Jewish literatures in Europe underwent tremendous tensions and pressures within the specific contexts of modernity. My case study focuses on Rabbi Nahman’s tales, which were told orally by him in Yiddish and subsequently written down by his disciples. The stories were published ten years after his death in a bilingual edition featuring both Yiddish and Hebrew (Mi’Breslev 1815).¹ This inherent bilinguality, I argue, characterizes the various traditions of Jewish literatures that emanated from Europe. As David Roskies has noted, even Y. L. “Peretz himself recognized [that] all roads led back to Nahman of Bratslav whom he hailed as the harbinger of modern Yiddish culture” (Roskies 1985, 69).

Such an understanding of the history of modern Jewish literatures involves a paradigm shift that would be comparable to teaching a survey of Western literature starting with Aesop’s fables rather than Homer’s Iliad or Odyssey. In the modern Jewish context, it involves being conscious, even as we teach secular texts, of the roots of this literature in religious mysticism and Hasidism – in a tension between geographical provinciality, spiritual searching, and political marginality. It also means recalling the demands of creating and maintaining communality, religious adherence, and national perseverance – all of which drove, in part, the stories that would later serve as both conscious and unconscious models for Jewish writing in Europe and, later, in the Americas.

In this essay, I hope to propose a framework in which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Yiddish and Hebrew literatures are considered in relation to each other. I will broach these topics in general terms and broad strokes in order to present my vision for teaching and studying European Jewish literatures – and the literatures it has influenced. My position, it should be noted, is less connected to canon-building – I am not interested in outlining specific works to be studied – and more in an inclusion of perspectives on religious Jewish life-worlds and their texts.

Rabbi Nahman (1772–1810) was known as the great-grandson of the Baal-Shem Tov, the spiritual leader credited with establishing, along with his disciples, the religious movement of Hasidism and a tradition of community building around a Rebbe – a kind of a tsadik (righteous man) who leads a group of fol-

¹ See Arthur Green’s entry, “Naḥman of Bratslav,” in The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Europe (Green 2010).
lowers. Rabbi Nahman was a special case because, while he had disciples and offspring, he left no surviving sons or other successors. Rabbi Nahman faced antagonism from within the Hasidic movement, more antagonism from the Misnagdim who opposed Hasidism, and even more antagonistic pressures on religious life from early forms of Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, which from an orthodox perspective could be seen as a kind of semi-assimilation. Rabbi Nahman also suffered from tuberculosis and has been posthumously diagnosed with emotional challenges described as bipolarity or manic-depression (Green 1979; Beale 1996). His disciples, the most prominent of whom was Rabbi Natan, wrote down and published his stories and his teachings, and also created a community that followed the oral teachings of this lost sage. Other figures, like Joseph Pearl, parodied Nahman’s tales as part of an Enlightenment critical critique, bringing a different kind of renown to these Yiddish tales, yet still placing them within modern cultural discourse (Dauber 2004).

Perhaps the most interesting circumstance for our consideration is the fact, mentioned above, that the first publication of Rabbi Nahman tales in 1815 was itself a bilingual edition which included Rabbi Natan’s renditions of Nahman’s Yiddish originals underneath Hebrew translations of the same text (Dauber 2004, 229). This bilingual method has complex literary, religious, and social implications, as, within the religious community in which these languages developed ahead of modernity, Yiddish books were generally printed for women, while Hebrew books consisted mostly of commentaries on holy writings, intended for men. Yet this book was printed within the religious community in both the Jewish vernacular and in the holy tongue – featuring strange, symbolic tales drawing on imagery from traditions religious and secular, Jewish and non-Jewish, and, to boot, published under the name of a religious leader who never wrote down anything of what he said and who left behind no dynasty.

One of the roots of modern Jewish literatures in Europe, then, is characterized by the linguistic tensions between Yiddish and Hebrew, by religious tensions and secular pressures of the period, as well as by spiritual, psychological, and stylistic elements that make up the subject of literature. The stories reflect European courtly and folklore storytelling traditions, with kings, princesses, and viceroys, as well as magical forests, mountains, and creatures. Yet they also incorporate Zoharic traditions of Kabbalistic thought and symbolism, including their Persian and Arabic influences.² The language of their composition is Yiddish, which did not, when Rabbi Nahman’s tales were published, yet have valence as a modern language with literary properties. Even the collection’s title,

² For an example of Arabic influences on early Kabbalah, see Ebstein and Weiss 2015.
**Sipurei Mayses**, combines Hebrew proper with Yiddishized Hebrew language: *sipur* means “story” in Hebrew, yet *mayse* has both Hebrew and Yiddish usages, both of them meaning “tale,” but used slightly differently. A Yiddish *mayse* is a tale or story, but a *ma’aseh* in Hebrew is an action or occurrence—a word used by rabbinical sages when describing a series of events centered on certain actions. Rabbi Nahman’s book is often called *The Tales of Rabbi Nahman*, but it should really be called Rabbi Nahman’s *Stories of Tales*, in the sense that he not only told tales, but also already embedded in his work a self-conscious form of telling that is usually associated with late high Modernism or early Post-modernism. He was not telling tales, he was telling *stories about telling tales*, he was making listeners—and later readers—aware of the value of the *telling* no less than the *told*. And this was done in both Yiddish and Hebrew.

