



JOSEPH PERL'S ESCAPE FROM BIBLICAL EPIGONISM THROUGH PARODY OF ḤASIDIC WRITING*

by

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Joseph Perl's two epistolary novels, published in 1819 and 1838, far surpass typical Hebrew prose from the early nineteenth century. The leading Enlightenment authors (the *maskilim*) were deliberate epigones, because they favored the rhetorical modes called *shibuz* and *melizah*.¹ By imitating the Hebrew of the Prophets—under the influence of the ornate style known from medieval Spain—the Berlin Enlightenment authors and their followers strove for what they considered to be “pure language” (*leshon zah*). Their preference for allusion and quotation encouraged epigonism and made originality a lesser priority; many Berlin *maskilim* valued the adherence to norms more than original self-expression. The epitome of that devotion to literary norms was the genre of the *Briefsteller*, exemplified by Buchner's and Naiman's works, which taught Jews how to write polite German or Hebrew letters and sound like cultivated, well-educated Europeans.²

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1. *Shibuz* inlays quotations as ornaments; *melizah* is a flowery style associated with both the Bible and medieval Hebrew poetry from Spain. The *maskilim*, when they created a mosaic from biblical sources, did not necessarily use a biblical style. See Boaz Shahevitch, “Arb’a leshonot: ‘iyunim shel sifrut ba-lashon ha-maskilim ‘al pi ‘Ha-me’asef;” *Molad* 212 (1967): 236–42. His first footnote cites H. N. Shapira's *Toldot ha-sifrut ha-‘Ivrit he-ḥadashah*: “The language of Wessely (and not only his, but also that of the Haskala in general) is by no means biblical, as many and various people are accustomed to state up until today, but rather a new creation based upon the Bible” (210).

2. Three of the popular contemporary letter collections were Ze’ev Wolf Buchner's *Sefer zahut ha-melizah* (Prague: Hladkyschen, 1805), Mosheh Shemu’el Naiman's *Sefer mikhtevei ‘Ivrit: oder Ebreyish-Daytsher brifshleter* (Prague: Shalal, 1817), and Shalom ben Jacob Ha-Cohen's *Ketav yosher: tavnit mikhtavim ve-‘igrot ‘Ivriyot ve-‘Ashkenaziyot* (Vienna: Anton Schmid, 1820). These collections were reprinted many times. For a thorough study of the Hebrew (and German/Hebrew) *Briefsteller*, see Yehudit Halevi-Tzvik, *Toldot sifrut ha-‘igronim (ha-brivnshtelers) ha-‘Ivriim (me’a 16–me’ah 20)* (Tel Aviv: Papyrus, 1990). Halevi-Tzvik discusses the collections that were contemporary with Perl's epistolary novel in chapter 4.

Unlike most Hebrew authors in the early nineteenth century, Joseph Perl went his own way and developed a distinctive postbiblical voice that curtailed the role of *shibuz* and *melizah*. In the context of a literary trend that so strongly favored epigonism, parody enabled him to avoid becoming a mere imitator. Instead of mimicking the Bible, Perl parodied the newly popular ḥasidic writings, in particular *Shivḥei ha-Besht* and Nahman of Bratslav's *Sippurei mayse*. Parody made it possible for him to escape the orbit of biblical epigonism through a kind of satiric realism. In his major works, Perl seldom wrote sublime or even "high," erudite Hebrew; instead, to satirize the *ḥasidim*, he attributed "low" Hebrew to his ḥasidic characters. From the usual Enlightenment standpoint, ḥasidic works were written in low-class Hebrew, and yet Perl distilled their mode of expression—mistakes and all—into a potent new style. In his later work, Perl moved beyond satire against the *ḥasidim* and parody of ḥasidic writing, and he began to use this style independently.

After 1816, when Perl was unable to publish his German article "On the Essence of the Hasidic Sect,"³ he wrote a scathing parody of Nahman of Bratslav's tales. The first Hebrew edition of *Shivḥei ha-Besht* was published in late 1814, and Nahman's seminal stories—in the bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish edition prepared by Nathan Sternharz—appeared in 1815. Because censorship made it impossible for Perl to print his open critique, he chose to convey his criticism of ḥasidic life and letters obliquely, through the medium of fiction. Thus arose his parodic *Ma'asiot ve-igrot mi-zadikim 'amitiim u-mi-'anshei shlomeinu*, which remained unpublished in his lifetime. This early and incomplete text shows Perl using fictional ḥasidic letters as a framing device around two parodies of ḥasidic storytelling: a supposed "completion" of Nahman's tale "The Loss of the Princess" and a new tale called "The Loss of the Prince."⁴ Many elements of Perl's later parodies are present in this work, including Hebrew calques from Yiddish, inserted Yiddish words, coded names for actual towns, ironic reversals, and a final, crushing victory of the *maskilim* over the *ḥasidim*. Perl must have realized that his parodies did not succeed in countering Nahman's folktales, however, because there is no evidence that he ever tried to publish this book. Perl's as-if ḥasidic tales fall short as parodies, because these Hebrew narratives do not measure up to their source; from a literary standpoint, the originals are more effective than the parodies. Not until Perl turned away from narrative and fully embraced the epistolary form was he able to achieve his desired results.

Perl's masterpiece, *Megaleh temirin (Revealer of Secrets, 1819)*, purports to be a collection of 151 letters written mainly by *ḥasidim*. In the course of the novel, as the intercepted letters reveal rampant corruption and immorality among ḥasidic groups, Perl mocks their use of Hebrew. Perl preserves an ironic distance from them; as Linda Hutcheon shows in her book *A Theory of Parody*, one dis-

3. Joseph Perl, *Al mahut kat ha-ḥasidim / Uiber [sic] das Wesen der Sekte Chassidim*, ed. Avraham Rubinstein (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy, 1977). See Raphael Mahler, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Eugene Orenstein, Aaron Klein, and Jenny Machlowitz Klein (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985), 110, 125–27.

4. Joseph Perl, *Ma'asiot ve-igrot mi-zadikim 'amitiim u-mi-'anshei shlomeinu*, ed. Khone Shmeruk and Shmuel Werses (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy, 1970).

tinctive feature of parody is irony or critical distance.⁵ One might argue that Perl sometimes wrote ironic pastiche of ḥasidic writing, targeting their flawed use of Hebrew for correspondence. Perl's literary accomplishment clearly depended on the prior ḥasidic authors: although he initially imitated them to satirize them, their texts and distinctive Hebrew formed the necessary basis for his early parodies and later literary innovations.

This paper briefly discusses the key works of ḥasidic narrative before turning to the critical reception of Perl's Hebrew. It shows how Perl's *Megaleh temirin* uses the ḥasidic style creatively—both imitating and debunking. Finally, examples from the later novel by Perl, *Bohen zadik (Test of the Righteous, 1838)*, illustrate the author's important steps beyond his ḥasidic models. In that work he recombined the most effective features of mishnaic, medieval, and ḥasidic-style Hebrew to forge some of the most natural-sounding Hebrew from the early nineteenth century.

The low Hebrew associated with many ḥasidic texts is clearly at odds with prescribed Enlightenment norms. Instead of drawing primarily from the Hebrew of the Prophets or the complex style known from medieval Spain, ḥasidic authors typically used a simpler, less ornate, mishnaic base.⁶ That postbiblical simplicity applies to grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary.⁷ At a distance from the ḥasidic writers, an atypical maskilic proponent of writing in a neo-mishnaic style was Mendel Lefin, who contributed to the modern use of a neo-mishnaic style.⁸ For example, he retranslated Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* into a simple, more readable Hebrew.⁹

5. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985): "Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (6); "Parody, then, in its ironic 'trans-contextualization' and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony" (32).

6. One notable exception is the first segment of *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, which quotes and alludes to many biblical passages to give dignity to the Besht's simple origins.

