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# The Odessa Years: Shoshana Persitz and the Gamliel Library of Omanut Press (1918–1920)

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## The Odessa Years: Shoshana Persitz and the Gamliel Library of Omanut Press (1918–1920)

### PREFACE

Hebrew picture books for children first appeared in the early twentieth century in a burst of color and flair, revolutionizing the world of Hebrew literature for young children.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by the exciting trends of the Russian avant-garde on the one hand, and by the revival of spoken Hebrew on the other, children's literature in Hebrew began to attract the creative powers of some of the finest Jewish writers and artists of the day. Among those who rallied to the banner of Hebrew publishing for children was a young woman named Shoshana Zlatopolsky Persitz (1893–1969), the twenty-four years old founder of Omanut Press in Moscow (1917) and its guiding spirit over the years to come in Odessa (1918–1919/20), in Frankfurt am Main (1920–1924/25), and ultimately in Tel Aviv (1925–1945). It is to her that we owe some of the first, most impressive picture books ever printed for children in Hebrew: the twelve titles published through the Gamliel Library, a series which Persitz established in Moscow shortly after founding Omanut Press in 1917. In many ways, the story behind their printing is almost as compelling as the books themselves, and yet it is a story that remains almost completely unknown.

Shoshana Persitz herself is scarcely unknown. For years she played a key role in the municipal Department of Education of Tel Aviv, and in 1949 she was elected to the first Keneset (“Constituent Assembly”) of the newly established State of Israel, chairing the Education and Culture Committee. She was awarded the Israel Prize for her achievements in 1968, and Shmuel Yosef Agnon himself paid tribute to her work in a short story written on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday (Agnon 1976).<sup>2</sup> We find entries about Persitz in most of the standard reference works, yet without exception they all give short shrift to the books in the Gamliel Library and to the Odessa period of Omanut Press or, more typically, pass over them altogether. The most comprehensive entry on Persitz' life comes in David Tidhar's monumental Hebrew-language *Encyclopedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel* (1947), yet even here we find no mention of Odessa or of the Gamliel Library. Nor do we find any mention of them in the entry on Persitz in the *Jewish Women's Archive*, written by Persitz' granddaughter, Racheli Edelman (2009). Adina Bar-El, author of a detailed article in the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, does make a brief reference to the Gamliel Library and to the Odessa period in Omanut Press, though only to say that in Odessa, Omanut Press “mainly published booklets for young children” (Bar-El 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the early years of children's literature in Hebrew, see Ofek 1988, 11–75; Gordon 2005, 31–55; in English, Ofek 2007, 619–623; and Brener 2017, 3–5.

<sup>2</sup> The author's abridged translation of Agnon's short story was read out loud towards the end of a lecture presented at the Library of Congress on January 4, 2016, “From Russia with Love: Illustrated Children's Books in Hebrew from Omanut Press.” The lecture is available at <http://www.loc.gov/rr/amed/webcast/hebraicsectionwebcast.html>.

Ayala Gordon, former head of the Ruth Youth Wing for Art Education at the Israel Museum, and Hebrew children's literature scholar Uriel Ofek have discussed the Gamliel Library in some detail. Nevertheless, there is still much to be done both in terms of presenting a more complete picture of the Gamliel Library and in correcting the bibliographic facts about its publications. This article is an attempt to do both, for while it draws extensively from the comprehensive work done by Ofek and Gordon, it will also rely on sources not previously used to flesh out the portrait of the Gamliel Library. Among these sources are articles by contemporaries who knew the Persitz family in Moscow, and also articles from the contemporary Russian Hebrew press. Furthermore, this article will also be able to add new information on one of the major conundrums in the history of the Gamliel Library, and that is the question of where, exactly, these twelve books were published, in Odessa or in Frankfurt am Main? On this point there has been considerable confusion and misinformation, as will be discussed just below, but now we are able to provide definitive answers for at least three more of these books.

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Up until now, the only books from the Gamliel Library known to have been published during the Odessa years (1918–1919/1920) are the first three, one of them bearing the imprint “Odessa,” and the other two “Moscow–Odessa.” The other nine have been known only through copies marked “Frankfurt am Main–Moscow–Odessa.” And yet, over the years scholars have grappled with the possibility that at least some of these nine books were actually second editions of books published first in Odessa (Kohen, Piekarcz, and Shmeruk 1961, 30, no. 242; Slutski 1961, 32). The only problem with this theory was that apart from those first three, as mentioned, no one had ever seen any book marked anything but “Frankfurt am Main–Moscow–Odessa.”

Uriel Ofek, author of the classic survey of children's literature in Hebrew, also adhered to the Odessa theory. But without real evidence on which to base this theory, his bibliography of the Gamliel Library is confusing, vague, and, ultimately erroneous (Ofek 1988, 638, 646). We leave a detailed discussion of these errors and their corrections to the appendix, which also includes a full bibliography of what is known to date about specific imprints.

More recently, Ayala Gordon has taken the opposite position, framing the problem this way:

To return to the question of time: when were the books in the Gamliel Library illustrated, and when were they printed? Were they in fact printed first in Odessa in 1918, and then reprinted again in Frankfurt? No doubt that was the plan, but was it actually carried out? To date, I have not come across a single book marked “Moscow–Odessa” [apart from the first three books; AB], but only “Frankfurt am Main–Moscow–Odessa.” So far as I know, “Moscow–Odessa” appears only on the first three books, whose illustrations by the Russian Mitrohin and Narbut were already in the hands of their first publisher, Joseph Knebel. (Gordon 2005, 104–107)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This and all the following segments translated from Hebrew were translated by the author.

Gordon thus concludes that apart from the first three books, the remaining nine were all published for the first time in Frankfurt am Main, and as the most recent scholar to weigh in on the question and an undisputed authority of children's literature her conclusion has remained the last word to date.

Now, however, thanks to the books newly discovered in the uncatalogued collections of the Library of Congress, we know of three more books in the Gamliel Library bearing the imprint "Moscow–Odessa," thus making Odessa the site in which at least six of the twelve books were first published, and thus solving once and for all the question of whether any but the first three books—the ones already prepared in Moscow—had ever been printed there. Let us now turn to examine these six books and the story behind their publication.

