

# Homophony in Multilingual Jewish Cultures

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the distinctive features of multilingual Jewish cultures is the interpretation of a sacred Hebrew signifier by its phonic identity or proximity to a signifier in another language. This essay demonstrates the cultural creativity that might inhere in such “mistakes,” providing examples from three different periods—rabbinic, Hebrew-Yiddish European culture, and modern Israeli Hebrew.

**I**N THE FOLLOWING I WILL DESCRIBE an often-underappreciated feature of multilingual Jewish cultures: the interpretation of a sacred Hebrew signifier by its phonic identity or proximity to a signifier in another language. My discussion draws on three cultural environments: the Talmudic and Midrashic culture, the Ashkenazi traditional one, and modern Hebrew literature.

One of the effects of the multilingualism prevalent in Jewish traditional cultures was the signification of a Hebrew signifier by a phonic proximity or identity to a signifier in another language. Early evidence can be found in the Midrash. Thus, for instance, the phrase *Ben lizkunaw* (Gen. 21:2), which reads literally “A son in his old age,” was interpreted by its phonic proximity to the Greek word *ikonion*: “a son in his old age [*Ben lizkunaw*] from which we are to understand that his face [Greek: *ikonion*] resembles his own” (Bereshit Raba 53:6).<sup>1</sup>

The interpretation of verses by their phonic proximity to words in other languages is only one way by which the Midrash interprets scripture. Indeed, it was part of a wider interpretive practice which Isaak Heinemann has characterized as “the neglect of the logos.” “[L]imiting the referential scope of the parts of the text by the logos,” as Heinemann explains, “means imposing the reign of the mind upon the matter, and it is this reign that the organic thinking opposes, and

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Jonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-Agadah ve-ha-Midrash* (Givatayim: Yad la-talmud, 1991), 116.

it cannot perceive the visible signs only as tools in the service of the logos.”<sup>2</sup> In the example above, Heinmann would have identified the first signifying string (in Hebrew) with the “logos” and the second (in Greek) with its “neglect.” For him, such an act of interpretation undermines the hierarchy between the logos and the tools that were to be at its service. The sages of the Midrash might be numbered among the offenders of the logocentric order, if we are to refer to Derrida’s famous critique of Western thought.

For the present discussion, suffice it to note that the sages were mindful of the tense relation between the literal meaning of the text and the Midrashic methods of interpretation. Such mindfulness is evident in midrashim of the type of *al tikri* (“do not read”), in which the reader changes some of the letters of a word, the order of the letters, or only the vowels. A well-known example of a vowel change occurs in the midrash of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi in which he alters the vowels of the word *harut*, meaning “engraved,” to produce the word *herut*, meaning “freedom.” He cites Exodus 32:16: “And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tables.” And he asserts: “Do not read ‘harut’ [engraved] but ‘herut’ [freedom], for there is no free person but he who studies the Torah” (Mishnah, Avot, 6:2). The writing of God is identified in this midrash with freedom—the freedom to extract from the text a multitude of concurring meanings through the Midrashic methods.

The rabbis must have been aware of the potential dangers underlying such a bold method of interpretation; otherwise, they would not have sought to give it a theological grounding in various midrashim. Such a grounding is found in a midrash that draws on the phonic resemblance between a Hebrew word and a foreign one. The school of Rabbi Yishmael inferred the presence of multiple languages in the Hebrew scripture from the verse “Is not my word like as fire, said God; and like a hammer that shatters the rock in pieces?” (Jer. 23:29). As the school of Rabbi Yishmael noted: “Just as this hammer produces many sparks, so every speech that comes forth from the mouth of God is divided into 70 tongues.”<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand the linguistic conditions that enabled the sages of the Midrash to transfer a signifier, or part of it, from Hebrew to another language, one should take into account the orality of their interpretive practice. As Roland Brown asserts:

When an oral tradition is committed to writing the reader may have difficulty in understanding the text because he does not pay attention to the sound of the words—he does not hear what the words are saying. Consequently a midrash may seem abstruse because instead of reading we should be listening.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Isaak Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-Agadah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1970), 108. While it is difficult to determine what Heinemann meant by the word “neglect,” one might understand it as invoking a mental shift away from, rather than the total abandonment of, the logos. It is this shift that one finds in the midrash cited above that draws on the aural proximity between a signifying string of vocals in Hebrew and one in another language. Both were present in the Midrashic interpreter’s ear.

