

The Versified Old Yiddish Blessing in the Worms Mahzor*

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[1]

ON FOL. 54r (92r according to the old foliation) of the Worms *Mahzor* the following blessing appears, written in Old Yiddish:

גוט טק אים בְּטָגָא שׁ יִר דִּישׁ מַחְזֹר אִין בֵּית הַכְּנֶסֶת טְרָגָא

This text means: A good day will be available (or lit up) for him who carries this *mahzor* to the synagogue.

The blessing is written in the spaces within the large letters of the word *ברעתו* which begins the liturgical hymn *חידות אביעה* in the prayer for dew in the additional service (*musaf*) on the first day of Passover. The outlines of the word *ברעתו*, which create the spaces, are written in dark brown ink, while the blessing which is in the spaces is written in a bright red colour. The vocalization of the Yiddish text was apparently added at a later date, and it is also written in dark brown ink.

There is no doubt that the blessing, which is the only Yiddish text in the entire *Mahzor*,¹ dates from the time of the original copying of the *Mahzor* in 1272, for it is written in the same hand as the *Mahzor* itself.

Furthermore, another word in this *Mahzor* which is undoubtedly an original element in the manuscript from the time it was first written is decorated in exactly the same fashion and in the same colours of ink (but without vocalization). This word is the word *אל*, written as one character, which opens the liturgical hymn *אל מתנשא לכל* for the Sabbath of *Parashat Sheqalim* on fol. 1r of the *Mahzor* as it is bound in this edition, in which the original order of the *Mahzor* is reconstructed. Here, on the original first page of the *Mahzor*, the following text is written in the spaces between

the letters of the word *אל*: "שלי ברוך בר' יצחק זל" (=Property of Barukh son of R. Yizhaq, may he rest in peace). This notation of the ownership of the *Mahzor* is in consonance with the original colophon in which the name of Barukh b. R. Yizhaq appears as the one for whom the *Mahzor* was written. Thus, there can be no doubt that the Yiddish blessing formed using the same graphic means and in the same colours as the note of ownership at the beginning of the *Mahzor* is an original text dating from the same time as the rest of the *Mahzor*.

It should be noted that while many words and large initials in the Worms *Mahzor* are graphically similar, i.e. coloured uniformly or decorated in their interior spaces with various ornaments,² only in these two instances — the notation of ownership and the Yiddish blessing — are the spaces within the letters decorated with inscriptions.

These two inscriptions are not part of the order of the prayers or of the prayers themselves. However, it would seem that their placement amidst the words of sacred texts indicates the intention of the scribe — and almost certainly also of his uncle, the owner for whom the *Mahzor* was written — to invest these inscriptions with great significance. With respect to the inscription of the ownership of the *Mahzor* this fact is self-evident. What, though, is the explanation, function and importance of the Yiddish blessing?

To date, no parallel has been found in any language to the Yiddish blessing on the use of the Worms *Mahzor*.³ From the

* I extend my thanks to Prof. M. Beit-Arié for his important comments on the draft of this article.

1 It is almost certain that there was something additional written in the *Mahzor* in Yiddish. On fol. 4v (42v according to the old foliation) the word *ווערן* remains in the margin as part of some note or commentary which was added to the *Mahzor*, apparently at a later period and by a different hand. The note was partially destroyed when the margins of the *Mahzor* were trimmed.

2 See, for example, the letters *אתי* on fol. 34v (72v according to the old foliation).

3 The parallel which Roell noted in the western vernacular from para. 3 of the 1537/8 Bologna edition of *Sefer ha-Hasidim*, p. 1, is irrelevant to the

nature of the blessing in the Worms *Mahzor* (See W. Roell, "Das aelteste datierte juedisch-deutsche Sprachdenkmal — Ein Verspaar im Wormser Machsor von 1272/73", *Zeitschrift fuer Mundartforschung*, XXXIII (1966) [henceforth: Roell], p. 137. The comment in *Sefer ha-Hasidim* refers to the following: "Every single time that we recall God's great and awesome Name we must bless Him, may His Name be sanctified, in the Holy Tongue and in the vernacular." In direct continuation of these words, the blessing is recorded in *la'az* in Hebrew characters. Roell brings this citation there, quoting Guedman, without referring to the context. For a parallel case where, in a manuscript from the middle of the fourteenth century, ownership was noted in the spaces within letters, see above, the article of M. Beit-Arié, n. 19.

wording of the blessing before us it is certain that even at the time it was written, the scribe and the owner of the *Mahzor* knew that it would not be kept in the synagogue. One can presume that the owner intended to keep the *Mahzor* at home. Since it was clear from the start that it would be necessary to bring the *Mahzor* to the synagogue before the recital of the prayers on the special Sabbaths and on the festivals, the inscription of the Yiddish blessing in the *Mahzor* itself served as an expression of thanks and a wish for the welfare of those who would subsequently trouble themselves to bring it. Recall that we are talking of a real burden, carrying this heavy book, which is written entirely on parchment. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the *Mahzor* was also larger and heavier than it is in our day.⁴

