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**TONGUE-TWISTED:
ITZIK MANGER BETWEEN *MAME-LOSHN* AND
*LOSHN-KOYDESH***

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Abstract

This article is part of a larger recovery project that aims to unearth the ideologically silenced dialogue between Hebrew and Yiddish modernisms in the first half of the twentieth century, a sustained though often clandestine dialogue that eventually allowed for what may be a distinctively Yiddish, deterritorialized, and radical mode of intertextuality to be absorbed into, not to say appropriated by, mainstream Israeli cultural production. Innovative, even blatantly anticlerical uses of biblical intertextuality in modernist Hebrew letters are often mediated through the glossed-over traditions of Yiddish radical allusion, parody, and fanciful, unfaithful translation. Looking closely at the parodic reworkings of biblical texts in the poetry of Itzik Manger (1901-1969), this article seeks to uncover another chapter in the latent, repressed, but persistent conversation between Hebrew and Yiddish modernism in the twentieth century.

Manger's carnivalesque intertextual subversion of the sacred—his iconoclastic and anachronistic rewritings of biblical texts, in a politically radical and poetically modernist context—emerges out of two traditions: a historical symbiosis of loshn-koydesh (Hebrew and Aramaic) and mame-loshn (Yiddish) that produces a vernacularized Jewish discourse, as manifested in the purim-shpil and other forms of radical Jewish culture and performance; and a European troubadour tradition of medieval macaronics linked genealogically to various forms of modernism. By aligning himself with these dual traditions, with the radical, neo-folkist, and antielitist trends within Jewish and European avant-gardes, Manger produces an alternative historiography that foregrounds Yiddish literary traditions that value irreverence for textual authority and use iconoclastic anachronism to make the Bible tell the egalitarian story of amkho, workaday Jews in the European diaspora.

Introduction

Secular, iconoclastic reworkings of biblical texts have been the hallmark of several waves of modernist Hebrew poetry. These intertextual practices were central to the poetics of the first generation of Hebrew modernists in Palestine, known as the *Moderna* poets of the 1920s and 1930s (e.g. Abraham Shlonsky, Nathan Alterman, Yokheved Bat-Miriam). Irreverent biblical intertextuality is even more closely associated with the next wave, the poetry of Yehuda Amichai, Nathan Zach, and Dalia Ravikovitch, the leading members of *Dor ha-medina* (The Statehood Generation) of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, normative literary historiography has typically foregrounded this radical form of biblical intertextuality as a particularly distinctive marker of the secularist poetics of the first two decades of Israeli literature, as if this were somehow an Israeli *khidesh* (Hebrew: *chidush*, meaning novum), part of the new *sabra* bridge from Tanakh to *Palmach* (the 1948 generation of the War of Independence), passing over all points in between.

While correcting this historiographic myopia is beyond the scope of this article—and is not, in the final analysis, our major focus in what follows—our discussion is informed by a multilingual approach to Jewish literary history. Specifically, we would venture to suggest that innovative, even blatantly anticlerical uses of biblical intertextuality in modernist Hebrew letters are often mediated through the glossed-over traditions of Yiddish radical allusion, parody, and fanciful, unfaithful translation. In this sense our article is part of a larger recovery project that aims to unearth the ideologically silenced dialogue between Hebrew and Yiddish modernisms in the first half of the twentieth century, a sustained though often clandestine dialogue that eventually allowed for what may be a distinctively Yiddish, deterritorialized, and radical mode of intertextuality to be absorbed into, not to say appropriated by, mainstream Israeli cultural production.

We focus in this article on the neo-folkist, avant-garde Yiddish poet Itzik Manger (1901–1969), and the ways in which he reinscribes traditional Yiddish cultural practices, such as the iconoclastic and anachronistic rewritings of biblical texts, in a politically radical and poetically modernist context. These cultural practices are the locus classicus of what Benjamin Harshav famously termed “Jewish Discourse.” Having its origins in rabbinic culture, these forms of communication

have three major principles in common: (1) associative digression; (2) resorting to a canonized textual store; and (3) assuming that all frames of reference in the universe of discourse may be analogous to each other.¹

The Yiddish versions of these discursive practices have historically privileged an anachronistic and critical recasting of biblical narratives, heroes, and—most importantly for our purposes—the biblical text itself. The continuous Hebrew-Aramaic tradition of rabbinic exegesis, especially the intertextual principles of midrash are, of course, quite

¹ Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 100.

relevant here;² however, the carnivalesque upending of biblical norms and language are most saliently found in the historical symbiosis between *mame-loshn* (“mother tongue,” the loving name Yiddish is given by its native speakers) and *loshn-koydesh* (Hebrew: *leshon-kodesh*; literally, “the tongue of holiness,” the reverent name for the Hebrew-Aramaic used in textual Torah study).³ Jordan Finkin has recently described the back-and-forth journey from rabbinic Hebrew-Aramaic to Yiddish, arguing that Yiddish is where the contrarian Talmudic logic, as well as the linguistic collocations of rabbinic *loshn-koydesh* get nativized and vernacularized;⁴ and that it is from Yiddish that these expressions journey back to Modern Hebrew along with their “nativized” discursive valences, enriching or—as Ghil’ad Zuckermann has argued provocatively—actually enabling Hebrew’s “revival.”⁵ After all, the very beginnings of Yiddish literature are inextricably linked not only with epic retellings and interpretive translations of *loshn-koydesh* texts but also with the parodic reworkings of biblical narrative into poetic performance genres. The most famous example of these genres is the *purim-shpil*, the comic drama performed traditionally in Eastern Europe at least since the sixteenth century on the Jewish carnivalesque holiday of Purim, based on an anachronistic, iconoclastic reenactment of the biblical book of Esther.⁶ This tradition, in turn, forms the major intertextual template for the neo-folkist trend in modernist Yiddish poetry, which—as has been recently argued by several scholars—also may have served the Hebrew modernists as an unacknowledged intertextual model.⁷

² Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

³ Boyarin, however, has recently traced the carnivalesque satiric and parodic modes to the Talmud itself. See Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009). On the embattled symbiosis between Hebrew and Yiddish, see Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁴ Jordan Finkin, “Constellating Hebrew and the Yiddish Avant-Gardes: The Example of Markish and Shlonsky,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 8, no. 1 (March 2009): 1–22, and Finkin, *A Rhetorical Conversation: Jewish Discourse in Modern Yiddish Literature* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

⁵ Ghil’ad Zuckermann, “A New Vision for ‘Israeli Hebrew’: Theoretical and Practical Implications of Analysing Israel’s Main Language as a Semi-Engineered Semito-European Hybrid Language,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5, no. 1 (2006): 57–71, and Azzan Yadin and Ghil’ad Zuckermann, “Blorit—Pagans’ Mohawk or Sabras’ Forelock?: Ideologically Manipulative Secularization of Hebrew Terms in Socialist Zionist Israeli,” in *The Sociology of Language and Religion: Change, Conflict and Accommodation*, ed. Tope Omoniyi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 84–125.

⁶ Ahuva Belkin, *Ha-Purim Shpil: iyunim ba-te’atron ha-yehudi ha-amami* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2002); Joel Berkowitz, *Yiddish Theater: New Approaches* (Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization); Robert Adler Peckerar, “The Allure of Germanness in Modern Ashkenazi Literature: 1833–1933,” Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2009; Zehavit Stern, “From Jester to Gesture: Eastern European Jewish Culture and the Re-imagination of Folk Performance,” Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011.

⁷ See Finkin, “Constellating Hebrew and the Yiddish Avant-Gardes: The Example of Markish and Shlonsky”; Sheila E. Jelen, “From an Old World to a New Language: Eastern European-Born Israeli Women’s Writing in Hebrew,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96, no. 4 (2006): 591–601; Barbara Mann, “Jewish Imagism and the ‘Mosaic Negative,’” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 11, no. 3 (2004): 282–291; “Visions of Jewish Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 13, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 1–27; “*Der eko fun goles: ‘The Spirit of Tel Aviv’ and the Remapping of Jewish Literary History*,” *Israel Studies* 14, no. 3 (Fall

However, we would like to emphasize that Manger's carnivalesque intertextual subversion of the sacred is far from being particularistically Jewish, or limited to the suppressed but nevertheless powerful joint literary history of Hebrew and Yiddish. True, the recoverable constituents of Yiddish as a fusion language (*loshn-koydesh*, Slavic, Romance, Germanic) lend themselves especially well to this sort of language play. Furthermore, in his intertextual practices, as well as in other aspects of his poetics, Manger may in fact have served as one of several unacknowledged Yiddish models for modernist Hebrew poetry from the *Moderna* of the 1920s and 1930s to *Likrat*, the group that formed the kernel of the Statehood Generation poetry of the 1950 and 1960s.⁸ But, as Kronfeld argues elsewhere, the rhetorical practices typical of Jewish modernisms are often Janus-faced: they exhibit a simultaneous affiliation with intra- and extra-Jewish trends, and they offer a “dual motivation” for the same poetic choices.⁹ It is therefore important to point out that Manger's sacrilegious uses of biblical intertextuality also engage a European troubadour tradition of medieval macaronics which is hardly particular to Jewish texts.¹⁰ By aligning himself with these dual traditions, Manger is then also siding with the radical, neo-folkist, and antielitist trends within the European and the Jewish avant-gardes alike, for whom, as both Raymond Williams and Peter Bürger have shown, the aggressive dynamism of radical politics and poetics need not be couched in an exclusivist “poetics of difficulty,” à la Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.¹¹

2009): 38–61; Shachar Pinsker, “Deciphering the Hieroglyphics of the Metropolis: Literary Topographies of Berlin in Hebrew and Yiddish Modernism,” in *Yiddish in Weimar Berlin*, eds. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2010); “That Yiddish Has Spoken to Me’: Yiddish in Israeli Literature,” *Poetics Today* 35, no. 3 (2014): 325–56; Allison Schachter, “The Shtetl and the City: The Origins of Nostalgia in *Ba-yamim ha-hem* and *Shloyme reb khayims*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 12, no. 3 (2006): 73–94; Schachter, *Diasporic Modernisms: Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). These new approaches differ from the one taken by Itamar Even-Zohar in “Poly-System Studies,” *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1 (1990), for example, where he suggests that the Hebrew-Yiddish diglossia disappears with the transition of the center of Jewish literature to pre-state Palestine. Dan Miron, in *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), even as he revises his earlier separatist historiographies of Hebrew and Yiddish literatures, argues that it is impossible to speak about a unified Jewish literature in modern times. For an alternative view of the translingual context of Hebrew and Yiddish literatures in the first half of the twentieth century see Naomi Brenner, *Lingering Bilingualism: Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literatures in Contact* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015).

