

Second Thoughts: Unknown Yiddish Texts and New Perspectives on the Study of Hasidism

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Abstract

This study explores an important Hasidic manuscript rediscovered among the papers of Abraham Joshua Heschel at Duke University. The text, first noted by Heschel in the 1950s, is a collection of sermons by the famed *tzaddik* Judah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger (d. 1905). These homilies are significant because they were transcribed by one of his disciples, in many cases capturing them in the original Yiddish. Comparing this alternative witness to Alter's own Hebrew version (called *Sefat emet*), printed shortly after his death, reveals substantive differences in the sermons' development, structure, and themes. But the manuscript's importance extends beyond a critical new perspective on Alter's teachings. It offers a snapshot of the processes behind the formation of Hasidic books, and calls for scholars to consider the unavoidable divergences between Hebrew and Yiddish, between orality and textuality, and the transmission of ideas from a teacher to his disciples, vectors of change that inhabit all Hasidic literature.

Keywords

Hasidism – Jewish mysticism – Jewish studies – orality – manuscript studies – Eastern European Jewish history

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In 1952 Abraham Joshua Heschel published a bibliographical article based on his findings as a researcher and collector of Hasidic texts for YIVO (Yiddish Scientific Institute) in New York City.¹ In this short paper he gave a list of texts that he had uncovered or identified, sources that he believed would change the study of Hasidism. Heschel presented portions of these various texts, which included letters, Hasidic teachings, and wedding contracts, and in some cases reprinted them in their entirety. But Heschel's Yiddish article was quickly forgotten and seldom revisited, and the unique Hasidic sources referred to therein sank back into the margins of history.

One of the most intriguing texts mentioned by Heschel was a lengthy handwritten manuscript numbering some sixty pages, which consisted of many dozens of sermons delivered by Judah Aryeh Leib Alter (d. 1905). This important Hasidic figure led the Ger Hasidic community for nearly thirty-five years. Unlike many other Hasidic tzaddikim, Judah Aryeh Leib wrote down his own homilies, and these were published after his death under the title of *Sefat emet*. But he transcribed his sermons for posterity in Hebrew, not the Yiddish vernacular in which they would have been delivered. *Sefat emet* became a classic of Hasidic literature and remains of great interest to scholars of Jewish mystical thought in the modern era.

It seems, however, that some of the Gerer Rebbe's perspicacious students wrote down their own versions of their master's teachings.² These disciples often transcribed them in the original Yiddish. In every case the students' versions, whether translated into Hebrew or given in Yiddish, reveal substantive differences in the development, structure, and often even in the themes of the homilies. Heschel's manuscript is perhaps the longest and most comprehensive alternative edition of Judah Aryeh Leib's sermons, and its importance is further magnified because the vast majority of the teachings are in Yiddish. Heschel informed his readers that only some of the sermons in the manuscript had parallels in the printed *Sefat emet*, and that the other homilies represented unique textual witnesses to unknown teachings. With the possible exception

1 A.J. Heschel, 'Unknown Documents in the History of Hasidism' (in Yiddish), *YIVO Bleter* 36 (1952) 113–135.

2 This study builds upon our treatment of the subject in three previous articles; see D. Reiser and A.E. Mayse, 'The Final Sermon of the Rebbe of Ger: The *Sefat emet* and the Implications of Yiddish for the Study of Hasidic Homilies' (in Hebrew) *Kabbalah* 30 (2013) 127–160; idem, 'Sefer Sefat Emet, Yiddish Manuscripts and the Oral Homilies of R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger,' *Kabbalah* 33 (2015) 9–43; and idem, "'For Many Years He Said This": A Forgotten Manuscript of the *Sefat emet*' (in Hebrew), *Kabbalah* 34 (2016) 123–184. The reader interested in a discussion of our method and the bibliographical issues arising in this work should turn to these studies and the scholarship in the footnotes.

of the Habad dynasty, which has long taken great pains to document its leaders' sermons, nothing of this sort from the Hasidic world has been brought to the attention of the academic community.³ Unfortunately, Heschel did not return to this manuscript and never published a study of its contents. It was not among the few remaining Hasidic documents in the YIVO archive, and for many years scholars assumed that it was missing.

