“Hakukot Otiyotayich” (Engraved are your letters), the “amazing” song of praise to the Hebrew language by the Hebrew-American poet Abraham Regelson (1896–1980) has received very little critical attention, none of it from a major literary critic. The system that filters, absorbs, and canonizes Hebrew culture has consigned the poem, as well as Regelson’s poetic corpus in general, to relatively minor critics who themselves were all but forgotten. The crowning glory of Regelson’s poetry remains forgotten, absent, unknown. “Hakukot Otiyotayich” is a poem of dense and rich rhetoric, wound in a tight web of philosophical concepts and ideas. The present article proposes a rhetorical and philosophical analysis of this long (twenty stanzas) and complex composition, one of the most unique and extraordinary poems in modern Hebrew poetry.

1. RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

Generally speaking, Regelson’s writing in “Hakukot Otiyotayich,” as in fact in all of his poetry, is one of highly developed process and style. His is quite the opposite of the “writing degree zero” espoused by Roland Barthes, that utopian, ideal, pristine kind of writing which, on the way towards total stylistic neutrality, sheds all ornamentation and frills, striving to become colorless, functional and egalitarian—a pure equation, as transparent and intangible as algebra itself.

In keeping with poetry that calls for enhancing and intensifying the literary or poetic nature of the utterance, the language of “Hakukot Otiyotayich” is tense, pushing Hebrew syntax and vocabulary to spheres and distances far and varied from the commonly accepted standardized language, far from the oral and written performance of daily discourse. This is grand and glorious literary language, high-headed, laden with ornamentation and device, a lan-

1 This is the word used by Dan Miron who mentions the poem flittingly in his essay נגיעהلغולוכדבקרה (From continuity to contiguity; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2005).
2 A. Regelson, “Hakukot Otiyotayich” (Engraved are your letters) in his collection Hakukot Otiyotayich (Tel Aviv: Machbarot Lesifrut, 1964), pp. 7–26. The poem was first published in the journal Hatkufa in 1946. All page references are to the 1964 edition.
language clad in royal poetic cloaks, carrying itself with stately dignity, although not without a considerable degree of agility and nimbleness.

The literariness, the stylization, the distancing from mundane, everyday language are expressed in both major aspects of language—the syntactic and the semantic.

“Hakukot Otiyotayich” kneads Hebrew’s standard syntax, twisting and rolling it into non-standard shapes. This reshaping is achieved by such means as changing standard word order (עַיְךָסְלָ מֶחְצָבלִמְלַאכְתִּי, 4 using intransitive verbs as transitive ones (הִבְרַקִתְּ בְּרִיקוֹת, יְקוֹדהִבְהַקְתְּ, 5 employing “unnatural” or archaic prepositions and conjunctions (אֻמָּתוֹ עִם הַנֶּאֱמָן, אֲשֶׁר אָהַלְתִּאִם י, 6 or, displaying regal indifference, simply dropping conjunctions altogether (מְרַצְּחִים בְּיַד דֲֹעֲכוּ עִבְרִים תִינוֹקוֹת; רק יֵדָעֵם/מִי סִיֵּר בְּרַשִּׁי, 7 and utilizing a variety of elliptical, condensed grammatical forms, such as deleting verbs, copulatives, and other elements (עַל אֱוִילוּת-יְהָבָם הֲמוֹנִים, עוֹלָמוֹת מַקֵּיפֵי לְגֹדֶלעוֹלָמוֹת, לְקֹטֶן עוֹלָמוֹת מְמַלְּאֵי עוֹלָמוֹת; הִסְמַכְתְּ מִצְוַת הַשֵּׁשֶׁת הַשְּׁבִיעִי לְמִצְוַת; בְּנֵי עַמִּי סוּסרְתָקוּנִי-דַּיִש;שוְשֵׁעַרְתִּיו וְנְצָרַיִךְ בְּאַקְלִימֵךְ, 8)

Also to be taken into account is the generous use of infinitives (פָּרֵט קְצוֹת צִדְקֵךְיִפְעוֹתַיִךְ וְסַהֵד, 9 constructs (דְּלוּעֵי-חֶמְאָה; יָם, בוֹדֵי), 10 and the possessive form (רַוְגַקַיְךְ מָּיִךְ; מְשַׁחֲפַיִךְ...וְתַמַּיְךְ), 11 in far excess of their use in common Hebrew.

The unusual syntax creates unique syntagmata which form the matting for the embedding and sprinkling of lexical gems, rife with exotic verbalism, coating the poems with gold beads and silver scales, cloaking it with crystal and sapphires and all manners of brilliant color. The exotic verbalism seems to emanate from two main sources. First, use of esoteric scientific-professional or domain-specific glossaries. This use is expressed, for the most part, in the Homeric catalogues that Regelson uses (e.g., the botanical glossary in the first stanza: פּוּאָה וְיוֹעֶזֶר אַבְרָשׁ, וְאֶפְעוֹן כַּרְשִׁינָה, 12 or the zoological glossary in the nineteenth stanza: רִצְפִּית לְפַזֵּר עִמּוֹ וְחָכְמוֹת/וּבְנוֹצָה לֻלְיוֹן או, חוֹחַ או, גְלוּלִית או, זֵרְעוֹנָיו לְהָפִיץ., 13 The second source is a bubbling morphological creativity, expressed in the form of taking existing linguistic

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4 Hakukot, p. 25.
5 Hakukot, p. 19.
6 Hakukot, pp. 22, 26.
7 Hakukot, pp. 21, 22.
8 Hakukot, pp. 23, 24, 25, 26, respectively.
9 Hakukot, p. 22.
10 Hakukot, pp. 20, 23, respectively.
11 Hakukot, pp. 14, 25, respectively.
12 Hakukot, p. 7.
roots and placing them in nominal and verbal paradigms (mishkalim and binyanim) in which they are not usually housed (e.g., הִזְדַּבְּדוּתֵך from the root זבד); even more radical is Regelson’s extracting roots out of names (of people or objects) and pouring these new roots into familiar grammatical structures (e.g., מַתְלַשְּׁמִים מִתְלַשְּׁמִים from the gems שֶׁלֶם and שֶׁמֹה, akin to “opaling and onyxing”), a procedure that reaches its peak in the chain of verbs וְכַמְתּוּ וְכָסַלְתְּ עַשְׁתְּ (derived from the ancient biblical names [שעָ, יסִכְל] of Ursa Major and the constellations Orion and Pleiades).

