

A Multilingual Modernist: Avraham Shlonsky between Hebrew and Yiddish

IN SPRING, 1927, Sholem Asch and Peretz Hirschbein went to Palestine in an effort to strengthen ties between Yiddish writers in the United States and the growing population of Hebrew writers in the Yishuv, the Jewish community in pre-state Palestine. At a reception in honor of the visitors, prominent Hebrew cultural figures—literary critic Ya’akov Fichman, politician and editor Berl Katznelson, and poet Uri Zvi Grinberg, among them—welcomed the visitors and proclaimed that the once rival languages of Yiddish and Hebrew had finally been reconciled. Ignoring the rowdy members of the resolutely anti-Yiddish Brigade for the Defenders of the Language (*gdud meginey ha-safa*) who attempted to disrupt the invitation-only gathering, the renowned Hebrew poet Chayim Nachman Bialik spoke eloquently of the long coexistence of Hebrew and Yiddish: “These two languages are a match made in heaven that cannot be separated” (“Ash ve-Hirshbein be-mesibat ha-sofrim” 1; see, also, Chaver 106 and Seidman 124–27). Though Bialik refined his conception of this relationship a few lines later by describing Yiddish as a language in support of and service to Hebrew, his comments ignited in the Hebrew press a vicious debate spearheaded by the poet Avraham Shlonsky and his fellow young modernists.

Within days of the reception, Shlonsky, the *enfant terrible* of Hebrew literature at the time, refuted Bialik’s representation of a harmonious linguistic partnership between the two languages in a strongly anti-Yiddish article published in *Ktuvim*, a literary journal affiliated with young Hebrew modernists: “We view this catastrophe of bilingualism as we would view tuberculosis, gnawing away at the lungs of the nation. We want Israeli breathing to be *completely Hebrew*, with both lungs!” (“Al ha-‘shalom” 1). For Shlonsky and many of his peers, Yiddish represented an insidious threat to the emerging Hebrew culture and identity in the Yishuv.

This article has benefited from extensive conversations with Chana Kronfeld and Jordan Finkin. I am very grateful for their time, insight, and suggestions.

The furor that greeted Bialik's remarks was an expression of the bitter rivalry that had developed between the two Jewish languages during the early decades of the twentieth century. In Jewish Eastern Europe, Yiddish had served as the language of daily life, Hebrew as the language of religious life, and other co-territorial tongues (such as Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, and German) as the languages for interaction with the non-Jewish world. But the pressures and opportunities of modernity, secularism, nationalism, and socialism brought Hebrew and Yiddish into conflict as they increasingly competed for the status of *the* Jewish national language. Nearly twenty years after the Czernowitz language conference had inflamed the passions of Yiddish and Hebrew partisans in 1908, the cultural and linguistic controversy was still simmering. Asch's and Hirschbein's trip to Palestine represented a calculated—and ultimately fruitless—attempt to bridge this antagonism.

Shlonsky's polemic against Yiddish was also a thinly disguised attack on Bialik, the premier poet of the newly modern Hebrew literature that had emerged in Eastern and Central Europe between 1890 and the First World War. Hebrew literature of this "Revival period" (*techiya*) was marked by both experimentation with European literary styles (Romanticism, Realism, Decadence, and Symbolism) and Jewish nationalist sentiment. By the 1920s, however, a new generation of Hebrew writers in Palestine, who wrote what Uzi Shavit has called "wild poetry" (*ha-shir ha-paru'a*) (165–66), was eager to dethrone the presiding "Jewish national poet" and his largely Romantic poetics. Bialik's conciliatory stance with regard to Yiddish thus becomes, in Shlonsky's rhetoric, one of a litany of complaints about Bialik's poetics and cultural leadership (see Shavit 176–79). Strangely enough, however, Shlonsky's early poetry and manifestoes are also infused with Yiddish influences and inflections, an implicit poetics that stands in opposition to his explicit pronouncements.¹ If Shlonsky articulated the Zionist stance that Yiddish was the language of the diaspora and had no place in Hebrew national culture, he also inscribed Yiddish into his poetics and poetry, revealing a personal and aesthetic attachment that was much harder to banish.

From the early years of his long and prolific writing career, Shlonsky continually wrote and rewrote himself into the Hebrew cultural scene as consummate artist and ideologue. Affiliating his artistic persona with a new Zionist language, ideology, and land, Shlonsky challenged the styles and themes of his Hebrew poetic predecessors. At the same time, he experimented with the modernist forms and aesthetics that dominated European culture in the first decades of the twentieth century, mixing aspects of Symbolism, Futurism, Expressionism, and Imaginism to create his own idiosyncratic Hebrew modernism. At the center of his modernist poetry and manifestoes is a chameleon-like lyrical "I" that dominates the text as it unfolds.

Indeed, Shlonsky's many self-representations are reminiscent of the "life-creation" (*zhiznetvorchestvo*) practiced by Russian Symbolist writers and analyzed by Russian Formalist critics. In the Russian literature of the time, prominent

¹ Barukh Kurzweil makes a similar claim about Shlonsky's poetry, arguing that its "internal truth" often strays far from the "programmatically I believe" that surrounds it. Kurzweil, however, makes no mention of Yiddish (Kurzweil 155).

figures such as Andrey Bely and Alexandr Blok cultivated aestheticized images of themselves as writers, carefully shaping their literary selves and stylizing their everyday behavior to suit those literary images (Boym 5–6).² As an admirer of Alexandr Blok in particular, Shlonsky emptied his lyrical “I” of biographical content and crafted a new poetic identity for himself as the exemplary pioneering poet, working the land and transforming the language.³ In many ways, however, Shlonsky’s poetic self resembles more closely the personae of such Russian modernists as Vladimir Mayakovsky and Osip Mandelstam, who inscribe—albeitly differently—a contradictory and fragmented modernity in their work and poetic selves.⁴

In this article, I analyze the contradictions that emerge in Shlonsky’s deft self-inventions during the 1920s within a context provided by contemporary modernist trends and the emerging Hebrew literary center in Palestine, reading his flamboyant authorial images as a particular version of the self-fashioning Stephen Greenblatt has traced in sixteenth-century England. For despite the many differences between Renaissance England and modern European Jewish culture, the early decades of the twentieth century, as Benjamin Harshav has argued, also marked a similarly transformative time for Jewish life, culture, and identity in both Eastern Europe and Palestine (*Language in Time of Revolution* 10–13). In my analysis of Shlonsky’s early work, I focus on one of Greenblatt’s many “governing conditions” of self-fashioning: “Self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language” (9). However, whereas Greenblatt’s analysis of the linguistic component of self-fashioning in texts by Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare relies upon close readings in a single language (English), I examine Shlonsky’s self-fashioning both *within* and *between* languages. If, on the one hand, Shlonsky uses Hebrew to establish himself as a revolutionary modernist poet, on the other, he also shapes his poetic persona by drawing upon elements of the very Yiddish language and culture that he rejects. Combining self-fashioning with critical-fashioning, Shlonsky and his contemporaries erase from his canonical image the Yiddish resonances and rhythms that surface in his early poetry, as well as affiliations with contemporary Yiddish modernisms. But as Greenblatt notes, “any achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss” (9). Recovering the traces of Yiddish in Shlonsky’s early poetic self-inventions, I argue, reveals

² In Russian literature, the “life-creation” of famous writers is not simply a modern phenomenon. See Ginsburg’s “The ‘Human Document’ and the Formation of Character,” and Greenleaf’s *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*.

