

English abstracts

Eduard Feliu i Mabres (1938-2009)

Dr. Eduard Feliu i Mabres, the president of the Catalan Hebraic Studies Society, has died. Dr. Feliu was an eminent scholar of the cultural history of Judaism in the territories in which Catalan is spoken. His work notably included the translation to Catalan of texts in medieval and modern Hebrew by various authors and the study of little-researched aspects of the presence of the Jewish culture in Catalonia. He received an honorary degree from the University of Barcelona in 2007.

Philip S. Alexander: How did the Rabbis learn Hebrew?

Nobody would dream of disputing that the ancient Rabbis spoke Hebrew, nor that they did so very well. They had a comprehensive knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and were perfectly capable of quoting it word for word at will. They used Hebrew to write extensive biblical essays, which, while seemingly extravagant by modern philological standards, show tremendous linguistic sensitivity. It was they who passed on many of the traditions of Halakhah in Hebrew, a tongue that they also used for prayer. Hebrew was so essential to their religious identity, and they were so comfortable with its use, that it is easy to forget that it was not their mother tongue but a second language that they acquired through a great deal of hard work, a sacred language that was not part of everyday life. So, how did they learn Hebrew?

Given that Aramaic was their mother tongue, it is highly unlikely that the Rabbis were educated in Hebrew in the period in question. Simply stating that they learned a great many Hebrew texts by heart and thus somehow came to absorb the language is not a completely satisfactory explanation either. Likewise, suggestions that they achieved such a high level of active knowledge of Hebrew as a second language by using it in day-to-day life can be ruled out, as they probably did not use it amongst themselves for everyday matters. Even if they had done so, the Hebrew in which they wrote their literary works is clearly not a colloquial, everyday form of the language.

The Rabbis proved to be actively proficient in the highest literary registers of Hebrew. They could not have achieved that proficiency via osmosis as a result of the repetition of texts, nor through the use of the colloquial variant of the language spoken in marketplaces. Some kind of constant, systematic language study was necessary. As so many of them attained such proficiency, the path that they followed to that end must have been well trodden. Is it possible to trace their steps along that path?

Despite their vast knowledge of Hebrew, there is no clear evidence of the Rabbis ever having studied the language's grammar in any depth. We do not even know if there were resources that would have enabled them to learn Hebrew, such as the grammar guides, dictionaries and other similar works we take for granted when studying a foreign language today.

Hebrew was learned through the Jewish education system, the *raison d'être* of which was to teach the language. Everything suggests that there were a great many schools in Palestine's Jewish towns in the latter days of the Second Temple period and the subsequent Talmudic era.

The *Bet Sefer* syllabus was exclusively geared to teaching children to read the Hebrew Bible. Schools were thus entirely religious and did not teach practical skills that could be used for trade purposes. Those looking to learn a trade or a craft were generally taught it by their father, another relative or a friend of the family. When they began studying, pupils were encouraged to copy Hebrew letters onto tablets to aid the development of their reading skills, although there is nothing to suggest that calligraphy was part of the curriculum in its own right. The art of the scribe was a trade, which, like any other, was learned outside the primary school system. In Jewish society in rabbinic times, literacy basically involved knowing how to read, not knowing how to write.

How did teachers go about their work? The first stage must have consisted of memorising fragments of the Scripture. The second stage, part of which may have taken place at the same time as the first, consisted of memorising the

translation of the Hebrew Bible into the tongue spoken by the pupils (Aramaic, in the case of Palestinian schools).

The translation in question was crucial in terms of learning Hebrew. It had to be performed very carefully, so as to correlate each word with its original counterpart to the greatest extent possible. Rabbinic sources appear to reflect differences of opinion with regard to how the biblical text ought to be read. There was a school of thought that a verse should not be split up but read in full, as a whole. That meant that the Aramaic translation of each verse also had to be recited as a whole. The Targum was certainly read in that manner in synagogues, with each full verse of the Bible corresponding to a full verse in Aramaic. Some people advocated following that practice at *Bet Sefer* establishments too.

