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Bialik, 1925.

"BIALIK."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

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Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

I shall speak this morning of a great and living poet--Bialik, who is writing in a great and living language--Hebrew. Some people are accustomed to think of Hebrew as of a dead language--as dead as Latin or classical Greek; and yet Hebrew was never a dead language, except to those, of course, who did not understand it. While it was not the vernacular of the people close onto two thousand years, while it was not the spoken language of Israel since the exile, yet so carefully was it tended and cultivated right through the last two thousand years, that when the opportunity presented itself for its revival, as it did in the last generation or so in Palestine--its revival as a spoken speech, it sprang to new life easily and spontaneously, as though it had been in use right through the ages; as though there did not exist a hiatus of two millenniums.

Even during the centuries when Hebrew was not a spoken tongue, it was not in disuse. It was always, as it is to this day in the case of nine-tenths of Israel, the language of prayer. The Jew always prayed in the sacred tongue. It was the language of instruction in the Hebrew school up to recent days, and for that matter in most schools to this day Hebrew is taught not as a subject, as Latin is taught as a subject in our schools, but it is the subject. Inasmuch as the full curriculum of the Hebrew school up to comparatively recent days was the Bible and the Talmud,

written almost exclusively in the Hebrew, the child's life was completely saturated, permeated, in the Hebrew speech.

Hebrew, too, was the literary language of the Jew up to recent times, except in the case of philosophy, for which the Jew had not yet developed a terminology and a medium. Every other literature effort of the Jew right through the ages was in Hebrew. His religious books, his ethical books, his Biblical commentaries, his Rabbinical commentaries, his community records and memoirs, his early scientific books, even his commercial paper and legal documents, were drawn up in the Hebrew. And what is more important, his emotional life, his real emotional self--which among every people expresses itself chiefly in poetry--was almost entirely expressed in the Hebrew. Halevi would write his philosophy, his Kasura, in the Arabic, but his poetry in the Hebrew; Ibn Gabirol would write his philosophy, his Fons Vitae, in the Arabic, but his poetry, his Keser Malcuth, in the Hebrew; and so down the ages. That was the medium closest and nearest to their real selves, to their true selves.

During the last one hundred years Hebrew witnessed quite a remarkable renaissance; not so much in Western Europe as in Eastern Europe, although it is well to remember that even the great Jewish scholars and writers of Western Europe, like Zunz and Maeterlinck and Frankel and others wrote very often in Hebrew; and it is one of the ironies of our history that even those among the early

reformers of Germany who opposed the use of Hebrew in prayers and in study, utilized the language of Hebrew in their propaganda against the Hebrew. In Eastern Europe, in Slavic lands, Hebrew was the only medium of expression on the part of the Jewish people, up to comparatively recent times. Eastern Europe was the last to be modernized; the ghettos of Eastern Europe were the last to resist the onslaught of Western civilization, and the intellectual sources of Eastern Jewry, who longed for the emancipation of their people, or the breaking down of the ghetto walls, used the Hebrew language in their marvelous, heroic propaganda work for the spiritual and mental emancipation of their co-religionists. The entire Haskalah movement of Eastern Europe, the reform movement among the Jews of Eastern Europe,--the intellectual and spiritual reform movement, was carried on by men of the moment, who wrote their satire in the periodical, in the newspaper, in Hebrew. One thinks only of such people as those titanic souls who waged the battle of an emancipated people at cost of self and at great sacrifice, and used this speech as their medium.

Of course, most of their writing did not participate of that excellence which we attribute to great literature. Most of their work was scholarly and propagandist; it was condensed literature. And yet by their patient and honest and consecrated service, these quiet souls paved the way for a great cultural renaissance in Israel during the

last generation. The revival of nationalist sentiment in Israel as a result of the pogroms in the early '80s in Russia; as a result of the Dreyfuss affair in France in the '90s; the realization on the part of the masses in Israel and Europe that their future and their hope lay not in the lands where they were but in the establishment of a home of their own in Palestine,--that nationalist sentiment gave a tremendous impetus to the revival of Hebrew, and from that day there begins, really, a most unique and a most fascinating chapter in the history of this ancient and modern speech--the Hebrew.

