

BY-PATHS IN HEBRAIC BOOKLAND

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SALKINSON'S "OTHELLO"

One of the first writers to combat, on the continent of Europe, Voltaire's depreciation of Shakespeare was Lessing. But his eulogy was dated 1759. A year earlier (1758) Moses Mendelssohn, in his essay on the Sublime, had anticipated Lessing's judgment. But his influence did not lead the new-Hebrew school to translate Shakespeare. It was not till near the middle of the nineteenth century that we find Hebrew translations even of such famous soliloquies as Hamlet's "To be or not to be." In 1842 Fabius Mieses and in 1856 N. P. Krassensohn rendered the passage. Both, however, were dependent on Mendelssohn, translating his German rendering. Others, at the same period, turned a few passages, including one of Richard II's monologues, from German versions into Hebrew.

"To-day we exact our revenge from the English! They took our Bible and made it their own. We, in return, have captured their Shakespeare. Is it not a sweet revenge?" With these words Smolenskin opened his introduction to Salkinson's Hebrew translation of *Othello*.

It is not easy to explain how it happened that we had to wait till 1874 for the first Hebrew adaptation of a Shakespearean drama. In fact, with the exception of Salkinson's *Romeo and Juliet* (1878), S. L. Gordon's *King Lear* (1899), and Isaac Barb's *Macbeth* (1883), I know of no Hebrew version of plays by the author of *Hamlet*, which latter drama so far as I have observed, has not even been printed in Yiddish. (Dr. Halper, however, informs me that *Hamlet* was translated into Hebrew by H. J. Bornstein, and that his version appeared in the pages of *Ha-Zefirah* somewhere about 1900). *Julius Cæsar* appeared in Yiddish in 1886. *King Lear* has also been printed in the same language, and the *Merchant of Venice* received the same honor, at the hand of Basil Dahl, in New York, in 1899. I use the words "printed in Yiddish" advisedly, because there are extant in manuscript acting versions of other plays used by Yiddish companies. Of course, select passages from Shakespeare have often been rendered into Hebrew, as, for instance, in that curious publication *Young's Israelitish Gleaner and Biblical Repository*, Edinburgh, 1855 (pp. 24, 16). The lack of Hebrew translations may be explained by two considerations. The *Merchant of Venice*, despite its sympa-

thetic treatment of some aspects of Shylock's character, dealt so deadly a blow at the Jews, that there could be no enthusiasm with regard to the other works. But more operative was another fact. The available Hebraists for the most part were ignorant of English. The *Macbeth* mentioned above was translated not from the original, but from Schiller's German.

There is a further consideration (for after all Schlegel's fine German version was at hand for those who knew no English). Drama in Hebrew, whether original or translated, has always been spasmodic. Drama needs an audience. Until the Hebrew revival become wider spread, there can never be a sufficiently popular demand for the presentation of Hebrew plays to encourage or cultivate the composition of them. It will no doubt be otherwise in the new Palestine. Indeed we already read of plans, instituted by M. James Rothschild, to organize a Hebrew Drama in Judæa.

Isaac Edward (Eliezer) Salkinson, however, knew English well. He was also gifted with a fine command of Hebrew, which he wrote not only fluently, but in real poetic style. He was born in Wilna, being perhaps the son of Solomon Salkind, himself a writer of meritorious Hebrew verse

(*Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. x, p. 651). Unfortunately, a knowledge of Hebrew does not of itself suffice to keep a Jew within the pale of the Synagogue. "As a youth, Salkinson set out for America with the intention of entering a rabbinical seminary there; but while in London he was met by agents of the London Missionary Society, and was persuaded to forsake Judaism." The Synagogue lost in him one of the most accomplished Hebraists of modern times.

