

# Y. D. BERKOWITZ'S RENDITION OF SHOLEM ALEICHEM'S "SONG OF SONGS": A STUDY OF ITS STRUCTURE AND HEBREW TRANSLATION\*

by

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## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

The story "Song of Songs," written between 1909–1911, belongs to the later works of Sholem Aleichem's literary career. A horizontal analysis, i.e., an analysis of this story in comparison with Sholem Aleichem's other works, conforms to the pattern of Sholem Aleichem stories as defined by Miron (1970): an open or circular story frame, an anecdotal structure, a yearning for a world of eternal childhood, frequent retardation which disturbs the chronological continuity of the plot, and the subject of "fall and recovery"—all are found in this fictive miniature. A vertical analysis of the story (an analysis of the story as an independent entity) reveals the intricate format unique to this work, all of whose revelations emanate from its individualized nature and serve its poetic integrity.

The strength of the story comes from its intertextuality, that is, its reliance upon biblical sources which give resonance to the narrator's declaration of love. The key to the success of the text is the use of *midraš* as an underpinning for the modern structure.

In the analysis of the Hebrew translation of the story I would like to turn to two puzzling phenomena, the untangling of which leads me to uncover the special vertical structure of this story:

\* This paper is dedicated to Professor Marvin Fox of Brandeis University.

1. a) All quotations from the Hebrew rendition were translated by Uri Nave according to: "Pirqê šir hašširim," *Kol kitbê, Yāmîm tôbîm*, 1968, Tel Aviv, Debir.

b) All page numbers following the English citations refer to the aforementioned Hebrew edition.

c) All emphases are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

- a) The purpose of the retardations in this story.
- b) The reason why Y. D. Berkowitz changes the heroine's name in his Hebrew translation.
- a) Even the reader who is familiar with Sholem Aleichem's stylistic deviation that serves to retard the chronological continuity of the plot would wonder about the purpose of the tedious repetition of the passage "and such are Lily's chronicles," which contributes nothing to the plot, to the molding of the characters or their personal style, nor to the story's atmosphere and tone. This unexplained repetition, which is evenly distributed in each chapter of the story, reveals an obvious structural problem which calls for an explanation.
- b) A second peculiarity emerges when comparing the original Yiddish text with the one in Hebrew. In the original the heroine's name is Esther Liebe and she is referred to as Buzy, while in the Hebrew text her name is <sup>2</sup>Estēr Lē<sup>2</sup>āh and she is referred to as Lily. What did Berkowitz find wrong with the name "Liebe" ("love"), which seems so appropriate for a story whose title is "Song of Songs"? The change is particularly puzzling since the name *Lē<sup>2</sup>āh* evokes the image of the paradigmatic unloved women of the Bible. The name *Lē<sup>2</sup>āh* creates some pronounced dissonance in a story which is essentially a love poem to that heroine "Liebe." The fact that no other names were changed in this story, or in other stories translated by Berkowitz, draws special attention to this change. Further study shows that the liberties Berkowitz takes with his Hebrew translation brings some striking and new literary dimensions to the work, which are analyzed in the last section of this paper.

### *Structure and Genre*

Miron (1970) indicates that at the start of his career Sholem Aleichem tried constructing novels in the style of the sentimental intrigue novel. According to Miron, Sholem Aleichem, like many of his contemporaries, believed that this genre would most likely capture the attention of Jewish readers. Writers since the time of Mapu (1863)<sup>2</sup> had come to realize that the novel was a powerful means of communication: they had understood the compelling allure of the "romance." And they realized that unless Jewish novels of quality were produced, foreign literature or

2. In the introduction to the third part of his novel, *ʿAyit šābūaʿ* (1863), Mapu admits to his readers the necessity of producing Hebrew novels as a means to preserve the ties between the Jewish people and the Hebrew language.

Jewish novels of poor quality such as the works of Sheikevitz<sup>3</sup> would be dominant among Jewish readers.

