JOB'S SOUL AND OTTO WEININGER’S TORMENTS: JEWISH THEMES IN THE THEATRE OF HANOCH LEVIN AND YEHOSHUA SOBOL

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The biblical figure of Job and the 19th century Viennese philosopher Otto Weininger do not really have anything in common. In spite of his painful losses, Job was able to withstand the temptations to deny the existence of God. Otto Weininger, on the other hand, gave up his Jewish faith and converted to Christianity after having published his infamous tractate *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Sex and Character) where he set out to prove the common moral inferiority of “the woman” and of “the Jew”. A few months after having published this book, during the night between the 3rd and 4th of October 1903, at the age of 23, Weininger committed suicide in the room where Beethoven had died in 1827. Job, who even in terms of the biblical narrator lived “once upon a time” in the mythical country called Uz, and who as the Bible formulated it “died old and sated with days,” after his possessions and children had been “returned” to him is clearly a fictional, even mythological character. Otto Weininger was a historical figure, but he lived in the now for very different reasons in mythologized *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, at the time of the budding Zionist movement.

The reason, however, for bringing Job and Weininger together in the context of discussing the configurations of Jewish theatre, and in particular the Jewish sources of the Israeli theatre, is that within a little more than a year, just before and during the first phase of the war in Lebanon in 1981–82, these two male-figures were cast as the heroes of what now, in a twenty-five-year perspective, must be considered as two seminal, and I believe very significant, Israeli theatre performances. Job is the hero of Hanoch Levin’s play *Yisurey Iyov* (The Torments of Job), which premiered at the Tel Aviv Cameri Theatre in April 1981, with the playwright himself directing; Otto Weininger is the hero of Yehoshua Sobol’s *Nefesh Yehudi: Ha’layla Ha’akharon shel Otto Weininger* (Soul of a Jew: Weininger’s Last Night). This performance premiered October 2, 1982 at the Haifa Municipal Theatre, directed by Gedalia Besser, on the eve of the 79th anniversary of Weininger’s suicide, a detail which, I am certain, was not a coincidence.
When writing these plays in the early 1980s, Levin and Sobol had not yet reached the “canonized” positions they achieved a few years later. It is possible in retrospect, though, to see how they were gradually working towards such a position, but using quite different means and strategies. For Levin, his play about Job signified more of a full-fledged transition to plays based on mythological sources than did Hots’a’a La’horeg (Execution) in 1979; it was a genre he continued developing after his play about Job in Ha’zona Ha’gedola Mi’bavel (The Great Whore of Babylon), which premiered in April 1982. This was after Levin had already written controversial political satires in the late ’60s and a number of grotesque or absurd domestic plays in the ’70s. He continued in the genre of political satire with Ha’patriyot (The Patriot), criticizing the war in Lebanon, which, just like Soul of a Jew, premiered in October 1982. Sobol, on the other hand, trying to reach a broader, less exclusive audience than Levin, was deepening his exploration of the theatrical potential of the historical sources of the Zionist movement and the Shoah, after having written Milkhamot Ha’yehudim (The War of the Jews), a play about the Second Temple period, which was performed at the Jerusalem Khan Theatre in 1981. In this play, Sobol relied on source materials similar to Levin’s. Sobol’s more significant break through came with Ghetto, which premiered two years after Soul of a Jew, in 1984; as a result, he became internationally known as a playwright. Levin, on the other hand, was struggling, though not always successfully, to build up a local audience. The Great Whore of Babylon had a very mixed, even hostile reception, and only in the early ’90s after his production of The Boy Dreams at the Habima Theatre did Levin become accepted and appreciated by broader audiences.

In spite of the significant differences between The Torments of Job and Soul of a Jew, they address quite similar ideological and existential issues, situating a male figure struggling with God in a world that is gradually approaching destruction in the center. It is even possible to show that Levin and Sobol, through these plays, as in much of their playwriting, were conducting an implicit “dialogue” about power and agency, about the relations between “male” and “female” and about the presence, or rather the absence, of God in the modern world. They were, though from quite different perspectives, exploring the delicate balance and dialectics between Jewish and Israeli identities. They were also engaged in a radical critique of the Israeli ideological establishments, frequently taking up subversive positions vis-à-vis contemporary developments of the country. In trying to elicit this dialogue between Levin and Sobol,