

Revisiting Bialik: A Radical Mizrahi Reading of the Jewish National Poet

A Personal Introduction

“Ken Latzipor”
Ken latzipor bein haetzim
Uvaken la shalos beitzim
Uvechol beitzim
Has pen taier
Yashen lo efro’ah
Efro’ah zaier.¹
“Bird’s Nest”
The bird has a nest
amongst the trees
and in the nest
she has three eggs.
And in each egg—
Hush, don’t disturb!—
There lies asleep
a baby chick.

I can still remember the gestures and expressions of the Yemenite kindergarten teacher as she acted out this lovely poem. We followed her in song, joyfully pronouncing the words with a guttural *het* and *‘ayin* that came from deep in our throats since we had just arrived from Morocco and Arabic still rolled off our tongues. When the teacher told us about Bialik, it was clear to me that he was one of ours, a sort of grandfatherly figure producing poems for his many grandchildren. What can I say? It was love at first sound. This was the first poem I learned to recite and sing as a child in Israel. It was followed by this one:

¹ The Hebrew texts of the poems and lectures by H.N. Bialik quoted in this essay have been taken from Bar-Tov, Asaf, ed., Project Ben-Yehuda. The transliterations are mine, as are the English translations, unless indicated otherwise.

“Parash”
 Rootz ben-susi
 Rutz udehar!
 Rutz babak’aa
 Tus bahar!
 Rutza tusa,
 Yom valayil—
 Parash ani
 Uven-hayil! (Bar-Tov)

“A Knight”
 Run, my horse,
 Run and gallop!
 Run through valleys,
 Fly up mountains!
 Run and fly,
 Day and night—
 A horseman am I,
 A hero knight!

We children—or at least the boys among us—used to roar the song and act it out, charging around, stomping our rubber boots on the ground, and slapping our little equestrian butts just like our energetic young teacher. Of course we had seen neither a horse nor a horseman pass through our gloomy slums, unless you counted the kerosene seller’s old donkey. But I easily and happily imagined the horseman, a heroic knight I would one day become.

I did not become a horseman, of course, and I have never ridden a horse, but Bialik accompanied me, as he did every Israeli schoolchild, throughout my studies, and I was always faithful. Thanks to him, I fell in love with language as a young boy: not with Hebrew, but with the language of poetry itself, with its power to create worlds and imbue them with meaning by using just a few words. Very early on I tried my hand at poetry, but it would be years before I would dare to publish my first poem.

I survived my high school years in Israel unharmed—which is to say, without any political consciousness, or at least not the kind that would make me read subversively between, or beneath, the lines. The university where I studied literature and politics in the early eighties was still dominated by the Tel-Aviv Structuralist school (Mishani), and it was only thanks to an encounter with one radical teacher, Dr. Naomi Kis, who supported the Black Panthers,² that I began to be skeptical of what I saw and heard. This skepticism increased over the years, until every text that fell into my hands became full of question marks, and that was before I’d even heard of Derrida or deconstruction. As a result, I may never again be able to read Bialik with the excitement I felt as a child. Yet today I feel the need, as a politically conscious writer and researcher, to revisit the writings of the man who remains the most important national poet of Ashkenazi Zionism.³

² The Black Panthers was a radical social movement founded by second-generation Mizrahim, mostly of Moroccan origin, in Jerusalem. It protested the economic oppression of Mizrahim by the Israeli regime. See Bernstein and Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict*.

³ I use the term *Ashkenazi Zionism* rather than *Zionism* throughout my work in order to make clear the association of political Zionism with European Jewry (Ashkenazi). Middle Eastern and North African Jewry had no affinity or partnership whatsoever with the development of political Zionism, although the religious longings for Zion and the commandment to settle there were also part of these Jews’ lives throughout the Ottoman Empire. See Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict*, Introduction and Chapter 1.

In my first year studying literature in Jerusalem, I read some works by Bialik in a required course. That was where I lost my innocence, but in a most unexpected way. After class one day, I asked a young Palestinian classmate from Galilee whether he found it difficult to deal with Bialik's national poetry, which was, after all, the poetry that had accompanied a Zionist revolution (cf. Gluzman et al.) whose main tenets were the settler-colonizing of the country and the dispossession of Palestinians from their land and livelihood (an endeavor Bialik attempted to identify as "enlightened occupation," even before the term was invented). My classmate responded by reciting Bialik's poem "El Ha Tzipor" ("To the Bird"):

Shalom rav shuvech, tzipora nehmedet
 Meártzot hahom el haloni—
 El kolech ki arev ma nafshi kalata
 Bahoref beozvech meoni.
 Zameri, saperi, tzipori hayekara,
 Me'erezt merhakim niflaot,
 Hagam sham ba'arezt hahama, hayfa,
 Tirbena haraot, hat'laot?
 Hatis'ie li shalom me'ahai betzion,
 Me'ahai harhokim hakrovim?
 Hoi meúsharim! Hayadu yado'a
 Ki esbol, hoi esbol machovim? (Bar-Tov)

Greetings of welcome, lovely bird,
 from the warm countries to my window—
 my soul yearned for your pleasant voice,
 in winter after you left my home.

Sing to me, tell me, dear bird
 from the faraway wonderful land,
 is there in the land of sun and beauty,
 much evil and hardship too?

Have you greetings from my brothers in Zion,
 my distant brothers yet near?
 Oh Happy ones, have they known,
 that I suffer, great pains I suffer?

Do they know how numerous my foes stand,
 so many, oh countless, who rose against me?
 Sing me, my bird, wonders from the Land,
 where spring will endure for eternity.

But he recited the lines, with slight adaptations, as if they were spoken by a Palestinian exile who, yearning for the land from which he has been severed, seeks greetings from his brothers in Palestine with the help of a migrating bird, the *asphoura*. (*Asphoura* shares its root with the Hebrew word for bird, *tzipor*, and migrating birds are a common motif in Palestinian national poetry.) In this reading, the Palestinian exile, who now lives in the cold of the north, tells the precious bird about the tribulations and sufferings of exile and asks her to describe for him the mountains and valleys, rivers and hills, and trees and fruits of Palestine.

I had never heard anything like this. I was excited and astonished, since at twenty-two I had never discussed such matters with a Palestinian. In fact, most of my encounters with Palestinians had occurred under completely different circumstances, and mainly when I was a soldier in the Israeli armed forces. It was one of those rare moments of sudden clarity in life, as though someone hands

you a pair of reading glasses and you are amazed to discover that up until that moment you were reading only one dimension of the text, because you simply could not see the rest. I wanted to tell him that as a Jew I had never imagined such a reading. But, before I had time to say a word, he turned my own question on me and shocked me by asking: “And you’re a Mizrahi Jew [a Jew from the Muslim world]: How do you read such an Ashkenazi [European] poem? Like an Ashkenazi from the cold lands? Or a Moroccan from the desert? What connection do you have with the suffering of the Ashkenazi Diaspora and Christian anti-Semitism?” Still startled by the revelation, I took the book and began to read the poem as a Mizrahi, albeit not yet a politically aware one. My teachers at the time—including some who are today post-structuralist, post-Zionist, and post-modern critics—had never presented me with the possibility of such a reading. A few years later I was introduced to Derrida, who gave me permission not just to deconstruct Bialik, but to tear him apart.

