

INAPPROPRIATION: Christian, Classical, and Theatrical Symbolism on Yiddish Title Pages

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at Yiddish title pages and their use of performance motifs such as proscenium arches, musical instruments, the masks of comedy and tragedy, curtains that rise to reveal text, and other theatrical effects. Most of these motifs appeared earlier in Hebrew and non-Jewish books, but Yiddish publishers altered and adapted them in ways that made them more useful for a Jewish audience. These appropriations are at times serious and at other times playful and ironic. Although often the imagery is theatrical in intent but not related to the theatre itself, in the twentieth century the traditional forms were further reinterpreted for publications related to the Yiddish theatre.

Yiddish book publishing came into being about 80 years after Gutenberg's movable type, with the publication of a Biblical concordance with translations into Yiddish in Cracow in 1534/5 (Haberman 1978, 136-7) (see image 1). Within a very few years, publications in Yiddish became an important component of books published in the Hebrew alphabet, making up about 20% of Jewish publishing in some locations and eras (Burnett 2006, 522). On that very first publication we see a typical traditional sefer title page: classical columns and an arch, an opening through which the reader is invited to walk to be admitted into the world of knowledge. The images that surround it—typically animals, plants, people, or incidents—are often dense and actually require the reader to finish reading the book before they can be fully decoded. These kinds of images are meant to entice the reader by promising that what is obscure will become clear through reading (Tomasi 1988, 373). The classical arch or gates, in fact, while widespread in Christian publishing, had only appeared on the title pages of Jewish books in 1524/5 in two different Hebrew books published in Italy. It is probably due to the use of this image that the title page is called the “shar-blat” in Yiddish—the gate page (Haberman 1969, XI). In spite of its cultural distance from Jewish life, this design was likely seen as elegant, elevated, and hinting at a dignified erudition.

It should be stated, though, that although the gate or arch motif was common in Jewish publishing, it was never the only design used, and it became complicated by a number of other factors. In most places in Europe, where royal censorship was the norm, almost all Jewish publishing had to occur with Christian assistance. Christians were required to set the type to ensure that Jews were not slipping disallowed material into the books after they had passed the censor. Among other things, this led to Jewish publications of this era containing a large number of typographical errors, because the typesetter was working by rote on letters he could recognize but not read. But a second effect was that there was a great deal of collaboration on design matters, including the illustration of title pages. Illustrations were in this era woodcuts, and they were frequently reused by Christian publishers until they had saturated their own market, then repurposed for Jewish books (Heller 2004).

Image 1



Rabbi Asher Anshil. *Mirkevet ha-Mishneh*. Cracow: Helicz brothers, circa 1534/5.
Image from: <http://www.goldmanrarebooks.com/cgi-bin/goldman/837>

The first edition of the *Mayse-bukh* (see image 2), a collection of Talmudic legends and folktales, published in Basel in 1602, uses a title page which is clearly a retread of a Christian book. In fact, the frame was from Thomas More's *Utopia*, a philosophical dialogue on the possibility of creating a peaceful, just, prosperous society, which has Christian overtones, published in Basel in 1518ⁱ. The images found on the title page are steeped in Christian conceptions and utilize classical symbols. Although at times this kind of symbol did not offend Jewish sensibilities, in other times and places certain rabbinical courts held them to be too pagan for Jewish use (Heller 2004, 273). Perhaps due to these pressures, the practice appears to have developed to create title page frames that drew on that part of the liturgy shared by Jews and Christians, with text in discrete blocks which could be altered to use the appropriate alphabet. Thus images of Abraham and Isaac could include Bible scenes related to their story and the lion of Judah (see image 3); David and Solomon could be shown with their recognizable Biblical symbols, including, importantly, David's lyre or harp (see image 4); and Moses and Aaron, who show up again and again, could be used to symbolize the priesthood for both Jews and Christians (see image 5).

Image 2

Bild 1



Titelblatt der Erst-Ausgabe des Ma'assebuches. Basel 1602

Mayse-bukh. Basel, 1602. Reproduced in Jakob Meitlis, Das Ma'assebuch, seine Entstehung und Quellengeschichte. Berlin: Mass, 1933.

Image from: <http://www.literatur-des-judentums.de>

Image 3



Esrime ve-arba, Prague: Katz, 1764/5.

