

# **ORIGINS OF THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE**

Edited by  
**DOVID KATZ**

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Volume 1

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# ORIGINS OF THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE

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Editor: Dovid Katz

Wolf Corob Fellow in Yiddish Language and Literature, Oxford Centre for Postgraduate  
Hebrew Studies and Leslie Paisner Fellow at St. Antony's College, Oxford, U.K.

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## THE PROTO DIALECTOLOGY OF ASHKENAZ

DOVID KATZ

*Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies and St Antony's College, Oxford*

### I. Primacy of historical reconstruction

First impressions frequently deceive, and so it is that the seeming *a priori* priority of written evidence in the recovery of lost states of language is illusory. It was Saussure (1916: 297-300) who eloquently proclaimed the superiority of retrospective (reconstructive) recovery of language history over prospective (paper trailing) work. The logic is all too simple. Documents are subject to a thousand and one doubts: paleographic (who, when and where?), linguistic (what unconscious normative model, whose language if anybody's, how accurately transcribed?), and interpretive (how receptive to accurate analysis by a researcher living in a time when not a single native contemporary of the writer survives?). Comparative reconstruction in the right hands, undertaken with the necessary safeguards (including overwhelming consistency of correspondences and accurate retrieval of data) is a vastly more powerful and accurate tool because the evidence (the corpus of forms discovered) is empirically visible and confirmable to the observer. This argument over 'primacy' is not an abstraction of preferred forms of evidence by historians vs linguists (thought that surely plays a role too), but a methodological dilemma every historical linguist must face. The conscientious worker will of course never ignore any piece of evidence, whatever its provenance. The question is, which evidence will he confront with which, and that is a question he confronts every day of his working life.

In the historiography of oldest Yiddish, the contrast between documentary extrapolation and reconstruction is rather more stark than on average. That is true for two reasons. Firstly, there is virtually nothing surviving in the vernacular from the earliest generations of Ashkenazic history in medieval central Europe. And secondly, those documents from later generations that do survive exhibit a far greater than usual gap between spoken and written language. That gap results from the relatively late emergence of YIDDISH CONSCIOUSNESS among Ashkenazic Jewry (see Marchand, Miller, Rosenfeld, in this volume; Katz 1986a on a similar situation in the history of Yiddish Studies). That alone is somewhat analogous to the position of other European vernaculars in medieval times. But there is a critical difference. Those vernaculars generally stood in sociolinguistic complementation to a nonsimilar classical language (usually Latin), while Yiddish on its native German language territory, in addition to standing in sociolinguistic complementation to Hebrew and Aramaic in the thousand year state of INTERNAL ASHKENAZIC TRILINGUALISM (Katz 1985: 98), also stood in complementation to coterritorial variants of German transparently cognate, even to the most naive observer, with the Germanic Component within Yiddish. More often than not it was some form or other of German literary language that provided the normative model for Yiddish writing. Nearly all of Old Yiddish literature reflects varying degrees of TARGET CONFORMIZATION and ACTUAL CONFORMIZATION with a German based normative model. Both may be subsumed by retrospective application over the whole history of Yiddish literature of the Yiddish term DAYTSHMERISH ('Germanish', esp. 'Germanized Yiddish of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Yiddish press and radical literature'). Genuine



Yiddish specificities in older Yiddish literature frequently represent the “failings” of the writer insofar as features of his actual language surface, notwithstanding his greater-than-average repressive efforts on that score. Older Yiddish literature is frankly unfaithful to the real language of its writers, far in excess of the usual speaking-writing gap. This has long been recognized by Yiddish philology (see Avé-Lallemant 1858–1862, III: 205; Shulman 1898: 44; Borokhov 1913: 354; Reyzen 1920: 26–27; Shtif 1922: 184, 189, 191; Erik 1928: 85, 336–337, 370–371; Tsinberg 1928: 82; M. Weinreich 1928: 22, 28).

## II. Empirical validity of Proto Yiddish

By definition, no protolanguage can have EMPIRICAL REALITY insofar as no modern observer can experience it as a spoken vernacular the way a contemporary variety can be experienced, and that is no more than to say that water is wet. Moreover, protolanguages, like historical linguistics generally, are out of fashion, and their alleged overdoing in the nineteenth century is often demonstrated by references to such exaggerated (but methodologically important) exercises as Schleicher’s (1868) reconstructed Indo-European fable. The continued implicit contention of some modern masters that one goal of historical linguistics is recovery of the “ancestor language” (Hoenigswald 1960: 119) contrasts with the view that the “end result of reconstruction is vastly less interesting [. . .] than the assumptions and procedures that advance us toward that reconstruction” (King 1969: 155).

By shifting the debate from empirical reality to EMPIRICAL VALIDITY, a much broader consensus is to be hoped for. The empirical validity of protolanguage *X*, as of anything else, depends on the strength of the evidence invoked. The three crucial factors here are the QUANTITY, QUALITY and CERTAINTY of the consistent correspondences discovered and methodically arranged by the historical linguist from spoken (i.e. empirically real) varieties of language. It is hence as measurable a linguistic entity as any on a continual scale ranging from the wildly conjectural to the logically irrefutable. And in my own view, Yiddish is a splendid example of this latter end of that scale. Marchand (1960: 41) correctly sees in Yiddish “a unique opportunity to be of service to the scholarly world”, among other reasons, by providing for the testing of “the theory of unified protolanguages” (Marchand 1960: 41). Although my conclusion is opposite to Professor Marchand’s (1965: 249 and this volume), it is he who has invaluable framed the question for us all.