⁸ Kronfeld, in her introduction to H. Binyomin/Gabi Daniel's *Kol hashirim / Ale lider* (Jerusalem: Carmel Press, forthcoming), discusses the role of Benjamin Hrushovski (Harshav) and his various pen names (H. Binoymn, Gabi Danie, and others) in the “underground” transmission of Yiddish modernism as a subtextual model for the Hebrew modernists of *Likrat*, of whom he was a founding member. See also Shachar Pinsker, “Choosing Yiddish in Israel: *Yung Yisroel* between Home and Exile, Center and Margins” in *Choosing Yiddish: New Frontiers of Language and Culture*, eds. Shiri Goren, Hannah Pressman, and Lara Rabinovitch (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012).

⁹ Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 87–92.

¹⁰ See, for example, Walter Salmen, *Der Spielmann im Mittlealter* (Innsbruck: Edition Helbling, 1983).

¹¹ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. and introduced by Tony Pinkney (New York: Verso, 1989), 61–62; Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Itzik Manger's Collocations: Between Hebrew and Yiddish

Itzik Manger is certainly the most celebrated among these neo-folkist poets, and the Yiddish modernist who most deliberately associates his own project with the radical carnivalesque heritage of Old Yiddish literature. In “*Medresh Itsik* and the Problematics of its Literary Tradition,” Chone Shmeruk discusses Manger’s anachronistic representation of the patriarchs and matriarchs as shtetl Jews, describing this anachronism as both an homage to and a parody of Old Yiddish literary practices.¹² We believe that looking closely at these parodic reworkings of biblical texts in Manger’s poetry helps us uncover another chapter in the latent, repressed, but persistent conversation between Hebrew and Yiddish modernism in the twentieth century. Thus, as Naomi Brenner has pointed out, Abraham Shlonsky, the leader of the *Moderna* during the 1920s and 1930s—despite his explicit anti-Yiddish polemics—was the first to translate Manger into Hebrew, publishing pieces by him in the Hebrew press in Palestine as early as 1939.¹³ In 1941 Shlonsky issued in book form a Hebrew version of Manger’s modernist fictionalized historiography of Yiddish literature, *Noente geshtaltn* (*Close Figures*), under the title *Dmuyot krovot*. Brenner argues convincingly that Shlonsky’s translations set the stage for later ones by Binyamin Tene and others, in offering “a careful rewriting of Manger and the Yiddish culture that he came to represent,” transforming “Manger’s work and Manger himself . . . to fit the prevailing norms in Hebrew literature,” and “revealing the distinct place created for Yiddish literature within Israeli culture.”¹⁴ But the mere fact that Shlonsky translates this work of imaginative Yiddish literary historiography into Hebrew at a time when his explicit poetics is still vehemently anti-Yiddishist is profoundly revealing: it expresses the intense ambivalence found throughout his poetic and translational practices regarding his—and his literary generation’s—ideological rejection of both *mame-loshn* and its rich avant-garde models.¹⁵

Beyond this larger project of uncovering the submerged joint literary history of Hebrew and Yiddish, our focus in this article is on Manger’s engagement with biblical narrative and biblical idiom as it informs his overall modernist poetic project. This project, far from being the simple nostalgic, folkist gesture it is often taken to be, is devoted to crafting a *fictional, critical genealogy* (in the Foucauldian sense) of Yiddish literature, as if flowing seamlessly from the disputed, if not refuted origins of Yiddish literature in the medieval *Shpilman*, the German-Yiddish irreverent troubadour, and from the epic and carnivalesque genres of Old Yiddish.¹⁶ This Old Yiddish tradition was

¹² Chone Shmeruk, “*Medresh Itzik* u-ve’ayat meserotav ha-sifrutiyot,” *Ha-sifrut* 2: 347–354.

¹³ Naomi Brenner, “Authorial Fiction: Literary and Public Personas in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature,” PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008, 61–62.

¹⁴ Naomi Brenner, “Itzik in Israel: Itzik Manger’s Yiddish in Hebrew Translation,” *Prooftexts* 28, no. 1 (2008): 53–84. For a comparative discussion of the neo-folkist aspects of the poetic personas of Shlonsky and Manger, see chapter 2 of Brenner, “Authorial Fiction,” 99–182.

¹⁵ On this matter see also Finkin, “Constellating Hebrew and the Yiddish Avant-Gardes: The Example of Markish and Shlonsky,” and Yael Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten: The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ It is important to note that Manger pays (parodic) homage not only to the carnivalesque but also to the

mediated for Manger, as Shmeruk has shown, by the seminal studies of Old Yiddish texts published by the great literary historians Max Weinreich (1928) and Max Erik (1928) around the time Manger published his first books of poetry. In these studies Weinreich and Erik emphasized (or according to Shmeruk, overemphasized) the radical, iconoclastic “roots” of Yiddish literature, holding them up as a model for their own contemporary modernist and progressive readership.¹⁷ More recently, Mikhail Krutikov and Peckerar have each highlighted in different contexts the important role played in this historiographic polemics by a now much neglected but once prominent contemporary of Weinreich and Erik—the Soviet Yiddish and Hebrew writer and critic, Meir Wiener.¹⁸

As David Roskies has shown in two groundbreaking studies, Manger writes himself into this historiographic narrative and constructs a fictionalized autobiography that parallels and foregrounds the literary history he produces.¹⁹ He presents himself as “The Last of the Purim Players” (to quote Roskies’ title), the final link in a chain of Central and Eastern European traditional Jewish troubadours epitomized by the *Broder Zinger*, the wandering troupe of singers from Brody in the Ukraine, and as a direct heir of folk bards such as Berl Broder, Velvl Zbarzher and the entire Yiddish carnivalesque tradition.²⁰ Situating himself within a cultural trajectory that is specifically proletarian, Manger goes as far as to inscribe himself—and his brother Notte—into a wandering troupe of tailor apprentices (*shnayder-yungn*), who craft poetry as they cut and sew.²¹ He recasts the traditionally denigrated culture of handiwork and quotidian Jewish

epic rewritings of biblical texts in Old Yiddish literature, such as the *Shmuel bukh*. See, for example, Chone Shmeruk, *Machazot mikra'iyim be-Yiddish, 1697–1750* (Jerusalem: ha-akadeyia ha-ivrit le-mada'im, 1973). For a new perspective on this matter, see chapter 2 of Stern, “From Jester to Gesture: Eastern European Jewish Culture and the Re-imagination of Folk Performance.”

¹⁷ Shmeruk, “*Medrehsh Itzik u-ve'ayat mesorotav ha-sifrutiyot*,” 348–50.

¹⁸ Mikhail Krutikov, “What is Yiddish Literary Tradition? The Soviet Marxist Moshe Litvakov versus the American Modernist Mikhl Likht,” *Prooftexts* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 204–228; Krutikov, *From Kabbalah to Class Struggle: Expressionism, Marxism and Yiddish Literature in the Life and Work of Meir Wiener* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Peckerar, “The Allure of Germanness in Modern Ashkenazi Literature: 1833–1933.”

¹⁹ David Roskies, “The Last of the Purim Players: Itzik Manger,” in *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 234–35, and Roskies, “Introduction,” in *The World According to Itzik*, ed. Leonard Wolf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xiii–xlvi. See also chapter 2 of Brenner, “Authorial Fiction,” 99–182, and Efrat Gal-Ed, “Itzik Manger and his *Purimshpil*,” *Zutot* 8 (2011): 53–62.

²⁰ In addition to *Noente geshtaltn* (New York: Itsik Manger yoyvl-komitet, 1961), this fictional literary genealogy is developed in numerous poems throughout Manger's oeuvre, such as “Zbarzheryade” in *Lid un balade* (New York: Itzik Manger komitet, 1952), 36–38; and the poem-cycle “Velvl Zbarzher shraybt briv tzu Malkale der sheyner” (“Velvl Zbarzher Writes Poems to Malkele the Beautiful”), *ibid.*, 281–303 (see discussion below).

²¹ See, for example, “Di balade fun Yaser shnayderl, dem altn boyar un der sheyner Marushka” (“The Ballad of the Tailor from Iasi, the Old Farmer and the Beautiful Marushka”), 87–89; “Der shnayder gezeln Note Manger zingt fun der goldener pave” (“The Tailor's Apprentice Notte Manger Sings of the Golden Peacock”), 375–78, and the cycle “Der shnayder-gezeln Note Manger zingt” (“The Tailor's Apprentice Notte Manger Sings”), 431–41, all in *Lid un balade*. All subsequent citations of Manger's poems will refer to page numbers in *Lid un balade* in parentheses and to translations from *The World According to Itzik* when available. All other translations are ours.

existence as the source and epitome of Yiddish literary production, and a model for Jewish writing par excellence. In an inversion of stereotypical Jewish class hierarchies, Manger depicts *shnayderay*—tailoring—in its analogy to sewing together texts, as the most valued form of Jewish labor. Radical intertextual collage, one of his major modernist rhetorical practices, is thus given a proletarian, quotidian motivation through the figure of *shnayderay*. Moreover, the model of the poet as tailor embraces the text/textile tropes of female creativity in the West, from Homer’s Penelope to Adrienne Rich’s Aunt Jennifer,²² while at the same time fixing such tropes in the humble male sphere of the Jewish tailors’ guild. The resultant valorization of both the female and the working class continues to inform Manger’s construction of an imaginary Yiddish literary history until the destruction of Jewish life during the *khurbn* (the Yiddish term for the Holocaust), after which he seems to abandon this project.

Manger’s alternative historiography foregrounds those Yiddish literary traditions that value irreverence for textual authority and use iconoclastic anachronism to make the Bible tell the egalitarian story of *amkho*, workaday Jews in the European diaspora. His poetry creates precisely what Mikhail Bakhtin termed a chronotope,²³ the merged imaginary space-time, in which biblical and European Jewish narratives are played out on a fictional yet historically produced stage. This is not a simple comic or parodic shift of setting and period, but rather a novel construct that situates a limited, deflated, yet gutsy and disobedient human agent in the midst of a series of attempts to simultaneously domesticate the biblical and sacralize the diasporic.

Linguistically, this new intertextual agent²⁴ focuses on rhetorical strategies such as the meaningful “misapplication” of biblical references and of Yiddish fixed expressions (idioms, proverbs, and *vertlekh* or “sayings” improperly employed), suggesting perhaps that these rhetorical strategies—anachronism in particular—are typical of Yiddish literature and Jewish culture at large. Thus, Manger’s unholy union of (mis)used Yiddish idiom and Hebraic biblical references unleashes the critical, iconoclastic potential within the Yiddish language itself.

