

“A Pseudo-Territory -- In Place of Religion” from *Grunt-tendentsn* (pp. 148-151)

Translation: eliui damm

Paul Buhle and others have claimed that the term ‘Yiddishland’ was invented by Rivkin, and this text thematizes territory, literary genealogy, and aspirations beyond land.¹

In this chapter, Borekh Rivkin reflects on questions of nation, land, and literature, theorizing Jewish literature as a ‘pseudo-territory’ or Yiddishland that would replace geographic territory and an art form that would replace classical religion. He offers a genealogy of Yiddish literature, tracing the theme of religiosity through the ‘classic’ writers of the 1890s, and breaking from a Marxist framework to introduce instead a spiritual idea of ‘pseudo-territory.’ The collection which includes this essay also features chapters on H. Leivick (Leyvik Hallpern) 1888-1962, Noyakh Nakhbush - 1885-1970, L. Shapiro - 1878-1948, Shmuel-Tsvi Zetser - 1876-1962, and Abba Gordin.

...
The Jewish religion obeyed what Marxism prescribed, and indeed, went further than obeying: wherever an entire nation needed to maintain the function of a single class, religion expanded to cover that entire nation. Through Jewish religion, Jewish consciousness functioned not as the class consciousness of merchants and businessmen alone, but as the class consciousness for every class of Jews. Behind the brick walls of the ghettos, all Jews held on together as a nation intact, although only one class had a foothold upon economic control and status.

And where isn’t even a single class characterized by position and function? While Jews engaged in the same trades and professions as those native-born in their lands, non-Jews cast Jews as mere guests. [...] Jews didn’t have economic terrain under their feet; no special function vindicated their existence, according to Marxist terms. But Jewish religion declared war on Jewish terrain-lessness [*bodnlozikeyt*], levitating itself above the ground entirely, creating a spiritual territory [*shel mayle*, ‘of above’] held together in its center by God [H”Sh].² And everything that shattered the soil beneath their feet, all that

¹ Paul Buhle, interviewed by Christa Whitney, “Borekh Rivkin’s Ideas.” Yiddish Book Center’s Wexler Oral History Project. See also Neal Gabler, “Introduction,” in Pekar, Harvey, et al. *Yiddishkeit: Jewish Vernacular & The New Land*. Abrams ComicArts, New York, NY, 2011, 10.

“Baruch Rivkin’s Ideas about Yiddish Sensibility.” Yiddish Book Center. Accessed March 2, 2022. <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/excerpts/woh-ex-0001588/baruch-rivkin-s-ideas-about-yiddish-sensibility>.

² Hebrew, one of the names of God, meaning “The Name.” Does Rivkin use this term, or your addition?

which is solid, strengthened this ‘territory *shel mayle*,’ the territory above. This territory was established in Babel, where the landed-born were specialized businessmen. This was a territory *shel mala* because nothing was there for the present: everything was the future: God’s *Shvues*³ and promises of the covenant between God and Abraham until the Messianic era, the prophecy of redemption, foretold a great Jewish triumph, one that will redeem themselves and the world. The Jews of the lowest classes have the highest *Shvues* and promise to repeat in their everyday prayers and studies. Magical deeds and incantations, ceremonies, rituals--all charged with the ineffable names of God--are enough to reify this territory-above as substantially and materially valid. It was strong enough that an entire nation could know its attributes without attachment to any physical nation itself. From this territory-above, an invisible protective barrier was lowered to safely contain the Jewish soul, even when their body writhed in naked danger.

Truly, the great Jewish cultural sites -- Southern France, Italy, Alexandria, long past their golden ages--were undoubtedly wrung out economically. Yet they held up and thrived for centuries, true? And the Talmudic territory which, properly speaking, descended from Babel, also persisted for centuries -- through its very end. This is historical fact. There must be a Marxist explanation for it. How the Marxists deal with the Jewish religion, I do not know. As far as I am concerned, Marxist truth may still stand: spiritual order must respond to economic context. But how should it respond? Not with blind obedience to its situation, but with *defiance*. Economic situation should be turned over and wrestled with until it is defeated. Whatever the response, it should be taken into consideration that what this situation lacks is a spiritual position; where it is missing completely, it is substituted. Subsequently, we are left hanging in midair, hovering over nothing. Regardless of Marxist truth, this is also a correct Marxist response.

Yet, how much is the limit? Thus it was befallen: the ghetto walls exploded, both visible and invisible walls. The spiritual pseudo-territory [*kmoy-teritorye*] was suddenly vulnerable to the windstorms of free thought, the Haskalah [Jewish Enlightenment], which relished eating up the heart of every

³ Hebrew, meaning “Oaths.” A book of the Mishha and Talmud (“Book of Oaths”), a reference for laws surrounding oaths.

ineffable name, every incantation, every magical deed -- even the world-heart of *the Blessed One*. Old Jewish religion was not enough; it lost its power to hold up the realm of spiritual pseudo-territory.

Simultaneously, things got worse: everywhere, the special middleman position began to slip from Jewish hands. Even in the most stagnant countries that barely had an window open to civilization, their native-born enthusiastically grasped at this intermediary role for themselves. Though few were able to do so, they still saw within this extortion and extermination of Jews a means to climb the social-economic ladder for their position. Jews remained exposed and naked, without religion or protection, in stark mortal danger. Those who carried the sabbath-spirit within them took courage to transgress the Commandment: *lo t'asey lekha pesl*.⁴ They sought to shape Jewish literature to serve as the most suitable tool, like religion, to establish a relationship with civilization. This is built on the principle that humans are not dependent on God, but free agents and creators. Literature has the merit that it both communicates with civilization and nourishes the folk's soul, as religion does. Both of these functions are crucial here. From religious pseudo-territory, literature takes upon itself the Jews' responsibility -- their role in the future, the higher justification and purpose for existence -- and translates it into modern worldliness. This is what I identify/designate as pseudo-territory within literature.

⁴ Exodus 20:4: You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. . "לא תעשה לך פסל וכל תמונה אשר בשמים ממעל ואשר בארץ מתחת .".
".נאשר במים מתחת לארץ."