לקט

ייִדישע שטודיעס היַינט

Jiddistik heute

Yiddish Studies Today

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Jiddistik Edition & Forschung Yiddish Editions & Research אויסגאַבעס און פֿאָרשונג ☸ יידיש

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Herausgegeben von Marion Aptroot, Efrat Gal-Ed,
Roland Gruschka und Simon Neuberg

Band 1

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Of Madonnas and Magdalenes

Reading Mary in Modernist Hebrew and Yiddish Women's Poetry

> The human psyche is an awesome labyrinth. Thousands of beings dwell there. The inhabitants are the various facets of the individual's present self on the one hand and fragments of his inherited self on the other.[1]

The inherited selves referred to by the writers of the אין זיך manifesto, a document describing both the general conditions of modernist poetry and the special circumstances of the Jewish poet, shaped the writing of lyric poetry and manifested themselves in various and often contradictory ways. These inherited selves refer to the cultural and historical touchstones which inform the poet's artistic world; the notion of fragments, of course, resonates strongly as a modernist trope, figuring centrally in the closing of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" ("these fragments I shore against my ruins.") Yet for the Jewish poet the notion of the fragment seems, in this instance at least, to a be a constitutional – rather than only a recuperative – act. That is, the essential gesture is one of production, of constituting the self in the present tense, out of various elements of one's individual and collective past, and not an act of recovery per se, of reassembling some lost wholeness. The Yiddishist's awesome labyrinth, then, more resembles the Freudian notion of the unconscious as an archaealogical site, which may be excavated in order to productively empower the self in the face of the present. This essay examines a specific set of inherited selves in the work of Anna Margolin (1887–1952) and Leah Goldberg (1900–1970), contemporaries and key figures in modern Yiddish and Hebrew poetry, respectively. I offer a comparative reading of work from their books לידער (Poems, 1929) and טבעות עשן (Smoke Rings, 1935), focusing on poems that incorporate female figures connected to Christianity as a mode of poetic self-expression.

The figure of Jesus played an essential role for modernist Jewish artists – from the more well-known work of Marc Chagall to the ubiquitous fictional and poetic renderings of Jesus in both Hebrew and Yiddish writing.[2] Indeed, what has been called "the Jewish reclamation

1 Glatshteyn, Leyeles and Minkov 1986: 775.
2 See, for example, Stahl 2008.

of Jesus" has surfaced in numerous circumstances.[3] These modernists built on the groundwork laid by Moses Mendelsohn's early invocation of Jesus as connected to Jewish teachings, as well as 19th-century distinctions between the historical Jesus, who was closely identified as a Jew, and the theological Jesus, a Christian invention. However, in the poems by Goldberg and Margolin examined here, it is not Jesus who plays a leading role in the poetic rendering of the Christian-European landscape. Rather, this position is occupied, in polymorphous and evolving fashion, by the figures of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. This variation on the Jesus theme may be understood not only as an exemplary instance of the modern Jewish 'reclamation' of Jesus, but also within the broader, emergent domain of women's poetry in Hebrew and Yiddish.[4]

Looking at the Mary figure in the work of two exemplary women poets, one of whom wrote in Hebrew and the other in Yiddish, offers an opportunity to explore how women poets negotiated the broader arena of Jewish literary production. It remains a matter of critical debate whether the same kind of "politics of exclusion" operated in the Yiddish sphere as has been located within Hebrew literary history.[5] However, one may view the use of the figure of Mary as a kind of symbolic intervention, denoting the presence of women poets within a male-dominated field, and within the normatively patriarchal parameters of traditional Jewish culture. The divergent poetic adoptions of Mary by Goldberg and Margolin may also be understood within modernism's more general recovery of motifs from the classical world and the Judeo-Christian tradition.[6] Indeed, we might compare this relatively infrequent turn to Mary to the more numerous references to biblical matriarchs such as Sarah or Rachel, or even to more ostensibly marginal figures such as Hagar, Lot's wife or Yiftach's daughter. However, perhaps for obvious reasons, Mary is not as easily absorbed as a poetic

3 Hoffman 2007: 1.

4 This essay therefore builds on the work of recent decades regarding the historical significance of modernist women's poetry in Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as appreciations of individual poets and their work. See Hellerstein 1988a, Gluzman 1991, Miron 1991, Novershtern 1990 and 2008, Sokoloff, Lapidus Lerner and Norich 1992, Karton-Blum and Weissman 2000, Mann 2002, Zierler 2004, and Brenner 2010.

5 For arguments about women writers and Hebrew literary history see Miron 1991 and Gluzman 1991. For related discussions about Yiddish see Hellerstein 1988a and 1992 and Novershtern 2008.

6 Shocham 2000 provides a compelling account of the intertextual use of canonical or mythical women figures in Leah Goldberg's work, arguing that her poems critique the image of women in a patriarchal society from within, by building on and revising those very texts which have produced stereotypical images of women as weak or fragile. She also traces a delicate relation between the paradoxical fragility and strength of these figures, and Goldberg's own life and sense of self.

figure as these more readily identifiable Jewish matriarchs. Indeed, the poems discussed below play upon the distinction between the historical figure of Mary and her iconic depiction within the Church and its institutions. If Hebrew and Yiddish writing about Jesus often drew on the tropes of suffering, compassion and, especially, victimhood to characterize their visions of Christ, what parallel themes might these (women) writers have extracted from the life of Mary, and to what ends? The experience of unrequited love as well as the dilemmas of sexuality and motherhood all appear in these poems, couched within a figure called Mary and her iconic representation.

