The Miracle of Speech and Jewish Identity in Russian-Israeli Literature

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of gaining the ability to speak in Russian-Israeli literature, which is written by immigrant writers who continue to use the Russian language in Israel. Often caught between Israeli and Russian, Eastern and Western cultures, these writers create characters who grapple with identity issues. Frequently, Jewishness becomes for them not just a recourse to memory or their own roots but takes on the scale of a miracle: the miracle of speech acquisition after a long period of silence. The works of Julius Margolin, Yulia Shmukler, and Efrem Baukh illustrate how openly speaking about their Jewish identity can lead to sudden and miraculous salvation in catastrophic circumstances. In contrast, Linor Goralik radically reinterprets this motif through a postmodernist lens, offering a new perspective on the problem of miracles and catastrophes. By applying philosopher Alexei Losev's theory of miracle to the analysis, this paper aims to elucidate the significance of the speech acquisition motif for Russian-Israeli authors. It explores the functions of this motif and investigates its various interpretations in the context of Russian-Israeli literature. Through analyzing selected works, this paper demonstrates the evolution and transformation of this motif over time. Additionally, it examines how the motif interacts with broader themes such as identity, memory, trauma, and the quest for meaning.

Keywords: miracle, speech, Losev, Russian-Israeli literature, myth, Jewishness

Introduction

The nature of miracles has been a subject of philosophical inquiry for centuries, with thinkers debating their existence, significance, and relationship to the natural world. In theological contexts, figures like Augustine (Augustine 2000, 876-880) and Aquinas (Aquinas 2019, II-II, q. 110, a. 4.) explored miracles as divine interventions, signs of God's power, and confirmations of religious faith. Their perspectives were often grounded in scripture and religious doctrine, viewing miracles as extraordinary events that transcended the ordinary laws of nature.

From a more skeptical standpoint, philosophers like David Hume questioned the very possibility of miracles. Hume argued that the evidence

for miracles was often unreliable and that natural explanations were always more probable. He emphasised the importance of empirical evidence and the consistency of natural laws, raising doubts about the credibility of miraculous claims (Hume 1975, 114-131).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, philosophers continued to grapple with the concept of miracles, often in light of scientific advancements and changing cultural attitudes. Some, like Søren Kierkegaard, embraced the paradoxical nature of miracles, viewing them as expressions of faith that defied rational explanation (Kierkegaard 1983, 47-56). Others, like Rudolf Bultmann, sought to reinterpret biblical miracles in existential terms, focusing on their symbolic meaning and impact on human experience (Bultmann 1958, 80-93).

Alexei Losev (1893-1988), a Russian philosopher, offered a distinct perspective on this age-old question in his work *Dialektika mifa [The Dialectics of Myth]*. Rather than focusing on the supernatural or debating the probability of miracles, Losev shifted the emphasis to the personal and experiential dimension. He challenged the conventional understanding of miracles as external interventions or violations of natural laws (Losev 2001, 173-175). For Losev, the essence of a miracle lies in the realm of personal experience and self-discovery. He writes, 'Personality is the realised intelligentsia as a myth, as meaning, the face of the personality itself.... The coincidence of a randomly flowing empirical history of a person with its ideal task is a miracle'[1] (Losev 2001, 190). Losev's 'ideal task' refers to an individual's inherent purpose or calling. A miracle occurs when the seemingly chaotic events of one's life unexpectedly align with this deeper purpose, revealing one's true essence and evoking a sense of lost wholeness.

This recollection of lost integrity, according to Losev, allows the individual to transcend the 'tedious emptiness and noise of empiricism' and attain a profound understanding of their identity and the meaning of their existence. A miracle, in Losev's view, is a sudden insight into one's true self, an experience of connection with something eternal and significant, which enables the realisation of one's full potential as a person.

Russian-Israeli literature frequently explores the theme of discovering one's Jewish identity as a transformative, even miraculous, event. Emerging in the 1920s, Russian-Israeli literature was initially a sporadic phenomenon, confined to a small circle of authors who repatriated from the territories of the former Russian Empire to *Eretz Yisrael* (Khazan 2023a). These writers continued to produce literature in Russian, first in Mandatory Palestine and, after 1948, in the State of Israel (Katsman 2020). The 1970s and 1990s witnessed two major waves of immigration from the Soviet Union and later post-Soviet countries, bringing many more Russian-speaking authors to Israel, including some with established literary careers (Katsman 2021). These writers, while becoming Israelis and engaging with Israeli themes and literary traditions, maintained their allegiance to the Russian language in their

work. This resulted in a unique 'in-between' status: they were no longer fully part of Russian literature but, due to their continued use of Russian, did not fully integrate into the Hebrew-dominated Israeli literary scene either (Rubins 2022, 2-3). Klavdia Smola argues that this hybridity reflects broader tendencies in Jewish literature to mediate between rupture and continuity, as the loss of 'natural' cultural reference points transforms tradition into an object of reinvention and negotiation. This dynamic underscores the tension between preservation and innovation in Russian-Israeli literature, where the act of writing becomes a space for negotiating fragmented cultural memory (Smola 2023, 160-161).

Such a translingual, hybrid environment often forces characters in Russian-Israeli prose to confront questions of identity. The discovery of Jewishness becomes far more than an acknowledgment of one's roots; it assumes a transformative force that reshapes the individual's entire life (Moore-Gilbert 2014; Smola 2011). Smola points out that this rediscovery often uses narrative structures akin to the paradigm of *anamnesis*, a challenging return to origins woven from rupture and recollection (Smola 2023, 12-13). By engaging deeply with fragmented histories, characters prepare themselves for profound moments of transformation, moving from introspective engagement with the past to a dramatic and often miraculous revelation. These revelations can be likened to J. R. R. Tolkien's concept of 'eucatastrophe', a sudden turn from despair to joy that rescues narratives from the brink of tragedy (Tolkien 2008, 75, 77-78). In Russian-Israeli literature, such moments often lead to a cultural re-semiotisation, wherein traditional Jewish symbols gain renewed meaning, bridging historical discontinuities with contemporary realities.