Midrashic hermeneutics has been the subject of theoretical studies in the past thirty years, inspired by new theoretical theories in American academia from the 1980s. Among the most influential are Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Michael A. Fishbane, *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); and David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-Agadah ve-ha-Midrash*, 115.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Brown, “Midrashim as Oral Traditions,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 47 (1976): 181.

Indeed, it is the passage from the graphic medium to the vocal one that enabled the sages of the Midrash to transfer a signifier, or part of it, from one language to another. For the act of pronunciation makes it possible for the distinctive phonological traits of the Hebrew signifiers to be blurred to the extent that they resemble signifiers in another language.<sup>5</sup>

The Midrashic philology that draws on the phonic proximity between signifiers in two different languages might be conceived of as the mirror image of translation: whereas in a translation of a word, the translator renders the signified from one language to another, here it is the signifier that is transferred from one language to another. And yet there is a decisive difference between the transfer of the signified and that of the signifier from Hebrew to another language. In the first case, the translation serves the holy language in rendering the meaning of the sacred text comprehensible to the believer. By contrast, the “translation” of the signifier does not bear the meaning of the sacred Hebrew text but rather alters it and, at the very least, enriches it. By “translating” the signifiers, the hierarchic relation between the “high” language and the “low” one, between the sacred and the profane, is briefly undermined when, unexpectedly, from beneath the Hebrew syllabic sequence, there suddenly appears a foreign and unintended signified.

### THE DIGLOSSIA OF THE HOLY TONGUE AND YIDDISH

The sages of the Midrash knew well, of course, the meaning of the Hebrew words in which they believed they were hearing words from other languages. At such moments they had to suspend the Hebrew signified in order to let a signified in another language assert itself. The same cannot be said of those large numbers of believers who did not understand Hebrew or understood it only partially, as was the case for the majority of Ashkenazic Jews whose life was marked by Hebrew<sup>6</sup>-Yiddish diglossia. They resorted to Hebrew verses in everyday life: upon waking up, before and after eating, at prayer, and before going to bed. Many of them uttered biblical verses without fully understanding them.

A telling anecdote on the use of Hebrew as a language of prayer by those who did not understand it is recounted by Max Weinreich. A high school principal in eighteenth-century Frankfurt on the Main asked a Jewish woman how she could pray in the holy language if she didn't understand a word she uttered. To which the woman replied: “When a physician writes a prescription for me, it is immaterial whether I can read it or not if the apothecary can.”<sup>7</sup> As Weinreich points out, the response of the Jewish woman reveals how Yiddish speakers who did not understand Hebrew related to these obscure and holy signs when they used them in their praying rituals. They took them as one takes medicine into one's mouth.

And indeed, the response of the Frankfurt woman reveals a more widely shared conception of prayer among Ashkenazic Jews, one that underscores the preponderant orality of the ritual

<sup>5</sup> Galit Hasan-Rokem extensively examines multilingual wordplays in the Midrashic literature based on the relations between Hebrew and Aramaic, on the one hand, and Greek, on the other. Whereas she focuses on the mutual influence between Jewish and Greek languages and cultures in riddles in Midrashic literature, I focus on cases in which the sacredness of the Hebrew words is central. See Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Mishak be-milim yevaniyot be-hidot ivriot-aramiyot: Maga'im ben-tarbutim?,” in *Studies in Talmudic and Midrashic Literature: In Memory of Tirzah Lifshitz*, ed. M. Bar-Asher, A. Edrei J. Levinson, and B. Lifshitz (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2005), 159–71.