We have examined Manger’s manipulation of fixed expressions in colloquial Yiddish as they appear in his biblically-themed work; and conversely, we have looked also at his recasting of Hebraic biblical phraseology as it appears in his non-biblical work. We have found that, contrary to the majority of the types of “deviant uses of collocations” analyzed by Gideon Toury and Avishai Margalith in their classic article on the subject,²⁵ for the most part Manger breaks up fixed expressions through a *clash of contexts*, often without violating the expression’s syntactic or semantic structure. As a result, both the old (collocated, or fixed) meaning and its novel (uncollocated, or free) use are simultaneously present for the reader, creating a discursive tension that is at

²² Adrienne Rich, “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” in *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 2.

²³ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–258.

²⁴ On the need to add a discussion of agency to theories of intertextuality see Kronfeld, “Sokhnut intertekstu’alit,” in *Intertekstu’aliyut be-sifrut u-betarbut: sefer ha-yovel le-Zivah Ben-Porat*, eds. Michael Gluzman and Orly Lubin (Porter Institute: Tel Aviv University, 2012), 11–58.

²⁵ Gideon Toury and Avishai Margalith, “Darkhey ha-shimush ha-sote ba-tseruf ha-kavul,” *Ha-Sifrut* 4, no. 1 (January 1973): 99–129.

once humorous and subversive. Furthermore, this contextual or pragmatic “deviant use” of collocations (rather than their semantic, syntactic, or phonological breakup) thematizes the clash of worlds—universes of discourse, in technical terms—between old and new, sacred and profane, *loshn-koydesh* and *mame-loshn*. This pragmatic reshuffling of cultural contexts reverses the Zionist association of Hebrew culture with secular modernity, and of Yiddish with Old World traditionalism: disturbing the Hebraic enables Manger to launch a secular, modernist-Yiddishist critique of the repressive gender and class aspects of traditional culture.

A brief explanation of the terminology may be in order at this point: We use the term “collocation” here interchangeably with “fixed expression” in its broadest sense, to refer to any expression—literal or figurative—whose components tend to co-occur in Yiddish usage and take on therefore a more or less fixed form and order. Thus, we will *not* be concerned here with the differences between 1) a literal collocation such as *nakhes fun kinder* (pride and joy in one’s children),²⁶ 2) an idiomatic expression employing a dead metaphor like *makhn a tel fun* (to mangle, destroy; literally: turn someone or something into an [archeological] ruin), 3) a tritely metaphorical collocation such as *a kalte briye* (a cold person; literally, a cold creature), or 4) a proverbial “psycho-ostensive” expression such as *af mayne sonems kep* (on my enemies’ heads [may this terrible thing be diverted to]).²⁷ Note that all of these examples of collocation involve in some way an interplay between *mame-loshn* and *loshn-koydesh*: the Hebraic *nakhes*, *tel*, *briye*, and *sonem*, respectively. What will concern us here is the fact that all these different types of utterances share one property, namely being in some sense “collocated,” “fixed,” or “bound” expressions, expressions whose components tend to co-occur in a fixed order, form and context; and that the violation of their collocability (namely, their tendency to co-occur in this precise form, order, and context) within the text of Manger’s poetry constitutes a meaningful rhetorical practice. Toury and Margalith describe—in the linguistic terminology that was common in the 1970s—“deviant” uses of collocations as uses that violate the syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic well-formedness of an utterance. Both syntactic deviance (e.g., cummings’ famous “he danced his did”)²⁸ and semantic deviance (Ruth M. Kempson’s somewhat less famous “truth broke the window”)²⁹ will not be discussed here, because it is the third and less universally recognized type of “deviance” which is most characteristic of Manger’s manipulation of Yiddish collocations and their *loshn-koydesh* intertexts. This pragmatic “deviance” consists of an incompatibility between an utterance and its linguistic or extra-linguistic environment.³⁰ Thus, for example, in the poem “Rokhl geyt

²⁶ Anyone familiar with the complex cultural and semantic valences of “*nakhes*” will note the ineptness of this English rendition. Thus even the most literal of collocations can be as pragmatically untranslatable as a figurative idiom.

²⁷ For a brilliant and utterly delightful study of such expressions in Yiddish, see James A. Matisoff, *Blessings, Curses, Hopes, and Fears: Psycho-Ostensive Expressions in Yiddish* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

²⁸ See “anyone lived in a pretty how town,” in e. e. cummings, *Complete Poems 1904–1962* (New York: Liveright, 1991), 15.

²⁹ Ruth Kempson, *Semantic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 112.

³⁰ Toury and Margalith, “Darkhey ha-shimush ha-sote ba-tseruf ha-kavul,” 109–10. There have, of course,

tsum brunem nokh vaser" ("Rachel Goes to the Stream for Water" in *Lid un balade*, 238-39)³¹ we find the line "Leye bahalt dem shund roman" ("Leah hides the trashy novel"),³² a line which has nothing syntactically or semantically "wrong" with it; yet because it is pragmatically deviant, we understand it as a typical Mangerish piece of humorous anachronism. Beyond that, it is perhaps also an allusion to *Madame Bovary* and a barb directed at Sholem Aleichem and the pre-modernist Yiddish literary establishment's war on the popular Yiddish romance novel or *shund roman*. And beyond even that it is a reference to contemporary debates about *shund* in the 1930s Yiddish press.³³ The speech community and the universe of discourse within which the term *shund roman* has a fraught and contested cultural valence—not to mention the sociolinguistic and cultural context for Flaubert's critique of romance novels and Yiddish literary culture of the 1930s—are clearly discontinuous historically and conceptually from our beliefs about the world and speech community of the biblical Rachel and Leah. This clash of contexts results in a modernist rereading of some of the major tenets of *Haskalah/Haskole* (Hebrew and Yiddish Enlightenment, respectively), especially the maskilic debates about such issues as women reading "the forbidden books" of European literature, popular versus canonical fiction, or romantic love versus arranged marriage. But the pragmatically anachronistic reference to *the shund roman* also establishes—in a few brief strokes—the lesser matriarch Leah as a modern, secular version of the traditional male Jewish scholar: She is "pale and wan" and her eyes are weak (Genesis 29:17) because she has destroyed them ("a tel gemakht") with too much reading. Note that the discontinuity evoked here between the biblical and the contemporary is itself a product of historically inflected judgment: As many Jewish narratives have pointed out, shtetl audiences were apt to see the biblical and Talmudic worlds as seamlessly contemporaneous with their own and as dimensions of one cultural chronotope. This is precisely the case, for example, with the men who are listening in the synagogue to the itinerant preacher in Devorah Baron's "Aguna" (Deserted Wife): It is totally natural for them to relate the text of the preacher's midrash on the verse from Lamentations 3:46, "all our enemies have opened their mouths against us," to anachronistic details in their own oppressive lives: ". . . and the

been interesting, more recent studies of functional and contextual breakup of collocations in poetry. See, for example, Dominique Costa, "Language Through Poetry: A Stylistic Analysis of Thomas Hardy's 'The Ruined Maid,'" in *Ensino Das Linguas Vivas no Ensino Superior em Portugal*, ed. Belinda Maia (Porto, Portugal: Faculdade de Letras, Universidade do Porto, 1999), 215-22; U.S. Rukhaiyar and Amar Nath Prasad, *Studies in Indian Poetry in English* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2002), 166-68. The topic has remained for the most part, however, outside the mainstream of contemporary literary studies. Toury and Margalith's study is still, to the best of our knowledge, the most rigorous theoretical analysis of the issue.

³¹ Translation ours. Leonard Wolf's translation restores the title to its "biblically correct" form: "Rachel Goes to the Well for Water." See *The World According to Itzik*, 19.

³² Translated by Wolf as "Her True Romance," *The World According to Itzik*, 19.

³³ See Sholem Aleichem's infamous *Shoymer's mishpet, oder der sud prisyzshnikh oyf ale romanen fun Shoymer* (*Shoymer's Trial or the Jury Court Case Against All the Novels by Shoymer*) (Berditshev: Sheftil, 1888). For a discussion of the debates surrounding *shund* in 1930s see Nathan Cohen, *Sefer, sofer, ve'iton: merkaz hatarbut hayehudit bevarshah, 1918-1942* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2003), 105-114. See also Roskies's discussion of this poem in "Call it JewSpeak: On the Evolution of Speech in Modern Yiddish Writing," *Poetics Today* 35, no. 3 (2014): 273-74.

congregations see, rising and turning: the double chin of that bloodthirsty government official, the inspector, tormenting them as he carries out his inspections of their shops; the drunken shouts of the gentiles and the terror of the riots on their feast days, the market days.”³⁴ Manger’s readership, like Baron’s readership and unlike the shtetl audience in the synagogue of her story, is supposed to recognize the gap between the context of the ancient texts and that of their latter-day rewritings, and to derive both humor and pathos from the reinterpretation of the source and target texts in their incongruous juxtapositions.

To return to Manger: The very fact that in *Medresh Itsik* expressions like *beheyme* (Hebrew: “idiot”; literally, “animal”), *klipe* (Hebrew: “bitch”; literally, “outer shell,” a Kabbalistic notion), or *pempik* (Slavic: “fatso”) are consistently used by one patriarch or matriarch to address another debunks traditional beliefs about these figures and their linguistic habits; it also seriously deflates their ethical stature, at the same time that it de-allegorizes and rehumanizes them. But why is this clash of contexts *almost never* accompanied by any violation of the actual structure of the collocation? In other words, why are Manger’s collocations *only* or mostly pragmatically “deviant”?

Our analysis will suggest a few poetic and political reasons why that is the case, but it may be helpful at this point to take a second look at what happens to collocations when they are changed even in the most minimal of ways. We know that idioms and trite metaphors get literalized or reified (or “realized,” as we say in Hebrew) when even small changes or “transformations” are introduced.³⁵ Even when such changes retain the semantic or syntactic “well-formedness” of the utterance, they have the result of breaking up its collocability. Thus, in the poem “Avrom shikt Elyezer zukhn Yitskhokn a vayb” (“Abraham Sends Eliezer to Seek a Wife for Isaac” *Lid un balade*, 234-35) the third stanza opens again, as in the image of Leah reading too much, with a focus on the eye:

ווייל יצחקל איז מיין אויג אין קאָפּ,
איך האָב אים קוים אויסגעוויינט.

For little Isaac is the apple of my eye
I’ve barely just finished crying him out.³⁶

The first line on its own retains its customary collocated, idiomatic meaning. The Yiddish “the eye in one’s head” is close to “the apple of one’s eye” in English—an expression referring to a most treasured person. The second line, however, through the weak enjambment, introduces a retrospective literalization of the first idiom, which nevertheless retains in its background the old idiomatic sense. This second line, in turn, is a slightly altered (and hence somewhat literalized) version of a different, hyperbolic idiom, *oysveynen zikh di oygn*, whose meaning is very similar to “crying one’s eyes out”

³⁴ Devorah Baron, “Aguna” in Nurit Govrin, *Ha-machatzit ha-rishona: Dvora Baron—chaye’ha vi-yetsirata, tarmach-tarpag / Parshiyot mukdamot: sipurim, tarsab-tarpa*, ed. Avner Holtzman (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1988), 614-619, and an English version in Dvora Baron, *The First Day and Other Stories*, trans. Naomi Seidman with Chana Kronfeld (Berkeley: University of Californian Press, 2001), 90–98.

