HEBREW CLASSICS

A JOURNEY THROUGH ISRAEL'S TIMELESS FICTION AND POETRY

DVIR ABRAMOVICH

Israel: Society, Culture, and History

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Dedicated to my children Lori and Ethan,
who are with me through every step of this journey,
and who are my pillars of strength
and greatest source of inspiration.
No father has ever had two more
wonderful and beautiful children.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a celebration of great Hebrew novels, short stories, and poems. Each piece of literature examined here has been recognized as a major and substantial work within the Israeli and, occasionally, the international literary canon. Of course, greatness comes in many forms. Yet the golden thread that runs through the canvass of works presented here is that they seem remarkably fresh in their subject matter as when they were read decades ago. In a sentence, they have not dated and their prominence has not waned.

Needless to say, tastes differ, and you may believe that another eleven works should have been selected. The inevitable agonizing headache I often suffered during the writing of this book involved the predictable and taxing concerns about inclusions and exclusions of texts. I was well aware of the inevitable questions I knew would be posed—"Why did you leave that out?" or "Should you not have covered this author or that novel?" But the huge range of choices available, and the rich furrow of the field I could plough, meant that there are many literary gems that could not be represented here.

One of the delights in writing this book has been the opportunity to include novels, short stories, and poems from various decades that have made a personal impact and that have meant so much to me. The simple truth is that my choice of materials stemmed first and foremost from my love for them and because of their literary, historical, and artistic value. But above all, it was because they made my heart pound when I first imbibed their words, images, forms, symbols, and messages. Since then, they have populated my intellectual imagination, and I have returned to them with some frequency.

This project is also in many ways a response to the urgent request of teachers (with whom I have collaborated for more than a decade in presenting the splendor of Hebrew culture and fiction) to publish a volume that in a clear and informative manner would deepen students' appreciation of the classics and serve as a valuable learning tool. It is my sincere hope that this book will connect readers with new experiences, challenge their perceptions, provide them with insights into Israeli and Jewish culture and generate greater empathy and understanding.

There may be those for whom certain names are not as recognizable as others since some of the writers featured here are not well-known outside Israel. This may inspire readers to follow up and embark on a tour of the authors' and poets' other landscapes. More generally, readers may choose to undertake a personal odyssey into the domain of Hebrew fiction, a vista dotted by other literary pearls that are sure to inspire them. If in a small way my efforts here serve as a gateway to introduce and provoke readers to search for other Hebrew writers and cause them to come away with a more nuanced and profound appreciation of the Hebrew canon, then this ambitious undertaking was not in vain.

I wrote these essays, in part, because I sensed that many readers seemed to possess little knowledge of the riches of Hebrew literature and, in part, because they were uninterested in the classics. What I did find was that when they did read and understood the themes of each of the narratives examined here, that it made an indelible impression on them. Their reluctance had vanished, replaced by enthusiasm and by a desire to continue to excavate the mines of this wondrous universe.

Over the years, I have come to believe that everyone deserves to encounter masterpieces that capture the vision, voice, and personality of a singular artist, as well as a moment in time. Frankly, I could not bear the thought that those who are not familiar with Hebrew letters may never taste the fruits of such iridescent, iconic opuses.

Finally, the chief pleasure of this project has been rereading these tales of merit and discovering anew the infinite complexities and wisdoms fleshed out in the caverns and domains the stories map. I hope that readers will share the enthusiasm that I poured into this book and

equally appreciate that literary excellence is a region we should all take a stroll in whenever possible. Like the floor of the ocean, they offer breathtaking and unexpected depths of beauty and contain incalculable joys that stir the soul. I hope that those who enjoy a good story will read this book in their homes, cafes, trains, or under a tree and that in some way the writings will transport them to the literary culture, period, and historical milieu that each work resplendently charts and embodies.

