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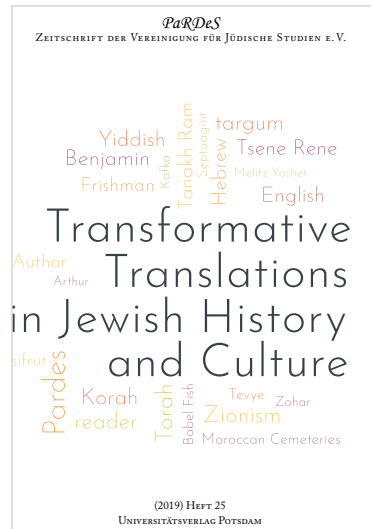
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# The *Melits Yosher* and the Audience for Early Modern Yiddish Literature

by Morris M. Faierstein

## Abstract

Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac of Yanova (d. 1623) is best known as the author of the *Ze'edah U-Re'edah*; the *Melits Yosher* ("Intercessor before God") is one of his lesser known works. It was first published in Lublin in 1622 and reprinted once in Amsterdam in 1688. Like the *Ze'edah U-Re'edah*, it was a Torah commentary, but composed for men who had some yeshivah education, but who could not continue their studies. The commentary on the *Song of Songs* by Isaac Sulkes is another Yiddish work that addresses the same audience as the *Melits Yosher*. The purpose of this article is to bring to scholarly attention an audience that has not been noticed or studied in the previous scholarship on early modern Yiddish literature.

## 1. Introduction

Interest in early modern European Jewry has increased in recent years, but an aspect that has lagged in interest in popular culture as expressed in the Yiddish literature addressed to this segment of Jewish society. This study of the *Melits Yosher* is part of a larger work that seeks to establish a foundation for the study of the basic corpus of early modern Yiddish literature: translations, paraphrases, and other works associated with the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The methodologies utilized in this study is the research on the history of the book and gender studies, a historical and philological analysis, and the description of the texts. One purpose of this study is to refute the conventional assumption

<sup>1</sup> The present study is a revised version of a chapter from my recently completed monograph: Morris M. Faierstein, *The Early Modern Yiddish Bible: From the Mirkevet ha-Mishneh to Blitz and Witzenhausen (1534–1686)*, presently being considered for publication.

that early modern Yiddish literature is for “women and men who are like women”<sup>2</sup> that is found not only in contemporary literature but also in much recent scholarship.

Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac Rabbino of Yanova (d. 1623) was the author of the most popular and widely reprinted Yiddish work, *Ze’edah u-Re’edah* (from Song of Songs 3:11: “Go forth and see”), a commentary on the *Humash* (Pentateuch), *Haftarot* (readings from the Prophets), and *Megillot* (Scrolls).<sup>3</sup> It was published in the first decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and went through four editions before the author’s death in 1623.<sup>4</sup> Despite or perhaps because of the popularity of this work, Rabbi Jacob felt the need to write another work on the Bible, which he entitled *Melits Yosher* (“Intercessor before God”). This work was written in a different style and for a different audience than the *Ze’edah u-Re’edah*. The phrase “Melits Yosher” has additional nuances in Jewish literature and liturgy. It can mean defense attorney, intermediary or intercessor before God. These additional meanings most likely found a resonance in the readers who saw this term and in Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac’s choice of title for his book. Where the *Ze’edah U-Re’edah* was aimed at a popular audience of men, women, and young people, the audience for the *Melits Yosher* was a more sophisticated group of men who had studied beyond the elementary education of the *Heder* (Jewish traditional elementary school) but had to leave their studies in order to earn a living. This is an audience that has not been noticed in most of the previous scholarship on early modern Yiddish literature.<sup>5</sup>

The “conventional wisdom” that one finds about early modern Yiddish literature, and especially Yiddish religious literature, is that Yiddish literature was for women and ignorant men who had no significant Jewish education, while Hebrew literature was for men who had spent years in *Yeshivahs*

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is first found in the introduction of Moshe Henochs Altschul, *Sefer Brantshpigl* (Basel, 1602), n. p.

<sup>3</sup> Morris M. Faierstein, *Ze’edah U-Re’edah: A Critical Translation into English*, ed. and trans. Morris M. Faierstein. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 2 vols. All translations of primary texts in this article are my own. Since my edition of the *Ze’edah U-Re’edah* worked with a different transliteration of Hebrew and Yiddish, the transliteration in this article differs from the PaRDeS style sheet. For example, I cite *Ze’edah U-Re’edah* and not *Tsene-rene*.

<sup>4</sup> The first three editions of the *Ze’edah U-Re’edah* have not survived. They are only known from a reference to them in the earliest surviving edition, published in Basel-Hanau in 1622.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Baumgarten, *Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 114, mentions the *Melits Yosher* and its audience in passing, but does not explore the implications.

(Talmud academies) and mastered the intricacies of rabbinic literature.<sup>6</sup> A recent expression of this perspective is the comment by Shlomo Berger:

“Indeed, it is now generally accepted that, in addition to writing intentionally for women, addressing them was also a smokescreen authors and publishers used to justify writing in Yiddish. Hebrew was considered the language in which men read, Yiddish the women’s vernacular.”<sup>7</sup>

Originally, this characterization was meant as a way to denigrate and ignore this literature. Where and when did this negative stereotype begin and who propagated it? Israel Tsinberg (1873–1939), the great historian of Jewish literature and a defender of Yiddish literature, suggested in his history that the culprits were the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars who reflected the modern German-Jewish negativity to Yiddish literature and culture. Tsinberg writes:

