

הו אריאל אריאל סיון חמד חיוך

Ho, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David encamped (Isaiah 29,1)

אריאל ariel

A Review of Arts
and Letters in Israel

Jerusalem / Number 73 / 1988

Who Was Ya'akov Rabinovits

Hillel Halkin

Poet, novelist, short-story writer and critic, Shimon Halkin is without doubt one of the major Hebrew writers of our times. Born in Russia in 1898, he emigrated with his family to America in 1905, where – apart from a long stay in Palestine from 1932 to 1939 – he lived until 1949. In the latter year he was appointed full professor of Modern Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a post he held until his retirement. He resided in Jerusalem until his death in 1987.

Practically nothing of Halkin's large body of work, which embraces nearly every genre of literary creativity, has been translated into English, the reason perhaps being the extreme richness and intricacy of his language, which makes him not only a difficult writer to translate but also a by no means easy one to read in the original. In this respect his long poem *Ya'akov Rabinovits in Yarmouth*, first published in 1948, is an exception in its simplicity, though it may also be said to point to a general relaxation in Halkin's style that is characteristic of his later years.

There is, however, yet another reason for the uniqueness of *Ya'akov Rabinovits in Yarmouth* in Halkin's work, one that makes it a special creation in world literature as well, for the entire poem is so its author has claimed, spoken to him by a ghost. In his own words, prefaced to the original edition of the poem:

"While staying in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, in the late summer of 1948, I was accompanied during two days of walks, as though by a vision, by the late Ya'akov Rabinovits, who had died that same year in a traffic accident in Tel Aviv. In his own words and in my own fashion he conducted a long conversation with me that touched upon various matters. Upon returning to my hotel on the night following

the next morning I set down in writing all that he had said exactly as it still reverberated within me."

Who was Ya'akov Rabinovits? The scion of a prominent east-European rabbinic family who settled in Palestine in 1910 at the age of thirty-five, and a master of all literary trades like Halkin himself, he and Halkin became close friends during the latter's stay in Palestine in the 1930s. It is easy to see what attracted the two men to each other: their small-town, intensely Jewish, east-European backgrounds, their enormous erudition in both Jewish and world culture, their militant Zionism, their iconoclasm and impatience with all orthodox dogmoths, and their sly and sometimes mordant sense of humour allowed them to be tolerant of all human faults except the one which both most disdained, namely, dishonesty in any of its forms. Whether it was this sympathy between them working on an unconscious plane that led to Halkin's strange experience, or something else, is a subject for parapsychologists; lovers of poetry will be content with the poem itself, one of Halkin's finest and among the most remarkable in modern Hebrew writing.

Ya'akov Rabinovits in Yarmouth

Shimon Halkin

I
So! It's good to meet again, even after death,
And, of all places, in this northern spot,
Whose name, it seems to me, I've never heard of -
In Yarmouth. That is, there is a Jarmuth in the Book of
Joshua,
And somewhere too, I think, in Nehemiah,
Which means there was a Jewish hamlet there,
En route to Jerusalem or in the Negev,
In early Second Temple days. What of it, though?
The main thing is to find you still alive,
Which is more than you can say of me, you tsaddik,¹
you!
Still, here we are, and in a lovely spot
Such as it takes the Gentiles to discover:
A really charming nook - and way up north.

You know, I read a bit about it once,
Some thirty-nine or forty years ago,
Back in the days of the Odessa Council,
When in the summers I'd be sent to speak
In the provincial towns of southern Russia;
That is, I read a book on Nova Scotia
While staying in a town in Bessarabia

¹ A righteous person

where I was put up by a friend of mine,

Zionist who once in fact had been
pro-Uganda² territorialist
until Ussishkin³ put some steel in him,
so that the speakers sent out by the Council
were naturally hosted at his house:
a good Jew, though a bit of an eccentric,
an honest Zionist, and quite a decent fellow.
He was the richest man in town but liked
to play the liberal as such Jews did,
while his wife read Gorky, made, of course,
the blintzes that the region was renowned for,
topped with gobs of sour cream and jam.
He sweetly looked at the big-city guest
with melancholy eyes. Nice people, though,
with a chubby boyo of a son,
a high-school lad who stuffed himself with candy
taken from his pockets all day long
and studied in Kishinev or Ackerman.
Did I say studied? He liked his candy
better than his studies! And the river at night...

