

under the bent tower, and the evildoer with his wagon was blocked from doing anything to her. There have not been many such miracles since we have been in the Diaspora, and it is possible to see from this how Reb Yehúde Khósid was so righteous that this occurred to enable him to be born by miracle, and to this day the tower stands bent over and all foreign visitors who come to Worms come and look at the tower to see the great wonder.

(*Yiftekh-Yospe Shamesh, Máyse nisim, sec. 8. Amsterdam, 1696.*)

The Leaning Tower of Worms stood, leaningly intact, until Kristallnacht in 1938.

The Three Languages of Ashkenaz

INTERNAL JEWISH TRILINGUALISM

For all their spiritual separateness from their Christian neighbors, the Ashkenazim were anything but “isolated” from their surroundings on the level of daily interaction in life and commerce. The Yiddish language itself, the daily vernacular of the Ashkenazim, is mostly derived from medieval German city dialects. One of the consistent attributes of Yiddish is the “specifically Yiddish reconfiguration” *within* the Germanic elements, in addition to the specific fusion formula (Germanic with Semitic) that Yiddish inherited when it was created in the linguistic big bang. The Germanic elements of Yiddish are most closely related to the German dialects of Regensburg and Bavaria, although there is no Yiddish dialect that corresponds in its major features to any one German dialect. The Jewish quarter of Regensburg dates to the early eleventh century, and there are records of Jewish residents from the tenth. Regensburg and the Danube region is the closest Yiddish has to a hometown. The “Rhineland Jewish language,” an early variant of the new language in the far west of earliest Ashkenaz, was not destined to become Yiddish. It disappeared but left numerous traces

on Yiddish, which soon encompassed all of Ashkenaz, including the Rhineland.

In addition to Yiddish, the average Ashkenazi also spoke the local German dialect well enough to communicate. But the issue here is not bilingualism in everyday speech but the internal trilingualism of Ashkenazic civilization. Ashkenazim had (and in traditionalist communities still have) three Jewish languages: Hebrew (traditionally called *loshn-kóydesh*, the “language of holiness”), Aramaic (called *arámish* or *tárgum-loshn*, “translation language” from the classic translations of the Bible into Aramaic), and Yiddish (traditionally called *loshn Ashkenaz*, the “language of Ashkenaz” or *leshoynéynu* “our language” in rabbinic texts).

The general configuration is one of graceful complementation between the three languages. Yiddish was the only Jewish spoken language in classical Ashkenaz. The ancient sacred texts imported from the Near East were in Hebrew (most of the Bible, the Mishna, and many other works) or Aramaic (the Bible targums, most of the Talmud, and rabbinic literature). The traditional Jewish alphabet was used for all three languages. From the earliest times onward, Ashkenazim read in all three Jewish languages; what is much more exotic from the modern point of view, the scholars in the society could write original works in all three. The same Ashkenazic scholar who wrote a Bible commentary in Hebrew could author a Talmudic or kabbalistic tract in Aramaic and a letter or popular book in Yiddish.

The three complemented one another regarding prestige too. In traditional early Ashkenaz, Yiddish as a spoken language was neither “low prestige” nor “high prestige.” It was what people in the community spoke to each other naturally and exclusively, without being a “statement” or “point of contention.” But when it came to reading and writing, knowledge of the classic languages was more prestigious, but they were not of equal prestige. The learned could understand written Hebrew. The more learned could write in Hebrew. The highly learned could understand Aramaic texts. And the most learned could write original works in Aramaic. Aramaic was generally reserved for the two highest endeavors in the eyes of Ashkenazic society: legalistic

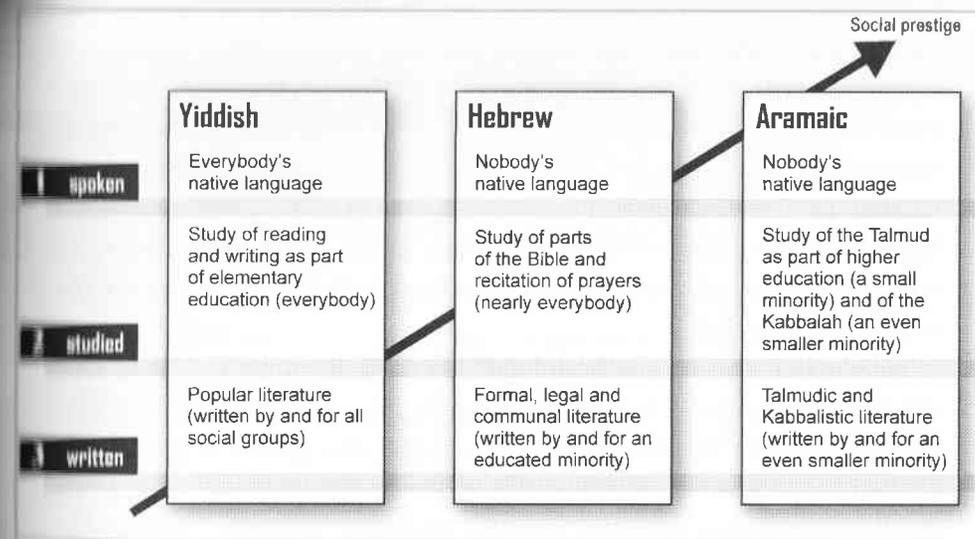


Figure 2.1 Function and status of the three Jewish languages in Ashkenaz.

commentaries and treatises in the field of Talmud and mystical treatises in the field of Kabbalah. Aramaic, which became the Jewish vernacular after Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. and eventually acquired sacred status, survived in Ashkenazic culture as part of a well-defined three-language system. It has a special mystique that has survived undiminished. It is the language of the highly emotive Jewish prayer for the dead, the Kaddish (which also has other sacred uses in the liturgy), and it is the language in which marriage contracts and bills of divorce continue to be written by traditional rabbinic authorities. But the creative use of Aramaic was not limited to the serious Talmudic, the esoterically mystical, and the divinely somber. It was the source of a lot of linguistic fun. Schoolchildren would combine Aramaic suffixes with Yiddish words to come up with multilingual jesting.

On the face of it, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish all had their fixed places. The trilingualism was so finely complementary as to ensure that no conflict arose. But “status issues” between the languages did arise because the three languages were necessarily associated in different degrees with different kinds of people. While a profound knowledge of Hebrew was the luxury of a small minority of educated males,

a profound knowledge of Aramaic was the luxury of an even smaller minority of even more educated males. The vast majority of men and virtually all the women were left out of the creative processes and even the passive culture of reading. Consequently Yiddish became associated with women and “simple people.” It was the universal vernacular in a society with near total literacy (in the Jewish alphabet). Simple people want, need, and deserve a popular culture that is accessible to the average person, hence the vast majority of the population. That meant Yiddish.

A word or two on methodology. The documentary evidence from the early centuries of Ashkenaz is sparse. There was no printing press, there were many massacres and expulsions, and if anything was to be rescued, it would be sacred scrolls of the Torah, or as dictated in the *Book for the Pious*, rabbinic works containing Talmudic innovations. Moreover, Ashkenazic culture minimized the need for biographical detail and contemporary observations of society. Consequently we must latch on to whatever hard evidence there is, which often means a preserved document that can be dated, at least roughly. We have to remember that what happens to be preserved probably reflects something that also happened beforehand and elsewhere, of which we happen not to have a dated record. And, finally, there are some documents that tell us something indirectly.

One such document is the oldest known complete Yiddish sentence with a date. It is a rhymed couplet in the holiday prayer book (the *mákhzer*) that was completed in 1272 in Worms (Vermáyzo to traditional Ashkenazim). The one Yiddish sentence is written into the calligraphic hollows of the large-size Hebrew first word of one of the prayers. The Yiddish sentence reads, “May a good day come upon him who will carry this *mákhzer* into the synagogue.” The fun element includes the rhyme in the vernacular and perhaps the great weight of the book, hence the special blessing for whoever will deign to shlep it to shul to actually pray from it. There may also be a subtle wink to the user to not worry about the possible prohibition of carrying something on a holiday in certain circumstances. The sentence occurs at the start of the prayer for dew in the supplementary service for the first day of Passover. Some scholars see in this a symbolic half-empty cup.



Figure 2.2 The oldest known Yiddish document with a date: a single Yiddish sentence (in small red letters) written into the hollows of a large Hebrew word in the illuminated Worms prayer book manuscript of 1272. (By permission of the Department of Manuscripts and Archives, Jewish National Library, Jerusalem)

Yiddish had no literary possibilities other than to “fill the odd gap” such as the hollows of letters.

There are also documents that contain no Yiddish and do not mention Yiddish but can shed light on the interrelationships of the Jewish languages of Ashkenaz. Yekusiel (Jekuthiel) of Prague, a Hebrew philologist who lived in the thirteenth century, wrote a commentary on the correct reading of the sacred texts. He lists a number of “mistakes” Ashkenazim make on account of using the sound system of their native language (Yiddish) rather than what he believed to be the “correct” ancient (Near Eastern) Hebrew reading. These instances, which modern linguists know as interference of one language in the sound system of another, are inevitable when one language is the spoken one and the other is not. In Yekusiel’s generation, back in the thirteenth century, things were shifting away from Near Eastern pronunciation norms, and this was bothering the learned observer who lived in a time when an older phonetic tradition still survived. The Ashkenazic and Sephardic pronunciations of Hebrew differ radically from ancient Hebrew and Aramaic pronunciation. Ashkenazic maintains many more distinctions among the vowels, and Sephardic is more conservative for consonants.

For most Jewish cultures, including Ashkenaz, the evolving canon of Hebrew and Aramaic prayers in the original has been, and is, sacrosanct, even if the majority of the people did not fully understand the literal meaning of what they were reading or reciting. It may be a universal of human culture that it is "easier" to engage in deep spiritual communion with higher powers in a medium other than the everyday vernacular used for all the nonsense of daily life and its foibles. However, the mystical Pious of Ashkenaz movement of the twelfth century and beyond believed in the power of praying in the spoken language, which in Ashkenaz meant praying in Yiddish. The *Book for the Pious* says (in Hebrew):

It is better for a person to pray and to read the *Shma* and the blessings in a language that he [or she?] understands rather than praying in Hebrew and not understanding it. For it is written [in Isaiah 29:12–13]: "[And when the book is given] to him who does not know of books, saying: "Read this, will you be so good" and he says "But I do not know of books!" And so God said: "Because this nation approaches and honors me with its mouth and its lips, but has distanced its heart from me, their veneration of Me is a commandment that people have learned by rote." . . . Inasmuch as one would not understand what one is saying, they therefore wrote the Talmud in [both] Babylonia and the Land of Israel in the Aramaic language in order that the Commandments be known, even to simple people.

(*Book for the Pious [Séyfer khasidim / Sefer Hasidim]*, sec. 78, Bologna 1538 and editions following it. Wistinetzki-Freimann edition, sec. 1590, Frankfurt, 1924.)

This early Ashkenazic encouragement of prayer in the spoken language ultimately led to the creation of a vast number of Yiddish prayer books. For centuries, as far as we know, they were translations or paraphrases of the sacred Hebrew prayers. The rabbinate, however, attempted to limit praying in Yiddish, principally because many Ashkenazic rabbis did not accept the "folkist" position of the early Pious of Ashkenaz and insisted on prayer in the original Hebrew and Aramaic. In many cases, it is difficult to determine whether the point of contention is the practice of Yiddish prayer as an auxiliary to the



Figure 2.3 This fragment from an early fourteenth-century holiday prayer book, known as the *Machzor Lipsiae*, shows a hare being hunted (at the top). It is a gentle reminder of the ancient Talmudic acronymic *yaknehöz*, which helps people remember the order of various ritual requirements when the end of the Sabbath at sundown on Saturday "collides" with the beginning of a festival. *Yaknehöz* stands for the Hebrew words *yáyin* (wine), *kidush* (reciting the text of the *kidush*), *ner* (candle lighting), *havdólo* ("separation" ritual, in this case between one holiness and another), *zman* (time, referring here to the blessing called *Shehekhiyónu*). Yiddish comes into the equation via the similarity of *yaknehöz* with old southwestern Yiddish *yak 'n hoz* (modern Yiddish *yog dem hoz*), "Hunt the hare!" Some humor derives also from the non-Jewish image of hunting in Ashkenazic civilization: the traditional Yiddish term for hunting is *göyishker nákhes* (gentile pleasure). (By permission of Bibliotheca Albertina, Leipzig)

classic texts or the danger that the vernacular prayer would come to be uttered and read instead of the original texts. There is extensive literature on the topic.

The "rise" of Yiddish from mere vernacular to an accepted cultural language is mentioned in the sources early enough to infer that the issue must predate the documents that happen by chance to survive, to be dated, and to be known to us. The sensational point is that when it came to alternative, universally participatory means of celebrating the religious truths held in common by virtually all Ashkenazim,

using the universal vernacular, Yiddish, the "word of the rabbis" suddenly became less than binding. One key text that has survived is from the *Seyfer Maharil* (Book of Maharil), the collection of wisdom and pronouncements of the foremost Ashkenazic rabbinic leader of his generation (Maharil, usually pronounced Maharil, is an acronym for Jacob ben Moses Mollin the Levite). He lived from around 1360 to 1427 and was a native of Mainz by the Rhine. After studying in the Danube region, he returned to found a great yeshiva which trained a new generation of top rabbinic scholars who provided spiritual leadership to Ashkenazic Jewry in the following generation. It is important not to confuse the modern, Western concept "rabbi" with the traditional Ashkenazic *rov* (plural *rabonim*). The concept of *rabonim* corresponds in some measure to the modern notion of educated people and/or intellectuals who have higher university degrees. With scant exceptions, the *rabonim* were the class of authors of Hebrew and Aramaic books. The book that contains the first known lines about a "Yiddish question" is a *Minhagim* (Customs) collection compiled from the Maharil's pronouncements and comments by his faithful pupil, Zalmen of St. Goar. It circulated widely for centuries in manuscript form. Since the first printed editions in the mid-sixteenth century, it has been reprinted frequently and remains in print to this day in traditional Ashkenazic communities.

We are told in the book, in an informal Hebrew style,

He [the Maharil] said:

"Those rhymed songs that they come up with in *loshn Ashkenaz* [Yiddish] on the Unity and on the Thirteen Principles, if only they wouldn't do it! The reason is that most simple people think that all the commandments depend on that alone, and they give up on a number of the Thou-shalts and the Thou-shalt-nots, such as wearing the fringed vest, putting on phylacteries, studying Torah and such. They think they fulfill their obligations by reciting those rhymes with devout intent [*kavone*]. But those rhymes are only an allusion to the main tenets of the Jewish religion and not even one of the six hundred and thirteen commandments which Jews are commanded to perform!"

