

“A Few Introductory Words”
Introduction to Borekh Rivkin’s Collected Essays
By Abba Gordin

The Yiddish essay may be read here:

<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc210176/rivkin-b-rivkin-minnie-a-gloybn-far-umgloybike>

Poet, author, editor, and anarchist, Abba Gordin (1887-1964) was an outspoken and prominent figure in Jewish anarchist circles. After being pardoned by Lenin’s wife, Gordin and his wife made their way to New York City, where Gordin met Borekh Rivkin. Both quickly became good friends, simultaneously creating an anarcho-Judaism that blended both anarchist and literary tendencies with Torah. After Rivkin’s death, Gordin edited “A Gloybn far umgloybike” and helped Mina Bordo-Rivkin publish Rivkin’s other posthumous books.

B. (Borekh) Rivkin was born in 1883 in Kurland Stadt, Jakobstadt [modern Jēkabpils, Latvia]. His parents were honest, simple, pious Jews, blessed with a healthy sense of justice. To them, belief was obvious and in plain sight, in the ears to hear, in the hands to touch, and on the tongue to taste. Faith was braided with confidence, woven together with assurance of redemption. Religiosity went hand in hand with kindness.

From his parents' innocent faith he inherited a great fortune, an unshakable belief in the search for justice over wrong, and still more -- a precious treasure, a solid foundation of faith in the power of spirit.

As a son--not only of his parents, but of his generation as well—Rivkin aligned with a revolutionary circle, though still a young man. This inspired him to immigrate to London in 1911, then on to New York City on the eve of 1912.

There wasn’t a single serious Jewish periodical in the United States in which Borekh Rivkin did not participate from time to time. He wrote passionate treatises about every important Jewish wordsmith.

Rivkin had his own approach to literature in general, and to critique in particular. Jewish literary works were to him a religious service [*avoyde*], not an everyday job. He quarreled with those who contended that belles-lettres’ task is to amuse; he taught that literature needs to offer guidance for the Jewish reader. But by what means? And how? Through the creation of daring images¹ that will serve as examples of ethical, heroic conduct. The declaration of principles and dry theories cannot exert any overwhelming influence on the diverse social classes of a people. These only speak to the mind and appeal to the heart, to emotions, to the subconscious, to address the unbeliever; one needs to struggle against the cynic of our generation with the magic spell of *mentsh-bashaf*.

¹ Gordin refers to Rivkin's idea of literature as a creation deeply linked to God, who creates humans in God’s likeness, in a kind of spiritual mimesis.

“Mentsh-bashaf”: this is Borekh Rivkin’s holiest term. *Mentsh-bashaf* is the ultimate purpose of all our undertakings of positive value. No revolution, no matter how wide and deep, could stand up for the welfare of humankind without *spiritual* revolution. The beginning and end of such a revolution is the creation of a new Adam. According to his conception of Jewish history, the Jewish people have a responsibility to carry out: to create a “complete Adam,” and through him, to transfigure the spiritual physiognomy of the nations, of humankind.

Before the image of such people, the redeemer can be fashioned in real lives, it must be depicted in concept, which is to say: it must first be painted in creative literary form. Such is the duty of the Jewish writer.

In order to achieve the idea of redemption, one must embrace the concrete form of a personified messiah. Messianism is a wonderful Jewish invention that has rescued the Jewish people from ruin. The tragic history between the Jewish people and the non-Jewish world is wrought with sufferings that humanity will have to endure before the arrival of the Messiah, which will herald the inevitable salvation of all the world.

The idea of divineness has moreover dressed itself in a persona so that the individual will fulfill the “I always place HaShem before me”² and become purified and ennobled through that principle.

B. Rivkin was attuned to the rare force of language. He mastered an altogether original style. He continuously transgresses against syntax. Yet all of his linguistic transgressions are not forgiven, but momentarily transformed into *mitzvahs*. He commands such powerful and passionate expression. His sentences are like a drawn bow; his words soar through the air like an arrow hitting its target.

² “I have placed the Lord before me constantly; because [He is] at my right hand, I will not falter” (Psalm 16:8).