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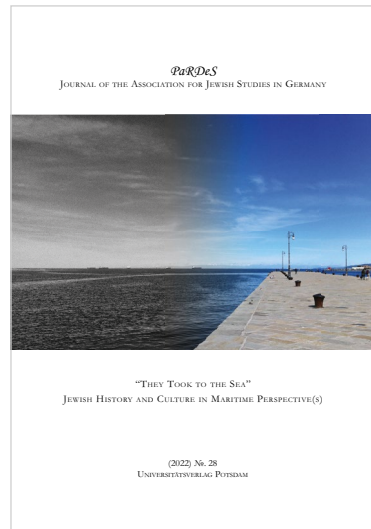
### **“They Took to the Sea”: Jewish History and Culture in Maritime Perspective(s)**

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**Marina Zilbergerts, *The Yeshiva and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022), 184 pp., \$ 35.00.**

Marina Zilbergerts's *The Yeshiva and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature* undertakes an ambitious task: to chart anew the emergence of modern Hebrew literature in Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century. Hebrew literature was informed, the author suggests, by three main forces: the Jewish *Haskalah*; Russian intellectual trends of the time; and elite rabbinic culture. Whereas the crucial role played by the Jewish *Haskalah* and the Hebrew writing associated with it in the formation of modern Hebrew literature has been dealt with at length, far less has been written on the other two.

The book is a welcome addition to the handful of volumes that probe in detail the Russian intellectual context in which Hebrew literature was written and furthers our understanding of the indebtedness of Hebrew writers to nihilist critics and to their emphasis on pragmatism and utility. Yet, Zilbergerts' greatest innovation lies in taking into consideration a third force: the new model of religious learning embodied in the modern *yeshiva*, which emerged in the nineteenth century. The latter had an indelible impact on how Hebrew writers – many of whom attended such *yeshivas* – perceived and conceived of literature.

At the center of the story lies the struggle of Hebrew writers with the notion of literature and, more specifically, with the value of the literary pursuit and textuality. The modern *yeshiva* underscored the importance of engagement with religious texts – particularly the *Talmud* – for their own sake, “*Torah lishma*,” certainly for textual pleasure but, more importantly, as a tool for moral improvement as well as out of a belief that reality itself could be affected by such a textual engagement. This conception of textuality informed the literature of the *Haskalah* both in form and in content: its textual practices were borrowed from the study of the *Talmud*, the book suggests, as well as its belief in the redemptive power of literature, for individuals and collectives alike. Yet, under the influence of Russian critics who turned to pragmatism and utility, coupled with their own personal experience as members of the religious scholarly elite, Hebrew writers came to doubt the value of literature: Can literature truly shape reality? Is there an inherent value in the engagement with texts for their own sake? Or, on the contrary,

are such texts completely removed from reality? Moreover, does such an engagement hamper one's ability to face reality and its tribulations? These questions informed Hebrew writing from the 1860s through the 1880s, leading writers to harshly censure the literary pursuit and textual practices as embodied by the *yeshiva*. The last decade of the nineteenth century, however, saw a renewed investment in textuality, when writers came to conceive the engagement with traditional texts as a source of Jewish cultural vitality. With this the foundation of modern Hebrew literature, the book implies, has been secured.

The chapters of the book are divided into two divisions. The first two chapters set the historical trajectory in motion. Chapter One traces the emergence of the *yeshiva* movement and its ideology, highlighting the textual practices at the center of its pedagogy. As elitist and seclusive, the *yeshiva* set the study of the *Talmud* as removed from practical considerations and from concerns of everyday life. The reading strategies instilled by the *yeshiva* shaped and formed the reading strategies of writers who attended it, even when they switched their attention to non-religious works. Chapter Two shifts our attention to the emergence of nihilism as a major trend in Russian intellectual life. Boldly, whereas the scholarship of Hebrew literature focuses exclusively on Jewish experience (and, more particularly, on the experience of Hebrew male writers), the chapter points at the kinship between the experience of the Jewish Rabbinic and Russian-Christian religious intelligentsias. Members of both intelligentsias grew disappointed with their respective religious education and suffered economic hardship which they attributed to their education. Most importantly, both were formed intellectually by the strategies employed in reading religious texts in seminaries and *yeshivas* alike. No wonder, then, that Hebrew writers found resonance in the writing of former seminarians, who were among the most influential nihilist figures.

Chapter Three serves as a transition, exploring the introduction of key notions of Russian nihilist criticism into Hebrew letters through the writings of the brothers-turned-literary-critics Avraham Uri and Yitzhak Aizik Kovner. Adopting the harsh censure of literature from the Russian context, they sought to purge Hebrew letters from the useless textual practices of rabbinic hermeneutic, and in face of the social and economic plight of Jews in Russia, they promoted realism as a tool for both modeling reality and for affecting social and economic changes.