“The German Jewish scholars of the nineteenth century, such as [Moritz] Güdemann, [Maier] Grünbaum, [Joseph] Perles, [Moritz] Steinschneider and others, always speak of Old Yiddish literature as a special ‘women’s literature.’ This, however, is incorrect. The following detail is worth noting. We have collected the texts of some seventy-nine title pages of Old Yiddish editions and among them are only nine that address themselves exclusively to ‘pious women, young women, and maidens.’ The other seventy write, ‘not for women and maidens,’ but also ‘for both young men and householders,’ ‘for men and women, boys and girls.’ Some address themselves to the ‘dear brothers,’ to ‘common people, men and women,’ to ‘ordinary cantors and teachers’ to ‘dear people, men and women, boys and girls.’ Others again are addressed simply to *ben Adam*, to ‘either the scholar or the ordinary man, householders or women,’ or to ‘every Jew [...] whoever he is [...] whether man or woman, whoever can read.’”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For a recent analysis of this assumption and why it is not accurate see, Faienstein, *Ze’erah U-Re’erah*, 14–17; Miriam Borden, “Di vaybershe Bibel.” The Myth and Mythopoetics of the ‘Women’s Bible’ (M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 2018), has dealt with this issue in greater detail. Borden notes that she found no references to the term “women’s Bible” prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>7</sup> Shlomo Berger, “An Invitation to Buy and Read: Paratexts of Yiddish Books in Amsterdam, 1650–1800,” *Book History* 7 (2004): 31–61, here 38.

<sup>8</sup> Israel Tsinberg, *History of Jewish Literature*, trans. Bernard Martin (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1975), 12 vols., here vol. 7, 124–125. The list of title pages that Tsinberg mentions are not found in the English translation of his work but can be found in the Yiddish version of Tsinberg’s history, cf. Israel Tsinberg, *Di geshichte fun der literatur bei Yidn* (“A History of

Another group that Tsinberg does not mention, but who must also share some of the responsibility for this perception of the role that Yiddish literature played are the East European *Maskilim* (enlighteners) who wrote in Hebrew and held Yiddish in low esteem. An interesting example is the story mentioned by Yehudah Leib Katzenelson (1846–1917), better known by his pen name Buki ben Yogli. He was the author of one of the more popular *maskilic* autobiographies. He mentions that in his childhood he would read the *Kav ha-Yashar* (“The Just Measure”), a popular ethical work by Tsvi Hirsch Koidanover (d. 1712), with great delight, which was published in a bi-lingual edition, Hebrew on the top half of the page and Yiddish on the bottom.<sup>9</sup> Initially, he read the Yiddish text, which was much easier for him to understand:

“But when one of my uncles explained to me that it was unbecoming for a male to read books in Yiddish, which were intended only for women, I began with great effort to climb up from below the margin.”<sup>10</sup>

Two other modern groups played a role perpetuating the myth of this literature as being only for women. Long before the ascent of feminism in the post-World War II era, were first secular Yiddishists (secular and linguistic movement), Bundists (secular Jewish socialists), and Communists, who had antireligious ideologies and attaching the “women’s label” as a way of denigrating religious Yiddish literature. With the rise of feminism, the narrative changed. Yiddish religious literature was now the source of a separate “women’s religion.” The literature on Yiddish prayers, the *tehinnot*, is a prime example. There are *tehinnot* written by and for women.<sup>11</sup> However, there are many *tehinnot* that are written for men or for a general audience that includes all ages and genders, as is true of all genres of this literature. Only a selective reading of early modern Yiddish religious literature would lead to the conclusion that the primary audience of this literature was women.

Jewish Literature”; Alveltlicher Yidisher Kultur Kongress (Buenos Aires: Argentinier Opteil, 1964–1968), 8 vols., here vol. 6, appendix 4, 330–332 (Yiddish).

<sup>9</sup> It was first published in Frankfurt am Main in 1705, and frequently reprinted, including many editions that were bilingual in Hebrew-Yiddish.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, ed. Paul Glasser (New Haven: YIVO/Yale University Press, 2008), 2 vols., here vol. 2: A263.

<sup>11</sup> A classic exposition of this feminist ideology is Chava Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

## 2. The *Melits Yosher* and Its Audience

The idea that there might be a middle ground of men and some women who were familiar with rabbinic ideas and teachings has not been adequately discussed in the scholarly literature.<sup>12</sup> The tendency in the scholarly literature to divide Hebrew from Yiddish and learned from ignorant, has produced a duality that is not found when the literature is examined without prior assumptions. Instead of a duality there is a gradation in the literature from works only understandable by a small elite of rabbinic scholars through Hebrew works written in a more popular style, Yiddish works that presuppose knowledge of rabbinic concepts and vocabulary with Yiddish works written for young people or men and women with no more than the most basic education on the other end. The audience that Rabbi Jacob had in mind when he composed the *Melits Yosher* was that middle group who might be able to follow a learned lecture or sermon, even if they could not read a rabbinic text in the original Hebrew or Aramaic. The introduction explains several important aspects of his work, why he wrote in Yiddish, why he was careful to cite his sources, and who was his target audience:

“Therefore, a person should study Torah, so that the evil inclination will remove itself. This has awakened me to make books in Yiddish to benefit the public, so that the people should not say: we do not have books, since we do not understand Hebrew. Therefore, I have selected from important books and have translated it into Yiddish. I did not want to boast, so my interpretations are few. Nonetheless, I have benefited the public. Concerning this, the prophet Isaiah said, ‘*Seek the Lord*

<sup>12</sup> There are a number of women who have come to light whose writings and activities clearly indicate a significant knowledge of the rabbinic tradition. The three women cited here are not an exhaustive list but signify that the old stereotypes cannot be sustained, and more research is needed. Reizel Fiszels, purchased a manuscript of a Yiddish Psalms translation from Moshe Stendal in Hannover in 1586. She brought the manuscript to Cracow and arranged for its publication by Isaac Prostitz (d. 1612), who was the most important printer of Yiddish books in late 16<sup>th</sup>-century Cracow, cf. Chone Shmeruk, “Appendix: Bibliography of Yiddish Books printed to the Middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century,” in Chone Shmeruk, *Yiddish Literature in Poland: Historical Studies and Perspectives* (Magnes: Jerusalem, 1981), 75 – 116, here 87, no. 20 (Hebrew). We also have two books written by women: Rivkah Tiktiner’s *Meneket Rivkah*, was published in Prague in 1609, cf. Frauke von Rohden, *Meneket Rivkah: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women* (Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, 2009). The *Memoirs of Glikel of Hameln* is perhaps the best known early modern work written by a woman, cf. Glikel of Hameln, *Glikel Memoirs 1691–1719*, ed. and trans. Chava Turniansky (Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar, 2006) (Hebrew/Yiddish).

