"OUR BELOVED BLENDED TONGUE": POLYGLOTISM IN SHLONSKY'S EARLY POETRY

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For European Jewish intellectuals, the language of poetic expression was a major defining feature: the implications of language choice were often profound and signified specific artistic and/or political allegiances. A Hebrew writer was typically identified as Zionist, whereas a choice of Yiddish frequently indicated an affinity with a Yiddishist ideology. Yet the lines were not always clear cut. Many writers were equally at home in both Yiddish and Hebrew and often wrote in both languages at different points in their careers. Such fluidity of movement between the two Jewish languages was possible because most Hebrew writers born in Europe had been raised in Yiddish language and culture, and male Yiddish writers were intimately familiar with the Hebrew liturgy and the considerable Hebraic elements of Yiddish. Further enhancing the complexity, Jewish culture was at least tri-lingual: Yiddish, loshn-koydesh, and the official language of government.

Avraham Shlonsky was born into a Chabad Chassidic family in the Ukraine, spent a year in Tel-Aviv as a young teenager, and began publishing in Hebrew in 1919. After immigrating to Palestine in 1921 he became the leading poet of the yishuv's socialist-Zionist community. Although his strong commitment to Zionism led to an ostensible renunciation of Yiddish (his was the chief voice in the 1927 attack on Yiddish in Zionist Palestine), the language supplied a significant substrate of his poetry. Shlonsky's modernist effort to break free of 19th-century melitsah, the intertextual pastiche of fixed expressions that had become the bane of Hebrew writers seeking to de-automatize the use of traditional sources, employed internal Hebrew polyglossia and legitimized many aspects of Russian and of Yiddish, itself a fusion language that incorporates elements from other languages.

The 1924 poem "Yarid" ("Fair") exemplifies Shlonsky's poetic practice of polyglotism. The title sets the tone for a pervasive atmosphere of chaos, through application of the modernist avant-garde principle of collage in which familiar elements take on new significance without losing their alterity. Throughout the poem, for example, the stresses shift between the traditional Yiddish-based "Ashkenazi" accent and the "Sephardi" accent that was becoming normative for Hebrew speakers. Yiddish syntax and translated phrases are incongruously introduced at crucial moments in the text, as well as Russian names, syntactical practice, and translated idioms. The use of biblical Hebrew, neologisms and invented onomatopoeic gibberish enhances this high modernist poetic linguistic melange, situated within the non-ideological framework of Jewish polyglot discourse.