## I. THE FOUNDING OF OMANUT PRESS

In April 1917, Russia was in the throes of Revolution, but even that was not enough to stop a group called *Hoveve šefat 'ever* (Friends of the Hebrew Language) from holding their annual meeting in Moscow. This was a group made up of Jews from all across the far-flung Russian Empire, and amongst its distinguished members were several of the richest Jews in Russia, and also Hayyim Nahman Bialik, the "National Hebrew Poet" whose prestige in the Jewish world was unmatched. Their one goal, a goal to which they were passionately committed, was the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language in Russia, seeing the ancient tongue as the natural, unifying choice of the Jewish people as a whole (Litai 1955, 53–59; Gordon 2005, 31–42; Moss 2009, 34–36).

Not surprisingly, the meeting that year was particularly dramatic. Recognizing the gravitas of the hour as well as the opportunities, the group changed its name from *Hoveve šefat 'ever* to that of Tarbut (Culture), noting that the old name sounded too dilettantish to accurately convey the significance of their work in Hebrew education ("Tarbut–ḥevrah le-ḥinukh ule-tarbut 'Ivrit" 1917, 22). The group also passed a series of sweeping resolutions that went far beyond previous efforts to instill Hebrew among the Jewish masses, voting to establish new Hebrew-language kindergartens and schools across Russia, new publications for children in Hebrew, and evening classes for adults with Hebrew as the language of instruction.

These were ambitious plans, indeed, yet the Hebrew press did not consider the meeting front-page stuff. The Warsaw-published *ha-Tsefirah* (The Clarion), for example, buried it in the back pages of the newspaper, page 15 in an issue with sixteen pages ("*min ha-Tenuah ha-tzionit*" 2017). The Moscow-based *ha-'Am* (The People) reported the meeting in much greater detail, yet even it left the first half of the issue to other, presumably weightier matters ("Tarbut–ḥevrah le-ḥinukh ule-tarbut 'Ivrit" 1917, 22–24). Did the editors think it was all just a lot of talk? Perhaps—there had been many such meetings over the years. But this time things were different. There may have been uncertainty over the road ahead, but the Revolution was also a time of

optimism and hope for great change.<sup>4</sup> Czarist Russia, after all, had been no friend to the Jews, and the ambitious program hammered out by the erstwhile Friends of the Hebrew Language in fact turned out to be incredibly successful. Now, under its new name of Tarbut, the group was to go on to some pretty spectacular success, opening some two hundred new branches across Russia and the Ukraine by 1919, and establishing new schools and presses in Hebrew (Moss 2009, 151–155). One of those presses was Omanut.

## II. THE LIONS OF MOSCOW

*“The lions in this group of activists in Moscow, in the field of Hebrew culture, were Hillel Zlatopolsky and his daughter Shoshana Persitz.”*

A. Litai, “Ha-‘yarid’ ha-sifrut ha-gadol be-Moskvah,” *he-‘Avar* 3 (1955), 57

Shoshana Zlatopolsky Persitz, the founder of Omanut Press, was the daughter of Hillel Zlatopolsky, a sugar tycoon from Kiev who had moved to Moscow shortly before the Revolution and was well known for his generous, indeed passionate patronage of Hebrew culture (Litai 1955, 57–59; Ofek 1966, 222; Moss 2009, 23–27, 49). Zlatopolsky was one of the chief patrons of ha-Bimah, the Hebrew theater troupe in Moscow that went on to world fame (Kampf 1987, 140). He was instrumental in founding *ha-‘Am*, the first Hebrew daily in Moscow, and he created a fund for Hebrew writers that financed, among other things, the publication of Bialik’s long-planned *Knesset* in Odessa, 1917. He also financed *Shetilim*, a Hebrew periodical for children founded in Moscow during the first white-hot months of the Russian Revolution and which sought “to instill the Hebrew world in the heart of its young readers” (“Shetilim” 1917). The journal’s lovely art deco masthead can be seen in [Figure 1](#).

Zlatopolsky was also one of the four Jewish magnates who together purchased the magnificent private library of the late Baron David Guenzburg (1857–1910), intending to present it to the National Library in Jerusalem on behalf of the Jewish people. The library was purchased from the Baron’s widow, Magdalena, and stored in a hidden steel-reinforced chamber in Zlatopolsky’s own home in Moscow pending shipment to Jerusalem (Ayzenshtadt 1968, 151). News of the acquisition electrified the delegates gathered in Petrograd to attend the Seventh Congress of Russian Zionists in May, 1917.<sup>5</sup>

Shoshana, the daughter of this Hebrew Maecenas, was therefore brought up in an atmosphere of secular Hebrew culture and love for the Hebrew language. In later years she was to recall her

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the stirring words of Y. Alterman (“ha-‘Ye‘idah ha-rishonah shel Hoveve šefat ‘ever” 1917, 19). Buba (1968, 106–107) gives a first-hand account of Jewish hopes and fears during this period, while Moss (2009, 23–28) offers an excellent overview from the perspective of an historian.

<sup>5</sup> Protocols from this meeting were printed in *ha-‘Am*, nos. 21, 22, 23, 1917. For further information concerning the Guenzburg Library following the confiscation of the Zlatopolsky home, see Ayzenshtadt 1968, 151.

parents’ home in Moscow as a gathering spot for Hebrew poets and novelists; a place where the Hebrew book was an object of reverence:

I was raised in an atmosphere of books; a book was something sacred in our home. From childhood I saw my parents cultivating Hebrew writers. Writers came and went at home like one of the family and I saw them in their despair, and in their loneliness. They wrote without really knowing who they wrote for. So I said: I will publish books for children—I will cultivate readers for these writers. (Sheva 1963, trans. A.B.).