Though these transformative moments manifest in diverse ways across Russian-Israeli texts, they share an inextricable link to speech. Frequently, a character's sudden utterance—one that defies expectation—becomes the instrument for revealing truth and dismantling illusion. I refer to this phenomenon as 'the gaining of the gift of speech'—the abrupt end of silence that empowers individuals to speak freely, openly, and fearlessly.

In this context, Mikhail Weisskopf has underscored the thematic prominence of the biblical book of Exodus in Russian-Israeli literature, portraying repatriation as a reenactment of the biblical departure from 'Egypt' and subsequent spiritual initiation (Weisskopf 2001). His analysis foregrounds a teleological framework in which the journey to Israel serves as more than just physical relocation; it symbolises a redemptive passage that re-enacts biblical paradigms and promises an ultimate alignment with Jewish history. While such an approach illuminates the collective resonance of mythic narratives, the present study offers a different perspective by focusing on the 'miracle of speech'. Here, rather than emphasising broad, Exodus-based motifs, I contend that sudden, revelatory acts of fearless speech often

serve as the individual's key transformative hinge—one that redefines the relationship between personal identity and cultural memory.

Foregrounding this 'miracle of speech', the article aims to enrich our understanding of how identity is reshaped not only by large-scale historical or religious paradigms but also by intimate moments of openness and self-declaration. This perspective does not negate the importance of Exodus imagery; rather, it highlights a parallel, more immediate mechanism of transformation, wherein the act of speaking truth itself becomes an occasion for rediscovering Jewish identity within a hybrid cultural environment.

Building on Alexei Losev's conception of a miracle as a profound personal revelation—when fragmented aspects of one's life align with an inherent purpose or 'ideal task'—I propose that, in Russian-Israeli literature, miracles are not supernatural interventions but transformative acts of speech. Fearless expressions of truth become a defining feature, enabling characters to reclaim their Jewish identity. Through this perspective, the 'miracle of speech' emerges as a central motif that facilitates identity formation, linking the individual to collective memory and cultural heritage.

Notably, themes of fearless speech and miraculous salvation appear across many religious and philosophical traditions, suggesting that speaking truth at a decisive juncture can lead to sudden insight or divine intervention. In Christian hagiography, unwavering declarations of faith under persecution frequently accompany miracles or martyrdom, as in the stories of Polycarp and Catherine of Alexandria (Foxe 2009, 43-45). In Islam, *tawakkul* (absolute trust in God) affirms the believer's reliance on divine will, promising relief in dire straits (Izutsu 2002, 70-71). In Buddhism, the moment of enlightenment—envisioned as a miraculous self-realisation—often follows a courageous confrontation with illusion, exemplified by the Buddha's triumph over Mara (Bhikkhu Nanamoli & Bhikku Bodhi 1995, 259-266).

Despite cultural differences, these examples highlight the transformative power of truth proclaimed at a critical juncture. Yet, the Russian-Israeli literary articulation of the 'miracle of speech' motif is shaped by the historical traumas of the Soviet regime, Jewish memory, and the quest for self-realisation. Here, the fearless act of speaking becomes not merely an affirmation of faith but also a conscious declaration of one's Jewish identity against forces of suppression and erasure. In this literature, the 'miracle of speech' emerges from a deeply personal revelation, echoing Losev's notion of a miracle as the sudden convergence of a life's chaotic course with a deeper calling.

To understand how the concept of 'gaining the gift of speech' functions in Russian-Israeli literature, I will begin by analysing Julius Margolin's chapter "Elijah the Prophet" in his book *Puteshestvie v stranu Ze-Ka [Journey to the Land of the Zeks]*. Then, I will examine Margolin's proposed concept of the miraculous acquisition of speech and demonstrate how this concept is developed and expanded upon in the works of Yulia

Shmukler and Efrem Baukh. Finally, I will explore how Linor Goralik radically reinterprets this concept in her writing, demonstrating how speech, while remaining a miracle, loses its transformative and transfiguring function.

Julius Margolin: Elijah the Prophet and the 'road to life'

Julius Margolin (1900-1971), a prominent figure in Russian-Israeli literature, was born in the city of Pinsk, a predominantly Jewish community on the western periphery of the Russian Empire. A Zionist, he left Poland, where he had resided since the mid-1920s, for Palestine in 1936. However, he returned to Poland in 1939 for family matters and was subsequently caught in the maelstrom of World War II (Jurgenson 2023, 48-49). Shortly after the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland, Margolin was arrested and sent to the Gulag, where he endured six harrowing years. Upon his return to Palestine in 1946, Margolin documented his survival experience in the Stalinist labour camp in his seminal work, *Journey to the Land of the Zeks* (1952).[2] In the 1950s and 1960s, Margolin published extensively in the Hebrew and Russian-language press in Israel and the United States, persistently criticising the Soviet Union's oppressive system. His critiques provoked discontent among the leftist parties then in power in Israel.

The fifth chapter of Margolin's *Journey*, titled "Elijah the Prophet", stands in stark contrast to the rest of the text, which chronicles Margolin's struggle for life and freedom in the Gulag. Abruptly interrupting the narrative of his arrest in Pinsk and deportation to the labour camp, Margolin invites the reader to make 'a retreat into the realm of the miraculous' (Margolin 2017, 74). In this chapter, he asks the reader to envision the arrival of Elijah the Prophet in Pinsk during the summer of 1940, when the city's inhabitants faced imminent threats from both German troops and Soviet occupiers.