The images of Mary point to large issues of cultural expression in both Goldberg's and Margolin's work, including the creation of a female poetic subject in modern Hebrew and Yiddish writing. Broadly speaking, I will argue that for Margolin, the Mary figure seems connected to her idiosyncratic reading of Christianity's penchant for "the word as such," to the text as the forging link between the material conditions of the body and the transcendent claims of the spirit. For Goldberg, images of Mary refer to the poet's cultural and psychological roots in the European landscape, and also – vicariously – to a devotional tradition suggesting a transcendent or sublime view of art. Hence, in Margolin's work, we find an imagining of a flesh-and-blood figure named "Marie," a Mary who speaks,[7] while in Goldberg's work, we find iconic renderings or artistic representations of the Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalene, but not a flesh-and-blood Mary herself. The work of both poets may also be productively read within the tradition of the תחינות, Yiddish supplicatory prayers, spoken and even at times written by women, and addressed to the biblical matriarchs.[8] While the connection between תחינות and modern Yiddish poetic subjectivity has been compellingly drawn by Kathryn Hellerstein,[9] the link between this pre-modern mode of female expression and modern Hebrew poetry remains to be explored. I am not concerned here with the question of influence per se between Goldberg and Margolin,[10] nor do I assume a direct experience by these poets of the older literary forms of female self-expression. Rather I am

7 These poems have also been translated under the title "Marie," and there is no critical consensus as to their engagement with Christian themes. I've used "Mary" here to stress the thematics, but would also note the historically interchangeable quality of these names, especially in the Gospels.

8 See Weissler 1998.

9 See Hellerstein 1988b.

10 That said, it doesn't hurt to know that Margolin's work was probably known in Tel Aviv during the 1930s: she herself had lived in Tel Aviv for a few years during her marriage to the writer Moshe Stavi/Stavski. We even have Reuven Ayzland's record of a letter written to her by Ch. N. Bialik from the early 1930s, in response to his receiving her book. See discussion in Mann 2002.

interested in the broader domain of intertextuality within literary history, and also what Chana Kronfeld has called "historical intertextual affiliations." Kronfeld uses the phrase to describe the affinity of Kafka's work for intertextual models prevalent in early modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Similarly, by employing a more comparative, "kaleidoscopic vision" and imagining Goldberg's and Margolin's "multiple literary affiliations," we gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of their work and its meaning for literary history.[11]

1. "Being a Beggarwoman": Anna Margolin's Mary

The case of Anna Margolin is complicated. Her poetry was part of the enormous flowering of Yiddish verse in New York in the interwar period.[12] In recent years she has come to serve, for better and for worse, as an exemplar of that perpetually productive but often fuzzily drawn category, "woman's writing," both for her work's emotional power as well as for the often dramatic details of the life story in which it was embedded. Indeed, there is something about the work – despite its relatively meager size: just a single, slim volume – that demands attention. In part, there is the audacious opening lyric, which may or may not be a 'signature' poem (see discussion below). Beyond that, however, the dazzling range of the book's stylistic achievements demands attention – is even hungry for it: is Margolin the Henry Roth of modern Yiddish poetry? What does her subsequent treatment and reception tell us about the history of Yiddish poetry? Of women's writing? Given the meager quantity of her work, and perhaps also because of what we know about the conditions of its production, we come up against an impasse of sorts that forces us to ask: what kind of circumstances lead to an "Anna Margolin"? The fictiveness of the name only exacerbates the desire to know what historical and social conditions conspired to produce such work, both the poems themselves and their ongoing critical reception.[13] For our purposes, we may note that Margolin was born in Brisk (Brest-Litovsk) and, like Goldberg, her family passed through Königsberg. Though not of the same socio-economic class, both girls were educated in secular, maskilic settings and afforded the opportunity to study Russian and, eventually, Hebrew. This cosmopolitan virtuosity is at the heart of Margolin's verse. Her poem, איך בין געווען אַ מאָל אַ ייִנגלינג ("I once was a youth") opens her only published volume of poems, לידער (New York, 1929):

11 Kronfeld 1996: 11f.

12 For her stylistic affiliations with די יונגע and אינזיכיסטן, see Novershtern 1990.

13 Novershtern 1991 provides essential archival material connected to Margolin, her work and her life.

איך בין געווען אַ מאָל אַ ייִנגלינג געהערט אין פּאָרטיקאָס סאָקראַטן עס האָט מייַן בוזעם-פרייַנד, מייַן ליבלינג, געהאַט דעם שענסטן טאָרס אין אַטען.	I once was a youth, heard Socrates in the porticos, my bosom friend, my lover, in all Athens had the finest torso.[14]

The poem contains some of the hallmarks of Margolin's verse: a deliberate masking of the poetic self, in this case within a cross-gendered persona; a focus on the aesthetic domain and the world of man-made objects; a delight in unexpected rhymes, often drawing on Yiddish's polyphonic resources as a fusion language; and an iconoclastic but enduring relation to the realm of Jewish ritual and experience. The poem concludes with this multivalent figure reveling in the late Roman empire, hearing rumors of Christianity's impending rise: "I heard the news/of the weakling from Nazareth/ and wild stories about the Jews." From the margins, the poetic speaker marks his distance from Western culture's historical foundations ("wild stories about the Jews") as well as the equally preposterous ascension of Christ. The Judeo-Christian tradition is held, as it were, close, but at arm's length, the better to both marvel over and critique it.

Worship is a central theme in Margolin's work. The imagery of private, often defiant worship in the face of an unresponsive divinity is threaded throughout her poems, and often coded in erotic terms. These scenes of worship combine elements of traditional Jewish life with a modernist sensitivity to the seductiveness and power of sculpted objects.[15] The prose poem דו addressing a lover, offers a typically claustrophobic scene of love and devotion in a materially rich setting:[16]

און ביסט מייַן באַזיגטע שטאָט. אין דייַנע אומע־ טיקע וויסטע טעמפּלען האָב איך אַוועקגע־ שטעלט מייַנע געטער.	For you are my conquered city. In your sad and empty temples I placed my gods.

