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## Rediscovering Haskalah Poetry

THE TOPIC OF THIS ESSAY calls for some apology. For most readers, Hebrew narrative poetry of the nineteenth century must seem rather remote and unattractive. The reputation of Haskalah literature in general has fallen on hard times, subject to the charge of being lacking in intellectual and aesthetic worth. Its poetry, with its high, ornate and imprecise diction, its impersonal, abstract and didactic themes and its tendency to acrimonious satire, is regarded as essentially nonpoetic. I have nevertheless chosen to discuss this poetry, or rather one of its central genres, because it occupies my thoughts much at the present. For some years now, I have been carefully rereading Haskalah literature, and the more I read it, the less I tend to regard it as barren of intellectual and artistic interest. There is much dead wood, of course, as I suspect much of the literature produced in our own time will seem to future readers; but there is also much that calls for rediscovery and reevaluation. Without grasping the meaning and implications of this literature, moreover, not much can be known about the historical significance of modern Hebrew literature as a whole; it is, after all, Haskalah literature which separates our modern, secular literary culture from that of the tradition, and it is through an understanding of the Haskalah's dialectic of ideology and art that we can better understand our own position vis-à-vis the tradition. A rereading of the narrative poetry of the Haskalah might help in clarifying this position.

I begin by dividing the mass of narrative poems written throughout the Haskalah period into two quite separate, though interrelated, stages. The two differ from each other in genre, form, and ideology as well as in the time and place in which the poems were written. The first

stage comprises mainly lengthy epics or pseudo-epics written in western or central Europe from the 1790s and throughout the first three or four decades of the nineteenth century. The second contains much shorter and more intense and dramatic poems which belong more or less to the genre of the *poema*. These poems were written in Lithuania and the Ukraine in the 1850s to 1870s.

The epics of the earlier part of the century are barely readable today. The model for them was set in the last decade of the eighteenth century by the educator-poet N. H. Wessely (Vayzl).<sup>1</sup> In his *Shirei tiferet* ("Songs of Splendor") Wessely introduced a formula which was then copied by dozens of followers and which can be reduced to the following points:<sup>2</sup>

a) The epic poem tells the life story of a hallowed biblical figure—Moses, Abraham or David—a national and religious leader, who can also be depicted as a moral paragon.

b) The poet repeats the facts as they are told in the Bible with no recourse to postbiblical narrative additions. Under no circumstances is he allowed to embellish his story with imaginary developments. His task is to render the true, objective facts (i.e., those told in the Bible) in a new poetic manner.

c) The dearth of new narrative material in the poem is compensated for by a generous dose of discursive commentary and moralistic deliberation, through which the biblical story is abstracted and developed into a system of moral concepts.

d) The diction used in the poem is high but not flowery. The poet's manner should be majestic, serious, sedate. His language should not be heightened into an individual idiom. He should refrain from difficult figurative expressions.

e) The poet is encouraged to express his own emotional reaction to the story in lyrical passages, but these should be carefully separated from the narrative-discursive body of the poem. Usually the lyrical passages, differentiated from the others by their stanzaic structure, form separate poems which are set as introductions at the openings of the various books or cantos of the epic.

To us, this formula seems as intended to ensure boredom and monotony. The strict loyalty to the biblical account makes the narrative flat and redundant. The poet fails to communicate anything we do not already know. There is even no attempt to relate the known facts to each other in a new and surprising way. His commentary—whether rendered as the narrator's thoughts or as those of the protagonist—does not allow for much delving into the human depth of the story, since it aims at abstraction and conceptualization rather than at an analysis of the behavior of a specific person under specific circumstances. What the poet is really interested in is not an explanation of

why David or Moses acted in a certain way but in the abstract formulation of a moral psychological, or theological category, the love of God, for example, or human fallibility, envy, charity, etc. The sedate and wordy diction contributes its share to the deadly impact of most of these poems, and the strict separation of the lyrical from the narrative and discursive elements guarantees the abstract and hyperbolic nature of the first as well as the dryness of the latter.

The interesting question is how this kind of poetry could dominate Hebrew literature for almost fifty years. (We know that contemporary readers found it fascinating, studied and emulated its style, and thirstily absorbed its wisdom and morality.<sup>3</sup>) An analysis of the poetic treatment of the well-known biblical facts will show something of why this poetry could satisfy a reading public which had hardly stepped beyond the boundaries of the traditional biblical exegesis.

