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Introduction

A GARDEN OF CHILDREN

SIX-YEAR-OLD OLKE is dreadfully busy. In Kadya Molodowsky's 1931 narrative poem "Olke," the eponymous heroine must fetch the water, wash the dishes, rinse the shirts, peel the potatoes, and rock her baby brother—and those tasks form just a part of the *first* round of chores that her parents assign her, hollering loudly enough to rattle the windowpanes of their sparsely furnished hovel in the heavily Jewish slum of Okhote.¹ Poverty is the central fact of Olke's life. She is content, though, to knead the sand outside her family's hovel into the makings of an imaginary tea party for her friends—that is, until her parents shout at her to go inside and attend to her domestic duties.

The poem unfolds as a cycle, one whose escalating tension the reader can feel almost bodily: Olke loses herself in a playful reverie, her parents bellow their admonitions, she rededicates herself to the housework, each new task prompting further distraction. The intrusive, recurrent hollering gives voice to the tightening cords of obedience demanded, the constrictions on the heroine's time and attention even as her headspace remains stubbornly free. Young minds, the poem implicitly argues, are drawn inexorably to imaginative play.

But what the poem celebrates is not youthful imagination in general; notice the distinctive shape of Olke's imaginings. Again and again, Olke's mind is drawn to all that can run or fly. Her successive visions of birds, airplanes, and trains point insistently upward and outward, toward mobility and escape. The cycle of daydreaming and being recalled to work is finally broken when the buttons that Olke is supposed to sew spill themselves out in every direction and mount a rebellion against their mandated fixity, arranging themselves into wagons and bicycles and wheelbarrows. At last, the mostly realistic poem turns

decisively toward the fantastical: Olke hitches the button-wheels together into a long train that she rides off into the distance.

Each time she entertains a new fantasy, Olke wields a real-world prop: the blue *parasolke* that chimes with her name in the Yiddish original. She opens her umbrella and instantly creates the soothing haven she needs in the moment, furnishing or herself “a roof and a house” in an image of cozy containment. But the blue curvature of the *parasolke* does more than shelter her: It puts the very heavens within Olke’s modest grasp. For a poor Jewish girl living in a Warsaw slum, the sky is not—cannot be—the limit; through the force of her imagination, though, Molodowsky’s heroine instead turns her tangible limit, the umbrella that is hers and hers alone, into her sky. She has so little power, as of yet, to wrench the world toward her ideals and desires, but Olke creates a world unto herself, where—at least for short intervals—her aspirations reign supreme.

“Olke mit der bloyer parasolke,” Olke with her blue parasol, who dreams of escaping the domestic drudgery for which she seems destined, is surely an eloquent exponent for girls in general in a culture that was just beginning to notice and celebrate their potential. But her character’s resonance exceeds the bounds of her age or sex. Impoverished yet imaginative Olke, with her blacksmith father and her mother who boils peas to sell in the market, is a powerful emblem for the cultural leaders of secularist, Yiddish-speaking Jewry who constituted a dynamic force in the early decades of the twentieth century. Her iterative opening and reopening of the parasol—holding it aloft as a firm if delicate shelter against the withering heat of adult expectations—stands for nothing less than a gutsy, insistent act of worldmaking. The term “worldmaking” conjures “political action animated by political hope,” according to one theorist of the concept.² Olke embodies the personal-as-political—when considered critically, her simplest and most apparently neutral actions are freighted with political significance. Olke’s situationally constrained yet emotionally potent act of defining a symbolic world resembles the larger project of literary and cultural worldmaking to which Molodowsky and her contemporaries were devoted. Her opening of the blue *parasolke* replicates, microcosmically, the audacious project of creating a vast, multifarious world in letters for children like Olke—children who spoke Yiddish.

When I was six, I did not speak Yiddish, and my only regular chores were feeding the cat and setting the table before dinner. My real “job” was to do my

best in school and—could such pleasure even be considered work?—to read like a maniac. It was a skill I had picked up just a few months earlier, under some degree of stress. My mother and I had moved in January from Massachusetts to Miami, and because reading instruction began only in first grade up north, I arrived midyear at my new school pale and lagging academically behind the suntanned kindergartners of the Sunshine State. I remember clearly the spring day when I had come home from school and read a book to the woman who had been reading to me since I was nine days old. I had struggled all that balmy winter to decipher the black letters, but now I held a book in my hands. It had a green cover, which meant I was finally out of the boring monosyllabic red primers (hardly books at all!) about the rat and the cat sitting on the mat. Was this green one about a (bisyllabic) lion, perhaps? In any case, I'll never forget the dazzle of the late-afternoon Miami sunshine pouring in through the sliding glass door. The warmth of the sun fused with the warmth of my mother's enthusiasm, which in turn melted into my own pride at having cracked the code of the little black letters.

But what was my first *Jewish* memory of reading? That came a couple of years later, in second grade, or so I thought. We went to see an exhibition of illuminated Hebrew manuscripts at Miami's Center for the Fine Arts. What I remember was emerging afterward from the museum gift shop with Marvell Ginsburg's *The Tattooed Torah*. It was an understated picture book introducing a young child to some of the realities of the Holocaust from a safe distance: just right for an American Jewish middle-elementary reader.

The main character is a small Torah scroll from Brno, Czechoslovakia, the one favored by bar mitzvah boys thanks to its lightness. Accustomed to a plush ark and being hugged and passed lovingly from hand to hand, the small scroll is shocked one day when soldiers rush into the synagogue, open the ark, and toss the little Torah and its larger neighbors roughly into a truck. In a dark warehouse, it gets tagged and tattooed with an identifying number and then left to languish on a hard shelf surrounded by countless other Torah scrolls. After what seems like forever, a kindly man picks up the Torah lovingly and declares it perfect for the bar and bat mitzvah children at his synagogue in America. Transplanted to its new home, the tattooed Torah once again became the object of affection and solicitude, and, presumably, a totem for its new community's sense of continuity with a severed past.