Within the seven poems of the Mary cycle we find these realms – Jewish ritual, a modernist embrace of "the thing itself" and dramatic eroticism – embedded within another domain: Christianity and the figure

14 Translations are taken from Margolin 2005, unless otherwise indicated (here Margolin 2005: 2f). Due to the relative accessability of the bilingual Kumove edition, I have used it as a reference for the poems.

15 Avrom Novershtern has written persuasively about the importance of statues and sculptural motifs in Margolin's work; the Mary poems both compliment and counter this essential trope. See Novershtern 1991 and Mann 2002.

16 Margolin 2005: 30f.

of the Virgin Mary. Unlike the poems by Goldberg, which, as we shall see below, unequivocally reference the historical and iconic depiction of the Virgin Mary, Margolin's poems need not be read as directly referencing these themes.[17] However, as a series, the Mary cycle seems to extract certain tropes of the historical depiction of Mary – her status as a mother, her humility, her appropriation by Church ideology – and combine them with a flesh-and-blood woman who exists within the social and material realia of the twentieth century.

The first poem speaks directly to a figure called Mary: וואָס ווילסטו מאַרי? ("What do you want, Mary?") presents a pair of stereotypically extreme choices in answer to its titular question: the presence of a child, marking the only bright spot in an otherwise loveless domestic life, or a dramatic, ecstatic union with the earth. Unlike the Goldberg poems below, this series does not seem to describe or evoke a specific geographical or social setting; rather, the constant trope is the figure of Mary, who appears in almost Zelig-like fashion in a variety of scenes: alone in the desert, welcoming guests at a country wedding and finally, approaching her death. מאַרי וויל זײַן אַ בעטלערין ("Mary wants to be a beggarwoman") describes scenes of deliberate destitution and squandering of one's riches, both material and emotional. I will focus here on two short poems – מאַריס תּפֿילה ("Mary's prayer") and מאַרי און דער פּריסטער ("Mary and the priest") – that offer a dense rendering of potential couplings, between Mary and a divine figure, and Mary and a priest.[18]

גאָט, הכנעהדיק און שטום זײַנען די וועגן.	God, meek and silent are the ways.
דורכן פֿײַער פֿון זינד און פֿון טרערן	Through the flames of sin and tears
פֿירן צו דיר אַלע וועגן.	All roads lead to You.
איך האָב פֿון ליבע געבויט דיר אַ נעסט	I built You a nest of love
און פֿון שטילקייט אַ טעמפּל.	and from silence, a temple.
איך בין דײַן היטערין, דינסט און געליבטע,	I am Your guardian, servant and lover,
און דײַן פּנים האָב איך קיין מאָל ניט געזען.	yet I have never seen Your face.

17 We should critically consider the reluctance to reading Margolin's Mary in this way. Perhaps Margolin herself resisted a more overt rendering of these themes? Given her love of "mash-up" rhymes that motivate assonant chunks to denote cultural hybridity, may we also read the MARy poems as referring to some abbreviated, "essential" version of MARgolin? On the meaning of Margolin's rhyme see Mann 2002.
18 Margolin 2005: 188f.

און איך ליג אויפֿן ראַנד פֿון דער וועלט,	I lie at the edge of the world,
און דו גייסט פֿינסטער דורך מיר ווי די שעה פֿון טויט,	while You pass through me darkly like the hour of death,
גייסט ווי אַ ברייטע בליצנדיקע שווערד.	You pass like a broad, flashing sword.

The poem opens with a direct address to God and describes possible approaches to him – mute and silent, through sin and tears. The poem's middle two couplets depict a more familiar relation between God and Mary, detailing what she has done to deserve his attention: the intimacy of the nest complimenting the rapt silence of the temple. Sacred space is often a supremely private affair in Margolin's work, where devotion takes place within a congregation of two. The speaker's relation to God is both normative – she is his servant – and unusual – she has protected him and been his lover. In none of these roles has she seen his face, an allusion to the biblical Moses, which further elevates the speaker's status: this is no ordinary woman, and her relation to her God is commensurately privileged.

The sudden shift in perspective in the poem's final stanza – from the near-intimacy of the frustrated gaze to some distant spot at the world's edge – is an attempt to describe a relation to a distant God, representing the Law and the Text, within a normatively patriarchal tradition where the female form is often figured as a passive receptacle.[19] In an article on the feminist politics of translation, Kathryn Hellerstein reads the poem's conclusion as an attempt to imagine Mary's psychological and emotional state as she encounters the divine. For Hellerstein, "[t]he last stanza [...] describes the moment of divine conception – a moment thoroughly foreign to a Jewish sensibility, yet presented in these Yiddish lines in the most intimate of terms." [20] Hellerstein's reading hinges on the term היטערין (translated here as 'servant'), a term she links with Yiddish liturgical practice. Indeed, the liturgical model standing in some fashion behind all Yiddish poetry by women, especially a poem framed as a prayer, is the תחינה, or prayer of supplication, a first-person singular petition of the biblical matriarchs for their blessing or aid with some instance of personal difficulty. The model of prayer suggests a specific subject-object relation between God and the speaker, where the agency of the latter is predicated on the presence of the former. Margolin's poems put pressure on this relationship, re-en-

19 The poem's closing spatial image calls to mind the idea of "circumference," an important term for Emily Dickinson, also used to signal a woman poet's encounter with the divine and its limits within Western tradition.
20 See Hellerstein 2000.

visioning it to suggest a kind of divine power for the poet, who creates within the charged, yet ultimately secular, domain of the lyric.