But this invaluable manuscript was not lost. The text (henceforth, MS Heschel) was recently rediscovered among Heschel's papers housed at David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University, and we are now preparing it for publication.⁴ It turns out that Heschel's short description of its contents and his suggestions regarding its importance were spot-on. Most of the teachings are indeed in Yiddish, and they differ markedly from the parallel homilies in *Sefat emet*. Some are longer than the published versions, while others are shorter, but they are never identical. The differences between them reflect changes in diction, structure, and theological message, and these divergences are both accidental and substantive. And many of the homilies in Heschel's manuscript have no direct parallel in *Sefat emet*, in some cases revealing new teachings for a year and section of the Torah reading cycle for which nothing remained from Judah Aryeh Leib's own hand.

Heschel's manuscript gives a critical new perspective on the *Sefat emet* and the religious thought of Judah Aryeh Leib. But its importance extends beyond this specific case study, because the manuscript offers a snapshot of the processes through which Hasidic books are formed. Very few Hasidic leaders transcribed their own teachings, and most collections of their homilies were recorded and published by their disciples.⁵ Some may have been written down shortly after the fact, but many were likely reconstructed from memory long afterward. These versions may have been edited, shortened, expanded and perhaps even censored before publication. These issues are compounded by the fact that, with very few exceptions, they were published in Hebrew and

3 See A. Roth, 'The Habad Literary Corpus, its Components and Distribution as the Basis for Reading Habad Texts' (in Hebrew) (Ph.D. Diss., Ramat-Gan 2012).

4 This manuscript appears in box 287, folder 7 of that collection.

5 For a few key studies of these questions, see Z. Gries, 'The Hasidic Managing Editor as an Agent of Culture,' in A. Rapoport-Albert, ed., *Hasidism Reappraised* (London and Portland 1997) 141–155; idem, *The Book in Early Hasidism* (in Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv 1992) 47–67; M. Rosman, 'Hebrew Sources on the Baal Shem Tov: Usability vs. Reliability,' *Jewish History* 27 (2013) 153–169; A. Green, 'On Translating Hasidic Homilies,' *Prooftexts* 3 (1983) 63–72; idem, 'The Hasidic Homily: Mystical Performance and Hermeneutical Process,' in B. Cohen, ed., *As a Perennial Spring: A Festschrift Honoring Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm* (New York 2013) 237–265; D. Abrams, '“The Becoming of the Hasidic Book” – An Unpublished Article by Joseph Weiss: Study, Edition and English Translation,' *Kabbalah* 28 (2012) 7–34.

thus translated from their original Yiddish. The rift between the language of the sermons' delivery and that in which they were recorded makes the study of Hasidic texts even more difficult. Heschel's manuscript provides us with a textual window into the formation of a Hasidic book. We can now compare Judah Aryeh Leib's own account of his sermons with those transcribed by his students, juxtaposing the author's Hebrew translation with the original Yiddish as captured by his disciples. Finally, tracking these specific elements of textual transformation will shed light upon the complex interface between written texts and oral culture, the nature and boundaries of translation, and the communication of teachings from master to disciple.

Another contribution of MS Heschel lies in the fact that the discourses were preserved in Yiddish. This may not prove that they are word-for-word transcriptions, but it suggests that these versions are closer to the original oral form in which the homilies were delivered. Some degree of interpretation must have crept into the written texts, but the similarities that emerge from comparing them to Judah Aryeh Leib's Hebrew versions shows that the person transcribing them had a prodigious memory. More broadly, we should remember that Hasidic sermons are often boldly referred to as *Toyres*, the plural form of Torah. Hasidic texts describe to listening to a homily by the *tzaddik* as a reenactment – or continuation – of the Revelation on Mt. Sinai.⁶ Hasidim took great care in preserving their teacher's message, and all the more so when they chose to transcribe his sermons in the original Yiddish.

