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Research project summary: Biblical allusions in the poetry of Leah Goldberg

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The proposed research seeks to shed new light on a particular aspect of Goldberg’s poetry: its continuous dialogue with the Old Testament and Jewish culture. An overview of the poetess’s work reveals that out of the roughly 1,000 poems she published, around 250 contain allusions to the Bible and references to concepts and images that are directly related to Jewish culture. When we take into account additional autobibliographical and critical writings, we begin to realize that the poems express a worldview that bears a strong link to the Bible and to the Jewish tradition. This link is neither one of opposition nor one of faith, but rather a personal and intricate connection with the Old Testament as part of a wide cultural identity. The proposed research project therefore consists of, first and foremost, locating the allusions and categorizing their instances (such as the different Old Testament sources and the types of textual dialogue with the citations and the Biblical text). The above will be facilitated through the use of the Digital Humanities technique. Next, our focus will be on outlining trends and central phenomena in the ways Goldberg uses the Old Testament, while proposing an in-depth discussion of the poems illustrating said phenomena. Analyzing the types of allusion gives us two directions in which to develop our thought and research process. The first is the direction of the Midrash research field, in an attempt to see the Midrash as a model for Goldberg's textual dialogue with the Bible. The second is the direction of poetry research, wherein we would endeavor to position our research findings in relation to the existing research on Goldberg's poetry, as well as the existing literature on the Bible in modern Hebrew poetry.

Goldberg's poetry is replete with allusions to the Old Testament and the world of Jewish culture. Her poems contain direct quotations and references to the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and so on. We can also recognize references to concepts inextricably linked with Jewish culture, such as Yom Kippur, Passover, prayer, faith and God, and even mentions of the Bible and the prayer books as material objects.

The presence of the Bible in the poems and their dialogue with the world of Jewish culture can be characterized as intense and varied in terms of the Biblical sources used and their dispersal throughout Goldberg’s creative period. We can also identify a diversity in terms of the modes of Biblical reference, which range from full citation and adherence to the Biblical context, to use of a Biblical scene or character as the central conceit for a poem, full citation of verse in a modified Biblical context, partial citation with the missing part of the verse resonating within the poem, citation with modification of a single word, subversion of the verse’s original meaning, quotations from various places in the Bible fused together within a single poem, and so on.

The discussion of the literary allusion of one text to another is of course one that takes place within the wider discourse of intertextuality. [[1]](#footnote-1) In the spirit of contemporary research I will insist on focusing on the term “allusion” as the term defining the places where Goldberg’s text contains references to the Old Testament. I will base my analysis on the research of Daniel Boyarin who argues that the Old Testament constitutes a unique manifestation of the idea of intertextuality (Boyarin, 2011). The framework for the categorization of allusion types was inspired by research on the secular poetry of medieval Muslim Spain, as well as the field of Midrash research.

A discussion of the types of Biblical allusions in Goldberg's poetry and their significance shows that, on the one hand, Goldberg does not wholly adopt or adhere to Biblical language,[[2]](#footnote-2) yet on the other hand, nor does she defy or undermine the Biblical text.[[3]](#footnote-3) Beyond a remarkable proficiency, the types of reference she employs indicate a strong affinity to the Biblical text, a delicate knack for juxtaposing various elements, without resolving them or finding a harmonious solution, as a way to express complexity. Some view non-resolution as the dominant stylistic element of Goldberg's writing. This feature is referred to by various researchers alternatively as: “refined oxymoron” (Fishlov, 2000), “non-resolution” (Weissman, 2012), or “tenting” (S. Hacohen, 2016), however the intention in all cases is similar. Allusions in poetry, according to Shamir's principle, are what best expresses the dominant elements of a poet’s style (Shamir, 2015), and indeed, the Biblical allusions in Goldberg's poetry exemplify the elements of non-resolution and complexity.

An analysis of the Biblical allusions reveals multiple aspects of similarity between Goldberg’s poetry and the traditional Midrash, both in the types of allusions used and in their interpretative development, not to mention the fundamental positions behind the interpretative text. Broad aspects of similarity between Goldberg’s poetry and the Midrash have already been raised in various studies, both in the field of Midrash research and in the field of literature and poetry research.[[4]](#footnote-4) The kinds of Biblical allusions found in Goldberg's poetry indicate a positive interpretive stance and a kind of bold intimacy. The latter terms are borrowed from the field of Midrash research.[[5]](#footnote-5) Of course, I have no intention to claim that Goldberg's poetry is a second-century Midrash, nor to draw any kind of profile of Goldberg's faith, but rather to see the Midrash as a model.