Almost any passage chosen at random from Wessely's *Shirei tiferet*, or from *Nir David* ("The Line of David") written by his main follower, Shalom Hacoen, yields, upon analysis, the same triad of elements: narrative, discourse and figuration. I use the term figuration here in the specific sense Erich Auerbach gave it in his analysis of the *Figura*,<sup>4</sup> i.e. the precedent or analogue which accompanies the main story in the epic and underlines its universal significance. Such are the references to Greek or Roman mythology in renaissance and neoclassical literature, or the references in the Hebrew Bible that supposedly foreshadow the appearance of Jesus in Christian writings. In each passage in *Shirei tiferet*, then, we find the basic narrative facts plus abstract discourse plus a catalogue of figurative precedents and analogues. Thus, for instance, when we read how Moses, leaving Pharaoh's palace for the first time, kills an Egyptian whom he saw torturing one of his Hebrew brethren, we are presented not only with the bare narrative facts but also with their abstract analysis.<sup>5</sup> Both the facts and their analysis are figuratively presented. Moses' rage and courage are compared to those of Abraham when he set out to fight the five kings of the north. They are compared to those of Jonathan at Michmash, where he managed to overcome single-handed a whole garrison of Philistines, and to those of young David the shepherd, who could fight and kill a marauding lion with his bare hands. The last comparison is particularly dwelt upon because the brutal Egyptian is compared to a hunting beast, a non-person whose killing cannot in any way undermine the moral integrity of Moses.

The discourse elements separate into two intertwined threads. The poet offers an analysis of the human (i.e., the ethical) significance of any given situation or action, just as at the same time he discovers in it a divine purpose, part of an all-encompassing superhuman plan. The poet strives both for a moral and for a theological placing or definition of the

narrated incident. When these two moral and theological components of the poem's idea are added to the figurative catalogue, we have before us the poem's intellectual structure. The Wessely-type epic vacillates between the human and the divine, the psychological and the theological; it finds its resting point in a concept of history which is both human and divine. If we go back to the scene of Moses killing the Egyptian, we see how on the one hand, the poet grapples with the ethical and psychological significance of such violence committed by a wholly moral human being. On the other hand, he reverts to an idea of an eternal, predestined divine plan which is being unknowingly served by this violence. (The murder sends Moses to the desert as a refugee. There he will encounter God and be prepared for his mission.) For both aspects of his commentary he needs the legitimation of precedent and analogue. Thus, he compares Moses to Abraham, Jonathan and David, identifying his act of violence as a pattern recurring throughout the continuum of a sacred history. It is only with this concept of a sacred history that the opposition between the human and the divine can be mediated, for history, for the poet, is both a sequence of human incidents and a pattern informed by a divine purpose.

What Wessely and his followers offered in their long, pedestrian pseudo-epics was not so much a story poetically rendered as a new biblical midrash, in which human experience was analyzed and conceptualized and then related to a divine intention and reconciled with it. The reconciliation is effected through figurative presentation of a sacred history, a medium which partakes both of the human and the divine. This perfect balance is at the root of the epic's static nature, and is to a very large extent responsible for its nondramatic and monotonous impact. With every incident analogous to others and predestined from the start, how can the story surprise and thrill us? At the same time, how can it fail to please a reader who is trained to regard harmony between God and man as the supreme good? It is the balancing of the human and the divine through history which made the didactic epic the major, indeed the inevitable poetic form of the so-called "new" Hebrew literature as it emerged from a traditional literature of homiletics, exegesis and midrash. On the one hand, the epic introduced a slightly Europeanized reading public to neoclassical European literature by emphasizing the universal moral significance of the human experience. On the other hand, like most of its readers, the epic was still deeply rooted in the theology of the tradition. While, for example, abstaining from any midrashic addition to the story of the life of Moses, Wessely argued the moral issues that this story presents following the midrashic-exegetical tradition.<sup>6</sup> His catalogues of precedents and analogues not only served as Hebrew equivalents of the mythological references in the European epic but also continued the practice of the

traditional piyyut with its tendency to the cataloguing of incidents according to precedent and similarities.

Throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century the didactic epic petered out. By the 1840s it had more than exhausted whatever energy it had had. Some of Wessely's followers tried to refresh it by emphasizing the human element of the story. Characteristically they chose as their protagonists such less-than-ideal biblical figures as Samson.<sup>7</sup> However, a genre that required a flattening of the human drama of trial and error could not long flourish within a culture that was constantly becoming more secularized and humanistic. A new poetic formula was called for, and there were signs that such a formula was forthcoming. For instance, already in the 1820s an unknown poet, Shmuel Mulder, published in Amsterdam a narrative poem which, while following to some extent the Wessely formula also completely twisted it. It narrates the quarrel of the great Tana Rav Meir with his famous wife, the intellectual Bruria.<sup>8</sup> Not only did Mulder innovate by using postbiblical materials as the basis for his poem, but he also focused his plot on an aspect of human life which the earlier poets hardly touched, i.e., the battle of the sexes. Meir and Bruria quarrel over the proposition *nashim da'atan kalah*—"women are frivolous by nature." The catalogue of precedents and analogues is not used here as a means of placing the story within a historical and mythological framework, but rather as weapon by the contending parties. He quotes examples of feminine frailty from the story of Paradise on; she reinterprets the examples and evokes examples of women's dignity, good sense and credibility. The conflict leads to a highly unusual climax: Bruria succumbs to illicit love with another man, one of her husband's prize students, who has been urged by his teacher to court his wife and so prove his point.

The poet ends his narrative with conventional praises of God, which, however, do not conceal his perplexity. What can be the divine meaning of the human sexual conflict and how can it be that even the greatest students of the Torah, men and women of the highest learning and morality, fall into rage, envy and lust? Mulder can be said to have produced the first Hebrew narrative poem of the new kind, which is usually called the *poema*. A *poema* is a relatively short, concentrated and subjective epic, often with many lyrical digressions, which describe the human predicament by emphasizing its psychological and social rather than its theological significance. Mulder, however, was a mere precursor. The sweeping change came about twenty-five years after the publication of his poem when the dying young poet Micah Joseph Lebensohn published a little collection of historical and biblical poems under the title *Shirei bat-Tsion* ("Songs of the Daughter of Zion").<sup>9</sup>

The appearance of this collection in 1851, coupled with the publication of the first Hebrew novel two years later (Abraham Mapu's *Ahavat Tsiyon* [The Love of Zion]), mark the great shift in the development of Hebrew belles-lettres in the nineteenth century. Now that the didactic epic has completely faded out of the literary scene, two new epic forms emerged and occupied its very center: the novel and the so called *poema*. Micah Joseph Lebensohn was the son of the prominent poet Abraham Baer Lebensohn, whose odes and philosophical lyrics present the last important examples of early Haskalah abstract moralistic poetry. Micah Joseph had almost no use for the Wessely tradition to which his father still adhered; his literary interests pointed to new directions. The conflict between the sexual urge and a sense of impending death was the theme the young consumptive poet sought to express. Love and decay were his obsessions, and he wished to deal with them in poetry not only as abstract categories, the way his father did (although he did that too), but also as real and specific conditions.

As a distanced medium for the expression of the erotic and the macabre, Lebensohn began by translating Virgil (through F. Schiller's German adaptation), picking the canto in which Aeneas unfolds the story of Troy's fall with its epic tableaux of conflagration and sudden death. When chided and urged by Samuel David Luzzatto, the great Hebrew scholar, to search for epic topics in his own Jewish tradition, he wrote six short narrative poems on biblical and historical figures. The first two, *Shlomo* and *Kohélet*, which form together one structure, juxtapose the eroticism of the young king with the obsession of the old one with physical decay and decomposition. The title of two other poems, *Nikmat Shimshon* ("Samson's Revenge") and *Yael veSisra* ("Yael and Sisera"), make the preoccupation with death clear enough. The last two poems in Lebensohn's collection portray death on the verge of fulfillment: Moses watching the land of Canaan from the top of the mountain, then dying without setting foot in the Promised Land, and Judah Halevi, killed by an Arab horseman at the moment of realization of his life's dream of praying at the holy places of Jerusalem.

