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Words Winged With Light

Jeffrey Saks

Homer. Milton. Joyce. Borges. Blindness, it seems, does not dim the literary vision of great poets and authors.

Hebrew poet Erez Biton is one such person. Born to Moroccan-Jewish parents in Algeria in 1941, he fled with his family in 1948, heading to the fledgling Jewish State. After a period of time in an absorption center the family settled in Lod where, at age eleven, Biton lost his eyesight when he was wounded by a stray hand grenade that detonated in a field where he was playing. Following this trauma he was sent off to the dormitories of the Jerusalem School for the Blind, after which he completed university degrees in social work and rehabilitative psychology, fields to which he dedicated the first fifteen years of his professional life. Afterward he transitioned to journalism, working as a columnist for the *Ma'ariv* newspaper, before accepting the mantle of poetry as his main vocation.

In the history of culture, memorization begins with poetry. We, so attuned to the power of Oral Tradition, might take note of the fact that blind Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were not committed to writing for numerous centuries. I recently had an opportunity to spend Shabbat with Biton at a weekend gathering organized by Jerusalem's Agnon House. During one session he discussed his work and recited, from memory, a selection of his poems. I sensed that he was playing with turns of phrase in the lines of poetry, finessing the verses as they were spoken, despite some of them having been first composed decades earlier. It occurred to me that I was witness to literature which still bore an air of orality.

Later, when I asked him if he thinks of his work as more of an oral or written artifact, he confessed that no one had ever asked him about this but, despite his poems having been cast black on white and bound in books, he feels less restricted by this than he imagines a sighted poet might feel. For him the poem remains principally a spoken text—print being a medium that, as a blind man, he feels less bound by. This allows him to continue tinkering with poems "composed" years ago. (He was delighted to hear that Agnon, too, was an inveterate reviser and polisher of his works.)

Already with his first volume of poetry, *Minhah Marokait* (*Moroccan Gift*, 1976), he established himself as a significant voice on the Israeli literary scene. Most often Biton is described as the founding father of Mizrahi poetry in Israel (that is, the community of immigrants from the Sephardic lands and their descendants). Biton's achievement within that ethnic community has been compared, no less, to that of national poet H.N. Bialik in his own era. There can be no doubt that his fame, linked as it is to his Mizrahi heritage, is due in no small measure to

the powerful expression his poetry gives to the often traumatic experience of the Mizrahi immigrants to early-State Israel.

By the late 1970s, the cultural scene was just beginning to show openness to forms of expression that lay outside of the Ashkenazi hegemony. Biton's poetry was taken note of, independent of the compelling biography of its composer, for its powerful depiction of the often marginalized and displaced experience of those immigrants. It also gave voice to their struggle to find themselves as individuals and as a community within the confusing cultural politics of an increasingly multicultural Israel.

[Listen to the musical adaptation of his poem "A MOROCCAN WEDDING."]

In recognition of his literary gifts, and his six volumes of published poetry, Biton has been decorated with Israel's most prestigious literary laurels, including the Amichai and Bialik Prizes (both in 2014) and the Israel Prize (2015). Unfortunately, only one volume appears in English (anthologizing a sampling of his work), published as *You Who Cross My Path* (Boa Editions, 2015), with skillful translations by Tsipi Keller.

However, the focus on Biton as a distinctly ethnic poet distracts readers from some other very compelling aspects of his art. In his two most recent volumes, *Nofim Havushei Einayim* (*Blindfolded Landscapes*, 2013) and *Beit ha-Psantarim* (*The House of Pianos*, 2015), he focuses on his life in the dark—having downplayed his blindness in earlier works. His move to the Jerusalem School for the Blind, which marked his transition from sight to darkness, constitutes another form of displacement—one which resonates with the earlier poems he penned about the geographic relocation of his immigrant youth. One poem, "Blindfolded Horses," which opens his 2013 collection, reads:

> In every blind person
> a galloping horse abides
> aspiring to tear across
> distances.

