

Literary Translations and Cultural Mediation among Jewish Minorities in Interwar Europe

Two Hebrew Case Studies

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Abstract

This article explores the role of literary translations in the cultural enrichment of the Jewish national minority in interwar Europe, with a specific focus on Hebrew translations. In the wake of the emergence of new independent European states, translations were one of the key tools that enabled Jewish readers to access the cultural and intellectual traditions of their host countries while expanding their own literary corpus. The study examines how translators navigated the tension between fidelity to the source texts and adaptation to the cultural and ideological expectations of Hebrew-speaking audiences. Translating concepts unfamiliar to Jewish culture, particularly those rooted in non-Jewish religious and cultural traditions, posed specific challenges. The article focuses especially on Hebrew translations from diverse cultural backgrounds, including works by Rabindranath Tagore and Vincas Mickevičius-Krėvė, to illustrate broader trends in literary translation and their impact on the development of Hebrew literature during the interwar period.

Keywords

literary translations – Jewish minority – interwar Europe – Hebrew literature – Rabindranath Tagore – Vincas Mickevičius-Krėvė – translation challenges – cultural adaptation

1 Introduction

During the interwar period, in newly established independent states such as Poland and Lithuania, complex systems of relationships developed between the state and ethnic minorities, as well as between national culture and minority cultures. This issue was particularly acute in the case of the Jewish minority, as Jews lived across all countries of Eastern and Central Europe, often forming culturally insular communities. With the collapse of empires, the balance of political relations in the former imperial territories changed radically.¹ Thus, both Lithuanian and Jewish cultures had previously been minority cultures within the Russian Empire, coexisting autonomously and without significant mutual interest. However, after 1918, Lithuanian culture became the dominant state culture, and the Jewish population began to take an interest in its elements, primarily as expressed in literature and poetry. Since mastering the state language to a level sufficient for reading literary works was a challenging task, literary translations took on particular importance. As their practical significance grew, so did the number of theoretical discussions analyzing the practical necessity of translations into Hebrew, the priorities in selecting works and authors for translation, the fundamental possibility of translating cultural concepts, various approaches to literary translation, and other related issues.

The tradition of translating works of world literature into modern Hebrew dates back to the beginning of the Haskalah period.² At that time, the primary goal was to create and expand a corpus of literature in modern Hebrew. Since the Haskalah movement originated in Germany, translators often had German as their first language. The approach to translation during this period had several distinctive features that set it apart sharply from later practices. First, works were frequently translated not from the original language but via German intermediaries.³ Second, fidelity to the source text was often loose:

1 See in this regard E. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington, IN 2001).

2 While some linguists associate 'modern Hebrew' exclusively with the revival of spoken Hebrew in the late 19th century, many scholars of the Jewish Enlightenment argue that the modernization of Hebrew began already in the late 18th century. They point to the shift toward secular literary functions, the adoption of European genres, and the deliberate expansion of Hebrew vocabulary to accommodate modern intellectual and aesthetic discourse. See Y. Shavit, 'A Duty Too Heavy to Bear: Hebrew in Berlin Haskalah, 1783–1819: Between Classic, Modern and Romantic,' in L. Glinert, ed., *Hebrew in Ashkenaz: A Language in Exile* (New York 1993).

3 For instance, the earliest Hebrew translations of Shakespeare were based on German ver-

while the overall meaning was retained, line-by-line correspondence was rarely maintained. Further, translation practices favored domestication, including the systematic Hebraization of character names.⁴ Finally, translators employed a highly elevated Hebrew style, saturated with biblical allusions and characterized by *melitzah*, the ornate and intertextual idiom of the Hebrew literary tradition.⁵

With the end of the Haskalah era in early 1880s and the beginning of the modernist period, the approach to translation changed. Works were now translated from the original language with stricter adherence to the original text, preservation of original proper names, and a style more aligned with the original. Additionally, the range of languages and cultures from which works were selected for translation expanded. Whereas earlier translations were primarily from English, French, or German literature, by the early 20th century, the selection had broadened beyond this standard set. Alongside the expansion of the corpus of Hebrew texts, the primary focus shifted to acquainting Jewish readers with the culture of the countries in which they lived, including the cultures of the newly formed states that emerged after the end of World War I.

To better understand the reasons behind the expansion of the range of languages for translation and the challenges associated with it, this section proceeds in two steps. It first considers debates within the Jewish community about the necessity of cultural and literary change, and then places these debates within the broader context of dominant Western views on translation and world literature in the early 20th century. After this, it turns to a set of specific examples that illustrate how these ideas were articulated and put into practice.

At that time, debates within Jewish literary and cultural circles increasingly revolved around two key questions. The first concerned whether the corpus of Hebrew-language literature should be expanded primarily through translations of globally renowned works or rather through the creation of original

sions, until Isaac Edward Salkinson's *Othello* (*It'el ha-Qushi mi-Vene'tzia*), translated directly from English and published in Vienna in 1874. see L. Kahn, *First Hebrew Shakespeare Translations: A Bilingual Edition and Commentary* (London 2018).

4 Thus, in Salkinson's translations of Shakespeare's texts, Romeo and Juliet became Ram and Jael, and Othello was rendered as Itiel. For more details on the name changes in Salkinson's Hebrew translations, see L. Kahn, 'Chapter 6. Judaisation in the First Hebrew Translation of *Romeo and Juliet*,' in J.F. Cerdá et al., eds., *Shakespeare in European Culture* (Amsterdam 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1075/sec.1.07kah>.

5 On *Melitzah*, see M. Pelli, 'On the Role of Melitzah in the Literature of Hebrew Enlightenment,' in Glinert, *Hebrew in Ashkenaz*.

works in Hebrew. The second question, if translations were to be undertaken, concerned the criteria by which texts should be selected for translation into Hebrew.

