

# Is There a God in the Heavens? Hayyim Nahman Bialik's Meditation on the Silence of the Divine in 'On the Slaughter'

## Dvir Abramovich

### Introduction

Regarded as the greatest Hebrew poet of modern times, Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934) was instrumental in the revival of the Hebrew language and in expressing the Jewish people's pain and yearnings in a time of great change.<sup>1</sup> Translated into more than thirty languages, formally, Bialik's corpus can be divided into verse articulating the national revival, interior poetry geyed in the personal, and songs of nature. But still today, the bard towers above all others as the artist who, more than anyone else, embodied in his work the spirit and mood of Jewish nationalism in the twentieth century. Never before had a poet developed such a cult of followers and evoked such popularity and admiration as Bialik did, setting his unique imprimatur on an entire generation.

It is worth quoting at length Sara Feinstein, author of a literary biography on Bialik, who elucidates the esteem in which Bialik is held in Israel and in the Jewish world:

Anyone somewhat familiar with Modern Hebrew literature recognises the name Hayyim-Nahman Bialik ... a special phenomenon ... reflecting the shock waves of his own generation and serving as a bridge of transition between old-world attitudes and modernity, between powerless victimization and vigorous self-determination ... one of the most powerful influences in the transformation of Jewish culture during the first three decades of the twentieth century ... Despite his long periods of silence, Bialik's supremacy

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<sup>1</sup> A recent excellent addition to the study of Bialik is the monograph by Avner Holtzman, *Hayyim Nahman Bialik* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar Letoldot Israel, 2009). See also Sara Feinstein, *Sunshine, Blossoms, and Blood: H.N Bialiki in his Time: A Literary Biography* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005); Dov Sadan, *Hayyim Nahman Bialik: Darko, Bilshono, U vilshonote-ha* (Tel Aviv: Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 1989).

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as ‘Hebrew poet laureate’ went unchallenged until the final decade of his life. Then suddenly, in a surge of poetic inspiration, he produced some of the finest poems in modern Hebrew literature—thus reaching the apex of his poetic mission.<sup>2</sup>

Benjamin Balint echoes this assessment:

Admirers hailed him as the Hebrew Pushkin, the Jewish Goethe. His verses were emblazoned on banners, set to music and memorized by schoolchildren. The artist Marc Chagall, visiting in 1931, attested: ‘I came to Tel Aviv and saw that Bialik is not only a poet, but also the city’s spiritual mentor. All shopkeepers buy and sell, and read, newspapers that say: Bialik spoke, Bialik wrote, Bialik is here, Bialik is there’.<sup>3</sup>

The subject of this article is the haunting and now canonical ‘Al ha-shehitah’<sup>4</sup> (herewith ‘On the Slaughter’ 1903), published in the magazine *Hashiloach* following the artist’s visit to Kishinev, Bessarabia, in 1903 in the aftermath of the pogroms that raged in the Czarist Russian city, and that shocked the civilized world. Dispatched by the Jewish Historical Commission of Odessa to interview survivors and compile first-hand reports of the massacre, the thirty-five-year-old took some sixty photographs of the atrocities and filled four notebooks with testimonies.

More than any other work, it is this poem that is fixed in the minds of most as the enduring image of the Kishinev pogrom. The work is part of Bialik’s ‘Poems of Wrath’ series, an unsettling and shockingly powerful bracket of pieces that led Maxim Gorky to label Bialik the modern Isaiah.<sup>5</sup> Doubtless, ‘On the Slaughter’ is a landmark powerful lamentation in Jewish fiction, achingly capturing and evoking, in broad, theological and historical strokes, the horrified, anguished reactions of Russian and world Jewry to this calamity. David G. Roskies remarks on the poem’s uniqueness in modern Hebrew letters:

Bialik’s *Upon the Slaughter* ... brought the Poem of Wrath into the Literature of Destruction. However angrily a medieval poet complained about the silence of God, no synagogue poet had ever arrogated to himself

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<sup>2</sup> Feinstein, *Sunshine, Blossoms, and Blood*, pp. xv-xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Balint, ‘Zion’s Mother Tongue: Visions of a Promised Land’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 March 2017, p. A8.

