarding the old diaspora’s backwardness. Regardless of whether Ramati is dealing here with contemporary Hebrew literature only, or if his words mask a critical nuance vis-à-vis Yiddish literature and theatre which flourished in America in the early decades of the century, his belief in the need for Jewish integration in the general-universal space is unmistakable and fitting to the spirit of the times. The publishing establishment in Israel must beware of falling into a trap of restricted regulation, Ramati claims, and in this way the national works of young authors, such as Moshe Shamir, Nathan Shaham, and Yigal Mossinsohn, will continue to mark a desired paradigm for Hebrew literature—an opposite paradigm to isolated particularity.

Not all American critics shared Ramati’s opinion on the dangers of regulation threatening Hebrew literature. To compare, Leo Schwartzman’s review of the new Hebrew literature from 1959, *Southern Israelite*, which also marveled at the pioneering “verve and vigor” of contemporary works, saw in the latest literary experiments a message that involved world Jewry in general. 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.”[[58]](#endnote-58) Still, beyond the dispute of whether Hebrew literature indeed manages to deal with comprehensive-Jewish or even universal issues, Schwartzman and Ramati’s shared perception of the desired purpose of national literature arises and is refined: they both see considerable value in a national Jewish writing matched by a non-isolationist tendency. In Jewish discursive sites more ‘intimate’ than the *New York Times*, such as Jewish periodicals, there was emphasis on the innate value in universal writing. In fact, Hebrew literature’s agents also postulated the existence of a *Jewish* American reader, to who’s ‘Jewish heart’ they appealed by often pointing to a general national, not necessarily Jewish, affinity among the communities. A fine example is the following excerpt from editor Leo W. Schwartz’s preface to the Israeli section, “Israelian [sic] Fruit,” in the 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.[[59]](#endnote-59)

Schwartz’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 but rather on nationalism. The kinship he presents is not derived from the particular roots common to both *communities*, but from the historical-national dimension common to both *states* (nations); this similarity, to a large extent, is not between Jews, but between Israelis (who are Jews) and Americans (who are also Jews). At the same time, the construction of this similarity helps Schwartz ascribe the American national ethos to the Jewish reader in contexts that are not naturally embedded in American Jews’ collective memory—the fighting in America’s War of Independence, pioneering in the Western frontier, etc.[[60]](#endnote-60) It is not coincidental that the addition of “our own history,” which appears twice in three sentences, does not refer to Jewish, but to American, history.

It is also telling that, contrary to what one might expect in a preface to a literary anthology, Schwartz does not describe literary, stylistic, or thematic characteristics at all, and refers very little to Hebrew literature as an artistic medium. In this sense, the readers’ sympathy toward Israel is more important to him than their sympathy toward the literary works. “As in Bible days,” he states, expressing the Zionist ethos of Jewish continuity as the origin of the historic right over the Land of Israel, “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.”[[61]](#endnote-61) Reading translated Hebrew literature is not proposed here as an opportunity to encounter a new kind of literary expression, but rather as a means to become familiar with the Israeli people, and almost as an expression of Zionist obligation.

If Louis *Binstock*’s review of *Feast of Leviathan*, which appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1956, is any indication, then Schwartz indeed succeeded in his mission. 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. He does not, however, mention the other two sections which contain mostly Jewish fables and Yiddish works about the ‘old world’—a clear indication of the transformation of key points of interest in the Jewish American discourse. The universal potential that Binstock ascribes to the national-Zionist dimension is evident in his description of the Israeli story by Jessie Sampter:

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.[[62]](#endnote-62)

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 question of the Zionist project, are presented to the reader as a ‘calling card’ of Hebrew literature. Thus, Binstock’s review locates national characteristics more than any other within Hebrew literature and depicts this nationalist trend as a source of inspiration that is not limited to tribal Jewish identity: the (particular) nationalism of Hebrew literature is presented as a source of inspiration for universal identity (that transgresses particular identities) and is intended to speak to the hearts of all American readers.

Obviously, this ‘universal’ national identity was contingent upon contemporary cultural norms. The attitude toward contemporary Arab nationalism in newspapers and the American diplomatic discourse, as Michelle Mart shows, was, for example, exceptionally hostile; it was described as ‘false,’ ‘blind,’ and ‘lacking integrity’—especially in comparison with Israel.[[63]](#endnote-63) Even in the reception of the (very few) works translated from Hebrew that dealt with Eastern Jews, an obscured East-West hierarchy emerges in the description of the desired communal identity. Of course, the negative American attitude toward Arab nationalism is not apparent here; yet, 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 thought patterns—a hierarchical ranking of cultivation. This is evident, for instance, in American critiques of Haim Hazaz’s novel *Mori Sa’id* published in translation in 1956. Against the background of the years of WWII, the novel describes the poor and abject life in a Yemenite neighborhood in Jerusalem and portrays the community’s 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 Lerman 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 pilgrim immigrants of the Mayflower. According to Lerman, throughout the years, the Yemenites:

[may have] 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 wing.... 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.[[64]](#endnote-64)