This combination of a “beheaded,” nonstandard, dense syntax, lexical esotericism, and morphological creativity yields a stubborn, abstruse text, riddled with opaqueness, which is reminiscent of the language of the piy-yutim, notorious for its outlandish vagaries, idiosyncrasies and obscurity. The poem seems to demand simultaneous on-line translation which will provide “down-to-earth,” “ordinary” paraphrasing for the tortuous formulations studded with arcane vocabulary.

In “Hakukot,” such language serves as a tool for the expression of heavy, uninhibited pathos, that turns its object—Hebrew—into a national and cosmic fetish. Reading the poem is like trudging through viscous rivers of unrestrained emotional fervor. Within the framework of this pathos Hebrew becomes a huge cosmic entity, all-penetrating and meta-historical, and at the same time a sensuous erotic object, which the dazed and crazed poet—fumbling desperately to find a linguistic vessel that would not burst from the intensity of his emotion—burning with desire, buries his face, as it were, into its curves, inhaling it as if inebriated:

However, it is not the pathos as such that makes the poem unique, but rather the conjunction between the pathos and its object, as well as the way this object is presented and described. The Hebrew language has enjoyed its share of love songs and songs of adoration, although never before, it seems,
were these songs so voluminous and passionate. But “Hakukot Otiyotayich” is not a run-of-the-mill song of praise. In fact, the poem is a unique combination of the ode (as proudly and openly declared in its confident subtitle: “hymn” [המנון]) and of the anatomy—the literary form which is based on a careful, detailed, “microscopic” analysis of its subject. In a way, then, this is an “odatomy,” which branches out the large river of pathos into myriad tributaries of rigorous analysis of the language. This analysis is done according to both familiar, well-established, “orthodox” parameters and totally unorthodox and idiosyncratic ones. The familiar parameters include universal ones, applicable to virtually all languages (tense, verbal system, prepositions, conjunctions, and foreign words that have been incorporated into the language) as well as some that are particular to Hebrew (diacritical marks, biblical cantillation). The idiosyncratic ones include inverse semantic links between like-sounding words or those with identical roots (חָטָאת—חִטֵּאת, תָּהֳלָה—תְּהִלָּה, קְדֵשִׁים—קְדוֹשִׁים), and “botanical” etymologies that supposedly track down words referring to abstract or distinctly human concepts to elements in the world of flora:

This unique amalgamation of the ode and the anatomy creates a somewhat paradoxical impression: On the one hand, the strict grammatical analysis acts as a moderating and regulating Apollonian factor, a cold harsh island in the boiling streams of erupting lava of pathos (pathos is also moderated by the epic scientific-cosmic classifications in the text). On the other hand, this analysis contributes to enhancing and increasing pathos, even as its accumulation slowly but consistently generates in us a feeling of the uncanny or the bizarre. This is the feeling that we experience when we come face to face with an emotional field completely taken over by a tyrannical principle of order, such as when, before our eyes, an object of desire is being systematically and carefully dissected, broken down into finer and finer elements, each of them—carefully classified, wrapped and stored—congealing onto an object of desire in and of itself.

19 Hakukot, p. 17.
Within this integration of anatomy and ode, “Hakukot Otiyotayich” contains a unique rhetorical figure or trope, in which, it seems, more than in any other element in the poem, lies the power of its wonderment. It first appears in the fourth stanza and lives on in different guises in the next stanzas, alongside the anatomical dissection of the language that takes place in them. The fourth stanza is devoted to the seven verbal paradigms of Hebrew (binyanim), grantedly a rather “singular” thematic choice, although a fairly natural one for a poem that, like “Hakukot,” models itself, at least in part, on a Hebrew grammar book. But the crux of the matter is that the poem describes each of the paradigms using verbs conjugated in that paradigm:

בְּפַשְׁטוּת הָעוֹשֶׂה קַלֵּךְ
בְּצִדְקוֹ וְקָם בְחֶטְאוֹ לוֹקֶה
לַסֵּב הַנִּכְנָע לַסֵּבֶ
וְנִשְׁבָּר בֶּאֱמוּנָתוֹ
וְנִשְׁאָר וִיָדוֹתָה
וּבַמּוּחָשׁ וּכָחמָשְׁזָר יֻבַּע
הִתְפַּעֲלֵךְ – מַה עָלָיו אֶשְׁתוֹמֵם מְאֹד
רֶהֶהֶהוּכִּי בּוֹוְשֶׁכֶב כֶב
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יִטַּמֵּא בְּצִוּרָו לֹא וְעוֹלָמִית יִדַּבֵּק
וכו יִתַּמָּם תְּמִימִים בֵּין.

The fifth stanza refers to the future tense using verbs in that tense (ומלקות), to the imperative tense by using imperatives (ה useCallback), and the Hebrew Pa’ul and infinitive are expressed by roots conjugated in these forms. The sixth stanza, which discusses root types (שורש), especially irregular ones, works wonders in referring to each type using verbs and nouns which belong to that type, etc.

