

## SOUTH AFRICAN WRITINGS OF MORRIS HOFFMAN: BETWEEN YIDDISH AND HEBREW<sup>1</sup>

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(Received 10/11/2014: Accepted 14/11/2014)

### ABSTRACT

Morris Hoffman (1885-1940), who was born in a Latvian township and emigrated to South Africa in 1906, was a brilliant example of the Eastern European Jewish *maskil* writing with equal fluency in both Yiddish and Hebrew. He published poetry and prose in South African Yiddish and Hebrew periodicals. His long Yiddish poem under the title *Afrikaner epopeyen* (*African epics*) was considered to be the best Yiddish poetry written in South Africa. In 1939, a selection of his Yiddish stories under the title *Unter afrikaner zun* (*Under the African sun*) was prepared for publishing in De Aar, Cape Province (which is now in the Northern Cape Province), and published after his death in 1951 in Johannesburg. The Hebrew version of the stories was published in Israel in 1949 under the title *Taḥat shmey afrikah* (*Under the skies of Africa*). The article deals with certain differences between the versions using the example of one of the bilingual stories. The comparison between the versions illuminates Hoffman's reflections on the relations between Jews and Afrikaners with a rather new perspective which underlines their religious background.

### INTRODUCTION

Morris (Meyer Falk) Hoffman (1885-1940) worked most of his life as a shopkeeper in the town of De Aar in the Karoo, but was widely known in the South African Jewish community as a Zionist activist, lecturer and prolific author who wrote both in Yiddish

<sup>1</sup> This is an extended version of the author's paper "Jews and Non-Jews in South Africa in Morris Hoffman's Yiddish and Hebrew writings" presented at "New Research in Hebrew Language and Culture" conference (January 2014) to inaugurate the Hebrew Department at the University of the Free State, and dedicated to the late Professor Joseph Sherman (1944-2009), Associate Professor in the English Department at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg until 2000, and Corob Fellow in Yiddish Studies at Oxford, 2000-2009.

and Hebrew. His mother tongue was Yiddish, but he knew Hebrew from a very young age, particularly from his Talmudic studies. Born in the small township Preili near Dvinsk, then part of the Russian Empire (today Preiļi, Latvia), he became a devoted reader of the Jewish Enlightenment (השכלה) writers Abraham Mapu, Y. L. Gordon, Adam HaCohen, Mendele Moykher Sforim, Peretz Smolenskin, and particularly Nahum Sokolow. At an early age he began to publish articles, poems, and stories in the Hebrew and Yiddish press in Eastern Europe. In 1906, to avoid being drafted into the Russian Army, he emigrated to South Africa. In the 1920s and 1930s, he published in most of the local Jewish newspapers, both in Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as abroad. In 1935 Hoffman published an anthology of poetry in Yiddish, *Voglungsklangen* (*Wandering echoes*), in Warsaw. These poems were given wide recognition both in South Africa and outside as the first significant South African work of Yiddish literature (Rybko 1935). In 1938 he prepared for publication a collection of stories in Yiddish called *Unter afrikaner zun* (*Under the African sun*) which he planned to publish in De Aar by himself but poor health did not allow him to do this. He died a little over a year later in De Aar.<sup>2</sup> After his death his widow, Sonia (Sarah Feiga) Hoffman, published the collection in Johannesburg in 1951 (Hoffman 1951). Even before that, in 1949, Sonia Hoffman also published the Hebrew version of the stories in Tel Aviv titled *Tahat shmey afrikah* (*Under the skies of Africa*) (Hoffman 1949). She was assisted by the Hebrew writer and editor Asher Barash (1889-1952), who personally translated two of the stories from Yiddish to Hebrew. It was apparently for this reason that the archives of the Jewish writer from South Africa found their way to Tel Aviv, to the bio-bibliographical “Gnazim” Institute for the Study of the History of Modern Hebrew literature which was established in 1950 by Asher Barash and which bears his name to this day. And so, torn between South Africa and Israel, as well as between two languages – Yiddish and Hebrew – the literary heritage of Morris Hoffman still awaits for scholars of Jewish multilingual creation.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For more information about Hoffman’s life and writing see Hoffman (1951:9-23); Charlash (1960); Sherman (1987:28-29). For three Hoffman stories in English, see Sherman (1987:30-49).