Parallel with the adoption of the Zionist ethos that rests upon a biblical promise, Lerman indirectly validates the idea that Americanism and Zionism share common roots. At the same time, his orientalist, patronizing presumptions, which attribute physical and instinctual superiority, but cultural inferiority to the ‘East’ as opposed to the ‘West,’ are revealed. Such orientalist images were common not only in Hebrew literature and culture, but also in American thought and Jewish-American literature in this period. The exoticization of the East complemented the American perception of the religious hierarchy between West (and the Judeo-Christian tradition) and the East (and Islam).[[65]](#endnote-65) In critic Alexander Holmes article, “Literary Renaissance Nurtured in Israel,” in the *Los Angeles Times* from 1958, the Yemenites are compared with America’s first settlers. Holmes admirably describes Hazaz as “a founding [...] father of the new nationalist literature,” and explains 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.”[[66]](#endnote-66) Like Lerman and Schwartz, Holmes aligns 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. The most important point in our context is that as amongst other cultural agents of his time, the word ‘nationalist’ as an adjective for literature carries for Holmes positive connotations only. In this vein, he describes the national awakening in the new Hebrew literature as “something wonderful, even inevitable,” and attempts to appropriate 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.[[67]](#endnote-67)

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. His attitude toward what he views as the authors and their works’ ideological dedication to their nation is not reserved, as may often be the case in reviews in American newspapers 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 a dramatic portrayal of the Hebrew authors’ biographical backgrounds: “men, from their 20s to their 60s, who shared experience in sorrow, danger, excitement,” some of who—and here Holmes amazement seems greater—“were outlaws during the British mandate, desert fighters against Arabs, members of the frontier farm collectives.”[[68]](#endnote-68) The image of the daring ‘new Jew’ naturally dovetails with the nationalist celebration as a literary platform.

Holmes does not stop here, and goes as far as explicitly bemoaning the lack of nationalist features in American literature, hinting 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.[[69]](#endnote-69)

Holmes’s perception of nationalism resounds the conservative patriotic tendencies in American society in the 1950s. Given the intensifying tensions of the Cold War in these years and that the impression of the victory in WWII had not yet waned, historiography was focused on schools of scholarship that promoted the notion of American exceptionalism, while Americans profited from the ongoing postwar economic boom. Set against the critical discourse of the first decades of the century, particularly in terms of its focus on the relationship between both Jewish cultures—in (the land of) Israel and in America—Holmes’s review effectively demonstrates the transformation that occurred in Hebrew literature’s mediation to, and reception by, the American reader. The presentation of the new generation of authors in Israel as a national school worthy of appreciation and imitation constitutes a striking counterpart to Harold Strauss’s criticism, 20 years earlier, of Agnon’s *Bridal Canopy* in which he asserted that the new Hebrew literature is a handmaiden (a mark of shame) of Zionism. In various pieces in the American press on Hebrew literature in the 1950s, critics tended to celebrate the nationalism as a worthy literary platform—not to invalidate it as parochial. “The intense spirit of nationalism,” terms which historian and literary critic Edmund Fuller used, in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1958, to describe the source of Moshe Shamir’s *King of Flesh and Blood*’s literary strength, usually carried solely positive connotations.[[70]](#endnote-70)

We find a certain resonance of this transformation, even if only slight, also in the changes made in the translations themselves. While at the beginning of the 1920s, the title of Abraham Mapu’s famous novel was changed from *Love of Zion* to *Shepherd Prince*, in 1950, the title of David Maletz’s novel on kibbutz life was changed from *Circles* to *Young Hearts: A Novel of Modern Israel*.[[71]](#endnote-71) Maletz’s original lyrical title became in translation to English 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 sub-title markets 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. Another intervention in the novel’s translation appears in the segment in which, in response to an event related to the Great Arab Revolt, the kibbutz members go out to plow virgin land nearby the kibbutz, while fully aware that the Arabs from neighboring villages would attack them. When the hero Menachke askes to be included in the list of plowmen, his reasons are described thus:

[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 very body and soul~~] **in defense of this land which he called his mother country**.[[72]](#endnote-72)

The quite restrained descriptions in the source text (“this corner” and “this land”) are replaced in the translation with a style filled with national pathos. The intervention represents Menachke’s feelings and motives as more patriotic and dramatic than in the source text. Admittedly, such ‘nationalizing’ interventions in the translation were quite few, and we cannot draw conclusions from them regarding comprehensive translation norms or even the habitual practices of a single translator. More than the interventions accumulate to form a distinctive characteristic of the translation process, they provide us with additional support for what occurred in the mediated processes in the critical discourse.

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When we set the transformation in the Jewish-American attitude toward 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. 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. Will Herberg’s influential book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* —a milestone in American sociological thought, which anchored the understanding of religiosity in America in social-ethnic terms—was published in 1955. In time, it became a symbol of Judaism’s evolving into a ‘first among equals’ within the principle religions in America and of the Jews successful assimilation in American society and culture. 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 in American society at large without relinquishing the particular contours of their identity. The mediation patterns in the Jewish-American discourse on the works translated from Hebrew—especially, the frequent association of the young Israel with what America was at its beginning, and the national tone imbued in the 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, to a large extent, American Jews already felt at home in their country, Hebrew literature, as representing the Israeli nationalism, served as both a resource of proud Jewish identity that preserves their distinctiveness, and as a legitimate way to establish their full belonging to the American national identity.