<sup>6</sup> More accurately, one should speak here of the holy tongue, or *loshen koydes*, which consists of Hebrew as well as Talmudic and Midrashic Aramaic.

<sup>7</sup> Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble, ed. Paul Glasser (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 261.

practice of prayer. This conception is reflected in the Yiddish idiom for the act of praying—*nemen a yidish vort in moyl arayn*—which literally means “to bring a Jewish word into one’s mouth.” The idiom suggests that the words of the prayer do not emanate from within the individual outward. The direction, rather, is opposite: from outside the individual inward. The words, that is, originate from the prayer book and make their way into the mouth of the praying individual.

And yet the Frankfurt woman and the scholar fully versed in Hebrew and Aramaic represent two extremities of a continuum. Most of the Yiddish-speaking Jews would fall somewhere in the middle. This is the case also for the vast majority of those Jewish men whose traditional learning was limited to their study as children in the *heder*. Typically, study in the *heder* was based on the recitation of the prayers and the Torah—one word after the other, with each word immediately translated into, or explained in, Yiddish (or, more accurately, in *Taytsh*, early Yiddish that served for the translation of the Torah). Such a pedagogical approach allowed the students to acquire some Hebrew (and, later, in advanced years of study, also Aramaic) vocabulary, but certainly not the grammar. For this reason alone, the Hebrew language could never become fully comprehensible to them.

Such a relationship to the Hebrew language would naturally lend itself to situations in which a person who does not fully understand the holy text would imagine hearing Yiddish in a sequence of Hebrew syllables. A well-known example is the Hebrew phrase *kol mevaser*, which means “a voice is announcing.” (The phrase is taken from a liturgical poem—a *piyut*—by Hakaliri for Hosh’a’ana Raba, the seventh day of Sukkot.) Hearing this sequence of syllables, some speakers of western Yiddish imagined hearing the German words *Kohl mit Wasser*, which means “cabbage with water.” Hence the tradition in some Ashkenazic communities of eating boiled cabbage on the day of Hosh’a’ana Raba.<sup>8</sup>

Another way of grasping this homophonic phenomenon is through the famous duck-or-rabbit illustration. Following Ludwig Wittgenstein’s use of the illustration in explaining the difference between “seeing *that*” and “seeing *as*,”<sup>9</sup> we could say that we are presented here with two possibilities: the Jew who does not understand the Hebrew meaning of *kol mevaser* can only hear *that* the phrase *kol mevaser* signifies “cabbage with water.” He or she is incapable of identifying any other meaning, just as a person who has never seen a rabbit can identify only a duck in the duck-rabbit illustration. On the other hand, for the Jew who is familiar with both Hebrew and Yiddish, the sequences of sounds can be heard either *as* meaning “a voice is announcing” or *as* meaning “cabbage with water.”

The latter possibility—the possibility of hearing *as*—is described through another example cited by Weinreich, that of medieval Haggadas, which often depicted an illustration of a chase after a hare. This illustration serves as a mnemonic for the order of the blessings that are recited whenever the Seder falls on Saturday night. The order is indicated by the word YoKNeHoz, a word composed of the initials of the Hebrew words *Yai’n* (wine), *Kiddush* (benediction), *Ner* (candle), *Habdala* (distinction), *Zman* (time). Yet the sound of the word YoKNeHoz is almost identical to that of the Yiddish phrase *yog ‘n hoz*, “chase the hare.”<sup>10</sup> We can be sure that those who

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 204–6.

<sup>10</sup> Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, 248.

invented this mnemonic were versed in both languages. They were able to hear an almost-identical sequence of sounds as signifiers in two distinct languages.

