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**Here Dwells the Jewish People**

by David Roskies

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## HERE DWELLS THE JEWISH PEOPLE

David Roskies

*Avraham Novershtern, Kan gar ha'am hayehudi: sifrut yidish be'artsot habrit (Here Dwells the Jewish People: A Century of American Yiddish Literature). Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 2015, 747 pp.*

### I.

In more ways than one, *Here Dwells the Jewish People* is guided by the poet Abraham Sutzkever. Sutzkever edited the Yiddish journal, *Di goldene keyt*, and in the process solicited some of his contributors' finest work. Novershtern was no exception: many of the best chapters of *Here Dwells the Jewish People* first appeared in Sutzkever's journal. Then there is the book's epigraph, taken from one of Sutzkever's later works, which reveals that Novershtern prizes American Yiddish poetry above all:

ווי ברענט בײַ נאַכט? סע ברענט, איך קען זיך וועטן:  
די פּוּסטיקייט אין ניו־יאָרק –  
אַן ייִדישע פּאַעטן!

What's burning so late at night? What's burning, you can bet,  
Is the emptiness in New York,  
Without a Yiddish poet!

As always with Sutzkever, it's the rhyme that packs the punch. Even in English, "you can bet" rhymes with "poet"; all the more so in Yiddish. When Sutzkever entered the scene, New York was the world capital of Yiddish poetry and he aspired, in a sense, to be a New York poet. Now there's been a disaster. Drawing on his uncanny ability to see beyond observable reality, the poet bets that he knows the fire's origins. The fire is coming from the void, the void of a city once bursting with Yiddish speakers where now not one poet

remains who can write for them in Yiddish. It is with this apocalyptic image that Novershtern begins his 747-page book.

Sutzkever reappears at the end of Novershtern's brief prefatory remarks. Here Novershtern lays out both the scope and method of his book. To be precise, the scope is the method. *Here Dwells the Jewish People* covers a century of prose, poetry, and drama; the daily and periodical Yiddish press, Yiddish literary criticism, literary translation, the politics of Yiddish; the rivalries and relations among Yiddish writers; highbrow and middlebrow literary production (which is to say, both the most difficult and most popular works). *Kan gar ha'am hayehudi* is of a piece with the "Jerusalem school of Judaic studies," so ably rendered in the movie *Footnote*. At the bedrock of true scholarship, this school believes, lies the heavily annotated monograph, especially in those fields where the time has not yet come to produce the grand literary-historical synthesis. Novershtern's book is written with a sobriety and severity that will be familiar to the academic Hebrew reader of a certain generation.

Sutzkever, first an Eastern European and then an Israeli Yiddish poet, might seem an unlikely guide for an opus on American Yiddish literature. But Sutzkever, in his literary and cultural production, embodied what Novershtern calls the "*shleymut*" and "*murkavut*" of modern Yiddish culture, which I would translate as its *coherence* and *complexity* (15). Sutzkever, in other words, is the paragon of modern Yiddish culture and its critical self-understanding. In the absence of any other guiding principles, let us try to spell out what Novershtern means when he sets forth these two key concepts.

By *shleymut* (coherence), Novershtern means that Yiddish literature and culture is a world unto itself. Novershtern emphatically rejects a comparative approach, which examines Yiddish within the multiethnic or multilingual expanse of American literary culture writ large. These comparative approaches, he writes on p. 14, have yet to shed new light on any linguistic corpus in particular, and merely confirm what we already know about the fate of all immigrant literatures on American soil. Novershtern instead marshals impressive evidence that American-Yiddish cultural production cannot be studied in isolation from its other two major centers, Poland and the USSR. Drawing on private correspondence, travelogues, and contemporary press coverage, Novershtern chronicles in vivid detail the sentimental journeys back to Poland and the USSR of H. Leivick, Joseph Opatoshu, Jacob Glatstein, Baruch Glasman, and a host of others. These trips had profound implications for their self-perception as Yiddish writers for an audience that was primarily located somewhere else. As a cultural artifact created by and for immigrants, the give-and-take between Old World and New would prove to be the most permanent and productive vein of American-Yiddish literature.

