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Report on Laurence Groffman's Rabbinic Thesis:
"The Role of Aggadah in Bialik's Poetry

Laurence Groffman brings to his study a profound love of the aggadah and much intellectual curiosity in tracing the dynamic permutations of Jewish lore in selected portions of Bialik's work. His research was greatly facilitated by the existence of such wonderful secondary sources as Lachover's two volume study of Bialik and the helpful articles of Efraim Urbach, Aryeh Strauss and others. He was able to receive many useful "leads" from these critics, but the manner in which he fleshed out the original contexts of the aggadic references and then attempted to correlate them with their applications in Bialik was distinctively Laurence's own. On occasion it was necessary to reign Laurence in from his enthusiastic digressions to the rabbinic material in order to preserve the primary focus on Bialik, but the student of Bialik's poetry will occasionally find much value in the full citation and expansion of the Talmudic subject matter.

The chapters dealing with "Ha-Matmid" and "Megillat ha-Esh" were extremely complex and difficult to synthesize. Groffman has attempted to appraise the impact of Bialik's yeshivah experience on selected poems of the beit midrash. He had to contend with Bialik's notorious ambivalence, and to show how certain allusions to aggadot accentuated Bialik's coming to terms with his yeshivah past. It would be audacious to contend that this rabbinic thesis is in any way definitive in grappling with this vast literary and psychological issue, but I would venture to say that Groffman's modest chapter will be very helpful to future students and scholars. Similarly, the vexed problem of Bialik's psychological

adaptation of the aggadot of the destruction of the Temple to modern events and sensibilities in Megillat ha-Esh is one which Laurence Groffman has tackled fearlessly. In probing these most intricate topics with Laurence, I was repeatedly impressed by his patience, his dilligence and his readiness to continue researching and rewriting until he produced a measured and intelligent statement of the problems. The end result with regard to the chapter on "Megillat ha-Esh," which I consider to be the best in this thesis, is that it is an extremely valuable entree for the English reader into the virtual inner sanctum of Bialik studies. We have here a balance between literary scholarship and a look at some extremely dramatic and poignant rabbinic citations that are right on the mark as far as Bialik's world is concerned.

Groffman has also given us a helpful summary of some of the issues pertaining to Bialik's "Agadat Sheloshah ve-Arba'ah." He was not able, and also did not deem it worthwhile, to get into the overextended discussions of this work by Dan Miron and others. Similarly, time and energy did not allow for a discussion of aggadic motifs in Bialik's prose fiction. Groggman did, however, assess the place of Bialik's Sefer ha-Aggadah with regard to his utilization of aggadot in his poetry, and he has also alluded briefly bit helpfullyin his introduction to Bialik's rendition of aggadot for children. All in all, this is an extremely fine thesis and a most valuable tool for students and scholars alike.

THE ROLE OF *AGGADAH* IN BIALIK'S POETRY

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
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Graduate Rabbinic Program
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I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Stanley Nash, for all his help, encouragement and patience throughout this project.

I must also express my deepest gratitude to my parents for all of their love, support and guidance in all that I have done.

NOTE

The handwritten letters appearing in the text refer to the appendix of Hebrew texts located in the back of the thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Chaim Nachman Bialik has been dubbed "the poet laureate of the Jewish renaissance;" 1 and "the greatest Hebrew poet of modern times." 2 Indeed, Bialik's work and influence on Hebrew letters has been enormous. His career went through several different phases, which will be briefly characterized here.

Spiegel detects three periods in Bialik's work. The first (1891- 1901) he describes as "mournful;" a period which featured poems reflective of the difficulties in his personal life. 3 The greatest work of this time is probably *Ha-Matmid* (1895), which is discussed at length in this thesis. The work of this period also speaks of Bialik's love and his ambivalent feelings for the *beit midrash*, the Jewish house of study. In addition to *Ha-Matmid*, the poem *Levadi* is a fine example of the work of this time.

At the turn of the century, Bialik's work entered a new phase, what Speigel refers to as the "reign of tears," his "period of revolt." 4 *Mete Midbar* (1902), discussed in this thesis, is a classic of this period. The poems of this period are indicative of Bialik's anger at the Jews of his

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1 Shalom Spiegel. *Hebrew Reborn* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962), 296.
2 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Bialik, Chaim Nachman."
3 Spiegel, *Hebrew Reborn*, 300.
4 Ibid. 301.

generation for their quietism in the face of Russian pogroms, assimilation and other negative features of life in the Diaspora. 5

The third phase Spiegel calls "wrath," or "despair," a period of time wherein Bialik doubted the effectiveness of his poetry (1905-1934). He now went into silence, or poetic inactivity. 6 He spent time engaged in *kinnus*, gathering the remnants of Jewish literature, which he saw as the key to the Jewish renaissance. He compiled (with Ravnitsky) the *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, a collection of rabbinic lore. He interpreted the Bible and the *Mishnah* for Jewish children in Palestine, and he wrote many childrens' poems. In addition, he gathered Spanish medieval poetry, including the work of Solomon ibn Gabirol and Moses ibn Ezra. He did not engage in his own creative literary work, but rather busied himself with teaching, publishing, communal work and philology. 7

This thesis will focus on the role of *aggadah* in Bialk's work. It will be shown that the influence of *aggadah* is pervasive. As Ben-Yehezkiel notes, Bialik "lived the life of *aggadah*." 8 As noted, he spent much of his time gathering

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5 Ibid. 303.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid. 308.
8 Mordechai Ben Yehezkiel, *"Vayihi Hayom,"* in Gershon Shaked, ed., *Bialik, Yetziro Lesugeha Bir'i Ha-Bikoret* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1974), 338.

various *aggadot*, for both the adult reader (*Sefer Ha-Aggadah*) and the child.

An outstanding children's aggadic work is *Vayhi Ha-Yom*, a collection of thirty-five aggadic works. They are culled from a variety of sources, mostly written ones. They were written in Hebrew and other tongues as well. Still others are oral traditions, gathered from national folk tales. Virtually all of the *aggadot* are about David and Solomon. Ben Yehezkiel theorizes that perhaps this was Bialik's attempt to arrange the histories of these kings aggadically.9

Bialik's primary intention was to give youngsters good reading material culled from ancient Hebrew sources. He noticed that there was nothing in the new Hebrew literature to amuse children and so he created *Vayhi Ha-Yom* to fill the gap. 10 Bialik's reason for working with the aggadic material in particular is not known, but it seemed that he had no specific reason. 11 As Ben-Yehezkiel notes,

> His love for the legends of the people in all of their forms, is a love that is unconditional; his attachment to it is a soul attachment, a beautiful attachment. He was drawn to the glory in which *aggadah* is bedecked. 12

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9 Ibid. 341-2.
10 Ibid. 342.
11 Ibid. 343.
12 Ibid.

The historical context is helpful in understanding Bialik's poetry as well as the role of *aggadah* in his work. The *haskalah*, or Jewish enlightenment was the crucial movement of Bialik's time. This ideology was prominent among the Jewish merchant class of Central and Eastern Europe. These people adopted the values of Europe. Taste and reason were to take the place of the restrictive, legalistic Judaism. 13 Bialik and his generation could accept he secularism of the *haskalah* and the modern view of humanity, but emotionally their hearts were connected to the Jewish experience. 14 It is this conflict between western secular enlightenment thinking and Jewish tradition that clearly influenced much of Bialik's writing.

During Bialik's youth, writers such as Y.L. Gordon, M.L. Lilienblum and Brandes were waging the battle for a revolution in religious thinking which would allow for a more tenable balance between *ha-Dat veha-Hayyim*, religion and life. Gordon, in particular, had initiated the Hebraic *kulturkampf* to emancipate the secular from the religious realms of Judaism in such works as Zedekiah in the Prisonhouse. Bialik could also not have been oblivious to such "Nietschiean" proclamations of the freedom of the individual from the tyranny of excessive spirituality and

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13 Stanley Burnshaw, T. Carmi, and Ezra Spicehandler, eds., *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1965), 198.
14 Ibid. 200.

stultifying bookishness as Tchernikofsky's poetry and Berdichewsky's stories and essays. Bialik also emulated the general romantic naturalistic appeal to myth in European literature. The appeal for both national consciousness and inidividual self-expression, then, were overarching influences in Bialik's development. While keeping this background in mind, however, this thesis will focus more narrowly on Bialik's use of specific *aggadot* and the way they affect our understanding of his work. From time to time, I will allude to current trends in the study of Bialik but primarily this is an appreciation of the permutations of the original *aggadot* in Bialik's poetry and the use of these references as a cipher for reading selected poems.

METE MIDBAR

In *Mete Midbar*, Bialik refers to several prominent *aggadic* themes, and invests them with new meaning in order to communicate his own message. The central theme of this poem is the rebellion of "the generation of the wilderness" against God. An examination of the *midrashim* used by Bialik should enable us to understand Bialik's point quite well.

First, *Baba Batra* 73B-74B provides the backdrop for the poem. Here, Rabbah Bar Hanan tells of his journey in the

desert with an Arab merchant, who shows the rabbi the *mete midbar*, the generation of Israelites condemned to die after forty years of wandering in the desert. They are so huge that "...the Arab merchant passed under the knee, riding a camel with spear erect, and did not touch it." As the poem progresses, it is these giants who, condemned to die in the desert after forty years of wandering in exile, join with the desert in an uprising against their Creator. The poem can thus be seen from one angle as the tangible manifestation of the frustration of *galut*, of being apart from *eretz yisrael*.

This is not inconsistent with Bialik's other work. In his poem, "Basadeh" (1894), he describes "...the bitterness and orphanhood of a people bereft of its soil, exiled from fields and meadows, and alienated from the green urge (?) of nature..." [15] In the poem, he writes:

> Wretched I stand before the glory of the shining and joyful standing corn. And I know how great is my wretchedness, yea, now will I see it! Not my hands are your sadness, ears of corn, not my hand is a handbreadth of your stature not my strength did disperse this,I will not gather it.

Bialik, Spiegel informs us, is reluctant to indulge in the beauties of the *galut* environment, an attribute reminiscent of the dictum in ***Pirkei Avot***

> He who walks by the way and studies, and then breaks off his study, saying, 'How beautiful is this tree, how beautiful is this fallow ground-'

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15 Spiegel, ***Hebrew Reborn***, 305

> Scripture holds it as though he were guilty of mortal sin.

Since we ourselves have not created this beauty, Spiegel contends, Bialik is reticent to enjoy it. Only in our own land can we truly appreciate nature.

Naturally, *mete midbar* direct their anger to God, since it is God who is responsible for their fate. This leads us to another (and related) theme: this is a rebellion against God's dictatorial rule, a revolt against the imposition of divine will upon humanity. Bialik cleverly reverses several *aggadot* in his effort to portray this.

At the beginning of the rebellion, the desert alone rises up against God as it dares to "to heap abuse on His face." This is a reference to *mishnah sukkot* 2:9, wherein the subject of rainfall on *sukkot* is addressed. The rabbis bring a parable to illustrate what rain on *sukkot* is like: "To a slave who came to fill his cup for his master, and he poured the jug over his face." The master is displeased with the slave, and therefore poured the jug of water over his face. Similarly, God expresses displeasure with Israel on *sukkot* by causing it to rain. Bialik picks up the phrase (to pour the jug) and uses it in the colloquial sense of "to heap abuse." However, in the poem, it is not God who abuses the people, but rather the people who abuse God. The revolt begins.

Then, the desert is described as doing this in an effort to "...restore chaos unto its former status..." This is a reversal of the *aggadah* in tractate *Shabbat* 88b, wherein God threatens to return the world to *tohu v'vohu*, if Israel does not accept the Torah. Again, Bialik employs an *aggadic* theme, only to turn it on its head. In the poem, it is the desert and the dead of the wilderness who threaten to return the world to its primordial state.

From the same page of Talmud, Bialik brings the *midrash* which may be central to his theme. He writes that

> Then the Creator shakes and grows angry and the face of Heaven changes, and like a white-hot bowl upon the rebellious wilderness it is capped... A

God turns the world upon the rebels. In the Talmud, Rav Avdimer Bar Chama Bar Chasa says that God held Mt. Sinai over the Israelites' heads, and said to them:If you accept the Torah- good, and if not-there will be your grave. The Torah was forced upon the Israelites, according to this *aggadah*, and Bialik uses it in the poem to symbolize God's imposition of the *mitzvot* and curtailment of our will. *Mete Midbar* is largely about human rejection of divine coercion. As Strauss points out:

> And again we see the integration, that is typical of Bialik, the integration of national forces with mythical cosmic forces. Here the will of these mythical rebels that are in our poem has in it a similarity to the will of the nation in exile, that in its striving for renewal it leans on the primal forces that are in its distant past. These

> forces rise up against every law and all order. Their source is in the soul of every person; there is in him (her) a latent will to cast off all law and order that is forced on him (her) like a pail.[16]

History has shown this to be a typical process in nationalist movements. In the nineteenth century, many European nations underwent national revivals, in which they harked back to the great myths and legends of their people (e.g., the German Teutonic warrior). The Jews were also engaging in a similar process in the ninenteenth century, and this process helped to bring about Zionism. Indeed, this was in part facilitated by the inherent exclusion of Jews from the nationalist past of all nations.

> The modern state requires cultural and national integration. The Jews, possessing distinct cultural and national aspirations of their own, are hence fundamentally incompatible with the modern state that hosts them.[17]

Thus, we see Bialik referring back to the mythic past of *am yisrael*, the nation of Israel. He sees the generation of the wilderness as representative of Israel's mythic national past.

This is expressed vividly when the dead of the wilderness rise up:

> We are warriors! The last generation of slavery and the first for redemption are we! Our hand alone, our strong hand The heaviness of the yoke from upon our proud neck did cast off. B

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16 Aryeh L. Strauus, *Bedarchei Ha-Sifrut* (Jerusalem: M Mosad Bialik, 1959), 134.
17 Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and JehudaReinharz,editors,*The Jew In the Modern World, A Documentary History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.)

