Preface

Wandering for millennia through space and language, Jews have been travelers in translation. Ancient Jewish communities moved from Hebrew to Aramaic and Greek, and while Hebrew remained the sacred and literary language, modern Jewish culture also emerged in translation. From the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, most central and eastern European Jews spoke Yiddish as they migrated among German, Polish, and Russian speakers. Influenced by the local languages, an avant-garde group of educated Jews remade Hebrew as they entered the modern world, discovering new vistas and imprinting novel forms onto Hebrew literature.

Following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, Jews began their long wanderings in exile. Dispersed throughout the world, for centuries Jewish pilgrims returned to Palestine and were buried on the Mount of Olives. These pilgrimages fired the imagination of many Diaspora Jews, who engaged in far-flung trade, fled persecution by land or sea, and continued to long for Zion. In spite of their tendency to be bookish and estranged from nature, traditionally educated Ashkenazic Jewish men were often attracted and captivated by sea travel. For centuries, the Land of Israel was a prime destination, both real and imagined.

As Jews entered the modern period in Germany and eastern Europe, Hebrew travelogues became an increasingly important genre that conveyed new values. Around 1800, European Hebrew authors expanded horizons by writing and translating narratives of wide-ranging world travel. Accounts of sea voyages marked a turning point in Hebrew literature and modern Jewish identity. Translations of Joachim Heinrich Campe's book *The Discovery of America* were especially popular, preparing the way for

mass immigration to *di goldene medine*, the Golden Land of the New World.

This collective history of travel is also part of my family history. My ancestors traveled to the United States in the century before I was born, and I grew up on these shores, watching the tides rise and fall in a harbor of Long Island Sound. The influence ran deep: in those waters we sailed, paddled canoes, explored desolate islands, watched yachts and speedboats beyond the breakwater. My family experienced hurricane tides that covered the yard, filled our basement, and flooded the furnace. These adventures and crises were some of the most exciting events of my childhood.

One summer I sailed my father's catamaran alone when a black flag was flying in the harbor—and came face to face with the power of nature when the upper pontoon lifted so high out of the water that the boat capsized. After my glasses fell off and sank, I encountered adversity half-blind, sitting on the twin hulls of the overturned boat and waiting to be rescued. Decades later, this book became a way to revisit my childhood by exploring Jewish literature of sea travel, shipwreck, and survival. Since then, although my lenses have thickened, my childish enthusiasm remains. When I had almost completed revisions of this manuscript, I was caught in another storm—on Skaneateles Lake in central New York, surrounded by thunder, lightning, and sheets of rain—but by then I knew that shipwreck is always the best part of sea narratives.

This journey in literary history is also a quest for what it means to be (a Jew) in the modern world. Looking at early-modern Jewish life, we recognize later patterns of immigration and acculturation among other ethnic groups. Persecuted and expelled, Jews involuntarily tested the waters for those who migrated later. Other immigrant groups, if they survive their perilous sea journeys, still encounter the consequences of exile and immigration that have characterized Jewish life and literature for two millennia.

Growing up in the greater New York City area, I never felt that I was living in exile from the Land of Israel. Our suburban street was already more than half Jewish, and in that miniature shtetl I was oblivious to any residual anti-Semitism. And yet, despite our thorough assimilation, some kind of alienation from American culture eventually took me abroad. I

lived and traveled in Europe, where I learned more about our roots. During the past two decades, I have traveled to connect the texts I study to my ancestors' real-world geography.

In search of remnants of history, I traveled back in time—to the Rhineland, a center of Jewish life during the Middle Ages. My grandmother's ancestors lived in Beerfelden, in the Odenwald, during the period of the wonder-working Ba`al Shem of Michelstadt (1768–1847). One day, after I had sifted through the records of the Moses family's births, deaths, and marriages, an archivist in the Beerfelden Town Hall threw open his window curtain and pointed to the site where they had lived, House 122. Most of the Jews in Beerfelden were horse and cattle traders. In 1855, the young Wolf Moses and his family sailed across the Atlantic and settled in Baltimore, where they sold horses to several American presidents. His granddaughter was my grandmother, Evelyn Gutman Frieden. When I visited the Jewish regional cemetery in Michelstadt with my father, he said, with the sly irony of a scientist, "Some of our DNA is in there!"

From Rügen, Germany, I took a ferry across the Baltic Sea to Klaipeda (near former Prussian Königsberg) and then drove to Kvatki, Lithuania, which the locals call "Kvetkai." In that predominantly Jewish shtetl, Avraham (Milner) Żyw raised nine sons and one daughter. Around 1908, my grandfather Sender Żyw (later Alexander Frieden) went on a hunger strike in Kvatki when he was a schoolboy, refusing to continue Hebrew and Bible lessons in the local one-room heder and demanding to study in a real school. His parents sent him to receive a secular education in Warsaw, where he lived with his favorite brother, Jakob, and his wife (figure 1). After the family—except for the ill-fated Jakob Żyw and Leonie—moved to the United States (under the name Frieden), Alexander finished high school and studied at the University of Virginia. By the time he received a PhD in chemistry at Columbia University, he had transformed himself from an Orthodox shtetl boy into a secular American scientist. He was proud to have squelched his foreign accent, and he refused to speak the Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and Polish he knew from childhood.

I returned to see Kvatki in 1995, but not to reclaim those shtetl roots. In that still impoverished town, consisting of little more than a dozen wooden houses near a slow-moving stream, I understood why my

Fig. 1. Leonie and Jakob Żyw in Warsaw, ca. 1930. (Courtesy of their grandson, Michael Żyw)

grandfather had so desperately wanted to leave.[1] And yet once assimilation had been achieved in America, what was the next step?

