than a reflective function for art, of what has been called by Zalmona and the historian Anita Shapira,29 the defensive posture of Zionist society and culture, which merely maintains the idea of a disappearance of Orientalism at a politically convenient moment, a moment when competition, imposed by the colonial overlord, came to define the struggle to be seen as native and thus could not allow any representation of otherness in the land.

At this point, I may have less solved a mystery than, I hope, complicated one. At least, that was my aim: to question and complicate the invocation of Orientalism and abstraction within a consideration of Zionist aesthetic responses to history and politics. The disappearance of Orientalist themes in Zionist art and literature—the very notion, I believe, a ruse, an idea that cannot really stand up to rigorous scrutiny, an idea that merely veils art’s ongoing collusion and contribution to a political history it would enable—seems to me neither reactive nor naively passive. Rather, the relationship between Orientalism and abstraction in Zionist culture can only be understood, I think, as a dialectics that drove much of the movement’s political and aesthetic encounters with the problems of internal settlement and the conflicts with an external indigene, issues that encompassed and drove both the creation of a new identity for the Jew and the transformation of the land of Palestine into something that could be called authentically Jewish.

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**SPEAKERLY TEXTS AND HISTORICAL REALITIES**

**MENDELE’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE REVIVAL OF HEBREW SPEECH**

*Sheila E. Jelen*

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I.

Did S. J. Abramowitz’s (1835–1917) stylistically innovative Hebrew texts, written toward the end of his career, usher in a new period of Hebrew nationalist vitality and secular Hebrew speech, or did they, in fact, work against the assumption that the creation of Hebrew vernacular literary texts would make possible Hebrew speech and a polysystemic Hebrew culture?1 Abramowitz, widely known as Mendele Mokher Sfarim (after a character and narrator who figured prominently in many of his Hebrew and Yiddish works), began his literary career during the Haskalah in 1860 with the publication of an essay in Hebrew, “Mishpat Shalom” (Judgment of Peace). Abramowitz’s career has generally been divided into three periods: (1) the early Hebrew period, in the 1860s, is characterized by Hebrew essays and novels in melisah (biblical pastiche) style; he wrote his first Hebrew novels in 1862 and 1868; (2) his middle Yiddish period, from the early 1870s through the latter part of the 1880s, during which he wrote the bulk of his best-known Yiddish novels, and (3) his later Hebrew period, from 1886 until the end of his life; from 1886 until 1894, Abramowitz wrote a cycle of Hebrew short stories and novellas, which will be the focus of this essay: “In the Secret Place of Thunder” [Be-seter ra’am] (1886), “Shem and Japeth on the Train” [Shem ve-Yafet ba-agalah] (1890), “No Rest for Jacob” [Lo naḥat ba-Ya’akov] (1892), “During the Earthquake”

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1 According to Benjamin Harshav, a polysystem is a “network of interrelated textual genres and social and cultural institutions in a society, each one of which is a flexible system in its own right; that is, a polysystem is a dynamic system of systems.” A polysystem, in linguistic terms, is established when a language penetrates multiple domains, becoming usable across disciplines and discourses. In the case of Hebrew, it would only become a living language when it was used in sacred as well as secular contexts, by the young and the old, by scholars as well as laypeople. See Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 33.
was born; this signature style was marked by an undifferentiated synthesis of Hebrew from different periods and deployed within a distinctly oral-rhetorical literary frame. With the *nusah* Abramowitz attempted to point to the dilemma he himself faced as a Hebrew writer during a populist moment in Jewish European history. He tried his hand at a “democratic” Hebrew literature that might exceed its usual elite and scholarly boundaries, but in Hebrew he could do so only in the language of the elite. By placing the necessary textual tools in the mouth of a pathetic homodiegetic narrator (a narrator who serves as a character in the narrative) named Mendele Mokher Sfarim, Abramowitz gave those texts a chance to reinvent themselves as populist. Of course, framing elitist texts as oral does not really render them accessible. It simply creates a fiction of accessibility predicated on the assumption that the oral is popular. This paradox lies at the core of Abramowitz’s texts’ “speakerly” qualities. Even while working to render his texts oral, Abramowitz encodes consciousness of the fictionality of that orality, of the impossibility of creating a truly accessible oral text out of elitist intertextual components.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. formulated the notion of a “speakerly” text in order to describe attempts to capture the colloquial rhythms of oral speech within African American literary works. According to him, “speakerly” texts, as distinguished from literary texts that simply attempt to communicate oral discourse, privilege their textuality even as they poke fun at it; the juncture between the oral and the textual is simultaneously executed and challenged. Speakerly texts speak their own process of textual transcription, privileging their textuality while commenting on it as if in voice. Abramowitz’s Hebrew *nusah* texts are “speakerly” in a similar vein, “speaking” their own intertextual genesis, thus highlighting their purportedly “speaking” voice even as they emphasize their textual composition.