*while He can be found, call to Him while He is near* [Isa 55.6]. Seek God when he can be found, call to Him when He is near. One can ask here. Why does it say 'seek' twice, since it means seek, and call to him means call? This is all one. Put aside one of them. Write '*seek Him*' and put aside, call him. One can further ask, write '*when He can be found*,' when He can be found, and put aside, '*when He is near*.' They all mean the same thing.

The explanation is that the prophet shows us that when someone gets up to preach divine things, that is to say, the Torah, he wants to preach it as it is found. That is to say, he found the same sermon in books, and he gets up to preach. The sermon is not to be praised. Why, "*call to Him when He is near*." That is to say, each person will be able to read it when he will come close to it, in the book from which he took it. Furthermore, "*Seek the Lord while He can be found*." When somebody wants to preach what he found, that is to say, he found this in books, and he gets up to preach. "*Call to Him while He is near*." He should call the sermon and give it a name of who is close to it. That is to say, he should say in which book he found it, in the name of the one who said it. Thus, the sermon is not so bad. Furthermore, where He can be found; one wants to preach as he found it in the books. "*Call to Him while He is near*." He should see that the sermon at least has a purpose. Everyone can read it, if they only come close to it. This the meaning of, "*Call to Him while He is near*." Whoever comes to it should be able to read it. This is when someone makes something in a language that everyone can understand. In these generations, in the majority of lands this is the language of Ashkenaz. Therefore, it is just to make everything in Yiddish.

I have seen that the book, *Ze'edah U-Re'edah* in particular, is written in Yiddish and everyone desires to learn from it. Therefore, it has been printed many times more than other important books, because it is in Yiddish. There is very little study, because of our sins, since not everybody understands difficult terms. When one already wants to study, he can't because of difficulties earning a living, particularly those who were yeshiva students before they married. When they take a wife, they throw away the Torah and become an ignoramus. When he gets old, he has regret. As soon as he sees a religious book in Yiddish, he buys it and reminds himself, let me also study Torah. He knows well that Torah study is the priority.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac of Yanova, *Melits Yosher*, (Amsterdam, 1688), Introduction, 1b. A full translation of the introduction to the *Melits Yosher* can be found in the appendix of this article.



Later in the introduction, Rabbi Jacob explains that the *Melits Yosher* was intended for an audience that was already familiar with the *Ze'edah U-Re'edah* and wanted something more sophisticated and equally important. Rabbi Jacob wanted a work of this style that would cover the whole Bible, and not merely the *Humash*, *Haftarot* and *Megillot* that were the basic study texts for the less educated members of the Jewish community.

Another indicator that this work was intended for a more sophisticated audience than that of the *Ze'edah U-Re'edah* is the list of authors he mentions in his introduction as indicative of the type of author the reader should expect to encounter. The commentaries on which the *Ze'edah U-Re'edah* is built are the classic rabbinic texts and medieval commentaries. In contrast, the commentaries mentioned in the introduction of the *Melits Yosher*, with the exception of Isaac ben Moses Arama (1420–1494), were all active in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and their works could all be considered recent works that reflected the latest intellectual trends, including the emerging influence of Kabbalah. They are also much more sophisticated commentaries, with kabbalistic and philosophical inflections, originally written for an elite audience. Some of the authors cited by Rabbi Jacob are among the first to popularize kabbalistic teachings and concepts in their commentaries. A topic needing further research is whether Rabbi Jacob incorporated kabbalistic concepts in this work and in this way served as a conduit for the dissemination of these ideas.<sup>14</sup>

“Since I have seen that many people desire to study, and they have informed me that they would gladly have a commentary on the *Twenty-four* [books of the Bible] in Yiddish, with midrashim, like the *Ze'edah U-Re'edah* is on the *Humash*. Thus, I have collected more midrashim and sermons for each Sabbath, from *Keli Hemdah*,<sup>15</sup> *Divrei Shalom*,<sup>16</sup> *Akedah*,<sup>17</sup> *Keli Yakar*,<sup>18</sup> *Alsheikh*,<sup>19</sup> and *Ma'asei Adonai*,<sup>20</sup> all of them briefly translated. I do not want to boast with the commentaries that others have made, since mine are very few. Thus, I am only an interpreter and want to *benefit*

<sup>14</sup> The *Ze'edah U-Re'edah* has only four references to the book *Zohar* (Splendor) and one each from Moses Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim* (Orchard of Pomegranates) and Elijah de Vidas' *Reshit Hokhmah* (Beginning of Wisdom), cf. Faierstein, *Ze'edah U-Re'edah*, vol. 2, 1253.

<sup>15</sup> Written by R. Samuel Laniado, Venice, 1594–1596.

<sup>16</sup> Written by R. Isaac Adarbi, Salonika, 1580.

<sup>17</sup> Published as R. Isaac Arama, *Akedat Yizhak*, Salonika, 1522.

<sup>18</sup> Written by R. Ephraim Lunshits, Lublin, 1602.

<sup>19</sup> Published as R. Moses Alshekh, *Torat Moshe*, Venice, 1600.