In the last generation the men writing in Hebrew were those who had completely assimilated the culture of Western Europe; men who were at home in all the cultural ideology in the world; who knew the best which there was in the literatures of other peoples, and who were therefore able to combine, when they wrote in the Hebrew, substance with form, subject matter with art. Their work already begins to partake of the character of real art. In the last generation we have such writers, in philosophy, as Neumark; in history, Klausner and Bernfeldt and Krauss; in the novel and the short story, Fischman and Brenner; in the essay, Sokolow; and in the field where they excelled most, in poetry, names like Kahn, Tchernichonsky, Schneir, and the greatest of these--Bialik.

The Hebrew press today is busy turning out numerous books; Hebrew journals and Hebrew dailies are every-

where. A great pedagogic literature, text books built upon the best educational theories of the day, are being developed; and from the newly founded university of Jerusalem, I have but recently received their first publication of scientific work in Hebrew, a publication, by the way, of which Albert Einstein is one of the editors. So that this "dead" language is very much alive, very vigorous, very creative.

I want to speak this morning briefly about one who is its greatest protagonist, its symbol, and, in a sense, its modern creator--Chayim Nachman Bialik. A word about Bialik's youth. Bialik was born in a small village in southern Russia some fifty-three years ago. His youth is very much like the youth of all the ghetto lads of his day and his land. It was a youth of poverty, a youth of misery and want and hunger and starvation; not so much physical starvation as cultural starvation. It was a youth very much different from that of young boys and girls in other lands and among other peoples whose lives are filled with sunshine and beauty, with nature and sport; it was the life ingrown and starved of a little Jewish lad who, from earliest infancy, spent his day in the....., in that unattractive miserable looking, little room, poring over these vast poems and volumes of ancient law, stifling the legitimate hunger of human life, devoting himself entirely to a continuation of this self-same study--a life without youth, a life without love.

Bialik, in one of his, perhaps his most, wist-

ful poems, indicates the pathos, the tragedy of his early youth, which was no youth. This little poem, which I will translate for you, is called, "Take Me Beneath Thy Wing."

"O come and take me under the shelter of thy wings,

And be unto me both mother and sister,

And let thy wisdom be the refuge of my head,

The shelter of my rejected prayers.

In the merciful hour of twilight,

Lean low and I will reveal unto thee the secret of
my suffering.

Men say there is somewhere in the world youth.

Where is my youth?

And yet another secret will I reveal unto thee.

My soul is being consumed in its own flame.

Men say there is somewhere in the world love.

What is love?

The stars have deceived me.

There was a dream once, but that, too, has fled.

Now I have nothing in the world, nothing left.

O let me dwell under the shelter of thy wings,

And be unto me both mother and sister.

And let thy bosom be the refuge of my head,

The shelter of my rejected prayers."

In another of his poems, called "My Song,"

Bialik asks his reader: "Do you wish to know, friends, whence

came my song? Whence did I derive the inspiration for my song?" And he describes his home in that forsaken little village in southern Russia--its poverty, its desolation, the hunger of body and soul, the misery of their days and the apparent hopelessness of things; and above it all and around it all, pervading it all, was that incessant, endless, monotonous chirping of the cricket, and that cricket sank into his mind and into his soul, and that cricket, that he calls "The Singer of Poverty,"--its song became the source of the song of the poet.

"And do you wish to know," he asks, "whence comes my sighs and the tears that glisten through my song?" He describes his home and his widowed mother, worn and weary of life, and seven orphaned children, and their struggles and their privation; and he describes his mother rising in the chill, cold dawn to kindle a fire in order to warm the shivering little bodies of the seven children; and to knead the dough so that they may have a bit of bread to eat; and as a child he would hear her sigh, and as a child he would see the tears run down her cheeks, and it is those tears and those sighs that mingled with his bread and entered his bones and his soul, and that was his song.

Bialik, like few men before him or since, describes the ghetto in all its ungainliness and all its misery. In one of his poems, called "The Lone Star," he speaks of the ghetto life.

"My father is black poverty, bitter exile is my mother,

But it is not the wanderer's staff,
Nor the beggar's wallet, I fear.