Image from: <http://www.literatur-des-judentums.de>

Image 4



Sefer Hok le-Yisra'el. Prague: Gabriel Ben-Nathan Otitz, 1797/8.

Image from: <http://www.literatur-des-judentums.de>

Image 5

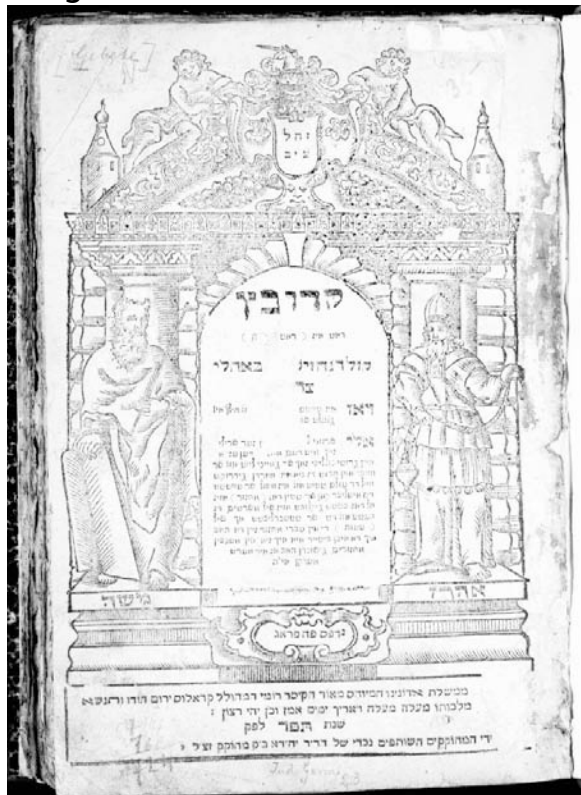


Sefer Menorat ha-ma'or. Sulzbach: Aharon Ben-Seckel, 1789/90.
Image from: <http://www.literatur-des-judentums.de>

But here the relationship of Jewish publishers to the printers and artisans on whom they were dependant becomes once more an issue. On some occasions, there were differing ideas about Moses' symbols. In addition to the usual symbols (his rod and the tablets of the law), the Christian engraver at times outfitted him with horns (see image 6). The image of Moses with horns is based on a mis-translation of a single word from Hebrew in the Vulgate translation of the Bibleⁱⁱ. Where Moses is described as having "rays" emanating from his forehead, St. Jerome chose a homonym meaning "horns." There is no history of this symbol appearing in Jewish art; its appearance on these title pages may be the only use of this image in a Jewish context. The inappropriateness of this image may have even caused Jewish book publishers to attempt to alter the image where the rest of the title frame was useful: in some cases, it appears that horns on a woodcut may have been scratched off to create rays (see image 7).

At some point over the centuries that the classical gates were in use as a central metaphor for the book, elements of performance and theatricality started to seep into the images. While both Christian and Jewish cultures were largely anti-theatre (except for religiously-mandated performance such as the Purim shpil and the passion play, which were not performed in theatres and had few theatrical trappings), allusions to classical and ancient performance appears to have been acceptable. Most commonly these were musical instruments, such as those we saw on the King David title page, but at other times the title page frames depict curtains pulled back, often by cherubim, to reveal a stage. In image 7, Moses and Aaron appear to be themselves acting on a stage. In these cases, the columns that once incorporated figures such Moses and Aaron have been transformed into human figures acting out Biblical or historical scenes.

Image 6



Kerovets. Prague: Enkel von Jehuda Bak, 1723/4.
Image from: <http://www.literatur-des-judentums.de>

Image 7



Deutsch, David B. Sefer tsenah David. Fürth: Hayim Ben-Tsevi Hirsch, 1749/50.
Image from: <http://www.literatur-des-judentums.de>