<sup>4</sup> I am using the translation to be found in *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, ed. T. Carmi (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 512-513.

<sup>5</sup> David Aberbach, ‘Hebrew Literature and Jewish Nationalism in the Tsarist Empire, 1881–1917’, in Zvi Y. Gittelman (ed.), *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), pp. ix-xiv.

the voice of the prophet. Bialik used the prophetic voice to rage against the Lord and His Chosen people.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, 'On the Slaughter' occupies a unique place in the annals of Hebrew and Jewish literature as the most influential work on the European pogroms and on the ancient tradition of anti-Semitism that the author maintains is deeply rooted in Christian myths and in the collective consciousness. As a host of theorists have observed, the poem towers above all others in Hebrew fiction as "the supreme expression of all that was most horrible in the conditions of the Jews in Christian Europe."<sup>7</sup> Avner Holtzman maintains that the poem's electrifying lines still resound in the Jewish collective memory today.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Life of Hayyim Nahman Bialik**

Born on 11 January 1873 in the Ukrainian Village of Radi, in Volynia, Russia, Bialik's childhood was dappled with tragedy and pathos, although in later years he viewed his formative days with sentimental fondness, which he portrayed in his musings. He was intoxicated by the mysteries of nature, a theme to which he would return to frequently in his poems, recapturing and idealising the hours he spent roaming the woods. His father Yitzhak Yossef was a timber merchant whose business failings forced the family to relocate to the town of Zhitomir, where Bialik's grandfather, a sternly religious man, also lived. The sojourn in Zhitomir left an indelible mark on the young man, who aged seven, was orphaned, when his father, now a tavern owner, fell ill and died.

This sudden loss would later come to occupy a central place in the poet's personality and thematic choices, all the more as the familial trauma was set to continue. Before long, his mother Dinah (née Priveh), incapacitated by her husband's death and unable to support her children, sent Bialik and his sister to live with her elderly in-laws. The poet paints a picture of the pain of life in his parent's house in poems such as 'Almenut' ('Widowhood' 1933) and 'Shirati' ('My Song' 1900-1) describing with pathos the scanty Sabbath meals, the chilly evenings, and his mother's grief. Bialik had to contend with his puritanical and stern grandfather,

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<sup>6</sup> David G. Roskies (ed.), *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> David Vital, *A People Apart: A Political History of the Jews in Europe 1789-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 525.

<sup>8</sup> Avner Holtzman, *Hayim Nahman Bialik* (e-book: Yale University Press, 2017), n.p.

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Yaakov Moshe Bialik, who shackled the boy to a rigorous program of learning and prayer. Nonetheless, this laborious study regime did not diminish the thirteen year old's enthusiasm for Talmudic inquiry, as he would often retreat on his own to the Bet Hamidrash (Jewish House of Study) to dissect the intricacies of *halachah* (Jewish law).

At seventeen, he convinced his grandfather to allow him to study at the Great Yeshiva in Volozhin, Lithuania under the tutelage of Rabbi Naftali Zvi where he not only began his poetic activity, composing in Hebrew, but also gradually came to be influenced by the polemical writing of the father of spiritual Zionism, Ahad Ha'am. Later, he became a supporter of the affluent Zionist movement Hovevei Tzion (Lovers of Zion) and its advocacy of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Growing impatient with the deadening and myopic regimen of Yeshiva study, Bialik left for Odessa, the hub of Hebrew literary activity. Although his hopes for a university degree were not actualised, the stay in Odessa did prove fruitful.

After meeting with his mentors Ahad Ha'am and J.H Ravnitzky, one of his poems, 'El Hatzippor' ('To the Bird' 1892) was included in a collection of Hebrew literature, cementing his place as one of the most capable young poets writing in Hebrew. Still, the bard had to return to Zhitomir to tend to his gravely ill grandfather who died shortly after. In 1893, he married Manya Averbch, the daughter of a wealthy timber merchant, for whom Bialik reluctantly worked. During this period, he produced a series of national poems, which in their despairingly bleak overtones condemned the passivity of the Jewish people in the face of the tragedies befalling them. In 1901, his first collection of poems appeared to critical acclaim and Bialik was lauded as the poet of the national renaissance. The first volume was followed by Bialik's *magnum opus*, the historical prose poem, 'Metei Midbar' ('The Dead of the Desert', 1902).

