The Nation State and the Promised Land

Translator's Commentary

by David R. Forman

The English translaion of *Medines Yisroel un Erets Yisroel* was first published on the internet, as a series of blog posts, from January through March, 2024. This document contains the posts that were uploaded to that blog, in addition to the text of the book itself. They contain additional clarifications, notes on context, and reflections from the translator.

Preface: About the Book

From his three-month-long stay in Israel in 1949, American Yiddish writer Solomon Simon reports on the experiences and attitudes of ordinary Jewish people, recounting conversations with schoolchildren, a falafel vendor, police officers and soldiers, young kibbutzniks, a bookseller and an Orthodox man, strolling on the street with his son on Shabbes. Their voices come alive across languages and decades as they speak about their sacrifices, about their euphoria at having just won independence, about the satisfactions and frustrations of their lives, about their fears and, above all, their hopes for themselves and for their new nation.

Simon had an unusual attitude towards Israel, a deeply ambivalent one, and one that ultimately made him few friends, whether among Israel's supporters or its opponents. Of course, the Israel described in the book is very different than the Israel of today. Neither is Jewish America what it was-- the absence of a Yiddish readership is one obvious sign of that. But the relationship between Israel and the diaspora is a burning topic, never more so than now. Solomon Simon's take on that relationship in 1949, with his combined love of the people and the land and his critical truth-telling about the moral sacrifices inherent in its establishment as a nation state, is surprisingly relevant for our understanding today.

Reviews from 1950

Here are some reactions to the book ***Medines Yisroel un Erets Yisroel*** from Yiddish language writers and critics at the time:

"Simon's book, Medines Yisroel un Erets Yisroel is a true colorful kaleidoscope of encounters. Few observations of nature, but many of humans. His meetings with children are particularly important. ***Though a travel book, it reads like a novel.***" --Melekh Ravitch.

"***Shloyme Simon is a writer with c****haracter*. His book, M.Y. un E.Y. is not merely a collection of articles gathered between covers, but clearly and distinctly a serious, well thought-out book from a thoughtful man. He searches for the sublime that he found in the Torah and Talmud and the clarity of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature." --Shmuel Rozhansky

"It's a good book, a charming. In it are joy and concern, piety and doubt… In short, it is one of the best travel books about the State of Israel that I have had occasion to read." -- Der Lebediker (Khayim Gutman)

"The virtue of Dr. Shloime Simon's book, is that over the course of a short three months he was in the country, the author almost exclusively spent time, as he said, with the people, with the actual builders of the country. With the ordinary people, not the authorities and government people… I would like this book—whose writing is ***lively, intelligent, and with deep understanding*****,** to be called 'The Confession of a Diasporist.'" -- Aaron Zeitlin

"*I have no words to express how accurately, deeply and comprehensively you have seen Israel.*" -- M. Tsanin, the *Forverts*' Israel correspondent.

In Serial Installments

The book ***Medines Yisroel un Erets Yisroel*** was first published in installments, in the Buenos Aires newspaper *Di Prese*. The first installment appeared on December 31, 1949, and the last on August 16th of 1950. Given our world today, I promise not to take 8 months to share the translation from beginning to the end. The ending of the newspaper version appears to be noticeably different from that of the book. At some point, I'll try to take a look at what he changed, and why. But first things first.

ערעזיסראָעל אָדער
מעדינאם אוסראָעל

איז דער טיטל פון א סעריע פרעכטיקע רעפּאָרטאַזשן
פון איצטיקן פּאָלקס לעבן אין מעדינאם אוסראָעל, גע-
שריבן פון באַקאַנטן שרייבער

שלוימע סיסאָן

וועלכע מיר הויבן אָן דרוקן איבערמאָרגן שאבעס

אין „די פרעסע"

This announcement appeared on December 29, 1949. I found the clipping among Simon's papers in the Yivo archives, pasted into one of his journals. The spelling is phonetic-- even the spelling of Simon's first name has been changed from שלמה to שלוימע. The announcement reads: "The Land of Israel or the State of Israel..."

That order will be flipped in the book title, but even more importantly, the 'or' will be changed to an 'and'. That is, "The State of Israel **and** the Land of Israel." He will be writing about both, without prejudging (or tipping his hand?) in the title as to whether he takes these two concepts to be mutually exclusive.

