

We invited four scholars to comment on the challenge of teaching texts in translation as part of our mission to focus on teaching in Jewish studies. We divided the task by the literature and time periods, and by areas most likely to be taught in universities. Our colleagues offer interesting reflections well beyond the pedagogical issues involved. Their insights about the possibilities and impossibilities of translating the subtlety of language and the challenges inherent in teaching about the cultural contexts of texts, whether they are from the seventh

LOST IN TRANSLATION?

century or the twenty-first, are contributions to understanding our enterprise. In addition, each brief essay offers a useful review of the best resources for teaching about these literatures and periods. While our colleagues do not deny that much is lost in translation, they also reflect on the ways that translation is, for our students as well as for ourselves, central to the endeavor of scholarship in Jewish studies.

How to Teach Translated Texts



Above Right: Title page from the *Polyglot Psalter* (Genoa, 1516), printed on paper.
Courtesy of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania.

TEACHING FROM RIGHT TO LEFT

Anita Norich

*“Andersh volt mayn lid geklungen
kh’zol far goyim goyish zingn”*

Much of my professional life (and, in truth, a good deal of my personal life) has been devoted to understanding these resonant lines from Y. L.

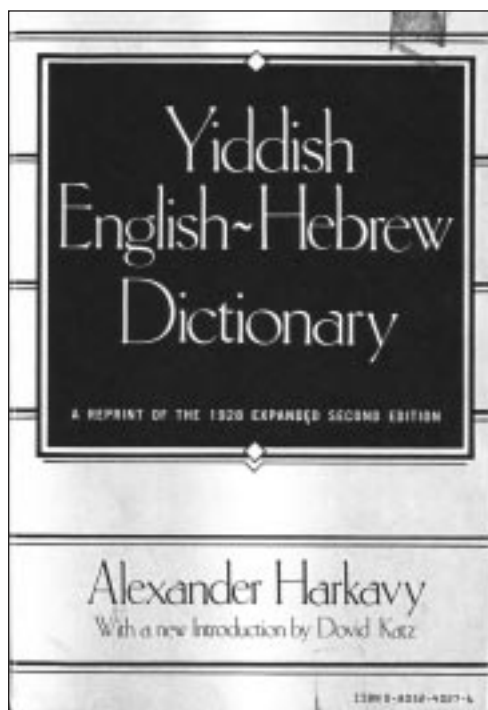
Peretz’s “*Monish*.” “My song [or my poem] would sound differently,” wrote Peretz at the beginning of his literary career, “if I had sung for non-Jews in a non-Jewish language.” The rest is commentary. Peretz went on to lament the seeming poverty of “zhargon,” the fact that it had “*keyn rekhtn*

klang, keyn rekhtn ton” [no right/proper note, no right/proper tone], lacked a vocabulary for love or emotion, and was most apt for uttering witticisms or expressions of suffering. Almost a century later, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, I. B. Singer would suggest that Yiddish has no words for weapons or war. Decades earlier, he had pointed out just how many words Yiddish had for “fool.” One of our tasks in teaching Yiddish in English translation nowadays is to elaborate on Singer’s rhetorical flourish and

Peretz’s struggle, to challenge the belief that their history or traditions make Yiddish-speakers necessarily pacifists or fools or comedians or simple or holy or any other essentialized characteristic. Our task is to evoke the cultural battles that led to Peretz’s pronouncement about Yiddish, to reveal the passion for the Yiddish word and the people who spoke it that inspired his outcry, to explore why he might have written these words in 1888 but erased them from the poem’s 1908 version, and to make our students care just as passionately about the varying interpretive

that produced a work, and to encourage a range of different perspectives. In Yiddish, this means conveying a literal, physical sense of different ways of perceiving. It is, for many of my students, surprising merely to see the Yiddish alphabet, to imagine moving their heads in a different way around the page, to know that meaning is conveyed in Yiddish by adding certain dots and dashes that are meaningless, and barely visible, to the English eye. Peretz’s sense that Yiddish is different has not only sociological implications, but aesthetic ones as well. Consider the “*rekhtn*” note

and tone he missed in Yiddish. Like the English word “right,” *rekht* suggests both direction and aptness. He might have asked, and we certainly should be asking, what is considered suitable, pleasing, possible when we change direction and our angle of vision? What about changing our



Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary by Alexander Harkavy. New York, 1988, reprint of the 1928 edition.
Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

possibilities in these words. Though not in a Christian sense of suffering and the passion of Christ, Passion is exactly the right word for the poem, since Peretz—anticipating more recent literary theorists—equates sexual passion and sin with literary, cultural passion which may be another kind of equally consuming, inescapable sin.