The framing of Hebrew literature as national in the Jewish-American discourse did not therefore, offer a paradigm for isolationist Jewish ‘tribalness.’ The ideology at the core of the critiques in this decade resounds the Zionist thought of American philosophers, such as Louis Brandeis and Horace Kallen, that identifies in the Israeli nationalism an inspirational source for an *integrated* Jewish identity, which in turn, constitutes a contribution to the pluralistic and multi-cultural American society. As Emily Katz has demonstrated in regard to Jewish-American agents of music, art, and Israeli folk dance, and as Matthew Silver illustrated regarding the reception of Leon Uris’s *Exodus*, the agents of Hebrew literature in the 1950s as well aspired to draw the American reader closer to Israel by presenting popular national American myths as common to both nations and by drawing similarities between the contemporary Israeli reality and the historical reality of the American nation. Thus, unlike the earlier decades of the century, in the 50s, Hebrew literature did not shed features associated with the Land of Israel and the national rebirth while being mediated to the American discourse. In the spirit of those years, there was nothing more natural for Jewish-American critics than to nurture, and even empower, this nationalism.

In the late 1950s and early 60s, the literary discourse began to change gradually, and throughout the ensuing decades more skeptical and critical voices were heard regarding the idea of a literature that draws its strength from nationalism. Remarks in the American press that identified national qualities in Hebrew literature, and which described them in quite positive and naïve terms, became rare. In fact, major voices in the American discourse began to celebrate the Israeli authors mainly for their *subverting* of the Zionist narrative’s conventions. This reversal in the American attitude toward Hebrew literature was not derived only from changes in the dominant perception in the American public discourse of nationalism in general, and particularly of Israeli nationalism. As we will see in the next chapter, it was derived to a large extent from the translation of new Israeli writers who coped in a more critical fashion than their predecessors with the charged ideological issues of the time, and especially from the publication of translated Hebrew works that undermined the moral image of Israel regarding the ongoing Israeli-Arab conflict. Nevertheless, during the decades of constant growth in the scope of translation, and considering changes in the discourse surrounding the Hebrew works of the 50s into the 60s, 70s, and early 80s—the ‘Zionist’ stage in translation, as we may call it—the fundamental point of departure that crystallized during the 50s with the integration of Hebrew literature in America remained the same: the Jewish-American discourse continued to view the Israeliness reflected in the Hebrew literature a *resource* for Jewish-American identity. This would manifest in different ways, and often require a subtler, and sometimes even entirely different, mediation from the trends of the reception of Hebrew literature in the 50s. However, they continued to reflect the deep relevance of Hebrew literature, in the eyes of its American agents and reading audience, for Jewish self-perception, both individual and collective. Along the line stretching from Lask’s apologetic words from 1937, that lamented the fact that the American reader does not acknowledge the existence of modern Hebrew literature, to Alter’s assuring words from 1991 on the unprecedented success of translated Hebrew literature in America, the national-Zionist context provides a most necessary point of reference for understanding the intellectual dialogue between the two Jewish communities embedded in translation.

Notes

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 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 the literary translation from Hebrew in the United States, therefore, contrary to Amit, in my calculations, I have not taken into account translation to English published in (the Land of) Israel or England. These translations were not distributed in America in the same way as works published by American publishers, did not receive attention in newspapers, and were not accessible to the American reading audience to the extent that the works published in America were. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. 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 prose works that appeared in translation in commercial and general (?) Jewish publications, and not to non-fiction and documentary literature translated by Zionist organizations’ publishers. The non-Land-of-Israel topics were dominant in the translated prose works at least until the end of the 1930s and even until the mid-1940s. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. This cultural gap was reflected in American Jews’ rather indifferent attitude to the Tarbut Ivrit’s Quixotic experience (attempt; of what). The movement, as its name indicates, strived to sustain a lively, vigorous Hebrew culture on American soil. Although the movement thrived briefly during WWI (when several leaders of the Hebrew Yishuv lived temporarily in New York) and published several journals in Hebrew, it did not acquire many supporters and in the years following WWI it slowly disappeared from the cultural landscape. See: Mintz, *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects*, pp. 13-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
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35. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. 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, and non-fiction works. The significance of literary translation among all translated works commenced as early as the end of the 1930s and early 40s. 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-38)
39. The decrease in the relative number of institutional American Zionist and Jewish publishers did not indicate a decline in the *absolute* number of translations in these publications: the Jewish publications translated more books each decade, but gradually occupied a smaller part 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 publications. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Glendy Dawedeit, *Washington Post*, 1956, July 1st, p. E6. The piece on David Maletz’s *Circles* published in *Commentary* also demonstrates substantial support for the book even though it inconspicuously describes the author as a bad (choice of word? -incompetent, perhaps?) one due to the way in which the book illuminates Israeli reality in kibbutzim. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
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