Abramowitz’s intertextual style does not deny its own components as much as it challenges them by setting them into a rhetorical framework that declares itself “oral” even while drawing attention to its necessarily literary components. While the rhetorical strategies implemented by Abramowitz in order to render his texts “oral” seem to motivate the text, the text’s orality is quite obviously produced by textual components—specifically other texts.

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4 See Bialik, “Yotser ha-nusah,” 240.

Not only is the orality necessarily contained within the literary text, it comprises literary intertexts—rabbinic, biblical, liturgical, etc. The different styles of rabbinic and biblical literature merge in Abramowitz’s texts in a way that reflects the fundamental tension beginning to be felt and expressed during the Haskalah between the scholarly language of the elite and the oral language of the folk. Abramowitz makes those texts "speak," acknowledging the distance between their scholarly textuality and the vernacular fictions that they are put to the task of creating.

Abramowitz’s Mendele Mokher Sfarrim, or Mendele the Book Peddler, serves as the vernacular center and the rhetorical key to the speakerly nature of Abramowitz’s nusah style. Prominently featured throughout Abramowitz’s Yiddish and Hebrew novels, Mendele appears first in elaborate prefaces as a literary executor of various sorts, but resurfaces in the body of Abramowitz’s Hebrew short stories as a homodiegetic narrator, a narrator who speaks in a first-person voice and also figures as a character in the story. Mendele enables Abramowitz to craft a text that is uniquely vernacular in ways that transcend the intertextual and highly literary style innovations usually associated with the nusah.

In contrast to a critical consensus on the link between Abramowitz’s Yiddish output and the birth of the Hebrew nusah, I would assert that the causal relationship observed between his Hebrew nusah and his Yiddish novels is further complicated by an understanding of the rhetorical role of the figure of Mendele. One difference between Abramowitz’s Hebrew short stories and his novels in Yiddish and Hebrew is the rhetorical and thematic construction of his Mendele figure. In the Yiddish novels and their Hebrew translations Mendele creates a literary frame, and only incidentally an oral register. In the Hebrew short stories, on the other hand, Mendele is the voice of literary texts but not the justification for a literary frame. Indeed, I would argue that Mendele’s different roles in Abramowitz’s Hebrew and Yiddish works correspond to the different trajectories of Hebrew and Yiddish literature at the turn of the twentieth century. Yiddish literature was pushing away from its identity as strictly a populist, religious, or satirical medium and toward becoming a serious forum for belles lettres, while Hebrew was pushing towards a vernacular, popular identity and away from its hyperliterary, rarefied religious-textual identity. Perhaps in understanding Mendele’s unique differences in the two distinct literary corpora—Hebrew and Yiddish—authored by Abramowitz, we can better understand why he was considered the “grandfather” of both Hebrew and Yiddish modern literature. Using Mendele, Abramowitz ushered an “oral” pretense into Hebrew literature, and a “literary” pretense into Yiddish literature. Even so, his dual identity always forced his readers, and his cre-

ator, to maintain consciousness of his role as neither wholly oral nor wholly literary. Rather, Mendele, read across linguistic lines, was a tool for chiasmus between the oral and the literary, but not a guarantee.

III.

