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AGGADIC POETRY

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The Talmud's non-legal portion, its multifaceted aggadah*, has long been a fertile soil for Jewish thought. In our attempts to articulate "the Jewish view" on a subject, we often turn to the* aggadah *for clarity and guidance. In these poems, however, I turn to the* aggadah *not for its clarity but for its humanity; not for its guidance but for its embrace. It is my hope that these poems will inspire others to study the* aggadah *seriously, that is, as the poetry of Jewish experience.*

Becoming Other

There's immortality at the top of that tree,
and I envy this little boy,
ascending toward a bird's nest,
with grace.
His eyes are celestial pools, reflecting an inner light.
There's immortality at the top of that tree,
but he's not looking for it.
He's looking for love in the boughs.

And then he's falling, this little boy,
he's falling,
but how?
And why?
And for what?
Who permitted it? Who foresaw?
Who will explain? Who will repair?

No one answers me,
only a whisper that I am lost,
that I am now Other,
because you will not admit
that the whole world is falling with this boy.
Your laws and your philosophies are falling with this boy,
Your governments, your hypocrisies,

Your plans and your stupid promises,
(and my heart,
my wretched heart)

falling forever with this boy.

Trees of Knowledge

The trees are cutting down men,
slicing them thin,
and writing poetry on them.
A lovely ode was cut into my father's liver,
A sonnet carved
at the back of my son's brain.
I read it often.
The words flow beautifully,
but occasionally a memory of his slips in,
an afternoon we spent in the fields,
and the meter is ruined.
The poem is about the changing colors
of a grown man's beard.
And then my son is asking
why the earth is filled with thistles,
and maybe we can finally
go home.
The beard is now gray;
the poem ends.

Editors Note: This article was originally published in October 2022

Prayerful Poetry: A Translators' Battle that Spanned the Atlantic

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Between *Selihot*, the *tefillot* of the *Yamim Noraim*, and prayers on Sukkot, synagogue goers find themselves reciting thousands of lines of dense Hebrew poetry during Elul and Tishrei.[1] Soon it will be Hoshana Rabbah, when in addition to whacking a flurry of *aravah* branches on the ground, *shul* participants will mumble a dozen poems about rainwater and salvation called *Hoshanot* at breakneck speed, some of them said while circumnavigating the *bimah*.

At all of these poetry-intense services, many of us would be lost without an English translation, and thankfully these are plentiful and diverse.

But how should Hebrew poetry, also known as *piyyut*, be translated? Should it be word-for-word, trying to match the Hebrew as precisely as possible, perhaps at the expense of the poetry? Or should the poetry come across in the translation, even if it means dispensing to a degree with the literal meaning?

[1] I would like to thank Nathan Kasimer and Michael Zatman for reviewing drafts of this article, and Zev Eleff for helping me track down some of the sources.

Perhaps this question is perennial, but for Ashkenazi Jews, it became a specific point of contention in the middle of the last century surrounding the 1960 publication of the Rabbinical Council of America's Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book. On one side was the *Siddur*'s translator, Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool of Shearith Israel in New York, who had incorporated the translations of some of British Jewry's most gifted poets, including Nina Salaman and Israel Zangwill. On the other side was Philip Birnbaum, one of the titans of translation on American shores. The dispute, in addition to making for an engaging story, raises issues about the purpose of translation, its intended audience, and how best to show respect for the original Hebrew.

English translations of the *Siddur* appeared as early as the eighteenth century in England. But our story begins with a remarkable 6-volume translation of the Ashkenazi *Mahzor* for the *Yamim Noraim* and *Shalosh Regalim* published in London between 1904 and 1909. The project, often called the Routledge after its publisher, was the brainchild of Arthur Davis (1846-1906), an engineer from Derby who despite having no formal Jewish education, spent all his free time on Jewish learning and scholarship.[2] According to Herbert M. Adler, a lawyer who took over the *Mahzor* project after Davis's death, Davis translated the *Mahzor* because he realized "the inadequacy of existing English renderings to express the form and beauty of the compositions that make up the Jewish liturgy," and wanted a translation "more worthy of the original."[3]

In addition to teaching himself about Judaism, Davis also taught his daughters Nina (Salaman) (1877-1925) and Elsie from a very young age. Arthur Davis translated the *Mahzor*'s prose, but it was his daughters who translated many of the *piyyutim* (as one can see from the index in the back of each volume).