(*Zalmen of St. Goar, Maharil, 103a, Sabionetta, 1556*)

We may never know whether the two specific Yiddish rhymed songs that the Maharil mentions were, in fact, Yiddish versions of Matmonides' Thirteen Articles and the Kalonymus family's Song of Unity of old Ashkenaz (in the second case, that would mean that the now lost Yiddish text could be as old as the Hebrew or older). Clearly there were Jews in the fourteenth century in the ultra-believing society of Ashkenaz who did not obey all the normative commandments and expressed their religiosity by singing songs on the basic principles of the Jewish faith in their native language, Yiddish, rather than in the society's sacred languages. There is no hint that the Maharil has anything against (or for) Yiddish *per se*, and it would be anachronistic to deduce a language policy here. But from its very beginning, Yiddish empowered non-scholars, simple people, to express their Jewish faith and enjoy singing in their native language. It is predictable that the natural language of the population should represent the masses, who are not masters of exalted classical languages. What is surprising in the case of Yiddish is that modern scholarship and popular Jewish culture alike have forgotten that a "Yiddish rebellion" of sorts has been underway in Jewish life for many centuries and is not a product of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Yiddish movement (Yiddishism). Few realize that the creative forms Yiddish has taken on within Jewish society have been controversial for the better part of a thousand years. In addition to rhymed couplets inserted into illuminated prayer book manuscripts and songs about God and the Jewish faith, Yiddish came into use for Jewish vocational training, especially for community positions requiring deep Jewish knowledge but not as high as that of an ordained rabbi. One such trade was the ritual slaughterer, who must have mastery of a complicated legal literature about the insides of the animal and many intricacies of Jewish law about various details. Not every community could afford to have a rabbi do its slaughtering. The long and short of it is reported by the Maharil in his collections of responses to legal questions that came his way:

There was a learned man who composed a work on the laws of slaughtering in a charming rhymed poem in *loshn Ashkenaz* ["language of Ashkenaz" = Yiddish], with a comprehensive commentary. And he did it with good inten-

tion, for he had seen that there were some simple people in the provinces, not to mention ignoramuses who cannot grasp or understand on their own even the laws of slaughtering from a work in *loshn kóydesh* ["language of the sacred" = Hebrew]. It is even necessary constantly to explain everything to them. . . . And those in [the language of] Ashkenaz are explained very well. Nevertheless it is not the custom to give license to slaughter on the basis of these, even though everything forbidden in the laws of slaughtering counts as a sin of the actual Torah. . . .

Every householder who can read the commentary of Rashi on the Torah, or the holiday prayer book. . . and there are some who never served a genuine scholar! All these are reckoned unto the Vale of Fools [wordplay on Genesis 14:3]. They look things up in the works of our rabbis the compilers of codes. . . . But according to the reasoning in a given case, the application of a law can change! . . . There is no deciding on questions of law other than by the Talmud!

(Yitzhak Satz, ed., *The Maharil's Additional Responsa* [in Hebrew], 92–93, Jerusalem, 1977.)

The basic knowledge required is to be able to understand a page of Talmudic debate in *Aramaic*, not just a page of a *Hebrew* summary of laws of one of the codifiers. Mastery of *Yiddish* summaries would not remotely qualify one to adjudicate legal issues. Without being intimately familiar with the debates and opinions, one could go wrong in any specific case. All three of the languages of Ashkenaz thus come into play in the Maharil's critique. Moreover, we learn of the practice of producing practical works in Yiddish that rhyme. The aspiration to literary or aesthetic creativity is inherently linked with the spoken language.

But it wasn't only ritual slaughtering that bothered the Maharil in connection with Yiddish. He was especially worried about women's issues.

WOMEN, CHRISTIANS, AND EARLY YIDDISH LITERATURE

The Maharil's comments about ritual slaughtering manuals in rhymed Yiddish were made in a by-the-way tone, in the course of a legal reply

to a different question. That question came from a certain man called Chaim, who had written to the great rabbi in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, asking approval for a project to produce a work in Yiddish about the laws of family purity. The term "family purity" in its original and in English is a euphemism for the laws of sex between married partners as they relate to the wife's menstrual cycle. In short, sex is prohibited from the day a woman expects her period until after seven full days following the end of the period (after Leviticus 15:19–33). The legal and practical questions that come up are the subject of an entire tractate of the Talmud and countless rabbinic tomes, and traditionally Orthodox Jews take these laws every bit as seriously today as thousands of years ago. The one great change in post-biblical times concerns the ceremony of purification following the end of the ritually unclean period. The Bible dictates that the woman take two turtledoves or pigeons to the priest on the eighth postperiod day, and "the priest shall offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering" (Leviticus 15:29–30). In later Judaism the ritual bath (*mikve*) replaces the animal sacrifices. For the Bible and traditional communities, these are laws given by God and of paramount importance. But *within* the determination to obey these laws, there has for a long time been a question as to how much the couple themselves, and particularly the wife, can determine without every private detail being brought before the rabbi. This is more pressing in places where there is no qualified rabbi. To return to the mysterious Chaim, who penned the question on these matters concerning his plan to produce a manual in Yiddish for couples to be able to ascertain the law in a given situation. The Maharil went nuclear over the idea (as rabbinic literature goes, at any rate).

It is a matter of urgency for me to reply to my cherished and dear learned friend, Reb Chaim, may you live and be well. I was astounded by you, extremely, to learn that you are thinking about writing in Yiddish that which you know. . . . But our rabbis the codifiers did not intend [for their compilations of laws to serve the ignorant] but rather for pupils to go on to higher learning, and for *them* to inform women of the laws relevant to them. . . .

And on top of everything [the proliferation of “experts” who cannot read the Talmud itself and just look up the law in one of the compilations in Hebrew], you go ahead and try to foist on us even newer products that scatter the Torah among the scatterbrained, the simple people and frivolous women, and to give them “a monument and a memorial” [literally *yod vo-sheym/yad va-shem* “a hand and a name,” Isaiah 56:5, here in the sense of “enduring authority”], to study and to teach from your Yiddish book the issues relating to menstruation and blood spots, which our earlier and later masters dwelt upon in great detail, even as waters that have no end. God forbid, God forbid that such a thing would have been found among your fathers and forefathers, notwithstanding that we see [in Yiddish] many books on the laws of what is forbidden and what is permitted, and menstruation, and the *challah* bread, and the laws of Passover and holidays and various other topics.

(S. Assaf, “A Rabbinic Reply Against the Composition of Law Books in Yiddish” [in Hebrew], 41–42. In *Qiryat Sefer* 19, 1942–1943.)

These parsimonious rabbinic mentions are treasure troves for the modern cultural historian. We learn, first, of the existence of a popular legal literature in Yiddish during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (and obviously earlier; a literature does not come into being overnight, and the Maharil knows of it as something evolved and widespread). Second, we learn of the social and societal framework that defined the trilingualism of Old Ashkenaz. Aramaic is necessary for a scholar who can adjudicate legal questions (he needs to be able to read all about it in the original Talmud). Hebrew is necessary for studying the Bible as well as the codes and compilations of laws (e.g., Maimonides and Tur) and occupies a middle rung of education and learnedness. Yiddish is the literary domain of the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population who could benefit from a book only in the vernacular, since advanced Hebrew and Aramaic education was something many men didn’t have, and it wasn’t open to women at all. The implication is that for a woman to read a Yiddish book is completely natural and expected and not a blow to her ego. But if a man reads such a book, it is because he did not succeed to the higher rungs of learning that entail the need to not only “read” (in the sense of “recite”) but actually understand books in Hebrew and Aramaic. Hence

the identification of Yiddish with femininity is as old as Ashkenazic Jewish trilingualism, as old as Ashkenaz itself. But it is critically important to remember that that is a literary, social, and cultural identification. In real life, Yiddish was everybody’s language, and it is obvious even from the content of older Yiddish literature that much of it was actually meant for men (or for men as well). Jerold Frakes sums it up aptly.

It is not Hebrew for men, Yiddish for women, but rather Yiddish for everybody, Hebrew for men. The fiction that men did not actually read Yiddish books is just that—fiction. Men translated those books, wrote those books, typeset, published, peddled, and read them too.

(Jerold Frakes, private communication to author.)

But symbols, and the way they were once perceived, are important in attempts to grasp the conceptual realia of another age. Yiddish was the symbolic cultural citadel of femininity. And it was a kind of femininity that also covered men who did not have the “masculinity” of Talmudic prowess, which was the Ashkenazic brand of male heroism, fulfilling something parallel to the societal role assumed by knights, warriors, and gladiators among the nation-states of the period. The overwhelming propensity to give baby boys a Hebrew- or Aramaic-derived name while assigning no significance to the etymology of a girl’s name is another reflex of the language and gender divide in Ashkenaz. Let us now engage in a thought experiment about the earliest generations of Ashkenaz, language, and the sexes. While literacy in the sense of reading the alphabet and basic prayers was nearly universal among men and women alike, serious knowledge of Hebrew (and even more so for Aramaic) was limited to a small number of males. “Being a man” meant knowing as much as possible of Hebrew sources (the Yiddish phrase for this type of knowledge is very old; in its modern form it is *óyskenen zikh in di shvártse píntalakh*, literally “to be expert in the little black dots,” a loving reference, perhaps, to the vowel points and accent marks in biblical and prayer book texts). For a man, being a hero meant knowing his way around the more difficult Aramaic Talmud and its literature. There would be a certain amount

of embarrassment at being unable to read Hebrew well. It was a question of male prestige. A woman on the other hand, though fully bound by laws of keeping kosher, Sabbath, and holidays, is not obligated to study Torah or pray as frequently. The Jewish woman's role in running the household and bringing up children in the spirit of traditional Torah Judaism is of paramount importance, and she is hailed every Sabbath eve with the exuberant singing of the *Éyshes kháyil* (Woman of valor from Proverbs 31:10–31). The woman was not supposed to be able to “enjoy” a book in Hebrew, she wasn't meant to be able to study a Talmudic argument, and she wasn't even allowed, officially, to delve into the Kabbalah, even if she had somehow gained the linguistic skills that women's education did not provide.

In this environment, the modern notion of rebellion against the status quo was unthinkable. For one thing, the status quo was almost universally regarded by women and men alike as a grand privilege of God's chosen people. The laws, traditions, customs, and mores of the society functioned in unison as a living system, one bequeathed by God to his people, as authoritatively interpreted. The prayer canon has the famous line *Ato bekhartónu mikól ho-ámim* (You have chosen us from among all the peoples). What kind of fool would replace all that with some human solution based in logic or fashionable philosophy?

Since overt rebellion was not a possibility, women (and many men too) could find cultural and spiritual empowerment through the vernacular. That the vernacular was written in the same alphabet as the two sacred languages, from right to left, gave Yiddish its first stimulus to become part of the Ashkenazic Jewish “written way of life.”

In some cases, the vernacular served ritual purposes, for example, the need for books on the law about irksome issues of family purity or kosher slaughtering. But the women of Ashkenaz needed far more than that. They wanted to enjoy books as much as their menfolk did, and they suffered no stigma about being seen reading a book in Yiddish instead of Hebrew or Aramaic. The actual intellectual freedom that the system gave women came to the fore in another arena. Yiddish, not Hebrew or Aramaic, was the effective link with the non-Jewish culture of the countries in which Ashkenazim lived. Not all of that culture was exclusively Christian in the narrower sense of the term. Medieval epics

about princes and princesses, knights and warriors, and damsels in distress could be enjoyed in Yiddish without violating any of the 365 negative precepts (thou shalt nots) of Jewish law. No Jewish law says, “Don't enjoy a good story in your native language.”

Put differently, it was Yiddish that provided enormous freedom for women (and their fellow travelers, the “simple men”) to enjoy literature, theater, and singing without grazing the traditional three-language system of Ashkenaz. Wealthy women began to invest in Yiddish. Many early literary manuscripts contain dedications to the *génénin* or the *patrónin*—the benefactress. They were commissioned by women for the enjoyment of “women and others.” It became standard for the writers of Yiddish books to sign themselves “the writer for all pious women” (various versions of *shráyber far ále frúme váyber*, where the words for “writer” and “women” rhyme). This has a double meaning. The book was written (or copied or recopied) on the commission of the benefactress, and it was brought into existence for the pleasure of women. One of the names of the Yiddish language became *váyber-taytsh*, which means “translation for women,” as many of the works produced were translations. The term shifted over centuries to mean the special language of these books translated into the vernacular, and in Ashkenazic “men's talk,” it became a mildly dismissive name for the Yiddish language itself—a women's language.

Old Yiddish manuscripts occasionally tell tales about how the writer (at first always a man, at least officially) was paid. Sometimes it was by an advance, sometimes by commission on further sale of the manuscript or a copy of it, and sometimes commitments to send food on Sabbaths and holidays. They also divulge a wealth of information about how Yiddish literature grew. A writer tried hard to satisfy his benefactress by coming up with a product that would be prestigious, entertaining, and beautiful to look at. Without Talmudic studies to occupy their (inherently equal) intellect, Ashkenazic women were more likely to covet the literary pleasure of German, Italian, and other medieval epic knightly romances. And what the women wanted in Yiddish was exactly what the writers sought to give them. Old Yiddish literature (literature, not the language itself) got underway by the efforts of various kinds of Jewish *shráyber* (a cover term for copyists,

popular scribes, translators, writers, paraphrasers, rewriters, editors, and more) to “render” into Yiddish the popular European romances of the day.

The oldest known extensive Yiddish manuscript with a clear Jewish date, corresponding with 1382 in the general calendar, is a handwritten anthology, probably written in Egypt where it was found in the late nineteenth century. In the fourteenth century, part of the Jewish community in Cairo consisted of Ashkenazim whose families had escaped the Christian persecutions and found refuge in the more tolerant Islamic world of that time. The manuscript as a whole symbolizes the interweaving of traditions of the ancient Near East with the cultural landscape of medieval Central Europe. Ancient Jewish and contemporary non-Jewish material are rendered in contemporary genres and, taken together, exemplify the European Jewish tradition, specifically its Ashkenazic core. Part of the manuscript is signed by *Ayzik der shráyber* (Isaac the writer).

Occasionally the name of the “commissioning lady” is found in older Yiddish manuscripts, sometimes embedded in a rhymed preface or colophon. For example, a 1532 manuscript containing Yiddish versions of Psalms and Proverbs was written by Eliezer son of Israel of Prague for “my patroness Peslin” (modern Yiddish *Pesl*). A Yiddish version of *Sayings of the Fathers*, a tractate of the Mishna with many famous dictums for everyday life, was compiled in Italy around 1580 by Anshel Levy. It contains a long rhymed colophon dedicated to his patroness Perl (modern Yiddish *Perl*). But such instances are few and far between, and the degree to which some norm can be extrapolated from them is a highly controversial question among scholars.

