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**BIBLICAL IDIOMS**  
**THAT HAVE CHANGED THEIR MEANING**  
**IN MODERN HEBREW**

**BIBLIJNE FRAZEOLIGIZMY**  
**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. בְּלִי לִשְׁכָּה 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 oddziały na współczesny hebrajski za pośrednictwem jidysz.

Modern Hebrew has been strongly influenced by the native languages of Jews living in the diaspora. An example of this influence is the process of the neo-semanticism in some Hebrew verbal classes: in Mishnaic Hebrew مضعكس means ‘to be the subject of sodomy’, while in Modern Hebrew it means ‘to lie down’ (ingressive of مضعكس), 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’. Another, slightly different example of this process is the root מסximo, which means ‘to turn’ in the Bible, while in Modern Hebrew מסximo means ‘to turn around’ but also ‘to go from one place to another, to move about’, probably under

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the influence of Yiddish, which in turn had been influenced by Polish \( kręcić się \)^4. The difference between the case of the in fluence of Yiddish and Polish 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, memory^6, 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 ‘kidneys and heart’ (Jer. 11,20) describing the whole mental life of a human being^7 has been replaced by ‘heart’ and ‘head’ in Modern Hebrew (ıdır, שׁוש, 70 (חדל אל הרונים, ‘the head did not think, the heart did not feel’) (70). 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: גוז לו לוב כוּכָם, Moffat: I have brains as well as you; CEV: I know as much as you do.

modern ‘to be capable of feelings’. לאיר אל רפואות ישנים י לְבָב not only female dentists are capable of feelings’ (230)⁹. The Slavic idi-

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^5 Cf. ibidem, p. 121.


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

^8 KB 514, p. 7; BDB 523, p. II 3, cf. Job 34, 34, where חָיָה חַֿבָּב is parallel to אָשֶׁר לִבּ.

^9 Even Shoshan (III 811-816) does not give this idiom.
oms mieć serce (Polish), мати серце (Ukrainian) mean the same. The Yiddish translation of Job 12, 3 (ᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶻᶼ
The main difference between the biblical and modern usage is that the biblical יִלָּכֶּ֑ד חֵ֑ד means that he did not do something because of his stupid stubbornness (so the biblical idiom expresses strong negative evaluation), while the modern יִלָּכֶ֑ד חֵ֑ד 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 з ці́жким се́рцем (Polish), з важким серце́м (Ukrainian), з і́чнякім се́рцам (Belarusian) have exactly the same meaning as יִלָּכֶ֑ד חֵ֑ד in Modern Hebrew.

d. ‘soft heart’
Biblical ‘fear’²¹. Deut. 20, 8: רָאָּר חֵ֑ד, GNB: afraid. Sometimes, in the archaizing style, the idiom is still used with the ancient meaning: רָאָּר חֵ֑ד ‘the cowardly ones quickly became convinced’ (מַכְבַּת) – about people frightened of a knife.

temporary ‘be moved, stirred, feel pity’.
modern ‘be moved, stirred, feel pity’.

e. ‘melted heart’
Biblical ‘fear’²⁴. Josh. 2, 11: יֵרָם חֵ֑ד, GNB: we were afraid.
modern ‘be moved, stirred, feel pity’.
I feel pity, but I am trying to hold out’ (עֶמֶּס, הָרְחַֽה, לְפָנַי;añ, נַעֲמָה; יִרָם נַעֲמָה, אָרָמָּה נוֹמָה, נוֹמָה נוֹמָּה – about one who is listening to the complaints of his relative; he was beaming with pleasant light, that moved me deeply’ (יִרָם, נוֹמָה, נוֹמָה; בּוֹשָׁה, נוֹמָה; יִרָם נוֹמָה, אָרָמָּה נוֹמָה, נוֹמָה נוֹמָּה – 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 кого 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. וּרְאָּר. וּרְאָּר וּרְאָּר.
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. וּרְאָּר, 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: Moffat: and consoled her. The idiom is still used with its ancient meaning: during subsequent meetings I tried to talk her into going with me to various places (369), Moffat: and consoled her. The idiom is still used with its ancient meaning: during subsequent meetings I tried to talk her into going with me to various places (369).

modern ‘to impress, to thrill, to stir’. The Polish idiom przemawiać do czego serca has the same meaning and is used especially about music or poetry. My examples suggest that the preposition ‘to console’.

