

THE CRISIS IN CONTEMPORARY JEWISH LITERATURE

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When Rabbi Sturm and your Chairman asked me about what I wanted to speak, my first impulse was to say "about five minutes". When this suggestion was rejected, however, I decided to choose the topic of "The Crisis in Contemporary Hebrew Literature". The reason for my choice should be obvious. Here is a topic which has come to the fore as recently as this past Chanukah, a topic which has broad significance for all of us and which encompasses all the major cultural and social movements and all the political nuances which are shaping up in the great drama of Israel today. For literature is more than art. Art can, at the most, after all is said and done, only reflect the undertones of the civilization which produces it. Literature, however, is more than a mirror, more than merely an instrument which passively tells us what has occurred or what is occurring; literature can be and should be a dynamic force in the life of a people. It must direct, mold, create and shape the main current of the life of the society from which it springs. And the function of literature is even more pronounced when it is considered in the setting of a people whose lives have been renewed and reinvigorated by great national events and when this people stands at the threshold of a new era in history and does not know where to turn. It is confused, bewildered and perplexed. ~~Its~~ Its future social life, political orientation, religious form and cultural character are one big question mark.

This, my friends, is Israel today. A nation of the verge of a great historical epoch, knowing that destiny has knocked on its door but not knowing where destiny wants or should want it to go. Such a situation is fertile ground for a man of letters with ideas and ideals. A literary movement sparked with zest and vigor can either lift Israel up to its former historical stature or can level it off until it is no more than a dull, near-Eastern replica of the disgustingly average inhabitant of this planet of ours. But before continuing with the actual problem on hand, let us quickly trace from our perspective, very briefly of course, the entire history of Jewish literature and the ideological movements with which they were bound up.

The biography of our literature starts with Matan Torah. From that moment on the thread of Jewish literature continues uninterrupted until this very day. The Chumash is followed by the Tenach then the Apocrypha, Mishna, and the Talmud. This is closely followed by the Tekufat Savoraim and Tekufat Ha'Geonim. We then have the Rishonim and here literature



is no longer exclusively Halacha but also grammar, philosophy, poetry and mysticism. In Halacha religious literature continues to our own day especially the Shealot U'Teshubot, fortified by the glorious literature of Chassidism and Mussar movement. Sooner or later the Haskalah makes itself known. The beginning of the Twentieth Century is particularly important. Achad Ha'am is at his prime at the turn of the century (he died in 1927), and he can be regarded as the man who more than anyone else, paved the way for the last 50 years of Zionism and Zionist Hebrew literature. Bialik is the first true son of the Twentieth Century. In this national poet we find the fullest expression of the new era, that swing from the melancholy attitude, which caused almost pathological inaction with regard to the bitter Jewish fate, to a young and fresh optimism. In Bialik, side by side with his nationalistic aspirations, we find the wide open fields, nature in full bloom, synthesized with a deep nostalgia for the Bais Hamedrash. His first poems, which appeared in 1892, coincide approximately with the publication of Herzl's "Judenstaat", and the conversion of Rothschild to Zionism by Achad Ha'am, to provide the dramatic setting for a revived Jewish dynamism, inspired by the prophets, which was to see its fruition in 50 years culminating with the declaration of the State of Israel. Until today, all modern Hebrew literature rotated in the Zionist orbit, stressing optimism and the healthy outdoors.

Now, as I have told you, the trend was to broaden the horizon of the Jew, to free him from his ghetto mentality by letting him sink his roots in his own native soil. All of us are happy and thrilled by the new note of optimism and courage in the symphony of Sabra life. Let me read for you a poem, written several years ago, which predicted and heralded this new healthy Israeli life. The poem, written by Yaacov Kahan, who recently visited the U.S., is entitled "Turn away from this people". The poet is a prophet to whom G-d tells to cast off his cloak of prophecy, signifying the democratization of the new spirit of optimism, and go among the people bearing the message of cheer. I will read the poem in Hebrew first and then translate it into English. G-d speaks to the prophet:

"Go out on the highways and every strong and healthy youth whom you meet shalt thou ask, 'Canst thou sing and dance?' and he will answer, 'No I cannot', and thou shalt say unto him, 'Go and 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, and in

צא בדרכים, והי' כל בחור אמיץ וקל  
אשר תפוש ושאלת אותו: הידעת שיר  
ומחול? וענה, לא ידעתי. ואמרתי אליו  
לן ולמדו כי רעה אני מביא על בית  
ישראל. וככה תאמר להם: אל תהיו כאבותי-  
קחיכם גורי יהודה, ובדרכיהם - אפס  
לא חלכנו! והצלחתם את נעוריכם ואת שמחת



their melancholy ways thou ~~It~~ not go. Save ye ~~לשכם מן החפכה, וזרקתם את צדוק אל פני~~  
your youth and the happiness of your hearts from ~~העם האפל ואל פני האויב, וברננתם~~  
the upheaval and cast your lapster upon the faces ~~מחול תצאו למלחמה.~~  
of your mela choly people and against your ~~foes~~, ~~חנה אני מקים בישראל דור ברזל ונחושה,~~  
foes; and with dance music shall ye go out to war. ~~אשר לא ידע דמעת ולא ידע אנחה, דור מער,~~  
Behold I will establish in Israel an iron and ~~יליד - מדבר, גא ומפקר ואכזרי, ובחביון~~  
steel-strong generation which will know ~~neither~~ ~~כנפיו - גאולה!~~  
tear nor sigh, a stormy generation, born in the  
desert, proud and free and merciless, and in the  
shadow of his wings ... redemption!"

The translation is, of course, far from perfect, but I hope that you will feel, by contagion, some of the cheer vitality which inspires Kahan. This is the theme of most of modern Hebrew poetry regarding the new personality of the redeemed Jew. The sadness of the Galut Jew 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. Almost everyone, regardless of religious or political convictions, admits that a new healthy type of Jew must emerge; but as to whether the new type of Jew which is actually emerging is better or worse, and what character this new personality should assume, about this there is a tremendous controversy with as many opinions as there are Jews. You have probably read in the newspapers that when President Chaim Weizmann visited President Truman at the White House and they were comparing their troubles and aches, Weizmann told Truman "Your job is easier - you are the President of millions of citizens. I, however, am the President of a million presidents". However, it seems that these million presidents believe in the two-party system. In general, some are happy at the growth of the type of Sabra whom people like Arthur Koestler worship. Koestler's hero is a big hulk of man, all six feet of pure brute, liberally gifted with brawn, and blessed with lack of brains. He gets up in the morning and the first thing he does is - grunt. After expressing this wonderful animal satisfaction, he proceeds to do what every good Jew should do. He eats - then he goes to his fields and he works under the strong sun. Then he eats. Then he works some more under the strong sun. Then he eats. Then he gets up - then he grunts and the whole cycle is repeated over again. What a great and wonderful personality this new Sabra is. No longer the complex intellectualism which stifled young minds in the Bais Hamedrash. No longer the thin cowardly Jew who believed in spiritual supremacy at the cost of physical health. No longer the frail Jew with a superstitious



preference of cows over pigs. No, now we have the Koestler Sabra, neither better nor worse than the average farmer of any other country. What a wonderful dumbell - what a glorious nitwit.

Koestler may like this type but others of us are liable to look with suspicion upon this anti-climax to 2000 years of hopes and prayers and dreams. I am sure that the purpose of Jewish martyrdom throughout the ages was not to transplant some hick farmer from Maine to the Holy Land with the only distinction being that if the same farmer lives in Israel he speaks Hebrew - a language which incidentally, according to Koestler, is far from perfect.

