HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
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REPORT ON THE THESIS OF WILLIAM KLONER

SUBJECT: Micah Joseph Lebensohn, The Poet and His Songs

This thesis is a study of the literary achievement of Micah Joseph Lebensohn (1828-1852), a leading poet of the Vilna School. It consists of 1) a biographical sketch of the author, 2) two chapters dealing respectively with the two volumes of poetry which the author produced (Shirai Bat Zion and Kinor Bat Zion), and 3) concluding with an evaluation of the poet's ideas and the influence which he exerted upon subsequent generations.

Mr. Kloner has not completely depended upon the standard works for his biographical data. He supplies us with a translation of substantial parts of Lebensohn's correspondence with his contemporaries. These translations retain the flavor of the Haskallah's melitzah, at times at the expense of correct English diction. I believe that they could be somewhat improved without destroying the effect.

His treatment of Lebensohn's two volumes of poetry is descriptive rather than critical. In his evaluations he relies rather heavily upon the standard works of Lachower, Klausner and Waxman. Nonetheless, his handling of his materials indicates a thorough familiarity with all the literature and a very good sense of discrimination. His discussion of the problem of Lebensohn's pantheism is well done and is a contribution to the understanding of the poet. It should also be noted that Mr. Kloner often cites the poems by giving only his translation of the Hebrew title. He should give the original Hebrew in paranthesis.

Because this is the most thorough treatment of Lebensohn which has thus been done in English, and because the presentation is competent, the thesis is quite acceptable. Mr. Kloner should rework portions of his thesis, in the light of some of the suggestions made to him by members of the faculty.

Dr. Ezra Spicehandler

May, 1954

Micah Joseph Lebensohn

The Poet and His Songs

by

William Kloner

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Foreword

The life and works of the poet, Micah Joseph Lebensohn, could be represented in three words; a cry, a prayer, and a song.

A cry is found throughout his verse which expresses a passion for life, and the anguish of approaching death. In the first chapter there is an attempt to bring to the reader the effects of the poet's illness and the other influences on his works.

A note of prayer is heard in Michal's musical lines which sing of love for his people, for God and the land of Israel. A creative portion of the thesis lies in the second chapter where the romantic tunes of Michal are presented in the English idiom.

By mingling in harmony the voices of Israel's past with the echoes of all mankind, Michal composes the song of Jewish survival in the modern world.

The third chapter of this thesis deals with the ideas and the consequent influence of the young lover

of Zion.

I wish to express my indebtedness to my teacher Dr. Ezra Spicehandler who was my advisor throughout the many months I have been engaged in this study. In addition to his patient guidance, it was he who foresaw my interest in the poetic figure of young Michal.

A final word of thanks to Mrs. Mildred White for her kind assistance in the typing of the manuscript.

William Kloner

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Chapter I

Biography and Influences

Micah Joseph Lebensohn was born in Vilna, Russia February 22, 1828; died there February 17, 1852.[1] His father, the poet, Adam Hakohen Lebensohn, implanted within his son a love for Hebrew and general education at an early age. In cheder, and afterwards from private teachers, M. Lebensohn learned Bible, Hebrew grammer, and Talmud, subjects which were dear to his father.[2] He acquired very soon a broad knowledge in German and Polish ~~for~~, ~~a~~t the age of thirteen, Lebensohn was already translating Schiller's poetry into Hebrew.[3]

The natural and free style, which later was to stamp his poetry as unique and fresh,[4] was largely due to his early training. Unlike almost all the other Hebrew writers of his day, Lebensohn was permitted to read Haskalah literature and to learn foreign languages without opposition of parents or teachers; indeed, and this is important, what is also important, he had direction and encouragement in these studies. Thus he was free of the mental conflict and anguish engendered by the suppression of secular education.[5] Gordon's aphorisms,

such as, "Be a Jew in your tent and a man abroad",[6] could never have been penned by M. Lebensohn, because Judaism and humanity were not mutually exclusive but rather combined.[7] This broad education given to the young poet by his father, Adam Hakohen, is not surprising when we recognize that the elder Lebensohn was the first of the new school of poets, influenced by Mordecai Aaron Gunzburg,[8] (1795-1846)[9] who in his autobiographical sketch, "Abiezer", gave a clear picture of the old-fashioned manners and customs of his generation which had such a pernicious effect on the education of Jewish children both at school and in the home.[10]

Adam Hakohen Lebensohn, (1794-1878)[11] was greatly influenced by Gunzburg's new school of thought, which in contrast to Isaac Dov Levinsohn's (1788-1860)[12] defensive approach for the dissemination of Haskalah,[13] advocated an aggressive new Hebrew literature, which would serve not merely as a means of spreading Haskalah, but as a national possession for the Jewish people.[14] Adam Hakohen Lebensohn was a born poet who thought deeply and felt keenly, but unlike his son, he lacked a broad intellectual background.[15] The older Lebensohn spent his entire life in the narrow milieu

of the elementary teacher and petty trader.[16] He was well past his youth when he became acquainted with general literature; thus his latent aesthetic sense was overlaid by years spent in the study of dry religious literature.[17] Being unable for the most part to shake off the habit of casuistry and pilpul, A. Lebensohn found most of his themes in the realm of abstract philosophico-poetical questions.[18] Although Gunzburg had called for the rejuvenating influence of a new "melodious burst" of poetry which once flowed from the Jewish heart in olden times and during the Spanish period,[19] it remained for Adam Hakohen's son, Micah Joseph, to bring back the fire of emotion and naturalness to Hebrew poetry[20] which had been cold for over three hundred years.[21]

By the time Micah Joseph Lebensohn was seventeen, he has already written the poem, Ha-achvah (brotherhood) a poem which gave evidence of a great developing poetic talent.[22] At nineteen, Lebensohn translated part of Virgil's Aeneid from Schiller's German translation which he called "The Destruction of Troy".[23] Although Lebensohn was drawn to the lofty and the beautiful, he was also moved by the wonder of human intellect and reason. In

one of his very first poems he waxes enthusiastic like his father,[24] contemplating the wonders of the human mind[25] which can "know the future which still lies in darkness - in time still unborn - in days not yet created." From this he goes on to the wonders of science in general which is only a reflection of boundless human intellectual powers. The human mind can, "place in order the stars on high - to count the array of the heavenly hosts, to know the ordinances of cold, heat, light and darkness - to forcast the ways of the sun."[26]

At the age of twenty, Lebensohn translated the drama "Saul" by Vitorio Alfieri. All that is extant is the first Act, first scene, which is a free translation of the Italian original, also the third act, fourth scene. Lebensohn did not necessarily work from the Italian, for he might have used as his text a German translation.[27]

M. Lebensohn inherited tuberculosis from his father. We do not know exactly when he began to suffer from this illness, but we do know that in a letter to his closest friend, Kalman Shulman, in 1847 at the age of nineteen, he

speaks in depressed and morbid terms about his illness which he knows will lead him to an early and unwelcomed death.[28]

The following is the letter written to Kalman Shulman on April 24, 1847:[29]

"Here I sit alone in the middle of the night; everybody is sleeping but I am awake. My eyes are robbed of sleep. My illness does not give me any rest even in the night time. This illness tightens its saddle upon me and leads me quickly to the king of terrors, because it refuses to be healed. The doctor's advice is rendered foolish. All their wisdom seems stupid. They can not bring healing, but only ~~lengthens~~ prolong ~~or extends~~ my sickness, without avail. And I have already despaired of life, and I am prepared to die. But why does it move so lazily? Why doesn't it make wings for itself?

" Oh, the most loathsome creature in the world is man. All the days that he passes over the shaking bridge of life, he is the most miserable cursed of all that is born. And all existence rises up against him - and even death, the last and fearful consolation, He ~~it~~ too

is cruel. Oh, my bones tremble. There await those who are wearied, walking bent under the burden of old age and sickness. Their eyes grow dim waiting for him. They even stretch out their hand to him, but he passes by without understanding them, and does not raise his scythe to harvest a dry plant.

" This is the portion of man who goes lost in all of existence. AND what is existence? A cloud that journies on the wings of stormy winds, pregnant with wails, laden with sighs, full of tears and blood. This journey of the clouds, — the eye of no man has seen its beginning or end. It travels from days everlasting, from an unseem place on a hidden road toward a concealed and sealed goal.

" At times the lightning increases under the rain of the clouds. After it, roars the thunder. A ~~group~~ mass of clouds moves a bit, but one ~~from~~ of this group is missing. ~~Without paying any attention~~ UNCONCERNED the clouds move onward, until the lightning increases a second time. But where have the wings of my imagination carried me? What do I care for the whole mass if I am the cloud that is WILL SOON BE quickly separated from the group?

" From the top of the tower, the sound of the bell

STRIKES TWELVE
is heard two times. I am still awake. Also my sickness does not sleep within me. As this dim candle goes out before my eyes, licking the rest of the oil around it, growing dark, so does the candle of my soul flicker ~~also.~~

" I am prepared to leave the world, to go down to the grave in the midst of my days, to leave my father and mother, my brother and my sisters, my friends and companions. My father is the grave, my mother the worm, my brother is death, and my friends are the grave.

" I see myself lying on the death bed, the sound of crying moans about me. My parents cry out, my brother and sisters wail, and my friends weep and sigh. I see myself going down and ~~lying~~ in the grave. Above me I hear the footsteps of the grave digger, and a very fearful cry shrieks above me. My eyes see the last glance that my parents cast upon me as they lay me all alone in the arms of terrible eternity. I see my hand that is now writing become worm eaten. I see my heart become rotten and my skull ~~is~~ food for the worms. Oh, how fearful is death, and how pleasant is life. I always imagined that I was prepared to die,

but in the midst of my youth, to die at 19! Oh my heart is still full of the desire for life. The light of the sun is still dear to me. I still desire to ~~extract~~ suckle and to enjoy the abundance of the earth's fullness. My spirit still ~~speaks out and flies~~ spreads its wings soaring over the endless expanses. Oh life, life, I wanted life!... Have I indeed wanted? Do Behold even now my hand grows weak and my bones waste away. Life's matter burns and boils. My veins rush and my breath grows short. Now do I see death. Oh death draws closer to me, and will come in another few days.

Death - woe is me - how all my ideas have gone astray, and my meditations have ended and ceased. All the thoughts of my heart have died within me and in my soul there rules silence and deep darkness of the Shadows. The Present and the Future ~~set~~ in array before my eyes terrifying pictures. Frightful images, scenes of death and the grave, rotting, and the worm,.. but from ~~among~~ the very midst these frightful terrors there appears a dear picture before my eyes, which lights up for me the fearful darkness around, and scatters these shadows of death from before my eyes.

Is it your picture Shulman; is it your picture which is dearer to me than all the world? You have I remembered, my soul's beloved, and I was consoled. Let, even my body, machinery be destroyed if only our love will not die nor be moved, for is it not immortal? Live then and succeed in this world which I am leaving, and only this do I ask of you my everlasting friend, that with my death that I should not die in your heart too? When my body rots in the grave, let not my ~~heart~~ name rot in your memory. Remember, ~~He who loved you~~ ~~(your loving friend)~~ your ~~forever."~~ dear friend whose (great) love is everlasting."

From this letter it is probably safe to assume that the poet's sickness had already revealed itself by the time he had written his first poem. Thus, both his sickness and art ripened together.[30]

In 1846, M. Lebensohn and his father went to a summer place located in the mountains outside of Vilna, but when his condition deteriorated in 1847,[31] he began to be treated by the physicians in Vilna who finally advised the poet to seek a cure in Berlin and at the German Spas such as Salzbrun and Reinarz.[32] Upon his return to Berlin from Reinarz, Lebensohn fell sick

again with the advent of the cold weather. He then decided to return to Vilna.[33]

This journey to Germany was the greatest event in the young poet's life. It is conceivable that his hunger for learning, coupled with his endless thirst for reading and writing, kept sapping his energies thus preventing a cure.[34] Senior Sachs states in a letter, "He came to Berlin to seek out doctors and he was not healed because he sought wisdom much more than doctors. As soon as he came to Berlin he forgot the purpose of his coming as if his aim was only to perfect himself further in the craft of poetry and wisdom in the Athens of Germany, and not to occupy himself in the healing of his weak body..... Also philosophy attracted him very much, and he loved dearly the theories of Plato, Spinoza, Schelling, and Hegel. These studies exhausted his remaining strength and he returned to his parents in Vilna in a worse condition than when he came to Berlin. The book, Shirai Bat Zion, he composed in Berlin in the nights of a single winter."[35]

The influence of Senior Sachs, with whom the young poet lived while in Berlin, was probably the

greatest molding force in Lebensohn's intellectual development aside from that of his own father.[36]

In a letter to Sachs from Reinarz, we learn that it was Sachs who planted the love for philosophy in Lebensohn's heart. The poet's concern for his father is very evident from his plea to Sachs to write an article about his father for one of the magazines.

It seems that M. Lebensohn was quite lonely in Reinarz. He writes that he was all alone and could not get himself to become friendly with the "stupid Germans". In the same letter he exhibits a lively interest in the events of the day, both political and cultural. Thus he asks for news, to be informed on political news. He expresses his longing for the evening Post. He asks about the current events in France, and he wishes to know about the new development in the Berlin theatre. It is interesting that from time to time, he breaks into German.[37] "Neither the tears of my eyes nor the lines of my pen can describe to you my soul's tumult when it calls to mind the autumn nights when the nights passed like hours and the hours like moments, when our searching hearts studied and

meditated upon all that exists in the world. Then you planted within my heart ~~the~~ a love ~~of~~ for philosophy, an eternal love that will not ~~die~~ cease while there is yet the breath of life within me.... Here I am all alone like a dead man in the grave, for you know how worthless I am, and I am not so friendly a person as to strike up acquaintances with stupid Germans, lacking in mind and spirit, therefore all ~~by myself~~ alone do I survey all the beauties of summer here.....

And now let me remind you of the article for my father. Woe is me if you have stopped writing it. Arise this one time in your life and overcome your laziness. In his letter that I received just two days ago, my father continues to speak to me of it, and what shall I do? Should not shame break my heart, that I did not do such a small thing for my father?.... Please answer me quickly, collect of course. [Sachs was extremely poor, and he could not afford the stamps for a letter]. Let me know the political news. Is everything all right with the evening Post? How my soul longs to read these newspapers. What is new in France?.....Let me know what is new in Berlin and in the theatres, since you can ascertain from the theatre

notices which famous plays were presented. Will Rachael come soon -- (Rachael Felix) and does the terrible ~~t. still dare to~~ play leading roles?

P.S. I forgot a French dictionary. Do you have it?"

The close relationship which existed between the young poet and Senior Sachs in Berlin is brought to light by M. Lebensohn's correspondence with Sachs upon his return to Vilna.