Heschel himself argued vociferously for the importance of Yiddish in the study of Hasidic texts.⁷ These later claims are anticipated by a note from Heschel introducing our manuscript:

Teachings from the Rebbe of Ger, author of *Sefat emet*. Some of these sermons were published in the book *Sefat emet*. The importance of this manuscript is in its source: a Hasid who heard these teachings and wrote them down – presumably – in Yiddish, in the form in which the Rebbe of Ger would have delivered them. The difference between the Hebrew-literary and oral formulation is quite instructive.

Examining a few key teachings from this manuscript will help us verify Heschel's interesting claims about the orality of this particular text and the importance of the Yiddish sermons included within it.

6 See G. Sagiv, *Dynasty: The Chernobyl Hasidic Dynasty and Its Place in The History of Hasidism* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem 2014) 182–200.

7 See Heschel's fierce remarks in his *Kotsk: In Gerangl far Emesdikeit* (Tel-Aviv 1973) vol. 1, 7–8.

Our first passage represents a case in which the Yiddish transcription of Judah Aryeh Leib's homily is longer and easier to follow than the Hebrew parallel:

Sefat emet

Sukkot 5658 [1897]

Simhat Torah that we celebrate on Shemini Atzeret. As it says, 'On Simhat Torah we have a meal for the completion of Torah.'⁸ The ultimate goal of the redemption and the purification of the souls was that they be ready for the Torah.

It is taught in the Midrashim that Shemini Atzeret is like Shavuot after Pesah.⁹ These seven days of Sukkot are like the seven weeks of counting [the Omer]. Just as the ultimate goal of the exodus from Egypt was in order to receive the Torah, as it says, '... who brought you forth from Egypt to be your God' (Num. 15:41), so too is the ultimate goal of the redemption and purification on Yom Kippur and Sukkot in order to be ready for Torah.

The explanation of 'completion of the Torah' – it means something that exists as a deed (*ba-uvda*). The Torah that is explained (*nitparshah*) through the 613 commandments (*pik-kudin*) is the lowest level of Torah. A commandment is attributed to the

MS Heschel, fol. 2b

Simhat Torah 5658 [1897]

Shemini Atzeret comes before Simhat Torah. These days are preparation for the Torah. It is written in the Midrashim: Just as the festival of Shavuot comes after Pesah, so does Shemini Atzeret follow Sukkot.¹⁰ On Pesah the redemption was a preparation for receiving the Torah. What is the meaning of the purification? One must be pure in order to receive the Torah. On Pesah [this took] seven weeks. [On] Yom Kippur, it happens through repentance in a single moment alone. It doesn't need to take a long time. All of Israel has a portion in the Torah – the 600,000 letters. 'Moses charged us with the Torah, the heritage of the community of Jacob' (Deut. 33:4). We must see to it that we are pure, so that we can receive this portion. Thus we recite [in the festival liturgy], 'give us our portion in Your Torah.'

*Simhat Torah day 5658 [1897],
first homily*

'On Simhat Torah we hold a meal for the completion of Torah.'¹¹ Throughout

8 *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:9; and see Moses Isserles' gloss to *Shulhan Arukh, orah hayyim* 669a.

9 *Tanhuma, pinhas* 15.

