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CHAPTER 6

Dreams of a Jewish Queen: A Literary Itinerary of National-Sexual Desires, from the Book of Esther to Aaron Zeitlin's *Esterke*

Roni Masel

It is some distant time in history. The Jews are in danger. A young and beautiful Jewish woman faces an extraordinary opportunity: to influence a powerful, gentile ruler in favour of her people by using her beauty and feminine wisdom. Will she agree? Will she succeed in turning the king's heart? Will such rescue be worth the intimacy with a gentile? Such questions and others have informed the retellings and reiterations of what we might characterize as Esther-like narratives that appeared repeatedly in Hebrew and Yiddish literature from the late nineteenth century up to World War II.

What follows seeks to sketch out a general mapping of this literary trope, the dream of a Jewish queen, and to follow its itinerary, the different locations and temporalities in which the historical fiction takes place and in which these texts were produced. But before turning to survey these narratives, it seems necessary to explain the appeal and fascination of this trope by suggesting an initial conceptual framework which would assist in approaching the texts. As the following analysis demonstrates, contemplating the image of the Jewish queen seems worthwhile since it stands at a dramatic crossroads of nationalism and notions of gender and sexuality. The young Jewish woman who rises to power through her relationship with a gentile ruler, as a cultural trope, enables a discussion regarding national ideology and identity and a construction of gender and of sexual norms. In the figure of the Jewish queen, as a merger of the two, no separation between notions of gender and nation is possible: its sexuality is nationalized, its national ideology gendered and sexualized.

More specifically, the trope of a Jewish queen lends itself readily to a national-symbolic interpretation. Royalty, in general, can serve as a compelling literary device. A king, for example, might stand for ideas of power and agency; or, in the Jewish diasporic setting, the king might represent the surrounding gentile nationalism and sovereignty. Female figures have also been used for allegorical

personifications, usually representing the entirety of the country or the empire, such as Britannia, Columbia, Marianne, or Mother Russia. However, as opposed to the king, the inclusive quality of these female figures lies in their anonymity, in their being 'the ordinary woman', not queens: since they are no one specific, they can be anyone; since they do not have any known children, they could be the mothers of the entire nation. The king is part of the nation, but through his image one can tell the story of the collective, as is the case in a metonymy. The anonymous woman, however, is not a significant member of the national collective; rather, her image substitutes the collective in its entirety, as in the rhetorical structure of allegory. What, then, activates the image of the Jewish queen? Does she, *like* the king and through her relationship *with* a ruler, represent the political circumstances of the people and enable a discussion of them? Or perhaps, like the anonymous plebian woman, her story overlaps and replaces that of the nation? The works presented in this study move between these two modes of representation, between metonymic depiction and allegorical substitution. In doing so, these works present varying configurations of national-sexual imagery and sexuality. This trope's aesthetic and thematic flexibility, as we will see, turns it into an evocative literary apparatus.

Let us begin by considering the first possibility, in which the narrative of the particular Jewish woman who encounters the gentile ruler is metonymic to the narrative of the nation and allows for an examination of the nation's burning issues. As Chone Shmeruk argued, the representation of young Jewish girls who immerse themselves in their surrounding culture had become a widespread theme in Yiddish literature by the late nineteenth century as an emblem of the fear of assimilation.[1] This is comparable to other nationalist discourses, in which discussions regarding the collective, its borders, its unity, and its future focus their attention on women's symbolic and concrete body and on what nationalist ideology often terms its 'sexual purity' which parallels the idea of 'national honour'.[2] Against this background, the trope of the Jewish queen stands out as exceptional, for it considers the possibility of physical-sexual contact between a Jewish woman and a 'foreign' man in positive terms. In this narrative, rescuing the Jewish people might render the in principle forbidden sexual 'contamination' — kosher. Nevertheless, this conflict of interest between benefitting the people and guarding the collective's purity and sexual honour continues to stand at the very core of all the Esther-like retellings considered in this study. Will the political benefit be worth the sexual contamination? Will the forbidden contact achieve political power and thereby justify itself?

In 1884, Shomer (Nahum Meyer Shaykevich), the writer and mass-producer of popular Yiddish literature, published a novella entitled *Di yidishe kenigin* [The Jewish Queen], which draws on the Polish Jewish folk tale of King Casimir the Great and his Jewish mistress/wife.[3] In Shomer's version, Esterke, the beautiful Jewish woman and daughter of a poor tailor, is saved by King Casimir from a Christian mob outraged by a blood libel. The king takes her with him to his castle, where he falls in love with her after they have a long intellectual conversation on the origins of anti-Semitism and bigotry. Esterke realizes that she loves Casimir as well, but her loyalty to her people and religion torments her. After a night of tossing and

turning, she comes to the conclusion that, if she succeeds in influencing the king in favour of the Jews, it would justify her love for a gentile. The two marry, and the king, who had already perceived himself as an enlightened ruler who favoured the rule of law over knightly ethos or religious fanaticism, listens to Esterke's words of reason and tolerance. Following her requests, he issues a decree that brings the surge of violence to an end, and the Polish Jews are relieved. Esterke does not want her identity to be revealed, for she worries it would harm her honour in the eyes of the Jewish community. The novella comes to its dramatic end after her parents arrive at the palace, seeking the new queen's help in finding their daughter. They arrive accompanied by their town's rabbi, who was previously in love with Esterke but forced to separate from her by his uncle, who arranged his marriage. The three meet the queen and are shocked to discover she is none other than their own Esterke. The unified family is thrilled, and the rabbi exclaims that he is happy for Esterke and for the Jewish people, thereby approving her marriage and resolving the love triangle.