In 1917, Persitz was only twenty-four years old but she was no novice to the world of cultural patronage. Like her father, Hillel Zlatopolsky, she was deeply involved in the work of Tarbut already from its days as Friends of the Hebrew Language, even serving as treasurer for several years running. Her annual reports, apparently printed almost verbatim, appear in newspaper accounts of the group’s meetings in 1916 and 1917 and these show a young woman fully conversant with Tarbut’s work throughout Russia and with a clear grasp of the financial details.<sup>6</sup> She was also married, and her husband, Joseph Persitz, came from a family very much like her own; that is, a very wealthy Jewish family passionately devoted to Hebrew education and culture. Joseph Persitz himself was a Talmudic scholar, a University of Moscow trained lawyer, and a respected businessman whose father owned sugar and oil factories “on the banks of the Volga” (Sheva 1963). From Sheva we further learn that Persitz met Shoshana on the landing outside her grandfather’s home in Kiev, where it was “love at first sight.” The smitten Persitz seems to have overstayed his welcome that first evening, with Shoshana’s mother wondering why the young man stayed so long on his very first visit—though apparently she was not kept wondering long. Litai, who knew the two families personally, provides us with a humorous soundbite from the married life of the young couple, quoting Joseph Persitz as saying, “I bring it in and my wife spends it,” a neat pun indeed, since in Hebrew the word for “spending” and “publishing” is one and the same (Litai 1955, 58).



Figure 1. *Shetilim* [Saplings: an illustrated journal for children]. Issue 2, Moscow, August 1917. (Hebraic Section, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress)

<sup>6</sup> The report from 1916, apparently signed with Shoshana’s pre-marriage Hebrew initials (Sh. Z), appears in *ha-‘Am* on February 12, 1916, p. 17. The report from 1917 is printed in no. 15–16 [22–23], pp. 16–19; a parenthetical remark notes that her words were greeted “with a storm of applause.” In both reports she speaks in the first-person plural and shows a close familiarity with operational details and finances, emphasizing the plight of Jewish refugees from the war and the lack of housing.

With Joseph Persitz at her side, therefore, it seemed only natural for the young couple to join forces with Shoshana's brother, Moshe, on the occasion of her father's fiftieth birthday and present the family patriarch with half a million rubles in order to establish a fund for Hebrew literature and education—a sum which Hillel Zlatopolsky promptly matched (Ben-Yishai, 192). Shortly afterward, Shoshana Persitz was able to purchase Hebrew typeface, “that rarest of commodities in Moscow,” to quote Moss (2009, 35), and setting up shop in Prechistenka Street 15, Omanut Press was officially born.<sup>7</sup>

### III. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE GAMLIEL LIBRARY

It was no coincidence that Persitz named her press Omanut, meaning “Art” in Hebrew. In Russia, the leading periodical for the Russian avant-garde was titled *Mir iskusstva* (World of Art; Kiselev 1989; Pyman 1994, 93–122), and by linking her own venture to this prestigious arbiter of taste, Persitz was proclaiming her own commitment to the highest standards of modern art and literature.<sup>8</sup> And indeed, Omanut Press *did* become known for the beauty of its publications (Ben-Yishai 1968, 194; Ofek 1988, 226; Gordon 2005, 89). In later years, Arie Leib Smiatizky (1883–1945), Omanut's chief editor through all its peregrinations, recalled how Persitz would examine each new book that came off the press, rejoicing not only in the fine Hebrew of the text but also in the high-quality paper, the exquisite black fonts, the perfect binding. He said that watching Persitz look at one of those new books was like watching the rabbi of his childhood village bask in the beauty of his *etrog* at Sukkot. Both acts could be considered in the light of *hidur mitzvah*—the sanctification of Jewish law through beauty (Sheva 1963).

In creating Omanut Press, Persitz' goal was to make Hebrew the natural mother-tongue for Jewish children in Russia,<sup>9</sup> and she decided that the best way to do this was by giving them the very best of world literature for children. She wanted to give them the pleasure that other children experienced through the wonderful books of such authors as Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens, Jules Verne—but to give it to them in Hebrew; a Hebrew that would mold their taste and literary expectations as they grew into adulthood.<sup>10</sup> And indeed it was in the field of translations from

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<sup>7</sup> An intriguing advertisement in *ha-'Am* (Thursday, October 4, 1917) shows the newly-founded press actively looking for “boys and girls 14 years and older who know Hebrew” to come learn the art of Hebrew typesetting, and directing those interested to Maroseika Street 10, Apartment 3. The two-month course was offered free of charge. The author would like to thank Ms. Galina Teverovsky of the Library of Congress for her generous help with the Russian text in this advertisement.

<sup>8</sup> Ben-Yishai (1968, 192) accounts for the name Omanut by saying that Shoshana Persitz purchased her Hebrew typeface from the Art Press in Moscow next door to the Institute for Oriental Languages; Moss does not account for the name, only notes that she purchased the typeface at the Institute for Oriental Languages itself (Moss 2009, 35). Yet even if Ben-Yishai's information is correct—and it seems to have come directly from Persitz herself (see note on p. 192)—it still does not explain why she retained the name for her own press; after all, she certainly could have changed the name had she wished. The decision to keep it was therefore significant.

<sup>9</sup> Ofek (1988, 221–222); Moss (2009, 49–50).

<sup>10</sup> Moss notes a similar phenomenon in the field of theater: “in Hebraist Moscow, the founders of ha-Bimah and their supporters in Tarbut conceived one of the theater company's chief tasks as the creation of a Hebrew theater which

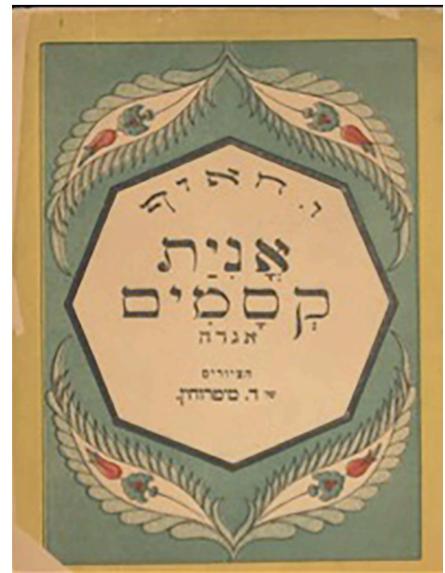
world literature that Omanut was to become famous. But before this goal could be accomplished tragedy struck, and when her four-year-old son died, Persitz turned her energies for a time in another direction, creating a series of picture books for toddlers which she named Gamliel after her son. In an interview many years later, Persitz explained her decision to create the Gamliel Library:

In those long-ago days of my youth, I felt this burning sense of shame: “here we are, the People of the Book, yet the hundreds of thousands of Jewish children in Russia have no books of their own.” They had no books they could grow up with, and I was afraid, [thinking] “if those children are not given Hebrew books in their childhood, they will be lost to Hebrew forever” (Sheva 1963).