The elements were in place for a dynamic, original Yiddish literature that would transcend the scope of translating, transcribing, and paraphrasing. Early diversification is another prominent feature. A recent anthology by Jerold Frakes, *Early Yiddish Texts, 1100–1750* (2004), demonstrates the enormous range, including medical treatises and various how-to books (from witchcraft to medicine), chronicles of historic events and local catastrophes, reworkings of Germanic epics (including King Arthur and Hildebrand) and Hebraic literature (in-

cluding Bible, Mishna, Aggadah—Jewish legends and homilies, books on laws, customs, ethics, Kabbalah, philosophy), multilingual dictionaries and Bible concordances, legal documents, travel logs, stories and poems of love and passion, holiday celebration books, early drama and plays, polemics, satires, spoofs, and more. In this mammoth output the modern reader will find a breathtakingly diverse literature that pulsates with the rhythms of a confident, wholly natural “Jewish-in-Jewish” civilization that is spiritually at peace with itself and with the components of the outside world that do not threaten it.

The printing of Jewish books got underway around 1475, about a quarter century after Johannes Gutenberg’s fabled invention of the printing press at Mainz (or, more accurately, reinvention of a mechanism devised and first used in East Asia). It originated in Italy, which was home to both Sephardic and Ashkenazic “relocated” communities, in addition to the scions of older Italian and Roman Jewry. The first works to appear were Rashi’s commentary on the Five Books of Moses and Jacob ben Asher’s legalistic compendium, the *Tur* (short for “the four Turim”). Rashi (1040–1105) and Jacob ben Asher (c. 1270–1340) were among the giants of early Ashkenaz, and it is no surprise that the era of Jewish printing in Europe started with their works. Jewish printing in Hebrew and Aramaic produced about 150 incunabula (pre-1500 prints) and emanated from around twenty printing presses.

Jewish printing meant that the literature of Torah in Hebrew and Aramaic could be taught much more effectively, economically, and evenly. Suddenly a library spanning millennia could be reproduced in standardized form. In time, however, it became obvious that the printer’s error was sometimes worse than the scribe’s error. Yiddish humor came up with the line *In áltsding iz shúldik der bókker ha-zétse* (The typesetter fellow is always at fault), which is used whenever a messenger or technician is blamed instead of the one who really caused an evil.

The advent of the printing press, which so benefited the classic Hebrew and Aramaic fare of European Jewry, might have been seized on as a commercial opportunity in the much bigger market for Yiddish. There was potential for a major new business in Jewish Europe. Sud-

denly the buying power of “women and simple people” was a formidable economic force in European Jewish society. It so happened that in the sixteenth century the geographic spread of Yiddish across Europe was at its maximum, stretching from Alsace and Italy in the southwest to Holland in the northwest to the Ukraine in the southeast and Belorussia in the northeast—one of the most extensive contiguous linguistic empires in the history of Europe.

But Jewish printers and publishers were slow to pick up on Yiddish. They were afraid it wouldn't be acceptable to produce books in the language of women and of men who didn't participate in the active culture of Ashkenaz beyond elementary Bible study and prayer, in other words, the vast majority.

Jewish printing in the Ashkenazic lands was founded by Gershom ben Solomon Cohen, who printed his books in various cities, including Prague, Augsburg, Ichenhausen, and Heddernheim, all of which became famous in Jewish printing lore. From 1513 onward, he specialized in providing prayer books for Ashkenazim, for both Germany (Western Ashkenaz) and Poland (Eastern Ashkenaz) and their satellite countries. His 1526 Passover feast book (Haggadah) contains the first known page in Yiddish in a Jewish printed book. Its symbolic value is therefore analogous to the rhymed couplet (or sentence) that had made it into the famous 1272 Worms holiday prayer book. But that was a manuscript. Famous as it may be, there was only one. Of a printed book there are many and it is always open to “further procreation.” The Passover song in the 1526 Prague Haggadah is “Almekhtiker got” (Almighty God), a Yiddish version of the Hebrew song “Adir hu” (Mighty is He); like its Hebrew prototype, it is alphabetic (in both cases going through the alphabet from *alef* to *tof* with attributes of God). In the Yiddish version, some letters that don't occur at the beginning of a word are just skipped. The song, which is known from older manuscripts too, is a favorite at the Passover *seyder* table, and it is perhaps not surprising that its inclusion in the Haggadah was the first “debutante Yiddish celebration” in the age of printing.

Another Passover table favorite is the Aramaic “Khad-gadyo” (One Little Goat). It was written in Yiddish and then translated into Aramaic. It is a classic counting-down song about one little goat that is de-

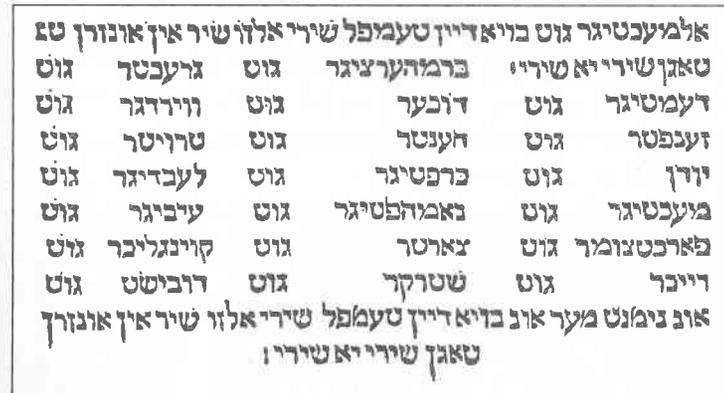


Figure 2.4 The oldest known printed Yiddish text is this 1526 Passover song “Almekhtiker got” (Almighty God), which appeared in a Prague Haggadah. Over the centuries the song (alphabetic in Yiddish as in the Hebrew prototype “Adir hu”) became standard fare for the Passover *seyder*. (By permission of Dr. Hermann Suess, Rostock University Library)

voured by a cat, the cat by a dog, and so forth. It is often thought to be a kind of allegory for the survival of the weak Jews in the face of all the great empires—Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome—that conquered them. Its earliest appearance in both Yiddish and Aramaic is in a fifteenth-century manuscript. But aside from Gershom ben Solomon Cohen of Prague and his inclusion of “Almekhtiker got,” nobody else. Jewish publishing dared print a Yiddish book for over half a century from the time the first Hebrew books appeared in 1475. It would have been too risqué to use the new tool of the “sacred work” for the “language of women.” The Jews were hesitant but the market prospects were alluring. And so the Christians moved in.

CHRISTIANS LAUNCH YIDDISH PUBLISHING

The Christians who established Yiddish publishing in the 1530s and 1540s fell into three categories: (1) Jews about to convert to Christianity, (2) Jews who had previously converted, or (3) born Christians who had commercial or theological interests (ranging from the study of H-



Figure 2.5 This version of “Almekhtiker got” (from 1719) has a woodcut to go with the refrain “Build Thy Temple Soon.”

brew and Aramaic in the spirit of European humanism to missionary activity or various combinations of both).

Yiddish publishing as an enterprise (beyond the single Passover song of 1526) is traced to the three Helitz (or Halicz) brothers of Cracow, Poland. Shmuel (Samuel), Osher (Asher), and Elyokim (Eliakim) put out the first bilingual Hebrew–Yiddish book in the early 1530s (most bibliographers date it to 1534). It is an alphabetical Bible concordance meant to enable “every simple person” to read “all the twenty-four” (the traditional number of books in the Hebrew Bible). From the preface we learn that many early Yiddish printed books have been lost or are yet to be discovered: “Inasmuch as it has become commonplace

to publish in Yiddish all esoteric things and books, so that every simple person can gain knowledge of them, it seems to me good to publish a useful work.”

The Helitz brothers followed up in 1535 with *Azhóres nóshim* (Admonitions for Women), which, they explain on the title page, was adapted from the works of the great Ashkenazic rabbis Judah Mintz (c. 1408–1506) and the twelfth-century Samuel of Worms. In the late 1530s, they released *Múser un hanhóge* (Ethics and Behavior), a Yiddish version of a famous ethical work by the great Ashkenazic scholar, Asher ben Jehiel (c. 1250–1327), known as “the Rosh” from his acronym. In 1537, the Helitz brothers were baptized. The Jews of Cracow (and elsewhere) organized a bitter boycott against their books and refused to pay the debts that had piled up. Although lacking a single Christian or missionary allusion, anything and everything they produced was retroactively tainted by this most painful act of community betrayal in the eyes of Ashkenazic civilization. Launched in this “baptism by fire” in every sense of the term, Yiddish publishing was a highly controversial prospect from the outset. The brothers Helitz and their many new Christian friends petitioned the king of Poland, Sigismund I (“The Old,” 1467–1548). The king was a devout Catholic who protected the rights of Jews, Greek Orthodox Christians, and nascent Lutherans. He issued a decree on March 28, 1537, ordering the Jews to buy up the remaining stock of the Helitz brothers’ books. But the controversy grew and by the end of 1539, the brothers had to obtain another royal decree ordering the Jewish community to buy up their stock of (mostly) Yiddish books—almost 3,500 volumes (a vast collection in those days). The Jewish community of Poland handled things in a classic Jewish Diaspora way. They obeyed the king, paid for all the books, and then set them on fire.

One of the three brothers (historians dispute which) changed his name to Paul and went on to publish the first New Testament in Jewish letters in 1540 (actually a transcription of the Lutheran German translation) as well as a handbook in 1543 to enable Christians to learn Yiddish for business purposes. He became a missionary among Jews. The brother originally named Shmuel eventually renounced his baptism, returned to the Jewish faith, moved to Istanbul (the former Con-

stantinople), and in 1552 printed a Bible with a colophon containing his statement of repentance.

Another pioneer of Yiddish publishing was a Christian Hebraist called Paul Fagius (1504–1549). Like many humanists, he “classicized” his original name, Buechlin, by translating it into Latin (Buechlin = *fagius* = beech tree). He was a German who became professor of Hebrew at Strasbourg and eventually at Cambridge University in England, where he died. Fagius translated Hebrew books into Latin, edited a famous Aramaic translation of the Bible, and wrote several tracts trying to prove the truth of Christianity. Like many Christian Hebraists, he had a Jewish teacher. And here the lines of cross-cultural communication become delightfully elaborate. His Jewish teacher, a great scholar of the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, was also the first great Yiddish poet, and the two interfaith friends shared a zest for publishing Judaica.

That Jewish teacher was Elijah Levita (1469–1549), the leading Hebrew and Aramaic philologist among Ashkenazim. Elijah was born in Germany and, as a result of persecutions, relocated to more tolerant Italy, where he spent most of his life (in Padua, Venice, and Rome). He is known to Ashkenazic Jews as Elye Bókher. It is more than a little symbolic that the first really brilliant linguistic specialist in Hebrew and Aramaic among Ashkenazim was also the first great poet in Yiddish. In other words, he was a master of all three languages of Ashkenaz. Philology had been among the specialities of preexpulsion Sephardic Jewry, and Elijah picked up where they had left off. He wrote commentaries to the classic Hebrew grammatical works of the earlier Sephardic masters, and he delved into the intricacies of the system of vowel points and accents and cantillation marks that were codified for the Hebrew Bible on the western shores of Lake Tiberias in the late first millennium A.D. (hence known as Tiberian Hebrew). His *Masóyres ha-masóyres* (Tradition of the Tradition or Tradition of the Mesorah), which appeared in Venice in 1538, remains indispensable for specialists in Hebrew. His *Meturgemon* (The Translator) remains vital for students of Aramaic. *Tishbi* (Isny, 1541) is one of the most “fun dictionaries” ever written, defining interesting Jewish words whatever their origin. It is also the book that established the science

(and pleasure) of Yiddish etymology. Its intrepid Yiddish etymologies remain in vogue today. For example, the Yiddish word *katóves* refers to fooling around, making fun of something or somebody, or saying something in a lighthearted vein. Elijah derives it (accurately) from the Hebrew and Aramaic root כטב, which means “to write,” and explains its origin from “those people who stealthily wrote their stuff on the doors of rich people or on street walls so that nobody would know the writer’s identity. And this is the custom even today in Rome.” It was, in short, early-sixteenth-century graffiti.

Fagius, with the help of Elijah Levita, set up a Hebrew and Yiddish printing press at Isny (in Württemberg, Bavaria). He delighted in Yiddish books and did very well with them. He was not a convert, as far as is known, and Jews, particularly Jewish women, had no problem buying good Jewish books from a Christian publisher. Fagius published Elijah’s *Shmoys dvórim* (Names of Things) in 1542. It is an exquisite quadrilingual dictionary (Yiddish-Hebrew-Latin-German). The same year, Fagius issued *Book of Traits* (*Séyfer mides*), a work on ethics and character building in the tradition of Jewish ethical or *múser* literature. The book has a dedication to a certain “Lady Morada, doctor of the free art of medicine,” who may have put up the financing or otherwise endeared herself to Fagius. The preface makes it clear that it is for everybody (using the contemporary term *ayéderman*, literally everyman), not just the women addressed in Hebrew on the frontpiece. It becomes transparent from such blatant inconsistencies that all “statements of intended audience” have a lot more to do with convention, mores, and promoting book sales than the eventual actual readership.

The *Book of Traits* includes the first-ever published rules of Yiddish spelling for Jewish readers (a Christian Hebraist had written out a version of Yiddish spelling rules in his Hebrew grammar back in 1514). This is important because Yiddish publishing was seeking a market throughout Europe, and the linguistic and spelling decisions that these early publishers made often involved choosing between various manuscript traditions and dialect areas. The result was a kind of “lowest common denominator literary Yiddish” with a relatively standard

spelling (insofar as variation was itself regulated and could be used to make up spaces in lines and so forth; it was not a rigid spelling). This sixteenth-century lowest common denominator literary Yiddish lasted until the nineteenth century. But to return to the *Book of Traits*, the anonymous compiler (perhaps someone Fagius commissioned), begins his afterword, which includes the Yiddish spelling rules, with the following words:

To God Almighty an exclusive oath! We send our sincere greetings to all women and girls. And in the first place to the honorable and pure lady, Morada, doctor of the free art of healing, resident of Guenzburg, a generous woman. After I understood that you have craving and desire for the *Book of Traits*, so I have taken it on myself with the help of God, blessed be He, the Almighty, and have on this day done it, and although I should not take upon myself such a thing, it is after all written in the Sayings of the Fathers [in the Mishna]: "Where there is no man, try to be a man." I therefore want everybody, and ask women and girls and whosoever will read from this *Book of Traits*, and might find something wrong in it. . .not to think the worst of me.

(Plóyni Almóyni, afterword to *Seýfer mides* [Sefer Middoth].
Isny: Paulus Fagius, 1542.)

By the 1540s, Fagius had become a missionary. At that point his name, for those Jewish buyers who knew, would not have helped sales, though he did not inject missionary tendencies in commercial ventures that were intended for a Jewish audience. In this case he seems to have felt that his book would fare better among Jewish readers signed with the name Plóyni Almóyni (biblical *ploni almoni*, an expression for "such and such a person," after Ruth 4:1), in other words, comic anonymity, rather than Mr. Paul Fagius.