10 See above.

11 See above.

one who completes it.¹² Therefore the essence of Torah is found with the children of Israel. Although the vitality of all the worlds comes from the Torah, it is attributed to them because they complete the Torah with deeds. Just as there are 248 [positive] and 365 [negative] commandments, corresponding to the limbs of a person, so too is there in time.¹³ In every year there is a particular order to the fifty-three portions of the Torah.¹⁴ The renewal of the Torah happens in the community of Israel each and every year. Therefore at the end of the year ‘we hold a meal for the completion of Torah.’

the year one reads the Torah over and over, but ‘the completion of Torah’ refers to a [specific] deed (*ma’aseh*). [But] that is something tiny! The measure of Torah is greater than the world, and one cannot approach (*tsi kimmin*) the Torah! Only through a deed can one grasp the Torah. ‘Moses charged us (*tsivah*) with the Torah, the heritage ...’ Moses divided the Torah into 613 specific commandments (*mitsvot*), so that the Torah can be grasped. Just as a person (*nefesh*) includes 248 sinews, [so too did] he divide the commandments. The year is also [divided] into [different] times: New Moons, Sabbaths, and festivals. The Torah is completed by the community of Israel, and therefore it is called Simhat Torah. Moses divided the Torah into particular commandments so that it would remain with the Jews as a ‘heritage for the community of Jacob.’ ‘This is the Torah that Moses set before [the children of Israel] (Deut. 4:44) – a *tsaddik* wants everyone to have a connection to the Torah.

Comparison of these teachings reveals something very interesting about the formation of *Sefat emet*. It seems that these two Yiddish sermons, originally distinct units, were merged into a single text as Judah Aryeh Leib reworked and rewrote them. There are clear attestations to the opposite phenomenon as well: in some instances, single homilies recorded in the manuscript appear as two homilies in *Sefat emet*. We should also note that the different homiletic tenor of the different accounts. The Yiddish version has Judah Aryeh Leib turning more to the individual, underscoring the role of each and every person

12 *Bereshit Rabbah* 85:3; *Devarim Rabbah* 8:4.

13 *Zohar* 1:170b.

14 *Tikkunei Zohar*, *tikkun* 19, fol. 38a.

in receiving the Torah. The Hebrew sermon is directed primarily to the community of Israel as a whole, and even struggles with broader issues of universalism. In the Yiddish homily Judah Aryeh Leib addresses his listeners in the first-person plural, referring to himself together with the assembled Hasidim, and in his final sentence speaks openly as a Hasidic leader to his community by revealing his desire for each of his followers to cultivate their own connection to Torah.

Our second example is indicative of the many Yiddish sermons in MS Heschel with no exact parallel in the printed *Sefat emet*. In this case, however, a similar homily was transcribed eleven years previously:

Sefat emet

Terumah 5647 [1887]

In the Midrash: 'For I have given a good instruction, etc.' (Prov. 4:2) – do not forsake the merchandise. Can there be a purchase in which [the buyer] does not know what he receives, etc.? The merchant is sold along with it, etc.?¹⁵

The matter is that the Torah has many levels, such that it is 'hidden from the eyes of all the living' (Job 28:21). Therefore the light of Torah was revealed according to the [capacity of] those receiving it. It is called 'a good instruction,' because one can find the hidden [divine] light through Torah. This is what it says, 'How great is Your goodness that You have hidden (*tzafanta*)' (Ps. 31:20), and as it says, 'He reserves (*yitzpon*) ability for the upright' (Prov. 2:7). This refers to the hidden lights that

MS Heschel, fol. 3b

Terumah 5658 [1898], *Sabbath Day*

In the Midrash: 'Take (*va-yikhu*) me a tithe (*terumah*)' (Exod. 25:2), 'for I have given a good instruction (*lekah*), etc.' (Prov. 4:2). Does a person ever buy merchandise and the merchant is sold along with it, etc.? See there.¹⁶ (The goal of Torah is that Israel become attached to the blessed Holy One. As soon as the Torah began with, 'I am Y-H-V-H Your God' (Exod. 20:2), (the name of heaven) divinity dwelled upon Israel. 'Happy is the one who takes refuge (*oz*) in You' (Ps. 84:6). Therefore the Torah is called a 'good instruction.' 'Good' refers to God (*dem eybershtin*), [as in] 'give thanks to Y-H-V-H, for He is good' (Ps. 136:1).

