

“MY BELOVED IS LIKE A GAZELLE”: IMAGERY OF THE BELOVED BOY IN RELIGIOUS HEBREW POETRY

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The critical study and analysis of medieval Hebrew secular poetry is still in its infancy.¹ Very little has been done, for instance, on the motifs and themes which typify this poetry. One of the most significant and interesting genres of medieval Hebrew poetry is love poetry, which may further be divided into the themes of love of women and love of boys (“boys,” and not men, for with the exception of some *muwaššahāt*,² which occasionally express the emotions and words of the female lover towards her male beloved, all the Hebrew poetry of this type is about an adolescent boy, *šebî*, “gazelle,” or *‘oper*, “fawn”).

While earlier scholars such as Brody and Saul-Joseph were already well aware of the motif of the beloved boy in Hebrew poetry and its dependence on Arabic love poetry about boys (in which the term “gazelle” is also used), the notes in which they discussed this were largely ignored; it was left to the late Hayyim Schirmann to demonstrate, although with too much caution, the importance of this motif in medieval verse (Schirmann, 1955).

In a recent article (Roth, 1982), I hope I have demonstrated that, in spite of the critics of Schirmann, the beloved boy was indeed a major theme in medieval Hebrew poetry and literature. It was by no means allegorical or a mere imitation of Arabic verse (as the critics suggested),

1. While many seem to know the work of Don Pagis, less well known is the more significant work of such scholars as Judah Ratzaby, Shraga Abramson, Dov Jarden, and Israel Levin. In English, there is still very little worth mention. A survey of sorts is Roth (1981), where other bibliography may be found, including some quite respectable work in Spanish. I am preparing a volume of translations of secular poetry, with detailed analyses.

2. These are Arabic or Hebrew strophic poems, of a more or less standard length, in which the final rhymed couplet is in Spanish (if the poem is in Arabic or Hebrew) or Arabic (if the poem is Hebrew), or sometimes a combination of both.

but reflected a reality which existed in medieval life—a reality that was not only Jewish and not only in Spain.

While there can no longer be any question that the beloved boy was a genuine motif of medieval secular poetry, there is an aspect of it which is of great interest in that it does serve an allegorical purpose: the image of the *ṣeḥî* as a symbol for God or the messiah, and the use of related love imagery in religious poetry or *piyyûṭ*.

It would appear that this use of secular love imagery, and the use of typical themes found in secular love poetry, is a unique feature of Spanish Hebrew religious verse. There seems to be something of a debate among scholars of religious poetry as to the “uniqueness” of the Spanish school of poets. On the one hand, it appears that Spanish *piyyûṭim* were greatly influenced by Arabic ascetic poetry, with its emphasis on a pessimistic world view, the inevitability of death, and so forth. Also, it has been suggested that Spanish Hebrew religious poetry was strongly influenced by that of Jews in other Muslim lands, chiefly Iraq, and that it was not as innovative as was secular Hebrew poetry in Spain of the same period (Levin, 1977; Fleischer, 1973 [contradicting what he himself wrote in 1970 in his article in *Sēfer Hayyim Schirmann*—see Marcus, 1970, p. 286]).

On the other hand, certain scholars have claimed to recognize in Spanish religious poetry considerable innovation and many new ideas, possibly under the influence of Muslim philosophy, yet still quite distinct from Hebrew religious poetry elsewhere (Mirsky, 1965). While this discussion is best left to experts in religious poetry, it may perhaps be suggested that this use of secular love imagery in religious poetry is an innovation of the Spanish poets which does not, as far as I know, have any similar expression elsewhere. Nor, apparently, do we really find anything like this in Arabic religious poetry, at least until the mystical poetry of the *Ṣūfīs* of the late Middle Ages, such as that of Ibn al-^cArabī (Murcia, 1165–1240) and al-Rūmī (Persia, d. 1273). In some of the poetry of the latter, for example, we find the metaphor of God Himself being addressed as the *sāqī*, the cupbearer (often the object of lust and amorous advances at a wine-party).³

Spanish mystical poetry also does not provide us with anything equivalent to this motif in Hebrew *piyyûṭ*. The outstanding example of the allegorization of love in religious verse in Spain is, of course, San Juan

3. See Ibn al-^cArabī (1911). Rūmī was also translated by Nicholson, but see now al-Rūmī (1983), a conveniently arranged (by topic) anthology of his poetry. There is a desperate need for a good new anthology, with translations, of Arabic mystical verse, as well as new scholarship to replace the outdated views of the last century and the early part of this century.

de la Cruz (sixteenth century), but his *Cantico espiritual* is obviously based on the Song of Songs; and, while it is of significance because of possible Arabic influences, his doctrine of the *Esposa* (the soul) and her beloved *Esposo* (Christ) has nothing of the audacity of Hebrew religious love imagery, and it is, moreover, well-grounded in perfectly orthodox and traditional Christian theology (at least in Spain, going back to the early medieval period).⁴ There has been some conjecture about the influence of religious or mystical vocabulary on *secular* poetry, Arabic and Provençal, but I am unaware of anything which would indicate the influence of secular love motifs on Arabic *religious* verse prior to the late *Šūfī* poetry.⁵

Like the Provençal *fin'amors* (which itself was most probably influenced by Arabic poetry), Hebrew poetry knew nothing of so-called "Platonic love." Its love is sensual, purely physical, and frankly erotic.⁶ It is the physical beauty of the boy or the woman which attracts the poet, and the desire is for sexual consummation—or, at the very least, passionate kissing—with the object of the aroused lust. While this very lust is used in *Šūfī* poetry to express mystical union and longing for God, the mystical aspect (union and so forth) is entirely lacking in Hebrew religious poetry. Instead, there is a frank borrowing of the traditional imagery of love poetry, including its language, which is used allegorically to refer to God or to Israel or to the messiah.

