

## P R E F A C E

Modern Jewish culture speaks with many voices.

Medieval Jewry was framed by its religion; there was an absolute boundary that defined a person either as a Jew or not. Being a Jew was a total framework, legal and mandatory. In the secular world Jewishness can be partial and voluntary. Many autonomous expressions, organizations and centers flourished in the modern age. Jews developed a new culture in Yiddish, in Hebrew, and in the languages of the global Diaspora. They built new institutions and wrote new types of texts in Russia, Poland, Germany, America, Argentina, Israel. Each movement, genre or ideological expression was a warm home for a group of adherents.

This book tries to reflect the polyphony of voices that make up together the totality of modern Jewish culture. The book grew out of a collection of essays written in English on various occasions. I tried to zoom-in on specific issues, understand the essential aspects of each phenomenon and mediate it to an English-reading audience. Indeed, several essays were first introductions to books. There is no attempt at being scholarly or comprehensive, just to cast a map of aspects and problems that touch the horizons of modern Jewish identity.

The framework is historical. It starts with the context of the Modern Jewish Revolution, which I developed in my earlier books, *The Meaning of Yiddish* and *Language in Time of Revolution*. I point out the unique situation in which the Jews found themselves in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century, where

they constituted—for the first time in history—an absolute majority on a polka-dotted map of hundreds of towns. And ends with the intensive life they conducted in the clutches of horror in the last days of Jerusalem of Lithuania. I try to make a case for seeing not one but two Holocausts: the physical annihilation of six million people (among fifty million who died in World War II) and the very different demise of a nation, a culture, a history.

I analyze the nature of multilingualism as a universal phenomenon and its place in the history of the Jews. I discuss the crisis of Jewish identity, the ambivalence between the Land of Israel and Diaspora, and between an orthodox and secular identity, as powerfully evoked in the key novel of that fundamentalist modernist S.Y. Agnon.

Several essays deal with Hebrew and Yiddish poetry, notably the flourishing of American poetry in the Yiddish language in the twentieth century. A long essay exposes the uses Marc Chagall made of the idioms of his first language, Yiddish, an example of language as a subtext in painting. And finally, a brief Note defines the basic forms of Hebrew verse from the Bible to modernism.

All essays were edited for this volume, yet substantially they remained as first written on various occasions. A list of the original sources of the articles is appended.

The interested reader will find further ideas in my published Hebrew writings and in the companion volume on literary theory, *Explorations on Poetics*.

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