In 1900, Bialik returned to Odessa with his wife, at first teaching Hebrew and then becoming the literary editor of *Hashiloh*. Three years later he wrote 'On the Slaughter'. Bialik reflected later that while he usually wrote his poetry slowly, the pogrom at Kishinev in 1903 in which 49 Russian Jews were massacred, women and young girls were raped, and more than 500 wounded, "brought him to the threshold of insanity."<sup>9</sup> As Russian soldiers watched on, a Jewish part of the city was decimated, with more than a thousand businesses, shops and houses looted and destroyed. Thousands were left homeless and impoverished. Bialik poured out his feelings on paper without delay, fearing

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<sup>9</sup> Feinstein, *Sunshine, Blossoms, and Blood*, p. 92.

that if he did not, “his heart would explode.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1921, he and a cadre of Hebrew writers were allowed to leave the Soviet Union. Besides putting out his first collected poems, he jointly established with Ravnitzky in 1921 the Moriah Publishing Company, with the explicit aim of generating Hebrew pedagogical materials for schools. Following his move to Germany he re-established and increased its capacity, at the same time opening Dvir Publishing

After three years in Berlin and Hamburg, Bialik immigrated to Palestine in 1924, settling in Tel Aviv where he re-founded Dvir Publishing. From the time he arrived, the roaring town became his beloved hamlet and his house today houses the Bialik Museum, frequented by thousands of visitors every year. In Israel, his creative output took a backseat to his public and cultural activities. Inevitably, he was called to serve on countless boards (The Hebrew University, Hebrew Writer’s association, the literary magazine *Moznaim*) and was sent by the Zionist organization abroad to enlist the financial aid of Diaspora Jews. He died in 1934 and was buried in Tel Aviv.

### **‘On the Slaughter’: A Lament for a Lacking God**

Ancient images of the Hebrew Bible and a rousing call to arms have equal prominence in ‘On the Slaughter’, an elegiac poem of agony and disbelief in the face of God’s apparent indifference. The poem’s title betrays a sense of subversive anger and irony, since the term ‘On the Slaughter’ is borrowed from the penultimate passage of the blessing pronounced by the ritual slaughterer before slitting the animal’s throat. Bialik may be announcing that like the slaughtered animals, the Jews are the emasculated, passive victims, or that the pogrom was not only evidence of God’s lack of divine intervention but, worse, a display of ritual martyrdom commanded by God. The poem’s overall tone and title imply that the murdered are akin to acquiescent animals whose necks are presented to the slaughterer’s knife. Most obviously, the title points to the bestial nature of the atrocities perpetrated during the anti-Jewish riots. From the outset, the speaker is enrobed by complete Jobian desperation and is shattered by the lack of heavenly intercession.

As the lacerating poem begins, the narrator, in a thunderous and rhetorical outburst, personifies the heavens—“Heaven, beg mercy for me”—and pleads clemency, although he is uncertain if God is still there and whether, sitting upon His throne, He will listen to his angry demands. In seeking lenity on behalf of the slain whose voices have been muted, he questions the

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<sup>10</sup> Feinstein, *Sunshine, Blossoms, and Blood*, p. 92.

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existence of God: “If there is a God in you, and a pathway through you to this God—which I have not discovered—then pray for me!” Roskies argues that, for Bialik, God is deaf and prayer is impossible,<sup>11</sup> while Holtzman avers that the heavens are limned as “an hermetic and evil expanse, purged of divine presence, that abandon man to face his destiny without any hope or comfort.”<sup>12</sup> Conscious that following the killing in Kishinev the very heavens he is addressing are barren of God’s mercy, Bialik may seem nevertheless to harbor a faint hope (evidenced by the word ‘if’) that the Almighty, who presides over earthly affairs, will help His children and extract vengeance for the deadly pogroms.