There is perhaps no fictional character who is more sensitive to these diglossic games than Tevye the dairyman, who cites compulsively from traditional Jewish literature. In the opening of the first monologue in Sholem Aleichem's work, Tevye invokes a phrase from Psalms: "to the conductor, on the *gittith* [a musical instrument]." Tevye says, "*vi zogt ir: lamnatseyekh al ha-geytes. Ven es geyt, loyft es*" (which means "How do you say: 'to the conductor, on the *gittith*'? When it goes, it runs"—or, idiomatically speaking, when it rains, it pours). As one can hear, just after citing the Hebrew word for the musical instrument *gittith*, Tevye takes the word apart and inverts the order of its syllables so that *geyt es* becomes *es geyt*. This playful inversion might be said to encapsulate the carnivalesque spirit that defines Sholem Aleichem's masterpiece, in which Tevye's faith is not without doubt and even harbors a measure of defiance against God. Indeed, Tevye's wordplay, which highlights the tension between the holy tongue and Yiddish, might be said to foreshadow the widening gap in Tevye's life between divine Providence and the calamities that befall him.

### **AVOT YESHURUN: BETWEEN THE HOLY TONGUE AND ISRAELI HEBREW**

Traces of the Ashkenazic diglossia inhere also in modern Hebrew poetry. A case in point is the poetry of Avot Yeshurun (born Yehiel Perlmutter, 1904–92). In his poetry we can find various manifestations of the diglossic conditions of the Jewish traditional Ashkenazic culture but also of other languages spoken by the Jewish immigrants in the land. This tradition had to resist the concerted institutional effort to ensure the primacy of modern Hebrew. As he himself attested, despite all the efforts he had made in line with the Zionist project of turning Hebrew into the dominant language of the Jews in Palestine, Yiddish kept haunting him:

This Yiddish that started coming to you at daytime and in your nighttime dreams, since it was aware of your resolute decision not to use it, not to think, not to dream in it, neither at nighttime nor while you were awake. And if you dreamed it or if you spoke it while asleep . . . you had hurriedly to translate all you had said into Hebrew, and only then could you fall asleep again.<sup>11</sup>

As Michael Gluzman has pointed out, Yiddish should be described as the language that was repressed by Hebrew Zionist culture and erupted in Yeshurun's poetry from the early 1950s.<sup>12</sup>

Later in the text cited above, Yeshurun describes how his Hebrew could find again its proximity to Yiddish:

When the Hebrew language intermingles with unlawful metal, then you suddenly feel: the hour of the language is upon you—this happiness, when it is permitted to peep everywhere and touch with your eyes everything, just as a bee touches with its music every single flower.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Avot Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, ed. Benjamin Harshav and Helit Yeshurun, 4 vols. (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz ha-meuhad, 1995–2001), 1:279.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Gluzman, "Pesah 'al kukhim," in *Hamishim le-arba'im u-shemone*, ed. Adi Ophir (Jerusalem: Van-Leer Institute, 1999), 113–23.

<sup>13</sup> Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 1:280.

Yeshurun describes the hybridization of Hebrew through its contact with Yiddish. An example of this hybridization can be gleaned from the poem “Ruah ba’arbeh” (Wind beneath the locusts), in which the Hebrew words *niv* (idiom) and *naveh* (abode) resonate with the Russian word *novi* (new):

There is an idiom [*niv*] like “*novi*”-*tzedeck* [new justice].  
 And “*novi*”-*sha’anan* [the new placid one].  
 The rhyme here is a bit cracked,  
 But this isn’t what it’s about.<sup>14</sup>

The first line draws on the fact that the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe often mistook the Hebrew biblical phrase *neve tzedeck* (Jer. 31:21, 50:7), which means “abode of justice” (and is also the name given to the first Jewish settlement outside Jaffa, established in 1887), for the Slavic-Hebrew combination *novi tzedek*, meaning “new justice.” Likewise, immigrants often pronounced the name of another neighborhood in Tel Aviv, Neve Sha’anan (“placid abode”; Isa. 33:20), as *novi sha’anan*, meaning “the new placid one.” Underlining Yeshurun’s reference to this apparently naïve linguistic mistake is his desire to distinguish between two sorts of justice: the new one, associated with the Jewish nascent state, which he sees as a sorry distortion of the second one, which he associates with the diasporic Jewish tradition. Moreover, as Naomi Seidman has pointed out, the word *novi* not only means “new” in Russian but is also the Ashkenazic pronunciation of the Hebrew word for “prophet” (in Israeli Hebrew it is pronounced *navi*).<sup>15</sup> This condensation of meanings in one phonic image reveals not only Yeshurun’s attitude toward the injustice done to the Arab refugees of the 1948 war but also his efforts to maintain multilingualism in his poetry as a distinctive mark of diasporic Jewish culture.