Now, let us come to the point. I told you that the modern crisis in contemporary Hebrew literature came to the fore this past Chanukah. Let me give you some details of what happened. That week, in Tel-Aviv, there took place the Fourteenth Convention of the Agudat Ha'Soferim, the first convention to be held by Israeli writers in the comparative security of a stable state. Just prior to the convention, the unity of Israeli writers was shattered when one faction seceded. This group, all left-wingers, was called the Yachdav. Then some young authors, mainly novelists and poets, such as Moshe Shamir and H. Guri, decided to return to the main fold. The ~~wound~~ wound, of course, was not healed, and the present convention graced with the presence of the Knesset Speaker, Joseph Shprintzak and elder ~~poet~~ poet Zalman Schneiur, highlighted a debate between two of the most controversial promising young writers. The problem - the future of Hebrew Literature and its new form in redeemed Israel. The first speaker was Avraham Kariv, a poet and literary essayist who went through the hell of Communist persecution of Hebrew writers in Russia. Kariv preached the return of the literary center of gravity from the Man to the Jew, a return to the Makor, the origin. Kariv did not specify which type he wants us to return to - whether the prophetic or the talmudic, whether to the Rambam or the Chassidic Jew. But there was return and it was a profound "Ahavat Israel" which spoke from the mouth of Avraham Kariv.

The second speaker was Moshe Shamir - a young novelist, whose literary orbit centers about "BA'shaar", a leftist Journal run by young Mapam members. Shamir wants a divorce from historical ~~his~~ types. Moses, Joshua, the Macabees, Rabbi Akiba, they all belong in the history books. Life as it is to be lived in modern Israel must forget these people. We must create our own myths and our own heroes and they must not be much different from other peoples. The duty of the writer then, is to completely neglect Jewish history and to create a new environment for this these which is a secularized Jew, a "Goy - Ke-chal Ha-goyim". This future course which we are to create, he indicated, must be strictly along the lines of Mapam socialism and there is a place for no one and



nothing else. Thus, all Hebrew writers except those who belong to Mapam or subscribe to that particular brand of political philosophy, are excluded from the future. Most writers, even most of the younger writers, protested Shamir's views. There was charge and counter-charge of ideological monopoly of Hebrew Belles Lettres. The Convention came to a close with a decision to reconvene in Jerusalem next Passover.

Well, now it seems that some of the best of modern Hebrew writers are no longer worthy enough to be considered by the Mapam ~~literary~~ literary hierarchy as writers of merit. We cannot object to political influence on literary thought but we are duty bound to strongly protest political control of thought and expression. One feels that Mapam is so close to the communists that it already shares its views about decadent bourgeois literature. As for Shamir's attempts to decimate the Jews, to cut him off from his proud history, all we can do is reply with a wry grin and with condescending sympathy, remind Shamir that his literary fancy has led him astray from reality. A people without a Past will have a difficult time in the present and might almost despair of a Future. True, all peoples sometimes started from scratch. A people entirely without a history can, though with great difficulty, hope to forge for itself a Future. But when a people factually does have its Past, and a great and noble one at that, and it attempts to completely forget it and start anew, the very nature of its history, its very inertia, will condemn these foolhardy attempts, and the result - - only a negation of a glorious history with nothing to take its place, and a people splashing around aimlessly in the black waters of nothingness. Shamir's new myths are but a poor caricature of the richest history on earth. We have no alternative but to write it off as a most brazen attempt at burying a people alive.

Rabbi Maimon, speaking at ceremonies at the foundation of some Mizrahi school recently stated; Usually, at a Yahrzeit, we "drink a L'chaim" and wish for an Aliyas N'shama. We have just had the Aliya. Now we must strive for the N'shama. It would do us good to study these words carefully. We have had our Aliyah, Jews have gone up to Israel in the hundreds of thousands, Aliyah Beth has proven an outstanding success - now we must strive for the N'shama, that soul, that spark of vitality which has shaped our destiny and which has created the genius of the historical Jew. Our future can and must be creative and it can find its greatest expression of creativity in the limits of our history, limits which are so to speak limitless. It is by a return to the Makor, to the origin, that we can find our greatest hope and faith in the future of Israel which stands invited by destiny to reach out and achieve its lofty and sublime Divine mission.