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“THE DEAD DO NOT PRAISE THE LORD”: ALTER’S PSALMS, AGNON’S “TEHILLA,” PASTERNAK’S *DOCTOR ZHIVAGO**

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Life in this world is the only life, according to the ancient biblical belief. Robert Alter (Uri) in the introduction to his translation of the book of Psalms (2007) explains why he sometimes chose one word and not another to remain faithful to the biblical belief of Psalms, and discarded here and there the excess baggage of belief in the world to come, which throughout the generations has clung to certain words and expression that appear in the psalms. Two texts from Modern literature, one Hebrew, the other Russian, exemplify in this article the tension between belief in this world and belief in the world to come of two female protagonists, independently of each other. The last part of the article relates a personal event that illumines something about Robert Alter, the man and the translator.

1. TRANSLATING PSALMS

In his illuminating introduction to his exciting translation of the book of Psalms,¹ Uri explains how he struggled to preserve its authentic Jewish nature in respect of biblical belief, and how he tried to do the impossible: reproduce in fluent English an ancient Hebrew poem, which would retain the character of the Hebrew language. That is, he aspired to render a translation that would read as if imitating the rhythm, the resonance, the poetic parallelism, the synonymity, embedded in the Biblical Hebrew; above all, it would preserve the theological and ideological meaning of the words and expressions. The English, so different from Hebrew, was meant to ingest the Hebrew and speak Hebrew in natural English. Anyone reading psalm by psalm this English translation of the book sees at once that Uri has achieved his goal. Furthermore, one who is hard pressed to understand the ancient Hebrew can find almost always a Modern English equivalent to the unfathomable Hebrew word.

Two literary texts, one from Hebrew literature and the other from Russian, floated into my vision as I read this introduction by Uri, and as I read several of the psalms that Uri translated into English. The Hebrew text

* Delivered at the “Alterations” conference, honoring Robert/Uri Alter’s seventy-fifth birthday. The conference was held at the University of California, Berkeley, on May 2, 2010.

¹ R. Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

is S. Y. Agnon's "Tehilla," whose heroine is named after the book of Psalms, *tehilim*; the Russian text is *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, in which, in an unforgettable scene, Psalm 91 is quoted.

2. AGNON'S "TEHILLA"

Let me begin with Agnon's "Tehilla," with its extraordinary eponymous heroine. Tehilla is a remarkable old woman, whom the narrator—Agnon's alter ego—meets on his return to Jerusalem after a lengthy sojourn abroad. The story consists of a series of encounters between the two, in each of which a fraction of Tehilla's long life, replete with calamity, becomes revealed; at each meeting, an aspect unfolds of her rare character and her outlook on life, which remains optimistic and yearns to repair the world. The narrator listens intently to her words, because this unique aged woman has sparked his curiosity and because Tehilla has charged him to compose a letter for her that she will take to her grave. She hopes to meet in the World to Come her betrothed, Shraga; the match had been annulled by her father over two generations before, and she wants to beg his forgiveness. Tehilla thus prepares her dying meticulously, hoping after her death to close unsettled accounts.

The book of Psalms occupies a central place in Tehilla's preparations for her departure from this world. For example, in one of the fascinating meetings of Tehilla and the narrator, he finds her in high spirits. When he asks what has made her so joyful she replies, "Each day I read the psalms appointed for the day; but today I read the psalms for two days together." But even as she explains the cause of her joy, her face grows sad. The narrator asks her to explain the sudden change. She answers:

Assuredly you know as I do, that all a man's deeds are appointed, from the hour of his birth to the hour of his death; and accordingly, the number of times he shall say his psalms. But the choice is free how many psalms he will say on any one day. This man may complete the whole book in a day, and that man may say one section a day, or the psalms for each day according to the day. I have made it my custom to say each day the psalms for that day; but this morning I went on and said the psalms for two days together. When I became aware of this I was sad, lest it mean that there was no more need for me in the world, and that I was disposed of and made to finish my portion in haste. For "it is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord," and when I am dead I shall not be able to say one psalm, or even one word.²

² S. Y. Agnon, "Tehilla" (trans. from the Hebrew by W. Lever), *Ariel* 17 (1966): 75–108.

