Random Harvest

The Novellas of Bialik

Translated by
David Patterson
Ezra Spicehandler

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Preface

Although Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik is known primarily as a poet—perhaps the greatest Hebrew poet in the past six hundred years—his novellas and other fictional prose writings are also of the highest quality and deserve the attention of a wide reading public.

Four of his stories, translated into English by I. M. Lask, came out in New York in 1939 under the title *Aftergrowth and Other Stories,* and the same translator had a fifth story appear under the title "Aryeh the Brawny" in *Israel Argosy* 7 in 1960. Similarly, Herbert Danby's translation of "The Legend of the Three and Four" was included in *And It Came to Pass,* published in New York in 1938. These translations have great merit, but they have been out of print and virtually unobtainable for many decades. Moreover, over the past half century English itself has undergone considerable changes and acquired a greatly expanded vocabulary.

In the light of these factors, a new translation of Bialik's five novellas, together with *The Legend of the Three and Four* (Second Version), seems both appropriate and timely. These works are presented to the English-language reader in the hope that they may help to illustrate the quality of modern Hebrew literature in its period of revival.

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Ezra Spicehandler

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Introduction

Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik (1873–1934) is considered to be the greatest modern Hebrew poet. His career spans a crucial period in Jewish history, and he belongs to the golden age of Eastern European Hebrew and Yiddish literature.

Biography

Born in the village of Radi in the Ukrainian province of Volhynia to a middle-class family that had become impoverished, Bialik was raised in the nearby town of Zhitomir, whose Jewish community had still preserved an almost medieval religious culture. He received a strictly traditional education (Bible, Talmud, and Midrash) and at the age of seventeen (1891) was sent to study at the great Yeshivah (Talmudic academy) of Volozhin. By the time he arrived there, he had already fallen under the influence of the *Haskalah,* the Jewish enlightenment movement, which had aspired to integrate Jews into the predominant European culture of the countries in which they resided. The naive *Haskalah* hopes, however, were shattered by the Russian government's adoption of reactionary policies following the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881. Most Russian Jews despaired of ever gaining emancipation under the oppressive czarist regime. Millions, driven by poverty and discrimination, began a mass emigration to Western Europe or to the United States, where economic and political conditions were more amenable.

A large segment of the Jewish intelligentsia who remained in Russia was attracted either to its rising revolutionary movements or to the *Ḥovevei Tsion* (Lovers of Zion), the pre-Zionist movement, and its call for Jewish auto-emancipation in a reestablished Jewish

homeland in Ottoman Palestine. Bialik and many of his fellow students became supporters of the *Ḥovevei Tsion*, and many became followers of Aḥad Ha-am, who advocated a cultural Zionism, which would primarily attempt to preserve the ethical values of Judaism by redefining them in secular terms. Although not fully rejecting the political objectives of Zionism, Aḥad Ha-am argued that the post-*Haskalah* generation had to solve what he called the problem of Judaism—that is, how to maintain Jewish cohesion in an age in which religion was losing its sustaining power. He urged that the primary goal of Zionism be to establish a Jewish center in the ancient homeland, which would serve as a focal point for a Jewish cultural renaissance.

Bialik began writing Hebrew poetry even before he left Zhitomir. Anxious to publish his early poems, he went to Odessa, then the center of the Lovers of Zion and a capital of Hebrew letters. During his first short stay in Odessa, he met I. H. Ravnitsky, the editor of *Ha-Pardes,* an influential Aḥad Ha-amist journal. Ravnitsky recognized Bialik's literary talent and agreed to publish one of his earliest poems. Unable to establish himself in Odessa, however, Bialik returned to Zhitomir. By the time he married in 1892, he was recognized as one of the most innovative and talented young Hebrew poets of his generation. In the 1890s, he engaged unsuccessfully in the lumber business, a trade that both his own family and his father-in-law had pursued. Like many Hebrew writers of his generation, he was compelled to turn to the teaching of Hebrew for his livelihood. Nevertheless, Bialik, encouraged by Ravnitsky, first his mentor, then his close friend and collaborator, continued writing poetry.

Bialik's poems during his early period often reflect his despondency at his "failure" in Odessa and his reluctant return to provincial Zhitomir. Personal anguish is aggravated by his concern for the sociopolitical state of Russian Jewry:

Who knows how many tears are yet to fall—
What storms will yet descend upon our heads.
Before a good and powerful wind [spirit]
bursts forth
And drives the clouds into the desert
Wiping away the veil obscuring our skies
And blocking our cries from reaching heaven.