Regarding the first question, a particularly illustrative debate took place between Jacob Fichman, poet, essayist and translator based at the time of the debate mostly in Warsaw, and Shlomo Zemach, literary critic and editor of literary journal *Maazanim* in Palestine. Fichman, who compiled several textbooks of literature for schoolchildren both in Hebrew and Yiddish, held translations of the modern era in high regard. Unlike the translations of the Haskalah period, whose elevated and heavily ornamented style tended toward stylistic monotony, modernist translations, in his view, had themselves become first-rate works of Hebrew literature. He believed that for an aspiring writer, producing such high-quality translations was preferable to writing mediocre original texts, which would contribute less to the enrichment of Hebrew literature. In contrast, Shlomo Zemach was highly critical of modern translations. However, his criterion was not the expressiveness of a translation or its fidelity to the original, but rather the presence of a genuinely Jewish national spirit within it. He argued that translations could attain in a national literature the status of valuable and influential literary works, capable of standing on their own, only when their roots lay in the creative forces of the people. As for the contemporary translations of his time, he wrote: 'It is futile to try to find their sources in Jewish creativity and its aspirations.'⁶ Therefore, it was preferable to encourage authors to write original works rather than judge who among them was weak or strong, as even weaker works helped lay the groundwork for stronger authors.

Thus, among Jewish literary critics and writers, the idea of the significance of a national spirit in cultural works – widely prevalent in European intellectual circles at the time – was highly popular. When literary texts were evaluated based on the criterion of national spirit, translations were, naturally, ranked significantly lower than original works, and the very necessity and value of translation were called into question.

In light of the second question – how to select texts for translation into Hebrew – the concept of *Weltliteratur* (world literature), formulated by Goethe, was widely discussed. World literature was viewed as a kind of canon of the greatest works, primarily written in the languages of colonial powers – English, German, Spanish, French, and Russian. According to critics, these works should be prioritized for translation into Hebrew. For instance, upon hearing that literary magazine *Sifrut* based in Warsaw planned to publish works

6 S. Tzemach, 'On Translations,' in *Ma'amarim u-masot* (Tel Aviv 1925) [Hebrew].

of Henrik Ibsen, the Jewish writer and literary critic Joseph Ḥayyim Brenner, in his article *Me-‘olam sifrutenu* (From the World of our Literature), while acknowledging the merits of Ibsen’s works, expressed dissatisfaction that translators’ efforts were spent on Ibsen when Shakespeare and Goethe had yet to be translated.⁷ In this case, Brenner did not rely on the criterion of literary quality or the work’s relevance to contemporary times but rather on its prominence in European culture. Viewing the skills and time of Hebrew translators as a highly limited resource, he advocated for prioritizing the translation of the most renowned texts of world literature.⁸

This approach to selecting works for translation appeared rational at the time. Translating works from languages and cultures that were not then considered central to world culture required additional justification. One such justification was the practical expansion of the literary canon. When the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Rabindranath Tagore in 1913, it introduced the understanding that works of interest to an educated readership were not limited to European culture. Another justification was a highly practical one: for Jews living in countries that had gained independence after World War I, it became necessary to familiarize themselves and their children with the culture of the country in which they now found themselves. Before the dissolution of empires, they could suffice with knowledge of the culture of the dominant ethnic group – German in the Austro-Hungarian and German Empires, or Russian in the Russian Empire. However, after the empires’ collapse and the emergence of new nations and national cultures, they had to acquaint themselves with the culture of the nation under whose rule they now lived.⁹

In both cases, translators faced new challenges that differed from those encountered and successfully resolved when translating from German or Russian. One of the key difficulties in such translations was how to render a concept that was widespread in the source language but either weakly represented or entirely absent in Jewish culture. When translating from English or Ger-

7 J.H. Brenner, ‘Me‘olam sifrutenu,’ in *Ma‘amarim u-masot* (Tel Aviv 1978).

8 On Brenner’s view on literary translations, see D. Drori, ‘Literary Fortresses: Translation and “World Literature” in Y.H. Brenner’s *Beyond the Borders* and “From the World of Our Literature,”’ *Prooftexts* 36, nos. 1–2 (2017) 190–216, <https://doi.org/10.2979/prooftexts.36.1-2.08>.

9 Familiarity with the culture and literature of surrounding nations took place through translations either into Yiddish or Hebrew. For the majority of Eastern European Jewry, Yiddish was the first language, and translations of literature for adults were often made into Yiddish. At the same time, Zionist educational institutions in Lithuania and Poland actively promoted Hebrew, and therefore literature for young people was more often translated into this language, especially for educational and ideological purposes. This aligned with the Zionist movements and schools’ efforts to revive Hebrew as a national language.

man, such challenges often involved elements of Christian culture, for which Hebrew equivalents had existed since Talmudic times. However, when translating works from Lithuanian, Polish, or Bengali cultures, especially those rooted in folklore, translators encountered concepts characteristic of pre-Christian or non-Christian traditions. In Jewish culture, these concepts were generally classified as broadly 'pagan,' and very few adequate Hebrew terms existed for them. To convey such ideas, translators had to explore unconventional methods to faithfully render the original text.

This issue was widely debated by Jewish publicists from the late 19th century onward, with opinions ranging from the belief that translating texts foreign to Jewish culture was impossible and unjustifiable to the position that Hebrew was (or should be) capable of conveying any concept from other cultures. A middle-ground position was expressed by Moses Ben-Eliezer, a Jewish writer and publicist:

If we examine the issue closely, we can see that every great work of global significance has two fundamental aspects. The first is particular and national, while the second is universal and human. The first can be truly understood and deeply felt only by the compatriots of the author, those whose souls have been nurtured by the same culture. This part of a work cannot be translated in any way. However, the second aspect is independent of the author's homeland, nationality, or language, and this is the part that should belong to readers around the world.¹⁰

This principle guided many Jewish translators, including those whose works will be examined in this study. Specifically, I will analyze the translation of *Gitanjali* by Rabindranath Tagore, rendered into Hebrew by David Frishman,¹¹ and the translation of a passage from *Sena Pasaka apie Narsujį Kunigaikštį Margirį Punios Valdovą* (An Old Tale of the Illustrious Duke Margiris, Lord of Punia) by Vincas Mickevičius-Krėvė,¹² translated by Chaim Nachman Shapiro.¹³ In the first case, the translation deals with concepts from a culture that European Jewry had never previously encountered. In the second case, it involves concepts from a culture with which they had lived side by side for centuries.