For seven times more cruel, more terrible than these,
Is life itself, the life that knows no hope nor radiance,
The life of a hungry dog fettered to its chain.
O curse upon you, life, that knows no hope!"

And yet when Bialik left the ghetto and entered into the great western world, the world of life and movement, of glitter and song, and there drank deep of the culture of other peoples, Bialik, when he reaches manhood and passes beyond the zenith of manhood, somehow looks back to that ghetto life with a certain longing; not for its poverty and its misery and its meanness, but for those rare spiritual sanctities which were there; for the steadfast loyalties and the sacrificial valor which were symbolized in the ghetto by the synagogue, by the school, by the student. And somehow, when Bialik writes of these things, one feels his nostalgia, his yearning for a world of rare beauty, which somehow has escaped him, and it is in those poems, like the "Talmud Student," and the poem on "The Threshold of the House of Study," and the poem on "Do you wish to know Whence your People drew the Strength," that one discovers that rare soul of the great Jew in Bialik.

In the poem "The Talmud Student" all the beauty of the old house of learning, the yeshiva, in all its pathos and all its sublimity and all its tragedy are mirrored; that student, the like of which exists nowhere else today, the

Talmud, the rabbinic student of the old yeshiva,--the man who, having forgotten life, and by life forgotten, stifles in himself all the longings and all the passions of young manhood; the man who stands there in the little corner of his little synagogue, chanting in the old, old litany of his people--the old rabbinic dialectics and the old rabbinic law, forgotten, isolated, while the great world of song and laughter and movement echoes around him. And Bialik describes that student in most marvelous, artistic pigments. I want to read you a line or two.

"Still, in some hidden towns of our Dispersion,
There smoulders on, concealed, our ancient light,
In cities where our God a remnant spared,
As 'twere a glowing coal amid the ashes,
Where, like a plucked-out fire-brand, faintly smoke
Weak human lives, poor souls of small account,
Who live without a life and early wither
Like blades of grass upon a thirsty land.
And sometimes, when you walk abroad by night,
In some such little city blest, while stars
Twinkle above your head, and all around
The grasses whisper and the winds tell tales--
You hear the distant murmur of a voice,
And you see behind a pane a distant gleam,
And then a figure like a corpse's shade,
That rocks and wavers, bending up and down,

With meaning chant--a rush of broken thoughts
Is borne to you upon the waves of silence.
A Talmud Student, prisoned in a Kläus
And keeping nightly vigil, you behold.
Within those walls, not one day, but six years,
Have watched his toil--his childhood ripened there
Too soon, his youth matured there ere its time,
His eyes were darkened and his face grew white.
Not one day, but six years, have passed since first
He turned him to the wall in that dark spot.
No sunshine has he looked on, only cobwebs,
Only the wall, daubed with untempered clay.
Hunger and vigils, leanness and decay."

The tragedy of his life appears to the poet.

"I also in my youth have heard these voices,
Have watched these toilers, seen the wrinkled brows,
The heavy eyes, the pallid face that seemed
To beg for mercy--and each look and line
Told me of stifled feeling, sparks crushed-out,
Each look and wrinkle stirred the best within me
And rent my heart and wrung my inmost soul. . .
But when I call to mind their voice, their voice,
That wails like that of wounded men forgotten,
Lord of the world! I cry within myself,
On what were all these lives, these powers spent?"

The aimlessness, the purposelessness of their study and their

work strikes the poet with all its grim tragedy.

In another one of his poems, a really magnificent, triumphal ode, the poet is returning from the great world of marvelous palaces and theaters and churches to that little village and to the mean, little, shabby synagogue; he enters that synagogue, and he exclaims with prophetic fervor and with marvelous understanding:

"If you wish to know, brother, the source whence

Thy persecuted and hounded brothers drew the strength
To endure the exile;

If you wish to know whence they drew the comfort
To endure the endless mockery and contumely of the world.

