

Literary and Didactic Trends in Selected Versions of Two Legends about King Solomon

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Abstract

This article discusses several different versions of two Jewish legends about the Biblical King Solomon: “Why is the Cyclamen’s Head Bent?” and “Why is the Olive Tree Hollow?” Both legends express the sorrow, pain, and even mourning of these two flora specimens over the death of the king. In the first, the cyclamen bends its head, and in the second, the trunk of the olive tree becomes hollow. The diversity of versions display deliberate omissions or additions made by the individuals circulating the stories in order to emphasize what they saw as appropriate, or to downplay and leave out details they felt were irrelevant or might not be accepted by their audience. Therefore, the message or moral of each version also changes in light of the essential nature of the story. The first legend is set during the beginning of King Solomon’s reign, and the second takes place after his death.

The discussion is held on two levels: First, the two stories will be analyzed and the various legend versions will be studied in order to understand how they vary from a *social-conceptual* point of view, while observing the narrator-audience interaction. The second part employs a *critical-analytical* perspective to observe changes in the legend, while referring to the literary text and its didactic components. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to demonstrate the thematic, literary, linguistic, and didactic considerations that led to the many different versions of each legend, and to explore a new way of perceiving legends as fulfilling the readers’ spiritual and/or emotional needs.

The literary and didactic trends in the different versions of two legends about King Solomon

Many legends were written about King Solomon, and some were collected or researched in several books (Alexander-Frizer, 1999; Bialik, 1933; Bialik and Ravinsky, 2015; Bin-Gorion, 1976; Elstein, Lipsker, and Kushelevsky, 2005; Gaster, 1935; Ginzberg, 2006; Shaked, 1992). Moreover, there are legends and versions of various legends about King Solomon in the *Israel Folktale Archives* website (IFA), named in honor of Dov Noy, and the *Center of Folktales and Folklore* website (CFF).¹

The legends discussed in this article form a thematic series. The manner in which the thematic series develops is a literary project in its own right and can be studied as a basic component of the development of Hebrew literature in general (Elstein and Lipsker, 1995). This article will discuss a thematic series of several versions of two legends with a homogeneous theme: “Why is the Cyclamen’s Head Bent?” and “Why is the Olive Tree Hollow?” This article’s goal is to reveal the thematic, literary, linguistic, and didactic considerations defining the many versions of each legend.

“Why is the Cyclamen’s Head Bent?” –version one

Following a long and full life, King David died and his son Solomon succeeded him and sat on his throne. His kingship was well-established for he was wiser than any other man, very intelligent, generous, and was famous among all the surrounding nations. Unlike his father who

¹ The legends include “King Solomon and Ashmedai” (the King of the Demons), “King Solomon and the Bee,” “King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba,” and “King Solomon’s Daughter.” It is also important to mention a well-known play written by Sammy Gronemann about King Solomon—*King Solomon and the Cobbler*—which was translated from the German (*König Salomo und der Schuster*) by Nathan Alterman (1943/1975). Out of all the 200 legends about King Solomon available at the IFA, the two legends discussed in this article were not there (after conferring with Dr. Haya Milo, the scientific coordinator at the archives on 25 June 2017). *Israel Folktale Archives*: <http://ifa.haifa.ac.il/index.php/he/>; *Center of Folktales and Folklore*: <http://folkmasa.org/>. My thanks to Dr. Yoel Peretz for his research assistance.

had been a man of war since he was young, Solomon was a great builder, who loved beauty and splendor. So he built the House of the Lord in Jerusalem, the walls of Jerusalem, the king's palace, the House of the Forest of Lebanon, as well as the chariot, cavalry, and storage cities.

The king then chose to design the palace furniture and symbols of his rule, so he made shields, bucklers of beaten gold, and his wondrous throne. The latter was a large ivory throne overlaid with sparkling gold and there was nothing quite like it in all the other kingdoms. However, he did not succeed in designing one thing and this was the shape of the royal crown. He sent his servants to wander the land for seven days, to examine all the flowers and bring him the most beautiful sampling they could find, so he could cast the royal crown in its likeness.