Three factors are paramount. First is the early, and ultimately, vast, multidirectional geolinguistic expansion of Yiddish throughout central and eastern Europe. The resulting contiguity and coterritoriality with a *multitude* of German and non-German dialects facilitates confrontation of the Germanic Component with evidence from German, free from fear of longterm ongoing impact by any one variety of German that would cloud protolanguage conclusions. Second is the contiguity and coterritoriality of Yiddish with *no* Semitic dialect that could have fed its Semitic Component. This state of affairs facilitates confrontation with appropriate forms of Northwest Semitic free from fear of continuing impact from that quarter. Finally, investigation of the mechanisms and chronology of FUSION between both components within Yiddish over time and space—bearing in mind the first two factors—take conclusions on PROTONESS well beyond the danger threshold of COINCIDENCE (a concept referred to variously in the literature, e.g. “parallel development”). These happy historical circumstances render Yiddish a protolanguage laboratory of rare potential.

There is, in fact, astounding consistency of correspondence between any Yiddish dialect and any other Yiddish dialect over time and space vis à vis the two pan-Yiddish cognate



donor language groups (Germanic and Semitic; the Slavonic Component is by and large limited to Eastern Yiddish and to recent centuries). This is evident via four parameters of correspondence, for which examples are offered to illustrate the methodology. The case can of course only be proven relative to quantity, quality and certainty of a vastly greater corpus, and a monograph on the subject is in preparation. No claim is made, of course, that all Yiddish can be traced to a unitary ancestor variety. The claim is that a significant portion of Yiddish in time and space exhibits clear signs of derivation from a protolanguage.

(1) SYSTEMATIC CORRESPONDENCE of the systems of stressed vocalism of all Yiddish dialects, Western and Eastern (Birnbäum 1923; Fischer 1934 [see now Bin-Nun 1973: 183–238], U. Weinreich 1958a: 223; M. Weinreich 1973: II, 321–382; Katz 1983a: 1021–1031). Thus, Southwestern Yiddish (SWY, “Swiss-Alsatian”) and Midwestern Yiddish (MWY, “Central German”) *ū* is systematically cognate with (= ||) Northwestern Yiddish (NWY, “Netherlandic”) *ö* || Southeastern Yiddish (SEY, “Ukrainian”) *ı* || Mideastern Yiddish (MEY, “Polish”) *ĩ* || Northeastern Yiddish (NEY “Lithuanian”) *u*, hence e.g. SWY, MWY *gūzmə*, ‘exaggeration’ *hūnt* ‘dog’ || NWY *gōzmə*, *hōnt* || SEY *gızmə*, *hınt* || MEY *gĩzmə*, *hĩnt* || NEY *gúzmə*, *húnt*. The correspondence obtains in *all* old items in the language.

(2) ANALOGOUS FUSION between Germanic and Semitic in all varieties of Yiddish (Katz 1979; 1982: 284–285; 1985: 95–96). The point of departure is provided by the normalized stock language cognates in Tiberian (the standard phonological system of Hebrew and Aramaic, codified on the western shores of the Sea of Galilee in the late first millennium), and Middle High German (MHG). In the above cited example, it is evident that fusion between the *u* vowels in Tiberian *gūzmə* and MHG *hunt* set in *before* the Yiddish shifts that processed the vowel regionally, resulting in *ĩ* in MEY, in *ö* in NWY, or in anything else anywhere else; otherwise these two would not be fused throughout Yiddish. The same is true in the arena of the more volatile long vowels and diphthongs. Take for example vowel 22 — SWY *ej* || MWY *ē* || NWY *ej* || SEY *ej* || MEY *aj* || NEY *ej*, hence e.g. SWY *méjlə* “it doesn’t matter; anyway”, *éjbik* ‘forever’ || MWY *mēlə*, *ēbik* || SEY *méjlə*, *éjbik* || MEY *májlə*, *ájvik* (|| Tiberian *mēl5*, MHG *êwic*). It would take quite a coincidence for all the locally differentiated Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic liturgical reflexes of Tiberian *šere* (= *ē*) and all the locally differentiated dialectal reflexes of MHG <*ê*> to “happen to fuse” everywhere. Still, coincidence is possible. Where the chance of coincidence is significantly reduced is in the application of analogous fusion throughout the vowel system. Indeed, analogous pansystemic fusion is the historical phenomenon that has enabled Yiddish dialectology to adopt numbers representing diaphonemic correspondences (U. Weinreich 1958a: 225–226; M. Weinreich 1960; Herzog 1965: 228; Katz 1983a: 1021–1024), such that the Yiddish dialectologist can speak of, say, *vowel 11*, rather than “a vowel cognate with Tiberian A fused with MHG X in Southwestern Yiddish but not applicable in Mideastern Yiddish where Tiberian A is fused with MHG Y and Tiberian B is the fusion partner of MHG X”. Had separate “Yiddishes” arisen at separate points of time and space, this hypothetical state of LOCAL FUSION would surely have resulted. A Semitic Component vowel would have fused with one local realization here, with another there. A protolanguage is indicated by the application of analogous fusion geographically over the vast expanse of Ashkenazic speech territory, and structurally throughout the stressed vowel systems of Yiddish dialects.

