

The Rhythms of Language Mixing: Ludwig Strauss's Notes for an Impossible German-Hebrew Hymn

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ABSTRACT: This essay takes a draft of a German-Hebrew bilingual poem, found in the archive of Ludwig Strauss at the Israeli National Library in Jerusalem, as its point of departure. In my reading, this experiment in bilingual prosody speaks to the historical moment in which it was written—the early 1940s—and comments on the state of the relations between the two languages, and the two nations, at that moment. But the poem does so not simply by naming the two languages, or by mixing them, but precisely by using them both to produce a single prosodic unit. In other words, it is a text that addresses poetic form and uses it as a medium to ask historical and ideological questions.

AN UNDATED, UNTITLED FRAGMENT OF A POEM, found in the archive of Arie Ludwig Strauss (1892–1953) at the Israeli National Library in Jerusalem, alternates between German and Hebrew:

ירושלים,
Aachen
und Deutsch
וגם עברית
Die Länder und die Sprachen
יִשְׁרָאוֹל הַיְהוּדִית¹

¹ Ludwig Strauss Archive, Israeli National Library, Jerusalem, ARC. MS. VAR. 424, 199–200. I focus on this version of the poem, though, as I discuss below, another draft is extant in the archive.



In my English translation, the poem reads: “Jerusalem / Aachen / and German / and also Hebrew / The lands and the languages / will sing the splendor of the covenant.” I propose to scan it as consisting of four trimetric lines (capitalization indicates strong positions; parentheses, extrametrical positions):

yRU sha / LA yim / AA chen //
 und DEUTSCH / ve GAM / iv RIT //
 (die) LAEN der / UND die / SPRA chen //
 ya SHI / ru HOD / ha BRIT //

Though Strauss used similar forms in both German and Hebrew, there is no evidence that he wrote other bilingual poems of this kind, nor is there any reason to believe that he intended to publish this one.² And yet, he did not discard it; nor should we dismiss it out of hand, despite its apparent simplicity, perhaps even banality.

The brief poem—let me revert to calling it that, though the designation is certainly debatable, since it was not completed—vacillates between bringing German and Hebrew together and keeping them apart. It starts out with a neat division between the two. The city of Jerusalem and the Hebrew language are both named in Hebrew; Aachen, the city where Strauss was born and where he taught Germanic studies until he was dismissed under Nazi law in 1933, is designated in German, as is *Deutsch*, the German language. Further strengthening the division, the German *Aachen* rhymes with *Sprachen*, and the Hebrew *Ivrit* (Hebrew) rhymes with *brit* (covenant).³ And yet the two languages must collaborate to produce two three-footed units, creating a symmetric structure: Hebrew (four syllables)—German (two)—German (two)—Hebrew (four). The languages get one word each in the first pairing, and two words each in the second, and in both cases they refer to the same type of thing (places first, then languages). This collaboration is suspended in the final two lines, which separate German and Hebrew into two units of three feet each. Yet here the two languages are mixed in the creation of a single grammatical sentence.

In this final sentence, the metonymic force of the two cities is explicated and they are paraphrased by the more general designation “Die Länder.” The relationship between land and language, however, is more complicated than metonymy. On the one hand, the poem seems to espouse the monolingual ideology dominant in the modern West, positing a one-to-one relationship between lands and languages. Aachen corresponds to German as Jerusalem does to Hebrew. But it is hard to believe that Strauss intended to make a claim for such a simple, straightforward correspondence. First of all, neither Jerusalem nor Aachen (which lies at the so-called tripoint border of Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium and has historically moved between French and German rule) are monolingual cities. Furthermore, Strauss’s journey from one city to the other does not follow the paradigm often applied to the German-Jewish immigration to

² Hebrew vocabulary items do appear with some frequency in the German poetry that Strauss wrote in Mandatory Palestine, but none of these poems mix languages to the extent we see in this manuscript. Lina Barouch, “Ludwig Strauss: Polyglossia and Parody in Palestine,” *Naharaim* 6, no. 1 (2012): 121–47. Another mode or genre favored by Strauss, which might be useful in thinking about this fragment, is the aphorism.

