**Epilogue Part 2**

**The Twenty-First Century—A New Cultural Process**

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the Yiddishpiel theatre, which had just been founded, was the only manifestation of Yiddish culture in the Israeli public space. There were indeed groups that conducted activities in Yiddish on a regular basis, the most important of which were held at “Bund – Brith Ha-avoda” House on Kalischer Street in Tel Aviv. But while these groups aspired to expand, in fact they were closed circles that operated far from the public eye.

Beit Shalom Aleichem stood derelict in the public space, and Leyvik House, which in the past had been the vibrant home of the Association of Yiddish Writers and Journalists in Israel, was in a state of decline. The generation of Yiddish writers and journalists was dwindling, and due to financial difficulties, Leyvik House management considered selling it, or donating it to the Tel Aviv municipality.[[1]](#footnote-1) A new cultural process was necessary to render Yiddish part of the Israeli culture. The passing of generations, the maturation of the second generation of immigrants from Eastern Europe within the new Israeli identity politics, and particularly private memory, which was largely associated with the folksy, likeable image of Yiddish – and as such, perceived as a positive asset – paved the way for this cultural process.

It began in Tel Aviv with the ‘changing of the guard’ in these two institutions and the transfer of leadership from the first to the second generation born after WWII. This process did not only lead to a refreshing of the ranks, but also reflected a completely different perspective than that of the prior generation. Instead of focusing on the veteran Yiddish speakers’ world and creating frameworks and platforms for them, attention was now turned outward – toward the Hebrew speaking Israeli society. The new trend was to incorporate Yiddish in Israeli culture; to draw second and third generations of East European immigrants, as well as individuals for whom Yiddish was not part of their family’s cultural biography, closer to Yiddish culture.

First was Beit Shalom Aleichem, which during the twenty-first century was transformed from a “desolate palace,” as journalist Nahum Barnea called it in the 1970s,[[2]](#footnote-2) into a vivacious center for Yiddish culture and a defining factor in the revival of Yiddish in Israel. In the fall of 1999, following its change of management, Beit Shalom Aleichem began offering Yiddish language lessons to the public. The response was surprising. Hundreds, mostly the second generation of Yiddish speakers, flocked to Beit Shalom Aleichem to study Yiddish, to hear Yiddish, to reconnect with a language that for them was a domain of memory with a deep emotional context. Yiddish’s folksy image, which had been embedded in Israeli society for decades, proved a connecting and bonding, rather than belittling and segregating, factor.

Very soon, Beit Shalom Aleichem began offering an extensive class curriculum, from beginner to advanced conversation levels, as well as Yiddish literature classes for speakers of the language. With a meticulously selected teaching faculty, and in cooperation with Israeli universities, the teaching curriculum at Beit Shalom Aleichem increasingly expanded, and today includes collaboration with The Naomi Prawer Kadar International Yiddish Summer Program at Tel Aviv University.

Not long after, Beit Shalom Aleichem began offering the public a wide range of activities, including lectures on topics related to Yiddish and East European Jewish culture, various cultural events, and theatrical and musical performances. In addition, it sponsored the Nehama Lifshitz Yiddish Art Song Workshop, founded by Lifshitz. Beit Shalom Aleichem also supported the “Bund – Brith Ha-avoda” House, which had slowly deteriorated with the gradual loss of the first generation, and enabled it to continue operating.

Beit Shalom Aleichem also collaborates with universities and scholars on academic research and publishing initiatives and works with various publishers on the publication of books and studies on topics related to Yiddish culture and East European Jewry.

Leyvik House underwent a similar process. In 2001, it experienced a dramatic change when it turned its attention toward Israeli society at large and initiated intensive activities for the promotion of Yiddish that reflected a high level of social engagement. Leyvik House hosts conferences on Yiddish-related topics, such as Yiddish theater and translation, and on issues associated with Israeli and Jewish identity. This institution, which had been associated with the first generation of Yiddish speakers, has even managed to attract young people of the third generation whose presence in turn reflects its substantial transformation.

