

A CENTURY AND MORE

Hebrew Poetry and the Swift Chariot

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For the students of the College-Institute, the people who have built our school these 125 years seem to be from a far away place and time: famous people from the past whose contributions are often reduced to one line or a summary value. For many of us on the faculty, these builders are barely a generation distant – a chronological version of “Six Degrees of Separation.” I myself did not know Isaac Mayer Wise nor Kaufmann Kohler, but I had teachers who did, or whose teachers did, and I have a sense of the complexity of their contributions.

And, from my own field, I never met Bialik, the “Hebrew national poet.” But the man whose oeuvre I had to master for my doctorate came to New York and visited with people I know who actually financed his journeys.

I had no personal experience with the Second Aliyah – that founding time of modern Jewish political life and culture (1904-1924 in Eretz Israel), but I wrote a dissertation on its two great writers, Agnon and Brenner. I also spent some significant hours with Agnon before his death, and was a guest at the dissertation defense of Brenner’s son.

Time, then, expands or collapses depending upon one’s perspective, and the awareness of the epistemological verity spins our gyroscopes until we may be disoriented. It either seems like yesterday or like a very long time ago. It is not just that we remember the young child we once held in our arms as we see him move on to marriage, career and social productivity. Adult memories of our own youth – stimulated by the infirmities of age, or awareness of lost stamina may remind

indeed, or sweet forgiven memories of a life we once lived on the brink.

It is dizzying to think of such turbulent paradoxes as they jumble the cosmos. The medium in which I work suggests both the compression

us that we were once strong. But some version of adult wisdom and lack of choices may make our own former indiscretions seem distant

the marketplace. Every biblical word is narrated differently at the mall. Carmi and Natan Zach and especially the recently deceased Yehuda Amichai have fondled the Hebrew language and molded its rich associations so that readers appreciate the value along with its subversion. One could live in childhood and adulthood at the same time; or see the ancient

world through a long distance telescope which – when turned around – makes one realize how close everything is.

For my purposes here, I have chosen two poems by the late Dan Pagis – perhaps the most complex of the



▲ *Life Support/Invitation to Prayer, Judith Cohen Margolis*

of time and its vast expanse, without the lengthy disquisitions of philosophy and without the solid empirical evidence of physics. Its canons serve both to preserve the connection of past to

modern poets—a man whose academic mastery of Medieval Hebrew contributed in a scholarly way to our understanding of that collapse of past into present.



▲ *Hanukkah Lamp, Steven Weinberg*

present and to remind its students that as time passed some values fade and others become clarified. There is a subversion in the literary art of the prescriptions and formulas of the religious life. But that is the spiritual contribution of literature in general – perhaps especially of poetry, and it is sometimes the subject of individual poems which may serve as an allegory of these rich and perplexing suggestions.

Modern Israeli poets have seemed especially sensitive to this chronic situation: the past is only yesterday even while it is a long time ago. The legacy of Chronos. It may be that the Hebrew language invites that rumination, for this language is an especially effective “echo chamber” (Robert Alter’s phrase) of the ancient past we try to preserve, and a measuring rod of the swift and abrasive changes of

Likrat “Towards”:

And I, like all the apes in the neighborhood
Murmur from branch to branch:
The sunny season of Eden passed is past.
Now the cold holds fast. The nuts are too tough
And night’s predators have become more nimble.

That’s it! I’m out of here! Good-bye.
But, what’s happening,
My tongue is getting tied
Where are my shoulders going
Suddenly I am standing
erect,
Forced suddenly until
My forehead is on top!
Lights are beckoning, lights!

How lovely the quiet. I am almost
completed. I pick a nice tie,
Button my coat, light a cigarette – nonchalant,
And sit with my stopwatch, my only companion,
at the table, entirely ready
for the invention of chess.