³ In 1923, Shlonsky published the first of his many translations of Blok’s poetry (Blok, “Beit charoshet” 56–57). A few years later, he celebrated Blok as a revolutionary poet in a 1926 article in *Ktuvim* (“Al tslav ha-lirika” 2–3), and he published a translation of Blok’s famous “The Twelve” three years later (“Shnem asar” 8–10). Perhaps his most influential translations of Blok are collected in *Shirat rusya* (*Russian Poetry*), which he co-edited with Leah Goldberg. For a complete list of Shlonsky’s translations of Blok, see Lachover 20–21.

⁴ Svetlana Boym emphasizes Mayakovsky’s “confrontation with modern conditions in their peculiar Soviet variation” and argues that “his repertoire of cultural masks is much wider than that of the Romantic poet, and much more contradictory and pluralistic” (147). Gregory Freidin likewise asserts that many contradictions exist within Mandelstam’s poetic persona: “Most students of Mandelstam are aware that the poet’s *life* was not endowed with this sort of unity. What unusual coherence it had came from his poetry and prose (both written in the person of the ‘lyric I’)” (ix).

the complex negotiations of language and identity that have been largely overlooked in Shlonsky's work and the Hebrew literary establishment. In essence—and almost despite himself—Shlonsky thus exemplifies an often-overlooked multilingualism that exists within the Hebrew national canon.

As a young man in the early 1920s, Avraham Shlonsky quickly established himself as a Hebrew pioneer, poet, and polemicist. In 1922 he published a series of poems in the Zionist paper *Ha-po'el ha-tsa'ir* and the fledgling literary journal *Hedim* that employ innovative and playful language to proclaim a new poetic sensibility. The opening lines of “Fruitless” (“Srak”), for example, demonstrate Shlonsky's linguistic virtuosity by transforming modern Hebrew into a supple instrument for poetic rhyme, rhythm, and sound.

ועלֵהּ תִּיבָה: קְלוֹב.
בְּקְלוֹב: בֶּן-תּוֹכִי.
הַדֹּלֵף: טוֹף-טוֹף-טוֹף.
וְאֵנִי: שְׁתוּקִי. (“Shirim” 32)

And on the “hurdy-gurdy”: a cage.
In the cage: a young parrot.
The dripping rain: tuf-tuf-tuf.
And I: mute.⁵

The jumbled images in this urban scene are linked by elaborate sound play: in startlingly brief lines, modernist slant rhyme links *kluv* (cage) with the onomatopoeic *tuf-tuf-tuf*, while the chattering *ben-tuki* (young parrot) rhymes with the silent lyrical “I,” *shtuki* (mute). Like the American Yiddish poet A. Leyeles's work from the early 1920s (see, especially, Leyeles's *Rondeaux and Other Poems [Rondos un andere lider]*, 1926), Shlonsky's poem assembles seemingly random street images into an exuberant poetic whole. The poem's obvious delight in sound reflects Shlonsky's experimentation with what the Russian futurist Alexei Kruchenykh calls his *zaum* (transrational) language—that is, language that replaces conventional meanings of a word with the significations of sound (Perloff 121). However, despite the modernist and neologistic elements of Shlonsky's early poem, it does not eschew lexical signification completely; as Chana Kronfeld argues, Shlonsky's lexical innovations are less radical than his futurist counterparts' because his neologisms are motivated by an attempt to revitalize the Hebrew language by shattering its traditional forms in order to create a legitimate modern literary language (108–09). For example, the second line's *ben-tuki* (parrot) rhymes with the fourth line's *shtuki* (mute), at once contrasting the presumably vocal bird and the mute lyrical “I” and playing on the different meanings of the word *shtuki*—a person who is unable to speak or is paralyzed, and also, in the rabbinic sense of the word, an illegitimate child, who literally cannot speak about his father because he does not know who his father is (see Even-Shoshan). Shlonsky thus carefully orchestrates the different historical strata of the Hebrew language, proving its viability as a literary language within a modernist framework even as he bastardizes his poetic persona.

Shlonsky's innovative Hebrew, however, also exists within a multilingual framework in such texts as his unusual tribute to Ch. N. Bialik, written to celebrate the

⁵ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

poet's fiftieth birthday in 1923. In the company of critics and writers such as Ya'akov Rabinovitch, Asher Barash, and Yitzchak Lamdan, who sing Bialik's praises in short essays, Shlonsky formally and thematically breaks out of the mold by immediately plunging the reader into a narrative that incongruously draws Bialik into a harsh pioneering life.

לשכב באהל ולמשש יריעותיו: „היחדר הגשם?” ולשוב ולקרוא בספר מודרני שבמודרנים תחת שמיכת-שרד
נסה ואפורה, או לילל: „בְּלָדִי! בְּלָדִי!” ולחשב: „צנה לו זולל על גדר—וינם”, ולחשב: שם, הרחק
באירופה—שלכת.

....

ולתכרבל בשמיכה מעל לראש כבוש בברכים:

—קר חברה, קר!

והן בספרים למדתי כי בא"י חם, תמיד חם, שקר דברו הסופרים!

ובנשפים הציונים דקלמו: „תחזקנה ידי . . . ” „אכן חציר העם . . . ”

—יחי משוררנו הלאומי!

....

מתחת אפרורית שמיכת-השרד הנה יסחבו את המגלות אל תחת לגנ הפחים אשר ל„מטבח”, ורגלים דשות,
בוססות, מתחוללות:

„דיא מאמע קאכט ווארעניקעס—און איך בין פליישיג.” (“Le-yovel Bialik” 8–9)

To lie in a tent and feel its canvas: “Will the rain seep in?” And go back to reading the most modern of modern books under a coarse gray standard-issue blanket, or to wail: “*beladi! beladi!*” [my hometown, my hometown] and to think: “a twig alighted on a fence—and dozed” and to think: there, far away in Europe—falling leaves.

....

To curl up in a blanket over a head lowered between one's knees:

—It's cold, comrades, it's cold!

Didn't I learn in books that in the Land of Israel it was hot. Always hot. The authors lied!

And at Zionist festivities they declaimed: “Strong be the hands . . . ” “Indeed the people is grass . . . ”

—Long live our national poet!

....

Beneath the gray coarse blanket they will lug the scythes beneath the tin roof of the “kitchen,” with feet threshing, stomping, dancing: “*di mame kokht varenikes—un ikh bin fleysbig*”

(“Mama's cooking dumplings—but I ate meat”).

Shlonsky establishes himself as a pioneering modernist in this short collage of images and words. As his speaker huddles in his tent in the cold rain of a Palestinian winter, his narrative darts between Israel and Europe, between fragments of Bialik's poetry and disjointed modernist phrases, between Hebrew, Arabic, and Yiddish. The coarse gray blanket simultaneously protects the speaker from the cold and rain and recalls the habits of Eastern European yeshiva students, who in archetypal enlightenment narratives would surreptitiously read forbidden controversial texts under the table. Here, however, the illicit “most modern of modern books” under the standard-issue blanket gesture metaphorically toward a modernism hiding under the bland official poetics of Bialik's generation. Bialik's European-composed poetry is also aligned with nostalgia for autumn, a European season that has no relevance in this new land, with Bialik's words now expressing incongruity rather than heartfelt emotion.⁶ The rhetoric of Zionist festivities—Bialik's lines “Strong be the hands” and “Indeed the people is grass”—takes on new meaning among the pioneering laborers in Palestine.