7. Abba Bendavid's classic study *Leshon mikra u-leshon ḥakhamim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1967) analyzes the syntactical and semantic characteristics of mishnaic Hebrew. In the nineteenth century, one seminal model for writing in a mishnaic style was Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, whereas the Tibbonic translation of his *Guide to the Perplexed* epitomized one prominent ornate style of Hebrew writing in Spain. For a linguist's astute discussion of Maimonides' Hebrew style, see Chaim Rabin's Ph.D. Diss. from Oxford University (1943), published as *The Development of the Syntax of Post-Biblical Hebrew* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 63–67.

8. On Mendel Lefin's works, see Yosef Klausner, *Historiya shel ha-sifrut ha-ʿIvrit he-ḥadashah: Shiʿurim*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1930), lesson 6, part 4; see also Nancy Sinkoff's doctoral dissertation, "Tradition and Transition: Mendel Lefin of Satanów and the Beginnings of the Jewish Enlightenment in Eastern Europe, 1749–1826" (Columbia University, 1996), and her book, *Out of the Shtetl: Making Jews Modern in the Polish Borderlands* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2004), esp. chaps. 3 and 4.

9. See Moshe ben Maimon, *Morei nevukhim*, trans. Mendel Lefin (Zholkva: Meir Hofer, 1829). The title page indicates that Lefin has translated the work into "the simple and pure [or 'the light and clear,' *ha-kala ve-ha-nekiah*] language of the Mishna." This interpretation of "pure" or clear language is at odds with that of the Berlin Enlightenment writers and their epigones, who equated "pure language" (*leshon zāh*) with biblical *melizāh*.

Beyond their reliance on mishnaic elements, the ḥasidic authors wrote a Hebrew that remained close to the vocabulary and syntax of Yiddish, their spoken vernacular.¹⁰ As is well known, for generations the seminal folktales about the founder of Hasidism were passed down orally in Yiddish. At the same time as the Hebrew publication of *Shivḥei ha-Besht* lends it an aura of sanctity, the Hebrew style reflects its oral Yiddish sources.¹¹ Similarly, Nahman of Bratslav first told his *Sippurei mayse*s in Yiddish, and they were subsequently recorded in Hebrew and Yiddish by Nahman's scribe, Nathan Sternharz.¹² Sternharz's narrative Hebrew style relies so heavily on the Hebrew component of Yiddish that it is readily accessible to Yiddish speakers.

Ḥasidic Hebrew around 1815 is epitomized by Nathan's publication of Nahman's stories. Even the fictional editor of *Megaleh temirin*, Ovadya, emphasizes the centrality of Nahman's stories in his preface.¹³ Nathan Sternharz uses numerous Yiddish words and incorporates many Hebrew phrases and structures that are based on Yiddish usage. One idiosyncrasy that Perl especially parodies is the overuse of the words *את עצמו* as a translation of the Yiddish reflexive *זיך*. This is not as frequent as Perl suggests in his parodies, but the first tale of the *Sippurei mayse*s provides some pertinent examples.¹⁴ When a character needs to deliberate, we find the Hebrew *haya meyashev azmo*, which translates from the Yiddish expression *hot er zikh meyashev geven* (2).¹⁵ Then comes the phrase *haya meza'er azmo*, also translated from a Yiddish phrase, *hot er zikh zeyer metsaer geven* (3). Perl exaggerates this use of *et azmo* to make it look ridiculous.¹⁶ Another feature

10. In the eighteenth century, Yiddish writing was looked down upon in rabbinic circles; in one telling episode of *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, Rabbi Gershon becomes angry at the young Baal Shem Tov because he uses Yiddish sources (*sifrei taytsh*) for a halakhic decision. See *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, ed. Avraham Rubinstein (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1991), 55; *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov [Shivḥei ha-Besht]: The Earliest Collection of Legends about the Founder of Hasidism*, trans. and ed. Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 27, tale 14. Rabbi Gershon represents traditional rabbinic culture, in which biblical Hebrew and later *loshn kodesh* were ascribed sanctity and status. But Hasidism, with its populist base, embraced Yiddish more willingly.

11. The Hebrew of *Shivḥei ha-Besht* retains many traces of oral transmission, particularly in its use of Yiddish and Russian words. An article by Menashe Unger lists more than a hundred Yiddish words in *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, some of them used several times. See "Yidishe verter in *Shivḥei ha-Besht*," *Yidishe shprakh* 21 (1961): 65–73.

12. The socioeconomic side to this situation is beyond the scope of this essay. It is significant, however, that because ḥasidic writings gave voice to a less educated segment of the population, their Hebrew was Yiddish-inflected and less associated with biblical or medieval *melizah*. At the same time, Nathan Sternharz deliberately rejected *melizah*; see Shmuel Werses' discussion of this point in the introduction to Joseph Perl's *Ma'asiyot ve-igrot mi-zadikim amittim u-mi-anshei shlomeinu*, 45.

13. Joseph Perl, *Megaleh temirin* (Vienna: Strauss, 1819), 2a.

14. *Sippurei mayse*s [1815], ed. Nathan Sternharz (Jerusalem: Ḥasidei Braslev, 1979).

15. How did a verb meaning "to sit" come to mean "to ponder"? The closest thing to an ancient precedent for this usage is the Talmudic phrase *yashav al ha-medokha*, which means to ponder a problem, because it evokes the metaphor of sitting over a mortar and pestle to grind something up into a powder. See Even-Shoshan's *Ha-milon he-hadash* (Jerusalem: Kiryat sefer, 1985), 2:632. This is analogous to the derivation of "to ruminate" from the literal meaning of the Latin verb *ruminan*, "to chew."

16. There are countless examples of the typical, Yiddish-based, ḥasidic *et azmo*. The editor who appended the paragraph at the end of Nathan's second preface to *Sippurei mayse*s, for example, uses

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of Nahman's *Sippurei mayse*s that Perl parodies is the use of glosses to explain less familiar Hebrew words. For example, at the start of "The Loss of the Princess," the wise man sees a *mivzar*, which is glossed by the parenthetical, Aramaic tinged words *she-korin shlos*. Explanatory Yiddish glosses also occur in Perl's writings, where they work both as parody and as aids to less educated readers.

At the end of his second preface to *Sippurei mayse*s, Nathan Sternharz responds to contemporary criticisms and touches on his reason for using simple Hebrew. He apologizes for the lowly and even vulgar language (he calls it *leshonot gasim*) in the stories.¹⁷ An editor of the 1850 edition—possibly Rabbi Nahman of Tulchin¹⁸—explains the reason for this: Nahman of Bratslav "told the tales in the Yiddish (*leshon Ashkenaz*) used in our land," and then Nathan "translated them into the Holy Tongue and deliberately lowered himself to a simple language—in order that the matter would not be changed for a person reading them in the Holy Tongue (*leshon ha-kodesh*)" (xiv). According to this explanation, then, the Yiddishized Hebrew is motivated by a wish to convey Nahman's Yiddish storytelling accurately in Hebrew.¹⁹ Nathan Sternharz gives two examples, both based on Yiddish expressions: *ne'aseh brogez aleiha*—he became angry with her (in the parallel Yiddish version: *iz afir brogez gevorn*, 1) and *lakah et azmo el ha-shtiah*—he took to the bottle (in the parallel Yiddish: *hot er zikh genumen tsum trunk*, 119; the concern is linguistic; if the issue were shocking contents, the apology could have mentioned the next sentence, *ve-halakh le-veit ha-zonot*.) In any event, the preface to the second edition of *Sippurei mayse*s acknowledges that the Hebrew might be considered substandard. But that lowly Hebrew, mimicking Yiddish, was justified by the desire to remain as close as possible to Nahman's own words—the Hebrew is *supposed* to sound like Yiddish.