It is important to know how the Rabbis studied Hebrew. The best answer to the question posed above seems to be that they learned Hebrew in much the same way as their non-Jewish contemporaries learned other foreign literary languages, namely through memorisation and literal translation. In this respect, as in so many others, the Rabbis' practice dovetailed perfectly with those of Late Antiquity.

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Jordi Casanovas i Miró: A new hebraic epigraphic element discovered in Castelló d'Empúries

This new fragment of Hebrew tombstone was found in December 2006. It had been reused along with other materials and was discovered during the demolition of a house in the Plaça de la Llana. It is exceedingly rare to come across an epigraphic element *in situ*, and we only know of a handful of such occurrences. On the basis of research carried out by M. Pujol, we are now aware of the existence and location of an ancient Jewish cemetery and of a newer one in Castelló. The first reference to the latter is dated 30 August 1306. The two necropolises are very close to each other, positioned on either side of the Rec del Molí irrigation channel, and it should be noted that one is an extension of the other, a situation that commonly arose due to the need for more space to bury the dead.

The new fragment of tombstone has been added to the series of 12 others discovered previously. We thus have a reasonable number of inscriptions at our disposal, running chronologically from the early 14th century to the early 15th century, a period that roughly coincides with the era of greatest prosperity of

the Jews of Castelló d'Empúries, when they took up residence in the Puig del Mercadal area and remained there until 1417.

Despite the fact that we have currently only a limited number of tombstones to work with, it seems plausible to accept that the traditional cippus was gradually replaced by the smaller stela towards the end of the 14th century, a process similar to the switch from large blocks to smaller tombstones in the Girona necropolis. The main way to distinguish between a cippus and a stela is on the basis of their form. The former is vertical, higher and thicker, while the latter is horizontal, wider and less thick. In some circumstances, however, it is not easy to make this distinction when working with fragments. In such cases, our only guide is the thickness of each fragment, as a cippus is thicker (between 14 and 22 cm) than a stela (between 10 and 13 cm).

In terms of the external features of the new fragment, it is worth noting that the block has been somewhat shoddily cut. Hardly polished at all, the inscribed surface bears a text spread over four or five lines. The preserved part of the new fragment constitutes approximately the upper half of the tombstone, although the first line has been lost. It is just about possible to make out the remains of some of the letters corresponding to the line in question.

I have not come across any reference to Sara, daughter of Joseph de Tena, whose name appears in the epitaph. The fact that the name Tena is preceded by the preposition *de* (meaning 'of') suggests that it is a toponym similar to that on the tombstone of David *de* Cotlliure.

With certain reservations, our reading of the verb structure in the inscription is *fou arrabassada* (meaning 'was taken away'; *arrabassada* is the feminine singular form of the participle), with the feminine ending being virtually illegible. The term used for 'youngster' on the tombstone refers, in sufficiently explicit cases, to young people of up to 20 or 22 years of age, as can be seen in certain examples from León and Girona. It seems that the name of the month of death, which could be *Adar*, appears at the beginning of the last preserved line.

Based on its shape and the text of the epitaph, we are inclined to think that the tombstone is from the last quarter of the 14th century.

Josep M. Llobet i Portella: Electing the secretaries of Cervera's Jewish *aljama* in 1485

While documentation related to the Jews who inhabited Cervera for centuries is in abundant supply, texts that shed light on the internal running of the Jewish *aljama* are rather scarce. Recently, however, such a text has been un-

earthed. Written in Catalan on Saturday 23 July 1485, it consists of the minutes of a meeting and records the election of the two secretaries of the *aljama*, plus that of another person, referred to as the «third party», who would be required to intervene in the process of choosing councillors in the event of any disagreement between the two secretaries.

According to the document, a transcript of which is provided at the end of the article, the electoral procedure was as described below.

