TRAVELS IN TRANSLATION: SEA TALES AT THE SOURCE OF JEWISH FICTION. Ken Frieden, Syracuse University Press

Ken Frieden demonstrates throughout his ambitious new book, *Travels in Translation: Sea Tales at the Source of Jewish Fiction*, how early modern Hebrew prose evolved from the narrative efforts of such Italian-Jewish travelers as Meshullam of Voltera, who traveled to Egypt and Palestine in 1481, and Ovadia of Bartenoro in 1488. Anticipating his next chapters, Frieden writes: "Linguistically, there is a tension between the authors' use of biblical quotations and their reliance on words or translations from their vernacular, such as Italian or Yiddish." Indeed, most illuminating is Frieden's meticulous analysis of the Hebrew and Yiddish sources of the pilgrimage to the Holy Land by Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav in 1798-99 as recounted by his amanuensis Nathan Sternharz. While the *Shivhei ha-Besht* has been studied as a source of modern Hebrew writing (Shalom Spiegel's *Hebrew Reborn* is one obvious work), Sternharz's weighty contribution is less well-known, although Frieden does credit Shmuel Werses's pioneering comments. Sternharz's narrative is less dependent on biblical language than is the rococo or *melitza*-ridden prose of the Maskilim. Especially fascinating are Frieden's lucid and brilliant explications of the sources in Yiddish of certain inventive and invigorating, if occasionally somewhat clumsy, Hebrew expressions in Sternharz's account. But Frieden's attention is not exclusively linguistic. He helps the reader enter into the world view of Rabbi Nahman and his relationship with his devoted fellow traveler, Sternharz.

Frieden next contrasts Sternharz's rendering of Nahman's more fantastic and metaphorically suggestive travels with Sternharz's own personal voyage in 1822. But the appeal of this chapter definitely exceeds its linguistic analysis, formidable as it may be. Frieden introduces us to the world of Nahman's tales. Frieden's focus on seafaring takes a metaphorical turn when he cites W.H Auden: "The sea is, in fact, that state of barbaric vagueness and disorder out of which civilization has emerged and into which, unless saved by the efforts of gods and men, it is always liable to relapse." The tales are replete with sexual allegories with "disguises, deceptions, abductions and naked men and women." In Frieden's words, "In Nahman's tales, as in other folktales, the sea is a place of transgressions and transformed identity. "I also especially liked the nexus he draws to the well-known folk song traced back to Nahman, "*kol ha`olam kullo gesher tsar me'od, ve-ha-`iqqar lo lefahed kelal."* (The entire world is but a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is not to be at all fearful). Frieden draws, at least for this reader, a potential

connecting line from the troubled waters of the sea to klezmer performance and the Yiddish folk world.

Frieden breaks new ground in his analysis of Sternharz's travel journal of 1822 entitled *Yemei Moharnat*. Piecing together a convincing portrait of this neglected work on the basis of considerable archival study, Frieden again blends his study of linguistic nuance with original philosophical reflection. Frieden demonstrates that Sternharz was a keen observer of lands and peoples on his journey, but in times of personal doubt and struggle he invoked Rabbi Nahman's memory and legacy in creating "a safe realm of sanctity with the help of sacred sources." "Sternharz feels confident," Frieden asserts, "because he can continue to inhabit a structured Torah-centered world."

Frieden devotes a beautifully researched chapter to the Maskil Isaac Euchel. He credits the extensive work done by Moshe Pelli and Yehudah Friedlander, and more recently the unpublished dissertation of Rebecca Wolpe, "The Sea and Sea Voyages in Maskilic Literature" (2011). Among many illuminating topics he references Euchel's fictionalized epistolary travel narrative, "Igrot Meshullam ben Uriah the Eshtemoite." "Perhaps to underline their claim to authenticity," Frieden writes, "Euchel's letters are written as if they were written by a Sephardic Jew who leaves Aleppo and travels through Spain, Italy and the Ottoman Empire during 1769." Frieden question Pelli's assessment as to the originality of Euchel's prose. He shows that Euchel was even more heavily reliant on biblical tropes and vocabulary. He grants Euchel and others some credit for trying to expand Hebrew's range but essentially he denies the overly "Hebraistic" reading of Yosef Klausner. Klausner credits the Maskilim too strongly for the rebirth of Hebrew prose and short-changes the importance of Hasidic sources and the enormous role of Mendel Lefin in synthesizing a new idiomatic Hebrew that influenced the famous "nusach" of Mendele more than scholars, and Mendele himself, have acknowledged.