10 M. Ben-Eliezer, "Al ha-targumim," in H.N. Bialik, ed., *Knesset* (Odessa 1917). Citation translated by the author.

11 Bialik, *Knesset*, 45–85.

12 V. Krėvė-Mickevičius (1882–1954) was a Lithuanian writer, playwright, and folklorist, one of the founders of modern Lithuanian literature. His work blends romanticism with realism and draws heavily on folk motifs and historical themes.

13 I. Kisin, ed., *Anthology of Lithuanian Literature* (Kaunas 1931) 74–83 [Hebrew].

Identifying the shared strategies employed in translating both works will help reveal broader trends characteristic of the development of literary Hebrew in the Russian Empire and, later, in independent Poland and Lithuania in the early 20th century.

Before turning to the analysis of the translations themselves, it is necessary to situate them within the theoretical frameworks developed in 20th- and 21st-century literary scholarship. First, both translators, each for their own reasons, selected texts originating from literary traditions that occupied a marginal position within the prevailing hierarchies of world literature. This can be understood through the lens of anti-imperial critique articulated by Edward Said and the ethics of translation discussed by Lawrence Venuti. Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, emphasized that literary culture was deeply entangled with imperial power structures, and that representing local voices constituted a form of resistance to cultural domination.¹⁴ Hebrew translators who introduced texts by authors such as Rabindranath Tagore or Vincas Krėvė were significantly expanding the canon of world literature and thus were actively challenging the Eurocentric hierarchy that privileged imperial literatures. Similarly, Venuti's advocacy for 'foreignizing' translation as a strategy of resistance offers a useful framework for understanding these translations.¹⁵ By preserving cultural specificity rather than erasing it through domestication, translators positioned Hebrew literature as a site of negotiation between universalist modernist aesthetics and the assertion of particular, peripheral identities. In this sense, translation became both a literary and ideological act, aligning Hebrew modernism with broader anti-imperial currents that sought to decentralize cultural authority.

Then it is necessary to consider the place of these translations within the context of European translation traditions that were widely debated in the 20th century. According to Walter Benjamin, a good translation differs from a bad one not by its ability to transmit content, but by its capacity to convey something more elusive, namely the atmosphere of the work and the sensations it evokes for a reader of the original language.¹⁶ Venuti, positioning himself within the long-standing debate on the balance between fluency and transparency, closely examined the idea that a text should conform as fully as possible to the spirit and culture of the target language.¹⁷ An opposite argument was

14 See E.W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London 2023) 186–187.

15 See K. Myskja, 'Foreignisation and Resistance: Lawrence Venuti and His Critics,' *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 12 (June 2013) 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.35360/njes.283>.

16 W. Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator,' in Harry Zohn et al., eds., *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926 (Cambridge, MA 1996).

17 L. Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London 2008).

made by Eugene Nida, who specialized in Bible translation into the languages of small communities. In his view, the translator should not adhere strictly to the images of the original, but should seek culturally appropriate equivalents in the target context.¹⁸

An even freer attitude toward original texts, common among Jewish authors and translators of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is described by Uriel Ofek. He discusses, for example, the book *Eden ha-yeladim* (The Children's Eden) by Israel Chaim Taviov (Warsaw 1904).¹⁹ The book is an anthology that includes more than one hundred short stories by authors from Russia, Germany, France, and England, translated by the compiler himself. As Ofek notes, Taviov consistently sought to give these stories a Jewish or Judaic character. He Judaized all holidays, gave the protagonists biblical names, and even assigned Jewish names to dogs. Taviov did not hesitate to relocate stories of European origin to the biblical period and saw no need to identify either their original authors or cultural provenance. As Ofek shows, such freedom was characteristic of many translators into Hebrew in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Frishman and Shapira likewise operated within this general orientation: although their departures from the source text were more limited, they nevertheless remained far removed from the philological tradition of translation that occupied an important place in contemporary discussions of world literature.²⁰ They did not supply commentaries or glosses, nor did they seek to foreground the foreignness of the original. Instead, they pursued fluency and cultural integration, drawing on biblical Hebrew to create texts that resonated aesthetically and emotionally with Jewish readers. Rather than treating translation as a scholarly exercise, they approached it as a creative practice within the emerging Hebrew literary system, privileging accessibility and literary effect over philological precision.

18 E.A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating* (Leiden n.d.) 4. As an example, Nida refers to translations of a series of texts about Jiggs, a character from the Irish-American comic *Bringing Up Father*, who is fond of simple food. '(...) for example, corned beef cabbage – a dish that fits so well the character of Jiggs – just does not make sense in many cultures. Accordingly, Jiggs's favorite food becomes rice and fish in Southeast Asia, cabbage stuffed with hamburger in Turkey, and stewed codfish in Italy.'

19 U. Ofek, *Sifrut ha-yeladim ha-'Ivrit: ha-hathalah* (Tel Aviv 1979) ch. 3, sec. B, § 6.

20 The philological tradition of translation, which played a significant role in the early project of world literature, emphasized strict fidelity to the source text, scholarly annotation, and the preservation of linguistic and cultural specificity. Translators working within this tradition often assumed the role of scholars, privileging transparency and historical accuracy over fluency.

