**The Image of the Beloved in Medieval Hebrew and Arabic Erotic Love Poetry**

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The surge in research on medieval Hebrew poetry during the first half of the twentieth century was largely due to the scholarly work of Haim Brody, J. N. Simchoni and Benzion Halper.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, due to their lack of knowledge of the Arabic language, their work mainly involved the production of critical editions and bibliographies. David Yellin, who was of Babylonian descent and had a deep knowledge of the Arabic language, culture, and way of life, demonstrated a profound interest in the affinity between Hebrew and Arabic poetry, particularly in terms of rhetoric. Given an overall lack of fluency in Arabic amongst his students, only few followed in Yellin’s footsteps. Thus, research on the close linkage between these poetries was scarce. Following Yellin’s death, Hayyim Schirmann, who was also aware of this mutual influence, inherited the stage of comparative studies and encouraged his students to explore this topic. Amongst these students, it was Dan Pagis alone who completed a study on the affinity between secular Arabic and Hebrew poetry. Yehuda Ratzaby and Israel Levin followed suit.

To date, the comparative research has focused mainly on the affinity and linkages between Arabic poetry and Hebrew poetry, and between Arabic and Hebrew *maqamat* (rhyming prose) in Spain.[[2]](#footnote-2) Many studies demonstrated how, given their similar spiritual inventories , Hebrew poetry drew from the Arabic and how Arabic motifs were conventionalized in Hebrew poetry.[[3]](#footnote-3) This study will further explore the question of the affinity between the Arabic and Hebrew cultures, and will focus on the question of the identity of the beloved in secular Hebrew poetry in Spain.

Erotic secular love poetry—known as *‘ishq* in Arabic and in Hebrew as *shirat hesheq*— is one of the literary styles and social practices adopted by the Andalusian Jewish elite from its Arab environment at the beginning of the eleventh century. The Hebrew poets drew their inspiration not from the ancient Hebrew tradition of love poetry (e.g. Song of Songs), but rather from the Arabic models of the genre.[[4]](#footnote-4) Following their Arab counterparts, the Hebrew poets developed this genre openly, praising the physical pleasures conspicuously without reserve. The Hebrew poets also adopted from Arabic poetry the hedonistic approach to life, which calls for the fulfilment of all worldly pleasures. Hebrew secular poetry reached its zenith in the Spanish period. Jewish poets composed poems extolling nature and love, wine and friendship. However, at the same time, they did not distance themselves from religious poetry: God and religion were at the center of their world. They did not see a contradiction in this. Predominantly in their youth, they indulged in wine and love songs.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Dunash ben Labrat, who lived in Cordoba (920-990), wrote praise poetry for Hasdai Ibn Shaprut in the form of the Arabic *qasida* and described with a great deal of detail the hedonistic lifestyle of the Jewish elite in Cordoba.[[6]](#footnote-6) Isaac Ibn Mar Shaul (who lived between the end of the tenth and early eleventh centuries) also wrote erotic love poetry, which included themes and imagery drawn from Arabic poetry. In fact, Mar Shaul was the first amongst the Hebrew poets to write about love of adolescent boys and describe their beauty.[[7]](#footnote-7) A few erotic poems were also written by Mar Shaul’s contemporary, Isaac Ibn Chalfon, who wrote only secular poetry. There is a personal element in the poetry of the first *hesheq* (desire) poets, in which the lover and beloved are represented in a style similar to that of pre-Islamic Arabic (Jahili) poetry. In their poetry, the emotion of love is depicted largely in terms of its natural manifestation as pounding in the hearts of the lovers. Ratzaby described this poetry as restrained and hesitant, and as befitting the early secular poetry of religious Jews in exile.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The presence of objects of homosexual love in erotic love poetry gave rise to scholarly debate regarding the question of whether these poems authentically reflect the atmosphere in Jewish society, or rather were mere literary imitations of Arabic poetry. Most scholars are of the opinion that erotic representations in the poetry do not indicate any actual activity involving sexual contact between lover and beloved, whether female or male. Some even viewed this assumption as a defamation of the great Spanish poets who were also religious authorities and committed to a life of sanctity, while others, predominantly Schirmann, insisted that this poetry was homoerotic, written in response to the reality of contemporary Jewish public life and influenced by Arabic culture.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The presence of the male love object in the Hebrew poetry of Spain warrants an in-depth examination of the nature of the depicted relationships, and this for the purpose of answering the question of whether this poetry veritably reflects the reality of the period. To facilitate this discussion, I will set out relevant theories dealing with the phenomenon of homosexuality, such as queer theory[[10]](#footnote-10) and social constructivism,[[11]](#footnote-11) and I will examine whether they can shed light on the existence of homosexuality amongst Jewish and Muslim men in Andalusia. Moreover, I will analyze the realistic representations of the male object of desire who expresses feelings and sensations[[12]](#footnote-12) in the poems of four of the greatest Jewish poets of the Spanish Golden Age: Samuel Hanagid, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Moses Ibn Ezra, and Judah Halevi, and later, in Christian Spain, Todros Ben Abulafia. I will also note their parallels in Arabic *‘ishq* poetry in Andalusia.

