JEWISH
CULTURAL
CORRELATES
OF THE GRAND DUCHY
OF LITHUANIA ⊙ *Dovid Katz*

for Alfredas Bumblauskas
on his 50th birthday

1. The concept of Lithuania in modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature

In modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature (both often dated from the mid or later nineteenth century onward), the term for Lithuania makes its appearance as a known quantity in the register of Jewish cultural concepts. Two fin de siècle examples can suffice to illustrate. When the Hebrew national poet Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934) wrote his famous poem "Loy ba-yóym ve-lóy ba-láylo" ('Neither by day nor by night'), around 1908, in the voice of a young woman fearful of being married off to an oldster, he included the question (among others) that she asks of a diviner: "Hami-Póylin im mi-Líto?" ('[Will he, her future arranged husband be] from Poland or from Lithuania?').

And, when the "grandfather of modern Yiddish literature," Mendele Moykher Sforim (pseudonym of Sholem-Yankev Abramovitch, ±1836–1917), subtitled his "Shlóyme Reb-Kháyims" ('Shloyme the son of Reb Chaim'): "A bild fun yídishn lebn in der Líte" ('A picture of Jewish Life in Lithuania' written around the turn of the century), there was no ambiguity. This autobiographical novel is set in the author's home town Kapúle (now Kopyl, Belarus). It appears in the narrative as "K."

2. A traditional spelling and its cultural prehistory

In Jewish cultural history, substantial importance is frequently attached to the precise choice of Jewish-alphabet spelling for a "new name" (and anything in the European period of Jewish history is "new" for this writing system). Ashkenazic Jewish trilingualism (Yiddish-Hebrew-Aramaic) included the two ancient "sacred languages" which were brought to Europe from the ancient Near East[1]. These two

---

[1] Dovid Katz, *Words on Fire. The Unfinished Story of Yiddish,* second revised edition. New York: Basic Books, 2007, pp. 45–75.

non-vernacular (but studied, recited and creatively written) languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, had relatively standard conventions over a wide swath of Europe, in the absence of any governmental power or coercion. That was in good measure a function of the remarkable authority exerted by the rabbinic class of intellectuals, writers and legalists.

What is perhaps particularly noteworthy from the modern sociolinguist's perspective, is not so much the retention of graphic forms inherited from the ancient Near East into the European period of Jewish history (that was to be expected in the case of the standardized languages in which the literature of the Bible, Talmud and Kabbalah had been passed down), but in the overall constancy of forms adopted for names relating to the new European environment. And in more recent centuries, with the advent of anti-traditionalist radical movements, one of the potent forms of ideological and social protest in the remarkable stateless culture called Ashkenaz, was in fact spelling reform. All this comes into ample play in connection with the word for the geopolitical and geocultural concept of Lithuania.

In the early parts of the Old Testament, final silent alef [א] occurs in Aramaic-language names, for example Yegar-Sohadutha [Jegar Sahaduta],[2] while final silent hey [ה] is the norm in the (more frequent) Canaanite-Hebrew language place names, as in `Amorah,[3] better known as Gemorra in English, or Shiloh.[4] Many centuries later, after the various diasporas and expulsions, the two languages were reidentified with the two geographically differentiated branches of contemporaneous Jewry. The Hebrew convention was applied for the Land of Israel (with final hey for place and personal names, whether old or new), even after Aramaic eventually supplanted Hebrew as the Jewish vernacular in postexilic Palestine.

Conversely, Aramaic spelling conventions (including the final alef in proper names) became characteristic of the diaspora Jewish communities in Babylonia and its environs, and indeed, in the Persian empire (as amply attested in the biblical book of Esther). In this way, the choice of the "final silent letter" for place names acquired a geographic connotation that survived intact, even after Hebrew was dead as a vernacular, and Aramaic became the universal Jewish spoken language in the Near East (from late Old Testament times onward). In other words, to Aramaic speaking Jews in both regions, a word final hey latterly indicated that a place was in the historic Land of Israel, a word final alef — that it was in Babylonia or Persia.

It is characteristic of Jewish cultural history that an ostensibly tiny orthographic detail, that started out in the realm of etymology, underwent various metamor-

---

2   Genesis 31: 47.
3   Genesis 13: 10.
4   Genesis 49: 10.

phoses. In stage 1, we have Hebrew vs. Aramaic derivation within Canaan-Israel. In stage 2, there is the shift to characterization of the (Hebrew speaking) Land of Israel vs. (Aramaic speaking) Babylonia. And then, in stage 3, when Aramaic became the Jewish language in both places, the difference became emotive as well as geographic; the hey-final names acquired a "sanctity of the lost homeland" ambiance for the exiles. These spellings contrasted with the more prosaic and non-emotive names ending in alef. Cumulatively and via evolved mechanisms of intricate interaction, the sum total of such devices can be tantamount to a hefty component of the national psyche of a culture in which writing plays a compelling role.

In the European period in Jewish history (dated in broad terms from around 1000 AD onwards), the "sanctity quotient" of the spelling of place names with word final vowels changed yet again. By now, the Aramaically spelled place names featured in the Babylonian Talmud, and ending in alef, had acquired their own status of emotional and psychological sanctity. These alef-ending place names were now themselves imbued with the aura of a romantically yearned-for far-away past. For example, the cities where much of the Babylonian Talmud was written, Neherdea, Sura and Pumbeditha (the latter is Al-Anbar in today's Iraq), became household Jewish names for generations of pupils of the Talmud, uninterruptedly. To this day their final alef gives them an aura of rarified romanticity.

In Europe, the inherited Semitic writing system was retained but its functioning principles radically remodeled for Yiddish. In a classic instance of the east-west synthesis characteristic of Ashkenazic civilization, the fashioners of Yiddish writing early on recycled some of the twenty-two classic Semitic consonantal graphemes (notably those that had lost a distinctive consonantal realization), and used them as vowels (though the tradition of using some to mark vowels began within the Near East).

In the case of word-final unstressed vowels, the early Yiddish usages were mixed, and one could find, for contemporary European place names and Yiddish personal names, a variety of letters, including yud, ayin, hey and alef. But over time, the Aramaic convention of final alef became standard in the Hebrew and Aramaic usage of Ashkenazic rabbinic literature for towns, cities and countries that were somehow being granted the emotive status of a holy Jewish community or land, albeit in the diaspora. One prominent example is the writing tradition for the Jewish concept that corresponds with the notion – Lithuania.

3. One classic spelling, three (culturally determined) pronunciations

From the earliest attestations through to modernity, the Jewish name for Lithuania was consistently spelled: lamed-yud-tes-alef (ליטא; the graphemes would be transliterated <lyṭ?> by Semitic philologists to produce a one-to-one transliteration of the ancient graphemes).

This centuries-old spelling, ליטא, was theoretically, and in formal usage factually, pronounced *Líto* in the Ashkenazic lands, though in informal rabbinic usage, and in the vernacular, Yiddish, the final vowel would be reduced to a shewa-like sound, yielding *Lítə* [lítə] following the typical pattern of Ashkenazic formal vs. Yiddish informal usage[5]. Regionally, there would be variant realizations of both the Ashkenazic and Yiddish forms. In western Ashkenaz, the world final *o* might be closed [o]; in the east — open [ɔ]. Final shewa was for example [ı] in the Grodna region, yielding [lítı].

This spelling — and indeed the very word for Lithuania — is attested in a fifteenth century rabbinic reply (responsum) attributed to Israel Isserlin (1390–1460), in which he remarks that it is seldom that a German Jew travels to Lithuania. Beyond the spelling, we are informed by this sparse rabbinic mention that Lithuania is "off the beaten track" for the (then) central branch of Ashkenazic Jewry that was in those years still conceived to be in the Germanic speaking lands.

The word *Líto* for Lithuania, in that spelling, occurs repeatedly in the works of the generations of East (/ East Central) European rabbinic authors and codifiers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not as the name of some distant eastern backwater, but as one of the central Jewish homelands which itself emanates scholarship and boasts its distinct customs. Among the codifiers who cite *Líto* as a matter of course are the Ramó (acronym of Moyshe Isserles, 1520–1572); The Taz ("book acronymic" from the commentary of Dovid ha-Leyvi Segal, ±1586–1667); The Bach (Joel Sirkis, 1561–1640); The Shach (Shabsai ha-Kohen, 1621–1662); the Mogen Avrohom (Magen Avraham, Abraham Gombiner, ±1633–±1683).

With the rise of the modern Hebrew movement, and a shift to "Sephardic" (actually Middle Eastern / "Palestinian-Syrian") pronunciation traditions in the early twentieth century in parts of that movement, there would be a conscious "forced" phonetic shift to *a*, giving *Líta* [líta].

5   Dovid Katz, "The Phonology of Ashkenazic" in L. Glinert (ed) *Hebrew in Ashkenaz: A Language in Exile.* New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 56–57, 76–78.

All three oral renditions (Yiddish [lítə], formal Ashkenazic Hebrew [lítɔ], and mideasternized modern "Sephardic" Hebrew [líta]) could painlessly be related to a single traditionally spelled name.

4. One spelling of the word for Lithuania splits into three

But this "three pronunciations for one spelling" phenomenon, implicitly retained in many rabbinic, liturgical and other traditional books published or reprinted in the twentieth century, was consciously modified on ideological grounds within the realms of the two modernist (and often mutually antagonistic) trends within Lithuanian (and East European) Jewry. Each of these movements wanted "their" spelling of famous East European place names that ended in an unstressed vowel to be relatable to "their" pronunciation exclusively (or as exclusively as possible) rather than optionally depending on the degree of "initiation" of the reader, student, or reciter. In that spirit, in the early twentieth century, two brand new spellings appeared.

The Yiddishists shifted (unanimously after the First World War) to ליטע, with word final ayin, as per the norms of the phonetically-not-historically spelled Germanic and Slavic components of Yiddish, yielding word-final shewa, hence Lítə [lítə], which could be pronounced no other way. The Hebraists, wanting a look-and-feel that would set themselves apart from both the traditional Talmudic environment (whose word final alef would still habitually be rendered [ɔ] or [ɔ] by folks in Eastern Europe), turned to the biblical-style final-hey spelling, ליטה, a kind of semi-obvious "signal" that it was meant to be read in the modern "Sephardic" mideasternized way as [líta] (even if, in real life, the native pronunciations of formal [lítɔ] and informal [lítə] would creep through more than occasionally, to the chagrin of ideologically stout Hebraist educators and cultural leaders).

