

Yael Chaver, *What Must be Forgotten: The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004. 238 pp.

In the enumeration of the achievements and missteps of the Zionist movement, the “creation” and dissemination of modern Hebrew has nearly universally been regarded, by both historians and the Israeli public, as a stunning and praiseworthy success. In the common narrative of the Zionist movement, Yiddish, the language of the East European Jewish diaspora—like numerous other Jewish mother tongues—was the necessary jetsam of a powerful Hebrew current destined to propel the Jewish nation forward.

“The essence of a nation,” Ernest Renan wrote memorably in 1882, “is that all individuals have many things in common and also that they have forgotten many things.”<sup>1</sup> Yiddish, Yael Chaver suggests in this important study, was seen as one such “must-be-forgotten” thing. And yet, as Renan himself knew, the process of forgetting is never absolute. The language that had to be “instantaneously and totally repudiated” (p. xiii), was in fact highly regarded by many and actively developed by a few. In shining a critical light on the politics of Yiddish in Palestine, Chaver points to a lacuna in the historiography and literature of the Hebrew revival and presents a passionate project to recover the work of three neglected or misunderstood Yiddish writers, using the techniques of a close literary-critical study.

There are two major, interwoven points in *What Must be Forgotten*. First, Yiddish was deeply ingrained in the consciousness of even those Zionist leaders who propelled the pro-Hebrew cultural project; although the language was largely suppressed publicly, it was not cast aside willy-nilly by its speakers. A survey of writings by Hebrew cultural figures reveals the anguish of abandoning the mother tongue—the labor activist and writer Rachel Katznelson went as far as to use the phrase “*milhemet safot*” (language war) to describe the situation in her divided Hebrew-Yiddish psyche (p. 40). Second, despite its repression, Yiddish indeed survived in Palestine in the writings of a cadre of Yiddish writers. Yiddish expression did not take place in isolation from Zionist society. On the contrary, using the forms of European modernism and the characteristic flexibility of Yiddish (a dynamic fusion language that could encompass disparate languages and linguistic features), Yiddish writers used their art to offer a deeply invested critique of the Zionist project and its assumptions about both Eastern Europe and its “other other,” the Arab population of Palestine.

Chaver claims that her study lies “in the indeterminate ground between historical and literary study” because, “as the cultural process unfolds, literature and history necessarily inform each other” (p. xxiii). In fact, the space between history

and literature is quite determinate in the organization of the book, which neatly divides the two disciplines by assigning different chapters to each. Chapters 1 and 3, the historical chapters, look primarily at writings about language by pro-Hebrew figures and at a selected set of historical controversies surrounding the presence of Yiddish in public life. In Chapter 3, Chaver attempts to read Yiddish back into episodes that are generally seen as victories for Hebrew: the decision made in 1910 by the Marxist Zionist organization Po'ale Zion to publish its newspaper in Hebrew rather than Yiddish; the outrage over the visit to Palestine of Yiddish writers in 1927; and a proposal to create a Yiddish language chair at the Hebrew University. Those on the "pro-Hebrew side" of these conflicts were not necessarily univocal in their opposition to Yiddish. For instance, Eliezer Shteynman, the editor of the Hebrew journal *Ketuvim* and one of Hebrew's advocates in the Yiddish writers' controversy, was also a regular contributor to Yiddish periodicals; as Chaver notes, he was "waging a war on a culture in whose production he was still actively participating" (p. 110). The insistence on Hebrew and the rejection of Yiddish, as clear as it was in many instances, was tempered by feelings of loss and ambivalence.

Chapters 2, 4, and 5, which stand largely independent of the historical chapters, offer close readings of selected works by three writers. Chaver's chosen figures, though disparate, are linked by a common language and related themes. Zalman Brokhes was a Zionist and his work was ultimately co-opted into the Hebrew canon in translations that elided both its original nuances and its more subversive strains. Avrom Rivess was one of the founders of the Yiddish Writers and Journalists club and a regular contributor to the Yiddish periodical literature in Palestine. His work is notable for its portrayals of fracture and alienation in the Yishuv setting. Rikuda Potash, the chronological outlier in a survey nominally about pre-state Palestine, offers a critique of "monocultural and monolingual nationalism" (p. 166) in a series of Yiddish stories written in the 1950s and 1960s, which were inspired by the disjointed, defamiliarizing tropes of German Expressionism.

These three authors deftly plied both the Yiddish language and the field of European modernist thematics. Over time, they became significant contributors to the rich literary communities of Zionist Palestine (and, in Potash's case, the early state of Israel). They did so, moreover, in a language that was more subtle, supple, and variegated than the still unwieldy Hebrew of the time. Yet Chaver goes further than simply crediting their writings with an aesthetic advantage over contemporary Hebrew literature, hinting as well at a possible moral advantage when she suggests that Yiddish texts offered a "counterversion" to the norms of Hebrew literature (p. xxiv). Potash, she notes, "did not automatically subscribe to all components of the mainstream Zionist cultural ethos, with its negation of Yiddish and its collective imperative to settle the land" (p. 172). While the statement is no doubt true for this writer, and indeed for Rivess and Brokhes as well, the implication that Yiddish writers set themselves against a mass of pro-Hebrew conformism underestimates the diversity of Yiddish- (and Arab-) related thought within the pro-Hebrew community (which, indeed, Chaver herself effectively demonstrates in her historical chapters). Moreover, such assessments fail to consider the fact that, although Yiddish writers employed a marginalized language and voiced cogent critiques, they were nonetheless participants

in the larger (Ashkenazic) Zionist cultural project in Palestine and a party to its outcomes, for both good and ill.

The recovery of Yiddish literature and politics in Zionist Palestine becomes a study in a series of psychological contradictions. Yiddish speakers and readers were at one and the same time “others” who were pushed out and insiders who were very influential in the Zionist movement. Yiddish texts, rich, complex, and probing, stood in complex but active relationship to the ideologically tinged but still unsettled Hebrew literature of the time. Chaver’s project to return the Yiddish linguistic margins to the story of Hebrew and Zionist culture is a welcome and important contribution within a growing set of studies that question the linearity of the Zionist move to Hebrew, the movement’s detachment from both diaspora Jewish and foreign cultures, and, ultimately, Zionists’ collective claim to have forgotten the past.

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### Note

1. Ernest Renan, “Qu’est-ce que une nation?” (1882), rpt. in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: 1990), 8-22; cited in Chaver, 16.