

**Reading Israel, Reading America:
The Politics of Translation between Jews**

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The relationship between Israel and Jewry elsewhere defies most assumptions about diaspora. Owing to the historical circumstances of their emergence—the hallowed homeland with its unbending emphasis on ethnic exclusivity and the co-descendants living away in fiercely multicultural societies such as America—both frustrate the vast body of veritable scholarship available on a subject broadly classified as ‘diaspora studies’. Notions such as employment, education, globalisation, indentured labour, colonialism, cultural shock, etc. that largely determine the contours of the said subject, somehow come to be of less consequence. If one may formulate a rationale for the puzzle, it would be—first came the diaspora, then the homeland. The Jewish community of America and the state of Israel, brought into existence by large-scale immigration, share a common origin in Eastern Europe, and a common tongue in Yiddish. Over the decades since the establishment of Israel, the two collectivities embarked on quite distinct, even conflictual, roads of reconstruction and affirmation, divided deeply over language and thriving in distinct social realities. Yet, for the sake of *Klal Yisrael*, or Jewish peoplehood, cultural discourses of either country actively seek to court the other by leveraging a set of shared themes and concerns. These

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include questions of faith, migration, political Zionism, language and the connotations of being a Jew, both personal and collective, in a non-Jewish world. Under the circumstances, literary exchange through translation serves as the fertile ground for negotiations and consensus building measures. Drawing upon the sociological turn in translations studies at the beginning of the 2000s, Omri Asscher's densely referenced *Reading Israel; Reading America* underscores some of these mediating trends, particularly those that emerge from the 1950s to 1980s.

For the Jews scattered across Europe and America, till the first three decades of the twentieth century, Zionism was predominantly a religio-cultural ideal, confined mainly to the domain of literature; it was a literary nationalism celebrated in Hebrew writings of authors such as the Lithuanian Abraham Mapu. According to Leo W. Schwarz, the editor of *The Jewish Caravan* (1935), a much-lauded anthology of Jewish writings, Jewish people traced their true homeland in Jewish literature, not Israel. As Asscher argues, novels such as Mapu's *Ahavan Zion* (1853) or *Love of Zion*, were responsible for sustaining the romantic notion of an ancient homeland through times of exile and religious persecution: a fact reiterated by the Hebrew reviews of the novel that credit Mapu for nurturing Zionist consciousness, calling him the foremost among Israel's visionaries. However, following the traumatic experience of the holocaust and the Six-Day War in 1967, the Jews of America found themselves more amenable to the idea of political Zionism—a possibility they were mostly indifferent to till the early 1940s. In the foreword of *Touching Evil* (1969), Jewish American novelist Norma Rosen, speaking on the behalf of American Jewry, appears to temper their collective guilt at being absent from the sites of Jewish persecution with a promise that the horrors of holocaust will never escape their imagination or writings. This new way of looking at Israel and its people had a telling effect on the fate of Hebrew literature in America. In decades to come, the number of Hebrew works translated into English increased from 18 in the 1950s to 75 in the 1980s. Leon Uris's 1958 novel *Exodus*, which emerged as the biggest best-seller in America since *Gone with the Wind* (1936), illustrates the newfound popularity of Hebrew literature, one that could cut across parochial affiliations of ethnicity, race and religion.

According to Alan Mintz, much before this dramatic turnaround in the Jewish-American perception of Hebrew-speaking Israelites, there were enough cultural agents on the American soil, assiduously promoting the idea of a Hebrew-speaking homeland of the Jews. These included Hebrew authors living in the United States, Hebrew publishing houses, Hebrew literary clubs, writers' associations, Hebrew periodicals and the network of Hebrew colleges. In the years following World War II, as the ties between the two collectivities sweetened and empathies grew to be warm, several independent American publishers started commissioning translations of Hebrew literature. This eased the pressure on print outlets connected with Zionist institutions, resulting in a decrease in their numbers.

However, the literary traffic between the two worlds, mediated through translations, wasn't without its share of ironies. In *America's Israel* (2017) Kenneth Kolander uses the adjective 'uneasy' to qualify the alliance between the two countries. Although Kolander has military partnership in mind—one that came into being during the Israel-Arab war, was nourished during the Cold War, and is hinged on Israel's strategic importance to the Middle East—one may, with sufficient justifications, use the same adjective to describe the cultural ties between the two societies. The history of the 'uneasy' literary discourse, that strategises assimilation of Hebrew literature in America, is nearly as old as the first American translation of Mapu's novel. In 1922, when Pastor Benjamin Schapiro, himself a Jewish convert, brought out the first English translation of *Ahavan Zion*, he changed its title to *The Shepherd Prince*—a name bearing distinct Christian connotation. And the *New York Times* review of its 1930 reprint by a Protestant publishing house made no reference to its Zionist undertone or to its role in political awakening among the Jews.

