THE EROTIC IMPULSE is a vital and dynamic force in life, and the theme of love is ageless and universal. "A pretty girl, a cup of wine, a garden, the song of a bird, the murmur of a brook"—proclaims Moshe Ibn Ezra—"are the cure of the lover, the joy of the distressed . . . the wealth of the poor, and the medicine of the sick." Thus Ibn Ezra advises:

Cling to the breast of the beautiful by night
And kiss the lips of the pretty by day.2

This prescription of Moshe Ibn Ezra for a happy and joyful life is characteristic of many of the Medieval Spanish Hebrew poets. Despite their deep piety, these poets knew how to express in their writings the splendor of the fields and flowery meadows, and the enchantment of feminine beauty.3 Indeed, these writings offer us a glimpse into the hidden vistas of their lives: their joys and sorrows, their triumphs and frustrations. The greatness of poetry, says Mardell, is in its eroticism, for it is "most true then to life, which is largely erotic" (1976, p. 15).

*All translations of Yemenite Hebrew poetry into English are my own. I would like to thank the Graduate School of the Ohio State University, the College of Humanities, and the Melton Center for Jewish Studies, for supporting my research on Yemenite Hebrew Literature.

1. See Sefer he'anaq (The Necklace, also known as The Tarshish), Part 3, verses 52–55.
Quite different is the attitude of Rabbi Shalom Shabazi,⁴ the most celebrated of the Yemenite Hebrew poets, who in one of his poems proudly proclaims: "I have not wasted my verse on amorous themes."⁵ This attitude, one may safely assert, is typical of the Yemenite Hebrew poets. Yemenite Hebrew literature, as reflected in the extant body of Yemenite works, is predominantly preoccupied with two themes: the suffering of Kneset Israel in Exile (agalut) and the great expectation for speedy redemption (g’dola). In spite of the profound prosodic and thematic influence which the Spanish school of Hebrew literature exerted upon Yemenite Hebrew literature, secular themes are scant in the latter. Poems pertaining to amusement and conviviality (ירמוי א отдנ spiritually), particularly those expressive of the erotic impulse and the pleasures of love and passion, are marginal in Yemenite writings.⁶

Passionate chords of love were, however, sounded within the framework of Yemenite sacred poetry. In a manner characteristic of the Kabbalah and mysticism, Yemenite poets used images, motifs and language of secular love poetry to describe the ecstasy of divine love.⁷ To express the bond between Israel, the Torah, and the Messiah, Yemenite poets incorporated erotic and sensuous language in eulogistic poems of friendship, styled in the manner of the ancient Arabic ode (qasida).⁸ The qasida which for a long time was the literary medium of Arabic poetry, was also prevalent in medieval Spanish Hebrew literature. This genre in which panegyric was a central theme, would charac-

⁴. Rabbi Shalom Shabazi was born in 1619 and died after 1680. He is considered to be the greatest poet of Yemenite Jewry. He was a prolific writer, and his poems are noted for their poetic spirit and loftiness of thought. His poems express an unquenchable thirst for God as the ultimate goal of life; they encourage clinging to the Torah as the source of life and warn against the cheating disillusionment of the materialistic world.

Shabazi left his strong impress upon Yemenite Jewry, who meticulously interpreted his poems and commented upon them, searching for esoteric messages and religious symbolism. On account of his charismatic character, legends clustered around his life and personality, and to this day he is revered by the Yemenites as a saint, capable of performing miracles from his grave (see Ḥoce, 1973, pp. 27–45).

⁵. Hapes hayyim (1966, p. 171). Hapes hayyim is the most extensive collection in print of Yemenite poetry.

