

## РЕЦЕНЗИИ

DOI: 10.31696/S086919080033622-1

**For citation:** Gordon A.Ya. [Review of:] Lapidus R. *Birch in a Desert Wind: Russian Influences on Hebrew Literature*. 1–2 vols. Jerusalem: Carmel, 2009–2023. Vol. 1: 320 pp. ISBN 978-965-407-949-5. Vol. 2: 536 pp. ISBN 978-965-7791-12-4. *Vostok (Oriens)*. 2025. No. 1. Pp. 275–279. DOI: 10.31696/S086919080033622-1

Lapidus R. *Benot Livne Be-Zaam He-Hamsin: Ha-Sifrut Ha-Ivrit Ve-Zikoteiha La-Sifrut Ha-Rusit* [*Birch in A Desert Wind: Russian Influences on Hebrew Literature* (in Hebrew)]. 1–2 vols. Jerusalem: Carmel, 2009–2023. Vol. 1: 320 pp. ISBN 978-965-407-949-5. Vol. 2: 536 pp. ISBN 978-965-7791-12-4.<sup>1</sup>

LAPIDUS R. *BIRCH IN A DESERT WIND: RUSSIAN INFLUENCES ON HEBREW LITERATURE*. 1–2 VOLS. JERUSALEM: CARMEL, 2009–2023. Vol. 1: 320 pp. ISBN 978-965-407-949-5. Vol. 2: 536 pp. ISBN 978-965-7791-12-4

© 2025

Alex GORDON <sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup> – University of Haifa, Israel

ORCID: 0000-0002-0213-7225; algor.goral@gmail.com

Modern Hebrew literature, it may be stated, began to evolve in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the early *belles lettres* and scholarly works of the precursors of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) in Germany, such as Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) and Hartwig Wessely (1725–1805).

Thus, the nascent Hebrew literature was clearly forged first and foremost out of a strong bond with the traditional Jewish sources, as well as with the German literature of the period. As Hebrew literature continued to develop, it became distanced from German literature over the following decades and centuries, ultimately breaking away from it.

Ties between modern Hebrew literature and the traditional Jewish sources likewise had gradually weakened, until, towards the latter half of the twentieth century, any connection between Hebrew literature and traditional Judaism has dissolved.

However, since its emergence in Germany in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, classical Hebrew literature continued to develop, with significant achievements among both Jewish audiences and international readership.

What were the sources of inspiration for classical Hebrew literature, if any?

Contemporary literary scholars tend to mention only Central European poets and writers as possible source of inspiration for modern Hebrew fiction.

By contrast, we now have a monumental pioneering study by Rina Lapidus, the recently published *Birch in a Desert Wind: Russian Influences on Hebrew Literature*. Volume I was

<sup>1</sup> Rina Lapidus is a professor at the Faculty of Humanities, Bar-Ilan University, Israel.

published in 2009, and volume II in 2023. Clearly, this is the fruit of many decades of painstaking research.

Rina Lapidus discusses classical Hebrew literature, which constituted the foundation for modern Hebrew literature and was instrumental to the formation of contemporary Israeli culture and Israeli identity. Classical Hebrew literature originated in the Russian Empire, from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through the 1930s, to the early 1940s. Its creators were Russian-speaking Jewish writers and poets who wrote in the Hebrew language although most of them had never left the borders of their native Russia. These writers and poets admired Russian literature, and regarded it as a sublime art, an example to emulate.

Among the Hebrew-language writers, Lapidus discusses Yehuda Leib Gordon (1830–1892), Mendele Mocher Seforim (1836–1917), Aharon David Gordon (1856–1922), Yeshayahu Bershadsky (1871–1908), Haim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934), Shaul Tschernichovski (1875–1943), Uri Nissan Gnessin (1879–1913), Yosef Haim Brenner (1881–1921), Yaakov Steinberg (1887–1947), Rachel Bluwstein Sela (aka Rachel, 1890–1931), and Haim Lenski (1905–1942? 1943?). These and other writers were fervent admirers of classical Russian literature and imitated the works of such Russian authors as Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852), Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841), Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883), Afanasy Fet (1820–1892), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), Lev Tolstoy (1828–1910), Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), as well as the Russian linguist Alexander Potebnya (1835–1891).

The second volume is larger, more inclusive, and more comprehensive of the two. It includes chapters discussing Russian influences on Jewish thought, Jewish press, and perceptions of art among Hebrew writers and poets. Other chapters are devoted to Russian influences on Hebrew prose and poetry, and yet others to translations of Russian masterpieces into Hebrew.

The two volumes cover the entirety of classical Hebrew literature. The broad scope encompasses the vast majority of Hebrew novelists and poets active in the aforesaid period, focusing on examination of their relations with Russian literature, language, and culture.

Lapidus begins with a broad overview of current research methodologies for studying international influence in the Humanities and Social Sciences and intercultural influences in world literary traditions, including Hebrew literature. Lapidus chose to apply the method of “close reading”; admittedly traditional and familiar, it would best serve the aim of her research, namely, to demonstrate the strong influence exerted by Russian literature on Hebrew one, drawing upon clear, conclusive textual evidence.