On the aforementioned date, a meeting took place in the school in Cervera's upper Jewish quarter (the usual venue for such activities). The Jews in attendance were Mossé de Quercí and Benvenist Sullam, in their capacity as secretaries; the doctor Cresques Adret, the doctor Issac de Quercí, the doctor Jucef Cavaller, Jucef Baró Creixent, Bonjuà Adret, Bonet Bellshom and Issac Samuel Sullam, in their capacity as councillors; and the doctor Samuel Cavaller, Jafudà de Quercí and the doctor Jacob de Quercí, in their capacity as three of the largest landowners and, consequently, three of the highest taxpayers.

First of all, they swore an oath, one after another, whilst touching a text containing the Ten Commandments, in the hope that they would choose wisely when electing two secretaries from among the Jews of Cervera's *aljama*. Voting was conducted in secret. Jucef Cavaller was elected as one of the secretaries by virtue of receiving the greatest number of votes, while there was a tie between Issac de Quercí and Bonjuà Adret for the second secretary's post. Votes were cast again to decide between the two. At this time of asking, Issac de Quercí received the most votes and was thus elected secretary.

The two elected secretaries, Jucef Cavaller and Issac de Quercí, subsequently swore an oath, whilst touching the scroll, to govern the *aljama* in a fitting manner, to act in its best interests and to protect the privileges it had been granted by various monarchs over the course of time.

With the two new secretaries having been elected and sworn in, the outgoing secretaries, Mossé de Quercí and Benvenist Sullam, designated five Jews from among the largest landowners and highest taxpayers, specifically the three mentioned earlier (Jafudà de Quercí, Samuel Cavaller and Jacob de Quercí) plus Mossé de Quercí and Mossé Sullam de Saporta.

Next, the two secretaries (presumably the outgoing secretaries), the seven councillors and five of the largest landowners swore the usual oath and elected the «third party», i.e. the person who would intervene in the councillor selection process in the event of the two secretaries failing to reach an agreement. Jafudà de Quercí received the greatest number of votes and was elected to the post.

The content of the document ends at this point. It appears that the councillors were chosen at a later date. By way of conclusion, it can be said that the text

described herein (a transcript of which is provided) is of great interest in that it reveals how the secretaries of Cervera's Jewish *aljama* were elected in the final period of its existence. A mere seven years later, royal orders would lead to the *aljama* vanishing forever, along with all the others on the Iberian peninsula.

Eduard Feliu: **The Hebrew translations of Arnau de Vilanova's *Regimen sanitatis***

Arnau de Vilanova was born in around 1240, probably in the diocese of Valencia, to which he had ties until his death.

Arnau began to study medicine in around 1260 in Montpellier. It was there that he married Agnès Blasi, who came from a renowned family of merchants and doctors. The couple lived in Valencia from 1276 to 1281, where their daughter Maria was born and where they always owned a considerable amount of real estate and chattel.

Arnau was appointed doctor to King Peter the Great in 1281, shortly before the latter set sail from Portfangós to Sicily to claim the rights of his wife, Constance. The king's absence meant that Arnau had enough time on his hands to translate a number of works by Arab authors to Latin. Arnau served Peter the Great closely during the final years of the king's life and was at his side when he died in November 1285. Arnau's ties with Valencia were strong during the reign of Alfonso the Liberal (1285-1291), but the focus of his medical activity gradually shifted to Montpellier, where he wrote most of his works.

In 1293, Arnau became royal doctor to James II of Catalonia-Aragon (1267-1327, also known as James the Just), as well as the king's spiritual advisor. King James married Blanche of Anjou, daughter of Charles of Naples, in October 1295. Beautiful and fertile, Blanche gave birth to 10 children during her 14-year marriage to the king. Hypochondria was a notoriously prominent feature in the life of the royal couple and, together with the plagues of the era, it caused them to change home repeatedly in search of a healthier environment.

Considering that prevention is better than cure, Arnau wrote a *Regimen sanitatis* in Latin for King James II between 1305 and 1308, a work containing frequent references to the monarch's status and his ill health. Given that the work also had potential benefits for common people, the queen ordered Berenguer Sarriera, the court's surgeon, to translate it from Latin to Catalan, which he must have done between 1307 and 1310.