The publisher's ambivalence about his readership is revealing. The frontispiece has a fancy Hebrew paraphrase from Isaiah, making it clear in big letters that this is a book for the ladies. The preface broadens that readership to "whosoever." The afterword uses the term "everyman." All in all, it is clear that "literature for women" is a euphemism for publishing in Yiddish.

This Freudian creative ambiguity enabled Yiddish literature to continue to use the label "for women" while appealing to ever more women *and* men. An unknown number of men enjoyed various writings in Hebrew, whether ancient or more recent, and *also* enjoyed Yiddish. From the point of view of really enjoying something that is read, men had up to three languages to choose from. Women usually had only one.

Paul Fagius did very well from publishing and selling Yiddish books. He published the first four chapters of Genesis in Yiddish and Hebrew in 1543, and a selection of favorite books from the Old Testament in 1544. It is telling for interfaith history (and literary commerce) that Fagius issued two prints of this Jewish Bible anthology, one for Jews and another, with a German title page and introduction, for Christians.

Perhaps unknown to Paul Fagius, he was the publisher of the first book of Yiddish verse in European history. In 1541, he published Elye Bokher's masterpiece of epic Yiddish poetry, *Bovo d'Antono* (Bovo of Antona). This first great work of Yiddish poetry was written in Italy by a Hebrew and Aramaic philologist born in Germany, using Italian rhyme, and published by a devout Christian. Yiddish literature acquired an international, cross-cultural, pan-European flavor that it retains into modern times.

Turning to the author's own thoughts about his Yiddish masterpiece, which he had drafted decades earlier, it is instructive to see that he regarded publication as a good deed for Jewish *women*. In his old age he writes in the preface for the about-to-be published poetic work of his youth (this is a rough translation; the original is in rhyme that ironically "leads in" from the lighthearted preface to the serious tale of the escapades and scrapes of the Knight Bovo):

I, Elye the Levite, the writer, serving all pious women, with respect and gratefulness, realize full well that many women hold a grudge against me for not printing some of my books for them, in Yiddish, so that they might enjoy them and read them on Sabbaths and holidays. So I want to tell the truth. It seems to me the right thing to do, as I have written some eight or nine books in our sacred languages, and I have begun to put them through the press, as

I reach the end of my days, and today or tomorrow might find myself on my back, and all my books and my poems will be forgotten. So if nobody deflects me from my purpose, I will print them all one after the other.

(Elye Bökher [Elijah Levita], preface to *Bovo d'Antouno*. Isny: Paulus Fagius, 1541.)

It was inevitable that someone should follow Fagius into the game. That “someone” was a convert to Christianity who was intimately familiar with Jewish literature and, unlike Fagius, did not need a teacher. After converting to Christianity, this fellow also became a Paul. Paul or Paulus Aemilius was a native of Roedlsee, Germany, who converted in Rome. He started publishing books taken from Yiddish manuscripts that had long been in circulation. Thanks to him, two of the classic works of Old Yiddish literature were published in quick succession, the *Mlókchim bukh* (Kings Book) in 1543 and the *Shmúel bukh* (Samuel Book) in 1544, both epic poems based on the biblical books of Samuel and Kings. There is no hint that the publisher is a convert to Christianity. It is hard to tell if Paulus Aemilius was interested purely in profit, or if he also took a certain “naughty” pleasure in seeing simple Jews having fun with a knightly romance in Yiddish that retells the stories of Samuel, Saul, David, and Solomon and their times with humor and zest, knowing full well it would infuriate the rabbis and scholars, who would prefer that they spend their Saturdays and other free time reading books on Jewish law, ethics, and proper behavior. He was working as bookbinder for the Dominican convent, and for many years worked for church institutions as a copyist of Hebrew manuscripts.

But the “two Pauls” at the genesis of Yiddish publishing, the born Christian Paul Fagius and the converted Paul Aemilius, went head to head in commercial competition with their editions of the Pentateuch, Scrolls and weekly Prophets selections. Fagius’s appeared in Konstanz in March 1544. Aemilius’s came out in July of the same year in Augsburg. Sometime that year, he too put out a separate edition for gentiles. So, we have four Yiddish Bible selections (covering the same “Ashkenazic canon” of Pentateuch, Five Scrolls, and Prophets selections) in 1544, published by two Pauls, each of whom issued a Jewish and a gentile edition.

Meanwhile, the rabbis, who had been busy publishing the sacred texts and their own legalistic and homiletic innovations, all Hebrew and Aramaic, were beginning to get frightened. Wom Christians, and “simple folk” were suddenly prominent in the Jewish book market and poised to take over its popular high-selling end. Two Pauls, having succeeded with Yiddish, went their separate academic ways. Fagius moved to England and became professor of Hebrew at Cambridge, where he died in a few months. Aemilius was appointed professor of Hebrew at Ingolstadt in Bavaria. Both Christian professors of Hebrew had fulfilled the historic role of launching Yiddish publishing in Europe. Fagius died rather young in Cambridge in 1549. His rival Aemilius lived to a ripe old age in Ingolstadt. In his last year, he was employed by the Munich Library to organize and catalogue its Judaica holdings, and is therefore regarded as the first professional Judaica bibliographer in European history.

Another character who entered the fray was also intimate with both Christians and Jews. Scholars differ as to whether Cornelius Adelkind converted. Those who insist that he remained a Jew who simply worked with Christians contend that he adopted the name of the father of his longtime, loyal employer Daniel Bomberg as a sign of honor and respect. Bomberg, a Christian, was a major European publisher who put out some two hundred Hebrew and Aramaic editions at his printing house in Venice. It was a golden age for classic Jewish texts. Bomberg employed Jewish experts on every aspect of text redaction, versions, and proofreading. He also fought for various privileges for his Jewish employees. The pagination of Bomberg’s massive edition of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds remains standard in every Jewish library in the world today. He was also the first to publish the entire Hebrew Bible. The sets appeared in the early 1520s with the express approval of Pope Leo X. His Hebrew Bible remains the classic Hebrew text for Jews and Christians alike.

Adelkind went into Yiddish publishing in the 1540s in competition with the “two Pauls”: Fagius and Aemilius. A German Jew who spent his childhood in Italy (whether or not he converted), Adelkind was a learned man who had many Christian contacts and spent a lifetime in the Jewish printing profession.

There is a very old self-satirizing Yiddish saying, *Azoy vi s'krístlt zekh, azóy yídl't zekh* (As among Christians, so among Jews). It wasn't long before the Christian episode and the heated dispute about the Helitz books in Cracow gave way to the publication of Yiddish books by the efforts of Jewish publishers, printers, and businesspeople in collaboration with Jewish authors, translators, and editors.

The start of Yiddish publishing as a Jewish enterprise was highly controversial. In the history of Yiddish, creativity goes hand-in-hand with impassioned, fiery debate. A Jewish printer, Chaim ben Dovid Shokher, turned to Yiddish after moving from Augsburg to Ichenhausen, where in 1544 he printed a Yiddish prayer book. It was compiled from various earlier manuscripts by his son-in-law, Yosef bar Yokor, whom some consider to have been the first "champion" of Yiddish. Some scholars try to trace an old pedigree for the more modern "Yiddish movement." There is enough ambiguity to allow two opinions about this forever, which is just as well. It might be best to let Yosef bar Yokor speak for himself. These are excerpts from his preface.

I have not translated this prayer book out of my own head but have taken what seems to me the best from those I have read through. . . . The prayers were constructed in very difficult language, and for all our sins, you barely find one in a thousand who knows what they mean. I therefore consider the people who pray in Hebrew and don't understand one word to be utter fools. I for one would just like to know what kind of devout intention [*kavóne*] they could possibly have. . . . We therefore came to the conclusion that we would publish this prayer book in Yiddish and many more books later on.

(Yosef bar Yokor, preface to *Tfilo* [Prayerbook]. Ichenhausen: Chaim ben Dovid Shokher, 1544.)

The august prayer book is followed by a lighthearted afterword, in which Yosef bar Yokor says, in fine Yiddish rhyme in the original:

I allowed it to go on sale for one crown, but I swear by my head, it is well worth ten, as you will very well see for yourself. When you take a look at other prayer books, you will verily conclude that the difference is as great as that between an old hag and a young maiden.

(Yosef bar Yokor, afterword to *Tfilo* [Prayerbook].)

Curiously, the word *kavóne*, that special quality of devoutness and intention while praying, crops up again. Earlier, the Maharil had directed religious songs in Yiddish even when they are sung with *kavón* and here, almost 120 years after his death, when the magical new invention of printing was finally used for Yiddish, a relatively simple fellow who could not hold a candle to the Maharil in learnedness, has the audacity to turn the argument around using the same word and as rhetorically how anyone can pray with devout intent without understanding the prayers. It is fair to say that the "prayer debate" (Hebrew and Aramaic versus the vernacular) is as old as European Jewish civilization, and that both sides have strong traditions. The pray in Yiddish camp could always look back to the famous quotation from the twelfth-century *Book for the Pious*, telling people to pray in whatever language they understand. On the other side of the fence were many rabbis and others who insisted on the classical texts in the original language, which was Hebrew or Aramaic. Ironically, the very song that Maharil had complained about over a century earlier, the song of the unity of God, also appeared in Yiddish as a pamphlet in the 1540s.

The intrinsic debate is intriguing. Some make the argument that prayer should be understood to be felt deeply. Some make the opposite argument: praying from sacred, ancient texts and believing that one is praying in the precise way one's ancestors prayed can bring a more profound spiritual high than using the vernacular. In the history of Yiddish, polemics aside (and there has been a lot of polemicizing) both sides contributed a lot to the traditional genres of Yiddish literature. Those who believed in the vernacular instead of the Hebrew and Aramaic published "sacred book" translations entirely in Yiddish. Those who believed in the primacy of the original "responded" by publishing bilingual texts, classically with the Hebrew and Aramaic original occupying the top half of the page, and the Yiddish translation the bottom half. Yosef bar Yokor's published prayer book (Ichenhausen 1544) speaks for the first approach. Less than a decade later the first published prayer book containing the original Hebrew and Aramaic prayers with a Yiddish translation as well appeared in Venice. It was published by our old friend Cornelius Adelkind in 1552. There is some irony. The "kosher" Jewish publisher went for the more dan-

ing project, going so far as to attack prayer in a sacred language one does not understand. The suspected convert, on the other hand, saw a fine market for the bilingual product that would in some sense satisfy everyone (surely the rabbis could not, and did not, hold it against anyone that they would look toward the bottom of a page to see what the sacred words mean). The bilingual model predominated for Yiddish prayer books and *khumóshim* (literally “editions of the Pentateuch” often containing the Five Scrolls and weekly Prophets selections as well). One could pray in Hebrew and Aramaic or study the original but “look down” at the translation at will. It also meant that women, who prayed together in the *váyber-shul* (women’s synagogue or gallery) could pray exclusively in Yiddish while the men, whether they understood or not, prayed in Hebrew and Aramaic and often had the daily and Sabbath prayers more or less memorized.

Neither of these two types of “pro-Yiddish” activity in the first decades of Yiddish printing was “Yiddishist” in the modern sense of the term. Neither saw (nor could have seen) in Yiddish an intrinsic value in the nineteenth-century sense of “language of the people” and modern nationalism. Yiddish was the only universal vernacular of Ashkenaz, virtually the only literary vehicle for women and, in fact, most men. The first type of activity (praying exclusively in Yiddish) was spiritual, on behalf of prayer from the heart and soul. The second was educational and intellectual within the parameters of traditional Ashkenazic culture and entailed dissemination of the Ashkenazic canon (Pentateuch, weekly readings from the Prophets, and the Five Scrolls) in a form that everyone could study. Still, with or without “language consciousness,” dissemination of a people’s cultural treasures in the vernacular is tantamount to empowerment of an otherwise disenfranchised majority.

LANGUAGE, FUNCTION, STATURE, AND TYPEFACE

In a civilization centered on words, texts, and quotations from ancient works, typefaces took on a major symbolic importance after the invention and spread of printing. Both Christian and Jewish printers pro-

duced pre-1500 books (incunabula) in Hebrew and Aramaic, in Italy and the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal). The Spanishquisition, which came to a head in 1492 with the expulsion of Sephardic Jews from their homeland, brought to a brutal end the of Spain and Portugal in the early history of Jewish printing. It which became the great center of Jewish printing in that period, home to both Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities.

The founders of Jewish typography, Christian and Jewish alike, were irresistibly attracted to the creative process of fashioning a modern Jewish-letter typeface *in addition* to the classic “square” Jewish letters. The square characters are called *meruba*, which means “square.” They are also known as *ksav Ashúri*, literally “Assyrian script” because the Jews adopted it after the 586 B.C. Babylonian exile and eventually abandoned the ancient Hebrew script, which looked completely different and can be read today only by few specialists. The new fonts were modeled on actual Ashkenazic and Sephardic writing of the period, sometimes called “Hebrew cursive.” The printers, inspired by the aesthetic and functional variation in the new Latin and Gothic fonts (and the different styles being developed for early used square letters for the text of the Bible and Talmud and other classic works. In the case of the Bible, they usually included the intricate system of vowel points and accents. They used their more creative adaptations of the contemporary popular written forms of the day for the commentaries on these texts. As noted, the Christian Daniel Bomberg’s printing enterprise pioneered editions of the Bible in both Talmuds that remain standard to this day. But it was the Jewish (originally Ashkenazic but Sephardicized) Soncino family that set the mold for the genre of the commentary, which was usually printed *around* the main text.

The differences between the newly created contemporary fonts were considerable. Not only is there a great deal of variation in handwriting, but it is natural that Sephardic-oriented printers, whether Christian or Jewish, would use Sephardic script as a model, while those oriented toward the Ashkenazic lands would look to typographic handwriting in those countries. The result was a wide array of styles for rabbinic commentaries. The specific style of Sephardic cursive 1

the Soncino family printers used for commentaries became known as Rashi script after the most popular commentator, Rashi (Solomon ben Isaac, 1040–1105), on both the Bible and Talmud. (Rashi, an Ashkenazic Jew who lived centuries before, did not use that script. But names have a way of sticking; to this day the font is known as just Rashi or Rashi letters.)

The story gets more involved. In the 1970s, Judaica bibliographer Herbert Zafren of Cincinnati cracked the mystery of how the third major kind of early Jewish type, the unique separate font for Yiddish, came about, starting with the prints of the brothers Helitz in Cracow in the 1530s (if not earlier). What came to be the Yiddish type font in the 1530s had previously been one of the competing (and now forgotten) typefaces for rabbinic commentaries based on the Ashkenazic handwriting of the time. When the Soncino Rashi script won the battle of the commentaries, the font based on Ashkenazic handwriting was left without a function. The Helitz brothers of Cracow and nearly everyone who followed them until the nineteenth century (close to four hundred years of Yiddish printing) used (1) the Ashkenazic handwriting-based font for Yiddish, (2) square Jewish for the classic Hebrew and Aramaic texts, and (3) Soncino's Rashi font for Hebrew and Aramaic commentaries. A typical Ashkenazic page often has all three fonts—a three-script culture to go with a three-language culture, although not in one-to-one correspondence. Instead, the three fonts roughly correspond to three strata in Jewish history. Square Jewish type was for the classical texts from the Near Eastern period in Jewish history, principally the Bible and the Talmud. The so-called Rashi font was principally for works of rabbinic scholars in Hebrew or Aramaic hailing from the European period in Jewish history and equally in use for Ashkenazic- and Sephardic-origin works. The Yiddish font, often called *máshkit* (formerly also *méshit*), came to be used for Yiddish only. The origin of the name *máshkit* is unknown, and the word continues to inspire etymological speculations.

