



### **Hillel Bavli, Chaim Tchernowitz—In Memoriam**

With the passing of Prof. Chaim Tchernowitz we have lost a noble figure who enriched our world with the charm and dignity of his personality and with the magnificence of his spirit. He was a man of potent vitality and creativity. He was one of the eminent members and faithful associates of that illustrious assemblage of authors and scholars of the Age of Rebirth who brought about the resurgence of modern Hebrew literature upon which they left the mark of their own personalities. His first appearance in Hebrew letters was half a century ago, as *Rav Tzair*, or "Young Rabbi." By this name he remained known to the end of his days, and it was always difficult to tell whether it was the youthful spirit in him or the rabbinical scholar that predominated. Few men of his generation were as capable of that exuberance and of that eagerness for new ideas that he possessed even in his advanced years.

Rav Tzair had the artist's capacity for retaining the integrity of his individuality despite its many contradictions and for remaining a harmonious personality in the face of the multiplicity of urges and conflicting forces within him. An outstanding talmudic

scholar, the product of a traditional yeshivah, a great student of the *halacha* devoting his days and nights to research and study, he could still find the time and the energy to give himself, almost as fully, to the stormy arena of current events, to public affairs and to the problems and struggles of daily life. He made no distinction between the spiritual and the mundane world, being a full-fledged citizen of both.

He drew his sustenance from the solid spiritual soil, which numerous generations before us drenched with the fountain of Jewish learning, as well as from the effervescent sources of daily life.

His very being, his radiant personality of a wordly rabbinical scholar was an embodiment of a large and rare slice of Israel's ancient and modern civilization, pulsating and stimulating. It was good to sit in his company, to listen to his scintillating talk, full of wit and peppered with apt quotations and anecdotes, combining humor with erudition. You felt at such times that you were abiding within the shelter of the generations which moulded our Jewish likeness, as if the division between the old and the new disappeared

and the heritage of the distant past merged, in youthful glee, with the treasures of the present.

He was quick and alert in his manner and in his actions, in life as well as in literature, sensitive to impressions from men and books and from the environment in which he lived. His vast knowledge did not rest upon him as a burden but rather adorned him as a crown or a wreath. His were the elertness and joviality of a man sure of his step who knew the road he trod. He held strong opinions and was loyal to the principles and aspirations on which centered his life.

His thinking and his expressions were straightforward, lucid and exhaustive and he had an unusual talent for expounding his own and other men's views. As he once said about Zalman Epstein, he had neither the overadorned style in which the words outweighed the thought, nor the dry style of the pedantic scholar in which the words were inadequate for the ideas. He was a stranger to oblique expression. He had little patience for vague uncertainties and just as little for the mystics who walk in the twilight and who clothe their writings in the multi-colored garb of reflections and mirages. He appreciated the great writers of fiction and poetry of our day, many of whom were his close friends, less for their imaginative works than for their erudition and personal qualities. Hating pretense and deception, he felt the need for periodic reassurance. "Do you consider so-and-so a real poet?"

he would ask. Or "is this person really a man of talent?"

"What a pity," he told me many times, "that Bialik did not study the Talmud and philosophy more thoroughly. He might have become a really great man!"

"Such as?" I would inquire.

"Such as Friedrich Schiller," he would explain.

"Many of us consider him a greater man than Schiller," I would remark.

"If that is so, he is one of the *rishonim*," he would say, "and that's different." A *rishon* (first), the rough equivalent of a classic, was a magic term to him. A *rishon* is a hero, a free man, a prince among princes. He is not subject to doubts or queries.

He was fundamentally a man of prose, matter-of-fact, yet he was endowed with a goodly measure of imagination and his visionary spirit shone like a beacon through the shifting stages of his life. He believed in his own forces and in the great mission for which he was destined—first as a rabbi and the head of a modern yeshivah, then as a writer, a scholar and a thinker. That mission consisted in reconciling religious and secular Judaism, traditional scholarship with modern Jewish renaissance. These two, he maintained, fed upon one another.

He believed in this mission when he arrived in the United States. One of his first efforts, on his arrival, was to found an Ahad Ha-am Society to discuss the problems of Jewish survival and to prop-

agate the idea of Jewish Renaissance in America. The Society did not last long, but Tchernowitz did not give up. The same idea was transformed into the Hebrew monthly magazine BITZARON which he founded in 1939. It took a man of abounding faith, imagination and resolution to found such a publication in New York, at such a period, in order "to build a fortress for the Jewish spirit" as he declared, and to maintain it at such a sacrifice.

A luminous vision led him on

and gave freshness to his mind in the last years of his life: the urge to serve as an actual force, with influence in Israel. But he was prevented to put his dream into practice by the impending publication of his books. In this case, the vision of the Book barred the vision of the Land. But throughout his life the two were intertwined to form the most potent influence in his life.

His friends and admirers will continue to see him through the spectacles of this dual vision.

