

## *Knaanic* in the Medieval and Modern Scholarly Imagination

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### I. Canaan in Europe

In the cosmos of ideas and writings, all sorts of things that once were can acquire newfound posthumous significance. Far from being immune to the tugs of the latterday observer's own aesthetics, predilections, and prejudices, scholars are occasionally inclined to press these into service for a perceived larger good.

The discovery and interpretation of the concept *Knaanic* for modernity is itself rooted in the byways of the cultural history of Ashkenaz, the (originally) Yiddish speaking civilization of central and Eastern Europe, and its post-Holocaust offshoots in the Americas, Europe, Israel, Australia and elsewhere. But the actual medieval attestations of the terms that give our present-day *Knaanic* come from medieval sources not necessarily Ashkenazic but quintessentially European. The modern appellation *Knaanic* derives from the medieval Hebrew usages of ארץ כנען 'Land of Canaan' and לשון כנען 'Language of Canaan'. The first is in classic Tiberian Hebrew קְנַעַן kəṇáʕān (standard Ashkenazic/Yiddish *érets knáan*, Israeli *érets kənáan*). The second: לֶשׁוֹן כְּנַעֲנִי (loshn knáan or leshóyn knáan; *leshón kenáan*).

That medieval corpus may be relatively small, but it is, collectively speaking, spectacular. The tenth-century book on Jewish history, *Yossipon* by an Italian (or Laazic) author, has the line:

"They are called Slavs [Sklavi] and some say of them that they are – of the Children of Canaan."<sup>1</sup>

There is a Hebrew letter of introduction that has been variously dated, usually to the eleventh century, containing the sentence about the bearer, which uses סְפָאֵת כְּנַעֲנִי for "Language of Canaan" or "Canaanite language" (as in Isaiah 19:18, where it is a poetic reference to ancient Hebrew).

"He knows neither Hebrew, nor Greek, nor Arabic, but the Canaanite language of his birthplace."<sup>2</sup>

The celebrated Sephardic travel writer Benjamin (ben Jonah) of Tudela, of the later twelfth century, more or less divulges the accurate medieval Jewish sense (and origin) of 'Canaan' in a passage of his *Journeys*:

"Thence extends the land of Bohemia, called Prague. This is the commencement of the land of Slavonia, and the Jews who dwell there call it Canaan, because the men of that land (the Slavs) sell their sons and their daughters to the other nations. These are the men of Russia, which is a great empire stretching from the gate of Prague to the gates of Kieff, the large city which is at the extremity of that empire. It is a land of mountains and forests, where there are to be found the animals called vair, ermine, and sable. No one issues forth from his house in winter-time on account of the cold. People are to be

<sup>1</sup> David Flusser, *The Josippon (Josephus Gorionides)*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1978–1981) 9–10. Cf. Moshe Taube, "Transmission of Scientific Texts in 15<sup>th</sup> Century Eastern Knaan," *Aleph* 10.2 (2010): 11.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Marmorstein, *Notes et mélanges* (Paris, 1921), 92–97; Jacob Mann, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine Under the Fātimid Caliphs* (Oxford, 1922), 192; Franciszek Kupfer and Tadeusz Lewicki, *Źródła hebrajskie do dziejów Słowian i niektórych innych ludów środkowej i wschodniej Europy. Wyjątki z pism religijnych i prawniczych XI–XIII w.* (Wrocław – Warszawa, 1956), 269–70.

found there who have lost the tips of their noses by reason of the frost. Thus far reaches the empire of Russia.”<sup>3</sup>

The twelfth century master thus cracked what would have to be rediscovered, reinterpreted, and re-understood only close to seven centuries later. Other medieval attestations (some of them only brought to light in the nineteenth century), usually occur in Slavic-gloss-introducing formulas like “in the language of Canaan” or “in the Canaanite language” e.g. in Rashi’s commentary, in the *Arúgas ha-bóysem* (Arugat ha-Bosem, “Bed of Spices” after Song of Songs 5:13, 6:2), a learned and interdisciplinary commentary on liturgical poetry, completed by Abraham ben Azriel in the 1230s; in *Or zoría* (Or Zarua, “Light is Sown” [to the Righteous], after Psalms 97:11), a compendium of Jewish law by Isaac ben Moses of Vienna, also in the thirteenth century, and others.<sup>4</sup> Note that these lustrous medieval rabbinic authors were all educated primarily in the Ashkenazic tradition, by great Ashkenazic rabbis of the times.

Until the eighteenth century, close to one hundred percent of Ashkenazim, both in Western Ashkenaz (centered in the German speaking lands and neighboring territories) and in Eastern Ashkenaz (generally coterritorial with Slavic and Baltic) were traditional Ashkenazim, deeply traditionalist and observant within a full-scale Jewish civilization that sought to observe all the observable commandments, both from the Bible and the later

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (London, 1907), 80–81.

<sup>4</sup> See Roman Jakobson – Morris Halle, “The Term *Canaan* in Medieval Hebrew,” in: *For Max Weinreich on His Seventieth Birthday. Studies in Jewish Languages, Literature, and Society*, eds. L. S. Dawidowicz et al. (The Hague, 1964), 148–55; Taube, “Transmission,” 11; Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, ed. P. Glasser (New Haven – New York, 2008), A61–A62; see now Ondřej Bláha – Robert Dittmann – Karel Komárek – Daniel Polakovič – Lenka Uličná, “On the Problem of Judeo-Czech and the Canaanite Glosses of the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries in Hebrew Manuscripts,” *Jews and Slavs* 24 (forthcoming).

authoritative rabbinic works, in both instances following their evolved rabbinic interpretation and normative tradition. It was a society of internal Jewish trilingualism. The three languages were (and in traditional Ashkenazic, usually Hasidic communities, still are) Yiddish – the vernacular; Hebrew – for study of Bible, prayer, commentaries and an array of traditional genres; Aramaic – for study of Talmud and Kabbalah, the two “hardest and highest” endeavors in the eyes of the society in question.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Yiddish linguistics turns to older rabbinic works

The intellectuals of this civilization, or to consciously anachronize, its chattering classes, were the rabbinic scholars: the rabbis. They were not necessarily rabbis in the modern sense of spiritual leaders of congregations, though to be sure some were. The class of rabbinic scholars was the intelligentsia of this society, whose written works, generally in Hebrew or Aramaic, were decidedly not in such modern genres as fiction, poetry, history, biography, science and so forth. They were crafted in one of the classic rabbinic genres: the commentary, the supra-commentary (in other words a commentary on another commentary), the liturgical or commemorative poem or elegy, the codification of laws and responsa. This last genre, known in Yiddish as *Sháyles utshúves* (modern standard Ashkenazic Hebrew *shəeyloys utshuvoys*) is particularly beloved and the most versatile. The rabbinic author can collect over time the legal and other questions that came his way, and publish a collection together with his answers. But it was also a creative literary template whereby it is fine for the rabbinic author to include “questions of the times” together with the queries historically sent his way or brought into his study or studyhouse or rabbinic court or synagogue. Responsa

<sup>5</sup> See Dovid Katz, *Words on Fire. The Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (New York, 2007), 45–77; Dovid Katz, *Lithuanian Jewish Culture* (Vilnius, 2010), 37–49.

literature in particular provided leeway for digressions into all sorts of other issues, including questions of what moderns call linguistics and philology.