The defining characteristic of the positive interpretive stance is that it does not criticize the Biblical elements, even when it encounters contradictions and difficulties. The Midrashic position seeks to preserve a plurality of opinions and requires no resolution in favor of one or the other. It sees the Bible as a wide textual territory from which it is possible to select quotations and reorganize them in a new interpretative production. This position, in as much as it centers on Biblical analysis, also seeks to include the present of the Midrashic author, and in doing so may lead to “simulated difficulties” within the verses (Hirschman and Kadri, 2018). The Sages assumed the authority to displace characters from the Bible into their world, just as Goldberg, in depicting Rachel waiting for Jacob, puts a cigarette into her mouth. The positive, sympathetic position of the author, a position which is committed to the text, allows for a great deal of intimacy, and therefore also boldness. These are the characteristics of the Midrashic position, and likewise, to my understanding, of Goldberg's position in her poetry.

The image we have of Goldberg is one of a woman of universal culture. The influence of global culture is evident in the entirety of her oeuvre as a poet, playwright, writer, theater critic, publicist, translator and academic. Her creative work, as well as her personal writings (diaries, letters, and interviews), abound in allusions to European, Russian and Christian traditions. Indeed, most of the research on Goldberg's work illuminates her affinity for the world of Christian European culture, both in terms of form and in terms of content.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Nevertheless, a fresh reading of Goldberg's work, including the autobiographical and theoretical writings, sheds new light on her person and her work. The Old Testament was a major source of influence for Goldberg, from her studies at the Hebrew Gymnasium in Kaunas, through her studies in Bonn, where she wrote a dissertation on the subject of the Samaritan Pentateuch,[[7]](#footnote-7) and to her work as a Bible teacher. In her essays and articles, Goldberg emphasizes the uniqueness of the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition as a unique source of influence in Hebrew literature. These writings, as well as her diaries, letters and poetry, point to a unique conception of the connection between the Jewish and universal traditions, which in her Utopian world come together to form the peak of creation, to form poetry.

In order to encompass the complexity of her work and to navigate one’s way through the vast amounts of source materials, one needs to have recourse to an effective and dynamic cataloging method. The methodology I intend to use in my research is that of Digital Humanities, an innovative application of said methodology, as far as my supervisors and I are aware, in the field Hebrew literature. [[8]](#footnote-8) The use of a dynamic cataloging and labeling system allows for database creation, easy orientation, and even new interpretative questions, such as the density of Biblical sources, the frequency of Biblical reference occurrences throughout the oeuvre, trends in the types of use made of Biblical quotations, etc. All of the above allow for an accurate selection of poems to undergo in-depth analysis demonstrating these phenomena.

The contribution of the study will be, first and foremost, the addition of a discussion of Goldberg's work and the Biblical allusions in her poetry to the wider discussion of Biblical allusions in modern Hebrew poetry, from which Goldberg's name is currently absent.[[9]](#footnote-9) Secondly, it will to paint a new portrait of Goldberg, highlighting her connection to Jewish culture in general and to the Old Testament in particular. Secondary contributions will be made through the use of Digital Humanities in the field of Hebrew poetry, and the use of the Midrash as a model for examining Biblical allusions.

The projected research schedule is:

Submission of research proposal in October 2019.

To be followed by continued research including, first and foremost, entering the poems into the Digital Humanities system, creating tags and categories, performing in-depth analysis of the poems, outlining models and discussing the central questions arising with regard to the various types of allusions, examining correlations to the Midrashic model, discussing the subject of gender, and more.

1. Kristeva (1982), Barthes (1968), Ben Porat (1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Which is how researchers qualify Bialik's use of Biblical language, for example. See Shamir, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Which is how researchers qualify Zach's and sometimes Amichai's use of Biblical language, as well as the majority of Israeli poetry in the 1970s and 1980s whose relationship to the Biblical text has been termed one of “negation” (Carton Bloom, 1999; Gold, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hartman (1986), Kornfeld and Bloch (2000), Shaked (2005), Shaked (2009), Jacobson (2012), Miron (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kogel (1983), Hartman (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hirschfield (2000), Bar (2000), Yeglin (2002), Tikozki (2011), Shamir (2014), Rotenberg (2015), Grodinsky (2015) and more. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. My sincere thanks to Dr. Alina Tarshin and Dr. Gideon Tikozki for allowing me to peruse the translation prior to its publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Similar work has been done, for example, on Biblical allusions in Bialic’s poetry – as a manual work bearing no interpretative dimension [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The reasons for this omission, touching upon gender and acceptance, will be discussed in the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)