<sup>20</sup> Written by R. Eliezer Ashkenazi, Venice, 1583.

the people, as God, Blessed be He, has helped me with the *Ze'edah U-Re'edah*, and I have benefited men and women, so should I continue to further be a faithful interpreter between the people and the Holy One, of His Torah. Therefore, this book should be called *Melits Yosher* ["Intercessor before God"]. I make known before everyone that I am only a faithful interpreter of these books. Very few of the interpretations are mine, but I have examined and collected these books together expecting to benefit the people, since to engage in arrogance is a bad attribute, if I would not cite from whom the comments are derived."<sup>21</sup>

At the end of his introduction, Rabbi Jacob alludes to his role as interpreter between the readers and the authors in helping them understand the new ideas and interpretations found in works that are not readily accessible to many readers. He also suggests that this was a book to be studied at leisure or discussed with a friend. It is also different in this respect from the *Ze'edah U-Re'edah* that was more of a digest of traditional commentaries and interpretations of the text of the liturgical Bible, the parts that were included in the synagogue services.

"We have been instructed that through the Torah the person comes to be *humble* and to have *reverence* for the Holy One. Therefore, one should study Torah, in particular this book, which is composed in brief easy Yiddish, from books that are not easily available, are difficult, and written in lengthy language. He will find complete sermons inside that the person might read. They are on many Psalms in the Book of Psalms, and other preachers, which are well translated. *To benefit the people*. The people hear sermons in the synagogue and do not understand the sermon. It is given too quickly in the synagogue. In this book, he can read it slowly alone, in order to understand it. When he does not understand, he can talk with his friend about it. Therefore, I want to begin with the help of the Holy One, and the verse, '*give truth to Jacob*' [Mic 7.20], will be fulfilled by me, that I should not come to an error, but to encounter the truth as the books meant it. It should be fulfilled, '*no harm is in sight for Jacob*' [Num 23.21], with the help of the Holy One, as the verse says, '*command salvation for Jacob*' [Psalms, 44:5]. Therefore, I have called this book, MELITS YOSHER, because I am an interpreter between the people and the Holy One, to help them understand the holy Torah that he Holy One had given is completely just. It

<sup>21</sup> Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac of Yanova, *Melits Yosher*, Introduction, 2c.

is called a *Torah of Truth*, and whoever studies the words of the Torah, is an interpreter for the person in the next world.”<sup>22</sup>

The *Melits Yosher* was only printed twice. The first edition was printed in Lublin in 1622 and reprinted in Amsterdam in 1688.<sup>23</sup> No copies of the Lublin edition survived, and our only knowledge of this edition is from the reference to it in the approbation by the rabbi of the Ashkenazi community of Amsterdam.

There is no reason to assume that the second edition is not an accurate reprint of the Lublin edition. Rabbi Jacob was still mentioned as if he was still alive at the end of the introduction. This would indicate that it was reprinted as found, without deletions or additions.

Another unusual aspect of the original edition was that it was given an approbation by six of the most important rabbis in Poland in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> The norm was that Yiddish books were published without approbation, in contrast to Hebrew works that were more highly esteemed by the rabbinic elite. At the semiannual fair held in Lublin in the spring of 1623, an approbation was issued for the new book being published by Rabbi Jacob. It states:

“Since we have seen the great usefulness that comes from the book<sup>25</sup> that was authored by the esteemed noble Rabbi Jacob son of Rabbi Isaac of Yanova, the author of *Sefer Ze’edah U-Re’edah*. He has now called the book that he has authored, *Sefer ha-Maggid*, and in it explained and commented on all twenty-four [books of the Bible] in Yiddish, through the methods of *hibbur* and *drash*.<sup>26</sup> He has explained many new interpretations that will illumine and enrich the eyes of all who see them.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac of Yanova, *Melits Yosher*, Introduction, 2d.

<sup>23</sup> For bibliographical information on the *Melits Yosher*, cf. Lajb Fuks and Renata G. Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography in the Northern Netherlands 1585–1815: Historical Evaluation and Descriptive Bibliography*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1984–1987), here vol. 2, 390, no. 501.

<sup>24</sup> The second Amsterdam (1688) edition received approbations by four contemporary rabbis, including the Sephardic rabbi of Amsterdam.

<sup>25</sup> My assumption is that this refers to the *Melits Yosher*, published the year before.

<sup>26</sup> *Hibbur* is the style of translation found in the *Teitsch Humash*, the traditional Yiddish translation that interspersed short comments from Rashi’s commentary into the translations. *Drash* is the homiletical style of biblical interpretation.

<sup>27</sup> The text of the approbation is in Israel Halperin, *The Records of the Council of the Four Lands*, ed. Israel Bartal (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1990), 40–41, no. 108.

The rest of the approbation follows standard language which is essentially a copyright for the author and publisher forbidding the publication of the book by anyone else to protect their rights and interests.

What is most interesting is the list of six rabbis who signed the approbation. The list included many of the most important rabbis of the period: Samuel Eleazar, known as the *Maharsha* and son of Rabbi Judah ha-Levi, author of a major Talmudic commentary that is found in standard editions of the Talmud; secondly, Joel son of Rabbi Samuel, known as the *BaKh*, author of *Bayit Khadash* ("New Building"), a major Talmudic commentary that is found in standard editions of the Talmud; thirdly, Samuel son of Rabbi Meshulem Feibush, Rabbi of Przemysl; furthermore, Samson the son of Rabbi Isaac and head of the yeshivah in Lemberg; fifthly, Aaron Benjamin son of Hayyim Morawczyk, the Rabbi of Poznan, and, finally, Menahem Monish son of Rabbi Isaac Chajes, Rabbi of Vilna.