What happens with this rhetorical device then is that the sign functions simultaneously both as sign and as referent, as the meaning of the sign. The sign becomes the materialization of that which is signed, part of its own extension (of course, what enables Regelson to do so is, inter alia, the fact that language itself—or certain aspects of it—is his referent). This is a semiotic grammatical stunt of sorts, which continues in the following stanzas and which Regelson exhibits a great deal of virtuosity manipulating. The sign

20 Hakukot, p. 9.
21 Hakukot, p. 10.
crosses conventional semiotic lines, positioning itself on both sides of the line separating the sign and its referent.

This semiotic line-crossing parallels what Gerard Gennette called, on the narratological level, metalepsis. Following Gennette, metalepsis—a term with a long and interesting rhetorical history—came to be identified with the crossing of boundaries separating various diegetic levels, levels that should be organized in a strict hierarchical order and sharply distinguished from one another (as each represents a different possible or “real” world). For the most part, the term came to be identified with a “transplantation” or “migration” of characters from one diegetic level to another, as in the migration or planting of the author (and possibly other elements from his world) in the world of fiction he created, or when a character moves “up” from its own diegetic level to the extra-diegetic one of the individual(s) who have made it up from the gossamer threads of literary imagination.

In “Hakukot Otiyotayich,” the differentiation between the sign and the referent is blurred. In front of our very eyes the sign turns into a referent, and that which represents turns into the represented. With Regelson, this procedure does not carry the subversive implications it often has in narratological metalepsis. Turning the sign into a referent does not undermine the system of signification or representation but rather thickens and materializes it.

“Hakukot” is the supreme example of this semiotic trickery, and Regelson is revealed in it as the maestro of this rhetorical tool, the Yasha Heifez of the grammatical-semiotic metalepsis. He utilizes it with incomparable panache and inventiveness. The sign reacts like a tamed bear—when the wand is raised it dances a dance that is not its own, cajoled into doing that which it is not meant to do. By nature, signs are meant to refer to the referent, not be it. The word “red” need not be red, the word “table” need not be a table. A road sign indicating a steep incline need not be a steep incline. A momentous effort of taming, of reeducation, of going against the grain was required from the author to turn the sign into a referent, yet leave its symbolic function intact. Even as the amazed reader watches, Regelson uses this fantastic trick again and again, employing different language categories. The resulting effect is not unlike that obtained by a musician who can play a full Beethoven symphony on a saw, or by an acrobat who can carry out a routine activity, such as operating a machine, while juggling various objects in the air, including a plastic bowling pin, an apple and a machete. This is a

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grammatical calembour of sorts, an incredibly intricate Baroque-style *jeu de grammaire*. It is this rhetorical figure, of which Regelson is the great, perhaps the only artist, that turns “Hakukot Otiyotayich” into a poetic locus where the reader wanders in amazement, nodding his head incredulously as it were, a poetic locus which is a sort of a literary nature preserve, where this very rare beast resides, the dinosaur of the forests of rhetoric—the grammatical-semiotic metalepsis.

2. PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

“Hakukot Otiyotayich” presents Hebrew in two contexts, viewing it from a dual perspective. On the one hand, Hebrew is imbued with cosmic status—it was there at the moment of Creation and will be there at the hour of Redemption. Hebrew is the key to all knowledge; it is the logos of the world, within which are encrypted the universal laws of nature. Hebrew is described as part of the universe and part of the Divine, at times as itself the universe and a Divine Being. Beginning with the seventeenth stanza, the poem takes on a more concrete tone. Regelson mentions the destruction of the Jewish people in the holocaust, the revitalization of the Hebrew language and Zionist settling in the Land of Israel, adding a sorrowful note that he himself does not live there. Such a concrete note is understandable, considering the historical context of the time of writing—the poem was published in 1946, a year after the end of the Second World War and not long before Israeli statehood was declared.

As mentioned earlier, there is a paucity of writing on Regelson’s poem. Major researchers of literature ignored it or mentioned it in passing. Those who did address “Hakukot Otiyotayich” paid no heed to the relationship between these two contexts—the eternal-cosmic one and the historical-current one—or made a feeble, often unfounded, passing comment on it. In an article about Regelson, Israel Zmora provided a rather schematic description of the first, abstract part of the poem, and erroneously misrepresented the last stanzas. Thus, he described stanza seventeen, where the destruction brought about by the holocaust is the main theme, as follows: “This is a chapter full of joy and gaiety, happiness and rejoicing over the fact that Hebrew has turned into the common language of babes, a language of laughter and levity and a language of the bitter weeping of the holy flock.”

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23 I. Zmora, "‘בחלות שיר’" (In the throes of poetry) in his *ספרות על פרשת דורות* (Literature at a generational crossroads; Tel Aviv: Mahbarot Lesifrut, 1949), 2:221–222.
Regelson’s personal history, which appears at the end of the poem—the fact
that he himself does not live in the Land of Israel even as it is emerging and
gaining life—is glossed over. Zmora does not address the relationship be-
tween the cosmic existence of Hebrew and its historical manifestations.
Abraham Epstein is somewhat more expansive, and mentions that “an echo
of the horrors of our generation emerges from the hymn-like notes, that
generations-old mournful note that accompanies our poetry and is concealed
in the very material of Jewish living.”24 He takes issue with Regelson’s more
personal notes, stating that “the final bars are born of impure poetic origins,
and are alien notes, marring the music. They are too bitter and contain harsh
personal feelings of insult and account settling.”25

It is our understanding that the relationship between both these contexts
of Hebrew—the cosmic dimension bestowed upon it and the historical back-
ground in which the last stanzas root it—is the theoretical and philosophical
focus of the poem. The main object of the present discussion is to explore
this relationship.

In general, what the reader is offered here is an analysis of the ideas
contained in Regelson’s song of praise, an analysis that the very nature of
this poem calls for. The poem has a clear philosophical atmosphere. In it
Regelson presents a pantheistic perception, both directly (e.g., מִתְגַּלֵּם
אֱלֹהַּ-מִתְעַלֶּה
וְעוֹלָם
מִתְעַלֵּם
-מִתְאַלֵּה
מִתְעַלֶּה
) and indirectly, as will be demonstrated. The
poem also makes abstract claims and statements regarding such matters as
the nature of the Hebrew language, the virtue of its unity, and the relation-
ship between Hebrew and the world.

