

Introduction

Hebrew tales of far-flung sea adventure began to appear during the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskala), supplementing traditional narratives of pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In contrast to premodern Jews, who often viewed the Land of Israel as the center of the world and dreamed of going there, Jews of the Enlightenment (*maskilim*) broadened their horizons by reading and writing about travels far beyond Zion. Pilgrimage narratives since the Middle Ages expressed a devotion to the scriptural Zion before there was political Zionism, whereas the new adventure stories challenged sacred geography and may have encouraged the mass migration of Jews to the New World.

This book traces the emergence of modern Hebrew literature from 1780 to 1825, when Jews gradually moved beyond their traditional, Torah- and Zion-centered worldviews. Ashkenazic Jewry had undergone a collective trauma during the Chmielnitzky massacres of 1648; Jewish communities had been splintered by the messianic claims of Shabbetai Tzvi (1626–76) and Jacob Frank (1726–91); and the Ba'al Shem Tov and his hasidic followers had challenged the authority of mainstream rabbinic Judaism. Following these unsettling developments, as European Jews began to modernize and secularize during the Jewish Enlightenment, their perspective began to shift. Writing in Hebrew, some authors changed their focus from spiritual pilgrimage to worldly travel and affirmed their Diaspora identities. Enlightened Jews in Berlin and their followers shattered boundaries, diverging from pilgrimage traditions and appropriating—mostly from German sources—stories of travel to America, the Indian Ocean, the Pacific, and the Arctic. Yet many of these Hebrew translators continued to rely on scriptural traditions, inserting

quotations from the Hebrew Bible instead of translating more literally from their German sources.

Jews have often seen themselves as diasporic, living in exile from the presumed homeland—and influenced by ancient and medieval sources, they sometimes considered Zion the center of the world. (The precise geographic locus of this lost “Zion” has never been definitively mapped, however, and its meaning in the Hebrew Bible is ambiguous.) There were exceptions to the Zion-centered norm, but travelers such as Benjamin of Tudela—who traveled far beyond the Holy Land to explore western Asia—and some Italian Jewish merchants, who voyaged across the Mediterranean, only underscore the rule. One persistent dream of a landlocked, persecuted, wandering people was to board ships and make a pilgrimage to the Land of Israel.

The Jewish literary imagination took the Torah as the blueprint of the world or mapped the Torah onto the world: pilgrims to Zion sought out sacred places and tombs using the Bible and Talmud as their travel guides. For hasidic Jews who traveled to the Land of Israel, the journey became a spiritual ascent. The earthly Zion or “Jerusalem Below,” alluding to a “Jerusalem Above,” brought the shadow of a higher reality or sacred space into play, which seemed to justify subjecting oneself to the dangers of sea travel. One of the most remarkable pilgrimages of this kind was Nahman of Bratslav’s journey in 1798–99, as narrated in a detailed account published by Nathan Sternharz in 1815. Then in 1822 Sternharz followed in the Rebbe’s footsteps with his own pilgrimage to the Land of Israel, which he documented in a new Hebrew narrative that was published half a century later. The style of Sternharz’s Hebrew was rabbinic, Mishnaic, and at the same time influenced by Yiddish.

Jewish writers’ expanding worldview found expression in the modernization of Hebrew, and their modernizing Hebrew in turn fostered a broader view of the world. As Jews moved away from traditional education, they started to break away from the Zion-centered world and simultaneously to reject rabbinic Hebrew writing. Hence, it is possible to trace the rise of modern Hebrew literature in tandem with the shift from narratives of pilgrimage to narratives of secular travel.

The German Jewish Moses Mendelsohn-Frankfurt (1782–1861; no relation to the renowned Moses Mendelssohn of Berlin) turned away from narratives of sacred pilgrimage in 1807. Translating from a popular German source, he launched a new genre of travel narrative in Hebrew. This nascent genre was intended to teach the reader history and geography as well as openness to other peoples of the world. From a specifically literary perspective, Mendelsohn-Frankfurt began to unfetter Hebrew style from the neobiblical limitations imposed on it by the Haskala. Several other Hebrew authors followed his example in eastern Europe, and Mendel Lefin reached new heights by using a rich vocabulary drawn from various historical phases of Hebrew.¹