The colophon implies that the original owner of the *Mahzor*, Barukh b. R. Yizhaq, was himself a *hazzan*. The scribe notes in the colophon that he edited and arranged "the entire prayer as recited by the cantor," adding a blessing to his uncle, the patron who ordered the writing of the *Mahzor* and who owned it: "May the Omnipresent grant that he merit to use it to thank, to praise, to sing and to extol the Maker of his soul." Such terminology could be used appropriately only with reference to a cantor. Indeed, when the *Mahzor* subsequently became "communal property" in Worms, it came to be known as the *Mahzor* "of the cantors".⁵

The owner of the *Mahzor* was childless, as M. Beit-Arié accurately concluded from the wording of the colophon. This implies that the *hazzan* Barukh b. R. Yizhaq ordered the preparation of the *Mahzor* when he was already an elderly man. Thus, the problem of transporting this heavy *Mahzor* from its usual place of keeping to the synagogue was in fact a problem which could already be anticipated at the time it was written. Presumably, then, the blessing was written in Yiddish, the common vernacular spoken by everyone, because the owner of the *Mahzor* might likely require the assistance of uneducated common folk or of children to carry the *Mahzor* from place to place. Had the blessing been written in Hebrew, these people would have been unable to understand it.

[2]

The Yiddish verse in the Worms *Mahzor* is the oldest Yiddish text known to us today which can be dated with certainty. It seems likely that several Yiddish glosses in other undated manuscripts are earlier, but this cannot be established with certainty.⁶ It now seems proven beyond doubt that the glosses to the commentaries of Rashi "in the language of Germany" are part of Rashi's original text and not, as had been thought, later additions com-

posed by his students and their students.⁷ Still, these glosses, which must predate Rashi's death in 1105, contain isolated words only. The short Yiddish text in the Worms *Mahzor* is the earliest example available to us of Old Yiddish in the form of a complex sentence whose function and meaning is entirely clear.

It is worth noting here that after the short text in the Worms *Mahzor*, the next dated continuous texts in Yiddish known to us are found only in a codex written in 1382, which was discovered among the fragments from the Cairo Genizah at the library in Cambridge (T-S 10 K 22). When the texts in this codex were first published in 1957, they were described as *The Oldest Known Literary Documents of Yiddish Literature*.⁸ However, the Yiddish verse in the Worms *Mahzor*, first published in an inaccurate fashion in 1961,⁹ then rediscovered by M. Beit-Arié and republished correctly in 1963,¹⁰ predates the manuscript from the Genizah by more than a century.

Actually, the importance of the verse in the Worms *Mahzor* goes far beyond its standing as the oldest Yiddish text known to date. The language, form, and even the position of the text shed light on several basic questions, with respect to the overall framework of Ashkenazi Jewish culture and specifically with regard to the study of Yiddish, language and literature, and their history. Our conclusions are the result of a broad reflection which looks beyond the marginal importance of the Yiddish text in the Worms *Mahzor* itself, and beyond its time. For already in this text itself and in its placement, fundamentals which remained fixed for centuries thereafter are discernible.

Before us is a text in the vernacular of thirteenth-century Ashkenazi Jews. According to the accepted periodization of the Yiddish language proposed by Max Weinreich, this text dates from the beginning of the period of Old Yiddish (*Altyiddish*, approximately 1250–1500), which is characterized by, among other things, the consolidation of Yiddish as an independent language.¹¹ The linguistic analysis of this short text reveals the melted character of the Yiddish language. The two dominant components — German and Hebrew — are clearly recognizable in the verse. There are three words derived from the Hebrew component (מחזור, בית הכנסת), constituting a significant percentage of the text. This is not the typical relationship in Yiddish texts between the Hebrew and the German. In most Yiddish texts, the proportion of the Hebrew lexical component is smaller. However, in our text the Hebrew component is greater due to the nature of its contents, which refers to sanctified objects in the Jewish religion. One of these, מחזור, remains unchanged also in the Yiddish of our day; the other, בית הכנסת, perhaps did not yet have the equivalent which is in use today, *shul*, which derives from the German component in Yiddish. In any event, from the Yiddish text in the Worms *Mahzor* one may conclude that from the beginning, as in

4 On the reconstruction of the *Mahzor* see above, the article of M. Beit-Arié, pp. 13 ff.

5 D. Goldschmidt, "The Worms *Mahzor*" [Heb.] *Kiryat Sefer*, XXXIV (1958–1959), p. 388; M. Beit-Arié, "The Vocalization of the Worms *Mahzor*" [Heb.], *Lēšonenu*, XXIX (1964–1965), p. 27 [henceforth: Beit-Arié].