"Wandering Afar"

His verse is suffused with a deeply passive resignation to the poet's tragic fate:

> *God has not summoned me to blow the trumpet blasts of battle*
> *The very smell of war fills me with terror*
> *I cringe whenever the bugle sounds on high—*
> *Between violin and sword I choose the violin.*
> ***"The Song of Israel"***

Yet his Aḥad Ha-amist hopes at times reinforce his faith in ultimate salvation:

> *You shall not totter, O tent of Shem*
> *From your piles of dust I shall rebuild your walls . . .*
> *And when I restore God's ruined sanctuary*
> *I'll widen its curtains, cut windows in it.*
> *Then the light will drive away the dark shadows.*
> *And when the covering cloud shall rise, God's glory shall descend.*
> ***"At the Threshold of the Beit Midrash"***

In the great poem of those sad years, "Ha-Matmid" (The Diligent Talmud Student), while lamenting the seemingly meaningless fixation of the pious student on archaic texts at the cost of his health and the suppression of his natural adolescent instincts, he is able to declare:

> *And I recall how strong the seed, how healthy*
> *The grain buried in your stunted field . . .*
> *And how great the blessing might be wrought*
> *Were a single ray of sunlight to heat it with its passion.*

This faith that the remnant spark of a dying fire, the surviving seed of an abandoned and desiccated field, might still be rekindled into a luminous flame, is the other side of the despair that had darkened the young poet's world.

In a sense, the hero of his first story, *Aryeh Baal Guf (Big Harry),* serves as an antipode (to use a phrase coined by Jacob Fichman) to the pale, aesthetic Talmud student. Harry's vitality, despite his vulgarity, almost unwittingly attracted Bialik's imagination.

In 1900, Bialik finally settled in Odessa and, except for a short stay in Warsaw, lived in that city until he left Russia in 1921. He soon became an intimate younger colleague of Aḥad Ha-am and the important Hebrew and Yiddish writer Mendele Mocher Sefarim. Within a decade Bialik emerged as a leading figure in the Jewish cultural life of Odessa and in its coterie of Hebrew and Yiddish writers and intellectuals. With Ravnitsky, he established Moriah, an important publisher of Hebrew and Yiddish books. Moriah specialized in Hebrew readers and children's books—many of which were written or scrupulously edited by Bialik himself. Two of its "best-sellers" were Bialik's poetical works and *Sefer ha-Aggadah,* the masterful anthology of Talmudic and Midrashic legends and anecdotes that to this day enjoys an enthusiastic readership.[1]

After the Communist revolution in 1917, Bialik realized that Jewish culture had no future under an antireligious and anti-Zionist Bolshevik regime. In 1921, through the intervention of the Russian writer Maxim Gorky, who admired his poetry (in Russian translation), Bialik succeeded in obtaining exit visas for his family and several Jewish writers and their families. He moved to Germany, where he reopened and expanded his publishing house, Moriah, and also established Dvir, originally devoted to more scholarly works. In 1924, he was able to realize his youthful dream of settling in Palestine, by then under British Mandate. He moved to Tel Aviv, transferring his publishing houses to that city. There he became the leading writer and literary mentor of an entire generation of Hebrew writers and a major figure in the growing Jewish community in Palestine. In 1933, the entire Jewish world celebrated his sixtieth birthday. He died the following year and was mourned by thousands of his ardent admirers.

Bialik was primarily a great Hebrew poet. He began writing as a *Ḥibbat Tsion* (Love of Zion) poet, although even then, he tried to tone down the prevailing sentimentalism and the fine phrasing that

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[1]An English translation of this work, entitled *The Book of Legends,* was published by the Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1992.

characterized most of the works of his older contemporaries. As an Aḥad Ha-amist, he believed that the battle against the old religious culture had ended and that the central problem was how to enter the modern world and at the same time preserve and advance the rich heritage of the Jewish past. In this stage of his career, he believed, as did Aḥad Ha-am, that Hebrew writers should confine their writings to Jewish themes, although he did write several personal poems whose contents were more universal.

During his Odessa period, he increasingly turned to lyrical themes, writing poems about the inner struggles of the self, the creative artist, and nature and love. The sunny, quasi-Mediterranean Odessa led to somewhat "sunnier" works. Bialik had reached the peak years of his creative enterprise.

In 1902, his collected poems finally appeared. The reception was enthusiastic. Josef Klausner's laudatory review was typical: "Bialik must be considered to be the Jewish national poet . . . not only a Hebrew poet, but one who fully (expresses) the Jewish national spirit." The volume closed the first phase of his career, largely dominated by poems on Jewish themes. He was, however, moving to a more subjective, universal period, although he never completely abandoned "national" subjects. Victor Ehrlich reminds us that nineteenth-century Russian poets often saw themselves as prophets and were viewed as such by their audience.[2] The overwhelming impact of the Hebrew prophets upon Hebrew readers led them even more to endow their "national poet" with the mantle of prophecy—a role that Bialik frequently declined and yet often assumed. He described his Yiddish poem "The Last Word"—as "prophetic." Its first line is "I have been sent to you by God."