<sup>3</sup> It seems that the only modern scholarly article dealing with Hoffman’s Hebrew writings, namely the story “Hesed” (“Compassion”), is Fleisher (1995).

## UNDER THE AFRICAN SUN – UNDER THE SKIES OF AFRICA

For seven years after Hoffman emigrated to South Africa in 1906 until he collected enough money to sail to Europe in 1913 and to marry the love of his youth in Koenigsberg, he sent his wife-to-be hundreds of letters in delicate lyrical Hebrew as well as in the language of their childhood, Yiddish. Over the years Hoffman nurtured his longings, which wounded his soul deeply. His letters, which are deposited in the “Gnazim” archives, laid the foundation for his particular literary style: brimming with emotion and love. This original style finds its expression in the only published collection of his prosaic stories: *Under the African sun* in Yiddish, and its equivalent in Hebrew, *Under the skies of Africa*.

In each of the stories, there is a poignant love, a fierce longing for a warm, supportive family, and a difficult conflict of a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe with the human landscape of South Africa, mostly based on the author’s personal experience. One can see in Hoffman’s writings a kind of “ego-document”, using the terminology of the Jewish Dutch historian Jacques Presser, where “an ego deliberately or accidentally discloses or hides itself” (Presser 1969:286), i.e., where the writer is continuously present in the text. Thus, for seven whole years the protagonist of the story “A fremder yid” in Yiddish, or “Yehudi zar” in Hebrew (“An alien Jew”)<sup>4</sup> waited for his wife and son from Lithuania, like Hoffman himself waited for his wife-to-be and like the biblical Jacob waited for Rachel for seven years, twice. This is Reverend Buchman who suffers from the brutish behaviour of the community who were influenced by their rude neighbours. And when they arrive in Cape Town, his son turns a cold shoulder to him and calls him “alien Jew”.

Taking into account Hoffman’s “first generation Litvak” background (see Sherman 2000, also Shimoni 2003:6), the matter of ethnic co-existence is of distinct interest. The mixture of marginalised position within the ruling elites from the one side and the “Eastern European” perception of Jewish-Gentile relations from the other side are not always easily processed.<sup>5</sup> The role of the Jews in the South African mosaic as well as

<sup>4</sup> For the English translation of the story “A stranger”, see Sherman (1987:49-53). The translation is by Joseph Sherman.

<sup>5</sup> Compare with Joseph Sherman’s statement that “South African Yiddish fiction ...

the stigma attached to them is often examined as the confrontation between the cultural treasures of Judaism, such as the Jewish holidays or tradition as Hoffman understood it, and the ethnic “Babylon” surrounding the Jews – the whites, the blacks, the Dutch/Afrikaner, the British, emigrants from Saint Helena, and Indians.

From one side the Jews are described as a kind of alternative “better” society as in the story “A tkiye” in Yiddish (“A blast”), or “Tkiyah she-bilbelah et ha-nokhri” in Hebrew (“The blast that confused the stranger”). The story is about a young Englishman who pretends to be Jewish in order to marry the daughter of a wealthy Jew. The pretender comes to the synagogue on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, and is engrossed in daydreams of his fictitious life when suddenly he is startled by the sound of the shofar. The shofar forces him to reveal the fact of his foreignness, and he flees in disgrace.

