

Between Israel and America: The Politics of Translation between Jews

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Prospectus

The ever-changing relationship between American Jewry and Israel is one of the most intriguing and intensely debated issues in the field of Jewish Studies as well as in the Jewish public sphere. These communities being the two major sources of Jewish collective identity of our times, this relationship has always been deeply embedded in questions of symbolic boundaries and communal self-perception; put simply, in what it means to be Jewish. Nonetheless, studies that explore it through a cultural prism are surprisingly rare. *Between Israel and America: The Politics of Translation between Jews* addresses the ways in which Americans, American Jews in particular, came to know what they (think they) know about Israel, and the ways in which Israelis came to know what they (think they) know about American Jews. It does so through the intercultural practice of translation, and the revealing lens of translation studies.

By crossing territorial-geographical as well as linguistic boundaries, the translated text can be conceptualized as a bridge between cultures. The English translation of Hebrew literature (with its largely American Jewish audience), and the Hebrew translation of Jewish-American literature, is a particularly compelling such bridge, allowing for the migration of images and ideas between the two major Jewish centers of the second half of the 20th century. "Writing itself, for Jews," Victoria Aarons recently remarked, "has been that center of gravity that has given weight and meaning to their lives." As works by Israeli writers Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua and Yoram Kaniuk, and American writers Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth, exemplify, the literary text served as a vital sphere of deliberation on the question of identity in both Jewish cultural arenas. Questions on the history and core identity of contemporary Jewry being so central to the two literatures, the movement of literary work across the two cultures, their migration from "home turf" to a foreign field, innately challenged and confronted each community with the otherness of its counterpart. *Between Israel and America* sets out to investigate some of the understudied aspects of this encounter. It stages this two-way literary transfer as an intellectual dialogue of sorts, conducted between the two major segments of the contemporary Jewish world.

The book shows that this transfer did not, however, occur in a vacuum, nor did the literary works reach their readership "untouched". Influential cultural agents such as translators, editors, and critics played a crucial role in mediating and appropriating the works for their target audience. The significance of this mediation of images extended well beyond the realm of literary style. I will show instances of ideologically distorted translation or biased interpretation that altered dramatically the ways in which the original representations of Jewishness came to appear to local eyes. Such alterations had to do with some of the most loaded questions of contemporary Jewish thought. To what extent did the often brutal historical reality of Israel, the Jewish State, reflect historical Jewish values? Does Jewish life set in a non-Jewish culture and language truly allow for authentic Jewish existence? Source texts implicated in such charged questions were subjected to varied processes of appropriation in the target culture. These processes both reflected and reinforced the dominant perceptions cultivated in each Jewish community of the other community, and its alternative way of Jewish life.

The book presents a historical, comparative look at the patterns of mediation in each literary sphere from the 1950s through the 1980s, revealing some of the underlying themes in the relationship between Israel and American Jewry during these years. As will become clear, these themes are still pertinent to today's most contested public debates: the question of Jewish morality against the background of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the internal cultural hierarchy of the Jewish world; the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews; and competing forms of contemporary Judaism. These issues, and the ways in which they were negotiated through translation and literary discourse during the post-state decades, can be seen as predecessors of the pervasive ideological tensions that strain the relations between the two centers today. Unveiling the intricate and often unseen manifestations of these tensions in the cultural field, *Between Israel and America* sheds new light on the ways in which each community sought to establish its collective boundaries in response to the challenge represented by the other, in the mediated realm of translation and literary discourse.

Description of chapters

Laying the historical background and theoretical premises of the study, the book's Introduction makes the case that the practice of translation may be paradigmatic for the study of homeland-diaspora relations. Translation is representative of transfer across *language* and *geographical space*, two of the mainstays of ethno-national collective identity, and two determinant factors of its textual production. This, I attempt to show, is particularly true in the case of the Jewish homeland and American diaspora of the 20th century. These two Jewish centers, whose communal identities have been separated from one another by a linguistic and geographical gap, nonetheless felt the need to maintain a connection with one another, and to bridge this gap, among other ways, through translation. The features of translation between homeland and diaspora are thus revealing of some of the underlying tensions between these two Jewish collectives.

The book is divided into two parts, the first dedicated to the absorption of translated Hebrew literature in (Jewish) American culture, and the second to the reception of American Jewish works in Israel. The first part of the book is comprised of three chapters. Chapter 1 describes the ways in which Zionism transformed major aspects in the representation of Hebrew literature in America, by comparing the earlier decades of the 20th century with the 1950s. It illustrates a turn from de-nationalization to over-nationalization of Hebrew Literature in the Jewish-American discourse, which reflected the growing Zionist zeitgeist in the U.S. and contributed to it.

