A NEW APPROACH TO RELIGION FOR A NEW LIFE: RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN THE POETRY OF AVRAHAM SHLONSKY AND LEVI BEN AMITAI

DAVID FRANKEL

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Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
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Advisor: Dr. Stanley Nash

This thesis contains six chapters.

The contribution of this thesis is a new approach to understanding the poetry of the pioneers resettling the land of Palestine in the 1920's and 1930's. Additionally, it presents new translations of the selected poems.

The goal of the thesis was to define the religious feelings of the poets Avraham Shlonsky and Levi ben Amitai, as well as translating their material.

The chapters are as follows:

1: Introduction
2: Background on the poets and the period
3: Translation and commentary: Avraham Shlonsky
4: Translation and commentary: Levi ben Amitai
5: Responses to prior critiques of their work
6: Conclusion and selected bibliography

Materials used were poems written by the two poets as well as commentaries on their work, modern Zionist thought, and Hebrew poetry in general.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to

The Poetry of

Avraham Shlonsky

And

Levi ben Amitai

> Literature, it has been argued and taught, can no longer remain a merely descriptive or even interpretive art. It cannot go on merely mirroring life; it must become an art which molds life. It must guide society rather than merely portray human relations, even against a social background which it tacitly criticizes. Implied criticism, subordinate to the objective requirements of literary art, must, it would seem, make room for the explicit annunciation of the arrival of the new- the "ideal"- values toward which society gropes.
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> However tenable or untenable such a philosophy of literature may be theoretically, it seems to have been inherent in most of modern Hebrew writing. From its halting beginnings in the 18th century to its latest full-throated utterances in Palestine, Hebrew literature has been intimately connected with all the vital manifestations of Jewish group living, furthering some of them passionately, but often even violently challenging some and bitterly condemning others. More significant still, it has always pioneered among those forces that have impelled and channeled the Jewish group will, calling the group to new forms of living, setting up new standards, anticipating social ideals long before they crystallized into organized movements, creeds and parties.[1]

Jewish literature represents the forces of Jewish life in a way that is unique. The people cannot be separated from their literature, which is tied into the people's history, which in turn is tied into the Jewish religion, which eventually comes to be connected to the present day. In the 1920's and 1930's, Jewish poets in what was then still called Palestine wrote about their experiences as pioneers in a land that was just being reborn, and their writings became forces to shape the lives they were forging in the new land. What was being created on paper influenced what was being created in living beings, and vice versa. The same questions were being asked and answered in both places: Who are we? What are we working for? How do we connect to our past? How do we connect to our future? How do we understand God? In this paper, I will look at two poets from this period. Avraham Shlonsky and Levi ben Amitai, and

[1] Halkin, Modern Hebrew Literature, pp. 100-101.

analyze how they understood their relationship , the past, present, and future, as well as the relationship to God.

The poetry I have selected for this paper comes from the writings of Avraham Shlonsky in the mid to late 1920's and the writings of Levi ben Amitai mainly from the 1930's. It comes from a period of great upheaval in the world of Eastern European and Palestinian Jewry. World War I had ended and Europe struggled to adapt to all of the changes it brought about. National Socialism began to take root in Germany in this period as well. In Palestine, there were Arab riots in Hebron in 1929. Added to all of this were the waves of immigrants coming from Europe to settle in Palestine, to rebuild the ancestral home of the Jewish people and make it a modern state. The influence of this period is reflected in the works of the poets I have selected, as well as others of the same period. For this school of Palestinian poets, their dream of the return came after WWI in Europe with tragedy, like the, "end of days," befalling the Jews. "The brittle, metallic cadences in which they sang their visions of the Redemption echoed the strokes of picks and shovels in the hands of tattered and hungry Halutzim..."[2] Here the connection to history is very clear: the Jewish present was an extension of the Jewish past, which began with the Tanakh and continued through to Europe, and was now in Palestine. The goal of this may ultimately have been the redemption of the people, as stated in the Prophets, but the current reality was the reality of work in the land and fields of Palestine.

This connection to the past and the Tanakh was also a connection to the Jewish religion, whether intentional or not. I would indeed argue that it was intentional, as the poets sought to envision a relationship with God that was born

[2] Halkin, Modern Hebrew Literature, pp. 124-5.

from the historical one and brought into their new world. This grappling with religious feeling is as much a part of the modern Jewish poet as it is of the modern Jew. Halkin writes that the poet does not want the old, monolithic faith of the Jewish past but rather, "His religious feeling is for the most part but one of the many tensions which constitute his poetic world." Man set out in search of God in his new world and his new life, and the poetry of the pioneers reflects this attitude.[3]

Shlonsky, along with a group of his contemporaries that included Uri Zvi Greenberg, Yitzhak Landman, and Shin Shalom, among others, "...had little faith in a dogmatized God, or in dogmatized Nature, and still less in dogmatized man."[4] He, as well as ben Amitai after him, represented the popular will for a new understanding of God and of religion in contemporary society. The society was more closely connected to the earth than was the one they left behind, and this element was important in their new understanding. Reading the poetry they wrote gives us an intimate look at the thoughts and ideas that were at play in the men and women who had changed from the urban life of Jews in Eastern Europe to the rural life of pioneers in the land of Palestine. "It is only in the poetry of men permanently settled in the kvutzot, such as Levi ben Amittai...that one still tastes the peculiarly earthy exhilaration which Palestinian verse as a whole conveyed in the twenties."[5]

The connection to the earth and its role in the new understanding of God sought by these poets will be played out again throughout this paper. We will now look at some background of the history and ideas of the era that will shed some light onto the poets being analyzed. Through these factors: the land, the change of lifestyle,

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[3] Halkin. Modern Hebrew Literature, p. 184.
[4] Ibid., pp. 174-5.
[5] Ibid., p. 128.

and the thought of the Zionists moving to Palestine. Shlonsky and ben Amitai found themselves trying to formulate new ideas out of old material. One of the outcomes of this poetry was that religion was refigured, not discarded. Lives were changing, and with the connection to the land and the past, the people incorporated their religion into their new lives, but turned it into something very current for them. The religion of the Jews of Eastern Europe was the same religion of the Jews of Palestine, but it was dressed in new clothing, given a new life and new parameters, and the poetry of the period reflects these new ideas quite clearly.

Chapter 2

Background Information

On the Poets

And the Period

Before I begin my analysis of selected poems by Avraham Shlonsky and Levi benAmitai, it is important to paint a sketch of the period in which they wrote and its social and intellectual influences. As is well documented, the period of the 1920's and 1930's was a time of great social change in what was then the land of Palestine. There was much immigration and work being done in cities and on kibbutzim to make the land bloom and create a new culture. There is no need for me to write more about these aspects of the period as there are many well written, accessible history books that cover the era much better than a thumbnail sketch here would do.

This section will give some notes on the period and what factors were at play in the minds of the poets, both consciously and subconsciously. The factors explored will mainly be thinkers of the Zionist movement who I believe to have been influences on the poets' thought. I will begin, however, by making reference to a quotation about the role of history in the vernacular of the pioneer poets. The ultimate goal of all of this is to present a clear idea of where the poets' views of religion are based and how they came to form the opinions they held.

The connection of the poet to his time and his people's history is clear. Indeed a poet can't operate outside of the realm of the present in which he finds himself, nor outside of the past of the people of which he is a part. This holds doubly true for the Jewish poet, as not only does he have the history of his people as recorded in historical books, but he also has the history of the people as recorded in the narrative sections of the Bible. As Halkin writes, "All of Jewish history, as it were strives in Palestinian[6] literature to sanction the efforts which present-day Jewry is making to

[6] As a reminder, this was written before the establishment of the State of Israel, hence the term.

find salvation in its ancestral homeland."[7] He further notes that there is a lot of history mentioned, however, "The biblical theme is still pre-eminent."[8] So here is the position of the pioneer poet: he is within the modern history of the people, and working with an eye on the history of the Bible. When the history of the Bible was combined with the new history being created in the land of Palestine, the tone was sharp. T. Carmi writes about this combination, "Hebrew poetry's encounter with its homeland often produced poems of an ecstatic, almost messianic tone, such as Abraham Shlonsky's 'Toil'..."[9] While this poem is not one of the poems selected for this essay, it is from the same collection as many I have chosen and the quotation tells us much about what was current with the poets. The history, combined with the religious history of the Bible, combined with the connection and resettling of the land of Palestine, caused the poets to write in terms that were religious, but with a twist. The religion was reformed, as the land and the people themselves were reformed in the period.

The poets of this period were coming on the heels of a period of revolutionary Zionist thought. Theodore Herzl, the main figure in the beginning of the modern Zionist movement, is an important person to note. Together with the thought of A.D. Gordon and Ahad Ha'am, he had a strong influence on the views of Shlonsky and ben Amitai. Amnon Rubinstein states this, "Herzl wanted to solve the plight of the Jews. But, as Ahad Ha'am phrased it, there was also the plight of Judaism, which could no longer be contained within the shackles of traditional religion and which had to find

[7] Halkin, Modern Hebrew Literature, p. 111.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Carmi, p. 45.

viable alternatives or disappear by attrition."[10] The major question in the period was the future of the Jews. The secondary question, and the one that is of prime interest in this essay, was the future of Judaism as expressed through poetry. It was not the point for the poet to solve all of the problems of the Jews, but rather to reflect and express ideas on how to make life better and the future brighter. So, from here, we get our introduction of religion to the arena of thought in poetry.

There were different ideas of religion in the air of Zionist thought, that is for certain. Rubinstein divides the thought between that present in Western Europe and that present in Eastern Europe. In the West, religion had its place even though most people didn't want to be involved with it. In the East, it couldn't be set apart, and as such, had to be addressed.[11] Zionist Jews in Western Europe, like Herzl, had experienced emancipation and equal rights, and had already shed religion without trouble. For the Eastern European Zionists, it was not so easy. There was a search for new meaning, or perhaps a substitute for Jewish life, in Eastern Europe.[12] I would argue the former was true, that the search was for new meaning, and the poets I am analyzing come from an Eastern European background and sought to contribute ideas to the search.

To take a step back before moving forward again, it is not too much of a stretch to state that the generally accepted opinion of the pioneers is that they were living in a society that did not want to incorporate Jewish religion into its everyday practice. Labor was the new center of life. Rubinstein writes that the new, "tree of life," out of the second and third aliyot, came from a combination of revolution and

[10] Rubinstein, p. 16.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., pp. 13-15.

nationalism. "The role of traditional scripture and prayer books was replace..." by, "...the religion of work, the redemption of man..." and with it communal life.[13] This makes the point clearly: Jewish religion was out, work was in. The Torah, the traditional, "Tree of Life," had been replaced. I would argue that it wasn't quite that clear-cut of a decision. The poets speak of trying to reconcile the two worlds: the new world of labor and settling the land and the old world of Jewish tradition. This was a crucial struggle for them, and they took their ideas, that religion needed to be transformed rather than abandoned, from thinkers of the period.

