

HAIM NAHMAN VS. THE HAREDIM

By Shlomo Avineri Haaretz 29 07 2011

In the 100 years since Bialik put the finishing touches on his seminal 'Sefer Ha'aggadah,' ultra-Orthodox extremists have condemned the national poet for apostasy, despite his close ties with noted rabbis and Torah scholars.

"My maternal grandfather, Rabbi Israel Halpern, found his friend reading 'Sefer Ha'aggadah' ['The Book of Legends'], by Haim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, which he had borrowed from the library. My grandfather got angry and burned the book. I asked him afterward how he had burned a book with God's name written in it? And my grandfather replied: 'A Torah scroll written by a heretic must be burned along with the references [to God's name] in it.'" Thus wrote Prof. Yehuda Friedlander, former rector of Bar-Ilan University, to me recently regarding the ultra-Orthodox community's self-imposed ban on Bialik's writings.

Another instance of burning the national poet's works - in Tiberias in 1909 - was related many years later by Hai Shefer (grandfather of the current director of the Prime Minister's Office, Gil Shefer) who, as a student at a Haredi yeshiva, was "caught" secretly reading Bialik's books. This is what happened the day after the young boy tearfully confessed his "sin" to his father: "We had just returned from prayers, I took out the books from their hiding place, with their wrapping paper and string, and placed them in the middle of the yard ... Father ordered Mother to bring the kerosene and the matches. With his own hand he poured the kerosene on the books and lit the match, as though bringing a thanksgiving offering, and the sea breeze [referring to Lake Kinneret] scattered the ashes" ("Auto-da-fe of Bialik's writings in Tiberias," Davar, July 8, 1960).

This testimony largely reflects the attitude of the extremist Haredim to Bialik and his literary enterprises, including "Sefer Ha'aggadah," whose writing was concluded by Bialik and Ravnitzky 100 years ago. It was the flagship of Bialik's effort to collect treasures of Hebrew culture, which was also supposed to include the publication of an annotated edition of Maimonides' "Mishneh Torah." In spite of this, Haredi circles saw Bialik as someone who deserted the study hall, desecrated the heavenly name and was a heretic who had penned such phrases as "If there is a God in you" and "May his throne be abolished forever" - and thus any contact with his writings and the corpus of his work was forbidden.

In their eyes, even Bialik's death did not atone for his "sins." Indeed, even when the Jewish community in Palestine mourned the poet's untimely death in 1934, the extreme ultra-Orthodox Neturei Karta cursed his memory, accused him of publishing heretical works and dubbed him "an instigator and an agitator, a sinner who caused others to sin" ("The reaction of Neturei Karta," Yedioth Ahronoth, June 20, 1956). Later, the organ of the Jerusalem branch of Agudath Israel also portrayed Bialik as someone who was "far from holiness and divinity in his lifetime," and attacked Chief Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hachohen Kook for participating in the memorial service for the poet, in spite of the fact that the latter had "abandoned the Torah and turned to secular education" (David Tamar, "The poet, the rabbi and Agudath Israel," Maariv, July 25, 1986).

It is true that even among the Haredim there were some who admired Bialik's personality and his work, but they downplayed that fact, as Prof. Saul Adler, a

scientist, wrote: "Once a devout Jew from the Old Yishuv, a teacher in one of the old yeshivas in Jerusalem, told me he liked and respected Bialik more than all the Torah greats who were leaders of his party, although he had heard that the poet did not strictly observe the commandments (but the man didn't dare to admit his admiration in public). He considered the poet a Torah scholar who drew from Jewish sources and became a mouthpiece for all the contemporary yeshiva students who had gone out into the world" ("Memories of Bialik," Al Hamishmar, March 18, 1966).

A former student of the Lida Yeshiva said the following about the contradictory feelings in the his circles regarding "Sefer Ha'aggadah": "There was a [clandestine] organization of aggadah [Jewish legend] study groups based on Bialik's book. About half an hour before the minha [afternoon] prayer services we would stop studying Talmud and begin studying aggadah ... When the mashgiah [spiritual mentor] 'informed' on us that we were studying aggadah based on Bialik's book, [director and founder of the yeshiva, Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines] invited us to his home and spoke to us. He disagreed with our study method and said: Why go to acquire oats from geese instead of going out to the fields and acquiring them there?" (Ben Zion Ziv, "Memories from the Lida Yeshiva").

