Plato, in an example presented in the book, speaks about the process of giving birth and the role of the midwife in this process, as a metaphor describing learning. The learner “gives birth” to what he knows from within. Learning is not planting external ideas in the learner’s mind. Indeed, reading this book enables very efficient learning since it brings up associations, pieces of information, and partial knowledge. Hebrew readers, not necessarily linguists, who will not even look at such a book in English, would enjoy its accessibility. A future planned translation of the book into English will address non-Hebrew readers as well.

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In the second chapter of Yaakov Shabtai’s groundbreaking novel, סוף דבר (in English translation, Past Perfect), the native born Israeli Meir Liphshitz, who has unexpectedly lost his mother, decides to travel to her beloved Europe, where she would have “been granted something of those wishes and desires after she had already despaired of everything and had been drained of her strength and the remnants of her vitality by the unendurable disappointments of her life in Eretz Israel” (Y. Shabtai, Past Perfect [New York: Penguin, 1987], p. 50).

Meir Liphshitz was not the only contemporary Hebrew literary protagonist to head for Europe in search of a brief respite from their disenchantment with the Zionist dream. Other characters before and after him, from Lea Goldberg’s Nora (L. Goldberg, והוא האור [And this is the light; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2005]) to A. B. Yehoshua’s Molcho (A. B. Yehoshua, מלחים [Molcho; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1988; in English translation, Five Seasons]), journeyed to Europe in an attempt to question the unidirectional trajectory from Eastern Europe to the land of Israel, which has driven Hebrew literature during most of its history. Unlike these other characters, however, Liphshitz’s journey to Europe culminates in a return to his own Hebrew origins. Thus, while in London, he suffers a nervous breakdown, which is almost a precise transcription of the breakdown suffered, also in London, by the protagonist of Y. H. Brenner’s well-known novella “עצבים” (Y. C. Brenner, “עצבים” [Nerves], in Works;
Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1978], 2:1229–1264), echoing the depression Brenner himself struggled with during his stay in London in 1904–1908. Furthermore, the writer’s bloc that afflicts Meir in London resonates with the plot of another well-known, fin-de-siècle Hebrew novella, Uri Nissan Gnessin’s "הצדה" (U. N. Gnessin, "הצדה" [Besides], in [Complete works; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1982], pp. 135–162), which documents Gnessin’s own erotic and literary adventures across Europe.

The European episode in Past Perfect came to my mind while reading Literary Passports by Shachar Pinsker, and not only because Shabtai’s novel evokes some of the most significant early twentieth-century prose works that Pinsker examines in his book. In fact, it seems that Shabtai’s novel could be read as the ultimate exemplar of Pinsker’s argument about the pivotal role played by Europe in the emergence of Modern Hebrew literature.

Indeed, Hebrew literature scholarship has, to date, not paid much attention to the formative years of Hebrew literature in Europe. Only recently, the prominent Israeli scholar and literary editor Menachem Perry argued that contemporary Hebrew literature has turned its back on its rich Diaspora heritage, in particular Eastern European Hebrew and Yiddish literary traditions, which have been excluded from current Israeli curricula. Critical as it may seem, Perry’s statement is in keeping with a long tradition, prevalent in Hebrew literary history, which, following Gershon Shaked, put forward what has been often referred to as the “Zionist meta-plot.” Indeed, as argued by Pinsker (p. 33), the Zionist meta-plot not only draws a direct line from Eastern Europe to the land of Israel, but also views the diverse Hebrew literary activity, taking place in Europe, mainly from the vantage point of its destruction in World War II.

Into this huge scholarly gap between Odessa and Tel Aviv, enters Pinsker’s impressive, comprehensive research shedding a new light on it. This light is not, however, the bright and optimistic light of Zionism (as the title of Lea Goldberg’s And This Is the Light, also written about the European Jewish experience, was mistakenly thought to suggest). Rather, Pinsker’s is the flickering and elusive light of modernism, which enabled a group of Jewish authors, wandering throughout the continent of Europe at the turn of the century, to explore their homelessness and lack of national affiliation via a new artistic medium. This group of young Jewish writers, including Gershon Shoffman, M. Y. Berdichevski, Y. H. Brenner, U. N. Gnessin, Dvora Baron, and David Fogel, forms the core of Pinsker’s study. Throughout the book, he conducts a fascinating examination of these writers’ poetics and the European experience facilitating them, moving between three prominent realms of modernity: urban experience and the ways in which it shaped turn-of-the-twentieth-century Hebrew literature; the
shifting terrains of gender and sexuality; and the effects of modernity on religion.