In turn, following Nathan Sternharz's example, Perl used a low Hebrew to parody the ḥasidic style of writing. The critical reception of Perl's work, in the early twentieth century, emphasized that the Hebrew of *Megaleh temirin* was "a barbarous jargon,"²⁰ which enabled Perl to mock "the corrupt Hebrew of the Zaddikim."²¹ According to Israel Davidson, "the nature of this style is that it pays no heed to grammar, mixes the Hebrew with Yiddish, Polish and Russian words indiscriminately, and gives many Yiddish idioms in a literal Hebrew translation."²²

the phrases *mezarez et azmo* and *horid et azmo*. Another instance of Nathan Sternharz's Yiddish-sounding Hebrew is the phrase "yesh raḥmones alav" (4).

17. The passage discussed here was found, according to the editor of the 1850 edition, among Nathan's posthumous writings.

18. See Mendel Piekarz, *Ḥasidut Breslav: p'rakim be-ḥayei meḥolelah, biktaveiha uve-safiheiha*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1995), 188.

19. Compare Lewis Glinert, "The Hasidic Tale and the Sociolinguistic Modernization of the Jews of Eastern Europe," section 4, in *Ma'aseh sippur: Studies in Honor of Yoav Elstein*, ed. Rella Kushelovsky (Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University Press, forthcoming).

20. Nathan Gordon, "Joseph Perl's Megalleh Temirin," *Hebrew Union College Annual* (1904): 235.

21. Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York: Columbia University, 1907), 61.

22. Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature*, 62.

Recently, Dov Taylor has agreed simply that “the Hebrew style of Perl’s ḥasidic characters is corrupt,” and his translation of the book amply conveys this view.²³ In his rendering of *Revealer of Secrets*, the ḥasidim write like illiterates and talk like ignoramuses.

We need to rehabilitate the allegedly “barbarous” Hebrew of *Megaleh temirin*—because the Hebrew of Perl’s low-class characters made a seminal, enduring contribution to Judaic literature. Some critics have seen a line of development from Perl’s Hebrew to the style of S. Y. Abramovitch,²⁴ the “*nusah Mendele*” that was championed by H. N. Bialik in 1910–12.²⁵ But Abramovitch-Mendele usually avoided the Hebrew style of Perl’s ḥasidim and kept to the high road of biblical and mishnaic Hebrew, medieval poetry, and some Aramaic from the Talmud. As a result, Abramovitch’s Hebrew novels, when they were translated and adapted from his Yiddish originals, never fully succeeded in capturing the vernacular tone of his Yiddish. Sholem Aleichem, who was the master at creating folk voices, had a greater appreciation for the significance and humor of “the language of *Megaleh temirin*.”²⁶

The synthesis of biblical and rabbinic Hebrew strata was not Perl’s greatest accomplishment. By mimicking Yiddish speech, Perl succeeded in imitating the spoken word even more than Abramovitch later did in Hebrew—and in so doing he anticipated the anti-*nusah* of I. L. Peretz and Y. H. Brenner, as well as much of the Hebrew now spoken in Israel.²⁷ The evolution of Perl’s Hebrew style may be followed from his *Luah ha-lev* (1813–16) and his parody of Nahman’s stories

23. *Joseph Perl’s Revealer of Secrets: The First Hebrew Novel*, trans. Dov Taylor (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), lii.

24. Jeremy Dauber, *Antonio’s Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Jewish Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): “In the Hebrew of Perl’s *Megaleh Temirin*, a complex interplay of various strata of language, of resonance and nonresonance, of Biblicism and secularism, emerges that had yet to appear in any earlier modern Hebrew literature. This final synthesis of Perl’s work becomes the stylistic starting point for the later *nusakh Mendele*, which in turn subsequently influenced writers like Bialik and Agnon” (269). This may be true, but there are also significant features in Perl’s Hebrew that were neglected by the *nusah*.

25. Bialik wrote the first of two key essays for the celebration of Abramovitch’s 75th birthday, which only partly accounts for its exaggerations. See H. N. Bialik, “Yozer ha-nusah,” *Ha-olam* 4, no. 50 (1910–11): 6–8, and “Mendele u-shloshet ha-kerakhim,” in *Kol kitvei Mendele Moykher Sforim*, vol. 3 (Odessa: Va’ad ha-yovel, 1912), 324–31. For a reexamination of Bialik’s theses regarding “*nusah Mendele*,” see Ken Frieden, “‘Nusah Mendele’ be-mabat bikoreti,” *Dappim le-mehkar be-sifrut* 14–15 (2005), and “Epigonism after Abramovitch and Bialik,” *Studia Rosenthaliana* (2006), forthcoming.

26. Shimon Dubnov states that he and Sholem Aleichem “carried on a humoristic correspondence . . . in the language of *Megaleh temirin*.” David Assaf has examined the pertinent letters closely, however, and has concluded that this formulation is imprecise. See Dubnov’s *Fun “zhargon” tsu Yidish un andere artiklen: literarishe zikhroynes* (Vilna: Kletzkin, 1929), 40 and 59, and Assaf’s “‘Ahuvi re’i, ha-magid miDubna’: mikhtevei bediḥot ba-signon ‘Megaleh temirin’ she-heḥlifu beneiheim Sholem Aleichem ve-Shimon Dubnov,” *Chulyot* 5 (1999): 61–107.

27. On the anti-*nusah*, see Gershon Shaked, “I. L. Peretz,” in *Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit 1880–1980*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Keter, 1977), 130–63, 468. On Israeli Hebrew, see Abba Bendavid’s remark at the beginning of his preface to the 1967 edition of *Leshon mikra’ u-leshon ḥakhamim*. He refers to the dulled linguistic sensibilities of his current generation, which “writes Hebrew words, but translated: the older people translate from Yiddish, and the young people from English” (v).

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(1816?), through *Megaleh temirin* (1819), to his final and stylistically most advanced work, *Bohen zadik* (1838).

In 1937 Yosef Klausner summed up the standard view of Perl's mock-ḥasidic Hebrew: "To this day, 'the language of *Megaleh temirin*' is a name for faulty, Yiddish inflected, barbarous language."²⁸ Yet Klausner doesn't simply accept a pejorative view of the ḥasidic style in Hebrew. He reconsiders the usual critiques of ḥasidic writing and adds:

The folk language is always different from that of the enlightened, and especially from that of writers. And indeed, much of what there is in the folk language, and which is considered corrupt in the eyes of the enlightened and the authors, after a certain amount of time becomes naturalized and slowly enters the enlightened literary language. . . . Sometimes the corrupt, folk language of the *ḥasidim* is more alive and more natural than the flowery, Enlightenment language. . . . Perl was wrong when he ridiculed and scorned folk Hebrew. That language begs to be cleansed of coarse mistakes and barbarisms that are unnecessary and misplaced; but it should not be *entirely* suppressed simply because it's not the flowery biblical language. . . . Yet Perl had no notion of a living, folk Hebrew, and because of this he scorned the language of the *ḥasidim*.²⁹ [Ellipses mine.]

From our standpoint, the content of Perl's satire is less important than are the literary effects he achieved by parodying and then transforming ḥasidic Hebrew.

Z. Kalmanovitsh, in his 1937 discussion of Perl's Yiddish writings, also comments on Perl's Hebrew style. He claims that it is not really a parody of ḥasidic writing, because it accurately emulates it and exaggerates its flaws: "Perl didn't need to think up anything new, he drew from what was already there. In *Megaleh temirin*, his achievement was that he conveyed this linguistic usage in a concentrated form, suited to the content."³⁰ Kalmanovitsh adds a sociolinguistic point: "If one may say that Hebrew also lived among the Jewish people before the recent attempt to revive it as a spoken language, it lived in exactly this form of a 'folkloristic' Hebrew, as one could characterize it. And it still [that is, in 1937] sounds this way in the Land of Israel, in the mouths of adults who come from among the Yiddish-speaking communities."³¹ Instead of seeing ḥasidic Hebrew and "the language of *Megaleh temirin*" as just corruptions of *melizah*, then, we can revalue them as more natural, folk expressions of the revival of Hebrew. Lewis Glinert corroborates this view, writing that "the popular style of the Hasidic tales played an essential part in the emergence of the new Hebrew of the Yishuv, sociolinguistically—in terms of creating new social functions for Hebrew and attitudes to it—and ethnolinguistically, in terms of the new actions that Hebrew would per-

28. "Lashon shel *Megaleh temirin*" *hi 'ad ha-yom kinui le-lashon meshubeshet, mezhorgenet u-barbarit*. Yosef Klausner, *Historiya shel ha-sifrut ha-ivrit he-ḥadashah*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1937), 303.