But though he was lost, his work—or some of it—remains to us, and we ought not to let it go. Nahum Slousch makes an admirable remark on the subject in his *Renascence of Hebrew Literature* (p. 245). Salkinson's first great translation was not of Shakespeare, but of Milton. In 1871 appeared a delightful Hebrew version of *Paradise Lost*. It was a masterly rendering, attaining almost to absolute perfection. Take Salkinson's title. He called it *Vayegaresh et ha-adam* ("So He drove out the man," from Genesis 3. 24). How much apter it is for *Paradise Lost* than Meir Letteris *Ben Abuyah* for Goethe's *Faust*. Salkinson's version is genuine Milton. "It was a sign of the times," says Slousch of Salkinson's rendering of an epic so Christian in character, "that this work

of art was enjoyed and appreciated by the educated Hebrew public in due accordance with its literary merits." It was, in brief, an indication that Jewish readers of Hebrew were discriminating between form and substance. Many who are as old as I am can recall a similar change in feeling with regard to pictures. To go through a great Art Gallery was a tax on one's forbearance. Madonnas at every turn offended the Jewish consciousness. Now, however, a large number find it quite easy to admire an artist's talent irrespective of the subject. Yet Josef Israels never painted a Madonna, though he was strongly urged to do so by eminent admirers of his genius.

In the case of Shakespeare's *Othello* no such problem as this arises. In finding a Hebrew title for it, Salkinson did not seek for any paraphrase. He just searched for a Hebrew name which would sound like "Othello," and he found it in the biblical "Ithiel," which may signify "God is with me." "Ithiel" would thus mean much the same as "Immanuel" ("God is with us"). It cannot be asserted that "Ithiel" fails to correspond in sense with "Othello," for the simple reason that no one seems to know what "Othello" means; Ruskin suggested the sense *careful*. On the other hand,

“ Iago ” is probably a variant of “ Jacob ”; Salkinson calls him Doeg: there is some similarity in character, as in a name, between the false Doeg and the wily Iago. The other names call for little comment. Desdemona becomes Asenath, not a happy choice, for while Desdemona apparently means the “unfortunate,” Asenath is probably the Egyptian for the “Favorite of Neith.” Cassio is Ceseð—a mere assonance. On the other hand, the Clown is *Lez* (the scoffer); this is a reproduction of meaning, not of sound. After all, not the names, but the play is the thing. Salkinson certainly gives us the play. His Hebrew is the real Shakespeare. Often have I found in difficult passages of the English that the Hebrew is a useful help to the understanding of the original. Sometimes a hasty reader of Salkinson may think that the translator erred, as in his rendering of Othello’s last pathetic speech:

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
 Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
 Perplex’d in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base *Indian*, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe.

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Salkinson turns these last two lines into:

Like the despicable *Jew*, who threw a pearl away
Richer than all the wealth of Israel.

It is no mistake. There is good authority for reading *Judean* in the English text in place of *Indian*. The most plausible suggestion is Theobald's, that Shakespeare was referring to Herod and Mariamne. The whole of this speech is a triumph of literalness combined with beauty of phraseology. If Salkinson had only written this one page he would be famous among modern Hebraists.

Othello was done into Hebrew at the suggestion of Perez Smolenskin, himself, of course, a noted pioneer of the new-Hebrew school. Smolenskin was delighted with Salkinson's performance. "See," he cried, "how Shakespeare lends himself to Hebrew. While so many are translating into Hebrew works utterly foreign to the Hebraic spirit, here we have one who has chosen a poem which lies near to that spirit." There is much truth in this contention. English does very readily lend itself to translation into Hebrew, just as is the case when the relation is reversed. No version of the Hebrew Bible, not even Luther's, has ever approached the English in its fidelity to the soul of the

original. But Smolenskin goes on to use another argument, which is somewhat amusing. He draws a picture of the Jewry of his day, and then exclaims: Lo! here are the very conditions presented to us in *Othello*. And he bids his contemporaries to draw a moral from the play, to regulate their conduct by it. I should hardly justify an appreciation of *Othello* on moral grounds. It is a great psychological drama, and it also touches the pinnacle of romanticism. But a moral? Smolenskin seems to have found in it a warning to men to treat women better. Certainly one would prefer that our Othellos should be a little milder towards their Desdemonas in real life.

All this is off the point. Salkinson's merit lay just in his power to take a work of art, pass it through the crucible of translation, and then bring out the result as a work of art still. Translators are not always traitors. I have said nothing about Salkinson's *Romeo and Juliet*, because his *Othello* came first. But in the former he reveals the same qualities. I do not know whom I would place above Salkinson in the list of the best translators into Hebrew.