The final three chapters examine literary works of three key figures of the emergence of modern Hebrew literature. Chapter Four looks at Moshe Leib Lilienblum's autobiography *The Sins of Youth*, and rather than as a story of loss of faith in god and a break from the Jewish tradition – as it has been commonly read –, Zilbergerts reads it as a drama of loss of faith in the value of literary pursuit. It further notes the author's circular logics, in which the rejection of literature is articulated by means of literature as well as his overall ambivalence towards Hebrew letters: Lilienblum insists on his disillusionment with traditional textuality, yet simultaneously manifests continuous attraction to *Talmudic* textual practices. Chapters Five and Six focus on Micha Yosef Berdichevsky and Hayim Nachman Bialik, both of whom attended the Volozhin Yeshiva, a center of the modern *yeshiva* movement. Chapter Five reads Berdichevsky's fiction in its exploration of dangerous textuality: Obsessive engagement with texts undercuts the economic alongside erotic prospects of Berdichevsky's protagonists, as well as their very health. In Bialik's poetry, however, dealt with in Chapter Six, the book sees a shift and a move away from the condemnation of textuality in the name of utility. In recasting the study of the *Talmud* as a source of literary creativity, Bialik once again allowed writers to reassert anew the value of literature.

*The Yeshiva and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature* is clearly and persuasively written, with a great gist. Yet, its endeavor to retell the history of the emergence of modern Hebrew literature falters and is undercut by quite a number of factual errors, unwarranted assertions, and contentious interpretations. A handful of examples must suffice here. On its first page, the book proclaims that, during the nineteenth century, one would have been hard pressed to imagine Hebrew as “a suitable vehicle for imaginative literature” (p. 1), thus eliding an entire history of imaginative Hebrew writing and, in particular, the great popularity of religious Hebrew fiction, the best-known example of which is *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (first printed in 1814/15). Or, to claim that Yiddish was, “the one language universally spoken among Jews in Europe” (p. 5) awkwardly elides the languages and cultures not only of Jews in southern Europe and the Balkan but also of many in England, the South of France, and the Netherlands; it also obscures the fact that even in the realms under the rule of the Russian Empire not all Jews spoke Yiddish. Along similar lines, Ahad Ha-Am could not have declined to publish Bialik's “El ha-tzipor” in his journal *Ha-Shilo'ah* in 1891, notwithstanding

what he actually thought of the poem (p. 131), because the journal first came into existence five years later, in 1896. Likewise, Ahad Ha-Am's translation of Pinsker's *Auto-Emancipation* into Hebrew could not have turned the text into the political manifesto of Russia's early Zionists (p. 139), because it was first published only in 1921, when Zionism in Russia had reached its final moment; indeed, it is quite likely that Zionists accessed the book in its original German, Yiddish translation, or one of the two earlier translations into Hebrew. A more careful redaction of the manuscript could have eliminated many of these errors.

Unfortunately, all this limits the validity of the argument put forward in the book. Whereas the book promises to open up new historical vestiges, it is still anchored in old paradigms that have been challenged by now. Most conspicuously, it conflates modern Hebrew literature writ large and the Hebrew writing in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century and, moreover, with a small cadre of *yeshiva* graduates. Whereas the latter remain, no doubt, at the center of the modern Hebrew canon, literary historians have always viewed the emergence of modern Hebrew literature within much wider geographical, temporal, social, and textual horizons (and recent scholars have pushed these horizons even further). Why should one, then, constrain their purview?

The book appears to flatten the complex social and economic reality under examination in other respects as well. It thus reduplicates the claim that a chasm existed between modern Hebrew literature and traditional religious literature (which it curiously limits to the language of law, prayer, and ritual). Yet, the division between the two was not as clear cut. Not only did many writers of modern Hebrew letters remain observant Jews, but many of its avid readers were public religious figures. Whereas, at times, the engagement with secular literature could indeed lead to exclusion and banishment, this was by no means universally so. Indeed, the book itself brings evidence that elite *yeshivas* were at the center of the reading and writing what we deem today to be "secular" Hebrew letters. In what sense, then, can one clearly demarcate the boundaries between the "secular" and the "religious"?

Last, given the central place hailed for the social and economic conditions underlying the emergence of "modern Hebrew literature," *The Yeshiva and the Rise of Modern Hebrew Literature* contains surprisingly little discussion of these conditions. In fact, the book explores in detail just one aspect of these

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conditions, the arranged marriage of members of the rabbinic scholarly elite. Important as this may have been to the self-perception of the Hebrew writers under discussion, nothing is said of the vast demographic, social, and economic transformations of Jewish life in the Russian Empire in general during the period that surely were as – if not more – crucial in shaping Hebrew writing and reading, by man and women alike: the rapid growth of the Jewish population, mass migration, urbanization, changing employment patterns, pauperization, and more. Without these, one can hardly understand what writing and reading Hebrew were at the time.

That being said, however, the book does chart what I believe would prove to be a fruitful path for future research. In particular, we should turn our effort to view the life of Hebrew letters within wider socio-economic and textual frameworks, both of Jewish life and of the societies in which Jews were residing.

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