In addition to the presence of Yiddish words in Hebrew, Yeshurun’s poetry also contains more discreet traces of Ashkenazic Hebrew-Yiddish diglossia, in which biblical texts homophonically echo in colloquial Israeli Hebrew. In this case, modern vernacular Hebrew often inherits the place of Yiddish. In other words, rather than two different languages, the diglossia that is sometimes found in modern Hebrew poetry consists of two variants of the same language. These two variants serve two distinct functions, and the difference between them is marked by linguistic aspects (morphological, grammatical, and occasionally also lexical). Naturally, those who tended to make present the diglossic conditions in modern Hebrew were the speakers and writers who had been raised in diasporic diglossic Jewish culture. Thus, in the eponymous poem of Yeshurun’s book *Adon menuhah* (Master of peace), the syntactic and morphologic traits of the last stanza betray the presence of verses from Ecclesiastes.

“Adon menuhah” is a long poem describing the speaker’s fear of his impending death. The speaker’s revolt against the presence of the “master of peace” is marked by a speech that deteriorates into a defiant and vulgar language. Only in the last stanza of the poem is he willing to go with the master of peace:

Master of peace  
 I’ll shit myself  
 And wipe myself  
 And clean myself

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>15</sup> Personal correspondence.



And shave myself  
 And shower myself  
 And I'll go with you.<sup>16</sup>

This act of self-purification before death is composed in Hebrew of a sequence of verbs conjugated in the future tense, third-person singular in the stem-formation of *hitpa'el*. Each of the verbs in the sequence, moreover, is also a homophone of a constructed state composed of the words *'et* (meaning “time”) and an absolute infinitive in the stem-formation of *pi'el*—a combination that calls to mind the famous verses from Ecclesiastes: “A time to be born, and a time to die,” etc. (Eccles. 3:2–8). Transliterated into Hebrew, the phrase “I’ll shit myself” is *etqake*, which is a near homophone to the phrase *'et qaqé*, which can be translated as “time to shit.” And the same applies to each of the other verbs as well. Thus, the signifiers of the colloquial Hebrew in the last stanza are transferred to a syntactic and morphological pattern that is nearly identical to that of the famous “Song of Time” in Ecclesiastes:

<i>etqaqé</i>	[I'll] shit myself	<i>'et qaqé</i>	Time to shit
<i>ve-etqanah</i>	And wipe myself	<i>ve-'et qanah</i>	And time to wipe
<i>ve-etnaqé</i>	And clean myself	<i>ve-'et naqé</i>	And time to clean
<i>ve-etgalah</i>	And shave myself	<i>ve-'et galah</i>	And time to shave
<i>ve-etqalah</i>	And shower my self	<i>ve-'et qalah</i>	And time to shower

This reading is corroborated by the centrality of Ecclesiastes in Yeshurun’s book *Adon mehuah*, whose opening poem, “All the Rivers,” reads as revision of the famous verse from Ecclesiastes (1:7): “All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place whither the rivers go, thither they go again.”

The relationship between the verses describing the act of self-purification before death in Yeshurun’s poem and those of the “Song of Time” in Ecclesiastes is further underpinned by their shared concern with life and death, as explicitly expressed in the first verse, “A time to be born, and a time to die.” It is in this polyphony, consisting of the voice preoccupied with the decaying body and that replicating the lofty style of Ecclesiastes, that the age-old Jewish diglossic tradition is made present in the midst of Israeli poetry. The homophonic formations capture the tension between the vernacular and the holy tongue and between the worldly and the sacred. A

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<sup>16</sup> Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 4:136.