³⁵ Toury and Margalith, “Darkhey ha-shimush ha-sote ba-tseruf ha-kavul,” 117–18.

³⁶ Translation ours; this poem is not included in Wolf, *The World According to Itzik*.

in English. When the two idioms are “concatenated,” in Toury and Margalith’s terms,³⁷ the result is an idiomatic graft, whose key term is “*oyg*” (eye). The omission of “*oyg*” in the second line metonymically enhances the identification of the eye with Isaac: “I have just finished crying him out.” Thus, the graft relies on the reader’s familiarity not only with the idioms but also with two central cultural background narratives, which loom large in the text even though they are not explicitly mentioned; these background narratives lend the new, conjoined collocation its serio-comic expressive valence, and foreground Manger’s critique of Abraham’s self-pitying monologue. The first is summarized by the traditional Talmudic maxim *tza’ar gidul banim* (the grief parents go through in raising children; B. Eruvin 100b), and the second, by the topos of the *Akeda*, the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22), and its appropriations throughout history for narratives of Jewish martyrology. Abraham’s concern for Isaac (he’s the apple of his father’s eye) is thus causally linked, through these unstated background narratives, with the father having cried his eyes out raising him; but the contextually literalized idiom suggests that he has lost his eye, namely his son, in the process. Thus, Abraham’s self-serving assertion (the stereotypical Jewish parents’ “look how much I’ve suffered”) unwittingly unleashes an authorial critique of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, and evokes postbiblical traditions from the midrash that he indeed did so.³⁸ This juxtaposition and contextual grafting of two “eye” idioms is as close as Manger comes in these poems to a semantically “deviant” use of collocations (as the term “eye” is exchanged for “him” in the second line). The majority of the *Medresh Itsik* poems, as we suggest below, abound in collocations which are only pragmatically deviant, and therefore require that the clash of worlds, of past and present, be supplied by the reader. This, in turn, may point to one of the main reasons for the mostly pragmatic nature of Manger’s deviant uses of collocations: his poems’ stylistic practices—like those of many other modernist texts—are meant to come fully into being only through an engaged, active reading process.

Medresh Itsik: Beyond Playful Anachronism

Medresh Itsik, the anthology of Manger’s biblically based poems from the interwar years, is the most salient example of this clash of contexts, as well as of Manger’s version of the imaginary Jewish chronotope in general. It is quite poignant that the anthology was published only in Paris after the war.³⁹ The book reappeared in Jerusalem in two additional posthumous editions edited by Shmeruk (in 1969 and again in 1984)⁴⁰ with some significant changes, not the least of which was that the poems were made to follow the order of the Bible. The effect of this move was to undo Manger’s modernist fragmentation of any linearity in biblical narrative (recall Amichai’s much later “*ani rotse le-valbel et ha-tanakh*” [I want to mix up the Bible]),⁴¹ which was a

³⁷ Toury and Margalith, “Darkhey ha-shimush ha-sote ba-tseruf ha-kavul,” 110–11.

³⁸ For these traditions, see Shalom Spiegel’s seminal study, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967).

³⁹ Itzik Manger, *Medresh Itsik* (Paris: Itzik Manger yoyvl komitet, 1951).

⁴⁰ See Itzik Manger, *Medresh Itsik*, ed. Chone Shmeruk (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984).

⁴¹ Yehuda Amichai, *Gam ha-egrof haya pa’am yad ptucha ve-etzba’ot* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1989), 131.

central aspect of Manger's avant-garde poetics. What is worse, Shmeruk's antimodernist editorial policy superimposed a literally canonical, Israeli Bible-centric linear narrative on Manger's anarchist chaotic fusion of disparate domains.⁴² Shmeruk reports on these profoundly consequential editorial changes with one laconic, agentless sentence: "Ale lider zenen oysgeseydert gevorn nokhn seyder fun tanakh" ("all poems have been reordered according to the order of the Bible"), as if the division into chapters and books in the Bible were some natural order and not itself a constructed, belated superimposition.⁴³

Significantly, the original 1951 edition was primarily a compilation of two separate books which had appeared in Warsaw some fifteen years earlier, *Khumesh lider* (1935), "followed," as Roskies points out, "a year later by a second edition and a sequel, the *Megile lider*."⁴⁴ Built into these two books was a pronounced carnivalesque tension between the social and historical circumstances of the poems' initial publication following Hitler's rise to power, and the fictional no-man's-land where the avant-garde poet-cum-troubadour jumbles together all phases and sites of Jewish social history. Describing the initial impact the *Khumesh lider* had on him, the Yiddish author L. Shapiro writes:

דאָס איז אַ ווּנדערלעך ביכל. פֿאַרגעס אויף אַ ווײַלע אַז ס'איז 1935:
היטלער-מוסאָליני-יאָפּאַן... די גאַנצע ייִדישע פֿאַרגאַנגענהייט פֿון העט העט ביז אַט דאָ
ניט לאַנג וואָס איז כּמעט איצט – איז אַרײַנגעקוועטשט געוואָרן אין אַ קליין ביכעלע,
איבערגעמישט געוואָרן אויף אַ שטיפֿערישן אופֿן, און ארויסגעקומען אין עפעס אַזוינס,
וואָס איז זייער געשמאַק פֿאַרן גומען און גרינג פֿאַרן מאַגן – און פֿאַרן מאַרן.⁴⁵

This is a wondrous little book. Forget for a while that it's 1935: Hitler-Mussolini-Japan... The whole Jewish past from way back when till just almost *now* is squeezed into one little book, mischievously reshuffled, and what comes out is something so pleasing to the palate and easy on the stomach—and the brain.

How, then, does Manger's language "squeeze" and "mischievously reshuffle . . . all of the Jewish past" into one tight time-space, one chronotope? Simply to say that he uses anachronism is to sidestep a more rigorous analysis of the discursive practices that defamiliarize, with great humor and equally great pathos, Jewish culture from the Bible to the brink of World War II, endowing it with a sharp, new perceptibility and a fearless critical voice.

That this reshuffling was originally perceived as rather threatening, Shapiro's enthusiastic response notwithstanding, is attested by Alexander Spiegelblatt in his memoir and literary biography of Manger. Spiegelblatt describes in detail a veritable

⁴² On editing and anthologizing as ideologically inflected forms of rewriting, see André Lefèbvre, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁴³ Chone Shmeruk, introduction to *Medresh Itsik*, xi.

⁴⁴ Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 258. The next volumes were published in Warsaw in 1935 and 1936.

⁴⁵ Lamed Shapiro, *Ksovim* (Los Angeles: L. Shapiro Ksovim Komitet, 1949), 355; cited in Kh. Sh. Kazdan, *Itzik Manger* (New York: Tziko, 1968), 115–16. Translation ours. *Markh* in Yiddish means bone marrow; idiomatically, it designates the core or the essence of life.

critical uproar arising both when the books were first published and when they were reissued, in circles ranging from the religious press to Bible and literary scholars:

ווען עס איז אַרויס, אין 1936, אין צוויי דינע ביכעלעך, מאַנגערס חומש-לידער און מגילה-לידער, האָט זיך דערהערט אין די וואַרשעווער בלעטער, דאָס יודישע טאָגנבלאַט און פֿדרכנו, אַ ויצעקו: ס'טײַטש, מאַנגער טרײַבט קאַטאַוועס מיט קדשײַ-ישראל! דער וויכוח אין רעליגיעזע קרײַזן אַרום מאַנגערס מדרש האָט זיך באַנייט אין די פֿופֿציקער יאָרן און האָט אויך אָפּגעקלונגן שפּעטער, אַפֿילו נאָך דעם דיכטערס פּטירה. אין ניו־יאָרק האָט, למשל, דער תּניײַך פֿאַרשער און עסעײַסט אַבֿרהם מענעס געטענהט, אַז די „חומש-לידער זענען ניט קיין פּראָדוקט פֿון דער ייִדישער פֿאַלקס־פֿאַנטאַזיע, נאָר פֿון ליטעראַרישער קאַפֿע...“ דער שרײַבער ברוך האַגער. . . האָט זיך אָנגענומען די קרײַודע פֿון אַבֿרהם אַבינו, און געטענהט, אַז מאַנגער האָט אים אַוועקגעשטעלט ווי אַ קליין מענטשל, וואָס איז מסוגל זיך צו דינגען וועגן אַ זעקסערל [אין ליד „הגל זאַגער“ אויף אַבֿרהם הויז“]⁴⁶. אַפֿילו דבֿ סדן, וואָס איז דווקא געווען פֿון די „הלל זאַגער“ אויף מאַנגערס מדרש, האָט אויך געפֿונען אַ פּגם אין דער סצענע, ווי אַבֿרהם דינגט זיך מיטן בעל-עגלה פֿאַר אַ זעקסערל, דאָס איז שוין, טענהט ער, „ווייט איבער די געמערקן פֿון אַ פֿאַרשטענדעלעכער לעגיטימקייט“.

When Manger's *Khumesh lider* and *Megile lider* appeared in 1936 in two slim books, there arose an outcry in the Warsaw papers, *The Jewish Daily* and *As Is Our Way*: How is that possible, Manger is making a mockery of all that is sacred to the Jewish people! The debate in religious circles around Manger's *Medresh* started up again in the 1950s, and continued to reverberate even after the poet's death. In New York, for example, the Bible scholar and essayist Abraham Menes argued that "the *Khumesh lider* are not a product of the Jewish folk-imagination but of the literary café . . . " The writer Barukh Hoger . . . took it upon himself to redress the injustice against the patriarch Abraham and argued that Manger depicted him as a petty little man, who is capable of haggling over a sixer [in the poem "Hagar Leaves Abraham's House"].⁴⁷ Even Dov Sadan, who was among those who sang Manger's praises about *Medresh*, found fault with the scene where Abraham haggles with the coachman over a sixer; that is, he argues, "far beyond the pale of understandable legitimacy."⁴⁸

These objections, quite apart from the fear of anti-Semitic stereotypes they reveal, also betray—like Shmeruk's editing project—an anxiety about anachronistic violations of biblical order in times of historical and cultural crisis, and a conservative, antimodernist impulse to keep these reshufflings "understandably legitimate." Our analysis wishes to

⁴⁶ Author's note.

