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. לֶב לֶשׁ 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’. Nielatwo ustalić, czy frazeologizmy te zmieniły znaczenie pod bezpośrednim wpływem języków polskiego, ukraińskiego czy białoruskiego, czy też języki słowiańskie oddziałyły 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 נֶשְׁכֶּב means ‘to be the subject of sodomy’, while in Modern Hebrew it means ‘to lie down’ (ingressive of שְׁכֶּב), 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 סָבַב, which means ‘to turn’ in the Bible, while in Modern Hebrew הָסַבָּב means ‘to turn around’ but also ‘to go from one place to another, to move about’, probably under

the influence of Yiddish, which in turn had been influenced by Polish *krecht się*. The difference between the case of the in fluence of Yiddish on Polish and the other way around is that it resembles the European ‘to lie down’ only in its form (or in its ‘etymological/structural meaning’), while one of the actual meanings of Polish *krecht 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).

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, 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 has been replaced by ‘heart’ and ‘head’ in Modern Hebrew (ריאה לא_meshub, ‘the heart did not think, the heart did not feel’) and (ראש לא ר陴ים, ‘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’. Job 12, 3: כָּמֹהוּ לְבֵבִי, Moffat: *I have brains as well as you*; CEV: *I know as much as you do.*

modern ‘to be capable of feelings’. אֲלֵךְ לְרֹפאות שְׁנֵי יָמָּה לְבֵב not only female dentists are capable of feelings’ (230) (משה). The Slavic id-

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5 Cf. ibidem, p. 121.
7 Cf. M. Piel a, *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 *לב* is parallel to *לבב*.
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 may indicate that the word ‘heart’ would already in Yiddish suggest rather feelings than intellectual skills.

b. ‘not to have heart’

Biblical ‘to be stupid’. Jer. 5, 21: GNB: you foolish and stupid people.

modern ‘to be cruel, incapable of feelings’. Jer. 5, 21: you foolish and stupid people.

The biblical idiom has a lexical variant: Prov. 6, 32: Adultery is a brainless act, and this variant has been used by a contemporary novelist with its ancient meaning: she was seized with a stupid attack of laughing’ (3, 344), which makes the style archaic.

c. ‘heavy heart’

Biblical ‘obstinate as a mule, stupid, infatuated’. Exod. 7, 14: The Pharaoh is stubborn.

modern ‘to do sth reluctantly, to be loathed to do sth’. Exod. 7, 14: The Pharaoh is stubborn.


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.

11 The translation by Yehoyesh.

Even Shoshan (III 813) gives the modern meaning of the idiom.
The main difference between the biblical and modern usage is that the biblical יְבִ֖שׁ לֵבָ֣ו means that he did not do something because of his stupid stubbornness (so the biblical idiom expresses strong negative evaluation), while the modern יְבִ֖שׁ לֵבָ֣ו 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 серцем19 (Ukrainian), з цяжким сэрцам20 (Belarusian) have exactly the same meaning as יְבִ֖שׁ לֵבָ֣ו in Modern Hebrew.

d. ‘soft heart’
Biblical ‘fear’21. Deut. 20, 8: הלִבְּבוֹ, נָרִי מִלֶּבַּב, GNB: afraid. Sometimes, in the archaizing style, the idiom is still used with the ancient meaning: הלִבְּבוֹ (מקסאני) ‘the cowardly ones quickly became convinced’ (פְּנַי 251) – about people frightened of a knife.

modern ‘be moved, stirred, feel pity’. לִבְּבוֹ ( JNI 2, 328, 2)22 – about one who saw a beggar and decided to help him. The Polish idiom zmiękło mu serce and the Ukrainian розмякло серце у кого23 have the same meaning.

e. ‘melted heart’
Biblical ‘fear’24. Josh. 2, 11: לִבְּבוֹ, וַיִּמְסֵ, GNB: we were afraid.

modern ‘be moved, stirred, feel pity’. לִבְּבוֹ (アメリ 494, וַיִּמְסֵ, בִּלְבָּשָׁה 92)25 – about one who is listening to the complaints of his relative; ‘he was beaming with pleasant light, that moved me deeply’ (뇌ז 494, שם ר)26 – 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 кого26 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. רָכָֽךַ וּמָרָכָֽךַ.
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. מָסָּס, 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: הילדה Lev haLev ve’idmar, 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 fåhrovicz; סליחה את ויבקש ליביה אל ידבר ווכיצד’ (21 הואון) – 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’. מ PROTOS והום אל لماذا המוזיקה ‘why does the music thrill us today’ (24 בית, אלון)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’


modern ‘cordial’. את זה Lev, אביו, ללבב, ’אמש Lev he treated her like a thoughtful, loving father’ (176 הסיפור, עוז;) – about a father who treated her like a thoughtful, loving father’ (51 פרדסק; פורטיק)³⁰. The Polish idiom gorące serce or Ukrainian гаряче серце have the same meaning. Also Belarusian серца гарыць у каго³² does not mean ‘to be angry’, but rather ‘to be stirred’ (in a positive sense).

h. ‘to seize sb’s heart’


modern ‘to thrill, to stir, to impress’. כל צליל תופס את הדול כمو בר יוכין (100 בincinn), ש’ each sound is seizing the heart like with heavenly pincers’ (¹³⁴ – about an impression made by beautiful music. The lexical

