Sa Le’at: A Social Dimension in the Hebrew Song of the Seventies

Alexander Rosenblatt

Abstract
The paper examines the social aspect of Israeli (Hebrew) songs, relating to what can be assessed as a “positive message to society” in the texts, a phenomenon associated in particular with one of the predecessors of the Hebrew song—the Russian song of the 1930s to the 1950s. Artifacts are analyzed using the tools and methods of several academic disciplines: sociology of music, cultural anthropology, and sociolinguistics. The history of positive statements about society or the environment in the lyrics, starting from the Romantic period, is part of this survey. As essential features of songs with a socially positive message, a range of properties are considered, for example, the image of the environment and some other structural and stylistic elements of texts. This background precedes the analysis of two songs chosen to represent the topic of the study itself. The Hebrew song of the seventies is regarded as part of the cultural heritage of the country, whose culture has traces of many cultures, whose representatives have built this young state, which in itself has a deep historical, cultural, and intercultural scope.

Keywords
Hebrew song, Israeli song, environment, positive message

The period of the 1960s and 1970s was a vibrant era in Western history, when the younger generation played a vital role in the design of new cultural codes and a new critical view of society. Yet, at the same time, in other countries, where the formation of national identity (and the construction of a national culture) was still on the rise, mass culture, including popular songs, received other contextual and textual manifestation. Among such societies can be considered the Russian Soviet society and Israeli society, in which a new culture is being built, and common values as well as public consciousness counteract individualism, which in the meantime grew up in the West.

Ritzarev (2012) reported that leading Soviet songwriters of the 1930s were of Jewish origin. In this regard, the researcher notes that composers who moved to the big cities of the Soviet Union and those who left Russia for Eretz Israel belong to the same category associated with people who aimed to build a new culture of the place. Yet, while Soviet songwriters created new urban culture supported by the government ideologically and by means of media, Shirei Eretz Israel (Songs of the Land of Israel) became a national folklore of the people who obtained their land and language (Ritzarev 2012: 36-38). This folklore did not lose its meaning until this day but over the 1970s was slowly superseded by the new generation of Hebrew songs; the urban ones, part of

---

Correspondent Author:
Alexander Rosenblatt, Nof HaGolan 1/2, Zefat 1305016, Israel
which—that contain the positive message to society—are the main target of present analysis.

The most striking peaks of “positive songs” in the history of the two countries do not coincide in time and, moreover, belong to the two different categories of songs—patriotic songs and personal observations with a caring for society. Therefore, direct comparisons are not entirely appropriate, and the traditional approach of historical musicology will give way to a multidisciplinary approach where the “historical line” coexists with other methods of comparison and analysis.

GOOD SONGS AND POSITIVE SONGS

The social aspect of the songs, as a subject of study, captures the common domain of several disciplines: sociology of music, cultural anthropology, and sociolinguistics. Yet, the focus of this vast research area is dominated by the nuances of rebellious practices using songs as a means of expression. Questions of the quality of the songs themselves as well as of the vector of their emotional attitude towards a society (critical vs. positive) somehow fall between the reference points. The author’s exploration of the subject performed in 2015 led him to a conclusion that both “good songs about society” and “positive songs about society”—at least in the English open access forums—seem to be underdeveloped topics, whereas scholarly publications on the subject as such had not been found.

Putting “good songs about society” and “positive songs about society” in the search engine as keywords, the author received in the first ten items links to two forums at Yahoo Answers, each of which began with a request for help, but in fact, a rhetorical question. The first such question was the following one:

Hey, I’m working on a project and wanted to know your opinion on what are some good songs overall that accurately portray society as it is today. Please give me the name of the song as well as the artist please. Any input is appreciated. Thanks in advance to anyone who could help me out here.

The only two answers (for the last five years) appeared, and they referred to the early works of Bob Dylan and Nobody Told Me by John Lennon. Below is the second request:

...i have a sociology assignment where i need to find a positive and negative song about society. The negative was easy but I cant think of a positive. It cant be a love song and it cant apply to one person, like the artist can’t sing a song about his life. it needs to be about the overall american society. HELP!!?

As in the first case, there were very few answers and recommended songs, like so different in their social message America by Neil Diamond and Last Fallen Hero by Charlie Daniels Band, a song “dedicated to the fallen heroes of 9/11, emergency responders, and our armed services who fought and fight for our freedom”. This situation prompted the author to rethink positive songs that he remembered from his childhood in the Soviet Union and positive songs that surrounded him in Israel during the 1990s, as social phenomenon, which is not typical of Western society.

