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James Rosenberg

**TWO AMERICAN HEBREW POETS**

**Baruch Katznelson  
and  
Abraham Zvi Halevy**

Baruch Katznelson (1900-recently deceased) came to the United States in 1922; he remained in America for only twelve years before leaving for what is now the State of Israel, where he remained until his death. In 1930, while still in the United States, Katznelson published a small volume of his poems entitled *L'Or ha-Ner (By the Light of the Candle)*. According to Menahem Ribalow, the poems which Katznelson wrote while in America "were not of the fruit of the land, for nothing of the spirit of the time or the place was reflected in them. They might well have been written in India or China, and there they certainly would have been better understood and comprehended."

Many of the poems in *L'Or ha-Ner* are indeed similar in spirit to Japanese Haiku; they are lyrical fragments, brief poetic observations of trees and stars and snowflakes. Two of the poems in this volume, however, do reflect, in a gentle, quiet way, some of the harsh realities of immigrant life in New York City during the 1920's. Unlike the strident, sarcastic poems in which Dolizky and Rosenzweig depict the world of the immigrants in the 1880's and 1890's, Katznelson's poems make their point through understatement. In *Achai ("My Brothers")* Katznelson compares the young immigrant men to abandoned children who wander aimlessly through the city streets. The poet turns his attention to the plight of the immigrant women in *Achyotai ("My Sisters")*. The crowded subways and the steaming sweat shops deprive them of light and fresh air:

My sisters get up early.  
 Their morning lurks above the mouth of the subway;  
 Their day crouches at the foot of the machine.

These young Jewish women spend lost evenings in tiny, furnished rooms; how they long "To nestle against a young man, / To press an infant to the heart." At times they grow so lonely that even "God cries on high."

While Katznelson's *Achai* and *Achyotai* speak in little more than a whisper, the poems of Abraham Zvi Halevy (1907-1966) scream out in agony against the dehumanizing conditions of life in New York City. It would seem that Halevy approached his poetry with the same feverish intensity that Van Gogh approached his painting. To some degree, the circumstances of Halevy's life explain the tortured character of his art. Halevy was six years old in 1913, when he left home in Poland and was brought to Israel. There he attended elementary

school and studied for a time in the Teachers Training School. In 1925, at the age of eighteen, Halevy left Israel and came to the United States, where "without family and with only occasional friends, the young lad worked as a factory hand, a farm laborer and a union organizer, and when the war came, he served five years in the army, rising in rank from private to sergeant." Throughout much of his life Halevy was torn between Israel and America; from 1925 to 1950, he made several short trips to Israel, but he could never bring himself to remain there and always returned to the United States. Halevy was one of the small group of American Hebrew writers who became actively engaged with New York's Ohel publishing house in the 1940's. In 1948, Ohel published *Mitoch ha-Sugar (From Inside the Cage)*, a collection of poems which Halevy had written between 1937 and 1948. In 1966, still unable to come to terms with himself or with the world, Halevy took his own life.

Throughout Halevy's poetry on life in New York City runs the theme of deep and unending loneliness. The people whom Halevy portrays are inescapably shut off from their fellowmen; each person is a prisoner in his own cage. Halevy uses brutal images to convey the intensity of human isolation. *Tachat Gesher Williamsburg ("Under the Williamsburg Bridge")*, for example, describes a drunken derelict masturbating on the black asphalt. Though many of Halevy's poems depict the loneliness of the individual, "Times Square" shows whole groups of people in social isolation from each other. While people from all levels of society exist side by side in New York City, no one can see beyond his own narrow world. Not the slightest amount of compassion or understanding spans the gulf separating the theater crowd from those who can hardly afford a cup of coffee:

Like animals at a watering trough,  
the crowd gathers at the theater entrance,  
milling about,  
That they might drink their fill of sounds  
and enchantments until they sink  
into blissful oblivion.  
Over there a group of the downtrodden  
besiege a pushcart laden with coffee;  
They silently depart with their meager portion  
and satisfy their hunger.  
And one world does not make contact with the other.  
The hungry one does not gnash his teeth,  
And his envy does not clench a fist  
seeking vengeance: rather he consoles himself:  
Tomorrow—and I'll be on top.  
The dandy does not spit at all this,  
and his heart does not throb within;  
Rather he fixes his crooked time and smiles:  
Drink and be merry, for tomorrow—  
it is downhill.

Even when a person tries to reach out to his fellow, the two remain in separate worlds. Thus, in *B'Simtah Ne'elachah ("In a Foul Alley")*, a loving couple offer assistance to a staggering, confused drunkard; however, "their imperfect and isolating happiness" prevents them from really understanding the man whom they have helped.

*Asarah "Cent" ha-Rikud ("Ten Cents a Dance")* describes the desperate attempt of emotionally empty men to find relief from their loneliness in a dance hall on the corner of Fourteenth Street and Third Avenue. Although a few do manage to find release for their sexual frustration as they shuffle along, their loneliness does not leave them. On the contrary, their sense of isolation is intensified by their guilt:

The girls twist and turn like snakes;  
and they slouch as they are grabbed tightly  
by those who give a whore's pay for the dance;  
The men shuffle along, their blood and faces burning,  
waiting attentively for the miracle to come  
from the depths of their bodies drawn taut  
like a bow.  
And the miracle does come and affords them release . . .  
Afterwards they go poor and empty  
into the darkest part of the hall  
and drop to the bench like those accused;  
There they sit drearily enveloped in a cloud  
of tobacco smoke until they find the strength  
to return to their jobs.