"...is the title of a series of splendid reports of the current folk life in the State of Israel, written by the well-known writer Solomon Simon, which we begin printing the day after tomorrow in Di Prese. And here is how the first words of his introduction appeared:

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12/31/49

ערעציסראעל אדער מעדינאם איסראעל

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פון שלוימע סימאן

(ספעציעל פאר „די פרעסע")

אריינפיר

עקאנאמישע שוועריקייטן. די גרויסע פיין פון די נייע אויליִם, אומאראלישע אויפירונגען, פארברעכנס, שווארצער מארק — דאס זיינען בלויז די כעוולי־ליידע פון א יונגער מדינה. איסראעל איז איבערגעקומען גיעסערע שוועריקייטן און ארויס געשטאלט. בא מיר איז וויכטיק דער עצם גאנג פון דער מדינה. קען מדינאם איסראעל לייזן די אויש פראגע און די אידן־פראגע? דישע איז איצטיקע מדינה א פארזוצונג. פון אידישער געשיכטע אדער א מאטאלער איבערבריך מיט אי־דישן אוועך און אידישן גאנג אין דער וועלט? וואס איז די באציונג פון מדינאם איסראעל צום גאלעם? ווי נעמט אויף אן אמעריקאנער איד אט די געשעעניש און דעם גרויסן אויפבוי פון דעם אישעוו?

איך וועל פראווין געבן אן ענטפער אף די פראגעם. איך וועל פראווין געבן דעם ענטפער נישט מיט בקירעם און מיינונגען, נאר קינדער. איך האב פארבראכט טעג אין די באטע־אויליִם; איך האב זיך אפגעשטעלט אף די שפיל־פלעצער פון די קינדער; אוונטן גאנצע האב איך אפגעגעבן, געזעסן רואיק און צוגעקוקט זיך צו די „פעולות" (אונטערנעמונגען), צו די קומזיצן (פארטיס) פון דער יוגנט. איך האב באזוכט צענדליקער חייזער פון מאשוועניקעם, פון פאשעטע אידן פון די שטעט, שטעטלעך און דערפער פון איסראעל.

איך האב אפט געפרעגט נישט קיין זיי ער טאקטישע פראגעם. נאר אפטער בין איך צוגעשטאנען צו מענטשן און האב זיי אויסגעפרעגט וועגן די אומוויכטיקסטע קליניקייטן און פערזענלעכסטע געלעגנהייטן. נישט זעלטן בין איך געווען ברוטאל אפגהארציק און זיער נישט מיסע־גאסט מיט מיינע קריטישע באמערקונגען. איך האב עם געטון נישט קעדיי עמעצן ווייטצוטון, נאר פאשעט וויל איך האב געוואלט זען און הערן די רעאקציע פון די טאג־טעגלעכע פארהאלטעט מענטשן צו מיינע מיינונגען.

זעלטן איז מען געווען צו מיר ניט העפלעך. קיינמאל האט מען מיך ניט

עלף וואכן און דריי טעג האב איך פארבראכט אין מדינאם איסראעל. איך האב נישט באזוכט די קנעסטע. איך האב זיך נישט געזען מיט קיין מיניסטארן, רעדאקטארן פון גרויסע ציטונגען און ביכלאל מיט אפיציעלע פערזענלעכקייטן. געצויגן מאל האב איך פארבראכט מיט יונגעלייט, וואס פארנעמען וויכטיקע פאסטנס אין דער רעגירונג. אבער די יונגע לייט זיינען נישט באוואוסט דעם ברייטן אויפעם. איך האב זיך געטראפן מיט זיי נישט אין זייערע ביורא׳ס, נאר בא מיינע כאווירים אין די היזער, וואו איך האב געזען און געשלאפן. די יונגעלייט זיינען געווען די קינדער אדער איידעמס פון מיינע כאווירים.

