

History, Memory, and Ideology: Ben-Avigdor and *Fin-de-Siècle* Hebrew Literature

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Concluding a review essay on Shmuel Feiner's *Haskalah ve-historya*,¹ Zohar Shavit raises an intriguing question: "Was it not especially the writing of popular history that fulfilled a central role in creating a Jewish historical consciousness and perhaps even prepared the ground for the writing of scientific history?"² Regardless whether we grant historical novels or poetry a toehold in the sphere of "popular history," the contribution made by *belles lettres* to affect the popular mindset about the past cannot be dismissed. Making history "come alive," such works also carry historical issues into the daily concepts and language of the common reader. One may suggest that, in the nineteenth century, these works were instrumental in shaping opinion among European Jews, cementing group identity and facilitating the growth of nascent nationalism.

More specifically, we may ask, to what extent did the Hebrew historical novel bear out Jacques Le Goff's assertion that "memory is the raw material of history,"³ selectively recovering past events to represent a group's self-perception and the reinvention of its identity in time. Yet if memory is the stuff of history, then fashions, ideologies and future aspirations at any given time affect the selection and character of that raw material to represent contemporary proclivities as much as the historical past. The Hebrew writer and intellectual Ben-Avigdor, among the earliest authors of the Hebrew historical novel, and one who commemorated the Jews' expulsion from Spain in his work, went further still, declaring that, "The future cannot be conceived of in one's imagination without the past which preceded it."⁴ To what "past" does literature go when the ferment in the "present" needs illumination? What freedoms does literature take with the past? What are the determinants behind the message that a Hebrew author brings

to readers upon looking into the future? In the following, I propose to address these, and related, questions as guides in rereading an oft-forgotten novel of the *fin-de-siècle*.

Tensions between alternate, and even contradictory, perceptions of the national self defined the state of *fin-de-siècle* Jewish life. The search for a fitting identity of what constitutes a modernized, quasi-assimilated Western Jewry, accompanied the forces – ideological, religious, secular, and socio-political – pulling at it in several directions. As part of the process of self-definition, alternative visions of past, present and future emerged out of a cultural memory harking back to ancient, medieval and pre-modern times. Other assimilationist or self-preserving developments of the most recent past signaled an opportunity for Jews to acquire a new identity in light of a contemporary revision of the past.

Hebrew literature, among the chief prisms through which Jewish civilization has always been refracted, was at a crossroads during the *fin-de-siècle*. For a century it served as the vehicle of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, whose principal goal was the accelerated integration of European Jewry into the modern world. For a measure of assimilation, its literary and ideological proponents proclaimed, Jews would be accepted as full and equal citizens into their respective European host societies.

The outbreak of pogroms in 1871 and 1881-2, and the Dreyfus Affair of the mid-1890s, forecast the bankruptcy of these aspirations. In their wake, Hebrew literature turned a corner, voicing alternate goals and heralding a new epoch. High on the agenda was the promotion of a Jewish national message, whose nascent manifestations among the scattered groups of *Hovevey Tziyon*, the Lovers of Zion, were, no doubt, a result of the Haskalah's earlier preoccupation with the Jewish past during its romantic phase. The rising interest in Jewish history concentrated and begot the raw material out of which Hebrew literature helped to shape a national consciousness for contemporary Jewish society.

Conscious of the Jewish past, nineteenth-century Hebrew historiography is characterized by exploitations of historical figures and events for current consumption. Its adherents identified historical personalities whose ideas were deemed to “anticipate” or affirm contemporary, nineteenth-century, Haskalah values – as if to validate the present in light of the past. Alternatively, probings into the past were made to expose its limitations, which the present was poised to rectify, making it the locus of ideals not realized in the past. Or, the past was seen as a didactic tool to instruct the present. Writers of history, among them Rashi (Shmuel Yosef Funn and Nachman Krochmal, focused on dividing the Jewish past between a lost national, temporal, political history and an ongoing moral, spiritual legacy which continues to sustain, unite, and distinguish world Jewry from the nations among whom they dwell.⁵

Nineteenth-century European Jewish intellectual life was preoccupied with historiographic and related ideological issues. The plethora of “-isms” arising at the time is one expression of Jewry’s search for identity and direction. Among the leading forces of change confronted by Jewish writers and intellectuals was the emergence of cultural, followed by political, Zionism, out of nascent activities by such as *Hovevey Tziyon*. *Fin-de-siècle* Zionism, which posed as an alternative to assimilationist tendencies among secularized European Jews, had already seen some early signs of success, as immigrants to *’Eretz Yisra’el* began to form the foundation of the new *Yishuv*. On the other hand, an array of socialistic and anti-nationalistic movements also emerged, advocating alternate solutions to the Jewish Problem in Europe. Vehicles carrying these ideas into a more general use were the popular histories of the day. Moreover, poetry and prose fiction filtered lofty, theoretical, concerns through a more palpable medium which made them a favored means for the dissemination of matters of history and ideology.

Sharpening and reflecting the socio-ideological debate in the realm of *belles lettres*, Hebrew literature expressed the motives behind the turning away from Haskalah values and its Eurocentric assimilationist orientation in favor of a nationalist agenda. As if requiring more avenues to address the plethora of issues besieging Jewish society at the time, Hebrew literature was not merely affected by the next sequence of European literary trends, Realism and Naturalism. Rather, it became the arena in which an amalgam of Realism, Naturalism, Classicism, and Neo-Romanticism were melded and harnessed to the task of addressing the national effort. In addition, a secondary trend, foregrounding the individual’s existential struggles, is also discernible among writers, although the issue was marginalized at the time by more sweeping ideological causes.

Among the leading personages in whose activities the reader witnesses the meeting of historical forces, the here-and-now centered literary impulse of realism, and the nationalist, Zionist, motives at the root of the neo-romantic trend, is the author, publicist and intellectual Ben-Avigdor, pen name of Abraham Leib Shalkovich (1866-1921).