But here's the rub: I did *not* get this book in 1983, my second-grade year. For one thing, the Center for the Fine Arts only opened in 1984, and the exhibition I recall only hazily, *A Visual Testimony: Judaica from the Vatican Library*, did not

go up until July 1987. I would have been ten that summer, heading into sixth grade. We usually stand to learn more from our mistakes and misperceptions than we do from our little certainties, and I can now draw a couple of illustrative lessons from this episode of my own distorted memory.

By the time I *actually* read *The Tattooed Torah*, I had attended a decade of junior congregation, five years of Sunday school, and two years of Hebrew school. Reading that book was certainly *not* my first Jewish reading experience or even my first education about the Holocaust. I had read or heard countless Bible stories and Jewish holiday tales, learned several prayers in Hebrew, and probably cut my teeth on some Chelm stories and assorted other folktales. In my fifth-grade public school social studies class the previous year, we had prepared a room-spanning timeline of the major events of World War II, from which several major events of the Holocaust had surely not been absent. Yet *The Tattooed Torah*, with its nearly monochromatic goldenrod hues (it has since been reissued with new illustrations in a cooler palette), eclipsed all these reading and learning experiences and lodged in memory as the *first*. I had personally experienced the power of the Holocaust, in its unfathomable enormity, to occlude all that came before. Just as a decade of Jewish reading experiences paled next to those beige and marigold pages, so too a set of Yiddish cultural materials, including—and perhaps *especially*—literature for children, has been largely forgotten in the wake of those terrible events that drain the air and light from every chamber of memory.

On to the second lesson. By the summer that the Vatican Library's Judaica collection came to grace downtown Miami, I had long since caught up with my schoolmates' reading ability. Nevertheless, I was drawn to that elementary-level picture book, with its plain and plangent symbolism. Perhaps part of the reason I remember *The Tattooed Torah* so clearly is that it was purchased thoughtfully as I approached my own marking of ritual maturity, the bat mitzvah, as a sentimental gesture toward an earlier time in my childhood. We didn't need the book to induct me into that solemn rite of passage in American Jewish identity, Holocaust education. But the purchase probably did mark my entry into the more quixotic project of reading children's literature critically—that is, when I was older and perhaps a little wiser than its intended audience.

I am still reading children's literature critically. In writing this book, I attempt to peer around the dark monolith we imagine the Holocaust to be, to the decades that came before, when the possibilities for worldmaking through literature seemed nearly endless. For Jews, the decades between the world wars were a time of very real anxiety spiked with a frisson of wide-open op-

portunity. It felt as if the old world was careening, tilting, shattering. The most optimistic, enterprising Jews saw in its shards the tiles for a new mosaic, whereby they might try to remake things in the image of their aspirations. They wanted to build a nation, or a nation of the spirit—but even more than that, they sought to make a world.³ No creative enterprise could be more aspirational, more flecked with hope, than the national Jewish project of creating a literature for children. Yet few endeavors touched so many lives so consequentially, only to have been so forgotten as the stories, poems, and plays written for the children whose lives, whether truncated or miraculously spared, unfolded in Yiddish.

Loss on a grand scale is a familiar theme in contemplating the fate of Yiddish, which has been attending its own funeral, metaphorically, for about 150 years—the whole of its modern existence. The patient was already ailing in the first decades of the twentieth century, before the violent blows dealt it by Hitler and Stalin.⁴ Any rational hope of recovery was all but wiped out by linguistic and cultural assimilation in the Americas and the triumph of Hebrew over Yiddish in the nascent State of Israel. Many of my students and readers are wistful about the disappearance of Yiddish from their families and from the Jewish mainstream. The forgetting of this fusion vernacular comes to stand in for modern Jewry's encompassing pain at *What Has Been Lost*: connections with departed or murdered loved ones, an irrecoverable past. I don't entirely share in this wistfulness, though, because I didn't lose Yiddish; my forebears, finding safe harbor in the United States between the 1880s and the 1910s, had managed to do that generations ago. Like the students who now make their way to campus language classes and intensive summer programs, I had the good fortune to *find* Yiddish. I devote far more time and effort to thinking about how to regain and preserve the language, how to help others make it a vehicle for their creative strivings, than about what cannot be retrieved.

I try to foster a kind of literacy, both in the narrow linguistic sense and in the broader cultural one. And what is literacy, anyway? I remember sitting on a preschool-sized chair at my eldest son's elementary school a childhood ago, where the principal implored us kindergarten parents *not* to try to teach our children to read, at least not obsessively or directly. "Help them to build their phonemic awareness," she pleaded. "Let them notice letters and words in their everyday environment." It turns out the activity I had always thought of as "reading" was more precisely known to early-childhood educators as "decoding," and it constituted only a sliver of a far broader set of competencies that would eventually lie at the core of a hoped-for relationship with books,

and with the book that is the world. Really, the principal insisted, literacy was about successfully navigating the world, and decoding printed words on the page was just one technical aspect of this infinite enterprise. Reading in its deepest sense, she urged, is about being able to get places.

Despite the tension between the irrepressible Olke and her beleaguered parents, this is a lesson that both parties intuitively understand. Molodowsky weaves a puzzle into the poem's refrain. The bellowing parents, referred to as the single unit *tate-mame*, assign their daughter a wide array of urgent chores but always conclude their tirade with the charge to "Read a little, write a little / Remember, I'll drive you out of the house!" Are they threatening to kick her out if she doesn't practice reading and writing, or if she doesn't complete her whole litany of chores? How can such menace, such a display of brute force, nestle so intimately with such sage and forward-looking parental counsel? "Don't get distracted," her parents practically beg. "Do what you must today to keep our household running but see to your own future as well." They know that the train that can transport their girl to a better life than the one they can provide is made of books, not buttons. When we read the poem as adults, the text invites us to identify with both the long-suffering heroine and the careworn parents, who bring all their authority to bear on securing a rudimentary education, and therefore a future, for their daughter.

