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HEBREW GRAVESTONE INSCRIPTIONS FROM JEWISH CEMETERIES IN THE *RAYSN* REGION (BELARUS AND UKRAINE)[*]

Hebrew gravestone inscriptions from Jewish cemeteries from the region called *Raysn* (mostly in current Belarus and partially in Ukraine) are studied as a historical source and a literature genre. The epitaphs express the idea of a connection between the ideal world of Scripture and religious Hebrew books and the world of everyday life of a shtetl or community. This can be traced at several levels. First, at the level of inscriptions' structure, the epitaph includes an indication of the place ("here lies"), time (date), and name, thus tying the deceased to a specific "coordinate system". Second, biblical quotations emphasize the relation of a particular life and death to the situation with that described in the Bible. Third, at the language level, despite the fact that epitaphs are almost always written in Hebrew and not in Yiddish, we are dealing with certain features of Hebrew—Yiddish bilingualism. Hebrew terms could simultaneously be Yiddish lexemes. We observe orthography code-switching between Hebrew consonant spelling and Yiddish phonetic spelling, depending on whether the concept is found in Hebrew holy books or in everyday life. Fourth, epitaphs occupy an intermediate position between the "high", author's literature and canonical religion, on the one hand, and folk literature and religion, on the other hand. The difference between the epitaphs from Ukraine and Belarus is discussed.
Key words: history, epigraphy, East Europe, Hebrew inscriptions.

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НАДГРОБНЫЕ НАДПИСИ НА ДРЕВНЕЕВРЕЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ ИЗ РЕГИОНА *РАЙСН* (БЕЛАРУСЬ И УКРАИНА)

Надгробные надписи на иврите с еврейских кладбищ из района Райсн (в основном на территории современной Беларуси и Украины) рассматриваются и изучаются как исторический источник и литературный жанр. Эпитафии выражают идею связи между идеальным миром Священного Писания и религиозных книг на иврите и миром повседневной жизни местечка или общины. Это прослеживается на нескольких уровнях. Во-первых, на уровне структуры надписей эпитафия включает указание места («здесь лежит»), времени (даты) и имени, тем самым привязывая покойного к определенной «системе координат». Во-вторых, библейские цитаты подчеркивают связь конкретной жизни и смерти с ситуацией, описанной в Библии. В-третьих, на уровне языка, несмотря на то, что эпитафии почти всегда пишутся на иврите, а не на идише, мы имеем дело с некоторыми особенностями двуязычия иврит—идиш. Термины на иврите могут одновременно быть лексемами идиша. Мы наблюдаем переключение орфографического кода между консонантной орфографией иврита и фонетическим написанием на идиш, в зависимости от того, встречается ли понятие в священных книгах или в повседневной жизни. В-четвертых, эпитафии занимают промежуточное положение между «высокой», авторской литературой и канонической религией, с одной стороны, и

народной литературой и религией, с другой. Обсуждается разница между эпитафиями из Украины и Беларуси.

Ключевые слова: история, эпиграфика, Восточная Европа, надгробные надписи.

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1. Introduction

Jewish funeral monuments, such as the gravestones, often called *matzevot* (or *matzeyves*[1]) from מצבה, "stele"[2], are among the most common artifacts of the history of Jewish communities in various regions where these communities have thrived in the past. When a Jewish community emerges, a cemetery is typically among the first communal institutions created. It is often also the last functioning institution when a Jewish community vanishes, and the only reminder of the community after it disappears. Gravestone inscriptions or epitaphs contain memory about both ordinary people and prominent figures of the community. Therefore, the study of Jewish cemeteries and publication of gravestone inscriptions is among the most important tasks in the research of various aspects of the history of Jewish communities.

While our previous studies have concentrated on Hebrew inscriptions from Crimea and Ukraine, the present paper is devoted to the Hebrew epitaphs from the historical region of *Raysn*, mostly coinciding with modern day Belarus.

The territory of the modern Republic of Belarus (sometimes called Byelorussia, *White Russia* in Russian, and in traditional Jewish sources called רייסן *Raysn*) has a long history of Jewish presence. Since the 13ᵗʰ century, what is now called Belarus was a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (*Великое князство Литовское*), where the Old Belorussian (Old Ruthenian, *руски езыкъ*) language was the main spoken language. The official name of this state was the "Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia", which corresponds to the three historic regions known in Jewish sources as ליטא *Lita* (meaning both Lithuania proper and the broad region where the Lithuanian Yiddish dialect was spoken)[3], רייסן *Raysn* (more or less corresponding to modern Belarus, with the word apparently originating from German *Reußen*[4], historical Ruthenia included also territory of modern Ukraine), and זמוד *Zmud* (Polish *Żmudź*, corresponding to the Lithuanian region of *Žemaitija*, Ruthenian *жемотьская земля*).

The origin of the earliest Jewish comminutes in *Raysn* remains a controversial issue, since it is difficult to determine to which extent they were related to the Slavic-speaking and other non-Ashkenazic Jews from the East. However, Ashkenazic Jewish communities emerged in what is now

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[1] For consistency, we transliterate Hebrew words and names in their Ashkenazic pronunciation based on the Lithuanian Yiddish dialect, which is authentic for Belarus. Thus, מצבה should be *matzeyve* and the plural מצבות *matzeyves*. However, common terms, for which standard Hebrew pronunciation is well known, the latter can be used, e.g., *matzeva, matzevot*.

[2] The Hebrew word מצבה (stele, from the root יצב/נצב "to erect, to establish") has a remarkable history. In the Hebrew Bible, the word *matzeva* is used for both a mark of a grave (Gen. 35:20, Sam 2, 18:18), any other stone mark (Gen. 31:45—52) or even stones used for idol worship (Dt. 16:22). Aramaic מצטבתא (*matzavta*) has a similar meaning, as well as the derived Arabic term مَصْطَبَة *mastaba* (bench). The word *mastaba* is also used to denote ancient Egyptian tombs, otherwise referred to as 𓉗 𓉐 *Per-Djed*, "house of eternity", which is a direct parallel to Hebrew בית עולם or Jewish Aramaic בית עלמין, *bet-'olam* or *bet-'alamin* ("cemetery", literally, "house of eternity").