In the thought of A.D. Gordon and Ahad Ha'am in particular, the poets saw a precedent, a voice given to the struggles they faced. Gordon saw the connection between the earth and religion quite clearly. The past had caused man to lose his connection with God because he had lost his connection to the earth. Samuel Hugo Bergman writes about Gordon's thought that, "In the Garden of Eden, man originally was part of nature; he was near to God. But after he had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, he was expelled from the Garden. Beginning to 'know,' and to, 'think,' he lost the immediacy of his creaturely existence."[14] Additionally, "The divorce of the Jewish people from nature had stymied the development of the Jewish religion."[15] Religion was stagnant, said Gordon, but it was not dead. There is an element of religion that needed to be changed, and there was also an element of man that needed to be changed. The Jew in Eastern Europe was far removed from Adam. The pioneer in the land of Palestine was far removed from the Jew in Eastern Europe. It is only logical that the religious expression of one should not be the same as the religious

[13] Ibid., p. 45.
[14] Bergman, p. 106.
[15] Ibid.; p. 117.

expression of the other. This was a time for rebirth, as it were, for a rethinking of traditional values and how they could be changed and brought into the world that was being inhabited by the pioneers.

Religion, however much it needed to be adapted and changed, was still an element of the people and a part of what made them who they were. The thought of Ahad Ha'am was that religion was one expression of the Jewish spirit, and in exile it became a dominant aspect of that spirit in order to keep the unity of the nation. In the current times, however, with the people settling in Palestine, Jewish culture and other parts of life could make a comeback. This was the view that enabled the Zionists to incorporate major attributes of Jewish tradition and religion.[16]

Religion held great value for man, but it would no longer come through the traditional venues that had been used for experiencing God and religion. Gordon felt that God couldn't be known through the intellect, but could be experienced and lived.[17] Working in the land would be a new avenue through which man could apprehend God. This was still Judaism, but was a far cry from the familiar world of study and prayer in a yeshivah. The ultimate outcome of this, for Gordon, was that, "Through religion man begins to feel once again that he is an inseparable and organic part of creation as if his self were identical with the Self of all being."[18]

Communion with God, the ability to feel like a part of creation, to even begin to understand the feeling of being like God in some ways, could come through experiencing God through work. This is a great point at which to turn to the poetry, in

[16] Rubinstein, pp. 38-9.
[17] Bergman, p. 107.
[18] Ibid.

which we will read about the communion with God and feeling like God, all through new expressions of Jewish religious experience.

Chapter 3

Selections From

The Poetry of

Avraham Shlonsky

Poem Hey, page 20[19]

And there
Across the Gilboa Hills
Tattered, an ancient city stands
The sheep breeder[20] went towards it after the flock
And in my mouth there is nothing to say to it.
And when Great God(s)[21] will ask me:
"What do you see in all this, O Shepherd[22]?"
I will answer:
"Cows will go straight ahead[23] in the Gilboa Hills,
Their udders swaying, like pails of blessing, between their knees."

He will wonder inwardly
And ask:
"What is the content of this vision, O Shepherd?"
I will say
"In the near future
An abundance of grain will sprout on the flesh of the hills
Because of the sheep dung.
You will come down and bow low to the earth to smell it
For it is better than any sweet aroma."

But perhaps He will not understand me and will ask
As if bemoaning me:
"Did you receive your reward, O shepherd?"
I will answer, saying,
"My reward is sevenfold greater than this still
For my jugs have been filled."

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[19] Page numbers are from Shlonsky, *Shirim Sefer Bet*.

[20] Here Shlonsky chooses, "sheep breeder," and not, "shepherd," and this is quite an interesting choice when he uses the word, "shepherd," in the rest of the poem. The word נוקד occurs twice in the Tanakh, in Amos 1:1 and 2 Kings 3:4. In Amos, it describes the prophet himself, and in 2 Kings it describes King Mesha of Moab. In modern usage, it also is used for the person who puts the perforations in matzot for Passover.

[21] Is this derision by Shlonsky or is it nothing but a linguistic jest? A similar phrase can be found in 2 Chronicles 36:18, כלי בית האלהים הגדולים, "the great instruments of the House of God," where in plain sense we know that the word great modifies the word instruments, but in an absolute sense it is possible that it could be describing, "great gods."

[22] There is a beautiful wordplay here in which Shlonsky employs two words that sound the same in Hebrew but have distinctly different meanings. It is impossible to tell the difference between the two when they are read aloud.

[23] This is a rather odd use of the root *y-sh-r* that occurs in the Tanakh in 1 Samuel 6:12. This translation, "cows will go straight ahead," is taken from the JPS translation of said verse. There, the verb is in the past tense, and here it is in the future tense, but the meaning is the same.

This poem offers a first glimpse into the true mastery of biblical material that Shlonsky demonstrates in his writing. We see here that he is clearly aware of material that comes mainly from the Tanakh, utilizing both phrases and ideas from the text in a way that applies them to the current state of affairs in Palestine. First is the word choice of calling the character a sheep breeder and not a shepherd. Through this odd word choice, Shlonsky connects us to the world of the Prophets, a world in which messages of repentance were delivered to the people for their transgressions. In Shlonsky's conception, however, the message of repentance does not need to be delivered. Amos, the sheep breeder of the Tanakh, warned the Israelites of their wicked ways. Shlonsky's sheep breeder in modern Palestine does not have a rebuke for the people. What they are doing is good and will result in different ends from the conduct of the people in the time of Amos.

The poet makes his protagonist a shepherd, and God asks him what he sees in all this, which also echoes the biblical language of God asking prophets what they see. What the poem's shepherd sees is an image borrowed from the Tanakh: cows walking straight in the Gilboa hills. When discussed in 1 Samuel 6, the meaning of cows walking straight is that the will of God is being exercised. Here Shlonsky is implying that the will of God is being exercised by having the *halutzim* settling in the land of Palestine. What does the shepherd see? He sees only one possible answer to the question of what is being undertaken in the land: it is indeed the will of God. This is an intentional parallel and a built in commentary by Shlonsky that connects the modern people of Israel with the ancient people of Israel.

After establishing this connection to the Tanakh in the first stanza of the poem, Shlonsky develops another level of the connection to the text in the next stanza. It is in this second stanza that the real essence of his message comes forward. The imagery of cows walking straight hinted at the will of God being done by the settlers in the land of Palestine. In this stanza the ante is upped: the work of the settlers will change the will of God and will even shift the paradigm of ancient religious practice to conform to the way of life in modern times. What I mean by all of this is that rather than living according to the precepts of the Tanakh, Shlonsky sees that the settlers in the land of Palestine are determining new precepts, and by doing so are telling God how to change because they have found better guidelines by which to live.

The protagonist of the poem has a vision, using the classical prophetic sense of the word, giving another hint of the feeling of the poet regarding what was happening. The land was being worked, and the interaction with God was being turned around as a result of this. Through having animals in the land, a lot of dung will be produced, and this dung will please God enough that He will come down to the earth to smell it. This is a complete revolution in thought, as the biblical text denotes dung as being unpleasant and something that should be burned separate from the rest of a burnt offering[24]. Here, the smell of the dung, which would have been quite prevalent in the agricultural society of the settlers, becomes the ideal smell. Contrary to the biblical text, in which the burnt offering rises up to God, God will

[24] For references to sacrifices and dung, see Exodus 29:14, Leviticus 4:11, 8:17, and 16:27. For the larger issue present here, that of pleasing odors for God, see Exodus 29:41, Leviticus 1:9, Numbers 15:10, and Ezekiel 6:13. In Numbers 19:5 the dung is burned together with the carcass of the animal, but it is not a pleasing aroma.

here be so interested in the smell of the dung that He will come to it; the people will be the center to which God comes, not vice versa.

Then I will catch scent of your dresses[25]
As the scent of night in the Jezreel Valley
As the scent of incense[26].

For here has come the one in whose hands are the keys
And he has opened the springs in every heart.
Let's bring our jugs down
For the water is pure
For it is very sweet.

"The nights in Canaan are beautiful."
Thus will the sadness sing from tents.
Will they indeed know that the nights have a scent
Like the scent of your garments
Like the scent of prayer in the nostrils of God?

[25] This phrase appears in Song of Songs 4:11, in which the narrator talks about the beauty of his bride. There the scent of the dresses is compared to the scent of Lebanon.
[26] The word קטרת is a common biblical word that Shlonsky uses here. It is important to note that the incense offered before God can be a positive, as seen all through Numbers 7, but it can also have negative consequences, as seen in Lev 10:1-2 and Numbers 16:35.

Scent is a major theme of this poem. The word itself appears six times: once in each of the first three verses and once in each of the last three verses, providing a very nice symmetry. The biblical allusion to Song of Songs is clear, and the description of the sweet scent of garments applies in both cases, with a different basis for comparison in each. The question here is to whom the narrator is speaking. Perhaps to his lover, as in Song of Songs, or perhaps he is just speaking to his fellow pioneer. Either way, the outcome is the same: the smell of the pioneer, the sweat and dirt of working the land, is what is so desirable. The smell of the pioneer's garments is paralleled by the smell of the land of the Jezreel Valley. The land becomes an object of affection either actively or passively, and it becomes equally desirable as a lover due to having the same scent, that which is compared to incense offered before God.

With the comparison of the scent of the land to the scent of incense, traditional religious structures are turned around, following on the ideas laid out in the previous poem. In the Torah, the incense is offered before God and is a positive item, as seen all through Numbers 7. There are instances where it is associated with negatives, most famously in the case of Nadav and Avihu, but generally it is a positive. Here the scent of incense is a positive, but what is of greatest concern is to what it is compared. In the Torah, incense is prepared, offered, and watched regularly, and is maintained by the priests. Here it has become egalitarian, where there do not appear to be boundaries around who can present it, where it can be presented, and when it can be presented. The working of the earth by all people represents a 180-degree turn from the presentation of incense by the priesthood. The outcome is the

same. but the conception of creating an aroma pleasing to God is turned around: everybody can do so by working the land.

The last verse of the poem frames the ideas presented in the previous verses very nicely. There is a subtle allusion to Psalm 141:2. "Take my prayer as an offering of incense. my upraised hands as an evening sacrifice." The prayer of the psalmist. equivalent to an offering of incense. is replaced by the labor of the pioneer. Shlonsky is equating the two. and offering the scent of the land as a replacement for the prayer before God. There are a number of images in the verse from Psalms that parallel the imagery of the poem: the incense is present in both places. the upraised hands of prayer parallel the hands of the pioneer in the Jezreel Valley. and the evening sacrifice parallels the scent of the nights. These things. the hands of the pioneer and the scent of the nights. are the new forms of worship. replacing the old. biblically based. traditional forms.

What is worth noting. and is of great interest in this paper. is that the need to please God is not made obsolete by the new life being established in the Jezreel Valley. Rather. there is a wholesale shift in focus and in priority. The connection to God remains important. but the relationship of the people to God changes to become more direct. and the expression of the relationship changes from traditional forms of worship to working the land and creating a new system of expression. Additionally. all people. not just the priests. become eligible to make these offerings.

Earth

All night the storm laughed
A laughter of hooligans and drunkards
It trumpeted:
"The sun is frozen, is frozen."
And clouds, like black concubines
Danced to the sounding of the trumpets[27]
And thunderbolts drummed after them:
Amen! Amen!