The special Yiddish type font survived in many places well into the nineteenth century. Why?

First, there is probably a subtle Christian influence. The right-to-left Jewish letter typography arose in emulation of the dazzling invention for left-to-right European gentile typography. There was a desire to replicate the variety of typestyles as a matter of art and professionalism. There was also the European custom of using so-called *bâtarde* (*bastarda*) typefaces for the vernacular to distinguish vernacular text from the classic languages. But even that explanation goes so far. After the first few years (or, more likely, the first few books), it could have gone out of fashion. What happened was that Rashi letters became popular precisely because they were similar to Ashkenazic handwriting on which they were based; the font had a certain heartwarming quality. And on that count the symbolism of Rashi typography had another level too. The mind-set of Ashkenazic civilization is not one of universalism or leveling out in the interests of efficiency or standardization. It is a culture of seemingly infinite differentiation, a culture that takes pleasure in the minutest of details. The morning, afternoon, and evening prayers must be said within fixed time spans that depend on the relative locations of the sun and the moon. There are blessings for the onset of the Sabbath for its end. A person who can study Pentateuch is not at the same level as one who can study Mishna. Mishna is not at the same level as Gemora (the Aramaic Talmud); Gemora can be studied at many levels of depth; serious, philosophical Kabbalah (mysticism) is for an even smaller set of learned people. Into this ancient culture, Ashkenaz gracefully inserted its trilingualism: Aramaic for Talmud and Kabbalah, Hebrew for Bible and its commentaries and community documents, Yiddish for the vernacular and its literature. Square letters for the basic texts, Rashi letters for the scholars, and Yiddish letters for the language spoken by the people. Nuanced Jewish reproduction of Christian custom could fit right into the Ashkenazic way of thinking.

Old Yiddish Literature

ORIGINS

Yiddish was written in the ancient Jewish alphabet as soon as it was spoken. The first Ashkenazim had their extensive Hebrew and Aramaic library, their literacy rate was very high, and there was a tradition of writing anything and everything in the Jewish alphabet (including numbers in the ancient alphanumeric system). Before modern times, most Jews, who could speak with their gentile neighbors, vendors, and customers, could not read Latin, Gothic, or Cyrillic letters, all of which were called *gálkhes* in Yiddish. The word literally means "that which belongs to the priests" (*galókhim*). Two conclusions suggest themselves. First, that non-Jewish writing remained strange for Ashkenazim (with the rare exception of highly assimilated individuals such as the bard Suesskind von Trimberg, who wrote German lyrics in the early thirteenth century). Second, they noticed that it was usually priests and other officials of the majority religion and government who could read and write in their Christian alphabet (in countries run in part or in full by the Church there were no clear distinctions between church and state). Hence the name they gave to this strange script, although created on an Aramaic collective noun mode.

is exquisitely Yiddish—*gálkhes* (from the Hebrew and Aramaic root for “to shave,” derived from the monastic practice of tonsuring).

Having an inherited alphabet and putting it to immediate use for their new language, the Ashkenazim rapidly established a more or less phonetic writing system, aiming toward “one letter for one sound.” The ability to adapt an ancient Semitic alphabet to a medieval European setting came about through a circumstance of linguistic history. A number of ancient Semitic consonants were lost in the European linguistic environment. They are generally the laryngeal (“guttural”) consonants produced deep in the throat that were alien to most European languages. Then there were other letters that had been made to double as vowels in the Aramaic period. The earliest writers of Yiddish took these “freed-up” letters and used them for the basic vowel sounds: of the ancient laryngeals, alef for *a* and *o* sounds and, most famously characteristic of Yiddish, ayin for the vowel *e*. Of the letters “vowelized” in the Aramaic period, yud was used for *i* and *e* sounds, two yuds for *ey* and *ay* diphthongs, and vov for *u* and *o* vowels. The system was rounded off by the use of two vovs for *v* rather in the spirit of European *w*.

One of the earliest types of written Yiddish was the private letter or note, although, not surprisingly, little has been preserved; for example, the Speyer Letter of 1454. There were also legal documents and declarations that authorities wanted Jews to sign with an understanding of what they were signing. Unlike the surviving private letters, whose Yiddish is relatively close to the spoken Yiddish of the time, the legal documents tend toward a Germanizing style. Although the spoken language had to be as stable (with plenty of variation allowed for) as any other spoken language, the written documents of those centuries can be located on a kind of continuum ranging from “real” Yiddish to German or Germanized Yiddish in the Jewish alphabet and using the Yiddish spelling system. Among these is a declaration signed in 1392 by Meir ben Borukh ha-Leyvi, a fourteenth-century rabbinic scholar, upon being released from prison. He subsequently became rabbi of Vienna.

In addition to personal and legal documents, there were medical works, ranging from recipes for proven remedies to superstition-laden

folkloristic cures for all kinds of maladies. One of the oldest Yiddish genres is the *ópshprekhenish*, a kind of magic formula that can drive away the demons and evil spirits that bring sickness and misfortune to people. Some of the undated survivals are very old, for example, the famous “Instruction on the Powers of Bloodletting and the Veil” from the Jewish year corresponding to 1396–1397.

Then there was the *shprokh*, a formula uttered for protection. One famous *shprokh* manuscript, from the fourteenth or fifteenth century, says: “When I go forth today, may twelve angels be with me, three to accompany me, three to show me the way, three to destine my journey for happiness and health, and three to bring me in the name of Almighty God back home.” Then come four final words in Hebrew: “in the name of God the God of Israel.” The flavor of Ashkenazic multiculturalism is discernible as Hebrew and Yiddish complement each other (Yiddish text with Hebrew sacred formula to cap it off) in the spirit of a prejourney incantation that was widespread throughout Christian Europe. It was used in addition to (instead of?) the traditional Hebrew prayer for the road.

EUROPEAN EPIC FOR A YIDDISH AUDIENCE

The people of Ashkenaz enjoyed some of the same epic tales as their Christian neighbors, as long as incompatible religious references were modified or brushed out. Compared to the traditional Jewish literature, these Christian-origin epics were chivalrous, violent, and sexual. They provided light relief and entertainment and were the first form of popular European culture that the Yiddish language brought to the Ashkenazic population. It didn’t bother the readership (or audience when these epic poems were performed) that these were basically the same stories enjoyed by their Christian neighbors. The modifications often came to provide a humor absent in the solemn original. The Yiddish versions are inherently humorous being disseminated among a population that was completely unarmored and had heroes who were scholars of the Torah and its literature. The same basic plotline entertained the two audiences in very different ways.

The primary modifications replaced Christian religious references with something neutral or Jewish. A plea to the Virgin Mary might be replaced by one to God Almighty, or even to our mother Sarah, with some humor. In a case where a famous German epic has the German word *Kirche* for “church,” the Yiddish might replace it with *tifle*, a humorous and frankly unflattering term, derived from a difficult ancient biblical word that is usually translated “unseemliness” (Job 1:22). This occurs in the tale of Horant preserved in the 1382 Cambridge Codex. It is, incidentally, appropriately symbolic that this Yiddish version of a European legend of the Middle Ages happens not to be preserved in German at all. It is the story of an exquisite beauty in Greece called Hilda, whose father, the wild King Hagen, arranges for the murder of anyone who asked for her hand. But young King Hetel decides to mount a dangerous expedition to capture Hilda. The royal expedition is led by Horant, one of the king’s vassals, who pretends to be a merchant-philanthropist and is welcomed in town. In the end, Horant’s magnificent singing attracts Hilda to meet him, and they plan their elopement. Only a fragment of the manuscript is preserved and the ending remains unknown.

There were Yiddish versions of other popular stories, such as the tale of Ditrikh of Bern and Hildebrand, two friends who are exiled from their homeland for over thirty years. This theme of exile struck a poignant chord with Jewish audiences. Hildebrand and Ditrikh confer on Hildebrand’s plan to finally return to Bern (the Italian city Verona). Ditrikh urges him to persuade the young guard of Verona to give him safe passage, but Hildebrand is determined, despite his age, to fight his way through. After the young guard wounds him, it emerges in the ensuing conversation that Hildebrand is the guard’s long lost father. In the Yiddish version, the wounded knight is offered “chicken and fish” to refresh him when they make it into town, replacing the general reference to refreshment in the Germanic versions. The juxtaposition of the exploits of the gentile knights with the traditional Ashkenazic dish would have made contemporary audiences roar with laughter. It is the humor of the unexpected and incongruous. The delight is enhanced by performance in rhymed verse.

The 1382 Cambridge Yiddish Codex contains a number of highly original Jewish-origin pieces. But the first known Yiddish versions of European literary favorites that show remarkable literary originality were composed in the early sixteenth century by Elijah Levita (Eliyahu Bokher), the master Ashkenazic philologist (see pp. 66–67). In 1515, a Christian Yiddish publisher Paul Fagius published his teacher’s Yiddish poetic masterpiece, *Bovo of Antona*.

It is a highly original Yiddish version of a Tuscan Italian epic romance, *Buovo d’Antona*, itself ultimately adapted, through a chain of translations and adaptations, from the originally Anglo-Norman romance of Bueve de Hantone (English *Sir Bevis of Hampton*), based on the legends of the semimythical founder of Southampton, England. The Yiddish version contains the first use in any Germanic language of the *ottava rima*, the Italian stanza form comprising eight eleven-syllable lines with an AB-AB-AB-CC rhyme scheme. It was an Italian standard from the time of Boccaccio in the fourteenth century. The narrative starts with Guidon, duke of Antona, who remains a bachelor until late in life. He suffers from a cold in his old age, and his advisers counsel marriage (in a scene hilariously reminiscent of King David’s last days when his advisers brought him the Shunamite; 1 Kings 1). Guidon has brought a luscious young beauty called Brandonia. She marries the old man but can’t stand the sight of him. They had a son, Bovo, who is raised in the castle of St. Simon under Count Sinibald. Meanwhile Brandonia becomes ever more unhappy with her old man and eventually decides on intrigue. She writes to Duke Dodon of Magentz (Mainz), suggesting he invade her hometown and rescue her from her senior citizen husband in the process. She coquettishly sends her husband on a hunting trip; Dodon lies in wait in the forest and murders him. Later the happy couple, Brandonia and Dodon, decide to do away with the unwanted child, Bovo. He manages to escape but is sold into slavery and eventually grows into a handsome young man with golden locks who wins the heart of the princess of the faraway land where he ends up. There is a feast (roasted chicken and fish in the Yiddish version), at which the princess, called Druziana, drops her knife on the floor in order to steal a kiss with Bovo. Bovo, then a poor stable hand in his land of refuge, fights a public duel with a stronger opponent

He gets himself a makeshift shield but cannot find a sword. Instead he finds a twisted old wooden beam and uses it to devastating effect, this time invoking for the Jewish reader's imagination the young David using his slingshot against Goliath (1 Samuel 17:40). Druziana continues her romantic pursuit of Bovo and eventually tries to seduce him by removing her top. The risqué scene allows the early sixteenth-century Yiddish writer to insert himself comically for the reader's pleasure. Bovo doesn't even look at her magnificent chest, but the author assures his audience, "Not likely that would be the outcome with Elye Bókher."

There are many instances of Yiddish humor. When Druziana fears at one point that Bovo will leave her for good, he reassures her: "May I be baptized if I don't come back to you!" The sultan in a distant land orders Bovo to convert to Islam or be hanged, telling his underlings to first try to bring the Jew into the Muslim *kóel*, using a word for "community" (*kóhol* in Ashkenazic Hebrew) that refers most emphatically, and exclusively, to a traditional Jewish community. Thanks to Jerry C. Smith's fine translation into English, called *Elia Levita Bachur's Bovo-buch* (2003), this classic can now be widely enjoyed.

Another Yiddish reworking from Italian, once (but no longer) thought to have been penned by the prolific Elye Bókher, was *Paris un Vyéne* (Paris and Viena). The story was popular throughout Europe and there are manuscript versions in ten languages. Its intricate plot revolves around the love of a lower-born knight, Paris, for Viena, the magnificent daughter of King Dolfin. Nothing comes of it because the king naturally wants his daughter to marry proper royalty. After considering the family of the king of England, he settles on the son of the duke of Burgundy. The wedding feast is prepared, but Viena shames her father by refusing; she is put in prison, where she refuses to eat. The foreign duke arrives. The king is ashamed to tell him the truth at first, but it comes out eventually. The duke accepts that matches can only come from heaven and asks only to see Viena once. Viena agrees on condition that three days elapse. She uses the time to allow the roasted chicken, which was delivered to her, to rot and binds it under her arm. Amid the repulsive odor, she tells her royal suitor that she is

deathly sick with an incurable ailment. Paris dejectedly wanders across Europe for many years and after many ins-and-outs finally turns to Dolfin's court in a Turkish outfit. He ends up having better luck the second time.

There are rhymes between words of Hebrew, German, and Italian origin, which function as an integrated literary language. The work is written in an exact iambic meter devised by the author. It is full of homey Yiddish expressions as well as hearty insults (like *mámzer-hanide*, literally "a bastard born of a woman who was [in addition to not being married to her partner] menstrually unclean during his deception"). The Jewish humor is laid on thick and fast. Viena is described early on as a maiden who doesn't need a guard to believe in herself (where the word for "guard" is Talmudic) because she is "kosher," a take on the common Yiddish phrase *a kóshere yíd* (*tókhter*, a kosher Jewish daughter). At a crucial point, someone tells Paris: "Boy, will she drive you crazy," using the popular Yiddish word *meshúge*. At points in the narrative where the French, German, or Italian reader would be taking it all rather seriously, the Yiddish reader would be rolling in laughter at the application of homespun Yiddish and a thick Jewish atmosphere to these very Christian characters. According to master Old Yiddish scholar Jerold Frakes, the Yiddish *Paris and Viena* is actually "at a high level of renaissance literature, folksy or homey at all."

These two sixteenth-century works demonstrate the sophistication of the old forms of literary Yiddish for complicated poetic epics. Other works may have been at the same level but were lost. That literature is secular insofar as the themes, plots, and heroes are taken from the gentile world, with ease and pleasure, and without any concerns beyond the replacement of specific Christian religious references.