Ber Borokhov (1881–1917) founded the field of modern Yiddish linguistics with two brilliant works in 1913, an essay and an annotated narrativized bibliography of four hundred years of Yiddish studies in Europe, much of it in earlier times from Christian humanists, criminologists (experts on Rotwelsch, the German underworld language), commercial handbook authors, missionaries, antisemites and more. The early *Jewish* comments that Borokhov assembled,<sup>6</sup> starting with the early sixteenth century, are in good part from rabbinic comments on spelling interesting words or forms from the vernacular that came up for one reason or another.

A veritable treasure of Yiddish linguistic material has still to be researched from the vast rabbinic literature on divorce law where the legal stipulation that the parties' names be given also in their everyday vernacular form in addition to their formal (usually Hebraic) form led to much commentary. Over the last century, Yiddish linguists have produced evidence from rabbinic literature on a wide array of topics. Examples include collections of Yiddish-related comments by a chosen rabbinic author,<sup>7</sup> of actual Yiddish testimonies in rabbinical court cases from the fifteenth century onward,<sup>8</sup> and comments on older Yiddish dialectology and phonology.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ber Borokhov, "Di biblyotek funem yidishn filolog," in *Der pinkes. Yorbukh far der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur un shprakh, far folklor, kritik un biblyografie*, ed. S. Niger (Vilna, 1913), nos. 68–100.

<sup>7</sup> Khaykl Lunski, "Iserlins yidish," *Yidishe filologye* 1 (1924): 288–302.

<sup>8</sup> Zalmen Rubashov, "Yidische gvuyes-eydes in di Shayles utshuves fun onheyb fuftsetn bizn sof zibetsetn yorhundert," in *Historishe shriftn*, ed. Tsherikover, A. (Warše, 1929), 115–96.

<sup>9</sup> Dovid Katz, "Origins of Yiddish Dialectology," in *Dialects of the Yiddish Language*, ed. D. Katz (Oxford, 1988), 39–42; Dovid Katz, "The Children of Heth and the Ego of Linguistics: A Story of Seven Yiddish Mergers," *Transactions of the Philological Society* 89.1 (1991): 95–121; Dovid Katz,

### III. But on Knaan, analysis waits for 19<sup>th</sup> century scholarship (and Prague rabbi-scholar Moses Landau)

Perhaps one day some penetrating older rabbinic comment will yet come to light on the meaning and origin of the intriguing medieval rabbinic terms *Lóshn Knáan* (or *Leshóyn Knáan*, with preservation of the old Hebrew construct form) 'language of Canaan' and *Érets Knáan* 'Land of Canaan'. But for now, such comments in the following centuries remain unknown in Ashkenazic rabbinic literature.

But as far as we know, the unraveling in modern times of the "Canaanite mystery" of medieval (mostly Ashkenazic) rabbinic literature would come from the first generations of modern (Westernized) Jewish scholars in the central European lands of Western (and transitional) Ashkenaz who were a product of the "German Jewish Enlightenment" spearheaded by Moses Mendelssohn in late eighteenth century Berlin. In addition to leading to an array of religious incarnations of subsequent German Jews (spanning the gamut from Baptism through Reform, Conservative, and modernized, eventually neo-Orthodox), the movement gave rise to the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* ("Science of Judaism") movement, whose symbolic founder was Leopold Zunz (1794–1886). It was in fact the academic field today known as Judaic studies, or Jewish studies, applying the methodology of the usual disciplines (history, philosophy, philology, paleography and so on) to Jewish material.

It was to be Zunz himself who took a first crack at the "Canaanite conundrum," the mystery of the terms for "Language of Canaan" and "land of Canaan" that turned up in some medieval works. Ever the honorable scholar, he explained in 1822 that he did not know the answer.

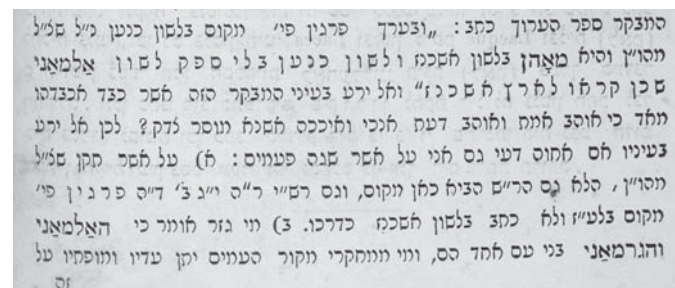
"Notions of Yiddish," in *Jewish Education and Learning. In Honour of Dr David Patterson on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, eds. G. Abramson – T. Parfitt (Chur, 1994), 75–91.

“I see as something weird this ‘Language of Canaan’ (Canaanite? Phoenician?) of which Rashi speaks on several occasions, and I don’t know whether we are to look for this language in Asia or in Germany.”<sup>10</sup>

Zunz’s blunt remark was followed by various others, sometimes claiming that Language of Canaan = German. It was left to a now largely forgotten Jewish poet, editor, typographer and lexicographer of early nineteenth century Prague, Moses Israel Landau (in Hebrew: Landa, 1788–1852), a versatile Jewish personality who was elected to the city council in his final years. One of his life’s projects was the compilation of the non-Hebrew glosses in European rabbinic literature.

After first following Zunz in his Prague 1826 edition of the medieval *Arukh* of Rabbi Nathan ben Jehiel, Landau, who knew Czech very well, discovered the “secret of Canaan” in medieval European Jewish literature in his linguistic commentary *Márpe Lóshn* (*Marpé Lashón*) that appeared in a Prague edition of the Mishnah published 1825–1830. (The commentary’s name can translate as “The Soothing Tongue” or “Healing Language” or by Ashkenazic extension “Remedies to [Issues of] Language” after Proverbs 15:4.)

<sup>10</sup> Leopold Zunz, “Salomon ben Isaac, genannt Raschi,” *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 1 (1822): 329.



