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BIBLICAL IDIOMS THAT HAVE CHANGED THEIR MEANING IN MODERN HEBREW

BIBLIJNE FRAZEOLGIZMY
KTÓRE NABRAŁY NOWEGO ZNACZENIU WE WSPÓŁCZESNYM HEBRAJSKIM

Streszczenie

We frazeologii współczesnej hebrajszczyzny wyraźny jest wpływ języków słowiańskich, którego przykładem są frazeologizmy, mające we współczesnej hebrajszczyźnie inne znaczenie, niż miały w hebrajszczyźnie biblijnej, np. **שׁ לוֹ לֵב** znaczyło w czasach biblijnych ‘on jest mądry’, a dziś znaczy ‘on jest zdolny do uczuć’. Frazeologizm ten zmienił znaczenie z tego powodu, że w językach słowiańskich występują frazeologizmy zbliżone doń pod względem znaczenia dosłownego, a znaczące faktycznie ‘być zdolnym do uczuć’. Niełatwo ustalić, czy frazeologizmy te zmieniły znaczenie pod bezpośrednim wpływem języków polskiego, ukraińskiego czy białoruskiego, czy też języki słowiańskie oddziaływały na współczesny hebrajski za pośrednictwem jidysz.

Modern Hebrew has been strongly influenced by the native languages of Jews living in the diaspora¹. An example of this influence is the process of the neo-semanticism in some Hebrew verbal classes: in Mishnaic Hebrew **נשכב** means ‘to be the subject of sodomy’², while in Modern Hebrew it means ‘to lie down’ (ingressive of **שכב**), and the verb changed its meaning because in Yiddish (and also in German and Polish) the ingressive of ‘to lie’ has the form of the reflexive/passive of ‘to lie’³. Another, slightly different example of this process is the root **סבב**, which means ‘to turn’ in the Bible, while in Modern Hebrew **הסתורב** means ‘to turn around’ but also ‘to go from one place to another, to move about’, probably under

¹ Cf. A. Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, transl. J. Elwolde, Cambridge 2000, p. 277.

² M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi*, The Judaica Press 1996, p. 1571.

³ M. Tomal, *Jidysz a hebrajski*, in: E. Geller, M. Polit (eds.), *Jidyszland. Polskie przestrzenie*, Warszawa 2008, p. 57.

the influence of Yiddish זיך דרעהען, which in turn had been influenced by Polish *kręcić się*⁴. The difference between the case of נשכב and הסתובב is that נשכב resembles the European ‘to lie down’ only in its form (or in its ‘etymological/structural meaning’), while one of the actual meanings of Polish *kręcić się* is ‘to turn around’. A similar semantic shift occurred in several Hebrew idioms that have changed their meaning between biblical times and now. If the literal meaning of a biblical idiom was similar to the literal meaning of a Yiddish or Slavic idiom, then the biblical idiom often took on the actual meaning of its European “literal” counterpart. Below are listed examples, together with Slavic (Polish, Ukrainian and Belarusian) idioms that might have triggered the abovementioned change of meaning. It is not easy to tell if the influence of Slavic was direct or indirect (through Yiddish)⁵.

1. IDIOMS CONTAINING THE WORD לב ‘HEART’

Their meaning has changed since in the biblical phraseology לב is the seat of thoughts, understanding, will, memory⁶, and in most European languages ‘heart’ is the seat of feelings. In the Bible feelings are located rather in the kidneys than in the heart. The biblical pair כליות ולב ‘kidneys and heart’ (Jer. 11,20) describing the whole mental life of a human being⁷ has been replaced by ‘heart’ and ‘head’ in Modern Hebrew (הראש לא השב, יזהר, ששה 70) ‘the head did not think, the heart did not feel’. That is why some biblical idioms, once referring to reason, nowadays refer mostly to emotions. Only in the archaizing style of some modern novelists are these idioms used with their ancient meaning.

a. ‘to have heart’

Biblical ‘to be wise’⁸. Job 12, 3: גם לי לבב כמוכם, Moffat: *I have brains as well as you*; CEV: *I know as much as you do*.

modern ‘to be capable of feelings’. לא רק לרופאות שיניים יש לב. ‘not only female dentists are capable of feelings’ (230 מבחן)⁹. The Slavic idi-

⁴ E. Geller, *Jidysz – język Żydów polskich*, Warszawa 1994, p. 108-109.

⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 121.

⁶ Cf. E. Jenni, C. Westermann, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Hendrickson Publishers 1997, vol. 2, p. 639-640; BDB 523, p. II 2-10.

⁷ Cf. M. Piel, *Grzech dosłowności we współczesnych polskich przekładach Starego Testamentu*, Kraków 2003, p. 44 and the bibliography there.

⁸ KB 514, p. 7; BDB 523, p. II 3, cf. Job 34, 34, where אנשי לבב is parallel to גבר חכם.

⁹ Even Shoshan (III 811-816) does not give this idiom.

oms *mieć serce* (Polish), *мати серце*¹⁰ (Ukrainian) mean the same. The Yiddish translation of Job 12, 3 (איך האָב אויך פֿאַרשטאַנדניקייט אַזוי ווי איר)¹¹ may indicate that the word האַרץ ‘heart’ would already in Yiddish suggest rather feelings than intellectual skills.

b. ‘not to have heart’

Biblical ‘to be stupid’. Jer. 5, 21: עם סכל ואין לב, GNB: *you foolish and stupid people*.

modern ‘to be cruel, incapable of feelings’. אין לה לב ‘she is cruel, void of feelings’ (112 מבחן)¹². The Slavic idioms *nie mieć serca* (Polish), *не мати серця*¹³ (Ukrainian), *не мець сэрца* (Belarusian)¹⁴ mean the same. The Yiddish version of Jer. 5, 21 (נאַריש פֿאַלק אָן שכל)¹⁵ seems to indicate that already in Yiddish ‘not to have heart’ would mean rather ‘to be void of feelings’.

The biblical idiom has a lexical variant: Prov. 6, 32: נואף אשה חסר לב, Peterson: *Adultery is a brainless act*, and this variant has been used by a contemporary novelist with its ancient meaning: עליצות חסרת לב תקפה עליה: ‘she was seized with a stupid attack of laughing’ (3, 344 שנהר)¹⁶, which makes the style archaic.

c. ‘heavy heart’

Biblical ‘obstinate as a mule, stupid, infatuated’. Exod. 7, 14: כבד לב, פרעה, Moffat: *The Pharaoh is stubborn*¹⁷.

modern ‘to do sth reluctantly, to be loathed to do sth’. אני הזרחי בלב. ‘I returned to the balance-sheet reluctantly’ (380 הורוביץ); ‘finally, and reluctantly, my father proposed settlement’ (522 סיפור); ‘Oved left home reluctantly’ (135 קפליוק)¹⁸.

¹⁰ Білоноженко I 475.

¹¹ The translation by Yehoyesh, available on <http://yiddish.haifa.ac.il/texts/ye-hoyesh/tanList.htm>.

¹² Even Shoshan (III 812-814) gives both meanings, but wrongly confines the meaning ‘cruel’ to the spoken language, as my example from the written language indicates. The new meaning is given in the dictionary without example from written language.

¹³ Білоноженко I 475.

¹⁴ Aksamitow 185.

¹⁵ The translation by Yehoyesh.

¹⁶ Even Shoshan (III 813) gives the modern meaning of חסר לב: cruel, void of feelings, but without example from written language.

¹⁷ Cf. Piela, *Grzech...*, p. 146 and the bibliography there.

¹⁸ Even Shoshan (III 812) gives the modern meaning of the idiom.