In his second letter[38] to Sachs, Lebensohn writes that he has received his letter, which is full of bitterness. He says that he will not attempt to justify himself, to prove the love that Sachs had despised, because he, Lebensohn, also has his pride. He can not understand Sach's logic, which insists that if you do not hate my enemy, (in this case Boehmer) you can not love me. The poet imagines that perhaps Sachs is so bitter because of his own difficult situation. However, Lebensohn reminds him that although he himself is even more unfortunate, he does not turn against his friends. Lebensohn promises, nevertheless, to distribute in Vilna and throughout Russia, Ha-ti-chi-ya, (Renaissance), a scientific collection,

published by Senior Sachs. And as final and complete proof of his fidelity, the poet tells Sachs that "Boehmer" had offered to list him as an editor of articles by Zunz, Luzzatto, and others, if he would help secure articles and support in Vilna. In spite of this great temptation, Lebensohn refused so that Sachs might be able to edit a work of this kind, and benefit thereby. Moreover, Lebensohn states that Boehmer did not thereupon hate him for turning down such an offer for the sake of a competitor like Sachs. Lebensohn insists that his religion is justice which he will always love. That the days to come would prove his uprightness. He concludes by saying that if they could not be friends, then let their relationship be that of two writers who respect and appreciate one another. In this regard Lebensohn tells Sachs that, Sachs will not have to be ashamed of him, because he hopes to create great things during the coming winter. He mentions having finished his poem "Yehuda Halevi" as well as his introduction to Shirai Zion.

"Today I received your letter full of bitterness and poison. I read it and swallowed your venom like water. My soul has long been sated with much bitterness, so let this also be for good..... Jealousy and envy have blinded you, have hardened your heart, and have hidden all feeling of love and friendship within you. Cursed be he who writes that jealousy of scribes increases wisdom; every trouble and strait, every evil and lie comes from it!..... When I recall in what a plight you are, alas, and that perhaps only out of a bitter heart have you spoken until now, how shall I not forgive you? Even though I am more unfortunate than you, crouching in the midst of the spring of my youth under the burden of an incurable sickness, strong as death which like a stormy wind undermines and blasts all the hope of my youth, the plans of my life.... But why shall I speak so much, when it will only make me worse in your sight, since not hating Boehmer, how can I love Sachs?

But I will say this, altho you do not consider me a good friend, I will do for you everything that one friend can do for another.... When the Tehiah (scientific work published by Senior Sachs, of which two volumes appeared) will be completed, send it to me in Vilna....

Send two hundred at first, but since I will send them all over Russia, I will write to our agents to do all in their power to sell many copies. And thus will I do with all your books, and all that you write to me and place upon me.

As God lives I will serve you joyfully altho not as a friend, for how can I be your friend if I am not Boehmer's enemy? I am also happy that I can spread your name and fame from one end of Russia to the other, and thus I will do as I have done until now for I have not mentioned your name without blessing and praising you. Even in the presence of your foe and enemy, Boehmer, by the dear life of my father and by the lives of Schulman and Kaplan who are dearer to me than all else on earth, even in his presence I spoke well of you, praising your work and your character. But how can you believe me if I do not hate Boehmer? And if you would shake off a bit of your laziness, I could help you at home with regard to a Hebrew Yearbook (Polen ~~collection~~ which I hope would do you more good than all your books and you could earn a great deal from it. If you would only attempt it, you could perhaps

live from it alone. And altho Böehmer came to me before I left and said that he was thinking of publishing scholarly articles under the name of the New Kerem Hemed, and that Zunz already promised to give him an article, that he will also get some from S. D. Luzatto and many other scholars, that he also has the money to print it quickly, that if I would only help him in Vilna so that the scholars of Vilna would send him articles and money, and if I would only promise to circulate them (articles) in Russia, he would be prepared to print my name as participating in their publication. Imagine how much honor this would bring me to be known as a publisher of the letters of Zunz, Luzatto, Regguo? You should know that, although I ~~do not~~ are not a show-off make much of myself, nevertheless, I am proud; and if I do not pursue honor yet do I like honor very much. However, I forewent this honor for which I longed more than for life itself. I forewent it because I imagined that it would help you.....

And I swear by God that I have held fast to righteousness and I will not let go of it, although,

I do not deceive myself to believe I am bound to go to the stake for my people and God. No! If they were to frighten me with the slightest pain, I would give up the name of my God. And if they intended to afflict me for a moment, I would kneel to a block of wood and bow down to an idol. My heart is bare and there is no cover for my thoughts. As I am, so do I appear. I know it is foolish in man to suffer for the faith. I have no religion! My brother - humanity! The world my fatherland! My religion is righteousness and God knows if I am able to make sacrifices for my friends and for his righteousness. However, to bring sacrifices for religion is stupid, lowly, and senseless, and found only among wild savages who knew no mercy. If you write to me that you would sacrifice your life for faith, I would not believe you. It is agreed that whoever is capable of sacrificing himself for his religion is also capable of sacrificing others for it. This is necessarily so and most logical; more so than your logic, for I will love righteousness forever. Not the kind of righteousness that is to be found in novels and in pastoral songs, but the practical and possible righteousness. The days to come will testify to my

righteousness, and purity of heart. Perhaps then you will regret despising your friend's love. If we can not be friends then let us from this day forward be two writers who respect and appreciate one another. You will not have to be ashamed of me. I hope to create great things this coming winter. I can not reveal to you all the many poetic plans that fill my mind, and if I desired, I could fill books, but there is still time.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, I have already finished and it has turned out quite well. Likewise I have already finished my introduction to Shirai Zion. Tomorrow I will send it to my father. Why haven't you let me know whether you have already finished the article on my father? Write to me, yes, or no."

In his third letter[39] he tells of his difficulties in returning to Vilna, due to the loss of his pass. He then inquires after Sach's health and wants to know whether he taught philosophy to a group of young men, how the Renaissance (periodical) was progressing, whether he sent his books to the rich men in Berlin and what was new in Hebrew literature. Lebensohn then reproves Sachs for neglecting to send the books that he promised, especially since the money has already been collected. He further scolds Sachs for failing to write the article he promised about Adam. He just does not know what else he can do to induce Sachs to write this article which would be an honor to Sachs as well as Adam. Lebensohn then goes on to relate the animosity of the Vilna Maskilim for one another, informing upon each other to the government, in the hope of securing some kind of government position. He expresses his thanks to Sachs for having acquainted him with the scholarly works of our people. He closes by asking for information on a number of subjects, such as:

1. The names of those who defended Maimonides and his "Guide For the Perplexed", against the French sages.
2. Whether the Talmud itself criticized the

Perushim.

3. Whether Nachmanides was not the chief cabalist from whom Spinoza's philosophy is derived.

It is interesting that he asks Sachs to write on thin paper, and in small letters so that the postage might not be too expensive.

It should be noted that Lebensohn came to Berlin in the summer of 1848 not long after the revolution of 1848. An indication of the changing political climate is the fact that Nicholas I, who was so highly praised by Adam Hocohen is now called the hangman of the March revolution, having suppressed the Hungarian revolt.[40] Clear proof that the tremors of revolt were felt in Berlin at the time of the poet's visit is the fact that Zunz who, as we shall see, exerted a great influence on Lebensohn, eulogized in fiery address "The March Heroes".[41] Zunz wrote a special article on the "principles of democracy."[42] Lebensohn, who had read Heine while yet in Vilna and had translated from the poems of Mieczkewicz and plays by Alfieri, must have been influenced by the young Germany and perhaps by the young Poland and young Italy movements, which stressed nationalism and individual freedom at the same time.[43] Thus the spirit of general revolution and national revolution exerted a decisive influence upon him. It is difficult to believe that his translation of Alfieri's "Saul" could have been sheer coincidence.[44]

It is known that Alfieri had to cloak the desire for Italian emancipation from Austrian yoke in the

garment of historical plays. Thus Saul, who liberated the enslaved Hebrews from the yoke of the Phillistines, is held up as an example to Italian youth.[45]

Lebensohn found this play particularly close to his sentiments for in the following letter to Sachs, he makes mention of his deep emotional reaction upon visiting the graves of those who fell in the March Revolution.

In this letter[46] to Sachs he recalls longingly the pleasant times they spent together in Berlin; how he had hoped to return but now he knew that he would never see Berlin or Sachs again. He brings to mind how they stood at the graves of those who died in the March Revolution of 1848, and how Sachs told him then of his abiding faith in that the nation of Israel and its faith would live forever. The poet is now all alone. Kaplan had become a clerk in the liquor customs office and wanders over the cities of Lithuania. He does not see Shulman for weeks. The rest of his friends and companions have left, and as for the Maskilim of Vilna, they are not worth wasting time upon. He is hungry for news of Berlin, new publications, news of

its scholars and Sach's progress in his work.

Lebensohn tells Sachs that after his book "Shirai Bat Zion" will be published, perhaps he will publish a book of new love poems called, "Roses and Thorns", which he had discussed the past winter. Lebensohn writes about what little news there was in Vilna, and singles out for his special hatred, Fin, and his book "Nidchai Yisrael", (Forsaken of Israel). Since Sachs is now in Leipzig, he reminds him that now is the time for him to finally fulfill his promise in reference to Adam, since the publishers are located in that city.

From Lebensohn's letters to Sachs we see that in the two years that he spent outside of Russia he threw himself completely into the stream of Haskalah. He read voraciously books written in different languages, visited theatres and concerts and heard literary and scientific lectures.[47]

Sachs introduced Lebensohn to the scholars of Berlin, particularly Zunz.[48] The poet learned to appreciate Hochmat Israel (Jewish Science) Hokhmat Yisrael Sachs claims that Lebensohn wrote, "Shirai Bat Zion", in accordance with his counsel.[49] It is curious that Lebensohn in his introduction to "Shirai Bat Zion", does not mention writing the historical poems upon Sach's advice, but rather thanks "The great Rabbi and sage - the lofty scholar, Leopold Zunz, who advised me faithfully after I placed before him my book, "The Destruction of Troy", to leave the songs of foreign gods and to sing the songs of the Daughter of Zion, and it was him I obeyed in writing these poems."[50] Nevertheless Sachs must be credited with influencing the poet to write historical poems in the light of the very close relationship that existed, and considering Sach's influence in turning Mapu to writing historical novels.[51]

In 1849, Micah Joseph Lebensohn, entered into correspondence with Samuel D. Luzzatto, who was one of the people to whom he had sent his translation on "Troy".[52] Luzzatto's influence on Lebensohn was clearly very great. In one letter he mentions sending to Shadal three of his poems, Shlomo, Kohelet and Yael and Sisera before printing them. From the first letter it is obvious that Luzzatto had the opportunity to criticize other poems of the poet, and he had advised him to write in lines of eleven syllables. (hendecasyllabic verse) Shadal likewise instructed him not to rhyme penultimate with ultimate words nor to use rhyme that sounded alike in Sephardic but not in Askenazic. In this same letter we gain an interesting insight into the poet's use of the Scriptures, since he mentions to Shadal that in the three poems sent to him, he has departed at times from the text and has made changes in line with poetic license permissible to every poet.[53]

After a polite introduction expressing his happiness at hearing from Shadal and stating his desire to follow his advice, Lebensohn says, "I have labored to the point of weariness to change all the lines to

eleven syllables, and I have removed every sheva from the beginning of the words. I have been careful not to rhyme penultimate with ultimate, and since you have begun to show me kindness and have said that you would look also at what I would send to you, I have herewith dared to send these three poems, "Shlomo", "Kohelet" and "Yael and Sisera", before printing them with several other poems of Zion. Spread over them also your kind wings. In your judgment tell me whether they find favor in your eyes.

I have permitted myself in these poems to depart at times from the path of our Holy Scriptures and to devise new things in line with the license which is given a poet, to destroy and to build, to uproot and to plant, as he sees fit. Excuse me if I still rhyme two or three letters that are not the same since the rhymes cause me trouble." (Shadal, whose pronunciation was Sephardic, cautioned Lebensohn not to rhyme the letters that were similar only in the Ashkenazic pronunciation, e.g. daas and kaas are pronounced daas and kaas in Ashkenazic, but daat and kaas in Sephardic.) 54

At first Shadal made remarks in regard to errors

in meter and rhyme, but when the poet began sending him his Biblical poems, he began criticizing the content as well. Thus, Shadal criticized Lebensohn's presentation of Yael, claiming that she is put in a bad light. Shadal feels that this is the result of foreign influence.[55] Concerning Solomon and Kohelet, Shadal objects to the description of true wisdom causing the loss of faith and hope. He finds it difficult to believe "that a Lithuanian Jewish lad who was born and brought up on the lap of the prophets, the Tannaim, the Ammoraim, should expound on the vain idols of the ancient peoples, to learn from them the secrets of wisdom." Shadal continues and says that, only one who has a false faith begins denying everything when he gains a bit of wisdom, because Greek wisdom has only flowers but no fruit. This is not so, however, with Jewish wisdom, because it teaches man to labor to help others and therefore he will find satisfaction in all his deeds, and even should troubles overtake him, his righteousness would stand by him and offer him consolation.[56] Lebensohn answers Shadal, thanking him for his correction in terms of technique. As for the concepts in his poem he writes,[57] "Do not suspect that

I am one of those youths who are the majority in this generation who strive to reveal blemishes and to say things that are not true about our holy books. On the contrary, I have always loved my people, its language, and our glorious books with a powerful love, and therefore your poem, Derech Eretz, is dearer to me than any treasure. Its thoughts are my thoughts, and from the day that I read this poem, my soul has attached itself to you with love.... However, I can not hide from you the fact that Yael's deed is very revolting in my sight....and therefore I couldn't justify her in any way.... Indeed, I have listened to your words of reproof not to sin against the prophetess who blessed her, and I have added a number of lines that will justify her... And thus did my father also advise me. But far be it from me to think evil, for the ideas of Kohelet are not mine, nor are his thoughts my thoughts. For I am upright with my God, hoping in silence and trusting in his salvation even in times of trouble. He is my one refuge in the days of my sickness.... Nor have I taken any ideas from a foreign poet, neither in the poem of Yael nor in this poem. However, I obey your words of reproof and I am changing

and adding material in the middle of the poem and even more at the end as you may today see for yourself."

The poet, in his introduction to Shirai Bat Zion (1851) thanked, "especially the great scholar and poet, pure of heart and spirit, Samuel David Luzzatto, who was like a father to me in his dear letters, to teach me the straight way in which I should go in the craft of poetry."[58]

From M. Lebensohn's correspondence to his friend Z'ev Kaplan, we learn about the loneliness and despair which gripped him in his last few consumptive years in Vilna. The poet recalls in a short letter how only a year ago, the two sat together alone in the woods. Micah was upset because of some love affair and Kaplan consoled him at that time.