In the early 1990s, Yung Yidish, a non-profit organization whose purpose is to instill traditional Yiddish culture in Israeli society, especially among young people, was founded. Its activities are held in centers in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and include lectures, performances, Klezmer music concerts, memorial ceremonies, and holiday events.

The Yiddishpiel Theatre, the largest and most stable institution in the world of Yiddish in Israel, expanded and developed. All its plays are accompanied by Hebrew and Russian subtitles, and it draws an audience of non-Yiddish speakers. In addition to support received from private factors, the theatre is subsidized by four government ministries and by the Tel Aviv municipality; and although it performs throughout Israel, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, it has become an integral part of Tel Aviv’s cultural landscape, not unlike the Hebrew theatres.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The new atmosphere and the young people’s – mostly of the third generation of Yiddish speakers – openness toward the Yiddish world, laid the groundwork for bringing Yiddish literature closer to Hebrew literature and its readers in Israel. This process is still in its early stages, but steps taken so far are of great importance.

The first was related to the public recognition of Yiddish poet Avraham Sutzkever. Although one of the greatest Jewish writers of the twentieth century, and despite his being awarded the Israel Prize in 1985 – the only prize in the Yiddish literature category to date –the Israeli public was completely unaware of Sutzkever. In 2005, fourteen years after a large collection of Sutzkever’s poems was published in English translation by Yale professor Benjamin Harshav – who, like Sutzkever, was born in Vilna – and Barbara Harshav, a similar collection appeared; however, in this edition, as in the original Hebrew, the title had been changed to *An Assembly of Silences*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Notably, the translation of Sutzkever’s poems into Hebrew was not unprecedented. Since his immigration to Israel in 1947, approximately twelve books of his works in Hebrew translation had been published. *An Assembly of Silences* was different.[[5]](#footnote-5) The collection included works from all periods of Sutzkever’s life. Most were translated by Benjamin Harshav, while some were translated by others. Several poems appeared in various translations alongside the original in Yiddish. In addition to Harshav’s erudite introduction, a brief, personal and moving epilogue by the book’s editor Nitza Drori-Perman, which implicitly and delicately reflected the difficulties involved in the status of Yiddish in the 1950s, was also included. This was not just another translation of Sutzkever, it was a tribute to a great Jewish poet and an attempt to gain the acknowledgment of departments of literature and intellectuals in Israel operating outside the Yiddish domain. Indeed, the book was praised in the media, a tribute event took place at “Tzavta” theatre in Tel Aviv, and it was even reviewed in the Israeli daily press.

The next step was taken seven years later in 2013, after Sutzkever’s death, when one of his poems (“My Amputated Arm is Mine”), which appeared in both the Yiddish original and in two Hebrew translations of *An Assembly of Silences*, and had been printed on the collection’s back cover, was introduced into the Israeli high school curriculum, and even into the literature matriculation exam. It should be noted that the poem was incorporated in the framework of the “poems in the wake of the Holocaust” section, and not as a poem translated from Yiddish. Still, the fact that it was included in the curriculum was an initial, yet palpable, step toward the recognition of Yiddish as an integral part of Israeli literature.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, several new Hebrew translations of Yiddish literature have appeared. Bilha Rubinstein’s translations of works by Isaac Bashevis Singer, with whom the Israeli public is familiar, have achieved wide circulation. In addition, young translators stand out for providing Hebrew readers with revised translations of previously translated Yiddish works, as well as of works that have yet to be published in Hebrew translation. The most active and productive of these translators is Benny Mer. In 2005, Mer’s Hebrew translation of “Iram shel Ha-anashim Ha-ktanim” (The City of the Little People), a collection of short stories by Shalom Aleichem, was published. This was not, so it seemed, an unprecedented endeavor. One hundred years had passed since Y. D. Berkowitz began translating Shalom Aleichem into Hebrew. These translations were followed by many more of this author’s works, including wonderful translations by veteran translators of *Tevye the Dairyman* (Dan Miron) and *Motl, the Cantor’s Son* (Avraham Yavin). And still, there is something refreshing and captivating in Mer’s translation, which presents Shalom Aleichem to the Israeli reader in contemporary Hebrew, and in so doing, demonstrates the timelessness of this great Jewish writer. Indeed, the book was well circulated, and was even adapted for the stage, and produced by the prestigious Jerusalem Khan Theatre.