The main difference between the biblical and modern usage is that the biblical *כבד לבו* means that he did not do something because of his stupid stubbornness (so the biblical idiom expresses strong negative evaluation), while the modern *בלב כבד* means that the action was performed, although reluctantly. The modern idiom does not evaluate this reluctance, as is seen in my examples (Horovitz: nobody would condemn a clerk who is not fond of office work, Oz: everybody would appreciate the willingness of the father to come to an understanding with his son; Kapeliuk: everybody can understand the young man who has just bidden his family good-bye and has to return to the army). The Slavic idioms *z ciężkim sercem* (Polish), *з важким серцем*¹⁹ (Ukrainian), *з цяжкім сэрцам*²⁰ (Belarusian) have exactly the same meaning as *בלב כבד* in Modern Hebrew.

d. 'soft heart'

Biblical 'fear'²¹. Deut. 20, 8: *ורך הלבב*, GNB: *afraid*. Sometimes, in the archaizing style, the idiom is still used with the ancient meaning: *רכי הלבב* *היו מהירים להשתכנע* (מבחן 251) – about people frightened of a knife.

modern 'be moved, stirred, feel pity'. *נתרכך בו לבו* (328, 2, שנהר)²² – about one who saw a beggar and decided to help him. The Polish idiom *zmięкло mu serce* and the Ukrainian *розмякло серце у когo*²³ have the same meaning.

e. 'melted heart'

Biblical 'fear'²⁴. Josh. 2, 11: *וימס לבבנו*, GNB: *we were afraid*.

modern 'be moved, stirred, feel pity'. *אבל אני מהזיק את עצמי* *'I feel pity, but I am trying to hold out'* (גפן, כורסת 92)²⁵ – about one who is listening to the complaints of his relative; *אור נעים, אור ממיס לב, קרן ממנו* *'he was beaming with pleasant light, that moved me deeply'* (עוז, סיפור 494) – about the impressions of a young man meeting his idol, David Ben Gurion. The Polish idiom *serce komu topnieje w piersi* or Ukrainian *тане серце у когo*²⁶ might have been the source of the new meaning in Modern Hebrew.

¹⁹ Білоноженко II 798.

²⁰ Aksamitow 186.

²¹ Cf. BDB 940, s.v. *רך* and *מרך*.

²² Even Shoshan (III 812) gives the modern meaning of the idiom, with the example from Yitzhak Dov Berkovitz (1885-1967).

²³ Білоноженко II 794.

²⁴ Cf. BDB 587, s.v. *מסס*, p. Niph. 2.

²⁵ Even Shoshan (III 812-815) gives only the biblical meaning of the idiom.

²⁶ Білоноженко II 798.

f. 'to speak to one's heart'

Biblical 'to console, to cheer sb up, to appease; to encourage, to persuade'²⁷. Gen. 34, 3: הנערה על לב הנערה, Moffat: *and consoled her*. The idiom is still used with its ancient meaning: בפגישות הבאות ניסיתי לדבר על לבה: 'during subsequent meetings I tried to talk her into going with me to various places' (הורוביץ 369); וכיצד ידבר אל ליבה ויבקש את סליחתה; (הורוביץ 369) 'how will he appease her and beg her pardon?' (מבחן 21) – about a father who expelled his daughter from home. This use does not seem to be very archaic.

modern 'to impress, to thrill, to stir'. מדוע מדברת היום אל לבנו המוזיקה. 'why does the music thrill us today' (מגד, החי, פרק כו); המלים של המשורר; 'the words of the poet thrilled me' (אלון, בית 24)²⁸. The Polish idiom *przemawiać do czyjego serca* has the same meaning and is used especially about music or poetry. My examples suggest that the preposition על is confined to the meaning 'to console'.

g. 'hot heart'

Biblical 'angry'²⁹. Deut. 19, 6: יחם לבבו, Moffat: *in hot anger*, CEV: *be very angry*.

modern 'cordial'. איש חם לב, אבהי, גלוב. 'cordial, fatherlike, whole-hearted man' (עוז, סיפור 176); כאב דואג וחם לב נהג עמה; 'he treated her like a thoughtful, loving father' (פרנקל 51)³⁰. The Polish idiom *gorące serce* or Ukrainian *гаряче серце*³¹ have the same meaning. Also Belarusian *сэрца гарыць у каго*³² does not mean 'to be angry', but rather 'to be stirred' (in a positive sense).

h. 'to seize sb's heart'

Biblical 'to frighten'³³. Ezek. 14, 5: למען תפוש את בית ישראל בלבם, FC: *Ma réponse bouleversera les Israélites*.

modern 'to thrill, to stir, to impress'. כל צליל תופס את הלב כמו בצבת. 'each sound is seizing the heart like with heavenly pincers' (בר יוסף, בשלוש 100)³⁴ – about an impression made by beautiful music. The lexical

²⁷ Cf. P i e l a, *Grzech...*, p. 151 and the bibliography there.