Not one drunkard was emboldened to go out
To the roaring storm:
Liars, you're telling lies, O storm and clouds!
Only I by myself, with the earth
We roared to the night:
Lie!
But the storm spit in our faces, a dripping of shame
Scratching the sky with fingernails of lightning
And with the mockery of thunder it laughed:
The sun will freeze, will surely freeze!

Oh if only the sun knew it was frozen
Like a prostitute after she has withered[28]
It would spit in its own face
And be extinguished.

But suddenly
Dawn's torch was lit in the castle of all my visions:
The East!
And flags of rebellion waved their red curtains:
Sun!

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[27] This phrase appears in Numbers 10:8-10 where it is the way to gather the people. These are trumpets that are to be sounded by the priests, so that God may remember the people, as a sign forever. This passage is also reminiscent of 2 Kings 10:13-14 where Atalya hears the sound of the trumpets and the people rejoice, but she cries, "Treason! Treason!" The double, "amen," two lines later is a sharp parallel to this passage. Linguistically, תקע is a less common choice of verb for the sounding of trumpets than הרים or החציר.

[28] Reference here to Sarah in Genesis 18:12, where she does not believe she could have pleasure and be fertile at her advanced age. The translation, "withered," used here, is taken from the JPS.

Then the winds' brooms came out
To sweep, from upon the floor of the morning sky,
The vomit of the storm
And the earth smiled at me
And its face
Was like the face of a girl who has risen from the bath
And its grass was a holiday hairdo.

And in the courtyard
A dog lay near her puppies.
And in the streets
The noise of children and a burbling of puddles
And a woman whose belly is between her teeth.
The torches of my rebellion alarmed them all
Hither!
Let us all kiss the woman
And the dog!

The past deceived me again:
The earth is just a handmaiden to her mistress[29], the sun
Among the masses of her servants.
Woe to you, foolish Copernicus[30]!
Do you not surely know
That on account of one dog laying near her puppies
All the suns, moons, and stars circle
The Earth
And with their tongues they lick[31] the hems of its black dress.

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[29] Here Shlonsky ties in a subtle parallel to the earlier allusion to the Sarah story. The use of handmaiden and mistress parallels the relationship between Hagar the handmaiden, and Sarah, her mistress. These terms in their relationship are clearly elucidated in chapter 16 of Genesis

[30] Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary has an entry for, "copernicion," which reads, "Of or relating to Copernicus or the belief that the earth rotates daily on its axis and the planets revolve in orbit around the sun." The idea expressed by the poet in the following lines, that the planets and the sun revolve around the earth, is just the opposite of copernician thought.

[31] This is the same language used in Judges 7:5, where God tells Gideon he should pick his troops based on how they drink their water, with those who lick with their tongues being chosen.

But today is a holiday for me
And I will run
A motley collage of trees, cows, houses, babies and puddles passes before my eyes.
It is the universe that blinks
At the appearance of the flags of rebellion waving before its eyes:
Rebellion! Rebellion!
And like a woman bearing her first child
Fresh faced, tired, and making herself beautiful
The Earth smiled:
Holiday!

And I understood:
I am the most exalted[32] of the songs of The Book of Psalms
That is called the universe
And my flesh- the palace of God[33]
With all the cattle that moo here before the face of heaven.

[32] This is very reminiscent of the language used towards God in *Kaddish* and in *Pesukei D'Zimrah*.
[33] There are two interesting usages of this phrase in the Tanakh. In Jeremiah 7:4 the message is to not rely on illusions, calling other places palaces of God. The message is to rather mend one's ways in order to truly dwell in the palace of God. The second location is Zechariah 6:15, where we read that people will come from far away to build the House of God.

This poem has an energy that the previous two do not possess. There is a great deal of imagery about noise, the storm that takes place, and the physical sensation and effort of giving birth. What unifies these three topics within the poem is the overarching theme of change: each of the three sets of imagery represents a type of change with a measurable outcome. The poem relates to the lives of the pioneers in Palestine more on a social and practical level here and less on a religious level. Rather than focusing on changing religion and/or the relationship with God, this poem focuses on changing the world of the pioneers.

This is not to say there is no biblical imagery at play here: to do so would indeed be an overstatement. There are still a number of relevant allusions that contribute to the overall meaning of the poem. The first of these allusions is present in the first stanza of the poem. "The sounding of trumpets." echoes Numbers 10:8-10, where the trumpets are sounded as a way to gather the people together. The storm of the world was raging around them, but the people were gathered together in Palestine by the sound of the trumpets. Additionally, the Torah tells that the trumpets were to be sounded so that God would remember the people, and this shall be an eternal sign. There is a political commentary here that the people have not been forgotten by their God and this is an important time for the people to gather in the land of Palestine.

The idea that God has not forgotten His people is further alluded to in the next stanza of the poem, with a reference to the story of Sarah and Abraham. Just as Sarah was infertile until late in life, so the land of Palestine lay dormant for many years, until now. What we see is that the sun may have thought that it was frozen, as in the poem, it may have heard threats, but, indeed, the truth is that it was only a

temporary status, and despite the land being dormant and the people in exile, God remembers them both and will reunite them in the rebuilt land of Palestine.

In the last stanza of the poem, the poem presents an idea that turns the traditional approach to religion on its head. In this stanza, the role of God is assumed by the pioneer himself, as the one that is worshipped and the one in whose place that which is truly holy is undertaken. The narrator states that he is the, "the most exalted," echoing the language of the liturgy of the *Kaddish*. The pioneer himself is praiseworthy for his actions, and is deserving of thanks from the people of the earth. There are hints here, that will be more fully developed in later poems, that the power of creation has been assumed by the pioneers and not left in the domain of God solely.

The image of the body of the narrator as the palace of God is a difficult one to put a meaning on. What I would say about it is simply that the focus of importance has been shifted from Jerusalem to the place where the pioneer is found. The center of worship and matters of importance is out with the people, not in the Temple and its precincts.

What is interesting about the words, "palace of God," is their association with phrases in the Tanakh. The phrase appears in Jeremiah 7:4 and Zechariah 6:15, and in both places it contributes a level of meaning to the work of settling the modern land. The overwhelming sense in both of these occurrences of the phrase is that there was a need for change, both in attitude and location, in order to truly create the palace of God. The people settling in the land of Palestine are undertaking this change and will see, similar to the texts, that they are doing something good and doing God's will.

What is different, as stated earlier, is that the diaspora is no longer called God's palace, nor is Jerusalem. The people themselves have become the centers of religious focus.

Poem Aleph, p. 37

Jezreel

Like suckling camels, with their humps in the sky
God made the Gilboa Hills kneel down[34]
And the Fields of Jezreel like young she-camels
Pressed close to the nipples of their breasts.

The milk of the rivers flows, flows, overflows their banks.
And the earth (oh black pregnant mare!)
Here it sticks out its neck, widens its nostrils, breathes-
Because it smelled water.

Water! Water!
Oh the holy milk from your breasts, God!

But behold my udders, too, are filled with milk
The udders of man!
And my flesh- a completely overflowing breast rises from the ground.

Oh the clodded Fields of Jezreel!
Suckle! Suck!

Come she-camels, horses, man, God!
And I will give you suck
For the nipples of my breasts[35] are yours!

---

[34] This translation of the *hiphil* form of *b-r-ch* is based on JPS translation of Genesis 24:11, which reads, "He made the camels kneel down." There are two possible alternative translations as well. First, it can mean to take a shoot from a plant and place it in the ground to cause it to take root, as illustrated by Kilayim 7:1-2. The second possible meaning is to produce offspring, as in Yebamot 63a. While the reference to Genesis may be the most clear, I believe there is much merit to considering the organic, earthbound nature of the second and third possible translations.

[35] There is a beautiful double entendre in the last line, *pitmot shaddai*, which could be understood as, "God's nipples," as well. Grammatically, the absence of the *dagesh* in the written word tells the close reader that the proper reference is to the narrator. When it is read, however, the play is unclear, and even to one who does not have an acute understanding of the rules of grammar the point could be mistaken. Furthermore, according to Even Shoshan, the source of the word *Shaddai*, God Almighty, may come from *shad*, meaning one who sustains and nourishes, in which case the double entendre is lent credence.

The tenor of this poem is of giving life and the relationship of the pioneers to the natural world around them. In addition to this relationship, there is a not-so-subtle image constructed of humans giving life, in many ways working in partnership with God. More directly, perhaps, there is a theme of humans continuing in work that was begun by God and then placed in their hands.

In the first stanza of the poem, the odd phrase, "God made the Gilboa Hills kneel down," presents a number of possible interpretations that allow the reader a wealth of understanding. The standard translation of this verse, based on simple meaning, relates the hills to kneeling camels. As noted above, however, there are two alternate meanings that are present in rabbinic literature and add layers of meaning here. First, with the image of the mountains being taken from another source and being planted in the Jezreel Valley, Shlonsky tells of a connection to the world, of the mountains as living entities, not just piles of rock. Second, with the meaning of giving life, Shlonsky tells of the true depth of his connection to the land. There is a shift, as seen later in the poem as well, away from God as the sole force in giving and sustaining life, towards God in partnership with the land and with the people. This gives a beautiful insight into the philosophy of the pioneer community and the esteem in which they held the land, and the respect they gave to each other and the work they were undertaking.

The most beautiful, and stunning, imagery of the poem comes after the discussion of the mountains, when the narrator begins to speak of himself. God is presented as the source of holy milk, the water of the earth, which comes from His breasts, as it were. Immediately following this, the narrator states that human udders

have been filled in a parallel sense. His body is a flowing breast, paralleling God's giving life.

Finally, in the last stanza of the poem, the narrator offers an admonition to the she-camels, horses, men, and God to come and suckle at his breast. The narrator offers himself as one who is strong and one who gives life, playing on the possible meanings of the root of the word *shaddai*. Here we see the partnership I mentioned earlier, where the human pioneer joins God in sustaining life. What is new in this last stanza, however, is the image that the human will sustain the life of God. This concept is in line with the traditional Jewish views that God is strengthened by our actions. What represents a major shift in philosophy, however, is how, specifically, God is strengthened. Normally, the praises, worship, and sacrifice of humans are what nurture God. Here it is life itself, the living and working in the land. In an earlier poem we saw a reference to the smell of the earth replacing incense for God, and here is an extension of the theme. God is still sustained by human actions, but there are actions different from traditional religious expression that come to the fore. Work and life on the land have replaced prayer and sacrifice as the new expressions of religion. Again the idea is presented that God is still as important as ever, but the ways of interacting with Him have changed.

Poem Bet, p. 38

Like hunchbacked old women here the tents panted
Because the load borne on the shoulder is great.
Man is flesh, and he labors in the sacred realm.
And the earth has bread.

The world is borne like a crippled young lamb[36] here
Under the armpit.
In the wind God's curls come down here
And caress every cheek

Who is great and who small here
In the kingdom of labor and flesh[37]?
Land is rolled out here- The Scroll of a New Covenant.
And we- are the twelve.

[36] The use of the word צולעה here could be a reference to Micah 4:6-7, which is about the days to come, in which God will gather up the צולעה, which is Israel, and bring them, the dispersed people, back into the Land of Israel. The same word and the same theme are present also in Zephaniah 3:19. In modern Hebrew usage, it refers to people with an incomplete language.

