

NOTES AND READINGS

An Anthem Reconsidered: On Text and Subtext in Yehuda Leib Gordon's "Awake, My People!"

In recent years, several literary historians have expressed a renewed interest in Haskalah poetry in general, and in the poetry of Y. L. Gordon in particular.¹ Additionally, the literature on Gordon has been enriched by the appearance of Michael Stanislawski's magisterial biography of Gordon, *For Whom Do I Toil?: Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry*.² Biographers and literary historians alike concede that Gordon's single most famous poem is his "Awake, My People!"³ Strangely, no one has of yet devoted a full-fledged analysis to this poem to understand its power in terms of Gordon's poetic art. In his book-length and highly detailed study on Gordon's literary *oeuvre*, Joseph Klausner devotes only a few sentences to the poem in the context of Gordon's prescription for Russian Jewry in the early 1860s: "and these two things—religion and literature in the Hebrew language—will preserve the Jewish nation. And from here stems the great cry: 'be a man in the streets and a Jew at home'—which is in the *typical Gordon poem* [my emphasis—G.B.] 'Awake, My People!'"⁴ No elaboration on this point is forthcoming. While providing important correctives to the views of previous critics on many aspects of Gordon's *oeuvre*, regarding this poem (which,

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1. For a summary and guide to criticism of Gordon's poetry, see Shmuel Werses, "Yalag's Poetry in the Test of Time" [Hebrew] in *Biqoret habiqoret—Ha'arakhot vegilguleihen* [Criticism of criticism: Evaluations in development] (Tel Aviv, 1982), pp. 11-33; Ben-Ami Feingold, "Yalag in Historical Perspective" [Hebrew], *Moznayim* 54: 3-4 (1982): 45-50; Dan Miron, "Rediscovering Haskalah Poetry," *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 298-304; Uzi Shavit, "Theme, Effect, Form and Genre in the Narrative Poems of Y. L. Gordon: On the Epic Poetry of Yalag and Its Place in the Development of Hebrew Epic Poetry" [Hebrew], *Dappim lemeḥqar basifrut* 3 (1986): 35-60.

2. New York and Oxford, 1988.

3. Written late 1862 or early 1863, first published in *Hakarmel*, 6:1, 3 Iyyar 5626 [1866], p. 1.

4. Joseph Klausner, *Historia shel hasifrut ha'ivrit haḥadasha* [History of modern Hebrew literature], Jerusalem, 5714, vol. 4, p. 325.

Awake, My People!

- 1 *Awake, my people! How long will you sleep?
The night has passed, the sun shines through.
Awake, cast your eyes hither and yon
Recognize your time and place.*
- 5 *Has the march of time stood still
From the day you left for all parts of the globe?
Thousands of years have come and gone
Since your freedom was lost and you wandered away.*
- 10 *Many generations have been born and died
Oceans and continents have intervened
Remarkable changes have taken place
A different world engulfs us today.*
- 15 *Awake, my people! How long will you sleep?
The night has passed, the sun shines through.
Awake, cast your eyes hither and yon
Recognize your time and place.*
- 20 *The land where we live and are born
Is it not thought to be part of Europe?
Europe, the smallest of continents
But the mightiest of all in wisdom and knowledge.*
- 25 *This land of Eden is now open to you
Its sons now call you "brothers."
How long will you dwell among them as a guest
Why do you reject their hand?*
- 30 *They have already removed the burden from your back
And lifted the yoke from around your neck
They have erased from their hearts hatred and folly
They stretch out their hands to you in peace.*
- 35 *So raise your head high, stand up straight
Look at them with loving eyes,
Open your hearts to wisdom and reason
Become an enlightened nation, speaking their tongue.*
- 40 *Everyone capable of learning should study
Laborers and artisans should take to a craft
The strong and the brave should be soldiers
Farmers should buy fields and ploughs.*
- 44 *To the treasury of the state bring your wealth
Bear your share of its riches and bounty
Be a man in the streets and a Jew at home
A brother to your countryman and a servant to your king.*
- Awake, my people! How long will you sleep?
The night has passed, the sun shines through.
Awake, cast your eyes hither and yon
Recognize your time and place.*

Translation from Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil?: Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 49–50. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

given its importance in Gordon's life and work, he quotes in full) Stanislawski in effect attributes the fame of the poem to its famed, oft-quoted and misunderstood line "be a man in the streets and a Jew at home."⁵ Beyond that, he, too, offers little analysis of the remainder of the poem.

