

# BY-PATHS IN HEBRAIC BOOKLAND

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## IMBER'S SONG

Throughout its whole range modern Hebrew literature can offer no poem to rival in popularity Imber's song. Naphtali Herz Imber was born in 1856, and wrote *Ha-Tikvah* in his youth in one of his many moods. His disposition was wayward; he had a full share of the artistic self-consciousness. Some of his characteristics are accurately hit off in Melchitsedek Pinchas of Mr. Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto*.

*Ha-Tikvah* owes its fame to the directness of its sentiment. What makes for weakness in it as a poem makes for strength in it as a song. The most effective national hymns are not usually the most poetical. "God save the King" is doggerel; "Rule Britannia" is bombast. But both put patriotic thoughts in straightforward terms, both are happily wedded to simple tunes within the range of average voices. *Ha-Tikvah* satisfies both these tests. The melody is beautiful and easily sung by large masses of people. The opening line of Imber's refrain: "Our hope has not perished yet" is certainly derived from the National Song, "Poland has not perished yet," to which the Polish legions marched. So the melody of *Ha-Tikvah* is

said to be a Polish folk-tune, but it closely resembles a favorite melody of the Sephardim. Various settings of the tune differ in detail, and the same is true of the current versions of Imber's words. It is strange that the versions—all known to me—retain unanimously the ungrammatical second stanza. It would, I admit, be difficult to correct it without destroying the rhythm, and poetical license has worse things to answer for. Indeed the grammatical lapse, to which I refer, is regarded by some authorities as perfectly normal and admissible in the new Hebrew.

The power of *Ha-Tikwah*, as has just been said, arises from its directness. There is no subtlety in its thought, no changes through its nine verses. Just as few ever sing through "God Save the King," so few sing all the verses of *Ha-Tikwah*. The stanzas tend to become monotonous. They all say the same thing; and it is not surprising that the number of verses is curtailed in some printed editions (thus in Idelsohn five of the nine verses complete the song). The burden of all the verses is identical. The hope of a return to the land of Israel will never die, so long as this or that endures. Each verse adds a this or a that to the count. While myriads of Jews go as pilgrims to the sepulchres of



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the fathers, while a single eye is left to drop its tear over the ruins of the temple, while the waters of the Jordan swell between its banks and fall with a rush through the sea of Kinnereth, while a drop of blood courses through a Jewish vein, while Israel retains his national aspirations, still may he hope for their fulfilment. Some of these appeals are genuinely pathetic, and the final appeal is magnificent in its strength. Only with the end of the Jews will come the end of the hope. This is the only way to write a popular song. There must be no nuances, but just a confident assertion. Imber supplies exactly that; nothing less, and nothing more.

Nothing more, for the song is not in any sense a declaration of the end. It deals only with the means, making them into an end. Unquenchable, he cries, is the hope of a return; no one has expressed this hope more vigorously and takingly. But what is to be the result of the return? With what ideals are the patriots filled? *Ha-Tikvah* is silent on these questions. Imber was not qualified to reply to them. He had no depth of spiritual feeling, and though he was capable of inspiring, he was incapable of inspiring. Hence the absence of all Messianic thought in *Ha-Tikvah*. Compare it, for instance, with *Leka Dodi*; the Friday

night hymn is like *Ha-Tikvah*, a song of the return, but, unlike *Ha-Tikvah*, it is Messianic, and is also a song of the rebuilding. When the history of the neo-Zionist movement comes to be written, this fact will undoubtedly come into due prominence: namely, that we have been passing through a phase in which the hope of the return has been divorced from the hope of the rebuilding.

It is remarkable that some versions of the refrain remove the only words which possibly can bear a Messianic construction. I have not before me the original words of Imber himself, and I have a notion that Mr. David Yellin is responsible in part for the chorus. Be that as it may, in the last line Jerusalem is described as "the city where David encamped." The phrase comes from the opening line of the twenty-ninth chapter of Isaiah. "Woe to Ariel, Ariel, city where David encamped"—Ariel is either "Lion of God" or, as the Targum takes it, "Altar-hearth." The Rabbis combined both senses. Ariel was the altar, yet they saw something lion-shaped in the sanctuary. In Isaiah the passage is one of doom, Ariel is to be humiliated by the Assyrians. Curiously enough, the ancient Greek translation gives also a hostile turn to the words "city where David encamped,"

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rendering "against which David encamped." But this is erroneous. The meaning is: the city in which David dwelt, selecting it as the royal capital. David, it is true, did not build the temple, but he brought the ark thither, and offered sacrifices on the occasion, and later on built an altar. Not only, then, is Ariel justly to be termed the city where David encamped, but the use of the phrase in *Ha-Tikvah* supplies the missing Messianic hope, for David is the type of this hope. In the version of *Ha-Tikvah* printed by Idelsohn four verses are omitted, and some of those which are retained are set in an inverted order. More culpably, the refrain is weakened into "the city of Zion and Jerusalem," thus removing the Davidic touch. The change does not merely offend against reason; it also sins against rhyme; thus adding another instance to many others of the destructive tamperings with masterpieces which some editors seem unable to avoid.

One other striking merit of *Ha-Tikvah* must be observed. Unlike many other poets of Zion, Imber does not denounce. He makes no attack on those who do not share his feelings. He points to the continued existence of the hope for the return, but he refrains from condemning, except by the merest



implication, those who have no consciousness of the hope. There is true art here, which I am able to appreciate, far removed as I am from Imber's nationalism. For, on the one hand, art is best when it pleases some without paining others. Imber pleases those who agree with him without paining the rest. On the other hand, art is strongest when it does not recognize that there are others to be displeased. The confident note is the artistic note. The poet assumes that what he feels is the only thing to feel. To talk of doubters is to throw doubt on himself. A popular song cannot stoop to argument. It is categorical. Thus Imber's *Ha-Tikvah* can be enjoyed by those who do not accept its message. And its melody is sung at table, to Psalm 126, by some who never sing the tune to Imber's words. "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like unto them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with exultation; then said they among the nations: The Lord hath done great things for them." Psalm 126, when all is said and done, is the most exquisite Song of the Return ever written. "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy." We can all realize the pathos and the hope, even though we are not at one as to the nature of the harvest that is to be reaped.