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Joseph Perl's Revealer of Secrets: The First Hebrew Novel

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modern people a growing intuition of a mysterious something beyond, a restlessness, a thirst for this “more,” perhaps this explanation of purpose will have a welcome ring to it, a hint of the “more” beyond the obvious.

Second, I detect that though the Kabbalah teaches that “each of us emerges from Ein Sof,” the infinite, the self-existent One, and describes this as a “process like a revolving wheel,” this process proceeds from the transcendent “Other,” rather than as suggested by Whitehead’s “process” explanation, which virtually eliminates the transcendent from ultimate reality. The transcendent “other” is not lost in Kabbalah.

Third, it may be of interest in our day when many people are concerned that language about God be inclusive, long before feminism began as a movement, kabbalists referred to a feminine and masculine aspect to God. In fact, the “modesty” of kabbalist allusions to God has room for “heresy” which it treats as a “silhouette” of an explanation, inadequate in itself but “actually the highest level of faith” (p. 35). Such an antinomy, an apparent contradiction, is characteristic of kabbalist thinking, that turns upside-down ordinary, empirical approaches to describing reality. If this explanation itself seems convoluted, the reviewer may be forgiven in that the book being reviewed condenses an arcane subject.

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Joseph Perl’s *Revealer of Secrets: The First Hebrew Novel*, translated with an introduction and notes by Dov Taylor. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997. 377 pp. \$23.00.

Joseph Perl (1773–1839) is one of the most remarkable links in the chain of Judaic literature. In 1819, four years after seminal hasidic works of the Ba’al Shem Tov and Nahman of Bratslav appeared, Perl printed *Megalei temirin (Revealer of Secrets)*, an erudite Hebrew parody that satirized them. This work purports to be a genuine collection of letters by several hasidim, but it adopts the epistolary genre primarily in order to expose corruption that Perl associated with the hasidic movement.

Hasidism was inspired by Israel ben Eliezer, who was eventually dubbed the Ba’al Shem Tov after he was “revealed” as a wonder-working leader in about 1736. He lived in the Ukraine, where there was a high density of provincial Jewish communities. Two generations after the death of this charismatic leader, his followers printed *Shivhei ha-BeShT (In Praise of the Ba’al Shem Tov, 1815)*, a Hebrew work consisting primarily of hagiographic tales about wonders of the rebbe, as passed on and elaborated by his disciples. In the same year, stories by Nahman of Bratslav—a great-grandson of the

Ba'al Shem Tov—were published by his scribe Nathan Sternhartz. Accompanied by Yiddish versions, the Hebrew tales were intended to reach the broadest possible audience.

Then came Perl, who inserted more than just a grain of sand into the happy oyster of hasidic life. Joseph Perl hailed from Tarnopol and became an erudite follower of the Jewish Enlightenment, or *haskalah*. He learned German and published an attack on the hasidim in that language, *Über das Wesen der Sekte Chassidim* (On the Essence of the Hasidic Sect, 1816). In so doing he aroused the ire of the hasidim; Perl encodes both his scorn and their fury into his epistolary novel, *Revealer of Secrets*. The plot of *Revealer of Secrets* revolves around an offensive anti-hasidic book in German, which is evidently Perl's own tract dating from 1816. The hasidic characters in *Revealer of Secrets* plot to find and destroy the offending book; in the course of their fictional search, they reveal many of the baser traits that Perl attacked in his 1816 essay.

From a literary-historical standpoint, *Revealer of Secrets* holds immense interest. As Dov Taylor notes in his useful introduction, it was inspired by the eighteenth-century epistolary tradition initiated in England by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), in France by Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse* (1760), and in Germany by Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774). Because Hebrew had as yet no novelistic tradition, Perl necessarily drew upon the prevailing norms of European fiction. Thus arose the beginning of modern Hebrew literature in the margins of eighteenth-century fiction from Western Europe.

Revealer of Secrets merits immense respect among readers of Judaic literature. With it Perl not only inaugurated a new branch of Hebrew writing but also entered the fray that was raging between enlightened *maskilim* and inspired *hasidim*, taking aim against corruption through sophisticated comic parodies. According to tradition, Perl's parody was so convincing that hasidic readers initially assumed that *Revealer of Secrets* was a genuine hasidic work. This impression was furthered by the presence of innumerable scholarly and pseudo-scholarly footnotes adorning the text.

Revealer of Secrets is particularly pertinent at the end of the twentieth century. We seem to be post-everything in this fin-de-siècle twilight of the millennium. Our age is called post-War, post-Shoah, post-Soviet Union, post-Cold War, and maybe even post-Zionist. Aaron Lansky calls the new building for the National Yiddish Book Center "heimish modern," but others will say that it is post-shtetl or post-modern. In our crowded post-age obsessed by imitation, influence, and parody, the time is right for a rediscovery of Joseph Perl's masterful parody of hasidic writing.

Dov Taylor's recent edition is a labor of love by an independent scholar. It does a great service to readers of Hebrew literature by providing both a translation and helpful notes to clarify the extraordinarily difficult Hebrew original. This text might turn out to be an antidote to the current Kabbalah craze, which owes more to New Age longings than to the obscure thirteenth-century *Zohar* it purportedly taps. Before attending

another workshop on practical Jewish mysticism, it would be wise to study some of the unsavory excesses of Jewish mystics two centuries ago. Perl reveals some of their less appealing secrets, as did S. Y. Abramovitsh, I. J. Linetsky, and I. L. Peretz later in the nineteenth century.

Dov Taylor has opted for a colloquial style of translation, a style that might be better suited to translations from Yiddish texts that emulate the spoken word. Superimposed on Perl's *Revealer of Secrets*, a Yiddish-intoned English translation sounds anachronistic, suggesting immigrants' Yinglish in the Lower East Side of the 1920s. The language Perl parodies is not uneducated, spoken Yiddish, but pretentious Hebrew. Much as Nahman of Bratslav's scribe, Nathan Sternhartz, produced exalted Hebrew versions of his master's Yiddish tales, the pompous hasidim in *Revealer of Secrets* aspire to an exalted Hebrew style. Their failures to attain this goal are often comic, yet they usually sound high-falutin' rather than colloquial. Hence, while the translator's choice is in keeping with the humorous tone of the novel, it jars the reader to see the hasidic attempts at literary Hebrew come out in English sounding like the Yiddish-intoned speech of first-generation American Jews.

In short, *Revealer of Secrets* ought to read a bit like Henry Fielding's *Shamela*, a contemporary parody of Richardson's *Pamela*. The hasidic characters can easily be imagined speaking eighteenth-century English. Indeed, the best model for Dov Taylor's translation would have been Ted Gorelick's rendering of *Fishke the Lame*, contained in *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler* (Schocken, 1996). Gorelick draws from the wealth of British literary styles to create a masterful parodic blend using deliberate layers of archaism. He has reserved the more colloquial, oral-based tone for his forthcoming translation of Sholem Aleichem's monologues, *Nineteen to the Dozen* (Syracuse University Press, 1997).

The greatest merit of this first English edition of *Revealer of Secrets* lies in its scholarly apparatus, which serves to orient the general reader. One may quibble with the non-standard transliteration of some Hebrew and Yiddish words or question certain dates and references, but this is one of the few English critical editions of modern Judaic literature. Taylor's introduction, notes, and critical apparatus are necessary aids enabling the reader to reveal many secrets about the hasidim that are hidden in Perl's masterpiece of nineteenth-century Hebrew prose.

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