On first impression, Shomer's Esterke is the most perfect and optimistic enunciation of her biblical prefiguration, Esther: she is beautiful and clever, and her influential deeds in support of her people soothe the pain of her sexual detachment from it in an exceptional manner that allows for an enlightened critique against Jewish separatism while simultaneously reaffirming the borders of the Jewish nation, defining Esterke as the exception that proves the rule.[4] However, when considering the structure of Shomer's narrative, the potential for another reading appears. The harmonious ending appeases the collective sentiment while simultaneously shifting the reader's eye from the national plot line to the romantic one, focusing on the resolution of the love triangle and thus transforming the story from one devoted to the national collective to one preoccupied with the romantic paradigm. This structural transformation emphasizes not a collectivist message but rather a distinctively maskilic programme of contradictory nationalist humanism or conservative universalism, promoting ideas of enlightened tolerance, rejecting parochial practices of arranged marriages that confine love to fanatic religious borders and economic circumstances, and championing a romantic ethos.[5]

Another interesting structural interplay between romantic love-triangle narratives and national-didactic ones can be found in adaptations of the apocryphal story of Judith and Holofernes. This story received many visual and textual representations during the centuries following its canonization in the Christian Bible. Since the nineteenth century, Jewish interest in this narrative has grown. One expression of this interest can be found in the translation of Friedrich Hebbel's play *Judith* (1841) into Hebrew by Shmuel-Leib Gordon in 1900.[6] Hebbel's play deviates considerably from the apocryphal original, most notably with regards to its end. After five days in Holofernes's camp, Judith faces the moment of truth. She has already captured his heart but now has to fulfil her task. Yet is precisely then that Holofernes loses patience with Judith's sexual modesty, or what she calls her 'honour'; he takes her into his tent, rapes her, and falls asleep. Judith feels violated, and begs her servant to help her in killing Holofernes. The only way she would be able to do so, she

says, is if her servant constantly reminded her of the way Holofernes had stolen her virginity and purity. Utilizing the rage over her violated sexuality, she gathers the required strength and decapitates him. Judith returns to her city with his head, but while her people celebrate the victory, she pleads to her fellow Jews to swear that if and when she asks them to kill her, they will do so. She dreadfully explains her will to her servant: if she conceived as a result of being raped by Holofernes, she would rather die and spare herself the pain of her impurity than give birth to Holofernes's bastard child. From a heroic deed of collective salvation, as in the original apocryphal narrative, the killing of Holofernes in this play becomes a tragedy of non-liberating revenge for sexual violation of the national purity.

Another important deviation of the play from the apocryphal original lies in a love triangle that Hebbel created. Before leaving her besieged town and going to Holofernes's camp in order to kill him, Judith dares her long-time rejected suitor, Ephraim, to go and kill him. Ephraim, the cowardly opportunist, is reluctant to do so, and therefore Judith decides to go there herself in order to prove Ephraim's cowardice to him, saying 'every woman has the right to demand of the man seeking her affection that he be brave and fearless'.[7] Ephraim, the effeminate Jewish man, wishing to save face, arrives at the military camp with a sword after Judith has already been there for a few days. He tries to stab Holofernes, but the guards block his way. He then tries to kill himself in utter despair, but Holofernes, full of contempt for this unmanly creature, does not even grant him the dignity of being executed by his enemy; instead, he incarcerates Ephraim in the same cage as his monkey, for entertainment.

Of the two men seeking Judith's grace, it is clear that, despite her resentment of his cruelty, Holofernes nevertheless attracts her far more than Ephraim, towards whom she feels nothing but disdain. As Hannan Hever elucidates regarding the motif, perhaps even the *idée fixe*, of retaliation in modern Hebrew literature, its significance lies in the structure and mechanism of revenge as a violent act.[8] As an empty action, as an action that could not fulfil any goals exterior to the act itself, it is a form of violence for the sake of violence, the exertion of power for its own sake and within an idiosyncratic, cyclical, and hollow structure that, precisely due to this sealed cyclicality, enables the use of power from a position of utter powerlessness. The year 1900, the year when Gordon's translation was published, might symbolize for us in this context a moment of powerlessness and an intensifying Zionist struggle to rehabilitate Jewish masculinity and Jewish national honour,[9] to make the great leap from a position of utter powerlessness to possessing and exerting power.[10] In order to perform such a leap, radical action must be taken. Ephraim is unable to rehabilitate his own injured masculinity, and therefore the play ends in tragedy. However, Judith, utilizing the violence turned against her, can channel the strength needed in order to spring from the position of the victim to that of the murderer, to attain power where it does not exist, even at the expense of dignity and national honour.