The only cure for loneliness is oblivion. Perhaps this is why Halevy writes so frequently about drunkenness and similar states of stupor. Only when those in the dance hall have whirled themselves into a drunken dizziness can they find even temporary refuge from the harsh reality outside:

And the dancehall, which arouses the congregation  
of bewitched ones who come to it,  
is a battered ship in the midst of the world,  
Making its way and struggling drunk  
towards the hidden island of forgetfulness,  
which casts its spell and beckons from afar.

It is as if all the impersonal forces of the city have conspired to dehumanize its inhabitants. In "The Bowery", Halevy calls the residents of the filthy flophouses "those whom the city has vomited up." Vomit and spit—two of Halevy's favorite words; the city reduces man to vomit and spit, the city robs man of his dignity. His condition becomes so wretched that he even loses the ability to cry:

The affliction of their lives tracks them down  
 like a bear without cubs,  
 crushing, squeezing their throat  
 In which a tear is stuck like a bone;  
 it will not come out, it will not well up  
 to make things easier, to comfort them.  
 And night comes, thick like poison in their bones,  
 and they lie twisted and coiled like snakes.  
 They tear at their flesh in anger  
 and discharge their frothy spit  
 into the mouth of the night.

When these lost souls, "freezing, hungry, their faces distorted," seek refuge at the church, they find its doors locked. The figure of Jesus above the lintel looks on impotently at those who tremble at the doorway:

But His stare is dumb, and He is like a helpless  
 captive. Salvation drops His vanquished head  
 and is silent.  
 A slanting rain beats loudly upon the body  
 of the naked Savior; filthy and muddy,  
 It falls upon the congregation who are kneeling,  
 trembling like dogs at the doorway.

The dehumanizing forces of the city have triumphed over the humanizing forces of religion.

In both descriptive style and choice of subject matter, Halevy is closer than the other American Hebrew poets to the Yiddish writers. A strong current of romanticism runs through the poetry of Silkiner, Efros, Lisitzky, and Bavli. This romantic tendency tends to soften the hard lines of reality. Thus, Silkiner, Efros, and Lisitzky do not look at America directly in their poetry; rather, they attempt to understand their personal experience in this country by looking at the experience of others—the Indians, the Negroes, the prospectors of 1849. In the case of Bavli, his sentimentality totally overwhelms any elements of real life which have somehow found their way into such poems as "Mrs. Woods." Maybe these poets found their experience in the United States too painful to confront directly in their poetry. In contrast to the romanticism of these American Hebrew poets, Halevy's poetry may be called realistic. Like the Yiddish writers, he writes of raw experiences; he describes life in New York City as he sees it—harsh, cruel, and intolerably lonely. That Halevy is a realistic writer does not mean that his poetry lacks emotion. On the contrary, he is probably the most intensely emotional of all the American Hebrew poets discussed here. Furthermore, that Halevy is a realistic writer does not mean that his descriptions are "objective"; his emotions certainly color what he sees. Reading Halevy's poetry, one cannot help asking: Have the dehumanizing forces of New York City made Halevy such a tortured poet, or has Halevy's inner agony made him see the city in such a morbid light?

Disappointment, depression, and incurable  
 disillusionment groan within his verses and  
 between the lines. The poet is imprisoned,  
 locked up inside the "asylum of himself," and  
 there is no window and no door to the world outside.

Perhaps it was the cruel impersonality of city life that ultimately drove Halevy into the "asylum of himself" for all eternity.

### About Translations

To translate is to make a series of choices. Hardly a single word can make the transition from one language to another without losing some subtle shade of its original meaning. Thus, all translations are incomplete, partial. Each translator has the obligation to establish for himself a system of priorities: What is it about a particular piece of literature that he wishes to preserve? What aspects of the original may he leave untranslated? Rarely is it enough to translate only the literal meaning; for in a work of art, the form of expression is an indispensable part of its content. In the case of poetry, the problems of translation are greatly multiplied. Rhythm and rhyme complicate the task of preserving the flavor of a poem in its new language. Unfortunately, many of the translators of Hebrew poetry seem to have become obsessed with the desire to keep unchanged the original scheme of rhythm and rhyme; the resulting translations are often pedantic exercises in ruthlessly shoving stilted English into predetermined molds.

In my translations, I have chosen to disregard the rhyme scheme of the original and have been very flexible with respect to its rhythm. I have dispensed with these externals — though with some misgivings — in order to create translations which are faithful both to the spirit of the Hebrew original and to the English language. I have not translated word for word, which is not really possible anyway; rather I have translated from Hebrew idiom to English idiom, trying to preserve something of the color and imagery of the Hebrew. All of this is highly unscientific, for the "spirit" of a poem cannot be bottled in a test tube and then subjugated to laboratory analysis. Each poem is an artistic whole; the translator must enter into each poem with an open mind and an unrehearsed heart. He must resign himself at the very outset to taking only a fragment of the original into the world of a new language.

J.R.

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*The following Hebrew poems were selected and translated by James Rosenberg.*