איך האב זיך נישט געזען מיט די גרויסע סראעם נישט וויל איך האב נישט געהאט די געלעגנהייט. צוויי מאל, נישט געבעטענערהייט, האב איך געקראגן אייגלאדונגען. אפילע איינער פון די מיניסטארן האט מיך איינגעלאדן צו באזוכן אים אין הויז. מיין פרוי האט זייער געוואלט זען ווי א אידישער מינים־

Orientation to the Blog, Chapters 1 & 2

This site's posts are divided into two kinds of content. The Main content is the text of Solomon Simon's book ***Medines Yisroel un Erets Yisroel***, translated into English as "The Nation State and the Promised Land: An American Yiddish Writer in Israel, 1949." Each English chapter is accompanied by a pdf of the corresponding pages of the Yiddish original, published by Undzer Bukh (Buenos Aires, Argentina), in 1950.

The other kind of content will by my personal observations regarding the text, or information about the author and/or his other work that could be useful in understanding the book in context. Occasionally, I might comment about the translation process. Notes with simple clarifications about the meaning of specific words or phrases are included in the chapters themselves.

In my commentary, I will not be writing about contemporary Israel and Palestine. I will say that I am devoting my time and effort to this project at this time because I believe that Solomon Simon's observations and perspective are interesting and relevant now. The war in Gaza has led many American Jews to rethink one or more of a set of fundamental issues, including the nature and meaning of the State of Israel for Jews in the diaspora, antisemitism's causes and our responses to it, and others. This trip back to 1949 could provide something the daily news reports do not, in support of those reflections.

Why Two Chapters at Once?

The first two chapters do very different things. Chapter 1 positions the author as a reverent secular Jew, a space occupied by very few people of his time. Simon never fully rejected the tradition in which he was raised. He retained his admiration for the textual tradition and the ethical teachings, and searched for some formulation which could create a synthesis between the old ways and our modern understanding of the world. It may be a useful reminder that political Zionism was a secular movement and that the nation was founded largely by socialist and other avowedly secular Jews. In that era, Simon was more afraid the wholesale rejection of Jewish religion than of he was of Orthodoxy, whose future strength he could not foresee. Chapter 1 also reflects the astonishment nearly all Jews felt at that historical moment, which saw the return of the state after two millenia, hard upon the worst tragedy in Jewish history.

Chapter 2 immediately plunges you into some of the core subject matter of the book. The voices of children reflect the Israeli Jewish mindset of the time with its joy, warm solidarity, and arrogance. Here you see how the author will be telling the story of his trip. I am grateful to my friend Itamar who gave me the correct name for it. The book is not primarily a travelogue or a history but an ethnography (with a little polemic thrown in at the end). Chapter 2 also introduces us to the author's sharp eye, love of language, and sense of humor. Enjoy!

Comment on Chapter 5

I did not comment on Chapters 3 and 4. There are two reasons. First, Solomon Simon (may his memory be a blessing) was not a man to keep his mouth shut. And yet, he let his hosts go on and on in Chapter 3, while he just listens. His amazement, and also his fear that Israel represented a rupture in Jewish history and in Jewish life, would best be conveyed by letting the facts, and the Israelis, speak for themselves. Similarly, the book can speak for itself without explanation, qualification or interpretation here. Elsewhere, a little context might help the reader, but here it's not necessary.

The second reason is that revising this translation is far more work than I thought it would be. I finished the earlier draft of the book over five years ago, and it turns out my Yiddish is better now than it was then. So, this is a thorough revision that does not leave over as much time as I thought it would to take you through all the nooks and crannies.

There are also plenty of conversations one might have outside the frame of the book. For example, there's actually a story about a coincidental link from Chapter 4 to my own life. There are delightful bits of language worth pointing out, or particular challenges to the translator. I do hope eventually to bring in at least a little of that. But fear not, you can always just read the chapters themselves.

After the heaviness of Chapters 3 and 4, Chapter 5 comes as something of a relief. It starts out like a more conventional travelogue, with complaints about the infrastructure and the prices and even accounts of annoying (sometimes downright rude) fellow tourists. Of course as he goes on there is more. He describes how the land itself seems infused with the events recounted in the Torah from thousands of years before. He brings in a character to introduce the problem of Yiddish, about which more will be said and written later. The recent war is everywhere, along with his concerns about how deeply a militaristic culture is being planted. But what stuck with me about chapter five was what the author makes of Abraham and the well and the Tamarisk trees.