Devotion to sacred texts has been both a strength and a weakness in Jewish cultural history. Commentaries, midrashic retellings, and legalistic arguments ensured the continuity of textual traditions, yet this recycling of ancient texts may have hindered the development of an original literature in response to everyday life. If the Torah was the blueprint of the world, what need was there to assert originality or explore distant lands? For almost two millennia, although Hebrew was no longer a spoken language, Hebrew writers continually referred to classical Hebrew texts, emphasizing their ongoing and evolving relationship to the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. This commitment to the past complicated these Hebrew writers' efforts to produce a modern literature. Dominant textual sources so influenced perceptions that they limited writers' capacity to see reality in new ways; it was difficult to convey immediate perceptions. Traditionally educated Jews tended to interpret experiences in relation to familiar, sacred texts; quotations from and allusions to these texts often took precedence over original expressions.²

Writing and translating sea narratives played a significant role in early-modern Hebrew literature because these tasks required a concreteness—an empirical, naturalistic approach—that was at odds with the textual focus that typified rabbinic culture. Instead of making fresh observations, Hebrew authors frequently fell back on clichés from the Book of Jonah, such as “the boat was on the verge of breaking up” (*ha-oniya hishva leshaver*). This was especially the case among the early *maskilim*,

who consciously strove to emulate biblical Hebrew. For different reasons, hasidic authors such as Sternharz also described sea journeys in relation to scriptural sources, often with Psalm 107 as a central reference point. For these writers, the spiritual meaning of the journey outweighed its tangible details.

Translated sea narratives played an important role in early-modern Hebrew writing, in part because the challenges posed by translation exerted pressure on authors to develop concrete language. In order to express the specificity of the events described in prior travel accounts, they had to invent new descriptive language in Hebrew. Thus, a few enlightened writers strove for more vivid, immediate, and original expressions, overcoming their tendency to introduce biblical phrases and quotations at every turn. In this manner, they anticipated the later accomplishments associated with the “revival” of Hebrew at the end of the nineteenth century.

When we compare hasidic accounts of pilgrimage to Zion to travel narratives translated by the enlightened Hebrew authors in Germany, Galicia, and Russia, we notice a literary and cultural parting of ways. Hasidim described their pilgrimages in scriptural and Mishnaic Hebrew, with a Yiddish subtext, and often expressed their Zion-centered worldview. In contrast, maskilic writers began to develop a new kind of Hebrew that described the modern world at a distance from rabbinic sources. Their subtext was German, and they no longer placed the Talmud and Land of Israel at the center. At odds with traditional texts, some enlightened Jews began publishing European travel narratives and translating non-Jewish travel narratives. Travel accounts by traditional and secular Jewish authors thus exposed a clash of worldviews. From hasidim to *maskilim*, from Sternharz to Lefin, these diverse and talented authors tried to reach the widening circle of Jewish readers.

As Hebrew writers reshaped Jewish literature, they attempted to influence their readers. New literary forms arose within the hasidic movement and the Jewish Enlightenment. These forms energized the Hebrew literary tradition, and the resulting battle of books made a modern literature possible. At the same time, as the opponents tried to vanquish one another, their conflict fostered the creation of an original literary culture.

The antagonists, without setting out to do so, fashioned a new narrative literature that became increasingly capable of representing everyday life in Hebrew. Even more remarkably, they re-created Hebrew as a language that sounded spontaneous and spoken after centuries when it had been primarily textual and ritual. The interdependence of Hebrew and Yiddish enhanced these languages, and both were enriched by German, French, Polish, and Russian. Hasidic authors commonly worked in a Yiddish-speaking context, whereas authors associated with the Enlightenment often translated from German. Whereas the hasidim reached the masses by writing in simple Hebrew and accessible Yiddish, the *maskilim* attempted to exalt Jewish literature by emulating the European culture they so admired. One author who emerged victorious from this fray was Mendel Lefin (1749–1826), who was influenced by the Berlin authors but chose to write accessible Hebrew and Yiddish. This book concludes with a chapter about Lefin’s synthesis, which may be found in his translations from German into Hebrew and from Hebrew into Yiddish.

Travel, Translation, and Cultural Transfer

Writers in Germany, Austrian Galicia, and Russian Ukraine charted a world of Hebrew and Yiddish translations that changed Jewish history, historiography, and literature. In their efforts to educate Jewish readers, several translators remade the genre of the travel narrative and contributed to the rise of modern Jewish literature.

