

hasak@aall.ufl.edu

**A DWINDLING REALISM:
THE EVOLUTION OF ABRAMOVITZ'S *THE TRAVELS OF BENJAMIN III***

Todd Hasak-Lowy
University of Florida

S.Y. Abramovitz's novel *The Travels of Benjamin III* appeared first in Yiddish in 1878 and then again in Hebrew in 1896. Abramovitz published a second Hebrew version again in 1911. While the switch from Yiddish to Hebrew was certainly meaningful, it has been argued that the monumental historical and societal transformations that occurred between the publication of the Yiddish and Hebrew versions have done as much or more to alter the text's meaning. Indeed, the latter versions are typically read as being in dialogue with the burgeoning Zionist movement, whereas the earlier version was seen as Abramovitz's satiric treatment of traditional eastern European Jewish society. Though this general interpretative strategy is hard to argue with, such an approach to *The Travels of Benjamin III* has additional consequences that have not been seriously considered. In particular, readings of the Hebrew novel as a satire of Zionist aspirations necessarily obscure the historically contextualized realist representation of mid-nineteenth century Russian Jewish life at the heart of the narrative's near-tragic climax.

In my talk I will address the social and historical sources informing Abramovitz's interest in realism and satire in this novel, in order to consider the larger implications of his apparent choice to accentuate the latter in the novel's Hebrew versions. As perhaps the seminal figure in the rise of the Hebrew novel, Abramovitz's emphasis on satiric social critique—itsself central to the effectiveness of his widely celebrated Hebrew *nusakh*—marginalized the development of a similarly critical Hebrew realism. This move would have consequences not only for Abramovitz's own work, but also for the trajectory of the novel as a genre within Hebrew literature.