This will be a three-part discussion. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 will describe the
essential nature of Hebrew as expressed in Regelson’s poem, and will take a
short look at two ideas which Regelson discusses in his theoretical articles.
All in all, these two sections will address the cosmic or metaphysical
significance that the poem accrues to Hebrew, and the poet’s role as dis-

24 A. Epstein, Ṭסרימי עברים באמריקה (Hebrew writers in America; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1953), p. 163.
25 A. Epstein, Hebrew Writers, p. 163. Other references to “Hakukot” include: S. P. Hudson,
Fragmentation and Restoration: The Tikkan Ha-Olam Theme in the Metaphysical Poetry of Abraham
104; S. Halkin, “דידיים וגולמי: על רומאיט רוסט ופילוסופיה של תקון עולם (By the tuft of his hair: On the beginning
of Abraham Regelson’s poetry) in his ה’עמה (Ways and sideways in literature; Tel Aviv: Yachdav, 1984), pp. 39–43; M. Giora,
“Regelson: A Poet of the New Hebrew Literature” (The uniqueness of Abraham
Regelson’s poetry), Ha’uma 11 (1965): 547–552; Y. Lichtenbaum, “ה’unidad של ספרות (In the realm
of literature; Tel Aviv: Aleph, 1963), p. 102; Sh. Y. Pnueli, אלבם שיטח תַּקנום ה’ לעולם (Links in new
Hebrew literature; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1953), pp. 54–61; Y. Peles, ל’כל סוחכ (Regelson: A
poets’ poet), Mozna’im 53.5–6 (1981): 390–394; and H. Liff, אברם רלסקו: איש משורר ואיש
coverer of the magnificent existence of this language. The last section, 2.3, will explore the relationship between this cosmic meaning of Hebrew and what is said in the historical parts of the poem. What is the relationship between historical events—the destruction of European Jewry—and the exalted existence of the Hebrew language? Our overall argument is that in this poem Regelson endows Hebrew with a special theological, pantheistic status. He turns to the language as if it were a deity, attributing immeasurable power and presence to it. It is thus that Hebrew becomes a total, all-penetrating entity which accompanies the Jewish people, “engulfing” it and providing the People of Israel with a solid subsistence. This song of praise to Hebrew also includes a literary reaction to the destruction of the Jews of Europe, and its theological-pantheistic nature relates it to some of the philosophical attempts to grapple with the holocaust and search for consolation in its wake. In order to understand how Regelson finds comfort in Hebrew, its status in this poem must be understood—and vice versa. As we shall see, the Jewish destruction and the search for consolation in Hebrew reveal an important aspect of the language itself.

2.1 Pantheism and Logos

In his theoretical essays on pantheism in American poetry26 and on Ernst Cassirer’s and Heraclitus’s perception of language,27 Regelson presents two ideas that could act as a good point of departure for our understanding of the unique status of Hebrew in his poem. Neither idea is original, and Regelson correctly attributes them to others; their importance to our discussion lies not in their contents or origins per se, but rather in the way they are integrated into Regelson’s poem and in their role in formulating the special cosmic status accorded the Hebrew language. One idea is pantheism. Regelson claims that pantheistic thought is an attribute of American poetry:

This pantheistic thought—recognition of the divinity of every inanimate object, everything growing and living, and each and every human being—permeates the corpus of American poetry wherever it took off its Old World coverings and became independent.28

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27 A. Regelson, “כריסר על האדם בראי תרבותה” (Cassirer on man in the mirror of culture) in his איילון על תרבות הדורות (Angels of thought: Listening to the words of those of the late generations; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1969). Cassirer’s book that Regelson discusses here is E. Cassirer, An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1944).
28 A. Regelson, A Tallith, p. 22.
Shortly thereafter he quotes from D. H. Lawrence and explains what pantheism is:

Creation is an immense current, forever flowing with beautiful and awesome waves. In everything—there is the spark of creation and the process of creation, and never the end of creation, never something finite and immutable. There can never be a distinction between God and the works of God, nor between spirit and matter. Everything, everything is a little sparkle of creation.29

The type of pantheism Regelson describes here does not content itself with the general identification of God with nature, but rather emphasizes the deep unity of nature, the identification of God and nature in the context of Creation. The Creator is not distinct from the Creation, he is not a finalized entity outside the world, but rather is completely integrated with all manifestations of nature and the dynamic life within them.

The second idea related to our discussion is one that Regelson mentions in his discussion of Cassirer’s book, where he follows Cassirer’s developmental analysis of language. The first stage is myth, when humans attribute active force to words and use them as a means to try and control nature. Next, people discover that nature does not obey their demands and language then takes on a different meaning: “If language has been drained of magical powers, it still has powers of meaning. The weight has shifted from the sound and resonance of the word to the logic within it.”30 Following Cassirer, Regelson finds that this change in the perception of language occurred within Greek philosophy, most notably in Heraclitus, in whose fragments language has cosmic meaning. Language becomes that which reflects the deep order of the universe and therefore becomes the main key with which to unlock the mysteries of the universe.31 Regelson quotes a section from Heraclitus and explains that “‘the Word’ exceeds its human boundaries and becomes cosmic truth. Heraclitus said, ‘Don’t listen to me, listen to the logos, and you will confess that all is one’”.32 The general idea expressed in the perception of language as universal logos deals with the relation between language and the world. Language expresses or reflects the world, and therefore has a very intimate relation to the objects symbolized within it. Language is not distinct from them but serves to conceal—and can

