History and Literature

Band, Arnold J., Cutter, William, Jacobson, David C.

Published by Brown Judaic Studies

Band, Arnold J., et al.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/73562

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2528370
The prose poem "The Scroll of Fire" ("Megillat ha'esh") is undoubtedly Bialik's most enigmatic work. For all of its supposed structural defects, it has been hailed as Bialik's greatest poem. Calling it "the most daring of his poems," Dov Sadan declares that "The Scroll" "achieves a tension that reaches a level of exoticism equaling that of the Kabbalah poets and of the hymnology of Solomon ibn Gabriol."¹

Bialik was concerned with the problem of how an aging tradition, particularly Judaism, could survive in a society that was rapidly being industrialized and secularized—a problem that occupied the minds of European intellectuals of his day. They too sought to preserve the values of their cultural and religious heritage that were being challenged by modernity. Like them, Bialik believed that a synthesis between traditional Jewish culture and the new secular European culture might be possible but could be genuine and seamless only if Jews would attain national independence and thus preserve their unique identity. Already as a young poet, he had called for such a synthesis in "Al saf beit hamidrash" ("On the Threshold of the Study House," 1884).²

The key theme of "The Scroll" is the quest to restore the holy fire of the altar in the destroyed Temple of Jerusalem, according to tradition, to a renovated Temple. During the destruction of the Temple, the fire had been salvaged by an angel and hidden away with the hope that it would be returned to the restored Temple in the end of days. Bialik believed that this restoration would occur only after the tradition that the fire symbolized would be made meaningful to modern men and women. He viewed the corpus of the literature of the past as a repository that had to be mined, reshaped, and infused with new meaning.

¹ Dov Sadan, Al sifrutenu: massat mavo (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1950), 64-66. Sadan is referring to the authors of the merkavah hymns as well as later mystical poets.
² Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Shirim, ed. Dan Miron (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1983), 1:255, lines 91-100.
In this context, he viewed the aggadah as a major source that should be tapped. Regarding the Hebrew style he had appropriated for "The Scroll," he says:

A possibility was created to write in a very ancient Hebrew ... about very modern matters. Perhaps this is the best instrument for writing very fine, modern things that cannot be grasped by the accepted linguistic instruments ... but we have to renew every single word ... to pour new metal into molds that have been emptied.3

At the very height of his career Bialik launched his project of kinnus (ingathering), collecting a corpus of those parts of classical Hebrew literature that still had relevance or, more precisely, that could be endowed with new relevance by their adaptation to new tastes and new ideas. In his introduction to Vayehi hayom, a collection of reworked Hebrew legends, Bialik asserted:

All of the legends collected in this book are the products of a literary adaptation of fragments of complete or incomplete legends drawn from various sources. ... Their structure and their elaboration are solely the fruit of the imagination and the labor of the author. ... By changing their form and their phrasing [i.e., their style] he imparted to them something of his spirit, endowing them with a singular color and shading that was lacking in their original source.4

T. S. Eliot later advocated a similar method of welding the culture of the past with that of the present. Writing in defense of James Joyce's use of Homer's Odyssey as a subtext for Ulysses, he argued:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue.... It is simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.... Psychology ... ethnology, and The Golden Bough have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago.... Instead of a narrative method, we may now use a mythical method.5

This affinity between Eliot and Joyce is recognized by Robert Langbaum:

3 Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Devorim shebe'al peh (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1934), 2:32–33.
4 Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Vayehi hayom (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1933), preface.
Eliot and Joyce show with uncompromising completeness that the past of official tradition is dead, and in this sense they carry nineteenth-century naturalism to its logical conclusion. But they also dig below the ruins of official tradition to uncover in myth the underground tradition, inescapable because of the inherent psychological patterns in which to fit the chaotic present.⁶

"The Scroll" follows the mythological pattern of a quest, in which a hero sets out in search of religious truth, a throne, a grail, a relic, or any object that could bring salvation, and encounters many obstacles before either achieving his goal or failing to do so.⁷ In his well-known public lecture about "The Scroll," Bialik said:

The subject is genizat ha'esh, the storing of the fire at the time of the destruction of the Temple. A legend relates that the holy fire from heaven, the perpetual fire, always had to be preserved on the altar and was never to be allowed to burn out because it descended from heaven. This is certainly based upon the idea that no strange fire may be kindled on the altar and is linked to the holy fire that fell from heaven which the primitive family fed and guarded lest it go out since no one knew how to rekindle it. When the Temple was destroyed, the fire was extinguished. The problem arose as to what would happen later when the Temple

---


⁷ Bialik drew, in part, upon the widespread Jewish folk tale about the search for King David’s cave in order to waken him from his deep sleep so that he might redeem Israel—a theme used by the Haskalah poet Abba Konstantine Schapiro (1839–1900). Schapiro’s poem “David melekh Yisra’el hai veqayyam” (“David, King of Israel Lives”) first appeared in *Melitsat ehad minei elef* (Petersburg: Alexander Zederbaum, 1884). It is an elaboration of a Jewish folk tale well known among Central and East European Jews. See Mordechai ben Yehezkel, “Sefer vayehi hayom,” *Knesset* 6 (1950): 47–50. Bialik’s literary remains contain two incomplete excerpts of what may have been part of a projected poem on the same theme. See Bialik, *Shirim*, 2:139–40. He had also completed the first act of a play on the theme. This has been lost. In Eastern European literatures, the Polish romantic poets were the first to compose prose poems, beginning with Adam Mickiewicz’s *Book of the Polish Nation and of the Polish Pilgrimage* (1832), a poem on the revival of Polish independence, which he wrote in biblical cadences. An English translation appears in *Konrad Wallenrod and Other Writings of Adam Mickiewicz*, Jewell Parish, Dorothea Prall Radin, George Rapall Noyes et al., trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1925). Numerous translations of Mickiewicz’s works existed in Russian and were in all likelihood read by Bialik. Russian symbolists as well often resorted to long prose poems in such cadences during the Silver Age of Russian poetry (1895–1914). An example in Russian poetry is Andre Bely’s work, “Dramatic Symphony.”
would be rebuilt. The legend was woven—in different forms—that the fire had been stored away. Where? Some say in Babylonia in one of the caves . . . and that later they would restore it and build the Temple. This . . . led me to write something about a Judean youth who went out—when the time of the Return [to Zion] had arrived—to search for this holy fire. . . . I consulted two friends about the style and said: "If I would write the thing in a biblical style, its quality would certainly be diminished. . . . It must be presented as a narrative epic, a megilla (that is in the narrative style of such biblical books as Ruth or Esther). It should be entirely epic but concentrated. Were I to use the (regular) biblical style, . . . it would lower its (i.e. the poem's) niveau. This biblical style has now become commonplace. Almost every kind of children's stories of the lowest order are written in the biblical style . . . and cannot excite the mind: The reader hardly pays attention to their contents."  

Chapter 1 of "The Scroll" begins with a description of the destruction of the Temple:  

All night long seas of flames seethed and tongues of fire darted to and fro above the Temple Mount. Stars shot out from the charred skies and sparks after sparks poured down earthward. Did God kick over His throne and shatter His crown to pieces?  

Tatters of reddened clouds heavy with blood and fire roamed the wide spaces of the night, mournfully telling of the wrath of the God of Vengeance . . . Did God rend His purple cloak and scatter its tatters to the wind?  

The terror of God lay upon the distant mountains . . . trembling, seized the sullen cliffs of the desert. The God of Vengeance, the Lord, God of Vengeance showed Himself!  

Behold the God of Vengeance. Serene and awesome, He sits upon a throne of fire in a sea of flames. His wrap is a purple flame and His footstool—burning embers. He is surrounded by fiery angels. A cruel dance of flames encircles Him. Above His head a destructive blaze consumes the world's void. Yet He is serene and awesome, sitting with His arms folded over His heart. With the look of His eyes, He causes the blaze to spread and deepens the pits of fire with the flick of His eyelids.

8 Bialik, Devarim shebe'al peh, 2:30-31  
10 The original Hebrew is daharot ishim, which echoes a line from a piyyut chanted during the hazzan's repetition of the morning Amidah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah.
Give praise to God, O fiery angels; Give praise to God, O dance of fire and blaze!^{11}

The destruction of the Temple by fire marks the end of Jewish sovereignty and the beginning of the galut (Exile). Exile means exile from God, a break that would be mended only in messianic times. However, God in His mercy, according to the tradition, allows the shekhinah, God’s aspect of love and mercy, to accompany the children He had driven away. The hurban (destruction) is a key symbol Bialik used to describe his personal tragedy—the loss of his childhood faith in a personal God and the consequent destruction of the sense of wholeness, that is, the complete union of the ego with the universe, what Yeats called the loss of the center. In psychological terms, it is the trauma of the separation of the child from its mother’s womb. In his “Al saf beit hamidrash” Bialik addresses the ruined house of study: Ha’evk lehurbankha, im evk lehurban (‘Shall I weep over your destruction, or over my destruction?’).^{12}

Fire (esh) is the central symbol of “The Scroll of Fire.” It appears three times in the first chapter, and it is the closing word of the work. Nouns and adjectives relating to fire are even more frequent. Sibilants reverberate throughout the text echoing the hissing of fire: hishtarbevu leshonot esh, reshafim reshafim, vayenapets kiso, leshonot esh, shalev venora hu yoshev al kiso, esh al rosho tisha’eh.

In the Kabbalah’s catalogue of symbols, fire represents God’s stern attribute of justice (midat hadin).^{13} God in chapter 1 is the austere judge who shows no mercy. In chapter 2, the scene changes, the fire ebbs. When the ministering angels gather to chant their morning prayers, they find the Lord of Hosts sitting over the ruins. “His head dropped between his arms and mountains of sorrow heaped upon it.” Now He shows His quality of mercy (midat harahamim). In the smoking ruins, the angels discover that Ariel, the lion of fire who routinely had crouched upon the altar, has been extinguished except for a flickering, singed curl of flame, a remnant of his mane. Suddenly a deep groan escapes from the mourning God (“the heart of the universe was broken”). God can no

---

^{11} Although by definition the prose poem dispenses with the conventional devices of traditional poetry such as a more or less fixed number of syllables per line, meter, and rhymes, often Bialik’s sentences can be scanned. The opening sentence, for example, is more or less anapestic. Most other sentences in chapter 1 are iambic. His rhythms echo biblical cadences, but his vocabulary includes postbiblical phrases and words.

^{12} Bialik, Shirim, 1:252, line 33.

^{13} See the commentary of Nahmanides to Deuteronomy 4:24.
longer contain Himself and, rising, roars like a lion. The shekhinah too rises from the ruins and hides itself in a secret refuge.

Chapter 3 introduces the Doe of Dawn (the morning star)\(^\text{14}\) and the young mournful angel. The latter had been charged to guard the pearls of tears hidden in the cup of sorrow.\(^\text{15}\) Above the Doe of Dawn, the angel sees the curl of fire,\(^\text{16}\) the remnant of Ariel flickering among the ruins. Anguished, the angel fears lest the last ember of God will be extinguished and the hope of God’s people and God’s abode will be lost forever. Quickly he flies down, scoops up the flame with a pan, and flies off above the Doe of Dawn. As he does, he sheds a tear that sinks with a hiss into the pile of ashes. Following the Doe of Dawn, he flies to a desolate island and places the flame on top of a cliff.

The intensity of “The Scroll” accelerates in chapter 4, in which Bialik reworks a talmudic legend about two hundred male youths and two hundred maidens who were taken captive by the Romans after the destruction of the Temple in order to serve in Rome’s brothels. According to the legend, upon learning of the enemy’s evil intention while still en route, the maidens dive into the sea and drown; the youths, impressed by the maidens’ courage, plunge after them and also perish.\(^\text{17}\) In Bialik’s version, the Romans cast the maidens and the youths, unclothed and

\(^{14}\) The Doe of Dawn in the Kabbalah symbolizes the community of Israel. It also represents God’s aspect of love and mercy.

\(^{15}\) There is no mention of the term “cup of sorrow” (kos hayagon) in the older sources. Kos hayegonim is first used in Judah Halevi’s piyyut “Tsiyyon halo tishali.” This is the probable source from which Bialik’s “cup of sorrow” was drawn. According to Jewish folklore, God gathers Israel’s tears into a cup; when it is filled redemption will occur. “The Scroll” reverses the process: the tears must be emptied from the cup of sorrow before redemption may take place. See Kol shirei Yehudah Halevi (Tel Aviv: Mahberot Lesifrut, 1976), 56; Hillel Barzel, Shirat hatehiyyah: Hayyim Nahman Bialik (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Hapo’alim, 1990), 341; and Yonatan Ratosh, Sifrut yehudit balashon ha’ivrit: petihot beviqqoret uvibe’ayot halashon (Tel Aviv: Hadar, 1982), 128. For the specific image of Ariel, see Fishel Lachower, Bialik: hayyav oytsirotov (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1950), 2:50. The sources are mainly in the Zohar, especially Balak, 3, 211a: “When the sacrifice was burnt at the altar, they would see the image of a lion crouching over the sacrifice and eating it.” Bialik may have read about Ariel (the lion of fire) in Reshit hokhmah, sha’ar hayirah, ch. 8. Bialik reminisced that he found a copy of this book in his grandfather’s bookcase (Bialik, Igrot [Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1937–1939], 1:163).

\(^{16}\) The “curl of fire” is one of many fire images frequently appearing in Bialik’s poetry.

\(^{17}\) Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 57b. A parallel story with different martyrs appears in Lamentations Rabbah 1:48.
without provisions, upon the same desert island where the holy fire was deposited. In a state of desperation, they wander aimlessly around the island with neither food nor water:

The fountain of their life slumbered within them... All desire was lost [and they were] helpless.... They did not know that they were walking.

Eventually, two figures of opposite qualities appear:

But when everything within them had turned dark, suddenly out of the silence: a sound of steps, sure and rhythmic, arose.... No one knew where these footsteps came from nor to whom they belonged, but the youths heard them in their hearts and knew that a wondrous person was walking among them....

One of the youths took courage and peered through the slits of his eyes, and singled out two youths set apart from the group ... both of equal stature and strength, taller than all the others. They were mysterious men whose eyes were large and wide open. But one was a tender bright-eyed youth who looked towards heaven, as if he were searching for the star of his life, while the second was a man of terror with angry eyelids who looked downwards towards the earth as if he were seeking his lost soul. The peering man was unable to decide who of the two was the wondrous one that will set their steps in the right direction.

In chapter 5 the youths discover a black river and a salt bush. They rush to appease their hunger and thirst, unaware that they are drinking from the river of perdition and eating of Satan’s root. Only the bright-eyed youth refrains from either food or water. Now the angry-eyed man approaches the youths, saying: “My brothers, have you not forgotten the song of hatred and annihilation?” Not receiving a response, he slowly chants:

Slumbering, deep and black are the abysses of perdition,  
And they spin the riddle of death....  
Eternal agony sinks like stones within them....  
And where is salvation?—She plays the whore to heaven  
And to God.

The youths remain sunken in silence, and the angry-eyed man continues:

From the abyss of perdition fetch me the song of the destruction  
Black as the charred brands of your heart;  
Carry it among the nations and spread it among the rejected of God.  
Pour its coals over their heads.  
And sow perdition and annihilation over all their fields.
And when your shadow passes over the lilies of their garden—
They shall turn black and die;
And whenever your eye shall light upon their marbles and their beauti-
ful idols,
They shall be shattered like shards;
And take laughter with you, laughter bitter and cruel as wormwood,
With which you will kill.

After a pause, the man brings his song to a close:

Is this not the song of wrath, sired by flaming pyres
On a wrathful night
Out of the blood of infants and the aged and the glory of precious bodies
Who have fallen dead....

The bright-eyed youth interrupts this dirge with a single question:
“My brothers, do you know the song of consolation and the end of
days?” But he does not recite the song. The chapter ends with a dramatic
scene: on the cliffs on the opposite side of the river, a straight, white line
of gentle, pure-bodied maidens walk with hands stretched toward
heaven. They are caught in the moonlight. Their eyes are closed like those
of sleepwalkers; their heads are adorned with crowns of thorns, and their
faces are frozen with the pangs of the Messiah. They are heading straight
toward the ravine. The youths shout at them, warning them of the immi-
nent danger. However, they proceed without pause and finally tumble
into the storming river. In a desperate effort to save them, the youths dive
after them but in vain. Youths and maidens drown in the swirling waters.
On the patch of black water, suddenly a very large black object silently
floats after the bodies. Is it a black boat or a coffin? The bright-eyed
youth, who had remained on shore, throws himself to the ground, covers
his face with his palms, and weeps and weeps.

How are we to interpret these passages? Klausner, Lachower, and
others give them a Zionist interpretation. According to them, the maidens
and the youths are the Jewish people and the desert island is the Exile, the
place of the suffering and hopeless plight of the Jews. The bright-eyed
youth represents the Zionist dream of salvation. The angry-eyed man
symbolizes Jewish pessimists who have lost all hope of redemption: in
their anguish they seek vengeance by deliberately striving to undermine
the alien Christian society that had persecuted Jews for centuries.\footnote{Josef Klausner, \textit{Yotsrim uvonim: ma'amrei bqqoret} (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1929), 3:51–55; Lachower, \textit{Bialik}, 2:558.} More
problematic is Klausner’s interpretation of the maidens as representing the martyrs of Israel, characterized by a great but naive faith and a constant readiness to sanctify God’s name. They carry crowns of thorns with glorious serenity because they believe that suffering is the lot of the Jews, yet they maintain a deep belief in the coming of the Messiah.¹⁹

Bialik himself, without specifically identifying what each group signified, contended that the separation of the youths from the maidens referred to “the idea of the division between the eastern and the western elements in Jewry.” We may assume that he had in mind the cultural difference between Central European Jewry that was assimilating to European culture and Eastern European Jewry, which still remained loyal to the Jewish tradition.²⁰ Lachower suggests that the male youths represent Western Jewry “who seek a material and temporal existence,” while Eastern European Jewry, like the maidens, strives for a different way of life. Yonatan Ratosh’s interpretation is more convincing: the youths stand for the ascetic Judaism of the beit hamidrash and all that it represents, and the maidens symbolize the uninhibited, hedonistic gentile world that loves life, nature, and eros—the Christian world, modernity.²¹ He, however, overstates his argument by claiming that the line of young maidens may have been inspired by Bialik’s reminiscences of a parade of nuns in the Zhitomir of his boyhood.²²

And what of the angry man? Bialik’s own explication is as follows:

The angry young man [represents] the element of hatred. The Jew does not love his tormentors…. Hatred leads to a desire for vengeance—this is the plain meaning (peshat) with all the biblical verses about the great vengeance that will be taken of Edom—the general term for all who would destroy Israel…. In its modern form, this represents the destructive element of the Jew when he enters any alien culture, and at times acts as a poisoner, a destroyer from within. This contains a large measure of truth—the destructive criticism which Jews brought into European culture with their oriental approach to Western problems—even people like Trotsky. In contrast, the second youth symbolizes the element of love and forgiveness … the hope for the redemption of humanity. This is the double Messiah of the Jews.²³

---

¹⁹ Klausner, Yotsrim uvonim, 56.
²⁰ Bialik, Devarim shebe'al peh, 2:31.
²¹ Yonatan Ratosh, Sifrut yehudit, 147.
²² Ibid., 158.
²³ Bialik, Devarim shebe'al peh, 2:35–36.
Most Israeli critics have shunned the earlier Zionist interpretations of "The Scroll" and tend to read Bialik—at least Bialik at the zenith of his career (roughly after 1903)—as a writer of personal rather than national poetry. Zalman Shneour, actually a younger contemporary of Bialik, is a precursor of this trend:

This poem belongs to another aspect of Bialik's poetry. It stands primarily as a poem of unrealized love. . . . I do not know any more intimate work in all of Bialik's poetry. . . . it is the biography of a Hebrew poet in the Exile, his anguish, doubts, hopes and loneliness.\(^\text{24}\)

Aryeh Ludwig Strauss has proffered a quasi-Freudian interpretation of the forced separation of the youths from the maidens: Bialik is aware of the division between the sexes and wishes to eliminate it but finds no way to do so except by the abyss of perdition. He favors sexual fulfillment, but his moral sense makes him view the \textit{eros} as impure, sinful. Aristophanes in the \textit{Symposium} recalls the myth that primordial man was androgynous but that the gods punished him by splitting him into male and female halves. Ever since, man and woman strive to reunite as one. For Bialik this yearning for reunion remains unfulfilled. His love poetry is harmonious only when it tells of spiritual love (\textit{agape}); physical love (\textit{eros}) causes disharmony.\(^\text{25}\)

This separation of the sexes may also be connected to the kabbalistic view that Adam's original sin caused the separation of the King from the Queen, splitting off the \textit{shekhinah} and banning her from having relations with her husband and the \textit{sefirot}. Ratosh has suggested that the destruction alludes not only to the destruction of the Temple and Bialik's destroyed personal faith but also to the cosmic destruction that resulted from Adam's original sin.\(^\text{26}\)

I believe that the maidens symbolize both \textit{agape} and \textit{eros} simultaneously—the Madonna and Carmen—and reflect Bialik's inability to realize the integration of the two aspects of love. The bright-eyed youth clearly starts out as a firm believer in his destiny and in the future redemption of his people. He is also the prophet-poet who goes forth in quest of the lost fire. His is both a religious and a national quest. He hopes that the retrieved and modernized fire will bring about redemption. But he is also the poet who seeks to restore the pristine

\(^{24}\) Zalman Shneour, \textit{H. N. Bialik uvenei doro} (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1958), 80.
\(^{25}\) Aryeh Ludwig Strauss, \textit{Bedarkhei hasifrut} (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1965), 139-42.
\(^{26}\) Ratosh, \textit{Sifrut yehudit}, 136-39, 156.
sense of unity he enjoyed in his childhood and to fulfill his potential powers in the realm of art.

Baruch Kurzweil gives an existentialist reading of “The Scroll,” asserting that it is

primarily a baring of the soul, a poetic confession of personal ruination…. [Bialik unconsciously endows it] with the power of a legendary theme, reviving an ancient myth…. Through poets like Bialik … [the problematic nature of] our Jewish world is revealed to us even if their works are ostensibly personal confessions.27

Kurzweil considers the bright-eyed youth to be dedicated to the mission of rekindling the fire but, like Klausner, calls him a messenger without a sender—having broken with the divine source of the light.

Bialik gives vent to the dialectical tension underlying his conception of the mission by dividing the mission complex into two poles: “two youths of equal height and strength, the bright-eyed youth and the angry-browed youth.” It is no accident that the two look so much alike that no one can decide who is the genuine wondrous one and who is the partner of the “other side” [i.e., the devil]…. The late return…. the main theme of Bialik’s poetry and of “The Scroll of Fire,” is the endless struggle as to the meaning of the mission. Only by asceticism, by foregoing private pleasure is it possible to preserve “the surviving little spark…. the concern of the angel “lest the last ember of God burn out”…. this is the ember of the mission for which Bialik fought in every one of his poems…. This battle has an ascetic character and it is especially hostile to eros, conceived as being opposed to the mission, as being a temptation.28

While, as Kurzweil states, the angry man intoxicates the youths,

the bright-eyed youth … alone passes the test. All of the other youths are drawn into the river of perdition…. the maidens are seen as temptresses but not only as such. They are … like a band of lithe angels…. [They are also] unwillingly, the negative, destructive, and demonic aspect of eros. “They fly like a flight of white storks into the blackness of the waters.”29

27 Baruch Kurzweil, Bialik veTschemnikovski (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1962), 24.
28 Ibid., 31.
29 Ibid., 33.
In his essay "Al hasheniyyut beYisra'el" ("On the Duality in Israel") Bialik presents his thesis that the history of Israel is persistently vacillating between two poles. On the one hand, there is a belief in universalism, an expansive openness to the world and its culture embodied in an optimistic belief in a Messiah who will redeem not only Israel but all of humanity. On the other hand, there is a tendency toward shrinking inwardly, withdrawing from the world, and a parochial belief that the Messiah will only redeem Israel. In "The Scroll" he uses duality as a literary device. The angry God of justice in chapter 1 becomes, in chapter 2, the anguished God grieving at the destruction of the Temple and the plight of Israel, a God of mercy who orders the Doe of Dawn to guard and preserve the holy fire. In chapter 4 the young captives are divided into maidens and youths and the two wondrous youths into a bright-eyed individual and an angry one. The mountain cliffs radiate with sunshine; the river of perdition is black. In chapters 5 through 9, the black river contrasts with the whiteness of the small cloud and protects the bright-eyed youth, while the den of vipers and black snakes represents the evil inclination. The work's climax is reached in chapter 7 when the messenger reaches the light, only to lose it as he plunges into the river of perdition.

On the personal level, the speaker-poet fails to reach the apex of his literary career. Is this a result of his allowing himself to be distracted by eros, or rather attributable to his failure to experience real love? On the national level, is the poet saying that the Jewish people lack the will (eros) to achieve salvation in his generation? This pessimism would also be consistent with the concluding portions of Bialik's "Metey midbar" ("The Dead of the Desert"), where the dead of the wilderness periodically rise up against God in a vain effort to ascend to the Promised Land against His will, only to be repeatedly crushed by God.

Klausner reads "The Scroll" in this manner:

The secular fire defeated the holy fire. Life is stronger than the ideal.... Exile is reflected in all of Bialik's national poetry. Bialik hopes for redemption but does not believe in [the possibility of] redemption.... the youth is a messiah without a mission, a redeemer without the capacity to

30 Bialik, Devarim shebe'al peh, 1:39–45.
31 The small white cloud motif recurs frequently. See A. Even-Shoshan and Y. Siegel, Qonqordantsyah leshirat H. N. Bialik (Jerusalem: Kiryat sefer, 1960), 208.
32 A repeated motif, frequently the primeval snake (naḥash haqadmoni) that tempted Eve. See ibid., 189.
redeem. This is why he is silent with the entire world and with his great agony, the agony of the individual. Here it is not the poet of renaissance, but the poet of the "end" for whom the individual replaces the nation—after despair.33

Yonatan Ratosh has contended that after the failure, the young angel removes tears from the cup of sorrow because they were counterfeit. Bialik, he avers, was expressing his regret that because of his role as the national poet he was unable to attain his potential as a great lyrical poet. In his mature period, according to Ratosh, Bialik realized his error and rejected his national poetry as a waste of his talent. This is why he suffered the "sorrow of the individual" and underwent his so-called silent period.34 Indeed, after "The Scroll" Bialik wrote mainly subjective poems and almost eschewed writing national poetry.

I should like to suggest that Bialik's despair was also motivated by his failure to synthesize Jewish culture (ascetic and ethical) with European cultures (aesthetic and scientific) into a new whole. His pessimism was also engendered by the political and cultural decline of Eastern European Jewry during the first two decades of the twentieth century. "The Scroll" was written during the bombardment of Odessa by the mutinous crew of the Russian destroyer Potemkin, the harbinger of the revolution of 1905. Shortly after the czar acceded to the demands for greater freedom, he rescinded his concessions and his ministers encouraged the perpetration of pogroms throughout the Pale of Settlement. The Hebrew and Yiddish press were suspended; Hebrew and Yiddish writers fled abroad. A decline of Zionism was precipitated by the Uganda controversy and deepened after the untimely death of Herzl. The new generation of Russian Jewry underwent accelerated Russification and either out of despair or hope joined the various revolutionary parties. It is no wonder that Bialik and his colleagues felt that their cause was lost.

Bialik's quest reached beyond his aesthetic achievement or even literary fame. He was part of a literary tradition that viewed the poet as a prophet, a concept that also pervaded Russian literature that so greatly influenced him.35 The hero of "The Scroll" is both a great poet in Israel

33 Klausner, Yotserim uvonim, 69.
and a prophet who can console his suffering people with a message of salvation and is even able to lead them to the Promised Land.

"The Scroll" ends with the failed messenger going out to his people and suffering with them. "His eyes thirsted only for the dawn ... the dawn's early light was the song of his life," reflecting the fact that Bialik never completely gave up on the cause of national redemption. Dan Miron has suggested that after Bialik settled in Tel Aviv in the 1920s, he again embraced his dream of the possible synthesis of Judaism with modernity. In "Aggadat sheloshah ve’arba’ah" ("The Legend of Three and the Four"), for example, Yedidyah, the Diaspora-born Jewish hero, succeeds in wooing Ketsiyah, the gentile princess, converting her to Judaism and marrying her in the Temple in Jerusalem under the approving eye of King Solomon. The marriage of Judaism to gentile culture is thereby consummated in Jerusalem—ethics and aesthetics, agape and eros are wed.36

---