

## Chaim Nachman Bialik

ALONE · LEVÁDI\* · לבדי

כָּלֶם נָשָׂא הָרוּחַ, כָּלֶם סָחַף הָאוֹר,  
שִׁירָה חֲדָשָׁה אֶת-בֹּקֶר חַיֵּיהֶם הִרְנִינָה;  
וְאֵנִי, גּוֹזַל רַחַ, נִשְׁתַּכַּחְתִּי מִלֵּב  
תַּחַת כְּנָפֵי הַשְּׁכִינָה.

Kúlam nása harúah, kúlam sáhaf haór,  
Síra hadásha et-bóker hayéyhem hirnína;  
Vaaní, gózal rah, ništakáhti milév  
Táhat kánfey haşhína.

בָּדָד, בָּדָד נִשְׁאַרְתִּי, וְהַשְּׁכִינָה אֶף-הִיא  
כְּנַף יְמִינָה הַשְּׁבוּרָה עַל-רֹאשִׁי הִרְעִידָה.  
יָדַע לְבִי אֶת-לִבָּהּ: חָרָד חֲרָדָה עָלַי,  
עַל-בְּנָהּ, עַל יַחֲדָהּ.

Bádad, bádad nişarti, vехаşhína af-hí  
Knaf yemína haşvúra al-róşi hir'ída.  
Yáda líbi et-líba: hárod hárdá aláy  
Al-bná, al yehída.

"Alone" expresses the central motif of Bialik's work: the struggle between Judaism and Western secularism; between the old and the new, faith and doubt, accepted truths and those still unexplored; between inhibition and abandon, the house and the world outside. Much like the speaker's own home in "Upon My Return" (pp. 20 f.), the setting of "Alone"—the House of Study—is a place of both desolation and refuge.

In both poems the "I" is separated from those around him but in "Alone" (1902) the speaker has never left his environment; hence the interrelationships are more complex. In the earlier lyric, he encountered the elderly couple and the house "pets," all of whom were so deeply absorbed in themselves that they didn't even look at him. But in "Alone":

- (1) *The wind carried all of them away, the light swept all of them away,* (2) *A new song made the morning of their lives exult with song;* (3) *And I, a soft fledgling, was completely for-*

*gotten [lit. from the hearts of all] (4) Under the wings of the Shekinah.*

The Shekinah, one of the most beautiful expressions of Jewish mysticism, is the feminine aspect of the deity, the personification of God's love for His people. According to legend, she was exiled from heaven together with them and she wanders to and fro, an outcast from the worlds of above and below, finding her only home in the hearts of this people. Here the Shekinah, assuming her traditional embodiment as a mothering bird, struggles for the speaker's soul, but she does so without compulsion; her very passivity is her power.

- (5) *Solitary, solitary I remained, and the Shekinah, too;* (6) *She fluttered her broken right-wing over my head.* (7) *My heart knew (understood) her heart; she trembled with anxiety over me* (8) *Over her son, over her only [son].*

Lines 4-8 call to mind a popular love poem by Bialik in which the man urges his beloved: "Take me in under your wing/ And be to me a mother and a sister/ And let your bosom

כָּבֵד וְתִגְרָשָׁה מִכָּל הַזְּיוֹיֹת, רַק-עוֹד  
פִּינַת סֵתֶר שׁוֹמֵמָה וְקִטְנָה וְשֹׁאֵרָה —  
בֵּית-הַמִּדְרָשׁ — וְתַתְּכֶם בְּצֵל, וְאַהִי  
עֲמָה יַחַד בְּצָרָה.

וְכִשְׁכָּלָה לְבָבִי לְחִלּוֹן, לְאוֹר,  
וְכִשְׁצָר-לִי הַמָּקוֹם מִתַּחַת לְכִנּוֹפָה —  
כְּבִשָּׁה רֹאשָׁה בְּכִתְפִי, וְדִמְעָתָה עַל-דָּךְ  
וְגִמְרָתִי נִטְפָּה.

חֶרֶשׁ בְּכִתְּהָ עָלַי וְתִתְרַפֵּק עָלַי,  
וְכִמּוֹ שָׂכָה בְּכִנּוֹפָה הַשְּׁבוּרָה בְּעֵדִי:  
« כָּלֶם נִשָּׂא הָרוּחַ, כָּלֶם פָּרְחוּ לָהֶם,  
וְאוֹתֶר לְבָדִי, לְבָדִי... »

וְכַעֲיֵן סִיּוֹם שֶׁל-קִינָה עִתִּיקָה מְאֹד,  
וְכַעֲיֵן תַּפְלָה, בְּקִשָּׁה וְחִרְדָּה כְּאַחַת,  
שְׁמָעָה אֲזִנִּי בְּבִכָּה הַחֲרִישִׁית הַהִיא  
וְבִדְמָעָה הַהִיא הָרוֹתָחַת —

Kvar nitgárša mikól hazavíyot, rak-ód  
Pínat séter šoméyma uktána niš'ára—  
11 Beyt-hamidraş—vatítkas batsél, vaéhi  
Íma yáhad batsára.

Uḥšekála levávi laḥálon, laór,  
Uḥsetsár-li hamákom mitáhat lihnáfa—  
15 Kávša róša bihtéyfi, vedim'áta al-dáf  
Gmaráti natáfa.

