



HIGH CULTURE, POPULAR CULTURE, HEBREW ALL OVER

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

One pervasive way in which high culture is made accessible through popular forms is how Hebrew literature, whether from classical Biblical verses or that of modern serious poetry, is put to music by popular artists and enjoyed throughout Israeli society.

Contemporary Israeli culture ties its highest expressions to its most popular forms using elements of the Hebrew language in ways that convey an ongoing enthusiasm for Hebrew as the central medium of the Zionist enterprise and the culture of Israel. This was true at Israel's founding and has continued through today. One pervasive way in which high culture is made accessible through popular forms is how Hebrew literature, whether from classical Biblical verses or that of modern serious poetry, is put to music by popular artists and enjoyed throughout Israeli society.

In 1982, Natan Zach, the acclaimed poet and scholar of Hebrew poetry, published the poem "For The Human Being is a Tree of the Field." It takes its opening phrase from Deuteronomy 20:19, a Biblical passage which mandates the preservation of fruit trees while laying siege to a city in a time of war, specifically because fruit trees are not human beings who can threaten one's army. In the Bible, "*Ki HaAdam Etz ha Sadeh*" is a rhetorical question, with the Hebrew word "*ki*" used interrogatively. In Zach's poem, the Biblical concern for fruit trees over the lives of the enemy population is turned around completely, and Zach uses the language of the Bible to emphasize the aspirations and yearnings of every person using the word "*ki*" at the beginning of the phrase to mean "because" or "for" in the affirmative

rather than the interrogative. Every person is like a tree of the field, solitary, yearning and growing.

In a 2011 interview, Zach claimed that he wrote the poem with the first Lebanon War on his mind and that the poem was one of protest. ("A Poet's Poet," by Eli Eliahu, *Haaretz*, May 20, 2011) The poem was put to music in 1983 by the popular rock and folk artist Shalom Hanoch, with a haunting slow melody that draws out the sense of human aloneness and yearning. In that same 2011 interview, Zach commented that when Hanoch first recorded the song, every time Zach heard it on the radio he feared it was in order to announce another casualty of war. In other words, his underlying message is just as we should take precautions to save trees in time of war, so should we take great pains to save human life. All of this is done with an intimate sense of the shifting meaning of ancient language in its contemporary use. The shift and play on a classical Hebrew source in a contemporary, high-level poem of subtle protest was not limited to the discussions of academics and esoteric poetry journals but was turned into a pop song and broadcast on the radio, reaching the widest arena of popular culture.

Likewise, musical artists of the Yishuv during the pre-state period often put Biblical verses to music outside of their contexts in ways that gave secular meaning to language which

Rabbi David Gedzelman is President and CEO of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.

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was decidedly theological in its original context. The well known “*Mayim, Mayim*” song and dance was created in 1937 by choreographer Else Dublin and composer Emanuel Pugashov Amiran to celebrate the discovery of water on Kibbutz Na’an after a seven-year search. It is thought of as the first Hebrew folk dance created by the secular pioneer culture in Eretz Yisrael. It celebrates the ingenuity and capacities of the young *Halutzim* (pioneers) to conquer the desert, make it bloom and to celebrate their accomplishments with great joy. The lyrics are from Isaiah 12:3, “And you shall draw forth water with joy from the springs of salvation.” The song decidedly leaves out the preceding verse 12:2, “Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; for God is my strength and song and has become for me salvation,” chanted together with the third verse every Saturday night as part of the traditional *Havdallah* service. The *Halutzim* knew what they were doing as they reconstructed the very notion of salvation, putting it firmly in the hands of the human, restructuring the refrain of the verse to emphasize water and joy, repeating the word *mayim* (water) over and over again as the dancers narrow their circle coming together in a hand clap to underscore their success together in finding water and joy. And so the Hebrew word, *yeshuah*, salvation, got redefined in a visceral way through a popular cultural expression that turned the Biblical source on its head but still kept the Biblical reference as an important cultural component nonetheless. In this way, language and meaning are changed but the ancient roots are not expunged.