Contrast this with a variety of his other poems which describe precisely how the sightless life is one of being reined in, almost corralled.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, when confronted with the blindness which beset his father, first considered the Biblical models of "blind Yitzhak and dim-sighted Yaakov," as well as their Talmudic era descendants, Rav Yosef and Rav Sheshet. Frustrated that the response to their plight can only be conjectured, for the holy writings never communicate the *experience* of blindness suffered by these heroes of the spirit, Rav Lichtenstein found solace and insight in

Milton's sonnet "On His Blindness" with its magnificent conclusion, "They also serve who only stand and wait." Its spiritual value to us as readers is great,

> "[a]ll the more so, when that experience has been communicated through culture at its finest, by great souls capable of feeling deeply and expressing feeling powerfully. The tragedy of personal affliction, in particular, is thus more acutely perceived because the tragedy of a great soul—Milton in the throes of blindness, Beethoven on the threshold of deafness—as well as its passionate response bears the imprint of that greatness and imparts to us a keener sense of the nature of the experience."

Biton is one such "great soul," and through his poetry we sighted readers see more clearly. One theme which repeats throughout his work is how the blind use touch to compensate for the loss of vision; hands become ancillaries of both sight and language (recall "The Miracle Worker"). But here Biton is again at a disadvantage: The explosion that robbed him of his eyes also claimed his left hand, and badly scarred his right. In a cycle of poems in *The House of Pianos,* he introduces us to many remarkable souls who populated the School for the Blind. In one we encounter "Shlomo the Typing Instructor":

> You,
> who prepared me for the typewriter keys
> which would mediate between the world and me
> to pass messages of love and beauty…

For a blind youth with literary aspirations, the braille-keyed typewriter is the best, perhaps only, form of writing available, and it must be mastered. But how does Shlomo instruct the boy who has been robbed not just of sight but also of the use of at least one of his hands which must need fly across those keys?

> Place your hand
> your only hand
> in the middle, in the middle,
> middle finger on letter *Alef*
> index finger on *Heh*, *Bet*, *Heh* [spelling *Ahava*; love] …
>
> Craft
> messages, messages,
> to that which is outside of yourself
> to give yourself through the keys
> to give your soul through the keys.

To peck out letters on a typewriter is one thing; to create music on the keys of a piano are something else entirely. In "For Mrs. Mira the Piano Teacher," a tender-hearted woman sees

the "gloomy heart of the child" whose physical defects prevent him from participating in her lessons while

> "other childrenenter and exit your classroom
> arriving with you
> to the enchanted depths
> of Beethoven's *Sonata Pathétique*."

The boy knows he has no hope of learning to play, yet the music teacher, through a gentle touch, guides the "deformed five fingers of his only hand onto the piano keyboard":

> I did not play Schubert's *Trout Quintet*
> but from that kindness
> there remains in me the magical journey
> to distant mountains
> and flowing streams.

One-armed pianists reminds us of Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*, composed for a pianist who had lost his right arm in World War I. The concerto is remarkable in the virtuosity it reveals while compensating for and obscuring the disability from which it sprung. But isn't all great art, and life itself, like this to one degree or another? Aren't we all covering up our shortcomings by foregrounding our greater talents?

This brings to mind my personal favorite Biton poem. A number of years ago Biton was riding in a taxi from Arad to Jerusalem through the Judean Desert with Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000), who is considered Israel's greatest modern poet. Amichai had been among the first to recognize Biton's promise, and was an early booster helping to bring him to prominence. As the car journeyed on Biton asked Amichai to describe the desert sights unfurling past them through the car windows. Instead of marshaling his powerful verbal skills, Amichai held Biton's one hand for a long, silent pause, after which Biton replied, "Now I understand." Later, he set the experience to verse in a poem dedicated to Amichai:

Saying Desert	**להגיד מִדבר**
Your silent hand	יָדְךָ הַשּׁוֹתֶקֶת
charted desert oases	סִרְטְטָה לְפָנַי
for me,	נְאוֹת מִדְבָּר
green upon green.	יָרֹק עַל יָרֹק.
As with communicating vessels	כְּמוֹ בְּכֵלִים שְׁלוּבִים
—a hand touches a hand—	יָד נוֹגַעַת בְּיָד
through your eyes	עָבְרוּ דֶּרֶךְ עֵינֶיךָ
I saw	אֵלַי
the greatness of the Word inscribed in stone	גְּדֻלַּת הַדִּבֵּר
and the wonder	וּפֶלֶא
of the burning bush.	הַסְּנֶה הַבּוֹעֵר.