Salaman in particular was a fascinating figure—a female Jewish scholar in an age where such a thing was a rarity. In addition to translating portions of the *Mahzor* and composing her own poetry, she authored a book of translations of Yehuda Halevi's poems, wrote prose and poetry for the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, and in 1919, became the first woman in England to give the sermon in an Orthodox synagogue after Shabbat services. (Some criticized her for doing so, but she was defended by the Chief Rabbi at the time, Rabbi Joseph Hertz.[4])

Other *piyyutim* in the *Mahzor* were translated by Israel Zangwill (1864-1926), a novelist, playwright, controversial Zionist, and perhaps the best-known English-speaking writer in the Jewish world at the

[2] A short biographical note on Davis is included in the *Mahzor*'s final volume. *Mahzor Avodat Ohel Moed: Avodat Hag ha-Shavuot*, arranged and trans. Arthur Davis & Herbert Adler (Routledge, 1909), 208-09.

[3] Ibid., 208.

[4] On Salaman, see Todd M. Endelman, "Nina Ruth Davis Salaman," *Jewish Women's Archive* (last updated June 23, 2021); Todd M. Endelman, "Surreptitious Rebel – Nina Davis Salaman," in *Report of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies*, ed. Jeremy Schonfield (2014), 57-73; Shira Koren, "Nina Salaman: 'The Fusion of the Old Judaism with the Modern Western World'," *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 9:1 (2012).

time. Among other things, Zangwill popularized the term "melting pot" in his 1909 play of that name, and after the plan to settle Jews in Uganda was voted down by the Seventh Zionist Congress in 1905, he established the Jewish Territorialist Organization to create a safe haven for Jews wherever one could be found, even outside of the land of Israel.[5]

Zangwill was not traditionally religious; he married a non-Jew and declined to circumcise his eldest son.[6] He espoused a somewhat universalistic approach to religion and even suggested in one essay that Judaism might profitably add the New Testament to its scriptural canon.[7] Nevertheless, Zangwill devoted himself to Jewish causes his entire life. It seems likely that he got involved in the *Mahzor* project because both he and Davis were members of the Kilburn Wanderers, an intellectual circle that formed around Solomon Schechter, a Cambridge scholar famed for his work on the Cairo Genizah who later became the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.[8] Zangwill and Salaman were also lifelong friends. (Upon Salaman's untimely death from cancer Zangwill called her "the spiritual queen of Anglo-Jewry."[9])

The Routledge translation is flowery and poetic throughout, channeling Davis' desire to compose a beautiful translation. The translations of the *piyyutim* by Salaman, Zangwill, and others are particularly flowery, and they also tend to rhyme in English to match Hebrew rhyme schemes (perhaps the most readily noticeable feature of the Routledge). Salaman's translation of *Ana Ezon Hin Te'eivei Yishakh*, one of the *Hoshanot*, is a good example of her deft work:

> I beseech Thee, give ear to their cry
> that implore Thee to save
> That seek to give joy unto Thee with
> the willows that wave—O save!
> …
> I beseech Thee to look to the
> covenant sealed at our birth
> When Thou castest men down to
> the darkness under the earth, And
> save.[10]

Here, Salaman followed the same rhyme scheme as the Hebrew. She also used some memorable phrases, like "willows that wave." At the same time, she was not strictly literal at every turn. For example, the same Hebrew refrain *ve-hoshiah na* becomes "O save!" or "I will save" or "And save" depending on the

[5] On Zangwill, see Meri-Jane Rochelson, *A Jew in the Public Arena: The Career of Israel Zangwill* (Wayne State University Press, 2008).

[6] Ibid., 15-16.

[7] See Israel Zangwill, "My Religion," in the collection *My Religion* (London, 1926), 60.

[8] See Endelman, "Salaman."

[9] Koren, 9.

[10] *Mahzor Avodat Ohel Moed: Avodat Hag ha-Sukkot*, arranged and trans. Arthur Davis & Herbert Adler (Routledge: 1908), 177.

verse.

Along similar lines is Zangwill's *Omnam Kein*, one of the *piyyutim* from *Maariv* on Yom Kippur night, and one of the most memorable translations in the Routledge.

The Hebrew reads:

אָמְנָם כֵּן. יֵצֶר סוֹכֵן בָּנוּ. בָּךְ לְהַצְדֵּק. רַב צָדָק. וַעֲנֵנוּ.
סָלַחְתִּי
…
שֶׁמֶץ טַהֵר. כְּעָב מַהֵר. כְּנֶאֱמַר. תִּמְחֶה פֶּשַׁע. לְעַם נוֹשַׁע.
וְתֹאמַר. סָלַחְתִּי

Zangwill rendered:

> **A**y 'tis thus / Evil us / hath in bond;
> **B**y Thy grace / guilt efface / and respond, 'Forgiven!'
> …
> **Y**ea off-rolled— / as foretold— / clouds impure,
> **Z**ion's folk, / free of yoke, / O assure "Forgiven!"[11]

One must admit to Zangwill's cleverness here. He maintained the Hebrew rhyme scheme and meter to a tee and created an English acrostic to match the Hebrew. One can sing the poem to the same tune in Hebrew and English and it works flawlessly.[12] But it comes at the expense of the Hebrew's literal meaning. *Le-am nosha* does not really mean "Zion's folk." And "free of yoke" for *timheh pasha* is more than a bit of a stretch.

