

A Critical Study of the Prose Writings of Ephraim Lisitzky

By

Katie Maurine Bauman

A thesis submitted in partial requirement for

Rabbinical Ordination

Cincinnati, Ohio

Hebrew Union College: Jewish Institute of Religion

---

Gary P. Zola

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to Doctor Gary Zola for his faith in my project and his assistance in reaching my goals. I would also like to express my appreciation to Dr. Matthew Kraus, Dr. Dana Herman, Dr. Stephen Katz, Dr. Alan Mintz, and Dr. Jill Havi Aizenstein for their advice and counsel at various points throughout my research and writing process.

A great pleasure of this experience has been my acquaintance with Mildred Brown and Rosalie Cohen, two beautiful New Orleans ladies who were very kind to share with me their experiences growing up on Ephraim Lisitzky's block on General Pershing. My admiration for them stems from their kindness and hospitality and also great strength in the face of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath that forced them to leave their home in New Orleans. While I am so very sorry that they had to uproot their lives and move to Cincinnati, I am also eternally grateful that I've had the chance to know them.

My love of Hebrew as a living language began at Washington University in St. Louis under the educational supervision of Giora Etzion. Reading and speaking Hebrew has been one of the tremendous joys of my academic and personal life for the last ten years, and I will always attribute that happiness, in part, to Giora's exceptional teaching and unending patience.

To my parents, sister, and closest friends, I am very fortunate to have such a support network in my life. Writing this thesis was a difficult process, and your constant love and laughter made it much easier to accomplish.

Finally, to my husband Adam and our baby daughter Gracie, you are the lights of my life. The most trying part of writing this thesis has been that it has taken me away from you on so many afternoons and evenings. You bring more joy and meaning to my life than you will ever know. Thank you for blessing me with smiling faces and warm embraces. I love you both. I hope that work contained within is something that makes you proud.

## Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of several prose essays written by Ephraim Elijah Lisitzky (1885-1962), one of America's most celebrated and prolific Hebrew poets. Lisitzky is possibly best known for his numerous volumes of Hebrew poetry and his interesting autobiography (originally written in Hebrew but subsequently translated into English). Although a number of scholars have studied Lisitzky's poetry, less attention has been paid to his articles and discursive essays. Lisitzky's prose gave voice to many of the tensions that overtook the American Hebraist. These writings help us to understand more about Lisitzky's unique perspective as a former *yeshivah* student turned Hebrew educator in the American South. In his published essays, Lisitzky presents his ideas regarding Hebrew education in America, the role of the Jewish educator in America, the purpose of Hebrew literature in America, the relationship between America and Israel, and the ideal image of a modern American rabbi, all of which were significant issues during the course of his professional career.

These discursive writings are in Hebrew and, to the best of our knowledge, they have never been translated, thereby rendering them inaccessible to most American Jews. This study examines many of those essays through translation, annotation, and interpretive analysis. It also seeks to understand the ideology that compelled Lisitzky to remain in America while dedicating himself to the writing of modern Hebrew literature outside the Land of Israel.

This work investigates the manner in which an American Hebrew culture was cultivated and maintained, and how Lisitzky's efforts as a writer and educator

supported that endeavor. Finally, this thesis seeks to shed light on Lisitzky's hopes for American Jewry were it to engage more fully in Jewish learning and the study of Hebrew and on his firm conviction that American rabbis would ultimately play a pivotal role in making this vision a reality.

The author's English translations constitute a modest attempt to introduce more of Lisitzky's writings to English speakers who may be interested in Lisitzky's life and work.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Ephraim Lisitzky as Historical Figure.....	4
1.1 Historical Context.....	4
1.2 Biography.....	10
1.3 Educational Career in New Orleans.....	16
1.4 Literary Achievements.....	18
1.5 Conclusion.....	21
Chapter Two: Lisitzky's <i>Chalutziut</i> in Theory.....	23
2.1 <i>Chalutziut</i> in New Orleans.....	23
2.2 Hebrew in America.....	24
2.3 Lisitzky and Israel: An American Hebraist's Dilemma.....	25
2.4 Lisitzky's Compromise: Cultural Zionism.....	31
2.5 Lisitzky and America: The Struggle of an American Hebraist in <i>Galut</i> .....	33
2.6 Lisitzky's <i>Chalutziut</i> : An American Hebraist's Frontier.....	37
Chapter Three: Lisitzky's <i>Chalutziut</i> in Practice.....	40
3.1 The Vehicles of Hebrew Culture in America.....	40
3.2 Lisitzky as Poet: The Development of <i>American</i> Hebrew Literature...42	

3.3 Lisitzky as Teacher: The Purpose of Hebrew Education in America.....	46
3.4 Lisitzky in the Press: An American Hebraist's Public Conversation.....	52
3.5 A Pioneer of American Hebrew Culture.....	57
Chapter Four: The Legacy of Ephraim Lisitzky.....	58
Bibliography.....	69

### **Introduction: The *Moreh* of New Orleans**

Upon entering the abode of Mrs. Rosalie Cohen, resident of Cedar Village Retirement Community in Cincinnati, one finds the wall opposite her bed covered in photographs. They are mainly of her family and of a past life in New Orleans, Louisiana, much of which was washed away in the summer of 2005 by the floods of Hurricane Katrina. One picture stands out: it is a portrait of a single man, and he is not a relative. When asked who this man is, 98-year-old Rosalie answers in a tone full of love and admiration, “That’s *Moreh*, the best teacher I ever had.” Her younger sister, Mildred Brown, also a lifelong New Orleanian until the hurricane, agrees. The sisters reminisce fondly about *Moreh*, having spent much time with him and his family. The academic awards that hang on Rosalie’s wall testify that Rosalie was one of *Moreh*’s best students. In fact, under *Moreh*’s tutelage, Rosalie went on to become respected in the New Orleans Jewish community for her Hebrew scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

This *Moreh* that Rosalie and Mildred speak of with such reverence was their Hebrew teacher when they were growing up in New Orleans: Ephraim Elijah Lisitzky (1885–1962). “*Yaho! Harimu hashamayim*” (“Yaho! Lift up the Sky”) is the stirring title of an article printed on April 29, 1960, in the Hebrew periodical *Hadoar* (*The Post*).<sup>2</sup> The title’s image is based on an Indian folktale in which human beings are called to expand their horizons in a very tangible way.<sup>3</sup> It conveys a final note of hope and triumph from this beloved Hebrew instructor upon his retirement after forty years of service to the New Orleans Jewish community.<sup>4</sup> A celebrated writer, Lisitzky has also been called “the foremost productive poet in the history of American

---

<sup>1</sup> Mildred Brown, interview by author, Cincinnati, OH, November 15, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Hadoar* (1921–2004) was the longest running Hebrew periodical in the country.

<sup>3</sup> Ephraim E. Lisitzky, “*Yaho! Harimu hashamayim*,” *Hadoar* (April 29, 1960): 435–441.

“Lisitzky, Ephraim” in Jacob Kabakoff Collection, Manuscript Collection (MSS) 659, Box 2/File 22, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (hereafter cited as AJA), Cincinnati, OH. Translated in Chapter Two. The legend comes from the Snohomish Indians.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



Hebrew letters.”<sup>5</sup> Lisitzky’s poetic reflections and essays appeared often in the pages of *Hadoar* and other American Hebrew newspapers. He was recognized both in America and in Israel as a prolific Hebraist who composed poetry, entertaining prose, *midrashic* commentary, interpretations of Black spirituals, and reflective essays on Jewish education in America.

Ephraim Lisitzky was known beyond his writings. He was called *Moreh* (Teacher) by his Hebrew students at the New Orleans Talmud Torah (Communal Hebrew School), an institution he directed and where he taught for the majority of his life.<sup>6</sup> He was a husband, father, and friend to many colleagues. In a tribute written after his death, one of Lisitzky’s peers remembered, “His tall stature, his wavy, rich hair, his beautiful eyes and dreamy expression, made him dear to everybody. And as his outward appearance was, so was his spirit. He was good and generous, loving everyone and being loved by everyone.”<sup>7</sup> The Jewish and general media referred to Lisitzky as “The Pioneer Poet.”<sup>8</sup> This epithet is based on his view of himself as a pioneer of sorts, likened to those of pre-state Israel, tilling the soil of the Jewish landscape in America, hoping to make the desert of American Judaism bloom.

His published writings were predominantly in Hebrew, and many of them have never been translated into English. His essays and speeches that relate to Jewish life in America, though extremely relevant to all Jewish leaders, both during his lifetime and today, were only printed in the American Hebrew press in their original language. While this has rendered his work inaccessible to most American Jews both during his lifetime and today, the pioneering spirit that penetrates his work and life has much to offer by way of challenge and inspiration to

---

<sup>5</sup> Samuel M. Blumenfeld, “Ephraim Lisitzky – American Hebrew Bard,” *The Chicago Jewish Forum: A National Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1964): 204.

<sup>6</sup> Allan G. Field, “*Chalutzit* in New Orleans,” *The Jewish Spectator* (June 1957): 25–26. “Lisitzky, Ephraim E.,” Small Collection (SC-7301), AJA.

<sup>7</sup> Abraham Spicehandler, “At Hearing the Sad News: A tear of a loving friend at the grave of E.E. Lisitzky.” “Lisitzky, Ephraim E.,” SC-7301, AJA.

<sup>8</sup> A.R. Malachi, “Ephraim Lisitzky – Pioneer Poet,” *The Jewish Ledger* (1954): 51, trans. Rose Brenner, reprinted from *Hadoar*. “Lisitzky, Ephraim E.,” SC-7301, AJA.

contemporary American Jewry. The questions he raised in relation to American Jewry and the causes to which he devoted his personal and professional life have remained remarkably relevant. In many ways, he was a remnant of the shtetl in which Judaism was not just a religion, but a way of life, a remnant of a world that was quickly disappearing and to which Americans Jews could relate less and less. At the same time, though, he addressed the future trials and challenges that, in his opinion, were confronting American Jewry.

## **Chapter One: Ephraim Lisitzky as Historical Figure**

### **Historical Context**

Ephraim Lisitzky was born in Russia in the town of Minsk in 1885 and immigrated to America in 1900. He spent his first American years in Boston. Subsequently, Lisitzky lived a peripatetic existence, traveling to upstate New York, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and even Ahmic Harbor, in Ontario, Canada, to study and find work. But in 1918, he settled in New Orleans, Louisiana, and remained in that city until his death in 1962.<sup>9</sup>

Lisitzky was part of the wave of East European migration to America that began a few years before his birth and continued until the eve of World War I. Between 1881 and 1914, around two million Jews from Russia, as well as from Austria-Hungary, Poland, and Romania, crossed the Atlantic to settle in America. Russian Jews fled violent pogroms as well as extreme poverty, forced conscription into the tsar's army, and terrible overpopulation on a small piece of land called the Pale of Settlement.<sup>10</sup>

Although conditions in the 1880s in Russia and other East European countries were extremely tenuous for Jews, the intellectual and literary life of Russian Jewry had been thriving for at least a generation. In 1855, a progressive tsar, Alexander II, ascended the throne, and under his rule Jews began to experience more educational and professional opportunities than ever before as well as an easing of the living restrictions placed upon them in the Pale. This inspired a creative awakening known as the *Haskalah*, or Jewish "enlightenment." Jewish intellectuals and bourgeoisie began to embrace the idea of Jewish "normalcy," hoping that the doors now open to Jews would inspire those still living separate from the general Russian public to abandon their ultra-religious and provincial ways and to acclimate to Russian culture. The

---

<sup>9</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. 1974 CD-Rom Edition. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., s. v. "Lisitzky, Ephraim."

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 171–172.

most famous and radical slogan of the *Haskalah* was written by Judah Leib Gordon, a prominent maskilic poet: “Be a Jew at home and a man in the street.”<sup>11</sup> As Gordon’s words convey the spirit of the *Haskalah* was one of pride in Jewish heritage but also excitement in being a part of the larger Russian society and a willingness to separate and compartmentalize the two.

Though *Haskalah* literature tended to be humanist in nature, one of its greatest legacies is that it revived the Hebrew language, bringing it out of the synagogue and using it for secular poetic expression:

One of their motives conceivably was social, to differentiate themselves from the Yiddish-speaking proletariat. But the principal reason unquestionably was ethnocentric, to assure that the Jews who wakened from their insularity would not become simply educated Russians, in the manner of the German salon-Jews of the preceding decades, but enlightened Russian Jews, aware of the treasured values of their heritage. And for whatever purpose, the secular, literary use of this classical tongue inevitably evoked a rich skein of historical associations. Thus, in Hebrew, it was natural to describe the conditions of Jewish life, even its straightened parochialism, in terminology rich with biblical allusions, to contrast the circumstances of the Russian village with the legendary (and idealized) glories of ancient Zion.<sup>12</sup>

The optimistic spirit of the *Haskalah* was shattered with the rise of Tsar Alexander III in 1881 and the enactment of his “May Laws,” a series of anti-Jewish decrees.<sup>13</sup> This marked the beginning of mass Jewish migration of which Lisitzky was a part. However, the legacy of the *Haskalah*, particularly its emphasis on Hebrew as a textual lingua franca, had a great influence on Lisitzky. He was exposed to *Haskalah* literature as a child and a young adult, and his Hebrew writing clearly bears its mark.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Judah Leib Gordon, *Igarot* [Correspondence]. 2 vols. (Warsaw: N.P., 1894).

<sup>12</sup> Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 2007), 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–13.

<sup>14</sup> Maskilic Hebrew was full of biblical allusions because Hebrew, which had previously been used for religious purposes, was now being transferred to the secular and literary realm. Maskilic writers took great advantage of Hebrew to emphasize intertextuality. See Sachar, 9.

Following the “May Laws” and the ensuing pogroms, great numbers of Jews sought refuge in America. Some Jews arrived on America’s shores to make their fortunes while others relished the opportunity they saw in America to cast aside the religious and cultural constraints of their past in order to pursue new political ideologies or social agendas. Of course, this was not the case for all of them. Some only reluctantly left the “old country” and sought to lead religious lives in America and to continue the learning that had defined their existence in their homelands. Ephraim Lisitzky was among these immigrants: upon his arrival to America, he strove to pursue his studies and to lead as observant a life as possible in his new home, though he came to find this difficult to achieve.<sup>15</sup>

Rather than make their way to the United States, a small number of Jews who fled eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century immigrated to Palestine. They lived in agricultural communities and worked the land so that Palestine would be able to support greater numbers of Jews. These *chalutzim* (pioneers) were attempting to settle in *Eretz Yisrael* (The Land of Israel) in the hopes of establishing a permanent and thriving Jewish existence.<sup>16</sup> These hopes came to fruition in 1948 in the wake of World War II and the catastrophe of the Holocaust in which millions of European Jews were targeted and murdered by the Nazi regime.

The spirit of the *chalutzim* is one that profoundly affected Lisitzky’s personal and professional life. This idealization of the act of working the land was a pronounced characteristic of the influx of immigrants to Palestine immediately following the First World War, and it was also a staple of the Labor Zionist movement.<sup>17</sup> These immigrants were

---

<sup>15</sup> Sarna, 171–172.

<sup>16</sup> Sachar, 138–162.

<sup>17</sup> Labor Zionism is the prominent left wing faction of the Zionist Movement, which emphasizes the importance of a Jewish working class that would build up the land through its commitment to socialist agricultural communities. The major intellectual forces of this movement were A.D. Gordon and Moshe Hess. David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, was also a proponent.

particularly young and idealistic, energized to work the land in Palestine in small collective villages. The literature produced by this group was infused with ideas of self-sacrifice and a commitment to pioneering in the land as the source of Jewish national strength and renewal.<sup>18</sup> This romanticized image of the strong “new Jew” tilling the soil and building his own national home became very prevalent in Zionist youth movements during this period, both in Europe and America. Lisitzky, having spent time both in Russia and in America with Labor Zionists and having been an avid reader of the new Hebrew literature that was being produced by them, was deeply influenced by the image and would frequently use the term “*chalutzit*” (“pioneering”) in his own writing.

The years between World War I and World War II, the period when Lisitzky’s career as a teacher and writer blossomed, was one of trepidation and wariness for American Jewry. These years were “...wrought by educational quotas, restrictive covenants, occupational discrimination, and physical attacks.”<sup>19</sup> Antisemitism was at an all-time high, and pronounced ethnicity and religiosity made Jews targets of their neighbors’ suspicion and dislike.<sup>20</sup> Exclusionary tactics aimed at Jews were at times overt and, at other times, subtle and unspoken. This difficult and uncertain atmosphere caused Jewish communities across the country to form their own parallel subcultures in an effort to feel and appear as American as they could. But it also spawned a great deal of internal conversation among Jewish leaders, rabbis, and educators about the essential nature of Jewish identity.<sup>21</sup> In this environment, the Jewish community asked itself what

---

<sup>18</sup> Sachar, 152–153.

<sup>19</sup> Sarna, 219.

<sup>20</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 78–104.