The next two chapters present dominant trends in the mediation of Hebrew literature for a Jewish-American audience from the 1960s onwards. Alongside a tendency by American Jewish agents of Hebrew literature to attribute a self-critical, humanistic image to this literature, the translated works (by canonical authors such as Oz, Yehoshua, Kaniuk, and Megged) were mediated to American readers in ways that, mostly suggestively or implicitly, limited and dulled the challenging traits that were celebrated as expressions of Israeli moral reflection. Such propagandistic principles were expressed in the choice of texts for translation, in selective interpretations in reviews, and in the manipulative translation of ideological aspects in the works themselves. Moreover, an attempt was made to mediate and adjust representations of Jewishness (in novels by S.Y. Agnon, David Shahar, and others) that contradicted core values of Jewish-American identity. Aspects of the negation of exile were obscured in translated works, and antagonistic representations of the non-Jewish world

and the relationship between Jews and non-Jews were mollified. In terms of religion, the desirable boundaries of Judaism reflected by American discussions on translated works corresponded with the image of liberal American Jewry at the time. These chapters demonstrate that the appropriation of Hebrew literature in the United States can be seen as part of the cultivation of Jewish-American identity, an identity in which conceptions of Israel fulfilled a central role during these years.

Opening the second part of the book, Chapter 4 outlines the tradition of Israeli thought on Israel-diaspora translation. It contends that a primary trend in Israeli intellectual and public discourse on intra-Jewish translation is doubt regarding the "authenticity" of Jewish-American literature. This reluctant approach often drew, explicitly or implicitly, from the ideological conception that Jewish creation could not assume any language other than Hebrew. Based on this notion, Israeli thinkers formulated a cultural hierarchy in the Jewish world which positioned cultural and literary life in Israel as more authentically *Jewish* and therefore superior to that of American Jews. Chapter 5 elaborates on the intrinsic ambivalence of Israeli literary discourse toward Jewish-American works (by major authors such as Bellow, Malamud, and Roth, as well as middlebrow writers such as Wouk), one rooted in the tension reflected in these works, of Jewish existence in a non-Jewish world. On the one hand, I claim, there existed a tendency to particularize and "Judaize" universal aspects of works by Jewish-American authors, to take pride in their literary achievements or criticize them when they are "too harsh" in their depictions of Jewish life, generally assuming a common destiny with American Jews and exhibiting an affinity to diaspora Jewish culture. On the other hand, I point to a tendency in the Israeli literary discourse to (over) emphasize the difficulty of living as a Jew in a non-Jewish world, both from a spiritual-intellectual standpoint and a physical-social one, in a way that bulwarked the conception of Israeli sovereignty as the best and perhaps the only true solution for contemporary Jewish existence. Shaped in the face of continuous challenge posed by the other major Jewish center in America during the second half of the 20th century, this Israeli perception of the diaspora entailed both inclusivity and dismissal, implied both communal affinity and hierarchy, and might have indeed been emblematic of the double-natured Israeli approach to the diaspora in general.

The epilogue ties the major themes of the two sections, concluding on how translation processes between homeland and diaspora have played an active role in formulating notions of identity in each community. It is no coincidence that the same themes - the question of Jewish morality against the background of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the cultural hierarchy of the Jewish world, and the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews - have taken center stage in each literary discourse. These, I claim, are not only at the heart of the cultural relations between the two communities; they also accentuate the acute differences between the ways in which these two communities perceive and understand themselves. Concomitantly, I stress that were it not for a basic assumption of affinity between the two communities, one would not find expressions of intense conflict and appropriation in the translation processes, but rather indifference. Each community would not pose a challenge to the other's self-perception if it were not deemed deeply relevant. The epilogue then discusses the possibility of a potentially different ethics of translation than the one revealed during the decades in question, and touches on some preliminary findings from the movement of translations between the two cultures in the early 21st century.

Other works in the field

The primary scholarly discourse to which my work belongs and seeks to contribute is the cultural history of the relations between American Jewry and Israel. A cultural prism was rarely used in the historical study of the relationship - particularly for the post Six-Day War years. On the American side, recent relevant works include Matthew Mark Silver's *Our Exodus* (2010), which describes the influence of Leon Uris's *Exodus* on American perceptions of Israel in the late 1950s and early 1960s; and Emily Alice Katz's *Bringing Zion Home* (2015), which studies the appropriation of phenomena such as Israeli folk dance and Israeli art in American Jewish culture between 1948 and 1967. My book supports the general claim made in both works, namely, that (imported) content related to Israeli or Zionist identity was negotiated within the frame of reference of the internal cultural needs of American Jewry – but concentrates on the ideological manipulation of the actual cultural products, and extends the discussion to the crucial post-Six Day War years. Similar to Katz's study, my book places importance on examining the American Jewish response to cultural products dreamt up and shaped in the context and environment of the Israeli sphere – but focuses on the literary field. The latter choice is not arbitrary: in the realm of literature, Israeli self-representation tended to pose a much greater challenge to American Jewish discourse than the images of Israel created on American shores, and could thus attest to the highly nuanced ideological sieve needed for these products to serve as a viable source of collective identity.

