

From *Sefer Ha'aggadah* to the Jewish Bookcase: Dynamics of a Cultural Change¹

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Sometimes adventure is acting within limits. It can then calculate its end, and reach it. Such adventures are the ripples of change within one type of civilization, by which an epoch of given type preserves its freshness. But, given the vigor of adventures, sooner or later the leap of imagination reaches beyond the safe limits of the epoch, and beyond the safe limits of learned rules of taste. It then produces the dislocations and confusions marking the advent of new ideals for civilized effort.

Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*

The manifest popularity of H. N. Bialik and Y. H. Ravnitzky's *Sefer Ha'aggadah*, its influence on the educational curriculum in the Yishuv and later in the State of Israel and the various languages into which it is translated all bear witness to the formative role of this book through the years in the construction of modern cultural memory.² Other famous

¹ This article is based on chapters in my doctoral dissertation, "From *Sefer ha-aggadah* (The Book of Legends) to the Jewish Bookcase (*Aron hasefarim hayehudi*): The Aggadic Anthologies and Their Place in the Configuration of Judaism in Modern Hebrew Culture" (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 2009). I wish to thank my advisor, Eli Yassif, for his most helpful guidance, as well as the Posen Fund for their generous support. The term "Jewish bookcase," is a modern term that apparently evolved as an association with Bialik's poem: "Before the bookcase" (1911), and his ingathering project (*kinus*), aimed to establish a new national library of Jewish books in Hebrew.

² During the 20 years between the early editions of *Sefer Ha'aggadah* (1908–11) and the expanded and revised version (1931–34), there were 18 printings. Numerous others followed, especially in the 1950s, and the book's popularity remained unprecedented. Bialik himself affirmed this in "Dvir veMoriah – skirah ketzarah al gidulam vepitucham;" see *Ketavim genuzim shel Hayyim Nahman Bialik*, ed. Moshe Ungerfeld (Tel Aviv: Beit Bialik, 1971 [1926]) 344–50. The central place of the anthology in the national education system and its influence on Hebrew culture emerges from the writings of Hayyim Harari, "*Shiurim ledugmah, mitato shel Moshe*," *Hahinukh* 2 (1911)

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authors, such as M. Y. Berdichevsky, S. Y. Agnon and I. L. Peretz, also compiled and published their own aggadic anthologies, but only *Sefer Ha'aggadah* acquired such an influence that it became known as “the New Torah” of the Jews.³

This article seeks to understand and explain Bialik and Ravnitzky's unique success in light of their literary innovations and cultural vision and to examine how they used their literary tools to bridge the historical and ideological gap between rabbinic tradition and the Jewish thought of their time. Furthermore, in what sense did they contribute to a new understanding of Judaism a hundred years ago?⁴ The following discus-

194–9; Yosef Hayyim Brenner, “Mesadeh hasifrut,” *Kol Kitvei Y. Brenner* (Tel Aviv: Stiebel, 1937 [1919]) 8b: 377–83, hereafter *Kol Kitvei Brenner*; S. Vider, National Library (ARC.4°1185), File 163; Shalom Kremer, “Mavo” (introduction), *Beshaarei sefer, kitvei Y. H. Ravnitzky*, ed. Shalom Kremer (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1961) 28; Ephraim Elimelech Orbach, “Bialik veaggadat Hazal,” *Al Yahadut ve-al hinukh* (Jerusalem: School of Education of the Hebrew University and Ministry of Education and Culture, 1966) 140–61; Joseph Heinemann, “Al darko shel Bialik be'aggadah hatalmudit,” *Molad* 6, vol. 31 (1974) 83–92; Yaakov Elboim, “*Sefer ha'aggadah*, pirkei mavo,” *Mehkarei Yerushalayim basifrut Ivrit* 10–11 (1988–9) 375–97; Shlomo Sheva, *Hozeh barah, sippur hayav shel Hayyim Nahman Bialik*: (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1990) 107 ff. The anthology has been translated into Yiddish, Russian, English and Japanese. The full English translation, following some partial ones, was published in 1992: Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York: Schocken Books, 1992).

³ Surveys on the compilation of Jewish folk traditions at the turn of the century may be found in David Jacobson, “The Recovery of Myth, A Study of Rewritten Hasidic Stories in Hebrew and Yiddish” (PhD diss., University of California, 1977); M. W. Kiel, “A Twice Lost Legacy: Ideology, Culture and the Pursuit of Jewish Folklore in Russia until Stalinization (1930–1931)” (PhD diss., Jewish Theological Seminary, 1991); David Roskies, “Sh. Anski, haparadigma shel hashiva,” *Huliot* 3 (1996) 137–57; Israel Bartal, “The Ingathering of Traditions: Zionism's Anthology Projects,” *Prooftexts* 17 (1997) 77–93; Adam M. Rubin, “From Torah to Tarbut: Hayim Nahman Bialik and the Nationalization of Judaism” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2000); Itzik Nakhmen Gottesman, *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003); Martina Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber's Representation of Hasidim as Kulturkritik* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Haya Bar-Itzhak, *Pioneers of Jewish Ethnography and Folkloristics in Eastern Europe* (Ljubljana: Studia Mytological Slavica – Research Center of the Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2010).

⁴ There is no way of knowing the nature of the literary partnership between the two and how they divided the editorial work. While Ravnitzky signed before Bialik on the flyleaves of the first Moriah anthologies and the first edition of *Sefer Ha'aggadah*, the reverse is true from 1934. One may only assume that Ravnitzky played a greater part in the first editing because of greater professional experience and as the young poet's patron. As Bialik developed as an editor and his reputation in Jewish society grew, the division of labor may have changed and possibly the balance of power too. See Ravnitzky, “H. N. Bialik and *Sefer ha'aggadah*,” *Kneset* 1 (1936) 510–18; Shalom Streitt, “Y. H. Ravnitzky,” *Pnei hasifrut* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1939) 1.261–74; Yosef Klausner, “Yehoshua Hana (Elhanan) Ravnitzky” in *Yotzrei tekufah umamshichei tekufah*

sion will therefore be dedicated to the new functions of the *aggadah* in the anthology as a “national asset” and as a model for a new secular law; to the innovative ways in which Bialik and Ravnitzky edited the stories following both Nahman Krochmal’s chronological model and rabbinic value concepts, which Bialik sought to interpret anew; and especially to the unique choice of genres in *Sefer Ha’aggadah*, such as parable and “halachic *aggadah*.” The last section of this article will deal with the national perception of the authors, who, like their mentor Ahad Ha’am, regarded Zionism as a spiritual and cultural project and not as a new secular religion, as some recent research on the anthology suggests.⁵

As will be demonstrated, the dynamics of cultural change in this context were not “revolutionary” but rather “adventurous” (if we use Whitehead’s concept). Bialik did not suggest “inventing” the past but wanted rather to allow it to take on new meanings. He used the Hebrew term *lehallel* to express his intention not only to desacralize the Jewish language, but also to inaugurate it and even redeem it from its narrow contexts.⁶ By doing this, he hoped to expand its range of validity, not to deny it. Maybe this is why he is remembered not only as Israel’s national poet, but also as “the last Jewish poet,”⁷ realizing the power of tradition as well as its limits.

(Tel Aviv: Masada, 1956) 133–9; Shlomo Avneri, “Hamabu’a hanistar: Ravnitzky shebe-Bialik,” *Haaretz tarbut vesifrut* (7 May 2004); and idem, “‘Veki nimkor nimkarti lekha, ani umekansei vesandalei,” on unknown litigation between Bialik and Ravnitzky, *Tarbut Vesifrut* (25 July 2008).