Héreş báhta aláy vatitrápek aláy,  
Uḥmó sáḥa bihnáfa haşvúra baádi:  
19 "Kúlam nása harúah, kúlam párḥu lahém,  
Vaiváter levádi, levádi . . ."

Uḥeéyn síyum şel-kína atíka meód,  
Uḥeéyn tfila, bakáşa vaḥaráda keáḥat,  
23 Şám'a ózni babíḥya haḥarişit hahí  
Uvadím'a hahí harotáhat—

be my head's refuge,/ The nest of my forsaken (exiled) dreams."

(9) *She has already been driven from every corner, only* (10) *One hidden nook, desolate and small, remained—* (11) *The House of Study—and she covered herself with the shadow, and I was* (12) *Together with her [lit. sharing] in the distress.*

(13) *And when my heart yearned for the window, for the light,* (14) *And when the place under her wing was [too] narrow for me,* (15-16) *She hid her head in my shoulder, and her tear dropped on my Talmud page—*

The two solitaries differ from each other. They touch and yet they do not touch. Both are forsaken and helpless as they meet in a secret, desolate corner where she huddles. For she has been "driven away" from all those places where she might have found her proper dwelling. While she, disconsolate, covers herself with shadow, he yearns impatiently for the window and its "light"—a current

designation for the Enlightenment—the same light that had drawn away all the people who had once lived in this house (1). Dolefully he finds the space under her wing too narrow to contain him (14) as he thirsts for all that lies outside this window opening onto the secular world—a world far removed from the stifling confines of traditional existence.

In a poignant moment in another Bialik poem ("Before the Bookcase"), the wind (*rúah*) blows out the candle when the loss of faith takes place. The wind is the new spirit abroad in the world, for *rúah* means both spirit and wind. Similarly in his celebrated long poem about the diligent Talmud student ("Hamátmid," 1894) as well as in other works by Bialik, terms of this type—wind, light—are used to represent secular wisdom, liberation, and love for the world of nature—whereas the constraints of the tradition are symbolized by the Talmud.



The speaker in "Before the Bookcase" had abandoned the Judaism of tradition: he returns from the "foreign isles" with "wrinkled forehead and wrinkled soul." Trying to recover his old, lost faith in the worn pages of the holy scrolls, he discovers that "no longer do open eyes look from your letters into the great depths of my soul" and "no tear trembles on [my] eyelid." The letters are "like beads of black pearls whose string has snapped." The quest to return ends with his realization that there is no return. In "Alone," written eight years earlier, no decision has been reached—and there appears to be no way out:

(17) *Silently she wept over me and enfolded me*  
 (18) *As though shielding me with her broken wing:* (19) *"The wind carried them all away, they have all flown off* (20) *And I was left alone, alone . . ."*

(21) *And something akin to the ending of a very ancient lamentation* (22) *And something akin to a prayer, a supplication-and-trembling:* (23) *My ear heard in that silent weeping* (24) *And in that tear, boiling—*

The title word—*levdi*—appears at only one place in the poem (20). The literal translation is "my alone," and it is worth noting that this inflected possessive form is reserved for the lament of the Shekinah, a variation of the speaker's opening words.

The poet and critic Ludwig Strauss pointed out an interesting parallel in the sense of confinement between the structure of the poem and its central idea. The six stanzas seem to form three "brackets" of a closed system—1-6, 2-5, 3-4—and such bracketing appears on two levels. Note, for example, how line 21 reinvokes line 2 (to join stanzas 1-6) and how line 20 reinvokes line 5 (to join stanzas 2-5). Similarly with the use of motifs. In stanzas 1-6, we see that the speaker is both aware of the new world (1) and yet bound in the old (6). In stanzas 2-5, we observe the

Shekinah's relationship to the speaker, and in stanzas 3-4 the contrast between the old and the new.

Surely no less remarkable is Bialik's way of using biblical materials. Line 12 brings a touch of surprise with its echo of Psalm 91:15, in which God says of the faithful: "I am with him in [his] trouble" and Bialik's human speaker says of God's spirit, the Shekinah: "I am with her in [her] distress." Line 14, however, brings something quite unexpected. The phrase "the place is [too] narrow for me" is drawn from Isaiah 49:20 but in Isaiah it is the many children of Israel who say this at the time of their redemption. In our poem, it is the constriction of the spirit in a world that has not yet been redeemed. Again, line 8 refers to the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22: 2). In Isaac's case the story leads to a theophany promising redemption, whereas Bialik alludes to the tragic termination of the covenant. Such alterations of meaning, disrupting the traditional intent of the passages they evoke, might be taken to indicate that for the speaker of the poem his Bible no longer means what it once had meant.

He never decides either to remain or to leave the House of Study. This tormented indecisiveness is emphasized by the way in which the poem does not seem to know how to end. Stanzas 5 and 6 lack closing punctuation. Moreover, an urge to break from the control of the meter is conveyed by the many leaps between the lines within the stanzas. One has the sense of an impatience striving against bonds. At the same time, each stanza is drawn up short with a 2- or 3-stress closing line playing against the anapestic tetrameters that precede. In terms of rhythmic structure, these two forces—the urge to control (also: to remain) and the urge to break out (also: to leave)—are unequal. The pressuring force is stronger than the force that binds.

— TUVYA RÜBNER