29. *Ibid.*, 304–06.

30. *Yidische ksovim*, ed. Israel Vaynlez and Z. Kalmanovitsh (Vilna: YIVO, 1937), xcix.

31. *Ibid.*, xcix.

form.”³² Perl first extracted ḥasidic-style Hebrew and made it available to Hebrew writers as the butt of parody; he then distilled the ḥasidic mode into a substratum for the original style of his late fiction.

Klausner and Kalmanovitsh were followed by lesser authors in this reevaluation of ḥasidic Hebrew. Regarding the language of ḥasidic books, Aharon Ben-Or (Orinovski) writes that “Perl points to it as a symbol of barbarism and ignorance, and we value it *as the beginning of popular* [or national, ‘*amamit*] Hebrew, alive and natural.”³³ In a related vein, following the new appreciation of ḥasidic writing, Baruch Kurzweil recognized that Perl was second to none in Hebrew prose before Abramovitsh.³⁴ More recently, Shmuel Werses and Khone Shmeruk have written extensively on Perl’s Hebrew and Yiddish work.³⁵ Of particular relevance here is Werses’ recognition of ways in which the Hebrew of *Megaleh temirin* is based on an implicit Yiddish model.³⁶

Already in 1813–16, influenced by his friend and mentor Mendel Lefin, Perl expressed his opinion about the importance of writing Hebrew in a simple, clear style. Initially he may have been motivated by pedagogical considerations, because at the time he was establishing his new, modern school for Jewish children.³⁷ For three years he printed *Luah ha-lev*, which consisted of Hebrew writings appended to a popular calendar; his prefatory comments always included this passage:

ויען כי דברתי על לב בני עמי, ספרתי דברים הנעימים לנפש, למען אשר כל איש יקרא בו בנחת מבלי עמל, כתבתי בלשון צחה וקלה להבין לכל איש, והדברים אשר הרצאתי מן התלמוד שלנו, גם בהם שנותי כה וכה את לשון הארמית, אשר היתה רגילה אז בפי העם, ועתה זרה ונכריה להם, ובחרתי לדבר בלשון עבר אשר ישמעו כל ישראל ויבינו דברי חכמים ומחשבות לבם. ואין זה חדש תחת השמש אשר עשיתי.³⁸

32. Glinert, “The Hasidic Tale and the Sociolinguistic Modernization of the Jews of Eastern Europe,” section 5 (as cited in footnote 19).

33. Aharon Ben-Or (Orinovski), *Toldot ha-sifrut ha-ivrit he-ḥadashah*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Yizreel, 1966), 77.

34. Baruch Kurzweil, *Be-ma’avak al arkhei ha-Yahadut* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1970), 70.

35. In addition to their extensive introduction to Perl’s *Ma’asivot ve-igrot mi-zadikim amittim u-mi-anshei shlomeinu*, see chapter six in Shmeruk’s *Sifrut Yidish: prakim le-toldoteiha* (Tel Aviv: Porter Institute of Tel Aviv University, 1978) and the many pertinent chapters and articles in Werses’ *Sippur u-shoresho: ‘iyunim ba-hitpatḥut ha-proza ha-ivrit* (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1971), *Mi-lashon el lashon: yezirot ve-gilguleihem be-sifruiteinu* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), and ‘*Hakiza ‘ami*’: *sifrut ha-haskala ba-‘idan ha-modernizaia* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001).

36. See “Mi-lashon el lashon: samemenei ha-nusah be-yidish shel ‘Megaleh temirin’ me’et Joseph Perl,” *Chulyot* 3 (1996): 80, and Jeremy Dauber’s discussion in *Antonio’s Devils*, 286–87.

37. See “Joseph Perl vi a bildungs-tuer un zayn shul in Tarnopol (125 yor nokh ir grindung),” *YIVO bleter* 31–32 (1948): 131–90. Nancy Sinkoff discusses Perl’s activities, including his creation of the Israelite Free School in Tarnopol—the first modern Jewish school in Galicia—in her book *Out of the Shtetl*, 225–37.

38. *Luah ha-lev 1813–16* [reprint of the essayistic sections of three calendars originally printed by Joseph Perl in Tarnopol], ed. Menuha Gilboa (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, n.d.), 1, 27, 59. One exemplary passage is Perl’s moralistic retelling of an aggadic story of a fisherman. See *Luah ha-lev* 2 (1814–15): 8–10; in the Tel Aviv reprint, 33–36. The only thorough analysis of these early writings by Perl is by Raphael Mahler in *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment* (as cited in note 3), chapter 5; he

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And because I spoke to the heart of my people, I have told things that are pleasing to the spirit; in order that that every person will read it with ease and without toil, I have written in a pure language that is simple for everyone to understand. And even the things that I have excerpted from our Talmud, here and there I have changed the Aramaic, which was common then in speech, but which is now foreign and strange to people. I have chosen to speak in a Hebrew that all Israel will listen to, and they will understand the words of the sages and the thoughts of their hearts. What I have done is nothing new under the sun. . . .³⁹

Even before he began to write his parodies of ḥasidic speech, then, Perl experimented with a pared-down Hebrew style that deviated from norms of maskilic *melizah*. He was already moving toward a “low” register and was able to give fullest expression to this when making fun of the *ḥasidim*. At the same time, there are still traces of biblicism—for example, in Perl’s use of the words *ya’an ki, lemá’an asher, ’ata*, and in the allusion to Ecclesiastes, *ein zeh ḥadash taḥat ha-shemesh*.⁴⁰

An example of quoted speech from *Megaleh temirin* illustrates the power of Perl’s Hebrew. In letter 80, the Rebbe’s assistant explains that he decided to eavesdrop on a conversation between the Rebbe and his wife, because he expected high spirituality to resound from the Rebbe’s secluded room (*beit hitbodedut*). The representation of lively dialogue is particularly significant in this scene:

ורציתי לשמוע מה שידבר רבינו הקדוש עם הצדקניות תחי', כי הדברים אשר הוא דובר עמה בבית התבודדותו, בודאי הם עתיקים וטמירים ומנושאים לעילא ולעילא, כי בעת הזאת לא הורשה לשום אדם לבוא שם, ועמדתי אצל החרר כמו רבע שעה. ולא שמעתי כלום, אחר כך שמעתי שרבינו הצדיק שיחי' אמר, לפי דעתי די חמשים, והצדקניות תנחי' אמרה, אתה תמיד קמצן רק עלי. כמה אנשים אוכלים ושותים אצליך, שאין לך מהם כלום, על זה אתה אינו קמצן, ועלי אתה תמיד קמצן, ואמר רבינו שיחי' אתה לא ידעת זאת, מן הסתם מחויב להיות כך. אני יודע בודאי למה אני אין מקמץ להם האכילה אצלי, וגם אמר רבינו הלא לא הבטיח אני לך יותר מחמשים, ואמרה הצדקת תנחי' מה זאת, לא הבטחת לי מחמת שלי היית יודע, שיבואו לך כל כך הרבה מעות, אבל עתה שהביאו לך הרבה, למה לא תתן לי על כל פנים חמשה ושבעים, ואמר רבינו שיחי', מה לעשות עמך. אתה עקשן גדול. ושמעתי שסיפר לה מעות.

argues that Perl’s aesthetic of simplicity is really a pretext for replacing late Hebrew with biblical Hebrew (152–53). The Hebrew edition of Mahler’s book is *Ha-ḥasidut ve-ha-haskala* (Merḥavia: Sifriat poalim, 1961). Compare Shmuel Werses’ comments in the introduction to Perl’s *Ma’asiyot ve-’igrot mi-zadikim ’amitiim u-mi-anshei shlomeinu*, 42.