From the other side, the moral qualities of the Jews are put in question as it is originally described in the Yiddish story “Zyamke Flokn”, which was translated into Hebrew by Asher Barash. The main protagonist, the so called *kafirtnik/kaffireatnik* (South African Yiddish neologism for a “kaffir eating-house” worker or owner),<sup>6</sup> is an emigrant from Lithuania, previously named Zyamke Flokn and later Simon Flake, who married a Dutch/Afrikaner woman, and she gave birth to his sons. He also had a half-caste son out of wedlock whom he refused to recognize. The boys grew up, and it became like the story of Cain and Abel in that they nearly killed one another. Their Jewish father had a stroke, and the only one in this country who remained loyal to him was the mother of the half-caste son. “Why did he come here, that fool, Zyamke, why?!” the story ends with the rhetorical question.

Paradoxically, these are the differences between the Yiddish and Hebrew versions which illuminate Hoffman’s reflections on these complicated relations with quite a new perspective. Since the Yiddish collection, *Under the African sun*, contains twelve stories, and its equivalent in Hebrew, *Under the skies of Africa*, nine stories with two of them translated by Asher Barash, we have at our disposal seven bilingual Yiddish

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undermine[s] self-congratulatory assumptions about the nature of the Jewish enterprise in South Africa” (Sherman 2002:31).

<sup>6</sup> About the Jewish experience at the “kaffir eating-houses” see Sherman (2000).

Hebrew stories by Morris Hoffman. One of these bilingual stories, “Simonim fun der hagode” in Yiddish, or “Otot ha-hagadah” in Hebrew (“The signs of the Haggadah”), can be used as an example to demonstrate this perspective.

## **THE SIGNS OF THE HAGGADAH**

The “The signs of the Haggadah” takes place in the plains of the Karoo region in the early 1930s. A Jewish cattle dealer aged about 50 is stranded with his car before Passover and he arrives at an isolated ranch which bears a sign proclaiming in Afrikaans: “Oom Paul” (“Uncle Paul”). These two words are cited in Afrikaans within the Yiddish and Hebrew texts – apparently to evoke in the reader the desired association: that is, the famous nickname of the last president of the Transvaal Republic, Paul Kruger. The owner of the ranch is an old man approaching 80 named Paul. It very quickly emerges that he is a Jew (his real name is Lev Paulshansky) who emigrated to South Africa from Russia, through America, in the 1880s. By choosing to name his Jewish protagonist “Uncle Paul” Hoffman continued the tradition that already existed in Yiddish literature in South Africa. He was well acquainted with another local contemporary Yiddish writer, Jacob Mordechai Sherman (1885-1958), the author of a short story of 1912 titled “Paul”. The name also belongs here to a Jewish protagonist. It is explained directly:

He was ugly, so the Boers nicknamed him “Paul Kruger”, after the last President of the Transvaal Republic, imagining a certain facial resemblance between them. The name “Paul Kruger” stuck, although they simply called him “Paul”. And Paul grew to be at home with the Boers, adopted their habits and customs, beliefs and prejudices, and eventually married the daughter of a rich Boer farmer. ... During the course of years [Paul] completely forgot his home and origin: he became a Boer. He would spend his evenings and Sundays with neighbouring farmers, drinking black coffee, chewing tobacco and discussing farming affairs, amusing himself with the girls and telling stories about devils and ghosts

which roamed the countryside for certain sins committed in their lifetime.

Being greatly ignorant, he believed everything that he was told.<sup>7</sup>

Sherman clearly wished to highlight the opposition between the Jewish “way of life” and that of the Afrikaner gentiles who were generalised in the image of Paul Kruger as their ultimate representative. This opposition somewhat deviates from the widespread agenda regarding the relationship between Jews and Afrikaners at the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, which managed to combine Afrikaner admiration for Jewish people in general and even a personal friendship between President Kruger and certain Jews<sup>8</sup> and the persistent refusal to recognize the Jewish emancipation. As Rabbi David Wasserzug, rabbi of the Jewish communities in Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth remarked with some degree of irony in an article in the *Jewish Chronicle* in London in 1901:

To ‘Oom Paul’ and his burghers, the Jew was the sacred vessel in whom the oracles of God were imperishably enshrined. Hence their singularly friendly attitude towards the people of the Book. ... Their persistent refusal to remove Jewish disabilities was the fruit of their narrow and sombre creed which taught them to believe that the granting of political power to a Jew was an act of flat blasphemy to their God, and in no ways conflicts with the theory of their sincere personal regard for our people (Wasserzug 1901).