CHAPTER I

AN IDYLL OF RURAL JEWISH LIFE

SHAUL TCHERNICHOVSKY'S "BOILED DUMPLINGS"

One of the giants of contemporary Hebrew poetry, Shaul Tchernichovsky was Hebrew's most productive and original sonneteer. Creating a new linguistic canvass that reflected and spotlighted new dimensions of Jewish spiritualism, he chronicled the pioneering era taking place in early twentieth century Palestine.[1] Notably, he departed from his peers in both substance and form, avoiding the preachy style common to Hebrew poetry of the time and replacing the biblical rhetoric (though not necessarily biblical poetic lexicon) with thematic and structural innovations. At heart, Tchernichovsky's writing, while textually underwritten by the scriptures, drew on those tales to configure a new creative reality that in a key ontological sense was primarily dissimilar to the Bible. Moreover, by eschewing the archaic scriptural vocabulary of his contemporaries and employing the style of the romantic and Greek poets, he liberated Hebrew from its rigid grammatical rules and earned the title of the first modern Hebrew poet. Indeed, his revolutionary works set new trends and anchored a radical change that has influenced generations of Israeli poets. Critics lauded his exquisite depiction of character and honest writing that focused, in part, on the quotidian nature of life, celebrating, with exuberant bliss and love, the simple existence of individuals. Ushering in a new era, Tchernichovsky enriched Hebrew literature, drawing on

1 There are numerous studies on this remarkable artist. One of the best is *Shaul Tchernichovsky*: *Mivchar ma-amarey bikoret al yetzirato*, edited by Yosef Ha'efrati. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1976.

the endless fount of Greek variety and resources. For his longer poems, and for almost all of his idylls, he utilized the dactylic hexameter, a mode typical of the Greek epic.

Propelled by a modernist yearning to reassess received traditional mores, Tchernichovsky revivified literary myth (in accordance with pantheistic values) and infused Hebrew poetry with its currents—an overtone that was sharply extraneous to the literary realm he was working within. One critic rightly noted that Tchernichovsky, free of the weight of exile and orthodoxy, "stands at the beginning of an era and he is its inaugurator."[2] In a prolific and impressive career, he penned four hundred and seventy poems, more than thirty stories, medical essays, children's poems, stories, feuilletons, journalistic entries, and humoristic pieces.

An ardent admirer of Greek culture and classics, especially their pre-monotheistic, pantheistic traditions, he used Greek poetic techniques and added—through his sonnets, idylls (his preferred genre), and copious translations—new elements to Hebrew poetry. In fact, in his youth, he was given the nickname "the sharp-witted Greek" for his affection for Greek mythology, and critics tagged him "The Greek."

Radiating effervescent joy and energy, Tchernichovsky's verse was modeled on Greek prosody, relying on the culture's philosophy and poetry. He continually underlined the pantheistic idea that God is identical to the universe. Though Tchernichovsky penned spiritual poems that tackled the subject matter of paganism and Hellenism, fundamentally the poet never found a way to reconcile with the alien culture and religion. As an example, while in a group of liturgical sonnets written in 1919 and titled "Lashemesh" ("To the Sun") a pagan appreciation of nature is expressed, in a poem such as "Lenochach pesel Apollo" ("Before the Statue of Apollo," 1899), the sculptor of a statue of Zeus is unmoved by his masterpiece during its dedication, but is instead awestruck by the Hebrew concept of an abstract, unreachable God.

Shaul Tchernichovsky was born on August 20, 1875, in the village of Mikhailovka, on the border of the Ukraine and the Crimea, and grew up in a modern religious home in which the ideas of the enlightenment

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2 Silberschlag, Eisig. *Saul Tschernichowsky: Poet of Revolt*. London: East and West Library; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968: 91.