A striking aspect of this quasi-manifesto is its exuberant and fragmented modernist language. Shlonsky's Hebrew is situated among the sounds of this new

⁶ Shlonsky is one of several poets who use autumn to convey the difference between pre-state Palestine and the remembered European landscape. See Ziva Ben-Porat.

land: the Arabic *beladi* (my country, my home town), phrases from Bialik's European-inflected Ashkenazic Hebrew, and the first line of a Yiddish folksong, *di mame kokht varenikes—un ikh bin fleysbig* (Mama cooks milk dumplings—but I ate meat).⁷ The juxtaposition of these linguistic fragments creates an effect of dislocation in this pioneering camp, which is situated at the mythologized moment of territorialization. The plaintive Arabic cry for origins ironically recalls the European home that has been left behind, while the Yiddish expression of thwarted desire is literalized in the makeshift kitchen mired in the Palestinian mud. Shlonsky's text simultaneously valorizes and undermines the figure of the heroic pioneer, sardonically mapping Bialik's poetry onto the "new pioneering reality," while also revealing the speaker's linguistic and emotional yearning for the past that Bialik represents. Both Arabic and Yiddish phrases also allude to folk music—the former to a provincial style of dance generally performed by women in the Levant and the latter to a well-known Yiddish folksong—with both serving as musical counterpoints to the structured meter of Bialik's quoted poetry. Indeed, the linguistic and stylistic flourishes of Shlonsky's narrative characterize his own persona far more than they pay tribute to Bialik.⁸

Although in this text Shlonsky uses a Yiddish phrase to evoke the modernist dislocation of the pioneer, the Yiddish resonances in his work from the early 1920s are not solely linguistic or ornamental. In "Freshness" ("Ra'ananut") Shlonsky incorporates elements from contemporary Yiddish manifestoes into a scathing critique of the literary journal *Hedim* and the Hebrew literary establishment in the Yishuv. While *Hedim* editors Ya'akov Rabinovitch and Asher Barash envisioned their journal as an effort to reinvigorate a literature mired in financial trouble and a crisis of confidence following the First World War and the death of Y.Ch. Brenner (Rabinovitch and Barash 3), Shlonsky insists that writers must challenge the status quo regardless of the economic pressures of Palestinian reality. This critique leads Shlonsky into a reflection on the nature of the poet:

זהו! והמשורר איוב הוא. ודי לחלום על אמן העומד מן הצד. על טוריסטן המסתכל בלורניטה של אמנות ומסתקר עצמו אחר-כך מאחורי בד היריעה ומציר. כי לא את זולתו ישיר המשורר אלא את עצמו. ננעי עצמו. ומי שלא הוכה בשחין בשרו—אינו אמן. באשר אינו האדם. באשר אינו הכואב. ("Ra'ananut" 60)

That is it! The poet is Job. Stop dreaming of an artist who stands to the side, of a tourist who looks through the lorgnette of art and examines himself later from behind the cloth of his canvas and then paints. The poet does not sing the rest of the world but himself, his own wounds. He whose flesh is not afflicted with boils is no artist, since he is not **the human**, since he is not **the pained**.

The greatest art, Shlonsky argues, comes from the depths of personal despair rather than detached observation. The "true poet" sings about himself and his pain from the midst of the biblical storm or, in the context of the rest of the essay, the contemporary literary crisis. But by turning his boils into poetry, this Job-poet in fact seeks to represent all that is human ("the human") and all that is suffering ("the pained"). In short, to be an artist is to expose oneself to the physical pain of the modern world.

⁷ The implication here is that because "I ate meat" I cannot have any dumplings. Jewish dietary laws prohibit eating milk after eating meat, so this phrase expresses the speaker's frustration with the unattainable, or at least what is unattainable within a traditional religious framework.

⁸ Avraham Hagorni-Green argues that Shlonsky's struggle against Bialik is primarily a struggle within Shlonsky himself (*Shlonsky ba-avotot Bialik*). While Hagorni-Green does not discuss this early piece, it certainly supports his argument.

Although Shlonsky uses a biblical figure to represent his poetic paradigm, a cluster of modernist ideas underlies his insistence on the poet as participant rather than spectator. In their 1919 manifesto, widely circulated among Yiddish readers in the United States and in Europe, a group of Yiddish poets in New York proclaimed their commitment to a new introspective method: “The world exists and we are part of it. But for us, the world exists only as it is mirrored in us, as it touches *us*. The world is a nonexistent category, a lie, if it is not related to us. It becomes an actuality only *in and through us*” (Harshav and Harshav 774). These “Introspectivists,” led by A. Leyeles, Yankev Glatshsteyn, and N. Minkov, adapted German Expressionist Kasimir Edschmid’s critique of Impressionism in order to focus on poetry as a thoroughly personal reflection of the world. In his 1917 manifesto “On Expressionism in Literature,” Edschmid writes: “The world exists. It makes no sense to repeat it. To explore it in its every last tremor, in its innermost core, and to create it anew—this is the greatest mission of art” (Harshav and Harshav 38). For the Introspectivists, like their German counterparts, poetry was acutely attuned to a historical and political world, but one that is mediated through each poet’s personal internalization. Since Shlonsky spent the years before his immigration to Palestine in 1921 traveling between Ekaterinaslav, Warsaw, and Vilna, it is highly likely that he encountered the *In zikh* manifesto, which was widely circulated in Eastern Europe after its initial publication in 1919. And, if he did not fully subscribe to Yiddish Introspectivism, his statement that “the poet does not sing the rest of the world but himself” nevertheless shares the Introspectivists’ preoccupation with the individual at the center of poetic experience.

In “Freshness,” however, Shlonsky adds a physical dimension of suffering to the poet’s psychological introspection that calls to mind European rather than American versions of Yiddish Expressionism. For example, in September 1922, almost a year before Shlonsky published his manifesto, Uri Zvi Grinberg sought to capture the chaos and suffering of the post-war, post-revolutionary modern poet in the opening manifesto of the Yiddish journal *Albatros*:

מיר שטייען אזוי ווי מיר זענען; מיט צעלעפצנטע ווונדן; מיט אויפגעוויקלטע אָדערן און צעשרויפטע קנאָכנס.
נאָך הויביצן און “הוראָ.” נאָך גאַז-אַנדרויבן; נאָך שאַלן גאַל. אָפּיום און טאַג-וואַסער: עקל. און שקיעהשער
שוים ליגט אויף די ליפן. (3) (“Proklamirung”)

We stand just as we are: with gape-mouthed wounds, with uncoiled veins and unscrewed bones, after the artillery and “hurrah,” after poison-gas attacks; after cups of gall, opium and standing water: nausea. And sunset foam lies on the lips. (Translation by Jordan Finkin)

The postwar, post-revolutionary brutality and pain that Grinberg places at the center of Yiddish Expressionism find a curious counterpart in Shlonsky’s Job-like poet. Although Shlonsky describes the afflictions of the poet in language that is relatively more restrained than Grinberg’s, for both poetry emerges from physical and emotional suffering. Indeed, in the second and third issues of *Albatros*, published the year before he immigrated to Palestine and began writing in Hebrew, Grinberg invokes pain as a key marker of the modern in such manifestoes as “Red Apples from Distress-Trees” (“Royte epl fun vey beymer”) and “Pain-Home on Slavic Ground” (“Veytikn-heyem af slavisher erd”). Linguistically linking Grinberg and Shlonsky, Benjamin Harshav translates the Yiddish *vey* (pain, distress) in Grinberg’s manifestoes into Hebrew as *dvay* (pain), a critical term throughout Shlonsky’s work and, not accidentally, the title of his first published collection of poetry (Harshav, *Manifestim shel modernizm* 155–68). Thus, although Shlonsky’s

poetry is often read in terms of Russian and French influences, the preoccupation with pain in his early poetry reflects important affiliations with Yiddish modernist trends, and, through them, with German Expressionism, affiliations that coexist with Shlonsky's staunch commitment to a new Zionist poetics.⁹