In “In the Secret Place of Thunder” Mendele meditates at great length on his impulse to speak in melitosah style stringing together phrases from traditional Jewish texts to a high rhetorical effect, but destroying any vernacular pretenses. He seems, in the Russian Formalist sense to be “laying bare his own device,” pointing to the role of texts even within an orally configured rhetorical voice. Mendele creates a hall of mirrors in which his oral style and the written style in which his oral style is depicted reflect each other to construct a commentary on the oral performance of textual culture.

In the course of a discussion on the nature of the inhabitants of Kisalon (Fool Town) Mendele and an acquaintance argue over Mendele’s oral discursive melitosah style.

“Reb Mendele, I can’t understand you because of your casuistry [pilpul]. I speak to you in a reasonable fashion, the way people speak to one another, and judge on the basis of what my eyes see, and you try to reveal the hidden through dialectics and deductions [pilpul u-svarah]. You seem to be studying a page of the Talmud with me.... Your speech is as strange to me as all the articles written in the same style,” the man said, pointing to the Hebrew periodicals lying before him. “Do you, Rebbe Mendele, understand yourself and believe in what you yourself say? Answer me truthfully....”

“Of course I understand and believe in myself, in the same way that those writers understand their words in writing [divrehem she-bikhtav] and believe in themselves.”

“If so, man, you must be insane!” he said horrified, shaking his head in frustration.

Even if I didn’t explicitly say so, you would understand yourselves, gentlemen, that that man is not a “patriot,” not one of us. I know that I am not crazy and lacking in judgment, thank God, and neither are you debaters, writers, lecturers. You fervent preachers are not crazy or stupid at all, though you may appear so in speech. Of course you do not preach in vain, and all proof and demonstration lie with you.... I too don’t want to conceal my own naturally exalted style [melitosat] and so I will open my mouth in melitosah [eftebah bi-melitosah pi] without hiding it even if they say of me. Doesn’t he speak in an exaggerated manner—hai tana guzma naka—just like all Kislonites!”

6 S. J. Abramowitz, “Be-seter ra’am” [In the Secret Place of Thunder], in Kol kitve Mendele Mokher Sfarrim (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1956), 381.
Mendele, in justifying his overtly “literary” style of speech, invokes melitsah as an oral rhetorical preference and not strictly a textual one. The literary style of the excerpt in which he explicitly refers to melitsah in this oral sense is, however, an exquisite example of textual melitsah. The final meditation, in which Mendele explicitly names melitsah is a mixture of rabbinic and biblical discourse, concluding with a line that is totally Aramaic and constructed as a concluding statement within a talmudic argument hai tana guzma nakat—“Doesn’t he speak in an exaggerated manner?” Mendele’s acquaintance’s earlier accusation that Mendele is speaking as if he were studying a page of Talmud, and here Mendele’s decision to conclude his remarks in Aramaic, the vernacular language of the Talmud, highlights the textual-oral symbiosis implied by his explicit discussion of melitsah.

Aramaic was the spoken language of the Jews of Babylonia and was used in the Talmud to represent the Rabbis’ oral discussion of classical Hebrew texts. In fact, Abramowitz often uses Aramaic in his Hebrew stories to signal Yiddish. While the introduction of talmudic language into Hebrew prose is to be understood as a radical vernacular innovation on Abramowitz’s part, here we see that talmudic discursive style can prove confusing as opposed to illuminating for the uninstructed. What was once a signal of speech in text has become a textual marker in speech. If one doesn’t study Talmud, talking to someone who speaks talmudic jargon is like speaking to a wall of text, not to a human voice. Accordingly, Mendele’s acquaintance finds it difficult to follow Mendele’s talmudic oral discursive style and accuses him of speaking like a text.

