A GUIDE TO

OLD LITERARY
YIDDISH

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Preface

This volume addresses learners of the literary language of the Old and Middle Yiddish period, which, for reasons explained below, will here be designated Old Literary Yiddish (hereinafter: OLY). It is anticipated that such learners may come from a variety of academic or non-academic backgrounds and preparations, including those who are starting at ground zero, i.e. without a knowledge of the Jewish/Hebrew alphabet, and thus without a knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic, or modern East Yiddish (modEY), perhaps even without a knowledge of any language beyond English. At the other extreme may be readers who know modEY, Hebrew, medieval and/or modern German, and have training in historical linguistics. For this reason, almost every reader of this volume will find some sections quite difficult and others quite unnecessary: readers of modEY, Judeo-Aramaic, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, or Hebrew will not need to learn the basics of the alphabet (although they will need to pay close attention to the many ways in which OLY represents sounds, especially vowels, that are not immediately apparent to those who use the Hebrew alphabet for other languages). On the other hand, those who know Latin, Russian, or classical Arabic, for instance, will not need the basic introduction to grammatical gender, which will be essential for monolingual English speakers, or case, which will be essential for bilingual Anglophone Hebrew speakers. Examples of the different needs of the range of potential readers could be multiplied almost indefinitely. Individual readers will then necessarily proceed at their own pace, whether in an organized class or through independent study, devoting more or less attention to individual sections, as their own situation dictates.

In general, an introduction to a currently spoken language has as its goal to present to the student a series of progressively more difficult lessons, starting at the level of the absolute beginner who has no knowledge of the target language, by means of which the student will generally acquire the "four skills" (reading, writing, listening comprehension, speaking) of language proficiency. On the other hand, an introduction to a language or to a period of a language that no longer has any native speakers, native readers, or currently productive native writers obviously has in large part different goals and methods, since there is little demand or practical use for learning to order pizza or write biology textbooks in, say, Gothic, Old Irish, or in the present case, OLY. So it is with introductory textbooks of most medieval languages.[1]

In the present case, the practical issues would become immediately apparent on the first page of a (hypothetical) "four-skills" introduction to OLY: no one alive can provide the idiomatic OLY equivalent of "See Spot. See Spot run" or: "Excuse me,

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[1] Although not so with Old Norse, since 21st-century Icelandic school children read medieval texts written in Old Norse with facility. And the same could in general be maintained for classical Arabic, which differs from modern standard Arabic essentially only in the vocabulary of material culture (no "photocopy machines" or "oil tankers" in medieval Arabic texts, for instance).

miss. Could we have another round of craft-brew IPAs, and the bill, when you have a moment?" Nor is such knowledge in any way necessary: since the goal of such an instructional manual is not to enable students to read texts about our contemporary world or to participate actively in our world *in* the target language, the absence of live native informants is generally less relevant. The goal of any user of an introduction to OLY is obviously to learn to *read* documents written in that language from the period 1100–1750 (although in this book the texts included date from the period 1272–1699).

There are no readings in the book that have been invented by the textbook's author, i.e. no attempt on my part to compose anything in OLY,[2] but rather I have simply included authentic and extant texts from that period, and on the basis of those texts provided the student with the grammatical, lexical, and (minimal) cultural tools necessary to read and understand them. On the one hand, that should be a comfort to the student: there are none of the awkwardly constructed (and often parodied) sentences here that one finds in older language textbooks of dead languages (e.g. "the two elderly female dwarves danced vigorously on the stone floor of the ancient mead-hall swept with rushes before the roaring fire of well-aged logs that had been cut and carried from the nearby forest by the esteemed nobleman's enterprising foster-sons"), that try to cram as many examples of grammatical usage and vocabulary as possible into a single sentence, the result being that the sentence becomes a monster that no one who actually spoke the target language could ever have imagined uttering. Rejoice in the absence of such artificial linguistic beasts.