"I remember that a year ago this evening, the two of us walked together, and at that time the fields had already grown green, the trees were beginning to blossom. As we sat there alone in the woods, my soul was then rendered unclean by a contemptible love, you persuaded me like an angel of God."[59]

In his second letter to Kaplan, Lebensohn mentions the terrible enmity among the Maskilim "and if your heart still yearns, let it yearn only for your home and your friends but not for the city. If you knew, my dear friend, the dark shadow which covers the heart of every Maskil now. From the smallest to the largest they eye each other with enmity. They all deal deceitfully, each one seeking to trap and overthrow the other, and every man spreading out the net of slander at his friend's feet."[10]

In his third letter, Micah writes to Kaplan, "Why are you angry with me though I haven't written to you? It is only because of my love and pity for you that I did not write, since I know that the Almighty has made your heart soft so that you to be grieved ~~by~~ at the trouble of every man ~~in the world~~. How much more so, do you grieve at the troubles of your friends, who are one half of your flesh and soul. If my lot were a pleasant one, as I live, I would have written until you would have had enough, but how shall I write to you, that I walk about gloomy, under the spell of my pain and misfortune, that I have become numb, and crushed under the pain of my sickness. My heart, which became alive at the sight

of the healing sun, now dies together with all my hopes. at the sound of the storm in my ear; at the sight of the snows which have cast its frost in my soul.

"And what should Shulman write to you? Do you desire to hear the sound of an owl among the ruins, and the pelican in the desert, that murmurs sadly, and wails even at the light of the sun? Should he write to you that he was going about up until two days ago without a house? Also, cursed be men and the world and all of existence, neither did he have bread to keep himself alive. Should he write to you of such things? Does Kaplan ask such things of us? Even now I would never have written to you of them but you have pleaded with me, and I have been persuaded. But be consoled my dear friend, Praised be God, for Shulman is now making a living and does not lack anything.

"Also, I, whose hopes were bound on the wings of the sun which flew away, with its return, hope has come back to my heart and I live once again. And how does your imagination lead you so astray as to create in the city of Vilna a picture of serene spirits and

secure souls? Why do you speak badly of your city of Vitebsk for no reason?.....Praise God, that you are not here with us. There you will not hear the cry of unfortunate mothers and the wail of fathers, which pour down like water for their only son who was taken away from them forever; gone are they on the road from which there is no return.... These ears of mine have heard the wail of the mother who swayed in her sorrow and cursed her soul for having saved the life of her only son from the wrath of the cholera, only to see him now taken at the hands of kidnappers, to be a soldier, an unfortunate forever.

For the fearful officers have come to levy the toll of eight souls of every thousand in Israel, and to him has been added the communal officers. Now the heads of the city have the power to conscript all of whom it is said that he is of bad deeds. Already, about eighty such people have been taken and although the majority of them are villains, yet there are among them people - innocent of all wrong other than putting on foreign clothes, or not praying in the morning or evening. For such an excuse many have already been stolen away."

In his poem, "Michal Dimah", the elder Lebensohn describes the last struggles of his son, especially his suffering during the last six months of his life. His father, describing the fierce cold of the northern country, pictures the young poet burning in the midst of this cold; his consumptive body wasting away day by day.[62] There is some consolation in the fact that Micah Joseph Lebensohn lived to see in print his Shirai Bat Zion and to hear the many praises that it merited and received.[63] A short time before the poet's death, his father asked him where his manuscripts were. Micah Joseph Lebensohn pointed to the place and added, "They will not waste away."[64]

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Chapter II

Shirai Bat Zion

When Micah Joseph Lebensohn realized that he would not find healing in Berlin, he returned home. Although his search for health was in vain, Lebensohn did not return to Vilna empty-handed. With him he carried a sheaf of magnificent poetry, written while he was racked with pain, and haunted by death in Berlin. Part of this collection was a group of six historical poems entitled Shirai Bat Zion. (Songs of the daughter of Zion). Solomon and Kohelet, The Revenge of Samson, Jael and Sisera, Moses on Mt. Abarim, and Judah Halevi are the epic poems, based on biblical episodes and themes of national import, which make up the book, Shirai Bat Zion.[1]

Lebensohn's introduction to Shirai Bat Zion, written in Vilna shortly before the publication of this work, reveals the love which the young poet had for his people and its history.[2]

"Dear reader, do not be angry with me if, after I have recently placed before you a translation of a poem by one of the great poets, Virgil, which I called

the 'Destruction of Troy', I have now taken it upon myself to present to you six poems of Zion which I wrote in Berlin, the city which is the praise of the world.... For what have you and I to do with the land of Tyre and Troy, mighty and powerful nations, which are now as if they never existed; and what have we to do with the foreign gods that they had then.... Behold the daughter of Zion, the daughter of our people still stands alongside the ruins of these ancient lands. She alone has turned away the sharp sword of time (the womb and grave of all existence).... Because her God lives forever, and to His name incense is burned from one end of the world to the other. Therefore, my dear reader, whose people are my people, and whose God is my God, come now with me, for on the wings of my Song shall I carry you to the holy land. (although others rule over it, yet it belongs only to us, for with rivers and streams of blood and tears have we acquired its holy soil). There I will show you visions of God, the king in his glory, the prophet in his holiness, the sage in his wisdom, the hero and his strength, the Levite and his song.... Perhaps I shall also receive a blessing for having placed before you sacred memories,

the recollection of ancient days in the period of our people's youth. If you will look favorably upon this poem of mine, I am prepared to place before you the rest of the Songs of Zion which are still in manuscript.

Before I conclude this introduction, let me publicly thank the mighty ones, the foundations of the earth.... Yom Tov Lipman Zunz, who counseled me wisely in writing when I sent him my book, The Destruction of Troy, to leave the songs of a foreign people and to sing the songs of Zion. I have obeyed him in composing these poems. Especially (let me thank) Samuel David Luzzatto, who is like a father to me in his dear letters, to teach me the straight path that I should go in the craft of poetry."

The first, the longest and the most representative of Lebensohn's historical poems, are Solomon and Kohelet, the two great opposites of the Bible, the most fortunate, the most despairing.[3] The subtitle, Faith and Wisdom, which Lebensohn gave to these poems, suggests a philosophic background.[4] According to tradition, Solomon wrote both the Song of Songs and the book Ecclesiastes. The poet draws upon this

legend~~ary lore~~ to describe King Solomon in two phases of life. In the first, King Solomon typifies faith in life as a young man, who is handsome, vigorous, the lover of the beautiful shepherdess, Shulamit, and the composer of the Song of Songs. The second depicts King Solomon in old age whose critical wisdom has analyzed all joy out of his life.[5]

Lebensohn, in his notes on these poems, explains how he is intrigued by the contrast between youth, which is innocent, full of love and hope, and old age with its skepticism and despair.[6]

From his notes it appears that his attitude toward Biblical criticism was a moderate one. While he dared to say that Kohelet was written in the Maccabean era, he, nevertheless, attributed the Song of Songs to Solomon. He was very severe with the critics, whose only aim seemed to be to ascribe every book to a different author and a different time.

"[7]The two poems Shlomo and Kohelet are one poem in two parts. The first describes Solomon in the days of his youth - singing the Song of Songs, while the second poem depicts him in his old age, composing the

Book of Kohelet. Upon reading these two books, who among you, my dear readers, will not be amazed by the fact that they are attributed to one author? Whose heart will not contract at seeing the man, who wonderously sang songs of love.... the man, who cried out of great joy, 'How lovely and how pleasant are you O love for delights', to see this man despairing and desolate, distressed and angry, calling out bitterly, 'I hate life', 'childhood and youth are vanity', 'Of laughter I have said it is madness' - 'the days of death are preferable to one's birth.' This thought stimulated me to write the poem of Shlomo and Kohelet, and I hope that your heart will not fall within you, O reader, when you read how doubt perturbed Solomon's thoughts so that he spoke as he did.... But this I will say to you, if the belief that is written in the book does not suffice. Lift your eyes over the whole broad world. There on every plant and bush, on every blade of grass and leaf, is written clearly the hand of God, the faith of a true and living God. Every bird that flies is an angel and a seraph, flying to relate his glory. Every plant of the field is a seer and a prophet, proclaiming his kingdom. All the world and

its fullness is a song of God, because he is in everything and he is everything.... Lift your eyes on high and see the tens of thousands of worlds, the suns and their moons, which race, revolve, and fly eternally without swerving from their course.... Only a fool or a madman would attribute this to chance and chaos, and not believe that the almighty God made it.... Know also, my dear reader, that I have not attributed the book of Kohelet to Solomon against the opinion of many scholars who have taken it away from him, because whoever has eyes can see that this book is a product of later days, in its language and content. Perhaps it was written in the days of the Hasmoneans, during which time there spread among all the people the belief in immortality. Therefore, he (Kohelet) also comes to investigate and judge it. The idea of this book in attributing it (Kohelet) to Solomon, is one of the loftiest concepts that spring from the heart of man, because if the words of this fearful book are indeed awful in and of themselves, behold they are even more awful in the mouth of a king who is successful, wise, and more fortunate than any man on earth; to whom ships of Tarshish brought all that the eyes could desire,

and to whom a thousand beautiful maidens gave pleasure, and for whom eighty thousand men built a dwelling place, and to whom people came from the end of the world to see the glory of his wealth and the greatness of his wisdom. However, regarding the Song of Songs, no Maskil can deny that Solomon composed it, although there have multiplied critics who seek to wrest this book also from Solomon's hands. (I am grieved for criticism which has become in these days a craft and not a wisdom, whose aim is to destroy all that is holy and create only new things and to attribute every book to a different author and a different time). The clarity and strength of its language testifies and proves that it was composed in the days of our nation's youth, and to whom shall we attribute this lovely and pleasant love poem, the like of which there is no other, if not to Solomon, whose songs were one thousand and five.... All my words here and in this poem are only according to the true meaning of the words and sayings in this book."

In Shlomo we see the youthful Solomon, whose pure heart and happy soul have not been touched by the sadness and difficulties of life. Life and the beauty

of nature about him, all sing together of happiness and love. At sunset, the handsome and vigorous youth is climbing the crests of Lebanon, where he suddenly sees Shulamit, the beautiful shepherdess. Love grips him instantly as he eyes her beauty which blends with all the glories of nature, rolling upon the hillsides of Judah and Ephraim. Embracing the beauty, Solomon sings the song of eternal love from the immortal Song of Songs. In his joy, the young prince can not envision the reality of wickedness, sorrow, pain and death.[8]

"Love in one's youth, how precious and pleasant,
Let every lad suckle at her consoling breast,
Every youth be happy and rejoice in it,
For youth is a flower, and she its honey.

How lovely is the portion of loving youth,
Though the celestial hosts tower over him,
~~Yet are~~ they ~~jealous~~ of his pleasant lot and ~~envy him~~,
Because they in their heights are all alone." ...

"The brooks ripple and their waters lap,
The mighty oaks murmur in the wind,
The doves coo in their nests,
It is the voice of love! She alone speaks in them.

His strong desire leads him to think there is no sadness,
For every man who loves is completely happy.
How should sadness not come to an end and death ~~disappear~~,
~~Since~~ he and his beloved are such a joyful pair!"[9]

The lyrical theme of love sings optimistically throughout the poem in a natural and fresh style which marks Shlomo as the love poem, par excellence, of the Haskalah.[10]

However, in Kohelet we find the antithesis of Shlomo. The young prince is now the old king weighed down by the burden of his wisdom, which has cancelled out both the joy and freedom of the past, the luxury and fame in the present.[11]

"In the palace covered with finest gold,
With its guilded cedars and brilliant capitals,
Among marble pillars that delight the eye,
Among precious stones and choicest treasures,

In this beautiful palace, the grandest abode,
On a throne of gold and ivory, expertly fashioned,
Cloaked in purple, on his head a crown,
Sits one hoary headed, weak, and sated with years.

The hair of his locks are white as snow,
On his forehead and cheeks, sadness has ~~marked its~~ planted furrows,
Like ~~the gloom~~ against in the ~~grave~~ sheaf is his face ~~darkened~~ shrouds,
Death's shadow looks out through his lids."[12]

Etched on his forehead is every grief and strait. If it were not for the lighting flash of his eye, one might think him a corpse just risen from the grave. Thus, desolately does he sit bereft of counsel. How

powerfully does his mute anguish speak? Who is this bent old man who can no longer carry the burden of life, walking about like a frail shadow? He is Kohelet, king in Jerusalem.

"Is this the youth crowned in all his glory,
Handsome and pleasant like the ~~light of the moon~~, moonlight
Is that his hair ~~which was~~ black as the raven,
Are these his eyes, ~~which were~~ like doves by the water?

Isn't he the one upon whom everything was bestowed sevenfold,
There being no limit to his treasure and pleasure,
His cup full with heaven's blessing,
And a thousand ~~women~~ beauties his portion?

Why is his heart a void and his soul distraught,
Is his spirit sad because of a multitude of days,
~~So~~ that he longs for death,
Or will his heart not rest because of an enemy's ravages?

Has he spilt man's blood, and does this blood pursue him,
Or do the oppressed and despoiled cry out against him,
Or does cruel regret consume him like the moth,
For having trampled under him his groaning people?"

The poet answers this rhetorical question by saying that it can not be old age that has whitened his hair. In his years others are still fresh and radiant.

"Neither does he fear an enemy, and fright is a stranger to him,
Round about have nations made pacts of peace,

At his feet lie many kingdoms smitten,
They have come from the ends of the earth to seek
his face.

He himself, has long recognized the rule of heaven,
And has long reigned in justice and in mercy,
His parables reiterate,
That only on these is a king's throne founded.

To
~~From~~ all the oppressed, lowly and weak,
He did not close his hand nor lock his door.
Nor did he plot to shed blood like water,
But rather were there many whom he turned from wrong.

His people held him in esteem and love,
Because every man dwelt securely in his peaceful
abode.
Sated and happy did they live in the land,
Each man resting under the vine in his own field."

Since the time that Israel settled in their own land, they never delighted in days such as these. Never before had they known such serenity, ~~but rather~~ fear and trembling ~~was~~ had their lot. Either outside enemies trampled their land, or one man spilled the blood of his brother. In Solomon's day, however, the land was not weary with battle, and the times were Eden - like. But this light shines only for his people for in his own heart there is deep darkness. He is disgusted with the world and all that takes place under the sun.

The poet explains the disillusionment of the king as being due to the wrong choice he made in his youth.

"O' he too ascended at first to the world's heights,
Before his soul desired to be so high,
But his heart misled him, and he wandered about
like a child,
Asking for wisdom when God appeared to him.