[37] The phrase, "Kingdom of labor and flesh," implies that there is a king of labor and flesh. This sparks associations with the classical rabbinic term, "king of flesh and blood."

This poem delivers the message of a continuation of earlier themes in Jewish history coming to bear fruit, and the continual unfolding of history. There is even a theme of history being created in the present here. The, "crippled young lamb," which represents the pioneers, hearkens to Micah 4:6-7 and Zephaniah 3:19, and gives an insight into the history that was being fulfilled and created in the land of Palestine. In these passages from the Prophets, God will gather the crippled young lamb and the dispersed people, to bring them to the Land of Israel. Once they have arrived there, He will make of them a populous nation and reign over them.

The prophecy of being gathered into the land has come true, and the new history of creating a populous nation ruled by God was being written. The poet sees himself within the chain of Jewish tradition here, connecting the past with the future through his present life. The new covenant being rolled out here is the return of the people to the land and the continued relationship with God is an element of the plot. What is interesting, and in line with the themes of the prior poems, is the involvement of the pioneers themselves in this process. Bringing the people to the land is part of God's plan, told in the Prophets, and the pioneers are actively bringing themselves to the land, with God's help. The lives of the pioneers are dedicated to holy work as well, but rather than service in the Temple, they are engaged in service to God. They are staying within the traditional framework of Jewish life, but they are redefining many of the terms to create a new relationship to their God, themselves, and their religion.

The sunrise moos at me from God's cowshed
And cranes its face.
Here it is- the Image of God!
Here it is- a mooing milk cow.

Herds have already gone out to the valley.
Herds have already gone out to their lime.
And my God shepherds His flock here
It being the flock of humankind.

"Are you hungry?"
"No!"
"What do you seek for yourself?"
"A jug of water for myself. and biscuits.
O brother
Let me please be a kid among the kids of God!"

This poem presents some difficulty to the interpreter: there is not a lot of material on which to base opinions about thematic elements. There just are not enough clues in this poem to allow one to say that it is promoting the same number of ideas as the other poems selected for this essay. I am not certain whether this conclusion is based on a lack of material in the poem or in a lack of insight by the commentator.

Despite the lack of new themes set forth in this poem, I do feel that it fits in with the other selections in this group and supports the major ideas presented in those other poems. The poem connects with the themes of relationship to God through the work being undertaken in the land and the holiness of that work. The sunrise in God's cowshed tells the reader that this is not just an ordinary field, one that could be found in Nebraska, with ordinary cows. Rather, it is indeed a holy cowshed, one in which relationship to God can be maintained. Similarly, God is seen shepherding His flock in the land, just as the humans have gone out into the fields with their flocks. There is a parallelism of imagery that invites the reader to understand the connection with God through terminology of the agricultural lifestyle.

Finally, there is a cryptic reference to having goat-kids that are among the kids of God's flock. I interpret this as a reference to wanting to have a greater connection with God through the work of the pioneers. Perhaps this acknowledges that the work would be made easier by God's assistance, or perhaps this is just an acknowledgment of the need for Divine guidance. Either way, we are still connected to the holiness of the work in the land and the connection to God through undertaking it.

The spring ground has grown hair- a large body
And my flesh has sprouted in its springtime
Thus I stand naked, and I covet my hairy body
Behold the dawn, too, has grown hair and is reddish.

It is good for you that your sprouting body will stretch out[38] here
Man!
A goat and a sheep will come to lick your flourishing hair
And bless you: meh-meh-meh.
Then God, too, will come down as a tender goat kid
To graze here in your flesh that sprouted in its youth.

[38] This phrase calls to mind 1 Kings 17:17-24, in which while Elijah is a guest in a woman's home, her son dies. Elijah stretches out his body over the child's corpse and God restores it to life. The modern usage of the word implies attempting to make peace with one's times and one's surroundings.

In this short poem, Shlonsky tells readers that the land and the animals in it will give strength and life to the pioneers, and that this is the place that is meant for them. It is good for them to be here, perhaps better than being in the lands in which they found themselves previously. The narrator's body is young and flourishing, displaying a fertility that parallels the earth. He is the one that is in bloom, ready to give life, produce, ideas, to the world around in which he lives. The traditional imagery is that if man is good, the land will blossom, as seen in the liturgy taken from Deuteronomy 11. Here it is the human who is sprouting and appears to have gotten rain in its season. Perhaps this is the reward for coming to settle the land of Palestine.

There is also one possible biblical reference here, and it appears in the first line of the second stanza. The phrase, "stretch out," echoes 1 Kings 17:17-24. In that passage, Elijah the prophet, "stretches out," his body over the body of a dead child, and God restores the child to life. It was good for the pioneers to stretch themselves out over the land that in many ways was like dead land. The narrator is telling other would-be pioneers that indeed it is good for more of them to come and join in the effort. The possible outcome would be that God would restore the land, and, consequently, the people living in it, back to life.

Through this restoration of life, coming from the efforts of the people, the sheep will feel blessed and will in turn bless the people for giving them nourishment. The sheep will not literally lick the bodies of the pioneers, but rather the earth they restore. God, too, will be involved in appreciation of the work done to bring the earth back to life, and, consistent with the other poems of this group, God will appreciate the work of the pioneers rather than simply waiting in heaven waiting for their praise.

The modern meaning of the Hebrew, "*titmoded*," to make peace with one's surroundings, also adds a layer of meaning to interpreting the poem. Settling in the land of Palestine at this time was very difficult physically and psychologically. There was not enough food, there was hard work and few creature comforts, and there was much disease. Added to this were the pressures of learning a new language and communicating with people who did not speak the same language to begin with, all while trying to adapt to an agricultural lifestyle. The message here is that it is good for the pioneers to try to come to terms with the life that they had chosen to undertake, for here it was that their bodies would be most fertile. Together with the allusion to 1 Kings, the poet is sending the message that through the efforts of settling the land and making peace with the new surroundings, life would be restored to the land, and through it, life would be restored to the people themselves.

Poem Hey, p. 41

Shirt unbuttoned like open palace gates[39]
I caress the morning ground with my toes.
Here I lay prostrate, crouching- a mother's bosom.
All the rivers will go to me
Every tree take root in me
God of the Whole World cuddles to me
And lovingly whispers to me:
You...! You...!

I will lift up my body upon the palms of my hands
And under the crest of a thick tree
I will place it on a throne of green grass
Man-God!
Behold the dawn wears a large sun as a crown on its forehead
Like *tefilin* for the head
And causes prayer to drip upon my breast.

Unbutton yourself, oh shirt, like open palace gates
Let the prayer of every living creature come
Before my flesh, which is good and grants good[40].

[39] This continues the motif from poem the poem, "Earth," that the poet's body represents, or actually is, the palace of God.

[40] This is a clear reference to the blessing of God, who is good and grants good, which comes from Berachot 9:2. There is a beautiful play on words here too: the blessing is recited over good news, which could also be the meaning of בשרי. This is a beautiful little detail that enriches the experience of reading the poem and shows Shlonsky's mastery of the language.

Here is the poem that is most likely to been seen as blasphemous of all the poems in this grouping. The themes of interaction with God and refiguring of the relationship with Him get taken to a level that is not seen elsewhere. The poet speaks of his body in terms that are used expressly for God in other places in Jewish tradition. The poet is equal to God, rather than just being God's partner in sustaining the earth in which he lives.

We see the narrator with his shirt unbuttoned, like open gates of a palace, and we are reminded of the previous poem in which Shlonsky speaks of his body as the palace of God. Here it is as if the shirt itself acts as a wall around the palace that is the body, and by opening the shirt the poet is granting admission, or access even, to the palace itself. What is interesting about this concept is the imagery of the palace being portable, and the idea that access to it is as easy to control as opening and closing the buttons of one's shirt.

In traditional Jewish thought and practice, the place to worship God was the Temple in Jerusalem, a fixed place with fixed gates and rules regarding when the gates would be opened, who would have access, and how those who gained access should proceed to act. Here we continue with the poet's democratization of the rules of religion and the openness of religious experience to the people. Each person represents a temple, meaning each person becomes a place in which God can be beheld. Workers in the field are no longer shut out from the palace, dependent on the actions of the priests in the inner sancta. They themselves have direct access, and they control that access in a simple manner. There are no secret words, no special

qualifications or times at which God can or can't be accessed. They simply have access, and their bodies bring them nearer to God.

The equation of the man with God begins in the second stanza, where the poet speaks of seating himself on a throne of grass, referring to himself as, "Man-God." This follows from the previous stanza where God will whisper to him, echoing the sounds of humans worshipping God. The skies, too, get involved in worshipping the narrator as they drip rain, which is seen as prayer, being dripped towards the bosom of the Man-God. I find this image to be somewhat difficult to understand, and find it best to see it within the context of pushing a boundary to see just how far it would go in this line.

Finally, the biggest of the images comes in the last stanza, which is quite brief. The narrator, shirt unbuttoned, being a substitute for the palace of God, will stand, and the prayers of all those who live will come before him, before his body which, "is good and grants good." The image of the prayer coming before him is a parallel to worshippers bringing offerings to the Temple, where they were brought before God by the priests. The image of the narrator's flesh[41] as good and granting good is where he places himself in the role usually assigned to God as the object of worship. He argues that he is like God, or as God, and I find this to be too much of a stretch to incorporate into a simple re-imaging of traditional Jewish thought.

[41] The poet has a beautiful play on words here: the Hebrew *b'sari*, which is translated as flesh, could also mean, "news," or, "information," and the prayer for God, as the one who is good and grants good, is recited upon hearing good news, *b'sorot tovot*.

Poem vav, p. 56

Please, Almighty[42], drape my soul in a *tallit*
And sing aloud: Come, O bride[43]!
Oh, my beautiful wife, light the candles
And prepare the bread for *kiddush*[44].

The night has already blessed the candles of its Shabbat
And the moon is hung for sanctification.
Today I want, upon my return home,
To kiss the *mezuzah* on the door.

The ship's chimneys have already stopped their smoke.
The siren has already stopped its wailing.
The Shabbat skies are bent over my resting land
Like grandmother over her *Tseinah U R'einah*[45].

For seven days are the days of the week
And seven branches has the candelabra.
And he who lights the candelabra in his soul
Will pour the oil for its light.

Oh please pour the oil and see how much song
Is sprinkled here from your golden cup
Upon roofs, upon streets, upon sands in my land
Behold your hand, my Sovereign, has poured this.

Do you remember the time we sang in the foreign ships
We, who were going up to Palestine in Your Name:
"...When Jews will come to the land of Israel
How great will the joy be in their dwellings."

---

[42] See note to last line of, "Jezreel."

[43] The admonition of the Sabbath bride to come is found in the last line of the hymn לכה דודי by Alkabetz, and it is where worshippers bow towards the entrance of the sanctuary to formally welcome the Shabbat bride into their communities.

[44] It is strange to read the Hebrew קדוש used instead of מוצא in reference to the blessing of the *halah* on Shabbat. It implies that the bread is being sanctified by itself rather than the usual formulation of God being sanctified for bringing bread forth from the earth.

[45] This is an exegetical version, in Yiddish, of sources from the Torah, *haftarot*, and *megilot*. Popular with women, it was used primarily as reading material for Shabbat. It was composed by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi at the end of the 16th century and gained universal acceptance among Ashkenazi Jewry. For more information, see Chava Turniansky's article, "Ze'enah U-Re'enah," in Encyclopedia Judaica.