Bialik's success in finding ways to win over some yeshiva students was seen as a threat to the religious purity of the faithful: "That same Bialik, several of whose poems are suffused with heresy, had a truly destructive influence, and he is the one who cast his net to trap many of the yeshiva students during the previous generation ... The quarrel is not with the wayward Bialik, but with the masses of wayward men who follow him and are misleading many innocent souls in Israel to this very day" (Y. Ben Amram, "The National Poet, the Great Deviator from the Path").

For his part, however, Bialik - who never stopped loving the Torah and those who studied it, even after he abandoned the Volozhin Yeshiva and gave up his meticulous observance of the 613 commandments - continued throughout his life to maintain contact and to cooperate with rabbis and Torah scholars from various camps. For example, he had a close friendship with Rabbi Kook, and together they worked to strengthen the status of the Sabbath in the pre-state Jewish community and to bring estranged Jews closer to their religious sources, without coercion. The poet also carried on a warm correspondence with Haredi Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky, a yeshiva head who wrote a commentary on the Tosefta (a compilation of the Oral Law). Furthermore, through his ties with writer Maxim Gorky, Bialik even helped to obtain the release of Abramsky from his Siberian exile (see: Raphael Benjamin Posen, "Like you, I'm also a wayfarer here," Hatzofeh, October 6, 2006).

'Great man'

Bialik also provided financial support to many rabbis and institutions of Torah study. Religious court head and yeshiva director Rabbi Eliezer Hager thanked him for helping to raise money for the Viznitz Yeshiva, in a letter that began with the words: "Honorable great man, minister of sciences and champion in Israel, aristocrat of the idea and of pure knowledge, Mr. H.N. Bialik" - and ended with the blessing: "May my blessing ascend to his head, may he be sealed for a good

and long life, may his sun shine wherever he turns" (David Tamar, "Letter of the Admor of Viznitz to Bialik," Hatzofeh, July 25, 1997).

In Tel Aviv's Bialik House archive there is a receipt for a donation by Bialik to the Hebron Yeshiva, with a thank-you letter signed by yeshiva head Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna, and another receipt for a donation to the Mea She'arim Yeshiva headed by Rabbi Yitzchok Yaakov Wachtfogel (see: Adam Baruch, "Bialik, Wachtfogel, a Jewish Treaty," Maariv, October 24, 2003).

Bialik also offered financial assistance to the-then young Rabbi Shlomo Goren, and in the foreword of his book "Nezer Hakodesh," published about a year after the poet's death, Goren wrote: "In eternal memory of the poet and great man, who guided me and encouraged me to dive into the sea of Talmud, H.N. Bialik of blessed memory, by the author."

Of all the religious movements, Mizrahi and Hapoel Hamizrahi were most appreciative of Bialik's poetry and writings, including "Sefer Ha'aggadah" and the poet's commentary on Tractate Zeraim. These movements generally tended to ignore the poet's religious crisis, and tried to focus on his poems from the yeshiva, like MK Rabbi Israel Eichler of United Torah Judaism, who recently read from the Knesset dais the poem "Im yesh et nafshekha lada'at" ("If you desire to know"), adding that "Bialik was and remained a Haredi Jewish yeshiva boy" in his national poems as well as in his poems of vision and anger. The people in those movements saw "Rabbi Haim Nahman Bialik," as they called him, as one of the spiritual spokesmen of nationalist Judaism, and as a person who expressed "the poetry and the soul of Judaism."

The members of Mizrahi and Hapoel Hamizrahi used to consult with the poet on matters of philosophy, invite him to ceremonies of writing a Torah scroll, dedicating a synagogue and so on, and were also among the regular participants in the Oneg Shabbat cultural project that Bialik started in Tel Aviv.

"Sefer Ha'aggadah" was received with less affection by literary colleagues and scholars in his time and afterward. For example, S.Y. Agnon was dissatisfied with the poet's editing of the book, and in a letter to his publisher, Zalman Schocken, he expressed a sense of missed opportunity: "It is hard at this time to write a new book of legends, after the book has already been written by Bialik and Ravnitzky, whether it is good or bad" ("Agnon-Schocken: Exchange of Letters ").

