

Renaissance of Jewish Literature and Art

(Talk before Sisterhood, Young Israel Grand Concourse, Jan. 20, 1950)

Unfortunate that title of talk is "Renaissance" etc. This word means, in plain English, "rebirth", and as we shall soon see, the continuity of J. lit. is such that it needs no rebirth, whereas J. Art has not really been born in the first place. However, shall accept it at face value.

1950. Half-century mark affords us opportunity to review the new literature which had its birth at the turn of the century and which now is at crossroads, its major crisis in its 50 yr. life. But, as said, J. lit. as such is undisrupted since Moses and Torah. Quick tracing of major outlines. Chumash, Tanach, Apocrypha, Mishna, Talmud, Geonim, Rishonim-philosophy-poetry-poetic prose-mysticism, Achronim-responsa-mysticism-Hasidic-Mussar-Haskallah. Ahad Ha'am at his prime at turn of century, died 1927, can be regarded as paver for last 50 yrs of Zionism & lit. Bialik first true son of 20 th cent. In this National poet find expression of the new era, swing fr. melancholy which caused almost pathological inaction w. regard to J. bitter fate, to young ^{optimism} pessimism. The wide open fields synthesized w. nostalgia for Beis Hamidrash. Nationalistic aspirations. First poems appear 1892, coincide approx. w. Herzl's "Judenstaat", conversion of Rothschild by Ahad Ha'am to Zionism, to provide the dramatic setting for a revived J. dynamism, inspired by Prophets, which was to see fruition in 50 years, culminating w. declar. State Israel. Until contemporary period, most lit. strong nation'istic kernel, optimism-outdoors etc till contemporary period.

The contemp period, the mid-cent, coincides w. Israel, which creates new problems for the literary talents of the new state. Lit, because it is the most articulate of the arts, is most intimately involved in the cultural, political, and social & economic issues as they evolve. Lit not only reflects them, it also directs. Our discussion of contemp, or as we call it "renaiss" of J. lit. must therefore be studied in its living context - the State of Israel and its diverse problems.

In all branches of culture, there is today a battle w. far-reaching effects. One school: now w. creation of indep. state, new Jew must evolve, cut off all relations w. our past & our history. Must strive to develop a J. who fits into normalized pattern of social-minded peoples, only distinction being language & new national customs. Striving is for socialistic concepts of social justice on international scale. Second school: Such ideas belong to past, first Haskala, when radical aberrations fr. J. necessary to J. mentality fr. pathological satisfaction w. Galut & assimilation. Now need reversion to purely J. types (not mentioning which - several schools of thought on this), discovery of ourselves, refuse to lose our unique type as living entity, not ashamed of our history, development of our Present integrated in Past is as creative as vulgar departure fr. tradition.

~~First school~~ - In general, as said, all admit change in physiognomy of the new J. Some herald it, some look at it w. suspicion. Describe hard, dull Sabra as depicted by Kocessier who worships his anti-intellect'ism. Others see it as good because "normal", earthish. Others - is this all we hoped for for 2000 yrs? However, all happy about new note of optimism & courage in symphony of Sabra life. Following is my transl'n of part of poem written by Yaakov Kahan (b. 1881) recently visited U.S., entitled "Sur me'al Ha'am ha'zeh" (Turn away fr. this people). Poet is prophet whom G-d tells to cast off his cloak of prophecy, means democratiz'n of the new spirit of optimism, and go among the people bearing the message of cheer. G-d speaks to the prophet:

"Go out on the highways, & every strong & healthy youth whom you meet shalt thou ask, 'Canst thou sing & dance? And he will answer, 'I cannot', & thou shalt say unto him, 'Go & learn, for if not I shall bring bad tidings upon the House of Israel'. And thus shalt thou say unto them, 'Ye shall not be as your ancestors, the frightened of Judah, & in their melancholy ways thou shalt not go. Save ye your youth & the happiness of your hearts from the upheaval & cast your laughter upon the faces of your melancholy people & against your foes,

לֹא יִשְׂכַּח בְּיָמָיו וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁאָל אֶת הַיָּלֵד הַזֶּה וְהָיָה
אָמַר: כִּינֹר וְחֶמֶד? וְהָיָה, אָמַר יְשָׁע; וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה!
כֹּדֶם אֵלָיו מִזֵּמַּר מִיָּד וְהָיָה. וְכֵן יֹאמַר אֵלָיו וְהָיָה
כֹּדֶם אֵלָיו, וְהָיָה יְהוֹדָה, וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁאָל אֶת הַיָּלֵד הַזֶּה!
וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה
וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו
וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו
וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו
וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו וְהָיָה אֵלָיו



and with dance music shall ye go out to war. Behold I will establish in Israel an iron and steel-strong generation which will know neither tear nor sigh, a stormy generation, born in the desert, proud and free & merciless, and in the shadow of his wings - redemption!"