In this imagined scene, Elijah prophesies the dire fate awaiting the people of Pinsk, caught between the Nazi Scylla and the Stalinist Charybdis. The townspeople, believing the prophet, inquire about their path to salvation. Elijah's response is to reveal the 'road to life', a path towards deliverance. In Margolin's view, this path involves 'stopping lying and pretending' (Margolin 2017, 75), refusing to abandon Hebrew and Jewish upbringing in favour of Soviet power, and rejecting the imposed Soviet passports. Instead, the townspeople are urged to openly declare to the occupiers, 'We do not need your citizenship, and we ask to be registered for emigration to Palestine' (Margolin 2017, 75). Thus, the imaginary Elijah identifies an open declaration of will as the key to miraculous salvation from impending doom.

Before delving into why Margolin associates openly expressing one's Jewish identity with miraculous salvation, it is crucial to understand why Elijah was chosen to convey this message of free speech to the Jews of Pinsk.

On the one hand, desiring to venture into 'the realm of the miraculous', Margolin selects a biblical character whose name is synonymous with a series of extraordinary events: from the resurrection of the widow of

Zarephath's son (1 Kings 17:21-22) and the bringing of rain after a three-year drought (1 Kings 18:41-45) to his own ascension into heaven while still alive (2 Kings 2:11). On the other hand, in Jewish folklore, Elijah often appears as a humble traveller who rewards those who show him kindness with miracles. For example, he might miraculously fill a poor man's table with food and wine (Noy 1991, xiii), or spare a hospitable family from death by redirecting the Angel of Death's attention elsewhere (Ausubel 1989, 447-448). In literary representations, such as Shmuel Yosef Agnon's stories, Elijah can even remind a troubled individual of their Jewish identity and urge them to find solace and salvation within their faith.[3]

As we see, Elijah is a figure of miraculous wandering who, in Margolin's narrative, could have saved the Jews of Pinsk from destruction. He urges them to abandon falsehood, remember their Jewish identity, turn away from assimilation, and recognise that their true safety lies in the land of Israel. Margolin writes, 'For 2000 years, the Jews have been adapting to the world around them. And for 2000 years, their artful calculations have invariably been built on sand, and their entire history, like that of the Jews of Pinsk, is a chain of catastrophes and a road to death' (Margolin 2017, 77).

Through the imagined arrival of Elijah, Margolin calls for an end to this cycle of catastrophes. He suggests that only by returning to their Jewish roots and openly affirming their identity as free individuals with the right to choose, and crucially, their belonging to the land of Israel, can Jews find salvation. This affirmation is achieved through speech. Margolin's gesture is one of breaking with lies, betrayal, and self-deception. To become free and gain a sense of self, one must 'declare' (Margolin 2017, 75) their freedom.

The true miracle lies not in Elijah's arrival but in the act of speaking the truth aloud—'I am a Jew'—and rejecting the falsehoods that have become ingrained in the Diaspora. This turn towards Jewish identity holds the potential for a miracle, a revelation of oneself as a mythological figure with their own unique story and destiny.

In the chapter 'Elijah the Prophet', Julius Margolin, I argue, introduces a formula for miracles that frequently appears in Russian-Israeli literature. This formula involves the anticipation of a catastrophe, followed by the moment of 'gaining the gift of speech'—an open declaration of oneself as a Jew and a free individual, aligning with Losev's concept of encountering one's 'ideal'—and culminates in a sudden deliverance or eucatastrophe. While there is no literal miracle in *Journey to the Land of the Zeks*, the Jewish community of Pinsk faces imminent destruction. However, by proposing a 'retreat into the realm of the miraculous' and urging the reader to speak 'what you really think' (Margolin 2017, 96), Margolin establishes a principle that becomes central in the works of later Russian-Israeli authors like Yulia Shmukler and Efrem Baukh.

Yulia Shmukler: Initiation and the miracle of speech

Yulia Shmukler (b. 1936), a writer and mathematician, immigrated from Moscow to Israel in 1972. Between 1973 and 1977, she held a teaching position in mathematics at Tel Aviv University. After losing her job, she experienced three years of instability and emigrated to the United States in 1980. Her first and only collection of short stories *Uhodim iz Rossii [Leaving Russia]* was published by the esteemed publishing house Library-Aliyah in 1975. Shmukler's work is reminiscent of Margolin's *Journey* in that it explores the themes of migration and displacement. According to Shmukler, the main reason for her move to Israel was the fear of ending up 'behind the gates of a Soviet prison' (Shmukler 1975, 132), and the possibility of imprisonment constantly looms over the characters in her writings.

The collection's opening story, "*Chudo* [A Miracle]", recounts an extraordinary event in the early childhood of the narrator, a Soviet mathematician. During World War II, her father is arrested due to a neighbour's accusation of organising discounted food for his employees. On the night of the arrest, the young and forlorn father is taken from their communal apartment by military police. Quietly wringing her hands, his wife cries out 'Isaac... Isaac' (Shmukler 1975, 6), echoing the biblical scene of Isaac's sacrifice. The totalitarian regime's figurative 'knife' is poised to strike, but the miracle of Isaac's salvation does not occur; the Stalinist system claims the father as its sacrifice. However, the miracle associated with Isaac is not negated but rather deferred, eventually manifesting in the narrator's own life when, once, in a kindergarten, where the character is treated with cold disdain as the daughter of an enemy of the Soviet people, a teacher brings a book. Knowing the book's contents by heart, the girl boldly declares she can read it, surprising everyone since four-year-olds are not expected to possess such a 'magical ability'. She pretends to read, reciting memorised verses, and thus earns respect and inclusion in games. This continues for a second day. However, on the third day (a significant number in fairytales, hinting at an impending miracle), the teacher brings an unfamiliar book. The girl's dread mirrors Isaac's fate, 'Fate struck me with one blow, it would have been better for me never to be born or to die right now' (Shmukler 1975, 7), echoing again the image of a sacrificial 'blow' hovering over Isaac on the altar (Genesis 22:9). Filled with fear, she sits on a stool, opens the book, and faces the unknown lines:

> God, I remembered.… I knew for a fact that there was no God, but this was not one of those moments where you choose. I opened my mouth to speak, to confess and be done with it ... and suddenly I heard my own voice, which calmly and evenly pronounced what was printed, at the same pace as I had memorised it, as I am reading it now. (Shmukler 1975, 8)

The miracle in this fragment is achieved, on the one hand, through the paradigm of the Jews as the 'people of the book': the ability to read becomes a magical attribute of the Jewish hero. On the other hand, there is a return to the miracle of Isaac: the sacrifice does not happen, God makes a 'covenant' with the heroine through reading aloud, literally enters her—'it was scary to be the speaking mouth of someone unknown'—leaving inside 'new knowledge' (Shmukler 1975, 8). Suddenly acquired knowledge relieves the girl of fear of the antisemitic Soviet society of the early 1950s. The miracle that happened to the character is a kind of initiation rite. Deprived of her father in the most difficult period of her life, she receives a miraculous father-patron who is able to guide her through the chaos of life. Turning to the myth of the heavenly protector leads to the restoration of a sense of security, both in the context of historical upheavals and personal losses: 'I fell asleep easily and calmly that night, realising that I was being guarded, and if necessary, I would be saved' (Shmukler 1975: 9).

At the very end of the story, the heroine returns home and checks if she has lost the ability to read. She opens the first book that comes to hand and reads aloud the lines she sees. Thus, the protagonist finally finds her voice. However, while in "A Miracle" salvation comes from an external source, in another story from the collection a heroine becomes able to protect herself.

The story "*Muzykal'niy moment* [The Musical Moment]" follows a ten-year-old girl's attempts to learn to play the piano through private lessons in Moscow during the early 1950s, a time associated with the peak of Stalin's antisemitic campaign. Despite her efforts, she is unable to produce a coherent melody, creating a chaotic noise that disturbs her teacher and neighbours. Although she seems utterly hopeless, the story takes a miraculous turn.

Friends from her building suddenly refuse to play with the girl when they discover she is Jewish. Devastated, she returns home, sits at the piano, and, lost in thought, begins to play. This time, instead of the usual pounding of the keys, she plays softly and gently, creating a melody. Soon, she notices an unexpected listener, a mouse, who sits attentively as she plays. The mouse becomes a regular attendee of the girl's impromptu 'concerts', and with practice, she transforms into a masterful performer, eventually impressing her teacher.

In this fragment, the encounter with antisemitism serves as the catalyst for the girl's initiation ritual. As is typical in such rites of passage, a young individual is separated from the community and experiences a form of exclusion from society (Frazer 1990, 547-548). In this instance, the girl is ostracised from the familiar world of childhood games and experiences a profound sense of isolation—'You alone, oh music, remained with me' (Shmukler 1975, 95)—which drives her to retreat into her inner world. At this crucial moment, the protagonist encounters a totemic animal that helps her uncover the mysteries of the universe or understand the order of things. In

some tribal cultures, initiation rituals are believed to 'complete' a person, imparting the full knowledge of the world necessary for life (Meletinsky 2000, 30). 'So, it [the mouse] gradually made a human being out of me' (Shmukler 1975, 95), the girl explains, identifying the mouse as a guide in her cultural initiation.

The character's transformation into a new spiritual state is complete, and she is no longer just a girl from Moscow's courtyards but a hero capable of confronting hostile forces. This is evident in a scene where she encounters her former friend Andrushka on her way home from her music lesson. Andrushka is carrying a worn-out condom on a stick, which he pokes at her, saying it is 'Jewish'. The theme of finding her voice culminates as the girl not only stands up to Andrushka verbally and openly expresses everything she feels about his bullying but also takes decisive action, grabbing him by the hair, destroying the stick, and discarding it.

In the context of the entire *Leaving Russia* collection, the moment of 'gaining the gift of speech' represents a key concept for understanding Shmukler's notion of miracles. Shmukler, like Tolkien, views a miracle as a eucatastrophe, a sudden turn towards joy and liberation. However, in Shmukler's perspective, the attainment of a eucatastrophe is often preceded by a transformative experience or challenge. In the first story, God appears to the protagonist as a patron figure, speaking for her and coming to her rescue. In the last story, the protagonist, having undergone personal trials, becomes capable of acting independently and advocating for herself. This illustrates Shmukler's concept of personal realisation: to attain autonomy and self-advocacy, one must navigate challenges and emerge transformed. In the writer's stories, the journey through personal trials and the eventual 'gaining of the gift of speech' serves as a powerful metaphor for rediscovering one's agency. Similarly, Efrem Baukh's works further explore themes of personal and cultural transformation, highlighting the pivotal role of language and speech in navigating the challenges of identity and liberation.