POSITIVE TO WHOM, TO WHAT

The genre of the mass song with a positive message to society was characteristic of the Soviet Union from the 1930s to the mid-1950s and resulted in quite a few examples of the good songs that people really liked. This model was also typical for Hebrew songs of the same period and even later. In opposite, in the West, “positive song about society” can hardly be found in the field. So, can we assume that the Russian or Israeli society of those years was a little better than Western society? Without answering this rather rhetorical question, one can just conclude: the more developed a society becomes, the less a poet loves it. This is
obviously due to economic reasons: Western society is a market economy where the state no longer requires the services of a poet, and the market is likely to pay for criticism of the society than for praise to it. Thus, songs with a positive message to society are a rare phenomenon in the developed countries, but, on the contrary, are typical for societies in process of formation or in danger when song is a factor of people’s consolidation, regardless of whether it comes from the soul of a poet, a common national feeling, or ideological support from above.

The review below is an experience to approach essential properties of the subject of study using appropriate research tools: reference points, comparisons, and other analytical devices. Among the reference points, the author will consider “depiction of the environment”, “motion”, and “enumeration”. Comparisons will be conducted between songs of appropriate or different periods and national origin, but from the same reference point. Analytical tools will deal with social processes, historical and cultural circumstances, and external influences that affect the artistic and socio-cultural value of the songs examined.

FROM CREATIVE PATHOS TO NATIONAL MELANCHOLY

First, the author will consider the corresponding periods of the formation of culture in the two countries—the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) and Israel—to distinguish between “positive songs of creative pathos” and “positive songs of national melancholy”.

The spirit of the creative pathos has reigned in the newborn Soviet State during the first decades after the October Revolution (1917). Towards the mid-1930s, a recognizable style of Soviet mass song was established. Similar spirit reigned also in Eretz Israel of the Yishuv period, actually in the same years. In the 1920s and until the mid-1930s, new immigrants from Russia brought with them many songs, some of which were immediately recognized as new songs of the Land of Israel—Shirei Eretz Israel (see Eliram 2006).

The World War II brought about the difference in socio-cultural concepts of Soviet and Israeli songs. However, despite the differences, some shared features and trends in “positive songs” of the two countries could be traced over the next two decades. One of such features is a sense of national melancholy caused by the awareness of the loss: in the case of the Soviet Union—the Great Patriotic War (part of the World War II, 1941-1945), in the case of Israel—wars of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The latter period, the seventies, is especially important to comprehend the socio-cultural change in Israel, since several factors affected the Hebrew song, including the influence of Anglo-American rock style on the music and lyrics (see Regev 1992). Yet, it is typical of the Hebrew song of the period, that personal observations in the texts employ an attitude to the national memory and a sense of national melancholy. Regarding the last point, two Israeli songs will be the main target for the analysis: Ahi Hatzair Yehuda (My Young Brother Yehuda, 1968) by Ehud Manor/Yohanan Zarai and Sa Le’at (Drive Slow, 1974) by Arik Einstein/Miki Gavrielov. These two songs reflect the most characteristic features of Hebrew songs, whose music stylistically resonates with the Anglo-American slow rock style and whose lyrics are closely associated with Israeli nationwide feelings. The texts of these two songs are related to the depiction of the surroundings and the enumeration of events, accompanied by the author’s comments.

Here we must go to the reference points listed above, to get the tools needed for further analysis.

REFERENCE POINT: DEPICTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Awareness of the environment as a factor of emotional attitude is probably one of the most important
elements in the historical formation of a “positive song”. While the appeal to nature is one of the typical features in songs since the Renaissance, the Romantic era, however, brings a new step in the relationship between human and nature: The latter becomes an essential part in program music, even without sung text, as for example in Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*. Poetry and songs of that epoch, first of all song cycles, are literally built on the interaction between the man and nature. Such are *Die Schöne Müllerin* (Wilhelm Müller/Franz Schubert, 1823) and *Dichterliebe* (Heinrich Heine/Robert Schumann, 1840). In Russian Soviet song, the portrait of the working environment, which is a kind of socialized nature, often replaces the images of nature characteristic of Romantic songs. Plant, factory chimney, factory whistle, and agricultural work in the field are almost indispensable participants in the environment surrounding the hero in the Soviet lyrical song.