In addition, I will address questions arising from the main query: How did this phenomenon penetrate Andalusian Hebrew poetry? And how did these poets dare compose poems in which the boy-adolescent beloved is referred to as ‘*tzvi*’ (fawn)?[[13]](#footnote-13) I will also address the infiltration of recurrent motifs in the genre of wine and love poetry.

The conclusion of this study is that Hebrew erotic love poetry is not a mere literary imitation of Arabic poetry, but rather that it reflects a genuine reality in Jewish society.[[14]](#footnote-14) In this study I will demonstrate and verify the existence of erotic and homoerotic relationships in Jewish society in Spain and the East, just as this phenomenon existed in Muslim Andalusia.

This study, the first of its kind, is intended to fill a gap in the scholarship on Hebrew and Arabic literature in Andalusia, which is mainly due to some of the scholars’ limited knowledge of the Arabic language and culture. The innovation and contribution of this study is in understanding the essence of the inter-cultural influences in Andalusia, both in the field of poetry and in terms of social life, while presenting parallel examples in both languages.

1. Schirmann, 1942, p. 475. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Many studies have described an undoubted affinity between Hebrew poetry and Arabic poetry. Amongst them: Yellin, 1948, תורת השירה הספרדית; Schirmann, 1992, ספרד המוסלמית; Pagis, 1970, שירת חול; Pagis, 1976, חידוש ומסורת; Pagis, 1993, השיר דבור על אפניו; Ratzaby, 1966, עיונים, pp. 11-16; Ratzaby, 1995, שירה ערבית; pp. 329-350; Fleischer, 1991, תחנות בהתפתחות שיר האזור, pp. 111-159; Levin, 1980-1995, מעיל תשבץ; Levin, 1973, על מות; Levin, 1947, כהבכי על החורבות-תרביץ, pp. 278-296; Solomon Hanagid; Tuby, 1988, קירוב ודחייה; Yahalom, 1948, שירה וחברה, ת.א. , pp. 286-298; Schippers, 2008, אבן ח'פאגה, רמב"ע וריה"ל, p. vol. 4; Schippers, שירה, סדן, אלחריזי, pp. 24-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yellin, לחקר; Schirmann, ספרד המוסלמית; Pagis, שירת חול; Pagis, חידוש; Pagis, השיר; Ratzaby, עיונים; Ratzaby, שירה; Fleischer, הרהורים; Levin, מעיל תשבץ; Levin, על מות; Levin, הנגיד; Tuby, קירוב; Yahalom, השירה; Schippers, חיקוי, Schippers, שירה, סדן, אלחריזי, pp. 24-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rosen, 2001, p. 97 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ratzaby, 1985, pp. 38-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Such as his courtier poem “אל תישן” Schirmann, 1979, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ashtur, 1960, p. 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ratzaby, 1970, p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Schirmann, 1979, p. 77, 98; Ratzaby, 1970, pp. 146-147; Aloni, 1961, pp. 256-260. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Quote directly from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This theory argues that homosexuality is a social product of a particular society. “Foucault was a prominent advocate of the argument that sexuality is not a natural trait of human life but rather a constructed category whose origins are historical, social, and cultural – not biological.” See Kader, Ziv, and Kener, 2003, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Tzemach, 1964, p. 69; Hoss, 1995, pp. 35-40; Tuby, 2007, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ben Naeh, 2001, p. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Tuby, 2000, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)