Lapidus then moves on to analyze the literary works of Hebrew novelists and poets and their ties with Russian literature. The analysis starts with one of the founders of modern Hebrew literature, Mendele Mocher Seforim, and the influence of Russian-Ukrainian novelist Nikolai Gogol on him. From Gogol, Mendele learned techniques of parody, satire, and irony, as well as comic and grotesque characterization of literary heroes and events. Mendele borrowed characteristics, motifs, entire scenes, even plot structures from Gogol, adapting them to the Jewish experience and environment. For instance, Gogol’s Russian characters reappear as Jews in Mendele’s works, and Gogol’s scenes are transposed to the shtetl as depicted by Mendele. Gogol mocks his heroes for their meanness, provinciality, and pettiness. Yet when Mendele attempts to mock his own heroes for these very qualities, a dismal picture is revealed: his Jewish protagonists live in miserable poverty, forced into being mean and petty not by their grotesque nature, as in Gogol’s works, but by impoverishment.

Other Hebrew writers did the same, for instance, Y.D. Berkowitz’s autobiographical novel *Childhood Chapters – My Father’s Home* borrows narrative elements and techniques from Lev Tolstoy’s autobiographical trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*. However, Christian elements in Tolstoy’s novel are converted to Jewish ones.

Likewise, under the influence of Ivan Turgenev's *Rudin* and *Fathers and Sons*, Yeshaya Bershadsky borrowed narrative elements for his *Aimless*. Both Turgenev and Bershadsky treat the theme of "the superfluous man" sunk in decadence and nihilism, but Bershadsky's hero is more modern, embittered, and cynical than Turgenev's emotional and sentimental hero.

The author also looks into Uri Nissan Gnessin's novel *On the Eve* and its affinities with the short stories and plays by Anton Chekhov. Gnessin also translated some of Chekhov's works into Hebrew. A line-by-line comparison of Gnessin's novel with the Chekhovian oeuvre shows that Gnessin borrowed most narrative elements from Chekhov: plots, characters, patterns, style, even phrases and idiomatic expressions – all are interwoven, practically unchanged, into his narrative.

Lapidus discusses the influence of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* on the short story "Shmuel Frankfurter" by Haim Hazaz. Here we also find the influence in such narrative elements as characterizations of the protagonists and the plot itself, but in this case Hazaz also borrows Tolstoy's moral, philosophical and ideological underpinnings.

The reader is presented with an impressive comparison of the work of a Hebrew poet Alexander Penn and that of Sergei Esenin. Penn's poetry seems to be a combination of Sergei Esenin and Vladimir Mayakovsky – but in Hebrew! Meticulous comparison demonstrates that most poetic elements, of content and form alike, are taken from the poetry of Sergei Esenin.

Hebrew women's poetry similarly exhibits a strong affinity to its Russian counterpart, for instance, Rachel Bluvstein Sela vis-a-vis Anna Akhmatova, whose poems she also translated into Hebrew. Bluvstein incorporated Akhmatova's themes, motifs, and moral stance into her own poems.

A section of this study is devoted to intellectual and philosophical influences of Russian literature and culture on Hebrew literature. Here we find a chapter comparing the political thought of Yehuda Leib Gordon to that of the Russian Slavophiles, particularly Alexey Khomyakov. While Gordon expressed reservations about their views, he embraced their notion of need for broad national self-determination, and applied it to the Jewish people.

Lapidus discusses the ideas of Aharon David Gordon in relation to the philosophical concepts by Lev Tolstoy, whose works he translated into Hebrew. Gordon adopted Tolstoy's idealistic views on the best ways to hasten redemption in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in order to achieve a perfect world founded upon principles of truth, justice, and moral values.

Lapidus goes on to discuss Haim Nahman Bialik's essay "Revelment and Concealment in Language" and its link to the linguistic theories of Russian-Ukrainian philosopher Alexander Potebnia. For Potebnia, words accrue associative meanings over the history of the nation speaking that language, and Bialik applied Potebnia's theory to Hebrew.

Hebrew authors and poets would sometimes intersperse their Hebrew text with passages in Russian – Russian proverbs, expressions, quotations from classic Russian authors, snippets of songs or poems – in Hebrew transliteration or even in the original Cyrillic alphabet. This technique imparts Russian authenticity to the Hebrew literary work. Such indeed is the narrative structure of many of Yosef Haim Brenner's novels and short stories, such as *Around the Dot*. Brenner was also influenced by the works of F.M. Dostoevsky, and borrowed many poetic elements from his works.

Haim Hazaz too frequently interweaves snippets of Russian or direct reference to Russian and Soviet literature and culture, as in his novella "A Rushing River" and short story "He Commanded". This device is used as well in Y.D. Berkowitz's play and short story "Him and His Son".