Nourished on the ideological and literary currents of his days, Ben-Avigdor stands among the preeminent exemplars of the realistic (or naturalistic) movement in modern Hebrew literature, termed “*Ha-Mahalakh he-Hadash*,” variously translated as the “New Course” (“*Der neue Kurz*”), the “New Wave,” or the “New Direction.”⁶ In his essays on literary tastes and values, Ben-Avigdor argued for the writing of literature which incorporates the contents, form and style best suited to engage with the here-and-now. Stories’ plots were to reflect a low mimetic reality, emphasizing contemporary existence, to move from the *beyt-midrash* (House of Study) to the market-place. A verisimilitude in the

representation of the lower-class masses must be accompanied, he insisted, by a plot reflecting a causality of action and psychologically motivated characters. The latter, he averred, are to be shown struggling with socioeconomic realities and hardships of life. Finally, the stories should be presented in a broader, livelier, and exact language liberated of the Haskalah's *melitza*, that pastiche of biblical verse fragments in use for the expression of ideas.⁷

Seemingly because of his prominence in the "New Course," scholarship has tended to simplify its evaluation of Ben-Avigdor's work by foregrounding his leadership in the advocacy for greater realism in fiction. Little has been done to resolve this central image with other factors in his literary and intellectual career, those pointing to his romantic tendencies, features which co-existed in his person with a bent for realism and challenge any attempt to simplify Ben-Avigdor by overlooking this important dimension in his career. In the following, I propose to redress some aspects of this author's complex, and even contradictory, portrait and illustrate his centrality in the intellectual and spiritual ferment of his times and in particular, his role in transforming and disseminating historical ideas for a diverse Jewish audience .

Exhibiting a capacity to realize his vision in a number of ways, Ben-Avigdor modeled his ideological manifesto in stories such as "Ma'aseh bi-Shetey 'Ahayot" (A tale of two sisters), "Leah Mokheret ha-Dagim" (Leah the fishmonger), and "Menahem ha-Sofer" (Menahem the scribe).⁸ In the public domain, it was he, whose activities were centered primarily in Warsaw, who launched "Sifrey 'Agora" (penny books), a series of books economically priced so as to be affordable to ordinary Hebrew readers in order to expose them to works of high literary and didactic value. To educate the public taste, Ben-Avigdor published original Hebrew literature – or some translated into Hebrew. He followed this enterprise by founding 'Ahi'asaf (1892) and Tushiya (1896), publishing houses dedicated to the dissemination of Hebrew language and culture.⁹

These activities amply demonstrate that Ben-Avigdor was in tune with the social and aesthetic standards of the age. On the other hand, supporting the proposition that he harbored neo-romantic ideas, is his veneration of Ahad Ha'am and his ideological platform. Ben-Avigdor was secretary of the Warsaw chapter of Beney Mosheh, Ahad Ha'am's coterie of followers in a secretive incipient Zionist circle dedicated to the promotion of the ideology of Spiritual, or Cultural, Zionism.¹⁰ In light of his concurrent interest in the Jewish proletariat, Ben-Avigdor's membership in this society, puzzling as it may be, is but another aspect of a complex, and seemingly contradictory, orientation, the latter of which implies an elitism and separatism from the very masses populating his realistic tales.

Also, and by contact with Ahad Ha'am, or perhaps independently of him, Ben-Avigdor was affected by the ideology and historiography of R. Nahman Krochmal (Ranak, 1785-1840). In this, too, he is but one of many intellectuals swept up by the latter's teachings. Enunciated in his posthumously published (by Leopold Zunz, in 1851) *Moreh Nevukhey ha-Zeman* (Guide for the perplexed of the time), Krochmal's thought formed the ideological foundation sustaining the views of many intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth century. That is the case with Ahad Ha'am, who wrote a number of essays in the wake of Krochmal's thought, most notable among them being the essay "'Avar ve-'Atid" ("Past and Future"), and M.Z. Feierberg, whose "Le'an?" ("Whither?") also includes reference to this seminal thinker's ideas.¹¹ Some four decades earlier, the author Abraham Mapu's plot for *'Ashmat Shomron* (The guilt of Samaria), was also patterned after Krochmal's historiosophy.¹²

As argued in his *Moreh Nevukhey ha-Zeman*, Krochmal held that the history of every nation is comprised of a tripartite cycle, each stage emerging dialectically out of the other: birth to growth, strength to creativity, decay to demise. In the case of Jewish history, Krochmal posited a more complex historiosophy. The history of Israel, he asserted, is marked by a recurring resurgence before the conclusion of each third phase, leading to a new cycle. The repeated cycles, governed by a divine hand, or the Absolute Spirit (*ha-Ruhani ha-Muhlal*), as he termed it, were Krochmal's explanation for the perpetuation of Israel through the millennia.¹³

Appearing during the romantic period of Hebrew literature,¹⁴ Krochmal's study helped fuel nascent nationalistic sentiments. It is evident that his ideology struck a chord among writers of Hebrew literature. Abraham Mapu acquired from Krochmal the ideological and historiographic basis upon which to compose historical novels possessed of an optimism about the resurgence of Jewish nationalism. Writers such as Mapu had been probing Jewish history, struggling to establish their identity in a liberal European environment seeming to welcome Jews into its fold. In what appeared to them as an ominous time for the continuity of Jewish civilization and culture, Krochmal's thoughts presented Hebrew writers with a vision of hope and national resurgence. Such impressions, and Krochmal's work, were perpetuated to the end of the century when Ben-Avigdor appeared on the scene.