²⁸ Even Shoshan (III 814) gives only the biblical meaning of the idiom.

²⁹ Cf. Even Shoshan III 816.

³⁰ Even Shoshan (III 812) gives the modern meaning of the idiom, but without example from written sources.

³¹ Білоноженко II 792.

³² Лепешаў I, p. 356.

³³ Cf. P i e l a, *Grzech...*, p. 92 and the bibliography there.

³⁴ Even Shoshan (III 815) seems to give only the probable biblical meaning of the idiom.

variant with צבט is nowadays more often: צובטי הלב, 'sounds of the piano, hesitant, touching the heart' (286 עוץ, סיפור). The Slavic idioms *chwytać za serce* (Polish), *брати за серце*³⁵ (Ukrainian), *брати за сэрца*³⁶ (Belarusian) mean the same.

i. 'good heart'

Biblical 'good humour, high spirits, cheerfulness'³⁷. Esther 1, 10: כטוב, לב המלך בייך GNB: *the king was drinking and feeling merry*. The idiom is still used with its biblical meaning: 'when the banqueters were merry with wine' (189, 3 שנהר); 'both of them were in good humour' (ביאליק נח) – about the participants of a sabbatical dinner.

modern 'kind-hearted': גבר עליו טוב ליבו 'he was overcome by his kind-heartedness' (273 מבהן)³⁸ – about one who decided to take care of a homeless woman. The Polish idiom *dobry serce* and the Ukrainian *добре серце*³⁹ have the same meaning, but as Even Shoshan indicates, the meaning 'kind-hearted' appears already in the Mishna.

j. 'broken heart'

Biblical 'sadness, depression, low spirits'⁴⁰. Ps 34, 19: קרוב יהוה, לב לנשברי GNB: *The LORD is near to those who are discouraged*. The idiom is still used with this meaning: "פירטה המכוננית" 'troubles with the building contractors and with the car – Eti explained sadly' (395 הורוביץ); 'they are groaning in such a way that one feels depression and pity' (156 פרנקל). This usage does not seem to be very archaic, since the meaning in Modern Hebrew is only slightly narrower (sadness caused by unrequited love).

modern 'unanswered love'. שברת כמה לבבות, שני נערים התאהבו בך [...] 'You have broken a few hearts: two boys fell in love with you [...] a few young workers from the village tried to court you' (6 העטלף)⁴¹. The Polish idiom *zlamać komu serce* and Belarusian *разбіць сэрца каму*⁴² have the same meaning.

³⁵ Білоноженко I 57.

³⁶ Aksamitow 185.

³⁷ Cf. BDB 525, s.v. לב, p. 9a.

³⁸ Even Shoshan (III 812) gives the modern meaning of the idiom, with the example from the Mishna.

³⁹ Білоноженко II 793.

⁴⁰ Cf. Even Shoshan III 812.

⁴¹ Even Shoshan (III 812-815) gives only the biblical meaning of the idiom.

⁴² Aksamitow 185, Лепешаў 2 p. 422.

meaning: 'they did not instruct me what to answer' (127, 3, שנהר); 'Nachman recited in a dry tone what the director told him to say' (190, רג ל 190).

modern 'to attribute an utterance to sb'. ובקול נוקשה ומהיר קראה שורות. 'quickly, in hard tones, she read a poem, which the Arabic poet who lived in the 6th century, Ta'abbata sh-Sharran, had attributed to his mother after her son's dead' (446, הכלה, יהושע)⁴⁹. So the idiom has today the same meaning as the Polish *włożyć w czyje usta jakieś słowa*, Ukrainian *вкладати в уста кому*⁵⁰ or Belarusian *укладваць у вусны каго*⁵¹.