In the following poem in the series, מאַרי און דער פּריסטער, Mary is figured as the object through which the devotional act transpires: [21]

מאַרי, ביסט אַ בעכער מיט אָפּפּערווייַן,
אַ צאַרט פֿאַררונדיקטער בעכער מיט ווייַן
אויף אַ פֿאַרווייַסטן מזבח.
אַ פּריסטער
מיט שלאַנקע לאַנגזאַמע הענט
הייבט אויף הויך דעם קרישטאָלענעם בעכער.
און עס ציטערט דייַן לעבן און ברענט
אין זייַנע אויגן, אין זייַנע הענט
און וויל אין גליק עקסטאַטישן און שווערן
צעשמעטערט ווערן.

Mary, you are a goblet of the wine offering,
a delicately rounded goblet of wine
on a sacrificial altar.
A priest
with delicate, cautious hands,
raises the crystal goblet high.
Your life trembles and burns
in his eyes, his hands,
and wants to be crushed
in profound ecstatic joy.

Here the priest and Mary-the-goblet are lovers, whose mutual devotion potentially leads to Mary's annihilation, just as the divine union augured the "hour of death" of מאַריס תּפֿילה. In a typically Margolian riff, the poem stresses the overlap of ostensibly competing religious traditions through its juxtaposition of Hebraic terms such as מזבח with the Germanic פּריסטער. An even more ancient tradition is referenced in the poem's concluding allusion to "forgotten gods." The vitality of these פֿאַרגעסענע געטער endures even as the Judeo-Christian ethic is forged. In both poems, the liturgical setting offers an opportunity to explore the freedom of the creative act, which is itself potentially self-destructive.

The figure of the sword in מאַריס תּפֿילה, both phallic and pen-like, appears in two other places in Margolin's work. A brief discussion of these other references will shed light on the complex subject-object relations of the Mary series. The sequence איך דייַן רו און איך דייַן שווערד ("I your rest and I your sword") details an often-stormy erotic relationship. The speaker looks down upon her sleeping lover, and offers an incantation: [22]

דרימל איַין, געליבטער, דרימל....
איך דייַן רו און איך דייַן שווערד.
וואַך איצט איבער ערד און הימל.
יעדער שטערן שטוינט און הערט,
וואָס איך פֿליסטער אין דייַן דרימל.

Drowse on, my beloved, drowse on....
I your peace and I your sword
now watch over heaven and earth.
Every star in amazement hears
what I whisper in your sleep.

21 Margolin 2005: 190f. I have modified the first line of the translation.
22 Ibid.: 35f.

The speaker becomes the sword itself, poised from a heavenly perspective, the poem's rhythm swelling like a powerful chant, whispered by the speaker who is both guard and lover. Significantly, the speaker is God-like and sword-like, no longer the passive object of another's actions. The connection between this figure of the sword and poetry is made more explicit in בלויז איין ליד ("Just one poem"), in which the progressive shaping and slicing of rhyme in the poem lead to the production of "just one poem," whose violent force resembles that of the divine, impregnating spirit at the end of מאַריס תּפֿילה. [23]

איך האָב בלויז איין ליד –	I have but one poem –
פֿון ייִאוש און שטאָלץ.	of despair and pride.
עס טונקלט און גליט	It darkens and glows
אין בראָנדז און שטאָל....	in bronze and steel....
איך פֿורעם דאָס וואָרט	I shape the word
מיט מײַן לעצטן אָטעם.	with my last breath.
מיט זכרונות שווער,	Again and again,
ווידער און ווידער	with heavy memories,
גיי איך ווי אַ שווערד	I go through the poems
דורך די לידער.	like a sword.

Both of these short poems reverse the foundational subject-object relations of מאַריס תּפֿילה: instead of being the object of the sword's (or God's) actions, it is the poet herself who moves like a sword through her poems. Artistic creation and procreation are fused in these poems, with the poet assuming near-divine control; poetry is the space in which this transfiguration of spirit and body is possible – where the word, shaped by the breath, becomes an object, where the crude chord (the poem) becomes the sword, wielded by the poet.

2. "Madonnas at the Crossroads": Leah Goldberg's Native Landscape

The elevation of "forgotten gods" points to Margolin's general engagement with multiple cultural affiliations, spanning the European continent and the historical development of its cultural underpinnings. With this figure of cultural complexity in mind, we may begin to approach

23 Margolin 2005: 174f.

the poems from Leah Goldberg's first book, טבעות עשן (Smoke Rings), published in Tel Aviv in 1935, the same year the poet immigrated to Palestine. Goldberg was a leading figure of the moderns, the first wave of Hebrew modernist poetry in Palestine, and also a prolific translator from Russian, German, French and Italian; in addition to nine volumes of poetry, she published several novels, a number of plays, volumes of literary scholarship, journalistic essays and a series of classic books for children.

The poems considered here largely depict the impoverished Lithuanian landscape of Eastern European Orthodoxy.[24] Throughout, the poems draw on diverse bits of the New Testament related to female figures, and we may track the evolution of these references to Mary and Mary Magdalene, to wooden madonnas, and finally to nuns and a version of the poet herself in a sacrificial setting. The speaker in these poems is both drawn to and repelled by these figures, using them to distinguish herself as a kind of local stranger, an ambivalence captured in Goldberg's description of Lithuania as "that abandoned homeland which does not mourn for me."[25] The poems represent an attempt to inhabit the world of the other, and to appropriate it for aesthetic purposes; in this case, a twenty-something Jewish woman poet, whose first languages were Russian, then German, then Lithuanian, chooses to write in Hebrew from the relative center of European culture, and adopts Christianity – as funneled through its iconic female figures – in order to become a poet.