In the parallel case of the Jewish name for the city now called Vilnius, the same orthographic trichotomy is much more obvious, because of the standard practice of printing on the title page of books the city of publication. In the interwar period, for example, when the official name of the city was *Wilno* under Polish rule, Jewish books published in the city featured all three spellings (and potentially, all three pronunciations) on their title pages. A traditional Talmudic tome published by the Romm Publishing House would stick to ווילנא (formally *Vílno* [vílnɔ] but inherently capable of informal realization as Yiddish *Vílnə* [vílnə]); a more Zionist-Hebraist educational book, and even a Talmudic tome published by a more Hebraist firm,

would have ‏ו(ו)ילנה‎, which was meant theoretically at least to be read according to the Middle Eastern, Zionist-preferred "Sephardic" rendition *Vílna* [vílna].

At the same time, virtually the entire interwar Yiddish movement, which was very strong in the city, used, as a matter of principle, the phoneticized Yiddishized spelling ‏ווילנע‎ with final ayin, which could *only* be rendered *Vílnə* [vílnə]. This spelling symbolized the new cultural legitimization of the vernacular form, ergo the rise of Yiddish to the status of a national language suitable for highbrow cultural, academic and literary endeavors, suitable for the city name on the symbologically potent title page of prestigious books. To some observers, it remains remarkable that "minor" spelling details become salient cultural and political symbols in Jewish cultural history. It is a topic of substantial interest to the cultural historian and the sociologist of language alike.

Incidentally, the greater phonetic congruity of the traditional Hebrew and Aramaic with Polish *Wilno*, and of modern Hebrew with Russian and German *Vilna/Wilna*, is completely coincidental in origin (the same dichotomy, applied to *Lito* vs. *Lita* and other names, has no such Polish vs. Russian/German parallel). Like many coincidences in social and cultural history, these too occasionally attracted various associations and interpretations. That, however, is a topic for another day.

5. The *Litvak*
in modern times

Any frequent use of *Lítə*, *Líto* or *Líta* is nowadays limited to those special-interest circles who are for one reason or another concerned with the topic of "historic Jewish Lithuania." A rather wider popular use is however accorded the ethnonym *Litvak*, which has survived into the twenty-first century and has been borrowed from Yiddish into English, Hebrew, and other languages that are used extensively by Jewish people. Moreover, it is quite widely known among educated people in Lithuania.

The broadest sense of the word, in both Yiddish and the recipient languages into which it has been accessioned, is "a person of Lithuanian-Jewish background," entailing in the first instance descent from the "Lithuanian lands" of the northern regions of the erstwhile Pale of Settlement, in stark contrast to scions of the southern lands, which include Ukraine, Poland, Galicia, Hungary, Romania and more. In terms of Jewish cultural history, the differentiation is broadly congruent with the classic concepts of Yiddish dialectology. Litvaks are folks who hail from the territory of Northeastern Yiddish, the dialect of Yiddish commonly called *Litvish* (literally 'Lithuanian').
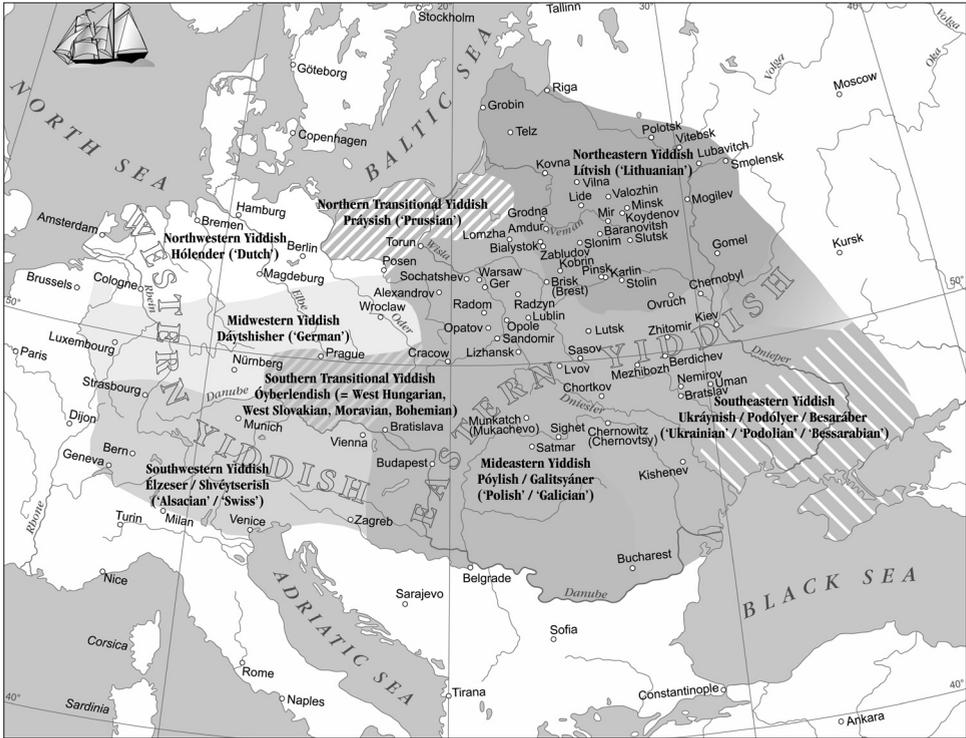
IMAGE I

Northeastern Yiddish, the territory of the Litvaks, is held up in contrast to the southern dialects: Mideastern Yiddish, popularly *Póylish* ('Polish'); and Southeastern, sometimes called *Ukráynish* ('Ukrainian'), but more frequently broken down into subregions, including *Padólish* or *Podólish* ('Podolian') in the north and *Besarábish* ('Besarabian') in the south. All three areas collectively constitute Eastern Yiddish, in contradistinction to the now defunct dialects of Western Yiddish. The areas are illustrated in image 1[6].

6. Dialect of the *Litvaks*

Within Eastern Yiddish, the northern dialect, *Litvish*, stands out starkly against the two much more mutually similar southern dialects, leading modern Yiddish scholars to talk about "Northern" (= Litvish, Lithuanian) vs. "Southern" (= non-Litvish). This most salient present-day consciousness is illustrated in image 2[7].

---

[6]   From Dovid Katz, *Lithuanian Jewish Culture.* Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2004, p. 49.

[7]   From Dovid Katz, *Words on Fire. The Unfinished Story of Yiddish,* second revised edition. New York: Basic Books, 2007, p. 150.
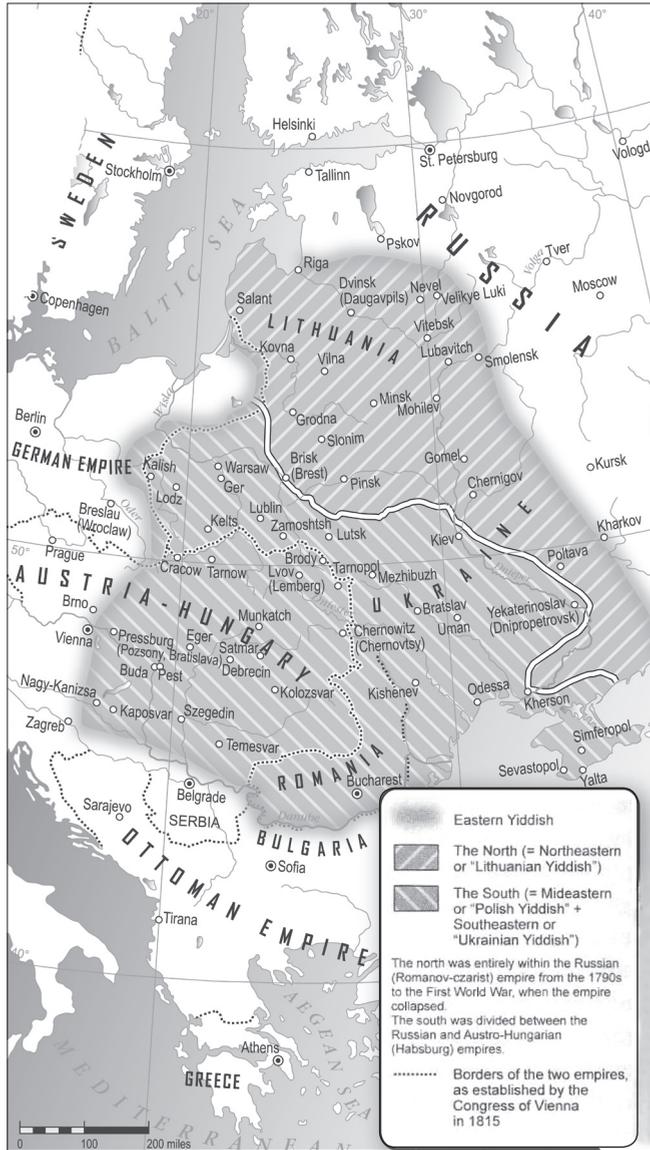
IMAGE 2

The dialect of the Litvak is evident "as soon as he opens his mouth" because so many of the stressed vowels are distinct. The following chart summarizes the major differences. English-based transcriptions are followed were necessary by phonetic transcription in square brackets. [8]

[8] For a more technical linguistic treatment see Dovid Katz, "Zur Dialektologie des Jiddischen" in W. Besch et al (eds) *Dialektologie. Ein Handbuch zur deutschen und allgemeinen Dialektforschung.* Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1983, pp. 1018–1041, esp. 1028–1031.