Surely the pedagogic work of literary scholars is to contextualize, to offer a view of both the textual traditions and material conditions

sense of the passage of time? Why does it matter when English replaces “*Tammuz*” with “summer,” or “*Rosh Hashanah*” with “the New Year,” or “*Shabbos Nakhamu*” with “the Sabbath after the holiday of Tisha B’av in which the Torah portion concerning consolation is read?” Or “non-Jews” for “*goyim*”?

The task of teaching in translation is complicated with respect to Yiddish not because Yiddish emerges within an interlinguistic community embedded in an irreproducible

historical and religious reality that cannot be translated, but rather because Yiddish has become a metonym for eastern European Jewry and the world destroyed within fading, but still-living memory. How, our students will wonder, can Peretz make such negative comments about his own culture? Similar examples abound. Students often resist considering Peretz's Bontshe Shvayg not merely as a holy man rewarded for meekness but as a negative figure of Jewish stagnation and radical passivity. The same is true when we note that Moyshe Leyb Halpern's "My Zlochov" is not a nostalgic poem about the author's past, but, rather, castigates the hideous perversions of family life he saw in Eastern Europe. Malka Heifetz-Tussman writes about women's bodies and their unabashed desires. Sholem Aleichem's Tevye is never really singing "Tradition" in Yiddish. The list—all taken from my own classroom experience—could go on, but only to underscore the radical misreadings to which Yiddish literature is subject and the protective gestures to which these misreadings attest.

In this sense, translation and interpretation are identical, products of particular times and places that have a limited, though indeterminate, shelf life. There is little justice in translation. The treasury of Yiddish stories and poems never translated into any language is enormous. At the same time, there are a handful of authors who have enjoyed many translators, often of the same text. One of the most powerful pedagogic tools available to us now is a comparison of these variant translations and the history they reveal of Jewish cultural contact in the modern period. One

illustrative example may suffice. Kadya Molodovsky's *El Khanun* (1945) ends with the line, "*nem tsu fun undz di skhine fun gaones.*"

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Among the translations of this poem are two by the same hand. When Irving Howe first published "God of Mercy" in 1969, he translated this final line as "Take back the gift of our separateness." When he republished it in 1987, it became "Take back the divine glory of our genius." In the difference between those two versions, we can trace a number of fundamental changes in American Jewish culture: the often aggressive assertion of ethnic pride of the 1970s; the increasing turn to Jewish texts and practices of these two decades; an evolving translation aesthetic following the publication of significant works of translation theory (e.g., the appearance in English of Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" in 1969, and George Steiner's *After Babel* in 1975); the renewal of interest in Yiddish internationally.

Teachers of Yiddish language wish we could send our students to Yiddishland to live in the language and experience a different cultural sensibility. We feel a little silly when we assign our students the kinds of conversational exercises that are the staple of introductory language courses. We ask them to practice asking for bus directions in Yiddish, or to learn how to do their banking in Yiddish, or order in a restaurant, or plan a romantic date, but we do so self-consciously, with more than a touch of irony. Every teacher of Yiddish literature wishes, more

fervently and more realistically, that our students would study the language and read texts in their original. And, indeed, a few are so inspired by the literature that they turn to serious language study. The majority who do not, however, now have an increasing number of excellent

translations to read. In the academic classroom, at the very least, these translations should be read and explicated alongside the Yiddish originals. In the absence of that longed-for Yiddishland, teaching Yiddish in translation is not a substitute for living in Yiddish. It is an entirely different enterprise, but one whose significance depends on being in constant conversation with the authors who lived and wrote there, and conducting some of that conversation in Yiddish.

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