Twelve years before the Hebrew translation, the playwright and promoter of Yiddish theatre Yosef Yehuda Lerner published a drama under the same title, *Judith*

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(1888).[11] While large parts of the play are in fact a plagiarized translation of Hebbel's play, its end transforms the original completely by adhering more closely to the paradigm of the Jewish queen. In Lerner's version, Holofernes does not rape Judith but rather admires her, claims she ought to be his queen, and plans to marry her. Eventually, however, she kills him for the original, national-strategic reason of saving her besieged town, and not as an act of retaliation, for she has successfully avoided sexual contact with Holofernes prior to his death. After she returns victorious to the town with her sexual honour intact, she marries Ephraim, whom she grows to love. As Hebbel's tragedy is turned into a comedy, ending in a wedding rather than an implied suicide, it seems that the structural focus of the play centres even more intensely on the question of national-sexual purity. While Hebbel's love triangle is shattered (both Judith and Holofernes die), in Lerner's version, Judith replaces the romantic possibility of marrying Holofernes with her true and worthy love for Ephraim. While the original play realizes the sexual potential of the encounter between the Jewish woman and the gentile ruler, the fantasy of a Jewish queen comes crashing down in a tragic ending. The Yiddish adaptation, by contrast, refrains from materializing the sexual potential in the first place, and ends in the celebratory union of intranational love and the rehabilitation of proper gender roles and characteristics. If we compare the political effect of the two versions, it seems that the act of retaliation in Hebrew literature aims at creating a tragedy, a cathartic crisis violently breaking with the past in order to build anew; whereas Lerner, in using similar materials, allows for a political rehabilitation of the Jewish national image by drawing the narrative closer to a more respectful and tolerated framework of contact between a Jewish woman and a gentile — by drawing Judith's story closer to the paradigmatic narrative of a Jewish queen.

In Lerner's *Judith*, we find a potential rehabilitation of Jewish masculinity through the image of the Jewish queen, but the divide between the Yiddish and Hebrew literary-political imaginations cannot be paradigmatically portrayed as the supposed opposition between Hebraist Zionism and Yiddishist diasporic nationalism. As a case in point, we might turn to David Pinsky's short story 'Zerubovel', which tells the story of the Book of Esther from the point of view of a young Jewish man in Shushan, Zerubovel, and his fiancée, Shoshana.[12] The Jews of Shushan entrust Esther with their fate, and they prepare for three days of fasting and praying. Zerubovel refuses to cooperate with the community elders' plan, arguing that a nation cannot be saved by a woman and demanding that the Jews join him in armed resistance and fight their persecutors in self-defence, that they 'not be lead easily like sheep to slaughter, rather be like lions, who come forward and fight their hunters'.[13] Mordechai explains that, while Zerubovel wishes to employ his arms and muscles for self-defence, the community knows how to navigate other resources for defence, such as money and the Jewish feminine body, just as Jacob in his day used his wealth in his meeting with Esau and just as Judith in her turn used her body and beauty to defeat Holofernes. 'Since when', Zerubovel further reproaches Mordechai and the crowd, 'is the meaning of self-defence — the pretty face of a young woman? Is Esther's body our self-defence?'.[14] The crowd dismisses

him, and he looks for Shoshana for comfort. However, when he finds her covered like the rest of the community in sackcloth and ashes, he finally understands that he is alone in his position, that the rest of the community feels comfortable in 'hiding behind a skirt', and that the rest of the Jewish men have no 'sense of honour'.[15] The story ends with the tragic separation of the lovers after the furious Zerubovel tells Shoshana she is not worthy of being the mother of his children. Thus, we might say that responses in Yiddish literature to the question of and need for rehabilitating Jewish masculinity with regards to the trope of the Jewish queen range from Lerner's celebratory embrace of the use of women for national relief to Pinsky's utter rejection of the trope and his demand for androcentric narratives and masculinist nationalism.

An opportunity for a different sort of negotiation of Jewish identity opens up through the use of the paradigm of the Jewish woman as a national saviour in another historical context: Sepharad, Spain, which was, in general, a prime locus of fascination for modern Jewish intellectuals.[16] Narratives that engage the cultural trope of the Jewish queen appeared in works that focus on the image of crypto-Jews — the Marranos or conversos — and their return to Judaism. The crypto-Jew serves as a very powerful token through which to discuss questions of identity.[17] As an image, it stirs a great deal of anxiety in both Jewish and non-Jewish political imagination. On the one hand, there is the anxiety of being exposed, of failing to pass; on the other hand, the fact that the stranger cannot necessarily be identified as such demands constant suspicion, since essentially anyone could be the enemy. This idea of a double-layered existence, composed of elements of exposure and concealment, resonates well with various articulations of modern Jewish identity, most famously in the maskilic Hebrew poet Yehudah Leib Gordon's construct: 'Be a man in the streets and a Jew at home'.[18] This duality of modern Jewish experience might explain its fascination with the image of the conversos.