"But now here was Abraham, alone, and I asked him:

“Father Abraham, did you not long for Babylon, for your father and for Ur-Kashdim? Your brothers and sisters were still there. You had planted trees there, too. Here, you had to fight with Abimelech and do battle with kings. You had seen God there too, hadn’t you?! Father Abraham, how could home be there and here?”

In this brief but remarkable passage, Simon identifies Abraham as a fellow exile, a man who had left the home of his childhood to make his way elsewhere. "Your brothers and sisters were still there." Simon, too, had left most of his siblings behind in Russia when he immigrated to the U.S. "You had seen God there, too." How, asks Simon, do you forsake one home for another, and how do you make your new home truly home? Especially when you have to fight an army to live in the new place.

Leaving aside the fantasy element of this literary device, why pose this question to Abraham, the founder of the tribe and the grandfather of Israel, whom God had ordered out of his home in order to wander in the land promised to his descendants? The answer, one would think, is evident. God told him to. But that may be the author's point. There are more than enough Israelis today, in 2024, who will tell you that God promised all of "greater Israel" to the Jews. But when Simon wrote his book, that was actually not the case. Zionism was a secular movement. The country was not founded by religious people. And, even if it had been, the God of contemporary religious people is not located in or confined to a particular place – not on top of a fiery mountain and not in any particular geographical feature or country.

Abraham's answer is, effectively, that of course it's hard and of course there are always questions about whether you are doing the right thing, but you have to find a way to live somewhere...

Comments on Chapter 6

Just a few comments about Chapter 6. First, I am not only Solomon Simon's translator, but also his grandson. But it follows that I am also his wife's grandson, and I want to put in a word here on her behalf. In the scene in Mea Shearim, the author uses Lena Simon as a foil to demonstrate his more broad-minded acceptance of their very-observant fellow Jews, and for comic relief. In 1949, it was acceptable and even expected to depict women as "practically hysterical" when they expressed strong feelings. He does not apply the same epithet to himself when he becomes distressed, for example, about land being left untilled. Lena was a brilliant woman, with her own ideas and opinions and often little outlet for them. The stereotype painted here is the more unjust for his barely having mentioned her up to now. Without waving it away, I would ask younger readers in particular to keep the historical time in mind.

Second, the photo from Mea Shearim doesn't precisely match the text. The boys in the photo do not look seven years old to me. They are also joined in the picture by an older boy who is not dressed in a Haredi style. Perhaps he is the son of the shopkeeper who helped set up the photo? There seems to be some poetic license at play. Also, in the narrative, Simon takes the photo in the first person.

The other photos accompanying the text so far were taken by Miriam Forman, who in mid-Tamuz, 1949, was about two weeks shy of her 13th birthday. Simon's daughter (and the translator's mother), she may have run out of film early in the trip, or else she may have left the camera at her aunt and uncle's when they traveled North. For whatever reason, after this photo there are not many more.

Third, it may be useful to underscore one element of the conversation with a bystander that began near the Jaffa Gate. "It seems that you are an observant Jew, so how can you agree with the Etzelniks?" He automatically associates tradition and frumkayt (piety or strict observance) with pacifism. Or, if not out-and-out pacifism, with an extreme and principled reluctance to use force.

There was an event in Simon's childhood that made such a powerful impact on him that he wrote the story of it at least three times: In the book *Amolike Yidn*, in the first volume of his memoirs, titled *Vortslen* ("My Jewish Roots" in the English version), and again in the children's magazine, *Kinder Zhurnal*. Simon grew up in a family of eight children. His father was a shoemaker, whose 'specialty' was work boots, which he made so well they never had to be replaced and so slowly that he never made any money. At the outset of the Russo-Japanese War, boots were in such high demand in the Russian Empire that the price for them multiplied by many times. However, despite the family's desperate poverty, his father Yeruchem Bentsion refused to make boots for the war effort. Someone, he said, had to be the first to take a stand.

Unlike most secular Jews of his generation, Solomon Simon did not resent but was proud of his traditional upbringing and Yeshiva education. Like most secular Jews of his generation, he assumed that the dramatic trends in his lifetime towards liberalism and away from fundamentalism would continue. Because they were a small (and shrinking) proportion of the Jewish population, he did not see 'Ultra-Orthodox' Jews (the term 'Haredi' was not in use then) as

a potential threat to his values. Rather, it was the secular Zionists, who wanted Israel to be a country like other countries and for the Jews to be a nation like other nations, whom he saw as a potential threat to the uniqueness of Yiddishkayt as a way of life.