While Yiddish clearly influenced Shlonsky's language and poetics in the early 1920s, it also played a critical role in his poetic self-representations during this intensely productive period. For example, "Clothe Me, Dear Mother" ("Halbshini, ima kshera"), one of his best-known poems from the period, incorporates a brilliant series of images and layers of allusion into the speaker's bold self-characterization:

הַלְבִישִׁינִי אִמָּא קְשֶׁרָה. כְּתִנֹּת פְּסִים לְתַפְאֶרֶת
 וְעִם שְׁחֵרִית הַזְּבוּלִינִי אֵלַי עֵמֶל.
 עוֹשֶׂה אֶרְצִי אוֹר כְּטִלִית.
 בָּתִּים נִצְבוּ כְּטוֹטְפוֹת.
 וְכַרְצִיעוֹת תְּפִלִּין גּוֹלְשִׁים כְּבִישִׁים. סָלְלוּ כְּפִים.
 תְּפִלַּת שְׁחֵרִית בַּהּ תִּתְּפֹלֵל קְרִיָּה נֶאֱחָה אֵלַי בּוֹרְאָה.
 וּבְבוֹרְאִים—בְּנֵךְ אַבְרָהָם.
 פִּיטֵן סוּלָל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל.
 וּבְעֶרֶב בֵּין הַשְּׁמֹשׁוֹת יָשׁוּב אָבִי מִסְּבִלּוֹתָיו
 וְכַתְּפִלָּה יִלְחֹשׁ נְחֹת:
 הַבֵּן יִקְרֶה לִּי אַבְרָהָם.
 עוֹר וְגִידִים וְעֲצָמוֹת—
 הַלְלוּיָהּ.

הַלְבִישִׁינִי אִמָּא קְשֶׁרָה. כְּתִנֹּת פְּסִים לְתַפְאֶרֶת
 וְעִם שְׁחֵרִית הַזְּבוּלִינִי
 אֵלַי עֵמֶל.¹⁰ (*Le-aba-ima, tseror shirim* 42–43; *Ba-galgal* 98–99)

Clothe me, dear mother, in splendor in a coat of many colors
 And with the dawn lead me to toil.

My land is wrapped in light like a prayer shawl,
 Houses stand like frontlets
 Roads stream like phylactery straps, paved by many palms.
 Here the lovely city recites morning prayers to its creator.
 And among the creators—your son Avraham,
 Poet-paver in Israel.

In the evening twilight father will return from his travails
 And like a prayer whisper slowly:
 My dear son Avraham,
 Skin and sinews and bones—
 Hallelujah.

Clothe me, dear mother, in splendor in a coat of many colors
 And at dawn lead me
 to toil.

These lines are rich with biblical allusions and religious imagery, expressed, appropriately enough, in a high Hebrew register that sanctifies this dramatic scene. While the first-person is signaled only in the archaic direct object pronominal

⁹ Both Avraham Hagorni-Green and Yael Chaver also note similarities between Shlonsky and the Yiddish expressionist poet Peretz Markish, a comparison bolstered by meetings between the two poets, first in Ekaterinoslav and later during Markish's 1923 visit to Palestine (Chaver 107–08; Hagorni-Green, "Gishot yesod u-foetika mutsheret" 118–19). See, also, Finkin.

¹⁰ Among the many readings of this poem, see Finkin 9–12; Goldberg ("Al arba'a shirim shel A. Shlonsky" and *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself* 82–84); Hever 38–40; and Laor.

suffixes attached to the elevated imperative verbs *halbishini* (dress me) and *hovilini* (lead me), the speaker's address immediately focuses on the male body that will be clothed in parental love and then toil on the land. Both of these actions evoke biblical parent-child relationships: the coat of many colors conjures up Jacob's love for Joseph (Genesis 37), a paternal preference with disastrous consequences after Joseph falls victim to his brothers' jealousy; and the early-morning journey recalls Abraham leading his son Isaac to be sacrificed (Genesis 22). Leah Goldberg reads these confluences of love and sacrifice as a reflection of the poet's sense that he also is a chosen son sacrificed on the altar of the new holiness, labor (277). But the opening line also echoes national sentiment through a secondary allusion to splendid garb (*bigdey tifartekh*) in Isaiah: "Awake, awake, clothe yourself in your strength, oh Zion, clothe yourself in the garb of your splendor, oh Jerusalem, holy city . . ." (Isaiah 52:1). The lyric persona thus suddenly shares the textual role of the feminized Zion and Jerusalem, becoming part of a national collective that is to be clothed in strength and splendor. Splendidly garbed as a laborer, he poetically fulfills Isaiah's prophetic exhortation, reviving in the holy tongue a long dormant land.

Shlonsky's well-known poetic persona emerges in the third stanza, precisely in the middle of the poem. While the opening lines alluded to the biblical Joseph and Isaac, here a modern-day Abraham takes center stage as a "poet-paver" in Israel, fulfilling his biblical forefather's instructions to come and settle in a new land.¹¹ As he assumes ownership of both poem and landscape, the speaker coins a hyphenated identity for himself that melds the cultural and physical work of realizing the Zionist dream. The *paytan*, a versifier, is yoked to the *solel*, a road-paver, a job central to the Zionist efforts to tame the Palestinian wilderness and promote Jewish settlement. This combination of poet and laborer proclaims a new approach to poetry in the holy land through its proud use of the word *paytan* (versifier) rather than the more common *meshorer* (poet). *Paytanim*, often anonymous, composed Hebrew liturgical poetry from the first century to the beginning of the Hebrew Enlightenment, writing sacred verse intended to embellish an obligatory prayer or to accompany a religious ceremony. This "versification" became a target of the poets of the late nineteenth-century Hebrew renaissance, who attacked the *piyyut* as an inferior art form laden with stilted rhetoric and flowery phrases, but *paytan* was reclaimed later by Shlonsky and his peers as a fitting title for a pioneering Hebrew poet.¹²

Like many aspects of Shlonsky's work, the choice of the word *versifier* also ushers another semantic field into the complex allusive framework. Goldberg argues that the choice of the unusual word *paytan*—a typically Shlonskian move—was motivated more by the Russian concept of the poet as proud talent than the traditional versifier of Jewish tradition (278). But Shlonsky imbues the traditional word *paytan* with a Zionist connotation that he ironically imports from the work of Sergey Esenin, a popular Russian modernist poet and one of the founders of Imaginism. In a 1922 issue of the literary journal *Hedim*, Shlonsky published his translation

¹¹ "And the Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father's house to the land I will show you. And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing'" (Genesis 12:1–3; trans Alter).

¹² See Uri Zvi Grinberg's use of the term *paytan* during the 1920s, particularly in his programmatic poem "Tur-malka" and the manifestoes in his short-lived journal *Sadan*.

of Esenin's "Hooligan" ("Khuligan," 1919), along with an enthusiastic review of the poem several pages later. In his commentary on the poem, Shlonsky focuses in particular on two lines:

Русь моя! Деревянная Русь!
Я один твой певец и глашатай. (Esenin 153)
My Rus! Dear Rus of wood!
I am your only singer and herald! (Esenin, Brengauz, and Levitan 245)

Shlonsky translates the same lines into Hebrew:

רוסיה שלי! אתה—רוסיה של עץ!
קרונך ופיוטך—אני הוא! (61)
("Le 'viduyo shel chuligan" 61)
My Russiya! You—my Russiya of wood!
Your proclaimer and poet [*paytan*]—I am he!

