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When Joseph met Zuleika – the theo-political underpinning of Joseph in Shlonsky's early poetry and its critique of the *halutz* ethos

Haim O. Rechnitzer

Hebrew Union College – JIR, Cincinnati, OH, USA

ABSTRACT
Rabbinic, kabbalist and hasidic traditions perceive Joseph as an emblem of righteousness, a guardian of the Covenant, a symbol of *Sefirat Yesod* and a divine representation of the earthly *zaddik*. In various sources, Joseph's struggle with Zuleika, Potiphar's wife, is elevated to a mythological struggle of the righteous with the forces of evil, manifested as a seductive, demonic woman. Zuleika casts her net to capture Joseph and break the divine union of God and "Knesset Israel." Avraham Shlonsky's account of the charged relationships between Joseph and Zuleika is a metaphor and a prism for his critical view of the Zionist-halutz ideology and its concepts of body, masculinity and sexuality. Reading Shlonsky's early poetry collected in the book titled *Bagalgal* (In the Wheel, 1927) while applying hermeneutical methods taken from the field of Jewish thought brings the array of references and allusions to Jewish traditional texts to the surface. These references range from the Bible through the Talmud and Midrash to Hasidism. This method yields two important contributions; first, it highlights the unique contribution of Shlonsky's poetry. Second, the reconstruction of the theo-political elements of Shlonsky's early poetry deepens our understanding of the theological undercurrents of what is considered "secular Zionist culture" and demonstrates the unique role of the modern Hebrew poet as a secular prophet of the Jewish national revival.

KEYWORDS
Political-theology; Zionism; Third Aliyah; Hebrew poetry; Kabbalah; Hasidism

Avraham Shlonsky (1900–1973), poet, playwright, innovator of the Hebrew language, journalist, translator, editor, and a leading proponent of modern Hebrew poetry of his generation, was born in Ekaterinoslav, Ukraine to a hasidic family of respected Habbad rabbis. On his mother's side, Zipora Braverman, he was related to Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the last Lubavitcher rebbe. As youngsters, Menchem Mendel and Avraham Shlonsky become close friends while attending the heder (the traditional Jewish elementary school). Shlonsky spent many hours and days at the Schneerson's home immersed in its unique Habbad teaching and religious spirit (Heilman and Friedman 2010, 70–71; Hagorni-Green 1985, 16–17; Halperin 2001, Miron 2010, 38–50). Thanks to his

CONTACT Haim O. Rechnitzer hrechnitzer@huc.edu Hebrew Union College – JIR, 301 Clifton Ave, Cincinnati, OH 45220, USA

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parents' wide education and involvement in socialist movements (on his mother's side) and Ahad Ha`am's Zionist teaching (on his father's), Shlonsky enjoyed a combination of secular, socialist and Zionist education, in addition to a traditional Jewish schooling. This particular combination of diverse ideological, literary and religious education is reflected in his poems and serves as cultural reference points for his readers. While various scholars mention Shlonsky's hasidic background and occasionally refer to "hasidic motifs" in his poetry, they fall short of referencing this body of knowledge when interpreting his verse (See for example Avneri 1973, 105–109; and recently Ofengenden 2010a, 341). As I demonstrate here and elsewhere, this body of knowledge is essential to the interpretation of his poetry (Rechnitzer 2014).

An editor and mentor, Shlonsky headed a generation of young poets who rebelled against the established poets of the modern Hebrew Renaissance (early Hebrew Zionist poetry) and particularly against Haim N. Bialik. His own poetry reflects the influence of futurism and symbolism, and on many occasions he was accused by literary critics of disconnecting his poetry from the geography and the real human situation of its locality, that is to say, the site of Zionist fulfilment. Shlonsky, writes Hillel Barzel,

> faithfully expressed the revolutionary Zeitgeist, suggested a different poetics, a poetry which contains "the establishment of loftiness and wonder" … Poems that are too concrete, important as their goals may be – national, civil, or of social classes, bear with them [says Shlonsky] "the virus of lowliness and disease." (Barzel 2001, 72) [1]

In spite of this critical assessment of his entire poetic corpus, Shlonski's early poems collected in *Bagalgal* (in the Wheel[2]) and especially the poem cycle *Gilboa* are usually considered among the quintessential Zionist poetry of the Third *Aliyah* and a celebration of the pioneering ethos (Levin 1960, 51–54; Yoffe 1966, 22–25; Shapira 1998, 256–257; Neumann 2011, 36).

Ari Ofengenden questions this interpretation. He highlights the ambivalence regarding the ideal of toil. Shlonsky, claims Ofengenden, describes a masochistic process of deformation of the body and refers to agricultural work as the "murder" of nature or of the Land (Ofengenden 2010b, 31–35). In a later work Ofengenden presents Shlonsky's poetry as realizing "secularization" (Ofengenden 2010a). Although I agree with Ofengenden's presentation of Shlonsky as a heretic, I disagree with his and with others' interpretation of his poetry on the religious-secular axis. I think that his heresy is embedded in religiosity and is in a dialogical stance with God and the Jewish sources. Shlonsky himself termed his heresy "*muliyut*," "againstness," meaning standing against, facing, daring, God (Shlonsky 1960, 43). This is not a simple process of secularization and diffusion of religious myth in order to create a national ethos, but a perpetuation of myth at a higher level, that of heresy.

Before we move to the reading of the poems, a definition of political theology is in order. By political theology I mean the use of a theological matrix within which political reality receives its meaning and interpretation. It is also the use of theological language and myth to provide the meta-narrative for the political entity – its past, present and future, and thus portrays the concept/s of the *good* for society. Political theology can be developed and presented as such or it can be woven intentionally or unintentional in texts that discuss subjects that do not directly deal with theory of government. Thus one can read parts of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treaties* or the relevant part of Hobbes' *Leviathan*

and identify both the role of religion in society and state as well as the more covert or esoteric function of myth in constructing the new cultural horizon. On the other hand, one can read poems about falling soldiers or the beauty of the landscape of the Land of Israel and reconstruct myths that underscore or seek to impact the theo-political narrative of the political society (Lorberbaum 2007; see also Rechnitzer 2008a; 2012a, 21–35; Schmidt 2009).