and Zionism were openly discussed. His father, Tuvia Guttman, a storekeeper and an early Zionist, and his mother, Bila Karp, imbued the young boy with a joyous love for Jewish law and ensured that he be taught the Hebrew language and its literature. From an early age, Tchernichovsky was exposed to Talmudic texts and Hebrew poems, which led him to compose, at age twelve, a poem about the biblical Uriah the Hittite. After attending Russian school, a period that enabled him to become acquainted with Russian and world culture, he was sent to Odessa in 1890 to conclude his studies at a private High school. It was in Odessa where he learned German, Latin, and English, and where he composed his earliest Hebrew poems. His first poem, "Bachalomi" ("In My Dream"), published in December 1892, marked the beginning of his national stage, evincing an attraction to the Land of Israel and to the ideas of political Zionism. In other poems, such as "Masat nafshi" ("My Ideal," 1893) and "Ani ma-a-min" ("I Believe," 1894), Tchernichovsky revealed his ideological manifesto, articulating, in a personal voice, the yearnings of generations of Jews to return to the land of their forefathers. Not surprisingly, Tchernichovsky served as the honorary secretary of the Zionist organization Nes–Tziyona (The Miracle of Zion). While in Odessa, he met his mentor, the scholar Yosef Klausner, who encouraged him to concentrate on his writing and who sent his early poems to various journals.

In the years 1899–1906, Tchernichovsky studied medicine at the University of Heidelberg, but graduated from Lausanne. During that period, he met his future wife, Melanie Karlovna Van Gozias, an ultraorthodox Christian from a noble Russian family. The poet's Heidelberg-Lausanne period was one of enormous artistic development, with Tchernichovsky authoring many of his most distinguished works. He then returned to Russia but struggled to secure a permanent position because of the prevalent anti-Semitism of the time.

After three years, he left Russia, sojourning briefly in Constantinople, Turkey, from where he hoped to secure a post in Palestine. Failing to do so, he settled in Berlin. He traveled to Melitopol, Ukraine, and later worked as a doctor in the villages of the Kharkov district. Accused of affiliation with revolutionaries, Tchernichovsky was jailed by the Tsarist authorities in 1907. When his medical qualifications were recognized in

1910, he made his abode in St. Petersburg (Leningrad).

"Chezyonot u-manginot aleph" ("Visions and Melodies A") was Tchernichovsky's first collection of poems, published in Warsaw in 1898. It included not only forty-six original poems of love and nature but also translated works. Ultimately, the collection proved to be one of his most popular, stirring readers with its romantic descriptions. At the same time, the group of verse also expressed sorrow, anger, and desperation at the struggles of the Jew within a hostile world. If Tchernichovsky claimed, through his art, that his generation was stagnant because it adhered to old values and resisted change, several of the works in "Chezyonot u-manginot aleph" celebrated the empowerment of the pioneering Jew in Palestine. In 1901, Tchernichovsky published "Chezyonot u-manginot bet" ("Visions and Melodies B").

Another literary preoccupation for Tchernichovsky was the life of King Saul, an interest stemming from the poet's attraction to marginal, downtrodden figures, rather than to pious men. The ballad "B'Ein Dor" ("In Ein Dor," 1893) narrates events from Samuel I, most prominently the encounter between the king and the witch at Ein Dor, and moves toward Saul's rueful end, in a manner reminiscent of *Macbeth*. At every juncture of his creative life, Tchernichovsky would write five meditative pieces about King Saul. His 1937 ballad, "Anshey chayil chevel" ("A Band of Valiant Men") again based on Samuel I and recording Saul's tragic end, has been lauded as one of the most splendid dirges in modern Hebrew literature.

There is general agreement that the idyll that emerged as Tchernichovsky's signature medium was a vessel into which he poured his ideological tendencies. Certainly, he is acknowledged as the father of the Hebrew idyll. Remarkably, even though his idylls dealt with harsh and explosive subjects, functioning as all-purpose charge sheets against the ruling authorities and their behavior toward their subjects, on the whole, the idylls radiated good-natured tranquility. "Hakaf hashvura" ("The Wooden Spoon," 1907), about prison life, demonstrates Tchernichovsky's ability to marry social indictment and melancholic equanimity. Another example is the epic, highly charged "Baruch mimagenza" ("Baruch of Mainz," 1901) which recounts Jewish history and its attendant pogroms and persecution during the period of the Crusades. Baruch, driven mad by the senseless murder of his

wife and by being forced to convert, kills his two daughters so as to spare them similar abasement. Tchernichovsky frequently visited the theme of Christian treatment of the Jews, displaying astonishment at the irrational savagery committed against his brethren.