On a more critical note, Agnon wrote to scholar Dov Sadan that Bialik had "made this thing very easy for himself; he omitted what should not have been omitted. I know the reasons why." In the letter to Sadan, Agnon does not spell out what he "knows" about Bialik's editorial considerations, and what fault he found with "Sefer Ha'aggadah," whose stylistic and linguistic "upgrade" he actually praised (in his book "From Myself to Myself"). But his complaint joins criticisms leveled at the book from the publication of the first volume in 1908 up to the completion of the third one in 1911, and to this very day.

One of the earliest critics of "Sefer Ha'aggadah" was Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg), who reprimanded Bialik and Ravnitzky for what he saw as the excessive liberties they took in changing the wording of and abridging the aggadot, the removal of erotic elements, the comprehensive translation from Aramaic to Hebrew, the insufficient explanations of obscure expressions, the absence of a proper index and so on ("Letters of Ahad Ha'am IV").

Writer Micha Yosef Berdichevsky complained that while expanding the concept of "aggadah," the two writers had included non-homogeneous literary genres in their book (from aphorisms to midrashim and research studies); protested their preference for adopting the version of the Babylonian Talmud (when there was a source that he considered more suitable); and also claimed that they had not been sufficiently scientific when it came to choosing and presenting the material (M.Y. Berdichevsky, "Sefer Ha'aggadah").

Over the years a series of scholars added critical remarks to the abovementioned reservations about the book in question, among them P. Lachover, A.A. Halevi, A.A. Urbach, J. Heinemann and others.

I will make do with citations from one of the most outstanding of them, Midrash scholar Prof. Avigdor Shinan of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who also tries to add critical thinking. In a speech at Bialik House on the 60th anniversary of Ravnitzky's death in 2004, Shinan confessed: "My own attitude toward 'Sefer Ha'aggadah' is ambivalent. As a scholar, with experience in accurate use of the language of the sources, I sometimes get angry at the great liberty that Bialik and Ravnitzky allowed themselves, to the point of introducing real changes to the words of the sages. In any case, I warn myself and my students that you always have to go back and check the citations in their work. Nor am I pleased with their decision to give preference to the Babylonian Talmud ... but if we set aside the researcher in me, I return to 'Sefer Ha'aggadah' as a lover of midrash and as someone who uses this book in the context of lectures to the general public, take citations from it as part of the teaching materials for the school system and similar things geared to the general public, whom Bialik and Ravnitzky were also addressing."

In conclusion Shinan announced to the audience that he was preparing to publish "a new, updated and contemporary edition of the book." It will include, among other things, an updating of the footnotes and concise commentary in the original edition, expanded references, a new preface, detailed indexes and more.

The various criticisms of "Sefer Ha'aggadah" were no obstacle to its widescale distribution or the fact that it became a basic text throughout the Diaspora, already from its first appearance in 1908-1909. In spite of that, Bialik was not enthusiastic about the success of the book and tried to improve it, to add chapters and vocalization. He was also aware of the book's shortcomings, and emphasized to Ravnitzky: "The success of the book obliges us to review it from beginning to end, to correct its defects, to fix its shortcomings and to improve it as much as we can" (Y.H. Ravnitzky, "H.N. Bialik and 'Sefer Ha'aggadah'").

Only 22 years later, with the publication of the second edition of the book, could Bialik note with satisfaction: "'Sefer Ha'aggadah' has become a popular book in the best sense of the word. We wonder if there is any book-loving Jewish home in Israel that has not adopted it." But even after that, Bialik continued to work on improving and expanding the work. According to Ravnitzky, he worked on copyediting galleys of "Sefer Ha'aggadah" between one operation and the next, up until two days before his death.

For his part, author Haim Beer has pointed out the revolution brought about by Bialik in the attitude toward aggadah: "Bialik is the greatest builder of modern Hebrew culture ever to arise ... One example is 'Sefer Ha'aggadah.' He took the legends of the Talmud, which were actually held cheap by both educated readers

and yeshiva students, who preferred the halakhic discussion [i.e., based on traditional religious law]. He demonstrated the beauty of those legends, while gleaning them, reorganizing them and placing them in the book in a uniform manner. By doing so Bialik gave the modern Hebrew reader a wonderful treasure that ... almost became extinct."

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