<sup>21</sup> There exists a multitude of platforms and essays written by several educational and religious leaders of the time regarding the current nature and future goals of Jewish education. See Judah Pilch ed., *A History of Jewish Education in America*. (New York: The National Curriculum Research Institute of the American Association for Jewish Education, 1969), 55–56; Judah Pilch, “Changing Patterns in Jewish Education,” *Jewish Social Studies: A Quarterly Journal Devoted to Contemporary and Historical Aspects of Jewish Life* XXI, no. 2 (April 1959): 91–98.

behaviors should be encouraged by synagogues and rabbis, and what texts and skills should be taught by Jewish schools and educators. Such questions only grew in frequency and saliency throughout Lisitzky's career.<sup>22</sup>

In the middle of Lisitzky's tenure at the New Orleans Talmud Torah, an in-depth study was conducted of the city's Jewish community. For his doctoral dissertation, Rabbi Julian B. Feibelman of Temple Sinai in New Orleans did a comprehensive examination of the demographics of the New Orleans' Jews, and the results offer an interesting snapshot of the community.<sup>23</sup> Feibelman found that somewhere between six thousand and seven thousand Jews lived in New Orleans in 1938. Other sources, he noted, offered figures closer to nine thousand, but he found those to be unrealistically high. The majority of New Orleans' Jews were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four, and most of the Jewish community had been living in New Orleans more than ten years. This indicated that a large number of New Orleans' Jews, even before 1940, had received their Jewish education in New Orleans rather than in some other city.<sup>24</sup>

At this time, the total population of New Orleans was approximately 500,000, which meant that the Jewish community made up approximately two percent of the general population. This, Feibelman noted, was significantly less than that of other cities of New Orleans' size. For example, Cincinnati was comparable in terms of general population, but over five percent of its population at this time was made up of Jews.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, according to Feibelman's study, the

---

<sup>22</sup> For a more extensive discussion of these issues, see chapter 3.

<sup>23</sup> Julian Beck Feibelman (1897–1980) was the rabbi at Temple Sinai in New Orleans from 1936 to 1967. He was very active in the fields of community relations, inter-faith dialogue, and as an integration activist in New Orleans. See his memoirs: *The Making of a Rabbi* (New York: Vantage Press, 1980).

<sup>24</sup> Julian B. Feibelman, "A Social and Economic Study of the New Orleans Jewish Community," doctoral dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1941).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

New Orleans Jewish community was even more of a minority than found in comparable metropolitan areas.

At the time of Feibelman's study, fifteen to twenty percent of Jewish individuals had attended a Jewish weekday school. Though he did not specify this, it may be assumed that many of those people had studied at the New Orleans Talmud Torah where Lisitzky taught since it was the primary weekday school in the city. Interestingly enough, over sixty percent of the Jews who Feibelman surveyed had attended Sunday Schools instead, and those Sunday Schools were to be found at one of three Reform congregations in the city. This figure communicates the dominance of the Reform synagogues in New Orleans as opposed to those of other movements. What type of education best prepared Jewish young people for the future was a source of constant discussion throughout these decades leading to the mid-century, and Feibelman's study offers evidence as to why this was so.<sup>26</sup>

At the time of Lisitzky's death in the early 1960s, the population of New Orleans had grown to about one million people, and the Jewish population of New Orleans had grown closer to 9,000. Very few Eastern European immigrants had chosen to settle in the city relative to the general Jewish population, which made Lisitzky's presence, vocal leadership, and religious lifestyle there somewhat of an anomaly. Historically, the Jewish population of New Orleans also prided itself on being well integrated into the general public. The Jewish community suffered a few antisemitic incidents in the 1950s and 1960s in relation to the Civil Rights struggles of that era, but for the most part, the Jews of New Orleans enjoyed a peaceful and prosperous existence in the Crescent City.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Not only were there multiple options, even in a city of New Orleans' size, where one could obtain a Jewish education, but as his study demonstrates, the curricula of these institutions were quite divergent.

<sup>27</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. 1974 CD-Rom Edition. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., s.v. "New Orleans."



## Biography

Ephraim Lisitzky wrote his autobiography late in life, but it ends when he is just over thirty years old.<sup>28</sup> It includes full explanations of his thoughts and feelings during his wanderings as a young man, but Lisitzky does not specify years for all his actions. In addition, there is very little information given in it about his family life. Therefore, details of his life as a young man exist in his own words, as unspecific as they may be, whereas the details of his middle and old age must be pieced together through multiple sources and others' interpretations of his life and work. Still unclear is why he decided to end his autobiography with much of his life story untold, but according to his own words, he believed his early struggles were more readily applicable to many Jewish immigrants in America. Because of this, he saw fit to write them down and make them public.

Ephraim Lisitzky's childhood in Minsk was marked by hardship, poverty, and personal tragedy. As previously stated, forced conscription in the tsarist army was a fact of life for Jewish males. Being a part of the tsar's army was generally perceived to be a terrible fate because it would take Jewish youths away from their families for decades. Ephraim's father had managed to avoid this obligatory service as a young man through the desperate and clever maneuverings of his mother. But because of his secret he was, as an adult, the victim of constant blackmail by Jewish outlaws. They threatened, if he did not pay them whenever they asked, to turn him in to the Russian authorities for having avoided conscription, leading to certain arrest.

The pressure of the relentless threat of blackmail, along with giving birth to five stillborn children and a sixth that died after a few hours, caused Ephraim's mother to lose her mind when she was rather young. Lisitzky wrote of this formative event in his autobiography, "The earliest

---

<sup>28</sup> Ephraim Lisitzky, *Eileh toldot adam* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1949). The English translation is *In the Grip of Cross Currents*, trans. Moshe Kohn and Jacob Sloan and revised by the author (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1959).

childhood feeling that I can remember was a sense of combined insult and humiliation: My father was a water carrier, my mother a crazy woman.”<sup>29</sup> In 1892, at the age of seven, Ephraim found his mother dead in her bed in the middle of the night.<sup>30</sup>

Ephraim’s father married his late wife’s stepsister and relocated his family to Slutzk, where his new wife’s parents resided. To his family’s disappointment, this move did not prevent the Jewish informers from continuing to blackmail him. Ultimately, his only recourse was to flee to America, which he was able to do by keeping it a secret from everyone, including his young son. Ephraim awoke early one morning to find his father gone. His father had moved to Boston where he had a sister, and he hoped to bring his family over to join him as soon as he could raise the funds to do so.<sup>31</sup>

Without his parents, Ephraim found comfort in the beauty and isolation of nature that surrounded his village and inside the walls of the *cheder*, the Jewish schoolhouse. He proved himself to be a gifted student, attracting the attention of all his teachers and some very prominent rabbis in the area. His love of learning grew as he matured, and he moved from *yeshivah* to *yeshivah* as he became more and more advanced in his Talmudic studies. During these years, he was also exposed to Zionist writings, those of the Russian *maskilim* (proponents of the *Haskalah*), and to the contemporary Hebrew poetry that was being published at the time. Ephraim found himself fascinated by both the religious and the secular worlds, and this fascination would come to define his future career in America.<sup>32</sup>

After several years, Ephraim and his stepmother received two tickets to America that would enable them to join his father in Boston. The young Lisitzky was hesitant to leave his

---

<sup>29</sup> Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–60.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

home and his teachers, and initially, he did not like life in Boston. He yearned for the pious and studious ambience of his *yeshivot* in Russia; little in his new environment inspired or excited him. He tried to work as a peddler, going from door to door selling household necessities. His shyness, however, prevented him from succeeding in this profession, and he quickly abandoned the effort.<sup>33</sup>

His failed attempt at peddling convinced him that his calling was as a scholar, and his new goal was to become a rabbi. At the advice of the chief rabbi of Boston, Rabbi Moshe Zebulun Margolies, Lisitzky decided to attend Isaac Elchanan Yeshiva in New York some time prior to 1906.<sup>34</sup> He was there for a very short time, barely half a year, not finding himself compelled by life at this American *yeshivah* the way he had been in Slutzk. He soon set his sights on attending an American university, and he returned to Boston to make new plans.<sup>35</sup> But due to economic hardship in his own family, Lisitzky took on a series of odd jobs to earn the money he would need for his tuition and to allow him to become self-sufficient. To this end, he became a certified *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), though he found that ritual slaughtering was very difficult for him to tolerate. In addition, Boston already had a number of *shochtim* and work was scarce.

He managed to find a job in Auburn, New York. There, he worked as a *shochet* and as a tutor, hoping that the money he earned would allow him to change his life. While in Auburn, he came into contact with a circle of *maskilim* and as a result, was exposed on a regular basis to the

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 63–107.

<sup>34</sup> Rabbi Moshe Zebulun Margolies (1851–1936) was a very prominent Russian-born Orthodox rabbi who immigrated to America to serve as the chief rabbi of Boston. In 1906 he moved to New York to serve as the rabbi for Congregation Kehilat Jeshurun. Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Yeshiva, also known as Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, is today Yeshiva University. At the time of Lisitzky's attendance, pre-1915, it had not yet merged with Yeshiva Eitz Chaim to form Yeshiva University under the leadership of Dr. Bernard Revel.

<sup>35</sup> Edward E. Grusd, "Tale of Two Cultures," *The National Jewish Monthly* (November 1959): 11. "Lisitzky, Ephraim E," SC-7301, AJA.

major literary works of the *Haskalah*. He found himself fascinated by this world. Within *Haskalah*, Lisitzky saw the revitalization of the Jewish soul.<sup>36</sup> He wrote, “For I regarded the Enlightenment as essentially a new interpretation of Judaism, an attempt to revive its ancient cardinal truths. The Enlightenment did deny some of the tenets of Jewish legalism – but this denial was positive in purpose. It represented an attempt to enable Judaism to withstand the attack of modernism by ridding it of superstitious elements.”<sup>37</sup> Additionally, he was introduced to socialist ideology. Socialism, which in its essence is anti-religious, caused a great crisis of faith within Lisitzky; he felt torn between his beloved teachers in Russia and the young activists with whom he found himself socializing in New York.

Shortly thereafter, he lost his job in Auburn and was forced to return to Boston yet again. While there, he found himself even more interested in Zionism than he had been in the past, as well as becoming exposed to more modern Hebrew literature. He wrote, “I sat on a solitary bench in a public park reading the new Hebrew literature all day. It was a new world for me, a haven from boredom and despondency.”<sup>38</sup> He found himself drifting away from his religious traditionalism, much more compelled by these new ideologies and interests. His growing sadness and confusion about which path to follow as well as the pain of falling in and out of love several times during this period coalesced into the literary inspiration that ultimately motivated Lisitzky to write poems in Hebrew.<sup>39</sup>

While living in Boston, Lisitzky had an influential encounter with the highly regarded Hebrew poet Menachem Mendel Dolitzky.<sup>40</sup> Lisitzky later recalled how excited he was by the

---

<sup>36</sup> Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 111–143.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 147–191.

<sup>40</sup> Menachem Mendel Dolitzky (1856–1931) was a Hebrew and Yiddish writer who was born in Poland and immigrated to America in 1892. Though his poetry was very well known in eastern Europe, his writing career in America was unsuccessful, and he died in poverty in Los Angeles, CA.

prospect of this meeting: “When I was a *yeshivah* student I thought there was nothing grander than an author. I saw the square letters of the Hebrew book as godly letters, which were handed down from Sinai, and its author as a sublime, almost divine superhuman being.”<sup>41</sup> Lisitzky’s meeting with Dolitzky in his hotel room was at once both disillusioning and inspirational for the young poet. Dolitzky was old and bitter from his years of struggle as a Hebrew scholar and Yiddish writer in America who had gained little respect and an even smaller livelihood. When Lisitzky gave him one of his first poems to read and comment upon, Dolitzky’s response illustrated the well-known plight of the early American Hebrew writer:

“Stop it,” he said bitterly. “There’s no glory in it. The devil with poetry! Don’t be a fool poetaster! You know what happens to Hebrew poets in this country: First stage – Hebrew poet. Second stage – Hebrew teacher – or rather cattle herder, with the children in the role of unwilling cattle. Third stage – you write trashy novels for maidservants and teamsters. You’re young, you can get into the university here. Learn an honorable profession that will give you a decent living. Do anything, be anything – peddle candles and matches – sell windbags and bubbles if you must. Be a tailor, a shoemaker, a cobbler – anything but a Hebrew poet in America!”<sup>42</sup>

To make a living and support a woman whom, at that time, he wished to marry, Lisitzky searched for a trade outside of the Jewish community. He applied to be a streetcar driver and attempted to work as a cigar maker. Neither profession fit, and, at the begging of his now-ill father that he return to his religious observances, Lisitzky decided to revert to the vocation of *shochet*. At the urging of a friend, he took a job in the small Canadian village of Ahmic Harbor in Ontario, leaving Boston and his father yet again.<sup>43</sup>

In Ahmic Harbor, Lisitzky worked for a family, preparing their meat and tutoring their two young sons. It was at this time that he truly found his gift for teaching. He inspired the children in the family, telling them stories from the Talmud, teaching Hebrew, and engaging

---

<sup>41</sup> Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 170.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 147–191.

them in discussions about God. After five years in Ahmic Harbor and due to an aborted love affair with a Gentile girl, Lisitzky returned to Boston to re-engage with his Judaism. En route to Boston, he was robbed of all the money he had earned in Canada, which meant that his dreams of going to an American university had to again be postponed.<sup>44</sup>

After the death of his father, Lisitzky was determined to move to Palestine to live the Zionist dream that had so mesmerized him during his time in Auburn. He planned to earn his livelihood in Palestine as a certified pharmacist, and he completed the necessary training at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. As it happened, finances prevented him from actually making a journey to Palestine, and he found that this profession was not enough to spiritually sustain him in America.<sup>45</sup> Finally, after all of these encounters, he resolved to embrace his new home and find a way to build a new Jewish life on its shores for himself and for those who would come after him.

Lisitzky was disillusioned with American Jewry in what he perceived to be its shallowness and ignorance, but he decided to face his disillusionment by attempting to change American Judaism. Lisitzky first settled in Milwaukee where he was offered a job directing the Talmud Torah.<sup>46</sup> He went on to devote the remainder of his life to teaching Hebrew to Jewish children in Milwaukee and, later, in New Orleans, where he became the director and *Moreh* of a community Hebrew school: the New Orleans Talmud Torah.<sup>47</sup> In his autobiography, Lisitzky evaluated the process that culminated in the choice of his career: “Much laborious effort and

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 195–283.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 287–300.

<sup>46</sup> While teaching at the Milwaukee Talmud Torah, Lisitzky was the Hebrew instructor of a young Golda Meir. Mildred Brown, interview by the author. Cincinnati, OH, November 17, 2008.

<sup>47</sup> At some point during this period, Lisitzky married and had two daughters. He and his first wife divorced and he would later marry Bertha Scheffrin. The details of his personal life are conspicuously absent from his autobiography and are difficult to ascertain.

deep probing went into the search for a suitable life goal, but at last I found it – the vocation of a Hebrew teacher in America.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Educational Career in New Orleans**

Lisitzky served as an educator and principal of the New Orleans Talmud Torah from 1918 to 1959, when he retired. The New Orleans Talmud Torah held classes six days a week, and students came to study for two hours on each of those days. Lisitzky’s students remember him as a strict teacher who was stingy with compliments. His standard praise was frequently doled out with the phrase: “Without error.” More than two hundred students graduated from the New Orleans Talmud Torah during the time he served as the school’s director, and many more attended but did not graduate. Many of them were Jewishly knowledgeable and capably trained in Hebrew as a modern, living language.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout his career, Lisitzky reflected a genuine affection for his students in his published essays and articles. He frequently praised them, in writing, for their commitment to learning even as he thanked them for giving his life purpose.<sup>50</sup> His affection for New Orleans appears in much of his early poetry, wherein Lisitzky lovingly described his adopted city:

Morning sun gold over reddish land  
Furrowed with soft-stalked millet  
And rows of blossoming cotton plants,  
Green amid flashing translucent dew...

Higher, higher, as far as eye can see  
Spreads a sapphire blue hemmed with  
Gold chainmail of tiny cloud-scales spread like foil

---

<sup>48</sup> Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 294. It seems reasonable that it was financial and personal factors that prevented Lisitzky from actually making his life in Palestine, as he had planned to do. At the end of his autobiography, he framed this choice as an ideological one, which may have been the manner in which he chose to rationalize his unusual situation.

<sup>49</sup> Field, 25–26.

<sup>50</sup> Lisitzky, “Yaho! Harimu hashayim”; Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 296.

Over earth and her dwellers, canopying  
A peaceful tabernacle, grace and beauty  
Over all God's creatures –  
God still is  
Within the world – and I was not aware!<sup>51</sup>

Periodically over the years, Lisitzky traveled to Israel, New York, and Chicago on occasion, and maintained an ongoing correspondence with contemporary Hebrew poets and men active in the Zionist movement in America. He retained a strong attachment to his life in New Orleans and to the school he ran for forty years. His daughter Annette was even married at the New Orleans Talmud Torah in 1949.<sup>52</sup>

When Lisitzky arrived in New Orleans in 1918, the Talmud Torah was, by many accounts, in a state of organizational disarray. Rabbis, communal leaders, laity, and alumni complained. During his first few years as the school's principal, Lisitzky worked relentlessly to mend communal ties and, simultaneously, to put the school back on solid footing.<sup>53</sup>

Lisitzky never left the classroom during school hours. He taught students approximately five hours a day without a break. He also established and advised a local chapter of "Young Judaea."<sup>54</sup> He also made it a priority during his tenure to work with the parents of his Hebrew students. He often volunteered to speak and teach to local Hebrew language societies and Zionist groups during the evenings, and he gave public recitations of his poetry.<sup>55</sup> Reflecting on the course of his career, Lisitzky's contemporaries noted that "... the educator left behind him a

---

<sup>51</sup> Ephraim Lisitzky, "New Orleans Countryside," transl. I.M. Lask in "An American Hebrew Poet's Dilemma [Sic]" reprinted from *The Jerusalem Post*. (No date printed.) "Lisitzky, Ephraim E." SC-7301.