But it wasn’t enough to print children’s books in Hebrew; they also had to be aesthetically pleasing, tempting enough to stand comparison with the wonderful children’s books illustrated by the likes of Walter Crane, Arthur Rackham, and Ivan Biliben. On this subject, Persitz was most definite: “I also wanted them not to have to feel ashamed of their books in front of the other children. So I said: ‘I will print books for them as beautifully as possible’ (Sheva 1963).

It was thus through personal tragedy that some of the most delightful Hebrew books for children were ever created.<sup>11</sup>

The first three titles in the Gamliel Library were Hebrew translations of Russian picture books, all three printed together with their original illustrations by well-known Russian artists. This must have been quite a coup for Persitz for she acquired the publishing rights from Knebel Publishing, printer of some of the most distinguished children’s books in Moscow at the beginning of the twentieth century (Gordon 2005, 90). The Library of Congress has all three of these very rare Hebrew books. One of them is a translation of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Nightingale* (*ha-Zamir*) illustrated by Georgy Narbut (1886–1920) with black-and-white silhouettes;<sup>12</sup> another is a swash-buckling tale of adventure called *Oniyat kesamim* (The magic ship; Figure 2), written by V. Hauf



**Figure 2.** *Oniyat kesamim* (The magic ship). Illustrated by D. (Dmitry) Mitrohin. Odessa: Omanut, Sifriyah Gamliel, 1919/1920. (Hebraic Section, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress)

could appeal to an audience already immersed in the aesthetic standards of Russian art-theater” (Moss 2008, 272).

<sup>11</sup> Moss comments that “the death of her four-year -old son Gamliel did nothing to undermine her commitment” to Omanut publishing (Moss 2009, 24). True enough, but this does not show how the tragedy in fact acted as a catalyst for a new series of books.

<sup>12</sup> A copy of the original Russian edition is housed in the Rare Books and Collections Division of the Library of Congress (OCLC: 26070701).

and illustrated by Dmitry Mitrohin (1893–1973); the third is *ha-Oniyah veba-ARBah* (The ship and the tugboat) by Swedish writer Richard Gustafson, and, like *Oniyat kesamim*, it was illustrated by Dmitry Mitrohin.

But before Persitz could actually publish any of these books, the Russian Revolution caught up with her, the Bolsheviks nationalizing the presses and taking over her equipment.<sup>13</sup> So less than a year after opening and before a single book was even published, Omanut closed its doors in Moscow and moved to Odessa, a bustling port on the Black Sea located in the Ukraine and as yet untouched by the Revolution. According to one contemporary source, the Zlatopolsky-Persitz family and members of Tarbut—twenty people in all—boarded a special train placed at their disposal by Count Wilhelm von Mirbach, the German Ambassador in Soviet Moscow, going first to Kiev and from there to Odessa (Ben-Yishai 1968, 193). It was in Odessa, therefore—“practical, work-a-day Odessa,” to quote Ya’akov Fichman (1942, 7–8)—that Persitz published these three books; the only ones previously known with absolute certainty to have been printed first in Odessa and not in Frankfurt am Main (Gordon 2005, 90, 104).

*Oniyat kesamim* is unusual in that it is the only one of the books in the Gamliel Library to note the place *and* date of publication, which it does on the back cover: Odessa, 1919/1920 (Figure 3). It is also one of only two books in the series to bear the image we see in Figure 4; the other book being *ha-Oniyah veba-ARBah*, likewise illustrated by Dmitry Mitrohin. This image appears on the verso of the cover of both books and is full-page.



**Figure 3.** Back cover (left) of *Oniyat kesamim* (The magic ship), bearing the place and date of printing: Odessa: Omanut Press, 1919/1920; and Verso of front cover (right), with the name “Gamliel” at the root of the tree (Hebraic Section, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress)

<sup>13</sup> Ben-Yishai (1968, 185) emphasizes that concurrent with the destruction of the center of Hebrew culture in Moscow, the Bolsheviks also took over Russian presses that did not identify with the new regime. ( )

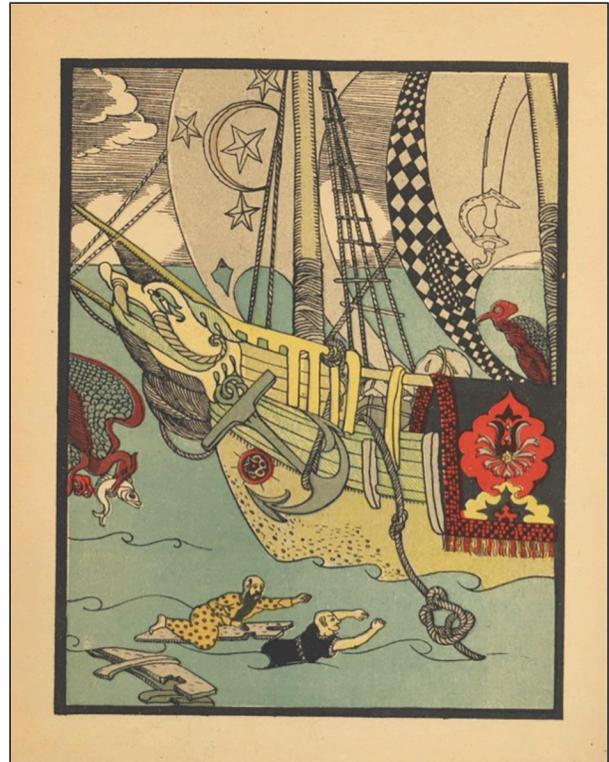
Persitz apparently commissioned the image from Dmitry Mitrohin, the same artist who created the books' orientalizing illustrations. Ayala Gordon called the design "a logo for the series" (Gordon 2005, 95), and indeed at first glance it might appear to be just that: a vegetal ornament or stylized "Tree of Life" in the best of Middle Eastern style. Yet this image may be more than just a logo. The name Gamliel, so tiny and nestling at the root of the tree, turns an "ornamental logo" into a full-fledged memorial; a "Tree of Life" in the Judaic tradition for the publisher's infant son, the one whose sudden death prompted this series of Hebrew picture books.