הנה אני יוצא עם נשק וזרע
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The transl'n is of course far fr. perfect, but I hope that you will feel, by contagion, some of the cheer & optimism which inspires Kahan. This is the theme of most of mod. Heb. poetry regarding the new personality of the redeemed Jew. The melancholy of the Galut-J. is being suddenly transformed into the happy cheerfulness of a people on its own soil, his sobs to chimes, his wrinkles to smiles, his persecution to freedom.

This, then, is a universally accepted fact - the change must come, is coming, & it is all to the good. But what of the more fundamental and crucial question - in what direction to express our new energies? The first school wishes to divorce the past; the 2nd to reinforce it. The first accuses the 2nd of reactionary conservatism, uncreative & blind adherence to a weak past. The 2nd suspects the 1st of Communist, or at least strong left-wing leanings, unrealism, J. antisemitism. The final victor in this new Kulturkampf will determine the entire make-up of the new J. people. This pitched battle, with its cultural, social, religious and political connotations is, then, of vital interest to everyone of us. It will shape our own future and that of our children.

This controversy, as regards lit., has come to a head less than 3 weeks ago at the 14th convention of the "Agudat HaSofrim" in Tel Aviv, 1st convention to be held by the Israeli writers in the comparative security of a stable State. Let me describe for you in some detail proceedings of the V'aadah.

Just prior to this convention, the unity of Israeli writers broken, one faction seceded - left wingers, under poet Avraham Shlonski & Eliezer Shteinman, called "Yachdav". Then some young authors (mainly novelists & poets) decide to return main fold as M. Shamir, H. Guri. Present convention, w. some semblance of organizational unity, & in presence of Knesset Speaker Joseph Shprintzak (connoisseur) & elder poet Zalman Shneier, highlights debate bet. 2 of most controversial promising writers. Problem: future Heb. lit. & its new form in redeemed Israel. First speaker is Avraham Kariv, poet & lit. essayist who went thru hell of Red persecution of Heb writers in Russia. Preaches return of lit. center of gravity fr. the man to the Jew, return to "makor", origin. No specify which type to return to - Porphyritic, Talmudic, Rambam, Hassidic, etc. but RETURN - profound "ahavat Israel". Second speaker is Moshe Shamir, young novelist ("Hoo Halach B'sadot") whose lit. circle centers about "Ba'shaar", Mapam journal run by young Mapamites. Divorce fr. historical types, create our own myths. Most important part of his message by implication. Accent on present, we to create future course ourselves, didn't say how, indicates that this future must be strictly along lines of left-socialist, place for nothing else. Thus all Heb. writers except those who belong to Mapam or subscribe his particular philosophy, are excluded from future. Most writers, even most of youngest writers, protest M. Shamir's views. Charge & counter-charge of ideological monopoly of Heb. belles lettres. Decision to reconvene in Jerusalem next Passover to discuss lit. theory.

Tell why against Shamir & Mapam lit. line. Seems that the best of mod. writers no longer worthy enough to be considered by Mapam lit. hierarchy as writers of merit. Cannot object to political INFLUENCE on lit. thought, but strongly protest pol. CONTROL of thought & expression. This "normaliz'n" can result in creation of a people as inferior as the broad masses of other people. Our object to nourish spiritual superiors as guides and teachers, fortify J. heritage even not necessarily religious. Discuss future type Jew if Mapam should win. ~~Tell why against Shamir & Mapam lit. line. because Jacob asks for physical sustenance when dressed as Esau. shouldn't fear normality in clothing of Jew.~~

Art: discuss poor state, expected development JEWISH art.

Drama: terrible. Only translations, no originals.

End: Our interest in America in general, & lit. we prefer in particular will have great influence. Importance of book in J. life. J. Book Month. Buy, interest, J. books.

Must do something about it, not say talk. Mark Twain complained that people always TALK about the weather, never do anything about it.

If I criticize don't think only my opinion - 2 artists, complain critic, other - only respects what everyone else says.