And the messengers went forth hastily from before him, and they searched the length and breadth of the land, from Tiphseh to Gaza, and from the Great Sea unto the Eastern Sea, that is, the Dead Sea. They examined all the beautiful flowers: the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valley, the wild peony, the rose, the anemone, the iris, and more. They did not overlook even a single one. But every bloom had a blemish. One had thorns and one a bad smell. One was boastful, and one had imperfect petals. The servants were at their wit's end. The week they had been granted for searching was over, and they had not yet found the sought-after flower. So they went up from the valley and returned to Jerusalem, angry and despondent. And, behold, while they were still journeying through the valley and climbing the mountains of Judah, they saw the cyclamen under one of the rocks. Setting their eyes on the flower, they found it beautiful and graceful, its flower was pinkish-purple, quite striking, and it lit up the face of the rocks and the grey rocky ground. And its leaves were in the form of a heart, which recalled Solomon's generosity of heart.

The king's servants took one cyclamen with them, and they made haste, in joy and of good heart, to the palace of the king in Jerusalem. King Solomon was sitting on his throne next to the lions, and they

brought the cyclamen and it found favor in his eyes. And he said to his servants: "You have chosen well. The flower is enchanting, and even so, its head is bent in humility before the Creator of the World. And its petals are like the horns of the gazelle, and it is the symbol of the Children of Israel and the Land of Israel, and it lives in the mountains between the rocks like the Tribes of Israel." And King Solomon made a golden crown decorated with precious stones in the shape of the cyclamen, and it was his royal crown for forty years. And when the great and wise king died and was buried in the tombs of the kings in Jerusalem, the entire world mourned, and the cyclamen mourned more than anyone else. And when, generations later, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, conquered Jerusalem, and destroyed the First Temple and plundered the crown of the kings of Judah, the cyclamen bent its beautiful head even more, and until this day it is bent from sorrow and grief (Smoli, 2001, pp. 120-121).

Version two²

Why does the cyclamen bend down its head? When King Solomon became King of Israel, he ordered a crown from artists and craftsmen. They all came and showed him beautifully crafted crowns made of silver and gold. But he did not like a single one of them. King Solomon was unable to reign without a crown on his head. With a heavy heart, he went out to the fields and mountains. And the land was full of flowers. The flowers lifted up their heads and called out: "I'm red! I will serve as the mold for the crown! I'm yellow! I'm suited for the crown! Me! Me! Me!" called out the flowers haughtily. But Solomon, who was a humble king, did not want vain flowers to serve as the mold for the king's crown. Again he was sad.

Suddenly his eyes lit up. Under a rock, he noticed a pink and humble cyclamen. He said to himself: "The cyclamen is a good mold!"

² This version can be found in the *La'metayel* website.

And the king was happy. “My crown will be like the cyclamen! It is a beautiful and modest flower. My crown, like the cyclamen flower, will remind me that I must reign over the Children of Israel, my people, and judge them with wisdom but also with modesty.” And when it was time for Solomon to die, the cyclamens were very sad and bent their heads—until this very day.

Version three—for children (the original Hebrew is in rhyme)³

Many years ago/ say the legends/ flowered in the Land of Israel/ the cyclamens—standing straight!/ And every cyclamen, like a queen/ its head so straight/ like a crown/ all pink./ And in those days Solomon reigned in Israel/ but the king didn't have a crown for his head./ Suddenly he heard a Heavenly voice saying/ “You will find the crown in the hills of Jerusalem!”/ “How strange,” thought Solomon/ “Because whoever heard of such a thing/ that the king's crown would be in the hills?”/ But he went out, as had said/ the Heavenly voice/ to find his crown in the hills, near Jerusalem./ He searched and searched and couldn't find/ any golden crown./ Suddenly he stopped and looked—/ What did he see?/ A graceful cyclamen between the rocks/ its head bent over/ wearing a beautiful crown—tall and pink./ “Here is the crown that was sent to me/ from Heaven!/ It is becoming for the crown of Israel/ the flowers of Jerusalem!”/ Solomon returned to his palace/ happy of heart/ and made in the form of a cyclamen/ a golden crown./ And all the people looked at him/ lifted their eyes to him/ “It is fitting for the King of Israel/ flowers of Jerusalem.”/ Good years passed by/ in peace and comfort/ under the vine and the fig tree/ everyone sat together.../ But then days also came/ of trouble and Exile⁴/

³ Miri Calelson. *Association of Private Kindergartens in Israel* website.

⁴ The Jewish “Exile” is often capitalized to indicate the significance of the expulsion and separation from the Land of Israel. The lands abroad where the Jews resided during this period are also called the Diaspora (Greek for “dispersion”). In this article, when referring to exile in a more general manner, the “e” is lower case.