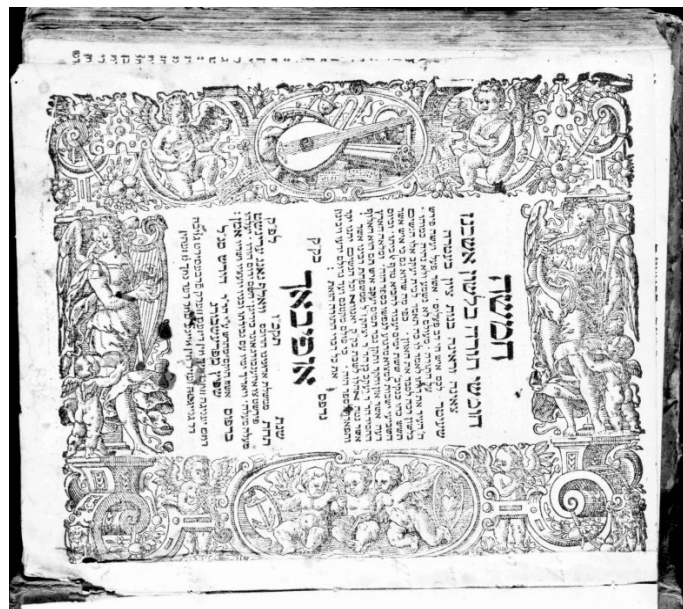
An extreme example of this is the title page frame in image 8. The frame appears sideways on this book, indicating that it was originally used for a publication of a different shape. Turning the page to view the frame upright (image 9), we see clearly that the images are Christianized evocations of classical symbols. At the bottom centre we appear to have faith, hope and love (a symbol drawn from the New Testament); bottom left and right may be masks of comedy and tragedy. Throughout this busy frame we see music and reading intertwined: a book held up by a cherub for the use of the harp-playing angel at left. In some places sheets of musical notation are turned towards the reader. The columns left and right are indicated but it is the musician angels who stand in their place and who lend dignity to the scene. In this complex set of images, text and performance are united. The book, it seems, performs culture, while we who hold the book, like the cherub at left, are both audience to this enactment of culture and active in creating it. The figure of "faith" in the centre bottom also appears to be reading a book, possibly a Bible, further elevating reading to an act of virtue.

All the preceding examples were drawn from the 16th to 18th centuries, and all were books of a religious nature. The largest number of books utilizing this title page imagery were published from the 1720s to 1760s, but it continued into the 1790s. However, throughout the 19th century this theme appears to have been little, if ever, used in Yiddish publishing. While the classical gates or columns continue to occasionally be found on the title pages of Hebrew books, they are less frequent than previously and perhaps completely absent from Yiddish onesⁱⁱⁱ.

Image 8



Image 9



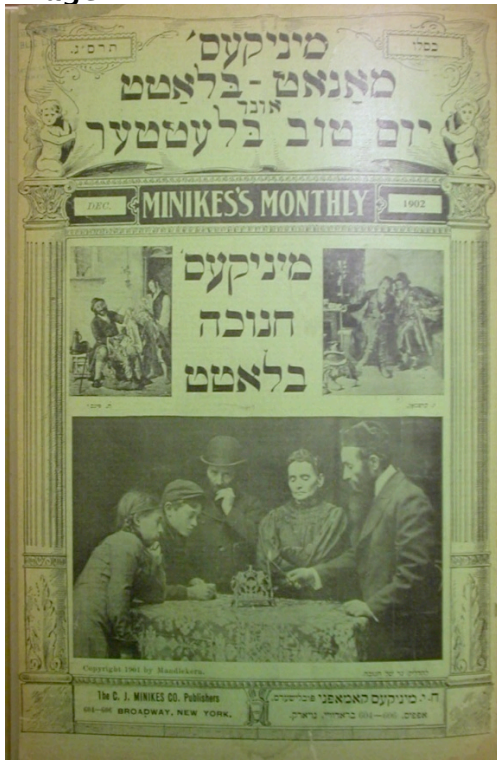
Hamishah humshe Torah bi-leshon Ashkenaz. Ofebak: Hirsch Spitz aus Presburg, 1766/7.

Image from: <http://www.literatur-des-judentums.de>

Secular Yiddish literature is thought to have sprung into being in 1863, and with it came a variety of reinterpretations of Jewish tradition for the modern world. One of these may have been the reinvigoration of the classical gates as an appropriate image of Yiddish-language erudition. We find the gates reappearing on the cover of a Yiddish magazine in 1902 (see image 10) where it is clearly a bridge between tradition and modernity. The magazine is a hefty holiday edition, meant for reading during the long hours when no work can be undertaken, aimed at a moderately religious audience. But the contents are largely drawn from the world of secular Yiddish literature. In the context of a much more obviously secular undertaking, the title page of a book of Yiddish essays and stories, the classical columns are simplified and stylized to be highly modern (see image 11). There was also playful re-use: when Max Erik published his history of Yiddish literature (image 12), he used the same frame as was found on the Mayse-bukh in 1602 (although he was probably unaware that it was itself a re-use of Thomas More).