On the other hand, however, since there are no extant authentic texts composed in the overly simple style most appropriate for elementary readers, it means that already in the first text the reader confronts not the semantically and syntactically simplistic "See Spot. See Spot run" (with illustrations of a cute puppy) but rather real, authentic, *literary* language as it was used by and for its native speakers. That is, it is something akin to learning the Cyrillic alphabet in the first two lessons of a beginning Russian course and on the third day being handed a copy of Tolstoy's *Война и мир* and told to turn to page 175 and begin "reading," i.e. not reading at all, but slogging through the text, word by word, wearing out a reference grammar and dictionary in the process. Except that OLY texts are, additionally, not a mere century-and-a-half old, as is Tolstoy's novel, but indeed four to seven centuries old. There is, alas, no easy access point. But then again, the purpose of this textbook is to obviate the difficulty of the slog itself by providing comprehensive grammatical and lexical aid at each step of the way. That should again encourage the reader.

The reader should be forewarned, however: it is not possible to learn a "dead" language without also studying its grammar, and it is not possible to study grammar without making tactical use of grammatical or linguistic terminology. The present volume is not a linguistic treatise, and every effort has been made to use linguistic terminology pragmatically, that is, only when necessary, but then again *always* when necessary, since that terminology makes both tactical and strategic explanation possible. There is no point, for instance, in wasting a half-page in

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[2] There are, however, a couple of brief sentences that manipulate an extant OLY sentence to illustrate distinctions in word order.

explanation in order to avoid the common linguistic designation "nominative case" every time that that concept arises and thus every time that those two words can specify very precisely what the point is. For the convenience of all readers not conversant with linguistics, all such terminology that is not part of standard non-technical but educated Anglophone usage will be explained or provided with examples at its first appearance.

Warning! Here follows the first such linguistic passage (explanation included, although the explanation itself cannot mask inherent conceptual complexities or transform them into simplicities): because of the linguistic nature of Yiddish as a *fusion language* (i.e. a language whose primary components derived from other languages) based on the *stock languages* of German and Hebrew-Aramaic through the mediation of the *language determinants* (i.e. the specific historical forms and dialects of those languages available to Jews as usable material at the particular historical period of their incorporation into Yiddish) from, respectively, medieval/ early modern German and ancient, medieval, and early modern Hebrew-Aramaic,[3] readers who come to OLY already knowing, for instance, Middle High German (MHG) *and* Hebrew, will generally make somewhat more rapid progress in learning OLY than those not so prepared, although the aid provided them by their knowledge of those other languages will stretch thin after the first few lessons, when they venture forth into the vast sea of texts in OLY. Those who know only Hebrew, or only modEY, or only modern German, or even a combination of those three languages, will, on the other hand, generally need to start at square one in OLY, progressing more rapidly through some sections than others.

This textbook is for all such readers, but also, perhaps even especially for those who know no modEY, no Hebrew, and no German, since in fact OLY is not Hebrew-Aramaic, not medieval or early modern German, and most definitely not modEY. OLY is a fusion of its fundamental components and was already a distinct language in the period in which the earliest texts appear. For that reason, those without knowledge of those stock languages need not feel particularly disadvantaged. As already noted, their comrades who know one or more of those stock languages will almost certainly proceed more rapidly in the beginning stages, and in their work through the early lessons of the book will frequently nod and/or wag their heads in recognition and surprise at familiar and unfamiliar aspects of OLY, while those without knowledge of the stock languages will, as adult learners of any language beyond their native tongue, likely spend more time with head-scratching.

Due to the nature of the authentic texts available for beginning students, as just described, from the first OLY text, the student ideally already needs to know everything—since in any given 400- or 600-year-old sentence, written by and for native speakers of the target language, any and every word of that language and any and

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[3] On the essential distinction between *stock language* (e.g. multi-millennial Hebrew and Aramaic), *linguistic determinant* (e.g. the specific dialect, vocabulary, syntax, etc. available at the time and place of adoption into Yiddish), and linguistic component (e.g. that which was actually adapted into Yiddish from the stock language), see Jacobs (2005: 20). While medieval Romance (primarily Old French and Old Italian) is already present as a component in the early period of Yiddish, statistically its input is minor; likewise modern Yiddish has Slavic as an additional (and very significant) component, which was, however, generally absent, and in any case not yet significant in OLY.