So far, only one scholar of medieval Hebrew poetry has taken notice of the existence of this motif in religious Hebrew poetry of Spain.⁷ That

4. I am aware that in this brief paragraph I have alluded to matters which are of great importance, and even innovative with regard to the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz. The relationship to the Song of Songs, possible Arabic influence, and even the connection with earlier Christian theological treatises and poetry on the nature of Christ as *Esposo*—all of these things seem to have escaped the attention of scholars, and all deserve fuller treatment than can be given here.

5. For Arabic, see von Grünebaum (1940), a suggestive note which was never followed up. For Provençal, see Lazar (1964, p. 84). Apparently some orthodox Muslims objected strongly to the allegorization of love terminology with reference to Allāh; cf. Latham (1964).

6. For the Provençal poetry, see Lazar (1964, p. 61); for Hebrew, Schirmann (1961), an article studiously ignored by his Israeli critics. There may or may not exist a theme of "Platonic love" in Arabic poetry—the so-called *Udhri* poetry which is the subject of some debate. Regrettably, there is no article on 'Udhri in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, nor any mention of it in the brief and unsatisfactory article on poetry (*shī'r*); perhaps this will be remedied in the new edition.

7. Levin (1972). Previously, Judah Ratzaby had observed that in pre-Spanish *piyyūṭim* for weddings there was no reference to love or beauty, only the ethical characteristics of the bridegroom and bride were praised (Ratzaby [1970]).

article, important as it is, by no means exhausts the discussion of the subject, and in fact it only scratches the surface. In more than a decade since the appearance of that study, nothing further has been said on the subject. The present article will not tread again the ground well covered previously, but it will add new examples, and hopefully new insights, to those already presented.

What was the cause of this allegorization in Hebrew religious poetry in Spain? Why do we not find it in religious verse—contemporary and later—in other lands? It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to answer these questions. The answer does not appear to be, as in the case of the later *Ṣūfī* poetry, that it was a reflection of mystical longing. Whether or not the observations of certain French writers (Henri Bremond, Jacques Maritain) are correct in noting that there is a similarity between Christian poetry and mysticism, in that both seek a truth in obscurity under the influence of external “illumination,” this does not appear to be true of Hebrew poetry of the Middle Ages—certainly not of secular poetry, and only rarely of religious poetry.⁸

It is important to realize that none of the Hebrew poets who composed religious verse of the genre here being discussed specialized exclusively in liturgical or religious verse, for all of them wrote secular poetry as well. Of them all, only Ibn Gabirol approached what might be termed “mysticism” in some of his verse, but not in any of this particular genre.

This, indeed, may be the key. Uniquely in Spain, we find poets who composed both secular and religious verse on a large scale—not to deny, of course, that some individual poets, such as Hayya Gaon of Baghdad, composed both; but these were isolated examples. Our poets lived, as has been demonstrated, in a society where this kind of erotic passion was openly expressed and not uncommon. Much of their own verse contains this kind of secular love poetry. It appears that it was natural, when searching (perhaps) for innovation in religious verse, to employ the themes of secular love poetry in an allegorical fashion.

The Bible, of course, already provided a frame of reference. It is rather astonishing, in the quite proper search for sources and similarities to Hebrew poetry in Arabic verse and literature, that the Bible has been somewhat neglected as an obvious source for medieval Hebrew poetry. Some scholars have virtually denied this influence. Yet, of course, the *Song of Songs* is the immediate source for most of the love imagery and terminology found in Hebrew poetry—however much the themes, or

8. See Hatzfeld (1976, p. 18). In his various works on Hebrew poetry, particularly on Ibn Gabirol, José M. Millás Vallicrosa also has had some observations to make on this.

ideas, may have been borrowed from Arabic verse. Indeed, the “gazelle,” as it appears in the Song of Songs as a term for the beloved, may well have influenced Arabic love poetry, where the term is used (for a discussion of the term, see Roth, 1982, p. 28). The Song of Songs was interpreted, for the most part, quite literally by the medieval commentators of Spain (Ibn Ezra, 1874; Ibn ʿAq̄nīn, 1964—the first and second [rabbinical] interpretations). In spite of the well-known statement of R. ʿAq̄bā, it was left to the early Christian exegetes, like Origen, to allegorize the book. Surprisingly, little of this kind of allegory is found in *Song of Songs Rabbah*, although there is some (for example on 1:4; 2:16; 8:14), and the *midrashim* dependent on it.

The Song of Songs served as a source for *piyyūṭim* outside of Spain, of course; for example, those known as “*ʿAhabōt*” (prayers expressing the love of God). Examples are especially to be found in the *piyyūṭim* of Shimʿōn b. Yiṣḥāq b. Abūn of Mayence (tenth century), such as the “*yōṣēr*” for Passover “*ʿAhūbekā ʿahēbūkā mēšārīm*.”⁹ The Song of Songs, of course, is read in the synagogue on Passover, and there is no surprise in finding these and other *piyyūṭim* for Passover devoted to this book.

Whereas the Song of Songs undeniably served as a source for the terminology, it was not the source of the genre—of the idea of using secular love themes and motifs to refer to religious subjects. This is what we mean by “audacity.” In itself, such audacity is also not new in Spanish Hebrew poetry. The opposite is found, quite frequently in secular Hebrew poetry: the use of religious terms and ideas, sometimes of the most holy nature, applied to a distinctly secular subject. This further lends support to the theory that it is the nature of the “cross-over”—poets quite accustomed to writing secular verse who also wrote religious verse—which produced this unique and innovative element in the religious Hebrew poetry of Spain.

The subject of some of these poems is clearly God Himself, and He is the beloved “gazelle” sought by the lover. In others, God is the lover, as it were, and the people of Israel the “beloved.” In some, the “beloved” is the messiah. There is an intimate relationship between the poet and the messiah; exactly the relationship of the lover and his beloved. It is not so much that the yearning—whether for God or for the messiah—is *erotic*, as that it is expressed in terms employed in secular love poetry.