But the wisdom he requested is only earth's wisdom,
And without faith it is powerless,
Therefore does it lead astray, and break all bounds,
Out of its impotence negating everything."

From the moment that wisdom was his portion, his youthful joy turned to wailing.

"O' stronger than death is cursed wisdom,
How good is your coming with shining face,
But when you approach us how fearful you are,
Therefore do hope and faith flee you.

Hope and faith, should they both expire,
They would turn into a paradise the grave below.
In their light could a man walk without fear,
But you, wisdom with all your light, reveal only
the pit.

You drove man out of Eden's garden,
And in these days too, you continue to expel
From his pleasant habitation and serene life,
Every Maskil seeking a word of innocence and
truth.

Also hope and faith do you chase from one's heart,
As well as every vision and image, however powerful.
What then do you give, if you cast everything away?
Only bitter truth, or cruel doubt.

Therefore the wise men of old pictured you thus,
On your heart an iron shield, a sword in your hand,
For you destroy every heart that knows you,
And your heart is of iron, like the iron upon you."

The owl which appears over Minerva's head, says the poet, does not teach that night's darkness is as light as day for wisdom, but rather it symbolizes the fact that weeping accompanies wisdom; that bitter grief is its companion. Therefore, Minerva has the frightful image of Medusa on her breast, because all who see into the heart of wisdom, are turned to stone.

Thus, when Solomon began thinking of wisdom, the whole world changed for him. When he sought pleasure with his beloved, wisdom whispered within him, "These beautiful eyes that cloak themselves in garments of light are mere skin and veins." When he went out to the pleasant fields and meadows, to the streams of water gurgling in the valleys, among the budding olives that grew so gloriously, his soul could not rejoice nor could his heart make merry.

"'What are they,' he would cry,'all spring's children?
Beauty is decay, a flowering death.'"

When night came to count the heavenly hosts, with the moon marching before the array, leading them slowly to a pleasant rest, Solomon could see no beauty in this,

and cried out in his sad bitterness,

"Their light is their death, for they burn like
the candle,
And what shines in them, if not death itself?"

Regretting the loss of youth and happiness, Solomon cries out to his youth to return. He longs for the time when he could believe, but his cries are in vain, for cruel wisdom has set doubt upon him, more savage than the wild beast.

"Like an iron shield do you rest upon man's heart.
Though you avert what is vain and false,
Yet love do you keep from one's heart and spirit,
Also true faith must stand aside."

Solomon, confronted with this sudden doubt, ceased to believe in friendship and companions,

"Because doubt paced about deep within his heart,
And his tongue kept saying, 'who knows'?"

The poet then illustrates how doubt destroys hope and faith. Thus, when Shulamit died in her youth, Solomon stood by her when her soul expired. Her cheeks were as white as the moon, but the hope of immortality shone in her eyes, as she whispered to Solomon,

"Do not mourn my beloved, give rest to your sadness,
And though my body here fades like the blossom,
My soul will rise high on the paths of immortality."

But when Solomon heard her words he asked in a bitter cry, "Alas, who knows, if the spirit of man ascends to the heavens?" Perhaps, "there is one death for man and beast alike."

Nathan, the prophet, had instructed him in the proper paths of life, had adjured him to observe the Torah, "because for the purpose of doing good was the spirit placed in the body, and it will return from within us to God and heaven." When Nathan died in his arms;

"Solomon quickly thought, 'alas, who knows,
If the soul is not the blood, and marrow of bones,
If the spirit does not flow from the veins,
Therefore, what profit that I should walk uprightly'?"

The poet suggests that ethics and morals seem to depend upon such slight biological changes that perhaps there is no basis for goodness. Should a proud tyrant lack a drop of blood he might then become righteous and meek, whereas, on the other hand, an upright person, who despises wrong doing, might become

wild, if only one vein were to change within him.

"From bewilderment of heart, he ran to the grave,
Where the maw of Sheol had swallowed men in
multitudes,
And among the dead bodies and bones,
His foot touched the head of Eytan Ezrachi."

Solomon is taken aback,

"'Is this the skull', he cried, 'of a God-like man?
In which wisdom and song came together,
Whose tunes echoed through the high heavens'?"

Solomon asks how this head, which had searched for wisdom and knowledge, has now become a dwelling place for the worm. Then he is assaulted by an even more terrible doubt.

"Who knows if God looks down from His heavens,
And gathers together the tears of the innocent?"

Seeing how the wicked prosper and the righteous cry out in vain, Solomon thinks bitterly,

"Who knows, perhaps there in the grave there is
no reckoning or knowledge,
And the forsaken cry without anyone to hear."

Solomon decides that evil would never cease, and that what was, would always be. Therefore, he decides

to seek pleasures in the few remaining days alloted to him; perhaps thereby to find peace. Thus, he planted gardens, orchards and vineyards, gathered together the finest treasures, built palaces, pools, and forests, led a thousand beautiful damsels into his harem, thinking that perhaps in noisy laughter, he would not hear the voice of doubt.

But when wisdom turned these delights to vanity, he decided to seek all knowledge under the sun, hoping to find a solution to the dark riddles of life. He searched out all the ways of the earth, from the moss on the walls to the tall cedars; from the ancients' and even Egypt's wisdom, hoping to derive light from the depths of darkness. But he discovered that he was merely increasing riddles without finding an answer.

"And Solomon was famous among the nations of the world,
Kings heard and came, and beheld him,
Astonished at his wisdom, which exceeded all limits,
Perceiving that he was wiser than all who preceded him.

'Woe, why have you come', he cried out to them,
'He merely increases pain who increases knowledge.
The wisest of all men is the most unfortunate,
And with more wisdom, I have only added more pain'."

Solomon now admonishes those who came to marvel at his wisdom.

"Hurry, go quickly, lest you hear wisdom,
Go quickly O blind ones lest your eyes be opened,
And in its light you will walk in darkness unto weariness,
Then you will despise life as myself.

Thus bitter was Solomon's life on earth,
In his straits all his bones did say,
'Better is the day of death than the day of one's birth,
A little foolishness dearer than wisdom'.

Till he rested in the grave, he knew no rest,
And a day before his death, he twice called out,
'All is vanity, only vanity and pursuing the wind',
Thus spoke Kohelet and closed his eyes."[13]

The poem seems logically to end here, but the poet's correspondence and his notes suggest strongly that he added the next eight stanzas, so as to end more traditionally on a note of faith. Thus, "he sacrificed the poetic conception on the altar of public opinion."[14]

Lebensohn now describes Solomon at that very moment of death, seeing a vision of God, in whose bosom wisdom rests. There doubt is cast down and lies mute. Solomon sees the spirit of all the pious, shining like the stars, singing the Songs of David. Righteousness

goes before them, carrying recompense and eternal sweetness in her hand, lending aid to all the humble and lifting their heads,

"And he saw that there is a final hope of immortality,
That God for the righteous does provide from on high.
The tears of the oppressed on this dark earth,
There in his high heavens, he wipes away.

He saw man's spirit, loftier than the body,
Elevated over death and pain,
Returning to God who gave it,
Since it is not of dust to go back to the earth

Suddenly the eyes of the king were opened,
And he cried out, 'After all, everything you shall obey,
God shall you fear, and heed his commandments,
For that is all of man' thus he died."[15]

Klausner states that the poet ended on the accepted traditional note because of the influence of Shadal and his father and the fear of Russian censorship which banned all anti-religious literature at this time.[16]

Lachover differs from Klausner in his attitude toward the ending of the poem. Klausner believes that the ending was anti-climactic and not inherently part of the structure of the poem, but rather added on at the urging and assistance of Adam and Shadal.[17] However Lachover believes that the ending is the most logical

conclusion to the development of the poem. Solomon, who began with faith and hope, ends with faith in God. Lachover is led to this conclusion by the fact that even the old king Solomon prefers faith and hope to doubt and reason, which destroys them. Lachover believes that Shlomo is the more important poem while Kohelet is used more for contrast; therefore, it is more logical for the poet to conclude with the affirmation of faith found in Shlomo.[18]

The poem Shlomo is unique in that it contains all the poetical themes of the poet's works. In Shlomo he sings of love, nature, youth, and the spring, and also the song of poetry itself. Lebensohn speaks of the poet who is always a prince, despite his station or birth and life. In this respect it is interesting that Lebensohn translated part of Shiller's poem, The Power of Song, which similarly sings the praises of poetry itself, that which expresses the beautiful hidden feelings of man.[19] In Kohelet, we obviously do not find the same lyrical qualities as in Shlomo. It is as if in Shlomo he pictures himself and in Kohelet his father who sought and gained wisdom and enlightenment at the expense of

hope and faith.[20] Even the successful descriptions of the beauty of Jerusalem and Lebanon in Shlomo could have been drawn from his own experience, since he was in the habit of frequently going up to the mountain, near his home town of Vilna.[21] In Kohelet we find cleverness and mental toil, but not the true ring of inner feelings. Kohelet is described more through conscious effort and awareness than through experience and feeling.[22]

An echo of the revolution of 1848 and the desire for emancipation which engulfed western Europe can be detected in Michal's Jael and Sisera, and the Revenge of Samson. Although the work Shimshon does not reveal great powers of epic characterization, in this poem, Lebensohn wonderously describes the feeling of the blind and chained Samson. The chained Samson reminds us of the young revolutionaries of 1848 who also died for the freedom of their people.[23] Although the depth of the hero's tragedy is not fully brought out, the passion for revenge is expressed in moving and powerful terms.[24]

25
"To the altar of Dagon, the chieftains of Philistia
Have gathered with laughter to see Manoah's son."

And they say arrogantly:

"Asleep is the Hebrew God, he can not save,
And Dagon has overcome him; he alone is God."

Approximately three thousand people are gathered to see the destroyer of their land. He is bound in chains and his hands are weary, but they still fear to approach him.

"Thus a lion in the cage, a ring in his nose,
He kneels silently, trapped in the net,
Let him move his head, only fix his glance,
And his captor will be frightened and fear to
draw near."

Samson stands powerless among the happy throngs of his enemies. Overnight he has turned grey. The worst of all man's straits has come upon him, and his face is fearfully calm. Thus the hero stands silent as the grave, like the silence of a volcano before bursting into flame. Is this the mighty Samson, the Nazarite from birth, who removed the city's gates on his shoulders, and smote the foe like lightning and thunder? He who broke the lion's jaw, how has the daughter of a foreign God laid him low?

The poet describes how Samson was cajoled into revealing the secret of his strength, and his pathetic plea, after his eyes had been pierced, begging Delilah to have pity and kill him. But the hatred of the foe is stronger than the grave. They did not kill the enemy but kept him to feast their eyes upon him.

"What is as terrible as his portion,
Blind, powerless, bound in the hands of the foe,
One to whom all this has happened does not fear
evil,
For God has expended upon him all his cruel arrows.

No pain does he feel, nor his eyes' affliction,
Neither mockery nor scorn, nor the foes' laughter,
Not his strength which has departed, nor his
hands' weakness,
Not even love which has sorely betrayed him.

What is love to him; eyes, or strength?
All his feelings have died, completely gone,
One feeling alone within him flaming,
And in his dead heart, only this feeling stirs.

It is revenge! It gives warmth to his heart.
It is his very breath, the spirit of life within
him,
Therefore, he did not smash his skull against
the wall
Nor strangle himself with his copper chains.

How can he choose death, when they have not died,
If the skull of his foe his hands have not yet
smashed?
The sound of his enemy's revenge have his ears not
heard,
And in their blood, his feet have not bathed?"

Blind and weak, what could he do? If he could command the thunder and the plague, perhaps then would his enemies be destroyed. In mute anger he gnashed his teeth; the sinews of his arms grew taut as he prayed, 'O strengthen me, but this once,' grasping the two pillars. Suddenly there reached his ear the cry of the dying. Although he could not see the enemy perishing, he could hear their shrieks of anguish.

> "He too fell dead among the bodies of the slain,
> But for a death such as this, his soul had thirsted."[26]

In the poem, Jael and Sisera, Lebensohn brings into sharp focus the inner turmoil of Jael, who is torn between her duty as a hostess who has given refuge to the defeated Sisera and her obligation to destroy her unsuspecting guest who is the enemy of her people.[27]

After Sisera is defeated in battle and flees, with Deborah in pursuit, he chances upon Jael's tent, and asks for shelter which she promises him. Sisera blesses her and calls her a saving angel. Jael's face clouds over; the praise and blessing frighten her for

she knows how little she deserves them, because she plans to destroy him. Michal is at his best here, where he describes the conflict between kindness and severity, between compassion for the helpless and hatred for an enemy, between trust and deceit, between a woman's tenderness and the patriot's revenge.

> "Shall I draw sword against him who lies so securely, against a weary man slumbering so calmly and peacefully, knowing not that murder lies in wait for him? How sweet his sleep, how calm and restful! Perchance he even dreams of my kindly welcome. How terrible should he awake and see before him Jael with murderous weapons, unstable as water, treacherously cutting short his life, delivering him only in order to slay him: the same whom he had blessed, "As thine eyes took pity, so may the gracious God reward thee." Thus did he bless me, then laid him down to sleep; and maybe he blesses me now in spirit, while I - as he sleeps - take his life! To slay a man who has covenanted peace with me, when he is secure and unarmed, and tears of thankfulness are not yet dry on his face! Shall I repay those tears with blood, and stain peace with the blood of battle?" 18

Then she calls to mind the cruelty of Sisera. She remembers how he killed and oppressed her people for two decades. Should he live, who knows how many more lives will be forfeited.

> "There sleeps the oppressor of my land, who forced thousands of my people to kneel before

> destruction, who reft the son from the mother's breast, and heard not her lament - why should not his mother be likewise bereft? Wherefore should this ruthless man sleep and live? Has he not robbed sleep from all eyes? When he awakens, will he not gather strength and power and crush my people with his heart of iron? And the blood of my people, alas, cries from the ground, 'Fill thy hand, Jael, fill thy hand with vengeance!"[29]

Jael thereupon calls upon death to urge her on, to make her merciless so that she could carry out her decision.

> "Come, Murder, ascend from the deeps of destruction! Drive pity from my heart and all calm and graciousness! Fill my pure heart with venomous fury, set thy bloody cloak about me, take out the flesh of my heart and set therein a stone that will not hearken to laments nor understand entreaty! Set darkness over my eyes, that they see not what my hands do in this room; let thy venomous adders hiss, and lick the blood of this carcass in a moment!"[30]

She is taken aback for a moment when she sees Sisera asleep, and hears him calling her an 'angel from heaven'. But she is determined, and lifting up the mallet, she drives the tent peg thru Sisera's temple. As he dies, he murmurs, 'Jael, my angel art thou - the Angel of Death!' This terrifies Jael. The tender woman is horrified by her deed. Suddenly she hears from afar the joyous cries of her victorious

people. Here once again we are shown the deep contrast between the sad ambivalence of Jael and the uncontrolled joy of the people. "Alas!" cried Jael, "this gladness is not mine; not my foeman have I slain, but him who took shelter with me." Jael hears Deborah praising and blessing her name:

"Blessed above women shall Jael be,
The wife of Heber the Kenite,
Blessed shall she be above women in the tent!"[31]

This absolution at the hands of the prophetess who speaks in God's name finally sets Jael's mind at ease.