In essence, when the poet states, “For my heart is dead, no longer is there prayer on my lips,” he bespeaks a partial loss of faith in God, yoked with a feeling of extreme disappointment. Conversely, the poet could be pointing to his own inadequacy since he cannot pray, cannot find the right registers that would open the gates of heavens and lead him to God. Therefore, he enlists the aid of the heavens to supplicate on his behalf. In different ways, the passage, “For my heart is dead, no longer is there prayer on my lips” underlines the Jew’s renunciation of his own personal capacity to connect with his creator. Moreover, the pity he appeals for is not sought for himself, but rather for the Jewish people as a whole, and underlines the deeply veined sense of dejection embodied in the words “all strength is gone and hope is no more.” With lines such as “Until when, how much longer, until when?” Bialik focuses attention on the absolute despondency felt by Russian and Diaspora Jews who knew that attacks such as those that took place in Kishinev were likely to reoccur.

The three questions—“Until when, how much longer, until when?”—gain extra textual significance when we consider that they correlate to the three questions asked in Psalms 13:3 and Psalms 94:3, verses that evince discontent with God’s treatment of the wicked, who are jubilant, and His forgetting of His people, who are being trampled on by their enemies. In Psalms the unmediated appeal is to God, whereas in the poem it is to the sky.

The stormy and prophetic tone of the poem is striking for its depiction (in the second stanza) of the gentiles’ abiding hatred and brutality. The speaker addresses the implacable murderers, the executioners, employing the present tense in hurling his contempt. Offering himself to the garrotter the narrator reinforces the vulnerability of the Jews, reminiscent of the defenseless Isaac bound to the altar:

You executioner! Here’s a neck—go to it, slaughter me!

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<sup>11</sup> Roskies, *Literature of Destruction*, p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> Holtzman, *Hayim Nahman Bialik*, n.p.

Behead me like a dog,  
yours is the mighty arm and the axe,  
and the whole earth is my scaffold—  
and we, we are the few!  
My blood is fair game—strike the skull.

The picture of a dog being beheaded further registers the grotesque humiliation associated with the slaughter of the Jews. Yet alongside his indictment of the beastly mobs, Bialik is perhaps expressing overwhelming disgust with the helplessness and impotence exhibited by the Jews.

The executioner (in some versions, “hangman”) reappears in the fourth stanza as Satan, reinforcing the grisly, monstrous evil of the period that Bialik portrays. In that connection, Roskies ventures this observation, “Since God is deaf and prayer is stifled, the speaker turns to the only active force around, the hangman ... The replacement of the heavens with the hangman resonates with an even more startling repudiation, that of God’s glory.”<sup>13</sup> The assortment of terms Bialik deploys in the second stanza is drawn principally from the terrain of the abattoir: “executioner,” “here is my neck,” “slaughter,” “behead,” “axe,” “blood spurting.” The phrase “the mighty arm,” referring to the vile butchers, can also be traced to Psalms 89:14, which praises God’s mighty arm, charged with immeasurable power, intimating that Bialik is laying the blame equally at the feet of a neglectful God. By directly addressing the hangman, representing the criminals who butchered the Jews, the speaker identifies with the victim.

Concurrently, the speaker states that the whole land has become a scaffold, a killing field, and by extension intimates that it is killers who rule the earth rather than God. Additionally, the sentence “and the whole earth is my scaffold” points an accusatory finger at the world’s indifference in the face of the Jewish tragedy, implicating the nations who idly stood by and watched as if this was happening on another planet. Never again will anyone be able to claim that they did not know of the barbarism and the loss of Jewish life. Instead of God’s mighty hand, it is the axe and scaffold that preside over his domain. Power now resides with the wicked who have become the new Gods. At the same time, the speaker depicts the powerless victims, whose blood is cheap, and reminds us that the rioters murdered young children and the elderly without distinction. As such, their blood will forever stain the clothes of the executioners like the mark of Cain: “the blood of nurslings and old men will spurt onto your clothes and will never, never be wiped off.” Note also that the motif of blood appears in three of the four stanzas, morphing from a corporeal,

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<sup>13</sup> Roskies, *Literature of Destruction*, p. 87.

