

The Task of the Jewish Translator: A Valedictory Address

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THERE IS NOTHING MORE EXALTED than the task of the Jewish translator. Little children are inducted into the secrets of Sinai by the rote repetition of Torah-and-*taytsh*: *VAYOYMER*, *un er hot gezogt*, *ADOYSHEM*, *got*, *EL MOYSHE*, *tsu Moyshe*, *LEYMER*, *azoy tsu zogn*. In the beginning was not the word, but the word as mediated by the professional translator.

There is nothing more tedious and thankless than the task of the Jewish translator. Since your average Jewish author was multilingual, possessing as many as three internal languages, the translator must be a polyglot, possessing at least one external language to boot. The author gets all the glory. The translator gets all the blame.¹

Prooftexts launched the field of Jewish literary history, a new cross-discipline, based on a bold theory of translation. The newness of it was already evident in the choice of name. Whoever invented the word “prooftext”—Judah Goldin, perhaps, or Shalom Spiegel—must have been a genius, because it captures both the denotative meaning of the Aramaic *asmakhta* and the connotative stodginess of a technical term; it is a word that only scholars would use. By turning “prooftext” into a plural, however difficult it is to pronounce, and by adopting it as the title of a new journal, we, the eight founding editors,² added two new levels of meaning. We wished: (1) to signify a late-twentieth-century concern with issues of textuality; and (2) to underscore that this modern critical agenda was perfectly compatible with a predilection for hermeneutics and midrash. If our journal succeeded, then not only

would an obscure term of Judaic “translatese” have become mainstreamed, but we would also have signaled the marriage of the modern with the classical, the renegotiation of modernity in light of our ancient and medieval heritage. Of course, things did not work out quite the way we planned. People asked whether the journal had something to do with proofreading. Local journalists who picked up the story of our founding complained that they had never heard of such a word; this, despite the translation that we so helpfully provided on the inside cover: “PROOFTEXTS: The scriptural passages used by the Rabbis to legitimate a new interpretation.”

The word “prooftext” had a further, hidden advantage in that it is English-specific; it does not readily translate into another European language. Were *le prooftext* ever to make it into French parlance, for example, it would sound as exotic as *asmakhta* does to the Hebrew ear. English was both our medium and our message; both our target audience and our teleology. English, for us, meant the road to emancipation. English was also our state of exile. And English may someday prove to be our national liberation.

Twenty-five years ago, when Jewish studies was still the province of a few elite schools, there was no English-language journal in which to publish a serious scholarly article on Jewish-in-Jewish literature. The field of Jewish literary history did not yet exist. At best, one could publish an occasional essay on Shylock, on Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*, on Fagin, on Leopold Bloom—that is, on the image of the Jew in this literature or that. The critical writing on I. B. Singer was all done by people who read no Yiddish. The scope of Hebrew literature was defined by Robert Alter’s reading habits. Holocaust literature consisted of what Lawrence Langer found in Widener Library shelved under the rubric of World War II. In the popular mind, Jewish was inherently funny, as in a button from the sixties that read “Proust Is a Yenta.”

So to enter the closed world of English as a scholar of Jewish literary texts was nothing less than an act of emancipation. And, to up the ante, we insisted on adopting the English literary essay—as opposed to the German scholarly monograph—as our model. Readability, we cried, *über alles!* We delighted in puns, epigraphs, and pithy formulations. We aimed at a style that was free of jargon. We wrote initially for one another; an essay of interest to all the editors was deemed an

essay fit to publish. Coming as I did with a Yiddish mindset, my own writing style tended to be cryptic and cramped. *Prooftexts* taught me how to think English.

The first principle of emancipation for Alan Mintz and me was aesthetic. We were determined to make *Prooftexts* the most beautiful English-language journal in the field of Judaica. For Alan, this meant that the journal should be judged by its cover. During our first eighteen years, Alan oversaw the choice and color of our original covers, designed by a new generation of Jewish graphic artists. Since our contribution to the renaissance of Jewish graphic art has yet to be acknowledged, I take this occasion to do so. My personal favorite is David Moss's brilliantly simple cover design for the tenth-anniversary issue, which combined our first nine covers into the form of a *yud*. Although most libraries, unfortunately, discard the covers when journal volumes are sent to the bindery, someday, I predict, the covers of *Prooftexts* will be featured in a permanent exhibit.

For me, aesthetic excellence could be measured by the layout, the font, the orthography, and the system of romanization. Who made this all possible was Miles Cohen, our typesetter, "nikkudic" authority, and guardian angel. Miles's profound knowledge of Hebrew is matched only by his meticulous attention to each and every detail of the printed page.