Jewish Cultural Correlates of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania ⊙ Dovid Katz

NORTHERN (LITVAK)	SOUTHERN (POLISH DIALECT)	MEANING OF SAMPLE
o [ɔ]	u (long or short)	
krókə	krúkə	"Cracow"
matónə	matúnə	"gift"
nosn	nusn	"Nathan"
zogn	zugn	"say"
u	i (long or short)	
hunt	hint	"dog"
mútsh(ə)n	mítsh(ə)n	"nag, torture"
púrim	pírəm	"Purim"
shvúəs [švúəs]	shvíəs [švíəs]	"Shavuoth"
ay ([aj], [ai])	ā	
gáyvə	gā́və	"arrogance"
dáygəs	dā́gəs	"worries"
haynt	hānt	"today"
vayn	vān	"wine"
e ([ɛ])	ey ([ej], [ei])	
betn	béytn	"ask"
krétshmə	kréytshmə	"inn, pub"
makhaténəstə	makhatéynəstə	"in-law" (female)
zélik	zéylik	"Selig" (m. name)
ey ([ej], [ei])	ay [aj], [ai]	
léyənən	laynen	"read"
meydl	maydl	"girl"
péysəkh	páysəkh	"Passover"
zéydə	záydə	"grandfather"
ey ([ej], [ei])	oy ([ɔj], [ɔi])	
teyb	toyb	"deaf"
téyrə	tóyrə	"Torah"
véynən	vóynən	"live, reside"
géyləm	góyləm	"golem; dope"
oy ([ɔj], [ɔi])	ou ([ō], [ɔu], [ou])	
froy	frou	"woman"
kloyz	klouz	"synagogue"
shoyb	shoub	"window pane"
toyb	toub	"pigeon, dove"

On all but one of these points (the exception being Litvish *ey* for standard *oy*, as in the chart's sample words *teyb*, *téyrə*, *véynən*, *géyləm*), the Litvaks' vowel is the standard in both spoken Yiddish and liturgical Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic. The how-and-why of that is closely related to the prestige of Lithuanian Jewish culture over centuries, a prestige that coincided with a phonological history conservative in the preservation of older vowel qualities, and a writing system which conveniently (for Litvaks…) marked vowel quality rather than quantity. These circumstances in turn provided for a converging factor of psy-

chological congruence with both the inherited writing system and the cognate languages[9].

The southern dialect itself is split into two primary components, a "Polish" part in the west (called Mideastern [or Central] Yiddish in Yiddish dialectology) that differs from the "Ukrainian" (Southeastern Yiddish) variety to the east. One main difference is to be heard in the many cases where "Ukrainian" goes with the "Lithuanian *ey*" but Polish has *ay.* Most forms of Ukrainian Yiddish lack distinctively long vowels. But by and large, the two southern dialects are closer to each other. Taken together, they constitute The South of modern Yiddish, in contrast to the Litvaks' language which is of The North.

There is, however, a consonantal divide in which the Litvaks' dialect is decidedly not standard at all. That is the frequent conflation of *sh* [š] and *s* [s] into a single consonant, leaving the impression of a single extra-hissing *s* type sound, or quite frequently, an impression of "confusion" or "semi-consistent substitution" between *sh* and *s,* sometimes a result of the speaker's attempt to be rid of this much-mocked feature of the dialect. This is known in Yiddish folklore as *sábesdiker losn* ("Sabbath language" with *šábəs* rendered as *sábəs*), and it was presented to the world of general linguistics in a brilliant paper by Uriel Weinreich in the middle of the last century[10]. The same phenomenon is often reflected in [ž] vs. [z] and [č] vs. [c]/[ts].

7. Semantics
of the word *Litvak*

The geographic, cultural and social dialectology of the word Litvak would in fact merit a separate study. These remarks are intended to delineate only some of the major features, and inter alia to comment on the complexity, a linguistic complexity absent, say, when the word and its anglicized plural *Litvaks* is used in English. In Yiddish the plural of *lítvak* is *lítvakəs*; the feminine is *lítvitshkə* ([lítvičkə]), pl. *lítvičkəs.* That is only the beginning.

In non-Litvak dialects, the unusual-for-Yiddish ending, *un*stressed *-ak*, is often reduced to the frequent suffix *-ik*, yielding *lítvik* (widely documented in Ukraine), though most Yiddish *-ik*'s are adjectives (e.g. *líkhtik* [líxtik] 'illuminated', 'with light'). This development can be semantically neutral.

---

9   Dovid Katz, "Náye gilgúlim fun álte makhlóykesn: di lítvishe nórme un di sikhsúkhim vos arúm ir" [New incarnations of older disputes: the *Litvish* standard and the conflicts around it] in *Yivo bleter,* n.s. 2, 1994, pp. 205–257.

10   Uriel Weinreich, "*Sábesdiker losn* in Yiddish. A problem of linguistic affinity" in *Word* 8, 1952, pp. 360–377.

Other dialect forms (invariably hailing from non-Litvak country) are distinctively pejorative. For example, the singular masculine can be stressed ultimately, giving *litvák*, pl. *litvákəs*; fem. *litvátshkə* ([litváčkə]), pl. *litvátshkəs* ([litváčkəs]). This mechanism derives from the circumstance that stressed Yiddish suffix *ák*, from the Slavic component in the language, is inherently pejorative (e.g. *foylyák* 'lazy person' or 'good for nothing'; *khitrák* 'cunning person', 'schemer'). These forms are used when referring contemptuously to Litvaks.

The most famous contemptuous form is however *lútvak*, where the Litvak's *u*, corresponding with southerners' *i* (as in northern *kúmən* vs. southern *kímən*, 'come') is "incorrectly" used in this word which has *i* in all dialects. It is used to highlight all the negative folkloristic characteristics in the assumed personality of the Litvak.

8. The notion Lithuania in the modern Yiddish culture movement

It is instructive to fathom the conceptualization of Lithuania by the modern Yiddishist movement (the Yiddish culture movement). During the interwar period, the de facto capital of the Lithuanian Republic was Kaunas (Yiddish *Kóvnə*), with massive swaths of historic Jewish Lithuania incorporated into the Polish Republic, including such famous Lithuanian Jewish centers as Grodna (Haródnə, Gródnə), Brest (Brisk d'Lítə), Pinsk and of course, Vilna itself.

During the interwar period, the territory of Jewish Lithuania was dispersed among four states: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and the relevant parts of the Soviet Union (all of the Belorussian SSR and some adjacent areas of Ukraine and Russia). In the free states, the various forms of Lithuanian Jewish culture developed further, with differing emphases, for example, modern Hebrew culture in the Lithuanian Republic, modern Yiddish in Vilna and other parts of the Lithuanian regions of the then Polish Republic[11]. In the Soviet Union, there were tight cultural controls, but the Minsk center exuded a particular Litvak flavor within Soviet Yiddish culture.

Some of the more fascinating attempts to "resurrect" a Jewish Grand Duchy of Lithuania tradition that would be tied to modern Yiddish culture were made in the early years of the twentieth century, particularly in Vilna, through World War I. These were parallel (and sometimes in direct partnership) with Lithuanian intel-

[11]   See Dovid Katz, *Lithuanian Jewish Culture*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2004, pp. 317–329.

ligentsia who were culturally paving the way for a revived twentieth century state[12].

One prominent example is the anthology *Líto* (*Lítə* in popular pronunciation) which appeared in Vilna in 1914 (see image 3).[13]

The anthology was published by the most elite of Yiddish publishers, Boris Kletskin (born in Haroditsh, now in Belarus, in 1875; died in Vilnius, then Wilno, in 1937). It was edited by Uriah Katzenelenbogen (1885–1980), a native of Vilna, and A. Y. Goldshmid (1882–1941/42), a native of Kreytsburg in the Latgalia region of Latvia (now Krustpils). None of them came from places that would end up in the new Lithuanian
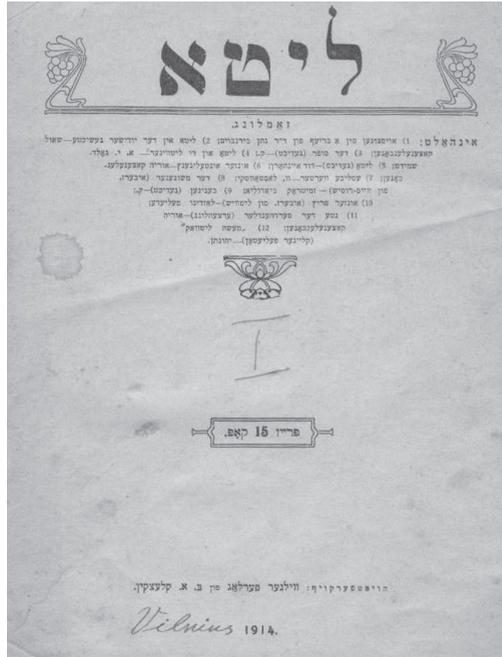

IMAGE 3

Republic several years later. Nevertheless this was a project about Jewish Lithuania and the editors' and authors' attempts to construct a Lithuanian-Belarusian-Jewish alliance that would echo the inclusiveness of the old Grand Duchy. Its contents include articles about the actual Lithuanian people, poems to Lithuania, historical pieces, and not least, translations from the modern Lithuanian and Belarusian languages, intended to forge a coalition for recognition of a historical-cultural territory and its proposed reincarnation. There is an attempt to deal with the borders of the historical and proposed Lithuania that is so enthusiastically embraced. One piece, by Goldshmid, demonstrates that Lithuania encompasses the Russian imperial provinces (gubernias) of Vilna, Vitebsk, Grodna, Kovna and Suvalk (Suwalki), largely mirroring the Jewish ethnographic conceptualization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

[12]   See Mindaugas Kvietkauskas, *Vilniaus literatūrų kontrapunktai. Ankstyvasis modernizmas, 1904–1915* [The Counterpoints of Vilnius Literature. Early Multilingual Modernism 1904–1915]. Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2007.

[13]   Facsimile courtesy of the Menke Katz Collection.

9. Folkloristic characteristics of the *Litvak*

There are a number of alleged characteristics of the Litvak that are encountered in folklore as well as in modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature. As ever, stereotypes and folklore may or may not have discernible (or postulable) relationships, howsoever oblique, with one or more lines of historicity.

(a) The Litvak is cold, heartless, a stickler for facts, and lacking in warmth, sympathy, and humor (except the sardonic, biting variety). The Litvak is hard to deal with, incessantly arguing for the sake of arguing, more interested in winning the argument than in getting his way in real life. This complex of alleged attributes is often implied by such Yiddish phrases as *a káltər trúkənər lítvak* ('a cold dry Litvak'); *a hártər lítvak* ('a hard-hearted Litvak'); one of the foregoing with a tack-on of *on a harts un on a nəshómə* ('without a heart and without a soul').

(b) The Litvak is given to rationalism and obsessive critical questioning; even when he or she is religious and a believer, the belief is not as pure and independent of the rational faculties as is the case for absolutely true believers, who do not allow logic to interfere with faith. This is alluded to in the insulting characterization applied by non-Litvaks: *lítvak tséyləm-kop,* literally 'Litvak with a cross in the head' i.e. not sufficiently Jewish for the non-Litvak.

(c) The Litvak is extremely honest and incapable of guile in business, hence he is usually poorer than his non-Litvak counterparts. On this particular point, the folklore would often mention in the same breath that the earth of Lithuania is quite poor, "specializing" in potatoes.