Writing a Better World into Being—in Yiddish

Like Olke's nameless parents, the writers and publishers who created the corpus of Yiddish children's literature invested their faith and their resources in the idea that children's reading could transport them into richer, more meaningful lives, could equip them, as the adults they would soon become, to create a better world. The idea of "writing a better world into being," through telling stories that are aspirational and redemptive, is characteristic of writing for children across most cultures. However, in the case of Yiddish-speaking Jewry, the very idea of writing specifically for children arose in tandem with the sweeping effort of a society to reinvent itself. Since the late eighteenth century, Jewish intellectual and cultural leaders had been trying to bring about a so-called Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah* in Hebrew, *Haskole* in Yiddish), a set of changes to the organization of Jewish society that would prod it into conformity with Christian norms with respect to education, economic activity, gender roles, family life, the relationship to the natural world, and more. The proponents of this enlightenment program, the *maskilim*, sought to medi-

ate between the received language of a venerable tradition and the immediate language of their own experience as modern people. This movement flourished throughout the nineteenth century, shifting eastward with the great demographic bloom of Eastern European Jewry and spurring the classic works of Yiddish literature. The end of the nineteenth century found Enlightenment ideals firmly entrenched in the collective Ashkenazi psyche. While the formal program of Haskole dissipated, its energies did not: They merely eddied into other movements, such as Zionism and leftist politics.

The goal was indeed to write a better world into being, but how? Accounting for variation within a corpus of about a thousand individual books and many more periodicals, here is a quick snapshot of how that better world might look:

- economically just (although the particulars of what economic justice would entail varied among authors)
- equal between people of different races, religions, and nationalities
- equal between men and women
- rational, scientific, educated
- democratic

Perhaps most important, that new world would entail *normalcy* for the Jewish nation, whose deep religious civilization would ground a set of distinctive cultural commitments without imposing the strict constraints of a binding religious system.

We might discern the concentrated essence of Haskalah messaging for children in a midcentury Zionist text, one entry among the story collections written *in Yiddish* by the pioneering and prolific Hebrew children's writer Levin Kipnis. Born in the Pale of Settlement in 1894 into a family of twelve, he emigrated to Palestine in 1913 and made a career as an educator. In 1961, he published *Untern taytlboym* (*Under the Date Palm*), a volume of Yiddish holiday stories with New York children's book publisher Farlag Matones (Gifts Press). The book was indeed conceived as a gift—from one of the foremost children's authors in a renascent Zion to the Yiddish-speaking children of the diaspora, who shared a set of socialist cultural aspirations with their Israeli coevals and might be persuaded, with honey rather than vinegar, to share in their Zionism as well. Over a lifetime that spanned almost the entire twentieth century, Kipnis

would contribute about eight hundred stories and six hundred poems to the burgeoning canon of Israeli juvenile literature, securing his place in a fondly remembered founding generation.

One of the Passover tales in the collection, “Children of the Field,” is based on a Talmudic elaboration of the Exodus story, which mentions the Israelite infants being placed protectively into the ground rather than drowned in the Nile, as Pharaoh had commanded.⁵ Kipnis embroiders on this wisp of interpretive text, imagining an apparatus for nourishing the “illegal” baby boys. To replace the maternal breast, each child received two stones whence sustenance flowed (oil and honey, according to the Talmud; milk and honey, in Kipnis’s version). As to the infants’ daily care, Kipnis furnishes some details that the midrash does not:

The apple trees cared for the tiny little boys, the blades of grass kept them hidden, and bright-eyed angels with clear wings flew down from the heavens, an angel for each and every child. They stroked the children’s little heads so that their hair grew very long, soft and silky, and covered their whole bodies. . . . They gave every child a pebble in each hand, one a milk-stone and the other, a honey-stone. After that, they dug out holes near the roots of the apple tree, and padded them with grass—as a mother makes a bed for her child; they laid the children in the holes—as a mother lays her child in the cradle; and they sang heartfelt songs—as a mother lulls her child to sleep.⁶

Divine protection, typically associated with the masculine God in the Biblical exodus narrative, is reimagined as maternal care in the rabbinic midrash; Kipnis further tweaks the rabbis’ imagery to focus on Mother *Nature*, as it were, furnishing the necessary nurture. Thus is a liminal period of vulnerability and exposure transformed into a state of womb-like safety for the generation of boys whose very survival is at risk: “The tiny little boys slept peacefully in their dark cradles, sucking milk from the milk-stones and honey from the honey-stones; they slept peacefully and dreamt of the bright day to come.” Meanwhile, when the designated time of salvation arrives, Kipnis marshals the sun itself to ratify the day’s specialness (“shining seven times more beautifully than usual”) and ensure the blossoming of the hitherto germinal children: “This made the earth split open, and little heads began to sprout forth like pretty flowers. In the blink of an eye, the entire field was full of little children, like a very large *kinder-gortn*, or garden of children.”⁷ Thus does Kipnis reliteralize an image that had already been bent into figurative daily use by the

mid-twentieth century. By foregrounding the image of the *kinder-gortn*, Kipnis redoubles an emphasis on cultivation, a rich and multivalent term we will return to.