The course of the development of criticism of Gordon's work points to several possible explanations for this relative silence. For many critics and literary historians, the critical agenda set out by Moshe Leib Lilienblum in his major critique of Gordon's poetry,⁶ which focused on a few themes, determined the direction of further discussion of the poet's work. Lilienblum evaluated Gordon's poetry from a national-ideological standpoint, and from this standpoint dismissed the ideas expressed in "Awake, My People!" as wrongheaded at the time of their writing and even more mistaken at twenty years' remove. Lilienblum judged Gordon's poem as an ideological manifesto. Its overt message expressed nothing new in the context of the Haskalah, and from the nationalist viewpoint of some of the critics, it was an expression of Jewish self-hatred and self-denial:

Be a man in the streets and a Jew at home. The poet is not the first to give us such a lesson. Many are the authors who advised us to hide the "Jew" in us (that is, our being Jewish), this contraband merchandise, in the secrecy of our tent, as if it were a disgrace for a man in the nineteenth century to be known as a Jew. Many have listened to this cry, and the results are evident now in our children.⁷

Some years later, Y. L. Peretz would dismiss the poem on aesthetic grounds: it was of low quality and thus unworthy of serious comment.⁸ In his view:

Gordon sang two "poems" [quotation marks in original—G.B.] in praise of Haskalah and knowledge, two tributes, and both of them are thin and very empty. Not in this way would his glory yet come. The first poem in this category is "Awake, My People!" Its aim is clear: to awake the slumbering. Poems like this were sung by Adam [Lebenson], Gottlober, and any young man who takes up the pen would surely so write . . . Gordon added no element of his own.⁹

5. *For Whom Do I Toil?* p. 50 [Stanislawski's translation of line in question]. On this slogan, see the fascinating essay of Dov Sadan, "In Your Going Out and in Your Tent: On the History of a Slogan and Its Meaning" [Hebrew], in *Betsetkha uv'oholekha: Minyan hiqrei sifrut* [In the street and at home: Ten literary studies] (Givataim-Ramat-Gan, 1966), pp. 9–50.

6. Moshe Leib Lilienblum, "A Critique of the Collected Poems of Yehuda Leib Gordon" [Hebrew], in *Kol kitvei Moshe Leib Lilienblum* (Odessa, 5672 [1911/1912]), vol. 3, pp. 26–85. Article originally appeared in the supplements to *Hamelits* 5645 [1884/1885].

7. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 34.

8. On the wider debate in Hebrew literary criticism on whether Gordon deserved the title poet altogether, see Dan Miron, "Between Precedent and Coincidence: The Epic Poetry of Y. L. Gordon and Its Place in the Literature of the Hebrew Haskalah" [Hebrew], *Melqerei Yerushalayim besifrut ivrit* 2 (1983): 127–29. See also Judith Bar-El, "The National Poet: The Emergence of a Concept in Hebrew Literary Criticism (1885–1905)," *Prooftexts* 6 (1986): 205–20.

9. Y. L. Peretz, "What Was Gordon, a Linguist or a Poet?" [Hebrew], in *Kol kitvei Y. L. Peretz* (Tel Aviv, 1960), vol. 10, part 1, p. 180. Article originally appeared in seventeen installments in *Hatsefira* 5657 [1896/1897] and is reproduced in *Kol kitvei*, vol. 10, pp. 161–200.