Have You forgotten? Behold Your hand it was that spread
The sails on the ship going up.
We are worthy of being seated first
At the feast of Your great Shabbat.

Please, my Sovereign, drape our bodies in a *tallit*
And sing aloud: Come o bride!
Our lovely wives will light the candles
And we will sanctify the bread.

This poem captures the experience of Shabbat among the pioneers, stating their desire to be united with God in traditional terms. The poet, from the very beginning of this poem, asks God to address him in religious terms, with the draping of a prayer shawl over his body. Then he asks God to sing aloud, "Come, O bride," hoping that God will indeed see the community as His bride on Shabbat. This phrase is taken from the poem, "*Lechah Dodi*," written in the 16th century by Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz, and is part of the traditional liturgy recited with the welcome of Shabbat. Here, again, Shlonsky locates himself firmly within Jewish tradition, stating that the pioneers are not breaking out and creating something new. God will, Shlonsky hopes, address the community with the respect and kind words given to a tired wife at the end of a long week. He also locates himself within tradition by speaking in terms of seven days of the week, echoing Exodus 20:8-11. There were six days for work and one day for rest, and here we see the rest.

What does stand out, additionally, is the use of the word, "*kiddush*," for the action to be undertaken over the bread, presumably at the Shabbat table. It is an acceptable usage of the word, but the more common word, and what one would expect to find here is, "*motzi*," the blessing to God for bringing bread forth from the earth. What this hints at, I would argue, is a reinforcement of the notion that the pioneers themselves also have an active role in their own sustenance and are no longer reliant solely on God for providing all of their needs. They will sanctify the bread on Shabbat, but they make sure to thank themselves, as well as God, for making sure that it is present on the table. This is another beautiful example of turning the religion around and changing its focus rather than discarding it or creating a new

religion altogether.

Poem Gimmel, p. 61

Gilboa- it sounds like *remez-drash-sod*[46].
And like the Sages' dove, the *Shekhinah* coos here.
This is the scent of parchments or the ineffable name
From Mapu's vineyard of ornamental language[47].

But this too is a living clod. And the *pshat* of thistles,
Of the mountain's rust. Of a jackal's wail at night.
This is the meaning of the vision of the herds' gliding[48]
That a boy, at the time of binding[49], sees the ram's horns[50].

If you see your son, in his binding, beholding
A moon rising like a slaughtering knife
Know, my mother, that truly your son feels good in this
Knowing that there is, there is a savior for the child.

---

[46] These are three of the four types of commentary on classical scriptures, translated as, "clue, exegesis, and secret." The fourth type of commentary, "*pshat*," means, "simple," or, "plain meaning." Here the author gives the hint that the Gilboa is not quite as simple as it sounds, and tells us the plain meaning a little later on in the poem.

[47] A reference to the mastery of the Hebrew language present in the literature of Abraham Mapu. He was creative and made the most out of the resources available to him in the Hebrew language at the time. For more information about Mapu, see David Patterson's article, "Mapu, Abraham," in the Encyclopedia Judaica.

[48] This is a reference to Song of Songs 4:1 and 6:5. "You are beautiful, your hair is like a flock of goats streaming down Mount Gilead."

[49] Makes reference to the binding of Isaac, Genesis 22.

[50] In the Torah text it is the father, not the boy who sees the ram's horn. See Genesis 22:13.

This poem attempts to compare the idyllic understandings of the Land of Israel with the modern reality faced by the pioneers in the land of Palestine when they were settling it. The contrasts are quite striking. Gilboa must have meanings that are beautiful and hidden, to be understood looking deeply into it. Perhaps it could even be like paradise, which is alluded to by the three elements *remez-drash-sod*. Along with this, one might expect that the *Shekhinah* would coo here, like the dove that represents the people in many places in rabbinic literature. Additionally, life could also be the smell of parchment and the ineffable name, or something written in the creative literary style of Mapu. All in all, there are a number of dazzling things that could be understood, or envisioned to be life in the land of Palestine.

The reality, however, is the simple meaning, which in this case is thorns. Life is not glamorous or glorious, and it is far from paradise. The land is hard, for it is a living thing, not a fantastical element thought up at some other time. Rather than the sound of God's presence, there is the sound of jackals in the night. Perhaps the rust of the mountain is to say that it is not necessarily gold there.

Shlonsky tells us that these descriptions of life in the land are the explanation of the vision recorded in Song of Songs 4:1 and 6:5. Song of Songs 4:1 reads, "Ah, you are fair, my darling, Ah you are fair. Your eyes are like doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats streaming down Mount Gilead." Here is the meaning: the beauty is hidden, like the beautiful eyes hidden behind a veil. Despite the thorns, despite the rust, despite the other hardships, Gilboa, and the land of Palestine, is beautiful underneath it all.

The additional biblical reference here is to the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. Part of the meaning of the vision from Song of Songs is that the boy who is bound, representing the pioneers in the land of Palestine, will see the ram's horns, and they will know that they will not be slaughtered. The imagery, beginning in the last line of the second stanza, and continuing through the third stanza of the poem, very much relates to the story of Isaac, and illustrates how the pioneers parallel him.

The last stanza is addressed to a mother, and in the Bible, Sarah was not present at her son's binding, so the information would need to have been told to her. He must provide reassurance that despite the appearance of danger, he will be alright. The moon, in the shape of a knife, is understood to be time that would pass, with life for the pioneers seemingly getting more dangerous as time passes. But this is not true, as it truly is good for the son, the pioneer, in this situation.

Finally, the poet repeats the phrases, "*ki tov*," and, "*ki yesh*," echoing the voice of the angel calling out to Abraham, instructing him not to slaughter his bound son. The repetition emphasizes the importance of the message. The message is clear: this time, just as before when a Jewish son faced danger, there will be a redeemer, and the son will be redeemed. Here we even have another repetition: the son will be redeemed by coming to the land of Palestine to settle it, and the pioneer, once he has been there, will indeed by redeemed from the struggles and hardship of life there.

Chapter 4

Selections From

The Poetry of

Levi Ben Amitai

In the Furrow[51]

Now I know limits. My path in the furrow is straight[52].
I will walk. I will trample the abundant rock fragments.
And if the rain pours down, or the sun beats.
Or a storm rages from the threshold of a nearby desert.

I will step. I will insert the blade. I will split the clump of earth.
I will bare the flesh of the sickly ground to the eye of the sun.
Oh. God. when with the fingers of Your hands[53]
Will You appear to plow the wounds of the soil?

---

[51] בתלם is an interesting choice for the phrase, "In the Furrow," as possible alternatives are גיר and חציץ. Outside of the word itself, what makes this noteworthy is the implied meaning of *halach ba-telem*, which means to go directly as instructed, without swaying to the left or to the right. This implies that there is a path in which one could walk, and that path happens to involve working in a field, from which I conclude that this is indeed a deliberate word choice. More about the ideological meaning of this will be provided in the textual analysis section.

[52] Here is another interesting word choice. Rather than saying he himself walks straight, Ben Amitai chooses to say that the path itself is straight. This is odd considering the first person state of the verbs in the same verse and in the subsequent verse. Linguistically, this is not a direct connection, but on some level it echoes the prose of Jeremiah 31:9, and ideologically I believe this is the start of a pattern: Ben Amitai inserts phrases that refer the reader to passages in the Bible that discuss return of the Israelites to the land of Israel to resettle it, paralleling his life as a *halutz*.

[53] Here is another interesting, presumably deliberate word choice. God's finger, *etsba Elohim* is also a phrase that means, "miracle," as is used in Exodus 8:15. It fits nicely with the imagery of working the land with the physical body and also presenting God as doing the same, while still allowing for some element of mystery and magic.

Here I begin analysis of the poetry of Levi Ben Amitai with a selection that serves as a thematic bridge between his poetry and that of Shlonsky. The elements of Shlonsky's poetry that are present here are connection to the past of the Jewish people, as recorded in the Tanakh, the ideology that the pioneers in the land of Palestine are doing their work in partnership with God, and the idea, seen in a number of Shlonsky's poems, that there was a goal, an endpoint for the work that was being undertaken to resettle the land.

The first line of the poem connects the poet, and the pioneers working in the field, to the Tanakh and the past of the Jewish people. There is a connection between the phrase, "my path in the furrow is straight," and the phrase, "by a level road where they will not stumble," found in Jeremiah 31:9. The word choice in Hebrew is much more similar in Hebrew than in English, with the phrase, "*yashar darki*," in Ben Amitai being paralleled by, "*b'derech yashar*," in Jeremiah. They both connote the image of a straight, level path, a way by which one would proceed.

What is most interesting about this reference to Isaiah is not the specific verse itself, but rather the larger context in which it is located within the book. The section of Jeremiah from which this verse is taken speaks of the return of Israel from exile, of people coming back to the land. There is a connection, and a deliberate one at that, to the views of settling the land of Palestine in the days before the founding of the modern State of Israel. The people were indeed in exile, living in Europe, in Africa, in the Middle East, and their return to the land served as a bridge from the past to the future. Again we encounter the image of the present of the Jewish people bridging its past to its future, and this is a very strong ideology. What was being accomplished by

the pioneers was more than just a physical move, it was destiny, a fulfillment of the future stated in the Tanakh.

Additionally, there is imagery connecting the people to God on the level of their work, and equating their work with work done by God. We even see an expectation of God to come down on the people's behalf and take His turn in the field, as it were, making Himself a laborer just like the people. The poet asks God when he will appear to plow the soil with His own hands, saying He should be responsible for the establishment of the new state just the same as the people who are already there. An additional element, along with bringing God down to the level of the pioneers by asking Him to do the same work, is bringing the pioneers up to the level of God. Perhaps they are the ones who have been elevated, seeing their working of the land with their own hands as a step in the process of maintaining the people and fulfilling the promise of return from exile that is stated in the Tanakh. Here we see that labor is more than just labor, it is indeed divine, and the connection to God and the promises made to the people is active, with the pioneers taking steps to bring about the future rather than just waiting for God in exile.

To My Brother, The Weeder

Among us, they don't ask who you are, brother,
Kneel at my side, like me here drop down.
How good it is to be on abandoned soil
To feel the warmth of the ground with ten fingers[54].
With a bare foot to feel the clods
And pluck, with full handfuls pluck.

We stand like paupers, we are as emaciated as a stalk-
But a toiling man is not completely impoverished.
Our palms are raised up to the searing heat of the sun:
We hope for its blessing, yearn for its fury.

We are all stalks of a field, and when the time comes
Somewhere far away, on good earth.
God kneels over in fields of grain[55].
Kneels and gathers from the expanses
Into His bosom in abundant mercy
Like stalks of the field, the harvest of the generation[56].

[54] Outside of indicating a number of fingers, which is quite a literal translation of the Hebrew, the phrase also implies a completeness of participation in the act. An alternative would be, "with your total being," or, perhaps, "fully," in which cases the line could read, "To feel the warmth of the ground with your total being," or, "To fully feel the warmth of the ground." While the translation I have chosen is a literal one, I would argue that the implied meaning is what really is meant to be communicated here rather than a picture of a plucker running all of his fingers across the ground.