Two manuscripts of Sarriera's full version of the work in Catalan have been preserved. One is kept in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid (code 10078) and

the other in the Biblioteca de Catalunya in Barcelona (code 1829). There is also an abridged version of the Catalan text in the Vatican Apostolic Library (code Barb. lat. 311). Rather than the original Latin text, it was the Catalan version, in both its full and abridged forms, that was translated into Hebrew.

Word of Hebrew translations of Arnau de Vilanova's works has mainly reached us from 19th century scholars. The information that they set out in their works was used and repeated by many 20th century authors, who were convinced of its accuracy. We now know, however, that the confusion arising from the information related by the aforementioned scholars with regard to Hebrew translations of the *Regimen sanitatis* essentially stems from the fact that they were only aware of the existence of the Latin version of the work, published in the 16th century, and never suspected that it had been translated into Catalan in Medieval times. The translators named in the prologues to or colophons of the Hebrew translations of the *Regimen sanitatis* constitute a source of further confusion, due to their identities having been determined on the basis of poorly founded speculation.

There are Hebrew versions of the full work in the following manuscripts:

Paris MSS, Hébreu 1128 and 1176, translated from Catalan by Samuel ben David Eben-Shoham, a native of Corfu, in Taranto in 1466, with a colophon by the translator (only found in MS Hébreu 1128).

New York MS, 8111, translated by Joseph ben Judah ha-Sefaradi, with a prologue by the translator, but without a date. Moscow MS, Evr. 209, contains the same translation, but in fragments and without the prologue.

There are Hebrew versions of the abridged text in the following manuscripts:

Munich MS, Cod. hebr. 288, translated by Israel ben Joseph Caslarí, with an extensive introduction by the translator. The same version is found in Lyon MS, Hébreu 15 (13), and Saint Petersburg MS, Evr. B-290, minus the introduction in both cases.

Vatican MS, Vat. hebr. 366, firstly contains a translation from Latin of chapter 18 on haemorrhoids, with a colophon. It is followed by a translation of the abridged version, as if it were a separate work, from chapter 11 to the end.

Arnaudina

El Escorial MS, G-III-20, translated by Crescas des Caslar, according to the colophon by the translator, in which no date is specified. The same work, minus the colophon, can be found in Munich MS, Cod. hebr. 288, Vatican MS, Vat. hebr. 366, and Florence MS, Plut. 88.26. Lyon MS, Hébreu 15 (13), and Moscow MS, Evr. 209, contain parts of the work (the same parts in each case).

Second regimen (= John of Toledo's *De conservanda Sanitate*)

Vatican MS, Vat. hebr. 366, Lyon MS, Hébreu 15 (13), and Saint Petersburg MS, Evr. B-290, all contain the *Second regimen*, which, in each case, forms a single unit with and is preceded by the translation of the abridged version of Arnau de Vilanova's *Regimen sanitatis*, and features a colophon by the translator, Crescas des Caslar, dated 1327/28. The *Second regimen* also appears in Munich MS, 288, but the translator's name and the date are not specified.

New York MS, 8111, contains a different translation of the *Second regimen*, in this case entitled «Brief *Regimen sanitatis* of the Aforementioned Christian» (i. e. Arnau de Vilanova). The translation in question is preceded by the authentic *Regimen sanitatis* in the manuscript.

Translators

Samuel ben David Eben-Shoham translated the full text of Arnau de Vilanova's *Regimen Sanitatis* in 1466 (Paris MSS, Hébreu 1128 and 1176).

Joseph ben Judah ha-Sefaradi translated the same work at an unspecified date (New York MS, 8111). Following the *Regimen sanitatis*, the manuscript in question contains a Hebrew translation of the *Second regimen* which differs from that produced by Crescas des Caslar, probably carried out by Joseph ben Judah ha-Sefaradi himself.

