

Theomorphism and Modern Hebrew Literature's Search for the Divine: Brenner and Shlonsky as a Case Study

NETA STAHL

Introduction

Modern Hebrew literature emerged during the 19th century as part of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, which attempted to break from traditional Judaism and offered a new understanding of Judaism and Jewish life. The “New Hebrew Literature” embraced the rebellious nature of the Haskalah. In this context, it is commonly viewed as a secular literature, which defied Jewish Orthodoxy and rejected the Hebrew God and the Jewish law.¹ This perception assumes a dichotomy between religious and secular literature. In the current article I challenge this assumption by suggesting that two central modern Hebrew writers who are commonly perceived as secular, Yosef Hayim Brenner (1881–1921) and Avraham Shlonsky (1900–1973), actually developed a nuanced, original and complex conception of God.

An interesting example of these writers' engagement with the divine is the way they make use of the concept of theomorphism. Theomorphism is the notion that man shares God's form and image. The idea that man was created in the image of God (*be-tzelem elohim*) has its roots in the ancient world. In the Jewish and Christian contexts its main source is Gen 1:27.² Alexander Altman points out that already in the writings of Philo of Alexandria we can find Platonic uses of the term *tzelem* (*eikon*) in this sense.³ According to Philo, man is not a direct image of God, but was created according to God's image, the logos. Philo distinguishes

¹ See Yosef Klauzner, *Historia shel ha-sifrut ha-Ivrit ha-hadasha* (Jerusalem: Hevra le-hotza'at sefarim leyad ha-universita ha-Iverit, 1930) 1:1; Baruch Kurzweil, *Sifruteynu ha-hadasha: hemshekh o mahapekha?* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1959) 13.

² ”So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.”

³ Alexander Altman, *Panim shel Yehadut* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1983) 15.

between the earthly and the heavenly man, and stresses that only the latter was created *be-tzelem*.⁴ Altman reminds us that the notion of a “heavenly man” is prominent in kabbalistic literature and its detailed portrayals of *Adam kadmon*.⁵

The notion that man bears the image of God is central to various corpora within traditional Jewish culture, from Talmud, Midrash, Kabbalah and Maimonides’ philosophy, to Hassidic literature and modern Jewish philosophy.⁶ Not surprisingly, Paul and the Church Fathers were also fascinated with it.⁷

At the end of this article I will get back to the ways in which this notion found its way into modern Hebrew literature. But before doing so, I would like to consider how Brenner and Shlonsky used it. Shlonsky’s aesthetics is very different from Brenner’s: while the former was known mostly for his poetry, the latter wrote only in prose. Yet they share a similar desire to compensate for the sense of the absence of God by stressing man’s theomorphic qualities. However, they do this for very different purposes. For Brenner, the comparison is meant to point at the helplessness of divinity and humanity alike, while Shlonsky’s theomorphism is aimed at elevating both man and God.

*“A Man of God in a World with No God, They Crowned Him
with a Holy Crown, a Crown of Thorns”⁸*

Yosef Hayim Brenner is considered one of modern Hebrew literature’s most influential writers. A legend in his life and even more so in his tragic death, he has been held as a cultural icon, the voice of his generation and of those that followed.⁹ The title of this section illustrates his unique status, while at the same time showing the kind of confusion that he sometimes evokes among readers and scholars. On the one hand, he denounced God, any god, and derided those who searched for the divine; but on the other hand, he was constantly looking for “holiness”

⁴ Kitvey Pilon ha-Alexandroni, Susan Daniel-Nataf ed. (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2006) 2:31–32.

⁵ Altman, *Panim*, 16.

⁶ For a discussion of the rabbinic views on this matter, see Yair Lorberbaum, *Tzelem Elohim (Imago Dei)* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2004).

⁷ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958).

⁸ Anita Shapira, *Brenner: Sipur Hayim* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2009) 7.

⁹ As such, his work has been the focus of wide and detailed scholarly research in Israel and around the world. This article focuses on a very specific aspect of this rich corpus, and it has benefited extensively from previous research.

in life and literature. He was a very vocal and opinionated writer, and he presented his ideas about different aspects of Jewish life and thought in both fictional and non-fictional forms. One of the best known and most provocative aspects of his writing was his rejection of Judaism as a religion. Seeing himself as a secular, national, atheist Jew, Brenner declared that he had nothing to do with the Jewish religion. When asked how and in what sense he was Jewish, he answered in the first person plural:

We are Jewish in real life, in our hearts and emotions, with no logical definitions, without absolute truths and without written commitments ... We are a living Jewish people, no more – and we care about Jewish labor, the principle of all life-principles, and precious is our language, the language of our speech and literature, and holy is our honor, the honor of our people, and this is our nationalism! ... The most important thing is new foundations of life, the most important thing is new Hebrew villages. For this, the best of the sons of Israel are fighting ... and they *do not* believe in the messiah, and they have nothing to do with traditional theological Judaism.¹⁰

Brenner had argued that a Jew can be an atheist or even an “anti-theist” or “anti-theologist,” since the Jewish people as a nation should not care about the Jewish religion; in fact, he went on to say, the two should not be connected at all. He asserted that his national consciousness had nothing to do with his religious beliefs or with “the creator of the world.”¹¹ Such comments, as Brenner no doubt intended, proved controversial and triggered a fierce public debate about the nature of Jewish nationalism and modern Judaism.

Brenner also went beyond dismissing Judaism and the Jewish religion. In some of his famous articles, he went as far as to dismiss God himself, whether Jewish or non-Jewish. In a rather provocative manner, he stated that he could not understand those who search and long for a “certain fiction – a fiction by all means – which is called God.”¹² Even more important for our discussion is the fact that his critique is directed specifically at those he calls “the pen heroes” – namely, writers:

A modern enlightened author who comes and talks to us in a clear mind about his quest for God, about his longing for God, about his existence in God – what is the face of this man in our view if not [the face of] a liar, a complete liar?¹³

¹⁰ Brenner, “Le-veyrur ha-inyan” (1911), in *Kol kitvey Y. H. Brenner* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me’uhad, 1960) 2:65. Brenner’s style is somewhat disjointed, and my translation attempts to preserve this unique style.

¹¹ Brenner, “Le-veyrur,” 58.

¹² Brenner, “Regashim ve-hirhurim” (1910), in *Kitvey Brenner*, 2:37.

¹³ Brenner, “Regashim,” 36–7.

In Brenner's worldview, veracity is one of the most important values. The fact that he does not see the search for God as a true and honest quest leads him to dismiss it as unworthy. This assertion can also be seen as a literary manifesto, as Brenner is clearly referring to writers and their literary agendas. In fact, he distinguishes between the common man, who is true to himself, and the writer. The former has a certain dialogue with God, but the latter only pretends to have such a relation with the divine.

