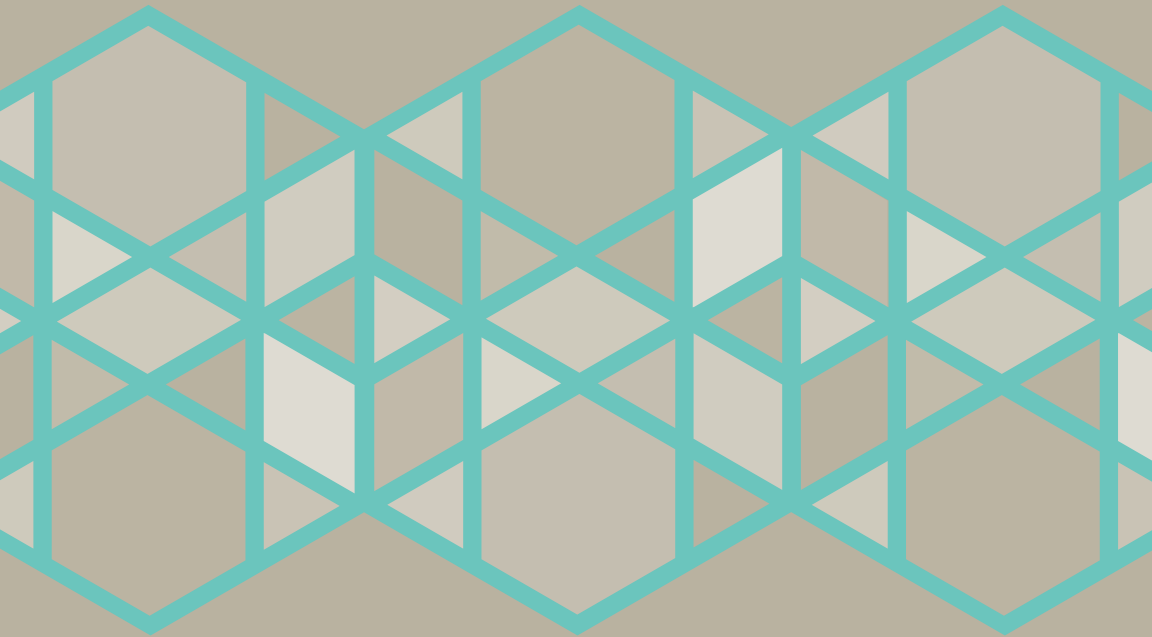




History and Literature

New Readings of Jewish Texts in Honor of Arnold J. Band



WILLIAM CUTTER AND DAVID C. JACOBSON, EDITORS

HISTORY AND LITERATURE

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JEWISH TEXTS IN HONOR OF ARNOLD J. BAND

edited by
William Cutter and David C. Jacobson

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PUBLISHERS' PREFACE

Brown Judaic Studies has been publishing scholarly books in all areas of Judaic studies for forty years. Our books, many of which contain groundbreaking scholarship, were typically printed in small runs and are not easily accessible outside of major research libraries. We are delighted that with the support of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program, we are now able to make available, in digital, open-access, format, fifty titles from our backlist.

History and Literature: New Readings of Jewish Texts in Honor of Arnold J. Band, edited by William Cutter and David Jacobson (2002), contains close textual readings by leading scholars of a broad range of texts that were originally written in different languages.

This edition is unchanged from the original.

Michael L. Satlow
Managing Editor
October, 2019

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PREFACE

David C. Jacobson

Arnold Band's graduate program in modern Hebrew literature at UCLA, in which I was privileged to study in the 1970s, was based on a fruitful synthesis of a close reading of texts and a profound appreciation of the historical contexts of those texts. Band makes clear his commitment to both approaches in his essay, "Graduate Education in Modern Hebrew Literature" (Jacob Neusner, ed., *New Humanities and Academic Disciplines: The Case of Jewish Studies* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984], 95–105). On the one hand, he writes that "close reading . . . is more than a necessary pedagogical device; it is the rationale, the driving principle behind all the various aspects of the graduate student's training" (99–100). On the other hand, later in the essay he informs us that when teaching a poem by H. N. Bialik, "Levadi" (1902), he asked his students to "peruse the newspapers of the weeks preceding the publication of the poem to see what the intellectual atmosphere and the mode of discourse were at that period" (103).

Historical contextualization in our graduate training included an awareness of the intertextual relationships of modern Hebrew literature with other modern works in Hebrew, Yiddish, and a variety of Western languages, and just as importantly, with the classic texts of the Jewish tradition. That is why Band worked so hard to create a position in Yiddish literature at UCLA. (He knew that one could not fully understand modern Hebrew literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without appreciating its bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish character.) That is why our doctoral preliminary examinations included all periods of the development of Hebrew literature, beginning with the Bible. That is why, in addition to the Friday morning seminar with him, my graduate course work included independent study courses in twentieth-century American Yiddish poetry with Janet Hadda and in the central text of Habad Hasidism, *Tanya*, with Amos Funkenstein, of blessed memory. That is why he made sure that I was appointed to the position of teaching assistant in his undergraduate course on modern Jewish literature, which modeled the concept of the interdependent relationship of modern

literature by Jewish authors in many languages. And that is why he urged me early on in my graduate career to undertake the traditional Jewish practice of reading the weekly Torah portion to myself, just to be sure that the most central text of the Jewish tradition was firmly embedded in my consciousness.

Band's scholarship has always reflected this twin commitment to close reading and historical contextualization, and I must say that there is nothing I have ever published or taught that did not aspire to the high standard of synthesizing both that Arnold Band set for me. Having imbibed these standards, every time I set out to write I can do nothing less than try to strike the right balance between these two approaches, constantly (often subconsciously) asking myself the questions: Have I discovered all of the ways that the text works? Have I discerned the historical implications of the text? Have I revealed every possible intertextual reference?

This collection of close textual readings by scholars in a variety of areas, including rabbinics, Jewish history, education, Hebrew literature, Yiddish literature, American Jewish literature, is therefore an appropriate tribute to Arnold Band. Each essay constitutes a new and original reading of a text. The texts analyzed are drawn from a wide range of genres: talmudic legal texts, hasidic tales, folklore, as well as modern poems, essays, and works of fiction in Hebrew, Yiddish, German, and English.

The contributors chose texts that were of significance to them. It is not surprising that we were able to organize the essays into four sections, each of which reflects the personal and scholarly interests of the person we honor. The essays in part 1 undertake analyses of classic Jewish texts or examine the significance of modern interpreters of those texts. The essays in part 2 continue the tradition of the textual analysis of S. Y. Agnon's fiction, of which Band was such an important progenitor. The essays in part 3 explore texts that reflect the Jewish Diaspora experience. The essays in part 4 interpret texts that reflect the emergence of Zionism, the Holocaust, and the establishment of the State of Israel.

The interpretive essays are preceded by three essays more explicitly about Arnold Band, written by individuals who represent major aspects of his academic career. William Cutter, who earned his doctorate at UCLA under Band's supervision, presents perceptive reflections on the significance of Band's wide-ranging scholarship. Ross Shideler and Kathleen Komar, long-time colleagues of Band in the UCLA Department of Comparative Literature, which he founded, vividly capture the way Band has functioned so effectively as a mentor for younger colleagues and as a moving force in the politics of academia. Finally, Michael Signer writes movingly about the powerful effect Band had on him as an undergraduate Hebrew major at UCLA, an effect that informs his scholarship to this day.

We present this collection of essays about Arnold Band and close readings of Jewish texts in gratitude for all that he has taught us and with the hope that he will continue to teach us how to read a text in its historical context for many years to come.



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TWO VIEWS OF ARNOLD BAND

— *Ross Shideler and Kathleen Komar* —

Arnold Band met with a small group of UCLA faculty in 1967 and 1968 and, based on some humanities courses being taught as part of the general education curriculum at the time, worked with the Dean of Humanities, Philip Levine, and various Academic Senate committees to establish a graduate program in comparative literature. Under Arnold Band's guidance, that small, almost ragtag program is now a thriving and still-expanding department. How did he do it? How did this renowned scholar of Hebrew and modern Israeli literature manage to oversee the development of a major comparative literature department that from its earliest stages cultivated a wide range of multicultural, often marginalized fields rather than the more traditional European studies of most comparative literature departments? (Among our first Ph.D.'s were students from Turkey, Japan, Iran, and Nigeria, as well as Italy and Finland!)

I can only offer bits and pieces of personal information, but I think he did it with a combination of intuition (something he would hate to admit), intellectual power (something that comes easily to him), a gruff sense of humor (just ask anyone who knows him), and unrelenting drive (any number of deans will certify this). I first met him when I was recruited in 1969 from the Department of English at Hunter College in New York by the Scandinavian Section, some of whose faculty I knew, and this new Comparative Literature Program, chaired by someone named Band. I was the first joint appointment in Comparative Literature. My fields were Scandinavian, English, and French, but I think I was acceptable to Arnold Band because I had passed a tough reading exam in Latin at Berkeley, and, as I discovered later, he had majored in classics at Harvard, and his Greek was probably as good as his Hebrew; only later did I learn about his Italian, German, and French.

One of the first things he told me to do after I arrived on campus in a three-piece suit on a hot summer day was to join the faculty club. He told me that most university business was done there. While that may have been true, I suspect now that he just wanted someone to have lunch with a couple of times a week, something we have done for over thirty

years, our lunch table at times expanding to include six or eight other faculty and administrators, because, indeed, a lot of university business gets done there. After a while the faculty club helped me to understand how Arnold, Arnie as his wife and many of his friends call him, played such an important role, not only in the Comparative Literature Program and the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, but in the university at large.

During our first discussions, he told me I would be deeply involved in the creation of a new graduate program and an expanding undergraduate program in humanities, with all the fun and responsibility that such a task involved. All this sounded exciting and convinced me to leave my position at Hunter. And it turned out to be true. I was deeply involved in the program in my first year and loved it. Unfortunately, I discovered that he also meant that a year after my arrival he was going on sabbatical to Israel for a year, and I would have to be chair in his absence. I think I wrote him a string of semihysterical letters that year (unfortunately, we didn't have e-mail in those days) and made a few phone calls. He was calm and supportive, giving me advice when I needed it and telling me not to worry about it when I thought I had just made a colossal mistake. I suspect that he may have gotten a number of complaints about me that year, not least from Dean Levine, but that year established a pattern, and we alternated chairing the program for some twenty years. We worked together with the faculty who had been initially involved and then with new faculty who were hired over the years. What characterized Band's open-minded guidance of Comparative Literature was a mixture of fairness, reasonableness, and aggressive effort to sustain and develop the program. Based on his leadership, we hired some brilliant faculty. Band claimed not to have been overly aware that we were probably the first program or department in UCLA's Humanities division to have an equal number of male and female faculty; we just chose the best people, and half of them turned out to be women. I took some pride in this, but to him it was simply logical. One trusted his sense of logic because so many people reached out to him for his advice. I suppose it was not until I was at a Jewish wedding of a mutual student of ours that I realized what an admired and important figure he is to the Los Angeles Jewish community. His toast there was erudite and sophisticated yet filled with warmth and grace, and the bride and groom and our student's family glowed with pride.

Over time I came to realize that Arnold knows an unbelievable number of people, not only on campus, but everywhere. Ora Band, Kathy Komar, Arnold, and I were at an International Comparative Literature Conference in Tokyo a number of years ago, and a group of us were out one evening strolling down a busy Tokyo street. Suddenly a man walked up to Arnold and said, "Aren't you Arnold Band?" The rest of us watched

in amusement and amazement as Arnold and the man renewed an old friendship and discussed people they knew. We weren't exactly surprised. We had been with Arnold and Ora in New York and watched as people there would grab him and say, "I took a class with you in such and such a year," or, "You came to my nephew's bar mitzvah," or, "I heard your talk in Boston," but somehow such a chance meeting in Tokyo seemed both amazing and absolutely typical. He can't go anywhere without meeting somebody who knows somebody who has stayed at his house or visited him while he was in Israel. Ora Band of course is a crucial part of this circle of warmth and friendship that has surrounded the Band family and house for so many years. They have regularly had receptions and dinners there, and a sense of loving family life and intellectual energy pervades everything they do.

It is Arnold's quality of gruff love, of intellectual curiosity and depth, as well as a sense of genuine caring that so many people have experienced over the years, and that's why they, or their friends, or their relatives' friends, come up to him on the street and say hello. He has a sense of loyalty that comes across in all these casual meetings and even more powerfully in his daily life. All of us in Comparative Literature have had the opportunity to benefit from that loyalty; he has supported us fiercely in any number of difficult times. But his loyalty comes with a price. I remember once when, because of my own impatience, I had accidentally done something that offended another faculty member. Arnold called me in, and we had a serious conversation about the obligation one has to be patient and considerate of other faculty members as well as of one's students. I don't think I ever made that mistake again.

On the other hand, to this day I don't know how he managed to remain so patient with as many people as he did and still accomplish so much. He was always trying to balance the demands made upon him by the Comparative Literature Program and the Near Eastern Languages and Cultures Department, as well as play a central role in the development of the Jewish Studies Program. Yet he could sit and talk for extended periods of time with difficult students, students whom others of us simply found exhausting. At the same time, he kept publishing article after article and reading an extraordinary range of books. He was our own private fount of knowledge, a kind of in-house encyclopedia. We all admired him for this, but I suspect he had no choice. I think insomnia gave him an unfair academic advantage; while the rest of us were sleeping he was up reading and working. This expansive range of knowledge came in handy when we were hiring new faculty. We could always count on him to know a good deal about any field we were interested in. Besides that, he is a great storyteller. He has travelled extensively and given lectures almost everywhere, and every time he

comes back from a trip he has new stories, new facts and information. I have learned much about the world and the people in it from those lunches we shared together.

He can be stubborn, though. As the Comparative Literature faculty and student body expanded we needed more space. He kept after the Dean until he finally agreed and gave us the offices we needed. Unfortunately, one faculty member had to be moved to another building, and he didn't want to go. I think he thought he could wait out or outwit Arnold, but he didn't have a chance. Arnold always worked closely with UCLA's administrators, though I have heard him be surprisingly blunt with senior members of the administration when he disagreed with them. In any case, the reluctant faculty member found his books, desk, and chairs moved to another building one day. I moved into that office, and the man has barely spoken to me since. This was a case where logic was simply inescapable and Arnold insisted on it. With our interdepartmental and interdisciplinary interests as well as our fine faculty we were, we felt, going to be of genuine importance to the university, and the administration needed to recognize that fact. To continue our development we needed a shared space, and he got it for us.

Part of the intellectual and physical cohesion that has united the Comparative Literature faculty for decades has been a sense of mutual commitment, not only to each other but to the multicultural and multi-ethnic society in which we happily found ourselves. That commitment and support was centered in Arnold, and the rest of us just picked it up and spread it around. He loves students and cultures from all over the world. While this volume of essays generously reflects his classical Hebrew and modern Jewish studies, friends, and students, I have seen him work closely with students from Japan, Lebanon, Egypt, England, and Germany. The students sense his interest in their work and his willingness to help them if they are willing to learn. He expresses civility in everything he does; in all the years we have worked together no matter how difficult the circumstances seemed, I don't think I have ever heard him get really mad.

The story about expanding our office space may seem like an odd story to tell, but it reflects Arnold. He was never driven by a need for power, but when a little progress was necessary, he would take that step. Comparative Literature has grown slowly but consistently, partially because, at Arnold's instigation, we were always careful to work closely with faculty in other departments. He has great respect for his colleagues and his students, and they recognize this and trust him because of it. He has always been willing to have lunches in private corners when colleagues needed to consult with him about an awkward personnel situation or a personal problem. It is his combination

of wisdom, reason, and loyalty that attracts people. He teaches a bit less now but still works with a variety of graduate students. He gives them that same blend of practical advice and intellectual challenge that I have enjoyed so much during those lunches that he suggested I attend when I first arrived at UCLA.

Ross Shideler

When he insisted on interviewing me in a “Choc Full O’ Nuts” coffee shop instead of one of the Modern Language Association Conference hotels (because the conference was boring and “like a meat market”), I knew I was destined to like Arnold Band. Still, as strange as this appointment was, I sat waiting for a dignified, serious professor when I walked a smiling patriarchal figure in an overcoat a few sizes too big. (Gogol leaped to mind, but I later found out the overcoat belonged to Arnold’s friend and dean, Phil Levine.) We began discussing our interests and discovered we were both teaching *Catch 22*. Arnold taught it as part of his Comedy course, and I was inflicting it on unsuspecting Princeton undergraduates. From that moment our fates were sealed. I knew I had found both a mentor and a kindred spirit. This was a man I wanted to work for and with. And I was enthusiastic as he assured me that I would be “fully involved” in the Comparative Literature Program at UCLA from the very beginning. I later discovered that that meant that I would have the opportunity to work twenty-five hours a day for the Program—but strangely enough, that seemed legitimate since Arnold was right in the trenches with us.

Before I arrived at UCLA, I had without much explanation sent Arnold cartons of books in anticipation of my imminent debarkation. Since his office was the only address I had at UCLA, I shipped all my books to him. After receiving what eventually became several dozen whiskey boxes (which were the strongest boxes a local market could give me for free) packed to the brim with books, he stacked them floor to ceiling in his office. Not in the least fearful that an office full of whiskey boxes would damage his reputation, Arnold’s only comment when I arrived was that my packing technique had deteriorated as I went along. When I did finally show up in his office to claim my only possessions, Arnold looked at me and said encouragingly, “Do I know you?” I had admittedly lost about thirty pounds and was wearing cutoff jeans and a T-shirt covered with the dust of the last three deserts I had driven through. Nonetheless, his greeting did nothing to assuage my fear that this job was all a fantasy that would be dispelled by a wizard upon my

arriving at the UCLA campus, which I had only seen on television during bowl games. My stuttered response was, "God, I hope so. . . ." After a brief recognition scene worthy of the *Odyssey* (but lacking the revealing of any scars), Arnold took me to see Ross Shideler. In one of Arnold's many prophetic moments, he exclaimed, "You'll love Ross; everybody does!" Ross and I were married several years later.

I eventually came to expect such premonitions and even omniscience from Arnold. He possesses, for example, the power to declare any day of the week to be a Friday. When we managed to survive until Friday, the Comparative Literature faculty and often faculty from other departments as well as some of our graduate students would gather in our humble lounge with soft drinks, pretzels, "wine in a box," chips, and dips to celebrate together the fact that we had survived another week. When Fridays seemed all too far off, and we were about to go under, Arnold would appear and declare it to be Friday. This miraculous power often saved a beleaguered and overworked academic crew. I began to think Arnold godlike—and in fact found a volume in the Comparative Literature library entitled *Arnold and God*. Although the author thought he was investigating Matthew Arnold, I was convinced that the volume referred to Arnold Band, a joke to which he assented, though he demurred at my suggestion that it should be "*Arnold is God*."

Given his good-natured godlike status, Arnold became my substitute for a reference encyclopedia. Whenever I needed a fact for class, I'd go to Arnold. Professor Shideler used to say, "Why don't you look it up?" but I knew that the Band reference service would provide much more interesting fare. I was teaching Günther Grass's *The Tin Drum*, for example, and I needed to know the history of Danzig. Having been bored by the encyclopedia information, I went to Arnold, who began, "Well, of course you know there was a curse on the city. . . ." I knew I should have gone to him first! But beyond his academic strengths, Arnold was a model (not always to be emulated) of administrative wile. I watched astoundedly as he would fire a rhetorical shotgun from the hip into a crowd of administrative types. There was always a moment when they tried to process what was happening, and then they would end up agreeing to Arnold's demands. (I must confess that this technique was less successful when attempted by a 5'2" blond female—in fact, it resulted in nothing but stunned silences. When I later chaired Comparative Literature, I learned that some techniques are indeed gender specific.) Although he remains my administrative role model, I have had to modify some of the lessons I learned at his side.

One lesson that I will never unlearn, however, is that of Arnold's relentless honesty and absolutely committed critical engagement. He will never let a sloppy idea slide or allow an awkward sentence to escape his


pen. While this characteristic can sometimes be painful to those of us rash enough to ask him to read our work, it never fails to improve the object upon which it is focused. What makes Arnold's critical acuity special, however, is that it is coupled with a generosity of spirit that impels him to spend hours with students and colleagues to perfect their ideas and review their work.

Arnold is one of those rare mentors who cannot travel even to the ends of the earth without running into a former student. And even more depressing is the fact that he remembers not only their names, but their entire life histories. He cannot stroll down an avenue or cross an airport without having someone hail him to catch up on the time since they had had him in class. In fact, like the truth in all good literary phenomena, Arnold is recognized even in his absence. While buying a new rug for our living room from a Middle Eastern carpet merchant, we found out that he had attended various functions for Jewish studies at UCLA. When we mentioned Arnold's name, the man's face lit up, and he knocked 10 percent off the price we had already agreed on. For a while, I thought Arnold had somehow arranged such encounters. But people recognizing his name became such a common occurrence that I began to believe he must have taught at least a million students (a figure that may not be far wrong).

And those of us who are his colleagues are no less his students. Arnold has waged wars on our behalf (entirely just wars, of course!)—and more taxing for him, he has adjusted to our idiosyncrasies. When one of his several female hires, Katherine King—a scholar from Princeton who nevertheless has the soul of a social revolutionary—was crocheting at a faculty meeting, Arnold asked "What are you knitting?" I am confident that he did not expect the response, "A string bikini," but he took it in stride. He has attempted to civilize us over the years—demanding saucers under cups and trying valiantly to teach us the proper way to peel an orange, but he has never demanded that we change to fit his image of the world. (Only once did he give in to the temptation to turn me over to a group holding a guitar mass on campus by shouting the words, "Here's one who got away," while pointing an accusing finger in my direction.) He and Ora are famous for their hospitality as well as the intellectual liveliness of their events. They revel in the diversity they encounter among all their acquaintances. I believe Arnold might even have a soft spot in his heart for my hometown of Joliet, Illinois (although he has studiously avoided testing this theory except for a fleeting salute as he flies over Joliet while approaching O'Hare). Only narrow-mindedness or mean-spiritedness truly anger him. More characteristic of his demeanor is that quick and ironic smile that makes him squint and a relentless intellectual curiosity that makes him irrepressible and irresistible.

I doubt that I will ever meet anyone quite like Arnold Band again. I am grateful to know and to work with him. He succeeded my Doktorvater as my intellectual father-figure (no Freud intended!)—and I am certainly not alone in this experience. May he continue to thrive and to mentor many more generations.

Kathleen L. Komar



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**REFLECTIONS ON ARNOLD BAND,
SCHOLAR, TEACHER, MENTOR**

William Cutter

This collection of essays honors a scholar and mentor by way of a traditional, established format. Its audience, however, is a unique scholarly community that its honoree has helped create. It is a broadly based community scattered by ideology and professional assignment, but it revolves in one way or another around Arnold Band. The editors wish to take note of the even larger community that has benefited from the work of Band and his students: the Jewish community at large as well as the more scholarly world. He has been a vigorous emblem of learning and public service, of Torah and *derekh erets*, for the more than forty years he has devoted to American Jewish studies, to Hebrew letters, and to the university and city he has served with such distinction.

As Band's graduate student, I learned what it might be like to become a professor. His day was filled with surprisingly different kinds of projects, from serving on requisite university committees to passionate attention to graduates and undergraduates. It included work with his wife Ora on issues of Hebrew pedagogy, at which she has excelled, and meetings at schools that needed his linguistic talents. This daytime work preceded a remarkable nocturnal energy for editing or preparation for classes, and for the creation of one of his over one hundred beautifully crafted articles. Behind all of the communal activity, scholarship, and pedagogy that occupied Band's imagination lay a canny mind schooled in Greek classics, Hebrew Bible, medieval literature, and modern Hebrew culture and a mind self-taught in even more occupations. He has been a scholar of many parts whose origins were embedded in different though confluent elements, and whose passion has been to ensure intellectual solidity in his students while they pondered the lives and the work of the artists who created what he called "The Grand Tradition" of Hebrew letters.

Band has been modest about informing his friends that he was chosen one of the twenty great teachers at UCLA during the twentieth

century. But most of those close to him do know the relationship between his scholarly contributions and his love of teaching and mentoring. The *Daily Bruin*, when it announced its selection of the century's twenty greatest teachers, placed his name just below the picture of UCLA's legendary basketball coach, John Wooden, the master mentor of sports heroes who went on to become famous themselves. Wooden certainly was the more familiar public figure. The journalistic layout may remind us of a great similarity between them: that just as Wooden was more than a coach—his protégés continue to lead the sport—so Arnold Band's academic guidance made possible an astounding number of careers: lives of women and men who have carried their mentor's legacy into their own unique projects.

UCLA has been his base, and there Band, the Harvard Bostonian, helped create a Department of Near Eastern Literature, a Judaic Studies Program, and a Comparative Literature Program. More globally, he helped mastermind and chronicle the development of Judaic studies in the American university. From a small office in Royce Hall he had a hand in helping UCLA reimagine its role in America's second-largest city, fashion some of its architecture, and train leading intellectuals in American life. Band himself mentored twenty-five doctorates and several more prominent academics and teachers for Israeli and American schools. It has been especially notable that a number of students who were to become leading teachers and scholars in Israel would have studied in what some Israelis insist on seeing as "Diaspora" in the sense of secondary status. The names of many of these Israeli students are listed in this volume as authors of the essays in honor of their teacher: Ruth Kartun-Blum, Dan Almagor, and Tamar Alexander, and there is a memory of the late luminous Yosef Ha-Efrati, whose loss is felt especially at such times of celebration. Other Israeli intellectuals in our volume have been influenced by Band, as he has been nurtured in his friendships with them. Band's teaching résumé includes a list of American protégés who have had a commensurate impact on the settings in which they have worked. Under his tutelage, major works have been created on the writings of Micha Yosef Berdyczewski and Yosef Hayim Brenner, the history of Hebrew drama, folklore themes, Hasidism, and on the poetry of such figures as Dan Pagis and the founders of poetic modernity, Bialik and Tschernichowski. His American doctoral students have produced hundreds of articles and books that have bridged the two cultures that dominate modern Jewish literary study, and Band himself has created much of the communication between the Israeli and American intellectual communities, even as he has identified with some of the conflicts between them. He enhanced the communication between Israel and America by insisting that his students get to

know important Hebrew literary figures personally. This teacher's influence resides not only in the scholarship his students have produced but in the creative writing and teaching that some of them have done and in the development of institutions that some of them have achieved. Finally, as Nahman of Bratslav states in a notable sermon on *bikkurim* and the occult, leadership and authority can reside beneath appearance, so that within our present volume are contributions written by people who have been influenced by the work of Arnold Band in all manner of indirect ways. The titles of this volume's articles and its authors are excellent indices of many of Band's interests during the forty plus years of his career.

The well from which Arnold Band has drawn with such care is the same well to which he has contributed with such generosity; and it is the source that provided these students and protégés with so much raw material for what has radiated out of the center of Band's influence. Now a cluster of Band's students and friends have contributed intellectual content to this volume, adding to the well. Others have placed their personal means at the disposal of its editors and Brown Judaic Studies. The scholarly work and the subsidies create a splendid blend of spiritual and material contribution, of *qemah* and Torah. We are particularly grateful for generous gifts from Lloyd and Margit Cotsen and from the Hebrew Union College Press Publication Fund, as well as assistance from the Hebrew Union College Weinberg Fund. In addition, we very much appreciate contributions by Lewis M. Barth, Behrman House Books, Jean and Jerry Friedman, David and Felice Gordis, Philip Levine, Allan L. Smith, and Ezra Spicehandler. I wish also to thank two people close to me, who also know Arnold Band from close up, Ben Cutter and Alan Bloch, both readers par excellence.

My essay is an effort to take the scholarly and intellectual measure of the man by describing a few of his principal concerns and achievements. Band has continued throughout his life to be fascinated by the accommodations of Jewish life to modernity and by the relationship of the individual to the cultural surroundings. One sees a thinker who has discovered multiple examples of those personal struggles in the texts he has illuminated and in the educational thinking he has developed and described. He has amplified understanding of the social condition of the modern Jew to include the means by which its literary subject has been represented. He has taught many of us to consider the ambiguities of the human condition as developed through language and the purposes to which language is most nobly put: the narrative and the poem. And although he is usually considered a modernist, his work has broken important chronological barriers. He has enjoyed continuing his attachments to the more ancient Jewish canons, and he

has called attention to the surprising classical pathways that led to modern literature.

In his introduction to the tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, for example, Band unites the theological qualities of secret, enigma, and ambiguity with the narrative functions of Nahman's work in a way that suggests an understanding of classic religious impulses and modern theories about the paradox of mystery and revelation embedded in story. This example is important precisely because of the authentic attachment Band has to the broader Jewish classical literature. When he draws classical Judaism and modernity together, there is no sense that one interest has been grafted artificially onto another. To the contrary, Band uses the "graft" to enrich the narrative and reduce the possibility of simplistic interpretation. As he cautions in his introduction to the tales of Rabbi Nahman: "by both evoking the biblical passage and blocking the possibility of facile allegorizing, the author (Rabbi Nahman) forces the audience into the enigmatic mode of response." This very resistance to allegorization, while at the same time acknowledging the inevitability of its temptations, characterizes much of Band's own work and teaching as well. Perhaps that is one of the things that brought Band to produce his translations of the Bratslaver's tales for Paulist Press. The tales have by now occupied an important place in the university classroom and in the adult education parlors of our public institutions, and Band's translations and introductions have made that possible.

Since Band's translation and essay on Nahman appeared, a great many articles have emerged from his students and from others, during a period when Nahman's "Torah" became a fashion among both populist and elite audiences. Among them, younger critics (some of them Band's students, such as Yoav Elstein) who may have first learned the literature as either hagiography or folklore have treated the material through the lenses of contemporary theory and have widened the window on Hasidic theology and the relationship of theology to narrative. During Band's second sabbatical term in Israel (1967), and just as he was leaving the Agnon project for awhile, he arranged for his students to work on Rabbi Nahman with Yosef Dan and Amos Funkenstein. He thus opened an entire universe to me and to many of his students who continued with Band when he returned from Israel. We came to understand that the Hasidic story took its place at the crossroads of modernity: a homiletical farewell to Judaism's classic religious period and an introduction to Judaism's modern attachment to belletristic narrative.

Of course, Band's most powerful turn at narrative study has been his lifelong engagement with the stories and novels of Shmuel Yosef Agnon. His magisterial treatment of Agnon's life and work (*Nostalgia and Nightmare*) remains indispensable for the study of Agnon's *oeuvre* and

continues to make the master available to students throughout the world. Since *Nostalgia and Nightmare* appeared in 1968, a tremendous amount of Agnon scholarship has been developed. Agnon's home has become a museum and a shrine, hundreds of books and articles have been written, and reminiscences about Israel's only Nobel laureate abound. Agnon is now part of cultured discourse in the literary West. But those early days were days of simpler fame, when Agnon would engage Band in informal conversation and when a bridge to America could be created from that hill in Talpiot on which his home was built. One can say that Band's sharing the idea of the Hasidic story as precursor of modernity contributed greatly to his reading of the modern narrative master who himself was so naturally linked to that premodern milieu. Band's perspectives on the Nobel laureate must still be addressed whether they had to do with Agnon's language, the historical context of the Galician and Hapsburg Empire or late nineteenth-century economic environment, or Agnon's theological ironies, which seemed to have set Band at odds with the important early Israeli Agnon interpreter Baruch Kurzweil. Band is as comfortable describing linguistic cadences as he is explicating the relationship of tenor and vehicle in highly symbolic stories. He is as comfortable uncovering a mystery as he is in appreciating mystery's frequent insolubility. He has often pointed out features of an Agnon narrative that seem, looking backward, to be simple and obvious, but which turn out to be surprisingly innovative. In his understanding of the tension between love of God and the physical erotic love of modern literature, Band drew weighty conclusions from the legendary story "Aggadat hasofer" ("Tale of the Scribe") by pointing out that the scribe's wife was barren because the couple had never consummated their marriage. He has always enjoyed uncovering the obvious.

The ideological struggle with Kurzweil had to do with whether the outcomes of Agnon's narratives constitute normative and moralizing statements, and they were based on a serious theoretical difference in their approaches to literature. While Band never eschewed ideological readings of narrative material, he understood that a work of prose was, like a poem, still primarily a work of art. In that sense he was more modern than the luminous Kurzweil, one of the creators of the field of modern Hebrew literature and certainly one of the major expositors of Agnon's writing. The two critics met at the turning of the literary generations, one as the intellectual father who faced the past, and the other as the father of new generations of critics and teachers. It is no surprise that eight articles within our current volume are devoted to Agnon study and that they are written from a remarkably wide range of perspectives—suitable to the range of Band's vision and to the richness of the original Agnon *oeuvre* itself.

In Band's work the social and psychological situation of a character or a plot has always been viewed primarily as a product of the creative imagination. He has applied the strategies he developed for dealing with the tension between literary technique and theme in Hebrew literature to his examination of writers as diverse as Kafka, Karl Kraus, and Elias Canneti. The present volume confirms the importance of uniting these artistic probes with attention to psychology and social setting in the articles on early twentieth-century figures. Dislocation of the literary figure as a theme of the early twentieth century turns out to have a contemporary echo within this volume as well. And the intellectual struggle with modernity is reflected in two essays on the struggle to adapt Jewish intellectual tradition to post-Enlightenment modernity.

One of those dislocated figures in modern Hebrew literature—almost the prototype—was the amazing scholar essayist and short-story writer Micha Yosef Berdyczewski (1865–1921), who also created displaced figures like the protagonists of *Miryam*, *Maḥanayim Urva parah*, and a remarkable series of short stories. In my view Berdyczewski often vied with Agnon for Band's passion, and he wrote a number of important treatments of that turbulent scholar-author-anthologist's work. In his contribution to the 1975 volume celebrating the jubilee of Simon Halkin ("Qera satan," on the function of the devil in Berdyczewski's short story "My Enemy"), Band not only resurrected an important and underappreciated story, but he laid out the old dispute about autobiographical approaches to the Jewish literature of the late nineteenth century. At the Eighth International Congress of Jewish Studies, he probed the image of Moses in Berdyczewski's essays and moved from the art of Berdyczewski to questions of other ways in which Berdyczewski developed character. On a few occasions (including an effort to place it on the widest possible canvas, "The Beginnings of Modern Hebrew Literature: Perspectives on Modernity"), Band reintroduced the division between the two principal streams in the development of modern Hebrew culture through a discussion of the tension between Ahad Ha-Am (Asher Ginsburg) and Berdyczewski. In that context Band recapitulated his oft-stated critique of the sense of detachment of modernity from classic Judaism that one finds in Kurzweil's canonical book *Our Young Literature: Revolution or Continuity?* (*Sifrutenu haḥadashah: hemshekh o mahpekhah?*).

Our management of Berdyczewski's narratives, essays, and scholarship could use more of Band's deft critical touch. Too little is known among English readers about Berdyczewski the artist, and his place as a dramatic figure in early twentieth-century Hebrew letters is secured more by his ideological writings than by his short stories or novels. Of course, modern Jewish intellectual life is often dominated by concerns of history and ideology (aside from some work on interpretation theory and

on biblical narrative), and so Berdyczewski is often grasped as an ideologue. But even here, Berdyczewski is too little considered. Band's students Dan Almagor and Samuel Fishman have made Berdyczewski accessible through their remarkable bibliography, which has itself enabled more scholarship on that intriguing early twentieth century figure; and his colleague Avner Holtzman has extended that accessibility through his publications and management of the Berdyczewski Archives. Band's presentation of the two poles of modern intellectual discourse makes his work on the disagreements between Berdyczewski and the more prominent Ahad Ha-Am among Band's most relevant essays. While Band makes clear that Berdyczewski has to be understood as an entirely more modern writer than Ahad Ha-Am, he also explicates the reasons for the greater endurance of the "elusive prophet," as Steven Zipperstein has identified him. Berdyczewski was a figure who, like Band, understood that the tensions within fictional narrative are more suited to the modern ironic universalist sensibility. Berdyczewski's endurance as an icon of popular versions of modern Zionism was just not in the cards. When, however, Band cited Ahad Ha-Am's critique of Berdyczewski's linguistic blunders in Hebrew, I am able to imagine that Band just may have sided with the "elusive prophet's" commitment to linguistic propriety.

Band's essay on that controversy deals with two issues: how universal should be the content of their shared periodical *Hashiloah* (published between 1896–1926) and with the discontinuities that Berdyczewski saw in Jewish history. It is a particularly lucid model of writing and certainly the best representation of these issues in English. It also anticipates some of the more elaborate work on Berdyczewski that I personally think Band inspired his students and disciples to pursue. Yosef Oren had not yet published his full collection of the letters between the Zionist essayist and his junior editor, and we did not know then just how rich that controversy might be. But Arnold Band did. At the time Band had published his short essay, the Western scholarly community still lacked a definition of the Jewish *fin de siècle* dispute between the so-called Nietzscheans and those who—their atheism aside—tried to create a sense of seamless continuity with the Jewish past. The year is 1897, a time before which Berdyczewski had fully articulated his aesthetic and historical position and before he had written those cultural essays that more clearly defined his argument with Ahad Ha-Am. In my view this aspect of the controversy between the two giant late nineteenth-century essayists is deeply symbolic of Band's own convictions about the intellectual neighborhood in which the tents of Shem can be established in the same neighborhood as the tents of Yafet. This is not surprising when one considers Band's training in Greek classics and the experience he has

had in almost all phases of the arts. And it is not unusual if one ponders his essay "Confluent Myths," on growing up Hebraically in Boston. What is unusual is that these probings have existed in one man and that this man became a figure within Hebrew letters, Jewish studies, and comparative literature and has, along with his colleagues in Los Angeles and Berkeley, brought a less known literature into the center of one of the largest university systems in the world.

Arnold Band has been one of the few critics in either America or Israel to comment authoritatively on the general scene of Jewish studies from the perspective of one whose scholarship has been dominated by aesthetics. Reading his studies of the Hebrew language in American universities, and his discussions of the state of Jewish studies in the American university, one might never guess that Band comes from the world of literary criticism and Hebrew prose and poetry. But it is precisely his literary sensibility that gives texture to these essays. Band has been particularly passionate about the place of Hebrew language training in the American university and—with his younger colleague Alan Mintz—about the place of Hebrew language in general within the Diaspora. Here his work has ranged from commenting on the linguistic condition at our universities and describing the history of Hebrew within America, to working on the intellectually less prestigious but practically most daunting area of language study: textbooks for young people. He has also boldly remarked on the new Diaspora Hebrew of Israelis who have settled in the United States and delivered two papers on this topic. His love of language is reflected especially in his scholarly essays about Hebrew poetry, to which I will now turn our attention.

Arnold Band's work with poetry was originally shaped by that close attachment to the language of Hebrew and to the language of the text itself. He somehow managed, in spite of his interest in time and place, to preserve a version of the New Literary Criticism that flourished while he was at university. Poetry suits his particular strength in language and linguistics, and the sounds of words are still a powerful part of the way he experiences any literary text. (Once in a while, he will surprise the reader with a comment about the lyrical sound of prose Hebrew.) Even his friends may not know that he is one of those scholars of poetry to have become a published poet himself, and his intriguing collection of poetry, *Hare'i bo'er ba'esh* (*The Mirror Aflame*), remains a too little examined collection. His work on Bialik and Tschernichowski focuses especially on close readings of the poetic text, and his essay on semantic rhyme in Bialik can still open doors to the art of rhyme. The focus on the linguistic art continues in slightly less known articles on the work of Yocheved Bat-Miriam and Uri Zvi Greenberg. He was as fascinated with discussions of prosody as he was

with theory that challenged the prevailing approaches to prosody, and I recall particularly his enthusiasm about Otto Jespersen's work challenging the predictability of prosodic patterns. Band has written about or taught the poetry of Amichai, Alterman, Goldberg, Shlonsky, Greenberg, Ravikovitch, and has moved his students from the grand traditions of Bialik and Tschernichowski to the most contemporary works of two relatively new periodicals: *Alpayim* and *Dimui*. He displayed similar suppleness when it came to bartering his fascination with literary theory in favor of that close textual reading. A glance at some of the titles of his essays indicates the theoretical questions that fascinated him: irony, the archaeology of the literary text, parody, literary tropes, and historicism. Theory may have fascinated him, and context was always basic, but the linguistic sounds and prosodic patterns always fixed his gaze. Yet his students had to do more than fix their gaze on a text.

He always highlighted—for his students most of all—the importance of historical empirical scholarship, and he usually contextualized the literary work within a specific historical period. In classes he might chastise students who were not attentive to major historical or technological achievements of the period in which a work was set, and how such elements might have either helped create that text. He might hammer home the obvious points related to those events (the importance of a railroad in an Agnon setting; a change in monarchy or an interregnum of an unstable province; the place of a Yiddish expression among families of a certain background). His vision of a literary text as a product of its time did not compromise his loyalty to the way that text operated as a thing in itself. There were occasions when he seemed like an heir to the intimacy with historical time and place that characterized the personality and teaching of the great literary scholar Dov Sadan. His articles on Kafka and Agnon, Yehoshua, and Hazaz all reflect this interest.

In all, his has been a remarkable career of balancing different priorities and of bringing them together, of harmonization in the interest of illuminating human conflict, and of bringing worlds into contact with a rich and stubborn imagination. His imagination has been embedded in essays that are composed with great simplicity and eloquence. He achieved that balance and that synthesis when it needed highlighting, and he highlighted the conflicts when the occasion demanded. As we honor a man who found the literary form to be the vehicle for examining the lived life, but who enjoyed the lived life above all, I wish to conclude my essay with a comment about a recent occasion on which Arnold Band honored yet another colleague of unique stature.

In his introduction to the Festschrift honoring his beloved friend Walter Ackerman, Band departed from customary scholarly practice. Here he chose to reminisce about their shared youthful days in Boston.


His informal essay "Confluent Myths" (discussed in David Ellenson's essay) is a narrative of the Boston in which two Jewish boys from middle-class immigrant families grew up. He must have sensed that this Proustian moment was its own kind of literature, and he presented a surprising perspective on the saga of the young Jew in America.

Band's "Confluent Myths" adds a unique dimension to the many anecdotes of American Jewry, as it does not draw on the simple legends of "making it" or "civility" made so familiar by Norman Podhoretz or John Murray Cuddihy. Further, his myths lack the ironies of Philip Roth's comic and angry voices. The myths he describes are embedded in the quintessential American immigrant city, including Latin, English, and Hebrew in a unique combination. The myths are described by Band, the American Hebraist, while honoring another Bostonian who had chosen to live in Israel. While acknowledging that not all of his peers carried the myth forward, the essay holds out the promise of new confluences and further synthetic creations of the American Jewish story. Best of all, it is wonderful history narrated from a personal point of view.

In some ways, the present gathering of important articles on a variety of Jewish texts suggests what that kind of thinking can produce—both the multiple provenance of its contributors as well as the multiple interests and talents that blossomed within Arnold Band. In the case of Boston Jews of a certain predisposition, "Confluent Myths" reflects the intense Hebraic atmosphere of the heder and the post-heder experience, and the classic version of the American dream captured in the products of the ever-evolving social composition of the Boston Latin School that led inexorably to Harvard (if one had the intellectual goods) and to double duty at the Hebrew College of Boston. While there were dual mythologies in the majority of Jewish American families in that period, the unique tones of Boston added an element of gravity to what Peter Berger described as the double consciousness that has characterized so much of American Jewish life. It is a doubleness that continues to follow Band as he multiplies his dynamic intellectual pursuits. And he used it brilliantly to teach his students.

Arnold Band has enlivened the dialectics of American-Israeli intellectual life at various times and in his several studies, and he has done so through his passion about both poles of the dialectic. He encouraged me, and all of his students, to ponder the nature of intellectual community and the task of Jewish culture within community. His community was closer to Berdyczewski's than to Ahad Ha-Am's, because he always let the text take one in independent directions no matter how devoutly he might have wished to find a Jewish essence. Literature for him and for his students has always had the power to embrace the dynamics of the individual human experience within community, in all of its multiplicity,

while reflecting the internal aesthetic values of the art. The search for essences often lurked behind his work, but the little textual clues always won out and thus prompted antinomian ruminations because each element of a work of literature had its own value. His students have brought a rich variety of new themes and ideas into public discourse, and his friends and colleagues have enjoyed a rich challenge from one of the great "counter-readers" of our time. Many of the imaginative textual readings of the essays in this volume have been influenced by Arnold Band's methodological legacy, and those that may be independent of that influence will yet be pondered by Band as he considers the next stage of his work. One never knows where an intellectual will turn next, but anyone who knows Band and who grasps the significance of his bibliography will know that Arnold/Avraham/Arnie Band will continue to turn toward Israel and will continue to be the man from Boston. He will always be the man from the Eastern Shore (his accent ensures that) and the Charles River, at home near the wadis of the Middle East and the dry riverbeds of Los Angeles, where other mythologies have been fostered, and where Arnold Band has created new realities. His experience of confluence is not limited to his New England boyhood, and his reflections on that confluence continue near the shores of the Pacific Ocean.



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DOR DOR VEDORSHAV: OF FATHERS AND SONS

Michael A. Signer

I belong to the small group of undergraduate Hebrew majors at UCLA who had the privilege of studying with Arnold Band when he was the bard of *The Mirror Aflame* and who, at the same time, was in the process of completing *Nostalgia and Nightmare*. Notwithstanding his scholarly activity and the hours he spent with his two boys, he and his wife Ora “adopted” me. As a result of their kindness my intellectual world was utterly transformed during the years 1962–1966. Ever since that time I have been able to “sit as his table” and be renewed and intellectually challenged.

Nearly four decades later it seems easy to reminisce about events *in illo tempore*, retelling stories about how Professor Band slept only one hour a night or about the biweekly vocabulary quizzes that were inscribed on a single sheet of paper hidden in his coat pocket. However, the clever title *Nostalgia and Nightmare* warns against sentimental musings—as appropriate as they might be for this volume. A student of Arnold Band’s must surely remember his tirades against the twin demons of “bourgeois thinking” and “revivalism.” These warnings have become part of the “hermeneutic of suspicion” that interrupts the flow of my thoughts and restrains my intellectual exuberance.

During my undergraduate years UCLA probably had a student population of more than twenty thousand students. We Hebrew majors felt as if we were studying at Oxford in a sequence of tutorials. Every class with Band—and I took nearly thirty-two undergraduate units with him—may have focused on reading and translating Hebrew fiction, but in reality these courses became a microcosm for the exploration of Western culture from Homer to Flaubert. Who else could turn a paragraph of Agnon into a study of the *Leitwort* “fire,” leading the student from the text of Agnon to the myth of Prometheus, to the multiple fires that destroyed Agnon’s libraries and back to the text of the story. In what other circumstances would a candidate for the Reform rabbinate read the withering critique of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* from the mouth of the ranting character in “Iddo veEnam,” who said, “They have turned our

Torah into folklore?" Band then explained that the story was a veiled critique of the historical investigations of Jewish mystical literature by Gershom Scholem. Later that semester, in a course on the history of the medieval church, UCLA Professor Gerhart Ladner announced a lecture by his "good friend" Gerhard Scholem. In retrospect, I do not believe that the juxtaposition of Band's class to Ladner's was accidental. Rather, it was the intellectual example set by Band himself that moved us between disciplinary boundaries to discover their deeper connection.

It was Band who sent me off to study with Vladimir Markov to read modern Russian fiction in translation. Reading Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* reinforced another theme of modern Hebrew literature, the antagonistic relationship between the generation of fathers and sons. It would be many years before I read T. S. Elliot's "Tradition and Individual Talent" or Harold Bloom's *Agon* (at the urging of my friend William Cutter), but they were foreshadowed in the stores of Mendele, Berdyczewski, and Brenner and in the poetry of Bialik. The intergenerational conflict is a central theme in these authors, who literally invented a new language, Hebrew, to express the deep sense of alienation they felt from the Jewish world that surrounded them. However, while they pushed for a new direction for Jewish life, they were also motivated to retell or summarize the world that was passing away. Band taught that both directions existed in the same author. The profound social critique by Berdyczewski was balanced by his efforts to translate rabbinic and medieval Jewish narrative into the German vernacular. The same Bialik who wrote "Hamatmid" engaged in the massive rewriting and thematic rearrangement of rabbinic literature in *Sefer ha'aggadah*, so that generations of Hebrew readers could appreciate their ancient wisdom in the idiom of the modern language.

As my own scholarly project in the history of medieval Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation has evolved, it becomes clearer that it is precisely the theme of rewriting the tradition for a "new generation" that is at the foundation of the entire endeavor. Both Rashi (Rabbi Solomon b. Isaac of Troyes, d. 1105) and Hugo of St. Victor (d. 1141) wrote biblical commentaries that condensed the complex traditions of the Rabbis and the church fathers into a continuous reading of the Bible for their respective communities. Both of these scholars indicated some degree of reticence to "go beyond" their ancestors—but they both did, and became authorities for future generations. Without knowing each other, both established their approach to Scripture on the basis of the *peshat* or *sensus litteralis/historia*. The innocence of seeking "plain meaning" based on an investigation of language set the criteria for discerning which rabbinic or church traditions they would choose to include in their commentaries. It is clear to me now, so many miles from UCLA,

that the search for *peshat* and *sensus litteralis/historia* is an effort to describe the discovery of the retelling of the tradition during a period of rapidly changing cultural and material conditions.

Arnold Band taught us that the text of the author before our eyes was a refraction of his library and of the broader culture. The points of orientation for understanding what we read and explaining it to others had to be grounded both in a diachronic (across generations) and synchronic (within the era) investigation. Subtle turns of phrase or the reversal of word order that interrupted the flow of reading constituted a signal calling the reader into a more profound and even transformative intellectual experience.


Years later, when I studied Latin paleography with my Doctorvater, Leonard E. Boyle, I was introduced to the type of manuscript called a palimpsest. In these manuscripts the original content is literally scraped away and overwritten by the text of a second author. When I saw a manuscript of Augustine's *Ennarationes in Psalmos* that was written on top of Cicero's *De Oratore*, it was as if I had seen in an iconic form what Band had tried so hard to teach us. He urged us to think that good reading is the ability to see through the texts and visualize the beginning of a network of relationships to other written texts, to the life experience and material world of the author. However, in any single reading of a great literary or historical text there is always the potential for further disclosure. The purpose of these efforts at interpretation was not solipsism, the enhancement of the individual for oneself, but the creation of a community—a community of interpreters who are prepared to argue passionately about how these texts can be brought to life in all their complexity and without simplistic reduction to a demagogic ideology.

I watched Band create that community when I was at UCLA. Orthodox Jewish students from the Rambam Torah Institute were warned by their Rabbi of the dangers of studying Judaica with Band. They were admonished that Professor Band would lead them away from a "life of Torah." Band gathered us together in his classroom and in his home. My friendships with these students and the stories they told me about their encounters with Professor Band indicated that they had just the opposite experience in studying with him. He was sympathetic yet direct in his approach. Band insisted that they read H. H. Rowley and learn about biblical criticism. The students did not need to believe it, but they had to know about it in order to take their place among educated human beings. His warmth drew all of us into the circle of his high standards and human compassion. We were unaware that Band's Boston included the world of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik and the Orthodox Maimonides School as well as the Hebrew College. Orthodoxy was different in Los Angeles of the 1960s. Those students opened their world

and their hearts to me long before I heard the word *geruv* used to describe such gestures of friendship.

I have searched for analogies to the “familial” relationship that has developed between Arnold Band and me. The correspondence between Hannah Arendt and her teacher Karl Jaspers has been helpful. Hannah Arendt came to Jaspers in a state of crisis as a young woman scholar. Jaspers gave her firm direction and direct criticism of her dissertation on Saint Augustine and the psychology of love. The brief period before the war witnessed a warming in their friendship. By the time the war had ended, Arendt was more than a student. She had become a material caretaker for both Jaspers and his wife. Yet Jaspers had no difficulty taking Arendt to task when she complained about the harsh treatment she received for her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. During the later period of their relationship, the deep sense of mutual respect and caring surpassed the student-mentor relationship. Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers had traversed the journey from mentor/student to colleague to friendship. Along the path they had exchanged the gifts of words and ideas.

Arnold Band was my teacher and mentor; he has been my colleague and, for many years, my friend. We have exchanged the gifts of words and ideas. However, I never believed that the gifts I presented could balance what I had received from him. Then an opportunity presented itself when I invited him to a conference at Notre Dame on “History and Memory in Christianity and Judaism.” In one of our conversations we discussed the paper he was preparing on refractions of the blood libel in modern literature. I casually mentioned that I had just read a passage in Philip Roth’s novel *Operation Shylock* in which the protagonist launches a satirical tirade in which he claims that Irving Berlin had eliminated anti-Semitism with the lyrics to his songs “White Christmas” and “Easter Parade.” In Band’s lecture and the subsequent article in the conference volume, *Memory and History in Christianity and Judaism*, Band analyzes this passage from Roth’s novel. In a footnote to that passage in the article Philip Roth receives the appropriate recognition. But I know—and Band knows—how that quote and note arrived at the proper place in his argument. Every time I read his contribution to that volume, I feel the satisfaction in knowing that my gift of words and ideas is beneath this text composed by my teacher, colleague, and friend, Arnold J. Band.



◆

PART I

**CLASSICAL JEWISH TEXTS AND
MODERN INTERPRETERS**

◆

◆

TWO LITERARY TALMUDIC READINGS¹

David M. Gordis

The text of the Babylonian Talmud has been the object of a range of readings and exegetical approaches, embracing the “naïve” and the source critical and including historical, legal, linguistic, theological, and socioeconomic points of departure and analytical foci. The source-critical approach, which seeks to discover the sources out of which the literary text was constructed, is particularly fruitful, due in no small measure to the many instances in the text that appear to indicate “seams” or places where sources have been brought together but where some disjuncture remains. It is a scholarly commonplace to see in the many instances of disjuncture evidence that the talmudic text preserves a primarily oral tradition, though the redactional process might have resulted in the obliteration of traces of oral antecedents to the literary text. It has also been suggested that the sources exhibit some of the characteristics of a folklore tradition, such as the preservation of a multiplicity of versions, sometimes inconsistent and contradictory. Whatever the nature of the materials constituting the sources from which the talmudic text was created, at some time approximating the end of the Amoraic period a literary text was created, perhaps by redactors who came to be known as *rabbanan sevoraei* or *sevora'im*. Though some fluidity remained, a literary text was created, and understanding the process through which the underlying materials were transformed into a literary text presents an intriguing scholarly challenge.

The methodology utilized in creating the literary text out of the oral tradition that underlay it is often described as “associative” or “stream of consciousness.” The intention of this paper is to suggest further fundamental criteria and methods that were utilized by the post-Amoraic

¹ It is with great joy that I present this paper as a tribute to my dear brother, friend, and teacher, Arnold Band, on the occasion of this significant milestone. *Ad me'ah ve'esrim*.

creators of the literary text in shaping it out of the large volume of oral traditions, some of which had in all likelihood been reduced to writing in fragmentary form and that circulated widely in the academies of Jewish Babylonia. I shall briefly set out what I would assert are the three methodological underpinnings of this literary/redactional process and then attempt to illustrate that process through the close reading of two talmudic pericopae.

To begin with the most basic assertion: the Babylonian Talmud is a carefully constructed literary text, rather than a casual anthology of transcriptions of discourse and debates in the academies of Babylonia. Talmudic pericopae were shaped with clear attention to a number of purposes and goals. First, consistent with other ancient redactional processes (such as New Testament redaction) and ironically resonant with the work of contemporary folklorists, the redactors were less interested in consistency and economy of expression than in the preservation of as much of the material at hand as possible. They did not seek to harmonize alternative versions or to choose a single "authentic" version and discard others. They preserved alternative versions. Often speculations on which version or approach was authoritative or authentic, frequently through the exploration of apparent inconsistencies and contradictions, were left inconclusive. Second, influenced by the orality of the tradition and the desire to shape a coherent though not necessarily consistent whole out of the material at hand, the redactors created contextual structures in which to embed the materials they sought to preserve. Fundamental to the contextual structures created was their "dialogical" inclination, their preference to cast apodictic and declarative statements into dialogical form, even when this required altering the original meaning of the earlier statements and creating anachronistic encounters out of these materials. Finally, consistent with their intention to preserve and include, they often shaped anthologies of texts either grouped loosely around a theme or created as collections of materials thematically unrelated but belonging to a single tradental tradition.

Through the close reading of two pericopae I shall attempt to demonstrate that the careful construction of talmudic pericopae drew on literary devices and constructions to suggest perspectives and insights that went beyond the superficial and literal meaning of the text. I shall argue that the process was conscious and skillful and that this literary approach to reading talmudic texts can enrich our understanding of these texts immeasurably.

I. SANHEDRIN 32A

סנהדרין לב.

משנה:

אחד דיני ממונות ואחד דיני נפשות
בדרישה וחקירה

שנאמר משפט אחד יהיה לכם

מה בין דיני ממונות לדיני נפשות דיני ממונות בשלשה ודיני נפשות
בעשרים ושלשה ...

גמרא:

דיני ממונות מי בעינן דרישה וחקירה ורמינהי שטר שזמנו כתוב באחד בניסן
בשמיטה ... שטר כשר ועדיו כשרין חיישינן שמא איחרוהו וכתבוהו ואי
סלקא דעתך בעינן דרישה וחקירה היכי חיישינן שמא איחרוהו וכתבוהו
ולייטעמיך תקשי לך מתניתין ... דעדיפא מינה קאמרינן ...

מ"מ קשיא

סימן חרפ"ש

א"ר חנינא דבר תורה אחד דיני ממונות ואחד דיני נפשות בדרישה
ובחקירה שנאמר משפט אחד יהיה לכם ומה טעם אמרו דיני ממונות לא
בעינן דרישה וחקירה כדי שלא תנעול דלת בפני לוינן

Sanhedrin 32a

Mishnah:

Noncapital cases and capital cases are alike in investigation and inquiry, as it is written: "You shall have one manner of law" (Leviticus 24:22). In what ways do noncapital and capital cases differ? Noncapital cases are decided by three and capital cases by twenty-three ...

Gemara:

Are investigation and inquiry actually required in noncapital cases? They challenged: "A contract that was dated the first of Nisan of a sabbatical year and witnesses came and said (of the witnesses who had signed and witnessed the contract): "How could you have witnessed this contract? On that day you were with us in another place!"² The contract is valid and the witnesses are unimpeached."³

² The contract included both date and place. The newly arrived witnesses state that the witnesses who had signed the contract could not have done so on that date in that place since they were with them in a different place on that day. The phrase "You were with us" is the classical formulation for witnesses who are

We presume that perhaps they wrote it later.⁴

And if it occurs to you to say that we require investigation and inquiry in noncapital cases, how can we presume that “perhaps they wrote it later?”

According to your reasoning, the mishnah should be viewed as problematical. . . . He prefers to ask a better question.

In any event, the question remains!

(Mnemonic symbol: HRPS)⁵

R. Hanina said: According to the Torah, noncapital and capital cases are alike in investigation and inquiry as it is written, “You shall have one manner of law.” And for what reason did they say: “In noncapital cases we do not require investigation and inquiry?” In order not to lock the door in the face of borrowers.

The literary unit under discussion here includes both the mishnah and the accompanying Gemara discussion. It is often the case that the Gemara material is quite independent of the mishnah with which it is associated; in the present instance the connection is intimate. Beginning with the mishnah, word order is significant. The first and defining word of the mishnah is *ehad*, “one,” and this word functions as a title for the mishnah, asserting that capital and noncapital cases are one, treated equally. Immediately following this first assertion is a radical limitation of the principle: *bidrishah vahaqirah*, “in the matter of investigation and inquiry.” That this second clause is in fact a radical limitation of the broad principle of consistency between capital and noncapital cases rather than

discrediting the testimony of other witnesses. It is a convention of Jewish law that the second group of witnesses who make this claim are believed, and the testimony of the first witnesses is discredited, all other things being equal.

³ Tosefta Makkot 1:2 in a different formulation.

⁴ Either that they wrote the contract after having seen the transaction on an earlier date at the place indicated in the contract, but used the later date of actual writing at which time they were in a different place, presumably where they were seen by the second pair of witnesses (Rashi), or that the note was written prior to the actual transaction and included the place where the writing was taking place and where the transaction was presumably to take place, and was postdated, so that by the time of the actual transaction the witnesses to the transaction were no longer at the place of the transaction (Tosafot).

⁵ A common interpolation in talmudic texts, in this instance identifying the authors of the four ways of responding to the stated problem: R. Hanina, Rava, R. Papa, and Resh Lakish.

the second part of a limited statement, namely, that only as relates to the matter of investigation and inquiry are capital and noncapital cases alike, is attested to both by the prominence of the initial defining word *ehad* and by the proof text that is adduced from Leviticus. The verse is, in fact, taken out of context and interpreted to refer to capital and noncapital cases. Its original context in Leviticus is the equality before the law of citizens and resident aliens. No suggestion of the application of the verse specifically to the matter of investigation and inquiry is adduced.

Most striking about the mishnah is the actual subject matter of which it is constituted. Following the bold assertion of the consistency of law regarding capital and noncapital cases and the proof text that itself is interpreted broadly and generally, the mishnah asks rhetorically about the differences between capital and noncapital cases and goes to some length to spell out ten substantive differences between them. In sum, then, after assigning by word placement the title "one" to this paragraph, the actual subject of the mishnah is quite opposite: it deals with the substantial and substantive differences between the two. The only remnant of the "one" left in the mishnah is the limited area of *derishah vahaqirah* (investigation and inquiry).

How striking then to find as we encounter the Gemara's comments that even this remaining consistency between capital and noncapital cases is challenged! Do we in fact require investigation and inquiry in noncapital cases? The challenge is based on a *baraita* that discusses the case of a contract in which the witnesses' testimony is called into question. A second pair of witnesses claim that the first could not have signed the document at the time and in the place referred to because they, the second witnesses, were with them elsewhere on that day. Rather than disqualifying the contract, the law presumes that it was postdated and validates it despite the challenge of the second pair of witnesses. If, in fact, investigation and inquiry were required in noncapital cases, the contract presumably should have been invalidated and the signatory witnesses impeached. Before attempting to respond to the apparent inconsistency with the mishnah, which states that investigation and inquiry are, in fact, required in noncapital cases as they are in capital cases, the Gemara suggests that the same challenging point might have been made from an even more authoritative source, namely, another mishnah that validates rather than invalidates post-dated contracts in general. That question is responded to by suggesting that the special circumstances of the sabbatical-year date make the contract discussed in the *baraita* even more suspect and therefore the basis for an even stronger challenge to the point of the mishnah.⁶ Salvaging an

⁶ The contract, already suspect because of inconsistency of date, is even more suspect because it formalizes a loan putatively made shortly before the end of the

even more seriously flawed contract would provide a stronger challenge to the principle that investigation and inquiry are required in noncapital cases. Having dealt with that subsidiary problem of the questioner's preference for the *baraita* over the mishnah to state his challenge, the Gemara reasserts that the major question remains, introduces a series of responses beginning with R. Hanina, and resolves the issue.

R. Hanina is quoted as affirming that the Torah requires investigation and inquiry in noncapital cases. And why did "they say" that noncapital cases do not require investigation and inquiry? In order not to place a closed door in the face of those seeking to borrow. The point appears to be that lenders who anticipate scrupulous investigation of a claim before repayment in the case of a dispute over the return of a loan would be discouraged from being responsive to any borrower's request. Other attempts at harmonization of the mishnah and *baraita* are proposed, including the distinction between loans in which scrupulous investigation would not be required and fines and other civil matters where presumably they would be required, and the suggestion that scrupulous inquiry would be required in noncapital cases only when the claim is suspect. The pericope concludes when a verse is cited in connection with the last mentioned attempted resolution, leading to a modest anthology of interpretations of the well-known verse, "justice, justice shalt thou pursue."⁷

In fact, the pericope focuses on the concluding reflections about meanings of the pursuit of justice in the biblical injunction. The subject of the pericope is the tension between legal truth and "objective" truth. The objective of the legal system is to bring legal truth into conformity with "objective" truth, that is, to render a legal decision that is just because it conforms with what actually occurred. The process requires rigorous investigation of the circumstances and careful interrogation of principle and witnesses. This requirement is not affected by the scale of the matter under consideration or by whether the case is capital or noncapital. That is the force of the mishnah's *ehad*, alike, for in theory the search for truth is the same in all manner of cases. In reality, however, whether a case involves a capital offense or a noncapital offense, and whether it is a civil or criminal offense must make a great difference. Rather than describing the contrast between theory and practice in

sabbatical year when along with other loans it would be cancelled and the obligation to repay wiped out. This circumstance would cast more suspicion on the document since a lender would presumably be disinclined to make a loan with a strong likelihood of its not being repaid.

⁷ Deuteronomy 16:20.

expository style, the talmudic text presents a dialogue that begins by boldly challenging the principle of unity that the mishnah states and focuses on the one area in which the mishnah asserts that the similarity between capital and noncapital cases survives, namely, investigation and inquiry. But in order to set up this dialogical confrontation, the very meaning of the term *derishah vahaqirah* undergoes transformation. In the context of the biblical usage of the term, it means careful and rigorous investigation. In the rabbinic law concerning capital cases, however, the term takes on a special meaning. Since the court takes the position that it seeks to bend over backwards to find for the defendant in capital cases, the court actively and energetically seeks to discredit witnesses for the prosecution. Any flaw in the testimony against the accused discredits that testimony. That specialized meaning of *derishah vahaqirah* is used to challenge the mishnah's claim that capital and non-capital cases are similar in their requirement of scrupulous and rigorous investigation. But the specialized use of the term makes sense only in capital cases because of the court's bias toward acquittal. In civil cases the court's active intervention on the side of plaintiff or defendant to discredit the other side's testimony would thwart, rather than serve, the purpose of the court to pursue justice. Through the intentional and conscious shift in the use of the term *derishah vahaqirah*, the construction of a dialogue based on this shift, and the presentation of a series of resolutions of the apparent inconsistency, the text is in fact making the point that it sets out to make: pursuing justice is in theory a single, straightforward, and consistent process. In reality, the situation has a fundamental and substantive impact on the procedures used. Procedures chosen must not only be right but must also be wise, and so lenders should not have to face potential insurmountable hurdles on the road to repayment of loans, and as the pericope continues, sometimes justice is best served through arbitration, mediation, or compromise, and though procedurally short of that ideal of *ehad*, justice is, in fact, served.

II. KETUBOT 2A

כתובות ב.

משנה:

בתולה נשאת ליום הרביעי ואלמנה ליום החמישי
 שפעמים בשבת בתי דינין יושבין בעיירות ביום השני וביום החמישי
 שאם היה לו טענת בתולים היה משכים לבית דין

גמרא:

אמר רב יוסף אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: מפני מה אמרו בתולה נשאת ליום הרביעי

לפי ששנינו הגיע זמן ולא נישאו אוכלות משלו ואוכלות בתרומה יכול הגיע זמן באחד בשבת יהא מעלה לה מזונות לכך שנינו בתולה נשאת ליום הרביעי

אמר רב יוסף מריה דאברהם תלי תניא בדלא תניא

הי תניא והי לא תניא הא תניא והא תניא

אלא תלי תניא דמפרש טעמא בדתניא דלא מפרש טעמא

אלא אי איתמר הכי איתמר

אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: מפני מה אמרו בתולה נשאת ליום הרביעי שאם היה לו טענת בתולים היה משכים לבית דין. ותנשא באחד בשבת שאם היה לו טענת בתולים היה משכים לבית דין שקדו חכמים על תקנת בנות ישראל שיהא טורח בסעודה שלשה ימים אחד בשבת ושני בשבת ושלישי בשבת וברביעי כונסה

ועכשיו ששנינו שקדו אותה ששנינו הגיע זמן ולא נישאו אוכלות משלו ואוכלות בתרומה הגיע זמן באחד בשבת מתוך שאינו יכול לכנוס אינו מעלה לה מזונות

לפיכך חלה הוא או שחלתה היא או שפירסה נדה אינו מעלה לה מזונות

ואיכא דבעי לה מיבעיא

(ב:)

פשיט רב אחאי ... אלא לאו דאיתניס כי האי גוונא וקתני אוכלות משלו ואוכלות בתרומה

אמר רב אשי: לעולם אימא לך כל אונסא לא אכלה ...

אמר רבא: ולענין גיטין אינו כן

אלמא קסבר רבא אין אונס בגיטין

(ג:)

איכא דאמרי אמר רבא וכן לענין גיטין אלמא קסבר רבא יש אונס בגיטין ...

Ketubot 2a
Mishnah

A virgin is married on Wednesday and a widow on Thursday, since courts convened twice weekly in towns, on Monday and Thursday, so

that if he had a challenge to her virginity,⁸ he would proceed to court early the next morning.

Gemara

R. Joseph in the name of R. Judah in the name of Samuel said: For what reason did they say, "A virgin is married on Wednesday"? Because we learned,⁹ If the time expired¹⁰ and they were not married she is supported by him and she may eat of the *terumah*,¹¹ you might have thought that if the time expired on Sunday he would be required to provide her food. For this reason we have learned, "A virgin is married on Wednesday."

R. Joseph said: Master of Abraham! You've linked what is learned in a *baraita* with what is not part of the *baraita*!¹²

Which is learned and which is not learned? Both are learned!

Rather (restating what R. Joseph said): You've linked a text that provides a reason with a text that does not provide a reason!¹³

⁸ Beyond the difference in marriage price between a virgin and nonvirgin, her status was considered an important matter because of the suspicion that she may have lost her virginity during the year of betrothal through a relationship that would have been considered adulterous. In those circumstances she may neither proceed with the marriage to her fiancé nor marry the man with whom she had had relations. The expectation is that the circumstances would be clarified in court if the groom brought a challenge to her virginity.

⁹ Mishnah Ketubot 5:2

¹⁰ The end of the prescribed maximum twelve-month period of betrothal, following which the wedding would take place and the bride would enter her husband's household and would be supported by him.

¹¹ If she was marrying a Kohen, she was entitled to eat the *terumah*, or heave offering, one of the sources of support of the Kohanim of which his household could partake.

¹² This is my suggestion for this passage, which the anonymous redactors themselves did not understand. R. Joseph is said to have lost his memory because of illness and was here upset with what was later reported to him as his statement. The fact that the original statement appended to R. Joseph's interjection was not understood is attested to by the continuation of the text. But the fact that the original statement was not understood and that a recasting of the statement is suggested confirms that R. Joseph actually made the statement in the first formulation. The thrust of my interpretation is set forth in the discussion.

¹³ This reformulation takes the two texts on which R. Joseph is commenting to be our mishnah, which provides the reason for Wednesday as related to the days the court convenes, and the text from the Mishnah Ketubot 5:2, "If the time expires," which supplies no reasoning for the law stated.

Rather, if the statement was made, this is what was said:

R. Judah said in the name of Samuel: For what reason did they say, "A virgin is married on Wednesday"? So that if he had a challenge to her virginity, he would proceed to court early the next day. Let her, then, marry on Sunday, so that if he had a challenge to her virginity he could proceed to court early the next day?! The sages were zealous¹⁴ to protect the interests of the daughters of Israel, to ensure that he (the groom) would spend three days preparing for the wedding feast, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, and on Wednesday he would marry her.¹⁵

And now that we have learned the principle of *shakdu*, concerning that which we learned, "If the time expired and they were not married, she is supported by him and she may eat of the *terumah*," if the time expired on Sunday, because he may not marry her he is not required to support her.

Therefore, if he became ill, or she became ill, or she became menstruant, he is not required to support her.

And there are those who frame this assertion as a question....¹⁶

(2b)

R. Ahai explained:¹⁷ ... Rather, we must be dealing with a case of circumstances beyond his control such as these, and (the Mishnah) states: "She is supported by him and she may eat of the *terumah*."¹⁸

¹⁴ The term *shakdu* now becomes shorthand for this provision.

¹⁵ This is a précis of the first *baraita* in the Tosefta of Ketubot 1:1.

¹⁶ What follows is a series of queries that "unpack" the prior assertion that under any circumstances where for reasons beyond their control they cannot be married, he is not required to support her. The "unpacking" raises the possibility that the nature of the circumstances may have a profound impact on his responsibility. Is it a circumstance caused by his situation, such as his illness? Perhaps in that case he would be required to support her, but not in the case of her illness. Perhaps in the case of her illness, too, he would be required to support her, but not in the case of circumstances established by the law that compelled them to postpone the wedding.

¹⁷ The verb used implies "made plain." The R. Ahai mentioned here is the subject of some discussion. The Tosafot *ad loc* argue against the suggestion that this is R. Ahai Gaon, author of the *She'iltot*. Their argument is probably correct. If not, this section of dialogue would be a very late, post-Amoraic, addition to the text. A demonstration of continuing fluidity, indeed!

¹⁸ R. Ahai uses a somewhat forced close reading of the text of the mishnah to substantiate his point: In any case of delay due to circumstances beyond his control, he is required to support her.

R. Ashi said: To be sure, I say to you that in the case of delay due to any circumstances beyond his control, she is not supported. . . .¹⁹

Rava said: "And in the matter of divorce that is not the case."

It follows that Rava held that a claim of "unavoidable circumstances" has no force in divorce. . . .²⁰

(3a)

There are those who say: Rava said, "And the same applies to matters of divorce."

It follows that Rava holds that a claim of "unavoidable circumstances" has force in divorce.

This pericope, which has sparked considerable commentary, provides a great deal of evidence of alternative versions and literary construction from antecedent source material. The mishnah itself is problematic, in that its assertion about the day of the week specified for marriages gives only a partial explanation for the day specified for the virgin and provides no reason at all for the setting of Thursday for the widow's marriage. The Gemara's discussion begins with a statement of R. Joseph in the name of R. Judah in the name of Samuel that is puzzling not only to the reader but that puzzled even R. Joseph himself! Upon hearing it recited, he burst forth with an interjection that suggested that the quotation had been badly garbled. But his own interjection was not understandable to the redactors, who shaped a brief dialogue about it: What did R. Joseph mean when he said: *tali tanya bedela tanya*? The redactors then provided a reconstruction of R. Joseph's statement that serves

¹⁹ R. Ashi takes the opposite position to R. Ahai and rejects his reading of the mishnah.