<sup>52</sup> Invitation to the wedding Annette Lisitzky. Solomon Goldman Papers, MSS 203/12/12, AJA.

<sup>53</sup> Arie Shpall, "Lisitzky Hamechanekh," *Hadoar* (July 13, 1962): 589; A.R. Malachi, "Lisitzky the Educator," *Bitzaron: The Hebrew Monthly of America* 214, no. 4 (February-March 1960): 203–221, MSS 659/2/22, AJA.

<sup>54</sup> Young Judaea is a Zionist youth organization founded in 1909. It was affiliated with the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) and later with Hadassah as well. Its peak membership is estimated to be at about 30,000 youth in 1948. Therefore, during Lisitzky's tenure as advisor it was at its most active as an organization.

<sup>55</sup> Shpall, 589.



living library, hundreds of students whom he educated about national culture and Hebrew literature, and some of [whom contributed much] to the public Jewish leadership in the United States.”<sup>56</sup>

Lisitzky was recognized on both the local and national levels throughout his career for his contributions to the field of education. Particularly as he neared retirement and his health began to fail, his peers in the fields of literature and education, as well as the New Orleans Jewish community, seized opportunities to recognize his many professional achievements. They did so on multiple occasions, both in person and in print.

For example, Lisitzky was honored by an annual gathering of Jewish educators at their 1958 conclave in Atlantic City.<sup>57</sup> In 1960, *Bitzaron: The Hebrew Monthly of America* devoted an entire issue to him and a celebration of his work.<sup>58</sup> In recognition of his retirement from teaching and directing the New Orleans Talmud Torah, the Jewish community of New Orleans honored Lisitzky for his many years of service. The list of sponsors for the community-wide testimonial dinner, held in the Spring of 1959 and honoring “Dr. Ephraim E Lisitzky, distinguished scholar, teacher and poet,” included Conservative, Reform, and Orthodox congregations, Hadassah, the Jewish Federation of New Orleans, and the Zionist Council of New Orleans among many other organizations.<sup>59</sup> He was also lauded at a New Orleans Talmud Torah dinner in 1961, with his former student Label Katz, the international president of B’nai Brith as the keynote speaker.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Translated by author.

<sup>57</sup> “Dr. Lisitzky to be Cited By Educators’ Conclave,” *The Jewish Ledger* (April 18, 1958). SC-7301.

<sup>58</sup> *Bitzaron: The Hebrew Monthly of America* 215, no. 4 (February-March 1960), MSS 659/2/22, AJA.

<sup>59</sup> Invitation to The Community-Wide Testimonial honoring Dr. Ephraim E. Lisitzky. “Lisitzky, Ephraim E.” Nearprint Biography, AJA.

<sup>60</sup> Label Katz (1918–1975) was a New Orleans native who became a prominent local businessman and national figure in the field of Jewish leadership. He served as the president of the New Orleans Talmud Torah as well as a leader in the B’nai Brith Hillel Foundation. *Jewish Ledger* (April 13, 1961): “Lisitzky, Ephraim E.” Nearprint Biography, AJA.

## Literary Achievements

The world of education was one of Ephraim Lisitzky's greatest passions, but the world of literature, particularly the writing of poetry, was an equally important interest. His first poems were published in 1904, and his first book of poems in 1908. Early on, as previously noted, Dolitzky warned Lisitzky that a Hebrew poet in America had no real future. Yet Lisitzky continued to write, receiving acclaim by American and Palestinian Hebraists for his fourth poem in particular, published in London by Joseph Chaim Brenner.<sup>61</sup> It was this poem about which a dear friend reminisced while reflecting on Lisitzky's death in 1962:

We first learned his name when his poem, "The Fearful Days" was published in one of the first issues of "Meh-Orer," which was published by J.C. Brenner in London, 1906–1908. We greatly rejoiced that one of us, though personally as yet unknown to us, was among the contributors to this monthly, which was so revered by us. It was as if all young Hebrew writers in this country were given a passport to the land of modern Hebrew literature.<sup>62</sup>

The circle of Anglo-Hebrew poets to which this writer refers included Lisitzky along with Benjamin Silkiner, Hillel Bavli, and Moses Feinstein, to name a few.<sup>63</sup> Lisitzky referenced some of these men, as well as other Hebrew writers of the time, in his own literary work, having found in their association a kinship and understanding that he lacked with so many other American Jews. However, unlike Lisitzky, most of these other significant Hebrew poets solidified their careers in New York or, ultimately, in Israel, places where their work would find

---

<sup>61</sup> Malachi, 51.

<sup>62</sup> Spicehandler.

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin Silkiner (1882–1933) was a Lithuanian-born American Hebrew poet who was also an elementary school Hebrew teacher and Bible professor at the Teachers College of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). Hillel Bavli (1893–1961) was a celebrated American Hebrew poet, also Lithuanian by birth. He was also a professor of Hebrew literature at JTS. Moses Feinstein (1896–1964) was a Russian Hebrew poet and educator. He founded and taught in *Herzliah*, the Hebrew Academy and Teachers Institute in New York.

appreciative readers and, perhaps, some degree of critical recognition. Lisitzky chose no such path, and he spoke about this choice in his own reflections on his life and work.<sup>64</sup>

Lisitzky published several books in addition to his first book of poetry. In 1937, he published *Medurot doakhot (Dying Campfires)* inspired by his fascination with American Indians.<sup>65</sup> Another muse for Lisitzky was the African American culture that captured his attention throughout his years of living in the South. He published *B'ohalei kush (In the Tents of Kush)* in 1953, a book of poetry inspired by and written in the form of black spirituals.<sup>66</sup> In addition, he published many of his articles and literary criticisms in a volume titled *Bishevilei chayim v'sifrut (On the Pathways of Life and Literature)* published in 1961. Perhaps his most famous publication was his autobiography, *Eileh toldot adam (This is the Story of a Man)*, written in 1949 and translated in English as *In the Grip of Cross-Currents* in 1959. In it, Lisitzky paints a picture of his childhood world and his life as a young adult. Though he was over sixty at the time his autobiography was published, he elected to confine his autobiographical account to the first thirty years of his life.<sup>67</sup>

Ephraim Lisitzky's was frequently covered by both the Jewish press in America and in Israel, and sometimes the non-Jewish media highlighted him as well. Because he was much acclaimed for his poetry, the New Orleans media announced and reviewed his new books as they were published. *The Jewish Ledger*, the New Orleans Jewish weekly publication, had numerous articles about Lisitzky, and towards the end of his life, his writings and honors were noted and described in *The New Orleans Times Picayune*, the major daily newspaper of the city. Regionally, Lisitzky was the subject of articles in *The Jewish Spectator*, one of the first Jewish

---

<sup>64</sup> Ephraim Lisitzky, "Yisrael b'artzo v'yisrael b'galut amriqah," *Hadoar* (August 31, 1956): 703–704.

"Lisitzky, Ephraim" MSS no. 659/2/22, AJA. See further discussin in this chapter.

<sup>65</sup> Ephraim Lisitzky, *Medurot doakhot* (Tel Aviv: Guttenberg, 1937).

<sup>66</sup> Ephraim Lisitzky, *B'ohalei kush* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1953).

<sup>67</sup> Grusd, "Tale of Two Cultures," 11. SC-7301, AJA.

weekly journals to be published in the South. His work was often reviewed in Israeli publications such as *The Jerusalem Post*, *Hapoel Hatzair*, and *Davar*, as well as other Israeli newspapers and several national Hebrew monthlies in America.<sup>68</sup>

As for Lisitzky's articles, many of them were to be found in *Hadoar*, the largest and most successful of American Hebrew periodicals. In these publications, Lisitzky found a forum to publicize his poems to a wider readership than they might have received in New Orleans or even in the South. He also found a medium through which to discuss what he viewed as the major issues affecting American Jewry. For example, his Hebrew articles discussed subjects such as American Jewry's relationship with Israel, the state of Jewish scholarship in America, the purpose of Hebrew education in America, and his own thoughts about the future of the Jewish people. Lisitzky's writings in these publications contributed to an ongoing public dialogue that involved a number of his literary colleagues who lived in the larger cities of the Northeast. These American Hebrew publications provided American Hebrew writers, like Lisitzky, with a forum wherein they could reflect on the issues of the day and respond to each other as colleagues.

## Conclusion

The communal concerns that drew Ephraim Lisitzky's attention were especially salient in New Orleans. He taught Southern Jewish youth, youth who were in danger of assimilation due to their very small numbers and lack of access to many institutional and social resources Jews in larger population centers had. Therefore, he was highly sensitive to these matters, and because of his skill as a writer, he was highly articulate in addressing them. Studying his life and writings not only contributes to the general knowledge of "the most prolific and one of the ablest of our

---

<sup>68</sup> "Dr. Lisitzky's Latest Book Acclaimed in Israel," *The Jewish Ledger* (November 20, 1953). "Lisitzky's New Book Acclaimed in Israel," *The Jewish Ledger* (November 20, 1953). "Lisitzky, Ephraim E," Nearprint Biography, AJA.

American Hebrew poets” as well as to the development of American Hebrew literature in general, but it also offers a lens through which to understand the current struggles which face America’s Jews.<sup>69</sup> Today, Jewish leaders are greatly concerned with assimilationist tendencies amongst American Jews as well as the rampant problem of Jewish illiteracy and Hebraic illiteracy. Certainly, these three issues are interrelated. In addition, many Jewish leaders strive to find ways to help American Jews deepen their relationship with the State of Israel and its people. Strengthening the identity of American Jews, teaching them what they need to know to perpetuate their identities in the Jewish world, and interfacing with the Jewish state are major issues on the agenda of all American Jewish leaders in the twenty-first century.

It was during the mid-twentieth century that Ephraim Lisitzky was at the pinnacle of his career—a time when so many children of East European immigrants were drifting away from Jewish life, when the catastrophic implications of the Holocaust were beginning to dawn on American Jewry, and when the fledgling State of Israel was struggling to its feet. Living in America at a time when there was tremendous growth in opportunities and challenges for American Jews socially, professionally, and economically, Lisitzky shone a spotlight on the enduring challenges that American Jewry faced and continue to face —Jewish literacy, Jewish education, and Jewish identity—and he did so using the Hebrew language.

---

<sup>69</sup> Samuel Dinin, “Editorial Comments,” *Jewish Education* 33, no. 1 (Fall 1962): 5

## **Chapter Two: Lisitzky's *Chalutziut* in Theory**

### ***Chalutziut in New Orleans***

"*Chalutziut* in New Orleans" was the title of a June 1957 article for *The Jewish Spectator*.<sup>70</sup> In it, author Allan Field recounted a conversation he had with a Jew from New Orleans whom he met at a party. This man informed him that Ephraim Lisitzky, the "brilliant Hebrew poet and the author of several important volumes" was teaching Hebrew at the New Orleans Talmud Torah. Field confessed that when this particular man told him that he had studied under Ephraim Lisitzky at the New Orleans Talmud Torah, Field was astounded. Field could not understand what a man of Lisitzky's stature and fame was doing living in the American South, teaching Hebrew at a relatively small communal school and maintaining an existence totally disconnected, at least on a daily basis, from his Jewish cultural and intellectual peers. Field wrote:

When I voiced my astonishment that a creative writer of Ephraim Lisitzky's stature could endure living in New Orleans, far from his colleagues and the literary life in New York, my new friend got indignant. "That's the trouble with the Jewish educators and intellectuals," he pointed an accusing finger at me. "They deliver lectures, they write articles and books, they spin ideologies of Jewish survival – but they are not ready for *Chalutziut*. They won't do a thing to translate their preachments into deeds."<sup>71</sup>

This *chalutziut* that Field wrote about in 1957 is a concept that Lisitzky used throughout his career to explain his choice to teach Hebrew in New Orleans. He was, in a sense, pioneering: etching out new territory and making it possible for others to live there. That someone with the extensive learning and Jewish cultural interests of Lisitzky would choose to spend his life as a Hebrew teacher in the south is not a foregone conclusion but rather a surprising and counterintuitive reality. An exploration of how and why Lisitzky came to make such a decision

---

<sup>70</sup> Field, 25.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

offers a window into his personal and professional existence as a fashioner of American Hebrew culture.

### **Hebrew in America**

Lisitzky's work reflects his strong belief in Hebrew as a keystone to the rebuilding of Jewish civilization after centuries of deterioration. This idea, though prominent among the *maskilim* of Lisitzky's homeland, was not mainstream amongst American Jewry. However, while common use of Hebrew dwindled in most places as Lisitzky approached adulthood, there were pockets of American Jewish society in which the study and use of Hebrew had been rediscovered and elevated to new heights. During his childhood in Russia and even more so upon his arrival in America, Lisitzky found himself drawn to and ultimately became a part of a very particular group of Jewish intellectuals who shared a common set of values and interests.<sup>72</sup>

The Hebrew language had experienced a revival of sorts in the *Haskalah* long before noteworthy numbers of East European Jews began settling in the New *Yishuv* toward the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, in the generations after the beginning of the *Haskalah* in particular, there were young Jewish intellectuals who rediscovered the ideals of Jewish nationalism – a love of Zion – in greater numbers than in years past.<sup>74</sup> Though most did not attempt to return to the land itself, they found that by reviving the Hebrew language they had access to a sort of “portable homeland” and an outlet for their nationalist ideas and ideals.<sup>75</sup> Some of these young idealists did indeed make their way to *Eretz Yisrael*, but an even larger

---

<sup>72</sup> Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 113.

<sup>73</sup> A Hebrew term connoting the Jewish community in Palestine prior to the creation of the State of Israel, including the pre-Zionist era (Old *Yishuv*) as well as the Zionists of the late Ottoman Turkish rule and British mandate eras (New *Yishuv*).

<sup>74</sup> Those who were a part of this movement were known as *Chovevei Zion* (Lovers of Zion). Sachar, 16.

<sup>75</sup> Alan Mintz, “Introduction,” in *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects*, ed. Alan Mintz (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1993) 13–14.

number of them immigrated to the United States. In America, these new immigrants sought to continue the Hebrew culture they had been a part of and had a hand in developing in Russia.<sup>76</sup>

Lisitzky found himself at home amongst not only the older *maskilim* but also among the younger Zionists whose paths he crossed. For both groups, and there was certainly overlap between them, the use of Hebrew was profoundly important and one of their highest ideals. This cadre of American Hebraists, those motivated by the ideals of the *Haskalah* and Zionist ideology, worked to organize themselves and to establish institutions for the study and use of Hebrew. They published newspapers, founded schools, and wrote poetry and books, all for the sake of Hebrew as a living language. For Lisitzky, as for the other American Hebraists of that era, the Hebrew language served as a venue for Jewish self-expression. They communicated with each other in Hebrew and Hebrew was the focus of their literary and educational careers.<sup>77</sup>

### **Lisitzky and Israel: An American Hebraist's Dilemma**

A twelve-year-old Ephraim Lisitzky arrived in America in 1900. He came of age just as this American Hebrew culture was reaching its peak. By his mid-twenties, Lisitzky had found his place in American society not simply as a *bar mitzvah* tutor but more importantly as a teacher of the Hebrew language to the next generation and part of the American Hebraist movement. As a member of this distinguished group of new Americans, Lisitzky's educational efforts were dedicated to the survival of the Jewish people.

The great irony of Lisitzky's position as an American Hebraist is of course that, as the description of this identity conveys, he chose to live in America rather than to make *aliyah* (immigrate to Israel) even as he chose to communicate predominantly in Hebrew. He spent the

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 13–26.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.



first twenty years of his American life searching for his place, not adhering to the secularist tendencies of the larger American Jewish majority and not being able to return to the *yeshivot* of his childhood. As a passionate Jew and Hebraist, Lisitzky felt drawn during this period towards Palestine, a land where people spoke the language he loved and were struggling to reconstitute a Jewish culture. As a young man, Lisitzky was impressed and even envious of life in the *Yishuv* and the *chalutzim*, the pioneer settlers who were working to create an independent Jewish existence in their ancestral home with their own hands. He admired their efforts and their goals, and he longed to be a part of their endeavor.

In 1956, *Hadoar* published an address Lisitzky had delivered to the Hebrew Writers Association in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv several years earlier.<sup>78</sup> In this speech, Lisitzky explained to his Hebraist peers the complexity of his existence in America. Through his words, the many layers of his identity and the challenges inherent in them emerge with great poignancy.

Lisitzky began by calling the writers' attention to his perplexing existence as a Hebrew writer in America. To emphasize the irony of this fact, he went on to share his feelings of anticipation when he travelled to Israel for the first time in 1934. With a maskilic Hebrew that utilizes the parabolic rhetoric of Judaism's ancient sages, Lisitzky called to mind, in the introduction to his talk, "*Yisrael b'artzo v'yisrael b'galut ameriqah*" ("Israel in its Land and Israel in American Exile"), how important his first trip was to him:

From the time I began planning my journey to Israel, [there was] a kind of religious ecstasy and a storm of supreme gladness reigning over me, and yet together with them, [there was] dread filling my soul – and this dread did not derive from any fear of the approaching riots upon our land, or the anticipated danger from them.<sup>79</sup> [My situation] is likened to a rich man who keeps in his storehouse a chest full of jewels, treasured and precious to him above all else, and

---

<sup>78</sup> The Hebrew Writers Association was an organization founded in 1937 by the renowned Hebrew poet, Haim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934).