In his book on Brenner's approach to traditional Judaism, Shmuel Schneider discusses Brenner's rejection of religion and argues that his "militant polemic" against the Jewish religion in his public writing has no parallel in his fiction. Schneider bases this argument on the fact that in most of Brenner's fiction, characters associated with traditional Judaism are depicted in a positive manner. He argues that Brenner has a "neutral, even sympathetic approach" to his observant protagonists and that his ideological, ridiculing approach to religion and faith is not echoed in his fiction.¹⁴

More often, however, scholars have understood Brenner's relation to the divine in a more negative light. The late literary critic Baruch Kurzweil has doubtless been influential in such readings. Kurzweil famously asserted that Brenner was a representative of a generation that experienced the death of God and argued that his entire oeuvre was a literary response to this experience.¹⁵ Kurzweil specifically identified Brenner's characters as representing the place where his ideology and literature meet: "It seems as if Brenner's protagonists will never forgive God for not existing for them."¹⁶

We can see the inherent (and intentional) paradox in Kurzweil's own words; if Brenner's protagonists will never forgive God for not existing for them, then they must believe in this non-existing God. The contemporary Hebrew writer Aharon Appelfeld (b. 1932) calls this condition the "distress of religiosity": a situation in which "one stops bothering himself with asking questions about God's existence and yet cannot just stand and watch when calamity is approaching people."¹⁷ As Appelfeld

¹⁴ Shmuel Schneider, *Olam ha-masoret ha-Yehudit be-kitvey Yosef Hayim Brenner* (Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1994) 175–6.

¹⁵ Baruch Kurzweil, *Beyn hazon le-veyn ha-absurdi* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1966), 273.

¹⁶ Kurzweil, *Beyn hazon*, 277. According to Avi Sagi, Kurzweil does not base his argument on Brenner's fiction but rather on Brenner's biography. See Sagi, *Lihyot Yehudi* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-me'uhad, 2007) 19.

¹⁷ Aharon Appelfeld, *Masot be-guf rishon* (Jerusalem: Ha-sifriyah ha-tzionit, 1979) 71.

understood it, this meant that Brenner himself had to become a kind of God, in the sense “that he cared for and loved humanity.”¹⁸ Appelfeld admits that Brenner might have disagreed with his statement, but asserts that his narrators, who are often identical with Brenner himself, prove it with their actions nonetheless.¹⁹

Appelfeld’s argument should be carefully considered and in fact ought to be taken a few steps further. Brenner indeed depicts a world devoid of the divine, but allows the divine to show itself in his characters. The paradoxical aspects inherent in Kurzweil’s statement about Brenner’s protagonists can be reconciled if we understand that Brenner’s protagonists’ inability to forgive God is the motivation for their actions.

Moreover, Schneider’s argument about Brenner’s sympathetic approach to his traditional characters should be expanded to include characters who are clearly not religious, but who carry in their actions a message that can be understood in religious terms. In this respect Brenner’s characters represent the very same quest for God that he so provocatively dismisses in his non-fictional writing. In several of his works Brenner depicts his characters as taking upon themselves divine qualities; they fulfill the role of a God whose existence they deny.

The Distress of Religiosity

Appelfeld designates the “distress of religiosity” as an inherent condition in Brenner’s fiction. How does Brenner achieve this sense of distress? In other words, how does he create the impression that his world is at the same time empty of God and filled with a sense of sanctity? This duality is reached, I believe, by means of a careful narrative technique: Brenner’s protagonists discuss the presence of God, God’s nature and intentions, while his narrator is often more cynical about God. As Menachem Brinker has shown, Brenner used his fiction to debate with his political critics. According to Brinker, Brenner implemented their arguments in his fiction in order to prove them wrong.²⁰

In the case of Brenner’s treatment of the divine, we can find a similar duality, even polyphony, which is very different from the univocal

¹⁸ Appelfeld, *Masot*, 71.

¹⁹ Appelfeld, *Masot*, 71.

²⁰ Menachem Brinker, *Ad ha-simta ha-tveryanit* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990) 18. According to Shaked, Brenner used “the authentic technique” to express his own political and ideological views. See *Lelo motza* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-me’uhad, 1973) 66–78.

approach to God in his opinion articles. Brenner achieves this plurality by distinguishing between his protagonists' views and his narrator's. We might argue that Brenner's protagonists represent the "God searchers" (*mehapsey elohim*) whom Brenner, the opinion journalist, accused of being obsessed with nonsense. His narrator, on the other hand, often echoes Brenner's own critique of these "God searchers." Brinker argues that Brenner's unique mode of narration was used to promote his opinions and debate opposing views.²¹ However, we should add that this technique might also be seen as a sophisticated method that allows the author to explore the divine and question the totality of God's death.

Moreover, in a deeper and more subtle layer, Brenner implements a heavy net of religious allusions that strengthen the contradiction between what his narrator says and the effect of the text as a whole. A good example of this sophisticated technique can be found in his story "Around the Point" (*Misaviv la-nekuda*, 1904), where the narrator describes the main protagonist Yaakov Abramson's experience of the burden of the divine: "His head was heavy. He felt (himself) as if every minute he was carrying God. And how naïve he was!"²²

Brenner portrays the agony of his protagonist in Christian terminology. He alludes to Jesus' Via Dolorosa and at the same time to Saint Christopher, a follower of Jesus who, according to legend, carried the heavy Jesus across the river on his shoulders.²³ These allusions allow Brenner to depict Abramson as a suffering Jesus or saint, carrying the burden of God, as Jesus carried his cross on his way to be crucified. Brenner renders Abramson's thoughts about the divine ironically, showing him sacrificing himself for a god who is his own cross. As if this were not enough, the narrator then portrays the same Abramson (whose name alludes to Isaac, Abraham's son, another potential sacrifice to God) as a young lamb (*seh tamim*). Using the double meaning of the Hebrew expression *seh tamim* as both "unblemished offering" and "naïve," he alludes to Agnus Dei – a New Testament reference to Jesus²⁴ – and at

²¹ Brinker, *Ad ha-simta*, 13–17.

²² Brenner, *Kitvey Brenner*, 1:72.

²³ According to the version that appears in the Golden Legends, Saint Christopher did not know that the child he carried was Jesus, and when they reached the other side of the river, he told the heavy boy, "You have put me in the greatest danger. I do not think the whole world could have been as heavy on my shoulders as you were." The child replied, "You had on your shoulders not only the whole world but Him who made it. I am Christ your king, whom you are serving by this work."

²⁴ And to Isaac, who naively asked his father, "But where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (Gen 22:7).

the same time allows his narrator to convey his dismissal of Abramson as a naïve young man whose sacrifice is nothing but a naïve delusion.

