A Yiddish Glossary with Slavic Words:

A Bible from Kraków, 1596–99

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As a subject for this lecture, why did I choose a Bible commentary in Hebrew with Yiddish glosses? A number of reasons rest behind my decision. I had thought of speaking about the role of Moshe Isserles as a philosopher or as a judge, and I toyed with examining the concept of history as expressed by Shlomo Luria. I was even playing with the idea of presenting a paper on the Bund’s understanding of Jewish history. After pondering those topics, I decided to focus instead on a remarkable book of Yiddish glosses to a Hebrew Bible commentary: Ayalah shelukha, by Naftali Hirsch ben Asher Altshuler, printed in Kraków between 1596 and 1599. Among the reasons for my choice was the fact that eminent Jewish scholars in the field of Yiddish, including Maks Erik,1 Alfred Landau, Chone Shmeruk,2 Nokhem Shtiff,3 and Max Weinreich,4 were not able to consult the actual book, but relied on Moritz Steinshneider, the only scholar who actually examined it. And even Steinshneider had not seen a copy when he published his famous articles in Serapeum in 1849–50. Only when compiling his monumental catalogue of Hebrew books in the Bodleian Library in Oxford did Steinshneider describe Altshuler’s text.5

The book and its author demonstrate how the former and latter prophets and the books of hagiographa were taught to young men (not children) in Poland at the end of the sixteenth century. In Ayalah shelukha, we meet not with an intellectual giant of the calibre of Isserles, Luria, or Mordecai Yaffo, but with an average Jew writing a commentary on biblical prophets in simple Hebrew, who provides between five and six thousand glosses in Old Yiddish that surprisingly contain some Slavic words. The book has more than double the number of words in Yiddish found in Sefer merkevet hamishne or Sefer shel Rabi Anschel (printed in Kraków in 1543 and 1589). Other interesting features are found as well: the section on the Torah contains only Rashi’s commentary, and it is intriguing that Altshuler included only writings on the prophets and books of hagiographa, texts hardly taught to children in Poland.

Before dealing explicitly with the author and his commentary, it is useful to consider conditions under which Slavic words appear in other medieval Hebrew texts. Although some such words are found in the commentaries of Rashi and Joseph ben Shimon Kara, these occasional instances might have been inserted much later by copyists. Since we lack the eleventh- and twelfth-century manuscripts of Rashi or Kara, one must view the appearance of

1 M. Erik, Vegn alyidishn roman un novele (Warsaw, 1926); Di geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur fun di eltste tsaytn bis der haskole tkufe (Warsaw, 1928).
2 C. Shmeruk, Sifrut yidish prakim letoldoteha (Tel Aviv, 1978); Sifrut yidish bepolin (Jerusalem, 1981); Prokim fun der yidische literatur geshikhte (Tel Aviv, 1988).
4 M. Weinreich, Shtaplen fun etiuadn tsu der yidisher sprakhvisnshaft un literatur geshikhte (Berlin, 1923); Bilder fun der yidisher sprakh begrifn, fakt , metodn, volumes 1-4 (New York, 1973); Bilder fun der yidisher literatur-geshikhte; fun di onhoyb bis Mendele Mokher Sforim (Vilna, 1928).
5 M. Steinschneider, Jüdisch-deutsche Literatur, Serapeum (Leipzig, 1848–64); Catalogus Librorum Hebraeorum in Bibliotheca Bodleiana (Berlin, 1852–60).
these few words with caution and scepticism. The oldest Slavic word known to me in a Hebrew
text is found in a commentary by Rabbi Moshe Hesia of London in his thirteenth-century Sefer
Hashoḥam. There he recorded that a Jew from Chernigov (Ukraine) came to him in London, and
to impress him, said that the Russian language derives from Hebrew. As evidence, he states that
the word yabeim in Hebrew is the same as yebat’ in Russian—in the latter language, meaning ‘to
have sexual intercourse’. Yabeim or yibum, in Hebrew, refers to a widow whose husband died
without leaving children; she is consequently obliged either to marry the late husband’s brother
or to receive his permission to remarry. Though Hesia refers to his visitor as Yoshke, or Itche of
Chernigov, the name in the original manuscript is difficult to read, and as much as one is amused
by the guest’s philological interpretation, he does indeed show off a knowledge of Russian.