²⁰ The fact that a circumstance beyond his control frees him from the requirement to support her by the end of the prescribed engagement period leads to the generalization that such a claim has force in marriage. Rava is first quoted as saying that in matters of divorce, which are often parallel to laws of marriage, this is not the case and such a claim would have no force. The Talmud proceeds to explore possible sources for this position and concludes that this was a position based on his own reasoning, in order to preclude the disastrous situation that would be created if doubt were cast over the status of a divorce because of an admissible claim of "unavoidable circumstances." This would lead to the proliferation of divorced women who might choose not to remarry because of concern about the possible invalidity of their divorces, and of *manzerim*, born to women who had remarried on the basis of a divorce that had later been declared invalid because of a claim of "unavoidable circumstances."

to interpret it in a way they could understand. They suggest that his critique of the version he heard was based on bringing together a source that provided a reason and a source that did not. That, however, hardly represents the key difficulty in the statement originally attributed to R. Joseph.²¹ In fact, the meaning of R. Joseph's statement as originally cited is quite clear, despite the redactor's difficulty with it. The translation I have presented reflects my suggested understanding of the passage. R. Joseph had originally cited the *baraita* from the Tosefta that gave the reason for specifying Wednesday for the wedding of a virgin and why Sunday was not acceptable. Two conditions were necessary: the convening of the court the next morning and preparation time for the wedding (*shakdu*). R. Joseph then drew the implications of this specification as related to the requirement of the groom to support his wife at the end of the prescribed betrothal period. He was drawing the implications of the *baraita* for the law stated in the mishnah, "If the time expired..." When he heard the conflated and corrupted version of his statement, he protested, saying, "you've connected that which is in the *baraita* (*tanya*) that provided the reasoning for the mishnah's law with the observation concerning its implication for the law of "If the time expired..." which is not part of the *baraita* at all (*la tanya*)."

What follows is a passage that serves to bridge the mishnah/R. Joseph section with the general theme: circumstances beyond one's control and their impact on legal claims. All that precedes the statement, "Therefore, if he became ill, or she became ill," is introductory to this anonymous but central assertion.²² Following the interpolated passage, "There are those who frame this assertion as a question," it serves as the referent for Rava's statement in both versions, "And in the matter of divorce that is not the case," and, "The same holds true in matters of divorce." Two versions of R. Joseph's statement are paralleled by two versions of Rava's statement. Moreover, each version of Rava's statement is followed by an inference of his position on the law and what is stated as conjecture over

²¹ Halivni suggests that only the interjection was originally stated by R. Joseph in the current context and that the continuation that puzzled the redactors was erroneously copied from another source. There can be no doubt, however, that the redactors had the problematic phrase in their text and that this elicited their reconstruction. See David Halivni, *Meqorot umesorot: be'urim betalmud* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1968), 1:131.

²² Rashi goes to some lengths to suggest that this statement was R. Joseph's own comment, in order to prepare the ground for the position being challenged by R. Ahai. Presumably, R. Ahai would not have challenged a mishnah or *baraita*. The statement may or may not be R. Joseph's.

what his reasoning might have been. It is clear that no direct citations of Rava were available to the redactors, although fragments of traditions of what Rava may have said must have been available. Out of the raw material of a problematic and laconic mishnah, a relevant *baraita*, a tradition relating to an anecdote about R. Joseph's reaction to having heard a corrupt version of his own earlier statement, and some indication that Rava had articulated a position on the subject at hand, the redactors constructed this pericope on the topic of the impact of claims of circumstances beyond one's control in marriage and divorce. Rather than choose a straightforward expository style selecting out what they considered authentic and authoritative, the redactors constructed a pericope that is dialogical and preserves alternative versions.

A final comment on the construction of this pericope: Why, it may be asked, preserve the flawed and problematic first version of R. Joseph's statement? I would suggest that the redactors found it particularly appropriate to introduce the topic of circumstances beyond one's control with an account of a scholar who himself was an example of the phenomenon. R. Joseph himself had "lost control" of his scholarly corpus because of illness. The account of his retrieval of that corpus and his correction of a corrupt version was viewed as an ideal introduction to the subject of uncontrollable circumstances and also a perfect literary context in which to embed this account, which, following the general principle of inclusiveness, they wished to preserve.

The two pericopae discussed here are not atypical or unusual. They illustrate the approach taken by the redactors of the text of the Babylonian Talmud in transforming the fragmented, heterogeneous, and predominantly oral corpus that they received into the literary work that they produced. The subtleties of their redactional method invite the reader to join the dialogical process. In so doing, the reader comes to appreciate and respect the complexity of their achievement and admire the artistry of their creation.



◆

SEFER HA'AGGADAH: TRIUMPH OR TRAGEDY?

Alan Mintz

The enormous success of *Sefer ha'aggadah* seems to have been matched by the enormous pleasure it brought Bialik over the many years he worked on it. The project began modestly shortly after the turn of the century as a kind of updated *Ein Yaakov*, the medieval anthology of talmudic aggadah. But after Bialik's return to Odessa from his sojourn in Warsaw early in 1905, the project grew considerably in its ambitions and in the claims it made upon the poet's attention. Bialik became increasingly devoted to the daily working sessions with his collaborator Y. H. Ravnitzky, and even the anti-Jewish pogroms and the revolutionary unrest that roiled Odessa at this time did not distract him from the desire to hasten the project along. The enormous satisfaction the project gave Bialik was punctuated, Ravnitzky relates, by frequent cries of childlike delight when some hitherto unfamiliar aggadic gem came across their work table.¹ Bialik lavished particular attention on the typographic design of the final product. Ravnitzky was dispatched to the printing firm of Josef Fischer in Krakow to have trial pages set in different fonts—with distinctions insisted upon among notes, sources, and the main text—and then sent to Odessa for Bialik's inspection, with the result that in the end an altogether new set of type was specially ordered from Vienna. When book 1 of *Sefer ha'aggadah* was finally completed and set in type, its arrival in Odessa in the winter of 1908 elicited a degree of emotion that Ravnitzky can describe only by recourse to an epic rabbinic topos: "He who did not see Bialik's joy when the completed volume arrived from Krakow has never seen joy in his life."² There were three more books planned for *Sefer ha'aggadah* at the time, and Bialik looked forward with gusto to continued work on the project. Indeed, with all the

¹ Y. H. Ravnitzky, "H. N. Bialik and *Sefer ha'aggadah*" [Hebrew], *Keneset* (1936): 312.

² The reference is to Mishnah Sukkot 5:1: "He who did not see *simhat beit hasho'evah* never saw joy in his life."

supplements, addenda, and vocalized editions to come, Bialik's involvement with *Sefer ha'aggadah* would cease only with his death.

When the main burden of the work had been discharged, Bialik paused in the summer of 1910 to write "Lifnei aron hasefarim" ("Before the Bookcase"), a 105-line poem that reflects upon the many years devoted to the "ingathering" of the aggadah. The black despair of the poem is utterly astonishing. Even if we discount Ravnitzky's enthusiastic descriptions, keeping in mind his adoration of Bialik and the thirty intervening years, nothing prepares us for the terms in which the poem's speaker describes his condition after years of toiling on the aggadah. He compares himself to a thief and a grave robber who, without benefit of lamp or candle, has been rooting around in the dust heap of culture and now, dispirited and exhausted, has nothing to show for it.

אם-לא בצאתי שוב לרשות הלילה
מכרות בקברות עם ובחברות רוח
ומאומה אין עמדי ולא אציל דבר,
מלבד האת הזה, אל-כפי דבק,
וזה אבק הקדומים באצבעותי —
אם-לא עוד דל וריק משהייתי

Emerging again into the domain of night / after digging in the nation's graves and the desolation of its spirit, / I have nothing to show and have saved nothing / except for this trowel that sticks to my hand and the dust of the ancients on my fingers. / I am even emptier and poorer than when I started out. (lines 85–90)³

There is no indirection here and no oblique persona. For contemporary readers, the poem's speaker could be taken for no one other than the poet Bialik, and the subject of his despair was unavoidably understood as the long years of investment in *Sefer ha'aggadah*.

The contradiction is fierce and profound, and no amount of dialectical acumen can explain it away. In 1910, at a major point along the way to the completion of *Sefer ha'aggadah*, Bialik experienced his many years of intense work on the project as both a source of sustaining pleasure and a soul-destroying waste of time. This is a contradiction that should be respected, I would submit, rather than being made the object of attempts at resolution. It is the meaning of this contradiction in Bialik's creative life

³ Dan Miron, ed., *Hayyim Nahman Bialik: Shirim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1990), 281–84. Translations of passages by Bialik quoted in this essay are mine.

and in the life of the Hebrew Revival in general that I wish to explore in the brief compass of this essay. To do so I adduce the two major documents that were not part of *Sefer ha'aggadah* proper but reflect on the project: the poem "Lifnei aron hasefarim" and the essay "Lekhinnusah shel ha'aggadah" ("On Anthologizing the Aggadah"), which Bialik eventually used as an introduction to the final project. The poem and the essay each tell a different story about a search for something that was carried out through the work on *Sefer ha'aggadah*. One search was successful, the other a failure.

The happier story is told in the essay, which is dated Sivan 5668 (= 1908) and written soon after book 1 had been printed and the work on the subsequent books was in full swing. No less than Bialik's other great essays, "Lekhinnusah shel ha'aggadah" deserves full attention for its metaphoric intensity and complexity. The first few lines shed light on one of the chief objects of the project as a whole. Against a variety of implied criticisms of the aggadah (it is inferior to the halakhah; it is fanciful and unphilosophical; it is unsystematic; it is antiquated), Bialik asserts that for many centuries the aggadah was the central literary embodiment of the Jewish people, that it remains the classical body of national creativity, and that altogether it constitutes "one of the great manifestations of the national spirit."⁴ The national spirit Bialik refers to is the *ruah ha'umah*, the term that Ahad Ha-Am, borrowing from the contemporary discourse of romantic nationalism, had coined to designate a distinctive and integral national genius that is embodied in Hebrew and inheres in the unfolding of Jewish civilization in different historical expressions. Bialik's contribution lay not so much in the theoretical elaboration of this notion as in his practical determination to recover and re-present one of the great classical sources of the *ruah ha'umah*. It is the search for the *ruah ha'umah*, in the face of all the detractors and trivializers of the aggadah, that is the theme of Bialik's essay.

Although the goal was clear, its realization was beset by many challenges. The aggadah as Bialik found it was intelligible only to expert religious readers, who had little interest in it per se, and inaccessible to modern readers of Hebrew, who might make use of it in the revival of Jewish culture. The individual aggadic passages, the aggadot themselves, were scattered over a thousand-year period throughout the vast reaches of the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds as well as among dozens of other rabbinic collections, some obscure, out of print, or extant only in manuscript. The same aggadot often existed in numerous incomplete variants and parallel passages, and the intermixture of Aramaic with

⁴ *Kitvei H. N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1935), 2:253.

antique Hebrew increased the difficulty. Within this dispersed galaxy of texts, moreover, there were those aggadot that had enduring spiritual value and those that belonged only to their far-away time and place. Once choices were made, the key challenge was to make them available. In the “rough,” aggadot were arranged by no thematic principle; one has to know the whole to make use of the parts. Bialik set himself the great task of arranging the best of the aggadah according to master rubrics (the history of the nation, its major figures, key concepts) that would make it possible for literate outsiders to rabbinic literature to find what they needed when they needed it.

In envisioning the form these arrangements might take, Bialik’s thinking in “Lekhinnusah shel ha’aggadah” turns around the axis of a central architectural metaphor. Bialik knows what the edifice of the aggadah once was and what it should not be; what it is now and what it should be are implied but less clear.

הפלטין הנאה, שבנתה ושכללה האגדה בכח יצירה של כמה דורות, לא היה בעיני העם כבית שכיות של עתיקות, שאדם נכנס בו לשעה, מסתכל — ויוצא, אלא היה משמש כעין דירת קבע לרוחה ולנשמתה של האומה; מערכי הפלטין, תכניתה וצורותיה — הן הן היו נופי החיים הרוחניים של האומה, סדרי עולמה הפנימי וציורי מחשבותיה ורגשותיה על כל מעשה ועל כל חזיון שבעולם.

The beautiful palace that the aggadah built and refined through its creative power over the course of several generations was not in the eyes of the people a museum of antiquities that one enters for an hour, takes in the exhibits, and then leaves. The palace of aggadah, rather, functioned like a permanent dwelling for the nation’s spirit and soul. The plan of the palace, its layout and configuration were the very vistas of the nation’s spiritual life, the arrangements of its inner world, the sights and sentiments of all it thought and did. (2:255)

In the high bourgeois culture of late nineteenth-century Western Europe, the idea of the museum was the master trope for the appreciation of the treasures of the classical past. But the aestheticized distance of the visitor’s appreciative gaze—and the forbidding impersonality of the monumental surroundings—was not what Bialik was after. Although modernity had made it impossible and even undesirable to reinhabit the aggadah, the memories of living on intimate and familiar terms *inside* the palace were too recent to settle for the mere ceremony of the cultural *hommage*. What the new edifice of the aggadah might look like is never spelled out, although the reader who has caught the drift of the essay’s architectural thinking can extrapolate as he or she wishes. I see in my mind’s eye a

large, stately—dare one say, palatial?—and user-friendly neighborhood lending library with a classification system that allows you to get what you need for specific purposes. It is not where you live, but you're always jumping in and out of it.

Yet beneath the surface of this homely and constructive image of beneficent institution building lurks something else: an act of systematic violence, and one that Bialik's essay—to use his own phrase from a later essay—is much better at concealing than revealing. If the essay contains an implied architectural image of the *current* state of the aggadah (as opposed to what it once was and might be), it is that of the palace in ruins, its debris misshapen and randomly scattered. Bialik presents himself as gathering, selecting, dusting off, and putting into a new order, but never tampering with the essential integrity of, the materials themselves. Yet anyone who has ever studied rabbinic literature knows that there is more to it than that. Virtually every aggadah in the galaxy of talmudic and midrashic collections is connected to a verse from Scripture. The verse serves either as the stimulus and irritant for the creation of the aggadah or as the peg upon which its homiletical ideas are hung. The connection is more like an umbilicus than a lifeless tether, and to lop it off is to do some essential violence to the aggadah. Yet Bialik knew that unless the aggadot could be cut loose from their scriptural anchors he could never move them from their remote and serendipitous locations and arrange them into tight conceptual and thematic alignments that would make *Sefer ha'aggadah* the useable work he wanted it to be. This necessary violence does not seem to have caused Bialik much anguish; the exegetical embeddedness of the aggadah in Scripture smacked to him of the casuistry of the *beit midrash*, and he went about "liberating" the narrative core without compunction. It presented itself to his mind in Berdichevskian terms as an act of destroying for the sake of building. All this is obscured in the atmosphere of curatorial benevolence in "Lekhinnusah shel ha'aggadah." It is worth bringing it to light in order to appreciate the strength of will, even the ruthlessness, Bialik brought to bear in pursuing his goal of revealing the *ruah ha'umah* in the aggadah and pressing it into service of the national revival.⁵

⁵ For an excellent overview of the relationship of *Sefer ha'aggadah* to rabbinic literature, especially on the issue of the excision of the exegetical connection, see David Stern's introduction to the English translation of the work. Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends, Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York: Schocken, 1992), xvii–xxii.

Like the essay, the poem records the pursuit of a prized goal, but it is one that is easy to miss the first time around. "Lifnei aron hasefarim" is a classic instance of the self-subverting Bialik poem described by Menahem Perry, which sets up expectations and undercuts them, thereby compelling the reader to adopt a revisionary second reading.⁶ At the outset of "Lifnei aron hasefarim," the speaker stands before the bookcase of rabbinic classics and addresses them in a manner that evokes one of the earlier great odes of the genre: "Al saf beit hamidrash" ("On the Doorstep of the Study House," 1894). The poem, we assume, is going to deal with the problem of tradition and perhaps explore the possibility of some reconciliation between the grown poet and the talmudic culture that nurtured him as a child and was rejected by him as a young man. The assumption is strengthened by the retrospective account of a childhood in the lap of learning and the dark night of religious crisis dramatized so effectively by the blood-curdling storm. Yet at the midpoint of the poem, when the speaker returns to the present time of his life, it becomes abundantly clear that there is not now, and has never been, a chance for reconciliation and that the content of the books remains for him, literally, a dead letter.

The true object of his revisiting of the ancient books has been a quest for something else.

וְעֵינַי תִּגְשֵׁשׁ, לְהֵא, בֵּין הַשְּׁטִיץ
 וּמְחַפְּשָׁה דָם בֵּין תְּגִי הָאוֹתִיּוֹת,
 הַשְּׁתַדֵּל תִּפְשׂ מִשָּׁם אֶת-עֵקֶבּוֹת נַפְשִׁי
 וּמִצֵּא נֹתֵיב רְאוּשׁוֹנֵי פְּרֻוֹרִיקָה
 בְּמָקוֹם מוֹלְדָתָהּ וּבֵית חַיִּיהָ.

My eye, exhausted, gropes between the lines, / searching silently among
 the crowns of the letters, / and struggling to catch a glimpse there of the
 tracks left by my soul / and to find a path to its first stirrings / in the
 place where it was born and began in life. (lines 53–57)

The quest turns out to be a kind of Wordsworthian project of recovering the origins of the self in childhood by returning to the scene of the most formative early experiences. (It is young adulthood that is being referred to rather than childhood, whose memories are reimagined in other works.) What the poet seeks from the years spent studying Talmud in the *beit midrash*, then, is not an intimation of his lost religious beliefs

⁶ Menahem Perry, *Hamivneh hasimanti shel shirei Bialik* (Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, Tel Aviv University, 1977).

and the world of Torah he once inhabited. He seeks, rather, the tracks that his soul left (*iqvot nafshi*) among the pages of the folios. He returns to the *beit midrash* not because of what the books have to say but because they constitute the setting, literally the birthplace, in which his self first stirred to life and began to take shape.

Although the true object of his search is not put before the reader until the middle of the poem, when we go back to the beginning we realize that it was there all along. In addressing the books, the poet declares that these tomes have been the sole companions of his youth and have served as his playground during the heat of the day and his pillow in the cold of night. Furthermore, and this is the giveaway, he says:

וְאֶלְמַד צְרוּר בְּגוּיְלֵכֶם פְּקָדוֹן רוּחִי
וְלִשְׁלֵב בְּתוֹךְ טוּרֵיכֶם חִלּוּמוֹת קִדְשִׁי.

I learned to roll up in your scrolls the deposit of my soul / and to interleave among your lines my most sacred dreams. (lines 12–13)

“Deposit of my soul” is an admittedly awkward rendering of *piqdon ruhi*. A *piqadon* is an object of value placed with a trusted person for temporary safekeeping. The inchoate soul of the poet did not emerge from the books nor did it merge with them. It is a separate entity that was only *stored* there, and now the mature poet, having journeyed far and endured much, returns if not to retrieve it from among the books then at least to catch a glimpse of it and locate the path of its first stirrings.

If the religious-cultural project of reconnection is out of the question, might not this more modest and personal romantic quest have some chance for success? Alas, no. The reason for the failure has to do with issues of communication and intelligibility that now emerge as the main theme of the poem. In order to extricate the thread of his youthful self from among the books, he must at the very least reestablish some rapport with them. He stands before the books and stares at them, yet he experiences a total failure of recognition. He cannot make sense out of these old tomes or even pick up the faintest murmur from their grave; and they for their part do not stare back, as they once did, into the depths of his soul. Who is to blame for this breakdown? The poem is curiously insistent on assigning responsibility here, because, after a different failure at the end of the poem, the account will be settled differently. “Is it my eye that has dimmed and my ear that has grown deaf?” the speaker asks, “Or are you, the forever dead, rife with rot / and bereft of the least trace of life?” (lines 69–71). The subsequent lines, describing the utter waste and futility of years spent digging around in these rotting graves, leave no room for mistaking where the fault lies.

Fault, however, is not the same as explanation. Beyond the speaker's angry despair, we are also offered a penetrating image of what went wrong.

כְּחֶרֶזִי פְּנִינִים שְׁחֹרֹת, נִתְקַ חוּטָם,
טוֹרִיכֶם לִי; נִתְאַלְּמְנוּ דְּפִיכֶם
— וְכָל־אוֹת וְאוֹת לְנִפְשָׁהּ הִיא יְתוּמָה —

Like a necklace of black pearls whose string has snapped / your lines are to me; your pages have been widowed / and each and every letter has become an orphan. (lines 66–68)

The simile is simple and unambiguous, yet throughout the whole literature of the Hebrew Revival I know of no image that captures the breakdown of a culture with more insight and greater economy. The crisis the image dramatizes is not about untenable religious beliefs or outmoded ideas; it is, rather, a crisis of coherence. The beliefs and ideas may in themselves be credible and, like pearls, valuable; but when the overarching system of plausibility that holds them in place is destroyed, they scatter into unintelligible fragments. The reason why the string has snapped is not explained; it is a given, it is what happened. It is the result that rivets our attention: the sudden devolution of the family into widowhood and orphanhood.

Surely there can be no more pointed contrast to this image of breakdown than the enthusiastic construction plans rehearsed over and over again in the essay on anthologizing the aggadah. The central difficulty presented by the aggadah, in Bialik's analysis, begins exactly at the point where the image of the unstrung pearls of the poem ends: the problem of *pizzur*, scatter. The materials of the aggadah are chaotically dispersed throughout all the many collections of rabbinic literature like "blasted stone fragments" among the "ruins of an ancient temple" (2:238). The rub is that there *never was* any ancient temple; even in its own classical age the aggadah was ever and always scattered. So it falls to Bialik not to rebuild a destroyed structure but to construct one that never existed before.

שְׁבָרֵי אֲבָנִים יִצְטַרְפוּ עַל־יְדֵי סֹדֵר כֹּזֵה לְנִדְבָכִים, נִדְבָכִים — לְכַתְלִים,
וְכַתְלִים — לְבִירָה שְׁלֵמָה, בִּירָה, שְׁכַל הַנִּכְנַס לְתוֹכָהּ מוּצָא כָּל דָּבָר עֹרֵךְ
וּמְתוֹקֵן בְּמִקוּמוֹ, עֵנִין עֵנִין שֶׁ לֵּם בְּמִדּוֹר מִיּוֹחַד לוֹ.

The shards of stone will be joined into bricks, the bricks into walls, and the walls into a palace in which all who enter will find everything in its proper place, each matter *in its entirety* in the location assigned to it. (2:258; emphasis original)

In his essay, Bialik pledges himself to the making of meaning and the conferring of order; in his poem, he bears witness to the foundering of coherence and the collapse of classical culture into unintelligibility.

Surprisingly, it is not this breakdown that is the real trauma dramatized in "Lifnei aron hasefarim." The speaker surveys the scattered letters and the desiccated books with complete detachment: "[M]y heart is still and there is no trembling tear on my eyelid" (lines 58–59). He regrets only the stupidity of the years wasted searching for his youthful soul in precisely the wrong place. The real blow comes when, after emerging from his underground futility and appealing to the night to gather him in and give him rest, the nighttime firmament stares back with blank indifference. This ending of the poem has long created problems for readers. Because the advertised theme of the poem is the belated encounter with the books, the abandonment of this subject in the final phase of the poem is perplexing. Attempting to stay within the given terms of the poem, many readers have taken the appeal to night as a sign of the poet's exhaustion unto death, even suicidal impulse, after the futile ordeal of the books. Yet this approach, which makes the night simply into a site of last resort, fails to explain the depths of the speaker's disappointment when he receives no answering gesture from the darkened heavens.

Dan Miron has demonstrated that the appeal to night can in fact be understood only by going beyond the bounds of the individual poem into Bialik's larger poetic career.⁷ By pointing to the crucial 1898 poem "Razei laylah" ("Night Secrets"), Miron shows how night became—in the crucible of Bialik's late-romantic, early-symbolist art—the powerful symbol for the forces of the cosmos that reveal themselves to the artist's imagination. It was to this source of inspiration the poet turned—and was successful in finding sustenance—long after the world of the *beit midrash* had ceased to speak to him. Although one must indeed go outside the poem to appreciate fully the devastating force of the ending, the unanswered appeal to the night remains bound to the poem through a deliberately framed structural analogy. This turns, again, on the question of communication and intelligibility. When the speaker attempts to account for the failed reconnection with the books, it will be remembered, he asks first whether it is his fault and then whether it is the fault of the books. It turns out to be the second; it is not because he is incapable of deciphering their message but because their inherent intelligibility has broken down. Now, in the poem's concluding lines, when he asks why the stars make no reply to his entreaties, the order is reversed, as is the apportionment of responsibility.

⁷ Dan Miron, *Bo'ah laylah: iyyunim bytsirot H. N. Bialik veM. Y. Berdichevski* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1987).

האַמָּנָם אֵין לַעֲפֵפֶף זְהַבְכֶם דְּבָר
 וְרָמַז קָל לְהַגִּיד לִי וְלִלְבָבִי?
 או אולי יש ויש — ואני שכחתי לשונכם
 ולא־אשמע עוד אֶת־שִׁפְתֵיכֶם, שִׁפְתֵי הַרְזִים? —
 עֲנוּנִי, כּוֹכְבֵי־אֵל, כִּי־עֲצֹב אָנִי.

Do your golden eyebrows indeed have nothing for me, / not even the slightest hint to tell me and my heart? / Or do they perhaps have much to say, but I have forgotten your tongue / and will never again hear your language, the language of secret things? / Answer me, mighty stars, for I am wretched. (lines 101-5)

In contrast to the books, the stars still possess untold reservoirs of meaning, but this time it is the poet who has lost the key, and, as the forlorn last utterance of the poem implies, he will never find it again.

I have, I believe, made good on my promise to sharpen the contradictions between the two important literary statements that Bialik made concerning the work of *Sefer ha'aggadah*. In doing so I have been impelled by no deconstructive pleasure in demonstrating the existence of a deep cleavage within the imaginative world of a great writer. Rather, my motive has been to call attention to a structure that is significant not only for Bialik's larger career but for the career of the Hebrew Revival altogether: the gap between personal salvation and collective salvation. With many fits and starts and crises, the Hebrew Revival, as a literary-cultural project, slowly established itself and eventually took part in the burgeoning society of the Yishuv. Yet for many of the young men and women whose creative endeavors made the revival possible, this sense of fulfillment and consolidation was always beyond reach. Deprived first of the nurturance of religious tradition and then of the nurturance of the natural world, they fell unprotected into the harsh void of modernity, and the personal pain of their fall could not be softened by the forward-looking march of national institutions. It is a plight from which we have never entirely escaped.



◆

"THE SCROLL OF FIRE": AN INTERPRETATION

Ezra Spicehandler

The prose poem "The Scroll of Fire" ("Megillat ha'esh") is undoubtedly Bialik's most enigmatic work. For all of its supposed structural defects, it has been hailed as Bialik's greatest poem. Calling it "the most daring of his poems," Dov Sadan declares that "The Scroll" "achieves a tension that reaches a level of exoticism equaling that of the Kabbalah poets and of the hymnology of Solomon ibn Gabriol."¹

Bialik was concerned with the problem of how an aging tradition, particularly Judaism, could survive in a society that was rapidly being industrialized and secularized—a problem that occupied the minds of European intellectuals of his day. They too sought to preserve the values of their cultural and religious heritage that were being challenged by modernity. Like them, Bialik believed that a synthesis between traditional Jewish culture and the new secular European culture might be possible but could be genuine and seamless only if Jews would attain national independence and thus preserve their unique identity. Already as a young poet, he had called for such a synthesis in "Al saf beit hamidrash" ("On the Threshold of the Study House," 1884).²

The key theme of "The Scroll" is the quest to restore the holy fire of the altar in the destroyed Temple of Jerusalem, according to tradition, to a renovated Temple. During the destruction of the Temple, the fire had been salvaged by an angel and hidden away with the hope that it would be returned to the restored Temple in the end of days. Bialik believed that this restoration would occur only after the tradition that the fire symbolized would be made meaningful to modern men and women. He viewed the corpus of the literature of the past as a repository that had to be mined, reshaped, and infused with new meaning.

¹ Dov Sadan, *Al sifrutenu: massat mavo* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1950), 64–66. Sadan is referring to the authors of the *merkavah* hymns as well as later mystical poets.

² Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *Shirim*, ed. Dan Miron (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1983), 1:255, lines 91–100.

In this context, he viewed the aggadah as a major source that should be tapped. Regarding the Hebrew style he had appropriated for "The Scroll," he says:

A possibility was created to write in a very ancient Hebrew ... about very modern matters. Perhaps this is the best instrument for writing very fine, modern things that cannot be grasped by the accepted linguistic instruments ... but we have to renew every single word ... to pour new metal into molds that have been emptied.³

At the very height of his career Bialik launched his project of *kinnus* (ingathering), collecting a corpus of those parts of classical Hebrew literature that still had relevance or, more precisely, that could be endowed with new relevance by their adaptation to new tastes and new ideas. In his introduction to *Vayehi hayom*, a collection of reworked Hebrew legends, Bialik asserted:

All of the legends collected in this book are the products of a literary adaptation of fragments of complete or incomplete legends drawn from various sources.... Their structure and their elaboration are solely the fruit of the imagination and the labor of the author.... By changing their form and their phrasing [i.e., their style] he imparted to them something of his spirit, endowing them with a singular color and shading that was lacking in their original source.⁴

T. S. Eliot later advocated a similar method of welding the culture of the past with that of the present. Writing in defense of James Joyce's use of Homer's *Odyssey* as a subtext for *Ulysses*, he argued:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue.... It is simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.... Psychology ... ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago.... Instead of a narrative method, we may now use a mythical method.⁵

This affinity between Eliot and Joyce is recognized by Robert Langbaum:

³ Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *Devarim shebe'al peh* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1934), 2:32–33.

⁴ Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *Vayehi hayom* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1933), preface.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, "James Joyce," *The Dial* (1923).

Eliot and Joyce show with uncompromising completeness that the past of official tradition is dead, and in this sense they carry nineteenth century naturalism to its logical conclusion. But they also dig below the ruins of official tradition to uncover in myth the underground tradition, inescapable because of the inherent psychological patterns in which to fit the chaotic present.⁶

"The Scroll" follows the mythological pattern of a quest, in which a hero sets out in search of religious truth, a throne, a grail, a relic, or any object that could bring salvation, and encounters many obstacles before either achieving his goal or failing to do so.⁷ In his well-known public lecture about "The Scroll," Bialik said:

The subject is *genizat ha'esh*, the storing of the fire at the time of the destruction of the Temple. A legend relates that the holy fire from heaven, the perpetual fire, always had to be preserved on the altar and was never to be allowed to burn out because it descended from heaven. This is certainly based upon the idea that no strange fire may be kindled on the altar and is linked to the holy fire that fell from heaven which the primitive family fed and guarded lest it go out since no one knew how to rekindle it. When the Temple was destroyed, the fire was extinguished. The problem arose as to what would happen later when the Temple

⁶ Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Penguin, 1974), 2–3.

⁷ Bialik drew, in part, upon the widespread Jewish folk tale about the search for King David's cave in order to waken him from his deep sleep so that he might redeem Israel—a theme used by the Haskalah poet Abba Konstantine Schapiro (1839–1900). Schapiro's poem "David melekh Yisra'el hai veqayyam" ("David, King of Israel Lives") first appeared in *Melitsat ehad minei elef* (Petersburg: Alexander Zederbaum, 1884). It is an elaboration of a Jewish folk tale well known among Central and East European Jews. See Mordechai ben Yehezkel, "Sefer vayehi hayom," *Knesset* 6 (1950): 47–50. Bialik's literary remains contain two incomplete excerpts of what may have been part of a projected poem on the same theme. See Bialik, *Shirim*, 2:139–40. He had also completed the first act of a play on the theme. This has been lost. In Eastern European literatures, the Polish romantic poets were the first to compose prose poems, beginning with Adam Mickiewicz's *Book of the Polish Nation and of the Polish Pilgrimage* (1832), a poem on the revival of Polish independence, which he wrote in biblical cadences. An English translation appears in *Konrad Wallenrod and Other Writings of Adam Mickiewicz*, Jewell Parish, Dorothea Prall Radin, George Rapall Noyes et al., trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1925). Numerous translations of Mickiewicz's works existed in Russian and were in all likelihood read by Bialik. Russian symbolists as well often resorted to long prose poems in such cadences during the Silver Age of Russian poetry (1895–1914). An example in Russian poetry is Andre Bely's work, "Dramatic Symphony."

would be rebuilt. The legend was woven—in different forms—that the fire had been stored away. Where? Some say in Babylonia in one of the caves . . . and that later they would restore it and build the Temple. This . . . led me to write something about a Judean youth who went out—when the time of the Return [to Zion] had arrived—to search for this holy fire. . . . I consulted two friends about the style and said: “If I would write the thing in a biblical style, its quality would certainly be diminished. . . . It must be presented as a narrative epic, a megillah (that is in the narrative style of such biblical books as Ruth or Esther). It should be entirely epic but concentrated. Were I to use the (regular) biblical style, . . . it would lower its (i.e. the poem’s) *niveau*. This biblical style has now become commonplace. Almost every kind of children’s stories of the lowest order are written in the biblical style . . . and cannot excite the mind: The reader hardly pays attention to their contents.”⁸

Chapter 1 of “The Scroll” begins with a description of the destruction of the Temple:⁹

All night long seas of flames seethed and tongues of fire darted to and fro above the Temple Mount. Stars shot out from the charred skies and sparks after sparks poured down earthward. Did God kick over His throne and shatter His crown to pieces?

Tatters of reddened clouds heavy with blood and fire roamed the wide spaces of the night, mournfully telling of the wrath of the God of Vengeance. . . . Did God rend His purple cloak and scatter its tatters to the wind?

The terror of God lay upon the distant mountains . . . trembling seized the sullen cliffs of the desert. *The God of Vengeance, the Lord, God of Vengeance* showed Himself!

Behold the God of Vengeance. Serene and awesome, He sits upon a throne of fire in a sea of flames. His wrap is a purple flame and His footstool—burning embers. He is surrounded by fiery angels.¹⁰ A cruel dance of flames encircles Him. Above His head a destructive blaze consumes the world’s void. Yet He is serene and awesome, sitting with His arms folded over His heart. With the look of His eyes, He causes the blaze to spread and deepens the pits of fire with the flick of His eyelids.

⁸ Bialik, *Devarim shebe’al peh*, 2:30–31

⁹ The Hebrew text I use here is the scholarly edition, Bialik, *Shirim*, 2:213–34. All translations are my own. For a reading of “The Scroll,” see David C. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth-Century Hebrew Writers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 45–62.

¹⁰ The original Hebrew is *daharot ishim*, which echoes a line from a *piyyut* chanted during the *hazzan’s* repetition of the morning Amidah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

Give praise to God, O fiery angels; Give praise to God, O dance of fire and blaze!¹¹

The destruction of the Temple by fire marks the end of Jewish sovereignty and the beginning of the *galut* (Exile). Exile means exile from God, a break that would be mended only in messianic times. However, God in His mercy, according to the tradition, allows the *shekhinah*, God's aspect of love and mercy, to accompany the children He had driven away. The *ḥurban* (destruction) is a key symbol Bialik used to describe his personal tragedy—the loss of his childhood faith in a personal God and the consequent destruction of the sense of wholeness, that is, the complete union of the ego with the universe, what Yeats called the loss of the center. In psychological terms, it is the trauma of the separation of the child from its mother's womb. In his "Al saf beit hamidrash" Bialik addresses the ruined house of study: *Ha'evok lehurbanakha, im evok lehurbani* ("Shall I weep over your destruction, or over my destruction?").¹²

Fire (*esh*) is the central symbol of "The Scroll of Fire." It appears three times in the first chapter, and it is the closing word of the work. Nouns and adjectives relating to fire are even more frequent. Sibilants reverberate throughout the text echoing the hissing of fire: *hishtarbevu leshonot esh, reshafim reshafim, vayenapets kiso, leshonot esh, shalev venora hu yoshev al kiso, esh al rosho tisha'eh*.

In the Kabbalah's catalogue of symbols, fire represents God's stern attribute of justice (*midat hadin*).¹³ God in chapter 1 is the austere judge who shows no mercy. In chapter 2, the scene changes, the fire ebbs. When the ministering angels gather to chant their morning prayers, they find the Lord of Hosts sitting over the ruins. "His head dropped between his arms and mountains of sorrow heaped upon it." Now He shows His quality of mercy (*midat haraḥamim*). In the smoking ruins, the angels discover that Ariel, the lion of fire who routinely had crouched upon the altar, has been extinguished except for a flickering, singed curl of flame, a remnant of his mane. Suddenly a deep groan escapes from the mourning God ("the heart of the universe was broken"). God can no

¹¹ Although by definition the prose poem dispenses with the conventional devices of traditional poetry such as a more or less fixed number of syllables per line, meter, and rhymes, often Bialik's sentences can be scanned. The opening sentence, for example, is more or less anapestic. Most other sentences in chapter 1 are iambic. His rhythms echo biblical cadences, but his vocabulary includes postbiblical phrases and words.

¹² Bialik, *Shirim*, 1:252, line 33.

¹³ See the commentary of Nahmanides to Deuteronomy 4:24.

longer contain Himself and, rising, roars like a lion. The *shekhinah* too rises from the ruins and hides itself in a secret refuge.

Chapter 3 introduces the Doe of Dawn (the morning star)¹⁴ and the young mournful angel. The latter had been charged to guard the pearls of tears hidden in the cup of sorrow.¹⁵ Above the Doe of Dawn, the angel sees the curl of fire,¹⁶ the remnant of Ariel flickering among the ruins. Anguished, the angel fears lest the last ember of God will be extinguished and the hope of God's people and God's abode will be lost forever. Quickly he flies down, scoops up the flame with a pan, and flies off above the Doe of Dawn. As he does, he sheds a tear that sinks with a hiss into the pile of ashes. Following the Doe of Dawn, he flees to a desolate island and places the flame on top of a cliff.

The intensity of "The Scroll" accelerates in chapter 4, in which Bialik reworks a talmudic legend about two hundred male youths and two hundred maidens who were taken captive by the Romans after the destruction of the Temple in order to serve in Rome's brothels. According to the legend, upon learning of the enemy's evil intention while still en route, the maidens dive into the sea and drown; the youths, impressed by the maidens' courage, plunge after them and also perish.¹⁷ In Bialik's version, the Romans cast the maidens and the youths, unclothed and

¹⁴ The Doe of Dawn in the Kabbalah symbolizes the community of Israel. It also represents God's aspect of love and mercy.

¹⁵ There is no mention of the term "cup of sorrow" (*kos hayagon*) in the older sources. *Kos hayegonim* is first used in Judah Halevi's *piyyut* "Tsiyyon halo tishali." This is the probable source from which Bialik's "cup of sorrow" was drawn. According to Jewish folklore, God gathers Israel's tears into a cup; when it is filled redemption will occur. "The Scroll" reverses the process: the tears must be emptied from the cup of sorrow before redemption may take place. See *Kol shirei Yehudah Halevi* (Tel Aviv: Mahberot Lesifrut, 1976), 56; Hillel Barzel, *Shirat hatehiyyah: Hayyim Nahman Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Hapo'alim, 1990), 341; and Yonatan Ratosh, *Sifrut yehudit balashon ha'ivrit: petihot beviqqoret uvibe'ayot halashon* (Tel Aviv: Hadar, 1982), 128. For the specific image of Ariel, see Fishel Lachower, *Bialik: hayyav vytsirotav* (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1950), 2:50. The sources are mainly in the Zohar, especially Balak, 3, 211a: "When the sacrifice was burnt at the altar, they would see the image of a lion crouching over the sacrifice and eating it." Bialik may have read about Ariel (the lion of fire) in *Reshit hokhmah, sha'ar hayirah*, ch. 8. Bialik reminisced that he found a copy of this book in his grandfather's bookcase (Bialik, *Igrot* [Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1937-1939], 1:163).

¹⁶ The "curl of fire" is one of the many fire images frequently appearing in Bialik's poetry.

¹⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 57b. A parallel story with different martyrs appears in Lamentations Rabbah 1:48.

without provisions, upon the same desert island where the holy fire was deposited. In a state of desperation, they wander aimlessly around the island with neither food nor water:

The fountain of their life slumbered within them. . . . All desire was lost [and they were] helpless. . . . They did not know that they were walking.

Eventually, two figures of opposite qualities appear:

But when everything within them had turned dark, suddenly out of the silence: a sound of steps, sure and rhythmic, arose. . . . No one knew where these footsteps came from nor to whom they belonged, but the youths heard them in their hearts and knew that a wondrous person was walking among them. . . .

One of the youths took courage and peered through the slits of his eyes, and singled out two youths set apart from the group . . . both of equal stature and strength, taller than all the others. They were mysterious men whose eyes were large and wide open. But one was a tender bright-eyed youth who looked towards heaven, as if he were searching for the star of his life, while the second was a man of terror with angry eyelids who looked downwards towards the earth as if he were seeking his lost soul. The peering man was unable to decide who of the two was the wondrous one that will set their steps in the right direction.

In chapter 5 the youths discover a black river and a salt bush. They rush to appease their hunger and thirst, unaware that they are drinking from the river of perdition and eating of Satan's root. Only the bright-eyed youth refrains from either food or water. Now the angry-eyed man approaches the youths, saying: "My brothers, have you not forgotten the song of hatred and annihilation?" Not receiving a response, he slowly chants:

Slumbering, deep and black are the abysses of perdition,
And they spin the riddle of death. . . .
Eternal agony sinks like stones within them. . . .
And where is salvation?—She plays the whore to heaven
And to God.

The youths remain sunken in silence, and the angry-eyed man continues:

From the abyss of perdition fetch me the song of the destruction
Black as the charred brands of your heart;
Carry it among the nations and spread it among the rejected of God.
Pour its coals over their heads.
And sow perdition and annihilation over all their fields.

And when your shadow passes over the lilies of their garden—
 They shall turn black and die;
 And whenever your eye shall light upon their marbles and their beautiful idols,
 They shall be shattered like shards;
 And take laughter with you, laughter bitter and cruel as wormwood,
 With which you will kill.

After a pause, the man brings his song to a close:

Is this not the song of wrath, sired by flaming pyres
 On a wrathful night
 Out of the blood of infants and the aged and the glory of precious bodies
 Who have fallen dead....

The bright-eyed youth interrupts this dirge with a single question: "My brothers, do you know the song of consolation and the end of days?" But he does not recite the song. The chapter ends with a dramatic scene: on the cliffs on the opposite side of the river, a straight, white line of gentle, pure-bodied maidens walk with hands stretched toward heaven. They are caught in the moonlight. Their eyes are closed like those of sleepwalkers; their heads are adorned with crowns of thorns, and their faces are frozen with the pangs of the Messiah. They are heading straight toward the ravine. The youths shout at them, warning them of the imminent danger. However, they proceed without pause and finally tumble into the storming river. In a desperate effort to save them, the youths dive after them but in vain. Youths and maidens drown in the swirling waters. On the patch of black water, suddenly a very large black object silently floats after the bodies. Is it a black boat or a coffin? The bright-eyed youth, who had remained on shore, throws himself to the ground, covers his face with his palms, and weeps and weeps.

How are we to interpret these passages? Klausner, Lachower, and others give them a Zionist interpretation. According to them, the maidens and the youths are the Jewish people and the desert island is the Exile, the place of the suffering and hopeless plight of the Jews. The bright-eyed youth represents the Zionist dream of salvation. The angry-eyed man symbolizes Jewish pessimists who have lost all hope of redemption: in their anguish they seek vengeance by deliberately striving to undermine the alien Christian society that had persecuted Jews for centuries.¹⁸ More

¹⁸ Josef Klausner, *Yotsrim uvonim: ma'amrei biqqoret* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1929), 3:51–55; Lachower, *Bialik*, 2:558.

problematic is Klausner's interpretation of the maidens as representing the martyrs of Israel, characterized by a great but naive faith and a constant readiness to sanctify God's name. They carry crowns of thorns with glorious serenity because they believe that suffering is the lot of the Jews, yet they maintain a deep belief in the coming of the Messiah.¹⁹

Bialik himself, without specifically identifying what each group signified, contended that the separation of the youths from the maidens referred to "the idea of the division between the eastern and the western elements in Jewry." We may assume that he had in mind the cultural difference between Central European Jewry that was assimilating to European culture and Eastern European Jewry, which still remained loyal to the Jewish tradition.²⁰ Lachower suggests that the male youths represent Western Jewry "who seek a material and temporal existence," while Eastern European Jewry, like the maidens, strives for a different way of life. Yonatan Ratosh's interpretation is more convincing: the youths stand for the ascetic Judaism of the *beit hamidrash* and all that it represents, and the maidens symbolize the uninhibited, hedonistic gentile world that loves life, nature, and *eros*—the Christian world, modernity.²¹ He, however, overstates his argument by claiming that the line of young maidens may have been inspired by Bialik's reminiscences of a parade of nuns in the Zhitomir of his boyhood.²²

And what of the angry man? Bialik's own explication is as follows:

The angry young man [represents] the element of hatred. The Jew does not love his tormentors. . . . Hatred leads to a desire for vengeance—this is the plain meaning (*peshat*) with all the biblical verses about the great vengeance that will be taken of Edom—the general term for all who would destroy Israel. . . . In its modern form, this represents the destructive element of the Jew when he enters any alien culture, and at times acts as a poisoner, a destroyer from within. This contains a large measure of truth—the destructive criticism which Jews brought into European culture with their oriental approach to Western problems—even people like Trotsky. In contrast, the second youth symbolizes the element of love and forgiveness . . . the hope for the redemption of humanity. This is the double Messiah of the Jews.²³

¹⁹ Klausner, *Yotsrim uvonim*, 56.

²⁰ Bialik, *Devarim shebe'al peh*, 2:31.

²¹ Yonatan Ratosh, *Sifrut yehudit*, 147.

²² *Ibid.*, 158.

²³ Bialik, *Devarim shebe'al peh*, 2:35–36.

Most Israeli critics have shunned the earlier Zionist interpretations of "The Scroll" and tend to read Bialik—at least Bialik at the zenith of his career (roughly after 1903)—as a writer of personal rather than national poetry. Zalman Shneour, actually a younger contemporary of Bialik, is a precursor of this trend:

This poem belongs to another aspect of Bialik's poetry. It stands primarily as a poem of unrealized love. . . . I do not know any more intimate work in all of Bialik's poetry. . . . it is the biography of a Hebrew poet in the Exile, his anguish, doubts, hopes and loneliness.²⁴

Aryeh Ludwig Strauss has proffered a quasi-Freudian interpretation of the forced separation of the youths from the maidens: Bialik is aware of the division between the sexes and wishes to eliminate it but finds no way to do so except by the abyss of perdition. He favors sexual fulfillment, but his moral sense makes him view the *eros* as impure, sinful. Aristophanes in the *Symposium* recalls the myth that primordial man was androgynous but that the gods punished him by splitting him into male and female halves. Ever since, man and woman strive to reunite as one. For Bialik this yearning for reunion remains unfulfilled. His love poetry is harmonious only when it tells of spiritual love (*agape*); physical love (*eros*) causes disharmony.²⁵

This separation of the sexes may also be connected to the kabbalistic view that Adam's original sin caused the separation of the King from the Queen, splitting off the *shekhinah* and banning her from having relations with her husband and the *sefirot*. Ratosh has suggested that the destruction alludes not only to the destruction of the Temple and Bialik's destroyed personal faith but also to the cosmic destruction that resulted from Adam's original sin.²⁶

I believe that the maidens symbolize both *agape* and *eros* simultaneously—the Madonna and Carmen—and reflect Bialik's inability to realize the integration of the two aspects of love. The bright-eyed youth clearly starts out as a firm believer in his destiny and in the future redemption of his people. He is also the prophet-poet who goes forth in quest of the lost fire. His is both a religious and a national quest. He hopes that the retrieved and modernized fire will bring about redemption. But he is also the poet who seeks to restore the pristine

²⁴ Zalman Shneour, *H. N. Bialik uvnei dor* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1958), 80.

²⁵ Aryeh Ludwig Strauss, *Bedarkhei hasifrut* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1965), 139–42.

²⁶ Ratosh, *Sifrut yehudit*, 136–39, 156.

sense of unity he enjoyed in his childhood and to fulfill his potential powers in the realm of art.

Baruch Kurzweil gives an existentialist reading of "The Scroll," asserting that it is

primarily a baring of the soul, a poetic confession of personal ruination. . . . [Bialik unconsciously endows it] with the power of a legendary theme, reviving an ancient myth. . . . Through poets like Bialik . . . [the problematic nature of] our Jewish world is revealed to us even if their works are ostensibly personal confessions.²⁷

Kurzweil considers the bright-eyed youth to be dedicated to the mission of rekindling the fire but, like Klausner, calls him a messenger without a sender—having broken with the divine source of the light.

Bialik gives vent to the dialectical tension underlying his conception of the mission by dividing the mission complex into two poles: "two youths of equal height and strength, the bright-eyed youth and the angry-browed youth." It is no accident that the two look so much alike that no one can decide who is the genuine wondrous one and who is the partner of the "other side" [i.e., the devil]. . . . The late return. . . , the main theme of Bialik's poetry and of "The Scroll of Fire," is the endless struggle as to the meaning of the mission. Only by asceticism, by foregoing private pleasure is it possible to preserve "the surviving little spark. . . ." the concern of the angel "lest the last ember of God burn out" . . . this is the ember of the mission for which Bialik fought in every one of his poems. . . . This battle has an ascetic character and it is especially hostile to *eros*, conceived as being opposed to the mission, as being a temptation.²⁸

While, as Kurzweil states, the angry man intoxicates the youths,

the bright-eyed youth . . . alone passes the test. All of the other youths are drawn into the river of perdition. . . . the maidens are seen as temptresses but not only as such. They are . . . like a band of lithe angels. . . . [They are also] unwillingly, the negative, destructive, and demonic aspect of *eros*. "They fly like a flight of white storks into the blackness of the waters."²⁹

²⁷ Baruch Kurzweil, *Bialik veTschernikhovski* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1962), 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

In his essay "Al hasheniyyut beYisra'el" ("On the Duality in Israel")³⁰ Bialik presents his thesis that the history of Israel is persistently vacillating between two poles. On the one hand, there is a belief in universalism, an expansive openness to the world and its culture embodied in an optimistic belief in a Messiah who will redeem not only Israel but all of humanity. On the other hand, there is a tendency toward shrinking inwardly, withdrawing from the world, and a parochial belief that the Messiah will only redeem Israel. In "The Scroll" he uses duality as a literary device. The angry God of justice in chapter 1 becomes, in chapter 2, the anguished God grieving at the destruction of the Temple and the plight of Israel, a God of mercy who orders the Doe of Dawn to guard and preserve the holy fire. In chapter 4 the young captives are divided into maidens and youths and the two wondrous youths into a bright-eyed individual and an angry one. The mountain cliffs radiate with sunshine; the river of perdition is black. In chapters 5 through 9, the black river contrasts with the whiteness of the small cloud³¹ and protects the bright-eyed youth, while the den of vipers and black snakes represents the evil inclination.³² The work's climax is reached in chapter 7 when the messenger reaches the light, only to lose it as he plunges into the river of perdition.

On the personal level, the speaker-poet fails to reach the apex of his literary career. Is this a result of his allowing himself to be distracted by *eros*, or rather attributable to his failure to experience real love? On the national level, is the poet saying that the Jewish people lack the will (*eros*) to achieve salvation in his generation? This pessimism would also be consistent with the concluding portions of Bialik's "Metei midbar" ("The Dead of the Desert"), where the dead of the wilderness periodically rise up against God in a vain effort to ascend to the Promised Land against His will, only to be repeatedly crushed by God.

Klausner reads "The Scroll" in this manner:

The secular fire defeated the holy fire. Life is stronger than the ideal. . . . Exile is reflected in all of Bialik's national poetry. Bialik hopes for redemption but does not believe in [the possibility of] redemption. . . . the youth is a messiah without a mission, a redeemer without the capacity to

³⁰ Bialik, *Devarim shebe'al peh*, 1:39–45.

³¹ The small white cloud motif recurs frequently. See A. Even-Shoshan and Y. Siegel, *Qonqordantsyah leshirat H. N. Bialik* (Jerusalem: Kiryat sefer, 1960), 208.

³² A repeated motif, frequently the primeval snake (*naḥash haqadmoni*) that tempted Eve. See *ibid.*, 189.

redeem. This is why he is silent with the entire world and with his great agony, the agony of the individual. Here it is not the poet of renaissance, but the poet of the "end" for whom the individual replaces the nation—after despair.³³

Yonatan Ratosh has contended that after the failure, the young angel removes tears from the cup of sorrow because they were counterfeit. Bialik, he avers, was expressing his regret that because of his role as the national poet he was unable to attain his potential as a great lyrical poet. In his mature period, according to Ratosh, Bialik realized his error and rejected his national poetry as a waste of his talent. This is why he suffered the "sorrow of the individual" and underwent his so-called silent period.³⁴ Indeed, after "The Scroll" Bialik wrote mainly subjective poems and almost eschewed writing national poetry.

I should like to suggest that Bialik's despair was also motivated by his failure to synthesize Jewish culture (ascetic and ethical) with European cultures (aesthetic and scientific) into a new whole. His pessimism was also engendered by the political and cultural decline of Eastern European Jewry during the first two decades of the twentieth century. "The Scroll" was written during the bombardment of Odessa by the mutinous crew of the Russian destroyer *Potemkin*, the harbinger of the revolution of 1905. Shortly after the czar acceded to the demands for greater freedom, he rescinded his concessions and his ministers encouraged the perpetration of pogroms throughout the Pale of Settlement. The Hebrew and Yiddish press were suspended; Hebrew and Yiddish writers fled abroad. A decline of Zionism was precipitated by the Uganda controversy and deepened after the untimely death of Herzl. The new generation of Russian Jewry underwent accelerated Russification and either out of despair or hope joined the various revolutionary parties. It is no wonder that Bialik and his colleagues felt that their cause was lost.

Bialik's quest reached beyond his aesthetic achievement or even literary fame. He was part of a literary tradition that viewed the poet as a prophet, a concept that also pervaded Russian literature that so greatly influenced him.³⁵ The hero of "The Scroll" is both a great poet in Israel

³³ Klausner, *Yotsrim uvonim*, 69.

³⁴ Ratosh, *Sifrut yehudit*, 124–25. In this he argues against Adi Zemach's interpretation of the meaning of the poem. See Adi Zemach, *Halavi hamistater: iyyunim bytsirato shel Hayyim Nahman Bialik* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1969).

³⁵ Victor Erlich, *The Double Image: Concepts of the Poet in Slavic Literatures* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964).

and a prophet who can console his suffering people with a message of salvation and is even able to lead them to the Promised Land.

"The Scroll" ends with the failed messenger going out to his people and suffering with them. "His eyes thirsted only for the dawn ... the dawn's early light was the song of his life," reflecting the fact that Bialik never completely gave up on the cause of national redemption. Dan Miron has suggested that after Bialik settled in Tel Aviv in the 1920s, he again embraced his dream of the possible synthesis of Judaism with modernity. In "Aggadat sheloshah ve'arba'ah" ("The Legend of Three and the Four"), for example, Yedidyah, the Diaspora-born Jewish hero, succeeds in wooing Ketsiyah, the gentile princess, converting her to Judaism and marrying her in the Temple in Jerusalem under the approving eye of King Solomon. The marriage of Judaism to gentile culture is thereby consummated in Jerusalem—ethics and aesthetics, *agape* and *eros* are wed.³⁶

³⁶ Dan Miron: "He'arot: 'Aggadat sheloshah ve'arba'ah,'" in Gershon Shaked, ed., *Bialik: yetsirato lesugeha bere'i habiqqoret* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1972), 390.



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RABBI NAHMAN'S THIRD BEGGAR

Joseph Dan

One of the most meaningful landmarks in Arnold Band's long academic career is, I believe, the volume dedicated to the tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, including an introduction, translation, and commentary on one of the most intriguing Jewish literary and mystical texts.¹ Band succeeded in finding the right tone in English to present these tales, reflecting the folk-tale character of the text and at the same time retaining the intellectual weight that they include. He avoided the temptation to rewrite and "improve" Rabbi Nahman's work, as several important writers, from Martin Buber to some contemporary figures, have done. Band's text is one of the rare cases in which reading a translation is very nearly as good as reading the original. Thanks to Band's work, one can offer a close reading of a section from Rabbi Nahman's tales in a study in English, without constantly referring to the Hebrew (or Yiddish) original.

One of the best-known sections in these narratives is the story of the third beggar in Rabbi Nahman's thirteenth (and last) tale, "The Seven Beggars."² Part of it was included in S. Ansky's immensely popular play, *The Dybbuk*, and in many anthologies and collections. The combination of mystery with fantasy that characterizes it fascinated

¹ Arnold J. Band, ed., *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales* (New York: Paulist, 1978).

² Bibliography concerning Bratslav Hasidism, Rabbi Nahman, and the stories is now one of the most accessible in Jewish Studies. The recent publication of David Assaf's volume *Bratslav Bibliography* (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 2000) is a landmark. It includes exhaustive annotated references to sources, studies, reviews, newspaper articles, etc., arranged by subject. A few months earlier the *Catalogue of the Gershom Scholem Library of Jewish Mysticism*, ed. J. Dan and E. Liebes (Jerusalem: The Jewish National and University Library Press, 1999) was published. It includes a detailed chapter on Bratslav (1:661–96, items 8499–8925). The comprehensive list of Bratslav sources was published in G. Scholem, *Quntres elleh shemot* (Jerusalem: Azriel, 1925). Rabbi Nahman's *Sefer sippurei ma'asiyyot* was published first in Ostraha, 1815, in Hebrew and Yiddish, edited by his disciple, Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov.

readers and listeners, even though it lacks any clear literal meaning. It seems that it is appropriate to read it again and view it as a fusion of literature and mysticism, using profound concepts drawn from Kabbalah and Hasidism.

The story of "The Seven Beggars" is unfinished, like the first tale, the story of "The Lost Princess."³ Its outlines are well known. The first segment of the story narrates the spiritual fall of a king's son "who fell from faith." Then the story moves, without any apparent connection, to an upheaval in a certain country that caused many people to flee from their homes. Among them were two children, a boy and a girl, who wander as beggars in the forests and towns. During their wandering they meet, in seven separate episodes, seven beggars, each of whom suffers a physical defect—a blind one, a deaf one, a stammerer, and so on. These beggars feed and assist them. When the children grow up, the beggars decide that they should marry each other and prepare a wedding feast in a hole in the ground covered by weeds and garbage. During this celebration the bride and groom crave the presence of the beggars. Each of them appears, in the order of their original meeting, and narrates a story in which he himself is the main hero who possesses supernatural abilities that correspond to his particular disadvantage—the blind one, for example, sees better than anyone else. Each beggar then gives his unique powers as a wedding gift to the children, thus allowing them to become masters of all the supernatural abilities of the whole group of beggars. The story ends with the narrative of the sixth beggar, so that the part that Rabbi Nahman never told included at least three segments: the story of the seventh beggar, who was legless (and, according to tradition, a wonderful dancer); the conclusion of the story of the wedding of the children and their ultimate fate; and the conclusion of the story of the prince "who fell away from faith" and of the narrative as a whole.

This structure can be explained as reflecting Rabbi Nahman's concept of the present moment in cosmic history, in the movement between creation and redemption according to the Lurianic messianic myth, which Rabbi Nahman internalized and absorbed as his own biography: the story of the fate of the soul of the Messiah.⁴ The time of the final

³ A detailed analysis of these two stories and the messianic meaning of the missing conclusions is included in my monograph, *The Hasidic Story* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), 132–72. Arnold Band was kind to include my suggestions in his presentation of these stories.

⁴ It is remarkable that Rabbi Nahman began to tell these stories in 1806, after his only son died, an event that intensified his messianic pretensions (as pointed out by M. Piekarz, "Hamifneh bederekh haba'ato shel Rabbi Nahman miBratslav

revelation of the Messiah and the implementation of the redemption on earth has not arrived yet, so the first story, as well as the last, could not be concluded. Traditional Bratslav commentators identified the last, seventh beggar with King David, who danced in front of the holy ark when it was moved from Shiloh to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where the Temple was to be built by Solomon—a clear indication of the completion of the messianic process. The catastrophes with which both the first and the last narratives begin can be understood as representing the myth of *tsimtsum* and *shevirah*, the primordial catastrophes within the Godhead in the Lurianic mystical-messianic myth.⁵ It seems that the bride and groom, in the hole in the ground covered by garbage, are in the process of accumulating the powers of the divine manifestations, the *sefirot*, which they receive as wedding gifts from the beggars who represent these divine entities. They are preparing themselves for their imminent role in the messianic event, of which the marriage ceremony, this *hieros gamos*, is a high point. From this ceremony the process of *tiqqun*, the mending and correction of the mythical catastrophes, can reach its ultimate conclusion. Unfortunately, this is also the point in which Rabbi Nahman forsakes the mundane world, and the completion of the messianic process is delayed until his return, according to the belief of his followers.⁶

be-1806," *Tarbiz* 40 (1971): 226-54; and see his monograph, *Hasidut Bratslav: per-aqim behayei mehalelah uvikhtaveha* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1972). It should be noted that this tragedy represented the end of the line of the founder of Hasidism and Rabbi Nahman's grandfather, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. The messianic meaning of childlessness has been demonstrated very clearly in the contemporary messianism of the Habad Hasidim, which was led in the last generation by a childless Zaddik and is now leaderless. See J. Dan, *Modern Jewish Messianism* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: MOD, 1999), 189-203.

⁵ See G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1954), 260-68; idem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 110-17; I. Tishby, *Torat hara vahaqelipah beqabbalat haAri* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1942).

⁶ It is thus incorrect to present the expectation of many Habad Hasidim that Rabbi Menahem Mendel Shneerson will return and redeem the world as a "first" in Jewish messianic thought. These Lubavitch believers are joining now the Bratslav Hasidim, who adopted this belief 190 ago. The Bratslav Hasidim were called by other groups "dead Hasidim," because of their faithfulness to a dead leader. There are now tens of thousands of new "dead Hasidim" of the Lubavitch kind. Early Bratslav believers were encouraged by computations concerning the date of Rabbi Nahman's return, in twelve years, then forty years, and so on.

The tale of the third beggar is placed in the middle of the story. It is suggested that it serves as the turning point in the narrative between the segments dedicated to the myth of the creation and the primordial catastrophes and the segments leading toward the correction and the redemption. It is neither “past” nor “future,” but rather the description of the extended present, the situation in a universe that is in balance, though a tenuous and temporary one:

There is an entire tale about this. The True Man of Kindness⁷ is indeed a very great man. And I (the stutterer) travel around and collect all true deeds of kindness and bring them to the True Man of Kindness. For the very becoming of time—time itself is created—is through deeds of true kindness. So I travel and gather together all those true deeds of kindness and bring them to the True Man of Kindness. And from this time becomes.

Now there is a mountain. On the mountain stands a rock. From the rock flows a spring. And everything has a heart. The world taken as a whole has a heart. And the world’s heart is of full stature⁸ with a face, hands, and feet. Now the toenail of that heart is more heart-like than anyone else’s heart. The mountain with the rock and spring are at one end of the world, and the world’s heart stands at the other end. The world’s heart stands opposite the spring and yearns and always longs to reach the spring. The yearning and longing of the heart for the spring is extraordinary. It cries out to reach the spring. The spring also yearns and longs for the heart.

The heart suffers from two types of languor: one because the sun pursues it and burns it (because it so longs to reach the spring); and the other because of its yearning and longing, for it always yearns and longs fervently for the spring. It always stands facing the spring and cries out: “Help!” and longs mightily for the spring. But when the heart needs to find some rest, to catch its breath, a large bird flies over, and spreads its wings over it, and shields it from the sun. Then the heart can rest a while. And even then, during the rest, it still looks toward the spring and longs for it.

⁷ The name of this person can be understood also as “the Man of Truth and Kindness.” The terms are part of the usual kabbalistic list of divine powers—see below.

⁸ *Qomah shelemah*, a reference to the concept of the divine world in anthropomorphic terms as a complete human stature, when every aspect and power is represented as a limb. It is derived from the ancient, prekabbalistic text known as *Shi’ur qomah* (*The Measurement of the Height*). See G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 1–45; J. Dan, *Jewish Mysticism* (Northvale, N.J.: Aronson, 1998), 1:205–16.

Why doesn't the heart go toward the spring if it so longs for it? Because, as soon as it wants to approach the hill, it can no longer see the peak and cannot look at the spring. (When one stands opposite a mountain, one sees the top of the slope of the mountain where the spring is situated, but as soon as one approaches the mountain, the top of the slope disappears—at least visually—and one cannot see the spring.) And if the heart will no longer look upon the spring, its soul will perish, for it draws all its vitality from the spring. And if the heart would expire, God forbid, the whole world would be annihilated, because the heart has within it the life of everything. And how could the world exist without its heart? And that is why the heart cannot go to the spring but remains facing it and yearns and cries out.

And the spring has no time; it does not exist in time. (The spring has no worldly time, no day or moment, for it is entirely above time.) The only time the spring has is that one day which the heart grants it as a gift. The moment the day is finished, the spring, too, will be without time and it will disappear. And without the spring, the heart, too, will perish, God forbid. Thus, close to the end of the day, they start to take leave one from the other and begin singing riddles and poems and songs, one to the other, with much love and longing. This True Man of Kindness is in charge of this: As the day is about to come to its end, before it finishes and ceases, the True Man of Kindness comes and gives a gift of a day to the heart. And the heart gives the day to the spring. And again the spring has time.

And when day returns from wherever it comes, it arrives with riddles and fine poetry in which all wisdom lies.⁹ There is a distinction between the days. There is Sunday and Monday; there are also days of New Moon and Holidays. The poems which the day brings depend upon what kind of day it is. And the time that the True Man of Kindness has, all derives from me (the stutterer) because I travel around, collecting all the true deeds of kindness from which time derives.

Consequently, the stutterer is wiser even than the wise one who boasted that he is as clever as whichever day you wish. Because all of time, even the days, come about only through him (the stutterer) for he collects the true deeds of kindness from which time derives and brings them to the True Man of Kindness. He in turn gives a day to the heart. The heart gives it to the spring, through which the whole world can exist. Consequently the actual becoming of time, with the riddles and poems and all the wisdom found in them, is all made possible through the stutterer.

⁹ The term "riddles" (*hidot*) should not be understood in a narrow sense. This Hebrew term was used by the Tibbonite translators of Jewish philosophical texts from the Arabic to Hebrew in the late twelfth and the early thirteenth centuries also to represent narratives in general, tales that often carry ethical or ideological messages.

I have an affidavit from the True Man of Kindness that I can recite riddles and poems, in which all wisdom can be found, because time and riddles come into being only through him. And now, I give you my wedding gift outright that you should be like me.

Upon hearing this, they had a joyous celebration.¹⁰

It is remarkable that the basic terminology and processes described in this section of the narrative are rather simple, well known, even mundane, zoharic ones, expressing the mainstream, pre-Lurianic concept of divine providence. Upon this foundation Rabbi Nahman constructed in this parable the modifications resulting from his Hasidic and his personal worldview.

The spring, obviously, is the third divine power in the kabbalistic system, *binah*, which is consistently described as the spring and the source of all existence, first and foremost that of the divine realms. The first two *sefirot* are conceived as potential rather than actual existence—divine will (*keter*) and divine wisdom (*hokhmah*). Real existence begins with the third *sefirah*, which is the springboard of all that is. Like a spring, it is half hidden within the realm of divine potentiality, and only its outer aspects flow forth into existence like a spring's waters. The "water" is the divine flow (*shefa*) that sustains all existence; if it is stopped, the world ceases to exist; if it is diminished, misfortunes and suffering come to the world.¹¹

The heart is another obvious, simple term, relating to the sixth *sefirah*, *tiferet*, which is conceived as the center of the "construction *sefirot*," the ones that support and direct all the affairs of the higher and lower realms of existence. The dependence of the "heart" on sustenance received from the third *sefirah*, the "spring," is a basic kabbalistic concept that is illustrated graphically by Rabbi Nahman in orthodox terms.

The dynamic aspect of this picture is supplied in this narrative by another basic kabbalistic concept, that of the impact of human deeds on the stature of the divine powers. In order to exist, the universe has to be sustained by divine flow, coming from the hidden, supreme, and innermost realms of the divine powers. At the same time, this flow cannot come into being without being triggered by an upward flow of power, resulting from human rituals, ethical behavior, and piety. The ancient belief that the world is sustained by the righteous, that the Zaddik is the foundation of the world (Proverbs 10:25), has been extended in the Kabbalah into a detailed relationship between righteousness and

¹⁰ Band, *Nahman of Bratslav*, 268–70.

¹¹ See in detail I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1:423–30.

existence.¹² In Rabbi Nahman's parable, this concept is described as the one giving the spring "time." The spring tends, according to the narrative, to disengage from existence and recede into the realm of eternity, which is timelessness, in which reality cannot exist. In other words, without the "time" given to the spring, "one day at a time," God recedes into precreation eternity, in which the world does not exist. The flow from existence toward the spring is therefore necessary to keep God loyal to his own creative endeavor for one more day.

It is not difficult to extend this interpretation to include the other elements of the picture presented by Rabbi Nahman: the sun threatening the heart (probably the fifth *sefirah*, *din*, the harsh law and the source of evil), and the great bird (probably the fourth *sefirah*, *hesed*). Yet the text should not be regarded as a textbook allegory, to be mechanically interpreted detail for detail. Even the most mundane kabbalistic concepts have undergone some transformation in Rabbi Nahman's personal world and are presented according to his own individual vision.

The process of providing one more day each day to the universe's existence as presented in this vision is different in a meaningful way from the dominant character of Rabbi Nahman's narratives. In most cases, his stories include elements of a catastrophe that is in the process of being mended, leading toward an expected final salvation. This is the basic structure of the story of the beggars as a whole and of several of the stories of the individual beggars. This structure, as noted above, reflects the basic myth of Lurianic Kabbalah: the road from the *tsimtsum* and *shevirah* to the final *tiqqun* and redemption. In the story of the third beggar this element is absent. It is a description of a continuous, basically static, situation repeated unchanged every day. The processes described here do not contain any intrinsic crisis that demands radical change. It can continue indefinitely. This is a zoharic myth, reflecting the mainly nonmessianic aspects of the early Kabbalah, rather than the revolutionary, intensely messianic Lurianic myth, which serves as the foundation of Rabbi Nahman's worldview and his concept of his own place in the world.

Understanding this unusual characteristic of the third beggar's story seems to be closely connected with the nature of the hero of the narrative, the stutterer himself. He portrays himself as the wandering collector of deeds of charity and righteousness, who gives these treasures to the "True Man of Kindness." This True Man, in turn, uses this spiritual power to give another day of existence to the universe. It seems that we have here one character, divided into celestial and earthly entities, which

¹² See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 232–34.

together fulfill this crucial role. They embody the process of delivering the life-force, derived of human observance of divine commands, to the supreme powers that sustain the world. The supernal part, the "True Man of Kindness" or "Man of Kindness and Truth," seems to be a combination of the characteristics of two *sefirot*, the fourth, *hesed* (usually rendered in English as "lovingkindness"), and the sixth, *tiferet*, which is described in standard kabbalistic terminology by the terms *emet* (truth) and *rahamim* (love, mercy, caring). It seems that Rabbi Nahman created in this character a dynamic figure who supplies "the spring" with all the good qualities of the these two *sefirot* combined. They are represented in the lower realms by the "stutterer," who actually fulfills the most important role of collecting the deeds of kindness that sustain the existence of the universe.

This is not a routine kabbalistic concept. It seems to be based more on the Hasidic doctrine of the role of the Zaddik than on traditional kabbalistic teachings. The most meaningful innovative idea that Hasidism introduced into Jewish thought is that of the intermediary power who stands between humanity and God.¹³ In the process of development of this central concept, which dominated Hasidism from the early nineteenth century to the present, Rabbi Nahman has a unique role. On the one hand, he contributed more than most other Hasidic thinkers to its development, and on the other, he is responsible, in thought and deed, for the emergence of an exception to the rule: the concept of the one-and-only Zaddik, the true Zaddik, who is the redeemer of the whole world, identified with the Messiah himself.

¹³ Among the main studies of the doctrine of the Zaddik in Hasidism, see G. Scholem, "The Zaddik," in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*; Arthur Green, "The Zaddik As Axis Mundi in Later Judaism," *PAAJR* 45 (1977): 327-47; idem, "Typologies of Leadership and the Hasidic Zaddik," in Arthur Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 2:127-56; Rivkah Shatz-Uffenheimer, "Lemalkhuto shel hatsaddiq bahasidut," *Molad* 18 (1960): 365-78; Samuel H. Dresner, *The Zaddik: The Doctrine of the Zaddik according to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy* (London: Abelard-Schiman, 1960); Rachel Elior, "Between Yesh and Ayin: The Doctrine of the Zaddik in the Works of Rabbi Jacob Isaac, the Seer of Lublin," in A. Rapport-Albert and S. J. Zipperstein, eds., *Jewish History: Essays in Honor of Chimen Abramsky* (London: P. Halban, 1988), 391-456; David Assaf, *Derekh hamalkhut: The Life of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996); Ada Rapoport-Albert, "God and the Zaddik As the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship," *History and Religion* 43 (1979): 296-325; I. Tishby and J. Dan, "Hasidic Doctrine and Literature," in *The Hebrew Encyclopaedia* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Hevrah Lehotsa'at Entsiqlopedyot, 1969), 17:769-821; J. Dan, *Jewish Mysticism*, 4:67-86, 111-30.

The doctrine of the Zaddik was developed mainly by the generation of Hasidic leaders who created their communities after the death of Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezhirich, in 1772, and it became the norm of Hasidic organization, theology, and daily behavior in the first half of the nineteenth century. Among the first leaders to formulate the theory we find Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk, Rabbi Jacob Isaac the "seer" of Lublin, and Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav himself. The most prominent example of leadership modeled according to this doctrine is the figure of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin, the founder of the Sadagora dynasties. While the first leaders who established communities based on this doctrine were charismatic ones who achieved their position by their unique spiritual impact, the next generation who assumed the leadership relied first and foremost on the concept of dynastic destiny. Most of the Hasidic communities today are led by Zaddikim who are sixth, seventh, and eighth generation, descended directly from the charismatic founders (thus, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Shneersohn, the last leader of Habad, was the seventh-generation descendant of the founder, Rabbi Shneour Zalman of Lyady). Charismatic leadership was replaced by a dynastic one, expressed by the formulation: "there is no Zaddik but the son of the Zaddik."¹⁴

The term "Zaddik" in this concept is based on kabbalistic tradition, which identified it with the ninth *sefirah*, *yesod*, following the verse in Proverbs 10:25.¹⁵ This power is portrayed in the classical Kabbalah as the pipeline connecting the divine world with the earthly one, delivering the divine flow of sustenance to the world and uplifting the spiritual power of human beings back to the celestial realms. When the leaders of Hasidism were identified with this power, they assumed the role of serving as intermediaries between the divine and the human spheres, a mystical role in which the actual meaning of "righteous" was marginalized, replaced by the belief in the Zaddik's unique spiritual-divine capabilities, with which the Zaddik's dynasty is endowed. The vehement insistence of Hasidism on dynastic leadership—the exact opposite of a charismatic model—was the reason that great thinkers, scholars, and leaders were replaced by direct descendants of previous Zaddikim.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Eyn tsaddiq ella ben tsaddiq.*

¹⁵ *Vetsaddiq yesod olam* ("but the righteous is an everlasting foundation"), which could be read also as "foundation of the world," *axis mundi*.