Abramson is a young and confused Hebrew writer, and his depiction may well be intended to recall those writers whom Brenner accuses of being “God searchers.” Later in the story, the narrator reflects Abramson’s thoughts while he is writing, after his headache (“heavy head”) has gone away: “He is free now from all the rotten exteriors and from all subordinations ... only the hidden God, the God that a man will see and live, only he is left in his heart, and it is him whom he will worship ...”²⁵ Here again Brenner implements an ironic allusion to the scriptures, this time to God’s reply to Moses’ request to see his face. The original words appear in Exod 33:20: “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” Brenner omits the negative and turns the divine reply upside down. Abramson ecstatically dances in celebration, only to be stopped by the imagined voice of his friend’s father, Rabbi Moshe-Aharon, who shouts at him: “You know? You?” The narrator notes that Abramson “woke up,”²⁶ perhaps from his illusion, because of the voice of Moshe-Aharon, who is himself an allusion to the biblical Moses, whom God refused to be revealed to. A few lines later Abramson’s neighbor looks at him and thinks of him as a good but “crazy” neighbor.

Abramson’s thoughts about God (mediated by the narrator) are presented from both positive and negative perspectives almost simultaneously. On the one hand, he is depicted as a true believer, who in a moment of truth finally discovers that he has nothing in his heart but the love of God. However, the perspective of his neighbor, who provides an outside view according to which his sanity is questionable, immediately follows this description and thus presents an alternative interpretation. In this view, Abramson’s sudden belief in God is in itself proof of his insanity, and this might be seen as evidence of the author’s desire to ridicule people who experience such revelations. However, by presenting both of these views, Brenner leaves his readers to wonder whether he shares Abramson’s sense of the presence of the divine as a valuable experience, or whether he depicts it as such only to present it as a travesty. The fact that the novelist alters the divine words adds an additional rhetorical layer to this uncertainty, especially since they refer to man’s unfulfilled wish to see the divine.

²⁵ Brenner, *Kitvey Brenner*, 1:75.

²⁶ Brenner, *Kitvey Brenner*, 1:75.

Brenner uses a similar method in his novel *Breakdown and Bereavement* (*Shekhol ve-kishalon*, 1920), in which each of the characters voices a different approach to the question of the nature of God. The young and sickly Yehiel Hefetz says that there is no way to know God. The old Rabbi Yosef believes that man should search for the essence of God and that this is the essence of faith. His brother Hayim, however, becomes more and more skeptical as the novel progresses. He is terrified by the thought that “now that he has seen that the ways of Providence were unfathomable, that good and evil were rewarded unfairly ... his faith in God, in a personal heavenly father, no longer sustained him as before; nevertheless, he lived in terrible dread of being left without it ... without faith in God one couldn’t breathe even for an instant!”²⁷ This passage ends with Rabbi Hayim’s fragmented thoughts about the emptiness of his life and the sorrows of his son, thoughts that lead him to declare, “There isn’t any God ...”²⁸

Schneider points out that the names of the two rabbis are actually the first and second names of the author, Hayim Yosef, and suggests that, despite their religious attitudes, Brenner may have used them as a vehicle for his own thoughts.²⁹ It seems that, especially toward the end of the novel, the two brothers voice Brenner’s ambivalence toward the divine. The name of the main protagonist is also significant here: Yehiel Hefetz means “(he who) desires the existence of God.”³⁰ To this polyphony we should add the voice of Hanokh, the son of Rabbi Hayim, who is quoted as saying that it is better to bear the troubles of life without God, since in any case “Life is hard for those who b-believe and h-hard for those who don’t.”³¹ Hanokh stutters, and the text imitates this feature by repeating the first letter of each word.³² This imitation serves the author as another rhetorical device by which to voice an opinion about the divine and at the same time to question it, as the fragmented sentence is read as if it were uttered with hesitation. This sense is strengthened by Rabbi Hayim, who doubts that his son could actually have uttered such

²⁷ Brenner, *Shekhol ve-kishalon* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1972) 212. Trans. Hillel Halkin (New Milford: Toby Press, 2004) 213.

²⁸ Brenner, *Shekhol*, 213.

²⁹ Schneider shows that representations of religious Jews can mostly be found in Brenner’s fictional writing, while in his non-fictional work he expresses his ideas about Judaism and its values.

³⁰ *Yehi* = shall live, *el* = God, *hefetz* = desire.

³¹ Brenner, *Shekhol*, 211 (Halkin, 213).

³² In the Hebrew original it is the last letter of each word that is repeated.

a complicated thought. Rabbi Hayim therefore assumes that it must have been his own.³³

Throughout the discussion of God's nature, the narrator periodically notes that "providence's hand is everywhere." This mechanical repetition is used to undermine the words of both the narrator and the characters. The discussion is thus presented as both a serious conversation on the question of the divine and its nature, and, at the same time, as Brenner's critique of this very discourse.

In all of these examples we can see that Brenner allows his characters to voice a much more nuanced and hesitant approach to God than is expressed in his non-fictional writing. By alluding to the Jewish and Christian scriptures, he adds another symbolic level of representation to this polyphony of approaches to the divine.

Tzelem Elohim (Imago Dei)

The depiction of Abramson as similar to Jesus in "Around the Point" is not accidental, and in fact can be understood as another literary device that allows Brenner to keep questioning the existence of a loving and caring God. The world of Brenner's stories is often presented as full of despair and helplessness, but he depicts his protagonists as reflections of the God who, according to the narrator and sometimes the characters themselves, does not exist. In many of Brenner's stories the protagonists carry some traits that might be associated with the divine. It is crucial to note, however, that they generally resemble the Christian rather than the Jewish divinity. More precisely, they often remind us of Jesus, on account of their own suffering and their compassion for the suffering of mankind.³⁴ Toward the end of the works, these Jesus-like protagonists

³³ Brenner, *Shekhol*, 212.

³⁴ In his attempts to explain how his atheist views were consistent with his Jewishness, Brenner argued that, despite being an atheist – and therefore refusing to ascribe religious importance to the New Testament – he still considered it "a book of our own flesh" (*basar mi-besarenu*), meaning of Jewish origin. As for Jesus, Brenner insisted that since "there is no god in heaven, no one can be the son or the apostle of that god." He explained: "Yet what kind of man was that 'shepherd'?" – this is indeed interesting from the psychological point of view, in the same way as it is interesting to know who Buddha, Moses, Isaiah, Muhammad were; who Shakespeare and Goethe were." *Kitvey Brenner*, 2:59. On Brenner's polemics regarding Jesus and Judaism, see Zvi Sadan, *Basar mi-besarenu – Yeshu mi-Natzrat ba-hagut ha-yehudit* (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2008).

often take action and bring what might seem like a kind of redemption, sometimes even sacrificing their own lives.

