

National Poets and Cultural Saints of Europe: Jewish (questionnaire)

Literary culture: Jewish (Hebrew)

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1. *Which individual poet (male or female) is generally considered to be the greatest poet in your literary tradition? (Give the first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death.)*

Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934)

2. *Are there other poets that come near or even reach such a status? If yes, name up to two, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the greatest poet (scale 1–5; 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

Shaul Tchernichovsky (1875–1943): During his lifetime, Tchernichovsky was sometimes described as Bialik’s “contrasting twin.” [4]

Nathan Alterman (1910–1970): In the literary generation that followed Bialik’s literary generation, Alterman was the most important and popular poet. [4]

One can also briefly mention two additional, pertinent names: during the literary generation that followed Bialik, Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896–1981) forcefully advocated nationalist ideals in his powerful poetry, but because of his right-wing politics he became a controversial figure and was marginalized for several decades. During the years that followed the creation of the state of Israel, Yehuda Amichai (1924–2000) was embraced by critics and readers alike; despite his shunning of national ideals, and his advocacy of the life and love of individuals in his poetry, he was perceived by many as the most representative poet of modern Israel.

3. *Is there a (single) poet that is considered the “national” poet? (Give the first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death.) Is the notion of “national poet” (NP) widespread in your literary culture? (Assess on a scale of 1–5; 1 = “irrelevant,” 5 = “very common.”)*

Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934); the notion of national poet was highly relevant during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century; during the past few decades, however, it has weakened in Israeli culture. [5]

4. *Were there many rival poets to the position of national poet during the canonization process that were later marginalized? If yes, name up to three, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess the decade of their utmost presence in the canonization processes (e.g., 1880s). (If there is no NP, answer for the “greatest” poet.)*

Judah Leib Gordon (1830–1892): He was the most important and respected poet of the Hebrew *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) movement, which preceded the literary generation of Bialik; Gordon’s utmost presence occurred circa the 1870s; when Bialik emerged as the national poet of the Jewish people in the early twentieth century, however, Gordon was no longer considered a candidate for that title.

Shaul Tchernichovsky (1875–1943): His literary career developed in parallel lines to that of Bialik, and during their lifetimes the two were sometimes described as “contrasting twins”; whereas Bialik was intimately connected to Jewish culture and his poetry constantly addresses Jewish themes, Tchernichovsky was perceived as a more universal poet, and this is one of the reasons why he lost ground to Bialik in the “contest” for the title of national poet; Tchernichovsky’s presence in the literary field was quite strong throughout the first half of the twentieth century, but almost always as a “second fiddle” to Bialik.

5. *Which period of canonization of the NP (or the greatest poet in case of no NP) was most important? (State the year or decade.) Name up to five of the most important canonization events (state the year and type; e.g., 1860: crucial textual edition; 1905: unveiling of an important memorial). Assess the current stature of the national (or greatest) poet compared to the most intense period (scale 1–5; 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

The most important period of Bialik’s canonization was the first decade of the twentieth century.

1892: The publication of Bialik’s first poem, “El Hatzipor” (To the Bird), in the literary collection *Pardes* (Orchard). The poem, which expresses longing for the Land of Israel, made Bialik’s name familiar to contemporary readers, echoed their innermost sentiments, and created expectations for his future publication.

1896: Bialik started to publish in the central and influential literary periodical *Ha’shilo’ach* (Siloam), edited by the important Zionist thinker Asher Ginzberg (a.k.a. Ahad Ha’am). (See also Answer 6.)

1901: The publication of Bialik’s first volume of poetry, which contributed to his growing reputation as a most talented and highly promising poet of his generation.

1903: The publication of “Al Ha’shchita” (On the Slaughter) and the long poem “Be’ir Ha’haregah” (In the City of Killing; first published under the title “Massa Nemirov” “The Vision of Nemirov”). These two highly effective poetic responses to the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 had an immediate and immense impact on the Jewish public. These two poems, notably the long poem “Be’ir Ha’haregah,” reverberated throughout the Jewish world, and contributed directly to his status as a national poet. Thanks to these poems, Bialik was perceived as a contemporary Jewish prophet, expressing the suffering of the Jewish people, and at the same time rebuking present-day Jews for showing weakness, spurring them to form organizations for self-defense against persecution.

1924: Bialik migrated to the Land of Israel and settled in Tel Aviv. During the 1920s, the center of modern Hebrew literature moved from Europe to Israel. Bialik contributed significantly to this shift by conducting various literary and cultural activities, thus becoming a cultural leader of the developing Jewish community in the Land of Israel.