⁵ “Rather than secularizing religious texts, Bialik sought to imbue the national movement with a measure of their sanctity.” Adam Rubin, “‘Like a Necklace of Black Pearls Whose String Has Snapped’: Bialik’s ‘Aron hasefarim’ and the Sacralization of Zionism,” *Prooftexts* (Spring 2008) 158.

⁶ He wrote further, “Throughout the generations we restricted our terms, we attached them to a specific content. I want to free them into the general human atmosphere: secularizing them and employing them in everyday living. ... To make secular may be to affront or it may be to rescue, to redeem. In that sense we only benefit by giving our own terms a humanistic meaning rather than inventing new ones. I am for rescuing, and believe that when I plant these words in new surroundings they acquire new meaning – new color.” Bialik, *Dvarim shebe-alpeh* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1935) 1.198 [1932] and 2.15 [1914] (henceforth *Dvarim* 1, *Dvarim* 2).

⁷ Itzik Manger, “Folklor vesifrut,” *Huliot* 7 (2002) 367. See also Yosef Hayyim Brenner, “Hane’eman, ledmut diokano shel Bialik,” in *Kol Kitvei Brenner* (Tel Aviv: Shtibel, 1937 [1914–16]) 7.280–303.

*The Aggadah as a National Asset and as a Model for a
New Secular Law*

I say we must try to rescue the aggadah from its narrow abyss and bring it out into the public domain of secular literature, if you will “secular sanctity.”⁸

Like the romantic philosophers Herder and Schlegel, and apparently following Ahad Ha'am, Bialik and Ravnitzky related to Jewish myth and particularly to the *aggadah* as a national cultural heritage.⁹ Considering it as an artistic work, they felt the *aggadah* could be edited freely in keeping with the ideological needs and esthetic taste of their generation. Nevertheless, it warranted particular attention, as they wrote in their introduction, “for generations so many invested in it.”¹⁰ Supporting this view, the *aggadah* was represented in the foreword of every volume as a “national asset” (*kinyan leumi*). Its new role in the anthology, accordingly, was to preserve and spread folk knowledge and thus strengthen the nation's cultural affinity to its language, its symbols, its customs, its heroes and its values: “Through the *aggadah* one enters the home of the Israelite nation and examines it from deep within. One recognizes that it belongs to the people and sees it as it is ... in its own unique light, as it is structured in the heart of the entire people.” This way, the *aggadah* was released (“redeemed,” if we use Bialik's terminology) from its long service to religion, subjected mainly to biblical commentary or to legal discourse, and was now enlisted in the service of the nation.¹¹ Previous authors as Ze'ev Jawitz (*Sihot minnei kedem* [Warsaw, 1887]) or Israel B. Levner (*Kol aggadot Israel* [Pyotorkov, 1898–1905]) had already emphasized the national significance of rabbinic literature, but Bialik and Ravnitzky were the first to refer to its national

⁸ Bialik, “Limud ha'aggadah bevethasefer,” *Kneset* 10 (1947 [1933]) 13–22.

⁹ Friedrich Schlegel wrote in 1800: “We have no mythology. But, I add, we are close to obtaining one or, rather, it is time that we earnestly work together to create one.” (Friedrich Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. E. Behler and R. Struck [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968] 81–82). Herder, as is well known, preceded him with his collections of German folk poetry and his writings about the ancient origins of the national spirit; see William A. Wilson, “Herder, Folklore and Romantic Nationalism,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 6 (1973) 819–835. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in a similar vein in *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1872]) 122–3; and also his contemporary, Edward Burnett Tylor, *The Origins of Culture* (New York: Harper, 1958 [1871]) 1.274–5. On the national value of our “spiritual possessions” see Ahad-Ha'am, “Thia ve-briyah,” in *Kol Kitvei Ahad Ha'am* (Tel Aviv: Hotsa'ah ivrit, 1947 [1898]) 291–3.

¹⁰ *Dvarim* 1.23 [1917]; see also 183–4 [1932]; and *Dvarim* 2.42–57 [1933] and 69 [1934].

¹¹ See also *Dvarim* 1.198 [1932] and *Dvarim* 2.15 [1914].

definition as an exclusive one, sufficient to replace its religious meanings and functions. Thus, instead of the original saying in *Sifrei*: “If you wish to know Him by whose word the world came into being, study *aggadah*,” Bialik and Ravnitzky’s introduction read: “If you wish to know the people of Israel, study *aggadah*.”¹²

Years later, when vowels were added in the new expanded edition, the editors explained that this was done to give their book the external appearance of a classic as “the fruit of the holy spirit within the entire people.”¹³ In symbolic fashion, this step shows that the compilers’ central purposes were achieved and that the anthology had found its place in public awareness as a sacred national literature, aiming both to express and to guide the perplexed Jews of the time.

Bialik and Ravnitzky’s contribution to a new understanding of the *aggadah* within Hebrew culture, however, was not only that the national spirit replaced the holy spirit as the highest source and purpose of literature. The selection, editing and formulating of the texts shows that Bialik also saw *Sefer Ha’aggadah* as a model for a new secular *halacha* (law). His models did not include, as might have been expected, contemporary European folklore collections like the *Grimms Brothers’ Fairy Tales* and *A Thousand and One Nights*, which influenced other anthologists of Jewish traditions,¹⁴ but rather Jewish religious books. According to his writings, Bialik hoped to compile an anthology that could take the place of the Pentateuch with Rashi’s commentaries, the *Mishnah* and the *Shulhan Arukh* (a compendium of Jewish religious observance) as an exclusive source for identification with Judaism.¹⁵ The genre the compilers chose to represent the spirit of these models in their book was “halachic *aggadah*.” As explained in their introduction, they used this genre to describe the unique life-style of Israel with its “secular and

¹² SH (1908) I.vii. Subsequent citations from the anthology in this article are all taken from the first edition, which was identical with all others until 1930: Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky and Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *Sefer Ha’aggadah* (Krakov, Y. Fischer, 1908–1911), henceforth SH; numbers denote volume, page and paragraph – e.g., SH 1.22 (13). The English *Book of Legends* is denoted BL, with numbers denoting page and paragraph – e.g., BL 189 (2).

¹³ Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky and Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *Sefer Ha’aggadah* (Tel Aviv, Dvir, 1936 [1930]) xiv.

¹⁴ See, e.g., the introduction of Itzhak Margolis’ *Sipurei Yeshurun* (Berlin: 1877) v; or the introduction to the anthology of Ze’ev (Wolf) Jawitz, *Sihot minei kedem* (Warsaw: 1887) 17.