D. J. A. Clines says the following about the notion of “God’s image” in the New Testament:

We find that by far the greatest weight in the New Testament doctrine of the image lies upon the figure of Christ, who is the true image of God. As the second man, the last Adam, Jesus is to perfect the image of God Man is God’s representative on earth; Christ in a *sensus plenior* is God’s ‘one’ representative on earth.... In Christ man sees what manhood was meant to be.³⁵

As we have seen above, Brenner paradoxically depicts Abramson as a kind of God, perhaps Jesus, in connection with his very human headache. In other words, his allusions to the Christian scriptures allow him to make the human and banal experience of a headache seem like a divine moment.

In *Breakdown and Bereavement*, the sick Yehiel Hefetz is depicted as a Jesus-like figure who is brought to Jerusalem by a young pioneer named Menahem. The name Menahem is mentioned in the Talmud as one of the names of the Messiah,³⁶ and this allusion is strengthened by the fact that Hefetz, like Jesus, arrives in Jerusalem on the eve of the Passover holiday. Soon after, the narrator refers directly to that “young Yeshiva student from the Galilee” and mockingly comments that he was a naïve man who believed that he holds transcendental powers.

Toward the end of the novel Hefetz struggles to unite the orphaned son of Hanoch with his old grandfather and great-uncle, and in this he brings a sort of salvation to the agonized brothers, who had been forced to flee from Jerusalem and leave their past behind.³⁷ At the figurative level, this is an allusion to Hefetz’ divine powers, but at the same time the narrative presents this act as a result of a human kindness on the part of the protagonist, who pities the brothers and perhaps even wishes to make sure that their traditional lifestyle continues in the coming generations. Here we can also see that yet another of Brenner’s names is symbolically important, since the biblical Hanokh is described as “taken by

³⁵ D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968) 102–103. On the religious sources for the association between *be-tzelem elohim* and Jesus, see also Altman, *Panim*, 19–21.

³⁶ “Others say: His name is Menahem the son of Hezekiah, for it is written, *Because Menahem* (the comforter), *that would relive my soul, is far* (Lam 1:16)” (BT Sanhedrin, 98b).

³⁷ Gen 5:24: “And Enoch went with God, but he was not, because God took him.”

God.” Upon Hanokh’s death, Hefetz, whose name echoes the wish that God will live, fills the empty space of a man who was taken by God.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of Brenner’s tendency to depict man in the image of God through an allusion to Jesus can be found in the story “The Way Out” (*Ha-motza*). In this story the protagonist is an old teacher who tries to save the starving refugees who endlessly wait at the entrance to his village, by feeding them bread that he collects with difficulty from his neighbors. Unlike the New Testament Jesus, he is not blessed with miracles to help him feed so many people, but he displays a Jesus-like compassion for them in their misery by becoming miserable himself, and he atones for the sins of his indifferent neighbors with his own death. Here, too, Brenner uses a subtle irony: The old teacher’s most heroic act, the one in which he sacrifices his life, is his burial of a baby girl who had starved to death. Carrying the body of the girl, like Jesus carrying the cross, he hurts his leg, and he dies shortly thereafter, apparently from the infected wound.³⁸ In the absence of God, his heroic act is therefore nothing but another reminder that there is no salvation. Brenner’s Jesus-like figure, then, is only an ironic re-articulation of the experience of the absence of God in the world, the lack of hope for redemption. Indeed, while he may be relieved of his agony by his death, the narrator comments that another group of miserable refugees had just arrived. The misery continues, and there is no hope for rescue. In Brenner’s world martyrdom does not bring redemption, and man has no transcendental power to come back from the dead.

Still, despite the fact that in most cases Brenner’s theomorphism results in a failed salvation, his work is very much filled with man’s yearning to embrace divine compassion. Perhaps it is this very yearning that Brenner expressed when he wrote to his friend, the author Uri Nisan Gnessin (1879–1913), that “it is necessary to intensify the reality and holiness (*kedusha*) in the world.”³⁹ According to Menachem Brinker, Brenner uses the term *kedusha* in reference to Hebrew writers and their commitment to the collective agenda. The writer should not devote himself to his own personal experiences; rather, his personality as well as his art should be connected with the social struggles and conflicts of the period.⁴⁰ At the same time, by “intensifying the reality and holiness in the world” Brenner could also have been referring to

³⁸ Brenner does not state explicitly that he dies, and therefore some scholars read the end of the story as ironic; the injuries are minor, and the old teacher just uses them to cease his efforts to help the refugees.

³⁹ The letter to Gnessin is dated Jan. 12, 1900.

⁴⁰ Brinker, *Ad ha-simta*, 18.

attempts by man to take upon himself divine qualities. Brenner's world is therefore not entirely devoid of God, since his protagonists in many cases try, though often without success, to repair his absence with their own actions. In their compassion and love for mankind, they fill the void of God with what Brenner called a "sense of religiosity," and this sense is further emphasized by the many Christian allusions Brenner employs in describing their actions.

"My God My God Why Have You Lied to Me?"

The notion of man as an extension of the divine is dominant, albeit in a very different manner, in the work of Avraham Shlonsky. In many senses, Shlonsky saw in Brenner a kind of a role model, an exemplary author, one who could be considered a "twenty-four-hour writer," in that he dedicated his time and energy to literature.⁴¹ He considered Brenner (as well as Gnessin and Berdyczewski) to be a true modernist writer.⁴²

In his book on Shlonsky's poetry and thinking, Ari Ofengenden argues that at the center of Shlonsky's work stands a "passion for absence."⁴³ Ofengenden shows that Shlonsky's poetry deals with different aspects of modernity, among which is the death of God.⁴⁴ However, the notion of the death of God is complicated in Shlonsky's poetry: he alternates between representing God's absence and revealing his presence in a new manner. We should understand this move in the context of Shlonsky's perception of the role of the poet in the modern world. Following a poet he admired, the Russian symbolist Alexander Blok, Shlonsky thought that poetry had the power to bring back the harmony that used to exist between man and God, before the technological wisdom of modern civilization interfered. According to Shlonsky, civilization killed God, as humanity gained technical knowledge and lost its fear of the great symbols of the old world. This loss led to humanity's loss of both faith and poetry.⁴⁵

In his early poetry, Shlonsky indeed portrays man as lost in the world, incapable of communicating with a detached and distant God.

⁴¹ This expression was coined by Eliezer Steinman in "The Authors Conference" of 1926.

⁴² Hagit Halperin and Galia Sagiv, *Masot u-ma'amarim* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat ha-po'alim, 2011) 411.