Other relevant works are the opening chapter in Alan Mintz's *Translating Israel* (2001, pp. 1-43), that deals with the reception of Hebrew literature in the American literary field; and two papers by Olga Zambrowsky (1994, 2000), focused on publishing decisions and secondary school teaching of Jewish-American literature in Israel. My book complements Mintz's approach by placing more emphasis on internal Jewish politics and ideological aspects of critical reception; and it complements Zambrowsky's papers by utilizing more recent approaches of translation studies, and by shedding light on the appropriation practices of literary reception and traditions of intellectual thought on translation.

The other scholarly discourse my work belongs to is that of historical translation studies. Previous studies on literary translation from Hebrew into English and from English into Hebrew gave little attention to the politics of the relations between the two major Jewish centers. Most studies focused on stylistic, linguistic or pedagogical aspects of translation, or on ideological aspects related to Jewish-Christian relations or the censorship of erotica.

My work will be the first book-length study to tackle English-Hebrew translation through the prism of the relations between Israel and American Jews, putting the spotlight on the question of modern Jewish identity. In fact, a research approach that seeks to compare the transfer of translated literature between cultures *in both directions* has yet to be taken in translation studies. Translation scholars have almost exclusively focused on one-directional transfer from a given culture of origin to a given target culture. The history of the Jewish communities in Israel and America, which are linguistically and geographically distinct yet belong to a broad collectivity and seek mutual connection, legitimizes a *bi-directional* framework for discussing translation. Although different agents participated in the translation process in each direction, the ideological issues pertinent to the meaning of these processes were highly similar if not downright identical. These issues preoccupied the two Jewish communities on either side of the ocean at a similarly high intensity.

The book's audience

Anyone interested in modern Jewish history, and the workings of ideology in the relationship between the two communities, could find interest in *Between Israel and America: The Politics of Translation between Jews*. More specifically, introductory and advanced courses in Israel Studies, as well as courses on the history and culture of American Jews, could benefit from including my book in their curriculum. The complex relations between Israel and American Jewry were not often portrayed through the prism of intercultural transfer. Moreover, some of the undercurrents of the relationship revealed in my book are extremely relevant to today's most impassioned public debates on Jewish ethics, religion, etc. American readers may be particularly intrigued by the ideological manipulations revealed in the English translation of acclaimed authors such as Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, Yoram Kaniuk, and others.

The recent emphasis on trans-nationalism and trans-culturalism in American Studies makes my book pertinent to certain courses in American history as well, as it offers a concise case-study of the complex interaction and mutual influence between an American ethnicity and a foreign national culture. The discussed ideological tensions between (Jewish) homeland and diaspora make the book easily relevant to Diaspora Studies classes. Finally, as the book deals with the practices of social agents in the literary field, and the socio-ideological underpinnings of the mediation of ideas across cultures, it may be included in the curriculum of courses in Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies and Translation Studies that focus on the sociology of literature.

Some findings presented in articles I've published in *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* and *Translating and Interpreting Studies* are incorporated into Chapter 2 of the book (~8,000 words out of a total of ~17,000 words).

Some findings presented in an article of mine in *AJS Review* are incorporated into Chapter 3 of the book (~6,000 words out of a total of ~12,000 words).

Chapter 5 is based on an article recently submitted for publication to *Jewish Social Studies* (~12,000 words).

The portion of the manuscript published elsewhere may therefore amount to ~26,000 words (out of ~80,000).

The manuscript is some six months from completion.

Table of contents

INTRODUCTION

Translation as Paradigm for Homeland-Diaspora Relations

The Jewish Case

CHAPTER ONE

The Zionist Transformation

From de- to over-nationalization of Hebrew Literature in the American (Jewish) Literary Field

CHAPTER TWO

Ethical Conundrums

Translation Agents as Ambassadors of Israeli Morality to the U.S.

CHAPTER THREE

Israel for American Eyes

Ethno-National Boundaries, Liberal Religion, and the Negotiation of American Jewish Identity

CHAPTER FOUR

"Judaism in Translation"

Israeli Linguistic Ideology, and the Hierarchy of intra-Jewish Translation

CHAPTER FIVE

Jewish-American Literature Makes Aliyah?

Jewish/non-Jewish Difference, and the Double-natured Israeli Approach to the Diaspora

EPILOGUE

A "Distinctly Radical Twoness"?

Towards an Ethics of Dialogue through Translation

Word count:

Introduction (~15,000 words)

Chapter 1 (~8,000 words)

Chapter 2 (~17,000 words)

Chapter 3 (~12,000 words)

Chapter 4 (~10,000 words)

Chapter 5 (~13,000 words)

Epilogue (~5,000 words)

Total word count: ~80,000