The Routledge became the *Mahzor* of British Jewry. No doubt it helped that Herbert Adler, who completed the project, was the nephew of the Chief Rabbi at the time, Hermann Adler. (It's also sometimes known as the Adler *Mahzor*.) But although the volumes for the *Yamim Noraim* were reprinted in America by the Hebrew Publishing Company in 1959, it was Dr. Philip (or Paltiel) Birnbaum's translations that took center stage there.

Birnbaum (c. 1904-1988), who emigrated from Poland at the age of 19, received a doctorate in Karaite Studies from Dropsie College in Philadelphia, and was a Hebrew school teacher for 40 years in three different cities. His 1949 translation of the Daily Prayer Book for the Hebrew Publishing Company was a stunning success, selling upwards of 300,000 copies by the time of his death in 1988 and becoming a fixture in Orthodox synagogues across America.[13]

Birnbaum took Hebrew very seriously. He was on the board of the Histradrut Ivrit of America, a Hebrew literary society, and contributed to the

[11] *Mahzor Avodat Ohel Moed: Avodat Yom ha-Kippurim*, part 1, arranged and trans. Arthur Davis & Herbert Adler (Routledge: 1904), 38.

[12] This is indeed exactly what the translators intended. The volume's prefatory note states, "The original metre and structure of the verse has been frequently adhered to, so that the worshipper might follow in the English version the traditional melodies in which the Hebrew is set." Ibid., vii.

[13] On Birnbaum, see David Olivestone, "A Most Obscure Best-Selling Author: Dr. Philip Birnbaum," *Jewish Action* 79:2 (Winter 2018): 78-82; and my article in JTA from 2021.

Histadrut's weekly magazine *Hadoar* for decades. Birnbaum had a thoroughly different approach to translation from Arthur Davis and his collaborators: plain, simple, and literal. In his introduction to the *Siddur*, he wrote, "A good translation ought to be authentic and free from deceptions. One must not read into the original what is not there. No new poetry should be introduced into the *Siddur* presumably as the translation of the Hebrew text."[14] Birnbaum in fact declined to translate the *Hoshanot*, which, he claimed "if translated, are likely to create a wrong impression and confuse the reader. . . . It may well be said that the editions that have included the available English translation of the *Hoshanoth* have not been enhanced by it. The *Hoshanoth* can be appreciated only in the Hebrew."[15]

In his 1951 High Holiday *Mahzor*, which is still in use in many Orthodox synagogues today, Birnbaum criticized the Routledge explicitly, taking Zangwill's translation of *Omnam Kein* to task. Although Birnbaum included relatively sparse commentary in the *Mahzor*, he reproduced three stanzas of Zangwill's rhyming translation, calling it "an attempt to preserve the meter, rhyme and alphabetical acrostic of the original Hebrew, at the expense of interpretive clarity and readability."[16] Birnbaum's own more modest translation of the first stanza read instead: "Yes, it is true, an evil impulse controls us; / Thou canst clear us, Merciful One, so answer us / *I forgive*."[17] Unlike Zangwill's version, Birnbaum's does not preserve the Hebrew rhyme scheme and contains no acrostic, but it attempts to render each Hebrew word with greater precision.

Birnbaum's sharpest criticisms, however, were reserved for the 1960 RCA Siddur, translated by Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool (1885-1970). De Sola Pool was the rabbi of Shearith Israel, New York's oldest congregation and one of its most prominent. He had an affinity for poetic translations, noting in his introduction, "The English rendition often essays to suggest poetic forms of the Hebrew text and catch the vivid nuances flashing from the original many-faceted Biblical allusions."[18] De Sola Pool was also from London, so perhaps it's no surprise that he incorporated several of the translations from the Routledge by Elsie Davis, Salaman, and Zangwill, particularly for the *Hoshanot*.

Birnbaum published a blistering review of the RCA Siddur in the Hebrew *Hadoar*. His criticisms were wide-ranging, but in one memorable passage, he zeroed in on Zangwill's translation of the prayer for rain recited on Shemini Atzeret, writing, "Could it be that the rabbis [of the RCA] approved the

[14] Philip Birnbaum, ed., trans., *Daily Prayer Book* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949), xvii.

[15] Ibid., xvii-xviii.

[16] Philip Birnbaum, ed., trans., *High Holy Day Prayer Book* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1951), 536.

[17] Ibid.