[3] The word *Lita* was used for the first time in a fifteenth century responsum (Rosenthal 1904: 118).

[4] Beider 2015: 200.

called Belarus since at least the 12th century. When the Polish—Lithuanian Commonwealth was created according to the Union of Lublin (1569 CE), the Lithuanian Jews already had many social and cultural characteristics in common with the Polish Jews. These included a broad communal autonomy, privileges from magnates, which allowed Jewish communities to function independently of self-governed magistrates under the Magdeburg Rights, and Yiddish language as a language of everyday life.

Lithuanian Jewish communities participated occasionally in the Council of the Four Lands (a council of Jewish communities which existed from the 16th until the 18th centuries), although Lithuania was not one of the four countries, which formed the Counsel. As far as the Yiddish language, the Lithuanian Yiddish dialect is considered among the three main dialects of Eastern Yiddish (along with the Polish and Ukrainian Yiddish dialects) and it was spoken on the vast territory including most of modern day Belarus and Lithuania.

After the three partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793, and 1795, the Belarusian lands became parts of the Russian Empire. Belarus was often considered a center of Jewish religious learning due to a network of religious academies (*Yeshivas*) established there by the followers of the Vilna Gaon in places like Mir (מיר), Valozhin[5] (Wołożyn, וואלאזשין), and Navahrudak (Nowogródek, נאַוואַרעדאָק). Belarussian and Lithuanian Jews were often called *Litvaks* (literally, Lithuanians) and considered a distinct ethnic sub-group of Ashkenazic Jews[6].

During the Second Polish Republic (1918—1939), western provinces of modern Belarus became parts of Poland's Nowogródek, Polesie, Wilno, and Białystok voivodships, while eastern provinces became parts of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). After the start of Word War II and the partition of Poland between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in 1939, the so-called "Western Byelorussia" merged with the BSSR.

Although Jewish cemeteries and gravestone inscriptions of Belarus have been studied by many researchers; there is no complete and comprehensive description of existing monuments at this point. One of the first attempts to document Jewish cemeteries in Belarus on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union was taken in 1989-1991 by the newly organized Leningrad Jewish University led by V. Dymshits, and M. Kheyfets, whose groups visited more than 95 Belarussian former *shtetlach* (towns) including the cemeteries in Mir (מיר), Valozhyn (Wołożyn, וואלאזשין), Navahrudak (Nowogródek, נאַוואַרעדאָק), Sharshova (Szereszów, שערעשאב) and Vysokae (Wysokie Litewskie, דליטע וויסאקא), where *matzeyves* (gravestones) dated back to the 1780s were identified[7]. Several field trips were also conducted by Polish historians including D. Sladecki and P. Sygowski from the Catholic University of Lublin in the late 1990s[8]. The cemetery of Druya (Druja, דרויע) was partially documented by a Belorussian team in early 2000s[9].

A series of field studies was conducted by the Moscow Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization (Sefer) including Zhaludok (Żołudek) in 2013[10], Lepel (Lepiel, ליעפליע) in 2014[11], Hlybokaye (Głębokie, גלובאָק) in 2015[12], and Beshankovichy (Bieszenkowicze, בייששינקוביץ) in 2016. These field trips were summer schools for students of Jewish Studies from the former

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[5] We use transliteration of modern Belorussian names of geographic place (which is often different from their Russian names), however, when relevant, we supply Polish and Yiddish names when the term appears for the first time.

[6] The Lithuanian Yiddish dialect is sometimes called the Northeastern Yiddish dialect (Beider 2015: 61—69).

[7] Kheyfetz 1994: 47—49. Leningrad Jewish University (since 1999 St. Petersburg Institute for Jewish Studies) was organized in 1989 by Ilya Dvorkin. Documenting Jewish cemeteries in Ukraine and Belarus was among its main activities (Khaimovich 1994: 83; Nosonovsky 1994: 107).

[8] Sygowski 2010: 283—287.

[9] Muratov 2009: 86—102.

[10] Kopchenova 2013: 88—266.

[11] Amosova 2015: 115—349.

[12] Nosonovsky 2017a: 287—300.

Soviet Union, whose focus was on ethnological studies (typically, documenting the perception of the Jews by their Slavic neighbors) and epigraphic studies of Hebrew gravestone inscriptions. The present chapter is based primarily upon these materials. Information about specific Jewish cemeteries in Belarus can also be found at specialized web-sites[13].

What information can be obtained from the Hebrew gravestone inscriptions or epitaphs? *First*, Jewish epitaphs from various regions are often used as a source for genealogical and family history research, although, unfortunately, most epitaphs do not include family names until the 20th century. *Second*, epitaphs can clarify certain historical events, such as the foundation of a community and thus serve as an additional (auxiliary) historical source. *Third*, the mass and standard character of the gravestone inscriptions makes them suitable for various statistical studies related to sociology and demography. *Last, but not least*, the very genre of the Hebrew epitaph, which, unfortunately rarely becomes a focus of literary studies, can provide important data on the attitudes towards life and death, mundane and sacred both in canonical Judaism and in folk religious practices[14]. In this chapter I will review some of these aspects using the material from several Belorussian Jewish cemeteries documented by the *Sefer* Center.

2. Old Jewish cemeteries in Belarus

A cemetery (*beys-eylomin*, בית עולמין or *beys-kvores* בית קברות), along with a synagogue (*shul*, שול or *beys-kneses,* בית כנסת), and a ritual bath (*mikveh*, מקוה), were among the most important institutions of a traditional Jewish community, without which a self-sufficient community could not exist. Typically, soon after the establishment of the community, Jews sought and received the privilege to have land for their cemetery, which was controlled by a Burial Society (*hevre-kadishe* חברה קדישא). A cemetery was also one of the locations in a traditional magnate's *shtetl* (literally "a small town"), which formed the landscape of the town, along with other Jewish and non-Jewish locations[15]. Unlike the synagogue, the *mikve*, and the market square, which, together with the castle, cathedral or church, and magnate's palace, were within the town itself, the Jewish cemetery was located on the outskirts of the town, often across a river or another body of water.