Rabbi Jacob mentions in his introduction to the *Melits Yosher* that he planned to write a commentary on the whole Bible. The *Melits Yosher* was the volume only on the *Humash*. What about the rest of the Bible? It has been generally assumed that the *Sefer ha-Maggid*, a commentary on the Prophets and Writings, first published in three volumes in Lublin between 1623 and 1627,<sup>28</sup> was the continuation of the *Melits Yosher* promised in the introduction. The language of the approbation clearly indicates that the *Sefer ha-Maggid* was expected to follow the style and method of the *Melits Yosher*. However, even a cursory comparison of the *Melits Yosher* and the *Sefer ha-Maggid* shows the dramatic differences between the two works. Where the *Melits Yosher* is a homiletical commentary on selected biblical verses, the *Sefer ha-Maggid* contains the Hebrew text, a Yiddish translation of the text with interspersed comments and the commentary of Rashi in Hebrew.

Chaim Lieberman found the answer to this conundrum in the publisher's introduction to the first volume of the *Sefer ha-Maggid* and an apologia at the end of the third volume. Rabbi Jacob died before he could complete the third volume. Lieberman suggests that he died shortly after the approbation was given, and before the first volume of the *Sefer ha-Maggid* was published. This is clear from the eulogistic comments by the publisher in the Hebrew Introduction to the first volume. There is also an apologia at the end of the

<sup>28</sup> The three volumes consisted of respectively Early Prophets (Joshua to Kings), Later Prophets, and Writings.

third volume that describes what happened. The publishers decided to scrap Rabbi Jacob's work and found an anonymous author who completely recast the work and created a work that had no relation to the work of Rabbi Jacob. Lieberman suggests that the publishers still put Rabbi Jacob's name on the title page and added the approbation hoping to sell the book on the strength of his fame as the author of the *Ze'edah U-Re'edah*.<sup>29</sup>

### 3. Isaac Sulkes and His Commentary on the Song of Songs

Forty years before Rabbi Jacob published the *Melits Yosher*, Isaac Sulkes published his commentary on the Song of Songs. In many respects, his work anticipated the perspective of the *Melits Yosher*. Nothing is known about Sulkes' dates or place of residence. A few comments in the introduction to his work give us some sense of his education and social status. The book was sufficiently popular that it was reprinted two more times.<sup>30</sup>

Sulkes presents himself as a simple Jew who has no pretensions to be a great scholar. He mentions that he is writing in Yiddish what he learned from his teachers. In other words, he is likely one of those people who once studied in a Yeshivah, but the demands of family or the need to earn a living caused him to leave his studies. The evidence of his work shows that he had a good command of the rabbinic texts and commentaries on the Song of Songs that were only available in Hebrew. In other words, he was probably the type of person who Rabbi Jacob foresaw as the target audience for his work. Sulkes writes about himself:

“Because the world runs this way, one finds many people who are mistaken. One gets up in the synagogue to lead the services because he thinks that he has a fine voice. He shouts like someone else does while plowing. Then there is another one who wants to think that he is the nicest and handsomest, and nobody can compare to him. He laughs very hard in a coarse way. Then there is the third one, who thinks that he is the smartest one in the world. The people know that he hurries very much. I might also be one of these three, because I took into my mind to walk among the lions and the

<sup>29</sup> Rabbi Chaim Lieberman, “Concerning the *Sefer ha-Maggid* and its Author,” in *Yidishe Shprakh* 26, no. 2 (1966): 33–38 (Yiddish); Rabbi Chaim Lieberman, “More on *Sefer ha-Maggid* and its Author,” in *Yidishe Shprakh* 29, no. 1–3 (1969/1970): 73–76 (Yiddish).

<sup>30</sup> Isaac Sulkes, *Shir ha-Shirim* (Cracow, 1579). The work was reprinted in Cracow in 1589 and 1599. For full bibliographical information see Shmeruk, “Appendix: Bibliography of Yiddish Books”, 83–84, no. 12; 88, no. 22; 99, no. 40.

large wild animals, who run with great speed on all fours, and tear to pieces the large rams who come against them to gore them with their horns. They cannot withstand their great power. How much more so I, since I am but a very small kid and my horns have not yet grown. How should I find the courage: I am faint hearted to go into the dwelling of the lions, that I should take some of their food or nourishment so that it does not harm me. Further, I should be ashamed. Perhaps it might not be good for me. So, I took some of the food from the lions. However, I remembered this, and it is certain that no harm is caused to the great lions and the wild animals, when one collects what they throw away and do not want. They do not worry about it when someone takes it. So too are the Yiddish books. They don't think at all about whoever writes them or makes them. The rabbis and important leaders are occupied with their casuistry and sharp-wittedness.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, they certainly would not consider it insolence for someone who writes in Yiddish what they had once learned from their teacher. I also believe that it is pleasing to the Almighty God to write such books in Yiddish that are useful and Godly. However, not Dietrich of Bern and Hildebrand and all the others; there are so many I cannot name them.<sup>32</sup> Those who spend time with them are certainly sinning. Therefore, someone who wants to be entertained, and also know about God's creation, should earnestly take hold of this book, since you will find in it many kinds of stories and parables. He will also know how to diligently translate this holy book, Song of Songs, along with its *hibbur*. Therefore, dear gentlemen, have some patience with me, and do not assign any blame to me. Every rabbi or *haver* who has the ability to study the Talmud or the *commentaries* on Song of Songs has a *hibbur*. However, what should the ordinary people do? They spend their time providing sustenance and could not study when they wanted to. Particularly now, when because of our many sins, money is very expensive, and the people must have much of it for taxes and other expenses. He can barely praise God with proper intention,

<sup>31</sup> The terms in Hebrew are *Pilpulim* and *Harifut*. These are modes of Talmud study popular at that time.

