Lexical Borrowings in the Eastern European Hasidic Hebrew Tale

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1 Introduction

The Eastern European Hasidic Hebrew tale corpus is a large collection of hagiographic stories composed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by followers of the Hasidic spiritual movement in a region spread chiefly over parts of present-day Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. The tales, which focus on the lives and works of the rebbes, or Hasidic spiritual leaders, provide an unparalleled linguistic insight into the historical development of the Hebrew language. Firstly, they offer a unique perspective on the role of Hebrew in traditional Ashkenazi society in the pre-modern period because they constitute the sole extensive record of narrative and discursive language use from this setting. Secondly, the language of the tales is one of the two chief forms of Hebrew, along with that employed by the Maskilim (adherents of the Jewish Enlightenment), that immediately preceded the vernacularization project in Palestine beginning in the 1880s. Therefore, a thorough understanding of Hasidic Hebrew can help pinpoint ways in which Hasidic literature influenced contemporaneous and subsequent forms of the Hebrew language. However, despite their significance the tales have not previously been the subject of detailed linguistic analysis.

One of the many fascinating and hitherto unexamined features of this idiom is its utilization of lexical borrowings from other languages. The Hasidic Hebrew tales are the product of a very distinctive type of multilingual environment. Their authors were all native Yiddish speakers, but they were schooled from an early age in written and recited varieties of Biblical and post-Biblical Hebrew and, from a slightly later age, trained in a range of Aramaic-language texts ranging from the Aramaic portions of the Bible (Daniel and Ezra) to the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds to the kabbalistic writings contained in the Zohar and other medieval mystical literature. In addition to their everyday spoken use of Yiddish and their familiarity with written Hebrew and Aramaic,
the authors lived in a Slavic-speaking (most typically Ukrainian, Polish, and Russian) environment. It is therefore informative to examine the ways in which these different linguistic influences, the Indo-European Yiddish and Slavic vernaculars on the one hand, and the fellow Semitic written language Aramaic on the other, are reflected in the lexis of their Hebrew writings, as well as the question of whether any other languages played a role in the lexical composition of these texts. I shall present and analyse the characteristic Yiddish, Aramaic, Slavic, and other borrowings appearing in the Hasidic Hebrew corpus in turn in order to illustrate the key patterns that they exemplify.

2 Yiddish

Because the authors of the Hasidic Hebrew hagiographic tales were all native Yiddish speakers, and because many of the tales are thought to have initially been transmitted orally in Yiddish (Dvir-Goldberg 2003: 19), it is unsurprising that they turned to that language in order to supplement the Hebrew vocabulary of their compositions. However, the specific ways in which they utilized Yiddish are instructive, as they reveal striking patterns about the relationship between the authors’ vernacular and their written Hebrew. Yiddish loanwords are an extremely common element of Hasidic Hebrew. They are comprised almost entirely of nouns, with other content or function words attested only very infrequently (see Kahn 2015: 378–380 for details of these rare cases). These Yiddish nouns are a deeply entrenched component of Hasidic Hebrew: for example, they are regularly incorporated into Hebrew grammatical patterns, taking Hebrew prefixes such as the definite article and inseparable prepositions. These trends conform to cross-linguistic tendencies regarding loanwords in multilingual environments, whereby nouns are typically the most common type of content word to be borrowed and such nouns are generally subject to the inherited morphosyntactic processes of the borrowing language (Matras 2009: 167, 173). The sentence shown in (1) illustrates this typical Hasidic Hebrew treatment of Yiddish loanwords: the Yiddish term \textit{untershank} ‘lining’ is prefixed by the Hebrew definite article and integrated into the surrounding text without any explicit definite article and integrated into the surrounding text without any explicit orthographic indication (such as vocalization, quotation marks, or brackets) of its borrowed nature.

1. \textit{תחת האונטער שלאק תפור קמיע}

\textit{taḥat ha-untershlak tap̄ur qameʿa}

Under the lining a talisman is sewn (Rodkinsohn 1865: 23)