Efrem Baukh: Language and speech as a ladder of salvation

Efrem Baukh (1934-2020) was born in Bender, a town in Bessarabia, and later moved to Chișinău, where he worked as a journalist and a teacher of literature. In the Soviet Union, he published three poetry collections and translated contemporary Moldovan poets into Russian. Upon emigrating to Israel in 1977, he became editor of the Russian-language journals *Tsion* (1977-1980) and *Kinor* (1980-1986). From 1981 to 1982 and again from 1985 until 2014, he served as chair of the Union of Russian-Speaking Writers of Israel. Baukh's literary legacy includes nine novels, the most prominent of which, *Lestnitsa Iakova [Jacob's Ladder]*, explores themes of personal transformation and self-realisation within the broader context of Jewish history and culture. Developed by the author in the first half of the 1980s, the book was first published in Israel in 1987, reprinted twice, and widely praised

by critics. The Hebrew translation of the novel, titled *Dante in Moscow*, was awarded the prestigious President of Israel's Prize for Literature in 2001.[4]

The novel depicts Moscow in the 1970s, a period of mass exodus from the Soviet Union when the Iron Curtain was opened to allow Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel. The novel's protagonist, Emmanuel Cardin, is a psychiatrist who, at the beginning of the narrative, is fully integrated into the Soviet system and its values. This system is characterised by conformity, stagnation, fear, and powerlessness. Individuals are expected to suppress their true feelings and thoughts, maintaining a facade of loyalty to the state. As a Jew, Cardin not only conceals his thoughts but also suppresses his Jewish identity, including his knowledge of Hebrew and Jewish traditions. He lives the life of an assimilated Jew, married to Lena, a Cossack woman, and surrounded by non-Jewish friends. At work, Cardin is rewarded for his loyalty and ability to forget about his Jewish origins, receiving a new apartment and car.

However, his comfortable life begins to crumble when he engages in conversations with one of his patients, Plavinsky, who is a Jew. Initially, Plavinsky enlightens Cardin on the true nature of their city and country, likening it to Dante's Inferno. The idea of Moscow as an earthly hell reminds Cardin that according to *The Divine Comedy*, the most terrible sinners are the traitors tormented by the devil in the Ninth Circle. Consequently, Cardin begins to feel that he has betrayed his Jewishness and his Jewish roots. As a result, his suppressed memories of his childhood in Jewish Odessa come flooding back; he recalls the rabbi with whom he studied *Tanakh*, excerpts from the Torah and Kabbalah, and begins to rethink his life as a person who has ultimately discovered his identity. Subsequently, for the first time in his life, Cardin feels free.

The protagonist's sense of newfound freedom serves as a catalyst for resuming his writing and speaking of Hebrew. Baukh meticulously details the symbolic weight of the Hebrew alphabet in Emmanuel Cardin's journey. For Cardin, the letters are not mere linguistic tools but instruments of revelation. As Baukh describes, each letter is imbued with layers of meaning: *gimel*, shaped like a hook, evokes the burden of life's trials, while *lamed* suggests an eternal ascent, its form echoing Jacob's Ladder (Baukh 2001, 240). Through this imagery, Baukh weaves a narrative where language itself becomes a medium for transcendence and spiritual renewal. Once left alone, Cardin pronounces the letters of the Hebrew alphabet aloud, combining the names of biblical kings from them. As he does this, a vision of the Promised Land materialises before him, its path illuminated by the very letters he speaks—a ladder to a reclaimed homeland.

> Here is your land; in these letters lies a five-thousand-year-old movement of air, wind fanning the flames in the valley of Gehenna. These consonants are the stones of Jewish mountains, the solid structure of the language: consonant by consonant, you climb like on

steps, and the vowels are drawn from David's harp by the same winds in the valleys of Jerusalem. (Baukh 2001, 204)

The letters, described as 'stones of Jewish mountains', anchor Cardin to his ancestral heritage while guiding him toward a reconstructed identity. Baukh's deliberate choice of words—imbuing letters with the solidity of mountains and the melody of David's harp—illustrates how language bridges the corporeal and the divine. For Cardin, this act of speaking Hebrew becomes a reclamation of a voice once silenced by assimilation and conformity, forging a path to freedom. The imagined ladder of language, mirroring the biblical Jacob's Ladder, emerges as a profound means of escape from the Soviet 'Hell'. Its vertical structure enables Cardin to rise above the endless labyrinth of this metaphorical Inferno. From this elevated perspective, he gains a comprehensive view of the Soviet underworld, recognising the Hebrew language as his singular route to self-discovery and renewal.

The equation 'language = ladder' takes on profound symbolism in the novel, representing life itself in opposition to the Russian land of the dead. Cardin's 'aspiration towards the word' achieves a dual purpose: it establishes his identity through the full expression of his voice and reveals the true destination of his ascent—not Heaven, but the land promised to Jacob in his dream about the ladder, Israel.

The culmination of Cardin's acquisition of a personal voice occurs during his speech at a scientific conference attended by foreign colleagues. The authorities, aiming to prevent any dissent, had tightly controlled the event, allowing only doctors who spoke favourably of Soviet psychiatry to participate. Essentially, the conference is intended as another Soviet spectacle for foreign guests, filled with formulaic and meaningless statements. However, Cardin disrupts these plans. Instead of reading the approved text, he unexpectedly speaks for himself—from his heart, hence his 'cardiac' surname—, expressing his own ideas and thoughts about psychiatry and its goals.

The content of Cardin's speech is secondary; the significant aspect is the act itself and its ritualistic nature, which enables him to emerge from his previous state of spiritual death. Having once suppressed his true self, Cardin now receives 'a sip of living water, moistening already dying lips with the sweetness of liberation' (Baukh 2001, 417). As he addresses the audience, the Hebrew alphabet letters 'flash' in his consciousness, signaling his rebirth. Although his microphone is abruptly silenced and loud music fills the room, drowning out his words, this does not matter to Cardin. The act of finding his own voice has already occurred.

At this pivotal moment, Cardin is granted a vision of Jacob's Ladder: 'something that spirals into the night sky ... and where it opens up, there is no more time' (Baukh 2001, 427). This vision induces a 'dazzling unfragmented' state, transcending his previous feeling of a fractured consciousness. The need for pretence—at work, among family, and with Soviet officials—falls away.

Life, once a jumble of disparate pieces, coalesces into a singular, miraculous moment. This transformative experience solidifies Cardin's decision to immigrate to Israel.