The first poem, "Pietà," draws on two familiar cultural motifs: the Pietà, an artistic depiction, often in sculptural form, of the Virgin Mary cradling Christ's dead body; and the idea of autumn as a season of transition and paradox, marked by both abundance (the harvest) and decay (the approach of winter).[26]

שׁוּב דְּרָכִים... וְדַם שַׁלֶּכֶת	Once again paths... the autumn's blood
עַל פִּצְעֵי הָאֲדָמָה.	On the earth's wounds.
יַד אִילָן גְּרוּמָה נִמְשֶׁכֶת	A boney pine branch [hand] stretches
אֶל הַשַּׁחַק הַסּוּמָא.	Toward the blind sky.
שׁוּב תּוּגַת מָרוֹם דּוֹמַעַת	Once again the weeping sadness of heaven
עַל גְּוִיַּת אַדְמַת הַסְּתָו.	over the corpse of the autumn earth.
כְּמָדוֹנָה הַכּוֹרַעַת	Like a Madonna kneeling
עַל גּוּפוֹ שֶׁל הַנִּצְלָב.	Over the body of the crucified.

24 See Hirshfeld 2000 and Ticotsky 2006.
25 Goldberg 2007: 12.
26 Goldberg 1986 (I): 38.

לוֹחֵשׁ הַיַּעַר, - Pietà	Pietà – whispers the forest.
עוֹנֶה הַסְּתָו, - Pietà	Pietà – answers the autumn.
וּדְמָמָה פּוֹתַחַת שַׁעַר	And silence opens a gate
אֶל שַׁלְוַת מַלְכוּת הָאָב	To the calm of the Father's Kingdom.
רַק הָרוּחַ מִתְיַפֵּחַ -	Only the wind howls –
יְהוּדָה בּוֹכֶה עַל חֵטְא,	Judas weeping for his sin,
מְנַשֵּׁק רַגְלֵי הָרֵעַ	Kissing the feet of his friend,
לְבַקֵּשׁ סְלִיחַת הַמֵּת.	Asking forgiveness from the dead.

The measured trochaic rhythms and regular repeating rhyme scheme locate the poem within a European tradition of autumnal verse addressing the paradoxical beauty of a vibrant, yet decaying, landscape. Goldberg's poem presents Mary in doubly-figurative fashion: on one level, Mary is depicted in the Pietà, an iconic rendering of her care for Christ; on a second level, the Pietà itself serves as an image for the autumn landscape. The substance of seasonal change is rendered in martyrological terms: the fall foliage's sacrifice is mourned by the heavens, whose "weeping" suggests the movement of rain and wind. The forest and the autumn collude in the poem's brief, enigmatic dialogue in the first two lines of stanza 3, prefiguring a silence – *dĕmāmāh* – that is itself a condition for opening the gates of the "Father's kingdom." We may understand this proactive meeting between silence (here rendered as "*dĕmāmāh*," grammatically gendered feminine in Hebrew, and also approximate to "stillness") and the masculine domain in semiotic terms, a female rendering of voice countering the masculine realm of the written Word, the Law. As in Margolin's work, this valorization of muteness (*dĕmāmāh* in Hebrew or *shtumkayt* in Yiddish), evokes a special form of agency, and a poetics that connects their verse to the creation of a neo-romantic voice. For both Goldberg and Margolin, I would argue, the idea of silence as a potentially empowering state poses an essential question: what kind of voice can a woman poet create within a patriarchal tradition, especially within the fraught and gendered realm of Hebrew and Yiddish writing? [27] In the final stanza, against the Pietà's traditional silence there emerges the voice of a Jewish presence in the land – Judah weeping for his sin – a presence both meteorological and metaphorical – "wandering" like a wind, seeking redemption and forgiveness.

The main formal device indicating an intimate connection between the season of both life and death, and the Christian narrative of resur-

27 See Mann 2002: 517.

rection, is the repeated rhyme of *sĕtāv* and *ẓĕlāv* (autumn and cross), in this poem and in the poem immediately following, "Madonnas at the Crossroads" (מָדוֹנוֹת עַל פָּרָשַׁת דְּרָכִים). Whereas in "Pietà," Mary is imagined at a remove – both in the iconic image of the Pietà, and as a metaphor for the landscape – this distance is diminished in "Madonnas at the Crossroads,"[28] as the first-person speaker expressly compares herself, forsaken in love, to a group of wooden icons at a frozen crossroad:

אֲנִי הִסְכַּנְתִּי לְחַכּוֹת לַשָּׁוְא	I became accustomed to waiting in vain,
וּבְלִי יָגוֹן לִזְכֹּר יָמִים מְבֹרָכִים.	And to remembering, without agony, blessed days.
מָדוֹנוֹת עֵץ עַל פָּרָשַׁת דְּרָכִים	Wooden madonnas at the crossroads
שְׁלֵווֹת כָּמוֹנִי בְּקֶרַח אוֹר הַסְּתָו.	Are calm like me in the ice of autumn light.
מָדוֹנוֹת עֵץ בָּלוֹת וְדוֹמְמוֹת	Worn and silent wooden madonnas
יוֹדְעוֹת: הוּא לֹא יָקוּם עוֹד לִתְחִיָּה,	Know: he will not rise and come to life,
הוּא לֹא יָבוֹא לִמְחוֹת דִּמְעָה בְּדוּמִיָּה	He won't come to wipe away a tear in silence
עַל אֵם דְּרָכִים קְפוּאוֹת וְשׁוֹמֵמוֹת.	at the frozen wasted crossroads.
הֵן לֹא תִזְכֶּינָה לְנַשֵּׁק הַדּוֹם רַגְלָיו,	They won't get to kiss the blood on his feet,
הַהֵן שָׁמְעוּ אֶת צְחוֹק הַיֶּלֶד מִנַּצֶּרֶת?	Did they hear the laughter of the boy from Nazareth?
וּמַה גַּם אִם רָאוּהוּ עַל הַצְּלָב	And what if they saw him on the cross
וְעַל שְׂפָתָיו קָרְאוּ אֶת שְׁמָהּ שֶׁל הָאַחֶרֶת?	And on his lips they read another woman's name?
אַךְ הֵן זוֹכְרוֹת יָמִים מְבֹרָכִים	But they remember blessed days
וּמַסְכִּינוֹת לְצִפִּיַּת הַשָּׁוְא –	And are accustomed to vain expectation –
כְּמוֹהֶן אֲנִי: עַל פָּרָשַׁת דְּרָכִים	So too am I: at the crossroads
קָרָה וְכֹה שׁוֹקְטָה בְּקֶרַח אוֹר הַסְּתָו.	Cold and so quiet in the ice of autumn light.