⁴³ Ari Ofengenden, *Ha-he'ader be-shirato uve-haguto shel Avraham Shlonsky* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2010).

⁴⁴ Ofengenden, *Ha-he'ader be-shirato*, 9.

⁴⁵ Halperin and Sagiv, *Masot u-ma'amarim*, 27.

Using a theme similar to that of his contemporary, Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896–1981), Shlonsky depicts God as indifferent and even hostile, estranged from humanity. Like Greenberg, he associates humanity's loss of trust in God with its inability to be artistically creative.⁴⁶ In his early poem "Just Like That" (*Stam*), he asks:

How shall we pray when we don't know a prayer?
 And how shall we cry when we forgot how?
 And when we should open our mouths out of pain, as we are eager to sing,
 then even He would become alienated [and would ask]:
 "Do these deserve to sing?"⁴⁷

This human lamentation over the lost connection with God is not necessarily an acknowledgment of the death of God, but it is a realization that communication with God is no longer possible.⁴⁸

Although Shlonsky was famously harsh in his criticism of Bialik, the longing for God that he expresses here recalls Bialik's poetry in some ways. In his 1894 poem "On the Threshold of the Study Hall" (*Al saf beyt ha-midrash*), Bialik depicts the study hall as a rotten, sooty old place. The Holy Ark, the holiest site within it, is "swallowed in the ashes" and the "worn-out Torah scrolls are rotten in the barrel."⁴⁹ Thirty-four years later, Shlonsky locates God in the house of prayer and, like Bialik, depicts him as stripped of his former glory:

Empty are my halls. The last [Christian] pilgrims have already left
 Left – and gone.
 My bells like goblets whose wine has been drunk
 They are hung upside down on their mouths.⁵⁰

God is left alone and forgotten in the house of prayer, which can also be understood as a metonymy for the world itself. This is an aloof divinity that can only lament the old days when it was admired and worshiped.

In many of Shlonsky's poems we find a similar dichotomy between the great God of the past and the diminished divinity of the present. In the poem "In My Haste" (*Be-hofzi*), for example, God is rendered as the powerful creator of the universe, who delivers the light of the sun from

⁴⁶ See Neta Stahl, "Uri Zvi Before the Cross: The Figure of Jesus in the Poetry of Uri Zvi Greenberg," *Religion and Literature* 40, no. 3 (2008) 49–80.

⁴⁷ Avraham Shlonsky, *Shirim* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Po'alim, 1954 [1927]) 1:15.

⁴⁸ In his book on the poetry of Shlonsky, Ofengenden argues that in his early poems, especially in his "Lekh Lekha," Shlonsky depicts man in his loneliness, facing God without the mediation of any social framework; see Ari Ofengenden, *Ha-he'ader be-shirato*, 63.

⁴⁹ *Kitvey Hayim Nahman Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Hotza'at ha-yovel, 1933) 21.

⁵⁰ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:24.

the womb of the sky to the welcoming world.⁵¹ The glorifying words of the poet himself describe this birth. God is a large and caring grandfather who allows his young grandchild to ride on his knees and play with his beard. But this ideal picture is replaced in the next section of the poem, when the boy becomes a man. There, God has disappeared from the world, and all that remains is a longing for the lost harmony between him and the child-man. Adulthood here represents modern man's loss of naiveté, and it is accompanied by the sad realization that "the skies are high above" and that God is no longer part of mankind's experience of, and in, the world.

This kind of defiance toward God can be found in Shlonsky's poetry cycle *Suffering* (*Dvay*, 1924), in which he depicts humanity's endless and hopeless search for the divine. The long poem titled "Leprosy" (*Tzara'at*) is set in a confinement camp populated by people who are sick with leprosy. The dialogues between these people reveal that their only hope for a cure lies in the figure of the camp's priest, whom they think of as God's representative on earth. This man, however, is nowhere to be found. When he finally appears, it is clear that he has no message to bring with him, and that in fact he himself has lost any hope of divine rescue:

Jobs in their leprosy will roar,
Jobs will rub themselves against me,
And in the brim of my cloth of mercy, they will stack their nails –
Cure! –
And I don't have any.
My God, my God, why have you lied to me (*lama kizavtani*)?⁵²

The agonizing words of the priest echo Jesus' words on the cross, but here the priest accuses God not of forsaking him, but of deceiving him, of breaking the covenant between divinity and humanity. Instead of curing the sick, the priest himself becomes a leper, and lying in his own blood he calls to God: "You have become leprous, God! / And how will I knock on your gates?"⁵³ Later he cries out: "My God my God why have you forsaken me?"⁵⁴ The poem ends with an apocalyptic description of humanity forever dying of leprosy. In this nihilistic vision, the world is devoid of the divine, but mankind is doomed to search for it.

⁵¹ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:42–45.

⁵² Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 77.

⁵³ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 109.

⁵⁴ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 110.

However, only a few years later, in his *To Father-Mother (Le-abama)* and *Ba-Gilgal*, Shlonsky abandons this nihilism, and his God becomes a much more comforting figure. In this poetry, God functions symbolically as a father. As Yisrael Zemora argues, in these poems man is clinging to both his earthly and his heavenly father at the same time. This sense of sonship, according to Zemora, is what saves the poet from sinking under the burden of life, and it allows him to carry his burden with pride and strength.⁵⁵ This renewed trust in the divine will soon bring Shlonsky to go beyond the father-son relationship, and to represent God as reflected in humanity's utopia.

“A Man-God!”

In most of his early poems Shlonsky's divinity is not bound to any specific religion. In fact, he even goes as far as to depict God as a pagan idol. In his essay “Tzelem,”⁵⁶ he argues in favor of the use of images in the arts, despite Judaism's prohibition of graven images.⁵⁷ The essay deals with the image in art and is strongly influenced by early-20th-century modernist literary trends.⁵⁸ Shlonsky is making a connection here between the literary image and the “idoltrous feeling” that elevates the metaphor into “an image, into a symbol, a mythological creature.”⁵⁹ It concludes with the assertion that even Moses did not rest until he saw his God, even from the back, since “a man wants a body (even) an image (of a body).”⁶⁰ According to Shlonsky, poetry has the power to create this imagery, which will allow man to see God, or at least to see God's signifier, i. e., his back.⁶¹ This poetic manifesto reveals Shlonsky's understanding of his role as a poet: he is to mediate between man and God and restore the lost harmony between them, by employing the rich imagery of his language.

This notion of the power of the poetic image found its place in his Third Aliya poetry, which he wrote as a response to his experience as a pioneer, working in the fields of the Jezreel valley. Perhaps reconstructing this euphoric experience, Shlonsky uses the poem “Jezreel” to

⁵⁵ Israel Zemora, *Avraham Shlonsky* (Tel Aviv: Yahdav, 1937) 24.