(d) The Litvak is more educated and erudite, and spends his entire life studying, and therefore makes a better teacher. This sometimes meshes into the more caricatured sense of "obsessed with getting to the bottom of something, just for the sake of knowing, whether or not it's of any importance." Yiddish has a phrase here too: *A lítvak leygt zikh in der leyng un in der breyt tsu dergéyn di zakh* ('a Litvak stretches himself out vertically and horizontally [or: goes to any length] to get to the bottom of it'). Some postulate a link to the shape of a cross.

Like *Lítə* or *Líto*, the concept of the Litvak is a known quantity in modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Excellent examples from the Yiddish classic short story writer, Y. L. Peretz (1852–1915), the Yiddish poet Moyshe Kulbak (1896–±1937) and the Hebrew poet Saul Tchernichovsky (1875–1943) are cited by Antony Polonsky[14]. If any one piece of literature is emblematic for the issue, it is Peretz's

---

[14]   Antony Polonsky, "What is the Origin of the Litvak? The Legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania" (paper placed before the Seminar on Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Faculty of History, Vilnius University, 6 October 2007, published in the present volume, pp. 265–291).

reworked Hasidic tale, *Oyb nisht nokh hékhǝr* (from around 1900). The title could be translated *If not higher still*, a reference to the belief in a Hasidic court down south, where the rebbe is believed to go to heaven during the high holidays to intercede with the Almighty on behalf of Jewish people. The Litvak refuses to believe it, but can't just leave matters there. He heads out there to disprove the Hasidic believers, hides under the rebbe's bed to follow him in the morning, and…[15]

10. The meaning of *Litvak* in religious communities

Folklore can be fun for all concerned; it is one of the symptoms of the precarious state of contemporary Yiddish culture, however, that it can on occasion (particularly in the literature in English) simply replace knowledge of a culturally crucial role played by various concepts in the actual lives of people. The reference here is primarily to religious (traditionalist, orthodox, haredi) Jewish people today, for whom a *Litvak* is often understood as a Jew who belongs to a traditionalist orthodox or haredi Ashkenazic but non-Hasidic tradition. Quite a mouthful for outsiders, but the synthesis of these ideas is crystal clear to modern Orthodox Jews from the single word *Litvak*. These include the communities that have grown up around "Lithuanian yeshivas" such as Lakewood, Mir or Telz in the United States; or Ponevezh, Brisk and Hebron yeshivas in Israel; Gateshead yeshiva in England; and others. In Israel, where religion and politics are quite inseparable for the haredi minority, the Litvaks have their own political party, Degel Ha-Torah (Flag of the Torah); it was founded in 1988 by Rabbi Elozer (Elazar) Shach, when he broke away from the Hasidic dominated Agudas Yisroel (Agudath Israel).

But even far from politics in the Holy Land, the notion of "Litvakness" has numerous correlates in everyday religious Jewish life starting with the essential issue of the exact prayer book text used every day to pray from, and extending to many deeper theological issues. The religious differences, extraordinarily important in the eyes of the society in question — as ever, it is *those* eyes that count — hail from the Hasidic-Misnagdic controversy of the late eighteenth century[16]. In the generation after its founding in Podolia, Ukraine, by Israel Baal Shem Tov (±1700–1760),

---

[15] One of the best renditions in English is by Eli Katz in his *I. L. Peretz: Selected Stories.* New York: Zhitlovsky Foundation for Jewish Culture, 1991, pp. 270–281.

[16] On the history of that conflict, see e.g. Simon Dubnov, *Toldoys ha-khasidus* (*Toledót ha-khasidút*) [History of Hasidism]. Tel Aviv: Dvir [3 vols]; Gershon Hundert (ed), *Essential Papers on Hasidism. Origins to Present.* New York and London: New York University Press, 1991; E. J. Schochet, *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna.* Northvale [New Jersey] & London: Jason Aronson, 1994.

Hasidism rapidly took over the hearts and minds, and in many cases the Jewish communal administration, of Jewish communities in Podolia, and then throughout Ukraine, and slightly later, in Poland, Romania, Hungary and elsewhere.

The Hasidic movement, however, ran into a brick wall in the Lithuanian lands, where the rabbis of Vilna issued the first of a number of edicts of excommunication in 1772, and where one of them, Elijah the Gaon of Vilna (Eylióhu ben Shlóyme-Zálmen, ±1720–1797), had justly acquired the reputation of the greatest rabbinic scholar in centuries. His followers became known as *Misnágdim* (literally 'opponents' or 'protestants' though they are perhaps a better analogy to the Catholics of Christianity as the older form of a religious tradition that rejected a reformation). The details of the prayer book, or of the knife used for kosher slaughtering might strike moderns as minor, but nothing to do with fulfilling the laws believed to be given by God in His Torah could be "minor" for the traditionalist sector of Ashkenazic Jewry.

There are also major theological differences between the Hasidic movement of the south, and its northern opponents of Lithuania, even as "being a major issue" might be conceded by moderns in the West. The Hasidic movement believed — and believes — in the special superhuman sanctity afforded to the *rebbe* ([rəbə]) or *tzadik* ([cádik]), whose status within a Hasidic court or group is dynastic, and who is believed to have the power to intercede in Heaven. Misnágdim are offended both by the (to them) slightly (or not so slightly) idolatrous worship of the rebbe, and the disrespect for learning that results in their view when Hasidim reserve the highest adulation for purported genetic (or divinely granted) privilege, rather than for what scholars attain in their learning by hard work. And that leads to a second major difference. For Misnágdim, Torah studies are on the highest pedestal; for Hasidim, it is prayer and ecstatic cleaving to God. Many forms of Hasidism also entail a kind of pantheism that is likewise anathema to the Misnágdim for whom the distinction between Creator and Created may never be blurred.

The "terminology of Litvakness" in Jewish religious circles is well developed, both in Yiddish and in Israeli Hebrew. The corresponding Yiddish adjective is *lítviš*, which declines as a regular Yiddish adjective (*lítvišər, lítvišə, lítvišŋ*). When used in these circles, the reference is to institutions, communities, rabbis and individuals committed to the "Litvak's way of life." Modern Israeli (Israeli Hebrew) has a fully parallel set of words which mirror their Yiddish etymons: for *lítvak* – masculine *litaí*, pl. *litaím*; feminine *litaít*, pl. *litaiyót*. For *lítvish*, Israeli has the adjectives: *litaí*, *lita(i)ím*; *litaít*, *litaiyót*. There are various colloquial variants, for example the use of Hebrew pluralizing *-im* suffixed to Yiddish *lítvak*, giving such (sometimes humorous) hybrids as the nominal plural *lítvakim* ('Litvaks') and the abstract noun *litvakiyút* ('Litvakness').
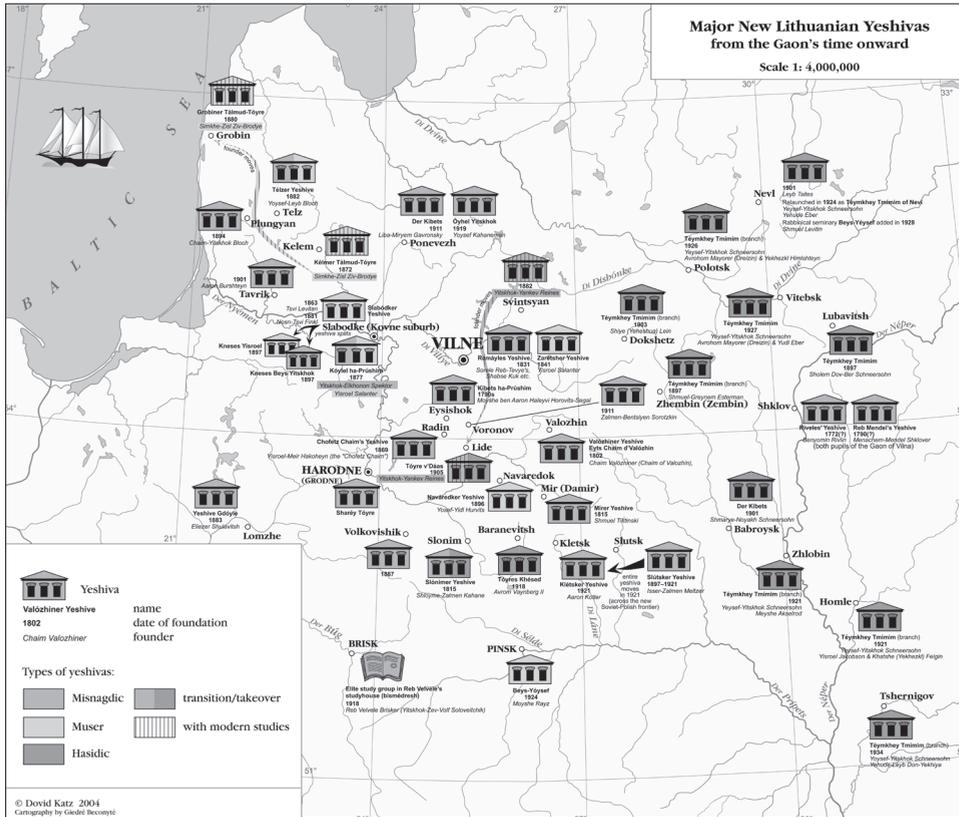
IMAGE 4

Today's religious Litvaks look for inspiration at the network of Lithuanian yeshivas that started to develop right after the death of the Gaon of Vilna (and at their successor institutions today). The "mother of Lithuanian yeshivas" was Valózhin.[17] The *Valózhiner yeshíve* was founded in 1802. The map in image 4 shows the major Misnagdic yeshivas in blue and the those of its nineteenth century offshoot, the Lithuanian mussar ("ethical living") movement, in green[18].

11. Where culture
and geography disconnect

It is also evident from the map of yeshivas, that the territory of Lithuanian Jewry is not perfectly congruent with the territory of Misnagdism. That is because much

---

[17] On the development of the Lithuanian yeshiva, see Shaul Stampfer, *Hayeshivá halitaít be-hithavutá* [Emergence of the Lithuanian Yeshiva], Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1995.

[18] from Dovid Katz, *Lithuanian Jewish Culture.* Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2004, p. 147. Online color version at: http://www.dovidkatz.net/LJC_sample.htm.