If you wish to know the fortress whither
They brought their holy of holies, their Torah,
There to be safeguarded through the storms
of adversity;

If you wish to know the dear old mother which
Folded her tired children in her arms and
Comforted them and cheered them,

Come with me to the little synagogue, lost on
The vast steppes, or in some forgotten village,
And there in the long cold nights of winter,
Or during the blazing days of summer.

If you enter you will perhaps find two or three
Time-weary, emaciated, exiled, lined and furrowed

Sons of thy people, bent over their ancient books,
Chanting the law and the lore of their forebears,

Or perhaps reciting in wistful voice the litany of some
psalm.
And there on the threshold of that synagogue,

You will be standing on the threshold of thy people's
eternal life.

There you will see the miracle of thy people's immortality.

They who suffered and died mutely and dumbly through the
centuries.

They willed to us the life, the life eternal."

Nowhere in the whole range of great literature
do you find this doxology of the Jewish people as you find
it in this song of Bialik. Bialik is the poet of the race,
and nowhere is he so truly the poet of his race as in his
songs of storm, his songs of wrath. Bialik witnessed the
pogroms of the early twentieth century--the Kishinev
massacre, or read about it or received reports about it, and
after the Kishinev massacre of 1903 Bialik wrote a poem
which is perhaps the most terrible piece of poetic writing
in modern literature--"The City of Slaughter"--a soul-wither-
ing poem. And in that song this great prophet of his people
turns not in anger and in denunciation upon this stupid,
blind, blood-maddened pogromist who betrayed his people; he
turns first of all against his own people, they who cringed
like cowards into cellars and attics and garrets--they, the
sons of the Maccabees, who did not have the courage to face
death bravely; they who shrank away while their dear ones were
being mutilated and tortured! All the wrath and the passion

of the great poet is turned in vicious denunciation on his own people whom he loved so much; and then he turns in protest against God himself, the source of moral justice, and the poet, in the name of his people, demands justice for these poor, beaten, butchered creatures. That poem is a marvelous bit of writing--marvelous for its depth of feeling and volcanic eruption of passion. Concerning his people, he says:

"Today's a fast-day, come where stands the School,
(this is after he describes the city of slaughter
and the pogrom; now that the pogrom is over, the
people have run to their synagogue to pray.)

And plunge thy soul in tears, their sea of tears.
Thou hear'st the lamentations and the moans
From open mouths, from out between locked teeth.
The rent and quiv'ring sounds, like things alive,
Unite, and--hearken! now they rise again
In one despairing wail of misery,
That tosses still between a damp, dark ceiling
And upturned faces all awry with pain.
A sudden horror chills you to the bone:
Thus wails a people only that is lost,
Whose soul is dust and ashes, and their heart
A scorched desert. . . .
No roof of hatred, not a blade of vengeance,
For hark, they beat the breast and cry, Ashamm!
They pray of me forgiveness for their sin.

Their sin? the sin of shadows on the wall,
The sin of broken pots, of bruised worms!
What will they? why stretch out their hands to me?
Has none a fist? And where's a thunderbolt
To take revenge for all the generations,
To blast the world and fear the heavens asunder
And wreck the universe, my throne of glory?"

The poet wonders why his people cannot arise in wrath and anger and vengeance, rather than cringe in self-pity and self-denunciation; and he turns to God in protest. Bialik is not the first great poet of Israel who demanded justice of God. Jeremiah did it, and Ezekiel, and the great Job. But in each case these prophets and poets soon turned upon themselves and the cause of the sufferings of the people. They chastised themselves, and they vindicate God's justice. Not so Bialik. Bialik does not apologize for divinity. And Bialik, in the bitterness of his soul, portrays the impotence of divinity in the face of the terrible injustice of the world. And so he says:

"Now go without the town when none may see thee
And steal thee softly to the place of burial;
And stand beside the martyrs' new-made graves,
And stand and look and let thine eyelids fall--
And turn to stone.
Thy heart shall fail within thee, but thine eye
Burn hot and tearless as the desert sand.