And finally, the third point concerns the contextualization of the translators under discussion within the Jewish literary milieu of the period. In this regard, it is useful to consider the concept of the ‘Hebrew literary republic,’ a term employed by scholars to describe the transnational network of Hebrew writers, critics, and readers active in Europe and Palestine during the early 20th century.²¹ This ‘republic’ was not a fixed entity but a dynamic field whose boundaries were shaped by ideological debates over the role of Hebrew literature: whether it should primarily serve as an instrument of national revival or participate in the cosmopolitan currents of European modernism. Both David Frishman and Chaim Nachman Shapira occupied marginal positions within this field, precisely because their work challenged dominant norms. Frishman’s universalist orientation and preference for biblical style over Zionist aesthetics placed him at odds with nationalist mainstream trends, while Shapira’s translations of Lithuanian texts foregrounded cultural mediation rather than ideological purity. These marginal tendencies illuminate the permeability of the Hebrew literary republic’s borders, revealing it as a contested space where competing visions of Hebrewness – national, cosmopolitan, and modernist – intersected. Against this backdrop, the following case studies demonstrate how translation functioned not only as a linguistic act but also as a negotiation of cultural identity.

2 Translation of *Gitanjali*

Gitanjali, translated from Bengali as *Song Offerings*, is a collection of poems by Rabindranath Tagore, first published in Bengali in 1910. In 1912, Tagore translated a substantial portion of these poems into English, a version that brought him international recognition and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. The English *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* is not a literal translation but rather an adaptation and reworking. It differs significantly from the Bengali original in both form and content, differences that Tagore addressed in his theoretical writings.²²

The original Bengali version is a collection of 157 poems that delve into themes of devotion, inner exploration, and unity with the divine. The poetry

21 See, for example, D. Berdichevsky, ‘Measuring Distances: Hebrew Essayists Reading World Literature,’ *Prooftexts* 36, nos. 1–2 (2017) 27–52, <https://doi.org/10.2979/prooftexts.36.1-2.02>.

22 S.C. Dasgupta, ‘Rabindranath Tagore and Translation Studies,’ *Translation Journal* (Oct. 2018), <https://translationjournal.net/October-2018/rabindranath-tagore-and-translation-studies.html>.

is rich in metaphor, drawing inspiration from nature, daily life, and the Bhakti philosophy to reflect human spiritual experiences. It emphasizes personal experiences and cultural contexts unique to India, being deeply rooted in local tradition. The language remains close to folk traditions, creating a sense of naturalness and ease, despite the philosophical depth of the text. Stylistically, unlike in earlier works, here Tagore departs from rhyme and meter and experiments with free verse, which shows his acceptance of the techniques of literary modernism of his time.²³

The English version, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*, comprises 103 poems selected and adapted by Tagore for a Western audience. The translation adopts a more universalist approach, often simplifying or omitting religious and cultural specifics in order to make the texts accessible to readers unfamiliar with Indian contexts. The emphasis shifts to broadly shared themes such as love, faith, and the search for meaning, which contributed to the work's wide international reception. Stylistically, the English version is more minimalist and dispenses with the complex poetic structures of the original. While this clarity enhances accessibility, it also alters the overall tone, moving the focus away from culturally embedded meanings toward more general spiritual reflection.²⁴

David Frishman translated *Gitanjali* into Hebrew from its English version, meaning that his source text had already undergone a degree of Europeanization. Both his choice of the work and his translation strategy were shaped by his broader literary outlook. Educated in Poland, Frishman studied German and French and was deeply familiar with European literary culture. He consistently privileged artistic form over nationally oriented ideological agendas. Within this framework, he approached the Hebrew Bible not primarily as a marker of Jewish cultural continuity but as a canonical text of world literature and a universal aesthetic model.²⁵ As a result, the style of his translation aligns more closely with biblical Hebrew, understood in this universalist sense, than with Hebrew writing of his time that was associated with Zionist cultural and aesthetic projects.

At the same time, he understood the need to adapt the work for an audience that might not be sufficiently familiar with world literature. This was

23 R. Panda, 'The Evolution of Rabindranath Tagore's Poetic Style: From Early Works to Gitanjali,' *International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies* (2024) 196–202, <https://doi.org/10.29032/ijhsss.v10.i5.2024.196-202>.

24 M.M. Lago, 'Tagore in Translation: A Case Study in Literary Exchange,' *Books Abroad* 46, no. 3 (1972) 416–421, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40126293>.

25 H. Bar-Yosef, 'Frishman, David,' in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (New York 2010), <https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/687>.

another reason he sought to draw imagery and expressions from the Bible, which was familiar to every Jewish reader and close to his own mind and heart. In his essays and articles, he often emphasized the inimitable aesthetic and emotional impact of the Hebrew Bible, suggesting that certain texts possess qualities that are challenging to replicate in another language. This perspective informed his translation practice, as he sought to balance fidelity to the original text with the need to adapt it to the unique nuances of Hebrew. Thus, in his introduction to the Hebrew translation of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1893), Frishman discussed the challenges of rendering the novel's sensibilities into Hebrew, highlighting the delicate balance between staying true to the source material and making it resonate with Hebrew readers.²⁶ He applied this principle of balance in his translation of *Gitanjali* as well.

One of the distinctive features of this translation is the translator's deliberate effort to restrict himself to biblical Hebrew vocabulary. The text contains almost no neologisms, despite their growing presence in Hebrew in the early 20th century. It likewise avoids medieval vocabulary and even lexemes from the Mishnaic period, relying almost exclusively on words and expressions drawn directly from the Hebrew Bible. This choice imposed strict constraints on the translator and often required him to restructure sentences or introduce extended phrasing in order to convey a single concept. This strategy affected not only lexical choice but also syntax. Frishman consistently sought to approximate biblical Hebrew constructions, most notably through the repeated use of the vav-consecutive, a feature characteristic of biblical Hebrew that reverses verbal tense and whose presence cannot be explained by the English source text, indicating a primarily stylistic motivation. Another characteristic feature of the translation is the extensive use of pronominal suffixes, a trait more typical of ancient Hebrew than of modern Hebrew.