Unfortunately, the Jewish cemeteries of Belarus have less extant old gravestones than in neighboring Ukraine. One of the reasons is in the geological history of these two regions. Unlike Ukraine, Belarus does not have many sources of sandstone or limestone. This is because for millions of years, the territory of today's southern Ukraine was covered by seas and oceans, while Belarus was dry land. Soft sandstone and limestone are sedimentary rocks which are formed on the floors of oceans. They are uncommon in the landlocked country of Belarus. Consequently, when material for gravestone monuments was needed, other materials were used, such as granite[16]. Granite is much harder and, therefore, it is much more difficult to carve letters deeply producing a long inscription on it than on limestone. Furthermore, inscriptions on granite last shorter than those upon sandstone or limestone. As a result, Hebrew inscriptions in Belarus are shorter and emerge later than in the Ukrainian regions of Galicia, Volhynia, or Podolia. For the same reason, Belarussian gravestones lack elaborated carved décor, so typical for *matzeyves* in Ukraine, Moldova, Poland, and Romania.

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[13] For example, at the international Jewish Cemetery Project of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org: 1), or at JewishGen.Org website (jewishgen.org: 1) or Jewish Heritage Research Group (jhrgbelarus.org: 1).

[14] About the genre of Hebrew epitaph see (Wodziński 1998: 23; Reiner 2011: 263—295; Nosonovsky 2017b: 97—102).

[15] About the history of *shtetlach* and their transformation during the Soviet period see (Veidlinger 2013: 1—29).

[16] Kheyfetz 1994: 48.

In addition to shorter and less deeply carved inscriptions, most Belarussian gravestones are also smaller, about one meter or less in height and they have very little ornamentation. There are cases of secondary usage of the old granite stones. In addition, old millstones were sometimes used as *matzevot* due to poor availability of stone and its' relative expensiveness.

Another unusual feature of Jewish cemeteries in Belarus related to the scarcity of appropriate rock stone material is the presence of wooden monuments instead of gravestones. Wooden monuments were cheaper; however, they did not last as long as stone monuments. Therefore, few of them are still extant. The best known examples are oak *matzevot* from the town of Lenin in Gomel oblast'. The town was known under this name since the 16th century[17]. There are some claims that the cemetery is dated from 1586[18] (which is stated at the signboard at its entrance), however, there is no substance to this claim.

Apparently, the lack of stone material was not the only reason for the use of wooden monuments. Wooden graves were common also in the areas, where there was no sandstone, such as the cemetery in Polish Chęciny (חענטשין), a town famous for its local production of stone matzevot[19]. Since wood is not a durable material, and Jewish cemeteries were running into ruins over the postwar years, only a few wooden *matzevot* are kept in various museums[20].

The typical Belarussian Jewish gravestones are stelae about 1 meter high, 0.5 m wide, and 0.2 m thick. Usually the reverse side of the monument is not processed. The upper edge of the stele is often semi-circular, sometimes rectangular with a broken corner. There are usually no decorations on the monuments, with the exception of the most common symbols such as the Star of David (on newer gravestones) or the Menorah (a seven-branched candelabrum), and the hand palms in the priestly blessing jest of the *kohanim*. Often the letters פנ (the abbreviation meaning "Here Lies" or "Here Buried" are inscribed inside the Star of David. Occasionally, other images can appear, such as birds, lions, ornaments etc, usually on gravestones since the end of the 19th century.

Starting at the end of the nineteenth century, 3D sculpture images can appear occasionally upon the gravestones, such as the tree with chopped off branches symbolizing death and grief. A large number of such sculptures are found in Volozhin. The monument on the grave of a family that perished during the pogrom in Orsha (Orsza, אָרשע) in October 1905 has the same design. Interestingly, this symbolism is found in the Catholic cemeteries of the time[21].

Painted polychromatic gravestones are quite rare in Belarus, and in many cases painting is not preserved because colors usually do not stay for a long time. Traces of coloring are found at a number of cemeteries including Grodno, Mir, Belitsa (Bielica, ביליצע), Mikhalishki (Michaliszki, מיכאלישוק), Ruzhany (Różana, ראָזשינאָי), Lipnishki (Lipniszki, ליפנישוק) and Traby (Traby, טראבי)[22]. A large number of painted monuments is found at the cemetery in Druja.

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[17] In 1939, Lenin was renamed briefly by Polish authorities for *Sosnkowicze* apparently due to the allusion with the Soviet leader's name. The name Lenin was restored after the Soviet occupation following the start of World War II in September 1939.

[18] Muratov 2009: 83.

[19] (sztetl.org.pl: 1).

[20] This includes museums in Prague, Helsinki, St. Petersburg (JEPS 2015), The Jewish Museum in Amsterdam and the Museum of the History of Religions in St. Petersburg (JEPS 2015).

[21] Kheyfetz 1994: 49.

[22] Sygowski 2010: 294.