A section of the study investigates influence of Russian poets and writers on style shaping in works by Hebrew writers and poets. It can be seen that the romanticist style inaugurated by Michael Lermontov impacted style shaping in the poetry of the young Saul Tchernichowsky.

Additionally, we learn of the affinity of Haim Lensky's poetry to that of Afanasy Fet, Russian symbolist and utopist. Another chapter recounts that Russian folklore exerted such an attraction for Haim Lensky that many of the latter's poems are imbued with a Russian folkloristic tinge.

Even in methodology, claims Lapidus, Russian influence on Hebrew literature can be discerned. The fiction of Shmuel Yosef Agnon, though not directly influenced by Russian literature, better lends itself to interpretation through application of the Russian formalist and structuralist method. The work of other Hebrew writers, such as Yakov Steinberg, Aharon Appelfeld, and Ida Fink, can be likewise analyzed by applying the Russian approach to construction of plots in the short story, employing this analysis to reveal new, previously unknown meanings.

Translations by Hebrew novelists and poets are the subject of another section. As translators of Russian literature, Hebrew novelists and poets would often invest much creative talent in the translation process, thereby producing another literary work, one that is different from the original. Brenner, for instance, translated Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* into Hebrew, employing phrases and expressions taken from traditional Jewish sources and in this way giving the Russian novel an emotional Jewish religious ambience. In his Hebrew translation of Tolstoy's short story "Master and Man", Brenner added dramatization which is to be found in Tolstoy's story, thus altering the essence of the original narrative.

When Y.D. Berkowitz, translating Tolstoy's autobiographical novel "Childhood", encountered difficulties finding suitable equivalents in the Hebrew language of his day for Tolstoy's rich descriptions, he resorted to explaining the Russian author's intended meaning in the body of the Hebrew text, detracting from the quality of his translation.

Haim Lensky translated Mikhail Lermontov's poem "Mtziri"; the Hebrew poet, identifying with the poem's protagonist, injected his translation with added emotionalism and romanticism, resulting in gaps between the original and translation. When Avraham Shlonsky translated A.S. Pushkin's rhyming verse novel "Evgeny Onegin", he incorporated many Hebrew neologisms of his own invention for words and concepts; more than a masterful translation, Shlonsky the poet produced a new literary work.

Towards the conclusion of her study, Lapidus discusses the European background of Russian literature and how European influences filtered into Hebrew literature through Russian literature. The chapter demonstrates that absorbing and assimilating influences is the primary operative factor in the development of any literature.

The second volume also contains a bibliography of nearly ninety pages (pp. 512–428), which lists everything written about each of the Hebrew literary works discussed in the study. It is noteworthy, however, that only few contemporary scholars work in the field germane to Rina Lapidus' monograph, and her research is therefore completely original. Accordingly, the studies salient to the works discussed in the monograph that Lapidus included in the bibliography list at the end of its second volume focus on a variety of aspects, which for the most part do not center on Russian influences on Hebrew literature. Lapidus' current study is truly groundbreaking, and the bibliographic list contains hardly any studies by other researchers that touch on foreign influences in general, and Russian ones in particular, on classical Hebrew literature.

Rina Lapidus has written a monograph that is undoubtedly a cornerstone in the study of Hebrew literature and Jewish studies in general – and this, among its other aspects, must be underscored to the fullest in the current review article.

Rina Lapidus proves that Hebrew literature, from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1960s, grew out of Russian language, literature and culture. As seen in this systematic, well-argued and well-documented research, the roots of Hebrew literature are grounded in Russian literature. Lapidus has composed a monumental study encompassing practically the entirety of Hebrew literature over nearly 150 years. Such in-depth scholarship is exceptionally exhaustive,

meticulous, and rigorous, and, consequently, reliable and convincing, ranking high by academic standards. Furthermore, this study is surprising, original, innovative and even revolutionary.

Lapidus “solves the riddle” of Hebrew literature and its sources of inspiration by proving conclusively that Hebrew literature drew its inspiration from Russian literature, language, and culture – the cultural origins of most of Hebrew literature’s creators.

Beyond Jewish Studies, Lapidus’s work is nothing short of brilliant, given its far-reaching implications for the study of cultural influences and interrelationships, making Rina Lapidus the select leading scholar in this field.

#### REFERENCES

Lapidus R. *Benot Livne Be-Zaam He-Hamsin: Ha-Sifrut Ha-Ivrit Ve-Zikoteiha La-Sifrut Ha-Rusit* [*Birch in A Desert Wind: Russian Influences on Hebrew Literature* (in Hebrew)]. 1–2 vols. Jerusalem: Carmel, 2009–2023. Vol. 1: 320 pp. ISBN 978-965-407-949-5. Vol. 2: 536 pp. ISBN 978-965-7791-12-4.

#### ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ / INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander Ya. GORDON, Professor (emeritus),  
University of Haifa, Israel.

ГОРДОН Александр Яковлевич – профессор  
(professor emeritus) Университета Хайфы,  
Израиль.