

BIALIK'S VERSION OF HEINE

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The well-known poem "Prinzessin Sabbat" by Heinrich Heine opens the cycle "Hebräische Melodien" (after Byron's "Hebrew Melodies"), which forms the third part of Heine's *Romanzero*, first published in 1851. This part of the *Romanzero* is considered as both "the result and the expression of Heine's re-awakening interest in the Jewish tradition".¹

In the poem "Prinzessin Sabbat", as in the two other works included in "Hebräische Melodien", "Jehuda ben Halevy" and "Disputation", contradictory and ambivalent elements find expression which are characteristic of Heine's sentiments and opinions with regard to the various manifestations of Judaism. In "Prinzessin Sabbat" the traditional Jew is presented as he might seem to a modern outsider.² The poem fuses "caricature, realistically observed detail, allegory and symbolism into a complex whole; to show how the poetic and the prosaic . . . exist together".³ Revulsion expressed by mockery and emotional attachment based on sympathetic appreciation are here interwoven in the attempt to create an equilibrium between the detested weekday existence of the Jew and the admirable solemnity of the Sabbath which embraces him week after week. Yet irony, even sarcasm, are not absent even from the descriptions of the Jewish Sabbath.

Bialik's initiative in translating Heine's poem, or at least his willingness to undertake this work, can be interpreted as a demonstration of his identification with the poem and the contradictory elements of which it is constituted, even though a certain measure of reservation about the original can be detected in his translation.⁴ At the same time, one has to recognize in the Yiddish translation an indication of the great popularity enjoyed by the "Prinzessin Sabbat" among those eastern European Jews who, in the course of the modernization process, had come to relate ambivalently to their own Jewish experience. The poem represented their identifica-

tion with the complexities of this experience.

The first translation of Heine's poem into Russian was published in the first Jewish periodical in the Russian language, *Rassvet*, on 23 September 1860. This weekly was published in Odessa and edited by Osip (Joseph) Rabinovich, one of the first Jewish writers in the Russian language. But more instructive than the publication of this translation, as well as several other Russian translations of Heine's poems, were the direct and indirect echoes of the poem in Jewish literature in various languages throughout eastern Europe. It is almost certain that the first reaction of this kind appeared in a Russian novel entitled *Kaleidoscope* by the same Osip Rabinovich. Like the first Russian translation of the poem, the book was first published in 1860. In this novel the themes of Heine's poem are transplanted into a contemporaneous eastern European Jewish environment in the region of Odessa, through the description of the Sabbath in a Jewish inn. The brusque change from the profane to the sacred is presented here with direct reference to a legend "which has been adapted into a poem by a well-known German poet", without mentioning Heine explicitly.

We have no proof that Bialik was acquainted with the novel by Rabinovich, but there can be no doubt that he knew well the works of Shalom Jacob Abramowitz (Mendele Mokher Sefarim). From the 1860s, Mendele's Yiddish, as well as Hebrew, writings contain both direct and indirect references to Heine's poem. They occur, for example, in the 1868 version of the Hebrew novel *Fathers and Sons* and in *Di Kliatshe* (*The Nag*) and *Dos vintshfingerl* (*In the Valley of Tears*), Mendele's later works in which the references to Heine's poem are more explicit. *Di Kliatshe* is based on the idea of the Jewish prince's reincarnation as an animal, in this case a horse. More directly—although again, without mentioning Heine's name—the same transformation occurs in Mendele's description of the



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1. Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Klaus Briegleb, 12 vols (Frankfurt a. Main, Berlin, Vienna, 1981), XII, 58.

2. S.S. Praver, *Heine's Jewish Comedy* (Oxford, 1983), p.555: "it is a portrait from the outside, an unassimilated Jew partially seen by a Europeanized observer."

3. *ibid.*, p.561

4. Bialik's Yiddish translation of Heine's poem, "Die Prinzessin Sabbat (Heine)", was first published in the collection *Lekoved shabes un yontev* (Odessa, 1907).