In pivoting to the German travel narratives so important in the translations by later Maskilim, (particularly J.H. Campe's *Die Entdeckung von Amerika)*, Frieden cites Rebecca Wolpe as to why travel literature was regarded as more innocuous to traditional readers. "Only very rarely," says Wolpe, "were *belles lettres* and fictional texts utilized; love stories are non-existent."

Moses Mendelssohn-Frankfurt (1782-1861), a traditional Jew, figures prominently in Frieden's book by virtue of his translation of J.H. Campe's work and his many stylistic innovations in his posthumously published book *Penei Tevel.* Frieden praises Mendelssohn-Frankfurt for his greater openness to Mishnaic Hebrew and also for what the literary historian H.N. Shapiro in

the 1930s termed Mendelssohn-Frankfurt's *ammamiyyut* (or "folksiness" in Frieden's rendering). This "folksiness" is a disputed judgment, and it would require an extremely careful reading of Frieden's chapter and the sources to render an independent opinion about this matter. This reader is convinced by the meticulousness of Frieden's analysis that he has made his case.

Before culminating his study with the work of the great Mendel Lefin, Frieden discusses in a chapter entitled "Bontekoe" a little known bilingual Hebrew/Yiddish edition of an ill-fated journey from the Netherlands to Java in 1619 by Captain Willem Bontekoe. It is clear that Frieden has labored mightily in unearthing this "Rosetta Stone" of an early bilingual text.

The Bontekoe text is entitled *Oniyah So`arah* (storm-tossed ship). Frieden does not bring us samples of the antiquated Yiddish. Instead he contrasts the German translation by Campe of the Dutch journals of Bontekoe with the Hebrew version. In his next chapter Frieden takes issue with the theory that Lefin was the author of *Oniyah So`arah* on the basis of such statistical analyses as the number of times that the more Mishnaic term *sefinah* is used in place of the biblical *oniyah*. However, most of Frieden's attention is directed at the greater degree of ideological interpolation in the Hebrew version. Frieden tells us that the Yiddish version by contrast is closer to Campe's German.

Lefin's translation of Campe entitled *Mase`ot ha-Yam* is, by Frieden's account, "a neglected masterpiece of early-modern Hebrew writing." Only Lefin's *Heshbon ha-Nefesh* has been widely known because "Israel Salanter reprinted and popularized it connection with the Musar movement." In view of the tremendous attention that has been paid to Lefin by Nancy Sinkoff and others, Frieden's study in this chapter is pertinent to much contemporary scholarship. Frieden shows that other authors of the Haskalah, such as Halle Wolfson and Joseph Perl, who used Aramaisms, did so in a satirical manner, but not so Lefin. Frieden also goes well beyond the purely linguistic. For example, Frieden cites a fascinating story told by Avraham Gotlober of how Mendel Lefin came to the attention of Prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski, who became Lefin's benefactor.

In an appendix, Frieden publishes from an archival manuscript the introduction by Lefin to *Mase`ot ha-Yam*. While this introduction is more philosophically dense and hence linguistically complicated, it is most interesting, and it articulates some of Lefin's underlying motives in publishing his travelogues. One motive is to alert the reader to the power of God's Providence (hashgahah). At the same time, an even more important moral of

his narrative tales is the exhortation for human beings to employ their "strength and strategy" (*`oz ve-tahbulah*) to make the most of this challenging life into which we are born.

Of all the riches in Frieden's book I believed it to be interesting for the reader of this journal to have a sample of Lefin's travelogue prose. It is striking how modern the Hebrew sounds.

> לסוף הבריק השחר ואז נראה בעליל מה שנדמה להם לראות לאור הברקים בלילה....
>
> Finally, dawn broke, and there appeared clearly what they thought they had seen in the flashes of lightning at night….
>
> אולם אהה! כמה דאגות אחרות הפיגו את השמחה הקצרה הזאת מתוך לבם ע"י הספיקות הרבות שנשארו לפותרם עוד.
> But oh! How many other worries weakened this brief joy in their hearts because of the numerous doubts that still remained to be solved.

What we have discussed is only a small sampling of the great riches in Frieden's study. Towards the end of his book Frieden discusses the many contributions of the leading scholar of the Haskalah, Shmuel Feiner, in shedding light not only on Lefin but also Joseph Perl, Nathan Sternharz and others. Frieden also engages with valuable studies such as Moshe Pelli on Shmuel Romanelli, Jonathan Meir on Joseph Perl, Hillel Levine on Mendel Lefin, linguistic comments by Chaim Rabin and Iris Porush, and much more. *Travels in Translation* should be required reading not only for students of early modern Hebrew literature but for the Haskalah in general.

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