³ The other draft of the poem found in the archive breaks this division, adding another, mostly illegible, line in German that ends with “singen mit” (sing along) to rhyme with the Hebrew “ivrit.”

the Zionist *Yishuv* in Palestine. According to this widespread narrative, German-speakers had to laboriously give up their mother tongue and acquire Hebrew, replacing one form of monolingual existence with another. But Strauss's interest in Hebrew predates his immigration to Palestine, and his German authorship continues after it. In addition to his academic training in the field of *Germanistik* and his enthusiastic engagement with the contemporary German literary scene, Strauss had an early interest in the Renaissance of Jewish culture in Weimar Germany and in particular in the Hebrew language and in Hebrew poetry.⁴ And, like several of his peers, he continued to have an active life as a German poet in Jerusalem.⁵ Indeed, the very existence of this bilingual text speaks loudly to the postmonolingual condition of its producer, who moves between the two languages and acts as a kind of conductor as they sing—together—of the “splendor of the covenant.”⁶

This final phrase of the poem evokes multiple allusive resonances, in both German and Hebrew. Though the combination *hod ha-brit* is not saliently recognizable from the Hebrew tradition, both of its components are laden with myriad biblical, liturgical, and Kabbalistic associations. At the same time, the image of a duet sung in praise of a splendid covenant or alliance can also be read as an homage to Hölderlin, the German poet whom Strauss wrote extensively about throughout his career as a literary scholar and used as a model in his poetic writing.⁷ In his late poem “Friedensfeier,” Hölderlin describes what humankind has learned “since we have been a discourse and have heard from one another” (seit ein Gespräch wir sind und hören voneinander). Hölderlin's stanza continues “But soon we shall be song” and, further down, speaks of the *Bündnis*—the “pact of peace”—between the “great spirit” and “other forces.”⁸ Strauss's bilingual hymn thus borrows its force from the models of both the biblical psalms and Hölderlin's “Hymns to the Night.” In other words, the poem might be read as an expression of what Tuvia Rübner—himself a German-Hebrew bilingual poet—has described as Strauss's “twin spirit,” in which “German and Jewish and the German and Hebrew counterparts do not experience mutual suspension (in favor of a higher synthesis) but rather display forms of cohabitation in which each language is assigned its own place but remains coupled to its twin.”⁹ If Hölderlin's use of the term

⁴ Lina Barouch and Galili Shahar, “Introduction: Arie Ludwig Strauss between Hölderlin and Yehuda Halevi,” *Naharaim* 8, no. 2 (2014): 246–52.

⁵ Other prominent examples of authors who continued to create in German in Mandatory Palestine and later in Israel include Werner Kraft and Shalom Ben-Chorin. As I have discussed elsewhere, in other cases the evidence for a continued creative life in German is archival rather than published. Na'ama Rokem, “German Hebrew Encounters in the Poetry and Correspondence of Yehuda Amichai and Paul Celan,” *Prooftexts* 30 (2010): 97–127; and Na'ama Rokem, “The Translator's Laboratory: A Draft from the Dan Pagis Archive,” *AJS Perspectives*, Fall 2015, <http://perspectives.ajsnet.org/translation-issue/the-translators-laboratory-a-draft-from-the-dan-pagis-archive/>.

⁶ I borrow the term “postmonolingual” from Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

⁷ On Strauss and Hölderlin, see Lina Barouch, “Hölderlin in Jerusalem: Buber and Strauss on Poetry and the Limits of Dialogue,” *Naharaim* 8, no. 2 (2014): 289–307. Strauss's studies of Hölderlin are published in the second volume of Ludwig Strauss, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Tuvia Rübner and Hans Otto Horch, 4 vols. (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1998–2002).

⁸ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments: Bilingual Edition with a Preface, Introduction, and Notes*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 438–39.

⁹ Tuvia Rübner, in Ludwig Strauss, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:596–97. I quote Rübner's statement as paraphrased by Barouch and Shahar in their “Introduction,” 249.

Gespräch suggests that dialogue is a universal existential condition, Strauss's poem enacts a conversation and an encounter between the two specific languages that meet on his page.¹⁰

As Galili Shahar and Lina Barouch have recently described, Strauss's bilingual notebooks from the early 1940s embody this "twin spirit" as they alternate between the two languages and the two directions of writing, including versions of poems in both of the author's languages.¹¹ The fragment that preoccupies us here most likely dates to the same period of time, a period in which the Nazis were perpetrating genocidal violence and claiming to create a "pure" monolingual German space, and in which, in response, many of Strauss's fellow members of the Jewish *Yishuv* in Mandatory Palestine were increasingly suspicious of the German language.¹² In this context, Strauss's practice of mixing the two languages can seem almost like a utopian venture, his bilingual notebooks establishing an alternative space in which the two languages coexist in peaceful coproduction. But this brief text does not belong to the relatively organized space of the notebook, relegated instead to a pile of scrap papers that were preserved separately. And if the notebooks document the productive movement back and forth between the languages and the traditions, this macaronic fragment provides a glimpse of a reality of code-switching and language mixing, even as it transforms this reality into the stuff of prosody. Thus, despite its almost-messianic tone, I propose that this text should be read not for what it says about the covenant between the two languages but rather for what it says about the history and the nature of poetic form. If the poem makes an argument, it does so not by mixing German and Hebrew or proposing that the two languages share a covenant (a *brit* or a *Bündnis*) not breakable by the current political crisis. Rather, it is the turn to bilingual *prosody* that carries the strongest message of this text.