⁵⁶ First published in *Hedim* 2, no. 11–12 (1924) 93–95.

⁵⁷ In Halperin and Sagiv, *Masot u-ma'amarim*, 80.

⁵⁸ Halperin and Sagiv, *Masot u-ma'amarim*, 80.

⁵⁹ Halperin and Sagiv, *Masot u-ma'amarim*, 81.

⁶⁰ Halperin and Sagiv, *Masot u-ma'amarim*, 82.

⁶¹ Halperin and Sagiv, *Masot u-ma'amarim*, 81.

describe the sensation of the divine as an integral part of the landscape of this center of Zionist pioneering. God's metaphorical presence gets a human "body" when God is depicted as planting the seeds of his vision in the fields of the valley. The surrounding mountains of the Gilboa feel the motion of his hand, and the entire landscape celebrates his presence. Shlonsky goes as far as to depict God as a huge, hairy man:

In a hairy hand, full of stars,
A seed of vision God will plant.
Dark lips hoveringly whisper:
How good are your tents, Jezreel.⁶²

In this anthropomorphic description, God shares both the Zionists' vision and the pioneers' labor. His masculine image, with hairy hands, gives the scene a manly, bodily flavor. This combination of divinity and masculinity embodies the pioneering enterprise and shapes the utopian feeling of the act of planting seeds in the fields of the valley. Not surprisingly, God appears in a subsequent poem, "Harvest" (Asif) in the middle of the field, where he is both an integral part of the land and a mirage or illusion:

In the middle of the stack,
A great God is standing,
And in his hand
A pitchfork.⁶³

Like one of the pioneers, God is taking part in the toiling of the land; he joins the laboring men and becomes one of them.

At the same time, in many of Shlonsky's poems, the pioneer himself turns into a man-god, embodying in this duality the transcendental, sometimes even messianic, aspects of the pioneers' vision.⁶⁴ Man and God almost become an identical entity, an image of the world and its vitality:

And then God too will come down like a young lamb
To pasture here in your flesh, that has grassed in its spring.⁶⁵

⁶² Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:186.

⁶³ Halperin and Sagiv, *Masot u-ma'amarim*, 1:187.

⁶⁴ For further reading on the Messianic elements in Shlonsky's interwar poetry, see Hanan Hever, *Be-shvi ha-Utopia* (Ben Gurion University Press: Sde Boker, 1995) 30–34, 43–48.

⁶⁵ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:185; trans. Ruth Finer-Mintz, *Poetry* 92, no. 4 (July 1958) 223 (with my own modifications).

Using Christian symbolism, Shlonsky depicts a divinity that becomes part of nature.⁶⁶ Man and God both cling to the land and unite with the landscape, as one figure:

I will carry my body with my hands
 And beneath the mane of a tangled tree
 On a throne of green grass I will sit him,
 A Man-God!
 Here the sky crowns a big sun around his forehead
 Like head phylacteries
 And trickles prayer into my lap.⁶⁷

Shlonsky uses natural imagery to portray God as a religiously devoted man. In this utopian picture, the sky is God's crown, and this crown is similar to both a Christian saint's aura and a Jewish man's phylacteries. Depicting the toil of the land as a moment of epiphany, where God and man unite with the land and become holy, he attributes a religious meaning to the pioneering act.

We can see that when Shlonsky turns to depict the utopian atmosphere of the Third Aliya, the harmony between man and God becomes central to his perception of the human experience of this period. Moreover, he uses this harmony to convey the kind of religious sentiments normally unarticulated by his self-proclaimed secular peers.

In Shlonsky's poetry of this period, God's presence illuminates the world and creates a sacred space. It is God's sanctity that grants the Zionist pioneering enterprise a utopian, even messianic, nature. Shlonsky's God, then, endows the political act of "reviving" Jewish national life in the land of Israel with eschatological dimensions.

These obvious efforts to restore the harmony between man and God should be understood also in the context of the contemporary image of the Hebrew man. At this period, manhood came to be associated with a sense of strength and vitality.⁶⁸ These qualities were needed in order to overcome the physical and psychological hardships that came with the

⁶⁶ For further discussion of Shlonsky's use of Christian symbolism, see Neta Stahl, *Other and Brother: The Figure of Jesus in the 20th Century Jewish Literary Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 24–29.

⁶⁷ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:185 (Finer-Mintz, 223).

⁶⁸ Micha Yosef Berdyczewski promoted the view that Second Temple Jewish heroism was a model for the Zionist revolutionary new Jew. According to this view, the new Jew is a Hebrew man who does not need to rely on the Torah and God for his rescue. For further discussion, see Yitzhak Conforti, "Ha-Yehudi ha-hadash ba-mahshava ha-tzionit," *Israel* 16 (2009) 63–96. On the new Jew in modern Hebrew literature, see Glenda Abramson, "Rishon la-shavim: The Image of the New Jew in Modern Hebrew Literature," *Israel* 16 (2009) 97–118.

pioneer effort to “revive” the land. Shlonsky’s theomorphic depiction of the Hebrew pioneer as not only carrying divine qualities, but as an actual extension of divinity, should be understood in this context. The pioneer, as an extension of the divine, toils the land, in an act that itself encompasses divinity. Thus, the unification becomes the symbol of the ideal type of man: a divine creature whose own hands re-create God’s world.

Metom (Deficiency)

Shlonsky’s poetry moves back and forth between two extremes: at times, it announces and even demonstrates the death of God, while at others it celebrates God’s presence in the world and inside man. *Ba-Gilgal* (1927) ends with a cycle of poems called *Deficiency (Metom)*, which represents this very duality through its use of negative theology. According to this Maimonidean model, God can be described only through negative attributes, i. e., by saying what he is not, rather than what he is. This seems an unlikely mode for Shlonsky’s poetics; but it can be understood as another way of resolving the tension inherent in his poetry between a dead and a vital divinity. The poem begins with the following confession:

And once again I thought of you, the calming passage:
 “not in the noise (is) my Lord”
 and again a still thin sound [this is how the revelation breathes]
 and there is no pleasure.⁶⁹

The word noise (*ra’ash*) in Hebrew also means earthquake; and indeed, the original passage (1 Kgs 19:11), which Shlonsky uses as the epigraph for the poem, refers to an earthquake. But it is this double meaning of the word that allows the poet to bring up at the same time both God’s disastrous actions and their negation. The passage itself refers to the actual action of God that is being negated, but the other meaning of the word, “noise” or “loud sound,” and its negation should be seen as an alternative way of representing God. This time Shlonsky avoids his imagistic tendency, and refers to God in the most abstract way. The next stanza brings a sort of an explanation for this choice:

Because what aches? What is the scream that silences from silence?
 Not a crying boy. Not bleating lamb.