From a poetic standpoint, Lebensohn builds up to the powerful contrast of a tumultuous and victorious people returning from battle - as against the tragic and lonely figure of a woman who is appalled at the murder she has committed, however justifiable the motive. Since this seems to be the true climax of the poem, we can understand what influence Shadal and Adam exerted on the young poet to cause him to add the anti-climactic ending whereby the people's praise vindicates and justifies her action.[32]

In the second letter[35] to Shadal, written the first day of Elul 5611, (1851), Michal excuses himself for not answering sooner and explains that he received the letter in Berlin as he was about to leave for home. But then for weeks and months he remained enroute experiencing endless troubles because his illness grew worse on the way and he also lost his passport, without which he could not gain readmission to Russia; thus remaining alone and sick in a foreign land. He goes on to say, "In regard to your letter concerning the poem Jael, do not suspect me that I am of the type of youth that comprises most of this generation who strive to reveal blemishes and fabricate things which are not so about our holy books. Rather have I always loved my people, its tongue, and our glorious books with a powerful love.... Believe me that I have not come to deride Jael, but rather in the manner of a poet to seek a beautiful and pleasant or monumental and awe inspiring theme to sing about. Thus I chose the story of Jael....But I will not hide the truth, that the deed of Jael is repugnant and distasteful in my eyes.... I think that the murder which she committed is even worse because she killed a man at peace with

her, who came to find shelter in her shadow, who depended upon his treaty with her, and we know from the words of our prophet (Ezekiel - 17-15) how evil it is to break a treaty of peace, even with an enemy king, how much more so with a man who trusted in her, and even more so to kill him."

Lebensohn then brings additional illustrations from the Bible to explain why he presented Jael in the light that he did. But he adds, "However, I have listened to your voice of reproach, not to sin against the words of the prophetess who blesses her, and I have added several lines that will justify her, and similarly did my dear father advise me."[34]

A comparison of the poems Jael and Sisera and Samson yields interesting similarities and contrasts. Whereas Samson is portrayed as a hero of his people with personal revenge as his consuming passion, Jael is also a heroine of her people, but her desire for national revenge is tempered with personal remorse. Although Samson was eager and anxious to destroy, Jael is portrayed as a woman, tender and kindly. In both

poems it is significant to note that the slaying of Sisera and the destruction of the Philistines, are not described in gory detail. This conscious omission of slaughter suggests the gentle nature and sensitive personality of the author.[35]

In Moses on Mt. Abarim, Lebensohn skillfully describes the past exploits of Moses who is now viewing from a mountain peak with mixed emotions the promised land for which he labored all his life. The poet's failure to depict the inner feelings of the monumental figure of Moses at his greatest and saddest moment, stands out in sharp contrast to his other works which reveal deep psychological insight and keen poetic analysis. Although the tragic moment of death is not emphasized, the poet's narration of the exploits of Moses is done in a thrilling and sweeping style.[36]

On the top of Mt. Abarim stands a solitary figure looking about him. What does he see? What joy does his face express? Why are his hands lifted towards the heavens? He sees the holy land and Jerusalem upon which he had ever set his thoughts. For this sacred land he suffered many evils, and now it lies before him. It

is a land flowing with milk and honey toward which the eyes of God above are continually turned. For eighty years Moses had dwelt in the wilderness; alone in the desert as God in his heavens. On God did he meditate all this time and to this land did he lift his eyes.

Michal goes on to describe how Moses discovered God in the wilderness and then led the children of Israel out of Egypt across the Red sea and the desert, obtaining water from the rock and manna from heaven, conquering the Bashan and the land of the Ammorites, until he finally brought his people to the shores of the Jordan. Were we to search through history to the beginning of time and read the record of all events, we would not find a figure comparable to this great law-giver who gave God to the world.

"There he led his people like a flock for forty years,
After him came Egyptians thirsting for their blood
With him a weak nation with countless troubles,
While before him, chaos and battling foe.

Thus was his life always in danger,
And the people he loved, his life did embitter,
Even to stone him they treacherously thought,
Denying his kindness and voiding God's covenant.

And as Noah once was one man alone,
Floating on the world's desolation, upon the
deep waters,
When the world was only a grave,
And Noah did hope for the lands of the living.

Thus in the desolate desert, among dark terrors,
For the land of God did Moses' soul yearn,
Hoping to leave the grave to dwell in life's
abode,
There, wishing to rest from all its weariness."

Michal explains that Moses had good reason to hope, because there is nothing too difficult for a man to whom God listens. He, alone, was left of his generation. Before him stood the land of Canaan, but the mighty command of God said, "you shall not enter there". Instead, Moses ascended Mt. Nebo, "With the setting of the sun there he died, his eyes still turned toward Jerusalem."[38]

Waxman points out correctly that, "emphasis is placed on the narration of the exploits of Moses rather than upon the pathetic moment of death."[39] This is a definite weakness since the area where the poet can be most effective is not in recounting historical facts which are already common knowledge, but rather in rendering a poetic description of the emotions which Moses must have felt at this dramatic and tragic

moment at the climax of his life.[40]

Although Micah Joseph Lebensohn was the first poet in modern Hebrew Literature to utilize the legend of the tragic end of Judah Halevi,[41] it could be said that Michal wrote this stirring poem in an atmosphere which practically demanded it of him. Shadal, in 1840, had published, Betulat Bat Yehuda and in 1845, Michal Sachs of Berlin published Religiöse Poesie der Juden. It is interesting to note that Heine's famous Yehuda Ben Halevi was published in 1851, the same year in which Michal's Shirai Bat Zion was published.[42]

Legend relates that Judah Halevi, the greatest of medieval poets, met a tragic end at the hands of an Arab while kneeling at the ruins of the Temple while singing his famous ode, Dost thou not ask O Zion? In thrilling style, Lebensohn portrays the all consuming love which Judah Halevi had for the land of his fathers. The perils of storm tossed seas, and the sight of ruin and desolation once the poet set foot upon the holy land, did not diminish his love or enthusiasm for the places of former glory.[43] Michal describes Judah Halevi

as he waters the holy ground with his hot tears, in that holy land,

> "In which every stone is an altar of the living God,
> Each rock a platform for God's Prophet." 44

And he dreams of Israel's heroes of long ago, the prophets and lawgivers, king David "the sweet singer of Israel", and Solomon, "wisest of all men." They gaze upon him, stretching out their hands towards him. As he falls into a trance, absorbed in his wonderful vision, he cannot tell whether he feels the sharp edge of the murderous sword in reality or only in his dream:

> "The hands of the dead still touch him, his heart is still a-quiver from his dream, when suddenly - ah, shameful violence! - a living hand plunges the sword through his heart, and his blood gushes forth like torrents of water, and his soul is swept away with the streaming blood. 'Thou art become as we!' the dead cry.
>
> A smile of pure joy - no fear of the shadow of death, but the glory of heavenly rapture-plays on his face; here his dream is ended - alas, for the death-bitter dream! - but the singer does not yet open his eyes.
>
> For scarce did he slumber, weary and spent, when a cruel Arab, bold of front and hard of heart - brother to the leopard and friend of the adder - brought murder upon him in the evil fury of the sword.

> Memory of his hallowed name will not end
> for Judah; when the pillaged daughter of Zion
> sorrows in the fast of the fifth month over
> the laments of the son of Hilkiah, her eyes
> weep over his song also."[45]

Lebensohn, who was also destined not to see the fulfillment of his dreams, is naturally drawn to the great classic figures of our Jewish history, like Moses and Yehuda Halevi.[46] Moses too, whom he describes with a great outpouring of feeling is fated to die without seeing the fulfillment of his fondest hope. The Bible says:

"You shall see it, but you shall not enter therein."[47]

This is not just a physical sight but a spiritual vision as well. Moses can visualize that this land will be settled, cities erected, temples built, people sitting under their vines and fig trees, and in all this Moses cannot participate. This is the plight of the poet, destined to die young with the gift of genius. Everyone has to face the inevitability of death, but how much more heightened is the remorse of one doomed to die so young. Thus, Lebensohn identifies himself with Moses, dying alone on a mountaintop, his eyes turned toward that which was denied him.

Yehuda Halevi is very clearly a similar image - he too was a great figure in Jewish history. He too had a dream. The only difference between him and Moses is that Yehuda merited to set his foot upon the soil of the holy land. However, he too was snatched at the moment of his greatest realization and victory. Both epic figures fell short of realizing in life their fondest dreams, but fulfillment was yet attained in that Halevi and Moses died with a kiss. Halevi kissed the holy ground and died with a smile, while Moses was kissed by God. The ambivalent fate of these classic Jewish heroes reflects the sad paradox of the young poet's life, who nobly attempted to accept premature death and partial fulfillment, while viewing the joys that could have been on the horizon of his young life.

Notes for Chapter II

Shirai Bat Zion

1. Joshua Bloch, Congress Weekly, Micah Joseph Lebensohn, Vol. 19, No. 32, Dec. 8, 1952, pg. 12

2. Jacob Fichman, Micah Joseph Lebensohn (Poems and Letters), Tel Aviv, 1943, pg. 2

3. Joshua Bloch Congress Weekly, op. cit., pg. 12

4. Waxman, A History of Jewish Literature, Bloch Publishing Co., N.Y., 1945, Vol. III, pg. 229

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Fichman, op. cit., pg. 30-31

8. History of Modern Hebrew Literature, Klausner, London 1932, pg. 34

9. Fichman, op. cit., pg. 6-7

10. Waxman, op. cit., , pg. 229

11. Ibid., pg. 230

12. Fichman, op. cit., Kohelet, pg. 9

13. Ibid., pg. 15,16

14. Klausner (Eng.) op. cit., pg. 35

15. Fichman, op. cit., pg. 16

16. Klausner (Heb), op. cit. pg. 255

17. Ibid.

18. P. Lachover, Toldot Hasifrut Haivrit Hahadasha
Tel Aviv, 1936, Vol. II, pg.124

19. Ibid. pg. 122

20. Ibid. pg. 123

21. Ibid. pg. 120

22. Ibid. pg. 123

23. Klausner (Heb), op. cit., pg. 259

24. Waxman, op. cit., pg. 231

25. Fichman, op. cit,. pg. 17

26. Ibid., pg. 19

27. Waxman, op. cit., pg. 231

28. Klausner (Eng.), op. cit., pg. 36 (Full quote)

29. Ibid, pg. 37, (Full quote)

30. Ibid., (Full quote)

31. Ibid., pg. 38

32. Ibid.

33. Fichman, op. cit., pg. 91

34. Ibid., pg. 93

35. Lachover, op. cit., pg. 128

36. Waxman, op. cit., pg. 231

37. Fichman, op. cit., pg. 24

38. Ibid., pg. 25

39. Waxman, op. cit., pg. 231

40. A. Orinovsky, Toldot Hasifrut Ha'vrit Hahadasha Tel Aviv, 1946, Vol. 1, pg. 161

41. Congress Weekly, op. cit., pg. 13

42. Klausner (Heb), op. cit., pg. 260

43. Waxman, op. cit., pg. 232

44. Klausner (Eng.), op. cit., pg. 39

45. Ibid, pg. 39,40

46. Waxman, op. cit., pg. 232

47. Deuteronomy, chapter 34, verse 4, J.P.S.

48. Ibid., pg. 261

Chapter II

Kinor Bat Zion

The Kinor Bat Zion, (Harp of the Daughter of Zion) published posthumously by Michal's father in 1870, contains a large number of short poems including many translations from Homer, Virgil, Horace, Schiller, Goethe, Heine, Mickiewicz, and Alfieri.[49]

If in the Shirai Bat Zion, the young poet merged the fears of his own heart with the lives of the heroes whose glories or sorrows he sang of, then in the original poems of the Kinor Bat Zion, the sick poet bares his soul.[50] Like Heine he sang from a "mattress grave"; thus many of his poems are fraught with pain and melancholy.[51] Even though Lebensohn cried out in the agony of his pain, "Cursed be death, and life be damned",[52] yet he loved life, thirsted and craved for its pleasures. Therefore, the poet's poems in the Kinor Bat Zion, sing of two themes, which have been and perhaps will always be the two most powerful and mysterious forces in all of man's existence; love and death.[53]

While on the one hand his morbid poems, written when the poet felt the terrifying grip of death, are gloomy and sad, yet his love poems speak of life pulsating with vigor and joy.[54]

The love poems of Micah Joseph Lebensohn are full of charm, of living emotion, which are fresh and natural. For the first time in the history of modern Hebrew Literature, here are love poems worthy of the name, born not of imitation of European poets, but written because of the real need of a young spirit which knew love with its pleasures and sufferings.[55]

In the first of five poems, "Forsaken Beloved",[56] the pangs of love are echoed. The poet does not play with love. He recalls the pleasant moments spent together. Now she had forgotten him. He attempts to erase her image from his memory, but in vain, for she rules over him.

"I was in bitter gloom last evening,
You were heedless of my troubled spirit,
And your haughty words pierced my heart,
Is this your love? O beautiful and pure!"

The poet asks whether his beloved has forgotten the night she swore to love him, when she listened to

his oaths of love with rapture, and clung to his every word. To remind her, he evokes memories and pictures of past scenes of their love.

"Remember when evening fell in the woods,
As the sun did red-eyed set,
In its light did your cheeks grow crimson
And feel the kisses of my mouth."

In like manner the poet asks her to recall the night they took a stroll, to the flute-like strains of the birds. The wind murmured softly in every flower's ear , and the woods whispered in a council of elders.

"Even the river waves lapped quietly,
Speaking to each other without words,
Then your arms embraced me,
'Of our great love do they murmur and tell'.

Thus did you speak to me, your soul astir,
With tens of thousand's of eyes did the heaven look down,
The silence alone listened to your words,
And in the sky the moon appeared as faithful witness."

The poet continues, calling to mind the spring night they went boating upon the waters, when suddenly a storm broke. The thunder awoke as one asleep, and the rain kissed the cheeks of his beloved. Amidst the fears of darkness and the night's terrors, she

embraced him and clung to him, both their hearts beating like the storm about them, as her breath burnt his cheek. He stood trembling, for in his heart was a fear,

"'If only forever, you said,
'Could we be t us together'."