9. Shimʿōn b. r Yiṣḥāq (1938, pp. 27–30); cf. also “*Berah dōdī*,” pp. 34–35, and the “*ʿAhabah*” there, pp. 53–54.

As I have shown in discussing that secular poetry, the chief purpose which the poet had in mind was to express not the joys of love (as, for instance, in modern romantic verse), but quite the opposite: the *pain* caused by love, the unrequited love, the deceitful boy who abandons his lover for another. It is precisely this imagery which is borrowed and used in this religious poetry.

Lest too much emphasis be placed on the "religious" nature of these poems (they are not, by the way, liturgical; i.e., they were not intended for use in the synagogue, but for private reading), it should be pointed out that the authors are first and foremost poets. They are all the greatest of the medieval Hebrew poets, with a genius for subtlety of style, wit, and sharpness of language. One cannot escape the feeling that these poems are, in a sense, "word games." That is, the reader is clearly not intended to realize the actual meaning of the poem until very nearly the end of it, when it suddenly becomes clear that it is of a religious, not a secular, nature. This will become clear when we turn to the poems themselves.

Dunash Ibn Labrat was the first Hebrew poet known to us in medieval Spain, and he was apparently the originator of many of the motifs which became common in later poetry. It is not surprising that we also find him to be the originator of our theme (not hitherto noticed), in the following *piyyût*:

- "What do you seek? they ask me—
 why is my spirit aching?
 The fawn has fled from my tent,
 my soul languishes for his return. [Jer 31:24]
 Beloved, whom, since he fled like a gazelle,
 my soul longs to see.
 Who will give me the glorious land? [Dan 11:16]
 on the wing of an eagle I shall fly;
 5- Perhaps there I shall find my lover
 and stand in the shade of my beloved.
 How many nights in the midst of the fire of sickness
 of separation I lie among the flames, [Ps 57:5]
 My slumber wandering from me
 and the sleep of my eyes not sweet; [Prov 3:24]
 And my soul thirsts, as [in]
 a thirsty land, and also pines
 For him—were it not for his mercy,
 the fire of his separation would consume.
 10- On his wandering I wept for him;
 those who see my reveal my secret.

- The fawn has made sick my heart—
how long he has not come!
From the blood of my heart, for want of a pail,
my eyes draw my tears."
- "My dove has wandered, from greatness
of sorrow, she said: Perhaps; maybe—
And when she heard his mention, flames
of separation arose in her heart.
- 15- How long has she lain on couches
of grief defiled by drinking?
She said: Why is it that he who seeks me
is hidden in the chamber of secrets,
And the hand of the enemy, my robber, is elevated,
and his bow abides in its strength? [cf. Gen 49:24]
Shulamit, why are you grieving
and desolate in your soul?
Hope for the coming of your beloved;
you shall not be hurt by your misfortune.
- 20- The day approaches when your balm shall come;
be comforted, be comforted.
Dove, why do you not eat?
The time of love approaches;
Lo, now my redeemer comes,
for his banner over me is love." [Cant 2:4]
(Brody-Wiener, 1963, Appendix, pp. 21–22)

In this case, as with some few other examples we shall discuss, the lover is a female and the beloved a male. The poem is in the form of a dialogue between them (although separated by distance)—actually, between Israel and God. There is nothing to indicate that this is not a typical secular love poem, until line 15 and the following lines, when we first realize the real intent. Here, God replies to Israel's complaint, recalling "her" words in saying: "Perhaps; maybe" (in line 5). Shulamit, a woman's name in the Song of Songs, is also symbolically a name for Israel, and so it is used in the poem.

There are numerous poetic devices in the poem which are typical of medieval Hebrew poetry generally. Of particular interest is the use of *sehî* (line 4a) to refer to the Land of Israel, "glorious land" (Dan 11:16), and as "gazelle" (beloved boy) in line 3a. Habermann, who edited this text, had difficulty in understanding the use of "For him" in line 9, apparently not realizing that it is the object of the verb "pines" in the previous line; thus, there is no need for his suggested correction.

The notion that Israel (*Keneset Yisrāʿēl*) is symbolized by a gazelle, derived, of course, from the Song of Songs in its allegorical meaning, is found also in a religious poem (again, not liturgical) of Samuel Ibn Naghrillah:

“My people, hide until the indignation is past [Isa 26:20]
on the top of Senir dwell like a fawn or gazelle”

(Ibn Naghrillah, 1966, p. 319, No: 209, line 1)

The image is taken directly from Cant 4:8 and 8:14; but *ṣebī* and *ʿōper* (“fawn”) here may also be taken literally: hide like animals atop the mountain, where you will be safe. This brings us to the first important aspect to be noted in dealing with this poetry, as with all allegory, and that is that there are two levels of interpretation: “level one,” the apparent literal meaning, and “level two,” the allegorical.

Although Dunash Ibn Labrat was the first poet to use secular love imagery in a religious poem, and this poem was apparently overlooked by Levin in the important study previously cited, it was not Judah Halevy, but Solomon Ibn Gabirol who was the first to make extensive use of this imagery in his religious verse, a fact also overlooked in that article.

Like Dunash, Ibn Gabirol appears to have employed the motif of the gazelle, but from the female point of view. That is, the lover here is a woman, and she pines for her beloved “gazelle”—a young man who is her beloved. Again, this theme is almost entirely lacking in secular love poetry, except for some of the *muwašṣahāt* which are written from the female’s viewpoint. This convention, and also, of course, the image of the female lover in Song of Songs, explains the use of this motif in the following poems. An interesting example of this is:

“The gate which has been closed, arise and open it;
and the gazelle who has fled, send him to me.
From the day you came to rest upon my breast,
there you left your good scent upon me.”

“Who is this, the image of your lover, O beautiful bride,
that you say to me, Send and fetch him?”