To better understand the translator's interventions, several passages from *Gitanjali* will be examined in detail.

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!²⁷

26 L. Nethanel, 'The Threshold of Sensibilities: David Frishman's Introduction to the Hebrew Translation of George Eliot's Novel *Daniel Deronda* (1893),' in E. Gal-Ed et al., eds., *In Their Surroundings: Localizing Modern Jewish Literatures in Eastern Europe* (Göttingen 2022), <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666306112.29>.

27 R. Tagore, *Gitanjali*, The Project Gutenberg, 2004, poem 11, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7164/7164-h/7164-h.htm>, accessed February 11, 2025.

מנע פיך מזמרה ומתחנה וחדל מהקטיר לבונה. אל מי אתה מתפלל פה בפנה החשכה
והעזובה אשר בהיכל הזה עם-הדלתים הסגרות? פקח עיניך והבט: אין אלהיך לפניך!

Frishman's translation remains very close to the original text, with a few notable exceptions. For instance, the phrase 'telling of beads', characteristic of Indian culture, is rendered as הקטיר לבונה (burning incense), a concept more familiar to the Jewish reader. Similarly, the word 'temple' is translated as היכל (hall or great chamber), since in Jewish tradition, there can be only one Temple – the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem.

Further:

I came out on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wildernesses of worlds leaving my track on many a star and planet.²⁸

עליתי במרכבת ניצוץ האור הראשון, כוננתי דרכי בין-שמימות עולמות ואת-שרשי רגלי
עזבתי אחרי בין-כוכבים ומזרות.

Here, the translator encountered an unexpected difficulty: biblical Hebrew lacked even an approximate equivalent for the word 'planet'. Frishman replaced 'planet' with 'constellation' and, in doing so, avoided the commonly used contemporary Hebrew word מזל, which had entered Hebrew in the medieval period. Instead, he opted for the purely biblical term מזר, a word that is rarely used in modern Hebrew.

One more example:

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said 'Here art thou!
The question and the cry 'Oh, where?' melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of the assurance 'I am!'

עיני תעו אנה ואנה ועד-סגרתך אותן ועד-אמרתך: 'פה אתה!' ושאלתי וקריאתי אשר
שאלתי ואשר קראתי: 'איה אתה?'
הן נמוגו באלפי זרמי דמעות ושטפו מלא תבל במבול אמרתך: 'הנני!'

The simple expressions 'Oh, where?' and 'I am!' were translated by Frishman using significant biblical phrases: איה and הנני (Behold, here I am). These ex-

28 Tagore, *Gitanjali*, poem 12.

pressions are primarily found in the first book of the Pentateuch and are typically used in dialogues with angels or with God himself.²⁹

Frishman's translation also serves as an interpretation that simplifies the original text. In Tagore's version, the seeker declares, 'Here art Thou' in addressing God. What follows can be interpreted in two different ways. The question 'Oh, where?' may refer to a previous question posed by the seeker, which has now been resolved. In this case, the following statement, 'I am!', would simply be God's confirmation of the seeker's exclamation, 'Here art Thou!' On the other hand, 'Oh, where?' could be an inquiry from God, as if asking, 'Where am I?' In this reading, 'I am!' could be the seeker's response, affirming that God is within himself.

I find the second interpretation more poetic and more in line with the spirit of Tagore's text. However, Frishman modifies the text by adding pronominal suffixes in the final line, which can be literally translated as: 'My question and my cry that I asked and I cried "Where are You?" – they melt into a thousand streams of tears and wash the whole world in the flood of Your answer: "Here I am."' Through this addition, he unambiguously chooses the first interpretation, which aligns more closely with Jewish tradition.

Thus, comparing Tagore's text with Frishman's translation, the following conclusions can be drawn. Tagore's work is universalist in nature, harmoniously blending the traditions of various religions. While stylistically modeled after classical texts of the Hindu tradition, it offers a modern reinterpretation of their themes. It is modernist in its content, allowing for multiple layers of meaning in the interpretation of its verses. Linguistically, the English text is relatively simple; its only deliberately archaic feature is the use of the pronoun 'thou' and the present-tense forms of modal verbs from the Early Modern English period (*art* instead of *are*, *dost* instead of *do*). Frishman's translation, by contrast, adheres strictly to biblical Hebrew, seeks to eliminate ambiguities in interpretation, and subtly modifies the text where necessary to align it as closely as possible with Jewish tradition.

3 Translation of *An Old Tale about the Brave Duke Margiris, Lord of Punia*

Published 14 years after the Hebrew translation of *Gitanjali*, this translation of a Lithuanian saga about the noble Margiris reflects a broader Jewish engage-

29 For example, 'And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am' (KJV, Gen. 22:1).

ment with Lithuanian literature during the interwar period, shaped by both educational and cultural initiatives. Hebrew translations of Lithuanian prose and poetry appeared in periodicals such as *Hacofe*, *Hed Lita*, and *'Olamenu*, introducing Jewish readers to works by canonical authors like Maironis, Liudas Gira, and Vincas Krėvė. These translations, often included in school anthologies and youth publications, served not only as linguistic exercises but also as bridges toward the cultural heritage of the Lithuanian majority.³⁰

Vincas Mickevičius-Krėvė's *Sena pasaka apie narsųjį kunigaikštį Margirį Punios valdovą* (An Old Tale about the Brave Duke Margiris, Lord of Punia) is a literary adaptation of the legend surrounding Duke Margiris and the defense of Pilėnai fortress. This narrative has deep roots in Lithuanian history and has been interpreted through various lenses over the centuries. In 1928, Krėvė included his rendition of the Pilėnai legend in his collection of tales from the Dainava region. His version, while rooted in the traditional narrative, offers a unique literary perspective that reflects the cultural dominants and nation-building processes of early 20th-century Lithuania. Krėvė's portrayal of Duke Margiris as a symbol of bravery and sacrifice resonated deeply with Lithuanian readers, reinforcing themes of national identity and resistance. Margiris is presented less as a feudal ruler than as a Lithuanian figure embodying the nationalist ideal, prepared to fight for it to the death. This representation reflects the centrality of national identity in interwar Lithuania, where loyalty to one's ethnic community had come to be regarded as a paramount value.³¹