¹⁶ Some of the famous examples of this process are the rejection of Rabbi Aharon haLevi, the great disciple of Rabbi Shneour Zalman of Lyady, in favor of the son, Rabbi Dov Baer in Habad Hasidism; and, on the other hand, the appointment of Israel of Ruzhin, an ignorant teenager, but the great-grandson of the Maggid of Mezhirich.

Rabbi Nahman, however, represented the two directions equally. He certainly was charismatic, and his unique personality attracted to him a small group of adherents, which, even though it was inferior numerically compared to other emerging Hasidic communities, was extremely loyal and deeply connected to him. On the other hand, no one had stronger dynastic credentials. He was the direct descendant of the founder of Hasidism, the Besht, both on his mother's and his father's side.

The Hasidic doctrine of the Zaddik is based on the belief in a mystical spiritual bond that unites the soul of the Zaddik and the souls of his adherents on two levels, the spiritual and the physical. The Zaddik guarantees the spiritual welfare of the Hasidim, lifting their prayers to the divine world and assuming responsibility for the divine acceptance of their repentance in case they have sinned. A typical element in this concept is the belief that a Hasid's sin appears as an evil thought in the mind of the Zaddik, who lifts it to its sacred origin and transforms it into goodness, thereby acquiring the acceptance of the Hasid's repentance. The mystical bond with the Zaddik assures the Hasidim everlasting life in heaven after they depart from this world. The Hasidim are required to have complete faith in the Zaddik and direct their religious endeavors toward him, thus enabling him to serve as the focus of the spiritual force of the whole community and to use this force to achieve their common religious aims. The Zaddik, in turn, is responsible for supplying his adherents with *banei, hayei, mezonei*—a legal formula meaning “sons, health, and livelihood.” This puts the Zaddik in the center of a Hasid's life, having the last word on his choice of a bride and a profession. The need for frequent contact with the Zaddik causes the geographic concentration of the community around his court. Some of the adherents actually live there, and others visit several times a year, to be inspired by the Zaddik and to receive his instructions. Furthermore, the Hasidim are responsible for the physical welfare of the Zaddik and his family, providing by their donations for all his earthly needs.

Some of the main components of this doctrine have been derived from the messianic teaching of Nathan of Gaza, the prophet of Shabbetai Tzevi. According to Nathan, the Messiah can achieve the correction of all evil in the world and bring forth the redemption both by his own power, being the incarnation of the sixth *sefirah*, and especially by the power of the faith of all the people of Israel in him. He serves as the focus of this power and directs it to the struggle against the forces of evil. The Hasidic thinkers have broken down the universal doctrine of Nathan of Gaza and endowed the Zaddik with similar powers for a limited time and a limited community. The Zaddik is a messiah, but only for his adherents who believe in him, and only for his own lifetime. Afterwards his endeavors will be continued by his son. Each Zaddik

can be conceived, therefore, as a sliver of the Messiah, a minute redeemer for his community.

Many of Rabbi Nahman's homilies, collected in the two volumes of his *Liqqutei moharan*, develop and express the concept of the Zaddik as the spiritual savior of his own community, the people faithful to him. Others, however, develop a novel idea in Hasidism: there is a true Zaddik (*tsaddiq ha'emet*) who is responsible for the whole people of Israel, the whole universe, and it is his role to be the redeemer of all and everything. This concept is almost indistinguishable from Nathan of Gaza's doctrine of the Messiah. This explains why Rabbi Nahman's disciples did not, and could not, nominate another Zaddik to replace him when he died. They believed Rabbi Nahman was not just their own Zaddik, bound by the limitations of time and place, but also the eternal, ultimate redeemer of all the people and of the universe as a whole. The absence of an heir to Rabbi Nahman was understood as the proof of his messianic role. If he were just a Zaddik, there must be a dynasty that will continue his responsibility to his particular community. They have remained loyal to their faith for 190 years so far, despite the persecutions and ridicule that they suffered, and they are still going strong. This is the reason why Bratslav Hasidism has always been open to all Jews, while most other Hasidic communities are almost completely closed, adhering mainly to families of a certain geographic area. Rabbi Nahman was the redeemer of all Israel.¹⁷

It is my suggestion that this is the background that enables us to understand the image of the True Man of Kindness presented in the third day of the wedding of the two children in Rabbi Nahman's last narrative. This story, like all the others, is motivated by a strong messianic drive. Hasidic messianism (and Rabbi Nahman's) has two aspects. The first is a modest, limited one, described by the Hasidic doctrine of the Zaddik and supplying the Hasidim with individual redemption for their souls and a minimal guarantee of sons, good health, and livelihood in this world. The other—the one first formulated by Rabbi Nahman—is a return to the concept of a universal savior, the ultimate Messiah.¹⁸ This duality is reflected

¹⁷ This is expressed today by the openness of Bratslav Hasidism to bohemians, artists, and individualists who are not accepted by other segments of ultra-Orthodox Judaism. Because of this, leaders of the Israeli Sefardi ultra-Orthodox (especially the rabbis and leaders of the Shas party) make the pilgrimage to Rabbi Nahman's tomb in the Ukraine. It is unthinkable that a Sefardi rabbi will go to the grave of any other Hasidic Zaddik.

¹⁸ I described these two aspects and analyzed their interrelationship in the study "The Two Meanings of Hasidic Messianism," in Jodi Magness and Seymour Gitin, eds., *Hesed Ve-Emet: Studies in Honor of Ernest S. Frerichs* (Atlanta: Scholars Press,

in Rabbi Nahman's narratives as well as in his homiletical-theological writings. Some of them describe everyday redemption, while others emphasize the final transformation of the world.


There can be little doubt that the final sections of the story of "The Seven Beggars" concern the ultimate messianic redemption. There can also be little doubt that the first segments of the story deal with the processes of creation, the catastrophes in the early history of the divine world, and the nature of the supreme *sefirot* that are not directly affected by worldly events. The story of the third beggar is placed between these two parts. It can be conceived as a moment of balance between creation and redemption, a state of equilibrium or stasis that separates the two great myths of the beginning and the end. The Man of True Kindness and the third beggar who supplies him with deeds of kindness performed in the world every day are together the expression of the ordinary Hasidic doctrine of the Zaddik. The divine fourth *sefirah*, *hesed*, connected with the sixth, *tiferet*, supply the universe with the spiritual power to exist another day, thus creating time. The person who collects the deeds of kindness gives the divine powers the spiritual sustenance they need in order to fulfill their role. This corresponds to the daily responsibilities of the Zaddik, who lifts up the prayers and good deeds of his community to the divine world, thus sustaining it and at the same time receiving the divine flow that enables the community to exist another day. This state is dangerous and the balance precarious. It is threatened by the burning sun (probably representing the harshness of divine justice, the fifth *sefirah*, *gevurah*) and by the unstable state of the whole process. In the segments of the narrative that follow, the emphasis is shifted to ultimate redemption.

The great scholar of Bratslav Hasidism, Joseph Weiss, suggested that Rabbi Nahman's stories should be viewed as the author's spiritual biography, which he identified with the Lurianic myth of the history of the universe and the myth of the Messiah as formulated by Nathan of Gaza.¹⁹ I believe that this is the correct way to read and understand Rabbi Nahman's teachings in all literary genres. Yet between the two great myths there is an interim period—all of what we call history—in which the Zaddik, assisted by his adherents, supplies the world with one day at a time, sustaining the divine world by the good deeds of

1998), 391–408. See also J. Dan, *Modern Jewish Messianism*, 150–77; and J. Dan, *Apocalypse Then and Now* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2000), 247–64.

¹⁹ Joseph Weiss, "Iyyunim bitfisato ha'atsmit shel Rabbi Nahman," *Tarbiz* 27 (1958): 358–71. See also his collection of articles published after his untimely death: M. Piekarz, ed., *Mehqarim behasidut Bratslav* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1974).

human beings and causing the divine flow that gives existence to the universe. This epoch of stasis, which the normative Hasidic doctrine of the Zaddik regarded as everlasting, is too frail, according to Rabbi Nahman, and is replaced by the unfolding messianic drama that has not yet reached its end in the unfinished story and the untimely death of Rabbi Nahman. The author is the hero of the three stages of existence: he was present in the beginning and suffered the primeval catastrophes that befell the divine world, he is destined to bring the messianic process to its successful end, and between the beginning and the end he stutters along each morning creating another day.



◆

PARALLEL WORLDS:
WISSENSCHAFT AND PESAQ IN THE SERIDEI ESH

David Ellenson¹

In his remarkably insightful memoir-essay, "Confluent Myths," Arnold Band wrote what he has described as an element of his "intellectual biography."² He observed that as a Boston-area Jewish child of the 1930s and 1940s he was involved in "two educational systems," that of the public elementary school and Boston Latin School for Boys as well as Harvard University on the one hand and the Boston Hebrew College on the other. Each of these universes had their own "elitist myths." The former promoted a Jeffersonian ideal of the individual as paramount and contended that it was the duty of the state to provide a pathway that would allow these Jewish children of immigrant parents to realize their own ambitions and aspirations. The latter emphasized "the primacy of the group over the individual" and promoted the more collectivist hope for "Jewish national cultural revival" as expressed in an attachment to Hebrew language and a vaguely defined Zionism. One world was gentile and Christian. The other was fiercely Jewish.³ These worlds, and the myths they each embodied, were, as Band has described them, "confluent and fused in the imagination of each person."⁴ Little time was devoted to an analysis into what these two disparate myths actually implied. Nor was the cognitive distance between them explored.

¹ I would like to express my thanks to Lewis Barth of HUC-JIR-LA, Marc Bregman of HUC-JIR-Jerusalem, Daniel Schwartz of Hebrew University, Marc Shapiro of the University of Scranton, and Rabbi Ross Singer of Vancouver, British Columbia, for their comments and assistance on sections of this paper.

² Arnold J. Band, "Confluent Myths," in Haim Marantz, ed., *Judaism and Education: Essays in Honor of Walter I. Ackerman* (Beer-Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 1998), 1–19.

³ *Ibid.* While this paragraph draws freely from the entire essay, see especially pp. 4–6 and 16–19 for the primary expression of the themes herein summarized.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

Arnold Band, in this autobiographical vignette, has demonstrated his awareness of the modern condition and the manner in which it has enveloped contemporary persons in the Occident—Jews especially. Peter Berger has given precise expression to what this means in sociological terms. Berger, in his influential work, *The Heretical Imperative*, has pointed out that *haireisis*, understood as option or choice, has become the defining characteristic of the modern Occident. Persons are no longer born and socialized into a single community as if by fate. Rather, identity becomes a matter of negotiation for each person. Each individual must choose among competing modes and models of values and culture as he or she undertakes the arduous task of constructing a life that is ordered and coherent in the context of a pluralistic and divided world.⁵ As the anthropologist Mary Douglas has observed, “for the Bushman, Dinka, and many primitive cultures, the field of symbolic action is one.” In contrast, modern persons in the West are quite conscious that they “operate in many different fields of symbolic action.”⁶

In the modern setting, identity cannot be constructed in isolation from a distant “other.” Band, as the Boston boyhood he has described indicates, instinctively understood this. His autobiographical fragment testifies to his realization that social, religious, and cultural identity is not simply an established fact. Identity is produced and reproduced within a matrix of complex social, cultural, political, religious, and economic traditions and realities. Identity is embedded in the many circles that constitute and inform a life, and these circles, rather than being fully harmonious, often promote a dissonance that must be overcome if synthesis is to be achieved, or perhaps ignored if comfort is to be felt by the individual.

This means, as W. E. B. Du Bois once phrased it, that modern people are marked by what he labeled a “double consciousness.” This phrase refers to the sense modern persons—particularly persons who are members of minority cultural, religious, and racial groups—possess of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”⁷ The “self” is realized and established in confrontation with “other inhabitants”—persons and cultural systems—of a world that is both broad and diverse.

While Band adumbrated this position in his “Confluent Myths,” he had already pointed to the tensions such “double consciousness”

⁵ Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1979).

⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 68–69.

⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks in Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 215, 218.

frequently produced three decades before. In his 1966 article, "Jewish Studies in American Liberal-Arts Colleges and Universities," Band devoted parts of the essay to the stress that living in multiple cultural worlds could produce for university scholars in the field of Jewish studies. He indicated that for over a century—since the rise of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in nineteenth-century Germany—academicians in the field had been trained to study and explicate Judaism "as a historical phenomenon." Such an approach stood in direct contrast to one that many had imbibed in their childhood study of Judaism, an approach that had taught them, as Band has phrased it, that Judaism was "a truth to be propagated."⁸ Those Jewish scholars who came within the ambit of the university were instructed to substitute "scientific study, based on the principle of historical evolution, for tradition as the foundation for Judaism." This substitution, as Band has observed, "exacted a high price for those Jews who sought it, and often ended in the loss of specific cultural identity." In other cases, it simply released "tensions" that remained either unexamined or "unresolved."⁹

These two articles, taken in tandem, indicate that Band has done more than present the cultural dilemmas that the present-day Occident has posed to all committed Jews. He has also focused on the specific challenges confronting Jewish academicians devoted to the study of Judaism as they engage in the arduous and complex task of constructing their own identity as modern Jews while remaining faithful to their vocation as critical scholars.

For Orthodox Jews who have entered the academy, the challenges involved in these tasks have been experienced with a special intensity. Among these Jews, no one has confronted the challenge of straddling two worlds more directly than Eastern European-born, yeshivah-educated Rabbi Yehiel Jakob Weinberg (1884-1966). As the famed author of a responsa collection entitled *Seridei esh* published after the Holocaust, Rabbi Weinberg attained a reputation as a preeminent twentieth-century Jewish jurist.¹⁰ The last head of the Berlin Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary before its destruction by the Nazis, Weinberg survived the Holocaust and lived the last two decades of his life in Montreux, Switzerland. Educated

⁸ Arnold J. Band, "Jewish Studies in American Liberal-Arts Colleges and Universities," *American Jewish Year Book* 67 (1966): 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ The biographical details that follow regarding Rabbi Weinberg are taken from Marc B. Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg 1884-1966* (London: Littmann Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999).

originally in the rabbinical academies of Lithuania, Weinberg was also trained in the canons of the academy at a modern German university. Throughout his life, he remained absolutely committed to an Orthodox Judaism that proclaimed the authority and truth of the tradition. This he learned from his childhood and during his adolescent years as a student in Slobodka at the Keneset Yisrael yeshivah headed by Rabbi Nathan Zvi Finkel (1847–1927), where he was deeply steeped in a broad variety of classical rabbinic texts.

In 1914, after having served as rabbi of the Lithuanian town of Pilwishki for over seven years, Weinberg journeyed to Berlin for medical treatment. While the outbreak of World War I initially prevented his return to Russia, Weinberg apparently found the intellectual and cultural life of the German capital to his liking, and he elected to stay there even when the opportunity to return to Pilwishki presented itself in 1916. As his biographer Marc Shapiro has phrased it, “Despite all his nostalgia for the east, he was now under the spell of the west.”¹¹

Indeed, several years later, Weinberg, like a number of other Eastern European Jews who had received traditional training in Talmud,¹² chose to expose himself to the rigors of modern academic study. In 1920, after a semester at the University of Berlin, he moved to Giessen, where he enrolled at the university under the tutelage of “the great Semitic and masoretic scholar Paul Kahle (1875–1965), a pious Christian and a vigilant defender of Jewish literature against anti-Semitic attacks.”¹³ There R. Weinberg also studied Old Testament with Professor Hans Schmidt and philosophy under Ernst von Astor. During the summer of 1923, he completed his examinations for his doctorate and wrote a dissertation on the Peshitta, the Syriac translation of the Bible. In addition, R. Weinberg also taught courses at Giessen on a variety of subjects—Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud—for both beginning and advanced university students. His feet were now firmly planted in the soil of two worlds, the traditional realm of the Lithuanian yeshivah and the Western universe of modern academic discourse. The modern university and the traditional yeshivah were now both parts of his patrimony. How he was to calibrate an allegiance to each of them was to be a major focus of his life.

Weinberg, as a person forged in the crucible of these two disparate worlds, addressed a matter where these two worlds met in his *Seridei esh* 2:92. In responding to the question as to whether Jewish law permitted a

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹² For a description of this phenomenon, see Hillel Goldberg, *Between Berlin and Slobodka: Jewish Transition Figures from Eastern Europe* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1989).

¹³ Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy*, 65.

Jew to lecture on the topic of Jewish law (*mishpat ivri*) in a secular university, Weinberg demonstrated how he had internalized the sometimes discordant values of each. He indicated, at the very outset of his responsum, that at the beginning of his academic career at Giessen, he had to confront this problem. He was well aware that the halakhic tradition clearly contained texts that forbade Jews to teach Torah to non-Jews. Indeed, two major talmudic warrants for this negative posture are commonly adduced. One is found in Ḥagigah 13a, where the Talmud states, "R. Ammi further said, 'The teachings of Torah are not to be transmitted to an idolater,' for it is said, 'He has not dealt so with any nation. And, as for His ordinances, they have not known them' (Psalms 147:20)." Sanhedrin 59a constitutes a second *locus classicus* for this prohibition. There the Talmud asserts, "R. Johanan said, 'A heathen who studies the Torah deserves death,' for it is written, 'Moses commanded us a law for an inheritance' (Deuteronomy 33:4). It is our inheritance, not theirs."

Weinberg, aware of these proscriptions, had to resolve for himself the question as to whether Jewish law provided an alternative path whereby these prohibitions could be circumvented or muted. Otherwise, as a pious Jew committed above all to Jewish law and its strictures, his participation in the enterprise of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* would have been severely constricted. Indeed, if these rulings remained uncontested, it would have been impossible for him to offer lectures on the topic of Jewish law before what must have been a predominantly gentile audience in a secular university. Therefore, in the responsum under consideration in this paper, Weinberg states that when he initially addressed this issue in 1923, he arrived at the unpublished conclusion, as Shapiro has pointed out, "that teaching gentiles Torah solely for academic purposes is not proscribed."¹⁴

Weinberg further noted in the responsum before us that he affirmed this stance in an actual written responsum. For, in *Seridei esh* 2:92, he adds that he wrote an additional responsum on this subject "several years earlier," at a time when Rabbi Teitz, a highly prominent Orthodox rabbi in Elizabeth, New Jersey, wrote an article on this matter in the rabbinic journal *Hapardes*.¹⁵ This second responsum, addressed to Rabbi Teitz, is not contained in the four volumes of *Seridei esh*. However, it does appear in

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁵ The Teitz responsum dealt specifically with the issue of radio broadcasts. Rabbi Teitz offered a regular lesson on Talmud over the radio air waves. As gentiles would presumably be among the listeners to these programs, the matter of the proscription against teaching Torah to gentiles arose.

his posthumously published collected writings.¹⁶ There, the first *published* responsum on this topic that Weinberg cites is dated as having been composed in 5714 (1953–1954). Thus, the Weinberg responsum under consideration in this essay must have been written several years after 1955 during the last decade of his life.

In this responsum, Rabbi Weinberg—on the basis of a host of classical rabbinic sources ranging from the Talmud and Maimonides to a number of modern rabbinical authorities—explained why the teaching of Jewish studies to gentiles for academic purposes was not forbidden. Space limitations do not permit an extended analysis of this rather lengthy opinion in this essay.¹⁷ Instead, this paper will highlight a single section of the responsum, one that touches upon the attitudes Weinberg displayed in this responsum toward the domain of *pesaq* (Jewish legal ruling) as well as the realm of *Wissenschaft* (academic study). This element in the text demonstrates how completely Weinberg had internalized both these areas within his own person. At the same time, these lines indicate how disparate the ethos that informs these worlds can be, and they reflect how difficult it may be to attain a complete synthesis between Jewish tradition and Western culture. As such, the text not only sheds light upon a specific challenge that confronted Rabbi Weinberg. It points to the larger dilemma posed to all committed modern Jews as they struggle with the task of constructing a meaningful and authentic Jewish identity within the parameters of pluralistic and at times discordant cultural words. The reflections Band has offered in his articles on this topic as well as the seminal role he has played in fostering the growth of Jewish studies in this country and throughout the world therefore make this responsum a particularly apposite text to analyze in his honor.

WISSENSCHAFT AND PESAQ—A SIGNIFICANT DIGRESSION

In the course of his discussion in this responsum, Weinberg provided an aside that directly addresses the issues raised at the outset of the essay by Band, for it displays the two diverse worlds of Jewish legal tradition and modern critical scholarship that Weinberg inhabited. In this section

¹⁶ Marc B. Shapiro, *Collected Writings of Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg* [Hebrew] (Scranton: University of Scranton, 1998), 1:26–30. Here Weinberg indicates that the Teitz article on this matter appeared in *Hapardes* 14 (5714). In addition, it should be noted that Weinberg, *Seridei esh* 2:90, wrote yet another responsum that touches upon this question. However, he does not allude to that ruling in 2:92.

¹⁷ Such a discussion remains an academic *desideratum*, and in a future essay I intend to present an analysis of the total Weinberg corpus on this matter.

of his responsum, Rabbi Weinberg directly commented on the passage contained in Sanhedrin 59a that forbade non-Jews from either observing the Sabbath or engaging in the study of Torah. It was on the basis of this passage that Maimonides and other medieval rabbinic authorities had issued their proscriptions that banned gentiles from such activities. However, as Weinberg here pointed out, the actual meaning of this Sanhedrin text in its original context had been informed and illuminated by modern critical scholarship on the topic. Indeed, this scholarship was unavailable to premodern Jewish jurists like Maimonides. These authorities had interpreted the meaning of the Sanhedrin text upon which they had based their rulings in the absence of such knowledge. Had this knowledge been available, it may well have altogether altered the content of the law as it had been codified and applied in numerous holdings by countless rabbis.

Furthermore, Weinberg not only made reference to this scholarship. He also reflected, as will be shown, on the legal weight such scholarship should be assigned in Jewish jurisprudence. The passage in Weinberg reads as follows:

ולא אמנע מלהודיע לכת"ר מה שמצאתי לפני שלושים שנה ויותר בספר אחד, בשם חכם אחד, כי המאמרים בסנהדרין על עכו"ם ששבת ועל העוסק בתורה, נאמרו נגד כת הנוצרים הראשונים, שפרקו מעליהם ברית מילה אבל קיימו את השבת וגם עסקו בתורה והיו מזדווגין לבני"ש בשבת ומועד ושמעו כל דבריהם ואח"כ הלכו והלשינו עליהם בפני הרשות. והביא ראיה ממה שנאמר בדברים רבה פ"א, י"ח: „ואמר ריב"ח, גוי ששמר את השבת עד שלא קבל עליו את המילה חייב מיתה. למה? שלא נצטווה עליה“. אולם הרמב"ם ושאר הראשונים הבינו את הדברים כפשוטם, שהדברים נאמרו לכל גוי, ואין לנו רשות לזוז מדברי הראשונים על פי השערות מחוכמות.

And I will not hesitate to inform you what I found more than thirty years ago in a book written by a certain scholar [*hakham ehad*]. He stated that the passages found in Sanhedrin concerning a gentile who observed the Sabbath and who engaged in Torah study were directed against the sect of earliest Christians who released themselves from the obligation of *brit milah*, but observed the Sabbath and also engaged in Torah study. They would join with the people Israel on the Sabbath and on holidays, and listen to their words. Afterwards, they would go and slander the Jews before the gentile authority. And he brought forth proof for this from what was said in Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:18, "And R. Yosi ben Hanina said, 'A gentile who observes the Sabbath, but does not accept the obligation of *milah* upon himself, deserves death. Why? For he was not commanded concerning it.'" Despite this,

Maimonides and other *rishonim* understood the words according to their plain meaning, and believed that they applied to every gentile. And we have no right to change the rulings of the *rishonim*, even on the basis of reasoned assumptions.

Throughout his responsum, Weinberg, as is the wont of every respondent, was most careful to name every authority he mentioned. Of course, each of the authorities he cited was one whose views were sanctioned by venerable rabbinic precedent. Each stood as a recognized link in the *shalsholet haqabbalah*, the chain of Jewish legal tradition revered by Orthodox *posqim* for generations. By quoting these men, Weinberg indicated that he was mindful that there was a “rule of recognition” that demanded he cite each authority by name. Indeed, such citation served to legitimate his decision on this matter. As a rabbinical jurist, Weinberg saw himself above all as firmly ensconced within this Jewish legal tradition. For the decision he would render in this responsum to be an authoritative one, Weinberg was required to justify it explicitly through the precedents provided by later rabbinic tradition. Though trained in modern critical scholarship, he was, in this text, writing as a rabbi, not an academic. The distinction is not insignificant.

As David Weiss Halivni has observed, “The roles of historian and jurist must be differentiated. The historian seeks to register and unravel the objective data of history by searching for the origins of society and culture.”¹⁸ This means that the historian seeks, through an investigation of pertinent sources, to determine what that data actually signified in its original temporal context. In contrast, the jurist operates within a framework where facts are “harnessed and manipulated” in light of an ongoing process of legal hermeneutics.¹⁹ The meaning of the data is not necessarily established by recourse to what the data may actually have meant in the original setting. Rather, the meaning is determined by the way that subsequent literature in the legal tradition has defined it. Indeed, the well-known Jewish legal principle, “*hilkhata kevatra’ei*—the law follows the latest authorities,” captures the point that Halivni is here making. Consequently, he concludes, “A jurist must work from within the parameters of a tradition of precedents and a system of regulations.”²⁰ Indeed, this “requirement of adhering to systemic rules of authority and hierarchy ... constitute restraints”

¹⁸ David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 99.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

upon the jurist.²¹ What is decisive for the historian may be of no consequence to the jurist.

To be sure, Weinberg did see himself as part of the academic world. As Shapiro puts it, "Weinberg was never totally removed from modern Jewish scholarship, and it was important to him that his views should find favour in the academic community."²² Indeed, he even co-authored an article in the academically acclaimed *Hebrew Union College Annual*, an extraordinary act for a man of his background and position.²³ The quest of the critical scholar was thus hardly alien to him, and he frequently maintained that when textual variants could uncover the true meaning of a rabbinic text, they had to be discussed. Indeed, on more than one occasion he engaged in textual emendations of classical texts on the basis of such sources.²⁴

However, his willingness to "grant legitimacy" to such academic explanations in the realm of Jewish law was severely circumscribed. Indeed, it was indulged only so "long as practical halakhah was not thereby affected."²⁵ In his responsa, Weinberg functioned not as an academician, but as a *poseq*. As such, he was compelled to pay attention, as Shapiro phrases it, to "well-established principles which must not be abandoned." Foremost among them is the notion "that it is forbidden to issue halakhic rulings which have no sound basis in earlier rabbinic authorities."²⁶

As stated above, Weinberg was consistent in attempting to acknowledge every legitimate legal authority cited in his responsa. His failure to do so in this instance of the "*hakham ehad*" leads to the inevitable conclusion, as Shapiro has put it, that "Weinberg is here referring to an academic scholar,"²⁷ not an established Jewish legal authority. Otherwise, Weinberg would have identified him. In light of the canons established by Orthodox Jewish jurisprudence for arriving at *pesaq*, the academic scholarship of this *hakham*, while interesting, could be assigned no legal importance. This scholar and his work, however respected, were not part

²¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

²² Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy*, 201.

²³ See his monograph, "The Mishna Text in Babylonia: Fragments from the Geniza," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 10 (1935): 185–222, which he co-authored with his teacher Kahle.

²⁴ Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Orthodoxy*, 193ff.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁷ Personal communication from Shapiro to the author on January 6, 2000.

of the *shalsholet haqabbalah*, the legitimate chain of Jewish legal tradition mentioned above.

While the identity of the *hakham* cited in *Seridei esh* 2:92 remains something of a mystery, it appears that it might be Louis Ginzberg (1873–1953), for significant elements of the scholarship quoted by Weinberg are found in his work. Ginzberg served for decades as professor of Talmud at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and was arguably the world's foremost academic scholar of rabbinic literature during his lifetime. His work was routinely consulted by academics in this area, and Weinberg was quite familiar with the corpus of his scholarship. Indeed, in another responsum published in *Seridei esh* 3:49, Weinberg referred to Ginzberg not only by name, but with the honorific, "Rabbi L. Ginzberg of blessed memory." In that responsum, Weinberg indicated that research Ginzberg had conducted on the Cairo Genizah clarified a problem in Jewish law concerning the ritual of *halitsah*.²⁸ Weinberg was delighted because Ginzberg had published a previously unknown responsum contained in the genizah that a medieval Babylonian rabbinical authority had issued on the matter. Weinberg wrote of this research,

I rejoiced in it in the way that one would if one discovered a great treasure. For this research confirms the explanation of the *Noda beYehudah* on the matter. Indeed, the *Noda beYehudah* had the merit of taking a stance on this matter that comported to the position advanced by the earlier Babylonian authority. *And their words are words of Tradition (qabbalah)*.²⁹

The *Noda beYehudah*, Rabbi Ezekiel Landau (1713–1793) of Prague, has long been recognized as one of the preeminent jurists in Jewish legal history. Ginzberg's research in this instance had uncovered a traditional text written by an earlier authority in the chain of Jewish case law that confirmed the stance Rabbi Landau had put forth on the issue. Weinberg

²⁸ When a woman's husband dies without male offspring, Jewish law requires the woman to marry her husband's brother in the hope that this union will produce a surrogate son and heir to the dead brother so that the dead brother's name "may not be blotted out in Israel" (Deuteronomy 25:6). Should the living brother reject his deceased brother's widow and opt not to fulfill his levirate duty, he is able to do so through the ritual of *halitsah*, "unshoeing," whereby he releases the levirate widow from her automatic marital tie to him. His sister-in-law is then to remarry or not at will.

²⁹ See *Seridei esh* 3:49. Take special note there of p. 179. The emphasis here is mine. Also, see the comments of Shapiro on Weinberg and Ginzberg, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy*, 205.

did not hesitate to cite Ginzberg in this instance. In fact, Weinberg was obviously pleased to cite the scholarship Ginzberg had authored, despite his association with a non-Orthodox seminary. It would appear he did so here for two reasons. In the first place, Ginzberg had not offered any type of historical commentary or theory on the medieval responsum that he printed. Instead, his research in this case had simply disseminated to a wider audience a traditional legal text hidden away for centuries in the attic of a Cairo synagogue. Secondly, the content of that responsum supported the position a great *poseq* had advanced on the matter two centuries prior to Weinberg. As such, the text published by Ginzberg not only presented the writing of a medieval Jewish authority but also reinforced a vital stream in the ongoing tradition of Jewish law. His scholarship, in this instance, therefore did not contradict the received legal tradition. On the contrary, it had a “sound basis in earlier rabbinic authority.” As such, Weinberg felt there was no constraint, despite Ginzberg’s institutional affiliation, against employing it.

In the case before Weinberg in *Seridei esh* 2:92, the issue was different. In the first place, it may be that the anonymous *hakham* was not Ginzberg, but another scholar. Indeed, I will indicate why this may be so below. Yet, there is the strong possibility that the scholar in question was in fact Ginzberg. After all, Weinberg, in the text before us, stated that he had read the scholarship of the anonymous *hakham* over three decades earlier. This is precisely the period when Ginzberg’s *Ginzei Schechter*—published in Hebrew in 1928 under the aegis of the Jewish Theological Seminary—had appeared.

In an essay there Ginzberg stated that the statements found in Sanhedrin 58b–59a proscribing gentiles from either observing the Sabbath or engaging in Torah study on pain of death were not aimed at all gentiles.³⁰ In fact, he claimed that the Sanhedrin texts had to be read in light of the wording found in Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:18, where a parallel and more complete version of the Sanhedrin passages was found. As Ginzberg wrote, “From this midrash we learn . . . that the Sages feared that those righteous gentiles (*hasidei umot ha’olam*) who had accepted the yoke of the Sabbath, but not the entire Torah, would be led to ‘heresy’ (*minut*), i.e., to the faith of the Christians (*le’emunat haNotsrim*). Therefore, the Sages protested their observing the Sabbath while they were yet uncircumcised.”³¹

³⁰ Louis Ginzberg, “The *Yelamdenu* Sermons in Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah” [Hebrew], in L. Ginzberg, ed., *Ginzei Schechter* (Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 5688/1928), 1:495–96. I would like to thank Marc Bregman for helping me locate this source.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 496.

The passages located in Sanhedrin 58b–59a are, as Ginzberg put it, “there abbreviated—*shesham ne’emar beqitsur*.”³² Instead of reading, “A gentile who observes the Sabbath deserves death,” the Sanhedrin 58b text should have added the phrase, as the Midrash did, “but does not accept the obligation of *milah* upon himself,” after “the Sabbath.” Similarly, in Sanhedrin 59a, the same wording should have been entered after “Torah study.” The proscriptions they contain did serve a boundary maintenance function—just as Weinberg had stated Maimonides maintained. However, the boundary they established did not include all non-Jews. Instead, they were specifically limited to the early Christians. Assuming that Ginzberg was correct, the implication would be that the rulings of Maimonides and other *rishonim* proscribing gentile study of Jewish texts were based on a noncontextual and therefore faulty understanding of the Sanhedrin passage!

Indeed, later academic scholarship on this passage in the Talmud supports Ginzberg’s insight. Lee Levine points out that there was a fierce rivalry that marked Jewish-Christian relations in Palestine at the time these texts were written. Each religion was anxious to make proselytes. As a result, writes Levine, “This competition for converts created antagonisms which were compounded by the exclusive claim of each side to legitimacy in religious matters.” Consequently, the text in Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:18, where Jose b. Hanina contends that a gentile who observes the Sabbath, but refuses circumcision, is deserving of death, must be understood as emerging from this crucible of Jewish-Christian competition.³³ Furthermore, Ephraim Urbach, in his magisterial study, *The Sages*, explains, “A gentile who studies the Torah is deserving of death,” in Sanhedrin 59a, as follows: “The exposition of the verse supports the assumption that the claim of the Christians, who sought to make the Torah their heritage, led to this sharp repudiation.”³⁴

To be sure, this does not prove conclusively that Ginzberg was the *hakham* Weinberg was quoting in his responsum. After all, Weinberg pointed out that this anonymous scholar had also claimed that those gentiles of this period who observed the Sabbath and engaged in Torah study “would go and slander the Jews before the gentile authority.” This contention is absent in Ginzberg. Hence, it may be that Weinberg had a scholar other than Ginzberg in mind. However, if this was so, then it appears obvious that this other scholar either relied upon Ginzberg for

³² *Ibid.*, 495.

³³ Lee Levine, *Caesarea under Roman Rule* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 82, 207.

³⁴ Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 550.

his insight or simply had arrived independently at an identical position. On the other hand, it may be that Weinberg, depending here upon his memory, accurately recalled Ginzberg's suggested emendations of the Sanhedrin passages but collapsed details he had derived from other sources into this citation. Indeed, standard scholarly sources of this era routinely maintained that passages such as those in Ḥagigah 13a and Sanhedrin 59b that proscribe teaching Torah to gentiles stemmed from the fear that these gentiles, including gentile Christians and semi-proselytes, would employ such knowledge "against the Jews" before public authorities.³⁵ Hence, it is entirely possible that Weinberg did indeed project these elements from his storehouse of knowledge onto the Ginzberg writing.

Whether the *hakham* in question is Ginzberg or another scholar, there is no doubt, as stated above, that Weinberg has here cited an academic-critical scholar, not a rabbinic authority. His failure to provide a precise identification of the work and its author indicates this. Of course, assuming it was a gentile scholar, his reluctance to supply the name and title of the work in a traditional responsum is readily comprehensible. The appearance of such humanistic scholarship by a gentile scholar in an Orthodox Jewish legal text would be virtually unthinkable in the traditional religious precincts Weinberg inhabited. Indeed, were it not that Weinberg cited Ginzberg elsewhere, I would add that it would be equally improbable for an academic-critical piece of historical scholarship by a famed scholar at a Conservative seminary to find a place in such a work as well.³⁶

However, as we have seen, Weinberg did refer to Ginzberg by name in *Seridei esh* 3:49 and even identified him by an honorific generally reserved only for Orthodox rabbis. In part, this reflects the rarefied status Ginzberg enjoyed in the realm of Jewish learning as well as the unusually broad scholarship that Weinberg commanded. Yet, there is a substantive distinction that must be drawn between the two types of scholarship mentioned in these two responsa, and this distinction may well account for the different treatment Weinberg displayed toward such scholarship in each of them. In the previous responsum, as mentioned above, the critical

³⁵ For example, see the 1907 *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v., "Gentile," and the bibliography contained there.

³⁶ In this regard, it should be noted that in *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy*, Shapiro writes, "Ginzberg also accepted some of the tenets of the Higher Biblical Criticism. . . . It is doubtful whether Weinberg was aware of this" (205). Indeed, had R. Weinberg been cognizant of this, it is interesting to speculate as to whether this would have led him to ignore Ginzberg and his scholarship altogether.

scholarship of Ginzberg simply provided a text written by a medieval rabbinic authority that had previously been unpublished. Furthermore, the text itself constituted a source for Jewish legal tradition and advanced a viewpoint that no less a personage than the *Noda beYehudah* had advocated. In the case of *Seridei esh* 3:49, the academic scholarship of Ginzberg informed and corroborated a stance sanctioned by venerable Jewish legal tradition.

In *Seridei esh* 2:92, the scholarship moves in another direction altogether. Here, a critical-historical point is made, and an academic hypothesis concerning context and meaning is put forth. In addition, the entire theory put forth in this instance runs completely counter to the legal tradition as codified by Maimonides and other early medieval legal authorities. There is simply no basis for this understanding in the legal sources of the Jewish tradition. As a result, whether the scholar cited by Weinberg is Ginzberg or another, the point made by the scholarship itself, from the viewpoint of a traditional Jewish jurist issuing a *pesaq*, would be problematic. It would be pertinent in a text such as the Weinberg responsum only if the type of scholarship it embodied was regarded as an independent legitimate source for determining the law. Otherwise, it could not be deemed admissible, as it had no basis in earlier rabbinic legal writings. Consequently, Weinberg's failure to provide the exact citation for this *hakham* indicates that Weinberg was not simply uncomfortable with identifying the author of this hypothesis because the author was either a gentile or a non-Orthodox Jew. Rather, his refusal to identify this author undoubtedly stems from his recognition as a Jewish jurist that such critical-historical scholarship, while intriguing, had no place in the realm of *pesaq*.

Of course, a different conclusion might be reached after analyzing all this data. It may be that Weinberg, in assessing this scholarship, regarded its argument as no more than highly plausible. Indeed, he asserted that this theory concerning the real meaning of the Sanhedrin passages only reflected a "reasoned assumption—*hasharah mehukamah*." It was hardly incontrovertible. Therefore, it may be that while Weinberg considered it probable that "Maimonides and other *rishonim*" did not correctly understand the texts upon which they established their rulings, he would not change those rulings on the basis of such conjecture alone—however likely. Such unconfirmed scholarship could not trump a millennium of Jewish law. As he wrote, "We have no right to change the rulings of the *rishonim*, even on the basis of reasoned assumptions." Thus, it may be that one could argue that his two worlds—the domain of the critical scholar and the realm of the Jewish jurist—were completely compatible. If the academic results put forth by the *hakham* had been absolutely certain, not just "a reasoned assumption," perhaps Weinberg would have

altered the holdings of earlier legitimate authorities. However, this position, while possible, is quite unlikely. For, as explained above, in the realm of Orthodox *pesaq*, historical-critical scholarship of the type manifest here is seldom, if ever, assigned any weight.

Moreover, the pronouncements that many of the major spokesmen of the Conservative Movement have put forth on the relationship that obtain between *pesaq* and historical-critical scholarship highlight the distinctiveness of the posture that marks the universe of Orthodox jurisprudence on this matter. Conservative Judaism has long been recognized as the ideological offspring of and heir to the Positive-Historical school of Judaism advanced by Zacharias Frankel (1801–1875), one of the foremost practitioners of *judische Wissenschaft* in the nineteenth century. Frankel actively engaged in critical scholarship and was comfortable with the notion that Jewish law had evolved organically in history. Indeed, Orthodox rabbis such as Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) of Frankfurt savagely attacked Frankel for these views.³⁷

Nevertheless, the Conservative Movement and its halakhic authorities insisted upon affirming the approach outlined by Frankel to the realm of Jewish law despite such Orthodox criticism. Indeed, the Jerusalem-based contemporary Israeli Conservative rabbinical authority David Golinkin, in a trenchant analysis of a major responsum issued by Ginzberg, has pointed out that the Ginzberg responsum pays great attention to history and bears “the indelible imprint of *Hokhmat Yisrael*.”³⁸ As a result, it is hardly surprising Golinkin himself has maintained that a major guideline that informs Conservative Movement jurisprudence is its inclusion of “critical-historical” scholarship as an integral element in the halakhic process. He asserts that there is a conscious attempt in the *pesaq halakhah* of Conservative Judaism to elicit testimony from experts in fields such as archaeology or history in legal matters where such academic expertise may be relevant to the holding that will emerge. Such critical scholarship, for Rabbi Golinkin, is a *formal* part of the halakhic process

³⁷ For an understanding of Frankel’s approach to Jewish law, as well as the condemnation it elicited from Orthodox peers in Germany such as Hirsch and others, see David Ellenson, “Traditional Reactions to Modern Jewish Reform: The Paradigm of German Orthodoxy,” in Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, eds., *History of Jewish Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 749ff.

³⁸ See David Golinkin, “The Influence of Seminary Professors on Halakha in the Conservative Movement: 1902–1968,” in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997), 2:479. Golinkin provides a detailed discussion of Ginzberg as a *poseq* on pp. 461–67 of this article.

that must be employed in arriving at the determination of the law in instances where its findings are relevant.³⁹

Joel Roth, Professor of Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, echoes this view and gives full voice to this position in his influential work, *The Halakhic Process: A Systemic Analysis*. Roth writes:

The goal of the critical study of rabbinic texts is to discover the *peshat* of each statement, comment, and question in a passage, and then to establish the *peshat* of the entire passage. *If the end product of such an analysis results in an interpretation different from the interpretation of the passage offered by the classical commentators or from that codified by the codifiers, its legal status is the same as that of another interpretation or a variant reading, and carries with it all the options that we have seen new interpretations and variant readings provide a posek. . . . Sages in all ages have accepted reliable new data from any source if it permitted them to better understand the texts to which they devoted their lives.*⁴⁰

In staking out this position, Golinkin and Roth insist that this posture is fully consonant with the legal practices of rabbis from the talmudic era on into the Middle Ages. Indeed, Golinkin contends that preeminent modern halakhic exemplars such as the Vilna Gaon and his circle also employed such guidelines in reaching their own judgments concerning the law.⁴¹ And Roth, in an extensive discussion of extra-legal sources and their impact on Jewish legal rulings, demonstrates convincingly that sociological, economic, medical, scientific, ethical, and psychological findings and sensibilities have all, at times, brought about a reformulation of Jewish law on the part of recognized authorities. Jewish law, he states, has often employed such sources to meet the challenges of new problems.⁴²

Nevertheless, Roth himself, in discussing the import of history for the determination of Jewish law, admits that its results may well be “legally irrelevant.” Thus, his contention that “the end product” of such historical-critical analysis would possess “legal” significance if it arrived at a conclusion other than that offered by the classical codes and decisions of Jewish law must be qualified. Critical scholarship does not function in any formal sense as an independent variable that can direct the law. It does not

³⁹ David Golinkin, “Introduction,” *Responsa of the Va’ad Halacha of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel*, 3:1–2.

⁴⁰ Joel Roth, *The Halakhic Process: A Systemic Analysis* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1986), 373–74. Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Golinkin, “Introduction,” 2.

⁴² See Roth, *Halakhic Process*, 231–304.

necessarily, if ever, provide additional options for the *poseq* in arriving at a ruling. Thus, as Roth himself writes, "Only statements that are systematically acceptable as legal sources have a claim to normativeness. The validity of the arguments of any legal system is internal to that system, not external to it."⁴³ In making this last point, Roth replicates the observations made above by Halivni. His own analysis reveals that the realm of the jurist is frequently distinct from the domain of the historian. What is of central interest for the latter may be of no concern to the former.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The section of the Weinberg responsum that has been featured in this paper demonstrates the point that Weinberg the jurist dwelt in a realm distinct from that of Weinberg the modern academic scholar. His text indicates that one of the hallmarks of the Orthodox world in which he lived was the limitation it placed on the relevance of critical scholarship for the process of Jewish jurisprudence. To be sure, the mention of the unidentified *hakham* in the Weinberg text is more than intriguing, for the citation of such critical scholarship in this genre of Jewish jurisprudence is itself quite rare. It demonstrates that Weinberg is no ordinary respondent. He is clearly informed by the academic world of the modern university. At the same time, his failure to name the *hakham* remains striking, though in light of this discussion, quite understandable. It indicates his discomfort with this type of citation in a responsum, as well as his recognition that reference to critical scholarship of this type was assigned no valence in the realm of traditional Jewish jurisprudence that he inhabited.

If this is so, the issue that remains is one of explaining why Weinberg mentioned this scholarship at all in this genre of Jewish legal literature. While the question cannot be resolved with absolute certainty, Halivni does posit a theory that may provide insight into the matter. In his *Peshat and Derash*, Halivni contends that there is a "double-verity theory" that sometimes operates in the world of rabbinic Judaism. He writes, "To be sure, nowhere do the rabbis explicitly state, let alone, explicitly justify, the double-verity theory." Moreover, to say that there is such a theory "does not mean that it is unanimous, that every rabbi accepted it."⁴⁴ Yet, some rabbis have and do, and they assert that there is often more than one "truth" contained in a text. Furthermore, Jewish religious tradition sanctions the discovery of these multiple truths. As Halivni defines and explains:

⁴³ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁴ Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, 112.

[This double-verity theory] accredits critical textual scholarship both of the Bible and Talmud as a bona fide religious activity, the practitioner of which fulfills the commandment to study Torah (by critical study, I mean here interpreting an authoritative text in a manner different from the interpretation which is endorsed by an earlier authority or upon which a practical law is based). [However], its verity belongs to the realm of intellect, not to the realm of practice. To practice according to critical norms is strictly forbidden, but to study critically as a religious activity . . . is nevertheless a legitimate historical aspect of religious learning.⁴⁵

As Halivni has here put forth, Jewish legal tradition could view the Weinberg reference to critical scholarship in this responsum as perfectly in accord with the canons of Jewish jurisprudence. His description contends that at least one branch of traditional Jewish legal research would countenance such citation as an acceptable intellectual activity that can take place in Jewish legal discussions. However, this branch simply would not extend the license granted this research into the realm of *pesaq* itself. In the domain of intellectual speculation, such research is completely acceptable. From this standpoint, Weinberg, in pointing to the hypothesis of the *hakham*, did nothing to violate the norms of the traditional rabbinic world that had formed him. His act comported to the standards established by normative elements in this society. The intellectual arrangements that marked Weinberg and that permitted him simultaneously to be an active participant in the world of *juedische Wissenschaft* as well as the domain of classical Jewish legal decision making can thus be viewed as a reflection of the worldview Halivni has described. From this perspective, it would seem that the citation of critical scholarship by Weinberg in his *Seridei esh* 2:92 was completely normative. His act in this instance conformed to the canons and norms of traditional Jewish legal investigation as evidenced in one stream of Jewish law. This explanation is certainly plausible, and it may well explain the mind-set that marked Weinberg.

However, the writings of Band on the notion of confluent worlds provide another angle from which to view the entire matter. The two worlds that Weinberg inhabited—the realm of modern critical scholarship and the domain of Jewish law—may be more distinct than a “double-verity theory” would suggest, and the ethos that informs each of them may be in greater tension than a “double-verity theory” would imply. Indeed, Weinberg may well have been able to resolve this tension only by leaving it unexamined.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

In each of these worlds, as in all traditions, there are always modes of behavior and investigation that are designated as normative and appropriate. After all, there are directives that regulate the construction and flow of norms within the major institutional spheres of all traditions. These guidelines often specify with great precision the process whereby norms are legitimately determined. When individual persons conduct themselves in accord with a process established by a particular tradition, it constitutes an act of solidarity that confirms their membership in the group that has promulgated these standards.

In the case discussed in this paper, it was seen that Conservative *posqim*, as members of a denomination that ideologically embraces the ethos of modern critical-historical scholarship, were able to affirm the notion that such scholarship be assigned normative weight in arriving at a Jewish legal decision. For them, the ethos of the academy and the values of rabbinic tradition as they perceive them converge. Indeed, their self-conscious and stated acceptance of the position that the realm of modern historical scholarship has the right to inform and guide the rulings of Jewish law not only bespeaks their judgment that there is a lack of tension between these two worlds; it confirms their identity as Conservative Jews.

For Orthodox rabbis like Weinberg, the matter was different. The decision Rabbi Weinberg made to cite critical-historical scholarship in his responsum demonstrates that he was socialized into the world of modern academic research and that he was both familiar and comfortable with it. At the same time, his rejection of that scholarship as a source for the norms of his community reflects a distinct Orthodox understanding of what a traditional rabbinic order demands. The values and beliefs that governed the world of rabbinic traditionalism that had nurtured him as a child and that had shaped his identity as an adolescent and as a young adult asserted that there were specified rules that had to be followed for the determination of Jewish law. As Weinberg understood them, these rules did not permit insights derived from the fruits of modern historical research to enter into the arena of *pesaq* unless sanctioned by classical rabbinic precedent. Indeed, his resolve not to grant the information provided by the anonymous *hakham* a normative voice in the realm of *pesaq* can be regarded as a sign that his allegiance to the rules established by the rabbinic order that had first formed him was accorded primacy in his life. As such, his decision reflects his own self-perception as an Orthodox Jew and constitutes an important act of self-definition as an Orthodox decisor.

His life-situation caused Weinberg, like all moderns, to choose between various roles. It placed Weinberg in an ambiguous situation in which his identity as an Orthodox Jew was potentially endangered, for the scholarship of the university had the power to shatter the existing

social-cultural rabbinic order that bound him. By rejecting the normative claims the *hakham* could place upon him, Weinberg confirmed his own social location as part of the Orthodox world and his own status as an Orthodox *poseq*.

In looking at the Weinberg responsum from this perspective, it seems that Weinberg could no more completely avoid compartmentalization than a young Arnold Band could when he was growing up in the parallel worlds of Dorchester and Brookline on the one hand and Boston and Cambridge on the other. Band has permitted us to see that an Orthodox authority like Rabbi Weinberg was no more immune from wrestling with the struggle presented by diverse cultural settings than any other modern Jew.

The challenge of constructing an authentic Jewish identity within the modern situation does not arise only *in extremis*. The testimony offered by Band concerning his own boyhood as well as his reflections on the rise of Jewish studies within the American university indicate that the struggle involved in the creation of an integrated human personality often occurs within the confines of an orderly social life. For Band, as for Weinberg, meaning was sought and identity constructed in the face of multiple and at times discordant cultural worlds. In this instance, as in so many others, Band has provided a framework that allows a text to be explored in novel ways. In so doing, he alerts those whose lives he has informed to the diverse ways that human beings go about the task of constructing individual and social meanings. The tensions among the circles that constitute and inform a life can frequently find no clear resolution. Parallel worlds are at times confluent and fluid. At the same time, they are often discordant and no real equilibrium can be achieved between them.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ This perspective illuminates some of the dynamics at play in this part of the Weinberg responsum. For this understanding, as for so much else, I thank Arnold Band. His scholarship and his person enrich my world immeasurably. It is an honor to pay tribute to him in this way.



◆

A THIRD GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED? SIMON RAWIDOWICZ "ON INTERPRETATION"¹

David N. Myers

In a recent lecture, Arnold Band trained his critical gaze on the work of one of the twentieth century's great and neglected Jewish thinkers, Simon Rawidowicz (1897–1957). Band and Rawidowicz crossed paths in Boston at opposite ends of their respective careers, in the mid-1950s, when Band was finishing graduate school at Harvard before coming to UCLA and Rawidowicz was in his last years at Brandeis.

Some forty years later, Band reacquainted himself with Rawidowicz. The occasion was the thirty-fifth Simon Rawidowicz Memorial Lecture at Brandeis.² Band commenced his talk by noting, with a familiar blend of delight and mild indignation, that no previous lecturer had seen fit to discuss Rawidowicz. Anxious to rectify this neglect, he proceeded to identify Rawidowicz's prescience as a critic of the Zionist rendering of Jewish history. One also senses that he identified *with* Rawidowicz's criticism of Zionism, particularly its negation of the vitality and necessity of Diaspora Jewish culture. Indeed, both Band and Rawidowicz occupy the peculiar status of Diaspora Hebraists for whom culture, more than nation, state, or religion, has served as the most durable and enduring pillar of Jewish group identity. More will be said about these affinities at the conclusion.

For the moment, I would like to return to Band's reencounter with Rawidowicz, because it reveals a number of characteristic intellectual features. First, Band is a tireless excavator, intent on retrieving precious and forgotten textual gems. Quite apart from his study of luminaries such as Nachman of Bratslav, Kafka, or Agnon, Band has often rummaged

¹ Simon Rawidowicz, "On Interpretation," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 26 (1957): 83–126. This essay was reprinted in modified form in Simon Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974), 45–80. References throughout the paper are to this article.

² Arnold J. Band, "Simon Rawidowicz: An Early Critic of the Zionist Narrative," unpublished lecture delivered at Brandeis University.

through the genizah of the Jewish literary past, extracting lesser-known essays, stories, or poems that merit, in his excellent and idiosyncratic judgment, serious attention. This archaeological labor does not rest on a simple literal-minded reading of the text but probes the mystery of the text's reception or lack thereof. Thus we can understand Band's retrieval of Simon Rawidowicz, whose remarkable erudition and clairvoyance have remained sealed off from a wide reading public for a regrettable mix of linguistic and ideological reasons. Band seeks to understand not only Rawidowicz's piercing of the armor of Zionist triumphalism from the early 1930s but also his adumbration of contemporary post-Zionist currents. In the process, Band hints at the way in which the target of Rawidowicz's early critique—a Zionist master narrative—became the very blanket obscuring his subsequent ideas and notoriety. The result of this method is a sympathetic yet unsentimental reading, a compelling fusion of horizons in which text and reception blur into one.

Band's orchestration of this kind of reading should not suggest an inattention to contextual detail. For another notable quality of Band's is his stubborn belief that history matters in literature. Having come of age in the heyday of New Criticism and witnessed countless theoretical turns since, he is conversant with much of literary theory but genuflects before none of its minor deities. Indeed, orthodoxy of any sort is anathema to him. The one possible exception to his heterodoxy is his insistence that historical knowledge is an essential ingredient of literary interpretation. At home in many and diverse areas of Jewish history, as well as in the scholarly debates attending them, Band enriches his textual readings through frequent recourse to context and biography in a way that few other literary scholars can or choose to do.

Band's talents as historian are on display in his Brandeis lecture on Rawidowicz. There he excavates a number of Rawidowicz's Hebrew essays from 1930–1932, a period in which the peripatetic scholar was still in Berlin (before moving to England and, later, the U.S.). These essays lay out Rawidowicz's vision of a Hebrew cultural nationalism distinctly at odds with more renowned forms of Zionist expression—including Ahad Ha-Am's notion of a spiritual center in Palestine. Throughout his prolific career, Rawidowicz inveighed against the territorial monism of Zionism, arguing for a genuine *shutafut* (partnership) between equals, Diaspora and Zion.³ In seeking to redress the imbalance of what Band identifies as an

³ The centrality of this notion of partnership has been noted by a number of key commentators of Rawidowicz. See Benjamin Ravid, "The Life and Writings of Simon Rawidowicz," in Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 15; see also Michael A. Meyer's introduction to Simon Rawidowicz, *State of Israel, Diaspora*,

emerging Zionist narrative, Rawidowicz repeatedly affirmed the vibrancy of Diaspora Jewish culture. At the core of that culture—indeed its unending source of creativity—was the enterprise of *perush* or “interpretation.” For Rawidowicz, interpretation was not merely a method of reading. It was a way of life, and a central one in the textually grounded Jewish tradition.

True to his archaeological mission, Band locates an early articulation of this point in Rawidowicz’s 1931 essay, “Halakhah uma’aseh.” Here Rawidowicz anticipates later literary theorists by describing interpretation—in this case, of Jewish Scripture—as a creative enterprise in its own right. “Does not [talmudic] commentary,” he queried in 1931, “represent a creation in its own right, indeed one of the greatest creations of Israel’s spirit.”⁴ In subsequent writings, Band notes, “it becomes increasingly convincing . . . that ‘interpretation’ [for Rawidowicz] is the instrumentality of Jewish creativity in the Golah.”⁵ The *summa summarum* of this line of thought is an extraordinary English essay Rawidowicz wrote, but did not finish editing, before his death in 1957. Entitled “On Interpretation,” the essay offers a distillation of Rawidowicz’s wide learning covering the entire range of Jewish history and thought.⁶ More specifically, it presents a sharply contoured vision of Jewish history predicated on the intersecting circles of interpretive sophistication, Jewish cultural vitality, and Diaspora. In evocation of traditional Jewish commentary, and in recognition of Rawidowicz’s bold insights, I now turn to an interpretive reading of this seminal essay.



Explicatio and *commentatio* follow the “text” step by step, “uncover” and explain it from the aspect of its form and content, language, and historical background. *Interpretatio* is centered on the “soul” of the text, its leitmotif, its main purpose, its essence, its particular character. (86)

and *Jewish Continuity: Essays on the “Ever-Dying” People* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998), 6.

⁴ “Halakhah uma’aseh,” *Ha’olam* 46 (15 December 1931): 978. In the same location, Rawidowicz insisted that “every creation of the spirit is but an interpretation, an interpretation of life, of reality.”

⁵ Band, “Simon Rawidowicz,” 14.

⁶ Although he did not elaborate on this essay, Band did note in his Brandeis lecture that it contains “one of the most compelling descriptions of the nature of Jewish creativity . . . from Ezra to the modern period and, consequently, constitute[s] a powerful argument for Jewish Diasporan existence” (*ibid*, 4).

Shortly after opening his essay with reference to the centrality of the text in Jewish history, Simon Rawidowicz hastens to distinguish among gradations of textual commentary. Both *explicatio* and *commentatio* remain beholden to the text, seeking to render it faithfully, as it was understood in its original context. In contrast to this seamless literalism, *interpretatio* is a deliberate agitation of the text. Impelled by crisis, *interpretatio* gains force from a recurrent “tension between continuation and rebellion.” The interpreter, or *homo interpretis* in Rawidowicz’s parlance, is forever torn between “a deep attachment to the ‘text’ and . . . an ‘alienation’ from it” (85). This tension, however, proves to be animating, driving the *homo interpretis* to a deeper, often hidden, meaning—to the “mystery between the words and between the lines” (86). And yet, while penetrating the “soul” of the text, the interpreter creatively subverts the original. Armed with the dialectical tools of *interpretatio*, the skilled practitioner sets about “absorbing a ‘given’ world and reshaping it, giving it a new meaning and direction” (88).



The *Bayit Sheni* is not a commentary but an *interpretatio* of the highest order. *Bayit Sheni* is second only in time; it is first in essence, in its own particular essence. (91)

Rawidowicz’s conception of the *bayit sheni* or Second House⁷ bursts forth with revisionist force. In the first instance, Rawidowicz eschews scholarly convention by expanding the temporal parameters of the *bayit sheni*, from the time of the Babylonian Exile (586 B.C.E.) to the completion of the Babylonian Talmud (sixth century C.E.) (89). At the same time, Rawidowicz transports the term *bayit sheni* beyond the realm of chronology. Indeed, the *bayit sheni* does not signify for Rawidowicz merely a historical period; nor is it a function of geography (i.e., Palestine). Rather, it embodies a noble spirit of cultural creativity, born in and cultivated through the Diaspora.

⁷ Rawidowicz himself translated the Hebrew *bayit* as “house” rather than “temple.” This choice of a more generic English term may well reflect a subtle attempt to shift the focus of Israel’s creative energies from the religious to the cultural sphere. Rawidowicz’s translator stated that Rawidowicz chose the term *bayit* in order to leave “the distinction of the various levels of meaning to be assigned to this term to the reader.” See the translator’s comment in Rawidowicz, “Israel’s Two Beginnings: The First and the Second ‘Houses’,” in Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 83. See also Benjamin Ravid, “The Life and Writing of Simon Rawidowicz,” in Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 29.

As such, this notion of *bayit sheni* stands in contrast to *bayit rishon* (First House). In "On Interpretation," Rawidowicz continues a theme that he developed over many years of work leading up to the publication of his monumental philosophy of Jewish history, *Bavel vYrushalayim* (1957). The opening *sha'ar*, or section, of this work is entitled "Al parashat habatim," or "On the Matter of the Houses." My awkward English translation does not capture the thinly veiled polemic of this Hebrew title, which consciously targets Ahad Ha-Am's famous collected writings, *Al parashat haderakhim* (1913, 1921). Rawidowicz's vision of *Bavel vYrushalayim*—two centers of equal magnitude symbolized by Babylonia and Jerusalem—challenges Ahad Ha-Am's view of Palestine as the center of Jewish cultural vitality (whose rays radiate out to the Diaspora).

Likewise, Rawidowicz's discussion of an expansive conceptual (rather than temporal or spatial) *bayit sheni* subtly challenges another kind of Zionist claim—that the core of Jewish national identity is bound up with the political and military achievements of Israel in the time of the *bayit rishon*. Adumbrating George Steiner's oft-quoted aphorism that "the text is the homeland" of the Jews, Rawidowicz aims to place the cultural achievements of the *bayit sheni* on an equal plane with its predecessor.⁸ This move is reminiscent of the earlier essay, "Halakhah uma'aseh," from 1931; in both cases, Rawidowicz sought to unhinge the *bayit sheni*'s defining textual creation, the Oral Law, from its dependence on the Bible. In the later "On Interpretation," we read:

The Oral Law or the *Bayit Sheni* did not just add something of its own to the Written Law or the *Bayit Rishon*. It is not just a continuation or a development but a new act of weaving undertaken by master weavers of rare power. (91)⁹

At times, it seems as if Rawidowicz wanted more than parity between the two *batim*. In *Bavel vYrushalayim*, he spelled out in considerable detail the distinct features of the two: the first *bayit* represented an unrestrained mythic world ordered by sensory perception; the second

⁸ Steiner's 1985 essay, "Our Homeland, The Text," offers a far less schematic view of Jewish history than Rawidowicz. And yet, Steiner's emphasis on the centrality and moral authority of the text, born or at least nurtured in the Diaspora, echoes Rawidowicz's position. See George Steiner, "Our Homeland, The Text," reprinted in George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978–1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 304–27.

⁹ The image of a new interpretive weave can also be found in Rawidowicz, "Al parashat habatim," in Simon Rawidowicz, *Bavel vYrushalayim* (London and Waltham, Mass.: Ararat, 1957), 1:81.

signaled the shift in Israel from vision (*mareh*) to concept (*musag*).¹⁰ Rawidowicz elaborated on this revolution in "On Interpretation," leaving little doubt that he favored the interpretive sophistication of the Second House to the sensory literalism of the First (98–99).¹¹

There he also argued that the guiding ethos of the *bayit sheni* did not expire with the sealing of the Talmuds but was carried forward, even perfected, in the medieval philosophic tradition. The giants of that tradition, Sa'adya Gaon and Maimonides, perpetuated "the operation of conceptualization, of purging, of strengthening *ratio* against *mythos*, of 'translating' the vision of ancient Israel into clear concepts" (99). Indeed, in their hands, *interpretatio* was a weapon in an unending struggle against the currents of base literalism that survived the *bayit rishon*. Mindful of this important function, Maimonides continually endeavored to demonstrate that *interpretatio* was not a luxury, but a duty for the Jew (101). In doing so, he was waging a heroic battle in Rawidowicz's eyes, guiding the perplexed against the interpretive simpletons of the past, as well as against the dangerous literalists of the future.



On the eve of modern times there stands out one opponent of Maimonides to whom he was very much indebted, against whom he rebelled so vehemently, a "literalist" of a new kind, without the faith of the medieval anti-Maimonides literalists: Baruch Spinoza. (106–7)

In Rawidowicz's periodization, it was Baruch Spinoza who induced the rupture of modernity. This in itself was not such a radical judgment, but Rawidowicz's rationale was typically idiosyncratic. Unlike Yitzhak Baer (among others), he did not point to Spinoza's status as the first Jew to leave the confines of the Jewish community without converting.¹² Nor did he concur with Harry A. Wolfson, in whose sweeping scheme Spinoza marked the end of the long medieval attempt to reconcile Scripture and philosophy that began with Philo. Wolfson emphasized

¹⁰ Rawidowicz, *Bavel vYrushalayim*, 1:59.

¹¹ Elsewhere Rawidowicz writes with evident approval that the creators of the Oral Law "not only elevated it to the degree of the text, but were sometimes not afraid to hint at a kind of 'if not higher,' or 'if not more' for this, Israel's second beginning" (Rawidowicz, "On Interpretation," 97).

¹² In a well-known formulation, Baer observed that Spinoza "*ist der erste Jude, der sich von seiner Religion und seinem Volk lossagt, ohne einen formellen Religionswechsel zu vollziehen.*" Yitzhak Baer, *Galut* (Berlin: Schocken, 1936), 90.

Spinoza's efforts to *uproot* the scriptural element of this equation in "restor[ing] philosophy to the status in which it was prior to the Philonic revolution."¹³ By contrast, Rawidowicz focused on Spinoza's effort to *recover* Scripture from allegory or metaphysics via an unstinting biblical literalism. In his reading of the seventh chapter of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Rawidowicz observes that Spinoza strictly "forbids the attributing of any doctrine to the Bible which is not to be found in it *clarissime*" (107). In fact, Spinoza did insist in the *Treatise* on recovering the "literal meaning" of the text even if it be "repugnant to the natural light of reason."¹⁴ Moreover, he proclaimed a break with the tradition of medieval interpretation, and quite dramatically so, by directing his wrath at the figure of Maimonides. Maimonides exemplified for Spinoza the flawed interpretive procedure—and philosophical hubris—of the medievals. For in subordinating a literal rendering of the text to the demands of reason, Maimonides was merely affirming "preconceived opinions, twisting them about, and reversing or completely changing the literal sense, however plain it may be."¹⁵ Spinoza concluded that this interpretive mode was "harmful, useless, and absurd."¹⁶

But it was precisely Maimonides' hermeneutical daring in scriptural interpretation that excited Simon Rawidowicz. Maimonides' "metaphorical *interpretatio*" brimmed with the creative spirit and independence of mind essential to Israel's survival in the Diaspora (114). That it was thoroughly undermined by Spinoza's literalism posed a grave threat to the entire project of Diaspora Jewish creativity. In his own efforts to parry Spinoza's anti-Maimonidean thrust, Rawidowicz excoriated the Dutch philosopher, calling him "the first *peshat*-Jew of modern times" (110). This epithet reveals not only Rawidowicz's antipathy toward Spinoza but also a number of important tenets of his own intellectual worldview. First, Rawidowicz was unhesitant in favoring medieval *interpretatio* over modern *peshat* (or *explicatio*); the latter was but a revival of the worst forms of ancient literalism. Second, Rawidowicz regarded Spinoza's "*peshat*-method" as the work of a committed historicist, who attempted to read

¹³ See Isadore Twersky's introduction to H. A. Wolfson, *From Philo to Spinoza: Two Studies in Religious Philosophy* (New York: Behrman House, 1977), 36. Twersky observes that Wolfson saw Spinoza as "overthrowing the old Philonic principles which by his time had dominated the thought of European religious philosophy for some sixteen centuries" (11).

¹⁴ See Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), 102.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

the Scripture text *ex ipsius historia*, “as it was.”¹⁷ The allusion to Leopold von Ranke’s “*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*” was not intended to honor Spinoza. Rather, Rawidowicz took delight in recalling Droysen’s condemnation of Ranke as a “eunuch of objectivity,” suggesting that Spinoza merited the same designation (116).

Behind this insult lay Rawidowicz’s belief that historicism bore a decidedly morbid impulse. Two centuries before Moritz Steinschneider was alleged to have done so, Spinoza was already plotting, through his historicization of the Bible, to give Judaism a decent burial.¹⁸ Rawidowicz writes:

Since he does not want to see the Bible as a life-giving body for the future, he embalms it. The Bible is “saved,” and becomes petrified. The *Tractatus* seen in this light—the great attack on traditional *interpretatio*—is thus also the document of emancipation for Europe and Israel from the Bible, closes the gates for a return to the Bible, terminates the possibility of turning it into a foundation of a revival. (118)

Where *interpretatio* “bridges the gap between past and present,” *peshat* isolates, contextualizes, and ultimately freezes the past (116). The consequences of such ossification extended beyond interpretive practice. For it was but a short distance, Rawidowicz implied, from a fossilized text to a fossilized people. To his mind, Spinoza wove a tight bond between the two, claiming that the demise of the First Temple—the *Bayit Rishon*—spelled the end of Jewish interpretive and political vitality. In one of his starkest formulations, Rawidowicz concluded: “No *perush*—means here no continuation, no expansion. No continuation of the Bible—means no survival of post-biblical Israel.”



All subsequent discussion [after Spinoza] in Israel and about Israel, inside and outside Israel, by individual thinkers or by religious and political movements, is at its source a discussion concerning the theological

¹⁷ Spinoza did outline in the seventh chapter of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (101–3) a methodological protocol for the historical study of Scripture whose foundations were philological competence, close textual analysis, and (in the case of the prophetic books) attention to contextual and biographical detail.

¹⁸ In another renowned essay, “Israel: the Ever-Dying People,” Rawidowicz refers to Heinrich Heine, Leopold Zunz, and Steinschneider as “*Totengraeber* [gravediggers], last custodians and collators of a vast tradition which was dying out.” See Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 217.

and political meaning of Israel's past and future. Practically it is either acceptance or rejection of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. (122)

Spinoza's definitive break with *interpretatio* severed the continuous and life-giving thread of postbiblical Jewish life. Enabled by historicism's chilling dispassion, Spinoza opened up the way for an abandonment of the glorious legacy of Jewish interpretation. His own betrayal—for which Rawidowicz labeled him “the great irresponsible of modern times”—prompted the rapid attenuation of Jewish cultural identity in subsequent centuries (118). Periodically, heroic figures arose who drew from the well of Jewish interpretive genius. Foremost among them was Nachman Krochmal, whose *Moreh nevukhei hazeman* Rawidowicz edited and, more importantly, regarded as a fitting successor to Maimonides' work, a true guide for the perplexed of the time (124).

And yet, the drift commenced by Spinoza proved both powerful and alluring. Those swept up in its wake lost touch with the guiding spirit of Diaspora Jewish life, the animating tension that, Rawidowicz asserted at the outset of his essay, impels interpretation. At least two groups of moderns were adrift in this current: those who were no longer burdened by the once-pervasive struggle between “continuation and rebellion, tradition and innovation,” having thrown in their lot with the latter; and those who fashioned themselves continuators of a sort, but who sought to reconnect only with the ancient past at the expense of the postbiblical. For Rawidowicz, the Zionist infatuation with the *bayit rishon*—and concomitant rejection of Diaspora cultural creativity—was a clear manifestation of the second.

That infatuation preoccupied Rawidowicz throughout his career, from Berlin to Brandeis. Following the creation of the State of Israel, Rawidowicz identified the great existential question of the day in terms consistent with his overarching scheme: What would be the fate of the *bayit shelishi*, the third house of the present era? Accompanying this question were a series of related queries that Rawidowicz posed in *Bavel vYrushalayim* with passionate and at times bitter urgency:

Will the third house be the first or the second, or will it be a continuation of the first—or will it be neither? . . . If the voice of the boiling blood of the conquerors of Canaan, and the hand of the members of the second house, win the day—could it be that Israel of the third house would uproot from its heart the second house? . . . If the first house prove decisive in the third—what will become of the thousands of years of the second house and the succeeding exile? Will those two thousand years be regarded as a waste that need not be taken into account, as history that is not worthy of the name “history,” *per* the

great “wisdom” of the negators of exile, the young and old Hebrews and Canaanites?¹⁹

Clearly, for Rawidowicz, to relegate those millennia to the dustbin of history would be a national disaster, akin to a second destruction of the *bayit sheni*. *Bavel vYrushalayim* was a *cri de coeur*, Rawidowicz’s own guide to the perplexed in the monumental tradition of Maimonides and Krochmal. Poignantly, his efforts to forge a sweeping rationale for Diaspora Jewish existence offered succor to precious few. He was now operating in an era marked, as Daniel Bell famously observed, by the end of ideology.²⁰ The golden age of both Zionist and Diasporist ideologies had lapsed decades earlier, replaced by étatism (*mamlakhtiyut*), in one case, and a pragmatic acceptance of Israel’s centrality, in the other. And yet, the fact that Rawidowicz failed to create a social movement should not cause us to dismiss his thinking. Nor should we ignore his extensive contacts with the leading literary, cultural, and political figures of the Jewish world until his last days. A recent foray into the Rawidowicz archives attests to the staggering range of correspondents who engaged the enigmatic thinker, even as the tide of history was moving away from his position. Among the luminaries whose letters populate the archives, one of the most renowned was David Ben-Gurion. Band finds the exchange between the two men in 1954–1955 “a bit comical,” in large measure because of the disparity in power between the Israeli Prime Minister and a peripatetic Diaspora scholar.²¹ However, it remains the case that Ben-Gurion, with much else on his mind, felt compelled to respond on four occasions to Rawidowicz, particularly to his claim that the term *Israel* should be applied only to the “people of Israel” and not to the political-territorial center in the Land of Israel.²² For Ben-Gurion, Rawidowicz was far more than a run-of-the-mill polemicist. He was a trenchant and uncompromising critic whose knowledge of the Jewish past and well-developed ideological stance demanded attention.

Such an appreciation, even from an ideological opponent, has not been heard much since. Sadly this is so, for Rawidowicz remains as neglected today as he was prescient then. In a recent volume of reissued essays, Michael A. Meyer reminds us of Rawidowicz’s unerring sense “for where the concerns of the Jewish people would lie well into the

¹⁹ Rawidowicz, *Bavel vYrushalayim*, 1:151.

²⁰ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960).

²¹ Band, “Simon Rawidowicz,” 3.

²² The exchange appears in English in Rawidowicz, *State of Israel*, 182–204.

future."²³ Indeed, Rawidowicz's insistence on a genuine partnership between equals in the Jewish world has immense relevance for contemporary debates about an appropriate relationship between the State of Israel and the Diaspora. Lamentably, few among the participants in the current debate can draw upon Rawidowicz's range of learning, bold formulations, and nuanced grasp of Jewish history and thought. In fact, few, if any, have even heard of him.



