

from a warmer clime! How my soul for songs was yearning when my dwelling you deserted in the winter time! . . . Does your singing bring me greetings from the land, its glens and valleys, mountain height and cleft? Has her God had compassion on Zion?" (*Complete Poetic Works of Bialik*, 9–10). It was the voice of awakening—first of individuals and then of a nation—to the task of returning to and rebuilding a Jewish homeland.

The signature moment for Bialik came after the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903, a two-day rampage resulting in the murder of 49 Jews, the rape of dozens of women, and the wounding of hundreds. Bialik was sent by a Historical Committee led by Ahad Ha'am and Dubnow to document these events. Apart from reporting on the blood-chilling facts, Bialik wrote the most powerful poem of his career, "In the City of Slaughter." While there is implicit condemnation of the perpetrators, the most damning cries are against God and the victims. Bialik sharply critiques the passive Jewish community for not doing enough (or anything) to take its destiny into its own hands. Holtzman points out that this masterpiece is credited with sparking the Second Aliyah.

Reading the poetry of Bialik is a must. But so too is immersing oneself in Holtzman's poignant biography. Today, Israel is too often a source of tension. It is important that we remind ourselves of the miracle that Israel is, unrivaled in human history. For it was out of the ashes and tears of Jewish history that our people came home—to build their lives anew and engage in the messiness of sovereignty. Bialik reminds us of the sanctity of this mission. And Holtzman is a loyal messenger, inspiring us to reengage with Hebrew poetry.

Vayehi 5778

ויחי תשע"ח



Can We Grow?

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Family relationships are often complicated, but the family of Jacob is a particularly jumbled mess. In this week's parashah, the story has hints and echoes of a decades-long, tangled skein of family dynamics. We see these in two particularly problematic scenes in this parashah. Both scenes illustrate William Faulkner's truism that "the past is never dead. It's not even past." And in this story, we see how the past leaks into the future.

Let's take the two scenes out of order: the first one to consider comes toward the end of the story. After Jacob dies, his sons send a message to their brother, Joseph, whom they had plotted to kill when he was 17 years old, and whom they sold into Egyptian bondage. Joseph subsequently became the second most powerful person in Egypt, and used his power to save his father and brothers and their families from famine and destitution, settling them and their considerable livestock in a good place in Egypt.

And yet, 17 years later, after Jacob dies, the brothers say:

"What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him?" So they sent this message to Joseph: "Before his death, your father left this instruction: 'So shall you say to Joseph, "Forgive, I urge you, the offense and the guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.'" Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him. (Gen. 50 15–17)

There are many ways of understanding these tears. One way is that Joseph is abjectly disappointed in his relationship with his brothers. After all this time, and after all he has done to sustain them, they still don't trust him.

There is another possible layer. What he really wants is to be accepted by his brothers as a brother—and it is clear from their message that they still see him one-dimensionally: he is the former victim of their murderous intent, who now has the power to take revenge. Where once he was the victim, they are now worried that they will be his victims. There is no way in which they are peers. Their way of relating is entirely hierarchical, and entirely based on power.

And there is yet another dimension. The brothers demonstrate that they have not grown in all the years that have passed. In contrast, Joseph has grown. He long ago stopped being the spoiled child, and even the manipulative vizier. Yet, the brothers are still stuck in their old stories, with their blindered vision.

The other, much more poetic, story is the long section in which Jacob predicts the future of the brothers (Gen 49:1–27). Here, again, many of the harshest predictions are based on the brothers' previous actions within the family. In Jacob's view, there is no growing beyond those incidents.

We do not know if, in fact, the brothers have changed their behavior in the years since some of them did truly atrocious things: Reuben bedding one of Jacob's wives (35:22); Shimon and Levi destroying an entire town after the Dinah incident (34:25–29). But Jacob does not envision any possibility for future development either. And he seems to be consigning the next generations of these sons, his own grandchildren and great-grandchildren, to the fury of his curses. This helps us understand the brothers. They are like Jacob.

In this family, the Torah provides us with two different ways of seeing the world: we can say, “You were always . . .” and cut off avenues of growth, the desire for growth, and the perception of growth. That way seems very Greek to me: once the Fates have decided who you are, that is your destiny. There is no way out of it.

I recently asked my grandson, Zeke, if the thought that Jacob's negative words were predictions or curses. Zeke, who is a first-year in college, said that, had Jacob allowed for reflection and change, these negative predictions could have become blessings.

Zeke's way is more like Joseph's way of seeing the world: throughout his interactions with his brothers, Joseph has provided opportunities for his brothers to change; has demonstrated change, himself; and has

encouraged others to see the world that way. That is why I believe that he is called, “Yosef Hatzadik”—“Joseph, the Righteous One.” Maybe we should aspire to be the Children of Joseph, instead of the Children of Israel!

But there is a bit of consolation in the fact that we carry the name of Jacob/Israel. In spite of all of Jacob's flaws and failings, God is always with Jacob. At every transition, at every challenge, there is God, encouraging him. I take comfort in this fact. If God can like Jacob, God can also like us! Perhaps we are well-named as “the Children of Israel” after all.

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Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



The Life of a Hebrew Poet

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

Hayim Nahman Bialik: Poet of Hebrew by Avner Holtzman (Yale University Press, 2017)

Born in 1873 in Zhitomir, Ukraine, Hayim Nahman Bialik went on to become the greatest Hebrew poet “since the time of Yehudah Halevi.” Holtzman identifies what made Bialik a national poet of the Jewish people: “a biography of epic, symbolic dimensions; a profound sense of involvement and identification with the national drama; and incontestable literary genius” (62). From humble beginnings in a family involved in the lumber trade, Bialik left at age 17 for the Volozhin yeshiva in Lithuania. There he immersed himself in yeshiva learning while simultaneously expanding his secular knowledge in preparation for academic studies in Berlin.

All the while, he was deeply influenced by the gathering national consciousness that swept the Jewish communities of Europe. The voices of Theodore Herzl and Ahad Ha'am moved Bialik to the core. In May 1892, his stirring poem “To the Bird” appeared, expressing the hope represented by the Land of Israel: “Peace to you, returning lovely bird, unto my window