

“Speak to One Another with Psalms”: the Unity of A.M. Klein’s Psalter

by Angela Bick

In 1944, the Jewish Publication Society of America printed a slim volume by A. M. Klein with the simple title of *Poems*. The first third of this collection is a series of thirty-six poems called “The Psalter of Avram Haktani,” and it is the number of poems and their classification which Zailig Pollock blames for the book’s “poor reception” (99). Pollock, the foremost contemporary critic of Klein, believes that the characterization of the poems as psalms as well as Klein’s failed attempt to produce fifty of them were the basis for negative reviews such as Randall Jarrell’s “These Are Not Psalms” shortly after *Poems*’ publication. Although the label of ‘psalm’ might have misled readers at the time of publication, the work was not titled unintentionally, and Klein’s Psalter deserves more consideration in relation to the Hebrew Bible than Jarrell, and even Pollock, have given it. Similarly, the original goal of fifty poems might have led Klein “to pad out the set with ... incongruous works” (99), but this is a minor handicap which does not justify a dismissal of the unity of the work as it was published. Overall, Pollock and other critics including Miriam Waddington, M.K. Steinberg, Usher Caplan, and Naim Kattan are guilty of the same hasty judgement as Jarrell; they isolate a psalm when it confirms their critical position, but neglect to analyse the Psalter as a complete work in itself. As a result, Klein’s Psalter has been splintered by theory, and the pieces have been misappropriated as evidence of the poet’s loss of faith. This article will examine “The Psalter of Avram Haktani” as a collection of poetry which both deserves its allusion to the biblical Psalms and has, in its entirety, a much different message from the one critics have posited when they privilege a handful of poems.

I have found it helpful to distinguish between three types of psalm, distinct in perspective and style, which compose Klein’s Psalter. These are not, with the exception of two sequences, found in groups; rather, the three varieties alternate throughout the Psalter. The first type, the *Ahat* psalm, [page 9] uses primarily the first-person singular, and it is

characterized by angry questions from the narrator to God. *Ahat* is the Hebrew word for the numeral one, and I have chosen it to identify these poems because of its connotations of solitude and isolation. In these psalms, the poet is familiar with suffering but he cannot understand it. The Holocaust, specifically, challenges his faith in the only direct reference to the twentieth century in the Psalter. Consequently quite dark, these poems are most often cited in criticism of Klein's Psalter, but in fact there are only nine of them, exactly one quarter of the whole Psalter. The Hebrew translation for the second type of Psalm comes from Genesis 1.24, when God first created wild beasts, or *Wehejuti*. The eleven *Wehejuti* poems are in the spirit of the fable—light, often humorous, but not without a moral. The narrator in these poems repeatedly encounters animals that either teach him a lesson or make him covet their status as beasts. Perspective vacillates between first and third-person singular, and a sequence of these poems retells the Jewish parable of Bratzlaver. All *Wehejuti* psalms reaffirm Jewish tradition by playfully yet seriously interacting with its rich history of myth and story. The other sixteen poems of the Psalter constitute the third type, the *Maha-Ahat* psalm, which detail Jewish customs and rituals. It is difficult to transliterate Hebrew into English, but *Maha-Ahat* refers to the numeral one hundred; it also, appropriately for Klein's work, depends upon the root word for individual (*Ahat*) to describe a multitude. Therefore these poems celebrate community, signified by the use of the first-person plural. Many of them are earnest prayers, asking for humility and an ability to accept suffering. *Maha-Ahat* psalms also affirm the importance of heritage, as possibly the most famous poem, "A Psalm touching genealogy," does as it ends the series. The arrangement of poems does not privilege one type of psalm over another; rather, their diversity and integration unite the Psalter. The sceptical individual must be viewed in the context of history and community, and identifying the psalms as evidence of the poet's "alienation and despair," as Pollock does (103), is a misrepresentation based only on the first type of psalm. Collectively, the psalms express the poet's faith, and it is all the more honest and believable for being a faith composed of doubt along with certainty.

Before examining the three types of poems within the Psalter, the title that Klein gave the cycle of thirty-six poems merits brief consideration. "The Psalter of Avram Haktani" can be interpreted, as M.W. Steinberg has done, as "an obvious play on [Klein's] own names" (101). Avram is a derivative of Abraham, which could refer to Klein's first name or to the forefather of all Jews. Several critics since Steinberg, whose 1965 article [**page 10**] in *Canadian Literature* was the first to do so, have noted that the word 'small' in English is

‘haktani’ in Hebrew and ‘klein’ in Yiddish. Solomon J. Spiro offers further illumination on the Hebrew root ‘hakutan’, saying that it is used by Jewish scholars to prefix their signatures in an act of humility (8). Thus the title, Spiro insists, “should be properly translated ‘Abraham the Humble’” (83). Spiro’s insight also helps to establish an important gap between the author of these psalms and their narrator: the latter is a merely a version of Klein, although they share many of the same emotions. The events in the psalms do not, as Steinberg believes, “describe the major events of Klein’s life from his birth through his marriage” (101). Instead, the Psalter belongs to “Abraham”, a combination of humble Avram, the historical Abraham, and Klein himself.