(3) CONGRUENT ANOMALIES vis à vis the stock languages. The traditional historical linguist’s exceptions to sound laws (measured against the correspondences holding in the overwhelming majority of cases) are anomalies compared with the bulk. Congruent



anomalies are exceptional in the same way in all known varieties of the target language (Katz 1982: 287–293; 1985: 95–96). Thus for example, vowel 41 (short *ɔ* in all Yiddish dialects) is expected in Yiddish reflexes of MHG *hocker*, based on the usual correspondence (e.g. MHG *ort*, *woche*, *wolf* and Pan Yiddish *ort* ‘place’, *vɔx* ‘week’, *vɔlf* ‘wolf’). That an expected cognate MHG ‘dictionary form’ doesn’t match the usual correspondences between MHG and the Germanic Component of Yiddish in itself proves nothing; there were after all, many variants of any item in German dialects, as everywhere else. What is striking is congruence, the consistent appearance of the same unexpected reflex (in terms of the diaphonemic system) throughout Yiddish. In this case, it happens to be vowel 42 (SWY *ɔu* | MWY *ɔ* | NWY *ɔu* | SEY *ɔj* | MEY *ɔj* | NEY *ej*), hence SWY *hɔukər* ‘hunchback’ | MWY *hɔkər* | NWY *hɔukər* | SEY *hɔjkər* | MEY *hɔjkər* | NEY *hɛjkər*. Similarly, vowel 52 (SWY *ū* | MWY *ū* | NWY *ū* | SEY *i* | MEY *i* | NEY *u*) is expected in the Yiddish cognate of Tiberian *məzūz* (e.g. Tiberian *bəθūlō*, *havrūθō*, *malbūšim* and SWY *besūlə* ‘virgin’, *xavrūsə* ‘bunch; crowd; (traditional) study pair’, *malbūšəm* ‘clothing’ | MWY *besūlə*, *xavrūsə*, *malbūšəm* | NWY *besūlə*, *xavrūsə*, *malbūšəm* | SEY *bsīlə*, *xavrīsə*, *malbīšəm* | MEY *bsīlə*, *xavrīsə*, *malbīšəm* | NEY *bsūlə*, *xavrūsə*, *malbūšim*). What turns up everywhere, however, is vowel 51 (SWY *ū* | MWY *ū* | NWY *ö* | SEY *ɪ* | MEY *ɪ* | NEY *u*), hence SWY *məzūzə* ‘traditional door post marker; mezuzah’ | MWY *məzūzə* | NWY *məzōzə* | SEY *məzɪzə* | MEY *məzɪzə* | NEY *məzuzə* (Katz 1978a; 1978b: 27–30).

(4) CONCRETE DISPARITY of realization is needed to clinch a proof for systematic correspondence, analogous fusion or congruent anomaly. If the systems of stressed vocalism in Yiddish dialects were concretely (= phonetically, physically) identical or highly similar from Strassbourg to Poltava, that state of affairs would severely weaken any case for protoness, in consequence of the possibilities of coincidence and more recent transdialectal borrowings coming into play. It is precisely the documentation of systematic correspondence, analogous fusion and congruent anomaly in items exhibiting radically differing concrete realizations that serves to recover a state predating the phonological evolution of any of the varieties examined.

### III. Semitic component proto vocalism

The phonetic realization of any stressed vowel phoneme in a Yiddish dialect is invariably identical for both the Germanic and the Semitic Component in that dialect. The dynamic phonology of the Semitic Component, however, differs radically in a number of ways, the two most salient of which are penultimate stress assignment (and the resulting shift of stress upon suffixation) and, to the point here, the salient morphophonemic alternations conditioned by the syllable boundary features open vs. closed, hence SWY *šējdam* ‘ghosts’ ~ sg. *šed*, *sófər* ‘scribe’ ~ pl. *sófrəm*, and *švōxəm* ‘praises’ ~ sg. *švāx* | MWY *šēdam* ~ *šed*, *sófər* ~ *sófrəm*, *švōxəm* ~ *švāx* | NWY *šējdam* ~ *šed*, *sófər* ~ *sófrəm*, *švōxəm* ~ *švāx* | SEY *šējdam* ~ *šed*, *sójfər* ~ *sófrəm*, *švúxəm* ~ *švāx* | MEY *šájdəm* ~ *šed*, *sójfər* ~ *sófrəm*, *švúxəm* ~ *švāx* | NEY *šējdam* ~ *šed*, *séjfər* ~ *sófrəm*, *švóxəm* ~ *švāx*. Amongst the high vowels, alternation has become vestigial, but enough traces survive to warrant their inclusion (e.g. MEY *dínəm* ‘laws’, with MEY *i*<sub>32</sub> ~ sg. *dín*, with MEY *i*<sub>31</sub>; NWY *xúšəm* ‘senses’, with NWY *u*<sub>52</sub> ~ sg. *xōš*, with NWY *ö*<sub>51</sub>).

Thus, Pan Yiddish exhibits alternations in the Semitic Component (only) that are not cognate with any known alternations in the stock languages—Hebrew and Aramaic. To put it in terms of the numbering system of diaphonemic Yiddish vocalism, these open vs closed syllable alternations are 22 / \_\_\_ $\mathfrak{F}$  ~ 21 / \_\_\_C $\mathfrak{F}$ , 42 / \_\_\_ $\mathfrak{F}$  ~ 41 / \_\_\_C $\mathfrak{F}$ , 12 / \_\_\_ $\mathfrak{F}$  ~ 11 / \_\_\_C $\mathfrak{F}$ , 32 / \_\_\_ $\mathfrak{F}$  ~ 31 / \_\_\_C $\mathfrak{F}$ , 52 / \_\_\_ $\mathfrak{F}$  ~ 51 / \_\_\_C $\mathfrak{F}$ . The