The model admired by Sholem Aleichem was the Russian and French realistic novel. Yet, both "Grandfather" (Mendele) and "Grandson" (Sholem Aleichem) understood that the realistic Jewish novel is in fact a novel without a love affair. Therefore, Sholem Aleichem defined the works "Sender Blank" and "Stempenyu" as "Yiddish novels" (*Yidishe Romanen*), and felt a need, at times, to add "a novel without a love affair," *a roman an a roman*<sup>4</sup> (in Hebrew and in Yiddish "*roman*" can mean either "novel" or "love affair"). In "Song of Songs," Miron sees Sholem Aleichem making an attempt to return to the popular sentimental genre as part of his expression of his artistic maturity.<sup>5</sup> In my view, however, this story is not a return to an old form, but rather a breakthrough, overcoming the genre and the aesthetic dangers related to it, without disclaiming the sentimental, experiential core of the novel. Actually, the work can be seen as an exercise in how to tell a Jewish love story without falling into sloppy, emotional excess. The solution Sholem Aleichem found was to have his story hearken back to the biblical Song of Songs. Eros here finds both restraint and expression through the language and association related to the biblical Song of Songs; and the story's structure follows the exegesis of the Song of Songs included in *Midraš hanne'elām*.

In Yiddish the story is called "Song of Songs." At the heart of the title lies a double innuendo: This is the epitome of poetry, and it follows the biblical paradigm of the experience of love. Nevertheless the Yiddish subtitle, *a yugend roman*, makes it unclear whether Sholem Aleichem refers to a novel or to a love affair, as the word in Yiddish denotes both. If he refers to the genre, then an intentional dissonance occurs between

3. a) G. Kressel (1965, p. 926) writes about Sheikevitz:

His stories with their adventurous and 'intriguing' plot, whose imagination went beyond proportion, caused Sholem Aleichem several years later, to come out in protest against him in a very harsh pamphlet, whose impression was striking.

b) Sholem Aleichem talks about works that are aesthetically destructive in his story "Sender Blank" translated by A. Aharoni (1981, chapter 9).

4. Sholem Aleichem dedicated "Stempenyu" to Mendele Mocher Sefarim. In his dedication he discussed the reasons for the essential difference between a "Jewish novel" and the genre in general.

5. As an argument for regarding Sholem Aleichem's "Song of Songs" as a sentimental genre Miron (1976, p. 169) claims that one can find an allusion to the untimely death of the heroine. I could not find the basis for this argument in the Yiddish edition nor in the Hebrew rendition done by Berkowitz.

the title and the narrative itself. If indeed Sholem Aleichem refers to a love affair, then this should be considered alongside the new title Berkowitz has assigned to the story in his Hebrew translation. Unexpectedly however, Berkowitz altered the title of the story. Instead of translating the title literary as "*Šir hašširim* 'Song of Songs,' he amended it to *Pirqê šir hašširim*, 'Chapters of Song of Songs.' In my view, Berkowitz's emendation is highly significant because it merges the lyrical, almost autobiographical tale of love with the mythical collection experience of the verse of love, expropriated from space and time. It correlates perfectly with Freedman's definition (1963, p. 2) of the "lyrical";

A lyrical poem's form objectifies not men and time but the experience and a theme for which men and their lives or place and events, have been used . . . a lyrical novel assumes a unique form which transcends the casual and temporal movement of narrative within a framework of fiction. It is a hybrid genre that uses the novel to approach the function of a poem.

Berkowitz named the story "Chapters of Song of Songs" in order to emphasize the mythical quality of what he saw as a collection of love songs, worthy of joining the mythical collection of Hebrew love poetry. (Chapter 17 will be used to illustrate that mythical poetic essence that Berkowitz had wished to realize.)

Furthermore, the construction of Sholem Aleichem's story clearly fits Freedman's description of the lyrical novel: "The lyrical novel absorbs action all together and refashions it as a pattern of imagery. Its tradition is neither deductive nor dramatic, although features of both may be used, but poetic in the narrow sense of 'lyrical'."

Through the analysis of the story's structure it becomes evident that Sholem Aleichem wished to design a plot without a story,<sup>6</sup> i.e., a plot that does not reveal new events but rather the significance of an experience. As a matter of fact the story contains nothing but two meetings between the protagonist and his beloved revolving around Passover and the Feast of Weeks, in childhood and again as adults.