Moreover, at the very time as he was composing realistic short stories, Ben-Avigdor also became one of the early writers of historical prose fiction possessed of decidedly romantic literary overtones. In retelling the past in his novel, however, he does not merely draw on a collective "ethnic memory"¹⁵ of a national cataclysm. Instead, he had before him a significant body of history scholarship of his times – as the works of Heinrich Graetz, Meyer Kayserling,

and Marcus Jost, as well as the sixteenth-century work *Shevet Yehudah* by Shlomo ibn Verga¹⁶ – to re-envisage the past in light of his times.

The depiction of characters drawn from biblical literature has been an oft-used subject among Haskalah writers, from N.H. Wesseley to Mapu, Michal, Y.L. Gordon and beyond. These writers chose biblical figures as didactic models into which contemporary ideals were cast in creating what has been termed a “Maskilic History.”¹⁷ Ben-Avigdor merely follows his predecessors, attributing to the past values held dear by Haskalah ideologues. And though Gershon Shaked correctly states that Ben-Avigdor, as others of his generation, remained, “in the way of ‘literary rebels,’ more loyal to the issues against which they rebelled than they were ready to admit,”¹⁸ his work also takes a decidedly new turn, incremental though it may be, by reimagining other periods of Jewish history in the spirit of his times.

Inspired or motivated by his familiarity with the public’s interest in historical fiction, the reception of Mapu’s novels, and the thought of Krochmal and Ahad Ha’am, Ben-Avigdor, in 1892, to mark the quadri-centennial of the expulsion of Jews from Spain, published his historical novel *Lifney ‘Arba Me’ot Shana* (Four-hundred years ago).¹⁹ As well as being among the early exemplars of the Hebrew historical novel, this work was also the first piece of prose fiction to commemorate the Jews’ expulsion from Spain in 1492. In keeping with those who wrote books of history and historical fiction in his days or earlier, Ben-Avigdor did not merely retell the tale but recast it in light of its contemporary significance. Testifying to his complex stand on literature, this work was published at the very time when the author was preoccupied with his agenda for the “New Course” with manifestoes and realistic short-stories published in the very same series of “Sifrey ‘Agora.”

Appropriating the Jewish concern with the Spanish Expulsion, its features and meaning, to express current national aspirations, the novel does not instruct the reader much about life in the past. This seeming failure of a realistic novelist to exploit the wealth of documentation available to him to offer a persuasive representation of the past has led readers to fault Ben-Avigdor for writing a novel which is unfocused and irrelevant. Indeed, ever since its appearance, the novel has either been bypassed completely in studies of Ben-Avigdor’s fiction or received cursory comments dismissing it as of little consequence. Such treatment has led to some negative critical evaluations asserting, as Meyer Waxman does, that “...its value as historical fiction is not great. The writer lacks perspective and knowledge of the life of the period...”²⁰ Waxman is right, but only if the criteria for evaluating the novel involve its capacity of realistically reproducing the past, an issue whose criteria have become even more stringent in our days. In a dismissive gesture, Waxman credits it with the simplest of approbation as “the

first original historical novel written in Hebrew since the days of Mapu.” Indeed, though translations into Hebrew of tales of the Spanish Expulsion and the Inquisition were published before, no other work of fiction appears to have been composed at the time to commemorate the Expulsion.²¹

Admittedly, the plot of *Lifney 'Arba Me'ot Shana* can be faulted for being sketchy, contrived, melodramatic and consisting of unmotivated and psychologically superficial and schematic characters. Again, judged by the criteria of realistic fiction, it is a failure. These accusations notwithstanding, the novel accomplishes its ideological goal of disseminating Krochmal's ideological, romantic, historiography in light of a nascent Zionism. As such, it represents the author's optimistic and consoling gesture to his people's perceived declining condition in light of pogroms, assimilation and socioeconomic travails.

From a thematic perspective, *Lifney 'Arba Me'ot Shana* departs from its contemporaries, and from the author's other works of fiction, immersed as they are in matters of the present and a depiction of life in a realistic vein. Instead, the novel recasts memory to serve a revised historiosophy in which the Jews are no longer doomed to be a suffering and persecuted people. Rather, the author retells the event to convey a message of an imminent national resurgence. Possessed of a rather simple and familiar plot, it is an account of the protagonist's, Miguel San Salvador, discovery of his Jewish ancestry, reacquaintance with his sister Amelia, and abandonment of a promising military career in the Catholic King's army to join his people as they are expelled from Spain in 1492.

The novel can yield to analysis from a number of perspectives, one of these being the role of the two central female protagonists, which needs further examination in light of the Haskalah's regard for the plight of women. The protagonist's vacillation between his personal desires and national, ethnic, allegiance, is represented by Clara, his Catholic fiancée, and Amelia, his sister.²²

Another approach is through the novel's affinity for time. Ben-Avigdor was an exponent and ardent advocate of realism and naturalism, but his vision as to time in this novel is uncharacteristic in contrast with his other stories. Portraying the present in gray tones, his narrative breaks with the realistic school's pessimism about the prospects for improving the lot of individuals. The novel – though set in the distant past – is future-oriented and optimistic. It finds meaning in Jewish exile which it sees as coming to an end. Expressed in the words of the old man, Amelia and Miguel's grandfather, who replies to Miguel's question about the end of the Jews' wanderings, the author's ideological message is clear:

To our people's wanderings, too, will come an end...wander must we through all corners of the world, through all lands, to sow in them the seeds of the faith and morals, to be tortured and persecuted in all as is

the lot of all those who fight for truth. Then shall we return to our former honor. Then will come our righteous savior and return us to the land of our ancestors and we will then return to be a great and happy people. (120)

The citation – as much of the novel – is suffused with the codes of the Haskalah, whose values the author attributes to earlier times. The subject of the mission of the Jews is a widespread issue debated among intellectuals, Jews and others, in the nineteenth century. The ultimate return of Jews to their homeland is a familiar idea found in the essays of Ahad Ha'am, for example.²³ Other aspects of the novel are also borrowed from previous Haskalah writers, leaving very little in terms of contents, style or structure for Ben-Avigdor's originality.