Jerusalem was burned/ the royal house fell.../ Then the cyclamen bent/ its soft stalk/ the pink crown was lowered/ so terribly sad.../ They say it's still waiting/ forever, since then/ for the future king to arrive—the Messiah!

Version four—for Arabic-speaking children

Many years ago, Solomon, King of Israel, wanted to make himself a crown. Solomon said: “I will go to the field and choose a beautiful flower, and then I will make a crown in the form of this flower.” The king went out to the field to choose a flower. The flowers heard his words, and immediately raised their heads. Every flower very much wanted King Solomon to choose it as the mold for the crown. King Solomon walked about in the field, going from one flower to the next. He saw many beautiful flowers. They bloomed in all colors: red, yellow, orange, blue, and white. But King Solomon did not find a suitable flower. Suddenly he saw a pink, delicate, and modest flower, hiding between the rocks. King Solomon approached the flower, and whispered to it: “You are a beautiful, delicate, and modest flower, and therefore you are fitting to be the mold for my crown. Every time I put the crown on my head, I'll remember that I must be a gentle and modest king.” King Solomon returned to his palace with a happy heart. He called to his artists, and commanded them to prepare him a crown in the shape of a cyclamen. From that day on the cyclamen bends its head, and its beautiful flowers turn toward the ground (Lipkin and Shani-Arban, 2011, p. 128).

It seems the above legend is based on the following origins. The Arabic word for cyclamen is *taj Suleiman* (تاج سليمان)—[King] “Solomon's crown.” The cyclamen's petals are reminiscent of a crown, and that is the source of the name. legend relates:

“When Solomon sat on the throne of his father, David, to rule over Israel, he went out to the flowers of the field to choose a model and to order a crown in that shape—the king's crown. And he saw the graceful

cyclamen and it found favor in his eyes. And he commanded his wise craftsmen to prepare him a crown in the form of a cyclamen. Therefore its name is also 'Solomon's crown' until this day. When Jerusalem was destroyed, on the day that the enemy prevailed, they took all the treasures of Jerusalem and its splendid palaces, and they delivered into exile all of Jerusalem's glory and splendor, including the royal crown; they took them away to foreign lands. The cyclamens were sad, they bowed their petals in sorrow, and thus they are bent over and fatigued from their mourning, until this very day" (Chizik, 2003).⁵



Embroidery to illustrate her father's story, by Naomi Chizik

Version five

Solomon wanted to cast himself a golden crown, and therefore declared a beauty contest among the forest flowers. On the day of the contest, the cyclamen hid in its home, while the anemone wanted to be chosen. [Since the anemone and



Illustration: Liora Grossman in Levi (2010)

the cyclamen are feminine nouns in Hebrew, they needed to wait passively to be chosen (Schwartz, 2016).] Solomon, of course, searched for a flower that was beautiful, yet modest (and we will add: passive without any self-esteem). Here is what the cyclamen said to Solomon: "I am ugly, I am bent-over, my leaves are pale, thin, and pointed. There is no chance that you will want to cast your crown in my likeness." At the end of the story, the crown was indeed cast in its form, but the cyclamen did not want to live in the palace in a golden flowerpot, because it missed the natural world. It became depressed, pale, and lost its vitality, and Solomon allowed it to return to its place of origin (Zev Vilnay, 2010).

An ideological and conceptual analysis of the different versions of the legend of the cyclamen

From its countless and varied experiences, humankind has always taken note of its symbolic link with the *flower*, based both on the conscious and subconscious experiences of earlier generations (Neumann, 1959). It is not an "accidental symbol" created by people in the context of a personal, concrete event, nor is it a "conventional symbol" (Fromm, 1951/1973). The legend "Why is the Cyclamen's Head Bent?" shows the symbolic connection between King Solomon's desire to reign modestly and the similar qualities of modesty and bashfulness ascribed to the cyclamen. One of the Biblical laws for kings is: "so that his heart does not become haughty over his brethren" (Deuteronomy, 17:20), and therefore in the story, Solomon chooses a "modest" flower.

