

SAPIENTIAL DIALOGUE. HEBREW AND ROMANIAN PROVERBS IN THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Maria RADOSAV
"Babes-Bolyai" University, Cluj
"Dr. Moshe Carmilly" Institute for Hebrew
and Jewish History

The study of proverbs has a long tradition in Romanian research beginning with the 19th century. Proverbs as a folklore genre¹ belong to the paroemiological or sapiential literature of a people and are acquisitions in time of a certain ethical code and life experience. At the same time, they are a self-educational exercise.

The first attempts in the Romanian culture to retrieve and collect proverbs were those of Dinicu Golescu, Iordache Golescu, Anton Pann, Gr. Alexandrescu and Timotei Cipariu. In 1895, Iuliu A. Zanne began to publish his edition of Romanian proverbs in ten volumes; the last volume appeared in 1903.²

The collection and inventory of Romanian proverbs commenced with a program of cultural research in the period between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. It aimed at displaying the national, ethnic values of the Romanian culture and spirituality through paroemiologic literature.

The present paper is a modest contribution to the comparative study of Hebrew and Romanian proverbs, therefore we would like to mention some bibliographic and historiographic references from the Romanian culture relating to the comparative perspective in paroemiology.

G.M.Teodorescu's work, *Cercetări asupra proverbelor române* (Research on Romanian Proverbs, 1877) is the first of

¹ P. Ruxandoiu, *Proverbele ca gen folcloric* (Proverbs as a Folklore Genre), in: *Folclor literar*, Timișoara, 1927, p. 83.

² *Proverbe românești* (Romanian Proverbs), ed. G. Muntean, Ed. Minerva, București, 1984, pp. 5-8.

these references. It is a comparative presentation of the Romanian proverbs perpending that paroemiologic literature lays in a zone of maximum permeability, at the meeting point of different cultures or cultural zones. G.M. Teodorescu admitted that to write the study, he was very much emulated by “foreign scholars who show us how they interpret our popular literature”¹ (he referred to Emile Pico in French, H. Bohn in English, Von Gall and Karl Schuller in German and Ács Károly in the Hungarian cultures).²

G. M. Teodorescu created a concise methodology of collecting and interpreting the proverbs. Starting from a sample of 80 proverbs in Romanian he outlined the borrowings from other languages and analyzed Romanian and foreign proverbs from a comparative perspective. The Romanian proverbs and those originating in other cultural zones were grouped in several classes that correspond to great cultures, cultural or linguistic groups: Greek and Romance, Turkish, Slavic, German, etc. This comparative approach is part of the “critical and scientific method”³ used by Teodorescu.

The second historiographic reference is C. Mureșan’s work, *Proverbe la români și alte neamuri*⁴ (*Proverbs of the Romanians and Other Nations*) published in 1935. Muresan juxtaposed Romanian proverbs with Albanian, Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish and Tatar proverbs that he had collected in a delimited geographical zone, Dobrogea, a multicultural region of Romania. The work makes no pretensions to be critical nor analytic.

Regrettably, a comparison between the Romanian and Hebrew proverbs is not to be found in any of these works. It is very possible that certain mental clichés and stereotypes born out of nescience and ignorance, lead to a general attitude of neglecting, disregarding and isolating a totally different cultural heritage.

¹ G.M.Teodorescu, *Cercetări asupra proverbelor române* (*Research on Romanian Proverbs*), București, 1877, p. 17.

² *Ibidem*, pp .18-19

³ *Ibidem*, p.35.

⁴ C. Mureșan, *Proverbe la români și alte neamuri*, (The Proverbs of the Romanians and of other Peoples), Constanța, 1935. Also cf. Sal Segal, *Din folclorul poporului evreu* *The Jewish People Folklore*), Bucharest, 2000

Nevertheless, Romanian culture came into direct contact with the culture of the Jewish communities living on the territory of the country for a long time. We do not have sufficient arguments to prove the contamination of the two cultures, the Jewish and the Romanian on the territory of Romania. However, a comparative study of the Romanian and Hebrew proverbs may point towards certain connections and common features that would serve as a ground for further discussions on the Hebrew-Romanian cultural interferences in the course of time.

It is important to scrutinize the dynamic of the Jewish culture in Europe in order to emphasize the context in which the Jewish spirituality and the Hebrew paroemiologic literature interfered with the Romanian spirituality.

As soon as the 16th century, the European Jewry began its move Eastward, mainly to Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine and the Romanian countries carrying with them a culture expressed on two levels, a folkloric - Yiddish and a spiritual level - Hebrew.

While moving from one place to another the Jews got in touch with peoples and cultures from different geographical zones and became transmitters of proverbs from their own spirituality and also of proverbs taken from the cultures they had got acquainted with. In other words, the Jews circulated sapiential literature from one place to another. Undoubtedly the Biblical thesaurus of proverbs, sayings, maxims enriched the Christian paroemiologic literature.