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variant with ʨʬʭ ʩʨʡʥʶ, ʭʩʱʪʬʮʤʸʺʰʴʤʩʬʩʬʶ, ‘sounds of the piano, hesitant, touching the heart’ (286). The Slavic idioms chwytać za serce (Polish), brero za serćę (Ukrainian), браць за сърцъ (Belarusian) mean the same.

i. ‘good heart’

Biblical ‘good humour, high spirits, cheerfulness’ (Esther 1, 10; GNB: the king was drinking and feeling merry). The idiom is still used with this meaning: when the banqueters were merry with wine’ (189, 3) – about the participants of a sabbatical dinner.

modern ‘kind-hearted’; he was overcome by his kind-heartedness’ (273) – about one who decided to take care of a homeless woman. The Polish idiom dobre serce and the Ukrainian добре серце 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’ (Ps 34, 19; GNB: The LORD is near to those who are discouraged). The idiom is still used with this meaning: troubles with the building contractors and with the car – Eti explained sadly’ (395) – they are groaning in such a way that one feels depression and pity’ (Fränkel 156). 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’. 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). The Polish idiom złamać komu serce and Belarusian разбойни сърца каму have the same meaning.

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35 Білоноженко I 57.
36 Aksamitow 185.
37 Cf. BDB 525, s.v. ב, 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 р. 422.
2. OTHER IDIOMS

a. ‘to seek God’

Biblical ‘to try to win sb’s favour, to beg for sth’ \(^{43}\). 2 Sam. 12, 16: אֵלֶי אָדָם, מֹפַּת: David implored God for the boy.

modern ‘to try to get some knowledge about God, to look after the proper notion or image of God’. ‘He is starting now to seek God’ (1, 227) \(^{44}\) – about one who has returned to the religion of his his fathers’ and tries to learn the foundations of the Judaism. The Polish idiom szukać Boga means the same, but I suppose that similar expressions exist in most languages. Nowadays the verb בִּקְשׁ rarely means ‘to seek’ (more often ‘to ask, beg, want’), and the expression has a lexical variant which is more widely used: דְּפֵשׁ אַתָּא אַלְּלוֹוָה, for example about various sects that are an alternative to the official religion, or: דְּפֵשׁ אַתָּא אַלְּלוֹוָה (מְמוּ, פְּרָסְפְּנָה 196) \(^{45}\). […] young people from America, who settled in the desert. They came to seek God, and they live in a commune. Each of them has a few wives’ (121). Surely, it does not mean that those people implored God in the biblical sense of the idiom. It seems that average speaker of Modern Hebrew would ascribe the meaning ‘to beg, to ask’ to the verb בִּקְשׁ in the verse בִּקְשׁ רוֹד אַתָּא אַלְּלוֹוָה בּוֹד נַחּוּב. 2. OTHER IDIOMS

b. ‘one’s bowels are humming’

Biblical ‘to feel love or pity’ \(^{46}\). Song 5, 4: וַתִּלְׁכֶה הַפָּנַי עַל־יוֹ: Peterson: excited I became, GNB: I was thrilled.

modern ‘to feel strong hunger’:\(^{47}\) their bellies are sunken […] their bowels are humming’ (211) \(^{48}\). ‘his bowels were humming because of hunger’ (69) \(^{49}\). The Slavic idioms kiszki komu marsza grają (Polish), кишки граютъ марш у кого (Ukrainian), кішки марш ігріють (Belarusian) mean the same.

c. ‘to put one’s words into sb’s mouth’

Biblical ‘to command sb to tell sth’. Exod. 4, 15: וָשָׁמֶה אֵל בְּדוּרָם בְּפֶרֶס, Moffat: and tell him what to say. Today the idiom is still used with this

\(^{43}\) Cf. KB 152, s.v. בִּקְשׁ, p. 3-5.