A drama by Sholem Asch, entitled *Maronen* [Marranos], tells the story of the converso Jacob Tirado, who fled Portugal in order to establish a community of ex-conversos in Amsterdam.[19] The story is based originally on the folklore of Amsterdam's Sephardic community;[20] Asch had likely encountered it through its literary adaptation by the German Jewish writer Ludwig Philippson, which, by the time Asch wrote his drama, had already been translated twice into Hebrew and once into Yiddish and widely disseminated.[21] While Philippson focused on the figure of Jacob Tirado, Asch took pains to dramatize extensively one scene of the story. According to communal lore, Tirado left Portugal with four other conversos, among them one woman. The group's ship was captured by an English one and brought to London; their possessions were taken away, and they were imprisoned. An English duke saw the young and beautiful woman, Maria Nunes, and fell in love with her. As the fascination with her grew among the guards, Queen Elizabeth herself asked to meet her. As a result of the meeting, the queen gave them permission to settle in her land, but they insisted on continuing their journey to Amsterdam. Asch's drama begins after their arrival in the Netherlands, while the English duke tries, for the very last time, to convince Maria Nunes to marry him

and become his duchess. He presents her with enlightened ideas of transcending religious boundaries. The offer is tempting, but Maria decides in favour of her faith, claiming that leaving her ancestors' religion, about which she knows very little, would render worthless their holy sufferings at the hands of the Inquisition.

If the converso can indeed serve as an emblem of modern Jewish identity, as a Janus-faced being torn between political loyalties and cultures, it seems that, when the risk of assimilation and utter loss of identity is at stake, the literary fantasy of a Jewish woman rising to power weakens. Such duality might be tolerated in certain circumstances, but when faced with a threat to the painfully sought-after identity, power gives way to the opportunity of authentically expressing one's Jewish self. The rejection of the ideas of enlightenment and universalist tolerance advocated by the English duke in Asch's play perhaps parallels a rejection of the maskilic demand for a double gesture of integration into the surrounding society while preserving a sense of Jewish particularism.[22] Maria Nunes wishes to do away with the duality that dictated her life as a conversa, even at the cost of missing the opportunity to gain power for the sake of the nation. She therefore vows to keep her body within the borders of the collective and refrain from contaminating it. A fantasy of national power gives way to that of national purity and honour; Jewish identity is restored.

Such is the case in a novella by Sholem Asch, *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilien* [The Witch of Castile],[23] built around the paradigmatic character of a beautiful Jewish woman who is capable of helping her people through her beauty, in which a family of ex-conversos arrive in Rome in their struggle to return to their original faith. In this novella, too, the young woman refuses to form any sort of connection with a gentile through which she could deliver her people, and the story ends tragically with her execution in an auto-da-fé. Shomer also dedicated one of his novellas to the character of a young Jewish woman, *Di sheyne Rokhele* [The Beautiful Rachel],[24] who lived in Portugal as a crypto-Jew. The narrative touches upon themes of sexual violence and purity, romance disturbed by national borders, the aspiration to political power, and finally the restoration of authentic Jewish identity (when Rachel's ostensibly gentile lover discovers his hidden Jewish roots, which allows for the couple's happy reunification).

For the last location and temporality of the Jewish queen's itinerary to be examined here, we return to the historical setting of Shomer's novella that opened this study: fourteenth-century Poland and the legend of Esterke. As mentioned earlier, Chone Shmeruk surveyed and analysed this theme, and the relationship between Polish and Yiddish literature, as it evolved around the characters of Esterke and Casimir. Shmeruk outlined two general trends. In Polish literature, he traced a shift in the course of the nineteenth century from Esterke's negative depiction as the source of the Jews' unjustifiable rights and privileges in Poland, to a more positive portrayal, perhaps even a celebratory one, at a time when the Polish intelligentsia was looking for symbols of Polish–Jewish coexistence and brotherhood. In reading Yiddish and Hebrew sources, Shmeruk pointed to perhaps an opposite move: one from a positive and naive characterization of Esterke as the perfect materialization of her biblical prefiguration to the more complex use of this motif as an emblem of

the difficulties, advantages, and disadvantages of Jewish integration or assimilation into Polish society. Natan Cohen continued Shmeruk's work by adding five sources, two in Hebrew and three in Yiddish, previously not accessible and therefore absent from Shmeruk's survey, which further support Shmeruk's observations regarding the shift in the Jewish sources from a naive embrace of Esterke's story as re-enacting the Book of Esther to a growing discomfort and ambiguity regarding the possibility of a young Jewish woman fraternizing with gentiles and flirting with the idea of assimilation. Cohen's survey ends with a serialized novel published in 1934 and 1935, about three years after the drama written by Aaron Zeitlin between 1929 and 1932 with which Shmeruk's study ends. By the mid-1930s, Cohen argues, the fantasy of a Polish–Jewish brotherhood was already crumbling, and the legend of Esterke, as a pre-text of that fantasy, with it. However, it seems that we can draw the end of this itinerant narrative out a bit further, since Zeitlin rewrote his drama in 1967, essentially creating a new Esterke story, an afterlife of the dream of a Jewish queen. Thus, although Chone Shmeruk and Yehiel Szeintuch have already attended to Zeitlin's drama,[25] it seems worthwhile to revisit his two versions of the story, the first written in pre-war Warsaw, the second in post-war New York.