On which side should the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Yiddish text appear when there is a parallel text in English? Open any Hebrew-English siddur or Bible, and you'll see the conventional answer: the Hebrew text appears on the right and the English on the left. Since the volume itself opens right to left, this seems logical, but it is visually dyslexic, all the more so when the volume in question—an issue of *Prooftexts*, for example—opens left to right. In David Segal's discussion of the thirty-fourth gate of the *Tahkemoni* (3:1), we still adhered to this antiquated system. But Miles hated the jagged typographical effect; it violated his sense of balance. So in volume 4, number 2, in Nili Gold's essay on Amichai, the languages were reversed: Hebrew on the left, English on the right.³ What a difference it made! Now, for the first time, a justified margin ran down the middle, making the comparison between text and translation seductively simple. The texts were twinned. The dynamic act of translation was emancipated from the fetters of typographical antiquity.

Which words should be italicized and which words should be normalized? I waged a campaign for de-italicizing words of Judaic import. If English, I argued, was to become a language of Jewish scholarly discourse, then such indispensable Jewish terms as *midrash*, *piyyut*, *Maskil*, *shtetl*, *heder*, *tannaitic*, *halakhic*, and many more had to be naturalized and printed in roman typeface. This was especially important in America, where Webster's *Third International Dictionary* was amazingly inclusive of Jewish-specific terms, and many of them were *sans italics*. If we are at home in America, these words must be at home in American English. And whosoever writes about things Jewish must be thoroughly at home in this vocabulary. Emancipation is a two-way street.⁴

How are Yiddish words to be spelled? Using the modern orthography, to be sure, even if that means spending days and weeks redesigning the standard Hebrew fonts in order to accommodate the diacritical symbols. I do not exaggerate how difficult this has been. At a certain point, Miles just stopped clocking the hours.

And with each advance in technology, the task of emancipation, of equal citizenship for all typographical and semantic fields, became that much more difficult to realize. How to distinguish between an apostrophe and a romanized *alef*? Between the *holem* and the left-handed dot on top of a *sin*?

All of this presupposed a publisher that cared about such matters. Lacking as we did an institutional or membership base, we had no choice but to trust the free-market economy. We sent out our prospectus and hoped for the best. And the best is what we got. From first to last, *Prooftexts* has been produced and distributed by the premier publishers of American academic journals: Johns Hopkins University Press until the new millennium; and Indiana University Press since then. The transition to Indiana—which took great pains to redesign the journal top to bottom—coincided with the great leap forward to Internet technology. Thanks to Project Muse, an international consortium of 258 academic journals, *Prooftexts* is available online to libraries and universities. (It is the only journal that uses Hebrew font.) Since 2003, the majority of our readers access the journal (or whatever articles are of particular interest) online, and our subscription base has doubled.

I make it seem as if all the battles have been won and all the glitches have been ironed out when, in fact, every issue raises a host of new problems, while the old problems never seem to get resolved. For English is also our state of exile.

What to do with Erets Israel? It looks bizarre on the printed page, but what's the alternative? Palestine? Mandatory Palestine? Or, as the politburo from Berkeley would have it, Zionist Palestine, which sounds appropriately neocolonial. An obvious solution is to use the term *Yisbuv*; but then, given what I said earlier, there is no good reason that it should be italicized.

If there is no elegant way to denote the Land of Israel during the struggle for Jewish political sovereignty—a problem that comes up only in articles on modern Hebrew literature—how much more forcefully were we reminded of our state of exile when the newly designed cover for volume 11 (1991) appeared, just after our tenth-anniversary extravaganza: the cover was published upside down! Thereafter, whenever we submitted a new design, we made sure to pen an arrow on the back to signal which side was up.

Truth is, just as “prooftext” will never become a household word, neither will Judaic literacy become the coin of the realm. So long as each cover design featured the letters of the Hebrew alphabet to stand for the number of each consecutive volume, the letters at least signified something—even if they were printed upside down. By contrast, the *alef* on the new permanent cover designed by Indiana turns the Jewish alphabet into something merely decorative. As an *alef* graces the front cover, a *shin* dignifies the back. Together that spells *esh*, fire, in Hebrew; *ash*, ashes, in Yiddish. Read it backward, and it spells *sha*, quiet down! Not exactly what we had intended.

Can one speak of cultural self-determination when the Jewish alphabet is merely an add-on? Can one, through the medium of a Judaically informed English, own the means of Jewish cultural production? By linking its fate to the English language, can Jewish literary history ever become a vehicle of national liberation?