Not only is Mendele accused of speaking like the Talmud, he is accused of speaking like a Hebrew journal article from the Haskalah period. Mendele defends himself by accepting the premise that he speaks like a text and claiming that he can read and comprehend his own speech as if it were writing. His acquaintance’s inability to comprehend talmudic casuistry as inherently oral parallels Mendele’s insistence that if he can read himself then he must be making sense orally. In the case of Mendele’s friend, Aramaic—the sign of orality within the talmudic text—has come to reify the textuality of Mendele’s speech. In Mendele’s case, he is so far from speaking an actual vernacular that his speech may as well be the embodiment of a text, and he accepts it as such. For Mendele’s acquaintance, only living speech can be the measuring stick for representations of speech, while for Mendele textual approximations of living speech are the only way to posit a vernacular.

The position of the Talmud in modern Hebrew literary culture is scrutinized here. Abramowitz acknowledges, in this passage, the centrality of the Talmud to his construction of a speaking voice for Mendele, but at the same time he acknowledges the limitations of such a strategy. The Hebrew vernacular texts that he constructs in his prose fiction are not, in many ways, even Hebrew. So while, on the one hand, those unfamiliar with Hebrew textual culture could not possibly read his attempts at a vernacular Hebrew literature, on the other hand, those who could read Hebrew would have to be familiar with a very specific Hebrew style, a talmudic one, in order to understand the vernacular strategy being implemented through Aramaicisms. Where does this place readers who are familiar with the Bible and liturgy but not Talmud? Women, for example, who by and large learned just enough Hebrew to read prayers, and most men, who only learned traditional texts in heder, until the age of thirteen, would probably not be familiar with the language of the Talmud. Mendele’s satirical voice pokes fun at itself, realizing his acquaintance’s critique. When accused of sounding like a text, he triumphantly claims to be able to read himself like a text. The net result is that the only person who can understand Mendele’s speech seems to be Mendele himself and a group of mythic writers who do not appear in the text, but whom Mendele apostrophizes. Abramowitz creates a solipsistic world for the vernacular voice of Mendele—one generated by texts and understood only by those with access to those texts.

In his apostrophe to a learned audience of Hebrew writers and thinkers the text breaks down into the most obscure, obfuscating Hebrew imaginable. As a reader and translator of this passage, I felt a palpable difference between this passage and what came before and after it. If Mendele had simply articulated this passage as a narrative aside, I could claim that he was juxtaposing the different melitsah styles of speech and text. But Mendele continues to speak, in an apostrophe, even after his conversation with his critical friend ends. Mendele, apparently, possesses two different oral voices, one dialogic and one performative. In the former, according to his friend, he is incomprehensible, and in the latter, as experienced by the reader, he is also incomprehensible. The fact that Mendele is presented as speaking both in dialogue and in narrative apostrophe seems to challenge Abramowitz’s zeal to create a vernacular text. If it is totally incomprehensible, then has a vernacular style really been achieved?

In “During the Earthquake” Mendele and his friend Reb Leib go to the big city seeking out financial sponsorship for a move to Palestine. There, Reb Leib becomes a vehement believer in the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, and he periodically breaks into oral melitsah Hebrew that drives Mendele to distraction:
“She’s come, you say... come to inquire after me! Now Reb Mendele, congratulate me”—Reb Leib got so excited he began to speak to me in the strangest Hebrew, “Did you hearken? I say this with no artifice. Truthfully, Reb Mendele, you must congratulate me.”

“What are you talking about?” I said after I looked intently at his face, thinking to myself that he had lost his mind, “and this language you are speaking, what is it? Reb Leib, speak Yiddish to me, the way we have spoken to each other until now.”

But Reb Leib was like a deaf man, chattering and grimacing in a strange language, a language that was neither a holy tongue, nor a jargon [ashdodite]. And he struggled with it—it did not flow off his tongue. He choked on every word, as if it was a bone in his throat, and I had to dislodge it for him. Reb Leib was, then, like a woman in heavy and difficult labor, and I was the midwife, mercifully trying to disentangle the child from her womb. And thank God we were successful—just then the messenger came and put a note in Reb Leib’s hand.