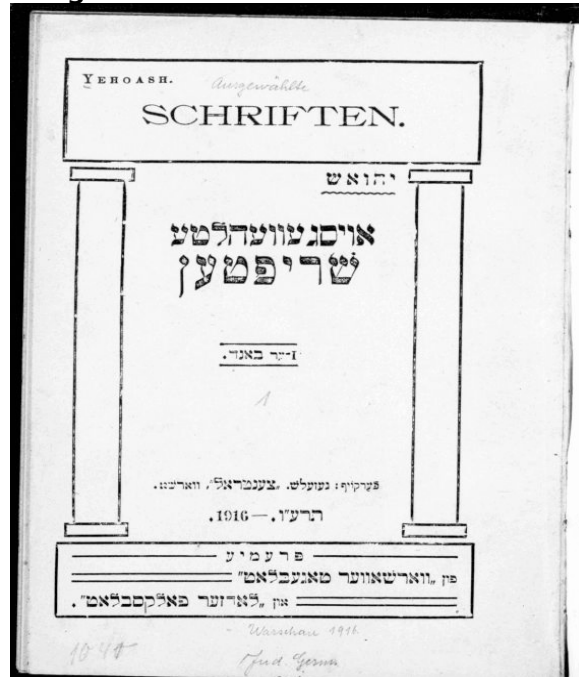
The “performance” motif we saw running through some of the earlier examples also went through a process of mutation. For the title page of the first volume of a major work on Yiddish theatre in 1931, the image of the classical gates are made explicitly about performance (see image 13). In addition to making the gates into a more obvious proscenium, the masks of comedy and tragedy are incorporated, but here they are Judaized with the addition of yarmulkes and beards. A few years later (image 14), the second volume brings that image up to date with a stylized, geometric take on the curtains. This time the Jewish content is made explicit by the performer, a dancing Hasid. This figure appears again and again in the visual culture of Jewish theatre, and seems to serve as a legitimization of Jewish performance by connecting it to a traditional Jewish activity performed by the most religious of Jews. The figure holds the masks of comedy and tragedy, thus uniting the Jewish tradition and the classical one.

Image 10



Minikes Monat-Blatt und Yontef Bleter. December 1902. From the collection of the New York Public Library, Dorot Jewish Division.

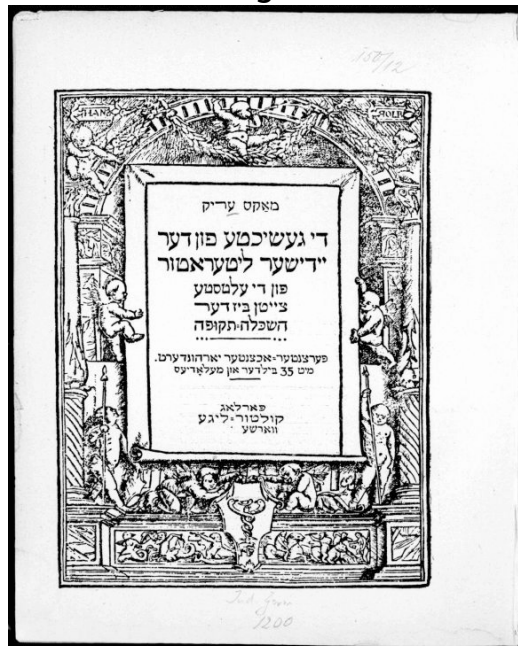
Image 11



Yehoash. Oysgevehlte shriften, band 1. Warsaw: Tsentral, 1916.

Image from: <http://www.literatur-des-judentums.de>

Image 12



Erik, Maks. Di geshikhte fun der Yidisher literatur. Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1929.