Thus, Baukh's entire novel assumes a vertical structure of ascent from the Soviet Union to Israel via Jacob's Ladder.[5] For Baukh, language serves as the mechanism that rekindles identity, acting as a bridge between a fragmented self and its rediscovered heritage. He portrays the moment of rebirth as a miracle comparable to the Kabbalistic myth of the world's creation from the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Scholem 1978, 24-25). By weaving Hebrew elements into his Russian prose, Baukh highlights the transformative power of language—a 'miracle of speech' enabling the protagonist to reclaim their native tongue as a source of personal and spiritual salvation. Additionally, Baukh's vision of identity is expressed through his references to cultural heroes, particularly the myth of Jacob as a Jew who possesses the 'secret of victory over forgetfulness', a guardian of ancient knowledge and wisdom beyond the reach of science or art (Baukh 2001, 489). By identifying with this hero, Cardin evolves from a Soviet 'man without qualities' into a figure with his own myth, symbolically becoming Jacob, who unveils the secret of the ladder as a path out of the Soviet Inferno.

Linor Goralik: Speech and communication failure

The miracle of 'gaining speech' takes centre stage in Linor Goralik's novel *Vse sposobnye dyshat' dykhanie [All Who Can Breathe Breath]*, published in 2018. However, it pursues goals entirely distinct from the works of Baukh and Shmukler. Goralik, born in Ukraine in 1975, has lived in Israel since 1989. In the early 2000s, she spent several years living and working in Russia, but in 2014, following the Russian occupation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Ukraine, she returned to Israel.[6] In *Vse sposobnye dyshat' dykhanie*, she portrays a world ravaged by '*Ason*',[7] a global catastrophe that has decimated cities, disrupted seasons, and unleashed layered storms called '*Busha-veHerpa*'.[8] These storms, along with the 'rainbow disease', inflict a sense of heavy, uncontrollable guilt and excruciating headaches upon all living creatures.

The key outcome of Ason, however, is that Earth's animals are suddenly granted the ability to speak human language. In this post-apocalyptic world, these speaking animals coexist with humans in refugee camps, receiving rations, attending doctor's appointments, listening to Jehovah's Witnesses' sermons, and occasionally engaging in illicit activities like drug dealing or begging. It is worth noting that the speaking animals are not morally superior to humans; the novel's network of cunning raccoons, for instance, proves just as dangerous as human criminals.

The primary setting of the novel is Israel, depicted as a barren wasteland with ruined cities, where humans and animals are forced to live under wartime regulations. While the consumption of animal meat is not

officially prohibited, it is discouraged by an unwritten social agreement. In this new reality, dogs, cats, raccoons, cows, rabbits, horses, elephants, and giraffes are considered communicative beings, making their consumption akin to cannibalism.

However, the status of speaking animals in this society remains ambiguous. The question of whether they are considered equal to humans or constitute a new class of beings capable of communication is raised but not definitively answered. This ambiguity becomes a central poetic device in the novel, as characters are often portrayed in ways that make it difficult to determine their species. To deepen this uncertainty, the animals are given human names like Yonatan Kirsh, Daniel Tamarchik, Dana Gideon, and Uri Fakelman, further blurring the lines between human and animal. Sometimes, subtle hints about a character's species are subtly revealed in phrases or details, leaving the reader to question their initial assumptions. In other instances, Goralik employs adjectives typically associated with animals alongside words denoting humans, creating a hybrid effect, for instance, the phrase 'pedigreed woman' (Goralik 2018, 164).

Ambiguity is the primary characteristic of the novel's reality, in which all universal values and norms are constantly questioned after the disaster. The text's architecture is also far from clarity and uniformity: some chapters are fragments from post-apocalyptic children's books and collections of army folk songs, poems, or plays, while others are short graffiti in Arabic, such as 'And how is it [to live] without a leash?' (Goralik 2018, 145).

The deliberate excess of narrative forms serves the same purpose as the blurring of the distinction between animals and humans in creating a world with disrupted communication, where the acquired speech of animals only emphasises the absence of a 'fully-fledged act of communication with the transfer of information' (Goralik 2018, 100), in other words, the acute inability of the inhabitants of Goralik's universe to understand each other. Additionally, various speech function impairments within Goralik's characters further underscore the defect in mutual understanding within the narrative. For instance, Kostya Maev suffers from dysarthria, a speech disorder characterised by difficulty pronouncing or distorting sounds or words. Another character tries to eliminate logoclonia, a speech disorder with involuntary repetition of a word's last syllable or a phrase's last word. A little girl, Nati, has Tourette's syndrome and involuntarily emits dog barks and howls.

The book's characters are filled with the desire to overcome the disrupted communication through empathy and compassion for their fellow beings, but their efforts are often in vain. More often than not, they encounter violence and aggression instead of understanding. In Goralik's novel, violence becomes the mechanism that triggers 'the gaining of the gift of speech'.

One of the most striking scenes in the novel is a reenactment and parody of the biblical story of Balaam's donkey. In the biblical account, the prophet Balaam beats his donkey for refusing to proceed on a path blocked by an angel. The animal then miraculously speaks, asking why it has been beaten three times (Numbers 22:28-30). Goralik's novel mirrors this scene, with the human character Romi Zotto beating a miniature horse named Arthur, who is proportionate to a donkey and, unlike many other animals after Ason, does not speak. Yet, despite the beating, Arthur does not resist or try to escape. Instead, he suddenly utters the words, 'Romi Zotto, Romi Zotto, what have I done to you? Why are you ruthlessly beating me?' (Goralik 2018, 301). This unexpected utterance shocks Romi Zotto to the core, causing him to fall to his knees.