Jewish Cultural Correlates of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania ⊙ Dovid Katz

of traditional Eastern *Lítə* (today's central and eastern Belarus) was in fact "taken over" rather early on by the special brand of Hasidism known as "Lithuanian Hasidism."[19] *Its* yeshivas are marked in red on the map. The major branch of the Hasidism that arose and thrived on the territory of historic Lithuania is of course Chabad, an acronym for three of the more "intellectual" emanations from among the sephiroth of the Kabbalah: *khókhmo* (wisom), *bíno* (understanding) and *dáas* (knowledge). The Chabad movement was established by Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi, whose treatise known as *Tanya* (Yiddish *Tányə*) remains a central text for the movement today. It was in effect a Third Way movement, fusing the Lithuanian insistence on learning and education with basic Hasidic ideals of the *rebbe* (or *tsádik*), a kind of pantheism, emphasis on joyousness, and more. Born in Lyozna, not far from Vitebsk, Shneur-Zalmen (1745–1813) moved his court southward to Lyadi, and became known as Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi. But since the days when his son Dober (Dov-Ber), the second Chabad rebbe, moved the group's court halfway back northward to Lubavitch, the movement, now one of the best known in modern Judaism, has been called Lubavitch or Chabad-Lubavitch. The town incidentally, is today Lubavichy in Russia, not far from the border with Belarus.

Traditional Chabad Hasidim are Litvaks in many senses of the word: their dialect of Yiddish and of liturgical Hebrew and Aramaic; to some extent their dress and demeanor; traditional emphasis on Talmudic learning. However, they are *not* Litvaks at all in the sense that is paramount to traditionally orthodox Jewish groups in the past and to the same extent today: they are Hasidim.

During expeditions to Ukraine in 2004, 2005 and 2006, informants were asked what the word *lítvak* means in Yiddish. The replies spanned the expected gamut – everything from 'non-hasidic Jew' to 'very difficult person' to 'someone who speaks *that* kind of Yiddish' and more. What was unexpected was the sporadically encountered answer: "A Litvak is a Lubavitcher!"[20]. For these Ukrainian Jews of Hasidic ancestry, the Lithuanian-Yiddish speaking Jews of Belorussia to their north are quite simply, Litvaks! The "for X, it is *Y* who are the Litvaks" revelation from these recent expeditions is instructive in a number of directions. The interlocking complexities of (a) northernness, (b) dialect definition, (c) religious definition, and (d) character stereotypes may lead to sharp divergences in the empirical issue of "Who is a Litvak?" while keeping touch, so to speak, with one or more of the historical attributes.

---

[19]   See W. Z. Rabinowitsch, *Lithuanian Hasidism from its Beginnings to the Present Day.* London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1970.

[20]   See Dovid Katz, "Vos meynt af yídish 'a lítvak'?" [What does "a Litvak" mean in Yiddish?] in *Algemeyner Zhurnál,* 16 Sept. 2005, pp. 1, 7–8.

While many of the yeshivas in the east of historic Lithuania were Chabad-Hasidic (non-Misnagdic and in the religious sense, non-Litvak), there are a few Misnagdic "Lithuanian" yeshivas that were on non-Litvak (non-Northeastern Yiddish) Yiddish territory. The most famous was the yeshiva in Lomzhe.

Far from debunking the popular notion of "Litvakness = Misnagdicness," the yeshiva map demonstrates its essential accuracy, in the nuanced sort of way in which cultural configurations exist in the real world, rather than in the purist minds of partisans of any one side in a debate (or, among academics, in retrospective conceptualizations). Nearly all the classic Misnagdic yeshivas were on deep Northeastern Yiddish (Litvak speaking) territory (just one major exception in a neighboring region of Poland in the southwest). The non-Misnagdic yeshivas (of Chabad-Lubavitch) in the east are all part of a quintessentially Lithuanian type of Hasidism that is "Hasidic" for "Litvaks-classic" while being "Litvak" for "proper Hasidim down south."

12. Linguistic evidence from recent expeditions

A project initiated by the author in 1990 (more systematically in 1992) entails ongoing in-situ investigations of the last generation of prewar speakers of Yiddish. The project is entitled *Litvish: an Atlas of Northeastern Yiddish*. It aims to document facts on the ground to the extent possible in a time when the last of the last mohicans are "also" disappearing. By early 2008, sixteen draft maps were placed online,[21] with a large amount of data collected waiting to be collated and cartographed in the future.

One of the best known linguistic litmus tests for "Litvakness vs. Southernness" is not at all part of the usual patterns of consistent vowel correspondences, but a single variation in a frequent "grammatical word."[22] Unlike the usual correspondences, where one spelling simply corresponds to different dialect realizations (for example vov usually signifying *u* for the Litvak and *i* for the southerner), this single-word North vs. South variation is expressed in two competing spellings, which are equally acceptable in standard literary Yiddish. The verb in question is part of the verb for 'to be'. The Litvak form *záynən* ([zájnən] for '(they) are' contrasts in Yiddish

---

[21]   Dovid Katz, *Lítvish. An Atlas of Northeastern Yiddish* (ongoing internet project with the goal of eventual hard-copy publication). Maps to date posted at: www.dovidkatz.net/WebAtlas/AtlasSamples.htm.

[22]   See Mordkhe Schaechter, "Four schools of thought in Yiddish language planning" in *Michigan Germanic Studies* 3.2, 1977, pp. 34–66.

IMAGE 5

writing with the southern form *zénən* ([zɛ́nən]) in the non-Lithuanian dialects of the south. This is equally evident in the second person plural (and formal) Lithuanian *ir zayt* [zajt] vs. non-Lithuanian *ir zent* [zɛnt] for 'you are' (plural or formal). The downfacing triangles on the map in image 5 are the classic Lithuanian Yiddish forms; the upfacing triangles represent the southern Lithuanian form *zaynt* [zajnt], documented in a strip from Suvalk (now Suwalki, Poland) in the west to Chernobyl in the east, and best known from the Pinsk area. It is also characteristic for Jerusalem Yiddish.[23] What has been most surprising in our results is the uncovering of traces of a layered buffer zone of transitional forms between north and south. On this version of the map, these include *zant* (represented by squares) and even *zont* (circle).[24]

13. THE TERRITORY OF *LITVISH*

As summarized above, fieldwork in Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, Ukraine and Poland has elucidated a complex sociolinguistic patterning of the nuances of the Yiddish word *lítvak*. Results were even more variegated than among the connotations of *Litvak* in the modern Jewish world in the west, in Yiddish, Hebrew, English and other languages. For these reasons, *Litvak* is a colorful, folkloristic term whose many connotations have myriad roots.

What *has* become clear in the course of nearly two decades of expeditions is the realization that the in-situ native-speaker-used word *Litvak* simply cannot define any "pan Lithuanian Jewish territory" without violating the cardinal principle of ethnographic identification, which is to give primacy to the opinion of the folks who "are kindly being offered a designation by the friendly ethnographer who rides into town for a day." A few examples. Some Yiddish speakers in western Latvia (Courland) insisted they are not *lítvakəs*, because their high culture was German. Some in eastern Latvia refused the term because *their* high culture had been Russian. Some whose formative years were spent in interwar Wilno, Grodno or Brest insisted they were "Polish Jews" based on their childhood citizenship and the official government culture of those days. Many informants in eastern Belarus, whose dialect is "ultra Litvak" (as it would seem to outsiders), know they hail from Lubavitch families and reject the term *Litvak* (even if they are themselves very far from any kind of religious observance). Survivors in some parts of Belarus

---

23   On Jerusalem and Palestinian Yiddish see Mordecai Kosover, *Arabic Elements in Palestinian Yiddish.* Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1966.

24   A color version of the map appears at http://www.dovidkatz.net/WebAtlas/8_YouAre.htm.

IMAGE 6

sometimes know that their families came from other Lithuanian Hasidic groups, such as Amdur, Koydenov, Lekhevitsh, Slonim and more. And they insist they are not Litvaks with the explanation: "lítvakəs záynən misnágdim" ('Litvaks are Misnágdim').

Furthermore, in wholly non-Lithuanian Yiddish regions, for example in Ukraine, informants recall that in the old days, the minority of non-Hasidim among their town's Jews, the local Misnágdim, were simply called *lítvakəs*, and they continue to understand the term in a strictly religious sense.

There *is* however a Yiddish word that is used by native speakers throughout the territory of Northeastern Yiddish to refer to their kind of speech, both in everyday Yiddish and in Hebrew and Aramaic prayers or quotations remembered. And, it is used just as emphatically by those of other regions to refer to *them*, in other words a term that "does exactly what the ethnographer wants" in fulfilling the request to provide self-definition. But it is a linguonym and an adjective referring to the form of language, not a classic nominal ethnonym.

That word is *Litvish* ([lítviš]). Image 6 is a working map for the new atlas of the territory of *Litvish*, as ascertained by field expeditions between 1990 and 2008.[25] The territory of *Litvish*, even as recoverable by empirical study of survivors in the early twenty-first century, is a vast swath of territory, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, that has obvious roots in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.[26] Note that the smaller core area illustrated above in image 1 is the "classic cultural area" of Jewish Lithuania; the narrower strip in the southeast that extends to the Black Sea is part of the "annex" that is assumed to have arisen from the early nineteenth century onward, with the advent of agricultural colonies and other settlement projects.

14. Origin of the word *Litvak*

The age of the word *Litvak* remains unproven. An older vintage could be established by attestation in a hitherto unknown source, and such discoveries are always possible. It seems certain that it arose among *non*-Lithuanian Jews as a derogatory epithet for their northern coreligionists. As noted above (§7), the stressed Yiddish suffix *ák* is intrinsically pejorative. Most likely the shift to penultimate stress oc-

---

[25] This version is 1 Feb. 2008; online at http://www.dovidkatz.net/WebAtlas/0_TerritoryLitvish.htm.

[26] See Dovid Katz, *Lithuanian Jewish Culture.* Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2004, p. 19 for comparisons with various stages of the Grand Duchy. The internal borders of the 1569 Lublin Union should be added in a future edition.

curred after this epithet was internalized and "accepted" in the language of the described folks. This often happens in the history of derogatory epithets that are subsequently claimed with pride by those who have thereby been signified. In the delicate patterning of Yiddish suffixal accentuation, it is not insurmountably difficult for neutral or positive *lítvak* (pl. *lítvakəs*) to be "re-insultified" to *litvák* (pl. *litvákəs*. (Incidentally, among present-day linguistically russified Yiddish speakers, even in Lithuania, it is possible to hear *litvákəs* instead of *lítvakəs* even when the intentions are absolutely positive. This is apparently a postwar phenomenon.)