mystery of these alternations has intrigued many. The currently accepted standard theory was founded, albeit in rather primitive form, by the Hebrew poet Avrom Dov-Ber Lebensohn, better known as Odom Hakoyheyn (= Adam Hakohen in Israeli pronunciation), an acronym for Avrom Dov-Ber Mikhalishker, after his native Lithuanian village Mikhalishek. Lebensohn (1874: 19–25) postulated that the vocalism of the Semitic Component derived from a five vowel system that underwent lengthening in open syllabic position, leading to the rise of long vowel reflexes. In the century to follow, massive supplementary evidence came in to support his theory. Tshemerinski (1913: 61–63) and Veynger (1913: 79–81) adduced parallels with the conditioning environments for the familiar lengthening of MHG short vowels in open syllables. Moreover, researchers of early Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts emanating from Ashkenazic territory found graphemic evidence of a prevailing five vowel system (§5 below). In short, a consensus emerged from both Germanic and Semitic researches that a five vowel Semitic Component system had undergone Open Syllable Lengthening (e.g. M. Weinreich 1973: II, 20–21, 334, 352–354; Birnbaum 1979: 60, 63–65). For a more detailed history of scholarly views on the subject, see Katz (1982: 149–181).

I have proposed in detail elsewhere (Katz 1977; 1979: 54–76; 1982: 182–314) that internal, comparative and transcomponent reconstruction (this last method entailing a modified invocation of the comparative method upon the interaction of the components within a fusion language) demonstrate unequivocally that the standard theory is untenable. Suffice it here to say rather informally that there are simply far too many vowels in the identical phonological environment to be derived from a primeval five. Thus, for example, vowel 25, cognate with Tiberian stressed open syllabic segol (SWY  $\bar{e}$  || MWY  $\bar{e}/\bar{i}$  || NWY  $\bar{e}$  || SEY  $i/\bar{i}/ej$  || MEY  $ej$  || NEY  $e$ ) represents the lengthened /e/ phoneme (originally short 21) lengthened under Germanic impact—e.g. SWY  $b\bar{e}g\bar{a}d$  ‘garment’ || MWY  $b\bar{e}g\bar{a}d/b\bar{i}g\bar{a}d$  || NWY  $b\bar{e}g\bar{a}d$  || SEY  $b\bar{e}jg\bar{a}d/b\bar{i}g\bar{a}d$   $b\bar{i}g\bar{a}d$  || MEY  $b\bar{e}jg\bar{a}d$  || NEY  $b\bar{e}g\bar{a}d$ . Vowel 22 cannot be generated by any rule or shift because its environment overlaps with 25; 22 is originally long. The same proof, albeit rather more involved, obtains regarding vowel 13 which is the genuine lengthened /a/ phoneme (originally short 11) in both components, rendering it impossible that 12 represents a vowel lengthened from the same /a/ from which 13 derives. That proof is clinched by the two lone dialects of Yiddish where 12 and 13 never merged in the Germanic Component—SWY and MWY where vowel 13 (cognate with MHG  $a$ ) while lengthened under the impact of Germanically engendered Open Syllable Lengthening, remained unrounded  $\bar{a}$  (hence e.g.  $z\bar{a}g$  ‘say’ || MHG  $sag$ ) while originally long 12 (cognate with MHG  $\hat{a}$ ) appears as  $\bar{o}$  (hence e.g.  $n\bar{o}dl$  ‘needle’ || MHG  $n\hat{a}del$ ). Semitic Component open syllabic qameṣ always appears as unambiguous 12, i.e.  $\bar{o}$ , hence e.g. SWY, MWY  $x\bar{o}s\bar{n}$  ‘bridegroom’, (< Tiberian  $h\bar{o}\bar{s}\bar{n}$  via Stress Shift, Posttonic Reduction and assorted consonantal shifts), never  $*x\bar{a}s\bar{n}$ . The status of open syllabic qameṣ as an originally long vowel is thereby demonstrated.

The reconstructed proto vocalism of the Semitic Component yields a ten vowel system along the lines of

\* $\bar{i}$ <sub>32</sub>

\* $\bar{i}$ <sub>31</sub>

\* $\bar{e}$ <sub>22</sub>

\* $\bar{e}$ <sub>21/25</sub>

\* $\bar{u}$ <sub>52</sub>

\* $\bar{u}$ <sub>51</sub>

\* $\bar{o}$ <sub>42</sub>

\* $\bar{o}$ <sub>12</sub>

\* $\bar{o}$ <sub>41</sub>

\* $\bar{a}$ <sub>11/13</sub>



#### IV. The candidate Northwest Semitic cognates

Having postulated this ten vowel Semitic Component protosystem, the next step is to confront it with the known systems of Northwest Semitic (Hebrew and Aramaic) vowels to see if a match is in sight. In sharp contrast to standard theory, a derivation from a five vowel Palestinian system is impossible, based on the evidence of Yiddish dialectology. The system is even more remote from the Babylonian system in which pathaḥ and segol are merged. The Northwest Semitic type with which the reconstructed vocalism of the Semitic Component is closest is the ten vowel quantity distinguishing Kimchian interpretation of Tiberian vocalism originated by Joseph Kimchi (Qimḥi) and elaborated upon by his sons Moshe and David in twelfth and thirteenth century Spain (see M. Kimchi [1509–1518: 11], D. Kimchi 1532: [86], 1545: 48a). From the perspective of the history of linguistics, it is noteworthy that the Kimchis saw fit to frame highly specific phonological environments to correspond with unitary diacritics they regarded as multivalent. The charge that the Kimchian system was contrived has been effectively refuted in recent decades. Chomsky, who originally ascribed the Kimchian system to “the influence of the Latin languages employed in the Provence” (1952: 31), retracted this view (1977: 177, xxvii) in the face of Bendavid’s (1958) impressive metrical and philological evidence. Alternatively, an imperfect but respectable matchup of Proto Yiddish vocalism can be made with the seven vowel Ben Asher version of Tiberian vocalism (cf. Ibn Ezra 1546: 134; Baer and Strack 1879: 11–12; Schramm 1964: 29).