Both the biblical story and its variation in the novel by the Russian-Israeli writer highlight that the animal gains the ability to speak as a reaction to pain and violence inflicted by another. The communicative message serves both as an inquiry into the reason for the aggression and as a statement of the cruelty in the other person's actions.

The hypothesis that the primary function of communication systems was to prevent aggression, especially its destructive forms, is a significant area of research and development within anthropology. Scientists view the evolutionary path of the communicative system, from aggressive contacts to friendly and cooperative ones, as a crucial factor in the emergence of human language.

For instance, Deryagina and Vasiliev suggest that several stages preceded the emergence of speech in hominids, the primate family that includes humans and great apes. The first stage, according to their theory, was 'preventing and inhibiting aggression' (Deryagina & Vasiliev 1993, 62), expressed through visual cues (gestures, facial expressions, postures) and acoustic signals. Mark Pagel similarly proposed that language evolved as an adaptation to avoid physical conflicts and resolve disputes through basic communication. The desire to reduce aggression drove early humans towards cooperation, which was facilitated and expressed through language and culture as a survival strategy. Pagel views language primarily as 'a social technology for managing and exploiting the benefits of reputation and cooperation' (Pagel 2012, 197).

In Goralik's novel, the manifestation of speech as a reaction to aggressive actions is not limited to the episode with Arthur and Romi Zotto but is a recurring motif throughout the entire work. For example, Rabbit Six B urges his friend Rabbit Forty-Three to say to the person who intends to kill them, 'We need to be fed, not beaten!' (Goralik 2018, 34). A bear, fearing violence from humans, suddenly tells them, 'No need for a rope' (Goralik 2018, 187). Another animal, witnessing its brother being experimented on, emits a human cry for the first time, saying, 'Don't do that! It hurts!' (Goralik 2018, 241).

Thus, like the anthropologists mentioned previously, Goralik references acoustic forms of violence avoidance as a trigger for the emergence and manifestation of speech abilities in her novel. However, while Pagel, Deryagina, and Vasiliev's theories consider the pursuit of cooperation to be the next stage of speech development, Goralik's work presents a more complex scenario.

In the novel, speech is not primarily a tool for conveying information or fostering communication and trust. Instead, it functions as a coping mechanism for dealing with pain and stress through the very act of speaking itself. This perspective is exemplified by the wise serpent Shufi, who engages in philosophical and theological discussions with Rabbi Arik Lilienblum.

Goralik cleverly imbues intertextual references into the image of Shufi, drawing from the biblical account of the serpent tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden. However, unlike the Eden serpent, who sought to reveal the truth about the fruit of knowledge, Shufi divulges a different kind of knowledge—the purpose of speech. As Shufi explains,

> It doesn't matter what I say. I just speak this way, and you just speak that way, and nothing changes. God allows us to say whatever we want because it's easier for us. He feels sorry for us and allows us to do anything to make it easier for us, so it's easier for us. (Goralik 2018, 357)

In this context, speech becomes a form of release, a way to alleviate suffering rather than a means of conveying meaningful information.

Thus, speech in Goralik's novel can be seen as a tool for adapting to life's challenges and the accompanying pain. Goralik portrays the function of speech as mechanical and self-directed, primarily serving the speaker's needs. While it may involve a psychological process of working through problems or emotions, it remains a closed system, not designed to establish genuine connections with others. This ultimately leads to a general inability to communicate effectively and a failure to build meaningful relationships, as illustrated throughout the novel.

Animals have acquired the gift of speech, but in the eyes of some humans, they remain soulless creatures. One character asserts, 'They're not human, straight up not human, and they chatter like people, but they're beasts, animals, reptiles, yes, animals, you can't teach her these new rules, she'll tell the truth, animals, animals, there's no soul in them' (Goralik 2018, 79). This sentiment is echoed in another scene where a soldier, Yasya Artelman, who repeatedly saves Rabbits Six B and Forty-Three, is horrified to discover that Six B ate its own offspring due to hunger. This revelation challenges Yasya's perception of the rabbits as sentient beings and reinforces the idea that, despite their ability to speak, they are still governed by animalistic instincts.

The capacity for animals to communicate in human language does not make them human; the abyss separating 'all [creatures] who can breathe' remains unbridged. While language can facilitate communication, it does not

guarantee greater understanding or empathy and can even be used for manipulation.

For example, one of the raccoons in the novel earns gold stars for practising speech, which can be exchanged for drugs and other post-*Ason* luxuries. However, these rewards are obtained by exploiting the loneliness of Miri Kazovsky, the 'bright person' who 'has absolutely no one to talk to' (Goralik 2018, 250). In another scene, there appears to be a moment of profound empathy when Death, disguised as a bony woman with a scarf-wrapped face and bony hands, helps a man named Khamdam Dauri, who suffers from excruciating back pain, drag a found couch to his room. However, this seemingly empathetic gesture is merely a means for Death to claim her 'client' and transport him to the afterlife.

These and other examples, generously scattered throughout the novel, repeatedly demonstrate the failure of communication and the inadequacy of speech in fostering empathy. Almost all attempts by the characters in this direction are unsuccessful, exposing a world where even the miraculous acquisition of speech by animals fundamentally changes nothing in the relationships between animals and humans, nor among humans themselves.

While comparisons can be drawn between Goralik's work and the classic Arabic prose of *Kalila and Dimna*, where speaking animals are used to illustrate moral and ethical truths, the fundamental distinction lies in *All Who Can Breathe*'s portrayal of the utter inadequacy of these truths. Although an officer may cry out in a moment of desperation, 'Protect not the bridge, but each other' (Goralik 2018, 238), this plea resonates only as 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness' within the context of Goralik's bleak and fractured world.