How then did the word *Litvak* originate? Just possibly, in the early seventeenth century (or earlier…). After all, the Lithuanian Jewish *váad* (council) split away from the Councils of the Lands back in 1623.[27] The underlying tensions – the North-South fault line within Eastern European Jewry – would have been considerably older, and the negative epithet *litvák* would have been nothing more than the Yiddish word for Lithuania plus the pejorative person-marking suffix *ák*. In other words, we are claiming that at first it was not "a special ethnographic term" as we know it today, but simply a frequent pejorative agentivizing suffix tacked on to a country's name, perhaps with a touch of backhanded humor. But in the absence of dated attestations, this is no more than an educated guess.

The earliest known datable explicit traditions go back to the later eighteenth century. The first generations of Hasidim down south would have been singularly enthusiastic about hurtling this word at their northern coreligionists who had suddenly become theological and societal opponents. In the newly arisen situation, an epithet of southerners against northerners would have moved "overnight" from the realm of folklore and fun into the realm of all too serious religious and economic strife, the realms, so to speak, of God and money (the latter because the early disputes centered on community control as well as basic tenets of the Jewish faith). A slightly pejorative humor-laden term can rapidly transform into an insult proper.

It is no small irony that the earliest presently known attestations of the word, going back to eighteenth century traditions, are in *Hasidic*, explicitly anti-Litvak tracts. But there is a twist to the plot. These attestations occur in nineteenth century manuscripts and printed editions of stories about the founder of the archetypal *Lithuanian* brand of Hasidim, Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi. He was of course born a Litvak in the sense of being a Lithuanian Jew from the Lithuanian dialect area of Yiddish. As a young man, this Litvak went down south to Ukraine to study with Hasidic masters, and of course, he went on in later years to found his Third Way movement, Chabad, which synthesized northern academic standards with south-

---

[27]   See Simon Dubnov, *Pínkes ha-medíno* (*Pinkás ha-medinâ*), Ajanoth: Berlin, 1925, pp. 278–289; Dovid Katz, *Lithuanian Jewish Culture.* Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2004, pp. 73–78.

ern theology. In various Lubavitch-Hasidic tales, those around the young Shneur-Zalmen during his Ukrainian years call him "that Litvak!" Although the oldest written versions are from decades later, the stories date from the period of his life that started around 1764 when he relocated down south.

One tale recounts Leyvi-Yitskhok of Berdichev (1740–1810), a leading personality of the "third generation" of Hasidism, recalling how the young "Litvak" Shneur-Zalmen would take the best from the pot, even when all were sharing it together. Versions of this story have appeared in various forms over the years.[28] Another, told in the name of the court of the Kozhnitser Magid, tells of this upstart Litvak rushing to take for himself certain holy deeds before another could move forward to carry them out.[29] And there are similar tales of Shneur-Zalmen being called this in the court of Dov-Ber the Magid ('preacher') of Mezritch (d. 1772), one of the primary founders of Hasidism.

The term *Litvak* occurs repeatedly in nineteenth century Hasidic tracts (both moralistic and hagiographic). One famous anti-Litvak sentence, containing one of the oldest datable attestations, is from the period 1820 to 1825, in the collected missives of Dov-Ber, the son of Shneur-Zalmen and second dynastic rebbe of Chabad (known as *der míteler rébə* or Middle Rebbe). The statement, in Hebrew but with Yiddish *lítvak* thrown in (Hasidic Hebrew style generally admits Yiddishisms), reads: "…because I know that it's the nature of the Litvaks to value their money above their body and their soul."[30]

Professor Dov Levin however surmises that the term *Litvak* originated in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century when poverty and the newly imposed czarist repressions led to migrations southward of Lithuanian Jews who were much poorer than their hosts, and often more learned, and were resented by some for the competition the scruffy newcomers were putting up for teaching jobs.[31] Levin alludes to the possible relevance of the period between the first partition of Poland (1772) and the final partitions (1793 and 1795), when some Lithuanian Jews fleeing the just-occupied sectors tried to relocate to regions still in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

In addition to the Hasidic-Misnagdic rift and the "export of Litvaks" to other Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, Antony Polonsky (in this volume) adds the specific nineteenth century Haskalah movement in Lithuania. It had a distinct

---

[28]   E.g. Menachem Mendel Schneerson (ed), *Sholom Dober, Toyras Sholom. Seyfer ha-sikhoys.* Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1946, p. 47.

[29]   S. Y. Zevin, *Sippurei Hasidim. Mo'adim* [Tales of the Hasidim – Holidays]. Tel Aviv: A. Zioni, 1957, p. 208.

[30]   Page 143 in the ms, Chabad Central Library. Courtesy Rabbi Sholom Ber Levine.

[31]   Dov Levin, Personal email communications, 12 Dec. 2006, 14 Nov. 2007.

character that harmonized with religious life rather more successfully than down south. This image of the northern Haskalah could have added fuel to the spread of the word in various southern regions.

All these factors played a role in the multifaceted evolution of the popular image of the Litvak since the nineteenth century. Two broadly relevant formation events still in the background were the splitting off of Lithuanian Jewry from the Councils of the Lands in the early seventeenth century, and the Hasidic-Misnagdic rift of the later eighteenth. Unless and until someone finds older documentations of the word, its dating will be open to speculation, but that is secondary to an appreciation of the cumulative picture provided by a variety of aspects: geography; dialect; council and power structure history; religious history; obvious cultural differences. All these and more conspire to make it clear that the *concept* of the Litvak is much older than the word, and given that the word started its life as an insult, that particular relative chronology is not much of a surprise.

It is in fact the normal rather than the exceptional course of events in cultural history that a web of popular attributes and stereotypes, each in various states of relationship to objective fact, ultimately coalesces into a composite image that eventually finds expression in a single term (whether a new term "coined to order" or, as we are claiming in the case of *Litvak,* a series of nuanced semantic evolutions from an older everyday word).

As far as we know, the first time the issue of northern Litvaks vs. their non-Litvak counterparts was brought up by the "modern Jewish chattering classes" was in the sharp polemic between Polish-born Alexander Zederbaum (1816–1893), and his Litvak opponent, Peretz Smolenskin (1842–1885). In addition to claims and counterclaims about the sharply differing pronunciation of both vernacular Yiddish and (for them more crucially) the different renditions of the sacred Hebrew texts, the "dirty laundry" is thrown in both directions with all the force that nascent journalistic Hebrew could muster. The debate was published in 1866 and 1867 in the weekly *Ha-méylits*, founded and edited by Zederbaum.[32] Zederbaum, who called his *j'accuse* "Rule by the Priests," delivers a broadside against the Litvak haughtiness that emanates from their superior abilities; also, against impoverished Litvaks who migrate elsewhere and continue to stick together and look down upon the locals.

---

[32]   The debate: (1) Erez [= Alexander Zederbaum], "Memshéles koyhánim" in *Ha-méylits* (*Hamelitz*), 21 Kislev, no. 44: 667-669 [part of the article published in 39: 588–590; 40: 606–611; 41: 625–629; 42: 638–643; 43: 652–654; 44: 667–669; 45: 683–684; 46: 698–702; 47: 714–719; 48: 730–734], 1866. (2) Peretz Smolenski[n], [letter to the editor in reply to Zederbaum 1866] in *Ha-méylits*, 4 Shvat, no. 50, pp. 765–766, 1867. (3) Zederbaum's reply to Smolenskin – 4 Shvat, no. 50: 766–767, 1867.

The much younger Smolenskin struck back, claiming that Litvaks in their land give great respect to Polish merchants even if they are ignorant, and that all the animosity is initiated by southerners who resent the Litvak for not believing in their (Hasidic) rebbe. The editor usually gets the last word, and so Zederbaum struck right back, claiming that the Litvaks' truly fine welcome of southern merchants is irrelevant because so few Polish folks make it up there in any case. For Zederbaum the real issue is of teachers and scholars, and openness in accepting other teachers and scholars. There are Litvak teachers everywhere, Zederbaum complains, but no southern teachers are welcomed up north. This is equally true of the staff and students of the great yeshivas. In the (government run) rabbinical school in Zhitomir in Ukraine, half are Litvaks, but in the Vilna yeshivas up north you'd be hard pressed to find a single southerner. And so on and so forth.

The terminology for Lithuanian (as for other) Jews in this polemic is archetypal for this era of maskilic Hebrew, a language under construction that was known for experimentation with various blends of ancient, medieval and modern. They use biblical style *ish Líto* (literally, man of Lithuania) and *ben Líto* (son of Lithuania) for singular. For the plural, they use *bney Líto* (Children of Lithuania, in a construction invoking the Children of Israel of biblical times) and *anshey Líto* (the people of Lithuania). The same short text contains attempts to neologize on later, Mishnaic and Talmudic Hebrew models, including singular *Litay* or *Litói*, and plural *Litáyim* or *Litóim*.

15. Age of the word *Líto* (*Lítə*) and the original way of referring to its people

The history of the Litvaks must not be confused by the word Litvak! The term per se might be relatively recent, it may have arisen in the first place as a simple insult, and it may not actually be documented until the nineteenth century. All three of these things may be true.

But that need not impact upon our ability to fathom the antiquity of the *concept* of the Lithuanian Jew as an integral component and direct product of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The empirical evidence garnered from expeditions in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries reveals that *one* word is both universally self-applied, and is used by Yiddish speakers in surrounding regions to refer to those who speak Lithuanian Yiddish: they are said to speak *Litvish.* Those who speak it say "Mir reydn lítviš." The literal translation would be "We speak Lithuanian" though they

are obviously not referring to the Lithuanian language. Translating this on-the-surface simple sentence into English is not so simple at all. It can mean (going from general to specific): "We speak in the way of Lithuania" or "We speak the language of Lithuania"" or "We speak Lithuanian Yiddish."

For the historical linguist, it is precisely this kind of universal phenomenon over a large and heterogeneous territory that points powerfully to derivation from a much earlier point in history. This is quite astounding, bearing in mind that documentations come from elderly twenty-first century citizens of (in alphabetical order) Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Ukraine. Most of these folks would (for one reason or another) never regard themselves as "Litvaks" (except in modern Lithuania, where it remains "convenient" and can have desired cultural kudos in Jewish and non-Jewish environments). By contrast, the linguistic designation for a certain kind of Yiddish has survived all the upheavals, massacres, migrations, and the falls and resurrections of an array of nation-states.

Verily, this universal reply, *Mir reydn lítviš* (We speak Litvish) harks back to a time, many centuries ago when *Litvish* — Lithuanian Yiddish — was the only language common to virtually the whole of various incarnations of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Such evidence is particularly impressive for linguists, for whom the empirical documentation of spoken forms is a priori the best evidence.