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concrete form to an entity that spurts, pursues justice and vengeance, and ultimately pierces the sustaining pillars of the world.

Burning with escalating fury, in the third stanza the poet demands that the God in the heavens step down from His celestial seat and swoop down as an avenging angel to dispatch divine retribution. Bialik is declaiming that one would expect nothing less from a God whose righteousness, we are told, in Psalms 85:11, looks down from the heavens. The speaker insists that he witnessed the sanctions and punishment first hand: “And if there is justice, let it show itself at once.” He warns that if it appears only after the destruction of the Jews, only after he is killed, then the throne of God must be smashed, dooming the menacing perpetrators to live in a world of hellish violence.

On display, front and center, is Bialik’s remarkably heretical and rebellious stand that God be removed from the helm, that the heavens He rules decay and atrophy because of His seeming lack of concern for the destiny of His people. This damnation is in sharp contrast to Psalms 89:14, which exalts God for having justice and judgment as the foundations of His throne and further acclaims that mercy, truth, love, and faithfulness are the forefront of His rule.

In another verse, the poet says to the murderers, “Live by your bloodshed and be cleansed by it,” conjuring up the haunting and disturbing image of the victims as sacrificial offerings whose blood is shed on the sacrificial altar to provide some kind of perverse atonement. It should be observed that the last word in the third stanza, *hinaku*, has been subject to varying interpretations that complicate matters considerably. While the translation I have relied on renders *hinaku* as “cleansed by it,” others construe it as “regurgitate this gore”<sup>14</sup> or “suckle.” If we are to accept this construction, this would support Bialik’s desire that the evildoers be plagued by the memory of the dead for eternity; their punishment is to metaphorically imbibe the blood they have shed, to be forever consumed by the guilt of their deeds, and to eventually be destroyed by their evil conduct.

The poem concludes with the speaker cursing those who seek vengeance for the crimes perpetrated, since even Satan has not conceived of a revenge for the death of a young boy. Equally, the poet is aware that any human retribution may lead to a sense among some that through a form of payback, symmetry has been achieved. Yet immediately afterward, he petitions for revenge, albeit a supernatural one. He promises that the blood of the victims will flow through the darkest recesses of the earth and will corrode its depths until it rots. A

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<sup>14</sup> Roskies, *Literature of Destruction*, p. 160.



corrupt world that immorally and irresponsibly stands by while observing acts of ethnic and religious hatred must be eviscerated in a kind of biblical flood that will eradicate humanity and bring about its rebirth. After all, Bialik contends, a world devoid of mercy, justice, and divine providence, ruled by violent stone-cold thugs, will inevitably revert to the chaotic state before creation. More broadly, the poet's confection of this kind of unworldly retribution may be underpinned by a desire to demarcate a moral distinction between the Jews and the persecutors. While the gentiles physically exterminate the Jews, their victims will never descend to such repugnant behavior.

The final stanza, dominated by shades of red (blood) and black (darkness, abyss, rot) reaps emotional dividends, lending the poem's coda a genuinely mephitic and menacing edge. Bialik wants the world to be continually reminded of its atrocities against the Jews. Echoes of Genesis 4:10 reverberate through the line "Let the blood seep," when God reminds Cain that the voice of his slain brother's blood cries to Him from the ground. For Bialik, there exists no passage toward redemption or forgiveness for the gentiles. The buried message of the poem is that if mercy, compassion, justice, and a path to God do not emerge in the backwash of the pogroms, anarchy will reign as retribution for the innocent blood of the Jews that was remorselessly spilled.

Formally, the poem moves downward, from the lofty and glorified space of the heavens down to the land where killers run amok then finally to a descent into the earth's decaying foundations. The poem that opened with a plea for mercy closes with a curse and an apocalyptic prophecy. It is noteworthy that the narrator assumes different personas throughout. At the beginning, he adopts the witnessing posture. He then embraces the first-person plural stance. Next, he reverts to the eyewitness position, and at the end takes on the role of the prophet of wrath. Although the poem is clearly a charge sheet of the horrific acts committed against the Jews, it also embodies a new perception of a reality that is purged of a God that protects His people. Daniel Grossberg astutely points out that:

The greatness of the poem is beyond Kishinev and Eastern Europe and any geographic boundary. It transcends any temporal delimitation, as well. 'On the Slaughter' is the wrenching cry from the depths of any agonized human being whose foundation is crumbling and who is teetering on the edge of the abyss. It is for this reason that it continues to resonate and its appeal lives on.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Grossberg, "Hayyim Nahman Bialik: the 'National Hebrew Poet,'" *Midstream*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2006), p. 45.