The Seventh of Adar, at the completion of the Talmud

When Moses was born, the entire house was filled with light.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Shemot Rabbah* 33:1.

¹⁶ See above.

¹⁷ bSotah 13a.

can only be revealed in this world through the Torah. Therefore it is called a 'good instruction.'

According to the Midrash, 'there is no "good" in [Scripture] except the blessed Holy One, as it says, 'Y-H-V-H is good to all' (Ps. 145:9).¹⁸ Through the Torah we take (*lokhin*) God, so to speak, as it says, 'take me a tithe' (Exod. 25:2). It is taught in the name of the holy Rabbi [Dov] Baer [of Mezritsh] that the verse, 'Happy is the one who takes refuge (*oz*) in You' (Ps. 84:6) refers to studying Torah with great attachment to God.¹⁹ This is the meaning of the sages' teaching, 'Do not forsake the merchandise,' as is written in the holy Zohar in this week's section, about the verse, 'May You, O Y-H-V-H, not be distance' (Ps. 22:20) – the children of Israel must cleave to the blessed One through immersion in Torah and prayer.²⁰ Understand this.

(Presumably) the house was filled with light at his death as well. (*Tzaddikim* are greater in death than in life.)²¹ Regarding Yom Kippur, it says, 'on this very day,' and [regarding Moses's death] it also says, 'on this very day,' to show that Moses's death effected atonement like Yom Kippur. It says that on that day upon which Moses departed, he spoke the section *Ve-zot ha-berekhah* ('and this is the blessing,' Deut. 33-34). He bequeathed (*ibergelegt*) a blessing to the generations.

In the Talmud [it says] that when the month in which Moses died arrived, he [i.e. Haman] rejoiced and did not know that Moses died on the seventh of Adar, and on the seventh of Adar he was born.²² It says, 'Moses Moses' (Exod. 3:4), a lower Moses and an upper Moses. When Moses arrived at his place (*zayn ort*), this caused the downfall of Amalek. 'And when Moses raised his hands, Israel overcame' (Exod. 17:11). 'Moses raised' – he came to his place. 'Behold, you will lie with our forefathers, and rise up' (Deut. 31:16) The lying was [actually an act of] rising up. When Moses departed, the Oral Torah was revealed.

18 bMenahot 53b.

19 *Or Torah* (Brooklyn 2011) #258, *tehilim*, 314–315.

20 *Zohar* 2:138b; *ibid.* 3:221a.

21 bHullin 7b.

22 bMegillah 13b.

This is the meaning of, ‘You will lie with your forefathers, and rise up’ – the Oral Torah arose. We must always remember Moses our teacher, that he bequeathed the entire Torah and commandments for the Jews.

The closest Hebrew parallel to the first section of this Yiddish teaching was written several years earlier by Judah Aryeh Leib. This is indicative of a trend visible throughout *MS Heschel*. Like most preachers, Judah Aryeh Leib must have repeated himself over the years, and he did not necessarily transcribe the subsequent iterations of his sermons. But why did Judah Aryeh Leib refrain from writing down this otherwise unknown teaching for the seventh of Adar and the completion of a cycle of Talmud study? Given the way the Jewish calendar fell out in 1898, the two homilies would have been delivered within a few days of each other, and it would have been possible for Judah to have omitted the first (a repetition) and written down the new teaching for the seventh of Adar. This latter sermon emphasizes the centrality of Moses as the giver of Torah – and the Oral Torah in particular – and the leader who infused later generations with the ability to connect themselves to the sacred light hidden within the Torah, themes which are not uncommon in *Sefat emet* and are even found in the Hebrew parallel from 1887.

The answer, we believe, reflects an important compositional principle behind *Sefat emet*. Surely Judah Aryeh Leib spoke at various community and life-cycle events, but these sermons are rarely attested to in his printed sermons. This may be because the teachings offered on these occasions were less focused on brilliant new readings of Jewish texts, the hermeneutical effort at the core of the printed *Sefat emet*, and were more concerned with the contours of that particular event. In his writings Judah Aryeh Leib sought to endow the world with literary legacy that was universally accessible, at least in the sense of not being moored to a particular time or social milieu. By contrast, the Yiddish sermons offer a glimpse of Judah Aryeh Leib’s oral teachings that were more closely bound to his specific time, place and communal context.