Whereas in my previous analysis I pointed out the way in which Mendele’s speaking voice, either in dialogue or apostrophe, dominates the text, here we see a variation on this phenomenon. In scrutinizing issues of speech, Mendele draws attention here to the gap in his own voice, between the language of narration and the language of speech, or diegetic and mimetic language. I use mimesis and diegesis here the way Gates uses it, to denote the quotation of speech in contrast to the representation of speech. His definition is based on that of Genette, who says that mimesis is when the narrator steps away from the text and serves to simply quote the language of the characters, while in diegesis the narrator’s mediation of characters’ speech through paraphrase or unmarked quotation, among other stylistic means, dominates the text.

The difference between mimesis and diegesis for Mendele becomes evident when, in a narrative passage, he distinguishes between Hebrew and Yiddish by referring to Hebrew as the “holy tongue” and to “jargon” as “Ashdodite,” or the biblical term for a jargon. Earlier, however, when Mendele explicitly tells Reb Leib, in quoted speech, to speak Yiddish, he refers to Yid-

dish directly as “Yiddish.” In so doing, he demonstrates the difference between oral utterances (“Yiddish”) and an orally inflected style of narration (“Ashdodite”). Even as he criticizes Reb Leib’s high Hebrew style, characterizing it as a resistant fetus, he himself engages in that same style when he narrates and is not speaking to Reb Leib. The only difference lies in the fact that Mendele narrates in textual Hebrew melitshah, while Reb Leib speaks it.

Reb Leib and Mendele only find their way out of their difficult predicament, with the former trying to speak Hebrew and the latter trying to facilitate the difficult process, when a messenger delivers a note to Reb Mendele. The letter extricates them from their plight, interrupting Reb Leib’s speech. For Mendele the text is the vehicle for salvation from oral confoundment, indicating the direction in which all of Mendele’s vernacular texts move—they circle always back to their textual origins. As Reb Leib’s midwife, Mendele seeks to assist the birth of a Hebrew-speaking voice. He is (as he himself admits) clearly not successful. Reb Leib’s Hebrew does not improve, at least not in the course of the story. Only a text in the form of a letter can deliver him from the linguistic travails in which he finds himself. The gap between the mimetic and the diegetic levels of the story, the quotation of speech and its descriptive representation, confounds Mendele.

IV.

Like the birth of Reb Leib’s Hebrew speaking voice depicted in “During the Earthquake,” “In the Secret Place of Thunder” is the story of Reb Mendele’s attempt to birth his own Hebrew voice, both as a narrator, and as an actor and speaker within the fictional world. The story begins with Mendele operating as a heterodiegetic narrator, vocally present but dramatically absent. As it continues, however, Mendele evolves into a homodiegetic narrator—not only an embodied character within the scope of the story, but the focus of the drama. The transition between Mendele as heterodiegetic to homodiegetic narrator is marked by several events.

7 Abramowitz, “Bi-yeme ha-ra’ash” [During the Earthquake], in Kol kitev Mendele, 415.
10 Here Ashdodite comically refers to Russian because in the Bible the Ashdodites were the quintessential non-Jews and in Mendele’s world as well, the quintessential non-Jews were Russian. I thank Robert Alter for this observation.
11 While teaching this text to a group of Israelis, they puzzled over the term “Ashdodite,” not understanding to what it could possibly refer. This further demonstrates my point—Mendele makes a conscious decision to speak in a more accessible terminology than that which he uses to narrate.
12 Birth is often a metaphor for the revival of Hebrew during the period of the Modern Hebrew Renaissance. Bialik wrote an essay entitled “Hevel lashon” or “Language Pangs” (as in birth pangs), which dealt with the necessity to infuse textual culture with oral resonance. See Bialik, “Hevel lashon” [Language Pangs], in Kol kitev, 201–6.
Relatively early in the story, he places himself in the middle of a Kislonite street and indicates that he recognizes a woman named Brayndel walking by:

I see Brayndel, my friend there healthy and full-bodied, the wife of Faytel the middleman. She is all dolled up in the finest adornments, her head is like a vineyard, with her hat, may it only bear good tidings, growing and blossoming like a well-watered garden [ya’aleh ve-yitzmah ke-gan ratuv]. Her face is rosy, rather, it’s aflame with the weight of her dress and the warmth of her coat. With your permission, gentlemen, I will call her over, this wise woman, and introduce you to her.