29 A. Regelson, A Tallith, pp. 23–24.
30 A. Regelson, Angels of Thought, p. 37.
31 See also the discussion in A. Regelson, Angels of Thought, pp. 69 ff.
32 In adapting this meaning, Regelson brings Heracleitus’s position closer to that of linguistic pantheism, which is actually Regelson’s attitude, not Heracleitus’s.
reveal—their secrets.\(^{33}\) In his article, Regelson attributes this perception to Heraclitus, although it clearly also has other philosophical origins.\(^ {34}\)

However, our main focus here is not the ideas of pantheism and language-as-logos in and of themselves, but rather the way Regelson integrates them in “Hakukot Otiyotayich.” These ideas have a common tendency—unifying the universe and its various manifestations. The main point in both ideas is the identification and fusion of apparently separate entities—God and the universe in pantheism and language and the universe in Heraclitus’s perception of logos. In other words, these ideas are something of an equation. God equals the world (pantheism), language reflects the world (logos), and thus emerges in Regelson’s song of praise a broad, almost amorphous identity with far reaching metaphysical implications: language, God, and the universe become different facets of one and the same thing. This broad identity can be thought of as a triangle, each of its apexes being inextricably bound with the other two. In short, in his poem Regelson combines two different ideas, and the resulting broad unitarian perception is the intellectual foundation for the cosmic and theological status of Hebrew in “Hakukot Otiyotayich.”

2.2 The Cosmic Status of the Hebrew Language

The poem begins with declarations of Hebrew’s all-penetrating being. Cosmically ubiquitous, from the stars and constellations (וְכוֹכָב בְּצֶדֶק אַתּ \(וּמַאֲדִים בְּשַבְּתַי \)) to the very last inhabitant of the world of flora—grasses, bushes, and precisely distinct plant species (רַחְיִית דְּפֶנֶה, צֲפָפָה, זִית אָחוֹת מִלָּה, תּות, אָמוֹת חֵלם). Rhetorical hyperbolic questions that point to the futility of trying to describe the Hebrew language—טְעָמַיִךְ לחֶבְיוֹן עד ירְגֹּל וּמֵי / לַתְּנוּעוֹת נְשָׁמוֹת וְהֵם, לַכּוֹכָבִים מַנְגִּינוֹת?—emphasize its inexhaustible and richly intense nature.\(^ {36}\) This presence of Hebrew is expanded in the second stanza—Hebrew is found not only in every nook and cranny in space but also all along history and throughout all time. It accompanies the major events in the life of the Jewish people (leaving the land of Canaan to go to Egypt, the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai), and spreads out to the beginning and end of time: יְחֵי לֹא לֵשׁוֹן

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\(^ {33}\) A. Regelson, *Angels of Thought*, p. 68.

\(^ {34}\) The best known are Wittgenstein’s early ideas in his logical-philosophical tractate.

\(^ {35}\) *Hakukot*, p. 7.

\(^ {36}\) *Hakukot*, p. 9.
This is further expressed in the sixteenth stanza. Half this stanza is devoted to the motif of “light” and the other to the revival of Hebrew and other historical events of the day. This stanza reiterates the ideas expressed in the first three stanzas, and so emphasizes—even as it turns to the level of actual historical events—Hebrew’s cosmic mode of existence.

As stated, the main term in this stanza is “light.” Hebrew is presented as the light of the world, that which in its very presence reveals all others: אָוֹר הָיִית, בֵּקדְמוּת וּבַכּוֹכָּבִים הַגְּדוֹלִים בַּמְּאוֹרוֹת וַתָּאִירִי - המַעֲשֶׂה. Immediately thereafter Hebrew radiates onto each of the mythical and historical chapters of the Jewish people: it shined like the noon sun on Noah’s ark, burned in the bush, gleamed over Moses, flooded Ayalon Valley with moonlight, and sparkled with brilliance from the Maccabees’ menorah. Hebrew was present at all moments in Jewish history and in the formative text of Jewish literature. It is the light shining from generations of Jewish creation: אתה בקניאו ידיע סיפורות, פסקת ידיעת הנומרים והŋרָמוֹנָה יָנוּךְ וְלָמֶ [Thou embered in hues of ten spheres and two and thirty paths, […]/ Thou lanterned in learning and candly and brightly flickered for scholars).39

From all that has been said thus far we could conclude that Hebrew’s unlimited presence endowed it with an autonomous standing. It is not a result of human use or creation—or at least that is not all it is. Hebrew was present at creation, at the making of the sun and the moon, and preceded the human race. It is therefore presented as an august entity, somehow paralleling the world and God, an entity constantly shining and lighting history and all inexhaustible universal manifestations. These attributes—an independent existence and the revealing of the world—are the first moves toward perceiving language as logos, as the essence of this perception is the fact that language is not limited to human existence but is a cosmic phenomenon.

A more radical conception of language as logos is implied in the stanzas devoted to the structure of Hebrew. At some points in these stanzas Hebrew is not conceived as that which reveals objects in the world but as the source of the world itself. Things of the world are attributed to it. Hebrew is presented as the source of life and knowledge: כל האדם רֶאֶהַ-שָּׂדֶה וְלָמֶ— עֵץ לְחיָם, עֵץ אַף-דָּעַת. In the Hebrew infinitive form (מקור) the very source

37 Hakukot, p. 8.
38 Hakukot, p. 19.
39 Hakukot, p. 19.
40 Hakukot, p. 17.
In the same stanza, when dealing with the tense system, Regelson addresses Hebrew as the source of both song and nature:

שָׂיִימָה תְּלַעָנְקֹת חָפָר / שָׂיִימָה לְכָבְשָׂא מְשֻׁאְבָּד
שַׂיִימָה לְטֶבַע בֵּן-חוֹרִין

(Make me an echo to your great decree/ Which commands enslaved nature to perish and free nature to be born). Here language is not only light, a passive entity whose existence merely reveals objects, but an active, godlike power. Language orders creation and death.