A determinist outlook on life arises from Tehilla's words. Everything is preordained, even "the number of times [a man] shall say his psalms." So if one day she has said twofold the number, she has thereby shortened her days on earth. For the heroine, the book of Psalms signifies the time left to her in this world, because when she finishes reading it, the several times she has allotted to herself, or that have been allotted to her from on high, her time will be finished. Hence, for every day in a person's life there is meaning, and the psalms for that day are a metaphor for the purpose of the day on which they are read. A person's life acquires validity through saying psalms. The sadness that overcomes Tehilla, who has recited two portions of the reading on one day, is not because she has thus shortened her life—she has reached a great age of 104 years and her death is not something she wishes to delay—but because if the number of her days is depleted, similarly depleted is her saying psalms: after her death, she will not be able to praise God, and a human being's purpose on earth is to praise God and His deeds. Her words about death, which halts the saying of Hallel, refer to Psalm 115, as follows (in Uri's translation):

The dead do not praise the Lord,
nor all who go down in silence

These words accord with Uri's statement in the introduction:

Again and again, the Psalmists tell us that man's ultimate calling is to use the resources of human language to celebrate God's greatness and to express gratitude for His beneficent acts. This theme is sometimes given special urgency by being joined with an emphasis on the ephemerality of human life: Only the living can praise God.³

This duality of the heroine, who knows, on the one hand, "that there is only one life, here and now, and it should be used to celebrate God's greatness," and on the other hand, hopes to meet her betrothed in the World to Come and hand him a letter of contrition, is a typical elaboration of Agnon. Uri's emphasis that faith in the World to Come is foreign to the spirit of the Bible, particularly the book of Psalms, reminded me, as I have said, of Agnon's heroine, whose name derives from the book of Psalms, and who well knows its inherent outlook, namely death is the absolute end of the human's existence. However, this same heroine does not discard the later

³ R. Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, p. xx.

Jewish belief, influenced by Christianity, that there is life after death. A heroine who blends within her two beliefs is named precisely after the name of the book of Psalms, founded on the belief in this world alone.

3. PASTERNAK'S *DOCTOR ZHIVAGO*

The primacy of this world, which Uri's introduction highlights in respect of the book of Psalms, sharpened for me the significance of an indelible scene in Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. Uri's striving to retain in his translation the book's biblical-Hebrew-Jewish hue, while one of the psalms serves in a scene of the novel portraying a Christian mother, took me back to that scene.

Yuri Zhivago, we recall, is torn between his wife Tonya and his beloved Lara. At a critical point in the plot, he casts aside his restraints, his searing conscience, and his powerful affection for his wife, and departs, after a long separation, to meet his secret lover Lara. The time is the civil war in Russia, between the Whites, supporters of the *ancien régime*, and the Reds (soon to be called Bolsheviks/Communists). Yuri and Lara have fled separately from Moscow, torn apart by the fighting, and they live in villages remote from each other. A blizzard conceals Yuri's way to his destination, and he stumbles into a battle between the hostile camps. He hides behind a tree, but to no avail. The Reds capture him, and when they learn of his profession, a physician, he is taken at once to treat one of the wounded.

The injured man is a young soldier, a villager. A bullet has struck him just above the heart. Yuri cuts open the patient's jacket, and is astonished at his miraculous survival. A plain locket, with an amulet inside, has saved his life. The soldier's mother had carved onto the amulet verses from Psalm 91, the well known "deliverance" passage. I remember my amazement on reading the words. I did not understand how a simple Russian Orthodox peasant woman could know so intimately "our" Psalms, and how the Hebrew verses had become a pure and simple maternal prayer and had caused an evident miracle.