Although the central focus of Krėvė's text, as in the original legend, is the heroic defense of the Pilėnai fortress, the author adds a brief introductory episode that functions as a backstory to the conflict. In Margiris's fortress, German prisoners captured during earlier raids are being held and are intended as sacrificial offerings to the gods. Upon returning from a campaign, Margiris learns that the prisoners have escaped and that they were released by his young wife. She explains her actions by recounting a dream in which she saw the suffering of the mothers, wives, and daughters of the condemned captives. Although moved by her words, the prince insists that such thoughts could not have arisen independently and must have been inspired by an external influence. It is then revealed that this influence was an elderly Polish priest, long held captive in the fortress, who had spoken to the princess about his god and

30 For detailed information on this topic, see M. Zalkin, 'Sharunas, Prince of Dainava, in a Jewish Gown: The Cultural and Social Role of Hebrew and Yiddish Translations of Lithuanian Literature and Poetry in Interwar Lithuania,' *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 21 (2012) 147–165.

31 D. Baronas and D. Mačiulis, *Pilėnai ir Margiris: istorija ir legenda* (Vilnius 2010) 325.

about ideals of forgiveness, mercy toward the oppressed, and compassion for all people, whether members of one's own community or strangers.

Thus, the text stages a conflict between humanistic principles and national values, a tension characteristic of the modernist period. In Krėvė's narrative, this conflict is resolved in favor of loyalty to one's people: after his conversation with the Christian preacher, the prince refuses to renounce his gods and maintains his view that the princess's actions constituted an act of treason. At the same time, the sympathetic portrayal of the princess, her emotionally charged explanation, and her readiness for self-sacrifice suggest that her position is not dismissed outright and is presented as morally compelling.

It was this passage, comprising the first three chapters of the legend, that Chaim Nachman Shapira selected for translation into Hebrew out of the ten chapters of the original text. His translation was published in the 1931 anthology of Lithuanian literature in Hebrew translation. The anthology was conceived as a multi-volume edition, with the first volume dedicated exclusively to the works of Vincas Krėvė. Subsequent volumes featuring texts by other authors, which were planned to appear semiannually, were never published.³²

The publication of the anthology pursued two main objectives. The first was educational, with a significant part of the target audience consisting of students in Jewish secondary schools. The editor, who taught in Jewish gymnasiums in Lithuania, outlined his vision of the task as follows:

I came to the conclusion that the methods used in schools for the Lithuanian majority were entirely unsuitable for Jewish schools, where students lacked basic knowledge of the Lithuanian language and had little to no understanding of Lithuanian daily life. I realized that students needed a specialized approach not only in the lower grades but also in the upper grades, enabling them to find their way into Lithuanian prose and poetry. One of the means to achieve this goal is the translation of selected works of Lithuanian literature into the language of instruction – Hebrew. Such a translation does not replace the original but encourages students to study it and gain a deeper appreciation of the spirit of these works.³³

Thus, the anthology was primarily conceived as a textbook for Jewish youth. The second objective was to foster cultural rapprochement between the Jewish minority and the Lithuanian majority. This process was reciprocal: transla-

³² Kisin, *Anthology of Lithuanian Literature*, 8.

³³ Kisin, *Anthology of Lithuanian Literature*, 8, citation translated by the author.

tions of Jewish literary works into Lithuanian were also published to introduce Lithuanian readers to Jewish culture.³⁴

The selection of works for the anthology required a careful balance between introducing readers to key aspects of Lithuanian culture and remaining within the limits of their interpretive capacities at an early stage. The choice of this particular passage from *An Old Tale about the Brave Duke Margiris* reflects this concern. The translator and the editor deemed more relevant the section that explored the universal issue of the relationship between humanistic values and national interests. The other part, which focused solely on Lithuanian history and the upbringing of a worthy member of the Lithuanian nation, likely seemed less pertinent to the editor of the anthology.

The cultural features of the translation can be illustrated through several examples from the text. First of all, while the translator renders the characters' dialogues almost verbatim, the authorial narration, intended to create the atmosphere of the work and convey its archaic style, is translated more freely. The work opens with a description of the majestic castle of Punia:

Dievų laiminta, milžinų statyta sena Punios pilis.

The old fortress of Punia, blessed by the gods and built by giants.³⁵

which is translated into Hebrew as

ברכת אל-עליון שרויה על המצודה העתיקה והנפילים אשר בארץ בנוה

The blessing of the Supreme God rests upon the ancient fortress and the giants who built it in the land.

Thus, the pagan gods in the plural were replaced in the Hebrew translation by the One Almighty God. At the same time, in the characters' dialogues, references to powerful pagan gods appear repeatedly, and in all such cases, they are carefully and appropriately rendered into Hebrew. However, the translator deliberately distinguishes between what the characters say – which reflects their subjective perspective – and what the narrator (and, by extension, the translator) conveys as a supposedly objective description of reality.

34 J. Verbickienė, 'Translations and Self-Representation: Literature as a Tool for a Mutual Jewish-Lithuanian Acquaintance,' *Jewish Culture and History* 18 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1328011>.

35 The literal translation into English here and throughout has been done by the author.

This phenomenon is related to the issue of authorial voice and the status of the epic narrator in literature. In classical narratology, the third person is traditionally associated with objectivity and omniscience. However, studies by contemporary theorists have shown that an omniscient narrator is not necessarily a neutral figure. In epic and historical tales, the narrator often adopts a particular stance, expressing a system of values specific to the culture in which the text was created. When a text is written as a stylization of an older cultural tradition, the author creatively constructs the figure of the narrator, who effectively becomes one of the characters in the work. The ideological position of this narrator may differ from that of the author.³⁶

In the case of translating from one language to another, the issue of the 'neutrality' of the epic narrator becomes even more complex. If the original text allows elements of mythological consciousness (such as the mention of ancient gods as creators of the castle), the translator may consciously or unconsciously adapt the text to the values and traditions of the target culture. This is precisely what we observe in this case: in the neutral authorial description, polytheism is replaced with a monotheistic representation, while in the characters' dialogues, the pagan worldview is preserved.