Comprehending these influences—and certainly teaching them in a literature class—involves interdisciplinarity, which I believe is better seen as integrative. This kind of integrative approach is rooted less in the desire to bring methods and concepts from different areas of study into a pluralistic approach, and more, like the Yiddish language, in an attempt to synthesize all of the different influences that flowed into the singular case of Yiddish storytelling. Without understanding some Zohar and Kabbalah, some European vernacular and chivalric literature, some of the history of Hasidism and its influence, some notion of the political and historical trajectories of the period— and without also having a sense of the Jewish life-worlds addressed by the tales themselves—it becomes difficult to fully understand the importance of Rabbi Nahman’s tales and their far-reaching influence on modern Jewish literatures in Europe. At issue are complex influences from the earliest writers in Yiddish and Hebrew to the rest of Jewish traditions that extended from the nineteenth- to the twenty-first-centuries.

With Rabbi Nahman’s texts, we focus an important chapter of Jewish writing in Europe around the beginning of the nineteenth century. The next step would be to consider some of the trends in Jewish writing in the second half of the nineteenth century—which means, undoubtedly, a look at S. Y. Abramovitch, also known as Mendele Moykher-Sforim, or Mendele the Bookpeddler. Abramovitch’s role as a founder of modern literary writing in Hebrew and Yiddish is nearly-un-

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4 This aspect of Rabbi Nahman’s life and work is only now being properly explored by Ofer Dynes of the Hebrew University.
5 The fact that one of the earliest Maskil or Enlightened Yiddish writers of the time, Yisroel Ak-senfeld, was a former Bratslav Hasid only strengthens the case for beginning such a class with Rabbi Nahman, as does the fact that yet another early Maskilic Yiddish writer, Solomon Ettinger, wrote in both Hebrew and Yiddish, strengthening the bilingual focus of this approach.
disputed, but it may be worth noting that he continues an important structural node in the network of Jewish writing in Europe – in which Yiddish plays a prominent role without existing in isolation from other movements, trajectories, or languages of Jewish life.

Abramovitch’s vacillation between Yiddish and Hebrew introduces an ideological view different from Rabbi Nahman’s tales. While Rabbi Nahman attempted to integrate the secular and the sacred in a newly deployed from of spiritual storytelling, Abramovich presented a modern, forward-looking, non-religious vision of the Hebrew language as a Maskilic subject and tool. This presents one of the Haskalah’s central problematics – its attempt to help Jews move out of an insular culture by modernizing an ancient language and using it with new methods of studying religious, philosophical, and scientific topics – a paradoxical issue that should be explored in a class on Jewish literatures in Europe. Yet setting aside these inherent contradictions, a renewed interest in the vitality of Hebrew also generated an interest in subjects that had not yet been incorporated into traditional Jewish life. This coincided with changes in the political, social, and economical status of Jews, secular or cultural perspectives on Jewish tradition, nationalistic ambitions, as well as on literary forms of storytelling that had not existed before. All this was accomplished in a literary mode that was, at least in part, influenced by the translatability that existed between Hebrew and Yiddish – and which has already been embedded into Rabbi Nahman’s tales.

This trajectory from Rabbi Nahman’s to Abramovitch’s bilinguality traces an important shift in the relation of Yiddish and Hebrew – a shift, interestingly, which preserved the idea of Hebrew having a higher status than Yiddish. Either way, the translatability between Hebrew and Yiddish literature at the outset of modernity also exposes the underlying links, however tense, that existed between different sectors of Jewish society, whether religious, secular, nationalistic, reformist, or, a little later, socialist and communist. One powerful model for how to explore and teach the two literary strands together can be found in research on the role of women in Jewish literatures, especially since it often addresses the early Yiddish context together with creative production in the later modern period in both Yiddish and Hebrew. In thinking about approaches to teaching Jewish literature beyond Europe, I propose keeping in mind the degree to which the founders of modern Hebrew literature – like Abramovitch, H. N. Bialik, Ahad Ha-Am, Leah Goldberg, S. G. Tchernichovsky, Y. H. Brener, and S. Y. Agnon – enacted

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6 For a recent discussion of his work, see Miriam Udel’s introduction to her monograph, Never Better!: The Modern Jewish Picaresque (Udel 2016, 2–7).

a translation, more conscious at some times than at others, of Yiddish language and literature in their work. A similar effect, I would argue, can be traced in major-language Jewish authors writing in both Europe and the Americas, before and after the World Wars. And at the core of my approach is an attempt to delineate not only historical and literary influences, but also mystical and spiritual points of inspiration from within the Jewish tradition and the Yiddish language— which, I believe, entered into and enriched the parallel development of Yiddish and Hebrew literature within secular contexts.

**Bibliography**