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'On the Slaughter' was followed by the epic dirge 'Be'ir haharegah' ('In the City of Slaughter' 1904), the longer of the two lamentations.<sup>16</sup> It again foregrounds the two-day rampage that ravaged the Jewish quarter of Kishinev and left 49 Jews dead. Bialik was so outraged and horrified by the bloodbath that he wrote the poem without delay so as to stir Russian Jewry out of what he considered to be their submissive posture. Thematically, it is structured as a searing address to God by the prophet, who surprisingly scolds and indicts the survivors for their meek capitulation and derides their lack of resistance to the attacks. In castigating and denouncing the chosen people for their supposed cowardly behavior and inaction, Bialik elects to overlook the few acts of resistance by the Jews he heard about as he crisscrossed the city speaking to local Jews. In a similar vein, the poet laments the absence of justice, portraying God as an impotent entity, unmoved by His people's suffering and unable to quell the violent storms of a sadistic, uncivilized world.

The penetrating eye of the poet, overflowing with tears of shame, takes the reader on a visceral and graphic survey of the physical and spiritual wreckage. The explicit account reports on the cemetery where the ground is soaked with the blood of the martyrs felled by the anti-Jewish rioters. From there, the prophet/speaker moves to the synagogue, disgusted with the mourners' slavishness and loss of pride and dignity. In fact, one of the cardinal leitmotifs of the poem is the self-flagellation of a people that have plumbed the nadir of humiliation and are unable to rise with indignation against their enemies. Equally, Bialik is incensed and bitter at the absence of justice and struck by the apathy of the world to the atrocity visited upon the Jews.

### **The Impact of the 'Revolutionary Poem'**

All in all, Bialik's poem did not fall on deaf ears. The opus electrified and prodded the Jewish nation into action, instilling palpable new energies into their weak and beaten heart. As a matter of fact, the poem was of immense importance for it goaded young Jewish men and women across Russia to establish Jewish squads of self-defence, composed of Russian youths, who, infused with a spark of revolt, were now galvanised by the Zionist spirit, and were determined to resist any further desecrations of life. Moreover, the poem and massacre led to mass immigration from Russia to the United States and to Palestine by many Russian Jews who were transformed into Zionists by the mayhem, in what became known as the Second Aliya.

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<sup>16</sup> One of the best examinations of the history of this poem is the book by Michael Gluzman, Hanan Hever, and Dan Miron (eds), *Be'ir Haharegah: Bikur Me'uchar: bimlot me-ah shana la-poema shel Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005).

Indeed, David Roskies maintains that 'On the Slaughter', along with 'In the City of Slaughter' "changed Jewish life and letters for good ... Bialik's poem attacked the victims for their passivity. No one had done this before ... The poem also ushered in a new world, which would look to artists and writers rather than rabbis for guidance."<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein, Rotstein contends that the poem encased within its midst an urging to Jewish religious authorities to "begin facing reality and step out of the insular environment that was detrimental to their very survival"<sup>18</sup> while young readers, "responded viscerally to the call to defend Jewish dignity and property everywhere. They found in Bialik a bold and coherent spokesman for their Zionist aspirations."<sup>19</sup>