*Shleymut* is also meant as an analytic tool. Novershtern's interpretive practice begins with the original reviews and the original versions, whether published or in manuscript. Not a great believer in plot summaries, Novershtern prefers to cut to the chase, which for him means fleshing out the literary-historical background of a given work. Not until fourteen pages into his detailed analysis of Opatoshu's *Di tentserin* (1926), used by Novershtern to exemplify the novel of urban American life, does he reveal the true identity of *The Dancer* of the book's title. (Her name is Regina.) What commands his attention instead are the novel's three lives—as published and variously received in the United States, Poland, and the Soviet Union (where, for prudish and

Marxist reasons, the title was changed to *Arum Grend strit* [Around Grand Street])—and how contemporary critics were quick to compare it with Opatoshu's best-selling historical novel, *In Polish Woods* (*In poylishe velder*, 1921). Novershtern does the critics one better, by contrasting the enigmatic figure of Reb Shabse, the zaddik who somehow finds his way to the Lower East Side, with Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, who commands center stage in *In Polish Woods*. *Shleymut* implies a mental curriculum in which the totality of Jewish literary culture and the entire map of Yiddishland lie spread out before you.

The second Sutzkever-category, *murkavut* (complexity), means that the needs and aspirations of both producers and consumers of this culture were contradictory and dynamic. The relationship between Old World and New was fiercely Oedipal, exploitative, and competitive. For every paean to America there are a dozen counterexamples. For every expression of nostalgia for the Jewish past there is an expression of rebellion and rejection. When closely examined, the very phrase “Here dwells the Jewish people,” taken from a poem by H. Leivick, bespeaks the love-hate relationship of the poet toward the Yiddish-speaking masses. The poet is both insider and outsider; looking with a critical eye at “the inner workings of Jewish existence,” he stands at a visible remove therefrom, “even though, fundamentally, he ought to be considered flesh of its flesh.” (109) The poet's cognitive map of the American-Yiddish polity, moreover, so clearly inspired by the Lower East Side, owes far more to the remembered past than it does to the lived present. Novershtern will follow the dialectical path of modern Yiddish culture wherever it leads him.

“Complexity” is also an aesthetic category. When writing about Yiddish prose, Novershtern adopts a New Critical approach: the more structural complexity, the more types of ambiguity, the better. Thus, Novershtern faults [David Ignatoff](#) for not being as subtle and ironic a writer as Bergelson, his exact contemporary. Like Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, Novershtern finds the short stories of Lamed Shapiro (a forgotten writer when Howe and Greenberg included him in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* in 1954) more aesthetically rewarding than the sprawling and still-popular novels of [Sholem Asch](#) or Opatoshu.

Complexity is also a feature of the masterpieces of American Yiddish poetry. Novershtern exhaustively analyzes some of the most difficult works: [Moyshe-Leyb Halpern](#)'s Zarkhi poems, Aaron Glanz-Leyeles's *Fabius Lind* and *Tsu mir—tsu dir*, Glatstein's *Yidishtaytshn*, and [Anna Margolin](#)'s tragically curtailed oeuvre. Although never acknowledged, in his overwhelming preference for post-Symbolism, Novershtern aligns himself with Harshav and Harshav. *Here Dwells the Jewish People* can profitably be read alongside Benjamin and Barbara Harshav's *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (1986), which places Leyeles at the top of the poetic pantheon, with the late Halpern and the early Glatstein not far behind.

*Here Dwells the Jewish People* is an essential work. It is the most comprehensive treatment of its subject ever written, and makes at least seven major contributions to the field:

1. Only in America did there arise three consecutive generations of writers, each of which had something to rebel against and something significant to inherit (18). The Sweatshop Poets begat *Di Yunge*, i.e., the Symbolist and Aesthetic

School, and *Di Yunge* begat the *Inzikhistn*, the Introspectivists. Novershtern's story of American Yiddish literature is the story of creative rebellion.