“It is he, lovely of eye, ruddy and of goodly appearance.

This is my beloved, my companion; arise and anoint him!”

(Ibn Gabirol, 1973, p. 468; Schirmann, 1954, p. 240; a prayer for *Simḥat Tōrāh* in Separdic prayerbooks)

The *piyyūt* is in the form of an imaginary dialogue, which is also a common device in secular poetry. Apparently (level one interpretation), a lover pines for her beloved (the only clue that we have, incidentally,

that it is a woman and not a man is the feminine word forms throughout); but actually (level two), it is a dialogue between Israel (lines 1–2, 4) and God (line 3). This realization does not dawn fully upon us until the end of the poem.

Line 3b, and all of line 4, allude to 1 Sam 16:11–12, the anointing of David. This provides the clue to the poem, for the "gazelle" is the messiah.

Messianic longing is also the subject of the following:

O recliner upon couches of gold in the palace,
 when will you prepare the couch of God for the ruddy one?
 Why, delightful gazelle, do you slumber, when the dawn
 ascends like a banner atop Senir and Hermon?
 Turn from the wild ones and incline to the graceful hind—
 behold, I am before you as you are before me.
 Who comes to my palace will find in my treasures
 wine and pomegranates, myrrh and cinnamon.

(Ibn Gabirol, 1973, p. 457).

Again, this is an address from the female lover to her beloved (level one); from Israel to the messiah (level two). The "ruddy one" again alludes to 1 Sam 16:12; hence, the messiah, who is directly addressed from line 2 on (line 1 being apparently directed to God). "Wild ones" of line 3 refers to the Muslims (cf. *Gen. Rabbah* 16:12), a term which appears frequently in polemical statements in *piyyût*. "Graceful hind" is, of course, Israel (*Keneset Yisrāʿel*).

It should be mentioned that "ruddy one," in addition to alluding to David (and thus the messiah), also refers to the complexion of the beloved in Cant 5:10. It is of interest that also in Arabic literature and poetry, "ruddy" is a term for desirable complexion (actually, light-skinned, or "white"), perhaps again under the influence of the Song of Songs.

Senir and Hermon are clichés for the land of Israel generally (although not, technically speaking, located in Israel); but of course the allusion is to Cant 4:8, where rabbinical allegory interpreted these mountains as being symbolic names for the Temple (*Targum, ad loc.*, and Ibn ʿAqin, 1964, pp. 194–195). In addition, the messiah is referred to as *ʿōper*, "fawn," by Ibn Gabirol also in the *piyyût* "*Shipʿat rebîḥîm*" line 5: "Hasten and send the fawn before [the time of] prayers departs" (1973, p. 322).

Similar imagery is also employed by Ibn Gabirol in the following:

"Greetings to you, my beloved, white and ruddy;
 greetings to you from a forehead like a pomegranate.

To meet your sister run, go forth and save;
 and prosper like David in Rabbah of the Ammonites."
 'What is with you, loveliest one, that you arouse love—
 your voice ringing like a vestment with the sound of a bell?
 The time which you desire of love I shall hasten with it,
 and descend to you like the dew of Hermon.'

(1973, p. 324)

Again, this is a dialogue between Israel (lines 1–2) and God (lines 3–4). The “forehead” (*raqqah*; either “temple” or, as Ibn Ezra says, “forehead”) like a pomegranate alludes to Cant 4:3. Of interest is Ibn Ezra’s comment in the third recension of his commentary, with respect to the allegorical level, in which he says “pomegranate” refers to the priests (Ibn Ezra, 1874, p. 18). This, perhaps, is also what the poet had in mind here. On the other hand, there is the well-known explanation of the rabbis: even the empty ones among you are full of good deeds like a pomegranate is full of seeds (*Beraḳôt* 57a; cited also by Ibn ‘Aqnin, 1964, pp. 178–179).

Line 2b refers to 2 Sam 12:26–29, but this is perhaps a “level one” interpretation, for the text actually has *Ben Yishāi*, which I have rendered as “David,” but which could have a “level two” allusion to the messiah.

Finally, one of the most difficult of Ibn Gabirol’s poems to interpret:

At dawn ascend to me, beloved, and go with me;
 for my soul thirsts to see the face of my mother.
 For you I spread out couches of gold in my palace,
 I prepare for you a table; I break for you my bread.
 A bowl I shall fill for you from the clusters of my vineyard;
 drink with good heart, may my taste be good to you.
 Behold, in you I shall rejoice with the joy of [for] a prince of my people:
 Son of Your servant Jesse, head of the Bethlemites.

(1973, p. 460; Schirmann, 1954, p. 241)

(Schirmann needlessly changes line 1b to *benê ‘ammî*, “sons of my people,” instead of *penê ‘immî*, “face of my mother”)

Neither Jarden nor Schirmann entirely succeeded in explaining this difficult *piyyût*. The female lover (Israel) calls to her beloved (the messiah) to go with her at dawn to her home, the house of her mother. The allusion, rather obscure to anyone not thoroughly familiar with the book (as Jews of medieval Spain, of course, were), is to Cant 3:4 (and 8:2). “House of my mother” there is interpreted allegorically as Sinai, or as wisdom and the Torah (*Song of Songs Rabbah*; Ibn ‘Aqnin, 1964, pp. 122–123). Thus, it is far more than simply a longing to go to “my

land" (Israel), as Jarden explains; rather, it is a metaphysical yearning for the restoration of the covenant relationship of Sinai.

The reference to dawn, and the longing which has kept the lover awake, is understandable also from a comparison with secular love poetry. In Ibn Gabirol's so-called "Golden Poem" (considered worthy to be written in letters of gold), "*Šûr kî yepepiyyāh*," there appears the line: (5)—"She [arouses] at dawn lovers, for / they are full of tossing to and fro until the dawn."¹⁰ Here, of course, allegorically the dawn is the dawn of redemption from the exile.