The following fragment illustrates the pagan elements introduced by Vincas Krėvė and their contrast with Christian ones. The text repeatedly mentions the *vaidilas*, who in pre-Christian Grand Duchy of Lithuania served as both priests and bards, much like in the Celtic tribes across Europe in the pre-Christian period. They are an important ethnographic element in the text, helping to characterize the era being described. Another character in the narrative is Krivis, the high priest of the ancient Baltic religion, who serves as an advisor to Margiris. Lastly, there is also a Christian priest, once captured by Margiris during one of his campaigns into Poland, who has since lived in the fortress.

In the original text by Krėvė, which provides a perspective on the events from the characters of the described era, this priest is also referred to by the word 'vaidila' – both in the speeches of the princess and in the words of the narrator. Thus, the author shows that, from the princess's point of view, he is a priest of his religion, equivalent in status to the bard-priests of her own cult. This free-thinking attitude outrages the prince, who retorts, 'Burtininkas jisai, raganius ir tavo sielą užkerėjo' (He is a sorcerer, a witcher, and has enchanted your soul.) The text then proceeds with a discussion between the priest and the prince, where the priest describes the virtues of his faith, while the prince mocks it.

36 Regarding the ideological stance of the narrator, including in epic narration, and the different types of authorial voice, see B.A. Uspenskii, *Poetika kompozitsii* (Moscow 1970) 16–26.

From the perspective of the Lithuanian reader, there is a contrast between the 'own' and the 'foreign,' even though much has changed since the time of Margiris, and Christianity has become the 'own' religion for the reader. However, for a reader from the Jewish tradition, both Christianity and the ancient paganism of the Balts are 'foreign.' This raises the question for the translator: to what extent should the reader be introduced to the ideological nuances present in the original?

The translator does not find a specific word for the term 'vaidila': in the passages where they sing at the feast or compose songs, he refers to them as *meshorer* (poet). In the passage where the princess calls the priest a *vaidila*, the translator replaces this with the word *me'unan* (prisoner). And where the word 'vaidila' is used in relation to the priest in the narrator's speech, the translator uses the word *kohen* (priest). Thus, the translator completely removes the element characteristic of Lithuanian folklore, replacing it with words that describe the character's function in a specific situation.

This translation strategy raises important questions about the role of the translator as both a mediator and an interpreter of cultural meaning. By replacing the culturally specific term 'vaidila' with functionally descriptive words, the translator effectively neutralizes the original term's ethnographic weight, shifting the focus from the historical and mythological context to the immediate function of the character in the narrative. This approach aligns with a functionalist perspective on translation, where the primary goal is to ensure intelligibility for the target audience rather than to preserve every cultural nuance of the source text.³⁷

At the same time, this method illustrates a broader phenomenon in literary translation: the reduction of polysemy in culturally embedded terminology. In the original Lithuanian text, the use of 'vaidila' to refer both to pagan bards and a Christian priest creates a layered meaning that invites the reader to consider structural parallels between religious traditions. By dissolving this parallelism in translation, the text becomes less ambiguous but also less conceptually rich. The translator thus makes a choice that prioritizes clarity over interpretative complexity.

The third example of the peculiarities of the translation of the *An Old Tale about the Brave Duke Margiris* into Hebrew concerns the descriptions of nature. In the original text, they are used as elements of the saga, characteristic of traditional epics, where the character transforms into various animals or com-

37 About functionalism in translations, see C. Nord, 'Scopos, Loyalty, and Translational Conventions,' *Target* 3, no. 1 (1991) 91–109, <https://doi.org/10.1075/target.3.1.06nor>.

municates with them. In this case, the princess dreams several times that she becomes a bird, flies to Prussian lands, sees the grieving relatives of the captives, learns from other birds about the reasons for their sorrow, and thus decides to grant freedom to the captives. During her journey, the bird briefly describes the nature of the places she visits: a cherry orchard, an oak forest, etc. All of this creates an atmosphere typical of sagas, and Krèvè adds these elements as important for Lithuanian culture.

Overall, it can be said that Krèvè was not simply creating a literary text on a historical theme, expanding the corpus of the new Lithuanian literature. He was crafting a text that shaped the national identity of the reader. When discussing Lithuanian literature of the interwar period, Aušra Jurgutienė notes the four most popular myths and stereotypes that were exploited to form and develop Lithuanian national identity. One of them 'glorifies the Grand Duchy of Lithuania during the 13th–16th centuries, the time of King Mindaugas, Grand Duke Gediminas, and the Jogiellonian dynasty.' Another 'is based on the ideals of rural culture, visions of a golden age of the ancient Balts, and on the collective folk imagination.'³⁸ Both of these myths were shaped and promoted in the texts of romantic authors, among whom the researcher mentions Vincas Krèvè. And although these two myths pertain to different historical periods, elements of both can be seen in the tale of Margiris – simultaneously the historical context of the 14th century and the form of a folk saga with descriptions of rural culture and the priests of the Baltic religion. Descriptions of the nature of the Baltic lands are an integral part of these myths and legends.

In contrast, such descriptions of nature are less characteristic of Jewish culture. So much so that in early 20th-century Hebrew, there were no words to describe certain types of birds or plants. Therefore, where Krèvè's text contains, for example, the phrase

Aš, berneli, aš, raiteli, sapnavau sapną, kad pavirtau geltona volungėlė ir nulėkiau toli už girelių, į tą Prūsų šalį.³⁹

I, young man, I, rider, dreamed a dream that I turned into a yellow oriole and flew far beyond the woods.