Ben-Avigdor's contribution, by writing of the 1492 Expulsion, continues the process of his contemporaries' confronting pivotal events in Jewish history, lending them their interpretation. His visiting this period is evocative of the eschatological, messianic Jewish expectations of the sixteenth century, inspired in part by the Expulsion. As if pointing at a similarity between those days and the spirit of his times, Ben-Avigdor has also embedded in this narrative central issues of his day, among them the place of Jewry in the Diaspora, assimilation and restoration. As an intellectual concerned with the fate of his people and a follower of the thoughts of Ahad Ha'am (though later his harsh critic), these matters were surely close to the author's heart.²⁴ They also echo the Krochmalian message of expectation of a better future evolving out of a series of historical occurrences.

In Krochmal's analysis, the third cycle of Jewish national renaissance – marking one of its low points in the seventeenth century, and possibly beginning its recovery in the nineteenth – reached its zenith during the Arab conquest of the Iberian peninsula, and was sustained until the conclusion of Muslim rule there. Anticipating the beginnings of the next, and fourth, cycle, Ben-Avigdor uses the novel to prepare readers to expect and facilitate sweeping changes in Jewish history in his times. Writing of the Expulsion, he traces the beginning of the end of the third phase, as Jewish history was about to take a downturn, and whose nether-most reaches he believes to witness in his days. This sense of an imminent demise of Jewry is also detectable in the writings of some of the leading intellectuals of the times, expressing a fear of the end of Jewish civilization.²⁵

The Exodus Theme

As if to underscore its message of an opportunity to facilitate a national renaissance, that the events described stand for the gamut of Jewish history, the

novel addresses the historically pithy events occurring four hundred years before its publication in 1892, but from the perspective of the present, as the title indicates. Yet one cannot escape the allusive language and imagery also linking it to the Children of Israel's Exodus out of an Egyptian bondage, one which also lasted four hundred years (Gen 15:13; Ex 12:40, 41).

Though sparse, the language at the novel's conclusion evokes archetypes associated with the Exodus from Egypt: The rabbi giving the sermon before the Expulsion asserts that "all of us, our women and our children" will leave (110). Although evoking Exodus 10:9 where it is Moses uttering the words "*bi-ne 'arenu uvi-zekenenu*" (with our children and elders), the words are a direct citation of Nu 14:3, where the Children of Israel, terrified by the stories of giants in the Promised Land, cry to Moses, "Why should the Lord bring us to this land, to fall by the sword, and leave our women and children to become the spoils of war; were it not better for us to return to Egypt?" Moreover, the Spanish mobs harassing and urging the Jews on as they leave are called "*'asafsu*" ("the mixed multitude"), the very words used in Nu 11:4 to describe those joining the Children of Israel on their way out of Egypt and who, later, are blamed for some of the people's sinful ways in the wilderness. The rabbi leading the Jews out of Spain bears a Mosaic countenance as "the congregation's rabbi, an old man whose face and hair are white" (121). Moses-like, he leads the exiles in taking an oath never to return to Spain, recalling the admonition of Dt 17:16 ("He [the king] shall not... cause the people to go back to Egypt"). He recites curses upon those who violate the oath with the biblical "*'arur*" ("cursed be") of Dt 27:15-28:19 (121-2).²⁶ Finally, the image of the House of Israel making its way out of Spain (116) cannot but resemble the Exodus. And the decision made by the story's protagonists to head east, significantly to Turkey, the land of the Muslims (120), bridges the past with the author's present, when the Ottoman Empire held sway over *'Eretz Yisra'el*.

Ben-Avigdor's recounting of the Spanish Expulsion in terms and images calling forth the Exodus implies that he perceived Jewish history in terms of recurring cycles culminating in his day to signal the rising tide of Jewish nationalism. The nexus of the Expulsion and the Exodus also testifies to the special regard with which the author held the events surrounding 1492, assigning to them a historical category reminiscent of the departure from Egypt. By striking an analogy in his plot with the account of the Exodus and juxtaposing it with his times, Ben-Avigdor also draws on Krochmal's historiography, which held this event as a crucial turning point in the history of the Jews. The apparent ahistoricity of the attitude is merely a secularization of the rabbinic hermeneutical principle of selectively ignoring temporal boundaries between events ("*'ein mukdam u-me'uhar ba-torah*," there is no early or late in the Torah).

An examination of the novel from this perspective demonstrates that weaknesses which ostensibly pervade the realistic unfolding of the plot are not a mark of the author's inability. That which appears to be an unpersuasive causality in plot, seeming to be a heavy-handed way of handling the events and a superficiality in depicting characters, is Ben-Avigdor's strategy of redirecting attention to the machinations affecting the plot and history, as if an invisible hand of Providence directs the unfolding of events. For as the Hebrews of old wandered through the desert for forty years, Ben-Avigdor seems to say, the European experience of four hundred years since the Expulsion is also an existence in the wilderness, soon to end with the return to the Promised Land. Alternately, the four hundred years may allude to the European period as one analogous to that of Egyptian bondage.

Alongside the author's seeming failure to take advantage of the realist's concerns and present a graphically moving treatment of Jews under the hands of the Inquisition, the reader also finds insufficient psychological depth in the characters. Instead, they possess stereotypical features one finds in other works of the Haskalah, particularly Mapu's historical works, from which the author appears to have borrowed some of his themes. They are strong advocates of a liberal education, tolerate members of other religions and live among them. They are members of the aristocratic class, or behave as the nobility, as if in so doing the author believed his impact on readers' values and tastes is enhanced. Rather than being a realistic novel, Ben-Avigdor's work bears the markings of neo-romantic fiction, a characteristic which he found most suitable to deliver his vision, tone and message of an imminent national renewal. The obviously unrealistic characterization is an aspect of the author's poetic of foregrounding the workings of history in human affairs.