But what of documentary attestations of the kind traditionally required by historians? *Litvish* as a traditional Yiddish linguonym could hardly be attested in centuries from which there are no presently known documents in the language from this territory. The written heritage of Lithuanian Jewry in earlier days was Hebrew and Aramaic. And that takes us back to the base noun from which we began this investigation: the traditional Jewish word for Lithuania, ליטא: *Lítə* or *Líto*, and in modern times also *Lita*.

As noted above (§3), the earliest attestation occurs in a reply by the famed Ashkenazic rabbi Israel Isserlin (Isserlein, 1390–1460). It was noted by Herman Rosenthal, in his classic encyclopedia article on the Jews of Lithuania.[33] And, as noted, *Líto* / *Lítə* occurs frequently in the works of the sixteenth and seventeenth century rabbinic codifiers and commentators. That the word is much older is obvious not only from its widespread occurrence in this first age of the great "Eastern" codifiers, but from the content and context of the mentions that occur in the various legalistic discussions. The word for Lithuania is often mentioned in connection

---

[33]   Herman Rosenthal, "Lithuania" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 8. New York & London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1904, pp. 118–130; see p. 119.

with a tradition or Jewish law that is distinct from that of (the usual contrastor) *Poyln* (Poland). Such traditions and laws do not emerge overnight, least of all in the ultra-conservative legalistic culture of the legal codifiers among the rabbis. Such references occur repeatedly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, concerning a wide range of customs and laws. It is not particularly risky to reconstruct that at least some of the customs referred to go back to a rather earlier date.

The Taz (Dovid Ha-Leyvi Segal, ±1586–1667), for example, a non-Lithuanian rabbi, in a complex discussion of the laws of kneading connected with the production of Passover matzah, explains that in most parts of Lithuania there are no water mills, and grinding is done with a hand mill operated by a non-Jew, and in those places it is considered perfectly permissible to use the product thereof.[34] In other words, a non-Lithuanian rabbinic codifier makes reference to well-known specificities of Jewish life and law in Lithuania.

In the *Khélkas Mekhóykək*, by the Lithuanian scholar Moyshe ben Yitskhok Yehuda Lima (±1605–±1658) the author makes mention of a difference in the law of dowries given a girl: "One follows the custom of the place. It is the case that *Lítə* and *Poyln* differ in custom. In *Lítə* five hundred zehuvim [lit. 'gold ones'] are given and in Poyln — four hundred. One doesn't follow the country where the marriage takes place but rather the place of residence."[35]

The Maharshál (acronym of Shloyme ben Yechiel Luria, 1510–1574) refers to similarly valued coins being in fact worth more in Lithuania and less in Poland.[36]

The many mentions of Lithuania in legalistic works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries amply demonstrate that the country's Jewish name was widely known. Obviously it was widely known before the rise of the East European rabbinic codifiers of these centuries who left treatises; there is no indication that the concept is in any way more recent than *Poyln*.

In the Acts of the Council of the Lands, the celebrated quasi-parliament of Jewish autonomy in Poland and Lithuania, "The Five Lands" over which the Council has jurisdiction are spelled out in 1588: "Poyln godl [Great Poland], Poyln kotn [Little Poland], Rusyo [Russia], Lito [Lithuania], Volin [Volhynia]."[37] The number of Lands included changed with the vagaries of internal and external politics. As is

---

[34]   Dovid Ha-Leyvi Segal [the Taz], *Turey zohov* on *Shulkhon orukh*, *Oyrakh khayim* (*Shulkhan Arukh, Orach Chaim*). Sabbethai Bass: Dyhernfurth, 1692, §460:1.

[35]   Moyshe ben Yitskhok Yehuda Lima, *Khelkas mekhoykeyk.* Cracow: Yehuda Leyb Meizls, 1670, §66.

[36]   Solomon Luria [the Maharshál], *Yam shel Shlóyme* (*Yam shel Shloymoy / Shelomo*) on tractate *Bovo Kamo* [*Bava Kama*]. Prague, 1616, §3:1.

[37]   Israel Halperin, *Pínkes váad árba arótsyoys* (*Pinkás váad arbá aratsót*). Mossad Bialik: Jerusalem, 1945, p. 4; *The Records of the Council of the Four Lands. Volume 1: 1580–1792. Revised and edited by Israel Bartal. Introduction by Shmuel Ettinger*, Bialik Institute: Jerusalem, 1990, p. 4.

well known, the Lithuanian *Váad hamdíno* (or *ha-mədíno*) — Council of the State (or Land) — split away in 1623.

That means that the documentary evidence for the famous Jewish correlate of Lithuania takes us solidly to the sixteenth century, and without too much straining of the sources, to the fifteenth and much earlier. In the absence of documentary evidence to the contrary, it seems overwhelmingly likely that the same name ליטא, spelled with the Aramaic final alef, pronounced *Líto* formally and *Lítə* in everyday speech was there long before the earliest datable attestations that happen to have survived and become known to us.

It is more difficult to surmise the timeframe for the popularization in Jewish lore of the various internal regions within Jewish Lithuania: for the western regions, *Zámət* (often spelled זאמוט — *Zámut*; modern Yiddish זאַמעט), and for eastern Lithuania, *Raysn* (often spelled רייסין — *Ráysin*; modern Yiddish רייסן). Zámət is of course cognate with Žemaitija (Samogitia) and cognate Žmut. Raysn is cognate with the German Reussen; in Yiddish Raysn refers to various regions of the Belarusian and adjacent Russian speaking areas or simply to Eastern Lithuania. In addition to its sensu largo use ("Lithuania in general"), Yiddish *Lítə* has the additional sensu stricto connotation of Central Lithuania located between western Zámət and eastern Raysn.

The borders of Zámət and Raysn are variable within Yiddish lore and dialect. The section that has attracted the most attention, in part because of its proximity to *Vílnə* (Vilnius) is the western extent of Raysn.[38] Note that the borders of Zámət too, have been historically variable[39]. But what is most relevant to the discussion at hand is the antiquity of both terms. Zámət (in the older spelling transliterating to Zámut), occurs in the *Pínkəs* (Book of Records) of the Lithuanian Jewish Council,[40] as well as in other sixteenth and seventeenth century sources. The same is true of Raysn, for example in the responsa of the Bakh (Joel Sirkis), who lived from 1561 to 1640.[41]

But returning to the term and concept *Lítə* and the methodology of historical linguistics: there are reconstructions that are logically compelling in the absence of

[38]   Dovid Katz, "Vu iz Raysn?" [Where is Raysn?] in *Fórverts,* 2 February 1996, 13, 22; 16 February 1996, 13.

[39]   See for example a twenty-first century definition by a survivor, in Dovid Katz, *Lítvish. An Atlas of Northeastern Yiddish*, at: http://www.dovidkatz.net/WebAtlas/13_InterwarZamet.htm.

[40]   Simon Dubnov, *Pínkes ha-medíno* (*Pinkás ha-mediná*). Berlin: Ajanoth, 1925, p. 21 [§97, dated 1623], p. 356.

[41]   Joel Sirkis [the Bakh], *Sheeyloys utshuvoys ha-Bakh hakhadoshoys* (*Sháyles utshúves ha-Bakh hakhadóshes / Sheelót uteshuvót ha-Bakh ha-khadashót*) [The New Responsa of the Bakh], Jerusalem, 1959, §60.

survival of "pieces of paper." Very simply: For as long as there was among Jews the noun *Lítə*, it is self-evident that there was a related noun to refer to a (Jewish) person from that certain place. Most probably it was the same stem that survives today both for the person and his or her adjectival attributes: masculine *lítvishər*, feminine *lítvishə*, plural *lítvishə*, etc. The final-syllable consonant of the place name that occasionally disappears in Yiddish from the nominal form "returns" in the adjective; cf. for example base-noun *Várshə* (Warsaw) contrasting with adjective *Várshəvər*; *Krókə*, or local *Krúkə* (Cracow) vs. adjective *krókəvər*, local *krúkəvər*. It is our contention that long before the (originally pejorative) term Litvak saw the face of the earth, both Lithuanian and non-Lithuanian Jews referred to a Jew from Lithuania as a Litvisher (*lítvishər* [lítvišər]), feminine Litvishe (*lítvishə* [lítvišə]).

That term is ipso facto as old as the name *Lítə*. To argue against this proposition is to argue, untenably, that Yiddish at one time had a name for a country but not for its inhabitants.

Lítə and *Litvisher* (the second being comparable in its connotations to our present day "basic" understanding of *Litvak* in its simple, non-derivative senses, in other words minus the centuries of later-accumulated lore) are as old as the Jewish settlement of the Lithuanian lands. That is a time older than the late fourteenth century by which time sufficient critical mass was reached to eventuate the famed edicts of toleration of Vytautas (Witold) the Great.

It firmly follows that "the Lithuanian Jew," whatever he or she is called, is deeply rooted in the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. He might be called a *Litvak* and she a *Lítvitshke* [lítvičkə] in late times, sometimes as an emotionally laden adjunct. He and she would have been a *Litvisher* [lítvišər] and a *Litvishe* [lítvišə] from earlier times and uninterruptedly to our time. One of the chief empirical consequences of that rootedness comes to light in recent fieldwork which elicits the adjective and linguonym *Litvish* (*lítviš*) from elderly survivors, more than a half century after the Holocaust, on a territory that is congruent, by and large, with that of various phases of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and that stretches verily from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

At some point, to be determined in the history of Lithuanian Jewry, a *Litvíner* or *Litvin* (fem. *Litvínerin* or *Litvínerke* [litvínərkə]) came to designate in Yiddish a person of non-Jewish, Lithuanian ethnicity. This too became a romanticized concept in (pre-Holocaust) modern Yiddish poetry, most famously in Moyshe Kulbak's (1922) *Raysn*, where, in a romantic vision, a Lithuanian man (*Litvin*) rises from the moonlit River Nieman to embrace a dark-haired Slavic maiden who has risen from the Viliya (today called Neris in Lithuania, but retaining its historic name in

Belarus)[42]. For Kulbak, the two rivers are symbols of the Lithuanians and the Slavs, respectively.

16. The old Jewish word for *Grand Duchy of Lithuania*

It follows on that there should be *some* Jewish language correlate for the *notion* Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the legalistic writings of the Polish and Lithuanian rabbis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These are the codifiers known as "early Acharonim" (Yiddish *akhróynim*; Litvish *akhréynim*, literally "later ones" signifying those came after the Sephardic Joseph Caro's halachic code *Shulkhon orukh / Shulchan arukh*). They were the first generation of major rabbinic authors centered in Eastern and East Central Europe, and their authority quite rapidly outstripped that of the places, mostly in the German speaking lands of central Europe, that had earlier been seen as the rabbinic and legalistic center of Ashkenazic Europe.

