

From **“To the Bird”**

Welcome back, lovely bird,¹
from hot lands to my window —
I died for your sweet song in winter,
after you left me at home.

Sing of miracles far away.
Is there, dear bird, tell me,
much evil there too, and pain
in that land of warmth, of beauty?

Do you sing greetings
from fruited valley and hill?
Has God pitied, comforted Zion,
or is she a graveyard still?²

Tears are done, hope is gone —³
but my torment has no end.
Welcome back, precious bird,
sing out your joyful song!

Spring 1891

Translated by David Aberbach



[1] The word *shuvah* means “return” and suggests both the religious concept of *teshuvah* (repentance) as well as the emergent turn-of-century movement *Shivat Zion* (Return to Zion), which pioneered emigration to Palestine. The bird is reminiscent of the dove in the biblical story of Noah: “And the dove came back to him at eventide and, look, a plucked olive leaf was in its bill, and Noah knew that the waters had abated from the earth.” (Genesis 8:11)

[2] Over the centuries, the Land of Israel became a place to be buried rather than a place in which to live.

[3] While the tears of exile and longing are replaced by the joy of return, for some reason the poet declares his own personal torment to be endless.

אַל הַצְפוּר

שְׁלוֹם רַב שׁוּבָה, צְפוּרָה נְחֻמָּדָת,
מְאַרְצוֹת הַחַם אֶל־חִלּוּנִי –
אַל קוֹלֶךָ כִּי עָרַב מֵה נְפֹשֵׁי כְלָתְהָ.
בְּחֶרֶף בְּעֶזְבְּךָ מֵעוֹנִי.

זְמָרִי, סִפְרִי, צְפוּרֵי הַיְקָרָה,
מְאַרְץ מְרַחֲקִים נְפִלְאוֹת,
הַגֵּם שָׁם בְּאַרְץ הַחֲמָה, הַיְפָה,
תְּרַבֵּינָה הַרְעוֹת, הַתְּלָאוֹת?

הַתְּשֵׂאֵי לִי שְׁלוֹם מְזַמְרֵת הָאָרֶץ,
מַעֲמֶק, מַגִּיא, מְרַאשׁ הָרִים?
הַרְחַם, הַנְּחַם אֶלּוֹה אֶת־צִיּוֹן,
אִם עוֹדָה עֲזוּבָה לְקַבְּרִים?

כָּבֵר כָּלוּ הַדְּמָעוֹת, כָּבֵר כָּלוּ הַקְּצִים –
יְלֵא הַקִּיץ הַקָּץ עַל יְגוֹנִי.
שְׁלוֹם רַב שׁוּבָה, צְפוּרֵי הַיְקָרָה,
צְהִלֵּי־נָא קוֹלְךָ וְרַנִּי!

ניסן, תרנ"א.

The Silver Platter

"The state will not be given to the Jewish people
on a silver platter."

— Chaim Weizmann

And the land quiets, the crimson sky slowly dimming over
smoking frontiers¹

And the nation arises, heartbroken but breathing,
To receive the miracle, the only one, there is no other....

As the ceremony approaches, it will rise amid the moon, standing erect
in terror and joy. When across from it a young man and woman
emerge and slowly, slowly march toward the people.

Dressed in battle gear, dirty,
Shoes heavy with grime, they climb the path quietly.
They didn't change their clothes, they didn't wipe their brows,²
Still bone weary from days and nights in the battlefield



The story of this poem begins on December 15, 1947 in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann was speaking to a gathering of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) to raise funds for the defense of the Yishuv. In his speech, Weizmann said, "The state will not be given to the Jewish people on a silver platter." The poet Nathan Alterman took these words and wrote the poem, "*Magash HaKesef*" ("The Silver Platter"), which he published on December 19, 1947 in his weekly column in the *Davar* newspaper.

[1] "And Midian was laid low before Israel, and they no longer lifted their heads, and the land was quiet forty years." (Judges 8:28)

[2] "By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread till you return to the soil, for from there you were taken, for dust you are and to dust shall you return." (Genesis 3:19)

מגש הכסף

"אין מדינה נתנת לעם

על מגש של כסף" –

חיים וייצמן

... והארץ תשקט. עין שמים אודמת

תעמעם לאטה

על גבולות עשנים.

ואמה תעמד – קרועת לב אף נושמת ... –

לקבל את הנס

האחד אין שני...

היא לטקס תכון. היא תקום למול סהר

ועמדה, טרם-יום, עוטה חג ואימה.

– – אז מנגד יצאו

נערה ונער

ואט-אט יצעדו הם אל מול האמה.

לובשי חל וחגור, וכבדי נעלים,

בנתיב יעלו הם

הלוך והחרש.

לא החליפו בגדם, לא מחו עוד במים

את עקבות יום-הפוך וליל קו-האש.