Why did a Jew from Ukraine arrive in London? How did he communicate with Jews
there, and how did he interact with the general public? Was he a businessman or a wandering
scholar? The answers remain a mystery. We know of Spanish and French scholars and scholars
from Palestine who came to London in the thirteenth century, but no document mentions
Yoshke.

The largest number of Slavonic words are found in the novellae and responsa of Yitzhak
(Zarua), a rabbi living in Vienna in the thirteenth century. The eminent Russian Jewish scholar
Abraham Elijah Harkavy believed that the words therein were generally in Russian, but Russian
linguist Roman Jakobson has shown definitively that Yitzhak’s words are rather the oldest texts
of Czech in written form. Jakobson could not read Hebrew characters, so he had the texts
transliterated. In the Slavic words bilshon kenaan (in the language of Kenaan), based on Genesis
9:27 (‘And let Kenaan be a Slave unto them’), Slave is equivalent to Slav.

In the early nineteenth century, a large number of coins with Hebrew inscriptions were
unearthed in Poland, dating from the twelfth century. On some of these are stamped in Hebrew
the name of Miszka, or Moszka Król Polski (King of Poland). Although these are the oldest
documents of Polish Jews, we know very little about the mints that produced them, and we do
not know the routes that brought them to Poland.

In the oldest Yiddish text printed in Kraków in 1534, Sefer azharat nashim, the Arabic-
Mishnaic word pashtida is interpreted in Judeo-German as flodn and in Russian as pirogi. Note
that the word is related to food, a frequent feature in such writing, and one to which I will return
subsequently.

The sixteenth century produced a few Slavic words in the Talmudic commentary Yam
shel Shlomo, by Shlomo Luria. In his treatise on tractate Chulin, he renders the Hebrew word eiz
‘in the language of Kenaan koza (goat). The word is the same in Czech, Russian, and Polish.

In Isserles’ glosses to the rabbinic code of Karo (Orah hayim, paragraph 202, section 7),
the German word latwerg is glossed in Polish as powidło (Eng., jam). And in Yore De’ah
(paragraph 96, section 7, the Hebrew word tsnon or chazeret, is glossed as the Polish chren or
chrzan, again related to food.

And now let us turn to our author, Naftali Altshuler, whose book of commentary on the
prophets and books of hagiography was printed in Kraków by Yitzhak ben Aron of Prostitz
(Prościejów) between 1596 and 1598. On the verso of the title page, he claimed approbations
(haskamot) from seven famous rabbis: Yitzhak ben Avraham, Mordecai ben Avraham Yoffo,
Efraim ben Aharon (of Łęczyca), Moshe ben Hakadosh (the Martyr), Yossha ben Alexander

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6 See Abraham Elijah Harkavy, The Jews and Slavic Languages (Wilno, 1867), 24–55, 54–62; Roman Jakobson
in Festschrift for Max Weinreich (Leiden, 1964).
7 Unicum in Schocken Library, Jerusalem. Quoted by Shmeruk, Safrut Yiddish be’folin (Jerusalem, 1981), 77.
(author of the rabbinic code *Meirat einayim*), Meir ben Yeshaye, and Avraham ben Yosef Meizls.

The bulk of the page, however, remains blank, leading us to ask what happened to the text of approbations. Why are there no dates indicating when they were given? Did Altshuler really have these letters, or was he just promised them? Could he even just have pretended to have had them? It is most unusual for an author to state that he received approbations but then refrain from printing them.

Altshuler’s text is followed by a long, four-column introduction in Hebrew, in which he complains that few Jews study the prophetic books of the Bible, and that too many are engrossed in philosophical speculations. Many Jews are ignorant of the Bible; young men prefer to study Talmud and rabbinic codes (i.e. *pilpul*), but cannot delve into and understand the many biblical commentaries (that is, except for those on the Pentateuch). And the majority of young men want to spend time in commerce.

