

TRUTHS THAT ARE NOT SELF-EVIDENT

By Michael Handelzalts Haaretz 28 01 2012

Is there perhaps some innate inequality gene in human nature that no amount of nurturing, in any given time or place, has not managed to suppress?

There is a saying, usually attributed to Haim Nahman Bialik, concerning the way Jews can prove that they have indeed become - according to Zionism's stated aim - a "normal" nation among nations. He apparently said such proof would be the existence of "a Hebrew thief and a Hebrew whore."

I dare say most of us would agree that we have achieved that aim, and have even gone one crucial step further in achieving equality with other peoples: The Jewish state even has Hebrew racists, as recent media reports show. There are so-called white Israelis who call on others of their ilk not to rent apartments to black Israelis; Orthodox Jews feeling unfairly treated by the secular community, and vice very versa; Sephardi Jews from Arab countries, with their dark-hued skin, claiming that Ashkenazi Jews, with their pale faces (who had arrived in Palestine earlier, mainly from Eastern and Central Europe) discriminate against them; Israeli Jews who won't allow Israeli Arabs to build or buy a house in their neighborhoods.

With all the ensuing clamor - and I haven't even mentioned in this context the ongoing conflict between men and women, in which gender battle lines cross race frontiers - nobody probably cares whether Bialik made the above-mentioned declaration or not; there is no solid documentation. A comment that is vaguely along these lines was found by Shmuel Avneri, a Bialik maven, in a book by Simon Rawidowicz, who recalled a stroll with the great poet in the streets of Berlin, in March 1923. They spoke about the future of Hebrew, then still struggling for primacy with Yiddish for the status of the main language of communication among Jews. Bialik expressed the hope that the language of the Bible would provide its speakers with a vocabulary that would enable Hebrew speakers to "answer nature's calls, quarrel, steal and commit adultery."

All things being equal (or not), it is also high time to reiterate, loudly, that there is not a shred of documented evidence that Bialik ever uttered a racial slur commonly attributed to him: "I hate the Arabs, because they resemble the Sephardi [Jews]." Indeed, Avneri, in publishing the results of his extensive research of both printed and oral "Bialikana" in Haaretz in 2003, cleared the poet of allegations of being an [inter-] Jewish racist.

Avneri found at least two hearsay first-hand (that is ear) testimonies about Bialik, denying vehemently that he ever said something so jarring. That, in itself, is not very convincing: We know that a denial, vehement as it may be, should not be taken at face value.

For instance, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's denial of a quote attributed to him more often than not turns out to be what one could call "proof negative." Based on past occurrences, for example, I'm inclined to take the fact that he recently denied declaring that Haaretz and The New York Times are Israel's biggest enemies - according to his PR people, he actually thinks the biggest enemy is Iran - as proof that he indeed said the things attributed to him.)

Prof. Josef Joel Rivlin, who translated the Koran into Hebrew in 1936 (which Bialik had published by his Dvir publishing house) spoke about the poet's

admiration and respect for Sephardi Jews' cultural achievements, but added: "Bialik could have said such a thing when carried away, but he wouldn't have meant it."

All Bialikists attribute the slanderous saw of contention to Aryeh Leib Semyatitski (1883-1945, a Hebrew teacher in Grodno, as well as a translator and editor who came to Israel in 1925 to work for Dvir). However, those who "transferred" the slur to Bialik's mouth misquoted and changed completely the meaning of the original declaration by Semyatitski, who apparently said: "How can one hate Arabs? They are so like the Sephardi Jews."

In any case, the mistaken attribution extracted a painful cost in terms of Bialik's reputation. When the Bank of Israel announced it was printing new 10-pound banknotes in 1969, bearing the poet's portrait, there was a spate of letters to the press by Sephardim, claiming it would be an affront to them to circulate currency commemorating somebody who had the temerity to compare them to Arabs - a not-so-slight racist slur in its own right.

Bialik's banknote remained in circulation at [his] face value for about six years. By 1975 he was replaced on the banknote by Sir Moses Montefiore, the Jewish-British philanthropist, a scion of a Jewish-Italian family of Sephardi origins. For what it's worth - \$1.4 in terms of its 1975 value - poetic, pecuniary and racial justice was thus served.

Israeli currency changed its name from pound to shekel in 1978, when 1 shekel replaced 10 Israeli pounds; the name was changed again in 1985 to the new Israeli shekel, 1 of which was equivalent to 1,000 old ones.

The debate over Sephardi-Ashkenazi representation on Israeli bills raised its ugly head again recently, when the Bank of Israel announced a competition for designing new banknotes that will bear the portraits of poets Rachel Bluwstein (NIS 20) and Shaul Tchernichovsky (NIS 50), both of which will enter circulation in 2013, as well as Lea Goldberg (NIS 100) and Natan Alterman (NIS 200), both of which will be introduced in 2014. However, while the genders are equally represented in the central bank's move, different ethnic-racial Jewish origins are not: All of these poets are Ashkenazim. Bialik has apparently forfeited his chance to be valued in shekels; indeed he has certainly been devaluated.

For what it's worth, it was a non-Jewish (but gay and Irish) poet, playwright and wit, Oscar Wilde, who said (through his mouthpiece, Lord Darlington, in the third act of his first play and hit, "Lady Windermere's Fan," from 1892): "What is a cynic? A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing."

Thomas Jefferson penned in 1776 the opening words of the American Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." The French Revolution's motto in 1789 was "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" - which sounds somewhat more stylish in French.

It remains to be seen whether these truths are indeed self-evident. The mere fact that there is a need for those truths to be reiterated again and again these days, in many languages, makes one wonder whether there is something in human nature - an innate inequality gene? - that no amount of nurturing, in many cultures and civilizations, through the ages and around the globe, has not managed to suppress entirely.