So I read the Russian mother's prayer as if she had drawn its words from the marvelous translation by Robert Alter:

He who dwells in the Most High's shelter,
In the shadow of Shaddai lies at night—
I say of the Lord, "My refuge and bastion,
My God in Whom I trust."
For He will save you from the fowler's snare,

From the disastrous plague,
 With His pinion He shelters you,
 And beneath His wings you take refuge,
 a shield and a buckler, His truth.
 You shall not fear from the terror of night
 Nor from the arrow that flies by day,
 from the plague that stalks in darkness
 nor from the scourge that rages the noon.
 Though a thousand fall at your side
 And ten thousand at your right hand,
 You it will not reach.
 You but look with your eyes,
 And the wicked's requital you see.
 For you—the Lord is your refuge,
 the Most High you have made your abode.
 No harm will befall you,
 Nor affliction draw near to your tent.
 For His messengers He charges for you
 to guard you on all your ways.
 On their palms they lift you up
 lest your foot be bruised by a stone.
 On lion and viper you tread,
 you trample young lion and serpent.
 "For Me he desired and I freed him.
 I raised him high, for he has known My name.
 He calls Me and I answer him.
 I am with him in his straits.
 I deliver him and grant him honor.
 With length of days I shall sate him,
 and show him my rescue."

In Psalm 91, God appears as a great mother-bird, who protects her chick with her wings, a recurrent metaphor in the Bible; this perhaps is the origin of the later Jewish feminine presentation of the Divine as *Shekhina*, and the Christian presentation of the Holy Spirit as a dove. A Christian mother, who sends her son away to war, will connect to this image, which was adopted and developed by the Christians. But perhaps precisely the concreteness of the danger, on the one hand, and the immediacy of the rescue from peril, on the other, as portrayed in Psalm 91—and these are typical of the ancient Hebrew worldview—are what made it relevant for a mother who asks God to protect her son here and now, from actual dangers. Not vague dangers in some barely grasped abstract space lie in wait for her son, nor does she wish for him a spiritual/mental redemption, but bodily, visible deliverance. She wants him to come back safe and sound to her bosom. So this concrete and explicit psalm is right for her, especially if it translated into Russian just as

Uri has translated it into English, so that it retains the clearly physical meaning inherent in it.

The concreteness of the danger in Psalm 91 is detailed, earthy, and clear: a fowler's snare, a specific plague, an arrow, a lion, a stone; likewise the rescue proffered by God: protective wings, an abode, guardian angels who lift the believer on the palms of their hands, a sturdy and whole covering for the body, an immediate response by the attentive God. How could a mother, who sends her son off to war, and knows the particular dangers lurking at every turn, not clasp such a minutely detailed poem, which does not speak in generalities or abstractions but in the here and now. For these dangers could somehow be talked of in general: a trap, illness, war, wild beasts—but the Psalmist prefers to realize all these specifically and concretely: illness is represented by the plague *dever*, the arrow is synecdoche for war, and even the beasts of the field will have concrete representation in the figures of the snake and the lion. And so also the deliverance that God extends is tangible, specific, and palpable.

In his introduction, Uri writes of the concreteness of the Hebrew language. The Hebrew concepts are implanted in the present physical existence of the universe. Uri gives as an example the word *zera* (semen), which signifies civilization (progeny, posterity), and other words that symbolize concrete relations between God and human being. But it seems to me that even the inventory of specific dangers that lie in wait for the human, and as against the inventory of possibilities of deliverance from them that God promises His believers, presented in Psalm 91, are also an example of the concreteness of concepts, which carries implications for the concreteness of the relationship. Similarly, God's featuring in the psalm under three different names—"Most High," "Shaddai," "Lord"—perhaps proves that each of His aspects offers rescue. All this attaches to the view that underlying the psalms are simple relations of reward to believers and punishment to non-believers, and all in this world.