Thy mouth shall ope to shriek aloud for vengeance,
And dumb as are the tombstones shalt thou stand.
Go, look and look, behold them where they lie
Like butchered calves, and yet thou hast no tear
To give to them, as I have no reward.
For I have hither come, O ye dead bones,
To beg of you, forgive me!
Forgive your God, you that are shamed for ever!
For all your dark and bitter lives forgive me,
And for your ten times dark and bitter death!
For when you stand tomorrow at my threshold,
When you remind me, when you ask for payment,
I shall but answer you: "Come, see, I've nothing."

But one must not be led to think that Bialik has denounced divinity and has turned from God, in these terrible cries of justly outpourings of a mutilated solace. Bialik believes in his God so strongly that he feels competent and justified to come before him and demand justice; demand of God to vindicate his own moral law.

But Bialik is not only the poet of storm and anger and strife and denunciation; Bialik is also the poet of love, of compassion, of hope. In his fine moments of exaltation he visions his people rebuilt and reconstructed, spiritually sane, and moving on from strength to strength along the road of its eternal destiny. I shall close with reading just this one poem of his called, "At Sunrise." This is like a peaceful finale after the

stormy and stressed poetry of his life.

"Awake with the sunrise! Clamber on the hills
To find the gold orient,
And being first to greet the sunlight, each
Will quaff to his soul's content.
The dear morn of God like a sapful freshet goes
Around you, and o'er flows;
For all the aged and withered in your heart
Its sunlight will revive,
And all idolatrous and vile therein
The morning star will thrive.
Guard ye the golden treasure hid away
As succour for your heart.
Ye who approached, burdened with sin and care,
Guiltless and rich will part.
O! ye decrepit, rotted of the night,
Pray for the sun--the light.
Moist with dew of blossoms ye'll return
And deck with mantle green
Each one his friend, and each in his father's house
Will tell of the wide demesne
Then in the fields ye will strew the stars to play
On the children's heads to-day.
Descend to find in the dark
Your brother low and stark,
The light will tremble, leaning on his heart,

And lips pressed softly ope:
'Rise, brother, pray, for there is room for prayer,
And a place for hope--come hope!'
Then he will awake--your friend of yesternight--
And thirst for the sun--the light.
If ye, in search for sunlight, found but void,
Go, fashion it from nought.
Hew it from crags and quarry from the rocks,
In cells of the heart be it sought.
And when the God of light draws back the veil
'Twill spread and never fail;
Your waifs will come anew
To life their soul to you
And in your bosom they will lodge desires
Sacred--to their sons impart
This heritage from age to age command:
'Live, stint no toil, take heart!
'Weaned from the darkness, drawn from the breasts of
night,
Clasp to your head the light!'"

And so through the Stygian gloom of pogrom and
massacre, of his starved youth and a denied manhood, and so
through the multitudinous suffering of a race, homeless,
wandering, this prophet-poet of his people sees the ultimate
life, and calls upon his people to pray, for there is room
for prayer; to hope, for there is room for hope; to live, to

stint no toil; to take heart; to fashion out of their own
lives that glow, that light, which will help them onto the
very battlements of the sky.

There is the prophet of Israel speaking.

--o--



1. I wish to thank this morning of a great and
every poet, ^{biography} writing in a great, and being language
- Hebrew.

2. Some people are accustomed to speak & think of Hebrew
as a dead language, like Latin and classic Greek.
- and yet Heb. was never a dead lang. except to
those who did not understand it. It was not
a spoken language for many centuries, but so
faithfully was it tended and cultivated ~~down~~
since it ceased to be a spoken lang. - since the
exile - that as soon as the occasion was ripe -
in modern Palest. - for its revival, it, from
to life again sprang, and early - as the new
biography & millennium of it.

3. Even tho it was not the vernacular of the people
these re centuries, it was in deuse. It was
part of all the Jews' lang. of prayer. To this
day I/O of Jewish prayer in Hebrew. It was the lang.
& instruction in the school. Heb. was not taught in
the school as Latin is now taught - just one subject
among many others. But was much as the whole
curriculum of instruction. In the Heb. schools created
recent times created, the Bible & the Talmud, & as
as much as there were exclusively in Hebrew. The
whole school life, the Jew child was saturated
with the Hebrew.