every grammatical construction of the entire language, whether the simplest or the most complex, may appear. Obviously if students did already know everything, they would not take the present volume in hand at all. Since, as already noted, it is not possible to begin with the absolutely simplest language use and progress toward more difficult texts, detailing the grammatical structures progressively in the pedagogically most accessible manner, a strictly pragmatic compromise has been adopted here: for the early lessons I have chosen texts that are as simple as any that I know, while still being culturally, literarily, or historically significant (which consideration of course immediately compromises the strict simplicity that one might otherwise ideally desire).[4] The grammatical presentations of each successive chapter guide the reader through progressively more complex structures, aiming over the course of the volume to present a systematic introduction to the literary language. At the same time, however, the reader must be aware that this volume is not a reference grammar, nor does it make any pretense to that level of comprehensiveness. Thus only the grammatical information necessary for the reader to navigate the texts is presented here. When complex structures appear in the texts of a given lesson before they have been formally presented in the grammatical sections of the book, they will be treated in the glosses and notes on an ad hoc basis, so that the student can cope with the text at hand. When necessary, there will at that point also be a parenthetical reference to the later systematic treatment of the particular issue in this volume.

The metalanguage of the volume is obviously English, and thus the linguistic examples and illustrations will almost always be drawn from English and will be oriented toward an Anglophone audience, even though it might sometimes seem easier to draw examples from Yiddish's nearer linguistic neighbor, German of one period or another. But, again, the purposes of the present volume are strictly and pragmatically focused on enabling readers to learn to read OLY texts; it is thus not a veiled treatise on comparative German-Yiddish linguistics. Even at a much lower lever of complexity, it would of course have been possible to increase the length of the book by 25–50 percent simply by identifying idioms and/or syntactic usages in Middle High German, modern standard German, dialectal German, or modern Western or modern Eastern Yiddish that are analogous to OLY usage, which would have struck a chord with those who had already recognized the parallel, i.e. it would have taught them nothing new, and it would have remained opaque to all other readers. Thus some readers can expect to catch themselves with some frequency asking: "But why does he not point out the parallel usage in language X here?" As often as that happens, I would suggest that the reader remember this paragraph.

Language learning is always a compromise, certainly and most definitively when children learn their native languages, which only seems to be effortless and automatic when one is not paying attention to the toil and frustration involved, or to the very limited range of vocabulary and of grammatical and syntactic structures

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[4] Such texts must be interesting, since the surest guarantor of readers' fatigue and abandonment of the study of the language is forcing them to claw their way through beginning-level instruction that teaches them to read uninteresting texts.

mastered.[5] For adult learners of a language, especially a "dead language" like Latin, Sumerian, or OLY, the toil and frustration is likewise ever present but much more obvious to all concerned. The goal of this book is to enable the learner to avoid as much of that frustration as possible.

Two of the most effective textbooks of ancient and medieval languages that I have come across in my own studies have been Clyde Pharr's *Homeric Greek* (1925/1985) and William W. Kibler's *An Introduction to Old French* (1984). Pharr's readings begin with the first line of book one of the *Iliad*, while Kibler begins with the first line of Marie de France's "Le Fresne"; they both then progress through those texts, treating a passage in each successive chapter of their books; Pharr treats the whole of *Iliad* I, while Kibler's first fifteen chapters present Marie's *lai* in its entirety before moving on to other texts. The advantages are obvious: in completing the textbook, the beginning student reads not a few hundred sentences in pseudo-ancient Greek or pseudo-medieval French invented by a modern scholar, but rather in each case one of the fundamental texts of the target language, gaining in the process a thorough grounding in the grammar, vocabulary, and cultural milieu of the focal texts, as well as an intimate knowledge of a core text of the literary tradition.