The first type of psalm, the *Ahat* poem, is characterized stylistically by its use of the first person and thematically by a desire, often frustrated, to understand why God perpetually allows the Jews to suffer. Both the perspective and the message of this group of poems can be found in these lines from Psalm XII¹:

These were the ones who thanked their God
With dancing jubilant shins....
I did not see this dance, but men
Have praised its grace; yet I
Still cannot fathom how they danced,
Or why.

(17)

Pollock infers that most of the psalms are ones “in which the poet searches for a voice of explication and justification” (104), but there are only nine *Ahat* poems. The psalms which correspond to this category include I, II, IV, VI, XII, XIII, XXIII, XXV and XXXIV. Unfortunately, Pollock is not the only critic who foregrounds the angry, interrogative poems; Miriam Waddington also identifies the “chief emotions” of the Psalter as “doubt and despair, and the chief gestures, retreat and denial” (60). While I do not believe that this assessment applies to the Psalter as a whole, it is a valid description of each *Ahat* poem.

“A Psalm of Abraham, when he hearkened to a voice and there was none” is prominently placed first both in the series and in the larger volume of *Poems*. In this psalm the narrator expresses nostalgia for the strong prophets in Israel’s past, listing “the open vision,” the High priest’s oracles, and “the word on the high places” as examples (1). “Abraham” says that even an experiment with witchcraft, such as King Saul’s encounter with [page 11] the occult in 1 Samuel 28, would be

welcome if it resolved his doubt. Since “prophecy has vanished out of Israel ... / Who is there to resolve the dark, the doubt?”(1). The second half of the poem does not appear to answer this question; instead, it elaborates on the contemporary suffering with images from Israel’s past. “The days of scorpions and of whips” alludes to King Rehoboam, who intensified his cruelty to the Jews by using scorpions in place of whips (I Kings 12.11). The eighth line refers to Samson, a “seer” who had his eyes put out by the Philistines (Judg. 16.21), and the ninth line to Isaiah, a prophet whose lips were burned with a glowing coal by an angel (Isa. 6.6-7) (Spiro 84). In the final quatrain, the speaker emphasizes that the “painted heathen[s] dance and sing” while the “holy ones are silent”(2). The five-foot beat in each line is consistent until this point; the last two lines, however, break from the pentameter to stress the silence literally with a space. Klein’s poem, in the tradition of the biblical psalms, fills that silence: it is a voice of lament on behalf of the Jewish community. Although King David’s psalms do offer God praise and thanksgiving, many of them are, similarly, refrains of doubt and uncertainty. The form of Psalm I, moreover, offers a ray of hope to alleviate its despair. Noreen Golfman notes that the rhythmic control in the indented tercet as well as the strictly cross-rhymed quatrain assert order over the rest of the poem, “a pattern over the frenzied clamouring” (1990:148) of the heathens. Psalm I also functions as a prologue to the message of the entire Psalter: the reader is introduced to “Abraham” as he wonders where to “take counsel” in “these dubious days.” The thirty-five poems that follow are a response to that hearkening voice, a call to listen to the conversation between a poet, his community, and God. The title implies that ‘Abraham’ only imagined he heard a voice, but it might also allude to the way God called the prophet Samuel. The Jerusalem Bible says that “it was rare for Yahweh to speak in those days; visions were uncommon”(1 Sam. 3.1); therefore, Samuel did not recognize God’s voice when he first heard it. During the 1940’s, when Klein’s Psalter was published, many Jews felt that “the word of the Lord” was altogether too rare, and that believing in God meant hearkening to an absent voice. Golfman aligns this struggle with the crisis of modernism, saying that Klein offers his faith, or “vision of unity,” to counteract “the chaos of the modern world” (1990:151). The Psalter, therefore, acts as a dialogue, one which does not necessarily resolve “Abraham”’s doubt, but which does begin to fill the silence left by the holy ones.

A recurring theme in the *Ahat* poems is precisely the nostalgia found in Psalm I for the strong prophets of biblical times such as Samuel and Isaiah. “To the prophets, minor and major” (Psalm XXV) is a poem honouring the [page 12] Old Testament prophets, but it does so with a parodic attack on the contemporary version of prophet in order to