The poem's lonely congregation waits in vain, one for her beloved, the others for the resurrection. Their distance from redemption – they will neither kiss the blood on Christ's feet nor hear his laughter – is absolute, and their devotion is further undercut at the end of the third stanza by the fact that he spoke the name of another woman: *šĕmāh šel hā-aḥeret*. This line seems to draw on diverse accounts from the New Testament: the naming of "*hā-aḥeret*" could refer to the report of Christ speaking the name of Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, an act that surprised his disciples. According to the diverse accounts of the Gospels, Mary Magdalene was the first witness to Christ's resurrection. Luke also mentions "the other Mary" who was present with Mary

28 Goldberg 1986 (1): 39.

Magdalene at the resurrection, a reference to one of Lazarus's sisters, also called Mary. In the Gospel of John, this Mary is referred to by the Greek "Mariam," which is a translation used in the Septuagint of the Hebrew Miriam, Moses's sister; some scholars have noted the prophetic or visionary qualities shared by these two figures.[29] Goldberg seems less interested in the potential overlap between Judaic and Christian sources and more drawn to the mutability of Mary herself, her ability to be both passive and active, both silent and voiced. The working through of the multiple Marys engenders both empathy and an awareness of difference.

"Peasant Woman Praying" (אִכָּרִית מִתְפַּלֶּלֶת)[30] also offers a pastoral scene involving a woman praying to a divine female presence.

מִטְפַּחַת־צִבְעוֹנִין עַל מֵצַח מְקֻמָּר,	Colorful kerchief on wrinkled forehead,
יַד רְחָבָה, כַּפָּהּ תֹּאחַז בַּטֶּנֶא.	Broad hand, palm grasping a basket.
בִּקְצֵה שְׂפָתַיִם קַו עָמֹק וָמָר,	A deep bitter line at lips' edge,
מַבָּט מֻשְׁפָּל מוּל פֶּסֶל מַגְּדָלֶנָה.	Downcast gaze facing a statue of
	Mary Magdalene.
מוּל פֶּסֶל עֵץ בָּלֶה וּמְנֻמָּר	Facing a worn and stained wooden statue
תְּפִלָּה קְצָרָה, כְּבֵדָה, עִקֶּשֶׁת:	A brief, heavy, stubborn prayer:
״אִם עֲוֹנִי הַפַּעַם יְכֻפַּר	"If my sin is forgiven this time
כְּזֶה שֶׁלָּךְ, קְדוֹשָׁה וּמְקַדֶּשֶׁת״... – –	this will be yours, blessed and blessing one."
אַךְ בְּשַׁלְוַת רַגְלַיִם יְחֵפוֹת	But in the barefoot calm,
בִּטְחוֹן תְּמִימוּת־הַחֵטְא שֶׁאֵין תְּקוּמָה לָהּ.	a certainty of the sin's naivete, which
וְכֹה מוּבָן: מִפֶּשַׁע הֵן חַפּוֹת	cannot be redeemed.
כְּאִלּוּ הַקָּמוֹת הַחֲשׂוּפוֹת	And so very clear: they are innocent of sin
שֶׁשַּׂחַק קַר צוֹחֵק לָהֶן מִלְמַעְלָה –	Like the grain exposed
	To cold heaven's laughter from above.

Mary's figurative nature is complicated by actual speech: a peasant woman makes an offering to an icon of Mary Magdalene, thus transforming the name of the אחרת – "the other woman" – into a statue. Magdalene's reputation as a penitent sinner makes her a logical site for the women's confession. In the final line, the cold heavens merely laugh in response to her plea; the efficacy of prayer, the whole idea of faith, is mocked, even upended. Yet there is something solid and invi-

29 There is thus some tension in Goldberg's poems between the relatively proactive stance accorded to both Miriam in the Hebrew Bible and Mary Magdalene in the New Testament – who are characterized by their "going out" – and the prolonged and passive waiting of both speaker and icons in this poem. See Meyers 2005.
30 Goldberg 1986 (1): 40.

ting about the landscape of peasant observance, a process tied to the seasons, and to a familiar landmark that has witnessed time's passage. Moreover, though the poem concludes by dismissing the devotional act, the woman herself seems transformed and comforted. The "bitter" set of her lips, her downcast face and mumbled words of prayer are lightened by the poem's end; she may be barefoot, but she is also "at peace." While the speaker distances herself from what is perceived as a blind or ignorant act of faith, there is also a grudging recognition of the ease with which the woman seems relieved of the burden of her sin. The cruelty of the poem's final line recalls the impenetrability of the "Father's kingdom" in "Pietà" but only from the point of view of the speaker, who stands outside the devotional act, with some amount of envy. Yes, the speaker may admire these icons, but she has no access to their comfort or power.