But there is still an insoluble noncompatibility between even the Kimchian interpretation of Tiberian vocalism and the stressed vowel system of the Semitic Component in Yiddish. The Pan Yiddish Semitic Component alternations of long vowels in open syllables with short vowels in closed syllables render a system like the Kimchis’ tenable as a prospective donor system in open syllables only. In closed syllables, the oppositions 11: 12, 21: 22, 31: 32, 41: 42 and 51: 52 would be systematically neutralized in favour of the short member of each pair as is the case in every modern dialect of Yiddish. Along with the segmental phonology of the proto Semitic Component, we must reconstruct its dynamic phonology, and the salient rule here is quite simply  $V \rightarrow [-\text{long}]/\_\_\_\_C\bar{\text{}}\bar{\text{}}$ . Hence I posited a hitherto unknown Northwest Semitic vowel system that most resembles the Kimchian interpretation of Tiberian vocalism (distinguishing five long/tense vs. five short/lax) in open syllabic position but is closest to a five vowel Palestinian type system in closed syllabic position (Katz 1979: 77–78).

#### V. Manuscript evidence: methodology

It is easy enough to say, as we have done, that the vowel system from which the Semitic Component derives happens to coincide with nothing else known, and that conclusion is certainly in concord with the proposed primacy of evidence via reconstruction from all the known varieties of the language (cf. above §I). It is a ten vowel system (\*ī, \*ī̄, \*ē, \*ε, \*ē̄, \*a, \*ō, \*ō̄, \*ū, \*ū̄) in which \*ī̄ → \*ī, \*ē̄ → \*ε, \*ō̄ → \*a, \*ū̄ → \*ū in closed syllabic position, the neutralization resulting in a reduced five vowel inventory. We are left with the dilemma of reconciling these results with a number of incompatible systems—the five vowel Palestinian system, the seven or ten vowel Tiberian system, and the five vowel system evident in early Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts (demonstrated inter alia by rampant confusion of qameṣ/pathaḥ and šere/segol). There need be no qualms about demonstrating a hitherto unknown Northwest Semitic system midway between two known systems, Tiberian and Palestinian, as a service of Yiddish



linguistics to Semitics. In fact, it is not at all difficult to imagine a ten vowel system neutralized contextually to five in a time and place for which ten-in-all-environments and five-in-all-environments are well documented. Such “compromise dialects” are neither typologically suspect nor rare in occurrence.

It is far more difficult to accept the lack of conciliation between the Semitic Component in Yiddish with the overwhelming evidence of twelfth and thirteenth century Hebrew and Aramaic liturgical manuscripts on Ashkenazic territory, written by and for the primeval Ashkenazic population. Yalon, researching medieval Ashkenazic manuscripts, uncovered massive scrambling of the Tiberian graphemes *gameš* (|| Yiddish vowel 12) with *pathaḥ* (|| Yiddish 11) and *šere* (|| Yiddish 22) with *segol* (|| Yiddish 21) in these manuscripts (the diacritic system is such that confusion among the remaining vowels is only rarely evident graphemically). His conclusions have repeatedly been reconfirmed by further investigation (Yalon 1930: 204–205; 1937–1938: 62–66; 1938–1939: 11; 1942: 27; 1964: 19; Klar 1951: 75; Bet Arye 1965: 34–37, 102; Eldar 1976; 1978: 16–32). Yalon and many of his followers conclude, not unreasonably, that the Semitic Component in Yiddish once had a five vowel system that underwent expansion triggered by Germanic open syllable lengthening. Those manuscripts making use of the Tiberian sublinear vowel graphemes, but exhibiting confusion in their distribution revealing an underlying five vowel Palestinian type pronunciation are known in the field as “Palestinian-Tiberian” manuscripts (Allony 1964). It is rather difficult to accept M. Weinreich’s “Babylonian Renaissance”, a scenario whereby Babylonian teachers brought Tiberian (i.e. northern Palestinian) vowels to medieval German Jews leading to their abandoning their erstwhile five vowel (i.e. southern Palestinian) system and shifting to the later known Ashkenazic system as a conscious normative effort (1954: 93–99; 1973, II: 31–32).

It is liturgical manuscripts that display the most interesting deviations from Tiberian standards. Biblical texts tend to be well normalized divulging little of the phonology of the *pointer*, the specialist scribe who inserted the vowel diacritics and who may or may not be the scribe of the letters *per se* in a given case. The meticulous modern scholars who have studied these documents have done so from the viewpoints of codicology and the history of Hebrew pointing rather than phonology *per se*. Moreover, such phonological interests as they have had have been from the perspective of the history of Hebrew vocalization systems, over a millennium after the demise of ancient Hebrew as a vernacular. The following methodological guidelines for the study of medieval Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts are proposed for the elucidation of historical *Yiddish* phonology, and it is hoped they may in some degree be useful for Hebrew phonology as well; far more can be learned about Hebrew and Aramaic liturgical pronunciation in the context of the phonological system of the readers’ everyday phonologies in their roles as speakers of their everyday vernacular than in the context of scribal pointing variants *per se*.