[18] David de Sola Pool, ed., trans., *The Traditional Prayer Book for Sabbath and Festivals* (Behrman House, 1960), ix.

translations of Israel Zangwill that are not translations, but free imitations infused with expressions from another world, the world of Christianity?"[19] Birnbaum's complaint was that Zangwill referred to Abraham as "thy blessed son" and Moses as "thy shepherd son," which to him sounded uncomfortably like a reference to Jesus, particularly since the word for "son" does not appear in the Hebrew. In addition to noting that Zangwill's translations have the "odor of the Christian liturgy wafting from them," he accused Zangwill of sometimes "resorting to a free translation because he did not know the meaning of the words."[20] (One wonders if Birnbaum was also uncomfortable with Zangwill's irreligiosity and essay embracing the New Testament.)

Rabbi Charles Chavel (1906-1982), the Chair of the RCA's Siddur Committee and a medieval scholar known for his translation of Ramban's Torah commentary, responded to Birnbaum in the same issue of *Hadoar*. In formulating his response, he worked closely with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who was the halakhic advisor to the RCA.[21] Chavel explained that de Sola Pool's translation was meant for "the American Jew, who speaks English and for whom the structure of the Hebrew language is strange, so that he can understand the loftiness and beauty hidden in the Jewish prayers . . . Our organization never intended, God forbid, for the translation to replace the Hebrew original."[22] As for Zangwill, Chavel said that "we are under no obligation to defend him," but he surely knew Hebrew and he used "free translations" according to the needs of the poetic verse. This was no issue according to Chavel because *piyyut* does not have the same status as other more significant prayers.[23]

Chavel and Birnbaum's bitingly acerbic debate continued in several subsequent issues of *Hadoar*. Their remarks went far beyond Zangwill, but all concerned questions of translation. One of Birnbaum's replies to Chavel is particularly telling. Birnbaum lamented that many American Jews do not know Hebrew, and "when they come to the synagogue, they sit like mutes and do not participate in prayer unless they are given some paragraphs in English translation."[24] Birnbaum seems to have suggested that de Sola Pool's translation, with its soaring phrasing, was for such people. If Birnbaum had a crusade, it was to increase the level of Jewish knowledge among the masses, not to cater to their ignorance.[25] To Birnbaum, the Routledge and its kind were enabling Jews to pray in English. He

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[19] Paltiel Birnbaum, "*Siddur Hadash Ba le-Medinah*," *Hadoar* 40:6 (Dec. 9, 1960): 85.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Aton Holzer and Arie Folger, "Letters to the Editor," *Hakirah: The Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought* 29 (Winter 2021): 14-15. But see Louis Bernstein, "Rabbi Soloveitchik Remembered," in *Memories of a Giant: Eulogies in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt"l*, ed. Michael Bierman (Jerusalem: Urim, 2003), 110, who claims that Rabbi Soloveitchik actually wrote Chavel's response.

[22] Chaim Dov (Charles) Chavel, "*Teshuvat Histadrut ha-Rabbanim da-Amerikah*," *Hadoar* 40:6 (Dec. 9, 1960): 88.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Paltiel Birnbaum, "*Lema'an Emet*," *Hadoar* 40:9 (Dec. 30, 1960): 141.

[25] For example, in his introduction to *A Book of Jewish Concepts*, one of his most popular works, Birnbaum wrote, "At the present time when we are confronted with

wanted a translation to teach them how to pray in Hebrew.

And the controversy didn't end there. Others wrote in to *Hadoar* and other publications; some supported Birnbaum, some Chavel. One ultra-Orthodox reviewer claimed that the RCA Siddur was full of foolishness, heresy, and even foul language![26] The controversy was also mentioned on the popular Yiddish Saturday night radio show of Rabbi Pinchas Teitz of Elizabeth, New Jersey.[27]

In the end, the RCA made some adjustments to the *Siddur*'s translation. At Soloveitchik's behest, his name was removed from the flyleaf of the new edition, perhaps because he did not want to make it seem like he had approved every aspect of either the original or revised translation.[28]

Given his stake in the prayer book market, Birnbaum was certainly no disinterested observer, and this might explain the fierceness of his attack. It's also interesting to consider the optics. Birnbaum, to be sure, was a popular writer, but he was a Hebrew-school teacher without rabbinic ordination and without strong denominational affiliations.[29] And yet here he was going toe-to-toe with some of the leading lights of Modern Orthodoxy. Even if some of his criticisms were over the top, no doubt the incident embarrassed the RCA.

In some sense, Birnbaum won the debate. His *Siddur* and *Mahzor* were far more popular than the RCA's, although the reasons had little to do with the translation and more to do with the timing of the *Siddurim* (Birnbaum was first) and the RCA's blunders in marketing its product. The RCA's credibility was tested, for example, when it continued making announcements about a new *Siddur*'s imminent arrival for over a decade without any *Siddur* appearing until 1960.[30]

Yet Birnbaum's approach did not last either. American Orthodoxy was changing. With the growth of the day school movement mid-century, knowledge of Hebrew increased. Many in the burgeoning communities of Yeshiva graduates still wanted an English translation, but one that was more subservient to the Hebrew. For this constituency, Birnbaum, an academic scholar with many non-Orthodox affiliations, did not go far

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widespread indifference, we have great need of a spirituality based upon genuine knowledge of our heritage." Philip Birnbaum, *A Book of Jewish Concepts* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1964), vii.