¹⁵ Fishel Lahover, ed., *Igerot Hayyim Nahman Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1938 [1905]) 5.293. Bialik compared “the Hebrew book” as a model to the books he edited with Ravnitzky in Moriah to the six Orders of the *Mishnah* (H. N. Bialik, “Hasefer haivri,” *Kol Kitvei H. N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1965 [1913]) 207) and to Joseph Caro’s *Shulhan Arukh* and Jacob ben Asher’s *Orah Hayyim* (*Dvarim* 1.85, 123, 194 [1926]).

sacred ways and customs.” Halachic *aggadah*, as I propose to show, seems to be a generic term for halachic midrashim, proverbs and short fables from the wisdom literature, with their morals. These appear mostly in the second and third volumes of the anthology in clearly halachic categories, such as “charity,” “raising orphans,” “burying the dead and comforting mourners,” “courts and court procedures” and the like. The practical value of this genre and its characteristics were later defined by Bialik in “Halacha and Aggadah” (1917).¹⁶ There he stated, “Our language-aggadah of today will in time go through this same process of condensation, and will finally become a new halacha, expressed in the concise and dry style required by the taste and needs of the age.”¹⁷ The halachic *aggadah* in the anthology is therefore presented as a unique combination of the Apollonian nature of Jewish law and the Dionysian nature of *aggadah*.¹⁸ Hence, it is not surprising that the examples of *halacha* that Bialik used in the article already appear in *Sefer Ha'aggadah*, since the blurring between *aggadah* and *halacha* that would become his ideal had apparently emerged in this very work.¹⁹

A New Wreath Made from Familiar Leaves:

Editing the Anthology in the Light of National and Humanist Ideals

A new projector has illuminated all our old cultural assets from within, imbuing them with a new vital force. The center has been moved and the inner order changed. The main point of 200 years ago has become insignificant and what was insignificant then is now central. A new time does not uproot or discard anything but shuffles orders and relative positions.²⁰

Reediting the rabbinic tales chronologically, as a series of biographies, by subjects or by genres was not an innovation of Bialik and Ravnitzky. Compilers like Isaac Margolis (*Sippurei Yeshurun* [Berlin, 1877]), Jawitz

¹⁶ Bialik, “Halacha ve’aggadah” in *Kol Kitvei Bialik*; English trans. by Leon Simon in Haim Nahman Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment: Five Essays* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000) 45–87. Bialik insisted on the importance of *halacha* in a secular context also as a part of his attempt to edit the Mishnah. See Bialik, “Mishnah la’am” in *Kol Kitvei Bialik*, 216; also *Dvarim* 1.198 [1932].

¹⁷ Bialik, “Halacha ve’aggadah,” 218 (English ed., 62–3).

¹⁸ The resemblance between the concepts of *halacha* and *aggadah* and the artistic principles Apollo and Dionysius represented in Nietzsche’s work is based on a system of contradictory images that complete each other in both Bialik’s and Nietzsche’s writings; see Bialik, “Halacha ve’aggadah,” 216–217; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ See, e. g., the *halacha* commanding that sacred writing be rescued from fire in Bialik, “Halacha ve’aggadah,” 217; also SH 3.123 (383); BL 449 (445).

²⁰ *Dvarim* 1.112 [1927].

and Levner had done it before. Their innovations indeed had a radical significance, one with which Bialik and Ravnitzky identified. For replacing halachic editing criteria with historical and literary ones meant changing not only Judaism's thinking patterns but also its practical uses. As Y. H. Yerushalmi has maintained, the popular history of the time was thought to be "what it never was – the belief of Jews who had ceased to believe."²¹ Leaders such as Ahad Ha'am and Simon Dubnov used history in defining their national affinity to Judaism, and popular history became proof positive of the wealth within the national spirit of the Jewish people.²² *Sefer Ha'aggadah* thus became an agent for change in Hebrew culture: by giving the ancient literary traditions an historical context, it strengthened the common historical consciousness, and this contributed to the new perception of Judaism as a culture rather than a religion.

The chronological rationale and chapter divisions of the first volume of the anthology follows Nahman Krochmal's historiography in *Moreh nevokhei hazeman* (Guide to the Perplexed of the Time; Lemberg 1851). It is constructed around the desire of the Jewish people to realize their national sovereignty in Eretz Israel, redefining each time anew the historical cycle of the nation's rise and fall.²³ Bialik and Ravnitzky divided the chapters of their first chronological volume into three such cycles in which the Jewish people awakens spiritually in exile, experiences national rebirth in Eretz Israel, and then falls as national sovereignty weakens in a historical crisis. The headings they introduced stress the national values that guide this perception, as in the last historical cycle of their book: "The Era between the First and Second Temples," "The Second Temple – Its Structure and Its Service," and "Destruction of the Second Temple and of the Land." The exile is reflected here simply as a transition towards the central historical goal of rebuilding Jerusalem, with all its implied national significance.

²¹ Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, *Zekhor: hahistoriah hayehudit vehazikaron hayehudi* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1988) 109.

²² According to Zvi Vislavsky, "History began to occupy the position previously occupied by myth and religion," and thus "history helped the individual in Israel in his new national position to withstand the flood of apostasy from within and without." Vislavsky, "Halacha ve'aggadah betarbutenu hehadasha" in *Havlei tarbut, mehkar sotsiologi bev'ayot uma velashon* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1946) 234. The national importance of the historical novel and its relation to the *aggadah* comes to the fore also in Noah Pines, "Limud hahistoriah haysraelit bevatei hasefer," *Hahinukh*, 3, no. 5 (1913) 309–336; and Yaakov Fichman, *Bebeit hayotzer* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1951) 1.259ff.

²³ Nachman Krochmal, *Moreh Nevokei hazeman* (Lemberg: Y. Schneider, 1851) 24–81.

The next volume in the anthology is "The Deeds of the Sages." The biographical legends Bialik and Ravnitzky chose for this volume were scattered throughout rabbinic literature in different halachic or biblical contexts. The aggadic hero functions in these contexts mainly as a moral exemplar, subject to rabbinic conventions. Assembling these fragments as complete biographies in *Sefer Ha'aggadah* turned the Sages depicted into cultural heroes, realizing a humanist ideal remote from Jewish tradition.²⁴ The interest of the story – its topic and main concern – is now man himself, and his unique life history from birth to death. Such a hero, as Simon Halkin taught, is "a person who is a Jew, but literature can penetrate the depths of his soul because he is a person,"²⁵ – that is, a complete model to identify with, having human strengths and weaknesses. The internal editing methods of the biographical chapters also serve to advance controversial values. Juxtaposing the stories of R. Meir and of Elisha ben Abuya or those of R. Judah I the Patriarch and of R. Hiyya the Elder and his sons, for example, illuminated the subversive aspects often concealed in their lives. R. Judah the Patriarch is presented through the critical view of his disciple, R. Hiyya, as a patronizing leader, and R. Meir is presented together with his controversial teacher, Elisha ben Abuya, as a contentious man.²⁶ Some of their stories are woven together in the talmudic version, but not all of them. Moreover, when the editors decided to transpose them from their old context into the new biographical one, they inevitably isolated them. Hence, deciding, unlike other anthologists, to combine certain biographies even if each Sage was known through his own rich repertoire of stories, carries ideological weight, along with the ways the stories were combined.

The other four books of the anthology, bound in two volumes in the first edition, are edited thematically, and a smaller section according to genre (proverbs, fables, animal stories, etc.). Here national themes stand out: "Israel and the Nations," "The Land of Israel" and "World Redemption and the Days of the Messiah." No less important are religious and cultural concepts, such as "The Holy One," "Sabbath Feasts and Fasts" and "Torah."²⁷ As the introduction explains, these chapters

²⁴ William S. Green, "What's in a Name? The Problematic of Rabbinic 'Biography'" in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice*, ed. idem (Missoula: Scholars, 1978) 77–96.

²⁵ Shimon Halkin, *Muskamot umashberim besifrutenu* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1978) 24.

²⁶ Current studies are more aware to these aspects, but it was not so in Bialik's time. For an extensive illustrated discussion, see Sebba-Elran, "From *Sefer ha'aggadah*," 312, 357–9.