Although the boys grow up like tall grass in both the Talmudic and Yiddish accounts, each version builds to an instructively different narrative climax. In the Talmudic tractate Sotah, it's the epiphanic moment when the newly freed grown-up children recognize the divine author of their liberation: "And when the Holy One, Blessed be He, revealed Himself at the Red Sea, these children recognized Him first, as it is stated: 'This is my God, whom I glorify.'" ⁸ That is to say, they are able to visually recognize God from the original divine revelation during their infancy and can claim with plausible authority, "This is my God." Meanwhile, in Kipnis's secularizing retelling, the human leader takes center stage, and the story crests with a more humanistic appeal to a generation that has been miraculously spared a disabling servile consciousness despite growing up enslaved:

So the sun illuminated the field: beams of sunlight flooded it, and the children bathed in light. They got up, found their footing, and began to grow bigger and taller—and just like that, they had become young men, tall and handsome as date palms, strong and brave—a large army of heroes standing at the ready and waiting for their liberator.

And the rescuer came.

It happened at midnight.

Moses the Liberator came and called, "Stand up, free children! You, who were never slaves to Pharaoh, you who never felt his heavy hand, you who never molded any bricks and mortar, stand up and lead the way for the entire people!" ⁹

Retrieving the idea of cultivation suggested by the garden of children, Kipnis's text manages to straddle the centuries between the biblical exodus and the modern Haskalah and its aftermath. Reading beyond the story's plain meaning in connection with the Passover liberation tale, "Children of the Field" offers an allegory for the cultivation of new, undeformed, post-Enlightenment Jews.

This particular story, then, presents a concentrated synecdoche for the larger project of Yiddish children's literature that flourished during the first half of the twentieth century. Just as Kipnis's Moses eventually comes to redeem a generation that has grown up bucolically in the fields and never known the overseer's lash, so too did Yiddish authors in the early decades of the twentieth

century write for a generation of Jews that wasn't supposed to have ever known the "enslavements" that dogged earlier Jewish life, whether imagined as religious superstition or antisemitic violence. In this allegorical reading, it is the educators and authors of books for Jewish children who serve as the liberators and redeemers of a new society of free men and women. Their vision would subtly reshape young Jews' relationship with the past and their purchase on the future. The sustaining milk, honey, and oil would be the stories themselves, and the situation of the Jewish child suckling on this literature was figured as a kind of protected, womb-like, set-off space—a nourishing refuge from a reality that, by the publication of Kipnis's volume in 1961, had turned as cruel and unyielding as Pharaoh's Egypt.

Writing for children necessarily stakes claims on a vision for the future, and texts intended for youthful audiences had no choice but to negotiate the tensions between traditional and emerging forms of Jewish identity at a bewildering moment. The first decades of the twentieth century were a time of bracing ideological ferment, when socialism, Soviet communism, and Zionism all appeared as lively and plausible paths, if not messianic destinies, for Jewish communal expression. Roiling beneath the surface of these politico-cultural movements and the institutions they spawned were the animating phenomena of modernity, including secularization, urbanization, mass migration, and rapid yet uneven economic development. These forces worked both centrifugally and centripetally on the Jewish community, flinging its energies outward while pulling into its very core disruption from the far corners of Europe and beyond.

Nor was Yiddish itself a stable entity, capable of absorbing and metabolizing these rapid transformations. Many of its most ardent devotees were multilingual and felt pulled in several linguistic directions. Whither the Yiddish language? Speaking to a nation without a country, the Yiddish arts reflected anxiety about their own belatedness: arriving tardy to the feast of European culture, showing up at last uninvited and in rags to boot. Would a Yiddish culture be able, its leaders fretted, to mature quickly enough to retain its participants, who were pushed by practical necessity and pulled by the lure of cultural prestige to assimilate to the surrounding languages or embrace new ones? Immigration to the Americas, nationalism in Poland and Central Europe, the communist revolution in Russia, and even Zionism, with its emphasis on Hebrew as the language of the whole Jewish people—all these unfolding trends militated against the continued flourishing of the *mame-loshn*. But perhaps the future could be rewritten after all.

However improbably, a vibrant and variegated literature for Yiddish-speaking youth dawned during those tumultuous early decades of the twentieth century and endures today, albeit in attenuated form. The stories, poems, and plays written for children during the heyday of the 1920s and 1930s and again in the postwar 1950s constitute a forgotten record of the Jewish twentieth century. This book has twin aims, then: to reexamine some of the defining events and phenomena of that unquiet century through the lens of “what to tell the children,” and at the same time, to grapple with how this body of literature sought to reshape the world by reshaping the Jews, one child at a time. In studying the enterprise of Yiddish children’s literature, however, I don’t wish to reinforce the nostalgia that can attach to these artifacts of a largely forgotten, superseded world. Instead I want to examine how this neglected corpus can shed greater light on our understanding of Jewish modernity, the relationship between childhood and adulthood, and the interplay between “normal” and “other” cultural spaces, where “normal” has been figured as adult and majoritarian and “other” has been imagined as juvenile and minoritarian.

Children’s books are neither trivial nor neutral. Their political freight can be difficult to discern in real time when our own politics, values, and worldview align too neatly with those imagined in their pages. Decades on, though, it becomes impossible not to see how *Curious George* opens with an allegory of the Middle Passage, and how Babar traffics in colonial stereotypes.¹⁰ While children’s literature might seem utopian, it is more accurately characterized as what Michel Foucault called a *heterotopia*, or “other place.” Foucault situates this concept as part of a shift, at the beginning of the twentieth century, from a preoccupation with time and its entropic sequences to an engagement with space and its network of simultaneities. “Our epoch,” he writes in an essay that formed the basis for his 1967 address to a group of architecture students at MIT, “is one in which space takes for us the form of *relations* among sites.” Foucault takes particular interest in external spaces that are “linked with all the others, which however contradict all the other sites,” concrete or abstract spaces that are “outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.”¹¹ Such “other spaces” teach us something about conventional spaces by reproducing features of the ordinary world at an instructively oblique or altered angle, like a mirror image at once reflecting reality and estranging it. A cemetery, for example, abuts the city of the living and reflects