In Vienna, Budapest, and Odessa, there were traces of our forebears on my mother's side—some of whom had left Austro-Hungary around 1860 and others had fled Russia in about 1882. My most illustrious ancestor, Solomon Mandelkern (1846–1902), came from the small town Mlynov, near Lvov. He studied Semitic languages in St. Petersburg, lived in Odessa, and taught Oriental languages in Leipzig. In 1875, he published a three-volume history of Russia, and later he wrote Hebrew poetry in the outmoded maskilic mode, sometimes translating from Byron or Heine. In 1896, he published a seminal concordance to the Hebrew Bible, which I used while writing this book.

Solomon's philological bent resurfaced in my passion for words, concordances, and literature. At some point, I took this identification beyond texts and decided to relive some part of what my ancestors were. Being American in the 1980s seemed too bland, lacking in cultural depth, and

so I learned to hear and to help my students hear the eloquent voices of Jewish writers.[2]

I did not try to turn back the clock. Nevertheless, my wife and I reconstructed a simulacrum of European Jewish family life in Syracuse, New York.[3] I have enjoyed doing research in Hebrew and Yiddish, living in Israel, reading and teaching Judaic literature, playing Klezmer clarinet and performing at weddings, holding Passover Seders, and building a sukkah in the backyard for family and friends. After decades of life and learning, I feel that I have become who I am or, rather, who I chose to be: my knowledge and travels have enabled me to reclaim my European Jewish affinities. , Like the heroine of the film *Woman in Gold* (Simon Curtis, 2015), who reclaims Jewish art looted by the Nazis, I have revived masterpieces of European Jewish literary culture that had disappeared from view.

Literary scholars have sometimes tried to separate literary meaning from mundane reality and world geography. Literature can offer an escape because fiction creates an alternate reality, which is part of its power and charm. Formalism, New Criticism, and structuralism contributed a deep understanding of literary form, but we should not be content to immerse ourselves in textuality and "the play of signifiers." Without turning to New Historicism, we need to change how we understand literary studies. Discipline is important, and we can count on the historians to go on writing and rewriting history without us; however, literary history is another discipline, told for different reasons and with distinctive goals.

I propose a new approach, textual referentialism: an orientation toward texts that emphasizes the interrelationship between literariness and world reference. Modernist abstraction, pure poetry, and verbal fireworks still have the power to fascinate and create a virtual reality in our imaginations. But the time has come to travel beyond the text because in some contexts and for very good reasons we want to reunite them with real sites in the world. Hence, travel narratives could become the flagship genre for this return to referentiality. Leaving aside fantastical travels, we can focus on narratives that represent human travel to actual places. Distinct from chronicles, memoirs, or diaries, which typically focus on events and people, travelogues describe places. This book takes a fresh look at

travel narratives—especially German, Hebrew, and Yiddish sea narratives—and focuses on some extraordinarily innovative prose written early in the nineteenth century.

When Yiddish studies were reawakening in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, it was still virtually impossible to visit most of the sites of Yiddish literature in eastern Europe. As a result, my peers and I had to imagine Jewish life in the city, in the shtetl, and on the road, with Yiddish films from the 1930s providing real and staged scenes that seemed to give a foothold for American Jews who did not know the language or the geography. Like Jews described by a character in I. L. Peretz's story "The Dead City," we lived our eastern Europe "without geography."[4]

A decade ago, in my advanced seminar on parody and allegory, students sometimes wondered what these literary forms have in common. I showed that parodies and allegories embody a radical textualism: they are texts that refer primarily to other texts. Literary parodies usually refer to prior texts, in contrast to satires, which refer to people and situations in the world around us. Religious allegories refer back to sacred texts while referring beyond the material world to a "higher" order of spiritual meaning. I still believe all this to be true but have supplemented my intertextual focus with referentialism. Travel narratives, along with real travel, may help us reunite texts and their world references. My effort to reclaim literary geography has inspired me to incorporate historical maps in this study of sea tales.

When people ask how long it took me to write this book, I usually answer that it is based on a decade of research. Nevertheless, the underlying framework in literary theory brings together my studies and scholarship over several decades. In New Haven, Chicago, and Berlin, I was in the right place at the right time—fortunate to be educated by leading scholars of literature and philosophy. Most influential to my thinking have been Harold Bloom, Wayne Booth, Leslie Brisman, Paul de Man, Peter Demetz, Jacques Derrida, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Dan Miron, Fred Oscanyan, Paul Ricoeur, Gershon Shaked, Khone Shmeruk, Michael Theunissen, and Ernst Tugendhat. I am grateful for the generous support of graduate and postdoctoral fellowships at Yale University, the University of Chicago, the Hebrew University of Jersualem, and

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has a future alongside Yiddish literary studies. Edward Mooney's intelligent remarks gave encouragement and inspiration during late stages of revision. David Ruderman critiqued my preface and introduction, helping me to strengthen the presentation. David Ehrlich spoke with me in Hebrew about the twenty-first century, and Dovid Katz spoke with me in Yiddish about the nineteenth century. My friends and colleagues Fred Beiser, Brooks Haxton, Steven Kepnes, Marc Safran, and Harvey Teres helped to keep my brain working through the long Syracuse winters.

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I hope that the coming generation, including my children, Tal and Maya, will understand why this literary and geographical journey is important to our collective future. May every generation have the good fortune to make a voyage to Jerusalem and, realizing that the Temple Mount is not the navel of the world, also travel beyond Zion.