Comment: On a Pair of Hebrew Words in Yiddish

Throughout the book[1], Solomon Simon uses Hebrew in two different ways. The first is when he quotes the Jewish source texts: Torah, the Prophets, the Writings, Talmud or the Medieval commentaries. Sometimes he quotes these sources in his own Yiddish translation. But in many cases, he cites the original Hebrew followed by the Yiddish.

The second way he uses Hebrew is to transmit his fascination with Israeli Hebrew. Elsewhere, he argued for retention of Yiddish in daily life. He also suggested that, in American Jewish education, children should be taught not Modern Hebrew, but Loshn-Koydesh (the Holy Tongue) in it's traditional form – that is, Biblical Hebrew with the Ashknazi pronunciation. *Ivrit* (Modern Hebrew) as a living language was destined to evolve over time with daily use. This, he argued, would cause a gulf between Israelis and traditional Jews in the diaspora, as well as a gulf between the present and the past. Instead of being a unifier, Hebrew would divide Jews from Jews.

Be that as it may, he spent a fair bit of ink educating his American Yiddish readership about all the new words that he was encountering: "ma yesh", "yofi", "beshutef v'bshetef", "tserif", "shuk", "pkidim", "nehag", and on and on. For all his complaints, it was clear he was enjoying learning and sharing the new words and that they added to the excitement of the new, rapidly-developing culture, an excitement he could not help but be caught up in at least to some extent.

There is a third kind of Hebrew that appears in the book. By this I refer neither to scripture nor to modern coinages, but to the Hebrew words that organically made their way into the Yiddish language over the centuries in which European Jews had learned both languages. The words sometimes retain their source meanings, but also sometimes evolve in their use over time. A familiar example is the Yiddish word for holiday, 'yontef' (spelled yom-tov, יום־טוב), which originates from the Hebrew words yom (day) and tov (good), even though the Hebrew word for holiday is 'khag'.

In Chapter 7, in Simon's heated conversation with the bus driver, two such Hebrew-origin Yiddish words struck me as worth pointing out. One is ***Yoven*** (plural, *Yevonim*). "A Yoven," says Simon, "is a uniformed murderer." The word Yoven, in Hebrew, literally means, 'Greek'. It can still mean that in Yiddish but, according to my dictionary, it is more often used to mean a Ukranian or Russian policeman or soldier, and, by extension, 'a ruffian.'

Why would the word for Greek evolve, in Eastern Europe, to mean a brute, and particularly a uniformed one? After all, since the fall of Alexander's empire we had also been bullied by the Romans, the Germans, the Spanish, the English, and on and on. The Greeks hadn't particularly bothered us since Judah Maccabee hit them back. The reason, simply enough, is that the word 'Yoven' sounds like 'Ivan'. So, Simon, who grew up in Imperial Russia, was being particularly blunt in tagging Israel's military heroes with that word. When you glorify those who put on a uniform, he implied, you become "them".

I have already included an explanatory footnote to that same conversation about another Hebraism that has morphed in its meaning over time. The driver says, "For me, it's no privilege

to be an ***ato bekhartonunik,*** chosen by God to be slaughtered." The dictionary gives the definitions, "A Jewish chauvanist" or an "aristocrat" (used ironically). Imported into Yiddish from the Hebrew, "You have chosen us". The driver's pointed choice of words accomplishes at least two things. First, he points to the indisputable historical fact that God did not and will not watch over us and keep us safe from physical harm.

Second, by calling Simon a "Thou-hast-chosen-us guy", he was charging him with elitism, a charge that must have hit home. In fact, Simon did think the Jews were better than other people. Not inherently better, but in the combination of not having state power and instead having the rule system of the Talmud (and the faith to center it in their day-to-day lives), the Jews had worked out a way to live that was at a higher ethical and spiritual level than the surrounding people. Never mind that Simon himself did not follow the prescriptions of Halachah in his own day-to-day activity. He had been formed by that way of life, and was trying to work out a way of continuing it in some form or else creating an analog. That was what was at stake for him in the Zionist claim that only by being like everyone else could the Jews be secure in their lives.