Aaron Zeitlin's drama *Esterke un Kazimir der groyser: Ahaswer in Poilin* [Esterke and Casimir the Great: Ahaswer in Poland],[26] first published in 1932, resembles other narratives of a Jewish queen: here too, her image stirs up a fear of assimilation just as much as national pride or a feeling of relief. In the opening act, King Casimir sits in his palace surrounded by his ministers when a group of Jews enter and ask the king for his permission to settle in the land as God's angel had ordered them to do, saying: 'Po lin!' [Here dwell!]. When, soon afterwards, Esterke enters the scene, searching for the king's protection, Casimir falls in love with her immediately. Everyone present tries to prevent him from marrying her: his knights, his clergy, and the rabbi and the Jews who accompanied him all believe it to be a bad idea. Only his loyal finance minister, the Jew Levko, fantasizes over the potential of having a Jewish queen: 'Esther is her name, why not a second Esther?'.[27] Throughout the play, Levko remains the chief mediator and articulator of the dream of a Jewish queen, and he reveals the assumption that encourages him to pursue this dream at the very beginning. When the Jews ask Casimir for his patronage, Levko tries to convince him to agree to the request thus:

> If two peoples chance on one land — surely a mystery lies therein, as in the encounter of a woman and man. A man's existence is no simple fact — great deeds he must accomplish. Nations too must complete great tasks. If two peoples come together, and they breath the same air — it is no mere coincidence, my king — .[28]

In this quotation, Levko positions Esterke as a placeholder of the nation; he offers a shift from the metonymic presentation of Esterke or of her counterparts, and transforms Esterke into an allegory. For Levko, her story does not simply allow for an engagement with questions of assimilation and national identity through the narrative of sexual encounter and its costs or benefits. Rather, her figure substitutes that of the national collective; her story becomes that of the nation in the same way

that Casimir here stands for the entire Polish people. The encounter of Casimir and Esterke in the royal palace is the same as two nations coming together in one land.

What then is this secret, or mystery, that Levko suggests exists in the encounter of two nations or in that of a man and a woman? Perhaps harmony, strong attraction, physical union? By using the structural symbol of the heterosexual family, the fantasy of a Jewish queen suggests that the two collectives live together peacefully, not threatening each other's selfhood. If the Polish nation is the man and the Jewish nation is a woman, then the two national identities do not come at the expense of each other and do not dispute or challenge the distribution of power and control. Jewish nationalism imagined as a woman, as opposed to the local nationalism imagined as a man, creates space for a non-territorial nationalism, searching for individual expression yet at the same time aspiring to integration into the local society. In other words, imagining the Jewish queen marrying the Polish king configures the ideal national-political existence for Jewish diasporic nationalism.

This understanding of the figure of Esterke as an allegory corresponds to the genre with which Zeitlin categorized his play: *misterie*, 'mystery-play', and with the appearance of other symbolic figures which Zeitlin called *gayster*, 'spirits', such as Christ; Ahaswer the Eternal Jew; the Shepherd who is described as 'the Good Dream'; and the Elder, described as 'the Bad Dream'. Adam Mickiewicz and Y. L. Peretz also appear in the last act, discussing the possibility of a Polish–Jewish symbiosis. This anachronistic anti-realism, or existential irrationalism, as Yehiel Szeintuch termed it, goes hand-in-hand with the universalist agenda that marks Zeitlin's Warsaw period.[29]

And indeed, it is precisely the narrative's resentment of rationalism and its embrace of fantastic and spiritual qualities that creates the universalistic vision that concludes the play: King Casimir's ministers force him to separate from Esterke, and he agrees. However, on the night they part, Casimir says to Esterke: 'We will die. But as long as the descendants of my race and yours sit together in this land — our story has no end, Esterke of Opoczno.'[30] While the two are sitting outside the castle, spending their last night together, two of the spirits observe them — the Shepherd, the Good Dream, and the Elder, the Bad Dream. The pessimist Elder complains about the end of their story, but the Shepherd comforts him: 'Their dream isn't "caput". Dreams always remain. The two might separate, but something still remains. There is a pillar of light between them, you cannot see it.'[31] The Elder insists: 'Only one thing has the power to remain — blood.'[32] His reference to blood echoes one of Levko's articulations of his dream of a Jewish queen. In one of his meetings with Esterke, Levko tries to educate Esterke on what he thinks of as her national role, and attempts to convince her that the only way she could keep Casimir with her is if she gave birth to his heir. Then he begins speaking more abstractly: 'Do you know what that means? A king, a Jewish king, Esterke ... A king who rules over us and them, whose blood — ours and theirs ...'.[33] As opposed to Levko's fantasy of a blood-tie, of a physical-sexual synthesis, groups of Christians and Jews who argue over well-poisoning and the accusation that the Jews are responsible for it, eventually come to agree on their mutual goals: 'Our waters — yours; our blood

— separate from yours.'[34] While the Polish soil and resources can be shared by the two groups, physical-sexual separation must be preserved.