In the first version alone, King Solomon sent emissaries to search for the flower that would be the model for his crown. In the other versions, the king himself went out to look to find the flower, aside from the third version in which a Heavenly voice instructed him to choose the cyclamen, which imparts a divine aspect to the story. Those writing the different versions of the legend wished to illustrate both the greatness of a king with servants who do his bidding, while

⁵ For further elaboration on identifying plants and their features as a key to understanding an important part of the world of symbols and customs for each culture, see Dafni and Khatib (2017, pp. 166-168).

also showing the king's humility, who goes on a search by himself. In regard to the crown: In two of the five versions in this article, King Solomon fashioned the crown himself; in two others, he employed craftsmen to design it; and in one version he recounts that "the crown was cast" without noting who made it.⁶

All the versions emphasize the cyclamen's qualities of modesty and humility, along with the bending of "her" (as noted above, depicted in the feminine in the Hebrew language) head at the end of each story, except for the final version. In the first version, the reason is the king's death and the destruction of Jerusalem; in the second, it is the king's death alone; in the third, it is the Exile; and in the fourth it is the cyclamen's modesty unconnected to the king's death. The fourth version is made for Arab schools, and therefore details identified with Jews are omitted—exile and destruction (despite the fact that it is based on the Chizik version that refers to exile and destruction), and even King Solomon's death, not mentioned.

The literary characteristics of the different versions of the cyclamen legend

The first version includes many Biblical words, and efforts were made to remain faithful to the verses. This is the version by Eliezer Smoli (1901-1985) who was a famous educator and children's author during the early days of the State of Israel. The second version is from the *La'metayel* website—a shorter story for the use of tour guides in Israel who might come across a cyclamen while touring nature with their groups. This version's literary characteristics are the monologues, with the flowers arguing: "I'm suited for the crown!" Ultimately, it is the cyclamen, which humbly stays out of the squabble, that is eventually chosen. The third version is written for children by author

⁶ It is interesting to note that the servants searched for the flower for *seven* days—a typological number having a symbolic meaning in many legends and folktales ("The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats," "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves," etc.)

Miri Calelson, and is characterized by simple language and rhymes suitable for young children. The fourth version is for Arabic-speaking children and it is the only version in which the king holds a one-sided conversation with the cyclamen—he whispers to the cyclamen that it is fitting to decorate his crown. This version was created from two sources (Chizik, 2003; Lipkin and Shani-Arban, 2011) and is an approximate combination of both.⁷ The fifth version, written by Zev Vilnay (2010), an Israeli geographer and historian, is of particular interest since it is the only version in which the flower talks to the king and asks him to return it to the fields. This version stresses the cyclamen's modesty and humility, reflecting its thoughts that it isn't worthy or suitable for the king's crown, and how it misses being in the natural world. It also portrays the noble character of the king, who allows it to return to the grasslands. In sum, two versions are characterized by Biblical language and rhyme, and three by monologue or dialogue. These literary characteristics are aids in advancing the plot and creating credibility for the listener or reader.

The didactic message in all versions is the emphasis on modesty, humility,⁸ and generosity, from an individual-particular aspect, and the fond remembrance of the glorious past of the monarchy of Israel, from a nationalist perspective.⁹

⁷ As noted earlier in the text, cyclamen in Arabic is called *taj Suleiman*—Solomon's crown.

⁸ The cyclamen is a symbol of humility, perseverance, and love, and also symbolizes the life cycle (*Eureka Encyclopedia*; <https://eureka.org.il/%D7%A8%D7%A7%D7%A4%D7%AA>). According to the book, *Natural History*, authored by Pliny the Elder, who lived in Rome from 22-79 B.C.E., a house where a cyclamen grows will be protected from suffering and troubles.

⁹ It is important to note the gender-based difference between the two legends—the cyclamen which has been discussed up until now, and the olive tree that will be discussed later. As noted, the cyclamen symbolizes modesty and humility in various cultures. The cyclamen—a feminine image—is modest and shy. The olive tree—a male image—does not express feelings and eats itself up from inside (Herzig, 2005). This reflects a patriarchal world in which gender-oriented structuring affects how children listen to and understand the story, and is the basis that serves, among other things, as a common platform for both legends. See, in particular, version five of this legend.

“Why is the Olive Tree Hollow?” –version one¹⁰

On the day of King Solomon's death, the world was filled with heavy mourning. People grieved, along with all the animals and plants, whose language the king had known. But more than anyone else, the fruit trees lamented, and in their great sorrow they shed their green leaves and stood bare. Only the olive tree did not shed its leaves, and its branches continued to flourish.

The other trees were angry at the olive tree: “You, the king of all trees; is it not fitting for you to mourn over King Solomon, who was the wisest of all men?” The olive tree replied: “You shed your leaves so that everyone can see your sorrow, but in a short time you will grow new leaves and return to your everyday existence. On the contrary, my grief is deep and unceasing. My heart is broken within me, and if you look inside me, you will see that my trunk is hollow from sorrow, and thus it will remain forever.”