²⁷ Value concepts, according to Max Kadushin, are spiritual possessions that, com-

introduce the “national assets” of Israel. In other words, the editors attributed symbolic cultural significance to them that could also be used in a national context: “I deliberately choose old terms for new concepts,” Bialik wrote years later, “to show that the meaning of these terms is eternal,” general and humanistic, as he explained.²⁸ He offered as an illustration “The Days of the Messiah,” which “are for us also the time when the dead will rise. Such a resurrection must show itself now in the resurrection of the creative spirits of all our past generations.”²⁹ Similarly, *kiddush hashem* (martyrdom) becomes “the nation as surpassing other nations in excellence,” and *hilul hashem* (blasphemy) “means inferior status,”³⁰ and so forth. *Tefillah* (prayer), the critique of *avodah zarah* (idolatry), the Sabbath and Torah are all the national spiritual heritage of Israel, according to the compilers. As such, they should be freed from their traditional designation and given a new one that is Jewish, humanist and modern, acceptable even when they do not coincide with the injunctions of rabbinic conventions.³¹ There was no need to change the text to mold it to this purpose. It was enough to choose sufficiently general texts and edit them stressing the human value to be derived and to label the text as a “national asset” in the introduction, in order to open it up to a secular interpretation.³²

ing together as a whole, constitute the characteristics of a culture and of a society. See Abraham Holtz, *Be-olam hamakshavah shel Hazal, b'eikevot mishnato shel M. Kadushin* (Tel Aviv: Poalim, 1978). My thanks to Avraham Shapira, who called my attention to Kadushin's concept, so relevant to this work.

²⁸ See n.6 above.

²⁹ *Dvarim* 1.68 [1926]. This seems the reason for including “The Days of the Messiah” in *Sefer Ha'aggada* as a subject, while a traditional anthology from the Middle Ages, like *Sefer hazikhronot*, edits it as a historical chapter. On the general way the compilers handled this chapter, leaving its meaning to the reader, see Elboim, *Sefer ha'aggadah*, 394.

³⁰ *Dvarim* 1.212 [1932].

³¹ Bialik's cultural vision based on renovated religious terminology is described in his address “The Sacred and the Secular in Language” (*Dvarim* 2.128–30 [1927]), trans. Jeffrey M. Green in *Revelment and Concealment*, 89–94). See also Shai Zarhi, “Hirhurim al tefisat hahalacha shel Bialik,” in *M'anit halev, minhat dvarim leMuki Zur*, ed. Avraham Shapira (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2006) 22–39; Ehud Luz, “Bialik al hatsorekh betirgum hiloni shel halashon hadatit,” *Iyunim bahinuhk hayehudi* 11 (2007) 217–35.

³² Most of its readers considered the thematic organization of the anthology as its “greatest contribution”; see, for example, Simon Bernfeld, “Sefer Ha-aggadah,” *Ha'olam* 4 (1910); David Stern, “Introduction,” in Bialik and Ravnitzky, *Book of Legends*, trans. Braude, xvii–xxii; Alan Mintz, “*Sefer ha'aggadah*: Triumph or Tragedy?” in *History and Literature: New Readings of Jewish Texts in Honor of Arnold J. Band*, ed. William Cutter and David C. Jacobson (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2002) 20–21.

Thus the two books in the second volume of *Sefer Ha'aggadah* highlight the unique cultural content of the Jewish national heritage, with its values, symbols and thought patterns. This heritage is brought in from the traditional world but is discussed as a national possession, embodying the immanent tension in such an anthology between tradition and innovation and between religious values and national ones.

The conception of Judaism as a language to be “reinvented” in a new cultural reality also explains the choice of genres, and in particular the very numerous parables that replace the usual historical rabbinic tale in the first volume.

Revelment and Concealment in the Parable

Who knows whether it is not for the best that man should inherit the husk of a word without its core – for thus he can fill the husk, or supply it constantly from his own substance, and pour his own inner light into it. “Every man prefers his own measure.” ... In the final analysis, an empty vessel can hold matter, while a full vessel cannot.³³

No one acquainted with *Sefer Ha'aggadah* fails to notice the prominence of fables and parables.³⁴ This is all the more surprising in the first book, which is historical, since parables are essentially fiction, not history.³⁵ They distance the reader from the concrete narrative, so as to illuminate it from some other context. Thus, while the parable helps one understand and internalize the tale, it also distracts attention from it. Daniel Boyarin supports this distinction in stating that the rabbinic parable functions as a code or plan of a story, representing and exemplifying the possibility but not the actuality of a concrete event.³⁶ It sheds light on reality but does not describe it as it is. Using Bialik's own image, the parable does not supply a direct answer that would “conceal” the questions arising from reality (e. g., whether God exists or how God looks), but rather gives readers an image of the invisible and thus compels them

³³ H. N. Bialik, “Giluy vekisuy belashon,” *Kol Kitvei Bialik*, 204; trans. Jacob Sloan in *Revelment and Concealment*, 14–15.

³⁴ The parable as a sub-genre of the fable presents a familiar perceptible representation or picture as an aid to understanding or fleshing out a complex idea. These “pictures” generally lack a literary plot, and they are not designed to exist as independent tales; see Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 191.

³⁵ David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) 13.

³⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 84–94.

to imagine it wordlessly, experiencing the reality it represents according to their ability.

As a literary model that raises no fewer questions than answers about the text, the parable represents the literary code Bialik sought in his entire anthological enterprise, the form of language that enables readers to picture incomprehensible reality for themselves.

The poet's natural inclination and perhaps even his cultural responsibility is to take the "worn-out" word that represents "worn-out forms of language" in the sayings of the Sages and seek out the long lost "primordial emotion" that created them, as Bialik writes in "Gilui vekisui balashon" (Revelation and Concealment in Language)³⁷. If the poet who stands on the brink of the abyss, the void, cannot restore the absolute force the words had in their glory days, he can at least sound the echo from the void for his readers.³⁸

This may also clarify the use of parables in *Sefer Ha'aggadah*. Whenever the editors wished to raise a story to the status of a symbol, in order to invite the reader to participate in the process of interpretation, they relied heavily on parables. An important story that requires such an adaptation is Jacob's departure from Beersheba.³⁹ In the anthology this story is based on midrashim and commentaries from two different sources (Genesis Rabbah 68–69 and BT Hullin 91b).⁴⁰ It tells of Jacob's departure from Beersheba on his way to Haran, his prayer at Beth El and the famous dream in which God revealed himself to him. The story is replete with miracles – on Jacob's way from Haran to Beth El "the road bounded ahead," according to the narrator, and God brought night on early so he could speak with Jacob privately ("The sun was extinguished," as the book emphasizes). The stones Jacob placed under his head were swallowed up one inside another, becoming one stone while he slept, and finally, the prophetic dream where God revealed himself was the last in a series of supernatural events. The editors chose not to leave out the account of the miracles, for that would have ruled out many tales of the Sages. Instead, they chose to expound it through parables that might "open" the story up to varied interpretations. To

³⁷ Bialik, "Giluy vekisuy," 202 (English ed., 13).

³⁸ See Bialik's use of *tehom* above in n. 8. Bialik's language perception is compared to Nietzsche's in Azzan Yadin, "A Web of Chaos: Bialik and Nietzsche on Language, Truth and the Death of God," *Prooftexts* 21 (2001) 179–203.

³⁹ SH 1.38–40 (40), BL 45–46 (67).