In the treatment of biblical materials there can be no greater contrast than between Lebensohn and the earlier Haskalah epic poets. While they meticulously rehearse the entire life story of their protagonists, Lebensohn chooses only single moments, usually the moment before death or a moment of an acute crisis. Earlier occurrences are evoked through flashbacks. Instead of a mechanical retelling of biblical facts there is an imaginative realization of biblical characters as they contemplate their own past at moments of crisis. The hero's biography is internalized and made part of his consciousness; the poem becomes shorter and more compact, since it need register only those heightened moments of a past life that bear on the present. The selection of the

heroes, moreover, is not moralistic. Lebensohn makes an intriguing comparison, for instance, between the Canaanite officer Sisera and the poet Judah Halevi: both are murdered in their sleep and both see visions forshadowing their death. Judah Halevi, as a poet representing Lebensohn himself, is particularly exposed to visions of death and mutilation.

In Lebensohn's poems the theological concerns of an earlier era have been replaced by the existential ones. The divine guidance of human affairs is rarely evoked. Death is meaningful within the framework of the human condition rather than a theological scheme, less a punishment than man's allotted fate. There is one poem, "Yael and Sisera," one of Lebensohn's most innovative, where the morality of murder is discussed. The concept of divine purpose is evoked there only by a reference to the Song of Deborah, for as a prophetess, Deborah's glorification of Sisera's undoing indicates a theological justification of the murder. However, these remnants of the old formula do not carry much weight in the poem. Yael's internal debate on whether she should kill Sisera in his sleep functions as an indication of internal conflict of an erotic nature rather than as an opportunity for moralistic abstraction. The sleeping Sisera looms in Yael's thoughts as a frightening enemy and as an attractive male. In his dream Sisera envisions the two corresponding faces of femininity: Deborah—the killing, triumphant fury and Yael—the loving, feminine helpmate, offering food and shelter, and by implication also sexual gratification. Thus both characters play in a drama which, on its face, is political and moral, but which at its root is symbolically sexual.

Lebensohn tore the biblical figures out of the web of sacred history.<sup>10</sup> He had no use for figuration and precedent, and he discarded epic objectivity. Events are mirrored in the mind of excited characters, not as divinely intended parts of a history. Time is experiential rather than historical and theological. The use of the biblical story in Hebrew poetry was thus radically changed. With Lebensohn the Bible no longer serves as a text for a moralistic midrash. The Bible is transformed into essentially modern poetry, which through elliptical and highly dramatized narrative, attempts the portrayal of internal upheaval and psychic experience.

Lebensohn was a pioneer; in his work Haskalah poetry came as close as it could to the modern Hebrew poetry initiated forty years later by Bialik and Tchernichowsky. The latter poet in particular was indebted to Lebensohn. Less than a year after the publication of *Shirei bat-Tsion*, however, the poet died at the age of twenty-three. The task of developing the Hebrew *poema* was left to its second founding father, Lebensohn's younger friend, Judah Leib Gordon, who contributed even

more to the establishing of this genre as the major narrative form in Hebrew poetry.

Unlike Lebensohn, Gordon was not by nature a modernist. He was a conservative radical, a man deeply rooted in the past and bound by its traditions, and yet pushed by a radical tendency to break away from them. He admired Lebensohn's poems but he did not directly emulate them. Rather than taking up where his innovative friend had left off, he went back to the Wessely tradition, picked the most predictable of biblical protagonists, King David, and set about writing an epic "life" which would supposedly complement or compete with the earlier David epic by Shalom Hacohen. However, from the start the task proved impossible. A new retelling of David's story was beyond the patience of the young poet, and the original plan had to be fragmented into shorter projects in which particular aspects of the David saga could be engaged.<sup>11</sup> The better known of these is the mini-epic *Ahavat David uMikhal* ("The Love of David and Michal") in twelve cantos. Though this is the least interesting of Gordon's major narrative poems, it possesses great historical interest. Gordon awkwardly complied here with some of the rules of the Wessely epic while at the same time undermining them. He was led to such measures by the dilemma he faced. The subject matter of his plot did not easily yield to the moralistic abstracted treatment which the Wessely formula prescribed. The intricate love story of David and the daughter of King Saul called for the insight of the novelist rather than the abstractions of the moralist. It begins with the story of a youthful love confounded by political circumstance and ends with a bitterly realistic rendering of the lovers' reunification after years of enforced separation, at which point they experience tension and hatred rather than renewed bliss. Though there cannot be a topic more fit for psychological inquiry, Gordon approached it with the Wesselian concepts of divine intention, precedent, and analogue. He even went so far as to state in the introduction that these concepts, particularly divine purpose in history, are the aesthetic *raison d'être* of the epic genre. What the epic does, he argues, is retell history in a way that underscores the manifestations of divine purpose. This is the source of poetic interest. "When we see the cause before the effect," Gordon goes on, "we cannot appreciate its meaning, since we do not know what is yet to come, and our heart is not caught by a sudden flame of excitement. But when we see first the result, which to us must be a riddle, suddenly solved by getting at its cause, how we do wonder at the wisdom of its creator, the one who was its first cause. How admirably we realize that no one of God's deeds, no matter how insignificant, is without purpose; there is no one thread that is not enmeshed and woven into this huge web."<sup>12</sup> Similar observations abound in the poem, which again and again quotes precedents and points to the work-