[Adapted from an unpublished translation by Varda Ya'ari.]

[מתוך: **נופים חבושי עיניים**, עמ'16]

Those attuned to the Biblical resonances in the poem, and to the symbolism of the desert and the Jewish experiences which unfolded there, will be sensitive to what is written here and what is hinted at between the lines. The "*dibber*," Word [inscribed on stone], is God's desert communication to His people, the force of which comes from what is missing. Unlike ink on parchment, the Two Tablets communicate through letters formed by absence: the stone chiseled away and removed from the rock becomes the communicating vessel.

Later in history the desert becomes the locus of the near sound of silent communication via the *kol demamah dakkah*'s still, small voice. Indeed, the beginning of God's revelation to Moses is not verbal, but visual, in the form of the "marvelous sight," as the soon-to-be prophet describes the burning bush. But in the desert, God's Word comes to us in a synesthesian symphony of "*ro'im et ha-kolot*," in which voice and word are not only heard but seen. Perhaps this is the type of "vision" of which the Divine Poet, and those so graced in miniature here below—even if they be blind—are capable.

Biton's poetry is a "concerto for one hand," but unbeknownst to him on that car ride, he was playing a duet. In 2014, upon being awarded the Amichai Prize for Hebrew Poetry, he related the story of his desert trek with the late poet. Amichai's widow, Chana, surprised Biton by revealing that Amichai, too, had written a poem based on that shared experience (not published in his collected works, but in a lesser known volume, it was unknown to Biton):

פַּעַם נָסַעְתִּי	Once I traveled
לְאֹרֶךְ יָם הַמֶּלַח	along the shores of the Dead Sea
עִם מְשׁוֹרֵר עִוֵּר.	with a blind poet.
רָצִיתִי לְתָאֵר לוֹ אֶת הַמַּרְאוֹת	I wanted to describe the sights to him
וְשָׁתַקְתִּי.	and I was quiet.
הוּא רָאָה,	He saw,
הוּא הֵבִין.	he understood.

[מתוך: יהודה עמיחי, **נוף גלוי עיניים**, עמ'1] [Yehuda Amichai, *Nof Gelui Einayim*, p. 1]

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about these paired poems, and the voice they give to the parallel experiences the poets shared in the taxi, is the volumes in which they appear. The blind poet Erez Biton published his poem about this experience in a volume entitled *Nofim Havushei Einayim* (*Blindfolded Landscapes*); keen-sighted Amichai included his in a work entitled *Nof Gelui Einayim* (*Open-Eyed Landscape*). Each man penned and titled these works unaware of the formulations of his friend and fellow poet! Amichai had held Biton's hand and became an open braille book; the communication of the visual not through word but

through silent touch, to transmit complementary experience, which then redounded to eerily coincidental artistic impulses of each poet working in isolation.

What was written by Oscar Wilde of Homer might one day be said of Erez Biton:

> "I have sometimes thought that the story of Homer's blindness might be really an artistic myth created in critical days, and serving to remind us not merely that the great poet is always a seer, seeing less with the eyes of the body than he does with the eyes of the soul, but he is a true singer also, building his song out of music, repeating each line over and over again till he has caught the secret of its melody, *chanting in darkness the words that are winged with light.*"

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The Lifespan of Hirschian Orthodoxy: On the 130th *Yahrtzeit* of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

Francis Nataf

How long is the lifespan of a man? In Jewish parlance, we like to speak of one hundred and twenty years. What about the lifespan of a man's influence? While one hundred and twenty years is far longer than the direct influence of most people, there are the unusual few who are able to cast a truly giant shadow. Still, on the hundred and twentieth anniversary of R. S. R. Hirsch's death, there is good reason to wonder how long the legacy of his *Torah im Derekh Eretz* approach will be sustained.