In their youth, the lovers journey out to the fields, that classical *locus amoenus*, but before they arrive they must cross a bridge. The bridge leads them to the erotic freedom which finds expression through the psychological language of Song of Songs. It is no coincidence that the

6. I use the terms "plot" and "story" according to Forster's (1927) definitions of them: a) "The story is the narrative of events arranged in time sequence" (p. 51); b) A plot is a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality" (p. 130). These definitions are important because my main argument is that Sholem Aleichem in this narrative tried to eliminate the element of time, which is the main feature of the "story" but not the "plot."

erotic expanse visited by the two lovers in Sholem Aleichem's story, the place drenched with gold and purple, is so reminiscent of the terrible splendor facing the poet and his beloved in Bialik's poem *Im dimdûmê haḥammāh*. In both cases, the erotic experience is a mystical experience as well: the unity is metaphysical. Those crossing the bridge experience a sensation similar to those passing the "curtain of fire":

That very night my secret was revealed to me. That I loved Lily. That I loved her with a love both rapturous and reverent, a love both pure and innocent, that same love we find written in the Song of Songs. *Great letters of fire rise and soar in the air*<sup>7</sup> before me. They are letters of the Holy which I had just read from Song of Songs: For love is fierce as death, jealousy is harsh as the grave. Its flashes are raging fire, a flame of the Lord. (p. 264)

Yet, although the erotic sensation is experienced as mystical, it is related to us within the frame of a realistic story, the nature of which Sholem Aleichem attempts to cancel by utilizing impressionistic means.

Many years passed between the lover's first encounter and the second. The narrator left his family and wandered off in his search for secular culture (*haskālāh*) and science. This entire interval is summed up in one sentence which explains the reason for the narrator's estrangement from his father: "There was no quarrel between us. I disobeyed him. I did not want to follow his ways. I have chosen a new path for myself—I wandered to a center of culture and science." (p. 259)

A laconic letter, in which the father begs to see his son for Passover, and incidentally adds that Lily got engaged and will be married on the week following the Feast of Weeks, causes the son's hasty return home. On the eve of Passover the narrator arrives. In spite of the fact that years have passed since he left his home, he finds the place and people as he has left them: "I found father as I had left him . . . His appearance not even slightly changed . . . Father—as he used to be. And only that

7. We find the phrase "letters . . . rise and soar in the air" in *The Zohar* translated by Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon (1967, vol. 3, p. 110):

All these nine orders are guided by a signal of engraved letters to which they constantly look up. The same procedure is followed by the rest of the orders, all of whom are similarly guided by engraved letters. Furthermore, they are arrayed in a series of ranks one above the other, all of them chanting praises in unison: and when those letters soar high in the air the chief of them gives the command and a melodious chanting is raised. Then one letter flies up from the lower world, rising and descending, until two letters fly down to meet it; they then join together into a group of three, corresponding to the letters YHV, which are the three letters within the "illuminating mirror".

silvery beard of his had silvered more, only the wrinkles on his wide and white forehead had deepened apparently of anxiety.” (pp. 249–250)

It seems the voice refuses to acknowledge what is in plain sight. All, apparently, is as it was and only one thing is missing—“the atmosphere of Song of Songs.”

The narrator comes home in order to revoke the results of time, to set things as they once were, to reclaim Lily, so that, God forbid, she will not be “His”—the “Other’s.” This state of emotions explains the yearning of the heart on the one hand, and its fear on the other. The narrator would like to convince himself that, in fact, nothing has happened and the wheels of time can be set backwards, that it is possible to overcome the strength of time. His goal is to reclaim Lily.

The childhood encounter in this story begins on the eve of Passover and ends on the Feast of Weeks. In the second encounter, too, the episode begins on Passover and ends on the Feast of Weeks. The details of these two separate scenes are identical in every respect.