⁶ See Ratzaby (1965a, pp. 133–165). The sources of Yemenite Hebrew poetry are ancient and may go back to the liturgical poetry (piyyut) of Babylon and Eretz Israel (cf. the poetic introductions to the Midrash haggadot, edited by M. Margaliot, 1967, pp. 17–18). The earliest traces of Spanish influence on Yemenite literature may be discerned in the poetry of Rabbi Daniel b. Rabbi Fayyumi who lived in the first half of the twelfth century. Fayyumi is also the earliest Yemenite Jewish poet known to us by name. His only three extant poems are dedicated to the Yamim noraim (Days of Awe). See Tobi (1979, pp. 29–38).

⁷. See Scholem (1941).

teristically begin with the *nasib* or erotic prelude, and then shift abruptly and skillfully to the subject proper of the poem: the enumeration of the great virtues of a noble, a patron or a friend. ⁹

Persecution and suffering marked the life of the Yemenite Jews. ¹⁰ The Torah provided them with both refuge and guidance through their difficult life, and at the same time allured them, and helped to alleviate their agony. Consequently, they often sang songs of love to the Torah, their beloved bride, and aspired to a total spiritual union with “her.” In such poems the mundane is fused with the sacred, the carnal with the spiritual. ¹¹ The Torah is often referred to as לְהַרְגָּדָה "a lovely doe," "a graceful gazelle," as can be seen in the following lines, which constitute the *nasib* of a poem singing the praise of So‘adia ben Natan ‘el: ¹²

I have a lovely gazelle, a damsel  
She is like unto the moon,  
Or the splendor of the sun  
Rising at morn.  
She abounds with wisdom  
The choice of my heart.  
She is upright and poised  
And endowed with beauty.  

My soul cleaves unto her  
And I am her slave.  
Coverlets she has made  
Of fine linen and silk embroidery. ¹⁴  
She has adorned my head  
With crown and diadem forever.  
She said: How long will you sleep?  
Morning has dawned!  

Behold, I have already prepared  
Five voices — all for you.

⁹. This artistic rift from the erotic introduction to the subject proper is known in Spanish Hebrew poetry as מִירְצְיָה 'the beauty of extrication or release.' See Yelin (1972, pp. 73–88).


¹¹. On the division of the Yemenite Jews’ existence between the mundane and the spiritual, the physical and mystical reality, see Bargad (1971, pp. 231–248).

¹². See Shabazi in *Hapes hayyim* (p. 43). These appellatives are based on Prov. 5:19.

¹³. The acrostics indicate that this poem was written by David ben Gad of the fifteenth century (see Ratzaby, 1968, pp. 137–139).

¹⁴. Based on Prov 31:22.

¹⁵. Referring to the five voices of rejoicing, as enumerated in Jer 25:10: the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones.
For it is you I have chosen
Come, ascend the stairs.
Come out unto me
Walking along my path.
Because innocent are my ways
Righteous is my course.

How enchanting is the sound
Of your voice, my beloved.
When I go to your abode
You heal my malady.
Let me mount your bed
For this I have ever desired...

Of the same sentiment are the following verses:\(^{17}\)

My desire is for the pristine princess
Who sings glorious hymns.
She intones songs of wisdom
Accompanied by drum and lyre.

The radiance of her countenance is like the sun
Awesome as a lion.
Her splendor and glory will never depart
She is my sun and my moon.
In you my soul finds rest.
Nectar and balsam too.
Sweet juice from her mouth
Fell to my lot.
I shall not hunger nor thirst
She is my portion, my good fortune.

Like the Torah, the Messiah was the object of the Yemenites' affections. The poems addressed to the Messiah are an outpouring of yearning for redemption. The Yemenite Jews, like their persecuted brethren elsewhere, awaited the advent of the Redeemer with great anticipation. They sang his glory, expressing love and exultation. At times they turn to him in plaintive tones, demanding his immediate appearance. They vent their innermost feelings in a language expressive of the universal theme of unrequited love. They complain of being forsaken by their lover, and give expression to the torments of separation. They recall the idyllic relations of old and beg their beloved to return promptly to his

"comely habitation." Such strain of both agony and passion is articulated in the following: 18

I adjure you, O my beloved
In the name of Love
And in the name of the gracious and dear maiden
To cure the heart of the love-sick,
Who faint with thirst (for you).
Too long have you wandered about,
Please return to your beloved's comely habitation
So that it may not be desolate.
Shine upon her with glory and splendor
Appear with your wisdom and majestic hand.
With the moisture of your lips
And the nectar of your utterance
Speak kindly to her words of consolation.

