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Russian Roots of Hebrew Literature

Rina Lapidus. *Birch in a Desert Wind: Russian Influences on Hebrew Literature*, Vols. 1-2, publisher: Carmel Publishing House, Jerusalem, Israel, 2009–2023

Beginning at the end of the 18th century, thousands of Jews began settling in the Russian Empire, and even before that, several Jewish communities lived within its territories which were annexed from Belarus, Ukraine and Poland. These Russian Jewish communities were more conservative than their counterparts in Central Europe, well-versed in the Jewish literature, but also familiar to some extent with the surrounding Russian culture.

Russian literature of the 18th century, and onward, was among the richest and prominent in the world. Jews living in the Russian territories were enthusiastic about it, translated it to Hebrew and Yiddish, and were influenced by it. As a result, Hebrew and Yiddish literature, written in Russia, bore the stamp of Russian literature. In other words, thus was born Hebrew and Yiddish literature, which discussed Jewish topics, but the content of which was shaped using narrative techniques found in Russian literature. It is this topic that Professor Rina Lapidus of Bar Ilan University in Israel addresses in her work.

The research on the influences between the different literatures and cultures constitutes an important pillar in humanities research. In over two hundred years of studying inter-literary influence, many studies have been written in this field. Its main researchers were Michail Bachtin, Harold Bloom, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Pierre Bourdieu. The book by Rina Lapidus, which is the subject

of this review, also joins the studies of these main researchers who worked in this field in the past.

The current book, titled *Birch in Desert Wind: Russian Influences on Hebrew Literature*, in 2 volumes, by Rina Lapidus, is dedicated to the study of the extensive and varied relationship between Hebrew and Russian literature. This is a huge comprehensive study of two thick volumes, totaling 900 pages. This is an enormous project that reflects many decades of work and effort invested in it. The study is in line with the leading studies in this field and is the greatest and most prominent among them, as it is a cornerstone in the study of literary influences in general, and in the study of Russian influence on Hebrew literature in particular.

The research relates to all the writers and poets of Hebrew literature over the past 150 years, from the 1880s until today, and also relates to all possible branches of literature - genres, trends, styles and methods. Before us is an interesting, intriguing and innovative study.

In the chapter on the connection of the Hebrew poet Alexander Penn (1906–1972) to Russian literature, Lapidus chooses, as an example, a scene where the poet and his lover part from each other on a gloomy and dark night, while standing in the rain high above a wide and stormy river, its waves hitting the foundations of the bridge. According to Lapidus, a scene such as this can only be interpreted in light of Alexander Penn's affinity to the romantic poetry of Sergey Esenin and Vladimir Mayakovsky, in whose poetry, such scenes appear. Lapidus also adds that the landscape of nature, as it is described in Penn's poetry, is not found in the arid and desert Land of Israel since it has neither stormy rivers nor large bridges over them.

In the same spirit, Lapidus analyzes the affinity of the Hebrew author, Haim Hazaz (1898–1973), to Russian literature. For example, in Hazaz's works, there is a scene of confirmation of love between a protagonist and his beloved, which includes an emotional conversation and the touching of their hands - something that is not found in Hebrew literature, but it does appear in Lev Tolstoy's writings, by which Haim Hazaz was influenced.

Rina Lapidus points out the relationship between Hebrew and Russian literature in the field of poetic design. For example, the poetry of the Hebrew poet, Haim Lensky (1905–1943), is depicted in a prosodic format of the minor folkloric genre of *chastushka*. Lapidus points out Lensky's affinity with Russian literature also in the existential realm. Thus, the description of the poet's suffering is presented as the poet's estrangement from himself. This expresses an ironic and mocking relationship of the poet *vis à vis* his

own suffering. This is his way of establishing a partition between himself and his suffering, to say, the one who suffers is the speaker in the poem and not the “realistic self” of the poet.