One of the most adored of European works rendered into Old Yiddish was *King Arthur's Court*. A partial 1279 Hebrew reworking of another work from the cycle, *Lancelot*, is kept in the Vatican library in Rome. Nobody knows when the first renditions in Yiddish arose, but they probably started circulating not long after the work on which they were based, Gravenberg's early-thirteenth-century German version titled *Wigalois*. The two central characters, Gavein and his

Vidvilt (Widvilt), were as cherished for Yiddish readers as they were for Germans and other Europeans. An old Yiddish saying about someone whose house is too fancy says that “the guy thinks his house is King Arthur’s court.”

BIBLE STUDY AND TRANSLATION; BIBLE AS EUROPEAN EPIC

The earliest preserved Yiddish written words go back to the eleventh century and predate personal names known from lists of Crusade victims. An early Ashkenazic tradition added Yiddish translations of particularly irksome words to manuscripts (usually in the margin). These marginal translations, known in Yiddish as *táytsht-verter* (translation words), are called glosses in the academic literature. They are sometimes found in Bible manuscripts intended for study (not to be confused with the sacred Torah scroll in the synagogue to which nothing may be added). Sometimes they are found in Hebrew and Aramaic lexicons and dictionaries. Some scholars believe that the tradition of writing the Yiddish equivalents for the “hard words” evolved into partial and then complete text translations.

In the Bible and Talmud commentaries of the great medieval Ashkenazic commentator Rashi (1040–1105), the phrase *b’loshn Ashkenaz* (in the language of Ashkenaz) is frequently used to introduce a Yiddish word to translate an occasional hard-to-explain word or phrase. For example, in his commentary to Genesis 1:27, “And God created man in His own image,” Rashi explains things using the analogy of minting a coin: “made with the seal [of the Maker] like a coin that is made by a mold that is called *coin* [or *konets*] and in *loshn Ashkenaz* it is called *shtémpel*” (which happens to be the modern Yiddish word for “seal” or “stamp”). Translations of parts of the Bible into Yiddish probably date back to the earliest generations of Ashkenaz. By the time we have a manuscript tradition, from which the printing traditions took their material in the 1540s, there is a fixed method of translating. The last thing on the mind of the translator of those days was “developing Yiddish style” or even “good style in the language into which the Bible is

translated.” The translator had two purposes, each of which helped to produce a special kind of written Yiddish that lasted many centuries.

First, the translation was to be as literally accurate as possible. An obvious motive for this is the holiness of the text being translated. This often meant inventing Yiddish words to match biblical Hebrew. If biblical Hebrew had a single verb for “to reign” or “to be king” akin to the Hebrew word “king,” then Yiddish would have one too. Some medieval translators took the Yiddish word for king, *kinig*, and made a verb *kinig* meaning “to reign.” If a biblical Hebrew word for catastrophe came from the Hebrew root for “break,” the Yiddish translator shadowed it, too, coming up with *brokh* (which has made it into modern Yiddish). In the well-known phrase, *Oy a brokh!* for “Oh darn!”).

Second, the Yiddish Bible translation was meant to have a psychological aura of sanctity, giving rise to a style that is differentiated from both spoken Yiddish and the Germanized style of the popular secular writings. What developed was an archaizing style not dissimilar in principle to the continuing pleasure taken nowadays in the King James translation, replete with its *thous* and *thines*. It was a tower of Babel in the twentieth-century Bible educator, Nechama Leibowitz (1905–1997), whose 1930 study demonstrated the technique of archaization in a study of Old Yiddish translations of the Psalms. Traditional Yiddish Bible translations brim with *náyert* (but or only) and *drum* (therefore) which were borrowed back into modern Yiddish literature for special effect.

The first Yiddish printed book, from Cracow (1534), was a Bible concordance, the kind of book that helped the serious Bible student to come to grips with the original text. Yiddish Bible translations also became popular in the first decades of Yiddish printing. But long before Yiddish printing, the Yiddish language and the Bible had a relationship that was deeper than translation for the sake of understanding the literal meaning of the text or even learning Hebrew in order to read the original. In the case of Ashkenaz, one of the most beloved activities was (and remains) storytelling. The first extensive Yiddish manuscript, with a date, the so-called Cambridge Codex of 1382, in addition to the *Dukus Horant* epic, includes poetic compositions on the death

Aaron, Paradise, Abraham, and Joseph the Righteous. It also has straight biblical material, such as lists of the traditional weekly portions from the Torah and of the precious stones in the high priest's breastplate.

These reworkings of the biblical narrative have a medieval European flavor. They reuse the ancient material in a novel way in Yiddish in one or another of the genres of Christian Europe. The most popular was the epic poem. The books of Samuel and Kings lend themselves to wistful reinterpretation as epic romance, with all the kings, wars, lovers, intrigues, and action. The appearance of characters like King David as a medieval knight had its humorous side too, especially when obvious postbiblical traditions are comically woven into the story. The Yiddish retellings of these two books, the *Shmúel bukh* (Samuel Book) and the *Mlókhim bukh* (Kings Book), go back to the fifteenth century at least and probably earlier. There is evidence that they were performed before an audience of some sort. The author of at least one (the *Shmúel bukh*) is supposed to be (the obviously pseudonymous) Moyshe Eshim-veárbe (Moyshe of the Twenty-Four, in other words, a master of the books of the Hebrew Bible). These two early Yiddish works symbolize the quintessential Ashkenazic spirit of a synthesis of ancient Jewish material with contemporary European form. Finally, the Bible is the ultimate source of Yiddish drama. It was traditional to stage a Purim play based on the book of Esther. It became acceptable over the centuries for the annual Purim play to have more than a touch of the "off-color" that would be condemned the rest of the year. At some unknown point, Yiddish playwrights started writing plays telling the stories of other books of the Bible, including "The Selling of Joseph," "Moses our Teacher," and "David and Goliath." Many of the details in these works are not based on the biblical accounts, but rather the much-embellished later midrashic literature.

FOUR

What Should a Lady Read?

THE BIBLE OR EUROPEAN ROMANCES?

Although Yiddish printing was established by Christians (born or converted) in the sixteenth century, the battle of early Yiddish publishing that shaped up by the end of the century was internal to Ashkenazic Jewry. The intellectual fault line within Ashkenaz had been aflame for centuries, between a rabbinate guarding its authority and control over Ashkenazic society and a popular culture movement to spiritually and culturally empower women and the masses of men via the vernacular and what the vernacular could bring to the nonscholarly majority.

By the twelfth or early thirteenth century, that same *Book for the Pious* that was so tolerant of prayer to God in the vernacular, had a rather different message when it came to secular romances:

A person may not cover a sacred book with pieces of parchment upon which romance works are written. . . . There was the case of the person who covered his Pentateuch with leather on which alien things were written, with nonsense about the quarrels of kings and nations. A pious man came and slit it right off.

(Book for the Pious [*Sefer khasidim* / *Sefer Hasidim*],
sec. 141. Bologna, 1538 and editions following it.)

Although this segment also refers to non-Jewish languages, there can be little doubt that Yehúde Khósid and the others in his twelfth- and early-thirteenth-century circle in Ashkenaz would have looked askance at any romances (the original has the word *romants* transcribed into Jewish characters).

In the centuries before printing, only well-to-do people could afford to own a manuscript, often a top-end luxury item bequeathed by parents to children. The first items that people wanted to own were a prayer book or Pentateuch. The secular romance manuscripts were often written to be declaimed before others as well as just “read.” Little is known about the details of these “performances” but they were likely declaimed before audiences comprising men and women. In the age of printing, secular works in Yiddish became available to people of average resources. For example, King Arthur’s Court texts changed from manuscripts for performers to printed editions for everybody. In a manuscript there would often be a line (fitting into the rhymed structure) in which the performer teasingly asks the audience to buy him a drink before he will tell them what happens next. In the printed versions it is sometimes deleted or changed, though some editors retained such references in the hope that the work might indeed be performed, much as a playwright includes stage instructions. But the age of these declamations (which may or may not have been widespread) was coming to an end. The printed book did for Jewish women and many non-Talmudic men what its non-Jewish vernacular analog was doing in Christian Europe.

In that literary sense, Yiddish in the age of printing provided a new European component in Ashkenazic civilization. But the debate was not over language in any direct sense. None of the combatants had anything for or against Yiddish per se. But Yiddish, being the vernacular, was of necessity the means by which European tales reached the Jews of Ashkenaz. Nobody complained about there being a Hebrew version of King Arthur’s Court. Hardly anyone knew it existed, very few people could read it even if they had known, and anyone who could would have been immersed in the sacred books in any case, and thus inoculated against the “harm” of cultural invasion by Christian

Europe. The debate would have remained an exotic rarity were it not for the rise of Yiddish printing. The published Yiddish versions of epic romances became popular, and the reading public would come a new (previously unread) secular romance in Yiddish as a respite from endless study of Bible translations, prayer, ethics, and women’s laws. This was also true of many men who, in Ashkenazic parlance, “could not learn” (did not know enough to study Hebrew and Aramaic texts in the original). Just as Yiddish distinguished between a traditional sacred book in Hebrew or Aramaic (a *seyfer*) and any other book (*bukh*), the plurals of these words came to have a cultural significance in that old internal Ashkenazic debate. The high ideal was to be immersed in *sfórim*, and the popular Yiddish books came known as *bikhlakh*, a grammatical diminutive that can be translated as “booklets” or “pulp literature.” The contrastive terminology fit well to the frequent physical size of the two types, the more so in the age of printing. Tomes of the Talmud would be in large folio sizes and a popular tale in Yiddish would be printed in small, cheap format to ensure maximal distribution at low cost.

When the debate heated up in the new age of Yiddish printing, with all its newly added commercial ramifications, the publishers, editors, and compilers of Yiddish religious books would routinely attack secular storybooks. Sometimes the same publisher was publishing both kinds of books, and the criticism rings rather hollow and insincere.

From the mid-sixteenth century there was a surge in the production of tradition-oriented books, such as *Commandments for Women* (*Mitsves nóshim*, published in Venice in 1552 and 1588), publications, and republications of individual books of the Bible in Yiddish, and a number of moralistic works and translations. Cracow, which had pioneered Yiddish publishing when the Helitz brothers’ publishing enterprise flourished in the 1530s, again became a major center of Yiddish publishing toward the end of the century. But this time around it was a Jewish enterprise. The leading publisher was the Prosznitz (or Prosnitz) family, originally of Moravia. They produced Jewish books in Cracow between 1569 and 1626. From the early 1570s through the late 1590s they are known to have published a good number of pious Yiddish tomes, mostly taken from earlier publications

and occasionally from manuscripts. The speciality was individual books of the Bible. The war drums against secular romances continued in the introductions to some of the sacred books in Yiddish, underlining that the conflict had shifted to a purely cultural one between two different kinds of literature, both entirely in Yiddish (as distinguished, say, from the Maharil's earlier worry about Yiddish songs potentially detracting from the perceived need to perform religious rituals).

The 1544 Konstanz edition of the Five Books contains a polemical pronouncement about reading choices open to women.

This book is also for the benefit of women and girls. It is common that they can all read Yiddish well but squander their time in books of nonsense like *Ditrikh of Bern*, *Hildebrand* and the likes of them, which are nothing but lies and concoctions. These same women and girls can now find their entertainment in this edition of the Five Books, which is all pure and clear truth.

(Preface to *Khúmesh*, Megiles, Haftóyres
[*Pentateuch, Scrolls and Haftiaroth*], Konstanz: Paulus Fagius, 1544.)

The counter-strategy of the antiseccular literature camp was then to empower women *within* the structure of the traditional religious community. Even today, many American Jews remember hearing from their grandmother about the women proudly following along in the Yiddish Bible and prayer book during Sabbath and holiday services. The "threat" of the 1544 Konstanz publishers to bring out the whole Old Testament in Yiddish was not realized. The first complete Yiddish texts of the Hebrew Bible were not to appear for well over a century thereafter. But the thrust of the movement for popular religious knowledge, coming as it did in the wake of the wide spread of printing in Europe and during the time of the Reformation and Luther's Bible were carrying out analogous goals among the Christians, is quite clear. With extraordinarychutzpah, the publishers even use the word *seyfer* for the book, classing it as a sacred book, to be cherished alongside Hebrew Bibles and Aramaic Talmuds, not one of "those little *bikhlakh*." Its title page has a motto from the book of Jeremiah that is explosive in the sixteenth-century Ashkenazic context: "And they shall no longer teach everyman his neighbor and everyman his

brother, saying: 'Know God' because they shall all know Me, from least of them to the greatest of them, so sayeth God" (Jeremiah 31:34). In one fell swoop, knowledge of God is open to everyone, including women and girls, all of whom can read Yiddish well.

Safety warnings against *Ditrikh of Bern* and *Hildebrand* became commonplace in Bible translation prefaces. The 1545 edition of *Psalm* ends with an afterword that might be described as the confession of Cornelius Adelkind, somewhat in the spirit of Elye Bókher's preface to his *Bovo of Antona* (see pp. 69–70).

In my younger days I published many precious and large sacred books, and put all my energy into it, as one can see from all of [Daniel] Bomberg's prints where I am inscribed at the beginning or the end. Now that I have grown old, I have thought things over, that I have done nothing for the pious women and for those men who had no time to study in their younger years or even later, and who would nevertheless spend their time on Sabbath or holiday with reading Godly tidings and not about "Ditrikh of Bern" or "The Good Luck of the Beautiful Girl." And so for their sake, those who would gladly read God's word, one finds very few books that are written in Yiddish and well translated, so I went to Mr. Elye Bókher [Elijah Levita] to translate some books for me, and first of all, the book of Psalms.

(Cornelius Adelkind, afterword to *Tebilm* [Psalms], Venice, 1545)

The rabbis worried that the aura of European popular culture—knights with swords, power, murder, intrigue, sexual allure, adult challenges, duels, in short, the adulation of physical and political power—would lead Jewish women to spend Sabbath afternoons on other times of leisure dreaming about those convoluted plots instead of being immersed in the values of the Torah and the literature of laudable morals, and customs that had been assembled for women over the generations. But this was a tricky issue. The Jewish intellectual tradition allowed for a few leading women, from the matriarchs of the Torah—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah—through Deborah the prophetess in the days of the Judges (around the twelfth century B.C.), Beruriah, the learned wife of Rabbi Meir (second century A.D.). They and others became the subject of many legends. Still, they were exc

tions in a patriarchal tradition. It would be anachronistic to apply twenty-first-century Western mores to old Ashkenaz; the traditional Ashkenazic woman believed with all her heart and soul that following the commandments and bringing up boys to become great scholars and girls to bring up another generation of great scholars was the greatest ideal, not the pursuit of personal intellectual fulfillment. But now, with the boom in production of Yiddish printed books with stories of European chivalry, the women “had where to go” without actually violating any commandment. Nowhere, after all, does the Good Book, which is hardly wanting in violence, sex, power, and intrigue, say “Thou shalt not read.” That was the nub of the crisis, psychologically speaking, and it irked some of the men who ran Ashkenazic intellectual life. But there was little they could do to stop it, especially in the face of the care that the authors and publishers of secular works took to ensure that all was culturally kosher. They removed or replaced Christian references and added Jewish ones. They sometimes went out of their way to add religious afterwords and the occasional godly moral to the story. That irked the rabbis even more. Elye Bókher concluded his *Bovo of Antona* with the words (in the original language they are in the rhymed pattern of the entire work): “And may we all merit to live to see Messiah’s time, may he lead us right into Jerusalem, or at least to a village nearby, and build for us the holy temple, may it come to pass, Amen.”