Israel ben Joseph Caslari translated the abridged text (Munich MS, Cod. hebr. 288, and fragments in Vatican MS, Vat. hebr. 366, Saint Petersburg MS, Evr. B-290, Lyon MS, Hébreu 15 (13), and Moscow MS, Evr. 209) at an unspecified date, although it is stated in the prologue that Arnau de Vilanova had written the work 20 years earlier. Given that the *Regimen sanitatis* was written between 1305 and 1308, and that Berenguer Sarriera translated it from Latin immediately (prior to 1310, the year in which Queen Blanche died), the reference to a 20-year period suggests that Israel ben Joseph Caslari translated the abridged version at the same time as Crescas des Caslar was translating the *Second regimen*, a task completed in 1327/28, according to the translator himself.

Crescas des Caslar translated the *Second regimen* (i. e. John of Toledo's *Book of health preservation*, attributed to Arnau de Vilanova) in 1327/28 (Vatican MS, Vat. ebr. 366, Lyon MS, Hébreu 15 (13), Saint Petersburg MS, Evr. B-290, and Munich MS, Cod. hebr. 288; the translator's name is not specified in any of these manuscripts). He also translated the text of the *Arnaudina* at an unspecified date (El Escorial MS, G-III-20, a translation that also appears in Munich MS, Cod. hebr. 288, Vatican MS, Vat. ebr. 366, and Florence MS, Plut. 88.26, as well as in fragments in Lyon MS, Hébreu 15 (13), and Moscow MS, Evr. 209).

This article is accompanied by a full transcription of the Hebrew version of

the *Regimen sanitatis*, as contained in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Hébreu 1128, plus a glossary of names of plants and animals mentioned in the text.

Joaquim Salleras i Clarió: Fraga's Jewish *aljama*

While there is no clear evidence of Jews having been present in the town of Fraga when the Count of Barcelona Ramon Berenguer IV reconquered it in 1149, the possibility cannot be dismissed out of hand.

The first documentary reference to the Jews of Fraga appears in a letter that King James I of Catalonia-Aragon sent to the Jews living in the town in around 1237. Another reference can be found in a document dated 8 October 1264, in which the king acknowledged that every *aljama* in Aragon had paid his eldest son, Peter, the annual tax for the Christmas celebrations. It should be noted that Fraga contributed to the coffers of Saragossa at the time in question, as did Lleida [Lérida].

In 1282, King Peter the Great ordered Fraga's Jewish *aljama* to submit its account books corresponding to the last 15 years for inspection in order to clear up a matter related to tax payment. Counting back 15 years from 1282 gives 1267-1268 as possibly either the time at which Fraga's Jewish *aljama* was first established or the point at which Fraga became accountable to Lleida rather than to Saragossa.

In summary, Fraga's Jewish *aljama* was already established in the 13th century, under the jurisdiction of that of Lleida. There had been Jews in the town since 1237, and a Jewish community since 1267-1268, when the Jews of both Fraga and Lleida ceased to have ties with Saragossa's Jewish community. The Jewish *aljama* in Fraga spanned carrer Barranco and La Collada, encompassing the present-day passageways of San Julián, Santa Irene, Aitona and Santa Margarita. Accessible via a gate on carrer Barranco, the Jewish quarter had a bakery, stores, wells or storage pits, wine cellars, workshops and shops looking out onto the street. However, there are now no traces of any of them, nor of the synagogue. The authorities that represented the Jewish community comprised a secretary, a rabbi or teacher, a treasurer, an almoner, a town crier and a gate-keeper or area guard, one of whom would also have acted as a judge. The rabbi oversaw religious celebrations and feast days. The Jews of Fraga came to enjoy genuine privileges as a result of a series of decrees issued in 1328.

The Jews contributed to standard royal expenditure through taxes known as the *cena* (a hospitality tax paid to the royal court) and the *quèstia* (an irregular tax usually levied in response to specific needs). Queen Maria de Luna exempted them from the *cena* tax in 1396, but it was reinstated following restoration

work on the *aljama* in 1436. The Jews' contributions to the extraordinary charges imposed by the king were unusual in that they could be made in an individual capacity, i. e. directly to the Crown. The Jews made such contributions when princes and princesses married, when members of the royal family were born, when kings were crowned and when funding was required for military campaigns, as well as through the *morabati* tax (paid to the king in exchange for a royal promise to refrain from altering the coinage), such as that of 1397, etc.