<sup>79</sup> Lisitzky is discussing his first trip to Israel, which took place in 1934. Most likely, he is referring here to the Arab riots in Palestine that began to surge in the mid-1930s.

from time to time he feasts his eyes and gladdens his soul upon their great radiance. After some time, he looses his fortune, and in his poverty he is forced to sell or to pawn these jewels, one by one, in order to make a living. His chest is nearly empty and only one solitary jewel, the most lovely of the jewels that he had sold or pawned, remains within it. And then he approaches, in his poverty, his chest, opens it and extends a trembling hand to bring out the gem from within, to sell or pawn it, and dread fills his soul: What will be left for him after he squanders this solitary remaining jewel?

This rich man is like me: good dreams were kept for me in the storehouse of my soul, and I have squandered all of them in the days of my absurd life. One dream – the last and best of them all – remained for me to cast up: a dream of the revival of Israel in the State of Israel, and here I approach and bring it out and interpret it [make it a reality] – and my hand trembles and dread fills my soul: I know from experience how much interpretations, in their grey reality, fall short of dreams... What will be left for me when I squander this last dream?<sup>80</sup>

It is clear from his words that his first trip to *Eretz Yisrael* held great personal and spiritual significance for him. Anticipating his impending visit, he experienced a wave of “religious ecstasy. It was his “one dream – the last and best of them all,” and it was so important to him that he was afraid that in making his dream a reality it would not live up to his vaunted anticipation. He continued to reflect on his first visit to the Holy Land:

And then I came to the Land and profaned my last dream through interpretation – [but] the interpretation was more precious in value than the dream, and I will return much richer than I came. I witness our people, after thousands of years of exile and detachment from the ground, grasped anew in its homeland and building her arid fields – and I bless: “Blessed is the One who establishes the widow’s boundary.”<sup>81</sup> I witness miraculous acts in Israel’s political revival in its homeland, and in the beginning of the ingathering of the exiles, wondrous miracles that, when they are told, when they are heard as legendary stories in the generations to come, no one will believe them<sup>82</sup> – and again I bless: “Blessed in the One who made miracles for our ancestors and for us in this place!”<sup>83</sup> I witness the formation of renewed Hebrew culture and, amidst an awesome creative stream, it sends me a message that, in the future, it will burst forth and spread out from the Land of Israel, and all the visions, yearnings, longings, prayers and tears of

---

<sup>80</sup> Lisitzky, “*Yisrael b'artzo v'yisrael b'galut ameriqah*,” in *Bishevilei chayim v'sifrut*, 126–127.

<sup>81</sup> This is the blessing one says upon seeing the houses of Israel rebuilt. Cf. Babylonian Talmud, *Brakhot* 58b.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Liturgy of the *Amidah*.

<sup>83</sup> This is the blessing one recites upon seeing a place in which miracles have been performed for Israel. Cf. Babylonian Talmud, *Brakhot* 54a.

hundreds of generations will be absorbed and concentrated within it. And this culture of Israel was destined to be renewed upon the ground of Israel, taking root within it and nourished from its resources ... And I believe with perfect faith<sup>84</sup> that this creative and cultural stream is destined to irrigate and fertilize the rocky ground of Judaism in the expanses of Exile... Once again I see these miraculous acts and again I say the blessing of resurrection of the dead.<sup>85</sup> Within the struggle of the building of our land, I see the splendor of a new life which has been brought about by a complete merging of Jew and man, a living Judaism created from the toil and suffering that cleanse the body and refine the soul, from the sanctification of a man's life upon the earth and the beautification of God's image engraved upon it, from the pre-Messianic tribulations and longings for a complete redemption -- and it seems to me to be a new manifestation of the Biblical phrase "the beauty of Israel"<sup>86</sup> -- a manifestation aglow with a new radiance that is giving us a new gift, sewn together from the mistakes that were made in it, intentionally and unintentionally, and again I say a blessing: Blessed is the One who clothes Israel in splendor.<sup>87</sup>

Lisitzky told the Hebrew Writers Association that his visits to Israel had been as marvelous as he had hoped. It was stirring for him to witness his people working and building up the land through their own physical labor. A Jewish nationalist at heart, Lisitzky was naturally influenced and inspired by the political Zionism of Theodor Herzl as well as the Labor Zionist movement.<sup>88</sup> It is clear through the words of this speech that the physical building of the state and the pioneering spirit of the *chalutzim* spoke loudly to Lisitzky even as he worked to build his own life and career in America.

With this evidence of his deep reverence for Israel and the men and women who strove to build it, the fact that Lisitzky did not make his home there becomes even more puzzling. It is apparent based on his speech that he was profoundly moved and inspired by the existence of

---

<sup>84</sup> Lisitzky uses the language of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith.

<sup>85</sup> Cf Liturgy of the *Amidah*, "Blessed are You who brings the dead to life."

<sup>86</sup> Lamentations 2:1

<sup>87</sup> Cf Liturgy of *Birchot HaShachar*. It is the blessing prescribed by the rabbis when one dons a head covering. Babylonian Talmud, *Brachot* 60b. Lisitzky, "*Yisrael b'artzo v'yisrael b'galut ameriqah*," 127–128.

<sup>88</sup> Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) was the founder of political Zionism, founder of the World Zionist Congress, and credited with having inspired and implemented the mainstream Jewish nationalist movement that culminated in the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

Jewish settlements in Palestine and the hard-working *chalutzim* who were making the desert bloom.

Lisitzky's confounding presence as an American Hebraist – in the south no less – did not go unnoticed by the American Jewish press. In an article reprinted in *The Jewish Ledger* after its original appearance in *The Jerusalem Post* shortly after the publication of his autobiography, Lisitzky is described as a poet with a problem. His problem, as outlined in the article by I.M. Lask, is that of the dual allegiances that being a Hebraist in America required. Lask attempted to explain, using Lisitzky's poetry as proof-text, why the poet remained in America. Lask writes, "Lisitzky to be sure, feels that he is not being fully true to himself and his heritage."<sup>89</sup> In one of his poems, Lisitzky likened the Land of Israel to a long lost mother who is no match in beauty or strength to her son's beautiful step-mother (viz., America):

In brief, he finds himself amid the rocks, the ruins, the desolation, the contention  
and the lack of rain in the position of one brought up on the milk of a step-  
mother, who now meets his own withered mother, and finds that he

*Gives his step-mother all a son's love*

*And you – sheer pity and nodding of head.*

It is true that the mother still has the twin bright blue eyes of Lake Huleh and  
Lake Kinneret but that is not enough to win more than compassion. Regret it  
though he may, he cannot offer devotion. And like so many of his compatriots he  
returns home.<sup>90</sup>

Lisitzky echoed the sentiment found in Lask's article in his speech before the writers. However, he ended this section of his speech with a message that continues to emphasize his complete devotion and admiration for the Jewish national endeavor in Palestine.

*Eretz Yisrael* is a hard land. It is written: When a man wishes to make *aliyah* to  
*Eretz Yisrael*, and on the way he doesn't know whether he has already arrived to  
the border of *Eretz Yisrael* or if he is still outside of the land – let him bend down  
and try to lift up a stone from the ground. If it is easy – the place that he is  
treading upon is still outside the Land, and if it is hard – this is a sign that he has

---

<sup>89</sup> I. M. Lask, "An American Hebrew Poet's Dilemma." *The Jewish Ledger* (No date printed.)3, 15.  
Reprinted from *The Jerusalem Post* (No date printed) SC-7301, AJA.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

arrived at *Eretz Yisrael*.<sup>91</sup> I did not need to bend down and try to lift up a stone from the ground and to understand from its hardness that I had already arrived at *Eretz Yisrael*. From the touch of my footsteps, I felt in the hardness of the stones, and this sensation becomes a feeling of familiarity that a man of Israel is excluded from enjoying in the *Galut* – firm and steady in the hardness of our land, [this feeling] guides the soul, strength, and the leg – from a path of promises in steadfast footsteps. A blessing in our land “whose stones are iron,” and we add to it the blessing, “whose builders are iron”<sup>92</sup> – according to the teachings of the sages – and iron on iron together, iron are the stones and iron the builders, for they are establishing for our people an eternal building upon the land of its origin.<sup>93</sup>

Lisitzky even went so far during his speech as to compare himself to Moses, one who desperately wanted to make his home among his people in the Holy Land and was prevented by God from doing so.

My heart is pained because I must return to a foreign land. I am an aged soldier who has stood these fifty years on the battlefield of Israel in America, and it seems that the burden of my fate is to die on that same exiled front. O that I could sit amongst you dwelling [as] a brother amongst brothers and to benefit from the radiance of the creative Hebrew Presence that will be revealed in the fullness of its radiance and in its luster in our land! Yet am I so much greater than Moses?<sup>94</sup> It is enough for me that I prevailed to see our land twice with my human eyes.<sup>95</sup>

He seemed resigned in his choice during his Writers Association speech. It is evident from the intertextuality contained in this quote that he considered his fate, “to die on that same exiled front,” as a sort of punishment akin to that of Moses, or at least that it was somewhat of a disappointment to him. His words in this portion of his speech therefore invite the question: Why did he not make his life in Palestine rather than teaching Hebrew? What compelled him to be a *chalutz* in America rather than in *Eretz Yisrael*? How did he rationalize such a decision?

---

<sup>91</sup> I have been unable to find the source for this saying.

<sup>92</sup> Deuteronomy 8:9. This is a reference to a *midrash* that calls for the reader not to read “whose stones are iron” but rather “whose builders are iron.” Cf Babylonian Talmud, *Taanit* 4a.

<sup>93</sup> “*Yisrael b'artzo v'yisrael b'galut amriqah*,” 128.

<sup>94</sup> God never permitted Moses to enter the Promised Land. Cf Numbers 20:12.

<sup>95</sup> “*Yisrael b'artzo v'yisrael b'galut amriqah*,” 134.

## Lisitzky's Compromise: Cultural Zionism

The question of why one so passionate about Hebrew as Lisitzky did not make *aliyah* has many possible answers. He was only one of many American Hebraists, men who shared his love for Jewish culture and the resurrection of Hebrew as an expression thereof. For some American Hebraists, it was a matter of money; they could not afford to immigrate. For others, it was a matter of age and physical ability: life as a *chalutz* in the *Yishuv* was physically trying and often dangerous. For others, it was a matter of family life and a desire to have the modern comforts that America promised. And still for others, the principles of the *Haskalah* embodied in Gordon's famous slogan held sway.<sup>96</sup> All of these might have been factors in Lisitzky's decision to remain on American soil.

But perhaps most importantly, Cultural Zionist ideology provided many American Hebraists with a viable rationale with which to explain their decision to remain living in an American Diaspora, and it was extremely influential in Lisitzky's Jewish and Zionist outlook.<sup>97</sup> The primary exponent of cultural Zionism was the noted Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha'am.<sup>98</sup> Ahad Ha'am recognized, even amidst his zeal for the political Zionist agenda of a permanent Jewish homeland in Palestine, that most Jews in the world did not have the means or the desire to settle in *Eretz Yisrael*.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, he called on Jews living outside the land to make large centers in the Diaspora pillars of Jewish learning and to resurrect Hebrew and Jewish culture as a means of

---

<sup>96</sup> Mintz, 14.

<sup>97</sup> Cultural Zionism refers to the idea that *Eretz Yisrael* must serve as an inspiration to revive Jewish culture and that it must be the spiritual center of Judaism.

<sup>98</sup> Asher Hirsh Ginsberg (1858–1927), or Ahad Ha'am (One of the People) which was his pen name, was born in Kiev and made his career as a Hebrew essayist in Odessa. His first essay "*Lo zeh haderekh*" ("This is Not the Way"), published in 1889, conveyed his reservations about the pace and nature of settlement in Palestine. He also famously disagreed with Theodore Herzl and other political Zionists, fearing that their type of Zionism was too disconnected from religious and cultural aspects of Judaism.

<sup>99</sup> Political Zionism had many factions, not all of which were committed to the Jewish homeland being Palestine. Theodor Herzl was willing to accept a Jewish state in Uganda. Palestine, however, was always viewed as the best option, and there were many in the Zionist camp who would accept no other possibility.

achieving the Zionist dream. *Eretz Yisrael* would be the spiritual center for world Jewry even though it could not be the demographic center.

Revival of the Hebrew language was a large part of Ahad Ha'am's ideology because Hebrew itself was a powerful symbol of Jewish nationalism. In addition, Hebrew allowed contemporary Jews to remain closely tied to their literary and cultural past. Ahad Ha'am's ideas inspired many young intellectuals, and they brought their commitment to Hebrew with them to America. While Cultural Zionist philosophy did not serve as a motivating factor for all East European immigrants to America, some took it upon themselves to live out Ahad Ha'am's mandate to build a thriving Hebrew culture in their new home.<sup>100</sup>

To be sure, for most of the Jews who came to this country, ideology exerted a weak force on their identity and motivation. Yet among those millions, there were the few (not insignificant in absolute terms) for whom Hebrew was an important ideal. Reaching a critical mass around World War I, these American Hebraists attempted to establish a vital Hebrew culture in America. They founded journals and wrote Hebrew poetry, fiction, and essays (largely about the American Jewish experience); and they succeeded in putting a Hebraist stamp upon most of the Jewish education that took place between the two world wars.<sup>101</sup>

They sought to accomplish this through writing and teaching. Thus, they existed in American society while functioning in Hebrew, and they attempted to create a new generation that would do the same.

Lisitzky's autobiography and the articles written about him by his fellow writers testify to the fact that composing Hebrew poems and serving as a Hebrew educator were his main occupations and passions of his life. These activities provided him with a purpose for which to use his extensive Hebrew and Jewish education; as well, they served as a respite from the melancholy that had plagued his early years. In his almost complete immersion into the Hebrew language, he seemed to have discovered a compromise between his religious and secular

---

<sup>100</sup> Mintz, 13–14.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

identities, between his Judaism and his Americanism, a way to fuse them productively and honestly. In this, his life's work sought to fulfill an ideological imperative articulated by Ahad Ha'am.<sup>102</sup>

### **Lisitzky and America: The Struggle of a Hebraist in *Galut***

In electing to remain in America instead of making a home in Israel, Lisitzky and other American Hebraists committed themselves to a lifetime of building an American Hebrew culture. Lisitzky did so via his own creativity and by studying, publishing, and commenting upon the Hebrew literature that was being produced by the Hebrew writers of the *Yishuv* and, after 1948, Israel. Along with great admiration for the efforts of their counterparts in the Middle East, as Lisitzky noted, the American Hebraists acknowledged with envy that to be a Hebrew writer in *Eretz Yisrael* was much easier than being a Hebrew writer in America:

The community of Hebrew writers in America – we created something in the American exile, and what we created came to be amidst great pains. To our brothers, the Hebrew writers in our land, pangs of creation have yielded a reward: they dwell amongst their people, their words are read, valued, arouse comment... For this, shall not all writers say prayers! But us – the pangs of creation are pangs of poverty and solitude. We are wandering strangers, marked as foreign American and foreign Jew, struggling against ourselves within the great gullet of American culture and American way of life and their great power of digestion and absorption, anguishing in the afflictions of indifference and alienation of our people amidst whom we dwell.<sup>103</sup>

Lisitzky described with vivid imagery the challenges that he, as an American Hebraist, faced. His work and even his very presence in America were, in many respects, counter-cultural and required, on his part, a constant effort as he swam upstream. In these words, Lisitzky articulated one of the greatest paradoxes of his life: he knew that, as a Hebrew poet, he would have enjoyed more popular acclaim had he chosen to live in Israel. Yet he remained in

---

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 13–26.

<sup>103</sup> Lisitzky, "*Yisrael b'artzo v'yisrael b'galut amriqah*," 131.



America, isolated from his Hebraic peers in *Eretz Yisrael*, and even more so, he remained in New Orleans, isolated from his Hebraic peers in New York and other major centers of Jewish life.

This irony was made apparent when *The Jerusalem Post* favorably reviewed Lisitzky's writings on multiple occasions, both for their rich linguistic style as well as for their resonant themes. Upon his completion of *B'ohalei kush* an article in *The Jewish Ledger* noted the book and its author's great acclaim in Israel, particularly in recognition of Lisitzky's stellar use of language. As the language of modern Hebrew continued to develop in Israel, Lisitzky could have logically anticipated that Israelis would be able to appreciate his linguistic artistry. The article quotes a review from one of Israel's leading daily newspapers of the time, *Davar*: "[Lisitzky's] rich Biblical style is spiced with expressions from the Mishnah and from the pulsating Hebrew of today's Israel. The rhymes are elastic, musical, resonant."<sup>104</sup>

When Lisitzky published his book of epic poetry *Anshei midot* (*Men of Stature*) in 1957, it was also reviewed favorably by the Israeli press.<sup>105</sup> The Israeli newspaper *Hapoel Hatzair* praised a different element of Lisitzky's writing—not his language, but rather his choice of themes. *Anshei midot* was, in Lisitzky's words, "to erect a spiritual monument in Hebrew literature for those rare Jewish personalities in the towns and townlets of East Europe who incarnate in their lives the beauty and sensitivity of Jewish ideals and Jewish traditions."<sup>106</sup> The review noted that such a theme held special meaning for the people of Israel since Israelis are often characterized as having fled the world of the shtetl hoping never to be influenced by it again. *Hapoel Hatzair* goes on to note the timely appearance of Lisitzky's book:

---

<sup>104</sup> "Lisitzky's New Book Acclaimed in Israel," *The Jewish Ledger* (November 20, 1953): 2. Reprinted from *Davar*: 2. SC-7301, AJA.