Good Sabbath [shabta taba], Brayndel! Can you hear me? No, she can’t hear…. 13

Brayndel is rendered in the biblical language of the Song of Songs, as if she, in her overdressed, overcooked state, is the idealized love object. The semantic gap between the biblical language of love and Brayndel, the absurd object of these linguistic flourishes is, as has been discussed by Robert Alter, one strategy employed by Abramowitz to poke fun at the necessary intertextuality of modern Hebrew prose. 14 By replacing the Shulamite with Brayndel, both Brayndel and the biblical language used to describe her are rendered ridiculous.

More important, Brayndel cannot hear Mendele speaking to her. Mendele attributes this, in the continuation of the text, to a sudden ruckus in the town. Alternatively, however, Brayndel’s deafness can be traced to the fact that Mendele’s melitsah voice, his citation of the Song of Songs is not audible within the scene itself. It exists only on the level of narration. The overdetermined textual nature of Mendele’s oral utterance undoes itself, renders it inaudible. Though he tries to incorporate himself into the drama, he is kept (or keeps himself) at arm’s length. The failure of Mendele’s attempt to converse with Brayndel presents a crisis in Mendele’s participation in the unfolding narrative, which he soon rectifies, foregrounding his dramatic as well as narrative presence in the text.

While Mendele is the focus of the drama enacted for the rest of the story, it is, unexpectedly, a drama of silence, and not of speech. After his melitsah discussion, Mendele’s horse is stolen, his cart is vandalized, and he is injured in a pogrom:

I was ill for a long while, from shock…. After a tremendous, salubrious sweat, as is my habit, I shut up and stopped talking; I just sighed, gestured, and stuttered. “Rally, Mendele,” my visitors said, affectionately, beseechingly, “Speak! Why lie there like a golem?” I sighed and squinted, but no words came…. 15

Mendele claims to begin speaking again in the course of the story, but only diegetically, as he talks about talking, but doesn’t actually speak. The only mimetically represented conversation that takes place from this point onward is a conversation with a Polish acquaintance. He and the Pole speak in the language of the Talmud, debating back and forth on the nature of Jewish/non-Jewish relations. This conversation draws attention to its own constructedness—placing not only Hebrew, but the Hebrew of Jewish legislative giants, in the mouth of a Polish peasant. As we saw earlier in the story, even Mendele’s educated acquaintance could not comprehend the language of the Talmud. Here, a Polish peasant does. This whole scene could be viewed as a mimetic transcription of Polish into Hebrew. More plausibly, it can be viewed as a mimetic fantasia, with Mendele imagining an actual talmudic debate, in the language of the Rabbis, between himself and his aggressor. 16 In either case, Mendele has not resumed the juncture between speech and narration, between Hebrew mimesis and Hebrew diegesis, that he so tentatively had achieved before tragedy struck.

V.

Mendele’s inevitable return to diegesis in “In the Secret Place of Thunder,” like the inevitable return to the text represented by the intervention of the letter in “During the Earthquake,” is dramatized throughout the short story sequence by Mendele’s shifting in and out of his role as a book peddler. Mendele, throughout Abramowitz’s story cycle tries his hand at occupations other than book peddling, either by necessity or by choice. In “In the Secret Place of Thunder,” after he loses his horse and cart, Mendele takes a break from book peddling, only returning to it at the very end of the story. In “During the Earthquake” Mendele leaves book peddling in order to become a professional pilgrim to Palestine, investing all his energy in finding sponsors to send him to the