Current status: Bialik’s position as a national poet is still strong and central in Israeli culture. Nonetheless, because national sentiments in general have weakened in Israel during the past few decades, and because the centrality of poetry has also weakened within the Israeli cultural system, [4] would be a fair estimate.

6. *Who were the individuals, institutions, and interest groups (cultural factions, political parties) that played major roles in the promotion of the canonization process? State the names and assess the most active decade(s).*

Several literary editors, critics, thinkers, and cultural leaders promoted Bialik’s canonical status from his first steps on the literary scene. Here are a few notable names:

Yehoshua Ravnitzky (1859–1944): a literary editor and future collaborator with Bialik on their highly influential *Sefer Ha’agadah* (Book of Legends), a comprehensive collection of legends from post-biblical Jewish sources (e.g., the Talmud and the Midrash);

Asher Ginzberg (known primarily by his Hebrew pen name, Ahad Ha’am; 1856–1927): an important Zionist thinker, a leading advocate of the Jewish cultural revival, and an influential man of letters; editor

and essayist. Ahad Ha'am served in some respects as a mentor for Bialik (although the two also had their differences);

Yeruham Fishel Lachover (1883–1947): a literary editor and critic that wrote a history of modern Hebrew literature, and a comprehensive and seminal volume on Bialik (its first two parts were published in 1937).

During Bialik's first steps in the literary field, there was an almost unanimous consensus among important literary critics (e.g., Joseph Klausner, 1874–1958), authors (e.g., Yosef Haim Brenner, 1881–1921; see also Answers 8 and 14), and men of letters (e.g., Ze'ev Jabotinsky, 1880–1940; see also Answer 10); not only about the literary qualities of Bialik's poetry, but also about the fact that he succeeded in giving voice to modern Jewish life and to quintessential Jewish dilemmas and themes.

Several literary periodicals in which Bialik published his works promoted his canonical status: *Lu'ach Achi'asaf*, *Pardes* (Orchard), and most importantly the important and central *Ha'shilo'ach*, edited by Ahad Ha'am (see previous paragraph). Also important were various publishing houses including, first and foremost, the Dvir Publishing House (founded in 1901, first under the name of Moriyah). Bialik was one of Dvir's founders and literary editors, and its list of books reflected Bialik's literary taste and cultural agenda. Thus, in addition to his established position, Bialik also became, in his function as literary editor, a respected arbiter of good taste. After Bialik's death in 1934, one of Dvir's missions became the publication of Bialik's oeuvres in various editions and formats, thus keeping his works available to the reading public.

Institutional forms of commemoration: From the time of Bialik's death in 1934, several public institutions declared their commitment to commemorate his name and to promote his literary works and legacy. These practices began just after Bialik's death with a decision by the Jewish Agency for Israel to republish his works and commemorate his name. Various commemorative practices gained momentum after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948: the naming of streets and schools in many cities after him, for example. In 1945, the Jewish National Fund issued a stamp with Bialik's image (next to the image of the prominent Zionist leader Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl; see Answer 10). Later, in 1959, the state of Israel issued a stamp with Bialik's image and, in 1969, a banknote with his image. A publishing house (*Mossad Bialik* 'the Bialik Institute') and a literary prize (the Bialik Prize) were founded, which contributed to his legacy and prestige. The city of Tel Aviv took it upon itself to renovate and keep the Bialik House, which holds the poet's extensive archive, and also functions as a venue for literary and cultural events. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem declared the centennial anniversary of Bialik's birth as "Bialik Year," and promoted his legacy with a series of events and publications.

Bialik's consensual status: It is important to note that, during the crucial period of Bialik's canonization during the first half of the twentieth century, he enjoyed consensual status; different political parties and ideological fractions did not allow their disagreements (which sometimes became quite bitter) to overshadow their deep appreciation of Bialik's literary achievements and his status as a national poet.

Translations and artistic dialogues with Bialik's works and public image: Bialik's canonical status was also strengthened during his lifetime, as well as posthumously thanks to a series of translations of his works into about fifteen languages; for example, Ze'ev Jabotinsky translated some of his poems into Russian as early as 1906 (see the first paragraph above and also Answer 10); Bialik's poems were translated into English starting in the 1920s. As for artistic dialogues, melodies were composed for many of Bialik's poems, notably his lyrical poems, which do not address public or national issues, as well as for his poems for children, thus contributing to his popularity in modern Israeli culture. In addition, several painters and illustrators offered interesting and creative dialogues with some of Bialik's works.