A WOMEN’S BIBLE AND THE BOOK OF STORIES

The spirit was “If you can’t beat them, join them.” The traditionalist initiative to provide a pleasurable Yiddish alternative to secular romances led to the rise of new Yiddish genres at the end of the sixteenth century. They include polemic spoofs, plays based on biblical motifs, and prose based on ancient midrashic tales. An arc of generally increasing literary originality can be traced in these religious and pious works. All are literarily significant though not adhering to any modern Western model such as novel, short story, or poem. A lot of it was emanating from the eastern part of Ashkenaz, the Polish area

Poland in the sixteenth century was rapidly becoming the nucleus of a new eastern Ashkenaz that would eclipse the older western branch.

The *Tseneréne* (the Yiddish Women’s Bible) became a long-running Yiddish best-seller. Over three hundred editions have appeared, but nobody knows exactly how many. It is a Yiddish elaboration and paraphrase of the “Ashkenazic canon” parts of the Hebrew Bible: other words the Five Books of Moses (the *Khúmesh*: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy); the weekly Prophet readings (*Haftaroth*, Yiddish *di haftóyres*); and the Five Scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther). It was compiled by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Yanov. No one is sure which of the many East European towns called Yanov (or Yanova) this is, and his location remains a source of mystique. For the book’s title, the author followed tradition and found an alluring title in the Bible. He took the Hebrew plural feminine imperative for “Come out and see!” from a passage in the Song of Songs (“Come out and see King Solomon upon the crooked O ye daughters of Zion,” Song of Songs 3:11). In Yiddishized pronunciation, these Hebrew words, *ts’éno u-r’éno* (Israeli Hebrew *tseéna u-réna*) became the *Tseneréne* (Yiddish *di Tseneréne*), a copy of which was the traditional Ashkenazic woman’s most precious possession for centuries to come. It continues in print today for Hasidic communities. The first three editions, starting probably in the 1590s, were read in pieces and not a trace remains. The oldest surviving edition, from 1622, indicates that the first three editions, one printed in Lublin and two in Cracow, were by then unavailable.

Instead of “translating” those principal parts of the Bible, the author interwove and interlaced his narrative with material from ancient and medieval commentaries and legends. The result was not a partial Yiddish Bible translation, such as those that had been appearing in print from the 1540s onward, but a new work that told the stories of the Bible in the way they had been interpreted, extrapolated, expanded on, and understood by a millennium and a half of rabbinic scholars. In addition to stories, it gave many commentaries of the type that learned men reveled in developing and exchanging



Figure 4.1 The Ashkenazic Women's Bible, the *Tseneréne*, a graceful paraphrase of the Five Books, the weekly readings from the Prophets, and the Five Scrolls, was written by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Yanov in the waning years of the sixteenth century. The oldest surviving edition of this work, often considered the greatest Yiddish best-seller of all time, is from 1622. Over three hundred editions have appeared to date. (By permission of Dr. Hermann Suess, Rostock University Library)

In one fell swoop, this erstwhile male world was opened to the Jewish woman.

The *Tseneréne* seamlessly interweaves several thousand years of texts and ideas in simple everyday Yiddish, without the apparatus of daunting bibliographic cross-references or a stack of esoteric tomes on the table. This was a book Jewish women (and some men) enjoyed reading and studying. It was infinitely more popular than the straight Bible translations. In the eyes of its female readership, it was genuine Yiddish empowerment in a way that a straight Bible translation could never be.

Jacob ben Joseph of Yanov followed the *Tseneréne* with a similar compilation on the Prophets and Hagiographa. Again, its name is in historic allusion. He called it *Séyfer ha-mágid*, which literally means "the book that tells" or "the messenger book" according to the biblical sense of the word *magid*; for example, "the messenger (*ha-magid*) came to David, saying" (2 Samuel 15:13). In Ashkenazic society, a *magid* was a traveling preacher who would deliver a talk interweaving many Jewish sources in a continuous narrative with a charisma that delighted his audiences. Now Jacob ben Joseph turned the genre from an oral discourse by a learned man into a second Bible book for women. Jacob ben Joseph of Yanov has rightly been called the Martin Luther of Yiddish. He used the vernacular of his people and the Bible to raise the level of creativity and stature of the spoken language by bringing serious knowledge to anyone who could read. Going beyond Luther, Jacob of Yanov synthesized commentaries and works from many diverse times and places in an easy-to-read book. This offered a form of intellectual liberation to the Ashkenazic woman.

Starting in early Ashkenaz, stories circulated about the hallowed personalities of the new European Jewish civilization, orally and in manuscripts. Among those that survived were tales about Rabe Gershom (c. 960–1028), Rashi (1040–1105), and the father and son who were at the center of the Pious of Ashkenaz movement. The "primeval Ashkenazim" thereby joined a pantheon of precious characters, starting with Adam and Eve, about whom stories were assembled in ancient and medieval Jewish literature. Parallels f

European Christendom include a late Latin analog to the early Yiddish *máyse* ("story," as in Jewish Aramaic; in biblical Hebrew, it meant "work" or "deed" from the root for "to do"). That was the Christian *exemplum*, a short tale used by a preacher to illustrate a point or exemplify model behavior by telling about the life of a saint. *Gesta Romanorum* (Deeds of the Romans) was a popular compilation preachers used to inspire their congregations and writers used as material on which to expand.

By the late sixteenth century, the indigenous Ashkenazic tradition of stories had coalesced into a book in the hands of generations of anonymous compilers. In the age of publishing this became part of the traditionalist literary response to the secular books, part of the rise of traditionalist Yiddish literature that is intended to satisfy the reader, not just inform. Like the *Tseneréne*, it was meant to be enjoyable, not just educational. The oldest known edition dates to 1602, published in Basel under the title *Máyse bukh* (Book of Stories), and was put together by Jacob ben Abraham of Mezritsh, also known as Yankev Polak, or Jacob of Poland. It was a hit with readers, especially its target audience, Jewish women.

The *Book of Stories* comprises three major threads. The first consists of tales from antiquity, mostly stories from Talmudic and midrashic literature that the compiler adopted from *Eyn-Yánkev* (*Ein Yaakov*), an anthology of legends from the Talmud that was put together by the Sephardic scholar Jacob ibn Habib, who died around 1516. The second part of the Yiddish work is drawn from the legends and stories around the father-and-son team at the center of the Pious of Ashkenaz movement, Shmuel ben Kalonymus the Chosid, of Speyer (twelfth century), and his son, Yehúde Khósid of Regensburg (c. 1150–1217). The final part comprises a wide variety of tales drawn from far and wide including many non-Jewish sources. Literary scholars have found that a number of beloved tales from the days of rhymed epics about gentle knights somehow made their way into the *Book of Stories*, Judaicized and shortened, transformed into the genre of the short-short story.

Second only to the *Tseneréne*, the *Book of Stories* became a must for every Jewish woman and many men in Ashkenazic society. Although the stories had to have a moral, which was sometimes a mechanical

tag-on from the literary point of view, the essential criterion was that they be enjoyable and succeed in the new European marketplace of printed Yiddish books.

LIFESTYLE LITERATURE

It was in another newly reinvigorated genre of Yiddish literature, lifestyle literature, that Yiddish expanded beyond its natural base and eventually include a hefty proportion of men readers who could find that it was addressed equally to them. This development can be traced through a number of authors and works, starting in the 1590s, to a decade of "pious counterattack" against secular Yiddish literature. It started with a desire—literary, commercial, or probably both—to have "official" male readers too.

Earlier Yiddish publications of works on Jewish ethics, such as the *Book of Traits* (*Séyfer mides*), and works on women's laws, such as *Conduct of Women* (*Hanhóges nóshim*), had been among early Yiddish printed works of the 1540s. The first of these was a version of a Hebrew text (published after the Yiddish version), and the second was a relatively straight rendition of women's laws. These Yiddish books mirrored their Hebrew counterparts (or the texts on which the "originals" were based) rather closely. They fulfilled the practical purpose of informing what the classic sources say, whether about everyday life or points of Jewish law that women need to know. There was no attempt at creativity.

But that changed at the end of the sixteenth century, as part of the traditionalist response to Ditríkh of Bern and other secular romances. As in the retelling of parts of the Bible (the *Tseneréne*) and the compilation of the classic tales of Ashkenazic civilization in the *Book of Stories*, there was a new wave of creative Yiddish writing in a pious, traditionalist, God-fearing mood. Alongside Bible and stories, the third genre of the revived, energetic Yiddish literature of the traditionalists is usually called *múser*. The word is derived from a biblical term (*musár*) that is particularly common in Proverbs, where it is usually translated "instruction," "correction," or "reproof" and came over the centuries to refer to the need to keep watch over one's character and

conduct, and to tell off friends when they have gone wrong. The classic European Jewish literature of this genre was written in Hebrew in the Middle Ages, mostly in Spain and partly in Italy. Its classics include *The Obligations of the Hearts* by Bahya ibn Paquda (late eleventh century), *The Book of Fear of God* by Jonah Gerondi (c. 1200–1263), and the *Advantages of Good Attributes* by Jehiel of Rome (late thirteenth century).

Late-sixteenth-century attempts at original Yiddish contributions developed this literary form into an all-encompassing lifestyle literature. Even in its earlier form in Hebrew, it covered far more than what would today fall under ethics. It included everything from the pitfalls of envy to the need to feel upbeat and in good spirits. In its new Yiddish guise, it was adapted to the Ashkenazic Europe of the sixteenth century. Like the secular romances and the traditionalist *múser*, it was inspired by deep feelings of pride and happiness with the traditional Ashkenazic Jewish heritage and all that it implies. The notion that one should feel *lucky* at being born into this minority is a point often brought home in this literature.

This lifestyle literature progressed over a few years, within the 1590s, from booklets of moral warnings to encyclopedias in which the reader could look up the right thing to do in a vast array of situations. One 1590 booklet intended for men was written by Abraham Ashkenazi Apetéker (the pharmacist). Like the author of the *Tseneréne*, Jacob ben Joseph, Abraham was from eastern Ashkenaz, the Slavic area to which the religious and secular center of Ashkenaz was by then rapidly shifting. Apetéker lived in Ludmir, Ukraine (now Vladimir Volynski). It was published in Prague in a bilingual Hebrew and Yiddish edition, with so many forced rhymes that a lot of it is barely comprehensible. Its name, *Sam kháyim*, can translate “Medicine that Heals” or simply “Elixir of Life.” In either case, the author meant to take a pharmaceutical image from his trade and to apply it to the moral sphere of daily life. Like many of the Yiddish authors and publishers of the day, he saw himself as part of a movement of the times that stressed vernacular language and the new liberating force of the printed book. He states the view that whoever doesn’t really understand Hebrew well “should look at books

printed in Yiddish. . . and for that reason the opportunity is given for things to be printed in every language.” For the late sixteenth century, this was a daring pro-Yiddish sentiment. The author identifies Yiddish not with women alone but with the vast majority of the population. This pharmacist stays away from such stock formulas as “women and men who cannot learn,” which provided others an excuse to publish in the vernacular. For him, knowledge of the right thing to do goes hand in hand with social protest against community leaders who are more interested in their own wealth than the people they represent. Apetéker explains what is required to be a member of the community leadership: “to treat the members of the community as they would treat their own children” and not to “show off power.” It is a book for men, itself innovative for a Yiddish publication of the time. It even discusses a number of male-specific issues, including the behavior of rabbis and students in a yeshiva (traditional Talmudic academy). The author warns students not to be in a carnival Purim-like mode for the whole term, and not to “think about girls all the time.”

The next rung was the first major “lifestyle encyclopedia.” It was called *The Burning Mirror* (*Brántshpigl*). No one knows exactly when it first appeared, but the oldest surviving edition was published in 1602. *The Burning Mirror* was written by Moyshe Henoeh Yerushalmi Altshuler, a scion of the famous Altshuler family that had spread out from Prague to many parts of Ashkenaz. It is a large-scale work (some 470 pages in 76 chapters). Much of the early parts are meant specifically for women, while most of the later chapters are ostensibly for everybody, though this is not consistent. The title page addresses the book to “men, women, and girls,” promising “eternal life in Paradise full of joy” as well as a long and good life “also in this world.” Chapter titles include Why This Book Is Written in Yiddish; How Women’s Talk Can Bring Eternal Life; How to Treat People Who Work in Your House; Not to Be a Too-Frequent Visitor; Not to Practice Magic.

The following excerpt can help us fathom how the role of Yiddish was grasped around 1600. The mention of the book’s prime competitor, the *Book of Attributes*, is also illuminating.

This book is written in Yiddish for women, and for the men who are like women and cannot study [the sacred texts]. Other sacred books are in Hebrew, and feature convoluted Talmudic arguments which they cannot understand. There are many fine Books of Attributes in Yiddish, but they do not tell about the good things in the world to come, or the punishments of hell. Only the great masters of Kabbalah write about that, and it's not very easy to understand. Therefore I have written this book for women and men who cannot read the sacred books. I write in Yiddish so that people will know what a person is and why people were created, and how it is better to be among the people of Israel than other nations. And what the reward is for being in awe of God blessed be He and serving him with love. And if people will read this book seriously and will keep to what it says, then I will later write about the attributes of the world to come.

It says in the Talmud that Rabbi Avohu and Rabbi Chiya bar Abba turned up in a certain city and gave talks. Rabbi Chiya spoke purely about laws. And Rabbi Avohu recounted legends and beautiful stories. And the people who were listening to Rabbi Chiya moved over to Rabbi Avohu and listened attentively to his talk. This made Rabbi Chiya feel badly. Rabbi Avohu told him: "I will tell you a parable. Two people came to a certain town. One of them sold needles. And the other sold precious stones. More people came to the one selling needles than the one selling precious stones. And you come and give a talk purely on law, and not everyone can understand it. But in my talk I bring the legends and beautiful stories which everyone can understand, and so they come to me."

("Why This Book Is Written in Yiddish" [in Yiddish].
In Brántshpigl [The Burning Mirror], sec. 3. Basel, 1602.)