I will not attempt to explain his approach here. Suffice it to say that Hirsch looked back to earlier days when even rabbis who rejected philosophy, such as Rabbi Yehudah ha-Levi and Ramban, were still highly knowledgeable about, and involved with, the world around them. Hirsch sought a median path that identified with the latter two scholars and rejected what he felt was Rambam's over-appropriation of Greek thought. He thought of Jews understanding the ideas of general culture as the default, and not something the Torah seeks to discourage. And as for the fact that this had not been the case for several centuries in most communities, he attributed it primarily to persecution and restrictions placed upon Jewish communities from the outside rather than anything intrinsic to the Jewish tradition.

In spite of the competition that his uniquely Western European brand of Orthodoxy faced from the much larger and more Jewishly erudite community in Eastern Europe and the dynamism and practicality of the growing American community; it was far from a foregone conclusion when he died in 1888 that Hirsch's version of Orthodoxy would not become the dominant one. Indeed, it was not only the Polish-born founder of the Bais Yaakov school system, Sarah Schenirer, that looked westward for guidance as to how to navigate Judaism in the modern world. While Hirsch was not unanimously praised in the far more conservative East European circles, there were many who looked very favorably to his ideas: In view of the mass defection from traditional practice and belief that made its way to Eastern Europe when Jews began to have more exposure to the general culture, there were many who saw the Hirschian model as the answer.[1] And had the latter had the day in Eastern Europe, it is highly likely that Hirsch's ideas would have spread more successfully to North America and Israel as well.

The paradox is that it was often the Eastern European-trained leaders best situated to appreciate R. Hirsch's approach who did the most to prevent its spread to the new Jewish centers in the West and in Israel.

[1] R. Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg is only the most famous of the Eastern European-trained rabbis who came to enthusiastic support of Hirsch's program. Less well known is the very positive view of Hirsch held by R. Yitzhak Elhanan Spektor. Thought the latter's appreciation of Hirsch's work did not amount to wholescale adoption of his ideas, it was the type of position that provided the high-level legitimation of Hirsch needed for others like Schenirer and Weinberg to first explore the approach.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is a good example. Having already lived in France and the United States for over thirty years, he wrote to a correspondent connected with Yeshiva University, "While it is understandable that the direct descendants of Rabbi Hirsch or those who were brought up in that philosophy should want to disseminate his teachings, I must say emphatically that to apply his approach to the American scene will not serve the interests of Orthodoxy in America." He continued to advise, "I have written the above only in the hope that you may be able to use your influence with certain circles in Washington Heights [New York], that they should again re-examine the whole question and see if the Rabbi Hirsch approach should be applied to the American scene. My decided opinion is, of course, that it should not, and I hope that whatever measure of restraint you may accomplish through your influence will be all good."[2] Of course, this is actually quite typical of the Rebbe's hyper-traditionalist approach and no surprise to anyone familiar with his thought. But the essence of his message was one that would eventually become the unofficial party line throughout the *haredi* world – that Hirsch's approach was only useful in his specific historical context.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler is another surprising case in point. Like the Lubavitcher Rebbe, he grew up in traditional rabbinic circles in Eastern Europe, and like the Rebbe, he became quite familiar with contemporary Western thought as he moved westward – in this case to England. And yet as his influence in the yeshiva world grew, he too made his active opposition to the Hirschian program very clear.[3] For Dessler, Hirsch's approach had shown itself seriously deficient in raising high-level Torah scholars. For him, this was not just a lacuna in providing leadership, but something much more profound. Rooted in the elitist orientation of Rambam, many of the Eastern European *yeshivot* had taught that these scholars were the only ones truly conforming to God's ultimate purpose in creating man.[4] [5]

Though Orthodox German expatriates could not help but resent the implications of these new anti-Hirschian directives, their rabbinic leaders made a strategic decision to go along. In this regard, Rabbi Shimon Schwab was an important transition figure who led or assisted in leading the the largest post-war concentration of German Jews, Kehillat Adat Yehshurun (KAJ) in Washington Heights, New York from 1958 to 1995. Though German-born, R. Schwab had studied in Eastern European *yeshivot* and was greatly influenced by the more

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[2] The Rebbe, "The Nature of American Jewish Students," CrownHeights.info, posted on Oct. 15, 2007 (http://crownheights.info/general/8538/the-rebbe-the-nature-of-american-jewish-students/). This is also quoted by Chaim Miller, *Turning Judaism Outward* (New York: KOL Menachem, 2014), pp. 94-95. See also a very similar letter at Chabad.org (https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/letters/default_cdo/aid/1877333/jewish/How-Important-Is-a-College-Education.htm)

[3] Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu*, vol. 3 (Bnei Brak: 1965), pp. 355-360.

