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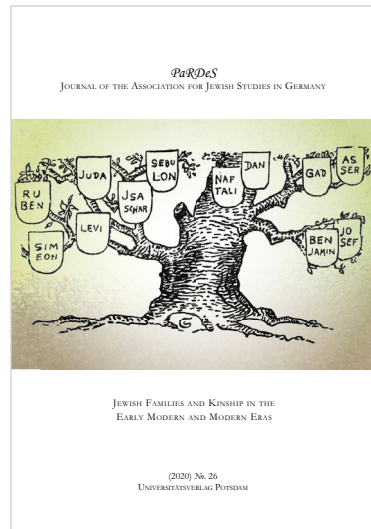
Jewish Families and Kinship in the Early Modern and Modern Eras

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Rachel Rojanski, *Yiddish in Israel: A History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 338 p., \$ 40.

On March 13, 1952, the Supreme Council for Culture assembled in the young State of Israel held its first meeting. Headed by Ben-Zion Dinur, a historian and minister in the newly established state, the council was debating all cultural matters, shaping the way the state should be molded. In her book *Yiddish in Israel*, Rachel Rojanski pays close attention to this council's work, namely to its engagement with language. Excavating the minutes of the council Rojanski focuses on a divide that began in the first meeting: should there be a push to legislate Hebrew as the official language of state and culture, passing a law to enshrine Hebrew as *the* language of the state, or would it be enough to divert preferential funds to cultural activity in Hebrew, over other languages?

This debate might sound familiar, and that is since this debate has been ongoing, if not undecided. Just recently, the 2018 nation state law declared Hebrew the official language of Israel, the first time such a law has passed. This law changed the stipulation of the British mandatory charter that defined Hebrew, Arabic, and English as the languages of Palestine. But in the interim, between 1922 and 2018, no language law was officially passed, thus *Yiddish in Israel* charts the modes in which the State of Israel, in many ways, regarded, promoted, and curtailed cultural activity in Yiddish, alongside an ongoing push to establish Hebrew as the language of the land.

As with the nation state law, where Arabic was demoted to bolster Hebrew, in the early years of the State of Israel officials and functionaries of all kinds and ranks were trying to parse their contradictory attitudes towards Yiddish. As Rojanski exemplifies in a wide array of instances, there was a unique conundrum that Yiddish posed for the State of Israel: it was the language of the near past for many citizens of the state, and also, and perhaps more importantly for the discussion, it was a language of many in the governing circles and cultural elite of the state, from David Ben-Gurion and down.

Anyone well versed in the history of Israeli policy making could tell the stories of how the state of Israel more often than not happens upon reality rather than shape it via policy. Rojanski's book shows how the case of Yiddish was no different: per Rojanski there was no sweeping policy of downright forceful disavowal of Yiddish, despite a pervasive common belief that such policy did exist, but rather clusters of practices that were to limit Yiddish while still allowing it to exist in designated enclaves. *Yiddish in Israel* examines case studies from theater, both popular and highbrow, from the press, both daily and literary journals, as well as instances in the academia and literary groups. Most of the chapters deal with the first twenty years of the state, roughly 1948–1965. The array of Yiddish culture interacting with state power, and the push and pull of the state in finding permissible avenues for non-Hebrew culture are the nexus of the book. In that sense, what binds this book together are the Yiddish case studies, but it is tempting to think how this book could be renamed, reversed: Israel and Yiddish. This is not to say that the discussions of Yiddish life and culture are not fascinating, but to offer this book as a contemplation of Zionism, state power, and Hebrew culture vis à vis Yiddish.

However, this contemplation of this book falls short in one fundamental tenant of Yiddish as the immigrant language of the cultural elite, and that is the idea of “immigrating home.” Rojanski invokes this clashing term several times, and it resonates well with the idea that for many of the activists in the young state, cultural and others, Yiddish embodied a contradictory energy: it was their language, more so than Hebrew ever was, and yet, to continue using it creatively was less than desirable. The book explores this line being towed time and again: the moments in which both Hebrew and Yiddish are part of cultural life, where they do not overtly clash, but rather navigate shifting fault lines. The characters in this book, from Ben-Gurion to journalist Mordekhai Tsanin, from literary scholar Dov Sadan to poet Itsik Manger, and many more, are navigating the tensions of their own agency. The language of the cultural milieu is anxiously debated, the production of culture in Yiddish both necessary and problematic, desirable and threatening.

Thus, for example, the case of *Di goldene keyt*, the long-lived literary journal. As Rojanski sees it, *Di goldene keyt* was supported and allowed to flourish in a clearly delineated role so as to “bolster Israel's status as the world center of Jewish culture, which, in turn, allowed it to spread its cultural hegemony

across the Jewish world” (155). Yiddish was part of this story, as Rojanski sees it, definitely. But her reading of the journal is focused less on the content of the volumes, and more on the role the establishment saw in founding a journal so as to help famous Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever (1913–2010) find footing in the land, and in turn place Israel as a center of Jewish culture. Thus, the story of the journal, told many times in the past, is told in this book from a different angle, more than ever focused on state institutions, and less on the literary aspect of the journal.

When reading the chapter on *Di goldene keyt* I was drawn to think of it in light of another journal, *Heym*, edited by Kadia Molodowsky (1894–1975), another great Yiddish poet. Thinking of the two journals together raises fundamental questions, that go beyond state power. Molodowsky, like Sutzkever, was lobbied to immigrate to Israel. Upon her arrival she too was integrated into institutions of the labor movement and was to publish a Yiddish language journal for women workers under the auspices of the Women’s Laborer Movement. This short-lived Yiddish publication, only two years compared to decades of *Di goldene keyt*, could serve as an entry point into a discussion of what made one journal thrive while one did not: closer readings of *Di goldene keyt* could show just how the story is more than about power centers in the young state using Yiddish for its means.

But writing a book is an act of picking and choosing, of using a focal lens to highlight moments of cultural significance, in this case of the role Yiddish had, and still has, in the 72 years of the state. This is a rare book, a history of Yiddish in Israel post-1948, and an important complement to studies such as Yael Chaver’s *What Must Be Forgotten* (2004) as well as other books, on pre-statehood language politics in Palestine, focused more or less on Yiddish. *Yiddish in Israel* paints a wide canvas of the saga of Yiddish in Israel, through impressive intellectual footwork (particularly in the chapter on the Yiddish press), delving into both untold stories of Yiddish in Israel, as well as previously known stories that are told anew through extensive archival work. As such, the book becomes an entryway into Yiddish and the state: the range of discussions in this book and the archival work make it a fantastic addition to Israel studies and Yiddish studies, and important to all who are thinking of the role language plays in nation building.

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