He who studies Jewish history will readily discover that there was hardly a generation in the Diaspora period which did not consider itself the last link in Israel's chain.²⁴

It is altogether fitting that Arnold Band returned to the legacy of Simon Rawidowicz several years ago. Not only has Band often retrieved important texts or figures that the rest of us have forgotten. And not only did Band and Rawidowicz cross paths in the fertile intellectual triangle of Waltham, Brookline, and Cambridge in the 1950s. More importantly, the two share an important patrimony, an abiding allegiance to Hebrew language and culture. In fact, both have devoted their lives to cultivating the rich and evolving forest of Hebrew, which they regard as the great *yerushah* of ancient Israel. That they have maintained this belief while living and teaching in the Diaspora is perhaps the most intriguing of their biographical commonalities. Both men seem drawn to the marginal position of critic, secretly relishing the liminal status between insider and outsider. In that sense, both are ideal candidates to be the last Diaspora Hebraist, clinging to the legacy of Hebrew culture in a sea of apathy and ignorance.

It was Rawidowicz who pointed out in one of his most memorable essays that visions of apocalyptic doom are a regular feature of Jewish history.²⁵ It is not altogether clear how sanguine Rawidowicz would have been about Hebrew culture in today's Diaspora world.²⁶ But I suspect

²³ See Meyer's introduction in Rawidowicz, *State of Israel*, 6.

²⁴ Rawidowicz, "Israel: The Ever-Dying People," 211

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 211ff.

²⁶ Rawidowicz was hardly naïve about Hebrew's limited future in the Diaspora, though he never surrendered his desire to fight for its survival. Indeed, his indomitable spirit led him to establish the Ararat publishing house in England in 1942 so that Hebrew would not cease its millennial existence in Europe. See Ravid's biographical essay in Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 22, as well as Avraham Greenbaum, *History of the Ararat Publishing Society* (Jerusalem: R. Mass, 1998), 10.

that he would not have been unhappy at the state of *interpretatio*. The impressive proliferation of Jewish studies in North American and European universities, along with the emergence of a new generation of Jewish authors, many of whom are learned in traditional Jewish culture, would have fortified his faith that reports of Israel's demise are premature. Had Rawidowicz counted the legions of students of Arnold Band, scattered throughout "Israel," he might even have uncovered a measure of faith in the future of Hebrew literary studies, if not Hebrew culture. Perhaps he would have recollected his sentiments of half a century ago:

Yes, in many respects it seems to us as if we are the last links in a particular chain of tradition and development. But if we are the last—let us be the last as our fathers and forefathers were. Let us prepare the ground for the last Jews who will come after us, and for the last Jews who will rise after them, and so on until the end of days.²⁷

To conclude on such a note of messianic optimism seems an almost unfair way to celebrate Arnold Band, given his proudly skeptical and antimystical cast of mind. So to honor my teacher, colleague, and friend, I offer this final note of dissonance. Simon Rawidowicz's view of *interpretatio* as the animating force of Diaspora life rested on a thinly veiled antihistoricism, directed against those who would reduce the people of Israel to the sum of its contextualized parts. To his mind, Israel soared beyond its context, immune from local vectors of influence that gave defining form to other peoples. Indeed, in Rawidowicz's language, assigning unilateral influence was an intellectual malady—"hashpaitis" (from the Hebrew *hashpa'ah*)—to be avoided.²⁸ In *Bavel vYrushalayim*, he inveighed against the notion of a Zionist center in Palestine that "influenced" the Diaspora.²⁹ In his decades-long work on Nachman Krochmal, he repeatedly challenged the assumption of Hegelian "influence" on the Galician thinker.³⁰ And in "On Interpretation," Rawidowicz asserted that while Israel lived in a gentile world, contending with "the outside is

²⁷ Rawidowicz, "Israel: The Ever-Dying People," 223.

²⁸ Rawidowicz, "Two That Are One," *State of Israel*, 155–56. See also the Yiddish original, "Tsvey vos zeynin eyns," in *Di Tsukunft* (May–June 1949): 287.

²⁹ Rawidowicz, *Bavel vYrushalayim*, 1:322–71.

³⁰ See the distillation of Rawidowicz's thinking in "Was Nachman Krochmal a Hegelian?" in Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 335. There Rawidowicz avers that "the starting point for Krochmal's philosophizing was neither a wrestling with the problems of ethics nor with one of pure logic or epistemology, but the problem of faith, of the Jewish religion, of Judaism in general."

certainly not the best of stimuli for a constructive and stabilizing *interpretatio*." It was rather the internal stimulus, the "pressure from within" to attain a deeper and truer meaning, that was the vitalizing force of *interpretatio*, and by extension, of Jewish life (125).

Despite his own Hebraism and considerable interpretive skills, Arnold Band could not embrace Rawidowicz's internalist view of *interpretatio*, itself a curious anticipation of Derrida's famous "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*."³¹ For Band, there is too much around the text not to notice. It is this kind of environmental curiosity that made him a pioneer in the study of comparative literature at UCLA. And it is this same curiosity that makes him such a deep, probing, and masterful reader of Hebrew and Jewish texts.

³¹ Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), 227. Derrida goes to greater lengths than Rawidowicz to demonstrate that historical/biographical considerations are *not* irrelevant to his mode of reading. At the same time, he is more explicit in positing the text as a comprehensive cognitive-epistemological framework. It is on this latter point that Moshe Idel offers an intriguing gloss, one that hints at the shared Jewish roots of both Rawidowicz's and Derrida's textual inclusivism. Idel proposes that Derrida drew his principle of "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" from the late thirteenth-century Kabbalist, Menachem Recanati, whom he encountered through Georges Vajda's French translation of Gershom Scholem's German lecture at the Eranos conference of 1954. Vajda translated a key passage from Recanati's *Ta'amei hamitsvot* to the effect that "*car la Torah n'est pas en dehors de Lui* (i.e., God), *pas plus qu'il n'est Lui-meme en dehors de la Torah*." Idel suggests that Derrida read this translation and then "substituted the term and concept of Torah by [*sic*] that of text." See the fourth chapter of Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). I thank Professor Idel for calling this citation, as well as his discussion, to my attention.

◆

PART II
S. Y. AGNON

◆

**S. Y. AGNON'S "FROM FOE TO FRIEND":
AGNON BETWEEN *BERIT SHALOM* AND
*BERIT YOSEF TRUMPELDOR***

— Dan Almagor —

Agnon's "Me'oyev le'ohav," variously translated¹ as "From Foe to Friend" or "From Enemy to Friend" (in Hebrew the words rhyme and appear as a couplet in other stories by Agnon),² is a very short story, less than eight hundred words, first published in the weekend literary supplement of the workers' daily *Davar* on May 3, 1941. Twelve years later, Agnon included the story in the volume *Elu ve'elu*, the second volume of the second edition of his stories.³

Dan Laor's comprehensive Hebrew monograph on Agnon does not mention the story.⁴ However, Arnold Band, in his pioneering book on Agnon, devoted half a page to the story, citing it as "a standard anthology piece."⁵ Indeed, along with "Ma'aseh ha'ez" and "Afar Erets Yisra'el," this is one of Agnon's most reprinted stories, included in anthologies and

¹ The story has been translated into English five times so far: Joel Blocker in *The Jerusalem Post*, August 1, 1958, and *The Reconstructionist* 25 (7) (1959): 30–32; Jules Harlow in *Mosaic* (Cambridge, Mass.) (Fall 1966); anonymous in *Jewish Echo* (Glasgow), February 9, 1968; Misha Louvish in *Israel Magazine* (1969): 70–71; and Reuven Morgan, "From Foe to Friend," *Mediterraneans* 6 (Summer-Fall 1994): 112–16. I am grateful to Nili Cohen from the Institute of Translation (Ministry of Education and Culture) for this information. I also thank Professor Dan Ben-Amos, Edna Heichal, Dr. Bracha Fischler, Dr. Gila Shenberg, and Emunah Yaron for their assistance.

² See, e.g., S. Y. Agnon, *Ad henah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1953), 330; idem, *Samukh venireh* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1953), 320.

³ S. Y. Agnon, *Elu ve'elu* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1953), 480–82.

⁴ Dan Laor, *Hayyei Agnon* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1998).

⁵ Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 278.

Hebrew textbooks (though not in all schools—some fear the implied political message). In Agnon's House in the Talpiot neighborhood of Jerusalem, a twelve-minute animated film is screened, in which the story is read, accompanied by Yossi Stern's illustrations. Agnon's House holds frequent tours titled "From Foe to Friend," guided by one of Band's students, Balfour Hakkak.

Several years ago, I included the story in a show on Jerusalem aimed at twelve- to fourteen-year-old children. Two actors and two actresses read and acted the story in story-theatre style, using pantomime that often turned to slapstick. Despite the teachers' fears that children would not understand Agnon's style, the young audience reacted with laughter and energy throughout the story, not only at the actual events, but also at the fine linguistic humor and the text's irony and sarcasm. The plot's structure—a five-round struggle between the narrator attempting to build a home and the wind that keeps trying to destroy it—and the story's tension fused with humor greatly enchanted the children. The story still awaits imaginative artists to use it as a basis for a musical piece or a plot for a short ballet.



Only a few Hebrew scholars have dealt with this story, each emphasizing one interpretation or another.⁶ The story can be read in at least half a dozen ways. Following Band's footsteps in teaching and research, I attempt here to review these various readings and expand one of them, though all are just as fascinating and enjoyable.

One reading, of course, is a textual analysis per se: structure, language, versions, the various and varied types of humor, the many linguistic associations, character representation, the tension and

⁶ Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 278; Yitzhak Ben-Yosef, "S. Y. Agnon lekitha het (gil 13)," in S. Adan, ed., *Agnon beveit hasefer* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, 1960); J. Marek, "Me'oyev le'ohav," in *Bisdeh Hemed* 10 (4) (1967): 231–35; Dov Sadan, "Beinenu leveinam," *Mibifnim* 21 (1959 [1979]): 249–59 (repr. in *Al S. Y. Agnon* [Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz hameuhad, 1967], 119–35); Malka Shaked, "Ha'alegoria hamerubedet," in her booklet, *Iyyunim besipurei Agnon* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1975), 7–55 (repr. in her *Hakemet shebe'or haraqia* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 159–74, 206; Galia Shenberg, "Agnon kesofer yeladim? misheloshet hazironim ad 'Me'oyev le'ohav,'" *Maaglei Qeria* 23–24 (1995): 95–110; idem, "Between Metaphor and Metonymy" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Haifa, 1995); idem, "Sheloshah hazironim, ze'ev ehad ume'ah sipurim," *Maaglei Qeria* 25–26 (1998): 77–92; and Hillel Weiss, *Aharit davar lesefer "Me'oyev le'ohav"* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1992).

denouement (almost as in a classical comedy synopsis, also formed of five parts). The second reading examines the story's relation to the many folktales of which it is reminiscent. This approach was taken by Galia Shenberg, who sees the story as an "alternative adaptation" of the three little pigs story,⁷ known to every English-speaking child. Agnon's story deals with a struggle between humanity and one of nature's forces, the wind, over the building of a house on the top of a hill. Though the English nursery tale deals with a struggle between animals, the bad wolf in that tale, just like the wind in Agnon's story, huffs and puffs and blows the house down.

The tale of the three little pigs has been examined in several literary, linguistic, folkloristic, and psychological essays.⁸ Shenberg devoted a whole chapter of her dissertation to the tale's various incarnations and its relevance to Agnon's story, as well as two essays⁹ in which she points out that the story is a known "type" of folk tale.¹⁰ Interestingly, the three pigs appear only in the English version, whereas in all other languages the wolf, the fox, or the troll threaten other animals—kids, billy goats (for whom the vow made by the pigs "by the hairs of my chin" is more appropriate!), geese, and sometimes other small, nonkosher animals—rabbits. According to Shenberg, it is due to a "kosher code" that the story of the three pigs has no parallel version among the ten thousand versions of Jewish folk tales in the Dov Noy Israeli Institute of Folk Tales at the University of Haifa. Until the mid-1990s, most Hebrew versions of this story told of kosher animals. Then, following Disney's animated television film of the three pigs and the popularity of Miss Piggy and *Babe*, along with some translated American parodies, young Hebrew readers got to know the heroes of the 1813 English story.¹¹

⁷ Shenberg, "Sheloshah hazironim," 77–92.

⁸ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 41–44; Zena Sutherland and May Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and Books*, 7th ed. (Glenville, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1986).

⁹ Shenberg, "Agnon kesofer yeladim?" 95–110.

¹⁰ Cited in A. Aarne and S. Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale: Classification and Bibliography* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961), as number AT 124 immediately after two similar types (122–123). See also Adir Cohen, *Liyshon im kippah adummah, laqum im sheloshah hazironim haqetanim* (Haifa: Amatsyah, 1997); Shenberg, "Agnon kesofer yeladim?"; idem, "Sheloshah hazironim."

¹¹ Meir Shalev, in *Sod aḥizat ha'einayim* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1999), associates the wolf from the tale of the three pigs with that of Red Riding Hood: "as a child I thought this was the same wolf, a creature evil from snout to tail." According to

Almost all the structural, literary, and folkloristic elements cited by Sutherland and Arbuthnot to explain the popularity of the mentioned folk “types” are present in Agnon’s story, complemented by the writer’s talent, sophistication, and humor. Was Agnon, who did not know English, aware of the story of the three pigs, which is far closer to his story than the other, more kosher versions? In October 1999, I wrote to Emuna Yaron, Agnon’s daughter, asking whether her father knew such a version or perhaps even told it to his children as a bedtime story. Mrs. Yaron’s answer, dated November 7, 1999, says:

To your question, my father never spoke to us of his writing, although at times, on a Sabbath eve, he would read us a new story. As is well known, he never discussed his writing, not even with us, his children. When “Me’oyev le’ohev” was published I was no longer living in my parents’ home, but in Safed, teaching the children of Israel to read and write.

Nevertheless, the close resemblance between the two stories cannot be coincidental, and it seems Agnon did know some variant—written or oral—of the story of the three pigs.¹² The version about the wolf and the three kids is included in the Grimms’ books, known to Agnon. According to Thompson,¹³ this version was prevalent throughout Europe during the Middle Ages in collections of Aesop’s tales. Variations of the English tale may have appeared in German children’s books. Agnon may have heard such a variation being read or told to the children of friends during a visit.¹⁴



The struggle of the narrator, who repeatedly returns to the piece of land on the top of the hill in an attempt to build a secure house, can be related to at least four themes, each wider than the other, each enabling yet another fascinating reading. The widest, of course, is the universal mythical struggle between humanity and nature, humanity and wilderness, and

Katharine Briggs, *Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), there are some English variants of the story without pigs, also belonging to type AT 124.

¹² Type AT 123, for example.

¹³ S. Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), nos. 200–299.

¹⁴ I would be grateful to any reader who could help in locating any possible source of influence.

the attempt to build a home, symbolizing culture and civilization—similar to early myths of humanity's struggle with wind, sand, desert, sea, or fire. Thus Band sees the story as a description of "man's conquest of nature."¹⁵ Shaked also offers an anthropological interpretation,¹⁶ and Shenberg rightly points to the midrash of the wind, which "as it leaves the Blessed-be-His-Name seeks to destroy the world" (Bereshit Rabbah 24; Vayiqra Rabbah 15). In the struggle between the forces of building and the forces of destruction and devastation, the wind appears as a satanic figure, a representative of the forces of evil.¹⁷ Bettleheim, too, in his discussion of the story of the three pigs, notes that the animals symbolize "phases in man's development," and "their houses symbolize the history of human progress: from cabin to stable to brick house."¹⁸

Dov Sadan associates the archetypal interpretation of Agnon's story with its Israeli political perspective, tying the struggle between desert and civilization to the struggle between human enemies: "the parable of the wind and the tree, the desert and the building, where the conquest of the wind over the tree and of the desert over the building means hatred between neighbors and the war between them. The tree's conquest of the wind, and the building's over the desert means love among neighbors and peace."¹⁹

"My wisdom also ruled over my judgment as I dug the deep foundations," says the narrator in Agnon's story.²⁰ The necessity of building a strong house with deep foundations on firm land is mentioned in various Hebrew sayings: Rabbi Binyamin, son of Rabbi Yehuda, says in his introduction to *Diqduqim*: "A house built on earth without foundation will soon fall," and Stahl cites the folk saying: "If you build, strengthen the foundation and you will not fail."²¹ These fables are preceded by two proverbs in the Christian Bible: "a wise man, which built his house upon a rock; and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon the house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock" (Matthew 7:24–25); and "a man which built a house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream

¹⁵ Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 278.

¹⁶ Malka Shaked, "Iyunim besippurei Agnon," in *Madrikh lamoreh* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, 1982), repr. in her *Hakemet shebe'or haraqia* (see n. 6 above).

¹⁷ Shenberg, "Agnon kesofer yeladim?" 108.

¹⁸ Bettleheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 41–44.

¹⁹ Sadan, "Beinenu leveinam," 120–21.

²⁰ "From Foe to Friend," trans. Reuven Morgan, 114.

²¹ Avraham Stahl, *Pitgemei edot Yisra'el* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), no. 1084.

beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock" (Luke 6:48).

Sutherland and Arbuthnot hear in these Christian Bible parables "biblical echoes" of the types of animal tales mentioned.²² However, in contrast to these folktales, in which small animals build a house in an attempt to find refuge from bigger animals, in the Christian Bible parable it is humanity itself trying to build a house, struggling against a force of nature—not the wind, as in Agnon's story, but water. Agnon's story is closer to that of the three pigs than to those of other animal versions, and its moral is closer to that of the Christian Bible parable than to that of the many variations that may have inspired him.



I turn from the wider mythical-universal, ethnographical-folkloristic approach to a narrower approach: reading the story for its distinct autobiographical elements. There seems to be no coincidence in Agnon's choice to narrate the story in the first person, in a manner similar to that of the surrealistic stories in *Sefer hama'asim*.²³ These symbol-laden stories, which tell of strange incidents in the narrator's life in Jerusalem, revolutionized the understanding of Agnon's modern and complex storytelling. Agnon's attempt to encourage the reader's sense that the story is autobiographical can be seen in the third and fourth words in the version published in *Elu ve'elu: nivnetah Talpiyot* (translated by Morgan as "before the Jerusalem neighborhood of Talpiot was ever built..."), alluding to the neighborhood in south Jerusalem to which Agnon was drawn in 1912, his fourth year in the Land of Israel, and where he himself had lived since 1927, first in rented accommodation and later in a house the family built, known today as "Agnon's House."²⁴

The story "From Foe to Friend" tells of the narrator's four attempts to settle in Talpiot and build his home there. The biographies and monographs on Agnon²⁵ clearly show that the stages in the story parallel, in many ways, Agnon's own life story: his various attempts to emigrate to

²² Sutherland and Arbuthnot, *Children and Books*, 162.

²³ The first of these appeared in *Davar's* literary supplement nine years before our story.

²⁴ However, Shenberg rightly comments that in the first version the hill is called "Zofit," a name coined by Agnon.

²⁵ See Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*; Laor, *Hayyei Agnon*; and especially Agnon's daughter Emuna Yaron's essay "Midirat aray leveit qeva" in S. Y. Agnon, *Esterlain yaqirati* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1983), 5–17.

Israel and his (and his family's) return to Europe; his various ascents from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; and especially the stages of moving from within Jerusalem to Talpiot itself, then a secluded neighborhood far from central Jerusalem. It seems the author and his family moved through dozens of rented rooms, hotels, pensions, rented apartments, and rented houses before settling in a house of their own in Talpiot. They were later forced to leave that as well during the Israeli War of Independence. Throughout these moves, a catalogue of catastrophes befell the various apartments and houses in which the family lived, caused by forces of nature (a fire in their Bad Homburg flat in 1924, an earthquake in their central Jerusalem apartment in 1927, and oppressive heat in that apartment's attic that summer) as well as human actions (the looting of the house in Talpiot in 1929 and its bombing in 1948). All these wanderings are certainly reflected in the story.²⁶

In his later story, "Hasiman" ("The Sign"), Agnon ties the building of his house in Talpiot to the destruction of his childhood hometown and the Jewish home in Europe. He tells of living in a rented house in Jerusalem when news reaches him of the mass murder of the Jews of his hometown. He then tells of the night in 1929 when his house in Talpiot was looted by Arabs (when he and his family were forced to leave Jerusalem) and of the vow he made that night to build a house in the very Talpiot that the Arabs had sought to destroy. He concludes with the building of the house in Talpiot, surrounded by a garden and trees, where he now lives, at times peacefully and at times in fear of the "sword of the desert" threatening the dwellers of the land.²⁷ The house, the trees, and the garden are all reminiscent of the ending of "From Foe to Friend" and are in a certain sense an answer not only to the "sword of the desert" (also mentioned in his novel *Shirah*) but also to the destruction of the old home overseas.



Along with the odyssey of building a permanent home in the Jerusalem of this world, one may also find in "From Foe to Friend" echoes of Agnon's long and manifold journey toward a "heavenly Jerusalem"—

²⁶ Baruch Kurzweil, *Massot al sippurei S. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1963), 86–94, 104–15, elaborates on "the house as a key symbol in Agnon's opus," and Sadan discusses the "problem of the house—the fear of losing it and the fear of discovering its loss—as a central problem in Agnon's stories" (Sadan, "Beinenu levinam," 106.)

²⁷ See also Shenberg, "Agnon kesofer yeladim?" 103.

his journey towards God and faith. Agnon was born to a religious household and received a traditionally religious upbringing. When he first came to the Land of Israel in 1908, Laor says, he still “behaved like a God-fearing Jew,” but since “the life style here was free, and most of the young people had deserted the way of the Torah and the commandments—he was obliged to change his ways and adapt to the ways of the new surroundings.”²⁸ Could there be an association between removing the headcover because of that new, tempting, and mischievous modern world and the fact that the wind, in its first encounter with the narrator of the story, “whipp[ed] my hat off my head. As I bent down to pick up my hat, the Wind blew away my clothes over my head, thus making a laughing-stock of me”?²⁹

One year after the publication of “From Foe to Friend,” Agnon published the satirical chapter “Shelom olamim” (“Eternal Peace”)³⁰ describing the struggle within the State of Israel between the “covered-head” and “uncovered-head” camps:

There was one man in that land, belonging neither to the covered-heads nor to the uncovered-heads, just an ordinary man, who, if he needed to scratch, would uncover his head, and if he didn't need to scratch, would not uncover his head.³¹

These lines are often quoted as a clue to the viewpoint of the writer, the holder of the “torn rucksack,”³² toward the two camps. It may be that “From Foe to Friend” can also be read in view of the storyteller’s manifold deliberation between faith and tradition on the one hand and, on the other hand, the persistent attraction to the “mischievous” wind. It was only after he had extended the house’s foundations (his faith), learned to shelter in the shade of the trees (the Torah, of course, is described as “the tree of life”), and carried out the commandment to “love the Lord thy God” that he could live in peace with that mischievous wind and no longer fear it or its temptations. And the wind, too, learned to accept him and coexist with him in friendship, even in love.

Agnon’s manifold struggle between the allure of faith and the many temptations of the wind—the same wind that is often referred to as *ruah*

²⁸ Laor, *Hayyei Agnon*, 62.

²⁹ “From Foe to Friend,” trans. Reuven Morgan, 112.

³⁰ Included in “Peraqim misefer hamedinah” (“Chapters from the Book of the State”), which appeared six years before the establishment of the State of Israel.

³¹ Agnon, *Samukh venireh*, 262.

³² See his earlier story “Tishrei.”

shetut, "a silly wind" or "folly" (see Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav's prayer for peace), or as Satan or as the evil inclination—is highly reminiscent of the classical medieval religious morality plays, where Everyman, usually a young man, is repeatedly caught between the angel or the good inclination and Satan or the evil inclination. Such struggles appear in Hebrew medieval liturgy and *maqamot*³³ and in some of the early Hebrew plays. Yehuda Sommo (or Leone di Sommi), the sixteenth-century Jewish playwright and director from Mantua who is considered the first Hebrew playwright, wrote *A Comedy of Betrothal*, considered by Dubossarsky to be a typical morality play. Sommo attempted to prove the Jews' originality in world drama through an "ancient Chaldean morality play" that he claimed to have translated. The as yet undiscovered *The Course of Life* tells of a young man's passage between the good and evil inclinations.³⁴ A close examination of some sections of Laor's monograph dealing with Agnon's "way to God" reveals that "From Foe to Friend" can be also read as an *argumento*, a *fabula*, a synopsis of such a morality play, a kind of condensed *Pilgrim's Progress*.³⁵



Along with the two aforementioned themes—the universal-mythical as well as the personal, quasi-autobiographical—the story can also be seen as a parable or allegory with national-historical perspectives, dealing with the connection between the Jewish people and their land. One perspective is millennial, spanning the nation's history since Abraham's arrival at the land through the nation's repeated attempts to return to their land after each exile and build their home again. Such a reading is reminiscent of Natan Alterman's 1945 poem, "Admat Biryah," speaking of the Jews' attempts and repeated struggles to settle on the top of a mountain near a holy city (in this case, the Mountain of Canaan, near Safed), from whence a foreign force—not the wind or the Arabs, but the British occupiers—try to uproot them. The poem first appeared in

³³ E.g., Ibn Zabara, *The Book of Delight*.

³⁴ See Y. Sommo in J. Schirmann, ed., *Tsahut bedihuta deqidushin* (Jerusalem: Sifrei Tarshish, 1965); and the English version by Alfred F. Golding, *A Comedy of Betrothal* (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1988). See also Dan Almagor, "Sommo's Dialogues on Theatre" [Hebrew], *Bamah* 17 (1963): 38–52; Allardyce Nicoll, *The Development of the Theatre* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 256–57; Yohanan Dubossarsky, "The First Hebrew Drama Reconsidered," in Ezra Fleischer, ed., *Mehqerei sifrut mugashim leShimon Halkin* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1973), 1–14.

³⁵ Laor, *Hayyei Agnon*, 62, 72, 75–76, 167, 173–75, 192–93.

Alterman's *Davar* weekly column, preceded, as was Alterman's wont, by an explanation of the events inspiring its writing: "Three times [again the formulaic number three!] the army uprooted the fences of Biryah, and again they were planted. The inhabitants and the hundreds who came to their aid lay on the ground and the soldiers labored to shake them and uproot them by force from the earth of Har Canaan."³⁶ At the end of the ballad, the earth itself apostrophizes the youth with whom it proclaims an eternal covenant.

According to the national-historical interpretation that prevails today in Israeli schools, the story is about the Jewish settlers' struggle in the past 120 years to establish themselves in the Land of Israel and build a "national home" (in the words of the Balfour Declaration), in defiance of the Arab inhabitants. Humanity's struggle with the desert and the attempt to turn it into a green garden is met here with "the desert sword" of the neighboring people.³⁷ Dov Sadan, who for many years served as Agnon's secretary, elaborates on this issue in his essay "Beinenu lev-einam" ("Between Us and Them"). He quotes various relevant passages from novels (*Oreah natah lalun*; *Temol shilshom*) and short stories ("Taḥat ha'ets"; "Midrash zuta") and ends with a discussion of "From Foe to Friend," in which he sees "symbolically, a dramatization of the theory [about the distinct relation between the people and their land] throughout the three periods in Agnon's life, here focused on the main problem mentioned in the stories, that of the home."³⁸ Others see the story as a "narrative of the national occurrences in our time."³⁹ Such a complex issue obviously calls for further research. I limit myself here to a few typical points that may subtly assist such a reading.

The story's optimistically idyllic ending seems to hint at a possible happy ending in the future (the story was first published in 1941), sounding almost like a vision of messianic days. However, a close inspection of some of Agnon's later stories reveals yearnings for a past, too. Not a far-away place, but one closer to home. Nor a distant past, but a near one: the past preceding the 1929 disturbances, which Agnon saw as the turning point that brought about the loss of paradise.

³⁶ Nathan Alterman, "Admat Biryah," in *Hatur hashevi'i* (Tel Aviv: Davar, 1948), 1:319–20. See also the ballad "Hinneḥ tammu yom qerav ve'arbo," in N. Alterman's *Ir hayonah* (Tel Aviv: Mahbarot lesifrut, 1957), 184–85.

³⁷ The same sword appears in Agnon's later story "Hasiman," as mentioned above, as well as in the novel *Shirah*.

³⁸ Sadan, "Beinenu leveinam," 105–21.

³⁹ Malka Shaked, "Iyyunim besippurei Agnon," 5. See also, Yitzhak Ben-Yosef, "S. Y. Agnon lekitah ḥet; "Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*; Weiss, *Aḥarit davar*.

In the story "Hasiman," as well as in the novel *Shirah*, the pre-1929 coexistence between Arabs and Jews in Talpiot is described as peaceful and calm. In *Shirah*, Arab and Jew greet each other "wholeheartedly, with true love,"⁴⁰ to the extent that people predict "that Jews and Arabs will live as one nation in the land." In "Hasiman," written several years after "From Foe to Friend," the "King of Winds" is described, sympathetically, as bearing "a pleasant scent from the hills and the valleys,"⁴¹ and the Arab women peddlers arrive from the villages, filling the neighborhood with "good air." The winds and scents of Talpiot are lovingly described in *Shirah*, this time unrelated to the neighbors: scents of "cypresses of pines of garden flowers of wild weeds of desert shrubs of cool earth."⁴²

The almost heavenly idyll is shattered one Saturday with the beginning of the 1929 riots. In *Shirah*, the rioting Arab neighbors are described as having lived "like beloved brothers" among the Jews.⁴³ In "Hasiman" the Arabs are described as "suddenly" attacking their neighbors. In a letter to Schocken, his publisher, written some two months after his home in Talpiot was looted, Agnon writes: "My attitude to the Arabs has changed since the riots. Now it is thus: I neither hate nor love them. What I ask for is never to see them. In my humble opinion we should now build a big ghetto of half a million Jews; if we don't, then, perish the thought, we are lost."⁴⁴ In the same letter Agnon relates the political arguments between the various camps in Israel regarding the Jewish-Arab question over the Jews' right to the land and the attitude of the British police: "The *Stimmungen* [moods] in Erets Yisrael are various. On the one hand the *Berit Shalom* people, cut off from reality, and on the other hand those high-talking mouths who want it all." Most of the Yishuv, according to Agnon, was between these extremes of right and left. Among them was a third camp, the Orthodox old Yishuv, fearing mostly for the fate of the Western Wall. In a sermon Agnon quotes having heard at the time in a Meah Shearim synagogue, a rabbi claimed: "The Arabs demand the nullification of the Balfour Declaration, but we have a greater declaration, earlier than Balfour's, the one in which God promised us this land." Like many others in the Yishuv, Agnon was caught between these two, or rather three, camps. Here too is a struggle of many courses, moods and surprisingly extreme changes of mind.

⁴⁰ S. Y. Agnon, *Shirah*, trans. Zeva Shapiro (New York: Schocken, 1989), 95–96.

⁴¹ S. Y. Agnon, "Hasiman," in *Ir umelo'ah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1973), 482. First printed in Agnon's *Ha'esh vecha'etsim* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962).

⁴² Agnon, *Shirah*, 30–31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁴ S. Y. Agnon, *Me'atmi el atsmi* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1976), 406.

The first camp Agnon mentioned, *Berit Shalom* (Covenant of Peace, better known in the United States as the Peace Association), was a small, intellectual movement that sought peace and dialogue with the Arabs. Founded by the first president of the Hebrew University, Y. L. Magnes, and others in 1925 (the same year in which the university was founded), the association included several of Jerusalem's foremost scholars, such as Buber, Bergmann, Simon, and Scholem, as well as Rabbi Binyamin (Y. Radler-Feldman), Agnon's close friend since his first arrival in the country. Rabbi Binyamin wrote in the association's manifesto: "And when you come to inherit your homeland / come neither as enemy nor as foe / but greet the inhabitants with peace. / Build your fathers' dwelling with neither hate nor wrath nor loathing / but with love and grace, justice and faith. / And love the inhabitant of the land, for he is thy brother / your own flesh, do not disregard him."⁴⁵

Agnon, the *Ostjude*, was attracted to the Jerusalem scholars, who were mostly German speakers. He respected some of them and was contemptuous of others, deriding them in conversation and writing, openly or indirectly. Of Rabbi Binyamin Agnon said, "many of his actions are close to our heart, others are not close to our heart."⁴⁶ One can imagine Scholem did not like his alter-ego's description in "Ido ve'Einam" (a story written in Scholem's house) and other stories. Many of the Peace Association are depicted mockingly in *Shirah*. The hero, Manfred Herbst, belongs to the association and like them believes that "every Jew living in Erets Yisrael usurps the place of the Arabs, to whom the land belongs."⁴⁷

In other letters Agnon was much more vehement than in his letter to Schocken describing the Peace Association members as "cut off from reality." In an interview with a Jewish newspaper during a 1930 visit to Poland, Agnon is quoted as regarding the movement's central members as "a great danger threatening the building of the land" and having "not enough harsh words to describe them."⁴⁸ He is even more caustic in a letter to Magnes, where he sounds more like the Meah Shearim sermon quoted above.⁴⁹ He was writing in response to a letter by the founder of the Peace Association following the publication of Agnon's two short allegorical parables, written after the 1929 riots and published

⁴⁵ *Mediterraneans* 6 (1994): 116–17.

⁴⁶ Agnon, *Me'atsemi el atsemi*, 180.

⁴⁷ Agnon, *Shirah*, 82.

⁴⁸ Sadan, "Beinenu leveinam," 109.

⁴⁹ See Agnon, *Me'atsemi el atsemi*, 413; and Agnon, *Shirah*, 106.

in November 1930 in *Moznayim*, the journal of the Hebrew Writers' Association, titled "Midrash zuta."⁵⁰ Both parables use the wolf and lamb from Isaiah's vision of peace at the End of Days—"The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb" (Isaiah 11:6)—and are a sarcastic parody using the carnivore wolf and the herbivore sheep. The clearly stinging remarks are directed not only at the Arabs and occasionally the British, but also at the Peace Association members who call for reconciliation and concessions for the wolf.⁵¹ The wolf is absent from our story, perhaps because Agnon had already used it as a political allegory nine years earlier.



Did Agnon identify more with the camp on the other extreme, those people he had described as "high-talking mouths who want it all," that is, the revisionist camp? (Ze'ev Jabotinsky's hymn, "The Jordan has two banks / This one's ours, the other, too," was written during this very period.) The answer can be seen at the end of his harsh letter to Magnes, in which he accuses the Rabbi, founder of the association, of being willing to give up the Land of Israel. "I have no solutions to the questions of this difficult time. . . . But we certainly do not want swords and bows."⁵²

In 1898, a year after the first Zionist Congress, Jabotinsky wrote a poem in Russian about Jerusalem, entitled "City of Peace," describing himself kneeling down side by side with an Arab sheik at a vision of Jerusalem, breaking through the walls. His 1929 poem "The Left Bank of the Jordan" ("The Jordan has two banks"), written while in exile in Paris, describes his vision of a state: "There, satiated with abundance and joy /

⁵⁰ Agnon, *Me'atsmi el atsmi*, 409–12.

⁵¹ See discussions of *havlagah*, the restraint policies, also in S. Y. Agnon, *Shirah*, 95.

⁵² One of Jabotinsky's greatest admirers lived across the street from Agnon (Agnon's House stands today on a street bearing his name). Professor Yosef Klausner, head of the Hebrew Literature Department at the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus, was a die-hard right-wing supporter who edited several collections of Jabotinsky's essays. Klausner thought little of Agnon's work and did his best, already in the 1930s, to recommend the poet Zalman Schneur for the Nobel Prize. Agnon, on his part, depicted a highly unflattering character of "Doctor Doctor" (even in describing the attack on Talpiot, in his letter to Schocken). In his opposition to Klausner, Agnon had been preceded by other authors, headed by M. Y. Berdyczewski, who had a long-standing account to settle with Klausner dating back to the days of the Hebrew journal *Hashiloah*.

The son of Arabia, the son of Nazareth and my son. / For my flag, pure and just, / Will purify my Jordan's two banks."⁵³

According to Jabotinsky, before such harmonious coexistence could materialize, with foes turning to friends, one condition had to exist: that of "the wall of iron" (*qir habarzel*), using the terminology of building. The term appears in Jabotinsky's writing from 1923 onwards, about two years after the riots of 1921, when he—a veteran officer of the British Army's Hebrew Battalions during World War I—was arrested by the British and sent to the Acre prison. This was shortly after the death in battle at Tel Hai of his comrade-in-arms, Yosef Trumpeldor. Jabotinsky had immortalized Trumpeldor in the name of the revisionist youth movement Betar, combining the name of the fortress from the days of the rebellion against the Romans with the acronym *Berit Yosef Trumpeldor* ("Yosef Trumpeldor Covenant").

The "wall of iron," in Jabotinsky's words, was

the only way to reach an understanding [with the Arabs] ... that is, a force in Israel whose foundations no Arab influence can destroy—our settling in the land must continue without paying attention to the natives' [i.e., the Arabs'] attitudes. In other words, it can continue and develop under the protection of a force that is independent of the local inhabitants' [the Arabs'] attitude; a wall of iron, which the local population cannot break.... As such, there is not much difference between the "militarists" and the "vegetarians" among us—except that the former demand an iron wall of Jewish soldiers, and the latter—of English soldiers.⁵⁴

Jabotinsky developed this theme in two essays published in Berlin in 1923 and 1927, in the journal *Raszvet*, which he edited and published in Russian and German: "The Morality (Ethics) of the Wall of Iron" and "On the Wall of Iron (We and the Arabs)." The term received wider publicity in Europe and the Land of Israel with the essays' Yiddish translation ("Der eizerner vant"), which appeared in a Betar pamphlet published in Warsaw in 1933, the year Hitler came to power. The essays appeared in Hebrew papers, too, before being collected along with Jabotinsky's writings, and would undoubtedly have reached Agnon.

⁵³ Z. Jabotinsky, "Semol haYarden," in Jabotinsky's *Shirim* (Jerusalem: Eri Jabotinsky, 1947), 201–2, 305–6. The poem was sent by Jabotinsky in his letter to the Yardenia Student Association in Kovna on November 18, 1929.

⁵⁴ Moshe Bella, ed., *Olamo shel Jabotinsky* (Tel Aviv: Defusim, 1972), 415–16. On Jabotinsky and "the wall of iron," see also Lenni Brenner, *The Iron Wall: Zionist Revisionism from Jabotinsky to Shamir* (London: Zed Books, 1984).

What, then, is Jabotinsky's emotional attitude to the Arabs? "Just as my attitude to all nations: disinterested indifference" (compare Agnon's letter to Schocken: "I neither hate nor love them"). Jabotinsky strongly criticizes the "vegetarians," the "heralds of peace" whose attitude, he feels, stems from a patronizing attitude to the Arabs. He firmly opposes driving the Arabs away and usurping the natives ("Two nations have always inhabited the Land of Israel"). Only when the Arabs recognize the force of the iron wall will the extremists among them make way for the moderate ones, who "will start negotiating with us about practical matters such as assurances against usurping the Arabs' national and civil equality of rights." In short, "a 'credo' that is peace-saying in its entirety." Jabotinsky summarized his essay about the "wall of iron" by declaring: "My hope and faith is that we can then provide them with satisfying assurances, and both nations can live in peace as good neighbors."⁵⁵

The steady home, surrounded by trees, in Agnon's story, can also be seen as a literary materialization of the "wall of iron." Jabotinsky writes: "both nations can live in peace as good neighbors"; and Agnon says, at the very end of the story: "I invite him to come back again, as one does with a good neighbor. And indeed we are good neighbors." The final words of the story, immediately after "we are good neighbors," speak of love—mutual love: "I love him with all my heart. And maybe he, too, loves me." This sentence echoes not only the "wholeheartedly, with true love" coexistence of pre-1929 life in the mixed neighborhood of Bakah described in *Shirah*, but also the words of Rabbi Binyamin, adopted as the Peace Association manifesto: "And love the inhabitant of the land, for he is thy brother / your own flesh, do not ignore him."

As an observant Jew, Agnon recited in his daily prayers the commandment to "love the Lord thy God." He also believed in the saying "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Contrary to the teachings of some rabbis in Israel today, "thy neighbor" means all humankind, not Jews exclusively. Thus, in the final sentences of this short story, Agnon optimistically (some may say naïvely) fuses the two *Stimmungen* mentioned in his 1929 letter to Schocken—the activist "militarists" (in Jabotinsky's words), and the "vegetarians."

Faithful to the story's title, Agnon may be hinting at a possibility of coexistence, peace, and even love, not only between the wind and the man who built his house on top of the hill (and the two nations they symbolize), but also between the two politically extreme camps in the Jewish Yishuv. Each camp's name bears the Hebrew word *berit* (covenant), implying a bond, an agreement. Thus, remarkably, the "good neighbors"

⁵⁵ Bella, ed., *Olam shel Jabotinsky*, 260–67.

from the “wall of iron” coined by the founder of *Berit Yosef Trumpeldor* (Betar) are merged with “love the inhabitant of the land” of the other covenant, *Berit Shalom* (the Peace Association).

History plays ironic games. In 1968, a year after the Six-Day War, Band described the story as reflecting “the pioneering spirit of the Palestinian community.”⁵⁶ He meant, of course, the Jewish Palestinian community. It was not long before a different reading could be given not only to Band’s statement but also to one of the story’s first and most meaningful sentences that refers to the King of the Winds, whose “princes and all his slaves were stormy winds who dwelt on the mountains and in the valleys, on the hills and in the dales, each doing as he wished as if the land was given him alone.” At the time of writing, Agnon may have meant this as a description of the Arabs. Since 1967, the tops of the hills are inhabited by many people of another nation, the Jewish settlers, who trust and behave “as if the whole land was given to [them] alone.”

The story is not over, and the *Stimmungen* among the present-day Yishuv are just as polarized as in the days of Agnon’s letter to Schocken. In the popular Israeli protest song “We Are the Children of Winter 1973,” written by Shmuel Hasfari twenty years after the Yom Kippur War, the twenty-year-old soldiers sarcastically remind their elders, “You promised a dove bearing an olive branch / You promised to turn a foe into friend.” Sixty years after the publication of “From Foe to Friend” many people of both nations still hope for the fulfillment of the title of Agnon’s story, and of its optimistic ending.

⁵⁶ Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 278.



◆

IS TEHILLAH WORTHY OF HER PRAISE?

Risa Domb

In his book entitled *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, Arnold Band describes the eponymous character of the story "Tehillah"¹ as "a loving yet wistful glorification of a pious old lady, a type that, the narrator suggests, is very rare today." Band goes on to say that "the heroine, Tehillah, whose name means 'praise' and 'psalm of praise,' is clearly one of Agnon's finest character creations, one whom he loves and admires." He also characterizes the story as "a wistful lament for the Old City types, personified in a pious, pleasant old lady."² Most critics endorse Band's evaluation of Tehillah and, like him, sing her praises. Gershon Shaked, for example, recognizes in Tehillah a pious heroine who suffers for the sins of her parents and represents the highest ideals of Jews in the Old City of Jerusalem in the 1920s. Hillel Barzel cites other critics whose perception of Tehillah is similar. Leah Goldberg suggests that Agnon employs her to express his yearning for a lost world, to which Barzel adds that the key to Tehillah's character lies in the book of Psalms and in particular the atmosphere of devotion described in it.³ He cites, among other critics, Baruch Kurtzweil's allegorical reading regarding Tehillah not only as a perfect individual but also as a metaphor for the Jewish people, its beauty shrouded by traditions. For Hillel Weiss she is a metaphor for Jerusalem and the eventual advent of the Messiah, whatever delays are involved.

Eddy Zemach sees, in Psalm 104 in particular, an explanation for Tehillah's attitude to the world and to God, and he reminds us that she

¹ First published in 1950. For the Hebrew version, see *Ad henah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1971), 176–206. All English quotations are from I. M. Lask's translation in S. Y. Penueli and A. Ukhmani, eds., *Hebrew Short Stories* (Tel Aviv: Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, 1965), 1:24–52. Another translation, by Walter Lever, may be found in *Ariel* 17 (1969): 75–108.

² Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 398–99, 406, 409.

³ Hillel Barzel, *H. N. Bialik, S. Y. Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Yahdav, 1986), 308–13.

was 104 when she died. For him Tehillah personifies this psalm, and he points out that a talmudic discussion of it happens to refer to the biblical book not by its full name *Tehillim*, but as "Tillie," which happens to be Tehillah's pet name. He concludes by saying that in no other work does Agnon sing such "a hymn for love, humanity, and faith."⁴ He identifies the opening three paragraphs as one of Agnon's more successful pieces of poetic writing, which he also divides into lines to demonstrate how they work as blank verse.⁵

There is, however, another dimension of the story that has not received sufficient attention. As Band notes,

Tehilla evokes in her creator nothing but the fondest admiration. And yet, beneath the admiring, wistful description there is an acute awareness of loss, of crime and punishment, expressed most pointedly by the story of Shraga. In spite of her composure before death, we see that Tehilla's personal life was ruined by religious strife, by her father's objection to Shraga who was then a Hasid.⁶

In my reading of the story I hope to show that Agnon has snared the reader with ironic deftness into thinking that Tehillah is wholly admirable, in order to highlight the deceptive and deceived course of her life. He hints that, far from being "praise"-worthy, as her name suggests, she is a vehicle for the author's critique of the doctrinal conflict between Hasidic and Mitnagdic Judaism current in his time, his exposure of the misery it caused, and his expression of regret for the flight from Judaism that it created among those alienated by its vigor.⁷ She is, according to this reading, more victim than exemplar, but that is not to exclude other readings along different lines. Indeed, the fact that this story lends itself to such varied readings is an indication, I would argue, of its greatness.

In departing from admiring readings of the character of Tehillah and proposing a different approach, I shall examine certain aspects of the text in new ways. I shall begin by attempting to identify and qualify the voice of the narrator, as his is the viewpoint that shows us the moral qualities of the characters and that determines our view of the events in which

⁴ Eddy M. Zemach, *Fine Letters: Hebrew Literature of the Twentieth Century* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1990), 68, 88.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89–90.

⁶ Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 408.

⁷ For more on irony, see Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 3–85; D. C. Mucke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969).

they are involved. The voice or voices presented as speaking in any literary composition determine the nature of the address, and their qualities guide our judgment of what happens in the created fiction. Most writers have found it useful to employ direct judgment, whether in the form of "descriptive adjectives" or "extended commentary,"⁸ and the first few sentences of the story offer just such judgmentally descriptive adjectives: "The light in her eyes spoke kindness and mercy, and the wrinkles in her cheeks, blessing and peace. Were it not that women were to be compared to angels, I would say that she was just like one of God's own angels" (24–25). But until we have formed an idea of what kind of a narrator this may be, how can we be sure that his evaluation of Tehillah is reliable? We are told that he met her only a few times and that each encounter save one was by chance. When he first met her after his return from abroad, he did not even recognize her (27–28). The narrator's voice can therefore be defined as that of a protagonist in the same fiction as that which Tehillah also inhabits. He is a reporter without privileged insight into other characters and is limited to realistic vision and inference. The reader, accordingly, is free to read between the lines to draw conclusions independently of the narrator.

The narrator produces a mixed speech: the basic voice is his own, but he is the reader's sole source of information on the speech of other characters, whose voices are introduced through direct quotations. Since the narrator is presented as the voice of the implied author, it is his function to persuade and convince the reader to accept these apparent norms. Only when this has been done can the reader rely on whatever the narrator discloses. The reader, together with the narrator, can then judge the characters in the light of those norms, which, indeed, might not necessarily be the reader's own. Yet if the narrator is a protagonist distinct from the author, the reader must ask what the implied author may wish the reader to conclude, or at least to ask. If the narrator cannot be regarded as reliable, therefore, stronger demands are made on the reader's power of inference and interpretation.

Let us examine next how the narrator establishes the norms in this story. In the opening paragraph he compares Tehillah to "an angel," relying on the assumption that the reader will agree that this is a "good" thing. He continues throughout the story to reinforce the norms that he tacitly regards as good, while overtly introducing his own self. He tells us how he was appalled to see, while wandering through the alleyways of the Old City of Jerusalem, that passers-by gave no money to the poor. He

⁸ As termed by Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

then impresses the reader by reporting how "I had a pocket full of small coins with me, so I went from one beggar to another giving each of them his alms" (26). He was at that time on a mission to visit a lonely old woman, the widow of a rabbi, in order to keep a promise made to her grandson whom he had happened to meet abroad. When he found the *rebbetsin* living in poverty, he bought her a portable stove, pretending that the grandson had given him the money to do so (27). When Tehillah praised him for his good deed, he reports, "I bowed my head like one embarrassed at hearing himself praised" (28). Hearing that Tehillah—who was "nicer than anybody you have ever seen"—told him that he was a good person inclines the reader to accept this evaluation. The narrator is believed because he seems to be not only objective but "good." Later, when he saw that the *rebbetsin* was offended because Tehillah was speaking to him and not to her, he left, showing himself also to be kind. His sensitivity emerges when he listens to her story and puts his finger to his eyes to wipe away the tears (49). His piety is established by the way in which he likens her room to a place of worship, and his religious background is indicated by the description of how, as a boy, he had written an Esther Scroll "in accordance with all the proper rules" (40). The norms regarded as desirable by the narrator are goodness, piety, kindness, sensitivity, and patience, and he encourages us to recognize these in Tehillah.

In this way Agnon lures the reader into a trap in which Tehillah is regarded as a paragon of virtue. But there is evidence that this is not so. The narrator praises those who emulate the good deeds of earlier generations "who had been full of good qualities" (31). Yet, ironically, Tehillah, who belonged to that older generation, was not completely good, even to judge by the evidence supplied by the narrator. This, I would argue, suggests that although on the surface the narration seems to be objective and reliable, it in fact is not so, suggesting that the reports of the narrator have to be viewed critically. When Tehillah tells the narrator that she believed her years to have been prolonged because she had not yet finished the amount of words allotted to her by God, the narrator does not support this reasoning and relies on the reader to doubt her words. Even if she accepts the idea of determinism, it is not clear that the narrator does. He therefore does not claim omniscience, but rather to be a witness reporting what he has seen and heard. Agnon deliberately subverts the impression of objectivity in his account of Tehillah's life by means of the intrusion of the narrator's personality. The narrator, although he seems to be an objective observer because he stands apart from the other characters in the story, is himself, in the end, a character in need of interpretation.

Band rightly places this story within the genre of the folktale, one of eight Agnon published between 1942 and 1953 under the influence of early nineteenth-century German Romanticism. There, as here, the epic

element contains lyricism blended with autobiographical elements, producing parallels between the lives of the narrator and the author.⁹ For example, both Agnon and the narrator returned to Jerusalem, a feature that should alert us to the narrative technique that he employs and the genre on which it is based. Folklore was an important component of Romanticism, and Agnon accordingly adopted and adapted Hasidic tales as a suitable mode for his writing.¹⁰ For historical reasons, Hebrew writers in the early part of the twentieth century were influenced by the Social Realism that dominated much Eastern European literature. But Agnon liberated many younger Hebrew writers from its narrower aspects by injecting both realism and fantasy into his own writing. We accordingly glimpse here the reality of Palestine, and particularly of Jerusalem, in the mid 1920s: the poverty of Jews and Arabs living without running water and the milling tourists. He refers to the Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate and to an event that took place around Passover in 1922, when Muslims prevented Jews from bringing chairs to the Western Wall, their place of prayer. (The British authorities thereafter decreed that chairs were indeed not allowed around the Western Wall.) Yet in Agnon's story historical reality serves only as a background to more fantastic elements.

Agnon leads us to expect that here, as in most folktales, there will be "good" and "bad" people, but he seems deliberately to sow confusion concerning the two old ladies whom he presents as embodying these qualities. The contrast is already diminished by the fact that their lives were so enmeshed that they had nearly become relatives. But in other respects, although they are startlingly opposite—Tehillah appearing to be the good one and the *rebbetsin* the bad one—the final picture is more nuanced than a reader who views the story as folklore will think. The narrator testifies that "The one who had seen me to the home of that sage of mine was amiable while the one to whom I sent the oven was rude even to someone concerned about her welfare" (27). The eyes of Tehillah "spoke kindness and mercy," while the *rebbetsin* appears as a grumpy and graceless old woman. However, we soon learn about Tehillah's failings. For example, she herself acknowledges that economy of speech, which was a desirable quality, had been difficult for her. As a child she had been a chatterbox: "From morning to night I simply never stopped chattering" (31). The *rebbetsin* seems not to have suffered from this fault.

⁹ Gershon Shaked, *Omanut hasippur shel Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1973), 264.

¹⁰ For more on this subject, see Leah Goldberg, *Ha'omets leḥulin* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1976).

Only when Tehillah was frightened that this might make her dumb did she manage to control her tongue. Again unlike the *rebbetsin*, who was unable to write letters, Tehillah ensured that she was properly equipped and could turn down the use of a fountain pen, saying "take this quill which I myself have prepared. I don't doubt your pen, but I want my letter to be written with my own utensils. Here is a sheet of paper, a first-grade paper which I have kept from bygone days" (39). Although on the surface of the text it seems to be unfortunate that the old world should disintegrate in the face of modernity, the reader knows that the narrator thinks differently, for it is clear that the fountain pen and the portable stove are good things.

The dissolution of this contrast between Tehillah and the *rebbetsin*, I believe, points to the possible resolution of the central tension of the story deriving from the confrontation between the Hasidim and their opponents the Mitnagdim. Tehillah, I suggest, embodies major characteristics of Hasidic belief and practice. The first of these is a belief that since the will of the individual cannot resist the power of Divine Providence, it is necessary to overcome one's finite nature and aspire to *bittul hayesh*, "negation of existence," particularly during prayer. The second is a commitment to resist melancholy attitudes and to embrace *hitlahavut*, "burning enthusiasm." A third principle of Hasidism is the realization that this program of utter devotion to God is impossible for most people, so that it is necessary to rely on a *tsaddiq*, a "righteous man," to pray on one's behalf.

This subversion of the folkloric contrast between the characters is supported by kabbalistic motifs in the story. But although it seems that the *rebbetsin* is the "other side," the *sitra ahra*, in kabbalistic terms, her qualities are not only negative. This is symbolically important because, according to the central work of mysticism, the Zohar, there is a spark of holiness even in the "other side." The *rebbetsin* is described in opposite terms to those applied to Tehillah, and a comparison between the two old ladies is inevitable. Indeed, the *rebbetsin* is cast as a negative figure on several levels. Before we even meet her we encounter the cat outside her door, a creature that is one of the forms taken by Lilith, the female demon, which in the world of sin fulfills a function parallel to that of the Divine Presence in the world of sanctity.¹¹

Yet in an important respect Tehillah joins the *rebbetsin* on the negative side, for she is seen seeking after the "hidden light" of mystical and erotic joy that humanity was unworthy to possess. It has been pointed

¹¹ Agnon used the cat in *Hakhmasat kallah* as the redeemer of a whole community. In *Temol shilshom*, the dog can be seen as the reflection of the protagonist, Yitzhak Kumer.

out that the deprivation of erotic joy occurs in many of Agnon's stories and that this arises particularly when an engagement to marry was not kept.¹² Tehillah longed for the forbidden "hidden light" in the form of her first fiancé Shraga and in doing so was unfaithful to her husband and transgressed a major moral prohibition. *Shraga* means "candle" in Aramaic and also suggests something used at an inappropriate time or place and therefore of no benefit, as in the talmudic expression: "a candle at noon, what can we benefit from it?" Zemach even suggests that Tehillah committed adultery with Shraga, if only in her imagination, a sin that would certainly justify her suffering more convincingly than the view, held by many critics, that she was punished because her father tore up the marriage contract. Ninety-three years after their separation, thirty since Shraga's death (after which she came to Jerusalem) and shortly before her own death, she thinks only of him. In support of this reading, one sees that, throughout the story, neither Tehillah's husband nor her children are mentioned by name. She does not want to be separated from Shraga in death any more than she did in life, and she plans to be buried together with her letter to him.¹³

It is not Shraga who was imperfect, but Tehillah herself, at least on the deeper level of the text. On the surface level, she had had to pay for her father's objection to the marriage that, even if it seemed right from his religious point of view, the narrator and reader know to have been wrong.¹⁴ The struggle between the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim was futile, and it is ironic that while Tehillah used to belong to the latter camp, her punishment led her to become a follower of Hasidism. She now tells her story to a narrator who is not a Hasid but is prepared to meet her despite her Hasidic characteristics, pointing to the idea that Agnon intended the story as a vehicle for rebuking the negative attitudes of Hasidic and Mitnagdic Jews to each other and to demonstrate the need for a third way, suggested here by the narrator. Agnon presents him as one who has completed the ideological journey that has torn Tehillah's life apart and found a way to the unity of vision exemplified by his acts of charity that reflect a value shared by Hasidim and Mitnagdim alike.

The dissonance that takes over Tehillah's life as a result of this antipathy is illustrated when she tells the narrator so briefly about mourning for

¹² See a detailed discussion on the subject in Zemach, *Fine Letters*, 82–83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

¹⁴ I disagree with Moshe Granot's reductive crusade against the religious message in Agnon's stories. See *Agnon lelo masveh* (Tel Aviv: Yaron Golan, 1991), 23–27.

her second son.¹⁵ She mentions neither the son nor her husband by name but immediately dispatches the husband to look for Shraga in order to seek his forgiveness for her father's sin of tearing up the marriage contract. Tehillah then tells the narrator about a dispute between two Hasidic rabbis that culminated in the killing of a Jew, sharpening the impression of the futility of such disputes and the tragedies they cause. Her whole life had been governed by the strife between the two sects, yet the husband discovered how easily the gulf could be bridged, for he found that Shraga had become a Mitnaged. Tehillah does not comment on this revelation, although the reader may guess that Shraga's move was motivated by his love for Tehillah, who by this time had become tacitly Hasidic. Her husband's death while searching for Shraga is reported briefly and dryly by Tehillah, as is that of her son. There is no reference to mourning, but merely that she "put up a tombstone over his grave" (48), returned to her hometown, and went into business. Tehillah reflects that "It might have been better if I have been granted wisdom instead of strength and energy, but the Lord is a knowing God Who does not require the opinions of His creatures as to what is good" (48). On the surface this seems to be an expression of religious passivity, but it also comments on Tehillah's flight from the factionalism that overshadowed her life and points to the dangers opened by her search for a third way.

As business increased, Tehillah had time for her home and her surviving daughter only on Sabbaths and Festivals, "and even then half a day was spent in synagogue and half in receiving guests" (48). She thought: "The more wealth I acquire the more I shall benefit her" (48), but the narrator and the reader have already heard that this was an error, even though she only later realized that the accumulation of money is not more important than personally caring for a child. Refusing to participate in the conflict that had brought her such misery, she hired gentile tutors because she suspected the local teachers of being "free-thinkers," which suggests that she wished to exclude the partisan views that she believed prevailed. In so doing, however, she created the conditions in which the daughter would convert to Christianity and become a nun, which in Jewish terms is little less disastrous than the death suffered by her brothers. We hear this from the *rebbe'sin*, but Tehillah could say about her daughter only that "an evil spirit entered into my daughter and she went crazy" (49). Was she too ashamed to tell the narrator the truth since she realized that she was to blame for her daughter's fate? The fact that Tehillah did not tell the narrator the true fate of her daughter, even

¹⁵ See the passages on pp. 202–3 in the Hebrew text and on pp. 47–49 in the English translation.

though she seems to be telling him the whole true story of her life, is another indication that we can no longer rely on her narration or his report of it. She is shown by Agnon to be manipulating the report for her own reasons, and this omission suggests that Tehillah's attempt to write a letter asking for forgiveness from Shraga may also fail, since she is still not entirely truthful even to herself. Indeed, his death may represent all the deaths in the story, for we are told that his occurred on 7 Adar, the anniversary of both the birth and death of Moses and the day on which Jewish burial fraternities meet to celebrate their year's work. Again, she does not mention her feelings when she learned of his death, but her desire to escape the conflict that had haunted her can be seen from her decision then to leave Europe for Jerusalem. Tehillah, who is therefore far from as perfect as she is said to be in the first sentence of the story, has erred in her life, is aware of her weaknesses, and is ashamed of them but repents only outwardly by her self-imposed exile and her devotion to good deeds. Inner atonement seems to elude her, and to be lodged with the narrator's account of her life and death.



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**RELIGIOUS ECSTASY, EROTIC TURMOIL, AND
CHRISTIAN INNUENDOS IN S. Y. AGNON'S
"HANESHIQAH HARISHONAH" ("FIRST KISS")**

Dalia Dromi

נודעזע לבי ודבק פי בפיה ופיה דבק בפי ונעימות נועם באה מפיה לפי,
ואולי אף מפי לפיה. לפעולה זו קוראים בלשון הקודש נשיקת פה
לגבי כאן יש להוסיף, נשיקה זו נשיקה ראשונה היתה שנשקתי אני
לנערה. וקרוב בעיני שאף נשיקתה נשיקה ראשונה היתה, נשיקת בתולים
שאינ עמה מכאוב, אלא טובה וברכה וחיים וחסד, שאיש ואשה
חיים בהם עד זקנה ושיבה. (161)

My heart thundered and my mouth fastened to hers, and her mouth to mine. And the purest sweetness flowed from her mouth to mine and—it is possible—from my mouth to hers. We call this in Hebrew “the kiss of the mouth” I should say here that this was the first time I ever kissed a young girl, and it seems almost certain to me that it was her first kiss as well: a kiss of innocence that carries with it no pain, but goodness and blessing, life, grace, and kindness, whereby a man and a woman live together till calm old age. (276)¹

S. Y. Agnon’s “Haneshiqah harishonah” is a somewhat enigmatic and puzzling story. The ecstatic kiss described above² is the climax of a bizarre experience that leaves the reader with many unanswered questions. Is the

¹ S. Y. Agnon, “Haneshiqah harishonah,” in *Pithei devarim* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1977), 158–61; S. Y. Agnon, “The First Kiss,” in Nahum N. Glatzer, ed., *Twenty-One Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 271–76. All references are to the English version.

² In the Hebrew version, the ecstatic nature of that kiss is accentuated in the language: the word “mouth” is repeated eight times in one short sentence, and the word “kiss” is repeated seven times in the course of four sentences.

story about erotic love or religious ecstasy? What do the Christian figures, appearing prior to that kiss, represent in this fiction? What is their relationship, if any, to the first kiss? The clue to these questions lies in the specific perspective from which the entire experience unfolds and, obviously, in the significance of that occurrence.

The story is located in an Eastern European *shtetl* around the beginning of the century. The narrator, an adult, tells us that when he was a youth his father had to leave town on a Friday and asked him to look after their shop. Most of the day the boy sat listlessly at the shop. However, in the afternoon as he was about to close for the Sabbath, three priests³ appeared and asked to have a word with him. The boy hesitated at first, but then he closed the shop and went with them. When they approached his home, the child invited them in. He hosted them, conversed with them, and offered them food that his mother had prepared for the Sabbath. Amazed at their extraordinary knowledge of Jewish customs, the boy completely lost track of time. After a while, he realized that the Sabbath was about to begin. Yet time seemed to have stopped mysteriously: the sun stood still, and so did the clock. Eventually the three priests left, and two other priests, who appeared from nowhere, came looking for them. As the boy was speaking to them, a bizarre event occurred: the two priests became one figure that appeared to be a Jewish boy but turned out to be a Jewish girl. Upon learning that the Jewish girl was the daughter of the Zaddik from Likowitz, the protagonist recalled hearing a sermon by her father that described the coming together of all nations under the Jewish God. The boy and the girl united in an ecstatic kiss, and the story ends with the bliss of love and harmony.

Although little has been written on this intriguing story, the few articles that have appeared present differing, even polarized opinions. Judith Weiss regards the story as the incessant struggle of the protagonist, who belongs to neither the old world nor the new, to locate himself.⁴ She suggests that the departure of the father, who symbolizes the old world, leaves the boy exposed to the temptations of the new world. For Weiss, the dream is the realization of forbidden desires. According to her, the young man lives in sin yet aspires to purity and sanctity that are beyond his reach. He is the keeper of the shop who, like Adam in Eden, fails.⁵ Yoav Elstein holds

³ Although in the English translation of the story the three are referred to as monks (and they may very well be monks), in the Hebrew version, they are specifically termed priests.

⁴ Judith Weiss, "Haneshiqah harishonah leS. Y. Agnon," *Biqqoret ufarshanut* 4-5 (1974): 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

that the story is about the realization of wishes, of yearnings for unity. Perfect love, according to Elstein, is at once mundane and metaphysical.⁶ Hillel Barzel finds in the story a yearning for the perfection of primary, innocent experiences, which coalesce in the narrator's mind with the religious perfection of the End of Days.⁷ I would like to suggest a different reading of the story, one that unites all these polarities—temptation and innocence, forbidden desires and perfection—in one specific experience.

"Haneshiqah harishonah" is autobiographical and personal in nature: told in the first person, an adult relates the story of an event from his childhood. Although never openly stated, the story seems to be formulated as a dream. An earlier, unpublished version of this tale, "Ḥalom" ("Dream"),⁸ explicitly puts the narrative in a dream setting. Agnon uses these techniques—an adult narrating his childhood and the dream setting—in "Hamitpaḥat" ("The Kerchief"), as well as in most of the stories in *Sefer hama'asim*.⁹ "Haneshiqah harishonah" offers a glimpse into the psyche of a Jewish lad who, like the child in "Hamitpaḥat,"¹⁰ goes through an experience that marks the shift from childhood to maturity.

In general, the shift from childhood to adulthood entails a psychological severing of the child from his family. The father's absence from home and from the shop furnishes, in "Haneshiqah harishonah," an ideal setting for the Jewish boy to acquire his independence.¹¹ The story captures that moment of change, the experience that marks the shift from childhood to maturity. This change seems to occur on the religious as well as the erotic level.

Ordinarily, prior to maturation a child's notions of his Jewishness are predominantly associated with religious customs and images of family

⁶ Yoav Elstein, "Hazarut hamitmateqet," *De'ot* 34 (1967): 263–66.

⁷ Hillel Barzel, ed., *S. Y. Agnon: miḥar ma'amarim al yetsirato* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982), 38–39.

⁸ S. Y. Agnon, "Ḥalom," unpublished, Agnon's archive, #1270 4. See Weiss, "Haneshiqah harishonah," 35 n. 61.

⁹ S. Y. Agnon, "Sefer hama'asim," in *Samukh venireh* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976), 103–221.

¹⁰ The parallelism between "Haneshiqah harishonah" and "Hamitpaḥat" was suggested by Arnold Band in a conversation. S. Y. Agnon, "Hamitpaḥat," in *Elu ve'elu* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953), 256–67; S. Y. Agnon, "The Kerchief," in Nahum N. Glatzer, ed., *Twenty-One Stories*, trans. I. M. Lask, 45–59.

¹¹ This is also the case in Agnon's "Hamitpaḥat": a child on the verge of his bar mitzvah goes through a certain experience of maturation, while his father is away from home.

life. The process of maturation involves the development of an independent Jewish identity. In "Haneshiqah harishonah" the boy, exposed probably for the first time to the world outside his Jewish milieu, faces the issue of his religious identity. The budding of an independent Jewish consciousness entails, in his case, an imaginary encounter with three priests who represent, in his mind, temptation. This encounter presumably occurs while the boy is daydreaming at the shop.

At the beginning, the boy's relations with the priests are described in terms of two opposing parties:

I thought to myself, if they've come to do business, Friday afternoon close to sunset is no time to do business; and if they've come to talk, I'm not the man for them. . . . I was hesitant to reply and they smiled. (271)
. . . They began to talk and I kept quiet. (272; emphasis added)

Yet, later on, the boy hosts the priests and lingers with them. He is simultaneously repulsed by and attracted to the priests: "I stood there . . . neither here nor there, like a man with nothing to do" (274; emphasis added), says the adult narrator. This vacillation results in the boy's neglect of his Jewish obligations: he fails to prepare for the Sabbath and, still worse, fails to arrive at the synagogue. Significantly, when his mother enters the room, the priests leave. The priests can function only in the presence of one whose identity has not yet fully matured. It takes a rude, entirely unexpected push by one of the priests to shake the boy and remind him that he is hated by them.

The boy's problematic religious identity at this stage is implied in the priest's remark at the sight of the two Sabbath candles: "There's you, your father, and your mother. Why doesn't your mother light a third candle for her son?" (272). The absence of that candle suggests that the boy does not yet exist as an independent Jewish consciousness. The episode with the priests at the boy's home recalls the biblical scene of Abraham and the three angels who heralded the birth of Isaac. That biblical echo comes, perhaps, to alert the reader to the imminent birth of a Jewish identity. At this point, however, the boy is still wavering. This is suggested by the fact that side by side with the biblical reverberations there are also Christian insinuations. The priest's comment on the third candle for the son may also imply the holy family: Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Moreover, the biblical episode of Abraham and the three angels is indirectly significant also to the Christians: the binding of Isaac is perceived by them as a prefiguration of Jesus' crucifixion.

In fact, throughout the story Christian and Jewish images and echoes are interwoven. Reverberations of Abraham, Isaac, and Jesus underlie the hosting of the three priests by the boy, as mentioned above. The sun that

does not set while the boy dallies with the priests recalls the biblical phenomenon of the sun that stood still over Gibeon: "The sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the people had revenge upon their enemies" (Joshua 10:13). Significantly, the context of that phenomenon is one of confrontation between two faiths, Judaism and paganism. The number two is another significant symbol in Jewish tradition: the two candles that possibly represent the Written Torah and the Oral Torah; the two entrances to the house that may stand for the duality of *qodesh* (holy) and *hol* (common). On the other hand, the recurring number three—three priests and the pointing with three fingers—alludes to the Trinity. The Jewish boy is himself associated, as previously noted, with Jesus. The priests likewise import both Christian and Jewish overtones. The three Christian priests are exceptionally knowledgeable of Jewish laws and customs and are referred to as "fathers." Although this is a regular term within the church, it is odd for a Jew, for whom "fathers" signify the three biblical patriarchs.

In the framework of the old world, Jesus and Christianity have always been unequivocally rejected by Jews. The boy's attitude toward the priests is, however, confused and indecisive. The combination of a Jew and a non-Jew in a Jewish protagonist often indicates a problem in Agnon's stories. This is the case, for example, in the figure of the old man in "Maglei tsedeq" ("Paths of Righteousness, or The Vinegar Maker")¹² and the peddler in "Ha'adonit veharokhel" ("The Lady and the Peddler"),¹³ who are naïve and shortsighted. The fluidity and interchange of Jewish and Christian images and scenes in "Haneshiqah harishonah" likewise reflect the boy's unsettled state of mind, signifying a problematic phase in the process of his maturation.¹⁴

The boy's preoccupation with his identity is further highlighted in the exchange between the boy and the priest who becomes a Jew, and in his recurring question regarding the priest's identity:

¹² S. Y. Agnon, "Maglei tsedeq," in *Elu ve'elu*, 383–88; S. Y. Agnon, "Paths of Righteousness, or The Vinegar Maker," in Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman, eds., *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories*, trans. Ariel Gurt (New York: Schocken, 1995), 192–97.

¹³ S. Y. Agnon, "Ha'adonit veharokhel," in *Samukh venireh*, 92–102; S. Y. Agnon, "The Lady and the Peddler" in Mintz and Hoffman, *A Book That Was Lost*, trans. Robert Alter, 198–210.

¹⁴ In the stories mentioned above, interchange of Jewish and Christian images and identities have a bearing on the collective level as well. It suggests, often ironically, the inherent tension within Jewish-Christian relations: the proximity between Christianity and Judaism, on the one hand, and the reality of an unbridgeable dichotomy, on the other.

"Listen, my brother, aren't you a Jew?" ... "Tell me," I repeated my question, "aren't you a Jew?" ... I said to him, "if you're a Jew what are you doing with them?" (275)

The priest who transforms into a Jew/ess can be perceived as the boy's alter ego. In that case, the last question—"What are you doing with them?"—harks back to the boy's former association with the priests and to his as yet unsettled religious identity. At this stage, the Christian option still exists alongside the Jewish one.

From the moment the scene turns Jewish, the boy's manner changes entirely. He becomes freer and more confident. He talks to the Jewish "boy," he touches him, he puts his hand on his shoulder and his lips to his, "as if to transfer my sense of hearing to my mouth" (275). This rapprochement culminates in a kiss of archetypal proportions. Described in religious terms,¹⁵ the kiss signifies religious innocence and perfection. It is a metaphorical kiss that epitomizes the uniting of the believer with the *shekhinah* (the female aspect of God in the Kabbalah). This first kiss marks the moment of maturity and the birth of an independent Jewish consciousness.

Alongside the boy's religious maturation, the experience he undergoes yields also an erotic interpretation. The boy seems to have faced, probably for the first time as the story's title suggests, a surge of sexual sensations that bewilder him. The frame of reference of an Eastern European Jewish child at the beginning of the twentieth century was predominantly religious. It is therefore not improbable to surmise that a primary confrontation with the unfamiliar would be conveyed in religious terms. Erotic temptation, deemed by the boy as illegitimate, is transposed in his mind to the religious sphere and perceived as the neglect of the Torah and perhaps even as a threat of conversion. The encounter with the three priests is then a manifestation of the boy's erotic confusion. Judith Weiss suggests that the traits and physiognomy of the three priests imply erotic temptation. The first priest's passion for food represents, according to Weiss, all passions; the red-colored stain on the forehead of the second priest conveys eroticism; the bizarre Adam's apple of the third alludes to Adam's sin and his temptation by a woman.¹⁶ Hillel Barzel points out that Agnon's story, "Harofei ugerushato" ("The Doctor and His Divorcée"), also introduces Jesus in connection with the erotic in its negative sense, namely, adultery. "Harofei ugerushato" recounts a primary erotic experience that has been desecrated, while

¹⁵ These religious terms are especially conspicuous in the Hebrew version.

¹⁶ Weiss, "Haneshiqah harishonah," 30.

"Haneshiqah harishonah" delineates a primary erotic experience that has been realized.¹⁷

If the Christian priests embody the boy's anxiety in the face of erotic sensations, the change of identity—a priest becoming a Jew/ess—and the return to the Jewish ambiance suggest the beginning of an acceptance of these sensations. The extraordinary change in the boy's conduct and attitude toward his interlocutor, the esteemed status of his beloved, the daughter of a Zaddik, and the ensuing archetypal kiss "of innocence . . . and blessing" (276) imply the ultimate vindication in the boy's mind of his feelings. Yoav Elstein correlates the cosmic arrest in the story when time stands still to this rapturous moment that exists beyond the flow of time.¹⁸ The primary erotic experience has become an epitome of love and marital harmony.

In Agnon's stories, the blurring of distinctions between Jews and Christians often culminates in some sort of an eruption or an anxiety that, for the most part, ends up in a restored order of separation. This is the case, for example, in "Nifle'ot shamash beit hamidrash hayashan" ("Wonders of the Sexton of the Old Beit Midrash"),¹⁹ "Ha'adonit veharokhel," and "Maglei tsedeq." In "Haneshiqah harishonah," Jesus and Christianity represent, in the psyche of the maturing boy, the antithesis, the "other," whose rejection is vital to the budding of the boy's Jewish identity. While order is again restored, this story, unlike the other stories, goes a step further. Beginning with a Jewish boy who almost yields to three Christian priests, the story ends with the Christians joining the Jewish God. In the boy's mind, if sin was aligned with Christianity, the uniting of the two lovers in a kiss merges with the prophecy of the End of Days.