The "palace" of line 2 is surely the Temple, and the table and bread refer to the table and shewbread in the Temple, as Jarden correctly noted. The prince, son of Jesse, of line 4 is, of course, David, and hence the messiah.

Moses Ibn Ezra is the next major poet to use this theme. While Ibn Gabirol certainly wrote several secular love poems about the beloved boy (although it is not true, as has been repeatedly stated, that he wrote love poems *only* about boys, or that he never mentioned women), Ibn Ezra composed more such poetry and utilized a wider variety of imagery. It is interesting to note that, while all of the religious poems of Ibn Gabirol which we have discussed express the love relationship between a woman and her beloved, Ibn Ezra employs "real" *ṣebî* imagery—i.e., the "lover" as a man, and the "beloved" a boy. An example is the following:

What is with my beloved that he is angry and haughty
 towards me, when my heart shakes for him like a reed?
 He has forgotten the time of my walking after him in the ruin of the desert
 desirous, and how can I call today and he not answer?
 Even if he slay me, I shall trust in him; though he hide
 his face, and to his goodness [I shall] look and turn.
 The kindness of a master to a slave shall not change—
 for how can lovely gold darken, and how change?

(Ibn Ezra, 1957, p. 38, No. 38)

In line 2, *ʿî*, "ruin," is found in the Bible mostly in reference to Jerusalem (Mic 1:6, 3:12; Ps 79:1). The line as a whole refers, of course, to Jer 2:2. Here the "lover" (Israel) chastises his "beloved" (God) that He has forgotten the time of His faithfulness in the desert. However, the theme of the unhappy lover wandering in the desert and coming upon the ruins of the camp of the beloved, fully developed in Arabic poetry, is

10. Ibn Gabirol (1975a, p. 20); Ibn Gabirol (1975b, pp. 359–360); reading *tāʿîr* with Brody-Schirmann, instead of *yāšûr*, as emended by Jarden, which makes no sense. For the meaning of "dawn" there, cf. Job 3:9 and 41:10.

not uncommon in Hebrew secular poetry. Note that the word *tā'ēḥ* here, meaning "desirous," is generally used not only in the sense of the appetite (cf. *Ḥerubim* 41a) but also of lust (e.g., Jer. *Nedarim* 41d). Therefore, the word is *not* used here in its biblical sense, as suggested by the editor (Brody).

The haughtiness of the boy is a standard theme in secular love poetry, as is his deceitfulness and lack of memory of the good times spent with his lover in the past ("and so every boy is deceitful," says one poem). All of this is here subtly woven into the allusion to the biblical imagery of Israel's idealized past with God and the righteousness of its youth, contrasted with the "deceitfulness" of God.

The martyrdom of love, borrowed from Arabic poetry, is another frequent motif. The lover is willing to die for his love, or imagines that the boy slays him (usually with the glances—"arrows"—of his eyes), or that he will slay him. So Ibn Gabirol in a secular poem entreated his beloved boy: "Take my soul and slay [it] / or if not, heal me, please heal!" And Ibn Ezra implores: "If it is in your soul to give life, revive me— / or if your desire is to kill, kill me!" (Roth, 1982, pp. 40, 45). Here (line 3) the poet combines this motif ("Even if he slay me") with the mystical "hiding of the face" of God. This line might also have been influenced by Ibn Gabirol's famous lines in *Keter malkūt* ("Crown of Kingship"):

And if I do not wait on Thy mercies
 Who will have pity on me but Thee?
 Therefore, though Thou shouldst slay me, yet
 will I trust in Thee.
 For if Thou shouldst pursue my iniquity,
 I will flee from Thee to Thyself.¹¹

Line 4 also contains allusions to standard clichés of love poetry: the boy is the master and the lover the slave, and the beautiful face (or body) is compared to gold, or to the moon. The unusual word *ketem* for gold here may allude to Cant 5:11, where the beloved is said to have a head like fine gold (the complexion must be meant, for his locks of hair are said to be black as a raven).

Another of Ibn Ezra's religious poems, reminiscent of his own secular love poetry, is:

From old as a seal on [his] heart he placed me;
 However, because of my sins he has turned to hate me
 And in the chambers of his heart he has concealed me.
 Therefore, today on every side they smite me.

11. Ibn Gabirol (1923, p. 118, lines 561–564).

- 5- From the wine of his mouth and lips he has given me to drink.
[But] today he has satiated me with drinking poisoned waters.
Please speak to him, please restore me
To him; for I am sick with love.

(1957, p. 39, No. 40)

Many of the images here are found typically in secular love poetry, including the reference to the "sins" (whether real or imagined) of the lover which have caused the beloved to turn from him. The lover drinks the saliva from the mouth of his beloved boy, and it is sweeter than wine (For examples, see e.g., Yosef Ibn Ṣaddīq, in Roth, 1982, p. 32). The beloved (God) has previously bestowed his favors on his lover, but now has become bitter towards him.

Love-sickness, of course, is a frequent motif in Arabic and Hebrew poetry. The saying was ascribed, probably erroneously, to Plato: "I do not know what love is, except that I know it to be a divine madness, which cannot be either approved or blamed."¹² Here we find allusion to this motif when the poet says he is sick with love, and only the restoration of his beloved's favors can cure him.

Isaac Ibn Ghiyāth (note the correct spelling of his name, which is Arabic and almost always wrongly given) also used this idea in one of his *piyyūtīm*:

Almighty, return the love-sick one [to You]—
Who moans constantly on the deceitful statute.

(Schirmann, 1954, II, p. 320, ll. 1–2).

The "deceitful statute" refers to the broken covenant between God and Israel, according to Schirmann's note there.