In 1408, an attempt was made to reduce the size of the Jews' debt corresponding to annual fees levied on property, at which point they owed varying amounts to Fraga's Augustinian monastery (outstanding since 1397), to Queen Violante de Bar and to the priest of the Corpus Christi Chapel of the Church of Saint John of Lleida.

The Jewish quarter was abandoned until 1436, after which time it apparently made a successful recovery. Information on the period in question is very scarce, however.

The Jews were granted many specific privileges, notably including measures to help them increase their earnings through sales of products such as wine (1309, 1322, 1324), taxes, called *cises*, on food products (1389, 1399, 1409) and a 10-year exemption from the *cena* tax (1400); exemption from fees, called *lluisme* and *fadiga*, payable to landowners as a result of transfer of landed property (1384, 1389); waived debts (1389); exemption from fines and penalties (1399); the right not to be disturbed (1399); the privilege of not being the subject of accusations (1409); the right to represent themselves in court (1391); exemption from contributions payable upon slaughtering animals (1409); protection for *aljama* officials involved in crimes (1453); the right to establish an *aljama* with up to 100 households (1413); the right to receive pledges from Christians (1413); free transport of belongings (1413); the right to have a house in any part of the town (1436); exemption from the *morabati* tax (1398, 1451); and the privilege of not being prosecuted by Christian courts.

There are no records of any deaths having occurred in Fraga in the disturbances that took place in August 1391. As of that time, the town council included two representatives of the *aljama*. The conversion of Jews in 1414-1415 led to more problems, possibly similar in all the *aljamas* along the banks of the Cinca River. The problems in question basically consisted of the conversions giving rise to a cultural change, a break with tradition and the abandonment of the *aljama*, whose inhabitants moved to another part of the town. The neophytes did not see why charges applicable to the Jews should also apply to them, and were forced to contribute thereto against their will. Some neophytes encountered problems in terms of obtaining annual payments levied on property due to them as Jews or the heirs of Jews. After 1436, the Jewish quarter was re-

stored and its synagogue reopened, and as many as 50 families lived there until the expulsion of the Jews in 1492.

Eduard Feliu: **Bialik or the prophetic cry**

Hayyim Nahman Bialik was born in 1873 in Radi, in the Ukrainian region of Volhynia. Bialik's father, a timber merchant whose business went bankrupt, died in 1880 when the future poet was only seven years old. Unable to raise her three children, Hayyim Nahman's mother left him to be brought up in her parents' home. In the family library, Bialik found the books that enabled him to develop a prodigious intellectual capacity at the age of just 13. He left his grandparents' home when he was 17 and spent 16 months living in a Talmudic academy close to Vilnius, one of the most highly renowned establishments of its kind in that part of the world.

In 1891, Bialik visited Odessa, where, influenced by the philosophical and political ideas of Ahad Ha-Am, he joined a clandestine Zionist society set up by the latter.

In 1893, Bialik married Manya Averbach, the daughter of a wealthy timber merchant for whom he worked for four years. The couple never had children, a lifelong source of frustration and pain discernible in Bialik's poetry, a scar that love affairs could never heal or conceal.

It was during the period in question that Bialik wrote many of his more evidently Zionist poems, in which he reproached the Jews for their apathy towards new ideas and new feelings, crying out with prophetic indignation against the indifference and blindness of his contemporaries.

In 1900, aged 27 and spurred on by Ahad Ha-Am and other writers, Bialik went with his wife to live in Odessa, which had by then become a hub of Hebrew literary life and a hotbed for the emerging Zionist movement. It was there that he made the acquaintance of a number of leaders of the new Jewish political movements, and his poems made a great impression on the men and women of letters of that important city.