**Fig. 1. Jewish cemetery in Glubokoe / Hlybokaye / Głębokie: the entrance with the statement
that the cemetery was destroyed by the Nazis, the part outside the current fence
used as a sand quarry in the Soviet time, and a commemorative structure.**

Cases of destruction of Jewish cemeteries during World War II were rare. However, after the
end of the war, cemeteries were being profaned on a large scale. This is because many Jewish
comminutes diminished or disappeared due to the physical extermination of Jews in the Holocaust,
and due to the closing of synagogues and Jewish institutions, there was a perception of the Soviet
authorities that Jewish cemeteries are not needed anymore[23]. Many necropolises were desecrated
with *matzeyves* pulled out and used as a construction material. Stadiums, housing estates, or farm
lands had been arranged at many sites of Jewish cemeteries. Thus, in Hlybokaye, while the main

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[23] This standard Soviet practice is documented in the case of the oldest Jewish cemetery in Ostróg (Ukraine), which
was destroyed in 1968 on the order of local authorities. The motivation was that the cemetery had been abandoned, and
"the graves are not maintained by relatives," while "there is no other place for the city park". Furthermore, the
cemetery, which was close to a school, had become a site of dangerous crimes; two women were raped there in
February and March 1968, according to a letter from a local police chief to the head of the Executive Committee. The
remains of six Jews who were buried at the cemetery between 1948 and 1966 were exhumed and brought to a different
cemetery (Fishel, Nosonovsky 2017: 79).

part of the cemetery was fenced in the early 2000s, the oldest section was used as a sand quarry and destroyed. According to local inhabitants, the paved road constructed with the sand from the quarry had a bad reputation of being built "upon the bones", and the quary was abandoned[24] (Fig. 1).

In some places where cemeteries are still in use, modern burials were made on top of already occupied sites, over old graves, which "raises" the level of the cemetery over the terrain in Vitsyebsk (Witebsk, וויטעבסק), Mahilev (Mohylew, מאַליעװ), and Rechitsa (Rzeczyca, רעטשיצע) resulting in multi-layer burials. In some cases, the Jewish cemeteries were converted into Christian ones, even with the construction of a church — for example, the cemetery in Kalinkovichi (Kalinkowicze, קאַלענקעוויטש)[25].

As far as the oldest Jewish gravestones in Belorussia, there are many contradicting reports on this matter[26]. For example, Sygowski points out that the dates 1620 in Radun (Raduń, ראָדין) and 1630 in Molchad (Mołczadź, מייטשעט) are hypothetical, as well as questionable reading of the date 1684/5 in Kamenka (Kamionka, קאמינקע). He claims that the 17th century dates can be discerned clearly in Ruzhany (Różana, ראָזשינאָי) (1634, 1638, 1640, 1654/5, and 1682) in Voupa (Wołpa, וואלפ) (1694/5), however, again, these inscriptions have not been published[27].

In Hlybokaye, a monument dated with the year 1707/8 was found in 2015 and documented, as it will be described in this chapter. Monuments dated with the 18th century have been found in several necropolis in Belarus including Belitsa, Indura (אמדור), Voupa, Mikhalishki, Molczad, Radun, Navahrudak, Polonets, Zdzieciole, Rozan, Mir, Zhuprany (Żuprany, זופראָן) and Grodno[28], as well as Druja[29], Shershev and Vysokaye[30].

3. Structure and content of a traditional epitaph

Let us now turn to the content of the inscriptions. Besides their shortness, Hebrew epitaphs from Belarus are not significantly different from those in other nearby regions such as Ukraine, Moldova or Poland. Note that the content of epitaphs is not stipulated by the requirements of the Jewish religion. Moreover, the sages of the Talmud questioned the very need to erect a gravestone, since this custom reminded them of idol worship[31]. Still, a tradition of Hebrew epitaphs had formed by the end of the first millennium CE. While not stipulated by the religion in detail, the contents of the epitaphs reflected certain traditional Jewish values and ideas.

Traditional epitaphs are written in Hebrew[32], with some influence of Yiddsih. As soon as it was necessary to point to some phenomenon that had no parallels in the sacred books, for example, the

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[24] Nosonovsky 2017a: 289.

[25] Kheyfetz 1994: 49.

[26] The earliest known Ashkenazi inscription from Ukraine of 1520 belongs to Yehuda b. Jacob from Busk, see (Nosonovsky 1998: 21). In Eastern Poland the earliest extant inscriptions are dated mid-16th century, although in Western Poland (Wrocław) an inscription of 1203 was reported. Several pre-1500 Ashkenazi epitaphs from different places in historical Poland or Lithuania are mentioned in several publications and unpublished archival sources; however, no reliable publications are available (Nosonovsky 1998: 26). The reported 1445 CE matzeva from the destroyed cemetery in Ostróg (Ukraine) was likely dated with 1520 CE (Fishel, Nosonovsky 2017: 84).

[27] Sygowski 2010: 297.

[28] Sygowski 2010: 297.

[29] Muratov 2009: 89.

[30] Kheyfetz 1994: 49.

[31] Rabbinical literature states that "monuments should not to be erected for the righteous, because their words are their memory" (*Bereishit Rabba* 82:10, *Yerushalmi Shekalim* 2:47a, Mekhilta 11:7). The tractate *Horayot* 13b lists reading epitaphs among ten activities which distract a learner and weaken his mental abilities.

[32] Early Jewish epitaphs of the first millennium in Europe were composed predominantly in Greek or Latin sometimes with a few Hebrew words. However, on the verge of the second millennium, Hebrew gradually becomes the language of epitaphs in Europe and long elaborated epitaphs emerge.

name of a settlement or a surname, the epitaphs switches to typical Yiddish orthography with the letter ʻayin for the phoneme [*e*], the letter ʻaleph for [*a*], and *komec-alef* for [*o*][33].

Most epitaphs have four required elements:

1) An introductory formula פֿ (נטמן פה — "here lies"; של המצבה זה — "this is the gravestone of"). The introduction marks the grave and it often contains allusions to biblical verses mentioning burial sites, such as Gen. 35:20, Gen. 31:52, and I Kings 23:17.