I must confess that I did not read Bialik after that, and I tired of studying Ashkenazi Hebrew literature overall. I did not find myself there; I did not find my voice. The Hebrew that I loved so much sounded foreign most of the time, and that was an especially cruel feeling, because for me it is not truly a foreign language. I only continued my studies thanks to meeting the scholar Ephraim Hazan, who opened a new-old world to me: the Hebrew poetry of North Africa—and primarily of Morocco, the country where I was born. For the first time at university I read texts whose language had echoed in my mind since my childhood in Morocco, Yet Hazan himself was not welcome to teach “liturgics” in the Hebrew Literature department in Jerusalem. In my work with him, I was exposed for the first time to Hebrew poets who filled “gaps” in the historical-literary continuity from the Spanish expulsion of the Jews in 1492 to the revival of East European Jewry in the mid 1800s. I discovered, for example, that when I.L. Gordon, a poet who preceded Bialik and shaped the modern Ashkenazi Hebrew poem, was still a boy studying Torah in Vilnius, the Moroccan poet Jacob Berdugo (who died in 1843) was writing Jewish Hebrew poems such as the following, written in honor of the holy cities in Eretz Yisrael. It begins:

Hon al yona, hon al yona
 Al na yintzor veyifde na
 Yerushalyim ier kodesh
 Yameha kekedem hadesh
 Veoyveha hadek ha'desh
 Tishkon alehem anana. (Hazan 322)

Have compassion for your dove,
 Compassion for your dove,
 God please save and redeem
 Jerusalem the holy,
 and bring back her old glory,
 her enemies eradicate and squeeze
 may a cloud rest upon them.⁴ (my translation)

For me this was an immeasurable discovery. I had grown up listening to North African *piyutim* (odes), which we sang on every holiday and at family celebrations, but because I was taught in school to think of *literature* as being comprised

⁴ The dove is one of the metaphors for the biblical “People of Israel,” as in Song of Songs 2:14: “O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock.”

of works that came from secularized Europe, it had never occurred to me that the songs we heard at home and in the synagogue were in fact Hebrew poetry.

I would like to revisit the poetry of the Ashkenazi Zionist poet Haim Nahman Bialik and offer a radical Mizrahi reading—namely, a reading that examines Jewish and Israeli history and culture through the radical Mizrahi discourse that has evolved in Israel during the past generation as part of Mizrahi resistance to the cultural and social oppression of Mizrahim (see, for example, Chetrit, “Mizrahi Politics”). This new Mizrahi discourse has both a critical and alternative dimension. The critical dimension views Israel’s founding and dominant ideology and movement—Ashkenazi Zionism—as a national Jewish-European organization that is politically neocolonial, economically capitalist, and culturally Eurocentric-Orientalist and anti-Arab (see Shohat). The alternative dimension focuses on economic, political, and cultural reforms. Within this broad generalization there are shades and nuances, of course, as well as a number of tensions, both theoretical and political, particularly on the question of the Palestinian national struggle (see Behar). Equipped with these critical lenses, I shall try to read Bialik’s poems both in the context of their own time and in the Israeli context of my own life. I will focus on three poems that I believe are central to Bialik’s identity as national poet, although the first was written in the early days of his emerging nationalism: “To the Bird” (“El Hatzipor”) from 1892, “A Small Missive” (“Igeret Ktana”) from 1893, and “City of the Killings” (“Be’ir Hahareiga”) from 1903. Alongside these poems, I will revisit two of Bialik’s lesser known lectures that are nonetheless critical to this discussion: “Tehiyat Hasefaradim” (“The Revival of the Sephardim”), which he gave to an audience of young Sephardim in Jerusalem in 1926, and “Eretz Yisrael” (“The Land of Israel”), which he delivered to Jewish youths in Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania, in 1929.

A Question of Geography and Culture: From the (East European) Cold Lands to the (Middle Eastern) Desert Heat

At school in the immigrant neighborhood in Ashdod, I first read and studied the poem “To the Bird” (see the first four stanzas quoted above) in the fourth or fifth grade. The teacher read the poem, appropriately, with Ashkenazi accentuation,⁵ like Bialik had written it (at only eighteen years old). Bialik was uncertain whether Hebrew poetry was an art form that would persist (see Aberbach xi–xii). Moreover, he was not yet entirely devoted to the new Jewish national movement. However, it was not only this strange and foreign accentuation—later reinforced by the music teacher—but also the content itself that should have raised questions among North African children who had just arrived in Israel. *Where was the poet writing from, dear pupils?* asked the teacher and then immediately responded to her own question: From the distant, freezing Diaspora. *And what does the poet feel in the faraway Diaspora, dear pupils?* Cold, suffering, pain, and persecution. *Who rises up against him in the Diaspora?* Exactly, the evil *goyim*, enemies of the Jews. *And what does he long for, dear children?* For the beautiful warm land. *And where is this warm land, children?* Here, in the East, Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Zion.

⁵ In general this means stressing the first syllable of a word, as in Yiddish, as opposed to Sephardic accentuation, which stresses the final syllable.

If I could revisit that lesson, I would probably find that I shed a tear or two for this miserable Jew. Had I been able to, I would have sent him a desert bird full of stories and love songs from Eretz Yisrael, and I was surely thrilled to learn that he eventually reached the warm and beautiful land, where he died as the national poet in his home in Tel Aviv, on a street that was named after him while he was still living. If I can reconstruct this aspect of that scene, however, it is impossible to recover the uncertainty in the soul of a young child who hears, on the one hand, stories of his parents' longing for their North African Arab homeland—stories and songs that never mention enemies or persecutors, cold or pain, or poverty of the kind that degrades a person's spirit—and, on the other hand, from his admired teachers, accounts of the anguish of the cold Diaspora, Christian tyrants, Cossacks, and terrible persecutors. Needless to say, the temperature in the Moroccan Sahara oasis from which we were brought to Israel was immeasurably higher than that of the Ukrainian plains where Bialik wrote this depressing poem in which he longs for a land he has never known.