illustrate its inadequacy. “Madame Yolanda” with her foggy crystal and “Sir Aries Virgo, astrology-professor” join the “spiritual inspectors” to foretell the future, but the poet is not comforted by their attempts at prophecy (31). This psalm, XXV, is a companion to the first one, as the speaker asks “where, O where is that inspired peasant ... / Who will explicate the folded present?”(31). Psalm XXXIV parallels this frustration; here, the narrator admits to being divided by doubt in this “terrible, tumultuous night”(42). Golfman says that the opening lines of Psalm XXXIV “evoke the horrible conditions of modern life [by echoing E.J.] Pratt’s diction and imagery, which identifies the primitive instincts of evil within the technological, inorganic realm” (1987: 398). The first half of this psalm idealizes the poet’s youth, when “nothing was difficult” with Rashi’s simplified exegesis of the Bible; his pedagogy took the poet “verse by verse, and clue by clue” up “the spiral splendid staircase of the Law” (42). Now, however, the poet is “grown, a man of men,” and there is “much [he] cannot grasp” (43). Rashi’s commentary no longer helps him unravel the mystery of suffering. “Abraham” recognizes that “hunger and hate and pestilence and war” (43) also existed in Rashi’s day, but this is little comfort. He is tormented by the “claw” and the “vulture beak” of the steel bird, contemporary versions of “the days of scorpions and of whips” in Psalm I. The subtitle to Psalm XXXIV says it is meant to be written down and left on Rashi’s tomb; it is another lament, from one individual to another, but it is still directed beyond the grave—in other words, to heaven. It is still a cry of suffering and a call for explanation from the silent “holy ones.” Although this qualifies the psalm in the *Ahat* category, the poem’s final lines demonstrate a quiet confidence which counteracts its earlier despair. Critics such as Pollock (104) have ignored the parallel to “I wait your answer” (43), which is “in the interim / I do ... intone ... a Kaddish”(43). “Abraham” says a Kaddish, a “reverent mourner’s prayer which sanctifies God’s name” (Golfman 1987:400). The poet’s voice can be heard “in the interim,” a further answer to the silence of the holy ones. Perhaps this poem itself can be viewed as a Kaddish for Rashi, a lament for the Jewish community across centuries.

Klein’s fourth psalm is important because it parodies David’s twenty-third Psalm, possibly the most beloved of the biblical Psalms. In Klein’s poem, “Abraham” describes an idyllic pasture only to have it overshadowed in the second verse by two German war planes. Although David experiences something similar when he goes through “the valley of the shadow of death” (*New International Version*, Ps. 23.4), David is certain [**page 13**] his journey will end in heaven—an assurance that “Abraham” lacks in this poem. Klein’s psalm ends with “an exquisite purity of note,” in E.K. Brown’s words (261), but it is a

bleak prophecy for the green pastures whose skies host war planes rather than clouds:

They'll not be green for very long,
Those pastures of my peace, nor will
The heavens be a place for song,
Nor the still waters still.

(5)

Parody also has the potential to universalize the poet's anger, as it does in Psalm XXIII. This poem typifies the *Ahat* psalms, and as such, deserves close examination. In a reading at McGill University, Klein introduced Psalm XXIII as "a thought I am certain which has occurred to all ... that were but opportunity given to us, we could improve upon the Lord's design" (1990: 970). The narrator of "A Psalm of justice, and its scales" fantasizes that:

One day the signal shall be given me;
I shall break in and enter heaven, and ...
I shall seek out the abominable scales
On which the heavenly justice is mis-weighed.

(29)

The poet imagines that once the scales are "gloriously" broken, "ever thereafter justice shall be done" (29). With bitter sarcasm, he implies that random chance would distribute justice more equally than God has done (Spiro 87). Psalm XXIII represents the tone of all *Ahat* psalms: bitterness only occasionally tempered with reverence. In this poem, there is much that "Abraham" "cannot grasp, and much that goes amiss" (Klein 1944:43), and he cannot find any prophets to explain the mystery of God's apparently arbitrary judgement. Nevertheless, it is important to note that "A Psalm of justice, and its scales" is a sonnet, and, just as in Psalm I, this fixed form immediately orders the "misery" it describes. Linda Hutcheon says that in Klein's work "meaning is generated through form" (58) as much as through content; the regular rhyme and rhythm of this poem, therefore, somewhat temper the speaker's bitterness by creating the balance and order that heaven lacks.

Another version of the poet's dream to see equity among the nations manifests itself in Psalm VI. Here, rather than breaking "the abominable [page 14] scales" of justice, he imagines that God's ancient fury smites the enemies of the Jews, as it did in Biblical times. "Abraham" sees a vision of the Holocaust's cattle-cars and other atrocities (7); he pictures the angels weeping at the sight, until God summons "the angels of Sodom down to earth" (8) to destroy the

Nazis. It seems likely that this dream is even more satisfying than breaking heaven's scales, although neither fantasy alters reality. The importance of dreaming cannot be underestimated, especially for a community with as lengthy a history of suffering as the Jews. Klein himself identifies Joseph as the Bible's archetypal poet in a speech by that name, because Joseph "is a dreamer and, what is infinitely more important, an interpreter of dreams" (1982:144). The narrator of Klein's psalms, "Abraham," cannot be condemned for dreaming, for his dreams help sustain "the weary Jew" of Psalm XIII. In this poem, the Jew is too tired to sing, as the gypsy and the sailor do, because "no song today wells from the heart / That has no morrow!" (18). This bitterness epitomizes, as in the parodic psalms, the *Ahat* psalm, and as Psalms VI and XXIII prove, such an anger finds a type of grim satisfaction in dreaming. The *Ahat* poems are a vital component of the overarching dialogue of the Psalter, for they articulate the anger and interpret the dreams that "all" surely share.