In the ensuing decades, whether it was Yehudit Ravitz putting Leah Goldberg poems to music or Yoni Rechter and Arik Einstein doing the same for the poems of Avraham Halpi, it would seem that Modern Hebrew poetry was often written waiting

for music to take it in flight. The cadence, rhythm and rhyme of many contemporary Hebrew poets still lend themselves to music in ways that contemporary American poetry with its insistence on defying the repetition of form and meter does not. And consequently, the work of those poets who earn the respect and consideration of their field in Israel is known and accessed on a popular scale in ways that don’t happen in the US. And with that, a corpus of literature that purposely mines traditional language and sources while restructuring those sources in contemporary language and perspective moves popular culture in authentic ways.

In the past 20 years or so, various contemporary Israeli musical artists have introduced traditional cultural elements into their music in new ways that leave intact much more of the fabric of authentic traditional forms without necessarily completely reconstructing them as their predecessors may have done. A forerunner of this came as early as 1989, when Ehud Banai included references to traditional Jewish religious life on his *Karov* album. Remembering his grandfather’s house, the holy books on its shelves and the traditional holiday songs he would hear at his table, he fuses a contemporary sound with the traditional melody for “*Asader Li Seudata*,” not just any Shabbat song but a hymn of deep mystical meaning attributed to Rabbi Yitzchak Luria and written for that matter in Aramaic. At the time this was rather novel and would have been somewhat threatening to the Israeli secular music scene if not for Banai’s credibility in that scene and personal qualities of humility and warmth that had made him quite beloved. Banai was introducing third-generation secularists to the traditional forms their grandparents had known well but had transformed and secularized through the very processes I’ve tried to quickly outline above. He was doing this in the medium of popular culture, a classic Israeli rock album.

By the time Idan Raichel appeared on the music scene in 2002, Israeli culture was ready for a new formula of using traditional forms in the context of contemporary expression. And those traditional forms were not only what would be familiar to those knowledgeable of Biblical and Rabbinic sources. Traditional Ethiopian elements, Yemenite sources and other traditions are fused with Middle Eastern and contemporary rock sounds in interesting new ways that celebrate a range of authentic expressions, sending a message that on the platform of Hebrew music a

wide range of cultures can be celebrated in an Israel that no longer feels the need to be homogenous. On his debut album, traditional sources and concepts are treated throughout. Of special note is the love song “*Hinech Yafah*,” which incorporates phrases from the Biblical *Song of Songs* into lyrics phrased in colloquial, contemporary Hebrew in interesting ways. Unlike the case with various Land of Israel songs from earlier decades which took whole passages from the *Song of Songs* and set them to music, Raichel is cutting and pasting where he wants to in an effort to say that he can take from the tradition on his own terms and feel comfortable in a contemporary idiom. His second Album, *Mi’ma’amakim*, released in 2005, plays with the language of Psalm 130 in its title song, using a traditional Hebrew expression of calling out to God but in order to speak of a romantic relationship. Again, Raichel does this while forging new possibilities of Hebrew phraseology, contributing to the language’s flexibility. The album is sprinkled with Hebrew, Amharic, Arabic, Zulu, Hindi and Yemenite Hebrew. What Raichel continues to do through his latest album, *At the Edge of the Beginning*, released in early 2016, is to celebrate a range of traditions and cultures but firmly in an overall Hebrew context. He doesn’t bracket classical sources and treat them separately from his overall work but cuts them down to the pieces he can use and fuses them into a new Israeli contemporary culture.

This phenomenon in Israeli art and culture comes at a time of new openness in Israeli secular society over the past decade to reclaiming elements of Jewish spirituality, religion and life. During this period, a range of “Secular Yeshivot” have opened. Young Israelis have evidenced all kinds of interest in expressing themselves through religious explorations on their own secular terms that would have been unthinkable 30 years ago. The informal *Hitchadshut* (“renewal,” not be confused with the American Jewish Renewal) movement has been growing and it finds openness to religious forms on a popular footing where there was hostility in previous times. This exploration finds resonance in forms of popular culture perhaps because there has always been an Israeli inclination to treat the serious questions embodied in high cultural expressions in the arena of broad popular forms with an enthusiasm for playing with the Hebrew language which ends up being the constant barometer of Israeli cultural development and change. ■