

In Their Surroundings

Localizing Modern Jewish Literatures in Eastern Europe

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Hebrew Critic Par Excellence: David Frishman

David Frishman was the preeminent critic of Hebrew literature in Eastern Europe during the last years of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. He advocated passionately for the creation of a distinctly European Hebrew literature and rarely hesitated to castigate writers who failed, in his view, to develop lyricism and other aesthetic features he argued were essential. As a translator, he created Hebrew versions of many European fictional and philosophical works held in high regard, including texts by Friedrich Nietzsche, George Byron, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and others. As an editor, he wielded power at many publishing venues for Hebrew writers young and old, such as *Ha-Dor* (The Generation), *Ha-Boker* (The Morning), *Ha-Tekufah* (The Era), and the Stybel publishing house. His literary work in Hebrew and Yiddish, however, was often overshadowed by his other literary pursuits. Still, Frishman's extensive efforts as a cultural agent left a lasting mark on the development of modern Hebrew literary culture.

Born in Zgierz, near Łódź, in 1859,¹ Frishman spent time in many of the centers of Jewish culture of the time: Warsaw, Berlin, St. Petersburg, and Odessa (fig. 1). He started publishing poems, translations, and articles in Hebrew at a young age in a variety of Eastern European Hebrew periodicals. By the late 1880s, he was writing for the Yiddish press as well; his first Yiddish poem, *Oyfn bergl* (On the Hill), appeared in 1888. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Eastern European Yiddish newspapers such as *Yudishes Folks-Blat* (Jewish People's Newspaper), *Der Yud* (The Jew), *Der Fraynd* (The Friend), and *Haynt* (Today) were publishing his lyric

¹ There is uncertainty among critics about when Frishman was born. Getzel Kressel lists 1859 in his lexicon, other lexicons suggest 1863, and Frishman himself writes in a letter he was born in 1865. See idem, *Leksikon ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ba-dorot ha-aharonim* [Lexicon of the Hebrew Literature of Recent Generations], Merhaviva 1967, 668f.; Eliezer Malakhi, *Igrot David Frishman. Im temunoto ve-ezem ketav yado* [Letters from David Frishman. With a Picture of Him and the Manuscript Itself], ed. by Lili Frishman, New York 1927, 7; Shalom Kramer, *Frishman ha-mevaker* [Frishman the Critic], Jerusalem 1984, 11.

poetry, stories, and feuilletons on a regular basis.² Frishman also took the first of many positions as editor at the daily newspaper *Ha-Yom* (Today, 1886–1888) in St. Petersburg, which allowed him to start shaping the kind of Hebrew periodical he believed his time needed. The growing press was essential to the development of Hebrew literature, as most writers began their literary careers publishing in various newspapers and periodicals. Frishman's editorial positions at Hebrew outlets and publishing houses granted him immense influence over the selection of writers and texts for publication.

Even before his rise to authority in literary circles, Frishman made a name for himself in Hebrew letters with his scathing criticism of Jewish cultural institutions, including the

venerable Russian Jewish weekly *Ha-Meliz* (The Advocate). In 1883, for example, the young Frishman published a small pamphlet entitled *Tohu va-vohu* (Chaos), which attacked several of the most prominent Hebrew writers and critics of the time. *Ha-Meliz* (1860–1904) published the works of most Hebrew writers active in Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century and was an important platform for many prominent maskilim, proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah). By the 1880s, *Ha-Meliz* supported *Hibbat Zion* (Fondness for Zion), a pre-

² For a detailed description of Frishman's Yiddish work, see Zalmen Reyzen, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye* [Lexicon of Yiddish Literature, Press, and Philology], 4 vols., here vol. 3, Vilna 1929, col. 204–228.

Zionist nationalist movement advocating for Jews to settle in Palestine. Frishman begins his essay by dramatically narrating his shock when he received a telegram informing him of *Ha-Meliz*'s plan to start publishing twice a week. In elegant, biting prose, Frishman launches into an extended critique of the newspaper and some of its best-known contributors, arguing that the paper featured self-serving and derivative journalism. Attacking prominent writers such as Saul Israel Hurwitz and Yehalel (Yehuda Leib Levin), as well as Aleksander Zederbaum, the long-time editor of *Ha-Meliz*, Frishman ridicules what he saw as their facile imitation of European literary ideas, sardonically noting Hurwitz's confusion of Auguste Comte with Immanuel Kant. Referring to *Ha-Meliz*'s contributors as "frogs" who infested various periodicals, he writes, "their idioms are dreadful, the words that issue from their lips are wanting, and their entire power emanates from the noise and storm of their words that a simple man like me cannot, for the world, understand."³ Not surprisingly, Frishman made a lot of enemies within the Hebrew literary establishment, especially since this was only one of the first of what would be many controversies provoked by his critical essays.