In May 1903, the Jewish Historical Society of Odessa sent Bialik to Kishinev to talk to the survivors of the pogrom that had taken place there. Deeply affected by what he saw and was told there, Bialik withdrew to the home of some relatives close to Kiev and composed one of Hebrew literature's most chilling poems, *In the City of Slaughter*, which consolidated his renown as the Jewish national poet, had a tremendous impact throughout Jewish society in eastern Europe and instigated the process that gave rise to a new Jewish identity. The poem's criticism of the inhumanity and lack of national dignity of the Jews at crucial moments had immediate effects.

In 1919, the Bolsheviks outlawed Zionist activities and shut down all Russia's Jewish institutions, which had enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy. November 1917 saw the British government publish the Balfour Declaration, in which it advocated the creation of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. A month later, British troops seized Jerusalem from the Turks. Bialik had been weighing up the possibility of emigrating to the Land of Israel for some time, but he nonetheless remained in Odessa during the civil war of 1918-1920. In the following two years, anti-Semitic associations organised over 1,000 pogroms, resulting in the massacre of some 60,000 Jews. Bialik eventually decided that he ought to emigrate to the ancient, venerable Land of Israel, where various waves of Jewish pioneers had begun working to rectify the effects of centuries of neglect and poverty. Thanks to the good offices of Gorky, Bialik and a group of Hebrew writers were given permission to leave Russia in 1921, relinquishing all their possessions. Bialik firstly spent three years in Germany, where he re-established his publishing house under the name of Dvir. He finally relocated to the Land of Israel in 1924, at which time it was under British administration. He spent the last ten years of his life engaging in a range of public activities and carrying out missions in foreign countries to aid the Zionist cause, which, in addition to national demands of a political nature, has always entailed the renaissance of the Hebrew language and culture. He wrote very little during the period in question. His poetry was not the product of contact with the landscapes or with the lives of the pioneers transforming the Land of Israel, but was rather inspired by a fierce struggle with the traditions and mentality of the Jews of the Diaspora.

Bialik played a vital role in arousing the political and cultural aspirations of the Jews of his time, an activity clearly reflected in the prophetic tone of some of his most overtly political poetry. By condemning the unfeeling and encouraging those who would go on to feature prominently in the history of the Jews in their ancient and new fatherland, he significantly influenced many people. The cultural and moral impact he made on the Jews of the turn of the century was tremendous, on a par, comparatively, with that made by Herzl in the political arena. He inspired countless Russian Jews to organise themselves and make a stand.

The importance that Bialik's work held for the Zionist movement was not mirrored by that attributed to it in terms of literary criticism. With few exceptions, it was only after his death that he began to be the subject of serious biographical and literary studies. Fundamentally, his work reveals the crisis of values in moral and religious life, a consequence of many Jews in eastern Europe giving up their traditional lifestyle, spurred on by increasingly worldly and politically committed movements. The poet spent his life trapped in two worlds, one of which was dying while the other had yet to be fully born.

Bialik died in Vienna on 4 July 1934, at the age of 61. The people of Israel of all ages, academic backgrounds and convictions had come to view him as a cultural symbol and a guide in terms of interpreting national aspects of Jewish tradition, the poet upon whom the laurels of Jewish nationalism were bestowed, who had succeeded in laying bare the weakness of the nation and the illusory aspirations of the religion, which was mistrustful of the secular innovations that the new political movement seemingly involved.

A leading scholar of modern Hebrew literature, Gershon Shaked felt that interest in Bialik's work could be attributed to his multifaceted personality. Shaked wrote that «many saw in him the poet of the Renaissance; others saw him as the poet of doom. There are those who saw him as a prophet and others who discovered in him pathos, sarcasm and irony. Some saw the face of an untainted yeshivah boy; others saw the hidden passions suppressed by the forces of a normative tradition. Everyone sought reasons and apologies in order to preserve him for future generations, but Bialik is with us here and now because the historical process that was actuated in his writing has not as yet run its course».