⁴⁷ The denomination is left on purpose unspecified in Manger's Yiddish (*a zekser*), to allow for both the biblical and the Eastern European contexts, thus pragmatically emphasizing their incompatibility. See "Hoger farlozt Avroms hoyz," in Manger, *Lid un balade*, 226–27; missing the point and unilaterally Americanizing the context, Wolf translates it as "six dollars" (*The World According to Itzik*, 14).

⁴⁸ Alexander Spiegelblatt, *Bloe vinklen: Itsik Manger—lebn, lid un balade* (Tel Aviv: Y. L. Perets-Farlag, 2002), 368–72.

explore the stylistic aspects of this anxiety. Fixed expressions are perhaps the first to fall apart when cultural contexts clash, unleashing in the process what linguists call “the creative function” of language.⁴⁹ This is where we look for the workings of Manger’s subversive yet, to return to L. Shapiro, delicious verbal art.

Manger makes powerful use of the fact that both Yiddish and Hebrew are languages whose users, for very different reasons, exhibit a great deal of what linguists call “component awareness”: a meta-linguistic consciousness of the source-languages (in the case of Yiddish) or the historical layers (in the case of Hebrew), and of the cultural class and gender hierarchies that go along with those sources and layers. This meta-linguistic consciousness informs all discursive practices in these languages, but is particularly evident—and vulnerable to disruption—in the pragmatics of fixed expressions. As far as his use of idiomatic Yiddish is concerned, Manger in his *Khumesh lider* effects a horizontal “translation” between the Hebraic and the other components of the language—Slavic, Germanic, or Romance—comically destabilizing their fusion. Conversely, as far as his use of *loshn-koydesh* collocations is concerned, Manger creates a vertical “projection” of Hebrew components back onto the narratives of Genesis. These components have either not formed part of the Yiddish fusion or are perceived as anachronistic to the biblical narrative because they come from “later” parts of the Bible, as well as from postbiblical rabbinic and liturgical Hebrew. In the process, the literal meanings—and textual authority—of these Hebraic components, as well as of the biblical narratives themselves, are called into question as they are temporally and geographically displaced onto the realia of Eastern European shtetl life. A “translation” between *mame-loshn* and *loshn-koydesh* thus parallels the mapping of Canaan onto the shtetl, effecting both an irreverent destabilization of the authority of the biblical text and a jumbling of the historical layers of Hebrew itself. These double translations within Yiddish and between Yiddish and Hebrew take *ad absurdum* the midrashic precept “eyn mukdam u-me’uchar ba-tora” (“there is no early and late in the Torah”), as befits a parodic, modernist neo-midrash; yet this translational mode has great cultural resonance precisely because it builds upon discursive practices such as midrash and exegetical translation that are at the very core of Yiddish—and more generally Jewish—textual culture.⁵⁰ Harshav describes this intertextual and metalinguistic practice as a manifestation of the simultaneously open and fused qualities of the Yiddish language. “Expressions from religious texts are *secularized*,” he notes. “They are used as *situational language* outside their original, specific religious meaning. Hence, they essentially function as metaphors, linking meaning from the lofty, religious domain to secular situations.”⁵¹

Manger himself credits his father with naming this practice, as David Roskies

⁴⁹ Toury and Margalith, “Darkhey ha-shimush ha-sote ba-tseruf ha-kavul,” 102.

⁵⁰ As far as we know, the first study to take on this aspect of Manger’s work was Yossi Gamzu, “Poetic and Linguistic Symbiotic Phenomena in Itzik Manger’s Biblical Poetry,” PhD diss., University of Texas, Austin, 1976. An interesting comparative gendered perspective to the study of Manger’s *Khumesh lider* can be found in Kathryn Hellerstein, “Ruth Speaks in Yiddish: The Poetry of Rosa Yakobovitch and Itsik Manger,” in *Scrolls of Love: Reading Ruth and the Song of Songs*, eds. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (New York: Fordham, 2006), 89–121.

⁵¹ Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish*, 36. Emphasis his.

reminds us, *literatoyre*—a modernist portmanteau of *literatur* and *toyre* (Torah), which self-consciously underscores the constructed artfulness of Manger’s neo-folkist iconoclasm and disorderly midrash.⁵² Many of these internal translation practices involve highly complex sets of fixed expressions which are broken up and re-sutured through a clash of temporal and spatial contexts and are therefore quite difficult to analyze in English translation. It may be easier to demonstrate them first through the relatively simple example of naming: the names, nicknames, and other forms of direct address which biblical characters use in Manger’s *Khumesh lider* to refer to one another.

In the first poem of *Medresh Itzik*, “Khavre brengt odemn dem epl” (“Eve Brings Adam the Apple”), the cloud begs the infantile Adam to stop spitting up at it (*Lid un balade*, 210–11; *The World According to Itzik*, 7–8). The cloud couches this request in an imploring address: *Odemshi kroyn*, where *Odem*, the Ashkenazi/Yiddish variant of “Adam” receives the colloquial Slavic diminutive suffix *shi*, followed by the Germanic idiomatic term of endearment *kroyn* (literally “crown;” idiomatically something like “darling”). The compound *Odem horishn* (literally, Adam the First; a fused, rabbinically derived Hebraic Yiddish epithet for “Adam, the first [human]”) is treated here as if it were a proper name: first name *Odem*, last name *Horishn*. Since Adam is referred to in rabbinic, Kabbalistic, and Christian texts as the “crown of creation” (*nezer ha-bria’h*), this address reads also as a mock *taytsh* or exegetical translation from Hebrew to Germanic Yiddish. The mutual translation between *mame-loshn* and *loshn-koydesh* underscores here the hilariously ironic gap between the concept of “man” as the perfect being, the crowning achievement of divine creation, and the pathetic exemplar we encounter in the first poem of the cycle—and, Manger suggests, in the real world as well—a silly and infantile *batlen* (lazy bum) who lies around doing nothing all day, except spitting and sticking his tongue out at the cloud. The first three stanzas read:

אָדם הראשון ליגט אין גראָז
און שפּײַט צום וואָלקן אַרויף.
בעט זיך דער וואָלקן תּחנּוּנימדיק:
„אָדמשי קרוין, הער אויף!“

שטעלט אים אָדעם אַרויס די צונג:
„כּמאַרע קאַפּאַרע, אַבע!“
און ס’פּליט אַ דינער שטראַל – א שפּײַ –
„און נאָ דיר, נעם און זע!“

דער וואָלקן ווישט מיט דער לאַפּע אָפּ
דעם שפּײַ און ברומט פֿאַר כּעס:
„אַז מען טוט נישט גאַרנישט גאַנצע טעג
און מען גייט אום פּוסט און פּאַס!“

The first man, Adam, lies in the grass,
And spits at a passing cloud,

⁵² Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 235.

Humbly, the cloud says, “Adam,
“Please, would you cut that out.”

But Adam sticks out his tongue
And says to the cloud, “Too bad,”
Then spits a slender stream of spit
And says, “There’s more of that.”

Wiping the spittle with his sleeve
The cloud grumbles angrily,
“That’s what comes of nothing to do,
And lying about all day.”

In “Sore zingt Yitskheklen a shloflid” (“Sarah Sings Little Isaac a Lullaby,” *Lid un balade*, 222–23; not included in *The World According to Itzik*), the matriarch Sarah-cum-*shtetl yidene* addresses her son who won’t fall asleep in his cradle, drawing on conventions and set phrases of the traditional Yiddish lullaby. The context is unambiguously Eastern European, and the discursive mode decidedly mock-rabbinic: The mother sings to her son of “real” little lambs, *shefelekh*, but for the speaker of Yiddish they are in fact a literalization of an endearing form of address to a child, *shefele*. These lambs-as-little-Jewish-kids are engaged in a disputation as to whether it is day or night, adducing various indirect forms of evidence and ignoring the most obvious one—looking outside. Like the *yeshiva bokhers* (young Talmudic scholars) satirized in *Haskala/Haskole* literature, these *shefelekh* (as both literalized human idiom and personified animals) seem to inhabit the textualized space of rabbinic argumentation and counterargumentation, treating the physical world as a nonlinear storehouse of discontinuous, fragmentary prooftexts. Sarah’s Judaization of both the landscape and the animal kingdom reaches a comical zenith in the middle of the poem, when one lamb argues that it must be daytime because in the *goens kloyz* (the study house named for the prodigal Rabbi of Vilna) the cat is studying Talmud with the mouse, a domestic mock-messianic *taytsh* (exegetical translation) on Isaiah 11:6, “vegar ze’ev im keves” (“and the wolf shall live with the lamb”):

זאָגט איין שעפֿעלע ס'איז טאָג,
דער צווייטע זאָגט: ס'איז נאַכט.
אַ סימן: בערל דער צעלניקער
האָט די קראָם פֿאַרמאַכט.

[...]

זאָגט דאָס ערשטע: ניין ס'איז טאָג,
אַ סימן: אין גאונס קלויז
לערנט דאָס ראָבע קאָטערל
די סדרה מיט דער מוּיז.

אַ סימן: אויפֿן חזנס דאַך
פֿאַשעט דעם שניידערס ציג,
און יצחקל דער קליינער ליגט
און שלאָפֿט נאָך נישט אין וויג.

Says one little lamb: it's daytime,
The other says: it's not.
The prooftext: Berl the notions-seller
Has just locked up his shop.

[...]

Says the first: no, it's daytime,
The prooftext: in the Goen's study-house
The little calico tom-cat is learning
The Talmud with the mouse.

The prooftext: on the cantor's roof
The tailor's goat still grazes
And little Isaac lies
In his cradle, wide awake.⁵³

The double contextual clash between the fixed markers of rabbinic disputation as practiced by shtetl fauna and the stock phrases of the Yiddish lullaby as practiced by a biblical matriarch forms the background for a more-than-comical collision of their universes of discourse. Again, this complex move is most easily recoverable in the use of naming and formulas of address at the beginning of the poem. In her conventional cradlesong address, “Shlof, Itsikl-tate, shlof!” (line 2; “Sleep, little Isaac-daddy, sleep!”), Sarah uses a common Germanic Yiddish diminutive ending, followed by a collocated, metaphorical term of endearment. In colloquial Yiddish *tate* or *tatele* are fond forms of address to a beloved child, but they retain their literal meaning, “father” and “daddy.” When towards the end of the poem (stanza 8) Sarah refers anachronistically to the child who has by now fallen asleep as “Yitskhok ovinu” (“Isaac our forefather,” the common rabbinically-derived formula for addressing the patriarch), the endearing “Itsikl-tate” of the poem’s opening lines becomes again a mock-translation (or *taytsh*) from biblical Hebrew to modern lullaby Yiddish. In the context of the extended fable on the Talmud-learning little lambs (read: children), the poem occasions a comic reversal of the parent-child hierarchy, a reversal that is dormant in the practice of calling one’s child *tatele* or *mamele*. More significantly for Manger’s poetic project, however, the reverence for the “patriarchs” is undercut and replaced by an empathic, domesticating gesture, at the same time that the Yiddish cradlesong and colloquial Yiddish terms of affection are made into a delightful substitute for traditional textual authority. This

⁵³ With thanks to Chana Bloch for her helpful suggestions. This poem is not included in Wolf, *The World According to Itzik*.

process recurs in almost all of the *Medresh Itsik* poems, but the collocational clashes as a rule are much too complex for us to analyze via English translation, since they involve the contexts of entire idioms and proverbs rather than just single lexemes.