Our teacher, like thousands of other teachers over three generations, did not know that she was engaged in the rewriting of Jewish history through an act of deceit, manipulation, and concealment, and the reproduction of Orientalist assumptions. She did know that she was tasked with reshaping these little ignorant Arab-Jews to fit an Ashkenazi Zionist mold, featuring a narrative of exile-persecution-suffering-Holocaust-immigration-settlement-revolt-triumph-independence. The typical Israeli teacher in a school for Mizrahi children read lines such as these without confusion: "Hariham, Haniham Eloha Et Tzion, / Im Oda Azuva Likvarim?" (Bar-Tov; Has God pitied, comforted Zion, / or is she a graveyard still?). I suppose she was unaware, and therefore could not tell us, that, while Bialik was imagining Zion as a distant graveyard, Ottoman Palestine was inhabited not only by three-hundred thousand Palestinians, but also by some thirty-thousand mostly Sephardic Jews from the Arab and Muslim countries, as well as some non-Zionist Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews.⁶ Bialik's delightful bird did not tell him that in 1892 the North African Jew Aharon Shloush had already built his home outside Jaffa, founding the first modern Jewish neighborhood with Haim Amzaleg and Yosef Moyal. Later, in the history that became official, we were taught that Eliezer and Shimon Rokah were the men who had founded the first neighborhood outside Jaffa, called Neveh Tzedek (see Levine). We likewise never learned about the Mugarbi Moroccan families who established Nahalat Shiv'aa and Mahaneh Yisrael, the first neighborhoods outside the walls of the Old City in Jerusalem. Indeed, although two thousand Moroccan Jews lived in Jerusalem at the end of the nineteenth century, I never heard or read of them during my Zionist school years in Israel; if I had, it would have warmed my heart, surrounded as it was by the chilly melancholy that attended our being reshaped into "new" Jews—that is to say, Jews who were persecuted by the *goyim* and redeemed by the Zionists.

Who is the brother in Zion to whom Bialik writes in his 1893 poem "A Small Missive" ("Igeret Ketana")?

⁶ Bialik was one of the first to develop the Zionist motif of Zion as a barren and abandoned land, as in the saying, "a land without a people, for a people without a land," usually attributed to Israel Zangwill, a Zionist activist from the turn of the twentieth century.

Ve'ata—hamèushar! lecha merhav misaviv,
 Dey avir linshima, dey shemesh, dey tzel.
 Im-ta'avod kashe—hoi, ahi hehaviv!
 La'avod velisbol tzivanu gam-El.
 Lo tizra el-kotzim, lo tiga larik,
 Od tir'e et yigmal amalcha verava;
 Od yiv'ar yitlakah kalapid hazik
 Tzafanta bilvav'cha betzet nedava. (Bar-Tov)

And you—the fortunate! For you the open plains,
 Sufficient air to breathe, plenty of sunshine, shade too.
 If you work hard—oh, dear brother!
 To work and to suffer is God's command.
 Your labor for the land is not for nothing,
 You shall see times of reward for your efforts;
 The spark from your generous heart
 Shall ignite and burn as a torch.

Who is this hardworking farmer of whom Bialik is envious and whom he encourages, promising great rewards for his labor? Certainly he is not among the Mugrabis of Jerusalem or the Sephardim of Jaffa, Hebron, Tiberias, and Tsefat, who would never have picked up a hoe. Perhaps he is referring to the Yemenites who came before the first Zionist Ashkenazi *aliya*, in a wave they named after Song of Songs 7:9: “*I shall climb up into the palm tree.*” (These were not the Yemenites of Yavnieli, who were brought as slave-like workers to serve the Ashkenazi established colonies in the early 1910s [see Meir].) And Bialik certainly wasn't referring to the group of independent Yemenite farm workers who settled on the shores of Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) around 1912, only to be expelled by Ashkenazi settlers in 1930 (Nini). To this day Israeli curricula do not mention the story of the Yemenites who settled on the Kinneret, survived the difficult days of the First World War, and were later driven out from their land by the Ashkenazi-Zionist “history makers” and eradicated by the historians. History, as we all know, is written, not just made. So who was Bialik's farmer-brother? An Ashkenazi who was the product of Zionist fantasy.

Zionist historiography has a defining principle: that which does not serve the Ashkenazi “Zionist meta plot,” as Gershon Shaked has called it, is excluded from a history of and by the occupying and ruling European peoples, who remake the non-European world, along with its natives and its imagery, according to their own needs (see Fanon, Said, and Shohat). The early configuring of the Jewish-Arab natives, and with greater vigor the Palestinians, as those who live outside of history is precisely what enabled their later economic dispossession and cultural oppression, including their uprooting and relocation from one region to another.

In his poem “A Small Missive,” as in other poems by Bialik and his generation, Palestine/Eretz Yisrael is a province of the imagination—distant and ungraspable in any concrete way. The handful of youth group leaders who went there roughly a decade earlier (calling themselves “The First Aliya,” meaning *the first ascenders*) were not able to plant their feet on the ground and normalize this connection to the biblical land because this romantic affinity was based not only on geo-cultural distance, but also on persecution and suffering:

Madu'a lo tabit hashemesh elai?
 Rak-kor, ave horef . . . vatir'e, havivi,
 Et-sidre bereshit mishtanim alai?
 Ein tikva po, ahi, kvar kala haketz,
 Pas hesed Eloha, bal-yaas yeshu-ot;
 Ein tikva layona betziporne hanetz—
 Ve'ata shtei enai mizraha nesu-ot. (Bar-Tov)

Why won't the sun look my way?
 Only cold, winter clouds . . . Can you see, my dear,
 The natural order of things toppled upon me?
 No hope here, brother, the end is here,
 God's grace has gone, no more redemptions;
 No hope for the dove in the claws of a hawk—
 And now, my two eyes look to the East.

Moreover, as the pressures of the terrible life of exile increase, so the fantastical vision of a Holy Land that promises redemption and liberty expands:

Hakarmel, hasharon gdeluni me'az,
 Uveshad yazuv halav yalduti fineku,
 Sie harerei olam samani am-az,
 Haruhot hatehorot atzmotai hizeku.
 Mimerom harei levona, merosh givot mor
 Gam-zera Adonai litzdaka zara'ti,
 Uvekol hatzotzrat terua'a hamehatzetzer "dror"! (Bar-Tov)

Carmel [a mountain in the North] and Sharon [coastal plains] have nurtured me since,
 With milk-dripping breast spoiled my childhood,
 Atop of world mountains that made us courageous people
 The pure winds strengthened my bones.
 From the heights of frankincense mountains,
 from the peak of myrrh hills
 A seed of the Lord for justice I planted,
 And with a trumpet I blow the blast of freedom!

Of course, this first-person narrative is not a lyric; rather, it is written from an *I am the nation* standpoint, fondly clinging to a distant childhood in the lap of the kind motherland.

In contrast to the imaginary land produced by Bialik and others of his generation, the Eretz Yisrael of contemporary Sephardic poets is an actual place to which they travel back and forth as part of life in the Mediterranean Middle-Eastern expanse. They pray for its welfare and divine redemption—always divine, never human. Thus, for example, Jacob Berdugo dedicates his poem “In Honor of a Groom” (“Lichvod Hatan”) to a groom who passed through Meknes on his way to the Land of Israel and who will return to his homeland of Morocco after his travels to the Holy Lands: “Hai olamim adon mamlacha / Yishmor tzetcha uboacha / Birkat horim Yevareche'cha / Beracha asher berach Moshe/” (Hazan; The eternal master of the kingdom / will foresee your departure and return / A parental blessing may He bless you / the blessing of Moses, my translation). In short, this is a routine matter. In these works, immigration to and settlement in Eretz Yisrael is a well-known religious commandment, but it does not evolve into a desire for territorial nationalist ideas. Indeed, Ephraim Hazan suggests that many of Jacob Berdugo's poems deal with the Jewish life-cycle (birth, *bris*, *bar-mitzvah*, wedding, death, and so forth) in order to teach us “about a social atmosphere that is hospitable to poetry and the existence of a poetic culture” (322).