And flirting with the girls down in the dinghy...
The facts is that your idyll of a shtetl
was dying even then - yes, even then.
Only in the books of Schalom Asch⁴
can the innocent console themselves
that the shtetl and its Jewish life
would still be alive today in Russia
and not the Bolsheviks so rudely killed it.
But what difference does it make? This high-school boy
knew nothing about Schalom Asch's idylls.
He had an idyll of his own - in fact,
several: candies all day long to suck on,

Reference to the British plan to establish a Jewish state in Uganda, 1903
Zionist thinker Menahem Ussishkin
Yiddish writer

The girls in the dark rushes by the river,
 And a quick fling with an idyllic *shiksa*⁵
 At home behind his mother's back – all in accordance
 With the *shulhan arukh*⁶ of the younger set,
 Just like our boys and girls in Tel Aviv.
 Do these things ever change? Youth is always young.
 Nowadays you hear it said that young folks
 Read only thrillers and the worst translations.
 And then? What did my host's son read? Pure junk:
 Translations of the cheapest sort mail-ordered
 From the Penny Library catalogue and travel books?
 At least I got some use out of the latter:
 While the little angel was on the river
 I read my way through memoirs of explorers
 About all kinds of islands, lands and oceans,
 Among them the one book on Nova Scotia
 That I already mentioned.

I knew the place was poor then,
 And, from what I see, it hasn't changed
 In any way – the poverty's still great.
 A rocky soil. The farms are all run-down.
 Thin oxen pull the ploughs still, while the barns,
 Though big and roomy, as if meant for much,
 Have a ramshackle look. And the houses?
 Not so bad, although back where we came from
 (That is, if he was Polish, not White Russian)
 A farmer's house was certainly no worse.
 Perhaps the roofs are better-made here: of tile,
 Not thatch. What sort of tile, though? Worm-eaten!
 What happens when it rains? How do the local children
 Brave the winter? It's no wonder that
 They seem so pale. They aren't tall, these people,
 Nor do they look well-fed like you Americans.
 (Of course, it's possible that what I've seen of you
 Is something to be found only in movies

⁵ Non-Jewish girl (Yiddish)

⁶ Code of Jewish law compiled in the 16th century

in Hollywood.) Well, as I say,
 a poor place, this Nova Scotia, which I thought
 be the climate's fault: it's too far north.
 I was wrong, I see, because it's not
 terrible especially in Yarmouth.
 goodness: how did Yarmouth get forgotten?
 a paradise: tulips everywhere,
 like in Holland: the bay both foggy
 brilliant like the Liman⁷ after Purim;
 the sun as mild as the Swiss sun in summer.
 don't expect me to believe that only summers
 warm and pleasant here, since there are trees
 that almost seem to be subtropical.
 which means the winters aren't such a menace
 her.

Leave it to the Anglo-Saxons:
 they manage everywhere. I wish that we did!
 there's nowhere on the globe they haven't reached,
 though the polar north and glacial Greenland
 ever seem to have attracted them.
 Perhaps because the Danes did not succeed
 making Greenland livable, and they,
 the English, like to find things ready-made.
 They waited to take India until
 the Dutch and others had a taste of it
 and found its flavour wasn't half so bad;
 they took South Africa from the Dutch too
 once its agriculture was developed;
 and with us, in Palestine, they only
 wanted to throw their weight around when they
 found out that we had managed to make something
 of the place and took a fancy to it.
 Maybe it's too bad that I departed
 before my time," to quote the eulogies –
 if there were a thing as timely death!
 But really, I'm still curious to know

How it will all turn out. Perhaps you know
 Yourself, you tsaddik? The point I wish to make
 Is that, unless we had accomplished something there,
 The English wouldn't want to take it from us.
 When did they finally start getting tough
 With the colonists in your America?
 Not until they realized that the latter
 Were on to something good – so good, in fact,
 That for such goodness they would risk their lives.
 That's a nation's character – and here?
 Nova Scotia too, you know, was got
 By them as a present from the French.
 And I see an abundance of French names
 On this excursion – both those of villages,
 And of the owners of these run-down farms.
 Don't tell me that you haven't smelled the smell
 Of France here, even in the farm wagons!
 A single, skinny ox is harnessed to them
 While its driver drags behind on foot
 Exactly as in some remote French province.
 And those blue cloth caps they wear here in the fields,
 I've surely seen them too in some French canton
 Of Switzerland. Yes, in the villages,
 At least, everything still looks quite French
 In Nova Scotia, very like Quebec –
 A place I won't be seeing if tomorrow
 You're really going back to your America.