The second type of poem in the Psalter, according to my system of classification, is the *Wehejuti* poem, and this group has received almost no attention in contemporary criticism. Most critics seem to share Waddington's opinion, that these psalms "are trivial in their subject matter and trivial in their execution" (64), although critical disdain is more commonly marked by disregarding these poems altogether. Yet the *Wehejuti* poems are a substantial part of the Psalter, and their tone and subject matter strive to ameliorate the anger of the *Ahat* psalms. Poems of the second type are distinguished by the use of animals: Psalms III, V, XXVII and XXVIII portray beasts solely, and VII, VIII and XI feature animals in secondary roles. *Wehejuti* psalms are light in content and tone, and, in sharp contrast to the *Ahat* group, wield irony free from malice. Specifically, these poems include III, V, VII, VIII, XI, XXI, XXVII, XVIII, XXIX, XXX, and XXXI. This category coincides with Steinberg's observation that Klein is "interested not only in the Bible as the centre of Jewish tradition, but in the folkways and thought-ways of his people" (85). Despite the fact that Steinberg does not examine any of the *Wehejuti* poems, his remark is accurate; this type of psalm does engage with a rich variety of Jewish writing, including fables and parables. Passages from the Hebrew Bible, however, still compose the majority of its allusions.

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Klein's third psalm is of "Abraham, when he was sore pressed" by the same burden of wisdom that troubled the author of Ecclesiastes (the twenty-fifth book of the Jerusalem Bible). It was most likely written by David's son, King Solomon (Qoheleth), and he writes in its first chapter that accumulating his vast store of wisdom was a "weary task" (Eccles. 1.12); another translation calls knowledge a "heavy

burden” from the Lord (*NIV*, Eccles. 1.12-14). “Would that the Lord had made me, in place of man-child, beast!” says the first line of Psalm III, and, in doing so, introduces animals into Klein’s Psalter (4). The tone is deceptively light, and the poem’s impact only deepens because of its proximity to the heartfelt anxiety found in Psalms I and II. A careful reader of the Psalter has already felt ‘the weight of thought’ with which the poet struggles in the first two psalms, and which the third psalm says is worse than the yoke of an animal: “Lighter the harness than the harnessed heart!” (4). This sentiment is repeated in Psalm VIII, a “Psalm of the fruitful field”:

Even a sheep which rolls in grass
Is happier than lad or lass
Who treads on stones in streets of brass.
(11)

Several other poems acknowledge the narrator’s envious gaze toward the life of animals, and it is significant that these occur throughout the Psalter. If all the wisdom that humans can acquire does little to alleviate suffering, or even make it comprehensible—if knowledge is in fact a burden in a world which so “mis-weighs justice”—then “Abraham” would rather pray “his portion with beasts”, as the subtitle to Psalm XXVIII states. “The better to understand Thy ways,” the poet asks God, let his companions be “the more-than-human beasts of Thine” (34). This poem systematically lists the biblical animals that instructed humans: a ram taught Isaac the meaning of sacrifice (Gen. 22.13), Noah’s dove was an example of patience (Gen. 8.8-12), and a donkey spoke to Balaam on behalf of God (Num. 22.28). Lambs, dogs, ravens, and lions seem to know ‘the mystic parables’ of life which elude “Abraham.” Psalm XXVIII is without sarcasm; instead, it is an earnest plea for an understanding of the world equal to the knowledge of animals, at least the biblical kind. G.K. Fischer believes that “the infinite potential for goodness” resides within creation (108)—in other words, that evil is an intrusion. Furthermore, she says that Klein “makes it his business to seek out [goodness] and make others perceive it” (108). This is especially evident in the *Wehejuti* psalms, where the simple rhythm and cheerful tone do not eschew depth of meaning. The beast psalms explore many [page 16] of the same issues that trouble “Abraham” in the darker, more egotistical poems, but, in addition, they offer a necessary glimpse of “goodness” in a world that is not overshadowed by German war planes.

Two of the *Wehejuti* psalms are pastoral, namely VIII and XXI, and these best illustrate the “goodness of creation.” If Jewish recipients of the original publication expected, as the irate Julian B. Feibelman did,

“deep devotional refreshment” (qtd. in Pollock 1990:99) from the Psalms, they should have focused on “A Psalm of the fruitful field.” This poem is a beautiful description of “A field in sunshine ... / On which God’s signature is sealed” (10) by every detail of nature. Golden hay, pale violets, fat bees, and plump strawberries are imagined by the narrator to be bits of paradise fallen to earth in divine effort to make life here more lovely and bearable. The poet ends by asking God to let heaven include his favourite parts of earth: “And grant my soul in after days / In clovered meadowlands to graze” (11). Likewise, Psalm XXI is a benediction, or blessing, for the new moon, where several characters see a different image in the face of the moon, but each one ultimately recognizes, as the poet in the field does, God’s handiwork:

Lift up your heels; lift up your eyes to see,
Each after his own fashion, the seal of God
Impressed upon His open writ!