some of its hierarchies and other modes of social organization, but it's home to the dead. Ships, antique gardens, prisons, brothels, and fairs all likewise offer revealing-by-distorting reflections aslant "normal" social spaces.¹² Similarly, literature for children replicates many of the genres and other storytelling conventions of literature for adults—demarcations of literary space, so to speak—but at an oblique angle inflected by the presumptive readers' juvenility. In other words, not only do many specific texts for children furnish us with images of heterotopias, such as the ground under Olke's parasol or the Israelite baby boys' *kinder-gortn*, but the corpus of children's literature as a whole can constitute a heterotopian precinct in relation to a given literary tradition. I propose to consider Yiddish children's literature as just such a heterotopia in relation to Yiddish literature and culture more broadly.

This expansive construction of the idea of the heterotopia might not leap too far beyond the concept's original parameters. As a sort of dress rehearsal, perhaps, for his presentation to the budding architects, Foucault appeared on French radio in 1966 and offered a preliminary anatomy of the heterotopia. The better-known elaborations of the concept usually discuss it as a kind of physical enclosure, but what he described on *France Culture* was more free-form and less bounded. Significantly, he illustrated the concept in part by discussing how children constitute and inhabit heterotopias through their imaginative play: "These counter-spaces . . . are well recognised by children. . . . It's the bottom of the garden; it's the Indian tent erected in the middle of the attic; or still, it's . . . on their parent's bed where they discover the ocean, as they can swim between the covers, and the bed is also the sky, or they can bounce on the springs; it's the forest as they can hide there; or still, it's night as they can become ghosts between the sheets and, finally, it's the fear and delight of their parents coming home."¹³

Foucault's vision links the ordinary spaces of home and garden to the children's inventive reclamation of them as the setting for extraordinary adventures. Children's imaginative play tends to combine slavishly imitative and improbably fanciful elements, and in so doing creates a unique kind of "space" in which their everyday experience nests cheek by jowl with their wildest imaginings. Even defining "space" broadly, how does the term stretch to include "the fear and delight of their parents coming home"? Those quivering feelings might be thought to delimit an emotional "zone" describing children's interim autonomy—as cherished as it is limited—over and against the usual control parents exert when present.

The heterotopian space of childhood is often a space without adults, or one that resists, as Olke eventually does, typical adult instruction and hegemony.

It is the zone of children's empowerment, set always against the context of their singular vulnerability and dependence on adult (or supernatural) caregivers. The power differential between adults and children, including surprising role reversals, means that children's literature is always implicitly about power and how it is used. Yiddish children's literature, as a rule, was exquisitely attuned to children's current and future power. An anthology published in 1920 styles children as *kleyne in der groyser velt*: little ones in the big world.¹⁴ But this phrase was a more accurate descriptor of adult Jewish self-perception than of the relative position of children in Jewish society. After all, one of the Jewish collectivity's enduring names for itself was the biblical "Children of Israel." While the original Hebrew (*bnei yisrael*) might bespeak belonging rather than juvenility, the Yiddish translation, *di kinder fun Yisroel*, unambiguously identifies the whole nation with its youth. The rise of Yiddish children's literature was predicated on an appeal by writers and cultural leaders to children as the repository of a great deal of social, cultural, and political capital—an immense reservoir of latent but soon-to-be-realized power.

Children's literature might seem at first blush like a utopian exercise in furnishing ideal reading material for the idealized denizens of what one thinker wistfully styled a "universal republic of childhood."¹⁵ But childhood is no more universal than adulthood, and its denizens, all temporary, are just as fully and messily human as the grown-ups they will someday become. Whereas the utopian view of children's literature and childhood itself might give rise to nostalgia, the heterotopian view instead sparks interrogation. As Foucault reminds us, literary utopias console, while heterotopias, in their uncanny mirroring function, disturb.

The Distinctive Poetics of Children's Literature

The "other space" of children's literature is defined by both how it is written and how it is read. Like books for adults, juvenile books generally fit somewhere on a continuum from didactic to aesthetically pleasurable and even whimsical. Unlike literature for adults, however, at least some degree of didacticism remained acceptable in children's literature even as adult fiction reached an apotheosis of aestheticism that rejected instruction in favor of delight.¹⁶ Moreover, even in texts that seem to stake out a position against or entirely apart from instruction, there is a certain inexorable patina of didacticism that inheres in the function of adults (authors, publishers, teachers, librarians, and book buyers) in relation to children (the ostensible readers).¹⁷ We instruct, we encourage,

and we *educate* or draw out the knowledge residing in children. We enjoy greater social and political agency owing to our ostensibly superior cognitive abilities, which in turn calls forth adults' sense of responsibility, protection, and (hopefully benign) empowerment in relation to our young charges.

When adults write for children, no matter how delightful and silly the product, how far from heavy didacticism, they are nevertheless teaching their target readers something of cause and effect, and thus of how to be or how not to be in the world. Nonfiction teaches children how things work, preparing them for a life in which it might be useful to know how a radio operates, or how Inuit people hunt and fish, or how ants organize their society (all topics of early twentieth-century Yiddish children's books). And because children are so deeply educable, it is impossible for any book not to teach them *something*—even if it is only an object lesson in the sort of marketing (supermarket aisle! glittery cover!) that might separate their parents from some of the money in their wallets. Books for children reinforce the habits of literacy itself—a politically freighted enterprise bound up in the transfer of power, for *saber es poder*—and often take as their implicit theme the development of the child reader.