This interpretation of the image would explain why *Oniyat kesamim* is the only book in the series to note the year of printing. Like a clock frozen in time to the hour of death, it creates a permanent, standing memorial—and was necessarily the first of the Gamliel series to be printed.

Lending weight to this theory is the fact that the imprint is simply "Odessa," and not "Moscow–Odessa" like all the other books printed in Odessa, suggesting that the pattern had not yet been established. If we are correct in this surmise, one can not help wondering why *Oniyat kesamim* was chosen to be the first book in the Gamliel Library. Was it a favorite of the small boy before his death? Did she read it to him countless times in the Russian edition as he stared at the beautiful illustrations (Figure 4) and dreamed of his own adventures to come? Or was there a more pragmatic reason; something involving the business end of her contract with Knebel Publishing? We may never know, but the question itself is intriguing.

#### IV. THE GAMLIEL LIBRARY COMES OF AGE: ODESSA, 1919–1920

It was in Odessa, therefore, that the first three books in the Gamliel Library were printed, but that was only the beginning. Odessa, of course, was a flourishing center of Jewish culture, home to such luminaries of modern Hebrew literature as Mendele Mokher Sefarim and Hayyim Nahman Bialik, but the events of 1917 sent even more Jewish writers and artists pouring in (Zipperstein 1981). So with such a stable of local talent from which to draw, Odessa was to prove fertile ground indeed for Omanut. Bialik himself created the text for at least one book in the Gamliel Library, *ha-Tarnegolim veba-shu'al* (The roosters and the fox; [Figure 5](#)).



**Figure 4.** Full-page illustration from *Oniyat kesamim* (The magic ship). Odessa: Omanut Press, 1919/1920. (Hebraic Section, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress)



**Figure 5.** Back Cover (left) and cover (right) of *ha-Tarnegolim veva-shu'al* (The roosters and the fox), with place of publication: Moscow–Odessa: Omanut Press. (Hebraic Section, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress)

Bialik in fact adapted the story from *Mishle shu'alim*, a collection of rhymed Hebrew fox-fables by Berechiah ha-Nakdan, a Jewish scholar who apparently lived in England towards the end of the twelve century (Ofek 1988, 223–224). But then Berechiah had done some adapting of his own, taking his tales from sources as diverse as *Aesop's Fables* and the Talmud.<sup>14</sup> Bialik's name does not appear on the book itself, but indeed none of the picture books in the Gamliel Library—with the exception of the first three books translated from the Russian—mentions the name of the author or translator.

Ofek (*ibid.*, 224) suggests that Bialik had a hand in at least one other book in the Gamliel Library, *he-Hatul veva-shu'al* (The cat and the fox), a suggestion with which Gordon agrees on stylistic grounds (2005, 111). But Bialik was not the only star in this constellation of Hebrew writers taking part in the Gamliel Library. Zalman Shneur, celebrated novelist in both Hebrew and Yiddish, wrote the lilting rhymes for one of the most beautiful books in the series, *la-Sevimon* (To the dreidel; Figure 6).



**Figures 6.** Cover (left) and full-page (right) illustration from *la-Sevimon* (To the dreidel). Moscow–Odessa: Omanut Press, Sifriyah Gamliel [1919/1920]. (Hebraic Section, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress)

<sup>14</sup> Bialik adapted the thirty-second chapter of Berechiah's *Mishle shu'alim*, where the story is entitled *ha-Tarnegol veva-tarnegolet* (The rooster and the chicken). One interesting change is that Bialik made the chicken in Berechiah's version "lame" instead of "sick"—perhaps because lameness is more resonant with the midrashic sources.



**Figure 7.** Cover of *Latset yede ha-kol* (Trying to please everyone). Moscow–Odessa: Omanut Press, Sifriyah Gamliel [1919/1920]. (Hebraic Section, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress)

Nor was that all: Asher Ginsberg, the renowned Zionist thinker better-known by his pen-name Ahad ha-Am, was apparently the translator who created the Hebrew version for *Latset yede ha-kol* (Figure 7), a title which we might loosely translate as Trying to Please Everyone (Ofek 1988, 223–225). This popular middle-eastern folktale attributed by Ofek simply to “Tolstoy”

(see [Appendix, no. 6](#)) is about a father, a son, and a donkey, and, contrary to the hopeful title, it ends with no one being pleased at all—except maybe the donkey!



**Figure 8.** “Band of Painters: Apter, Muzelmacher, Kravtsov, Khiger” motto, enlarged; cover of *ha-Tarnegolim ve-ha-shu'al* (The roosters and the fox). (Hebraic Section, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress)

It was also Odessa that provided the beautiful lithographic illustrations accompanying these and other picture books in the Gamliel series. These were all created by Jewish students at the Odessa School of Art, a group of four young men in their early twenties who signed collectively as *Havurat Tsayarim*, a “Band of Painters” in Hebrew. Their stylized motto appears on the covers of the books they illustrated for the Gamliel Library (Figure 8).

The motto includes only the last names of the four young men, but thanks to the work of Hillel (Grigoriy) Kazovsky in the Russian archives (Kazovsky 2005), we now know the full names of these artists

and additional biographical details. The young men were Jacob Apter (1899–1941), Yefim Khiger (1899–1955), Aaron Kravtsov (1896–1941), and Moses Mutzelmacher (1900–1961). All four artists remained in the Soviet Union, where they seem to have stayed in contact with each other through the years and to have had active, productive careers. Noticeably, Apter and Kravtsov died the same year, soldiers in the battles on the outskirts of Moscow during World War II (Kazovsky 2005, 169, 177).