The city—as an object of positive attitude, a positive background for the lyrical narrative or both—is a communicative environment typical for “positive songs”. Moscow and Jerusalem are among the cities that received a significant number of beautiful songs, although, in terms of the total number of songs associated with a particular city, New York and Paris are likely to head such a list. Most Soviet songs dedicated to cities (like many other Russian patriotic songs of the time) are based on the genre of a march, with few exceptions. The first decades after the Great Patriotic War reduced emotional intensity and expanded the genre variety of Soviet songs, including songs about cities. Thus, the song *Podmoskovnye Vechera* (Moscow Nights, 1956) by Mikhail Matysovskiy/Vasily Solovyov-Sedoi is characterized by sincerity and lyricism, and it has neither ideological nor military component. This song became widely known in the West, especially after its piano arrangement by Van Cliburn, an American pianist who won the First International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow in 1958 and introduced this song in the USA.

All songs dedicated to Jerusalem—from *Me’al Pisgat Har Hatzofim* (Above the Peak of Mount Scopus, 1928) by Avigdor Hameiri up to *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav* (Jerusalem of Gold, 1967) by Naomi Shemer—are highly lyrical whenever they were written. Senior citizens recall that in the first decades after the establishment of the State of Israel, the anthems for the major cities were composed. Moreover, during the 1970s, school students who studied these songs were encouraged to write additional stanzas, since the quick development of the cities supposed bringing new facts and remarkable events in the history of the cities to be memorized.

**REFERENCE POINTS: ENUMERATION AND MOTION**

The plot of a song is, sometimes, nothing more than an enumeration of events, objects, actions, or other text elements that are similar in a semantic function, whereas only the author’s comments (or conclusions) following such a list determine the moral content of the song’s lyrics. For example, the text of *Junk*, a beautiful melancholic song by Paul McCartney (1968, released in 1970), consists of enumeration of household and tourist accessories, such as candlesticks, sleeping bags, or bicycle for two, all referred to as “broken hearted jubilee”. Each of the two stanzas is completed by the refrain:

```
Buy! Buy!
Says the sign in the shop window.
Why? Why?
Says the junk in the yard.
```

Does it really mean that sentimental memories of the author directly or indirectly criticize the consumer society, or was it just a gesture expressing a sad feeling of the songwriter after the dissolution of the Beatles?
As a structured text, enumeration can serve as a part of the narrative, or formative element, or artistic means, or even all these together. Thus, having listed the moving items of Miller’s surrounding environment and equipment (namely, stream, wheels, and millstones) in *Das Wandern* (Wandering), an opening song of *Die Schöne Müllerin*, the poet leaves a comment:

A man isn’t much of a miller,
If he doesn’t think of wandering,
Wandering!

On the contrary, the lyrics of the song *Ohev Lihiyot Babayit* (I Love to Be Home), written by Arik Einstein/Miki Gavrielov in the mid-1980s, describes challenges characteristic of other people:

There are people who climb mountains
And people who jump from airplanes.

There are people who ride horses
And those who burn up the miles...

This meets a stubborn author’s assertion, which receives here rather a positive meaning:

But I love to be home
With tea and lemon
and my old books.
Yes, I love to be home
With the same old love
and the same old habits.
I love to be home.

Here we are actually dealing with motion and action, both of which are related to the time factor, and both of which are characteristic accessories of the song as a genre, unfolding in time.

At a certain stage, depicting a motion requires an appropriate accessory: a vehicle. Moreover, such an accessory might even become a central element of the narrative, whether a vehicle itself is the object or it is an object, from within which the fixed objects might be successively observed. For example, *Poputnaya Pesnya* (Travelling Song, 1840) by Nestor Kukolnik/Mikhail Glinka seemingly deals with the excitement of the people watching a rapidly passing locomotive. However, the locomotive serves here a measure for the speed of the secret thought of the hero, a thought that is flying faster than a train, in the dream of a meeting with the beloved. On the other hand, *Dorozhnaya* (A Travel Song, 1949) by Sergey Vasilyev/Isaak Dunayevsky already uses the train as an object, from which the hero observes (and enumerates) the various elements of the surrounding industrial environment, followed in refrain by an emotional comment:

Oh, how much I saw,
Oh, how much I drove,
Oh, how much I passed,
And all around is mine!