Our final example also has no parallel in the printed *Sefat emet*. Similar themes are found in Judah Aryeh Leib’s Hebrew writings, but they appear in a very different cluster of associations.²³ We read:

23 See *Sefat emet, ve-zot ha-berakhah* 5653 [1893]; and *ibid.*, *be-midbar* 5651 [1891].

Rosh Hashanah 5659 [1898], first night, first homily

Rosh Hashanah stands upon awe (*yir'ah*). 'The beginning of wisdom is awe of Y-H-V-H' (Ps. 111:10). The world was created in this way as well. 'God has made it, so that men have awe before Him' (Eccl. 3:14). 'In the beginning' (*bereshit*, Gen. 1:1) [can be interpreted as] 'awe and Sabbath' (*yir'ah shabbat*) and 'awe and shame' (*yir'ah boshet*). Now there are two kinds of awe: one comes from distance (*rahekut*), and the other from intimacy (*kirvut*). The Sabbath is a little bit of light, an awe that comes from intimacy. This is the true awe, for 'His awe is upon those who are near more than it is upon those who are far away.'²⁴ The awe that comes from intimacy is better than the awe that comes from distance.

The future will bring the awe of intimacy, and each person will be in his [rightful] place. Today the awe is because we are not in the [correct] place. This is referred to as 'awe and shame' (*yir'ah boshet*),²⁵ since one must be ashamed that the awe is not the correct awe. But on the Sabbath one can attain a bit of the awe that comes from amidst joy.²⁶

Here too Judah Aryeh Leib's sermon is tied to a specific experience, for in 1898 Rosh Hashanah took place on the Sabbath. The connection between Rosh Hashanah and Shabbat, the parting note of the sermon, would have been obvious to each of his listeners. Yet despite that fact that this confluence of sacred days happened several times during Judah Aryeh Leib's tenure as leader, this is the only existent homily that draws the association so clearly. His message is clear: the very day on which this address was delivered represented a golden opportunity for cultivating a sense of awe before the Divine grounded upon awareness of one's joyful intimacy with God rather than upon fear of a punishing ruler.

Heschel's manuscript is a new witness regarding the ways in which Judah Aryeh Leib edited, rewrote, and even omitted his ideas while transforming his specific Yiddish homilies into a timeless literary creation. This fact must impact the ways in which scholars examine his thought as well as the specific structure of his teachings. But the implications of this text extend beyond the *Sefat emet*. The manuscript is priceless, but it is not the only one of its kind.²⁷ This increases its value as a historical artifact, because it highlights the

²⁴ See *Mekhilta, masekhta de-shirah* 8.

²⁵ See *Sefat emet, toledot* 5654 [1894], citing bNedarim 20a.

²⁶ MS Heschel, fol. 4b.

²⁷ The present authors have located nearly a dozen such texts from several different stemmata, proving that manuscripts of this sort are rare but are not *sui generis*.

importance of these alternative textual witnesses. Some such manuscripts were collected by Heschel and are now housed in his archive, but there are many others in private and institutional collections across Israel and America. There may well be others in the former Soviet bloc, either in official archives or in forgotten corners in private homes or institutions. Scholars must hunt for these texts that offer a different aspect of the history of Hasidism, remembering that a robust manuscript culture existed in Hasidism long after the advent of printed Hasidic books. Furthermore, the differences that emerge from comparing this manuscript to the printed *Sefat emet* demand that scholars of Hasidism be mindful of the unavoidable divergences between Hebrew and Yiddish, between orality and textuality, and the transmission of ideas from a teacher to his disciples, vectors of change that govern the formation of Hasidic literature.