In recent years we have witnessed an increase in scholarship dedicated to political theology both in Jewish thought and Hebrew literature (for example, Hever 2013; Rechnitzer 2008b; 2014, 261–284; 2012b). This paper seeks to build upon this scholarship and yet differ regarding the key interpretation of the messianic theme of Shlonsky's early poetry as portrayed by Hanan Hever (Hever 1995a, 33–51). Hever presents his messianic poetic endeavour as aimed at modernization and secularization of the traditional Jewish messianic myth – "instead of a vague messiah whose coming symbolizes an event of revolutionary redemption, Shlonsky creates a messiah whose message symbolizes a messianic stage that grows from relentless suffering and anguish" (Hever 1995a, 46–47). Shlonsky's messiah (in the image of Job), claims Hever, "is the modern secularized version of the messiah" (Hever 1995a, 46–47). However, Hever bases his interpretation of Shlonsky's messianic message on a poem-cycle entitled "The Last Covenant." This cycle is part of the book *Devai* [suffering, anguish] published in 1923/1924. Unlike Hever, I refer to Shlonsky's book *Bagalgal* published 1927.[3] This is a compilation of poetry that had been published in various publications since 1920.[4] The collection presents a self-reflective culmination of Shlonsky's endeavours as a poet and a member of the Third *Aliyah.*[5] In my opinion it has greater gravity when we examine Shlonsky's ideological and theological reflection on his years a as a *halutz* (pioneer).

In *Bagalgal* Shlonsky sets out to tell a messianic drama, a cycle of exile, redemption and letdown, an ecstatic mystical communion between God, the Land of Israel, the breach of this communion and the fall of the protagonist-poet-prophet into a second exile. The poems of *Bagalal* are written in the first person singular. The narrator is a protagonist-poet, a prophet and self-proclaimed messiah who provides a personal account of his journeys, visions and fortunes. He is living a revelation of which we become an audience, his "people."[6] The book ends with the poet standing at the Temple Mount's Dung Gate, a symbolic topography describing God's presence on earth – the Temple, yet the lowliest step, the most sacrilegious point of the divine stratum, at the foot of the Temple Mount. Rejected and neglected he cries to God in despair "Oh, let me go forth as [he] who carries his sheaves" (Shlonsky 1927, 199). In his cry, the poet recalls Psalm 126, which encapsulates the hopes for Israel's redemption "When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, … They who sow in tears shall reap in Joy. He who goes weeping on his way, bearing a bag of seed, shall come back with joyful song, carrying his sheaves."

A comprehensive interpretation of this book and its theo-political themes requires a lengthy monograph that is yet to be written; here, I would like to provide one of the keys that unlock Shlonsky's political theology and shed light on his reservations about the Zionist ethos of the *halutz*. I should note a difference between my interpretation of Shlonsky's poetry and Hever's. Hever categorizes Shlonsky's *Bagalgal* as "political poetry" and hence interprets its religious elements within an overall paradigm of secularization. (Hever 2011) This leads him to overlook the theo-political motifs that are

sustained and undergo a creative theological development in Shlonsky's poetry during that period.

I see these poems, and, in particular, the Joseph-Zuleika poems, as connected to the messianic narrative of *Bagalgal* (See Rechnotzer 2014). In contrast to the predominant opinion in the scholarship, (see, for example, Hever 1995b, 38–39) they present a critique, not a celebration, of the pioneering ideals of restraint and self-control, devotion to manual labour and conquering the landscape. His critique is highlighted by hasidic concepts of *yerida lakelipot* (descent to the chaff), *yerida lezorekh aliyah* (descent for the purpose of ascent), *avodah behipukh* (worship through inversion), *hishtavut* (equanimity) and the *zaddik's* ability to draw God's abundant grace to earth (Elior 1996, 168–179; Elior 1993, 144–145, 209–218).[7]

The protagonist is a poet and a prophet, and faithful to the biblical models taken from Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the poet's own experiences and actions become symbolic of the human condition. His endeavour is at once personal and universal.[8] The character of the poet as a prophet is predominant throughout the book and presented openly in the dedication poem *Hitgalut* (Revelation). Shlonsky chose to place this poem at the beginning of each edition of his collected work, presenting his own appearance on the stage as a shift of power to the new generation of Hebrew poets and to an alternative kind of prophetic leadership.[9] The poem describes the narrator-poet's ordination as a prophet-saviour for his nation.[10] Just as young Samuel was called by God, so, too, is the speaker. However, Shlonsky establishes a different dynamic between God and the prophet, assigning different roles for them to play. Before accepting God's mission, the poet transforms himself into the locus for the world's misery "and now the universe lies inside of me, wounded as the sunset / between the remains of my clouds." Only after the speaker has immersed himself in the "world's lamentation, in its pain and song" is he ready to accept the God's mission. Shlonsky's poet-prophet is not a submissive, passive recipient of God's words. He becomes God's prophet only after his transformation into a kind of mythological entity that assumes man's suffering.[11] Shlonsky alters the concept of prophecy, infusing it with the motif of the suffering *zaddik*, and echoes the talmudic and zoharic concept of the "suffering messiah" sitting "amongst the poor who suffer from wounds and diseases" at the gate of Rome, the symbol of the oppression of Israel in exile (Sanhedrin 98:a; *The Zohar* II:212a).[12] Shlonsky's *Hitgalut* is the theo-political blueprint for his poet-prophet-messiah, the prism through which Shlonsky asks us to listen to the voice of his speaker in the book. The theo-political stage is set.

Shlonsky is known by his inclination to associate his protagonist with biblical characters. Within one book, poem cycle or a single poem the protagonist is called by the author's own name – Avraham – and he also appears as Cain, Noah, Ishmael, Isaac, Joseph, Samson, Jonah or Job. The text presumes awareness of the biblical and traditional features of the characters juxtaposed with their new context. In all of *Bagalgal* there are five poems in which the protagonist's name is Joseph and two of them directly refer to the struggle between Joseph and Zuleika. The first is the poem entitled "Ani hagever" (I'm the man). The second is part of the poem-sequence *Tnuvah* (yield, produce). Their location in the book marks two distinct defining moments in the evolution of the protagonist's messianic voyage; the first is his transition from a prophet-like figure, preaching furiously against the masses' passivity and incompetency (Shlonsky 1927, 37–38, 41), to an active participant in the messianic drama. The second is the speaker's mystical experience

of union with God and the Land. At its pinnacle this mystical union contains the seeds of the poet's own destruction, and with it the symbolic letdown of the messianic fulfilment of the *halutz*. Let us turn now to a close reading of the poems but before that we should summarize relevant elements of the biblical story of Joseph that are the backdrop for our discussion.

Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh, bought Joseph from the Ishmaelites. Once realizing Joseph's wisdom and merits, Potiphar put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned. Joseph's success was intertwined with his physical beauty. Zuleika,[13] Potiphar's wife, was possessed by her lust, and Joseph was thrown to Pharaohs' jailhouse. The Midrash tells us that Zuleika tried repeatedly to seduce Joseph, but, to no avail.[14] Joseph's rejection drove her to insanity and illness. She even tried to poison Joseph, and threatened to kill herself. However, there was one incident in which Zuleika's beauty and sexual advancements shook Joseph's steadfastness. On the verge of succumbing to her, his father and mother's images appear before him and mask Zuleika's enchanting beauty. Seeing his parents' images, his desire subsides and he resists temptation. Joseph keeps his ethical obligation to his master and his "father's morals." Nevertheless, his momentary weakness does not pass without a price. The Talmud explains that Joseph could not contain the semen created by the intense sexual desire for Zuleika. Attempting to suppress his desire for Zuleika, Joseph had to divert his sexual energy. He "stuck his hands in the ground and his semen burst out from between his finger-nails" (Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah*, 36:b).

The primeval sexual desire, the image of the father and the mother as inhibitors of the libido, sublimation and the role of the woman as femme-fatale resurface in Shlonsky's poetry and convey his ambivalence and critique of the Zionist pioneering ideal and its concepts of body, masculinity and sexuality. To this we must add that by attributing Joseph-like characteristics to his protagonist, Shlonsky intensifies the contrasts between his hero and the masculine attributes of the pioneer. Joseph is portrayed in midrashic literature as a beautiful, yet fragile and feminine young lad who "behaved like young girls [*na`arot*], penciling his eyes, curling his hair, and lifting his heel" (Genesis Rabbah, 84:7).

The peculiarity of Joseph's character and the highly charged sexual tension between Joseph and Zuleika nourished an abundance of mystical allegorical and symbolic interpretations in the Kabbalah and hasidic literature. Joseph becomes the symbol of the *zaddik* who struggles and overcomes the temptation of the forces of evil, the emblem of the ninth Sefira – *Yesod* – which is the celestial manifestation of the sexual organ of the Divine Anthrop. Joseph is the organ of abundance, the place of the covenant, *brit*, the mark of circumcision. Joseph is also regarded as the messianic figure that precedes the Messiah Son of David. He is supposed to lead the final war of Gog and Magog, to die in battle and be resurrected by the Messiah son of David.[15] This rich literary tradition has echoes in Shlonsky's own account of his protagonist and his encounters with Zuleika.

Our first encounter with Joseph and Zuleika is in the poem "Ani hagever". The title itself radiates self-assurance, buoyancy, even machismo. However, to appreciate its appearance on the "stage" we should first provide a brief description the chapter *Stam* (unadorned, insufficient, meaningless) that precedes it. *Stam* presents a depressing description of the harshness and emptiness of life in exile (Shlonsky 1927, 16). More acute is the fact that dullness and misery have undermined and eroded man's ability to envision a better future (Shlonsky 1927, 19). Against the backdrop of this existential ennui the protagonist-poet is portrayed as one filled with a sense of a prophetic mission

and tries to awaken his fellow men but his words falls on deaf ears. No one follows him, no one listen to his message (Shlonsky 1927, 23–34). A prophet without followers, he is filled with despair and his life mirrors the lack of vitality, direction or hope (Shlonsky 1927, 30). *Stam* ends with a poem titled “Isru hag” (the day following the feast of Sukkot) which expresses the crumbling of the poets’ messianic attempts (Shlonsky 1927, 34).

Following this depressing ending, Shlonsky opens the chapter *Behofzi* (In my haste) in which our poem “Ani Hagever” appears, with a manic dedication poem:

> If the universe – is drunk and torn-
> I am its wild song,
> I am the song!
> And if the universe – is a mad dog
> / – /
> I am the drool dripping from its lips …
> I am the man madly longing
> for a different incarnation, the incarnation of a man! (Shlonsky 1927, 37)

The word “I” is repeated five times intensifying the nature of this ecstatic phase. Indeed, the title of the chapter foreshadows the calamity awaiting to unfold.

The poet in *Behofzi*, intoxicated by messianic fervour, hurries to redeem himself from exile and its misfortunes. He embarks on a voyage towards salvation, and inter alia neglects, or even betrays, his fellow man, his family, his father and mother, and hence his own “original” mission that predominated in the previous chapter *Stam*. The poem preceding “I am the Man,” “Bezel Shadai” (Under God’s shade), describes a strong sense of blissfulness that lifts the poet’s spirit in an ecstatic enthusiasm (Shlonsky 1927, 50). The exhilarated disposition propels his departure from his home towards what seems to be a path of deliverance. This euphoric situation ends with an unavoidable transformation of the protagonist’s childlike persona to that of a man. Indeed, leaving one’s home, seeking deliverance entails maturity. However, the transformation of our young Joseph into a man begets loss and destruction through violent sexual assault.