Frishman's *Tohu va-vohu* is often regarded as a rejection of the maskilic ideas espoused by many of these writers, as part of a broader transition from the Haskalah to a new phase called the *tehiya*, the national revival, in the wake of Russian pogroms in the early 1880s. While Frishman's Hebrew aestheticism differs from maskilic approaches to Hebrew literature, his critique of *Ha-Meliz* is driven by his rejection of Zionism, a stance that came to define Frishman's writing. Iris Parush delineates two related themes that begin to emerge in texts like *Tohu va-vohu*: Frishman's belief that the creation of a national homeland was both impossible and inadvisable.⁴ Frishman was deeply invested in questions of national revival, but he rejected both political and spiritual Zionism as solutions to the challenges facing Jews in the modern world. In 1899, only two years after the First Zionist Congress convened in Basel, Frishman writes in a letter to Mordecai (Marcus) Ehrenpreis: "I have never felt myself as lonely and solitary as now [...]. The few friends that I had are leaving me one by one, day by day, going to one place—Zionism, and I am left alone and lonely."⁵

³ David Frishman, *Kol kitve David Frishman* [Collected Works of David Frishman], 9 vols., here vol. 4, ed. by Lili Frishman, Warsaw/New York 1937, 43.

⁴ Iris Parush, *Kanon sifrut ve-ide'ologiya le'umit. Bikoret ha-sifrut shel Frishman be-hashwa'ah le-vikoret ha-sifrut shel Klozner ve-Brener* [Literary Canon and National Ideology. Frishman's Literary Criticism in Comparison to Klausner's and Brenner's Literary Criticism], Jerusalem 1992, 19.

⁵ Cit. in Parush, *Kanon sifrut ve-ide'ologiya le'umit*, 27.

Fig. 1: David Frishman, undated.

Despite the power Frishman maintained as an editor, he was convinced that his politics, namely his resistance to Zionism, curtailed his influence and his status in Hebrew literature.

While Frishman's harsh rejection of Zionism changed later on in his career—scholars still debate whether his poetry and essays of the time cautiously embrace Zionist ideas or if he essentially modulates his opposition⁶—he remained committed to his own national cultural vision in his numerous essays and feuilletons. From the 1880s on, Frishman argued that literature was an essential foundation for national revival. As he wrote in 1913, “All of my hopes have always been in literature—and only literature. It has been a life-saver for me, the only one that we have left ... National revival begins with literary revival.”⁷ Belletristic literature, he argued, was the only way to rehabilitate the Jewish soul.

Frishman's goal, however, was not the creation of a particularistic, nationalistic Hebrew literature, but rather a modern, universal literature in Hebrew. His understanding of “universal” was strongly oriented toward Europe, since he regarded classical and modern European thought and literature as both inspiration and raw material for his cultural project. While he criticized contemporary writers for their shallow imitations of European literary trends, Frishman envisioned the creation of a modern Hebrew literature that was thoroughly European in its sensibilities. His focus on individual sensibilities cultivated in and through literature represents a significant contrast to the collectivist mentality that came to define twentieth-century Hebrew Zionist culture.

Frishman's strong inclination toward European literature is evident in his essays and many translations. Starting in the 1890s, after Frishman spent four years at the University of Breslau, he translated a remarkable number of literary texts into Hebrew, including German, Russian, French, and English poetry, prose and plays by Goethe, Aleksandr Pushkin, Heinrich Heine, Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Hans Christian Andersen, Nietzsche, Shakespeare, George Eliot, and more. While these works demonstrate Frishman's supple Hebrew and stylistic command, his commentary—in prefaces to his own translations, letters, and reviews of other people's translations—provide great insight into the cultural and political work of translation. For Frishman, both the act and the product of translation were, in Danielle Drori's words, “an arena of cultural battles,”

⁶ Many critics have analyzed Frishman's relationship with Zionism. For example, see David Fishelov, *Tirgumo shel Frishman le-“Kayin” me'et Byron, u-mashma'utaw* [Frishman's Translation of “Cain” by Byron, and Its Meaning], in: *Mehkerei Yerushalayim be-sifrut ivrit/Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 24 (2011), 125–142; Kramer, *Frishman ha-mevaker*, 28–32; Parush, *Kanon sifrutit ve-ide'ologiya le'umit*, 17–32.

