

Made in the Pauper's Image: Theology and Economy in Modern Jewish Literature

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ABSTRACT: The article examines the relations between economic thought and Jewish theological discourse in modern Jewish literature in Yiddish and Hebrew from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s. Treating capitalism and Jewish theology as two parallel orders of representation, the article claims that the abstract reasoning characteristic of the capitalist economy provided modern Jewish literature bold complex concepts with which to articulate the relations between the earthly and the heavenly and between history and its messianic end.

IN THIS ARTICLE I EXAMINE THE RELATIONS BETWEEN economic thought and Jewish theological discourse in modern Jewish literature in Yiddish and Hebrew from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s. These relations, especially those between economic discourse and eschatology, are evident in biblical Hebrew. The examples are many. Thus, for instance, the word *go'el* (גואל) designates one who buys back a property that was sold by his relative to pay a debt (Leviticus 25:25). Yet the word is also commonly used to refer to God as the redeemer of his creations.¹

The use of the same vocabulary to designate both economic and theological concepts is bound to forge an ideational analogy between them. Thus, God is represented as the owner of history in its very materiality and as the one who encompasses the metaphysical riches by which History will be redeemed. This ideational analogy creates a discursive bond by which a mutation in one discourse might affect the other.

¹ The epithet *go'el*, "redeemer," appears nine times in Deutero-Isaiah as an epithet of God. The same Hebrew root, *g'-l* (ג-א-ל), is used to describe the Exodus as a divine act of redemption (Exod. 6:6). See David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), 73–88.

Treating capitalism and Jewish theology as two parallel orders of representation, I claim that the abstract reasoning characteristic of a capitalist economy² provided modern Jewish national literatures in Yiddish and Hebrew new, bold complex concepts with which to articulate the relations between the earthly and the heavenly and between history and its messianic end. I focus on the development and use of these concepts through readings of Hayyim Nachman Bialik’s “In the City of Killing” (1903), Sholem Aleichem’s *Menakhem-Mendl* (1892–1913), and a number of poems by Avraham Shlonsky from the 1920s and 1930s. My readings will demonstrate how the use of a capitalist discourse serves to mediate between the theological realm and the political one. This mediating function, I show, is made possible as verbal signs assume something of the malleability inherent to money.

BIALIK’S PAUPERIZED GOD

A good point of departure is Bialik’s poem “In the City of Killing.” In the poem, written in response to the Kishinev pogrom in April 1903, God addresses the victims who are asking him to reward them for their martyrdom:

הִנֵּה הֵם עֲגָלֵי הַטְּבָחָהּ, הִנֵּה הֵם שׁוֹכְבִים בְּלֶם
וְאִם יֵשׁ שְׁלוֹמִים לְמוֹתָם—אָמֹר, בְּמָה יִשְׁלָם?
סְלָחוּ לִי, עֲלוּבֵי עוֹלָם, אֲלֵהֵיכֶם עֲנֵי כְמוֹתְכֶם,
עֲנֵי הוּא בְּחַיֵּיכֶם וְקֵל וְחֵמֶר בְּמוֹתְכֶם,
כִּי תִבְאוּ מְחַר עַל-שְׁכַרְכֶם וְדַפְקֵתֶם עַל-דְּלָתֵי—
אֲפִתְחָה לָכֶם, בָּאוּ וְרָאוּ: יִרְדְּתִי מִנְכָסִי!

See, see, the slaughtered calves, so smitten and so laid;
Is there a price for their death? How shall that price be paid?
Forgive, ye shamed of the earth, yours is a pauper-Lord! (*lit. your God is as poor as you!*)
Poor was He during your life, and poorer still of late.
When to My door you come to ask for your reward,
I’ll open wide: See, I am fallen from My high estate.³

(translation by Israel Eφος)

Scholars have extensively debated God’s presence in the poem and the status of his prophetic addressee. Baruch Kurzweil, for instance, has claimed that God’s presence is undermined because of Bialik’s failure to transpose the theological metaphoric language from the transcendent sacred realm to the worldly realm.⁴ On the other hand, Alan Mintz has argued that, despite the representation of God as a bankrupt, God remains the commanding speaker of the poem:

² Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, ed. David Frisby, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). This book was first published, in German, in 1900.

³ Hayyim Nahman Bialik, “Be-‘ir ha-harega” [In the city of killing], in *Hayyim Nahman Bialik: Ha-shirim* [Hayyim Nahman Bialik: Poetry], ed. Avner Holzman (Or-Yehuda: Dvir, 2004), 258; “In the City of Slaughter,” in *Complete Poetic Works of Hayyim Nahman Bialik*, ed. Israel Eφος (New York: Histadruth Ivrit of America, 1948), 129–43. Eφος’s translation omits the analogy between God and his believers. All the following translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ Baruch Kurzweil, *Biyalik ve-Tshernikhovsky: Mechkarim be-shiratam* [Bialik and Tchernichowsky: Studies on their poetry] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1975), 187.

“The status of the poem as God’s monologue means that even though the poem ridicules traditional religious hopes and travesties the image of God as the dispenser of future rewards, God remains the speaker of the poem. God’s voice constitutes an unironized—or perhaps, transironic in the sense of *beyond* irony—framework of value *within which* the poem’s famous and flagrant impieties, derisions, and sacrileges are enacted.”⁵

Concurring with Mintz’s reading of the poem, Hannan Hever stresses that “not only does the representation of God as a pauper in the poem not obliterate him, but it emphasizes his presence and, by doing so, enforces his importance and moral weight.”⁶ Hence, Hever continues, “one cannot offer a secular existentialist interpretation of the poem. The theological imagery in the poem is more than a metaphorical reflection of human secular conditions. In other words, the appropriation of God to the human world is not complete.”⁷

Mintz’s and Hever’s readings are corroborated by the economic imagery in the poem. If we were to follow Kurzweil’s interpretation, the representation of God as a pauper would be in flagrant contradiction to any Jewish orthodox reading. Yet, such a reading would miss Bialik’s ambivalent stance toward the divinity. Bialik’s God exists even in a pauperized form. In the economic logic underlying Bialik’s lines, the change in God’s status is quantitative, not qualitative. This reflects a capitalist principle according to which everybody may win just as much as they may lose—and God is no exception. Unlike Nietzsche’s God, Bialik’s God has not died.⁸ He continues to exist, albeit impoverished.

The economic metaphor in the poem has another important role. It establishes capital as a means of exchange between the divine and the secular. From this point on, the believers are actors in the same system as God. Thus, the metaphor redefines the relations between theology and Jewish politics: as realms that should be thought of not, or no longer, as exclusive of one another but rather as complementary in a single economy.

MENAKHEM-MENDL AS A THEOLOGICAL ALLEGORY

The relations between an economic discourse and a theological one might also be reflected in the figure of Menakhem-Mendl, the protagonist of the Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem’s eponymous epistolary novel.⁹ The novel, which was serialized in Yiddish publications from 1892 on and was first published in book form in 1910, tells the story of a Jewish family man who leaves his wife and children to try his luck, unsuccessfully, at various trades in the expanding capitalist order of the turn of the century.

⁵ Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 141–42.

⁶ Hannan Hever, *Be-ko’ach ha-’el: Teologia ve-politika ba-sifrut ha-’ivrit ha-modernit* [With the power of God: Theology and politics in modern Hebrew literature] (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2013), 52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, with a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 109, 120; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. Robert Pippin, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5, 69.

⁹ The first chapter, “London,” appeared in 1892, and it wasn’t until 1910 that the novel appeared in book form. For a history of the publication, see Avraham Novershtern, “Menakhem-Mendl le-Sholem Aleykhem: Ben todot ha-tekst le-mivne ha-yetsira” [Sholem Aleichem’s *Menakhem-Mendl*: Text history and literary structure], *Tarbiz* 54, no. 1 (1984): 105–46.

Modern capitalist trade appears in the novel as a flux of signifiers that are detached from their signifieds.¹⁰ The unbridgeable abyss between the signifiers and the signifieds, between words and things, is presented by Menakhem-Mendl in theological terms:

the market has crashed just as futures, God help us, were being called. I'll see the Messiah before I see my money again. Bismarck, they say, caught a bad cold and all politics went into a panic. No one knows what tomorrow will bring. Londons are worth more than gold, the ruble has hit rock bottom, and futures have fallen through the floor. But where, you ask, are the shorts I bought? That's just it: the shorts aren't short, the futures have no future, and call me a monkey's uncle! The small-time operators I entrusted my shares with have been wiped out. Odessa has been hit by a whirlwind, you wouldn't know the place. I should have made my move a day earlier. But go be a prophet!¹¹

Unlike the pauper-god, who has fallen from his high estate, Menakhem-Mendl cannot lose what he has never gained in the first place. Again and again, financial success slips between Menakhem-Mendl's fingers, and yet he does not lose heart. His attitude to wealth explicitly resembles a religious Jew's relation to redemption—the faith that redemption will surely come, even if it will tarry.

As Dan Miron has suggested, what Menakhem-Mendl wants to gain above all else is time, not money: time away from his duties as paterfamilias.¹² Accordingly, we would do well to take Menakhem-Mendl's letters with a grain of salt. The widening gap between words and things characterizes not only his feigned trade but also his letters to Sheyne-Sheyndl, who constantly suspects his sincerity. In this sense, his letters are not different from the financial instruments he pretends to hold—devoid of any relationship to substantive reality.

Rather than seeing in Menakhem-Mendl a failed businessperson, we should view him as a trapeze artist, one whose art is no less in his downward dive than in his swing back up. Menakhem-Mendl knows that every fall is followed by a rise, and that each rise is as good as each fall—provided the movement continues.¹³ He is, in the term of the Yiddish critic Y. Y. Trunk, a *homo movens*—one who is always on his way, his movement resuming with every step.¹⁴

Transposing Menakhem-Mendl's trapeze art to the eschatological realm, we might observe that, just as Menakhem-Mendl prefers to delay his return home, so did many Jews prefer the diasporic present to the realization of their own prayers for a national return to Eretz Israel, the site of the promised redemption. As an exemplary representative of this diasporic existence, Menakhem-Mendl is antithetical to any redemptive teleology. Thus, Menakhem-Mendl cannot be associated with the Zionist stance underlying the depiction of God in Bialik's poem. There is no worse candidate than Menakhem-Mendl and his like to participate in the effort to regain the lost eschatological riches by national means. All he wants is to stay away from home, be it his own private home or—as an allegorical reading suggests—the national one.

¹⁰ Gershon Shaked, "Shlim-shleymazl durkh tir un toyer": Al Menakhem-Mendel shel Sholem Aleichem" [The schlimazel of capitalism: On Sholem Aleichem's *Menakhem-Mendl*], *Khulyot* 8 (2003): 154.

¹¹ Sholem Aleichem, *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl, and Motl, the Cantor's Son*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 15.

¹² Dan Miron, *Shalom Aleichem: Masot meshulavot* [Sholem Aleichem: Combined essays] (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1970), 107–12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 121–24.

¹⁴ Y. Y. Trunk, *Tevye un Menakhem-Mendl in yiddishn velt goyrel* (New York: Tsiko Bikher Farlag, 1944), 179–85.

No wonder that Menakhem-Mendl became in Zionist culture emblematic of the diasporic Jew, whom it sought to replace with the figure of the *halutz*—that is, the Zionist pioneer.¹⁵ The figure of the *halutz* was antithetical to the Talmudic scholar, as well as to the Jewish tradesman and financier. In contrast to these figures who dwelt in the worlds of the abstract and the speculative, the pioneer was firmly planted in material reality.

SYMBOLISM AND CAPITALISM

In Eretz Israel, a new, modernist, postsymbolist Hebrew poetry emerged at the beginning of the 1920s. It used an ardent messianic rhetoric in its description of the pioneers' labors. In the poetry of the leading poets of the time, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Yitshak Lamdan, and Avraham Shlonsky, every act—the plowing of the soil, the paving of roads, the construction of houses—was interpreted as the materialization of the biblical vision of redemption.¹⁶

This messianic enthusiasm, however, lasted only briefly: starting in 1924 Eretz Israel experienced mass immigration of Polish Jews. This wave of immigration, known as “The Fourth Aliyah,” comprised mainly lower-middle-class Polish Jews, whose political values were not in line with those of the Zionist socialist pioneers. Furthermore, owing to an economic crisis in 1926–27 in Palestine, many of the pioneers who had hitherto been employed in construction and infrastructure found themselves out of work. The crisis was not merely an economic one; it was also one of faith and morale. The messianic rhetoric that dominated local Zionist culture in general, and Hebrew modernist poetry in particular, appeared increasingly disconnected from reality.

Avraham Shlonsky, a major representative of the poets identified with the pioneers, described the crisis of Hebrew poetry in economic terms in a poem published in 1927:

וְקָרְאוּ הַקּוֹרְאִים הוּא יָרַד מִנְכָּסָיו!
הַקְּבָצוּ, הַקְּבָצוּ אֶל בַּעַל הַחֹב!

וְחָרְדוּ הַנוֹשִׁים (כִּי יִגַע אֶל בְּשָׂרָם!):
שְׁלֵם הַנִּשְׁי! פָּרַע נָא הַשֵּׁטֶר!
אֵלֵי! הֵה, לָמָּה גִּאוּתִי לְלֶכֶת
וְרוּחַ קִדְשְׁךָ מֵעָלֵי כְּמוֹ סָר—

And so the readers read: He lost his assets!
Collect, assemble where the debtor is!

And the creditors feared (he might contaminate them).
Pay what you owe! Repay the debt!
My God, Ah, why did I agree to go,
And your holy spirit was taken from me.¹⁷

¹⁵ Hannan Hever, *Be-shevi ha-'utopia: Masa al meshihuyut u-politika ba-shira ha-'ivrit be-erets-Yisra'el bein shtei milhamot ha-'olam* [Captive of utopia: An essay on mechanism and politics in Hebrew poetry in Eretz Israel between the two world wars] (Beer-Sheva: Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 1995).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Avraham Shlonsky: *Ba-galgol: Shirim ve-poemot* [In the wheel: Poems] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1927), 151–52.

The poem presents a portrait of the speaker in three forms: he is a poet who has disappointed his readers; a player in the financial market who has accrued debts he cannot repay; and a prophet abandoned by the Holy Spirit.

According to Shlonsky, the poetry written by him and his peers in the early 1920s was understood by its readers as promissory notes representing the messianic value of the Zionist enterprise in Eretz Israel. And yet the poet now realizes that he cannot make good on his promise.

What, then, should be done about the promises that Shlonsky and his fellow poets disseminated during the volatile days of the Third Aliyah? In a poem published in 1930, Shlonsky articulates this question by asking whether contemporary poetry should stick to its messianic rhetoric or instead seek to blunt the urgency of the promise. Shlonsky charts a possible way out:

אַחֲרֵי אֵילֶת-שׁוֹא רֹדְפִים אֲנַחֲנּוּ.
עַל קַרְנוֹ צְבִי מִדָּח אֶת הַזֶּהָב הַנִּחְנָנוּ.
עַל קַרְנוֹ צְבִי חֲקוּק הַשֵּׁם הַמְפֹרָשׁ—
לְמַנְצֵחַ מְזֻמֹּר שִׁיר לְרֵשׁ!

We chase after a false doe.

We put the gold on the horn of the chased gazelle.

On the horn of a gazelle the Explicit Name of God is engraved

To the leader a psalm, to the pauper a song.¹⁸

Both fleet-footed animals mentioned in these lines—the doe and the gazelle—carry a reference to false redemption: *ayelet ha-shav* (literally, “false doe”) suggests *ayelet ha-shahar*, a name for Venus, the light of which, according to a famous midrash in the Jerusalem Talmud, symbolizes redemption.¹⁹ Here, then, *ayelet ha-shahar*, referring to redemption, has become a false *ayelet*—a false sign of redemption. As for the gazelle (Hebrew *zvi*), the reference here is to Shabtai Zvi, the most famous of the false messiahs in Jewish history.²⁰

The gazelle’s horns carry not only the gold of the speaker and his friends but also God’s ineffable, most sacred name. The halakha, Jewish rabbinical law, stipulates that only at the time of redemption, when the Temple will have been rebuilt, will the sacred name be pronounced again. In other words, both the material and the metaphysical are being carried away from the speaker and his fellows.

While in Shlonsky’s 1927 poem the speaker turns to God with his grievance about being unable to cover the messianic promissory notes, in the 1930 poem he seems to be pleased with his poverty. “Let me rejoice, for I am poor,” he says. The speaker in this poem might remind us of Menakhem-Mendl: he, too, continues his vain pursuit of wealth. Yet, whereas Menakhem-Mendl pretends that he is not after such false visions, the speaker in Shlonsky’s poem plainly declares it.

Shlonsky performs a volte-face here: he who eagerly used Jewish messianic symbols to represent the Zionist endeavor in Eretz Israel a few years earlier seeks now to devalue these very symbols. Yet this concern cannot be limited only to known religious symbols, for the Hebrew

¹⁸ Avraham Shlonsky, *Be-ele ha-yamim* [In these days] (Tel Aviv: Ktuvim, 1927), 70. The poem also appears in *Avnei bohu* [Stones of void] (Tel Aviv: Yahdav, 1934), 137. For Shlonsky’s stance on religion, see Ari Ofengenden, *Ha-he’ader be-shirato u-ve-haguto shel Avraham Shlonsky* (*The Self and Its Passion for Absence: The Aesthetic of Negativity in the Modernist Poetry of Avraham Shlonsky*) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2010), 59–104.

¹⁹ Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 1:1; Hever, *Be-shevi ha-utopia*, 104.

²⁰ Hever, *Be-shevi ha-utopia*, 104.

language in its entirety is fraught with sacred meanings. To blunt the apocalyptic sting of the language, Shlonsky has to seek a poetic system in which these sacred names can be devalued. This poetics was created in the image of the capitalist market during the stormy interbellum period.

Such a market appears in *Avnei bohu*, Shlonsky's seminal neosymbolist book published in 1934. It represents a journey to the big city, where everything is subject to bargaining and speculation:

שוב יום נגרף באשד הקבוע
בסמבטיון־די־נור שוקקת מונפּרנס.
כרוז נסתר מזעיק אושפיזין: באָה!
מי מחיר ירבה—? ובהלם הקורנס
פה ימכרו סגולות אלה.

מי מחיר ירבה! הכל בזיל הזול!
כוס קפה־קרם—חי סו? כפלים—מחיר גלגלת.
הדרך פה קצרה: בקו הקרנזול—
משער אלהים אל שער המרכלת.

Another day swept away on the falls—
On rivers of fire bustles Montparnasse.
An occult notice calls to guests: Come!
Who will raise the bid?—And at the hammer's drop
They will sell godly talismans.

Who will raise the bid? Everything must go!
A cup of café crème—18 sou? Twice that for a skull.
Here the road is short: the diagonal cuts
From the gate of God to the rate of wares.²¹

The tides of the market pull everything along: the divinity itself falls prey to the speculators. Its value differs in no way from that of the wares on the grocery shelves.

These lines also offer a surprising response to the crisis experienced by Hebrew poetry in the late 1920s. Shlonsky chooses to deflect it to a capitalist-symbolist domain of representation that has lost its link with the reality it was meant to represent. Shlonsky's neosymbolism is marked by an excessiveness. In a poem in *Avnei bohu*, he describes an inflation of symbols: "And then every moment is the end. And every step: Mount Nebo. / Each syllable—a note from heaven."²² If every moment is the end, then no moment will be the last one; if every step is Mount Nebo, from which Moses looked down at the Promised Land, then the Promised Land is everywhere and nowhere in particular. If every syllable, the smallest fragment of a word, is tantamount to revelation, then nothing is revealed.

In the 1930s Shlonsky's Hebrew neosymbolism was molded by the financial crises that plagued the West in the years between the two world wars: from the hyperinflation in the early years of the Weimar Republic to the New York Stock Exchange crash in 1929. The economic

²¹ Shlonsky, *Avnei bohu*, 31.

²² *Ibid.*, 200.

instability found its equivalent in the flamboyance of the poetry of Shlonsky and Alterman, which was replete with paradoxes and oxymora.

In Shlonsky's neosymbolist Hebrew poetry, we have reality trying in vain to match the symbol. This possibility—of political reality attempting to make good on messianic rhetoric—was a real threat in the decades leading up to the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948. Shlonsky and Alterman, the leading figures of local neosymbolism, had a crucial role in curbing the messianic rhetoric that Shlonsky had unleashed as an outspoken poet of the Third Aliyah. A