Until about 1800, Jewish geography centered on the Land of Israel—the despoiled homeland of the Jews’ ancient forbears, according to the accepted canonical narratives. Exalted by diasporic Jewish writers in medieval psalms, poems, and prayers, Zion inspired pilgrimages and dreams of redemption. Premodern Jewish communities around the world reaffirmed their bond to the Land of Israel in prayers and at the annual Passover Seder.

Most notable early Jewish travel narratives were written in Hebrew: the narratives by Benjamin of Tudela (dating from about 1173), Ovadia of Bertinoro (who sailed the Mediterranean in 1486–88), and Shmuel Romanelli (who traveled in 1787–90 and published a book about his travels in 1792). Other travel stories, such as the fantastical Hebrew “Tale of a

Jerusalemite,” sometimes ascribed to Maimonides’s son Abraham (1186–1237), also exist in later Arabic and Yiddish versions. During the medieval and Renaissance periods, Hebrew remained the primary language of Jewish literacy, although Jewish communities in different regions read and spoke Aramaic (or Judeo-Aramaic), Arabic (or Judeo-Arabic), Ladino (Judeo-Spanish or Judezmo), Persian (or Judeo-Persian), or Yiddish. The genre of the travelogue was dominated by pilgrimage accounts in Hebrew, yet descriptions of travel began to emerge in other languages as well. Moreover, the spoken vernaculars influenced how Hebrew was written.

Jewish travel narratives have been intertwined with a history of exile, migration, and immigration. Modern Jewish migration has its roots in the late eighteenth century, when western European Jews began to embrace a worldview that no longer revolved around the Land of Israel. Following Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86) and his disciples, a new cohort of Jewish writers broke with tradition by urging Jews to learn formerly unfamiliar subjects. As secular education and modernization reached more Jewish Europeans in the nineteenth century, the Jews’ geographical horizons widened as well. Palestine under the Ottoman Turks remained a pilgrimage destination for pious Jews, but Jewish travel narratives moved beyond the ancient longing for Zion. By 1880, more than one hundred thousand German Jews had migrated to the United States, and in the subsequent four decades almost two million Jews from eastern Europe traveled to “the Golden Land.”³

In 1782, Naftali Hirsh Wessely—a leader of the Berlin Jewish Enlightenment—argued vehemently that Jews should learn history, geography, ethnography, mathematics, and other secular subjects.⁴ He specifically recommended reading travel books, probably alluding to works such as Joachim Heinrich Campe’s *Die Entdeckung von Amerika* (The Discovery of America), which had recently become a best seller in German.⁵ Wessely also praised the study of biblical Hebrew grammar, which would enable Jews to write “pure” Hebrew. Although many traditional communities rejected Wessely’s arguments, some Hebrew writers did respond by translating travel literature into Hebrew. Their translations became part of a broad project of “modernization via translation,” which Yaacov Shavit describes as “an intensive, ongoing attempt at transfer and adaptation, to

enable the new Hebrew reader to find the knowledge he or she needed about the ‘world around them’ and its culture, through Hebrew.”⁶

Many enlightened Jewish writers in Berlin, influenced by German classicists who idealized the Greeks, returned to the biblical prophets for inspiration; they opposed centuries of linguistic evolution in rabbinic and literary circles. Spoken Hebrew had waned in Palestine at the start of the Common Era, supplanted mainly by Aramaic and Greek. After the period of the Mishna (ca. 200 CE), rabbinic Hebrew continued to evolve in writing, though not in spontaneous speech. Alongside Aramaic, it was used by educated men for prayer, study, poetry, correspondence, and legal decisions. The religious associations of Hebrew were so prominent that the Hebrew used by the rabbis, often incorporating Aramaic from the Talmud, was referred to as *leshon ha-kodesh*, the Holy Language (or “language of sanctity”). Many early Enlightenment Jews had learned the Talmud in traditional yeshivas, but they generally avoided Aramaic and scorned the long history of rabbinic Hebrew, viewing it as a degradation of the best or “purest” biblical Hebrew. Moreover, many educated Jews rejected vernacular Yiddish as a barbaric jargon unsuited to serious literature and an obstacle to modernization.

