



The Many Worlds of The Dybbuk

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An-ski's *The Dybbuk* has the subtitle "Between Two Worlds", referring to the complex interactions and tensions between the world of the living and the world of the dead in this play. These tensions can also be distinguished in the particular performances of the play depending on the context within which a specific performance was conceived, first performed and then in many cases, also performed over time. An example of this would be the famous production of the Habima theatre which premiered in Moscow in 1922 and was performed in many countries for more than 40 years, until the 1960's. In this essay I will examine the scenographic design of the three acts of the Habima production. In particular, I will be drawing attention to the quotes from the Bible in each of the three acts suspended in big Hebrew letters over the stage, which thereby reinforce and expand the complexities of being situated "between two worlds", with one 'leg' in each of them.

From the perspective of the plot, the interaction between the two worlds is triggered by the pledge (נדב) made by two young male friends studying in a Yeshiva whose respective wives are both pregnant. They pledge to betroth the two children to each other should they be a boy and a girl and this is 'recorded' in heaven. However, this pledge is broken many years later by Sender, who becomes the father of Leah and whose wife dies while giving birth to her. Sender's close friend also dies close to the birth of his son, Hanan. We will gradually learn what the tragic consequences of breaking the pledge are.

* All the pictures in the article are courtesy of Habima Theater and the Israeli Center for the Documentation of Performance Arts

♣ Synagogue with Chonen and Leah in the bimah in the center and the Torah Ark in the back (first act).

Sender breaks the oath by betrothing his daughter to another man. As a result of this, Hanan, who has come to the synagogue to meet his beloved Leah, dies in front of the Tora Shrine in the synagogue. This is where the first act of the play takes place. In the second act, during Leah's wedding to this other man, Hanan returns as a Dybbuk, the spirit of a dead person who has not been properly buried or has died under strange circumstances. The Dybbuk literally possesses his 'bride', speaking through her mouth, and thus serving as a 'living' concrete proof of the existence of this other world, the world of the dead which in Hebrew is often called "the next world" or "the world to come", existing in parallel to "this world", the world of the living, but often interfering in it. In the third and last act, the attempts of the Rabbi to expel the Dybbuk from Leah's body fail, and she dies during the exorcism ceremony in order to become unified with her true lover in the next world.¹

Besides the interactions between the worlds of the living and the dead on the level of the plot, An-ski's play also exists ambiguously in several linguistic universes, reflecting the dynamic Jewish socio-linguistic contexts within which the play was composed and first performed in the wake of the First World War. It is not clear if An-ski first wrote the play in Yiddish or in Russian, though it is certain that it was Bialik who made the translation into Hebrew, most likely from Yiddish. It was first published and then performed by the Habima theatre, premiering in Moscow in 1922.

The play itself was however first performed in Yiddish by the Vilnaer Truppe, in 1920, on the *shloshim* of An-ski, thirty days after the death of An-ski. An-ski never saw a staging of his play as it was quickly gaining popularity all over the world. In 1921 the play was also performed by the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York, directed by Maurice Schwartz. The reason

¹ An-ski had written a four-act play which in the Habima production was compressed into three acts, in three different locations.

for preparing a Russian version, or even first writing the play in Russian, was that An-ski wanted to convince Constantin Stanislavski – the founder and leader of the famous Moscow Art Theatre – where Chekhov’s plays had first been performed and who was also directly involved in the founding of the Habima theatre – to have it performed. The meeting between An-ski and Stanislavski was at least one of the reasons why it was later performed by the Habima collective which was working within the Studio-system established by Stanislavski.

In these early performances, *The Dybbuk* first emerged in Hebrew and Yiddish and this can be seen as a linguistic parallel to the two worlds, of the living and the dead. Russian would have been the language of the social revolution which for An-ski, was an important ideological aspect of his life. At the time of the writing of the play, Yiddish was still a vital language, creative in a host of traditional and in most modern literary genres, as well as in a rich oral plethora. The Hebrew language was at that time the ‘corpse’, the dead language that poets and ideologues strove to awaken to life, gradually creating a veritable Hebrew Renaissance, serving as an important basis of the gradually developing Zionist movement. From a historical perspective, however, the roles of the two languages have been radically reversed, with the Shoah not only murdering millions of Jews but also killing their forms of life and literary creativity, turning Yiddish into an almost dead language. Hebrew, on the other hand, has been transformed into a language expressing all the modes and forms of life and of literary creativity, not only in Israel, but more and more in the growing Hebrew-speaking Diasporas of Israelis in Europe as well as in North America.