No God can compel them, their destiny is in their own hands, not in the hands of God, or of the rabbis who debate the merits of their generation (see B.T. *Sanhedrin*, 110B). This poem can perhaps be seen as a "call to arms" by Bialik, a call to all diaspora Jews to take their fate into their own hands. Spiegel connects this attitude to the time (1902) when the poem was written:

> The Kishinev pogroms showed the poet how shameful was the chasm between those heroic ancestors and their degenerate descendants in the ghetto. Bialik's revolt now loosed itself against his own generation in burning, prophetic anger.[18]

In Genesis Rabbah 3:6, it is said of the light of the six days of Creation: "It is stored up for the righteous in the Messianic future." In the poem, Bialik identifies the *mete midbar* with the righteous of future generations. Bialik hopes that this generation of the wilderness (and his own) are the righteous for whom the light is stored. This is a direct rebuke to God, obviously, who has decreed that they are to die in the desert (*Sanhedrin* 110). It is also interesting to note the discussion in the *gemara* of *dor hamidbar* in *Sanhedrin* 110B. There, the rabbis discuss whether or not *dor hamdibar* has a place in the world to come. Akiba says no. R. EIiezer, however, quoting Psalm 95:1, explains that initially God was angry with them, but they returned to God and thus He feels they merit a place in

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18 Spiegel, *Hebrew Reborn*, 302.

the next world. The overwhelming tone of the *gemara* is positive; *dor hamidbar* is viewed favorably. Although it is hard to know, the sentiments of the *gemara* may have helped to shape Bialik's attitude toward them (or at least have affirmed his attitude for him). Although the Torah in Numbers (and the poem) condemn the generation to die in exile, the implication in the *gemara* may be that ultimately they will be looked upon favorably. Their day will come. (Lachover also points out that this debate is found elsewhere in the rabbinic literature: *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 11:3, *ToseftaSanhedrin*13, and the Jerusalem Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 10:4).[19]

Lachover, however, points out that the debate over the merits of *dor hamidbar* is found as early as the *Tanakh* itself.[20]

There are several negative evaluations of them, in addition to Numbers 14:29-35. There is Joshua 5:4-6, where we are told that they died in the desert, "because they had not obeyed the Lord, and the Lord has sworn never to let them see the land that the Lord had sworn to their fathers to assign to us..." Similarly, Psalm 78:40-41 exclaims, "How often did they defy Him in the wilderness, did they grieve Him in the wasteland! Again and again they tested God, vexed the Holy One of Israel." Psalms 106:24-26 and 95:10-11

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19 P. Lachover, *Bialik, Chayav Veyitzirotav*, vol 2.(Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1955), 399.
20 Ibid. 398-399.

also condemn the generation of the wilderness. But the condemnations are not confined to the Torah and Psalms. In Ezekiel 20:13-24, there is a vicious diatribe against this generation:

> ...But the children rebelled against Me: they did not follow My laws and did not faithfully observe my rules...they profaned My sabbaths. Then I resolved to pour out My fury upon them, to vent all My anger against them, in the wilderness. But I held back My hand against them and acted for the sake of My name, that it might not be profaned in the sight of the nations..."

Thus, were it not for God's public relations concerns, the generation of the wilderness would have been wiped out completely and immediately.

But Jeremiah 2:2 paints a more favorable picture of the generation of the wilderness; "I accounted to your favor The devotion of your youth, Your love as a bride- How you followed Me in the wilderness, In a land not sown." Deuteronomy 32:10 also provides a more favorable evaluation: "He found him in a desert region, In an empty howling waste. He engirded him, watched over him, Guarded him as the pupil of His eye."

Strauss has suggested that the Dead of the Wilderness are similar to Prometheus of Greek myth, in that he rebelled against the law and order of Zeus.[21] This is borne out by

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21 Strauss, *Bedarchei Ha-Sifrut*, 134.

the various animals, including the eagle, that approach the "mete midbar." In Greek mythology, Prometheus breaks away from Zeus when the latter finds humanity faulty, and decides to replace it with a new race. As Fox says," he defiantly became the sponsor of the human cause."[22] Because of his rebelliousness, Zeus has Prometheus chained to a pillar, and sent an eagle to gnaw at his insides. At night, his wounds would be restored, only to have the eagle feast again the following day.

Bialik departs from the Greek myth. Prometheus is eventually released by Heracles, and brought back to Olympus to serve as a prophet for the other gods. In the poem under consideration, of course, the dead of the wilderness remain buried in the desert. Also, the eagle in our poem flies away and disappears, whereas the eagle in the myth returns again and again. The Greek influence is also seen, by the way, in the use of the hexameter meter employed by Bialik.

Despite the fact that Bialik does not strictly adhere to the Prometheus myth, the basic underlying theme of cosmic rebellion remains. Even if the revolt does not "succeed" in the poem, the "dead of the wilderness" demonstrate that they indeed possess these rebellious powers, and Bialik's suggestion may very well be that they can be tapped at any

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22 William Fox Sherwood, *The Mythology of All Races*, volume 2 (Greek and Roman) (New York: Cooper Square Publishers,1964), 12

moment. Thus, the *mete midbar* can be seen as a Prometheus of sorts. Indeed, Strauss suggests:

> Their rebellion is the rebellion of the primal forces from before "the giving of the Torah" against the existing world; and here we see hints of a similarity of the dead of the wilderness to Prometheus, who is the great symbol of rebellion against the rule and the law, which is Zeus.[23]

One of Bialik's contemporaries was Berditchewski, much of whose thinking is complementary to the themes in *Mete Midbar*: the triumph over the constraints of tradition and history, and the lamentation over the diaspora of the Jews. As Spiegel writes:

> But Berditchewski proclaims the rights of the present as against the dead memories of the past. With Nietzsche he revolts against the immoderate cultof history,against the hypertrophy of historic memory,which makes us unfree,uncreative, imitative. We no longer shape our own rhythms, but copy the men and the deeds of the past,we live historic recollections.[24]

Berditchewski himself wrote (as Spiegel quotes him):

> I believe in my fathers, believe that they were what they were, lived what they lived! But allow us to live on our own account, to stand upon our own feet. Let us have hopes of creating, and do not make us mere guardians of the old inheritance.[25]

And regarding the diaspora, Spiegel characterizes Berditchewski's attitude as follows: "Jewish life in the Diaspora seemed to him a continually recurring catastrophe

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23 Strauss, *Bedarchei Ha-Sifrut*, 134.
24 Spiegel, *Hebrew Reborn*, 351.
25 Ibid.

of the spirit." Thus we see that the attitudes and themes expressed by Bialik in *Mete Midbar* do not exist in a vacuum, but rather seem to be part of a current in at least some of the Hebrew literature of the time. This is, no doubt, a function of the situation of Eastern European Jews at the time and the concomitant stirrings of Zionism in that part of the world.

Lachover comments upon Bialik's use of desert imagery. He observes that Bialik takes the desert out of its usual context and meaning and expands it to represent the concept of the "desert of nations."[26] He notes that this usage of the desert motif was typical of the time:

> ...this was typical in the days of *chibat tzion* to use the desert, in which Israel wandered before their coming into the land, as an allegory for the lands of the wandering of Israel in the last exile, and the generation of the wilderness (as an allegory for) the last generations. [27]

According to this usage, the desert symbolizes the lands of wandering in the last exile, and the generation of the wilderness represents the children of this last generation, the wanderers.

Bialik makes the generation of the wilderness the "eternal dead of the desert," not at all bound to any particular time. Their wars are not time bound, but rather eternal "wars within eternity." Lachover notes that there is

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26 Lachover, ***Bialik***, 401.
27 Ibid.

a legend of the "Eternal Jew" in the legendary creations of the Jewish people.[28] These legends emphasize that giants cannot defeat us, mighty warriors don't harm us; we are invincible. Lachover contends that these ideas form the basis of *Mete Midbar*, where *dor hamidbar* is portrayed by Bialik as thinking of itself as invincible.

AL-HASHECHITA

On The Slaughter is another poem in which Bialik makes effective use of both Biblical and rabbinic sources. One senses that the narrator is confused, angry and skeptical about God. This is evident from the very first stanza, which seems to be a prayer:

> Heavens, demand mercy for me!
> If there is a God in you and if the God
> has a path in you-

Here, Bialik expresses doubt that there is a God, and if there is one, then this God is not very accessible. As Rubner notes:

> For Bialik a world without God is a doomed world; hence he struggles throughout the poem to hold on to a conception of a universe having a God.[29]

Thus, we see that despite the skepticism, Bialik still seeks mercy from God, albeit through intermediaries. He tries to obtain forgiveness for his people. As Lachover notes, "...

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28 Ibid.
29 Burnshaw, Carmi, Spicehandler, eds., *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*, 34

he confesses for the sin of his faithless generation..." 30 The notion that he is admitting guilt is made quite clear by the Talmudic source on which he appears to have based this first stanza. In *Avodah Zarah* 17a, R. Eliezer is distraught because a harlot that he has visited has told him that he will never be received in repentance. He wept, and sitting between two hills and mountains, he cried out: "mountains and hills, demand mercy for me." They responded, "How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, (Isa. 54:16), 'For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed.'" He then turns to the Heaven and earth with the identical plea, and receives the identical reply. The process is repeated with the sun, moon, stars and constellations. He then concludes, "The matter depends on me alone." He then died. A *bat kol*, a heavenly voice proclaimed, "R. Eleazar is destined for the world to come."

Bialik virtually lifts the opening line of the poem from this page of Talmud. The Talmudic passage, though, helps to reinforce Bialik's theme. The mood is one of despair and helplessness in the Talmud. A similar mood grips the poet, for the Kishinev pogroms of 1903 have taken place, and he implores God for mercy. Like Eleazar, his generation has sinned, and they try to win forgiveness. But like Eleazar, no one listens- "The matter depends on me alone."

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30 Lachover, *Bialik*, 427

Bialik's generation, like Eleazar, stands alone. They are both guilty and die for it.

Particularly noteworthy is Bialik's conception of his generation as being responsible for the tragedy. Therefore, there is no hope for the people, nothing to do but capitulate to their fate: "Executioner! here's the neck-come and butcher me!" D

As Lachover understands the poet's feeling:

> The hand of God does not rule in the world, and the eye of the upper world does not watch over man, therefore, there is no hope.[31]

It is much like Eleazar, who in the Talmud, is depicted as putting his head between his knees, and expiring, giving himself over to his fate, now that all his pleas have fallen on deaf ears, and all hope is lost. This conception of his generation as sinful seems to contrast sharply with his depiction of *dor ha-midbar* in *Mete Midbar* That generation was depicted as brave and righteous. They were rebelling against God's tyrannical rule. In <u>On The Slaughter</u>, the narrator is alternately meek and scornful, but in the first stanza, he is clearly supplicating God (granted, he is not sure if God exists; as Rubner noted above, Bialik desperately tries to maintain a conception of God in the poem, for he could not imagine a world without God). This is a generation that capitulates to God's rule. They

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31 Ibid.

acknowledge God's sovereignty, whereas the generation of the wilderness wanted to cast off the yoke of God's rule.

Rubner, and especially Strauss, detect a strong Psalms influence in the last line of the first stanza, "How long? Until when? how long?" Psalms 94:3 says,"How long shall the wicked, O Lord, how long shall the wicked prosper?" And in Psalm 13:2, the Psalmist cries out, "Until when shall you forget me, forever?" In addition, Psalm 89:14, "Yours is an arm endowed with might, which brings to mind Bialik's, "you have the arm with the ax." Strauss also notes that Bialik's line, "let its (justice's) throne be hurled to the ground," is based on Psalm 89:45. Here the Psalmist describes how God threatens to throw the throne of God's anointed to the ground, saying, " You have brought his splendor to an end and have hurled his throne to the ground." As Strauss notes, Bialik utilizes the same concept in his poem: "What God did to Israel His people, throwing his throne, the poet threatens to do to justice." 32

On the other hand, there is a strong sense or tone of indignant outrage, that somehow this is not fair. The tone is one of bitter resignation:

> Behead me like a dog-
> you have the arm with ax
> The whole earth is a slaughtering block to me-
> And we- we are the few!

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32 Strauss, *Bedarchei Ha-Sifrut*, 109.

Having appealed to heaven, he has now turned earthward, to the executioner. [33] They give themselves over to the slaughter, not for *kiddush hashem*, but as Lachover states:

> rather from a lack of faith in the worldly good, and in a glimmer of divine compassion in the heart of people. Thus, the whole world is like a desolate field...and for the few, there is no other way than surrender...[34]

The third stanza now combines his appeals to heaven and earth. [35] He appeals now to justice, mercy having failed him (recall the rabbinic notion of *midat ha-din* and *midat harachamim*). As Rubner notes, he is also skeptical of justice, thus the appeal is conditional- " if there is justice." Here, Bialik makes a reference to the Bible

> And you too, evil-doers, go forth in this your violence,And live in your blood and be found innocent. G

The reference is to Ezekiel 16:6:

> When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: "Live in spite of your blood." Yea, I said to you: "Live in spite of your blood."

In context, this is a positive statement, wherein God describes how He gave rise and life to our nation. In the poem, Bialik uses it in the opposite way- it is the evil-doers who will live in the blood that they have shed.

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33 Burnshaw, *Modern Hebrew Poem*, 33
34 Lachover, *Bialik*, 427.
35 Burnshaw, *Modern Hebrew Poem*, 33

The last, and perhaps most powerful stanza, contains Bialik's contention that there can be no revenge for the slaughter of an innocent child. The poem here seems to reach the height of despair and helplessness. This is seen quite vividly in the line: " let the blood pierce the abyss." This is an allusion to the Talmudic statement, "let justice pierce the mountain." This is another classic example of how Bialik reverses the original meaning of the Talmudic phrase. In the Talmud *Yebamot* 92A, there is a discussion concerning a widow who remarries. According to the *Mishnah*:

> A woman whose husband had gone to a country beyond the sea and on being told, "Your husband is dead," married, must, if her husband subsequently returned, leave the one as well as the other..."