“The Grieving Olive Tree” –version two¹¹

When King Solomon died, all the animals and plants grieved. The animals wailed and refused to eat. The trees shed their leaves and did not bear fruit. They spoke amongst themselves in regard to great King Solomon's good-heartedness. Only the olive tree was silent and did not shed its leaves. The trees ostracized the olive tree, who had not spoken in praise of the king. Then, suddenly, one day there was a deafening noise. All the trees turned to look where the noise was coming from, and saw that the olive tree's trunk was splitting! They said to each other: The olive tree is mourning for King Solomon far more than we are. He mourned secretly, and his heart was breaking until it split. And ever since then, the trunk of every ancient olive tree is hollow and split from its great sorrow about the death of King Solomon.

¹⁰ *Ramat Hanadiv* website.

¹¹ *Educational Center* website.

“The Olive Tree and the Destruction of the Temple” –version three¹²

Once upon a time, many years ago, the olive tree was straight and beautiful, with a healthy green color and large blossoms. The olive tree was famous for its beauty and for being one of the Seven Species¹³ with which the Land of Israel was blessed. Everyone, of all ages, loved to eat olives and dip their bread in the clear, delicious olive oil. The olives also brought light into the homes, because their oil could be used in lamps. But more than anything else, the olive tree was proud for being able to provide the oil that lit the lamp in the Temple, which burned constantly. And why, you may ask, are the olive branches we see today coarse and twisted, and why are its flowers so small? Why is its trunk crooked? Why are the leaves silver instead of fresh green? All of this took place when the Temple was destroyed. When the olive tree heard the cries and saw the destruction, it bent over its head, its hair turned grey, and sadness consumed its flesh until it became hollow and its branches became twisted. It was as if all the suffering of the Jewish people had been chiseled into it, and it tells the story of destruction and Exile. But still, despite its pain, the olive tree continues to bear olives—yielding both fruit and oil to eat—and to be satisfied. It still cherishes hope in its heart that one day its oil might be a gift and light the lamp in the Temple again. It is true that the white olive blossoms have become smaller, but they continue to bloom and promise times of Redemption.

“Why is the Olive Tree Trunk Hollow?” –version four (the original Hebrew is in rhyme)¹⁴

A long time ago, or as they say, “once upon a time,” a sound as loud

¹² *Hebrew Scouts Movement in Israel* website.

¹³ The Seven Species (or *Shivat Haminim* in Hebrew) are seven products of the land, that is, two grains and five fruits, which are accorded special status in the Hebrew Bible. They are wheat and barley (the grains), grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates. At a certain stage, the first fruits of these species were the only acceptable offerings in the Temple.

¹⁴ *Jewish National Fund* website.

as thunder could be heard. And since it was summer and not winter, everyone said: "Surely something important and terrible has happened in the world." And, indeed, something truly terrible and sad had occurred: King Solomon, the wisest of all men, had died. The animals mourned, from large to small, even the jackal sounded a very sad cry. The giraffe bent its neck, and the peacock folded its tail, the turtle went into its home and did not reemerge. The lion, who felt he had lost a fellow royal, let out a roar that was a huge sigh. And everywhere, among the streams and mountains, one could hear the unhappy chirping of birds. The trees and flowers were also mourning, even though it wasn't fall; they shed their leaves, and the cyclamen bent its head over even more than usual. Tall trees like the palm and the cypress also bent in veneration, and only one tree didn't shed its leaves, nor did it bend its head or neck, and this single tree stood as it did every day next to the house. It was...it was...The olive tree. "Did you see? It's a real scandal, he's standing straight! Ugh, of all the nerve!" And one tree said: "I won't even be surprised if Mr. Olive decides today to go sailing..." And the terrible thunder sounds heard that day turned into sounds of rage and anger. And the trees raged: "We won't forgive this—King Solomon died, and how can anyone dare to forget it?" And they decided to go into the yard. There, strong and upright, stood the olive tree, and when they reached him, they spoke fiercely: "King Solomon died; aren't you ashamed of yourself? The wise king, who knew the language of the trees! So maybe you should shed your leaves, or at least lower your crown?" But the olive tree answered: "No, I have no need to shed leaves. I don't need to show my pain publicly, because my heart is truly broken." The trees looked at the olive tree, from in front and from behind, and suddenly they saw that there was a gaping hole in his trunk. "Indeed his sorrowful heart is eaten. See how sorrowful, his trunk is hollow." And until this very day, people in every home know why the olive tree's trunk is hollow.