Thinking that it could, we invested enormous energies in the act of translation. The list of literary translations that have appeared thus far in *Prooftexts* is formidable—if not in quantity, then surely in scope: Hillel Halkin's translations of “Night,” by S. Y. Agnon (1:1), “Sideways,” by U. N. Gnessin (2:3), and Peretz's *A Night in the Old Marketplace* (the whole of 12:1); and Raymond Scheindlin's “Miniature Anthology of Medieval Hebrew Wine Songs” (4:3), of medieval Hebrew love poems (5:2), of four Hebrew sonnets from Italy (11:3), and the first two cantos of Moses da Rieti's *Miqdash Me'at* (23:1). Other works of medieval

Hebrew literature include love sonnets by Jacob Frances, translated by Marcia Falk (1:2), and “The Thirty-Fourth Gate of Alḥarizi’s *Taḥkemoni*,” translated by David Segal (3:1). Other works of Yiddish literature include “Green Aquarium,” by Abraham Sutzkever, translated by Ruth Wisse (2:1); Isaac Rosenfeld’s “Yiddish Fables,” translated by Philipp Veit (2:2); and the introduction to the *Auschwitz Anthology*, translated by David Suchoff (19:1). It is probably no exaggeration to say that the two most frequently cited essays from the pages of *Prooftexts* are both translations: I. B. Singer’s 1943 manifesto, “Concerning Yiddish Prose in America,” translated by Robert Wolf (9:1); and David Fogel’s heretofore unknown Hebrew article “Language and Style in Our Young Literature,” translated by Yael Meroz and Eric Zakim (13:1).

But that’s the least of it. From May 1981 until May 1994, the following paragraph appeared on the inside front cover:

Submissions from Israelis are invited *in Hebrew* [emphasis in original]. If a manuscript is accepted, PROOFTEXTS will take responsibility for having it translated. PROOFTEXTS publishes only original material. Publication of an article or portions thereof in Hebrew is permitted only after the appearance of the English version in PROOFTEXTS, and only with the clear acknowledgment to prior publication in PROOFTEXTS.

For thirteen years, this was our stubborn, sacred mission: to serve as a bridge between Israel and America; to forge a bicultural community of discourse; to get those stuck-up Israeli colleagues to take us seriously. Only to list those Israelis who have appeared in our pages—many of them making their first appearance in English—reads like a who’s who of Israeli literary studies: Yairah Amit, Judith Bar-El, Israel Bartal, Hamutal Bar-Yosef, Dvora Bregman, Yaakov Elbaum, Amos Frisch, Nurith Gertz, S. D. Goitein, Hannan Hever, Avner Holtzman, Zipora Kagan, Ruth Kartun-Blum, Dan Miron, Abraham Novershtern, Iris Parush, Yigal Schwartz, Gershon Shaked, Uzi Shavit, Reuven Snir, Yochai Uppenheimer, and Shlomo Yaniv.

This was a utopian venture that failed, and it failed not because our energies or funding ran out.⁵ When Israeli academics were required to have foreign-language publications on their CV if they hoped to get promoted, they were only too glad to subsidize and supervise the translation. Our bridge-building venture failed because we spoke two different languages: the discourse of English was incompatible with the discourse of Hebrew. We, as members of a minority culture, had adopted the discourse of the majority (the English literary essay) in the hope of achieving emancipation. Hermeticism, in the case of Israelis, was the minority discourse adopted by a majority.⁶

The task of the translator of contemporary Hebrew criticism and scholarship was therefore both substantive and stylistic. Most every article had to be unpacked, recast into broader cultural and literary terms. Most every article had to be rewritten, because the Israeli academe placed no premium on clarity, structure, and topic sentences. And their footnotes! Two and a half articles were buried in the notes, based on a territorial imperative, that if they didn't stake out every ancillary theme, someone else would beat them to it.⁷

We alone could not teach Israelis how to think English. But by dint of creative translation, by bringing together in every volume the Hebrew Bible, midrash and rabbinics, medieval and modern Hebrew literature, and Yiddish, European, and Jewish American writing, we did succeed in building a paper bridge to a universal Jewish culture that lies somewhere over the horizon. In this culture, everything matters.

Footnotes do matter, because footnotes signify the chain of transmission; they acknowledge an existing body of scholarship upon which to build—and rebuild. Footnotes matter because as Jews, we have learned that tradition attaches to the text. The unmediated reading of the text is at best naive; at worst, heretical. And since the purpose of the commentary is to serve the text, the correct citation, romanization, and translation of the text also matter.

In this imagined universal Jewish culture, Yiddish matters. However proud I am of the three thematic issues that we devoted to Yiddish—"Sholem Aleichem: The Critical Tradition" (6:1), "Reclaiming Isaac Bashevis Singer" (9:1), and I. L. Peretz's *A Night in the Old Marketplace* (12:1)—a much greater accomplishment, it seems to me, is that Yiddish was represented no matter what the subject: Jewish

responses to catastrophe, translation, international Jewish writing, the role of periodicals in the formation of modern Jewish identity, Jewish American autobiography, the Jewish anthological imagination, and the cinema of Jewish experience. *Prooftexts* is the only even playing field, the only forum where the reader comes to expect that all periods of Jewish creativity and all languages of Jewish self-expression will be treated with equal respect and equal rigor.