As the *Haskalah* came to a close, some Hebrew poets began replacing the syllabic meter used by their predecessors with the accented meter prevalent in romantic German and Russian poetry. Bialik was among the earliest Hebrew poets to adopt this new metrical system. However, his stresses followed the Ashkenazic pronunciation of Hebrew, which ignored the biblical accentuation, a system scrupulously observed by the Sephardic pronunciation and employed by speakers of modern Hebrew. Although Bialik pre-

[2]Ehrlich, Victor. *The Double Image.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1960. Pp. 18–20.

dicted that a later generation of Hebrew readers might not "hear" his superb rhythms or be familiar with many of his rhymes, he used the Ashkenazic pronunciation current in his day in most of his verse.

Poetry

In Odessa, he composed four long poems (*Poemas,* as the Russians called them): "The Dead of the Wilderness," "The City of Slaughter," "The Scroll of Fire," and "The Pond." Of the four, only the last was purely lyrical, whereas "The City of Slaughter" was clearly "national." "The Dead of the Wilderness" and "The Scroll of Fire" fall somewhere in between. Although they involve national themes, they do so subtly and symbolically. They can, therefore, also be read as "universal" poems. "The Dead of the Wilderness" has the plasticity characteristic of an epic poem. "The Scroll of Fire" is written in a strongly lyrical vein, with allusions to the poet's personal struggle with his identity as both a Jew and an artist endowed with a unique mission.

"The City of Slaughter" (1904) is the longer of two powerful poems composed in the wake of the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, an event that, although dwarfed by the Holocaust of the 1940s, in its day shocked the entire Western world. It is written in a "prophetic style"—God addressing the prophet—but is revolutionary because it turns the traditional Jewish *kinah* (lament) on its head. The accused are not the perpetrators of the massacre or the unforgiving God who inflicted a deserved punishment upon his wayward people, but the bloodless Jews who passively endured bloody outrages without the courage to resist their savage attackers.

The God of Israel who addresses the poet is reduced to a helpless bankrupt whose once-great values are ignored by humanity. He is no longer capable of stemming the gross tide of murder inflicted upon His chosen people. The poem was immediately translated into Yiddish and Russian and became the rallying cry that evoked a more aggressive response to later attacks upon Jews.

"The Dead of the Wilderness" (1902) is based upon a Talmudic legend according to which the members of the generation of the Exodus, condemned for their insolence against God to perish in the wilderness and not to enter the promised land, never really died.

Instead they lay eternally asleep in the desert, ready to rise at redemption's call.

The poem opens with a powerful description of the army of dead warriors stretched rank upon rank in the scorched desert sands. Periodically they are attacked by predators: an eagle, a lion, and a snake, but each retreats before striking the valiant army, repelled by the power and majesty it exudes. According to Numbers 14–15, the warriors, upon hearing God's cruel decree, attempt to advance up the hill country toward Canaan in revolt but God cruelly crushes their mutiny. Bialik expands the story and has the Israelites rise in revolt against God several times in different historical epochs, only to be repulsed each time and return subdued to their slumber. At times the desert, too, rises in stormy rebellion against its Creator: "[It] wakens to avenge the desolation imposed by Him. Dares to pour out the basin on His face . . . and wreak havoc upon His world, restore chaos upon His throne."

One may read the poem "straight" as a magnificent epic poem. F. Lachover, in consonance with his generation, gives it a national interpretation.[3] The dead, he suggests, symbolize the dormant Jewish people confined to exile, yet possessing a latent power that from time to time impels them to revolt against their fate, attempt to force God's hand and regain their freedom. The predators, he contends, are symbols representing Israel's oppressors: Egypt—the snake; Babylon—the lion; Rome—the eagle (these symbols are found in the Bible and Midrashic literature).

Others have suggested that the poem is a hymn celebrating man's Promethean struggle against the restrictions imposed by God, the Creator—humanity's eternal struggle to alter the natural order with the power of science and intellect.

Like Yehuda Halevi, his great medieval predecessor, Bialik expressed his dissatisfaction with the alien metrics and rhyme patterns adopted by Hebrew poetry throughout the ages. Despite his mastery of these forms, Bialik felt that they often jarred the natural cadences of the Hebrew language. On various occasions he composed poems in free verse but usually reverted to the accepted European models. "The Scroll of Fire" (1905) was his boldest experiment to free his poetry from these conventions.