"Why is the Olive Tree Trunk Hollow?"—version five¹⁵

During the time of the destruction of the Temple, when the great shrine was set aflame, all the institutions on earth collapsed—the sun set in darkness and the earth enveloped itself in mourning and endless sorrow. All the produce, the trees and the plants, withered and dried up and fell to the ground. They no longer felt like bearing their fruit, and the Seven Species for which the Land of Israel is praised, and which are known for their splendor and glory, were particularly affected. And when the land, crumbled and the great building fell—the splendor left the entire land, and the region remained desolate and in ruins. All the trees withered except for one, the olive tree, which remained upright and continued to bear fruit.

The others grumbled and were amazed that it was him, this symbol of Israel, the graceful olive tree, who was the traitor! He remained standing and continued living, and therefore they ostracized him and distanced themselves from him. When the olive tree felt they were criticizing him, he came to them and invited them over. And when they came and looked at him, they saw that he was hollow. "I am eaten up inside, eaten by my tears, even though on the outside I am growing and bearing fruit. I share your sorrow, and mourn with you." They all nodded in a sign of admiration, but they still asked: "We see your sorrow and tears, but why are you different from everyone else and are not falling down like us?" The olive tree answered with a sigh: "I cannot wither and fall; I am the symbol of Israel, and Israel lives forever and cannot be destroyed, wither, or fall. But I—like Israel—am hollow inside, crushed inside like the symbol of Israel that is still 'expected to give light' and all its suffering and persecution are only to increase its light in the world."

¹⁵ *Orianit* website.

“Why is the Olive Tree Trunk Hollow?”—version six

On the day that the Prophet Muhammad died, a deep mourning descended on the whole world. Believers, animals, and even the grasses and trees mourned. And the fruit trees—the fig tree, pomegranate tree, and vine—grieved more than anyone else. As a sign of sorrow and mourning, they shed their green leaves and stood bare. The olive tree, too, the king of the fruit trees, was enveloped in heavy mourning. The hollow inside it greatly expanded, and wide, braided furrows appeared in his thick, strong trunk; but its branches continued to bloom and were covered with greenish-silvery foliage.

The trees looked at the olive tree and were taken aback by its appearance. They wondered: “You, the king of trees; is it not most fitting for you to mourn the prophet’s death?”

The olive tree answered and said: “You shed your leaves so that your sorrow is seen in public, but your sorrow is external and fleeting, and you will soon grow new leaves and return to your daily routine. Whereas, my sadness lies deep in my heart, and it is an ongoing sorrow, because indeed my heart is parched and remains so when I heard the bitter news and the brain of my trunk is rotting and being consumed.”

Since then, Muslim reverence for the olive tree has grown, and the people of this religion have turned it into a symbol of awe and respect (*Bnei Moshavim* website).

Another source for this legend which associates the death of the Prophet Muhammad with the olive tree is the book by Grace Crowfoot and Louise Baldensperger (1932). This text includes a great deal of information about plants and Arab plant folktales, originating mainly from the village of Artas, where the authors lived for many years. While residing in this village, which is close to Solomon’s Pools and Bethlehem, they diligently collected the local folklore.

An ideological and conceptual analysis of the different versions of the legend of the olive tree

In four of the six versions presented here, the literary exposition is the mourning for King Solomon’s death. In the third and fifth versions, he is not mentioned at all. Perhaps these two latter versions can be classified as a different prototype of the legend that explains the hollow olive tree trunk. It is not connected to King Solomon’s death, but rather the tree’s hollowness is linked to the destruction of the Temple and the Exile. The death of a king or prophet leads to great mourning in the world. In the four similar versions, the trees begin to shed their leaves or stop bearing fruit in their grief, and a conversation ensues between the olive tree and the other trees. They are angry at the olive tree, or they even reject it because it does not shed its leaves as a sign of mourning, as the rest of the trees do. Eventually, the olive tree explains its reasons or its reasons become apparent.

In addition to the similar characteristics, several interesting differences are revealed: In the first version, the trees ask the olive tree to mourn for the king who was the wisest of all, because he, the olive tree, is king of the trees. The olive tree reigns over them, and the comparison is self-evident—the king of the trees must mourn for the king of humankind. In two versions, the other trees don’t even talk to the olive tree, but rather shun it without asking for reasons. Another version contains a visual description that doesn’t appear in other variants, i.e., the olive tree’s bent-over branches in addition to its hollow trunk. There is also one version in which the “heart of the tree” is replaced by the “brain of my trunk,” and the difference raises the question of which organ feels pain and sorrow—our heart or our brains?