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Sabbath in the home of Shmulik, the rag-and-bone man of *Dos vintshfingerl*. In a famous chapter of this book, he contrasts the dog on weekdays with the prince on Sabbath days. Here the “Princess Sabbath” in Yiddish and “Sabbath the queen” in Hebrew are explicitly mentioned. Above all, we have to remember that the Hebrew versions of *Fathers and Sons*, *The Nag* and *In the Valley of Tears* were all included in the three-volume edition of Mendele’s collected works which was produced by the “Jubilee Committee” and published in Odessa between the years 1909 and 1912. Bialik was actively involved in the preparation of this edition and even wrote his famous article “Mendele and the Three Volumes” as a preface to Volume Three. Moreover, Volume Three also contained the story entitled “For the Sabbath Day” in which, toward the end, Mendele highlights the same contrasting features of traditional Jewish existence.

What is common to Mendele’s treatment of this subject and all the other literary echoes of Heine’s poem is the transposition of the hero into an eastern European reality, with the unequivocally positive evaluation of his Sabbath experience. This approach is marked by the evident inclination to pathos.

It appears, then, that Mendele was providing Bialik with reminders and echoes of Heine’s poem and its subject-matter over a considerable number of years. Even if we consider as immediately relevant only the final compilation of all these reminders and echoes—the three-volume Hebrew edition of Mendele’s works prepared for publication shortly before Bialik’s Yiddish translation of Heine’s poem—there is no doubt, as is evident in a number of expressions which occur in this translation, that Bialik had direct access to at least some of the earlier Yiddish versions of Mendele’s works.

As is well-known, Heine’s works were translated into Hebrew and Yiddish relatively late. We know of no Yiddish translation of the poem before Bialik’s but two translations of “Prinzessin Sabbat” into Hebrew had appeared earlier. One, by Solomon Mandelkern, was published in 1890, and the other in 1901 by Asaf Feferman. The absence of a Yiddish translation may have prompted Bialik to respond to an invitation to translate the poem.

Bialik’s is neither an exact nor an adequate translation, attempting to create in Yiddish exact equivalents of the German; it is fairly free, following the conventional standards of poetic translation which prevailed during the nineteenth century. Bialik’s Yiddish version is close in character to the Hebrew translations of the poem, in which some of the same alterations and cuts can be detected which occur in Bialik’s translation. In any case, one can discern in Bialik’s Yiddish translation an intentional toning down or even elimination of all the elements of

caricature and mockery which characterize the German original. The same tendency had been displayed earlier by the Hebrew translators of the poem, especially Feferman.

Heine enlarges on the figure of the cantor at the Sabbath evening service in the synagogue, devoting twelve lines to him. The cantor is vain and affected in his clothes and gestures:

. . . *Schmuckes Männchen, das sein schwarzes
Mäntelchen kokett geackelt.
Um die weisse Hand zu zeigen,
Haspelt er am Halse . . .* (51-4)

(. . . Pretty little man, with his little black
Coat on his shoulders.
To show us his white hand,
He fidgets with his throat . . .)

In Mandelkern’s Hebrew version, we find nearly all the components of this original section. Its purpose is to emphasize the hollow vanity of the cantor who is eager to impress with both his clothes and his good looks. To be sure, Mandelkern translates “and with his prayer-shawl on his shoulder he endeavours to look handsome” and also “to show his snow white hand he fidgets at his neck”. He makes changes only within the limits of accepted usage; so instead of “the little black coat” of Heine we find “his prayer-shawl on his shoulder”, with the word “prayer-shawl” stressed in the translation, probably to draw attention to the translator’s emendation. Feferman retains the “black coat” but leaves out the dandyism of the original; he also omits the cantor’s gestures.

In Bialik’s translation the entire section is compressed into only one strophe which sums up the cantor’s appearance in a distinctly positive vein:

*Shteyt un vart . . . ot kumt der khazn
Ayn gehilt in vasyt talis
Ruft er oys dem zisn ruf:
“Lekho dodi likras kale!”⁵*

[Stand and wait . . . here comes the Khazn
Wrapped in a white talis
Calling out the sweet call:
“Come, my beloved, to greet the bride!” *Ed.*]

Instead of the black coat, “a white prayer-shawl” makes its appearance, perhaps following Mandelkern’s rendering of this line. The cantor’s dandyish manners are left out altogether, perhaps following Feferman, and clearly to avoid disrespect. As Dov Sadan has pointed out, this is an elimination of “the Jewish Reform Movement (Temple, Cantor)” and an effective transposition of the synagogue to an east European Jewish setting.⁶

It must be stressed that in this Yiddish transla-

5. The text is quoted here from the version I have prepared for the critical edition of Bialik’s poems, edited by Dan Miron, which is currently being published by the Katz Research Institute for Hebrew Literature, Tel Aviv University, Dvir Publishing House, Vol. 3, forthcoming.