In Peretz's opinion, only when he took up the cudgels of the militant social critic would Gordon's truly poetic muse first find expression. Writing on the fortieth anniversary of Gordon's death, Joseph Hayyim Brenner presents a more complex evaluation of the poet, which owes much both to the national-ideological and the aesthetic critical traditions that preceded him, yet evinces much sympathy for the man and his works. The negative view of "Awake, My People!" remains, however:

Gordon the poet always dwelled among his people and diligently set about its reform and its internal enlightenment, a national enlightenment that will stand forever. Yes! The spiritual obsequiousness of "Awake, My People!" is horrifying and it is impossible to pass over it in silence even in words of memorial. But happily, life is greater than any formulation; and if in this poem, which was proclaimed to the Jews in their own tongue, but was completely directed outward, Gordon the man sinned, in his true life, in the poetry of his life, which flowed from within, from the fountain of his people and for his people, he unceasingly rose, step by step. What he did not see—his poetic muse did see.¹⁰

Finally, we would venture the speculation that the poem's status as an unofficial "anthem" of the Haskalah movement placed it for some critics outside the bounds of standard literary discussion and debate, onto a more rarefied plane of national-cultural myth. Just as we would not expect to find serious literary analysis of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" or the "Star Spangled Banner" or "Hatikvah," for that matter, "Awake, My People!"—the "Marseillaise of the Haskalah movement"¹¹—had its function as a cultural monument irrespective of any fleeting or lasting literary value. Placing the poem on this lofty plane of an anthem may have affected the critics in another way. In a kind of reverse literary snobbery, they might have considered any poem adopted by such wide circles of the reading public as perforce of lesser literary merit.

Even in their short discussions of the poem, the literary critics and historians note their perplexity as to its popularity. After all, note these authors, Gordon's poem introduced no new ideas, but rather rehearsed themes and images going back to the German Haskalah in the late eighteenth century. Furthermore, they noted that within the same time period, Gordon wrote prose essays in Hebrew and Russian that expressed the same ideas and never kindled any wide public interest or debate.

What, then, gives "Awake, My People!" its power? Stanislawski's theory seems justified at least in part. The "quotability quotient" of a text can provide much of its public impact. Some decades later, contemporary observers would

10. Joseph Hayyim Brenner, "In Memory of Yalag" [Hebrew], in *Kol kitvei Yosef Hayyim Brenner* (Tel Aviv, 1967), vol. 3, p. 19. Article appeared originally in *Hapo'el hatsa'ir* 5673 [1912/1913] and was reproduced in *Kol kitvei*, vol. 3, pp. 11–34.

11. Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* (Philadelphia, 1918), vol. 2, p. 228.

attribute the impact of Leon Pinsker's *Auto-emancipation* to the pamphlet's quotable, apothegmatic nature.¹²

Beyond this point, however, we would suggest that an additional, no less important factor is at work, namely Gordon's powerful use of allusions to biblical and rabbinic literature. This aspect of Gordon's *oeuvre* has been noted by many observers. Stanislawski, to take but one example, cites Gordon's "dextrous manipulation of biblical imagery and language."¹³

Our thesis is that only when we consider the rich subtext of allusion built up by Gordon in the poem can we understand its power. It is here, below the level of overt meaning, that Gordon transmits a message that resonated for his audience of East European Jews educated in the traditional heder and schooled in the synagogue liturgy of prayers and Psalms. On this level, the poet communicates two powerful messages: on the one hand, a message of secularization, a call for human action and initiative; on the other hand, a "geographical reorientation" of the symbols of tradition, where the "valences" of Jews-Gentiles and Diaspora-Land of Israel are reversed.

In her study of literary allusion, Ziva Ben-Porat describes the special intertextual aspects of literary allusion as opposed to allusion in general. The end result is a deeper understanding of both texts, the alluding text and that alluded to, on the part of the reader, as both texts are activated in new ways.¹⁴ By his use of biblical allusion, the Maskil poet expresses an ambivalent relationship to the culture represented by the canonical texts. In a fascinating study, Tova Cohen has shown this phenomenon in several Haskalah poets, including Gordon. While using the formulas of traditional literature and thus maintaining a link to the classical poetry of the Bible and the liturgy, at the same time the modern poet gave new meaning to these expressions, oftentimes at variance with the message of the traditional texts.¹⁵ Cohen brings instructive examples from Gordon's poetry of such reversals of meaning in biblical and liturgical allusions.¹⁶ In the midst of her discussion, Cohen actually mentions "Awake, My People!" but only in the context of Gordon's changing "prophetic" self-perception (e.g., the use of the prophetic catch phrase "my people"), and she does not consider the allusive techniques employed in the poem.