Too bad, because we haven't even talked yet.
 You feel uneasy, since you aren't sure
 Whether it's really me who's speaking to you,
 While I can't be relaxed about it either
 When you, my fellow-conversationalist, are not.
 Spiritualism never frightened me:
 What's all the fuss about? The locked door opens,
 A candle's burning in the darkness – please,
 Don't be afraid, come in. The trouble is
 That one's companion doesn't see the door
 That opens for him too all by itself,

I doesn't see the candle in the dark.
 It'll be that as it may: we've met this time –
 I'll meet again. Meanwhile, of all places,
 I'm glad we've met in this one, you old tsaddik.
 How superbly solid life is here!
 Such thoroughness, such quiet, such self-confidence,
 If one simply couldn't help but be
 Nonchalantly human. I never was an Anglophobe,
 You know.
 How can one hate a people? Not that they
 Have been so good to us, the way they let
 The Arabs slaughter us in '21,
 '29, and in their uprising
 '36 to '39 – need I go on?
 And more recently? And this past year?
 I too, of course, was curious to see
 How it would end, though it seemed clear to me
 That they were digging for themselves a deep, deep pit,
 And that the blood of our young folk, shed each day,
 Forever would cry out against them from the earth.
 Right up to that bizarre and final moment –
 I mean, until my death beneath the car
 (And not just any car but a kibbutz's!) –
 I harbored no illusions about them.
 One thing was clear: they never favoured us.
 And yet what nation owes us any favours
 If no matter how mistakenly,
 I think that we are standing in its way?
 The fact is that they never harmed us either
 As other people might have easily.
 I always thought it was a lucky thing
 We were not struggling against the French
 Or the Americans. Then too, the English
 Taught us law and order, and I thought
 That when a Jewish state arose at last
 We would be able to appreciate
 The good that they, and they alone, had done us.
 Still, without hating them, I feel no closeness to them.
 I never got to know their literature,

And only through its literature can I
Get to know a people. Long before
I have a sense of its more puerile earmarks –
Its history, its politics, its press –
I will have smelled it out via story
Or poem it has written. A propos those fiends, the Germans,
The less said the better: God damn the lunatic
Who forced me in the end to eat my words
About that horrible ingenious,
And world-destroying people. Who in Volkovisk
Did not believe that all of Germany
Was Goethe. Schiller. Kleist? And Scandinavia?
What more could anyone still learn about it,
Even if he toured it all on foot.
After reading Hamsun, Bang, and Lagerlöf?
Whereas the English literature I've read
Has given me no feel of English life.
No, nothing even of those blond officials,
The British ruling class in Palestine,
Could I have imagined from the works
Of Oscar Wilde, or of that jester, Bernard Shaw.
That is, what such officials understand
About subduing riots when they have to,
Or obtaining respectable promotions
In Tanganyika, India, or Malaya.
I know from Kipling; what an ordinary
Englishman might feel, though, as a mortal
Human being, unhappy and alive,
A trifle wistful, as most people are,
Because there's death and love and other things,
I never could discover anywhere
In their vast literature. Not even Shakespeare –
The Lord forgive me! – was my kind of man,
Half opera and half cerebral verse.
Not Goethe or even Gundolf, I'm afraid,
But rather Tolstoy was correct about him.
Byron too rings false; both Frischmann⁸ and Goethe

⁸ David Frischmann, Hebrew writer

have admired him, but for sheer cosmic sorrow
me Goethe any time. That leaves Dickens. Well.
ing been so hard on Mendele⁹,
s Dickens to me? An unpoetic soul
aps he knew the sentiments of women –
gh not of young ones – and of children too,
he man inside the Englishman
er found in him. And it's the man
counts. I wish he'd had more Dostoyevsky in him,
ough I know that that Jew-hating Russian
be bewared of. Where, then, I ask you,
d I know the English from? Both love
hatred for a people are abstractions;
point's to understand.

And so I'm glad
e here in Yarmouth. Once in his life –
t not exactly in his life, it seems –
an should see some Anglo-Saxon landscapes.
I'm glad too to meet with you again,
in so fine a place, so northern-looking
yes, so warm, with such high, lucent vistas,
ough a mist's already coming on
the bay. It will be worth our while
wait to see the sun go down in it. Of course,
sky will still be blue the whole night long
if the bay's all misted over,
there'll be stars too, pale ones, just a few,
a scent of flowers like in Copenhagen.

good indeed to meet: even after death,
in this foreign land, so far away
in Tel Aviv and the Valley of Jezreel –
too, it seems, from any Jews at all.
ven't asked you yet: isn't it strange
after strolling here all day and night

Mendele Mokher Seforim, Yiddish writer

We haven't seen a single Jewish name
 On a local storefront or hotel?
 But Nova Scotia may have so few Jews
 That, even though it's mentioned in the Bible,
 Not one of us is to be found in Yarmouth,
 This spot suffused with green and ringed around
 By villages of none too wealthy farmers.
 What would a Jew do here? Go in for growing
 Varieties of subtropical plants and flowers?
 Work as a sailor on the ferryboats
 That ply the bay? I still recall Odessa
 And its Liman – and don't try telling me that your
 New York