<sup>32</sup> Dietrich of Bern and Hildebrand were the heroes of Christian chivalric romances that were popular in Germany. Concerning this genre of literature and its relation to Yiddish literature see Baumgarten, *Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature*, 128–162. Paulus Fagius, in the introduction to his Yiddish *Humash*, published in Konstanz in 1544, n. p., mentions Dietrich of Bern and Hildebrand as works read by Jews instead of religious books: “This book is likewise good for wives and young women who all know well how to read Yiddish, but who pass their time by reading worthless books such as Dietrich von Bern, Hildebrand and others like them which are nothing but lies and invented things. These wives and young women could read this *Humash* which is nothing but pure truth.” Very similar comments mentioning Dietrich of Bern and Hildebrand in the same context can be found in a number of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Yiddish religious works.

not to mention that he does not have the time to sit over the Song of Songs, or that he should study other books. Therefore, I took this upon myself, so that one might come to the Yiddish Song of Songs and will not need much exertion for it and could read it through with ease. He will quickly understand it all properly and informatively, including boys or girls, woman, or man, as long as they can read Yiddish. I wrote this and made it for the sake of heaven. I ask You, God, do not let me be despised in the eyes of people, since someone must know very much before one can properly do this. How much more so, I who am lowly, and does not know much, and because of the many sins, much time is demanded from my study. Therefore, whoever will judge me, should do so positively and not destroy my book. You should be worthy to enter the Holy Land, together with your wife and children. This is desired by the one who would gladly be without shame and without sin. Thus, you will sincerely buy the book, the Song of Songs. God willing, I will also publish the book of Job in Yiddish.”<sup>33</sup>

Sulkes writes in his introduction that he has taken the liberty to write his book because the great scholars are too busy with their own work to be concerned with the spiritual needs of ordinary people. Though he may not be qualified, he has tried to fill the need for works aimed at a more popular audience.

At the same time, Sulkes includes a nice parable about a small shopkeeper and the nobility who occasionally venture into the small shop and might find something of value. His point, which is also found in the writings of other authors of early modern Yiddish works, is that even scholars and important people can find something of spiritual value in Yiddish works.<sup>34</sup> He writes:

“Dear gentlemen, I see that some are upset with me and have subdued my nonsense, because I have stepped into their office. The great masters are full of Torah and sit over their books day and night. However, I the pauper can only go over it occasionally. They can make books through which many can fulfill their obligations [*yotze*]. However, I barely know enough to make the blessing over bread [*ha-motzi*].<sup>35</sup> Therefore, I should be ashamed, to undertake such things. However, you should certainly believe me that the world must have such things. Not everybody can run into an expensive shop to buy gold, silver, velvet and silk. One must

<sup>33</sup> Sulkes, *Shir ha-Shirim*, introduction, n. p. There is no evidence that the book on Job was ever published.

<sup>34</sup> This is a theme found in the introductions of a number of early modern Yiddish works relating to the Bible. My monograph on these works that is nearing completion has examples and more details.

<sup>35</sup> This is a pun and the two terms rhyme.

have many other things in the house. There are many more peasants than noblemen, so I can make my thing, [and write my book]. Therefore, one must also have small shopkeepers who can sell things for the money that ordinary people have. The small shopkeepers have all the things that they ask for. All the shopkeepers can testify about this and sell everyone what they want to have. When a nobleman does come to buy a mirror for his wife or a whistle for his child, he can also freely find it in his shop. The ordinary man cannot do this. When he comes to the rich merchant, he cannot buy anything that he would like from him with the money he has. It is all too expensive for him and above his means. However, at the small shopkeeper he finds everything he needs. Therefore, I have also dared and set up a small shop for the ordinary people and for the women. Let them come to the shop and look around. They will find many things that are found in our sacred books. I have patched it all together in the Song of Songs. I ask every pious person, if they will come across a mistake, where I made a mistake or wrote something wrong, he should not be upset with me, as I did not intend it. He should correct it and explain it. Thus, he will be worthy to see the Messiah, who is the son of Peretz.<sup>36</sup> He should speedily lead us to the land of Israel, our inheritance. Isaac Sulkes of Cracow asks and desires this.”<sup>37</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The evidence of the *Melits Yosher* and Isaac Sulkes’ *Shir ha-Shirim* raises serious questions about the “conventional wisdom” regarding the early modern audience for Yiddish literature and their lack of Jewish knowledge. It is self-evident to anyone who is familiar with talmudic, midrashic and other Jewish religious texts and ideas that early modern Yiddish texts are full of references and allusions to Jewish religious ideas and teachings.

For whom did the authors fill their works with these materials? It must be assumed that they believed that their audience would have at least had some familiarity with these ideas and stories. Isaac Sulkes’ suggestion that these works could appeal to a variety of audiences must be seriously considered. The study of the religious dimension of early modern Yiddish literature has been neglected by much of the previous scholarship. This study is a chapter in an ongoing project devoted to this subject.

<sup>36</sup> Peretz was the son of Judah, who was the ancestor of David, who was the ancestor of the Messiah.

<sup>37</sup> Sulkes, *Shir ha-Shirim*, Introduction.



## Appendix: Introduction to the “*Sefer Melits Yosher*”

### Translator’s note:

The translation is my own. The first page is the title page; the introduction begins on the second page.

### SEFER MELITS YOSHER

These things were taken from many precious books and they are, *Akedah*, *Alsheikh*, *Keli Hemdah*, *Kely Yakar*, *Divrey Shalom*, *Tseror ha-Mor*, *Ma’sey Adonai*, and were translated into the language of Ashkenas, by the author of the *Ze’edah U- Re’edah*, by the true scholar, the pious, our teacher, Rabbi Jacob, son of Rabbi Isaac, of the Rabbino family, who was worthy, and benefited the public.

Now has been added to them, pleasant and sweet interpretations, things that reconcile the heart, from the book *Siftey Cohen* on the Torah, and from *Sefer Ma’sey Adonai*, in the portion of *ve-Zot ha-Berakhah*, that was not found in the earlier authorities. The merit of the many depends on them, and “*many of the people of the land professed to be Jews*” [Esth 8.17], since there are found in this work, explanations and teachings that expand the heart of the person and arouses him to study it.