6 Roell, p. 129.

7 Erika Timm, "Zur Frage der Echtheit von Raschis 'jiddischen Glossen'", *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 107 (1985), pp. 45–81.

8 L. Fuchs, *The Oldest Known Literary Documents of Yiddish Literature* (1382), Leiden 1957.

9 E. Róth, "Das Wormser Machsor — Geschrieben von Simcha ben

Jehuda, illustriert von Schemaja ha-zajjar", *Festschrift zur Wiedereinweihung der Alten Synagoge zu Worms*, Frankfurt o/M 1961, pp. 217–277.

10 D. Sadan, "The First Old Yiddish Inscription in the Worms *Mahzor*" [Heb.], *Kiryat Sefer*, XXXVIII (1962–1963), pp. 575–576; idem, "Der älteste gram in Yiddish", *Di goldene keyt*, 47 (1963), pp. 158–159; M. Weinreich, "A yiddisher zats fun far zibn hundert yor — Analiz fun a gor vikhtikn shprachikn gefins", *Yiddische shprakh*, XXIII (1963), pp. 87–93 [henceforth: Weinreich, *Zats*].

11 M. Weinreich, *Geshichte fun der yiddisher shprakh, bagrifn, faktn, metodn*, II, New York 1973, p. 397; idem, *History of the Yiddish Language*, Chicago–London 1980, p. 773.

later periods, Yiddish was widely open to linguistic absorption from Hebrew.¹²

The Hebrew component, which preserves its normative spelling in the text we are dealing with, stands out in relation to the German component, which is also written in Hebrew letters and with Hebrew vocalization, as is customary in all the Jewish languages which make use of the Hebrew alphabet. The effort required to make the Hebrew letters and vocalization fit the sounds of another language is noticeable. Nor is it fundamentally important if — as claimed by several scholars — these spelling conventions owe their origins to the western *la'az*,¹³ or if, as one scholar maintains, they originate directly from the Hebrew.¹⁴ However, whereas the Hebrew letters and vocalization graphically represent the German component (and any other component which is not Hebrew) in a phonetic spelling which represents the actual pronunciation of the language, words of Hebrew origin preserve the historic spelling, which does not reflect the linguistic realities of mediaeval Germany and does not enable us to reconstruct the pronunciation of the Hebrew component in Yiddish. We cannot be certain how the words *מחזור* and *בית הכנסת* were then pronounced.¹⁵ It should be emphasized, though, that the preservation of historic Hebrew spelling in Yiddish is conventional in standard Yiddish writing from the thirteenth century onward. As we have already mentioned, the Hebrew consonants and vowels represent the German component in Yiddish phonetically. Even so, one can discern in the Yiddish text from the Worms *Mahzor* several conventions of spelling and vocalization whose significance is wholly graphic and not at all phonetic, in accord with the conventions of the Hebrew vocalization throughout the *Mahzor*. So, for example, the symbol indicating *lene* pronunciation which appears over the letter *gimel* in the words *גַּטְגָּא* and *גַּרְגָּא*.¹⁶ The letter *aleph* in these two words combined with the *sheva* under the *gimel* were meant to represent a sound close to /e/.¹⁷

The German component in the rhyme in the Worms *Mahzor* corresponds to the German of the period. M. Weinreich has noted, though, that the *shuruq* in the *vav* in the word *גַּט* in the beginning of the verse exemplifies the monophthongal tendency of Yiddish. During the period in question, the equivalent German word, *guot* was still a diphthong.¹⁸

The letter *shin* appears twice without a diacritical mark.¹⁹ We can presume that this letter already then indicated a sound close to that indicated by the letter *samekh*, even without any left diacritical mark.²⁰

In the light of all we have said above, it is possible to present the verse in the modern transcription of Yiddish now current as follows:

gut tak im b(e)tag(e)
s(e) vaer dis מחזור in בית הכנסת in tag(e).²¹

The Hebrew words are printed here in Hebrew letters to indicate, as we have said, that we cannot know how they were pronounced. The text is reproduced here in a form which emphasizes the rhyme. Several of the words and forms in the verse in the Worms *Mahzor* might well cause some difficulty to Yiddish speakers in our day, but the text is not unintelligible to them. Most of it is clear even today, and the intention is understood. Thus, Max Weinreich was right to conclude that “in morphology, syntax and vocabulary, there are [in the blessing in the Worms *Mahzor*] many strands which lead directly to the [Yiddish] language of our day”.²²

[3]

The Yiddish blessing in the Worms *Mahzor* was written as a rhyme. The use of this form should be seen as an expression of the desire to deliver the relevant message in a literary-aesthetic manner. Therefore it is possible, thanks to this text, to date the beginning of literary forms in written Yiddish no later than the thirteenth century.