ב. אֲנִי הַגֶּבֶר	**B. I am the Man** (Shlonsky 1927, 51-53).
כָּכָה אָמַרְתִּי – וָאֵצֵא.	Thus I said – and departed.
אַךְ אַחֶרֶת אֲדָמָה לְרַגְלָי,	But the earth at my feet is changed,
וּגְבֹהִים שָׁמַיִם.	And skies are high.
(אָז הֵצַת בְּדָמִי אֲבוֹיֵי הָרִאשׁוֹן	(then the first woe in my blood was ignited
וְלָהַט כְּשׁוֹכְנִי בַסְּנֶה).	And sizzled as though I dwelt in the *Sneh*
הִנֵּה כְבָר חוֹתֶה הַתַּמּוּז גֶּחָלָיו –	*Tammuz* heaps its hot coals –
עַל רֹאשִׁי, עַל רֹאשְׁךָ, עַל רֹאשׁ כָּל הַקָּמָה.	Upon my head, on your head, on top of the ripened-grain.
כּוֹרַעַת הַקָּמָה מִתְפַּתְּלָה וְשָׁחָה –	The grain bows twisted and bent –
כְּמוֹ פָּקוּ בִּרְכַּיִם מֵעֹצֶר הַלְּשָׁד.	Knees give way from weakness
הֲזוֹהִי אֲדָמָה?	Is this the soil?
הֲזֶהוּ עֲפָרָהּ הַשָּׁחוֹר הַדָּשֵׁן,	Is that its black fertile soil,
מִמֶּנּוּ רְקִיקִים וְחַלּוֹת אָפִיתִי	From which I baked loaves and crusts
לְאַחַר יוֹם-גֶּשֶׁם בַּחוּצוֹת? – –	After a rainy day? – –
כְּבִיצוּעַ-אֲהָבִים	As a love-act
בְּאַלְפֵי אֵבָרִים זְלֵיכָה תִּתְמוֹדֵד	Zuleika contends with thousands of limbs
וּתְעַגֵּב בְּחֵמָה – –	And courts heatedly – –
מֵאֵיזֶה יַיִן? מֵאֵיזוֹ חֶמְדָּה?	From wine? From desire?
וּבְאֶצְבְּעוֹת-סִרְפָּד, זָרוֹת, שַׂרְטָנִיּוֹת	And with nettle-fingers, strange and clawing
בִּבְגָדִי תִּתְפְּשֵׂנִי:	She will cling to my garment:
בֹּאָה!	Come!

בֹּאָה, יוֹסֵף הַצַּדִּיק!	Come, you righteous Joseph!
וּפָרְמוּ חֲרוּלַי אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפַּסִּים,	And my thorns unravelled your many coloured coat
לְעוֹרְךָ הוֹרָתְךָ הִלְבִּישָׁה.	That your mother dressed you with.
וְנֶחֱשַׂף הַבָּשָׂר מִבַּעַד לַקְּרָעִים,	And the skin exposed through the rips
כְּחַמָּה מִמִּפְלְשֵׂי-עָבִים.	Like sun from expanses of clouds
הַבָּשָׂר? כֵּן: בָּשָׂר – –	The flesh? Yes: flesh – –
הַסּוּת כְּפָרֹכֶת עַל פְּנֵי אֲרוֹן-קֹדֶשׁ,	The garment as a curtain on the Ark,
שָׁם סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַכָּתוּב וּמֻגָּה	Where lies the Torah written and proofed
בִּידֵי אֱלֹהִים.	By God's hand.
אַךְ הָאֶצְבָּעוֹת מוֹשְׁכוֹת, שׂוֹרְטוֹת הַפָּרֹכֶת,	But the fingers are pulling, scratching the curtain,
וּבוֹכֶה, בּוֹכֶה סֵפֶר-תּוֹרָה – –	And the Torah-scroll cries, cries – –
אִמָּא! אִמָּא!	Mother! Mother!
*	Mother! Mother!
אַלְלַי לִי כִּי נִדְמֵיתִי!	* Woe is me, I am lost!
עַתָּה לֹא יִשְׁפֹּךְ לִי לַיִל מִטַּנְאוֹ	No longer will night pour golden
דֻּבְדְּבָנִיּוֹת זְהָבוֹ.	cherries from his basket.
עַתָּה לֹא תַחֲלוֹץ לִי חַמָּה אֶת שַׁדָּה	No longer will Sun offer me her breast
לְהָנִיק חֲלָבָהּ הַנּוֹהֵר .–	To let me nurse from her glowing milk – .
…	…
…	…
הֵי, טְרֹפְנָה, צִפָּרְנֵי-חֲרוּלִים אֲרֻכּוֹת,	Ho, long thorn-nails, rip apart
אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפַּסִּים עַל בְּשָׂרוֹ שֶׁל נָעַר.	The many coloured coat on the boy's flesh.
וְאָבִי כִּי יָבוֹא וִישַׁוֵּעַ:	And when my father comes and cries:
אַיֶּכָּ?!	Where art though?!
טִבְלוּהָ בְּדָמִים וְאִמְרוּ:	Douse the coat in blood and say:
אֲבוֹי!	Woe!
טֹרַף זֶה בִּנְךָ – כִּי הָיָה לְגֶבֶר– –	Your son was devoured - for he became a man – –

A resolute masculine voice proclaims "Thus I said – and departed." The protagonist pushes forward confidently towards the uncharted terrain. However, with the first strides, an unfamiliar sensation undermines his confidence. He utters "but" – an abrupt monosyllable that foreshadows the eerie psychophysical disposition described in the following five lines. The earth is estranged and "the skies are high," intensifying the feeling of empty space between heaven and earth. "The first woe" echoes inside like a stone thrown into a deep well, sending alarming waves of "ignited blood." A fiery presence, like a *sneh*, scorches the speaker from within. Shlonsky's use of the word *sneh* creates a sense of defamiliarization (ostranenie). Although the *sneh* is a sign of God's presence, here it underscores the absence of the God of Israel from the scene. After all, it is not YAHW, but Tammuz (*dumizid*) that descends upon the poet. Tammuz, the god of fertility in Mesopotamian mythology, is doomed to die at the height of each summer. His death is marked by a six-day funeral accompanied by a procession of mourning women. Like the looming death of Tammuz, heaps of coals scorch the poet's head and burn the soil under his feet, turning them to ashes. This is the stage on which Zuleika appears and engages with Joseph who has declares so proudly at the beginning of his journey "I am the man." He stands incapacitated bowing "twisted and bent" like "ripened grain" waiting for the deadly scythe. It is Zuleika, not "the man" who is active, penetrating, breaking the hymen, ripping and stripping him of the "many coloured coat." She exposes his flesh. Her thorny fingers penetrate the poet's flesh symbolically in a reversal of role resembling the violent rape of a virgin. Exposing Joseph's flesh is likened to exposing the Torah. This violent act has no resemblance to the constructive deciphering of the secrets of the Torah. It is a violent process in which Joseph, now identified with the Torah scroll, "cries / Mother! Mother!"