In other words, two concepts of national existence compete in this play: spiritual and abstract connection through shared life on the same land on the one hand, or, on the other hand, a physical-sexual symbiosis which is a source either of wonderful fantasy (for Levko) or of great anxiety (for the rest of the general public). The end of the play, however, rules in favour of the spiritual connection and rejects Levko's allegorical-yet-physical understanding of Esterke and Casimir's encounter as that of two nations. The Shepherd wins the argument with the pessimist Elder. Peretz poetically claims that he can hear the world speaking to him in Yiddish from the depths of the Polish soil. Adam Mickiewicz muses over the elements composing his name — *dam*, 'blood', and *Adam*, 'human': 'There is a solution! "Dam" becomes 'Adam'!'[35] — meaning that the logic of blood gives way to a humanistic and universalist philosophy. Ahaswer, the Eternal Jew, concludes the play with a long monologue which celebrates 'the kiss of the two races', regardless of the termination of a concrete physical union between the two nations and between Casimir and Esterke, and he encourages everyone to come out in dance, in a universalist utopia, 'until through dance we find our way to the one and only mother!'.[36]

In this play, Zeitlin endorses the Esterke motif in its entirety, asserting its legitimacy. The inter-ethnic sexual contact is freed from the binary judgement of assimilation versus segregation through a unique formula that Zeitlin creates. The drama maintains physical separation while at the same time holding on to the spiritual symbiosis between Esterke and Casimir and between Jews and Poles. Thus it avoids the national-sexual anxiety fundamental to a nationalist discourse. This unique formula is indebted to the play's genre — Zeitlin's choice of symbolistic plot lines, and his rejection of realist or allegorical representation, allows for equivocal yet powerful configurations, creating space for Jewish particularism through a symbolic, non-physical symbiosis with the local non-Jewish nationalism.

However, Zeitlin, who had by chance left Warsaw for a visit to New York in 1939 and who had lost his family in the war, rewrote the play in 1967, thereby creating an afterlife for the dream of a Jewish queen in Yiddish literature.[37] The revisited version realizes all the elements that in the first, open-ended version remained merely an abstract potential. Esterke gives birth to Casimir's son, Pelko, who is kidnapped by the king's ministers and raised in a monastery. Once he is separated from his national and religious collective, his 'mixed blood' loses meaning. Esterke's love for Casimir also becomes more concrete when she argues against Levko that, in fact, she was never interested in Casimir's love because of his royalty and the potential to help her people through him, and that she has always loved him as an individual instead.[38] By de-allegorizing herself and de-nationalizing their love, turning the story into a paradigmatic romantic narrative, the sexual contamination loses its legitimacy — if Esterke never meant to act in favour of her people through her marriage, then no justification can be found for her violation of the collective boundaries. In turn, the story becomes nationalized and allegorized again when, towards the end, Esterke, persecuted by the Christian masses, understands for the

first time the meaning of national oppression. As a result, Esterke, together with Levko, Peretz, Mickiewicz, and a new symbolic figure, Meshigener, apparently a Holocaust survivor, decide to leave Poland. Ahaswer, who in this version is called Nitsḥiel, 'Eternal', or 'Eternal God', changes his celebratory concluding monologue to a shorter one, replacing the initial divine order of 'Po lin!' [Here dwell!] with 'oys po lin' [here dwell no more]:

> *Po lin! Po lin!*
> Such was the verdict.
> You must spend your night here,
> you must.
> Why?
> Somewhere in the unknowns the answer lies.
> But once, when the night
> will nightly fall
> with a demonic force
> unforeseeable,
> then, consequently, will it be
> *oys po lin.*
> And in Jerusalem
> will a new dawn rise
> and to Jerusalem will we go;
> to Jerusalem will we go.[39]

In the second version of the play, the dream of salvation, of national empowerment through Jewish femininity and sexuality, falls apart. Zeitlin's fantasy of a universalistic, Jewish–Polish symbiosis fails with it. The Jewish queen refuses her role as an allegorical substitute for the collective and concretizes the romantic narrative, thereby rendering the Jewish–Polish relationship illegitimate. Consequently, the collapse of the allegory ends the hope that the heterosexual family, as a metaphor of a political *modus vivendi*, would enable two competing national identities to live peacefully in the same territory. The utopic articulation of diasporic nationalism through the image of the Jewish queen has given way to a notion of national introversion, an ingathering of the exiles in Jerusalem, and the creation of a separatist identity. *Oys po lin*; *oys* Jewish queen.

To conclude the discussion of Zeitlin's work, the key to understanding the shift between the pre-war and the post-war versions lies in two fundamental elements of this drama: its genre and mode of representation, and the way in which it uses the historical material. First, while the pre-war version uses symbolistic figures, language, and plot lines, the second version witnesses the destruction of representation through the materialization of all elements of the drama that previously had a symbolic potential. Further, in the second version we witness the shattering of Esterke as an allegorical figure. The drama shifts from a symbolistic mystery play to a realist allegory. The difference between symbol and allegory in Walter Benjamin's theory of the *Trauerspiel* might help us make sense of this generic shift.[40] While the symbol is based on deep intimacy and kinship between the signifier and the signified (as is the case, for example, in the River of Time,

Mother Earth, or the Horn of Plenty), in the allegory an arbitrary figure is chosen (say, a woman) in order to convey an unrelated idea (e.g. Grace, Christianity, Music, or War). This arbitrariness postpones the derivation of meaning; it leaves traces of the process of representation, and by doing so is thus always embedded in its historical context, in its singular historical moment. The allegory thus gains its meaning only through what Benjamin calls the 'stations of destruction',[41] where the allegory stands as a monument to the failure of representation and meaning. The textual affect that is therefore tied to the allegory is melancholy. Like melancholy, the allegory forms arbitrary attachments between linguistic objects as a transference of the unmourned loss of language and expression.

