

Closing Words: In Bialik's Garden

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It would seem we cannot conclude this conference without entering briefly into one of the most enchanting gardens in modern Hebrew literature, namely H. N. Bialik's "I Have a Garden". Among the wide and varied oeuvre of the man who was crowned early in his life as the "national poet" of the Hebrew nation, there is a group of what he named "popular songs". These were mostly adaptations of Yiddish folk ballads, often depicting the anguish and romantic yearnings of unmarried girls, which he recreated in Hebrew and published under a separate heading in his collected poetry. They were soon adopted back into popular culture and sung to various tunes.

"I Have a Garden" expresses the thoughts and emotions of a betrothed girl who fears that her intended groom will not keep his promise to her. Simultaneously she is full of erotic yearnings, which are expressed subtly through biblical allusions. The very garden in which the girl is waiting anxiously for her groom, and the well where she expects to meet him, are well-known symbols of erotic potential expressed in verses such as Song of Songs 4:15-16: "A locked garden my sister bride, a locked well, a sealed spring [...] gardens spring, a well of fresh water [...] Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his precious fruits".¹

Eventually the boy comes and sits with her at the well, and although holding hands and touching heads, the girl is still restless and worried. Her question "why does the jug run to the fountain?" alludes to one of the group of verses in Ecclesiastes that are traditionally interpreted as describing old age, but she uses the metaphor out of the original context, wondering about erotic passion. She reformates the expression in 12:6: "...and the pitcher be broken at the fountain"² as one of the anxious questions she poses to the boy. He tries to calm her mind with descriptions of their anticipated wedding day, in which, once again, nature will join symbolically with its abundance of fruits.

¹ In Hebrew:

גן נעול אחתי כלה גל נעול מעון חתום [...] מעון גנים באר מים חיים [...] יבא דודי לגנו יאכל פרי מגדיו.

² In Hebrew:

ותשבר כד על-המבוע.

Throughout most of Jewish history, Song of Songs was interpreted allegorically, and the garden was used mostly as a mystical symbol, but Bialik revived the pure erotic meaning of the abundance offered by nature. He did so in several of his “popular songs” as well as in the novella “Behind the Fence”, in which the profusion of fruit again hints at erotic fulfilment. In this, as in many other ways, Bialik was the great innovator who opened up the paths that many have later followed.

Below, the song is quoted in the original Hebrew, in my own literal translation that follows the original meaning as closely as possible, and in an anonymous, lovely rhymed and metered translation which I happened to find on the Internet.

חיים נחמן ביאליק / יש לי גן

יש לי גן ובאר יש-לי,	ומדוע, הגד-לי,	נהפךה תעמד כאן:
ועלי בארי תלוי דלי;	גבך בדממה, גבך הדלי—	בין הבאר ובין הגן;
מדי שבת בא מתמדי,	טיף, טיף, גים — וכה בלי הרף	את תושיטי לי שם דרן:
מים זכים ישת מדי.	מן-הערב עד הערב.	אצבע קטנה עם צפרן.
פל-העולם ישן — הס!	ומאין בא הכאב	ואני לך: "הרי את
גם תפוח ואגס;	פתולעת אל הלב — ?	מקדשת לי לעד — "
אמי נמה, גרדם אבי,	הוי, האמת שמעה אמי,	שונאי יהיו שם וראו,
ערים רק אני ולבבי.	פי לבבך סר מעמי?	ומקנאה תפקעו.
נהדלי כלבבי ער,	ענה דודי ואמר לי:	
נוטר פז אל-פי הבאר,	שונאי שקר ענו בי!	
נוטר פז ונוטר בדלח:	ובעוד שנה, פעת חיה,	
דודי הולך, דודי הולך.	אל החפה גלד, פמיה!	
הס, בגן נדעזע נור—	יום של-קנין נביהק אז,	
דודי בא אם-פרקס עוף?	על ראשנו ייצק פז,	
דודי, דודי! — חוש מתמדי,	ויכרכונו מן הגדרות	
אין כחצר איש מלבדי.	כפות עצים טעוני פרות.	
על השקת נשב אט,	אח ורע, דוד ושאר,	
ראש אל-פתר, יד אל-יד;	קהל גדול, איש וגר,	
אחוד חידות לך: מדוע	וכלי זמר כל-המינים	
רץ הכד אל-המבוע?	יוליכונו עם שושבינים.	

Chaim Nachman Bialik / I Have a Garden

(my own literal translation)

I have a garden, and I have a well
And in my well hangs a pail
Every Sabbath my darling comes
Fresh water he'd drink from my jug.

Brothers and friends, uncles and relatives,
A large crowd, each carrying a candle,
And musicians of all sorts
Will lead us on with attendants.

The whole world is sleeping – hush!
Sleeps an apple, sleeps a pear,
My mother is sleeping, my father too,
Awake are only me and my heart.

And the canopy will stand right here:
Between the well and the garden;
There you will extend to me a gift:
A little finger with a nail.

And the pail like my heart is awake,
Dripping gold into the well
Dripping gold and dripping crystal:
My beloved is coming, my beloved is coming.

And I to you: “Thou art
Consecrated to me forever” –
My enemies will be there and see,
And they'll burst up with envy.

Hush, a branch stirred in the garden:
Is my beloved coming, or had a bird quivered?
My beloved, my beloved, hurry up my darling!
There's no one but me in the yard.

On the trough we'd sit down slowly,
Head to shoulder, hand in hand;
I'd ask you some riddles: why
Does the jug run to the fountain?

And why, pray tell me,
Crying silently, cries the pail –
Drip, drip and so incessantly,
From evening to evening?

And whence comes the pain
Like a worm into the heart? –
Was it true what my mother heard,
That your heart is no longer mine?

My beloved answered telling me:
My enemies have slandered me!
And in one year from now,
We will be wedded, foolish one!

A bright summer day it will be,
Pouring gold over our heads,
And from the fences will bless us
Branches of trees laid low with fruit.

Chaim Nachman Bialik / I Have a Garden

(an anonymous rhymed translation)

Two steps from my garden rail
Sleeps my well beneath its pail:
Every sabbath comes my love
And I let him drink thereof.

Friend and kinsman, young and old
Shall be gathered to behold,
And with music and with mirth
They shall come to lead us forth.

All the world is sleeping now
Like the fruit beneath the bough.
Father, mother, both are gone
And my heart wakes here alone.

And the bridal canopy
In this place shall lifted be.
I shall slip a ring of gold
On this finger that I hold.

And the pail awakes with me,
Dripping, dripping, drowsily:
Drops of gold and crystal clear.
And my love is drawing near.

And pronounce the blessing: "Thee
God makes consecrate to me."
And my enemies shall there
Burst with envy and despair.

Hist! I think that something stirred;
Was it he, or but a bird?
Dearest friend, my lover dear,
There is no one with me here.

By the trough we sit and speak,
Hand in hand and cheek to cheek;
Hear this riddle: Can you tell
Why the pitcher seeks the well?

That you cannot answer, nor
What the pail is weeping for?
Morn to even, drop by drop,
Fall its tears and cannot stop.

This then tell me, why my breast
Daylong, nightlong is oppressed.
Spoke my mother truth in saying
That your heart from me was straying?

And my lover answered: See,
Enemies have slandered me.
Ere another year be gone,
We shall marry, foolish one.

On that golden day of days
Shall the summer be ablaze.
Fruited branches overhead
Shall in benediction spread.