Fragment from the *Márpe Lóshn* commentary by Moses Landau of Prague on the Mishnaic tractate *Shvi'is* (Sheviit, Shevi'ith, etc.) which concerns the laws of the sabbatical (literally: seventh) year. Therein are contained the “immortal lines” in which the Prague rabbi corrects the great German-Jewish scholar Leopold Zunz, demonstrating that *Language of Knaan* refers to Slavic rather than to German. Ever the gentleman, Landau writes: “And may it not be taken the wrong way in the eyes of this scholar whom I honor with great honor, for he is a lover of truth and a lover of knowledge ...” before going on to correct both the general meaning of *Language of Knaan* and the specific lexical items in dispute. This image is from the 1864 edition, page 104.

On the Hebrew title page the author’s name in Hebrew is given as Moyshe (Moshe) Landa, rather than Landau, and it proudly identifies him as a grandson of the great *Nóyda b’Yehúda*, a Polish rabbi who came to particular fame after becoming rabbi in Prague, eventually known by the name of his most famous book, a collection of responsa he named *Nóyde b’Yehúde* (*Nóydo b’Yehúdo*, *Nodá biYhudá* etc.), a phrase from Psalms 76:2 that includes his father’s name. His actual name was Yekhézkl (Yechezkel, Ezekiel) Landa(u).

Image credit: Courtesy of The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary (Call No. 4527.S6 L3 1865, p. 104), courtesy of Rena Borow, Yevgeniya Dizenko and Jerry Schwarzbard.

Moses Landau (Moshe Landa) saw that inexplicable glosses became wholly clear when identified with Slavic forms, and in particular forms from the Prague area. The history of the scholarly literature, including a frank discussion of those who would fail to credit Landau is provided by Jakobson and Halle.<sup>11</sup>

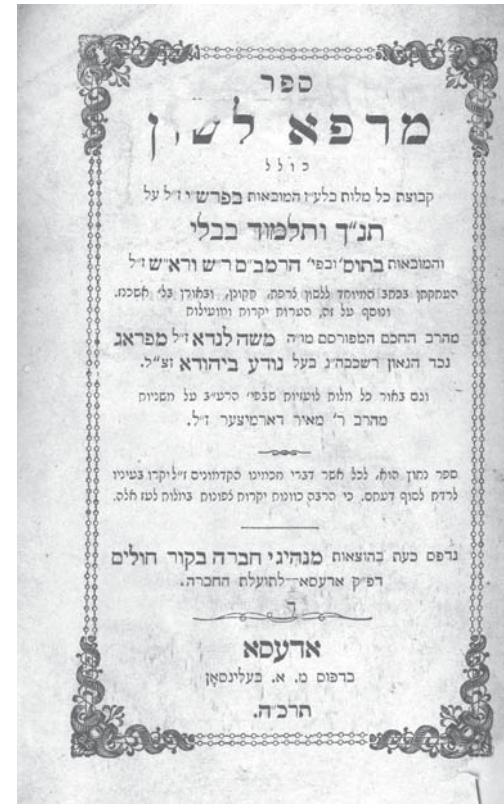
<sup>11</sup> Jakobson – Halle, “The Term *Canaan*,” 156–57.

In one sense then, the understanding of the meaning of Language of Canaan (medieval Slavic and sometimes specifically of the Czech region), and by implication the motive behind the Hebrew term Canaan being applied to Slavic areas on the basis of the link to slavery, were coming full circle. What the twelfth century Benjamin of Tudela had so clearly explained was rediscovered by nineteenth century German studies, via a kind of public search initiated by Zunz in the circles of 1820s *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*, and cracked by an unjustly forgotten Moses Landau of Prague.

For Slavic linguistics and for Czech linguistics, and their small sub-branch of Knaanic linguistics there is a new drive, revived in the twenty-first century by scholars at Charles University in Prague, among others, to collect as many attestations of Knaanic as possible from medieval Hebrew and Aramaic texts and to draw linguistic and other conclusions as merited by the growing corpus.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, from the nineteenth century onward, the European, recognized-as-Slavic Language of Canaan would as a linguistic, sociolinguistic, historical and political idea be setting out a brand new and long-post-vernacular life of its own. Not of course in the sense of revival among some ethnic group (let us keep sober, these are scattered glosses) but rather as a “usable concept” among Jewish scholars for whom the issue of language was, from the nineteenth century onward, tied up with so much more. For that battle in the history of ideas, it was often not important whether the original spoken variety referred to as Language of Canaan designated the language of Bohemia or the Slavic languages generally. Many other “boring facts” also tend to fade when grand quasi-national debates come into play.

<sup>12</sup> See now Bláha – Dittmann – Komárek – Polakovič – Uličná, “On the Problem of Judeo-Czech”; Ondřej Bláha – Robert Dittmann – Karel Komárek – Daniel Polakovič – Lenka Uličná, “Roman Jakobson’s Unpublished Study on the Language of Canaanite Glosses,” in *Jews and Slavs* 24 (forthcoming).



Title page of the Odessa 1864 edition of the *Márpe Lóshn* (Marpé Lashón) of Moses Landau, identified on the title page as: “by the wise and famous rabbi, our teacher Rabbi MOYSHE LANDA of blessed memory Of PRAGUE, grandson of the genius, the rabbi of all the Children of the Diaspora, author of the NOYDE B’YEHUDE, may the memory of a saint be a blessing.”

Note that the Jewish year on the title page, [5]625 transposes to the Christian year 1865, but the reverse title page indicates the year of publication as 1864, a usual feature when a book appears between the Jewish new year (which fell on 1<sup>st</sup> October in 1864) and 1<sup>st</sup> January of the following Christian year.

Image credit: Courtesy The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary (call No. PJ4527.S6 L3 1865, title page), courtesy of Rena Borow, Yevgeniya Dizenko and Jerry Schwarzbard.

#### IV. The “Knaan question” for 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish politics

It is part of the sociology of smaller and weaker languages and cultures, and even more so of the stateless cultures, that dry facts or proposals about facts assume symbolic proportions. There is no intention here to pass any judgment. The “nationalist excitement” about philology can itself be a spur to building the philology of smaller groups’ languages, literatures and philologies, and it can verily inspire many more to join such fields than would otherwise be the case. At the same time, the ideological, social and political goals in play will invariably affect not only what is chosen for attention, but how that data will be treated, issues that are to be reckoned with in any of the linguistic and social sciences.