The poets of North Africa and the East in general did not neglect secular poetry, or the poetry of friendship and even love and desire, Andalusian traditions that continued alongside the liturgical poetry that naturally gained a broader audience.

Enlightened Colonization: Bialik in Herzl's Footsteps

Some three decades after writing "A Small Missive," Bialik no longer had to imagine Eretz Yisrael and its happy farmers: he settled there himself, in Tel Aviv, in 1924, and then set off to preach Zionism to his Ashkenazi brethren in Europe. In a lecture entitled "Eretz Yisrael," presented to a group of young Zionists in Kovno, Lithuania, in 1929, Bialik not only analyzes the Jewish situation in Eretz Yisrael, but also employs his prophetic powers to legitimize its colonization and settlement: "A nation, even when it has historical rights to a land, must occupy it with its own hands" (my translation here and throughout my discussion of this lecture; for the original Hebrew, see Bar-Tov). Yet the enterprise must be an enlightened one: "We return to Eretz Yisrael with the most sincere and honest of intentions. We come there not to seek wealth and property, and not to live an idle life. On the contrary! Nor do we come there to bring sorrow to others, to dispossess anyone, to impoverish anyone. Not in the slightest!" Not exactly an occupation or colonization, then, but rather a "return"; and yet not quite a "return," because it is necessary to occupy. This colonization and settlement, Bialik explains to his young audience, is not a colonial occupation that has pretenses of delivering a new message to the local natives. In the same breath, however, he depicts the country as a desolate and moribund place, which only the miraculous touch of the European Jew (the Ashkenazi Zionist) can restore to life, both physically and spiritually: "Over time the land has become a barren desert. No greenery and no trees. The earth is covered with scabs, a body whose skin has been shed, a dead skeleton. Plants and forests uprooted, destruction and void around. Arab villages stand—no trace of greenery or hint of trees; poverty and hunger, blindness and leprosy—this is the lot of the inhabitants for as long as they live; and around them is desolation and destruction. Yet in every place where a Jewish foot has stepped, everything changes utterly right away; everything—even the filthy, leprous Arab villages. The scabs of the earth grow covered with hairs, the leprosy gradually heals. The green of lawns and the green of trees envelop the land, and life becomes human, cultured."

That Bialik's description of Palestine had no connection with reality is readily apparent from many photographs taken in Palestine in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century.⁷ For example, in a photograph of Gaza from 1862 and another of Jaffa from 1905, both taken from a distance, we see plenty of trees, plantations, and greenery surrounding the Palestinian urban centers. In a classic Orientalist description that is devoid of even the paternalistic admiration for Arab exotica found in the writings of Western European nineteenth-century travelers like Gérard de Nerval and Edward Lane

⁷ Although in small numbers, Jews—mainly Sephardim—lived in both cities along side Muslims and Christians. For a wide variety of pictures of pre-1948 Palestine, please visit: <http://www.palestineremembered.com/>

(see Said), Bialik bases Jews' spiritual affinity with, and claim on, the land on the superiority of Europeans to the land's inhabitants. They bear not only the historical right "to restore what was stolen from us," but also an obligation to heal the land and its leprous inhabitants: "Arabs wallow in tents of straw mats, driven mad by flies, their eyes afflicted with trachoma—and then come Jewish doctors and cure them." In the footsteps of Theodor Herzl, Bialik grants a Zionist legitimization to the occupation of the land and, later, to the expulsion of its people.

Herzl himself frequently used the language of medicine and purification in conveying his impressions of the country, but he did not write poetry and so his thoughts are not concealed or encoded. For example, when describing Jerusalem, he says it "reminds [him] in certain details of Rome" and suggests that "all the filthy noisy hagglers should be isolated from within these walls . . . and the city, thus purified, can remain afterwards for institutes of charity and benevolence of all faiths" (Herzl 4). In his utopian novel *Altneuland*, Herzl also dares to imagine Jerusalem after its redemption and purification at the end of days, when the modern third temple stands tall as the sounds of a Jewish chorus singing Heine's "Princess Sabbath" erupt from within.⁸ Although Bialik denies any such intention to expel these Arab "hagglers" in the lecture, he does accuse them of spreading "fabrications and falsehoods, libel and confusion, as though we wished, allegedly, to rob their temple." There's nothing like historical perspective for such lines, and today, when we can plainly see the history and present-day effects of the Zionist occupation for at least the past sixty years, we can only bow our heads in shame before the descendants of those who "spread fabrications and falsehoods, libel and confusion" (see, for example, Morris). Bialik acknowledges the fear of expulsion among those Arabs, and he struggles repeatedly to brush it away from their eyes as one waves away a fly. It is not, God forbid, the Arab whom we wish to banish from the land, he explains, but the desert which the Arab brought to it: "Ishmael returned from the desert and came to the land and brought the desert with him." Therefore, Arabness must be uprooted and replaced with culture. And even though at the very beginning of his lecture Bialik states that this settlement by the returning Jews would not be a colonial one, and not accomplished by the sword and deception, he asserts that "Eretz Yisrael is ours—if we only wish to take it."

Only many years after elementary school did I discover that Bialik wrote "To the Bird" at the height of a period of terrible suffering that he endured as a homeless, hungry, and sick eighteen-year-old boy, roaming the streets of Odessa in the company of lepers and other outcasts for six months (Aberbach xii). I thought about those lepers and derelicts in Odessa and wondered if they were the people Bialik wished to banish from his sight when he spoke with such revulsion of the Arabs "driven mad by flies," or if perhaps he needed to purge himself of some invisible leprosy. Either way, Bialik's distilled personal suffering quickly became the lifeblood of his national poetry, and to a great extent that of all Israeli national poetry, a lifeblood that was later augmented by the controversial dimensions of admonishment and prophecy—not to mention embarrassment—in Bialik's work (Miron).

⁸ Heinrich Heine, who was born Jewish and converted to Christianity in order to avoid anti-Semitism, was supremely admired by Herzl. Ironically, although the Nazis burned his books, Zionists in the Jewish State refused to commemorate him until the 1990s. They also refuse to teach his poetry in schools to this day.