Was any different! Even in Tel Aviv the wharves
 Were only built when we were forced to build them:
 The whole city would have starved to death
 Had we remained dependent on the port
 In Arab Jaffa, while Haifa and the north
 Would have been cut off too. Well, this will yet end
 With fighting worse than any that I saw
 Before what happened to me there – I mean,
 Before my death. The blood of our youngsters
 Keeps haunting me: they're shedding it, of course,
 For something that is precious to me too,
 Yet they, not me, are being killed for it.
 Do you suppose it could have been prevented
 By some utopia of brotherly love
 Concocted by our starry-eyed professors
 In Jerusalem? We are not a wise people:
 We learn too little and too late. It says in Psalms
 That God looks after fools, but how much longer
 Will he agree to play the fool himself?

You know, I was annoyed at Weizmann once
 For calling Tel Aviv a Polish ghetto.
 Not that we musn't have our farm districts –
 Why, if all we do is buy and sell, the Arabs
 Will inherit Tel Aviv as well. Why be annoyed, then?
 Because Tel Aviv is not a Polish ghetto.

is a working town, a vibrant anthill.
 even if it doesn't always look it,
 and not at all like Haifa, which – although,
 as told, it has its own black market –
 doesn't even boast a stock exchange.
 The main point is that only in a land
 that is their own can Jews be made to learn
 that work is no disgrace: unwillingly,
 so slowly, yet they learn. Which is the reason
 makes me feel uncomfortable to meet
 Jews overseas: if meet with them I must,
 please let me have them there, in Palestine.
 I always did feel jealous of Barash¹⁰
 for never having felt the need, like me,
 to go abroad. I can't stop travelling –
 you see yourself how far I've got this time:
 further north than I have ever been,
 and over the Atlantic in addition –
 while he, Barash, stayed put year in, year out,
 and never thought of budging anywhere.
 serene soul, our august critics called him.
 being how, each morning and each evening,
 stepped outside to water his front lawn
 on Mendelee Street. They thought, the idiots,
 they had the genuine article in him:
 serene, transparent epicist, no less!
 maybe in that piece you wrote on him
 you set them straight a bit – it beats me how
 tag pinned on his victim by a critic
 could accompany the man for life
 and after death. Thus, Bialik is "The Prophet,"
 and Tchernichovsky, naturally, "The Greek."
 we are an undeniably odd people:
 abid iconoclasts among the gentiles,
 ultra-Orthodox among ourselves,
 pious as the Vilna Ga'on's¹¹ pupils

Asher Barash, Hebrew writer
 Eighteenth-century Jewish sage

On the Left no less than on the Right,
 In literature as well as life. You, old saint,
 Must wonder that despite my being dead
 Here in these luminous autumnal vistas
 I still concern myself with my old pastimes.
 Well, feel free to wonder at me all you please.
 The only one who didn't, I believe,
 Was Barash himself. He knew me well,
 Knew, without a word being said, that something
 Made me wander to the north, to Germany
 And Czechoslovakia, while he stayed put.
 He never argued with me – not even when
 You all thought me a noxious renegade
 For understanding, damn his soul, that murderer
 Who wanted *Lebensraum* for his own country
 Just as the English wanted it for theirs.
 But that's a thorny issue I'd prefer
 To stay away from. What I'm getting at
 Is that I understood our people well,
 Far better than any of you.

Translated by Hillel Halkin

The Socio-Political Role of Israeli Theatre

Shosh Weitz

Contemporary culture tends to regard theatre as being of limited importance; some scholars, in fact, go as far as to declare it obsolete, claiming that anyone wishing to influence public opinion and the value system of contemporary society should concentrate on cinema and television, which determine the shape of the world and the image of reality for modern man.

This view is at odds with the situation in Israel. The influence of television is, of course, undeniable. However, the theatre was always a popular art form in Israel and its popularity and social status have increased tremendously in the last decade. Current Israeli theatre is an institution whose audience is growing and the number of productions increasing. Larger and better theatres are being built. The culture hall of Tel Aviv (opened on 2nd October, 1957), the Frederick Mann Auditorium, has served as a model for new halls recently built in Tel Aviv itself, in Jerusalem and in many of the development towns, such as Kiryat Gat, Carmiel and Yavneh.

Furthermore, the per capita number of theatregoers in Israel is among the highest in the western world. Despite cuts in public spending which have become increasingly drastic over the last few years, the number of productions has not declined and publicly-supported theatre reaches every corner of the country. It is popular among highly diverse sectors of the population, including those whose education is relatively limited, both in relation to that of audiences in the larger Israeli cities and to that of European and American audiences.

The diverse character of the audiences has turned Israeli theatre