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Hayyim Nahman Bialik

- 15 poems -

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Hayyim Nahman Bialik (9 January 1873 – 4 July 1934)

Hayim Nahman Bialik, also Chaim or Haim, was a Jewish poet who wrote primarily in Hebrew but also in Yiddish. Bialik was one of the pioneers of modern Hebrew poetry and came to be recognized as Israel's national poet.

Biography

Bialik was born in the village of Radi, Volhynia in the Ukrainian part of the Russian Empire to Yitzhak Yosef Bialik, a scholar and businessman, and his wife Dinah (Priveh). Bialik's father died in 1880, when Bialik was 7 years old. In his poems, Bialik romanticized the misery of his childhood, describing seven orphans left behind—though modern biographers believe there were fewer children, including grown step-siblings who did not need to be supported. Be that as it may, from the age 7 onwards Bialik was raised in Zhitomir (also Ukraine) by his stern Orthodox grandfather, Yaakov Moshe Bialik.

In Zhitomir he received a traditional Jewish religious education, but also explored European literature. At the age of 15, inspired by an article he read, he convinced his grandfather to send him to the Volozhin Yeshiva in Lithuania, to study at a famous Talmudic academy under Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, where he hoped he could continue his Jewish schooling while expanding his education to European literature as well. Attracted to the Jewish Enlightenment movement (Haskala), Bialik gradually drifted away from yeshiva life. Poems such as HaMatmid ("The Talmud student") written in 1898, reflect his great ambivalence toward that way of life: on the one hand admiration for the dedication and devotion of the yeshiva students to their studies, on the other hand a disdain for the narrowness of their world.

At 18 he left for Odessa, the center of modern Jewish culture in Ukraine and the southern Russian Empire, drawn by such luminaries as Mendele Mocher Sforim and Ahad Ha'am. In Odessa, Bialik studied Russian and German language and literature, and dreamed of enrolling in the Modern Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin. Alone and penniless, he made his living teaching Hebrew. The 1892 publication of his first poem, El Hatzipor "To the Bird," which expresses a longing for Zion, in a booklet edited by Yehoshua Hone Ravnitzky (a future collaborator), eased Bialik's way into Jewish literary circles in Odessa. He joined the so-called Hovevei Zion group and befriended Ahad Ha'am, who had a great influence on his Zionist outlook.

In 1892 Bialik heard news that the Volozhin yeshiva had closed, and rushed home to Zhitomir, to prevent his grandfather from discovering that he had discontinued his religious education. He arrived to discover his grandfather and his older brother both on their deathbeds. Following their deaths, Bialik

married Mania Averbuch in 1893. For a time he served as a bookkeeper in his father-in-law's lumber business in Korostyshiv, near Kiev. But when this proved unsuccessful, he moved in 1897 to Sosnowiec, a small town in Silesia, southern Poland, then part of the Russian Empire, near the border with Prussia and Austria. In Sosnowiec, Bialik worked as a Hebrew teacher, and tried to earn extra income as a coal merchant, but the provincial life depressed him. He was finally able to return to Odessa in 1900, having secured a teaching job.

Literary Career

For the next two decades, Bialik taught and continued his activities in Zionist and literary circles, as his literary fame continued to rise. This is considered Bialik's "golden period". In 1901 his first collection of poetry was published in Warsaw, and was greeted with much critical acclaim, to the point that he was hailed "the poet of national renaissance." Bialik relocated to Warsaw briefly in 1904 as literary editor of the weekly magazine HaShiloah founded by Ahad Ha'am, a position he served for six years.

In 1903 Bialik was sent by the Jewish Historical Commission in Odessa to interview survivors of the Kishinev pogroms and prepare a report. In response to his findings Bialik wrote his epic poem In the City of Slaughter, a powerful statement of anguish at the situation of the Jews. Bialik's condemnation of passivity against anti-Semitic violence is said to have influenced the founding Jewish self-defense groups in the Russian Empire, and eventually the Haganah in Palestine. Bialik visited Palestine in 1909.

In the early 1900s Bialik founded with Ravnitzky, Simcha Ben Zion and Elhanan Levinsky, a Hebrew publishing house, Moriah, which issued Hebrew classics and school texts. He translated into Hebrew various European works, such as Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Schiller's Wilhelm Tell, Cervantes' Don Quixote, and Heine's poems; and from Yiddish S. Ansky's The Dybbuk.