After 1807, a radically new travel literature arose in Hebrew. Under the star of the Berlin Enlightenment, authors such as Moses Mendelsohn-Frankfurt and Mendel Lefin published books that charted a new literary route through the world and in European history. Without being explorers or seafarers themselves, they took up the western European fascination with travel. A century or more after narratives of sea travel became popular in Dutch, French, German, and English, Jewish authors imported the genre into Hebrew (and later Yiddish). The “plain style” of captains’ accounts was one characteristic that challenged Hebrew translators to develop new resources.⁷

Literary history shows how original works of travel literature have creatively transformed preexisting forms. When Daniel Defoe published *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, he alluded to past narratives about sea travels and shipwrecks and helped inaugurate a literary era with roots in earlier models. Although European ship captains and their ghostwriters had been publishing travelogues in several languages for centuries, Defoe

made an original contribution with his fictionalized prose narrative that centered on an individual's survival, far from civilization, following shipwreck. Defoe's novel was published in hundreds of editions and in dozens of languages, spawning imitations, adaptations, and even philosophical worldviews.⁸

The nineteenth century saw at least seven Hebrew and Yiddish versions of *Robinson Crusoe*, some of them adapted from J. H. Campe's adaptation, *Robinson der Jüngere (Robinson the Younger, 1779)*. Contrary to expectations, Jewish travel writers achieved both popularity and originality when they adapted the travel genre to their needs and goals in Hebrew and Yiddish. Only a handful of the modern Jewish authors discussed here—such as Isaac Euchel and Shmuel Romanelli—published accounts based on their own journeys. More often, the new Jewish writers were armchair travelers who adapted narratives from other languages. They were travelers in translation.

Readers sometimes assume that translations lack originality. Yet the resulting texts can be highly original and significant in their own right. Obvious examples include many of the time-honored translations of the Hebrew Bible—for example, into Greek, Latin, German, and English. Other classic works such as Shakespeare's plays were the source of groundbreaking translations into several languages. Some literary historians have argued that Charles Baudelaire's French translations of Edgar Allan Poe's stories surpassed the originals and influenced the subsequent advance of French short fiction.

At an early stage of literary development, exemplified in modern Hebrew after 1800, translation often plays a decisive role. Itamar Even-Zohar explains this phenomenon in general terms, writing that “in such a state when new literary models are emerging, translation is likely to become one of the means of elaborating the new repertoire.”⁹ In this case, the new repertoire included narratives of sea travel, carried over from German. According to Even-Zohar's analysis of translation in literary history, “through the foreign works, features (both principles and elements) are introduced into the home literature which did not exist there before.” Sea narratives illustrate his theory: they showed the way to a new naturalism and at the same time explored new “compositional patterns and

techniques.”¹⁰ The period around 1800 was a turning point, a time when modern Hebrew writing was in the process of redefining itself in relation to German, Yiddish, and rabbinic culture.

George Steiner has written that from one perspective “the translator invades, extracts, and brings home.”¹¹ With reference to travel narratives, this metaphorical language of mining is especially suggestive: in the same way that the explorer may invade, extract, and bring home goods from a foreign land, so a pioneering translator may bring home literary techniques from a foreign language. And so it was when Hebrew (and Yiddish) writers adapted travel narratives from German. Steiner’s image is especially apt in connection with Columbus’s obsessive search for gold, as described in Campe’s German narrative, which was repeatedly translated into Hebrew and Yiddish.

Naomi Seidman and Seth Wolitz have shown how a translation can sometimes become a “second original” that surpasses the source.¹² Some readers have claimed, for instance, that Isaac Bashevis Singer improved his Yiddish stories when working with translators on English versions. Elie Wiesel transformed his Yiddish account of his Holocaust experiences into the more effective French autobiographical novel *La nuit* (*Night*, 1958).¹³