Hand in hand with his artistic creations, Tchernichovsky contributed medical essays to the Russian *Jewish Encyclopaedia* and was commissioned to edit *The Book of Medicinal and Natural Science Terminology*. He served as physician in the Russian army during World War I and while working as a doctor amidst the turbulent days of the Russian revolution, continued to produce fine poetry, penning another piece about King Saul, and translating poems of Anacreon, Horace, Plato, and Homer. In 1923, *Hechalil* (*The Flute*), a book of children's poems, was published, revolving around Jewish daily life and tradition and informed by an accurate sense of childishness.

Alongside his poetry, Tchernichovsky, over a span of thirty years, also wrote prose works. A large portion of them were gathered in *Shloshim ushlosha sipurim* (*Thirty-Three Stories*, 1941). Constantly traveling, between 1924 and 1928 he stayed in Hungary (where he was labeled "The King of Hebrew Poets" by the Hungarian minister of Education), was in Poland for a year at the invitation of a friend, and visited the United States. He finally immigrated to Palestine in 1931, first settling in Jerusalem and then moving to Tel Aviv, where he worked as a doctor for municipal schools. In 1935, he was awarded an honorary title by the Finnish government, his work by then gaining worldwide recognition. In 1936, after obtaining a contract with Schocken Publishing House, he moved to Jerusalem, where he lived for the remainder of his life. Afflicted for a long time with cardiac chest pain, in the final years of his life he suffered from leukemia. The last poem he composed, "Kochvei shamayim rechokim" ("Distant Stars in the Sky"), printed after 1948, once again echoed the King Saul narrative in the way its lonely hero reflects on a life lived, reminiscing about his youth—just as King Saul did in "Ein Dor." Tchernichovsky passed away in his home in Jerusalem on October 14, 1943, and was buried in the old cemetery in Tel Aviv. In honor of his monumental contribution to Jewish culture, Beit Hasofer, an archival literary center, was posthumously renamed after him.

There is no doubt that Tchernichovsky was instrumental in bringing Hebrew poetry closer to European literature, in introducing major genres and in bringing to the fore innovations that realigned the parameters of the canon. His ballads are still regarded as perhaps the finest and most inventive ever written by a Hebrew poet, and his poetry has been translated into several languages, including English, French, Russian, Spanish, and Yiddish.

It would not be too much to state, as Silberschlag does, that the idyll was not only Tchernichovsky's most beloved form, but also that, "he was as much the father of the Hebrew idyll as Theocritus was the father of the Greek idyll."[3] Silberschlag goes on to elucidate the poet's unique contribution:

> The poetic reflection on the life of Jews in rural, southern Russia was Tschernichowsky's gift to Hebrew literature. Before him, Hebrew writers had confined themselves to the traditional urbanism of their people. When they wanted rural themes, they turned to history. Tschernichowsky was the first modern Hebrew poet to celebrate his native district. And he had the power to lift segments of life from regional obscurity to the status of literature. In his idylls Tschernichowsky achieved mature serenity. No overt fight against accepted norms, no iconoclastic stance mars the inner repose of his long hexametric lines. The Jew is at peace with nature.[4]

Tchernichovsky's first idyll, "Levivot"[5] ("Dumplings"),[6] was written in Heidelberg in 1902. It has been celebrated for its coherence, vibrancy, and multiplex form as well as for its engagement with weighty subject matters significant at the time of its writing. "Boiled Dumplings" vividly illustrates Tchernichovsky's bittersweet humor, sophisticated construction and acute feel for folklore. Critic Yosef Klausner observed that "Boiled Dumplings" had become a precious asset to the New

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3 Silberschlag, *Saul Tschernichowsky*, 61.

4 Silberschlag, *Saul Tschernichowsky*, 61-62.

5 I am using the English translation found in *Modern Hebrew Poetry*: *A Bilingual Anthology*, edited and translated by Ruth Finer Mintz. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982.

6 In the first version Tchernichovsky called the idyll *Levivot mevushalot* and *Levivot berotchim* (*Cooked Dumplings* and *Boiled Dumplings*) respectively — but later dropped the adjectives "cooked" and "boiled."