7. *When were the works of the national (or greatest) poet fully integrated into the education system? (Name the decade; e.g., 1910s.) Assess the overall presence of the national (or greatest) poet and his or her works in education (scale 1–5; 5 = "excessive," 3 = "not particularly strong," 1 = "marginal"). If there were unusual shifts or breaks (due to politics, etc.), add a brief comment.*

The works of Bialik have been integrated into the education system of the state of Israel since the time of its creation in 1948. This integration continued a strong tradition of teaching Bialik's works in schools in the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine / the Land of Israel under the British Mandate and in the Jewish Diaspora, especially in eastern Europe, from about the 1920s onwards. Bialik's works were taught in a variety of schools and for children of different ages. Thanks to the fact that Bialik also wrote poems that became songs for children, his name became familiar to children even before they were introduced to his canonical poems in school.

8. *Are there other literary writers (prose writers or playwrights) in your literary culture that come close to the canonical position of the national (or greatest) poet? If so, name up to three, give their information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = “much more important,” 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970): Agnon enjoys a central and important canonical status in modern Hebrew literature; he is the only Hebrew writer that has won the Nobel Prize (in 1966, together with the Jewish-German poet and playwright Nelly Sachs); his works are taught in the Israeli education system, researched, and interpreted, and continue to serve as a source of inspiration for readers and authors. Agnon's complex, Talmudic-like language, however, makes his prose less accessible to today's Israeli readers. [5]

Yosef Haim Brenner (1881–1921): Brenner's tragic, untimely death (he was murdered by Arabs at the age of thirty-nine) contributed to him earning his halo as a secular martyr. Brenner is probably the greatest realistic prose writer of the early twentieth century, offering harsh, penetrating descriptions of modern Jewish life, especially of the Zionist pioneers in the Land of Israel. [3]

9. *Are there other artists (composers, musicians, painters, architects, etc.) in your literary culture that come close to the canonical position of the national (or greatest) poet? If yes, name up to three, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = “much more important,” 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

For many centuries, Judaism had a negative or, at the very least, highly ambivalent attitude towards figurative art (or beaux arts) because of the biblical prohibition on creating "an image" (e.g., Exodus 20:4). This negative attitude has begun to change in modern times. During the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century, together with the processes of secularization and openness to European cultures, Jewish culture witnessed a flourishing of artistic creativity. In Palestine / the Land of Israel under the British Mandate there arose a group of artists that painted local landscapes and were perceived as reconnecting contemporary Jewish life in the Land of Israel with its biblical roots. This group of the “Land of Israel Style” enjoyed both critical acclaim and popularity and included painters such as Nachum Gutman (1898–1980), who illustrated some of Bialik's works, and Ruben Rubin (1893–1974). However, as far as cultural status is concerned, these artists are no match for the important literary figures, let alone Bialik's central position as a national poet, and thus can be rated as [1].

10. *Name up to three other individuals (in politics, military, scholarship, etc.) that were most venerated in the nation-building context and remain highly canonized today. Give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death) and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = “much more important,” 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

Benjamin Ze'ev (Theodor) Herzl (1860–1904): Herzl is often referred to as “The visionary (or prophet) of the State of Israel.” He was an important leader of the Zionist movement, promoting the idea that the Jewish people should have a homeland and an independent state in the Land of Israel. In his

writing, public speeches, and institutional and diplomatic activities (e.g., founding the World Zionist Organization and serving as its president), Herzl inspired contemporary Jews and advanced the Zionist cause in many ways that laid the ground for the creation of the state of Israel about half a century after his death. [6]

David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973): Ben-Gurion was the first Israeli prime minister, and also its first minister of defense for almost fourteen years. Ben-Gurion was the most important Israeli leader during the time of the creation of the state of Israel and during the Israeli-Arab war of 1948. Even his political opponents acknowledge his unique role during this critical historical period, as well as his crucial role in laying the foundation for many institutions and norms of modern Israel. [4]

Ze'ev Jabotinsky (1880–1940): Jabotinsky was a revisionist Zionist leader and also a highly talented man of letters (a poet, an essayist, and a translator). Although his ideology and politics were in opposition to the ruling Labor hegemony during the greater part of the twentieth century, in the late 1970s the carriers of his legacy came to political power in Israel. Even his political opponents acknowledge his contribution to the creation of modern Israel. (However, I believe that Ben-Gurion scores higher than Jabotinsky because of the central role that he played in the critical years of the creation of the state of Israel.) [3]