[26] Simcha Elberg, "*Ha-Siddur Ha-Hadash Ha-Musmakh Mi-Ta'am Histadrut Ha-Rabbanim*," *Ha-Pardes* 35 (February 1961): 5.

[27] Editors' Introduction, "*Gemar ha-Vikuah al ha-Siddur shel 'Histadrut ha-Rabbanim da-Amerikah'*," *Hadoar* 40:12 (Jan. 20, 1961): 192.

[28] See Jonathan Krasner, "American Jews in Text and Context: Jacob Behrman and the Rise of a Publishing Dynasty," *Images* 7 (2015): 77; Louis Bernstein, *Challenge and Mission: The Emergence of the English Speaking Orthodox Rabbinate* (New York: Shengold, 1982), 264.

[29] See Zev Amiti, "Local Scholar Publishes New Book," *The Jewish Voice* (Jewish Federation of Delaware, Oct. 7, 1983),:3.

[30] Bernstein, *Challenge and Mission*, 261-62.

enough. Enter the *ArtScroll Siddur*, published in 1984, which still holds the dominant market share in American synagogues that stock translated *Siddurim*. ArtScroll's translations are often more literal than Birnbaum's. For example, ArtScroll's translation of the first stanza of *Omnam Kein* from its 1986 *Mahzor* runs, "It is indeed true that passion rules us; / so it is for You to justify (*le-hatzdek*), O abundantly just (*rav tzedek*), / and to answer us, 'I have forgiven!'"[31] Unlike Birnbaum, ArtScroll translates the repeated root *tz.d.k* as "justify" and "just," which is consistent.

ArtScroll's translations are also known for maintaining the syntax—or the order of the words—if at all possible. I've noted elsewhere that ArtScroll translates "*retzon yereav yaaseh ve-et shavatam yishmah ve-yoshe'em*" in *Ashrei* as, "The will of those who fear Him He will do; and their cry He will hear, and save them."[32] This tracks the Hebrew precisely, but is rather stilted.

Yet as Rabbi Nosson Scherman explained in the daily *Siddur*'s introduction, "The Men of the Great Assembly," who composed the *Siddur*, "had the ability to combine letters, verses, and ideas in ways that unlock the gates of heaven. Their composition of the *tefillah* is tantamount to an act of creation, which is why it is so important not to deviate from their language and formulation."[33] Rabbi Elli Fischer has written that in ArtScroll's conception, literary issues of English style and idiom are rendered irrelevant by the metaphysical qualities of the Hebrew. The point of translation is simply to aid the reader in understanding the original. If it fulfilled that function, it didn't have to be beautiful.

From the Routledge to ArtScroll, we've come full circle. Davis and his collaborators wanted to inspire worshippers with felicitous English phrases befitting prayer's exalted nature. One can perhaps imagine congregants with hymnals standing decorously in their pews reciting Salaman's arresting poetry. (The British "high church" approach is exemplified in a recent memorial service for Queen Elizabeth II held at London's St. John's Wood Synagogue—which featured traditional *hazzanim*, two choirs, special prayers recited out loud in Hebrew and English, and closed with "God Save the King." It's well worth watching some of it if you have time!)

It's also important to understand that British Jewry has always been more inclusive than American Orthodoxy; the United Synagogue is a big tent for many who might belong to other denominations in the United States. Having a *Siddur* with literary appeal was therefore of increased importance. Birnbaum, operating on American shores, instead composed translations that illuminated the Hebrew and would not distract the reader. ArtScroll went further in ensuring that the English departed as little

[31] Nosson Scherman, ed., trans., *The Complete ArtScroll Machzor: Yom Kippur* (Mesorah Publications, 1986), 117.

[32] Nosson Scherman, ed., trans., *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur* (Mesorah Publications, 1984), 69.

[33] Ibid., xvi.

as possible from the Hebrew.