This has been brought into print again, in order to benefit the public, by the printer and by Rabbi Jacob, son of Rabbi Jacob Segal of the Wimpfe family.

IN AMSTERDAM In the year “my heart was BLAMELESS ... when I did this” [Gen 20.5], in the small counting.<sup>38</sup> In the house and command of the generous Moses Kosman, son of the wealthy dignitary, Rabbi Elijah, may he live long, Emrich.

### Introduction.

This introduction will speak about how important the person is through the Torah. One may read them, since there are many teachings with intentions inside. THE TEACHINGS OF THE LORD IS PERFECT, RENEWING LIFE [Ps 19.8]. It is not anything else in the world that brings the soul to its first

<sup>38</sup> The gematria of the highlighted word equals 488 which is the year 1688.

state, but the Torah that brings the person under the Throne of Glory. It is the evil inclination that brings the person to all transgressions, so that he cannot come to the world to Come. Therefore, the Torah was given, which counteracts the evil inclination.

This has awakened me to make books in Yiddish to benefit the public, so that the people should not say: we do not have books, since we do not understand Hebrew. Therefore, I have selected from important books and have translated it into Yiddish. I did not want to boast, so my interpretations are few. Nonetheless, I have benefited the public. Concerning this, the prophet Isaiah said, "*Seek the Lord while He can be found, call to Him while He is near*" [Isa 55.6]. Seek God when he can be found, call to Him when He is near. One can ask here. Why does it say "seek" twice, since it means seek, and call to him means call? This is all one. Put aside one of them. Write "*seek Him*" and put aside, call him. One can further ask, write "*when He can be found*," when He can be found, and put aside, "*when He is near*." They all mean the same thing.

The explanation is that the prophet shows us that when someone gets up to preach divine things, that is to say, the Torah, he wants to preach it as it is found. That is to say, he found the same sermon in books, and he gets up to preach. The sermon is not to be praised. Why, "*call to Him when He is near*." That is to say, each person will be able to read it when he will come close to it, in the book from which he took it. Furthermore, "*Seek the Lord while He can be found*." When somebody wants to preach what he found, that is to say, he found this in books and he gets up to preach. "*Call to Him while He is near*." He should call the sermon and give it a name of who is close to it. That is to say, he should say in which book he found it, in the name of the one who said it. Thus, the sermon is not so bad. Furthermore, where He can be found; one wants to preach as he found it in the books. "*Call to Him while He is near*." He should see that the sermon at least has a purpose. Everyone can read it, if they only come close to it. This the meaning of, "*Call to Him while He is near*." Whoever comes to it should be able to read it.

This is when someone makes something in a language that everyone can understand. In these generations, in the majority of lands this is the language of Ashkenas. Therefore, it is just to make everything in Yiddish. In particular, since I have seen the book, *Ze'edah U-Re'edah*, that is in Yiddish and everyone desires to learn from it. Therefore, it has been printed many times more

than other important books, because it is in Yiddish. There is very little study, because of our sins, since not everybody understands difficult terms. When one already wants to study, he can't because of difficulties earning a living, in particular, those who were yeshivah students before they married. When they take a wife, they throw away the Torah and become an ignoramus. When he gets old, he has regret. As soon as he sees a religious book in Yiddish, he buys it and reminds himself, let me also study Torah. He knows well that Torah study is the priority.

The *Sefer Ikkarim* asks a question in the third treatise [*ma'mar*]. Why is it not written, “and it was good” when the person was created? It is written, “and it was good” regarding wild and domestic animals and all creatures when they were created. The explanation is that as soon as the animals were created, their creation was completed and the purpose for which they were created, and nothing concerned them. Therefore, it is written, it was good concerning the animals, because their creation was completed. However, with regard to the person, when he was created, his creation was not completed. His creation is completed when he studies Torah. This is the purpose of the person, for which the Holy One created him, that he should study Torah.

This Torah is the purpose. It causes that the person will complete the creation of his body and also his soul, as the verse says, “*The teachings of the Lord is perfect, renewing life*” [Ps 19.8]. The Torah is whole, it refreshes the soul, and the body. Since the person has three parts, first the body, second is the soul, and the third is the body together with the soul, and they were joined and stay together, therefore the Torah is also in three parts, as the verse says, “*He issued His commands to Jacob, His statements and rules to Israel*” [Ps 147.19]. –

Therefore, “it was good” was not said when the person was created, because the person was not yet completely created, but when he studies Torah, he is completely created. Therefore, the Torah is called good, as the verse says, “*For I have given you good instruction; do not forsake my teaching*” [Prov 4.2]. That is to say, when the person studies Torah, his creation is completed. Thus, it is just to say good, because his creation is complete. Therefore, the person should study Torah and have thoughts to study. Concerning this, King David, of blessed memory, said in Psalms, and began the Book of Psalms with this. “*Rather the Torah of the Lord is his delight*” [Ps 1.2]. But his desire is in the Torah of the Lord.

That is to say, when the desire to study in his heart is for the sake of heaven, then God will give him that he will be worthy that, “*he recites*<sup>39</sup> *the Torah day and night*” [Ps 1.2]. That he will have time to study day and night. ...

Therefore, when the person studies Torah, the Holy One rests near him, as the sage said, the Holy One rests in the four ells where Torah is studied.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, as soon as the soul sees the *Shekhinah* in the four ells of the person, it remains at peace within the body. Therefore, one should study Torah. Thus, his soul has rest in this world and brings the person after his death to heaven, as the verse says, “*the Torah of the Lord is perfect, renewing the soul*” [Ps 19.8]. This causes that his soul has an eternal existence above. Therefore, the Torah is called *good*. That is to say, the creation of [the soul] is separate from the person and happens first. Afterwards, it is called, *because it is good*, but at the initial creation of Adam it was not said, *because it is good*. [...]