Although the four young men always signed together in the books published in the Gamliel Library, there have been some attempts to attribute specific illustrations to one or the other of the four artists based on works they later published separately. Ayala Gordon, for example, notes the similarities between the illustrations for *ha-Tarnegolim veba-shu'al* and a children's book published in Jerusalem around 1925: *Yesh li tsemed parim* (I have a pair of oxen), illustrated by Moses Mutzelmacher—one of our four Odessa artists (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** *Yesh li tsemed parim* (I have a pair of oxen). Jerusalem: ha-Ginah Press, [1925]. Folk-song adapted into Hebrew by F. [Alec] Halperin and illustrated by M. [Moses] Mutzelmacher. (OCLC: 179196994; Hebraic Section, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress)

Remarking on the striking similarity of colors and form, Gordon makes a good case for attributing *ha-Tarnegolim veba-shu'al* to Mutzelmacher as well (2005, 107–108). But is it really necessary to make these attributions? Or to put it another way: in doing so, are we not missing an opportunity to see these artists in their true context? According to one source, the four young men “may have needed to remain anonymous for fear of persecution.” But this way of signing hardly seems very anonymous, and the argument is not convincing. Maybe the four young artists *chose* to sign this way—informally, and collectively—because it seemed to fit the spirit of the times. Bolshevism, after all, was in the ascendant, collectiveness was in the air, and signing collectively probably felt wonderfully, dangerously avant-garde. Or perhaps they signed that way

simply because they were young, creative, and companionable—one thinks of the young Lennon and McCartney, a partnership that has undergone similar deconstructions over the years.

Before closing the chapter on Odessa, it seems right to point to another group of books that *may* have been printed first in Odessa, inasmuch as they, too, were illustrated by the Odessa “Band of Painters” (see [Appendix, nos. 7–10](#)). To date, however, these books are known only through printings in Frankfurt am Main. Like the three books printed in Odessa and discussed above, these four books were also written or translated by distinguished Hebrew writers, amongst them Judah Steinberg (1863–1908), a popular children’s author, and also S. Ben-Zion, renowned educator as well as the father of iconic Israeli artist Nahum Gutman. But for now, at least, the bibliographic information remains unchanged.

## V. EPILOGUE IN FRANKFURT: THE END OF THE GAMLIEL LIBRARY

History with a capital “H” soon stepped in once again, and as the Bolsheviks advanced on the Ukraine in March 1920, Omanut Press relocated yet a second time, this time to Homburg vor der Höhe (“Hamburg before the Heights”), a small town on the outskirts of Frankfurt-am-Main in Germany. There Persitz found a congenial group of Hebraists with whom she formed life-long relationships, among them S. Y. Agnon.<sup>15</sup> There, too—as we can now say with assurance—Persitz *re*published the picture books illustrated by the young art students in Odessa, the ones formerly assumed to be the first and only printings. But four other books in the Gamliel Library were also illustrated by the “Band of Painters” in Odessa, and to date, as just noted, the only known copies all bear the imprint “Frankfurt am Main–Moscow–Odessa.” The question of whether these titles were reprints as well or, in fact, first editions must remain for the present an open question. For a complete list of titles in the Gamliel Library, see the appendix.

In addition to publishing the books in the Gamliel Library—or *re*publishing in at least six cases—it was also in Frankfurt that Persitz began publishing the elegant Hebrew translations for which the press became famous. But though published in Germany, the translations came directly from Russia. “One day,” as Persitz was to relate many years later, “Arieh Smiatitzki [the editor-in-chief] came to Frankfurt from Russia, and as he plunked his suitcase down in front of us we all crowded around him” (Sheva 1963; trans. A.B.). Out of that suitcase, as Sheva sums up, came nothing less than sixty Hebrew translations.

The little town of Homburg vor der Höhe was thus a fruitful period in Persitz’ life, and even though her husband died there in 1925, on the very eve of the family’s immigration to Israel, she seems to have recalled it with affection. In a speech given many years later in Jerusalem on the occasion of Agnon’s seventieth birthday, Persitz referred to the town not as “Homburg vor der Höhe” (literally, “Homburg in front of the Heights”) but by the half-Hebrew name by which

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<sup>15</sup> Agnon’s letters to his wife mention Shoshana Persitz only briefly, but as someone who was clearly a close family friend dating back from those days in Homburg vor der Höhe. See, for example, Agnon 1983, 6 (letter 3), 203 (letter 133), 207 (letter 135), 272 (letter 180).