Similarly, the poem, the words, and the poet’s actions are all echoes of the language itself, and in their status they stress language’s primordial being.

Viewing language as logos is the deep philosophical foundation of the figure described and analyzed in section one, that of the semiotic-grammatical metalepsis. In fact, it is this figure, whose essence is breaking the boundaries between the sign and that which is being signed within language, that becomes a model for the relation between language and the world that Regelson expresses in this poem. The permeation from linguistic sign to linguistic signed, typical of this figure, illustrates the wider relationship between language and the world as envisioned by the poet. Regelson rejects the separation between the linguistic-symbolic level and the ontological one (the notorious “arbitrariness of the sign”) and establishes deep bonds of inclusion (language is in the world), analogy (language is like the world), reflection (language reflects the world), causality (language causes the world), and identity (language and the world are one and the same). Here we may be able to find the basis for the tenacity with which Regelson repeatedly uses this figure and for the magic it holds for him. The linguistic arena offers him a locus where he can directly demonstrate his conception, giving it concrete form, providing it with a sort of objective correlative. At the same time, the very virtuosity demanded, the very hypnotic acrobatics required to bridge or obliterate the gap between sign and signed, and the very power of this trick to amaze and astonish us, indicate that this is indeed a real gap, and that the boundary between sign and signed—even within language—is a deep-rooted one, a formative element in our weltanschauung.

41 Hakukot, p. 10.
42 Hakukot, p. 10.
43 This is reminiscent of the midrashic tale that God created the world out of the letters of the Torah. This association could have well been on Regelson’s mind when he wrote these lines, yet is further from the overall viewpoint presented in the poem than would first seem. The main point is that in the midrash God is active, whereas Regelson does not see God as a separate entity but rather as being expressed by the Hebrew language.
What has been said so far has to do with the identity between Hebrew and the world, and is related to the perception of language as logos, that is, language as a cosmic issue, not a solely human one. We commented (in 2.1) that the ideological basis for the status of Hebrew in this song of praise is a very broad resemblance, broad to the point of being amorphous, between language, world, and God. We will now address the other identities entailed in this triadic relation, the godlike status Regelson accords Hebrew, the pantheistic spirit informing it, and the implications thereof.

We have already mentioned some of the signs of divine status accorded the Hebrew language in “Hakukot Otiyotayich”: Hebrew is a cosmic, omnipresent active force; it accompanies Jewish history and is part of all natural creation; it is all-engulfing, was present at Creation and will be present at Redemption. In some part of the poem, Regelson addresses Hebrew in phrases and terms used for addressing the biblical God: יָקוּם בְּמִשְׁפָּטֵךְ מִי? (stanza eighteen), and in the next stanza he addresses those who are abhorred by Hebrew and those who sin against her—again, evoking the idea of the personal biblical God. Among the “abhorred” mentioned, there are those who אֶחָדמַּ נֹסַח אֶל אוֹתָךְ קְפִּיִם, referring to those who believe that Hebrew had already reached its apex and that henceforth all Hebrew writing will be nothing but imitation. Regelson’s argument against the “abhorred” is important for our discussion. He counters “those who adhere to one frozen version” with reference to פְּרָקֶיהָ כָּל על הַיְּקוּם מְנוֹרַת—the universal menorah with all its segments—by which he means the great variety in all creation. It might be worthwhile to present an excerpt from this section in order to feel the power of Regelson’s rhetoric and the argument entailed in it:

44 Hakukot, p. 22.
45 Hakukot, p. 23.
46 Hakukot, p. 23.
The conclusion of this section is that there is no limit to the Lord’s glory. What Regelson expresses here is what he also attributes to American poetry: “Recognition of the divinity of every inanimate object, everything growing and living, and each and every human being,” and also, “in everything—there is the spark of creation and the process of creation, and never the end of creation, never something finite and immutable.”48 The endless variety of the universe, the tiniest of creatures and the grandest of objects, the endless movement within creation—all bear direct witness to Him. In other words, because God and his deeds are one and the same, descriptions of the fullness and dynamism of the universe all necessarily apply to Him. Significantly this pantheistic mood ends with an analogy to Hebrew. Just as the universal menorah sheds light on God, so does it illuminate the Hebrew language. As there is no end to the majesty of the Lord, there is no end to the majesty of Hebrew. The assumption is that they are one and the same and that both are equally related to the “universal menorah.”

An understanding of this assumption requires that we clearly define the role of pantheism implicit in this stanza. We shall, therefore, mention again the polemical context within which this epic catalogue is brought forth to spread its resplendent fan. This context is the attack against the “lingual sinners,” in particular those whose aim is to incarcerate Hebrew in a narrow cell of excellence that is presumed to be part of the history of the language. Their sin is the attempt to freeze language. Therefore, all that will be said against these “cryo”-sinners points to what is completely ignored by them—the dynamic nature of the language. And why is the language dynamic? The answer can only be understood through the analogy to God. Based on the previous discussion (section 2.1) and on the present discussion, we are able

47 *Hakukot*, pp. 23–24.
to reconstruct that which is missing, that which is hidden within the analogy. The concept of language-as-logos emphasized the cosmic meaning of language, and the pantheistic way of thinking related God with the world and identified Him with it. Pantheism, then, provides one of the equations required for the purpose of cracking the fortress of cryo-sin with the battering ram of the universal menorah. Pantheism does not only provide the necessary “middle ground” which is needed to weld God and the language—it establishes a common dynamic character to both. It is pantheism that gives God His dynamic nature. God is not a finished entity, certainly not a transcendental one, but rather bustles with the infinity of his manifestations, just as does its image—the Hebrew language. All this underlies Regelson’s answer to the cryo-sinners. Hebrew is not static, and its very being—just as that of the pantheistic deity—is brimming with cosmic life. This argument is of special significance in the understanding of the last part of the poem. We will soon turn to clarify this point. At the moment, however, suffice it to state the main point: Despite the majestic existence of the Hebrew language, although it was there at the Beginning and will be there at the End, Hebrew is not detached from the world and its events. It is constantly being renewed. Hebrew is of metaphysical dimensions on the one hand and part of real life on the other. This “linguistic pantheism” is the key to understanding the relationship between Hebrew and contemporary events—the destruction of European Jews and the national rebirth in the Land of Israel.