The first three chapters of the *Reading Israel, Reading America* explore the role of social agents—critics, institutional publication houses, newspapers, etc.—that have, since the 1950s, controlled the absorption of translated Hebrew literature in America. Through a plethora of keenly-curated examples, the study brings to fore tactics through which Hebrew texts are rendered palatable to American readership, reinforcing, inter alia, the image of a morally upright

Israel. These include tempering the emphasis in Hebrew works on Jewish/non-Jewish boundaries; omitting sweeping accusations of anti-Semitism aimed at the Christian world; playing down territorially defined notions of Jewish identity; framing texts that speak of moral ambiguities inherent in Israel's sociocultural outlook as laudable specimens of the country's pluralistic ethos; describing works that rake up the question of Palestine as demonstrative of a vibrant national psyche.

At the same time, as Asscher recounts in the second chapter of the book, translation prodded Americans to rethink the idea of Israel, particularly at a time when they had no intention or inclination to do so. This he attributes to the new age authors of the 1960s in Israel (led by the likes of Amos Oz) whose writings exhibited clear strains of moral conundrum. These authors were ready to move away from parochial concerns of political Zionism and defy the institutional hegemony that promoted it. Their questioning of Israel's conduct in the context of Israel-Arab conflict challenged the image of Israel that agents of Hebrew literature were trying to dish out to the Americans. However, through their choice of texts deemed appropriate for translation, editorial commentary and interpretative proclivities of reviews, the cultural agents could easily tide over the crisis. The dissenting new authors were recast as the voice of the Left in Israel and their severe scrutiny of Israeli society was described as having its roots in Israel's age-old tradition of unrelenting social criticism.

The second part of the book, which deals with the circulation of Jewish American works in Israel, problematises the latter's desire to find a common destiny with the American Jewry; the assumption that Jewish literature can find its true expression only in Hebrew casts aspersions on the authenticity of Jewish American literature and warrants modifications in the translated texts that find their way back into the 'home'. As Asscher points out, such ideologically driven manoeuvres, both in translation and criticism, assumes patronising overtones and refuse to recognise the particularities of American Jewry, let alone the criticism of the Israel found therein. For the social agents controlling literary discourses in Israel, American Jewish literature must not be celebrated for its independent voice; it is an inferior, often inadmissible, constituent of the larger idea of universal

Jewish brotherhood. While its achievements must be celebrated, those aspects which do not conform to Zionism must be elided and removed from translation. These aspects are described as a form of corruption rooted in the contaminating contact with the non-Jewish.

In the dominant cultural imagination of Israel, American Jews are anything but a source of inspiration. As Asscher notes, there is little desire to engage with the literary productions of the American Jewry, either in academic curriculum or in the writings of Israeli authors. Only those who conform to the idea of political Zionism are deemed worthy of inclusion in the canon. The omissions in Emil Feuerstein's anthology *Jewish Writers in World Literature* exemplify this tendency: Saul Bellow's refusal to identify with Zionism explains his exclusion from the said anthology. Further, in their reviews of Jewish American works, a number of Israeli critics highlighted the nearly insurmountable challenges of living as a Jew in a non-Jewish world. Such assumptions, by implication, tend to project Israel as the only safe haven for Jewry the world over, and Hebrew as the only language empathetic to their unique experience.

It is a critical commonplace that American Jewish literature is constantly shaped, with varying degrees of success, by the institutional, cultural and political imperatives of the state of Israel. The oft-quoted anecdote about Israeli author S. Y. Agnon and the American Saul Bellow, both Nobel laureates of Jewish ancestry, is a case in point. Upon Bellow's first visit to Israel in 1960, Agnon advised him to get his works translated into Hebrew at the earliest. For Agnon, only a Hebrew translation could guarantee immortality to a Jewish author and bestow authenticity on his writings; an embrace from homeland is the ultimate recognition that a Jewish author must aspire to. However, this stance, which is symptomatic of Israel's engagement with Jews elsewhere, tends to disregard the struggles of American Jews and their specific history. For them, home is where Hebrew is spoken. The Israeli Jewish identity is a result of an elaborate programme of linguistic purification, concerted efforts at cultural homogenisation, and an unabashed assertion of religious beliefs, all sponsored by the political machinery. The American Jewish identity, by contrast, is predicated on incessant negotiations. As David G. Roskies points out, the Yiddish-speaking Jews of America

were thrust headlong into a melting pot and forced to fraternise with Jews who spoke other dialects.

Asscher's fascinating narrative emphasises the centrality of text to Jewish identity; it was a literary imagination that, for long, kept a spatially fragmented community together. However, even after the 1940s, when a logo-centric ethnicity evolved into a geographically defined entity, based preferably in Israel, the centrality of Modern Hebrew literature to nation building and *Klal Yisrael* remained intact. But Asscher's study piques the suspicion that its autonomy stands somewhat compromised, for now it is expected to play second fiddle to the state of Israel and its geocultural propaganda. Considering this, it is only fair to say that a reader would have expected a little more reflection on the ways in which contemporary Jewish authors think of their nineteenth-century classics. For the same reason, a segment on Jewish American writers' take on their Yiddish heritage would have further enriched the text's sparkling intellectual matrix.