²⁷ Cf. Piel 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 Љепешаў 1, p. 356.
³³ Cf. Piel 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 'sounds of the piano, hesitant, touching the heart' (286). The Slavic idioms *chwytac za serce* (Polish), *брати за серце* (Ukrainian), *браць за сэрца* (Belarusian) mean the same.

i. *good heart*

Biblical 'good humour, high spirits, cheerfulness'37. Esther 1, 10: *כטוב*, בין המלך ולב GNB: *the king was drinking and feeling merry*. The idiom is still used with its biblical meaning: ‘כטוב למדוסים ביני扬尘, when the banqueters were merry with wine’ (189,3) ‘both of them were in good humour’ (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’40. Ps 34, 19: *יהוה קרוב לכנשבר* GNB: *The LORD is near to those who are discouraged*. The idiom is still used with this meaning: ‘לכ Souls of the pianist, hesitant, touching the heart’ (286). The Slavic idioms *chwytac za serce* (Polish), *брати за серце* (Ukrainian), *браць за сэрца* (Belarusian) mean the same.

modern ‘sadness caused by unrequited love’. יברות ללב: ‘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 разбіць сэрца каму have the same meaning.

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 p. 422.
2. OTHER IDIOMS

a. ‘to seek God’

Biblical ‘to try to win sb’s favour, to beg for sth’. 2 Sam. 12, 16: ויבקש הנער בעד האלהים את דויד, Moffat: 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). 196: 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 בקש rarely means ‘to seek’ (more often ‘to ask, beg, want’), and the expression has a lexical variant which is more widely used: חפש את האלהים, for example about various sects that are an alternative to the official religion, [ע] תוערצין מאמורים והנהות במצבי. או חפש את האלהים, or: מְפֶסֶפֵנָה (196), or: חפש את האלהים, לָלֶכֶת אַחֶד כָּל נַשְׁמָה [...] 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 בקש in the verse ויבקש הנער בעד האלהים את דויד.

b. ‘one’s bowels are humming’

Biblical ‘to feel love or pity’. Song 5, 4: excided I became, GNB: I was thrilled.

modern ‘to feel strong hunger’: עכל המיא [&] מיעבד עופר [&] מיעבד עופר their bellies are sunken [...] their bowels are humming’ (211). מִשְׁמֶר, שמח 69 and מִשְׁמֶר, שמח 69 ‘his bowels were humming because of hunger’ (69). The Slavic idioms kiszki komu marsza grają (Polish), הקְֶשֶׁקグラי (Ukrainian), הקְֶשֶׁקグラי (Belarusian) mean the same.

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

Biblical ‘to command sb to tell sth’. Exod. 4, 15: מְשַׁמֶּה את המобще במרי, Moffat: and tell him what to say. Today the idiom is still used with this

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43 Cf. KB 152, s.v. בקש, 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 Білоноженко I 374.
48 Aksamitow 108
meaning: ‘they did not instruct me what to answer’ (127, 3).

modern ‘to attribute an utterance to sb’.

Nachman recited in a dry tone what the director told him to say’ (190, הרץ, ברטוב."

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, תובלה, יניושע)."

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

d. ‘sth is on one’s head’

Biblical ‘one is guilty of sth/ punished for sth done in the past’. 2 Sam. 1, 16: מחבק על אשתך, MP: you yourself should be punished for your death. Sometimes the idiom is used in this meaning: ‘I am responsible for everything that happened afterwards’ (36, רבךוכו, הרץ)."

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

I have to arrange many matters’ (353, סיפורי כל, ראובני).

The Polish idiom mieć coś na glowie has the same meaning. The Belarusian на сваю глаўу 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: בצלו שיר תהלים, 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, ברישמי).

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

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. Piela, Grzech..., p. 176-182 and the bibliography there.
54 Even Shoshan (V 1731) gives only a shortened form of the idiom, the exclamation ראשי על 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 Jenewajă 1, p. 255.
56 Cf. BDB 853, s.v. צל, p. 2.
his office,’ (161) he was afraid to stand near her charismatic husband [...] and preferred to be in his shadow’ (42) The Slavic idioms w cziym cieniu (Polish), бути в тіні (Ukrainian) and y цняні (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’.
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 opadł y komu ręce (Polish), руки опускаются у кого (Ukrainian) and апускаць руки (Belarusian) mean the same.

g. ‘to hide one’s face from sb’
Biblical ‘to ignore sb’. Ps. 143, 7: turn away, don’t ignore me.
modern ‘to hide one’s nature, not to reveal oneself’.
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 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. Pie la, 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. Pie la, Grzech..., p. 160-164 and the bibliography there.
h. ‘guardian of the law’

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

modern ‘to make other people obey the law’. שומרי החק (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 שמר (II 600). The Polish expression stróż prawa means the same.

i. ‘to carry one’s sin’

Biblical ‘to be punished’. Lev. 5, 17: ינשא ועונו, 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 שלח ענה אם ואת התשובה ה디ין, means ‘if he has to be punished for the sins of the pervert generation’ (310,zewins).

modern ‘to be/feel guilty’. בלבי חטא כל נשאתי לא, I did not bear in my heart any sin’ (80,ברטוב, אחות). 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 טוב לב, what means that the modern meaning appeared not earlier than in the period of Haskalah.

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66 Cf. KB 726, p. 15.
Abbreviations


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