2) A name of the deceased in its "official form" "X, son/daughter of Y". The "official name" was the name used to call one to the Torah; it was used in the *ketubbah* (wedding contract) or the *get* (divorce document). The "title», such as רב / רבי "Reb / Rabbi" or הרב מורנו "our teacher Rabbi" precedes the name. Historically, these titles were used in epitaphs throughout the ages; however, they would tend to eventually depreciate, leading to increasingly pompous, often tautological sets of titles. Thus, the word רבי (Rabbi) could refer to virtually any adult man. In order to distinguish a learned person, the tautological construction הרב רבי (*ha-Rav, Rabbi*) was introduced, which, in turn, devaluated and got replaced with the abbreviation מוהרר (*Moharar = moreynu ha-Rav, Rabbi*, "our teacher, the Rav, Rabbi"). Later, in the 19th century, epitaphs could include even more pompous abbreviations ההמוהרר (*hah moharar* or *ha-Rav, Rabbi, Moreynu ha-Rav, Rabbi*). Consequently, it is difficult to obtain meaningful information from such titles, although some hints to deceased social status still can be found.

If the buried was an unmarried young man, he is referred to as בחור; a young woman as בתולה or בחורה ("girl"); a boy as ילד ("boy"). The name of the deceased is followed by the name of their father and frequently the name of the husband in the case of women. The name of the father is followed by זל (blessed be his memory), if he is already gone, or וגואלו צורו ישמור) יצו) "May his Stronghold and Savior protect him"), if he is still alive. All of the above are standard Talmudic formulae.

The name is often preceded by a brief (or in some cases quite extended) description of the virtues of the deceased. The most typical version, איש תם וישר ("A pure and honest man") is derived from the book of Job. Female gravestones have אשה חשובה וצנועה ("an important and modest/respected woman[34]"). Authors of epitaphs excel in variations of laudatory formulas, often including in the epitaph a biblical verse about a character of the same name.

Surnames are rarely used in traditional epitaphs until the 20th century. Most of the Jews of the Russian Empire were given surnames in the 19th century, however, they were used only in contacts with the authorities, and therefore the surnames usually do not appear in internal communal documents and epitaphs. At the cemetery in Hlybokaye, the earliest surnames belong to the first half of the twentieth century: Shverdlin (1909), Guzman (1918), Presman (1919), Foygelman (1920)[35]. This is similar to most other Belorussian cemeteries, although occasionally family names may appear on gravestones from the mid-19th century. Thus, in Zhaludok we find Nakshter (נאקשטער) in 1857 and Vilenkin (וילנקין) in 1881[36].

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[33] Nosonovsky 2017b: 100.
[34] Apparently, the term חשובה ("important") could signify a certain social status of a woman in the Talmudic time. Thus, *Pesahim* 108a distinguishes between an ordinary women dependent on her husband and an important woman, the former does not have an obligation to recline during the Passover *Seder*, which men are obliged to do. However, this distinction was lost and already in the 16th century Moses Iserlis states that every woman is treated as an important one. The expression אשה חשובה וצנועה is also mentioned in the Yiddish memoires by Glückel of Hameln (1646—1724) as an expression in Yiddsih.
[35] Nosonovsky 2017a: 296.
[36] Kopchenova 2013: 263.

The family names should be distinguished from nicknames and titles marking belonging to *kohanim* or Levites. Thus, in Hlybokaye[37]: הכהן Cohen (1887), כץ = צדק כהן Katz (on many gravestones of the 18th — 19th centuries), הלוי Levi (1863, 1900), סגל = לוי סגן Segal ("descendant of Levi", 1822, 1853, 1857), Fig. 2.

פנ
כ מהור
ד קלו קלמן
ב הה׳
מאוה׳ גמ׳
דוד כץ
ברח [אדר]ב
תקדד

Fig. 2. The gravestone of Kalonimus Kalman, son of Dovid Katz (1764, 14a) in Hlybokaye. The text reads "H[ere] l[ies our] r[espected] t[eacher]Kalo[nimus] Kalman s[on] of the gr[eat] l[ight] Dovid Katz in [the] n[ew] m[onth of Adar the] s[econd] [5]524".

3) Date according to the Jewish calendar. The date is preceded by the words "passed away on". Sometimes euphemisms are used for the word died, such as "was called to the heavenly assembly". The year is usually given "by the Minor Era", i.e. without stating the millennium. The date can be duplicated in a chronogram — a biblical verse with certain letters (acting also as numbers) highlighted to denote the date (Fig. 3).
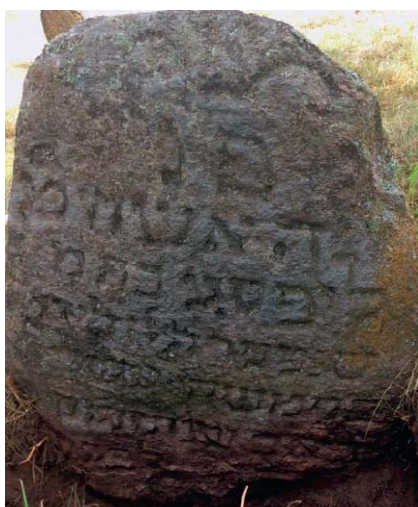
פנ
האשה מ
ליפסע בת מ
מן שנפטרה החיים
חמשה עשר באב
תקמ שנת
לפק

Fig. 3. The epitaph of Lifsa who died on the Fifteenth of Av 5540 (1780), Hlybokaye.

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[37] Nosonovsky 2017: 296.

4) Final blessing formula. Virtually every epitaph is concluded with the abbreviation תנצבה meaning נפשו תהי/ה צרורה בצרור החיים ("May his/her soul be bound in the Bundle of Life"). This blessing formula is borrowed from the memorial prayer *Yizkor*, the full phrase being: "May his soul be bound in the Bundle of Life together with the souls of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and other righteous ones". The Talmud says these are the words the angels say as they welcome the souls of righteous people ascending to heaven. This expression is based on a biblical verse, unrelated to death or the afterlife. This illustrates an important principle of the epitaph: biblical material is not adopted directly; instead, it is derived from its interpretation in rabbinic literature. As for the expression צרור החיים "Bundle of Life", M. Fogelman[38] conclusively showed its relation to the concept of the rabbinic literature כיסא כבוד "Throne of Glory"; from under this "throne" human souls originate and to this throne righteous souls return after death.