⁷ Frishman, *Kol kitve David Frishman*, vol. 8, 54.

in which intellectuals shaped and revealed their distinct aesthetic and ideological visions.⁸ In his introduction to the Hebrew translation of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1893), Frishman posits translation as a way of constructing a modern Hebrew subject, as he attempts to balance widespread Zionist interpretations of the novel with his own political reservations. In the preface to his translation of Byron's *Cain* (1900), he seeks to mediate between European Romanticism and Hebrew literature, calling attention to the Romantic themes that he held in high esteem, such as tragic heroes and their moral and metaphysical rebellions.⁹

These translations, in addition to Frishman's other writings, continued at a remarkable pace during and after World War I. As the founding editor of the Stybel publishing house and the highly regarded literary quarterly *Ha-Tekufah*, Frishman facilitated the publication of many translations into Hebrew and served an instrumental role in Stybel's efforts to promote the development of a cosmopolitan Hebrew culture. Under his stewardship, the press embarked on an ambitious program of translation, focusing on a list of European and world literature chosen by Frishman. Kenneth Moss argues that Frishman's editorial efforts represented a major shift from translation as a means of reeducating the Jewish reader to one of reinventing Hebrew culture as part of a pan-European literature.¹⁰

Frishman was not alone in his efforts to expand and transform Hebrew literature through European literary tradition. The 1890s saw confrontations between *Ahad Ha-Am* and a group of younger writers over the suitability of European literary values for Jewish literature, and debates over the desirability and adequacy of Hebrew translations of European works by the Tushiyah publishing house. Frishman's rejection of Jewish particularism, however, drew a great deal of attention as it highlighted what was perceived as the radical nature of his aestheticism. In 1908, Frishman attacked *Hayyim Nahman Bialik*, who was recognized by many contemporaries as the Jewish national poet. Frishman dared to criticize Bialik's “prophetic” early-twentieth-century poems that adopted an authoritative and often wrathful prophetic voice, advising Bialik to return to his earlier lyricism.¹¹

⁸ Danielle Drori, *A Translator against Translation. David Frishman and the Centrality of Translation in Early 20th-Century Hebrew Literature and Jewish National Politics*, in: *PaRDeS* 25 (2019), 43–56, here 44 and 52.

⁹ Fishelov, *Tirgumo shel Frishman le-Kayin me'et Byron u-mashma'utaw*, 130.

¹⁰ Kenneth B. Moss, *Not The Dybbuk but Don Quixote. Translation, Deparochialization, and Nationalism in Jewish Culture*, in: Benjamin Nathans/Gabriella Safran (eds.), *Culture Front. Representing Jews in Eastern Europe*, Philadelphia, Pa., 2008, 196–240, here 207 f.

¹¹ Frishman, *Kol kitve David Frishman*, vol. 5, 170–178.

But it was Frishman's second public repudiation of Bialik that demonstrated his own approach to the Jewish cultural past and future. In 1913, Bialik presented an ambitious project of cultural ingathering (*kinus*), arguing that Jewish texts must be collected and translated into Hebrew (fig. 2). Bialik insisted that a vibrant modern Hebrew culture had to preserve the masterpieces of Jewish tradition and that "national

artists" must create a new literary corpus from historical Jewish linguistic and literary reservoirs.¹² Frishman countered Bialik's project with a proposal of his own: to provide financial support for writers to produce new literary works in Hebrew and attract young readers. His plan was far less developed than Bialik's, but it represented a fundamental difference in historical perspective and cultural values. Bialik looked to the past to craft a Jewish national culture, seeking to balance European influences with Jewish particularity. Frishman found little of value in the Jewish cultural past and in historical categories more generally, arguing that Hebrew literature needed to emulate European literary traditions instead of resuscitating Jewish literary traditions. He stressed that the new generation of readers, no longer educated in the traditional *heder* or *yeshiva*, needed new literature in Hebrew that resonated with their modern sensibilities, otherwise they would abandon Hebrew for other languages. In a clear rebuke of Bialik, Frishman proclaimed, "We need not the book, but literature, not the dead library, but living creation [...]. Our ancient literature is our genius. But we must show our sons not our genius [...], but our strength to give birth, to create and to create no less than others do."¹³