In the case of a stateless East European Jewry struggling from the nineteenth century for various competing national aspirations (most famously, Zionism / Hebraism vs. Diasporism / Hereism [Yiddish *dó-ikayt*] / Yiddishism), with all the contending factions wishing for a better life on the ground in the here and now in any case, such debates could be elevated to public discussion. That is in any case good in so far as it enables examination of a recognized phenomenon, instead of having to “prove” that the great linguists of a bygone age were “subconsciously” impacted by their ideals in the realm of contemporary political battle and upheaval.

In the case of modern Yiddish studies, the field’s twentieth-century founder Ber Borokhov started his founding essay for the new subject with this sentiment:

“Of all the sciences, philology plays the greatest role in the national awakening of the oppressed peoples. Philology is more than linguistics. It is not a mere theory for academic desk-sitters but a practical guide for the nation. It has certain theoretical and historical components, such as the history of the language and literature, the general principles of language development and

the like, but its purpose and its educational significance are to be found in the nation’s real life. [...]”<sup>13</sup>

Footnote 1 starts out:

“I repeat: It is necessary to be clear about the difference between linguistics and philology. Linguistics is a general science, philology a national science. Linguistics can concern itself also with utterly dead and utterly wild languages. Philology, by contrast, works with the assumption that the language it focuses on has cultural and historical value at least for the past. Usually, however, philology goes further and is supportive of the conviction that its language has a national value in the future. Whoever does not believe in the survival of the Yiddish language can maybe still be a Yiddish linguist. But not a Yiddish philologist. [...]”<sup>14</sup>

To this day, oldtimers in the field of Yiddish continue to use the phrase *filológye in Borokhóvishn zin* “philology in the Borokhovian sense” in a number of changing contexts.

Borokhov’s candor here made it easy for him to include some of the burning language-related debates in his work on Yiddish philology, duly placed in separate sections of his bibliography. And one of those sections is directly relevant not to the Language of Canaan specifically but to the linguistic and cultural heritage of Jews in the Slavonic lands in general. Just as modern German-Jewish philologists who were also patriots of German-Jewish integration “wanted” the Jews to once have spoken pure German like their neighbors before latterday unhappy changes, so did, for example, Russophile Russian-Jewish philologists in the Russian Empire “want” Yiddish-speaking Jewry to have once spoken the same Slavic, or even “better” – Russian, as their Christian neighbors. Only here in the East, the language would

<sup>13</sup> Ber Borokhov, “Di ufgabn fun der yidisher filologye,” in *Der pinkes. Yorbukh far der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur un shprakh, far folklor, kritik un biblyografye*, ed. S. Nizer (Vilna, 1913), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Borokhov, “Di ufgabn fun der yidisher filologye,” 2.

have been lost not to straightforward cultural decline or “east-to-west remigration” in the wake of the Chmelnitski massacres in Ukraine, as some of the “Westernists” had posited, but rather to an adjusted Eastern model of the desired linguistic history to fit the social and political movement for civil or equal rights and acceptance in society. In the case of the East, that meant positing a primeval Slavic-speaking Jewry in the Slavic-speaking lands that was then overwhelmed, assimilated, integrated or culturally crushed (depending on one’s stance) by the “newcomers,” the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim of the German speaking lands who obviously brought their Yiddish language from the West (the German speaking areas and its peripheries).

Borokhov’s *Biblyoték funem yidishn filológ* (“Library of the Yiddish Philologist”) comprises the sub-section “Controversial Linguistic Issues and Peripheral Questions” of which the sixth and final sub-sub-section is called “How old is the Yiddish language among the Eastern [European] Jews?” It contains dozens of entries divided into two further parts: the debate per se<sup>15</sup> and historic documents bearing on the controversy.<sup>16</sup> From his brief preface to the section, it is evident that Borokhov assigned the proponents of each side in the linguistic debate to the “larger debate in society.” For him, and for the cultural historian of East European Jewry, there is little surprise in learning that the chief “pro-Slavic” voice in the debate was that of Albert Harkavy (1835–1919), an eminent Judaic scholar born in Jewish Lithuania (in a town today in western Belarus) who was for decades head of the Department of Jewish Literature and Oriental Manuscripts at the Imperial Library of St. Petersburg. He was an effective founder of the theory (popular in some quarters to this very day) that East European Jewry originated with migrants from the Black Sea and Caucasus regions, including the Khazars. In his political battles, he was often engaged with

<sup>15</sup> Ber Borokhov, “Di biblyotek funem yidishn filolog,” nos. 422–35.

<sup>16</sup> Borokhov, “Di biblyotek funem yidishn filolog,” nos. 436–57.

“competing” claims of Karaite scholars about that group’s antiquity in the area. The chief opponent of the theory was the great Jewish historian Simon Dubnov (1860–1941), who was an effective founder of the concept of autonomy for minorities, a concept recognized by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, informing the policies of a number of the new interwar states. He also evolved into a staunch supporter for the historic status and contemporary rights of Yiddish language and culture.

For those who championed the idea of an originally Slavic speaking East European Jewry, both in historical linguistics and political warfare, the medieval references to “Language of Canaan” could readily be “directed” toward Slavic in general, to debates in the Russian Empire, and without too much concern for the specificities of Czech or Bohemian provenance of those medieval references, all the more so given that “Land of Canaan” readily fit the definition “the Slavic speaking lands” on the basis of the Biblical passage about Canaan’s father Ham being cursed forever: “Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be unto his brethren” (Genesis 9:25, more below in section VII); that, along with the subsequent legal concept “Canaanite slave” in Jewish law (which came in time to mean “non-Jewish slave”), made for a neat parallel with the words for *Slav* and their well-documented ties with words for *slave* in a number of European languages, rooted in the medieval slave trade in the Slavic lands.

To grasp the flavor of the wider debate from the “primeval Slavic” school, let us give the floor to Albert Harkavy:

“...Until the time that there multiplied among them their brothers (co-religionists), those who had been exiled from Germany, who were persecuted up to their necks in the days of the Crusades and were pushed out of their land into the lands of the Slavic peoples; For from that time onward the numbers of the exiles from Germany began to exceed the numbers of their brothers the old-timers, and the language that these new guests brought, the language of Ashkenaz, began to overwhelm the Slavic language and to inherit its

place up to the point of late when the language of the land stopped being the spoken language among the Jews. Nevertheless, in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, according to the calendar that is customary, there were still to be found regions and counties where the Jewish inhabitants did not know any language other than the Russian language, as we will be proving further on.”<sup>17</sup>

When he turns to a numbered series of proposed scholarly proofs for the theory, proof no. 1 is taken from the medieval attestations of Slavic-origin words in rabbinic Hebrew texts.