2. Only in America did the free and politically variegated Yiddish press create a mass audience for a new genre, ideally suited for modern times: the serialized novel. Novershtern identifies and carefully analyzes the major novels of Asch, Opatoshu, I. J. Singer, and I. B. Singer, who were read throughout the Yiddish world, and beyond. These authors, he argues, were only as strong as the inherent limitations of this genre.
3. The popularity of the serialized novels and of the dramas and melodramas written for and produced by the American Yiddish theater derived in large measure from their central concern: the conflict of generations as played out against the mass immigration to America. The plays of Jacob Gordin and H. Leivick exemplify this theme. Novershtern examines in fascinating detail the synergy between the press, the theater, and the reading public.
4. Yiddish Modernism existed alongside the popular and populist strand of Yiddish literature, and was sometimes, surprisingly, produced by the same writers. In the finest chapters of his book, Novershtern argues that the most lasting contribution of American Yiddish literature was the incomparable voices of Halpern, Margolin, Leyeles, and Glatstein.
5. Despite their differences, all three generations of Yiddish writers were first-generation immigrants to America. The push-and-pull between the Old World and the New runs through much of their writing. What characterized and animated the best of American Yiddish prose—the Impressionist prose of Lamed Shapiro and the novels of Glatstein—was a highly critical attitude to the immediate severed past.
6. This is the first study to exploit the vast corpus of Yiddish literary criticism, scattered throughout hundreds of periodicals and newspapers. The reader can see precisely how American Yiddish culture understood—and failed to fully understand—itsself.
7. Novershtern has provided the reader with an additional bonus: a timeline of American Yiddish culture. This chronological survey, covering the years 1870–2013, concludes with a research bibliography broken down by author and subject. It is indispensable.

## II.

*Here Dwells the Jewish People* began as pilot essays in Yiddish and English: “The Pogrom Theme in Lamed Shapiro’s Oeuvre” (1981), “The Young Glatstein and the Structure of His First Book of Poems” (1986), and “The Modes of Leyeles’s poetry in the 1920s” (1986). The 1990s brought a critical edition of Anna Margolin’s *Lider* (1991), the publication of her correspondence with Reuben Iceland (1991), and major essays on Glatstein (1991) and Leyeles (1995). Not until 2008, however, was the Hebrew reader

exposed to Novershtern's interest in the field. In a blockbuster essay called "The Voices and the Choir: Yiddish Women's Poetry between the Two World Wars," published in a special issue of *Bikoret ufarshanut* on "Women in Yiddish Literature," Novershtern aimed to set the record straight on the question of tradition in Yiddish poetry by women. From then on Hebrew became Novershtern's preferred linguistic medium, and earlier Yiddish essays were translated into Hebrew and revised.

Though drawn from these earlier essays, Novershtern has produced a wonderfully coherent book. Novershtern's book is unified by its focus on Yiddish poetry, by its teleological narrative, and by Novershtern's concentration on the "spiritual relationship" between the Old World and the New, the past and the present. *Here Dwells the Jewish People* opens with four synoptic chapters: on the making of the American Yiddish literary center; the attempt to engage America, whether as blessing or curse; the rise and fall of the American-Yiddish writer; and intergenerational strife in Yiddish (melo)drama and the family saga. These synoptic chapters are followed by another ten, each devoted to a single author: six poets and four prose writers. Indeed, *eight* chapters are devoted to the unique achievements of Yiddish modernist poetry and prose while two are about the *tsaytungs-romanen* of Asch and Isaac Bashevis Singer, serialized urban novels of questionable quality. As a champion of Yiddish modernism, Novershtern can celebrate the fact that it enjoyed a longer and more productive lifespan in America than anywhere else (94), but as a literary historian he feels obligated to give Bashevis Singer the last word.