The first part of *Literary Passports* lays the foundation for Pinsker’s extensive exploration of Hebrew modernism in Europe. He addresses the European metropolis not only as the place where Jewish authors’ homelessness was the most palpable but also as a source of tremendous creativity. Thus, he describes the “literary cafés” in various European cities as polyglot places of gathering for the literati, in which Hebrew and Yiddish writers conversed and exchanged ideas with Western authors (or at least read some of their most influential works).

The far-reaching implications of these literary encounters are fully appreciated in the second, and in my opinion most fascinating, part of the book. Here Pinsker examines turn-of-the-twentieth-century Hebrew literature’s growing interest in gender and sexuality as a confluence of two contradictory literary and ideological forces. The first was the Zionist preoccupation with the degenerate, effeminate diaspora Jew (to be replaced later on by the virile “muscle Jew”). Set against this was a modernist fascination with “decadent” European literature and themes of gender fluidity. As Pinsker persuasively argues, the unique combination resulted in a “sexual turn,” in which sexuality and its many discontents moved center stage, giving rise to various neuroses, obsessions, and sexual repressions, from unfulfilled passion to love triangles and homoerotic desire.

One of the most striking episodes in this chapter addresses Brenner and his generation’s obsession with Oscar Wilde, the epitome of European decadence and excessive and “deviant” sexuality. Pinsker’s reading of this poetic obsession as expressed in a series of translations (more accurately described as rewrites) of Wilde into Hebrew places earlier discussions of “sexual anarchy” in modernism in a Jewish context. Indeed, although Pinsker mentions Michel Foucault in this connection, one could equally consider Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s classic exploration of sex changes and gender fluidity in modernist fiction as it appears in the third volume of their pioneering *No Man’s Land* (S. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988]). At the same time, Brenner’s preoccupation with Wilde broadens the historical perspective of more familiar discussions about eros in Judaism and in Hebrew literature, emphasizing the significance of the encounter between the latter and European literature and culture. (See, for instance, D. Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* [New York: Basic Books, 1992]; D. Boyarin, *Un-heroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* [Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997]; M. Gluzman, *הנפש הציוני* [The Zionist body; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007].)
The last part of the book offers yet another perspective on this overwhelming encounter through an in-depth exploration of the modernist endeavor of reinventing Jewish traditions. Pinsker refers to a number of modern reworkings of religious texts, such as Haim Nachman Bialik’s ספר האגדה (The book of legends), which in some senses created a new Talmud to replace the old. In light of Pinsker’s discussion, it is interesting to note that The Book of Legends has gradually become one of the most important mediators between Jewish tradition and Modern Hebrew literature, one that is still evoked in numerous contemporary Hebrew prose works.

Indeed, it seems that the true significance of Literary Passports lies in its exploration of literary, historical, and cultural processes that continued to influence Hebrew literature long after the specific period of Pinsker’s study. In many respects, the book itself serves as a “literary passport” providing access for the reader to geographical locations and ideological mindsets long neglected by traditional, Zionist historiography. This is the kind of a passport that has the potential to open the Hebrew literary tradition to a new generation of writers and readers who can now follow Meir Lipshitz and his many precursors on their journey back to Europe and to the defining moments of Modern Hebrew literature.

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One would hardly expect a scholarly study of language, accents, and poetics in early twentieth-century Palestine to begin by invoking Gene Simmons (former lead singer of KISS) as a pivotal cultural referent, but it is a sign of author Miryim Segal’s good humor and remarkable capacity for channeling broad currents of popular culture and identity in portraying the emergence of Zionist national culture and language, that she not only does so gracefully but in a manner that cogently sets up the complex argument about the far-reaching stakes and consequences of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda’s vigorous promotion of the Sephardic stress system that follows. Segal relates that she once tuned in to a public radio show just as the former rocker (who was actually born in Israel just after the founding of the state) was complaining about the interviewer’s pronunciation of his Hebrew name: “It’s not