“1) The first proof for us is the use of Slavic words by Jewish authors in the middle ages in their commentaries to the holy books and Talmud. It is after all well known that these authors, coming upon passages that are hard to understand or upon infrequent words, would provide for us a translation of those passages and words, each one according to the language of the land of his birth. The great commentator Rashi and the rest of the sages of France will provide the gloss in French, Maimonides and the sages of the Ishmaelite lands will always translate into Arabic. From this we may extrapolate the corollary that if authors bring from time to time words from the Slavic language, and even translations of complete documents, we shall be able to judge rightly that for these authors, the language of the Slavs was natural in their mouth and the spoken language among the Jewish people. Otherwise they would have translated into another language that is understood and habitual for their readers. The first [sic] to grasp this fact was the master Yom-Tov Lipman [Leopold] Zunz. Before him, nobody figured out how to explain what the language is, that was called in the mouths of the Jewish sages with the name Language of Canaan.” [...]”<sup>18</sup>

It is a Freudian curiosity that Harkavy’s original Hebrew uses not the usual *Leshóyn Knáan* (*Loshn Knáan*), which is part of the set of phrases evoking the Knaan of the ancient passages, but *Sfas Knáan* (Israeli Sefát Kenáan), a synonym perhaps, but with the altogether different association and positive, inspiring feel

<sup>17</sup> Albert Harkavy, *Hayehudim usfas haslavim* (Vilna, 1867), 1–2.

<sup>18</sup> Harkavy, *Hayehudim*, 19–20.

for the traditional learned Jewish ear of Isaiah’s usage of this phrase as a poetic synonym for Hebrew (which was based on the ancient Northwest Semitic Canaanite language that the first Abrahamic Aramaic-speaking settlers in Canaan found in their new land). It is a lofty, poetic and victorious usage in a poem against Egypt:

In that day shall five cities in the Land of Egypt speak the Language of Canaan, and swear to the Lord of Hosts [...]”

(Isaiah 19:18)

### V. Knaanic in the dreams of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Yiddishists

The multiplicity of “Notions of Yiddish” informs more than a little of Ashkenazic scholarly thought on Jewish language issues.<sup>19</sup> There are many nuances to be found *within* each of the larger schools of thought, which range from love of Yiddish to hate of Yiddish.<sup>20</sup> A short introduction to two of the schools of thought in the twentieth century is in order.

The twentieth century “pro-Yiddish” school of scholars (Yiddishist in the double sense of “specializing in Yiddish” and “championing the language and its culture”) developed an internal-based paradigm of Saussurian structuralist synchrony, first enunciated by Borokhov (in fact before publication of Saussure’s *Cours*) in lines that set the future tone for Yiddish studies:

“German, Hebrew, and Slavic elements, as soon as they entered the people’s language, stopped being German, Hebrew, and Slavic. They lose their former face and take on a new one: they become *Yiddish*.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See Katz, “Notions of Yiddish,” 75–91.

<sup>20</sup> See Katz, *Lithuanian Jewish Culture*, 188–323.

<sup>21</sup> Borokhov, “Di ufgabn fun der yidisher filologye,” 9.



Almost immediately, the study of Jewish languages (what some would later call “Jewish interlinguistics”) developed two contrarian schools, echoing to some degree the Hebrew-Yiddish conflict raging among the chattering Jewish classes of the day. The pro-Yiddish position naturally posited that other Jewish languages need likewise to be seen “from inside” as synchronic structures rather than as dialects or varieties of the source language that provided most of the language-matter. The anti-Yiddish, Hebrew-centric position, by contrast, saw Hebrew (or Hebrew with Aramaic) as the real historic Jewish language(s) with the rest a fleeting array of local mixed dialects or jargons. The first major incarnation of the debate came when the German-Jewish scholar Heinrich Loewe’s 1911 book<sup>22</sup> was replied to by Matthias (Matisyóhu) Mieses in his book of 1915.<sup>23</sup> Mieses had, even before Borokhov, delivered the first academic paper that was “in, on and for” Yiddish.<sup>24</sup> Where Loewe tended to see linguistic corruption and ghettoization, Mieses saw the inspiring creativity of minority languages.

On the pro-Yiddish side of the debate, by analogical extension, the paradigm being refined for Yiddish was applied to the other Jewish languages. One classic paper is Solomon Birnbaum’s “Jewish Languages.”<sup>25</sup> It became characteristic for this school to opt for internal names instead of the Judeo-hyphenated names or even popular names that some thought were

<sup>22</sup> Heinrich Loewe, *Die Sprachen der Juden* (Köln, 1911).

<sup>23</sup> Matthias Mieses, *Die Entstehungsursache der jüdischen Dialekte* (Vienna, 1915).

<sup>24</sup> Matthias Mieses, “Matisyohu Mizeses referat vegn der yidisher shprakh,” in *Di ershte yidische shprakh konferents. Barikhtn, dokumentn un opklangen fun der Tshernovitsker konferents 1908*, [eds. M. Weinreich – Z. Reyzen] (Vilna 1931), 143–93.

<sup>25</sup> Solomon A. Birnbaum, “Jewish Languages,” in *Essays in Honour of the Very Rev. Dr. J. H. Hertz, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire*, eds. I Epstein, I. – E. Levine – C. Roth (London, 1942), 51–67.

derogatory. Writing in Yiddish, Birnbaum<sup>26</sup> published the paper “Judezmo” (in its Yiddishized guise: *Dzhudézme*), in which he insisted that Judeo-Spanish / Ladino be called by a more culturally specific name, one, that like *Yiddish* actually means “Jewish.” Later in the twentieth century, Max Weinreich, working in the Borokhov-Mieses-Birnbaum paradigm, would develop a workable template for Yiddish and other Jewish languages.<sup>27</sup> Weinreich would distinguish *stock language* (all forms of a donor language) vs. *determinant* (what *could have* gone into the recipient language by virtue of coterritoriality and cotemporality) vs. *component* (the synchronic parts of the recipient language that are structurally part of that language alone). For example, Israeli *shabát* (‘Sabbath’, ‘Saturday’) is stock language from the viewpoint of Yiddish, late classical (Tiberian) Hebrew *šabbāṯ* is determinant, *šábes* is component (in layman’s language: a Yiddish word, derived from the Hebrew).

For Yiddishists and their sympathizers in the wider community of general linguists, *Knaan* was a natural name for the posited language of the medieval Czech Jews whose language had been called Language of Canaan in rabbinic sources. In his *History of the Yiddish Language*, Weinreich would collect more sources on Knaan, and construct a “stronger case for Knaan” than probably anyone to this day.<sup>28</sup>

Among the major sympathizers of Max Weinreich and the Yiddishist school among general linguists was Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), one of the towering figures of twentieth century linguistics. After the Second World War, he and Weinreich would

<sup>26</sup> Solomon A. Birnbaum, “Dzhudezme,” *Yivo bleter* 1 (1937): 192–98.

