Weaving Textual Tapestries: The Role of the Biblical Intertext

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Abstract— In Medieval Iberia, Arabic was perceived as the most communicative, practical, and beautiful language. Forced to contend with this, authors of Hebrew works sought to raise the caliber of the Hebrew language. This paper will explore the use of these Biblical intertexts through an intertextual analysis of Judah Halevi's poem "Song of Farewell." These intertexts utilized the contexts of their original stories to convey a deeper meaning to the literary works as well as create additional layered meaning subsequently aiding in the reinvigoration of the Hebrew language.

Throughout much of diasporic Jewish existence the Hebrew language was relegated to the status of *lashon hakodesh,* holy language, reserved only for sacred topics, and not spoken as the vernacular for common conversation. Furthermore, in literary pursuits, specifically in 10th century al-Andalus, the Hebrew language was deemed convoluted, and below the level of the highly acclaimed Arabic language, which was viewed as a more communicative and practical language.[1] In response, authors of Hebrew literary works sought to raise the caliber of the Hebrew language. Perhaps the most ubiquitous and central of the literary tools employed to accomplish this is the Biblical intertext. Because Hebrew shared Biblical language, authors became adept at utilizing Biblical Hebrew words in their work that in a sense functioned as a "code word." The word appeared common on the surface but to a knowledgeable reader, that word was also an allusion to a Biblical story. This paper will explore the use of these Biblical intertexts through an intertextual analysis of Judah Halevi's poem "Song of Farewell." These intertexts utilized the contexts of their original stories to convey a deeper meaning to the literary works as well as create additional layered meaning subsequently aiding in the reinvigoration of the Hebrew language.

Judah Halevi (1075-1141) was a Jewish poet and religious philosopher who wrote both in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic. Halevi was a prolific author, composing nearly 800 works of various genres, ranging from liturgical poems, philosophical works (the most famous of which is the *Kuzari)*, as well as other poetic forms such as secular love poetry. This secular love poetry combines Arabic quantitative meter with the Hebrew language, which caused controversy regarding the potentially blasphemous decision to use the holy Biblical language in a secular pursuit. Another poetic form utilized by Halevi was the *muwashah*, where the poem was composed in strophic form and written in classical Arabic. Though this poetic form was originally invented in al-Andalus by authors of Arabic works, many Jewish authors also used this model. It may seem as though when Jewish authors such as Halevi used the *muwashah* as the general form of their poems, it was their way out of finding their own unique structure by using a previously established one in its place. In truth, the combination of the *muwashah* with

[1] Rina Rory,. "Words Beautifully Put." *Genizah Research After Ninety Years: The Case of Judeo Arabic,* (Joshua Blau, Cambridge Press, 1992)

the creative and innovative use of Biblical intertexts became a fundamental form in demonstrating the effectiveness and beauty of the Hebrew language.

Halevi's *muwashah*, "Song of Farewell," is a secular love poem detailing the narrator's affection towards his beloved, despite their imminent separation. The most overt Biblical references in the poem is to Song of Songs, the *megillah* that centers on the passionate, exciting, and fleeting love of a beloved and lover (often interpreted as an allegory of the love between the Jewish People and God). The title of Halevi's poem itself, "Song of Farewell" seems to be in some way mirroring the title of Song of Songs, establishing an innate connection between the two works. This could be a result of the overlapping nature of the poem and thematic elements of Song of Songs, namely the profuse love poetry exchanged between the lover and beloved. This shared foundation builds the context to understand that this poem is more richly read through the lens of Song of Songs.

However, in addition to these overarching thematic parallels, there are specific textual intertexts that strengthen the connection and entrench Song of Songs deeper into the poem. Halevi opens the poem with the line ",*mah lach tzivia*" immediately characterizing the beloved as a gazelle, a word that is only mentioned twice (in this form) in the entire Bible, both times in Song of Songs. While comparing the female lover to a number of natural phenomena, the male beloved exclaims, "your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle" (4:5, 7:4). The context of *tzivia,*gazelle, here is unabashedly erotic; which is surprising especially given the religious nature of Song of Songs. The plural form of the word *tzivia*, *tzva'ot*, is a recurring motif throughout Song of Songs, whereby on two occasions the lover declares, "I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem, By gazelles or by hinds of the field: Do not wake or rouse Love until it please!" (2;7, 3:5). The plural form, *tzva'ot,* is also employed in the Bible as a sacred name of God, "*Hashem Tzevaot"*, bringing an unmistakable wordplay that lends itself to a religious undertone within Song of Songs.[2] The two uses of *tzivia* in Song of Songs highlights the meta-theme of the tension in having two conflicting themes, both erotic and religious within the same book. Halevi harnesses the complexity of Song of Songs in his own poem by using the word *tzivia* as the opening line of his poem, perhaps using it to reflect his own tensions with writing a secular love poem using Biblical language; allowing this one Biblical word to encapsulate his feelings without him having to state this dilemma explicitly.