We should note here, though, the limited possibilities open to Yiddish and its literature even at its inception. The placement and presence of the Yiddish blessing in the *Mahzor* indicates much about the limitations posed on Yiddish literature in the bi-lingual religious-cultural-literary framework of mediaeval Ashkenazi Jewry. The verse appears as a decoration; its place is marginal in this collection of canonical texts, its location fixed in the spaces between the letters of the Hebrew word, which alone constitutes an inseparable part of the prayers. The positioning of this, the first Yiddish literary document, which apparently was only a graphic consideration, actually reflects both symbolically and in fact the status of Yiddish and Yiddish literature in the totality of the many-faceted Ashkenazi culture. It could be said that the placement of the blessing reflects the limited possibilities available to Yiddish literature from its inception: it could fill only those empty spaces left to it, or created for it, in the cultural life of the Jews which was built upon the variegated, ancient, traditional literature. This traditional literature continued to serve as the main and unchallenged centre and foundation even after the appearance of Yiddish as the spoken language of the Ashkenazi Jews.

If we may speak of a kind of functional division in linguistic-literary usage, it is clear that almost all of the literary spheres in the Jewish community were already occupied by the traditional Hebrew-Aramaic language. The designation of this latter language as “the Holy Tongue” expresses best its status, composi-

12 U. Weinreich, “The Hebrew-Yiddish Writing Style” [Heb.], *Lēšonenu*, XXII (1957–1958), pp. 54–66.

13 Weinreich, *Zats*, p. 93; S.A. Birnbaum, *Yiddish — A Survey and a Grammar*, Toronto 1979, pp. 149–151 [henceforth: Birnbaum].

14 Roell, pp. 131–135.

15 Weinreich, *Zats*, p. 92; Birnbaum, pp. 150–151.

16 Sadan (above, n. 10); Weinreich, *Zats*, p. 88; Beit-Arié, p. 45; and cf. I. Eldar, *The Proto-Ashkenazi Reading Tradition, Its Nature and Its Common Bases with the Sefardi Tradition, I: Pronunciations and Vocalization* [Heb.], Jerusalem 1978, pp. 107–108; Birnbaum, p. 150; Roell, p. 134.

17 Weinreich, *Zats*, p. 92; Birnbaum, p. 150; Roell, p. 134.

18 Weinreich, *Zats*, p. 89; Beit-Arié, p. 32; Weinreich, *History* (above, n. 11), p. 669.

19 In one of the early publications of the verse (Sadan, *Kiryat Sefer*, above, n. 10) a right diacritical mark was printed in each *shin*. Rechecking the original, I failed to find such marks.

20 Weinreich, *Zats*, p. 91; Eldar (above, n. 16), pp. 101–102; Birnbaum, p. 150.

21 The rules of transcription are described in U. Weinreich, *College Yiddish*², New York 1960, p. 26.

22 Weinreich, *Zats*, p. 93.

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tion, tradition, and functions. The Holy Tongue served not only for prayer and the Torah-reading in the synagogue, but also at family gatherings outside the synagogue, for instance in *qid-dush*, benedictions and grace after meals. By the time Yiddish appeared on the scene, most of these texts, as well as the Passover Haggadah, already had been fixed in the Holy Tongue. Legal documents, such as marriage contracts, writs of divorce, and various other contracts, were required to be written in the Holy Tongue, even though these documents apparently deal with secular spheres of activity where the spoken language was used. Similarly, Hebrew was used for most other areas of written expression, from Bible commentaries and halakhic or philosophical discussions to private correspondence, even between laymen. All this at a time when in dealings among themselves, these same Ashkenazi Jews — certainly by the thirteenth century —

already used Yiddish in oral transactions. Yiddish was likewise used in correspondence with men and women unable to read a letter in the Holy Tongue.

To sum up, then, in that Ashkenazi society in which one can distinguish only with difficulty between the sanctified and the profane in both public and private life, the possibilities for written expression in Yiddish were restricted from the start. However, it was the bi-lingual situation itself and the necessities of life which could create new possibilities for Yiddish beyond oral contacts. Such functions first developed — in accordance with the religious character of the community — in order to fulfill religious needs. In cases where comprehension of the law was essential by women, laymen and children, it was presented in the vernacular. The blessing in Yiddish in the Worms *Mahzor* is evidence for the start of this process.²³

23 For more on the continuation of this process see Ch. Shmeruk, *Yiddish Literature — Chapters in Its History* [Heb.], Tel Aviv 1978, chap. 1.