The Habima theatre was the first fully professional theatre performing in Hebrew. It was founded in Moscow in 1916-17 by a group of young theatre ‘lovers’ led by Nachum Zemach. The well-known and acclaimed Armenian director, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, was assigned by Stanislavski to work with the

Habima actors when the collective became included within Stanislavski's Studio network. After the Bolshevik Revolution, it was considered to be an innovative avant-garde theatre within the Soviet context. It integrated different ethnic groups towards the creation of a true trans-national, proletarian culture, including taking the first step towards the creation of a professional theatre in the Hebrew language. It was this theatre which would eventually emerge as the Israeli National Theatre, realizing an important aspect of the Zionist ideology, with the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language. The most important Habima production from the Moscow years was the production of *The Dybbuk* which premiered in 1922.

Habima had been established on the ideological basis created by the multicultural openness and tolerance of the Bolshevik revolution. However, this gradually diminished in importance after the death of Lenin in 1924 and Stalin's forceful consolidation of power. In 1926, the Hebrew actors' collective left Moscow for good and set out on a world tour to the United States and to the cultural capitals of Europe. They also travelled to British Mandatory Palestine, mainly performing in the newly founded city of Tel Aviv and developing their work there for a year. They made Berlin their home for about another year, in 1930-31, before finally settling in Tel Aviv in 1931. The members of the collective finally decided to leave Europe after Nazi sympathizers had interrupted a performance of *The Dybbuk* in Würzburg that year. In 1958, they celebrated the first decade of statehood and Habima was named the Israeli National Theatre.

The Habima-*Dybbuk* had by this time become world-famous and this production was played over 1,300 times, closing down for good only in the 1960's when Tel Aviv had been the permanent home of the theatre for more than 30 years. During this time, it had undergone many changes, most importantly perhaps becoming a mainstream, established theatre, catering to a growing bourgeois audience. As *The Dybbuk* premiered in 1922, it was

an avant-garde performance rooted in a revolutionary moment, depicting the revolt of the young couple against the bourgeois values of their parents. While at the same time, it was occupied with traditional Jewish customs and values as most of the actors had revolted against the traditional Jewish values of their parents. The basic 'message' of the production had also become more nationalistic, considering the meeting of the young couple in the next world in connection with the national revival.

As the *Habima-Dybbuk* premiered in Moscow in 1922, it both expressed a deep attraction to Jewish life at this revolutionary moment while it also revolted against the superstitious traditional, religious values. Yet already from the outset, the *Habima* production (somewhat ambivalently) valorized the utopian future where the two lovers can become united beyond death, not in "this" world, but in some higher form of existence. For the actors performing in Hebrew in Moscow in 1922, this also meant Zion, the home of their spiritual as well as political yearnings. This was not an easy balancing act in post-revolutionary Moscow, but there is no doubt that its artistic results were extraordinary and led directly to the fame of the theatre.

One of its many interesting features, which added to the mysterious and complex nature of the *Habima* performance, was the use of Hebrew words as an integral aspect of the scenography. These words were all quotations from the Bible, and were suspended over the stage in each of the three acts. These inscriptions are an important part of the set for the *Habima Dybbuk*, as designed by the Jewish, Soviet avant-garde artist Nathan Altman in a constructivist, almost cubistic style with strong diagonal lines on a slightly slanted stage. In the center of the stage in the first act, taking place in the synagogue where Leah and Hanan meet, stands the Torah Ark where the scrolls of the *Pentateuch*, the five books of Moses are kept. On the right we can see the elevated platform, the *bimah*, where the weekly portions of the Bible are recited from these scrolls.





▲ Beggars' Dance (second act).

The word *bimah* which actually means 'stage' was also part of the name of the theatre – the Ha-*bimah* theatre – which was also called "The Biblical Studio." This draws attention to ways in which the new tradition of the theatre interacts with the old tradition of reciting from the Bible in Hebrew. The importance of the Hebrew language in a performance where the characters in the fictional world speak Yiddish, gave the performance a Zionist ideological framing, drawing attention to the clear cultural dichotomy of the two languages.

The *bimah* is located in the middle of the synagogue, serving as **the center of the congregation**, while the Torah Ark (more to the left because of the custom to direct the prayers toward Jerusalem, where the temple once stood) represented by the holy books, creates **a focal point in the distance**, towards which the congregation is directed, individually and collectively while reciting the prayers. In the Habima production of *The Dybbuk*, the Ark and the *bimah* give rise to a dialectical tension between the distant focal point of holiness (the Ark) and the creation of a center (the *bimah*) for the community of the fictional world, where the holy words suspended over the stage are an appeal of the performance and the *Habima* theatre for the creation of an ideological, communal experience through their art.

The words of the Tora first emerge from the Ark in the more distant focal point as a *deus ex machina*, corresponding exactly to the point where the divine intervention took place in the traditional Baroque theatre, as well as – at least indirectly – in the Greek Classical theatre. The divine words of the Tora are then metaphorically placed on the table of the *bimah*, entering the communal life, and on the stage they become strongly magnified as they are suspended over the stage itself, connecting the actors and the spectators in the auditorium.