Joseph's transition is not conceived of as that of adolescence to manhood but as a change from femininity to masculinity. We note that the identification of the protagonist with the Torah entails the transformation of the Torah itself [note that "Torah" in Hebrew is a feminine noun and traditionally referred to by the sages as a feminine entity] ((Fishbane 1989). In Shlonsky's poem, the transformation of both Joseph and the Torah is through violence and distortion rather than through perfection. The disambiguation of Joseph's identity from a feminine boy to a man is the first outcome of his attempt to extract himself from exile. It is a necessary act, yet instead of clarity and strength, it yields fear of existential isolation and alienation from his fellow men and the world. Joseph's new terrifying situation is augmented by Shlonsky's reference to Isaiah 6:5 "Woe is me; I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my own eyes have beheld The King Lord of Hosts." At the highest point of the mystical encounter with the divine, the prophet is terrified and overwhelmed by a profound sense of unworthiness, uncleanness and desolation. Joseph's devastating disposition is exacerbated by the fact that it is not God, but Zuleika whom his eyes have beheld.

Shlonsky's inversion of God and Zuleika is aligned with the Habad concept of worship in inversion and the paradoxical unity of opposites (Elior 1982, chapter 4; and Elior 1993, 25–26; Idel 1995, 111–127). I do not suggest reducing Shlonsky's description of Joseph's messianic journey to Habad theology.[16] However, highlighting major themes of this theology is instrumental to the interpretation of the poems and to the appreciation of his theological underpinnings of the *halutz* ethos. The *zaddik* descends to the shells that is, a descent to the depths of material reality, the opposite of divinity and the forces of evil (*yerida lakelipot*) to assist in the revelation of God in the world. The process is often symbolized by Joseph's descent into Egypt and his battle with the forces of temptation in the house of Potiphar. In the Lurianic Kabbalah the forces of evil have a primordial mode of existence within the Godhead and only after the "breaking of the vessels" do they assume a separated existence. Their separated existence is an outcome of a cathartic cleansing process by God Himself. This theology suggests an ontological dualism in which the roots of evil coexist with God (Tishby 1984, 53–61; Scholem 1961, 265–268). However, Ḥabad theology overcomes the ontological dualism of the Lurianic Kabbalah. It explains that every substance, including the Deity, requires its opposite to achieve complete realization and full revelation. Creation is the revelation of God. We can imagine God as an accordion that stretches outward to manifest Himself. This is a necessary process that enables the revelation of God in the vessels, in corporeality, in the world. Thus, what we consider "evil" is in fact the inverted dimension of God from His complete infinite concealment to external revealment. It comes into existence through the transformation of God's unity and "oneness" into plurality and hence is an integral part of the creation. Creation is the outcome of God's attainment of His perfection and His complete manifestation. Unlike the Lurianic concept, "breaking of the vessels" is not a catastrophic accident in God's manifestation but a "high need" (*Zorekh gavo`a*) of God. Without it, the world on all of its plains, divine and corporeal, would not have come to be and God would not have been able to reveal and perfect Himself. Evil, therefore, has no independent essence or ontology. It assumes a separated dimension only in the human mind. In Ḥabad theology, the struggle against "evil" is understood on a psychological plane. To overcome evil man must undergo a transformation of consciousness, a change of

perception. By way of *imitatio dei*, as God expands Himself into "the vessels," men descend into corporeality, to the *kelipah.* The process is called worship by way of inversion (*avodah behipukh*). Man descends to the *kelipah* in order to invert its separated existence and return its divine light back to its origin, which is back to a complete concealment (Elior 1993, 201–218). Worship by inversion assigns value to sin and transgression and therefore borders with antinomic practices such as that of the Sabbateans. This is the backdrop of Shlonsky's description of the dynamic tension between Zuleika and Joseph.

In *Bagalgal* the journey towards redemption starts with a descent into deeper exile. Thus, the speaker fulfils the quest expressed in the dedication poem at the beginning of the volume "I am the man madly longing / for a different incarnation, the incarnation of a man!" (Shlonsky 1927, 37) However, his encounter with the *kelipot*, here represented by the Lilith-like woman Zuleika, was not an intentional act of descent and inversion. He is "attacked" and forced to descend and perceives his experience as a traumatic experience of transformation into manhood. Manhood, it seems, is a source of agony and a reason for mourning lost youth and innocence. It entails a violent separation from one's parents, from Torah and from God. This is the mythological backdrop against which the more distinct Zionist chapter, *Gilboa*, is presented to the readers.

If Shlonsky is following his hasidic teachers, Joseph is supposed to use this incident to elevate divine sparks back to the Godhead. However, at this stage he is totally devastated by the process, pushed by Zuleikah to the verge of madness (Shlonsky 1927, 67). The analogy to Habad theology of "descent" intensifies the sense of the speaker's colossal failure. He cannot fully embrace his transformation nor can he connect the fallen sparks back to their Divine origins. Will his second attempt, as a *halutz* on mount Gilboa, be a successful one?

The second poem describing the encounter between Joseph and Zuleika appears in the third chapter of *Gilboa. Gilboa* is considered by many to be Shlonsky's quintessential *halutz* poetry. Israel Levine, A. B Yoffe, A. Shapirah and recently B. Newman perceive these poems an emblem of the pastoral expression of the *halutz* ethos, a glorification of nature and agricultural toil and of the redemptive return to the deepest and primordial elements of human existence (Levin 1960, 51–54; Yoffe 1966, 22–25; Shapira 1998, 256–257; Neumann 2011, 36). Ari Ofengenden questioned this interpretation and identifies elements of masochism (deformation of the body), referring to agricultural work as the "murder" of the Land which is the pioneer's object of adoration (Ofengenden 2010b, 31–35). I view these poems as part of the overall messianic narrative of *Bagalgal.* In *Gilboa* Shlonsky describes the dialectics between the sense of omnipotence and of frailty. The poet's ecstatic fusion with the soil [*adam-adama*] and with the Torah elevates him to a demi-god that nourishes the soil and provides for livestock. Alas, this ecstatic process also contains the seed of the destruction of the speaker and his eventual fall from the heights of messianic ecstasy to another exile and despair. The seeds of failure are planted in the second encounter with Zuleika and the pioneer's confusion regarding his messianic task and hence his refusal to consummate his union with her.