The center and essence of both episodes are the meeting of the lovers in that field, that realm of the terrible splendor, the realm of Eros. Through the second meeting we learn that Lily has been engaged to somebody else, because the narrator has never approached her since he left home. He never answered her letters, and she was convinced he had forgotten her. It becomes obvious through their dialogue that they are both in love with each other as they were in their childhood. This discovery manifests itself in the undertones and the echoes of a well-known melody that the narrator recognizes in Lily’s manner—the echoes of Song of Songs: “And I hear in her last words a melody long known to me, many years ago, and its lyric is the lyric of the Song of Songs: Make haste my beloved, and be thou like to a gazelle or to a young stag on the cleft mountains . . .” (pp. 280–281)

The first episode progresses from the time defined in the passage, “and such are Lily’s chronicles,” to the moment when the narrator leaves his home. In the second episode, the narrator attempts to make time turn back to the starting point. If he can do this he will restore the essence of the Song of Songs. In the first episode, the time movement is from A to B. But in the second cycle, when time inexorably goes forward, there is a desire to move the plot from B to A.

The story, like life itself, progresses chronologically. After every chapter in which we advance from Passover to the Feast of Weeks, from childhood to adulthood, we are also returned to the starting point by the passage “and such are Lily’s chronicles,” which is the starting point of the story. Therefore, after each chapter, when it is evident to the reader

that "time" has passed, the narrator denies this by placing us back at the starting point. It is in this light that the conclusion of the story must be interpreted.

Do not press me, reader, and do not force me to tell you how it ended. The end of a matter, be it even a very good one, is but a sad note. Its beginning, on the other hand, is always pleasant. Therefore, it is with greater ease and pleasure that I can tell you the story once more from its beginning, to begin at the start. And once again in the same language: I had a brother, his name was Benny . . . (p. 282)

Sholem Aleichem does not want to tell a story—a narrative arranged in time sequence—but a poetic experience. In fact the entire aim of the story is to preserve the love, to eternalize the union, to live the experience outside of the confines of time. This need is served by the passage, "and such are Lily's chronicles."

The psychological basis of the work's structure is anchored in such traditional sources as the *Midraš hanne'ēlām*.

Rabbi Shim'ôn Bar Yôḥai interprets the verse, "make haste my beloved, and be thou like to a gazelle or a young stag" (Cant 8:14). There he says:

It is the desire of Israel that God should not go or remove himself but escape like a gazelle or like the young stag. Why? Rabbi Shim'ôn said: not one animal is likened to the gazelle or the young stag, for when it runs away it walks a while and turns its head back to where it came from. And forever, always will it be turning its head backwards.

There is an obvious analogy between the *midrāš* of the gazelle and the structure of the story. Sholem Aleichem's protagonist, like the gazelle, turns his head back in time while trying to move ahead.

#### *The Reasons for Changing the Heroine's Name*

If Berkowitz had translated the story into English and had then changed the heroine's name from "Buzy" to "Lily," it might be supposed that he was making use of the English translation of "Lily of the valley." However, the problematic change of "Liebe" to "Lē'āh" would remain elusive, especially as it is the Hebrew translation which concerns us.

In Berkowitz's book *Hār'īšônīm kibnē 'ādām* (1938, p. 94), he recounts Sholem Aleichem's reaction to his first translation:

Such is right!—he says,—such should translation be! I do not like the translator who follows me like an innocent calf, ruminating at my words. The translator must be independent! Only, what is missing here are a few more verses. There is a want of the verses . . ."

“What verse?”—I wonder.

“Verses from the Bible, from the Midrāš . . . We need to add a few verses directed at the heart of the matter. The holy language requires verses . . .

Berkowitz was strict in keeping with these principles. He saw in the traditional sources the psyche of the work. *Midraš hanneʿēlām* serves as an example.

Another *midrāš* may explain the change of the name “*Liebe*” to *Lēʿāh*. In his commentary on the verse “and the eyes of *Lēʿāh* were tender” (Gen 29:17), Rashi says: “She thought she would have to fall to the lot of Esau and she therefore *wept continually*, because every one said: Rebecca has two sons, Laban has two daughters—the elder daughter to the elder son and the younger daughter to the younger son.” And thus we find in the story. The bride, who will be married in the week following the Feast of Weeks, is crying.

