

lital <lital@socrates.Berkeley.EDU>

**BIALIK AND THE SEPHARDIM:  
A LOVE/HATE STORY ABOUT HEBREW LITERARY HISTORY (H)**

Lital Levy  
University of California at Berkeley

The most renowned modern Hebrew poet and scholar, Hayyim Nahman Bialik, devoted many of his last years to editing the works of the Sephardic poets of the Spanish Golden Age. At the same time, Bialik is also known to have made disparaging remarks about contemporary Sephardim. Iraqi and Egyptian Jewish intellectuals during Bialik's lifetime, who were then deeply engaged in the self-described "renaissance" (*nahdah*) of their communities, were attentive to, if conflicted about, Bialik's views. Contemporary Sephardi and Mizrahi writers in Israel have criticized Bialik, the Hebrew "national poet," as an enduring symbol of Ashkenazi cultural elitism.

This paper explores the complex relationship between Bialik and the Sephardi/ Arab Jews as articulated in scholarly and journalistic essays as well as in Hebrew poetry. The sources include a number of articles on Bialik's lectures on Sephardim that ran in the Cairene Jewish newspaper *Israel/Israil* in the late 1920s; Bialik's own comments about contemporary Sephardim in his introduction to the works of Solomon Ibn Gabirol; a 1933 Hebrew ode to Bialik written by the Baghdadi Jewish poet and scholar Dahud Semah; a 1995 poem about Bialik and the Sephardim by the young Israeli poet Eytan Glass; and a large article in *Haaretz's* literary supplement from January 2004 on Bialik and the Sephardim, followed by readers' responses. Through these sources, including close readings of the two poems, I will trace the evolution of this ambivalent relationship, in which the name "Bialik" eventually came to represent much more than the man himself, but indeed, the Ashkenazi-Israeli cultural center. The question then becomes not whether Bialik loved or hated Oriental Jewry, but rather, how literary personalities such as Bialik become discursive symbols within a contested cultural field (here, that of modern Jewish culture), and how such symbols are manipulated by those writing – and then, by those contesting and re-writing – the national literary-historical narrative (in this case, that of modern Hebrew literature). More broadly, I aim through stories such as that of Bialik and the Sephardim to explore the relationship between literary historiography and the national narrative. This small chapter is part of my larger project to revise Hebrew literary historiography by bringing to light the works of Arab-speaking Jewish writers from 1870-1950.