As mentioned above, Zuleika appears again in a sequence titled *Tnuva* (crops, produce, yield). Preceding the poem are the poems *Amal* (toil), and *Be`ikvei hatzon* (in the herd's tracks). On first reading, these poems seem to depict an ideal of the pioneering ethos painted in an ecstatic favourable light. They also convey ambiguity about the Zionist

ideal of conquering of the land and labour and in no way are they a celebration of this ethos.[17] The title *Tnuvah* denotes the aspiration of every farmer, every *halutz*, to see blessing in his toil, to harvest the crops. *Tnuvah* is a symbol of the realization of the redemption of *Eretz Israel* and the conversion of the exilic Jew to the New Hebrew. With this seemingly optimistic setting one might expect that this time around our Joseph will overcome any diversions and redeem himself from the of Zuleika's "nettle-fingers." However, in stark opposition to "I am the Man," in this poem the narrator is identified with Zuleika. As if on trial he presents her case, portrays her compelling feminine qualities and depicts Joseph as the one who fails to reciprocate Zuleika's natural and justified sexual and maternal needs. We are called to judge between Joseph and Zuleika, between Joseph the *halutz* and Zuleika the Land. Consequently, Shlonsky intensifies the tension between the messianic aspects of Zionist ideology and positions them in contrast to "nature" and "Land." He contrasts them by using Joseph as his symbol, a man not at ease with his masculinity, a transvestite in disguise:

תְּנוּבָה	**Harvest** (Shlonsky 1927, 104)
מִי עָבַר פֹּה וּבִגְדוֹ צֹאָה,	Who walked here with spotted clothing
וּבִגְדוֹ צֹאָה צֹאַת-צֵל;	A garment covered by spots of shade;
פֹּה עֶדְרֵי צֹאן הִתְנַהֲלוּ עִם הָרוֹעֶה,	Here the herds walked with the shepherd ,
וַיָּטִילוּ גֶּלְלֵי זָהָב עַל שְׂדֵה-לֵיל.	Depositing golden dung on the night meadow.
אַתֶּם אוֹמְרִים: זִמָּה הִיא וָתֶבֶל,	You say: lewdness and perversion,[18]
וַאֲנִי אוֹמֵר: שָׂדֶה הָרָה – לֵב.	And I say: a pregnant field – a heart.
וַאֲנִי אוֹמֵר: הַכּוֹכָבִים – זֶבֶל.	And I say: the stars – are rubbish.
מִי יַזְרִיעַ זֶרַע בִּי בִּכְאֵב !?	Who will painfully sow seed in me!?
מִי יַזְרִיעַ, מִי יַזְרִיעַ בִּי הַזֶּרַע –	Who will sow, who will sow the seed in me –
וּבְקִרְבִּי תּוֹסֵס לְשַׁד הַדָּם?!	And within me the blood-life ferments?!
יוֹמִי הָלַךְ לוֹ, כְּזָקֵן פּוֹטִיפֶרַע,	My day has gone, like old Potiphar,
וּכְזֻלֵיכָה – לֵילִי חָם.	And like Zuleika –my night is hot.
וְעֶצֶב כָּחֹל בָּא, כְּיוֹסֵף יְפֵה-תֹאַר.	And blue sadness comes, like handsome-Joseph.
"שִׁכְבָה עִמִּי – וְהָרִיתָ אָז "– –	"Lie down with me – and conceive a child" – –
עָזַב בִּגְדוֹ יוֹסֵף יְפֵה-תֹאַר	Handsome-Joseph left his garment
וְהַחוּצָה עָרֹם נָס.	And naked, ran away.
כֹּה יָנַח לֵב זֻלֵכָה עֲלֵי עֶרֶשׂ	Thus will Zuleika's heart rest upon the bed
וּלְזֶרַע יִכְמַהּ. אַךְ בִּכְדִי.	And yearn for seed. Alas, to no avail.
וְרַק אֲדָמָה שְׂרוּעָה צָבַת-כֶּרֶס –	Only earth lays with distended belly –
כִּי זִבְלוּהָ צְפִיעֵי גְּדִי.	She has been fertilized[19] by kid's dung.

The poem begins with a pastoral depiction of a shepherd and his herd. However, the pastoral description is depicted by an unconventional choice of words, part of which are lost in English translation. The shepherd's clothing is stained by the goat's excrement, but Shlonsky does not let the seemingly repulsive image of a person covered with animal excrement to linger in the reader's mind for long. The stanza is built both musically and rhythmically to create a sense of smooth transition from this image to the picture of the herd's golden dung covering "the night's meadow." We are asked to hold two contradicting images in our mind; one repulsive the other pastoral in the backdrop of a stanza that is structured in rhyme and rhythm like a lullaby. We sense a dissonance, waiting for the next stanza which starts with a voice speaking directly to us, and as if the poet is guessing our response to the verses we read: "You say … " However, the poem is not an invitation to a dialogue but the description of a dispute between the speaker in the poem and the other. These others are not only readers but his comrades the *halutzim*.

One of the core values of the *halutz* movement is the *havurah*, the collective as a commune of body and soul. In the poem the collective "You" is confronted by the narrator. At the outset Shlonsky is breaking the collective voice by stating "I" versus "you." The divide between the two is both an ideological and religious. That which is identified as an abomination, "lewdness and perversion" by the collective, is perceived favourably by the speaker – "a pregnant field – a heart." Shlonsky cites two biblical words, *zimah* and *tevel* that express sexual perversion and animal lust and thus keeps the erotic symbolism as a thread between the two Zuleika poems and their messianic drama. However, the very word that denotes forbidden sexual acts, *tevel*, is the word for "universe" or "world," as in Psalms 24:1 "The earth is the Lord's and all that it holds, the world [*tevel*] and its inhabitants." The etymological duality of *tevel* plays to the schism between the speaker and the *havurah*, the collective "you." They share the Zionist quest for redemption of the Land through agricultural labour; however, they interpret the required implementation with diametrical oppositions – "You say: lewdness and perversion, / and I say: a pregnant field – a heart." In Hebrew it is clear that the speaker is a man, using the masculine form "I say," yet he speaks as Zuleika and his quest for realization is expressed as a quest to be inseminated as a female. Shlonsky preserves the male identification of the speaker in the line "Lie down with me – and conceive a child" by using the masculine form *shikhva* (lie down) and not *shikhvi* and the masculine form *harita* (conceived) and not the feminine form *harit.* Zuleika is calling the man to sleep with her and promises him that *he* will conceive. Joseph the *halutz*, like the biblical Joseph, refuses to engage sexually with Zuleika, to fully immerse himself in the Land that, like Zuleika, is "in heat." He flees the scene, failing to act yet again. If in the first poem, Joseph was identified with the speaker, here the protagonist is Zuleika. Shlonsky is using her character to point to the shortcomings of the collective "you," the *halutzim*, now personified as Joseph.