Hasidic authors also made unparalleled advances in literary narrative, especially in their use of oral-style language and folk motifs. Hebrew and Yiddish authors—compilers, scribes, and translators—disseminated *Shivhei ha-Besht* (*In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, 1814–15). Within three years of the publication of these hagiographic stories about the founder of Hasidism, several Hebrew reprints and three different Yiddish translations were printed. Shortly after *Shivhei ha-Besht* appeared, Nathan Sternharz of Nemirov (1780–1844) published a groundbreaking Hebrew/Yiddish edition of Rabbi Nahman’s *Sippurei ma’asiyot* (*Tales*, 1815), bound together with his Hebrew account of Nahman’s journey to the Land of Israel in 1798–99. These popular narratives have withstood the test of time in spite of efforts by envious rivals of the hasidim to suppress and lampoon them.¹⁴

Opponents of the hasidim were another essential source of innovation: by satirizing and parodying the hasidim and their writings, they helped import folk Hebrew into the literary mainstream. The sharp ideological

rift between hasidim and their antagonists led nonhasidic Hebraists to be skeptical of hasidic writings. After Joseph Perl (1773–1839) mocked hasidic circles, it became commonplace to say that their Hebrew was riddled with errors and thus “barbaric.” Yet the ultimate victors were, against all odds, the hasidim. Most of Perl’s highly educated friends, who wrote poetry in the ornate, neobiblical style called *melitza*, have been forgotten. And although Perl’s intent was satiric, his greatest literary success came when he emulated hasidic writing. Today’s modern Hebrew readers—most of them living in Israel—find it almost impossible to read the high *melitza* mode espoused by the Enlightenment Hebraists. In contrast, hasidic sources have over the past two centuries garnered an increasing number of readers and devotees around the world. By working from Yiddish, the hasidim anticipated the creation of a modern Hebrew vernacular.

A central problem for modern Hebrew writers was how to break through the stylistic limitations that had been established by Enlightenment literati. Perl escaped their excessive reliance on biblical quotations through his parodies of hasidic writing.¹⁵ This book contends that translation in connection with travel narratives was another essential literary strategy used by *maskilim* such as Mendel Lefin.¹⁶

Rewriting Hebrew Literary History

Hebrew writers faced an arduous task in adapting to new literary fashions during the nineteenth century. The high literary style, widely preferred in the eighteenth century, became outmoded early in the nineteenth. At a time when European romanticism was turning toward everyday lives and vernacular speech, the biblical Hebrew of the prophets no longer served the needs of prose authors.

Mendel Lefin, associated with the “moderate Haskala” in Galicia, led the development of a more accessible Hebrew literature. He was an early proponent of using Mishnaic Hebrew, expanding stylistic options beyond the biblical Hebrew of the prophets.¹⁷ His goal was to write clear, simple Hebrew that could be understood by a wide readership. His works thus questioned the dominant position of *melitza*, the quasi-biblical Hebrew of the Berlin Haskala. Lefin’s discursive books—*Refu’at ha-`am* (Healing for the People, 1789/1794) and *Heshbon ha-nefesh* (Moral Accounting,

1808)—moved in this direction, and his translation *Mase'ot ha-yam* (Sea Voyages, 1818) showed how effective his postbiblical style could be in narrative literature. Translation played an essential role in Lefin's contribution: translating from German exerted a pressure to match in Hebrew the effects that were possible in a culturally dominant, living language.

The modernization of Hebrew occurred in several phases. First, the Berlin writers tried to limit the influence of rabbinic (and hasidic) writing by favoring biblical Hebrew. Second, a few notable followers of the Berlin Haskala loosened their leaders' narrow, puristic demands. Hasidic writing intervened, competing for readers and provoking responses from the *maskilim*. In 1818, Lefin brought together the traditions of biblical and rabbinic writing in a new synthesis. This book follows an arc that culminates with Mendel Lefin's translated sea voyages, in which he demonstrated that modern Hebrew literature could be written by translating from German sources and drawing upon different historical layers of Hebrew. At the same time, he retained many traditional Jewish ideas, such as the belief in Divine Providence.¹⁸

The rise of modern Hebrew travel writing contributed to a growing freedom from biblical models and fostered graphic descriptions instead of pilgrimage clichés, fantasies, allegories, and parables. Where the hasidic pilgrim found spiritual meaning in every storm at sea, secularizing writers worked toward more immediate representations of the everyday world. As Rebecca Wolpe commented to me, the *maskilim* were “trying to show that all natural phenomena can be explained by science and that they are not all omens and signs.”¹⁹