That same method will be employed in the present volume, such that the student will read the entirety of the Old Yiddish (OY) midrashic heroic lay "Yousef ha-tsadik," from the earliest extant manuscript collection of Yiddish literature (1382), the entirety of the Middle Yiddish (MY) adventure tale "Briyo ve-Zimro," from a later collection (1585), and a full canto of the MY epic *Pariz un Viene* (1594), each with full lesson-by-lesson glosses, notes to specific grammatical and cultural issues in the passages, and a step-by-step introduction to the morphology, syntax, and phonology (insofar as practicable) of OLY. In addition to these three focal texts, beginning in lesson six, each lesson will include a second brief and, one might hope, entertaining text at the end of the chapter as a reward for the reader's industrious study; some of these will be complete texts in themselves, including a blessing, various charms, potion recipes, and incantational spells, the earliest love song in Yiddish, a fable, a prison letter, a riddle, the final paragraph of the Passover song "Khad-gadye," and newspaper articles about Mongol emissaries at the czar's court, and Mediterranean pirates, among other things. All the texts are drawn from those edited in my *Early Yiddish Texts* (Frakes 2004). Further supplementary texts are added in Appendix 4, as are facsimile pages of manuscript or early print editions of several selected texts, a table of strong verb classes and irregular verbs, a full end-glossary, and an index of grammatical topics.

To learn to read OLY will be a challenge. The intent and guiding principle of the present volume has been never to disguise or deny that challenge but instead to make it as rewarding as possible at every stage.

In a sense this project has been under way since I first began my own studies of OLY some decades ago. The general intellectual debts incurred along the way are

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[5] Those impressed by the 3-year-old who already speaks "perfect" Russian (or another language) are either naïve or confused: it is after all only the Russian of a 3-year-old that the child has mastered, not that of the complexity of a Tolstoy or Solzhenitsyn.

Abbreviations

*	non-standard/ungrammatical form (for the sake of illustration)
~	related to
+	constructed with/governs (case)
a/acc	accusative
Ab	"Abraham the Patriarch"
adj	adjective
adv	adverb
Ar	Aramaic
art	article
aux	auxiliary (verb)
BI	"The Binding of Isaac"
BZ	"Briyo and Zimro"
c	common gender
card	cardinal
coll	collective
comp	comparative
conj	conjunction
const	construction
constr	quasi-construct state
correl	correlative
Cou	*Tuesday and Friday Courier*
d/dat	dative
dat.poss	dative of possession
def	definite
dem	demonstrative
dim	diminutive
Dt	Deuteronomy
DWB	Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm (1854–1971). *Deutsches Wörterbuch*
EYT	*Early Yiddish Texts, 1100–1750, with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Jerold C. Frakes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) (cited by text number)
F/fem	feminine
FF	*Fox Fables*

g/gen	genitive
geo	geographical/place name
G	German
Gmc	Germanic
H	whole Hebrew
H-A	Hebrew-Aramaic
id	idiom/idiomatic
imp	imperative
impers	impersonal
ind	indicative
indecl	indeclinable
indef	indefinite
inf	infinitive
inter	interrogative
interj	interjection
intpr	interrogative pronoun
IPA	International Phonetic
ir	irregular
irv	irregular verb
It	Italian
JtR	"Joseph the Righteous"
L	Latin
lit	literally
M/masc	masculine
MHG	Middle High German
mil	military
modEY	modern East Yiddish
mv	modal verb
MY	Middle Yiddish
n/nom	nominative
neg	negation/negative
NHG	New High German (= modern standard German)
nt/N	neuter
num	numeral
obj	object
OLY	Old Literary Yiddish
OMY	Old and/or Middle Yiddish

ord	ordinal
OY	Old Yiddish
p/pl	plural
PaV	*Pariz and Viene*
per	of person
plprf	pluperfect
Port	Portuguese
poss	possessive pronoun
ppr	personal pronoun
pr	present tense
pred	predicate
prf	perfect
prn	pronoun
prop	proper
prp	preposition
prt-pr	preterite-present verb
prt	preterite
prv	periphrastic verb
ptprt	past participle
pv	passive voice
Rec	medical/remedy recipes
refl	reflexive
relpr	relative pronoun
Rid	"Riddle" (1554)
s	strong
scv	strong, stem-changing verb
sg/s	singular
SM	*Seyfer Mides*
stat	stative
subj	subjunctive
suprl	superlative
spv	separable prefix verb
sv	strong verb
talm	talmudic
TC	"Traveler's Charm"
temp	temporal
th	of thing

trans	transitive
v	verb
vul	vulgar
w	weak
Wh	"Whither am I to go?"
wn	weak noun
wv	weak verb
YIVO	Yiddish Scientific Institute
Yos	*Yosifon*

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