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This compressed history of ours—from the pre-historic ape to the techno man, to the reversal that the stopwatch is invented before chess—could probably only be believable in a poem. Just as the full strain of time's attack on each of us might itself best exist in the poetic heterocosm:

The Portrait:

The boy
Does not sit still,
And I can't quite capture his lines.
I draw one while the wrinkles in his face multiply
While I dip my pen
His lips twist and his hair becomes white
His bluing skin peels from his bones. And he disappears.
The old man is gone,
So what is to become of me.

Each of these poems exploits at least one glaring reference to ancient text: The portrait painter utters the very lines that jump from Reuven's self-concerned mind when he finds that the abused Joseph is missing from the pit. "Hayed einenu, va'ani ana ani ba," The boy is gone, what will happen to me. (Reuven is the older brother responsible for his brother's well-being). Relying heavily on the gorgeous sound of that line in Hebrew, the poet not only appropriates a verse intended for a situation of the moment and powerful enough for a larger existential question, but he signals that the ancient lives within the present. "Likrat," even more elaborately mixes the ancient world with the present, and the port reminds us that the epoch (in Hebrew "Idan") was full of sun – an "Eden" indeed, which was perhaps not a garden, but an entire forest, not inhabited so much by people as by primates. But something happened, it began to get colder, and the apes have murmured their way towards clothing, stopwatches and chess – the tools of civilization that is modern life as we came to know it from the Middle Ages to the present. Modernity already?! Old age already!? Va-ani, ana ani ba? What of us? And what of us?

In Memoriam

John Bergreen, beloved son of Adele and Morris Bergreen.

Morris Bergreen, treasured member of the Board of Governors for more than three decades, member of the Executive Committee, Chair of the Library, Museum and Archives Committee, and President of the Skirball Foundation.

Rabbi Alan D. Bregman, esteemed alumnus of the Cincinnati School, Coordinator of Adult Jewish Living and Learning, and Director of Alumni Relations, HUC-JIR.

John Levine, beloved son of Aaron Levine, a member of the New York Board of Overseers.

Alter and Heschel on Jewish Time

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keeping the Sabbath was not only a ritual act: it was a statement of humanity's proper place in the world.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the Gerer *Rebbe* had looked with optimism at an almost unbridled human potential. Scarred by war and loss, Heschel kept faith with humanity, but held that we must acknowledge our submission to the passage of time, as we acknowledge the very presence of God who searches for us.

The style of Judaism reflected and refined at HUC-JIR over the last 125 years is far

away from Polish piety, but it has in common this same ambivalence towards human potential. We believe that humanity can make its mark on time, but we are alarmed at the idea of an all-powerful Superman, cut loose from the moorings of morality and the great anchor of time.

The story of the Jew in modernity is the story of this tension between the belief in human potential and the dread of human self-deification. Consciousness of time is not simply a mark of punctuality or an emblem of history. It is a safeguard for humanity.

TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO TRANSFORM THEIR SYNAGOGUES:

The Synagogue 2000 Approach

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observed that they can extend to their synagogue lives. For applying what they learn in class, the students emphasized the importance of the details. Rabbi Philip Rice ('01) focused on the details for creating a friendlier environment in the synagogue by using a welcoming vocabulary, and placing signage that makes navigating within the building easier. He remarked that Synagogue 2000 is "really working. It's not just theory." Cantor Rosalie Will Boxt ('01) emphasized the process of taking people from where they are to where they want to go, stating that "each person needs to grow at his or her own level."

Synagogue 2000 speaks of a guiding acronym: "PISGAH" (literally, mountain summit), the initials which represent six areas where innovation is required – Prayer, Institutional Infrastructural Deepening, Study, Good Deeds, Ambience, and Healing. Reform, Conservative, and traditional congregations all across North America are currently implementing this unique cross-denominational approach to revitalizing the synagogue.

The class and the program are working. To become involved or for additional information, please contact Harriet Lewis at (212) 824-2228 or harriet@s2k.org.