An added motive for Ben-Avigdor to resort to the non-realistic mode of writing emerges out of practical considerations. The average Hebrew reader of Ben-Avigdor's times was more interested in what Don Miron, in describing public literary tastes of the period, calls "a gripping tale, based on sentimental intrigue and, if possible, also on a theme of Jewish history" than on a portrait of life on the streets among the suffering masses.²⁷ The most sought-after works of the times were those possessing a strong dose of Mapuesque Romance. It is no surprise, then, that Ben-Avigdor's novel is also a compromise with his declared poetic principles.

It is by writing a novel after the fashion of Mapu that the author was able to reach a significantly larger readership. By improving his chances to sell more copies, Ben-Avigdor enhanced his ability to convey, in a popular medium, his world-view on the question of Jewish history in his days, and to announce the advent of an age for a renaissance of Jewish culture and nationalism.²⁸

In composing his historical novel, it is obvious that Ben-Avigdor had the opportunity to mimetically reproduce the past by recapturing it through a rich array of details, or writing an epic of 1492 that stirs and informs the reader. Yet his work lacks the rich texture and concrete verisimilitude that would have rendered this novel an educational tool about the past. Rather, its schematic representation of those events, including what could have served as a “realistic” account of the Spanish Expulsion, has less to do with collective memory than with a turn-of-the-century rereading by Jews of their past to create a contemporary image of what was, in the words of Le Goff, a “past present,”²⁹ or alternatively a “usable past.”

The relatively scant attention accorded to Ben-Avigdor’s novel in its days, as today, is due, in part, to its evaluation by criteria which it was never meant to fulfill. The author, who concurrently with his novel composed realistic tales, did not fail. It is difficult to imagine an author who creates realistic characters in his short stories, sketchy as they might be, failing to do so in the case of his novel, composed at the very time as those tales. His preoccupation with the poetics and practice of realistic fiction interfered with a proper evaluation by scholars of the novel’s limited accomplishments – for even by reading it without the criteria of literary realism it falls short of being an accomplished work, something which must have led the author to reissue it as a children’s novel in later years.

These features of the novel, and its perpetuation of Krochmal’s ideology, constitute the work’s redeeming value. For with all its drawbacks, the novel’s accomplishment is in foregrounding a tendency of *fin-de-siècle* Jewish intellectual and literary circles to revise, or reconstruct, history with an eye to the present. In that light it is likely that the depiction of Jewish persecution and the Inquisition’s intolerance stand as the author’s indirect observation on the troubles of his times, be they pogroms, threats of assimilation, and even the lingering tensions between proponents of the Haskalah and their orthodox adversaries. As one overcome by expectations for imminent change in Jewish fortunes, perhaps as in apocalyptic visions of old, the author acknowledges what he perceives to be the perils in the way of Jewish existence at the turn of the century. Optimistically, Ben-Avigdor sees an opportunity for a turning-point in Jewish history. He declares and anticipates the renaissance of Jewish history and civilization, as foreseen by his visionary mentor Nahman Krochmal, given the will and combined effort of those willing to seize the day.

As author, Ben-Avigdor confronts the seemingly contradictory notion that history deals with singular, unique events while pointing at the universal. As a story teller, he transmutes the particular into a trope for the general, symptomatic state of the Jews, echoing the events of the present in the past.³⁰ Ben-Avigdor adopts the Spanish Expulsion not as a sign of a national shame but as another

facet of the collective national memory at the dawn of a new age. Therefore, in attempting to define him, we note the complex of past and contemporary trends, literary and ideological, affecting his writing, poetics and socio-cultural activities.

Though the failures of Ben-Avigdor's novel have, in fact, relegated it to the margins of the Hebrew literary corpus, its adherence to Krochmal's understanding of history is nonetheless testimony to the way popular literature participated in the dissemination of history and a consciousness of history among Jews in *fin-de-siècle* Europe. It most emphatically illustrates Zohar Shavit's suggestion about literature as a bridge to the study of history. Those affected, moreover, were not necessarily consumers of popular culture alone, since among them we can number Ahad Ha'am and Shai Hurwitz.³¹ Perhaps because of Ben-Avigdor's reliance on Krochmal, the novel made an impact on no less a figure than Joseph Klausner. In 1947, Klausner composed an introductory essay to Ben-Avigdor's novel, then revised for young readers. In the wake of the Holocaust, witnessing the impending establishment of the Jewish State, and seeking models of Jewish assertiveness and heroism, Klausner, like Ben-Avigdor, was caught-up in a Krochmalian expectation of the onset of the next, fourth, cycle of Jewish history.

Afterword: Klausner's Re-reading and Krochmal's Persistence

Interestingly, in 1948, the publisher of the novel, now revised and renamed *Don Miguel: Sipur Histori mi-Zeman Gerush Sefarad* (Don Miguel: a historic tale from the time of the Spanish expulsion), was Tushiya, founded and run by Ben-Avigdor forty-six years earlier. Klausner's introduction stressed additional redeeming factors in the novel for readers in the post-Holocaust years when the establishment of an independent Israel was imminent. Of particular interest in Klausner's essay is the implicit impact of Krochmal's thinking on writers and intellectuals even beyond the turn of the century.