<sup>105</sup> Ephraim Lisitzky, *Anshei midot* (Tel Aviv: DVIR, 1958).

<sup>106</sup> "Dr. Lisitzky's Latest Book Acclaimed in Israel," *The Jewish Ledger* (November 20, 1953). Reprinted from *Hapoel Hatzair*, trans. Rose Brener. SC-7301, AJA.

With the Holocaust in Europe, the children of [*Haaretz*] stood as strangers, not comprehending the upheaval in the distant land. Their parents ached silently with the pain of destruction. Only when the world of yesteryear was wiped out completely did those who rebelled against it realize that it was their world and they were uprooted once again ... Lisitzky has reconstructed the world of yesteryear in "Men of Stature"; and it is fitting to bring this world near to the generation that is growing up in [*Haaretz*], not through imitation or repentance but through a feeling of identity of sons with fathers and through the searching of the roots of spirit and soul.<sup>107</sup>

By various accounts, it is clear that Lisitzky's literary artistry was recognized and appreciated by his fellow American Hebrew writers as well as by those who lived in Israel. In America, though he certainly had a readership, it appears that the fact that he had an international renown as a writer and was somewhat of a celebrity in Israel brought him more attention and commendations than did his work itself. The articles about Lisitzky written by New Orleans journalists have titles such as "Tale of Two Cultures," "Pioneer Poet," or "Dr. Lisitzky's Latest Book Acclaimed in Israel."<sup>108</sup> These headlines convey the bewilderment and distance that Lisitzky's southern and American neighbors felt when faced with his work. The titles constantly highlight the "otherworldliness" of Lisitzky's personal and professional existence. Although these articles express a great deal of pride in the local author's international reputation and broad achievements, it is evident that Lisitzky's artistry was exotic and foreign to American Jews and to southern Jews, in particular. It was difficult for American audiences to articulate precisely how Lisitzky's work contributed to American Jewish culture.

Lisitzky himself described this distance that separated the Hebraist and the general public in America on several occasions. In his Writers Association speech, he explained that he and the other Hebrew writers in America were striving to resist not only the non-Jewish majority culture, but also that of an increasingly assimilated and disinterested Jewish public:

---

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> "Lisitzky, Ephraim," SC-7301, AJA.

What is the nature of American Judaism at its jubilee year?<sup>109</sup> Judaism [that is] in its essence: ignorance, vulgarity, ruthlessness, and impenetrability of spirit. Conservative religiosity emptied of its cultural substance and doomed to mummified paralysis. A Jewish path abandoned, void of Jewish tradition and way of life...I have come from Israel's exile in America ... and it is in our present days the largest Jewish *kibbutz* in the world, greater in all matters, from the perspective of the stability of its economic state and the strength of its political weight. And what will be the end of this American exile? Will the power to cling to status be stopped so [American Jewry] will not be eroded in the streams of assimilation by which it is being attacked...? Is her future to make an offering of [new] spiritual and cultural values as came about in other times of exile, beginning from the Exile of Babylon and ending with the Exile of Russia? Only God knows!<sup>110</sup>

It is clear from this quote that he was frustrated with the state of American Jewry. He fretted over the perception that Judaism had only to do with God and Temple membership and nothing to do with religious observance, culture, or history. His concerns were not unfounded, as community surveys taken during the last decade of his life confirm this reality.<sup>111</sup>

In an ongoing column in *The Jewish Ledger*, Lisitzky put forth his argument that Judaism was, in fact, a culture and must be understood as such. He addressed the predominant American view that Judaism is a religion like all other religions, and he dispelled this notion through a systematic overview of the common elements of religions and the ways in which Judaism lacks these elements: "Judaism viewed in the light of all these enunciated characteristics of religion appears to be the most irreligious religion ..."<sup>112</sup> His determination to show Judaism in a new light underscored his refusal to accept what he considered to be the dangerous and deviant path of American Jewry. It also reflects the choice he made in response to the lessons he learned in his childhood *yeshivot* as well as in the inner conflicts he faced as a

<sup>109</sup> While the date of this speech is not given in the "Lisitzky" issue of *Bitzaron*, Lisitzky's reference to America's jubilee year would seem to indicate that it is 1953 or 1954, the American Jewish Tercentenary.

<sup>110</sup> Lisitzky, "*Yisrael b'artzo v'yisrael b'galut ameriqah*," 131–132.

<sup>111</sup> Judah Pilch, "Analysis of Study of the Assessment of Priorities on Specific Goals in Jewish Education," preliminary report (New York: The National Curriculum Research Institute, 1960).

<sup>112</sup> Ephraim Lisitzky, "Judaism as a Culture," *The Jewish Ledger* (no date printed). SC-7301, AJA. It is clear from the content of the article that it was written before 1948 and the founding of the State of Israel.

Jewish writer whose initial inspiration was Jewish culture but who deliberately elected to live in a country that offered him little of it.

### **Lisitzky's *Chalutzit*: An American Hebraist's Frontier**

Lisitzky's decision to remain in New Orleans and to teach Hebrew, according to Field's article, made a significant impact on the community. Field observed that many towns in the South to which he traveled were truly the *midbar* (wilderness) in terms of Jewish life but, as Field noted in his article, New Orleans touted a different culture. For example, Label Katz, American Jewry's outstanding Young Man of the Year in 1957 and the future national president of B'nai Brith, grew up in New Orleans and studied under Ephraim Lisitzky. Rose Brener, a writer for *The Jewish Ledger*, enriched New Orleans with information on important Jewish issues and even translated Israeli newspaper articles from Hebrew to English, a skill she learned under the tutelage of Lisitzky.<sup>113</sup> Field emphasized the contributions and commendations of Lisitzky's former students:

But over a period of almost forty years, the *Moreh* transformed the Jewish *midbar* he found into a vineyard of blossoming Jewishness. Moreover, while serving as a *Chalutz* in the truest sense of the word, the *Moreh*, did not lose out as a creative writer. His colleagues who stayed in New York did not produce more or better books than he did. But in addition to books, the *Moreh* raised up many disciples, some of whom can read his books – and *do*.<sup>114</sup>

This characterization of Lisitzky as a *chalutz* answers the dilemma of how a man with such interests, passions, skills, background, and dreams managed to exist amidst the relatively small Jewish community of New Orleans, in the cultural exile of America. Lisitzky conceived of his role as the work of a *chalutz* plowing barren fields and planting seeds in the arid soil of

---

<sup>113</sup> "Dr. Lisitzky's Latest Book Acclaimed in Israel," *The Jewish Ledger* (November 20, 1953). Reprinted from *Hapoel Hatzair*, trans. Rose Brener. SC-7301,AJA.

<sup>114</sup> Field, 25.

American Jewish culture.<sup>115</sup> The figure of the pioneer had significance in both Jewish and American minds. Certainly the pioneer was a powerful image in American history, just as the spirit of the *chalutz* was in the modern Jewish experience. Lisitzky's use of the image hearkened to both, but by employing it to describe his choice to remain in America, he made himself part of the Jewish national endeavor and connected his actions in America to those of the settlers in Palestine.<sup>116</sup> As Field explained in his article:

There are *Chalutzim* who reclaim and work the soil of the Homeland and there are *Chalutzim* who reclaim the souls of a Jewishly lost generation – and both are important and needed. The *Moreh* of New Orleans is a *Chalutz* in the best and truest meaning of the term. If there were more *Chalutzim* of this type, the wastelands of American Jewry could be transformed into orchards, as that famous Zionist propaganda slogan puts it.<sup>117</sup>

Lisitzky's pioneering presence in New Orleans was somewhat of an anomaly, even to those who knew him intimately. According to the voice of his former student in Field's article, the sacrifice *Moreh* made for the sake of his ideals did not go unnoticed amongst those whom he touched, and the bravery of his *chalutzit* inspired those around him.

In his speech to the Writers Association, Lisitzky explained the complex existence of the American Hebraist. He spoke of the admiration that those involved in the American Hebraist movement felt for the *chalutzim* in Israel. He also pointed to the difficulty implicit in his choice to remain in America but to write literature in and teach the Hebrew language. As Lisitzky explained it, [the American Hebraists'] lives were filled with contradiction and paradox. In addition, Lisitzky chose to make his life away from the major Jewish population centers of America, which only compounded the absurdity of his literary ambitions.

---

<sup>115</sup> *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 296.

<sup>116</sup> Jill Havi Aizenstein, "Engaging America: Immigrant Jews in American Hebrew Literature," doctoral dissertation (New York University, 2008), 344–345.

<sup>117</sup> Field, 26.

Lisitzky himself explained to his fellow Hebrew writers his perception of his own *chalutzit* and how vital it was to Jewish survival in the world:

There is a religious dependency between these two parts of Israel. The Judaism of America is disconnected and cut off from the act of building and creativity in Eretz Yisrael in which the vision of redemption is being realized, ... the windpipe of the community of Israel in the thousands of years of exile, condemned to dry up, wrinkle, and degenerate. And the Judaism of Israel needs the Judaism of America as well. It is obliged not only for the aid [she gives] for its institutions and for maintenance of its building endeavors, for her [monetary] gifts and for her influence and political action...Israel is also in need of the creative impulse of the Jews of American in the realm of the spirit. This creativity, whose beginning is suffering, can be grown and expanded by diverting that same vital force of the eternity of Israel that inspired [Israel's] actions in the physical realm toward the stream of the spirit, and when it flows within the current of the stream of creativity of Israel in his land, it will only add bountifulness and vigor.

It is our duty to unite the Jewish body that is in exile [American Jewry] with the Jewish heart in *Eretz Yisrael* by healing the body of this calcification of the veins that is afflicting it, so that there will be a flow of vital blood pouring forth from body to heart to add sustenance and strength, and from the heart, saturated with oxygen flowing with life, to the body, to revive and to restore it to health. In this light, conquering the exile of Israel in America is as great as mitzvah as [conquering] *Eretz Yisrael*.<sup>118</sup>

As he explained it, Jews in Israel and Jews in America should have a symbiotic relationship, sharing the resources of material and creative wealth. This was Lisitzky's life's mission. The frontier for this American Hebraist was not the rugged terrain of Israel, but rather the rough and assimilated Jewish community of America. Just as the *chalutzim* sought to make the desert bloom through the work of their hands, Lisitzky, an American Hebraist, sought to make American Judaism come alive again through the creations of his mind and pen.

---

<sup>118</sup> Lisitzky, "*Yisrael b'artzo v'yisrael b'galut ameqah*," 133–134.

### Chapter Three: Lisitzky's *Chalutzit* in Practice

#### The Vehicles of Hebrew Culture in America

As an American Hebraist, Lisitzky charged himself with the task of *chalutzit* in America. He struggled to build a vibrant and diverse American Hebrew culture just as the *chalutzim* in the *Yishuv* were building a permanent Jewish settlement in Palestine. For him, a commitment to Jewish territorialism was replaced with Hebrew textuality.<sup>119</sup> Through his work, he hoped to broaden the minds and inspire the hearts of American Jewry. And to do this, Lisitzky used several methods of communication, each of which was a different manifestation of his love for the Hebrew language: writing Hebrew poetry, particularly focusing on American subjects; teaching Hebrew to American Jewish children; and publicly communicating, through the American Hebrew press, with other Hebraists about issues affecting American Jewry.

He produced Hebrew literature, mainly poetry but also prose, that was distinctly informed by the American experience in which he was immersed. This meant writing of the plight of oppressed groups in America, namely African Americans and American Indians. He appreciated their individual cultures, but what drew Lisitzky to memorialize their stories in Hebrew literature was their stories' similarity to the Jewish one. He saw in these groups' suffering something of himself and of the Jewish people. Two of his creative works, *Medurot doakhot* and *B'ohalei kush*, were tributes both to the unique histories and conditions of African Americans and American Indians, and to that which connected them to other subjugated peoples of the world.

Lisitzky also brought Hebrew to life by teaching American Jewish children the language of the people of Israel. The impact of the American Hebraist movement on American Jewish education is unmistakable, even if its vision of the widespread use of the Hebrew language never

---

<sup>119</sup> Aizenstein, 329–349.

came to fruition.<sup>120</sup> For Lisitzky, teaching was the most important vocation of his life, and he is well remembered by his students and their children for his pedagogic contribution to the Jewish communities of Milwaukee and New Orleans.<sup>121</sup>

To broaden his impact beyond those he taught and those interested in reading his literature, Lisitzky used another medium of communication, one which reinforced the other two. He publicly communicated with other American Hebraists in Hebrew through articles in periodicals and newspapers. The various journals and publications of the American Hebrew press served as venues for the American Hebraists to discuss, using the Jewish language, not only Jewish history and scholarship, but also American Hebrew literature and current issues affecting American Jewry, including Jewish education.<sup>122</sup> Over several decades, Lisitzky published Hebrew poems, essays, and articles in newspapers like *Hadoar*.<sup>123</sup> His submissions were poems of his own composition, articles celebrating his colleagues' accomplishments and milestones in their lives, and essays airing his own thoughts and concerns about the state of American Judaism.

Through these forums, Lisitzky expressed his love for, and his desire to further, Zionism and Hebrew. He enhanced Jewish creativity, and he pushed the boundaries of Hebrew as a language. He worked to inspire a new generation to carry that culture forward. Furthermore, he exemplified American Jewish participation in a thriving Hebrew culture, albeit on a small scale. A study of Lisitzky's writings concerning each of these three media reveals the artistry and passion of this American Hebraist, and of Hebraism in practice.

---

<sup>120</sup> Mintz, 17–18.

<sup>121</sup> Mildred Brown and Rosalie Cohen, interview by author, November 15, 2008. See also letter from former Milwaukee Talmud Torah pupil, "Ephraim Lisitzky," SC-7301, AJA.

<sup>122</sup> Mintz, "A Sanctuary in the Wilderness: The Beginnings of the Hebrew Movement in American in *Hato'ren*," in *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects*, ed. Alan Mintz (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 29–67.



## **Lisitzky as Poet: The Development of *American* Hebrew Literature**

Lisitzky openly yearned for the Jewish traditionalism and culture of the shtetl of his youth. He wrote, both in poetry and prose, about its beauty and its serenity, despite the great poverty of its inhabitants. But as he came to view America as his home, he became fascinated and inspired by distinctly American stories as well. For most of his life, Lisitzky lived in New Orleans, a southern city where segregation often defined social interaction. However, Lisitzky was able to develop relationships with African American leaders of New Orleans, and he came to appreciate the suffering of their community as well its inherent creativity:

In the Crescent City, Lisitzky made the acquaintance of local Black ministers and residents, witnessing first hand their experiences as a discriminated people but possessed of a rich culture in which the Hebrew Bible took center stage as a source of inspiration and themes for spirituals and other songs. He also took note of how Black ministers reinterpreted biblical accounts in their sermons, a practice that he no doubt perceived as familiar in their resembling midrashic re-readings of biblical narrative. By reproducing their conventions, his poems brought the practice full circle back to their origins.<sup>124</sup>

Lisitzky's affinity for the writings and exhortations of New Orleans' Black religious leaders and poets is evident in his great tribute to them, *B'ohalei kush*. In this 1953 publication, Lisitzky wrote epic poems in Hebrew, inspired by the Black spirituals and folk poetry he learned in New Orleans. Lisitzky wrote an essay of introduction to *B'ohalei kush* expressing his affection for and fascination with the spirit of the African American population of New Orleans. He preemptively addressed questions his readership might have had about why he became interested in this population and what he hoped to gain by spending time learning about African American culture:

---

<sup>124</sup> Stephen Katz, introduction to "So Miriam Spoke of Moses," *CCAR Journal: A Reform Jewish Quarterly* (Fall 2008): 60.

This [idea] came to me from thirty years that I have been in the south of the United States, the southern landscape filled with a Black population. The peculiarity and uniqueness of these blacks is more pronounced than it is in their brothers who are [in other parts] of America because of the racial barrier that separates them from whites through communal estrangement and through legal discrimination. From the time that I got acquainted with the southern blacks, they stole my heart with their primitive qualities, with the purity and cunning of their childish behavior, and with their simple religious outlook, without fear or trembling, but rather with “religious fervor...”<sup>125</sup>

While his description of Black culture is steeped in the patronizing language of the segregation era in which it was written, it conveys a sincere admiration for what he viewed as distinctive characteristics of this neighboring African American culture: the strong faith of its people and the simplicity with which they expressed it. As he noted later in the introduction, the intense religiosity of the Black community in New Orleans was something that piqued his curiosity. In spite of the fact that Lisitzky crafted his literature based on Black preachers’ sermons and Black choirs’ spirituals, the themes of the poetry itself remained Jewish because the Bible was a text that both African American religious leaders and American Hebraists used with great frequency and ease.

Lisitzky went on in his introduction to explain his efforts to study and appreciate the culture of his Black neighbors:

I decided to observe their way of life for many years; I, along with them, listen to sermons about the relationship between man and his neighbor and between man and God; I gather with them in their meetings in their residences and in their churches; I listen to their addresses and the sermons of their ministers; I give ear to their prayers and their “Spirituals” that are sung by their community and by their choirs with the passion and devotion of *Chasidim*.<sup>126</sup>

The characteristics of Black culture that Lisitzky stressed in the above quote must have been quite foreign to him when he first encountered them as a Russian immigrant to America. Nevertheless, he found a kinship with African Americans in their shared passion for religion. In

---

<sup>125</sup> Lisitzky, *B'ohalei kush*, 3.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

fact, he compared the Black choirs of New Orleans to the *Chasidim* of his youth with regard to the fervor and excitement with which they sang to God. This illustrates the manner in which he found his identities as a Jew and as an American colliding and becoming intertwined. This blending of distinct identities became integral to his development as an American Hebrew writer.