In his use of intertexts, Halevi not only creates deeper meaning in his poem by mirroring the words' original source, but also inverts the original Biblical meaning of the word to add another layer. Most notably, the term *dod* in Song of Songs is the female lover's name for her male beloved, whereas in Song of Farewell, it is used by the lover to speak about himself in the third person. The inversion of voice here highlights how there is a shift in the balance of power between the lover and beloved. In contrast to Song of Songs' equality, in Song of Farewell, it is the male voice that is dominant in all facets pertaining to the relationship. Moreover, Song of Songs is at its core a dialogue between the lover and beloved, each calling out to each other, searching for one and other, desperate to be reunited. Halevi takes this idea of the back and forth and inverts it.; The poem becomes about a beloved who "withholds her voice" from her lover; transforming it into a one sided dialogue. This inversion draws attention to the fact that not only is the beloved reluctant, but the beloved's voice is entirely absent from the picture. The reader never experiences the vantage point of the beloved, as is depicted in the playful back and forth of Song of Songs.

Moreover, the *dod* in Song of Songs is at times reluctant to race to find his beloved, dodging the advances of his lover and resisting her pressure. The female lover beckons to the beloved, asking "Tell me, you whom I love so well; Where do you pasture your sheep? Where do you rest them at noon?" (1:7), but all the *dod* answers is, "Go follow the tracks of the sheep"

[2] Adin Steinsaltz, *The Steinsaltz Megillot: Megillat Shir Hashirim*. (Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2019).

(1:8), refusing to give away his exact location.[3] Halevi draws on the experience of the *dod* as a reluctant lover and inverts it, instead it is the female who is the reluctant one, "withholding [her] envoys from the lover" and the *dod* becomes the active pursuer, encouraging the woman to remain with him and open up to him. The textual inversions bring to to the fore the complexity of the relationship; on the one hand the intertexts themselves are reminiscent of the powerful and passionate love of Song of Songs, yet on the other hand, the inversion refracts the passionate love into a light of imbalance in the relationship, where the love in Song of Farewell cannot be equated with the love of Song of Songs.

In addition to the intertextual inversions, the larger thematic development of the poem progresses in the exact opposite trajectory of Song of Songs. The beginning of Song of Songs begins with the two lovers in tension, struggling to find each other, and waiting for the moment they can be reunited and delight together in their love. At the conclusion of Song of Songs, there is a sense of mutual harmony and tranquility. The end of the seventh chapter details the female lover's plans,"Let us go early to the vineyards; Let us see if the vine has flowered, If its blossoms have opened, If the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give my love to you." (7:13) The unity between them is represented by their plans to go to the fields together, standing side-by side instead of in opposition, and they will proceed in their relationship together. However, in Song of Farewell the tension is impending with the beloved's imminent departure, as the lover laments "we two are doomed to parting." In Song of Farewell, at first they are close and then doomed to part, whereas in Song of Songs, the lovers must first search and work towards a deep love. Perhaps Halevi inverts Song of Songs to demonstrate how the relationship has not yet undergone the same trials as the relationship of Song of Songs, still in its fledgling state, unsure if this newfound love will hold its own through the test of separation.

The Song of Songs intertexts are not the only ones employed by Halevi. The poem closes with the words ״לא אדע אם בין צלעי נעצר לבי.״ It seems that in addition to the Song of Songs ״ references, the closing line creates an intertext with a different story. The Hebrew word for rib is *tzela*, a word that instantly transports the reader to Genesis 2 when "God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man." (Genesis 2:22) Perhaps the rib of the lover is meant to mirror Adam's rib that God used to create Eve. Using this reference would underscore the importance of the love the speaker feels. Instead of being relegated to the fleeting and playful love of Song of Songs, their relationship is one of necessity in the same way that Adam needed Eve, and could not be without her. Adam felt an existential loneliness without Eve, and the lover implies that they will feel the same thing without their beloved. These closing lines are known in this style of poetry as a *kharaja*, or closing. The *kharaja* here seems to invite complication to the notion that this poem is one of a farewell, and perhaps even disagreeing with the poem's characterization of the love in a fledgling state; the speaker wishes that this love can develop into something more lasting, permanent, and reminiscent of the relationship between Adam and Eve.