Moshe Pelli ends an essay on Enlightenment Jewish travelogues with an astute comment on the prominent literary-historical role of travel writing: “In its literary devices, its story development, characterization, the portrayal of the protagonist, and many other literary traits, Hebrew travel literature may be said to have paved the way for the development of the Hebrew novel, as is the case in European literature.” Pelli then comments that “Romanelli's travel to an Arab land may be construed as a metaphor of a *maskil's* voyage to, and his exposure of, the unenlightened segment of the Jewish people, not only in Morocco, but in other places closer to home.”²⁰ This metaphorical resonance may explain why Jewish

readers were so drawn to travel narratives involving encounters with foreign cultures. Nancy Sinkoff follows Pelli and writes that Mendel Lefin “appears to be comparing the ‘noble savages’ with east European Jewry and the British and their world with Western, non-Jewish culture.”²¹ Many of the meetings with indigenous people could, therefore, represent some of the elite authors’ dealings with the less-educated members of Jewish society. Sinkoff adds that “by the second decade of the nineteenth century, the image of the east European Jew as culturally backward was already well on its way to becoming an immutable stereotype among Germans, German Jews, and east European Jewish maskilim who moved in German cultural circles.”²²

Europeans’ ambivalence toward indigenous people—whom they perceived variously in different contexts as “noble savages” or ignorant barbarians—resembles enlightened Jews’ ambivalence toward uneducated Jews. Moreover, when the European conquerors and colonizers mistreated the natives, Jewish readers in czarist Russia could easily identify with the victims. In some respects, the Jews of Russia were a disenfranchised, colonized people who saw their plight reflected in the distant lands they discovered in Hebrew and Yiddish translations. Travels in translation were, for all of these reasons, central to the rise of early-modern Jewish literature.

This book tells a story, in three movements, about the creation of secular literature in Hebrew. We begin with *premodern* and *hasidic accounts of pilgrimage*. These texts express the traditional, Zion-centered worldview. As an extraordinary outgrowth of this tradition, Nathan Sternharz writes rabbinic Hebrew based on the Bible, Talmud, and commentaries, but his grammar often follows that of Yiddish. Second, in a short interlude, we turn to *Enlightenment prose writing* by the Berlin *maskilim*. Isaac Euchel, when describing travels in Europe, sets his sights beyond the traditional Jewish world while keeping his language close to Hebrew scriptural traditions. Finally, we turn to *translations by moderate maskilim*, starting with Moses Mendelsohn-Frankfurt. Translating from German, Mendelsohn-Frankfurt and others travel beyond the traditional Jewish world; their grammar continues to be shaped in part by biblical conventions. Mendel Lefin’s language moves away from reliance on Hebrew scripture, and his works show how translating into Hebrew helped him create a more flexible language.

Both the *hasidim* and *maskilim* contributed to the modernization of Hebrew. Unlike the early *maskilim*, the *hasidim* had an expansive view of Hebrew, using all layers of the language and allowing influences from Yiddish. It remained for moderate *maskilim* such as Lefin to create a new synthesis with the help of translations. Together and in opposition, the *hasidim* and the *maskilim* moved from sacred pilgrimage to secular Hebrew literature.

The chapters in this book do not follow chronological order. The first chapter provides background by returning to biblical, Renaissance, and early-modern sea narratives. The subsequent two chapters analyze hasidic texts of pilgrimage that were published in 1815 or later, representing a traditional worldview. Chapters 4 and 5 turn back in time to 1785–1807 because the German Jewish authors of that period express a modern sensibility. The last two chapters shift to eastern Europe, where moderate adherents of the Jewish Enlightenment synthesized some of the achievements of the *hasidim* and the early *maskilim*. We could view this movement as one from thesis and antithesis to synthesis, but the more sensible model would be a hermeneutic circle: by the end of the book, it becomes evident that we must cultivate a new approach to Hebrew literary history. My hope is that by moving through these chapters, readers will come to appreciate these authors' remarkable writings. Two centuries ago a small number of innovators opened up new prospects for modern Hebrew prose. The *hasidim* made contributions that have too often been ignored; the early *maskilim* have been praised to the detriment of their successors.