But the poet realizes the impossibility of his request ,

"Remember! How can you remember if you have
forgotten me?"

Moreover, now she laughed at his sorrow, and who could understand his pain?

"My pride awoke, also my spirit waxed wroth,
No longer, O maiden, shall you deal arrogantly
with the poet,
I have gathered my strength to break your bonds,
And shall command my soul to love no more.

But alas - My soul do you alone rule,
How can I command my soul and spirit not to love?
Shall I order my blood to cease flowing,
And my heart to stop beating?" 57

The poet asks how he can tear this powerful love from a tumultuous spirit and a burning heart. Should you tear a petal from the blossoming rose's heart, it would surely turn pale and expire. Yet he can not

suffer her haughtiness, and vows to leave her forever, even if he should die, or fade like a bud deprived of the sun, or a body which has been parted from its soul.

This poem has the ring of truth and authenticity. The poet does not speak of love in the abstract, but rather depicts the moments so familiar to everyone who has loved and been loved. He describes those moments when nature conspires to aid the progress of one's love. The setting sun heightens the maiden's beauty, and the blush it raises on her cheeks is supplemented by the lover's kiss. The woods, the birds, and the stream seem to speak and whisper their love. The stars look down and the moon witnesses the enamored couple. Even nature in its harshest aspects with her lightning, thunder and storm, manages to bring them closer together when the girl clings to him in fright, and their hearts beat wildly together. At this moment the maiden becomes aware of how close they really are, and expresses her hope that they might remain thus forever. But now that all this has ended, the youth realizes that these moments can mean nothing to her for she has forgotten him. He struggles with the pain of every

rejected lover, to throw off the bonds of his passion and to cease loving. It is so authentic to witness the poet discovering that he is pitting his mind in vain, in the unequal struggle against his heart. And yet, with all this, he must forsake his beloved with the full realization of his consequent grief and desolation.

Not all five of Lebensohn's love poems are of equal quality or sense of conviction. "My Beloved's Birthday"[58] is obviously much more general and much less personal, although one cannot deny the charm that it possesses. In this poem the poet expresses the difficulty he has in choosing an adequate present.

> "What gift can I give you upon the day of your birth?
> If I tore out the sun and the moon from up above,
> Should I bring down to earth the morning star,
> My heart tells me, they would not be acceptable to you."

The sun, the moon, and the stars are dim in comparison to her beauty; thus the poet looks about for a more appropiate offering. Perhaps he should give his heart to her as a gift?

> "But my soul and heart are no longer mine,
> Having given them to you for a smile of your lips,

My songs, too, fear to approach
Knowing that I can not through them repay your goodness.

But I have a lovely bright eyed child,
And see how she stretches out her hands to you,
She will be yours forever, and you will be hers too,
It is my love, dearer to me than wine."

The third poem, entitled, "We Have a Sister",[59] is once again more personal,

"There with me in the meadow does Hannah sit,
As my hand playfully runs through the braids of her curly hair,
At my arms embrace and burning kisses,
She grows angry for a moment, but her face is gay."

He can not control his feeling for her since she is so beautiful, and she must share with him the blame for his ardor,

"What is this my beautiful one, why do you slip away?
Do not be so lovely, O beautiful and sweet,
Nor laugh with your charming lips,
Only t en shall I not redden your cheeks with kisses."

After extolling her incomparable beauty and her smile with the like of which Eden was created, he continues,

"How beautiful you are my lovely one, as you grow angry,
When my strong love breaks the bonds of propriety.
How awful is this great ire, wrath and beauty,
Captivating my soul while breaking my heart."

And when the poet's sadness darkens his face, when the clouds of sorrow lie upon his forehead, then the breath of her mouth dispels the gloom and her beautiful eyes restore his countenance.

Although this poem is not as convincing as the first, yet it is more real than the second.

The fourth poem, called, "The Sworn Love", is permeated with a lighter spirit.

"Forgive me my pure one, if the bonds of modesty,
Have been overstepped - Now let me swear,
That your modest way I will no longer profane,
Even should my soul be consumed by your fire."

At first he swears by the light and by the beauty of the stars. However, he has opened his mouth in vain, since her eyes are lights and he can swear only by them. Thus he vows:

"Not to draw near, even to touch your hand,
And deep within my heart, I will silence the storm,

My love's flame will also grow dim and go out,
And the sparks of my desire will not stream from
my eyes."

And so he tells his beloved that she need not slip away. He calls to her to return, no longer to keep her distance, for he will not raise his hands or eyes, nor even bring the blush to her cheek again. His lips, which have thirsted for her, will not dare to taste of her love which is sweeter than wine. Nor will he give his heart ease by embracing her heart. And thus he promises to be perfectly behaved, since this is what she apparently desires. However, the poet feels constrained to point out the possible disadvantages to her.

"Come then my beautiful one, O come back,
A blind mute shall I be, like a marble statue,
I will not rejoice with trembling at the sight
of your grandeur,
And to your gracious words will my ear prove heavy,"

However, after all these promises he hears the door open and out go all his good intentions,

"But why has the door swung open on its hinges?
My dove has returned, how great is my joy,
In vain have I spoken, my heart will not rest.
In vain have I sworn. The devil take my promises."

The last poem is "A Sonnet", which is patently the poorest of the five. There are no pictures or feelings that strike the reader as fresh or vital. The poet describes how from the moment he saw his sweetheart, his heart was aflame and his soul longed for her. He asks her to forgive his love. His very life and soul are hers. Were she to give him her love, then would she have given him everything and taken nothing. In school boyish fashion, Lebensohn describes how the lover lies faint at her feet,

> "How my spirit and my heart sigh upon the earth,
> While in your eyes, the heaven opened for me.
> I shall no longer see you, Woe, the skies close upon me,
> What remains for me here on earth - what need have I of life?"

The love poems of Lebensohn present two interesting questions. Firstly, from the poet's letters to Sachs, it seems that in Vilna, upon his return from Berlin, he wrote a complete book of love poems called "Roses and Thorns." In the Kinor Bat Zion, which was published 18 years after his death, there are only five love poems, not enough to fill a small notebook, much less a whole book. There are a few possible explanations for this;

1. Lebensohn added to his love poems other lyrical poems which together comprised the Kinor Bat Zion.

2. It is also possible that Adam chose five love poems from his son's writings, and discarded the rest just as he discarded most of the play "The End of Saul."[63]

Many wonder if the love poems of Lebensohn are, like those of his father and Gordon, merely the result of reading love poems written by foreign poets, or whether they are the result of true love, of living feeling, and personal experiences. For a long time it was thought that the 'Chana' to whom the poet refers in his poem, "The Holiday of Spring", was fictional. S. Mendlekorn who was closer to Michal in time than all his biographers, and who was both a student and a friend of Adam Hakohen, definitely insists that "She", meaning Chanah, was the creation of Michal's poetic imagination.[64] This is an indication of how extremely careful one must be with even the best of sources, because Mendlekorn's opinion was generally accepted for many years until the comparatively recent publication of Lebensohn's letters.[65]

In one of them to Sachs, he clearly refers to "the girl that you know, the beloved of my heart, and the treasure of my soul."[66] And he continues, "Your dear memory, the memory of Berlin, and of the days of my first love for this girl; these thoughts almost renew my youth."[67] From these letters and the real tenor of his love poems, it is safe to say that the poet wrote from a living experience that was all too true.

> "Even the love of Chanah, my dearest one,
> Have I torn from my heart.
> What has she to do with my heart, where the grave awaits,
> Can life's light dwell in the place of death's darkness?"[68]

Although the spectre of death walked with the young poet casting its morbid shadow upon his works, Michal's love of nature and desire for life, left a sad beauty in his poems.[69]

In the poem, "The Festival of Spring",[70] which was written in Berlin, the poet describes the city on a spring evening when;

> "The evening shadows grew long, the day has fled,
> All the city streets are swallowed up by shadows,
> And over the river Spree, the sun does sink,
> Its footsteps known only to the cloud's edges."

But this evening is exceptionally gay,

> "The city of Berlin is tumultuously happy,
> Because today is a holiday, the festival of
> Easter and the spring,
> And as with a garment does she cloak herself
> with joy and gladness,
> And in her streets, there is nothing but
> gaiety round about."

Having set this happy and festive mood of both nature and man, the poet contrasts it most effectively

with his personal state. Thus he continues,

"Desolate do I sit indoors, hopelessly broken"

His spirit is low because of his inherited illness. He realizes that he must leave in the midst of his days. Soon tears will no longer fall from his eyes, which have flowed with rivers of tears. Soon sighs will no longer break forth from a heart, already rent by a multitude of sighs. There resides a dreadful silence within him, the restfulness of the grave, like a forest after having been buffeted by the wind, like a fleet of ships, after having been pounded by a stormy sea.

"I live but my soul is weary unto death,
I am alive, if we can call death, life,
If a youth carrying all the grief of death's
shadow
Can still be called alive under the heavens.

Oh, I still do live, because to add to my mis-
fortune,
The love of life still resides within us,
Oh, how fearful it is to go rejoicing to the grave,
While one's soul and spirit still clings to life."

Lebensohn is truly a tragic figure, following the Greek definition of a noble hero, cursed with a fatal flaw, that leads inevitably to the hero's doom.

The poet's terrible sickness, and his inevitable death are tragic enough in themselves, but this is compounded by the will to live, which does not permit the young poet to make his peace with death. Neither can he come to terms with life as he cries out,

> "May the love of life be cursed forever,
> Of all man's straits, it being the most fearful.
> It prevents my hands from destroying myself,
> And paints illusions of vain hopes."

However the happy shouts in the streets, and the gas lights persuade the poet to leave his house, in the hope of finding momentary surcease from his pain. He sees,

> "Already beautiful girls, streaming forth,
> Lyrical joy on every face.
> Among these beautiful sights, my face darkens
> Like a cloud among the heavenly stars.
>
> And lovely girls dressed in scarlet,
> In vain do their eyes express love.
> Oh gone are the days of my desire, the time of pleasure,
> When to beauty's grandeur, did my soul sing of love."

The poet can no longer respond to love's charm and enticement.

"In your beauteous eye, I no longer see heaven,
Even your plessant voice does my ear not understand,
Oh, life's sweetness has become a burden,
Because my heart is dead within me and has
turned to stone.

Even the love of Chanah, my dearest one,
Have I torn from my heart,
What has she to do with my heart, where the
grave awaits.
Can life's light dwell in the place of death's
darkness?"

Perturbed, he walks heavy-hearted among the festive throngs, hurrying his steps, but he realizes that he is fleeing not the people, but rather his own pain. He passes the railroad station, music hall and the royal palace, until he finds himself at the edge of the city, a wanderer among the teeming crowd. But in vain does he flee, because with him is his grim companion, who watches his steps, and follows after him; who will not desist, and who holds his hand in a vise-like grip.

"And death's terrors come with her,
Her face is the pit, her odor that of the grave,
Her bone's protrude, and like the gloom,
She tells my life, there is no hope."

In the bloom of his youth, his terrible illness has created a hell within him. In the cup of his youth

a poison has been poured, a sickness worse than the grave. In terrible pain, with no hope for the future, consigned to an early and tortuous death, in love with life, but resentful of the sad and cruel fate which it has meted out to him, wearied to death by the hopeless struggle, Lebensohn ends this touching poem,

"After it does death follow like a companion,
She is slow in coming, stepping lazily along,
To my cry he does not hearken, my voice he does
not hear,
Cursed be death, and life be damned." [71]

Michal's poem, Cholera in Berlin,[72] affords a further insight into the effect of the fatal illness. When the terrible plague of Cholera struck Berlin with savage fury, taking a fearful toll, the young poet, almost reveled in the city's struggle with death. He is no longer alone. His personal burden of death now being shared by the entire populace.

"Sleep had enveloped the heaven and earth,
And after her came her brother, death.
Reel and stagger Berlin! For destruction has come,
And with its mighty step, does the shadow of
death walk within you."

For the cholera walks about like a guest, cutting down the living in its wake.

"And I walk quietly among those dying of the plague,
There among the dead do the sick also call,

Destined to die, looking toward the grave,
And with a parched throat, crying out in bitter
pain.

Fearful is the sight, like the satyrs of the night,
And a horrible blue does cover their cheeks.
Wrestling with their death in the stillness
without strength,
Their limbs do move, their eyes grow dim."

After describing the general carnage, Lebensohn chooses the image of a tender youth to express more vividly the plague's horror. Toward this end he pictures the delicate young man, gasping for breath, his whole being crying out in his losing battle with death, as his blood congeals within him and he finally dies. Michal turns to him and asks,

"What do you fear youth, and why do you thus murmur?
How is it that all living beings have desired sleep?
The sleep of death is long and pleasant,
Without terrifying dreams - so why be afraid?"

The poet asks cynically, whether he trusts in the vain idol of hope and adds,

"There is only one hope, and that is death"

As he continues, one can not help but feel the poet's identification with the dying youth.

"Then die, you who are expiring!
Your bed in the grave means only rest.

These who are alive do I pity,
Lest they will yet live, and suffer till the
grave.

Whether you go to the Sheol, or the heavens,
To chaos should you return, or to eternal
oblivion,
Happy are you! Oblivion and Sheol are better
than life.
They are better than the world, this murderous den."

Thus Lebensohn ends with his observation that the dying youth will not find hell in the grave, because hell can only be found on earth.[73]

This bitter and sarcastic poem requires little commentary.

In the plague, Michal has found a perfect foil for his own misfortune, and uses it to cry out bitterly against a world which has been so cruel to him and which has proven to be for him,

"A hell on Earth!"[74]

When he addresses the youth, it is not with the unfeeling remarks of an insensitive observer. We realize that he is speaking to himself, observing the symptoms of his own struggle with death, and wondering why human beings battle so hard to remain alive, when life can

mean only further pain and agony; when the grave is so inviting with its promise of surcease from struggle, and restful slumber.

His unconcerned manner, while walking about in the midst of the infected city, focuses the readers attention upon the fatal nature of the poet's illness which permits him to have such a carefree attitude toward death. The spectre of death is a horrible image to normal people suddenly stricken by the fatal plague; but death which is so fearful to them, has been Lebensohn's constant life's companion.

Indeed, the poet muses upon the fearful contrast: they, that is the people stricken by the plague, quickly live or die, but he naither lives nor dies.

To the Stars,[75] is a poem which the sick poet wrote in the last year of his agonizing illness.[76] The poet has been impressed by the grandeur of nature and the wonder of life, but in his affliction, he cannot help but grow impatient with the conflict which tears at his faith, the loveliness of the universe and the desolation of his own body.[77]

With the setting of the sun, the stars march out upon the seas of heaven. The poet is moved by the beauty of the scene and calls upon the heavenly hosts to stop for a moment and tell him who they are.