More broadly, Bialik's poem influenced the Holocaust poems of Yiddish writer Jacob Glatstein,<sup>20</sup> while the belief by attorney-general and chief prosecutor in the Eichmann trial Gideon Hausner that Jewish heroism was not part of Holocaust history, was heavily influenced by Bialik's opus and its themes.<sup>21</sup> It is also of note that Jewish intellectuals in Nazi-occupied ghettos, such as diarist Chaim Kaplan, and Rachel Auerbach who ran the ghetto archive, were motivated and inspired by Bialik's 'creative endeavours to craft a lasting memorial for the future. To wit, when in 1943, more than 235,000 of Warsaw's Jews were sent to Treblinka, teacher and historian Luba Lewin wrote in his diary, "Will these terrible agonies of the spirit call up a literary response? Will there emerge a new Bialik able to write a new Book of Lamentations?"<sup>22</sup>

David Roskies, nicely sums the powerful resonance and legacy of Bialik's oeuvre as it was felt in the ghettos, arguing that it gave rise to what he calls "born-again Bialiks:"

Bialik was an obvious source of inspiration for such intellectuals as Kaplan and Lewin ... What's more, each of these poets did not set out consciously to emulate Bialik; rather, by reliving the specific historical conditions that had first given rise to Bialik's Songs of Wrath, they assumed Bialik's mantle of their own accord.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mordechai Beck, 'Texts and Contexts: David Roskies talks to Mordechai Beck', *Jerusalem Post* (12 September 1996), n.p.

<sup>18</sup> Menachem D. Rotstein, 'Chaim Nachman Bialik: A Tribute', *Canadian Jewish News* (8 July 2004), p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Rotstein, 'Chaim Nachman Bialik', p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Zev Garber, 'Shoah in Israeli Writing, with an Emphasis on Hebrew Poetry: Editor's Introduction', *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2005), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Yechiam Weitz, 'In the Name of Six Million Accusers: Gideon Hausner as Attorney-general and His Place in the Eichmann Trial', *Israel Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2009), p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> David Roskies, 'Bialik in the Ghettos', *Prooftexts*, vol. 25, nos 1&2 (2005), p. 104.

<sup>23</sup> Roskies, 'Bialik in the Ghettos', p. 107.

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In fact, the first ever Yiddish translation of Bialik's 'On the Slaughter' appeared in the summer 1940 edition of the underground periodical *Dror*, by Russian poet and dramatist Yitzhak Katzenelson, along with a lengthy essay of appreciation of the bard's poetic canvass." Katzenelson asserted that Bialik's rage, was ever present and alive, and wrote that Bialik was resurrected in the guise of a "holy dybbuk."<sup>24</sup>

Significantly, 'On the Slaughter' was one of the first poetic renditions in the canon to register such a stirring protest against the all-mighty who does not protect his people against the bloody pogroms. The poem, in its harsh criticism of diaspora Jewish life, shocked and startled readers in casting blame on the Jew—here depicted as a miserable, passive by-stander and as a weakling. It is small wonder that Shalom Goldman called 'On the Slaughter' a "revolutionary poem,"<sup>25</sup> noting that it went against the grain of Hebrew literature by leveling its denunciation not just at the cold-hearted killers and the world for its crimes, but at the elusive God and at the humiliated and disgraced victims. Correspondingly, David Vital argues that several elements distinguish this flaming work from previous expressions to be found both in the Hebrew literary landscape and in classical liturgy: "it is fueled by sentiments that are firmly and consciously antithetical to those which Jews had been traditionally wont to express in the midst or in the aftermath of persecution."<sup>26</sup> In other words, Bialik here introduces a modern challenge to Hebrew lamentation literature, rejecting the customary view of divine goodness and the concept of pious martyrdom.

In various ways, the artist was confecting a new pathway to understand contemporary Jewish identity, spirit and culture at the beginning of the twentieth century, using his poetry to illuminate the ambivalent relationship with God, and the gradual disbelief some felt concerning the capacity of the normative pillars of the faith to defend them, especially in light of the unfolding destruction of Russian Jewry. On another level, in memorializing the horrors, we see that Bialik's prophetic reconfiguring of the traditional theodicy marked a radical departure from the stereotypic scriptural lamentation and from Romantic Hebrew literature of the period.<sup>27</sup> To borrow from DeKoven Ezrahi, Bialik, in this opus, was

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<sup>24</sup> Roskies, 'Bialik in the Ghettos', p. 107.