To this category of sacred love poetry belongs Shalom Shabazi's most celebrated poem 'Ahafat Hadassa 'The love for Hadassah.' In this poem, whose imagery echoes some of Halevi's poems, particularly Libbi hamizrah 'My Heart is in the East,' Shabazi gives utterance to his people's profound yearnings for Zion. Like Halevi, Shabazi sees himself as a prisoner of passion for Jerusalem, to which he consecrates his heart, soul and mind. Shabazi pours forth his grief at Israel's misery in the galut, but at the same time sings Israel's absolute faith in ultimate redemption. 'Ahafat Hadassa is remarkable for its simplicity of language and depth of religious thought. A strain of passionate love for Zion emanates from it, charged with beauty and emotional power. 19

The Love for Hadassah is bound up in my heart
But I, deep in Exile my feet are sinking.
Would that I were able. I would go up and become one
With the gates of Zion, the glorious ones.
Morning and evening the Princess I do recall
My heart, my very being throbs with desire.

This is a glorious day for the precious 'ayumma 20
She and her beloved reciprocate grace and affection

With the cup of salvation I will rejoice and sing
I will reveal my secret to all.

18. Hapes hayvim, p. 36. The name and time of the author are not known.
20. 'ayumma is an appelation for Kneset Israel.
My soul surges with love unto the goodness of the Lord
Blessed is He who rewards all good deeds.

Although the echo of suffering rather than the joy of life dominates Yemenite Hebrew literature, there are a few secular poems in which the splendor of nature and the charm of feminine beauty find expression. These poems, however, are not frivolously erotic, nor do they ardently describe the object of their affection. The intense feelings of love are conveyed through subtle formulations, bearing sensual connotations, as can be seen in the following verses which give expression to the anguish of separation:

I am ill because you have gone
And my heart cries out for you.
I am drowning in a sea of separation
And there is none to draw me, save you.
Turn to me and be gracious unto me
And inscribe me in your book.
Do not withdraw your grace from your beloved
who is ailing and debased.
I eagerly await your letter
With eyes fixed in anticipation
Because it is the balm of my pangs
And through it my agony will be assuaged.
I will hold fast to your love till the heavens wear out . . .

The relationship between love poems and dreams has often been noted. The erotic impulse, when unfulfilled in reality, may find expression in dreams. Thus dreams serve not only as an outlet for erotic fantasies, but also as a bridge between painful reality and the object of desire. Such use of this artistic device of dream and fantasy is exemplified in the following verses:

He appears in my dreams
He enters my reflections

21. Compare for example the licentious poems of Emanuel of Rome, in Haberman (1946). See also Israel Najara's poems, about which Bialik wrote in his *Siratenu haccvira*: "Just as the Italian 'Don Juan' with the bunch of flowers in his hand, sings to his señora in Italian, behind the window, on a spring night, thus Rabbi Israel Najara, with the ashes on his head sings with the very same melody and in the Holy Tongue to the Holy One, Blessed be He and His Shekhinah, by the Holy Ark at midnight prayers" (Bialik, 1962, p. 249).
My magnificent Uzalian24
   Whose cheeks are as bright as the moon.
Enchanting are his eyes
   More radiant than a ruby.
He captivates my heart
   With his beaded throat.

Like a scarlet thread
   So his lips are red
His teeth are crystalline
   Resembling marble.
Firmly fastened they appeared
   Looking like pearls and turquoise.
This is my lot and my portion
   No more do I ask.

So let him stand beside me
   Carried by the wings of dreams.
His countenance is comely
   Lustrous like a cut diamond.