Reading Klausner's essay, one is struck by his keen grasp of the ideological roots of the novel, which must have been the impetus behind his active support of its dissemination to the extent that he would even compose an introductory essay as a self-revealing guide for the Hebrew reader in the post-Holocaust, pre-Statehood year of 1947 (28 of Tishri, 5708). Though unstated, it is clear that Klausner saw in the novel a Krochmalian message with which he personally identified: the superiority of Judaism, though persecuted, over that of a persecuting Catholicism and the victory of national duty over the sensual, personal, one. Whereas in the case of Jewish superiority Klausner's observation is a fair reading of Ben-Avigdor's implicit message and concerns, it is less so with regard to his foregrounding of the novel's stand on the issue of the individual

and the collective. Like Ahad Ha'am and Shai Hurwitz, Klausner was deeply concerned with the threats of assimilation and abandonment of the Jewish heritage among Jews. The question of putting national ahead of personal fulfillment may have been a more urgent matter in Klausner's times. Considering the circumstances of the year in which Klausner was writing, he escorted to republication at least one work strengthening national and spiritual resolve, pride and confidence in the face of the Holocaust's devastations and the impending challenges before which the Jewish state-in-the-making stood. Klausner's act of recovering the novel from oblivion also indicates that, in his mind, the Expulsion is causally linked to the Holocaust, with the saving remnant being the basis for the rise of the new state. The emergence of the following, or fourth, cycle in Jewish history seems palpable to the writer of the introduction.

In the spirit of his times, Klausner exaggerates the extent to which the novel depicts the excesses of the Inquisition, and he dismisses as of secondary import those features of the plot which Ben-Avigdor held up as examples of his protagonists' progressive, enlightened, values. While Klausner heeds the Haskalah's foregrounding of the spiritual strength of Judaism in the face of adversity, he dismisses its position on Judaism's need to promote a tolerant and humanistic attitude toward non-Jews.

Reading the novel as an allegory of the Jews' history in Europe, and their ultimate annihilation by Nazism, Klausner faults Miguel's devotion and love for Spain – "his land," Klausner admonishes – and the Spaniards, "even though it is clear to him that they are not his own people at all" (ii). On the other hand, he prefers Amelia because she "knows how to hate those who hate – those beasts of prey in the guise of human beings..." (ii).

Rereading the plot, Klausner replaces Miguel as chief protagonist with his sister, Amelia. For Klausner, her stronger expressions of enmity to those pursuing the Jews, and her energetic repetition of the biblical "*'arur*" ("cursed be") are personality traits deserving praise and emulation. By contrast, Miguel's maskilic liberalism and assimilated background make him unpalatable, for he has surrendered to the forces of assimilation.

As Ben-Avigdor before him, Klausner, too, sees the past through the lens of the present, his present. Klausner's adoption of the novel for his own times is a fitting message about the longevity of any work of art. The best among them, it appears, are those lending themselves to the dynamic flux of time and change. In light of the times in which Klausner wrote these words, and chose to foreground this novel, Krochmal's ideology seems to be made manifest alongside the spirit of the introduction which rereads, or misreads, Ben-Avigdor's socially programmatic novel to fit the demands of a new age. And in that sense a supercommentary on a vehicle that was itself commentary, Klausner has given

us a striking example of the literary transmission – and recreation – of historical memory, in which the past is transmuted to reflect ever changing contemporary ideals.

NOTES

1. Shmuel Feiner, *Haskalah ve-Historyah: Toldoteyha shel Hakarat-'Avar Yehudit Modernit* [Haskalah and history: the emergence of a modern Jewish awareness of the past] (Jerusalem, 1995).
2. Zohar Shavit, "Ha-Maskilim ke-Historyonim Rishonim" [The maskilim as first historians], review of Shmuel Feiner, *Haskalah ve-Historya, Ha-'aretz/Sefarim* (15 November 1995), 4; also see Feiner, 460.
3. Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, tr. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York, 1992), xi.
4. Ben-Avigdor, *Ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-Hadasha va-'Atidoteyha* [Modern Hebrew literature and its future] (New York, 1908), 9.
5. Feiner, 262, 271 and more.
6. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Shalkovitch, Abraham"; *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Ben-Avigdor"; Stanley Nash, *In Search of Hebraism: Shai Hurwitz and His Polemics in the Hebrew Press* (Leiden, 1980), 103; Menuha Gilboa, *Ha-Mahalakh he-Hadash u-mi-Hutza lo ba-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit* [From naturalism to realism in Hebrew literature] (Tel Aviv, 1991), 7. She also claims that this movement is Hebrew literature's naturalistic movement. Although some of the above credit Ben-Avigdor for the term, at least one, Moshe Ungerfeld, gives it to Reuven Breinin, and see Ungerfeld, "Ben-Avigdor," in idem, *Hogim u-Meshorerim* [Thinkers and poets: selected essays] (Tel-Aviv, 1974), 229.
7. Ben-Avigdor, "'El Hovevey Sefat 'Ever ve-Sifruta" [To the lovers of Hebrew and its literature], in *Nitzaney ha-Re'alism ba-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit* [Early realistic short stories in Hebrew literature], vol. 2, ed. Yosef Ewen and Isaac Ben-Mordecai (Jerusalem, 1993), 202-206; for his poetics, see his short story "Menahem ha-sofer," and his *Ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-Hadasha*, 7, 10, 13, 14, 18, 21. Also see Menuha Gilboa, "Ben-Avigdor be-Torat Mevaker" [Ben-Avigdor as critic], in Nurit Guvrin (ed.), *Peles: Mehkarim be-Vikoret ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit* [Peles: Studies in Hebrew literary criticism] (Tel Aviv, 1980), 175-194, esp. 178-185; Fischl Lachower, *Toldot ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-Hadasha* [History of modern Hebrew literature], vol. 3, pt. 2 (Tel Aviv, 1966), 17; also "Ben-Avigdor," in Getzl Kresl, *Leksikon ha-Sifrut Ha-'Ivrit ba-Dorot ha-'Ahronim* [Lexicon of Hebrew literature in recent generations], vol. 1 (Merhavia, 1965), 259. For ideologies, see Meyer Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature, Vol. 4: From 1880 to 1935, Part One* (New York, 1960), 81, etc. On *melitza* (or *melitsah*), see Robert Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism* (Seattle, 1988), 23-4; and Ben-Avigdor, *Ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-Tze'ira* [Young Hebrew literature] (Warsaw, 1910), esp. 17-18; and Stanley Nash, *In Search of Hebraism*, 30-1, 100, 102.
8. For the first two, see Yosef Ewen (ed.), *Nitzaney ha-Re'alism ba-Siporet ha-'Ivrit (Kovetz Sipurim)* [Early realistic short stories in Hebrew literature], vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1972), 151-185; vol. 2, edited with I. Ben-Mordecai (1993), 207-253, accordingly; "Menahem ha-Sofer," "Sifrey 'Agora" (Warsaw, 1893); Gershon Shaked terms Ben-Avigdor's composition of naturalistic stories as nothing more than "a sentimental attempt at writing stories of local