In our view, "Awake, My People!" offers an instructive example of the power of such literary allusions. Stanza-by-stanza analysis of the poem reveals a consistent pattern of allusions to canonical texts by which the poet attributes to the words of tradition what we term "negative valences," in which all relations are reversed or upended. The present short study of this poem will examine several of the allusive techniques employed by Gordon, offering examples of each.

12. Simon Dubnow, *Divrei yemei 'am 'olam* [World history of the Jewish people], 6th ed. (Tel Aviv, 1958), vol. 10, p. 112, n. 1.

13. *For Whom Do I Toil?*, p. 66.

14. Ziva Ben-Porat, "The Poetics of Literary Allusion," *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 1 (1976): 105-28, esp. 107-10, 127.

15. Tova Cohen, "From Prayer Leader to Prophet—Metamorphoses of Prayers and Prophecies in Haskalah Poetry" [Hebrew], *Bar-Ilan* 24-25 (1989): 61-62.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-82.

Secularization

The poet shows his hand, as it were, in the opening line of the poem: *הקיצה עמי! עד מתי תישנה* (Awake, my people! How long will you sleep?). The combination of the two verbs *הקיצה* . . . *תישנה* appears only in Ps. 44:24, but there the Psalmist addresses these words to God. In context, the entire psalm speaks of God, who acts in history, and pleads with Him to manifest that power once again. Gordon, on the other hand, addresses his cry to man, urging him to take action. In the article cited above, Tova Cohen has written about this phenomenon in Haskalah poetry in general, in which the poet acts as the *sheliah tsibbur*, the traditional prayer leader, uses the language of prayer and supplication, but turns his plea to man rather than God (see her graphic depiction of the change in orientation, p. 63 of the article).¹⁷

In this poem, Gordon strikes the well-worn Haskalah theme of economic reform of Russian Jewry, listing a number of alternative professions for Jews in this new age (ll. 33–36), to which he appends a more general observation on the place of the Jew in gentile society: “to the treasury of the state bring your wealth” (l. 37). There are echoes here of Mal. 3:10, which is read in the synagogue as a prophetic reading (Haftarah). The poet executes another of his reversals, whereby the Jew is urged to bring his wealth to the Russian state treasury rather than to the Temple in Jerusalem, or by extension, to Jewish causes. Another possible but less likely allusion is to the combination *חילך . . . ארצו* found in Jer. 15:13. In the original context, there is a message of the Jews being a target for spoil and ruination. Now, says the poet, the situation is different, and the Jew is a partner in the state enterprise. And so, continues Gordon with his plea, *ובנכסיה קח חלק חובר* (bear your share of its riches and bounty—l. 38). Here we have a clear case of secularization and reversal. The word *zeved* appears only once in the Bible, in Gen. 30:20. There *God grants* the gift of a son. For Gordon, it is *man* who *takes* of the bounty of the modern state.

In other biblical allusions, the poet’s words “they have already removed the burden from your back and lifted the yoke from around your neck” (ll. 25–26) hark back to Isa. 10:27, but here Gordon reverses and secularizes the message of the prophet. Not God but man has granted freedom to the Jew in the modern era. The Psalmist’s plea to God (Ps. 5:9) for guidance is transformed by the poet into a call to the Jew himself to “stand up straight” (l. 29). Gordon tells his fellow Jews to speak the language of their gentile neighbors: *ובלשונם שיחה* (speaking their tongue—l. 32). The related form *אשיחה* appears many times in the Psalms (77:13; 119:15, 27, 48, 78; 145:5), where the object of the discussion is either God’s wondrous deeds or God’s law. Here the poet adjures his brethren to discuss secular matters in the language of the nations. Finally, the most obvious of these secularizing allusions of reversal is Gordon’s comment that the nations *לך שלום ישימו* (they stretch out their hands to you in peace—l. 28), a clear play on the priestly benediction (Num. 6:26), of which the recitation by the *kohanim* (on

17. On the maskilic view of the press as “preacher” see Eli Lederhendler, *The Road to Modern Jewish Politics: Political Tradition and Political Reconstruction in the Jewish Community of Tsarist Russia* (New York and Oxford, 1989), pp. 122–30.

holidays) or the reader (all other occasions) forms a basic part of the daily synagogue service. Here again, Gordon changes the direction of the biblical context. The Gentiles, rather than God, will grant you peace. In this instance, Stanislawski's translation "they stretch out their hands to you in peace" obscures the biblical allusion.