Esenin sings to his Rus, the early name for the emerging nation, and dons the mantle of national singer in a manner that is well suited to Shlonsky's desire for a new Hebrew poetry. Particularly interesting is Esenin's choice of *glashatai* (глашатай), an archaic word for a court herald that comes from *glas* or voice.¹³ For Esenin, the hooligan, not the conventional poet, heralds the nation. Shlonsky translates Esenin's patriotic singer into the Hebrew *paytan* and integrates this figure into his own work, just as he incorporates the extensive Imaginist emphasis on figurative language into his poetry. Although Esenin's hooligan is an appealing model for Shlonsky, as a socialist he deemphasizes the nationalist elements of the Russian herald, while still sharing Esenin's enthusiasm for an alternative model of the poet in service to his land and people.

But as he creates a *piyyut* of sorts, a secular-sacred poem-prayer that weaves the new land into a text studded with religious imagery and biblical allusions, Shlonsky's lyric persona also maintains the identity of "your son Avraham." The avant-garde celebration of labor, with its vivid imagery and expressionist rhythms, continually refers to the speaker's family; from the opening apostrophe to the mother to the father's whispered prayer, it alludes to a parade of biblical sons, from Isaac to Joseph and Ephraim. Shlonsky's lyric persona thus alternates between the role of the son and the poet-paver, oscillating between the child's memory of the parental home and the exalted, almost ecstatic view of the new land. Leah Goldberg attempts to reconcile these dimensions into a synthetic whole, reading this poem quasi-biographically as a nostalgic meeting point between a lost childhood and a new reality, a bridge between the Jewish diaspora and the Zionist experience:

This is the bridge upon which the poet stood above the river of his life, one bank—the tradition of the Jewish people, *aba-ima*, part of the Jewish diaspora more than the poet's real, personal biography, and the Hebrew language, the language of prayer in its essence; and the other bank—roads being paved and houses being built in a steamy old-new land, and that same Hebrew language, beginning to call objects by name . . . (276)

Goldberg suggests that "Clothe Me" bridges the Jewish past and future, the diaspora and the land of Israel, a sacred and a secular Hebrew. But in representing the poem as a link between these dichotomies, Goldberg—a contemporary of Shlonsky and fellow participant in the first generation of Hebrew modernists—obscures another linguistic duality that is built into the poem and reflected in its curious publication history.

¹³ Thanks to Sasha Senderovich for this observation, as well as for his help in locating and understanding Esenin's poem in Russian.

Shlonsky included “Clothe Me” as part of longer poems in two collections of poetry—*Le-aba-ima* (*To Papa-Mama*) and *Ba-galgal* (which can be translated as *In the Wheel* or *In the Whirlwind*)—published in the spring and fall of 1927, respectively, and despite a serious economic crisis in Palestine.¹⁴ Doubly inscribed in these collections, the poem shapes a dual identity for the lyric persona as it registers the poet’s affiliations with both the Yiddish of the old parental world and the Hebrew of the new land.

The first of the 1927 collections, *To Papa-Mama*, is a slim volume of lyrics that repeatedly invoke the characters of mother and father, mixing images of a new land with memories of childhood and biblical allusions. Shlonsky’s language is redolent with Yiddish calques and overtones from the title on, as the Hebrew phrase *aba-ima* (papa-mama) is a transparent rendering of the common Yiddish phrase *tate-mame* (parents). “Clothe Me” is the sixth and final section of the title poem “To Papa-Mama,” which traces the speaker’s development from a joyful child, rejoicing in the mud, to a weary grown-up addressing his parents and God:

רַגְלִים קְטַנּוֹת הָיוּ לִּנִּי
(*Le-aba-ima* 33) (אָפּוֹרֶזֶח־אֱלֹהִים! הֵי, נַחַת אָמָא-אָבָא)
We had little feet
(God’s chicks! Oh, parents’ pride and joy)

Opening with a childlike perspective, this poem first focuses on “little feet” that have taken the poetic speaker far from the world of his parents. The second line immediately plunges the poem into the Yiddish language of *tate-mame*, as the exclamation *efrochey-elohim* (God’s chicks) imports the Yiddish endearment *oyfele* (little chick) commonly used to refer to a baby, as well as the parents’ *naches* (joy) from their child. As the final poem in the cycle, “Clothe Me” reads as a culminating address to the parental figures, blending a weary self-sacrifice with the ethos of labor, Hebrew with Yiddish. The first line, *ima kshera* (dear mother), is a calque of the Yiddish phrase *koshere mame*, a colloquial endearment that summons the generic mother figure of Yiddish folksongs. Similarly, the father is explicitly Yiddishized when he returns from his work and slowly whispers his blessing; the Hebrew word *nachat* is used here as an adverb (slowly, leisurely), but by omitting the preposition typically affixed to the adverb (*be-*), Shlonsky simultaneously elevates his Hebrew and calls to mind the related Yiddish phrase *naches fun kinder*, a parent’s delight in his or her child. This single word encapsulates the complicated linguistic and cultural relationship between the two languages: the Yiddish *naches* comes from the Hebrew expression *nachat ru’ach* (satisfaction), but acquires a new meaning in Yiddish—a parent’s pride and delight in a child—which then returns to modern Hebrew with its Yiddish connotations intact. Shlonsky’s poem, however, transforms the set phrase *naches fun kinder* into *nachat ima-aba*, infusing this parental pride with a reciprocal child’s pride and a child-centric view. Here and throughout the collection, papa-mama are filtered through the poetic speaker’s words and language. This *naches* also knits the larger poem together, appearing

¹⁴ I am grateful to Chana Kronfeld for this and many other observations relating to Shlonsky’s poetry.

Like many of his contemporaries, Shlonsky often published poems in literary journals and newspapers and later collected them into books of poetry. Thus “Halbishini” first appeared as the concluding section of the poem “Amal,” published as part of a 1924–1925 yearbook (Tsiporni, Rabinovitch, and Shimonovitch 253–56), and the following year it served as the end of the poem “Le-aba-ima” in the weekend literary supplement to the newspaper *Davar*.

three times in the full text: in the second line, as part of the speaker's exclamation of parents' joy in their child—"Oh, a parent's delight" ("hoy, nachat aba-ima"); in the fourth section, as the speaker's brother describes his young daughter—"and leisurely recounts her wisdom" ("vi-ysaper nachat chokhmoteha"); and at the very end of the poem, with the father's pride in his laborer-son in "Clothe Me." Thus the Hebrew word powerfully evokes Yiddish family and linguistic dynamics, thereby stressing the lyric persona's identity as a Yiddish son.

The poem's linguistic layers are complicated by an intricate poetic form that weaves together different meters and rhythms. Though its scansion is not regular, Jordan Finkin points out that there are significant sections that can be read in meter if one employs the Ashkenazic pronunciation characteristic of the Eastern European Hebrew of Shlonsky's poetic predecessors. This Ashkenazic scansion, however, is often visually disrupted by the layout of the lines, a layout that has led most readers to assume that the poem was written as free verse in the new "Sephardic" or "Israeli" pronunciation adopted in Palestine (9–10). It is of course true that Shlonsky, a key figure in the adoption and implementation of a radically different pronunciation scheme in modern Hebrew, was experimenting with the poetic possibilities of both pronunciations in the middle of the 1920s, a period of transition reflected in *To Papa-Mama* as well as *In the Whirlwind*. But, interestingly enough, Shlonsky himself suggests that "To Papa-Mama" be read using the Ashkenazic pronunciation. In the list of poems at the end of *To Papa-Mama*, Shlonsky differentiates between poems written in the Ashkenazi pronunciation and the new pronunciation that marked his own poetic evolution in the early 1920s. "To Papa-Mama," he tells us, was written with the traditional Ashkenazi stresses (*Le-aba-ima* 30). Even the famous middle line, "a poet-paver in Israel," scans, ironically enough, close to an Ashkenazic trochaic tetrameter: *PAY-tan SOY-lel be-yiz-ROY-el*, or, in essence, a Palestinian poet-paver with a distinct Yiddish flavor.