Wasserzug’s explanation of Jewish religious disabilities mirrors the “official” Jewish historiography about the Afrikaner’s general “predisposition” to friendliness towards the People of the Book, despite “occasions... when critical opinions were voiced about the Jews” (Saron & Hotz 1955:179-212). As Gustav Saron, one of the mainstream South African Jewish historians diplomatically expressed himself (Saron & Hotz 1955:179-212):

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<sup>7</sup> Sherman (1987:56). The story was translated from Yiddish by Woolf Levick and Joseph Sherman.

<sup>8</sup> About the friendship between President Kruger and the Lithuanian Jew Sammy Marks, see Mendelsohn & Shain (2008:54-56).

Although uncompromising in his own religious convictions, Kruger never questioned the right of others to their own religious beliefs. He was, however, somewhat brusque and tactless in his approach to members of other denominations and sometimes offended their religious susceptibilities, probably quite unintentionally. On one occasion... he is reported as saying ‘Why are you so small-minded? I take your Old Testament and read it; why do you not take my New Testament?’”

Against this standpoint adopted by dominant historical discourse regarding the early Jewish history in South Africa,<sup>9</sup> for J. M. Sherman the more his protagonist recalls Kruger, so he is less Jewish. In Hoffman’s story “Uncle Paul” the Jew is presented in similar light, though with much more sympathy. The Yiddish version of the story was written in 1934, several years before the Hebrew one. Both versions correspond with each other, complement each other, and even argue with each other. The final editing and arranging, in Hebrew, when the “programmatically anti-Semitism”, to use Milton Shain’s term, became more “visible” in South Africa (Shain 2001:142-153), enabled Hoffman to hone his messages and characters, to skip over the manifold minutia of the Yiddish version and to create a more universal picture, and ultimately, more of a biblical epic.

Actually, one can see from the first glance that the Hebrew version is not quite a translation of the Yiddish version. Its epic quasi-Biblical style takes the story to a different semantic field, as if the special religious atmosphere prevailing in the Afrikaner perception of the Jews was taken into account. Writing about the period, Hoffman might use his own ambivalent impressions, as he described in a letter to his wife-to-be in 1907:

ובנוגע לנו, יהודים – לו היו כעת ה"בורים" ברוסיה היו בטח עומדים על צד הריאקציה והיו מן הראשונים נגד זכויות היהודים, הם הנם על פי רוב אנטישמיים קדמוניים בכל שנאתם ה"צ'לבי"ת" ...  
 ליהודי "הורג האלהים" ... [...] ועוד מה: בלבם המה מכבדים את היהודי. [...] ובקראם שם [ב"ביבל"]  
 את כל מעשי היהודים בארצם, בבית מקדשם וכו' הם מתארים בדמיונם את היהודים ההם כמו שהנם

<sup>9</sup> For a critical approach to this standpoint see Mendelsohn & Shain 2009:43-52.

רואים את אלה היהודים הנוודים בארצם (!)... פעמים אחדות כבר שאלו אותי בורים מכרים: "מה מראה מקום מקדשכם אחרי אשר נשרף באש?.." לפי דעתם באתי אליהם מארץ-ישראל...

Regarding us, the Jews – if the Boers were now in Russia, they would for sure stand on the side of reaction and were the first against the Jewish rights. They are the most ancient anti-Semites in their “Holy-hatred” ... of Jew the “God-killer”... [...]