These reminiscences of the narrator's experience of maturation uncover his longing for the impossible, that is, the recapturing of that innocence that enables the powerful experience of "primariness," whether religious or erotic. These recollections also import longings for the religious innocence of old times, which in the post-Enlightenment era is problematic: "He [the priest who transforms into a Jew] had the kind of beauty you used to be able to see in every Jewish town, the beauty of

¹⁷ Barzel, *S. Y. Agnon*, 37.

¹⁸ Yoav Elstein compares that cosmic moment in "Haneshiqah harishonah" to a similar phenomenon in Agnon's "Hamitpahat," which occurs when the boy hands his mother's kerchief to the beggar. See Elstein, "Hazarut hamitmateqet," 264.

¹⁹ S. Y. Agnon, "Nifle'ot shamash beit hamidrash hayashan," in *Elu ve'elu*, 375–78.

young Jewish boys who have never tasted the taste of sin" (274). The first kiss, signifying innocence and perfection, momentarily resolves these longings by uniting the adult narrator with the child in himself and the modern man with the unwavering faith of the past. "Halom," the earlier, unpublished version of "Haneshiqah harishonah," specifically suggests this reuniting of the adult with the experiences of the maturing child: "And when I woke up, I felt a certain sweetness in my mouth, *which I have not felt for many years.*"²⁰ Indeed, the unique taste of that moment of unity between the adult and the child could only be retrieved by the adult in a dream, or reproduced in an act of narration in "Haneshiqah harishonah."

²⁰ S. Y. Agnon, "Halom." Italics are mine.



◆

FLIRTATION IN S. Y. AGNON'S *SHIRA*

Nancy Ezer

יושב לו מנפרד הרבסט בלילה בכיתו ואינו הולך לעיר. ודבר זה טוב, שאם בא לעיר נכנס אצל שירה, וליכנס אצל שירה אינו רוצה. לשון אחר, רוצה ואינו רוצה, והואיל ואין הרצון שלם סבור הוא שבאמת אינו רוצה.

Manfred Herbst sits at home nights and doesn't go into town. Which is a good thing, for, if he were to go there, he would stop at Shira's, and he doesn't want to stop at Shira's. In other words, he does and he doesn't want to, and since he is ambivalent, he assumes he really doesn't want to. (95)¹

יצא הרבסט מבית החולים בלא שראה את שירה. לכו היה מעורבב ולא ידע אם מרוצה הוא שלא ראה את שירה אם אינו מרוצה שלא ראה את שירה. ושוב אותה מדה שמצויה ברוב בני אדם ולא בהרבסט בלבד. כשהחליטה דעתו שמרוצה הוא שלא ראה את שירה באה דעה אחרת ואמרה לו כאן היית יכול לראותה. אילו בקשת אותה היית מוצאה.

Herbst left the hospital without seeing Shira. He had mixed feelings. He didn't know whether he was pleased not to have seen Shira or whether he was displeased not to have seen Shira. Once again, a quality common not only to Herbst but to most people was manifest. When he decided he was pleased not to have seen Shira, an alternate view asserted itself: You could have seen her here. If you had searched, you would have found her. (387)

In his book *On Flirtation*, the English psychoanalyst Adam Phillips observes that in any shift of allegiance, in any transition, there is some flirtation. Flirtation sustains the game of uncertainty and sabotages the vocabulary of commitment. It is often an unconscious form of

¹ All citations of English translations from the novel are from S. Y. Agnon, *Shira*, trans. Zeva Shapiro (New York: Schocken, 1989).

skepticism.² People tend to flirt only with serious things: madness, disaster, other people's affection.³ Flirtation in itself, as a means of relating to people and ideas, has usually gotten bad press because of our human preference for progressive narrative and closure.⁴ However, precisely for its oscillation and suspense, flirtation turns the unpredictability of life into a new kind of master plot.⁵ Flirtation can be a source of excitement and pleasure,⁶ and flirtation's implicit wish is to sustain the life of desire. It keeps things in play and exploits the idea of surprise, until the point where the known and wished-for end in refusal, deferral, or sometimes even sadistic denial. As the German sociologist, Georg Simmel intimates, "every conclusive decision brings flirtation to an end."⁷

² Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), xii.

³ In the last twenty years, researchers in social psychology have addressed flirtation as a behavior and interpersonal communication and illuminated the complexity of its messages. See Monica Moore, "Nonverbal Courtship Patterns in Women: Context and Consequences," *Ethology and Sociology* 6 (4) (1985): 237-47; Jerrold Downey and Williams Vitulli, "Self-Report Measures of Behavioral Attributes Related to Interpersonal Flirtation Situations," *Psychological Reports* 61 (1987): 899-904; Matthew Abrahams, "Perceiving Flirtatious Communication: An Exploration of the Perceptual Dimensions Underlying Judgments of Flirtatiousness," *Journal of Sex Research* 31 (4) (1994): 283-292; and Pamela Kalbfleisch, ed., *Interpersonal Communication* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1993). Researchers have compared the approach of senders and recipients (Jerrold Downey and Katharina Damhave, "The Effects of Pace, Type of Comment, and Effort Expended on the Perception of Flirtation," *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 6 [1] [1991]: 35-43) and men and women (Dorothy Peven and Bernard Shulman, "Current Role Confusion among Young Women from the Viewpoint of Adler's Psychology," *The Individual Psychologist* 14 [2] [1977]: 22-29; Naomi McCormick and Andrew Jones, "Gender Differences in Nonverbal Flirtation," *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy* 15 [4] [1989]: 271-82; Jeffrey Simpson, Steven Gangestad, and Michael Biek, "Personality and Nonverbal Social Behavior: An Ethological Perspective of Relationship Initiation," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 29 [1993]: 434-61). Researchers have also attempted to define the criteria differentiating flirtatious and friendship messages and to measure the effectiveness and the recognizability of flirtation (see Downey and Damhave, "Effects of Pace"; and David Givens, "The Nonverbal Basis of Attraction: Flirtation, Courtship, and Seduction," *Psychiatry* 41 [1978]: 346-59).

⁴ Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xvii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁶ Georg Simmel, "Flirtation," in *On Women, Sexuality, and Love*, trans. Guy Oaks (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 133-52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

Therefore, the dynamics of flirtation demand avoiding risks and commitment and refraining from action.⁸

The lengthy, unfinished novel of S. Y. Agnon, *Shira*, which takes place about ten years before the establishment of the State of Israel, is undoubtedly a virtuoso representation of the dynamics of flirtation. The protagonist, Dr. Manfred Herbst, is a father of two grown daughters with a baby on the way, and a serious and modest "yekeh" scholar of Byzantine culture at the Hebrew University. He finds himself, in his forties, flirting with the idea of having an affair with a young and beautiful woman and attempting to write a historical tragedy. What seems at first only a fantasy quickly and unexpectedly materializes when Herbst brings his wife to the maternity ward and meets the liberated and opinionated nurse, Shira. What is supposed to be a one-night adventure turns into ceaseless and complicated mental swings between Herbst's love and loyalty to his wife Henrietta and his obsessive attraction to Shira, who stops responding to him after their first meeting. This oscillation and indecisiveness is the heart of flirtation. And, as Phillips points out, flirtation is a state in which one is continuously making up one's mind.⁹ Herbst's compulsive running between the two women provides him with an opportunity to redefine his identity and, in the course of the novel, develops into an additional flirtation with the truth about himself. In order to understand how this shift comes about, we need to examine the tension between Henrietta and Shira as it takes shape in Herbst's mind.

In Herbst's consciousness, Henrietta and Shira embody complete opposites. The contrast between them is rendered through allusions to the traditional tension between Eve, the mother figure, and Lilith, the voluptuous and lascivious queen of demons. The psychoanalyst Nitza Abarbanell¹⁰ uses Freud's explanation of the incest taboo and the Oedipus complex derived from it to account for the existing split in the patriarchal culture between motherly and erotic love. This division, in her opinion, finds its expression in the contrast between the two female archetypes, Eve and Lilith. Abarbanell quotes Freud, intimating that "where they love, they do not desire, and where they desire, they cannot love."¹¹ This polarization is realized in Herbst's oscillation between Henrietta, the motherly, pregnant, and legitimate wife, and the childless, forbidden, and ever-more

⁸ The source for the excitement and play in flirtation lies, according to Phillips, in childhood. Children's attempts to seduce and rival their parents leads them to unconsciously discover the incest taboo while trying to sabotage it. See Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xxiii-xxiv.

⁹ Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xii.

¹⁰ Nitza Abarbanell, *Eve and Lilith* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1994), 14.

¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 207.

desirable Shira. The difference between the two women parallels the particular roles Eve and Lilith serve in the literary tradition.¹²

Like Eve, the loyal and submissive wife whose task it is to maintain the family unit, Henrietta is portrayed as a devoted, resourceful, beautiful, and educated wife. Her main concerns revolve around the welfare of her children and husband. She does all she can to enable her husband to concentrate on his research, trying not to burden him with the household chores and the children's education. A considerable part of the narrative describing the couple's relationship is dedicated to Henrietta's motherly care for Herbst's meals and her concern for his physical health. She insists that he eat nutritional meals on time, sleep well, not smoke, and take his daily walk. Henrietta, however, is always tired and busy with the household management and preoccupied with the certificates she is trying to obtain to bring her relatives in Germany to Palestine. She neglects her appearance, and since the birth of her now seventeen-year-old daughter, Tamara, she has rarely been intimate with her husband, claiming that she is a dry tree. Henrietta does not join her husband in his daily stroll, which lasts until midnight, and she never questions him about his whereabouts. The children Henrietta gives birth to during the course of the novel, when she is already about forty years old, are the fruit of only occasional intimacy between the couple; their third daughter, Sarah, was born nine months after Herbst's birthday, and their son is a product of a nightmare that caused Herbst to cling to his wife out of fear and emotional confusion.

In direct contrast to Henrietta stands Shira. She is, like Lilith, an attractive woman in control of her own sexuality, since she is not constrained by obligations to family¹³ or cultural ideals. Shira is portrayed as a *femme fatale*.¹⁴ She is loyal only to herself and to her patients. Independent minded, Shira has been difficult for those who have tried to control her since her childhood. She does not wish to win anyone over to her view, and she is content with the way she is. Insubordination is one of Shira's distinguishing traits. She testifies about herself, "The gypsy whose tune I dance to hasn't been born yet" (245). This insubordination

¹² *Ibid.*, 15, 23.

¹³ The sandal, which is a metonym for Shira's sexuality, alludes also to her barrenness. According to Mishnah Bekhorot 8:1, Keritut 1:3, and Niddah 3:4, "sandal" is a name for squashed fetuses born dead. My thanks to Professor Adina Abadi who pointed out this meaning to me.

¹⁴ Gershon Shaked, "What Can a Man Do to Renew Himself," *S. Y. Agnon: Critical Essays on His Writings* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1992), 2:345; Dan Miron, *Le Médecin Imaginaire* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 301-5.

is also a central characteristic of Lilith's nature. Thus, for instance, we read in Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*:

At the beginning until the Holy One created Eve, Adam used to sit bored and desolate, and he was not happy alone. The Holy One gave Adam Lilith to be his wife in order to relieve his loneliness. But she did not last many days in his charge because she did not accept his authority. She said to Adam, like you, I was also created from the earth, and both of us are equal. They would pound away at each other and quarrel. Seeing this, Lilith pronounced the Divine Name which was known to her, and flew away, disappearing¹⁵ to the lighted air.¹⁶

Lilith refuses to return to Adam even after the Holy One sends angels after her to beg her to come back, and she argues that Adam rules her high-handedly. Herbst unconsciously associates Shira's rebelliousness, as evidenced in her absolute rejection of religion and religious people, with a devilish essence. Thus, he jokingly responds to Shira's complaints that an ugly house recently built in Jerusalem hides God's works: "'Bravo, Shira, Bravo. Finally, you believe in God.' Shira responds, 'Can I invent a special language for myself? I was using accepted terms.' Herbst said 'No need to apologize. On the contrary, your slip of the tongue is evidence that the devil in you is not so formidable'" (252).

Lilith is also known for her seductive power to lead men astray (Bereshit Rabbah 23:4).¹⁷ Yet, Shira does not try to seduce Herbst. On the contrary, she attempts to cool him down. Nevertheless, the whole of her physicality and personality stirs up Herbst's passions against his will. The name "Shira" embodies in the novel the poetic wholeness and instinctual vitality of this woman. "Shira" means poetry and song; her predecessor is Naama, who is first mentioned together with Lilith in the Zohar¹⁸ to typify demons that get intimate with human beings. Naama, as her name indicates, seduces with her power to create pleasure. However, according to Bereshit Rabbah 23:4,¹⁹ she has musical talents as well: "Why do they call her Naama? Because she would play the

¹⁵ Interestingly, the use of the verb "disappear" in this context is central to Shira's fate and occupies a key place in the novel.

¹⁶ Abarbanell, *Eve and Lilith*, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28. All references from Talmud and Zohar are from Abarbanell, *Eve and Lilith*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 302, 363, 372-74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

tambourine and sing for idolatry."²⁰ Furthermore, in one of the folk tales,²¹ the difference between the legal wife and the other seductive woman is that the latter is a poetess.²² The irony in the novel is that Shira is far from a poet herself. As she testifies, "If my life depended on it, I wouldn't know to write a poem" (249). Shira's seductive power does not stem from the poetry she creates, but rather from the poetic inspiration she serves, and Herbst is well aware of this fact. Herbst muses, "'You don't need to know how [to write a poem]. You have other talents, Miss Shira.' As he spoke, a faint tremor swept over him and he whispered, 'Flesh such as yours will not soon be forgotten'" (249). Herbst compulsively recites this refrain whenever he thinks of Shira.

The intimacy between Herbst and Shira seen in their first encounter draws on folklore mentioned in the Zohar. According to legend, the demonic Lilith and Naama go out at night and stalk lustful men, teasing and seducing them in order to get impregnated. Yalqut Shimoni 6:18 explains that even the ministering angels would be misled by them.²³ Thus, it is not by mere chance that Professor Herbst, the modest and learned researcher, devoted to his wife and family, is tempted and seized with a violent impulse. The Babylonian Talmud intimates that Jewish scholars are especially prone to the temptation of these demons (Sukkah 52a), explaining that "Every one who is greater than his friend in learning, his instinct is stronger as well." The demons also search for the very finest human beings.²⁴ Like Lilith, whose attraction is fatal, Shira destroys the men with whom she interacts. Like her mother, who in her time abandoned her husband and daughter and ran away with a Russian officer, Shira escaped from the man she married at the age of seventeen, before he had a chance to consummate their marriage. Although Shira does not initiate anything that may wreck Herbst's marriage, and she receives him at her home only as a close friend, her contact with Herbst disrupts the foundations of his tranquil bourgeois life and, in his eyes, undermines the purpose of his work at the university and his research.

Herbst must choose either to surrender to the institution of marriage or to rebel and give up his life to join with Shira. But as follows from the rules of flirtation, Herbst vacillates between the two women, narcissistically

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 56.

²² Ibid., 248.

²³ Ibid., 28.

²⁴ Ibid., 63.

wishing he could have them both and not have to choose between them. This forbidden unconscious wish is symbolized by his appetite for black cigarettes, to which Henrietta especially objects, in addition to the regular white ones. The following dialogue between the couple alludes to Herbst's secret desire:

"Now, Henriett, am I released from the ban?" "What ban?" "The ban on smoking." Henrietta said, "If you must smoke, then smoke. But not the black ones, please." Manfred laughed and said, "Why is that? Because they have a pinch of mandragora, or because they have no mandragora?" Henrietta said, "What's so funny about mandragora?" Manfred said, "Have you forgotten the erotic properties of mandragora?" Henrietta said, "To think that the father of a married daughter and of another whose hand is being sought in marriage is making such jokes! But who can blame you—you are young, truly young. If we were Yemenites, I myself would find you another wife." Manfred said, "You? You would find me another wife?" Henrietta said, "Why not?" Manfred said, "I don't think a European woman could do that." "Do what?" "Yield her position to another woman." Henrietta said, "You've forgotten the wife of the teacher from Beit Hakerem." (207-8)

Henrietta reminds Herbst about the young wife who faced a dilemma whether to attend to her small children or her husband. In this anecdote, the teacher's wife argues:

"'I can't go with my husband because the children are small' ... [and] 'On a teacher's salary, I can't afford to hire help. What's the solution? My husband could have two wives. When he is out with one, the other one could look after the child, and then they would switch.'" Manfred said, "De jure but not de facto." Henrietta said, "What do you mean, 'de jure but not de facto'?" Manfred said, "Those are common terms, meaning 'easier said than done.' What woman could see her husband in someone else's arms and be silent? In any case, I wouldn't subject my wife to such a test." Henrietta said, "Do you ever have such thoughts?" Manfred said, "Me? What are you saying? Me, God forbid." Henrietta said, "You stuck another cigarette in your mouth. You still have one, and you're reaching for more. Another woman, in my place, would see that as symbolic." Manfred pressed his palms against each other, folded them over his heart, closed his eyes, and crooned a song:

"I am tender, my heart pure,
 No trace of sin in it;
 Only you forevermore,
 My sweet Henriett;
 Only you forevermore,
 My sweet Henriett." (208-9)

Herbst simultaneously wants to smoke white and black cigarettes. This is to say that he secretly flirts with the idea of having a second wife without divorcing the first one: the white one for family and love, and the dark one to satisfy the fire of lust and serve as an inspiration. Herbst's hidden wish echoes the biblical Lamech, who married two women, Adah and Zillah (Genesis 4:19). Rashi explains this practice as follows, "Two women, this is the custom of the Flood Generation: one for multiplication and another for sexual intercourse" (Bereshit Rabbah 23). The ironic gap between the refrain about Shira, "flesh such as yours will not soon be forgotten," and Herbst's love song about sweet Henrietta exposes the cruelty of this flirtation and Herbst's self-indulgence and wretchedness. As implied in one of his dreams, Herbst identifies himself with the painter Böcklin, dreaming that he, like Böcklin, must paint skulls because the jealous wife prohibits bringing female models to the studio (210). Unconsciously, Herbst is angry with Henrietta for becoming old while his vigor is still undiminished. In his dream, Henrietta sabotages his sexual and creative fertility.

Herbst's unconscious desire to be free leads him to wonder about himself. Wondering, a major theme in the novel, also characterizes flirtation. Flirtation is an endless game of doubts and the need to be persuaded.²⁵ Flirting is frequently associated not only with incredulity, but also with ambiguity and logical contradiction.²⁶ Herbst wonders at himself for continuing to pursue Shira even though she is neither beautiful nor intellectual (281). He cannot comprehend what business a researcher like him has with a woman so unconcerned with academic scholarship. To his own surprise, Herbst does not torment himself over his attraction to Shira even though the majority of his thoughts revolve around her. Herbst assumes that when one fantasizes a great deal about something, it loses its intensity. But this is not the case with Shira. He wishes both to see her and never to see her again. Herbst longs for Shira and condemns her. She is both "Shira," the inspiration, and "Nadia," the ostracized. Shira is welcoming, but at the same time she doesn't allow real contact. Herbst doesn't know if he has to thank Shira for this or complain about it. Unlike a penitent who regrets his sinful actions, Herbst regrets his inaction. Since his feelings and desires conflict, canceling each other, he cannot reach any decision or take any action. Thus, for instance, when he imagines that Shira has infected him with a disease that he may transmit to his wife and daughters, "he was struck by the two simultaneous thoughts. One was: Woe unto you. The other was:

²⁵ Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xii.

²⁶ Simmel, "Flirtation," 144, 150; Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xvii.

Now that the facts are known, there is nothing you can do" (300). Flirtation continually sabotages the narrative of commitment, and, as Simmel points out, "it plays off all oppositions against one another and, in a certain sense, relieves the relationship in which they are situated from every burden of a decision."²⁷

Paralleling his vacillation between the two women, Herbst finds himself in a transitional shift of allegiances in regard to his research. Here he also swings between writing a book about the burial customs of the poor in Byzantium, which he cannot tie to a coherent narrative, and attempting to write a historical tragedy. Characteristically, Henrietta does all she can so Herbst can be free to sit at his desk and finish his research. Herbst's interaction with Shira, even though she is not part of his work and she does not know what is going on in his head, stimulates him and awakens his hidden creative power. Without her knowledge, Shira serves as an inspiration for Herbst. Every time he decides to break off his relationship with her, he also gives up the writing of the tragedy. He mentions to Henrietta his intention to write a tragedy only once, and even then, because of an interruption, he is unable to elaborate on it. As far as Henrietta is concerned, this endeavor is not serious, and she never brings up the matter again (457–58). As previously, when Herbst has to make up his mind and act, he cannot accomplish either task; for his book, he continuously gathers and accumulates notes, and for his tragedy, he cannot bring himself to experience the maladies of leprosy that his protagonist encounters. Herbst resembles Tantalus and Sisyphus whom Phillips perceives as the anti-heroes of flirtation. Like Tantalus, Herbst experiences the torture of seeing his heart's desire and being unable to reach her, and like Sisyphus, Herbst is taught through his work the rigors of incompleteness.

Flirtation's effects, however, are not only negative. Indeed, Herbst's life loses its stable equilibrium, but flirtation inevitably brings to it refreshing and exciting elements mixed with a touch of "enlivening torture."²⁸ Flirtation opens Herbst's erotic life to contingency, suspense, and surprise.²⁹ It eroticizes his skepticism and sexualizes his indecisiveness, sustaining his interest and desire. Nevertheless, what started for Herbst as a play for time and a game to defer aging and death³⁰ gradually turns

²⁷ Simmel, "Flirtation," 147.

²⁸ Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xvii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxiii; Shaked, "What Can a Man Do to Renew Himself," 345.

³⁰ For Freud, according to Phillips, flirtation is the relationship for those who are too fearful of death. See Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xxiii.

out to be a countererotic flirtation with the truth, which can be fatal, as suggested by *Shira's* "Final Chapter." Flirtation unavoidably stops when it is taken seriously.

On the surface, *Shira* seems to be a story about a man's midlife crisis when his erotic and professional life become monotonous and his effort to reinvent himself through flirtation with a stranger and creative writing. On a deeper level the novel is about Herbst's flirtation with the truth about himself. As a scholar who passionately pursues the historical truth, Herbst finds himself in his private life constantly oscillating between self-denial and self-deception on the one hand, and the urge to be truthful in all his dealings on the other. Although Herbst is not fanatical about the truth until he meets Shira and becomes compelled to seek her out again and again, he assumes that he is the kind of person who avoids lies. He is convinced that only from that night spent within Shira's chamber does he begin to heap lie upon lie "in the interest of peace and tranquillity" (537). But this is not completely accurate. The contact with Shira indeed causes Herbst to sway from the path of the truth. However, paradoxically, it also exposes him to the truth about himself. In his own eyes, Herbst is a sensitive, intellectual, modest, and moral man who respects others, especially his wife. Shira undermines this self-image. He swings like a pendulum between his old self-image and his new one, not daring to know the truth about himself but only to flirt with it. In a direct manner and without malice, Shira exposes for him the gap between his conduct and his self-image. She tells him that while in his own eyes he "amble[s] through the palaces of wisdom" (245), the truth is that he strolls for his pleasure in her company while he tosses the household and the children in his wife's lap. Sitting in an armchair, smoking and drinking coffee, he reads all about the lives of saints, contemplating whether he could give up worldly vanities for the sacred life. However, when the opportunity comes to do a good deed and pay a call on the ill, he tries to avoid it, "preferring legends of holy men to an act of charity" (246).

Paralleling the plot, at the rhetorical level of the text, the narrator flirts with his reader in order to hold the reader's interest and desire for reading. Following the dynamics of flirtation, the reader, who is eager for a love story, is both tortured and delighted by the narrator's long and charming digressions and by the progression and suspension of the Herbst and Shira story. The narrator indeed reminds himself and his reader from time to time that these tangents do not constitute the main plot and that he has to stick to the heart of the story. Yet, with no apprehension, he continually delays the progression of the plot, and, with self-irony, he teasingly remarks, "Actually, I have nothing new to add" (92). The narrator humorously compares himself to the preacher in the parable he heard from Dr. Taglicht. According to this story, in order to

validate his ideas and to convince his audience, the preacher would cite one proof after another, though the second one added nothing to the first (317–18). Thus the narrator testifies about his narration and says:

My novel is becoming more and more complex. A woman, another woman, yet another woman. Like that preacher's parable. As for the man whose action I am recounting, he is lost in thought that doesn't lead to action. I am eager to know what we will gain from this man and what more there is to tell. Having taken it upon myself to tell the story, I will shoulder the burden and continue. (319)

The narrator is also like his protagonist: just as Herbst blames Shira, the narrator accuses his protagonist, and like him, he piles episode upon episode and does not complete his story. Since the story doesn't lead to an ending and closure, the reader becomes a partner in the narrator's game of contingency and surprise, where the end seems unpredictable and unforeseeable.

The flirtation between the narrator and his reader can be experienced at best as a thrilling and exciting suspension, but flirtation can also be somewhat cruel and sadomasochistic. The reader who reaches the last line in the novel's first edition (1971) cannot avoid feeling cheated and frustrated when reading, "I will show you Manfred Herbst. I won't show you Shira, whose tracks have not been uncovered, whose whereabouts remain unknown." The frustration of the reader who is denied the wished-for ending is an inevitable by-product of the dynamics of flirtation. The narrator is well aware of this strategy, and he remarks on his profession, "Novelists allow Amnon to die a thousand deaths before he marries Tamar, linking one thing to another, and another, and still another" (555). We as readers might add that good novelists let their readers die a thousand deaths until they allow them to know what will happen at the end of their stories.

The open and double ending of *Shira* in which Herbst finds or does not find Shira is the heart of flirtation, which never leads to a decision. It seems, however, that flirtation is not only central to the narrator's world, but its oscillations reflect the author's consciousness as well. Agnon could not finish this novel and decide in favor of only one ending. The dialectical structure typical to Agnon's novels in which every plot has an unmaterialized counterplot also coincides with the rhetoric and themes of flirtation evident in *Shira*.³¹ In the spirit of uncommitted

³¹ Gershon Shaked discusses the tension between "the dramatic order" and the "epic order" in Agnon's novels, concluding that *Shira* differs from Agnon's

and indecisive flirtation, the author flirts with the alternate option where the other woman (Lilith) triumphs over the wife and family. The trouble is, however, that Agnon cannot come to terms with the implications of such an ending,³² even though he cannot sin against the narrative truth that demands it.³³ Agnon, therefore, leaves the novel to flirt with its double ending.

previous novels. Shaked argues that in Agnon's other novels, the digressions have dramatic or comic functions, or they widen and deepen the novel's structure. In *Shira*, however, according to Shaked, the digressions have mainly epic functions, and they are not an integral part of the psychological drama. See Shaked, "What Can a Man Do to Renew Himself," 352. In my opinion, Phillip's theory of flirtation can illuminate the role of the digressions as a part of the game between the narrator and the reader.

³² Miron, *Le Médecin Imaginaire*, 342–43.

³³ Robert Alter, afterward to *Shira*, by S. Y. Agnon, trans. Zeva Shapiro (New York: Schocken, 1989), 582–85.



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**REB NAHMAN KROCHMAL IN JAFFA:
A HALLUCINATORY VISION IN
S. Y. AGNON'S *TEMOL SHILSHOM***

Avraham Holtz

אותה שעה ישב חמדת במרפסת שלפני חדרו והביט לתוך האפלה שכל מיני צללים טיילו בין אילנות שבגינה. נתעלמו הצללים פתאום ודמות אדם זקן עלתה מתוך האפלה. פניו ארוכות וזקנו מגודל, עשוי חטיבה אחת אדמדמת חומה, ומצנפת של צוביל בראשו, וידו אחת נתונה על לבו, וזיו של ענוה וצניעות מבהיק ויוצא ממנו. יום אחד קודם הפסח כמה שנים קודם לכן נזדמן חמדת לביתה של רבקה דודתו הזקנה ומצאה מנענעת תמונה כדי לנערה מן האבק. הביט חמדת והיה תמיה, שמימיו לא ראה בהכרה ברורה שכזו תמונת איש מצויירת. הרגישה דודתו בדבר ואמרה לו, זו צורת רבי נחמן קרוכמל שעשה ספר. ועדיין לא היה חמדת יודע שאנשים עושים ספרים, שהיה סבור שספרים מוציאים מן הארון כפרחים שמוציאים מן הגינה וכיין שמוציאים מן המרתף. כשהגדיל בא אותו ספר לידו. קרא בו קצת דברים שהיה נבוך בהם, נפעמה רוחו ונתעוררה הנפש המבקשת, והיה זיו איקונין של רבי נחמן קרוכמל, עושה הספר, מהלך לפניו. עלה לארץ ישראל ולא נזדמן לו לא אדם לדבר עמו על ר' נחמן קרוכמל ולא ספרו של ר' נחמן קרוכמל. נשתכח מלבו הספר ועושהו. אמש הלך אצל ברנר. מצאו יושב לפניו ביתו כשהוא עצב. אמר לו ברנר, נזכרתי קיץ שעשיתי בזולקוב ונזכרתי יהודיה הלבביים הילדותיים קצת וקצת ליריים פטטיים המושכים את הלב כאגדה על ידי העממיות הפנטסטית שבהם, ומתוכם מזדקר רנ"ק, שאם אני כותב את שמו כותב אני ע' במקום ר'. והנה אני מתאוה לכתוב פרקים אחדים על ענק זה. לא טומוס של צרות על האנומלי שבחינו, כי אם לגולל קצת מגילת חיי אדם שנחה עליו רוח דעת להעמיק חקר ברוח האומה ולהתבונן התבוננות אמיתית בתכונותיה. אילו ניתן לי סגנון מתאים לכך הייתי מתקרב אל המלאכה. עכשיו שישב חמדת יחידי נזכר לו ר' נחמן קרוכמל, שכל הספרות שלנו שבאה אחריו דומה כתפילת ערבית שלאחר נעילה. נתמלאה נפשו של חמדת כיסופים נעלים, כנפשו של אדם מישראל כשהיא נזכרת בגדולי ישראל.

At that time Hemdat was sitting on the balcony in front of his room and peering into the darkness, where shadows of all sorts strolled among the trees in the garden. Suddenly the shadows disappeared, and the image of an old man arose from the darkness. His face was long with a long, thick, reddish-brown beard. A fur hat was on his head. One hand was on his heart, and he was radiant with an aura of humility and modesty. A few years ago, on the day before Passover, Hemdat happened to be at his elderly Aunt Rivka's house, where he found her shaking the dust off a picture. Hemdat watched and was surprised, for he had never looked so intently at any portrait. His aunt sensed this and said to him, "This is a portrait of Reb Nahman Krochmal who wrote a book." Hemdat was not yet aware that people write books; he thought that books come from bookcases as flowers come from gardens and as wine comes from wine cellars. When he grew up, he chanced upon that book. He read some chapters on subjects that perplexed him. He was bestirred; his searching soul was aroused, and the radiant image of Reb Nahman Krochmal, the author of the book, accompanied him. After he arrived in Erets Yisrael, he found neither anyone with whom to discuss Reb Nahman Krochmal, nor a copy of Reb Nahman Krochmal's book. He forgot about the book and its author.

Last night he visited Brenner. He found him sitting sadly in front of his home. Brenner said to him, "I recall the summer I spent in Zolkiew, and I remember the open-hearted Jews there who attract you like a fairy tale with their fantasy-like simplicity, a little childlike and a little romantic. And among them Ranak stood out; I begin his name with the letter *ayin*, instead of a *resh*. I'm really anxious to write a piece about this giant, not a tome of tribulations about the anomaly of our lives, but rather to unroll the scroll of a life of a person upon whom the spirit of knowledge rested so that he was truly able to fathom the spirit of our nation and to examine its essential characteristics faithfully. Were I granted the appropriate style, I would begin this project." Now that Hemdat sat alone he recalled Reb Nahman Krochmal because all of our literature that was written after him is like the evening service after *Ne'ilah*. Hemdat's soul was filled with sublime yearnings like those that Jews feel when they think of the great sages of Israel.¹

Temol shilshom (*Only Yesterday*), like most of Agnon's novels, belongs to the genre of documentary or historical fiction.² While the background

¹ S. Y. Agnon, *Temol shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*) (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953), 414-15. The translation is mine.

² *Temol shilshom* is a bound biblical phrase (Exodus 5:8 and elsewhere), rendered in English as "heretofore" or by some other synonym. The title of Agnon's novel could be translated as "Only Yesterday" or "Yesteryear." See S. Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

details are accurate, verifiable, and authentic, the plot, action, and characterization are patently fictitious. Events in this novel describe the life and times in Jaffa and Jerusalem, the two major urban centers in the Land of Israel, during the years 1908–1911.

Yitzhak Kumer, the novel's central protagonist, leaves eastern Galicia (preface), arrives in Jaffa (book 1), visits Jerusalem for an extended period (book 2), returns to Jaffa (book 3), and then moves to Jerusalem. There he marries a young woman from the ultra-pious Hungarian Quarter, is bitten by Balak, a rabid dog, upon whose back, during his earlier sojourn in Jerusalem, he had fatefully written the words "Mad Dog," and dies shortly thereafter (book 4).³ While in Jaffa, Kumer befriends Hemdat, a romantic, enigmatic, and bashful upstart writer, marginally a part of bohemian Jaffa.⁴ Although the stories of Hemdat and of Kumer bear many

2000). In this article, I cite only English critical sources. For summaries of this novel and critiques, see Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 414–47; Baruch Hochman, *The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), especially 134–57; Harold Fisch, *S. Y. Agnon* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1975), especially 51–53; Jeffrey Fleck, *Character and Context: Studies in the Fiction of Abramovitsh, Brenner, and Agnon* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984), 87–102; Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1989), especially 146–52; Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 125–48; Amos Oz, *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God* (trans. B. Harshav; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. 61–191. For some examples of documentary or historical fiction, see Avraham and Toby Berger Holtz, "S. Y. Agnon's *Temol shilshom* As a Medical Record," *Korot: Israel Journal of Medicine and Science* 9 (Fall 1989): 629–49; Avraham and Toby Berger Holtz, "The Adventurous Life of Moritz Hall: A Biographical Sketch," *Bibliotheca Nubica* 3; Piotr O. Scholz, ed., *Orbis Aethiopicus* (Albstadt: Karl Schuler, 1992), 1:49–66.

³ The subtheme of Balak, the mad dog, has given rise to many studies and interpretations. See, for example, Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 432–39; Hochman, *The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon*, especially 138–45, 153–57; Fleck, *Character and Context*; Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return*, 128–32; Ann Golomb Hoffman, "Inscription and Madness in *Temol shilshom*," in Leon Yudkin, ed., *S. Y. Agnon: Texts and Contexts* (New York: Markus Wiener, 1988), 163–97; Ann Golomb Hoffman, "'Mad Dog' and Denouement in *Temol shilshom*," in David Patterson and Glenda Abramson, eds., *Tradition and Trauma: Studies in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994), 45–63.

⁴ On the figure of Hemdat, the story by that name, Kumer, and Agnon, read Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 364–66. He correctly concludes: "One of the dominant personae of the writer, Hemdat, is clearly Agnon's self-image as the young

resemblances to Agnon's biography, both characters ultimately remain personae whose features are defined by the contours of the literary works in which they appear.

The passage cited here is from book 3 and follows immediately after a lengthy depiction of Hemdat's cohorts who set out to top off their evening's raucous tomfoolery by shocking Hemdat as he sits alone on the balcony that adjoins his rented room,⁵ in a trance, transfixed by other times, places, and people. While these bawdy Jaffans are cast as "shadows of all sorts," Hemdat relives a cherished scene from his naïve, sheltered childhood. A vivid image of an old man appears through the darkness. His features are distinct: a long face, a full brownish-red beard, a fur hat on his head, one hand on his heart, and a radiant, virtuous demeanor.⁶ One Passover eve, Hemdat had paid his elderly aunt a visit and, as part of her zealotry to rid her home of leavened food as required by Jewish tradition, he had found her dusting off a portrait that adorned the wall. His aunt, sensing that Hemdat was mesmerized by the picture, had informed him that it was a painting of Rabbi Nahman Krochmal (1785–1840),⁷ who was universally acclaimed

poet and lover. . . . Indeed, it may very well be that this narrative ["Hemdat," published in 1947, two years after *Temol shilshom*] was originally composed for *Temol shilshom*, but deleted because of the need to suppress the figure of Hemdat so that Yitshak Kummer, a different persona of the writer, could emerge as the pale, but doomed hero of the novel. Hemdat and Yitshak are identical in background though different in temperament; they are, in effect, two sides of the same person. But Hemdat could never be the hero of *Temol shilshom*" (364). On Hemdat, see also Alan Mintz, "Agnon in Jaffa: The Myth of the Artist As a Young Man," *Prooftexts* 1 (1981), 62–83, especially 67ff.; and Miri Kubovy, "Sleeping Prince, Beggars of Love," in Patterson and Abramson, eds., *Tradition and Trauma*, 187–206.

⁵ Hemdat's rented room in an apartment in Neveh Tzedek, a Jewish suburb of Jaffa, has been identified with the room in which Agnon resided from 1908–1912. Presently, there is a plaque on the building at 2 Rokach Street that reads: "In this building the author Shmuel Yosef Agnon lived from 1908–1912." The building has undergone some structural renovations.

⁶ Although not specified, it becomes clear that this image of Krochmal is based on the portrait that Hemdat had seen in his aunt's home during his childhood. The picture that accompanies Rozshansky's essay lacks any of the details presented by Agnon in this description, aside from the full, dark beard.

⁷ On Rabbi Nahman Krochmal, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* 10:1269–73. Notice that, in this article, in place of a picture of Krochmal, there appears a photograph of the monument at his grave in Tarnopol, Ukraine. See also Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, ed. and trans. Bernard Martin (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1977), 10:45–78. See also the more recent scholarly monograph by

as the foremost philosopher of Galician Jewry during his lifetime and for decades thereafter.

Curiously, Hemdat's aunt does not refer to Krochmal's book by name. For unexplained reasons the significant and well-known title of Krochmal's work is entirely absent from *Temol shilshom*, although one can assume that the readers of this Agnon novel would readily be able to supply this title. *Moreh nevukhei hazeman* (*Guide to the Perplexed of the Time*) was originally suggested as a title by Krochmal himself and so designated by Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), who edited the volume after Krochmal's death. The title clearly associates Krochmal's treatise with that of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), whose classical philosophical work is entitled *Moreh nevukhim* (*Guide to the Perplexed*). In addition, as Ismar Schorsch indicates, "the very title of Krochmal's book with its stress on the word 'time' illumines the chasm. The term embraces a *double entendre* which alludes simultaneously to the book's audience and to its central problem. Krochmal wrote for contemporary Jews confused and distressed by the introduction of time into Judaism."⁸

Upon reading this reference to a Krochmal portrait, I wondered if such a portrait exists. According to Simon Rawidowicz (1897–1957), the foremost scholar of Krochmal's *œuvres* and biography, a portrait of Krochmal did exist prior to World War I. However, the original portrait or any reproductions of it could not be located after World War I, and Rawidowicz was

Jay M. Harris, *Nachman Krochmal: Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age* (New York: New York University Press, 1991). Except for various citations translated by critics, no English translation of Krochmal's *Guide* is available. See also Edward Breuer's review of Harris's study in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 85 (3–4) (January–April 1995): 419–21.

⁸ Concerning the historical facts related to the title of Krochmal's book, see Ismar Schorsch, "The Production of a Classic: Zunz As Krochmal's Editor," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 31 (1986): 281–315, especially pages 281 and 289. The cited quotation is from Ismar Schorsch, "Historical Consciousness in Modern Judaism," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 28 (1983): 45, reprinted in Ismar Schorsch, *Text and Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, Brandeis University Press, 1994), 179. Cf. Ismar Schorsch, "The Ethos of Modern Jewish Scholarship," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 35 (1990): 64, where he reiterates the point that "*Moreh nevukhei hazeman* as title conveys a sense for both the audience and the problem and hence is best rendered as a guide for contemporaries perplexed by the problem of time. Only a paraphrase can capture the subtlety of the *double entendre*" (*Text and Context*, 166). Other essays of Ismar Schorsch on Krochmal include "The Philosophy of History of Nachman Krochmal," *Judaism* 10 (3) (1961): 237–45; and "Krochmal: The Galician Socrates," *The Reconstructionist* 28 (8) (1962): 19–22.

thus unable to include a picture of the writer in his comprehensive edition of Krochmal's works.⁹ Yet, since Hemdat's visit to his aunt's house occurs about two decades prior to World War I, it is indeed possible that this reference is to a popular reproduction of the original portrait.

Curiosity led me to Professor Sid Z. Leiman, who possesses a well-known collection of pictures of famous rabbis, Jewish dignitaries, and scholars. Initially, he confirmed Rawidowicz's conclusion that no portrait of Krochmal exists. Subsequently, he informed me that a volume published in Argentina contains a picture with the caption "R[eb] Nahman Krochmal."¹⁰ The essay that this picture accompanies was written by Shmuel Rozshansky (1902–1995). I have been unable to verify the source of the picture or its provenance. Professor Leiman and other experts seriously doubt that it is an authentic portrayal of Krochmal. One wonders, however, on what basis Rozshansky considered this picture to be as authoritative a portrait as the accompanying photograph of Professor Dov Sadan (1902–1989). Incidentally, no mention is made anywhere in the article or elsewhere in the volume concerning the source of the picture, nor is there any discussion of Rawidowicz's claim about the disappearance of all copies of Krochmal's portrait. It is possible that a copy of the picture was brought to Argentina before World War I and was the source for the illustration that appears in Rozshansky's article. By now I am as intrigued by this purported picture of Krochmal as Hemdat was by the portrait he saw in his aunt's home.

Continuing his stream of reflection, Hemdat recalls that some years after his initial contact with Krochmal's captivating portrait, he chanced upon a copy of Krochmal's book and read several chapters dealing with philosophical issues that had baffled him. The phrase "that perplexed him" clearly alludes to the accepted title of the book. Probably Hemdat, like most of his enlightened contemporaries, was perplexed by the apparent and

⁹ The English title is *The Writings of Nachman Krochmal*, ed. with an introduction by Simon Rawidowicz, 2d enlarged ed. (London: Ararat, 1961). Concerning Krochmal's portrait, Rawidowicz (20 n. 1) records that many Galician Jews, including Krochmal's son-in-law Dr. Biegeleisen, attested to the fact that Krochmal's portrait was available in Brody up to the time that the Russian army entered the city during World War I. The painting and Krochmal's manuscripts disappeared sometime during this period. After the war, Rawidowicz spent a year in an unsuccessful search for these materials.

¹⁰ The picture purporting to be Krochmal's portrait can be found in Nachum Lindman and Mordecai Kaufman, eds., *Galitsianer yidn yoyol-bukh: 1925–1965, fertsik yor eksitents funem tsentral farband fun Galitsyaner yidn in Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral Farband fun Galitsianer Yidn in Argentina, 1966), 225.

distressing conflict between traditional Judaism and historicism. Hemdat and his peers were unable to reconcile the compelling conclusions of the nascent philological-critical-historical studies of the biblical, rabbinic, ga'onic, and medieval texts with traditional religious beliefs and practices. Full and frank examinations of this and other contemporary dilemmas were the hallmarks of Krochmal's dialogues with his devotees and later became the basis for his philosophical treatise. In the words of Solomon Schechter,

[Krochmal] had to establish the facts of Jewish history as well as to philosophise upon it. . . . He had to survey the ground and to collect the materials, besides constructing the plan of the edifice and working at its erection. . . . It was he who taught us to regard the ancient Jewish literature from a historical point of view. He enabled us to trace the genesis of the tradition, and to watch the inner germination of that vast organism. He indicated how we might derive nourishment from it, and in turn further its growth.¹¹

Precisely because of Krochmal's convincing arguments and compelling achievements, Hemdat laments the distressing realization that presently, in the Land of Israel, he is unable to locate a copy of this monumental work, which he urgently needs to consult in his personal struggle to reassess his positions vis-à-vis the predominant secularist trends that attract his fellow *halutsim* and wrench them from their traditions. Hemdat feels this profound sense of intellectual deprivation ever more pointedly because there is no one with whom he can converse about Krochmal's inspiring analyses. In the context of the novel's frequent references to the lack of traditional practices, the implication of this Krochmal sequence takes on ever more significant dimensions. The narrator suggests that had Krochmal's work been accessible, or had Hemdat found colleagues with whom to discuss Krochmal's ideas, he and they may not have been so readily inclined to reject, ridicule, and abandon their traditional beliefs. Then, too, the passage implies, the harmful rift between the Old and New Yishuv might have been avoided and the entire course of the Jewish reencounter with the Land of Israel and with the past might have been more conciliatory and more constructive.

Returning to the text, we are informed that the evening prior to this epiphanous experience, Hemdat had visited Yosef Hayyim Brenner

¹¹ Solomon Schechter, "Rabbi Nachman Krochmal and the 'Perplexities of the Time': A Paper Read before the Jews College Literary Society 23 January 1887," (London: Jewish Chronicle Office, 1887), 1–15, where the citation is on p. 12. The same article also appears in *Studies in Judaism: A Selection* (New York: Meridian, 1958), 321–44, where the citation is on p. 339.

(1881–1921).¹² Chronologically, this remarkable, revelatory conversation with Brenner about Krochmal preceded and initiated the entire reminiscence. Brenner, an already-revered, charismatic, yet iconoclastic Hebrew author and journalist, had first met the novice Yiddish and Hebrew poet and storyteller Samuel Joseph Czaczkes (Agnon's original name) in Lemberg in 1908. After Brenner's arrival in Jaffa in 1909, their friendship was renewed.¹³ Brenner here recounts his pilgrimage to Zolkiew in eastern Galicia, the town in which Krochmal lived during most of his adult life. Brenner resided there for several weeks, in order to admire the townsfolk's extraordinary, exemplary virtues and to absorb viscerally the spirit of RaNaK (the acronym of the name of Reb Nahman Krochmal), whom he always called ANaK ("giant").

Applying the words of Isaiah's messianic message (Isaiah 11:1–2) to RaNaK's genius—"an individual upon whom the spirit of knowledge rested (or rests)"—Brenner tells Hemdat that were he to discover the proper style and appropriate diction, he would undertake to write a biography of Krochmal, for only Krochmal successfully plumbed the Jewish national ethos and expertly sketched its essence.¹⁴

Returning to the present nocturnal scene on the balcony, we find Hemdat coming to a truly startling realization presented in a formulation that requires familiarity with the liturgy of the most sacred Day of

¹² On Brenner, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* 4:1347–51; Jeffrey Fleck, "Brenner in the Seventies," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 285–94; Avner Holtzman, "Poetics, Ideology, Biography, Myth: The Scholarship on J. H. Brenner 1971–1996," *Prooftexts* 18 (1998): 82–94; and Alan Mintz, *Banished from Their Father's Table: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), index "Brenner, Y. H.," 221.

¹³ On the relationship between Brenner and Agnon, read Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 15–19; and Fleck, *Character and Context*, 87–89.

¹⁴ Brenner's exceptional admiration and reverence for Krochmal are reiterated in Agnon's other writings. Agnon stressed that Brenner adored Krochmal and considered him to be "the father of all seminal ideas in our literature. . . . What I heard from him is what I am recording. One day before sunset I visited Brenner and found him sitting outside his dark room, in which he had spent the day at a wooden study stand that he had built himself. He was dejected and morose. Life in Eretz Yisrael distressed him. Each day was the same as the previous—joyless, purposeless, and meaningless. Then he began recalling the days he had spent in Galicia with its inspiring ambiance, its staunch, sensitive, altruistic, and idealistic youth. Finally, he spoke to me about his stay in Zolkiew. Then he remarked: 'If only I could hit upon the appropriate style I would write a book about RaNaK and his circle.'" See S. Y. Agnon, *Me'atsmi el atsmi* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976), 120–21. (The translation is mine.)

Atonement, Yom Kippur, a full-day fast that concludes the ten-day period of repentance with which the Jewish New Year begins.¹⁵ Traditionally, the liturgy for the eve of the Day of Atonement begins with the famous “Kol Nidrei” declaration and a special evening service. From early morning of the next day until sunset, Jews engage in prayer and scriptural readings. As the sun sets, but before the day’s end, an additional, extraordinary service, *Ne’ilah*, is chanted. The unique name of *ne’ilah* (which means closing or locking) simultaneously refers to the closing of the gates of the Temple and the gates of repentance. At the day’s end, each person’s fate for the coming year is about to be sealed. This is the day’s prayerful climax, the final opportunity for repentance and forgiveness. One senses anxiety, contrition, and hopeful anticipation for a blessed year. The heightened tension, the intense feeling, and the profound emotions during the *Ne’ilah* service leave the worshiper with little spiritual energy for the regular weekday evening service, which is recited immediately after the *Ne’ilah* liturgy. Generally, this evening service is chanted quickly, perfunctorily, and without much fervor, in order to permit the worshipers to return home and break the fast.

Accordingly, then, to compare Krochmal’s literary achievement with the *Ne’ilah* service is to view it as the apex of modern Hebrew literature, the epitome of Jewish national creativity. And also, then, all subsequent authors (is Agnon including himself, as well?) are epigonous and lacking Krochmal’s stature, profundity, and insight.

Closely following the course of this exceptional series of reverential accolades about Krochmal, the reader, as it were, along with Hemdat, experiences that intense, exquisite empathy and yearning that are evoked by the mention of great Jewish sages. Thus, too, the vivid image of Krochmal that had accompanied Hemdat in Galicia reappears with greater intensity and poignancy in this critical vision in the Land of Israel.

¹⁵ For a brief history of Yom Kippur and a description of its special liturgy, see “Day of Atonement,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* 5:1376–87; Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 124–28; and S. Y. Agnon, *Days of Awe* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 183–279. On the *Ne’ilah* service and the weekday evening service that follows it, see Agnon, *Days of Awe*, 264–73.



◆

CHILDISH DISTORTIONS OF RABBINIC TEXTS IN S. Y. AGNON'S "HAMITPAḤAT"

David C. Jacobson

אלמלא לא לימדתני אמא שאין עומדין על כסא ואין עולין על השולחן ואין מגביהין את הקול הייתי עולה על השולחן וצועק לה' הארץ ומלואה, כאותו תינוק בגמרא שהיה יושב באמצעיתו של שולחן של זהב משאוי ששה עשר בני אדם ושש עשרה שלשלאות של כסף קבועות בו וקערות וכוסות וקיתוניות וצלוחיות קבועות בו ועליו כל מיני מאכל וכל מיני מגדים ובשמים מכל מה שנברא בששת ימי המעשה והיה מכריז לה' הארץ ומלואה.

Had my mother not taught me that you do not stand on chairs and do not clamber onto the table and do not shout, I would have climbed onto the table and shouted out, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof"; like the child in the Talmud who used to be seated in the middle of a golden table which had to be carried by sixteen men; sixteen silver chains were fixed in it; and plates, goblets, pitchers, and flasks were set thereon and upon it were all kinds of food, dainties, and spices of all that was created in the six days of creation; and he used to proclaim, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."¹

Arnold Band has praised S. Y. Agnon's story "Hamitpaḥat" ("The Kerchief," 1932) for its "unique fusion of nostalgic memoir and mature understanding of the loss of innocence."² In recounting the narrator's

¹ S. Y. Agnon, *Elu ve'elu* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1966), 263–64; S. Y. Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1970), 54. I have adapted each of the English translations of I. M. Lask that I quote in this article so that the choice of words is as close as possible to that of the Soncino translation of the Talmud that I have used for corresponding talmudic passages, because Agnon quoted Hebrew expressions in the talmudic texts verbatim. I have also modernized the style of the Soncino translation.

² Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 224.

transition from a naïve, childish perception of reality to a gradually more sophisticated realization of the complexities of human existence, Agnon transcends the tension between modern Jews' longing for the positive qualities of the world of tradition and their highly critical view of that very world, which they have abandoned in favor of modernity. The story is not solely a maskilic satire on the limitations of traditional Jewry nor a nostalgic remembrance of a community steeped in learning and piety. In a certain sense, it is neither and it is both.

In "Hamitpaḥat" Agnon expresses an appreciation for what was nurturing in the world of his childhood, while at the same time conveying to his readers why he was not content to live solely in that world as an adult. Many aspects of the story would seem to reflect the author's nostalgic evocation of the traditional side of his upbringing, highlighted by his account of the tranquility of his family's Sabbath observance, with all of the exposure to modernity that he experienced in Buczacz filtered out. At the same time the story conveys some very strong social criticism of the author's childhood milieu when the narrator recounts, albeit from a naïve perspective, the harsh treatment of a poor beggar who arrives in town.

Agnon strikes this balance between nostalgia and a critical adult perspective, in part, by means of connections the narrator recalls sensing as a child between his own situation and narrative aggadic texts found in the Talmud. It is not surprising that this traditionally raised child frequently blends his present reality with the world of rabbinic narratives. Children throughout the world make sense of life, at least in part, in terms of the literature and lore of their community, and the heroes with whom they identify are often the heroes of their culture's narrative traditions. Each time the narrator refers to an aggadic text, however, he does so in a distorted manner that reflects more his own self-centered childish concerns than the original meaning of the text. It is these very distortions deliberately introduced by Agnon into the story that serve to convey his mixed nostalgic/critical relationship to the world of Jewish tradition, and in particular to the effect of traditional Jewish texts on the culture in which he grew up.³

In the passage quoted above the narrator as a boy feels carried away by ecstasy as he experiences his father's return from the Sabbath morning synagogue service and the rituals conducted by his father in preparation

³ For a discussion of the relationship between classical textual references in Agnon's fiction and the author's ambivalent relationship to the Jewish tradition, see Dov Landau, "Hashimush bemuva'ot bekhitvei Agnon," *Biqqoret ufarshanut* 2-3 (1972): 80-86.

for the Sabbath lunch. It is all the boy can do to restrain himself from defying his mother's norms of proper table manners by standing on the table and praising God. But who is this child in the Talmud, who for some reason was not restrained by his mother from doing what the narrator wanted to do as a child? In truth, there is not even the trace of such a boisterous, religiously ecstatic child in the talmudic text to which the boy alludes. I doubt that any reader would attribute this distortion of the intertext to carelessness on the part of Agnon. In fact, Agnon has the boy quote the description of the table and that which was on the table exactly as it appears in the talmudic passage. On one level, this distortion of the text can be attributed to the child's imaginative invention of a hero with whom he could identify. It certainly can be seen as contributing to the charming nature of the story's portrait of the child. A close comparison of the original talmudic text and the child's distorted version, however, suggests that it is just such childish distortion that serves Agnon's more general purpose of balancing nostalgia and criticism.

The talmudic narrative (Shabbat 119a) reads as follows:

דאמר רבי חייא בר אבא: פעם אחת נתארחתי אצל בעל הבית בלודקיא, והביאו לפניו שלחן של זהב משוי ששה עשר בני אדם, ושש עשרה שלשלאות של כסף קבועות בו, וקערות וכוסות וקיתונניות וצלוחיות קבועות בו, ועליו כל מיני מאכל וכל מיני מגדים ובשמים, וכשמניחים אותו אומרים: לה' הארץ ומלואה וגו', וכשמסלקין אותו אומרים השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם. אמרתי לו: בני, במה זכית לכך? אמר לי: קצב הייתי, ומכל בהמה שהיתה נאה אמרתי: זו תהא לשבת. אמרתי לו: [אשריך שזכית], וברוך המקום שזיכך לכך.

For Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba related: I was once a guest of a man in Laodicea, and a golden table was brought before him, which had to be carried by sixteen men; sixteen silver chains were fixed in it, and plates, goblets, pitchers, and flasks were set thereon, and upon it were all kinds of food, dainties, and spices. When they set it down they recited, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and so forth" [Psalms 24:1], and when they removed it [after the meal] they recited "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord; but the earth has He given to the children of men" [Psalms 115:16]. Said I to him, "My son, whereby have you merited this?" "I was a butcher," replied he, "and of every fine beast I used to say, 'This shall be for the Sabbath.'" Said I to him, "Happy are you that you have [so] merited, and praised be the Omnipresent who has permitted you to enjoy [all] this."⁴

⁴ The translation is from *Shabbath*, trans. H. Freedman (London: Soncino, 1935), 2:586–87. I modified the translation to read in a more contemporary style. There

The boy recalls much of the original text with remarkable fidelity: as noted above, the description of the table bearing the utensils and plentiful food is word for word exactly as it appears in the Talmud. There are, however, a number of significant differences: in the original version the hero is a man whose wealth is presented as a reward for paying careful attention to the honor of the Sabbath. The boy has eliminated this hero and substituted a child who makes no reference to the need for people to prepare for the Sabbath, but instead refers only to God's role in providing the bounteous meal. Another significant departure from the original text is when the boy recalls only one of the two verses from Psalms contained in the talmudic version: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," leaving out the second verse, "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth has He given to the children of men," thereby once again putting more emphasis on the role of God in the world than on the role of people.

A second example of a distorted version of a talmudic narrative occurs in an earlier passage in the story when the boy's father returns home from a business trip on the eve of the Sabbath. The original talmudic narrative (Ta'anit 21a) tells of the appointment of a man named Nahum to bring a gift from the Jews to the Roman emperor:

ואמאי קרו ליה נחום איש גם זו דכל מילתא דהוה סלקא ליה אמר גם זו לטובה זימנא חדא בעו לשדורי ישראל דורון לבי קיסר אמרו מאן ייזיל ייזיל נחום איש גם זו דמלומד בניסין הוא שדרו בידיה מלא סיפטא דאבנים טובות ומרגליות אזל בת בההוא דירה כליליא קמו הנך דירוראי ושקלינהו לסיפטיה ומלונהו עפרא (למחר כי חזנהו אמר גם זו לטובה) כי מטא התם [שרינהו לסיפטא חזנהו דמלו עפרא] בעא מלכא למקטלינהו לכולהו אמר קא מחייכו בי יהודאי [אמר גם זו לטובה] אתא אליהו אדמי ליה ליה כחד מינייהו א"ל דלמא הא עפרא מעפרא דאברהם אבוהון הוא דכי הוה שדי עפרא הוה סייפיה גילי הוה גירי דכתיב יתן כעפר חרבו כקש נדף קשתו הויה חדא מדינתא דלא מצו למיכבשה בדקו מיניה וכבשוה עיילו לבי גנזיה ומלוהו לסיפטיה אבנים טובות ומרגליות ושדרוהו ביקרא רבה כי אתו ביתו בההוא דירורא אמרו ליה מאי איתית בהדך דעבדי לך יקרא כולי האי אמר לזו מאי דשקלי מהכא אמטי להתם סתרו לדרייהו ואמטינהו לבי

is another, shorter version of this story with some variations in Bereshit Rabbah, Parashah 11. Agnon may also have had this version in mind, since it contains the expression, "everything that was created in the six days of creation," but he also clearly had the talmudic version in mind, which contains expressions not found in the midrashic version. Since the talmudic passage is longer and provides for a richer comparison, and also since the boy alluded to the Talmud, I am using the talmudic passage as the intertext for purposes of this analysis.

מלכא אמרו ליה האי עפרא דאייתי הכא מדידן הוא בדקוה ולא אשכחוהו
וקטלינהו להנך דיוראי.

Why was he called Nahum Ish Gamzu? Because whatever befell him he would declare, "This also is for the best." Once the Jews desired to send to the Emperor a gift and after discussing who should go they decided that Nahum Ish Gamzu should go because he had experienced many miracles. They sent with him a bag full of precious stones and pearls. He went and spent the night in a certain inn and during the night the people in the inn arose and emptied the bag and filled it up with earth. When he discovered this next morning he exclaimed, "This also is for the best." When he arrived at his destination and they undid his bag they found that it was full of earth. The king thereupon desired to put them all to death saying, "The Jews are mocking me." Nahum then exclaimed, "This also is for the best." Whereupon Elijah appeared in the guise of one of them [i.e., as a Roman] and remarked, "Perhaps this is some of the earth of their father Abraham, for when he threw earth [against the enemy] it turned into swords and when [he threw] stubble it changed into arrows, for it is written, 'His sword makes them as dust, his bow as the driven stubble' [Isaiah 41:2]." Now there was one province which [the emperor had hitherto] not been able to conquer but when they tried some of this earth [against it] they were able to conquer it. Then they took him [Nahum] to the royal treasury and filled his bag with precious stones and pearls and sent him back with great honor. When on his return journey he again spent the night in the same inn he was asked, "What did you take [to the emperor] that they showed you such great honor?" He replied, "I brought there what I had taken from here." [The innkeepers] thereupon razed the inn to the ground and took of the earth to the king and they said to him, "The earth that was brought to you belonged to us." They tested it and it was not found to be [effective] and the innkeepers were thereupon put to death.⁵

⁵ The translation is from *Ta'anith*, trans. J. Rabbinowitz (London: Soncino, 1938), 105–6. I modified the translation to read in a more contemporary style. I left the name of the hero in its original Hebrew, Nahum Ish Gam Zu, in order to preserve the play on words created by alternative vocalizations of the letters *gimel*, *mem*, *zayin*, *vav*: vocalized *gimzo*, it can be taken to refer to the town of Gimzo as the place from which Nahum came (i.e., he is *ish Gimzo*, a man from Gimzo, a town in Judea mentioned in 2 Chronicles 28:18); vocalized *gamzu*, it can be taken to refer to Nahum's persistent optimism captured in his tendency to say about even bad occurrences, *gam zu letovah* (this also is for the best). See *Sanhedrin*, trans. H. Freedman (London: Soncino, 1935), 2:474 n. 5. There is a similar version of this aggadah in *Sanhedrin* 108b–109a. However, since Agnon makes use of some expressions found only in the version in *Ta'anit*, it is most likely that the latter version is the intertext.

As a man of great faith and indomitable optimism Nahum merits miracles, and therefore he is the best person to send on the perilous mission of trying to promote good relations between the Jews and the Roman emperor who rules them. In the end, Nahum is indeed rewarded for his optimism when Elijah appears disguised as a Roman and convinces the emperor that the earth the robbers had placed in Nahum's box was the earth of the patriarch Abraham that could miraculously turn into swords. An important aspect of this narrative is the role reversal that takes place when the Jews are transformed from relatively powerless subjects of the Roman emperor to providers of a weapon that provides victory to the emperor. Nahum himself experiences a dramatic transformation: at the beginning of the story he is a mere supplicant to the emperor; by the end he is in a position to return the Jews' tribute and have vengeance visited on the people who had robbed him.

The narrator as a boy recalls this aggadic passage as his father goes to open his trunk:

לכסוף נעץ את המפתח במנעול ופתח את המלתחה והכניס ידו לתוכה ופשפש בין מטלטליו. פתאום הביט בנו ושתיק. כלום שכח אבא ליתן שם את הדורונות? או שמא לן במלון וקמו אנשי המלון והוציאו את הדורונות, כמעשה התנא ששלחו בידו דורון לקיסר, ארגז מלא אבנים טובות ומרגליות, הלך ולן לילה אחד במלון, בלילה עמדו בעלי המלון ופתחו את הארגז ונטלו כל מה שבתוכו ומלאוהו עפר. באותה שעה עמדתי והתפללתי בלבי, כשם שנעשה נס לאותו תנא שאותו עפר היה מעפרו של אברהם אבינו, שכשהיה אברהם זורק עפר נעשו חרבות, כך יעשה הקדוש ברוך הוא עמנו נס ואותו דבר שמלאו בו בעלי הפונדק מלתחתו של אבא יהא מעולה מכל המתנות.

Finally [Father] pressed the key into the lock, opened the trunk, put his hand inside, and felt among his possessions. Suddenly he looked at us and became silent. Had Father forgotten to place the presents there? Or had he been lodging at an inn where the inn people rose and took out the presents? As happened with the sage by whose hands they sent a gift to the Emperor, a chest full of precious stones and pearls, and when he lodged one night at the inn, the inn folk opened the chest and took out everything that was in it and filled it with earth. Then I prayed that just as a miracle was done to that sage so that that earth should be the earth of Abraham our father, which turned into swords when it was thrown into the air, so should the Holy One, blessed be He, perform a miracle with us in order that the things with which the innkeepers had filled Father's trunk should be better than all presents.⁶

⁶ Agnon, *Elu ve'elu*, 261; Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, 51.

In this distortion of the aggadic passage, the boy has cast his father in the role of Nahum (the bearer of the gifts) and himself in the role of the emperor. The boy has eliminated the central focus of the plot on Nahum's heroic role as a mediator between the emperor and his fellow Jews. Instead, the story becomes merely that of a self-centered boy whose primary concern is to know what his father brought him from his trip. It is not the miracle of earth turning into arrows that will right the balance of power between Jews and a gentile authority that interests him; instead, he hopes for a miraculous transformation of the earth into wonderful presents.

While these first two examples of intertextuality occupy relatively limited space in "Hamitpaḥat," another example pervades the story. Three times the narrator as a boy alludes to a talmudic aggadah, each time in a distorted manner that gives him a central role. The talmudic text (Sanhedrin 98a) begins with a conversation between the third-century *amora* Rabbi Joshua ben Levi and Elijah the prophet:

רבי יהושע בן לוי אשכח לאליהו, דהוי קיימי אפיתחא דמערתא דרבי שמעון בן יוחאי, אמר ליה: אתינא לעלמא דאתי? — אמר ליה: אם ירצה אדון הזה. אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: שנים ראיתי וקול שלשה שמעתי.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi met Elijah standing by the entrance of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai's tomb. He asked him: "Have I a portion in the world to come?" He replied, "If this Master desires it." Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, "I saw two, but heard the voice of a third."⁷

Elijah does not go so far as to make a definitive prediction that Rabbi Joshua will merit a place in the world to come. He merely states that such matters are dependent on God's will. When Rabbi Joshua then asks when the Messiah will come, Elijah tells him he can go and ask the Messiah himself:

— אמר ליה: אימת אתי משיח? — אמר ליה: זיל שיליה לדידיה. — ויהיכא יתיב? — אפיתחא דרומי. — ומאי סימניה? — יתיב ביני עניי סובלי חלאים, וכולן שרו ואסירי בחד זימנא, איהו שרי חד ואסיר חד. אמר: דילמא מבעינא, דלא איעכב.

He then asked him, "When will the Messiah come?" "Go and ask him himself," was his reply. "Where is he sitting?" "At the entrance of Rome."

⁷ The translation in this and subsequent quotations of this aggadic text is from *Sanhedrin*, 2:664.

“And by what sign may I recognize him?” “He is sitting among the poor lepers: all of them untie [them] all at once, and rebandage them together, whereas he unties and rebandages each separately [before treating the next], thinking, should I be wanted [it being time for my appearance as the Messiah] I must not be delayed [through having to bandage a number of wounds].”

There is, of course, much significance to the description of the Messiah provided by Elijah. The Messiah’s location at the entrance of Rome creates a meaningful link between the seat of power of the empire that destroyed the Temple and the hope of redemption that the Messiah represents. It is as if the Messiah must always stay close to the source of evil that brought about the Jewish people’s exile in order to be ready to reverse that exile and restore the Jews to their land. The fact that the Messiah sits among those who are poor and sick associates him with the end of suffering that will come with the Messianic era. Particularly striking is Elijah’s description of the Messiah never allowing more than one bandage to be untied at any one time so that he is always ready to appear when God calls him to do so.

Rabbi Joshua then goes to Rome, puts his question to the Messiah, and brings back to Elijah the Messiah’s puzzling answer, which is then interpreted by Elijah:

אזל לגביה, אמר ליה: שלום עליך רבי ומורי! — אמר ליה שלום עליך בר ליואי. — אמר ליה: לאימת אתי מר? — אמר ליה: היום. אתא לגבי אליהו. — אמר ליה: מאי אמר לך? — אמר ליה: שלום עליך בר ליואי. — אמר ליה: אבטחך לך ולאבוך לעלמא דאתי. — אמר ליה: שקורי קא שקר בי, דאמר לי היום אתינא, ולא אתא! — אמר ליה: הכי אמר לך היום אם בקלו תשמעו.

So he went to him and greeted him, saying, “Peace upon you, Master and Teacher.” “Peace upon you, son of Levi,” he replied. “When will you come, Master?” asked he. “Today” was his answer. On his returning to Elijah, the latter inquired, “What did he say to you?” “Peace upon you, son of Levi,” he answered. Thereupon he [Elijah] observed, “He thereby assured you and your father of [a portion in] the world to come.” “He spoke falsely to me,” he rejoined, “stating that he would come today, but has not.” He [Elijah] answered him, “This is what he said to you, ‘Today, if you will hear his voice [Psalm 95:7].’”

It takes the deeper understanding of Elijah to explain the full significance of the Messiah’s response. When he greeted Rabbi Joshua, the Messiah actually answered Rabbi Joshua’s original question, implying that both the rabbi and his father will have a share in the world to come. As for the Messiah’s statement that he is coming “today,” Elijah explains,

the Messiah did not lie, but rather he alluded to the verse from Psalms, "Today if you will hear his voice," thereby making the coming of the Messiah dependent less on God's will than on the ability of humanity to obey God's commandments.

In "Hamitpaḥat" the narrator refers to this text at two different points. In each passage the child imagines himself in the role of the hero of the aggadic narrative, Rabbi Joshua. The first reference to the text reflects the concerns of the narrator as a boy during the period before his bar mitzvah and belongs to the realm of fantasy and dreams. A later passage is presented as an actual reenactment of the Rabbi Joshua narrative by the narrator on the day of his bar mitzvah.

In the first reference to the aggadah the narrator recalls how during the week that his father would go to the annual merchants' fair in Lashkowitz, he would lie on his father's bed and before falling asleep would reflect upon the aggadic scene of the Messiah sitting among the poor:

אתמול היה אוסר ומתיר את פצעיו והיום הוא מלך. אתמול היה יושב עם העניים והם לא הרגישו בו ויש שהקילו בכבודו ונהגו בו בזיון. פתאום נזכר הקדוש ברוך הוא שבועה שנשבע לגאול את ישראל ונתן לו רשות שיתגלה בעולם. אחר במקומי היה מתרעם על העניים שלא נהגו כבוד במלך המשיח, אבל אני הגיתי להם חיבה, מאחר שנתאווה המלך המשיח לישב במחיצתם. אחר במקומי מיקל בכבודם של עניים, שהם אוכלים פת קיבר אפילו בשבת ולובשים בגדים מפוחמים, אבל אני מחבב אותם, שיש מהם שזכו לישב במחיצתו של משיח.

Only yesterday he was untying and rebandaging his wounds and today he's a king! Yesterday he sat among the poor and they did not recognize him, but sometimes even abused him and treated him with disrespect; and now suddenly the Holy One, blessed be He, has remembered the oath He swore to redeem Israel, and given him permission to reveal himself to the world. Another in my place might have been angered at the poor who treated Messiah the King with disrespect; but I honored and revered them, since Messiah the King had desired to dwell in their quarters. In my place another might have treated the poor without respect, as they eat black bread even on the Sabbaths, and wear dirty clothes. But I honored and revered them, since among them were those who had dwelt together with the Messiah.⁸

Here the boy imagines the scene from the aggadah of the Messiah sitting among the poor. Unlike Rabbi Joshua, however, the boy's interest in the

⁸ Agnon, *Elu ve'elu*, 257; Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, 47.

scene is not motivated by an urgent desire to know when the Messiah will come. He is content to attribute much importance to his respect for the Messiah, which will put him on the right side when that poor beggar is transformed by God's will into the savior of humanity.

This passage is shortly followed by a dream sequence in which the boy assumes a role parallel to that of Rabbi Joshua going to Rome to speak with the Messiah:

פעם אחת נטלתי את ציציותי וקשרתי עצמי בכנפיו ואמרתי, עוף הביאני אצל אבא. פירש העוף את כנפיו וטס עמי והביאני לעיר אחת רומי שמה. נסתכלתי למטה וראיתי כת של עניים יושבים בשערי העיר ועני אחד יושב ביניהם ומתיר ואוסר את פצעיו. כבשתי את עיני ממנו גבה הר גדול מלא קוצים וברקנים ביסורים. כיון שכבשתי עיני ממנו גבה הר גדול מלא קוצים וברקנים וחיות רעות רועות בהר ועופות טמאים פורחים ושקצים ורמשים מרתיעים ובאים. נישבה פתאם רוח גדולה וזרקה אותי על ההר. התחיל ההר מתמוטט ועמדו איברי להתפזר. ביקשתי לצעוק ולא צעקתי כי יראתי שאם אפתח פי יבואו עופות טמאים וינקרו בלשוני. בא אבא וצרני בטליתו והביאני על מטתי. פקחתי עיני להסתכל בפניו וראיתי שהאיר היום. מיד ידעתי שקימט הקדוש ברוך הוא לילה מלילותיו של היריד. נטלתי את ציציותי ועשיתי קשר חדש.

Once I took my fringed garment and tied myself to [a great bird's] wings and said, "Bird, bird, take me to Father." The bird spread its wings and flew with me to a city called Rome. I looked down and saw a group of poor people sitting at the gates of the city, and one poor person among them untying and rebandaging his wounds. I turned my eyes away from him in order not to see his sufferings. When I turned my eyes away there grew a great mountain with all kinds of thorns and thistles upon it and evil beasts grazing there, and impure birds and ugly creeping things crawling about it, and a great wind blew all of a sudden and flung me onto the mountain, and the mountain began quaking under me and my limbs felt as though they would fall asunder; but I feared to cry out lest the creeping things should enter my mouth and the impure birds should peck at my tongue. Then Father came and wrapped me in his prayer shawl and brought me back to my bed. I opened my eyes to gaze at his face and found that it was day. At once I knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, had rolled away another night of the nights of the fair. I took my fringes and made a fresh knot.⁹

This dream sequence contrasts with the boy's fantasy about the Messiah, as well as with the aggadic passage on which it is based. Here the boy

⁹ Agnon, *Elu ve'elu*, 258; Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, 48.

loses his purported delight in and respect for the Messiah and for the poor people among whom he sits. Furthermore, unlike Rabbi Joshua who goes to Rome to ask the Messiah about redemption, in the dream the boy is carried to Rome when he asks to see his father. Once there, unlike Rabbi Joshua the boy does not have a conversation with the Messiah but rather turns away from the Messiah's suffering and is then thrown into a nightmarishly dangerous world, only to be saved in the end by the miraculous appearance of his father.

The aggadic passage plays a role in the climactic passage of the story. On the day of the narrator's bar mitzvah, his mother ties the precious kerchief that she had worn on Jewish holy days around his neck. On his way back from the House of Study, the boy comes across a poor person who had begun to spend time in the boy's town. The poor person, who had been treated unmercifully by the Jewish residents of the town, closely resembles the Messiah as poor person in the aggadic passage and in the boy's fantasy and dream. Now the boy interacts more directly with this poor person in ways that parallel but also are in marked contrast to the way that Rabbi Joshua relates to the Messiah:

בדרך נזדמן לי אותו עני כשהוא יושב על קופה של אבנים ומתיר ואוסר את פצעיו ובגדיו קרועים ומקורעים, ממש סמרטוטין שאין חופין אפילו את פצעיו. אף הוא הציץ בי, פצעים שהציצו מתוך פניו כעין עינים של אש נראו. באותה שעה עמד בי לבי והתחילו ארכובותי מרתתות ועיני מתעממות והולכות ונתבלבל עלי עולמי. אבל אני נטלתי את לבי בידי והרכנתי את ראשי לפני העני ואמרתי לו שלום והחזיר לי שלום.