Throughout the years 1899-1915 Bialik published about 20 of his Yiddish poems in different Yiddish periodicals in the Russian Empire. These poems are often considered to be among the best achievements of modern Yiddish poetry of that period. In collaboration with Ravnitzky, Bialik published Sefer HaAggadah (1908–1911, The Book of Legends), a three-volume edition of the folk tales and proverbs scattered through the Talmud. For the book they selected hundreds of texts and arranged them thematically. The Book of Legends was immediately recognized as a masterwork and has been reprinted numerous times. Bialik also edited the poems of the medieval poet and philosopher Ibn Gabirol. He began a modern commentary on the Mishnah, but only completed Zeraim, the first of the six Orders (in the 1950s, the Bialik Institute published a commentary on the entire Mishnah by Hanoch Albeck, which is currently out of print). He additionally added several commentaries on the Talmud.

In Odessa, namely in 1919, he was also able to found the Dir publishing house, which would later become famous. This publishing house, now based in Israel, is still in existence, but is now known as Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir after Dvir was purchased by the Zmora-Bitan publishing house in 1986, which later fused with Kinneret as well.

Bialik lived in Odessa until 1921, when the Moriah publishing house was closed by Communist authorities, as a result of mounting paranoia following the Bolshevik Revolution. With the intervention of Maxim Gorki, a group of Hebrew writers were given permission by the Soviet government to leave the country. While in Odessa he had befriended the soprano Isa Kremer whom he had a profound influence on. It was through his influence that she became an exponent of Yiddish music on the concert stage; notably becoming the first woman to concertize that music.

Move to Germany

Bialik then moved - via Poland and Turkey - to Berlin, where together with his friends Ravnitzky and Shmaryahu Levin he re-established the Dvir

publishing house. Bialik published in Dvir the first Hebrew language scientific journal with teachers of the rabbinical college Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums contributing. In Berlin Bialik joined a community of Jewish authors and publishers such as Samuel Joseph Agnon (sponsored by the owner of Schocken Department Stores, Salman Schocken, who later founded Schocken Verlag), Simon Dubnow, Israel Isidor Elyashev (Ba'al-Machshoves), Uri Zvi Greenberg, Jakob Klatzkin (founded Eschkol publishing house in Berlin), Moshe Kulbak, Jakob-Wolf Latzki-Bertoldi (founded Klal publishing house in Berlin in 1921), Simon Rawidowicz (co-founder of Klal), Salman Schneur, Nochum Shtif (Ba'al-Dimion), Shaul Tchernichovsky, elsewhere in Germany Shoshana Persitz with Omanuth publishing house in Bad Homburg v.d.H. and Martin Buber. They met in the Hebrew Club Beith haWa'ad ha'Ivri □□□ □□□□ □□□□□ (in Berlin's Scheunenviertel) or in Café Monopol, which had a Hebrew speaking corner, as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's son Itamar Ben-Avi recalled, and in Café des Westens (both in Berlin's more elegant western boroughs). The then still Soviet theatre HaBimah toured through Germany, renowned by Albert Einstein, Alfred Kerr and Max Reinhardt. Bialik succeeded Saul Israel Hurwitz after his death (8 August 1922) as Hebrew chief editor at Klal publishing house, which published 80 titles in 1922. On January 1923 Bialik's 50th birthday was celebrated in the old concert hall of the Berlin Philharmonic bringing together everybody who was anybody. In the years of Inflation Berlin had become a centre of Yiddish and Hebrew and other foreign language publishing and printing, because books could be produced at ever falling real expenses and sold to a great extent for stable foreign currency. Many Hebrew and Yiddish titles were also translated into German. Once the old inflationary currency (Mark) was replaced by the new stable Rentenmark and Reichsmark this period ended and many publishing houses closed or relocated elsewhere, as did many prominent publishers and authors.

Move to Tel Aviv

In 1924 Bialik relocated with his publishing house Dvir to Tel Aviv, devoting himself to cultural activities and public affairs. Bialik was immediately recognized as a celebrated literary figure. He delivered the address that marked the opening (in 1925) of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and was a member of its board of governors. In 1927 he became head of the Hebrew Writers Union, a position he retained for the remainder of his life. In 1933 his 60th birthday was celebrated with festivities nationwide, and all the schoolchildren of Tel Aviv were taken to meet him and pay their respects to him.

Works and Influence

Bialik wrote several different modes of poetry. He is perhaps most famous for his long, nationalistic poems, which call for a reawakening of the Jewish people. However no less effective are his passionate love poems, his personal verse or his nature poems. Last but not least, Bialik's songs for children are a staple of Israeli nursery life. From 1908 onwards, he wrote mostly prose.