The Hebrew proverbs followed a two-direction trajectory to get into daily use. First, from the religious texts they penetrated into Yiddish (when Hebrew ceased to be a spoken language) and then into the European languages. This was the way they entered the European patrimony of proverbs. At the end of the 19th century when Hebrew became again a spoken language, the proverbs took a reversed direction: from Yiddish and possibly the European languages, they got into Modern Hebrew.⁷

There are proverbs of absolute equivalence in the two languages. They are equivalent in meaning, form, lexical

י. גורי, קובץ פתגמים, תרבות ירושלים, 1990, ע. 191 ⁷

composition and image. This total parallelism can be explained by the everyday contact between two cultures and peoples and also by the great incidence of international motives in a pre-eminently folklore genre such as the proverb:

עם האוכל בא תאבון.

Pofta vine mâncând.

(Appetite comes with eating.)

שתיקה שווה זהב.

Tăcerea e de aur.

(Silence is golden.)

זאב מחליף שערור ולא טבעור.

Lupul își schimbă părul dar năravul ba.

(The fox may grow gray, but never good; Black will take no other hue.)

כלב גובח לא נושך.

Câinele care latră nu mușcă.

(Barking dogs never bite.)

The differences in content and image were due to different historical, social and economic conditions. The Jewish moral precepts, their way of life of in the Galut (Exile) were different from those of their neighbors. It explains the small number of Yiddish proverbs on war and revenge. Moreover, there are only a few proverbs about love and they are all skeptical.⁸

Yiddish proverbs have largely spread on account of their humor. They mock at everything, at the most difficult moments and even at God. Their ingenious humor, often based on a pun makes them sometimes untranslatable.⁹ Therefore, there are much more proverbs in Yiddish or in European languages than in Modern Hebrew that took most of its proverbs from the Tanach and the Talmud. The paucity of proverbs in Hebrew led to the use of Yiddish proverbs in the current language for they are unique in zest and irony.

⁸ *Idem*, p. 192

⁹ *Ibidem*, p.193

The following case study shows the similarities and differences between Romanian and Hebrew proverbs from a stylistic and grammatical point of view.

Figures of speech such as hyperbole and personification seldom appear in Romanian proverbs¹⁰ but they abound in metaphor and comparison. In contradistinction to the Romanian, metaphor is rare in Hebrew proverbs as they generally are brief and concise expressions:

מפיך לאוזנו של הקדוש-ברוך-הוא.

(From your mouth to the ear of the mighty God.)

Să-ți fie gura de aur.

(Let your mouth be of gold.)

The metaphor **gura de aur** = *mouth of gold*, in the Romanian proverb has as its correspondent an adjective qualifying a noun phrase in the Hebrew version:

הקדוש-ברוך-הוא = *Mighty God*.

Both variants contain the same message of hope, enriched with new meanings by reality, by the concrete circumstances. In the Hebrew version the divine intervention guarantees its fulfillment (the attribute **הקדוש** = Holy, is undoubtedly positive) whereas the Romanian version becomes laicised by the expression **gura de aur** = mouth of gold and the hazard, the fortuity seem to prevail.

The proverb:

שתיקה כהודאה [דמיא].

(Silence [is] as [though you had] a confession.)

¹⁰ Const. Negreanu, *Structura proverbelor românești* (*The Structure of Romanian Proverbs*), Edit. Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1983

Tace ca porcu-n cucuruz.

(He is silent like a pig in the maize field.)

contains a stylistic comparison in both languages כהודאה and **ca porcu-n cucuruz** . The allegory in the Romanian version heightens the irony and humor.

The epithet is a frequent figure of speech in paroemiologic literature that deepens the subjective attitude of the narrator vis-à-vis the facts he is referring to:

סוף טוב – הכל טוב.

Totul e bine când sfârșește cu bine.

(All's well that ends well.)

Undoubtedly, there are fewer epithets in the Hebrew proverbs than in the Romanian ones. The Hebrew elliptic forms, the elimination of the verb concentrate the meaning in fewer words while the epithet has a determining role:

סוס שניתן במתנה אין בודקין את שיניו.

(We do not check the teeth of the horse that we received as a gift.)

compared to

Calului de dar nu se caută în dinți.

(Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.)

The epithet **de dar** = gift in the Romanian version replaces the verbal phrase in Hebrew: **שניתן**

In the proverb:

שקר - אין לו רגלים.

Minciuna are picioare scurte.

(Lies have short legs.)

the negative verbal form **אין** in the Hebrew variant excludes the possibility of untruthfulness and dishonesty while in Romanian,

the epithet **scurte** (short), although restrictive, offers a chance for falsehood and inveracity.