My beloved is my banner
   The sweet nectar of the Sharon.

A paragon of wisdom
   Is Ben-Abram, the noble one.
I inhale your fragrance
   Which never grows faint.
You have hardened your heart, 'Amram
   And relinquished me.
I beseech you, O Lord
   Restore my joy.

A tender interplay between dream and reality is articulated in the following:25

She perceived an image in her dream and said:
   Who kissed me while I slept?
Recognizing that it was my image
   She disavowed saying: I am but dreaming
And I said: If this were a dream, then who is the one
   Who put a ring on your left finger?
And she was silent, knowing that what I said
   Was right and my words—true.

24. 'Uzal is a name for San'a, the capital of Yemen.
Then she took a veil and covered her face
   And I understood that she was embarrassed by that.
She concealed her cheeks, but they shone behind
   Her veil as the sun wrapped in a cloud.
If you ask me how she looks, I would testify
   And my testimony shall abide:
She transcends grace and beauty . . .

The language of the Yemenite poems is permeated with biblical phrases and allusions, as is Hebrew poetry in general and medieval Hebrew poetry in particular. As Robert Alter (1976, p. 1371) rightly observed, the poet can "dialectically engage an earlier Hebrew text with the slightest passing gesture—by the collocation of two or three words from a biblical phrase, sometimes even by a peculiarity of rhythm, syntax, or grammar that recalls a classic source." The sibbus 'mosaic style' stimulated the imagination and challenged the intelligence of the reader, making the poem an intellectual and emotional intercourse between poet and audience.

The biblical precedent for the use of erotic imagery in religious poetry is the Song of Songs. The Yemenites, like Hebrew poets elsewhere, acknowledged its influence by directly alluding to it or by adapting its literary devices. The following poem is a typical example of Yemenite adaptation and emulation.

Hark, my beloved knocks
   I shall open to my beloved
   I shall answer from afar
   I shall say to my lover

26. A further example of this poetic type, expressive of the craving for the beloved through the medium of dream, can be seen in the following verses composed by Zacharia al-Dahri. See Ratzaby (1968, pp. 146–147):

   As in a dream I see an apparition
   I behold a cloud from the north side
   Like a human form wrapped in humility,
   In a coat of righteousness, and on his countenance—the Shekhina
   A paragon of wisdom, a kin to beauty and splendor
   There is no end to his glorious virtues.
   Seven prominent sages surrounded him
   And with him they were eight.
   My dreams carried me to them
   And my heart was wakeful, though my body was dormant . . .

29. See Cant 5:2.
If you so desire
    Come suckle at my breast
My sweet honey
    The balsam of my Gilead.
I beseech you not to look at me
    Till I am adorned
Because my children have afflicted me
    They and my mother’s sons
They made me guard (their vineyards)
    I did not guard my own
All my vineyards are barren
    I have nothing in hand.

Hold your peace, O beloved
    You are lovely and pure
There is no blemish in you
    You are radiant like the sun.
Come along with me
    To the chamber in my mother’s house.
She answered from afar
    Come, let us take our fill of love.

When she rose to open
    Her hand dripped myrrh
The wind wafted
    The sweet smelling myrrh to him
Like the fragrance of an apple from a tree
    Planted beside streams of water
Even like a brook of Sorek
    Like the fruit of Ein-Gedi.

In my opinion, the sweetest and most tender of all the Yemenite secular love poems is “Shalom.” The precise date of the composition of this poem is not known. However, according to Yehuda Ratzaby, the terminus ad quem of its composition is the fifteenth century. The name of its author as spelled out in

30. See Isa 60:16
33. See Prov 7:18.
34. See Cant 5:5.
36. Cant 7:8.
39. Ratzaby (1968, p. 149)
acrostics at the beginning of the poem’s stanzas, is Natan ‘el. Like the verses quoted above, “Shalom” is written in accordance with the principles of Arabic quantitative metrics (משקל הרטה), which were widely used in medieval Hebrew literature, including that of Yemen.