<sup>25</sup> Shalom Goldman, *Zeal for Zion: Christians, Jews, & the Idea of the Promised Land* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 155.

<sup>26</sup> Vital, *A People Apart*, p. 524.

<sup>27</sup> Dan Miron, 'Introduction,' in Atar Hadari (ed.), *Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of Hayim Nahman Bialik* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. xxxviii.

“[s]traddling the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, open to influences both from within and without, he was no longer strictly bound by the religious authority of the tradition or by the formulas with which it has confronted historical crises.”<sup>28</sup>

The utter lack of hope, portrayal of the Jewish people as wretched victims, and the call for natural justice to be exercised by the heavens in punishing the perpetrators, add to the work’s persistent refusal to conform to literary and cultural conventions.

All in all, it was this rebellious poem and the “polemic that lives on even today”<sup>29</sup> that earned Bialik the fame and the veneration as the leading figure of Hebrew culture. In fact, one only has to glimpse at parts of a letter penned in 1903 by prominent historian of Hebrew literature Joseph Klausner, to grasp the colossal impact ‘On the Slaughter’ had on fellow intellectuals: “Anyone with even a single spark of the nation’s soul in his heart, of any denomination, cannot help but kneel before this great national talent, before the true *Hebrew* poet, who is more of prophetic poet than a poetic artist.”<sup>30</sup> Tellingly, this masterpiece, and Bialik’s oeuvre, are still a staple of the school syllabus in Israel and are required reading for all students.<sup>31</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It is worthy of note that Bialik’s dramatic focus was the process of change that affected the world of East European Jewry, transforming it from one of fierce tradition to one of secular values. Instead of using the biblical rhetoric of his predecessors, Bialik constructed a new and expansive linguistic canvas that reflected the new and vibrant national and linguistic reality, and which allowed Hebrew poetry to depict the youthful pioneering revolution sweeping through Palestine. As Balint aptly notes, “No one better embodies this renaissance than H.N. [Hayim Nahman] the poet who stood at the vanguard of the migration of Hebrew literature from mute dormancy in Eastern Europe to articulate maturity in the land of Israel.”<sup>32</sup> Radically experimenting with linguistic configurations and metres, he fused symbolist poetry with romanticism, making modernist Hebrew verse accessible for future poets.

Hand in hand with the crystallizing of Zionism as a political movement, Bialik’s artistic output—appropriated by Zionist leaders and followers alike as

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<sup>28</sup> Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), pp. 101-102.

<sup>29</sup> Holtzman, *Hayim Nahman Bialik*, n.p.

<sup>30</sup> Holtzman, *Hayim Nahman Bialik*, n.p.

<sup>31</sup> Leon Yudkin, ‘Bialik’s Prose and his Poetry Too’, *Hebrew Studies*, vol. 5, no. 42 (2001): p. 299.

<sup>32</sup> Balint, ‘Zion’s Mother Tongue’, p. A8.

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jeremiads of hope and renewal, despite their chronic angst-filled nature—was reaching its apex. Earning the title of ‘national poet’, Bialik set his imprimatur on an entire generation, combining the personal with the collective and intermingling national catastrophes and aspirations with his intimate sense of sorrow and orphanhood. The generation of poets who followed Bialik, including such luminaries as Yaakov Fichman, Yaakov Steinberg, and Zalman Shneur, to name but a few, were labeled ‘The Bialik Generation’ in recognition of the enormous artistic and spiritual influence he wielded on their *ars poetica*. It is of note that Bialik’s sixtieth birthday in 1933 was celebrated as a national holiday.

It is no small wonder that Bialik was clothed with the label of a ‘modern prophet’, especially as many of his poems acted as a springboard for the revival of the Hebrew language and its piecemeal enshrining as the representative tongue. Yet, it is of particular salience that Bialik deployed the classical Hebrew of the founding books, with its theological weight, to have hewn a poetry that in effect challenged and disrupted the historical authority of Orthodox Judaism. In this respect, the boldness and genius of forging religious visions, encasing within their midst multiple ironic meanings, out of the coherent qualities of biblical words and phrasings, was not lost on later Hebrew poets who followed his route in displacing the original meaning of the founding text.