In high school we studied at least twenty of Bialik's poems, which, along with the poetry of perhaps one or two others, made possible the transformation of the "lost" Arab-Jew and so his acceptance into history. Not only was the Arab part of me erased, but also, and primarily, the Jewish part. By the time I had finished my high school education in Israel, it was clear to me that I had come from Europe, the birthplace of my Jewishness and my Hebrew language, which I had learned from kindly European teachers. As in Yosi Alfi's wonderfully simple poem,

Keshe-hayiti katan
 Meshorer katan
 Tsharnikosky haya elil
 Veshadmot Ukraina avari.
 U'Bialik hevi li ken latzipor
 Me'artzot ha'hom tl kor etmoli.
 U'keshegadalti hevanti
 Ein bei shadmot
 Ve'Ukrina lo beiti
 Ve'ken latzipor bamidbar
 Beli etzim
 Lo hetila bemohi
 Et sheloshet habeitzim. (Chetrit, *One Hundred Years* 88)

When I was little
 a little poet
 Tchernikhovsky was a god
 and the fields of Ukraine my past.
 And Bialik brought me a nest for the bird
 from the warm lands to the cold of my yesterday.
 And when I grew up I understood
 I have no fields
 And the Ukraine is not my home
 and a nest for the bird in the desert
 without trees
 did not lay in my mind
 its three eggs. (trans. Jessica Cohen)

The Arab had become an enemy that needed to be destroyed, and not only the Arab who sought to kill me with guns and bombs, but also the Arab in my home, the one hiding in my parents' Arabic, in their mentality, in the remnants of their culture, and, moreover, the one who looked back at me from the mirror every day. The Arab who was, in fact, me: a Jewish Arab implanted as a foreign element on the margins of history. In Bialik's words, "this is the path of Israel's wanderings: it begins in Eretz Yisrael and ends there! We wandered from the East to the South, from the South to the North, and from the North back to the East: For we now are returning to Eretz Yisrael" ("Revival"). I opened up a map and tried to trace this path, but I emerged in confusion. How and when did the Jews of North Africa and the Middle East wander north? Somehow, we had never noticed.

In the City of Killing: The Horror, the Solidarity, and the Erasure

Bialik's poem "City of the Killings" (1903) shocked me perhaps more than any other in my youth. I think our high school literature teacher's voice broke when he read it. These were the living words of God, he said, because it is the Lord who speaks to us in the poem, the impoverished Lord, as depicted by his prophet

Bialik, who is sent to see the horrors: “Rise and go.” And it is as though we ourselves have seen the sights that Bialik collected for months like a meticulous forensic investigator, like a level-headed photographer or poet-reporter who neglects no scene, even the most terrifying:

Ma'ase beveten retusha shemiluha notzot,
 Ma'ase binhirayim u'masmerot, begulgalot upatishim,
 Ma'ase bivnei adam shehutim shenitlu bemarishim,
 U'ma'ase betinok shenimtza betsad imo hamedukara
 Keshe'hu yashen ubefiv pitmat shada hakara;
 U'ma'ase beyeled shenikra' veyatzaa nishmato be"eemi!" (Bar-Tov)
 . . . the case of a disemboweled chest filled with feathers,
 the case of nostrils and nine-inch nails and skulls and hammers,
 the case of slaughtered human beings hung up from beams like fish,
 and the case of a baby found by the side of his stabbed mother
 still dozing with her cold nipple in his sucking mouth;
 and the case of a child who was quartered and gave up the ghost with the word “Mamma!”
 (Atar 1–9)

As a young boy, I had never heard such horrific descriptions, not even in the Holocaust stories we were told by our teacher, a Holocaust survivor herself. At home I certainly had not heard stories like this about the Jews of Morocco. Only many years later did I read about the massacre in Ifrane (see Knafo) and about “Soulika the Righteous,” a nineteenth-century Jewish girl who preferred “to die in sanctification of God’s name” rather than submit to the son of the Muslim ruler, who had fallen in love with her and wished her to marry him. Many poems were dedicated to her and told her story; this one—“The Greatness of a Girl” (“et godel na'ara”)—is by Rabbi Yaakov Ben Mas'ud Abuhatzeira, who wrote in the early nineteenth century:

Ya'atzu etzot goyim achzarim
 Le'ha'avir al dat bat haksherim
 Birotam yofya ufanim hadurim
 Vehut shel hesed mashuch aleha
 Yahdav lehaid sheker hiskimu
 Amru, hemira ledat hevel lamo
 Kesher reshaim katvu vehatmu
 Vehi 'halila' nishma' befiha
 Ad beit hamalchut higiuha ratzim
 Pituha bechol minei hafatzim
 Ma she'elatech, hayafa banashim?
 Ma bakashatech?—vena'aseha. (Hazan 336)
 Cruel *goyim* gave the advice
 to convert from her faith the pure girl
 As they saw her beauty and her refined face
 and a thread of grace running over her
 Together they agreed to falsely attest
 saying, she converted to their vain religion
 A conspiracy of the wicked they scribed and signed
 and her mouth spoke “No, God forbid”
 The messengers of the kingdom approached her
 seducing her with all manner of gifts
 What do you desire, the pretties of woman?
 What is your request?—And we shall fulfill it. (my translation)

But this isolated story is completely unlike Bialik's terrifying account of the Kishinev Pogroms of 1903 (see Miron et al.). In his poem we learn not about the unwanted courtship of a prince, but about the widespread and horrific rape of many Jewish women in front of their men:

Isha isha ahah tahat shiva' shiva' arelim,
 Habat le'einei eemah ve'ha'em le'einei bita,
 Lifnei shehita uvishat shehita ule'ahar shehita;
 Uveyadcha temashesh et-hakeset hametunefet ve'et-hakar hameodam,
 Mirbatz hazier yaar umirba'at suse adam
 Im kardom metaftaf dam roteah' beyadam. (Bar-Tov)
 . . . woman by woman under seven after seven uncircumcised,
 daughter in front of mother and mother in front of daughter,
 before killing, during killing, and after killing;
 and with your hand feel the filthy pillowcase and blushing pillow,
 den of wild boars and raping paddock of centaurs,
 with the axe's blood dripping and steaming from their hand. (Atar 1–9)

These women had no way out, however undignified. Their brutish assailants were not asking them to convert to another religion in return for a life of royalty, or even to save their own simple lives. Furthermore, if Soulika the Moroccan girl also met with a horrible fate—judged and beheaded (as in Ben Mas'ud Abuhatzaira's poem) and then, according to oral tradition, dragged through town by a horse, while the miserable Jews who watched scattered silver coins along her path of humiliation to divert the Muslims' eyes from the girl's exposed body—in Bialik's account Jewish men silently watch from hiding places as their wives and daughters are raped:

. . . be'alim, hatanim, ahim, hetzitzu min-ha'horim
 Befarper geviyot kedoshot tahat besar hamorim,
 Nehenakot betumatan ume'alelot dam tzavaran,
 Ukehalek ish pat-bago hilek metoav goy besaran—
 Shachvu bevoshtan vayirou—velo naou velo zaou,
 Ve'et-einehem lo-nikru umida'atam lo yatzaou. (Bar-Tov)
 . . . husbands, fiancés, brothers, peeping out of holes
 at the flutter of holy bodies under the flesh of donkeys
 choking in their corruption and gagging on their own throats' blood
 as like slices of meat a loathsome gentile spread their flesh—
 they lay in their shame and saw—and didn't move and didn't budge,
 and they didn't pluck out their eyes or go out of their heads. (Atar 1–9)

I can still hear the harsh words of this poem in the choked voice of my high school teacher. I was a good Zionist boy of sixteen or seventeen, and it is possible that if at that moment someone had placed a gun in my hand and said, "Rise and go," avenge your humiliated sisters and brothers, I might have gone to seek a target for my vengeance.⁹ Perhaps it would have been Arabs, as Rabbi Kahane suggested when he visited the Mizrahi neighborhoods. Indeed, Meir Kahane built his racist "Kach" movement, which called for deporting all Arabs from Israel-Palestine, on the backs of Mizrahi supporters. He warned them repeatedly of the danger of facing their own Kishinev, casting the Arabs in the role of the Russian Christians and the Mizrahim—particularly women—as the humiliated Eastern European Jews (see Peled). By thus transposing the memory and anxieties of European Jewry

⁹ Nowadays, reading a poem such as this is apparently not enough to create the right sort of national patriotism on Israel. Most 11th graders travel to Auschwitz as part of the curriculum.

from one realm to another, he managed to create in his audience an imagined recollection from which they produced imagined anxieties. Many of them even voted for him in the Knesset elections.

