

“Literature Instead of Religion!”:

On B. Rivkin’s Theory

For the literary critic Borekh Rivkin, spiritual revolution was central to social revolution. Although early in his life he had joined the Jewish socialist Bund in Russia and later wrote for various newspapers and journals with varied political leanings, Borekh Rivkin leaned toward anarchism and worked within anarchist circles in Russia, Sweden, England and occupied Turtle Island.¹ His wife Mina Bordo-Rivkin succinctly stated that the “messianic interpretation of literature was his primary goal [...] and successfully highlighted the messianic leanings in Yiddish literature.”² Rivkin’s anarchism was rooted in Judaism and a yearning for *meshiekh* (the messiah) “charged” with a spirit “that illuminated the dark road of exile.” For Rivkin, both *meshiekh* and literature were that light and road. Visions of the era of *meshiekh* have appealed to Jewish anarchists and philosophers including Walter Benjamin, Martin Buber, and Gershom Scholem.³ As a literary critic, Rivkin picked up threads of messianism woven by rebellious rabbis, seeking to break from religious paternalism and bring these ideals to atheist radicals.

Rivkin’s concept of *mentsh-bashaf* (human creation) played a prominent role in his literary critique: “Seeing that the human is created in the form of God—where does one need to search for God? Not in heaven, but in people!”⁴ Rivkin saw people as creators--literally and figuratively--and here lay messianic potential: through artistic creation a new world is made, mimicking Divine creation.

¹ For Rivkin’s biography, see Joshua Fogel, “Borekh Rivkin,” Yiddish Leksikon, June 19, 2019, <https://yleksikon.blogspot.com/2019/06/borekh-rivkin.html> and *Biographical Dictionary of Neo-Marxism*, ed. Robert A. Gorman (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986), 358–59.

² Mina Bordo-Rivkin, *Geblibn aleyh lid un proze* (Tel-Aviv: ha-Menorah, 1969), 7.

³ Though messianic currents run through both Rivkin and Benjamin’s work --- most notably in their treatment of temporality -- there is no indication that either theorist knew of the other. Paul Buhle notes that in Rivkin’s *Yiddishe Yomtoyvim* [Jewish Holidays], the necessity of Jewish time brings relief to Jews who suffer under gentile-time; for Benjamin, there is the empty homogenous capitalist time (*jetzzeit*) and revolutionary time (messianic). As Jewish philosopher André Neher noted: “Hebrew time does not start over again like Greek time; it engenders” (Oaknin 1998, 169).

⁴ B. Rivkin, “Der driter seder,” in *Yidishe Yomtoyvim* (1950), 113.

In the essay “A Pseudo-Territory in Place of Religion” (1938), Rivkin begrudgingly utilizes a Marxist framework--only to break it open for a new religious interpretation suitable to Judaism. Understanding the human role as one of creators [*mentsh-bashaf*], Rivkin maintained an anarchist stateless position that geographic territory should not be the priority; placed him in opposition to the “autonomous” Birobidzhan,⁵ the Zionist’s desire for a Jewish State, and even Zhitlovsky’s diasporic nationalism.⁶ His desire was to “create a territory for a territory-less people who, despite their territoriallessness [add Yiddish term here?],” remain a people.”⁷ This territory was to be literature -- as he said: “*literature instead of religion!*”⁸

This territory is akin to the holy words of the Torah, where the “*Ein-Sof*, the divine Infinite, contracts into letters of the Torah in order to be revealed...”⁹ Within the swirling of ideas and imagery that exists before the author and reader of Yiddish literature, between these letters thrives an infinite world of meaning and interpretation, representing a boundless, multicultural, “egalitarian, [...] anarchistic, ‘peaceable kingdom’”¹⁰ — a utopian Yiddishland: the *meshiekh*’s era. Or perhaps it is more of an *atopia*, a society without borders. Ouaknin notes the Torah, the Book, as a non-place: “Atopia is the refusal of the place without hope of a place. Place of atopia is, radically, the nonplace (*non-lieu*). On the other hand, utopia is a temporary non-place, linked to the place by hope, or by demand.”¹¹ Rivkin’s Yiddishland was to be a boundless home for the Jewish people who were constantly under attack by the anti-Jewish and capitalistic world.

For Rivkin, Yiddish and literature were as holy as Hebrew and Torah, tied to revolution and redemption.

⁵ Boruch Rivkin and Mina Bordo-Rivkin, *Grunt-Ṭendentsn fun der yidisher literatur in Amerike* (New York: Iḳuf Farlag, 1948), 148.

⁶ However, Rivkin maintained a relationship with the leftist Labor Zionist.

⁷ Bordo-Rivkin, *Gebliḳn aleyḳ lid un proze*, 12.

⁸ Bordo-Rivkin, 8.

⁹ Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 227.

¹⁰ Paul Buhle and Nick Thorkelson, “Baruch Rivkin’s ‘Shrayber un Arbeter,’” in *Yiddishkeit: Jewish Vernacular & The New Land*, ed. Harvey Pekar and Paul Buhle (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2011), 30.

¹¹ Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, 151.