On the way I found that poor person sitting on a heap of stones, untying and rebandaging his wounds, his clothes rent and tattered, nothing but a bundle of rags which did not even hide his wounds. He looked at me as well. The wounds on his face seemed like eyes of fire. My heart stopped, my knees began shaking, my eyes grew dim, and everything seemed to be in a whirl. But I took my heart in my hand, nodded to the poor person, and greeted him, and he returned the greeting.¹⁰

As Rabbi Joshua and the Messiah greeted each other in the aggadic passage, so do the boy and the poor person. In contrast to the aggadic passage, however, the mutual greeting is nonverbal, and Rabbi Joshua's grandiose question to the Messiah regarding when he would bring redemption is subsequently replaced in this version with a simple act of charity when the boy gives his kerchief to the Messiah to bandage his wounds.

¹⁰ Agnon, *Elu ve'elu*, 266; Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, 57–58.


The three aggadic narratives that the narrator as a child distorts each reflect the ongoing tension in Jewish religious thought regarding the relative roles of divine and human agency in assuring human well-being. The aggadah of Nahum Ish Gam Zu deals with the relative political powerlessness of the Jews under Roman rule. Nahum's eventual triumphant raising of the Jews to a status of parity with the Romans is achieved by a combination of human optimism and faith and divine supernatural intervention. The aggadah of Hiyya bar Abba is about a wealthy man whose material needs are more than adequately satisfied. He attributes this material well-being to his own personal diligence in honoring the Sabbath, for which he receives divine reward. The aggadah of Joshua b. Levi suggests a divine control of personal salvation in the world to come, but a dependence by God on humanity to obey the commandments in order to bring the messianic redemption.

In each distorted version of an aggadah the boy upsets the delicate balance between human and divine agency found in the original aggadic narratives. In his first two distorted versions, he tips the scale to the side of divine intervention: the Sabbath meal that the boy experiences is associated only with what God gives and not with the necessary human preparations related in the aggadic text, while the earth's supernatural transformation into swords occurs with no reference to the human hero Nahum. The boy's interactions with the beggar as Messiah, however, move from the experience of total dependence on an outside power (the Messiah will one day miraculously rise to power; the father can save him from the evil that the Messiah suffers) to an almost complete focus on the role of humanity in bringing about redemption by such charitable acts as giving a poor person a kerchief with which to bind his wounds.

Beneath the surface of this story of individual maturation lies a critique of the ways that misreadings of rabbinic Judaism have fostered inappropriate approaches of traditional Ashkenazic Jews seeking to meet their basic needs. The childish distortions in this story mask a deeper radical declaration that the world in which the author was raised was excessively dependent on God. In the spirit of prevailing modern Jewish political trends (Zionism, Socialism, etc.), the author declares, in effect: Reject excessive dependence on divine sources of redemption and take matters into your own hands. Political, material, and spiritual well-being can only be accomplished if humans act. If this means sacrificing long-standing sanctified worldviews, so be it. Even if this involves the abandonment of the world of one's childhood, it is preferable to a blind attachment to religion that serves as a refuge from taking on the problems of human existence.

By alluding to talmudic aggadic texts, however, Agnon subtly avoids the antirabbinic bias of much modern political thought. It is as if he is

saying: Go back to the original texts of the rabbinic tradition to discover the balance between the roles of God and humanity. Only then will you realize that if Diaspora Ashkenazic Jews have been prone to passivity, it is because they have chosen a distorted, overly simplistic approach to meeting their needs. The future of Jewish culture is dependent on a mature return to the wisdom of tradition, which will reestablish a balance between human practicality and religious faith that will assure a true and lasting material and spiritual Jewish revival.



◆

WHAT "DANCES" IN AGNON'S "DANCE OF DEATH"

Malka Shaked

"Meḥolat hamavet" ("Dance of Death," or "Danse Macabre"),¹ one of S. Y. Agnon's minor stories, is not very popular with readers in spite of the fact that its special dramatic, balladic qualities have been exposed lately through dramatization.² As Arnold Band correctly observes, "Meḥolat hamavet" combines the atmosphere of Yiddish and Hebrew folk tales on the one hand with the atmosphere of German Romanticism on the other, and its charm derives from the fact that it is directed simultaneously at both naïve and sophisticated readers.³ In this essay I will attempt to reveal the charm as well as the complexity and sophistication of this story.

On a first reading, "Meḥolat hamavet" seems to be a sad, balladic story about the cruel destruction of matrimonial love, but as in every ballad, it has a mysterious dimension activating the plot that must be discovered by the reader. In order to decode this dimension, the reader must ask several questions, such as: Why did the implied author "murder" the couple? Why did he have the bridegroom die first, and later the bride, as opposed to having them die together? And the major issue: What brought about their tragic end?

¹ Published in 1919 in the collection *Polin: agaddot mini qedem* (Poland: Legends of the Far Past). In the second edition of Agnon's collected stories (1953) the title of the story was expanded to "Meḥolat hamavet o hane'ehavim, vehane'imim" ("Dance of Death, or The Beloved and the Pleasant"). Its basic plot existed already in Agnon's Hebrew story "Hapanas" ("The Lamp," 1907) and in his Yiddish story "Toytntants" ("Danse Macabre," 1911). "Hapanas" was not included in Agnon's collected stories. It was reprinted in *Molad* 21 (175–176) (1963): 64–65. "Toytntants" was reprinted in S. Y. Agnon, *Yiddishe verk* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 73–83.

² This dramatization was created by Yehudit Rizi and has been performed at the Agnon House in Jerusalem since July 1999. On December 22, 1999, I introduced a performance with a lecture that stimulated this essay.

³ Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 100–102.

The alternative titles presented in the full name of the story, "Dance of Death, or The Beloved and the Pleasant," reflect the two cultural sources of the story, German Gothic and Jewish. The title "Dance of Death" reflects the German Gothic world that includes the tragic intensity of the *danse macabre*. "The Beloved and the Pleasant" alludes to David's lament on Saul and Jonathan's death in the war against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa—"Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant, never separated in life or in death" (2 Samuel 1:23)—thereby reflecting a Jewish image of the inability to separate lovers, as well as the defeat of Jews at the hands of their enemies. As the plot of the story unfolds, the wedding of a young Jewish couple is tragically transformed into a funeral when a gentile landowner murders the bridegroom and kidnaps the bride (358).⁴ The wedding dance of the bridegroom and the bride is delayed until the end of the story after the bride dies, when it becomes a *danse macabre* that unifies the dead couple and proves their eternal love.⁵

The human tragedy of the young couple in "Meḥolat hamavet" is that the happiness of their wedding is destroyed by the violent power motivated by intense instincts imposed on them by the *parits*, the gentile feudal landowner. This tragedy is depicted very intensely by the effective use of elements drawn from nature that evoke a mytho-poetic effect. For example, toward the beginning of the story the narrator describes weeds as "red like blood" (356). Later he portrays the *parits* by means of a simile: "His shadow crouches like a heavy rock" (359), and he refers to events occurring after the bride's death "every night when the rooster cries at midnight for the second time and the stars have their exchange of guards in the firmaments" (359).

⁴ All references are to S. Y. Agnon, *Elu ve'elu* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953). The translations are mine.

⁵ The balladic motif of the *danse macabre* story appears quite frequently in European ballads, and Agnon probably derived this motif from German sources. As mentioned above, he made use of the image of the *danse macabre* in his earlier Yiddish story "Toytntants." The motif reappears in the *danse macabre* of Raphael the Scribe with his deceased wife Miryam, while they are covered with her wedding gown in "Aggadat hasofer" ("Legend of the Scribe," 1919). It is also transformed into metaphorical forms in a number of other stories in which Agnon deals with matches that have not been consummated because of various impediments, such as "Agunot" (1908), "Shevu'at emunim" ("Vow of Faith," 1943), and "Tehillah" (1950), as well as in stories about the resurrection of the dead from their graves as a result of a sin committed against them, such as "Hayaldah hametah" ("The Dead Girl," 1932) and "Halev veba'eynaym" ("The Heart and the Eyes," 1943).

Agnon also evokes an unmistakable Jewish theme that he used in the stories "Hapanas" ("The Lamp") and "Halev veba'einayim" ("The Heart and the Eyes"),⁶ as well as in the story "Sippur hana'arah hame'orasah" ("The Story of the Engaged Maid").⁷ This theme is the tragedy of an innocent Jewish girl who is captured by a non-Jewish man, but nevertheless remains loyal to her religious and national identity.⁸ The Jewish aspect of this theme is emphasized in the text by folkloristic and historical means. The location of the dramatic events is the old synagogue where the wedding takes place, the bridegroom is murdered and buried, and the bride is kidnapped. It is also the place where the *danse macabre* occurs night after night following the death of the bride. Moreover, the Jewish identity of this location is deepened by the presentation of a riddle that can be solved only by reference to traditional Jewish law (*halakhah*). At the beginning and the end of the story the narrator indicates that priests (*kohanim*) are not allowed to step into this place and that weddings are not permitted there. At first, the narrator wonders why this is so. Then he suggests that the answer may be found in the story he will tell. At the end of the story the narrator makes clear the solution to the riddle: since this is a place where blood has been shed, the dead have been buried, and the dance of the dead still takes place, it must be treated as a cemetery that, according to Jewish law, is forbidden to priests and inappropriate for celebrations.

The story also portrays Jewish wedding customs. The father chooses a bridegroom for his daughter in accordance with the traditional Jewish preference for a man "great in the knowledge of Torah and awe of God"

⁶ It is no coincidence that this story appears in *Elu ve'elu* next to "Meḥolat hamavet."

⁷ It is unknown when this story was written, but it was published posthumously in S.Y. Agnon, *Ir umelo'ah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1973), 272–74. In the language and plot of this story there are numerous parallels to "Meḥolat hamavet," although the story does not end up with a dance of death. It seems that the two stories share the same historical background, which is the end of the eighteenth century, when the Polish feudal landowners could still mishandle Jews as much as they wanted.

⁸ This theme appears in various configurations in works by other Hebrew writers. See, for instance, three ballads by S. Tschernikhovski, in which a Jewish girl is afraid of being kidnapped and/or raped by a gentile: "Bat harav" ("The Rabbi's Daughter," 1924), "Bat harav ve'immah" ("The Rabbi's Daughter and Her Mother," 1942), "Bito hayaffah shel harav" ("The Beautiful Daughter of the Rabbi," 1942), and his long poem "Barukh miMagentsa" ("Baruch from Mainz," 1901), in which the father kills his daughters in order to prevent them from bearing children to the enemies of the Jews. See also "Laḥash haqesem" ("The Magic Murmur," 1920), by Jacob Cahan.

(256). The wedding takes place on the fifteenth of the month, when the moon is full, in keeping with Jewish custom. The father follows the traditional Jewish practice of making a great feast for the poor and donating money to support the weddings of impoverished brides. Customs that recall the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem are observed: people shed tears for the destroyed Temple, the groom is dressed in a white robe, he puts ashes on the part of his head where he would wear phylacteries, and he breaks a glass (357). Other folkloristic customs are depicted as well. The men dance in front of the bride, and the women circle her three times, interlacing their feet and slapping twisted *hallot* as they dance. One woman says, "A bridegroom is like a king," and another says, "a nice and pious bride" (357–58).

Thus, the story of a Jewish wedding is implanted into a historic world in which taxes have to be paid to the king, presents have to be given to the queen in order to be married, a *parits* abuses Jews, and Jewish authorities forbid brides to wear silk dresses.⁹ This historical frame shows that the tragic plot reflects not only the exertion of the instincts of a villain who kidnaps a bride under the canopy, but also the fate of the Jewish minority. This Jewish minority is dependent on the benevolence of their gentile neighbors. While the Jews obey the laws of the land, they are abused by the gentiles, who can do to them whatever they have in mind, for there is no rule of law preventing them from doing harm.

This Jewish destiny is portrayed also in symbolic and mythological ways. For example, the murder of the bridegroom and the fearful reaction of the people suggest the atmosphere of a pogrom, which is intensified by the use of the expression "awful terror" (*herdat elohim*), and especially by use of the expression "the remnant of the survivors" (*she'erit hapeletah*, 358), which frequently refers to survivors of pogroms. The description of the acts performed by the *parits* alludes to biblical descriptions of destruction; for example: "His sword moves like a drunkard swinging around his loins" (cf. "The earth moves like a drunkard swinging back and forth like a hut," Isaiah 24:20); in describing the killing of the bridegroom, the narrator states, "from his throat his blood spills," which alludes to "their blood spills on my clothing" (Isaiah 63:3); the *parits* is depicted as a hunter returning from his hunting ground "his cloth red [or, sour] with blood"—alluding to, "Who comes from Edom in red clothing" (Isaiah 63:1)—thereby associating him with the ancient enemy of Israel, the Edomites, and their forefather Esau.

⁹ The historical background of this prohibition executed by the Jewish authority is explicated in Arna Golan's essay, "'Meḥolat hamavet' by S. Y. Agnon," *Molad* 4 (23) (1972): 513–23.

Although Agnon exercises much freedom in his use of biblical references, it is significant that the main sources for these references are chapters 24 and 63 of Isaiah. These chapters describe the future revenge to be enacted on Israel's enemies, thereby reinforcing the idea of revenge on the foreign oppressor, which functions also as a main element in the plot. This desired revenge is expressed when it is told that the bridegroom was buried soiled by his blood in order "to arouse fury and revenge" (358). The emergence of the bride from her tomb is depicted not less than three times as an emergence from "the graves of a foreign god-head" (*miqivrot el nekhar*, 359). This final image of a surrealistic revenge gives the story the character of a Jewish revenge ballad.

The folkloristic, historic, and mythological Jewish dimensions that appear in all aspects of the text through its plot and language stress a different aspect than the balladic, Gothic dimension. According to these Jewish dimensions, the root of all evil is not masculine lust and desire but the viciousness of the gentile who inflicts harm on the Jew at will, robbing, tormenting, and killing him whenever he likes. Suitable revenge for the criminal acts of the gentiles cannot, of course, be realized in the lifetime of the characters, but only in the permanent demonic return of the captive bride to her Jewish identity and to her bridegroom to share with him a kind of post-mortem love life in their *danse macabre* night after night.

If we note the degree to which the bride and her father are portrayed with human weaknesses, we can discern that Agnon sought to defy conventional notions of absolute virtue colliding with absolute vice. Indeed, these portraits imply that the tragic plot was driven, in part, by the behavior of these two characters. The father is portrayed as displaying a moral flaw, which must be understood in the context of the historical dimension described above. When the father asks the leader of the Jewish community¹⁰ to allow his daughter to wear a silk dress on her wedding day, the leader refuses to violate the rule made by Jewish community leaders that prohibited Jewish brides from wearing silk (356). The father is not pleased with this ruling, and he accepts it only half-heartedly. Although "he did not appeal the leader's verdict" (356), he had actually prepared his daughter's silk dress even before the response of the head of the community, and following the ruling, the father moves his hand in an unaccepting way, thereby indicating that he is a man who underestimates the importance of established rules. Moreover, the prohibition of

¹⁰ According to historical information this leader represented the community in the Board of Four Countries (*va'ad arba aratsot*) and had to take care that the regulations of the governing bodies were fulfilled.

silk dresses does have a moral justification, for it is said that “they are prohibited in the holy community of Israel because they bring about destruction and desolation and a waste of their money” (356). In contrast, the father’s request has no moral justification and is motivated by his wish to spoil his only daughter and probably by his impulse to show off before the community. Although the father does understand that “his daughter is also a nice and pious bride in a simple dress,” and he even sells the silk dress and dedicates the money “for bridal canopies of poor girls” (357), nevertheless, he does not let go of his basic dissent from the community leader’s ruling.

The bride’s attitude also seems to be morally questionable. On the one hand, it is said several times that she is a “nice and pious bride,” and she seems to relate to her father in an obedient manner. She neither opposes the choice of the bridegroom who suits the heart of her father,¹¹ nor does she refute her father’s request for her to be permitted to wear a silk dress. On the other hand, however, the story indicates that there may be a hidden dimension to the relationship between the bride and the *parits*. This hidden dimension is suggested by the figurative language of the story in three phases. In the first phase, the appearance of the *parits* is observed collectively by the wedding guests: “They were under the canopy and a small cloud was rising from the end of the city. They raised their eyes and saw a horse and its rider” (357). Although the wedding guests think that the horse and its rider are positive signals, the expression “a horse and its rider,” which alludes to a biblical reference to Pharaoh’s army pursuing the Israelites (Exodus 15:1), suggests anxiety and danger.

In the second phase, the rider on his horse is the concern of the bride and not of the guests: “The bride lowered her two pure eyes to the ground. Who rides on a horse? Like the shadow of a heavy rock its shadow lies between her and the bridegroom” (358). The small real cloud rising from the end of the city is transformed in the consciousness of the bride into the simile “like the shadow of a heavy rock,” an expression of a component in

¹¹ In the dramatic adaptation and performance of the story mentioned above, the director interpreted the repeated expression *kilvavo* (“suing his heart”) as an indication of the father’s sin. According to this interpretation the father has chosen a bridegroom according to his own taste, thereby defying his daughter’s resistance. The wedding in the play is forced on her, indicating that the father wanted to dominate his daughter’s life. In my opinion, this interpretation overly exaggerates the father’s sin. The expression *kilvavo* reflects the traditional social order in which parents used to select bridegrooms according to their taste and understanding but not necessarily against their daughters’ wills.

the soul of the bride. The question "Who rides on a horse?" comes immediately after the statement: "The bride lowered her two pure eyes to the ground." From the juxtaposition of the statement and the question we can conclude that the sight of the rider as a "shadow of a heavy rock" is the reason why she is lowering her eyes. The statement "its shadow lies between her and the bridegroom" points out that the rider's shadow endangers the marriage of the bride and groom. On one level, it appears that the bride is terrified by the possibility that a stranger will hurt her innocence, which explains the lowering of her "pure eyes." On another level, it might appear that the bride is not afraid to lose her innocence by means of this stranger and that she is attracted and fascinated by him. Thus, the lowering of her eyes signals that she is not as pure as she seems to be.¹² Nevertheless, this interpretation is contradicted by the description of the forcible kidnapping of the bride: "the girl was shouting and she did not have any savior," an allusion to a biblical reference to rape (Deuteronomy 22:27).¹³ Moreover, since the bride lowers her eyes immediately after being married, even before the rider is identified as somebody dangerous, we may assume that the heavy shadow between the bride and the bridegroom is a metaphoric reference to the anxiety she feels in anticipation of the consummation of her marriage.

In the third and last phase we find, "Who rides on the horse? As the shadow of a heavy rock lies down on her heart" (359). Here the heavy rock is disconnected from any external reality and seems to emerge solely from the bride's memory. The shadow is no longer between herself and the bridegroom but explicitly "on her heart." The bridegroom had been murdered many years before, and his bride lives in the house of the *parits* as his wife, but she is persecuted from the inside, in her heart, by the heavy shadow. While in the earlier stage the shadow separated her from her bridegroom, now it separates her from her life in the palace. The heavy shadow that lies on her heart causes her heart to be transformed. The expression "her heart has been transformed" (*nehpakh aleha libbah*, 359) is quite significant. Its basic literal meaning is that she had a heart attack or a stroke, but the metaphorical meaning is that she was transported back to her past, reunited with her bridegroom and her Jewish identity, and especially that she became connected with the world of the dead to which the bridegroom belongs. According to this interpretation, the shadow of the *parits* that brought about the first transformation of her life has become the shadow lying on her heart,

¹² See Nitza Ben Dov, *Ahavot lo me'usharot* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), 333–54.

¹³ The same phrase is used by Agnon to indicate rape in "Sippur hana'arah hame'orasah."

not letting her stay with the *parits*, meaning that it dialectically has caused the second transformation of her heart—her death and her return to her bridegroom.

The analogy between the bride's death and burial in her wedding gown and the burial of the groom in his wedding clothes, as well as her leaving the gentile cemetery every night to visit the bridegroom's grave by the synagogue, accentuates metaphorically the unification of the bride with her bridegroom as "the beloved and pleasant" in their death, although it is a macabre realization of this unification. On the other hand, it accentuates the bride's return to her Jewish roots, which happens ironically only after she passes away. If we choose to maintain that she had committed the sin of falling in love with the *parits* and deserting her Jewish identity, this return to her roots could be understood as an act of atonement. On the overt level of the text, however, there is no need for her atonement, as it says that "she refused to leave the God of Israel and was strolling round the castle depressed and lonely under the pressure of her agony" (*qoderet shomemah belahats yegonah*, 359).

The bride's transformation can also be interpreted as an act of vengeance directed at the gentiles. The bride's inner transformation, her abandonment of her husband the *parits*, her wearing of her wedding dress, her being buried in it, and her nightly leaving of her tomb in the gentile cemetery to be united in a *danse macabre* with her murdered lawful Jewish husband constitute a metaphysical revenge that has a romantic, individual, and national meaning. This post-mortem reunion of these two young Jews is brought about in spite of persecution and murder. This revenge obviously does not cause much harm to the *parits*. It is less an act of reprisal and more a surrealist poetic justification of the victim that takes place in the world of fantasy, or in the afterlife. Agnon omitted here the outcome of his earlier story "Hapanas," in which the grandson of the kidnapped bride returns to Judaism and becomes an important Jewish scholar. The omission of this epilogue in "Meḥolat hamavet" is an obvious sign of despair. It means that the vicious acts of the adversaries will never be revenged in the real life of the victims or their descendants. Even if the bride returns to her Jewish origins, the *parits* continues to live, and she with her bridegroom can become "the beloved and the pleasant" only in death. The revenge is thus transcendental, and the consolation seems to be quite macabre.

Who is to blame for this tragic state of affairs: the *parits*, the father, or the daughter? The guilt of the first is laid bare on the overt level of the story. The definitive proof of his guilt is the fact that he murdered the most innocent character in the story, the bridegroom. A number of critics have found insinuations of the guilt of the two others in the covert

level of the story.¹⁴ This led them to impose on the story meanings derived from its intense allusionary power that do not have much evidence in the text itself. It is true that Agnon frequently uses all kinds of intertextual devices to create a covert text, but interpretations based on intertextuality in Agnon's texts can sometimes be quite far-fetched. Not every connotation is relevant, and very often the construction of a covert plot on the basis of these devices can be quite artificial. In order to discern the relevance of intertextual devices and not to ascribe too much significance to their function, it is important to check and recheck the connection of the covert intertext to the overt text. A major misunderstanding can be created especially when the reader projects a subjective perspective onto the reading. For example, a reading that finds in "Meḥolat hamavet" the opposition of Agnon to the deterioration of faith and moral strength of the Jewish characters would seem to be a far-fetched secular reading,¹⁵ while an allegorical reading that sees the story as an anti-Diaspora and pro-Zionist allegory would seem to be an excessively Zionist interpretation.¹⁶

In considering the "sins" of the father and the daughter, it should be asked if those are the cause of the catastrophe. Furthermore, is the catastrophe supposed to be a punishment at all? And why was the *parits* the one to execute it? Even the father's guilt, which seems to be more obvious than his daughter's, is not definitive because although he is unsatisfied with the verdict on the silk dress, he does obey it. But even if the father sinned, Agnon does not make it easy to understand how that sin is connected to the catastrophe. On one hand, he does not describe the father's reaction to the calamity, and on the other hand, if it is a punishment for the father's feelings but not for his actions, it is disproportionately


¹⁴ Golan claims that the father sinned heavily not only by his inner opposition to the prohibition of the silk dress, but also by arranging a sumptuous wedding meal, and that the bride sinned by her attraction to the *parits*. See Golan, "Meḥolat hamavet." Ben Dov also claims that the father and the daughter are both sinners. By referring to several biblical connotations she creates a brand new covert story, which is absolutely different from the overt one. In this story the daughter knew the *parits* before her wedding and died while giving birth to his child. See Ben Dov, *Ahavot lo me'usharot*. Roni Kohavi-Nehb claims that the father is guilty for his intensely felt inner opposition to the verdict on the silk dress, but she exempts the daughter. See Roni Kohavi-Nehb, "'Meḥolat hamavet o hane'ehavim vehane'imim' leS.Y. Agnon: hagaddah ufishrah," *Dappim lemehqar besifrut* 12 (2000).

¹⁵ Ben Dov, *Ahavot lo me'usharot*, 334.

¹⁶ Kohavi-Nehb, "Meḥolat hamavet," 253, 256, 261–62.

unjust. Moreover, it seems to be quite ironic that although the prohibition against brides wearing silk dresses was kept strictly in order to prevent destruction, its observance did not prevent the tragic destruction. It would seem, therefore, that Agnon is indicating that the calamity was not a punishment and that the cruel actions of the *parits* have nothing to do with the intentions or actions of the Jews.

As for the daughter's "guilt," it is only imaginable in an overly sophisticated intertextual interpretation. If she committed any sin, in her death she underwent a process of complete purification. Moreover, her death while remembering her past constitutes an indictment of the *parits*. In the final analysis, the guilt of the father and his daughter are not to be compared to the obvious guilt of the *parits*. They certainly do not deserve blame for the tragedy in the way the *parits* does. The hints of minor guilt in two of the victims would seem to be aspects of their characterization rather than elements of a moral judgment. Nevertheless, these hints of guilt are the means for Agnon to suggest that human characters are not perfect and that even innocent victims of a pogrom probably have some flaws that make them appear more human and vulnerable than they would if they were presented as shallow stereotypes. Such complex characterization is Agnon's way of transcending the simplicity of the core folkloristic legend of this story.



◆

AGNON FROM A MEDIEVAL PERSPECTIVE¹

David Stern

Agnon's short story "Agunot" has been justly celebrated for many reasons. First, it was the story from which its youthful author, the nineteen-year-old S. Y. Czaczkes, took his pen name when he published it in *Ha'omer* in 1908, shortly after emigrating to Palestine from his birthplace in Galicia.² It was also Agnon's first published Hebrew story in Palestine, and it immediately won him recognition, thereby beginning his illustrious career. Finally, it was in "Agunot" that Agnon discovered and cemented the fictional persona that became the unmistakable trademark of all his later writing: the unreliable narrator in the form of the pious, naïve storyteller steeped in the law and lore of Jewish tradition and seemingly oblivious to the deeply disturbing depths lurking beneath his innocent and simple tales. As Agnon critics have long recognized, the figure of this narrator, aside from being its author's faithful literary persona, has effectively personified the essential tension behind

¹ My earliest encounter with Arnold Band was through his words, specifically his classic book on Agnon, which I first read as a graduate student when I was applying for teaching positions. I had to deliver a lecture on Agnon as part of an interview for a job in modern Hebrew literature, not exactly my field but one that I tried to convince an interview committee I could nonetheless teach. The ploy didn't work. But I was fortunate to get another position, and it was there, in Los Angeles, that the words became flesh and I finally met Band. In the three years I lived in Los Angeles, Band taught me many things—among them, the essential oneness of Hebrew literature from the biblical period to the modern, and the indispensable importance of mastering Hebrew grammar in all its niceties if one wished to work in Hebrew literature. In being asked to contribute to this volume in his honor, the circle now comes fully round, for at last I have an occasion to return to the lecture on Agnon I hastily began some twenty-plus years ago. It is therefore with special gratitude for the opportunity, and for all Band has taught me and others over the years, that I offer this article.

² For biographical background, see Dan Laor, *Ḥayyei Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 54–68 especially.

all Agnon's writing, namely, the conflicted and problematic relationship of tradition and modernity, the quandary of religious faith in a world of existential doubts and uncertainties.

"Agunot" is profoundly shaped by this quandary. Compounded out of intertwined tales of disappointed, thwarted love and artistic catastrophe, the narrative is prefaced by an introductory homily that, because of its centrality to the story that follows, I will quote in full:³

It is cited in the writings: A thread of grace is spun and drawn out of the deeds of Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, in His glory, sits and weaves—strand on strand—a precious shawl all grace and all lovingkindness, for the Congregation of Israel to deck herself in, for times of happiness, for the joy of the commandments. Radiant in the splendor of the shawl's beauty, on Sabbaths and holidays, she glows even in these, the lands of exile, as she did in her youth in her Father's house, in the Temple of her Sovereign and in the city of sovereignty, Jerusalem. And when He, may He be blessed, sees her, and that she has been neither sullied (God forbid) nor stained even here, in the realm of her oppressors, He—as it were—leans toward her and says, "Behold thou art fair, my beloved, thou art fair" [Song of Songs 1:15]. And this is the secret of the power and the glory and the majesty and the tenderness in love that every man in Israel, every woman, and every infant, feels at this moment.

But there are times—alas!—when some hindrance is aroused, and it snaps a thread in the loom. Then the shawl is damaged; evil spirits hover about it, enter into it, and tear it to shreds. At once a sense of shame assails all Israel, and "they know they are naked" [Genesis 3:7]. Their days of rest are wrested from them, their feasts are fasts, their lot is dust instead of luster. At that hour the Congregation of Israel wanders in her anguish, crying, "Strike me, wound me, take away my veils from me" [Song of Songs 5:7].

Her Beloved has slipped away, and she, seeking Him, cries, "If ye find my Beloved, what shall ye tell Him? That I am afflicted with love" [Song of Songs 5:8]. And this affliction of love leads to darkest melancholy; it thoroughly deforms her, as though—heaven forbid—she were a woman given over to abandonment . . . until, from the heavens above, He breathes down upon us the spirit to repent and to muster deeds that are pride to their doers, and again draw forth that thread of grace and lovingkindness before the Lord.

³ My analysis is based on the original 1908 version published in the literary journal *Ha'omer*; unless noted otherwise, all page references are to the *Ha'omer* text. Later in his life, Agnon returned to the story several times, significantly revising it in 1921 and 1931, and somewhat less so, in its final published version in 1951. The translations in this essay are based on Baruch Hochman's masterful translation of the 1951 text but revised to accord with the original 1908 version.

And it was this matter that the author intended to address in telling the following true story....⁴

As Agnon scholars have demonstrated, the passage is a dense weave of intertextual references: to the midrashic interpretation of the Song of Songs as an allegory of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, to the Garden story in Genesis as background to the disruptive moment in the narrative, and to other biblical passages.⁵ The opening image of the thread of grace and lovingkindness is conflated out of rabbinic and mystical sources, while the divine shawl (*tallit*) derives as well from medieval and kabbalistic texts.⁶ All these sources and texts are woven together into a homily as seamless as the vision of mutuality it describes. From Israel's good deeds God weaves the *tallit* with which He garbs His bride and proclaims her beauty, which is in turn the "secret" of the love for God that fills the heart of every Jew. On the other hand, when the unspecified hindrances intrude and tear the shawl Israel is left to wander heart-stricken at the loss of her Lover. Her melancholy is cured only when God breathes down upon her the spirit of grace that leads the Jews to repent and thereby to perform the good deeds out of which He can once again spin the thread to repair the shawl.

This homily, an almost perfect imitation of the classical literary form of the *derashah*, introduces the narrative that is, as I have already noted, a double tale. A venerable and wealthy Jew named Ahiezer emigrates to the Land of Israel with his only daughter, the beautiful and virtuous Dinah. When she reaches the age of marriage, Ahiezer sends emissaries abroad to the great yeshivot of Europe to find a worthy husband for her. Meanwhile

⁴ The story first appeared in *Ha'omer* 2 (October 1908). The later revised version can be found in *Elu ve'elu* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953), 405–16. Hochman's translation appears in N. Glatzer, ed., *Twenty-One Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1970), 30–44. On Agnon's revisions of the story, see Yitzhak Bakon, "Al 'Agunot' leShay Agnon," *Moznayim* 16 (1977–1978), 167–79; and Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 54–57. As Band points out, Agnon's revisions were mainly in the way of "condensation"; in the course of his changes, he shortened the story by almost half.

⁵ See especially Gershon Shaked, "Midrash and Narrative: Agnon's 'Agunot,'" in G. Hartman and S. Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 287–93; and reprinted in a Hebrew version in Gershon Shaked, *Panim aherot byetsirato shel Shay Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hemeuhad, 1989), 11–27. Cf. Hillel Barzel, *Sippurei ahavah shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1975), 92–97.

⁶ See Gershom Scholem, "The Paradisiac Garb of Souls and the Origin of the Concept of *Haluka de-Rabbanan*," *Tarbiz* 24 (1954): 290–306.

he builds a great mansion in Jerusalem, and with it a prayer hall, and he commissions a young artist, Ben Uri, to build a Torah ark as its centerpiece. Ben Uri sets to work and, as he fashions the ark, he sings. When Dinah hears the song, she is magically drawn to watch him and she falls in love with the young artisan as he does with her. But Ben Uri becomes so enraptured by his work, pouring his entire being into the ark, that he forgets Dinah. The moment he completes the ark, however, he finds himself in a state of utter loss and creative emptiness, as if he has been abandoned by his completed work. Weeping for his loneliness, he leaves the workroom and descends to the garden outside, where he falls asleep. At that moment, Dinah comes to the workroom in search of Ben Uri, but when she sees the ark that has stolen him from her, she is aroused to jealousy by demonic thoughts—in the story, Satan himself is said actually to appear!—and she pushes the ark out the window where it falls to the garden.

The next morning, when the ark is discovered in the garden, the Jews of Jerusalem are scandalized and interpret its mysterious “fall” as a sign of divine displeasure. The rabbi of Jerusalem orders another ark to be made in its place, and the first ark, Ben Uri’s, is hidden away. But the second ark cannot replace the first one, and Ben Uri himself disappears. At this point, Yehezkel, the young scholar who has been chosen to be Dinah’s husband, arrives for their marriage. Dinah, bereft of her true love and guilt-ridden over having pushed the ark out the window, goes to the rabbi and confesses all. He attempts to console her, tells her that all her sins will be forgiven on her wedding day, and orders Ben Uri’s ark to be restored to the synagogue. But when his messengers go to find the ark, it has disappeared just like its maker.

Dinah and Yehezkel marry, but their marriage is never consummated. Dinah can think only of Ben Uri, while Yehezkel has his own true love, Freydele, the daughter of his father’s housekeeper, back in Poland. When Yehezkel learns that Freydele has married another, he too becomes inconsolably depressed. Dinah and Yehezkel are divorced, and the yeshivah Ahiezer has built for his son-in-law is abandoned by its students. Following the failure of all of Ahiezer’s projects—the yeshivah, the synagogue, the ark, and his daughter’s marriage—Yehezkel returns to Poland, and Ahiezer and Dinah depart Jerusalem in shame:

[Ahiezer’s] house was deserted, the House of Study stood desolate. And the quorum that had gathered in the synagogue to honor Sire Ahiezer so long as he was there, now did not assemble there for even the first round of afternoon prayers on the day of his departure.

In an epilogue, the narrative shifts to the rabbi of Jerusalem, who, immediately after Ahiezer and Dinah depart, has two dreams in which

the *shekhinah*, the divine presence, appears to him in the form of a beautiful woman in mourning. When he inquires after the meaning of the dream, he is shown a vision of the afterlife, of the souls of the dead, and among them, *neshamot agunot vetohot*, abandoned, wandering souls in search of their partners.⁷ This is the line from which the story takes its title. The word *agunah* (pl. *agunot*) is a technical term in Jewish law for a woman whose husband has disappeared and who, according to the law, cannot remarry as long as he does not formally divorce her or there is no evidence of his death. In his story, however, Agnon uses the term in a more figurative sense to refer to those stranded in a state of helpless, bereft abandonment, caught in a condition of interminable limbo and purgatorial exile. Indeed, in the midst of the rabbi's dream, Ben Uri himself emerges from the darkness to admonish him. "Why have you banished me from my share in God's inheritance?" he accuses the rabbi. "I will not leave you until you restore me and my ark to our place, to Jerusalem, the house of the Temple." Whereupon the good rabbi leaves his wife and home, willingly taking upon himself the life of exile in order to pursue a mission of restoring *agunot* to their rightful partners. "They say that the good rabbi still wanders," the story concludes, with several increasingly legendary and fantastic reports of rabbi-sightings: in one, he is seen floating off into the Great Sea on a red kerchief with an infant child in his arms; in another, young school children claim to have met him in Jerusalem where he stops them in the street, peers into their eyes, and then vanishes. "*LElohim pitronim*," the story ends, quoting Joseph in Genesis 40:8: "Interpretations are God's alone."

In retrospect, this last line may appear less like a final adieu from the story's naïve and pious narrator than like a sly word of advice from the story's author to literary scholars. Not surprisingly, given the story's incredible power as a work of narrative art, and because of its strategic position in Agnon's career, immense interpretive efforts have been expended upon "Agunot." Most of these begin with the prologue quoted earlier and its connection to the story that follows it. As Arnold Band has correctly noted, the connection between the two is profoundly disjunctive. The prologue, with its vision of the *tallit* woven from threads of grace that are spun in turn from the good deeds of Israel, suggests that "human action is responsible for human destiny" and that "divine grace is dispensed upon merit." The actual story, in contrast, depicts a world devoid of divine grace in which its human protagonists suffer their state

⁷ In the later revisions, the phrasing was changed and the word *agunot* left out of the line, though it reappears shortly thereafter when the rabbi announces that he is leaving home *letaqqen agunot*, "to restore *agunot*."

of *agunut*, abandonment and deprivation, for no good reason of their own doing. "Why is this a world of *agunut*?" Band asks, reiterating the disturbing question that the story implicitly poses.⁸

Part of the answer to this question, I would suggest, lies in the generic status of the story as a whole and of the prologue in particular. In virtually all the scholarship on "Agunut" I have seen, the prologue is regularly described as a midrash, and the tale as a kind of story woven around the midrash, a homiletical expansion or "realization" or "concretization," as it were, of the more abstract themes related in the prologue.⁹ To be sure, there is indeed a midrashic substratum to the prologue, but the passage is not really a midrash, an interpretation, so much as it is an aggadic homily. This last point is not simply a nit-picking academic distinction. The prologue is in fact the key to identifying the genre of classical and medieval Jewish literature upon which Agnon modeled "Agunut." To the best of my knowledge, that genre has not been discussed in the scholarship, and it is, I propose, the critical category for correctly appreciating the meaning of this enigmatic story.

The genre to which I am referring is that of the medieval *ma'aseh*.¹⁰ As a literary term, the word is usually translated as "exemplum," that is, a story that exemplifies a moral tale. In rabbinic literature, the term takes on the additional sense of referring to a story that actually took place, as opposed to being a mere fiction (like a *mashal*). In this sense, it is also the term for a legal precedent, that is, a story that proves or confirms a certain practice or law. These two connotations—that of being exemplary and of being historically verisimilar—are not opposed or exclusive. Precisely because the story claims to have taken place—a claim that is, above all, rhetorical, not necessarily factually true—it offers itself as a strong proof of the moral it exemplifies. Indeed, the more far-fetched the story, the stronger its claims to verisimilitude and the greater its capacity for being a compelling exemplary story.

As a literary genre, the *ma'aseh* makes its first appearance in Hebrew literature of the rabbinic period, but it fully comes into its own in the Middle Ages in such story collections as the "Midrash [*sic*] on the Ten

⁸ Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 61.

⁹ See *ibid.*, 59; Shaked, "Midrash and Narrative," 288–93; Bakon, "Al 'Agunut' leShay Agnon," 171–73; Barzel, *Sippurei ahavah*, 72–76.

¹⁰ On the *ma'aseh*, see David Stern, *Parables in Midrash* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 240–42; David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky, *Rabbinic Fantasies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 15–22 especially; and Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning*, trans. J. Teitelbaum (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 283–96.

Commandments" and Nissim of Kairouwan's *Hibbur yafeh min hayeshu'ah* and *Sefer hama'asim*, as well as in such works as *Ma'aseh haYerushalmi*. Indeed, the *ma'aseh* becomes, arguably, the quintessential literary form of medieval Hebrew literature. From there, it passed on to the various hagiographical genres that subsequently developed about the Ari (R. Isaac Luria), the Baal Shem Tov, and other Hasidic masters. Undoubtedly, the genre had some impact as well on Nahman of Bratslav's parabolic stories.¹¹ There is no question that Agnon would have read the latter works, and he very well may have been familiar with the more obscure medieval texts, or at least some of them. From a tender age, as we know, Agnon was an insatiable consumer of classical Jewish literature of all types.

Even if he knew only a few of these works, Agnon would have been familiar with the *ma'aseh's* basic literary form—which generally consists of a moral or lesson followed by a story intended to exemplify the moral—and the genre's essential narrative logic. Just as the narrative follows upon the lesson it purportedly illustrates, so too these narratives are meant to teach that good deeds invariably issue in merit and reward, and evil ones in punishment and disgrace. What this means, in other words, is that the logic of the genre is essentially causal, both formally and thematically. But even if he had been familiar with only a few examples of the genre, the young Agnon would have recognized one of its most distinctive endemic features, namely, the degree to which these exemplary stories do *not* in fact perfectly exemplify the morals they are intended to exemplify. Their formal causality is, to a degree, distorted or out of joint. In the narrative sections, justice itself is often skewed, with the rewards or punishments (usually the latter) way out of proportion to the characters' deeds or misdeeds. To rephrase both points somewhat differently: Agnon would have been familiar with the ways in which the pious and traditional moral frames of the *ma'asim* are variously at odds with the profane and morally ambiguous worlds actually depicted in their narratives.

The relevance of this description of the *ma'aseh* as a genre to the interpretation of "Agunot" should by now be obvious. In choosing the literary form of the classic medieval *ma'aseh* for his story, the young writer was able to exploit both the classical structure, with its inherently causal logic, *and* the essential disjunction that tends to characterize the literary form in practice, namely, its violation of the ideal rules of causality. What distinguishes Agnon's use of the genre from its medieval model is one thing: Agnon was self-consciously aware of the features I have described. By

¹¹ On the Hasidic tale, see Joseph Dan, *Hasippur haHasidi* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975); and Arnold Band, ed. and trans., *The Tales of Nahman of Bratslav* (New York: Paulist, 1978).

choosing to foreground these features and make them thematic, he effectively made disjunction itself—the distance between desire and its fulfillment, intention and deed, traditional ideals and human reality—the story's primary subject.

From its very beginning, such questions of disjunction and skewed causality virtually riddle the narrative of the story. Agnon doubtless wished the reader to believe that the opening homily was authentic, not one he had made up. But the author's real agenda in hooking the reader through the homily emerges in the transition from the homily to the narrative with the formulaic statement: "And it was to this matter [i.e., the lesson of the homily] that the author intended (*nitkavven*) in telling the *ma'aseh* that follows" (53). The word *nitkavven* has kabbalistic connotations—*kavvanah*, "intention," being the essence of a commandment—but its true meaning for the narrative is laid bare a few lines later, at the end of the transition:

O Lord, credit him kindly, this lord and patron [Ahiezer], for his deeds on behalf of his brethren, sons of his people, who dwell before God in the Land of the Living, *and this though he ultimately failed.*¹²

From its inception, the tale to be told is characterized within the narrative itself as a tale of good but failed intentions. Walter Benjamin once remarked about Kafka, "Once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him *en route* as in a dream."¹³ "Agunot" possesses the same dreamlike, inexorable, perfectly scheduled rhythm of failure.

Instances of failed, unrealized, or misfired intentions regularly repeat themselves in major and minor episodes in the narrative. For example, when Yehezkel prays and tries to concentrate upon the words of the *Shema*, he can think only of Freydele, his former love. Her *shekhi-nah* (Agnon here is using the term very playfully) steals into his heart and does not budge until Yehezkel finishes his prayers and puts his *tallit* and *tefillin* back into the bag she had sewn for him in Poland before he left her (61). Another instance of such failed good intentions occurs when the rabbi tries to console Dinah after she confesses to him that she pushed the ark out the window. He tells her that, according to the Sages, God will forgive the sins of a bride on her wedding day. He also speaks to her the praises of her bridegroom, in order to endear him to her, and he assures her that he will restore the condemned ark to its rightful place

¹² Italics are mine.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 148. The text was actually part of a letter to Gershom Scholem dated June 12, 1938.

in the synagogue. But the ark has disappeared and is never recovered. Dinah's heart is never drawn to Yehezkel, and their marriage is never consummated. As for Dinah's act, whether or not it is ever forgiven, it has irrevocable, tragic consequences for everyone involved. Even the rabbi, despite all his good intentions, is finally held personally responsible for all the other failures. He is condemned to leave his own home and wife (leaving *her*, in effect, as an *agunah!*) in order to restore and reunite the abandoned souls of the other characters—a mission that, by the tale's end, is still incomplete. Indeed, by the narrative's conclusion, the rabbi has become "the wandering Jew," whose wandering, by definition, will never be completed.

The problematics of intentionality—of the relationship between intention and deed, and of the human possibility of realizing one's intentions at all—is also intimately connected to the role of the various demonic or supernatural spirits that appear in the narrative at virtually all its crucial moments. For example, when Ben Uri begins to build the Torah ark we are told that "another spirit" (*ruah aheret*) immediately possesses him (55). Then, when he begins to sing, his song comes to possess an "odd power of attraction" (*koah moshekh meshuneh*) that attracts Dinah, whose heart is drawn to the song "as though through witchcraft" (*kemo al yedei keshafim*) (55). Presumably we are meant to understand that Dinah has fallen in love with Ben Uri. But significantly, the narrator never says this much, only that she descends to the workroom to see the "works of the artisan." Here again, only to confuse matters more, the narrator adds: "And he [Ben Uri] too [*ve'af hu*—it was as though he intended [*ke'ilu hu mitkavven*] to draw her with his melody more and more, so that she would stand there longer and longer and never ever leave him" (55). Does he intend to draw her to him or not? What is the nature of this mysterious melody? What is the source of its power? Has it independently possessed Ben Uri and then used him to entrance Dinah? Does Ben Uri sing because of his art or because he wishes to attract Dinah's attention? Where does the magic begin and end?

The same ambiguous causality informs the central act in the story's first movement, namely, the catastrophic accident that befalls the ark. Dinah, it will be recalled, comes to Ben Uri's workroom just after he has completed the ark and descended to the garden. When Dinah does not find him and instead sees the ark, she is filled with anger and jealousy. But then Satan himself appears, and he "prepares a glass of vengeance in her heart, and whispers to her, 'This is your rival.' Ideas come into her head, they spread out on their own—and suddenly they pushed the holy ark with a great push, and it teetered and fell out the open window" (57). Who has pushed the ark out the window—Dinah, Satan, the "ideas" in her head?

The role of these demonic supernatural interventions in the narrative cannot be explained simply as rationalizations of human behavior. Nor can they be dismissed simply as a function of the pious, naïve Agonesque narrator who recounts the *ma'aseh*. Certainly through the invention and the masterful use of this persona and his voice, Agnon was able credibly to inject all these elements into the story and to endow it with what we might call a virtual magical realism. But to take the demon and the other supernatural elements simply as tokens of the narrator's religious naïveté and superstitious piety is, I think, to be seduced and taken in by Agnon's rhetorical persona.

In a later revision of the story, Agnon himself made this all but explicit. After Dinah and Yehezkel are unhappily married, Yehezkel goes walking in the Judean hills in the evening. The narrator quotes a famous rabbinic saying, first in its original Aramaic, then in a Hebrew translation:

Happy is the portion of the man who is granted the privilege of making his home in the Holy Land in his lifetime; and not only this, but he who is privileged to dwell there in his lifetime is also deemed worthy to enjoy the Holy Spirit for ever and ever.¹⁴

But, the narrator continues (seemingly oblivious to the meaning of what he says), Yehezkel's feet may be planted in the gates of Jerusalem and may stand on its holy soil, yet his heart and eyes are pledged to houses of study and worship in the lands of the Diaspora. Even now he fancies himself among the scholars of his own town, strolling in the fields to take the evening air. The rhetorical discontinuity in this passage has an obvious message. The characters in the story are not behaving as they should—that is, in accordance with the beliefs and structures of tradition—nor is the world in which they live. Here, again, intention—the pious narrator's intention in recounting the rabbinic saying—is at odds with the reality of the narrative, as he acknowledges. Tradition is not working as it should. Good and pious intentions are not sufficient to produce their expected results. The piety of the narrator is not to be taken at face value.

The reason why this is necessarily so—why, in other words, this is a world of *agunot*—is left unexplained. Partly because of this silence—and because of the overwhelming helplessness of the story's characters and their inability to resist or to change their unhappy fates—they tend to appear as virtual automata or allegorical emblems. The story as a

¹⁴ Agnon, *Elu ve'elu*, 413.

whole seems itself at times to be working out some larger cosmic allegory. But what allegory? As scholars have long noted, the names of virtually all the characters are emblematic.¹⁵ Ben Uri obviously alludes to the biblical Bezalel Ben Uri, the fashioner of the Tabernacle in the book of Exodus. Yehezkel refers to the biblical prophet who is also the prophet par excellence of Exile. The name Freydele means "happiness," and its Yiddish form definitively locates that happiness in the Diaspora (and unhappily so for Yehezkel). Ahiezer literally means "my brother, a helper" or "a helper to my brother," both of which are what he wishes to be. Dinah may allude to the hapless daughter of Jacob who is raped by Shechem in Genesis 34, but her name also invokes the idea of *din*, "judgment," the inexorable, oppressive law of fate whose unwitting agent Dinah becomes.

Teasingly emblematic as they may be, however, the names of the characters still do not unravel the mystery of the story's meaning or what its allegory is about. The story of Ben Uri's ark, with its many references to the *shekhinah*, might be taken to allude to the story of the Temple, its destruction, and the consequent spiritual and historical exile of Israel. Equally so, it might be read as an allegory of the modern artist and of artistic creation. This reading is especially convincing in light of the story's pervasive, brooding late romanticism, its notion of art as self-immolation and its almost unmediated identification of creator and creation.¹⁶ Hillel Barzel has noted that the words *Uri* and *aron* (ark) are composed of virtually the same letters. The narrative's account of how Ben Uri made the *aron* itself repeatedly stresses their identity. The double meaning of the word *aron* as both ark and coffin encapsulates the entire story of Ben Uri and his ark from beginning to end.¹⁷

Nor do these two readings exhaust all the possible allegorical approaches to the story. With its constant use of kabbalistic overtones and terms—specifically, the verb *letaqqen* and its nominal forms *taqqanot* and *tiqqunim*—it is tempting to read the story along kabbalistic lines. Particularly relevant is the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, with its idea of a tragic "accident" that attended the creation of the universe causing the Divine Being to withdraw from the world, and its view of human history as a mirror of God's own exile and redemption. One literary critic has suggested reading the story in more concrete historical terms (in reference to a contemporary secular attempt at figurative redemption, i.e.,

¹⁵ Shaked, "Midrash and Narrative," 295.

¹⁶ For this reading, see especially Bakon, "Al 'Agunot' leShay Agnon," 174, 178–79.

¹⁷ Barzel, *Sippurei ahavah*, 73–78.

Zionism) as Agnon's allegory of the Second Aliyah (in which Agnon himself participated) and its failure.¹⁸

Yet no matter how much the story suggests that its meaning is not to be taken at face value and that none of these readings should be lightly dismissed, there is also no clear evidence to suggest that any of these allegorical interpretations is the correct one. As past critics have pointed out, Agnon, like Kafka, sacrificed the content of wisdom for its transmissibility, to use Walter Benjamin's terms.¹⁹ By casting his story in the form of a classical *ma'aseh*, Agnon preserved the literary form of tradition even if he could not save its exemplary lessons, the doctrines of tradition that, it seems, were either lost to him or otherwise unavailable. All that remains is the shape of allegory; its content is left amorphously unspecified.

"Agunot" is not, however, a Kafkaesque parable about the impossibility of retrieving wisdom or the absurdity of existence. Rather, it is a story about redemption (or, more accurately, the failure of redemption) and about the relationship of the artistic vocation to redemption—a question, again, of the efficacy of cause and effect, intention and deed, human desire and its consequences in this world. Agnon remained true to the story's origins in the medieval *ma'aseh* even while he translated the genre into the fundamentally modern terms of a frustrated love story and even though he acknowledged that the perils of modernity made the genre's governing premises impossible to sustain.

I have already remarked upon the disjunction between the opening homily and the narrative proper. There is an equivalent, perhaps even more telling, disjunction between the narrative and the story's epilogue about the rabbi and his mission to restore *agunot*. That epilogue does not follow from the narrative of "Agunot." The latter should logically end upon a note of total failure and disappointment.²⁰ The epilogue does not so much resolve those failures and disappointments as provide a means of escape from them—but an escape into another realm, a different order of discourse, a narrative universe inhabited by a disappearing, reappearing, and all-but-supernatural, out-of-a-*maerchen*-like rabbi. (The narrator's main source for the reports about the wandering rabbi is a Rabbi Nissim, meaning Rabbi Miracles.) The world of the

¹⁸ Orna Golan, "'Agunot' and the Second Aliyah" [Hebrew], *Moznayim* 32 (1971): 215–23.

¹⁹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 147. For Agnon and Kafka, see Hillel Barzel, *Bein Agnon leKafka* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan Histadrut Hastudentim, 1972); and Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 13–17.

²⁰ I wish to thank Alan Mintz for pointing me toward this insight and its consequences.

epilogue is fantastic in the classical sense of the word: literally incredible, not to be believed.

In some respects, the character of the rabbi with his restorative mission might also be seen as providing a competing conception of the artistic vocation, an alternative to the artist as a figure of self-immolating creativity. In this second conception, the artist, like the rabbi, is an agent of redemption, one whose task is to restore the *agunot* of the world to their partners. Indeed, according to this conception, the artist is probably the only person in the world who *can* restore and reassemble all the world's *agunot*—that is, the estranged and fragmented shards of reality—and regather them into a new (if imagined) whole.

But true to the complexity of his story's overall vision, Agnon does not leave even this fantasy-laden conception of the artistic vocation untouched by the frustrations and disjunctions of the world of *agunot*. In the first report he receives of the wandering rabbi, the pious narrator of "Agunot" tells us that he heard from an aged *sheluḥa derabbanan*—one of the traditional emissaries who travel abroad seeking donations for yeshivot and other institutions in the Holy Land—the following account (which I will summarize):

Late one night in a certain holy place in Lithuania, the emissary dozed off after the prayers had long since ended and suddenly woke up to a loud cry. He saw the rabbi standing over a youth, and he cried out, "Rabbi, are you here?" at which point the rabbi immediately vanished. Whereupon, the youth, "out of fear," at once confessed to the emissary his "sin." At that late hour, when no one was left in the synagogue to see him, the boy had been secretly drawing a *mizrah*, the decorated placard signifying "East"—the Holy Land, in other words—which is traditionally hung upon the eastern wall of houses of worship in order to signify the direction in which the pray-ers should face. "And that *mizrah*"—the emissary testified—"was truly a work of art to exult over!" While the youth was sunk in work over his *mizrah*, the rabbi suddenly appeared and began to pull him off and whisper, "Come, come with me to return to Jerusalem." Until, that is, the emissary had interrupted him, and the rabbi had vanished. (65)

What is this brief but charged episode about? Is it not an allegory of the relationship between the two competing conceptions of the artist? The wandering rabbi, the restorer of *agunot*, the artist as agent of redemption, mistakes the youth for Ben Uri and is about to restore the artist as creator (even if the latter does not understand what is happening and is all but terrified out of his wits, convinced that his art is really a sin and that the rabbi has come to punish, not redeem him). Yet what prevents the rabbi from redeeming the artist (or, alternatively, "saving" the youth)? The

interruption of the well-intentioned emissary! A figure who is not unlike the pious narrator of "Agunot" himself. Again, another interruption, another disjunction. Even here, in the realm of miracles, no one is safe from good intentions, which, as always in this world of *agunot*, jinx any chance of redemption. Why? *VelElokim pitronim*, as our pious narrator would say. Which we might translate as: Only God knows.

In effect, then, the epilogue only reiterates the question: Why is this a world of *agunot*? Yet even if we cannot answer the question, it is possible to speculate as to what led to the question being asked. The reason, I would suggest, is intimately linked to the rationale that led Agnon to name himself as a writer after the story's title. In calling himself Agnon, the young Czaczkes was following a time-honored rabbinic tradition, according to which sages have regularly come to be known by the names of their works. In taking his name from the word *agunah* with all its connotations of helpless abandonment, he simultaneously severed himself from that tradition. As Anne Golomb Hoffman has noted, the *agunah* is a figure of almost complete passivity. By taking his name from the *agunah*, Agnon was appropriating for himself a comparable passivity, in effect, renouncing his active role in deciding to leave Galicia and emigrate to Israel.²¹ Yet how truly strange it is that Czaczkes/Agnon, so soon after emigrating, should write a story in which every attempt "to restore a corner of the anteroom from its state of destruction [so that we might be worthy to see it transformed into a mansion when the Holy One, blessed be He, returns His Shekhinah to Zion]" culminates in catastrophic failure! And how even stranger that all his characters who have emigrated to the land should end up returning to the Diaspora in shame! What really is the relationship between Agnon's emigration to Palestine and his imagining, some four months later, of a story whose contents all effectively renounce the efficacy of settling in the Holy Land?

Agnon was famously reticent about his personal life, and little evidence survives about his inner life that first year in Jaffa after he left home. From a few remarks, however, there are indications that the young Czaczkes dearly missed his mother. She died from a heart condition just a year after he had left Poland. He apparently felt guilty enough about having left her that, in later years, he would claim to have left Poland two years before her death, not one, as though the additional year's absence

²¹ Ann Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 66–69. Ilana Pardes has pointed out to me that, in taking his name from the *agunah*, Agnon was also complicating the gender of his identity as writer.

shielded him from the accusation of having abandoned her.²² It would be safer to place hot coals upon one's tongue than to try to fathom the psychological motivations of a writer as great as Agnon. But as someone who also left home for Israel as a teenager (the only thing this writer shares in common with Agnon), I would like to suggest that it would not be surprising if Agnon sought to displace his guilt over having left his mother and father and birthplace by imagining a world in which all characters are absolved of responsibility for their deeds. They become helpless victims to a fate more powerful than anything they can resist. The irony of the inexorable fate imagined in the story is that it is virtually the reverse image of Agnon's own situation: it moves the story's characters in exactly the opposite direction, back to the Diaspora. But given the inexorable and overpowering quality of the fate that drives the characters in "Agunot," does it really matter in what direction they are forced to travel just as long as it is the opposite of what they desire?

To a certain extent, the world imagined in "Agunot," with all its romanticized brooding, fatalistic determinism, and renunciation of human agency and personal responsibility, might be fairly called an adolescent writer's vision of the world rather than an adult's. The greatness of "Agunot" lies, however, less in what it tells us about its author and his state of maturity than in the bedrock universality of its vision of the fundamental sadness of human existence, of our thwarted abilities to realize our desires as we wish, and of our powerlessness in avoiding disappointment and the failure of our deepest and best ambitions. The story's achievement is all the greater for couching its universal vision in the nuanced particularity of an archaic literary form whose self-conscious language, in the hands of a less gifted writer, would have been the stuff of parochialism. The story was a more than remarkable achievement for a youth of nineteen.

²² Laor, *Hayyei Agnon*, 65. Cf. the interesting comments of David Aberbach pertaining to Agnon's psychological state and the implicit identification of Dinah with Agnon's mother in *At the Handles of the Lock* (Oxford: Littman Library and Oxford University Press, 1984), 84–85.

◆

PART III
DIASPORA

◆

**“THE WEALTHY SEÑOR MIGUEL”:
A STUDY OF A SEPHARDIC NOVELLA**

Tamar Alexander

A

In folk literature the novella¹ functions as an intermediate genre between the fantasy world of the fairy tale and the realistic world of the legend. The plot of the novella takes place in reality: time, place, and names of heroes can be indicated. There are no supernatural characters and no wondrous transformations as in fairy tales. Everything described could have happened in reality, but unlike the legend, the novella is full of strange events, adventures, accidental events, and exact timing. Everything is strange, amazing, but still possible. The primary emphases in the novella are two human traits: wisdom and love. The main force that controls the plot is fate. No one—not even a king—can fight this force.

The fairy tale takes place in a world of fiction and fantasy and is considered a genre appropriate to children and women. The legend requires emotional involvement or religious faith and is told and heard as a true story about exemplary behavior. The novella, on the other hand, is usually a long story, very stylized, and based on literary sources, making use of proverbs and quotations. It fulfills the social necessity for wonderful, amazing worlds without crossing the borderline between reality and the supernatural. Its story is told as if it could have happened even though we know that it probably did not. Thus, the listener feels more comfortable with the novella than with the fairy tale or with the legend.

¹ For a definition of the novella, see Maria Leach, ed., *The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 803. For a discussion on the novella in Hebrew folk literature, see Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale, History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 61–64; and on the Sephardic novella in folk literature, see Tamar Alexander, *The Beloved Friend-and-a-Half: Studies in Sephardi Folk Literature* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Ben-Gurion University Press, 1999), 328–38.

In this article, I will consider one Sephardic novella told in Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) in Jerusalem in the 1930s to Yosef Meyuhas, who wrote it in Hebrew, elaborated on and styled it, and published it in his collection *Ma'asiyyot am livnei qedem* (*Folk Tales for Ancient People*).

B

Meyuhas's collection, published in Jerusalem in 1938, was the first Sephardic collection to be published in Israel. It includes twenty-eight stories divided according to ethnic group: fifteen Sephardic, seven Persian, four Yemenite, one Georgian, and one Moroccan. In his introduction, Meyuhas describes his goals and method of work:

I go and write down the stories from original sources, from the narrators themselves in their own language. Then I write them in Hebrew and I stylize and elaborate on them. Then I read them to my pupils in the high school of which I am the head, and only then do I publish them. (12)²

Thus, after using the stories he collected as didactic material in his school, Meyuhas presumably has made changes according to the reactions of his students before publishing the polished tales.

This method is very different from the academic scientific method of documentation in which stories are recorded on tape and written as they are told without changing a word. Meyuhas chose a very high Hebrew heavily influenced by the biblical style, which required biblical grammatical forms, and deliberately interwove verses and expressions taken from the Bible. He was very conscious of what he was doing; it was part of his ethnic ideology. In his introduction, he wrote:

I call from the bottom of my heart to all my Sephardic brothers and I say: Come back to the Sephardic culture. But only to the past of this culture. A past that has already written a brilliant golden page in our history. But this page needs to be supplemented. Each of us—the Sephardic people—have to collect something of this important tradition [i.e., folklore]: romances, songs, customs, descriptions of everyday life, festivals.... It is important that those materials will stay forever in our memories and be written in the history book of the Jews. (16–17)

² Yosef Meyuhas, *Ma'asiyyot am livnei qedem* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1938; reprinted in Ramat-Gan: Dvir, 1969), collected among Sephardic and Oriental Jews in Jerusalem. My free translation. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

Yosef Meyuhas is credited with calling for the preservation of ethnic cultures long before it became the official cultural policy of the State of Israel in the 1970s. Meyuhas called for the preservation of the Sephardic group culture through collection and documentation. But he did not think that it was necessary to document it in its own language, even though the language of an ethnic culture is considered to be its most prominent trait. He himself transformed this Judeo-Spanish oral tradition into a high literary Hebrew. He feared that the Ladino tradition would not continue to survive, and he wanted to commemorate it for posterity. In 1938 he was already very aware of the importance of Hebrew as the common language that would unify the Jewish people. This approach later became the official ideology of David Ben-Gurion and became institutionalized when the State of Israel was established. Meyuhas believed that he was solving the conflict between ethnic group language and the unified Hebrew language by documenting the ethnic group traditions in Hebrew.

Another important point about Meyuhas's work is that he did not fall into the trap of an in-group author describing his own heritage. He did not need to censor texts in order to show only the "beauty of the legacy." He did not turn to nostalgia: for example, he did not censor the first episode in the Sephardic version of Cinderella, in which the daughter kills her own mother.³

The turning point in Meyuhas's life came when he heard a lecture given by the poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik, and he made the decision to document the background of his own ethnic group. Meyuhas wrote:

And here is the place to tell the audience with joy that my main motivation to start collecting Sephardic folklore was my meeting with our greatest poet, Bialik. . . . I had the honor to be present at his lecture, and I heard him calling: "Go back to the Sephardic culture." . . . He [Bialik] talked about "tribes," about the ancient division of Israel into different tribes. He thought that this structure has great advantages, since each tribe has its own color and its own traits. . . . From this point of view, I understood this call from our poet to us, the Sephardic people . . . and because of that I chose for myself, since I am Sephardic, too, to take care of Sephardic folklore, especially folktales. (13–14)

³ Story type AT 510*D. A. Aarne and S. Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale* (Folklore Fellows Communications 3; Helsinki: Adademia Scientiarum Fennica Suomalainen Tiedakatemia, 1973). Sephardic version, see Meyuhas, *Ma'asiyyot*, story no. 2: "Reward and Punishment," 6–12. See also discussion in Alexander, *The Beloved Friend-and-a-Half*, ch. 9: A: Cinderella stories, 283–308.

Bialik's call in 1927 for cultural pluralism motivated Meyuhas to go back to his own heritage, but it took him eleven more years before he was able to publish his collection.

All fifteen of the Sephardic stories chosen by Meyuhas are defined as folktales (fairy tales and novellas), although it can be assumed that during his extensive fieldwork among the Sephardic people of Jerusalem he heard other genres as well, such as historical and religious legends, or humorous stories about Djuha—a literary character who is the “trickster” and simpleton of Sephardic folk literature—both of which are very common among this group.

According to his professed ideology, his stories are very much anchored in Spain, the long-ago homeland of the Sephardic Jews. This is emphasized in Meyuhas's collection much more than in Sephardic collections by other authors,⁴ who collected tales in which other countries appeared—the countries where the Sephardic Jews fled when they were expelled from Spain in 1492, such as Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, and Morocco. Of the fifteen stories Meyuhas published, six take place in Spain. All the heroes living in Spain before the expulsion are very wealthy and have high positions in the king's court. The stories are full of references to Sephardic ethnic culture: names of the heroes, idioms and expressions that he left in Ladino, descriptions of food, and everyday life and customs.

Since I have not been able to see his original notes in Ladino, I do not know how much Meyuhas changed or elaborated the stories to fit them to his declared ideology to express the rich culture of the Sephardic Jews. I can only analyze the text as he eventually published it.

C

I purposely chose the story that most typically exemplified Meyuhas's concepts: “The Wealthy Señor Miguel.” As the story is very long (fifteen pages, which is not typical of oral tales told today), I will summarize the plot according to the nine subchapters of the story as Meyuhas published it. The original oral narrator, of course, would never have divided the tale in this manner.

⁴ For example: Matilda Koen-Sarano, *Kuentos del Folklore de la famiya Djudeo Espanyola* (Jerusalem: Kanah, 1986); idem, *Konsejas i Konsejikas del mundo Djudeo-Espanyol* (Jerusalem: Kanah, 1994); Tamar Alexander and Dov Noy, *The Treasure of our Fathers: Judeo-Spanish Tales* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim, 1989).

1. *Without title.* Once there lived in Toledo a very wealthy man, called by the people of the town "the wealthy Señor Miguel," but his real name was Miguel de la Roza. Señor Miguel had inherited a legendary fortune from his ancestors. On the gate of his palace he hung a big sign, also inherited from his fathers, that said: "No one withstands wealth—not even kings."

Señor Miguel had an only son, Alberto, who was extraordinarily handsome and wise, as well as possessed of a noble character. As wealthy as Señor Miguel was, so was he also generous, and his donations to charity were always very large. His palace was always full of guests. It was said that "whoever entered crying, left laughing" (*ken entra yorando sale ríeyendo*). The fame of Señor Miguel became known even to the king, who one day decided to come himself with his vizier (minister) to see this man with his own eyes.

2. *The visit and its results.* One night the king and his vizier came to the Jew's palace disguised as simple people. They were amazed by the beauty, the richness, the generosity, and the artistic taste of everything—the rooms, the furniture, the crystal lamps, the food, the musicians, and the dancers. The atmosphere was as if everything was enchanted and full of magic. When they left, the king noticed the sign at the gate. He immediately became furious that this arrogant Jew dared to challenge kings.

3. *The trial.* The day after his visit, the king called all his counselors, told them about the Jew, and demanded that they bring him to trial immediately. Señor Miguel arrived, trembling and full of fear, without knowing that the king himself had been his guest the night before. He explained that he had inherited this sign and that its meaning was very innocent. The sign was intended to encourage people to work and accumulate money. Money is like air to the state, to the king. With no money, people would not respect the king. The saying, he said, was meant to praise the king.

The judges did not accept the explanation. "Even if you are right," they said, "it is an insult for the king that a Jew should make propaganda for him." "But," said the king, "I will give you three months to prove that the saying on the sign is true. If you fail, you and your family will be hanged on the gate of your palace where you hanged your sign." Señor Miguel returned home crying, sure that this was his end and without understanding why it happened.

4. *The advice of a mother.* Señor Miguel had an old mother who was extremely rich and very noble. Like Miguel, her palace was also

always open to guests. She made her house a center for noblewomen from all religions and races. They would meet and discuss how to help people with money or ways to raise their spirits. Among her women visitors was a wonderful young woman called Elizabet, who was of the Jewish family Rozanes, and who was also the art teacher of the king's only daughter.

The king's daughter was the most beautiful girl in the whole kingdom. Her beauty was like the sun and the moon. Her father the king loved her so much that he built a special palace for her and locked her in it so that no man could see her or try to win her love. The king was determined that only he would choose her bridegroom when the time came. Meanwhile, he sent her the best teachers of the kingdom to teach her art and science, but the teachers were all women. The teacher most beloved by the princess was Elizabet, who became her confidante.

When Miguel's mother heard the terrible decree, she comforted her son and told him to trust God. "You always helped people. You gave so much to charity. The Almighty will not leave you. Go to sleep and tomorrow we will find a solution."

5. *The night is the angel of advice.* The mother could not sleep during the entire night. Suddenly before her eyes appeared the image of Elizabet. The mother prayed to God and thanked Him for this sign. In spite of how late in the night it was, she immediately ordered her carriage prepared and rushed to Elizabet's house.

When Elizabet heard the situation, she immediately had a very original idea. She told the mother to prepare a big lion made all of gold and precious stones. In the lion's belly there would be a small room, and through his pearl eyes things could be seen. Air would enter through the lion's ears and nose. Into this lion they would put Alberto, the only son of Miguel. In this way, Alberto would be delivered to the guarded princess and ask for her help.

The next day, Miguel's mother told her son the plan and added that she would pay for the precious lion with her own money. She ended by thanking God.

6. *The visit to the king's court.* The old woman invited the best jewel maker in the kingdom to come to her and asked him to do the work. For this work, she gave him an enormous amount of money, promising that she would add much more, since money was not important in this case. When the lion was ready and Alberto was inside, the old woman put on her best clothes and went to the king. She told the king that she had to go to visit her son overseas, and she could find no better place to leave

her precious treasure than the king's palace. If she did not come back, she would willingly donate the lion and all her money to the king. The king was so amazed by the extraordinary lion that he immediately accepted. More than that, he gave the lion to his own dearest treasure—his daughter.

7. *The strange meeting.* Very late at night when the princess had finished playing her piano, she approached the lion to look at it. When she gazed into his eyes made of pearls, she saw the picture of a young man. Then she heard the faint sound of a key opening a door. Before she had time to scream, a very handsome young man, as noble as a prince, stepped out of the lion. He knelt before the princess and begged her to listen to his story. In response to the story and the handsome appearance of this young man, she promised to help. She hid him in a room next to hers, suggesting that meanwhile they would spend time talking and learning together.

8. *The main thing forgotten.* The princess spent wonderful days with Alberto. She felt drunk, but not from wine. She forgot her promise to help him at first, but after a few days, she did remember. When she tried to think how to help him, there appeared in front of her eyes the image of her beloved teacher, Elizabet.

The princess summoned Elizabet and told her everything. Elizabet pretended that she knew nothing about Alberto and the lion. And yes, she had a very good solution. "The king, your father," she told the princess, "is in a very dangerous situation right now. There is a rebellion in the kingdom, but the king has not enough money to hire soldiers and suppress the rebels. Go to your father," she advised, "and ask his permission to bring him money. I can get it easily for you." The princess did as she was told, and the king agreed.

The princess then sent Alberto home secretly. Miguel's mother gave Elizabet the enormous amount of money necessary to build an army and even promised more. The princess gave this money to her father, saying it was a secret, anonymous donation. Because of the money, the king was able to save his country.

9. *The happy ending.* The time of the trial came. This time Señor Miguel arrived proud and self-assured. He repeated his speech on the importance of money, stating that no kingdom could exist without it, that money was like air to kings. Without money, he said, the people would not respect their king. "And if you are still not convinced, you can hang me. Only remember that I and my family have been serving the kingdom with sincere loyalty for many generations."

Then the princess rose. She had come especially to this trial to testify that Señor Miguel had saved the kingdom with his generous donation. Elizabet, the beloved teacher, added details (without telling the secret of Alberto and the princess) and ended by saying: "No one withstands wealth, not even kings."

The king and the judges and all the court were amazed. Not only did the king thank Señor Miguel and his son Alberto, but he appointed Miguel as Minister of the Treasury and Alberto as his Chief Minister and private counselor.

Not many days passed before the king recognized the wisdom and nobility of Alberto and chose him as the bridegroom for his only beloved and precious daughter. The wedding lasted seven days, and all the kingdom rejoiced. Many presents were distributed to the poor. And there was no end to the happiness of the king and all the people.

D

Unlike the legend, the novella does not specify details of time and place. But the story is related as if it might possibly have happened. Our story is set in Toledo, Spain, and although the time is not specified, it is clear that the kingdom spoken of is Muslim. The Chief Minister is called vizier, and God is called Allah. Toledo was conquered by the Moors in 712 C.E. and became part of the Caliphate Kingdom of Cordoba. In 1035, Toledo became an independent Muslim state and remained so until 1085, when it was conquered by the Christian King Alfonso VI, who declared Toledo the capital of Castile and Leon.

During the Muslim period, the Jews integrated very well into society and gained central positions in the kingdom. The Jewish community developed especially in the eleventh century and were both socially and economically successful. Some Jews bought land near the town and became very rich. They also played important roles in the Muslim kingdom.⁵

The Muslim rulers of Toledo were of Berber origin. They needed the educated Jews as administrators in their court, and they found they could rely more on the loyalty of Jews than they could on the loyalty of their own people, who came from fanatical Muslim tribes. Nor could they trust the rulers of the surrounding Christian kingdoms, which were increasingly posing a threat to the Muslims in Spain. In order to bind the Jews

⁵ Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1965), 14–22.