If we return to Zeitlin's drama, his rewritten play intentionally fails at enacting figurative mechanisms of narrative and representation. All of the abstract ideas of the pre-war version become concrete, material, embodied, and 'fleshed out' — the sexual desire, the physical union, and the shared blood. In the language of the text, we might say that '*Adam* becomes *Dam*'. The text cannot hold figures of speech, just as the melancholic cannot: metaphors collapse and the system of signification is shattered. On the face of it, the play ends with a Zionist message — the protagonists decide to leave Poland and go to Jerusalem, where a redemptive new dawn is ostensibly rising. However, the text's affect runs against any narrative of redemption. Whereas the past in the first version served as a source for utopian fantasy, in the second version history appears as a continuum of ruins, as an allegorical monument to the failure of representation. In this way, Zeitlin's drama reveals the affective melancholic logic underlying many post-war representations of Jewish history. This is particularly true of those representations which build on such historical ruins in order to argue in favour of national introversion and pseudo-redemptive narratives of an ingathering of the exiles. The past appears there repeatedly as a haunted gravestone, melancholically chained to the unmourned loss of language, exilic homes, and diasporic dreams.

In conclusion, the trope of a young Jewish woman who, by using her body and beauty, attains the ear of a powerful ruler, dubbed here as the 'dream of a Jewish queen', emerges as a strong and evocative literary apparatus. Whether as a figure through which one could probe questions of assimilation, national identity, and Jewish masculinity and potency, or as an allegorical substitute for the nation that enables a political message regarding diaspora, territory, and sovereignty, the Jewish queen is a discursive token in which piercing national-sexual anxieties as well as avid fantasies converge. Moreover, the literary appeal of the dream of a Jewish queen is an illuminating intersection of nationalist and sexual ideas not only in the sense that the two are interrelated in this particular fictional figure, but also in the sense that notions of nationalism, gender, and sexuality ought to be read and analysed in conjunction with one another. This analytical sensibility seems of particular importance with regards to modern Yiddish and Hebrew literatures and Jewish nationalism. As literatures indebted to and in constant correspondence with nationalist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and as cultural systems imbued by their very linguistic choices in a sexualized discourse,[42] their

representations, formulations, and narratives ought to be read with a multifocal perspective for a finer understanding of sexualized nationalism, nationalized gender identity, or racialized Jewish physiology.

Lastly, the dream of a Jewish queen directs our attention to the encounter between history and fantasy. While imagining a historical reality, in its legendary elements and its saturation with sexual anxieties and fantasies this trope draws the genre of historical fiction towards that of fantasy and thereby hints at the profound affinities between the two. Further, as a dream of national-sexual salvation, it proposes an understanding of the role of historical charm and fascination in the nationalist imagination: desiring history and the historical can be seen as a source for national redemption and deliverance.[43] Further still, in moments of the disintegration of the dream of a Jewish queen, we find instances of history and historicity as a haunting force, as a non-liberating and compulsive matter, a textual site where unmourned ghosts of political fantasies converge.

Notes to Chapter 6

1. Chone Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1985), pp. 71–74. See also Avraham Novershtern, 'Ha-kolot veha-maqhela: Shirat nashim be-yidish bein shtei milhemot ha-olam', in *Nashim be-tarbut yidish*, ed. by Tova Cohen and Aviva Tal (= *Bikoret u-farshanut*, 40 (spring 2008)), pp. 61–145 (pp. 76–77).
2. Joane Nagel, *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
3. Shomer [Nahum Meyer Shaykevich], *Di yidishe kenigin* (Warsaw: [n. pub.], 1884). The literary adaptations of the Esterke story and its various reincarnations were comprehensively discussed by Shmeruk and later by Natan Cohen, who added to Shmeruk's work an analysis of materials previously not at hand; Natan Cohen, 'The Love Story of Esterke and Kazimierz, King of Poland — New Perspectives', *European Journal of Jewish Studies*, 9.2 (2015), 176–209. The present study, therefore, will not focus on the works already analysed in detail by Shmeruk and Cohen unless they are of critical significance for our more general understanding of the trope of the Jewish queen.
4. This is Shmeruk's reading of Shomer's version — he explains this optimistic ending as a result of Shomer's traditional adaptation, which naively follows the biblical narrative.
5. See Olga Litvak's reassessment of the Haskalah not as a form of Jewish Enlightenment but rather as a distinctively Eastern European brand of Romanticism, interested in universalist ideas of the Enlightenment yet also sceptical of them: *Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2012).
6. Friedrich Hebbel, *Yehudit*, trans. by Shmuel-Leib Gordon (Warsaw: Tushiya, 1900).
7. Ibid., p. 27.
8. See the chapter 'Mavo: Uma be-ikvot ha-shevet, veha-shevet be-ikvot ha-uma' in Hannan Hever's forthcoming *Ha-uma veha-shevet ba-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-modernit*.
9. For a broader discussion of the ties between Hebrew literature and the attempt to rehabilitate Jewish masculinity, see Michael Gluzman, *Ha-guf ha-tsiyoni: Le'umiyut, migdar u-miniyut ba-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-hadasha* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007); see p. 27 specifically on Gordon's own participation in this discourse.
10. Dan Miron, *Bodedim be-mo'adam* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1988), pp. 23–111, described extensively the expression in the world of letters of this feeling of utter powerlessness, of weakness, of a 'literary republic' struggling with scarce resources and dwindling readership around the year 1900.
11. Yosef Yehuda Lerner, *Yehudis* (Warsaw: Alapin, 1888).
12. David Pinsky, 'Zerubovel', in David Pinsky, *Naye ertseylungen* (Berlin: Funken, 1923), pp.