Still, upon reading “City of the Killings” from a distance of more than a century, what strikes me perhaps even more forcefully than the horrors themselves is Bialik’s fury and bitterness, not at the anti-Semitic Christian persecutors who are responsible for the pogroms, but at the survivors of the massacre, because they have been so utterly debased and humiliated that their status among the Gentiles is now irreparable, and, moreover, because there is no hope of them awakening from the European nightmare. The Jewish Diaspora is dead, declares the prophet as he walks towards the desert, and with it—so he would have us believe—shall die all of Europe (Miron 7–8):

Ve’eder adonai omed bizkenav uvinearav,
 Ele’ shom’im umefahakim ve’ele’ rosh yaniu;
 Tav hamavet al-mitzham ulevavam yukat sheiya.
 Met ruham, nas leham, ve’elohehem azavam. (Bar-Tov)

... and God’s flock stands in all its young and old,
 these listen and yawn and those nod their tired heads;
 the note of death is on their brows and in their hearts the desolate blight.
 their spirit dead, their vigor fled, and their God left them behind. (Atar 1–9)

In the line, “achen hatzir talush ha’am—veim yesh latalush tikva?” (Bar-Tov; “Uprooted grass this race—and do the uprooted have hope?” Atar 108), Bialik foreshadows his “prophecy” in the later poem “Indeed This People Is Grass” (“Achen Hatzir Ha’am”). Using God’s words as his foundation, Bialik calls for rebellion—not against the *goyim* but against God himself, who asks his people to harden their hearts:

Velama ze yithanenu elai?—daber alehem veyir’amu!

Yarimu-na egrof kenegdi veyitbeou et elbonam,
 Et-elbon kol-hadorot merosham ve’ad-sofam,
 viyfoztetzu hashamayim vechisei be’egrofam. (Bar-Tov)

And why do they plead with me?—Speak to them and they’ll thunder!

They’ll raise a fist against me and protest their insult
 the insult to all the generations from the first unto the last,
 and they will shatter heaven or my stool with their fists. (Atar 1–9)

Bialik reached the height of his prophetic style in his poem “A Word” (“Davar,” 1904). Such a bold and direct admonition had not appeared in Hebrew poetry since the Prophets themselves. It is no wonder that the epithet “prophet” was attached to the poet’s name, at times seriously and at times in mockery.¹⁰ It was not until the rise of the Zionist movement in the early 1920s, together with the

¹⁰ Several critics in fact called for Bialik to abandon the embarrassing pose he had adopted and return to his national poetry. The prophetic tone is also responsible for a wave of parodies that lasted for decades, from Shlonski to Pinhas Sadeh (see Hagorni). And if we add to this the fact that Bialik’s prophetic poetry reached “the people” in the people’s language—Yiddish or Russian—rather than in the language of the prophets, Hebrew, we can almost hear the giggling echoes of ridicule. For at the end of the day there was no messianic awakening in Russia as a result of this national poetry, and very few were willing to follow the prophet to the warm lands to the south. Perhaps this is precisely what Frishman had in mind when he determined that prophetic language and pathos were inappropriate for the Eastern European world (Miron 9).

dissemination of Hebrew among the Jews of the *Yishuv* in Palestine, that Bialik's prophetic poetry was read in Hebrew by a large audience. Ultimately it was added to the arsenal of a Zionist education that has become one of the central mechanisms in the colonization of the land and its inhabitants—the conquest of hearts that Bialik does not consider an occupation at all. For, after all, it is the Lord of Israel who speaks through his lips in “Davar” (“Word”): “ve’ata ma-lecha po, ben-adam, kum berah hamidbara” (Bar Tov; “And now, what are you doing here, Son of Man? Get up, escape to the desert,” Aberbach 88–95).

Only a close retrospective reading of the text can allow us to grasp the full force of the erasure that the Jews of Arab and Muslim states underwent through national “poems of diaspora and redemption” like this and many other poems of pain and diasporic despair written by Bialik and his contemporaries. The effect of this erasure of Mizrahi history, culture, and identity can be measured today by what seems to be a total Mizrahi identification with Zionism, accompanied by a collective self-contempt that lasted until the last generation's cultural awakening (see Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict* Chapter 4). Although this awakening against cultural oppression was far from homogeneous, most Mizrahi cultural agents at the time sent one message: identification with Ashkenazi history and the Zionist solution—yes; self-cancellation in face of that solution—no. (In this context I recall seeing a Ladino translation of Bialik's “To the Bird” printed in Rashi writing on the website for the Center for Ladino Research at Ben Gurion University.) For many decades it had been almost forbidden for a Hebrew writer or scholar to propose a different narrative, a different story, or different words. And to this day, despite a new Mizrahi narrative that seeks to give prominence to the world, identity, languages, literature, and art of Mizrahi Jews in Israel and in the world, in official Israel the words are still those of Bialik and his successors (on Israeli curricula see Chetrit, “Ashkenazi-Zionist Eraser”; and Firer).

Thinking of the cold north and the murderous European Diaspora as a point of origin for Ashkenazi Hebrew culture once again takes me back to my Palestinian classmate in Jerusalem. His life was far more difficult than mine, since he was defined as “the enemy within,” or, as phrased by an Israeli general, “a cancer in the nation's body.” But at least everything was much clearer for him: the Bialik who provided my Palestinian classmate with a universal language and images of exile, was, after all, also the national poet of a Zionist enemy who sought my classmate's life and land. From his point of view it was that simple. And he invited—or perhaps “incited” me—to read Bialik, if not as an enemy poet, then at least as an alien and invasive one.