<sup>27</sup> See Max Weinreich, “History of the Yiddish Language: The Problems and their Implications,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 103 (1959), 563–70; Max Weinreich, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh*, vol. 1 (New York, 1973), 32–33, 563.

<sup>28</sup> See Weinreich, *Geshikhte*, 83–95, and vol. III, 68–89; Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language* (New Haven – New York, 2008), vol. 1, 79–91, A61–A80.

be dedicating papers on the subject of Knaanic to each other in their respective festschrifts. A Russian Jew by birth, Jakobson migrated to Prague as a young man, where he would become a founding partner in the rise of the Prague School, and where he would live until his daring escape at the start of World War II. The current work of a specialist team at Charles University in Prague, working under the guidance of Dr. Robert Dittmann, is revealing the depth, and also the timeline, of Jakobson's scholarly interest in the Knaanic glosses and the issues they raise. According to Jakobson's own report, Slavic glosses in Hebrew manuscripts first caught his attention in 1915.<sup>29</sup>

Weinreich would publish his daring paper, "Yiddish, Knaanic, Slavic: The Basic Relationships" in the volume compiled to honor Jakobson's sixtieth birthday.<sup>30</sup> In the paper, Weinreich went out on a number of limbs, some of which he would later discreetly withdraw from in his (posthumously published) *History of the Yiddish Language*.<sup>31</sup> No more and no less:

"The first imprints on Yiddish [in Slavic lands] were left by a language called *leshon Knaan* 'the language of Knaan; Knaanic' in medieval Hebrew sources."<sup>32</sup>

In other words, it is here taken as a given that there was once a Jewish language which we may now call Knaanic, a far cry from the sum total of a corpus of (not all that many...) medieval

<sup>29</sup> Robert Dittmann, "K významu raných česko-židovských jazykových kontaktů v oblasti českých zemí pro diachronní bohemistiku," *Listy filologické* 135.3–4 (2012): 259–85; personal communication, April 2013; see also Bláha – Dittmann – Komárek – Polakovič – Uličná, "On the Problem of Judeo-Czech" and Bláha – Dittmann – Komárek – Polakovič – Uličná, "Roman Jakobson's Unpublished Study."

<sup>30</sup> Max Weinreich, "Yiddish, Knaanic, Slavic: The Basic Relationships," in *For Roman Jakobson. Essays on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday, 11 October 1956*, ed. M. Halle et al. (The Hague, 1956), 622–32.

<sup>31</sup> Weinreich, *Geshikhte*; Weinreich, *History*.

<sup>32</sup> Weinreich, "Yiddish, Knaanic, Slavic," 623.

Slavic glosses in rabbinic materials emanating from the writings of (mostly Ashkenazic) authors who lived in the Czech speaking area. But ever the careful scholar, Weinreich, later in the paper, does add a caveat that can be interpreted as practical or methodological, underscoring that the Knaanic language is a theoretical construct rather than an empirically proven reality.

"[...] there is one more dilemma to cope with: did Yiddish acquire a particular item from the coterritorial Slavic directly or through the medium of Western or Eastern Knaanic, respectively? The scarcity of the Jewish material compels us to neglect the second alternative and to look for solutions to the Slavic languages directly."<sup>33</sup>

It would be altogether possible for a critic to claim that not one word of attested Yiddish, or at the very most one word, *nébekh* (or *nébakh*) 'alas', derives from the Czech area. Even in the case of that one word, it is a mighty leap from position (a), a claim that it derives directly from Slavic to (b), a claim that it derives from Czech, to (c) a claim that it derives from the lost Jewish language Knaanic. Incidentally, the later attested forms of Prague Yiddish, it would appear, had not one word of older Slavic vintage in their dialect, not to speak of Knaanic,<sup>34</sup> a situation unchanged by entertaining etymologies and fanciful juxtapositions sometimes conjured.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, when it came to naming the proposed historical *components* of the Yiddish language, in the technical Weinreichian sense, in his monumental four volume *History*, Weinreich opted for the "Jewish language name" for the (tiny) Romance component, which he calls *Laazic*, but when it comes to the

<sup>33</sup> Weinreich, "Yiddish, Knaanic, Slavic," 626.

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. *Handlexicon der jüdisch-deutschen Sprache* (Prague, 1773); Leopold Schnitzler, *Prager Judendeutsch* (Gräfelfing bei München, 1966).

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Paul Wexler, *Explorations in Judeo-Slavic Linguistics* (Leiden, 1987); cf. Dovid Katz, "A Late Twentieth Century Case of *katóves*," in *History of Yiddish Studies*, ed. D. B. Kerler (Chur et al. – Oxford, 1991), 141–63.

(substantial) Slavic component of modern Eastern Yiddish, it is the *Slavic component*, not the “Knaanic component.” A critic of Weinreich interested in linguistic weight rather than cultural pedigree might well argue that there is no Romance component in Yiddish, just a small corpus of lexical items of Romance origin, and certainly no Knaanic component, where the “evidence,” less than hard, might be down to a single claimed word. In the notes in the *History* (completed before his death in 1969), Weinreich backtracked to some degree.

“Determinant Slavic: Matters relating to the Slavic component in Yiddish are treated in this chapter only to the extent to which they can help us in reconstructing Determinant Slavic. [...] Bearing in mind that the source of a Slavic-origin word in Yiddish could be either Knaanic or a Slavic language directly, the term Determinant Slavic is used here, not: Determinant Knaanic. This is the opposite of the situation with Determinant Laazic; in that case, there was no sense in taking about a Determinant Romance, because Romance-origin elements entered Yiddish in the period of its genesis only through western and southern Laazic.”<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, Jakobson, writing together with his close collaborator Morris Halle, would duly reciprocate in the festschrift for Max Weinreich’s seventieth birthday in 1964. Their paper, “The Term *Canaan* in Medieval Hebrew” remains a central paper in the field of Knaanic studies and a captivating document in the sociology of modern historical linguistics generally. The paper’s conclusions about individual glosses, and about the history of modern scholarship up until then, remain largely unassailable. What is fascinating is the subjective (and thoroughly well-intentioned) series of interpretations given to the origin of the application of biblical *Canaan* to the medieval Slavonic lands.

<sup>36</sup> Weinreich, *Geshikhte*, vol. 4, 250; cf. Weinreich, *History*, vol. 2, 584.