⁴⁰ The anthologists did not mention which Talmud editions and other writings of the Sages they used, or if they used a single source. Thus in comparing versions I tried to use those popular in their time: the Vilna editions of the Talmud and Genesis Rabbah.

this end they introduced into the short tale no fewer than five parables! The first describes the righteous Jacob leaving Beersheba, which then loses its aura and radiance, according to Genesis Rabbah. This may suggest that Jacob represents many other heroes who left to go on their way. The road “bounding ahead” receives extensive editorial explanation in a note in which the miracle is highlighted, not concealed. But immediately afterwards, in the miracle of the early sunset, the editors introduce two parables. According to the first (from Hullin), Jacob is likened to a righteous man, an honored guest in the lodging of God. An additional parable (from Genesis Rabbah) likens God to a king wishing to make the sun set early as a suitable background for a tryst with his beloved. The supernatural union of all the stones into one goes unexplained, but the encounter between Jacob and God – the story’s focus – is interpreted with two more parables. In the first God appears as “a man fanning his son,” and in that spirit Jacob is compared to a king’s son “sleeping in his cradle while flies [angels] were settling upon him” (Hullin). When his nurse (God) arrived, she protected Jacob, and the flies flew away (Genesis Rabbah). Through these parables, which are not found together in any other source, the literary model with its schematic images replaces historical reality, to explain and to enrich its possible contexts and interpretations. This constant movement between the different planes of the plot – between the abstract mode and its actual manifestation – destabilizes the historical orientation of the reader, but it also brings him closer to the philosophical idea behind the story.⁴¹ Another editorial choice – to limit the description of Jacob’s dream – serves the same intention. This seems to be part of the general tendency of the anthology to limit the role of revelations of all types and to leave them only with symbolic meaning that the modern reader could experience and comprehend.

By making extensive use of parables, Bialik and Ravnitzky not only imitated the traditional practice of the Sages, in contradiction to the historiographic orientation dominant in parallel anthologies, but in addition they combined overlapping sources. Hence Halevi’s impression that the editors of *Sefer Ha'aggadah* “covered up the roots of the *aggadah*” and severed it from any commitment to accepted biblical or historical contexts.⁴² The tale in the anthology is indeed cut off from its historical roots and, with the mediation of the parable, turned into a sym-

⁴¹ Bialik, “Limud ha'aggadah,” 20.

⁴² A. A. Halevi, “Hacompozitsiah shel ha'aggadah” in *Bialik: yetsirato lesugeyah ber'ai habikoret*, ed. Gershon Shaked (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1974) 418.

bol – a symbol of faith and providence, in the case of Jacob. As a symbol, it can represent a variety of cultural contexts and so, it can rise above the limits of time and space.

Bialik and Ravnitzky used the parable in other contexts as well, to bridge the gap between the ideas and concepts of the Sages and those of their own time. Parables are numerous, for example, in the sections on creation, on the Torah and on the Exodus. “For the purpose at hand,” the editors explained in their introduction, “‘when’ or ‘who’ is not important in the *aggadah* but rather ‘what’ and ‘how’. He [the reader] is interested only in literary matters that come together in one general form called *Aggadah*.”⁴³ The “literary garb” that anchors the *aggadah* in a particular time and place, then, is perceived as secondary to its timeless human quality. Like every symbol and word in Jewish culture, the *aggadah* for Ravnitzky and Bialik was a cultural model: “an empty vessel” (to quote Bialik in “Revelment and Concealment”⁴⁴) that gave resonance to their tireless search for belonging.

The “Halachic Aggadah” as a secular Torah

The value of *aggadah* is that it issues in *halacha*. *Aggadah* that does not bring *halacha* in its train is ineffective. Useless itself, it will end by incapacitating its author for action.⁴⁵

The chapter headings in the third volume and especially in its fifth book indicate the practical function of the “halachic *aggadah*” in the anthology: to adapt not only the tales of the Sages, but also their customs and rules (*hanhagot*) to the current reality of the secular reader. “Care of the body,” “Rules of conduct and good manners,” “Returning a lost article,” “The ways of charity,” “Visiting the sick,” and “Burying the dead and comforting mourners” follow the categories of a halachic book such as the *Shulhan Arukh*. Since Bialik regarded this as a literary model for his own “halachic *aggadah*” (see discussion above of the *aggadah* as a national asset and a model for a new secular law) a comparison between these two works is instructive.

⁴³ SH 1.xi. Elsewhere Bialik stated that “the wonderful secret” of creating the *aggadah* is to reduce the idea kernel to a minimum, allowing readers to plant it in their own contexts and raise an entire tree from it: “Thus its concerns can live in all times.” (*Dvarim* 2.54).

⁴⁴ Bialik, “Giluy vekisuy,” 202 (English ed., 15).

⁴⁵ Bialik, “Halacha ve’aggadah,” 221 (English ed., 81).

Comparison of the chapters “Between husband and wife” in *Sefer Ha'aggadah* and “Rules of modesty” in the *Shulhan Arukh*⁴⁶ shows surprising similarities together with differences. The resemblance between the chapters is based mostly on their similar subjects, common genres and overlapping texts that represent traditional world views. These are expressed in *Shulhan Arukh* by warnings against sexual temptation, and in *Sefer Ha'aggadah* by negative characterizations of women, according to which, for example, “A woman is a leather bag full of excrement, her orifice full of blood, yet all men run after her.”⁴⁷

The parallel texts in both chapters are usually based on midrashim and sayings of the Sages, such as, “One should not drink out of one goblet while thinking of another” or “A man has [on his body] a small member. If he starves it, it is satisfied; if he satisfies it, it is starved.”⁴⁸ Bialik’s unique intention – to provide the *aggadah* with the prosaic style of the *halacha* in order to give it the role and influence of a behavioral model – is remarkable in this context. Nonetheless, it is also easy to indicate the differences between the two genres, especially where the texts are almost identical. As the headings already indicate, in the *Shulhan Arukh* the laws are central, while the chapter in *Sefer Ha'aggadah* is devoted principally to tales of universal moral significance. Accordingly, the main goal of the stories in *Sefer Ha'aggadah* is not to illustrate and reinforce the law, as in the *Shulhan Arukh*, but to replace it.

Consider for example the formulation of the story of R. Eliezer from BT Nedarim 20b. The *Shulhan Arukh* details the law and afterwards the story in brief: “He will not cohabit at the beginning of the night and not at the end [...] but in the middle of the night. And he shall do this in fear and awe, as it is said of R. Eliezer that he revealed a hand’s breadth and concealed another hand’s breadth, as one driven by a demon.” *Sefer Ha'aggadah*, however, expands on the story without introducing the law:

Imma Shalom was asked: Why are your children so handsome? She replied: Because my husband does not cohabit with me at the beginning of the night or at the end of the night, but only at midnight. And when he cohabits with me, he uncovers a hand’s breadth of my body even as he covers another hand’s breadth, and he acts as though a demon is driving him.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Joseph Caro, *Shulhan Arukh: Orah Hayim* (Vilna: Ha'almanah veba'ahim Re'em, 1874) 154–6.

⁴⁷ SH 5.65(171); BL 629 (181).

⁴⁸ SH 5.64 (159), 65 (172); BL 628 (167), 629 (183).

⁴⁹ SH 5.64 (156); BL 628 (164).

The first-person testimony of Imma Shalom lends the story authenticity and poetic quality, but it lacks the force of specific instruction that marks the *Shulhan Arukh*. For *Sefer Ha'aggadah* is not obliged to lay down norms, but rather to set up a general moral framework in which readers may freely determine their own behavior.

Sometimes, however, not only are the headings the same and the stories taken from the same sources, but there is a poetic resemblance as well, due to the choice of genres and their compilation. Alongside stories from the *aggadah*, exempla and proverbs removed from their midrashic context, the halachic tale also states rules, like "Do not gossip with a woman. The Sages said: This applies to one's own wife ... how much more so to another man's wife. Hence, say the Sages, whoever gossips with a woman will bring harm to himself."⁵⁰ This appears only slightly differently in the *Shulhan Arukh*: "He is not to discuss with her matters not related to intercourse, not during intercourse and not before it, so as not to think of another woman, and if he told her and had intercourse, it is said of him that a man's conversation, even casual talk between man and wife, confronts him in the hour of judgment."