6. Dov Sadan, *Sugiyat Yidish be-Masekhet Bialik*, ed. D. Mashbits (Jerusalem, 1965) p. 18.

tion of Heine's poem, Bialik was adhering to what had become an established practice among Jewish writers in eastern Europe, from Osip Rabinovich to Mendele, and to a certain extent also to the Hebrew translators of the same poem. All had read Heine selectively, consciously ignoring some or all of the scorn and mockery of the original. To this tendentious practice belongs also the transposition of the scenery from a western to an eastern European setting, in the cases of both Rabinovich and Mendele. The same transposition is even more striking in Bialik's translation of the poem into the language of the Jews of eastern Europe.

In spite of all probable links with the Hebrew translations which were available to him, there can be no doubt that in his Yiddish translation of the "Prinzessin Sabbath", Bialik relied on Heine's German original. This is borne out by a number of German expressions which were taken over from the original into the translation, even in those instances where Yiddish could have provided perfectly adequate equivalents. Bialik translates the word "Hirt" (line 132) as "pastekb" ("shepherd"), but he leaves "Herden-glöckchen" (line 129) as "herden-gleklekb" even though the word "stade" ("herd") would have been more appropriate in the Yiddish text. However, cases such as these are few and they do not effect the quality of the translation.

The popular Jewish character of Bialik's translation is determined from the beginning of the poem, where Heine cites a tale from the *Arabiens Märchenbuch* ("Book of Arabian fairy tales"), as well as the story of a prince who had been turned into a hairy monster. Bialik substitutes these legendary sources with "Alte Bovo mayse"—a phrase whose original source is the Italian chivalric romance *Buovo d'Antona* which, thanks to the translation and adaptation by Elijah Levita Bakhur at the beginning of the sixteenth century, became immensely popular among Yiddish readers until the nineteenth century, first as *Bovo D'Antona* and eventually as *Bove bukh* or *Bove mayse*. This is also the origin of the expression "bobe mayse" whose literary origin has been obscured through the reading of the hero's name Bovo or Bove as *bobe*—grandmother in Yiddish. The spelling *Bovo* occurs consistently since the first edition of Bialik's translation of the poem and points to the fact that Bialik was well aware of the source of the expression and exploited its double meaning. In line with the Judaization of the original story, instead of the hairy monster of the German version, we find in Bialik's translation the *volkulak* ("a werewolf"), which is known through the Chassidic hagiographical tradition as preserved in *Shivkhei ha-Besht*, and a creature whose source is to be found in Slavonic folklore. This was also recognized by Lachover⁷ and it is no accident that the *volkulak* occurs in Mendele's *Di Kliatshe*

as well.

Indeed, the very first strophes of Bialik's translation determine its intended popular character. The tales of Bovo and the *volkulak* place the text in a completely different tradition from the one to which Heine's poem belongs. The references to Schiller, to Greek gods and their ambrosia in the original (and omitted in the translation) become superfluous and even out of place in a translation whose character is determined from the start by memories of Bovo and the *volkulak*. In tune with this approach, Bialik leaves out also the *Minnesinger* ("troubadour"), the title which Heine had given to the author of "Come, bridegroom".⁸

The cuts which intentionally change the character of the poem, the leanings on Yiddish conventions and traditions, the popular and idiomatic language, all these together have turned what is commonly referred to as Bialik's translation of Heine's poem into a conscious, calculated and tendentious adaptation. This adaptation is in tune with the prevailing attitude to Heine's poem in the Jewish literature of various eastern European languages. Yiddish, the language of Bialik's translation, opened up additional and new possibilities, yet at the same time it prevented Bialik from reproducing directly certain parts of the original which were alien to the potential readers of the translation.