It should be kept in mind that for all the legal authority the rabbinic elite held for the Jewish population in Europe, there was no known pressure from anywhere, neither internal nor from the powers that be, about formal nomenclature specifically or language standardization more generally. There was a generous measure of stylistic freedom in the works of rabbinic authors who wrote responsa (replies to questions submitted, sometimes real questions, sometimes used as a literary form), commentaries on other works, or codes of law. The same is true in the extant *Pínkəs* records of both the Council of the Lands, covering the period from 1580 to 1792,[43] and of the separate Council of Lithuania, covering 1623 (the year the Lithuanian Council declared its independence from the rest) to 1761.[44]

It is little wonder therefore that we find several terms to describe the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. (In the following discussion, we will stick with *Líto* [Lítɔ], because these sources are in Ashkenazic rabbinic Hebrew where that would have been the received pronunciation, with a concomitant "relaxed" pronunciation *Lítə*.) Sometimes, for example, in the protocols of the Council of the Lands, *Líto*

---

[42]   Moyshe Kulbak, "Raysn" in *Tsúkunft*, New York (Feb. 1922). Reprinted in Khone Shmeruk (ed), *A shpigl af a shteyn. Poézye un próze fun tsvelf farshnítene yídishe shráyber in Rátnfarband*, compiled by B. Hrushovski, A. Sutzkever, Kh. Shmeruk. Tel Aviv: Goldene keyt, 1964, pp. 530–545.

[43]   Israel Halperin, *Pínkes váad árba arótsyoys* (*Pinkás vaad arbá aratsót*). Mossad Bialik: Jerusalem, 1945; *The Records of the Council of the Four Lands. Volume 1: 1580-1792. Revised and edited by Israel Bartal. Introduction by Shmuel Ettinger*, Bialik Institute: Jerusalem, 1990.

[44]   Simon Dubnov, *Pínkes ha-medíno* (*Pinkás ha-mediná*), Ajanoth: Berlin, 1925.

appears on its own ("just Lithuania" so to speak), e.g. in the records for the years 1588, 1612, 1641, 1644, 1668, 1677, 1678, 1679, 1681, 1688. Sometimes, *Medínas Líto* (modern Israeli Hebrew *Mədinát Líta*), meaning "The State of Lithuania" is used, e.g. in the protocols for 1595, 1623, 1627, 1644, 1662, 1665, 1667, 1676, 1672, 1680, 1682, 1683, 1684, 1690, 1752. And there is a third common usage, using the Hebrew construct plural, *Medinoys Líto* (modern Israeli pronunciation would be *Medinót Líta*), which can be translated The States of Lithuania, e.g. in the protocols for 1644, 1650, 1655, 1668, 1681.

It can be enlightening to compare these results with the names for Lithuania in the protocols of the Council of Lithuania itself, turning as it were, from "how one's neighbors refer to one" to "how one refers to oneself." At first sight, the patterning from the Council of the Lands seems to be replicated in the Council of Lithuania. There are occurrences of just *Líto* (1637, 1638, 1670), of *Medínas Líto* (including minutes from 1633, 1634, 1647, 1655, 1664), and many cases of the plural *Medinoys Líto* (including 1623, 1626, 1628, 1631, 1633, 1634, 1639, 1664, 1670, 1676). There are, moreover, other variants. These include *Hamdíno Líto* (The State, Lithuania), in entries for 1627, 1632, 1634, which might be regarded as a grammatical westernism in Hebrew (absolute instead of construct state), but which might also convey more emphasis on the aspect of statehood.

And, as would be expected in the record book of scholars and scribes talking about their own country, there are constructions that would be unlikely in the Council of the Lands minutes. These include *b'artséynu* ([bəarcéjnu], 'in our country') in 1650, and much more frequently, *bimdinoséynu Líto* ([bimdinəséjnu lítə], 'in our State of Lithuania' or 'in our country Lithuania'), documented for 1628, 1637, 1650, 1652, 1655, 1664, 1670, 1676). There could be some emotive significance in the biblical style *érets Líto* ([ɛ́rəc lítɔ], 'Land of Lithuania') used inter alia in 1623 and 1627, and evocative of the classical term for the Land of Israel in Old Testament usage.

The formal terminology for the name of the country in the Hebrew language records of the Jewish Council, or *Váad*, of Lithuania, was a source of some obvious editorial tension. This is singularly evident from entry no. 566, from 1664. In preparing his critical (and now classic) edition of the records of the *Pínkəs hamdíno*, the record books of the Jewish Council of Lithuania, master Jewish historian Simon Dubnov (1860–1941) compared the copies of the protocols in Grodna with those he found in Vilna and Brisk (Brest). Vilna has *mədinoséynu d'Líto* — Our State of Lithuania. Brisk (traditionally called Brisk d'Líto in Lithuanian Jewish culture) has *mədínas Líto* — The State of Lithuania. Grodna goes with *Mədinoys Líto* — The States of Lithuania.

This last name, the States of Lithuania, the most frequently encountered in the annals of the Council of Lithuania, *is* in fact the Hebrew equivalent for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Lithuanian Lietuvos Didžioji Kunigaikštystė; Belarusian Вялікае Княства Літоўскае / Vialikaye Kniastva Litoŭskaye; Russian Великое Княжество Литовское / Velikoye Knyazhestvo Litovskoye; etc.). The modern Yiddish word *fírshtntum* for "Duchy" was not traditionally used in this context, as far as we are aware.

* * *

The Hebrew name for the Grand Duchy, elegant in its simplicity, was just: The States of Lithuania — *Mǝdinoys Lítǝ*. This is the standard Ashkenazic pronunciation — [mǝdínǝjs lítǝ] or [mǝdinɔ́js lítǝ]. In deep modern Lithuanian Ashkenazic it would be [mǝdínejs lítǝ] or [mǝdinéjs lítǝ], in older Ashkenazic perhaps [mǝdínous lítǝ] or [mǝdinóus lítǝ][45]. The intricate and complex possibilities of Ashkenazic usage would also allow the combining of the foregoing versions of "States of" with the more homey and intimate sounding *Lítǝ*. (It is unfortunate that it remains the habit of Jewish Studies, even East European Jewish Studies, to anachronistically and inaccurately "Israelicize" the Hebrew and Aramaic of Eastern Europe, thereby losing entire layers of cultural history and nuance.)

And so, *Medinoys Lito* is the name by which Lithuania became famous abroad as a home of talented Jewish scholars. By way of example, the philosophical work *Gívas ha-móyre*, published in Prague in 1611 (see image 7), advertises on its title page that its author is "the godly philosopher, a master of wisdom and young in years, Rabbi Joseph the son of Isaac the Levite, from The States of Lithuania."[46]

Medinoys Lito — The States of Lithuania — is the formal name for the Grand Duchy, intended to incorporate its various provinces and components. It is also attested in the works of the first generation of Eastern (and East Central) European rabbinic codifiers of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, including the Taz (1586–1667)[47] and the Bakh (1561–1640)[48]. One cannot now find earlier attestations

---

[45]   For the history of these vocalic developments see Dovid Katz, "Zur Dialektologie des Jiddischen" in W. Besch W. et al (eds), *Dialektologie. Ein Handbuch zur deutschen und allgemeinen Dialektforschung*. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1983, pp. 1018–1041; Dovid Katz, "The Phonology of Ashkenazic" in L. Glinert (ed), *Hebrew in Ashkenaz: A Language in Exile*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 46–87.

[46]   This text corrects the editing error in the caption, in Dovid Katz, *Lithuanian Jewish Culture*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2004, p. 67.

[47]   Dovid Ha-Leyvi Segal [the Taz], *Turey zohov on Shulkhon orukh, Oyrakh khayim (Shulkhan Arukh, Orach Chaim)*. Sabbethai Bass: Dyhernfurth, 1692, §460:1.

[48]   Joel Sirkis [the Bakh], *Sheeyloys utshuvoys ha-Bakh hakhadoshoys (Sháyles utshúves ha-Bakh hakhadóshes / Sheelót uteshuvót ha-Bakh ha-khadashót)* [The New Responsa of the Bakh], Jerusalem, 1959, §60.

because these scholars are of the first generation of eastern codifiers whose works have been preserved. The occurrence of the Hebrew name for the Grand Duchy in their various works, when referring to Lithuania, and in the *Pínkəs* records of both the Council of the Lands and the Council of Lithuania, is ample evidence that this term was a common inheritance from earlier times.

Incidentally, there is an occurrence of a term for the Grand Duke (of Lithuania) in the protocols of the Council of the Lands. An entry for 1688, translating a royal edict, renders the ruler's title: *Yan hashlíshi, bəkhésed*

IMAGE 7

Eloyhím, mélekh Poyln, hanósikh [or: *hanəsíkh*] *hagódl shel Líto* (Jan the Third, by the Grace of God the King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania = John III Sobieski, 1629–1696). What is not apparent is whether *hanósikh* [or: *hanəsíkh*] *hagódl* (formal Ashkenazic *hanosíkh hagodóyl*) for Grand Duke was a standard term or an ad-hoc translation. The scribe used a biblical word for "prince" (e.g. Joshua 13:21, where it occurs in the plural), combined with with *hagódl* ('the great') to yield 'the great prince' = The Grand Duke in the present context. The Hebrew word *dúkəs* (*dúkas*, etc.), a borrowing from Latin that occurs in various stages of European Hebrew is not used, perhaps because it would imply a rather lower-level prince. Reaching right into the Bible provided a more elegant and appropriate approximation of the grand duke's title.

17. Conclusions

The term *Litvak*, though centuries old, is quite secondary in Lithuanian Jewish cultural history. It arose as a pejorative epithet in non-Lithuanian Jewish communities. It was eventually modified and recast in positive terms from within, with various folkloristic and emotive connotations, within and without. But the concepts of Jewish Lithuania (*Líto*, *Lítə*), of its unique dialect of Yiddish, Hebrew and Aramaic (*Lítvish*) and the Lithuanian Jew (*a Lítvishər*) are deeply rooted in the Grand

Duchy of Lithuania and are as old as substantial Jewish settlement in the country. At some early stage, rabbinic Hebrew developed the term *Medinoys Lito* (The States of Lithuania) in the sense of: The Grand Duchy of Lithuania.