There is hardly a chance to find such texts in parallel anthologies of the time, given the uniqueness of Bialik and Ravnitzky's purpose of bringing their readers closer not only to the literary treasure in the writings of the Sages, but also to their practices as a model for a moral way of life.⁵¹

The halachic *aggadah*, which appears for the most part in the second and third volumes, thus indicates the practical use and the sense of commitment with which the editors wished to imbue modern Judaism. It was to provide its readers with a kind of cultural compass in the absence of a generally accepted law.⁵² However, Bialik differs not only from the rabbinical judges but from the Sages too, who tolerated self-criticism and pluralism (as we know due to Bialik). This is because his *halacha*, with its symbolic function for the generation of national rebirth, stems from the individual, and its goal is the individual and the nation that imparts meaning to his life. From this position Bialik and Ravnitzky could select their sources freely, editing and formulating

⁵⁰ SH 5.64 (160); BL 628 (168).

⁵¹ Another *halacha* that appears at length, surprisingly, relates to the rebellious woman (*sotah*). The only reason to include it seems to be that the Sages discuss it at length. See Y. Rosen-Zvi: *Hatekes shelo hayah: mikdash, midrash umigdar bemasekhet Sotah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2008).

⁵² "Midot shoalot" (asking attributes), according to Zipporah Kagan, *Halacha ve'aggadah ketsofen shel sifrut* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1988) 77.

them in a creative spirit. Hence, while the *aggadah* was designed to encourage cultural unity based on selected Jewish values, it could not guarantee it, for the guiding principle remained individual freedom to understand and apply those values.

From this vantage point another typical editorial change becomes comprehensible: omitting certain *halachot* from the tales of the Sages. R. Meir, for example, returns home from the study house and eats the meal Bruriah prepared for him, without saying the blessing (and maybe as an early hint that he does not intend to assign blame for his sons' death...). R. Yosi, similarly, "skips" the three laws that Elijah taught him (which the editors indicate by three lines) perhaps to plunge into the heart of the story in which God takes upon himself the blame for the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. Abraham, in a different kind of example, does not rise early on the day of the binding of Isaac so he can hasten to fill his halachic duties, as mentioned in Tanhuma, but because he fears Sarah's objections (that he may well have shared ...).⁵³ The law is thus secondary to the tale and the human value it embodies. This value is the secular Torah of Bialik – opened to explication as folklore and at the same time enjoying its cultural validity.⁵⁴

Inventing a Pacifist Tradition Following Ahad Ha'am's Cultural Zionism

The gathering of rabbinic literature at the turn of the century by so many central authors bears a national significance, for this literature, as opposed to the Bible, was identified over the years with the national calamity of the destruction of the Second Temple and was part of Jewish history throughout the years of the Diaspora. In Bialik's view it represented the identity of a minority whose cultural sovereignty sufficed for survival:

⁵³ This characteristic recurs both in the motto for the whole anthology and in the story of Nadav and Avihu, as Avigdor Shinan points out in his "Avodat yahad, avodah ne'emanah' al H. N. Bialik, Y. H. Ravnitzky veSefer ha'aggadah" in *Y. H. Ravnitzky, hamabua hanistar*, ed. Nurit Nissan (Tel Aviv: Hotsa'at hamehabrim, 2007) 25, 28.

⁵⁴ This contradicts Kiel's view, that the secular *halacha* was a later idea of Bialik's as a thinker, inconsistent with the romantic spirit behind *Sefer Ha'aggadah* (Kiel, "A Twice Lost Legacy," 179–82). On the place and nature of the *halacha* according to Bialik, see also Eliezer Schweid, *Hayahadut vehatarbut hahilonit* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1981) 49; Cynthia Ozick, "Bialik's Hint," *Commentary* 75 no. 2 (1983) 22–8; and Luz, Bialik. There are also attempts today to revive Bialik's "secular halacha," according to Zarhi, "Hirhurim," and Yair Sheleg, "Olam hakamei hamishnah im ketsat Bialik," *Ha'aretz* (16 June 2006).

If from the Bible we enter the aggadah, it is as if from a stormy wood we enter a peaceful field of grain, [...] David the Warrior King with his bloody hands becomes the Sweet Singer. The aggadah forced the book about the wars of the Lord, that epos of wars, to tell of the wars of the Sages conquering each other through halacha.⁵⁵

Sefer Ha'aggadah was designed in this spirit and under the influence of Ahad-Ha'am's cultural Zionism. The editing of the anthology reveals, on one hand, the values of the Hibat Zion movement: attachment to the Hebrew language, to the Jewish people and to the sacred sites in Eretz Israel. But, on the other hand, it is also easy to identify the editor's empathy toward the reality of the Jews in the Diaspora as they criticize (following either the Sages or the Enlightenment) the leaders and national heroes who maintained ambitions for sovereignty.⁵⁶

The selection of tales in the first book, for instance, shows the centrality of the desert era in Jewish history and of Moses' leadership, at the expense of periods of Jewish sovereignty under leaders like David and Solomon.⁵⁷ Similarly, "The Era Between the First and Second Temples" is presented briefly but positively as the time when such heroes as Daniel, Ezekiel and Mordechai enjoyed success and divine favor. Critics of the anthology found these choices far from obvious, and the editors were accused of "negligence regarding education in the national tradition."⁵⁸

One criticism was more specific regarding the story of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's departure from besieged Jerusalem in 66 CE.⁵⁹ The

⁵⁵ Bialik, "Limud ha'aggadah," 14.

⁵⁶ "National strength is not a quality of Israel," Weiss stressed in the foreword to his popular *Dor dor vedorshav* (1871–1891). "The only wars it encountered were not wars of conquest." International tolerance and pursuit of peace became dominant values among the Jews of eastern Europe at that time, according to the comprehensive ethnographic work of S. An-ski, "Ha'etnopoetika hayehudit," trans. Haya Bar-Itzhak, *Huliot* 5 (1999) 323–62 [1908]. See also Herman Cohen on the commandment "Love the enemy": Herman Cohen, *Ketavim alhayahadut*, trans. Zvi Vislavsky (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1935) 128–39; Natan Gruneboim, "Milhemet hakulturalah beIsrael beyemei kedem," *Hashiloah* 1 (1897) 293–307; Shimon Dubnov, *Miktavim 'al hayahdut hayeshanah vehahadashah* (Tel Aviv: Hahoker, 1937) 22; Anita Shapira in the extended survey that opens her *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Ehud Luz, "The Moral Price of Sovereignty, the Dispute about the Use of Military Power within Zionism," *Modern Judaism* 7 (1987) 51–98.

⁵⁷ These proportions were reversed in a later anthology of Bialik's, *Vayehi hayom* (And It Came to Pass, 1934), which was devoted principally to David and Solomon; see Zivah Shamir, *Mah zot ahavah? "agadat shloshah ve'arb-ah," tsohar le-olam hadeot ha'ishiot shel Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1991).

⁵⁸ Fishel Lahover, *Bialik, hayav veyetsirato* (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik at Dvir, 1964) 694, SH 1.168–72 (2); BL 189–92 (2).