The Hebrew writers who resided in Europe and Palestine during the early part of the twentieth century were vocal in their desire for Hebrew writers in America to offer American images and themes in their poetry and prose. Many Hebraists answered this call with literature that described the American landscape and the Jewish immigrant experience. Some even focused on American groups such as American Indians.<sup>127</sup> But Lisitzky stands out among them as having devoted a great deal of his literary career to describing and emulating the creative culture of both American Indians and African Americans.<sup>128</sup> For example, his interactions with the African American community of New Orleans inspired him to create a new kind of Hebrew poetry. In his introduction, he wrote about his decision to use Black culture to write Hebrew poetry:

From what I came to understand about the existence of the black, as much as it is possible for someone who is not of their people or race to understand, I said to myself: Here we have substance for poetry that has the chance to bring blessing to the Hebrew verse of America, and we are in great need of it. Therefore, I have sought to give it a form and to collect into universal Hebrew poetry in a way that I thought would preserve it, so that its roots would be planted in the soil of America and its landscape would stand in the realm of the universal Hebrew poem.<sup>129</sup>

Here Lisitzky articulated a void he saw in the scope of Hebrew poetry—while it dealt with a certain amount of American issues, the African American experience and the racial struggle in

---

<sup>127</sup> Benjamin Nahum Silkiner, *Mul ohel Timora (Before the Tent of Timora)*, 1910; Israel Efros' *Vigvamim shotekim (Silent Wigwams)*, 1933.

<sup>128</sup> Ezra Spicehandler, "Ameriqa'iut in American Hebrew Poetry," in *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects*, ed. Alan Mintz (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 68–104.

<sup>129</sup> Lisitzky, *B'Ohalei kush*, 3.

America was generally under-represented. Lisitzky found himself so inspired by the experience and culture of this American group that he introduced it into the world of Hebrew poetry.

Lisitzky felt it very important to preserve the poetry's original ethnic flavor and American roots even as he gave voice to it in Hebrew. As Stephen Katz, Associate Professor of Modern Hebrew Language and Literature at Indiana University, noted in his critique of one of Lisitzky's epic poems, "So Miriam Spoke of Moses," which appeared in *B'ohalei kush*:

...[Lisitzky] reproduces for Hebrew readers a host of poetic genres comprising folk and religious songs that saturated Black folk culture. Composed in simple rhyming couplets that sustain the plot of this long poem, the account bears technical and thematic hallmarks of naïve, childlike easy rhymes that the poet used to simulate Black folkways.<sup>130</sup>

His effort to mimic the speech patterns of the Black ministers he encountered while writing in Hebrew is an example of his commitment to expand and enrich American Hebraism.

Lisitzky concluded his introduction to the book with a broader explanation of his poetic endeavor. He made mention of an earlier publication, *Medurot doakhot*, a book of his poetry which uses American Indian rather than African American folkways as his inspiration:

This, my book *In the Tents of Kush* is a supplement to my book *Dying Campfires*. In this [book] just as in the first one, I intended to record in our Hebrew poetry an echo of the poetry of America at the hour of its creation from within the wrestling of natural forces – the wrestling of powers uprooted from their homelands and cast into a chaotic mixture for the sake of their formation into a new existence. How much that which I intended has been realized – let the reader be the judge.<sup>131</sup>

He considered America a young nation, struggling for survival. He found the confrontation of races and cultures within it both during his own lifetime and in the past so profoundly interesting that he wanted to record it and comment upon it specifically for Jews, both in America and around the world. He believed it would not only broaden Hebrew poetry as a genre but it would also be deeply moving to those who would discover it. By choosing to write about this

---

<sup>130</sup> Katz, 60–61.

<sup>131</sup> Lisitzky, *B'Ohalei kush*, 4.

American experience in the Hebrew language, Lisitzky developed a Hebrew literature that was distinctly American in nature.

### **Lisitzky as Teacher: The Purpose of American Hebrew Education**

Like many of the other American Hebrew writers of his day, Ephraim Lisitzky taught Hebrew to children and adults.<sup>132</sup> From his earliest days as a new immigrant in Boston, Lisitzky was employed as a Hebrew tutor. He headed a Talmud Torah in Milwaukee before making his career as the principal at the New Orleans Talmud Torah. He retired in 1959 from teaching at the New Orleans Talmud Torah, and his closing address to his students upon retiring, "*Divrei peridah mitokh perisha*" ("Words of Departure upon Retirement"), was published in *Hadoar*. In it, he reflected back on his career, and he outlined his core beliefs about the way in which Jewish children should be educated.

Early in this address, Lisitzky recalled his encounter with the poet Dolitzky who had tried to dissuade him from becoming a Hebrew poet in America.<sup>133</sup> The day after his discouraging encounter with Dolitzky, Lisitzky recounts an event that occurred the following morning:

...I was with my father in a neighborhood bookstore, next door to [Dolitzky's] hotel, to buy the Jewish newspaper that had come in from New York and was sold there to a few people. The owner of the bookstore knew my father and greeted him in front of Dolitzky. Upon hearing my father's family name that had been uttered before him, he asked, "Is that young lad Ephraim Lisitzky that visited me yesterday a relative of yours?" "Yes," answered my father, "my closest relative – he is my son." Immediately Dolitzky interrupted him with a mocking smile – and his next utterance was not unlike the decree of judgment he had placed on me [the day before].<sup>134</sup> "I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet, and it is too difficult for me to prophesy how great will be the power of your son in Hebrew poetry and how great are the heights that he will reach in it – and but one thing do I know

---

<sup>132</sup> For a comprehensive list of American Hebrew writers who were also educators, see Gershon Shaked, *The New Tradition: Essays on Modern Hebrew Literature* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2006), n. 12, 99.

<sup>133</sup> Cf Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 174.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., "'Be a tailor, a shoemaker, a cobbler – anything but a Hebrew poet in America!'"

with certainty: your son will go through life barefoot, without shoes on his feet!” You say that this sentence is given to exaggeration and pessimism? Not at all! There was, in this utterance, a realistic estimation of Hebrew education and Hebrew literature in America during that period – the period of *chalutzit*. His advice that he gave me to enter into one of the universities was actually the same advice that I gave myself in my heart when I left the *yeshiva* of Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan. After numerous days of a few meanderings and difficulties and adventures and experiences that were unsuccessful, I entered into the university and studied the trade of pharmaceuticals and completed my studies and was received two degrees – that of certified pharmacist and that of medic, and I was able to make a decent living. Even more than this: I was able to fulfill my yearning for whose sake I had chosen to study this trade: settling *Eretz Yisrael*. Despite this, I rejected pharmaceuticals for teaching Hebrew in America, and I had my reasons: ...to provide me with a life goal that would fill my life with a spiritual content, rendering it worthwhile in my eyes, after the difficult crisis that happened to me, and quite unexpectedly, I had found an ultimate life goal in teaching Hebrew.<sup>135</sup>

As Lisitzky explained to his students with this anecdote, the choice to become a Hebrew teacher and a Hebraist in general was not one that would bring him wealth or fame. In fact, a strong role model such as Dolitzky had warned him against it. In addition, Dolitzky believed the job of Hebrew teacher to be beneath any Hebrew writer, only a safety net when one could not sell one’s poetry.<sup>136</sup> The fact that Lisitzky chose to do it anyway and accepted the role of Hebrew teacher with great pride and commitment is something that distinguishes him from many other American Hebraists.<sup>137</sup>

*Moreh* Lisitzky guided his students and the New Orleans Jewish community through a very significant period of transition in Jewish history, and his devotion to education as delineated in his farewell speech is all the more admirable because of it. The 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s saw ongoing changes in the way the American Jewish community viewed and organized itself, and Jewish education in particular was the subject of much study and debate.

---

<sup>135</sup> Lisitzky, “*Divrei peridah mitokh perishah*,” in *Bishevilei chayim v’sifrut*, 182–183.

<sup>136</sup> Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 174.

<sup>137</sup> Arie Shpall, “*Lisitzky Hamechanekh*,” *Hadoar* (July 13, 1962): 589, “Lisitzky, Ephraim,” MSS 659/2/22, AJA.

With the influx of East European immigrants to America beginning in the 1880s, Jewish educational institutions in the New World looked very much like those in the Old World. The schools that these immigrants established began as *chadarim* or one-room schools taught by one teacher who very often had no other source of income and was forced into teaching out of economic necessity. More successful was the Talmud Torah or community school. These institutions were originally set up for poor children, but ultimately became the chief disseminators of Jewish education for children across the board.<sup>138</sup> By World War I, the culture of the Talmud Torah was specifically Hebrew in nature. Lisitzky reflected on this ideology and its challenges upon his retirement from teaching:

*Chalutzit* – it is the essential dimension of Hebrew teaching in this country, not unlike the bold vanguard pioneering carried on in *Eretz Yisrael*. Here you might call it rearguard pioneering. I took upon myself this pioneering task, and along with it, its inescapable burdens.<sup>139</sup>

Through Lisitzky's administration of the *Talmud Torahs* of Milwaukee and New Orleans, he was able to expose several generations of students to cultural Zionism and to an elevation of the Hebrew language as a staple of Jewish identity.<sup>140</sup>

Toward the middle of the twentieth century, American Jewry became increasingly concerned about the state of Jewish education. This topic became the focus of many papers, platforms, and research initiatives published by a variety of institutions. Such conversations about the future of Jewish education arose with more frequency during these decades than had been the case at the beginning of the century for several reasons.

First, the American Jewish community was undergoing major changes in the areas of population, demographics, and organizational structures. In 1959, Dr. Judah Pilch, the director of

---

<sup>138</sup> Judah Pilch ed., *A History of Jewish Education in America* (New York: The National Curriculum Research Institute of the American Association for Jewish Education, 1969), 55–56.

<sup>139</sup> Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 296.

<sup>140</sup> Mintz, 17.

the American Association for Jewish Education, pointed out in an article that by the 1940s, Jewish neighborhoods in which Yiddish culture had once dominated were disappearing as families moved away from the cities and into the suburbs. In general, this led to a decline in attendance of neighborhood communal Hebrew schools and an increase in congregational affiliation. Strengthening this dynamic was the religious revival that swept through post-World War II-America. Religious affiliation was up among the general population, partly as a protest against Communism, and Judaism—like Catholicism and Protestantism—came to be seen as one of America’s three great religious traditions.<sup>141</sup>

In addition, by the middle of the twentieth century, most of the Jews who had school-age children were native-born Americans. While the immigrant experience played a formative role in the lives of the previous generation, Jews who were born and raised in America had an entirely different world-view. In contrast to the Jews who immigrated to America who had to learn about the American way of life, Jews who were born in America maintained strong American values. They had become full partners in their local community’s secular, communal, and civic endeavors, and in some instances had even become leaders on a national scale. Because of the way the non-Jewish population came to think of Judaism, as a religion and rather than a culture or ethnicity, as well as its changing meaning to many Jews themselves, the synagogue was increasingly viewed as the center of Jewish life.<sup>142</sup> It had a religious mission rather than a cultural or ethnic one, and this religious outlook was much more compatible with mainstream American sensibilities at this time.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> Sarna, 275. See Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

<sup>142</sup> Sarna, 277–280.

<sup>143</sup> Pilch, 91–98.



As Pilch and other researchers of the time noted, such trends had a profound effect on the discussion that was taking place in America about the nature and goals of Jewish education. In Lisitzky's writing on the subject, his concerns about these shifts in Jewish communal outlook are evident. In several of his articles, he expressed his dismay that Hebrew education was being reduced to a purely religious exercise, a clear response to the shift in the way Jews were thinking about their Judaism in the mid-century.<sup>144</sup> Lisitzky continued his address by responding to these prominent trends in the Jewish community:

In the years I have lived in America, I have witnessed the continuing growth of a flourishing Jewish community, a community destined to exert a decisive influence on the rest of the Jewish Diaspora. No less substantial is bound to be its share of *Eretz Yisrael* through contributions of its wealth and energy. True, this amazing growth has been mainly in the material sense. Yet material growth is not unrelated to spiritual growth. Those same vital forces, so created in the material sphere, are equally effective in the realm of the spirit, and to foster this creative process is the great mission of Jewish education in this country. A great and difficult task indeed, but wholly within the bounds of possibility. Whatever the reason for the failure of Jewish education in America, in no way is the Jewish child himself to blame for it. I had ample opportunity to get to know this child well during my years of teaching. He is excellent human material, free from dross which ghetto life used to deposit in his counterpart across the ocean. What is more, through the public school he comes into the possession of an American culture which, potentially, is a blessing for Jewish education, for he is thus better prepared to absorb the best and the highest that Jewish culture has to offer. The great enemy, then, of Jewish education in America is not the make-up of the Jewish child but the utter contempt in which it is held by unworthy parents and teachers. What it needs is inspired and enthusiastic teachers, and above all, a spirit of dedicated pioneering, of *chalutzit*.<sup>145</sup>

Lisitzky viewed the failure of Jewish education in America as being caused by a lack of interest, commitment, and knowledge among parents of Jewish children. At the same time, though, he praised the influence of American public schools on Jewish childrens' outlook and ability to learn in a classroom setting.

---

<sup>144</sup> Lisitzky, "Harav hamoderni v'hachinukh;" "Hachzarat harabbanut l'yoshnah" in *Bishevilei chayim v'sifrut*; "Judaism as Culture."

<sup>145</sup> Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 295–296.

Lisitzky emphasized the importance of attitude of everyone involved in Hebrew study. Hebrew study itself, according to Lisitzky, needed to be thought of as an act of *chalutzit*. It was his hope that Jewish students would then be inspired by their Hebrew education and would feel a connection to it in a way that they were not at the time he delivered his speech.

Lisitzky concluded his address with a reference to one of the Indian folktales with which he had become fascinated during his career as a poet. He utilized it as a call to action for his students, and through it he communicated his hopes for the future of Jewish education in America:

When the Great Spirit created the world for his four winds, together with the remainder of creation he created men, the Indian culture. He created tribes, each tribe with its own language, and no tribe listened to the language the other. Corruption was there in the creation of the world: lowest of all were the skies and the men could not walk upon the earth standing upright without stumbling upon them and [hitting their heads], so they had to go on their bellies and crawl. Finally there came to rule elders of the tribes who were wise, and they called a council to discuss what to do to fix the deformity and to raise up the skies from their depths. They discussed and decided to push the skies up with their rods that this would fix them. But it was too difficult for them to perform this task, so all the tribes met together, not a tribe was missing, and they worked together, with united powers and concentrated strengths. And because the four winds were dispersed, a tribe could not hear the language of the tribe beside him, and they did this to ensure that their action would succeed. A Sign would be given to them, a call would be heard “Yaho!” And its meaning: Lift up the sky! Each man would say it and tribe to tribe. And this is how it was: All the tribes gathered together on the appointed day, and each man would stand at his post, his rod in his hand at the ready, and when they heard the call “Yaho!” from the mouths of the tribe elders – it would be repeated from mouth to mouth and lifted up from man to man and from tribe to tribe, and upon hearing it, each man would life up his rod high and push the skies and raise them from height to height until they lifted it high enough that a man could walk on the ground, his stature high, and they had comfort.

This has been our historical assignment since Sinai: to lift up the sky with rods – not [rods] of wood like the rods of those Indians but of spirit that God has placed inside us...And this is my word to you: take up the rods of spirit, of Torah and faith and tradition and culture continue to push the sky with them and to lift up their depressions – it is impossible for us to stand and to continue to endure in the world we have today when the skies are so low – “Who will raise up Jacob” – will

the revival not be for us! We will be faithful to our assignment of fate: lifting up the sky from its low place. And with that same Indian call I part from you: “Yaho!” – Lift up the sky!<sup>146</sup>

Lisitzky’s lofty agenda for the future of Jewish education is unmistakable. For him, the present manifestation of Jewish education and Hebrew in America was not enough. He encouraged his students throughout his career and with his parting words to broaden the horizons of their Jewish identity, to make an effort to communicate with each other, and to work together to change the world they were given. This was the way he lived his *chalutzit* as a teacher and how he hoped the spirit of *chalutzit* would be felt and experienced by his students.

### **Lisitzky in the Press: An American Hebraist’s Public Conversation**

Lisitzky published numerous books throughout his career. With the exception of his autobiography, almost all of them were books of poetry. The other major exception is his book *Bishevlei chayim v’sifrut (On the Paths of Life and Literature)*, published in 1961 very shortly before his death. Unlike *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, *Bishevlei chayim v’sifrut* is not a narrative story. Rather, it is a collection of articles that he wrote throughout his life, many of which appeared in the American Hebrew press including *Hadoar*, *Bitzaron*, and *Hatoren*. The sheer number of articles in this book indicates how important the Hebrew and Jewish press was to the work of American Hebraists. It was the chief vehicle by which they communicated with each other and built a visible Hebrew culture in America.

As Professor Alan Mintz writes with regard to the Hebrew journal *Hatoren* and its impact on Hebrew culture in America, the establishment of a Hebrew journal was the way in which cities like New York sought to elevate themselves as centers of Hebrew culture, comparable to Berlin or Odessa:

---

<sup>146</sup> Lisitzky, “*Divrei perida mitokh perishah*,” 191.