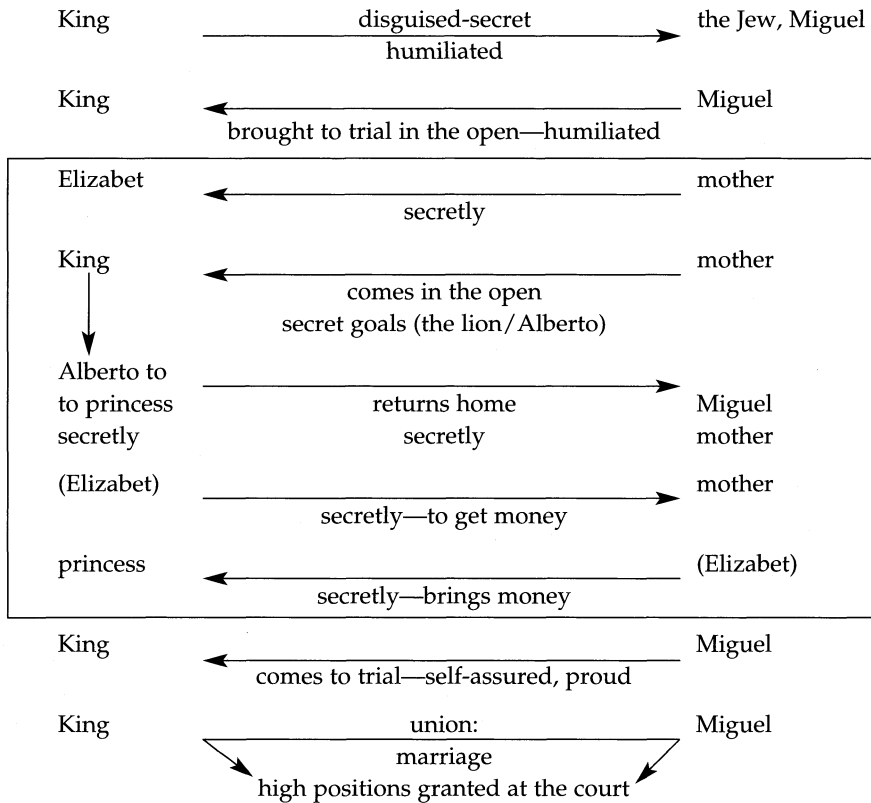
to them, the Muslim rulers granted them estates and whole villages. This became known as the Jewish "Golden Age" in Spain, so eloquently described in the poetry of the court culture of that period. An example of extraordinary success during this period is the career of Shmuel Ha-Nagid of Granada.⁶

There are only two family names mentioned in the story, both of them Jewish—de la Roza and Rozanes—but these are very well known names among Sephardic Jews. The descendants of these families—among whom were counted many rabbis, writers, and prominent people—were active among Sephardic communities in Turkey and Jerusalem at the approximate time in which this story is set. No wonder the original storyteller chose these names. The atmosphere and background of the story, even without recognizable names and time, suggests that everything could have actually happened as it was told.

Since the narrator focuses on the Jewish viewpoint, the Jewish characters do have names: Miguel, Alberto, and Elizabet. The gentiles, however, have no names. Typical of that period, in addition to their Hebrew names, all Jews had foreign names that they used daily. The plot of the story moves between two worlds: Jewish and Muslim (gentile). Each world is concentrated into a small space, namely, the palaces of the different characters. In each world there are two palaces, one of which belongs to a woman. The king and his daughter live in their own palaces, and likewise, Miguel and his mother live in separate palaces.

Unlike the typical novella, in which the hero travels to faraway countries encountering adventure after adventure, here the plot moves within a narrow space—four specific palaces in the same town. The king penetrates into the Jewish world only once. Otherwise, movement is from the Jewish palace to the king's palace. Some of these penetrations are effected secretly. The only character who moves freely between the two worlds is the Jewish teacher, Elizabet, who acts not only as mediator between Jew and Muslim but also between the king and his daughter and the princess and Alberto. The following figure is presented to help clarify the spatial movements that govern the structure of the plot.

⁶ Hayim Shirman, *Hebrew Poetry in Spain and Provance* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1961), 1:74–168; Ezra Fleischer, ed., *The Hebrew Poetry in Islamic Spain* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996); T. Rosen, with A. Zemah, *Studies on Shmuel HaNagid Poetry* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1983).



The plot consists of eight movements back and forth between the two worlds. Between the trial and the retrial there are five secret movements involving two important acts. The first brings Alberto to the princess and results in their marriage at the end of the story. The second brings money to the king and results in three things: the salvation of the kingdom, the salvation of the Jewish family, and the marriage between the two families. In keeping with this genre, the movements concern love and wisdom. The first two movements function as exposition and plot motivation, while the last movement is the closure and the happy ending. The secret movements concern only two characters: the two men. Miguel does not know that the king visited him secretly. The king does not know about Alberto and will never know. But he does know at the end who saved him. The level of secrecy is different according to the different characters. The king, who has the highest status or position, knows the least.

Although the two main characters belong to different religions and are of a different status—one is the ruler, the other a subordinated Jew—they are almost equal. The Jew is richer than the king; the king is more

powerful (although without the Jew he would have lost everything). The Jew ends up as second to the king (his Minister of the Treasury). While the Jews in Spain were rich and powerful, none of them could become a king, even though they practically ran the kingdom by serving as advisors and administrators to the king.

In each world, the story presents two parallel families, both small and apparently lacking a wife. Miguel has only one son and the king only one daughter. Wives are not mentioned. Both children are beautiful, educated, wise, and of excellent character. The grandmother functions as mother and "wife" to her son. She advises him, it is to her that he runs with his problem, and she saves him through her wisdom. Elizabeth functions as mother to the princess—in fact, even more than a mother—a woman in whom the princess can confide her secrets.

The women in this story play very important roles. They are rich, powerful, independent. They save their men, and they find solutions to the problems that confront their families. Elizabeth, the mediator, works behind the scenes, suggesting the trick with the lion. She brings Alberto to the princess. She gains the trust of both sides: the king and the princess, the Jewish mother and Alberto. She covers the princess's secret of hiding Alberto in her quarters. She is the one who recognizes and understands the dangerous political situation confronting the king, and she knows how to use this knowledge in favor of the Jew, even as she saves the king. The king respects her and listens to her. She herself has no male partner—she acts on her own.

The mother, besides being rich, is also independent and powerful. She insists on paying for the lion, and she sends money to the king on Elizabeth's advice. She lives in her own palace and not, as expected in traditional families, with her son. She conducts meetings of women in her house where philosophy and ways to help people are discussed. She comforts her son, and she knows whom to approach for help. She is not afraid to stand in front of the king, nor to deceive him by convincing him of the lie that she is going away and needs him to keep the lion safe for her. She has the courage to risk her only beloved grandson and send him in the golden lion to the "mouth of the real lion"—the king.

The princess, though guarded heavily in her own palace and surrounded only by women, reacts quickly and intelligently when she meets Alberto. It is she who plans what they will do together. She hides him and takes care of him. She falls in love with him. At the same time, his emotions are not mentioned in the story at all. It is she who convinces her father to accept the "anonymous" money; thus, she, like the grandmother, deceives the king, since she knows perfectly well where the money has come from. She is not afraid to appear at the second trial and gives a logical and enthusiastic speech, convincing her father that Miguel

is right. But she also knows what not to tell her father—how she met and hid Alberto, for example. At the trial, she knows how to control herself so that the king never suspects that she and Alberto know each other.

On the other hand, the men are passive in this story. Although he is the ostensible hero because he is named in the title, we do not learn much about Miguel except that he inherited his money and spends most of his time entertaining his guests and donating to charities. He does not convince the king at either of the trials. It is, in fact, the women—Elizabet and the princess—who carry the burden of conviction in their appearance at the second trial. When the crisis with the king first arises, the only thing Miguel can think of doing is to seek his mother's advice and comfort. He then goes to sleep while she is the one who acts.

Alberto is brought into the plot by his grandmother, accepts passively being locked in the lion's belly, and is taken first to the king's palace and then to that of the princess. The first thing the princess likes about him is his beauty—his physical appearance. In folktales, this is usually a response that is confined to men relating to women. Though Alberto does earn her trust by the conviction with which he tells his story, this is his only active role. From that moment, it is she who decides what will happen to him. She puts him into the next room, brings him food, teaches him every night what she has learned from her teachers during the day, and then decides when to send him back home.

The king does not know how to save his country or where to find the money he needs. He is deceived twice—once by the grandmother and once by his own daughter—but suspects nothing. Strangely enough, he has absolute trust in Elizabet, his daughter's teacher, and accepts all her advice. He thinks that he is guarding his daughter and preventing her from the company of men, but he knows nothing about what really happens in her palace. Ironically, at the end, he thinks that he has chosen the right bridegroom for her, not suspecting that she already chose him long before.

Although the women are those who direct the plot and save the family and the kingdom, the end of the story maintains the traditional social roles of men. Miguel is appointed to be the Minister of the Treasury and Alberto becomes second to the king. The women are not mentioned thereafter. Presumably the grandmother retreats to her palace, and the princess is happy to be Alberto's wife.

The main ideological axis of the story is the power of wealth. Religious values and faith in God appear only perfunctorily in the background, and even less noticeable is the power of love—the romantic axis.

The protagonist, Señor Miguel, is characterized mainly through his property. The townspeople do not call him by his family name but give

him a nickname that describes his wealth: "the wealthy Señor Miguel." Money is his *raison d'être*; because of his money, he can give to charity and entertain his many guests. This belief in money is expressed clearly in his two speeches before the king. While it was his money that almost brought him to disaster when the king threatened to kill him, it was also money that not only saved him from execution but also raised him to one of the highest positions in the kingdom.

Money, therefore, motivates the entire plot. Because she has money, the mother can save the family. Her independence as a woman who lives alone is possible because she is so rich. "I will pay all the expenses for preparing the lion," she says. The main literary means of expressing this idea is by using a proverb: "No one withstands wealth—not even kings."

This proverb is appropriately engraved on a golden sign and hung on the front gate of Miguel's palace. The proverb has the power of expressing the authority of the experience of the collective, and thus summarizes tradition.⁷ It indicates for the users/listeners "the wisdom of many."⁸ Using proverbs presents the driving force behind a group's norms; because proverbs are short, structured, and use poetic forms like rhyme or rhythm, they are easy to remember. Proverbs are thus used in recurring situations by members of the group to interpret a behavioral or interactional situation.⁹ Using proverbs in a literary context can serve several functions: as a key to the plot, to portray a character, or to express the ideology of a story.

The main proverb in "The Wealthy Señor Miguel" appears three times in the story and is said by three different people at three turning points in the plot. The first time it is mentioned is by the narrator during the exposition of the story. It emphasizes a static situation. In identifying the proverb, the narrator says, "A wonderful sign, written in big prominent golden letters." The narrator also indicates that this sign passed through many generations: "inherited from his fathers, and his fathers from the fathers of the fathers from the very early generations." By using this sentence, the narrator gives the proverb the heavy weight of tradition, as well as the idea that there is nothing wrong with its emphasis on desiring money—that it has never caused any trouble before. This is supposed to create surprise in the listeners

⁷ Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Adam le'adam geshet: The Proverbs of Georgian Jews in Israel* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Makhon Ben Tsevi, 1993).

⁸ Wolfgang Mieder, *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb* (New York: Garland, 1981).

⁹ Tamar Alexander and Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Games of Identity in Proverb Usage: Proverbs of a Sephardi Woman," *Proverbium* 5 (1988): 1–15.

when the king notices and takes such violent exception to the sign and its inscription.

The reaction of the king is described by the narrator in indirect terms: the king tells his vizier "his deepest bitterness against the Jew who has a palace, who is so proud and arrogant as to hang this sign declaring in big letters: 'No one withstands wealth—not even kings'." The next day, the king repeats the content of the proverb to his counselors, but the proverb itself is not repeated: "The king told them about the insulting, shameful sign." The interpretation of the proverb thus becomes the main issue of the trial. The judges interpret it as an insult to king and crown. Señor Miguel has an opposite interpretation, that the proverb "praises the king and the kingdom." The life of Señor Miguel depends on his ability to justify his interpretation of the proverb.

One of the traits of a proverb is that it can be interpreted differently, sometimes in directly opposing interpretations according to the situation and the perceptions of the users of the proverb.¹⁰ But here we have only one situation (the trial) and one audience (the king and the judges). Miguel's interpretation, though a minority opinion, does not completely fail, since he gets the chance to prove the validity of his exposition in three months before final sentence is passed. The plot might be described as a competition between two interpretations of a proverb—that of the Jew who is in an inferior position, and that of the king who holds ultimate power and status. It is thus Miguel who must find the proof to uphold his interpretation, and he must be convincing, because his very life depends on it.

During the retrial, the proverb is quoted again, but now it is by Elizabet, who ends her defense of Miguel by repeating the proverb. Now the reaction of the king and the judges is completely different. "And they all said: now we see that Miguel spoke the truth and the content of his sign is true and he deserves glory."

The narrator justifies the wealthy Jew with pride, without even hinting at stereotypical views of Jews often held by non-Jews (Jews as greedy, wanting only money, or obtaining their money by "sucking the blood" of the non-Jews).¹¹ This story might, however, be interpreted as an apology for the wealth of Jews, since its conclusion is that this wealth is ultimately helpful for non-Jews (it might actually save their kingdoms). The only

¹⁰ A. Kirkman, *On Denotative Indefiniteness of Proverbs* (Talin, Estonia: 1974); Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941).

¹¹ Hayim Hillel Ben-Sasson, *Chapters on Jewish History in the Middle Ages* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1969), 29–54.

time the word "Jew" is used is when the king sees the sign with its proverb and calls Miguel "an arrogant Jew."

An expression of Judaism and faith in God is almost absent, appearing only through the character of Miguel's mother. It is interesting to note that, during the time of the Marranos, the secret practice of Judaism was mainly kept by women.¹²

From the generic literary point of view, Judaism is treated like the idea of wealth—it is also expressed in proverbs and quotations. The mother uses biblical phrases, which function as proverbs. When Miguel tells his mother about the terrible situation facing him, she says, "Do not fear. God is with us and he will save us. . . . let us trust God." She ends her words with a biblical quotation: "For gracious and merciful is He" (Joel 2:13), which is combined with an expression that has the structure of a proverb: "God has many ways." That night, when the mother sees the image of Elizabet and realizes that the young woman is the one who can help her son, she sees this as a solution that came from God. She thanks God, concluding with a quotation from Psalms, a book that is usually used for private prayers for help: "My strength and song is the Lord, and He has become my salvation" (Psalms 118:14).

The third time Judaism is mentioned is when the mother is given the solution of the golden lion and tells her son about the plan. Again she tells him to trust God and repeats the same phrase, but now more fully: "for gracious and merciful is He, long-suffering and of great kindness" (Joel 2:13), and she adds: "When God favors man's ways, even his enemy will help." This is the only time the narrator defines a sentence with the term "proverb." All the biblical phrases used by the mother are common, and they appear in the regular prayer book, which is repeated every day. One does not, therefore, need any deep knowledge of Judaism to quote them.

Using biblical quotations has not only the authority of collective tradition but also the absolute authority of a holy text. There is, however, no substantive difference in the basic interpretative process whether the text is a proverb or a quotation. Biblical verses may easily become proverbs if they express a function. When such a verse is used in a narrative text, the empirical proof of its context is usually provided by the tale.¹³ Miguel's family, indeed, was saved. On the level of the plot, this was due to Elizabet's intelligence and cleverness. On the mother's interpretive level, God saved Miguel's family through Elizabet, because the mother

¹² Oral tradition; personal fieldwork.

¹³ Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Proverbs in Israeli Folk Narratives: A Structural Semantic Analysis* (Folklore Fellows Communications 232; Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1982), 57–58.

believed that God first gave her the idea to turn to Elizabet for help and then gave Elizabet the plan of the golden lion.

In the genre of the novella, love and romance are usually strongly emphasized. Some novellas actually contain explicit erotic descriptive material. "The Wealthy Señor Miguel" provides a very romantic situation: a man is secretly transported directly to the princess's room, although she is heavily guarded and surrounded only by women. This motif of the precious princess locked away by her father (for her own good, according to him) is well known in folk literature.¹⁴ It is enough to mention King Solomon's daughter, who was locked in a tower.¹⁵ In that story, one of the most famous in Jewish culture, the young man manages to get into the tower carried by an eagle. In "The Wealthy Señor Miguel," our hero arrives in the belly of a lion. Both of these "conveyances" are kings of the animal kingdom: the eagle is the king of the birds, and the lion is considered the king of animals.¹⁶ Although Alberto enters the forbidden precincts of the princess by way of a lion—an image that is considered in many cultures as the symbol of manhood¹⁷—there are no erotic descriptions in our story. Although the lion is a symbol of masculinity, the lion of our story is only a statue, even though Alberto does emerge from the lion's belly. Love between the couple is only alluded to. In contrast to Solomon's daughter's tale—where the couple kiss and make love, and she bears him three children by the time her father finds out the truth—in our story nothing of the sort occurs. The princess puts Alberto into another room next to hers, and they converse about philosophy

¹⁴ AT 930 The Prophecy, Jewish Oicotype 930*C, King Solomon's daughter in the tower; cf. AT 310 The Maiden in the Tower, Rapunzel. Motifs: M 372 Confinement in tower to avoid fulfillment of prophecy; T 381 Imprisoned virgin to prevent knowledge of men (marriage, impregnation), usually kept in a tower; and R40 places of captivity (tower, castle, palace). For Sephardic versions of tale type 930, see Reginetta Haboucha, *Types and Motifs of the Judeo-Spanish Folktales* (New York and London: Garland, 1992), 436–50.

¹⁵ The story was told by H. N. Bialik in "The Legend of Three and Four," in *Writings of Bialik* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1960), 345–77 (two versions). For stories on King Solomon in the Sephardic oral tradition, see Matilda Koen-Sarano, *Lejendas* (Jerusalem: Nur, 1999), 21–106.

¹⁶ J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), 180–82 (for the lion) and 87–89 (for the eagle). In Jewish culture, see, for example, "King of the Beasts—the Lion," Babylonian Talmud, Ḥagigah 13b. The lion is a symbol of the tribe of Judah and of all Israel (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 11b).

¹⁷ E. Neuman, *Amor and Psyche* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1982); Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 181: "[the lion] the possessor of strength and of the masculine principle."

and science. She is said to teach him every night what she has learned during the day. The father never finds out the secret and imagines that it is his own idea that his daughter and Alberto be married. Even when the princess defends Alberto in public at the trial, she is so controlled that no one suspects that they have had a secret relationship. The only hint we have about love is when the narrator describes the princess as "drunk, but not from wine." The narrator of the story uses the verse from Isaiah 51:21, "drunken, but not with wine," but the context in which it is used here is a love story, so the narrator may in fact have been alluding to the Song of Songs 1:2, "for thy caresses are more pleasant than wine." Even today, Hebrew speakers often use the expression "drunk, but not with wine" to describe someone in love.

Though both stories belong to the same genre, the novella, the differences are in the aims and ideology of the stories. Solomon's story is about fate and a confrontation with social status. Solomon locks his daughter up to prevent her predicted marriage to a poor man. Our story is about the importance of wealth and involves interreligious confrontation. But, as noted above, this confrontation is presented in a rather perfunctory manner. The boy and the girl are almost equal: she saves his father, and his father saves her father (with his money). The result is marriage. It does not bother the narrator that this is an interreligious marriage. Usually in Jewish folktales, when such a couple meet, the boy is Jewish and the girl is non-Jewish, but before getting married, she converts to Judaism. Or, if the man is non-Jewish and the girl Jewish, the girl prefers to die rather than marry a non-Jew, however noble or powerful. Stories of the latter type include the one from Morocco about Saint Solika,¹⁸ the Yemenite story about the daughter of Rabbi Shabazi,¹⁹ or the Ashkenazi story about the Rabbi's daughter.²⁰

In another Sephardic tale, the Jewish girl, Sara, was able to use her marriage to the king in order to save the Jewish community.²¹ This, of course, is in imitation of Queen Esther, who, after the expulsion from Spain, became a symbol of admiration for the crypto-Jews in Spain, since she, like them, kept her Judaism in secret. However, typical of Jewish life

¹⁸ I. Ben-Ami, *Jewish Holy Men of Morocco and Their Miracles* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: 1995), 283–86.

¹⁹ Dov Noy, "Rabbi Shalem Shabazi in the Jewish-Yemenite Legends," in Y. Ratzhabi, ed., *Bo'i Teiman* (Tel Aviv: 1967), 106–31.

²⁰ The story is written as a ballad, "The Rabbi's Daughter," by the poet Shaul Tschernikhovski, *Collected Poems* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1956), 438.

²¹ Koen-Sarano, *Konsejas i Konsejikas*, 267–68.

in medieval Spain, many storytellers preferred to end their tales with interreligious marriage, power, and money rather than with death or martyrdom. In our story, no one changes religions or dies; on the contrary, the marriage is considered a great achievement and victory.

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"The Wealthy Señor Miguel" was told to Yosef Meyuhas by Efraim Tager in Jerusalem around 1930. Most of the Sephardim living in Jerusalem at that time were very poor, but proudly refused to use the support of *haluqah*²² money, unlike the Ashkenazim who did take these donations of money from abroad. This story, which describes the legendary richness and status of the Sephardic ancestors in Spain, expresses their longing for the glorious golden past. The Sephardim in Jerusalem considered themselves to be an elite. They were very proud of their Spanish origin. But their view of Spain was not unambiguous. They never forgot that the same glorious Spain vomited the Jews out, expelling them with great cruelty. Nor did they forget the suffering they experienced in their flight, nor the Inquisition, which burned many who remained in Spain as crypto-Jews.²³ As one reaction to their experiences, many of the expelled Jews from Toledo adopted the family name of Toledano, which combines "Toledo" with "no," thereby expressing their oath never to return.

One of the folk explanations for the expulsion from Spain was the arrogance of the wealthy. This idea is expressed very clearly in the book *Shevet Yehudah*, by Shlomo Ibn-Virga. In one of his stories, Ibn-Virga describes an argument between King Alfonso and Don Yosef Nasi. The king says: "You came to our country naked and hungry; the Christians accepted you with love, but you returned evil for good. You took interest [on loans], you took the houses and grounds [of your debtors].... why are you dressed like nobles? Why do you teach your sons music? And why do you teach your sons the art of sword fighting? Why do you

²² H. Ram, "The Sephardi Community in Jaffa 1800–1880, Independently of the Haluka: Reasons and Results," in A. Haim, ed., *Society and Community: Proceedings of the Second International Congress for Research of the Sephardi and Oriental Jewish Heritage*, 1984 [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim, 1991), 99–105.

²³ H. Beinart, *Conversos on Trial by the Inquisition* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1965); Y. T. Assis and Y. Kaplan, eds., *Jews and Conversos at the Time of the Expulsions* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1999).

insult us?"²⁴ The same concept is found in other Sephardic oral tales that are still told today. In one, the queen of Spain sees a very rich Jewish couple at her ball. She looks at the woman and tells her husband: "Look at this dirty Jew; look how his wife is dressed, and look at the diamond ring she is wearing! Give an order and expel all the Jews from Spain." And so he does.²⁵

Yosef Meyuhas declared in the introduction to his collection that he wrote down these stories to remember the glorious past of the Sephardic Jews in Spain. The text of "The Wealthy Señor Miguel" conforms very well to this intention, but the subtext reveals the dangers of the situation. The inner narrator in the text praises the richness and pride and ends the plot with victory and justification for Señor Miguel. The oral narrator—the out-of-text narrator Efraim Tager in Jerusalem, 1930—knows already the consequences and the suffering caused by this wealth. Aware of the huge gap between the present and the past, all that is left for him is to yearn for the past and hope for the future.

²⁴ S. Ibn-Virga, *Shevet Yehudah* [Hebrew] (new edition reprinted; Jerusalem: The Sephardic Library, Benei Issachar Institute, 1992), 36–37.

²⁵ Told to me orally by Matilda Koen-Sarano as she heard it from her father.



◆

**THE IMAGINED JEW:
HEINRICH HEINE'S "PRINZESSIN SABBATH"**

Michael A. Meyer

On a number of occasions during recent years, when asked to do a study session for Jewish groups, I have chosen to engage my students in a reading of Heinrich Heine's extraordinary poem, "Prinzessin Sabbath" ("Princess Sabbath"). I chose the poem because of my own interest in Heine, because it is, I believe, the poem most succinctly reflective of Heine's attitude to Judaism, and because I thought it would raise questions of Jewishness for my students, as well. What I did not realize was how divided the reactions would prove to be. Invariably, there were those who insisted that this poem reveals Heine's Jewish self-hatred, while others were no less adamant in their contention that Heine here identifies himself profoundly as a Jew. Still others preferred to speak of Heine's ambivalence. The emotionality and diversity of the reactions prompted me to analyze the poem more carefully and also to investigate how earlier generations of Jews had received it. I also became dissatisfied with the standard English translation and decided to try my hand at a new translation, which, while not fully reproducing the meter, tries to be relatively more faithful to the text.¹ What follows, then, is the German text² with a new translation and a reflective, nontechnical commentary on the poem divided into thematic units. My study ends with a brief look at its reception by Jews in Germany and how reactions to the poem are reflected in the way it was translated.

We do not know exactly when "Prinzessin Sabbath" was written, but it must have been around the year 1850. It appeared for the first time in

¹ The standard English translation of Heine's poetry is, of course, the quite remarkable volume by Hal Draper, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine: A Modern English Version* (Boston: Suhrkamp Insel, 1982).

² I have used the critical edition that reproduces the original orthography: Manfred Windfuhr, ed., *Heinrich Heine: Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke* 3/1 (Hamburg: Hoffman & Campe, 1992), 125–29.

October 1851 as the first poem of three that Heine, borrowing a phrase from Byron, called "Hebräische Melodien." These three poems were, in turn, part of a larger corpus that was published as *Romanzero*. At this point in Heine's life a severe nerve disease had confined him to his bed and made his life an ongoing agony of physical pain. Twenty-six years had gone by since his conversion to Christianity in 1825. His trajectory away from Judaism, which continued for more than a decade thereafter, had begun to reverse itself after the Damascus Affair of 1840, which brought Heine to an identification with these new Jewish victims of persecution. By the early 1850s he was also rediscovering the Bible and personal religion. He had not "returned to Judaism"; on one occasion he claimed that he had never left it. He also maintained, apparently just after he had written "Princess Sabbath," that "it would be fatuous and petty had I—as some have accused me of doing—ever been ashamed of being a Jew. But it would be just as ridiculous were I to assert that I am one."³ Heine's paradoxical understanding of his own relation to Judaism is right on the mark, and it is reflected, as well, in the poem: its author identifies with the Jews and with Jewish history and tradition as an insider; but at the same time both his poetic self and his real self remain anchored outside Judaism in his own individuality.

In Arabiens Märchenbuche
Sehen wir verwünschte Prinzen
Die zuzeiten ihre schöne
Urgestalt zurückgewinnen:

In Arabia's book of legends
We may see enchanted princes,
Who at times regain
Their original and lovely form:

Das beharrte Ungeheuer
Ist ein Königsohn geworden;
Schmuckreich glänzend angekleidet,
Auch verliebt die Flöte blasend.

The hairy monster
Has become a prince
Arrayed in shining jewels,
Passionately playing on a flute.

Doch die Zauberfrist zerrinnt,
Und wir schauen plötzlich wieder
Seine königliche Hoheit
in ein Ungethüm verzottelt.

But the magic time elapses
And suddenly we see again
His royal highness
Monstrously transmogrified.

The poem begins outside of history, in the realm of fable, as universal as a tale from the Arabian Nights. The reader who had not read the poem's title could hardly suspect that a surprising shift is about to follow in the third line of the next verse.

³ H. H. Houben, ed., *Gespräche mit Heine* (Frankfurt am Main: Rutten & Loening, 1926), 693.

Ein Prinzen solchen Schicksals
Singt mein Lied. Er ist geheißten
Israel. Ihn hat verwandelt
Hexenspruch in einen Hund.

Of a prince who was thus fated
My song sings. He is known as
Israel. A witch's spell has
Transformed him into a dog.

Hund mit hündischen Gedanken
Köttert er die ganze Woche
Durch des Lebens Koth und Kehricht,
Gassenbuben zum Gespötte.

A dog with doggish thoughts,
All week he doglike drags himself
Through life's slop and slime,
While urchins mock him on his way.

Suddenly, the reader's spell is broken. This is not "never-never land," and the poet's narrative does not take place outside of historical time. The subject is not a legendary prince, but the very concrete Israel, the Jewish people, which exile has robbed of its nobility. Israel appears in the guise of a Jewish peddler, much like the figure that the nineteenth-century German-Jewish artist Moritz Oppenheim drew: leaving home at the beginning of the week to wander from village to village with his pack of used clothing or trinkets on his back, exposed for six days to the elements as well as to the hostility and mockery of the gentile populace.⁴

Heine likens this weekday Jew not to a monster but to a dog. It is this comparison, more than other elements in the poem, that upset Jewish critics (as we shall see) who believed it to represent Heine's lack of Jewish self-respect. It also very much disturbed some of my students. The ascription of "doggish thoughts" to Israel would seem to be the severest insult. But Heine is not, in fact, casting an aspersion on Jews here. Israel is not responsible for his thoughts; they follow from the magic curse. The witch who casts the spell is, of course, the anti-semitic prejudice that has forced Jews into the economic interstices of gentile society. Sniffing here and there for a sale as a dog sniffs for food, the peddler on his rounds scarcely has the leisure to think high and noble thoughts.

In fact, it is with this peddling Jew that Heine can more fully identify than with the *nouveau-riche* and bourgeois Jews of Paris and Berlin, who have tried to hide their Jewishness or to escape it. His Jewish fate has imposed a suffering that he is unable permanently to elude. Like the medieval "Rabbi of Bacherach," to whom Heine devoted an earlier prose fable rooted in antisemitic reality, and like Heine himself, the peddler Israel bears the consequences of his birth. It is also likely that Heine had learned from the friend of his youth, Leopold Zunz, of the

⁴ The highly romanticized drawing is reproduced in Michael A. Meyer, ed., *German-Jewish History in Modern Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 2:245.

link between suffering and ennoblement that became a theme of Zunz's medieval studies.

Aber jeden Freytag Abend,
in der Dämmerungstunde, plötzlich
Weicht der Zauber, und der Hund
Wird aufs Neu' ein menschlich Wesen.

Yet on every Friday evening,
Just at dusk, and suddenly,
The spell is broken, and the dog
Becomes again a human being.

Mensch mit menschlichen Gefühlen,
Mit erhobnem Haupt und Herzen,
Festlich, reinlich schier gekleidet,
Tritt er in des Vaters Halle.

Human now with human feelings,
With head and heart raised high,
Clean and festively attired,
He steps into his Father's hall.

"Sei begrüßt, geliebte Halle
Meines königlichen Vaters!
Zelte Jakobs, eure heil'gen
Eingangspfosten küßt mein Mund!"

Hail to you, beloved hall
Of my regal father!
Tents of Jacob, see I kiss
Your sacred doorposts with my
mouth!

Durch das Haus geheimnißvoll
Zieht ein Wispern und ein Weben,
Und der unsichtbare Hausherr
Athmet schaurig in der Stille.

Through the house mysteriously
A whisper weaves its way,
And the house's unseen Master—
Awesome—breathes into the silence.

Stille! Nur der Seneschall
(Vulgo Synagogendiener)
Springt geschäftig auf und nieder,
Um die Lampen anzuzünden.

Silence! But for the seneschal
(He's the synagogue's factotum)
Who busily jumps up and down,
Kindling all the Sabbath lamps.

Trostverheißend goldne Lichter,
Wie sie glänzen, wie sie glimmern!
Stolz aufflackern auch die Kerzen
Auf der Brüstung des Almemors.

Golden lights that promise solace,
How they glisten, how they shine!
Proudly too the candles flicker
On the pulpit's balustrade.

Vor dem Schreine, der die Thora
Aufbewahret, und verhängt ist
Mit der kostbar seidnen Decke,
Die von Edelsteinen funkelt -

Then before the Holy Ark that
Keeps the Torah and is draped
With a precious silken curtain,
That is sparkling with its jewels—

Dort an seinem Bepultständer
Steht schon der Gemeindegänger;
Schmuckes Männchen, das sein
schwarzes
Mäntelchen kokett geachelt.

By his bookstand over there
The cantor eagerly awaits;
Spruced-up little man, he shoulders
His small black cloak coquettishly.

Um die weiße Hand zu zeigen,
Haspelt er am Halse, seltsam

To display how white his hand is,
He fidgets with it oddly at his neck,

An die Schläf' den Zeigefinger, Index finger at his temple,
An die Kehl' den Daumen drückend. Thumb thrust up against his throat.

Earlier, in "The Baths of Lucca," Heine had described a simple Jew called Moses Lump, who closely resembles the peddler Israel of this poem. Of him Heine wrote:

He's called Moses Lump and also Moses Lämpchen or simply Lämpchen; all week long he runs around in wind and rain with his pack on his back to earn a few marks; but when he returns home on Friday night, he finds the lamp with its seven candles lighted, the table set with white cloth, and he sits down at the table with his homely wife and his even homelier daughter. With them he eats fish that are cooked in a tasty white garlic sauce while singing the most magnificent songs of King David. He rejoices with a whole heart over the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt, rejoices too that all the evil doers who did them evil died in the end, that King Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Haman, Antiochus, Titus and such people are dead, but that Lämpchen is still living and eating fish with his wife and child.⁵

Here, likewise, Friday evening has come and Israel enters, not his home for the Friday evening meal, but the synagogue. Lovingly, he kisses the mezuzah. The Sabbath has transformed him from the object of suffering to the proud progeny of an ancient people. Heine describes the synagogue as an awesome place, but it also has its humorous aspects. The *shammes* scurries about lighting the lamps; the *hazzan*, a bit of a dandy, displays his streak of vanity. Here, as also later in the poem, Heine avoids sentimentality through comic relief.

Trällert vor sich hin ganz leise, Bis er endlich laut aufjubelnd Seine Stimm' erhebt und singt: Lecho Daudi Likras Kalle!	First he warbles to himself, And then at last exults aloud, Lifting up his voice, he sings: Lecho Daudi Likras Kalle!
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Lecho Daudi Likras Kalle - Komm' , Geliebter, deiner harret Schon die Braut, die dir entschleyert Ihr verschämtes Angesicht!	Lecho Daudi Likras Kalle— Come, my beloved, the bride Awaits you, ready to unveil For you her blushing countenance!
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Dieses hübsche Hochzeitscarmen Ist gedichtet von dem großen,	This attractive wedding song Is a poem of the great
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⁵ Cited from Hugo Bieber, ed., *Heinrich Heine: Bekenntnis zum Judentum (Confessio Judaica)* (Berlin: Welt Verlag, 1925), 84.

Hochberühmten Minnesinger
Don Jehuda ben Halevy.

And highly famous minnesinger,
Don Jehuda ben Halevy.

In dem Liede wird gefeyert
Die Vermählung Israels
Mit der Frau Prinzessin Sabbath,
Die man nennt die stille Fürstin

In this song he celebrates
Wedding ties of Israel
With the Lady Princess Sabbath,
Who is called the silent princess.

The synagogue is clearly Ashkenazi. The pronunciation of Hebrew is in the manner of German Ashkenazi Jews. But the hymn welcoming the Sabbath transports Israel from Germany of the nineteenth century to medieval Spain. Israel may be a simple peddler, but he is drawn to the lofty poetry of the liturgy. As critics have pointed out, his experience seems more aesthetic than strictly religious.⁶ The fascination with Sephardi Jewry on account of its greater openness to art and philosophy, which began with the Haskalah, is reflected here in Heine's decision to focus on this hymn welcoming the Sabbath.⁷ It is often pointed out that Heine has misattributed the "Lekha Dodi," which was written by Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz in the sixteenth century. What is not known for sure is whether he knew better. I suspect that he did, especially since we know that a complete prose translation of the poem was found with Heine's papers.⁸ It seems most reasonable that he simply used poetic license to tie this song that so well reflects the festive character of the Sabbath to the greatest of all Hebrew poets. For Heine, symbolism is more important than historical accuracy. In fact, Heine makes no less than five errors: he misattributes the poem, he calls the Spanish poet "ben Halevy" instead of simply Halevy, he gives him a patent of Spanish nobility by calling him "Don," he puts him falsely into a German context by calling him—humorously—a minnesinger, and he makes the reader believe that the bride in the "Lekha Dodi" is called a princess although that word does not occur in Alkabetz's poem.

Perl' und Blume aller Schönheit
Ist die Fürstin. Schöner war
Nicht die Königen von Saba,
Salomonis Busenfreundin,

Pearl and flower of all beauty,
Is the princess. Not more lovely
Was the fabled Queen of Sheba,
Bosom friend of Solomon,

⁶ Alberto Destro in Windfuhr, ed., *Heinrich Heine* 3/2, 876–77.

⁷ See most recently on this subject Jeffrey Sammons, "Who Did Heine Think He Was?" in Jost Hermand and Robert C. Holub, eds., *Heinrich Heine's Contested Identities: Politics, Religion, and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York: P. Lang, 1999), 11–13.

⁸ Hartmut Kircher, *Heinrich Heine und das Judentum* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1973), 269.

Die, ein Blaustrumpf Aethiopiens,
Durch Esprit brilliren wollte,
Und mit ihren klugen Rätsheln
Auf die Länge fatigant ward.

Ethiopian bluestocking,
She could dazzle by *esprit*,
But with all her clever riddles
She, at length, was *fatigant*.

Die Prinzessin Sabbath, welche
Ja die personifizierte
Ruhe ist, verabscheut alle
Geisteskämpfe und Debatten.

Princess Sabbath, who indeed
Is perfect rest personified,
Despises each and every
Mental duel and debate.

Gleich fatal ist ihr die trampelnd
Deklamierende Passion,
Jenes Pathos, das mit flatternd
Aufgelöstem Haar einherstürmt.

Passion-laden declamation
Is for her embarrassment,
When that pathos with its flapping
Loosened hair storms all about.

Seltsam birgt die stille Fürstin
In der Haube ihre Zöpfe;
Blickt so sanft wie die Gazelle,
Blüht so schlank wie eine Addas.

The silent princess, with her braids
Tucked up oddly in her bonnet,
Glances soft as a gazelle,
Blossoms like a slender myrtle.

The contrast Heine draws here between the Sabbath Princess and the Queen of Sheba reflects the accepted role of women in Jewish tradition and in Heine's time. It is presented in the name of the poet, and not of Israel. Making the Queen of Sheba into a caricature of the liberated woman intellectual of the eighteenth or nineteenth century once again adds a touch of humor, and it also enables Heine to link the Sabbath Princess with the Sabbath rest that the exhausted Israel finds in her company.

In describing the princess as blossoming "like a slender myrtle," Heine does not use the German word for "myrtle," which is *Myrte*, but rather a slightly altered form of the Hebrew *hadas*, a word Heine apparently knew from its association with the holiday of Sukkot. This is not the only instance in which Heine uses a term not to be found in a contemporary German dictionary. Earlier in the poem he had used words like *Thora* and *Almemor*. Later he will mention *Schalet* and a *koscheres* ambrosia. Although Heine was writing principally for non-Jewish readers, the Jewish world of the poem inscribes secrets at which those not familiar with the Jewish ambience could only guess.

Sie erlaubt dem Liebsten alles,
Ausgenommen Tabakrauchen -
"Liebster! Rauchen ist verboten,
Weil es heute Sabbath ist.

She allows all to her lover,
Smoking, though, is not allowed—
"Dearest! smoking is forbidden,
Since this is the Sabbath day.

Dafür aber heute Mittag
Soll dir dampfen zum Ersatz,

In return, today at noontime
At your place a dish will steam,

Ein Gericht, das wahrhaft göttlich -
Heute sollst du Schalet essen!"

That in truth is simply godlike—
Schalet you shall eat today!"

Schalet, schöner Götterfunken,
Tochter aus Elysium!
Also klänge Schillers Hochlied,
Hätt' er Schalet je gekostet.

Schalet, spark divine and lovely,
Daughter from Elysium!
Schiller's canticle would sound like
This if he had tasted Schalet.

Schalet ist die Himmelspeise,
Die der liebe Herrgott selber
Einst den Moses kochen lehrte
Auf dem Berge Sinai,

Schalet is the dish of heaven,
That the dear Lord God Himself
Instructed Moses how to cook
Up there upon Mount Sinai,

Wo der Allerhöchste gleichfalls
All' die guten Glaubenslehren
Und die heil'gen zehn Gebote
Wetterleuchtend offenbarte.

Where God likewise did reveal
All fine teachings of the faith
And the holy Ten Commandments
Amidst the flashing storm and
thunder.

Schalet ist des wahren Gottes
Koscheres Ambrosia,
Wonnebrod des Paradieses,
Und mit solcher Kost verglichen

Schalet is the true God's blessing,
Kosher-style ambrosia,
Blissful bread of paradise,
And compared to such a diet

Ist nur eitel Teufelsdreck
Das Ambrosia der falschen
Heidengötter Griechenlands,
Die verkappte Teufel waren.

The ambrosia of the false
And pagan gods of Greece, who were
Nought but devils in disguise,
Is simply devils' dirt and filth.

What sets Heine apart from the Maskilim, the Jewish religious reformers, and the early practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* is his understanding that not lofty ideas, but lived and remembered simple pleasures, are the markers of Jewish identity. He had once spoken of "pleasant tasting memories."⁹ Israel of the poem is the Jew of the flesh, without pretensions to *Bildung*, either Jewish or gentile. For Heine, he is more genuinely a Jew than the preachers of a refined Jewish doctrine. Earlier Heine had described another Jewish food, *kugel*, as the Jewish "holy national dish, which has done more for the preservation of Judaism than all three issues of the *Zeitschrift* [published by the Jewish scholarly society to which Heine for a time belonged]. Moreover, it has also enjoyed

⁹ Christhard Hoffmann, "History versus Memory: Heinrich Heine and the Jewish Past," in Hermand and Holub, eds., *Heinrich Heine's Contested Identities*, 40.

a wider circulation."¹⁰ We know that Heine himself loved to eat *Schalet* (*tsholent*) even as he detested chewing on Passover *matsot*. His hyperbolic juxtaposition of *Schalet* with the Ten Commandments is not intended as a derogation of the latter, but to jostle the reader into the characteristically Jewish realization that the good things of life are no less related to the divine than God's moral demands.¹¹ Once himself a Hellene who fancied that Greek ambrosia might keep him young, Heine now decries ambrosia as *Dreck* that feeds the pagan pseudogods but gives no sustenance to an aging invalid.

Speist der Prinz von solcher Speise, Glänzt sein Auge wie verkläret, Und er knöpft auf die Weste, Und er spricht mit sel'gem Lächeln:	Once the prince eats such a victual Brilliantly his eyes light up, And his vest he soon unbuttons, And with blissful smile he speaks:
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"Hör' ich nicht den Jordan rauschen? Sind das nicht die Brüßelbrunnen In dem Palmenthal von Beth-El, Wo gelagert die Kamehle?"	"Don't I hear the Jordan splashing? Are not these the gushing fountains Midst the palm trees of Beth-El, Where the camels are encamped?"
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Hör' ich nicht die Herdenglöckchen? Sind das nicht die fetten Hämmel, Die vom Gileath-Gebirge Abendlich der Hirt herabtreibt?"	Don't I hear the sheep bells ringing? Are these not the fatted wethers, Which from up on Gilead's heights Each eve the shepherd drives below?"
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Having filled his stomach and opened his vest, Israel's contentment is now complete, and he begins to daydream. His imagination enters yet another time and place: the bucolic, restful landscape of ancient Israel, a place where innocent activity proceeds without historical event, idyllically, day after pleasant day. By imagining himself now into the biblical past through the vehicle of the Sabbath and what it offers him, he has escaped to the furthest point from the brutal week-day present.

Doch der schöne Tag verflittert; Wie mit langen Schattenbeinen Kommt geschritten der Verwünschung Böse Stund' - Es seufzt der Prinz.	But the lovely day is ending; As on legs of lengthening shadow Comes the evil hour of magic— And the prince lets out a sigh.
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¹⁰ Cited from Bieber, ed., *Heinrich Heine*, 64.

¹¹ More on this subject now in Gunnar Och, "'Schalet, schöner Götterfunken'—Heinrich Heine und die jüdische Küche," in Josef A. Kruse et al., eds., *Aufklärung und Skepsis: Internationaler Heine-Kongreß 1997 zum 200. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1998), 242–55.

Ist ihm doch, als griffen eiskalt Hexenfinger in sein Herze. Schon durchrieseln ihn die Schauer	He feels the witch's ice-cold Fingers reaching down into his heart. Rippling through him goes a shudder—
Hündischer Metamorphose.	To turn again into a dog.
Die Prinzessin reicht dem Prinzen Ihre güldne Nardenbüchse. Langsam riecht er - Will sich laben Noch einmal an Wohlgerüchen.	The princess gives her golden Box of spices to the prince. Slowly, he breathes in the fragrance— A sweet aroma just once more.
Es kredenzt die Prinzessin Auch den Abschiedstrunk dem Prinzen - Hastig trinkt er, und im Becher Bleiben wen'ge Tropfen nur.	Now, as well, the princess offers A farewell goblet to the prince— Hastily he drinks its contents, In it but few drops remain.
Er besprengt damit den Tisch, Nimmt alsdann ein kleines Wachlicht, Und er tunkt es in die Nässe, Daß es knistert und erlischt.	These he sprinkles on the table, Then he takes a small wax candle, And he dips it in the wetness, Lets it crackle and go out.

There is no permanent escape from Israel's curse. As the shadows lengthen, the spell takes hold again and the cycle starts anew. The separation between the holy and the profane marked by the Havdalah ceremony here sharpens to a separation between the life of a human being and that of a dog. There is no redemption; there is no progress. The flights of fancy to medieval Spain and ancient Israel are compacted into the single day of the Sabbath. They cannot be recaptured in reality. On the morrow Israel will set out again to peddle his wares amidst dirt and hostility, able to think only "doggish thoughts." His Sabbath has taken place in the sanctuary of home and synagogue, in ritual enactment, in "sacred" food, and in the realm of memory. History offers him nothing; his future will not be different from his present.



The contemporary reception of Heine's works among spiritual and intellectual leaders of German Jewry had been negative to ambivalent from the first, and it remained so, even though sentiment moved in a more favorable direction as Heine's poetic genius became more widely recognized and as Heine returned to a greater appreciation of Judaism. The Liberal rabbi Ludwig Philippson and the jurist and polemicist Gabriel Riesser, both of them fighters for Jewish emancipation and committed to a reformist interpretation of Judaism, found Heine's early work

irreverent and frivolous. When *Romanzero* was published, Philippon declared it a disappointment. Of "Prinzessin Sabbath," in particular, he wrote that Heine had made a poetic ascent but did not get very far before falling back "into filth." Cleverly, he charged that Heine's muse more closely resembled the foreign Queen of Sheba, with her fatiguing *esprit* than the calm and modest Sabbath Princess.¹²

However, the Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz devoted an entire chapter in the last volume of his *Geschichte der Juden*, published in 1870, to Heine and Ludwig Börne (both of them apostates), comparing Heine's work to that of Ibn Ezra, al-Harizi, and Immanuel of Rome, and declaring that "the varied blossoms of the Börne-Heine spirit shot up from Jewish soil and were only watered by European culture."¹³ Heine's understanding of Jewish history as suffering and creativity, *Leidensgeschichte* and *Geistesgeschichte*, matched Graetz's own. Heine was also of importance to the twentieth-century German-Jewish scholar Max Wiener. In his *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation*, at the conclusion of in-depth discussions of Jewish thought, *Wissenschaft*, and religious reform, Wiener begins a chapter on "Judaism As Atmospheric Mood" (*Stimmung*) with a discussion of Heine.¹⁴ Perhaps reflecting his own shift away from the narrow interpretation of Jewish consciousness as strictly religious, Wiener pointed to Heine as the outstanding, if flawed, representative of Jewish feeling. Heine could empathize with Jewish suffering and conjure up a romantic Jewish past even if he could not place himself within the bounds of contemporary Jewry. In his romanticism, Wiener might have thought, Heine was more typical for twentieth-century German Jewry than were its earlier great thinkers and ideologues. But neither Graetz nor Wiener took specific note of "Prinzessin Sabbath." Other Jews did, and some even tried to make Heine's poem more Jewishly acceptable in the way that they presented it.

On July 10, 1854, Meir Letteris published "Prinzessin Sabbath" on the front page of his periodical, *Wiener Mittheilungen*. At the bottom of the text he placed a note that reads:

Few works of poetry that glorify the Sabbath can pride themselves on such sincerity and such a natural, humorous conception as can the above

¹² *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* 15 (1851): 555–56.

¹³ Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden* (Leipzig: Leiner, 1870), 11:369–70.

¹⁴ Max Wiener, *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation* (Berlin: Philo Verlag, 1933), 258–261; Itta Shedletzky, "Zwischen Stolz und Abneigung: Zur Heine-Rezeption in der deutsch-jüdischen Literaturkritik," in Hans Otto Horch and Horst Denkler, eds., *Conditio Judaica* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1988), 1:206.

poem by a famous, albeit profane poet. However, in the present poem we have had to soften some harsh tones, which often have a way of marring his most beautiful and gripping poetry, in order not to spoil the pure poetic enjoyment of our readers by the destructive tendency that dominates the poet.¹⁵

Letteris, himself a Hebrew poet, did not see fit even to mention Heine's name as the author of the poem.¹⁶ His version of the text is both abbreviated and altered. Gone is the comparison with a dog, the persiflage on the Queen of Sheba, and the encomia on *Schalet*. Since the metamorphosis could not be wholly excised, the dog becomes a "beast of burden." And to make the curse more explicit the witch's spell is transformed into the "hatred of [Israel's] enemies." Thus sanitized and deprived of ambiguity, the poem, for Letteris, has become Jewishly acceptable.

Hebrew versions of the poem began to appear in 1889 as East European Jews discovered Heine.¹⁷ At least a dozen Hebrew translations appeared within a century.¹⁸ Like Letteris, the Hebrew translators were not averse to creating omissions and changing the text. The Sabbath Princess, of course, becomes the Sabbath Queen. As Dafna Mach points out, some translators were eager to protect Heine from error, inconspicuously changing Judah Halevi into Shlomo Alkabetz; *Schalet* occasionally became *tsholent* or even *hammin*, *kugel*, or *pashtidah*. One translator even added the Havdalah blessing. A number of them were appalled that Heine had made God into a purveyor of recipes, so they substituted an angel or Moses for the deity. Perhaps the most striking innovation was one translator's decision to substitute pork for the pagan ambrosia!

Hayyim Nahman Bialik also translated "Prinzessin Sabbath," not into Hebrew but into Yiddish. It appeared first in the collection *Lekoved shabes un yontev* in Odessa in 1907. According to Chone Shmeruk, Bialik's decision to translate the poem reflected both his own identification with

¹⁵ Cited in Barbara Otto, "'Berühmt, wenn auch profan': Form und Funktion der österreichisch-jüdischen Rezeption Heinrich Heines zu seiner Zeit," *Heine Jahrbuch* 34 (1995): 98.

¹⁶ Otto notes that Heine's work at the time was no longer under the ban of censorship (*ibid.*, 97).

¹⁷ See Dafna Mach, "Heines 'Prinzessin Sabbath'—hebräisch verkleidet," *Heine Jahrbuch* 22 (1983): 96–120.

¹⁸ In addition to the eleven listed by Mach (*ibid.*, 105–7), I have seen a translation by Yaakov Cohen, published by Mosad Bialik and Masada in the volume *Heine—Manginot ivriyyot* in 1957, pp. 9–15. I find the Cohen translation both accurate and effective.

it, at least in part, and the popularity that the poem then enjoyed among East European Jews, especially those who had themselves become Jewishly ambivalent. Like Letteris and the early Hebrew translators, Bialik sought to make the poem less abrasive and hence more acceptable to his readers. He also sought to bring it closer to the East European Jewish milieu. As Shmeruk points out, *Arabiens Märchenbuch* becomes *Alte bovo mayses*, and the atmosphere of the synagogue, where a romanticized cantor wears, not a black *Mäntelchen* but a white *talles*, seems more like an Eastern *shtiebl* than a Western temple. In Bialik's version, the Master of the house has been replaced by the *shekhinah*, who, covering her eyes, herself lights the candles in the synagogue. The *shammes* has disappeared entirely. Later the Queen of Sheba engages in *pilpul*, while the Sabbath Princess, by contrast, is described as *frum*. But Bialik translates the biblical section quite faithfully and retains the metamorphosis from dog into human being and back again to dog.¹⁹



It is not remarkable that publishers and translators of Heine's poem took liberties with it. That was a common practice. What is of interest is the power of their apologetic motive and their readiness to deprive the poem of its ambiguity and drive it into sentimentalism. Clearly they had problems with it, no less than many of my students have today. I suspect that Heine would have shown little regard for the efforts of those who sought to make his work more palatable, more unambiguously Jewish. I have no doubt, however, that he would have appreciated the irony.²⁰

¹⁹ See Chone Shmeruk, "'Prinzessin Sabbath' by H. Heine in a Yiddish Translation by H. N. Bialik," in Ada Rapoport-Albert and Steven J. Zipperstein, eds., *Jewish History: Essays in Honor of Chimen Abramsky* (London: P. Halban, 1988), 379–89. The text I have used is in Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *Lider und poemen*, ed. I. J. Schwartz (New York: Yiddish Natsyonaln Arbeter Farband, 1935), 31–35.

²⁰ I would like to thank Bettina Freeland for her critical reading of my translation and commentary.



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**THE WAY OF "THE WAIL OF THE WIND":
PERETZ SMOLENSKIN'S LATENT, WORTHY *ARS POETICA***

Yair Mazor

Where order in variety we see
And where, though all things differ, all agree.
(Alexander Pope, "Windsor Frost," line 15)

While not overlooking all of Peretz Smolenskin's literary talents, many critics of Haskalah literature have directed a great deal of criticism toward his narrative works. In a critical essay entitled "Smolenskin As a Storyteller,"¹ Reuven Breinin describes the mixed feelings of several critics who both appreciate Smolenskin's writing and denounce it as aesthetically lacking. Breinin depicts Smolenskin's narratives as rocks of the wilderness that are tremendously impressive in their untamed, wild, and threatening might, yet are roughly molded and scarred, displaying no well-wrought polish.² Targeting the art of composition in his works,

¹ Reuven Breinin, "Smolenskin betor mesapper" ("Smolenskin As a Storyteller"), *Hashiloah* 3 (1914): 244–52, 434–43, 521–30. See also Joseph Klausner, *Kitsur toldot hasifrut ha'ivrit ha'hadashah* (Concise History of the New Hebrew Literature) (Tel Aviv: Moledet, n.d.), 91; idem, *Historyah shel hasifrut ha'ivrit ha'hadashah* (The History of the New Hebrew Literature) (Jerusalem: Achiasaf, 1960), 213; Nahum Shloshtz, *Qorot hasifrut ha'ivrit ha'hadashah* (The History of the New Hebrew Literature) (Warsaw: Tushia, 1921), 208; A. A. Kovner, *Heqer davar* (A Study of Matter [Word]) (Warsaw: 1882); Fishel Lachower, *Toldot hasifrut ha'ivrit ha'hadashah* (The Chronicles of the New Hebrew Literature) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1954), 1:213, 218; I. H. Tabyuv, *Mivhar hasifrut: antologyah ivrit* (Literary Selection: Hebrew Anthology) (Warsaw: Tushia, 1920), 387; Aharon Ben-Or, *Toldot hasifrut ha'ivrit ha'hadashah* (The Chronicles of the New Hebrew Literature) (Tel Aviv: Izre'el, 1951), 1:312; Shalom Streit, *Ba'alot hashahar* (As Dawn Rises) (Tel Aviv: Heddim, 1943), 86; S. Briman, ed., *Sefer Smolenskin* (Smolenskin's Volume) (Tel Aviv: Achiasaf, 1928), 76; David Frishman, *Kol kitvei David Frishman* (David Frishman's Complete Works) (Tel Aviv: Yovel, 1930), 1:30; Jacob Fichman, *Anshei besarah* (People of Gospel [Vision]) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1938), 112.

² Breinin, "Smolenskin betor mesapper," 224.

critics have almost unanimously pointed to Smolenskin's weakness as a storyteller.

My book, *A Well-Wrought Enlightenment*,³ examines the compositional poetics of Hebrew Haskalah narrative. In this study I offer a detailed probe of that literary corpus, reaching the conclusion that there exists in Haskalah narrative a latent poetics with an aesthetic value that has largely been overshadowed by the weaknesses of the surface poetics. This latent poetics features well-fashioned compositional structures as well as round characters (in the sense of E. M. Forster's use of the term) who provide a plausible psychological depth. Smolenskin's work provides an excellent example of the coexistence of these two levels of poetics. While the weaknesses of the prominent surface poetics of his narratives drew the attention of critics, a valuable latent poetics coexists with the surface poetics in Smolenskin's stories and in portions of his novels (notably *Qevurat hamor* [*Donkey's Burial*]). The story examined in this article, "Yilelat haruah" ("The Wail of the Wind"), is a remarkable example of Smolenskin's artistic and literary skills. The following close reading of "The Wail of the Wind" illuminates Smolenskin's latent poetics and provides new grounds for a discovery of the value of his *ars poetica*.

The plot of "Yilelat haruah" follows the tragic plot pattern of descent from happiness to misery described by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. In "Yilelat haruah," however, this plot pattern develops in a spiral-like fashion. The starting point of the exposition is the happiness of Sarah, the story's protagonist, along with her husband and her daughter Yael. The sudden death of the young husband begins a process of deterioration, as events go from bad to worse. Sarah is mistreated by the provincial Jewish community when she lets her daughter attend singing and dancing lessons (an unforgivable transgression according to this narrow-minded, Orthodox community). However, when Sarah and Yael move to the big city and Yael meets success, the plot takes a positive turn. Nevertheless, Yael's success soon hardens her heart, and she neglects her devoted mother as well as her faith. When Sarah realizes that Yael has become a Christian prince's lover, she ends her life by throwing herself in the prince's palace pool. Sarah's tragic death shocks Yael and robs her of her peace of mind. Eventually, she ends her life the way her mother did. Thus, the plot's "descending" development is rather bumpy, in that it oscillates between misery and happiness before finally ending at the most somber state of misery.

³ Yair Mazor, *Haskalah besom sekhel (A Well-Wrought Enlightenment: The Compositional Poetics of the Hebrew Enlightenment Narrative)* (Tel Aviv: Papyrus Press of Tel Aviv University, 1986).

"Yilelat haruah" features a pattern of textual circularity. For the purposes of this article, I would define textual circularity as an indifferent container whose character is defined by the material poured into it. Thus, the complete roundness of textual circularity may express either serenity, perfect peace, tranquillity, or the extreme opposite: a somber state void of resolution, a never-ending circle with no way out. While the thematic/semantic meaning of textual circularity is flexible by its very definition, throughout the composition it is constant, due to the fact that it surrounds the piece on all sides and reinforces the piece's compositional unity.⁴

The story begins with an element that resembles its ending: Sarah watches her daughter being embraced by the prince, to the incredibly sad sound of the "wail of the wind," an event that leads to her suicide. Compositionally, the textual circularity fortifies the story's structural unity, as it opens and closes with the same tragic element creating a tight, albeit somber, central component. The thematic-compositional pattern of circularity and rounded quality of "Yilelat haruah" reflects the somberness of this scene, which sets a tragic tone. The bleak events chronicled in the story further reinforce this sense of sadness.

This textual circularity produces a rhetorical device in its conclusion of unfulfilled expectations as it defines the plot's borders: the wail of the wind, which begins the story, also ends it as Sarah, the protagonist, ends her life. The pattern of textual circularity establishes this intersection where composition and rhetoric meet and interweave. The unity of the textual circularity effectively encourages the reader to believe that Sarah's death marks the end of the plot as well. The fact that Sarah is the protagonist supports this expectation, for the death of the principal character has a way of ending a story quickly.

Smolenskin, however, has a surprise in store for his reader. This carefully cultivated expectation is now unfulfilled as the story continues. Sarah's death is the very reason for the continuation of "Yilelat haruah." Yael, her daughter, realizes that her mother's death was the result of her own selfish actions, and she eventually drowns herself in a tragic mirroring of Sarah's death. In addition to the surprise of the continuation of the story after the death of the protagonist, the reader also encounters an unexpected compassion and introspection on the

⁴ For further discussion of textual circularity in detail, see Yair Mazor, *A Sense of Structure: Hebrew and Biblical Narrative* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: University Publishing Projects, 1987), 186–205; and idem, *Not by Poem Only, David Vogel's Art of Narrative* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: University Publishing Projects, 1987), 44–46.

part of Yael, who had been singularly cold-hearted and uncaring about her mother's feelings.

At this stage in a close reading of "Yilelat haruah," the reader is bothered by the double ending. Several questions spring to mind: What is the aesthetic justification for an extra ending (beyond its role as a component in another literary system)? Does not the extra ending upset the story's perfect textual circularity? It appears to be nothing but a clumsy compositional patch, an aesthetic error on the part of an incompetent writer who does not control his fictional material and characters well. Critical consideration, however, proves the aesthetic value of the double ending.

Ending the story with two similarly gloomy events increases its somber resonance and supports the thematic-ideological focus of interest. It produces a sense of haunting fate, a sealed verdict of doom, with no redemption. Causal connections between the two endings strengthen the touch of inescapable destiny that hounds the characters. The tragic end of the older generation (Sarah) foreshadows the end of the younger generation (Yael), without regard to time barriers. The affinity between the two tragic endings reinforces the fatal nature of the story's message. Accordingly, the story's double ending is not a display of clumsy composition on Smolenskin's part. Rather, it is a clever aesthetic device that contributes to the story's tragic atmosphere while underlining its ideological message: tragedy, which is always present in human life, strikes both the innocent (Sarah) and the guilty (Yael).

Smolenskin further demonstrates his aesthetic talents by employing patterns of compositional and thematic dynamics of motifs. *The Dynamics of Motifs in S. Y. Agnon's Works*⁵ introduces definitions and detailed descriptions of these two patterns, which are basic to the nature of the literary (as well as the nonliterary) text. Both patterns consist of the dynamic changes occurring in the components of motifs found in the text. A pattern of the thematic dynamics of motifs is based on the changes taking place in the semantic/thematic nature of the motif components or changes in the respective contexts in which they occur. A pattern of the compositional dynamics of motifs is based on changes taking place in the motif components (changes manifested through alternating orders, distances, groupings, etc.).⁶

The presence of the "wail" in Smolenskin's "Yilelat haruah" is emphasized by the components that open and conclude the story. Both

⁵ Yair Mazor, *The Dynamics of Motifs in S. Y. Agnon's Works* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dekel Academic Press, 1979).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5–21.

compositional and thematic dynamics of the wail motif underscore deliberate systematizations meant to establish specific meanings that echo and reinforce the story's major developments and ideas. This motif's compositional dynamics are anchored in major developmental turns of the plot. These compositional dynamics draw an imaginary graph that reflects and underlines the plot's evolution, as well as major developmental events. Accordingly, the wail motif appears at the beginning of the story, as Sarah loses her beloved husband, and when Yael, her daughter, deserts both her mother and her faith, and also at the end of the story, as both mother and daughter commit suicide. In this respect, the wail motif serves as a map of the story's major trends, or as a metaphor mirroring the story's very essence. A similarly expressive systematization is in the motif's thematic dynamics.

Smolenskin presents the wail motif components in various ways. At the beginning of the story, he depicts the motif of *yilelat haruah* (the wail of the wind) as a universal cry of human suffering embracing both the world and the very core of human existence. This is the first component of the wail motif. The second component, however, echoes the shift in the story from the universal to the concrete. The *qol qorea lev* (heart-rending voice [sound]) is heard as Yael is seen in the prince's embrace; only later does the reader learn that the "voice" is Sarah's. The shift from the "wail of the wind" (the first component) to the "heart-rending voice" (the second component) mirrors the plot development from the exposition (which is of general nature) to the plot's actual events (which are of concrete nature). Accordingly, the "wail of the wind" is rather general as it is associated with the world's sadness (in the story's general exposition), while the "heart-rending voice" is associated with concrete occurrences (Sarah's suicide). Hence, the plot's development is informed by the thematic dynamics (the changes occurring in the thematic/semantic characteristics of the motif components as they are distributed along the unfolding text). The third motif component, *anahah* (sigh), appears as Sarah suffers the loss of her husband. The "sigh" appears eight times during this period of the story, consequently signaling the end of a happy time in Sarah's life (one of the conditions for tragedy according to Aristotle's *Poetics*). Less dramatic than the "heart-rending voice" or the "wail of the wind," the "sigh" is associated with the sad daily routine of Sarah's life after she is widowed. Thus, these motif components metaphorically mirror the plot's development as it progresses from one stage to another.

It is important at this point to note the collaboration between the motif's thematic dynamics and its compositional dynamics. These both operate on the grounds of reciprocally tight congruency: the semantic-thematic shifts occur not only in motif components (thematic dynamics) but also in crucial locations along the textual continuum (compositional

dynamics). In this respect, thematic and compositional dynamics echo and reflect each other.

Smolenskin introduces the fourth incarnation of the wail motif component as the *qol ra'am* (thundering voice [sound]). The thematic shift to such a dramatic component effectively reflects the context in which the motif is anchored. Sarah realizes that her only daughter has deserted her and her faith. Sarah hears the "thundering voice" as coming from above, which seems to blame her for this desertion: she took her daughter to the big city and exposed her to non-Jewish activities such as dancing and singing, and as a result, her daughter abandoned both her mother and her faith. The dramatic shift to the "thundering voice" echoes the dramatic development in the plot as Sarah realizes that she is responsible for her daughter's failings and for her own calamity.

The "wail of the wind" appears for the last time at the end of the story, bringing the cycle of motifs full circle as it marks the tragic deaths of both Yael and Sarah. As in the beginning of the story, this motif component marks gloom and sorrow, just as it does in the end, creating a perfect resonance with the plot's development and eventual ending. The meticulous placing of this motif component along the textual continuum (compositional dynamics) suits the thematic-semantic change (thematic dynamics) from the preceding component.

Hence, one may discern a careful orchestration in the "wail of the wind" motif, which simultaneously conducts and monitors two diachronic systems (thematic dynamics and compositional dynamics) that are deftly synchronized to reflect the story's major trends in plot and idea. Surprisingly, the "sigh" motif component does not reappear. The reader might expect that, because it represents Sarah's sad daily routine (especially after losing her husband), it would continue as she eventually loses her daughter as well. Nevertheless, though Smolenskin leads the reader to just such an expectation, he frustrates it by dropping the "sigh" motif from the story altogether. The author makes use of a literary intersection where thematic and rhetorical devices meet in order to produce a certain meaning, fortifying the story's major trend. The absence of the "sigh" motif component possesses a rhetorical quality (as the reader's unfulfilled expectations operate as bait to catch his or her attention) and a thematic quality (the absence of the "sigh" motif component acts as what T. S. Eliot refers to as an "objective correlative" to Sarah's death). This absence of the "sigh" motif component, connected with Sarah's everyday sad life, foreshadows her eventual disappearance from the story. Thus, the absence of motif components is every bit as telling as their appearance.

In addition to his clever use of motifs, Smolenskin's *ars poetica* is also evident in the area of characterization. While many Haskalah characters are rather flat, psychologically shallow representatives of ideological trends,

Smolenskin's characters are of a dramatically different nature. Sarah, Yael, and even the Christian prince (despite his relatively minor role) all display psychological roundness, persuasive presence, and emotional complexity.

Smolenskin makes use of a compositional-rhetorical device that should be seen as the overture to a deftly orchestrated system of characterization. This device consists of developing a tension between the story's *fabula* and *sujet* (which differ from E. M. Forster's terms "story" and "plot").⁷ In keeping with the definitions coined by the Russian formalist critics,⁸ I use *fabula* to mean the organization of events according to a chronological order of occurrence and *sujet* to indicate the concrete order in which the plot's events are organized. If a writer deviates from the chronological order and arranges events according to a different order, one may define this state as a *sujet* manipulation of the *fabula*. Flashback or suspension of expositional plot events (which occurred earlier in the *fabula*) are well-known examples of such *sujet* manipulations of the *fabula*. Usually, the *sujet*'s deviation from the *fabula* is neither random nor arbitrary, as it deliberately aims to gain a specific aesthetic achievement. Such is the case with the suspension of expositional material. Expositional material, by its very nature, does not possess the same appeal as does the plot. The exposition's main goal is to introduce the reader to background data that preceded the plot's occurrences, and while the plot is the story's focus of interest, the exposition belongs to the margins of the piece. The plot's occurrences tend to be portrayed in a dramatic fashion ("showing"), but expositional material belongs to the past; therefore, it is of a more static nature and is portrayed in "telling" technique.⁹

On a scale of aesthetic attractiveness, the exposition falls far behind the plot. It is, therefore, a natural aim of the writer (or, rather, the "implied author" according to Wayne Booth) to bestow on the exposition the appeal it intrinsically lacks. *Sujet* manipulation of the *fabula* seems to act as an effective means of doing this. In delaying expositional material from its natural early location along the textual continuum (as dictated by the *fabula*), a writer creates a lack of expositional information from the past that precedes the plot, which arouses the curiosity of the reader.¹⁰ Because the reader must be acquainted with the delayed expositional material in order to comprehend a specific

⁷ See E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Pocket, 1961), 35.

⁸ See T. Lemon and M. J. Land Reis, eds., *Russian Formalist Criticism* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1965), 63.

⁹ See Meir Sternberg, "What Is Exposition? An Essay in Temporal Delimitation," in J. Halperin, ed., *The Theory of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

¹⁰ See Mazor, *A Well-Wrought Enlightenment*, 38–46.

plot occurrence, the expositional material becomes more valuable and, in this way, gains attractiveness ordinarily lacking in its generic nature. "Yilelat haruah" opens with such a delay, when a *sujet* upsets the *fabula's* chronological order as it removes a piece of information from its natural place at the end of the story's textual continuum and plants it at the beginning. The opening sentence of the story reads,

The wail of the wind does always cause sadness in our heart. . . . such is also the prince S., when his beloved was shaken as he embraced her, by a heart-rending voice [sound] that came through the window; but he did not think much of it and told her, "It is just the wail of the wind," and continued holding her in his arms; but let us see what has caused that wind which carried a heart-rending voice [sound] on its wings.¹¹

Although the story's ending is foreshadowed here, the reader's curiosity is not resolved, as the ending is only partly revealed. The reader wonders: Who is the young woman, the prince's beloved? The story's narrator, carefully manipulated by the implied author, does not seem to be in a hurry to answer this question. In the face of this lack of information, the reader is compelled to cultivate one's own hypothesis, based on one's current knowledge of the story, in regard to possible expositional information that might answer these questions. Thus, since Sarah is the only adult woman mentioned in the story until a relatively advanced stage of the plot, it is natural on the reader's part to assume that she is the prince's beloved. Only later is the reader presented with the information that Yael, and not Sarah, is the prince's beloved, thereby proving the reader's assumption wrong. The curiosity that the narrator fosters in his reader endows the expositional material with an appeal that it lacks in its generic status.

The traditional function of a curiosity-raising gap in a narrative is to transform thematic material from undesirable to desirable. In the story under consideration, this gap operates on another, more specific level that involves the system of characterization. Since the gap focuses on both the unknown beloved (assumed to be Sarah) and the Christian prince, and later the filling of the gap focuses on Yael (who is discovered to be the beloved), the gap draws attention to these three characters. The gap makes the core of that system (the three characters) a focus of interest in the story and subsequently acts as a signpost that paves the way to the characterization system. This aesthetic achievement of "Yilelat haruah" illustrates the story's importance as a literary work of great value; each of the three characters who operate in this characterization system proves to be a most

¹¹ All translations are mine.

persuasive fictional persona; each demonstrates roundness, unlike other Haskalah characters, as noted earlier, and each is dynamically characterized in a way that efficiently presents lights and shadows, merits and flaws, thereby revealing the character's psychological complexity.

As Yael appears for the first time in the story, she could not earn more sympathy or appreciation on the part of the reader. She is "ten years of age, and she already has gained fame in her town and neighboring towns due to her good looks, wisdom, good heart, as well as her language talent and singing and dancing skills." Years later, however, this formerly appealing characterization has changed. Yael, now a world-famous opera singer, has coldly rejected her mother and her faith, a tremendous sin according to both the story's and the period's standards. Apparently, her success has ruined her feelings and hardened her heart. Although the change in Yael's character is extreme indeed, it is not wholly unreasonable and certainly not at odds with psychological credibility.

At the end of the story another dramatic shift in Yael's character occurs as she realizes that due to her actions her mother has killed herself. Yael then regrets her past attitude and, because she cannot go on living with the moral burden of her guilt, kills herself by drowning, as did her mother. This abrupt change again in her character is psychologically convincing because such a trauma in a young woman's life (realizing that she caused her mother's suicide due to her hard-hearted attitude) can certainly cause a sobering reaction, a guilty conscience, and possibly even suicide.

Yael's characterization is as systematized as it is dynamic. It begins with a positive orientation, reverses to negative, and finally returns to positive. The fact that all three characters within the multisystem characterization go through a similar dynamic and systematized process of characterization reflects the most sophisticated nature of that multisystem of characterization.

Although the Christian prince, Yael's lover, goes through the same three stages of the characterization process as do Sarah and Yael, in his case the process begins as negative characterization, switches to positive, and then returns finally to negative. This is neither a major deviation from the multisystem orientation, nor a denial of it. On the contrary, while the prince's characterization obeys the principal multisystem's dynamic momentum, the opposite movement of the prince's characterization adds aesthetic flexibility without upsetting the rule. In other words, that slight deviation proves again the story's subtle sensitivity even toward the tiniest textual elements.

At the beginning of the story, the prince appears embracing his beloved. As the wail of the wind is heard, he remains disgracefully impervious to his beloved's distress on hearing the horrible sound, and, although she is shivering in his arms, he does not quit his lovemaking.

This constitutes a rhetorical device that emphasizes the prince's lack of sensitivity as well as his repulsive egotism. The narrator's formulation "also the Prince" encourages the reader to cultivate expectations that the prince was also shaken by the horrible wail and, therefore, will stop his lovemaking. However, this does not occur, and the reader's expectation is denied; the surprise that results from the function of this rhetorical device underlines the prince's negative characterization at this point in the text.

As the story continues, however, the prince appears to be somewhat redeemed: when he hears of Sarah's and Yael's being mocked and tormented by the narrow-minded and envious members of the Jewish community, despite the fact that he knows of Sarah's tacit disapproval of his liaison with her daughter, he nonetheless comes to their house to aid them. Sarah's disapproval seems to be solely on account of his faith, not on the basis of his character. Furthermore, the prince possesses a handsome countenance ("a young man strong-looking as a cedar"), which significantly contributes to his positive image. Haskalah narrative (influenced by European romantic narrative, notably the French sentimental novel) identified physical beauty with morality and intellectual faculties. Indeed, handsome villains are rare in Haskalah narrative; the exception to this is Yoseph Habirzi in R. A. Braudess's *Hadat vehahayyim* (*Religion and Life*), who is eventually found to be a good man who temporarily fell from grace. Thus, the prince's character, which began as negative, appears to redeem itself halfway through the story. In light of this, his previous insensitivity might be considered to be a function of the distraction any young man might experience in the face of lust.