In one of the most beautiful, and difficult, of Ibn Ezra's religious poems, he employs the image of the garden:

- Wind of my joy and the beauty of its delights,
Blow upon my garden that its spices may flow out.
From the mount of myrrh and the hills of frankincense,
O north wind, awake; and come, O south;
5- Perhaps my fawn will go down to the garden
To eat of my fruits and to gather the lily,
And as the days of his youth renew his days.
Ask and see, masters of words,
And seek and read hidden secrets—

12. See Nykl (1946, p. 123). In addition to the references in Roth (1982, p. 32), see also the interesting anecdotes in González Palencia (1929, especially p. 91ff.), and Walzer (1939), and also Manẓalaoui (1979). For Spanish literature, see the not-altogether-satisfactory book of Bonilla García (1964, especially pp. 127–135).

- 10- Perhaps you shall find healing for my illness.
 To my beloved carry the greeting of a wife of his youth—
 And arouse his compassion to obtain his well-being.
 O gazelle, return to me as before,
 And restore to me my ornaments.
- 15- The lights of my rejoicing make goodly before me,
 And raise up my tents and plead my cause
 And the son whose steps have stumbled, wound his enemies!
 The words of the son of the maidservant are strong against him,
 And daily he digs a pit for his feet
 And stirs up contention and offers strife.
 A branch bearing poison he makes his food,
 And a root of bitterness he makes his delicacies.
- (Ibn Ezra, 1957, p. 40; Schirmann, 1954, I, pp. 411–412)

The opening couplet and the first two lines of the first stanza allude to Cant 4:16 and 4:14, with its allegorical level of interpretation making it refer to *Keneset Yisrāʿēl* and the restoration of the Temple (see especially Ibn ʿAqnīn, 1964, pp. 188–189 and 230–233). Thus, the fawn (l. 5) and gazelle (l. 12) here means not the messiah, but God. The north and south winds are called upon to symbolize here the ingathering of the exiles of Israel.

Certain textual explanations are necessary. In line 10, *māzôr* (cf. Jer 30:13) is “healing”, according to the commentaries (Rashi, there; Ibn Janah and Ibn Balʿam¹³). The “ornaments” (cf. Isa 61:10) and “lights” of lines 14 and 15 allude to the vessels and candelabrum of the Temple, as Schirmann correctly explained, in keeping with the allegorical interpretation of the rabbis of the previous verses from the Song of Songs. In line 17, the “son” must be Israel, i.e., son of the “gazelle”—God. He is contrasted with the son of the maidservant, i.e., Hagar (thus, Ishmael, symbolizing the Muslims), in line 18, who “daily digs a pit” for the feet of Israel.

Thus, the poem closes on a polemical note, concluding with the strong words about the poison and “bitterness” which Ishmael constantly offers to Israel (cf. Deut 29:17). The word *rōtem* (Job 30:4 and elsewhere), which for want of a better idea I have rendered here “bitterness,” is of uncertain meaning. David Qimḥi (on 1 Kgs 19:4) translates it as *xiniesta* (*hiniesta*), which means “broom” (a kind of plant), or *jengibre* (“ginger”).

13. Ibn Janah (1896), s.v. *z-ô-r* (this is one of the most important Hebrew dictionaries, absolutely essential for understanding medieval texts); Ibn Balʿam, “*Sēper ha-tajnis*” in Kokovtsov (1970, p. 76).

On the literal, or "level one," level of interpretation, the garden is a frequent motif in Hebrew and Arabic secular poetry. This was particularly important in Muslim (and Jewish) life in Spain, where the garden was literally the center of the house, and the fragrant scent of flowers was a constant accompaniment to lovemaking and to wine parties throughout the city. Many an invitation to come and drink wine, and many a love poem about the beautiful boy, include the scent and delights of the garden.

Among many structural elements of this poem which deserve mention, the perhaps intentional parallelism of lines 5 and 10 should be pointed out: "*Perhaps* my fawn will go down . . .," "*Perhaps* you shall find healing." This kind of poetic device frequently adds to what was considered the beauty of a secular poem, but is not so frequent in religious poetry.

Isaac Ibn Ghiyāth was a distinguished talmudic scholar and author of important *piyyūṭim*, including some with philosophical and even rudimentary astronomical themes.¹⁴ There is at least one *piyyūṭ* from his pen utilizing our theme:

- Do you know, my friends—the gazelle fled from my chamber;
 When will he return to my dwelling?
 My cherub shall tell you,
 After he took my heart;
 5- How can I bear my pain?
 He did not know, when he carried with him all my joy,
 With whom he left my grief!
 I am greatly distressed by his wandering;
 He has removed from me his glory,
 10- The light of his brightness and splendor.
 Where are the days his lips dripped honey on my tongue,
 And his neck [rested upon] my throat?
 My graciousness how has he forgotten?
 My delights how has he rejected?
 15- And companionship, among the sons of Ham
 Which he showed me in Amon, showing his wonder to my oppressors,
 And [when he] brought out my people?
 He split the Sea of Reeds before me,

14. His poetry is scattered in numerous collections, including rare holiday prayer books. Dr. Menahem Schmelzer, librarian of the Jewish Theological Seminary and devoted friend to all scholars, who has recently given us a superb edition of the poetry of Isaac Ibn ʿEzra, may hopefully publish a complete edition of Ibn Ghiyāth's poems, incorporating at least some of the material in his important doctoral dissertation (there, chapters four and five discuss some of the astronomical poetry, and six and seven some of the philosophical-theological poems).