Song of Songs and Genesis not only function in their own independent intertextual realms, but also come together., Halevi creates a layered meaning by weaving together two otherwise separate Biblical stories in one poem, highlighting Halevi's creativity. The male lover in Song of Farewell states," *lo tedei ki ain l'dodekh mizman bilti shomea kol shlomotaich"*; the words *shomeah* and *kol* are integral to both Song of Songs as well Genesis, but represent opposite emotions.

In Song of Songs, the lover demands, *"hashmeini et kolech ki kolech arev u"mareicha naava"* (2:14). The formulation of "*hashmeini et kolech*" is the reflective pattern. "Let me hear your voice," the lover demands, begging the woman to open up to him and to reveal a part of herself to him through her voice. Much like in the Song of Farewell, where a similar request is

[3] Mosheh Lichtenstein, "Your Time For Love Has Arrived: A Literary Analysis Of Shir Ha-Shirim". *Blogs.Timesofisrael.Com*, 2017, https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/your-time-for-love-has-arrived-a-literary-analysis-of-shir-ha-shirim/. Accessed 14 Apr 2021.

made to the beloved to "*shomea kol shlomotaich*," hear your welcoming voice. In both, the welcoming and sweet voice serves as a possible way to draw the two together, hopefully eventually serving to cement the relationship.

In contrast, in Genesis, the first time *kol* appears is immediately after the sin of Adam and Eve when they partook of the forbidden fruit, against God's explicit instructions. God turns to Adam to ask "*ayeka*", where are you, and Adam responds, "*vayomer et kolech shamat bgan vaera ki airom anokhi v'echba"* (Genesis 3:10). The *kol* of God here seems to represent discord between man and God; God reveals Himself through His voice, and instead of using it to draw closer; man hides, fearing God's voice. God's voice also creates a separation, as Adam responds "I heard your voice," and not "I heard you". Further, why does God have to ask Adam "*ayeka*", if He is an omnipotent God? It seems that the question of *ayeka* is not literally a question of location, but rather "where are you" on the emotional level; attempting to work with Adam to realize what prompted him to sin. However, Adam does not realize God's intended goal of the question of "where are you", which indicates ineffective communication between them; and they are no longer on the same level of understanding.

Thus, the meaning of the line " *lo tedei ki ain l'dodekh mizman bilti shomea kol shlomotaich*" in the Song of Farewell is drawn from the weaving together of the two intertextual associations- "*hashmeini et kolech* of Song of Songs, is the demand and *et kolech shamaati* is the answer: these two texts in conversation represent the plight of the beloved and the lover in the Song of Farewell; the lover idyllically wishes that the beloved would open herself up in order to create a lasting and meaningful relationship. But there is also a foreboding sense of disunity as an answer is never heard from the beloved herself, she only hears his voice but does not respond. It becomes unidirectional, ineffective communication that is reminiscent of Adam's inability to communicate with God, unable to grasp the meaning behind the words. Moreover, the development of the role of the voice from Song of Songs to Genesis underscores the emotional distance between the lovers. The voice transforms from a Song of Songs-esque unifying voice to a voice that puts up a barrier between the two partners; the female only hears the voice, not the person behind it, or what the male really wants from her and their relationship. The intertexts and inversions of Biblical language create a more complete picture of the relationship between the lover and beloved, that would not have otherwise been obvious according to the plain meaning of the text. The layers and complexity of the intertexts mirror the layers and complexity of the relationship.

Taken together, these intertexts not only lend nuanced depth to the poem itself, but also highlight Halevi's ingenuity, innovation, and creativity with the use of the Hebrew language through redefining Biblical language, and giving it new meaning. The intertext is a mechanism that functioned on multiple planes, which is why it was able to imbue such incredibly complex layers of meaning. Halevi thereby proves through his use of the Biblical intertexts that the Hebrew language is relevant and beautiful. The flexibility of the language is derived from its ability to speak both to the past and present, both in the use of its original Biblical context and in the new meanings created by Halevi. Halevi inserts his own voice into the evolving Hebrew language, making room for future authors to riff off of the new meaning he gives to these Biblical words while adding yet another stitch in the textual tapestry of the Hebrew language.