Finally, there's no question that what constitutes good English writing has changed. Simple, direct language is now in vogue. Even in England, the Routledge is being replaced by the *Mahzorim* of the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Sacks' translations are concise and elegant, and like his American counterparts, he tried not to stray too far from the Hebrew. But he was also more attuned to English style and poetry than Birnbaum or ArtScroll. For example, the penultimate lines of Sacks' translation of *Adon Olam* run, "He is my God; my redeemer lives. / He is the Rock on whom I rely – / My banner and my safe retreat, / my cup, my portion when I cry (*menas kosi be-yom ekra*)."[34] This rhyming translation is simple and poignant. (Compare that last stich to the far less literal de Sola Pool translation, "my guide to whom my prayer is prayed," which is trying to rhyme with the word "aid," and the more literal, but less moving ArtScroll version, "the portion in my cup on the day I call."[35])

Despite these understandable shifts in translation over time, Salaman and Zangwill have fortunately not been entirely forgotten. Their verse lives on in the RCA's 2018 *Siddur Avodat Halev*, which resurrects and slightly updates their poetry, particularly their translations of the *Hoshanot*. Whether the dazzling virtuosity of their work will draw worshippers closer to God or distract from the Hebrew's majesty remains an open question, but it's one worth contemplating this season.

Editors Note: This article was originally published in Septmeber 2017

Steely Dan and Rosh Hashanah

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Walter Becker died over the weekend.[1] As one half of the band Steely Dan, Becker was not exactly a household name in my own Jewish community. It's not that Modern Orthodox Jews don't like rock music—they most certainly do—it's just that there's a more or less defined canon of artists around which most of this fandom revolves, including the Beatles (and the other British invasion bands), Bob Dylan, Billy Joel, Neil Young, and Simon and Garfunkel.[2] If Leonard Cohen counts as part of this genre, I'd stick him in there as well. I doubt, however, that Becker's death will inspire the same sort of religious introspection as did Cohen's last December.

And that's a shame because I love Steely Dan.

[34] Jonathan Sacks, trans., *The Koren Sacks Siddur* (Koren, 2009), 22.

[35] De Sola Pool, 94; *ArtScroll Siddur*, 13.

[1] I'd phrase that less laconically, but it would feel like an inauthentic tribute to his oeuvre.

[2] I'm not exactly sure why this is the canon, but it is. If you're interested in writing about this, it just so happens that I know people at *Lehrhaus*.

I don't just love Steely Dan as a diversion. I love Steely Dan because their music is wonderful, thoughtful and haunting, and I think it's good for my *neshamah*.[3] Their music is especially meaningful to me at this time of year, as our thoughts naturally turn to the opening chapters of 1 Samuel. That, of course, is a sentence in need of some unpacking if ever there was one, and so I'll begin with a bit of background.

Steely Dan's two core members, Donald Fagen and Walter Becker, are two of the most maniacal perfectionists in the recent history of music. Their songs sparkle with a slick, cerebral exactness. Over time, they came to rely more and more on session-musicians. In fact, for a while, in the mid-to-late seventies, they retired from touring altogether to become a studio-only band. Every note had to be perfect, to the point where, reportedly, they would ask musicians to record up to forty takes of each track. In fact, most people who dislike Steely Dan cite this proclivity for perfection as their reason. Trying to enjoy a Steely Dan song, I've been told, is like admiring a calculator for adding together two large numbers. It's not that the summing is unimpressive, it's just that it's not art.

Now, to be honest, I've always admired their sonic exactitude for its own sake. But there is so much more to Steely Dan than just that. Artistically the meticulous presentation is only surface deep. It covers up a world that is gritty and grimy, populated by severely unreliable narrators, and desperate, often miserable, sometimes sleazy characters. A Steely Dan song's immaculate exterior more often than not masks something either sinister, depressing, or both.

Take "Peg," for example, off of 1977's multi-platinum *Aja*. "Peg" is one of the most successful singles Steely Dan ever released. It opens with a warm progression of jazz chords, before settling into an upbeat refrain accompanied by a cheerful horn lick.[4] The first time I heard the song I was in high school, and it sounded to me like a chipper song about a loving relationship between the

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[3] I obviously can't make any promises on that last score. But note that I am trying to impose a *humra* here. If you think listening to music—or partaking of other forms of amusement—is just a diversion then it is almost certainly true that you should be imbibing a lot less of it than you currently are. Incidentally, I wholeheartedly concur with the following sentiment from Rabbi Shalom Carmy, offered in the context of sports: "Whatever the positive goals to which involvement in sports culture can be applied—physical, social, or recreational, it is hard to make the argument that the sports culture ought to be an important part of our education and an essential leisure activity. It seems clear that investing huge quantities of time and attention to following sports, purchasing expensive paraphernalia and articles of clothing and footwear because they are marketed using the name and image of a famed and charismatic athlete, agonizing over the fortunes of favorite teams and players as if these were earthshaking events in our own lives, is foolish and invites satire."
Two points: 1) This quote is from an average Rabbi Carmy article, which is to say that the article is extraordinarily insightful. Do read the whole thing. 2) I realize that my argument here is not the same as Rabbi Carmy's in that article.