However: in their hearts they respect the Jew. [...] Upon reading there [in the Bible] all acts of the Jews in their land, their Temple, etc., they describe in their imaginations as those Jews the wandering Jews whom they are seeing in their country (!)... Boers acquaintances several times already asked me: “How does the place of your Temple look after being burned with fire?..” In their minds I’ve come from the Land of Israel...<sup>10</sup>

Hoffman’s protagonist warmly receives his unexpected guest and regales him with the story of his life. He immigrated to South Africa a half century before. In both versions of the story, a Boer neighbour, one who was raised on the Bible stories and the New Testament, described Uncle Paul the Jew as the “good Samaritan” who was known for his hospitality to strangers. But when the Yiddish version describes Paul’s becoming wealthy somewhat laconically, the Hebrew one elaborates upon the nature of the work done by Paul:

“Simonim fun der hagode” (Yiddish) <sup>11</sup>	“Otot ha-hagadah” (Hebrew) <sup>12</sup>
און “פעטער פאָול” האָט מיט אן אמת האַלט געהאט צו ארבעטן און ער האָט א גרויס רייכטום אָנגעזאמלט. /’Uncle Paul’ indeed knew how to work and that is how he amassed great wealth./	...ויקה לו כדרך ה”ירוקים” צרור סחורות ומקל, וישא רגליו וילך מכפר לכפר ומאחוזה לאחוזה... /...and he took in the manner of the “Greens” a bundle of merchandise and a staff, and he set out walking from village to village and from farm to farm.../

Hoffman’s will to detail the issue of Paul’s enrichment is rather easy to explain. Later

<sup>10</sup> Hoffman’s correspondence is preserved in the “Gnazim” archives in Tel Aviv.

<sup>11</sup> Hoffman (1951:182).

<sup>12</sup> Hoffman (1949:100).



on the story is told of the owner of a neighbouring estate, a widower of Irish-Catholic origin with two daughters, the younger of which Paul married. Hoffman identified the biblical potential of this situation and with a touch of bitter irony turned the Jew, “Paul”, into a kind of biblical Jacob. In the Hebrew version Paul’s story echoes the tale of the biblical Jacob’s flight on his way to the family of Laban the Aramean, starting his long exile in an alien land (Gn 29:1):

וישׂא יַעֲקֹב רַגְלָיו וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶרְצָה בְּנֵי קְדָם

/Then Jacob set out on his journey, and came to the land of the children of the east./

The change in perception that comes with translating into Hebrew led to other changes when compared with the Yiddish version. The father of Paul’s wife decided to return to Europe and sold his farm to his son-in-law. The Yiddish version tells us that Paul the Jew “became a Boer”. However, in the Hebrew version he became just a farmer.

“Simonim fun der hagode” (Yiddish) <sup>13</sup>	“Otot ha-hagadah” (Hebrew) <sup>14</sup>
און אזוי ארום איז פאול פאררעכנט געווארן פאר איינעם פון די רייכסטע בורן אין זיין געגנט.	...ויהי ה' דוד פאול" האיכר העשיר בחבל הזה.
/And that is how Paul became one of the richest Boers in his region./	/...and so “Uncle Paul” became the richest farmer in this region./

How did a Jew become here a Boer? In Joseph Sherman’s words, “The common roots of both Afrikaans and Yiddish gave each language a familiar ring to the speakers of the other...”<sup>15</sup> After all, Hoffman was using the word “Boer” in its primary meaning, which comes from the same root word as the word in Yiddish *Poyer*: that is, farmer, and not as the designation of an ethnic group.

Having no problem to use the word “Boer” in the adaptive and “earthy” Yiddish,

<sup>13</sup> Hoffman (1951:182).

<sup>14</sup> Hoffman (1949:100).