11. *Briefly describe the main reason why the chosen poet was considered “national” (or greatest in the case of no NP).*

First, Bialik expressed in a powerful, original, and accessible way the deepest sentiments (hopes, aspirations, fears, and frustrations) of the modern Jewish people: the psychologically complex departure from old, traditional ways of life; the agonies and humiliations associated with Jewish life in the Diaspora, including its horrid persecutions; the drive to revolt and to change these appalling circumstances; and the effort to revive and reconnect to the vital parts of Jewish history. Second, in his poetic diction, Bialik made ingenious use of a variety of literary and linguistic sources, adapting the rich, multilayered Jewish textual tradition (the Bible, Talmud, and medieval poetry) to contemporary needs and sensibilities. Thus, he made a major contribution to the revival of Hebrew, turning it from a language mainly used in liturgy into a living language that served the growing Jewish community (*Yishuv*) in the Land of Israel.

12. *Speculate briefly on reasons why the concept of NP did (or did not) gain ground in your literary culture.*

The concept of a national poet gained ground in modern Hebrew literary culture because of a convergence of at least two major factors. First, Zionism, the modern national Jewish movement, needed a central literary and cultural figure to serve as its symbolic spokesperson, and Bialik seemed to fulfil this need. During the crucial time of the early twentieth century, he expressed in his poetry Zionist ideas and ideals (although in complex, not superficial ways), thus contributing significantly to the spreading of deep Zionist sentiments. Another major reason is that, since the late nineteenth century, modern Hebrew literature flourished mostly in eastern Europe (notably in Russia and Poland), and in these countries the notion of a national poet was already deeply ingrained (e.g., Pushkin and Mickiewicz). Thus, the literary and cultural environment in which Bialik and his readers grew up was already familiar with the notion, and was expecting to have their own Jewish national poet.

13. *Speculate briefly on the reasons why the position of a national (or greatest) poet was either occupied by a single poet or shared by a number of poets.*

From the time that Bialik gained the title of a national poet in the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a consensus that this title belonged to him and to nobody else. Other contemporary poets were able to achieve critical acclaim (first and foremost Tchernichovsky), but Bialik alone was perceived and portrayed

as the “spokesperson” of modern Jewish existence. Highly talented and respected poets in the next literary generation (e.g., Avraham Shlonsky, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and Nathan Alterman) were able to introduce new poetic schools and sensibilities to modern Hebrew literature (e.g., Modernism and Expressionism), but none of them, even those that criticized Bialik’s poetics (e.g., Shlonsky), were in a position to challenge Bialik’s consensual status.

14. *Do you notice any interesting connotations regarding the canonization of a national (or greatest) poet that resemble the veneration and cults of religious saints? What about other artists? Specify briefly.*

Some Jewish figures can connote sainthood (e.g., the *tzadik* ‘righteous one’ in the Hassidic movement), but Jewish culture by and large rejects the veneration of human beings. Nonetheless, in addition to being a highly respected national poet, Bialik also became, especially in the years when he lived in the Land of Israel (1924–1934), a central cultural leader, performing several functions simultaneously: a founder of cultural practices (e.g., leading gatherings of *Oneg Shabbat*, or celebratory gatherings with lectures and singing held after Sabbath services), an important publisher, an editor, an arbiter of good taste, and a spiritual leader. Bialik’s special public status during the decade that he lived in the Land of Israel, until his untimely death in 1934, can be likened to the status enjoyed by an admired Rabbi in a traditional Jewish community. There were two other Hebrew men of letters that acquired something that can resemble the halo of a secular saint. The first is Yosef Haim Brenner (see Answer 8), who was perceived not only as an important writer of fiction, but also as a spiritual leader that conducted an ascetic way of life, devoting himself to Hebrew literature and culture, and finally “sacrificing” his own life, almost like a martyr, when he was murdered at the age of 39. Another Jewish man of letters and ideologue, whose life and legacy can be indirectly associated with secular sainthood, is A. D. Gordon (1856–1922), the founder of Labor Zionism. Gordon’s ideas were partly inspired by Leo Tolstoy, and he became known for his preaching and practicing of farm work, austerity, and devotion to Zionist, humanist, and mystical ideals that combine spiritual, personal salvation with Jewish national rebirth.