39. All translations of Perl’s Hebrew are by the author of this article; here and in subsequent examples, periods have been added to phrases in which Perl simply uses a string of commas. The only major work by Perl to have been translated into English is *Revealer of Secrets*, trans. Dov Taylor (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997). A measure of the extent to which his writing has been undervalued is the fact that Perl’s two Hebrew novels have not even been reprinted in Israel, though Jonatan Meir is currently working on a critical edition of *Bohen zadik*. One unfinished book was edited by Khone Shmeruk and Shmuel Werses using extant manuscripts: *Ma’asiyot ve-’igrot mi-zadikim ’amitiim u-mi-anshei shlomeinu* (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy, [1970]).

40. According to Abba Bendavid, however, Ecclesiastes provides some of the best examples of late Hebrew, closer to the style of the Mishnah (Bendavid 1967, 77–80); see also the first edition of this work, *Leshon ha-mikra o leshon ḥakhamim?* (Tel Aviv: Maḥberot le-sifrut, 1951), 82–86.

And I wanted to hear what our holy Rebbe would talk about with his saintly wife, long may she live. For the things that he talks about with her in his house of seclusion—obviously they are timeless and secret and exalted to the highest heights, because at that time no one is permitted to go there. And I stood near the room for about a quarter of an hour and didn't hear anything. After that I heard our saintly Rebbe, long life to him, say: In my opinion, fifty is enough. And his saintly wife, long may she live, said, You're always stingy just with me. How many people eat and drink at your house, though you get nothing from them? You're not stingy then, but with me you're always stingy. Our Rebbe, long life to him, said, You don't understand it? Of course it has to be that way. I know very well why I'm not stingy about food when they come to my house. Our Rebbe also said, Didn't I promise you no more than fifty? His saintly wife, long life to her, said, What do you mean? You didn't promise me because you haven't known that so much money would come your way. But now that they brought you a lot, why don't you give me at least seventy-five? And our Rebbe, long life to him, said, What can I do with you? You're so stubborn. And I heard him counting out money for her. (31b)

The humor of this passage derives from the clash between the assistant's spiritual expectations and the mundane reality of the Rebbe's life. The imperfect Hebrew enhances this effect while conveying the concreteness of an argument over money. Among hints of the implicit Yiddish original is the compound past (*lo haita yode'a* for *host nit gevust*), translated here as "you haven't known" to suggest its awkwardness. The marital dispute sounds quite contemporary, and apart from some of the grammatical mistakes (e.g., *ata* for *at*), most of the dialogue could be spoken in Israel today.⁴¹

Soon after *Megaleh temirin* was published, the young Isaac Ber Levinsohn (later known as "RIBaL") wrote one of the first literary responses: a dialogue called *Megaleh sod*, in a Hebrew style that somewhat resembles that of Perl's book. Levinsohn sent the short manuscript to Perl, who acknowledged having received it in a letter dated November 17, 1820. Perl praised Levinsohn's text and recommended that Levinsohn expand the work and publish it.⁴² For reasons that remain unclear, however, Levinsohn did not add to his dialogue; instead, Perl eventually added three letters and arranged to have the book published in 1830.⁴³

41. This purports to be the translation of a Yiddish dialogue. According to the fictional convention, then, the grammatical mistakes are those of the Rebbe's eavesdropping secretary. Another passage in letter 97 gives a clear instance of Hebrew that translates a Yiddish expression. An angry person says, *lekh teikef mimeni, ki 'ani e'aseh lekha sof sha'hor*. The second phrase is implicitly translated from Yiddish, *ikh vel dir makhn a shvartsn sof*.

42. See Jonatan Meir's introduction to his Hebrew edition of *Divrei z'adikim*, entitled *Words of the Righteous: An Anti-Hasidic Satire by Joseph Perl and Isaac Baer Levinsohn* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2004), 21. The Hebrew title of this scholarly edition is *Gilgulav shel Megaleh sod: kuntras Divrei z'adikim le-RIBaL ve-Yosef Perl*.

43. I. B. Levinsohn and Joseph Perl, *Divrei z'adikim: lehodit'a ezei derekh yishkon 'or; kolel shalosh 'igrot ve-siha bein shnei hasidim be-veit tefilatam ha-nikr'a hasidim shtibl'o kleyzl / asher be-kehilat kodesh Aluk / 'al 'odot* Sefer megaleh temirin *ha-meuhas leha-hasid reb Ovadya ben Pesahia* (Vienna: Anton Schmid, 1830).

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Levinsohn's Hebrew dialogue is a kind of missing link between Perl's *Megaleh temirin* and his second novel. Most significantly, Levinsohn moves beyond the epistolary form when he structures his response to *Megaleh temirin* as a dialogue between *hasidim*. The fact that one character is named "Reb Henoch" suggests, in addition, that Levinsohn may be alluding to the plays by Isaac Euchel and Aharon Wolfsohn. The dialogue opens with Reb Hirsh Itsik wondering aloud who wrote *Megaleh temirin*. Reb Henoch says, "Of course, one of the *briyot*," probably referring to the *maskilim*. After Reb Henoch says that his cousin is also a *briya*, they have this exchange:

ר' הירש איצק. מה אתה אומר, בן דודך ג"כ בריה רחמנא ליצלן, מה הוא אומר למשל, מה עושה.
ר' הענוך. מה לו לומר ומה לו לעשות, הוא עושה זאת שעושים כל הבריות, יושב כל היום על ספרמליך, ולומד א"ע [את עצמו] שטותים ואינו הולך עם שום אדם אפילו לפעמים לשתות יין שרף בשענקהויו.
ר' הירש איצק. רחמנא ליצלן, פחדו לשמוע, אך אמור נא אמור למשל מה כתוב בספריהם.
ר' הענוך. לא ידעתי, כולו שטותים וגראמין.

Reb Hirsh Itsik. What are you saying, your cousin is also a *briah*, God save us. What does he say, for example? What does he do?

Reb Henoch. What's he going to say and what's he going to do? He does what all of the *briyot* do, sits all day over books and studies nonsense and he never goes out with anyone, even sometimes to drink brandy at the tavern.

Reb Hirsh Itsik. God save us, it's a fright to hear, but tell, please tell for example what's written in their books.

Reb Henoch. I don't know, it's all nonsense and rhymes. (*Divrei zadikim*, 1830, 8–9)

Like the *hasidim* in *Megaleh temirin*, Levinsohn's characters overuse the Yiddish reflexive form *את עצמו* (e.g., saying *lomed et 'azmo* for the Yiddish *lernt zikh*). Moreover, Levinsohn anticipates Perl's *Bohen zadik* in this heavily Yiddish-inflected exchange. The characters use Yiddish words (e.g., *sforimlekh*) and typical Yiddish Aramaisms (e.g., *rahmana leizlan*).

There is little in Hebrew prose of the time that compares with Levinsohn's creation of what sounds like a colloquial dialogue. The closest precedent is perhaps Aharon Halle-Wolfsohn's Hebrew version of his Yiddish play *Laykhtzin un fremelay* (1796), which was circulated in manuscript among *maskilim* but was not published until 1955.⁴⁴ Other forerunners were Wolfsohn's dialogues, including "Siḥa be-ereẓ ha-ḥayim," which was printed serially in *Ha-me'assef* from 1794 to 1797.⁴⁵

44. See Bernard Weinryb, "An Unknown Hebrew Play of the German Haskalah," in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 24 (1955): 1–36 (Hebrew numbering). Dan Miron provides a number of insights into this work in the introduction to his edition of Wolfsohn's play, *Kalut da'at ve-zvi'ut [Reb Hanokh ve-Reb Yosef khe]* (Tel Aviv: Siman kri'ah, 1977). Perhaps the most essential similarity in this line of development—from Wolfsohn, through Levinsohn, to Perl—is the implicit presence of several competing languages, in which the Hebrew conveys the language struggle that is taking place.

