

Territories and Textures: The Hasidic Sermon as the Crossroads of Language and Culture

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ABSTRACT

The present study offers a focused analysis of the complicated interface of Yiddish and Hebrew in Hasidic preaching and writing, exploring the unique crevasse between written and oral cultures that Hasidism has occupied since the eighteenth century. We argue that scholarship on Hasidism has not fully appreciated the linguistic element of the remarkable success of this socioreligious movement that has shaped the course of Jewish modernity. This lacuna is particularly acute in research dealing with Hasidic sermons and their theological and ideational message. It is our contention that those engaged in the study of the Hasidic homily must not forget that the original moment, transformed only later into a text, was a dramatic oral event that took place in Yiddish. Hasidic literature published in Hebrew is the result of a long process of translation (literal and figurative), a textual artifact whose linguistic form shapes the sermon and its ideational core in a variety of significant ways.

Key words: Hasidism, modern Jewish thought, Jewish mysticism, orality, print culture

The charismatic gifts and religious ethos of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (the Besht, d. 1760), enshrined in Hasidic memory as the movement's *paterfamilias*, were expressed primarily through spoken words and oral teachings rather than in written texts.¹ Though these traditions were eventually committed to writing by his students