Image from: <http://www.literatur-des-judentums.de>

Image 13



Zilbercweig, Zalman. Leksikon fun Yidishn teater, band 1. New York: Elisheva, 1931.
Image from: <http://www.archive.org/details/nationalyiddishbookcenter>

Image 14



Zilbercweig, Zalman. Leksikon fun Yidishn teater, band 2. Warsaw: Elisheva, 1934.
From the collection of the New York Public Library, Dorot Jewish Division

These examples may have been the first to put the theatrical motif to this particularly Jewish use. Many books followed suit (see images 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19). In general, what unites these images is their use of a male figure, coded as Jewish through beard, peyes, and kippah or Biblical headdress. It should be noted that most stock images of people which are used to denote "Jewish" are images of men: this is not a phenomenon restricted to this set of literature, but one which seems to have put a brake on the imaginative re-interpretation of motifs. Although they were able to playfully recreate the masks of comedy and tragedy as Jewish, they were unable to conceive Jewishness as anything but male. A further problem with this typology emerges where the artists' rendering of the Jewish masks of comedy and tragedy stray to the nasty edge of stereotype: in addition to the kippah, peyes, and beard, we find hooked noses and the heavy-lidded, lecherous look associated with Jewish men in particularly vicious anti-semitic literature (see image 20).

Image 19



Pulaver, Moshe. Ararat. Tel Aviv: Farlag I. L. Perets, 1972.

Image from: <http://www.archive.org/details/nationalyiddishbookcenter>

Image 20



Mide, Adolfo. Epizodn fun Yidishn teater. Buenos Aires, 1954.

Image from: <http://www.archive.org/details/nationalyiddishbookcenter>

Finally, in a possibly unique example, the entire classical apparatus is brought firmly into a modern framework by the use of photography. On the title page of Celia Adler's autobiography (image 21), a picture of her in costume, pulling back a curtain, invites the reader one step further. Where earlier the reader was the audience for the book's performance, in this image we are being invited behind the curtain to become privy to the performers' own world—a thoroughly appropriate message for a backstage memoir.

Image 21



Adler, Celia with Yankev Tikman. *Tsili Adler dertseylt*. New York, 1959.
Collection of Faith Jones.

In this paper I have been looking at how a particular kind of historical imagery could be re-utilized to be useful in a modern context. In early Yiddish publishing, this was a necessity rather than a choice, but became a convention that had its own utility in connecting Jewish learning to classical ideals. The theatrical elements that run through these 16th to 18th century title pages add the metaphor of the book as performance. Non-Jewish images could be re-purposed for use in a Jewish context, as the conversion of Moses' horns into rays may indicate.

In the 20th century, the traditional title page frame was revived in a modern form. The use of *sefer*-style title pages situate modern Yiddish books in a Jewish tradition, while the Judaizing of non-Jewish elements such as the masks of comedy and tragedy is more than a clever wink to the audience—although it is meant to be funny. As mentioned at the outset, the original usage of the classical images was meant to entice the reader: the title page hinted at the riches to be found within the pages of the book. By re-creating this knowledge as specifically Jewish, the frame suggests the reader will become further bound to the community of Jews. It is an invitation which situates the knowledge as both elevated and our own. While many 20th century Yiddish books adopted these motifs—the classical columns were used for the title pages of a variety of literary texts—it was in the books pertaining to the theatre that the images became most widespread and most densely symbolic. Perhaps this is because Jewish theatre was still so young that it required the force of tradition offered by well-known iconography. The Yiddish theatre was also still struggling to establish itself as authentically Jewish and as consistent with religious Judaism, and so the need to imbue these icons with a Jewish sensibility. While the problematically stereotyped masks of comedy and tragedy attest to the dangers involved in attempting to reconceive images, and the use of all-male symbols to denote Jewishness is understood to give us a limited vision of the world, these title page images retain much of their original power as a creative response to a particular problem: that of Jewish publishing in a non-Jewish world.

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<http://www.archive.org/details/nationalyiddishbookcenter>

The “Jiddische Drucke” collection at the Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt am Main

<http://www.literatur-des-judentums.de>

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ⁱ The 1518 Basel edition of *Utopia* is online at <http://www.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/diglib/more/utopia/>

ⁱⁱ Full discussion of the emergence and meaning of this symbol can be found in Ruth Mellinkoff, *The horned Moses in medieval art and thought* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1970).

ⁱⁱⁱ I have examined several hundred Yiddish books published in the 19th century without finding this motif on a title page. Given my overall finding of about 4% of Yiddish books with these motifs, there is reason to think no book may have utilized this imagery in this era. There is no immediately obvious reason why this may have come about; the question requires further investigation.