[4] See Esther Solomon, "Rabbi Dessler's View of Secular Studies and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*," *Pardes* 24 (2018), pp. 103-124.

[5] Indeed, such a position was at odds with R. Hirsch's attempt to celebrate the contributions of the Jewish layman as equally important as those of the Torah scholar. See, for example, his essay, "Lessons from Jacob and Esau" in *The Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, vol. 3 (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1997), pp. 319-332.

traditional approach he found there. Given that the Hirschian community always had close political ties with the more traditional wing of Eastern European Orthodoxy, the decision was gradually made to accept the notion that *Torah im Derekh Eretz* had only limited application outside of pre-war Germany. And while not all agreed with their rabbis, the German Jewish laity had always been very deferential. This would be no exception.

Meanwhile, Orthodox Jews more inclined towards openness to the outside world found other approaches that provided a more open-ended approbation for involvement with secular knowledge. The two greatest thinkers in this regard were Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook in Israel and Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in the United States. While the two were very different in just about every other way, neither seemed particularly interested in the teachings of Hirsch. The Eastern European roots of the two certainly ran deep, and this was no doubt a factor in making R. Hirsch's approach a bit foreign to their sensibilities. In the case of R. Soloveitchik, these roots were marked by the house of Brisk, which had an important impact on the way he would formulate his approach even to the outside world.[6] In the case of Rav Kook, it was a combination of Volozhin and his deep engagement in Kabbalah and Hasidut that was decisive in creating a differing frame of reference. In fact, there were many variables that separated these three champions of secular learning, but laying even the major ones out is beyond the scope of this article.

And what of today? Unless there is some great unanticipated revival of Hirschian thought, it is hard to imagine his influence growing in the years to come. Fortunately, his legacy extends beyond his overarching approach and is passed on in his writing as well, the most famous of which is his commentary on the Torah (although even this has not survived completely unscathed). One of the great advantages of textual commentary is that the timeless nature of the text gives off some of that timelessness to the commentary as well. While many of R. Hirsch's comments are tied to his philosophy or to his idiosyncratic understanding of biblical Hebrew, many other comments are just plain good *parshanut* – keenly picking up real textual issues that others had missed and providing insights that give us a deeper understanding of some of the Tanakh's major figures. Moreover, some of his other works, such as *Horeb* and the *Nineteen Letters*, provide exceptional models of what can be done to create larger contexts of meaning from our texts and traditions.

In the final analysis, it is hard to pinpoint one single cause for the disappointing fate of Hirsch's legacy. Yet above and beyond the question of the merit of his work or even the response it got from some of his critics, we would be remiss not to at least mention the obvious impact of outside events. For had the Nazis not overrun Germany and destroyed its Jewish community, a large and self-confident German Jewish community might have been more successful at confronting their leader's critics and exporting his vision to other major communities. But this was not to be.

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[6] Based on a conversation with my teacher, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, I got the impression that R. Soloveitchik viewed the type of Talmudic mastery that he had found in Brisk to be a prerequisite for a leading rabbinic thinker. While R. Hirsch was certainly well versed in the Talmud and codes, he was never known as a Talmudic virtuoso. That was not his major area of involvement and his greatest works were accordingly in other areas of Jewish learning. Whether such must indeed be a prerequisite or not, however, is certainly not a foregone conclusion.

We are neither the master of our own destinies, nor even less the master of our legacies. It was perhaps partly with this in mind that the Mishnah (*Avot* 2:16) tells us, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it." To this I can only imagine R. Hirsch answering, Amen!

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