## VI. 20<sup>th</sup> century political correctness

To scholars of any persuasion who correctly understood that the medieval rabbinic use of *Land of Canaan* and *Language of Canaan* refers to Slavic, or specifically to the Czech area, there could be no escaping the obvious semantic origin: The relationship of *Slav* to words for “slave” in various European languages was the obvious source for the application of Biblical Canaan because of an ancient link of the name (in one of its senses) to – slavery. Both Weinreich’s paper of 1956, and Jakobson and Halle’s of 1964, tread rather gingerly. Weinreich says:

“But as far as *Knaan* is concerned, there is not the slightest doubt that it owes its existence to the association with *S(c)lavonia*. Since the Hebrew Biblical term for the non-Jewish slave is *eved knaani* ‘Canaanite slave’, the country from which the slaves in the main used to come was styled many centuries later, with a bold stroke of imagination, *Knaan*.”<sup>37</sup>

The problem here is, however, that the Hebraic legal term *עֶבֶד כְּנַעֲנִי* (‘Canaanite slave’ or more generally in later times ‘non-Jewish slave’) does not occur in the Bible. It is attested in post-biblical literature of the Talmud, and is known to veterans of traditional Jewish education from the beloved commentary of Rashi (1040–1105), most famously from his commentary at Exodus 21:2.

The impact of well-meaning concern for what is “good” upon straight historical linguistics should not be disparaged. As noted earlier, in the case of many smaller languages and cultures, linguistics – and indeed, philology in the Borokhovian sense – certainly plays its role in helping small, endangered, and especially stateless language and cultures emerge from obscurity and prejudiced suppositions into the bright sunshine of the academic

<sup>37</sup> Max Weinreich, “Yiddish, Knaanic, Slavic,” 623.

forum. At the proverbial table of learning, small and large languages can have a kind of equal status and be studied with the same methodological tools. That is certainly good.

Issues can arise, however, when aspects of the language and culture that can be embarrassing for moderns (not to mention postmoderns) lead to unconscious (or semi-conscious) omissions or recalibrations to put as humanistic as possible a spin on the past ethos of the languages and cultures in question. It is only to say, so to speak, that water is wet, to note that for such signature issues as race, nationality, religion, gender, tolerance of the Other, it would be rather futile to hope for the twenty-first century standards of liberalism or correctness that characterize much of modern Western academia and society at large.

Even today, some people who come to the field of Yiddish are taken aback by some of the straightforward remarks of Borokhov in the essay that founded the field. Here are two of them, from different parts of the *Aims of Yiddish Philology*:

“[concerning] those uncivil characterizations, that Jews used to apply to non-Jews, taking as their point of departure the ‘We are the Chosen People’ point of view [...], this category of disparaging vocabulary results from national separatedness, and is found among the uneducated classes of all nations.”

“Implementation of humanism in the language broadly speaking entails turning it into an arsenal for bringing to the Jewish people all the cultural values of modern pan-human development.”<sup>38</sup>

Such quotations should not be taken out of context. They came in the context of a much greater volume of text revealing for the world the wealth and beauty and uniqueness of Yiddish. More narrowly, they came in the course of the campaign Borokhov launched against the flood of modern German inward flows in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unlike

<sup>38</sup> Borokhov, “Di ufgabn fun der yidisher filologye,” 11 and 17.

some of the extreme purists who followed him, he recognized the humanizing effects of borrowing modern neutral words, even while condemning the greatest part of the influx, known in modern Yiddish culture as *dáytshmerish* (“Germanish”) that was in fact displacing genuine Yiddish forms evolved over centuries with innumerable cultural nuances and delights.

Scholars, even great scholars, are only human, and they have every right to seek out what is most positive and interethnically harmonious in the cultural past. Still, there is a time unto every thing under the sun, and the time comes when this too needs to be critically examined.

Even more than Weinreich in his 1956 paper on Knaanic, Jakobson and Halle in their 1964 paper on Knaanic, wanted to find something inspiring in the choice of the term by the medieval rabbinic authors who used it to characterize individual glosses coming from contemporary Slavic and particularly from the Czech area. Their efforts, at different points in the paper, are noteworthy.

“It would, however, be erroneous to read a pejorative sense into the appellations ארץ כנען [Land of Canaan], לשון כנען [Language of Canaan]. On the contrary, these two concepts evoked in the Jewish mind reverent associations with the Promised Land (Genesis XVII: 8) and with the holy tongue. Cf. the Biblical designation of the latter as שפת כנען (Isaiah XIX: 18).”

“And the exegete of the French school David Kimhi (died 1235) in his commentaries on Obadiah notes the legend about the Slavs as descendants of the inhabitants of Canaan which were put to flight by Joshua. ‘And even now they are called Canaanites’, adds the bookman.”

“Thus, the Jews of medieval Europe simply took over the ambiguous Biblical term כנען [Canaan] for the name of the Slavs, thereby rendering the corresponding ambiguity of this word in the majority of Western European languages.”

“And we have no reason to interpret this terminological identification of Slavs (and especially of Czechs) with עבדים ‘slaves’ as a testimony ‘einer Ideologie der Juden’, as was done by S. Krauss.”<sup>39</sup>

“The association between the two meanings of ארץ כנען [Land of Canaan] – ‘the Czech Kingdom’ and ‘the Promised Land’ – may well reflect the feelings of the Jews regarding their status in Bohemia and Moravia, which was incomparably better than that of their German brethren. Conditions were particularly favorable under Wenceslaus I and Otakar II, who was called the Judaophile king, whereas for Germany this was one of the periods of interminable bestial pogroms.”<sup>40</sup>

With no pretensions to any absolute accuracy, and with no disrespect to previous emphasis laid on one or another aspect, it is perhaps time, deep in the second decade of the twenty-first century, to look anew at the medieval recycling of Biblical *Canaan* for the Slavic area generally, and in some cases, the Czech area more specifically.

### VII. Recovering the lost medieval meaning (and humor) of European Knaan

There are two major points of departure.

First, the European Jewish context. Medieval Jewish authors successfully recycled Biblical names to their new European Jewish culture areas, using names that caught on, were used by Jews for European language and culture areas, and in time came to denote their specific Jewish communities (even when geographically displaced). The most famous instances, Ashkenaz

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Krauss, “Die hebräischen Benennungen der modernen Völker,” in *Jewish Studies in Memory of George A. Kohut*, eds. S. Baron – A. Marx (New York, 1935), 398.