The following is a translation of “Shalom”:

Shalom, by you I have sworn,  
Upon your life I say  
Because you I have loved  
Come to my abode, Shalom.

Drink wine from my cup  
Eat bread from my table  
Smell the fragrance of my spices  
Abide in happiness, Shalom.

Let us take our fill of love, O beloved.  
I will spread my hand over your head  
I shall impart my secret to your heart  
Abide in happiness, Shalom.—

Embrace your maiden, O beloved.  
Who shines like the rays of the sun  
Come closer and feel my mouth  
I will delight in you, Shalom.

Delight in my bosom,  
Cleave to me and grant my portion  
Taste the honey of my saliva  
Stored in my mouth for you, Shalom.

Arise, O beloved, and quench my thirst  
Sate me with juicy wine;  
Upon your life, O beloved, revive me  
Kiss my lips, O Shalom.

40. Alludes to Cant 1:2,4; 4:10; 8:2.
41. Based on II Sam 12:3.
42. Based on Cant 1:3; 1:12; 4:11; 7:9. Odor is an essential element in love.
43. This expression bears sexual connotation. See Ruth 3:9, Ezek 16:8.
44. Based on Cant 6:10.
45. Based on Prov 30:8. See also Exod 21:10.
46. Based on Cant 4:11.
47. Alludes to Ps 31:20; Cant 7:14.
48. Cant 8:2.
49. Cant 1:2.
Whenever I see you on the ground
I prostrate myself upon the earth
I desire none but you,
Only you, my beloved. Shalom.

While "Shalom" expresses intense longing for the beloved and her reach for affection, it is not explicitly sexual. Of the beloved's physical attributes the poet mentions only her lucent skin and radiant form, which "shines like the rays of the sun." No additional physical details are provided.

The lover's craving is enveloped in allusion, which is conveyed through images and subtle formulations, bearing delicate sexual connotations. Thus, Shalom is encouraged by his lover to come and drink of her wine, to smell her fragrance, to delight in her bosom, and to taste the honey of her mouth. This poem is characterized by plain style, easy rhythm, and a spontaneous and smooth flow of feelings, rather than ostentatious imagery. The seductive power of the lover is accentuated by both content and form in the poem. In essence the poem is a seductive monologue of a lover addressed to her beloved in which she promises him a paradise of pleasure and delight: "Come to my abode, Shalom... indulge in happiness, Shalom... I will delight in you, Shalom." The recurring invocation of the beloved's name, Shalom, at the end of each stanza, the rhythmic effect of the repetitious metric unit, and the carefully interlaced rhyme—all these are bewitching, as if the lover were trying to cast a spell on her beloved. At the same time, these artistic features serve to weld the elements of this poem into a harmonious whole. The poem "Shalom" is perhaps the most subtle and alluring of the secular Yemenite love poems, which are indeed few in number.

The contact of the Yemenite Jew with Spanish Hebrew literature gave a great impetus to the development of Yemenite Hebrew literature. The Yemenites were particularly responsive to the prosodic influence of the Spanish Hebrew verse, and they incorporated into their poetic work most of its ornamental devices. These included the laws of rhythm, sound patterns, and especially the principles of Arabic quantitative metrics. But, while Spanish Hebrew literature reflected both the secular and sacred aspects of life, Yemenite Hebrew literature confined itself mainly to the spiritual realm. The secular erotic element, in particular, did not accord with the Yemenites' religious spirit. As a result, they did not care to "waste" much of their verse on it. However, the few secular poems which were composed in Yemen reflect the conflict between the magnetic power of the Spanish Hebrew literature and the negative attitude of the Yemenites towards secular love themes. This tension probably accounts for the composition of secular poems marked with simplicity and restrained erotic
expressions. In fact, these poems attained their compelling charm and power by virtue of this tension.

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