The conclusion of the novel leaves the reader with a profound sense of ambiguity. Unlike *Kalila and Dimna*, where talking animals provide clear moral codes—'If you cannot overcome your own misfortune, endure it, but when misfortune befalls your neighbor, be merciful' (Ibn al-Muqaffa 1986, 287)—, Goralik offers no such easy answers. In her world, the ability to speak becomes a mere mechanism for expressing pain, a desperate attempt at temporary relief in a reality devoid of resolution. The apocalypse itself is not a catalyst for moral clarity; it is a stagnant torment, a 'perpetual swaying', as described by one character. This sentiment is echoed in another quote:

> Everyone felt like they were witnesses to the apocalypse, but it was some listless and empty, kitschy apocalypse. It wasn't like we were going to die tomorrow, or like every metro station would now have scrappy dogs begging 'for the children's food', we'll just keep living and go on living. (Goralik 2018, 37)

The characters are left grappling with unresolved ethical questions, trapped in a world where suffering persists even with the 'miracle' of speech.

Thus, the semantics of the miracle described by Shmukler and Baukh becomes the object of parody, a narrative masquerade cloaked in the form of

dystopia, in Goralik's work. By invoking biblical myths while rejecting the possibility of constructing new ones, Goralik offers a discursive exploration of the imperfection of language and communicative practices. This imperfection leads to ethical ambiguity and moral dilemmas without clear resolution.

Conclusion

The analysis has revealed that the motif of 'gaining the gift of speech' serves multiple functions in Russian-Israeli literature. In Margolin's work, it represents a call for open declaration and a return to Jewish roots as a path to salvation. Shmukler's stories depict it as an initiation rite that empowers characters to overcome personal and societal obstacles amid the antisemitism of the late Stalinist era, while Baukh's novel portrays it as a means of escaping Soviet oppression and reclaiming one's Jewish cultural heritage. Goralik, by contrast, subverts the motif, highlighting the limitations of language and the complexities of communication in a post-apocalyptic world.

A comparison between the literature of the 1970s-1980s (Shmukler and Baukh) and contemporary works by Goralik reveals a decisive shift in the cultural and ideological context of Russian-Israeli writing. For authors who emigrated to Israel in the 1970s—against the backdrop of Soviet Jews' struggle for the right to emigrate—the 'miracle of speech' was imbued with a sense of hope and transcendence, tied to the rediscovery of Jewish identity and the possibility of liberation. In Baukh's view, language becomes a ladder leading out of the Soviet Inferno and into the Promised Land. For Shmukler, the act of speech enables the protagonists of her stories to reveal themselves as free individuals, endowed with agency and memory. Goralik's postmodern perspective, shaped by the fragmented realities of the 2000s, when her literary career began following her relocation to Russia, strips speech of its transformative power, reducing it to a mechanism for expressing pain or coping with existential despair. While Baukh and Shmukler focus on the redemptive potential of language, Goralik emphasises its fundamental inadequacy: in her stories, words fail to bridge the gap between individuals or create meaningful connections.

This trajectory highlights the shift from the myth-driven narratives of Baukh and Shmukler to Goralik's deconstructive dystopia. While Baukh and Shmukler's characters find solace and salvation through Jewish culture and the journey to Israel, viewing it as the pinnacle of their ascent, Goralik's protagonists, already residing in Israel, inhabit the ruins of a shattered cultural ladder. Their fragmented perspective offers no coherent or meaningful narrative, and they fail to find any myth or symbol capable of rescuing them from disconnection. This stark contrast highlights the evolution of the 'miracle of speech' motif—from a neo-romantic, transfiguring, and enlightening vision of language to a postmodern critique of its limitations—

reflecting how the priorities and challenges of Russian-Israeli literature have transformed over the decades.

Finally, while Baukh and Shmukler depict moments akin to eucatastrophe—miraculous deliverance on the brink of disaster—Goralik emphasises the catastrophic nature of existence itself. In her world, ethical and meaningful orientations have been lost, leaving characters in torment and uncertainty without hope of redemption. As Losev describes in *The Dialectics of Myth*, the 'tedious emptiness' remains untranscended. The encounter with an 'ideal task' that redeems Baukh's and Shmukler's heroes, enabling them to escape the Soviet underworld, is absent in Goralik's work. Even after the transformative event of Ason, her human and animal characters continue to exist amid disrupted communication and mutual incomprehension. Their transformations bring neither salvation nor deeper understanding but leave them adrift in a world devoid of meaning and connection.

Tracing the motif of 'gaining the gift of speech' from Margolin to Goralik thus reveals a dynamic evolution in how Russian-Israeli prose envisions personal growth and myth-making. Margolin, Shmukler, and Baukh construct hierarchies and oppositions—good and evil, God and the Devil, Heaven and Hell, celestial and earthly, fantastical and mundane—thereby allowing mythic frameworks to emerge as separations of light from darkness, chaos from cosmos. In their works, the Jew who openly declares meaningful words is a figure who steps out of historical darkness. Goralik's world of *All Who Can Breathe Breath* also presents speech as a response to violence, yet without a sustaining mythological structure. It remains an expressive mechanism for articulating pain and suffering, offering no resolution to the underlying causes of that suffering.

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Endnotes

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

[2] For more on Julius Margolin, see also Lenart 2022, Katsman 2018, Khazan 2023b.

[3] See Agnon's "Ad she-yavo Eliyahu" (61).

[4] For more on Baukh and his works, see Surin 2023, 104-107.

[5] It is no coincidence that in Hebrew, emigration to Israel is referred to as *Aliyah*, meaning 'ascent'.

[6] For more about Goralik and her works, see, for example, Promyshlianskaia 2023, 281-282.

[7] In Hebrew, the word *Ason* means 'catastrophe' or 'terrible event'.

[8] In Hebrew, *Busha-veHerpa* means 'shame and disgrace'.