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[3]Lachover, Fischel. *Bialik Ḥayyav Vitsirotav* (Vol. 2). Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1950. Pp. 400–406.

During his relatively short stay in 1904 in Warsaw where, for a time, he served as the literary editor of *Ha-Shiloaḥ*, he may have read some of the great Polish national poets—Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Slowacki, Jan Kasimierz, and Krasiński—and been impressed by their recourse to ancient Polish myths and folklore. He probably also came across the prose poems of the Russian and European symbolists and neoromantics. Yet the form he chose for "The Scroll of Fire" was essentially his own. He described it as "a mosaic of legends reworked by his imagination." The basic plot had its archetype "in the quest for the Holy Grail." He drew upon two older Jewish myths: the first was the rescue of the holy fire from the destroyed Temple of Jerusalem, as related in Maccabees 1:18–2:13 and retold in the medieval *Chronicle of Josipon*. The prophet Jeremiah rescued the sacred fire that had descended from heaven and carried it to Babylonia, where he hid it in a cave. There it remained until Ezra and Nehemiah rebuilt the Temple and restored it to its new altar. The second was the Talmudic and Midrashic legend about two hundred youths and two hundred maidens who were taken captive by the Romans at the fall of Jerusalem to be enslaved as prostitutes in Roman brothels. Apprised of this scheme, the chaste maidens leaped to their death into the sea and the youths followed suit (Babylonian Talmud 75b and Midrash to Lamentations 1:45).

In Bialik's version, the act of rescuing and concealing the fire recurs following the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.). This time the holy fire is salvaged by an angel, who is also charged to guard "the cup of tears" shed by God whenever Jews suffered. When filled to the brim, the cup signals redemption. The angel flies with the flame to a desert island and places it atop a craggy hill. God orders him to guard the fire as well as the "Hind of Dawn," the symbol of the Jewish people and its messianic hopes. Shortly thereafter the two hundred youths and the two hundred maidens taken by the Romans are cast away on an arid desert island. The groups are placed on either side of a deep ravine through which a perilous river flowed. Among the youths, two tall males of equal height stand out above the others. One is a gentle youth whose clear eyes are fixed upon the sky as if he is seeking for the star of his life; the other is a wrathful young man with sullen eyes cast down upon the earth, searching for what his soul has lost.

The bright-eyed youth appears to represent the optimistic aspect of Jewish history, and the dark-eyed youth, Jewish despair and loss

of hope. In various works, Bialik referred to the negative reaction that persecution and anti-Semitism provokes among despairing Jews—the other side of Jewish messianism. If God or man denies them salvation, its frustrated victims should turn to terrorism, an attempt to undermine Western civilization from within. The bright-eyed young man rejects this spirit of despair and calls instead for a song of consolation and reconciliation, for ultimate salvation.

Before the bright-eyed young man sets out on his quest, he suddenly sees the maidens across the chasm, marching in single file, hands outspread to the sky, eyes moonstruck, heads crowned with thorns. Oblivious of the danger threatening them, they reach the edge of the ravine and tumble like a flight of white ostriches into the abyss below. The youths leap after them in a vain attempt at rescue. All drown. Suddenly a heavy, black object floats after the drowned bodies. Is it a ship or a coffin?

Only the chosen, clear-eyed youth survives.

After much agony and many trials, tribulations, and temptations, he finally reaches the craggy cliff on top of which glows the holy fire. Of all the obstacles he meets on the way, temptation is the most onerous. He constantly encounters two maidens—one a pure-eyed, innocent maiden over whose head the Hind of Dawn hovers; the other, a luscious, earthy, seductive maiden, whose image is reflected in the dark waters of the abyss. Both struggle for his soul. During his journey, he also encounters an elderly holy man who teaches him how to overcome his passion for the earthy maiden by devotion to religious asceticism. The youth seems to evade temptation and ultimately reaches the holy fire. However, just as he seizes it, he again succumbs to the allure of the lusty maiden and leaps after her into the abyss. He has failed.

Unlike the other youths, however, he survives. The dark waters carry him to the shores of a distant land. He becomes a wandering exile among his brothers, suffering with them and, at times, showing them great compassion.

> And when his heart oppressed him very much and his great dreams and true torments found him . . . he would go out of the city and sit under a desert bush raising his eyes toward the Hind of Dawn, searching for her image in the waters of the river . . . and looking at the void within his heart, facing the world in silence with his great grief, the grief of the individual.

> And the young angel . . . charged to guard the Hind of Dawn, would quietly tip the cup of silent grief, dropping from it one drop after the other, in the quiet dawn.