[4] I want to say the horn used is a lyricon, but that's mostly through process of elimination based on the song's Wikipedia page.

narrator and the titular Peg. In any case, the iconic chorus and gripping guitar solo[5] were so good that I didn't give it too much thought.[6]

Further listening, however, was repaid in full. Lyrically, the song is a conversation between the narrator and a woman, Peg. The narrator encourages Peg to get excited for her debut in the entertainment industry, her name lighting up a grand marquee. "So won't you smile for the camera / I know they're gonna love it." You could listen to the song a hundred times and mistake Peg for a young, up-and-coming Hollywood actress. But coded warnings to the contrary lie scattered across the song. Peg's audition photo is "done up in blueprint blue," and the narrator tells the listener in a winking aside that the film is "your favorite foreign movie." As law professor Scott Beattie reminds us in his recent book, "blue film" and "French film" were once both popular euphemisms for pornography. All of a sudden, the cajoling tone throughout the song takes on a more malevolent, coercive cast. In fact, if you listen very closely near the end of the song as the chorus rings out a third time, you'll hear a background audio recording of a voice protesting "I don't want to do this." In the end, "Peg" is a delightful, shiny, perfectly played song that cheerfully conceals a terrible act of exploitation in plain sight.

Every year before Rosh Hashanah I find myself returning to the first several chapters of 1 Samuel. The entire Rosh Hashanah liturgy is extremely fertile ground for close study, but I've always been especially taken with the *haftarah* for the first day, taken from 1 Samuel's first two chapters. This *haftarah* recounts Hannah's prayer for a child, her confrontation with the High Priest Eli, the birth of Samuel, Hannah's surrendering Samuel to service in the Tabernacle at Shiloh, and Hannah's song of praise to God. It's an incredibly powerful, emotionally jarring chapter and a half.

This year I read through it with "Peg" in the background.

Here's the first thing that occurred to me: I've always read the beginning of 1 Samuel—always heard it discussed—as if it were the introduction to Samuel's life story. It is, to an extent. But read through that lens, it's easy to miss some of the counter-messages in those chapters. That is, if 1 Samuel 1-2 (and 3-4 for that matter) narrates a heroic beginning, the whole world in which that beginning unfolds seems lighter, and pregnant with potential. It's a world in which the priests of Israel played the ritual roles they were meant to play (1.1); in which all of Israel gathered together at the Temple during festivals (1.1, 21); in which the highest religious official in the land, Eli himself, waited around to interact personally with pilgrims to the Temple (1.9); in which the people of Israel merited a prophet in their midst (3.19); in which the Ark of the Covenant still resided with people of the covenant (4.5). Of course

[5] By the way, for a great window into the otherworldly nuttiness of working with Steely Dan, read this account of what it took to record that guitar solo.

[6] In my defense, De La Soul's sampling of this song on the sweet, breezy track "Eye Know"—set against a sample from Otis Redding's "(Sittin' On) A Dock of the Bay" no less(!)—has probably similarly misled many a hip hop enthusiast.

things weren't perfect, but readers[7] often treat the imperfections as so much brush that merely needed to be burnt away so that Samuel could rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

But remember "Peg." Here too the bright, shiny exterior conceals a rotting core. The society of the early chapters in 1 Samuel was fundamentally sick. The priests of Israel were utterly corrupt (2.12); whenever the Israelites would gather at the Temple, they would be shaken down (2.16). Indeed, consider in this light Eli's encounter with Hannah.

> 12 As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. 13 Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. 14 So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." 15 But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. 16 Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." 17 Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him" (1.12-17).

I've always read Eli's mistake in line with Rashi's commentary (to 2.13), namely, that it was a chance misunderstanding. After all, most petitioners prayed out loud, while Hannah prayed in silence. Eli mistook her heartfelt intent for intemperance. Indeed, Abarbanel (in his comment on 2.12) suggested that Eli, in fact, recognized Hannah from previous pilgrimages and was concerned for her wellbeing.

But even with Rashi and Abarbanel in hand, before "Peg" I had never paused to contemplate how strange this story remained. That is, even assuming Hannah's behavior was out of the ordinary, why on earth would Eli assume the cause was inebriation? Of all the places to find drunkenness, wouldn't the last place in the world be in the Temple?

But that's precisely the point. Israelite society at the time was "Peg." It was rotting on the inside. At a time when even the priests were thugs, it was only a matter of course for Eli to assume that he might find a drunk in the middle of the Temple.

Indeed, read this way 1 Samuel 1-4 picks up right where the narrative of Judges ended. Judges (chapters 17-21) concludes with an account of the idolatry perpetrated by the tribe of Dan, and the harrowing story of the concubine of Gibeah, and the resulting Israelite civil war. In line with the rabbinic principle (e.g. Sifre Bamidbar 64) that readers should not presume Biblical narrative to proceed in chronological sequence, the legendary twentieth

[7] ...at least this reader.

century Biblical scholar Shemaryahu Talmon[8] demonstrated conclusively that as a matter of chronology, these stories actually belong at the beginning of Judges. Why, then, were they designated as the work's coda? It appears to me that the reason is to close the book by emphasizing the degradation of Israelite society. The reader who turns immediately to 1 Samuel should thus notice that nothing has changed since the end of Judges.