At the same time, it appears that Bialik's most immediate motivation for preparing this translation-adaptation of the "Prinzessin Sabbath" was not his consciousness of the translation tradition and possible literary echoes of the poem in eastern Europe. His adaptation appeared in an anthology entitled *Lekoved shabes un yontev*. The contents of the anthology suggest that it was published in Odessa before Passover in 1907. It served as one of the means by which the Jews were protesting against the law which made Sunday the compulsory rest-day throughout Russia. The Jews feared that the law would have an adverse effect on Jewish traders and artisans who observed the Sabbath on Saturday. Either they would be forced to close their businesses on both Saturdays and Sundays or, it was feared, such an economic sanction would prompt Jews to desecrate the Sabbath by opening their businesses.

The law was promulgated on 15 November 1906, together with another law restricting the number of daily working hours of all employees. Both laws were regarded as a step calculated to generate support for the government among the labouring masses in Russia, in anticipation of the imminent elections to the Duma.

It seems that only at the beginning of 1907 were the Jews of Russia alerted to this threat. They embarked on a campaign against the law of compulsory Sunday rest: articles directed against it appeared in the Jewish press, the Jewish public was called to protest meetings and intense poli-

7. P. Lachover, *Bialik, Hayyav vi-Yetsivotav*, Vol. 2 (Tel Aviv, 1944), p.723.

8. In Heine's original (line 68), the author is given, erroneously, as Judah Halevi. Bialik has "Velt-barimter zinger"—"the world-famous poet"—without mentioning his name.

tical agitation in the Duma was initiated. The Central Zionist Bureau in Poland published a special proclamation on "The Question of Sabbath Rest" and it invited all Polish Jews to sign a protest petition.

The anthology in which Bialik's adaptation of Heine's famous poem appeared must be seen, therefore, as one of the expressions of protest against this law. On page three of *Lekoved shabes un yontev* was printed the statement that this was only the first collection of its type and that the second would include "protocols of all the meetings and sessions of the Sabbath Committee [in Odessa] as well as several articles". It has not been possible to establish whether or not the second collection ever appeared. But even the first, which we do possess, indicates clearly by its contents that the aim and purpose of the booklet was to protest against the compulsory rest-day which interfered with Jewish tradition and all those who observed it. In addition to Bialik's adaptation of Heine's poem, it included a poem by B. Shafir entitled "Pessah" and the first instalment of a story by Yona Rosenfeld, *Der Farshterter Shabes* ("The broken Sabbath"), with the next instalment promised in the forthcoming second issue. The main point of the collection was expressed in indignant and outspoken articles against the law, written by Y. H. Rawnitzki, Chaim Tchernowitz, Moses Leib Lilienblum and E.L. Lewinsky. Some of these articles refer to Heine's poem explicitly or allude to it. The following are Lilienblum's explicit remarks:

Our ancient sages have said that on the Sabbath all Jews acquire an additional soul (a new soul, in addition to the one which dwells within the body permanently). It is true that young Jewish rebels have begun to make light of the words of our sages, and it is not difficult to find in Odessa a Jew who knows nothing of this new soul; but such a soul truly inhabits the body of any Jew who knows the flavour of the Sabbath. Even the poet *Heine*, famous throughout the world and a freethinker, sensed this with his whole being. Otherwise he would not have been able to write his famous poem, the "Prinzessin Sabbat".⁹

The publication of the Yiddish adaptation of Heine's poem in this collection points clearly to Bialik's motivation. It is immaterial whether he undertook the task of translation at his own initiative or in response to an invitation by the editors of the volume, one of whom must have been his close friend Y. H. Rawnitzki who launched the collection with an article entitled "Kheyryus" ("Liberty"). In this context, Bialik's adaptation acquires the significance of a national-political act, which highlights also the programmatic nature of his adaptation as a response to a topical issue. This explains the peculiarities of the adaptation beyond the influence of literary convention and the earlier references to the poem in the literature of eastern European Jewry.

9. M. Lilienblum, "Shabes ru" in *Lekoved shabes un yontev*, p.7; Heine's name is stressed in the original.