Are they far off lands as the astronomer teaches? Or is the astrologer correct in his contention that the thoughts of God are engraved on the book of the skies, holding secret treasures of wisdom and understanding for him who can read them. Or do they sing to God with the music of the spheres, as described by Pythagoros and Plato, the ancient Greek philosophers who believed that the stars sang of the greatness of creation; philosophers who listened intently to catch the heavenly strains?

Is it true that the souls of the righteous do dwell among the plains of light, that they leave the world of death to rejoice in eternal pleasantness? But the poet does not know and he continues to ask, "Who are you?". His desire is to have the veil of secrecy rent from the stars for a moment, so that he might see their secrets, even at the cost of his life. He continues,

"I remember when I was just past seven.
My foot had just trod upon life's threshhold.
Then the child stood on the hilltop,
And already raised his eyes to you."

The little boy would stand with an astonished heart, andhis eyes would be sweet with tears. The wind would seem to whisper into his ear the secret speech of the angels. Then, as a lad of twelve, he began asking "Who are you?," with the simple uninvolved questioning of a young boy.

But now he asks this same question no longer in innocent and naive wonder, but rather as one who has seen life in its bitter reality.

"Now, please listen to a youth's voice,
Though my days be few here on earth,
Yet does my heart within me expire,
Having seen affliction, illness and ruin.

Michal rebels against his stifling frustrations;

"Answer me, O answer, who dwell on high
On your eternal courses, stop for a moment,
Alas, my soul is weary with the whole world
In which man is born to toil and trouble,"

The poet vents his agonizing feelings upon the sad world of men.

"Here wickedness resides and evil does dwell,
And infamous malice does smooth its tongue.
Here false belief spreads its fearful wrath;
At her right hand, her brother's falsehood stands."

Religious hatred is also rampant.

"In its mouth a merciful God, in its right hand
a sword,
Praying and kneeling while destroying;
And in the name of a forgiving God,
Tearing like a wolf at even tide."

Michal describes the world as one which was cast away in anger by its creator. Seeing its opportunity, death pounced upon the world, and now holds it eternally in its claws. To this was added misfortune, which came with gnashing teeth, afflicting man all the days of his life. Time has become high priest of death, sacrificing its guilt offerings on the altar of every grave. The poet, weary of this world, longs for the stars, asking them to open their lips and teach the youth who has come to them, seeking their light and truth.

Suddenly he is beset with doubts,

"Does wickedness sanctify itself among you too,
Despoiling and crying, robbing and praying?

Does flattery cloak itself in piety, there too,
Bringing the pure of heart to the pit?

Do you see truth then eye to eye,
Do you perceive the secret of creation which is
too lofty for man?
Do you know how existence was woven out of
nothingness,
With the law of eternity in its warp and woof?"

The poet wonders whether the same laws rule the heavens as the earth. Does death ascend even to the stars? Are there old and grey stars among them too? Does the great bear die with its children? Has the sun's eyes dimmed, or, on the other hand, has eternal life been given to the stars for their portion, so that they have ceased to count the days and years? But the poet realizes the futility of his questions; since for years without end have the wisest men sought out, studied, and asked of the stars, but they have sought in vain, because,

"To man, who is vanity, you do not give ear,
Mute and deaf do you pursue your eternal courses."

In the days of the world's infancy when the stars were man's gods and later when the unity of God was proclaimed, throughout all the ages, the stars remained

immutable. Thus, the poet closes his poem,

"You were silent and your tongue was dumb,
Because the mighty God had placed his hand upon your lips."[78]

From this poem we gather that Lebensohn could wrest nought from the stars other than a cold and relentless stare.

The sick poet consoles himself with the thought that no man has ever been able to lift the veil which the mighty God has stretched over the secrets of his universe. The haunting mysteries of love and life, death and despair; these were not to be fathomed by the youthful, but dying poet.

Of the other works in the Kinor Bat Zion, there is but a single poem which is Zionist in subject matter. In his poem, The Tossed Twig,[79] the poet sings of a twig being tossed aimlessly upon the surging waves of the seas.

To this query,

"Alas, poor twig, whither go you? What marks your way?
Forlorn you stray.

Storm and the whirlwind know you,
Darken your way."

the answer is given:

"Once in a leafy tree, there was my home.
Torn from a swaying branch, friendless I roam.
Plucked from the joyous green that gave me birth,
What is my life to me, and of what worth?
Thus do they taunt me, with none to save,
Prey of the whirlwind, the storm and the wave."

In this simple allegory, both the life of the poet and the fate of his people are symbolized.[80]

Though the poet had grown old prematurely, he was only a short span of time removed from his childhood. In his poem, Childhood,[81] Michal strikes the lost and forgotten chord of childhood, emitting a nostalgic and charming tune.

"A garden of God is our childhood, each day
A festival radiant with laughter and play,
And angels of peace gather there in the glen,
And tiptoe on carpets of flowers, and then
Joy, glee and frolic and innocent fun -
These are the blossoms that smile at the sun.
Far from the tumult, far from the crowd,
Only the singing of birds is allowed.
Roofed by a heaven of purest blue,
Earth dressed in garments of radiant hue.
No care or sorrow, no tearful prayer
Shatter the beauty and loveliness there."[82]

These and other poems became poetic tunes when the "Harp of the Daughter of Zion" was plucked by the master hand of Micah Joseph Lebensohn. "But alas, the harp fell too soon from the feeble hands of the sick poet."[93]

Notes for Chapter II

Kinor Bat Zion

49. Klausner (Eng.), op. cit., pg. 40

50. Waxman, op. cit., pg. 232

51. Klausner (Eng.), op. cit., pg. 40

52. Fichman, op. cit., pg. 44

53. Klausner (Heb), pg. 261

54. Congress Weekly, op. cit., pg. 12

55. Klausner (Heb), pg. 261

56. Fichman, op. cit., pg. 45

57. Ibid., pg. 56

58. Ibid., pg. 47

59. Ibid., pg. 47

60. Ibid., pg. 48

61. Ibid., pg. 48

62. Klausner (Heb) pg. 243

63. Ibid.

64. S. Mandelkern, History of the Great Poets of Israel, in Ha'asif, Sokolow, 1887, Vol III, pg. 427-428

65. Klausner (Heb), op. cit. pg. 244

66. Fichman (1948), op. cit. pg. 101

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid, pg. 44, Holiday of Spring

69. Waldstein, Modern Hebrew Literature, N. Y., 1916, pg. 17

70. Fichman, op. cit., pg. 43

71. Ibid., pg. 44

72. Ibid., pg. 49

73. Ibid.,

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid., pg. 36

76. Klausner (Heb), op. cit., pg. 246

77. Waldstein, op. cit., pg. 17

78. Fichman, op. cit., pg. 38

79. Waxman, op. cit., pg. 234

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

Chapter III

Ideas and Influence

When Micah Joseph Lebensohn passed away in the middle of the nineteenth century, little did he realize that the time of his death would become a natural time division, signaling new life for modern Hebrew literature.[1] The publication of Michal's Shirai Bat Zion in 1851, a volume of poems with a freshness and naturalness heretofore unknown, and the birth of the Hebrew novel from the pen of Mapu, both mark the beginning of the revival (Romantic period) of Hebrew literature.[2] With the exception of Hokmat Yisrael during the Galician period, Hebrew literature now left behind a century of effort lacking in creativeness and originality. All too often it was, in spirit and form, a poor imitation of stifling European classicism.[3] In keeping with the dryness and formality of this old pseudo-classic literary spirit, Hebrew literature was likewise deistic and rationalistic in a most colorless fashion. Since the medieval flame of Yehuda Halevi, there had been no great national idea or stirring emotion which could

fire the imagination.[4] But, just as the German romanticist turned back to the days of Wehmgericht or the Teutonic knights, Dumas to the cape and sword, Scott and the subsequent pre-Raphaelite poets to the middle ages,[5] the sickly Vilna youth blew the breath of poetic life into the classic giants of Israel's Biblical and Medieval past. When for mental convenience we mark the beginning of romanticism in France with Rousseau about 1762, in Germany with Goethe, Herder, Schiller and Wieland about 1781, in England with the publication of the "Lyrical Ballads" of Wordsworth and Coleridge,[6] then the publication of the Shirai Bat Zion shortly before the death of its young creator, gives rise to a new era in Hebrew literature.

Even though romanticism was a belated blossom in Hebrew Literature,[7] Michal's poetry still came before its time, for there is nothing like it in the poetry which preceeded him, and its continuation was delayed in coming directly after him. It was only in the time of the Hebrew renaissance that the seeds that were planted in the field of Hebrew poetry finally sprouted. Lebensohn's poetry was an oasis in the Haskalah

literature which suffered from an overload of verbiage, a wailing lack of talent, and the artificiality of its false pathos. Michal's poetry did not serve as an instrument of propaganda, as a means to an end, but was rather an end in itself. In his poetry we do not find communal or didactic goals, or the battles of his generation, because its basis was in art, feeling, and beauty.[8]

In this respect Michal's poetry is all the more startling in the light of the severe criticism meted out to the contemporary Hebrew literature of his day. Kleinman[9] sarcastically comments on the "enlightenment and knowledge" which was being fostered by the growth of small groups of "Maskilim" in Russia. He singles out for particular "distinction", the large center of Haskalah in Vilna where the wreath was placed on the head of the "poet", Adam Hakohen Lebensohn. Kleinman wryly states that although Adam Hakohen was merely an idle teacher who learned a great amount of Bible and Grammar, and also a little of foreign language, yet he managed to inject "inspiration" into his barren verses. There are poems of Adam, although few, that we can still read today with pleasure, though by our standards Adam

never was a poet. Kleinman comments that Hebrew literature was in such a sad state that it is no wonder that Adam wore the poet's crown, and that the eyes of the Maskilim round about were raised toward him, although there were those who were greater than Adam in Judische Wissenschaft, both in the language of science and writing ability. Kleinman admits grudgingly that the center of Haskalah in Vilna did have a great influence upon Russian Jewry in general, especially upon the development of modern Hebrew literature. The Songs in the Sacred Tongue of Adam Hakohen, in spite of all their defects, are the cornerstones in the structure of our new literature. Likewise, many have read and been influenced by Kalman Shulman's books such as Mysteries of Paris, The History of the World, and History of Scholars of Israel. Kleinman does not fail to add that not one of these books were original, but that these imitations were in line with the taste of that generation.[10]

Micah Joseph Lebensohn also translated many works of foreign authorship. Indeed, even his original works are in many instances close aproximations of European poetry. K. A. Bartini,[11] in dealing with the original

and the translations in the work of Michal, gives us a more objective insight into the tendency on the part of Haskalah writers to translate and imitate European literature.

Most of the writers of the Haskalah spaded at one and the same time in two fields, the field of the original and the field of translation, both of which were equally worthy in their sight to serve the new literature coming into being. The tendency to translate secular literature was due to three reasons:

1. To emplay the use of the Hebrew tongue for the purpose of turning it into a true organ of expression for all shades of thought and feeling.[12]

2. To give the Jewish reader a taste of the beauty of Japhet (European culture); and to foster the cultural-aesthetic values and the social ideas which the Hebrew writers preached. Therefore many of the Haskalah writers felt their principal purpose to be translation and re-working of secular works. Their influence is consequently recorded in this area. (eg. Kalman Shulman)[13]

3. For the sake of lending greater scope to the

personality of the writer through blending his own experiences and thoughts with those that were expressed in the creations of the other peoples.[14]

With the cutting through of the first window, looking out upon the broad heretofore unknown world, it was natural that the Hebrew writer should grow drunk with all the grandeur which burst upon him, and that he should seek to share with the Jewish members of his generation at least the smallest portion of this great wealth.[15]

The impact of general culture upon Michal is clearly demonstrated by the range of his interests and translations. From his works we can sense the youthful attempt to encompass the whole literary world. The fact that he translated the works of German, Italian and Greek authors suggests the exuberance of youth which, in refusing to recognize any restrictions or bounds, flies in wide arcs of admiration from one beautiful discovery to another, overwhelmed by all the literary treasures which lie waiting to be tasted.

Fichman [16] revealed in his time (and after him

others) the source of the short poem Forsaken Bough, which is a reworking of a poem called La Feuille by the French poet and fabulist Antoine Vincent Arnault. It is probable that Michal used the French source. Michal's biographers do not stress his knowledge of French; however, it is a fact that he translated a fable by La Fontaine which he entitled The Wolf and the Kid,[17] which is very close to the original.[18] Thus, in his letter to his friend Senior Sachs, he asks whether he left his French dictionary with him.[19] From these facts we gather that in the last year of life, Michal was interested in French works. Moreover, a poem was found which is completely a translation of the poet Lamartine which Michal called Vanity Under the Heavens.[20] In the original edition of Kinor Bat Zion this poem was placed at the end without any remark. It is possible that Adam Hakohen found the poem among his son's writings and did not know it was a translation. It is also possible that he knew this fact, but he did not bother to mention it. This poem, Vanity Under the Heavens,[21] is in fact one of Michal's most successful translations. In it all the verses are kept in terms of content and structure, and since French poetry was built on the

number of syllables and not on the rhythm, Michal was happy to keep the exact number of syllables as in the original (eleven syllables) omitting only the rhyme as he did also in translating from Goethe and others. The name of the French original is L'Isolement (Loneliness).[22]

The tone of Michal's most typically lyrical poems such as The Prayer[23] and the Holiday of the Spring[24] reminds one of French romanticism in its most stormy period. Michal's poem To the Stars[25] contains a good deal of Lamartine's poem Le Soir, and strongly resembles Lamartine's poem, Les Etoiles. A comparison yields the same scrutiny of the cosmic secrets, the same comparisons, and even the same questions. The three first stanzas of Michal's poem The Prayer resemble almost in everything the first portion of Lamartine's poem[25a] called, La Prière.[26]

The fact that Michal incorporated within his own works the genius of others should not detract from his talent and ability. Like every young poet, he too was subject to influences. It is important to recognize that in wrestling with the material of others, Michal in an unstilted and natural fashion, succeeded in pouring

out his own molds by singularly making borrowed themes and influences his own.[27]

There are three main aspects in the poetry of Lebensohn; the personal, the national and the universal. All of Michal's poetry is tied to his personal tragedy. However, on the anvil of his profound suffering, he beat out a universal poetic pattern which reflects and highlights a suffering humanity, tortured by its eternal questions, absorbing the battering blows of fate.[28] In his poem To the Stars he speaks about himself and his illness. He expresses the feeling that there is no life on earth for the afflicted poet in pain. This feeling envelops him completely and finds expression in a whole chain of lyrical poems which are outstanding for the depths of sorrow to which they give utterance.[29] In the Cholera in Berlin, the plague did not frighten the poet for life is more fearful, particularly a life devoid of health, or hope of ever being well; a life of endless pain whose goal is only an early grave. One for whom the whole world has become a grave, for one who tastes the pangs of hell on earth, death holds no terror.[30] Thus, in the poem, Holiday of Spring, there bursts

forth the cry, "Cursed forever be the love of life".[31]

Michal is by nature not a dark and despairing pessimist. He does not really want to die. He loves life and thirsts for its pleasures, though they are not destined to be fulfilled. He is desirous of the joys of existence, and the beauty of creativity; therefore, the thought of the nearness of death and its untimely inevitability is difficult to accept, "O how dreadful it is to go rejoicing to the grave when soul and spirit cling to life."[32] The poet's love for life is evidenced by his partiality to the spring, because it meant life resurrected, life beginning, bloom, as against the autumn which presaged the arrival of winter when life ceases. In winter Michal sees the symbol of death.