The Burning Mirror became a standard for the Ashkenazic woman who could afford to buy it, but about a generation later it was displaced by a better book that really was for everybody and proudly in Yiddish. That is *The Good Heart (Lev tov)*, which appeared in Prague in 1620. In addition to being more sophisticated (and less patronizing), it was acclaimed by a number of great rabbis and scholars who recommended it for woman and men who "could not learn" the sacred texts in the original. As usual, extracts from the title page containing the rhymed commendation for the book help explain the Ashkenazic mind-set of the time, now into the late first quarter of the seventeenth century:

All you men and women, all who are made by the Creator, who want to build This World and The Other World for themselves, come and look at this beautiful book. Anybody who reads it through will not regret it. The reader will find in it all of *Yidishkayt* [traditional Judaism], in its length and its breadth, easily understood and well explained, spread over twenty chapters.

(Preface to *Lev tov* [The Good Heart], Prague, 1620.)

Among the chapters in *The Good Heart* are Laws of [Honest] Business, Laws of Good Judgment, Anger and Rage, Not Revealing a Friend's Private Matters. The book's charm includes its interweaving of Hebrew and Aramaic bits and pieces to give the flavor of the totality of traditional Ashkenazic civilization. The names of the chapters sometimes start with the word *hilkhes* (Laws of), using a term known to Talmudic students from various tracts and codes of law. The book became so popular that it contributed to the word *hilkhes* entering Yiddish in a wider and humorous sense as "laws of" juxtaposed with a nonlegal issue ("he's really good at the laws of showing off"). Many of the chapters conclude with the Aramaic phrase *sliko pirko*, "end of the chapter." This is a Yiddish book for men and women that introduces to the Yiddish reading public major points of law and wisdom from a wide variety of times and places.

The Burning Mirror concentrated on women pleasing their husbands. *The Good Heart*, by contrast, offers a two-way street, demonstrating how the popularization of Yiddish books, thanks to the spread of printing, was affecting attitudes about culture and gender by the early seventeenth century. Husbands and wives could both read about the respect they owe each other, in their own language from the same book. *The Good Heart* even touches on domestic violence. A man who raises his hand as if to hit his wife, even if he doesn't touch her, is considered evil. He may not be called to say a blessing on the Sabbath, the reading of the Torah, and his signature in business documents is null and void until he repents. A husband who forces sexual relations on his wife when she is not in the mood for it is cursed. Although various famous ancient platitudes about wives and husbands are repeated, the author, Yitskhok ben Elyokum (Isaac ben Eliakum) of Posen, adds that a wife should be as a maidservant to her husband, and a husband a manservant to his wife. He warns against marriage for beauty

money. The thematics of male–female relations recur throughout the work and reveal a Yiddish “counter-spirit” to a male-dominated traditional Near Eastern civilization long ago transplanted to the heart of Europe.

WOMEN PIONEER OLD YIDDISH POETRY

Sooner or later the chain of events unleashed by the initiation of Yiddish publishing primarily for women would result in women becoming writers. The literacy rate of women, like men, was high. But women did not aspire to write ethical books teaching others how to act or to compile lifestyle encyclopedias. They were inspired to creativity by a more intimate, spiritual genre: the Yiddish prayer. A canon of special Yiddish prayers for women had been developing in any case, in addition to the various translations of the Hebrew and Aramaic standard canon. In its published forms, the special Yiddish canon came to be known as *Order of Personal Prayers* (*Séyder tkhínes*) or more fully as *Order of Personal Prayers and Requests* (*Séyder tkhínes u-bakóshes*). These titles were parallel to many editions of canonical Hebrew and Aramaic prayers called *Order of Prayers* (*Séyder tfiles*). It is noteworthy that women’s prayers became a significant genre notwithstanding that women are exempt from daily canonical prayer according to rabbinic law.

The Yiddish prayers in the *Order of Personal Prayers* are sometimes supplements to various specific Hebrew prayers. Sometimes they are specific to certain holidays or days of the week. And sometimes they are specific to circumstances in life. There is a prayer for successful childbirth, a prayer for the health of the children, a prayer for a widow, and the prayer of a wife whose husband is away on a business trip. It becomes apparent that the *Order of Personal Prayers* is a standardized personal prayer book in Yiddish for the Ashkenazic woman. Many editions contain specific instructions that would be unthinkable for the original canon in the classical languages. One famous instruction tells a woman to “read this prayer slowly and joyfully, even if it means finishing it only the following day.” Another calls (in print!) for her to weep when uttering it. One of the classic editions of

the *Order of Personal Prayers* was the Amsterdam 1648 edition. But it took quite a few years for the fully developed *Order* to emerge. Earlier printed versions contained only a few prayers. For example, a booklet called *Tkhíno zu* (This Personal Prayer) appeared in Prague around 1590. It is a small booklet comprising a bilingual Hebrew–Yiddish title page and two pages of a Hebrew prayer text followed by four in Yiddish.

We usually don’t know whether it was men or women who actually wrote the special Yiddish prayers for women. In either case, this genre eventually inspired women to start writing individual Yiddish poems and have them published under their own name. Modern scholars who learn that women started publishing the first nontranslated Yiddish poetry during the age of earlier Yiddish printing sometimes get very excited about what they expect to find in the way of the top feelings, and purposes of that poetry. Thinking that there might be a subtle revolution, they are often disappointed when they read the poems and find out that they snugly fit the bill of ancient Jewish piety and sensibilities as evolved over the millennia by standard rabbinic Judaism. These are deeply pietistic, religious poems, in which a woman talks to God one-on-one, asking, for example, for her mother and children to be Torah scholars or for her husband to succeed. But it is a need to avoid applying contemporary ideas to a completely different time, place, and society, and look at the society through its own eyes. For Ashkenaz, it was quite revolutionary that a work written by a woman would appear with her name as the author.

The daring new enterprise started sensationally in 1586 in Cracow. A Yiddish edition of the book of Psalms, by one Moyshe Shtendl, was prefaced with a rhymed poem by one Royzl Fishls. In the poem (typed here as continuous prose), she tells of her life history as it relates to the edition of the Psalms, of which she is the publisher. She is the daughter of the late Rabbi Joseph, and granddaughter of Rabbi Judah Levinsky who kept a yeshiva going for fifty years in Ludmir, Ukraine. In the course of the poem, she explains that she was forced into a period of wandering, and in Hanover found this rhymed translation of Psalms by Rabbi Moyshe, which is to be sung according to “the melody of the *Shmúel bukh*.” She goes on to say that seeing how good it would be to

men, women, and religious girls, she copied out the text with her own hand and brought it to press. The poem becomes a prayer only at its conclusion, where she thanks God and beseeches him to continue having mercy on her, and to stand by her, just as he stood by David son of Jesse (the traditional author of Psalms). Royzl's poem, appearing in the highly prestigious incarnation of a preface to a book of Psalms, helped inaugurate the age of the woman Yiddish poet. It daringly went against the old tradition in which a woman's prayer might ask her to be in the eyes of God as deserving as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah; instead, and importantly for the history of ideas and their published literary expression, she asks to be treated as David was. In a more cosmic sense, Royzl Fishls initiated the tradition of women Yiddish poets that has continued, albeit in different senses, unbroken into the twenty-first century. Sometime early in the seventeenth century another star emerged—Toybe Pan, wife of Rabbi Jacob Pan and daughter of Rabbi Leyb Pitzker. She published her personal prayer, known to generations of scholars as "Toybe Pan's *tkhine*," though the title on the book itself is *A Lovely Poem Newly Made*. It has fifty quatrains (with some exceptional five-line stanzas), with the refrain "Father King" and a user's note suggesting it be sung according to the melody for a popular Hebrew prayer. In the context it becomes clear that the occasion for the poem is a plague that the author begs God to call back. Writing in Yiddish verse, this learned woman dares to construct an argument that determines the structure of the poem. Its opening stanzas characteristically praise God's mercy and ask him to look at people's prayers rather than their sins. It goes on to explain the loneliness and sense of helplessness caused by the plague, and the specific request that no further victims succumb to it. She then talks about what the community is doing for itself. "Five men" are devoting themselves, at great risk, to helping those in need, and God is asked to reward them appropriately. Toybe quickly moves to what women always do for sick people (in the original, stanza 9, all five lines rhyme).

*But goodhearted women all the time,
Do fine things for sick people.*

*Bringing them company all the time,
At the ready to carry out many good deeds,
May God protect them from all suffering.*

The poet dares God to do his work whether or not the acts of repentance suffice:

*We are doing penance, young and old,
But halt the plague!
And if we God forbid were too sinful
Then do it for us as a gift for naught.*

By stanza 26, Toybe respectfully points out to God that there is no longer a high priest or temple to properly intervene for the people, and therefore God is beseeched to accept *this* prayer.

*We have no temple, no high priest
Who will stand for us
And pray on our behalf
So dear God, accept our prayer.*

By stanzas 29–30, God is challenged to "remember well" his oath to the patriarchs, and he is reminded of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son Isaac for God.

*O dear God, remember well Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob of old,
And keep your oath,
That when the people of Israel in great need be
You will help them out of all their misery.
You promised Abraham
When Isaac lay bound on the altar
That you would keep your hand over us
For the sake of old Jacob.*

God's image is obviously in some trouble after the death of the pious rabbi of the community in the plague.

Toybe then throws up to God the death of tiny children, “jewels of two, three years, and those who can read and pray too.”

With an obvious knowledge of rabbinic terminology, Toybe takes up two of the classic measures of justice, the (harsh) *mides ha-din* (measure of the law) and the (compassionate) *mides ho-rákhmim* (measure of mercy).

*O dear God who sits in the seventh heaven,
Pay attention to your poor flock.
Get up from the measure of law,
And sit yourself down upon mercy's measure.*

While the poetry and tone would strike some modern critics as simplistic and naive, Toybe was making bold statements. This is a woman talking sternly to God in a time of community crisis, not afraid to take on God and argue with him, within the faith and tradition concerned, and to tell all about it in a carefully rhymed poem published as a separate pamphlet in her own name in the early seventeenth century.

Another female poetic sensation came a century later. Not yet twelve years old, Gella was the daughter of a printer-publisher who had, very unusually, converted to Judaism. Her father, who went on to become a rabbi, published a Yiddish prayer book in Halle in 1714. The rhymed preface is by his daughter Gella, who also typeset the book:

*Typeset with my own hands, every one of the letters.
My mother Freyde, daughter of Reb Yisroel Katz of blessed memory,
Gave birth to me among her ten children.
I am a virgin a little under twelve,
But don't be surprised that I must toil,
The gentle abandoned Daughter of Israel sits long days in the Diaspora.
One year goes by and another comes yet around,
And we have not yet beholden our redemption,
That we cry out and beg God for every year.
Would be see that our prayers to God, blessed be he, shall come to pass,
But for now I must stay mum and still.*

*I and my father's house must not talk much.
Soon all Israel will come to see it,
So may it happen to us,
As the passage says, all people will rejoice,
Who had bewailed Jerusalem's sack,
The great who were banished to exile,
Will come rejoice at Redemption,
Amen may it come to pass.
Now, my dear people, buy this prayer book for a pittance,
For we have no other living in this world,
Because that is how God, blessed be he, wanted things to be.*

The most famous woman writer of devotional Yiddish poetry lived most probably in the early eighteenth century. Her name came to assume mythical proportions. She was Sora bas Tóyvim (Sarah, daughter of the good people of the city). Her two most famous surviving works both have Hebrew names. One is called *Shéker ha-khéyn* (“Deception of Charm, from Proverbs 31:30: “Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears God shall be praised”). The second has a rabbinic-sounding title, *Shlóysho sheórim* (Three Gates, the image of the gate being common in Talmudic and later rabbinic literature). Sora bas Tóyvim became the symbol of female piety in prayer in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ashkenazic society.

GLIKL HAMEL

Older Yiddish literature is rich in works on local history, often in the form of ballads about a disaster that struck a community or what appeared to be a miraculous deliverance from disaster (otherwise known as neighborhood disaster works). One of the best known was written to commemorate the salvation of the Jews of Frankfurt from the bloodthirsty Vincenzo Fettmilch. The resulting bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish poem, *Megillat Vintz*, or *Megillah* (Purim-like story) of Vincenz Fettmilch, appeared in 1616. It was cherished by the Frankfurt Jewish community right up to the Holocaust. In 1612, Fettmilch, a guild leader, protested to the emperor, accusing the Frankfurt municipality of favoring Jewish

terests. When his protest got nowhere, Fettmilch incited violence. His mob broke through the gates of the Jewish quarter in August 1614. There was some armed resistance on the part of the Jews, but eventually most of the men fled to the cemetery where the women and children had earlier taken refuge. Some scattered to surrounding towns and villages. Fettmilch's dispute with the emperor took its own course. The emperor eventually issued an order for his arrest and on March 10, 1616, he and his associates were hanged and quartered. A Purim-like scenario indeed. The city's Jewish population returned home in a joyous parade.

But all the "professional" historical literature pales in comparison to a work that has much to say about European Jewish cultural history, while also standing out as a substantial literary work. It is the memoir of Glikl Hamel (whose name is spelled in many ways: Glikel, Glueckel, etc.; Hamil, Hameln, Hamelin, etc.). Although her husband was "of Hamel," the epithet stuck to her too (Glikl of Hamel). In Yiddish she is known simply as Glikl Haml. Born in Hamburg in 1645 or 1646, she was married at the age of fourteen to Chaim of Hamel (near Hanover). In addition to bringing up their dozen children, she ran most of his business affairs, rather more successfully after his death. She started her journal or diary at the age of forty-six to combat her loneliness after being widowed. She eventually remarried and for a time stopped writing. After her second husband, Cerf Levy of Metz, died, she went back to the manuscript, completing it in 1719. The original was lost but her family and descendants kept copies. In 1896, a famous German Jewish scholar, David Kaufmann (1852–1899), published the work with his own introduction on the basis of the copy made by Glikl's son, Moyshe Hamel, rabbi at Beiersdorf. It became a classic and has been translated into English, German, Hebrew, Russian, modern Yiddish, and other languages. There may well be other invaluable memoirs "out there" waiting to be discovered.

Glikl Hamel was a woman of the world who ran, in terms of the day, a business empire. It involved many non-Jewish and Jewish people in Amsterdam, Berlin, Hamburg, Hanover, Hildesheim, and Metz. She was learned in sacred books, exhibiting a degree of knowledge of Talmudic literature that is usually thought to have been acquired only by

men (though scholars point out that most of this knowledge could have been gleaned indirectly from the Yiddish pious books of the day). In spite of all her worldliness and Jewish learning, she is comfortable with the Yiddish writing style of those personal women's prayers, *Tkhines*, which gave Yiddish its first original, pietistic poetry.

Besides quoting freely from biblical and rabbinic sources, Glikl's text reveals more than a passing knowledge of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism. She is well acquainted with the Act of Genesis and Adam's Chariot notions, two prime events in kabbalistic thinking. Glikl also extols the powers of an ancient scholar by referring to his knowledge of mysticism. In fact, Yiddish has been linked to Jewish mysticism in various ways throughout the history of Ashkenaz.