The literary characteristics of the different versions of the olive tree legend

All the versions (aside from two exceptions) are characterized by

a dialogue between the trees and the olive tree. The plot develops in a similar way in each version, i.e., the dynamics are an outside-inwards movement. The outside is the external dialogue of the other trees and “inwards” indicates what happens inside the olive tree. These dynamics express a circular process from the outside-inwards in concrete physical terms; what happens to the other trees on the outside and what happens to the olive tree on the inside. The two dialogues, the external among the trees and the olive tree’s internal dialogue, complement each other to present a more complete picture. They also contribute to the dramatic tension in the story. At the same time, there are also a number of literary features that characterize each version separately. The first version includes the expression, “my heart is broken within me,” taken from a verse in Jeremiah (23:9). It is possible to see the great influence of the story on present-day reality in the second version, “*and ever since then*, the trunk of every ancient olive tree is hollow” (my emphasis, ND). In the third and fifth versions, which are exceptional in regard to their content matter, there is an interesting cultural transformation. These variants are laden with mythical symbols regarding the destruction of the Temple and the Exile, unrelated to the death of King Solomon. They are intrinsically exceptional, despite the link between King Solomon and the Temple. The literary characteristics of the fourth version are humor and rhyme, as this adaptation attempts to inject a little lightness into the sad story. Rewriting the legend using these two literary properties indicates the writers’ affinity toward the original version. However, this version demonstrates independent thinking, which provides the freedom to change it with an aesthetic, artistic approach that gives shape to the text.

The sixth version ascribes the legend not to the death of King Solomon, but to that of the Prophet Muhammad. The main literary characteristic in this version is the higher register: “the greenish-silvery foliage,” “my heart is parched,” “the brain of my trunk is rotting.”

The didactic message is different in the various versions. In two stories, the message is the proverb: “don’t judge a book by its cover.” Another version teaches the value of one “who hears someone insulting him and doesn’t respond.” In the fourth version, where the trees are judgmental and overcritical towards the olive tree, the message is: “don’t judge your friend until you’ve walked a mile in his shoes.” The two versions that don’t include King Solomon’s death, but rather give destruction and Exile as the reason for the olive tree’s hollow trunk, feature the values of hope for redemption, and the olive tree also symbolizes the eternalness¹⁶ of the Jewish people. The olive branch is also a symbol of peace. The national flag of Cyprus includes olive branches and this island has seen many wars, therefore, the olive branches on the flag convey the desire for peace. The United Nations emblem displays a globe with olive branches on each side, expressing the wish for the unity of nations. The emblem of the State of Israel is that of a menorah with olive branches, symbolizing peace. Even the Hebrew word for peace—*shalom*—has the same root as that of Solomon in Hebrew—*Shlomo*—and the meanings of both words indicate completeness.

Discussion

Most literary systems include many linguistic rewrites of folklore, and classic stories can also be relevant to modern times. These stories often create an image of an ideal person who anticipates events and is full of humility. This figure is not patronizing of others, but rather justifies all the components of creation, learns from them, and is also aware of the limitations of his or her understanding (Raveh, 2017).

More than all other types of literature and culture, it is precisely the legend that speaks to us using symbols that are archetypal or universal in the language of its symbols (Bettelheim, 1976).

¹⁶ Due to its evergreen canopy, ability to weather harsh conditions, and potential to live for hundreds, even thousands, of years, it is also sometimes viewed as a symbol of eternity.

Although these legends were composed long ago, people's nature and tendencies have remained unchanged, and they are concerned with the same problems in their present lives. The message from the past, based on the wisdom of many generations and embellished by them into a distinctive artistic form, was only passed on due to the discovery of timeless authentic qualities (Roth, 1969). The previous generations' understanding of humankind's weaknesses and inclinations as they appear in folktales are equivalent to, and are even more effective than, the conclusions of modern psychology (Sharon, 2001).