Though we are less than half way through, Chapter 7 is one of the pivot points of the book. It gives a distilled version of one tension inherent in Israel-diaspora relations. Are we, in America, able to afford being holier-than-thou only because, for the moment, being slaughtered is not on the agenda? Or are the Jews in Israel trading our distinctive spiritual and moral strength for physical security or, even worse, for an illusion of physical security? For me, one benefit of learning Yiddish is that – in the overlay of past persecutions with recent ones, and in the ironic juxtaposition of holiness with a hollow elitism – it feels to me as though the words themselves are calling our accumulated experiences in history as witnesses in their argument.

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1. Note: I originally intended this comment to come out shortly after Chapter 7 dropped. With the start of classes, it turns out I have a little less writing time than I thought I would, and I've fallen behind the schedule I set myself. Under the circumstances, continuing to post the translation itself takes priority and my ongoing commentary less so. However, if you, the reader, find that anything is confusing or comment-worthy, please feel free to contact me. Similarly, if those of you who are following the Yiddish find mistakes in the translation, please let me know.

Comment on Chapters 11 and 12 - Kibbutzim

Chapter 11 marks something of a shift in tone. It's true, there is more on the themes he has already been developing – his amazement at the Biblical landscape come to life, his discomfort with the Israelis' militarism, with their cavalier attitude towards the Arabs who were just displaced and with how, even now, some Israelis were actively awaiting a chance to expand their territory (as shown in a children's school project). There is continuity, too, in Simon's interest in the changes Hebrew was undergoing and his complaints about the buses.

What's new is that he is finally delving into the day-to-life of the kibbutzim.

Simon was ardently anti-communist and against violent revolution, but he was also from an extremely poor family. He came from "Bal-mlokhes" -- artisans and tradesmen. His family escutcheon was comprised of carpenters, wagoners, tailors and shoemakers all the way back. He had escaped the grinding and poor-paying labor of the rest of his family members through his gifted intellect. He was the only one of his siblings who continued his formal education in Russia past age 13 by attending Yeshivas, and when he came to America, he graduated from a combined college and dental school program and became a professional dentist. But he never lost his sympathy for and sense of identification with common working people.

In the kibbutzim, he witnessed "true democracy (both political and economic) without the whip". He was very moved. It seems to me that up to that point, he had mostly been asking which of the values he admired in traditional Jewish life were being retained and which were being discarded by the Israelis. Now there was a different feeling -- that the Israelis had created something new that could benefit the rest of the world. He had already noted his hosts' idealism (but in service of ideals that were mixed in their appeal to him), and also their willingness to sacrifice. Now he saw that energy harnessed towards something about which he had fewer qualms or no qualms at all. The ideal of equality.

He recounts visits to numerous kibbutzim of different ideologies and in different locales, not just in chapters 11 & 12, but also in the three chapters that follow, to highlight the achievements and problems of these new "model societies" for his American audience. As usual, his admiring something does not preclude him from criticizing it when he feels the need. All in all, Simon devotes nearly a third of the book to the subject.

Chapter 12 ends with another moment that struck me deeply, a vignette that I find really heartbreaking. In his conversation with a kibbutz librarian, he learns what the Zionist concept of the "negation of the diaspora," meant when it came to his own work as a Jewish children's book author. Among the books he had published for children in America, two in particular had been very successful. Shmerl Nar (The Wandering Beggar) and Di Heldn fun Khelm (The Wise Men of Helm), were grounded in European Jewish folktales but transcended their source material and created something new in Jewish children's literature[1]. Both had been translated into English and would also seem to have been perfect material to translate into Hebrew for Israeli children. The problem? Simon had too positive a view of Jewish culture in the diaspora, and of the people who embodied it. The Israelis thought that Tarzan would make a better role model.

Finally, a heads-up. There are a couple of bits in the upcoming chapters, 13 and 14, that will seem racially insensitive by current standards. The point of this project is not to idealize the author or present him as some kind of prophet. I'm against revising history through subtraction unless something is hateful. These don't qualify, but there will be a moment or two you'll be reminded that we're dealing with a man who is the product of his time, and that time was 75 ago.

