

**SONGS OF GRIEF
AND GLADNESS
AND "DEBORAH"**

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Songs of grief and gladness and "Deborah" by Ezekiel Leavitt

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EZEKIEL LEAVITT.

UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA

SONGS OF
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and
"DEBORAH"

BY
EZEKIEL LEAVITT.



WITH AN APPRECIATION OF LEAVITT

BY

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AND

A Foreword by the Translator,

MISS ALICE STONE BLACKWELL.

AN APPRECIATION OF LEAVITT.

BY PROF. GOTTHARD DEUTSCH.

More than a hundred years ago, Issachar Falkensohn Behr, a Russian Jew, who studied medicine in Germany, published a volume of poems under the title of "Poems of a Polish Jew." No less a man than the great Goethe himself honored this work with a review, in which he says that the man who calls himself on the title page of his work a Polish Jew is guilty of a pretense. He claims by this phrase, that his poetry is something original, and when, like Behr, he merely gives weak imitations of the customary run of odes to the spring, and when he sings, like every other mediocre genius, of the rosebuds and the nightingale, he has no right to give his poetry a specific name.

The condemnation was quite justified one hundred years ago and remained so for a long time. When Jews, who were imbued with some slight secular knowledge, tried their hand at literature, it took a long time before they emancipated themselves. It may have been about fifty years ago that Abraham Mapu began to write some novels in the Hebrew language. He tried to give expression to the longings and the ideals of the Jewish soul. At first he transferred his poetry to Biblical times, and naturally was affected. Later on he began to place his stories in a more modern environment. He spoke of the battle of the new ideals, which stood for refinement of life, breadth of culture and secular education, against religious obscurantism, against the uncouthness of the Ghetto and the evils resulting from bigotry. Independently there arose a Jewish literature in the German

language, which pathetically describes the transition from the Ghetto life to modern culture. It showed that a phase of life which was vanishing, while it had to go, possessed some pathetic features, which deserved our love and admiration. Nowhere, however, did this pathos appear more strongly than in the literature of the Russian Jew. They formed large communities, were more distinctly separate from their environment by their language and mode of life, and finally suffered more severely from the prejudices of the world around them.

The world's literature will no doubt at some time be enriched by this chapter containing the achievements of the Russian Jews in their Hebrew, Russian and Yiddish writings, and amongst the names which represent this activity stands out, as one of the best, the name of Ezekiel Leavitt.

I do not think that the literature of the whole world contains one genius who was able to write poetry in two languages. Even a prose writer in two languages, who has acquired any standing in the literature of both nations, is exceedingly rare. It would seem, however, that the Russian Jew is unique in this respect. Unable to judge the Russian, I must say that both the Hebrew and the Yiddish works of Ezekiel Leavitt possess great poetic merit. His muse is distinctly Jewish, he gives expression to the griefs and to the pathos of the Jewish soul, produced by the unparalleled sufferings of his people. He sings of Israel's hope, and he wails over Israel's woes. He presents to us the touching conflict between the simplicity of the old, who are happy in the midst of their afflictions, and the impatience of the young, who yearn for a life of freedom, comfort and unhampered intellectual progress. I am sure that all lovers of the beautiful and all admirers of true poetry and of literary art will wish Mr. Leavitt success in his literary activities.

Leavitt has amply experienced the difficulty of "arriving," which all men of genius have to combat with. He now has already a community of appreciative readers, in spite of the fact that most of the languages in which he writes have a limited public in the land where he lives. His poetical works will now appear in English, and thus conquer for themselves a larger public and win that recognition which they richly deserve.

CALIFORNIA

A FOREWORD BY THE TRANSLATOR.

Alice Stone Blackwell.

It has as yet been my privilege to read only a part of this author's poetical works; but these display some characteristics so marked that the reader feels sure they must reappear in all the poet's other writings.

1.) *These poems are idealistic, and often strike a high and noble note, as in "My Creed."*

2.) The author's spirit is intensely nationalistic. He is not only an idealist, but *distinctly and fervently a Hebrew idealist*. Wherever his body may be, his soul dwells in Zion. Over and over again, in different forms occurs the exhortation with which he closes "A Zionist Marseillaise."

The invincible passion with which the poet clings to this idea is very well expressed in his lines, "They Tell Me."

3.) The poems are profoundly mournful, as is to be expected of songs written under the shadow of the greatest tragedy of modern times—the Jewish persecutions in Russia. Many of them breathe the discouragement of an ardent spirit that started out with sanguine hopes of the speedy triumph of right and freedom throughout the world, only to become convinced by sad experience that the complete victory is still far in the future.

4.) The author is deeply imbued with the history of his race, a history so interesting and so wonderful that it is impossible for any open-minded person to read it without feeling his heart swell with pride over the achievements of the old Jewish heroes and heroines. This feeling is of course tenfold stronger in those who share the same ancient and heroic blood. Mr. Leavitt's poetical gift attains some of its highest flights in descanting upon the old glories of Israel, as in his remarkable poem "To My Nation."

5.) The poet is indefatigable in urging his people to live up to their record.

6.) Mr. Leavitt has good ability to impress a moral by means of a fable or parable, as is shown, for instance, in his humorous poem "The Pig."

ANNEXILLAS

7.) The poems are *characterized by fiery indignation against wrong, often enforced with striking similes and illustrations*, as in "The False Prophets." Sometimes as in "The Poet to the Public," there is a note of what sounds like arrogance, but is perhaps only the legitimate self-assertion of the idealist against surrounding materialism, or the exaltation by the poet of his art in the face of coarse and stupid depreciation of the divine mission of poetry. Sometimes a beautiful bit of description of natural scenery occurs in the midst of a philosophical poem, as, for instance, in his poem "The Prophet."

It is true of Mr. Leavitt, as of all other poets, of all nationalities, that the most valuable among his poems are those which inspire courage and predict the inevitable triumph of right. A good example is "The Streamlet."

THE POET TO THE PUBLIC.

My house is heaven, the angels are my friends;
My comrades—flowers, and birds that sweetly call.
Loud-sounding praises do not make me glad,
The critic's censure grieves me not at all.

Oh, I have studied you, my brethren dear!
I know you, pigmies, know you through and through!
You can not comprehend or feel my songs,
Writ with a pen that tears and blood bedew.

You can not understand. Life's daily prose
Has blunted all your feelings long ago.
I only wonder at your impudence
In mocking poetry: "We want it so!"

Trust me, you will not make the poet fear,
Nor choke his voice divine, his song sublime.
His duty is to sing and wake men's hearts,
And he will do it always, every time.

Yea, the true poet does not ask for thanks.
His just reward, let Fortune smile or frown,
Lies in his work; he feels in his sick heart
That he is of humanity the crown.

To the true poet all must honor give;
His artist glance you should not render sad.
He is your father, brother, and your judge,
Your comrade in good fortune and in bad!