<sup>15</sup> Sherman (1987:5; Introduction). Compare with the Yiddish writer Peretz Hirschbein’s impression: “The Jew bowed his Yiddish a little bit to the right, a little bit to the left, and the Jew began to speak Boerish” (Hirschbein 1929:117).

despite its parallel ethnic meaning, Hoffman wished to avoid the double meaning in Hebrew, where the word “boer” looks graphically like “bur” (בור), that is, “ignorant”. It seems, however, that first of all he intentionally aimed to clearly divide the Jews from the Afrikaners in the complex ethnic and political situation, because the entire story is built upon this dichotomy which was intensified during the translation into Hebrew, as follows.

Paul and his Irish wife had two sons. All was well and good until the advent of the pernicious *Rinderpest*, an infectious cattle plague in South Africa which allows us to date the events to 1897.<sup>16</sup> As a result of the plague, Paul was impoverished, but his hardships had only begun. The government tried to stop the plague and took certain measures. As part of these efforts, a young Dutch official was stationed in their house, which caused Paul’s wife to lose her senses. And this is what she said to her Dutch lover before she left the house:

“Simonim fun der hagode” (Yiddish) <sup>17</sup>	“Otot ha-hagadah” (Hebrew) <sup>18</sup>
<p>מיין כ'ווייס, אז פאָל איז גערעכט. [...] אָבער... מיין לייכטזיניק האַרץ ציט מיך דיר צו פּאָלגן און גיין מיט דיר... /I know that Paul is right [...] but... my fickle heart draws me after you.../</p>	<p>אף יודעת אני מה צדק בזה, אבל מוכנה ומזומנה אני בכל לבי להמיר יהודי תשוש ודך בנוצרי צעיר וחסון כמוך... /I also know what justice is in it but I am prepared with all my heart to trade a worn-out, wretched Jew for a young, vigorous Christian like you.../</p>

As we can see, in contrast to the Yiddish version, in the Hebrew Hoffman makes the statement more extreme, turning it actually anti-Semitic.

The wife absconded to the great city and left Paul with two teenage sons. And when the Anglo-Boer War broke out several years later, the boys volunteered to fight on the side of the Boers. The eldest son was caught within a short time by a British patrol and executed, together with the other rebels. The second son also fell in that war, in a bloody battle with the British somewhere near the Orange River:

<sup>16</sup> “By May 1897 the Transvaal was riddled with rinderpest; by June it was raging in the southern Orange Free State” (Phoofolo 1993:114).

<sup>17</sup> Hoffman (1951:183).

<sup>18</sup> Hoffman (1949:101).

“Simonim fun der hagode” (Yiddish) <sup>19</sup>	“Otot ha-hagadah” (Hebrew) <sup>20</sup>
<p>וואו הונדערטער ברידערלעכע קברים ליגן צניעותדיק פארטרויערט, אונטער די שטומע אומעטיקע צלמים.                      /...where hundreds of mass graves lie meekly and dolefully, under mute, mournful crosses./</p>	<p>במלחמת-התנופה הראשונה על הרי ה"מדינה החופשית".                      /...in the war of the first charge forward on the mountains of the "Free State"/</p>

The mass graves and mournful crosses of the Yiddish version disappear in the Hebrew in favour of the Free State! The participation of teens in the Boer guerrilla war was a common occurrence, but Jews among them were a rare exception.<sup>21</sup> Although Paul’s sons might see themselves as Boers, their death just deepened the Jewish father’s tragedy. And maybe he was the one who actually sent them to their death? The Hebrew version adds that Paul himself was imprisoned by the English, “because he had publicly expressed his love for the Afrikaner people and his bitterness at the yoke of the tyrants who came to steal from them the precious republics”. And yet the dichotomy between Uncle Paul’s personal Jewishness and an abstract “Christian” reality around him in the Yiddish version was replaced in the Hebrew version by a heightened dichotomy between Jewish immigrants in general and such or other local patriotic interests, defined by Rhoda Rosen as “a complex geographical disjuncture” in the South African Jewish context.<sup>22</sup>

This shift sharpened the main idea in Hoffman’s stories: the paradox of Jewish existence in the “exile”, everywhere and nowhere, without a real home. As the Russian American Yiddish writer Peretz Hirschbein stated somewhat bitterly after visiting South Africa in the beginning of the 1920s: “The non-Jew takes with him his rest and plants it behind his new home. A Jew takes with him his unrest and carries it always in his heart” (Hirschbein 1929:227). In both versions of “The signs of the

<sup>19</sup> Hoffman (1951:184).

<sup>20</sup> Hoffman (1949:102).

<sup>21</sup> For a story of the Jewish teens from Latvia, Joseph Segall and Wolf Jacobson, who fought on the Afrikaner side, see Saron & Hotz (1955:334), Mendelsohn (2000:24-25).

<sup>22</sup> Rosen (2006:87). Compare with Richard Mendelsohn’s statement that “there was no nostalgia amongst Jews, unlike among the Afrikaners, for the defeated republican order, no yearning for the restoration of the republics. This was to be expected, for Jews in the Transvaal had always been Uitlanders in Boer society, despite the intimate friendships that some, like the industrialist Sammy Marks, had enjoyed with the Boer leaders, including President Kruger” (Mendelsohn 2002:54).

Haggadah” the catharsis comes in the form of the holiday of Passover that brought the elderly Uncle Paul together with his Jewish guest at the *Seder* table. In time Paul had drawn closer to Judaism. And now on his table *matzot* are arranged in an elegant holder and bottles of wine with labels “Kosher for Passover” attached. At the end of the table is a Passover Haggadah in a silver box. The guest lifted the Haggadah, looked at it, and let out a cry: “Oh no! This is my father’s Haggadah! Look here ... the letters of my father’s name Lev Paulshansky are engraved on the silver plate!” The old man lifted his white head and murmured: “My son ... my son ...” before he fell like a stone. Before that he had yet managed to tell his guest/his son of feelings he had that he deserved all of the punishment that life has meted out to him for leaving a young wife and small son in his birthplace of Russia (Hoffman 1951:185 and Hoffman 1949:102).

## CONCLUSIONS

It seems that in the shift from Yiddish to Hebrew, Hoffman’s stories undergo a type of “sacramentalization” (to borrow a term from the Romanian-American scholar of religion, Mircea Eliade [1961:170]), that is, the heroes, events, space and time acquire a (quasi-)religious meaning. In the first years after he migrated to South Africa, the young Hoffman taught Hebrew to a Christian pastor of Dutch origin who paid him back in lessons in English and Afrikaans. It is possible that among the readers of his Hebrew stories, he envisaged also a potential reader of this kind. In any case, comparison of the Yiddish and Hebrew versions demonstrates, it seems, that Hoffman’s storytelling in Hebrew is a result of a “mythological” writing mode – because of the biblical background – which always accompanies depictions of paradigmatic relations between Jews and Afrikaners. There is no doubt that the style Hoffman used in his Hebrew writings, which was shaped under the influence of his mentor Nahum Sokolow, was very helpful in this task. Hundreds of letters that Hoffman wrote in Hebrew to his wife-to-be, his translations of the poems of Heinrich Heine, Chaim Nachman Bialik, Sokolow, his correspondence with the Johannesburg

Yiddish poet David Fram and the Johannesburg chief rabbi J. L. Landau, the texts of his lectures and other items which are deposited in the “Gnazim” archives in Tel-Aviv, will give us more research material to elaborate this point.

But already it is rather clear that, whereas the Yiddish stories are written in the utilitarian language of everyday life, the Hebrew ones grew out of Hoffman’s Talmudic studies and the imagined reality of the Jewish-Afrikaner religious dialogue. Actually, this way of analysing Hebrew writings can be applied to many authors who wrote in Hebrew outside of Hebrew-speaking communities.

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