Complex Collocations Continued

A hint of just how complex things get is offered in “Hoger farlozt Avroms hoyz” (*Lid un balade*, 226–27; “Hagar Leaves Abraham’s House,” *The World According to Itzik*, 13–15), one of three powerful poems about Hagar. Dedicating three of the book’s poems to Hagar’s point of view was not an uncontroversial choice at the time of the book’s initial publication in the mid-1930s. Given the traditional association of Hagar and Ishmael with Islam, these poems take on a doubly resistant stance: On the one hand, they repudiate the Nazi ideological separation between Muslim and Jewish Semites (a separation that idealizes the former and despises the latter);⁵⁴ and on the other hand, these poems reject both the traditional Jewish and the more recent Zionist “othering” of Hagar as alien to “our” genealogical narrative because of her association with the biblically “unchosen” line, or with the Arab enemy of modern-day Israel. The poem’s mock-refrain, the lines that repeat symmetrically at the end of the fifth and tenth stanzas, divide the poem symmetrically into two sections and underscore the literally anti-patriarchal Yiddish message that Manger puts in the mouth of the Hebrew Bible’s non-matriarch: “ot azoy firn zikh di oves / mit di lange frume berd.” (Literally: “That’s how the patriarchs behave / with their long, pious beards.” Wolf’s translation is a little more forgiving: “This is the way of the Fathers / With their long and reverent beards.” *The World According to Itzik*, 14–15). Hagar’s anachronistic reference to the Hebraic term *oves* (Yiddish for the “biblical patriarchs,” not “fathers,” which would be *tates*), before the category exists, points up Manger’s polysemous play—via the gap between Hebrew and Yiddish—on the tensions between the familial and the ancestral senses of (fore)fathers. This ironic tension is reinforced by the changing contexts in which the lines are repeated:

„וויין נישט, ישמעאליקל טאַטע,
אַזוי איז אונדז שוין באַשערט,
אַט אַזוי פֿירן זיך די אַבֹּת
מיט די לאַנגע פֿרומע בערד.“
[...]

און הגר נעמט פֿאַר אַן עדות
דעם הימל און די ערד:
אַט אַזוי פֿירן זיך די אַבֹּת
מיט די לאַנגע פֿרומע בערד.

“This is our portion, Ishmael;
Darling, dry your tears.

⁵⁴ For a cogent discussion of this issue, see Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

This is the way of the Fathers
With their long and reverent beards.”
[...]

She takes the earth and heaven
To be her witness:
This is the way of the Fathers
With their long and reverent beards.

The term *oves* first appears in contrast to Hagar’s endearing address not rendered in Wolf’s translation. There, in the first line of the fourth stanza, Hagar addresses *Yishmoelikl tate*, the *tatele*—or sweetie (literally, little daddy)—who will not become one of the Jewish “patriarchs,” even though the line is completely analogous to Sarah’s lullaby for little Isaac above: “veyn nisht, Itiskl-tate” (“Don’t cry, little Little Isaac-daddy”). Manger presses Yiddish into service to endear and Judaize Ishmael, the ethnic other, to the Jewish reader by piling on the diminutive suffixes on his name (the Slavic *-ik* plus the Germanic *-l*). The refrain appears again at the end of the poem, as Hagar calls on heaven and earth to witness the injustice done to her and to all other women in similar conditions. The resonance of her words is rabbinic legalese: “nemen far an eydes” means “summon to testify on one’s behalf;” an idiomatic Yiddish oath, it also translates verbatim Moses’s condemnation of the people’s conduct, which is reiterated three times in Deuteronomy (4:26, 30:19, and 31:28): “va-a’ida bam et ha-shamayim ve-et ha-aretz” (“I call heaven and earth to testify this day against you”). In these richly resonant contexts, *oves* comes to function as a junction word, a polysemy that brings together the main strands of meaning in the poem, just as *oyg* (eye) did in the Abraham and Isaac poem discussed above. Hagar first condemns in one and the same expression the conduct of *oves* in the literal Hebrew sense of fathers who abandon their wives and children; second, she lambastes the conduct of *oves* in the sense of the biblical patriarchs, all of whom—we are reminded—practiced unfair favoritism toward wives and children; ultimately, however, it is a condemnation of patriarchy in general, as Hagar describes sarcastically the hypocrisy at the heart of male dominant traditional Judaism: *a frume bord* (a pious beard) is a sarcastic Yiddish idiomatic expression that functions as a synecdoche for Jewish men who are religious only in their external appearance and not in their morals or actions. Their unethical conduct (*ot azoy firn zikh*) belies their pious appearance.

Our final example from the corpus of *Medresh Itzik* is perhaps the single most popular poem by Manger in Israel to date (with the possible exception of the *Megile lider*):⁵⁵ the magnificent “*Avrom un Sore*” (*Lid un balade*, 216–17; “Abraham and Sarah,” *The World According to Itzik*, 11–12). In this domestic dialogue, Sarah is the one who gets most of the lines—and the poetry. She expresses her despair over her childlessness in vivid, idiomatic Yiddish, and addresses urgent pleas to her husband,

⁵⁵ For accounts of the *Megile lider*’s enthusiastic reception in Israel in the 1960s see Diego Rotman, “Teatron yiddish beyisrael: 1948–1988,” *Zmanim* 99 (Summer 2007): 38–45; Dorit Yerushalmi, “Ben ariga lifrima: Shmuel Bunim mevayem et Itzik Manger,” *Iggud* 3 (2008); and Brenner, “Itzik in Israel: Itzik Manger’s Yiddish in Hebrew Translation.”

which are initially folksy but become increasingly lyrical, to do something about it. It is, however, Abraham's response, repeated without variation three times, which offers the most powerful example of a contextual explosion of a collocation—and of the belief systems that clash within it. This is also where the Hebrew translation, which at one point became a popular hit performed by Israeli singer Arik Einshtein, engages in its own cultural rewriting: both the Yiddish proverb of the shooting broom at the core of this refrain, and the Jewish concept of *bitokhn* (faith and certainty in the just ways of the divine) get completely revised by the new Israeli meanings of *bitaḥon* (security in the military sense) and *yoreh* (shoots). You will note that the concept of *bitokhn* is simply erased in Wolf's English rendition, while it is assimilated into the modern Israeli sense of military security in the Hebrew:

אַבְרָהָם אָבִינו שְׁמִיכֶלֶט און שװײַגט
און פֿיפּקעט פֿון זײַן לײַלֶקע רױך:
„בטחון, מיין ווייב, אַז דער אײבערשטער וויל,
שיסט אַפֿילו אַ בעזעם אױך.“

The Patriarch Abraham puffs at his pipe
And waits, then he says with a smile,
“A broomstick, my dear, can be made to shoot
If the Lord thinks it's worthwhile.”

אַבְרָהָם מַחִיךְ וְשׁוֹתֵק,
מוֹצֵץ מִקְטָרְתּוֹ בְּכָל פֶּה
בְּטַחּוֹן, זֹגְתִי, בְּרִצּוֹת אֱלֹהִים
אַפִּילוֹ מִטַּטֵּא יוֹרֵה.⁵⁶

Now, the Yiddish proverb *az got vil shist a bezem (oykh)* (literally: If God wants, (even) a broom can shoot; idiomatically: You can't tell where deadly danger lurks) is repeated almost verbatim by Abraham, in a self-important, all-knowing attempt to assure Sarah (asking her to have *bitokhn*) that they will indeed have a child, despite—as we know from the Bible and from the first stanza of the poem—all biological indications to the contrary. But in the gap between the idiomatic meaning of the proverb, which Manger's readers were sure to be familiar with, and its literalization in the context of the poem (and the biblical story of Genesis 18), it is Abraham's dried up sexuality, not Sarah's, that is being vividly invoked (thus, turning the broom into a broomstick in the English translation misses the point: the image of the dry straw whisk of an old-fashioned broom, when combined with the idiomatic meaning, comically undermines the phallic fortitude Abraham is boasting about). The proverb *az got vil shist a bezem oykh*, in its idiomatic Yiddish use, is an expression of a Jewish minority's anxiety at an always potentially dangerous environment: God can turn anything—even a broom—into a weapon against you. It is used either in stoic acceptance of one's fate (similar to *der mentsh trakht un got lakht*—literally, people think [i.e., make plans] and God laughs;

⁵⁶ From *Shirim u-valadot*, trans. Binyamin Tene (Ramat-Gan: Al Ha-Mishmar, 1968). Music by Misha Segal.

akin to the English proverb “man proposes, God disposes”⁵⁷ or as a call for vigilance in the face of danger. As Rella Koshelevsky has suggested, in dialogue with an earlier study by Dov Sadan, this proverb may have its origins in the medieval Yiddish *mayse-bukh*, which in turn rewrites rabbinic *aggadic* materials about Aaron’s flowering staff.⁵⁸ The Germanic sense of *schieszen* as sprouting, still active in the Old Yiddish text, does not exist—as Sadan argues—for speakers of modern (Eastern) Yiddish, “who understand the word *shisn* only literally, namely *as a shot*.” Sadan goes on to paraphrase the proverb’s meaning in the following manner: “With divine intervention even a broom is a weapon that emits deadly bullets,” and adds: “and that is the sense of the proverb in all its literary uses.”⁵⁹ A literary example which neither of these sources mention but which may actually have served as Manger’s intertext for the refrain of “Avrom un Sore” is Sholem Aleichem’s 1908 short play, *Az got vil, shist a bezem*. This parodic skit, billed by the author as “a tragedye kosher lepeysek, dekadent-simbolistish geshribn” (A Kosher-for-Passover Tragedy, in the Decadent-Symbolist Style) features a cast of characters that are all associated with preparations for the Passover seder: matzos, four cups, eggs, a grater, etc. Beyond personification, however, the text of the play is entirely focused on the literalization of a series of collocations (e.g., one of the characters is a “kokhlefl,” a stirring spoon; idiomatically, a busy-body who gets involved in matters that don’t concern him). All these characters, items in the kosher-for-Passover pantry of a Jewish household, make fun of the lowly broom in the corner, until the broom scares the cat and causes a *khad gadya*-like chain reaction that destroys all of them, to the homeowner’s horrified exclamation: “A duner hot mir dershlogn! Der gantser peysek iz khorev gevorn.” (“Thunder has struck me! The whole Passover is in ruins.”) The broom has the last word. Addressing the pile of garbage that all the play’s characters have been reduced to, he says: “Nu, haynt zet ir shoyn? Az got vil, shist a bezem! . . .” (“Well, now you see? If God wants, even a broom can shoot!”)⁶⁰ When Abraham uses the same Yiddish proverb to reassure Sarah, the new-old context grants both “broom” and “to shoot” a new, sexual meaning.⁶¹ The phallic broom, however, retains the original sense of danger associated with the idiomatic meaning, undermining Abraham’s speech-act of reassurance, and signaling that Sarah—as well as the son who will be the result of this “shooting”—are in danger. Both the *Akeda* (The Binding of Isaac) narrative (Genesis 22) and Sarah’s death immediately after it (Genesis 23:2) are thus subtly but critically

⁵⁷ We are grateful to Chana Bloch for this observation.