6. In East. Europe, where modernism was lost to
made headway, Hebrew was used by the early leaders
as their medium of propog. for Haskalah.
The great attack upon the med. & the ghetto-
life - its superst. & obscur. re. backward, &
unambitious was made by some, the ghetto
who had hated Eur. culture, and who conceived
their heroic struggle in the 18th & 19th c. Ex.
For all these ^{early} reformers - Leberstein, ^{Polak} Mapa,
Judah Leon Judson, Steinthal, and a
host of others, in novel, poems, essays & tales
battled at the superst. ghetto walls, Israel and
sowed their seed. ^{but} their work is & ext.
artistic merit - They were schol. & prop. - rather
artists - but they paved the way for a great artist.
7. Cult. revival in Israel, which ^{has} set in the
last generation.

7. The revival of the sp. of nationalism among Jews,
following the pogroms, 1882, and again the
Alufin affair, of 1895 (?), ^{the 1st Zion. Congress} ^{in 1897} saw a renewed
to Heb. life - If Israel is to be returned to her
land to nat. indep. we must have a nat.
lang. The learning & teaching of Heb. now became
a symbol and an evidence of deep Jew.
nat. sentiment. Within the last generation
- the greatest Heb. writers of the 19th & 20th c. have

2. In another poem called mail "who goes with
to know from whom I inherit my song? - The
circle of 1830 to 1840 - the song, poverty - Alas,
the desolation in home - the want, the hunger -
the sound of the raven's chirping, the anvil - as an
exhausted old leaving hopeless repair - My eyes
underneath mother's ^{exhausted by lab} rephased - taking an early
dawn to warm the thaw where he sheds - and
to take some bread for them - the head fell into
the head and looked into her when
Sheth - 1830 to 1840 p. V .

10 - He takes the Sheth to life, its money, its
habits - But after he had left it for the
brighter fields and the free life of the great
world - He returns to it after many years,
with a legacy in his heart - not for its poverty
etc. but for the spirit, beauty, which there
awaits the squalor - the despair, the
loyalty, the purity of heart & soul, which the Sheth
school & the Sheth men - its Sheth student
symbolized - Brail had left his early left
for behind him - ^{the narrow path of struggle} And yet there is a sad
nostalgia for the poems the
a lay, for a world which held rare treasures
- at times he rises to their defence - as though
were the supreme savants / he were not -

11. Bialik is the essentially the racial poet -
the spirit + the prophet.

1. Populus - Kesheneff 1903 - ...
- the most terrible, the most disgusting piece, writing
in our literature - if not in all literature -

2. Turns not against butchers - but against
his own people who hid, concealed -
- cry + wean -

3. (p. 83) - caricatures his people -

12. Protest.

1. Other Hebrew writers rebelled - blamed
Eos - not Bialik - Jeremiah, Ezekiel,

2. Revenge - Justice. ...

אם ילד צדיק יצא חיים
אם אדם צדיק יצא חיים
האדם הצדיק יצא חיים

3. ...

3. for beg, pardon (p. 82)

1. World, obscene, outburst of a beaten,
mutilated but unconquered soul,
which believes in God, and demands God's
Vindication of God's moral law -

12. 44th. Redemption - Zion - Future. ... p. 98

that this people -

1- 3 מנוח - The ^{Talmud} student - In which is mirrored
the grandeur - the pathos - the sublimity & the
tragedy of the world - when young men, the
world's future, by the world's past - suffering the
legionnaires' life hunger, & every moment
spend their strength & power on the ancient
Talmud, the Talmud - & returning in the grand
chant, the world, his antiquated dialectics
and its 'beautiful' ~~romantic~~ lore, while the
great world echoes round around.

p. 66-75

2x13 ליל ליל ליל ליל - 1. Spring - they the - to face
death - 2. Comfort, to endure eternal conscience
3. Bosom into which were poured all the
tears - 4. Fortress, into which they for then
placed for safety - Torah - Halakha - Halacha - Prut
5. Merciful Mother, who embraces her
children - The old & true - ladder ladder ladder -
a few years - old ladder ladder - & let
Bosom deep - solus - feruana
- Pralus - Threshold - Treasure gold
Smil -

מנוח ליל ליל ליל
ליל ליל ליל ליל