The Hebrew translation reads:

38 A. Jurgutienė, 'The Deconstruction of National Identity in Lithuanian Literature: Marius Ivaškevičius' Plays,' *Interlitteraria* 20, no. 1 (2015) 23–34, <https://doi.org/10.12697/IL.2015.20.1.3>.

39 V. Krèvè, *Sena Pasaka apie Narsujį Kunigaikštį Margirį Punios Valdovą* (Kaunas 1933) 15–16.

אנכי, אלופי, אנכי, אבירי, חלום חלמתי והנה הפכתי צפור צהבהבה ואעוף הרחק
מאחורי היער

I, my hero, I, my knight, dreamed a dream, and behold, I turned into a
yellowish bird and flew far beyond the forest.

Here, the Lithuanian word for a specific type of bird is replaced simply with the word 'bird'. In another instance, for example, the Lithuanian word 'sakalėlis' (small falcon, a diminutive form expressing affection) is replaced with the Hebrew term גַּז (fast [bird]).

These translator's choices illustrate a fundamental difference in how nature is represented in different literary traditions. In Baltic and Slavic folklore, nature is not merely a setting but an active participant in the narrative, often serving as a mediator between the human and the supernatural. The transformation of a character into a bird is not just a symbolic act but a structural element tied to the mythological perception of the world. Such imagery aligns with the animistic worldview, where animals, trees, and natural phenomena possess agency and interact with human characters in meaningful ways.

By contrast, classical Hebrew literature, including biblical and post-biblical texts, rarely employs natural elements in this manner. While nature certainly appears in biblical poetry, such as Song of Songs or Psalms, it typically serves a metaphorical or didactic function rather than as an independent force within the narrative. As a result, when Hebrew literature was revived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many of the Romantic and folkloric elements found in European traditions had to be introduced artificially. The absence of established terminology for birds, trees, and landscapes in early modern Hebrew was not merely a linguistic gap but reflected a cultural difference in how nature was historically conceptualized. An important attempt to address this gap was made in the second half of the 19th century, when Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh published a three-volume work systematizing Hebrew terminology related to the natural world;⁴⁰ nevertheless, this terminology largely remained confined to educated circles, and even translators familiar with it could not assume that their readers (especially young ones) would recognize or understand it.

The translator's choice to render 'volungėlė' (oriole) simply as 'tzipor' (bird) demonstrates this challenge. Instead of preserving the specificity of the original, the translation abstracts the image, shifting it from a particularized reference within Lithuanian nature to a more generalized one. This process can

40 S.Y. Abramovitsh, *Sefer Toledot ha-teva'* (Zhitomir 1873).

be seen as a form of cultural adaptation, where translation smooths over unfamiliar elements instead of introducing them to the target audience. In those cases, however, where the Lithuanian word has an equivalent in Hebrew (such as cuckoo, cherry, poplar), the translator provides an appropriate translation of the name.

The three approaches to adapting the original text by the translator (the emphasized distinction between the narrator's and the characters' points of view, the adaptation of religious cult terms, the generalization of terms related to the description of nature) illustrate the translator's approach to adapting the text for the Jewish reader. At the same time, the translation remains very accurate, with the structure preserved down to the level of individual sentences and lines. Moreover, the translator conveys, as far as possible, the national spirit of the Lithuanian work. At the same time, stylistic devices for conveying the epic style of the work are drawn from the Bible, just as Frishman did in his translation of *Gitanjali*. Such devices include the use of the vav-consecutive combined with the imperfect tense, which in the biblical text is perceived as a form of the perfect (past tense), as well as pleonastic expressions like *het' hata'ti* (I have sinned with sin), *shekhaḥ shakhaḥti* (I have forgotten with forgetfulness), and others. In this way, a work is created that aligns with Jewish culture in form and Lithuanian national identity in spirit.

4 Conclusion

Returning to the earlier debate between Jacob Fichman and Shlomo Zemach on the role of the Jewish national spirit in translation and in the selection of works for translation, this article suggests that the decisive parameter in the cases discussed here was the intended audience. David Frishman, who was educated in Poland, lived in Germany, and published translations in the Russian Empire, saw his audience as the broad layers of Jewry in Eastern and Central Europe. He chose to translate the work of a world-renowned author, a Nobel laureate; the work itself, being moderately religious in spirit, conveyed universalist principles rather than specific features of any one religion. By using vocabulary, imagery, and stylistic devices from the Hebrew Bible, Frishman created a text that, for the Jewish reader, was organically perceived as conveying the spirit of Jewish culture, even if Tagore himself did not include elements of this cultural layer.

In contrast, Chaim Nachman Shapiro, who dedicated his life to political and educational work in Lithuania, created his translation primarily for Lithuanian Jewry. The work selected for translation was intentionally written by the author

to foster Lithuanian national spirit and shape Lithuanian cultural identity. The goal of the translation, as stated in the preface to the anthology in which it was published, was to introduce the Jewish reader to elements of Lithuanian culture. While Shapiro, like Frishman, drew on vocabulary and stylistic devices from the Hebrew Bible, the result was a text in which the form inherent in Jewish culture does not overshadow the Lithuanian national spirit central to the content.

Most Hebrew translations of the early 20th century fell somewhere between these two extremes. Translators had to navigate the balance between cultural domestication and faithful representation of the source text, often making strategic choices that reflected their ideological affiliations, literary goals, and the intended audience of their work. Some translations sought to integrate the stylistic and lexical richness of biblical Hebrew while preserving the foreignness of the original, creating a hybridized text that resonated with Jewish readers without erasing the cultural specificity of the source material. Others leaned more toward adaptation, shaping the text to align with the cultural and national aspirations of the emerging Hebrew literary tradition. These varied approaches illustrate the complexity of translation as both a linguistic and cultural act – one that was deeply embedded in the intellectual and national debates of the time.

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