⁵⁹ SH 1.168–72 (2); BL 189–92 (2). For additional studies of this story, see Jacob

story tells of the confrontation between R. Yohanan and the Zealots during the siege, when he chose to steal out of the city so he could ask Vespasian for Yavneh as a refuge for the surviving Jews. The version in *Sefer Ha'aggadah* is based mainly on BT Gittin 56a-b, which justifies R. Yohanan's escape, given the suffering of the citizens. Abraham Kreisel, who wrote a long article on the anthology, alleged that Bialik and Ravnitzky should have shown the warriors defending the city as freedom fighters, not as "hooligans," and also have described R. Yohanan's grief over the national calamity at greater length.⁶⁰ Bialik, who justified R. Yohanan's course of action in other contexts as well (e. g., in "Halacha ve'aggadah"), did not exploit the Zionist ideological potential of this story as his critics would have wished. According to the exposition in *Sefer Ha'aggadah*, the destruction was foretold by R. Yohanan himself decades in advance, from a prophecy in Zachariah. A subsequent quote from the Talmud, introduced as a portent of things to come, mentions the Sages' decision to adhere to the laws of Temple sacrifice at the expense of keeping the peace with the Romans. These sections, functioning as a background to our story, represent the destruction as an unavoidable crisis and justify R. Yohanan's position of trying to negotiate with the Romans before the final battle.

Immediately afterwards, Bialik and Ravnitzky brought in R. Yohanan's story. According to *Sefer Ha'aggadah*, as in the BT, the Sages proposed to the warriors that they should go out and make peace with the Romans, even before the Romans tightened their siege and starvation stalked the city. That is, according to the editors, the Sages had long held a tolerant national outlook, striving for coexistence with the Romans even if there was no immediate reason to come forward at that point: "At that time the Zealots dominated the city. When the Sages

Neusner, *A Life of Yohanan Ben Zakkai* (Leyden: Brill, 1970) 145–73; Galit Hazan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press) 171–189. Having surveyed earlier research on this tale, Hazan-Rokem discusses the folk motifs that make it a pivotal story in Jewish culture on confronting life and death. At least two important studies on the story followed her book: Daniel Boyarin, "Massada or Yavneh? Gender and the Arts of Jewish Resistance," in *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 306–329; and Daliah Marks, "Mithos atik besheret hahoveh: Yetsiat Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai me-Yerushalayim vehakamat Yavneh," *Akdamot* 24 (2010) 156–176, which deals with the story vis-à-vis our time, given the achievements of Zionism and the criticism it faces.

⁶⁰ Abraham Kreisel, "Ha'aggadah hamezukeket" [on the appearance of *Sefer Ha'aggadah*], 57 pages (1911). This work, now in Ravnitzky's personal archive in the Israel National Library, was published soon after the anthology itself. I found neither the article nor anything about it in print, although Kreisel declared his intention of publishing it to increase public acceptance of SH (see Arc.4°1185, file 152).

said to them, 'Let us go out and make peace with the Romans,' they did not allow them to, saying, 'No, we will go out and fight them.'"⁶¹

Using the Babylonian terminology and deviating from other versions, Bialik and Ravnitzky called the warriors within the city "Zealots," expressing the idea that they were not only fighters but hooligans. R. Yohanan, by contrast, represented the peace-seeking Sages as prepared to forego their independence out of profound anxiety for the people of Jerusalem and for the culture of the Jews. Following the BT and differently from the other versions, Bialik and Ravnitzky added two other stories that depart from the central narrative. The first describes how Martha, daughter of Beithos, one of the city's wealthy men, suffered hunger and degradation until she died a humiliating death. The second story is about R. Zaddok, who undertook numerous fasts in the hope of averting the impending destruction. Thus, even one who did not identify with R. Yohanan's tolerant approach at the beginning of the story might become convinced at this point that the situation during the siege of Jerusalem was so terrible as to leave no possibility that the rebellion would succeed, and justify R. Yohanan's decision to leave the city.

R. Yohanan is also shown as an active hero in *Sefer Ha'aggadah*, by contrast with the talmudic tale in which he fears the warriors and leaves the city in a coffin as advised by his nephew, Abba Sikra. Here he is not afraid and summons the nephew to remonstrate with him about the situation in the city. The idea of posing as a corpse to wrest a minor deliverance for its inhabitants was his own, as a leader with initiative who would change the course of history. Thus, such a display of initiative, a shining Zionist virtue, became part of his image, although it is absent from the textual sources Bialik and Ravnitzky used.

Commentators on the story ascribe a symbolic significance to this decision: just as the body of R. Yohanan was symbolically sacrificed here in order to save his spirit, so the Jewish body (meaning the state) should be delivered to the Romans in exchange for religious freedom.⁶² The assumption is therefore that the body – the individual or the national body – can shrivel and expand in situations of distress and revival. R. Yohanan used this later in the story, when he was called to explain to Vespasian why his leg grew when he was told that he was going to be emperor.

R. Yohanan's departure from Jerusalem in a coffin, then, is an attempt to transpose Judaism from a national identity with territorial

⁶¹ SH 1.169 (2); BL 190 (2).

⁶² Hazan-Rokem, *Web of Life*, 171–189.

ambitions to a religious one based on a cultural heritage. The purpose (with which the compilers could identify) was to save what was left of Jewish culture and of the Jewish people at that crucial time, to help it recover in the future.

According to *Sefer Ha'aggadah*, when R. Yohanan met with Vespasian outside the city, he made so bold as to foretell that Vespasian would become emperor. When Vespasian asked why he had not come to him sooner, the Sage replied that the Zealots responsible for the siege would not let him. Here as before, we understand that he had opposed the rebellion from the beginning as part of his tolerant outlook. Vespasian, sensing that before him stood a potential ally, shared with R. Yohanan his plan to utterly destroy Jerusalem. In response, according to the talmudic version Bialik and Ravnitzky adopted, the Sage held his peace and asked nothing for his followers. This differs from Lamentations Rabbah (quoted later, in the expanded edition), according to which he negotiated at length to save as many people as possible from the city and perhaps even the city itself. Even among the Sages R. Yohanan's silence aroused opposition. According to the later criticism of R. Yosef or R. Akiva, R. Yohanan should have asked Vespasian to take revenge only on the rebels, while sparing the others in the city. Bialik and Ravnitzky mentioned this episode parenthetically as an example of the pluralistic perception of the Sages, holding onto two contradictory opinions.

Later on, when Vespasian gave R. Yohanan another opportunity to plead with him, all he asked for was Yavneh as a refuge for R. Gamliel and his extended family and for the healing of R. Zaddok, who was wasted by his long fasts. Like the talmudic narrator, Bialik and Ravnitzky included R. Akiva's criticism of this excessively modest request, justifying it on the grounds that R. Yohanan knew he could get nothing more from Vespasian. But the story in *Sefer Ha'aggadah* does not end there. Surprisingly, Bialik and Ravnitzky chose not to include the healing of R. Zaddok, which appears with all its symbolic significance in almost all versions as a proof that the body (meaning also the state) can recover! They went on to describe how Titus, son of Vespasian, destroyed the Temple and how he was punished for it. Here too the Sages voiced criticism, albeit parenthetically, of God and his silence in the face of the destruction, indicating divine harshness or even absence. With this, the compilers of *Sefer Ha'aggadah* seem to be trying to show that the national crisis that gave rise to courageous leaders also gave rise to doubts, disputes, anxiety and questions without answers like "Why the Land Was Destroyed," as the name of this chapter puts it.