Geographical Reorientation

The opening stanza of "Awake, My People!" repeated as a refrain two more times in the poem, appeals to the Jewish people to "recognize your time and your place," to become part of the exciting new Europe of the nineteenth century. Through his use of allusion, Gordon adds on the subtext level an even more resonant call to the Jews of his day to shift their geographical horizons. Thus, in the same opening stanza, the poet entreats his nation *שא עיניך אנה ואנה* (cast your eyes hither and yon—l. 3). The typical reader of Gordon's message, reading the phrase *שא עיניך* would have automatically associated it with the context in Gen. 13:14ff., where the continuation of the verse urges Abraham to lift up his eyes and survey the Land of Israel, which is promised to his descendants as an inheritance. Here the poet exploits his audience's expected reaction to an alluded text, assigning to the text a "negative valence," urging his readers to survey their own time and place in the Russian Diaspora. This switch is enhanced by the use of the accompanying phrase *אנה ואנה*, which appears in 1 Kings 2:36, 42 where the hapless Shimei ben Gera is warned by Solomon not to leave the precincts of the city or face capital punishment. Gordon takes the phrase associated with confinement and applies it to the new freedom of the Jews to go out and explore the world. Unlike Moses, who would see the Holy Land from afar (Deut. 33:52), the Jews of modern times no longer have to stand at a distance, but rather can approach general society with confidence and without fear—"why do you walk opposite (*מנגד*) them?" (l. 24 [my translation—G.B.]).

Probably the ultimate geographical reversal occurs when Gordon refers to Russia as "this land of Eden now open to you" (l. 21). Russia as a modern Eden certainly reverses biblical understandings of a lost paradise after the expulsion of Adam and Eve. The closed-off Eden of old is replaced by a modern Eden open to the Jew.

Miscellaneous Reversals and "Negative Valences"

At several points in the poem, Gordon utilizes his allusive art of what we term "negative valences" to orient his reader, familiar with the texts alluded to, in unexpected directions. What had been directed to God, now points to humans; what referred to Jews, now refers to Gentiles; what the Bible used to express limits and sadness, now alludes to openness and happiness. To take but a simple example of the last, the poet uses the word *עורניו* (a different world engulfs us today—l. 12). This unique usage appears in Ps. 119:61. What in the original context refers to the snares of the wicked here refers to the positive changes in the modern

era. Gordon exclaims in his opening stanza גו הליל (the night has passed—l. 2) The word גו appears only once in the Bible, in Ps. 90:10, a psalm included in the preliminary prayers for the Sabbath and holidays. In the original context, the word refers to the fleeting nature of human existence, while for Gordon the word denotes the fleeting nature of the “night” of the degraded state of the Jewish people. Even as simple a word as the preposition אלינו (at them—l. 30) carries with it the moods of its unique biblical context, Ps. 2:5, where it appears in the context of the wrath of God. For the poet, it is used to express love by man.

In his enthusiasm, Gordon tells his fellow Jews that Russia’s people “now call you ‘brothers’” (l. 22). Critics both then and now have challenged the realism of this evaluation of changed Russian attitudes toward Jews. What interests us here, however, is the extra power that the subtext bestows on the poet’s overt message. The word אחינו carries some overtones of the Joseph story, whereby the brothers express their feelings of guilt over their treacherous acts against Joseph (Gen. 42:21), but we would suggest another source for the poet’s allusion. Though we may be stepping into the realm of speculation on this point, could the poet be alluding to the well-known story of Herod Agrippa mentioned in the Mishnah Sotah 7:8? Carrying out the ritual reading of Deuteronomy by the king in the Temple performed once every seven years, Agrippa is said to have cried as he recited the words “do not place over you a ruler who is a stranger,” remembering his descent from the Edumean Herod. Seeing his tears, the crowd in the Temple precincts then cried out: “do not fear Agrippa—you are our brother (*ahinu ata*), you are our brother, you are our brother” (phrase appears three times in Albeck’s text of the Mishnah, Seder Nashim, p. 252). If this is so, we have another fine example of the “negative valence” technique. Where in the original story, the man of gentile descent feels the outsider and has to be encouraged by the Jews, here the poet places the Jew as the outsider who is encouraged by the Gentiles to feel part of the larger nation.