The strong Yiddish resonances that emerge in the poem "To Papa-Mama" permeate the collection as a whole. "Tishrey," a poem named after the first month of the Hebrew calendar, opens the volume with a curiously understated self-identification.

אָבן. אַני פּוֹעֵט. לָבֵן קֵל כֵּף עָצוּב
שִׁירֵי הָאָחֵרוֹן—כַּמְיָמִים מִיָּמֵה.
הֵבֵן הַלֵּךְ (לָאֵן?). הֵבֵן רוֹצֵה לָשׁוּב
אֶל שִׁיר הָעָרֶשׁ. אָבֵא-אָמָא. (Le-aba-ima 1)

Indeed, I am a versifier. Therefore so sad
Is my last poem—like the days of yore.
The son went (where?), the son wants to return
To the lullaby, papa-mama.

From the first line of the first poem, Shlonsky's poetic persona asserts his role as a *paytan* in a straightforward declarative sentence. A *paytan* without the *solel* attached, Shlonsky's speaker could be a religious versifier, a European poet, or a working-class bard. Despite this ambiguity, the opening stanza invites a biographical reading of this first-person "I": the poet's previous poem that is "so sad" immediately conjures up Shlonsky's first book of poetry, *Pain (Dvay)* (1924). That both the speaker-as-poet and his latest poem are colored by the sadness that dangles at the end of the enjambed first line recalls Shlonsky's brash claim that the poet writes from the depth of his suffering, like Job. Yet this pain, in contrast to Job's afflictions, is emo-

tional rather than physical. Although Barukh Kurzweil reads this poem as emblematic of the sadness that defines Shlonsky's *paytan*, the modern man who can never return home (159–60), in doing so he overlooks the Yiddish echoes that fill the poem, focusing instead on the “condition humaine” of the Cain-like poetic figure.

But as the second half of the stanza indicates, the speaker wants to return not to some universal state or place, but to the language of childhood. The speaker as poet traces his work and his poetic desires back to a Yiddish point of origin marked by the recurring phrase *aba-ima* and the invocation of *shir eres*, the lullaby. While some lullabies, often expressing longings for Zion, had been written in Hebrew by writers such as Aharon Livushitsky during the late nineteenth century, a far better known corpus of songs existed in Yiddish (Hovev 534). As the vernacular language of East European Jewish communities, Yiddish was typically the language in which parents sang their children to sleep. In this poem, however, the son in Palestine is geographically and temporally far from his parents, a reversal of the conventional circumstances of both the early Hebrew lullabies, with their dreams of the holy land, and the well-known Yiddish ones, with mothers singing songs about absent fathers. Here, the lullaby becomes a manifestation of linguistic and personal distance, an intertextual marker of the lost world of *papa-mama*.¹⁵

Thus the speaker is figured as both poet and son in a thoroughly poetic universe, living between his most recent poem and the remembered lullabies. The poem continues in measured, rhymed quatrains that integrate a Shlonskian *tour-de-force* of images and allusions with a continuing meta-poetic perspective; writing in Hebrew and in Palestine, the only way that this homesick son can revisit the comforts of childhood is through poetry. The *paytan's* role in Hebrew literary history is replaced by a very different image of a traditional folk-poet representing the Yiddish sounds and rhythms of childhood.

Shlonsky places “Clothe Me” in a very different context in *Ba-galgal* (*In the Whirlwind*), a longer collection of poetry published only a few months later. While *Ba-galgal* showcases the young, canonical Avraham Shlonsky—from the modernist satire of “Honolulu” to the images of revolution in “Bareness” (“Srak”) and “Mob” (“Asafsuf”) to the many celebrations of land and labor in the “Gilboa” section—it also includes all but two of the poems collected in *To Papa-Mama*—reordered, revised, and scattered throughout the different sections. Thus, for example, the poem “To Papa-Mama” is reprinted toward the end of *In the Whirlwind*, but in a reduced version based on the first half of the original poem. “Clothe Me” appears in its entirety, but at the end of the poem “Toil” (“Amal”), which itself appears in the section entitled “Gilboa.” In the context of *In the Whirlwind*, the aestheticized nostalgia for a Yiddishized childhood of the poems from *To Papa-Mama* is overwhelmed by the range of topics and expressionist style of the other poems in the collection. The *To Papa-Mama* poems no longer form a coherent

¹⁵ Many of Shlonsky's poems include figures familiar from Yiddish lullabies. See, for example, “Azalzel,” “Ne'um ha-shoteh” (“Prophecy of the Fool”), and “Shemesh kashah” (“Hard Sun”). See, also, Moshe Gefen's discussion of Shlonsky and Yiddish lullabies (61–68). Like Bialik before him, Shlonsky's calculated efforts to expand the reach and depth of Hebrew literature included attempts to create Hebrew folk songs and lullabies. If writers did not fill in the gaps in Hebrew culture, Shlonsky argued, people would turn to other languages, “*sdot zarim*” (foreigners' fields), to meet their cultural needs. To promote the Hebrew folksong, Shlonsky created a section in the literary journal *Ktuvim* for “new folksongs” in Hebrew that reflected the new Palestinian reality, but there were few submissions and even fewer successful folksongs or lullabies (Haperin and Sagiv 11–12).

collection that speaks in a different poetic key; rather, they are occasional glimpses of a different side of the poet within an explicitly Zionist-socialist framework.

For example, not only does “Clothe Me” become the concluding section of a different poem (“Toil” instead of “To Papa-Mama”), but Shlonsky also replaces the feet of the earlier version with hands in this one, maintaining the childlike perspective but opening with the words “We have a small palm that has five fingers” rather than “Little feet we had”:

כף יד לנו קטנה ואצבעות קטנות לה.
 אצבעות-שענה דקות להשבר.
 בראשיתן הולם דפק ובקציהן—צפרניים.
 מה נעש לאצבעות ביום שיעברן? (Ba-galgal 93)

We have a little hand and it has five fingers,
 Wax-fingers delicate enough to break
 At one end beats a pulse and at the other—fingernails.
 Oh, what shall we do to the fingers when they are put to work?

These lines concentrate on the hand, detailing its component parts (fingers, fingernails) and anticipating the toiling hands of the “Clothe Me” section. Moreover, even before the collective “we” reveals the body that owns these hands, they are consecrated to manual labor, as the poem looks forward to the day when—not if—they begin to toil. Shlonsky deftly rewrites a verse from the Song of Songs (8:8) to express the inevitability of this labor:

אחות לנו קטנה ושדים אין לה מה נעשה לאחותנו ביום שידבר בה:

We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister when she is spoken for?

In a deft gender reversal, Shlonsky’s poem replaces the little sister of the biblical passage with the poetic speaker. Just as the girl of the Song of Songs will mature sexually, so the speaker’s delicate childhood fingers ultimately will be dedicated to manual labor. These hands thus plunge the poem into an exaltation of labor through the glorification of the male body: its fingers gripping a sickle, sweat dripping from a high forehead over hairy flesh, fists on the sand. In the process, the feminized hands of the diaspora yeshiva student are transformed into the new worker’s hands, hairy and calloused.