Hence it is clear why the psalm in Alter's translation ends with an undertaking to the believer: "With length of days I shall sate him, And show him my rescue," and not with the words "And show him my salvation." The term *yeshua*, translated since 1611, in the King James Version, as "salvation," is replaced by Uri with the down-to-earth, concrete word "rescue." This is because the concept "salvation" has a long wake of Christian eschatological and theological meanings of redemption, principally in the World to Come. It seems to me that Pasternak too, the Jew, who designed a miraculous situation in which an amulet given by a mother to her

son saves his life—prefers “rescue” in this world to the “redemption” of the World to Come. So too, undoubtedly, does the mother who has armed her son with an amulet so that he will return to her alive. And if our concern is concreteness and earthiness, the concrete, substantial material of the amulet in this case has prevailed over the oblique words. For the amulet is made of hardy, dense material, and is placed next to the heart; this is what has saved her son “from the arrow that flies by day,” not necessarily the eternal words carved into it. They perhaps would have served the mother had her son not had the fortune of the biblical rescue, and she was obliged to find solace in the redemption that occurs in the Christian world of belief. On the other hand, had the psalm not been carved into the hard material, it is doubtful that it would have been placed next to the heart.

4. *SIN CITY AS IR AVON*

I have cited two works that came to my mind as I read Uri’s introduction to his translation of Psalms. In conclusion, I would like to relate an incident brought to my mind as I read the introduction, and brought me to a deeper understanding of the event.

When Uri visited us in Haifa, shortly before his Psalms was published in 2007, we were driving together one day in my car. A huge hoarding heralded a film titled in Hebrew *Ir Hata’im*. Uri glanced at the poster and said it would have been better to have translated the original English title, *Sin City*, as *Ir Avon*. I mused that indeed the s-sound of “s” and “c” of “sin” and “city” would then be matched by the *ayin*-sound of *ir* and *avon*, thereby preserving the alliteration. Also, syllabic pattern of the adjectival phrase “sin city” would be paralleled by the Hebrew construct *ir avon*: the first word in each language has one syllable, the second two. But in *ir hata’im*, the first word has one syllable, the second three. Brilliant! I thought. Here is Uri—it’s enough for him just to glance at the ad, and he at once translates it from English to Hebrew—and does so despite his renown for his translations from Hebrew into English, not the reverse. But here he is, able to do it in both directions with the same measure of success.

Yet when I read Uri’s introduction to Psalms, I realized that Uri is not forever walking the streets of Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem, to put right the Hebrew titles of Hollywood movies. (By the way, they frequently do need repair. Very often they are translated literally and sound clumsy and ridiculous in Hebrew.) Uri suggested rendering *Sin City* as *Ir Avon* not *Ir Hata’im*, not only because of the ring and the economy of the title in

English, which in this case can be achieved similarly in Hebrew, but also because at that time in his life he was preoccupied with the rendering of the Hebrew word *het* in English. He rejected the prevalent translation “sin” as in early and modern versions of the Psalms. This term, in his view, like *yeshua*, translated “salvation,” is replete with a Christian theological charge which transforms the nature of the relation between human being and God, or between Israel and God, to which the Psalmist refers. This is not a relation for which the term “sin” is suitable, but the word “offense” or in a few instances “crime.” Uri, who for ideological reasons discarded the known lexical connection between *het* and “sin,” in his translation of Psalms from Hebrew into English—discarded for esthetic reasons the connection between *Sin City* and *Ir Hata'im* in his translation of the movie’s title from English into Hebrew.

Presumably, if ever an Israeli film entitled *Haḥet Vehayeshua* is screened, and this is translated, Heaven forbid, into English as *Sin and Salvation*, Uri will appear on the scene and will unburden the title of its excessive theological load and will suggest translating it as *Crime and Rescue*; without doubt, he will thereby be more faithful to the spirit of the Israeli film.