“The Revival of the Sephardim” by Bialik the Prophet

It is to Bialik, then, that I owe my rite of rebellion and maturation; I had a large, obvious wall to beat my head against, cracking them both in the process. A poem by Eitan Nahmias-Glass expresses especially clearly the ambivalence that I (and an entire generation of Mizrahim) felt towards the poet and representative of Ashkenazi Hebrew culture:

Hameshorer haleumi shel haAshkenazim
Hayim Nahman Bialik sana otanu

Et hash'horim, et haSepharadim, et haMizrahim,
 Uvekavod vehadar hurad haragish haze lakever.
 Ma la'asot, ve'ani ohev et shirav,
 Libi nisraf lemilotav, velo sole'ah'.
 Hachniseni tahat kenafech,¹¹ ben sharmuta! (Chetrit, *One Hundred Years* 225)

The Ashkenazis' national poet
 Haim Nahman Bialik hated us
 The blacks, the Sephardim, the Mizrahim,
 and with pomp and ceremony the sensitive one was lowered into his grave.
 But what can I say, I love his poems,
 My heart burns with his words, and does not forgive.
 "Take me under your wing, you son of a bitch!" (trans. Jessica Cohen)

I do not myself attribute a hatred of the Sephardim-Mizrahim to Bialik, and I certainly do not wish to debate whether or not he made racist statements about Mizrahim and Arabs.¹² I am more interested in the cultural-political standpoint from which Bialik dispatched his poems and prophecies, one which undoubtedly belongs to the Orientalist colonialist world view adopted by Ashkenazi-Zionists at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century. Not only in their political manifestos (Herzl, Weizmann), but also in their literature, the persecuted Jews of the continent located themselves as tall and strong European observers of the Middle East, thereby creating what has been called the Ashkenazi-Zionist complex: Jews who were rejected and persecuted by Europe (and especially by Eastern Europeans) leave with nothing but their European superiority and the promise of one day being accepted again as equals in the European club (see Raz-Krakotzkin). The Zionist politics of Herzl and his successors rests on these tenets, which Bialik himself attempted to renounce, but, as we shall see, without great success.

Having established himself as the national poet of Ashkenazi Jews, Bialik's fame and poetry also reached the Jews of the Arab and Muslim world. In my search for traces of Bialik in Middle Eastern Jewish communities, I came across an amusing poem, written in Tripoli in 1933 (only a few months before Bialik's death) by a Jewish school boy. It is called "Hayeled Vehatzipor" ("The Child and the Bird"):

Hayeled: tzipor tziporati
 Haba'a me'erezt moladeti
 Hagidi li yakirati
 Me rait be'admati?
 Ma adaber uma omar
 Sham kol yofi vehadar
 Bearim ubamoshavot
 Bagai ve'emek vahar.¹³

¹¹ "Hachnisini tahat kenafech" (Take me under your wing) is the first line of a very famous love poem by Bialik. (See Bar-Tov for Hebrew and Atar for English.)

¹² There is a long-standing debate in Israel as to whether Bialik made racist remarks toward Arabs and Mizrahim. The most infamous comment attributed to him is "I hate Arabs because they remind me of Sephardim." All of Bialik's biographers and scholars have rejected such accusations, as did Bialik during his life. I accept this rejection. For more on this topic, see Levy.

¹³ Pedhatur 49. The poem was written by Hai Chalfon, a third grade student at *Tikva* ("Hope") School, Tripoli, Libya. It appeared in the school paper, "*Limdu Ivrit*" ("Learn Hebrew"), in December, 1933.

The Child: Oh Bird, my Bird
 coming from my homeland
 Tell me, my dear
 what have you seen in my land?
 The Bird: So much to say,
 what should I tell
 there is all the beauty and grace
 in the cities and colonies
 in the valleys and the mountains. (my translation)

But Bialik had in fact been discovered long before that (as early as the 1920s) by David Tzemah, an important poet and scholar of the Iraqi “Golden Age” of literature. Tzemah forged close ties with Bialik, dedicated a poem to him for his sixtieth birthday, and even visited him in Palestine in 1932. As Lital Levy has pointed out, the poem Tzemah dedicates to Bialik identifies the Andalusian origins of Hebrew and modern Hebrew literature, which thrived until Mendelssohn, Gordon, and then Bialik stole its thunder, as Bialik himself attests in “The Revival of the Sephardim,” a lecture he gave to a group of young Sephardim in Jerusalem in 1926. Like Tzemah, these young Jews, who were natives of Palestine, were also seeking proximity with Bialik and the Zionist movement: “It is the personal creation of the Sephardim that has become an active and influential force in the days of the revival, from Mendelssohn until today,” Bialik tells them, but he then goes on to ask: “this tribe [the Sephardim], which contained almost the entire Hebrew genius in the diaspora over hundreds of years, and which drove the entire nation, at that time and for generations thereafter—how did it occur that after such glory, it saw days of descent in the spiritual and creative sense, until it had grown very distant from the Hebrew creation and remained, if I dare say, a dry branch, or at the very least a branch that did not bear fruit?” (my translation here and throughout; for the original Hebrew, see Bar-Tov).

Although Tzemah did not hear Bialik’s lecture in Jerusalem, his poem positions the Hebrew “national poet” in a far larger and broader Jewish cultural context, thereby reducing him to the right size, culturally, from Tzemah’s perspective as a scholar of Sephardic poetry (see Levy). Moreover, despite Bialik’s acknowledgment in the Jerusalem lecture of the Sephardim’s “active and influential force in the days of the revival,” the subtext and the context of his comments tell a very different story. First, Bialik ignores—as he also does in his introduction to a volume of the Jewish medieval poet Ibn Gabirol’s poetry that he edited—the Arab dimension of Sephardic Jewry’s poetry. For him, Sepharad is culturally European, and perhaps this even makes it easier for him to stretch one line of descent from Abu ‘Imran Musa ben Maimun ibn ‘Abd Allah (Maimonides), the Jewish philosopher, to the Ashkenazi Moshe Mendelssohn, and from Abu Ayyub Sulaiman Ibn Yahya Ibn Jabirol (Shlomo Ibn Gabirol), the Jewish poet and philosopher, to the Ashkenazi Yehuda Leib Gordon. Second, not only does Bialik ignore earlier and contemporary scholars of the Golden Age in Sepharad (for instance, Shaul Abdulla Yosef and David Tzemah himself), but he also asserts in front of young Sephardim, some of whom are writers and teachers, that the Sephardim have abandoned the Sephardic literary tradition, which the Ashkenazi Jews then adopted and continued: “We know the role of the Sepharad era in the age of renewal during the Haskalah (Enlightenment) . . . That was among the Ashkenazi Jews. To our

great sorrow, the Sephardim were the last to know their roots, the roots of their spirit. And their own assets." Let us suppose, then, that he had not heard of contemporary Sephardic scholars, and let us suppose as well that he had not heard of a series of poets from North Africa, Iraq, and the entire Middle East who continued to write in the Sephardic *Massorah* (see Hazan). But could it be possible that he had never opened a Sephardic *sidur* or *Mahzor* (prayer books)? That he had not come across collections of *piyutim* (liturgical poetry) that had been printed before he was even born? In these he would have found a "hidden" treasure preserved and used not only for prayer, but also as a source of inspiration and a connection with the glory of Andalusia. Had he done even a little research, Bialik would have found that Sephardim from Morocco to Iraq never stopped disseminating the poetry of the Sepharad greats. Moreover, writing in the Sepharad tradition continued to be produced until the "new" poetry came along and put an end to it.¹⁴