Last but not least, we discern Gordon’s allusive art in a new way in the most famous line in the poem, the most famous, in fact, of all of Gordon’s *oeuvre*: יהיה אדם בצאתך ויהודי באהלך (l. 39—be a man in the streets and a Jew at home; lit., be a man in your going out and a Jew in your tent). All the interpreters of Gordon’s work have noticed in this oft-quoted line the echoes of Deut. 33:18, the blessing of Moses to the tribes of Israel (“Rejoice, O Zebulun in your going out and Issachar in your tents). From Gordon’s time onward, debate has raged on the exact meaning of the poet’s call to his people.¹⁸ For some reason, however, the midrashic extension of the alluded verse, which in our opinion is crucial to the understanding of the passage, has been ignored in this polemic. Rashi, in his commentary on this verse, cites the legend of the blessed partnership between the brothers (tribes) Issachar and Zebulun. The latter went out into the world to earn a living through commerce, and provided financial support for the former, who

18. In a speech at the dedication of a Russian-Jewish school for girls later that year, Gordon attempted to clarify his statement. Russification did not prevent Jews from remaining Jews according to their faith, just as Jewishness in no way prevented Jews from becoming Russians. Cited in Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, trans. and ed. Bernard Martin (Cincinnati and New York, 1978), vol. 12, p. 128.

spent his time "in the tent" studying Torah. Through his allusion to a well-known passage, Gordon adds a new twist, for in his construction both halves of the partnership in the original context refer now to the same person. For the modern Jew, this "division of labor" no longer held. The tent-dwelling scholar was also to go out into the world. In this light, we find Stanislawski's interpretation of the slogan to be most persuasive: "[this] was a call not for the bifurcation of Jewish identity, but for its integration: it advocated being both a full-fledged man—a free, modern, enlightened, Russian-speaking Mensch—and a Jew at home in the creative spirit of the Hebrew heritage" (*For Whom Do I Toil?* p. 52).

On the surface level, "Awake, My People!" brings to the reader a standard Haskalah prescription for Russian Jewry. The times have changed; European society has changed, including its attitude toward the Jew; Jews should take the proffered hand of their gentile neighbors, should learn the language of the land, and undergo professional, educational, and economic reform. Below the surface, however, there lies a more radical message of secularization, of taking one's fate in one's own hands, of breaking with a theocentric view of the universe. Our claim is that Gordon communicates this message through his special use of allusive techniques, what we termed "negative valences," in which the alluded texts take on a reversed meaning or orientation in the poet's discourse. Having surveyed his use of allusion in the poem, we can discern two additional phenomena that strengthen our conviction that the observed pattern of allusions is indeed intentional on the part of the poet. First, the unusually high concentration of unique biblical phrases, so-called hapax legomena, in one relatively short poem, functions as a "trigger" for the reader, calling attention to the subtext and its encoded message. Second, we observe the high concentration of allusions to the Book of Psalms. What better way could the poet transmit his new, secular intent than through the usage of allusions from the classic biblical collection of prayers, still used by Jews to pour out their hearts to God in times of distress? The book of man's prayers to God becomes upended and is used to bring a new teaching of secularism. Many critics have noted Gordon's secularization of the language of sacred tradition. Thus, Dan Miron: "It was Gordon's poetry that revealed the cultural dialectics of the new Hebrew literature of the nineteenth century, its vacillation between traditional formulas and modern humanistic emphasis."¹⁹ As we have shown, "Awake, My People!" his best-known poem, fits this understanding of his work. His skillful use of the intertextual by-play between his modern call and the texts of prayer and study struck a familiar yet revolutionary chord for many of his East European Jewish readers.

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19. Dan Miron, "Rediscovering Haskalah Poetry," pp. 301–2.