...There remains a subtler and deeper reason which addresses the question of why, later on, when there were many Hebrew colleges, books, and other institutions and organs of culture, journals like *Hatoren* and *Bitzaron* remained the lifeblood of Hebrew culture. The answer has to do with the very nature of Jewish life in America. In contrast to Yiddish, there was no real ... site for [Hebrew's] embodiment... [Hebrew letters] lacked the kind of coffee house society that characterized Yiddish culture. Although most of the writers ... were centered in New York, many of the readers (and a few of the writers) were scattered across the country. Many were teachers and educators whose sympathy for the ideal of Hebrew found no echo in the towns and cities in which they spent their days in the attempt to convey the rudiments of the language to the unwilling children of American immigrants. For the deep loneliness of these provincial Hebraists, the arrival in the post of Hebrew journal served as both a consolation and a connection...[Hebrew periodicals] served as a kind of invisible synagogue whose dispersed congregants were joined in worship when they broke open the wrappings of the journal and took part in the ritual of reading.<sup>147</sup>

Lisitzky was assuredly one of these congregants as well as one of the congregational leaders. He most certainly located his life outside the cultural center of New York and, as his personal papers testify, he yearned for contact with his fellow writers and Zionist activists in the North and Midwest.<sup>148</sup> In addition, he was a regular columnist for several Hebrew journals, submitting his latest poems as well as his thoughts about his fellow writers' work and the state of the Jewish community in America.

As early as 1927, Lisitzky was participating in the national conversation about Jewish communal organization and education. That year, he wrote an article titled "*Harav hamoderni v'hachinukh*" ("The Modern Rabbi and Education"), the first article in his book *Bishevilei chayim v'sifrut*. While it is unclear as to where this article first appeared, it was likely aimed at other Hebraists who were Jewish communal leaders. In it, Lisitzky makes the public argument that the power struggle between rabbis and educators taking place in America was a hindrance to the successful functioning of Jewish schools and to the education of Jewish children. Lisitzky

---

<sup>147</sup> Mintz, 34.

<sup>148</sup> See Solomon Goldman Papers, MSS 203/12/12, for extensive Hebrew correspondence with Lisitzky concerning Zionist activities.

begins the article with an argument based on a shared history with other Hebraists, namely that of the *yeshivot* of the Old World, that teachers have always had their own authority when it comes to teaching their students:

Hebrew education, even in those days when the visage of the Jewish life was stamped with the seal of traditional legality, was free and rested on its own authority. The father called for and oversaw the education of his children – “thou shalt teach them to your children”!<sup>149</sup> – and he sent them to that teacher of children whom he found worthy and suitable to enact the commandment of teaching Torah to his children, and the teacher instructed and oversaw this holy task that was given to him that he should not misuse it, as the words of the prophets [tell us]: “Cursed is the one who does God’s work in treachery” – and he does his work with faith and devotion.<sup>150</sup> And even though [the teacher] is a slave to this work – he is free: the man is not forced into his authority, to teach him knowledge and to [bring] oversight upon him. He stands upon his own authority, grasping onto this and letting go of that, according to an accepted and sanctified path of study in the nation, a path of study that becomes not a “*shulchan arukh*” that is taught according to the rabbi but rather a “*orech chayim*, way of life” ... And he is the authority in the *Talmud Torah* ... And even in the *yeshivot*, whose principle function is to erect great teachers in Israel, the heads of the *yeshivot* are the communal leaders and not the rabbis. Therefore, Hebrew education was free from oversight of the rabbi. And not only education ... The life of the Jews, even in the holy realm, in the synagogues and the houses of study, in their behaviors and their manners, were written not by [the rabbi] but by the Torah, from her mouth [Torah] and not by his mouth. Indeed the truth must be said that the rabbi influenced education and life very deeply, but this influence was not by intention... It was derived from the essence of his being in the capacity of his scholarly and ethical personhood, which everyone respects and esteems.<sup>151</sup>

While Lisitzky did, in some ways, idealize the “Old World,” his main goal was clearly to criticize the current manner in which his school was functioning and to make an emotional appeal to his fellow Hebraists who grew up in the same world as he did and would be reading his words to take action in their own communities and on a national level.

Although the article did not specify as such, it is likely, based on the time frame that Lisitzky was responding to a power struggle within the Jewish community that took place in

---

<sup>149</sup> Cf Deuteronomy 6:7

<sup>150</sup> Cf Jeremiah 48:10.

<sup>151</sup> Lisitzky, “*Harav hamoderni v'hachinukh*,” 5.

New Orleans in the mid-1920s. It seems that the local rabbis were, and had been for some time, trying to exert control over the local Talmud Torah. As the new principal, it fell to Lisitzky to mend the rifts in the community and to decide on a new direction for the school.<sup>152</sup> In the article, he expounds upon the ideal relationship between rabbis and communal educators. He lays out his argument for the Hebraist approach to the teaching of Hebrew. He asserts that because teachers have always had some degree of autonomy within the Jewish community, the study of Hebrew was never purely a rabbinic, or religious, endeavor. Nor should it be in the present time. He writes, “Hebrew education was never only religious but rather cultural-national, and in this has set us apart from all other nations.”<sup>153</sup>

The article continues with a scathing indictment of the modern rabbinate, which Lisitzky accuses of being shortsighted and unworthy of the respect given to it. He declares:

The changing in the Jewish way of life dragged after it a shift in the conservatism of the rabbinate. A modern rabbi continues to maintain his position based on the status of the old rabbi. What is this modern rabbi’s character? He is no longer a person of scholarship and ethics but rather a leader who subdues Torah and ethics and makes them a stepping-stone for clerical politics, and only the tiniest minority is the exception. He does not *sacrifice himself for the sake of* Torah – no one in his community demands this of him!<sup>154</sup> His entire essence is nothing but an ornament, something to beautify the synagogue. And more than that, it uses him as a beast of burden upon whom all of Judaism is placed in order that [his actions will exempt his entire community from their responsibilities] – and peace on Israel.<sup>155</sup>

Lisitzky was clearly speaking to his fellow Hebraists who remembered Jewish life as it once was and who found themselves and their values at odds with the local rabbinate. He went on to criticize what he viewed as watered-down Judaism, not from the perspective of observance but rather from the depth of experience and scope of influence:

---

<sup>152</sup> Arie Shpall, “Lisitzky Hamechanekh” *Hadoar* (July 13, 1962): 589.

<sup>153</sup> Lisitzky, “*Harav hamoderni v'hachinukh*,” 5.

<sup>154</sup> Cf Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 83b.

<sup>155</sup> Lisitzky, “*Harav hamoderni v'hachinukh*,” 5.

The modern rabbi has become a priest who imitates the priests of other religions in all his actions, and he erects Judaism as only a religion. Just as the religious leaders of other faiths have a “Sunday School” that they run, so too he has a religion factory through his synagogue or his basement in which he passes on to the flock in his pasture all the teachings of “Judaism” on one foot, which are *Kiddush*, *Kaddish*, and *Maftir*, and the religious among them don prayer shawls with pomp and joy (this is actually done!) to the pleasure of their grinning parents, and they say, “Look at our boys!” This modern rabbi is the highest authority in the school, influencing it with his spirit and inflicting his will upon its teachers. And the results? How terrible are the results for all of us!<sup>156</sup>

The attitude of the rabbinate with which Lisitzky had such a disagreement was a reflection of the changing nature of American Judaism. For Lisitzky, Judaism was and always would be essentially an ethos, of which religion was but one important facet. In his article, he openly criticizes rabbis’ attempt to fit in and make Judaism a religion like Christianity, and calls upon his fellow Hebraists for support:

Hebrew education in America will be defective all the time that it is not divorced completely from the authority of the modern rabbinate. The rabbi within the leadership of his community can participate – he must participate! – in the funding and the management of the Hebrew school, but he cannot run it. If he really wants to fix education, he should ignite hearts in the synagogue, cause the parents to stand up for the need of improved Hebrew education, influence the graduates of the school so that they will continue their studies in institutes of higher education, and organize the graduates and establish for them times for Torah. This work will be good for him and good for education. There is a place for reciprocal influence between the rabbi and the teacher: the rabbi will supply the teacher with students, and the teacher will supply the rabbi with Jews. This reciprocal influence is a blessing and is honest. But the current situation, the Hebrew teachers must enlist themselves in a war of liberation – and free Hebrew education!<sup>157</sup>

While Lisitzky called for a sort of collaboration between the teachers and rabbis of New Orleans, it appears that he saw the religious leadership and the educational leadership as having very different philosophies. Though he was the most prominent Hebraist in his community at the time of this public feud, he clearly felt a kinship with other Hebrew teachers who would read his

---

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

article. It appears as if he hoped they would help each other to change Jewish education for the better by utilizing a more Hebraist agenda.

### **A Pioneer of American Hebrew Culture**

Lisitzky's American *chalutzit*, then, involved many different aspects of his professional existence. As an American Hebraist, Lisitzky produced poetry and prose, was a leader in Hebrew education, and produced a body of social and literary commentary in order to build and sustain a Hebrew culture in America. Though his decision to remain in America and to devote his life to these vocations was fraught with complexity, he managed to understand it in a way that still included him in the Zionist dream on a cultural level, if not a political one.

In his writing, he added to the general body of Hebrew poetry and was well recognized for it in *Eretz Yisrael*. He brought forth American images of America that had yet to be examined by a Hebrew poet. He found a Jewish soul in the stories of oppression of American Indians and African Americans and worked to express it using their genres and the Jewish language.

His educational endeavors never wavered from inspiring a love among his students for Hebrew as a living language. He worked throughout his years in New Orleans to create bonds between his local community and that of Palestine, and later Israel, both through language and communal leadership. His approach to Judaism as a culture was prevalent both in his teaching and in the way he wrote and spoke about his educational work.

Through his public conversations with other American Hebraists, he had the opportunity to make Hebrew in America a relevant mode of communication. The language itself remained



current both because of its frequent use in the Hebrew press and because of its constant application to the newest and most pressing problems facing the American Jewish community.

The American Hebrew culture that Lisitzky helped to pioneer was transitory in its existence. As for its impact, that is a much more elusive question. How successful he was in building a culture that would have a genuine effect on the nature and future of American Judaism is difficult to say, but his efforts are worthy of consideration as American Jewry's relationship to the Zionist dream and to Hebrew as a language grows ever more complex and pressing.

## Chapter Four: The Legacy of Ephraim Lisitzky

Ephraim Lisitzky led a life full of paradox. Though fervently supportive of the Jewish national endeavor in Palestine, he made his life in America. Though an American writer, his literary work was predominantly in Hebrew. Though part of a group of Cultural Zionist activists and passionate Hebraists, he made his life far from New York and other Jewish cities where they were centered. The paradoxes of his life speak to the complexity of Lisitzky's identity both as a Jew and as an individual.

The Cultural Zionist ideology that Lisitzky embraced did not have immigration to Israel as its focus, though Lisitzky certainly considered it at various points throughout his life. Rather, Lisitzky sought to elevate the level and content of Jewish discourse in America and connect it to the Jewish discourse in Israel and the rest of the world through the Hebrew language. He believed that *chalutzit*—pioneering work to build up the Jewish people—could be carried out in his literary world of words and ideas rather than the traditional Zionist concept of physical labor as it was practiced in the *Yishuv*. Lisitzky's *chalutzit* was a struggle to make the wilderness of America blossom with Jewish knowledge, idealism, and commitment even in the face of a changing national landscape.

To make the American “desert” bloom, Lisitzky used the Hebrew language as nutrients for the parched soil of American Judaism. He wrote literature that was relevant to America as a country, but in the Jewish language. Lisitzky's interest in the plight of African Americans and American Indians inspired him as he began to produce his American Hebrew poetry. Lisitzky taught Hebrew to the children of New Orleans based on the educational agenda of the American Hebraist movement. In Lisitzky's work as a

teacher and principal, he strove to open his students' eyes, as well as the eyes of their parents, to the important role that Hebrew language played in the strengthening of Jewish life and identity in America. Lisitzky communicated with his fellow Hebraists in the Hebrew press, as well as in his personal correspondence, in an effort to demonstrate that a living Hebrew culture could exist in America. He took great advantage of this outlet by submitting numerous poems and articles for publication, often discussing issues of pressing concern to the American Jewish community.

Lisitzky's accomplishments are many. He produced a wide range of literature, covering a myriad of subjects and genres. He was a beloved teacher and principal. Even today, his students remember him fondly and have made their own contributions to Hebrew culture in America. Some, for example, have gone on to be teachers themselves. Women like Rosalie Cohen and Mildred Brown have retained the Hebrew skills they learned under *Moreh's* tutelage to this day.<sup>158</sup> His Hebrew articles exist for students of the language to learn from, not only in the realm of linguistics, but also as a study of American Jewish culture during the twentieth century.

But what is the legacy of Ephraim Lisitzky and of the American Hebraist movement of which he was a leader? How is American Jewish history affected by his work and life? What can American Jews learn from his commitment to Hebrew and from his vision of the Zionist dream? These questions are difficult, perhaps impossible, to answer fully. The Hebraists exist as a relatively small and obscure group in the scope of the American Jewish experience. Most of their names are unknown to the typical American Jew. Even Ephraim Lisitzky, one of the most prolific of the American Hebrew

---

<sup>158</sup>Mildred Brown and Rosalie Cohen. Interview by the author. Cincinnati, OH: November 15, 2008.

poets, is a name that very few, save those who studied with him, or who study the Jewish history of New Orleans, or who study Modern Hebrew literature, even recognize. Based on these realities, the story of Lisitzky and the small world of American Hebraica that flourished during the first half of the twentieth century has seemingly little to teach the next Jewish generation.

But the life and work of Ephraim Lisitzky do offer lessons for today's American Jews. As American Jewry struggles to define its relationship to the rest of the Jewish world, and with Israel in particular, and as it seeks to renew its commitment to Hebrew as the historic language of the Jewish people, but struggles to identify the nature of that commitment in an American context, Lisitzky serves as an interesting model to consider. Lisitzky found a way to make Hebrew relevant to non-Israeli Jews, and he used Hebrew to forge a strong and meaningful relationship to the land of Israel among his American disciples, who had no plans to settle there permanently.

Even more profoundly, Lisitzky viewed Hebrew as a link to world Jewry—past, present, and future. He believed that learning Hebrew was a way for American Jews to participate in the mainstream of Jewish life. Throughout his lifetime, he strove, through his pedagogic and literary efforts, to make this Jewish life relevant to himself and to his students.

In the early spring of 1960, Ephraim Lisitzky was the primary focus of an issue of *Bitzaron: The Hebrew Monthly of America*.<sup>159</sup> The issue included both articles by and about Lisitzky. At this time, Lisitzky was already very sick with one of his several brushes with throat cancer, and he would finally succumb to it two years later. The issue

---

<sup>159</sup> *Bitzaron* was established in 1940 and, like *Hadoar*, became a popular venue for American Hebraists to carry on their public conversations and to introduce their work and thoughts to their peers.

presented a graduation address Lisitzky had hoped to give in person to the newly ordained rabbis of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in appreciation for an honorary degree bestowed upon him by the institution in 1949.<sup>160</sup> As circumstances would have it, he did not have the opportunity to do so.<sup>161</sup> In this piece titled “Restoring the Splendor of the Rabbinate to its Former Glory,” Lisitzky intended to speak to those future rabbis who would be continuing the work that previous rabbis had started. These are his words, embellished with the echoes of Judaism’s sages and prophets:

My dear rabbis and graduates! It is not to you, my rabbis, that I direct my words. What can I say to you that you don’t already know? What sensational news will you hear from my mouth, a villager from the *golah* of the edge of the South on the shore of the Mississippi, so far from the Jewish center, cut off from the pulse of life stirring within it? To you, my dear sirs, I offer an expression of my thanks for this honor you have bestowed upon me.<sup>162</sup> This honor is precious to me, coming from this important institute for the study of Torah – an illustrious honor for Hebrew poetry and Hebrew education in America that I have had the great pleasure of being one of its servants and flag bearers. I am grateful to you, my rabbis, for this, your kindness that you extended to me from New York the capital to New Orleans the village, from the bank of the clear Hudson to the bank of the muddy Mississippi.

My fellow graduates, I will direct my words. I called you “fellow graduates,” and I am including today, with you, all of the graduates. I am also a graduate like you; whereas in your graduation is, for you, a new beginning, the ending of study and the beginning of action, a great action of a rabbi in Israel, a mission for which this institute of Torah has prepared you—you are young and life is still before you, your sun is on the rise! Whereas my graduation is for me the ending of the beginning and passing to the last period—life is behind me and my sun is preparing to set.<sup>163</sup> I will speak to you as an old man speaks to his younger friend, my words will be few, and I will condense and direct them to one wish: restore the

---

<sup>160</sup> The Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTSA) is the academic institution for rabbinical training for the Conservative Movement in American Judaism.

<sup>161</sup> Lisitzky did not specify in his introduction to the speech why he was unable to give it in person. He wrote, “[These are] my words of a written speech that was prepared for the occasion of the receipt of an honorary degree that was given to me by [JTSA], and I did not have the appropriate time to present it in person.”

<sup>162</sup> Here Lisitzky is referring to his honorary degree that the institution was giving him.

<sup>163</sup> Lisitzky was around sixty-three years old at the time he wrote this speech.

crown of the rabbinate to its former glory, to the splendor and the eternity and the majesty that it used to have.