This sentence contains a rather positive social concept, as it is a recognition of the collective nature of property in the Soviet country, where everything is common and at the same time accessible to the individual.

Now we can move to the Hebrew songs that are the main objects of this review.

**EHUD MANOR: PERSONAL LOSS AS COMMON FEELING**

*Ahi Hatza’ir Yehuda* (My Young Brother Yehuda, 1968) is a song written by Israeli poet and singer Ehud Manor in memory of his brother Yehuda Wiener killed during the War of Attrition that followed the Six Day War. Music for this song was composed by Yohanan Zarai.

The song sounds like a ballad. However, it is rather a dialogue, which the poet is trying to conduct with his dead brother. Each stanza of the song begins with a rhetorical question:
My young brother Yehuda, 
Do you hear? 
Do you know? 

It is accompanied by a list of events of the surrounding nature and closest social circles—the family, kindergarten, and school. Thus, first stanza portrays the cycles of nature that continue to flourish: The sun is shining, the wind scatters leaves, and rain falls. Second stanza describes the childhood counties, which continue to exist: kindergarten learns a new song, and high school students are training again on the court. However, despite the apparent calm appearance, life had not returned to normal, and will doubtfully return. The loss fills the heart at any moment. At the end of the second stanza, the poet confronts the false peace with the fact that, despite the time that has passed, “Mom secretly waits, letter may yet come”.

Third stanza of the song intensifies the size of loss. At the end of the stanza, the poet promises to name his son after his deceased brother. Manor, indeed, fulfilled his promise a few years later with the birth of his son Yehuda (Yadi) in 1974.

When Ehud Manor was awarded the Israel Prize in the field of HaZemer Haivri (the Hebrew Song), specified among other things:

Ehud Manor never wanted to be a public emissary. His poetry does not usually leave place for “we”. As he sees it, a songwriter cannot speak but on behalf of himself. Indeed, he brought into the Hebrew song his private voice, intimate, revealing, and sensitive, but miraculously became a song of the individual, a song of the many.

Among Ehud Manor’s songs, Ahi Hatza’ir Yehuda has become over the years one of the most prominent songs of Israeli national eulogy.

**ARIK EINSTEIN: A POEM OF NATIONAL MELANCHOLY**

Throughout the seventies and further on, until the end of his days in November 2013, Arik Einstein was perhaps the most significant figure among Israeli songwriters and singers. He accumulated both the tradition of HaZemer Haivri and the rock style, using the latter among the means of bringing the traditional Hebrew song in accordance with the spirit of the epoch. Several songs of Arik Einstein, where he appears as a lyricist and singer, are emblematic for not only the history of Israeli song, but also for the awareness of the social change in Israeli society of the 1970s. Sa Le’at (Drive Slow, 1974) is obviously of that stuff. Miki Gavrielov composed music for this song, which is the title song of Sa Le’at, the tenth solo album of Einstein. The album reflects the national mood prevailed in Israel after the Yom Kippur War (1973) and largely represents a retreat from the “rock line” characteristic of previous Einstein’s albums. Song Sa Le’at is among the songs directly associated with the public image of the singer.

The plot of the song is based on a passage from an imaginary trip of Arik with his friend Zvi (perhaps Zvi Shissel—Israeli actor and television producer, with whom Arik was connected a creative friendship for years) in an old car through the rain, whereas a dialog between the two is conducted. “Sayings” of Zvi are followed by “thoughts” of Arik—all in response to rainy weather, troubles of the old car, and other events listed during this trip.
We’re driving in the old car
Through the wet night.
The rain got heavy again,
And you can’t see a meter ahead.
Drive slow.
Zvi says rain like this
hurts the farmers,
And I think how warm it is at home,
And the poor soldiers
lying in the mud right now.
Drive slow, drive slow.

Depiction of a motion (from within a vehicle) is designed as a direct interaction with a portrayed environment through the said and thought statements, associated with different layers of the social life of the time. Soldiers, security situation, home, farmers, football, personal relationships, and finally, sentimental memories—these are the topics throughout the song. The text moves from topic to topic, seemingly without direct link between them, but the link is there and it is a keen sense of social inclusion. The lyrics just laced with warm feelings for the country and its people.

The lyric section of the song recalls sentimental memories of visiting Eilat, entering the sea, and singing Beatles:

Everybody was on the same wavelength – We sang Beatles in harmony.