The poet-paver Avraham in “Clothe Me” becomes, in the fourth and final section of “Toil,” an extension of this masculine Jewish body. “Clothe Me” immediately evokes this body, summoning the mother-figure to “clothe me in splendor in a coat of many colors” and, soon after, mapping the landscape of Mt. Gilboa onto a different male body, one garbed in the accoutrements of prayer. Again, the poem reverses a traditional biblical metaphor, turning the land-as-sexual-woman into the land-as-worshipping-man to inscribe a new religion of labor. In the context of the preceding sections of the poem, which are written in free verse, these lines also read as free verse in the new Israeli pronunciation. The repetition of words that evoke this landscape under construction, such as labor (*amal*), houses (*batim*), town (*kiryá*), and road (*kvish*), knit together the different sections of the poem with the language and the rhetoric of labor Zionism and overshadow the poem’s Yiddish-inflected words. The speaker’s declaration “we are going to toil” (“*anu holchim eley amal*”) is echoed throughout the poem’s different sections, stressing and sanctifying this labor. Transposed into a radically different poetic context, the poet-paver Avraham is identified here with the sweaty, toiling body of the first half of the poem, the “new Hebrew man,” rather than with the nostalgic child of *aba-ima*.

In *In the Whirlwind*, a very different metapoetic figure presides over this celebration of manual labor, transforming the poetic persona from bard to prophet. While the opening poem of *To Papa-Mama*, “Tishrey,” conveys the speaker’s deep nostalgia for Yiddish and childhood, the first poem of *In the Whirlwind*, “Revelment” (“Hitgalut”), enacts a poetic changing of the guard. Standing alone—neither part of a larger section nor multi-part poem—at the beginning of both *In the Whirlwind* and Shlonsky’s collected works (*Shirim* 9–10), “Revelment” serves as a programmatic initiation into Shlonsky’s canonical poetics (for representative readings of the poem see Bahat and Barzel 73–75). Through a lyrical rewriting of a biblical narrative, Shlonsky “reveals” a thoroughly Hebraic poetic persona. The first three stanzas read:

הַתְּגָלוּת

וְעַל־זָקֵן מְאֹד . . . וּבְנֵי עֲלֵי בְנֵי בְלִיעֵל . . .
וְהַנְּשֵׂר הָיָה מְשֵׁרֵת אֶת ה'
(שְׁמוּאֵל א': ב')

אִי-מִי קָרָא לִי: שְׁמָע!
אִי-מִי קָרָא בְּשְׁמִי.
—מָה?
—מִי?

עֲלֵי אָמַר: שׁוּב שְׁכַב!
עֲלֵי אָמַר: לִשְׁוֹא!
עֲלֵי אָמַר: אֵין חֲזוֹן. כִּי קִהַתָּה עֵינַי.
אֵךְ שׁוּב קָרָא לִי: שְׁמָע!
אֵךְ שׁוּב קָרָא בְּשְׁמִי.
(Ba-galgal 5)¹⁸ הַגִּנְיָ?! אֵיכָה אֲשַׁעַן?

Revelment

And Eli was very old . . . And the sons of Eli were evil-doers . . .
And the youth served God
(I Samuel 2)

Someone called to me: Hear!
Someone called me by name.
—What?
—Who?

Eli said: Lie down!
Eli said: In vain!
Eli said: There is no vision, because my eyes have dimmed.

But again I am called: Hear!
Again my name is called.
How can I answer: Here am I?!

Beginning with its title and epigraph, the poem immerses the reader in biblical language and a biblical atmosphere rather than Yiddish echoes of Eastern Europe. The title “Revelment” anticipates the discovery of both the poem and the volume that follows, while the epigraph explicitly sets the scene by quoting three phrases from the story of the priest Eli and his young apprentice Samuel in I Samuel. Shlonsky deftly appropriates the biblical narrative to suit his poem, subtly reordering the quotations to stress the narrative of succession. In the second chapter of I Samuel, Elkana leaves his son Samuel with Eli to serve God, “and the boy served God before Eli the priest” (I Samuel 2:11). The biblical narrator then switches scenes to focus on Eli’s troublesome sons—“And Eli’s sons were scoundrels and did not know God” (I Samuel 2:12)—before turning to Eli’s old age, “And Eli was very old” (I Samuel 2:22). Shlonsky’s epigraph reverses the order of the three

statements, accentuating the clash between generations; priestly leadership rests with the old priest, his corrupt sons, or the pious youth. Not surprisingly, this pious and deserving—but still unnamed—youth stands in for the narcissistic poet at the center of the poem that follows.

The poem narrates the prophet Samuel's divine summons over the course of several stanzas, representing the climactic calls in stripped-down language filled with sound play and rhyme. As the poem reenacts this call to prophecy, it challenges Bialik's dominant role as the presiding figure and prophet of Hebrew poetry.¹⁶ In the second stanza, Eli orders the poetic persona to bed, ridiculing his pretension because, as he says in the third line, "there is no vision, because my eyes have grown dim." Shlonsky uses the biblical text's careful evocation of the senses of sight and hearing to critique Eli's egotistical claim: if he cannot see—physically or prophetically—then there is nothing to be seen. A barbed critique hides behind this representation of Eli, the presiding priest: Bialik, the prominent Hebrew poet of his generation, was deep into his so-called silent period by the 1920s. If he cannot write, Shlonsky's speaker asks implicitly, does that mean that there is nothing to be written? The poem dramatizes the challenge faced by the next generation to respond to the divine summons with the confidence of the biblical Abraham, who responded to the divine order to sacrifice his son Isaac with the same words, "Here am I" (*hineni*) (Genesis 22:1).

In the second half of the poem, the restrained vocabulary of the divine call gives way to poetic imagery rich with prophetic speech.

הַצוֹת. עַל־יָשִׁישׁ עַל־יָצוּעוֹ יִתְנַפֵּחַ:
 ..כִּנִּי . . . הֵהָ. כִּנִּי—
 וְכִבְרֵר רֹבֵץ הַיְקוּם בִּי. פְּצוּעַ פִּשְׁקִיעַ
 בֵּין פְּנֵי-עֲנַנִּי.
 יְדַעְתִּי: הַנֶּה יָבוֹא יְהוָה.
 הַנֶּה יָבוֹא וַיִּנָּשֶׁק פְּצָעֶיךָ בְּסֶעֶר.
 וְעַלִּי זָקֵן מְאֹד. וְכִנִּי-עַלִּי—נְקָלִים.
 וְאֲנִי—עוֹרֵי נֶעֶר—
 אֵךְ הַנֶּה שׂוֹאֵג יְקוּם. הֲנֵנוּ כּוֹאֵב וְרָן.
 וּבְמִזְרַח הָאֲדָמָה אֶצְבַּע בְּרָק לִי קוֹרְאָה.
 —דַּבֵּר יְהוָה. כִּי שׁוֹמֵעַ עֲבָדְךָ! (Ba-galgal 5–6)

Midnight. Eli is old and groans on his bed:

"My sons . . . ahh, my sons"—

And the cosmos crouches within me, wounded like the sunset
 Among the carcasses of my clouds.

I've known: Here comes God.

God comes and kisses your wounds in the storm

And Eli is very old. And the sons of Eli—scoundrels,

And I am still a boy—

Here the cosmos roars, pained and joyous,

And in the red east a finger of lightning calls to me.

Speak, God, for your servant is listening!

¹⁶ Bialik's prophetic mode and status as "national poet" are much more complex than Shlonsky's critique suggests. It is also important to note that Shlonsky's own approach to the prophetic mode changes dramatically between his early poetry and persona in the 1920s and his later work. For discussions of Bialik's own complex relationship with prophetic and national poetry, see, for example, Miron, *Chadashot me-ezor ha-kotev* and *H.N. Bialik*; and Shoham.