In such a critical environment, amazing cultural synapses have been forged. Without realizing it, we have developed a modern Jewish hermeneutics, a method of reading that answers to the cultural specifics of this ancient civilization. And the key to this method, it turns out, is the prooftext. Call it inner-biblical midrash, call it intertextuality, call it the art of quotation—it amounts to the same thing: the creative recycling of a textual tradition, the invention of something new out of something very old. Prooftexts are the *alef-bet-gimel* of modern Jewish literature: of Agnon, Amichai, and Abramovitsh; of Bialik, Berdyczewski, and Baron (sometimes, even of Bellow); of Uri Zvi Greenberg, Glatstein, and Gilboa. It is surely no accident that the revisionist reading of “Teveye’s Art of Quotation” by Michael Stern (6:1), which demonstrates the subversive intentionality of a character heretofore considered merely comical and unsophisticated, should appear in the pages of *Prooftexts*.⁸

By trumpeting the prooftext, by chronicling scriptural parody from the *Tahkemoni* to Teveye, by excavating rabbinic locutions and cadences in the work of women writers, who were ostensibly bereft of rabbinic learning, and by celebrating the Jewish anthological imagination, we are doing much more than modeling a method of reading Jewish texts. We are revisioning a civilization. We are creating a thickness of description, a marketplace of voices, a cultural space of extraordinary density, an echo chamber in which all forms and all periods of Jewish self-expression miraculously reverberate. We are simulating a virtual reality that may never be achieved in English, but the longing for it is what keeps us honest, creative, and competitive.

I sometimes imagined, as I put the issues of *Prooftexts* together, as I cross-checked a reference, corrected a romanization, or added a diacritical mark, that I was Zelig Kalmanovitsh, sequestered with Max Weinreich as the two of them rewrote and ghost-translated every single submission to the *Yivo-bleter*, because

when the YIVO was founded, in 1925, there were no more than a handful of scholars who could write academic Yiddish. Inspired by their heroic efforts, I eventually became a scholar, a teacher, a translator, and a mediator of Yiddish literary culture. Thanks to them, I cofounded *Prooftexts*, believing that Jewish scholarship could once again be by the people, for the people.

Great are the travails and the joys of the Jewish translator. For me personally, editing *Prooftexts* has been a powerful means of expressing myself as a Jew. Through *Prooftexts*, I have learned the art of becoming a meticulous, multicultural Jew.

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NOTES

- This address was delivered at a daylong meeting held at the Jewish Theological Seminary on January 9, 2005, to mark the formal transition to a new and younger editorial board of *Prooftexts*. The new board will take charge as of volume 25 (2005).
- 1 See Avraham Holtz's review of the Harshav translation of Agnon's *Temol shilshom* in this issue of *Prooftexts*.
- 2 The eight founding members were: Edward L. Greenstein, Janet Hadda, James Kugel, Alan Mintz, David G. Roskies, Raymond P. Scheindlin, David Stern, and Hana Wirth-Nesher.
- 3 Nili Sharf Gold, "Images in Transformation in the Poetry of Yehudah Amichai," *Prooftexts* 4 (1984): 142–44.
- 4 A few years ago, we stopped italicizing the titles of talmudic tractates and other late-rabbinic classics; standard Judaic works, in our judgment, should be treated on a par with the Hebrew Bible.
- 5 For many years, translations were made possible by special funds made available by the late Joy Ungerleider, and later, by the Jewish Theological Seminary. Since autumn 2003, *Prooftexts* is published under the auspices of JTS.
- 6 Two caveats: (1) When the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was founded, in 1925, German scholarship was the gold standard by which a new generation of Hebrew

scholars and intellectuals wished to be judged. Six and seven decades later, however, there were competing models of excellence, and being stuck in the German mold had become a mark of pedantry. (2) Nothing in my comments is intended to impugn the scholarly rigor and depth of our Israeli colleagues. Scholarship produced in America often appears superficial and impressionistic by comparison.

- 7 If the scholars listed earlier come out sounding more user-friendly in *Prooftexts* than they do either in other English-language publications, or in their Hebrew original, the credit often should go not only to the translator listed just below the academic byline, but also to the editors who work behind the scenes. I should like to take this opportunity to express my special thanks to our indefatigable copyeditor, Janice Meyerson, and to Joel Rosenberg, the guest editor of the special issue “The Cinema of Jewish Experience” (22:1/2).
- 8 For a brilliantly suggestive analysis of how intertextuality in the modern period differs from classical usage—and how it doesn’t—see Hillel Halkin, “Adventures in Translating Mendele,” *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 69–89, esp. 86–87. The intertext of my own valedictory address is the famous essay by Walter Benjamin called “The Task of the Translator,” known to English readers in the translation of Harry Zohn from *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 69–82.