(1) GRAPHEMIC VS PHONOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE. It is vital that instances of nonstandard vowel pointing resulting from variant pointing tradition or just plain ignorance of the prestigious Tiberian norm not be bunched together with instances truly signifying phonological features. With no claim being made for complete accuracy, it is proposed that all features can be affixed to a scale ranging from clearly insignificant (e.g. the graphic variants of *gameš*—whether its vertical portion is a bar or a dot) to probably insignificant (e.g. confusion between ‘ultrashort’ *ǎ*, *ě* and *ǔ* and their ‘just plain short’ counterparts—*a*, *e* and *o*), to clearly significant (e.g. confusion between *a* and *ā*, and between *e* and *ē*, which points to a five vowel Palestinian type system). Classification of a manuscript on



phonological grounds should generally be limited to those criteria demonstrably phonological.

(2) **STRUCTURAL COMPATIBILITY WITH THE SEMITIC COMPONENT.** It was U. Weinreich (1958a) who unmasked "Chancery Yiddish" (the heavily Hebraicized Yiddish of certain communal documents) on the grounds that the Hebrew elements therein do not jibe with the known and universal fusion formulas whereby Germanic and Semitic are joined in Yiddish, and that numerous constraints (e.g. against the conjunction 'and' being other than Germanic) are violated. All the more must the student of medieval central European Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts be aware of this constraint. A deviation in pointing in an obscure inflection may represent nothing more than grammatical ignorance on the part of the pointer. If however, we find, say, that a simple noun adhering to a common nominal paradigm attested throughout Yiddish is pointed in a deviant manner, we will have discovered something of the pointer's phonology.

(3) **LEXICAL COMPATIBILITY WITH THE SEMITIC COMPONENT.** Carrying caution a stage further, one would limit the investigation of the manuscript to lexical items known beyond doubt to be extant in Yiddish. By thus restricting investigation of a liturgical nonspoken language on the basis of the evidence provided by cognates in an everyday spoken language, results are further desirably confined to the phonological systems of speakers rather than the normative aspirations of pointers.

(4) **ISOLATION OF THE CONDITIONING ENVIRONMENT.** Whenever a form deviating from the Tiberian (or any other) norm is discovered, its phonetic environment must be isolated just as in fieldwork with speakers.

(5) **CORRELATION WITH NON-PHONOLOGICAL EVIDENCE.** Following upon all the above, classifications of manuscripts would be correlated with non-phonological data. The two most important areas are codicology—to determine if the ordering and variants of prayer texts reveal their period and provenance, and paleography—to determine the degree to which the writing can elucidate these.

## VI. Western vs eastern Proto Ashkenaz

The Jewish civilization of central (and later, eastern) Europe that has come to be known as Ashkenaz was in its earliest phases, beginning around a thousand years ago, divided into two distinct cultural centres. The best known is the Rhineland, centred upon the three communities of Speyer, Worms and Mainz, known by the acronym *Shum*, after the first letters of their Jewish names. That is the Rhineland territory then known as either *Rinus* (i.e. Rhine, Rhineland) or *Loter* (after Lotharingia) where Rabeynu Gershom, whose best known edict forbade polygamy, lived and worked (see Finkelstein 1924: 111–138). Gershom's role in breaking European Jewry away from the Orient, and in the founding of Ashkenaz has been splendidly analyzed by M. Weinreich in a framework of cultural history (1951; 1964).

Now, it is no diminution of the status of Loter in the formation of Ashkenazic Jewish culture to claim, as we do, that the language we know as YIDDISH, in all its geographic and temporal variation, simply does not derive from Loter. The Germanic based language spoken by Rhineland Jewry that *could have* become Yiddish, but didn't, was, quite simply, lost, though not without a trace—proper names and a few relic forms survive as borrowings into the Germanic based language of Jews of a more easterly territory that spread throughout the lands that came to be subsumed by Ashkenaz, including, of course the Rhineland itself,



and that language known to us via its many later incarnations, is Yiddish. The evidence is overwhelming. As King (1979: 7–8) puts it, “Yiddish bears hardly any trace of having been derived from or influenced by a dialect from the western part of Germany, i.e. by the Rhineland” and “No linguist, using the evidence of Yiddish and German dialects [. . .] would arrive at the conclusion that the Rhineland is the cradle of Yiddish”. Indeed, the debate within the Germanist camp is between those who find East Central German features of paramount importance (Gerzon 1902: 131) and those who find more congruence with Bavarian (Mieses 1924: 270; King 1979). Bin-Nun (1973: 77–85) and Birnbaum (1979: 71–76) tend to support synthesis of both. But to the point here is that nobody has found points of congruence with Rhineland dialects of German, and the Rhineland family trees of Yiddish seem to derive at least in part from the noble but historically invalid method of adopting a wished-for pedigree.