Novershtern's narrative, foreshadowed by the terrifying epigraph, is from grave to cradle. The story begins at the end. Chapter 1 opens with the tercentenary celebration of American Jewry, in 1954, when YIVO joined the festivities by inviting the renowned novelist Joseph Opatoshu to deliver a keynote address on a half-century of American-Yiddish literature. But Opatoshu, who would only live another three months, delivered a predictable and self-serving speech that Novershtern proceeds to demolish (including the shoddy editorial job done by the *YIVO-bleter*). The only future for American-Yiddish culture in 1954 was its past, a past that it was utterly incapable of presenting either honestly or accurately. For secular Yiddish culture in America, the party was over.<sup>1</sup> On the face of it, *Here Dwells the Jewish People* tells a very sad story. America would prove to be both the birthplace and burial ground of a great cultural experiment. Leivick himself admitted as much, as early as 1921, when the pathos of "*Do voynt dos yidishe folk*" ("Here Dwells the Jewish People") devolved, at poem's end, into "*Do shloft dos yidishe folk*" ("here sleeps the Jewish People") (111). The living, heroic, ever-struggling, Yiddish-speaking folk seemed already to be breathing its last. Soon thereafter, Leivick came to be known as the prophet of doom and destruction.

Reading between the lines of Opatoshu's speech, Novershtern discerns "the complicated spiritual relationship between present and past, between Jewish Eastern Europe and the United States, both on the personal and the collective-national plain" (23). And this complicated spiritual relationship, as I've already indicated, will prove to be the main and most valuable trajectory of Novershtern's sweeping narrative. At the

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<sup>1</sup> The word "secular" needs to be underscored. On p. 717, in Novershtern's timeline, we learn that the Haredi sector in America began publishing its own Yiddish newspaper, *Der yid*, in 1953, which is still going strong.

core of almost every chapter lies the push and pull between here and there, then and now. By following this spatial and temporal arc, Novershtern produces startling results.

On the one hand, there was the sociolinguistic reality of Yiddish. Leivick and Opatoshu did not merely make a sentimental journey back to Poland and the USSR. For them, these trips were a personal triumph, especially after they crossed into the Soviet Union. But like many of their American colleagues, they came to the tragic realization that while *they* lived on one side of the Atlantic, their longed-for readership lived on the other. Despite the efforts to create a network of Yiddish secular schools and reading material appropriate for American-born readers (to which Novershtern pays scant attention), it was obvious to any candid observer that America could not replenish its Yiddish-speaking ranks from within.

On the other hand, the huge wave of immigration after 1905 brought some of the brightest and the best to America, including such key members of I. L. Peretz's inner circle as Menahem Boraisha, J. L. Cahan, Opatoshu, Abraham Reisen, and Lamed Shapiro, so that by the time of Peretz's death, in 1915, only in America was there a critical mass of poets (notably, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern), writers, and scholars (notably, Ber Borochoy) to produce a memorial issue worthy of its subject. There were also enough dissenting voices to produce a split within the ranks of the Yiddish literati (34–44). When Zishe Landau, reviewing the Peretz issue of *Literatur un lebn* (*Literature and Life*), wrote disparagingly of “*der farshtorbener Varshever literat*” (“the late man of letters from Warsaw”), Iceland and Mani Leib quit the journal in protest. World War I, meanwhile, turned *Di Yunge* from immigrants into exiles, in Ruth Wisse's memorable phrase.<sup>2</sup> News of the mass destruction along the eastern front reinforced their emotional ties to Europe, turning them into keepers of the flame. By Armistice Day, Leivick had written *The Golem*, soon to become the second most celebrated play in the modern Yiddish repertoire, and Opatoshu was working on the first bona fide historical novel in Yiddish, *In Polish Woods*, a runaway best seller. Both works, significantly, were set in the Old World, not in the New.