Consequently, Altshuler has prepared a small glossary containing difficult words translated into or paraphrased in Judaeo-German (i.e., Yiddish). His own commentary is based on the established classical commentaries of Rashi, Abraham ibn Ezra, Levi Gersonides (Ralbag), David Kimchi (Radak), Saadya Gaon, Rabbi Isaiaih, Joseph Khayum, Shimon ben Zemach, Ovadia (Sforno), and Ibn Yechia. He received the key or main part from his own teacher, Bendet Akselrod, and from other scholars from Ashkenaz (i.e., the Germanic states) and Spain. He also acknowledges his debt to Rabbi Anschel and to his cousin Rabbi Nahman Shen Shen written as an anagram. (I regret I have no additional information about these two teachers.)

He states that his book should replace all earlier commentaries and make it easy for his readers to follow the texts of the prophets.

Altshuler promises to refrain from quoting extensively from other commentaries, and occasionally will offer brief summaries to save space and costs. He asks his readers to stop philosophizing, and proceeds to quote at length Gedalia ibn Yechie, author of the *Shalshelet ha’kabbalah*, who wrote that even Aristotle and Plato admitted that they were wrong after both met Jeremiah and Shimon the Righteous One. He also quotes a pseudo-epigraphic letter of Aristotle’s, allegedly written to his pupil Alexander the Great, about how he became convinced of his errors in philosophy after an encounter with Shimon the Saint. All this is taken from the *Shalshelet ha’kabbalah*. (Steinschneider referred to the author as an incorrigible liar.)

The introduction is signed by the author, who lives in ‘Rossia’ but does not give the name of the town in which he dwells. From a document published by the late professor Israel Halpern in his *Pinkas Va’ad Arba Aratzot* (Documents Relating to the Council of Four Lands), we know that Rossia is in east Galicia (Red Ruthenia, especially the area around Lwow). It is of interest to note that the date in the Pinkas is the date of the publication of Altshuler’s book. It is most unusual that he does not state the type of work he was doing in Russia, though he does mention that his father is a rabbi. Could he himself have been a wandering teacher?

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8 Of the rabbis who were supposed to have given their approbations, I know nothing about the first; Mordecai Yaffo, the author of the ten parts of Levushim, was rabbi in Poznań, and died in 1614; Efraim ben Aharon (of Łęczyca) was the author of the popular *Kli yakar* and many other works. He had to leave Poland and became a preacher in Prague. See Halperin, *Va’ad Arba Aratzot*, 14–14, 26, 33, 62; and H. H. Ben-Sasson, *Hagut vehanhangah* (Jerusalem, 1959); on Moshe son of the martyr Avraham, see Halperin, 15, 62; Yoshua ben Alexander, a famous Talmudic scholar, author of *Sefer meirat einayim* (sema) died in 1615. The sixth and seventh names of the rabbis remain unclear to me, as I could not find material about them.

The introduction to the second volume, the commentary on the latter prophets, is shorter. Altshuler asks his readers to forgive him if he has made errors, saying that many passages in the prophets remain as closed as some books and that even great scholars find them difficult to understand. It is signed ‘living in Rossia’, though he provides no date nor place.

Altshuler wrote a brief introduction to the books of hagiographa. He says he completing the book on Job on Sunday 26 Elul in (5)359 (i.e., in September 1599). At the end of Daniel, he states that he finished this book on the thirty-third day of the counting of the Omer in Meseritsch, which sits on the isles of the sea, in the year (5)356 (1596). This is probably Mezerich (Międzyrzecz) in Volynia. Again he does not mention why he was in that town.

The book is rare. The existing copies are in the British Library, the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and the National Library in Jerusalem. The private copy to which I refer is in London, and is the most complete version. Of the five copies known, two are defective.

Let me conclude by mentioning the assessment of this work by the young Max Weinreich. When he was in his twenties, he saw in it ‘[n]ot only a love of Old-Yiddish literature and its cultural historical context, but also a lively actual interest in the further development and enrichment of the Yiddish language’. The first part of his statement is still valid, but the second part is a prophecy that alas will remain unfulfilled, as the majority of Yiddish-speaking Jews perished in the Holocaust and Yiddish has largely become an academic subject.

\footnote{Max Weinreich, Shtaplen (Berlin, 1923), 123.}