ings of divine will in history. Yet it is also abundantly clear that the framework does not fit the human contents of the story and the logic of their drama. "The Love of David and Michal" remains a hybrid, a characteristic product of cultural transition, in which two literary systems seek expression, each interfering with the other.

Throughout the 1850s and early 1860s Gordon continued to experiment with biblical and historical poetic narratives. He shortened the poems, made them more dramatic, and focused them on the theme of love. *Asenat bat Potifera* ("Asnath, Potiphar's Daughter"), is an example of the poems from this period. Reinforced by the flowering of the novel, the topic of love took off as the major concern not only for Gordon, but also for such other writers of narrative poems as Solomon Mandelkern (better known as the author of a concordance to the Bible) or Abraham Goldfaden (better known as the founder of the Yiddish theater). Both wrote interesting poems on the affair of David and Bathsheba,<sup>13</sup> dilating, unsurprisingly, on the topic of lust and its moral implications. Mandelkern stayed close to the older style, i.e., he presented David's sexual urge as part of God's plan (it was triggered not only by his carnal appetite but also by the need to ensure the continuation of his line through Solomon), while Goldfaden followed the new tendency to emphasize the human element.

In the second half of the 1860s Gordon discovered his real epic theme, and it had little to do with love and its vicissitudes. The theme is *hurban* (national catastrophe, the fall of the people). The subject is first developed in a work which is probably the best Hebrew narrative poem of the century: *Bein shinei arayot* ("Between [the] Lion's Teeth"). The poem shows how it was necessary for Gordon to evoke a new technique and a new narrative style to deal with the new thematics. The poem tells the story of the rebel Simeon bar Giora and his wife Martha, against the background of the destruction of the Second Temple and the crushing by the Romans of Jewish political statehood. Starting towards the end of the siege of Jerusalem, the poem follows a narrative line somewhat reminiscent of the Hector-Andromache episode in the Iliad. Simeon is separated from his wife when he is taken captive after the fall of Jerusalem. He sees her next in the Colosseum in Rome, where he is made to fight lions as a gladiator. Martha is a slave of one of the Roman ladies who are so inured to the sight of a naked man torn to pieces by starved beasts. Simeon perishes between the lion's teeth and Martha expires with him.

The story, however, is not told directly. Only snatches of the narrative are given by the poet, and these are rendered in short concise sequences, separated from each other by addresses on topics that do not