Thus, says the *Mishnah*, if the *Bet Din* authorizes her marriage, she must leave her second husband if her first husband returns, and is exempt from a sin offering, since she acted on a <u>ruling</u> of the court. The *gemara* then debates whether or not the court's granting of permission to the woman was in fact a ruling at all, or a mere error, caused by incorrect information regarding the first husband's condition (the woman is not required to bring a sin offering if it was an error). R. Eliezer thought that it was an error, and he said: "let justice pierce the mountain."

The phrase, "let justice pierce the mountain," is generally understood to mean, "delve deeper into the matter" (so Rashi, Steinsaltz; Jastrow says,"justice under all

circumstances"). Regardless of the translation, the basic meaning is that a matter should be investigated fully so that a just and correct decision can be rendered. According to Avraham Min-Ha-Har, this expression is said if we delve deep into the matter, then we must accept the conclusion derived from this investigation. In this poem, however, the rule of law is replaced by the rule of blood. Clearly, there is no divine assistance, and revenge is pointless- only the shedding of Jewish blood dictates the course of events. The ultimate result is desolation:

> And let it eat away in the dark and undermine there/all the rotting foundations of the earth." H

The world is doomed- godless and lawless. Rubner points out, interestingly,

> *yikov* also means "curse!" And the poem that began with a demand for heavenly mercy concludes with a curse.[36]

Lachover sees another issue at play here. Quoting Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karmazov, he isolates a dilemma: is it acceptable to sacrifice a small child for the sake of humanity and eternal tranquility and peace? He sees echoes of this in Bialik's cry: "A revenge such as this: the revenge for the blood of a little child!" The "Russian" answer is "no." Lachover writes:

> Maybe one can hear in Bialik's call in the first section from the last stanza of the poem about the revenge of a small child's blood, which Satan has not yet created, a type of echo from the voice of the call of the great Russian visionary. But the

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36 Ibid., 34.

> great belief, that innocent blood that has been spilled does not rest, it boils and rises in anger for generations, this is a Hebrew belief.[37]

This notion has a Talmudic basis. In the Talmud, *Gittin* 57B, the story is related of Nebuzaradan, who killed "211 myriads, and in Jerusalem he killed 94 myriads until their blood joined that of Zechariah." The Jerusalemites explained that Zechariah used to chastise them for their irreligious ways, so they killed him, and his blood has not rested. Nebuzaradan indeed noticed that Zechariah's blood did not rest, it continued boiling. Nebuzaradan tried to appease Zechariah by killing the great and small Sanhedrins, and young men, women and school children, but to no avail. Zechariah's blood did not cease. Finally, he said, "Zechariah, Zechariah, I have slain the best of them, do you want me to destroy them all?" After saying this, the blood ceased boiling.

The Talmudic images are most appropriate to *Al Ha-Shechita*, and the Kishinev pogroms which inspired it. The dominant image in the Talmudic passage is that the blood of the innocent can never stop boiling, certainly not by killing more innocent people. Only when the murderer expresses some reluctance to continue, does the killing stop. As long as Jews continue to be slaughtered, their blood will rise up in fury. If the day should come when killing stops, the innocent blood may cease boiling. Indeed,

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37 Lachover, *Bialik*, 429

as Lachover understands Dostoyevsky (and consequently Bialik):

> one cannot establish the well being and happiness of all humanity, even for eternity, on the tears of one little boy. [38]

The only possible "revenge" is the end of bloodshed.

Rubner also detects Judges 6 in the background. Judges 6 contains the story of the Midianite oppression of Israel and how Gideon becomes the leader of the Israelites. The first allusion is "go forth in your violence (i.e., evil-doers)." This is reminiscent of Judges 6:14, when God says to Gideon, "go forth in this strength of yours." Like the narrator in the poem, Gideon contemplates the situation of his people only to sink into profound religious doubt. [39] Indeed Gideon says to the angel:

> Please, my lord, if the Lord is with us, why has all this befallen us? Where are all His wondrous deeds about which our fathers told us...(Judges 6:13).

Thus, two of the central themes of *Al Ha-Shechita* appear in Judges- oppression of the Israelites and religious doubt. [40] But, yet again, Bialik's story is different. Whereas Gideon repeatedly asks for signs from God and gets them, "Bialik and his generation cry out but receive no answer."[41]

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38 Ibid.
39 Burnshaw, *Modern Hebrew Poem*, 34.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.

We see then, that in *Al Ha-Shechita*, Bialik again makes intensive use of Talmudic and Biblical sources. Interestingly, he at times remains quite faithful to the original contextual meaning of the text, and other times he seems to change the meaning to suit his particular material. But the common denominator is that he uses the traditional material as his starting point, and as the backdrop in so much of the poem. When he changes the meaning, it almost seems to have a tone of scorn, as when he says, "let blood pierce the abyss." It as if he says 'the tradition is wrong, horribly wrong, and this is the reality- blood, not justice.'

Or when he refers to Gideon, he does so almost wistfully, since Gideon received the divine affirmation which he so desperately seeks in the poem.

HA-MATMID

"Ha-Matmid" is partly an autobiographical poem. It concerns the life and world of the Yeshiva student, a life which Bialik lived himself for a number of years in Russia. Having turned away from that world, one might expect a negative portrayal of the Yeshiva by the poet. But in fact, this is not the case. Despite some feelings of ambivalence, we will see that Bialik admires the *matmid* and the yeshiva world. Ultimately, he admires the student's devoutness and tenacity in upholding Torah.

This poem is set against the backdrop of the late 19th century literary revolution, when many Jews were looking to western secular culture and away from their own. Jews wanted to broaden the limits of literature. These people perceived western seucular literature to be rich, broad and fulfilling, while they saw their own tradition as wretched. They felt lost in the Jewish heritage, and wanted to set themselves free from its constraints. There was a perceived rift between Judaism and humanity. But the *matmid* is one who does not struggle with this dichotomy. In contrast to the revolutionaries, he is firmly rooted in his Jewish heritage and thus experiences none of the tension that the revolutionaries do. As Lachover describes it,

> The poet created and placed before us in his creation, a hero whose strength is in his roots, that all of him is rooted in one soil, and that is the individual soil of Israel, of the creation of it's generations, which he guards, and it's continuation, and protects them from all the winds blowing in the world."[42]

The *matmid* then, is the true, steadfast guardian of Jewish heritage in a world that wants to break away from the "chains of the tradition." [43]

> For him, there is no rift between Judaism and humanity. Indeed, the strength of the perseverance, dilligence of the *matmid* is what is stressed here...his spiritual fullness and his faithful connection with the thing that he guards...day and night...[44]

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42 Lachover, *Bialik*, 251.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 253.

Thus, the poem touches upon the theme of the conflict between Judaism and western secularism. This same tension is also explored in other poems by Bialik.

In *Biteshuvati*, "Upon My Return," he paints a portrait of a person returning home. It is a depressing scene- a worn old man, swaying among his books; a worn old woman wearing stockings, mindlessly pronouncing oaths and curses ; a stationary, day dreaming cat, and cobwebs full of swollen flies. Yet, despite this, the narrator chooses to stay- "Let me come, brothers, into your company/ Together let us rot 'till we stink." It is the comfort of the familiar, no matter how bad, that appeals to him. Perhaps in the light of the Jewish/secular conflict, this is meant to tell us that the old world of Jewish tradition, even if it pales in comparison to the seemingly more vibrant secular world, is preferrable to the uncertainties of western secularism. In a sense, the pull of the home may be too strong for the narrator to break away from. As Rubner notes,

> The last two lines enforce the tragedy in identifying the speaker with all that he abhors. He who has been unable to escape this "home" must return to it over and over again, for there is no way out. He must stay there and rot and fill the air with the odor of his disintegration.[45]

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45 Carmi, *Modern Hebrew Poem*, 21.

In *Levadi*, the narrator describes the devastation wrought by secularism (represented by the wind and light) on the Jewish world:

> Solitary, solitary I remained, and the *Shechinah* too.../ And when my heart yearned for the window, for the light/ And when the place under her wing was too narrow for me,/ she hid her head in my shoulder, and her tear dropped on my Talmud page.

As Rubner comments,

> ...wind, light are used to represent secular wisdom, liberation and love for the world of nature- whereas the constraints of the tradition are symbolized by the Talmud page. 46

Strauss sees the relationship between the *shechinah* and the individual as representative of the relationship of God/*shechinah* and Israel. Bialik employs an old convention of portraying the love of God as love between individual human beings. The relationship portrayed in the poem, however, is far from ideal. As Strauss notes, the narrator sits alone, and the wing of the *shechinah* is broken, and she is exiled from every corner. The person feels constricted in the *beit midrash*. And her tear that drops on the page of Talmud, seems to bind the two of them to each other in "invisible chains." Strauus thus sees their relationship as ambivalent, neither positive or negative. 47

This ambivalence may be detected in *Ha-Matmid*:

> Like a smile of the perfect righteous one, light shines forth/ The *shechinah* delights in the breath of the mouth of a baby./ Or perhaps it mocks her sacrifices/ Who bury their lives in the darkness,

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46 Ibid., 26.
47 Strauus, *Bedarchei Ha-Sifrut*, 112.

> in the prison-cell,/Who sacrifice gallantly their souls for her? I

It is unclear if the *shechinah* admires what "the saving remnant" does. In *Levadi*, the *shechinah* desperately clings to the yeshiva and its student as the only hope for her return home. But here, her attitude is hard to detect. It could be one of admiration for the sacrifice of the *matmid*, or one of scorn. This mirrors the ambivalent nature of the relationship between the narrator and the *shechinah* in *Levadi*[48]

The poem alludes more specifically to the aggadic notion of the exile of the *shechinah*. The third stanza reads:

> She has already been driven from every corner, only.One hidden nook,desolate and small, remained- The House of Study- and she covered herself with the shadow, and I was Together with her in the distress.

The *shechinah* is here portrayed as an exile, homeless and wandering. Her only remaining refuge is the yeshiva. This is an idea that figures prominently in the tradition. To begin with, the phrase "I was together with her in the distress," is based on Psalm 91:15,

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48 See In the City of Slaughter, where the narrator goes to a cemetery wherein are buried the martyrs of the Kishinev pogroms. God expresses disbelief, shock and horror at what has happened, and says, "And the Shechinah, what does she say?- She hides her head in the cloud/ And withdraws and is ashamed becuase of oppression, pain, and disgrace..." The helplessness of the Shechinah in this poem is reminiscent of the broken wing of the Shechinah in Levadi.

> When he calls on Me, I will answer him;
> I will be with him in distress; I will rescue him
> and make him honored

In the poem, Bialik has reversed the roles. Instead of God saying tnat God will be with Israel in her distress, here the person says that he will be with the *shechinah* in her distress. The mutuality of the divine-human relationship is seen in various aggadic sources.

In the Zohar it is written, "So whenever Israel goes into exile, *shechinah* is with them." In the Zohar, the *mishkan* is viewed as God's pledge to Israel. Thus, God says, "Even though they have sinned against Me, the pledge must remain with them so that I will not leave them...for its sake I will not abandon them wherever they are." In B.T. *Megillah* 29a, R. Shimon b. Yochai comments, "Come and see how beloved Israel is to the Blessed Holy One: whenever they are in exile, *shechinah* was with them. So intertwined are God and Israel, that according to one *midrash*, God says, "What happens with twins? If one feels pain in his head, so does the other; so says God, 'I will be with him in distress.'"

The implication of these sentiments for *Levadi* may be that although Jews have turned away from Jewish culture and moved to western secularism, God has not forsaken them. As long as the pledge (here, the yeshiva) remains even the slightest bit alive, God can, and will return. God depends

on Israel- God's condition mirrors our own situation. In the context of this poem, God is in the exile of western secularism with the Jews, and the *shechinah* clings pathetically and hopefully to the lone remaining Jew in the yeshiva, hoping that he can maybe effect her return home.

What happens to the protagonist is unclear. Does he stay or does he go? Perhaps Bialik intentionally leaves the dilemma unresolved, as if to indicate that this conflict between secularism and Judaism must be faced by every modern, thinking Jew.

This very idea seems to be alluded to in ***Al Saf Beit Ha-Midrash***, where we find the narrator sadly looking at his old yeshiva, which now sits desolate. He asks, "Has God departed from your wastes forever?/ Dust-sunken walls, will He never return to you?" God seems to have been exiled along with the narrator who appears to have left for the "west," only to return disappointed. He asks about the new world he has come back from exploring, "Who is there for me? What is there for me? I will return to my resting place."

Here the protagonist returns to Judaism happily and eagerly. Unlike ***Levadi*** and ***Beteshuvati***, the way to resolve the conflict between secularism and Judaism is to return to Judaism. For this person, the secular world was one of deceit. Indeed, Aberbach claims that ***Al Saf Beit Ha-Midrash***

demonstrates that Bialik "...is or was an Orthodox Jew and remains deeply attached to Jewish tradition."[49] Aberbach goes even further and sees in Bialik's reference to the walls as "silent mourners" a hearkening back to the poet' childhood sense of loss and grief.[50]

Aberbach sees ***Veim Yishal Ha-Malach*** in psychological terms as well. "In this Gemara's maw, dead letters' grave/ my soul, imprisoned, writhed convulsively." As in The Yeshiva Student, this is a story about another soul deprived of a full life. His life has been entirely wrapped up in study, and has had little time for anything else. Aberbach notes that the poem is about "...the longing for woman and the search for love...bound up with the yearning for the lost world of wholeness in Jewish tradition."[51]

In ***_El Ha-Aggadah*** Bialik clearly extols the virtues of the tradition. He refers to the *aggadah* and the Talmud as the place where his "soul finds consolations," when he is distressed. *Aggadah* is like the musicians of our people in ancient Babylon, "that knew the heart of their people." It is *aggadah* that gives him relief from life's travails. The *aggadah* was literally formed out of the sounds of the harp, and it is the modern equivalent of the ancient harp.