It is the second area of early Jewish settlement upon the territory that was to become Ashkenaz that lies on territory coterritorial or contiguous with German dialects that are the serious candidates for being donors to the Germanic Component in Yiddish—the Jewish cultural area known as *Peyhem* (/péjħəm/ ‘Bohemia’) or *Estraykh* (‘Austria’), names that like so many in Jewish history became divorced from the narrower geographic sense of their etymons and acquired significance as cultural configurations. A word on the self definition of each Jewish area in the Middle Ages is necessary. Among the most salient conscious differences between Jewish cultural areas are those expressed in the applicable local *mínheg* ‘custom, tradition’ or *núsekh* ‘version’ of the exact texts used and the internal ordering of those texts within the daily and festival prayerbooks. Bearing in mind the frequency (thrice daily) of the prayers and the ultimate sanctity they assume within the cultural framework of the analyzed society—and that is at the end of the day the framework that matters—it is hardly surprising that the most minute difference could help identify an individual’s communal, ergo geographical homeland and, crucially, that *mínheg* and *núsekh* would be pivotal factors in the cultural self identification of a community and its perceptions of other communities outside. The modern historian of Yiddish must fit the known language divisions into the puzzle. And in the international cultural differentiation within earliest Ashkenaz (that term being applied in part retrospectively), the great Jewish centres situated in the general vicinity of the Danube—Regensburg, Nürnberg and Rothenburg—were all part of the *Eastern* rite—*Peyhem* or *Estraykh*—although they were in later centuries realligned and linked to the Western rite, when both stood in contradistinction to the *new* Eastern rite of eastern Europe—*Poyln* (‘Poland’). But it is the primeval state that is relevant to the matters at hand, and in that state, Regensburg, Nürnberg and Rothenburg are unambiguously part of the early Eastern rite, as opposed to the Rinus/Loter based Western rite of the Rhineland (cf. Goldshmid 1970: 14). Regensburg housed the oldest Jewish quarter on German speaking soil (cf. Aronius 1902: 139–142; Brann *et al.* 1963: 285–305; Wasserman 1972), and settlement in Nürnberg and Rothenburg was scarcely younger. Now it is true that this earliest Eastern rite did not at the very outset boast the same calibre of Talmudic (ergo cultural) luminaries as Rinus/Loter but it was not long before the Danube centre—the Eastern Ashkenaz of those days—caught up. In the thirteenth century the Maharam of Rothenburg (Meyer ben Borukh) was acknowledged by all Ashkenazim as the outstanding rabbinic authority of the generation.

## VII. The proto dialectology of Ashkenaz

Two hanging threads remain. First—Yiddish, a language bearing no intimate affinity



with German dialects of the medieval Jewish Rhineland centre. Second—a large corpus of medieval Hebrew and Aramaic liturgical manuscripts that betray a five vowel system similar to that of the Palestinian system of vocalization, the medieval French Jewish cultural area and the Sephardic tradition, but nothing suggestive of Yiddish. The obvious answer is that those pointers of these manuscripts who were Ashkenazim at all were Loterians, Rhineland westerners who spoke a Germanic based language in the western dialect regions of earliest Ashkenaz, whose Hebrew and Aramaic reading tradition and vernacular Semitic Component were in fact characterized by a five vowel system.

There are three corroborative proofs, one circumstantial, one correlative and one definitive. Circumstantially, the open syllabic congruence of the vowel system of the Proto Semitic Component with the norm—the classical Tiberian system—renders all those manuscripts exhibiting a Tiberian type system elusive. They can equally represent the work of a pointer trained in Tiberian and that of a Danube region resident and they therefore sadly fail to pinpoint “Danube” in the way the five vowel pointers leave their “Rhine” trademark on everything they touch. Every traditional Yiddish speaker knows when to apply long vowels in closed syllables in Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic based inter alia on his knowledge of their nonneutralized allomorphs in open syllables in the Semitic Component of his everyday Yiddish; hence, for example, any nonsecularized MEY speaker who has *šéd* ‘ghost’, *sód* ‘secret’ and *klál* ‘rule’ in his everyday Yiddish will know, with the barest minimum of traditional education, that their Ashkenazic Hebrew forms are, in his dialect, *šájd*, *sójd*, and *klól* (the history of the anomaly of this last case, shortening of 12 to 41 in the Ashkenazic of the dialect rather than to 11 as in its Yiddish, is outside the scope of the present paper). And that knowledge derives largely from his native Yiddish where the open syllabic allomorphs, *šájdəm* ‘ghosts’, *sójdəs* ‘secrets’ and *klóləm* ‘rules’ serve to apprise him of the underlying forms which turn up on the whole as the surface forms in the liturgical language. The moral of the story is that the Danube region pointer had vastly less difficulty in mastering Tiberian pointing than his five vowel Rhineland counterpart, because Tiberian phonology matched his own to a great extent, and it is therefore no wonder that most Danube manuscripts betray little that is interesting in the way of deviations from Tiberian norms.

A very different tale is told by the manuscripts exhibiting promiscuous confounding of vowels, nearly all of which, even when reexamined as per the principles proposed above in §V, show the Yalon school to be correct in its assessment. Thus, for example, British Library Add 27205 has *panim* (p 41b) for *pānīm* ‘face’ (pathaḥ for qameṣ). Munich MS Heb 617/Staatsbibliothek 21 has *ḥēseḏ* (p 126a) for *ḥéseḏ* ‘righteousness’ (šere for segol); my sincere thanks to Mr Hermann Süß for kindly arranging for a swift microfilming of the MS. The famed *Vormzer makhzor*, the 1272 Worms makhzor (festival prayerbook) containing the oldest known purportedly Yiddish sentence (cf. M. Weinreich 1963), is no different, exhibiting forms such as *bəraxa* (p 97b, after Bet-Arye 1965: 35) for *bəṛāxā* ‘blessing’ (pathaḥ for qameṣ twice). I for one am convinced that no Yiddish speaker, proto or otherwise, could have penned any of these diacritics because the relevant oppositions in open syllabic position — pathaḥ || Pan Yiddish vowel 11 vs qameṣ || 12, and segol || 25 vs šere || 22 — are valid in all Yiddish dialects, and these three lexical items happen to have 12, 25 and 12 respectively, hence SWY *pōnəm*, *xēsəd*, *brōxə* || MWY *pōnəm*/*pūnəm*, *xēsəd*/*xīsəd*, *brōxə*/*brūxə* || NWY *pōnəm*, *xēsəd*, *brōxə* || SEY, MEY *púnəm*, *xéjsəd*, *brúxə* || NEY *pónəm*, *xésəd*, *bróxə*.