(26)

King David also says that “the heavens declare the glory of God” (*NIV*, Ps.19.1); furthermore, that “there is no speech or language where the voice [of heaven] is not heard” (19.3). Klein’s pastoral psalms articulate nature’s testament not only to God’s existence but also to his goodness. The new moon and the clovered meadowland point to their creator; they act as universal “holy writ,” witnessing to those who have not read the Bible. This celebration of nature is important because it undermines Pollock’s argument that Klein’s Psalter echoes only King David’s despair at being an exile. The pastoral psalms, indeed most of the *Wehejuti* psalms, are unconcerned with other humans. It is perhaps best in isolation that the poet can appreciate “fields with sunny skies” (11) as proof of God’s existence.

J.F. Nims, in a 1945 review of the Psalter, called the psalm that I will use to represent all *Wehejuti* poems, Psalm XXVII, “extravagant to the point of bathos” (105). The shift from the tone of the previous psalm is certainly abrupt, but Nims’s criticism is unwarranted. Although Psalm XXVI outlines centuries of Jewish oppression, and Psalm XXVII sings the praises of a common barnyard rooster, the transition is not bathetic. The six [page 17] poems referring to animals that precede “A Psalm to teach humility” establish the poet’s serious reflection on the lives of beasts. Lines calling the rooster “more melodious / than nightingale”, a “Prophet of sunrise”, and a “Calligraphist upon the barnyard page” (33) are undoubtedly ironic, but the final stanza reveals that the poet views even this creature with wonder and humility. The rooster knows “the movements of the

turning day ... / better than I, who neither sing nor crow / and of the sun's goings and comings nothing know" (33). The rooster, like all the animals mentioned earlier, understands his place in the world more clearly than the poet grasps his own. Spiro sees this as Klein's "lament of his own inability to comprehend the mysteries of life" (93), but, juxtaposed with Psalm XXVI, a more metaphorical interpretation is possible. Both historically and contemporarily, Jews do not believe that Jesus was the son of God; they are, therefore, still waiting for the Messiah. The poet in Psalm XXVII envies the rooster for being able to herald the *sun's* arrival and simultaneously wishes he knew when God's *son* will descend to deliver the Jewish community from the suffering detailed in the previous psalm. This longing is modest extravagance indeed. Furthermore, it is worth noting that this poem has no recognizable form: the twenty-one lines vary in length and hold a loose thirteen rhymes. The stanzas about the rooster, however, carry numerous scattered internal rhymes, embodying the stars which lie "like well-scattered grain" in the brain of the bird. Homage to the rooster also holds ironic comment on poetic form, such as "five-noted balladist," which implicates iambic pentameter along with the cock's crow. Finally, the phrase "O creature marvellous" is repeated twice, acting as a tidy bookend for the poem as a whole, and establishing through repetition the sincerity of the poet. This earnest tone, unfortunately, has been lost on many readers. While I do not mean to remove entirely either the sarcasm or the possibility that the speaker is more spiteful than sincere, I do think that an honest faith has room for both anger and doubt. Furthermore, in response to Nims's negative review in *Poetry* (1945), Klein said that the rooster belongs to the Jewish tradition—there is actually a benediction for its ability to distinguish night and day. Klein "sought to translate and amplify" this tradition (Klein 1990:970) in Psalm XXVII, which is the same motivation that I see behind the final set of poems in the Psalter.

The third type of psalm that composes Haktani's Psalter is the *Maha-Ahat* psalm, namely IX, X, XIV, XV through XX, XXII, XXIV, XXVI, XXXII, XXXIII, XXXV and XXXVI. These poems further counteract the assumption that Klein's psalter is primarily about the alienated individual, for each *Maha-Ahat* psalm explicates the importance of the customs and [page 19] rituals of the Jewish community. Ludwig Lewisohn, in his preface to *Hath Not a Jew...*, also recognizes the place of heritage in Klein's work: "We are not born on the day of our birth; we are not abstract and unfathered creatures" (13). The poet of these psalms situates himself firmly within the Jewish community across centuries, or, as in Psalm XXXVI, finds "the fathers that begat" him in his veins, eavesdropping at his ears, pulling the latches of his heart, and looking through his very eyes

(46). Of this poem, Rachel Feldhay Brenner says that “the poet’s sense of mission is overwhelming; he is both the product and transmitter of heritage” (11). This conflation of the individual and his community characterizes the *Maha-Ahat* poems, as the designated Hebrew word implies.