45. "Siḥa be-ereẓ ha-ḥayim," *Ha-me'assef* 7 (1794), 1:54–67; 7 (1795), 2:120–53; 7 (1796),

Dialogues were a popular genre in Hebrew *haskala* writing.⁴⁶ But apart from their rare plays, authors like Wolfsohn generally wrote stilted dialogues of historical personages, such as Maimonides and Mendelssohn, in the ancient tradition of “dialogues of the dead.”

It seems that Perl was influenced by Levinsohn and Wolfsohn when he chose to make the dialogue form a central feature of his second book.⁴⁷ At about the same time as Perl added his three letters to Levinsohn’s dialogue *Divrei zādikim* and prepared the manuscript for publication, he wrote *Dover ʿemet*, which was the first draft of *Bohen zādik*.⁴⁸ Perl’s indebtedness to Levinsohn may be reflected in his recycling of his title—transferring the roots of both words in *Divrei zādikim* into the successive, singular titles *Dover ʿemet* and *Bohen zādik*. Moreover, the overall conception of *Bohen zādik* closely resembles the opening thrust of *Divrei zādikim*: in both texts, readers discuss the book *Megaleh temirin*.

In Perl’s *Bohen zādik*, the premise is that Ovadya—the fictional author—plans to become invisible and record everything he hears people (like the characters in *Divrei zādikim*) saying about the prior collection of letters he supposedly edited, *Megaleh temirin*. He knows, however, that he will not be able to write as fast as people talk. Ahead of his time, therefore, Perl has to invent a kind of tape recorder—or voice-recognition software. Ovadya finds a magic writing pad (*shraybtafel*) that will take down everything people say. After it is full he will need to erase the pages, so he hires two scribes who “will copy [and translate] them into *loshn kodesh*.”⁴⁹ One of the scribes is a descendant of Alexander Shohet, who was a scribe for the Besht for eight years; his son-in-law is often considered to have compiled *Shivhei ha-Besht*. This makes explicit that Perl’s scribe will write Hebrew in the *ḥasidic* mode—much like Nathan, when he translates Nahman’s oral Yiddish storytelling into Hebrew.

There is a major difference between this literary pretense and that of *Megaleh temirin*. Like other epistolary novels, *Megaleh temirin* consists of letters sup-

3:203–27; and 7 (1797), 4:279–98. Compare Moshe Pelli, *Dor ha-meʿasfim be-shaḥar ha-haskalah: terumatam ha-sifrutit shel ḥaluzei Ha-meʿassef, ktav-ha-ʿet ha-ʿivri ha-rishon, le-haskala ha-ʿivrit be-reshita* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbuz ha-meʿuḥad, 2001), 93–98. See also Jutta Strauss, “Aaron Halle-Wolfsohn: Ein Leben in drei Sprachen,” in *Musik und Ästhetik im Berlin Moses Mendelssohns*, ed. Anselm Gerhard (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1999), 73–74.

46. See Moshe Pelli, *Sugot ve-sugiot ba-sifrut ha-haskala ha-ʿivrit: ha-genre ha-maskili ve-avizareihu* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbuz ha-meuḥad, 1999), 48–60.

47. Shmuel Werses mentions the possibility that Perl was influenced both by real dialogues about *Megaleh temirin* and by Levinsohn’s dialogue in draft, *Megaleh sod*. See “Bein meḥziʿut le-bidyon: ‘Megaleh temirin’ shel Joseph Perl be-ʿeinei maskilim ve-ḥasidim,” in *Be-maʿagalei ḥasidim: kovetz maʿamarim mukdash lʿzekhro shel Mordechai Vilenski* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2000), 213. Moreover, Khone Shmeruk refers to the possibility that Perl drew from actual *ḥasidic* letters. See “Dvarim kehaviatam ve-dvarim she-bedimion be-‘Megaleh temirin’ shel Joseph Perl,” in the collection of Shmeruk’s essays: *Ha-kriʿa la-navʿi: meḥkarei historia ve-sifrut*, ed. Israel Bartal (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 1999), 151. A seminal study of connections between Perl’s literary writing and his reformist activities is Raphael Mahler’s article “Joseph Perls kamf kegn khasides in likht fun ofitsiele dokumentn,” in the early Yiddish edition of his book, *Der kamf tsvishn haskole un khasides in Galitsia in der ershter helft fun 19m yorhundert* (New York: YIVO, 1942), 164–202; in the English translation, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment*, 121–48.

48. See Jonatan Meir’s introduction to *Divrei zādikim* (2004), 26.

49. Joseph Perl, *Bohen zādik* (Prague: Landau, 1838), 15.

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posedly written by the fictional characters. Yet in the most innovative segment of *Bohen zadik* (pages 18–37 in the first and only edition of this neglected masterwork), the book purports to be a transcription of dialogues. Because the characters in *Bohen zadik* speak Yiddish, we read the Hebrew translation of their oral speech. This conveys what we already know about the ḥasidic Hebrew writing of Perl's characters: it is translated from Yiddish. As Kalmanovitsh puts it, the Hebrew version of *Megaleh temirin* “is built upon a Yiddish foundation.”⁵⁰

What makes *Bohen zadik* especially interesting is how Perl writes—or pretends to have his scribes write—a Hebrew that he considers adequate to convey oral speech. At a time when maskilic Hebrew was still dominated by biblical *melizah*, Perl uses the “folkloristic Hebrew” influenced by Yiddish speech as well as by the Hebrew of *Shivḥei ha-Besht* and Nahman's works (as written down by Nathan Sternharz). In *Bohen zadik* Perl is less concerned to satirize the ḥasidic way of writing Hebrew and more interested in giving the impression of ordinary speech. Long before “*nusah Mendele*” pushed beyond the limits of *haskala* Hebrew, Perl experimented with another way to create lifelike dialogue.

In the beginning of the first argument Perl hears about *Megaleh temirin*, two characters dispute whether it is “full of nonsense” or “full of *hamzoes*”:

ראיתם אתם את הספר מגלה טמירין הוא מלא שטותים.
יהודא. שמע לי ושתוק. כי העולם ישחקו עליך הוא מלא המצאות וחכמות ומה שכתב
51. בר הכל אמת. [in errata list = שכתוב]

[**Itsik:**] Have you seen the book *Megaleh temirin*? It's full of nonsense.

Yehudah: Listen to me and be quiet, because people will laugh at you. It's full of novelties and smart ideas, and everything written in it is true. (18)

There is a liveliness about this dialogue that differentiates it from *melizah* and from the contemporary Hebrew in publications like *Kerem ḥemed*. Perl's character's use of the word *shtut* is mishnaic—mediated by ḥasidic usage and Levinsohn's parodic use, quoted above, in *Divrei zadikim*. The more common plural is שטויות, but שטותים (*shtusim*, as in Yiddish) is also found in medieval literature.⁵² Yehuda's answer contains three Hebrew words that had picked up new meanings by passing through their Yiddish usages: *ha-oylem*, *hamzoes*, and *hokhmes*. The Yiddishized version of *hamza'ot* works well with the irony in this passage. The origins are medieval, as when the Hebrew translation of Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* uses the word *hamza'ot* to mean creations or inventions.⁵³ But the Yiddish-inflect-

50. See Joseph Perl's *Yidische ksovim*, as cited in footnote 30, ci.

51. The typesetters added many more errors to those Perl intended his fictitious scribes to appear to make. A long errata list corrects them; in this passage, for example, *she-katav* should be emended to *she-katuv*.