It is impossible, then, to write about children's literature without writing about childhood, which is a dynamic set of socially constructed experiences rather than a static and stable span within a lifetime. The field of children's cultural studies seeks to understand the shades of difference and the deep, often biologically driven similarities in how various societies shape and understand their denizens' younger years. The shift from functional to romantic and sacralizing views of childhood, and then again to a phased developmental view, has given rise to reading materials designed especially for children's consumption even as it has repeatedly revised the desiderata governing such texts.¹⁸ Concomitant with these shifting perceptions have been varying approaches to the education of the young: from scaring children straight to modeling good conduct and exemplary thought. Shifting social values have led children's authors to prioritize, variously, hegemony and subversion, to countenance and indeed valorize a degree of juvenile skepticism toward adult caregivers. Henrik Ibsen famously threw his sympathy with those "most closely in league with the future." Indeed, the children's books that seem to age best are often those more concerned with teaching children to question authority than with propping it up.

A further distinctive property of children's literature is situational rather than textual, and it has to do with the circumstances of reading. Books for the very young are unlike most other texts in that they are read aloud in the habi-

tats of nursery, day care, and preschool, and then often reread. The worst of them become a torment, while the best of them lodge in the psyche of both adult and child as poetry—or prayer.

I have been a mother for as long as I've been a scholar and have seldom researched or written for longer than the duration of a school day; I often work in far shorter bursts of time. Having a safe, salutary, always available way for my children to occupy themselves has allowed me to attend to my work and enjoy the pleasure that is bound up in researching, writing, and teaching. I appreciate potty training and sleeping through the night as much as the next parent, but to me, the real milestone that marks “no longer a baby” is when my children learn to read. Of course some of this enthusiasm is bound up in nurturing their independence, their ability to explore their interests and gain knowledge, their empowerment. Yet my delight in their literacy has also been in some measure selfish. The path to raising independent readers, at least the one we have trodden, leads through a period of literary interdependence: reading aloud together as a shared activity. I try to honor the desire of the preschooler who pleads insistently, “Read it again. Again and again and again. A lot of times, okay?” I spend a great deal of time rereading, performing the books' words in different ways, improvising gestures and vocal flourishes, feeling the books' textual and visual messages seep into our shared consciousness. Expressive reading staves off boredom *and* gets a literature professor thinking.

Meanwhile, my years of parenting young children have overlapped with another foundational but oft-undervalued form of teaching: several semesters of Yiddish language instruction. I was aware of recent translations of *Curious George*, Dr. Seuss classics, and *Winnie the Pooh* into the language of Sholem Aleichem, but I wondered: Had any books for children *originated* in Yiddish? It was this naïve and deeply uninformed question that launched over a decade of research into the body of almost one thousand extant Yiddish children's books, as well as several juvenile periodicals spanning several continents and almost the whole of the twentieth century. I combed through hundreds of stories, poems, and plays, seeking to propose a provisional canon of primary texts on which we might focus a cultural conversation about this neglected literature. A few dozen of them appear in my 2020 anthology *Honey on the Page*. Even as I fine-tuned those translations, I began to think seriously about what this literature means as a body of work, how temporally concentrated

and geographically diffuse was its production, and what we might learn from this peculiar intersection of time and space, language and culture. How could Yiddish children's literature help to tell the story of twentieth-century Ashkenaz?

In interrogating the juvenile literature and culture of the civilization that I study, I have found a way to unite the work of the mind with the work of the hands. While my inquiry originated in twinned identities as a language teacher and a mother, it continues under the sign of my commitments as a feminist. Choosing to interrogate Yiddish children's literature was not so much about making my time spent reading on the floor "pay," as about realizing that I have chosen to spend my time in this way because I think it has value. Forming deep relationships with the small people called children, participating in their play, and sharing books in order to see the world through their eyes—these activities have inestimable intellectual worth. If we attune ourselves to children's frequencies, their freshness of thought and speech can pry loose our most tightly held, reflexive assumptions, complicating and decentering our adult habits of mind and received ascriptions of value.

With this project, I seek a kind of attunement, not only as a scholar poised to trace the volutions of intellectual and literary history that the canon of Yiddish children's literature reveals but also as a woman making visible the in-between work of translation. I attempt to mediate between the best that has been thought and said, usually by men, and the essential-for-the-species-but-too-easily-overlooked thought-world of children, a realm traditionally overseen by women. I wrestle not only with the question of whether individual works are thematically subversive or hegemonic, radical or reinforcing of cultural norms—but also with the question of how the study of children's literature itself can act as a radical practice within cultural studies by shifting our sense, as heterotopias will, of which kinds of texts and whose experiences are worthy of critical attention.

Researching this book has led me on a quest whose object has shifted throughout the life of the project. I began by seeking something for my Yiddish students and finding an abundance of material that could help me make sense of my own inextricable experiences as a scholar and a mother. Finally, I ended up wanting something on behalf of the neglected texts themselves: to restore to these stories the readership they've lost and the pride of place they deserve as a cultural artifact worthy of study. I want Yiddish children's stories to regain the chance to become irksome through repetition. I want whimsical

Yiddish poems to resound in the mouths of children and their educators. I don't want Kadya Molodowsky's poetry to be the honored guest who sits primly on the antique sofa in the front parlor but rather to be tumbling with the kids on the stained couch in the family room.

Part of embracing the synchronicity between my own journey as scholar, teacher, and parent with the Jewish sojourn into modernity means grappling with and sharing in the anxieties of the cultural workers who began to create a Yiddish literature for children a century ago. What if Molodowsky and Yankev Pat and Moyshe Kulbak did indeed show up one day, plunk themselves down on the sofa, and ask what's become of their collective legacy? What would I tell the Yiddish children's authors, the culturists, the activists of yesteryear? It has been more terrible than you can imagine, I might confess. Within a generation, the children were hopelessly Americanized. Some families emigrated to Israel, and their generations have created in Hebrew but seldom in the *mame-loshn*. Yiddish is in tatters, lost out long ago to English, French, Spanish, and, however improbably, to *Hebrew*. The mother tongue has become the language of secrets that parents keep from children, pungent curses, and bawdy jokes.