⁵⁸ Rella Koshelevsky, “Ha-mateh ha-pore’ah: ‘iyun be-’ikaron hamekhoneh shel ha-sidra ha-tematit,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 13–14 (1991): 207.

⁵⁹ Dov Sadan, “Mateh Aharon vetze’etza’av” in *Beyn she’ila le-kinyan* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1968), 204. See also Ben-Zion Fishler, “Yorim u-forhim,” *Ha-Aretz*, 27 September 2004. Both Sadan and Fishler indicate that the negative valence of the proverb may be enhanced by the fact that in several Eastern European dialects of Yiddish, *bezem* also means a shooting star, which is considered an omen of bad tidings.

⁶⁰ Sholem Aleichem, “Az got vil, shist a bezem” in *Lekoved yontef* vol. II, *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleykhem* (New York: Sholem aleykhem folks-fond oysgabe, 1908 [1925]), 127–131.

⁶¹ See discussion of this point in Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 255. Sadan ignores, rather prudishly, the phallic signification altogether and reads Manger’s use of the idiom as if it simply reinforces the biblical narrative: “Indeed a nice metaphor for a 90-year-old barren woman who in the end gives birth to a son.” Sadan, “Mateh Aharon vetze’etza’av,” 208.

invoked. No such tension between promise and jeopardy exists in the Hebrew translation, where the spiritual *bitokhn* has become the political *bitaḥon*.⁶² In the absence of the idiomatic meaning of the Yiddish proverb for the Hebrew reader, all we are left with is the crass analogy between shooting rifles and inseminating phalluses.⁶³

Breaking the Barriers between Sacred and Profane

Outside of *Medresh Itsik*, Manger often uses similar rhetorical strategies with playful seriousness to recast biblical fixed expressions in works that are seemingly unconnected to biblical themes. Following the tradition of the Yiddish liturgical poem, generally uttered by women, such as the “Got fun Avrom” (“God of Abraham”), Manger revels in texts that break the barriers between sacred and profane and reverse the stereotypical class and gender distinctions between *mame-loshn* and *loshn-koydesh*.⁶⁴ This bridging of the culture of the *seyfer* (sacred book) and of *amkho* (workaday Jews) is already characteristic of Manger’s first collection, *Shtern afn dakh* (*Stars on the Roof*). In this early work, published in Bucharest in 1929, Manger simultaneously literalizes and reconfigures poetic topoi, merging them with biblical motifs and thereby shaking up our conception of what constitutes holy texts.

In this early publication, the twenty-eight-year-old Manger does not attempt to establish his literary genealogy by linking his project to the German Romantics, which the title of this first book spoofs (in particular, perhaps, the *Novellen* of Theodor Storm, and their preoccupation with the motif of the stars).⁶⁵ Bringing the stars down from heaven to the (often leaky) shtetl roof is, of course, a gesture that parallels his attitude toward the sublime in general, and is clearly in dialogue with Chagall’s version of a modernist critique of romanticism, a critique which reaches its zenith in the 1920s. It is telling, therefore, that in two seminal poems in this first book Manger adopts the carnivalesque mock epic as his genre of homage, and two “stars” of popular, “subcanonical” Yiddish literature as his poetic paragons. The aptly named poems, *Goldfadenyade* and *Zbarzheryade* (each more of a Dunciad than an Iliad) pay tongue-in-cheek—but also deadly serious—homage to Manger’s two cultural icons: Abraham Goldfaden (1840–1908), the so-called father of the modern Yiddish theater and the poet behind hundreds of Yiddish “folk songs,” and Velvl Zbarzher, the byname of Benjamin Wolf Ehrenkranz (1826–1883), the “folk-bard” who singingly wandered across Europe, ending up in Constantinople. He is perhaps best known for his *misnagdish* (affiliated with the rationalist, antiecclesiastic movement valorizing rigorous

⁶² The Hebrew writer Haim Be’er discussed the vulgarity of that transformation in the meaning of *bitaḥon* in a talk at UC Berkeley titled “Milim le-lo erets” (“Words without a Land”), 15 February 2010.

⁶³ On the change in the valence of “rifle” and the root y.r.h. (teach > shoot) in Israeli cultural discourse, see Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 291–92.

⁶⁴ For a nuanced exploration of these distinctions see Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven*.

⁶⁵ But of course Manger is very much indebted to the German lyrical tradition, especially in his use of the ballad. For an insightful analysis of this matter, see Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 236–37. See also Efrat Gal-Ed, “The Local and the European: Itzik Manger and his Autumn Landscape,” *Prooftexts* 31 (2011): 31–59. Gal-Ed provides an account of Manger’s autodidacticism in the European tradition and his negotiation of its demands as a young poet in the 1920s.

text study) parodies of Hasidic songs in praise of the rebbe, the charismatic Hasidic leader, such as “*Kum aher du filosof*” (“Come Here, You Philosopher”). Manger pays serio-comic tribute to Goldfaden and Zbarzher, elevating them—and Jewish mass culture overall—to canonical models for modernist, and especially avant-garde Yiddish literature. But he does that through a secular mock-*shibuts*, a pastiche of quotations from their works interspersed with a modernist montage of fragmented biblical quotations, all parading together in carnivalesque disorder as in a Purim *adloyada* (costume parade).⁶⁶

In the “*Goldfadenyade*” (*Lid un balade*, 33–35) Manger temporally and spatially merges the biblical text of *Shir ha-shirim* (Song of Songs) with Goldfaden’s operetta *Shulamis* (1888), and with Goldfaden’s actual production of this operetta in the Romanian city of Iași, a temporary home base for both Goldfaden and Manger. Iași of Goldfaden’s time is commonly described as the “vig fun yidishn teater” (“cradle of Yiddish theater”), to quote the poem’s last line. But in Manger’s poem the city itself is treated, as Shpiegelblatt has aptly noted, as a “miniature scene, that could serve as an introduction to a Goldfaden play,” stage decorations and all; but, he goes on to point out, “Manger does not let us forget that he is the director of this whole masquerade . . . leading it back all the way to its source,” as if forty years didn’t separate the two poet-dramaturgs.⁶⁷ The organizing principle of a Purim parade allows Manger to fuse periods, realia, text, and intertext: the title character of Goldfaden’s play, *Shulamis*, the biblical Shulamith, and the actress performing this role on the Romanian Jewish stage. This blending of the varied levels of representation—the textual layers of Goldfaden’s play and its biblical intertext, the biblical streets of the Song of Songs and the Iași stage—combine to dismantle the dichotomy between high and low, creating an equivalence of sorts between them. Yet it is all hidden in a jumbled parading catalogue of cursing Jews, street vendors, and dancing Purim-players, along with a mosaic-like tableau of characters from various other Goldfaden plays and songs, all disintegrating in the end as one stage light after another topples. Paradoxically, the moment in which the biblical aesthetic illusion is broken is precisely the moment of birth for the modern Yiddish theater:

גייט שולמית אויף צופֿריר,
און דער מאַסקאַראַד נאָך איר,
ביז זיי קומען צו אַ טויער,
ביז זיי קומען צו אַ טיר.
אַ פּראָזשעקטאָר פֿאַלט – אַ צווייטער...
און אַ דריטער – ווייטער, ווייטער...
פֿאַרביק בליצט אַ שילד אַרויס:
„פֿאַמול ווערדע“ – „גרינער בוים“ –
וויג פֿון ייִדישן טעאַטער.

⁶⁶ One may wonder if the Modern Hebrew term *adloyada*, supposedly invented by the writer Y. D. Berkovitch in 1932, was not influenced by the carnivalesque costume-parades in Manger’s poems “*Goldfadenyade*” and “*Zbarzheryade*” which appeared just three years earlier.

⁶⁷ Spiegelblatt, *Bloe vinklen: Itzik Manger – lebn, lid un balade*, 124–25.

First of all Shulamis goes
And the masquerade in tow,
Till they come unto a gate,
Till they come unto a door.
A stage light falls—and then another . . .
And then a third—further, further . . .
a sign flashes its gaudy colors:
“*Pomul verde*,”— “a green tree”—
The cradle of Yiddish theater.

(*Lid un balade*, 35)

In the first half of *Zbarzheryade* we find Velvl Zbarzher as he wanders through the Jewish quarter of Bucharest. After a surrealist, seemingly drunken depiction of the nocturnal street scene, Zbarzher, in the poem’s last two stanzas, springs forth in his *tsebrokhenem tsilinder* (crushed top hat), gathers an audience around him, and transforms himself into a street performer-cum-street prophet. Not just *any* street prophet, but Zechariah. Manger’s Zbarzher begins his performance/prophecy with a parodic Hasidic song that, like the biographic Zbarzher’s songs, lambastes the Hasidic cult of the rebbe. Manger has Zbarzher, then, move beyond his signature parody and fully assume his role as prophet, as he makes a self-ironizing critical turn in the final stanza:

חזק־שפיל, און פורים־שפילער,
פֿעלדער־מיז, און קהלס בעלי־טובות,
ס'ווערט געמקלט און גחובלט
ווי אין מקל נועם ... מקל ... חובות...
און ער מאַכט אַ רעוועראַנס:

– וועלוועל זבאַרשער ערנקראַנץ.

Travesty-play and Purim-players,
Bats, and public benefactors,
It gets brokered and be-debted
As in a rod of Grace . . . a rod of . . . debts . . . ”
And he makes a bow once:

– Velvl Zbarzher Ernkrants.”