The gradual eclipse of an American-Yiddish setting in the years following World War I became an all-but-total eclipse in the wake of the total destruction of Yiddishland. *Here Dwells the Jewish People* ends with a triptych, one chapter each devoted to the three major works of American-Yiddish literature published in the 1940s: Glatstein's *Ven Yash iz gekumen* (translated recently in *The Glatstein Chronicles*, 2010), set in a sanatorium just outside Lublin (1940), Boraisha's epic poem, *Der geyer* (*The Wanderer*), set largely in Brisk de-Lite (1943), and I. B. Singer's *Di familye Moshkat* (*The Family Moskat*, 1945), set in Warsaw. The message to the American-Yiddish reader could not have been clearer: here perished the Jewish people.

Novershtern loves nothing better than binary oppositions, and Old World vs. New is a godsend for his critical imagination. His chapter on Lamed Shapiro pits Lamed Shapiro's European-based stories against those set in America. Among the many insights that he gleans from this comparison is that the Old World, even though it is torn by dissent from within and exposed to pogrom violence from without, comes across as so much more vibrant and youthful than the New World (306). In Chapter 3, which

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth R. Wisse, “Di Yunge: Immigrants or Exiles?” *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 43-61.

tracks the rise and fall of the American-Yiddish writer, Novershtern compares Bashevis Singer's *Shosha* (1974, 1978), set in prewar Warsaw, to *Meshugah* (1982, 1994), set in postwar New York City. On the whole, Novershtern doesn't care much for Aaron Greidinger, *Shosha*'s protagonist and Singer's fictional stand-in—and especially not for Greidinger's escapades with women. But he admits that Greidinger's attraction to the mentally challenged Shosha is highly suggestive, bordering on the irrational, while *Meshugah* suffers from the “superficial realism” that is endemic to any Yiddish novel set on American soil (192). Even bad writing, in other words, is better when the setting is Eastern Europe. Chapter 7, devoted to Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, obeys the same binary structure, thanks to the fortuitous division of labor between Halpern's *In New York* (1919), one day in the life of a vagabond newcomer to the city, and *Di goldene pave* (The Golden Peacock, 1924), his encyclopedic parody of Jewish, Christian, and Romantic myths. “A modernist Jewish encyclopedia” is how Novershtern describes the cycle of Zarkhi poems (384–92), and compares their polyphony to that of Glatstein's *Yash* novels, which are the subject of chapter 12.

Perhaps the most tantalizing case Novershtern builds on the theme of old vs. new is his study of the “literary” *tsaytungs-roman*, a unique feature of the American-Yiddish marketplace. These serialized novels ran on Fridays and the weekends, unlike the *shund*, pulp fiction, which ran every day of the week and were read by straphangers on their way to work. Novershtern defines the genre in chapter 2 when he spells out the formulaic features of Opatoshu's *The Dancer*:

1. Nineteenth-century realism;
2. A panoramic setting with the city at its core;
3. A thesis novel with the pretense of something meaningful to say about life and society;
4. Characters that are stand-ins for their class, social status (turned upside-down by American capitalism), and sub-ethnic origins;
5. A huge cast of characters, never fully integrated into the plot;
6. A thoroughly domesticated American landscape, with predictable, insular spaces, and familiar spatial coordinates (onboard a ship, the workplace, the tenement), especially in a novel of immigration;
7. A romantic plot with plenty of sex.