2.3 Hebrew vis-à-vis Contemporary Historical Reality

Regelson devoted the last part (stanzas 16–22) of his ode to the revival of Hebrew, the destruction of the Jews of Europe, and the settling in the Land of Israel. The inalienable rock solid existence of Hebrew is the starting point for Regelson’s account of contemporary events:

כַּכּוֹכָבִים, הִיא, וְאַחְלָמָתֵךְ נָגְהוּ

And yet, only a few lines later, this inextinguishable flame which has accompanied Jewish history and has been alive since time immemorial, is presented as conditional, if not fragile. This is clear in the descriptions of the destruction (the annihilation of European Jews) and the revival (settling in the Land of Israel and the recrudescence of Hebrew).

49 Hakukot, p. 19.
Hebrew, which according to the first part of the poem is an eternal cosmic entity, is depicted here, quite surprisingly, as contingent upon the events of the day. Prior to this, it was inconceivable that such a grand entity could be actually wrapped in shrouds. We now suddenly learn that it is breathing “blue air,” and that the neologisms, the creation of words expressive of the life and work of the pioneers in their new land, breathes new life into it. Hebrew becomes a “living and breathing being,” completely enmeshed with the locale—be it the wilderness, the new garden cities (עִירֵי-גְּאוֹן), or Mount Scopus. How can that which was described in the first part of the poem—Hebrew’s cosmic existence and extra-human being—be reconciled with that which the pioneers’ bold enterprises can imbue with such potent life? Why did the cosmic, eternal dimensions of Hebrew not place it beyond the contingent vicissitudes of history?

These questions become more poignant in the next stanza (17), where Regelson describes the holocaust of European Jews—which took place at about the time he was writing his great poem or very soon before it (the poem, we recall, was published in 1946). The stanza opens with the declaration תִינוֹקוֹת פִּי הֲבֵל בִּלְעֲדֵי חַיִּים לֹא חַיַּיִךְ (Without babies’ breath, your life is not living). Regelson writes powerfully expressive lines to tell of the disaster

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50 *Hakukot*, p. 20.
51 Alluding, most probably, mainly to Tel Aviv, which was designed by Patrick Geddes in the 1920s in accordance with Ebenezer Howard’s concept of “garden city.”
that befalls a language whose speakers are being massacred, זִיּוּז הַגְּרוֹנֹוֹ נֶחְנְקוּ תִּזָּה הַדַּקִּים, נִגּוּנָיִךְ יַעֲלוּ מִתּוֹכָם and בְּנוֹת-תִּתְלַקַּחְנָה לֹא עַיִן לִקְרַאת גִּיל / אַשּׁוּרִית רִבּוּעֵי מְנֻקָּדִים, שְׁחוֹרִים מְטַפְּחָיִךְ. At the end of this lamentation it is clear that the destruction of the Jews is a death blow to Hebrew:

בְּכִיוְעַצְמֵךְ עַל לָשׁוֹן אָתְּ דְמוּתֵךְ נִתְמַעֲטָה הֵן, פֶּרֶץ בָּךְ נִפְרַץ, וּמְטַפְּחָיִךְ נוֹשְׂאַיִךְ עַם בְּהִקָּטֵם.

הַשְּׂרוּפוֹת בַּגְּוִיּוֹת, הַמִּדַּרְדְּרִים בַּשְּׁלָדִים—עָתִיד שֶׁל מֶנְדֶּלָאִים, אַחַד-מָחָר שֶׁל הָעַמִּים, דּיָחַדעַל וֹרְשֵׁיָם, לע וֹרְשִׁיְתָם יְהוָה.

נְכָה חֻלֵּית מָה! 52

It would seem that all we discussed previously regarding the first part of the poem is at odds with everything said here. The fact that Hebrew has a god-like status, that it is perceived as logos, means that it has cosmic existence stretching far beyond the scope of its speakers, that it exists in the universe and even acts within it as a great force, somehow identical to the world and to God. All these attributes are not at all commensurate with the idea of a fragile entity dependent upon the actions and discourse of pioneers and diminishing with the destruction of its speakers—“the chopping down of its bearers.” The depiction of destruction and rebirth in two consecutive stanzas emphasizes the dependence of language on the events of the day, as the Hebrew language—presented as a majestic and eternal entity—is fiercely rocked by an inexplicable force between death and life.

The answer to this contradiction can be found in the nature of the theology of language we described in the two previous sections—the theology we called “linguistic pantheism.” God is the bustle of cosmic life. The pantheistic weltanschauung contains no independent transcendental entity, one which stands unto itself and exists outside of the world. God, and similarly language, are what they are by their very becoming so. Therefore, the cosmic dimensions of the language do not mean an eternal detached existence, but rather an existence that is immanent in nature. Hebrew’s cosmic character does not clash with its seemingly inferior dependence on present events, but rather dictates it: cosmic existence and historical dependence are manifestations of immanence. The fact that language has been around since

52 Hakukot, pp. 20–21.
Creation does not rule out its dependence on what happens to it in the present.

This pantheistic theology of the Hebrew language has two implications. The first relates to the role of the poet as well as to the understanding of Regelson’s personal address at the end of the poem. At the end of stanza seventeen which discusses the holocaust, Regelson succinctly defines his poetic mission:

This mission is also mentioned previously (stanza 11):

Thus, it is the poet’s role to bear testimony to Hebrew, a testimony we may better understand if we refer to stanza seven which is devoted to nominal paradigms (משכליים). Regelson begins by stating: לקים משכלי רקמי, and continues to define what he means by these embroideries:

The poet’s activity includes the creation of new words through smelting Hebrew’s linguistic material and pouring it into hitherto unused molds. It is interesting to note that this creative activity is not attributed to the poet but rather to “the creative geometry of thy spaces” (הגיומטריה של מרחבך). Hebrew includes not only empirical linguistic reality but also linguistic potentialities, which are tested in the poet’s volcanic “laboratory” and find their way into his poetry. It is thanks to the poet’s creative energy that this linguistic space is gradually unveiled. The poet, then, is entrusted with revealing the treasures of language. The poet’s mission is not merely a detailed, loyal, and affectionate description of a finished, external entity, rather, it is active participation in the constant creation and coming into be-

53 *Hakukot*, p. 22.
54 *Hakukot*, p. 15.
55 *Hakukot*, p. 12.
The poet’s role is in the constant effort to realize the possibilities offered by Hebrew and to bear evidence to its nature. In all these the poet harnesses his life to that of the Hebrew language, and his action is part of Hebrew’s dynamic existence. Clearly, such a description is based on the pantheistic approach through which Hebrew is presented. By means of dwelling on his

56 Hakukot, p. 25.
activity as a poet who harnesses his life to that of the majestic national entity, and who is conscious of the theological dimensions of such an activity, Regelson resolves his agony about being in exile. Thus, having resolved this issue, he uses the last lines of “Hakukot Otiyotayich” to proclaim his inclusion among the new pioneers in the Land of Israel:

צִנּוֹרוֹת וּמַנִיחֵי בְאֵרוֹת קוֹדְחי עִם לוּחֵך עַל כִּתְבִינִי,
בָעֵץ בַבּרְזֶל וּבַכֹּתֶן עוֹשֵׂי עִם בַּמֶּלטַבִּיס בֶאַשְׁלָג בַבְּרוֹם,
בַּיַּהֲלוֹם בַכֹּתֶן וּבַצֶּמֶר בַכֹּתֶן עִם כְּבִישִׁים בִגְבוּלֵך עִלְנוּ מָתְגַלֶם אֱלֹהַה
ומַעְלֵהּ עִלְנוּ מִתְעַלֶּה וְעֹלָם מִתְעַלֵּם-מַמְגַיְּדִים בְּפַקְעֵיֵי הַכֹּמֶסְהָאָדָם,
לַתְכֵלֶת תְרוּעָתֵךְ ההַנּוֹשְׂאִים תַּכְלִית אֶל כְּבִישִׁים בִגְבוּלֵך וּמְגַיְּדִים בְּפַקְעֲיֵי הַכֹּמֶסְהָאָדָם, 57

וּבַיַּהֲלוֹם עָמוֹדָה עִם בַּמֶּלטַבִּיס בֶאַשְׁלָג בַבּרְזֶל וּבַכֹּתֶן עִם בִגְבוּלֵך וּמְגַיְּדִים בְּפַקְעֲיֵי הַכֹּמֶסְהָאָדָם, 57

Up to now we discussed the first issue that is a corollary of linguistic pantheism—the role of the poet and the meaning of Regelson’s personal plea at the end of the poem. The second issue is the public comfort that may be derived from this pantheistic perception. To reiterate, the poem was written during the Holocaust (or very close to it) and published in its aftermath. As we read them, the verses about destruction and rebirth are not an unnecessary appendage to this song of praise, as some critics have suggested. Rather they are expressions of the distress and the hope for redemption that are at the basis of the theological significance accorded Hebrew in this poem. Regelson’s embracing of the godlike Hebrew language, with its cosmic power and immanent existence, is a way of finding solace in the face of the atrocities of destruction, and also acts as a tacit settling of accounts with the traditional God. Jewish theology—in any and all varieties of Judaism—is not pantheistic, placing as it does a transcendent God in center place. This is common knowledge which was also shared by Regelson and his readers. This traditional theology is hinted at in “Hakukot Otiyotayich,” for example, in the mention of Creation and Redemption. 58 However, the poem accords no space whatsoever to this theology, and it was replaced, and totally so, by a pantheistic approach. The disappearance of traditional theology and its replacement with a pantheistic theology of the Hebrew language cannot be without significance. Events of the present day rock the Jewish people, perching it between life and death, and Regelson places an immanent

58 For example, at the end of stanza 2, Hakukot, p. 8.
Cry, O you bereaved one, and with your tear still warm against your cheek, 
Act on behalf of your charred orphans, those who have remained, 
Who long for comfort, a loaf, a garment, a book, 
Regain your strength and return to your burdening duties: sustain, heal, and build,—

Instead of an alienated entity, the reader is given a cosmic power whose huge force sustains and nurses the people. This power gives the reader the force of the universe, but does not remain distant, beyond everything. This is a god who partakes of life, comes into being in the manifestations of life, and is even fragile and vulnerable. The main rhetorical effect we discussed in the beginning of this article—the internal identification between the sign and the signed—receives a deep meaning here. The transcendental god, the hidden, non-existent god, is being replaced by a cosmic presence, palpable and immanent. The immanence of this entity is realized in the grammatical-semiotic metalepsis whereby language is transposed from its status as a detached, arbitrary mechanism of signification and—holding on to its full array of signification powers—is thrust into the realm of the signified, the realm of “things,” while its constant coming into being is displayed in the plethora of neologisms which are concrete and immediate instances of a linguistic life force. The present analysis then shows “Hakukot Otiyotayich” to be a site of numinous revelation. The divine entity which is the subject matter of the poem reveals itself or becomes realized in the very modus of its rhetoric, pulsates in its very words and sentences. It is through this pervasive, omnipresent, divine entity, that the poet tries to sweeten the pain of his exile in the aftermath of destruction; perhaps the public too may find in it a modicum of comfort.

59 Hakukot, p. 22.