The Yiddish book translation project continued, and in the last decade new translations of Yiddish works have appeared, including two works translated by Mer – Shalom Aleichem’s *Menakhem Mendl* and *Black Beads,* a collection of translations of Sutzkever’s works – as well as a new translation of Sutzkever’s *Ghetto Vilna*, which first appeared in Hebrew translation in 1947, by the young translator Vicky Shifris.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Concurrent with these activities, Yiddish is making its way to new Hebrew literature written in Israel. Since the beginning of the century, young Israeli authors – all of whom were born from the late 1960s onward – have published outstanding literary works whose content and style are associated with the Yiddish world. The first was Yirmi Pinkus, who in 2008 published *Professor Fabricant’s Historical Cabaret*, a novel about a Yiddish theatre troupe that travels throughout Eastern Europe until its downfall on the eve of WWII.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Matan Hermoni’s *Hebrew Publishing Company*, a novel that weaves a plot in the world of Yiddish speakers, was published in 2011. While Pinkus takes his tale to the “Shund” theatre in Eastern Europe, a major element of Yiddish culture, Hermoni positions the heroes in his novel – which is, to a large extent, reminiscent of “Shund” literature – at a different core of Yiddish culture: the world of literature and printing. Although Hermoni places his heroes at the center of the Yiddish-speaking Jewish society in New York, his Hebrew, which evokes Yiddish expressions and vernacular, links them to Israel. This direct linkage is reinforced in Hermoni’s second novel, *Four Lands*, which also deals with Yiddish literature and authors, but which takes place in 2010 in Tel Aviv, on Arba Aratzot (Four Lands) Street, named after The Council of Four Lands, the central body of Jewish authority between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Another book by a young author, Ya’ad Biran, was published in 2017. The book, *Laughing with Lizards* – a Yiddish idiom referring to laughing while crying – is a collection of stories all related to the Yiddish world, some even dealing directly with Yiddish in Israel.

Common to all these writers, notwithstanding the biographical element – young and Israeli born – is the fact that, in one way or another, all their characters elicit smiles, if not laughter, and therefore ostensibly validate Yiddish’s image as a folksy language associated with humor. These are not grotesque characters but rather, to a certain degree, tragic, heart-rending figures, and the works reflect not only a serious and respectful attitude toward Yiddish, but also that the language constitutes a part of young Israeli authors’ cultural heritage.

1. Conversation with Daniel Galai, Director, Lyvick House [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nahum Barnea, “Armonot Shomemim” *Davar*, July 10, 1970: 8-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Yiddishpiel is supported by the following ministries: Ministry of Culture and Sport, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Aliya and Immigrant Absorption, and Ministry for Senior Citizens. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Barbara and Benjamin Harshav, Translators, A. Sutzkeber, *Selected Poetry and Prose*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Kinus Dumiot*, Am Oved and Carmel, 2005. Contrary to what is customary in Hebrew books published in Israel, the book’s title in English did not appear in the front-matter pages. The additional title was in Yiddish. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ghetto Vinla* first appeared in Hebrew translation by Natan Livne in 1947, Shahoi Publishing, 1947. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yirmi Pinkus, *Ha-kabaret Ha-Satiri shel Professor Fabricant*, Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Matan Hermoni, *Arba Aratzot*, Tel Aviv, Kenneret Zemora Bitan, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)