They cannot act when called upon, cannot transgress, cannot work by way of inversion, leaving their desired earth "with distended belly." They, like Joseph, are so preoccupied with keeping the "covenant" that they become its very destroyers. They have traded the religious preoccupation with laws and fear of transgression for another set of fixed laws, or another kind of fanaticism. An indication of that interpretation is in the words describing Zuleika's agony, "with swollen belly," in Hebrew *zavat-keres.* This expression points the reader to the biblical law concerning a case in which a husband suspects that his wife has been unfaithful yet there are no witnesses or circumstantial evidence to substantiate his suspicion. He brings his wife to the Temple before the priest. The priest gives the women a ceremonial potion that supposedly takes affect only if the woman indeed has transgressed. In that case "[her] thighs waste away and [her] belly distends" (Num. 5: 21).

In the poem, Zuleika remains untouched both by her rightful husband who is too old to have intercourse with her and by the *halutzim* who have refused her because they perceived the occasion as "lewdness and perversion." Nevertheless, Zuleika is left "with distended belly." She has become the victim of Joseph's inactivity and God's curse. If Zuleika represents the Land and Joseph the *halutz*, then in a subversive way Shlonsky blames the *halutz* for failing to plunge into the dangers of worship, or work, by inversion. The Zionist pioneering ethos required a total spiritual revolution which, according to Shlonsky's speaker, they were not capable of achieving. Shlonsky's poetry of *Gilboa* should be read not as a celebration of the *halutz* ethos but as the tale of its tragic shortcomings. These are not due to political errors or the hardship of labour but by the inability to fully

unite Zuleika and transform their "Josephean" character, to leave behind the old Torah, delve into heresy and be born again, a man unbound by old laws and taboos.

Shlonsky does not provide a detailed theological teaching of the transformation that is required of the *halutz*. However, in the poems following *Tnuvah* he gives a description of the protagonist's transformation from which we can deduce the basic characteristics of this new spiritual horizon. The first is the person's immersion in the Land, the vegetation and the livestock. This theme weaves through many of the poems that constitute *Gilboa*.[20] The second is an antinomic act, a return to a state that precedes the covenant with God, to a wild, barren situation represented in poems by Ishmael, the son sent by Abraham to the desert, and by the speaker's quest to grow wild fingernails and regrow his foreskin (Shlonsky 1927, 108). Only after undoing "the coat of many colours" can the revolutionized state of being yield a new covenant, new Tablets written in flesh, blood and soil, not in words or laws. This ecstatic state is apparent in the closing stanza of the poem that follows, *Adama* (soil): "I am the loftiest Psalm / called cosmos / and my flesh – is God's Palace / as all the cattle mooing to heaven" (Shlonsky 1927, 119). Thus, the protagonist can continue and a few poems later complete the undoing of Joseph's coat of many colours by approaching his mother to ask "Do not sew, mother, from your expensive silk / a coat of many colours for me! / See, how the wind broadens its nostril / inhaling my scent – the scent of pears" (Shlonsky 1927, 119).

It seems that Shlonsky demanded a total transformation that does not entail a new written code or a reformation of the old tablets. In hasidic language it is not "a worship in inversion" for the sake of heaven, and even not a Sabbatean heresy of "redemption through sin," but a much more radical transgression, a total revolution and transformation. Essentially, in *Bagalgal*, Shlonsky is using Jewish theological language to undo the theological baggage in order to fully engage with the new Zionist horizon. He is using charged language not to defuse its theological past or to secularize it, but to recharge it with new theological heresy. To what extent this enterprise was successful is for readers to judge. We can only recall Gershom Scholem's letter to Franz Rosenzweig "On Our Language: A Confusion" in which he warns against the Zionist project of secularizing the Hebrew language while being oblivious to the theological and apocalyptical potential embedded in it: "It is impossible" Scholem states (1926 (1990), 97) "to empty the words so bursting with meaning, unless one sacrifices the language itself." In *Bagalgal* Shlonsky not only did not seek to "secularize" the language but purposely charged its apocalyptic potential. One may say that he took Scholem's warning as a positive suggestion. In Shlonsky's poetry, what Scholem saw as a danger became a blessing. He admonishes his comrades for not bringing the theological and subversive potential embedded in the tradition to its final conclusion.

My purpose in this article has been to focus our attention on the theological motivation and underpinnings of the book through one of its central theological motifs – the struggle between Zuleika and Joseph. This struggle, as I sought to demonstrate, symbolizes the agenda of the speaker and his critique of his fellow *halutzim*, the members of the Third *Aliyah and* their falling short of their Zionist spiritual revolution. As such, it is a benchmark in our understanding of Shlonsky's poetry. Beyond this I believe it adds another facet to our understanding of the theological drama of the Zionist revolution and its strong ties to Jewish texts and myths. It is clear that it is not enough to look at the Zionist cultural phenomenon illustrated in the poetry of Shlonsky and other poets whose poetry is

steeped in references to Jewish sources as moving along an axis of "religious" to "secular." Reading their poetry and reconstructing the world of allusions embedded in it enriches our perspective on Jewish "secularism." It also requires, *inter alia*, a culture of readers who can share the language of this poetry in the broadest sense possible, the ability to follow the textual allusions and share existential experiences steeped in religiosity.