Agnon was wont to call it, “Homburg ‘*al gabe* Höhe” (“Homburg on the Heights”). In his note to Persitz’ speech, Dan Laor (2006, 238) writes that Agnon used that name because that is how it appears in the old Hebrew books printed there in the eighteenth century. But in point of fact, of the forty Hebrew books printed in Homburg vor der Höhe listed by the *Bibliography of the Hebrew Book* at the National Library of Israel, only one of them, a *Yalkut Reuveni* printed in 1712, uses that wording.<sup>16</sup> Far more common is “*Homburg par der He*,” an exact transliteration of the German. So is there more to Agnon’s name for the town than a trace of old book lore? Agnon being Agnon, this is likely the case. Perhaps what we have here is a wry parallel to *Yerushalayim shel ma’alah* (“Jerusalem on High”); wry, because they were living in Germany, after all, and not in Jerusalem. Or perhaps it wasn’t wry at all, but a clever nod to the heights of Hebrew culture they had created there in Homburg: Homburg actually *on* the heights, and not just *before* or *in front of* the heights. Or, perhaps all these meanings together . . .<sup>17</sup> Be that as it may, the Gamliel Library had run its course, and was never to print any more titles in the series.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In 1925, Omanut Press left Europe altogether, establishing itself once and for all in Tel Aviv, this time without the Gamliel Library. By the time Omanut closed its doors in 1945, its books had become a staple of education for several generations of Israeli youth, introducing them to such world-class authors as Victor Hugo, Jules Verne, and Charles Dickens. But Omanut never reissued the elaborate picture books with which Persitz began her printing odyssey, and they remain almost completely unknown to this day, even to dedicated bibliophiles. Indeed, as noted at the beginning of this article, Odessa and the Gamliel Library seem to have been written out of Persitz’ life. Reading her biography in the Jewish Women’s Archives (Edelman 2009), for example, or in Tidhar’s monumental Encyclopedia (1947), one would never know what a remarkable chapter this was in Hebrew culture, or even that it existed at all. Adina Bar-El’s article on Children’s Literature in Hebrew in the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2008) does mention the Odessa period in Omanut Press, as mentioned earlier, though only to say that in Odessa, Omanut “mainly published booklets for young children.” “Booklets for young children,” yes, but what booklets! Persitz was able to harness all that was best and brightest to create them and they are filled with color, humor, and verve. It was a brief period in Hebrew printing but an important one, and it deserves to be better known. The three newly-discovered first editions from Odessa in the Library of Congress provide an opportunity, therefore, to showcase these exceptional books, to revise the bibliography for the Gamliel Library currently accepted in the research, and, just as important, to throw new light on an equally exceptional woman on the front lines of culture in revolutionary times.

<sup>16</sup> The exact wording on the title-page there is “Homburg le-gabe He”. See Bibliography of the Hebrew Book at the National Library of Israel. [http://aleph.nli.org.il/F/?func=direct&doc\\_number=000141374&local\\_base=MBI01](http://aleph.nli.org.il/F/?func=direct&doc_number=000141374&local_base=MBI01).

<sup>17</sup> Agnon’s seventieth birthday was celebrated on July 26, 1958, in the Schocken Library in Jerusalem. Persitz’ speech, together with speeches made by such notables as Gershom Sholem and Ben-Tzion Dinur, were transcribed by Micah Schocken and given to Dan Laor, who published them in *Alpayim* 30 (2006). And as a fantastic bonus: all of these speeches are recorded on the CD included with this issue of *Alpayim*.

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## APPENDIX: TOWARDS A NEW BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE GAMLIEL LIBRARY

The bibliography at the end of Volume Two in Ofek’s classic *Sifrut ha-yeladim ha-‘Ivrit 1900–1948* has two entries for the Gamliel Library: #75 and #135 (Ofek 1988, 638, 646). It is not clear why there are two different entries, but they are both incorrect and need to be revised.

The imprint for the books listed in #75 is given as Odessa–Frankfurt, but in reality there is no such imprint. Books from the Gamliel Library are either marked Moscow–Odessa or Frankfurt am Main–Moscow–Odessa. By writing Odessa–Frankfurt, Ofek appears to be hedging his bets, and frankly blurring over the problem of where, exactly, the books were printed for the first time: Odessa or Frankfurt? For while all the books listed in #75 were indeed published in Frankfurt, Ofek thought that some of them might have been *reprints* of titles first printed in Odessa (as has indeed since proved true). But since he had no evidence, he swept all of them under the general

heading “Odessa–Frankfurt.” Now, however, thanks to the findings in the Library of Congress, we can say definitely that two of the books in this list (no. 2 *Latset yede ha-kol*; and no. 5 *ha-tar-negolim veba-shu'al*) were indeed first printed in Odessa; the printings from Frankfurt are only second editions. But two other titles in Ofek’s #75 are also incorrect, for no. 6 (*Oniyat kesamim*) and no. 7 (*ha-Oniyah veba-arbah*) were also printed first in Odessa, as shown by Ayala Gordon (2005, 104–107).

There are similar problems in #135 (p. 646), for which Ofek lists the imprint only as “Frankfurt,” thereby implying that *here* he was not hedging his bets and that he knew for certain that these books were first printed in Frankfurt. But in fact, as it turns out from the new findings in the Library of Congress, no. 11 (*la-Sevivon*) was first published in Odessa, and only *re*-published in Frankfurt. There are similar problems with no. 12 (*ha-Zamir*), since this was also first published in Odessa (Gordon 2005, 104–107).

In sum, the two listings in Ofek’s bibliography are not only misleading but in fact incorrect. The list below provides a full bibliography of what is known to date about specific imprints.

### ***THE FIRST PRINTINGS OF TITLES IN THE GAMLIEL LIBRARY, OMANUT PRESS***

#### **I. Books printed first in Odessa (as reflected in Gordon 2005 but not in Ofek 1988) but illustrated by artists in Moscow:**

1. *ha-Oniyah veba-arbah* [The ship and the tugboat]. Richard Gustafson. Illustrated by D. [Dmitry] Mitrohin. Moscow–Odessa [1919/1920].

.[1919/1920] **האניה והארבה: אגדה.** סיפור מאת ר' גופסטסון. הציורים של ד' מיטרוחין. מוסקבה-אודיסה [1919/1920].

*Translation rights and illustrations acquired from Knebel Publishing, Moscow, which had previously published the book in Russian.*

2. *Oniyat kesamim* [The magic ship]. V. Hauf. Illustrated by D. [Dmitry] Mitrohin. Odessa: Omanut, 1919/1920.

**אניית קסמים: אגדה.** הסיפור מאת ו' האוף. הציורים של ד' מיטרוחין. אודיסה, תרע"ט.

*Translation rights and illustrations acquired from Knebel Publishing, Moscow, which had previously published the book in Russian.*

3. *ha-Zamir: agadat Andersen* [The nightingale: an Andersen fairytale]. [Hans Christian Andersen]. Illustrated by A. [Georgy Ivanovitch] Narbut. Moscow–Odessa [1919/1920].

.[1919/1920] **הזמיר: אגדת אנדרסן.** סיפור מאת ה"כ אנדרסון. הציורים של ע' נרבוט. מוסקבה אודיסה [1919/1920].