Note that in epitaphs from Hlybokaye, especially the early ones, the final blessing is sometimes omitted, which is not typical for Hebrew epitaphs of this period.

The relatively rigid structure is associated with the functional objectives of the epitaph and the gravestone in general. *First*, the gravestone marks the burial spot to avoid accidental entry into the zone of impurity (which is forbidden, for example, to the *kohanim*, the priestly families). Besides that, according to some texts, the soul keeps returning to the grave for a year (until the body fully decomposes), and it is easier to contact it there. This utilitarian function of the gravestone is reflected in the first element of the epitaph, the introductory formula. The *second* function is related to the notion of the epitaph as a prayer, which is why numerous blessings are present in epitaphs. A prayer epitaph must testify for the merits of the deceased and promote an acquittal by the Heavenly Court[39]. Moreover, the epitaph links the soul of the deceased to the other souls of the Jewish people, placing them in the context of Jewish history. This is why the name and date are sometimes ciphered in biblical verses thus highlighting the similarities between the death of a particular Jacob or Rachel and the Jacob and Rachel of the Bible. The unity of place, date, and name provides for the unification of three "coordinates": space, time, and individuality (Fig. 4, Hlybokaye).

פנ ˝הא
הרר יוסף
במהורר
יהודאליב
זצל׳
ד׳ל׳ סיוון
תקמ לפק

Fig. 4. Epitaph of Yosef, son of Yehuda-Leyb, 22 Sivan (5)540 (1780) with the ligature אל.

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[38] Fogelman 1961: 176—180; Reiner 2011: 281—286.

[39] The expression נתבקש לישיבה של מעלה "was called to the High Court" is one of the euphemisms of death used in the epitaphs; this expression is also used in the *Kol Nidre* prayer for the day of Atonement.

4. Epitaph as a historical source

The specific historical information contained in the epitaphs is limited. However, there are cases when such information can clarify certain events in the history of a community. Thus, in Hlybokaye, an important finding in 2015 was the discovery of several monuments from the first half of the 18th century, dated with the period before 1742, when the bishop of Vilna, Michal Zenkovich, according to some reports, gave the Jews permission to build their own cemetery. However, the new findings clarified that the cemetery was founded before 1742. The old monuments were found on the destroyed western part of the cemetery, outside the limits of the modern cemetery fence, thrown down from the slope and partially covered with earth. It was possible to read several inscriptions relating to the first half of the 17th century, including the following[40]:

<div dir="rtl">

פנ

חינה האשה

שמואל הרר בת

זל

תקי

ל

</div>

"H[ere] l[ies] a woman Hina, daughter of R[abbi] R. Shmuel b[lessed his] m[emory] [5]510 minor era (1749/50)"

<div dir="rtl">

פנ

הה כהרר

שמואל

בה [אפ]רים

זצל

לפרט תקא

ל

</div>

"Here lies a respectable Rabbi R. Shmuel, son of R [Ef]raim blessed be memory of a righteous [5]510 minor era (1741)"

<div dir="rtl">

פנ

יצחק מהו

מהורר האלוף

יוסף

יצו

רח לפר

ניסן

לפ תקא

</div>

"H[ere] l[ies] o[ur teacher] Itzik, the head, o[ur teacher] R[abbi] R[eb] Yosef, ma[y his rock and] s[avior] g[uard him], c[ounting] new month *Nisan* [5]501 (1741) by the M[inor] E[ra]".

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[40] Nosonovsky 2017a: 291.

<div dir="rtl">

פנ

האשה

מ מרים

בת הר אהרן

נפ ג י אייר

תפח

לפק

</div>

"H[ere] l[ies] a woman Mrs. Miryam, daughter of R. Aharon, pas[sed away on] Tuesday 10th of Iyyar [5]488 (1728) by the M[inor Era]" (A23).

The oldest monument was found under the slope of the ravine, where a sand quarry was created during the Soviet period (Fig. 7). The monument is a round stone with a hole in the middle and, apparently, was used as a millstone before it was used as a tombstone (Fig. 8). The use of the millstone suggests that the Jewish community in Hlybokaye was small in the beginning of the 18th century and could not afford an original stone for the monument. Note also that the renting of the mills was a typical Jewish occupation in the economic system of the Polish-Lithuanian magnate's town. The inscription on the gravestone: פנ התורני מ שז זל תסח לפק "H[ere] l[ies] learned in the Torah Mr. Sh[lome]-Z[alman] of b[lessed memory] [5]568 by the M[inor] E[ra] (1707)" (Fig. 5)[41].

<div dir="rtl">

פנ

התורני מ

שז

זל

תסח

לפק

</div>

Fig. 5. The oldest gravestone of Shlome Zalman, 1707 (Hlybokaye).

The name of the deceased is provided by only two letters *shin* and *zayin*. Abbreviation שז, according to reference books, can mean either זלמן שלום Shlomo-Zalman (Scholem-Zalman) or זלמן שניאור Shneur-Zalman. It should be noted that the name Shneur-Zalman is particularly associated with the spread of the Lubavich Hasidism (more precisely, the Chabad movement) in the 19th century, since this was the name borne by the founder of this movement, R. Shneur-Zalman from Lyada (1745-1813). In the 16th-17th centuries, this name was less common.[42] In epitaphs from Hlybokaye, there are two mentions of this name: Shneur-Zalman Yitzhak, son of Abraham-Shmuel Yakubovich (1921), and Shneur Zalman, son of R. Yosef-Chaim on an epitaph without a date from the section of the cemetery where the gravestones of the 20th century are found.

At the same time, the name *Sholom-Zalman / Shlomo-Zalman* and the abbreviation שז are found on several tombstones of 1741/2, 1800, 1807, 1813, 1853, and 1872)[43]. For example:

יוסף פנ

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[41] Nosonovsky 2017a: 292.

