Prior to the collapse of the Russian Empire, a sizable percentage of world Jewry lived in its western borderlands. Although the vast majority did not live in ethnic Russian territory, many East European Jews developed a strong connection to Russian high culture. They tried to maintain this connection even after migrating from Eastern Europe, or staying behind in lands that ceased to be part of the empire. One example of this is the Hebrew translation of an iconic work of Russian literature, *Eugene Onegin*. Despite all the energy that such a project expended on non-Jewish literature, the Hebrew-language version of *Eugene Onegin* served as an achievement of, rather than a distraction from, the project of developing a new and modern Hebrew culture.

The author of this verse novel, Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), is a figure whose stature might be compared to that of Shakespeare, but whose iconicity in Russian culture as an artist and character has no parallel in English-language literature. Many East European Jews understood Pushkin, and some could recite his works by heart. *Eugene Onegin* represented Pushkin and, by proxy, Russian literature and modern culture. East European Jewish writers absorbed the Russian concept of a “national poet.” Whether they admired Pushkin or wished to avoid being compared to him, a number of them aspired to become Jewish national poets in Russian (Semion Frug), Hebrew (H. N. Bialik), and, arguably, Yiddish (A. Layvick).

Jewish writers who embraced literary modernism did not abandon this concept—or Pushkin—right away. Avraham Shlonsky (1900–1973), who aspired to unseat Hebrew national poet H. N. Bialik, not only took great pains to translate *Eugene Onegin* into Hebrew (1937), he also received the prestigious Tcher-nichovsky Prize (1946) for his efforts. In other words, a Zionist Hebrew writer in British
Mandate Palestine took time and creative energy away from writing modernist poetry in order to translate a 19th-century Russian classic, and the Hebrew literary establishment rewarded him.

Shlonsky’s translation was a significant event in Israeli literary history. Hebrew poet Leah Goldberg and others recognized it as a masterpiece of the Hebrew language. Shlonsky’s public appearances during the year of Pushkin’s centennial in 1937 more than compensated for the book’s lack of introduction and translator’s statement. Because of Shlonsky’s celebrity status, his philosophy of translation can be found in public speeches and letters as well as in materials he added to a later edition (1966) of the translation. A dispatch from one of his readings sent to the Russian-language Zionist newspaper Gadegel in Harbin, China, demonstrates how Shlonsky publicly proclaimed his relation to the text and the prospect of its translation:

“Three principles guided me, when I at last took on Eugene Onegin,” says A. Shlonsky. “First of all, reverence for Pushkin and a desire to mark his centennial anniversary. Further, it has always been painful for me to think that the Palestinian [Jewish] youth, that has already grown up in our country and lost all connection with the Russian language and literature, will be deprived of the fortune that has fallen to our lot—the fortune of reading Pushkin. The third principle was a desire to demonstrate to myself and to others, that Hebrew, that...
'dead,' covered in the dust of ages, language, is so revived and rejuvenated, that one can communicate six thousand lines of Pushkin in it.’

The “three reasons” given can be reduced to two apparently conflicting loyalties: loyalty to Pushkin versus loyalty to Hebrew, since the second reason (of the fortune of Hebrew youth) stems from Shlonsky’s own reverence for Pushkin. Loyalty to both Pushkin and Hebrew, however, seems a conflict of interest. On the one hand, Shlonsky expresses nostalgia for the Russian culture from which the new Hebrew youth are cut off — after all, while the next generation was being raised speaking and reading Hebrew, its teachers and parents maintained a high level of Russian literacy and had already read the novel in Russian. On the other hand, like the teachers and parents, Shlonsky is committed to the Hebrew project.

Shlonsky’s public readings, appearances by scholars and performers, and special supplements or articles in nearly every Hebrew periodical of Mandate Palestine collectively served as a national Zionist commemoration of the centennial of Pushkin’s 1837 death. Pushkin was being celebrated throughout the Russophone world, divided as it was between state-sanctioned Soviet commemoration, and that of a Russian Diaspora, which had increased worldwide since the revolution. The grand, transnational Soviet celebration involved translation of Pushkin’s “progressive” works into Soviet national languages, including Yiddish; but a more conservative and nostalgic Pushkin united the vast Russian Diaspora as well.

Among fellow Zionists in Palestine, the new Hebrew speakers celebrated Pushkin’s centennial even as they rejected many Jewish aspects of their past in the Jewish Diaspora. Despite their antagonism toward Jewish attempts to assimilate into other European cultures, Zionist settlers in Palestine exposed the deep connection that had been forged between themselves and those cultures, especially Russian literature. This affinity for Russian literature existed even though Yiddish had been the most common mame-loshn.

Pushkin has enjoyed a renewed popularity in contemporary Israel since the arrival of a large population of Jews from the former USSR, most of whom speak Russian as their mother tongue. Several new Hebrew translations of his works have been published, along with a recent edition of Shlonsky’s Eugene Onegin and a new translation of the novel by Yoel Netz. In a meeting with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in 2009, the Soviet-born Israeli Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman (a fervent Israeli nationalist) boasted about the Israeli celebrations of Pushkin: According to Putin’s archives, Lieberman said, “I should tell you that in Israel these celebrations are even more elaborate. Far more events have been organized, and they are more solemn.” When Putin asked if Lieberman was “feeling nostalgic,” the Israeli Deputy Prime Minister dodged that plausible explanation for the celebrations, replying instead, “Alexander Pushkin has Ethiopian roots. There is a big community of Ethiopian Jews in Israel.”

Lieberman’s reply notwithstanding, nostalgia for Pushkin extends back for nearly a century.

1 Gadegel is a Russian transliteration of the Hebrew word hadegel (the flag).