It is noteworthy that the peak of sentimental memories accounts for singing the music of a group associated generally with an individualistic approach of Western songwriters. As we have seen above, one of the most lyric songs of McCartney, Junk, deals with sentimental memories at the level of commemorative accessories that have lost their emblematic values and joined other “junk” in the yard.

Song Sa Le’at is a panorama of the national mood, the national feeling of the era, but in fact a portrait of Israeliyut (Israeliness) in the seventies. It reflects a national sense of melancholy when, after decades of enthusiasm and pathos of building the new country, people recognize that wars are integral part of Israeli reality. Part of this feeling was to find a peace of routine life between the wars, accompanied with a sense of the one family, and that feeling still existed in Israeli society. Meanwhile, the new socio-cultural realities, including the growing influence of musiqa mizrakhit (Oriental music) on the national song style, gradually brought the Hebrew song from the public dimension to the world of personal feelings and experiences.

Ahi Hatza’ir Yehuda and Sa Le’at are vibrant examples of the good songs with a positive message to society, reflecting their time and place where have been created.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the paper was to emphasize the social aspect in the Israeli (Hebrew) songs of the seventies, introducing songs with a “positive message” to society, a phenomenon not typical of Western society in those years and later. Historical search pointed to the connection between early Hebrew songs (namely the Songs of the Land of Israel) with the legacy of Soviet Russian songs of the 1930s-1950s, most of which also contain a socially positive message. The study showed, however, that Russian and Hebrew songs with a positive message belong to two different categories: patriotic songs and personal observations with concern for society, respectively.

While part of the Songs of the Land of Israel was written by people for whom Russian culture, including songs, was part of their cultural identity, some other Hebrew songs come directly from Russian origin: they were simply brought by the newcomers. Given these details, the parallels between the two cultures of the songs become clear.

A historical retrospective of songs with a positive message to society or the environment, beginning with
the Romantic period, preceded the analysis of two Hebrew songs chosen to represent the subject of the study. Research tools of sociolinguistics were useful in determining the basic properties of the text in all analyzed songs. Thus, depiction of the environment, as well as several structural and stylistic elements of the text, namely enumeration and motion, were considered as typical features of songs with a socially positive message.

The study showed that, although parts of the Hebrew songs throughout the 1960s and even the 1970s still resonated with Soviet songs of the time, a new stream of Anglo-American rock music affected the Israeli song without bringing with it individualistic content and a rebellious spirit. The texts of these new songs reflect the pain of the Israeli people, whose families have already experienced the loss of their members in wars and terrorist acts during the short history of the new state, as well as the feeling of the one family in a small country.

The Hebrew song of the seventies remains part of the cultural heritage of the country, whose culture has traces of many cultures, whose representatives have built this young state, which in itself has a deep historical, cultural, and intercultural scope.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Prof. Marina Ritzarev and Prof. Edwin Seroussi for valuable comments on the earlier version of the material, which helped to bring the review to its present form.

Notes

4. Industrial environment as a part of communicative environment in the functioning of the Russian language is one of the topics addressed by the contemporary sociolinguistics (see Galimyanova 2010).
7. Russian linguists consider the enumeration among the “methods of literary presentation” (see Bylinsky and Rosenthal 2011, ch. 10). Traditional English linguistics does not refer to the term or to the concept. Recent publications on English literature written by the foreign scholars (such as Siantova 2013) address this expressive means among the “stylistic devices”.
8. Translation of Arik Einstein’s lyrics (here and further on) by J. J. Goldberg.
9. For the purpose of this analysis, we consider all motion events as one category, though functional linguistics tends to make a distinction between human motion and object activity (see Filipec 1994). Furthermore, a distinction is also made between how the languages of the world refer to different parameters of the motion, such as trajectory, manner, cause of motion, and so on (see Papafragou, Massey, and Gleitman 2003).
11. Recent study (Dragolov et al. 2013) found that social cohesion in Israel (1989 to 2012) is one of the lowest in the Western world.

References

Haifa Press.


Bio

Alexander Rosenblatt, Ph.D. from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2013), Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of British Columbia, Canada (2013/2014), presently Lecturer at Zefat Academic College, Israel, author of several publications in the USA, Germany, and Israel; research fields: music and socio-cultural issues, music of Christian worship, and multiculturalism.