Lily *wept*.

Lily *wept* and the whole world grieved . . .

Lily *wept*. Covered her face with her hands and her shoulders trembled and her cry grew stronger . . . The cry of someone whose world has been destroyed, gone from under his feet (p. 277).

Through the second meeting between the narrator and his beloved, who has been engaged to another man, it becomes clear that she is still in love with him. Sholem Aleichem’s “*Liebe*,” like the biblical *Lēʿāh* (according to Rashi’s exegesis to Gen 29:17), does not want to marry her intended groom. She has been engaged to him because the narrator did not pursue her at all after he had left home. She thought he had forgotten her. Now, upon his return she is crying.

Furthermore, the analogy created between the two brides adds a special aesthetic dimension to the end of the story, which reads as follows: “Do not press me, reader, and do not force me to tell you how it ended. The end of a matter, *be it even a good one* . . .” Was it indeed a good one? We are not told. But we do know that the biblical *Lēʿāh* did not fall into Esau’s lot after all. By replacing the name “*Liebe*” with “*Lēʿāh*” in the Hebrew rendition, Berkowitz opens up a possibility for a happy end, but he does it in a most sophisticated and refined manner, without falling into sloppy emotional excess.

Another talmudic source, included in the 17th chapter, Part III may further explain the reason for the change from “*Liebe*” to “*Lēʿāh*.” This chapter is an inner monologue in which the narrator gives expression to all that occurred in his heart—a sort of personal *Tiqqûn hāšôt*. Feelings of guilt, regret, fear and hope gain expression through a personal hymn whose language and content testify to its origins.

Alone and lonely on this night, this vigil.

On this calm and quiet night, on this soft and ardent night, this night of early spring.

I open my window and gaze toward the flickering stars, those glimmering like sapphires. And I wonder: Could it be? Could it be?

Could it be that *I set my temple aflame and banished* the beautiful and delicate princess whom I had entrapped with my charm in the past? Could it be?

Could it be?

Here too, the passage reveals a talmudic source: *Bērākôt* 3a.

The night has three watches, and at each watch the Holy One, blessed be He sits and roars like a lion and says: Woe to the children on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and *set My temple aflame and exiled them* among nations of the world.

The relationship of the narrator to his beloved is shaped according to the classical model of relationship between Israel and God. When <sup>3</sup>Estēr Lē<sup>3</sup>āh cries in her bed, the narrator roars like a lion, crying: "Could it be that I set my temple aflame and banished the delicate and beautiful princess . . ." And thus the prayer becomes—*Tiqqûn Lē<sup>3</sup>āh*<sup>8</sup> carrying a double meaning: a) The traditional midnight prayer. b) The narrator's personal midnight prayer, in which he cries over banishing his beautiful princess Lē<sup>3</sup>āh-Lily.

And why Lily then? What object did Berkowitz have in changing "Buzy" to "Lily"? Here again Berkowitz realizes the inner essence which is the poetic essence of the story. On his way home from the synagogue on the eve of Passover the narrator's father catches up with him and asks: "Why do you rush so?" and the narrator replies through an inner monologue:

Oh father, father! Can't you see, that I am like to the gazelle or the young hart upon the cleft mountains . . . For me the hour is pressing, father, most pressing. For me the road is long, very long, since Lily is already engaged. Engaged to another and not to me. (p. 260).

הוי אבי, אבי! וכי אינך רואה, כי דומה אני לצבי או לעופר האילים על הררי בתר? . . .  
השעה דחוקה לי אבי, דחוקה מאוד. הדרך ארוכה לי אבי ארוכה מאוד,  
אחרי אשר לי י נתארסה כבר. נתארסה לאחר ולא לי.

The passage centers on the word *lî* ("mine" or "to me"). The gazelle, the gazelle of the Song of Songs, is quick to turn around and head back, so that, God forbid, *Lily* will not become the other man's wife. In the

8. *Tiqqûn Lē<sup>3</sup>āh* and *Tiqqûn Rāhēl* are the segments of the night prayer *Tiqqûn hāsôt*.