52. See Avraham Even-Shoshan's entry under “Shtut” in *Ha-milon he-ḥadash* (Jerusalem: Kiri-at sefer, 1985), 4:1353, and Ernest Klein's entry in *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (Jerusalem: University of Haifa, 1987), 652.

53. Even-Shoshan, *Ha-milon he-ḥadash*, 1:275; Klein, *Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, 154.

ed *hamzo'es* can mean schemes, stratagems, or novelties.⁵⁴ And while *hokhmah* is usually a good thing in Hebrew, in Yiddish *khokhmes* are false, as-if “wise” ideas. So, if a character says that Perl’s book is full of these things, Perl himself preserves an ironic ambiguity: does the character mean that *Megaleh temirin* is full of worthwhile inventions and wise remarks, or that it is characterized more by schemes and the false wisdom of the rebbes?

In the next round of debates, Avrom asks: “Have you seen the new book?” (A long list of errata at the end of *Bohen zadik* corrects, among other things, *ha-sefer hadash* to *ha-sefer he-hadash*—the printer added mistakes to those made by Perl’s fictional scribes.)

אברהם. ראיתם הספר חדש [החדש] ?
מרכי. ראיתי בו איזה אגרות ונראה שחיבר אותו איזה אפיקורוס.
יחיאל ליבוש. אפיקורוס חיבר את הספר מי אמר זאת אני איני יודע, לא ראיתי בו שום
אפיקורסות.
מענדל. אני קריתי בו וכמדומה לי שחיבר אותו איזה חסיד אני לא ידעתי למה לא, ראיתי
שם איזה דברים מרבי אחד והנה הם כך כמו שהרביס הם באמת.
יחיאל ליבוש. מה אתם אומרים חסיד כתב את הספר איך נופל לכם זאת.

Mordechai: I looked at a few letters in it. It seems to have been written by some *apikores*.

Yehiel Leybush: An *apikores* wrote the book? Who said that? I don’t know, I didn’t see any *apikorsus* in it.

Mendl: I read it and it seemed to me that some *hasid* wrote it. Why not? I saw some things about a rebbe and they were just the same as rebbes really are.

Yehiel Leybush: What are you saying, a *hasid* wrote the book? How does such a thing occur to you? (20–21)

As in *Divrei zadikim*, the characters wonder who could have written *Megaleh temirin*. Linguistically, the last phrase is an amusing twist: *eikh nofel lekhem zot?* is an over-literal translation of the Yiddish *vi falt es aykh ayn*? In addition, Perl is again making a joke of ambiguity. Mendl argues for the genuineness of *Megaleh temirin* because, he says, it reflects the true nature of *hasidic* leaders. Left unsaid is whether this means that it praises or defames the rebbes. More to the point, this Hebrew dialogue resembles the way people speak—in Yiddish, that is.⁵⁵

54. See Alexander Harkavy, *Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York: YIVO and Schocken, 1988), 194; Uriel Weinreich, *Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary*, reprint (New York: YIVO, 1990), 635; and Yitskhok Niborski and Bernard Vaisbrot, *Yidish-Frantseyzish vert-erbukh* (Paris: Medem-Bibliotek, 2002), 238. Compare Aharon Wolfsohn’s use of *hamza’a* in the opening lines of *Kalut da’at ve-zvi’ut* (ed. Miron, 1977), 61, a calque on the Yiddish *המזאכה* that is found in the Yiddish/German version of *Laykhtzin un fremelay*.

55. Another interesting aspect of this passage relates to the claim that an *apikores* wrote *Megaleh temirin*. In his preface to *Megaleh temirin*, Ovadya states that the simple Hebrew style of the rebbes is becoming more widespread—to the point that “when we see one of our people writing in language that is called *zah*, he is considered to be an *apikores*.” From a *hasidic* perspective, that is, the very fact of writing “pure” biblical Hebrew could be evidence that the author had been influenced by the secu-

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Soon after, Avrom makes a comment that, in Hebrew, echoes his idiomatic Yiddish way of expressing himself:

אברהם. קריתם אתם בהספר, מה שאתם אומרים שלא יש בו אפיקורסות אני באמת לא קריתי בו ולא רציתי אפילו להביט בו למה לי זאת על כפרות אני צריך זאת.

Avrom: Have you read the book, what you say there is no *apikorsus* in it? I really haven't read it and didn't even want to look at it. What do I need with it? I need it *af kapores*. (22)

The opening question parallels the grammar of an implicit Yiddish phrase, *hot ir geleynt dos bukh, vos ir zogt az es iz in im nito keyn apikorsus?* Later, the Hebrew *'al kapores ani zarikh zot* is based on the Yiddish expression *ikh darfes af kapores*. This is one of many instances in which Hebrew words were borrowed by Yiddish, took on new folk meanings, and were then imported back into Hebrew. The combination of rhyme and metathesis between *apikorus* and *af kapores* adds to the humor.

Fifty years before Abramovitsh returned to Hebrew and developed the so-called *nusah*, Perl achieved remarkable results based on a simple mishnaic Hebrew that emulated Yiddish. Instead of flowery language following the Hebrew of the Prophets, we get vibrant speech, stichomythia, and lively dialogue like this conversation in a shop:

יחיאל ליבוש. היום היה לי מלחמה קטנה בבה"מד אודות הספר מגלה טמירין.
אליה. לפי דעתי לא היה להמחבר מה לעשות וכתב את הספר.
יחיאל ליבוש. אל תאמרו זאת המחבר היה יודע מה שחיבר.

Yehiel Leybush: Today I had a little battle in the *bes medresh* about the book *Megaleh temirin*.

Elia: In my opinion, the author didn't have anything to do and wrote the book.

Yehiel Leybush: Don't say that—the author knew what he was writing. (26)

The final phrase, using the Hebrew *haya yode'a*, calques the Yiddish composite past-tense form, *hot gevust*. Apart from this comic quirk, however, the fictional Hebrew of Ovadya's scribe sounds colloquial and even contemporary. It has aged as well as any other nineteenth-century Hebrew. In the following exchange, Perl saw fit to insert, as an explanatory gloss, the Yiddish expression *shlim mazl*:

איצק. אני איני יודע מי ביקש את המחבר לכתוב זה הספר הוא דוקא רוצה לתקן את העולם. רוע מזל (שלים מזל) לקח אותנו דוקא רוצים בחזקה לתקן אותנו.
יחיאל ליבוש. לא ידעתי מה אתם רוצים. לא היה להמחבר מה לעשות וכתב את הספר.
איצק. לא הי' לו מה לעשות הי' לי להכות את הראש בהכותל.

larizing *haskala*. Yet most of *Megaleh temirin* is in fact written in simple, ḥasidic Hebrew, which might seem to support Yehiel's view that it does not contain *apikorsus*.

Itsik: I don't know who asked the author to write this book. He really wants to fix (*l'takein*) the world [or people, *ha-olam*]. Bad luck (*shlim mazl*) for us—they want to improve us by force.

Yehiel: I don't know what you want. The author didn't have anything to do, so he wrote the book.

Itzik: He didn't have anything to do? He should have beaten his head against the wall. (29)

Here לתקן את העולם both suggests a kabbalistic *tikkun olam* and another meaning from Yiddish, in which the *oylem* means the people, the crowd, or the audience. In accordance with this ambiguity, Itsik refers to the author's pseudo-kabbalistic leanings, which mask his true maskilic goals. The next sentence dispels the ambiguity, tipping the balance toward the concealed meaning by adding that “they want to improve us by force.” It may be that Perl's use of the parenthetical words *shlim mazl*, as a gloss on *ro'a mazal*, reflects his goal of reaching a popular audience. This device also reminds us that the fictional characters are actually speaking Yiddish, no matter how natural the Hebrew may sound. Another suggestion of Yiddish usage lies in the word *davka*, an Aramaism that came to modern Hebrew through Yiddish. In this respect, using Aramaic to convey the popular level, Perl anticipates a distinctive feature of “*nusah Mendele*” as developed by Abramovitsh and Bialik.