Shlonsky's *halutz* could not have accomplished his or her fulfilment without the highest form of religiosity as he himself defined it – "againstness" – facing and daring God. In his book *Secular Age* Charles Taylor presents three basic paradigms of secularism: (a) neutralization of the public sphere, that is, the State and its institutions from "God," i.e. from religion as the core narrative of justification for its activities and ideals; (b) a decline of belief and practice; and (c) a state of affairs in which in a given culture, the life of a believer in God is but one reasonable and moral option amongst other ways of life (Taylor 2007, 1–22).[21] Shlonsky's heretical imperative, his demand to fulfil the call of Zuleika, echoes with each of Taylor's three components of secularism. It envelopes the private and public spheres; it demands engagement and practice and reinvigorates the spiritual horizon of the *ḥalutz* even if in a rebellious, heretical religiosity. Thus, the heretical imperative is, in the final analysis, theo-political in nature.

Notes

1. Barzel refers his readers to Shlonsky's writings in Shlonsky (1960, 32). On Shlonsky and his rebellion against Bialik, see Hagorni-Green (1985).
2. Recently, Hagit Halperin suggested four different explanations for the title of the book – "the Wheel" as a symbol of the world's insanity; "wheel" as gematria of suffering (*makhuv*); "Wheel" as an alarm bell used by the *halutzim* to mark the end of the work day or an emergency, and "Wheel" as symbolizing an eternal cycle from bad to good and from good to bad. See Halperin (2001, 312–313).
3. (Shlonsky 1927) The poem cycle *Beḥufzi* was composed in 1920 during Shlonsky's flight from the Kazaks' pogroms in Ekaterinoslav to Krim (Crimea). *Honolulu* was published in its entirety in the Journal *Hedim* 1923.
4. The poetry volumes *Stam* (unadorned, insignificant, meaningless), *Behofzi* (In my haste), *Le'aba-Ima* (To father-mother) were published in the early 1920s.
5. Shlonsky scholarship usually treats these volumes as individual units collected in *Bagalgal* and does not regard this edition as a new/renewed creation. See for example Avneri (1973, Chapters 2, 3, 7), and Ofengenden (2010b).
6. When already a well-established Israeli poet Shlonsky would say that "Every poem is a personal biography but its value is measured only if the personal biography is rooted and paralleled with the objective time of the society." An interview with the poet, Israeli Broadcast Association – the Educational T.V. (1968). (My translation) http://www.23tv.co.il/1474-he/Tachi.aspx (30 September 2014); see also Isiah Ben-Prat's interview with Shlonsky, *Ha'aretz* (16th March 1962); and Shlonsky's testimony in an interview with G. Yardeni as cited by A.B. Yoffe (1966, 7–8).
7. For a *Zaddik* as "a Vessel" that can draw down God's powers, see Idel (1995, Chapter 6) and Garb (2011, 79); for bodily mystical experiences, see Wolfson (2010, 147–199).
8. See for example Jer. 13; 15; 18. Ezek. 3:22- 5 end. Ari Ofengenden emphasizes the disappearance of the speaker by the implementation of the symbolic literary style and interprets this as a manifestation of Shlonsky's passion for absence. My interpretation attempts to present Shlonsky's symbolic style and his mythologization of nature and the poet's life as a part of the messianic process. See Ofengenden (2010b, 12–15).

9. Shlonsky is known for his attempts to transcend Bialik's dominance of the Hebrew literary scene and overcome Bialik's influence over his own poetic soul. For Shlonsky's conflicts with Bialik, see Hagorni-Green (1989, 87–97). And Halperin (2001, 217–228). Halprin presents the poem *Hitgalut* as a dialogue with Bialik's poem *Hozeh lekh berah* (Prophet, run away). Bialik portrays the prophetic mission as a burden while Shlonsky accepts it "with excitement bordering with intoxication, devoid of any hesitation and anxiety" (Halperin 2001, 218).
10. First published in *Hapo`el Hatza`ir,* No. 17 vol. 1–2, p. 9 (19th April 1923). See also Bahat (1981, 220–235).
11. The theme of the poet as the locus of world's condition repeats in various poems; see, for example, "If the universe – is drunk and torn- / I am its wild song, / I am the song" (Shlonsky 1927, 37)
12. See also Yehudah Liebes "The Messiah of the Zohar: on R. Simeon bar Yohai as a messianic figure," in Liebes 1993, 1–84, 163–193.
13. The name appears in medieval period Midrash traditions and its source is Muslim.
14. See for example Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 35:b (Epstein 1961); Bereshit Rabbah 87.9 (Margalioth 1975); Midrash Hagadol I (*Vayeshev*, 39:-9) 561–567.
15. There are numerous sources for this tradition, here are a few samples: Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkah* 52:a; and for a modern source see Rabbi Kook "The Lamentation in Jerusalem" (An eulogy to Dr Theodor Herzl) English translation in Kook (2003).
16. Ḥabad theology here refers in our discussion to the second generation of Ḥabad Rabbis, and especially to that of Rabbi Aharon Halevi Horowitz.
17. Due to the scope of this paper, I cannot delve into a close reading of these poems. For further analysis, see Rechnitzer (2014) and Ofengenden (2010b).
18. In Hebrew – *Zimah* and *Tevel.* The context is that of a violation of sexual taboos. See Leviticus 18:17: "You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter, nor shall you take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter, to uncover her nakedness; they are blood relatives. It is lewdness." and ibid verse 28 "Also you shall not have intercourse with any animal to be defiled with it, nor shall any woman stand before an animal to mate with it; it is a perversion."
19. In Hebrew *Zafi'a* with a connotation also to a name of a poisonous snake *Zefa'*. See also reference to Ezekiel 4:15 "Then He said to me, 'See, I shall give you cow's dung in place of human dung over which you will prepare your bread.'"
20. For example Shlonsky (1927, 105).
21. For recent work on Jewish secularism, see Ben Rafael et al. (2006) and Jobani Fall (2008, 160–169).

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Notes on contributor

Dr Haim O. Rechnitzer is Associate Professor of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew Union College – JIR and a poet. His research is dedicated to Jewish and Israeli political theology and poetry. His recent books are *Prophecy and the Perfect Political Order: The Political Theology of Leo Strauss* (Jerusalem, 2012), *Songs of the Third Exile* (Jerusalem, 2014) and *Shibolet (Vortex)* (Jerusalem, 2015).

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