⁶⁹ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:241.

And only somewhere when no one sees
Quietly man and God will stand, one in front of the other.⁷⁰

The silence represents God's presence in the world, but it is this very silence that also illustrates his absence. Man and God stand before each other as rivals, but also as mirror images of one another. Shlonsky indeed goes on to poetically represent this mirroring by using two parallel oxymora when describing God's and man's silence:

Ho, restrained silence of God,
Ho, silence of man's quiver.⁷¹

Strikingly, negative theology, the negation of speech, is used here to point at the similarity between God and man – both make a visible effort to remain silent, but underneath this silence there is a suppressed voice. But soon we learn that God's silent voice breaks through his written words; the poet recognizes God's handwriting in "some heretics' books of Jobs."⁷² The poem ends with a sort of a call for God to allow the poet to continue to announce his presence in the world, as he silently reads the scriptures. It is perhaps not surprising that the next poem in the cycle begins with the poet's declaration: "Indeed I am a poet (*paytan*)."⁷³ Here, the silence is interrupted by the voice of the poet, who becomes a prophetic voice, the voice of God.

In this meta-poetic poem, Shlonsky makes a sophisticated allusion to the philosophical problem typically associated with the Judeo-Christian discussion of human attempts to refer to God. He describes God in human terms, attributing human traits to him, but these traits are negated in accordance with the Maimonidean notion of negative theology. This allusion is important, as it raises the meta-poetic question that Shlonsky is constantly struggling with; as in other cases, his effort to represent the divine here contains a certain paradoxical element.

Now we can better understand Shlonsky's interesting choice of the word *metom* as the title of this cycle of poems. Yaakov Bahat explains that this word always appears in the scriptures preceded by the word *eyin* (there is not). But here it appears alone and can be understood as both perfection and deficiency. It is not by chance that the only place where it appears next to its original *eyin* in the whole cycle is in a poem

⁷⁰ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:241.

⁷¹ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:241.

⁷² Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:241.

⁷³ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:242. For a brief discussion of the word in Shlonsky's poetics, see Bahat, *Avraham Shlonsky*, 96.

called “When There Is No God.”⁷⁴ The very same word, which is the title of the cycle itself and of three separate poems in it, might refer to the world, man or even to God. At the end of the cycle, in another poem titled “Metom,” the speaker declares, “but there is still Jehovah, and he called me to come.”⁷⁵ The entire cycle ends with a call for God to guide the poet, or perhaps the pioneer, through his toil, “since the time has come.”⁷⁶ This phrase, which is traditionally associated with the coming of the Messiah,⁷⁷ alludes to yet another extension of divinity in the form of man. The poet comes full circle, as man and God re-unite for the sake of the pioneers’ toil of the land.

Summary

As we have seen, Brenner and Shlonsky share a similar view, according to which man embodies the divine. This may lead us to wonder how such different writers came to adopt such a similar notion. I will suggest that they were influenced in this by two different, yet related, sources from outside Judaism. The first is the 19th-century Russian notion of the man-god. This notion, which suggests that humanity has reached absolute wholeness and therefore received divinity,⁷⁸ originated in the work of Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), philosopher, theologian and poet.⁷⁹ According to Solovyov, humanity’s great achievement, which dates back to the Reformation, was its discovery that humans are free to consciously turn to the divine principle and enter into union with it. He thought such a union possible because the divine is rooted in human personhood itself, or, in his words:

The free inner union between the absolute, divine principle and the human person is possible only because the latter also has an absolute significance. The human person can unite with the divine principle freely, from within, only because the person is in a certain sense divine, or more

⁷⁴ Yaakov Bahat, *Avraham Shlonsky: Heker ve-iyun be-shirato uve-haguto* (Jerusalem: Yahdav, 1982) 250.

⁷⁵ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:257.

⁷⁶ Shlonsky, *Shirim*, 1:260.

⁷⁷ “Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion: for the time to favor her, yea, the set time, has come” (Ps 102:13).

⁷⁸ Vladimir Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, trans. Peter Zouboff, ed. Boris Jakim (Hudson: Lindisfarne, 1995) 73.

⁷⁹ Hamutal Bar Yosef, “Sophiology and the Concept of Femininity in Russian Symbolism and in Modern Hebrew Poetry,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 2 (2003) 59–78.

precisely, participates in Divinity. The human person (not, however the abstract idea of the human individual in general, but every real living person) has absolute, divine significance. In this affirmation Christianity agrees with contemporary secular civilization.⁸⁰

Solovyov spawned an entire movement called “God-Building,” which held that our fallen world is gradually being restored through the efforts of heroic humans.⁸¹ In fact, according to Lina Steiner, Solovyov’s central idea was already implicit in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, who was a major influence on Solovyov. Dostoevsky thought that humanity is still evolving and that the ultimate end of this evolution is something like Godliness. Some of his characters are clearly aspiring to this ideal.⁸² The main representatives of this highly influential movement were Anatoly Lunacharsky, Maxim Gorky and Alexander Bogdanov.⁸³ This strain of thinking was influential among Hebrew writers around the beginning of the 20th century.⁸⁴ Shlonsky, who translated Solovyov’s poetry and Gorky’s plays into Hebrew, may have borrowed this notion from them and from another admirer of Solovyov’s, the Russian poet Alexander Blok (1880–1921), whom he also translated.⁸⁵

Clearly, these Russian intellectuals were engaged with a general crisis of “disbelief” that attended the contemporary obsession with the “death of God” and Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*’s idea of elevation of the aesthetic as the new reinstatement of the numinous in the post-Darwinian world. However, Nietzsche also had a more direct influence on many modern Hebrew writers, including Yosef Hayim Berdyczewski, Shaul Tchernichovsky, Hillel Zeitlin, Yaakov Steinberg, S. Shalom and Zalman Shneour.⁸⁶ Nietzsche’s declaration that “that old God liveth no

⁸⁰ Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, 17.

⁸¹ See Lina Steiner, *For Humanity’s Sake: The Bildungsroman in Russian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 145–147.

⁸² Steiner, *For Humanity’s Sake*, 145–147.

⁸³ I am thankful to Lina Steiner for sharing with me her rich knowledge of the movement and the influence of its ideas on many writers and intellectuals of the 1920s.

⁸⁴ See Bar Yosef, “Sophiology.”

⁸⁵ Brenner’s 1911 Hebrew translation of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* appeared in 1924. For more about this translation, see Maya Arad, “Al targumo shel Y. H. Brenner le-*Ha-het ve-onsho*” in *Misaviv La-nekuda*, ed. Avner Holtzman et al. (Beersheba: Ben Gurion University, 2008) 209–238. Rafi Tsirkin-Sadan has studied the influence of Russian thought and literature on Brenner; see his *A Jewish Letter at the Pushkin Library: Yossef Haim Brenner’s Thought and Its Connection to Russian Literature and Thought* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2013).