The two youths seem to symbolize the two possibilities of salvation—a hopeful, optimistic, and creative course or a pessimistic, vengeful, and destructive course. Bialik himself hinted that the camps represented the gap between two different manifestations of Judaism. This has been taken by some to mean the difference between Western European Jewry—in Bialik's time—optimistic and enlightened, and Eastern European Jewry—pious, mystical, and of isolationist mentality.

Baruch Kurzweil has argued that the poem should be read on two levels.[4] It depicts the inner conflict that Bialik had experienced throughout his life—between his profound sense of mission as a poet called to give voice to his people's tragedy and its struggle toward its national renaissance, and his personal predilection as an artist seeking to express his selfhood. The maidens symbolize the eros—passion, beauty, nature; the youths and the old sage represent the puritanism of the Jewish tradition—ascetic, ethical, and devout. The subject of the poem is the age-old conflict between the Hellenic view of life and the Jewish view. The two maidens also represent the conflicting attractions of the eros itself—the innocent, angelic female as against her seductive, sensual counterimage. For Kurzweil, the destruction of the Temple alludes to the destruction of traditional Judaism by the forces of modernity (European civilization). The flame salvaged by the angel symbolizes the core of Judaism that Aḥad Ha-amists had hoped to salvage by giving Judaism a moral, positivist, and historical interpretation. The failure of the youth to hold on to the flame expresses Bialik's fear that Aḥad Ha-amism might fail to salvage the holy fire.

In "The Pond" (1904–1905) Bialik is at his lyrical best. He began the poem while in Warsaw. Members of Warsaw's corps of Hebrew and Yiddish authors were more "European" than the staid Odessans and subject to the influences of the neoromantic and symbolist literary trends that had begun to dominate continental writing:

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[4]Kurzweil, Baruch. *Bialik ve Chernikhowsky* (Bialik and Chernikhowsky). Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1967. Pp. 47–51.

In the thick foliage, isolated from the world,
In the shadow of a tall oak, blessed by light
and taught by storms,
It [the pond] dreams alone of an upside down
world spawning its golden fish,
Yet who knows what is in its heart?

Are these echoes of Dante's forest, symbols for the turbulent visible world—and does the pond, the mirror reflecting the forest and contemplating its true essence, signify the mind and heart of the artist?

The poem's theme is the dilemma of the artist who in childhood experienced the world as a unified whole but, with maturity, has lost this sense of wholeness. In Bialik's generation this dysfunction is linked to the loss of faith in God. The artist (the pool) is (or holds up) a magic mirror to the universe, restoring its shattered unity.

Yet Bialik at times doubted whether this quasi-Platonic idea could indeed fill the void left by this severance.

But who knows perhaps it [the pond] dreams
secretly
And that only in vain does the prince wander
Searching in the primeval forest, in desert
sands, and sea beds
For a lost princess

"The Pond" is structured in patterns of contrasts: morning, then moonlit night, a stormy day, and a serene dawn. It closes with a lyrical intrusion of the speaker's self, shifting the discourse from the third person to the first.

In my youth . . .
When the wings of the Shekinah *first fluttered*
over my head
And my heart knew how to yearn unto death
. . .
Seeking a refuge for its prayers,
I would sail forth in the heat of a summer's day
To the glorious kingdom of serenity—
To the forest's thicket.

Among God's trees that never heard the sound
of an ax . . . ,
I would wander for endless hours
Alone with my heart and my God until
I came upon
The forest's holy of holies . . .
Inside the curtain of leaves
Is a small green island, soft with grass
. . . Secluded, as if it were a world by itself,
A sacred shrine . . .
Of venerable forest trees . . .
Its ceiling—a small blue dome . . .
Its floor—glass: a pond of lucid water,
A silver mirror framed in wet grass
Containing . . . a second universe.

The poem closes with a hymn, which translates the array of images into the secret language of the gods. It is a secret, wondrous, soundless language in which God reveals Himself to His elect. It is a language in which the Ruler of the World contemplates His profoundest thoughts and in which the creative artist gives concrete form to the meditations of his heart, finding in it the solution to an ineffable dream. It is indeed language of imagery.

And here follows a rich catalog of contrasting visual images: the broad strip of blue sky and its expanse, the white and black little clouds; the tremor of a golden stand of wheat, the stature of a cedar; the flutter of a dove's white wing, the soaring pinions of an eagle; the beauty of a man's body, the brilliance of the eye's glance; the wrath of a sea, the gay mischief of its waves; the silence of falling stars, and so on.

In this language, the language of all languages,
The pond spells its never-ending riddle to me.
And secreted in the shade, bright, serene, and
silent
Seeing everything and seen by everything
within it,
It seemed to me to be the open eyelid of the
prince of the forest, great in mystery
And steeped in thought.