[55] Here again Ben Amitai uses a phrase that echoes a Biblical verse. The phrase here, שדות תנובה, is resemblant of Ezekiel 36:29:30, where the phrase תנובת השדה is employed to speak of the abundant crops that will be given to the Israelites. Again, along with the literary connection, there is a thematic connection between the two sections that is addressed in the analysis of the poem.

[56] יבול, translated here as, "harvest," has an additional meaning to the agricultural one implied here. It can also mean, "cultural output," and it adds a beautiful layer to the poem when considered. There is the clear element of working the land to get it to yield its bounty for the people, and along with it there is the effort of Ben Amitai, as a poet, to produce something that also will yield a bounty for the people. The cultural bounty of the generation was important for establishing the people in Palestine with a language and a cultural that were still in flux. This implies also that the poet, in his work, parallels the farmer, in his work, both taking their role in defining the society.

This poem establishes the ideal outcome of the efforts of the pioneers: that God will gather them into His bosom, as it were, and bring them to a land that produces an abundant harvest, land that is good. There is the reality of the land that was difficult to work and required much effort to be habitable, and there was the ideal: good land, easy life, being individuals again.

This poem again bridges the Jewish past to the Jewish future via the efforts of the pioneers in the land of Palestine. We see references to an extended section of text from chapter 36 of Ezekiel, and there are three themes at play in this poem. The reference is based on the phrase, "fields of grain," relating to verses 29 and 30 of that chapter. First, there is the image presented that the people were to be free to live and work in the land. Ezekiel 36:30 tells that the people will never again be humiliated by the nations because of famine. The connection to this poem and to the work of the pioneers is clear: in the diaspora, in exile, there was famine; here, in the land of Palestine, however, the workers, the pluckers in this case, are making sure that the land will give forth its bounty so that the people may be sustained, no longer dependent on the nations around them for sustenance.

This will happen, that the Jews will have abundant crops in the field, when God has delivered the people. This second idea sheds light on the meaning of actually being back in the land and being delivered from exile. The past, of being sent into exile, and the future, of the fields full of abundant crops, are being brought together by the pioneers settling the land of Palestine. They have joined into a partnership with God to restore the people to the land to allow the next step of the promise to come true. Finally, we read in 36:33-38 that the land that was empty will be populated

again. and the land that was laying waste shall again be tilled. There is indeed a connection to God and to the past of the Jewish people in the efforts of the pioneers in the land. The people arriving in the land. settling it. working it. and reaping the rewards of its harvest are all fulfillments of the promises made to the people by God in the Tanakh.

Combined with the promise of physical sustenance given in the Tanakh is the poet's hope for intellectual sustenance by the new generation in the land of Palestine. "The harvest of the generation," speaks of the desire to create a future that is based on the past and connected to it. but is not necessarily limited by it. The Jewish present and future were to be something new. something created. and the use of the word harvest gives an organic connotation to the process of creating a new life. The work in the fields contributed to the cumulative output of the generation, and together with not again being famished physically. the people shall never again be famished culturally either.

On the Kibbutz

By day I shovel the manure
From under the foot of the cow in the shed
Or I knead mud for repair of the stove
Or on the heels of horses go out to the field.

My fate is modest and poor in Your world,
The fate of a woodcutter, a water-drawer[57].
I am without a name[58], one of the Gibeonites[59]
Servants of Your house in Jerusalem.

And with the darkening of the day I wash my hands.
Dress my body with a white tunic[60].
In the assemblage of a group of priests I take my place
And from the bread table[61] I have a portion.

Over a meager evening loaf, with a company of Levites
I will raise up to You song and praise:
Blessed are You for the goodness of the sprouting manure.
For the bread, and the feeling of prayer.

---

[57] These two people, the woodcutter and the water drawer are grouped together in Deuteronomy 29:10 and represent the spectrum of laborers from one end to the other. Another idea present in this word choice is the image of the anonymous laborer, one who is common, with equals, and this reading is quite tenable in light of the next verse.

[58] This word choice is a reference to Job 30:8, where it refers to men who, wasted from want and starvation, flee to a parched land.

[59] This is a reference to Joshua 9, in which the Gibeonites appear. The narrative there tells that they were a group of people living in the land of Israel who made a peace treaty with the Israelites, under the guise of being newcomers to the land. When the duplicitous nature of their action was revealed, the Israelites were angry and wanted to kill the Gibeonites, but, due to the treaty, could not. As a consequence, a compromise was reached: the Gibeonites were not to be harmed, but they were fated to forever be woodcutters and water drawers for God's altar. Here we have the tie in to the previous verse, in which Ben Amitai uses these occupations as an illustration of himself, and, presumably, of his compatriots, as anonymous laborers.

[60] The word כתנת gives the phrase a biblical, ancient sound, resounding with images of the priests' garments in Exodus 28:40 and Joseph's many colored coat in Genesis 37:3. The alternative would have been to use the more common modern Hebrew word חולצה. I don't derive any symbolic meaning from this, rather just an association, one that causes the reader to look twice.

[61] This refers back to the later chapters of Exodus. There, we read about the making of the table in 25:23-30, where we are told that the, "bread of display," shall always be set upon it. We read further in 40:23 that the table is placed inside the Tent of Meeting.

Ben Amitai again locates his poem within the frame of reference of narratives from the Bible, this time hitting all three component sections of the Tanakh. Woodcutters and water-drawers are taken from the Torah, the Gibeonites are appropriated from the Prophets, and the one without a name is taken from the Writings. All of these different elements combine to form a poem that captures the experience and feelings of the pioneers in the land of Palestine and the connection they felt to their past, the images with which they identified in the Bible.

The first biblical reference, to woodcutters and water-drawers, is taken from Deuteronomy 29:10, and it gives word to the scope of the variety of people that were living together in the land of Palestine, all working in the fields. They literally were gathered from all ends of the Jewish population and all ends of the spectrum. Rather than saying, "all types of people," Ben Amitai chooses to use a well-known phrase from the Torah that lets the reader know there is a link to the past and these are not people coming into an entirely new world; rather, they are linked to the old world of Jewish history.

The second biblical reference, to the Gibeonites, presents a difficulty to the interpreter trying to pin a specific meaning upon it. The reference itself is clear; there is not much to argue when trying to determine from where it comes. Meaning, on the other hand, escapes me. I am not able to find a parallel to an occurrence in the world of the pioneers. Nonetheless, the use of a name from the Bible is noteworthy.

The third and final biblical reference, the one without name, tells us much from its context within the book of Job. There, in 30:8, the ones without name are men wasted from want and starvation who flee to a parched land. They are very poor

men and have it rough, and so they are called nobodies. This gives us insight into the condition of the pioneers working in the land of Palestine. They were, the poet tells us, wasted from want and starvation in their former lands, and they fled to the parched land. Here they work, and they are figuratively anonymous, like the men from Job, and they are literally anonymous, working in the field together. This connects with the theme from the poem, "To My Brother, The Plucker," in which Ben Amitai writes that they don't ask names. All the men are indeed without names, working the parched land.

Adding to the drama and religious/biblical undertones of this poem is the fact that it is all addressed to God. It is unclear whether the narrator is speaking this as a prayer or whether it is more likely a journal entry, something written on paper. In both cases the poet acknowledges that he and his fellows are living in God's world. This is a significant feature, because it states clearly that they are not creating any sort of Godless world or a life without religion. Indeed, similar to the characters in Shlonsky's poetry, they are trying to reimagine it, still with God in the center. In an effort to do so, the poem closes with a prayer that has a traditional structure but non-traditional content. The bread is traditional, and the feeling of prayer does not sound an odd chord in the ear. The goodness of the sprouting manure, however, is an innovation. It ties religion into the land, making the manure, something as mundane as can be, something holy. It also connects the need for fertile land and the act of working and farming the land with God and with religious action. Holy work, this poem tells us, is undertaken out in the fields as well as in prayer on Shabbat.

Shabbat On the Kibbutz

The Shabbat Mother lit her candles on the table
And spreads a pure white tablecloth with the fingers of a hidden hand.
She gathered her children from six days of toil, for rest
And for a familial meal.

Shabbat light is on the table, a shadow retreats to the walls.
Light is on the suntan of the arms and shadow is in the wrinkles of the face.
And the whiteness of the shirt upon back and shoulders
Is like a *tallit* in an old age home.

Night warm and dark cloaks[62] the landscape of the valley together with all of creation.
And the Kinneret breathes with the rustle of soft waves.
The singing of the night is in the fields, and the sound of a cricket saws
To the dance of the butterflies.

What is the image that rises from the east: A company of shepherds?
A family sacrificial feast[63] among the people? The glory of a holiday in Israel?
What is it with the heart that it pines at the memory of a group of Essenes
Ancient dwellers of Jordan?

There is he whose eyes are trained on the trees of the future.
And there are eyes full of joy and trembling[64]
And she whose soul suffers sadness secretly
And whose tear is soothing.

---

[62] Here there is a beautiful word play that is completely lost in translation. In the last line of the previous stanza, the poet describes his shirt as having an affect similar to that of a *tallit* on the skin of an elderly person. In this line, he uses the word עטה to capture what the night is doing to the landscape below it, and it echoes in the reader's ear the blessing for wearing a *tallit*. I don't believe there is a way to capture it accurately, as, although a literal translation captures the meaning of the words, it does not express the two Hebrew words that are joined together in the blessing upon donning a *tallit*.

[63] The phrase זבח משפחה occurs once in the Tanakh, in 1 Samuel 20:29. In the story of David and Jonathan. Jonathan gives his father Saul the excuse that David had gone to Bethlehem for a זבח משפחה when asked why he was not present at the king's table. It was at this time that Saul had sought to kill David and Jonathan defended him. There is no description in the text as to what the familial sacrificial feast would entail, when and where it would be performed, etc.

[64] Here is a reference to Psalms 2:11, where the English is, "Serve God in awe, rejoice in trembling."

Light is strewn[65] on the table, and the light rises and grows stronger:
If you peer intently, the sparks are created.
The shadows flee from the wall, and with a hand that is all whiteness
A hidden Sabbath Mother walks about.

Shabbat Mother! Hearken[66] to the pinings
And to the muteness of language on this night on the Jordan.
Spread your palms over their table
And recite a blessing for peace.

Bless the faithful, sowers of light upon fields of humanity,
And may an eternal rejoicing rest in the heart[67] of one who longs for brotherhood.
Yet will all the inhabitants of the earth come to dwell as brothers[68]
For the Great Shabbat[69].

---

[65] This phrase echoes Psalms 97:11, where it is written that, "Light is sown for the righteous." What makes this phrase even more compelling is that Psalm 97 is part of the liturgy for the *kabbalat shabbat* service, drawing an immediate connection to the title and theme of this poem.

[66] The word האזינ is a curious choice here, where a more likely alternative may have been הקשיב. It echoes the language of Deuteronomy 32:1 and Isaiah 1:2. There is something else to this word choice, in which the poet almost infuses the Mother Sabbath with some sort of magical power, as if her listening would cause a difference to be made on the shabbat.