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49 Aberbach, David, ***Bialik***, Peter Halban, London, (1988), 57.
50 Ibid.,115-116
51 Ibid.,73.

In *Im Yesh Et Nafshecha Ladaat*, Bialik claims that it is the world of *talmud torah* that has preserved our people through all it's trials and tribulations. He asks a series of questions: "If you would know the spring from which your doomed brothers in evil days drew strength like this, and fortitude..." Toward the end, he advises us to

> "Go to the house of prayer, old and decayed... this house is but a little spark, a remnant/ Saved by a miracle, from that great fire/ Kept by your fathers always on their altars./ Who knows if their rivers of tears did not bring us to this stage/ and in their prayers they asked of God for us/ and in their deaths they bequeathed to us life/ eternal life!

Bialik's point here seems to be that perhaps the key to Jewish survival has been the small remnant that stayed in the study houses and pored over the sacred texts of our tradition. Thus, the *beit midrash* offers more than just refuge and comfort for its alumni who have strayed from the Jewish path, but it is what has maintained our people's existence.

These are the themes that set the stage for *Ha-Matmid*, which is really a poem about going "against the grain," about holding fast to what one believes even in the face of overwhelmingly contradictory societal trends.

In *Ha-Matmid*, Bialik employs many aggadic themes. In the beginning, Bialik represents the yeshiva world as "a

fiery ember upon the ash heap." The traditional life that the student leads is literally a "point of light" in the midst of the exile. This is reminiscent of *Pirkei Avot* 5:5, a *mishnah* that lists the ten miracles done for our ancestors in the Temple. One of these miracles was that "...rains never quenched the fire of the wood pile in the Altar..." It is a most fitting image, as Bialik addresses the themes of the *matmid*'s sacrifice of his boyhood on the altar of Torah, and the maintenance of Jewish tradition in the face of the "rain" of Western secular culture. Regarding his sacrifice, Bialik writes in the poem, "Six full years, years of boyhood and youth/ Like the shadow, as if without any life, are forever lost." As Lachover notes, the student is one who "sacrifices on the altar of Torah his fat and blood." [52]

The light/fire imagery is also seen elsewhere in the poem:

> Is this here the potter's house for the soul of the nation? Is this the source of her blood that plants within her ever-Lasting life, that instills in her fire and warmth? Is this here where her majesties are- future luminaries Who will form her spirit upon the birthstones? For what are the thunderings and lightnings Which lift up the soul to the heart of heaven!

These images have an aggadic basis. In B.T. *Ta'anit* 7a, we read:

> Rabbi Bar Bar Chana said: Why are words of Torah compared to fire,as it is written, 'Is not my word like fire, says the Lord' (Jer. 23:29). This teaches you that just as fire does not ignite by itself, so words of Torah do not endure with him who studies alone.

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52 Lachover, Bialik, *Chayav Veyitzirotav*, p. 255-256.

If Bialik in fact had *Ta'anit* 7a in mind, it is a most interesting allusion. If one of his main themes in *Ha-Matmid* is the dilligence of the lone student, then this text condemning private study is a strange choice. In fact, the text goes on to say that solitary students become "stultified" and are guilty of sin.

If anything, Bialik seems to portray the *matmid* in heroic terms:

> Lord, take what You would take! My fat and my blood- I swear before You and before Your Holy Torah, I will not refrain the quivering of my lips and my voice will not be silent, I will not move from my place, abandon my corner, My heart will know no rest and to my eyes Will I not give sleep- until I quench my thirst for Your Word.

Lachover remarks,

> The poem...is...a poem about the faithful guardian of the Holy fire, the fire of the superior creation in Israel, a fire that rises and comes up from the inner individual spirit, the original of the people...and he, the *matmid*, the faithful guardian of it, who gives it its continuance, does not allow it to be extinguished as he maintains it with his fat and his blood, that lights the altar of God day and night. [53]

Another interesting Talmudic allusion equating Torah study with fire is found in *Ketubot* 62b. There we are told that Judah always spent his time at school studying, but he came home every Sabbath eve. Whenever he came, the people saw a "pillar of light" moving before him. Here, *talmud*

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53 Ibid.,256

torah is equated with fire. But the text continues to relate that once Judah was so consumed by his studies that he forgot to come home. His father, not seeing the pillar of fire, said to those who were with him, "Lower his bed, for had Judah been alive he would not have neglected the performance of his maritial duties." However, the Talmud remarks that his father's remarks were erroneous since Judah's soul rested peacefully. Nonetheless, this passage raises the question of over-indulgence in study to the point that the demands of life and family are pre-empted. This was the view presented by Judah's father.

The image of a roof is also evident in *Ha-Matmid*, and it also relates to the theme of over-indulgence in study. This too has aggadic echoes. Bialik writes:

> In caves, on roofs- there sat our sons
> Also they learnedin stealth,in secret they studied
> And luminaries ascended from the caves to us And
> geniuses descended from the roofs to us

In B.T. *Ketubot* 62b the story is related of Rav Rehumi, who used to study often at the school of Raba at Mahuza, but he used to come home every year on Yom Kippur eve. The one time that he forgot to return home because he was so involved in his studies, the roof upon which he was sitting collapsed and he died.

Although it is not stated explicitly, it seems that R. Rehumi was studying on the roof, a motif that Bialik has

picked up on in the poem. Like the *matmid*, R. Rehumi is engrossed in study. But the point being made in the Talmud seems to be that indulgence in study to the point of neglecting worldly obligations (in the context of this talmudic passage the obligation is performance of marital duties with one's wife) is deadly. It perhaps can be argued that Bialik makes a similar insinuation by painting a picture of a "swaying corpse" of a student, who has virtually no contact with the outside world. Like R. Rehumi, he is "dead" to the external world. Although they are both engaged in "lofty" pursuits, the passages seesm to imply that when one reaches too high a plane, one sacrifices "life" in the day-to day world. The implicit call is for a balance between study and daily obligations and activities, a balance not struck effectively by the *matmid* or R. Rehumi.

Bialik also seems to express some ambivalence toward the *matmid*'s career, although ultimately he admires the student. In the beginning of the poem, Bialik's description of the *matmid* is far from glowing:

> In the window, and through it the image of a man, who resembles/ The shadow of a corpse swaying, struggling/ Struggling, quaking, and the stifled sound of a moan/ Is lifted up to you upon the springs of silence-/ Then a yeshiva student in one of the prison houses/ Tarrying late in the evening- your eyes behold.../here the light of his eyes was extinguished and his face became pale. [7]

He also describes the gloom, the spiders, the hunger, the lack of sleep. Yet, as noted above, this apparently is not

enough to diminish the heroic nature of his life; it may help to increase the student's heroism, as he sacrifices so much for the tradition. It is as if Bialik paints a particularly gloomy portrait of the *matmid* and his yeshiva existence so as to increase the greatness of his life's work.

A passage in B.T. *Sukkah* 28a further illuminates the student's heroism through light/fire imagery. We learn that Hillel the Elder had eighty disciples. Of these, the greatest was Jonathan ben Uzziel and the least was Johanan ben Zakkai. Zakkai studied *mishnah*, *gemara*, *halachah*, gematria, etc. (there is a long list of esoteric disciplines). After listing his accomplishments, the Talmud asks, "And if the smallest of them was so great, how much more so was the greatest? They said of Jonathan ben Uzziel that when he used to sit and occupy himself with the study of the Torah, every bird that flew above him was immediately burnt." Apparently, when one reaches a certain extraordinary level of Torah study, it is as if one creates blazing fire. This is similar to what Bialik writes about words of Torah; "Every utterance of hewn fire, every word of sprinkled blood." Perhaps Bialik is insinuating that the *matmid* is on such a level, or on his way to this level, that the student is creating his own sparks.

Another clear equation of Torah and fire is found in Exodus Rabbah 36:3, where a person who studies Torah is compared to someone who stands in the dark holding a candle in his hand, and he sees a stone and does not stumble over it, because he had the candle. As the *midrash* states, "Those who engage in Torah they bring light to every place."

Lachover has suggested that another prominent aggadic motif found in *Ha-Matmid* is Satan. As the student goes to school early in the morning:

> Then it happens that the devilish wind like/ Satan to greet him/ Dances from the abundant blue sky,/ And flatters him and curls his ear lock/And entices him secretly, uttering foolishness.../Then descends the wind to the garden foliage/ It charms, it entices with a still small voice:/"Behold, beloved youth, how green is my bed,/ Enjoy before your lungs rot away."
>
> This brings to mind the passsage from *Pirkei Avot*:
>
> He who walks by the way and studies. and then breaks off his study, saying, 'how beautiful is this tree, how beautiful is this fallow ground-" Scripture holds it as though he were guilty of mortal sin.

According to Lachover, "from the days of the 'Odyssey,' poets and artists knew to put before their heroes obstacles, in order that their strength and might in their wars might be seen." 54 Satan, in the guise of the wind, appears as the stumbling block of the *matmid* trying to lure him away from his mission, and into the outside world, as symbolized by the garden foilage and the bed. The figure of Satan of

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54 Ibid.

course, is prominent in aggadic literature. We often see Satan functioning as the stumbling block in the *aggadah*.

In the *midrashim* on the *akedah*, Satan goads God, Abraham and Isaac. In one encounter with God, Satan questions Abrahams's dedication to God. He suggests that Abraham is not sufficiently appreciative of all that God has done for him. God replies, "He has done nothing except for the sake of his son, (yet) if I say to him, 'sacrifice your son to me, he will sacrifice him immediately.'" And thus was born the *akedah*.

In another midrashic scenario, Satan appears to Abraham and Isaac in various guises and tries to convince them not to go through with the sacrifice. Once, Satan appears as an old man and asks Abraham where he is going, and when the latter responds, "to pray," Satan says, "Why is someone who is going to pray have fire and a knife in his hands, and wood on his shoulder?" Satan calls Abraham crazy for killing a son who was given to him when he was one hundred years old. Abraham, however, remains undaunted, and when Satan asks if he will stand even more severe trials, he says that he is willing to do so. Abraham and Isaac cannot be distracted by their environment, much as the *matmid* cannot.

Satan takes a similar approach with Isaac, who also resists, although with a little coaching by his father, who

tells him to ignore Satan. There are also legends involving David and Satan. In short, Satan the accuser/tempter figures prominently in aggadic literature, and it is probably safe to say that Bialik based the "Satan/wind" passages on this aggadic motif.

Thus, in ***Ha-Matmid***, the student is the hero who resists the temptations of Satan. Like Abraham and Isaac, the *matmid* holds true to his mission, and does not waiver from his course:

> And he remembers his obligation and he/ remembers the corner/ And like fleeing from sin he flees into the yeshiva.

Bialik clearly paints the *matmid* in heroic terms by associating him with this aggadic motif. Setting aside the fact that he withstands the trial, we should remember that to be selected for a trial in the first place requires a certain stature as evidenced by this passage from *Pirkei Avot*, 5:4

> With ten trials was Abraham our father tested and he stood in all of them- to let you know how great is the love of Abraham our father.

There is also the ***midrash*** that explains that God chose to try Abraham because God knew that Abraham could withstand the trials and would succeed. Thus, to even be tested required a certain degree of spiritual and emotional fortitude. However, all does not go smoothly from here:

> And it happens also that the youth's spirit/ becomes desolate/ In its worthless toil and as if

> embittered.../And a green spider comes from somewhere/ To pitch its web into the corner walls,/ And a two-fold gloom in the corner, in his heart/ And in all the chambers of his soul trembling and chill-/ ()

Lachover suggests that the desolation brings the spider. Indulgence in Jewish study is like a spider's web "that goes from being the lightest to the heaviest." 55 It is interesting that Bialik uses the image of a spider's web to describe the gloom, isolation, and desolation of a life of study. In the *aggadah* the same metaphor is used for sin.

> In B.T. *Sukkah* 52a, it is written:
>
> R. Assi stated, the Evil Inclination is at first like the thread of a spider, but ultimately becomes like cart ropes, as it is said, "Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and as it were with a cart rope " (Isaiah 5:18).

And in B.T. *Sanhedrin* 99b: "R. Assi stated: Temptation at first is like a spider's thread, but eventually is like a cart rope."

We have seen how the poet portrays the *matmid* and his study in heroic terms. But here, *talmud torah* seems to strangle the *matmid*; once he is engaged in it, he cannot break from it; it is addictive, like *yetzer ha-ra*. Is the *matmid* still a hero even if he has no choice about the path he takes? Suddenly the student is engaged in "worthless toil." Rather than being the great, valiant hero, the *matmid* here is a poor, embittered, miserable soul, who has been

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55 Ibid.,259.

captured in the web of yeshiva life and cannot escape; he is an unwitting hero.