*Translation rights and illustrations acquired from Knebel Publishing, Moscow, which had previously published the book in Russian. Source text unknown; perhaps from the original Danish by Hans Christian Andersen.*

## II. Books printed first in Odessa, as shown here for the first time; all of them illustrated by the “Band of Painters” in Odessa:

4. *ha-Tarnegolim veva-shu'al* [The roosters and the fox]. [Translated by Hayyim Nahman Bialik]. Illustrated by *Havurat tsayarim* [Band of Painters]: Apter, Mutzelmacher, Kravtsov, Khiger. Moscow–Odessa [1919/1920].

**התרנגולים והשועל.** [סיפור מחורז מאת ברכיה הנקדן בעיבודו של חיים נחמן ביאליק]. הציורים של חברות ציירים: אפטר, מוצלמכר, קרבצוב, חיגר. מוסקבה-אודיסה [1919/1920].

*Adapted by Bialik from a medieval fox-fable written in Hebrew by Berechiah ha-Nakdan.*

5. *la-Sevivon* [To the dreidel]. [Zalman Shneur]. Illustrated by *Havurat Tsayarim* [Band of Painters]: Apter, Mutzelmacher, Kravtsov, Khiger. Moscow–Odessa [1919/1920].

**לסביבון.** [חרוזים מאת זלמן שניאור]. הציורים של חברות ציירים: אפטר, מוצלמכר, קרבצוב, חיגר. מוסקבה-אודיסה [1919/1920].

*Original poem in four quatrains by Zalman Shneur.*

6. *Latset yede ha-kol* [Trying to please everyone]. [Author unknown]. Illustrated by *Havurat Tsayarim* [Band of Painters]: Apter, Mutzelmacher, Kravtsov, Khiger. Moscow–Odessa, [1919/1920].

**לצאת ידי הכל.** [סיפור עממי תורגם בידי אחד העם]. הציורים של חברות ציירים: אפטר, מוצלמכר, קרבצוב, חיגר. מוסקבה-אודיסה [1919/1920].

*Folktale translated by Asher Ginsberg, better known as Ahad ha-Am. Ofek attributed the source text simply to “Tolstoy,” but there are at least 4 well-known Russian writers by this name in the nineteenth century. One likely candidate is Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy (1817–1875).*

## III. Books perhaps printed first in Odessa since they were illustrated by the “Band of Painters” there, but to date known only through editions published in Frankfurt am Main:

7. *ve-Ayeh ani?* [Whither am I?]. [Judah Steinberg]. Illustrated by *Havurat Tsayarim* [Band of Painters]: Apter, Mutzelmacher, Kravtsov, Khiger]. Frankfurt am Main–Moscow–Odessa [ca. 1923].

**ואיה אני?** [סיפור מאת יהודה שטיינברג]. הציורים של חברות ציירים: אפטר, מוצלמכר, קרבצוב, חיגר. פרנקפורט ע"נ מייין-מוסקבה-אודיסה [1923 לערך].

*Original story by Judah Steinberg.*

8. *Hamishah 'ivrim* [Five blind men]. [Author and translator unknown]. Illustrated by *Havurat Tsayarim* [Band of Painters]: Apter, Mutzelmacher, Kravtsov, Khiger. Frankfurt am Main–Moscow–Odessa [ca. 1923].

**חמשה עורים.** [מחבר ומתרגם לא ידועים]. הציורים של חברות ציירים: אפטר, מוצלמכר, קרבצוב, חיגר. פרנקפורט ע"נ מייין-מוסקבה-אודיסה [1923 לערך].

*Translated into Hebrew from an Indian folktale; translator unknown.*

9. *Ma'ašeh bi-zekenah uve-dov* [The old woman and the bear]. [Author unknown]. Illustrated by *Havurat Tsayarim* [Band of Painters]: Apter, Mutzelmacher, Kravtsov, Khiger. Frankfurt am Main–Moscow–Odessa [ca. 1923].

**מעשה בזקנה ובדוב** [מחבר אלמוני]. [תרגום מאת ש' בן-ציון]. הציורים של חבורת ציירים: אפטר, מוצל-מכר, קרבצוב, חיגר. פרנקפורט ע"נ מיין-מוסקבה-אודיסה [1923 לערך].

*Translated from a folktale by S. Ben-Zion, the penname of Simha Alter Gutman.*

10. *he-Hatul veva-shu'al* [The cat and the fox]. [Author unknown]. Illustrated by *Havurat Tsayarim* [Band of Painters]: Apter, Mutzelmacher, Kravtsov, Khiger]. Frankfurt am Main–Moscow–Odessa [ca. 1923].

**החתול והשועל** [מחבר אלמוני, אולי בתרגומו של חיים נחמן ביאליק]. הציורים של חבורת ציירים: אפטר, מוצלמכר, קרבצוב, חיגר. פרנקפורט ע"נ מיין-מוסקבה-אודיסה [1923 לערך].

*A folktale apparently translated by Hayyim Nahman Bialik.*

#### IV. Books known only through editions published in Frankfurt am Main and not illustrated by the “Band of Painters” in Odessa:

11. *Etsbe'oni* [Tom thumb]. [Hayyim Nahman Bialik]. Illustrated by Hayyim Shaklover. Frankfurt am Main–Moscow–Odessa [ca. 1923].

**אצבעוני** [חיים נחמן ביאליק]. ציורים של חיים שקלבר. פרנקפורט ע"נ מיין-מוסקבה-אודיסה [1923 לערך].

*Bialik's Hebrew version of Tom Thumb, a poem in rhymed couplets first published, without illustrations, in the pages of ha-Shaḥar: shavu'on metsuyar li-vene ha-ne'urim. 1911. Yarshah: Hotsa'at ha-Or. 15–16.*

12. *ha-Tanim veva-pil* [The jackals and the elephant]. [Author and translator unknown]. Illustrated by A. Narochoy. Frankfurt am Main–Moscow–Odessa [ca. 1923].

**התנים והפיל** [מחבר ומתרגם לא ידועים]. ציורים של א' נרוצב. פרנקפורט ע"נ מיין-מוסקבה-אודיסה [1923 לערך].

*Translated from a folktale; translator unknown.*