Every generation has its interpreters, and every generation has its rabbis, and there is no comparison between the rabbis of one generation and rabbis of the next. Even so, one chain, a chain of gold, connects all of them: the rabbinic tradition, in all its glory, its splendor, and its honor. There are so many good virtues to this rabbinic tradition, that if I were to start counting them, I would not have enough time. I will expound on two of them, and, in my opinion, they outweigh the rest – two that are actually one: *Talmud Torah*, whose meaning is the study of Torah, and dissemination of Torah.

A rabbi in Israel – in every generation he should enact that which Hillel taught: one who does not add to his knowledge causes it to cease.<sup>164</sup> Not a day or night passed for him that he did not linger in the study of Torah, breathe its air – air which is its soul, warm himself by its fire, brighten his soul in its light, to perfume himself with its myrrh, and to be ennobled in its radiance. Important in his eyes were the commandments of greeting the bride, visiting the sick, burying the dead, and acts of loving kindness, but he considered the study of Torah to outweigh them all, so he made his learning constant while engaging in the needs of the public on occasion, and for this, the name of “rabbi” was singled out for him, and he was crowned with it, not in its false meaning: a priest who mediates between man and God, but rather, in its original meaning and its true meaning: a teacher of meaning, lifting up the flag of Torah, expanding it and broadening it.<sup>165</sup>

Because a rabbi in Israel viewed it has his responsibility to make handles for the Torah, so too was it his responsibility to open ears to it, to disseminate it in the square of Israel, to cause its springs to overflow.<sup>166</sup> Our rabbis were among the founders of *yeshivot* and their supporters, concentrating and sacrificing so that they would establish wise men of Israel among us. Even a rabbi who was exiled to a little town that had no place to [study] Torah established in it a community of boys and young men, just landlords and scholars, including craftsmen, tree cutters and water carriers, and brought them together for the purpose of a fixed time for study under his guidance: a page of Gemarra, a passage of Mishnah, *Ein Yaakov*, *Chayei Adam*, and the like, and in his exile to that town the *Shechinah* (Spirit of God) was exiled with him, and because he made it a

---

<sup>164</sup> *Masechet Avot* 1:13.

<sup>165</sup> *Masechet Pe'ah* 1:1. The list he presents here is a reference not only to the Mishnah but also to *Birkhot Hashachar* and the recitation of a list of duties the performance of which are without measure.

<sup>166</sup> *La'asot oznaim la-Torah* is a rabbinic expression whose meaning is to make handles for the Torah, that is, to create clear and simple ways for students of Torah to grasp the ideas and lessons of the text. In the Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 21a, it is written that the Torah is like a basket that has no handles until Solomon came and made handles for it.

place of Torah, the *Shechinah* dwelled there. Our rabbis knew that the greatness of the Rabbi Hiyya was that he disseminated Torah and was exiled to teach.<sup>167</sup>

Restore this rabbinic tradition, fellow graduates, to its glory. Don't hold on to antiquated practices just because they are ancient - shells that have nothing worth saving inside them - cast them off. But don't discharge all of the old for the sake of the new - there is that which is old that has blessing in it, like that old wine that is distilled and purified and its taste and smell are ameliorated because of its age.

The American rabbinate, taking into consideration time and place, is compelled to submit itself to public business and becomes mostly men who [perform marriages], visit the sick, bury the dead, and collect charity. God forbid that I make light of its value of attending to the needs of the public, but God forbid you erect your rabbinate [solely] on public business. Remember what our sages concluded, that learning precedes action, even burying the dead...<sup>168</sup>

I will speak to you in the words of Rabbi Meir: attend to public needs- in engagement of the public needs - and engage in Torah, in the study and dissemination of it.<sup>169</sup> Fix times for Torah that your learning for which you've striven to acquire through many years will not be forgotten, because "words of Torah are difficult to acquire like a garment of fine wool but easy to lose like a garment of flax,"<sup>170</sup> and "God cries every day for he that can [study Torah] and doesn't do so."<sup>171</sup> Teach and learn, expunge from your communities the plague of ignorance and commonness that has spread through the Jews of America and taken over the soul of American Jewry.

Please do not think me one who teaches *halakhah* before his rabbis if I expand the meaning of the concept of Torah past the boundary drawn by the *rishonim* (The Rabbinic Sages of the Middle Ages).<sup>172</sup> I am using the word in its broad meaning which is: the culture of Israel, that creative stream that pours forth and overflows while springing, breaching all the seals that tried to close it off within them, and in which there is no separation between holy and profane - there is holiness in its profanity. The Rambam, Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Ezra, and Halevi and the like, and

---

<sup>167</sup> Rabbi Hiyya was one of the *ammoraim*, a rabbi of the Mishnaic period. He is known for traveling from town to town in order to teach Torah.

<sup>168</sup> According to Rashi, doing kindnesses for the dead is an ultimate good because one cannot expect to be repaid for it. See Rashi's comment on Genesis 47:29.

<sup>169</sup> Cf Rambam's commentary on the Mishnah, *Masechet Sanhedrin* 3:3.

<sup>170</sup> *Masechet Avot D'Rabi Natan* 1:28.

<sup>171</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Chagigah* 5b.

<sup>172</sup> A Talmudic phrase meaning one who is brazen and disrespectful of his teachers. See Babylonian Talmud, *Brakhot* 31b, Jerusalem Talmud, *Gittin* 1, 32.

alternatively in value and relatively, Mapu, Smolenzkin, Judah Leib Gordon, Mendeley Mocher Sefarim, Ahad Ha'am, Bialik and Tchernichovsky, and the like, cedars of Lebanon, the giants of the literature of the Enlightenment and of the literature of the [Hebrew] Renaissance;<sup>173</sup> All of these are words of the living God<sup>174</sup> and expounders of the spirit of Israel, holy in their secularity. And this literary current that spread their creations appears like a side stream, gushing into the channels, overflowing the trenches dug by the *rishonim*: its origin is the homeland of Israel and its result is the eternity of Israel.

Arguably, Lisitzky's message to these new rabbis was a lesson drawn from his own personal and professional odyssey. The advice he offered the neophyte rabbis is still relevant to American rabbis. For Lisitzky, *Talmud Torah* – the study of Torah—was a term that embodied all knowledge that pertained to the historic culture of Israel and the full power of its creative impulse. If American rabbis hoped to be worthy of their historic title, they would need to commit themselves as students and teachers of Torah as Lisitzky defined it. Any subject that related to the cultural and intellectual life of the Jewish people was – as far as Lisitzky was concerned – proper grist for the Jewish scholarly mill.

Scholars like Lisitzky believed that the Hebrew language constituted a crucially important skill for those who were dedicated to the work of *Talmud Torah* as he understood the meaning of that phrase. Full engagement with the Hebrew language allowed a man or woman to truly become acquainted with the expanse of the Jewish cultural spirit and to be able to know and understand the articulation of its hopes, dreams,

---

<sup>173</sup> Rambam, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1135–1204), a great medieval rabbi who spent much of his life in Cairo and who composed the foundational code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*. Solomon Ibn Gabirol (1021–1058), a renowned Hebrew poet and philosopher from Spain who was a proponent of Neoplatonism. Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164), a Spanish-born biblical exegete and philosopher. Judah Halevi (1075–1141), a famous poet and philosopher who was born in Spain and who is perhaps most famous for his allegorical work *Sefer hakuzari*. Abraham Mapu (1808–1867), a Lithuanian-born Hebrew novelist of the *Haskalah* whose novels inspired the founders of the Chovevei Zion movement. Peretz Smolenzkin (1842–1885), a Russian Jewish novelist whose work also helped inspire early Jewish nationalists. Judah Leib Gordon (1831–1892), a noted Hebrew poet of the *Haskalah*. Mendeley Mocher Sefarim (1835–1917) is the pseudonym of Sholem Yankev Abramovich, one of the founders of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature. Shaul Tchernichovsky (1875–1943), a noted Russian-born Hebrew poet who immigrated to Israel and who introduced the sonnet into modern Hebrew literature.

<sup>174</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvin* 13b.



and intellect. A commitment to the study and use of Hebrew was a way to constantly rediscover the old and to simultaneously plant the new sprigs of cultural creativity in the historic literary soil of the Jewish people. Lisitzky's emphasis on the role of a rabbi being one who knows this literature and feels compelled to teach can be interpreted as his effort to implement a Hebraist agenda.

Finally, Lisitzky's life as a Hebraist in New Orleans epitomized that idiosyncratic determination to contribute to the perpetuation of Jewish life that has been so distinctively American. Through a commitment to the Hebrew language, to learning it, to teaching it, and to using it in America, this American *chalutz* aspired to actualize his Zionism and his Americanism. Lisitzky's relationship with Israel was strong all his life, and from his perspective, it was strengthened by his giving students a vehicle through which they, too, would feel a part of the Jewish national experience, even though most would most certainly never live in Israel.

More pointedly, from Lisitzky's perspective, it was not only by living in the land of Israel that a contemporary Jew was able to participate in the revitalization of the Jewish people. By means of his quixotic devotion to Hebrew, which he sought to implant within his American students over the course of his career, Lisitzky believed he was genuinely contributing to the ongoing work of *chalutzit*, the renewal of the Jewish people in their ancient homeland. In this way, Lisitzky's career demonstrated that even a Jew living in New Orleans could participate in the modern struggle to renew the Jewish spirit, the Jewish culture, and the Jewish people.

Lisitzky's enduring lesson, the lesson delivered in his speech to the graduates and the lesson of his life's work, was that the word *Torah* not only refers to the Bible. It is

not even limited to the Mishnah, Talmud, or even the whole of rabbinic literature. Torah, for Lisitzky, was the ongoing story of the Jewish people written by them in their language. He committed his life to learning this story and adding to it, and he hoped that the Jewish leadership of the future would do the same.

At the end of his speech, Lisitzky introduced a parable that, to him, illustrated the duty of the American rabbinate. Through it, he explains that American Jewry does not see Judaism in its fullest splendor—does not fully know Judaism’s value—perhaps because it is obscured by an extra layer of unfamiliar language to which American Jewry feels no connection. These are fitting sentiments as Lisitzky’s legacy to the future leaders of American and world Jewry. They bespeak his honest and yet sympathetic portrayal of American Jews’ lack of understanding and constant disregard for their inherited culture. His charge, given to the future rabbis of America and spoken in the modern language of Israel, was actually issued to all those future American *chalutzim* who might one day follow in his footsteps. In essence, it was Lisitzky’s plea for the future of American Judaism, a plea that Judaism not be allowed merely to adapt itself to a secular America, but rather that true *chalutzim*, true pioneers dedicate themselves to the belief that even in secular America, the cultural of Judaism – its language and literature – was a magnificent gem that could yet be polished and made to sparkle anew.

I will end my words in the words of a parable told by The *Maggid* from Dovna.<sup>175</sup> There is a story of a merchant of jewels who sent his servant to bring from a certain place a suitcase full of jewels that he had left there. This merchant stood and looked out the window impatiently waiting for his servant who was delaying his return. He finally saw him from afar, progressing slowly, burdened from the suitcase, groaning and sweating under the weight of the load. Immediately he clapped his hands: “Woe to me! A disaster has befallen me. Thieves have stolen the jewels and filled

---

<sup>175</sup> Jacob Kranz of Dubno (d.1804) was an itinerant preacher who was famous for his stories and parables.

my suitcase with stones that they exchanged for them, because one does not groan and sweat when one is carrying jewels.”<sup>176</sup>

The Jews of America are bowing under the load of Judaism, groaning and sweating, not because jewels have been switched for stones, but rather because dust and mildew have gathered and clouded [the jewels'] luster and they seem to [the Jews of America], to the ones who carry them, that they are simply stones. This is your mission, O graduates, to cleanse and polish these precious stones, to return to them their sparkle and their luster, so that an appreciation of their value will return to the Jews of America, so that they will not be bowing under their load, groaning and sweating, but lifting them with upright stature, in joy and singing: We rejoice – how good is our portion and how lovely our fate and how beautiful our inheritance!<sup>177</sup>

---

<sup>176</sup> Cf *Kokhav miyaaqov* based on the *Haftarah* of the Torah portion *Vayiqra*. It is an explication of the verse Isaiah 43:22.

<sup>177</sup> Liturgical phrase from *Birchot HaShachar*.

## **Bibliography**

### **The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives:**

Ephraim Lisitzky. Nearprint Biography.

Ephraim Lisitzky. Small Collections no. 7301.

Jacob Kabakoff Collection. Manuscript Collection no. 659, Box 2, Folder 22, Cf  
"Lisitzky, Ephraim."

Solomon Goldman Papers. Manuscript Collection no. 203, Box 12, Folder 12, Cf  
"Lisitzky, E.E."

### **Primary Sources:**

Lisitzky, Ephraim. *B'ohalei kush: Shirim*. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1953.

—. "Divrei perida mitokh perisha." In *Bishvilei hayyim vesifrut*, pp. 177–191  
[orig. pub. 1959], 1961.

—. *Bishevilei chayim v'sifrut*. Tel Aviv: Hotza'at mahberot lesifrut, 1961.

—. *Eileh toldot adam*. Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1949.

—. "Harav hamoderni v'hachinukh." In *Bishevilei chayim v'sifrut*, pp. 5–8 [orig.  
pub. 1927], 1961.

—. *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*. Translated by Moshe Kohn and Jacob Sloan  
and revised by the author. New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1959.

—. *Medurot doakhhot*. New York: Ogen, 1937.

—. "Yisrael b'artzo v'yisrael b'galut amariqah." In *Bishevilei chayim v'sifrut*, pp. 124–  
135 [orig. pub. 1956]. 1961.

### **Secondary Sources:**

Aizenstein, Jill Havi. "Engaging America: Immigrant Jews in American Hebrew  
Literature." PhD diss., New York University, 2008.

Bauman, Mark K. ed. *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History*.  
Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2006.

Benshalom, Benzion. *Hebrew Literature Between the Two World Wars*. Jerusalem:

- Youth and Hechalutz Department of the Zionist Organization, 1953.
- Blumenfield, Samuel. "Ephraim Lisitzky–American Hebrew Bard." *The Chicago Jewish Forum* (Spring 1964): 204-207.
- Brown, Mildred. Interview by the author, Cincinnati, OH, November 17, 2008.
- Cohen, Rosalie. Interview by the author, Cincinnati, OH, November 17, 2008.
- Dinin, Samuel. "Editorial Comments." *Jewish Education* 33, no. 1 (Fall 1962): 5.
- Diner, Hasia. *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks 1915–1935*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977.
- Dinnerstein, Leonard. *Antisemitism in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Encyclopaedia Judaica*. CD-Rom Edition. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1974.
- Feibelman, Julian B. *A Social and Economic Study of the New Orleans Jewish Community*. Philadelphia, PA: Howard Publishing Company, 1941.
- Feldman, Yael S. *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism*. Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1986.
- Ferris, Marcie Cohen and Mark I. Greenberg, eds. *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press / University Press of New England, 2006.
- Gordon, Judah Leib. *Igarot* [Correspondence]. 2 vols. Warsaw: N.P., 1894.
- Kabakoff, Jacob. *Chalutzei hasifrut ha'ivrit be'ameriqah: mehkirim u'teudot*. Tel Aviv: Hamakhon lelimudei hayahadut, 1966.
- . *Shochrim v'ne'emanim: masot u'mehkirim al hasifrut v'hatarbut ha'ivrit b'ameriqah*. Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1978.
- Katz, Stephen. "So Miriam Spoke of Moses." Introduction and commentary. *CCAR Journal: A Reform Jewish Quarterly* (Fall 2008): 59–88.
- . "To Be as Others: E.E. Lisitzky's Re-presentation of Native Americans." *Hebrew Union College Annual*, (2002) 249–297.
- Keshet, Yeshurun. *Meshekhiut: masot bikoret*. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1953.

- Marcus, Jacob R. *American Jewry*. Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1959.
- Mintz, Alan. *Churban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *"Banished from Their Father's Table": Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography*. Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1993.
- Neuman, Larry A. "The History of Zionism in New Orleans: Its Emergence and Development Until 1948." Final Paper, New Orleans, LA: Tulane University, 1964.
- Pelli, Moshe. *Hebrew Culture in America: 80 Years of Hebrew Culture in the United States, 1916–1995*. Tel Aviv: Reshafim Publishers, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Hatarbut ha'ivrit be'ameriqah*. Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1998.
- Pilch, Judah ed. *A History of Jewish Education in America*. New York: The National Curriculum Research Institute of the American Association for Jewish Education, 1969.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Changing Patterns in Jewish Education. *Jewish Social Studies: A Quarterly Journal Devoted to Contemporary and Historical Aspects of Jewish Life* XXI, no. 2 (April, 1959): 91–98.
- Ravid, Zevulun. *Lisitsky – chalutz hahora'ah ha'ivrit be'ameriqah*. *Shevilei hahinukh* 32 no. 3 (Spring 1972): 226–234.
- Sachar, Howard M. *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.
- Shaked, Gershon. *The New Tradition: Essays on Modern Hebrew Literature*. Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2006.
- Shpall, Leo. *The Jews in Louisiana*. New Orleans, LA: Steeg Publishing Co, 1936.
- Silberschlag, Eisig. *Hebrew Literature – An Evaluation*. New York: Theodor Herzl Foundation, 1959.
- Simons, John, ed. *Who's Who in American Jewry*. Vol. 3, 1919–39. New York: National News Association, 1938.