Zion and Beyond

What does “Zion” mean? What is the etymology of the Hebrew word צִיּוֹן (Tzion or Zion)? There are no simple answers to this question, but lexicographers raise several possibilities. This is Ernest Klein's full entry for the word צִיּוֹן, *Zion*: “Of uncertain etymology. Some scholars derive it from צוה in the sense ‘to erect’ (cp. צִיּוֹן). Others connect it with base צין, appearing in Arab. *ṣāna* (= he protected), so that צִיּוֹן would lit. mean ‘fortress, citadel.’ Scholars, with reference to Syr. צִיּוֹן (= Heb. צִיּוֹן), derive these words from base צוה or ציה; according to them the orig. meaning of צִיּוֹן would be ‘bare hill.’ Other scholars regard Syr. צִיּוֹן as the older form.” Originally, then,

“Zion” may have meant “something erected,” “fortress,” or “bare hill.” In the subsequent entry, Klein further notes a connection to the word צִיּוֹן, adding three more related meanings: “1 monument. 2 landmark, signpost. 3 gravestone [Related to Syr. אַרְיָא (= heap of stones). . . . These words prob. derive from base צוה in the sense of ‘to erect’].”²³

All of this suggests that “Zion” is something that is constructed or that serves as a marker or monument (*tziun*). In biblical texts, the term frequently appears in the name “Mount Zion” (*har Tzion*; e.g., Isaiah 1:8, 10:32), in reference to Daughter/s of Zion (*bat Tzion, banot Tzion*; e.g., Isaiah 3:16–17, 4:4), and as another name for the City of David (*‘ir David*; e.g., 1 Kings 8:1). If “Zion” can be synonymous with “Jerusalem” or a synecdoche referring to the Land of Israel, then the biblical word *Zion* has no exact geographical referent.

We might speculate that in literary texts the name “Land of Israel” is the more literal designation of a geographical place, whereas “Zion” is more heavily weighted with biblical, Talmudic, and later rabbinic significance. A sober description of the place, then, would sooner refer to “the Land of Israel,” but a nostalgic recollection is more likely to refer back to “Zion.” This distinction is confirmed by one of the most prominent exilic texts ever written, quoted here from Robert Alter’s translation of Psalm 137:

By Babylon’s streams,
 there we sat, oh we wept,
 when we recalled Zion.
 On the poplars there
 we hung up our lyres.
 For there our captors had asked of us
 words of song,
 and our plunderers—rejoicing:
 “Sing us from Zion’s songs.”²⁴

In this poem from the Babylonian Exile after 586 BCE, the speaker refers to a collective nostalgia for Zion, with all of the biblical associations to that name. Recalling “the Land of Israel” would not have had the same resonance.

The rise of modern Hebrew literature required that writers strip away some of the excessive reliance on biblical allusions. Moving “beyond Zion”

also required moving away from undue dependence on biblical texts. In other contexts, it was essential that travel writers see what they actually encountered instead of projecting their expectations and familiar biblical quotations onto the landscape. As Wallace Stevens writes in the poem “The Snow Man,” a distinctive sensibility is required to see “nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is.”²⁵

Secular writers such as S. Y. Abramovitsh and H. N. Bialik, who helped reinvent modern Hebrew at the end of the nineteenth century, thereby heightened the possibility of creating a state in which Hebrew would become the national language.²⁶ If we acknowledge the importance of the forerunners discussed here, however, it is necessary to push back the date of the *tehiya*, the so-called revival of Hebrew, by about a century. This suggests that the rise of a secular, modern Hebrew did not necessarily imply a connection to the Land of Israel; the modern point of view did not always place Zion at the center of the world. A post-Zionist thinker might argue that Zionism returned to a premodern conception and biblical associations for support.

Since 1948, many literary scholars working in Israel have overemphasized the “revival of Hebrew” that took place alongside the Zionist movement since the 1880s. After the decline of the Haskala, territorial Zionism reappropriated the premodern belief in the centrality of the Land of Israel. In spite of this deliberate anachronism, most modern Zionists did not try to reverse the secular worldview that had become widespread, and Theodor Herzl envisioned a secular state. Nevertheless, Zionist rhetoric inevitably drew strength from religious assumptions and echoes of biblical sources. In short, we need to remember that early-modern Hebrew literature preceded Zionism and that one of the primary goals of this literature was to expand horizons beyond the limitations of biblical prose and beyond pilgrimage (or messianic) narratives of returning to Zion.