And yet: It is also more wonderful than you can imagine. Every few months, a journalist calls, working on a story about the Yiddish linguistic and cultural revival. You can hear Tevye sing in Yiddish on Broadway, dance to klezmer music throughout the year on nearly every continent, attend summer camp and farm in Yiddish. You can read learned articles about Yiddish culture and pedagogy, transmitted instantaneously on the glowing slabs of wizardry we all keep in our pockets. You can learn the language as a kind of game on something called an "app." Half a million Jews, more or less, still speak Yiddish as their daily vernacular, refreshing its fossilizing vocabulary with infusions of English, Hebrew, and Russian. Children play Yiddish board games and read Yiddish comics. Young adult students return summer after summer to study the language; they feel it is their birthright, and they are snatching it back from oblivion. Like the carters and wagoners of yore, the mild-mannered, taxi-driving sons of central Massachusetts have picked up a few words of Yiddish from the many writers, scholars, musicians, and translators they ferry to a bucolic repository for the Yiddish book. Phalanxes of new Yiddishists are working at the horizon of the possible, finding room for maneuver within the constraints of the time and places into which they were born.

Yiddish Cultural Nationalism and Modern Jewish Worldmaking

Every children's literary tradition is marked by its origins. The fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm were not originally meant for children at all, although they were gradually revised, over four decades and seven editions, to suit juvenile readers. While as collectors and editors, Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm prized the oral tales of the German *Volk* above all else, their project evolved to stress the elements of Christian piety considered salutary for children (such as imbuing heroic characters with religious devotion and sanitizing all references to sex outside of marriage).¹⁹ Their tales both reflected and further reinforced the aesthetic tropes and conceptual ideals of German romantic nationalism.²⁰ Even in the most recently updated Disney adaptations, it is possible to trace a through line from Herder and Schiller to the large-hearted, wasp-waisted princesses of contemporary American girlhood. Hans Christian Andersen's tales likewise fused pan-Scandinavian identity with Christian piety. Even twentieth-century Anglo-American children's tales bear the stamp of Victorian attitudes, pointing back toward the moment when English juvenile literature truly burgeoned and took flight.²¹ Although subject to aesthetic and ideological changes over time, the corpora of children's literature shaped in the twentieth century were just as enduringly marked by their origins. What did this mean in the case of Yiddish? Mutually overlapping forces, including cultural nationalism, secularism, and leftist politics, intersected with transformations in family life owing to the widening dissemination of the principles of child psychology and the attitudes and practices that would eventually blossom into feminism. This era saw a new emphasis on the scientific study of childhood and interest of the state in guiding children's development.²²

For modern European Jewry, culture making *was* nation building. "Since the Jews had no state and their political influence in Poland was weak," David E. Fishman explains, "their cultural institutions were important sources of pride and self-validation." These institutions, including the emerging arena of children's literature "were considered proof that Jews were a nation, a people deserving of collective dignity and national rights."²³ And increasingly, throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, child-rearing became another, complementary form of nation building. Parents, educators, and culturists who worked on behalf of children collaborated in building the Jewish nation by raising its national subjects, or better yet, citizens. Yet even as their political commitments pushed them toward a collective understand-

ing of their child-rearing task, the voices of child psychology (as it was known in the United States; pedology, or “child science,” was the reigning term in the USSR) insisted that they were also raising individuals. At the very same time, the nature and meaning of childhood was evolving, and not necessarily in a linear or unidirectional way. This tension gave rise to a multifarious canon with respect to such decisions as how politically explicit or subtle, how mimetically accurate or imaginatively fanciful, and how subversive or hegemonic children’s books ought to be.

Yiddish now trails a kugel-scented vapor of nostalgia that threatens to obscure its fierceness as a medium for revolution, for remaking the world. The Jews who developed secular Yiddish culture between the wars fell out along a wide spectrum of progressive ideologies. They were involved in a variety of nation-building projects, and they conceived of “revolution” in different ways. But it is axiomatic that progressive or revolutionary movements try to speak directly to a society’s children. However unfairly, parents are often imagined to be retrograde in their thinking, standing in the way of “progress.” Wherever societies were being built or radically rebuilt, whether in pre-State Palestine or the Soviet Union, the adults in the cultural vanguard prioritized their address to children. Even if young minds weren’t completely blank slates, there was still plenty of room to write new storylines upon them. Surely this strategy bespoke the power of tapping into children’s latent cultural capital. At the same time, though, it represented a concession to constraints on the changemakers’ power to effect a full revolution *right now*. In speaking to children, revolutionary leaders made an end run around the defenses of the present toward the goalposts of the future.

Harnessing Yiddish to the cause where possible but granting pride of place to other languages, the Soviet Union and the State of Israel came to be fully realized as nation-building projects, which of course Yiddish never did; there has never (yet) been a Yiddish-speaking state. Since victors write history, it stands to reason that both Soviet and Israeli children’s literature have each received thoughtful and bountiful attention from scholars, while the study of Yiddish children’s literature is only starting to gain momentum in the twenty-first century. The comparison with Hebrew is especially illuminating, as the founding of the State of Israel makes it possible to interrogate the mechanics of conventional nation-building through children’s literature—undertaken at the same historical moment and under a similar set of guiding values and aspirations as Yiddish. Jewish cultural nationalism, whether played out in Yiddish or in Hebrew, was at once a thoroughly secular and a deeply spiritual

project.²⁴ But precisely insofar as Yiddish cultural nationalists could never succeed at building a conventional nation “with an army,” they perforce embraced the transcendent project of making a symbolic world.²⁵ Whether the various cultural leaders of the Yiddish Left understood themselves to be mercifully freed of the burden or vexingly deprived of the privilege of building a proper nation, they poured their copious energies into limning the very heaviness on the inside of a parasol.