The poet discusses Jewish heritage in several different ways: he reinterprets Talmudic passages, as in Psalms IX, X and XIV; he examines, at length, the Jewish customs surrounding marriage (XV through XX), nighttime (XXXV) and death (XXXIII); and he accepts the suffering of his people on a personal (XXII) and public (XXVI) level. The latter two psalms are especially important as an antidote to the anger of the earlier psalms, for in XXII and XXVI, the poet seems resigned to sorrow and, although still conscious of its injustice, he does not use suffering to challenge God. On the contrary, the *Maha-Ahat* psalms are genuine prayers without any reference to time period. In Psalm XXII, “Abraham” asks to be “preserved whole” in his old age; if God’s design says otherwise, “Abraham” will struggle against it, yet ultimately acquiesce with “so be it; and Thy will be done” (27). In addition, the *Maha-Ahat* poems are significant for explicitly detailing “hopeful”, happy events; in other words, even for the “doubt-divided” Jew, joyful experiences such as betrothal and marriage are not solely fantasies. The wedding sequence, Psalms XV to XX, is in the spirit of the biblical Song of Songs, but where its author, Solomon, writes personal love lyrics, the Psalter’s poet describes the rituals surrounding Jewish marriage in general. In Klein’s poems, “Abraham” remembers when the “Old Rabbi” who marries them was his earliest teacher; he studies the scribe who writes the marriage contract in Hebrew; he explains why the bridegroom breaks a wineglass under his heel; he extols the virginity of his bride and prays for a healthy firstborn, and he ends with a song celebrating the senses at the wedding feast. “The Jewish religion,” observes R. Patai, “places extraordinary emphasis on food observances. Whenever the Jew eats or drinks anything, he either obeys or disobeys a religious commandment” (qtd. in Spiro 90). Therefore the rich dietary details in Psalm XX, of “golden-dotted soup,” “tender chicken,” and “tasty crust” (Klein 1944:25), are a vital part of the marriage ceremony and central to Jewish rituals. Fischer confirms that the purpose of the nuptial verses is to remind the Jewish community that peace and happiness are possible in the “dark,” “dubious days” of Psalm I. She adds that “if their stylized solemnity fails to touch us, it is probably because in literature, longing and passion tend, on the whole, to be more interestingly portrayed than fulfilment” (Fischer 108). Barney Panofsky, the central character in *Barney’s Version* by Mordecai Richler, describes the role of poems about ‘fulfillment’ by quoting

Samuel Johnson. According to Johnson, “the sacred writers related the vicious as well as the virtuous actions of men, which has this moral effect, that it kept mankind from despair” (qtd. in Richler 235). The Jewish community seems especially susceptible to crises of despair, but I see the virtue depicted in the idyllic marriage sequence, although it might be less “interestingly portrayed,” as a powerful deterrent to the melancholy of the *Ahat* psalms.

Naim Kattan believes that Klein tries “to give secular relevance to Jewish tradition” (67). Although this evaluation applies to many of the *Wehejuti* and *Maha-Ahat* poems, it is especially evident in Psalms XXXIII and XXXV. These two poems wrap around the Psalm of Abraham, “to be written down and left on the tomb of Rashi,” reminding the poet of Jewish rituals in Psalm XXXIII and comforting him with “The four good angels of the night” (44) in Psalm XXXV. After the marriage sequence and a poem about birth, it seems only natural to include a psalm when “The candles flicker on the floor” (41) in the Jewish ritual of mourning. There is no morbidity in this; it is a terse but meaningful poem about death, published significantly near the end of the entire collection, in its place within the order of life. This psalm appeals to man’s desire to understand death by surrounding it with tradition and ceremony; similarly universal, Psalm XXXV has “secular relevance” because it describes the familiar fear of the dark. This poem elaborates on a Jewish tradition which believes that a man’s soul travels to heaven to be reinvigorated while he is sleeping. “Abraham” prays that Gabriel, Uriel, Raphael and Michael will guard his body during his soul’s journey; it is a prayer made “because of fear in the night” (44). Kattan’s analysis regarding implications beyond the Jewish community, however, sounds cautious compared to Pollock’s statement that, for the poet, “the theology has vanished, but the tradition has remained” (26). Once again, this is a dangerous summation to make, and it overlooks the lines which end Psalm XXXV:

Yet when the shadows flee away,
And [...] I fare forth, exiled from that land,
Back to my blood, my bone, my day, [page 20]
Untowered, unflowered, unscented banks,
Back to the lumpy sack of skin,
The head, the torso, and the shin,
I offer up, to Thee, my thanks.

(45)

The last line does not simulate the sincerity of a vanished theology; rather, the poet’s unaffected gratitude for the resurrection of the dawn

and his earthly body brings tradition and faith together. “Abraham” places his trust not only in the ceremony which makes life bearable, but in his God. The *Maha-Ahat* poems do have secular relevance, but that does not eradicate the possibility that they are also expressions of faith.