Reduced to such a formula, the Yiddish novelist who was employed by a Yiddish daily newspaper would seem to have little room to maneuver, especially when the novel drew to a close. On two separate occasions, Novershtern lumps together the endings of several disparate works in order to drive home the finality, the inevitability, of the American-Yiddish master plot. Even though they were written decades apart, in prose and in verse, the endings of *The Dancer*, *Kentucky* (I. J. Schwartz), *Uncle Moses* (Asch), *The Family Carnovsky* (I. J. Singer), and *East River* (Asch) are essentially the same: the founding generation, so rooted in Judaism and the Jewish experience, comes to a dead end in America (149). And this dead-endedness is literally driven home when the main subject is the fate of the Jewish family. In a tour de force, Novershtern compares three sets of endings in the serialized novels of Opatoshu, I. J. Singer, and Sholem Asch, one in which the family is Old World and the other, when it belongs entirely to the new

(269). All six end with death and burial, the only difference being that burial in the old country still has some communal significance, while there's nothing lonelier than being buried in New York. Deep structure: American-Yiddish literature and culture are all about endings.

### III.

On every page of *Here Dwells the Jewish People*, sometimes in every paragraph of every page, there is something that provokes further thought. This is because every paragraph of every page is informed by the same combination of *shleymut* and *murkavut* that Novershtern so values. For example, when discussing the use of space in three novels of immigration—Opatoshu's *The Dancer* and Asch's *Uncle Moses* and *East River*—he notes the inclusion of a decrepit *besmedresh* located in the very thick of the Jewish quarter. “These two novelists,” he notes, “found it appropriate to incorporate manifestations of the traditional Jewish world that continue to exist within the ambit of immigration, and this, in marked contrast to a[n earlier] writer like Leon Kobrin, whose American characters are mostly far removed from any attachment to religion” (136). Just to write a sentence like that, think what you need to have read! The mention of Kobrin, in turn, is very suggestive. Perhaps one ought go back to the invention of American Yiddish prose, to Kobrin and his circle of first-generation realists, and see how they constructed a thoroughly secular, urban space. Novershtern's Janus-faced portrait of American-Yiddish literature—one face looking at the New World and another face looking back to the Old—provokes us to ask whether that early school of the here and now wasn't in some respects more “American” than what followed. As Novershtern is known to say, “*Vegn dem volt men gekent onshraybn an interesante arbet*—this could be turned into something really interesting!”

The one criticism I have to make of *Here Dwells the Jewish People* is this: Its methodology is self-validating, and, as I have already intimated, highly intolerant of competing methods. Hebrew academic readers especially, who are presumably Novershtern's addressee, if they have heard of Celia Dropkin, Glatstein, Halpern, and Leyeles at all, would have done so thanks to the late Benjamin Harshav. Harshav's *Introspektivizm biNyu York* (1997) and *Shirat hayaḥid beNyu-York* (2002) contain the first translations of these poets into Hebrew, their literary manifestos and a superb explication of their poetics. In the rhetorical gesture that the Jerusalem School is known for, Novershtern dismisses Harshav's contributions to our understanding of American Yiddish modernism in one sentence. The subject is Leivick, and Novershtern has just finished telling us that at least in the last part of his career, the poet most emphatically saw himself as a Yiddish poet in America, not as an American poet whose language of self-expression was Yiddish (81). In the next (long and complicated) sentence, Novershtern makes a cryptic reference to “attempts in recent years” to pander to the English reader by stressing the degree to which American-Yiddish literature was essentially American, and the annotation reads as follows: “See, for example, the introduction to the aforementioned anthology of Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, and *passim*.” This will not do. In their bilingual anthology of 1986, Harshav and Harshav juxtaposed the modernist poetry and graphic art of Yiddish-speaking immigrants to America in order to demonstrate that they were all engaged in a common effort, to

change the cognitive landscape of America, except that whereas the poets were consigned to linguistic oblivion, the artists were eventually acclaimed as modern American masters. Indeed, Novershtern himself has chosen a famous painting by Raphael Soyer for the cover of his book.