Correlatively, the researcher is fortunate to have substantial evidence from contemporary comments on *bney khes* and *bney hes*. The *bney khes* were the Danube region Jews who realized Tiberian  $\text{ḥet} = [\text{h}]$  consonantly, possibly as voiceless velar spirant  $[\text{x}]$  while the *bney hes*, the Rhinelanders, couldn't, and merged it with  $[\text{h}]$  or lost it altogether. It is not often that rabbinic talent was turned toward phonology and the motives relate to pronunciation norms of sacred texts. M. Weinreich (1958) brilliantly collated the available evidence and produced a schematic map showing which western cities are documented *hes* territory, and which eastern ones are in *khes* country. Now the incontrovertible fact is that  $[\text{x}]$  appears in all its historical positions in all the components of Yiddish and in all the dialects of Yiddish. As happens not infrequently in Yiddish historical linguistics, it becomes fashionable to cite exceptional cases to no end (e.g. *mékḥ* 'erase' cf. the Hebrew root *mḥq*) and ignore the overwhelmingly applicable generalization. It is a cornerstone of linguistic methodology that a feature found in every known period and every known variety of a language was probably there all along, unless proof exists to the contrary. In this case as in many others, Weinreich (1958: 108) invoked his "Babylonian Renaissance" to account for the later "reintroduction" of  $\text{x}$ . It is fascinating for the history of Yiddish linguistics that a giant of Weinreich's stature ignored his own substantial findings both in German dialectology and the medieval rabbinic *khes-hes* evidence in adhering tenaciously to the Loter theory, at the expense of explaining away yet another problem via Babylonia. At the same time, it is a tribute both to Weinreich's thoroughness in assembling data and his genius at structuring data into coherent conceptual systems that his findings can often be used as forcefully to argue against his own theses as for them.

Definitive proof can only derive from a manuscript matching the system arrived at via reconstruction. One has thus far been examined that corroborates the proto vocalism proposed for the Semitic Component in Yiddish (Katz 1977; 1979: 54–76; 1982: 294–311; cf. above §III). It is Oxford Mich 617/627, a festival prayerbook completed in 1258 by one Yehude ben Shmuel Zlatman (Zeltman?). This MS, analyzed according to the principles proposed in §V above, yields the predicted Proto Yiddish phonological configuration. Confusion of  $\text{ṣere}$  with  $\text{segol}$  and of  $\text{qameṣ}$  with  $\text{pathaḥ}$  is limited to closed syllabic position, hence *ješ* (p 10b) for *ḡeš* 'there is' ( $\text{segol}$  for  $\text{ṣere}$ ), *kəlal* (p. 54a) for *kəḷāl* 'generality, rule' ( $\text{pathaḥ}$  for  $\text{qameṣ}$ ), etc. In open syllables, pointing follows Tiberian norms, hence *bəhēmō* (p 19b) 'animal', *ḥōxōm* (p 25a) 'wise man'. Most significantly, the Oxford MS exhibits systematic morphophonemic alternation conditioned by the syllable boundary. In a number of cases alternation is cognate with Pan Yiddish alternation, e.g. *šəvōḥō* 'praise (Aramaic determinate form)' (p 115a) ~ *šəvāḥ* (absolute), cf. SWY *švōxəm* 'praises' ~ sg. *švāx* || MWY *švōxəm/švūxəm* ~ *švāx* || NWY *švōxəm* ~ *švāx* || SEY *švūxəm* ~ *švāx* || MEY *švūxəm* ~ *švāx* || NEY *švōxim* ~ *švāx*. In other instances, would be Yiddish alternation has been obliterated by Stress Shift (from ultimate to penultimate) and ensuing Posttonic Reduction, both under Germanic impact. All the more illuminating to learn from the MS that final Semitic Component syllables (later processed by Stress Shift and Reduction) once underwent alternation in earliest Ashkenaz, just as nonreduced vowels meeting the structural description of Closed Syllable Shortening do today. Hence, *gannōvim* 'thieves' (p 109a) ~ sg. *gannav* (p 105a), an alternation lost in the modern language where the final syllable is processed by Posttonic Reduction, giving Pan Yiddish *gānəv*. The pointer of Yehude ben Shmuel Zlatman's prayerbook hails from the Danube regions, congruent with the eastern dialect region of earliest Ashkenaz, whence Yiddish derives. Although there isn't a single explicitly "Yiddish" word in the entire work, it may have more to say about earliest Yiddish than the renowned 1272 sentence in the Worms makhzor.



It has become customary, in the tradition of Max Weinreich, to seek out a "symbolic founder" of a Jewish cultural area. In the rise of the easterly regions of Old Ashkenaz, centred in Regensburg and its environs in the Danube Basin, it was Yehude Khosid (Yehuda Hehasid), also known as Rabbi Yehude of Regensburg (c. 1150–1217), who was the central figure in the far reaching ethical and mystical *Khasidey Ashkenaz* movement and the principal author of its key work, the *Seyfer khasidim* (see Dan 1968). Like the Maharam of Rothenburg after him, Yehude Khosid, too, was a native of the Rhineland who moved eastward and became a beloved leader in the Danube centre. The edicts attributed to Yehude Khosid frankly had less impact on Jewish history than Gershom's in Loter. The most famous forbid an author to sign his name to a book, and a man from marrying a woman who has the same name as his mother.

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