Jahan Ramazani has shown that the poor social reputation of code-switching—often understood as a denigration of language or a symptom of speakers' limited competence—has circumscribed its role in the culturally elevated medium of poetry. In addition to the often-articulated defense of bilingual poetry as a form of social mimesis (the argument that poets use code-switching to reflect their social realities or to affirm their resistance to hegemonic culture), Ramazani shows that the mixture of languages in poetry performs specifically poetic tasks. Thus,

code-switching in poetry often points in two opposite directions at once: by virtue of breaking with monologic literariness, it heightens poetry's speech-effect, its seeming orality; and yet by virtue of its pattern-rich code-stitching, it also signals poetry's literariness, its bending back of reference on to itself, its insistence on the verbal materiality and sonic textures that resonate even across languages.¹³

¹⁰ As Lina Barouch describes, Martin Buber uses Hölderlin's "Hymns to the Night" in an essay written in honor of Strauss, who was his son-in-law, for his sixtieth birthday. Through this poem, Barouch inserts Strauss into a network of thinkers who conceptualize dialogue and encounter in different ways, including Buber himself and Martin Heidegger. Barouch, "Hölderlin in Jerusalem," 289–90.

¹¹ Barouch and Shahar, "Introduction," 249–50. On Strauss's practices of writing poetry across the two languages, see Shimon Sandbank, "Arie Ludwig Strauss: A Psalm Returns Home," *Naharaim* 8, no. 2 (2014): 253–72; and Rachel Seelig, "The Middleman: Ludwig Strauss's German-Hebrew Bilingualism," *Prooftexts* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 76–104.

¹² Adi Gordon, "German Exiles in the 'Orient': The German-Language Weekly *Orient* (Haifa 1942–43) between German Exile and Zionist Aliya," in *Placeless Topographies: Jewish Perspectives on the Literature of Exile*, ed. Bernhard Greiner (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag), 149–59.

¹³ Jahan Ramazani, "Code-Switching, Code-Stitching: A Macaronic Poetics?," *Dibur* 1 (Fall 2015): 34, <http://arcade.stanford.edu/dibur/code-switching-code-stitching-macaronic-poetics-0>.

Precisely such an insistence is at work in Strauss's stitching together of the German and the Hebrew to form a single poetic unit. In this reading, the poem is not *about* the relationship between German and Hebrew and its task is not to claim, against historical appearances, that a covenant between the two is possible. Instead, it is written to explore and expose the relationship between the two, specifically as *poetic* languages, by highlighting their materiality. Furthermore, it is a poem about the history of poetic forms as they evolve interlinguistically, and especially as they evolve on the seam line that switches and stitches between German and Hebrew.

If we choose to scan it with a strong emphasis on the stress pattern (which alternates between trochees and iambs), Strauss's poem appears to transform the stuff of conversational code-switching into a rhythmic drone, directing our attention precisely to the artifice—even the artificiality—of poetic form. It wants us to pay attention not simply to the fact that German and Hebrew are mixed but rather to the fact that they can be combined to concoct a conventional matrix of poetic language. What thus comes under scrutiny is the interlinguistic nature of this matrix, that is, the fact that this artifice comes out of a long history of borrowings, importations, and translations. This applies in general to the history of poetic forms, significant parts of which can be told as a succession of importations and adaptations of models across languages, and is of particular importance to the long history of Hebrew verse. The examples that come most readily to mind are the adoption of Arabic poetic forms by Hebrew poets in medieval Spain and the adoption of accentual-syllabic forms, inspired by Russian and German poetry, by the revival poets at the end of the nineteenth century. These revival poets, such as Haim Nahman Bialik and Shaul Tchernichovsky, applied these adopted forms in their Eastern European, Ashkenazi Hebrew dialect. But by the time Strauss produced his experiment in bilingual prosodics, a new generation of Hebrew poets were writing in the Sefardi accent, and thus they had to contend with two forms of heteroglossia: the adoption of accentual-syllabic meters from the European languages and their adaptation to the new stress pattern.¹⁴