⁸⁶ See Bahat, *Avraham Shlonsky*, 72.

more: he is indeed dead”⁸⁷ seemed to articulate these writers’ own worldview, and it is no accident that it is echoed in their works.⁸⁸ In his article on “Nietzsche in Hebrew Literature,” Menachem Brinker discusses at length the ways in which the philosopher’s ideas were borrowed by Berdyczewski, Brenner, and their peers,⁸⁹ and Anita Shapira notes that both the Russian translation of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and the Hebrew translation by David Frishman were admired by many of the young ex-Yeshiva Jewish writers at the turn of the century.⁹⁰

The problem of the Nietzschean death of God is further complicated in the works of Brenner and Shlonsky. Both authors question this notion: as we have seen, in their writings God is not totally dead or absent, but transformed in one way or another. Brenner’s protagonists reveal divine qualities, not because they have any transcendental traits, but thanks to traits shared by both man and God. In this sense, Brenner follows Nietzsche’s advice (coming from his *Zarathustra*) that man is better off if he himself becomes God.⁹¹ Shlonsky, too, adopted this notion of man turning into God and even associated it with the utopian reality of Zionist pioneering.

Brenner’s search for a source of compassion and love as the *imprimatur* of the divine within the human might also have been influenced by Ludwig A. Feuerbach (1804–1872). For Feuerbach, the divine is found in man, since man creates the divine:

God as a morally perfect being is nothing else than the realized idea, the fulfilled law of morality, the moral nature of man posited as the absolute being: man’s own nature, for the moral God requires man to be as He himself is: Be ye holy for I am holy.”⁹²

In the notion of love, Feuerbach sees a way to mediate between the perfect and the imperfect in man:

Love is God himself, and apart from it there is no God. Love makes man God and God man. Love strengthens the weak, and weakens the strong, abases the high and raises the lowly, idealizes matter and materializes spirit. Love is the true unity of God and man, of spirit and nature.⁹³

⁸⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 293.

⁸⁸ Bahat, *Avraham Shlonsky*, 74.

⁸⁹ See Menachem Brinker, “Nietzsche in Hebrew Literature,” in *Nietzsche and the Soviet Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 393–413.

⁹⁰ Shapira, *Brenner: Sipur Hayim*, 27.

⁹¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 292.

⁹² *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (London: John Chapman, 1854) 14.

⁹³ *Essence of Christianity*, 49.

In Brenner's work, the divine trait (love) that is missing from the world because of God's disappearance can be found in the most elevated form of man. We might think, for example, of the old teacher in "The Way Out," who uses his own love and mercy in an attempt to compensate suffering humanity for the absence of the love of God.

This view of love as the divine in man brings us back to our attempts to understand the perception of the divine in the works of Brenner and Shlonsky in the context of their understanding of the role of man, at times specifically the Hebrew man, in the modern world. Both writers use theomorphism to depict the relation between man and the divine. In both their works, man appears to carry divine qualities, and in both cases this depiction sometimes alludes to the figure of Jesus.

However, the two writers differ in their motivations for using this mode of representation. Brenner depicts the reflection of the divine in his characters mostly in order to point out God's weaknesses. His protagonists have no choice but to become divine, as God himself is nowhere to be found. Moreover, their divine qualities often emerge in their helpless attempts to show compassion. In most cases, this failed compassion shows both characters and readers that human mercy is not sufficient to create a better world. While Shlonsky's early poetry reflects a similar trend, his later poems use theomorphism to elevate both man and God. In fact, when Shlonsky questions God's presence in the world, his depiction is mostly anthropomorphic; he attributes human qualities to God. But when he wants to elevate man, he depicts him as similar to the divine, and his poetic world is then filled with God's presence. This is the way Yair Lorberbaum suggests we should understand the notion of *be-tzelem elohim*. In his understanding, it was used by the Tana'im as a means of elevating man to the value of God.⁹⁴ In his more utopian poems, it seems as though Shlonsky symbolically does exactly that.

This brings us to another difference between the two writers. For Brenner, theomorphism is the appearance of God in man in the course of events that can be described according to the categories of everyday experience.⁹⁵ Shlonsky, on the other hand, allows his God to appear in man in great and celebrated moments of epiphany. This is because, as I have tried to show, Shlonsky needs God in order to restore harmony to the world.

⁹⁴ Lorberbaum, *Tzelem Elohim*, 10.

⁹⁵ E. LaB. Cherbonnier, "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism," *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962) 195. Cherbonnier argues that when the biblical anthropomorphic God chooses to make himself known, he does so in the categories of everyday experience.

For Shlonsky then, the role of the poet is to bring God to the human world. Shlonsky thought of the poet as a kind of mediator between man and God who restores the lost harmony between them. This may explain the difference between Brenner's prose and Shlonsky's poetry. While Brenner articulates – through multiple voices – an existential ambivalence, Shlonsky uses the poetic mode to assert a totalizing lyrical ego, which might be seen as a sort of a formal, poetic cure for Brenner's broken selfhood. Shlonsky's confidence in the power of poetry and in the role of the poet as reflected in his generic choice, allows the totality of his lyrical ego to present itself as a redeeming force. Indeed, Shlonsky continues here a prevalent trend in modern Hebrew poetry: the prophetic mode that Bialik was so famous for.⁹⁶

While we can find a similar approach in the work of Shlonsky's contemporaries, such as Uri Zvi Greenberg and Yitzhak Lamdan, it was Brenner's defiance toward God that had the greatest influence on later Israeli poetry. Yehuda Amichai, Natan Zach and David Avidan adopted Brenner's defiant tone toward a God who does not pity humanity. As Amichai puts it in one of his most celebrated poems:

If God were not full of mercy,
Mercy would have been in the world
And not merely in God.

Amichai's anthropomorphism stresses God's human qualities, but while doing so it alludes to the very same qualities that Brenner attributed to God, especially the divine compassion that he seems to lament throughout his work. Like Amichai, Brenner and Shlonsky do not declare and lament the death of God, but rather God's seemingly ignorance and lack of concern for man's suffering. As I hope I have succeeded in showing, Brenner's and Shlonsky's famous nihilism (and in the case of Brenner even self-declared atheism) does not necessarily prove the secularity of their work.

⁹⁶ See Dan Miron, *H. N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), and Reuven Shoham, *Poetry and Prophecy: The Image of the Poet as a "Prophet," a Hero and an Artist in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Boston: Brill, 2003).