While this sense of urgency drove Frishman's work in the last decade before his death in 1922, it is striking that his own creative efforts—in

poetry and prose—have received far less attention than his criticism. Menuḥa Gilboa traces the evolution of Frishman's poetics, and argues that, by the last decades of his career, Frishman combined the Romanticism that had defined much of his writing, particularly in poetry, with expectations for realism in fiction, championing lyric pathos within a Realist literary framework.¹⁴ Perhaps most notable in the context of his political and aesthetic views are a series of nine stories that Frishman published in Hebrew and Yiddish from 1909 onward and which appeared posthumously, in 1923, in the Hebrew collection *Ba-midbar* (In the Wilderness). Given Frishman's comments about the Jewish literary tradition, the engagement of the stories with the Hebrew Bible, specifically the Israelites' experience in the wilderness, might be surprising. In the short story published in Hebrew as *Meḥolot* and in Yiddish as *Der tants* (Dances and Dance respectively), a woman mourns the loss of her lover, rumored to have returned to Egypt, as she moves with her tribe from site to site in the desert, culminating in a frenzied scene, as the high priest creates the golden calf. The protagonist is estranged from the collective, though she ultimately capitulates to the pressures of a misguided collective will. *Sorer u-moreh* and *Der soyrer umoyre* (Rebellious Son) narrate the fate of a young man who dies standing up for the poor and downtrodden and against the corruption of the priests, blaming his murder on their hunger for power and misguided mob justice. Frishman's stories are set in biblical times and recounted with flourishes of neo-biblical language, but speak to modern sensibilities and feature searing critiques of Eastern European Jewish society. They valorize men and women who rebel against the authority of the priests and the law given at Sinai, combining a biblical facade with distinctly European concepts: Schopenhauer's idea of art as a visionary medium, Nietzsche's perspective on the supremacy of aesthetics, and Anatole France's reimagining of historical narratives as spiritual redemption.¹⁵ The stylized desert becomes, in Frishman's lyrical prose, a space for the critique of Eastern European Jewish life and the imagination of alternative modern Jewish subjectivities.

Several of these stories appeared in *Ha-Tekufah*, the literary journal Frishman edited during the last four years

Fig. 2: David Frishman (left) with Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik (right) in conversation, drawing by Leonid Pasternak, 1921 or 1922.

Fig. 3: The literary journal *Ha-Tekufah*, edited by David Frishman from 1918 to 1922.

¹² See Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik, *Ha-sefer ha-ivri* [The Hebrew Book], in: idem, *Kol kitve Ḥ. N. Bialik* [Collected Works of Ḥ. N. Bialik], Tel Aviv 1971, 194–199; and his description of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher Sforim) as "the first national artist" in idem, *Mendele ve-shloshet ha-krakhim* [Mendele and the Three Volumes], in: *ibid.*, 242–245.

¹³ Frishman, *Kol kitve David Frishman*, vol. 8, 58f.

¹⁴ Menuḥa Gilboa, *Bein re'alizm le-romantikah. Al darko shel David Frishman ba-vikoret* [Between Realism and Romanticism. On David Frishman's Path in Criticism], Tel Aviv 1975, 170.

¹⁵ Yaron Peleg, *Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination*, Ithaca, N. Y., 2005, 44.

of his life, along with a variety of poems; new installments in his series on Hebrew literature, *Mikhtavim ḥadashim al davar ha-sifrut* (New Letters on Literature); translations of works by Rabidranath Tagore, Goethe, Heine, and Byron; and many assorted essays and reviews (fig. 3). This remarkable range of publications—just a fraction of his immense corpus—demonstrates Frishman’s instrumental role in developing modern Hebrew literature and his sustained commitment to lyricism as the foundation for a culture that he argued could be both Hebrew and universal.

Literature

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