seem to form an integral part of his narrative. An example is a diatribe against the Pharisees and Tannaim, who supposedly did not prepare the Jewish people for life in the political world and thus indirectly brought about its downfall; there are also apostrophies to the seeing eye and listening ear of God, questioning whether the eye sees the misery of the Jewish people and the ear listens to their lamentations. The narrative proper seems to be hidden behind a smoke screen until we reach the scene of the arena which occupies almost half of the poem. Here, perfect clarity reigns. Every movement of the beast and every nuance of expression on the face of Simeon and Martha is rendered in an effective descriptive language, more supple and direct than that of any Haskalah poet before Gordon. It is not difficult to understand why this has to be so. Like Lebensohn, Gordon uses the last moment before death as the focus of the poem, yet it is neither the personal flashback nor the rendering of experience *per se* that interests Gordon. What he seeks is the suprapersonal significance of the moment, and he finds it not in Simeon's feelings but in the dramatized fact of his death between the lion's teeth. The talmudic gloss on the biblical verse "From Bashan will I bring [them] back" (Ps. 68:23) assures us that God would retrieve his people even from the depths of the sea, from the lion's teeth.<sup>14</sup> Gordon alludes to this gloss in his title only to explode the expectations it raises. In his last attempt to overcome the lion he cries: "Where is the God of Samson?"<sup>15</sup> evoking the precedent of Samson's vanquishing of the lion and his removal of the honey from the carcass. Such precedent would be quoted by Wessely and his followers as a matter of course whenever their protagonist confronted a ferocious animal or foe. Gordon makes the allusion so he can crush us with the realization that optimistic precedents are meaningless. Samson's God is no longer on his side; He has joined the uncircumcised Philistines, his enemies. Sacred history is an illusion and Simeon's fall has no divine significance. The point is, of course, that what happened in the arena also happened in history. The fall of the Jewish state is not more meaningful or acceptable than the feeding of a human being to a hungry animal in front of a titillated and brutalized audience. History is a cheap spectacle with no purpose and meaning. It is absurd. God's all encompassing plan is mockery.

In *Bein shinei arayot* Gordon parted from the Wessely tradition in the way a conservative revolutionary often parts from his own past: rather than letting it drop out of his life, he attacks it and clings to it in order to destroy it. Lebensohn simply jettisoned his precursors' obsession with divine purpose in human life. Gordon became obsessed with the idea of human life deprived of divine intervention and replaced it with a concept of desecrated history. While Lebensohn's poetry may be more "modern," it was Gordon's poetry that revealed the cultural dialectics of

the new Hebrew literature of the nineteenth century, its vacillation between traditional formulae and modern humanistic emphasis.

Gordon's style followed directly from his obsession with the meaninglessness of history. If history is not informed by a unifying purpose its telling cannot be narrated by a false sequential linearity. The poem should progress in fits and starts and leave room for any kind of digression, be it a lyrical interjection or a bitterly sarcastic aside. It cannot be committed to a unified plot or to a close and continuous observation of the protagonist. It should be concentrated and dramatic but not in the way Lebensohn's poems were. Lebensohn used historical figures to project a sense of a personal desolation, while Gordon uses them as metonymic expressions of the historical and national desolation.

After *Bein shinei ara'yot*, Gordon never strayed far from the theme of *hurban*. He must be considered the first major modern poet who made destruction the theme central to his entire poetic achievement, the way Bialik and Uri Zevi Greenberg later did. In *Bimtsulot yam* ("In the Depth of the Sea") he complemented the story of Jewish heroism with a story of Jewish martyrdom. Here *kiddush hashem*, the martyr's suicide, is presented as an act of faith devoid of meaning because there is no divine presence to accept the heroic gesture and respond to it. Here too Gordon subtly evokes precedent in order to subvert it. He does it by the clever use of his linguistic resources. As the two heroines of the poem drown themselves in the sea, the poet comments: *ra'ah hayam vayanos, memav hitpaltzu* ("The sea saw it and fled, the water was shattered").<sup>16</sup> The verse immediately calls to mind the verses of the psalmist who glorifies God's miracles, among them the miracle at the sea, when Israel went out of Egypt (Ps. 114:3). But the precedent of the crossing of the Red Sea is indirectly referred to only to be annulled, since this time the sea fled and the water was shattered not to let the women escape but rather in horrified reaction to their death. The sanctified women do not escape death like the ancient Hebrews but rather suffer perdition like the Egyptians in Moses' song. They *tsalalu ka'oferet bimtsolot hamayim* ("sank like lead in the depth of the water"; cf. Exod. 15:10). The bodies of the dead women rest "at the bottom of the mountains." We remember how the prophet Jonah, when thrown into the sea, sank "to the bottom of the mountains" (Jon. 2:7). But Jonah was retrieved. Gordon's use of language is pivotally located between a rejection of the Wessely-type epic and the anticipation of Bialik's style in *Metei-midbar* and *Megilat ha'esh* ("The Dead of the Desert" and "The Scroll of Fire").