We have followed these poems as they grapple with the figure of Mary in all her diverse emanations, from a muted, metaphorical rendering in "Pietà," to wooden icons of Mary, to actual prayer by an individual woman facing a statue of Mary Magdalene. These figurations evolve one more time in the startling reversal חֲלוֹם נַעֲרָה (A young girl's dream),[31] where the speaker imagines herself as Jesus, being served by Mary Magdalene. The gender reversal in "A Young Girl's Dream" resembles Margolin's audacious impersonation of a young Greek hedonist, whose time traveling ends at the margins of approaching Christendom. In both poems we find an attempt to poetically inhabit the world of the other, to appropriate it for one's own aesthetic purposes.

חֲלוֹם נַעֲרָה

״מגדלנה הקדושה״ – תמונה מאת קרלו קְרִיוֶלִי
נמצאת ב־Kaiser Friedrich Museum בברלין

אֲנִי חָלַמְתִּי שֶׁאֲנִי – אַתָּה,
וּמַגְדָּלֶנָה שֶׁל קְרִיוֶלִי
לִי מַגִּישָׁה מַשְׁקֶה רוֹתֵחַ, זַךְ
בְּגְבִיעַ־בְּדֹלַח מְצֻפֶּה זָהָב,
וְתַלְתַּלָּהּ – נָחָשׁ נִפְתַּל וָרַךְ –
מִדֵּי עָבְרָהּ, נוֹגֵעַ בִּלְחָיַי,
וְכָל גּוּפִי שִׁכּוֹר מֵרֵיחַ טֻבֶּרוֹזָה.

A Young Girl's Dream

"Holy Madgalena" – painting by Carlo Crivelli
found in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin

I dreamed that I was – you,
And Crivelli's Magdalene
served me a boiling-hot drink, pure
In a gold-crusted crystal goblet,
And her curls – a spiraling soft snake
On each side – touch my cheeks,
And my whole body is drunk with
the scent of tuberoses.

31 Ibid.: 71.

אֲנִי חָלַמְתִּי שֶׁאֲנִי – אַתָּה.	I dreamed that I was – you.
וּפַרְצוּפָהּ שֶׁל נַעֲרָה חִוֶּרֶת	And the face of a pale young girl
נִמְחָה מִזִּכְרוֹנִי לְעוֹלָמִים	Was forever wiped from my memory
וְאָנֹכִי צָמֵא לְמַגְדָּלֶנָה.	And I am thirsty for Magdalena.
וְלֹא הָיָה מוֹצָא מִתּוֹךְ זַוְעַת־חֲלוֹם,	And there was no way out of the dream's terror,
וְלֹא הָיָה מִפְלָט מִמַּגְדָּלֶנָה.	And no escaping Magdalena.

The poem marks a distinct thematic and formal departure: the setting has moved indoors, away from the pastoral landscape and into an interior space of contemplation; furthermore, it is ekphrastic; that is, it describes a painting, not an actual scene, though given the epigraph, we may imagine the speaker standing in front of this particular painting in a specific location: the Italian Renaissance channeled through a museum in Berlin. The Hebrew term used is "*magdālenāh*" and not "*mariāh ha-migdālīt*," the proper form of reference to the historical figure. But this is precisely the point: Goldberg is less interested in the historical figure, and more in her artistic representation as a Christian icon. The speaker's thirst for the Magdalene destroys the memory of all else, including the "other woman," "*hā-aḥeret*," in this case the figure of a pale young girl. "No escaping Magdalena" points to a kind of erotic servitude, a cyclical condition of waiting and substitution that characterizes the volume's poems of frustrated love.

Critics have largely viewed the Christian imagery of Goldberg's early poems as a kind of immature and unripe stage (בסר) – what Dan Miron has called her "diasporic modernism"[32] – something the poet needed to get out of her system before addressing the proper Hebrew literary business of the day – that is, the national and social imperatives of the Zionist movement. Some have suggested that Goldberg's depictions of women praying to statues, especially matriarchal figures, are foreign to Jewish tradition.[33] However, if we think about these poems within the context of Yiddish poetry and the תחינות, their scenes of female devotion do not seem so unusual. A female address to the matriarchs, especially in times of trouble, was a model for female liturgical experience in traditional Jewish life. Furthermore, the Madonna's grief and joy are references to life-events that are key features of the תחינות. Finally, we should note that the idea of women treasuring idols, to the point of theft, in fact has a solid biblical precedent. The image of Rachel stealing the idols constitutes the metaphorical core of Wendy Zierler's recent study of the emergence of modern Hebrew women's writing,

32 Miron 1999: 330.
33 Ibid.: 350. See also Karton-Blum 2006.

in which she argues that women writers refashioned the language of men to create their own distinct literary tradition.[34] Goldberg's country scenes of a female speaker worshiping a female aspect or incarnation of the divine is just such a scene; her poems domesticate the sacred, rooting the divine in a specific location – this is what idols generally do. In fact, modern Hebrew poetry also had its own internal example of a female address to a female deity – Saul Tchernichovki's עשתרתי לי ("My Astarte"). Tchernichovski's poem impersonates a female voice addressing a religious amulet, which itself represents a deity who is adamantly part of the pagan world. The most well-known modern Hebrew example of this general scene of addressing a statue may also be found in Tchernichovski's work: לנוכח פסל אפולו ("Facing a statue of Apollo," 1899), where the poet declares an ambivalent aesthetic loyalty to Hellenic culture. That poem too reverberates within this later, different scene of worship: instead of *lĕnōkhaḥ pesel apōlō*, *mūl pesel magdalenāh*. This connection becomes more easily apparent with the mediating example of Yiddish and the תחינות. Of course, it's true that תחינות, or any kind of prayer, do not invoke actual statues; but viewed as a model for modernist poetry, liturgical texts may evoke – in much the same way that Margolin viewed her poems, divinely shaped by her breath, as objects – with all the attendant seductiveness of other spiritual traditions, with their relative openness to icons and idols.