14 Robert Alter has analyzed Abramowitz’s use of allusion to create contextual gaps between the source text and the modern text for a comical effect. See Alter, Invention of Hebrew Prose, 32–40.
16 In “Shem and Japheth on the Train,” the speech of a Pole and that of a preverbal babyl are rendered mimetically, echoing this challenge to the possibility of actual spoken Hebrew. While we may lapse into believing that Mendele or other characters may actually be speaking Hebrew, at moments like this; when Hebrew is placed into the mouth of a distinctly non-Hebrew-speaking character, the pretense of mimesis of speech is sorely challenged. Abramowitz, “Shem ve-Yefet bagalal” [Shem and Japheth on the Train], in Kol kine Mendele.
Holy Land. In “Shem and Japheth on the Train” Mendele trades in his horse and book cart for a journey on a train, changing the nature of his profession to the extent that he travels farther afield than would have been possible in his original conveyance. He carries his books in his luggage and his primary identity, upon encountering fellow passengers, is not that of book peddler, because his wares do not precede him as they did before. In “In the Tribunals of Heaven and Earth,” Mendele, as in “Shem and Japheth on the Train” travels again on a train, and his book peddling is barely even invoked, although implied. The only stories in the Hebrew corpus that seem to foreground Mendele’s book peddling are “No Rest for Jacob” and “The Burnt.”

Book peddling, primarily in Mendele’s Yiddish works and their attendant translations into Hebrew, serves for Mendele as the justification for the peripatetic lifestyle that keeps him in contact with a variety of different communities. It also enables him to try on many different literary hats. As a locus of textual exchange, Mendele’s book peddling puts him symbolically, and often practically, in a position to receive unsolicited manuscripts that he feels responsible to rework and to publish, or even unsolicited oral tales that he feels compelled to transcribe.

In the Hebrew short stories, as mentioned earlier, Mendele’s role as a literary mediator seems less relevant than his role as a vernacular mediator. He is not defined by his identity as the Book Peddler to the same extent that he is in his other works. In fact, in “In the Secret Place of Thunder” and “In the Tribunals of Heaven and Earth,” Mendele subtly tries on a different rhetorical hat, notably that of hazan (prayer leader or cantor), as an alternative to book peddling. In repeatedly undermining his identity as a book peddler, Mendele experiments with roles that will enable him to adopt a more “oral” stance, while taking into consideration the textual undercurrent necessary for any Hebrew rhetorical orality. He creates a nusah comprising orally voiced liturgical texts. This nusah, like Haskalah literary melitsah, is a textual pastiche. In this case, however, it is not biblical pastiche, but liturgical pastiche, and it is quite explicitly oral, expressed in the voice of Mendele as a hazan. In the beginning of the second section of “In the Secret Place of Thunder” Mendele turns to God and addresses him in the style of the hazan’s private prayer, recited on Rosh Hashanah, or the New Year. In “In the Tribunals of Heaven and Earth,” he invokes the same prayer through the well-known self-denigrating liturgical formula: “Here I stand, impoverished in deeds [דנה נטני]”

In this New Year prayer, the hazan invokes his role as an oral intermediary, a melits, on behalf of the congregation, speaking a written text to God as if it was their articulated prayer. Thus, the figure of the hazan as melits reifies Mendele’s narrative performance as that of an oral melits as well, an oral intermediary on behalf of the liturgical texts that constitute the melitsah backbone of the story. Periodically the hazan also falls silent in the course of the Rosh Hashanah prayer, articulating the words under his breath yet coming back to fully voiced expression spontaneously and unpredictably. Thus, this prayer is a wonderful way for Mendele to be both fully voiced on the mimetic plane and fully narrative on the diegetic plane within the rubric of the orally directed literary form of prayer.

“In the Tribunal of Earth,” the second part of the story, is constructed out of what seems to be an unbroken pastiche of prayers that is almost impossible to translate. In fact, the phrase “in the tribunal of heaven and in the tribunal of earth,” is derived from the high-holiday liturgy, alerting us to the overarching theme and style of prayer in these two stories. In the second paragraph for example, we read the line: “Hineh ze eli, el yeshuati, mashiv ruah tsah”—This is my God, my savior, sending out a clear breeze….” Three prayers are invoked here: the Havdalah service concluding the Sabbath (hineh el yeshuati); the Song at the Sea from the daily liturgy (zeh eli ve-anvehu); and a meditation added to the eighteen benedictions, also from the daily liturgy, that petitions God for rain (mashiv ha-ruah u-morid ha-gashem). The first two sources, from Havdalah and the Song at the Sea, are taken from the Bible originally, though their invocation by Mendele is done so quite explicitly from within their later, derivative, liturgical context. The relationship between this liturgical pastiche and the more typical Haskalah biblical pastiche is thus implied here. Beginning with the pastiche, which possesses an inherently more oral resonance, the resonance of orally performed prayers, we move, through analysis of the individual prayer fragments, toward biblical pastiche. The textual is understood as the backbone for the oral.