We find in the works of Michal a strong religious echo. To the young poet faith and hope are life itself. Whereas, to his father, Adam Hakohen, knowledge meant light, beauty, and life; to Michal it suggests doubt which consumes hope and faith. This aspect of the poet's thinking is sharply defined in Kohelet where wisdom destroys hope and faith.[33]

Despite the influences of his day, the faith in

and the affirmation of life on the part of the poet was the product of an inherent and firm religious feeling. It is true that he was influenced by pantheism through his association with Sachs, who was an authority on Ibn Gabirol whose philosophical speculations reflected definite pantheistic leanings.[34] Likewise, some critics feel that Schelling's influence must have been a romantic and pantheistic one. However, it is interesting and important to note that Lebensohn attended Schelling's lectures after the philosopher had stopped lecturing at the university. Schelling at this period of his life was stressing mythological themes.[35] Therefore, in his poem Hatifilah, Michal outdoes the Psalms in saying that the heavens themselves can not tell the glory of God. It is man alone, of all creatures blessed with reason, who can approach and recognize God, and thus "from the lap of death be born into life".[36]

Lebensohn's aversion to pantheism is understandable when we realize that Haskalah, meaning enlightenment, defies human reason as being supreme and the essence of life itself. Therefore, there would be a logical rejection to seeing life in matter. The strongest

feeling evidenced in the poem is one of religiosity, as inferred by the title, The Prayer. In this poem there is nothing expressed which could be deemed untraditional. God is almighty, omnipotent, and omnipresent. To God does man turn in silent prayer and with a tear. In Him does man place his hope and trust; therefore is man confident even in a world of turmoil and conflict. Michal significantly closes the poem,

> "And blessed are you heartfelt prayer,
> For upon your wings is healing for every wound,
> Like the dew that falls from the wide heavens,
> Do you revive man's heart, and heal his spirit."[37]

Thus the conclusion is of a traditionally religious nature.

The body of the poem is anti-pantheistic. God is not equated with nature. Nature is not only subservient to God, it is not even man's equal. Nature is completely lifeless, and only man breathes the spirit of life into it. Nature itself can not pray, and without man everything is dead.

> "My mouth did I give to those that could not speak,
> The wind only storms, the storm only rages,
> Though the cedars of God move, they do not pray,
> The bird only murmurs and chirps in the woods.

Can the heavens speak, the firmament relate
There being no soul within them to long and to
yearn?
My spirit alone within them speaks as my mouth
gives utterance.
A living void are they without knowledge or reason.

A mere dead corpse is the world too,
And in it do move clods without life,
Dead too are all they who live upon it,
For to the living God they cannot lift their eyes.

But man, behold he does live
And without him death is everywhere.
For his heart perceives God, his eye does see Him.
He is the eye of all existence, and the world's
heart." [38]

It would be difficult to interpret this as anything but the traditional Jewish attitude of man's centrality in a universe created and ruled by one God.

In a letter to Shadal, Michal expresses his love for Israel and his faith in its God.[39]

"Far be it from me to think evil or unworthy thoughts. The ideas of Kohelet are not my ideas, nor are his thoughts mine, for I am upright with my God, hoping in silence and trusting in his salvation even in times of trouble. He is my refuge in the days of my sickness and depression. Therefore, do not attribute the thoughts of Kohelet to my heart or soul. I have not taken any ideas from a foreign poet, neither in the poem of Jael nor in this one, nor in my interpretation of the figures of Minerva and Medussa, for it is not

my custom to do so. Rather, all the ideas of doubt are written in the book of Kohelet itself, and I only beautify them and put them in order. I added to them for the sake of aesthetics just as I have taken my subjects from the Song of Songs. The ideas of these two poems, are only to show the great and fearful contrast between these two books, as I wrote in my remarks on the poem of Kohelet which were intended to remove every obstacle from before those who are young. However, I have listened to your voice of reproof, and I have changed and added things within the poem and more at its end as you can see for yourself today."[40]

In truth Lebensohn added very little if anything to the traditional stories of the heroes in the Shirai Bat Zion. In general there is no deep philosophy expressed in the poems. Michal's strength seems to lie in describing the natural beauty of the holy land, which in some cases more effective than others, to describe the feelings of the characters which are not given in the strict economy of the Biblical narrative or of the folk legend. A great deal of Michal's claim to fame lies in the fact that he was among the very

first to attempt this type of character portrayal and development. His delineation of character and circumstance attest to his aesthetic sense and literary ability, but does not really indicate any deep philosophic interest or grasp. Singing of death, love, spring, or emotional conflicts, does not make one a philosopher or a critic or the social system. What impressed most admirers of Michal was that for the first time in modern Hebrew literature a poet had managed to express personal emotions in a natural fashion. That he was not always successful is not the point. After all he was also the product of his generation. This is evident in the manner in which occasionally he falls back upon the didactic style of Adam and his fellow Maskilim in digressing and expounding almost parenthetically on themes which began in a personal and fresh manner.[41]

The personal basis is the starting point in Lebensohn's development, but universalism is its end point, culmination, and peak.[42] The genius of the young poet becomes strikingly evident when we comprehend the broad base of his thought and poetry. In embracing

and fusing into his literary personality the universal genius of mankind, as illustrated by his choice translations of Homer, Virgil, Horace, Shiller, Goethe, Heine, Miechewicz, and Alfieri, Michal at the same time has given to Hebrew literature its Biblical-national poetry, par excellence.[43] In the Shirai Bat Zion, Michal is one of the poets of Zion; not one who wept for the exile, but rather the poet of our past, of the spring-time and strength of our national life.[44]

It is interesting that the subjects of the first and last poems in Shirai Bat Zion are, like Lebensohn, poets of Zion. The first is Solomon of Biblical days, who sang one thousand and five songs in the holy city of Jerusalem; and the other, the greatest poet of the middle ages, who also reached the gates of the city, the gates of Zion. All the subjects of the six poems are heroes of Israel who lived and died for their people. Michal's identification with the poets and the heroes of Zion is a clear indication of his love for and his dedication to Israel.[45]

This is important to remember in the light of the

contention of some that Maskilim like Michal carried the germ of assimilation, that in the search for general knowledge they infected themselves with the disease of assimilation and contaminated others. It merits repetition to note the ever increasing arc of secular knowledge achieved by young Lebensohn; this broadening of the poet's cultural base, served only to deepen his powers in expressing the glory and romance of his own people. This observation is all the more striking when we recognize that while Adam's poetry is general, abstract, and not bound with any strong or recognizable bond to Jewish content, Michal sang the songs of Jewish heroes. Whereas his father's poems were called, Poems of the Sacred Tongue, the son called his book, Songs of the Daughter of Zion.[46]

Michal, like Mapu and Kalman Shulman, is nationalistic and Zionistic even before Zionism. He is a Zionist having been immersed in Tanach, and in the glowing age of kings and prophets of Israel.[47] In his introduction to Shirai Bat Zion, he writes, "My dear reader, whose people is my people and whose God is my God, arise and

come now with me, for on the wings of poetry will I carry you today to the holy land, and although others have taken her to themselves, behold she is ours, because with rivers and streams of blood and tears have we acquired its holy soil." [48] In his poem, Forsaken Bough, the twig which symbolizes Israel is asked why it is not watchful of the storm and for what reason it wanders. To this it answers, "On a leafy tree did I dwell in peace; suddenly was I cast away. Before my time was I plucked. If, from the place of my birth, I must wander, then what is life to me? Therefore let them carry me, and let the angry waters lift me and turn me about." [49]

With the publication of Shirai Bat Zion, there began in the Hebrew literature of the Haskalah, a short period of "love of Zion". Although Mapu's famous novel, "Love of Zion" was not influenced by Michal and was begun a long time before Lebensohn wrote his poems, nevertheless, the Shirai Bat Zion was published before Mapu's book. Consequently the period of "the love of

Zion" actually began with Lebensohn and his poetry."[50]

There is no doubt that Michal exerted great influence upon the poets who came after him. His influence is evident in the early poems of Judah Loeb Gordon, M. M. Dolitsky, Constantin Schapiro, Mordecai Zeid Mané, H. N. Bialik, and others who picked up Michal's passionate thread of yearning for the old glory of mother Zion."[51]

Although Mané began his literary career some thirty years later than Michal, there are startling points of resemblance. Both shared the same fate, dying young from the same dreaded disease. Mané, like Lebensohn was enamored of the beautiful, but where Michal's main passion was love as a life-like force, Mané sought beauty for art's sake. Mané was far more preoccupied with his wasting disease which fostered in him a gentler nature and more of the artist.[52] In the brevity of their lives and in their love for the beautiful, they were akin to poets like Catullus, the brilliant Latin poet who died at thirty, and especially Keats, who died at twenty-six. Lebensohn, like Keats, left enduring testimony to

his genius in his works.[53]

Had not Lebensohn died so young, he might have become the greatest lyric poet of the Haskalah movement. In the central figure of Haskalah poetry,[54] Judah Loeb Gordon, we see the unmistakable influence of Micah Joseph Lebensohn. Gordon also began his literary career as a romantic, reverting to the ancient or medieval world forhis material. The influence of Michal is evident in a number of poems, written by Gordon during his romantic mood, the best known of which is, The Love of David and Michal. This poem is similar to the narratives of Lebensohn in meter, rhyme, and somewhat in romantic flavor. Gordon, however, never achieved the mellow style, the profound sentiment, or the serene romanticism which mark the works of Michal.[55] Aswath, Daughter of Potifera, David and Barzilai, In the Depth of the Ocean, and In the Lions Jaws, are poems of Gordon in which the influence of Michal can also be seen. "Alas Brother!", written by Gordan on the occasion of Lebensohn's death, is imbued with fine sentiment and noble grief at the passing of the young poet, friend, and inspirer of Gordan.[56]

Micah Joseph Lebensohn was a Hebrew poet in all his being with his deep love of Zion, his dedication to the sacred tongue, through which medium he poured out his heart; this ancient Eastern language which he converted into a modern Western idiom. But with the cry of his personal pain, and the prayer for his faith and people, like all great writers and creators he was also universal in his song of love for all mankind, the works of all men and all nations.[57]

Although the song of Michal was cut off in the middle, the sickly youth who fought with life and courted the poetic muse overcame his fate. For many years the scent of his youthful fragrance was preserved in all the poetry after him. In the lyric portions of Gordon, in the chirping songs of Mané, in the half choked sounds of Shapiro, and even in the beginnings of our newly revived poetry, there is still felt his strength and inspiration.[58]

His early death deprived Haskalah poetry of one of its mighty supports, for in Michal was combined Mapu's visionary magic with the sharp satirical power

of Gordon. He had many powers that remained unrevealed; but what is visible from the handful of his works, shows us a man of stature. His death was a loss to his generation; a family mourning for all the Jewish writers and scholars. Everyone felt that a chosen son had died. He was beloved not only to his father, but also to the irascible Shadal; he was a favorite child to Zunz and Sachs; nor could ~~Yalag~~ Gordon forget him. The unsentimental Gordon many years after Michal's death, brought him to mind in a elegy which testifies to the mysterious echo which the young poet left in the hearts of his generation.[59]

"From the walls of your heart, the divine harp [60]
Did Zion's daughter hear, forgetting all grief."

Notes for Chapter III

1. Congress Weekly, Joshua Bloch, Vol. 19, No. 32, Dec. 8, 1952, pg. 12

2. Waldstein, History of Modern Hebrew, N. Y., 1906 pg. 12

3. Ibid., pg. 14

4. Ibid.

5. The March of Literature, Madox Ford, Dial Press, N. Y., 1938, pg. 540

6. Ibid., pg. 541

7. Waldstein, op. cit., pg. 15

8. A. Orinovsky, Toldot Hasifrut Haivrit Hahadasha, Tel Aviv, 1946, Vol. I, pg. 161

9. D'muyot V'Komot, Moses Kleinman, Paris, 1928, pg. 42, 43

10. Ibid.

11. K. A. Bartini, The Original and the Translations in the Work of Michal, Gilyavot, Vol. 27, No. 7, pg. 9, Tel Aviv, 1952.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Jacob Fichman, The Works of Micah Joseph Lebensohn, Berlin, 1924, pg. 36 (This is the only reference of this edition in this thesis)

17. Fichman, 1948, op. cit., pg. 56

18. Bartini, op. cit., pg. 10

19. See pg. 13

20. Bartini, op. cit., pg. 10

21. Fichman, op. cit., pg. 71

22. Bartini, op. cit., pg. 10

23. See pg. 121

24. See pg. 92

25. See pg. 99

26. Bartini, op. cit., pg. 11

27. Ibid.

28. Orinovsky, op. cit., pg. 169

29. See pg. 99

30. See pg. 96

31. See pg. 94

32. See pg. 93

33. Lachover, op. cit. pg. 123

34. Klausner (Heb) op. cit., pg. 238

35. Ibid.

36. Fichman, op. cit., pg. 34, 35

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Orinovsky, op. cit., pg. 168, 169

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Lachover, op. cit., pg. 116

46. Ibid.

47. Klausner (Heb), op. cit., pg. 266

48. See pg. 41

49. Fichman, (1948), op. cit. pg. 60

50. History of Zionism, L. Hazan and Y. Feller, Jerusalem, 1945, pg. 37

51. Waldstein, op. cit., pg. 68

52. Ibid., pg. 69

53. Congress Weekly, op. cit., pg. 13

54. Ibid.

55. Waldstein, op. cit., pg. 46

56. Ibid., pg. 47

57. Orinovsky, op. cit., pg. 169

58. Fichman (1948), op. cit. pg. 20 (Introduction)

59. Ibid.

60. J. L. Gordon, Poems, Tel Aviv, 1945, pg. 21

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