Lapidus claims that Russian literature influenced Hebrew literature also conceptually. For example, in her writings, a Hebrew-language poet, Rachel Bluvstein-Sela, aka Rachel (1890–1931), expresses a wish that her physical suffering should serve as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of those laboring in the fields of the Land of Israel, whose ranks she was unable to join because of her illness. This perception Rachel assimilated from the writings of Anna Akhmatova, which exerted a considerable influence on her own poetry, and some of whose poems she translated to Hebrew. The idea itself is rooted in Russian philosophy, whence it found its way into Akhmatova’s poems.

We also learn other fascinating things from Lapidus’s book. From the chapter on the links between Jewish and Russian journalism, we learn about the Russian national ideas that contributed to the shaping of Jewish nationalism at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

From the chapter dealing with the philosopher and thinker of the kibbutz movement, Aaron David Gordon (1856–1922), who was active at the beginning of the twentieth century, we learn about the ways to depict the redemption of the human race in the “new” era of the 20th century in the spirit of Lev Tolstoy’s teachings.

Similarly, Chaim Nachman Bialik’s (1873–1934) conception that a single word integrates a multitude of meanings emanates from the teachings of a Ukrainian philosopher of language, Aleksander Potebnia, whose books were part of Bialik’s home library and can today be found in Bialik’s House in Tel Aviv.

According to Lapidus, Russian decadence influenced depictions of the image of “the Jewish superfluous man,” as it is shown in the chapter dealing with the novel “Without Aim” by Yisayahu Bershadsky (1871–1908).

So did sermons for Christian moral values that Lev Tolstoy incorporates in his trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*. The criticism of Christianity, its rejection and ridicule towards it alternate in the autobiographical novel of Y.D. Berkowitz’s (1887–1970) *Chapters of Childhood—My Father’s House*, which was influenced by Lev Tolstoy’s autobiography.

Rina Lapidus also discusses the Hebrew literary creations which are not directly influenced by Russian literature, but are deciphered according to the research methods developed in Russia like the works of Mendeley Mocher Sepharim (1836–1917), Ch.N. Bialik,

Y.Ch. Brenner (1881–1921), Y.D. Berkowitz, S. Y. Agnon (1887–1970), Yakov Shteinberg (1887–1947), Aaron Appelfeld (1932–2018), and Ida Fink (1921–2011). The interpretation of these works can be reached through the methods of Russian formalism and structuralism.

There are also two special chapters here. The first is a comprehensive and exhaustive theoretical review of the research methods in both literature and art. The chapter opens up to the reader a large-scale canvas in the history of the study of influence. Although, today, there is a rich selection of research methods in the study of literary and cultural influences, Lapidus chooses the traditional research method of “close reading” because, in her opinion, this research method allows for the analysis of works in the most precise way, while reaching the most certain and convincing conclusions.

Lapidus also includes an illuminating chapter that traces the European influences on Russian literature. These are mainly influences from British, French, Italian, and Spanish literature, as well as Scandinavian, Latin and those of Ancient Greece.

The chapter discusses the European background of Russian literature and the penetration of European influences into Hebrew literature through Russian literature. This chapter has weighty implications as it places Hebrew literature in a broader context of the whole of European and Russian literature from the Middle Ages to the present day. The chapter shows that the absorption of influences, and their assimilation, is the main element in the development of any literature. It is impossible to exhaust the study of Russian influences on Hebrew literature without referring to the European literatures that served as the quarry where Russian literature was mined.

Lapidus’s comprehensive study relates to the overwhelming majority of contemporary Hebrew literature and illustrates the essential, deep and rooted link between Hebrew literature, and also contemporary Jewish and Israeli culture, and Russian literature and culture. Her research proves that Hebrew literature and Israeli culture are, in essence, a replica of Russian literature and culture - something that was unknown until the publication of this work, providing Rina Lapidus’ innovation in the field of Jewish cultural research.

We have in front of us an ingenious study of a kind that is unparalleled in the field of Jewish studies and the humanities in general. This research positions Rina Lapidus as the leading researcher in today’s academic world in the field of intercultural interrelationships in the Jewish world.