Throughout “In the Tribunal of Earth,” Mendele can be found in postures of prayer. The woman who owns the boarding house where he stays even asks him to pray on her behalf because she mistakes him for a tsadik, a hasidic Holy Man. In fact, at moments Mendele misses large chunks of conversation among his fellow boardinghouse guests because he falls spontaneously into prayer. Thus, while he may not spend much of the story speaking to the other characters, Mendele performs this text like a hazan before and on behalf of an implied congregation of auditors. Mendele, in effect, prays “in the tribunal of heaven.” Voicing liturgy provides one resolution for Mendele’s struggle to find a marriage between the diegetic and the mimetic, between speech acts and acts of
narration. Narration becomes a speech act in that it is constituted by prayers—
orally performed but textually based.

Early on in "In the Tribunal of Earth," Mendele hears someone responding
to someone else's query in the language of liturgy, and he finds the formal
idiom employed to be extremely distasteful and ineffectual: "His answer,
because it was in the style of the penitential service, vexed me, though it didn't
indicate any irritation or abuse." This is reminiscent of the scene in "During
the Earthquake" when Mendele rejects Reb Leib's melissah speaking style even
while employing that same style himself narratively. What Mendele will do on
the level of narration he won't do on the level of speech, and what he allows
himself to do on the level of narration, he won't allow others to do in speech. In
contrast to his initial expression of distaste in "In the Tribunals of Heaven and
Earth" for the language of the penitential service in common speech, when
Mendele thinks to himself or explicitly narrates without speaking out as part of
the drama of the text, he holds forth in that very same style—the language of
prayer. Later, Mendele even speaks out publicly in the style he censures. In
response to a query as to whether or not Mendele hopes for redemption, he
answers in the language of the prophets. His interlocutor responds that the
prophets were speaking of the distant future, while "we, simple people, speak
of work in the here and now."

VI.

Speakerly texts privilege their textuality while attempting to create oral reso-
nance. That oral resonance, however, must be generated by textual materials,
and that process of generation, more often than not, declares itself. In his cre-
ation of speakerly texts within his Hebrew short story corpus, Abramowitz
draws attention to the intertextual necessity of Hebrew literary production at
the end of the nineteenth century; he focuses his readers' attention on the nec-
sary intertextual constructedness of any vernacular pretense. His nusah, he
seems to be emphasizing, is a literary vernacular, with the literary consider-
ations preceding and controlling the vernacular considerations at all times.
Even as he speaks melissah, Mendele invokes its intertextual backbone; even as
he tries to render his narrative voice dramatically audible, Mendele reminds
his readers that he is more comfortable in narrative than in speech. Finally,
even as he takes on the role of a prayer leader, Mendele's voice leads us back not
just to the textual prayers, but to the textual underpinnings of those prayers.

Bialik's intention in naming Abramowitz's style the nusah was not only to
gesture toward a stylistic template to be used as a model for future vernacular
literary texts; nor was Bialik's coining of the term nusah strictly evocative of
orally infused textual traditions within Jewish culture such as the synagogue
practice of orally performing written texts in a variety of adaptable melodies.
The literary nusah was, in Bialik's view, to be understood as a blueprint for the
revival of Hebrew speech. A rhetorical analysis of Mendele's place in
Abramowitz's rhetorical universe belies such a claim, pitting nationalist liter-
ary historiography against the realities of nineteenth-century Hebrew literary
norms.

17 Abramowitz, "Bi-yeshivato shel ma'alot uvi-yeshivato shel matah" [In the Tribunals of
Heaven and Earth], in Kol k'vov Mendele, 420.
18 Ibid., 140.