Stories

At the urging of his colleagues Bialik again returned to writing prose fiction. This was in keeping with Russian literary traditions. Great poets like Pushkin and Lermentov wrote not only poetry but works of fiction as well.

Mendele Mocher Sefarim (1835–1917) was the most important writer of Hebrew and Yiddish fiction at the time. He was influenced by the social realism that pervaded contemporary Russian letters—a realism with a satirical bent that lashed out at the social problems afflicting Russian society. He realized that writing in the lofty classical Hebrew style then used by his contemporaries to describe the impoverished and folksy masses of Russian Jewry was awkward and inappropriate. Thus Mendele, who began as a Hebrew writer, shifted to writing his works in Yiddish, the spoken language of his characters. In the 1880s, however, in response to the prompting of many of his Hebrew writing colleagues (including Bialik), he began adapting, not merely translating, his Yiddish works into Hebrew. To do so, he felt he had to fashion a new modern Hebrew idiom that blended the "high" Hebrew style of the Bible with the "lower," more mundane, Hebrew of Rabbinic literature. This newly forged medium was seized upon by the fiction writers of Bialik's generation and became "the style" in which many of them wrote their stories and novels.

Bialik never completely confined his prose writing to "the style." Although a number of his fictional works were influenced by Mendele's astute combination of realism and satire bordering on the grotesque, even in Bialik's earliest stories (*Big Harry,* for example), his writing is more objective and his satire modulated by a certain empathy for the butts of his humor. His cast of characters also included men and women who were less "lumpen proletariat" than those who inhabited Mendele's world. Raised as he was in a family of lumber dealers, he often depicted the milieu of middle-class merchants and dealers, who were more representative of his generation. Moreover, whereas Mendele does include gentiles in his cast of characters, they are, on the whole, alien "types" rather than real individuals. Bialik, too, maintained a certain "distance" in his treatment of gentile figures, but he had a more intimate knowledge of them (see *Big Harry, The Shamed Trumpet,* and *Behind the Fence*).

He was also attracted by the growing symbolist movement. His extraordinary command of all facets of traditional Hebrew litera-

ture was skillfully mined. As he reached the zenith of his career, both his poetry and prose writing were enriched by the use of intertextuality. His subtle employment of these subtexts appealed to his many Hebrew readers who, like him, were well acquainted with the various levels of Jewish literature. Bialik's symbolic catalog includes references to the animal world—snakes (original sin), eagles or hawks (ideals, optimism), lions (righteous anger), deer, does, and fawns (positive signs), sun, sunsets, white clouds (vision, natural beauty), the pool or pond (the inner world of the artist). These motifs repeat themselves throughout his works.

In reading the novellas, the reader will become aware of the development of Bialik's narrative skill. In *Big Harry* Bialik's style is slightly marred by digressions and lengthy descriptive passages. Works like *The Shamed Trumpet* and particularly *Behind the Fence* are more tautly constructed. *Short Friday* is a charming, humorous portrayal of the naive world of a country Rabbi and is free of any digressions.

Elements of social realism abound in Bialik's stories. Referring to *Big Harry* in a letter to Aḥad Ha-am, Bialik asserted that Harry was a "new type," not yet described in modern Hebrew literature—a brawny, self-confident, and ignorant entrepreneur. Harry's son, Moshe "the Candidate" (the sobriquet given to him by his father), is portrayed as a social-climbing young man who imitates in manner and mien the elegant and cultured members of the Polish gentry.

A whole galaxy of non-Jewish types populate Bialik's prose works: the peasant friends of Harry and Noah *(Behind the Fence)*; the faithful, quasi-"Judaized" servant Yavdoha, totally familiar with Jewish customs and traditions, Styupe, the loyal jack-of-all-trades, both employed by Yose the village Jew, and the peasant boy who is sent to ḥeder to learn how to read and write at least in Hebrew *(The Shamed Trumpet)*; the lovely Marinka and her witchlike anti-Semitic "Auntie" *(Behind the Fence)*; Ivan, Reb Getzel's street-smart servant *(Short Friday)*; and Makarka, Noah's bosom friend *(Behind the Fence)*. This cast of gentile characters also includes the various officials, high and low, ranging from sympathetic, apathetic, to hostile, whom Yose "the villager" must court, cajole, and bribe in his vain effort to remain in the countryside *(The Shamed Trumpet)*.

Of course, greater attention is given to Jewish characters: Harry, his sons, and his social-climbing wife; Alter—Harry's angry and vir-

ulent competitor; and the "fine Jews" *(Big Harry);* Noah, the Jewish child and adolescent, with his gentilelike love of nature and sport, his conventional parents, his classmates, his cynical and lusty tutor *(Behind the Fence);* the world of the Jewish children *(The Shamed Trumpet* and *Random Harvest);* the stern and abusive fathers, the caring *Yiddishe mame (Random Harvest* and *Behind the Fence);* the naively religious Pesach-Itzi, the dairyman *(The Shamed Trumpet);* and Reb Getzel, the tax collector.