But this, it seems, is precisely the point, at least as Lachover sees it. The greatness of the *matmid* is in his victory over himself, and his human urges and instincts. His is the victory "over himself, over the personal Satan that is within him, over the human claims that are in his heart." 56 Perhaps these are the claims of a more normal life, a life devoid of the dreariness of the yeshiva. His heroism stems from the fact that he can persevere, that he is the dutiful student depsite the less than ideal circumstances. As Lachover puts it, "the enjoyment of this *mitzvah* is enjoyment within sorrow, and his victory is the victory over his life." 57

This is seen more clearly in the beginning of the poem. There we have a negative image of the student, as he is described as

> the shadow of a corpse swaying, struggling,/ Struggling, quaking, and the stifled sound of a moan/ Is lifted up to you upon the springs of silence-/ Then a yeshiva student in one of the prison houses/ Tarrying late in the evening- your eyes behold. ח

Lachover feels that this is an allegorical way of expressing the idea "*adam ki yamut baohel*," the person who kills

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56 Ibid.,261.
57 Ibid.

himself over Torah. [58] This idea is expressed in the Talmud, *Shabbat* 83b and *Gittin* 57b. In *Shabbat*, it is said that one should never abstain from attendance at the house of study and from Torah study, even in the hour of one's death. "Resh Lakish said: the words of the Torah can endure only with him who sacrifices himself for it, as it is said, 'This is the Torah, when a man dieth in a tent'" (Numbers 19:4). Here, Bialik appears to remain faithful to the original text (if he indeed had it in mind). This is clearly a text that admires self-sacrifice, and giving one's life to Torah. Although Bialik does not use the metaphor directly, the image is there- a corpse in the 'tent' of the yeshiva. Towards the end of the poem, Bialik writes

> How great the blessing it would have brought to us/If only a single ray of light had warmed it by its warmth/ How many sheaves in joy would we have reaped/ If only a single willing spirit blew upon you/And cleared the "way of Torah" from which we rebelled.

The phrase, "the way of Torah," seems to be an allusion to *Pirkei Avot* 6:4:

> This is the way of Torah: a morsel of bread with salt you will drink, and on the ground must you sleep and live a life of trouble while you toil in the Torah.

This passage from the ***mishnah*** coincides nicely with much of the attitude expressed in ***Ha-Matmid*** namely, that the yeshiva life is one of drudgery and sacrifce of a "normal" life." In the passage from the poem quoted above, Bialik seems to express an almost wistful regret that life in the yeshiva

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58 Ibid.,263

was not more pleasant. "If only a single willing spirit blew upon you/ and cleared the "way of Torah" from which we rebelled." The yeshiva life as it stands is too much for him, but Bialik seems to want to be able to be a part of that world, if it would only reform itself. This illustrates nicely the ambivalence which pervades the poem: a scathing description/critique of the traditional Torah world, juxtaposed with admiration for the *matmid*, and his world, a world in which Bialik would participate if it allowed him.

Bialik has indeed created the image of death in the phrase, "the shadow of a corpse swaying." Lachover agrees that the picture drawn here of the student is "not the most fortunate one." [59] He notes that Bialik in *Miveni Ay'anim* painted a similarly depressing picture of the *matmid*, and did so in a prosecutorial tone, as he wrote that the

> light of his life was extinguished by Torah. In the *Matmid*, by contrast, this negative tone is mingled with a tone of adoration for the great sacrifice made by the student. [60]

Again, this is the ambivalence of the poem- the life of the *matmid* is gloomy, and full of drudgery, but this, precisely, is his greatness. As Jacobs comments

> in his martyrdom, Bialik found anew the symbol for the eternal vigilance of the Jewish people, its single-minded dedication to serving the One God, against all outside pressures and obstacles.[61]

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.,265.
61 Steven L. Jacobs, *Shirot Bialik, A New and Annotated Translation of Chaim Nachman Bialik's Epic Poems* (Columbus: Alpha Publishing Company, 1987),22-23.

MEGILLAT HA-ESH

Megillat Ha-Esh is considered by some to be Bialik's greatest effort, and has been the subject of much analysis. Indeed, many themes have been detected in the poem, and it is thought by some that Bialik's personal history is the backdrop of the poem.

Jacobson points to two childhood events that inspired the composition of *Megillat Ha-Esh*. 62_One is the first fire Bialik ever saw. He was living with his family in Zhitomir, when at the age of seven, a house caught fire in the neighborhood. Jacobson quotes the adult Bialik on the subject

> When I wrote *Megillat Ha-Esh*__before me were revealed the trees which were dry and had been burned by a great power in a great fire storm, while of everything that had been destroyed only piles of embers remained.63

The second experience was the rebellion of the ship Potamkin in the Odessa harbor in 1905. Jacobson feels that__Bialik experienced conflicting feelings of hope and despair during the 1905 revolution. There was the expectation amongst many Hebrew writers that the situation of Russian Jewry would be improved as a result of the revolution._On the other hand, there was an increasing feeling of despair about the Jewish

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62 David C. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth Century Hebrew Writers* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 46-47.
63 Ibid.

future in Europe, due to continued persecution and internal divisions. Many Jews' disillusionment with traditional Judaism had not been replaced with vialble alternatives. Finally, Bialik and friends were upset by the lack of interest in Hebrew literature by European intellectuals. 64

Jacobson also sees these events as providing some of the imagery for the poem. Images of fire, water, dryness and barrenness dominated his memory of these events. It is true that these images also play a prominent part in the *aggadot* that Bialik utilizes in the poem.

Jacobson also notes that Bialik makes important changes in the legends he uses. In the Talmudic legend, the captives are destined for a life of prostitution. In the poem, the captor actually deprives the captives of sexual activity by separating the sexes on the desert island.

In the original legend, the youths interpret a Psalm to help them decide what to do. In the poem, they turn to "the song of hate and annihilation," expressed by the "man of terror." It is a song of despair, and the youths take to this song, and decide that striking back at the oppressors is the proper course of action. Thus, here the captives' deaths are not acts of martyrdom,as they are in the original

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64 Ibid.,47-48

aggadot, but acts of self-destruction. Thus, instead of achieving *olam ha-ba* by their act of martyrdom, these youths actually help the captors by killing themselves.65

Strauus notes that Bialik has taken liberties with the *aggadot* by weaving together two historical time periods. The legend of the hidden fire is from the First Temple era, and the legend of the deported exiles is from the Second Temple. In addition, he notes that the motif of an individual searching, virtually unknowingly, for the holy fire is consonant with the post-Dostoyevsky era of the nineteenth century.66

On the surface, this is a story about a young man's quest to reclaim the holy fire, a remnant of the Temple altar, hidden by an angel on a desolate island. This is the same island to which the young Jewish captives_were deported at the time of the destruction of the Temple.

But this is also a story about lost childhood, about a youth who grows up an orphan, becomes a Nazirite, lusts for a girl who he cannot have. At the end of the poem, he has become a prophet among his exiled brethren, who treat him with fear and apprehension.

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65 Ibid.,54-56

66 Strauss, ***Bedarchei Ha-Sifrut***, 137-138.

This is also a poem about love and the youth's childhood and adult lustful urges for the unattainable. In addition, the holy fire seems to represent the cultural quest of the renascent Jewish people, as Fichman puts it,

> this fire symbolizes the power of the tribe, the fitness of the soul and the people to overcome all the obstacles of its wanderings and to return to the nation the holiness that it lost...the cultural renaissance (i.e., the holy fire) precedes redemption; it is a precondition for redemption."67

Given that the backdrop of the poem is the destruction and exile from the land, inevitably questions arise in the poem as to what is the best way to reclaim the nation's prior status (a question Bialik had to handle himself in his life and in his work). Is this to be achieved through forgiveness, hatred, martyrdom? All these themes are expertly woven in with various *aggadot* to produce a gripping poetic drama.

In the words of Bialik himself, ***Megillat Ha-Esh*** is based primarily on the legend of the holy fire of the Temple's altar that was hidden away at the time of its destruction.68 The altar fire had to be constantly burning, as this was the fire that descended from Heaven. But with the ***hurban*** the fire was extinguished, and the question arose, what will be done about the fire after the Temple is rebuilt? This led to the emergence of the *aggadah*, according

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67 Jacob Fichman, "***Megillat Ha-Esh***," in ***Bialik, Yetzirato Lesugeha Bir'iHaBikoret***, Gershon Shaked, ed. (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1974), 267.

to Bialik, which holds that the holy fire was stored away. There are two different answers given as to the location of the hidden fire: one legend claims it was stored in Babylonia, while the other claims it was stored away in *eretz yisrael*. Bialik preferred the former version. He viewed the Babylonian legend as an allegory in which the fire is transformed into an *esh ruhanit*, or "spiritual fire."69 The exiles have nurtured and sustained this fire in Babylonia, and they will bring it back to the Holy Land upon their return.

This aggadic notion forms the basis of the plot of *Megillat Ha-Esh*, which is that the hidden fire is lost, needs to be found and made to be the foundation of the new Temple. Lachover identifies this fire as the "eternal, spiritual fire of the Torah, the same fire that burned in the heart of the *matmid*.68 As he says,

> We have to understand...that the intention is also of a creative, spiritual fire, and also as the fire of Torah, that as if from the time of the destruction, the holy fire was hidden within its letters, and from there one can extract it and bring it and make it the steadfast basis of the renewal of the nation.69

The idea of the "holy fire" goes back to the *Tanakh*. There, the fire that comes from above is a sign of divine power revealed (see Numbers 9:15, Leviticus 9:23-24, Second Chronicles 7:1-3).

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68 Ibid.,544.
69 Ibid.

In the Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 21b and 39a, the fire is referred to in miraculous terms. In *Yoma*_21b, it states:

> Has it not been taught: Five things were reported about the fire of the pile of wood: It was lying like a lion, it was as clear as sunlight, its flame was of solid substance, it devoured wet wood like dry wood, and it caused no smoke to arise from it?...the fire comes down from heaven.

And in *Yoma*_39a:

> Throughout forty years the westernmost light (of the candlestick) was shining, from that time on, it was now shining, now failing; also the fire of the pile of wood kept burning strong, so that the priests did not have to bring to the pile any other wood besides the two logs, in order to fulfill the command about providing the wood unintermittently; from that time on, it would occasionally keep burning strongly, at other times not, so that the priests could not do without bringing throughout the day wood for the pile (on the altar).

But in B.T. *Shabbat* 22b, it is written that :

> it is a testimony to mankind that the Divine Presence rests in Israel. What is the testimony?- Said Rab: That was the western branch (of the candelabrum) in which the same quantity of oil was poured as into the rest, and yet he kindled (the others) from it and ended therewith.

And *Pirkei Avot* tells us that the fire never went out. Thus, in biblical and rabbinic literature, the holy fire is intimately connected with God and God's Presence and Providence in Israel.

This helps explain the terrible import of chapter three of *Megillat Ha-Esh*. Here, the angel

> saw the curl of fire above the morning star, the remnant of the lion of God, as it gleamed,

> quivered and died on the scorched stones of the Temple mount. And the angel was exceedingly troubled lest this last ember of God go out, and the holy fire vanish from the earth and be lost to the people of God and to His house forever.

Based on the texts of the Bible and the Talmud, we know that if this fire is lost, it is tantamount to losing God's Presence. Thus, the angel brings it to a desert island for safekeeping.

This act has an aggadic basis. In Numbers Rabbah 15:10, we learn that when the Temple was destroyed, the menorah was hidden. This was one of five things that were hidden at the time, along with the ark, the fire, the Holy Spirit, and cherubim. And, the *midrash* tells us, when God returns and builds the Temple again, God will return all these items. All these items are connected to God and God's Presence, and the theme of exile and return is prominent here, as it is in *Megillat Ha-Esh* As exile begins, the need arises to hide the fire; upon termination of exile, these items will return. Thus a four-fold pattern emerges: destruction-exile-hiding of fire- absence of God's Presence; the reverse, of course, is also true: return-rebuilding-re-use of fire, return of God's Presence.

In Second Maccabees, we find perhaps the source most closely related to our story. 2:18-23 relates that when the exile began the "pious priests" hid some of the fire of the altar in the hollow of a dry cistern. Years later, upon

return from exile, Nehemia sent the descendants of the priests who hid the fire to get it. All they found was a thick liquid. But Nehemia had the liquid poured on the wood and sacrifices. When the sun came out, a great fire went up. In this text, it would appear that the fire was hidden in Babylonia. Bialik adds his own touch by having the angel bring the fire back from Babylonia (the same story with modifications is found in Josiphon).

Bialik describes, briefly, the destruction of the First Temple itself, in chapter one. The description contains Biblical and aggadic images and themes. One of these is God kicking the divine throne. Bialik writes "Has God kicked His throne aside, and smashed his crown to smithereens?" A look at the prophets may help us understand the implications of this question. In Isaiah 66:1, it is written, "the heavens are my throne." In Jeremiah 14:19,21, the prophet cries out,

> Have you rejected Judah/ Have You spurned Zion? Why have you smitten us so that there is no cure?...For Your name's sake, do not disown us/Do not dishonor Your glorious throne; Remember, do not dishonor Your covenant with us."

It would seem that when a break in the divine/human relationship occurs, God damages or disgraces the Holy Throne. Kicking aside the throne might then be taken as a tangible symbol of God's removal from Israel, and the severance of the divine connection with Israel. Bialik clearly seems to associate the *churban* with a poor divine-human relationship.

Bialik also asks in the poem, "Has God torn His purple mantle and scattered the rags to the wind?" In Lamentations Rabbah 1:1, God asks the angels,

> If a human king had a son who died, and mourns for him, what is it customary for him to do?...He rends his purple robes. God said to them, "I will do likewise."

Thus, even though the Temple had been destroyed, and Bialik describes God as a "revengeful God," God is nonetheless engaged in an act of mourning for God's "son," Israel. This is even more ironic, since the context of Lamentations Rabbah indicates that it is Israel's wayward behavior that causes the *churban*. 70 The irony is that God utilizes "tough love" with Israel, and feels great remorse about it. But God is clearly constrained by external factors- the covenantal relationship has been breached, therefore God must punish Israel, regardless of how painful it is to do so.

The aggadic sources also provide background for the description of God in chapter two of ***Megillat Ha-Esh***. In the *aggadot* of the *churban*, God is often found weeping. In Lamentations Rabbah we read:

> At the destruction of the Temple, it is written, "Therefore said I, look away from Me" (said to the angels). I will weep bitterly, strain not to comfort me (*Petichta* to Lamentations Rabbah 24).

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70 "Israel did not go into exile until they had repudiated the Divine Unity, circimcision which had been given to the twentieth generation, the Decalogue and the Pentateuch (Lamentations Rabbah, 1:1).