(*Lid un balade*, 38)

Needling the world of vulgar Jewish commercialism, a world of *mekleray* and *khoyves* (brokership and debts), Manger has his Zbarzher manipulate the very language of the

Jewish merchant class, merging it with the language of another “Z,” the prophet Zechariah, and specifically Zach. 11:7–11, a chapter that takes a very dim view of human behavior: “va-’ekah li shney maklot le-ahad karati no’am ule-ehad karati hovlim (“And I took for myself two rods; the one I called Grace, and the other I called Severity [literally: “hitting (rod)].” Jerusalem Bible). Manger puns here brilliantly on the tensions between the Hebrew and the Yiddish senses of unrelated but phonetically similar expressions: *mekl* (Yiddish: to broker, mediate) and *makel* (Hebrew: “rod”), *khoyves* (Hebraic Yiddish: “debts”) and *hovlim* (Hebrew: hitters, saboteurs; translated in the Jerusalem Bible as “Severity”).⁶⁸ Through these bilingual puns between *mame-loshn* and *loshn-koydesh* Manger has Zbarzher stage the chaotic interplay of the biblical and the contemporary in a modernist jumble of juxtaposed fragments that is a barely veiled critique of capitalism. The wheeling and dealing thus turns out to be—through the mere linguistic similarity to the biblical fixed expression—the *makel hovlim*, the hitting rod of Zechariah. But Manger doesn’t end here, with the prophetic, apocalyptic message of Zechariah, where God’s covenant with the people is described as broken like the stave of Grace itself. He is also not content with the critique of capitalism this prophetic stance opens up for him. Instead, as in the end of *Goldfadenyade*, Manger has Zbarzher break the aesthetic illusion as he breaks off his own performance. Manger ends the poem with a gestural flourish that calls attention to the performativity and fictionality of this capitalist-apocalyptic chronotope—Velvl bows and announces himself to the crowd.

Manger returns repeatedly to one specific biblically inflected gesture in his work, the gesture of taking off one’s shoes. While the move itself is mundane enough, Manger, like Yehuda Amichai after him (who interestingly also uses this same image repeatedly), infuses the most everyday event with a touch of the divine, and retroactively brings the lofty quite literally down to earth. The biblical substrate that informs this move is, of course, from Exodus 3, where Moses encounters God in the burning bush. While the biblical text uses “shal na’alekha,” something along the lines of “shed your shoes,” Manger latches onto the normative Yiddish *taytsh* of the line. According to Yehoash’s translation, the line reads, “Tu oys di shikh fun di fis, vorum der erd vos du shteyst oyf im, dos iz heylike erd.”⁶⁹ (Literally, “Take the shoes off your feet, for the ground which you are standing on is holy ground.”)

One strikingly beautiful poem that incorporates this image—via Yehoash’s translation—is found in yet another poem about Velvl Zbarzher, a poem that appears in the epistolary collection, *Velvl Zbarzher shraybt briv tsu Malkele der sheyner* (*Velvl Zbarzher Writes Letters to Malkele the Beautiful*), published in Warsaw in 1937. The volume is structured as a *bintl briv* (a traditional epistolary collection, following the conventions for proper letter writing) from Velvl to his beloved Turkish “little queen,” Malkele, as he treks across the frontiers of Europe to be united with her. Throughout the work, Manger explicitly declares Zbarzher to be his own poetic alter-ego, for example by having Malkele refer to Velvl’s published collection of poems in her highly Germanized,

⁶⁸ In these puns, Manger also makes allusion to the titles of Zbarzher’s books of poetry: *Makel no’am* (1868) and *Makel hovlim* (1869).

⁶⁹ Yehoash’s (1871–1927) eight-volume translation of the Bible was published between 1926–1936. Cited here from the 1951 edition.

daytshmerish style as “Die Sterne auf’n Dach.” In the poem “S’hot Malkele der karshenboym” (“Malkele, The Cherry Tree Has”; *Lid un balade*, 293-94), Manger describes Velvl’s longing for his beloved in terms of an encounter with a sacred presence. The last two stanzas read:

אין פֿענסטער שטייט דער בלומענטאָפּ,
צוויי נעלקן און אַ רויז –
און מיין בענקשאַפּט בי דיין שוועל
טוט די סאַנדאַלן אויס.

זי גייט צו דיר אַרײַן אין שטוב
מיט שטילע, פֿרומע טריט
און, מלכה'לה די שיינע, זע –
דו ביסט געוואָרן ליד.

In the window stands the flower pot,
Two carnations and a rose –
And my longing at your door
Takes her sandals off.

With quiet, reverent steps,
My longing enters your home,
And, Malkele the Beautiful, see:
You have become a poem.

The physical act of taking off one’s sandals is figuratively transformed as Manger removes the human agent from the scene. Indeed, it is Velvl Zbarzher’s *longing* that takes off *her* (as *benkshaft* is grammatically feminine) shoes in order to approach his sacred Malkele (literally: little queen). The evocative line “un mayn benkshaft ba dayn shvel / tut di sandaln oys”) conjures up not only the burning bush revelation scene but also a chain of associative links with the notions of sacred ground and holy places, *heylike erd* or *heylike erter*, in general. *Benkshaft* taking off her sandals transplants the biblical collocation signifying reverence for the divine presence from its original context, a context embedded in one sort of imaginary East, to another fantasy of the Orient in Constantinople, where taking off one’s shoes at the threshold of a holy space has quite a different valence. This holy place is the beloved’s mundane *shtub* (the more colloquial of the various lexical options for “house” in Yiddish; cf. “*heyim*” and “*hoyz*”), and even its oriental location is a rewriting of the sacred: an aestheticized Turkey, rather than the Holy Land, is here and elsewhere in Manger a site of Jewish and romantic yearnings.

The conflation of meanings of *heylike erter*, not only in the sense of the biblical *admat-kodesh* (terra sancta) or the more modern Israeli sense of *hamekomot hakedoshim*, religious sites such as mosques, or even *dos heylike ort* as cemetery in Yiddish, finds its greatest expression in the opening poem of Manger’s wartime collection, *Volkns ibern dakh* (*Clouds over the Roof*), published in London in 1942. The book opens with a remarkable poem, “Kh’vel oyston di shikh” (“I’ll Take off My Shoes,”

Lid un balade, 357-58), whose somber tone is in keeping with the turn in Manger's poetics during and after the *khurbn*. Here Manger uses the full arsenal of poetic devices to decry the futility of poetry and of the Yiddish poet in particular. The speaker begs to be stripped of his *shlikhes* (his poetic/prophetic mission), even if that entails death. Manger begins his poem with a stunning first line, combining syllepsis and zeugma: "Kh'vel oyston di shikh un dem troyer," "I'll take off my shoes and my sorrow" (and see the parallel in Amichai's post-1948 "arazti et hultzotay ve-et yegoni" "I've packed up my shirts and my grief").⁷⁰ Manger's speaker is a wandering poet, whose shoes—like his sorrow/grief—are part of his being, and taking them off to "lay himself out on a cloud" before God constitutes a self-initiated *akeda* of sorts (a topic Manger returns to in at least four other poems). The speaker describes himself also as a Cain who wants to be relieved of the mark that preserves him, and out of sheer weariness and defeat, to offer himself up to the God he has abandoned long ago. But Manger articulates a complicated poetic stance here that belies the poem's sweet melancholy surface: He is asserting the sanctity of poetry as "the holy place" and refusing the lachrymose mantle of victimhood, at the same time that he acknowledges the pressures of history make it impossible for him to hold on to these positions any longer. In the poem's main meta-poetic move, the speaker tries to break the tie between "Jew" and "poem," and between "beauty" and "tears." This tie is brought about not by any inherent meaningful connection between the two (an obvious *shtokh*, barb, against Jewish romanticism, Bialik in particular), but rather by the error of Yiddish rhyme: "Is it my fault that by mistake 'Yid' (Jew) rhymes with 'lid' (poem)?" and again in the next stanza: "is it my fault that by mistake 'sheyn' (beautiful) rhymes with 'geveyn' (weeping)?" Ultimately, in the harrowing historical context of 1942 Europe, the God he addresses has nothing of the sacred left in him. He is a surreal montage figure, a graft combining grim reaper and mother, whose lullaby can at best bring the defeated poet eternal sleep. It is an impossible poem to translate, and we will let it have the last word, in *mame-loshn* and only our literal translation:

כ'וועל אויסטאָן די שיר...

כ'וועל אויסטאָן די שיר און דעם טרויער,

און קומען צו דיר צוריק

אַט אַזוי ווי איך בין אַ פֿאַרשפּילטער,

און שטעלן זיך פֿאַר דיין בליק.

מיין גאַט, מיין האַר, מיין באַשאַפֿער,

לייטער מיך אויס אין דיין שיין

אַט ליג איך פֿאַר דיר אויף אַ וואַלקן

פֿאַרוויג מיך און שלעפֿער מיך אַיין.

און רעד צו מיר גוטע ווערטער,

און זאָג מיר אַז איך בין „דיין קינד“.

און קוש מיך אַראָפּ פֿונעם שטערן

⁷⁰ Yehuda Amichai, "Re'ach ha-benzin oleh be-api," in *Shirim 1948-1962* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1965), 21.

די צייכנס פון מיניע זינד.

איך האָב דאָך געטאַן דיין שליחות
און געטראָגן דיין געטלעך ליד
צי בין איך דען שולדיק, וואָס גראַמט זיך,
על-פי טעות „ייד“ מיט „ליד“.

צי בין איך דען שולדיק, וואָס גראַמט זיך,
על-פי טעות „שיין“ מיט „געוויין“,
און די בענקשאַפֿט, די אמת'ע בענקשאַפֿט,
וואַגלט כסדר אַליין?

צי בין איך דען שולדיק דערלויכטער,
וואָס כ'בין איצט דערשלאָגן און מיד,
און לייג דיר אַוועק צופֿוסנס,
דאָס דאָזיקע מידע ליד?

מיין גאַט, מיין האַר, מיין באַשאַפֿער,
לייטער מיך אויס אין דיין שיין
אַט ליג איך פֿאַר דיר אויף אַ וואַלקן
פֿאַרוויג מיך און שלעפֿער מיך איין.

I'll take off my shoes...

I'll take off my shoes and my grief,
And come back to you—
As I am, a forfeit
And place myself before your gaze.

My God, my master, my creator,
Purify me in your shine—
Here I lie before you on a cloud
Cradle me and put me to sleep.

And speak to me good words,
And tell me that I am "your child."
And kiss off of my forehead
The marks of my sins.

For I have fulfilled your mission
And carried your godly poem—
Is it my fault, then, that Yiddish rhymes
By mistake "Jew" (*yid*) with "poem" (*lid*).

Is it my fault that Yiddish rhymes

By mistake "beautiful" (*sheyn*) with "weeping" (*geveyn*),
And that yearning, real yearning,
Wanders on always alone?

Is it my fault, radiant one,
That I'm now beaten and tired,
And lay down at your feet
That same old worn song?

My God, my lord, my creator,
Purify me in your shine—
Here I lie before you on a cloud
Cradle me and put me to sleep.

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