In the 1922 Moscow performance, the magnified words in Hebrew suspended in the air no doubt at the same time also divided the audience between the Jewish spectators, who could read and decipher these words and the non-Jewish spectators, presumably the Soviet revolutionaries who most likely regarded these words as some kind of secret code for the Revolution. At the time of the premiere, the Bolshevik Revolution and Zionism were quite closely synchronized. Their common goals are reinforced by the suspended fragmentary quotations which serve as free-floating speech acts coming directly from a higher authority. This serves as reminders as well as promises and warnings, realized through their materiality, being suspended over the stage close to the proscenium arch. As the Habima theatre gradually began performing for more predominantly Jewish audiences and in Tel Aviv for almost exclusively Hebrew speaking spectators, the significance of the division between those who understand Hebrew and those who do not – which was an important dimension of the original performance – was gradually erased.

Another stage sign reminding the audience of such a dual nature of the revolution was the red color of the wedding canopy under which Leah and her true groom unite (through her being possessed by the *Dybbuk*) in their revolt against the bourgeois values of the generation of the father who has not adopted the struggle for authentic social change. This red cloth is simultaneously the revolutionary banner and a traditional Jewish wedding canopy, under which the two struggles are united.

In the thematic contexts of the performance the three ‘banners’ can be deciphered in the following way:

1. שמע ישראל:

“Sh’ma Israel” are the first two words of the sentence saying “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (שמע ישראל יהוה אחד) from Deuteronomy (the 5th book in the *Torah*, verse 6:4) which is said twice daily in the prayers; it is the first prayer parents teach their children and they are the last words a Jew supposedly utters before his death.

Here it also means that we have to listen carefully – “Hear O Israel” – something will happen with the way in which the voice will make its sounds with the possession of Leah by the *Dybbuk*, preceding the affirmation of God’s unity and uniqueness through the unification of the female and male elements, which happens when the *Dybbuk* of Hanan enters the body of Leah at the wedding.

2. קול חתן וקול כלה:

“Kol Hatan ve-Kol Kala” meaning “the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride” appears three times in the book of Jeremiah (7:34, 16:9 and 25:10) and in the last of these (25:10) the whole verse, where the prophet actually pronounces God’s threat to the people of Israel, reads (in the King James Bible), “I will **take** from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the candle.”

However, the words over the stage together with “the voices of mirth and gladness” (קול ששון וקול שמחה קול חתן וקול כלה) from the verse in Jeremiah, which is actually a threat in the Biblical text, have been included in the last of the seven blessings in the Jewish wedding ceremony, which the wedding

guests (still until today) sing together, celebrating the union of the ‘voices’ of the young couple through marriage.

By means of a slight variation of one syllable from the quote, instead of talking about “the voice of the bridegroom **and** the voice of the bride”, which is the traditional blessing at the wedding, it will in *The Dybbuk* performance mean that the “voice of the groom is **inside** the bride”, coming from her body. This powerful vocal gesture is achieved by changing one consonant from *ve-* to *be-*. The Dybbuk entering the body of Leah is clearly a sexual act, which is only supposed to take place at a wedding, where the voices of the bride and the groom become unified.

3. זֶה הַשַּׁעַר...

“Ze he-Sha’ar” is a short quote is from Psalm 118:20 (קִיחַ: 20) where the full verse reads, זֶה הַשַּׁעַר לַיהוָה צְדִיקִים יָבֹאוּ בוֹ. This verse means “This gate of the Lord, into which the righteous shall enter.”

In all the reproductions of this act that I have seen in photos, the name of God is erased or perhaps unclear. But because it is very well-known it can be inferred from the first two words, “This gate...”, which can refer to the entrance into the synagogue, but more typically to the passage from life to death through which every human being will pass, inferring that when Leah dies, she is one of the righteous. Having opened the “gates” of her body to the *Dybbuk* she is now united with him, entering through the ominous gate of heaven.

When trying to expel the spirit from her body in the third and last act, the Rabbi performing a Kabbalistic ritual of exorcism realizes that the vow of betrothal between Leah and Hanan is still in force. When he tries to free Leah from this vow and expel the evil spirit of the *Dybbuk* from the young bride, she falls down and dies and is united with her true lover in the next world, the *igra rama*, the high abode. At this point the chant, with which the play opens, is now repeated in the past tense, describing the journey of the soul in Kabbalistic terms, is repeated:

Why and for what reason

Did (does) the soul descend

From the high abode

To the depths?

The descent is needed for the ascent.

The descent is needed for the ascent.

(ירידה צורך עלייה היא)

The journey of the soul between the two worlds has been completed and the couple has finally been united in the *igra rama* of the afterworld.

The Hassidic Rabbi house Azriel from Miropol's house: The Exorcism (third act). ►