Why did these two legends about King Solomon merit different versions? According to Almog (2000), the leaders of the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine prior to the establishment of the State) ascribed great importance to the educational accomplishments of their children. Such successes were viewed as an achievement for the entire Zionist enterprise. Many of the articles and debates discussed the education of children and their future, and therefore a great deal of the writing for children was concerned with Zionist ideals: "Most of the children's authors viewed their work as holy Zionist work and did not see a real contradiction between good writing and propaganda" (ibid., pp. 53-54). In the child-story-author triad, the author was seen as a tool of the great Zionist project, and therefore his or her identity was of lesser significance. The important matter was the spiritual asset he or she imparted to the younger generation. Fondly remembering a strong Biblical figure in particular concurred with the educational philosophy of creating a "new Jew" in the Land of Israel. No more identifying with the weak, persecuted Diaspora Jew, who spoke a foreign non-Jewish language. Here was a new source to identify with, i.e., a king of Israel with a glorious past, who boasted wisdom, glory, and strength. The styles and designs of the assorted versions vary in accordance with the narrative conventions and allegorical style of the specific legend type: a humoristic, rational, allegorical, or flowery ornate style, or one nostalgically remembering the Jewish

nation's glorious past. The discussion of the legend's *literary* message ends at this point. However, in addition to stylistic differences, it is clear that most of the versions also focus on a didactic message that teach the values of modesty and humbleness (in the legend of the cyclamen) and an uncritical and nonjudgmental view of what is *prima facie* unacceptable in society (in the legend about the olive tree). It is quite evident that all the narrative processes, in addition to their literary-cultural pedagogic aspect, have instructive socio-religious significance, that is, they identify character traits that the transmitter wishes to internalize in the recipient.

There is also a chronological continuum between the two legends. In the first legend about the cyclamen, the time period is the beginning of Solomon's reign, when he searches for a cast mold for the crown. The second story, about the olive tree, indicates the end of Solomon's reign. Both have a textual setting that also includes a psychological-behavioral aspect of King Solomon, clarifying and elaborating the meaning of his personality. The legends clearly contribute to, and have a textual affinity for, the spirit of Judaism. Finally, the fables present a representative glimpse of the glory and decline of the Kingdom of Israel.

Summary

In our post-structuralist era, literature is no longer seen as an art with universal values, independent of the particular contexts in which it was created, but rather as an expression of norms dependent on time, place, ideology, and politics (Raveh, 2014). Various fields of comparative literature and folklore deal with different versions of stories and engage in comparisons among them. Thematology is the study of stories over periods of time and defines the thematic phenomenon as the sum of all its versions—in other words, a type of meta-historical theme that is realized in different ways over the generations (Lipsker and Kushelevsky, 2006, p. 221). The differences

among the versions require that the reader or listener complete them, discover the contradictions, create and overturn expectations, and examine reading hypotheses at various stages with the goal of creating patterns of significance (Iser, 1978). While perusing each variant, the reader discovers new possibilities of filling in gaps and constructing interpretative models that he or she never imagined during previous readings (ibid., p. 4). Jewish folktales are often rooted in the Biblical tradition, and they sprouted trunks, leaves, and branches of stories that proliferated among Diaspora Jewish communities over centuries and in the local Jewish languages (Elstein, Lipsker, and Kushelevsky, 2005, p. 9). This literary material, of broad scope and deep historical dimensions, lives on in the historical Jewish community consciousness. Collections of Jewish writing materials span over 150 years, from 1842 until the present day (ibid., p. 28).

The genre that consistently succeeds in reappearing in Jewish literature throughout the generations, and which has served as a historical expression of its place and culture, is the *legend* (p. 221). In other words, the legend is the literary expression of all Jewish spiritual life from its beginnings until the present day. It constantly takes on new forms, but its poetic presence is always there. The more versions that exist, the more they differ, thus inspiring unending interpretative stimuli (p. 241). Therefore, the meta-historical potential of the theme lies in the disparities among the variants.

This article discussed two Jewish legends and their different versions. The theme in both legends is timeless, and was examined from various viewpoints. The differences are dependent on time and audience, but do not affect the meaning or interpretation. The evolving versions reveal cultural vestiges that have amassed and ultimately changed and developed the stories. The variations and their diverse styles (dialogue, humor, expanding the dialogues, legends of theological-religious character such as human-God relationships) tangibly shape the message in a positive manner. Both legends in this

article express the sorrow, pain, and even mourning of two objects from the flora world over the death of King Solomon. In one group of stories, it is the cyclamen that bends its head, and in the second, the trunk of the olive tree becomes hollow. The different versions of these legends reveal the deliberate omissions or additions of the person who circulated the stories—usually for emphasis—and, at the same time, the renditions may omit details that seemed irrelevant to the narrator or might not be accepted by his or her audience. Therefore, the message or moral of each version also changes according to the character or nature of the legend.

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