Gordon went on to write narrative poems dealing with contemporary affairs. The poems were—and still are—understood as social and cultural criticism in the narrow sense, as satirical onslaughts on the

contemporary rabbinical establishment. They contain much of this, to be sure. But the antirabbinic satire does not constitute their core. In these poems, too, Gordon is obsessed with the idea of destruction and a meaningless and desecrated history. Destruction is now exemplified by limited, domestic instances concerning the undoing of individuals and families, but the message is the same. The new strategy underscores the absurdity of human existence by developing absurd plots which hinge on the silliest kind of first cause, something utterly insignificant such as a *kotso shel yod*, the letter Yod missing from a name in a divorce certificate, or *ashaka derispak*, an axis of a cart wheel, because of which the town of Beitar fell to the Romans (cf. Gittin 57a).

The insignificance of the cause is used in the poet's warfare with rabbis and communal leaders because it emphasizes their rigidity and stupidity. However this use does not exhaust its meaning. The fact that human life can be destroyed for such silly reasons has wider and more universal bearing. One of Gordon's main poems with contemporary background *Shenei Yosef ben Shimon* ("The Two Josephs Son of Simeon"), which ends with the devastation of its young maskilic hero and his family, is plotted in such a way that the disaster can by no means be explained as a consequence of the cultural warfare between proponents of Haskalah and Orthodoxy. It is not for his maskilic aspirations that Joseph is punished; he goes under merely as a result of a mistaken identification. When he left his hometown for the western university where he studied medicine, his identity, i.e., his name and passport number, was sold by a corrupt communal functionary to a criminal, and now, as Joseph returns an accredited physician, he is simply mistaken for his namesake. Here too precedent is cited. The sacrificing of Joseph resembles Isaac's Akedah. But again, this time it is an akedah with no delivering angel, with no ram, no God. This is why Gordon starts the poem with what seems an irrelevant ode written in the Wessely manner. Like Wessely, Gordon heaps praises on a transcendent presence who holds the keys of life and death. The poet is careful not to mention specifically the divine name, so he can drag his ode through thirteen stanzas up to its last verse, where he reveals the name, not *the* Name but the name of the corrupt functionary, who unintentionally sent Joseph to prison for life. At this point we reread the ode as a brilliant travesty, a travesty far more trenchant than a criticism of communal corruption. In a world devoid of divine presence, it says, every powerful villain assumes the role of God.<sup>17</sup> *Shenei Yosef ben Shimon* is thus the direct and final answer to *Shirei tiferet* as well as a parody on it. For this reason it must rest on a narrative as absurd and silly as that of *Shirei tiferet* was august and "significant." That was Gordon's way of closing the circle of the narrative poem of the Haskalah.

In his last *poema*, *Tsidkiyahu bevet hapekudot* ("Zedekiah in Prison") written in the form of a dramatic monologue, Gordon went beyond this circle and initiated the modern completely subjective and lyrical *poema*. Back in the biblical milieu he chose the least heroic of characters, that of the last king of Judea who lost his kingdom, his sons, his eyesight and his freedom. In his bitterness the king contemplates his life and refuses to accept any explanation of the atrocities he suffered. Least of all can he accept the explanation offered by the prophet Jeremiah, i.e., that he suffers for failing to heed God's warnings as pronounced by himself. Neither he nor the Jewish kingdom was destroyed because of this failure. Rather their destruction was caused by the physical superiority of the Babylonians. No divine plan, only the moral chaos of human existence, was revealed here. Thus it is not only sacred history which does not really exist. History itself is a delusion. Only the pain, the bitterness, the haunting memory, the deadliness of despair are real. With *Tsidkiyahu bevet hapekudot* Hebrew narrative poetry entered a new phase in which narration itself becomes problematic. The narratable facts themselves become questionable now and the line separating them from the emotional reactions they trigger has been erased. Here the epic, the lyrical and the dramatic modes of presentation spill into each other. Thus the chasm between traditional liturgy and modern poetry has been bridged. On its way from the *piyyutim* to Bialik and Tchernichowsky Hebrew poetry had to go along the path of the narrative poem of the Haskalah—from beginning to end, from Wessely to Gordon.

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#### NOTES

This paper was read on the occasion of J. L. Gordon's 150th birthday at a colloquium held by the center for Jewish Studies, Harvard University, 31 March 1981.