Repetition as a figure of speech means the “recurrence of a word or group of words in order to express the intensity of an action or a quality; it can also express duration, distribution, progress.”¹¹ As opposed to the Hebrew proverbs where repetition is very frequent, the Romanian proverbs abound in metaphors and epithets. Hebrew proverbs in which repetition is the main stylistic feature, have the message condensed in a few words; in most cases the verb is elliptical if the keyword is a noun and vice versa.

There are proverbs in which repetition is present in both (Romanian and Hebrew) versions:

צוחק מי שצוחק אחרון.

and in Romanian:

Cel ce râde la urmă râde mai bine.

(He who laughs last laughs longest.)

The repetition of the keyword **צוחק** in Hebrew and **râde** in Romanian underlines the significance of the proverb and it is also a way of rendering it more concrete through insisting upon it.

In the Hebrew proverb:

רחוק מן העין – רחוק מן הלב.

the repetition of the key word which is an adverb **רחוק** emphasizes the meaning of the proverb, the consequences of being far away. In the Romanian version of this proverb:

Ochii care nu se văd, se uită

(Far from eye far from heart)

the repetition of the adverb is replaced by two verbs, one in the negative and the second in the affirmative. In this way, an “intramicrocontextual sapiential antinomy”¹² is created that carries

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p.166.

¹² *Ibidem*, p.168.

the same message about the consequences of being far away, without actually using the word “far away”.

The Hebrew proverb

תפסת מרובה – לא תפסת.

(He who grasps much holds little.)

is a classical example of “intramicrocontextual sapiential antinomy” that clearly demonstrates the synthesizing power of the Hebrew language. The repetition of the Hebrew keyword, the verb **תפסת** = grasp, alternatively in the affirmative and then in the negative, changes its proper meaning and suggests the idea of greed and vice.

The Romanian version of the proverb carries the same message:

Cine lăcomește, nu se pricopsește.

(All covet, all lose.)

It is provided again by two verbs, one in the negative and the other in the affirmative, the first referring to greed, and by the relative pronoun **cine** = who that transforms the singular and particular into general.

In the Hebrew proverb:

מטאטא חדש – מטאטא טוב.

(A new broom sweeps clean.)

the repetition of the keyword **מטאטא** = broom, with a slight phonetic difference, endows the proverb with a mnemotechnic value. The structure of the proverb is **noun + adjective, verb + adverb**.

The Romanian version of the proverb:

Mătura cea nouă, în cui s-atîrnă

replaces the repetition with an attribute - **cea nouă** = the new, in the first part, while the second part of the proverb underlines the efficiency of a new object.

In the Hebrew proverb:

כל פרוטה ופרוטה מצטרפת לחבון גדול.

the keyword is פרוטה = money. Its multiplication, suggested by the repetition of the word in the first part conditions the fulfilment of the message itself.

The Romanian version,

Banul face banul, păduchele păduchii

(Money makes money, lice make lice)

has a double repetition **banul** and **păduchele**. The humour and irony of the proverb arise from relating money to lice; the multiplication of money depends on human will and skill while that of lice, on the contrary.

In proverbs such as:

יגעתי - מצאתי.

Cine caută, găsește.

(Finders keepers, losers weepers.)

the message is provided, in both languages by the same grammatical structure: **verb + verb**. Despite this similarity, there is still a difference between the two sapiential units. The use in Hebrew of the verbal form in the first person singular makes the message highly personal, the narrator tells about a subjective although verifiable experience. In the Romanian version, on the contrary, the message is rendered general by the use of the relative pronoun **cine** = who preceding the same **verb + verb** structure.

The Hebrew and Romanian versions of the proverb:

מי שנגנב הסוס נועלים את האורווה.

După ploaie chepeneag.

(Locking the barn after the horse is stolen.)

carry the same message but the linguistic structures are completely different. In the Hebrew variant there is a complex structure – **relative + verb + noun + verb + noun**, whereas in Romanian the grammatical structure is much more simple – **adverb + noun + noun**, the verb missing completely. The Hebrew variant is more didactic while the Romanian is essentialized, reduced to a small

number of words. In addition, none of these variants contain words referring to the essence of the message, namely, the uselessness of any effort after an accomplished fact. The context suggests it.

To conclude with, it is important to point out that this brief study cannot evince the phenomenon of contamination and acculturation between the Hebrew and Romanian proverbs. It serves only as an introduction – methodologically and thematically – to several other comparative inquiries and interpretative approaches. We have, nevertheless, tried to emphasize certain similarities and differences, both in the grammatical structure and expression, between the Hebrew and Romanian proverbs. They undoubtedly heighten the certainty that the sapiential and paroemiologic thesaurus of the two peoples have a common background that subscribes them to universal wisdom.