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1. In the 'unbiased' opinion of the writer's grandson, who grew up on these books.

Comment on Chapter 16: The Tables Turned

In Chapter 15, Simon writes briefly about an orthodox school, and then about his visit to the Kibbutz Chofetz Chaim (a transliterated name, so spelling varies depending on whether a Yiddish or Hebrew system is being used). By coincidence, this religious kibbutz was named after the man who headed the third and last Yeshiva that Simon had attended as a teenager in Belarus, then in the Russian Empire. This was in Radin (Raduń) near the Lithuanian border.

In addition to his description of a wedding and of the infrastructure at that kibbutz, he writes about what adaptations have to be made to this new way of life. The religious Jews he was used to had all been townspeople. I'm sure the question of what to do with the milk from a cow that has been milked on Shabbes was not a burning one in his youth. Similarly, "shmite", the seventh year when the land must be left fallow, had been either a curiosity of ancient history or an abstraction.

Consistent with his views up to now, Simon sees the changes he observes as not just surface ones, but as tokens of a true transformation, even a rupture, in Jewish life. A strong, Jewish athletic teacher, or a proud military guard, who is also devoted to the Talmud was not just a curiosity, but was irreconcilable with his image of the young Talmudic scholars he had grown up with, and betokened future combinations he had never dreamed of. Simon jokes about Orthodox Jews raising race horses one day. As far as I know, that never happened, but Kibbutz Chofetz Chaim did later go on to build a water park. A strictly gender-segregated one, mind you.

Chapter 16 departs, for now, from the author's long string of kibbutz visits. He describes his visit to Holon and conversations with a close childhood friend there. I, who grew up on my grandfather's Chelm stories, was delighted to learn that his friend was named Beinush. Beinush the Policeman was the hero of a story in "More Wise Men of Helm," a book that I knew practically by heart from childhood.

This Beinush, however, is an ardent Zionist. For the first time, Simon's disquiet about Israel is now discussed in its fuller context. A restless man with a deep love for and high demands of the Jewish people, he had long been vocally unhappy with what he saw as a lack of creativity and communal commitment back home among American Jews. Simon wanted American Jews to keep the Yiddish language. He wanted the secular Yiddish schools, and the community of adults around them, to find a way of making Judaism a full way of life, not just a weekend supplement to an assimilated American way of life. To do that required a return to studying the source texts, a certain degree of separatism from the gentile population, and perhaps even a renewed Halachah, consistent with our modern understanding of the world. As it turned out, his secular Yiddish colleagues were not all that interested in what Simon wanted. In his earlier writing, he had warned that founding a state based on Zionism was not just risking a break with Jewish history, but also posed yet another threat to American Jewish society, because American Jews would look to the State of Israel both to set a cultural tone for our lives here, and to embody our hopes for the future.

And so, Beinush turns the tables on Simon. "Why haven't you established a Yiddish-speaking generation in America, which is as stubbornly determined as we are with Hebrew here?" He describes Jewish life in America as in decline, as still living off the cultural and spiritual "scraps" of a bygone way of life, and as empty. Who are American Jews to tell Israeli Jews how to live, when they can't get their own act together? His son-in-law is even more blunt. Why should Israel solve American Jewry's problems when they have their own, very different, problems? In fact, he views the differences between diaspora Judaism and Zionism as a zero-sum game: "We want to use your strength for us. It's a question of who will use whom." Remarkably, given that there were then over five times as many Jews in America as in Israel, both Beinish and his son-in-law see American Jewry not as the older, stronger, more influential community, but merely as "manure" for the growth of a new Jewish state. As we slowly declined, we would send Israel our money and our young people, and they would know what to do with them.

Simon does not argue any of these points here, but simply presents their views. I will point out that there is a deep contradiction in Beinish's argument justifying the rejection of Yiddish, even while admitting that choice went against the unity of the Jewish people. "But, first of all," he is quoted as saying, "we do believe in the unity of the Jewish people. Second, we wish to intentionally distance ourselves from everything that smacks of goles..." Yes, the Israelis welcomed all Jews and considered their country, at least in theory, the home of all Jews everywhere [How they actually treated Jewish immigrants who were "other" is outside my purview here]. But "goles" was where most Jews, including most Israeli Jews, had been raised. The price of acceptance was rejection of one's culture of origin. In America this was called "assimilation," but in Israel, "a new Jewish People."