By writing his works in Hebrew, Bialik contributed significantly to the revival of the Hebrew language, which before his days existed primarily as an ancient, scholarly tongue. His influence is felt deeply in all modern Hebrew literature. The generation of Hebrew language poets who followed in Bialik's footsteps, including Jacob Steinberg and Jacob Fichman, are called "the Bialik generation".

To this day, Bialik is recognized as Israel's national poet. Bialik House, his former home at 22 Bialik Street in Tel Aviv, has been converted into a museum, and functions as a center for literary events. The municipality of Tel Aviv awards the Bialik Prize in his honor. Kiryat Bialik, a suburb of Haifa, and Givat Hen, a moshav bordering the city of Raanana, are named after him. He is the only person to have two streets named after him in the same Israeli city - Bialik Street and Hen Boulevard in Tel Aviv. There is also a High School in Montreal, Quebec named Bialik High School,and a cross communal Jewish Zionist school in Melbourne called Bialik College, both named after

him.

Bialik's poems have been translated into at least 30 languages, and set to music as popular songs. These poems, and the songs based on them, have become an essential part of the education and culture of modern Israel.

Bialik wrote most of his poems using "Ashkenazi" pronunciation, while modern Israeli Hebrew uses the Sephardi pronunciation. Consequently, Bialik's poems are rarely recited in the meter in which they were written.

Death

Bialik died in Vienna, Austria, on July 4, 1934, following a failed prostate operation. He was buried in Tel Aviv: a large mourning procession followed from his home on the street named after him, to his final resting place.

Works:

Selected Writings (poetry and prose) Hasefer, 1924; New York, New Palestine, 1926; Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1939; New York, Histadrut Ivrit of America, 1948; New York, Bloch, 1965; New York, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1972; Tel Aviv, Dvir and the Jerusalem Post, 1981; Columbus, Alpha, 1987
The Short Friday Tel Aviv, Hashaot, 1944
Knight of Onions and Knight of Garlic New York, Jordan, 1939
Random Harvest - The Novellas of C. N. Bialik, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press (Perseus Books), 1999
The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself (2003), ISBN 0-8143-2485-1

A Long Bough

A bough sank down on a fence, and fell asleep –
so shall I sleep.
The fruit has fallen; and what do I care
for my root and stock?

The fruit has fallen, the flower is long forgotten,
only leaves remain.
One day a storm will rage and they will fall,
casualties, to earth.

Afterwards, terrible nights.
No respite, no sleep.
I wrestle alone in darkness, batter
my head on the wall.

Spring will blossom again. Only I
hang on to my stem –
bald shoot with no bud and no flower
no fruit and no leaf.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

A Twig Alighted

A twig alighted on a fence and dozed;
So do I sleep.
The fruit fell and what have I to do with my trunk,
What with my branch?
The fruit fell, the flower is already forgotten,
The leaves survive.
One day the storm will rage, they will drop.
To the ground, dead.
Afterwards, the nights of dread go on,
No rest or sleep for me,
Alone I thrash about in the dark, smashing
My head against my wall.
And again spring blossoms,
And alone I hang from my trunk
A bare shoot, without bud or flower,
Without fruit or leaf.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

After My Death

After my death mourn me this way:
'There was a man-and see: he is no more;
before his time this man died
and his life's song in mid-bar stopped;
and oh, it is sad! One more song he had
and now the song is gone for good,
gone for good!

And it is very sad!-a harp too he had
a living being and murmurous
and the poet in his words in it
all of his heart's secret revealed,
and all the strings his hand gave breath
but one secret his heart kept hid,
round and round his fingers played,
and one string stayed mute,
mute to this day!

And it is sad, very sad!
All of her days this string moved,
mute she moved, mute she shook,
for her song, her beloved redeemer
she yearned, thirsted, grieved and longed
as a heart pines for its intended:
and though he hesitated each day she waited
and in a secret moan begged for him to come,
and he hesitated and never came,
never came!

And great, great is the pain!
There was a man-and see: he is no more,
and his life's song in mid-bar stopped,
one more song he had to go,
and now the song is gone for good,
gone for good!

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

Alone

Wind blew, light drew them all.
New songs revive their mornings.
Only I, small bird, am forsaken
under the Shekhina's wing.

Alone. I remain alone.
The Shekhina's broken wing
trembled over my head. My heart knew hers:
her fear for her only son.

Driven from every ridge –
one desolate corner left –
in the House of Study she hides in shadow,
and I alone share her pain.

Imprisoned beneath her wing
my heart longed for the light.
She buried her face on my shoulder
and a tear fell on my page.

Dumbly she clung and wept.
Her broken wing sheltered me:
"scattered to the four winds of heaven;
they are gone, and I am alone".