[67] Here is another echo of Psalms 97:11. The language of the first half of this phrase sounds like the next segment of that biblical verse, ולישרי דב שמחה. It is a beautiful example of bringing a phrase, similar to the use of the language of the *tallit* blessing, that are allusions to previous lines and will indeed spark the mind of the reader to look twice and connect the two phrases.

[68] A possible echo of Psalm 133, *Hineh Mah Tov U'Mah Naim, Shevet Achim Gam Yachad.*

[69] The Great Sabbath means a day of complete rest in the Bible, with examples being found in Exodus 31:15 and Leviticus 16:31. It is also a nickname for Yom Kippur.

The familiar imagery of Shabbat celebration is presented here by Ben Amitai in a discussion of life and of a day off from labors on the kibbutz. There are many familiar elements employed here: lit candles, a fresh tablecloth spread across a table, and a group gathered together for a meal. Shabbat is the day on which the pioneers did not go out into the field for their labors, similar to the Israelites wandering in the desert who did not go out of the camp on Shabbat to collect *mannah*. Here Shabbat becomes more than just a day off. It becomes a metaphor for life to come, for one of the goals of settling in the land of Palestine, and for a time when things will be different from the hardship the pioneers found themselves facing.

In the sixth stanza, Ben Amitai writes, "light is sown upon the table." Immediately this conjures associations with Psalm 97, where it is written in verse 11 that, "light is sown for the righteous." This hits the double images of the light from Shabbat candles being cast through a room and the worship of *kabbalat Shabbat*, of which Psalm 97 is a part. This familiar imagery tells the reader that the pioneers in the land of Palestine are not so far removed from the rest of the Jewish world, but rather they are engaged in a different type of work. An interesting question arises when trying to describe the pioneers in light of the allusion to Psalms: are the pioneers seen as righteous by the poet? Is it for them that the light is sown? He doesn't answer the question explicitly, but it seems plausible they could be righteous ones.

The similar theme of the pioneers being rescued from the lives they had been living before coming to Palestine is present here as well. The reference to light being sown is from verse 11 of Psalm 97, and in verse 10, the Psalm speaks of being saved

from the wicked, which in many ways was a view of coming to live and work in the land of Palestine. There would be no more need for suffering and hunger at the hands of the people of the world for the pioneers would work and provide for themselves. The larger picture here could easily include those who were wicked with their power: the autonomous Jewish state would eventually provide a true haven from the storm in the world of the pioneers' former homes.

We are also given a glimpse of the future that Ben Amitai envisions coming for the pioneers. "Eternal rejoicing," is an outcome of rebuilding the State of Israel, and happiness will come in place of sadness. People will come to celebrate Shabbat as brothers, echoing Psalm 133, in which the eventual goal was eternal life; perhaps here, rather than eternal life, the goal was indeed peace, with people truly dwelling as brothers. Finally, they shall rejoice in the Great Shabbat, a day of complete rest. There shall be no more toil or strife, but rather the pioneers shall all be gathered together, and the world shall be better and life will indeed be like Shabbat.

Monument[70]

Herzl's mound on the hill of Bait-Yerach

From the boulders of the earth.
From rocks scattered in every field upon it.
And abandoned at the side of a clod.
Each and every person will take his packet.

He will kneel
And pick up the stone
Load it on his shoulder
And walk.

Walking and crying
Walking and singing
To the mound he will give his stone.
Layer upon layer
The monument[71] will steadily ascend -
A mound of memorial.

And this mound bears witness
Between us and the heavens:
This time, the ***third*** time.
We will not again go away from here!

As long as the waves of the Sea of Galilee not flee
The waters of the Jordan do not retreat[72]
As long as the radiant mist does not fade
From the tops of the Golan and the Gilad
Or from the mountains of Naphtali
As long as the Hermon whitens like a long awaited silvery hope.

---

[70] Here the poet makes reference to the story of Jacob and Laban in Genesis 31. In that chapter, the two men erected a monument that they say will testify to the pact of peace agreed upon by the two of them. Jacob swears here by the fear of his father.

[71] The word גל is rich with meaning and is loaded with associations. It is commonly used as, "wave," like in the waves of the ocean. It is also very much worth noting that it is used to mean, "rubble," as is seen in Isaiah 25:2 and Jeremiah 9:10.

[72] The first two lines of this last stanza are a very direct parallel of Psalms 114:3. I don't see too much of a contextual connection joining the texts there with the text offered here. I am more inclined to believe that this is another example of Ben Amitai's use of language that would be familiar to his readers and would spark other associations in the reader's mind.

This poem, while clearly alluding to two very different pieces of text from the Bible, serves more as a political and social statement about the present and the future of the people in the land of Palestine than it does about the past or the contexts of the biblical allusions. The people are here: they have arrived, they are laying down roots, and they are establishing proof that they will be here for time to come.

The title, Monument, echoes the story of Jacob and Laban in Genesis 31, where a monument was erected as a symbol of the pact for peace made between the two men. In the context of the poem, the monument is more than just a physical monument. It is a psychological monument as well. Here interpreting *gal* as, "wave," says a lot about the process of establishing life in the land of Palestine at the time. The third meaning for *gal*, "rubble," also comes into play here when discussing the past, present, and future of the people in the land. The past is seen in the rubble of a land that needed to be resettled, made livable and workable, and turned into a home, when it was in rough condition when the pioneers first arrived. Second is the wave that would build and grow higher and stronger as the settlements were established and people came to live. Finally, the monuments would be made: houses would be built, communities established, people would simply live there, and there would be testimony that the people were present. This time, the third time, which Ben Amitai emphasizes in the text, the rubble will rise into a wave, and from a wave it will become a permanent monument, and the people will never again be exiled from their land. The past is the past, and the poet deftly speaks in the first person plural to say we will never again leave, connecting those who were settling in the land with those

who had lived there before and were exiled. Again, there is a connection to the past, a link to a different future.

Finally Ben Amitai makes strong allusions to Psalm 114, which is read as part of *Hallel* on festive occasions. The first two lines of the last stanza of the poem very deliberately parallel the third verse of Psalm 114, and they serve to connect the reader to the *Tanakh*, and also to connect the past to the present. The use of familiar language is quite significant in strengthening the link to the Jewish people and not coming across as creating a fissure and branching out into some new venture altogether. The venture of the pioneers was a relatively new one, but it was continuing in the line of Jewish history and expressing itself in terms familiar to the Jewish people.

Longings

There is an appointed time for me (A time of looking at the path of the stars.
Where constellations go up and constellations come down)
And on a dark and warm night, or the aura of the light before dawn.
I, unkempt and barefoot
And with a disheveled shirt-
In a crooked way, upon a remote trail.
I ascend to the elevated peak on the edge of the Azazel Wilderness.
There is no walkable way in it[73]- and no path to return[74].
Then I hold myself erect and look straight ahead facing You
And extend a poor hand between the sky and the depths,
In my palm an offering to you, My God:
My soul
And my tear
Accept the offering[75] of a mortal man.

I am a son, to my mother was I born.
I was raised according to your commandment in the land of the living:
From the half-light of the same dawn
And I was a baby, smooth, pink lipped,
Silently I suckled my mother's milk.

From that reddish morning
In the beginning I opened an eye.
A wondering eye of a youth.
Until the day rose, in it an abundance of sun and power
To me flowed, and from me,
Wonders encircled me and mysteries were revealed
Both of these
Sought, demanded their meaning
From me and from You.

I, the man[76], walked
To the earth you had cursed because of me.

---

[73] This phrase echoes Proverbs 3:17, where the text talks about finding wisdom-Torah. There the ways are ways of pleasantness and all the paths are peace. Here we encounter just the opposite.
[74] Here is another, very subtle echo: the word on the end of this line, לשוב, echoes the end of the Torah service. After singing Proverbs 3:17-18, we ask God to return us. Ben Amitai's reference is very subtle, but it sparks the reader to connect the two.
[75] This draws a connection to the *Amidah* prayers in general and the *Avodah* prayer in particular, where worshippers beseech God to be pleased with His people Israel and to receive their prayers.
[76] "I, the man," is the phrase the narrator uses to describe himself in Lamentations 3:1

In hardship and in sadness I ate bread[77].
And I studied the matter:
The sun is still strong in the noons of my days-
But on the face of my fields
The shadow is turning eastward
And to my left the sunset lies in wait.

And this soul that You placed in me[78]
For love-mercies and for longings
Has always longed for You.
And if I did not cry out Your name,
Because I didn't know the name by which I should call You;
I did not know Your place,
Where are You[79]
Nonetheless Your hidden finger
Always walked before me and by my side
In a path that is hidden, twisted, promising
Leading-
But I know not whither
I know not where.

And when my soul yearned for You
I bent a knee
Before everything that I called
Divinity:
Wherever there was goodness and truth
The embodiment of Your Living Essence.

Did it have the seal of truth to it, or a mask of falseness-
I did not know.

And out of distress, from illusions
Now I have come to You:
Singed of lips and seared of heart,
The flame of thirst in me, of which my soul was not quenched.

---

[77] These two lines are direct references to the story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3:17. These phrases, about the earth being cursed on man's account, and his eating bread by the sweat of his brow, recall the language of the curses God pronounces for having disobeyed the commands of living in the Garden and life that would follow the expulsion.

[78] Here Ben Amitai almost directly quotes a prayer from the morning service. The prayer speaks of, "*nishama she-natat bi.*" Again, this is Ben Amitai's use of language that would be familiar to the reader, and I don't see that there is a poetic meaning of any sort added by using this particular phrase.

[79] The Hebrew question word, "*ayeka*," is used in Genesis 3:9, among other places. There, however, it is the word God speaks when seeking Adam, who had tried to hide in the Garden upon first becoming cognizant of the fact that he is naked. It beautifully connects the thematic elements of this paragraph with the previous one, in which the language of the Garden of Eden story is used so clearly.

There is a time appointed for me (A time of looking at the path of the stars
Where constellations go up and constellations come down)-
I will hearken to the singing of the skies and stars above,
And below- the groaning of the depths.
And I, unkempt and barefoot
Will fall on my face
And I will know:
You are in everything and there is no way to You,
And I'll hear Your voice call[80] me from the depths and from the heights...

[80] This phrase echoes Zechariah 7:13-14, in which the Israelites did not listen to the voice of God calling out to them and were sent into exile as a result.

In this final poem, the poet expresses his longings: his longings to find God and his longings to return to a time when things were easier than they are at the time of his writing the poem. In a number of places Ben Amitai addresses his quest to find and to understand God and also makes a number of references to the story of the Garden of Eden, perhaps envisioning himself as Adam and longing for a return to that state.

Asking God to accept the offering of mortal man, the poet acknowledges the difficulty with trying to make this happen. Indeed there was a structure in place for offerings to be made by priests in the Temple, but now there is a need for offerings to be made by workers in the field. This picks up on the theme of the *Avodah* prayer from the *Amidah*, and also echoes themes that were present in the poetry of Shlonsky. The *Avodah* prayer asks that prayer itself be acceptable before God, and Shlonsky, echoed by Ben Amitai, refashions the idea that work in the fields be the basis for making a plea before God, for bringing an offering. Again I do not find this to be a break from religion, but rather an emphatic restatement of the importance of God in the whole operation of settling the land and the need for the pioneers there to understand religion in terms to which they could relate, and create rituals in which they could partake, for the present experience of life was not satisfied by rituals of the past.