- Showing his light to my eyes.
 20- He spoke his love in my ears
 And to his room my beloved turned, to the gracefulness of the voice of
 my bells
 And the scent of my spices.
 Transgressors of laws and testimonies
 Have removed from me companionship
 25- [Which is] esteemed and precious.
 Restore to me the joy of your salvation—and if the chief of my pride has
 gone,
 Please remove my transgression.¹⁵

This remarkable poem is very nearly a true *ṣebī* poem; the complaint of a man about his beloved boy who has abandoned him. There is nothing to “give away” the true meaning of the poem, at first glance, until line 15, at which point it suddenly becomes clear that the “gazelle” here is God. Nevertheless, there are hidden clues even earlier in the poem. In line 2, for example, *maʿōn*, “dwelling,” can also mean “refuge,” which is used figuratively of God (Ps 71:3, for example). Thus, it could also be understood: when will my Refuge return? The “cherub” is unusual, and while on “level one” it certainly means the “boy,” on the “level two” interpretation it is almost like a guardian angel (Habermann explains it simply as angel or messenger). I know of no similar use of this image.

In line 11 we find the standard reference to the saliva of the boy’s mouth, like honey in its sweetness; but there is, of course, a second level here also: knowledge (Torah), and particularly esoteric knowledge.¹⁶

Amon, in line 16, refers to Egypt, and the whole line to the exodus. Line 21 is again an allusion to the Temple. There seems to be no messianic intent to the poem; rather, it speaks of the relationship between Israel and God.

There are other *piyyūṭim* by Ibn Ghiyāth which utilize the imagery of love within the context of the poem, although the theme of the poem as a whole is not love; for example, the very interesting “*Baʿalat ʿob veqesem*,” which is an imaginary dialogue between Israel and the prophet Daniel. Following Daniel’s exhortation not to abandon God, Israel replies, as if directly to God:

15. Edited in Brody-Wiener (1963, pp. 135–136); previously in Dukes (1842, p. 159), and in Mirsky (1957, pp. 154–155).

16. See especially Moses b. Maimon (1963a, I. 32, p. 69); cf. also Moses b. Maimon (1961, p. 66) and (1963b, p. 35).

I have been made drunk with the wine of your love, O my companion,
 In restoring your glory to me and rejoicing my soul.
 I shall inscribe on my heart a poem of companionship to my beloved.
 My beloved comes to his house; I am his and he is mine,
 And in my heart his love is sweeter than honey.

(Schirmann, 1954, I, 319, ll. 23–27)

In the previously mentioned study (Levin, 1972), an attempt was made to compare a *piyyûṭ* of Judah Halevy (Schirmann, 1954, I, 467; Halevy, 1978–82, III, 778–779) with one by Ibn Ghiyāth (Schirmann, 1954, p. 324). True, both of these are on the same theme: the suffering of Israel in exile, particularly at the hands of the Muslims (it has nothing to do with the Christian Reconquest of Spain, as suggested by Levin), but neither of them are in any sense love *piyyûṭim*, nor is there any love imagery in them at all! Schirmann quite correctly explained that Halevy's poem was talking about the well-known talmudic adage of receiving all tribulations with love; i.e., as a sign of God's love. This is not at all the same as the theme we have been discussing. The "quarrelers" in line 2 of Halevy's poem are not, as Levin thought, the typical "rebukers" of secular love poetry, but the literal enemies of Israel (Muslims)—again, as Schirmann correctly noted there. Incomprehensible is Levin's statement (p. 118) that Halevy's poem is an actual poem of love, in which the lover speaks to his beloved in the present tense.

Even less is Ibn Ghiyāth's *piyyûṭ* there related in any way to love poetry or love imagery. Thus, all of the nouns which have a connotation of burden and sorrow, which so surprised Levin in a poem ostensibly based on love imagery, are no surprise at all, for the message is simply that Israel has borne with patience the burdens of its suffering in the exile, even when its enemies have sought to lead it astray and have almost forced it to abandon its religion (a clear allusion to the Almohad persecutions).

However, Judah Halevy did compose some important *piyyûṭim* which reflect this type of secular love imagery, an example of which is the following:

"What shall I give as ransom for the fawn who wandered?
 Perhaps he will yet shine upon me from the east."

'Dove, loveliest of maidens, if you pine for me
 Put on embroidered garments—only entreat me,

5- And I shall wear garments of vengeance to avenge me.

Why do you lie in the dust? The flower of your salvation blossoms.
 And I shall remember for my children the love of the son of Terah.'

- “The beloved whom I have called from the depths
 Has hearkened to the song which I have sung to the skies.
 10- How long, for the sin which I did, must I pay double?
 If my sins are written in a book, extend
 Your mercy, and upon my transgress rub waters of mercy.
 Will you not give to the deserted woman a time of favor,
 And grazing in faithful pastures to the remnant of the flock?
 15- How long shall I be tested with the delighters in scorn,
 Between the people of Edom and ‘Efer? before you I cry.
 From the pit of affliction of my ruins my unshorn hair I pluck bald.”
- ‘Be silent! Behold, now I have restored you to good.
 The time of your redemption is near—here, I have told you.
 20- You shall be saved in ease—return, for I have remembered you.
 Of flowing myrrh and camphor shall I prepare your gift—
 Only my faithful festivals let not be a burden.
 Rouse yourself, treasure, from your mourning awake.
 I have come to the garden of praise—I have gathered your myrrh.
 25- Your light, as in the beginning, has come; arise, shine!
 Your beloved, who like a fawn from your breast fled,
 Has returned, and the glory of the Lord shines upon you.’

(Halevy, 1978–82, III, pp. 761–763)

This is a dialogue between Israel (ll. 1–2, 8–17) and God (ll. 3–7, 18–27). The opening stanza, “What shall I give as a ransom for the fawn,” immediately calls to mind a typical theme of secular love poetry—I shall give my soul (life) as ransom for the boy I love. Typical is the short love poem by Halevy himself, which incorporates much of the imagery discussed in the present article:

I am a ransom for the fawn who arose at night
 to the voice of the lyre and sweet love songs;
 Who saw in my hand a cup and said:
 “Drink from between my lips the blood of grapes!”
 And the moon was like a *yôd* inscribed upon
 the covering of dawn in golden liquid.¹⁷

Thus, the typical reader (or “hearer,” for those who insist, with absolutely no evidence, that medieval Hebrew poetry was always recited orally) would assume from this stanza that this is a secular love poem with the usual complaint about the boy who has wandered.