The *shleymut* method of reading, which is to say, an interpretive practice that begins with the original reviews and the original versions, whether published or in manuscript, is but one method of reading. Novershtern believes that only such a literary-historical and intracultural approach can protect against special pleading, presentist fads, and the hegemony of American cultural trends. A case in point is his reading of I. J. Schwartz's *Kentucky* (1918–22), the first epic poem in Yiddish set on American soil. His interpretation of *Nayerd*, the opening poem, is perfectly credible, but insular. What he most appreciates about the poem is that it has no ideological agenda. Nowhere does Novershtern allow for the possibility that Schwartz, who adored Milton and translated Bialik's oeuvre into Yiddish, in writing this epic of transplantation, might have adopted specifically American models, such as Whitman's *Song of Myself* and Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*, while his epiphany at poem's end might owe a debt to Bialik. Ideology, in other words, can assume many forms. And sometimes, even Novershtern admits defeat. After doing a thorough text-historical analysis of Boraisha's *Der geyer*, evaluating all the contemporary reviews and the poet's own explanation of the work, Novershtern comes up with a reading that contradicts both the critics and the author himself. If this is the best that the *shleymut* method can produce, then maybe something else is called for.

In America, a third world culture called Yiddish entered—and engaged—the first world. Thanks to Novershtern's timeline and the literary-historical trajectory that emerges between the lines, we learn how and when this engagement happened. Novershtern describes the decade of 1915–25 as the high-water mark of American-Yiddish culture, beginning with World War I, which cut off the cultural supply line from Eastern Europe and forced *Di Yunge* to rely on their own internal resources, and ending with the Johnson–Reed Immigration Act of 1924, which effectively closed the gates of mass immigration. So perhaps the lead concept of *shleymut* should be reframed more dynamically, not as a Neoplatonic ideal to restore Yiddish culture to some prelapsarian wholeness, but as the attempt on the part of Yiddish-speaking journalists, writers, poets, playwrights, artists, and actors; critics, publishers, translators, and editors; pedagogues and ideologues across a broad political spectrum to achieve a degree of cultural autonomy. Enlisting Itamar Even-Zohar, we may ask: Can American Yiddish culture be viewed as a polysystem, which aimed to answer all the varied national, social, intercultural, and aesthetic needs of its producers and consumers? After all, the same prose writer (Opatoshu) who wrote *The Dancer* wrote *In Polish Woods*; the same playwright who wrote *Shop and Rags* (Leivick) wrote *The Golem*; the serial novelist (I. B. Singer) who produced *Shadows on the Hudson* also wrote “Gimpel the Fool,” and the same poet who translated Ibn Gabirol and Bialik (I. J. Schwartz) wrote the great Jewish-American epic, *Kentucky*. Alternatively, was American Yiddish culture a *defective* polysystem from the get-go, its structural deficiencies becoming only more evident with the passage of time?

*Shleymut*, in other words, ought to be posed as a question, not presented as a given. To capture a century of American-Yiddish literature, the literary historian should wholeheartedly embrace the dynamism and diversity of a culture produced on American soil—from Grand Street and Coney Island to Dixie and beyond. One thing that America has been doing since its very inception is acting as a cultural catalyst, creating new idioms, exporting its chutzpah and extraordinary energy. Revisiting Novershtern's timeline, for example, it may be possible to extrapolate what was invented in America and was then exported back to Eastern Europe and to Greater Yiddishland:

- The Jewish labor movement and most of the stirring hymns that would be sung at May Day rallies everywhere;
- The professional theater, with its resident composers, songwriters, sheet music, and later, phonograph records;
- The free press, covering the entire political spectrum, from right to left;
- The *tsaytungs-roman*
- Naturalism in drama and prose
- The urban novel
- The pogrom theme
- The historical novel
- The apocalyptic poem
- The still small voice of lyric poetry
- Humor magazines and the grotesque school of modern Yiddish poetry
- Modernist poetry for an elite reader
- The book-length epic poem
- The *yizkor* book

Even if Novershtern is right, that the American Yiddish century lasted only so long as there was still an influx of Yiddish-speakers from abroad, by adding vectors of adaptation, change, and global influence to his story, we arrive at a cultural enterprise that wasn't doomed from the start but one that generated multiple beginnings.

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