The two authors ultimately answer this question by quoting another Sage, R. Elazar, who said at the end of the story that God destroyed his house and burned his sanctuary because of Israel's corruption. This accusation comes from the Talmud itself, but since it is not part of the story, it should be ascribed to the editors, who chose to place it specifically here for the sake of emphasis.⁶³ At the same time, they omitted some of the verses and midrashim in order to keep the unity of the plot, as well as to play down its traditional context.

One infers, then, from the formulation of the R. Yohanan story – between Jerusalem and Yavneh – that Jerusalem was destroyed because God kept silent while the warriors led their people to destruction. On the other hand, Judaism was saved thanks to R. Yohanan's initiative. He managed to wrest “a lesser deliverance from the tragic situation,” as Ahad Ha'am explained a few years earlier when he used this story to emphasize the importance of the Jewish heritage for the future Zionist revival:

While the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem round about, while the sword wreaked devastation in the streets and hunger stalked within, as the young men of Israel fought their people's foes with their last strength but with no hope of victory, at that very time the elders of Sages sat in Yavneh discussing the laws of uncleanness and purity. The warriors complained about those *Prushim* who separated themselves from the community, engaged in the life of the spirit while their brethren fell to the sword, to pillage and to captivity. But we know now that these same *Prushim* had the right on their side more than the warriors laying down their lives for “the life of the moment,” who died the death of the righteous and whose memory is blessed, but it was not they who saved our people from extinction. Rather it was the peaceful *Prushim* who understood from the beginning that all hope to recover the life of the moment was lost and so devoted themselves to spiritual matters, building a world for the future generations that would dwell among the Gentiles.⁶⁴

Including so pacifist a leader in a collection enlisted in the service of Zionist values is in fact to invent a pacifist national tradition. The greatness of R. Yohanan and of the literary heritage he defended, according to the authors of *Sefer Ha'aggadah*, lies not in the actual rescue of the sacred writings, but rather in the symbolic rescue of the national will to live a meaningful life – a life rooted historically in a distinctive Jewish culture.

⁶³ Evident from the story of R. Yosi in the ruins, SH 3.44 (25); BL 382 (42).

⁶⁴ Ahad Ha'am, “Pits'e'i Ohev” (A Lover's Wounds) in *Kol Kitvei Ahad Ha'am* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1947 [1891]); see also Shapira, *Land and Power*, 6–29.

From the historical perspective this model, seeking to combine emerging Zionist values with traditional Jewish ones may appear naïve, but it represents the need to combine the traditional Jewish ethos of a minority in the Diaspora with their ambitions for national self-determination. Since this served as an ideological model for earlier anthologies as well, it seems impossible to agree with Rubin and credit Bialik and Ravnitzky with the intention of sanctifying Zionism.⁶⁵ More than Bialik wrote about Eretz Israel in those years, he wrote about the desert and the longings of the exiles for Eretz Israel, as well as the many doubts besetting their national ambitions. Conquering the land had, therefore, a cultural meaning for him, not a practical one.⁶⁶

*“Beyond the Safe Limits of Learned Rules”:
Sefer Ha'aggadah as a Cultural Adventure*

Change, according to Chadwick, frequently evades historians because it comes gradually, but this does not make it any less radical.⁶⁷ Similarly, Rotenstreich observed that in the quest for renewal, Bialik was less an extremist than his contemporaries, but he was deeper than them.⁶⁸ Rereading *Sefer Ha'aggadah*, as this article suggests, sheds new light on the gradual (partial and relative) change Bialik tried to introduce to his readers and its revolutionary contribution to a new understanding of Judaism, mainly as a national humanist culture. The canonical Jewish books the authors used as their models, the comprehensive repertoire they collected, and the unique genres they adapted, all indicate the loyalty of the editors to the Jewish past and the representative role of their anthology. Furthermore, *Sefer Ha'aggadah* was edited and published

⁶⁵ See n. 5 above.

⁶⁶ “We have no desire to drive the Arabs out of the country. We are not going to drive them into the desert as Father Abraham did to Ishmael his son. On the contrary, let them stay and find their place there. But Ishmael came back from the desert and brought the desert with him. We are coming to drive the desert out of the country, making it a place of settlement and culture for all its sons and builders.” (*Dvarim* 1.156 [1930]).

⁶⁷ “The historian knows how powerless revolutions are. And therefore he might understand change and fail to mention that something irreversible happened to the past; that though the instinct of religion might be powerful as ever, and men use hallowed words to express it, yet they begin to understand those words in a new way, often a radically different way.” Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 265.

⁶⁸ Nathan Rotenstreich, “Haguto shel Bialik beinyanei tarbut,” *Kneset* 1 (1960) 207–214, 214.

among other Hebrew anthologies, and some of its characteristics, such as chronological editing or translation into Hebrew, were not especially innovative. The editors apparently wished to give their readers a reliable adaptation of the rabbinic text that did not lose its sense of originality. But this was not the main reason for their success. In order to accomplish its mission of creating an alternative for the old literary field, an anthology should not only preserve the past, but also form the future. Here lies the real contribution of *Sefer Ha'aggadah* to the "Jewish bookcase," as this article tries to show. Unlike their predecessors, Bialik and Ravnitzky introduced the *aggadah* and the rabbinic value concepts it contains, as national possessions that every Jew should acquire by an active interpretive process. Moreover, they formed their *aggadah* in the light of *halacha* in order to provide alienated readers with a frame of reference, and they replaced the historic legend with the parable to emphasize universal values rather than literary formats. Hence, Judaism is reflected in the anthology as a language of symbols to be interpreted anew in keeping with the needs of the perplexed Jews of its time.

Still, the process of change must be understood in its own context, since the ideological (the national and the secular) concepts Bialik and Ravnitzky had in mind are not those of today. The editors of *Sefer Ha'aggadah* were committed no less to tradition than to change, to the Diaspora with its moral awareness and unique historical experience no less than to Eretz Israel and its new communal agenda. Alongside the Zionist values they emphasized by the editing, titles and Hebrew translation, they preserved the literary style and retained the moderate national model of their forebears. The national identity reflected in *Sefer Ha'aggadah* is therefore based on social justice, peace and international tolerance in the humanistic tradition of the Enlightenment. The centrality of such value concepts as sanctity and deliverance were not there to give the national literary enterprise religious authority. Rather, their function was to reopen the discussion of the text's cultural role just as the parable does in its new context in the anthology.⁶⁹

"The artistic field," as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, "is the site of partial revolutions which shake up the structure of the field without

⁶⁹ Again, the subject of the discussion is not the messianic secularism fired by theological terminology and thought patterns that Yotam Hotam found in other works at the time, as it does not suit what Rubin calls "the sacralization of Zionism"; see Yotam Hotam, *Gnosis moderni veTzionut, mashber hatarbut, filosofiat hehayyim vehagut leumit yehudit* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007) and n. 5 above. Bialik's plan derived chiefly from the cultural synthesis based on ideologies common to religious tradition and emerging Jewish nationalism. While giving up central religious values led to renouncing any religious definition, renouncing central Zionist values did not require

calling into question the field as such and the game that is played there.”⁷⁰ Exploring the editors’ considerations regarding the repertoire of *Sefer Ha’aggadah*, as well as the innovative ways in which the compilers edited and reshaped the ancient texts, reveals the dynamics of such a revolution – acknowledging the necessity of tradition as well as of struggle for the creation of history.

renouncing the national one, which could be dialectic and partial. Hence this eventually defined the editors’ affinities, despite their identification with traditional values.

⁷⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Metamorphosis of Tastes,” in *Sociology in Question*, trans. R. Nice (London: SAGE Publications [1980] 1993) 108–116.