d. 'sth is on one's head'

Biblical 'one is guilty of sth/ punished for sth done in the past'. 2 Sam. 1, 16: דמך על ראשך, MP⁵²: *you yourself should be punished for your death*⁵³. Sometimes the idiom is used in this meaning: מה שקרה מאותו רגע כולו על ראשי 'I am responsible for everything that happened afterwards' (ברטוב, אחות 36).

modern 'one is responsible for sth that should be done in the future'. (ראובני, כל סיפורי 353) 'I have to arrange many matters' (אלף עסקים על ראשי)⁵⁴. The Polish idiom *mieć coś na głowie* has the same meaning. The Belarusian *на сваю галаву*⁵⁵ also refers to future troubles and not to past crimes.

e. 'in the shadow of sb'

Biblical 'under the protection of sb'⁵⁶. Ps. 91, 1: בצל שדי יתלונן, GNB: *whoever remains under the protection of the Almighty*. The idiom is used to this day in this meaning: 'under the protection of her love and her great talent, he will be able to [...]' (בירשטיין 70).

modern 'to keep in the background, to play second fiddle'. כל 'who lived all those years in the shadow of Mrs. Fracht and almost did not appear outside of

⁴⁹ Even Shoshan (V 1454) gives only the biblical meaning of the idiom.

⁵⁰ Білоноженко I 135 (the authors give two meanings of the Ukrainian idiom: a. to attribute an utterance to sb, b. to make sb say sth, but their example confirms that the Ukrainian idiom has exactly the same meaning as the Polish one).

⁵¹ Aksamitow 53.

⁵² My translation.

⁵³ Cf. P i e l a, *Grzech...*, p. 176-182 and the bibliography there.

⁵⁴ Even Shoshan (V 1731) gives only a shortened form of the idiom, the exclamation 'on my head' (without a noun referring to the duty), and attributes it to the influence of Arabic. The dictionary gives the example from Yehuda Burla (1886-1969).

⁵⁵ Ленешаў I, p. 255.

⁵⁶ Cf. BDB 853, s.v. צל, p. 2.

his office' (161 לילה, אפלפלד); מופרשת ומובדלת מהציבור, מוכרשת ניצבת בצד, כאילו חוששת לעמוד במחיצתו של בעלה הכריזמטי [...] ומעדיפה להיות בצילו 'she always stood aloof, separated from society, as if she was afraid to stand near her charismatic husband [...] and preferred to be in his shadow' (42 המורה, באר)⁵⁷. The Slavic idioms *w czym cieniu* (Polish), *бути в тіні*⁵⁸ (Ukrainian) and *у цяні*⁵⁹ (Belarusian) mean the same.

f. 'sb's hands sank'

Biblical 'to be discouraged, frightened'⁶⁰. 2 Sam. 4, 1: וירפו ידיו, NEB: *his courage failed*.

modern 'to feel helplessness in the face of troubles'. עד מהרה היה צינוק 'after a short time the prison cell of the kitchen, blackened with smoke, made his hands sink' (503 סיפור, עוז, סיפור) 'ינסה מייד (עוז, סיפור) 'he will immediately try to discourage her' (286 מולכו, יהושע, יהושע)⁶¹. The Slavic idioms *opadły komu ręce* (Polish), *руки опускаются у кого*⁶² (Ukrainian) and *апускаць рукі*⁶³ (Belarusian) mean the same.

g. 'to hide one's face from sb'

Biblical 'to ignore sb'. Ps. 143, 7: אל תסתר פניך ממני, Peterson: *Don't turn away, don't ignore me*.

modern 'to hide one's nature, not to reveal oneself'. מדוע הוא מסתיר 'Why does he hide his face and does not reveal himself to me?' (12 דמקני)⁶⁴.

