**The representation of books in Hebrew literature during the Renaissance: the book as symbol and object of passion**

The current study seeks to explore appearances of books in Hebrew literature during the Renaissance. “Mountains of books – but no book to be found,” claims Bialik in his speech, “The Hebrew Book.” Reflected in this impossible statement is the extent to which the signifier “book” is complex and expansive. It is an object which is always more than the mere object: functioning at times as metonymy, at times as the object of passion, and at other times as a cultural and conversational marker. On occasion the book is a messianic object: mountains of hope may be cast upon it, expected to be *the* book, with an accentuated definite article.

Zalman Shneur describes his childhood in the poem “Vilna” by personifying books and describing them as awakening passion, as possessing scent and materiality. The description of the book as arousing Eros brings to the surface questions of gender (male and female alike): In what way is the book an alternative to a woman (such as with Ben-Azai) and how can his sensual description be understood? Historiosophic questions arise from the manner in which Bialik describes books in the poem “At the Bookcase”: the description of the holy books which filled the speaker’s adolescence employ a great many words semantically linked to old age. The speaker describes himself in his youth as an “ascetic of life.” The erotic association has not disappeared but is projected onto the books. The speaker’s youth occurs within the religious study house, and the books exaggeratedly stand in for all of life’s embodiments: the love of a woman, the garden on a summer’s day, and “all of G-d’s wonders.”

Textual and librarian studies allow gaining knowledge about what occurs within the actual literary republic. This is what Zev Gris, in the book “Agent of Culture,” teaches us to see: he claims that the distribution of books and their acceptance can teach us about Jewish history no less than a discourse on theological issues. Similarly, the history of reading reflects processes of community and national establishment, as Avriel bar-Levav claims: “The process which began with the translation and printing of books in Yiddish eventually peaked in the creation of an imagined commonwealth of Jews which is a national community and which replaced, at least in principle, the religious commonwealth. In early modernity the Hebrew book assisted in redefining the imagined Hebrew commonwealth” (Avriel bar-Levav: From Awareness of the Library to the Jewish Literary Republic, cited in *Libraries and Book Collections,* pg. 224).

I wish to follow these studies and the way they point to the centrality of the book per se, rather than the concepts that a book offers, but through a reversed procedure: I wish to delve once again into the pages of literature and examine how the book itself was perceived in literature. In other words, in what way was it written about and what was thought of it? What types of changes can be seen in the significance of the word “book” per se, and how does it serve other areas (the Torah scroll, the Bible, didactic literature, belles lettres)? Simultaneously, I wish to examine the types of passions and complexities that “book” arouses. From the synchronous perspective, I will examine whether findings are similar or dissimilar to those for other libraries in the same period. And accordingly, from the diachronic perspective: how does use of the signifier “book” within Jewish literature alter over the years?

I would presume that the figure of the book in literature itself, particularly during the Renaissance, may clarify as a critical junction of important areas: modernity, secularity and tradition; the place of “the Bible” and its changing status in Zionist, Yiddish, and Hebrew writing; ‘fine’ literature and popular literature; masculinity and femininity; and more. I believe that delving deep into the instances themselves, rather than a theoretical discussion, may reveal, perhaps like “a stroke of the pen,” passions and longings that were not exposed thus far.