Therefore, David said: since the commandments that we should not do are many more than the commandments that one should do, and should one not receive a reward for the commandments that one should not do, the essential principle of the Torah would be abrogated, heaven forbid. However, it is certain that one receives a reward when one sits still for the sake of heaven, that he will not commit any transgressions. It is heard when a person begins to fulfill a commandment or has a thought to fulfill a commandment or begins to study, even when he has not completed it, he receives a reward as if he has completed the commandment. Therefore, the person should see to think about studying Torah, particularly on the Sabbath when he does not work, he should study then.

Since I have seen that many people desire to study and have desired from me that they would gladly have a commentary on the *Twenty-four* [books of the Bible] in Yiddish, with midrashim, like the *Ze’edah U-Re’edah* is on the Huma. Thus, I have collected more midrashim and sermons for each Sabbath,

<sup>39</sup> The term “*yehege*” is translated normally as studies. However, as the note on this word in the New Jewish Publication Society of America Tanakh translation indicates, the literal meaning of this term can mean utter or recite. The author of the *Melits Yosher* sometimes uses the term with that literal meaning. Thus, I have translated it in this manner.

<sup>40</sup> A conflation of two statements in the Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot*, 8a.

from *Kely Hemdah*,<sup>41</sup> *Divrey Shalom*,<sup>42</sup> *Akedah*,<sup>43</sup> *Kely Yakar*,<sup>44</sup> *Alsheikh*,<sup>45</sup> and *Ma'sey Adonai*,<sup>46</sup> all of them briefly translated. I do not want to boast with the commentaries that others have made, since mine are very few. Thus, I am only an interpreter and want to *benefit* the people, as God, Blessed be He, has helped me with the *Ze'edah U-Re'edah*, and I have benefited men and women, so should I continue to further be a faithful interpreter between the people and the Holy One, of His Torah. Therefore, this book should be called *Melits Yosher* [Faithful Interpreter]. I make known before everyone that I am only a faithful interpreter of these books. Very few of the interpretations are mine, but I have examined and collected these books together expecting to benefit the people, since to engage in arrogance is a bad attribute, if I would not cite from whom the comments are derived. *Humility*, to be humble is the best attribute, and with the attribute of humility one who studies Torah is worthy, as the sages say, "it clothes him with humility and reverence."<sup>47</sup> That is to say, the one who studies Torah is worthy to be humble and reverent.

Concerning this the sages said that the Torah clothes him in humility and reverence, because the one who studies Torah for the sake of heaven, the Holy One joins Himself to him. Therefore, he is humble and lowly. Therefore, it is written concerning Moses, "*Moses was a very humble man*" [Num 12.3]. Moses held himself to be very humble until he separated from his wife, because the *Shekhinah* was joined to him. Moses did not have relations with his wife, because no person in the world has relations with his wife when any other creature in the world is present. *How much more so*, in the presence of the *Shekhinah* that was joined to Moses. Therefore, he was humble because the *Shekhinah* was with him. The *reverence* [*Yirah*] also came upon him because he studied Torah and saw in it the *Account of Creation* [*Ma'sey Bereshit*], and miracles and wonders. Then he became awestruck before the Holy One, and when he was joined to the Holy One, awe came upon him even more.[...]

<sup>41</sup> R. Samuel Laniado, *Kely Hemdah*, Venice, 1594–1596.

<sup>42</sup> R. Isaac Adarbi, *Divrey Shalom*, Salonika, 1580.

<sup>43</sup> R. Isaac Arama, *Akedat Yitskhak*, Salonika, 1522.

<sup>44</sup> R. Ephraim Lunshits, *Kely Yakar*, Lublin, 1602.

<sup>45</sup> R. Moses Alshekh, *Torat Moshe*, Venice, 1600.

<sup>46</sup> R. Eliezer Ashkenazi, *Ma'sey Adonai*, Venice, 1583.

<sup>47</sup> Babylonian Talmud, M. Avot, 6.1.

We have been instructed that through the Torah the person comes to be *humble* and to have *reverence* for the Holy One. Therefore, one should study Torah, in particular this book, which is composed in brief easy Yiddish, from books that are not easily available, are difficult, and written in lengthy language. He will find complete sermons inside that the person might read. They are on many Psalms in the Book of Psalms, and other preachers, which are well translated. *To benefit the people.* The people hear sermons in the synagogue and do not understand the sermon. It is given too quickly in the synagogue. In this book, he can read it slowly alone, in order to understand it. When he does not understand, he can talk with his friend about it. Therefore, I want to begin with the help of the Holy One, and the verse, “*give truth to Jacob*” [Mic 7.20], will be fulfilled by me, that I should not come to an error, but to encounter the truth as the books meant it. It should be fulfilled, “*no harm is in sight for Jacob*” [Num 23.21], with the help of the Holy One, as the verse says, “*command salvation for Jacob*” [Ps 44.5]. Therefore, I have called this book, *MELITS YOSHER*, because I am an interpreter between the people and the Holy One, to help them understand the holy Torah that the Holy One had given is completely just. It is called a *Torah of Truth*, and whoever studies the words of the Torah, it is an interpreter for the person in the next world.

“*LET THE NAME OF THE LORD BE BLESSED NOW AND FOREVER*” [Ps 113.2].

“*HE GIVES STRENGTH TO THE WEARY, FRESH VIGOR TO THE SPENT*” [Isa 40.29].

SO PETITIONS, THE HUMBLE, JACOB, SON OF MY MASTER AND FATHER, RABBI ISAAC, OF BLESSED MEMORY, RABBINO, OF THE HOLY COMMUNITY OF YANOVA.