79–100. Although there is a considerable chronological gap between Lerner's publication and Pinsky's, I believe this serves to further stress the need to refrain from paradigmatic distinctions that attribute, as a rule, diasporic nationalist ideology to Yiddish literary texts — if, as late as the 1920s, we find narratives in Yiddish that follow Gordon's extreme more closely than Lerner's, the same situation can be observed in earlier texts that were published in an ideological atmosphere less sharply divided.

13. Pinsky, p. 90.
14. Ibid., p. 93.
15. Ibid., p. 98.
16. For a collection of studies dealing with this fascination in various contexts, see *Sephardism: Spanish Jewish History and the Modern Literary Imagination*, ed. by Yael Halevi-Wise (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
17. For a more general mapping of the imaginative connection between the conversos and questions of identity, see Ban-Ami Feingold, 'Historical Dramas on the Inquisition and Expulsion', *JTD: Journal of Theater and Drama*, 1.1 (1995), 9–30.
18. From the poem 'Hakitsah 'ami' [Awake, my People!], translated in Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil? Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 49–50 (p. 50).
19. Sholem Asch, 'Maronen' (signed 1919), in Sholem Asch, *Dramatishe shriftn*, 4 vols (Vilna and New York: Sholem Asch Committee, 1922), IV, 199–230.
20. For an elaborate description and analysis of this tradition, see Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 22–24.
21. Ludwig Philippson, *Jakob Tirado: Geschichtlicher Roman aus der zweiten Hälfte des sechszehnten Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Leiner, 1867). Translations prior to 1922: *Ya'akov Tirado: Sipur korot yesud hama'alah le-yishuv ha-yehudim ha-sefaradim be-holandiya*, trans. by Shmuel Yosef Fünn (Vilna: Fünn, Rosenkranz, Schriftsetzer, 1881); *Di blutike nekome; oder, Yakov Tirado*, trans. by Yitzhak Yoel Linetsky (Warsaw: [n. pub.], 1893); *Ya'akov Tirado: Sipur histori*, trans. by Aleksander Ziskind Rabinovitz (Warsaw: Tushiya, 1907). All these translations were reprinted at least once.
22. For a discussion regarding a similar process in German Jewish literature, particularly with regards to later adaptations of Philippson's work, see Jonathan Skolnik, 'Dissimilation and the Historical Novel: Hermann Sinsheimer's *Maria Nunnez*', *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 43.1 (1998), 225–37.
23. Sholem Asch, 'Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilien', in Sholem Asch, *Gezamelte shriftn*, 12 vols (New York: Sholem Asch Committee, 1921–24), XII (1923), 1–144.
24. Shomer [Nahum Meyer Shaykevich], *Di sheyne Rokhele* (Vilna: Mats, 1884).
25. Shmeruk; Yehiel Szeintuch, 'Al shnei mahazot historyim mi-toldot yehudei Polin bi-ytsirato shel Aaron Zeitlin', in *Bein shtei milhemot olam*, ed. by Chone Shmeruk and Shmuel Werses (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), pp. 182–207.
26. Aaron Zeitlin, 'Esterke un Kazimir der groyser: Ahaswer in Poilin', *Golbus*, 5 (November 1932), 5–38; 6 (December 1932), 12–46.
27. Zeitlin, 'Esterke', *Golbus*, 5, p. 22.
28. Ibid., p. 20.
29. Szeintuch, pp. 184–85.
30. Zeitlin, 'Esterke', *Golbus*, 6, p. 37.
31. Ibid., p. 39.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., p. 14.
34. Ibid., p. 21.
35. Ibid., p. 45.
36. Ibid., p. 46.
37. Aaron Zeitlin, 'Esterke' (signed 1967), in Aaron Zeitlin, *Drames*, 2 vols (Tel Aviv: Peretz, 1974–80), II (1980), 80–150.
38. Ibid., pp. 129–30.

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39. Ibid., p. 150.
40. Walter Benjamin, 'Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels', in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5 vols in 11 parts, ed. by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1971–82), I. 1 (1978), 203–409.
41. Ibid., p. 343.
42. Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also Seidman's recent work on the intertwined processes of Jewish secularization and adoption of the romantic paradigm as an organizing social and cultural principle: *The Marriage Plot; or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).
43. On the interplay of nationalism and the ideas of history and of salvation in a closely related context, see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, 'Exile, History and the Nationalization of Jewish Memory: Some Reflections on the Zionist Notion of History and Return', *Journal of Levantine Studies*, 3.2 (winter 2013), 37–70.