Bialik's fiction concentrated upon those elements of the Volhynian Jewish milieu most familiar to him: the Jewish lumber dealers, the village Jews in charge of tree cutting or the smelting of tar, the religious functionaries: Rabbi Lippa *(Short Friday),* the pious but naive Rabbi; Reb Gadi, the *shoḥet (The Shamed Trumpet);* the innkeeper, the poverty-stricken, incompetent, and often cruel *melamdim.* We may note Bialik's penchant for the simple, unlearned Jewish classes, despite the fact that he himself was raised in the home of his erudite and moderately prosperous grandfather, had studied at a prestigious Yeshivah, and in his youth associated with Zhitomir's intellectual elite. Like his contemporary, Shalom Aleichem, his attitude to the "common folk" was on the whole sympathetic rather than critical, his humor more ironic than satirical.

His later prose writings were no longer constrained by traditional literary techniques. In *Random Harvest* he records his pseudoautobiographical memoirs, giving free rein to his brilliant poetic imagination, with seemingly little concern for the structural demands of what may have been a novel he had planned to write. The unstable conditions in Russia during World War I and especially during the Bolshevik revolution, his subsequent immigration to Germany and finally to British Palestine, his multifarious activities as publisher, scholar, and active participant in communal affairs also did not allow him the leisure required for the writing of so long a work. Indeed his literary output during that whole period was quite scant. Such works as he managed to write were shorter literary pieces, including several remarkable children's stories.

As the coeditor of *Sefer ha-Aggadah (The Book of Legends),* Bialik had a profound knowledge of the vast repository of Talmudic and Midrashic materials. In his many children's stories he had drawn upon these legends, revised and expanded them. He was particularly attracted to the legends about King Solomon, whose reign marked the golden period of the ancient Davidic monarchy.

The Legend of the Three and Four, written several years before his death, is an exciting experimental-symbolist work. Its semiarchaic Hebrew style is disarming. Bialik resorted to ostensibly older forms of Hebrew literature to write this quasi-allegorical story, open to a rich variety of interpretations. It is a veritable masterpiece.

Modern Hebrew literature has canonized Bialik as its greatest writer. His writings express the yearnings of the modern Jew for a synthesis of the hallowed traditions and ideals of a dynamic Jewish culture that evolved over three millennia and the Helleno-European culture that has permeated the modern world. His poetry deals with the crisis engendered by the loss of faith and the endeavor to salvage those elements of a religious tradition and a rich literary heritage that remain relevant in a modern age. It expresses the despair of those who, shattered by the decline of religious belief, lose the sense of wholeness, and the quest not only for a new reading of ancient texts, but also for a renaissance of Jewish culture in the new-old national home. It both personalizes and universalizes the tragedy and the quest. Although the world he described has long ago sadly disappeared and been replaced by the new, dynamic, but often brash, Israeli society, Bialik has retained much of his relevance because of his compelling literary achievement.

1

Random Harvest

Random Harvest is an incomplete work of fiction. Seven chapters (2–8) appeared in 1908 in *Ha-Shiloaḥ*, the literary journal on which Bialik once served as literary editor. Seven additional chapters (9–15) were published in 1919, and the opening chapter appeared in 1923.

Some scattered prose fragments found among Bialik's literary remains deal with a young man called Shmulik, the very name of the hero of *Random Harvest.* It would seem that Bialik had intended to write "the novel of his generation" but never finished it.

Although *Random Harvest* contains some autobiographical elements, it is a fictionalized autobiography. Bialik had occasion to criticize those readers who naively took everything he wrote in the first person to be autobiographical. Zeva Shamir, a noted Bialik scholar, goes as far as to claim that Bialik "invented" a mythological autobiography that actually was a portrayal of the life of a typical product of the shtetl rather than a real account of his own life. This mythologizing, she claims, extended to Bialik's so-called autobiographical notes, such as his letter to Joseph Klausner. Even these alleged memoirs deal with stereotypical experiences that any one of his contemporaries may have had. She makes much of Bialik's description of his cruel schoolmaster and particularly of his stern father and of the putative poverty his family had suffered after his father's early death. Bialik actually came from a middle-class family; his

widowed mother was never reduced to peddling in the town's marketplace (as he depicts her in one of his poems). He himself denied this last point. However, many of the incidents he described, particularly those reflecting the inner world of the imaginative child who was destined to become an important poet, have the ring of truth.