Moreover, the narrative in 1 Samuel takes pains to emphasize how oblivious the Israelites were to their spiritual condition. Here, too, Steely Dan is important.

After an extended hiatus, Fagen and Becker would reunite for the album *Two Against Nature* (2000). That album includes one of my favorite Steely Dan songs, "Cousin Dupree." Set to a sneering guitar riff, a hyperactive beat, and Donald Fagen's trademark whine, "Cousin Dupree" recounts the travails of a typically Steely Dan-esque character: Dupree, a lecherous creep constantly ogling his cousin. Eventually Dupree makes a pass at her, and she rebuffs him in the strongest possible terms, citing "the skeevy look in your eyes" and "the dreary architecture of your soul." Dupree's response? "But what is it exactly turns you off?"

That line floors me every time I listen to the song. The towering obliviousness! The obnoxious self-absorption! She brutally lets him have it, but he simply refuses to acknowledge that anything is wrong.

Think now about the end of 1 Samuel 4. While Samuel was coming into his own as a prophet, his people were in the midst of an extended war with the Philistines. In the wake of an unexpected defeat at the battle of Ebenezer, the Israelites arm themselves with the Ark of the Covenant, expecting God's presence to overwhelm their enemies. The result, of course, is that the Philistines rout the Israelites and capture the Ark, in the process killing Eli's two corrupt sons, Hophni and Phinehas. The latter's wife hears the news of her husband's death just before going into labor:

> 19 Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. When she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth; for her labor pains overwhelmed her. 20 As she was about to die, the women attending her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer or give heed. 21 She named the child Ichabod, meaning, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the ark of God had been captured and because of

[8] Talmon, who passed away just recently in 2010, was a fascinating figure. He was detained for three months in Buchenwald before escaping to Palestine. He would go on to win the Israel prize for his work on Tanakh.

her father-in-law and her husband. 22 She said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

This is a tragic story, full of pain and *pathos*. In an emotional sense it's impossible to push past the fact that it's a tale about a freshly widowed bride who dies in childbirth. But literarily I can't help but hear "Cousin Dupree" whining in the back of my head. Consider the narrative circumstances. The reader has just been battered with tales of corruption and bullying; with a High Priest whose default assumption about a (non-standard, to be sure) petitioner in God's Tabernacle is that she's a drunk. And amid all this social decay, it took a large-scale military defeat to compel the recognition that "the glory has departed from Israel" (4.21)?[9] This beggars the mind! Israelite society was rotting from the inside; the capture of the Ark was a symptom of the problem, not the cause. And yet there seems to be no acknowledgement whatsoever of the larger structural problems with Israelite society. No wonder that in just a few short chapters (1 Samuel 8), the people would ask for a king "like all the other nations" (8.5). After all, for many it must have seemed that there was little that was morally distinctive about Israelite society. So why not just be done with it and have a king like everyone else? Once again, the Israelites exhibit no willingness to do the difficult work of understanding the systemic problems plaguing their community.

"But what is it exactly turns you off" indeed.

Now here we are, on the cusp of Rosh Hashanah, about to read some of these stories afresh. As Tanakh's eternal values echo down through the generations, it is imperative that we constantly re-apply ourselves to the task of extracting meaning from its sacred words. This year, in the wake of Walter Becker's passing, it seems to me an opportune time to consider the gloomy reading of the chapters comprising, and surrounding the *haftarah* for the first day. The story of these chapters, on this reading, is of a nation of Israel that failed to grapple with its structural moral and spiritual challenges. We too, of course, live in an era in which the fissures cracking the surface of contemporary society appear to be systemic. Whether the culprit be racism, anti-Semitism, ignorance of an opioid crisis, all of the above, or something else entirely, it is our responsibility to consider deeply the root causes of our divisions. Indeed, rather than lamenting the consequences of this or that proxy issue for our problems, let us take the opportunity during this new year to examine the problems themselves. In what ways have we fundamentally failed? Have we created a "Peg"-like society? Have we donned the oblivious mantle of Dupree? How might we do better?

Fortunately, when the Jewish people—when *am yisrael*—are living up to the Torah's Godly ideals, we are enormously capable of serving as a powerful

[9] Although it doesn't necessarily impact my broader point, I should note that Shawn Zelig Aster has highlighted the fact that glory (*kavod*) in this sense is a technical term.

force for good in our world. May the coming year therefore be one of frank honesty, and moral majesty.