Perl created the illusion of a workable vernacular, both by using a mishnaic base and by emulating Yiddish. This is not the style of his own Hebrew letters, but he knew that it was necessary to convey the speech of everyday people. To justify using low Hebrew, Perl pretends that these Yiddish dialogues have been translated by a ḥasidic scribe.

In one later dialogue, some people at an inn are arguing with a book peddler who is trying to sell copies of *Megaleh temirin*:

בנימין. דבר נחוץ הוא לנשא החיבור הזה למכירה אשר הוא מלא אפיקורסות
פשיטא הכרח הדבר מאוד.
אבלי. בבקשה מכם אל יתרעמו עלי אני איש עני, ואני מרויח על כל ספר ט"ו קרייצר.
בנימין. אני אתן לכם הט"ו קרייצער ולא תשאו הדבר מיאוס הזה למכירה.
אבלי. לא ידעתי למה אתם מבזים אותי ותרצו שאקח מכם נדבה השם ישמרני
מלקבל נדבות אני מרויח הצטרכותי בכל מה דאפשר בדרך כבוד, ואיני רוצה
לקבל צדקה.

Benjamin: It's really necessary to sell this book, which is full of *apikorsus*? Obviously it's very important.

Avli: Please don't get angry at me. I'm a poor man, and I earn 15 kreutzers on each book.

Benjamin: I'll give you 15 kreutzers if you don't carry this horrid thing (*ha-dvar mies ha-zeh*) for sale.

Avli: I don't know why you're making light of me and want me to take a hand-out from you. God protect me from taking charity. I earn whatever I need, so far as possible, in an honorable manner, and I don't want to take charity. (32)

Joseph Perl's Escape From Biblical Epigonism

Again, Yiddish-inflected *loshn koydesh* words—פשיטא and מיאוס—add a second, ironic layer of meaning. “Obviously” the book is important, or is it just *mies*?⁵⁶

How was it possible to represent everyday speech in Hebrew, early in the nineteenth century? Jews were praying and studying in Hebrew, but seldom thinking original thoughts in Hebrew. Basically, lively Hebrew had to be translated from another language—usually Yiddish. “Lifelike” dialogue in Hebrew was most often based on the existing vernacular. The German *maskilim* stuck to their epigonic *melizah*, because they considered any other Hebrew style “impure.” Their writing, with its reliance on allusions to biblical Hebrew, almost automatically distanced it from features that could sound like natural speech. Perl was more willing to use “low” Hebrew, at least to represent everyday Jews. He moved beyond *melizah* and its biblical pastiches by mimicking ḥasidic Hebrew and Yiddish phrases.

Following Linda Hutcheon, we may define parody as repetition with a critical or ironic distance. Perl's accomplishment was his parody of several forms of ḥasidic writing: the *mayse*, the letter, and the *shevaḥ*. And this parody helped Perl escape from mere epigonism in his Hebrew style, moving toward dialogue. In *Megaleh temirin*, the ḥasidic letters have a liveliness and vibrancy that is unmatched by any other *haskala* Hebrew.

From Mendel Lefin, Perl gained a more favorable view of Yiddish than was common at his time and place.⁵⁷ Like Lefin, Perl translated several works into Yiddish, including his own *Megaleh temirin* and Fielding's *Tom Jones*, which enhanced his sense of what could be done in a vernacular mode. This is similar to what is often said of Abramovitsh, that his later Hebrew style was enriched by his Yiddish phase from 1864–78.

Perl's Hebrew writing evolved rapidly from 1813 to 1819, from his early efforts in *Luah ha-lev* to *Megaleh temirin*. Subsequently influenced by I. B. Levinsohn's *Divrei zadikim* (written in 1820, but not published until 1830), Perl supplemented the epistolary form with dialogues. This had far-reaching consequences. His parodic Hebrew letters from *ḥasidim* often mocked their faulty usage while revealing corruption from within. When Perl has Ovadya decide to collect conversations among various people discussing *Megaleh temirin*, he takes a major step forward. In the most innovative sections of *Boḥen zadik*, Perl leaves literary parody behind. His Hebrew style has attained a power and fullness that enables Perl to represent Yiddish conversations in Hebrew. A new measure of mimesis has become possible, apart from all didactic or polemical intentions. Ovadya has turned away

56. The word מיאוס is another interesting case of Yiddish-influenced modern Hebrew: there is a late Hebrew use of מאוס as a noun, but Yiddish usage seems to have invented the adjective in the pronunciation מיאוס. See Even-Shoshan *Ha-milon he-ḥadash*, 1985, 2:612 for entries under the adjective and abstract noun; compare C.D. Spivak's and Solomon Bloomgarten's *Yiddish Dictionary: Containing all the Hebrew and Chaldaic Elements of the Yiddish Language* (New York: Yehoash, 1911), 138, and Yitskhok Niborski and Simon Neuberger, *Verterbukh fun loshn-koydesh-shtamike verter in Yidish* (Paris: Bibliothèque Medem, 1999), 164.

57. See Khone Shmeruk's discussion of Lefin's Yiddish writing, especially his Yiddish translation of Proverbs, in *Sifrut Yidish be-Polin: mehkarim ve-iyunim historim* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), 165–83.

from Hasidism, and as he comes to value a return to the simplicity of farming the land, his author also upholds simplicity and directness in Hebrew.

Hebrew literary history has been skewed by Bialik's notion that Abramovitsh created the dominant *nusah* of modern Hebrew literature. Perl's writing is an important early stage in another tradition, which preceded the creation of "*nusah* Mendele" and eventually became associated with the anti-*nusah*. One of Perl's descendants is I. L. Peretz, whose remarkable Hebrew writing has been unjustly neglected. Also drawing from ḥasidic traditions in his neo-ḥasidic writings, Peretz uses a Hebrew that deviates widely from both the formerly accepted *melizah* and the later *nusah*. His best early Hebrew works in the neo-ḥasidic genre (1891–94) are contemporaneous with Abramovitsh's Hebrew stories.

One common denominator for the effective Hebrew of Perl and Peretz is their parody of the Hebrew used by *ḥasidim*. Drawing on a mishnaic base, medieval rabbinic writing, and Yiddish, that Hebrew is the antithesis of *melizah*. We need to recognize the importance of this aspect of modern Hebrew writing. Instead of just seeing the high road that runs from Berlin to Odessa and then Yafo, we must follow the detour through Mezhibozh and Nemirov, Tarnopol and Warsaw. Ḥasidic writing and Perl's parodies offered an important alternative both to *haskala* Hebrew and to what Bialik subsequently called "*nusah* Mendele."

For Perl and his circle, there was a choice between pastiche of biblical Hebrew and parody of ḥasidic Hebrew. The latter, with its calques from Yiddish, eventually proved more successful as the inspiration for a language of mimetic fiction. Although in theory Perl shared the German Enlightenment prejudices against Yiddish and favored *melizah*, in practice he showed how lively Hebrew could become when it mimicked Yiddish. Perl created an illusion of orality with the help of a Yiddish pretext, and he transcended epigonism through parody.

Joseph Perl may have been the most original Hebrew author in the first half of the nineteenth century. While moving away from epigonism in relation to biblical *melizah*, he not only secured a new place for himself and modern Hebrew literature by parodying the ḥasidic writers; Perl also drew from the European genre of guides for letter writing. Samuel Richardson changed the course of English and European literature by transforming that genre into the first epistolary novel, *Pamela*, in 1740. Perl would have read Richardson and his imitators in German translations. Then Perl made his mark with *Megaleh temirin*—the first Hebrew epistolary novel. It appeared soon after the popular German/Hebrew *Briefsteller*. In spite of Perl's astonishing originality, one might argue that he was nevertheless an epigone in relationship to the epistolary models supplied by precursors like Richardson. Epigonism is hard to escape, even with the help of parody.

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