[42] Etymologically, the name *Shneur-Zalman* dates back to the Hebrew-Spanish *Senior* ("senior") and the Germanic *Zalman* (Solomon). Note that the names of non-Semitic origin זלמן *Zalman* and קלמן *Kalman* are written in consonant spelling (without vowels), as if they were originally Hebrew.

[43] Nosonovsky 2017a: 294.

שלמה ב'
זלמן ז'ל
ממדינת
פרוסיא פאמערין
שבט טו נפ

— "H[ere] l[ies] Yosef, son of Shome-Zalman of b[lessed memory] from the land of Pomerania and Prussia, pass[ed away] on 15th of *Shevat*" (Fig. 6). Prussia was one of several countries with which the Jews of Hlybokaye maintained trade ties.

פנ יוסף
ב' שלמה
זלמן
ז'ל
ממדינת
פאמערין
פרוסיא
נפ סו
שבט

Fig. 6. Grave stone of Yosef son of Shlome-Zalman from Pomerania.

Therefore, the abbreviation שז in the oldest epitaph from Hlybokaye was interpreted as Sh[lome]-Z[alman].

The total number of monuments having dates is: 1703—1750 — 9 gravestones, 1750—1799 — 100 gravestones, 1800—1850 —109 gravestones, 1850—1899 — 74 gravestones. Such a distribution is consistent with the historical evidence that the Jewish community became noticeable and reached impressive proportions during the 18th century.

In addition to proper names, historically important information may be contained in place names. In Hlybokaye, besides the already mentioned Pomerania and Prussia (G154A), these are Lepel (G223, 1928), Velikomir (G47, 1916) and some others. This situation is typical for other epitaphs from Belarus[44].

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[44] For the index of family names and geographic names in Zhaludok see (Kopchenova 2013: 263), in Lepel see (Amosova 2015: 346), in Hlybokaye see (Nosonovsky 2017a: 314).

5. The genre of the Hebrew epitaph

While the content of the epitaphs is not regulated by the requirements of the Jewish religion, the tradition of Hebrew epitaphs took its shape by the end of the first millennium CE and formed a certain literary genre, which is to some extent similar to non-Jewish epitaphs while to some extent different from them. The content of the epitaphs reflected traditional Jewish values and concepts.

In comparison with more elaborate inscriptions from neighboring Ukraine and Poland, Hebrew inscriptions from Belarus provide limited material about the epitaphs as a literary phenomenon. One interesting question is how Hebrew epitaphs were related to other genres of Hebrew medieval literature. In rabbinic literature, there is a genre called הספד *hesped*, a lamentation or mourning over the dead. Examples of *hesped* are found in the Talmud (*Moʻed Katan* 25—28). Epitaphs echo the typical motifs and formulas of *hesped*, which included descriptions of the deceased person's virtues and his family's grief.

Rhymed poetic epitaphs were popular in many communities; however, they were not very common in Belarus. An interesting example is the epitaph of Shaul Grinberg from Zhaludok (1894)[45], which forms an acrostic with the name "Shaul".

ציון לנפש שאול גרינברג
שומי ארץ והי לתהו
אל מות נתחברת ותהי כמהו
ולשחת כל בשר יצאתם כאחת
לאסוף גם נפש צדקה לשחת
בלעט אדמה הרסת לא חמלת
נשמת אבינו אמנם לא הללת
צחוק תשחק לך ממרומים
בצל ד לה נחלת עלמים
יום ד אדרייח מרחשוון תרנה
תנצבה

Fig. 7. Gravestone of Shaul Grinberg from Zhaludok.

"Mark of the soul of Shaul Grinberg. / Shake, oh the Land, and become deserted / for the death, as / every flesh descends to the earth like one, / it also gathers the soul of a righteous person to the ground, / as earth swallows and mills it without mercy. However, our father's soul does not weep, / it is laughing happily in heaven, / under God's shade, for its eternal destiny. / Wednesday, 1st of new month *Markheshvan* [5]655 (1894 CE). / M[ay his] s[oul be] b[ound in the] B[undle of] L[ife]".

Poetic Hebrew epitaphs are compared to the genre of קינה *kina* ("lamentation" or "elegy") in the traditional genre system of medieval Hebrew poetry, which, in turn is parallel to the elegy (*risa*) in

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[45] Kopchenova 2013: 101.

the Arabic *qasidah*, known since pre-Islamic times. At the same time, the Hebrew genre is related to the Book of Lamentations and to Hebrew liturgical poetry. Unlike in the Arabic medieval poetry, the Hebrew *qina* (as well as many texts in other genres) was often formed as a combination of biblical quotes and expressions in the so-called "mosaic style".

Another relevant genre of early modern rabbinical literature is מליצה *melitza* (a term, which can be translated either as "praise" or "rhetoric"). Colorful laudations consisting of biblical and Talmudic expressions are found, for example, in prefaces and approbations to Hebrew books. Sometimes the epitaph itself would be referred to as מליצה *melitza* , which is interpreted as a guardian angel, implying that the epitaph is playing the part of a guardian angel (המליץ, *ha-melitz*) testifying before God and the heavenly court.

Another interesting question is whether the epitaphs should be treated as folk texts and whether they have authors. The question of who is the implied author and implied reader of Jewish epitaphs may seem naïve at first glance. Of course, epitaphs are usually written by the relatives of the deceased (or on their order) with the objective to keep memory of the person and remind about him or her to those who visit the cemetery. However, a more detailed analysis using such narratological concepts as "implied author», "narrator", and "implied reader" reveals a number of paradoxes. With rare exceptions, the traditional epitaphs are impersonal, that is, the figure of the narrator is missing from it. The text itself is almost never written on behalf of the deceased, and only occasionally on behalf of bereaved relatives.