One of the young men at Bialik's lecture in Jerusalem was David Avisar, a native of Hebron who taught Hebrew in Jerusalem and was among the founders of the "Mizrahi Pioneers Organization," a movement that sought to join with the Zionist institutions that had become, upon the establishment of the British Mandate, a sort of Jewish autonomous government. One wonders what went through his mind as he listened to the list of national tasks assigned to him and his friends by the poet-prophet: "I shall summarize briefly: the Sephardim must do three things: A) Revive and arrange the works of the past; B) Education and educational literature in particular; C) Bring together the Sephardic peoplehood." Bialik, here representing an entire generation, then puts forth his terms for the return of Sephardim-Mizrahim to the axis of Jewish history from which they fell "400–500 years ago," as he would have it: "The Sephardim wish to marry the Ashkenazim and we must task the Sephardim with preparing a dowry." And who prepares a dowry in the Jewish tradition, particularly in the very conservative early twentieth century? The bride, the woman, the passive one whose opinion is not solicited. Bialik's third task must have been especially confusing to the young Elisar and his friends, and must have caused some agitation among the audience. On the one hand, they were being invited to join ("And if the Sephardim all over the world wish to join—in fact they are already included"), but, on the other, they were being encouraged to "bring together their peoplehood"—namely, their tribalism—or, in the language of the state, to nurture their ethnic heritage against a general Jewish (Ashkenazi) backdrop.

¹⁴ In his pioneering study "Hebrew Poetry in North Africa," Ephraim Hazan traces a continuous line of poets from early figures like Yehuda Ben Kureish, the first Hebrew linguist, through the Moroccan Dunash Ben Labrat, who went to Baghdad and returned to Kordova having heard Arab meter, to the Moroccan Yehuda Ben Shmuel Abbas, who never lived or worked in Sepharad. Others in this tradition include Nahum, Yehuda Ben Shmuel Ben Dara, Yitzhak Bar Sheshet, Yehuda Ben Yosef Sajalmusi, Shimon Ben Tzemah Duran, Ephraim Barbi Yisrael Ankawa, Sa'adiah Ibn Denan, Shimon Lavi, Avraham Ben Meir Ben Zimra, Avraham Ben Shlomo Bakrat Halevi, Mendil, Farji Shawat, Yehuda Ben Rabbi Avraham Alkaletz, Yitzhak Ben Avraham Uziel, Natanel Ben Yehuda Karshkash, Sa'adiah Ben David Zurapa, Mussa Bojnakh, Avraham Ben Shlomo Even Mussa, Moshe Ben Yaakov Adhan, Moshe Even Zur, Yaakov Even Zur, Freiha Bat Avraham Bar Adiva (the first known female Hebrew poet), Aharon Peretz, Nehorai Jarmon, David Ben Aharon Hassin, Shlomo Ben Yisaschar Khalua, Eliyahu Sadbon, Yaakov Berdugo, Shmuel Ben Yehuda Elbaz, Yaakov Ben Shabat, Yaakov Ben Rabbi Mas'ud Abuhatzaira, Rafael Moshe Elbaz, Yitzhak Hai Bukovza, Yosef Cohen Tanuji, and—most recently—David Elkayam and David Bozaglo. Such lists can of course be compiled in the communities of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Palestine, among others.

Bialik, moreover, does not lose his footing when responding to a question that points out this paradox. He apologizes for failing to explain clearly and for perhaps having been lazy in preparing his lecture. But in the course of apologizing he explains: "And do not think that only among the Sephardim is there indolence of thought . . ." This statement attests, above all, to the source of Bialik's cultural mindset: the supposedly "scientific" Ashkenazi-Zionist myth (on which we were raised) that Mizrahi are culturally retarded and intellectually stagnant "as a result of fossilization or some sort of collective amnesia" (Frankenstein).¹⁵ Such pseudo-scientific myths have formed the basis of an entire educational system for Mizrahi children, a system meant to awaken them from the spiritual slumber imposed upon them by their Muslim neighbors. It is perhaps also worth noting that most of these educational programs do not include the humanities or the arts and sciences.¹⁶ At the conclusion of his apologetic response to the young Sephardim, who no doubt surprised him with their far-from-indolent thought, Bialik tries to justify himself and even leaves room to escape from some of his more insulting and humiliating statements. "My intention was to acquaint myself with you during our first meeting," he says suddenly; "I came slightly disguised." It seems that they too were able to acquaint themselves with this national poet, an Ashkenazi prince, a secular prophet, a follower of Sephardic poetry, and above all a man whose self-importance and authoritativeness was based entirely on the superiority of Ashkenazi Jewry over Sephardic Jewry, a direct reflection of the "superiority" that Europe held over "the rest of the world." Needless to say, this was their first and last meeting.

In my own first "meeting" with Bialik as an innocent little child, I fell in love, without masks. In my later encounters, I was disguised as an Ashkenazi-Zionist youth, because that is all I longed to be. Today's meeting comes many years after I removed my masks. Still, in memory of our innocent love, I would like to conclude with at least one prophecy of Bialik's that turned out to be false: "I never draw myself a textbook fattened from head to toe with the lives of Jews in Russia, where the entire life-style is completely different . . ." Later Bialik predicts a glowing future for the culture of Mizrahi Jews: "The Sephardic accent in Eretz Yisrael serves to show how the minority can overcome the majority. . . . I believe that the Sephardic stream, not only in its inflection but in other aspects, can expect victory in the near future. The day will come when the Hebrew style will undergo a vast change under the influence of Sephardic poetry, when it appears and spreads. The next twenty and thirty years are the years of Sephardic creation."¹⁷ Bialik did

¹⁵ Frankenstein's *They Are Relearning to Think*, which many scholars believe to be racist (see Swirski), has been for many years a major textbook in state-funded teacher training programs in Israel. He was awarded the Israel Prize for education.

¹⁶ For more on this topic see Feuerstein. In the mid 1990s Professor Feuerstein, like K. Frankenstein, was awarded the Israel Prize for his contribution to education in Israel, although in interviews he expressed regret for his earlier work and wished that he could destroy all existing copies of his book.

¹⁷ Bialik is referring here to the Hebrew Language Committee's 1904 decision to adopt the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew, which stresses the final syllable in a word, among other characteristics, mainly in order to move away from Yiddish, which was perceived by the Zionists as the language of the Diaspora and the Old World.

not say a single word about Arabness, which for him was a different world that had no connection to Jews. By speaking always of Sephardicness without Arabness, Bialik acts as a pioneer of the de-Arabization of Arab Jews and their culture, a trend that would grow evermore deeply entrenched in Israel's official policy towards Mizrahi Jews. Seventy years have gone by, and, ironically, Bialik—as institution and literary symbol—has served three generations of Zionist educators who have ignored his prophecy and devoted themselves to writing a new Jewish history from which the Jews of Arab and Islamic lands in the last few centuries were erased. Israel's official curricula were devoted from the first days of the state to the history of European Zionism and all that serves it, including, primarily, the poetry and thought of Haim Nahman Bialik, the national poet. Even on that day in Jerusalem, in the small Jewish community in Palestine, Bialik said of the textbooks in Jewish schools that they were “fattened with the lives of Ashkenazim.” And who better than Bialik to advocate for us, then and today: “I cannot comprehend how the Sephardim teach from Ashkenazi textbooks.”

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