In B.,T. *Hagiggah* 5b, the question is asked,

> Is there any weeping in the presence of the Holy One Blessed Be He? Although R. Pappa holds that there is no grief in God's presence, there is the verse from Isaiah: "And in that day did the Lord, the God of Hosts, call to weeping and to lamentation, and to boldness, and to girding with sackcloth (22:12)- The destruction of the Temple is different, for even the angels of peace wept (over it).

Further on the same page, Jeremiah 13:17 is quoted:

> "And mine eyes shall drop tears and tears, and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock is carried away captive." R. Eleazar said: Wherefore these three expressions of tears? One for the First Temple, and one for the Second Temple, and one for Israel, who have become exiled from their place.

Bialik, however, does not directly paint God as crying. As Lachover sees it, instead of emphasizing the tears of God, Bialik

> ...reduced the crying of God to one elevated final point, and its impression is endless...and instead of God's crying in the sources, comes the eternal distress of God...another divine figure filled with endless distress and sorrow.71

Indeed, it would appear that Bialik <u>implies</u> God's weeping only at the end of the chapter: "and the *shechinah* from the ruins and went and hid herself." This may be a reference to B.T. *Haggigah* 5b,

> "But if you will not hear it, My soul shall weep in secret for the pride." R. Samuel b. Inia said in the name of Rab: The Holy One Blessed Be He has a place, and its name is 'Secret.'

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71 Lachover_*Bialik, Chayav Veyitzirotav*, p. 551.

Even more explicit is the *Petichta* to Lamentations Rabbah 24. According to this *aggadah*, when the Temple was burnt, God said,

> I no longer have a dwelling place in this land; I will withdraw my *shechinah* from it and ascend to my former habitation...At that time, the Holy One Blessed Be He, wept, and said, "Woe is me! What have I done? I caused my *shechinah* to dwell below on earth for the sake of Israel but now that they have sinned, I have returned to My former habitation."

Bialik effects a transition from the vengeful God to the remorseful *shechinah*, at which time, God leaves and weeps (although the crying is not stated explicitly in the poem). But given that the *aggadah* clearly speaks of the leaving of the *shechinah* at the destruction and its weeping, Bialik very well may have had this *aggadah* in mind.

The transition from the vengeful to the remorseful God is also clearly seen in the shifting of imagery from the God who roars like a lion to the (weeping), desolate *shechinah*. As Lachover notes,

> And so we rise up, little by little, step by step, to be witnesses to God's weeping, which for all that, isn't weeping, not in front of our eyes, and also not in front of the angels' eyes- and He is not the God of our *aggadah*, who cries and pities; He was like a complete contradiction to the vengeful God, that the poet showed us in chapter one of the *Megillah*.72

Thus, by the end of chapter two, we are left with a less "terrifying" God than the God of chapter one, but not quite

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72 Ibid.,554.

the crying, compassionate God of the *aggadah*. And despite the strong aggadic basis, Bialik refuses to present God directly as weeping. This is perhaps the major change that he makes in the *aggadot*. However, he does directly lift the image of the angels weeping in chapter two, from the *aggadah* (see Lamentations Rabbah 24, and 1:23).

Although Bialik does lessen the vengefulness of God in chapter two, there is still the image of God as a roaring lion, a theme found in B.T. *Berachot* 3a. In the midst of a discussion about the proper time for reciting *kriat shema*, the rabbis make two relevant statements. One is that,

> there are three watches in the night, and the Holy One Blessed Be He sits at every watch and roars like a lion, as it is written, "The Lord roars from on high/ He makes His voice heard from His Holy dwelling; He roars aloud over His earthly abode" (Jer. 25:30).

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz remarks that the reason God roars is because of the remembrance of the *churban*. Thus, even the portrayal of God as a lion is symbolic of remorse, not revenge. Later in the *sugya*, this idea is stated more explicitly:

> At every watch God sits and roars like a lion and says: Woe for my children that on account of their sins I destroyed my house and burned my shrine and exiled them among the nations of the world.

Bialik's imagery is thus quite appropriate. As the angels of the world lament the *churban*, so does God, first by roaring (a traditional modality for expressing sadness about the

destruction) and then by the departure of the *shechinah* into hiding.

The reference to the *shechinah* is reminiscent of the *beit midrash* poems, especially *Levadi*, wherein there was a reversal of the idea that God is a strong, protecting fire with Israel in exile. But here, it seems that Bialik is staying true to the original notion from the Zohar that "whenever Israel goes into exile, *shechinah* is with them."

There is also Biblical support for the image of God roaring like a lion (see Hosea 11:10, Amos 1:2). The fact that this is a prophetic theme exposes clearly the paradox of the *churban*- on the one hand, God had no choice but to destroy the Temple because of Israel's sins, but God is nonetheless greatly distressed by the act.

It is interesting to note, then, that the contexts of Hosea and Amos in which this image is found are different. In Amos, it is used in the context of a rebuke against Israel for transgressions against God. In Hosea, it is used in the context of reconciliation:

> The Lord will roar like a lion/ And they shall march behind Him/ When He roars, His children shall come/Fluttering out of the west/ They shall flutter from Egypt like sparrows/ From the land of Assyria like doves/ And I will settle them in their homes (Hosea 11:10-11)

This again demonstrates the wrath/compassion of God, a portrayal consistent with *Megillat Ha-Esh* (wrath in chapter one and remorse in chapter two).

Chapter three tells of a young angel who saves the remnant of the holy fire and stores it for safekeeping on a desert island. The angel took the fire and touched it to his lips. This recalls the actions of the *seraph*in Isaiah 6:

> Then one of the *seraphs* flew over to me with a live coal, which he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched it to my lips and declared, "Now that this has touced your lips/ Your guilt shall depart/ And your sin be purged away."

In Isaiah, touching the fire is a purifying process. Indeed, Israel's sin lurks throughout the aggadic material on the *churban*, and perhaps Bialik intends to convey the message (like the prophets) that repentance is possible. He writes, in fact, that after the angel touched the fire to his lips, "In front of him, the morning star danced, and his heart was full of hope and solace."

Israel's return will be effected through a spiritual revival. Lachover, for one, identifies the fire as a spiritual fire, reminiscent of the "slow burning coal" of *Ha-Matmid*.73 There, this was indeed a symbol of Torah study, and it was this study that was seen by Bialik as the lifeblood of the Jewish people. And this fire (Torah) is most precious to God; God instructs the morning star, "Take

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73 Ibid.,556.

care, my daughter, of my fire. Do not let it go out, for it is the apple of my eye." The *aggadah* makes it clear that the fire (Torah) is a sign of hope of reconciliation. In Deuteronomy Rabbah 8:7, God says to Israel

> See how beloved you are to me, that no creature in my palace knows my Torah, yet I gave it to you...My children, if words of Torah are close to you, so do I call you "close." It is through Torah, as represented by the fire, that return (spiritual andl physical) will be effected.

Chapter four describes the actual exile. This description has an aggadic basis in two sources, Lamentations Rabbah 1:45 and B.T. Gittin 57b. One major change that Bialik makes is that the captives in *Megillat Ha-Esh* survive the journey, whereas in the above-mentioned sources, they drown themselves in the sea.

Central to this chapter are the two "wonder workers." One is described as a "fair youth, pale-eyed," and the other is a "man of terror." What do these mysterious figures represent? Lachover quotes Bialik himself:

> The angry looking youth is the foundation of hate...and a foundation of hatred and animosity leads to revenge. And on the contrary, the second is the symbol of love and forgiveness and together with this is the hope for the redemption of humanity.74

According to Bialik, this is representative of the Jews' "double messiah": one is the red-cloaked messiah of revenge

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74 Ibid.,558.

(which is also the modern messiah found in various freedom movements in history that boasted great Jewish participation). Bialik speaks of

> the foundation of the subversive Jew, who is in each foreign culture, into which he penetrates, sometimes he is like bubbling poison and subverts from within. 75

In this vein, he then proceeds to speak of Nordau:

> If you will recall, for example, the noise that Nordau made in his day- and he even did this openly- against all the western creative geniuses...the roar from within was the roar of theh Jewish blood and the Jewish protest.

As for the two types of messiah, Bialik explains their inclusion in the poem:

> these two youths had to symbolize these two shapes of the different ages in history...a messiah that takes revenge on all the enemies of Israel, and the opposite, a messiah that unifies everything together making world peace...indeed in the life of Israel they have been discerned as such.

These images of the messiah can be found in the aggadic literature. A militant, vengeful messiah is alluded to in *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 13:4:

> "The rain is over and gone." This refers to the subjection of Israel. "The flowers appear on earth:" The conquerers have appeared on the earth. Who are they? R. Berekiah said in the name of R. Isaac: As it is written, "And the Lord showed me four craftsmen-" namley, Elijah, the Messiah, Melchizedek and the War Messiah."

Numbers Rabbah 14:1 makes a militaristic allusion to God:

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75 Ibid.

> He made war against Pharoah, Amalek, Sisera, Senacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Haman and the Kings of the Greeks, but His mimd will not be calmed until He will Himself execute judgement against Edom.

In the *Tanhuma*, it is said,

> "When will God be made exalted in His world?"?- when He will do jusice and right among the nations of the world... and it is written, "and I saw God sitting on the throne," (Daniel 6:1). What are these thrones...one said these are the thrones of the bations which in the future the Holy One Blessed Be He will overthrow, as it is written, "I will overthrow the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the might of the kingdoms of the nations." (Haggai 2:22).

Strauss sees in the two messiahs a refernce to *mashiach ben-David* and *mashiach ben-Yosef*. The latter, in the tradition, is depicted as war-like, who will precede the true messiah, and it is only after the death of *mashiach ben-Yosef*, that *mashiach ben-David* will soon arrive. 76 The aggadic literature does indeed contain references to these two messiahs. In B.T. *Sukkah* 52b, we read:

> "And the Lord showed me four craftsmen-" Who are these four craftsmen?- R. Hana b. B Bizna citing R. Simeon Hasida replied: The messiah son of David, the messiah the son of Joseph, Elijah and the Righteous priest..

And in B.T. *Sukkah* 52a:

> Our rabbis taught, The Holy One Blessed Be he, will say to the messiah, the son of David: Ask of me anything, and I will give it to you...But when he will see that the messiah the son of Joseph is slain, he will say to Him, "Lord of the Universe, I ask of You only the gift of Life."

But, as noted above, for Bialik, these two figures represent various strands of thought and feeling in the Jewish world.

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76 Strauss, Aryeh, *Bedarchei Ha-Sifrut*,140.

In modern times, the angry looking "messiah of revenge" took the form of the Jew as s revolutionary or positively subversive force within a foreign host culture to help bring about social change.

This messiah's compassionate alter ego can be found in an *aggadah* that appears in a variety of places (J.T. *Berachot* 80b, Lamentations Rabbah 1). This *aggadah* claims that on the day of the *churban*, the messiah was born and his name is *menachem*, ("compassionate one"). Thus, the messiah is seen as having a compassionate as well as a venegful side in the *aggadah*.

This bifurcation is evident in the text of the poem itself. The man of terror says to his comrades, "Brothers, have you not forgotten the song of hate and annihilation?" But the pale-eyed youth asks, "Brothers, do you know the song of comfort and redemption?"

In chapter five, the youths arrive at a river on the third night (which is described as "all blue and starry"). According to Lachover,

> the night which is full of blue and stars in the exile, this is the night which is full of hope for freedom and liberation, and the big river, dark as pitch is from the rivers of hell.77

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77 Lachover, *Bialik, Chayav Veyitzirotav*, 561.

In support of this,he refers to the work *Reishit Hochma* by R. Eliezer Di Vidash, wherein it is written that in *gehenom*, there are "Rivers of pitch flowing and wormwood boiling."

Strauss sees the river as an erotic symbol. It represents the separation of the sexes and the desire to do away with this separation.78 Indeed, Jacobson remarks,

> It is significant that Bialik transformed the suffering of the Judean captives in the traditional legend from forced prostitution to forced separation between the sexes. By means of this transformation Bialik expresses his belief that the enemy of the Jews in modern times is not only the gentile who physically attacks the Jews but also the Jewish tradition that has mandated a separation between the sexes in religious life. This traditional separation of the sexes, he believes, is based on a misguided ideal of sacrificing the erotic for the sake of the holy and has destroyed the individual Jew's soul.79

Bialik, according to Strauss as well, wants to end this separation, and the only way to do this is through the depths of the river Abbadon. Indeed, it is there, where both sexes drown together, that they finally are reunited with each other. This recalls the story of Aristophanes, wherein it is told that in the beginning, all humans were androgynous. Then, the gods became jealous of the humans, and split them into the separate genders. Since that time, the desire to reunite with the opposite sex is a prime human motivation. There is a trace of this notion in Genesis Rabbah 5:1:

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78 Strauss, *Bedarchei Ha-Sifrut*, 138.
79 Jacobson, *Modern Midrash*, 59.

> When God created the first human, He created him as an androgynous. Thus it is written, male and female He created them and He called their names 'human', Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said: When God created the first human, two-faced He created him. He crafted two backs, a back for here, and a back for here.

But Bialik, according to Strauss, can neither solve the problem of joining with the opposite sex, nor can he dismiss it; He finds no harmony in corporeal love, only in spiritual love.80

Another prominent image is the salt which the boys find and lick (except the fair, pale-eyed youth). In B.T. *Avodah Zarah* 3b, R. Levi states:

> He who discontinues (learning) words of Torah and indulges in idle gossip will be made to eat glowing coals of juniper, as it is said, "They pluck salt wort with wormwood and the root of juniper as their food." (found with slight variation in B.T. *Hagiggah* 12b).