- color," *Ha-Siporet ha-'Ivrit 1880-1970 I: ba-Gola* [Hebrew narrative fiction 1880-1970 I: In exile] (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, 1977), 111, also 121, 242, 244; Dan Miron describes Ben-Avigdor's writing as his participation in "a literary-stylistic ideology which was anti-formalistic and anti-puristic." He also terms as "naive realism" and "primitive naturalism" the writings of members of the "New Course." Cf. Miron, *Bodedim be-Mo'adam: li-Deyokana shel ha-Republika ha-Sifrutit ha-'Ivrit bi-Tehilat ha-Me'a ha-'Esrin* [When loners come together: a portrait of Hebrew literature at the turn of the twentieth century] (Tel Aviv, 1987), 68, 94.
9. Ben-Avigdor, "'El Hovevey Sefat 'Ever ve-Sifruta," 202-206; also see his *Ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-Hadasha*, 9ff.; on the crisis in Hebrew literature at the turn of the century, its authors and readership, as well as predecessors who strove to publish a series of original Hebrew works in the 1880s which inspired or anticipated Ben-Avigdor's enterprise, see Miron, *Bodedim be-Mo'adam*, 23-111, and 67 on the latter. Also, see Ben-Avigdor's testimony in his *Ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-Tze'ira*, 21; and Stanley Nash, *In Search of Hebraism*, who cites testimony by Ben-Avigdor in 1909, and the "scholar-journalist" Shai Hurwitz in 1890, 1905 and 1906, pp. 287, 101, 171-2 and 154, accordingly.
 10. Regarding Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginzberg, 1856-1927), see Steven J. Zipperstein, *Evasive Prophet: Ahad Ha'am and the Origins of Zionism* (Berkeley, 1993), 259; also see Shaked, *Ha-Siporet ha-'Ivrit*, 20; also Ben-Avigdor, "'Ahad Ha'am u-'Veney Mosheh," *Netivot: Bima Hofshit le-'Inyaney ha-Hayim ve-ha-Sifrut* [Paths: Open forum for issues of life and literature], vol. 1 (Warsaw, 1913), 238-290; and his *Ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-Tze'ira*, esp. 9-13. On the timing of this essay, see Nash, *In Search of Hebraism*, 290. Ungerfeld also comments on the criticism vented by Ben-Avigdor at Ahad Ha'am in his *Hogim u-Meshorerim*, 233-4.
 11. In Leon Simon, tr., *Selected Essays of Ahad Ha'Am*, (Philadelphia, 1948), 80-90. On Krochmal's direct influence on Eliezer Zweifel and Peretz Smolenskin, see Feiner, pp. 418-30, 433. For the most recent discussion of Feierberg's inclusion of Krochmal in his fiction, see Elliott Rabin, "Idolatrous Fictions: Art and Religion in Modern Hebrew Literature" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1997), ch. 4. For Krochmal's especially strong impact on Shai Hurwitz, "Krochmal's unique æfundamentalist' heir," who rediscovered Krochmal in 1885 and saw him as the "father of modern Jewish nationalism" (pp. 75, 76), see Nash, *In Search of Hebraism*, 72-87 and index. Nash also includes Simon Dubnow among Ranak's intellectual heirs, *ibid.*, 125.
 12. Dan Miron, *Beyn Hazon le-'Emet: Nitzaney ha-Roman ha-'Ivri ve-ha-Yidi ba-Me'a ha-Tesha 'Esrey* [Between vision and truth: beginnings of the Hebrew and Yiddish novel in the nineteenth century] (Jerusalem, 1979), 147ff.; Feiner, 312, 316; other writers, too, composed their works in the same spirit, among them Y.L. Landau (1866-1942) who wrote historical dramas. And see Gershon Shaked, *Ha-Mahazeh ha-'Ivri ha-Histori bi-Tekufat ha-Tehiya: Nos'im ve-Tzurot* [The Hebrew historical drama in the twentieth century] (Jerusalem, 1970), 26, 27, 28. Incidentally, Ranak was not alone in embracing a cyclic view of Jewish history. As attested to by Feiner, Rashi Funn, too, wrote his *Nidahey Yisra'el* (1850) focusing on the repeated resurgence of Judaism through history. And see Feiner, 231-3, 262ff, 285, 293.
 13. See Feiner, 157-168; Lachower, *Toldot ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-Hadasha* [History of modern Hebrew literature], vol. 2 (Tel Aviv, 1966), 45-47; Jay Harris, *Nachman Krochmal: Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age* (New York, 1991), 103-155. Briefly, Ranak categorizes Jewish history around the following cycles:
 - I. 1. Growth: from Abraham to Moses.
 2. Strength and action: from the Conquest of Canaan to Solomon.