Hebrew text the narrator repeats the word *li*, which expresses his hope that Lily will remain “his”. Thus the heroine’s name creates the double sound in the heart’s supplication: Li-ly.

Return, return Shulamit, I say to her once again in the language of Song of Songs, return to me, Lily, while there is time. (p. 280)

שובי, שובי השולמית-אני אומר אליה בלשון שיר השירים-  
שובי ל ל י ל י אלי בעוד מועד.

And at different times, Berkowitz triplicates the sound:

Home, homeward! Lily says to me . . . And I hear in her last words a melody long known to me . . . and its lyric of the Song of Songs: Make haste my beloved and be thou like to a gazelle or to a young hart.

הביתה, הביתה! אומרת ל ל י ל ל י . . . ואני שומע בדבריה . . . נעימה ידועה  
לי מלפנים . . . והלשון לשון שיר השירים: ברח דודי, ודמה לך לצבי או לעופר  
האילים . . .

The chapter is set within a visible frame which determines the situation and makes the name Lily more meaningful. The protagonist is facing the open window, late at night, and contemplating. His soliloquy develops from previously mentioned *Tiqqūn Lē’āh*, into an epiphany of a mystical nature. His secret love for Lily is revealed through the language of the Song of Songs in which a phrase from the *Zohar* has been inserted: “Great letters of fire rise and soar in the air.” Through this unexpected addition, the human experience is elevated to a transcendent plane of a mystical nature. The chapter ends with the narrator, once again, standing alone in front of the window, late at night.

Regarding the sound, the entire chapter is orchestrated around the name “Lily,” which appears capitalized in the middle of the chapter. Both senses, acoustic and visual, instantly catch the balanced structure: “night” (*laylāh*) at the beginning and at the end, and “Lily” at its heart. In Hebrew the words *laylāh* and “Lily” create the dominant sound and the inner rhythm of the whole scene.

Alone and lonely on this *night* (*laylāh*), this vigil. On this calm and quiet *night*,

on this soft and ardent *night*, this *night* of early spring . . .

And for a long while I sit by the open window on this *night*, this vigil.

And sweet council I take with this calm and quiet *night*, this soft and ardent *night*, this *night* of early spring, which is so secretive, so mysterious.

That very *night* my secret was revealed to me: *That I loved Lily*.<sup>9</sup>

9. It is emphasized by Sholem Aleichem.

That I loved her with a love both rapturous and reverent, a love both pure and innocent, that love we find written in the Song of Songs. Great letters of fire rise and hover in the air before me. They are the letters of the Holy which I have just read from Song of Songs:

"For love is fierce as death, jealousy is harsh as the grave. Its flashes are raging, a flame of the Lord" . . .

And I sit for a long while on this *night*, this vigil by my open window, and I ask this *night*, which is so secretive, so mysterious: could it be? Could it be?

And yet the *night* keeps silent . . .

This *night*. This vigil. (pp. 263–264.)

That the soliloquy occurs on Passover Eve adds a further dimension to the repetition of the phrase "this night." This is part of the refrain of the four questions. By it the night is pronounced to be different—*mah ništannāh hallaylāh hazzeh*, but the narrator, on this special eve, is praying: "*Ya<sup>c</sup>ābōr nā<sup>c</sup> hallaylāh, yaḥālōp nā<sup>c</sup> hallaylāh, hallaylāh hazzeh, lēl šimmūrīm*" 'may the night just pass, may it pass, this night, this vigil'. The personal prayer of the young man; the name "Lily"; the revelation of love as well as his fear of losing are integrated in the communal *mah-ništannāh*.

Yet, although in the Yiddish text, the name "Buzy" combines harmoniously with the leading chord "*der doziker nakht*" (Because the sound *buzi* is very close to *dozi*, which are the longest and the stressed syllables of the Yiddish phrase), the name "Lily" corresponds with *hallaylāh hazzeh*, absorbing within it the heart's prayer—"lī-lī"—in like harmony.

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