Lachover takes this as an indication that those boys who ate of the salt forsook Torah in pursuit of freedom, while only one of them did not. This is an allegory , perhaps, for all those East European Jews, who left Judaism behind in pursuit of the benefits of the Enlightenment, while only a few dedicated Jews remained in the fold. This, of course, is reminiscent of the poem ***Levadi***- the lone faithful Jew, remaining with the broken-winged ***shechinah***. In ***Megillat Ha-Esh***, this is symbolized by the pale-eyed youth who remained by the rock, out of the waters and the salt. He alone survived, perhaps with the implication that he survives

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80 Strauss, ***Bedarchei Ha-Sifrut***, 138-139.

poem set in the exile is that it is better to die in captivity than to forsake Torah and gain freedom, for as was made clear in *Ha-Matmid*, Torah is the lifeblood of the Jewish people. Thus, a life without Torah, is not really life.

Chapter six is a long autobiography/confession by the pale-eyed youth. He talks of how, as an orphan under the wing of a Nazirite, he saw a girl bathing in the river. He was overcome with desire, but he resisted temptation, and decided to become a *Nazir*. He goes to Jerusalem and shaves his head. An *aggadah* found in B.T.*Nedarim*9b (as well as Numbers Rabbah and elsewhere) is helpful.

> Simeon the Just said: Once in my life have I eaten of the trespass offering brought by a defiled *nazir*. On one occasion a *nazir* came from the South country, and I saw that he had beautiful eyes, was of handsome appearance, and with thick locks of hair symmetrically arranged. Said I to him: "My son, what reason did you see to destroy this beautiful hair of yours?" He replied: "I was a shepherd for my father in my town. Once I went to draw water from a well, gazed upon my reflection in the water, whereupon my evil desires rushed upon me and sought to drive me from the world (through sin). But I said to it (my lust): "Wretch! Why do you vaunt yourself in a world that is not yours, with one who is destined to become worms and dust? I swear that I will shave you off (i.e., his hair) for the sake of Heaven."

The *nazir* in *Nedarim* resisted temptation and controlled his passions. Removing one's hair is a sign that one is casting off the tangible, material pleasures of this world.81 The

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81 Ibid., 569.

off the tangible, material pleasures of this world.81 The curl of hair is juxtaposed to the "curl of fire" in the rest of the story. 82 As Lachover writes, "The *Nazir* who shaves his head is like one who sacrifices the desires of his heart, his inclination."83

This is what the *aggadah* speaks of and it is consistent with the character of the pale-eyed youth. He is the faithful one who stays behind while others lick the salt; instead he sacrifices his youth.

> In an instant, my fleece soared up to heaven in the flame of the sacrifce, and the splendor of my youth was dust and ashes- fragrance to God.

AGGADAT SHELOSHA V'ARBA'AH

Aggadat Shelosha V'Arba'ah is different from the works discussed in the previous chapters, in that it takes the form of a folk tale, and not a poem. Like the others, however, it does have a strong aggadic basis. The two versions of the story are a combination of ancient aggadic material and Bialik's more modern additions and expansions

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81 Ibid., 569.

82 Ibid., 570

83 Ibid.

of the *aggadah*. The result is a story that is aggadic in basis, but with a strong Bialik influence. Bialik himself addressed the issue of the aggadic sources of the work:

> ...I relied principally on the abbreviated *aggadah* which is brought in Buber's introduction to the earlier *Tanhuma*, and on my hypothesis that this *aggadah* grew up from the influence of the writings in Proverbs: "These three things are wonderful for me, etc." This hypothesis was confirmed for me afterwards, when I happened to hear a few additional details from my wife. According to her version, which she heard in her childhood from an old lady, also the snake obtained a place in the *aggadah* and I improved it with artistic improvement until it became a complete novel with a plot. Other sources for this *aggadah* I don't know.84

Urbach, however, takes exception to Bialik's claim that the passage from Proverbs was the inspiration for his work, since the motif of the princess in the tower is common to many cultures' folklore. 85

The underlying aggadic theme of both versions is the midrashic story about the Roman matron who unsuccessfully tries to play matchmaker with her slaves. R. Yosi tells her that "The Holy One Blessed Be He sits and matches them against their will and attaches a chain to this one's neck and brings him from one end of the world and matches to her at the other end of the world." (*Tanhuma*, introduction).

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84 Ephraim A.Urbach, "*Aggadat Shelosha V'Arba'ah, Yetzirah u' Mekorot,*" *The Magazine of the Hebrew Univesity in Jerusalem* (June 1973): 59.
85 Ibid.

The *midrash* continues with the story that appears in the first version -the story of how Solomon consults the constellations and learns that a poor boy is destined to marry his beautiful daughter. Solomon, in an effort to evade this fate, confines his daughter to a tall tower. In short, the boy is brought to her by an eagle, they marry, sign the *ketubah* with blood with the angels Michael and Gabriel as witnesses and Solomon blesses the union.

Bialik is quite faithful to the *midrash;* the basic theme remains unchanged. However, he does seem to do two things to the original *aggadah*. He tells it in an elongated, story-like manner, and he adds something to the story. Bialik tells how the king appoints his new son-in-law as his chief scribe and he gathers the king's sayings in a volume. Also, at the end of the book, he adds his own words of wisdom (really from the book of Proverbs 30:18):

> There be three things which are too wonderful for me,
> Yea, four which I know not:
> The way of an eagle in the air;
> The way of a serpent upon a rock;
> The way of ship in the midst of the sea;
> And the way of a man with a maid.

From here, of course, the title of the work is derived. But, as Urbach notes, the first version only relates to two of the four, "the way of an eagle in the air," and "the way of a man with a maid."86

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86 Ibid.,59.

There is a fundamental difference between the two versions. They both address the matter of a man and a woman coming together, but in the first, Solomon tries to circumvent the decree. In the second, he is the one trying to prove that it is God who makes the matches and that this is the accepted decree of God. 87

There is, however, a source found outside of traditional Jewish literature, which Urbach claims forms the basis for one of these two missing elements, namely, the ship. It also includes mention of the tree, which is also absent from the first version, but which figures prominently in the second version. The source is a folk tale presented in Yiddish by Immanuel Olsonger. The name of the story is "The Holy one, Blessed Be He, Matches Couples." In it, a ship departs for sea. The son of R. HaHovel gains his father's permission to go on the voyage with him. During the trip, a great storm arises and many people drown. The son manages to swim to a distant island. There, he climbs into a tree, where he finds fruit to eat. Eventually, he discovers the girl put on the island by Solomon. He finds her in a room inside of another tree, a tree visited by a rooster who brings her food.88

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87 Ibid.,63.
88 Ibid.

This could very well be the foundation for the Malchishua interlude. Here, Bialik expands greatly on the drowning ship motif, writing a whole section about Malchishua and his son in Sidon (parallel to the Rabbi and his son in the folk tale). Urbach thinks that Malchishua represents the diaspora Jew, and Sidon is perhaps representative of New York, whose Jewish community apparently impressed Bialik.89 He was especially moved by the way the New York community helped immigrants. Perhaps it is no surprise then that the Malchishua character is known for his philanthropy, providing a haven for all exiles and refugees.

The parrot plays a prominent role in the story. Solomon dispatches the parrot to bring the girl food and to revive her spirits. Urbach claims that his description of her as "...a ripe cluster of grapes on the vine, and of a sudden she found herself asking, 'when comes the grape gatherer?'" is reminsicent of Lamentations 1:15, from the lament over Jerusalem, "As in a press the Lord has trodden fair maiden Judah." It also conjures up Isaiah 63:2, "Why is your clothing so red/ Your garments like his who treads grapes?" Urbach thinks that the girl waiting for her redeemer is symbolic of the nation Israel waiting for its redemption. 90 It seems that Bialik may have reversed the meaning of the

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89 Ibid.,64.
90 Ibid.

midrash (*Lamentations Rabbah* 1:15) which says about the aforementioned verse from Lamentations:

> We find that the death of youths is considered as grievous as the destruction of the Temple; for it is written, "The Lord has trodden as in a winepress the virgin daughter of Judah," and in the same way, "He has called a solemn assembly against me to crush my young men."

In the poem, the grape imagery is used to signify one who is "ripe" for redemption, in contrast to the *midrash* and Torah, which uses it as a metaphor for the *hurban*.

Bialik's use of betrothal imagery is quite consonant with standard Jewish imagery about the divine-human relationship. Song of Songs has been allegorized by the rabbis as the love of God for Israel, and the prophet Hosea uses marriage as the metaphor to describe God's relationship with Israel. Just as the story is about the two lovers coming together, so too does traditional Jewish imagery speak of the joining of the two partners.

The parrot, which cheers the princess up, and heralds the arrival of the redeemer, is seen by Urbach as representative of all the good tidings received by Israel in the midst of oppression and persecution. 91 The words of the ninth chapter of Zecharia, which speaks of the restoration of Israel in the context of sixth century Persian rule, touches on this theme of the hope for redemption. "Rejoice

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91 Ibid.

greatly, Fair Zion/ Raise a shout, Fair Jerusalem/ Lo, your king is coming to you/ He is victorious, triumphant/ Yet humbly riding on an ass/ on a donkey foaled by a she-ass" (Zecharia 9:9). The Jerusalem Talmud (*Ta'anit* 1:1) also contains statements of hope for Israel. "But there will be morning for the righteous, and night for the wicked, morning for Israel, and night for the idolaters." And "If Israel repents for one day, forthwith the son of David will come."

Not only does the parrot's promise of redemption have aggadic basis, but so does the girl's skepticism about the redemption. In B.T. *Sanhedrin* 97b, it is written:

> "R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Jonathan: Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the end. For they would say, since the predetemined time has arrived, and yet he (i.e., the Messiah) has not yet come, he will never come. But even so, wait for him, as it is written, "Though he tarry, wait for him.'"

Likewise, in B.T. *Sanhedrin* 98a, the story of R. Joshua b. Levi is related. He asked the Messiah when he would arrive, and the Messiah told him, "today." When he saw that this did not turn out to be the case, he complained to Elijah that the Messiah had lied. Elijah answered him, "This is what he said to you: "Today, if you will hear his voice."

Indeed, Urbach sees this relationship between the parrot and the girl as paradigmatic of Israel's history-looking, hoping for redemption. He also notes, in connection with Solomon's great opening feast, that Bialik wrote the

piece in 1929. At that time, Palestine was under British rule. That is why Solomon is portrayed in the beginning of the story as alone and under "attack" by the foreign rulers. since Palestinian Jewry in 1929 was alone and surrounded by antagonistic, jealous neighbors.92 Perhaps the current political situation influenced Bialik's use of this aggadic theme- Ketziah waiting for her redeemer, as the *Yishuv* in Palestine hoped for their "redemption." While this interpretation is intriguing, it seems rather difficult to substantiate, lacking confirmation by Bialik himself. Redemption is such a prominent theme in Bialik's writing, that the situation of the *yishuv* in Palestine hardly seems a necessary inspiration for this work.

Not only Ketziah but her future spouse, Nathania, provides some insight into Bialik's use of *aggadah*. He is found on the island inside the animal carcass, and she is in the tower. This may be reminiscent of the *Mechilta*'s comment on Exodus 14:13, when the Egyptians are closing in on the Israelites at the sea during their escape from Egypt:93

> But Moses said to the people, "Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again!

The *midrash* reads:

> To what may Israel have been comapred at that time? To a dove that fled because of the hawk, and went into the crevice of the rock, and there was a

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92 Ibid.,62.
93 Ibid.,65.

> snake that stung it; if she goes in, behold there is the snake, and if she goes outside, behold there is the hawk; such was Israel to be compared at that time; about them it is interpreted in the tradition: "My dove in the cranny of the rock" (Song Of Songs, 2:14).

If indeed Bialik had this particular *midrash* in mind, it would be most fitting. The text which it interprets is indeed a "redemption" text, a text which speaks of God's deliverance of our people through human agency. Thus, both the human and divine involvement in redemption are at work in the *midrash* as they are in the story. It is Nathania who redeems Ketziah, but it is also an allegory for God's redemption of Israel. Further, Nathania is actually an instrument in proving Solomon's statement that it is God who matches couples. Although it is God's will, it still falls to human beings to effect the actual redemption. That is evident in the text of Exodus itself, when God says to Moses at this critical juncture at the sea, "Why do you cry out to Me?" (Exodus 14:15). God then instructs Moses to use his rod to split the sea. Thereby, Moses makes a human contribution to the divine redemption, much as Nathania's efforts contribute to the fulfillment of God's plan.

In fact, the basic motif of the entire story, matchmaking, is connected in the *midrash* with redemption. In *Tanhuma Buber* 16, we read that God intentionally matched Yocheved with Amram so that there would emerge from among their children a redeemer for Israel.94

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94 Ibid.,67.

The snake is an important motif with an aggadic basis. The snake is transformed from an enemy who steals the emerald into a friend who helps Nathania reach the top of the tower. Urbach notes that there are not many references in the aggadic literature to the snake as a redeemer, but Shabbetai Tzvi did mention a "crooked snake" in connection with redemption, "because the snake in gematria is *Mashiach*."95

The theme of the snake as a friend is found in Genesis Rabbah 54:1, commenting on the verse in Proverbs, "when the Lord is pleased with a man's conduct/ He may turn even his enemies into allies," R. Samuel said, "This is the snake." The *midrash* proceeds to tell of a snake who enters a house, eats a bowl of garlic and spits his venom into the bowl. When he leaves, the snake of the house comes and fills the bowl with dirt (so that no one would eat it).

Urbach further notes that the snake has been described in *Midrash Ahavah* as the "staff of kingship, staff of strength and might." This is reminiscent of Exodus Rabbah 9:2:

> "The Holy One, Blessed Be He, does not castigate the wicked except with a staff. The Holy One Blessed Be He said to them (presumably Moses and

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95 Ibid.

> Aaron): Pharoah is evil, if he says to you, 'give me proof,' hit him with the staff."96

Indeed, in the Exodus stories, the staff is instrumental in effecting redemption, as we have seen. The *midrash* quoted above refers to the use of the staff in Pharoah's court. It is also used to "activate" the plagues. Thus, the rod plays a major part in the redemption of Israel. The snake, which has been identified with the staff, plays a similar role in helping bring about the redemption of Ketziah.

