Jordan D. Finkin. *A Rhetorical Conversation: Jewish Discourse in Modern Yiddish Literature.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. x + 202 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-03630-4.

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Associations, Analogies, and Allusions

Jordan Finkin's incisive work, *A Rhetorical Conversation: Jewish Discourse in Modern Yiddish Literature*, is an indispensable new contribution to the fields of modern Jewish literature and Yiddish linguistics alike. Combining precise literary analysis with nuanced examination of linguistic elements, Finkin shows how the study and speech patterns of Talmudic scholars first entered conversational Yiddish and later modern Yiddish literature.

While other scholars have extensively described the Hebrew element within Yiddish (see, for example, Max Weinreich, Yudel Mark, Nathan Birnbaum, Dovid Katz, and Neil Jacobs, among others), Finkin takes the next step and traces the progression through the language and culture not just of lexical or syntactical items, but of entire discursive patterns. Unique to his study is his self-described "hybrid analysis" (p. 3), which follows the integration of linguistic elements from rabbinic texts into spoken Yiddish and investigates the development of a "distinctly modern Yiddish literary language [that] builds upon the recognition and manipulation of these patterns" (p. 7).

In his introductory chapters, Finkin describes the process through which Talmudic discursive features were incorporated into literary Yiddish. In traditional study houses in eastern Europe, men engaged with Hebrew and Aramaic texts in a learning method that involved word-by-word translations into Yiddish during group and partnered study. As both the text of the Talmud and the way of studying it were argumentative, the dialogic mode was absorbed into the Yiddish of these scholars, along with lexical and grammatical elements. Because of the high prestige of the scholar's idiom, the influence of these borrowings on the common language of unilingual Yiddish speakers was strong. Literary Yiddish, in turn, as it developed drew heavily on the spoken language: "Developing norms of a modern literary idiom for Yiddish involved not only the imitation of Yiddish speech, but a distinct stylization of it" (p. 13).

In the first chapter, Finkin looks closely at one particular grammatical structure, the tautological infinitive (a phrase that repeats the conjugated verb with a topicalized infinitive form, such as "shraybn shraybt er") to demon-

strate the complex ways in which the different source languages that contribute to Yiddish interact. By deconstructing existing scholarly analyses of this form, Finkin shows that the feature cannot be attributed to one origin alone but must be understood as stemming from "simultaneous clusters of complicated linguistic, social, and cultural factors that operate in concert" in a process he terms "similative buttressing" (p. 24). Drawing on examples from Yiddish literature, the author establishes the influence of Hebrew and Aramaic sources (interconnected with German and Slavic ones) on the complex system of the Yiddish language using the tautological infinitive as but one illustration.

Finkin then proceeds in the second chapter to describe in detail the associative logical structures and conversational patterns that Talmudic scholars introduced into spoken Yiddish, focusing on the use of discourse connectives (words and phrases used to link parts of discourse and to indicate the semantic relationship between these parts). The framework set up in this chapter, which demonstrates the linguistic and cultural naturalization of Talmudic discourse vocabulary into Yiddish through shifts of meaning, is then applied in the subsequent chapters to modern Yiddish poetry, in particular the works of Moyshe Leyb Halpern, Avraham Reyzen, and Yankev Glatshteyn (chapter 3), to the conversational style of the *Tsenerene* (an extremely popular Yiddish translation and commentary of Tanakh) and the monologues of Sholem Aleykhem (chapter 4), and to two versions (Hebrew and Yiddish) of a Yitskhok Leybush Peretz story (chapter 5).

Every poem and story that Finkin selects is analyzed with the greatest care and depth; he extracts and masterfully explains those elements of Talmudic discourse that each author chose to employ in his work. For instance, in Halpern's poem cycle "Zarkhi by the Seashore," Finkin examines the vocabulary of possibility that suffuses the text. Discussing both Hebrew-element words such as "efsher" (maybe) and the Talmudically digressive chain of logic in the poems, Finkin draws out a conclusion about the "relationship of a modern Yiddish poet to his cultural tradition" based on these discursive features (p. 60).

While Finkin's literary analysis demonstrates his deep engagement with the texts, profound understanding of the sources, and ability to identify even the most obscure allusions and references, his own writing style at times reflects, or indeed emulates, the very associative digressive discourse that he describes. This style can be disorienting for the untrained reader, as Finkin often

synthesizes an incredible number of religious and literary texts within each section. The logical progression of the chapter that addresses the *Tsenerene* and the orality of Sholem Aleykhem's oeuvre can be particularly difficult to follow, as it shifts fluidly back and forth between various texts, both original and theoretical. For the scholar of Yiddish literature, however, this approach may add another nuance of meaning to Finkin's work as a text that both describes and is shaped by Yiddish literature and traditional Jewish sources.

Another potential weakness in *A Rhetorical Conversation* is the selection of works that the author chose to illustrate Talmudic discourse in Yiddish literature. While all of his examples include multilayered influences from Jewish discourse, he does not differentiate sufficiently between authors who place this discourse into the mouths of everyday lay characters and those who employ such speech to reflect the conversational style of actual Talmudic scholars. If Finkin's main interest is with "what happens as a result of the bilinguals' coming into contact with unilingual Yiddish speakers ... and second, with what ultimately happens when the inheritors of that cultural dynamic *write* in Yiddish" (p. 5), he would have been better served by staying away from using examples such as Avraham Reyzen's "May ko mashme lon" (What does it teach us?)(1917), a yeshiva student's "somber rumination ... about his gloomy, abject condition" (p. 69) and Peretz's "A shmues" (A conversation)(1930), a dialogue between a Kotsker Hasid and a Belzer Hasid. A clearer distinction ought to be made between cases like these, in which the author is stylizing a character's speech to match his background, and ones in which Talmudic discourse connectives, for example, are used *despite* the character's lack of familiarity with Talmudic texts.

Despite these minor limitations, Finkin's work overall very convincingly argues and provides evidence for his major claims. Having read *A Rhetorical Conversation*, I now find myself constantly noticing the patterns that Finkin has explicated in the Yiddish literature that I read. Finkin's contribution is of special importance as traditional modes of Jewish religious study become increasingly more difficult for the secular scholar to access. By absorbing Finkin's analysis, a student of Yiddish literature can much better understand the context of the tautological infinitives, associative digressions, and otherwise seemingly illogical connections that authors infuse into their characters' speech.

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