In line 2, *yašîš* has the meaning of “shine” (as in Ps 132:1, not “flourish,” as often translated there), and not the meaning it has in Cant 2:9;

17. Judah Halevy (1894–1930, II, 290).

cf. also line 26 at the end of the poem. In line 4, “embroidered” garments, *reqāmôt*; i.e., of different colors, which is in paranomasia with *neqāmôt*, “vengeance,” in the following line.

While “dove” is a typical term of affection for a girl (or boy) in love poetry, it also symbolizes *Keneseṯ Yisrāʿēl* (see *Beraḳōt* 53b). While nearly all the Spanish Jewish poets used the dove in some of their poems, Halevy appears to have been fonder of it than most, and he used it constantly—so much so that it may almost be safe to assume that a newly discovered poem unattributed to any other poet, in which the dove appears, may well be his. The “fawn” here, of course, is God—against whom Israel complains of having been abandoned. Israel is referred to as *ʿagūnāh*, “deserted woman,” in line 13. This is a strong rebuke indeed. Line 24 is an allusion to Cant 5:1, in spite of the fact that the *midrashim* do not, in fact, refer this verse to God.

Parts of other *piyyûṯim* by Halevy also contain love imagery (see, e.g., “*Yigʿal ḥalôm*,” Halevy, III, 768–771, especially line 9ff., where the *ṣebî* is the messiah, and the “beloved” of line 24 is God), and the following lines:

O sleeper under the wings of wandering,
 Slumber in the extremities of imprisonment!
 I rest and my beauty is far spent,
 Silent with a heart gloomy and sad.
 My heart is restored to the gazelle;
 My spirit is renewed within me.

(*Ibid.*, I, 218, lines 1–3)

Finally, there is no doubt that Wallenstein was correct in his identification of the author of the *piyyûṯ* which he published from a manuscript as being Judah Halevy, and it also reflects our theme:

May the [gazelle] come back—come back to my chamber;
 May he again sit on (the) precious throne.
 Enough for my court to be a trampling-place—
 (A place) where an alien and strange people is let loose.
 Is it time for Thee to support my adversaries—
 To make them wield a regal sceptre?
 (Surely) when I shall call to my God, the rock of my strength,
 He will awaken His kindness to help.
 5- Let them know that are far-off; let the inhabitants of the isle (be aware)
 That there be no restraint for the grieved
 To (re-)build on the [acceptable day] my wall
 Of carbuncle and white and black marble.

(Then) to the glory of His name, facing the Temple,
will king and ruler bow.¹⁸

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article has explored a particular theme, unique to the religious poetry of medieval Spain: that of the allegorical use of the *ṣebî* or “beloved boy” motif in a religious setting. Some of this poetry expressed the love imagery from the viewpoint of a female beloved, while most of it follows exactly the secular love poetry of the love of a man for a boy. In all cases, what is common to the poetry is an allegorization of the terms and expressions of love, love-sickness, abandonment, and so forth, which are typical and characteristic of secular love poetry. Through a skillful use of these typical images, the reader is subtly “tricked” into thinking he is reading a secular love poem, and only gradually does the true nature of the poem become evident. In this allegorical religious poetry, the “beloved” is either Israel or God or the messiah. The poems are never left to be completely ambiguous, however; at some point within the poem it is made perfectly clear that it *is* allegory and the true subject is revealed in a manner about which there can be no doubt.

Thus, those who have sought to deny the existence of secular love poetry of the *ṣebî* type in medieval Hebrew verse, claiming that it is all allegory, were not entirely wrong, in that there are allegorical uses of this imagery and allegorical examples of this type of poetry. However, these are always and exclusively *religious* poems, in which the subject of the poem is made quite clear, while none of the secular love poetry is allegorical. Furthermore, without the existence of a well-established tradition of a secular love poetry of this type, these religious poems would be inconceivable and unintelligible. This is why we find this type of *piyyût* only in Spain, where just such a tradition of secular poetry existed.

The present study has been restricted only to those “classical” Hebrew poets of the Muslim period in Spain. Abraham Ibn Ezra, whose poetry was by no means all written in Spain, has not been included, nor have other minor poets or poets of the later periods. In addition to the type of poem here discussed, where the allegorized beloved is male, there is a considerable amount of religious poetry where the allegory involves the female beloved (*ṣebiyāh* or *ʿofrāh*). This has not been discussed here.

In addition to the use of allegory and the deliberate attempt to “fool the eye” (or ear) by holding off the real meaning and subject of the

18. Wallenstein (1960–61). The translation here is his, with a few minor corrections in brackets.

poem, many of these poems are characterized by “audacity,” which is itself something typical of medieval secular Hebrew poetry. In this case, the audacity consists in using imagery and words which are typically associated with erotic verse (such things as drinking the saliva from the mouth of the beloved) in a religious setting. If we may say that the religious setting is the intermingling of *ḥôl* (secular) with *qôdesh* (sacred), then the audacity of secular poetry is in the mingling of *qôdesh* with *ḥôl*—the use of traditionally religious terms and ideas in a secular context.

If we are to fully appreciate the literary genius of the great classical Hebrew poets of Spain, we must understand their world. In their eyes, there was absolutely no inconsistency between leading a religious life, loyal to the observance of the commandments and the love of God, and the sensual enjoyment of wine (drunk, as we know, in company with Muslims at wine parties) and the pursuit of passion in the love of both women and boys. If it was audacious to introduce such ideas into religious poetry, it was no less audacious to lead such a life and to write about it in secular verse.

Their intent was only, perhaps, partially to shock—and to dazzle the reader with brilliance and cleverness. Behind it also lay, possibly, a very sincere desire to express a relationship with God in terms of everyday love and passion, which was a very real part of their lives.

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