It was an ancient lament
a suppliant cry I heard
in that lost and silent weeping,
and in that scalding tear.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

I Didn’t Win Light In A Windfall

I didn’t win light in a windfall,
nor by deed of a father’s will.
I hewed my light from granite.
I quarried my heart.

In the mine of my heart a spark hides –
not large, but wholly my own.
Neither hired, nor borrowed, nor stolen –
my very own.

Sorrow wields huge hammer blows,
the rock of endurance cracks
blinding my eye with flashes
I catch in verse.

They fly from my lines to your breast
to vanish in kindled flame.
While I, with heart’s blood and marrow
pay the price of the blaze.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

In The City Of Slaughter (excerpt)

Proceed thence to the ruins, the split walls reach,
Where wider grows the hollow, and greater grows the breach;
Pass over the shattered hearth, attain the broken wall
Whose burnt and barren brick, whose charred stones reveal
The open mouths of such wounds, that no mending
Shall ever mend, nor healing ever heal…

Terror floating near the rafters, terror
Against the walls in darkness hiding,
Terror through the silence sliding.
Didst thou not hear beneath the heap of wheels
A stirring of crushed limbs?

Much suffering and tribulation–tried
Which in this house of bondage binds itself.
It will not ever from its pain be pried.
Brief-weary and forespent, a dark Shekhinah
Runs to each nook and cannot find its rest;
Wishes to weep, but weeping does not come;
Would roar; is dumb….

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

On A Summer's Day

When high noon on a summer's day
makes the sky a fiery furnace
and the heart seeks a quiet corner for dreams,
then come to me, my weary friend.

A shady carob grows in my garden –
green, remote from the city's crowds –
whose foliage whispers secrets of God.
Good my brother, let's take refuge.

Pleasure and tenderness let us share
in the sweet hidden prime of noon,
and the mystery golden rays reveal
when sunlight pierces the rich shade.

When the black cold of a winter's night
bruises you with its icy pinch
and frost sticks knives in your shivering flesh,
then come to me, blessed of God.

My dwelling is modest, lacking splendour,
but warm and bright and open to strangers.
A fire's in the grate, on the table a candle –
my lost brother, stay and get warm.

When we hear a cry in the howling storm
we will think of the destitute starving outside.
We will weep for them – honest pitiful tears.
Good friend, my brother, let us embrace.

But when autumn approaches with rain and cloud
and the roof leaks and there's moth in the heart
and the desolate world sinks, sullen, in mire,
then merciful brother, leave me alone.

I would be alone in the barren time
when the heart withers in slow decay.
Unseen. Unknown. No stranger understands.
Let me grieve alone in my silent pain.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

On The Slaughter

Heaven, beg mercy for me! If there is
a God in you, a pathway through
you to this God - which I have not
discovered - then pray for me! For my
heart is dead, no longer is there prayer
on my lips; all strength is gone, and
hope is no more. Until when, how
much longer, until when?

You, executioner! Here's my neck - go
to it, slaughter me! Behead me like a
dog, yours is the almighty arm and the
axe, and the whole earth is my scaffold
- and we, we are the few! My blood is
fair game - strike the skull, and
murder's blood, the blood of nurslings
and old men, will spurt onto your
clothes and will never, never be wiped
off.

And if there is justice - let it show
itself at once! But if justice show itself
after I have been blotted out from
beneath the skies - let its throne be
hurled down forever! Let heaven rot
with eternal evil! And you, the arrogant,
go in this violence of yours, live by
your bloodshed and be cleansed by it.

And cursed be the man who says:
Avenge! No such revenge - revenge for
the blood of a little child - has yet been
devised by Satan. Let the blood pierce
through the abyss! Let the blood seep
down into the depths of darkness, and
eat away there, in the dark, and breach
all the rotting foundations of the earth.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

One, Two

One, two, three, four —
find yourself a wife — choose her!
Do not dally, don't be late
or someone else'll get there first.

I myself found me some honey
but it never came to my lips.
Two she had her, this one widow:
one brunette and one had fair hair.

Not girls-pearls,
fillies fine and gorgeous,
the joy of whoever saw their face
and I loved both of them.

But who'll foretell and who'll say
which of them I loved more.
The time went, I don't know how
I dillydallied, dillydallied.

Suddenly a demon came and scarfed them
a demon with a ponytail and handlebar mustache.
And I remained, silly bugger,
an old bachelor ever after.

And from this to all the young men
a moral to the wise and let who learns learn.