Our understanding of the place of such adoptions and adaptations in the history of Hebrew literature owes much to the work of Benjamin Harshav. In his synthetic explanation of three thousand years of the evolution of Hebrew poetic forms, Harshav describes Hebrew literature as “a nomadic laboratory for the metamorphosis of poetic forms in the context of Jewish history.”¹⁵ And his account of the evolution of the systems of Hebrew versification highlights the cultural and ideological contexts that frame these transformations and presents a history that is punctuated by changes in geographic location (Italy, Spain, Eastern Europe, Eretz Israel) and, concurrently, by changes in linguistic points of reference (the dialogic interaction of Hebrew with Greek, Latin, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, Yiddish, German, and other languages, which forms what Harshav elsewhere calls the polyphony of Jewish culture).¹⁶ Thus, as Vered Shemtov has emphasized, prosodic choices made by Hebrew authors are always already rooted in history, always already ideological. And in the early 1940s, what is at stake in the prosodic choices made by Hebrew poets is precisely the relationship of modern Hebrew literature, at the moment that it

¹⁴ Vered Shemtov, *Changing Rhythms: Towards a Theory of Prosody in Cultural Context* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2012); and Miriam Segal, *A New Sound in Hebrew Poetry: Poetics, Politics, Accent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Benjamin Harshav, *Three Thousand Years of Hebrew Versification: Essays in Comparative Prosody* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 64.

¹⁶ Benjamin Harshav, *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

is about to become *Israeli* literature, with its multilingual pasts.¹⁷ At this moment Hebrew literature was closer than it ever had been to imagining itself as adhering to the normative model of a national literature, written in the language spoken by an ethnically homogeneous group, inhabiting a discrete geographic space. This is the context in which Strauss's manuscript should be read.

When Strauss writes of the Lands and the Languages that sing the glory of the covenant, he is not merely offering a descriptive statement about the state of the relations between his two languages at that moment or historically, nor is he simply offering a prescriptive or utopian vision of what it might be. Rather, he is using this relationship, with all of its difficulty and complexity, as a potent medium for his exploration of the cultural and ideological dynamics of poetic form. The poem demonstrates that Hebrew poetry continues to sing a duet with other languages and other poetic traditions, thereby questioning whether it can become—in the narrow, normative sense—a national literature.

Ultimately, this is an argument that cannot be made in poetry (at this historical moment, with the medium of a German-Hebrew mixture). Strauss's hymn remains impossible; it is not discarded but neither is it completed. But of course, this small fragment is part of a rich career in poetry, translation, and scholarship, and it should be read in this context. In conclusion, I offer a brief reflection on another dimension of Strauss's work that can be read as an expression of a similar position to the one I find articulated in his bilingual sketch: namely, his role in the founding of the Department of Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. After he arrived in Palestine, Strauss taught in different institutions, including the youth village of Ben-Shemen and a teacher's seminary in Jerusalem. The extensive archival materials from his teaching show that he devoted much attention to Hebrew poetic forms, especially the Hebrew poetry of the Middle Ages, but that he also taught world poetry and was interested in providing his students not so much—or not only—with an acquaintance with their national literature but rather with a universalist aesthetic sensibility.¹⁸ At the Hebrew University, Strauss was employed as a professor of aesthetics and taught mainly in what was called *limude yesod* (Fundamentals). The Department of Comparative Literature was founded only after his death in 1953, under the leadership of his successor, the Hebrew poet and translator Leah Goldberg.¹⁹ But the very existence of this department at the relatively young university, which had recently become the national university of the State of Israel, speaks perhaps to that same *brit* or *Bündnis* intimated in Strauss's poem: the implication of poetic forms in interlinguistic and intercultural dialogue.

As a scholar and teacher, Strauss made an argument for the covenant between German and Hebrew by pursuing the field of aesthetics and comparative literature. In this way, he was continuing, in Jerusalem, the German intellectual tradition of which he had been a part in Aachen, and intimating the possibility of an impossible German-Hebrew hymn. A

¹⁷ Shemtov, *Changing Rhythms*.

¹⁸ This is a very general, broad-strokes description of the materials. Much more work is needed on the notes and on their relationship to his published literary scholarship.

¹⁹ There is a lot more to say about the personal and the professional relations between Strauss and Goldberg and on the divergence between their attitudes to poetry, prosody, and the problem of the "two homelands" (as Goldberg described it in a famous poem). On Goldberg's position, see Shemtov, *Changing Rhythms*, 117–19.