3. Downturn to demise: divided Kingdom to the Babylonian exile.
- II.
 1. Growth: Return to Zion (536 B.C.E.) to Alexander the Great (331 B.C.E.).
 2. Strength and action: from the Great Assembly to death of Alexandra (67 B.C.E.).
 3. Downturn and demise: From Pompeii to the Destruction of the Second Temple, Exile and Betar.
- III.
 1. Growth: Judah the Prince to the Rise of Islam.
 2. Strength and action: Early Islam to end of Golden Age in Spain (death of Maimonides).
 3. Downturn and demise: Spanish Expulsion to eighteenth century.
14. Josef Klausner, *Historya shel ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-Hadasha* [History of modern Hebrew literature], vol. 4 (Jerusalem, 1960), 78-104; Lachower, *ibid*.
15. Le Goff, 54-5ff.
16. Amply documented by Feiner, 53, 225, 293, 298, 302-3, among others. I wish to thank Professor Derek Jonathan Penslar for reading the paper and advising me on historical matters including his comments bringing to my attention Baer's presentist, and nearly Krochmalian, Romaniticized anti-Wissenschaft reading of Christian Spanish history, noted by David N. Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past* (New York, 1995), 109-128. Though it is likely that Ben-Avigdor read Graetz in the original, he may have also had access to Graetz's history in translation. By the late 1880s, parts of his monumental work were already available in Hebrew translation. Abraham Kaplan published one of its parts in 1875, and Kalman Shulman published its first part in 1876, "borrowing" from its third, sixth and eighth parts as early as 1873; beginning in 1888, Graetz's great edifice was translated, with its synopsis appearing first, by S.P. Rabinowitz. And see Feiner, 465-6, 364-373; Miron, *Bodedim be-Mo'adam*, 85, 94; G. Kresl, *Leksikon ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit*, s.v. "Rabinowitz, S. P.," vol. 2, 823.
17. Contrasted by Feiner with "Traditional History," 91 ff., 403ff., 461.
18. Shaked, *Ha-Siporet ha-'Ivrit*, 227.
19. *Lifney 'Arba Me'ot Shana, 'O 'Ah ve-'Ahot le-Tzara: Sipur Histori mi-Gerush Sefarad* [Four hundred years ago, or brother and sister during trouble: a historical tale of the Spanish expulsion] (Warsaw, 1892); published in Ben-Avigdor's edited series "Sifrey 'Agora," vol. 2 number 5; also found in Ben-Avigdor, *Sipurim*, ed. Menuha Gilboa (Tel Aviv, 1980), 456-566; revised and published for young readers in 1907 as *Don Miguel: Sipur Histori mi-Zeman Gerush Sefarad* [Don Miguel: a historic tale from the time of the Spanish expulsion], introduction by Joseph Klausner (Jerusalem, 1948).
20. Meyer Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature*, vol. 4, 84.
21. *Ibid.*. It must be added that at least some poetry, the epic historical poem "Bi-Metzulot Yam" (In the depths of the sea, 1865), by Y.L. Gordon, and David Frishman's poem "Shevu'ey Shevu'ot" (Oaths upon oaths, 1887) also concern the Spanish Expulsion. On the latter, see Hillel Barzel, *Shirat Hibat Tziyon* [The Chibbat Zion period] (Tel Aviv, 1987), 293-6. Earlier works on the subject also abound, and see Feiner, 317-28. For translated fiction published in Hebrew on the Expulsion in the nineteenth century, and the interest of the Jewish reader of the 1880s and 90s in historical works, see Miron, *Bodedim be-Mo'adam*, 63, 67, 94; and Feiner, 93-4. Regarding the treatment by Haskalah non-fiction writings of the Expulsion, see Werses, "Gerush Sefarad ba-'Aspaklarya shel Sifrut ha-Haskalah" [The Expulsion from Spain in Haskalah literature], *Pe'amim* 57 (autumn, 1993): 48-81. To commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the Expulsion, Amnon Shamosh wrote *Har ha-Anusim* [Marrano mountain] (Tel Aviv, 1991).
22. Miron, *Beyn Hazon le-'Emet*, 155.
23. See, for example, Ahad Ha'am's 1892 essay "Dr. Pinsker u-Mahbarto" [Dr. Pinsker and his

- pamphlet]; for discussion on the varying notions of the mission of Israel, see Ahad Ha'am's "Al shetey ha-se'ipim." Also Feiner, 264 and more; also Nash, *In Search of Hebraism*, 114 ff., 139, 143.
24. See his essay in *Netivot*, n. 10 above. On assimilation, see also Nash, *In Search of Hebraism*, 110, 113 ff., 158 ff.
 25. Miron, *Bodedim be-Mo'adam*, 23ff.
 26. According to Miron, the curse is based on the one uttered by Don Yosef ben-Adret with the oath of never to return to Spain. The incident is incorporated into David Frishman's poem, "Shevu'ey Shevu'ot." On the above, see Miron, *Bodedim be-Mo'adam*, p. 83. On the question of the historical validity of this tradition, see Marc Shapiro, "The Herem on Spain: History and Halakha," *Sefarad* XLIX, 2 (1898): 381-394. My thanks to Professor Benjamin Gampel, of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, for bringing this article to my attention.
 27. Miron, *Bodedim be-Mo'adam*, 95.
 28. *Ibid.*, 95-8.
 29. Le Goff, 48.
 30. *Ibid.*, 115.
 31. Ranak's importance is acknowledged by Ben-Avigdor in his *Ha-Sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-Tze'ira*, 13, 43, and was undoubtedly well known to him even before. On the diffusion of historical knowledge by means of popular literary forms, see Feiner, pp. 276-283, 287-293, 309-373. On Mapu's use of Krochmal, see Miron, *Beyn Hazon le-'Emet*, pp. 100-106, 113. One can make a case that even the opening of Agnon's "Agunot" is inspired by Krochmal. For that, see Hillel Barzel, "Tefisa historiosofit," *Yedi'ot 'Achronot* (13 February, 1976): 1; continued (20 February, 1976): 6, 17.