The ruby Urbach believes, is representative of *k'nesset yisrael*, and the boy is the redeemer. Thus Nathania chases the ruby, just as the redeemer looks for his people in order to redeem them. In Urbach's words,

> The youth Nathania who changes from being simply the mate to the redeemer, who is destined to bring redemption to the girl and not just to her but to his people, goes to the light of the gem -it is the inheritance, it is the precious treasure and the wonderful inheritance that was given to him by his mother- *k'nesset yisrael*. 97

He notes that the ruby is one of the stones on the breastplate of the High Priest (Exodus 28:17 and 39:10); and is identified in the *aggadah* as the stone of Levi.98

There is a poignant image at the end of the story. On the eighth day of the wedding feast, Nathania delivers his mother's emerald to the Temple, and Ketziah brings her gift from Solomon, also an emerald. Bialik writes that "these two

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96 Ibid.,67.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.

emeralds are like the two tears of God, with which God shows compassion to people, the tear of sorrow and the tear of joy." In B.T. *Berachot* 59a, we read,

> When the Holy One Blessed Be He remembers His children living in distress among the nations of the world, two tears drop in the great sea, and their voice is heard from one end of the world to the other.

Urbach is positive that Bialik knew this image and used it. 99 It seems that despite the happy ending, despite Solomon's wisdom, Nathaniah's bravery, and Ketziah's steadfastness, God remembers those who are in misery, and those who are not so fortunate. Every happy moment is saddened when brethren are in dire straits.

Mention should be made of two articles that approach *Aggadat Shelosha V'Arba'ah* differently than Urbach. Urbach's article was the primary source for this chapter because he approaches the work "aggadically," that is, he uncovers the aggaadic underpinnings of the story. Since that is the approach of this paper, his article was the main refernce for this chapter.

Dan Miron, in *Hearot L' Aggadat Shelosha V'Arab'ah*, and Avraham Marthon's *HaKesher Bein 'Megillat Ha-Esh V'Aggadat Shelsoha V'arba'ah,"* take a psychological approach to the story. Miron notes that the "damsel in distress" or "sleeping beauty" motif is prevalent in Arabic and Hebrew

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99 Ibid.,69.

literature, and the basic principle underlying these stories is the change in the life of the princess as she reaches maturity.100 As he describes it,

> This *aggadah* describes...the great crisis that comes to the girl's world, from the leaping from the harmony of the childhood family world of life in the shadow of the parents until her return to the harmony of the mature family world (married life).101

Marthan agrees with Miron's interpretation and suggests some erotic readings of the story. For example, the foreign girl is an erotic symbol. He explains this with reference to Bialik's childhood in the *yeshiva*, when he was cut off from love and nature. Thus, love is "foreign" to Bialik.102 In addition, Israel is emblematic of the spirit, and the gentiles represent nature. In order for there to be peace between Israel and the nations there must be a "marriage" between the two. There must be a mixture of the spiritual and the sensual, the heavenly and the earthly, and male and female.103 Indeed, Marthan claims that all the tragedies of the Jews in the diaspora are preceived in erotic terms by Bialik.104

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100 Dan Miron, *Hearot L'Aggadat Shelosha V'Arba'ah*, in *Bialik, Yetzirato Lesugeha Bir'i HaBikoret*, Gershon Shaked, ed. (Jerusalem: *Mosad Bialik*, 1974), 377.
101 Ibid., 379.
102 Avraham Marthan," *HaKesher Bein "Megillat Ha-Esh" V "Aggadat Shelosha V'Arba'ah"*, *Gratz College Annual* (1986): 18.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.,23.

While Miron and Marthan propose interesting interpretations, they seem to go well beyond the meaning of the text. If this is a work about the maturation process, why doesn't Bialik devote space to a description of the girl's thoughts and feelings as she matures? Indeed, we do not learn very much about the type of people the protagonists are. Bialik basically describes what they do, but offers little, if any, insight into their psychological development. How can the story be about leaving the parental world, when we are not told anything about the girl's childhood? Similarly, the erotic interpetations seem much more appropriate for *Megillat Ha-Esh*, where issues of love, sensuality and maturation play a prominent part. Urbach's reading of the text as an allegory for national redemption and revival seems much more fitting.

EPILOGUE

Having treated at some length Bialik's use of *aggadah* in his poetry, it might be useful to briefly examine his overall view of aggadic literature. We will see that a consistent picture does not necessarily emerge.

In *Halacha va-Aggadah*, Bialik makes a rather interesting argument in favor of *halacha*. Aberbach theorizes that the urgency characteristic of the essay may be

connected to the increasing pressures of war (the Russian revolution was in the offing) and the huge refugee problem stemming from the eastward migration of Jews in the Russian empire. 105 In addition, Spiegel postulates that *Halacha va-Aggadah* is reflective of the poet's feelings during his period of silence. At this time (1915) when the Jews were struggling for survival, he despaired of art for art's sake. 106 The time had come for imperatives and obligations and not just sentiment. As Spiegel describes it:

> Bialik truly bent his back under the yoke of ordinances. He felt that he had been born for the hour of reconstruction, and must follow in the path of Haggai, Zecharia and Ezra. He recognized that he had to apply himself to the realities and necessities of our new life. He performed the everyday useful work of the Halakha. He gathered up the treasures of past Jewish generations; he strangled his own talents in order to recuscitate the ancient treasures of his people.107

Thus, Bialik dedicated himself to the education of the new generation, for they had to be exposed to the finest aspects of the Jewish spirit, and these literary treasures had to be presented in suitable form. Thus, he abandoned his true avocation to do work that could have been done by others, for he felt that therein lay the future of the Jewish people. 108

In his essay, Bialik expands the traditional categories of *halacha* and *aggadah* into cultural categories.

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105 Aberbach, *Bialik*, 10.
106 Spiegel, *Hebrew Reborn*, 309.
107 Ibid.,311.
108 Ibid.

As Pinchas Ginosar points out, *halacha* and *aggadah* are not just literary designations. 109 Ginosar claims that four-fifths of the essay is dedicated to *halacha* and *aggadah* in life, while one-fifth refers to *halacha* and *aggadah* in literature. 110 As Ginosar understands it, *halacha* and *aggadah* represent the static and the dynamic in life. For Bialik, *aggadah* is the dynamic component- the spirit, the ideas, which are reflected in the beauty of the literature. *Halacha* represents the rules of behavior, reflected in law codes. 111 But the two are not diametrically opposed. *Halacha* are like the laws that our tradition characterizes as *bein adam l'havero*, laws based on compassion, and on the sense that justice is innate in the heart of the people. *Halacha* is shaped and inspired by *aggadah*. But Bialik feels that there is a need to crystallize clear obligations that people will shoulder- we cannot live on our desires and aspirations alone. 112

Bialik seems to believe that *aggadah* alone is not enough. *Halacha* is the crystallization of *aggadah*, the "ultimate and inevitable quintessence of *aggadah*."113

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109 Pinchas Ginosar, "*Halacha V'Aggadah* of Bialik and Brenner's Reaction," *Eton* 77 (June-July 1984): 28.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
113 Sir Leon Simon, trans., *Halacha V'Aggadah*, (London: Education Department of the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland, 1944), 9.

Aggadah must inevitably lead to the formation of *halachot*, which in turn will spawn new *aggadot*. As Bialik puts it,

> In fact, I would be surprised if there were a single *halacha* without some spark of heavenly fire, without its roots in some lofty idea, whether individual, social, or national. For after all, *halacha* is but one of the forms in which the creative spirit of man clothes itself.114

Indeed, *aggadah* is valuable only insofar as it spawns *halacha*. *Halacha* has great value and is to be considered literature insofar as it lends us insight into the nation of Israel. A *halacha* is not to be studied for its details alone, but for what lies beneath it. Thus, Bialik brings the example of the *mishnah* which discusses saving holy writings from fire, and the attendant debate as to whether translations of books are included in that category. What this seemingly trivial matter is indicative of is the nation's historical and psychological attitude towards the national language and literature. Despite his ringing endorsement of *halacha*, Bialik does not seem to be taking quite the rigid "Orthodox" approach to Jewish law, which might dictate that one simply follows the law- and that its observance is an end in and of itself. While making the case for the necessity of observance, Bialik seems to approach *halalcha* "aggadically." That is to say, we can learn much about the people Israel through the study of law, since it offers us insight into the issues and dilemmas faced by our

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114 Ibid.,17.

people over time. Law, just like legend, can fill us with a sense of the worldview and values of the Jewish people.

Halacha's ultimate advantage is that it is a course of action. A life that is all *aggadah* is not desirable because it does not require people to act. This is made clear by his quotation (suggested to him by Ahad Ha'am) of the *mishnah*

> If a man studies as he walks, and breaks off his study to say, 'How lovely is this tree! How lovely is this field!'- Scripture regards him as guilty of deadly sin.

For Bialik, this statement is indicative of the Halachist's fear that the study and observance of the *Torah* will be abrogated, by the Jew's affection for the diaspora. The law is the lifeline of the Jewish people, especially in the diaspora. He states quite clearly, "What we need is to have duties imposed upon us!" 115

David Stern, in his introduction to the English translation of *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, also writes of Bialik's view of *aggadah*. He claims that whereas for the rabbis, *aggadah* was a way of understanding the Torah, for Bialik it was a way of discerning the Jewish people's worldview and perspective on life. 116 *Aggadah* is the key to Jewish uniqueness for Bialik- collecting the dispersed *aggadot* was a way of restoring the Jewish people themselves. The Jewish

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115 Ibid.,28.
116 William Braude, trans., *The Book of Legends_Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, (New York: Schoken Books, 1992), xix.

national genius is in the literary past and it must be recovered to ensure the future of that genius. 117

Stern postulates that just as the *midrash* enabled the rabbis to remake Judaism by creating a timeless, mythic realm in which their values, beliefs, dreams, anguish, etc. could take shape, so did ***aggadah*** allow Bialik to remake Judaism in his time. His time was marked by a loss of faith, and a collapse of the traditional structures and tenets of Jewish belief, and the feeling of the security of existence provided by these religious structures. *Aggadah* was a surrogate for the traditional faith. 118 As a repository of the cultural heritage, "*aggadah* was the national genius." 119

Further, Stern contends that Bialik viewed *aggadah* as literature, and not as real folklore. The fragments of *aggadah* which he collected in *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* were, in Bialik's opinion, parts of an epic literature of the Jewish people. His goal in compiling the book was to rebuild that epic literature.

Saperstein makes a distinction between true *aggadah* as defined by Berditchewski and homiletical/exegetical material. For Berditchewski, "the more purely literary and

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117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.,xxi.
119 Ibid.

narrative aspects represent the essential characteristics of the *Haggadah*." 120 He is concerned rather with the *Aggadah* as the storehouse of Jewish legends and folk tales. 121 Thus, according to Saperstein, Berditchewski and Bialik have opposing views about what *aggadah* really is. ***Sefer Ha-Aggadah*** treats as *aggadah* anything that is not halachic, and stresses the ideas and concepts of the legends as opposed to their literary value.

Perhaps Bialik himself best captures his thoughts on *aggadah* in his poem ***El Ha-Aggadah***. *Aggadah* is portayed here as his refuge, a place where his soul can find rest. He compares *aggadah* to the violin (***kinor***) of old. The violin enabled David and Solomon to see God. It was the musicians who "knew the heart of their people." But now "I will take *aggadah* as a violin- In you I will cry the humility of my people. In it I will sing consolations. I will play- and you will be my comfort."

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120 Harold I. Saperstein, "Studies in the *Haggadah* of Berditchewski," (Rabbinic thesis, Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, 1935), 57.

121 Ibid.

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APPENDIX

Selection of original Hebrew texts quoted in English in the thesis.

ישנו בית אחד ישן אחד
גם בבית ההוא חלונות בתוך
כלי אין — כי אם אבן אחד אל־יסוד אחד:
בבית הזאת גר הנשוף הגדול

כאשר בראש — ונלכדתי אחיך
על מזבח אחאב בבקר הקדוש
ויהוא אל־תוך הארמון הלך —
מגורות מגורות ושבוי הכתף הלוך
לחצי אל־מה מגורות מגורות
בחוץ, אל־מה מגורות מגורות
בטוחי ישראל לנוח שלו בעיני
ולכן אחיך מלוכד אינך נגוע

(3)

ישחיטו מחנה אשר יבוא
ובאין מחנה מחנה אשר יבוא
עם כתי בחרבי בשוב לחמי
בחמתי אל־תחנו — אם יחנו בחרבי

(2)

כוכ אחיך יאמין בשוב יבוא —
ישחט — אשר לכאן־ ישלח את בשרו
אל אשר הא־ם ישמיעו בשרו —
הארור יאכלנו, ואיש ציד ישחטנו
אחיו אחר — אל אחיו לחלוק אחריו:
אם־יש לחמי אחיו ישלח
את אחיו מחנה מחנה, מחנה אחיו
את אחיו בי אחיו ישלח יבוא לבו,
בחמתי בי ישחטנו אחיו בשרו
"אחיך, אל אל־יאמין את אשר ישוב —

(4)

בחמתי בחרב אל־תחנו בי אחיו:
בי אחי הם בחמתי ישוב בחמתי
בישראל אחיו אל־תחנו בשרו:

(1)

ישנו בית אחד ישן אחד
גם בבית ההוא חלונות בתוך
כלי אין — כי אם אבן אחד אל־יסוד אחד:
בבית הזאת גר הנשוף הגדול

(H)

ישבתם בו ישחטו:
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא

(E)

בחמתי בי אחיו — אחיו אחיו:

(D)

אל־תחנו בי אחיו בשרו אחיו
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא

(C)

אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא

(B)

אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא
אל־אחיו אל־יבוא אל־אחיו אל־יבוא

(A)