The elements that refer to the story of the Garden of Eden interestingly seem to be promoting the return to the Garden, or at least to a state that is similar to what was there. The earth being cursed on his account, and eating bread through hardship and sorrow are exact references to the curse given Adam and Eve upon their exile

from the garden. Ben Amitai says that he has lived through the curses that God placed upon them for their actions, and is wondering why he must continue to do so. If there is indeed the progression of the past, of incidents in the *Tanakh*, coming to pass in the present lives of the pioneers in Israel, why should there not be some changes. We have seen the fulfillment of promises made in the books of the Prophets that there would be a different future with better times, so why not change this? Is there, the poet asks, an original sin, as it were, from which the pioneers in the land of Palestine were unable to escape? Were they suffering on their own account or were they suffering on account of Adam and Eve? If so much was being changed, the poem asks, why can't we have our own opportunity to live in a peaceful place and be established on our merits, rather than being punished for the sins of those who came before us?

In the final reference to the story of the Garden, Ben Amitai asks God, "Where are You?" It is a seemingly unremarkable question given that one of the major themes of the poem is the quest to understand God. It is the language that is remarkable: the one word, *ayeka*, is the word God used when seeking out Adam in the Garden. The poet wants to know the same thing of God that God wanted to know of Adam: are you hiding? For a moment here the poem is unclear about who is searching for who currently. What fascinates me so is the confluence of roles in this partnership, both searching the other, both with the right to ask questions of the other, reframing the relationship between God and his people to make it current for the lives of the pioneers.

Chapter 5

Responses to Criticism

Of Shlonsky

And Ben Amitai

As I prepared the material on Shlonsky and on Ben Amitai, I decided to write a commentary based on my own thoughts mainly. There is material written about the work of both of the poets, but I felt the desire to express my own opinions on the subject, which allowed me the opportunity to both state ideas that are outside of the norm and really feel that I have gotten inside the material. Solely repeating and restating the work of others would have left me feeling like I had never gained a true understanding of the poetry itself.

One of the first places to look for commentary on the poetry of Shlonsky was in the rabbinic dissertation of Herbert Bronstein, submitted to HUC-JIR in Cincinnati in 1957. In the thesis, under the guidance of Dr. Ezra Spicehandler, Bronstein extensively translates, analyzes, and reviews Shlonsky's collection of poems entitled, "Dvai," which also was published in the 1920's and predates the works I reviewed by just a few years. It is important to note that while the material itself is not what I have chosen for my thesis work, it is indeed close enough chronologically to the poems from Gilboa to be part of the same era in Shlonsky's work.[81] That being stated, some of the thematic elements presented by Bronstein are present in the work on which I am focusing, and it affords me the opportunity to interact with Bronstein's thoughts and compare them to my own. However, there is an inherent limitation to my needs in this fact: the poetry is not the same, and so I can comment on general ideas, but there are not a lot of specifics that are common between the two.

One of Bronstein's concluding statements caught my eye as I read it. It is a general observation of Shlonsky's writing style, stating that Shlonsky's poetry is,

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[81] Bronstein, p. 33.

"obscure poetry." [82] He states further, clarifying the matter, "The symbols require associative thinking, and often, reference to classical sources for their full elucidation."[83] I agree fully with Bronstein on this point. Shlonsky's language is obscure, and many references are not fully grasped without a knowledge of their background. Examples of this are his references to the Akeidah, the story of Jacob and Lavan, and many of his phrasings that echo passages of redemption found in the Prophets. I believe that this is one of the strengths of Shlonsky's poetry and is a major factor in my decision to analyze this work: it encourages, even demands of, the reader to fully immerse himself to try and understand what is happening. There is no way to grasp the true significance of his work without understanding the Bible and Jewish tradition.

It is these references to the Bible and Jewish tradition that I find so compelling in the work of Shlonsky. As stated, I believe that he sought to reframe Jewish tradition and bring an understanding of some of the prophecies of the Bible to modern times, drawing a parallel between the two. Here is one particularly notable quotation from Bronstein on this element of Shlonsky's work:

> It is as if Shlonsky were saying: Tradition which was once so fertile a source of values for human beings remains barren to us, either because of our impatience and weakness, or because it is really used up, useless, and sterile. But, if we overthrow our previous approach to the search for values via tradition, and begin with a tabula rasa to create our own values ex nihilo, then we are worse off than before, and there is nothing to restrain us from destroying ourselves.[84]

This is an astute observation of Shlonsky's approach to tradition: there is a need to change, but not to completely wipe out, what has been established up to this point. I

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[82] Ibid., p. 124.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., p. 87.

am not certain upon what Bronstein bases his opinion that the world, according to Shlonsky, would be worse off if a new value set was created out of nothing rather than adapting the one that is present. Bronstein's reading has provided an opinion that I did not encounter in the poems selected from, "Gilboa." I imagine this can be accounted to a difference in material between the two collections.

Nonetheless, I am in agreement with his assessment in this paragraph. Shlonsky sees value in keeping tradition, but feels a need to adapt it to modern circumstances. In this statement, Bronstein brings up an intriguing point that I hadn't considered before: there are two sides to the equation of reframing tradition. I had looked at the poems through the lens of humans needing to shape tradition to meet them where they are, when really I agree with Bronstein that there was some element of the people needing to change themselves. Both may have been stagnant, and perhaps what we see here is that the pioneers have undertaken to change themselves, they have done their part of the bargain. Having undertaken this, the poet calls upon tradition, as it were, to meet him, and all Jews, halfway: we have changed, now it is time for you, tradition, to do the same.

Subsequently, in his work, Bronstein encapsulates the meaning that Shlonsky seeks in his poetry. His summary provides clearly supports the point made above

> This is the dilemma of man: When he seeks values through an orientation to God and tradition, the result is spiritual drought, famine and sterility: when he seeks to create values of his own, overthrowing previous values entirely, the result is chaos and self-destruction.[85]

This is a dilemma shared by the poet as well. His is the quest to promote new ideas, and he finds that going to one extreme or the other on the matter does not serve the

[85] Ibid., p. 97.

people well. The statement rings true to our ears today as well: religion is indeed a good, important source of values for us as people. The approach taken up to the point of Shlonsky's writing was one of looking at God and tradition together as one, which, he states, leads to less than ideal consequences. Looking away from God, at ourselves only, also leads to negative consequences. The true answer is found in a combination of God and man, in a dialogue, conceiving the truth that is needed for each time, establishing values that are connected to our past, yet current. Religion by itself is not the problem, nor are the people by themselves a solution. Each side of the equation is dependant on the other, and the solution, so the poet tells us, is to find a middle ground that values Divine Guidance, tradition, and human input.

The other place in which I found commentary on the religious, traditional aspect of Shlonsky's poetry was in Ruth Finer Mintz' work. She agrees with Bronstein, which I feel supports the overall thesis of this paper. She writes,

> Despite its secular view and new form, Shlonsky's poetry was not uprooted from the past. He transformed conventions, reinterpreted them to repattern traditional images into new metaphors with extended associations. He reintegrated old symbols, relating them to the new life and the building of the country.[86]

There is not much I can add to this statement that would make it a better summary for this chapter. I will conclude with this: Bronstein, along with Finer Mintz, noted that Shlonsky was building, but not always building from scratch. Some of his material was brand new, and some of it was old material, which he cast into a new form.

A final note, almost a postscript to this section, is a brief response to the contentions of Rubinstein that Shlonsky and his contemporaries were anti-religious rather than searching for an updated approach to religion as I contend. Rubinstein

[86] Finer Mintz, p. xlix.

writes, as quoted in this paper, that Labor replaced the Torah with revolution and nationalism. Prayer and sacred texts gave way to work, communal life, and the redemption of man.[87] This misses the point on Shlonsky. Carmi, too, writes that Shlonsky was, "...aggressively secular..." yet, "...when he came to celebrate his pioneering days, found himself drawn to sacred imagery."[88] Carmi gets halfway there, writing that Shlonsky employed sacred images while remaining secular, but this explanation is unsatisfactory. Perhaps he was secular because he didn't have a revitalized approach to religion yet, but was busy seeking it. Halkin notes that there is something more to poetry, which, I believe, counters the anti-religious approach to Shlonsky. Halkin notes that there are many studies of human work, "But the student of this poetry remains blind to the less rational inspiration of that poetry, to the definitely religious ecstasy which it often exhibits."[89] Ignoring the religious tones, the seeking out of connection, present in the poetry I have analyzed would be ignoring what is clearly present.

[87] Rubinstein, p. 45.
[88] Carmi, p. 45.
[89] Halkin, Modern Hebrew Literature, p. 182.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and

Selected Bibliography

The poetry of the period in which Shlonsky and ben Amitai wrote is indeed a reflection of the world from which it came; poetry, by necessity, cannot exist in a vacuum, nor can it be written by a poet who is removed from his surroundings. The factors at play in the worldview of Palestinian poets in the 20's and 30's were feeling like a part of Jewish history was unfolding, the need to define an approach to religion that was acceptable, and the need to just be part of a new society.

Both poets, we have seen, have taken imagery from the Bible where it was needed and employed it in a modern setting. The outcome of this, as stated, is a reframing of the experience of the pioneers in Palestine: the connection to history becomes clear when one sees himself and his contemporaries as being in its modern era. The choice of texts with connections to redemption of the people, seen primarily in Shlonsky, is a reflection of the feeling that this really was the next step in Jewish history. Shortly after the Balfour Declaration, "An atmosphere of messianic expectation pervaded Palestine. The redemption of the Jewish people, the fulfillment of Israel's national aspirations and destiny seemed at hand."[90] It would have been impossible for the poets to have not addressed this element in their poetry.

Religion, too, was a central factor. As we saw earlier, these poets, who were refugees from Eastern Europe, had a struggle to designate the role that religion would play in their new societies. It was indeed an important struggle, and this quest is detailed in poetry, where, "The literature also reflects this life, while too devout to proclaim its religiosity pragmatically, is the expression of the most sustained quest for faith made by the Jew in modern times."[91]

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[90] Bergman, p. 121.
[91] Halkin, Dissertation, p. 279.

Finally, these poets were really on the vanguard of an entirely new society. They were speaking a new language, which although they had learned it, was still being developed and was not their mother tongue. They were adapting to life in the Middle East after having lived in Eastern Europe. The weather was different, the topology was different, and the experience of living on a kibbutz was different. These three elements most certainly played a role in the formulation of thoughts and ideas that became poems. They also were adjusting to a new way of life. The city-based lifestyle of Eastern Europe gave way to the labor-intensive, outdoor lifestyle of the land of Palestine. A hard day's work can do wonders to change one's point of view dramatically. This new society necessitated change.

In summary, religion was changed by the poets, not abandoned. In fact, it may be a more accurate statement to say that expressions of religion were changed and not religion itself. God was still central, but the role of humanity changed. Man became more of an active partner in creation, and became more important to God. God would come down to earth to smell sweet scents instead of man simply causing them to rise to the sky. The Bible became a previous chapter in the people's story. They were living the next chapter. Prayer was expressed through working the land too. Indeed they were creating something new out of something old, not creating something new out of something new.

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