In an evocative image the lyrical voice lays claim to the cosmos while the bloodied sky ends the day and metaphorically encapsulates this narrative of succession. As Ya'akov Bahat points out, Shlonsky's sunset imagery alludes to a rabbinic midrash on Samuel's commissioning as a prophet: "Rabbi Chiya son of Abba said Rabi Yochanan said: A righteous man (*tsadik*) does not leave this world until another righteous man like him is created, as it is written (Ecclesiastes 1:5) 'and the sun sets and the sun rises'—before the sun of Eli set, the sun of Samuel was shining (Yoma, 38b)" (170). The poem dramatizes the setting of the sun and the rising of a new visionary, tracing a poetic ascent into subjectivity. The poem closes with the divinely inspired renewal of the universe, bellowing in its pain and joy as dawn creeps across the sky. Reborn and divinely commissioned, the speaker wholeheartedly embraces his mantle as prophet, God's servant, and poet, the anointed voice of the Hebrew poetry that follows.

While the poem stages a mystical vision of prophetic and, implicitly, poetic succession through its biblical and rabbinic allusions, it also invokes the imagery of social revolution. As the sun sets on the old order, the poem heralds the rising of the "red dawn" frequently invoked in the literature that followed the Russian revolution. Called by a rising "roar" and a "finger of lightening" from the Soviet "red east," Shlonsky's speaker responds to a summons from the proletariat, replacing biblical divinity with the rising power of modernity and socialism. This poetic fusion of socialist imagery and biblical narrative reflected the prevailing attitude among Labor Zionists, particularly members of the left-wing party *Ha-shomer ha-tsa'ir* in the early 1920s. Perceiving themselves as a community (*eda*) rather than a political party, Shlonsky and his ideological companions were inspired "by the sense of being . . . a spiritual and moral vanguard" (Shimoni 225). In 1927, the same year that "Revelment" was published as the opening poem in Shlonsky's *In the Whirlwind*, *Ha-shomer ha-tsa'ir* was articulating its ideological platform as part of a larger process of ideological politicization in the Yishuv. Buoyed by the rhetoric of revolution but working within traditional themes, Shlonsky's poem reflects his unique distillation of the Zionist left's transition to what Gideon Shimoni calls "a unique ideological alchemy of constructive socialism, nationalism and Marxist rhetoric" (225).

Like the work of the Russian Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, the poem stresses its speaker's (and so Shlonsky's) youthful vigor. Replacing the wistful memories of an Eastern European childhood with a brash young poetic consciousness, Shlonsky's poem represents his efforts to storm the bastions of traditional literature and to renew Hebrew poetry: "not newness in poetry but a new poetry" (*Yal-kut Eshel* 56). As Michael Gluzman suggests, Shlonsky employs the poetics of newness advanced by the Russian Futurists for political means—to help create a new society, a new language, and a new homeland (48). But he also uses this "newness" to characterize himself as a fresh, vibrant writer on the literary scene. Ironically, Shlonsky's poetic persona is here thoroughly traditional: he is a prophet in Bialik's mold. In contrast to the term *paytan*, the traditional versifier, or the *paytan-solel*, Shlonsky's poet-paver, this new persona places Shlonsky firmly within the narrative of Hebrew literary history. As a result, even though he seeks to dethrone Bialik as presiding poet-prophet, Shlonsky's speaker in this early poem writes himself into the vaunted literary tradition of poetic prophecy epitomized by the very poet he would displace.

The double inscription of Shlonsky's self-representation as *paytan solet be-yisra'el* in "Clothe Me" suggests two very different lyrical personas, the canonical laborer-poet of "Toil" and the homesick *oyfele* (chick) of "To Papa-Mama," as well as two dramatically different metapoetic and mythopoetic constructs: the prophet of modern Hebrew poetry in *In the Whirlwind* and the versifier of a Yiddish-inflected Jewish tradition in *To Papa-Mama*. In a thoroughly modernist gesture, Shlonsky splits himself in two distinct directions, crafting one persona that bolsters his standing in the Hebrew literary establishment and a second that is largely omitted and overlooked in literary history because it challenges the anti-Yiddish stance of that same establishment.

Despite Bialik's warm welcome for Yiddish and its writers in 1927, there was no place for Shlonsky's ambiguous relationship to the Yiddish language in his poetic persona, nor in the canonical image of the poet shaped by literary critics. In a review of Shlonsky's poetry, Ya'akov Rabinovitch writes: "The time has come to stop the folkloric stunts and self-indulgence, to leave the madness of growing up to others, and also 'aba-ima'—we've had enough" (419). Although Rabinovitch, the editor of the influential literary journal *Hedim*, does not explicitly mention Yiddish, he criticizes Shlonsky's self-indulgence, his folkloric stunts (*lehatey-amamiyut*), and obsession with "aba-ima"—all of which target the Yiddish elements in these poems. In the same year, Menashe Falk mocked "Clothe Me" in *Grogeret*, a collection of humor and satire; in it a parody entitled "To Daddy and Mommy" ("Le-abaleh, imaleh") ridicules the poem's poetic pretension, pseudo-childishness, and Yiddish inflections as it deflates its Zionist mission with the lines "Clothe me, dear mother, in pants of splendor / —we are going to poetry!" (Halperin and Sagiv 290). Even critics from within Shlonsky's modernist camp avoided the first of his 1927 collections. In the first book-length study of Shlonsky's poetry, Yisrael Zmora ignores *To Papa-Mama* altogether, discussing Shlonsky's first book, *Dvay*, and then moving directly to *In the Whirlwind*, *In These Days*, and *Stones of Void*. In her discerning essay on "Clothe Me," Leah Goldberg neglects to mention that it appears anywhere other than as part of the poem "Toil." And in his book on Shlonsky's fraught relationship with Bialik, Avraham Hagorni Green focuses extensively on the poet and his work in the 1920s, but he overlooks the strong Yiddish component in *To Papa-Mama* and claims that Shlonsky only rediscovered Yiddish at the very end of his life (*Shlonsky ba'avotot Bialik* 51–52).

Shlonsky was himself complicit in this suppression of *To Papa-Mama*: he scattered most of its poems throughout *In the Whirlwind* and later omitted it from the publication of his collected works in 1954, perhaps because it was not compatible with the image he had shaped for himself as the standard-bearer of a new and resolutely Hebraic modernist poetics. The pioneering poet of "On Bialik's Jubilee" and *In the Whirlwind* overshadows the Yiddish resonances that mark the manifesto "Freshness" and *To Papa-Mama*. Similarly, the prophetic dimension of Shlonsky's literary persona eclipses the complex *paytan* that figures prominently in one of Shlonsky's best known poems.

The view that Yiddish had all but disappeared in the Yishuv by the late 1920s is, as Yael Chaver has demonstrated, a Zionist myth that camouflaged the significant place held by Yiddish language and culture in the Yishuv (34). But by 1927 a prominent Hebrew poet such as Shlonsky could only articulate his nostalgia for Yid-

dish in a coded manner, splitting his poetic persona in two distinct directions through his publication of two books of poetry. In the process, however, he thematizes the linguistic and cultural split between an East European childhood and a pioneering Palestinian life, between the Yiddish sounds of home and the Hebrew neologisms of this new homeland, leaving traces of a very different Avraham Shlonsky at the center of the Hebrew canon. Indeed, if Shlonsky and his poetry represent a particular literary and historical moment in Hebrew culture, they are far from the only instance of the complex and often conflicted suppression of Yiddish in the fashioning of a new Hebrew identity and the formation of the modern Hebrew canon.

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