The Structure of This Book

How to organize a discussion of something as multifarious as an entire literary corpus stretching across decades and continents, political ideologies and literary genres? Of course, no single study can do justice to the sheer variety of Yiddish children’s books, but I identify a set of thematic and stylistic nodes where several texts and ideas converge. My analysis moves through time and space in tandem, starting in Eastern Europe and shifting its attention with the geographical migrations of Yiddish cultural activity to New York, the USSR, Latin America, and Israel. While most publishing activity for children took place between the world wars, the long twentieth century is the necessary canvas on which to paint the story of this literature’s development, flourishing, and denouement.

The book’s first section, “Claiming a Usable Past,” focuses on works that pull inward, paying special attention to the holidays, history, and heroes that define the Jewish past, deep and recent. This focus on concentration takes on a distinctively Jewish cast in light of concepts like *zamlung* (collection as a cultural activity, especially of folklore) and *kinus* (ingathering, a potent concept in Zionist discourse). Yiddish writers and educators of the early twentieth century were interested in refashioning the past, or retooling its meaning and legacy, and so articulating a vision for the Jewish future. Indeed, this project unfolds against the backdrop of the fully encompassing ingathering that was taking place in the Land of Israel with the creation of a Hebrew literature for Israeli children. If Israeli Hebrew acted as a magnetic force of concentration on the Jewish geographical and conceptual map, then Yiddish might be imagined as having operated as a force of diffusion.

Writing under the sign of “diaspora,” from the Greek “to scatter,” many Yiddish writers sought to cast as broadly as possible their strivings for democratic processes, economic justice, and gender equality. Their fictions, poetry, and plays reflect rapidly evolving understandings of how children think, feel, and

learn. Taking children to be the engaged citizens and national subjects of the future, authors from a variety of stances on the broad Yiddish Left sought to shape the Jewish polity to come. The book's second section, "Contesting the Jewish Future," analyzes the most universalist, outward-turned tendencies in the corpus, taking stock of the features that still marked these works as distinctively Jewish.

This organically unfolding account of how Jewishness meets modernity was interrupted by a set of events that would uproot and transform Jewish life. The Holocaust is, in a profound sense, not a Jewish story—yet Jewish communities have been forced to call on their own creativity to metabolize its harms. Yiddish children's literature had no choice but to reckon with this violent intrusion into modern Jewish life, turning its attention in the 1950s to the project of recovery, cultural preservation, and consolidation. A focus on what we might style "the Jewish timeless," the holiday cycle and the Jewish alphabet, constituted a powerful form of remembering and self-determination. In the Afterword, I visit briefly the two places where Yiddish children's literature and culture continues to be created today: Sweden, where Yiddish is elevated (and subsidized) as an official language, and the Hasidic communities, where Yiddish children's culture enjoys a flourishing market.

Most of this book was researched in the sober spirit of the subjunctive mood, the sense of what could have been. What would the world look like if Yiddish had . . . ? One of the consolations of scholarship is getting to simply chronicle and analyze what happened as thoroughly and honestly as possible; success or failure isn't predicated on changing the course of history. Occasionally, though, an incandescent burst of the indicative breaks through the softening scrim of that subjunctive and declares, "Look at what *is*!" My five-year-old spent long days homebound during the worst of an epoch-defining pandemic. With patience, love, and determination, his father taught him to read. For a while, in our improvised homeschool pre-K, we urged him to write down his thoughts: usually a sentence each day. In late May of 2021, he wrote, "I wish there were more Labzik stories."

For months, he had seen his mother spend long hours holed up in the basement with seemingly imaginary people whose faces appeared in little rectangles on her computer screen. In the mornings, these people were her students. In the evenings, they were a group of grown-ups and near grown-ups making

a puppet show. She spoke frequently with a puppeteer who had a big voice.²⁶ One evening, she shouted rhythmically into her microphone, “Mir viln zen dem meyor! Mir viln zen dem meyor!” (We want to see the mayor!). She was heard menacing someone unseen in a low growl, threatening to tear them apart like a herring should they raise a hand against one of the children.

Finally, in late spring, the show was ready: a film adaptation of *Labzik*, the proletarian pup at the center of Chaver Paver’s collection of twelve short stories first published in New York in 1935, the nadir of the Depression. A sound designer had recorded the actors’ voices and layered them into a soundtrack complete with lively klezmer and folk music and loud protest scenes full of chanting and stray crowd noise; the familiar growl now belonged to a dauntless Bronx mother, defending an elementary-aged protest leader and unafraid to face down a thuggish police captain. An ingenious fabricator had constructed almost two hundred puppets, by turns winsome and terrifying, most of them manipulated expertly by a professional puppeteer.²⁷ The videographer had captured it all and woven it together so seamlessly that it looks animated. There was no red carpet thanks to the pandemic, but the focus group at home chomped through a deep bowl of popcorn, cheering the proletpup and his humans and sneering at the authoritarian school principal and his cruel henchmen.

The five-year-old was entranced. He had dozens of questions about the plot, the characters, the puppetry, the Yiddish. For weeks, he quoted snippets from the script in Yiddish, a language he does not speak. “I wish there were more *Labzik* stories,” he wrote. His wishful subjunctive is my indicative: Look what is *now*! We recycled old culture into new. We broke through the weight of counterhistory suffused with its wistful “might have beens” to create something declarative, exclamatory even, in and with Yiddish. The language itself exerts a heterotopian pull: The world that could have been but never fully was promises to teach us a great deal about the world that is—and the world we might yet make.

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