1. N. H. Wessely's epic was published in six volumes. The first five appeared between 1789 and 1802. The last, unfinished volume appeared posthumously in 1829. Long before the completion of its publication the poem was widely imitated by Hebrew poets living in Prussia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Netherlands and later in Poland and the Ukraine. For a selective list of these imitations, see F. Lachover, *Toldot hasifrut ha'ivrit ha'hadashah* [The History of Modern Hebrew Literature] (6th ed. Tel Aviv, 1949), vol. I, p. 146.

2. This "formula" does not include Wessely's metric and other prosodic rules which he expounded in his introduction to *Shirei tiferet* and practiced throughout the poem. These became the prosodic norm of Hebrew poetry for almost a century. For the best analysis of

*Shirei tiferet*, see Ch. N. Shapira, *Toldot hasifrut ha'ivrit haḥadashah* (Kovno-Tel Aviv, 1940), vol. I, pp. 213-46.

3. This is also reflected in nineteenth-century Hebrew fiction. In his novel *'Ayit tsavua* ("The Hypocrite"), for instance, Abraham Mapu has Zerah, the son and heir of the anti-maskilic villain, convert to the Haskalah, become an aspiring Hebrew poet and fall in love with Elisheva, the beautiful maskilic heroine. Wessely's *Shirei tiferet* is the book which the young couple secretly read and greatly admire. See part three, chap. 7 of *'Ayit tsavua* in *Kol kitvei Avraham Mapu* (Tel Aviv, 1939), p. 340.

4. See "Figura" in E. Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York, 1959), pp. 11-76.

5. See *Shirei tiferet* (Przemysl, 1870), Canto III, pp. 28-35.

6. Wessely, for instance, contends that the Egyptian miscreant killed by Moses was not only a criminal deserving death, but also, if not eliminated, he would become the father to a whole line of criminals. Moses as prophet and clairvoyant knew this. Thus, by killing the Egyptian he saved future generations from the danger of the Egyptian's potential offspring (Canto III, p. 32). This is derived from the midrashic reading of Exod. 2:12: "[Moses] turned this way and that and, seeing no one about (*ki eyn ish*), he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand." The midrash reads *eyn ish* as "non-man," i.e. that the Egyptian, as a criminal deserving death, was already morally nonexistent; or alternately, that there was "no other man" who could wreak God's vengeance on him; or still another interpretation, that he was a "non-man" in the sense that nothing good would ever come of him and of his offspring "to the end of time" (Exod. Rabba I:33). Wessely drew on the first and last gloss when he wrote:

בִּי אֵל חֶפֶץ הַמִּיתוֹ הִכִּינוּ לְטֹבָה  
 בִּי עוֹד יִרְבֶּה פֶּשַׁע יוֹצֵר לְבוֹ יוֹדֵעַ  
 בִּי עַד דּוֹר דּוֹר עוֹשֵׂי טוֹב מִמַּעֲוֵי לֹא יֵצְאוּ  
 וְכֹלֵא אֲדָם נִחְשָׁב לוֹ כְּתֵהוּ וּכְאֶפֶס.

7. Cf. Ziskind Rashkov Halevi, *Hayyei Shimshon* [Samson's Life] (Breslau, 1824).

8. Cf. *Bruria bat rav Hanina ben Tradion* in S. Mulder's *Peri to'elet* [The Fruit of Profit] (Amsterdam, 1825).

9. Micah Joseph Lebensohn, *Shirei bat-Tsiyon* (Vilna, 1851).

10. It should be remembered that Lebensohn spent two formative years (1849-50) in Berlin where he attended Schelling's lectures at the University and came to know the founders of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement who were then developing their developmental approach to Jewish history in general and to sacred Jewish texts in particular.

11. See the two unfinished cantos of Gordon's epic *Milhamot David bapelishtim* ("David's Wars Against the Philistines") in *Kol shirei Y. L. Gordon*, 6 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1929-35), 6:1-43, and Gordon's own note, *ibid.*, p. 43.

12. *Ibid.*, 3:5.

13. See Shlomo Mandelkern, *Bat-sheva o shigayon leDavid* [Bathseba or a Hymn to David] (Vilna, 1866) and *Bat-sheva* in Avraham Goldfaden, *Tsitsim ufraḥim* [Blossoms and Flowers] (Zhitomir, 1865), pp. 27-33.

14. See Gittin 57b.

15. *Kol shirei Y. L. Gordon*, 3:147-48.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

17. *Ibid.*, 4:57-60.