Translator's Comment on Chapter 22, and Thanks

As a Yiddish language learner in adulthood, I originally began translating my grandfather Solomon Simon's books in order to read them. A rough translation of *Medines Yisroel and Erets Yisroel* existed at least six years ago, when I used it to apply (unsuccessfully) for a translation fellowship. I also ran the book by a publisher or two, but they were not interested. So it sat.

Then, the horrific terrorist killings and kidnappings in Israel, followed by the predictable horrific response by Israel's government and military. At Cornell, where I teach an Elementary Yiddish class, Jewish students were subjected to public, graphic death threats and my students were concerned enough that I temporarily moved our class meetings to an undisclosed location. Now there is famine in Gaza and international bodies have been urgently calling for a cease fire for months, while on the streets of Western democracies, demonstators shout, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free." One hundred hostages are still being held, if they are still alive.

I took on the task of editing (as it turned out, fully re-translating) my earlier rough effort, at first just in order to stay sane. It was my way of not dwelling on the massive, unspeakable suffering in Israel and Gaza without altogether turning away. But I also wanted to share the book with others because I saw, and still see, a kind of murderous certainty all around me, among Zionists and anti-Zionists alike. I felt that my grandfather's ambivalence could hearten those of us who do not have simple answers now.

There are many things I could attempt to highlight or clarify, but I will keep it short and sweet. I believe the challenge on the last page still rings out. If we want a different kind of Yiddishkayt, it is on us to build it here, where we live. If we want more democracy, what is the condition of our democracy here? If we want justice for the dispossessed and equality for minority citizens, what are we doing about that here? If we want a spiritually rich Judaism that is not just a holiday observance or two, tacked onto an otherwise assimilated American daily life, who is stopping us? Nor is Yiddish completely gone. And, if state power is not a satisfactory or sufficient solution to antisemitism, what are our alternative strategies?

Though he leaves us with his disquiet about American Judaism, with these big ideas and challenges, for me the greatest power of the book is not there, but in the "little people" he touts in his introduction. The crowd filing past Herzl's coffin, a woman staffing a theater ticket booth, immigrant children, an indignant bus driver and a proud holocaust survivor in her tiny kitchen, an orthodox father who pushes against the condescension of the ruling secularists, a bereaved mother, de-comissioned soldiers, kibutzniks, dancing their trays of flatware over to a pregnant friend, and more: They become part of us who have read this book. We are as blind about our future as they were about theirs. They were hopeful and they were willing to talk. Maybe a little of that can rub off on me. On a good day. Thank you, dear reader, for your attention.

Many thanks are due many people, but two in particular come to the fore. Thank you to Itamar Haritan, who helped me correct a few of my many Hebrew mistakes and whose pleasure in and admiration of this book helped me see it anew; and to my mother Miriam Forman who was there with the author nearly 75 years ago, and who has been here with me every step of my journey into the Yiddish language and the world it has opened.

About the Author and Translator

Solomon Simon (author) was born in 1895, in Kalinkovitch, now in Belarus. He came to New York in 1913. Over the course of his career, he served as as president of the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, which ran a secular Yiddish school system and a press, as editor of *Kinder Zhurnal*, as a regular contributor to numerous newspapers and literary journals, and as the author of 20 full-length Yiddish books. The English translation of his *Di Heldn fun Khelm*, titled *The Wise Men of Helm and Their Merry Tales*, was a classic in its time and is still in print today.

Though Simon was best known as a writer of children's books, his interests ranged well beyond. The subjects of his books and essays included Torah commentary, memoirs, Israel and Zionism, education, Jewish literature, and the problems of Jewish life in the modern world. In addition to his educational and literary work, he was a full time dentist. He died in November, 1970.

David Forman (translator) is Solomon Simon's grandson. He began studying Yiddish in his fifties. He has described and cataloged Yiddish materials for Cornell University Library and has taught beginning Yiddish language classes privately, in adult education classes, and at Cornell University. His English translation of Simon's *Dos Kluge Shnayderl* was published in a bilingual edition as *The Clever Little Tailor.* He is also a poet.