One, two, three, four —
find yourself a wife — choose her!
Do not dally, don't be late
or someone else'll get there first.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

Return

Once more. Look: a spent old scarecrow
shrivelled face
straw-dry shadow
swaying like a leaf
bending and swaying over books.

Once more. Look: a spent old crone
weaving and weaving
knitted stockings
mouth full of curses
lips forever mumbling curses.

There’s the household cat
has not moved since I left,
still dreaming by the stove
playing cat and mouse
in his dream.

And as ever, in darkness
the spider weaves
hanging its web
full of swollen fly corpses
in the dark west corner.

You’ve not changed:
All old as the hills.
Nothing new.
I’ll join you, old cronies!
Together we’ll rot till we stink.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

Sabbath Queen

The sun has already disappeared beyond the treetops,
Come let us go and welcome the Sabbath Queen,
She is already descending among us, holy and blessed,
And with her are angels, a host of peace and rest,
Come, O Queen,
Come, O Queen,
Peace be unto you, O Angels of Peace.'

We have welcomed the Shabbat with song and prayer,
Let us return home our hearts full of joy.
There, the table is set, the lights are lit,
Every corner of the house is shining with a divine spark.
A good and blessed Shabbat.
A good and blessed Shabbat.
Come in peace, O Angels of Peace.

Sit among us, O pure Shabbat Queen, and enlighten us with your splendor.
Tonight and tomorrow–then you may pass on.
And we for our part will honor you by wearing beautiful clothing,
By singing zemirot, by praying, and by eating three meals.
And with complete rest.
And with pleasant rest.
Bless me with peace, O Angels of Peace.

The sun has already disappeared beyond the treetops.
Come let us accompany the Sabbath Queen’s departure.
Go in peace, holy and blessed.
Know that for six day we will await your return.
Yes, till next Shabbat.
Yes, till next Shabbat.
Go in peace, O Angels of Peace.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

Should You Wish To Know The Source

Should you wish to know the Source,
From which your brothers drew…
Their strength of soul…
Their comfort, courage, patience, trust,
And iron might to bear their hardships
And suffer without end or measure?

And should you wish to see the Fort
Wherein your fathers refuge sought.
And all their sacred teasures hid,
The refuge that has still preserved
Your nation's soul intact and pure
And when despised, and scorned, and scoffed,
Their faith they did not shame?

And should you wish to see and know
Their Mother, faithful, loving, kind
Who…sheltered them and shielded them.
And lulled them on her lap to sleep?

If you, my brother, know not
Then enter now the House of God,
The House of study, old and gray,
Throughout the scorching summer days
Thoughout the gloomy winter nights,
At morning midday or at eve…
And there you may still behold,
A group of Jews from the exile who bore the yoke of its burden who forget their toil, through a worn out page of the Talmud.

And then your heart shall guess the truth,
That you have touched the sacred ground
Of a great people's house of life.
And that your eys do gaze upon
The treasure of a nation's soul.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

Summer is dying

Summer is dying in the purple and gold and russet
of the falling leaves of the wood,
and the sunset clouds are dying
in their own blood.

In the emptying public gardens
the last strollers break their walk
to lift their eyes and follow
the flight of the last stork.

The heart is orphaned. Soon
the cold rains will be drumming.
'Have you patched your coat for winter!
Stocked potatoes against its coming?'

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

Take Me Under Your Wing

Take me under your wing,
be my mother, my sister.
Take my head to your breast,
my banished prayers to your nest.

One merciful twilight hour,
hear my pain, bend your head.
They say there is youth in the world.
Where has my youth fled?

Listen! another secret:
I have been seared by a flame.
They say there is love in the world.
How do we know love’s name?

I was deceived by the stars.
There was a dream; it passed.
I have nothing at all in the world,
nothing but a vast waste.

Take me under your wing,
be my mother, my sister.
Take my head to your breast,
my banished prayers to your nest.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik

The Old Acacia Tree

Neither daylight nor the darkness
See how silently I wander.
Not on mountain, nor in valley,
Does an old acacia ponder.

The acacia solves all mysteries,
Tells my fortune while I tarry.
I shall ask the tree to tell me
Whom O whom, am I to marry?

Where will he be from, O Acacia,
Is it Poland, Lithuania?
Will he come with a horse and a carriage
Or with staff and sack will he appear?

And what presents will be bring me -
Necklace of pearls and coral flower?
Tell me, will he be fair or dark-haired?
Still unmarried or a widower?

If he's old, my dear Acacia,
I won't have him, please don't try me.
I'll tell my father; you may slay me,
But to an old man do not tie me!

At his feet I'll fall and with tears I'll cry;
To an old man do not tie me.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik