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*Revival and Decay:
On the Politics of Gothic Ambivalences
in Modern Hebrew Literature*

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After the bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish writer Isaac Leib Peretz suddenly passed away in Warsaw in 1915, his friend, colleague, political opponent, and celebrated Hebrew poet Ḥayim Naḥman Bialik wrote the following:

Peretz's passing made an impression on me, as if [like the prophet Elijah] he went up into the heavens by a whirlwind. After all, so was his work, too: 'a chariot of fire, and horses of fire'.¹ In a whirlwind he scorched by in his blazing chariot; lightning striking before him and trailing behind him. It seems to me, however, that he is yet to reappear and be revealed in fact as good-natured, as an ancient and soft grandfather ... After all, he – same as that fiery zealot [Elijah] – is not dead.²

Bialik's admiring tone notwithstanding, his decision to depict Peretz as a ghostly figure, non-living and yet undead, hints at a conflict that had erupted between the two writers a decade earlier over the terms and means of Jewish national revival. Life and death, as well as the myriad

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pathological conditions ranging between the two polarities, informed not only the imaginative framework of the conflict between Bialik and Peretz, but also the wider political and cultural conversation in which the two participated.

In this chapter I tend to such figures of the undead or the living dead that inform the cultural and political metanarratives of modern Hebrew literature in the period commonly known as the Hebrew revival, or *ha-teḥiyah*, around the turn of the twentieth century. More specifically, I demonstrate how Peretz's bilingual work in both Hebrew and Yiddish manifests a critical rejection of the discourse dominant in Hebrew literatures at the time,³ which depicted the Jews of Eastern Europe as a decaying organism in urgent need of cultural and national revival.

While written, published and read in Europe around the turn of the twentieth century, the texts examined here played a definitive role not only in the rise of modern Hebrew *belles-lettres*, but also in the crystallisation of the political aspirations to rid Jews of their diasporic culture, to nationalise them and, ultimately, to bring them to the Middle East, where their national culture could presumably be rehabilitated. As such, these texts and the political and imaginative framework of revival and decay that they construct stand at the very centre of the Hebrew national discourse and remain to this day at the core of the modern Hebrew canon.⁴

The central narrative animating the rise of Jewish nationalist movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was, as mentioned, a narrative of resurrection: a dead or decaying national organism rising from a millennia-long slumber in which it had presumably been steeped in the muddy towns and backwaters of the European Jewish diaspora. In the context of Hebrew literature, this assessment of the Jews as a decomposing living-dead figure manifested in the idea that Hebrew writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a literature of *Teḥiyah*, of revival. Contemporary writers depicted the end of the nineteenth century as a new period of Hebrew writing, distinctly marked by a national, lingual and literary awakening in response to intensifying anti-Jewish persecution. They tied together violence, discrimination, literary and lingual creativity and the nascent Jewish settlement in Palestine by way of painting a picture of death and rebirth.⁵

Later scholars of Hebrew literature accepted and promulgated this revivalist narrative until the 1970s, when the Hebrew literary critic Shimon Halkin coined the conflicted near-homophone of *Teḥiyah* and *Tehiyah* (notice the difference between the letters *het* and *heh*), meaning ‘revival’ and ‘uncertainty’ or ‘revival’ and ‘reservation’.⁶ Through this conflicted coinage Halkin sought to explain the until-then unacknowledged fact that Hebrew revivalist literature produced not only images of national rebirth, but also scenes of national failure, powerlessness, passivity and decay. For Halkin, these conflicting scenes expressed an overall uncertainty with regard to the course and outcomes of the revival project among the revivalist authors themselves. This characterisation has become a working premise for scholars in the field, pointing to moments where feelings of anxiety, hopelessness and disintegration surface at the heart of the Hebrew national revival.⁷ However, ever since Halkin conceived of this conflicted coinage, defining the Hebrew renaissance as an ‘ambivalent’ project has allowed scholars to gloss over particular tensions within it. Is the revivalist ambivalence an expression of indecisiveness and uncertainty, or does it reflect a national anxiety of either its success or failure? Or does it rather conceal a conflict that ought to be discussed in political terms?

In this chapter I seek to animate these tensions, and to show how various articulations conventionally lumped together under the term ‘ambivalence’ in fact present distinctly different positions with regards to the goals and means of a Jewish national revival. Moreover, other expressions of ambivalence, as is the case with Peretz, point us to a foundational challenge waged against the national revival project and to a question routinely overlooked: whether a Jewish national revival was at all needed.

More specifically, I seek to understand the revivalist ambivalence by attending to the Gothic in thinking about these authors and texts. Such an approach provides a particularly productive outlook, since as Karen Grumberg has recently elucidated, the Gothic resonances in the revivalist narrative of a reanimated national corpse demand consideration.⁸ In order to illustrate the particular promise that the Gothic carries for our purposes, I wish to briefly turn to a founding text of the Jewish national revival: Leon Pinsker’s 1882 *Autoemanzipation* (‘Self-Emancipation’).

In this formative essay, Pinsker, a Russian-Jewish physician, defined the Jewish problem of political precariousness as a result of the Jews' lack of national territory, which created a monstrous condition of decomposition and living death:

The world saw in this people the uncanny appearance of a dead man, who walks with the living [*die unheimliche Gestalt eines Toten, der unter den Lebenden wandelt*]. This ghostly appearance of a walking dead man; of a people without unity and organisation; without land or band; no more alive, but still walking among the living; this astonishing spectre, unparalleled in history, without a model or copy, could not but produce a peculiar and strange impression on the imagination of the nations.⁹

In depicting the Jew as an uncanny, ghostly figure, Pinsker embraces what Margaret Davison has characterised as 'the ambivalently positioned Wandering Jew, a dark double' to the European Enlightenment, in which 'the Gothic is "thrust upon" Jews', constructing them as an emblem of alterity in the emerging European self-perception.¹⁰ Yet, crucially, while Pinsker accepts an orientalisising view of the Jews as living outside of time and progress in an eternal, pathological slumber, and while he essentially blames the Jews' volatile political condition in Europe on their own alleged monstrosity, at the same time he also uses the very same pseudo-scientific discourse and Gothic imagery for his own ends, turning its logic on its head.¹¹ As a physician, Pinsker diagnoses the gentiles' fear of the Jewish ghost as itself a disease, a chronic pathology: 'Judophobia is a psychosis, and consequently hereditary, and since it has been inherited through two thousand years, it is incurable'.¹² In a magnificent flip, Pinsker produces the very auto-emancipation that his essay calls for: from a point of powerlessness he achieves power. From being the object of the orientalisising, pathologising discourse, he becomes its producer, its ruler. This is another way of saying that by describing the Jews as monstrous and the gentiles as sick, Pinsker finds a way to solve the problem of Jewish powerlessness.¹³

Flips, dualities, contradictions and ambiguities such as these inform every aspect of the Hebrew revival literature and illustrate the great

promise of attending to the Gothic qualities of the Hebrew revival narrative. The Gothic's particular claim to questions of power and violence, alterity and monstrosity, and history and historicity, which are among the most fundamental to the modern Jewish experience,¹⁴ allow for a renewed appreciation of how various Jewish writers tackled these questions. Beyond a thematic intimacy between Gothic narratives and the modern Jewish experience, I am interested in the unpredictable elasticity of the Gothic, in its characteristic instability. While Jews and their temporality served as main points of interest for Gothic literature for their role as readily available tropes of alterity – through which the Gothic achieves its main objective, terror – the great force of such tropes and modes lies in their persistent instability and uncertainty, as Jack Halberstam has illuminated.¹⁵ As the Jew haunts the text as an unnatural, exotic Gothic figure, his identity and position keeps unexpectedly changing in order to produce his textual role, horror. And since the past in Gothic literature serves as a site of horror and savagery, it refuses a linear narration in the form of history, appearing instead as an ever-shifting, illegible temporality.¹⁶ It is these fundamentally contradictory qualities of the Gothic that allowed Jewish thinkers like Pinsker to use this mode for their own ends. It is these same qualities that make it worth our while to attend to the Gothic when we go looking for the tensions that ought to recalibrate our assessment of the Hebrew revival and its ambivalences.

In the pages that follow I analyse three manifestations of the revivalist Gothic ambivalence, moving beyond an understanding of 'ambivalence' in the pedestrian sense of undecidedness to an appreciation of the political anatomy of Hebrew revivalist Gothic. I begin with a persistent dialectic of the revival literature in which, I argue, the duality of life and death serves as a discursive device that encodes the dictates of a nationalising Jewish culture. I then tend to the second manifestation, reading Bialik's work to show how the ambivalence of revival and decay ought to alert us to the colonialist coordinates of the Hebrew revival imaginary. Finally, I conclude by arguing for the importance of the political qualities of the revivalist Gothic, which helps bring to light Peretz's (and others') often-overlooked, outright political objection to the Hebrew revivalist discourse and political imagination.

Torn Hearts and the Dialectic of Revival

Halkin found his ultimate example for the uncertainty and despair, or *Tehiyah*, in the writer Micha Joseph Berdichevsky. Around the turn of the twentieth century Berdichevsky, alongside many of his contemporaries, constructed the ultimate literary figure of Hebrew literature at the time: the *talush* – an uprooted, conflicted Jewish man who has left the traditional Jewish fold and the ultimate Jewish locus, the decaying *shtetl*, but cannot find his place elsewhere, within Christian European society. In Berdichevsky's 1903 short story 'Between the Hammer and the Anvil' ('Ben ha-patish la-sadan') we find a first-person account of such a *talush* and his tormented psyche, who cries out to his Jewish neighbours in despair: 'In vain are all my efforts, my ancestors' efforts, and your efforts. You call for the resurrection of the dead, yet you dig us graves.¹⁷ What is the meaning of life, of Judaism, of redemption? What kind of future must one wish for? Berdichevsky's protagonist ends his monologue: 'What is to me the past and what is the present? Everything to me is a graveyard, and I cannot even hear the language of the tombstone.'¹⁸

In other stories by Berdichevsky from that period, Gothic imagery transcends a figurative, rhetorical device for the portrayal of fear and hopelessness.¹⁹ The Jewish town, the *shtetl*, becomes itself a Gothic space, slowly disintegrating in its primitivity and haunted by its pathological timelessness. Dead figures rise from the old Jewish cemeteries, possessing their neighbours as *dybbuks* or ghosts in the stories 'Between Life and Death' ('ben ha-metim veva-ḥayim') (1905), 'Death's Holiday' ('Ḥag ha-mavet') (1904) and 'Banishment of a Dead' ('Niduyah shel metah') (1907). In one of Berdichevsky's most famous works, 'The Red Heifer' ('Parah adumah') (1906), a group of Jewish butchers rebel against the town's ritual slaughterers and religious leaders as they steal a heifer, kill it and eat it in a dark cellar in a grotesque feast of lust, blood and flesh. That rebellion is expressed in their defiance of the Jewish dietary laws (*kashrut*) as well as in their specific choice of a *red* heifer, which hints at Jewish eschatology and a forced provocation of divine redemption.²⁰ For their transgression, the narrator tells us, they paid not only in earthly punishments, but also in a divine curse that haunted them and their families for generations to come.

Some of Berdichevsky's contemporaries similarly portrayed the shtetl as a Gothic space. A particularly Gothic locus within the shtetl is the study hall, *bet ha-midrash*, at night. In Mordekhai Ze'ev Feierberg's 1899 novella *Le'an* ('Whither') we find Naḥman – a devout learner-turned-madman through his studies. Naḥman's father prepares him from youth to sacrifice his life for the study of Torah, to be God's soldier, to participate in a long chain of Jewish martyrs who sacrificed their lives for that ideal. During his long nights at the study hall, Naḥman's mind meanders between eschatological fantasies, desires for self-sacrifice and a fear of the dark shadows of forbidden books. After he finally 'loses his mind' (or so the townspeople believe after he blasphemously extinguishes a candle on Yom Kippur), he embarks on a fiery speech directed at a crowd of townsmen who seek to organise for a solution to the Jewish condition through settlement in Palestine. For Naḥman, the national solution cannot be territorial; a true national renaissance, a true cure for the sick Jewish body and soul (and he, as we know, has a first-hand knowledge of those illnesses) lies not in territorial solutions but in cultural and spiritual revival. His arguments echo common ideas of the time: the West is in a state of decay, he says, and since the Jews, who are originally 'Easterners', currently dwell in the West, they have degenerated alongside their neighbours. In the current draw of Europeans eastwards, Naḥman argues passionately, Jews should take a major role, not in order to take over the East (as the Westerners do), but to revive and rehabilitate as Easterners themselves: 'I myself – you may laugh if you wish – am convinced that the day is not far off when these dry bones, the hundreds of millions of citizens of the East, will come to life and create new, vital nations that will found an entirely new civilization.'²¹ This vitalist vision notwithstanding, Naḥman himself remains injured by his conflicted condition, and he leaves the renaissance mission to the younger generation. He cries 'Eastwards, Eastwards!' but the spirits of horror from his youth still haunt Naḥman, the madman from the study hall.

What should we make of this genre of Hebrew shtetl Gothic? Dan Miron has argued that the shtetl theme in Hebrew and Yiddish literatures constitutes a wholesale metanarrative of desertion: the shtetl appears as a site of nostalgia, which thus turns the shtetl (or the locus

of Jewish communal, diasporic culture and intimacy) into a place one must leave behind, in the past.²² Absent from this analysis, however, is an account of the relationship that the Gothic produces with the past. In contrast with the historical narrative, the Gothic as an alternative mode of telling the past has no interest in linearity and progress. In the Gothic, the past constantly penetrates the present – uninvited, unsummoned – by way of inflicting terror on it. ‘Shtetl Gothic’ thus refuses a linear narrative in which the past is left behind in favour of a new Jewish temporality, a Jewish national modernity; instead, it produces a sense of a Jewish present dangerously contaminated and possessed by the diasporic past.

That very contagion, however, explains the duality of revival and decay, life and death, or *Tehiyah* and *Tehiyah*, in the works of Berdichevsky and Feierberg. While Halkin and others perceived of such works as constituting a contradiction, an uncertainty with regard to the revivalist project,²³ we ought to note the rhetorical and figurative force that the Gothic encodes and activates. It constructs the diasporic Jewish way of life, the Jewish Eastern-European space, as a site of constant danger, which therefore requires a continuous work of elimination. Revival and decay thus do not contradict each other in such works, nor do they reflect an ideological ambivalence or indeterminacy; on the contrary, they produce the revivalist imperative to repeatedly engage in the obliteration of the degenerate Jewish diasporic present, to actively and incessantly negate the Jewish diaspora in favour of a nationalising mission.²⁴

Revival and Colonial Ambivalence

The East is where the ultimate Jewish revival is to take place, according to Feierberg’s protagonist. Yet the relationship between the East, its present dwellers, and its exiled, native Jews who currently degenerate in the West is puzzling: the West is decaying, in Naḥman’s analysis, and only the East possesses lively vitality. At the same time, Naḥman describes the current dwellers of the East as dead bones that can be revived only by the hands of the now-decaying yet once-vital Western

Jews, who are originally Oriental themselves. We could have excused this contradictory narrative as the pathological hallucinations of the shtetl's madman, if only it did not penetrate much of the Zionist discourse on the Orient. Instead, this conflictual description of revival and decay in the Orient merits an assessment of another sort of Hebrew revivalist ambivalence – its colonial ambivalence.

Such a narrative of revival in the East stands at the centre of Bialik's epic poem 'Dead of the Desert' ('*Metē midbar*') (1902).²⁵ The poem's Aramaic epigraph, '*ta ve'eḥeve lakh metē midbar*' ('come and I will show you the dead of the desert'), borrows from a Talmudic chain of grotesque tall tales told by the third-century Babylonian Talmudist Rabbah bar bar Ḥana about his fantastic adventures and travels between Babylonia and Palestine.²⁶ He tells of gargantuan birds and sea creatures so huge that the human eye cannot perceive them. The chain of tales then takes a turn from the humoristic exaggerations, describing the wonders that an Arab traveller showed Rabbah bar bar Ḥana in the desert. The Arab proves to bar bar Ḥana that he can tell how far away they will find water by smelling the sand, and takes him to see Mount Sinai, surrounded by giant scorpions, and to a spot in the desert where one can hear the biblical Korah and his followers. Finally, in the story to which Bialik refers in his poem, the Arab takes bar bar Ḥana to see the gigantic 'dead of the desert' – those biblical Israelites who left Egypt but died on their way to the Promised Land.

In Bialik's adaptation of this Talmudic story, the dead of the desert are mighty and forceful warriors, sun-baked and silent in the endless, flaming desert vistas. Bialik expands the narrative in light of Numbers 13–14, and in his poem the desert dead are those Israelites who complained against God and Moses, fearing they will not be able to inherit the Promised Land. When God punishes them for their lack of belief, they change their mind and decide to go to battle for the land the next morning. Moses stays behind, and the Israelite warriors lose the battle. When Bialik's dead of the desert exclaim 'We are heroes / last generation to oppression and first to redemption!',²⁷ the poem animates questions of power and powerlessness, striving for redemption through unconventional means, against the word of God; it touches on the potential cost of such an action, as well as celebrating its heroism.

Bialik's poem shares this theme of a forced redemption against the laws of God and nature with Berdichevsky's aforementioned story 'The Red Heifer'. Analyses of this poem's simultaneous desire for and fear of resurrection have conceptualised its duality along Halkin's lines, as exhibiting 'gloomy skepticism' or an 'embarrassing conflict'.²⁸ However, considering our interest with the nature of such contradictions, I ask whether Bialik's poem in fact exhibits uncertainty or hesitation. In what other terms might we conceptualise this poem's fascination with the undead and its terrors?

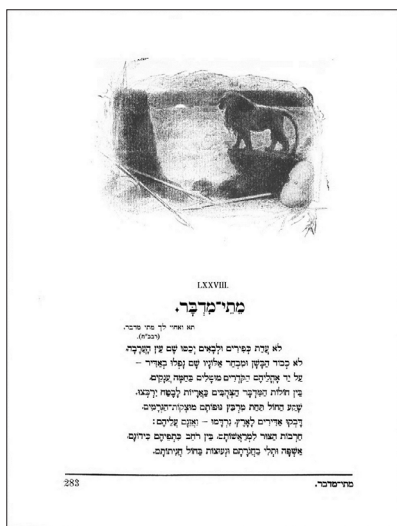
Indeed, Bialik's desert dead inflict terror on all who see them: a brave eagle, a vicious snake, a mighty lion. When, from time to time, these valiant undead wake from their eternal slumber, they rattle the entire desert. They startle even a fearless Arab knight who rides his horse faster than lightening. The knight returns to his caravan, terrified to his bones. The caravan's old sage tells him:

'Bless the name of Allah, believer! / By the beard of the Prophet! Your eyes saw / the dead of the desert! / This godly camp, primal folk, valiant people, ancient; / Indeed heroic and hard like the rocks of Arabia was this people: / They disobeyed their prophet and aggravated their God - / And God enclosed them between the mountains and doomed them to eternal slumber, / And He commanded the desert to guard them, memorialising them for generations to come - ... / And they are the forefathers of the People of the Script!'

So concludes the elder his words. / The Arabs are listening, the fear of Allah on their faces, / Peacefully treading by the ribs of their heavily loaded camels; / For a long while the scarves on their heads still whiten in the distance / As the camels' humps slowly vanish in the bright horizon, / As if carrying away on their backs just another ancient legend - / Then silence is restored, and lonesome stands the desert.²⁹

Readers of this volume will doubtlessly recognise the orientalist fantasy that the poem generates through a focus on camels, caravans, wise elders, the slow silence of the desert and the occasional reference to the Prophet and to God in his Arabic name, Allah. Yet crucially, and similarly to Feilerberg's Nahman and his conflicted fascination with the Orient, Bialik's poem too constructs a dual relationship to the East. In his poem,

the guardians of legendary knowledge of the desert dead are nomadic Arabs, yet he relies on a (Babylonian) Talmudic textual tradition, which itself ascribes the origins of that folkloric tradition to an Arab traveller-merchant. At the same time, while attributing primary knowledge to the native Arabs, Bialik's poem also depicts the Arabs acknowledging the ancient Israelites as the originators of transferable knowledge, as the 'forefathers of the People of the Script'. Similarly, the poem admiringly describes the young, fearless and forceful Arab knight in great detail, until he frighteningly escapes the mightier, gigantic and valiant ancient Israelites. In other words, Bialik's poem presents a conflicted account of nativism, knowledge and power. Who are the true, original natives of the desert – the Arab travellers or the ancient Hebrews? Who owns primary knowledge of the space – the Arab keepers of legend (like the Talmudic Arab who can navigate the desert by smelling the sand), or



Illustrations by Ira Jan (commissioned by Bialik) showcase a *fin de siècle* merger of self-orientalising, decadent and symbolist imagery (note the decadent serpents, the Kohanic-priestly hands, the wilting *fleurs du mal* and the majestic lion). H. N. Bialik, *Metē Midbar, Shirim* ('*The Dead of the Desert, Poem*') (Krakow: Fisher, 1908), pp. 281 and 283.

the inventors of the script? And finally, who is stronger, and who truly has the power to govern that space?

Contrary to previous critical assessments, however, these dualities do not reflect an ambivalence in the pedestrian sense of the term – uncertainty, indecisiveness or hesitation. Instead, we should note the particular role that such dualities and seeming contradictions play in nationalist and specifically colonialist discourses. Postcolonial thinkers have long reflected on the fundamental contradictions that colonialist cultures persistently produce. While Edward Said noted the contradictory perception of time in the colonialist imagination between a global stasis that fixes the identity of dominator and dominated on the one hand, and a narrative of progress that justifies European domination on the other hand, Homi Bhabha examined the uses that colonial discourses make of such contradictions.³⁰ For Bhabha, that ambivalence is exemplified in the colonialist drive to make the colonised ‘almost the same, but not quite’ or ‘almost the same, but not white’ – that is, in the coloniser’s desire to be mimicked by the colonised, as an affirmation of his supremacy, alongside an imperative that the colonised will never *fully* resemble the coloniser, in order to maintain domination. That constant slippage upholds the very foundations of the justification for colonial domination.

The orientalist duality that Bialik produced through his own brand of Middle Eastern Gothic, I argue along parallel lines, does not reflect indecisiveness or hypocrisy. Instead, it constructs the discursive ambivalence, which in turn generates and sustains the revivalist project and grants it political power. Whereas in the European Enlightenment discourse, Jews, particularly the Jews of Eastern Europe, occupy the position of the Oriental subject, operating within colonial-like relations with the empires and nation states under which they lived,³¹ the Jewish revivalist project aimed to produce political power by extracting Jews from that colonised position. The Gothic colonialist ambivalence, manifested in Bialik’s poem, uses the same colonialist narratives subjugating the Jews within Europe in order to materialise the revivalist, Zionist desire for power and control in the Middle East. It claims a native status for European Jews in the Middle East as descendants of a valiant people who have waited patiently in a millennia-long slumber; yet it

constantly positions European Jews as newcomers to the East, bearers of science and progress (both 'forefathers of the script' and its rightful carriers in the present), and thus more worthy rulers of the region. The Gothic's non-linear relationship to the past and its characteristically ever-shifting concepts of identity allow Bialik to locate himself concurrently as both native and coloniser, ancient and modern, powerless and powerful.³² His revivalist Gothic ambivalence, in other words, functions similarly to a colonial ambivalence.

Who Needs Revival Anyway? The Rebellious Politics of Ambivalence

I have up to this point examined two uses of the revivalist Gothic and its ambivalences: first, as a rhetorical, poetic device aimed at advocating for revival through the negation of its presumed dialectical opposite – diasporic decay in the shtetl; and second, as manifesting the revivalist use of colonialist discourse in the aspiration for political power. In this section, I examine more closely the political nature of this revivalist ambivalence, which I interpret as a struggle over concrete and symbolic power within Eastern European Jewry as well as between the Jews of Eastern Europe and the European Enlightenment, the European empires and nation states and the native populations of the Middle East unto whom the Hebrew revival has thrust its own Gothic desires and fantasies. Recognising this complex power dynamic ought to encourage us to pay closer attention to the political conflicts at the heart of the Hebrew revival. In the following pages, I demonstrate how some of what has conventionally been cast as a revivalist ambivalence or an ideological indeterminacy between life and death or revival and decay does not constitute an ambivalence at all but rather an outright rebellion against the nationalist revivalist discourse.

Such is the case with the conflict between Bialik and Peretz, with which I began this chapter. That conflict erupted after Peretz had published a Yiddish translation of Bialik's most famous Hebrew poem and the most important poem of the Hebrew revival: 'Be'ir ha-haregah', or 'In the City of Slaughter', written after the 1903 Kishinev pogrom. The poem narrates the horrific sights of the pogrom while blaming

its victims, the Jews of Kishinev, for passively and shamefully accepting their fate, doomed to blunder forever in their degenerate diasporic decay. Bialik was infuriated not only at Peretz's choice to translate the poem into Yiddish in the first place,³³ but also by Peretz's overall liberal translational choices. As I have shown elsewhere, Peretz omitted full stanzas, cut lines in half and altered the poem's prosody. Moreover, he added an entirely new stanza that did not exist in the Hebrew original.³⁴ Yet when just a few months later Bialik set out to produce his own self-translated Yiddish version of the poem, he ended up accepting some of Peretz's stylistic, prosodic and lexical choices and integrating the scene that Peretz had added, never acknowledging its origins in Peretz's translation. In this added stanza, the poetic speaker turns directly to the Jews of Kishinev and orders them to go to the graveyard, dig up their dead ancestors' bones and carry them around the world in a spectacle of grotesque martyrdom:

To the graveyard, beggars! Dig for the bones of your fathers / And of your sainted brothers and fill with them your bundles / And hoist them on your shoulders and take to the road, fated / To merchandise them at all the trade fairs; / And you will seek a stand at the crossroads where all can see, / And lay them out in sunshine on the backs of your filthy rags / And with a parched voice sing a beggar's song over their bodies / And call for the mercy of nations and pray for the kindness of goyim / And where you've stretched your hand you'll stretch it further, / And where you've begged you will not stop begging.³⁵

In a reversal of the ultimate redemptive prophecy on the 'Valley of the Dry Bones' in Ezekiel 37, this scene's dry bones are being dug up not by God or his prophet, and not in order to live again and be delivered, but rather to serve as a prop of beggary for the humiliated Jews of Kishinev. In other words, in this poem – the most canonical Hebrew poem of the century, and certainly of the Hebrew revival – we find not a redemptive vision but rather a vision of decay and degeneration. Crucially, however, I argue that the usage of the Gothic imagery of the undead in this added stanza differs significantly between Bialik and Peretz. While a comprehensive comparison of the two Yiddish translations remains

outside the scope of this essay, I will point to but a few differences that illustrate the ideological gap between the two.

In a similar manner to Berdichevsky, Bialik uses the duality of revival and decay as a generative dialectic in constructing the national discursive apparatus. Bialik's scene ends with a harsh verdict: 'And where you've stretched your hand you'll stretch it further, / And where you've begged you will not stop begging.'³⁶ As such, the poem imagines and encodes power and powerlessness as the only and ultimate binary choice for the national collective, as if threatening – either you revive, or you wallow in your constant state of deathly infestation. In simpler terms, we can say that Bialik's poem produces the nationalist, particularly Zionist, negation of Jewish diaspora – a *negation* whose role is to portray the national, territorial project in Palestine in *positive* terms.³⁷ In Peretz's version, on the other hand, the Gothic and grotesque images are significantly elaborated, and include rotten flesh, crumbling bones and starved children haggling corpses for a miserable penny. In his version, moreover, these images never fold back into the poem's prophetic discourse, and Peretz avoids providing an immediate didactic, nationalistic elucidation for that vision such as Bialik's verdict for the timeless Jewish beggary. Instead, the figure of the undead in Peretz's translation of this poem joins other narratives of the undead in Peretz's *oeuvre*.

In his 1892 short story "Ir ha-metim" ('The Town of the Dead'),³⁸ for example, an itinerant narrator arrives at a Jewish town where a local informant tells him of the town's condition: one day, the dead rose up from their graves and went back to their original homes. While they did not reproduce, slowly their population grew as they took the sick and the recently deceased to their ranks, and the living became a minority in the town. The dead have taken over all the town's professions: the rabbi is a dead man, his assistants and rabbinical judges are all dead, even the Mohalim, the circumcisers, are dead, 'sucking the circumcision-blood of living babies'.³⁹ They remain preoccupied with their own deadly matters, while urgent questions of the living – such as Jewish agricultural colonisation in Palestine or in Argentina, assimilation, nationalisation, reformation – have been put aside. The slow, creeping growth of the dead population clearly hints at the prospect of contagion and contamination: when the dead open their mouths, the stench of death

could kill whomever they talk to. Indeed, the story ends with a punchline that creates both a terrifying Gothic effect and a profound parody and critique of the nationalist discourse on life and death. The itinerant narrator asks his informant: 'And you, are you dead or alive?' The informant replies: 'Me? I'm half alive half dead!'⁴⁰ The informant's state of infectious death tells us that those who come in contact with the dead become themselves at least partly dead. The story's ending guides its readers to comically speculate that not only did their narrator get infected, but also that, through reading, they themselves might have been exposed to that deathly condition.

In later works, Peretz gradually honed his critique of the revivalist discourse and of the life-death and revival-decay binaries that it relied on. In one of his most famous Yiddish dramas, *Bay nakht afn altn mark* ('A Night in the Old Marketplace'), which he began writing in 1904, he replied directly to Bialik's poem and to Bialik's revivalist ideas.⁴¹ In it, the night falls on a stereotypical marketplace of a Polish Jewish town. As the last living characters slowly disperse and go home, ghostly souls from Purgatory appear on stage, followed by dead corpses rising from their graves and taking over the abandoned marketplace in a demonic dance. In the fourth and final act, the dead grow weaker towards the break of dawn. When they return to their graves, the living appear again in the marketplace. Already at this point, before reading more of the drama, we can see Peretz's use of the living dead and his approach to the tension between revival and decay, an approach fundamentally different from Bialik's. At the end of the play, after a night of horrors, life returns to normal, in rejection of apocalyptic fantasies of resurrection.

Since the drama has no real plot, its main driving force is the constant stream of characters that appear on stage. Among both the living and the dead we find Zionists and revolutionaries, who argue over the best form of Jewish revival. Nevertheless, parodying the very idea of a revival, national or otherwise, the dead rise from their graves, yet they remain dead. They appear as both physically revolting and as self-interested and petty, as they often complain about their 'living conditions' in their graves, where they are constantly being eaten up by maggots or suffering from frostbite. Among the dead figures we see dead children running around and playing hopscotch, a young woman

and her mother who complain about the style of their shrouds, and a klezmer group playing without instruments. They are thus neither living nor entirely dead, at the same time as they are comically, painfully human, and are therefore entirely unsuited for an apocalyptic, prophetic vision like Bialik's.

At other times, they are happy and charming, as is the case with one of the play's few characters to speak more than once: the macabre figure of a bride who appears accompanied by four men holding extinguished candles and carrying a black *huppah* ('wedding canopy') over her head. The men try to cheer her up, but as it turns out, she is actually very happy and content to be dead, for she did not love the old man her parents had arranged for her to marry; rather, she loved another boy. That boy, we learn, is still alive and has turned into the town's drunk, sleeping at night in the old marketplace. Suddenly she finds him, and he stares in shock at the hole dug in her cheek by worms. He drops dead, and the two are happily reunited in death. Death, in other words, is their redemption. It is a grotesque, worm-infested redemption, but a redemption nonetheless.

By staging a scene of resurrection, Peretz's narrative fully materialises the idea of national renaissance and drives it to its final conclusions. What we are essentially being asked in this drama, particularly through the dead bride, is whether the people are actually dead and in need of revival. As far as Peretz was concerned, the people were very much alive, and not at all dead or in need of resurrection. At the break of dawn, after all, life returns to the marketplace where people continue running their businesses. Furthermore, in contrast with Bialik's generative, nationalist dialectic, in Peretz's work we do not find pure binaries. Instead, we see that the boundaries between life and death are porous and infectious, constantly contaminated. While in Bialik's model the binary tension between revival and decay in the figure of the undead activates the nationalist discursive apparatus, Peretz uses the undead in order to collapse those very oppositions. Peretz turns to the undead in a grotesque parody, laughing off nationalising binaries while embracing the political peculiarity of the Jewish condition in Europe, embodied by the living dead.

* * *

The Hebrew revival at the turn of the twentieth century is riddled throughout with equivocal images, interweaving narratives of resurrection and degeneration. While Hebrew literary scholarship tends to explain away these riddles under a generalised conceptualisation of ‘ambivalence’, I have argued in this chapter that attending to the Gothic qualities of the revival narrative proves useful precisely because of the Gothic’s own use of unstable temporalities and identities, which can be harnessed to produce divergent political commitments. Depictions of the Jewish ‘living death’ have thus served in the Hebrew revival for ‘legislating’ a dialectic of nationalisation and diasporic decay, as in Berdichevsky’s example. The Hebrew revival’s configurations of the Middle East, moreover, showcase the flexibility of the Gothic mode, where Jewish writers, themselves objects of the European Gothic imagination, transposed the exotic terror of the Gothic onto the Middle East and its dwellers. The revivalist ‘ambivalence’, in that instance, functions similarly to the forceful colonialist ambivalence to produce narratives of domination and control. Finally, I have suggested that once we pay attention to the Hebrew revivalist Gothic as a site of political struggle over power, a new view emerges of the conflicts among revivalist authors themselves, some of whom, like Peretz, rejected the foundational assumption that a Jewish national revival was at all needed.

Peretz, however, does not stand alone in his use of Gothic themes, tropes and images to produce a resistance to the discourse on revival. Naomi Seidman points to a similar refusal to narratives of Jewish modernisation in her work on the homosocial/homosexual politics of Sh. Ansky’s famous 1919 play *The Dybbuk*, in which a dead lover possesses a young bride-to-be.⁴² Along different lines, Karen Grumberg illustrates how the shtetl Gothic in the work of Dvora Baron and Yaakov Shteinberg produces a ‘metaphor of staying’ in the traditional, Eastern European Jewish space, instead of the conventional revivalist narrative of an obligatory desertion of Jewish diaspora in favour of a new Jewish territory.⁴³ Further attention to the particular gendered dynamic of those forms of resistance – both Peretz’s and Ansky’s brides, and Baron’s female protagonists and their own perspectives on the Jewish shtetl – will prove particularly productive for understanding the

imaginative and political anatomy of living-death in the Hebrew revival. Nevertheless, in all these cases, the revivalist Gothic invites its readers to consider – or perhaps, terrifies and amuses them into considering – not only if and how to promote a Jewish national revival but also if such a revival is at all needed, and whether readers should accept the dehumanising portrayal of diasporic Jewry at the turn of the twentieth century as a sick, degenerate and decaying organism in need of national resurrection, in Palestine or elsewhere. The Hebrew revivalist Gothic invites us, in other words, to reanimate the ambivalences, dualities and political tensions at the heart of the Jewish nationalising project and of modern Hebrew literature.

Notes

- ¹ II Kings, 2:11.
- ² Bialik, 'Bialiks yidisher briv'. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Hebrew and Yiddish are mine.
- ³ The relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish writing is often portrayed as constructing a binary opposition between Zionist Hebraism and diasporic, populist Yiddishism; this portrayal is clearest in Miron, *Continuity*. Nevertheless, I follow Anita Norich and Chana Kronfeld, who have challenged this view: Kronfeld calls for a joint historiography of the two, and Norich warns against an essentialist division between them. Kronfeld, 'Joint Historiography', p. 22; Norich, 'Hebraism and Yiddishism'.
- ⁴ While an investigation of the undead in post-1948 Hebrew literature remains outside the scope of this chapter, the figure of the undead, *ha-met ha-hai*, featured prominently there, and has received expansive scholarly consideration. Among others, Hever, *Suddenly*; Tzami, *Be-she-m*, pp. 149–76; Oppenheimer, 'Gilgulav'; Miron, *Mul ha-ah*. The continuities (and discontinuities) between the undead in Hebrew literature at turn of the century and in the 1940s onwards merits further consideration.
- ⁵ For example, Slouschz, *Renaissance*.
- ⁶ Halkin, 'Tehiyah u-tehiyah'.
- ⁷ Among others, Miron, *Bodedim*; Shaked, *Modern*.
- ⁸ Grumberg, *Hebrew Gothic*, p. 9.
- ⁹ Pinsker, *Self-Emancipation*, pp. 11–12. For the German original, see Pinsker, *Autoemanzipation*.

- ¹⁰ Davison, *Anti-Semitism*, p. 24, p. 23.
- ¹¹ For more on Pinsker's appropriation of the Gothic, see Grumberg, *Hebrew Gothic*, pp. 17–18.
- ¹² Pinsker, *Self-Emancipation*, p. 12.
- ¹³ On Pinsker's political program, see Shumsky, *Beyond*, pp. 24–49. Following Shumsky's critique of the nation-state teleology, it is worth noting that Pinsker calls here for a national reawakening not necessarily in the form of national sovereignty.
- ¹⁴ Grumberg, *Hebrew Gothic*, pp. 16–25.
- ¹⁵ Halberstam, 'Technologies'.
- ¹⁶ Several critics have noted the concurrent rise of Gothic fiction with the Enlightenment notions of subjectivity, rationality and history, wherein the Gothic constantly returns to the past as a locus of alterity while refusing rational modes of telling that past – linearly, chronologically. Botting, *Gothic*; Punter, 'The Ghost of a History'.
- ¹⁷ Berdichevsky, *Ktavim*, vol. 7, p. 271.
- ¹⁸ Berdichevsky, *Ktavim*, vol. 7, p. 276.
- ¹⁹ Berdichevsky's later work depicts a more nuanced image of the Jewish town, particularly at the moment of its greatest destruction during the Revolution and the Russian Civil War. On his later works, see Rokem, 'Multilingual'; Ronel, 'Ha-merḥav'.
- ²⁰ The ashes of a red heifer are supposed to be used in a purification ceremony that would allow Jews to participate in sacrificial rituals at the Temple, once that practice is renewed in the days of the Messiah.
- ²¹ Feierberg, *Whither*, p. 213.
- ²² Miron, *Image of the Shtetl*.
- ²³ Following Berdichevsky's own terminology, scholars refer to this duality as 'the tear at the heart' (ha-*kera*' shebalev). See Holtzman, *Ha-kera*'; Henig, 'Life'.
- ²⁴ In writing on decadence in Hebrew literature, Hamutal Bar-Yosef and Elazar Elhanan similarly recognise the dialectic of revival and decay that produces a narrative of national healing from diasporic degeneration. Bar-Yosef, *Maga'im*, pp. 13–41; Elhanan, 'Ha-merḥav'. Along different lines, Hannan Hever argues that the revivalist figure of the *talush* crucially creates the modern individual subject so desperately needed for the production of a national discourse. Hever, 'Struggle'.
- ²⁵ Bialik, *Ha-shirim*, p. 219.
- ²⁶ Bava Batra, pp. 73–4.
- ²⁷ Bialik, *Ha-shirim*, p. 224
- ²⁸ Dan Miron, 'Literature', p. 45; Bar-Yosef, *Maga'im*, p. 84, pp. 58–67; Hirschfeld, *Kinor*, pp. 252–8.

- ²⁹ Bialik, *Ha-shirim*, p. 226.
- ³⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 240; Bhabha, 'Mimicry'.
- ³¹ Raz-Krakotzkin, 'National'. On the centrality of the 'Jewish Question' in colonial discourse, see Mufti, *Enlightenment*. On the political modalities of Jews and empires, see Katz, Leff and Mandel, 'Colonial History'. On Eastern Europe as the object of orientalist discourses, see Wolff, *Inventing*; particularly regarding Eastern European Jews, see pp. 27–30.
- ³² On Bialik's construction of an ambivalent Jewish nativism, casting himself poetically in a persistent process of 'going native', never to be completed, see Segal, *New Sound*, pp. 140–8.
- ³³ Bialik had previously written in Yiddish but held the position that the diasporic Yiddish ought to give way to Hebrew, which he defined as the national language. After publishing his own translation of the poem, he wrote to his colleague Ben-Ami: 'And I, the sinner and transgressor, wrote in Jargon [Yiddish, pejoratively]. I translated the poem into Yiddish, and I am sending you a copy. Peretz's awful translation forced me to do so.' Bialik, *Igrot*, vol. 2, p. 17. In another correspondence, Peretz apologetically explained: 'My wish was to make up for your absence, to give you to the people to whom you belong' (i.e., to the Yiddish-speaking masses), and accused Bialik of being an elitist Hebraist. Peretz, 'Igrot'.
- ³⁴ Accumulated bibliographical evidence and textual analysis bring me to conclude that, contrary to the speculation currently dominant in the field of Hebrew literary studies, Peretz in fact developed this scene. Masel, 'Skeletons'.
- ³⁵ Bialik, *Songs*, p. 9.
- ³⁶ Bialik, *Songs*, p. 9.
- ³⁷ On the negation of diaspora, see Raz-Krakotzkin, 'Exile'.
- ³⁸ The story first appeared in Hebrew in 1892, and then in Yiddish with significant variations in 1895. Peretz, "Ir ha-metim'.
- ³⁹ Peretz, "Ir ha-metim', second installment, p. 3.
- ⁴⁰ Peretz, "Ir ha-metim', second installment, p. 3.
- ⁴¹ Peretz, 'Bay nakht'. The drama appeared in three significantly different versions from 1907 to 1915. For a comprehensive comparison between them, see, Shmeruk, *Peretz*; Novershtern, *Kesem*. I have detailed elsewhere the entangled genealogy of this drama and Bialik's poem, including the Yiddish translations, pointing to the different ways that images from the drama respond directly to Bialik's work. Masel, 'Skeletons'.
- ⁴² Seidman, 'Queer'.
- ⁴³ Grumberg, *Hebrew Gothic*, p. 78. Shteinberg's rejection of the national revival is the subject of Elhanan's work, who focuses on Shteinberg's use of Decadence rather than the Gothic. Elhanan, 'Ha-merhav'.

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