In the Bible God hides his face in order not to see somebody (cf. Exod. 3, 6 about Moses covering his face in order not to see God)⁶⁵, in Modern Hebrew God hides his face in order that people could not see him, as my example indicates. It leads to differences in the actual meaning of the metaphor: hiding face means 'to ignore' in the Bible, and 'to remain unknown' in Modern Hebrew. The Polish idiom *ukrywać przed kim swą (prawdziwą) twarz* means the same.

⁵⁷ Even Shoshan (V 1587-1588) gives only the biblical meaning of the idiom.

⁵⁸ Білоноженко II 885.

⁵⁹ Лепешаў 2, p. 550.

⁶⁰ Cf. P i e l a, *Grzech...*, p. 139 and the bibliography there.

⁶¹ Even Shoshan (V 1797) does not differentiate these two meanings, ascribing both of them to the biblical and modern usage, and gives examples only from classical sources.

⁶² Білоноженко II 770.

⁶³ Лепешаў 1, p. 78.

⁶⁴ Even Shoshan (IV 1330) gives only the biblical meaning of the idiom.

⁶⁵ Cf. P i e l a, *Grzech...*, p. 160-164 and the bibliography there.

h. ‘guardian of the law’

Biblical ‘to obey the law’. Deut. 4, 40: ושמרת את חקיו, GNB: *obey all his laws*.

modern ‘to make other people obey the law’. שומרי החוק ‘policemen’ (441, 3, שנהר 3).

As far as my example indicates, the modern usage confines the expression to the substantivised participial form. Also Even Shoshan (VI 1921) does not give the new meaning in the entry שמר, but only the expression שומרי החוק ‘policemen and judges’ in the entry חק (II 600). The Polish expression *stróż prawa* means the same.

i. ‘to carry one’s sin’

Biblical ‘to be punished’⁶⁶. Lev. 5, 17: ונשא עונו, CEV: *and you can be punished*. The idiom is still used with this meaning, but I found only one example, meaning ‘to be punished for other people’s sin’: אם עליו לשאת את חטאות הדור הנלוו ‘if he has to be punished for the sins of the pervert generation’ (310, צפוני 310).

modern ‘to be/feel guilty’. לא נשאתי כל חטא בלבי ‘I did not bear in my heart any sin’ (80, אהות 80, ברטוב). The Polish expressions *dźwigać grzech na sumieniu*, *być obciążonym winą* also mean ‘to be guilty’ and not ‘to be punished’.

The dictionary by Even Shoshan does not help to determine the chronology of the semantic shifts described above, because the entries concerning the modern meaning do not give examples from written sources, except in a few cases, as I have indicated in the footnotes. Entries giving the modern meaning are marked with the letter ח (with the exception of לב טוב), what means that the modern meaning appeared not earlier than in the period of Haskalah.

⁶⁶ Cf. KB 726, p. 15.

Abbreviations

- Aksamitow: Anatol Aksamitow, Maria Czurak, *Słownik frazeologiczny białorusko-polski*, Warszawa 2000.
- BDB: F. Brown, S. R. Driver, Ch. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Peabody 1997.
- Білоноженко: В. М. Білоноженко (ed.), *Фразеологічний словник української мови*, vols. 1-2, Київ 1993.
- CEV: *God's Promise for People of Today. The Contemporary English Version. Uncorrected Proof*, Nashville 1995.
- Even Shoshan: Avraham Even Šošan, *Milon Even Šošan meħudaš ume'udkan lišnot ha'alpayim*, vols. 1-6, Jerusalem 2004.
- FC: *La Bible Ancien et Nouveau Testament Traduite de l'hébreu et du grec en français courant*, Alliance Biblique Universelle 1998.
- GNB: *Good News Bible with the Deuterocanonical Books*, The Bible Societies/HarperCollins 1998.
- KB: L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, revised by W. Baumgartner and J. J. Stamm, translated by M. E. J. Richardson, vols. 1-5, Leiden 1994-1999.
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- Moffat: *The Moffat Translation of the Bible*, London 1958.
- NEB: *The New English Bible*, Oxford–Cambridge 1970.
- Peterson: *The Message // Remix. The Bible in Contemporary Language*, transl. E. H. Peterson, 2003.

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