\(^{44}\) Even Shoshan does not give this idiom.

\(^{45}\) Cf. Piela, Grzech..., p. 186-189 and the bibliography there.

\(^{46}\) Even Shoshan (II 393, III 1036) gives only the biblical meaning of the idiom.

\(^{47}\) Білонощенко I 374.

\(^{48}\) Aksamitow 108
meaning: ‘they did not instruct me what to answer’ (Nachman recited in a dry tone what the director told him to say).

modern ‘to attribute an utterance to sb’.

They did not instruct me what to answer’ (190 Jahren, S. 230).

Nachman recited in a dry tone what the director told him to say’ (190 Jahren, S. 230).

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 death’ (446 Jahren, S. 230).

So the idiom has today the same meaning as the Polish włożyć w usta jakies słowa, Ukrainian вкладати в уста кому or Belarusian укладваць у вусны караг.

d. ‘sth is on one’s head’

Biblical ‘one is guilty of sth/ punished for sth done in the past’.

2 Sam. 1, 16: יתור עלי, MP: you yourself should be punished for your death.

Sometimes the idiom is used in this meaning: המ שקרה אתoro, this sentence is used to say: ‘I am responsible for everything that happened afterwards’ (36 Jahren, S. 230).

modern ‘one is responsible for sth that should be done in the future’.

I have to arrange many matters’ (353 Jahren, S. 230).

The Polish idiom mieć coś na glowie has the same meaning. The Belarusian на вусны радавь also refers to future troubles and not to past crimes.

e. ‘in the shadow of sb’

Biblical ‘under the protection of sb’.

Ps. 91, 1: בצל שרי יתולין, 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 [...]’ (70 Jahresheft).

modern ‘to keep in the background, to play second fiddle’.

She is clever, but under the protection of his wife, he will be able to play second fiddle’ (70 Jahresheft).

who lived all those years in the shadow of Mrs. Fracht and almost did not appear outside of...
his office’ (161). 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). The Slavic idioms *w czyim cieniu* (Polish), *ɛɭɬɢɜ* (Ukrainian) and *ɭɰɹɧɨ* (Belarusian) mean the same.

f. ‘sb’s hands sank’

Biblical ‘to be discouraged, frightened’ 60. 2 Sam. 4, 1: *his courage failed.*

modern ‘to feel helplessness in the face of troubles’. דש מדרה היה ציטום המנסה המיפה מטרה את דידי [משה מיר; וトップ 196]; *he will immediately try to discourage her* (286). The Slavic idioms *opadł y komu ręce* (Polish), рукі опускаються у кого (Ukrainian) and *апускаў рукі* (Belarusian) mean the same.

g. ‘to hide one’s face from sb’

Biblical ‘to ignore sb’. Ps. 143, 7: *אלא המפר פנים עצמו*; Peterson: *Don’t turn away, don’t ignore me.*

modern ‘to hide one’s nature, not to reveal oneself’. מдоров הוא מה نطاق אליה עלייה ‘Why does he hide his face and does not reveal himself to me?’ (12).

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), 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. Піеля, Греч..., 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. Піеля, Греч..., p. 160-164 and the bibliography there.
h. ‘guardian of the law’

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

modern ‘to make other people obey the law’. שופרי שתוקן (441,3).

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 שופר, but only the expression ‘policemen and judges’ in the entry תוקן (II 600). The Polish expression stróż prawa means the same.

i. ‘to carry one’s sin’

Biblical ‘to be punished’. Lev. 5, 17: 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’: ואל תשלח להם את התשאת הדור הנלה ‘if he has to be punished for the sins of the pervert generation’ (310).

modern ‘to be/feel guilty’. ‘I did not bear in my heart any sin’ (80). 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 ʧ (with the exception of על בות), what means that the modern meaning appeared not earlier than in the period of Haskalah.

66 Cf. KB 726, p. 15.
Abbreviations


List of Hebrew Sources

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