

אִגֶּרֶת

איגוד הפרופסורים לעברית בארצות-הברית

Newsletter of the National Association of Professors of Hebrew

Editor: Zev Garber, Los Angeles Valley College

Fall 2010

No. 82

Notes From the Field

The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Creativity in Babylon from 1735-1950

I am working on preparing for publishing a new edition of a book that was authored by a Babylonian Rabbi, Sason Mordekhai Moshe (1747-1830), in 1796. The book, *Sefer Kol Sason*, was published for the first time in Livorno in 1859, and later on several times. This is a book of moral reproof that each one of its forty three chapters focuses on another subject, such as modesty, patience, love, hatred, slander, peace and dispute, generosity and greed, arrogance, anger, and more.

Each chapter includes one parable or more that illustrate the ideas expressed in the chapter; and a poem or poems that are poetic expressions of the parables. Therefore each chapter has moralistic reproof in prose, one parable or more and one poem or more.

In my introduction, I write about the author, the Jewish community in Babylon at his time, Jewish sages and community leaders in Babylon at his time, the various books this author wrote, his manuscripts, the various themes in this book, the poetics of the author, the structure of the chapters, the style of the author, his parables, and I closely read some of the poems in the book. At the end of the original book there is a collection of poems of the author, unlike in my book they appear in the original edition in long, prose lines, without titles and unvocalized.

Here are some of the changes I made in comparison with the original edition: the poems in the original edition are not vocalized, in my edition they are vocalized; I added hundreds of sources which the author quotes; I added a summary for each chapter; my edition includes a list of abbreviations that are used in the book; the collection of poems at the end of the book appears with poetic graphic, it is vocalized and I added clarifying titles to the poems.

This project is part of my project taking place in a series of books that I published in this area since 2003. In this project, I researched the existence of Modern Hebrew creativity from 1735-1950 in Babylon, the country that was the spiritual-religious center for Judaism for more than a thousand years. The questions that I asked were: Did the Jews of Iraq write secular Hebrew literature in modern times? If the answer is in the affirmative, what was that literature? How should it be evaluated? Why wasn't it part of the history of Modern Hebrew literature?

My first book in this area was *Nitsaneh ha-Yetsira ha-Ivrit ha-Hadasha be-Bavel* (The Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center, Research Institute of Babylonian Jewry, 2003, 380 pp). In this introductory book I presented secular poetry, stories, articles, journalistic articles, epistles, literary research, periodicals, a play, folktales and textbooks all in Hebrew, published by Babylonian Jews in the years 1735-1950.

The second book in my current project was *Iggerot ha-Rav Shelomo Bekhor Hutsin* (Hakibbutz Hmeuchad, Sifriyyat Helal Ben Hayyim, 2005, 281 pp). In this book I collected the essays of Rabbi Shelomo Bekhor Hutsin published in 1843-1892 in periodicals such as *ha-Maggid*, *ha-Levanon*, *ha-Tsefira*, *he-Havatselet*. In my introduction (pp. 12-104) I described the cultural-spiritual environment in which these essays were written, the various intellectual activities of the author, his printing house, the way he related to Jews in Europe and to the ideas of the Enlightenment, his style, his poems, and more. This book can serve scholars for various pursuits – for its language, historical facts and more.

My third book in this project is *Hasid Mul Hotaim: Sefer ha-Tokhahot shel Ezra ha-Bavli* (Hakibbutz Hmeuchad, Sifriyyat Helal Ben Hayyim, 2008, 215 pp). This is a book of moral reproof published in 1735 by Ezra ha-Bavli from Baghdad. His poetic abilities make him a giant poet. In my introduction (pp. 9-105) I wrote about the author and the Jews of his time in Babylon, the structure of his poetic reproofs, his poetic devices, his style, etc. My edition includes corrections of printing errors, vocalizing the poetic texts, adding sources in footnotes and more.

The fourth book was *The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Creativity in Babylon, 1735-1950* (Purdue University Press/West Lafayette, Indiana, 2009, 258 pp.). It is a version of my introductory book above mentioned, keeping in mind the Western reader, deleting, modifying and adding texts for this purpose. For example, I added a chapter about the history of Babylonian Jews and a chapter of translations of folktales.

While I am not claiming that the poets presented here produced Hebrew poetry of higher aesthetic accomplishment than that of their contemporaries in Europe, I am suggesting that they should be recognized and made part of the history of Hebrew literature of their time. The exploration of Hebrew creativity in various countries has to continue, and especially in the Near Eastern countries, where there has been considerable Hebrew culture that has been neglected. Until this is done, the mapping of Hebrew literature in modern times will be lacking.

Lev Hakak, UCLA, hakak@humnet.ucla.edu

Uniting Contradictory Layers is the Name of Literary Analysis

Thirty five years is a long period of time. Indeed, a very long period of time. I am still astounded that my academic career (first in Israeli universities and later in North American universities) was launched thirty five years ago. Such a long period of time enables one to conduct variegated scholarly research and publish prolifically in diverse fields of study. During those thirty five years, I have yielded and published 20 books and over 220 articles in the following fields of study: modern/contemporary Hebrew/Israeli poetry and prose fiction; Hebrew Enlightenment/Haskalah literature in Russia towards the culmination of the 18th century and at the commencement of the 19th century; biblical literature (approaching the biblical text from an aesthetic/structuralist perspective); comparative literature; theory of literature; Scandinavian literature (notably the influence of August Strindberg and Knut Hamsun on Agnon); Hebrew children's literature; and Hebrew Holocaust poetry. Nevertheless, during the last decade or so, I primarily focused on biblical literature and modern/contemporary Hebrew/Israeli poetry.

During the last two years, I published the books *Who Wrought the Bible? Unveiling the Bible's Aesthetic Secrets* (Wisconsin University Press) and *Love in the Back Seat: Contemporary Hebrew Poetry* (Zmora Bitan Press). I also published the books *Poetic Acrobat: The Poetry of Ronny Someck* (in both English and Hebrew versions by Zmora-Bitan Press and Goblin Fern Press) and *Like a Whistle in the Dark: The Lyrical Novel by Amos Oz* (Keter Press). However, despite the diversity in my fields of scholarship, they actually share a leading common denominator. The latter enables me to maintain a