Among modernist Hebrew poets, Goldberg's work does not display an easily readable connection to Yiddish writing and culture; and this essay does not wish to claim her as a kind of 'covert' Yiddishist. Her translations from the Yiddish were far fewer, for example, than those of her contemporary Avraham Shlonsky. Yet we do find, in a late autobiographical statement by the poet, an enigmatic reference to her father as a "Yiddishist," a term which perhaps had more of a political than a cultural connotation for the poet in this context.[35] Furthermore, the Christian motifs in her early work, and their particular connection to Italian Renaissance painting, represented a spiritual example for the poet, a religious experience which was not a part of her early family life or childhood world. Goldberg's poems do not highlight the foreign quality of the Christian Mary in order to shore up her own Jewishness; if anything the poems seem to want to make her more familiar, to appropriate her in order to motivate a poetic utterance. It is not the strangeness of Mary that appeals, but her grudging proximity, her like-

34 Zierler 2004.

35 אבי היה יידישסטאן לגבי השקפותיו, אבל לשון הדיבור בבית היתה רוסית. Goldberg 2007b. The document, dated 13th December 1968, was discovered in the Goldberg archives by Gideon Ticotsky.

ness to the poetic speaker and her situation, a strategy similar to that found generally in modernist Hebrew and Yiddish writing about Christian motifs. The proximity between the poetic speaker and Mary exists in situational terms that are emotional and affective, as well as, broadly speaking, cultural.

Ariel Hirshfeld has argued that the early massive appeal of Goldberg's poetry was due to the fact that it both recorded the psychic break engendered by leaving Europe and its landscapes behind, and intimated the approaching physical destruction of these landscapes.[36] Indeed, the images of Mary in Goldberg's poems are ultimately connected to the idea of home, both actually and mentally. Yet this 'home' is certainly not the social demography of the shtetl but perhaps that very same landscape, with few recognizably Jewish attributes. The native landscape is dotted with multiple Marys, who were all, historically speaking, Jewish. We also find an expressly gentile figure – the praying peasant, who turns out, through the mediating example of the *tkhine*, to resemble Jewish women, at least in some respects.

3. Hebrew and Yiddish Women Poets – A Room of Their Own?

This essay addresses the broad domain of Hebrew-Yiddish literary relations, and begins to consider the implications of thinking critically and comparatively about women poets within this wider sphere.[37] I have already written about the possibility of a more "visual" poetics on the part of Hebrew and Yiddish women poets, given the less traditional cultural baggage brought by women poets to the production of a secular literary genre in languages linked to sacred texts.[38] Here I have explored diverse renderings of a central figure from the Western imagination, one which seems to have struck the fancy of two Jewish women writers living, liminally, at its center, in more or less the same cultural moment. "Mary" matters massively, of course, in narratives about Christian origins; yet her meaning differs substantively from that of Jesus, who, as noted above, often appeared in Hebrew and Yiddish writing by male authors. Mary is both a creative agent of her own fate and a passive receptacle of God's will, the dual quality of which we have noted in poems by both Margolin and Goldberg. Perhaps this ambiguity suited the aesthetic needs of these women poets operating within normatively patriarchal literary systems.

36 Hirshfeld 2000: 137.
37 See Kronfeld 1996, Brenner 2010 and Schachter 2011.
38 Mann 2004.

An example from another tradition in which religious imagery figures heavily offers an enlightening context for our purposes. Cynthia Scheinberg explores how Victorian Jewish women poets such as Amy Levy utilized religious tropes to critique literary norms governed by a Christian belief system. Their poems represented, in essence, an intervention in these dominant norms, and were related to the religious imagery in work by more well-known non-Jewish poets like Elizabeth Barrett Browning. For example, according to Scheinberg, Milton's *Paradise Lost* "present[s] Mary as the object of male narrational gaze and minimize[s] her active role in Christian history."[39] However, we find the related figure of Mary Magdalene cast in a very different role in Amy Levy's poem "Magdalen." That poem alludes to an intimate physical relationship between Jesus and his female disciple, but ultimately refuses to accept the transformation of their relationship after his resurrection – a rejection of Christianity and an insistence on Magdalen's (and the poet's) Jewish roots.[40] Obviously there exist significant linguistic and cultural differences between the work of Anna Margolin and Leah Goldberg, on the one hand, and the Victorian milieu of Amy Levy, on the other. However, when we expand our purview beyond Hebrew and Yiddish modernism to consider work by Jewish women writers from other periods, we isolate gender as a category of analysis, enabling us to better and more critically view the strategies historically deployed by women writers operating in these diverse social settings. Embedding these insights in a more complex discussion of Margolin's and Goldberg's work and its reception deepens our appreciation of the meaning of these two poets for Hebrew and Yiddish literary history. In some sense, their poetry exists at the canonical center of modernist literary production in Hebrew and Yiddish – both for its formal innovation and for the multiple cultural affiliations that emerge through a close reading of their work. At the same time, however, something about these Mary poems resists absorption into this consensual center, pushing stubbornly against the cultural taboos governing the depiction of both female agency and Christian icons, offering an alternative path for the reading of Jewish literary history.

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40 Ibid.: 220f. Levy's "Magadalen" also includes the line "I wonder, did God laugh in Heaven?"

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