The quintessential *Maha-Ahat* poem is Psalm XXVI, because it is the only psalm to use the first person plural: “we sat down, we wept / When we remembered Zion” (32), for example; this characterizes the strong sense of community which is featured in all the *Maha-Ahat* poems. Psalm XXVI is “A Psalm of Israel, to bring to remembrance,” and it involves what Klein called “a fluvial view of Jewish history” (1990:972). The poem, therefore, uses water to symbolize suffering as it recalls how Jewish tears have augmented the rivers of Babylon, the Nile, the Tiber, the Vistula and the Rhine. The psalm ends with a supplication to the Lord, asking him to dry the abundance of tears, and, further, to cause the evaporation to form clouds which will rain blessings down into the river of the promised land, the Jordan (32). Although this poem is largely in iambic rhythm, it is devoid of rhyme. The free-flowing form, therefore, which is unusual in Klein’s work, mimics the unpredictable currents of the very rivers it describes. The poem is also replete with alliteration, specifically a hard “s”, which conflates the sound of water and hardship: “O Rhenish wines are sharp / The subtle salt of blood gives them their sharpness” (32). Spiro comments that the water from these rivers, “associated at first with memories of suffering, become, ironically, metaphors for a return of the dispersed peoples of Israel and an obliteration of painful memories as the waters evaporate and are re-made” (93). Psalm XXVI “brings to remembrance” the heavy history of grief that is a part of the Jewish tradition, but it simultaneously eclipses that memory with the promise that the prophet Jeremiah offers the people of Israel in “a Letter to the Exiles”: specifically, that Yahweh has reserved “a future full of hope for you” (*Jerusalem Bible*, Jer. 29.11).

Klein once said that his great-grandfather was a prophet (Brenner 10), and I think “The Psalter of Avram Haktani” is a poetical response to this rich prophetic history. In the Jewish tradition, a prophet delivered God’s words to the people, but, equally important, he also spoke on behalf of the [page 21] community to God. Many of Klein’s psalms address God directly, as Psalm XXIV does:

I have no title for your glorious throne,
and for your presence not a golden word, –
only that wanting you, by that alone
I do evoke you, knowing I am heard.

This is not “the voice of [a] bewildered child,” which Pollock says is “Klein’s truest voice ... in the psalms as a whole” (106). Rather, it is the voice of a poet-prophet, a member of the Jewish community, “not a detached observer” (Brenner 31). Pollock’s analysis is limited to the *Ahat* poems while making generalizations about the entire Psalter, and conveniently ignoring the affirmation of faith in lines such as the ones above. It is clear, in conclusion, that the *Ahat*, *Wehejuti*, and *Maha-Ahat* poems are all vital components in the unity of the Psalter. Furthermore, the combination of doubt and praise, which is also found in the biblical Psalms, strengthens rather than invalidates the poet’s faith. In the same way, Pollock’s focus on the fact that the author initially wanted to produce fifty poems means that the critic has neglected to consider the total which was published: thirty-six. This number seems especially significant in light of the tenth Psalm. This poem’s subtitle is *Lamed Vav*, which has, like all Hebrew symbols, both numerical value and metaphorical meaning. Spiro says it indicates “thirty-six” and “righteous men” simultaneously (86). The Talmud states, furthermore, that “God sustains the world for the sake of thirty-six righteous men in each generation” (86), but that their identity remains a mystery until after they die. This information is submerged in the lines of Psalm X, although perhaps Brown is correct when he states that the poem’s ideas “are not adequately embodied” (262). The success of this poem, however, is less important for the moment than the resonance that *Lamed Vav* has with Klein’s entire Psalter (and his oeuvre, as this theme is explored more fully later in *The Second Scroll*). The author chose to publish thirty-six poems, one for every member of his generation for whom God preserves the Jews. Whether these men are “in a cave” (II) of doubt, “sore pressed” (III) by worry, or afraid in the night (XXXV), these poems “bring remembrance” (XXVI) to “the great goodness” (X) of the silent “holy ones” (I). “Abraham” experiences doubt and despair, as many righteous men have, but it does not cause him to revoke his beliefs. In fact, his struggles “against madness” (XXII) strengthen his faith, and deepen the poignancy of his interaction with the Jewish community. Elsewhere, Klein [page 22] says that “seldom, if ever, is the truth one-sided. Truth, oftenest, is a composite, a series of gradations, a harmony in which *yea* and *nay* echo one another” (qtd. in Greenstein, 199). It is thus that “The Psalter of Avram Haktani,” not only in content but in form, captures the essence of faith. Klein’s Psalter, like a hymnal, acquires its harmony through the integration of many voices: the *Ahat*, *Wehejuti*, and *Maha-Ahat* psalms. These psalms imitate the dialogic nature of their biblical predecessors and obey what St. Paul says in a letter to the Ephesians (NIV, 5.19): that is, to “speak to one another with psalms.” [page 23]

Notes

1. Every such reference indicates Klein's Psalms rather than the biblical ones, unless otherwise noted. [\[back\]](#)

Appendix I The Psalms in Numerical Order

Psalm I (1): A Psalm of Abraham, when he hearkened to a voice and there was none.

Psalm II (2): Maschil of Abraham: a prayer when he was in the cave.

Psalm III (3): A Psalm of Abraham, when he was sore pressed.

Psalm IV (4): A Psalm of Abraham, touching his green pastures.

Psalm V (5): A Psalm of Degrees.

Psalm VI (6): A Psalm of Abraham, concerning that which he beheld upon the heavenly scarp.

Psalm VII (7): For the chief physician.

Psalm VIII (8): Psalm of the fruitful field.

Psalm IX (9): A Psalm, to be preserved against two wicked words.

Psalm X (10): Lamed Vav: a psalm to utter in memory of great goodness.

Psalm XI (11): A Psalm of a mighty hunter before the Lord.

Psalm XII (12): To the chief musician, who played for the dancers.

Psalm XIII (13): A song for wanderers.

Psalm XIV (14): A Psalm for five holy pilgrims, yea, six on the King's highway.

Psalm XV (15): A Psalm of Abraham, touching the crown with which he was crowned on the day of his espousals.

Psalm XVI (16): To the chief scribe, a psalm of Abraham, in the day of the gladness of his heart.

Psalm XVII (17): For the bridegroom coming out of his chamber, a song.

Psalm XVIII (18): For the bride, a song, to be sung by virgins.

Psalm XIX (19): A benediction.

Psalm XX (20): A Psalm of Abraham, which he made at the feast.

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Psalm XXI (21): A benediction for the new moon.

Psalm XXII (22) A prayer of Abraham, against madness.

Psalm XXIII (23): A Psalm of Justice, and its scales.
 Psalm XXIV (24): Shiggaion of Abraham which he sang unto the Lord.
 Psalm XXV (25): To the prophets, minor and major, a Psalm or Song.
 Psalm XXVI (26): To the chief musician, a Psalm of Israel, to bring to remembrance.
 Psalm XXVII (27): A Psalm to teach humility.
 Psalm XXVIII (28): A Psalm or prayer—praying his portion with beasts.
 Psalm XXIX (29): To the chief musician, a Psalm of Bratzlaver, a parable.
 Psalm XXX (30): To the chief musician, a Psalm of Bratlaver, which he wrote down as the stammerer spoke.
 Psalm XXXI (31): To the chief musician, a Psalm of Bratlaver, touching a good gardener.
 Psalm XXXII (32): A song that the ships of Jaffa did sing in the night.
 Psalm XXXIII (33): A Psalm, forbidden to Cohanim.
 Psalm XXXIV (34): A Psalm of Abraham, to be written down and left on the tomb of Rashi.
 Psalm XXXV (35): A Psalm of Abraham, which he made because of fear in the night.
 Psalm XXXVI (36): A Psalm touching genealogy.

Appendix II

The Psalms in Alphabetical Order

Benediction for the new moon. Psalm XXI (21).
 Benediction. Psalm XIX (19).
 For the bride, a song, to be sung by virgins. Psalm XVIII (18).
 For the bridegroom coming out of his chamber, a song. Psalm XVII (17).
 For the chief physician. Psalm VII (7).
 Lamed Vav: a psalm to utter in memory of great goodness. Psalm X (10).
 Maschil of Abraham: a prayer when he was in the cave. Psalm II (2).
 Prayer of Abraham, against madness. Psalm XXII (22).
 Psalm, forbidden to Cohanim. Psalm XXXIII (33).
 Psalm for five holy pilgrims, yea, six on the King's highway. Psalm XIV (14).
 Psalm of Abraham, touching his green pastures. Psalm IV (4).
 Psalm of a mighty hunter before the Lord. Psalm XI (11).
 Psalm of Abraham, concerning that which he beheld upon the heavenly

scarp. Psalm VI (6).
 Psalm of Abraham, to be written down and left on the tomb of Rashi.
 Psalm XXXIV (34).
 Psalm of Abraham, touching the crown with which he was crowned on
 the day of his espousals. Psalm XV (15).
 Psalm of Abraham, when he hearkened to a voice and there was none.
 Psalm I (1).
 Psalm of Abraham, when he was sore pressed. Psalm III (3).
 Psalm of Abraham, which he made at the feast. Psalm XX (20).
 Psalm of Abraham, which he made because of fear in the night. Psalm
 XXXV (35).
 Psalm of Degrees. Psalm V (5).
 Psalm of Justice, and its scales. Psalm XXIII (23).
 Psalm of the fruitful field. Psalm VIII (8).
 Psalm or prayer—praying his portion with beasts. Psalm XXVIII (28).
 Psalm, to be preserved against two wicked words. Psalm IX (9).
 Psalm to teach humility. Psalm XXVII (27).
 Psalm touching genealogy. Psalm XXXVI (36).
 Shiggaion of Abraham which he sang unto the Lord. Psalm XXIV (24).
 Song for wanderers. Psalm XIII (13).
 Song that the ships of Jaffa did sing in the night. Psalm XXXII (32).

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To the chief musician, a Psalm of Bratlaver, touching a good gardener.
 Psalm XXXI (31).
 To the chief musician, a Psalm of Bratzlaver, a parable. Psalm XXIX
 (29).
 To the chief musician, a Psalm of Bratlaver, which he wrote down as
 the stammerer spoke. Psalm XXX (30).
 To the chief musician, a Psalm of Israel, to bring to remembrance.
 Psalm XXVI (26).
 To the chief musician, who played for the dancers. Psalm XII (12).
 To the chief scribe, a psalm of Abraham, in the day of the gladness of
 his heart. Psalm XVI (16).
 To the prophets, minor and major, a Psalm or Song. Psalm XXV (25).

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