<sup>40</sup> Jakobson – Halle, “The Term *Canaan*,” 148–49, 152–53.

for the Germanic speaking lands of central Europe, and Sefarad (Seforad, Sfarad) for the Iberian Peninsula continue in wide and varied use to this day, most frequently denoting Jewish communities and traditions long displaced from their origins wherever they may now be. By suffixation of the agentivizing Hebrew-derived *-i* (plural *-im*), there is the most convenient nomenclature for singular and plural of people hailing from each group.

Less widely known (and largely extinct) are the Biblically derived names for the remaining medieval areas and Jewish culture groups, including Hogor (Hagar) for the Hungarian speaking lands, Tugermo (Togerma) for the Turkish lands, Tsorfat (Tsarefat, Tsarfat etc.) for France, Canaan (Knaan) for the Slavic (or more specifically the Czech), lands among others.<sup>41</sup>

The attached map, on which all borders are of necessity approximate, aims at least in outline to illustrate first, the major Jewish-named culture areas of medieval Europe; second, to illustrate Knaan vis-à-vis the rest; and finally, to illustrate the opposition of “Big Knaan” (the Slavic lands in general as they or part of them might have been perceived to their west) and “Little Knaan” or Knaan in the narrower sense of the Czech-Bohemian area, more or less as conceived by Jakobson and Halle<sup>42</sup> and others. The approximate borders of “Little Knaan” are based on Žemlička,<sup>43</sup> based on the thirteenth century state of affairs, and, as pointed out by Dittmann, represent one of a series of possible geolinguistic constructs for specialists in the area to consider in the coming years.<sup>44</sup> Finally, this map makes the explicit claim that “Little Knaan” in the Czech-Bohemian sense was a Jewish linguistic and cultural slice of both Ashkenaz and Knaan, where

<sup>41</sup> See Krauss, “Die hebräischen Benennungen”; Weinreich, *History*, Ch. 2; Katz, *Words on Fire*, 19–24.

<sup>42</sup> Jakobson – Halle, “The Term *Canaan*,” 148–55.

<sup>43</sup> Josef Žemlička, *Počátky Čech královských 1198–1253. Proměna státu a společnosti* (Praha, 2002), 278.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Dittmann, personal communication, April 2013.



course other uses of Canaan in the Hebrew Bible (see Prudký's survey in the present volume). The Land of Canaan became the Land of Israel and was in times of the dual monarchy, from the later tenth century BC, divided into the Kingdom of Israel (or Samaria) in the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south, until the fall of each; the north to Assyria around 722 BC and the south to the Babylonians around 586 BC.

As for the indigenous people displaced, the Canaanites are mentioned numerous times in the Hebrew Bible, but not with any regrets about an invader displacing inhabitants, but quite to the contrary, among the nations God wanted destroyed to make way for His people. Abraham himself administered an oath to his servant to ensure "that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell" (Genesis 24:3). In Exodus it is usually about God's promise: "And I will send an angel before thee; and I will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite" (Exodus 33:2). Later things morph into a more proactive command: "Thou shalt utterly destroy them: the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee, that they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods [...]" (Deuteronomy 20:17–18). This was the Hebrews' war of God against the gods (or Gods, depending on one's point of view).

From these rather uncomplimentary references to the Canaanites of old and their fellow inhabitants of the Land, we can turn to the more directly relevant Biblical (and post-Biblically developed) story and meaning of the interlinking of the curse of slavery with the name Canaan.

Noah had three sons: Shem (considered progenitor of the Semitic peoples), Ham (of the African peoples) and Japheth (of the [Indo-] European peoples).

"These are the three sons of Noah, and of them was the whole earth overspread. And Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard, and he drank of the wine, and was drunk, and exposed himself within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were turned backward so they would not see their father's nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said: 'Cursed be Canaan. A slave of slaves shall he be unto his brethren'. And he said: 'Blessed be the Lord God of Shem. And Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant. And Noah lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years.'

(Genesis 9:19–28)

There is something mysterious about the text. Why was Canaan cursed rather than his father Ham who committed the offence? It is even more puzzling in light of the information that "Noah knew what his youngest son [not grandson!] had done unto him" (verse 24). For modern Biblical scholarship, it may be a straightforward case of two ancient versions edited into one less than seamlessly. But for the matter at hand, it is the Jewish tradition over the millennia that counts.

And that takes us to a second, perhaps smaller mystery: As morally wrong as gaping with triumph at one's naked father at a drunken party might be, it doesn't quite seem to fit into the league of sins recorded earlier in the same chapter: murder and the consuming of an animal's blood.

In the Talmud, certain gaps in the narrative are filled in. The tractate Sanhedrin records the following deliberation between two major Talmudic figures:

"And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him.

"Rav and Shmuel differ, one maintaining that he castrated him, while the other says that he sexually abused him.

“Whoever thinks he castrated him reasons this way: Since he cursed him by his fourth son [Ham had four sons: Kush, Mitsraim, Phut and Canaan; Genesis 10: 6] he must have injured him with respect to a fourth son [in other words depriving Noah of the possibility of ever having a fourth son].

“Whoever thinks he sexually abused him, draws an analogy concerning the words ‘and he saw’ which occur twice. In one place it is written: ‘And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father’ while elsewhere it is written ‘And when Shechem the son of Hamor saw her’ [i.e. Dinah, ‘he took her and lay with her and defiled her’; Genesis 34:2].

“Now, according to the opinion that he castrated him, it is right that he cursed him by his fourth son. But according to the opinion that he abused him, why did he curse his fourth son [Canaan]: he should have cursed him [Ham] himself? Both things were done!

[Babylonian Talmud, 70a; punctuation and paragraph division added]

Over the last thousand years, the main point, so to speak, was known to every child studying the Torah with the commentary of Rashi, who comments succinctly, based on the Talmudic material, as follows at the words “saw the nakedness of his father”:

“There is one opinion that he castrated him, and another opinion that he sexually abused him.”

(Rashi, Genesis 9:22)

But Knaan bashing does not end there. In another tractate, Pesahim (Ashkenazic *Psókhim*, laws of Passover), there is something more. In a section prefaced by the words “Our rabbis taught” we find:

“Five things did Canaan command his sons: Love one another, love robbery, love lewdness, hate your masters and do not speak the truth.”

(Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim, 113b)

Does any of this mean that the medieval Jews of the Slavic lands despised their neighbors or wanted some harm or curse to come upon them? Absolutely not. It was a classic case of

intra-Jewish lore, humor by juxtaposition, and analogy with deep Biblical and Talmudic roots, in the spirit of the scholars of medieval European Jewish civilization, who coveted no political power or military might, but had their own linguistic fun with many things, not least the slightly naughty recycling of words from the Bible.

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