Moreover, the implied reader, as a rule, is also absent from the Hebrew epitaphs. This is a significant difference with the ancient Roman and Christian epitaphs, which are often addressed to passers-by or accidental readers, reminding them of life's futility and encouraging them to repent. Even if the Jewish epitaph is addressed to a human reader, it hardly ever contains a didactic motif. Instead, the assumption is that a passer-by might say a prayer in memory of the deceased.

Apparently, an important objective of the traditional Jewish epitaph is mystical. The text should help the deceased's soul to find its rest in heaven by joining other souls of the Jewish people. Stating the virtues of the deceased serves this goal, rather than impressing passers-by. Once in heaven, the soul is brought to the Heavenly Court, where virtues and behavior towards people and God are judged. It is no coincidence that one of the euphemisms for מת "died" is נאסף "joined [his/her people]", and the phrase נפשו תהי ה/צרורה בצרור החיים "let his/her soul be bound in the Bundle of Life [with the souls of our forefathers and the righteous]" have become common formulas of the epitaphs. The Jewish epitaph puts the deceased in the context of Jewish history, compares and matches him/her with the biblical heroes and patriarchs. At the same time it enumerates his/her virtues for the heavenly court to reckon.

The connection between the dead and the survivors works two ways. It is not only praising the merits of a deceased which can help him/her in the heavenly court, but also listing the virtues of the deceased can protect the living, as judgment is also imposed on them every day. This idea is expressed by the formula זכותו יגן עלינו "his merit will protect us".

An additional technical argument that the epitaphs are not addressed to an earthly implied reader, is the use of complex chronograms and abbreviations, which do not simplify, but complicate the establishment of the date for the reader. A chronogram relates the date of the death to the sacred texts, but it does not make it more convenient for a reader to figure out the date.

The question of the authorship of epitaphs is ambiguous. Often they were compiled to order by semi-professional authors who used already existing material, combined fragments of previous epitaphs adjusting them to a specific situation. There are also cases, when epitaphs had specific authors. Despite this, the epitaphs possess features of folk texts: they do not have any canonical text or distinct authorship: in the modified form one inscription can be used many times on different tombstones. At the same time, from the point of view of their plot and structure, inscriptions are very similar to each other, representing an infinite variation of the same plot ("Someone, who was a righteous person, was buried

here after dying on such a day, may his/her soul be bound in the bundle of life"). Therefore, all the inscriptions are, in a sense, a variation of the same generic epitaph.

Biblical quotes are common in epitaphs, and they are usually meant to emphasize the similarity of a particular death to an archetypal situation described in the Bible. Verses are often quoted about a character with the same name as the late person. However, the citation is often indirect: what is cited is not the Bible *per se*, but various later texts, which cite the Bible. Thus, the blessing formula תהי נפשו/ה צרורה בצרור החיים "May his/her heart be bound in the Bundle of Life" is based on the biblical verse "but the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God" (1 Samuel 25:29), where the matter is not death, but quite the opposite, protection of a living person. This quote appears in epitaphs because it is featured in the common prayer *Yizkor*, which in turn is based on an interpretation of the צרור החיים "Bundle of Life" in rabbinic literature.

Traditional epitaphs are written in Hebrew. Inclusions in other languages are rare, with the exception of rabbinical Aramaic expressions. Epitaphs are almost never written in Yiddish, since Yiddish was the household language and epitaphs were not meant for idle reading[46]. Having said that, Yiddish, which was the mother tongue for the authors of Hebrew inscriptions, is sometimes discernible through this Hebrew. Whenever they needed to refer to a phenomenon with no equivalent in the sacred Hebrew books, for example, a place name or a family name, they would switch to the typical Yiddish orthography.

Later epitaphs from the period of modernization and decline of the traditional society (late 19th-early 20th century) could be bilingual or composed completely in a language other than Hebrew: Russian or Polish, especially during the Soviet period, when knowledge of Hebrew gradually dwindled. Despite that, certain Hebrew elements, such as the initial Hebrew abbreviation פנ ("here lies") the final blessing formula תנצבה were often preserved.

6. Conclusion

To summarize, Hebrew epitaphs express the idea of a connection between the "sacred" world of Scripture and religious Hebrew books and the world of everyday life of a *shtetl* or community. This can be traced at several levels. *First*, at the level of inscriptions' structure, the epitaph includes an indication of the place (נטמן פה "here lies"), time (date), and name, thus tying the deceased to a specific "coordinate system". *Second*, biblical quotations emphasize the relation of a particular life and death to the situation with that described in the Bible. *Third*, at the language level, despite the fact that epitaphs are almost always written in Hebrew and not in Yiddish, we are dealing with certain features of Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism. Hebrew terms could simultaneously be Yiddish lexemes. We observe orthography code-switching between Hebrew consonant spelling and Yiddish phonetic spelling, depending on whether the concept is found in Hebrew holy books or in everyday life. *Fourth*, epitaphs occupy an intermediate position between the "high", author's literature and canonical religion, on the one hand, and folk literature and religion, on the other hand.

Epitaphs from Belorussia are usually shorter than those from Ukraine and Poland, apparently, due to the lack of soft stone material appropriate for carving. Thus, in earlier epitaphs, for example, in Hlybokaye, the final blessing formula can be omitted and names can be abbreviated.

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[46] However, the language of the epitaphs is not Biblical Hebrew but is rather a set of standard Hebrew formulas. In the "inherent" (Hebrew/Yiddish) Jewish bilingualism, Hebrew (*loshn-koydesh*) was the language of Scriptures and their realities, while Yiddish (*mameloshn*) served as the household language. This specific distribution of functions between two Jewish languages is what Weinreich called the "internal Jewish bilingualism" (Weinreich 2008: 247). In a traditional Jewish society, Hebrew and Yiddish were not always opposed to each other, but existed in a close symbiosis. In the period preceding modernization, the Hebrew language (studied from the sacred books) served to denote "bookish" realities and referents, while Yiddish (used in everyday life) served to denote everyday realities. This explains a number of features of switching between the phonetic and consonant spelling in epitaphs (Nosonovsky 2008: 53—76).

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