The Hebrew title Bialik gave to this work is *Safiaḥ,* a biblical term designating the aftergrowth of random fruits and vegetables following the Sabbatical year (when the fields in ancient Israel were left fallow [Leviticus 23:5])—hence our title *Random Harvest.* Bialik gave this term an additional connotation. He may have borrowed it from the Hebrew poet Judah Leib Gordon, who described the Hebrew writers and readers of his generation as *sefiḥim,* "the orphans of humankind, abandoned by their fathers and mothers . . . men incapable of any (productive) trade or who occupy themselves with outlandish matters." Bialik, too, extended this term not only to refer to the random chapters of this work but also to label his protagonist: "And before I begin to recount a little bit from here and there, a few chapters from the meanderings of the inner life, and the true dreams of a random son of Israel, may I be permitted to relate, without apparently any obvious connection to what has gone before or what will come later . . . "

Actually, most of the first segment (Chapters 1–6) forms a well-structured, lyrical, and fictionalized account of the narrator's earlier years in the village of his birth. Of these the first chapter is artistically the most moving, depicting the discovery of the future poet's "self":

> How true the saying is that a man sees and perceives only once: in childhood! The first visions, in that same innocence as on the day when they left the Creator's hand, they are the real essence and the very stuff of life; and those impressions that follow are secondary and deficient, seemingly like the first, but weak reflections of them, and not genuine. And from my flesh I saw this.

These primary visions are lost once the narrator leaves the village (his childhood Eden) and moves to the pitch-makers' quarter of the city (Exile). "[M]y world darkened a little and its radiance faded. In our new place of residence on the outskirts of the

town, gray and noisy days confronted me, the life of a Jewish townlet with its vexation, anger, and unpleasantness." . . .

He recalls the rural landscape he was forced to leave: the green hillock with its two tiny white houses, the splendor of its sunset, the glory of its forests, the village pond that "sparkles at the side of the hill like a bright mirror," and above all his wondrous dream of walking in a tumultuous band of people, wagons, and beasts of burden trudging along a sandy road. Everyone is returning from an unsuccessful fair, and they are disgruntled, bickering with and shouting at one another. He is dragged along with the throng. Suddenly he finds himself alongside a stream, separated from the mob by a curtain of reeds. Through a break, he sees the image of a "mysterious creature" sitting alone beyond the barrier on the grassy bank of a stream, undisturbed by the passing caravan. He ponders the mystery as he finds himself separated from both the crowd and the enigmatic stranger. Suddenly it dawns upon him: "Surely I know him, surely I have been with him. Surely he is very, very close to me and to my soul. Surely he and I are one." The dream is about the self-image of the artist in society, and the conflict between his yearning to express his unique "self" while bound to the social milieu in which he dwells and to its demands upon his heart and his mind.

The remaining chapters of *Random Harvest* do not quite reach the lyrical quality of the first. With ironic humor they describe the awakening curiosity of the gifted child, his wonder at the riddle of the mirror, his inability to read the symbols of the alphabet. He is taught them in a conventional way but gives each letter his private and richly imaginative reading. He struggles against the obtuseness and conventionalism of his Hebrew teachers and the incessant taunting of his classmates. His teachers and his father are epitomic representations of the severe discipline and the rigorous proscriptions of the religious law. He tells of his fascination with sunsets, his fear of fire, his dream of encountering a band of dwarfs.

In the second group, the sketches lose their temporal and logical order. They continue with descriptions of an inspiring and imaginative schoolteacher; they depict fascination with the biblical narratives, which, in the mind of the child, become part of his immediate experience. He describes his life as a

schoolboy, his encounter with peasant boys, the awakening of his libido—involving both his attraction to the lusty peasant girls and his memories of an idealized puppy love affair.

Bialik refers briefly to the village pond that became a recurrent motif in his poetry and to which he devoted his long poem "The Pond." Scholars have disagreed as to the symbolic meaning of the pond. For some, relying on Bialik's autobiographical letter to Klausner, it represents the mind or soul of the artist, which converts the illusory reality of the world into a truly metaphysical or aesthetic reality. Others argue that Bialik's realism precludes such a reading and suggest that the pond serves as the repository of the visions and images that are absorbed by the artist. They base their interpretation on a passage that appears in our text (Chapter 1):

> Hardly had I bared to the heavens the little windows of my soul, my two eyes, when the visions of God came streaming unsummoned from the four winds. Sometimes they would well up to me from the depths of silence, in shapes such as appear in dreams or in the waters of a clear pool. There was no speech and no words—only a vision.

Random Harvest is a brilliant unfinished poem in prose written at the height of Bialik's career. The translators have tried to convey something of the magic of the original Hebrew.