The third stage in the prince's characterization, however, signals a return to a negative portrayal. The story ends as it began, with the wail of the wind, and the prince again demonstrates insensitivity to his distressed beloved and eventually both Sarah and Yael drown themselves. The fact that the prince cannot be distanced from either Sarah's or Yael's death stresses his return to a negative characterization. Here again the pendulum swings for the last time as the three-stage process of dynamic characterization comes to an end.

Hence, the textual-circularity pattern plays a significant role in the prince's characterization as it reemphasizes the prince's emotional indifference along with other blemishes, all of which ultimately lead to the deaths of the two women. (I find it interesting here to note that it is the two women who destroy themselves, rather than the man. Does this suggest an intrinsic weakness in women or an intrinsic strength? Or does Smolenskin see women as nobler and more apt to stick to their principles than men?¹²)

¹² My gratitude for this observation goes to Anne Brokaw.

An attractive physique cannot extricate the prince from a verdict of condemnation. Thus, the prince's characterization is presented by means of the very same dynamic process of characterization evident in the case of Yael: a pendulum that swings back and forth between two opposite poles, along with a literary device (textual circularity, in the prince's case) that serves as an appendix system of characterization. The fact that the poles are reversed for the prince does not weaken the pattern, but rather enriches it with a touch of flexibility while avoiding an undesirable aesthetic stiffness.

Sarah's case almost echoes her daughter's. As "Yilelat haruah" begins, her character is presented in glowing terms: handsome, clever, pure, and loyal to her beloved husband to the point that she refuses to marry again after his death, despite the fact that the most prominent men of the Jewish community desire her. Her abuse at the hands of the women of the community contributes to this glowing character, as the women are of a worthless nature.

At the second stage of Sarah's characterization, however, a flaw is revealed in her character by means of a rhetorical literary device, which acts as an appendix characterization system (as in the case of Yael and the prince). The story's omniscient narrator, who strictly avoids interfering in the plot, deviates from this approach once during the story: he becomes an inner narrator, a "literary voyeur" who observes and comments upon the scene during the second stage of Sarah's characterization. As he conveys the Jewish community's criticism of Sarah when she decides to send Yael to the big city to attend singing and dancing classes (in direct contradiction to the Jewish community's behavioral code), the narrator suddenly intrudes into the story, expressing his own opinion: "If it [Sarah's sin] had been done by a daughter of a shoemaker, or a cook, or a tanner, *we* would have been keeping silent, or perhaps *we* would not have been keeping silent and *we* would have taken her to court." The narrator's utilization of the collective pronoun "we" not only designates a rhetorical shift associating him with the story's characters but also emphasizes the fact that he has joined the Jewish community's criticism of Sarah. In this way, the narrator, controlled by the implied author, wishes to stress that the criticism against Sarah is not only leveled by the narrow-minded community but by himself as well, despite his ordinarily high regard for her.

The narrator uses his moral authority to criticize Sarah for allowing her daughter to be exposed to the moral dangers of the big city, and later events prove this criticism to have been right. The rhetorical device of alternating viewpoints (an interfering versus a noninterfering narrator) is indeed an appendix system that illustrates a severe flaw in Sarah's characterization, despite her generally good characteristics. Nevertheless, Sarah's character also eventually reverses poles a third time and returns to its positive pole. Accordingly, she regrets her past mistakes and again

goes through an unbearable *via dolorosa*. Her regret, her agony, and her tragic death take her back to the most positive pole of characterization, from which she had been exiled only a short while ago.

Thus, Smolenskin makes use of a sophisticated, multidirectional characterization system in "Yilelat haruah" based on three dynamic patterns of characterization. Each of these consists of a deftly monitored process of three stages, marked by the swinging back and forth between positive and negative poles. Any deviation from this pattern is not arbitrary but rather carefully controlled by the author to bestow aesthetic flexibility upon the multisystem. Each of the three parts of the multisystem has its own appendix characterization system, which plays a major role in the dynamic characterization system of the three principal characters in the story (the unexpected double ending in Yael's case, textual circularity in the prince's case, and rhetorical metamorphosis of the narrator, in Sarah's case).

The impressive intricacy of the aesthetic achievements in "Yilelat haruah" is not only due to the cluster of literary systems and devices that simultaneously operate within the story; it also emerges from the meticulous and dexterously balanced synchronization that controls all systems and devices in the story. For instance, the patterns of textual circularity and the compositional-thematic-rhetorical device of the unexpected double ending function simultaneously as components in the multisystem of characterization, as well as independent devices that serve the story as a whole. Hence, the interaction between the story's various literary systems and devices produces an intricate orchestrating of the story's aesthetic layers generally not associated with Haskalah narrative works.

Quite a number of Smolenskin's works in fact do not display the latent worthy *ars poetica* that he created in "Yilelat haruah." Indeed, many of them contain aesthetic flaws noted by critics such as Patterson, Shaked, Miron, Werses, Friedlander, and Weinfeld. However, Smolenskin's skill in crafting the sometimes cryptic, latent *ars poetica* presented in "Yilelat haruah," as well as in such stories as "Neqam berit" ("Covenant Vengeance")¹³ and the novel *Qevurat hamor* (*Donkey's Burial*),¹⁴ should be recognized for its literary merit, thereby shedding new light on Haskalah narrative as a whole.

¹³ See Mazor, *A Well-Wrought Enlightenment*, 91–95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82–91.

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ASSONANCE AND ITS SHARE IN IRONY: COMMENTS ON *SEFER HAQABTSANIM*¹

David Patterson

In 1869, Shalom Jacob Abramowitz, using the name of the persona Mendele Mocher Sefarim, published his Yiddish novel *Fishke der krumer* (*Fishke the Lame*). With the help of Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Mendele published a transmutation of the story in Hebrew under the title *Sefer haqabtsanim* (*The Book of the Beggars*) in 1909.²

The first paragraph of the novel introduces a contrast between the natural world and the Jewish condition through an introduction by the bookseller narrator:

כיון שנושב רוח חם וימות החמה מגיעים, ובעולמו של הקדוש־ברוך־הוא אורה ושמחה — ימי אבל וצום ובכי ממשמשים ובאים ליהודים בזה אחר זה, מתחלת ספירת העומר עד ימות הגשמים. והשעה שעת עבודה לי, מנדלי מוכר ספרים, לחזור בעיירות שבתוך התחום ולהספיק לבני ישראל שם מכשירי־הבכיה, דהיינו קינות וסליחות ומיני תחינות, שופרות ומחזורים, מענה־לשון ותפלה־זכה וכיוצא באלה שיפים לשפיכת דמעות. ישראל עמנו סופדים ומבלים ימות החמה בבכיה — ואני עושה בה סחורה. אבל אין זה מעניני.

Now the wind blows warm, and sunny days are on the way, and all God's world is full of light and joy—we Jews will soon be facing days of

¹ This article is dedicated to Arnold Band in long and valued friendship.

² For perceptive accounts of the author and his works, see especially Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schocken, 1973); and David Aberbach, *Realism, Caricature and Bias: The Fiction of Mendele Mocher Sefarim* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993). The extracts quoted in this paper are drawn from the Hebrew version, *Kol kitvei Mendele Mocher Sefarim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1958), and the translations are my own.

mourning, tears, and fasting, one after the other, from the spring sowing at Passover until the autumn rains. This is the busy season for me, Mendele the Bookseller, when I do the rounds of the little townlets in the Pale, providing all that is necessary for a good cry, namely, dirges, supplications, penitential prayers, rams' horns, solemn lectionaries, graveside elegies, pietistic tracts, and whatever else is happily conducive to tears. Our fellow Israelites lament and spend the summer weeping—and I make my living from it. But that's another story. (91)

The lightheartedness and gentle humor of this opening paragraph disguise the important message that the natural order of the seasons and the cycle of the Jewish religious year are clearly out of sync. Just when the natural world is at its most appealing, with warm and sunny days when all is light and joy, and with the trees in blossom and the countryside at its very best in this fertile Eastern European milieu, Jewish life is plunged into deep gloom as the days of mourning, tears, and fasting follow hard upon each other's heels. Mendele's business year is also out of sync with the annual cycle. For Mendele the Bookseller this is the busy season in which he travels round the little towns of the Pale of Settlement providing all the liturgical texts and ritual objects suitable for mourning: the tools for crying. He makes his living from the laments and summer weeping of his people. The formulaic "but that's another story" is repeated constantly throughout the novel and suggests the possibility of an additional important narrative.

From the very beginning, therefore, it is clear that whatever message the author intends to convey he will not make recourse to the didactic tub-thumping of his immediate Haskalah predecessors³ but will use irony and literary strategies that both delighted his audience and created some artistic rounding that enriched the story's hermeneutics. The author's clear intention is to arouse self-awareness and the realization of their situation in the minds of his readers in Eastern Europe. But his imaginative use of language prompts richer readings.

Driving slowly through the lovely countryside in a wagon pulled by a sad, moth-eaten mare, Mendele is increasingly conscious of the gulf separating his own gloom from the joys of nature all about him. It is the seventeenth of Tammuz, one of the blackest days in the Jewish calendar, when, according to tradition, the walls of Jerusalem were breached by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E. and by Titus in 70 C.E. With the seventeenth of Tammuz the three-week mourning period over the destruction

³ See David Patterson, *The Hebrew Novel in Czarist Russia: A Portrait of Jewish Life in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1964).

of Jerusalem begins, ending on the ninth of Av. Hence, fasting and faint with hunger, Mendele is trying to concentrate on the sad liturgical poems appropriate to that day, while all about him the beauties of nature are attempting to seduce him and divert his thoughts from sadness and prayer.

While dozing in the driver's seat, his wagon collides with another wagon, and the event unleashes an episode, simple enough, but complicated by Abramowitz's textual dexterity.

דומה שחטפתי השנה, לא עליכם, וישנתי באמצע תפילתי. רואה אני והנה עגלתי טובעת בתוך אמת־המים, ובאחד מאופניה האחרונים נתונה סדנא של עגלה אחרת. סוסי רגלו האחת עומדת מחוץ לעבותות העגלה והוא ממושך, דחוק ולחוץ ורע רע לו. ומאיך גיסא קללות נמרצות עולות ובאות לי בלשון יהודית וגניחה ושעול כאחת נשמע משם. יהודי אתה! — אומר אני בלבי — אם כן למיחש לא מיבעי ... ומיד אני קופץ ובא לשם מלא חמה. והנה איש יהודי סבוך בטלית ותפלין מפרפר לפני תחת עגלה. הרצועות והשוט כרוכים יחד, והוא מפרסס ומשתדל בכל כחו לצאת מן המצר. אני תוהא וצועק עליו: היאך! והוא משיבני בקול: היאך והיאך! — אני משלח בו חרון אפי וכל חלומותי הרעים שחלמתי, והוא חוזר ומשלחם בי ואין אחד מאתנו רואה את פני חברו. אני לו: יהודי, איך אינו בוש וישן בתוך תפלתו? והוא לי: יהודי, איך אין מורא שמים עליו והוא מתנמנם? אני מקללו באביו, והוא — באבי ובאמי. אני חובט את סוסו, והוא מתיר את עצמו מאסוריו ועומד וחובט את סוסי. הסוסים מתהוללים ומזדקפים קוממיות, ואנו כועסים ומשתערים זה אל זה כתרנגולים ומתכוונים להחזיק זה בפאותיו של זה. שעה קלה היינו עומדים שותקים ומסתכלים אחד בפני חברו. אמנם מה נהדר היה מראה זה! שני גבורי ישראל בטליותיהם ותפליהם עומדים בשדה זועפים ונזעמים ומזומנים להיות סוטרים אחד בלחיו של חברו ... אשרי עין ראתה אלה! עוד רגע ומכות־לחי מתרגשות לבוא, — ופתאם נרתענו לאחורינו ושיננו בכת־אחת קוראים תוהים ומשתאים:

— אוי, ר' אלתר!

— אוי, אוי, ר' מנדלי!

I must apparently have nodded off asleep, right in the middle of my prayers—may such a thing never befall you! I see my wagon sinking in a pond, with the axle of another wagon stuck in one of its rear wheels. One of my horse's legs is standing outside the traces, and he is being pulled and pressed and squeezed, and is in a very bad way. From the far side a stream of piercing curses in Yiddish rises aloft punctuated by coughs and groans. So you're a Jew, are you!—I say to myself—in that case, there's nothing to fear. So I get to my feet at once and go round the other side full of rage. There I see before me a Jewish fellow entangled

in his prayer-shawl and phylacteries squirming under a wagon. The straps and whip are all tied up, as he struggles to free himself with all his might. "What's going on!" I shout at him in astonishment. And he replies at the top of his voice: "You might well ask what's going on!" I vent my wrath on him, heaping all the insults on him I can conjure up, and he hurls them back at me, without either of us seeing the other's face. I say to him, "Are you not ashamed to be a Jew and fall asleep in the middle of your prayers?" And he replies, "How can a Jew be so little God-fearing as to doze off like that?" I curse him by his father, and he throws my mother into the bargain. I beat his horse, and he manages to free himself and gets up and starts beating my horse. The horses take fright and rear up, while we angrily take each other's measure like fighting cocks, preparing to grab each other's sidelocks. For a little while we stand in silence gazing into each other's faces. What a spectacle we make! Two Israelite heroes in their prayer-shawls and phylacteries under the open sky, furiously preparing to box each other's ears. What a sight for sore eyes! A rain of blows is just about to descend—when suddenly we both draw back, each of us crying out in simultaneous surprise:

Oy, Reb Alter!

Oy, oy, Reb Mendele! (92)

The lighthearted and humorous description portrays the aggravation of these two poor Jews, dressed in prayer-shawls and phylacteries struggling to free themselves from the mire. But the text's richness reveals disturbing undertones that the author is clearly anxious to convey to the reader. The phrase that I have translated "while we angrily take each other's measure" is *ko'asim umista'arim* in the Hebrew. Here the rhythms work with the assonance and lead to strong association. For the person familiar with Jewish liturgy the phrase *ko'asim umista'arim* is strongly reminiscent of the phrase *kor'im umishtaḥavim* (we bow and bend the knee), which appears in the Aleinu prayer recited daily.

The phrase "what a sight for sore eyes" is *ashrei ayin ra'atah elleh* (literally: happy is the eye that saw these things) in the Hebrew. This phrase appears in the additional Musaf service for the Day of Yom Kippur as a response to the dramatic depiction of the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies in all his splendid finery on the one occasion in the year when he was permitted to do so.

Mendele's language helps to contrast the present miserable state of Jewish life with the glory and dignity of the ancient Israelite kingdom. I would suggest that in order to foster self-awareness in his readers of the degradation of their lives, and perhaps even to call attention to the need to strive for something better, Mendele uses the above two instances along with the following third instance of intertextual contrast between past and present reality.

In this third passage Mendele's friend Alter has begun to complain about the misfortunes that have befallen him in his recent visit to the fair at Yarmolinitz:

ועד שאלתר מקלל את ירמוליניץ ואת היריד שם וקרונות של אכרים
באים נגדנו, והם תוהים בעגלותינו למה הן עומדות ומעכבות את הדרך
על העוברים. וכיון שהגיעו למקומנו וראו אותנו מעוטפים בטלית ובציצית
ותפלין עם רצועות בראשינו ועל ידינו — מיד הרימו את קולם, מלגלגים
עלינו ואומרים:

— ראו נא אותם, את הבריות היפות הללו! תפח רוחם של אביהם ואמם!
הוי, פנו מקום, יהודים מצויצים!

ומיד היינו מזדרזים ובאנו להסיע את עגלותינו. והערלים, אף על פי שלא
מבני ישראל הם, מעיד אני עליהם שקיימו בנו מצות „עזוב תעזוב“
ועמדו לנו בשעת דחקנו, ובזכות דחיפתם החזקה יצאו עגלותינו מן אמת-
המים בשלום. ואלמלא הם, מי יודע כמה היינו מטפלים בהוצאת העגלות,
ואפשר שלא הועלנו כלום, קפוטותינו נתלכלכו בטיט וטליותינו היו
מתמרטטות, שהרי באמת, מה אנו ומה כחנו? אבל בכח ידיהם של בני
עשו המלאכה נעשית יפה. הם היו דוחפים כדבעי, ומדחיפתם היה נכר,
שהידים ידי עשו. אבל אנו, להבדיל, אין כחנו אלא בפה — הקול קול
יעקב; וכשהיו הם דוחפים היינו אומרים: דחפו היטב, היטב דחפו, מפני
שהקול יפה לדחיפה — ואנו בעצמנו היינו גונחים ומפרפרים בכל אברי
גופנו ונראים כדוחפים ... אבל אין זה מעניני. כשנתפנה הדרך הלכו להם
בניחם אלה לדרךם, הופכים פרצופיהם אלינו, מלעיבים ומלעיגים בנו,
שאנו מטפלים בסוסינו בכגדי כהונה ועובדים את הבורא במקל וברצועה
... קצתם מקפלים כנף בגדם בדמות אוזן-חזיר ומושיטים אותה לנגד פנינו
כדי להכעיסנו. אלתר לא היה חושש להם, מבטלם בלבו ואומר: פי נותן
דעתו על פראי אדם אלה ומה הם שנתבייש מפניהם? ... ואני — עקיצת
עקרב היה לי זו לעגם עלינו. אי שמים! הלעג הזה למה? למה ולמה? ...

But while Alter was cursing Yarmolinitz together with its fair, a number of farm-carts drew near, with the farmers clearly wondering why our wagons should be standing there blocking the road. No sooner were they close enough to see us wearing our prayer-shawls and ritual-fringes, with phylacteries strapped to our heads and on our arms, than they started mocking us aloud and crying: "Look at those fancy boys! The devil take their fathers and mothers. Hey! Make way there, you fringy Jews!"

We at once bestirred ourselves and set about moving our wagons. As for the gentiles, in spite of their not belonging to the seed of Israel, I can testify to the fact that they observed the commandment, "Thou shalt go to the help of thy neighbor," and they stood by us in our hour of need. By dint of their mighty efforts our wagons emerged safely from the pond. Had it not been for them, who knows how long it would have

taken us to get them out. Perhaps we might never have managed it. Our coats were all muddied and our prayer shawls torn. For indeed, what are we and what is our strength? But the strong hands of these sons of Esau made light work of it. They did all the pushing, and from the way they went about it, it was obvious that the hands were the hands of Esau. But as for us, all our strength is in the mouth—the voice is the voice of Jacob. So while they pushed, we shouted: “Together heave! Together heave!”—because shouting goes well with pushing. We, ourselves, were groaning and twitching in every limb, and we looked just as though we were pushing—but that’s another story. Once the road was clear, those sons of Ham went their way, turning back to look at us in mockery and scorn because we were tending our horses in priestly vestments and serving our creator with sticks and reins. Some of them screwed up the corners of their coats to look like pigs’ ears and pushed them under our noses to aggravate us. Alter paid no heed to them, dismissing them with the remark: “Who cares about hooligans like them?” But for me—their mockery pierced me like a scorpion’s sting. God in heaven! Why all this mockery? Why? Why? . . . (92–93)

Here, as well, the degradation and helplessness of the two heroes is emphasized by the description of clothing as “all muddied with our prayer-shawls torn.” For indeed, what are we and what is our strength? The gentiles are portrayed as strong and competent, and they do all the pushing, and from the way they go about it, it is obvious that the hands “are the hands of Esau.” But as for us, all our strength is in the mouth—“the voice of Jacob.” The biblical references are obvious and apposite. But the phrase that I have translated “together heave” is *dahafu hetev, hetev dahafu* (literally: push well, well push) in the Hebrew. The rhythm and assonance call to mind a passage in the talmudic tractate Keritot in which the young priests, preparing the incense for the Temple service, encourage each other with the cry *hadeq hetev, hetev hadeq* (pound well, well pound), corresponding to Mendele’s “push well, well push,” once more emphasizing the striking contrasts of the miserable present with the glorious past.

This remarkable exercise in self-awareness with the consummate artistry and gentle self-deprecating humor of Mendele clearly illuminates his purpose to arouse readers from their lethargy and their willing acceptance of their miserable plight by indicating the former dignity and nobility of Israel’s status in biblical and rabbinic times. Not the didactic tone of the Haskalah, but artistry with a social purpose, nonetheless. How sad, he seems to indicate, that a nation of priests has been reduced to a nation of beggars, and how desirable it would be to restore that former glory.



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THREE *KALIKES*: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MENDELE, AGNON, AND BASHEVIS

Gershon Shaked

A full understanding of the unique features of a literary work may depend on the comparison of such features with those in works of similar theme or form. This essay compares narratives of three major Jewish authors who depicted similar oppressed and miserable figures as symbols of the economic and social conditions of their societies: the bilingual writer Mendele Moykher Seforim; the Hebrew Nobel laureate, S. Y. Agnon, who wrote Yiddish stories, poems, and essays in his youth;¹ and the Yiddish Nobel laureate, Isaac Bashevis Singer.² The three narratives to be compared are Mendele Moykher Seforim's "Fishke der krume" ("Fishke the Lame"),³ S. Y. Agnon's "Ovadia ba'al mum" ("Ovadia the Cripple"),⁴ and Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Gimpel tam" ("Gimpel the Fool").⁵

The physical dismemberment in each story symbolizes both psychological and social impotence, and the characters are victims of social

¹ Agnon published Yiddish stories and poems under his original name, Czaczkes, in Buczacz before he emigrated to Israel. See the introduction by Dov Sadan to Shmuel Yoseph Agnon, *Yiddishe verk* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977), 7–55.

² Bashevis also published Hebrew stories (e.g., "Nerot behatser shel nokhrim" [1925]). He translated exotic Hebrew Palestinian stories with an Arab background by Moshe Smilansky in *Araber: folkshtimlikhe geshikhtn* (Warsaw: n.p., 1932).

³ First written in Yiddish in 1869 and translated and rewritten in Hebrew by the author in 1909 under the title "Sefer haqabtsanim" ("The Book of Beggars").

⁴ Published first in the American Hebrew periodical *Miqlat* 5 (44) (1921): 115–21. It was collected in S. Y. Agnon, *Al kapot hamanut* (1922) and in Agnon's collected works (1932).

⁵ First published in Yiddish in the periodical *Yiddisher Kempfer* (1945) and in the collection, Isaac Bashevis, *Gimpel tam un andere dertseylungen* (New York: Tsiko, 1963).

repression in Jewish society and of the *condition juive* of the Eastern European *shtetl* in the nineteenth century. The character of Fishke seems to be the prototype for Ovadia and Gimpel. These characters are what Peter L. Hays calls “limping heroes,” emasculated, sterile figures who are literary expressions of the grotesque.⁶ Hays likens the limping hero to an impotent helpless cuckold, pathetic and comic at the same time.

Fishke seems to be one of those nonpersons on the margin of society who have a name but no identity. They are components of the social mass repressed by society, but they are also a kind of synecdoche of the society in which they live. There is no possibility of personal choice for this group of social underdogs. The community handles them with indifference because they are not considered human beings. Pauperism in this work is a synecdoche of Jewish homelessness. It is a metaphor of a collective subconscious describing the repressed id in the society’s collective unconscious.

A wedding—the Jewish occasion for joy and restoration—opens the story. Fishke marries a blind beggar woman, because when the match between her and the original groom was canceled by his mother, the community did not want to waste the food:

Aller that work! Oh’ it’d be a terrible thing if the end we’d have naught to show for it. We couldn’t think what to do. So the whiles we are chawin’ the thing over like, the Gimper feller sudden come to mind. By golly! Fishker’s the thing can deliver ever’body outer this quandary. Why, he’ll do as crackerjack as any feller. For what difference it make, long as ther’s a bridegroom. And sure Fishker he won’t mind. Why ever should he for?⁷

Fishke and his “wife” join a group of wandering beggars, but she abandons him for the bastard Feivush, the aggressive leader of the group. A romantic affair develops between Fishke and Beila the hunchback, an abandoned child who was sold to this band of beggars. When she tells him the story of her life, she and Fishke speak in a romantic diction that is dissonant with their station in life:

“God is a Loving Father and He sees and hears everything. Silly! Think for a minute God don’t know about our misery? Oh He know all right.

⁶ Peter L. Hays, *The Limping Hero: Grotesques in Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), especially 63ff.

⁷ “Fishke the Lame,” trans. Ted Gorelidk and Hillel Halkin, in Dan Miron and Ken Frieden, eds., *S. Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher Seforim): Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 71–72.

You bet! Why lookit the moon up there. See it? Well that is God's moon which she look down upon us here' even inside of this house from all wet up to the sky. Why it is a sin to be talking so, silly. . . ." Well she give me such a fiery a look then, and tears were come to her eyes which they sparkle like diamonds in the moonlight. No, I shan't ever forget them eyes of hern, nor that look she give me then, not ever!⁸

For the booksellers, to whom this story is nominally addressed, these sentiments are not appropriate to this class; for them the reality of the lower classes is sex and lust and not spiritual love. Even if love occurs among the destitute, it is not regarded as a reality according to the expectations and social norms of what may be the intellectual lower middle class of the *shtetl* as represented by the booksellers.

Fishke and Beila are victims of the sexual sins of their fathers. Fishke is an orphan and the victim of the *shtetl* community, which serving as his parent has married him to an inappropriate woman. Beila is the victim of her father, who divorced her mother for a younger woman, and the lust of her mother, who abandoned Beila for a lover. The main parallel subject of the novel is the destruction of the personal life of the members of the society through the economic and social practices that characterize this materialistic, down-to-earth community.

The indirect narrating filter, the interplay between *sujet* and *fabula* in the frame story, gives this novel the ambiguous state of mind of a satiric interpretation of a basically melodramatic plot and the ambiguity of the tragicomedy of the destruction of human beings by their biological progenitors and spiritual parents. The mixture of ambiguous fragmentary comic forms with a sentimental social subject conveys the grotesque mood of a social problem that has no solution. Beila still remains the victim of Feivush, the leader of the beggars, who represents the unconscious greed and lust of the fathers. In abandoning their children they take away their identity, and these children, losing their social status, become part of the what Mendele called the infantry or cavalry of paupers.⁹ In this symbolic reading sexual lust and material greed distort the life of the younger generation. The children become cripples, sacrificed by their

⁸ Ibid., 196–97. The translation does not convey the biblical connotations found in the Hebrew version more than in the Yiddish version, which create a much higher register in the discourse of the two lovers.

⁹ See Gershon Shaked, "A Groan from a Broken Heart: Mendele Mokher Seferim's 'Fishke the Lame' As a Demand for Responsibility," in S. Rimmon-Kenan, L. Toker, and S. Barzilai, eds., *Rereading Texts/Rethinking Critical Presuppositions: Essays in Honor of H. M. Daleski* (Berlin, Bern, New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 177–96.

biological as well as their social parents represented by the community. The implied author believes that their homeless wandering and mutilation are the consequence of domestic corruption. The rescuing father is Mendele the narrator, who, while he cannot change their social status, can be a witness to the cul-de-sac where the beggars find themselves and tell the audience that they are the real sinners, that it is their fault that all this happened. The story is an indictment of the morals, manners, and norms of the Jewish social entity that is responsible for its own sufferings. The destitute masses of paupers are the alter ego of their society. The gross instinct suggested by Feivush's attempts of rape and robbery symbolizes the unconscious nightmares of their society.

Agnon's story "Ovadia the Cripple"¹⁰ was published approximately twelve years after the Hebrew version of "Fishke the Lame." It tells the story of an errant maidservant, Shayne-Seril, betrothed to Ovadia, a miserable cripple.¹¹ After a flirtation with the son of her employers, she becomes pregnant from another servant. Meanwhile, Ovadia is hospitalized after having been tormented by a group of young men who break his crutch (a phallic symbol). This is not merely the story of a couple who have been overwhelmed by the hypocrisy of bourgeois society; it goes beyond the exposure of the victims and the victimizers. In the final passage of the story we read:

Ovadia's mouth was open, his tongue like an immovable rock, and the sweets in his hand kept melting and melting. The baby suckled with pleasure at his mother's breast, with a small voice. Ovadia took the candies with his right hand and the crutch with his left. The baby stretched and removed one hand from the teat, and Shayne-Seril's anger was still not appeased. Ovadia feared to give her the candies and bent down and laid them on the infant's palm.¹²

¹⁰ The character of the orphan, the helpless creature without the security of a family, appears quite often in Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Thus, no outside influence for this figure needs to be sought. Nevertheless, Agnon and Bashevis were both probably influenced by the Norwegian neoromantic writer Knut Hamsun, whom Bashevis translated into Yiddish in the late 1920s. Hamsun had an enormous impact on such Second Aliyah writers in Jaffa at the beginning of the century as Agnon, Reuveni, Kimchi, and Arieli-Orloff. Like Ovadia and Gimpel, Minutte, the antihero in Hamsun's novel *Mysterien* (1892) is a victim of cruel maltreatment and abuse at the hands of his society.

¹¹ Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 212-17.

¹² S. Y. Agnon, *Al kapot hamanul* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953), 428.

The reader might have expected that Ovadia would turn on his heels and leave the mother and her child to their sighs. But Ovadia does not. Agnon turns the moral tables: he creates an effect of moral deautomatization that is also an effect of literary deautomatization.¹³ The child, according to Agnon's view, need not be ostracized. Although he is not the biological father, Ovadia gives the child the candies, thereby accepting moral responsibility for the child's welfare. In contrast to the bourgeois morality based on genetic rules and regulations, a humanistic ethos is promoted, based on relationships of grace, mercy, and responsibility—all of which contrast with conventional bourgeois values. At the end of the story, a deep power of humanistic responsibility dominates. The hero has overcome the sins of a tempting and enticing bourgeois social environment that seduced his fiancée and the benevolence of the welfare society's hospital that tempted him to escape the hard facts of life. In the end he heroically faces his human responsibilities.

The heroes' weddings in "Fishke the Lame" and in "Gimpel the Fool" are an interesting point of departure as we seek to compare the two stories of physical *kalikes* (cripples) with the story of the mental *kalike*, Gimpel.¹⁴ The idea of "let him be the groom" starts Bashevis's short story, as it is the point of departure of Fishke's bad fortune. The description of Fishke's wedding¹⁵ is paralleled by the description of Gimpel's wedding: "It so happened that there was a dysentery epidemic at the time. The ceremony was held at the cemetery gates, near the little corpse washing hut."¹⁶ The personal life of both characters was determined by

¹³ *Deautomatization* is a concept of the Russian formalists, which refers to changing accepted conventions of form that usually create automatic reactions. I use it here also metaphorically to describe a revolutionary response to conventional moral norms.

¹⁴ In his translation of "Gimpel the Fool" into English, Saul Bellow attempts to adjust the text for a non-Jewish or assimilated American Jewish readership. Literal translations of two passages from the Yiddish original read: "She had her hair put up in braids and pinned across her head like a *shikse*," and "That was how it was; they argued me dumb. But then, who really knows how such things are. They said that Jesus never had a father." In the English translation the negative allusions to non-Jews are omitted: "She had her hair put up in braids and pinned across her head," and "That was how it was; they argued me dumb. But then, who really knows how such things are." The change in the target audience brought about a change in the text by omitting references to Jewish-gentile relations as reflected in *shtetl* mentality.

¹⁵ See the pages cited in note 7 above.

¹⁶ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* (New York: Noonday Press, 1957), 7–8.

the decision of the community to sacrifice to the "gods" the poor and destitute as scapegoats of their society. In the world of high mimetic mode kings and aristocrats are sacrificed; in the world of the ironic anti-heroic mode the victims are the poor, the lame, and the fools.¹⁷

If there is any real literary source for Gimpel the Fool, it is not the Shakespearean jester, Dostoyevski's Mishkin (*The Idiot*), or the archetype of the holy fool,¹⁸ but the schlemiel of Yiddish literature.¹⁹ The world of Gimpel the orphan has made him the permanent victim of a practical joke. His wedding, like Fishke's, is the climax of the joke. In contrast, Ovadia escapes from the abuses of his society into the open possibilities of the welfare system of the Western world, represented by the hospital. Agnon is very humanistic in his moral judgment: the escape has made Ovadia responsible for the sins of the woman that was supposed to be his future fiancée. "Gimpel the Fool" is based on the conventions of the *Commedia d'ell Arte*. Gimpel is a Pantalone and/or an Arlequino and, in Northrop Frye's nomenclature, Alazon and Bomolochos, the cuckold-husband and the victim of his society. He is the practical joke of his society because he is ready to believe whatever he is told: "When the pranksters and leg-pullers found that I was easy to fool," he states, "every one of them tried his luck with me."²⁰

The deautomatization of the conventional plot derives from the depiction of the consciousness of the main character. He is one of the first to know that his wife has betrayed him, and the more she cheats the more he accepts the facts of life. He loves her even though he has never consummated their marriage. There are different stages in the discovery of his destiny. He marries her and is told that her son is her younger brother. This child is born four months after the wedding, but Gimpel is ready to believe that the birth was premature—that the child is actually his. After he finds his wife in bed with somebody else, he, like a real comic Alazon or Pantalone, finds it outrageous but does not act. He speaks to the wise man of the clan, the rabbi, who advises him: "You

¹⁷ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

¹⁸ Paul N. Siegel, "Gimpel and the Archetype of the Wise Fool," in Marcia Allentuck, ed., *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 159–73 (especially 160).

¹⁹ Ruth Wisse writes, "The transplantation of the figure from Europe to America could be symbolized by the story 'Gimpel the Fool' written by the Yiddish master Isaac Bashevis Singer." See Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel As Modern Hero* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 60.

²⁰ Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 4.

must divorce her at once. Let her go, the harlot and her brood of bastards with her."²¹

After a while, the rabbi changes his mind and persuades him to return to his torturing wife and accept the idea that whatever he has seen are hallucinations. At the last stage, he finds his wife in bed with his apprentice and is again comforted by the notion that he had experienced a hallucination. Gimpel is ready to live with the conditions of his marriage for twenty years. Only when his wife Elka confesses on her deathbed that she has cheated him all her life is he ready to be seduced by Satan to take revenge and to punish the society that has made him a comic scapegoat.

Actually, Gimpel's denial of reality can be seen by the reader as a survival technique in a society that has pushed him into the state of the holy cuckold. He has become an ascetic holy comic man who accepts the prostitute as if she were a holy woman, like Jesus marrying Mary Magdalene and consenting to have her continue working in the oldest profession. Gimpel falls in love with the woman he was married to by the community that wanted to get rid of both the naïve village scapegoat and the local prostitute.

Gimpel's wife, Elka, has the daemonic power of the *femme fatale*, a character that appears quite frequently in Bashevis's works.²² In describing her qualities, Gimpel states, "Pitch and sulfur that's what they were full of, and yet somehow also full of charm. I adored her every word. She gave me bloody wounds.... I thieved because of her and swiped everything I could lay hands on."²³ She responds to his love sadistically: she will not let him sleep with her, and she tortures him physically and spiritually. The more she tortures him the more he loves her and is fascinated

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²² The relationship between the two resembles the relationship in "The Riddle" between Oyser Dovidl and his wife Nechele, who leaves him with Bolek, the son of the pig butcher. See Isaac Bashevis Singer, *A Friend of Kafka and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1970), 144. Hodke, the daughter of Lipa the rag picker in "The Gentleman from Cracow," is one of those daemonic women like Elka with whom Singer is fascinated: "[Hodke] was in truth Lilith, and the host of the nether world had come to Frampol because of her." See Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 44. These daemonic women are not only representatives of the vicious aspects of their society but there is something realistic in them as figures from the underclass. Their social status is always a metaphor for their psychological status, and they are from the daemonic underworld of the collective unconscious.

²³ Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 10.

by her. In his role as the village fool he understands that he is a victim and a cuckold, but he accepts the situation because he is satisfied with their sado-masochistic relationship.

Bashevis ironically portrays Gimpel as having no choice but to like playing his role in this tragicomedy. In contrast, by the end of the story, Agnon presents a humanistic undermining of the irony of Ovadia's situation. Agnon's Ovadia is a victim of cruel torture, but he hates his role as victim and finds in his hospitalization a legitimate psychological escape from that role. Ultimately, Ovadia takes moral responsibility for his psychological and physical inability to hold on and "to take arms against a sea of troubles."

Gimpel's behavior and the behavior of the community do not fit the moral norms of any Jewish community. Bashevis signals what the real norms of this society should be. The rabbi is the mouthpiece and *raisonneur* of the desired norms, declaring:

It is written, better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil. You are not a fool. They are the fools. For he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses Paradise himself.²⁴

Yet even this justification of the fool and the indictment of the community put forth by the rabbi is ironically undermined by the implied author as the rabbi's own daughter joins the ranks of Gimpel's victimizers:

Nevertheless the rabbi's daughter took me in. As I left the rabbinical court she said: "Have you kissed the wall yet." I said. "No, what for?" She answered, "It's the law; you have got to do it after every visit."²⁵

The daughter of the rabbi represents the antinorm to which the rabbi refers, and while this distortion of the norm undermines the power of the rabbi in his own house, it remains the dominant norm of the larger society.

It seems to me that, as he did in many of his works, in "Gimpel the Fool" Bashevis created a fictitious Jewish community that engaged in a degree of sinfulness that is not based on historical reality.²⁶ This approach creates a permanent tension between the irrational and the rational, the

²⁴ Ibid., 5

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Similarly, Micha Yosef Berdyczewski depicts in his Hebrew short novels *Under the Thunder*, *Inhabitants of the Street*, and *You Will Build a House* a Sodom-like sinful community. For Berdyczewski the creation of a fictitious sinful community was the best way for the reevaluation of all values (*Umwertung aller Werte*).

instincts and repression. The story attempts to come to terms with the repressions of its readers as it portrays an exotic world that according to convention should have been religiously restricted but is entirely corrupted and perverse. Some of the religious and intellectual leaders even use the holy scriptures for their practical jokes, and the *melamed* (schoolmaster) teaches Gimpel a midrashic lesson that interprets the scriptures according to the distorted norms of this community:

[B]ut when I talked it over next day with the schoolmaster he told me that the very same thing happened to Adam and Eve. "Two they went up to bed, and four they descended. There isn't a woman in the world who is not the granddaughter of Eve," he said.²⁷

Parodying Jewish cults and ceremonies is one of the major literary strategies of Bashevis. The manners, morals, and rituals of this society are depicted as false and phony, and those who are naïve are sacrificed on their altars. They are the Isaacs of the cults of their community, and there is no ram to rescue them from their torturers. Like Mendele and Agnon, Bashevis depicts the *shtetl* community as a sadistic-daemonic social group where sexual debauchery and maltreatment are rampant and many Jews mistreat the naïve victims of their society.²⁸ On the one hand, the uncorrupted outsider of this community is supposed to be a fool: he is not accepted by the community because his naïveté is the source and subject of social irony and of the ambiguous evaluation of the implied author. On the other hand, the *shtetl* community not only accepts Elka's sexual debauchery, but an unknown number of men participate in her sexual orgies, and when she dies she leaves behind several children with unknown biological fathers.

The end of "Gimpel the Fool" is quite surprising. It seems to change from a social melodrama to a poetic manifesto. The cuckold and scapegoat becomes a *poet dolorosa*. There are even signals that the implied author identifies with Gimpel, when he concludes that "there were really

²⁷ Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 10.

²⁸ This we can even see in some social stories by the neoromantic writer Isaac Leib Peretz. Based on my reading of "Gimpel the Fool," the interpretation by several critics of Gimpel as representing the figure of the Holocaust victim is at least questionable. Edward Alexander, for instance, maintains: "Gimpel never takes the analogy a step further to say that the Jewish people have been far more faithful to their God than He to them, but in the aftermath of the Holocaust there are few Jewish heads through which that thought will not at least momentarily flit when they read this passage." See Edward Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), 144.

no lies."²⁹ When Gimpel relates the stories he tells others in his wanderings, they remind us of stories composed by Bashevis:

Going from place to place, eating at strange tables, it often happens that I spin yarns—improbable things that could never have happened—about devils, magicians, windmills and the like. The children run after me, calling “Grandfather tell us a story.”³⁰

The man who tells stories about devils (as Bashevis did in *Satan of Goray*), magicians (as he did in *The Magician of Lublin*), and windmills (the storyteller as Don Quixote) is Bashevis’s image of the storyteller. The storyteller, according to Bashevis, has to be the scapegoat and victim of his society and endure the sufferings of the naïve in a world of sexual and social sophistication in order to become somebody who knows that everything is possible and that there is no gap between grotesque fantasy and grotesque reality: “No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world.”³¹ From Bashevis’s point of view, there is no redemption for human beings in the true world; the only way to survive is to imagine the world as an image (*Vorstellung*), the only way open is to ignore reality and to approach it as hallucination. According to this story, resignation and acceptance of destiny shape the storyteller, the victim of his society who tells the story of his victimization by the magicians and Satans of his community. He, the stepson of mother community, the naïve outcast, may tell the story of his deception and victimization. He, the great sufferer like Oedipus in *Colonus*, has the holy power of the muses, but he knows very well that he has escaped from the world of reality into the world of fantasy. The only redemption from the tortures of this world is “the Other World”:³² “Whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: Gimpel cannot be deceived.”³³

²⁹ Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21

³² I prefer this reading of the text to the reading of Paul Siegel: “Is Gimpel’s foolishness then, really limitless, and is his final assurance that he will attain the world of reality after death either another self-deception or the continuation of an endless deception practiced upon him by malevolent Higher Powers? Will death, instead of blissful certainty, bring him either nothingness or another world of dreams and deception?” See Siegel, “Gimpel and the Archetype of the Wise Fool,” 173.

³³ Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool*, 21.

Mendele's Fishke and Beila are victims of the disruption of social norms in a society in which the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. The sons and daughters are the sacrificial victims of their parents, who at the last moment are ready to repent (e.g., Beila's father, Alter). Agnon's Ovadia is the victim of a bunch of rascals and of the social order, which establishes the relationship between the employer and his servant. Gimpel is the victim of his own masochistic readiness to be tortured and to survive by believing that there are no limits between fantasy and reality.

One of the main differences between the ways that Agnon and Bashevis portray the social underdog (the fool, the poor man, the mental or physical cripple) is in their approaches to the issue of responsibility. For Bashevis I would call it genetic responsibility: Gimpel is born a fool, and the facts of life neither change him nor change the responsibility of a cruel society represented by the monstrous woman to whom he is married. He is partly redeemed by the power of fantasy he acquires when he closes his eyes to the brutal realities of his life.

All three stories about the limping hero are based on a sterility myth. The three main characters have no children of their own, and none of them, it would appear, ever has sexual relations with his spouse. Mendele's story ends with the separation of the two miserable lovers. The only chance to reverse the chain of events from sterility to fertility would be if Alter, Beila's father, would rescue her from the brutal, impersonal world of the beggars. Ovadia overcomes his own impotence and sterility by acknowledging his illegitimate child as his own, because unconsciously he was responsible for his birth. Gimpel accepts all of Elka's children, even though he knows that they were only hallucinatory offspring and that after twenty years he is in fact as sterile and limping as he was before he married. Nevertheless, Gimpel transforms physical sterility into spiritual fertility. Although he will pass away childless, the children who have heard his stories inherit the products of his imagination. Their attentiveness makes the sterile, limping hero a productive storyteller.



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**SOME CROSSCURRENTS OF LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM:
M. Y. BERDYCZEWSKI ON THE CENTRALITY OF HEBREW***

William Cutter

Change and continuity dominated the cultural landscape of Jewish Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, after the breakdown of the old religious order had wrought nearly a century of spiritual revolution. The struggle between these poles of change and continuity resulted in extraordinary literary and intellectual creativity, including a protoexistentialist reframing of philosophical issues, as well as a surprising collocation of contradictory forces within the literary and political communities of Europe: religious reform and rich traditional piety; cultural assimilation and Zionism; an attraction to Hasidism coupled with a rejection of religion in the conventional sense; a desire to be part of the Western literary world and a desperate holding on to parochial literary values.

The enigmatic scholar, belletrist, and essayist, Micha Yosef Berdyczewski, epitomized these tensions. Like many intellectuals he struggled to harmonize opposing worlds, including his cosmopolitan linguistic interests, on the one hand, and his love for the intensity and passion of Yiddish and his commitment to Hebrew on the other. On occasion, these interests threw him into a certain amount of intellectual chaos. All of this became clearer to me as a young scholar continuing my literary studies at UCLA under the generous baton of Arnold Band. The scholar from Boston was then especially engaged by two great Hebrew narrative writers: Shmuel Yosef Agnon, and Micha Yosef Berdyczewski, and he used each of these figures as an example of intel-

* The research for this paper and the time to work on all of Berdyczewski's essays on culture were made possible by a grant from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. My thanks, as always, are extended to Professor Avner Holtzman, the director of the Berdyczewski Archives in Holon. Among teachers and colleagues in Israel, I would single out Gershon Shaked, Shmuel Werses, and Tzipora Kagan.

lectual tensions that dominated Jewish life in our modernity.¹ Their intellectual positions and their art have helped define an entire century of Jewish culture, even though Berdyczewski's name is little known outside of scholarly circles.

A century after Berdyczewski's most productive year, 1900, during which he published an astonishing number of stories,² essays, and cultural pieces, versions of these battles continue to occupy Jewish minds. No problem has been more intractable than the place of Hebrew language within the religious and cultural lives of American Jews. And yet Hebrew language has been a mirror of the perplexing dynamism of these hundred years. It is a concern to which I have been devoted, both as a scholar and as a rabbi practitioner. Jewish continuity today seems dependent on the broad deployment of the very language that is unattainable for members of a religious community who cherish the historical resonances of the language without understanding it. Jewish continuity seems linked to a language whose very spirit both fosters and challenges that continuity. Berdyczewski understood such things, and he understood the unruly and dynamic nature of languages in general. He reflected this understanding in his essays on the Hebrew language, and the essay I have translated for this article demonstrates the contrary linguistic passions that emerged from his understanding.

Micha Yosef Berdyczewski was one of several leading thinkers of the Hebrew literary renaissance who wrote about Hebrew, but one of the few who actually studied language and linguistics. He devoted his life to promoting Hebrew language and literature even as he understood the limitations of its function. He lived his final ten years in the Berlin of the second decade of the twentieth century. For years before he had been living within a German-language milieu that fostered much of the great language discourse of the time and that reflected the heritage of Kant, Hegel, and Herder. His library—relocated to Holon, Israel—contains books that give evidence of his linguistic sophistication. He was a novelist, essayist, and a classical scholar whose contributions to the Hebrew narrative tradition and ancient folklore studies are still not fully

¹ My debt to Arnold Band is acknowledged in this simple note. That debt includes personal matters as well as academic skills: learning how to examine textual clues to larger issues and understanding the dynamic nature of cultures. In these areas he continued the mentoring of my teachers Ezra Spicehandler and Ellis Rivkin.

² M.Y. Berdyczewski, *Stories of 1900* [Hebrew], ed. Avner Holtzman (Holon: Dvora and Emanuel House, 1991). See Holtzman's introduction.

appreciated. The Berlin where he died at the age of fifty-six was the Berlin that fostered some of the greatest achievements of modern Jewish history and produced giants whose impact touched business and academic life, Christianity and Judaism, and which, of course, gave birth to the nearly successful attempt to annihilate the Jewish people. And German hegemony, through its great linguistic authority, extended far beyond national boundaries. Berdyczewski was a part of that complex drama, both its localized intensity and its international reach, even though his death came too early for him to have had premonitions of what was to happen, either the tragedy of Fascism or the triumph of Jewish nationhood.

Although history's tricks had a way of marginalizing Berdyczewski in Western scholarship, during the 1920s and 1930s he inspired thinkers and activists from a wide range of the Jewish intelligentsia. In a certain sense the young rebels who embraced Berdyczewski in the struggle against orthodoxies rebelled as much against the solutions of progressive Jewish thought: the essentialism of *Ahad Ha-Am*, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and religious reform. These rebels, who called themselves the *tse'irim*,³ included Berdyczewski, Yehoshua Thon, and Mordecai Ehrenpreis. However loosely they defined themselves, they were men (for the most part) who were comfortable with the lack of definition of what was "Jewish," ontologically speaking, and who espoused a kind of universalism of personal spirit and national culture. The *tse'irim* pale in historical prestige compared to such Jewishly influential figures as Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Leo Baeck, Gershom Scholem, and Martin Buber; and on the world stage they are utterly insignificant in comparison to such iconic figures as Horkheimer, Adorno, or Walter Benjamin.⁴ Yet their very contrast with *Ahad Ha-Am* remains a valuable antipode for contemporary discussions of Jewish thought.

Berdyczewski's resistance to labels and to clear definitions of Judaism applied to language as well, and it is part of what makes his views on the Hebrew language so interesting today. Berdyczewski could not grant Hebrew the ontological clarity or the spiritual purity ascribed to it by so many of its early promoters, and he was one of the few thinkers of his time (Bialik was certainly another) who understood the dynamic mix of the classical and demotic in language in general and Hebrew in

³ Josef Oren, *Ahad Ha'Am, M. Y. Berdyczewski, vehatse'irim* (Rishon Le Tsion: Yahad, 1985).

⁴ Even Jacques Derrida has entered the discussion with such essays as "Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German," *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 39-95.

particular.⁵ Indeed, the dynamic qualities in language were for him a mirror of the way in which culture in general unfolds.

One of Berdyczewski's short essays on this subject was called "Davav midavar," and it, along with a small corpus of essays on language, reflected his struggle to situate Hebrew sensibly within the Jewish national revival. The essay (the title of which could be translated as "Drawing Conclusions" or "An Idea Grows from a Word") was written in 1907 as part of a series of essays entitled "Inyenei lashon" ("Language Matters").⁶

Berdyczewski understood that spoken language was always developing and recreating itself through new vocabulary and even syntactical forms. A language without a home, however, had the more limited function of helping to preserve the culture of a people which may remain on foreign soil. He himself inhabited such foreign soil, exploiting one of his suggestive paradoxical principles: that the new Jewish person required "light from the outside" in order to reach the stages of aesthetic and moral improvement that would propel his or her culture into the future while bestowing on it a kind of particularistic density. For Berdyczewski the possibilities of cultural density seemed all the richer for the fact that his host culture was Germany, home to a language that he seems to have felt was a superior vessel for bearing serious ideas and aesthetic and moral norms.

Berdyczewski's struggle with German, his attachment to it even as he tried to continue his imaginative work in Hebrew, has been chronicled extensively, so far as I know, only through the work of Avner Holtzman, in an important chapter of his seminal book on Berdyczewski's early career.⁷ Holtzman traces Berdyczewski's fundamental interest in German beginning even prior to his departure from Russia and continuing over the course of his career as a writer. The several examples of Berdyczewski's struggles with German, and hints that German served a critical role in Berdyczewski's view of his private self, leads a reader to ask whether we can understand his articles on the Hebrew language without some consideration of the conflicted personal involvement he had with the language of his surroundings. As Holtzman notes in the concluding sentences of his chapter:

⁵ H. N. Bialik, "The Hidden and Revealed in Language" [Hebrew], in *Kol kitvei H. N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1921), 207–10. The essay is available in English in Robert Alter, ed., *Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York: Behrman House, 1975), 57–74.

⁶ See William Cutter, "Language Matters," *Hebrew Studies* 39 (1998): 57–74.

⁷ Avner Holtzman, *El haqera shebalev* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1996), ch. 4.

[There was a] permanent tension between his desire to rebel against the ancestral tradition and to seek replacements in another place, and his involuntary connection to the world from which he came and his desire to preserve and foster it. This fundamental contradiction can be seen in Berdyczewski's struggle to write in two languages which represented his rambling between two contradictory cultures.⁸

The question is picked up again in Moritz Heimann's reminiscences about Berdyczewski's struggles,⁹ and I have dealt with it in passing in my attempt to understand his often conflicted relationship with Martin Buber.¹⁰ In an even larger context, one might speculate about the importance of German language as a source of identity for Berdyczewski in his own search for affiliation with the broader world where literature was better, where the philosophy was more responsibly articulated because it was in the proper language, and where an aesthetic norm dominated cultural values rather than the narrow parochial themes that beset the Jewish people.¹¹

The essay "Davar midavar" is particularly apropos, even though it is brief and seems innocuous enough. It begins with the very old convention of ascribing the inquiry to another person: the author has a friend involved in spreading spoken Hebrew who has asked him two critical questions that one might assume Berdyczewski would answer with the conventional wisdom of the Hebrew patriot. The inquiry is ascribed to the poet Ya'akov Kahan in the Dvir edition of Berdyczewski's writings, but the issues raised are independent of Kahan's identity (although it is interesting to note that Kahan was another literary figure who brought German culture into the Tents of Shem). The convention of question-answer gives the author the opportunity to argue against the very interests that would seem to serve some of his own purposes as a Hebraist.



⁸ Ibid., 159.

⁹ Moritz Heimann, "Jewish Atlas" [translated into Hebrew from the original German by Emanuel and Rachel Bin Gorion], in *Boded be-ma'aravo* (Holon: Dvora and Emanuel House, 1998). Heimann discusses his failed efforts to help MYB develop fluency in writing German.

¹⁰ William Cutter, "The Buber and Berdyczewski Correspondence," *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (3) (Spring-Summer 2000): 160–204.

¹¹ Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), esp. ch. 3.

Drawing Conclusions
or
An Idea Grows from a Word¹²

Recently a friend who is involved in spreading spoken Hebrew asked me two questions:

1. In what way does knowing a language help an individual gain a personal sense of national identity and a sense of self-respect and have an outlet for self-expression?

2. What is the value of language revival for national liberation, or in other words, [how is revival] a means of national liberation?

It is difficult to answer these questions, which—in the order in which they are expressed and in their format—are built on certain assumptions, if one doesn't share the assumptions or questions them.

What (indeed) is the value of knowing a language for a person's sense of national identity? By separating a part of this question from the remainder it becomes possible to answer as follows: There is a value in knowing the language for the purpose of national self-knowledge and for grasping the attributes of the nation, but only to a limited extent, and not as if it were sufficient to the task. (It is not the complete basis for this knowledge.) Certainly in the case of a people like ours, which has a folk status with a heritage contained entirely in written language, knowledge of language constitutes the greatest possibility for getting at those folk elements, for recognizing and knowing them. In contrast to this, our historical material, the concepts from books and spiritual elements are given us in such a narrow traditional format, a framework that even our scholars and preachers have not developed adequately, and not even adequately understood, to the point where someone among us who wants to know the true state of things must search for that truth from the outside and not internally. *In matters of our biblical texts where the principal element or foundation of the Jewish spirit resides, the knowledge of Hebrew in the deepest sense will not help without the "keys"—that is to say, without the introductions to Scripture or to the Jewish histories that have been written by non-Jews and not written in Hebrew.*

Now we come to the second part of the question: What is the value of the knowledge of Hebrew for the individual person's self-respect, or personal respect as a member of the nation? And here, too, we can answer in the affirmative, although with reservations. We see many Western Jews who don't know Hebrew, who have a deeper affection for their people

¹² The translation of the essay is mine. I have added italics to passages on which I will comment in my analysis.

than those who do know Hebrew. We cannot deny that sometimes there are non-Jews who work with the language in the interest of linguistic research or only for their own understanding and come to appreciate our people and respect us. And the reverse is true. Paul de la Garde had a profound knowledge of Hebrew (that is, more than just a technical understanding) but was a Jew-hater. Sometimes knowledge of Hebrew is the cause of respect for a nation, sometimes only the result, and there are times when it has no effect either way. There are people who come to be God-fearing because they know God's word, and there are those who study God's word because they already fear God. There are people whose moral spirit is entirely unaffected by the fact that they know Torah and *mitsvot* and are worse morally than many Jews who are not initiated in Torah at all. And the final part of the first question is "What can we say with regard to language as an expression of the soul?" Even in this regard, it is difficult to arrive at a definitive statement. When a people is situated properly on its own land, then every subtle whisper is nourished by the language, and one finds full expression in it by speaking it exclusively. In that case, one's spirit can only be expressed in the mother tongue. *But it is not necessarily that way with us Jews. For one thing, we are divided into two or three separate language communities: Hebrew, Yiddish, and the language of the place in which we live, or the language of the people from whom we learned to think.* We have two or three nations in our souls, each making its claim. In the second place, even Hebrew itself, because it has been written and not spoken, is compounded from many streams. When a writer doesn't find a ready language, he must fashion it for himself. There is yet another matter, exemplified by someone like Shalom Aleichem. He knew Hebrew, yet he found that Yiddish gave faithful expression to his lyric; Mendele certainly knew Hebrew and found his way to Hebrew lyricism through Yiddish. We can see that certain writers may translate their words from one language to another without making any great changes, and then we see that words written in the one language can be written as well in another, and to the contrary, there are writers who use two or three languages that may not feed each other, whereby each grows only with the language in which he found expression so that one can't clothe one language in another.

In poetry, its lyric expression, the Hebrew language is the only utterance for the Jews, and only in Hebrew can its great richness emerge; therefore lyric poetry is our most valued medium. In epic poetry, for describing the complexity of life and in descriptive power, Hebrew is not as strong as Yiddish, its near neighbor. I am not speaking of essential strength in this regard, but from the perspective of contingency (that is, the sociological condition in which a language finds itself). If one is speaking to the people, then Hebrew is what is called for; but if we are

speaking about the people, about its life, then Yiddish is preferable. And with regard to thought, the language of thought, until now there are only very few who know how to say what they are thinking (in Hebrew) in anything but small units. *Most writers (in Hebrew) are not free from euphuism even if they aren't naturally inclined toward it. It should be no wonder, then, that people will be better off writing in a living language and knowing it to its fullest—from within themselves, and not from a text, for that is the only way their words will be lucid and mean what they are intended to say.*

We still have to deal with the question of the value of reviving the language for purposes of national liberation. Even here the affirmation is limited. With regard to a people on its own land, fighting over rights with its neighbors: One liberates oneself to the degree that one liberates oneself from his neighbor's language. In a community where the civil law operates, every linguistic conquest gives work and gainful employment to the people there who speak that language. In short, every linguistic victory is attached to an economic victory, or a political territorial conquest. It is the opposite case with Hebrew. The resurrection of the Hebrew language does not give us dominion over any land in which we live or in the life situations in which we find ourselves. We are strangers in the eyes of the world, and we will remain strangers, if we speak in Hebrew, Yiddish, or even in the indigenous language; and conquest of our land will not come about because we speak Hebrew or because we build a platform for Hebrew in any diaspora. A people dwelling on its land that has the ingredients to be a people no longer asks—it acts! And the response won't benefit us as long as we don't have a satisfactory hold on life.



Berdyczewski's essay may have surprised the reader who anticipated a less equivocal Hebrew bias. Along with his essay "Ivrit be'ivrit" ("Hebrew through Hebrew"), "Davar midavar" is a qualified endorsement of the centrality of Hebrew for Jewish destiny, but the qualifications are weighty. On the one hand, he urges the lived experience of a language, "on its own land," where he reflects some of Bialik's belief that language grows out of experience, beyond its ability to express or reflect already existing ideas.¹³ On the other hand, Berdyczewski insists that a language can only be effective in that way in a location where it has the political and economic status associated with utility and social power.

¹³ H. N. Bialik, "The Birth Pangs of Language" [Hebrew], *Kol kitvei H. N. Bialik*, 201–6.

His understanding of linguistics joins with his practical need for a language and his desire to be a German. In Berdyczewski's critique of the linguist Tavirov, for example (in the article "Yiddish and Hebrew"), he states that languages do not grow by way of intentional and deliberate innovation, but through organic and natural development. He seems, indeed, to have assimilated some of the ideas of Herder about the link between physical attachment to land and the relationship of language to that attachment. Holtzman's description¹⁴ helps one understand Berdyczewski's attitudes about German and Hebrew. Understanding that ambivalence as background casts three phrases within "Davar midavar" into a new light: (1) "Knowledge of Hebrew in the deepest sense will not help without the keys" (2); "the language of the people from whom we learned to think"; and (3) "people will be better off writing in a living language and knowing it to its fullest." In these three phrases Berdyczewski asserts that the keys to understanding Hebrew were composed in German; Hebrew is inadequate for serious thought; and there are advantages to participating in the growing German-Jewish synthesis by learning German as a living language.

"Davar midavar" is composed in Berdyczewski's characteristically uncolorful Hebrew, and some of the points he makes may be obscured by stylistic problems. The essay not only suggests the turmoil within his thought and personal life but also captures the dilemma of the modern person not content with the simple answers of Diaspora nationalism. "Davar midavar" contains indicators of other problems Berdyczewski was dealing with at the time. One can see, for example, a preference for language that reflects the lived lives of people—either a Yiddish coming from the soul of the people, or a Hebrew established within a national Hebrew-speaking territory. His use of the "power" metaphor to describe territory seems troubled to me, and his understanding of power may have more to do with his image of the German state than with any realistic notion about the future Jewish state. It certainly can be associated with romantic German thought. Berdyczewski never went to Palestine, a fact that added to the irony of his attachment to the land. On the other hand, while Yiddish captivated him as the language with which one ought to speak about the Jewish people, he fundamentally rejected the culture out of which it came. He worried about the power that classical biblical Hebrew had over the contemporary discourse that he preferred, for biblical Hebrew has a theologizing tendency, which was anathema to him, and an apodictic power that he rejected because it fostered "essences." And yet, that was the dilemma with which he was stuck, and

¹⁴ Holtzman, *El haqera shebalev*, 104–11.

the idea that a language could grow without its political and economic power was impossible for him, in my view, as long as he lived within the world's most influential language community.

Language as an expression of human experience, Hebrew in particular, was, for Berdyczewski, the concrete manifestation of the fact that culture found continuity only through a measure of assimilation of outside cultures, preferably when accompanied by some hegemony of its own. With territorial hegemony a culture could establish stability through interaction with other cultures (something he desired and valued), and the inevitable instability of language was actually a guarantee of continuity. Hebrew was a vehicle for personal expression that simultaneously freed the individual from a sinking Jewish collective even as it attached that individual to a past and to an anticipated future. But it suffered from severe limits and did not guarantee what many of its proponents promised. Berdyczewski's balanced and sometimes equivocal voice is something of a stylistic trope in his writing. But in the case of the essay before us, it is an ambivalence fostered by his experience with another more established, and certainly more hegemonic, language.

As many historians of modern Hebrew literature know, Berdyczewski's entire intellectual career was bolstered by the paradoxes that nearly destroyed him. And he fostered ideas that actively undermined his thought. For Berdyczewski, assimilation was critical as a value, and the Hebrew language itself demonstrated assimilative power. One fights for the survival of a language that has no clear identity; the oral manifestation of a language is the only tool for its growth. Yet Hebrew had been fundamentally a written language. And the people who provided the tools for understanding Hebrew at its most pristine phase actually wrote their understandings of Hebrew in the German language. Indeed, German was sometimes a way for Berdyczewski to renew his commitment to Hebrew. ("My friend," he wrote to an unnamed party in November 1894, "I have not been able to express myself fully in German which is near and far to me. In Hebrew I can accomplish all of the 'I' in me and reveal myself, whereas in German, it is only my shadow.")¹⁵ Berdyczewski's language essays make it clear that Judaism for him is not a morally superior culture, not just because it has no independent ontological status, but because the morally superior culture may be German.

Berdyczewski was more a contrarian than a nihilist. Yet it is probably his much touted nihilism and the equivocation, the partial certainties reflected in this essay, that have rendered him increasingly obscure and distant to those committed to a way of redefining Judaism as prior to

¹⁵ Cited in Holtzman, *El haqera shebalev*, ch. 4.

reconceptualizing peoplehood. What Berdyczewski offers us, however, is an instance of turmoil expressed in multiple shadings of inconsistency, harmonized only by the intensity of his insistent voice and the willingness to carry on a communication through hundreds of letters, essays, and stories. Berdyczewski's essays are full of surprises that our more pluralistic religious culture awaits. It is to the retrieval of those surprises that I tie my hopes in this essay.¹⁶

¹⁶ In a similar retrieval Arnold Band has been engaged as a scholar of the Jewish literary text and as a critic whose hope for the future includes skepticism. That skepticism would have suited Berdyczewski had he only survived another twenty years and come to know his intellectual progeny from Boston, another locus of confluent and contradictory myths. See what Band writes about his youth and education in Boston in Arnold J. Band, "Confluent Myths," in Haim Marantz, ed., *Judaism and Education: Essays in Honor of Walter I. Ackerman* (Beersheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 1998), 1–19.

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BIALIK'S "TSAFRIRIM": INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

Glenda Abramson

צפּריריִם

הנְשִׁיקָת פִּי אִמִּי, אִם־צִפְצוֹף הַדְּרוֹר
תְּנוּמָתִי וְחִלּוּמֵי הַמְּתוּק הַפְּסִיקוּ?
אֲנִי הַקִּיצוֹתַי וְאַגְדוֹת שֶׁל־אוֹר
הַצְּלִיפוּ עַל־פְּנֵי וּבְעֵינַי הַבְּהִיקוּ.
מִעֲפֵעֵי לֹא־נִמְחוּ עוֹד קוֹרֵי הַחִלּוּם,
עוֹד כְּרוּבֵיו מִתְּפֹשִׂים בְּכַרְכָּב הַקִּיר —
וּכְבֹּר יִצְהַל בְּקֶר, יִשְׁתַּקְשֵׁק הַיּוֹם
בְּדַהְרוֹת עֲגֻלָּה עַל־מְרַצֶּפֶת הָעִיר.

עַל־מִשְׁקוֹף אֲשֵׁנְבִי הַתְּנַעַר הַקֵּן,
וִירֵעַע וִיִּצְפְּצֵף „צוּיץ, צוּיץ” עַד־בְּלֵי דִי,
וּבִזְהַר אֲשֵׁנְבִי בַּפְּחֻזוֹת חֵן־חֵן
צִפְרִירֵי הַבְּקָר מִשְׁקָרִים אֵלַי.
הֵם מִפְּזִזִּים וְנוֹצְצִים בְּמִשׁוּבָה צִהְלָת,
מִתְּדַפְּקִים כִּיּוֹנִים עַל זְכוּכִית אֲשֵׁנְבִי,
מִחֲלִיקִים, מִתְּחַמְּקִים בְּאוֹרָה נִזְלָת
הַשְּׁפַעַת, שְׁפַעַת עַל־גְּבִי.

הֵם קִרְצִים וְרִמְזִים וּפְנִיָּהֶם יִקְרְנוּ:
„אֵלֵינוּ צֵא, פְּחֻז! זְרַח, הִזְהַר עִמָּנוּ!
עֲלִיזֵי גִיל יְלָדוֹת נְפוּצָה, נְצַחְקָה,
וּבְאֲשֶׁר נִמְצְאָה אוֹר נִזְהָ, נִזְרְקָה:
בְּשַׁעַר רֹאשׁ שְׁבָלִים, בְּקִנְצוֹת תְּלַת־לִים,
עַל־חֲלֻקַּת הַמַּיִם, בֵּין רִצֵּי הַגְּלִים,
בְּשַׁחוּק יֶלֶד יִשָּׁן, בְּלֵב אִם רַחֲמֵנֶיהָ,
בְּרִסְסֵי טַל־בְּקָר, בְּלַחֵי יְפֵה־פִיָּה,
בְּדַמְעַת יְלָדִים, בְּכִנֵּף הַצִּפְרָת,
בְּמִכְתּוֹת כּוֹס זְכוּכִית, בְּבוּעָה שֶׁל־בְּרִית,

בכפתור נחשת, בחרוזי השידה —
 אלינו צא, פחזו! נזרחה, נזהירה!
 הם קרצים ורמזים, עיניהם מזהירות
 ופניהם הקטנות מאירות מאירות,
 גפיהם הזכות ובהירות משיקים,
 אורים חמים וגדולים על־פני מבהיקים.
 מה־נמוג הלב! עיני אפקת, אסגרה —
 אלהים, שטפתני האורה!

הו, אלי באו, זכים! צפרירי התם!
 אלמתחת לסדיני הצחר, הצחר!
 שם נתפלוש, נתפל עד־יכון היום,
 ופנותם על־עורי ובשרי הרך.
 הו, אלי! על־תלתלי עפעפי שפתותי,
 אלי גומות לחיי מעמקי כבותי;
 הזכונני שטפונני, אללכי חדרו,
 באו רדו אל־נשמת, היו שם ואורו! —
 חמדה מתוקה ונומה נפלה עלי,
 וכל־ערק וגיד צנור תענוג שפע,
 והלב שטף עבר על־גדותיו בלי־די,
 ומתפרץ כמעין של־נה נבע — — —
 הו, מה־מתוק! עפעפי אפקתה, אסגרה —
 אלהים, שטפתני האורה!

Morning Creatures¹

- 1 Was it my mother's kiss, and the sparrow cheeping
 That ended my sweet sleep and dream?—
 I awoke, and clusters of light
 Lashed my face, and blazed in my eyes.
- 5 The dream's strands clung to my lashes
 Its mystic shapes still cling to the wall—
 And morning exults, the day sounds
 With the rumbling of a cart on the town's paths.

¹ "Tsafririm," in *Kol shirei H. N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1953), 110–12. My translation of the poem is literal, as close to the original as possible, a rendering into English rather than a translation. Rhyme in the original has been ignored.

The nest awakening on my windowsill
 10 Stirs and twitters an endless "cheep, cheep,"
 And in the splendid light of my window, with enchanting haste
 The morning creatures beckon to me.
 They shine and sparkle in noisy impudence
 Beating like doves on the windowpanes
 15 Sliding, darting in dripping light,
 Which pours and flows on my back.

They wink and beckon with glowing faces:
 "Come out to us, mischievous one! Shine, sparkle with us!
 We'll scatter the joys of youthful delight, we'll laugh
 20 And wherever we find shreds of light we'll sprinkle them
 On heads of corn, on braided curls,
 On the smooth water, between the rushing waves,
 On the laughter of a sleeping child, on a mother's kind heart,
 On the last of the morning dew, on a beautiful woman's cheeks,
 25 On children's tears, a bird's wing,
 On a glass's splinters, on a bubble,
 On a brass button, on the verses of poetry—
 Come out to us, you high-spirited one! We'll sparkle and shine!"
 They wink and beckon, eyes glowing,
 30 Their small faces ever radiant,
 Their pure bright limbs touch,
 Warm light glimmers on my face,
 How my heart soars! I open my eyes and close them—
 Oh God, light has drenched me.

35 Oh, come to me, pure ones! Innocent creatures!
 Beneath my brilliant white sheet!
 Then let us play, entangled until noon,
 Dance over my soft skin and flesh.
 Oh, to me! On my curls, lashes, lips,
 40 On the dimples in my cheeks, the depths of my eyes,
 Purify me, flood me, enter my heart
 To my very soul, where you'll glow!
 Sweet joy and drowsiness fall upon me,
 Each nerve and sinew engulfed with a course of brimming joy,
 45 My flooded heart overflows its banks, again and again
 And bursts like an endless fountain of radiance—
 Oh sweetness! I open my eyes and close them—
 Oh God, light has drenched me.



Few Hebrew poems have been the subject of such widespread discussion as Bialik's "Tsafririm" ("Morning Creatures"), the first of his series of poems in Hebrew on the subject of light. Its title is an untranslatable term, broadly denoting creatures of wind and light, partly natural and partly mythical. The etymological association of the word *tsafririm* with "zephyr" is obvious, yet Bialik is not writing of breezes but of light. "Tsafririm" describes the slowly brightening morning sunlight as it enters the bedroom of a boy who has just awoken from a dream, and it takes possession of him both emotionally and physically, culminating in a kind of ecstasy of radiance. This occurs between dreaming and waking, the symbolic and the real: the dream's mystic shapes still inhabit the room while a cart rumbles by outside.

The uncertain definition of the creatures and their function in the poem is not the only source of debate.² Equally enigmatic is the poem's subtext of apparent homoeroticism. Contemporary scholars have, by and large, abandoned the attitude to Bialik's texts that Robert Alter once characterized as "kidnapping," in the sense that much of Bialik's verse that is not explicitly nationalistic or didactic was being pressed into national shape by what he called the "powerful vise of allegorization."³ Bialik himself objected in speech and writing to this process.⁴ Nevertheless, even some contemporary scholars have insisted that his texts be confined only to what is traditionally acceptable. Aharon Mazya, for example, in a book on Bialik published in 1978, not long before the two objectively evaluative accounts by Ziva Shamir and Dan Miron,⁵ launches into a long anti-Freudian diatribe, an aggressive protection of Bialik's verse from psychoanalytical incursions. Mazya conflates Freud exclusively with eroticism and accuses what he terms "Freudism" of harming Bialik and his works:

² For a full discussion of this aspect of the poem and a summary of interpretations, see Dan Miron, *Haperedah min ha'ani he'ani* (Tel Aviv: The Open University, 1986), 327ff. For a discussion of the term *tsafririm*, see Barukh Kurzweill, *Bialik veTschernikhovski: mehqarim beshiratom* (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1968); Zvi Adar, *Bialik beshirato* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Neumann, 1967); Eliezer Schweid, *Ha'ergah lemele'ut hahavayah—pirqei iyyun beshirat H. N. Bialik veS. Tschernikhovski* (Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1968); Yitzhak Bakon, *Bialik bein ivrit leyiddish* (Beersheva: Ben Gurion University, 1987); Y. T. Helman, *Asara peraqim leshirei H. N. Bialik* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew Institute for Intellectual Writing in Israel, 1957).

³ "The Kidnapping of Bialik and Tschernikhovski," in *After the Tradition* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969), 229.

⁴ See David Aberbach, "On Re-reading Bialik," *Encounter* (June 1981): 41–42.

⁵ Miron, *Haperedah min ha'ani he'ani*; Ziva Shamir, *Hashirah me'ayin timatsei* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1987).

There is nothing in Bialik's writing which is a sign of an erotic "ideology" or which views the world through erotic glasses. On the contrary, from everything he said in speech and writing there emerges a clear standpoint which is anchored in an open, uncompromising and unwavering admiration for morality, conscience, truth, the purity of life and, it goes without saying, for Judaism, nationalism, Zionism, Jewish culture and so on. And as far as love and eroticism are concerned, everything he had to say he said in his poetry and stories. He said it openly, clearly, without having to resort to a curtain of shame or to symbols.⁶

Notwithstanding this passionate protection of Bialik, his verse did quite frequently reveal sensuality and eroticism. In fact one of its central problems is the confrontation with what Zvi Adar defines as the "chaos" of love.⁷ Yet "Tsafririm" is not about human love, despite its overt sexuality. It appears to be a nature poem dealing with childhood, in the spirit of Wordsworthian verse, containing numinous overtones. One need not invoke Mazya's "Freudism," however, to determine that there is another, less transparent, aspect to it.

This exercise in visual evocation was written in 1900, shortly after Bialik's move to the sunny seaport town of Odessa in southern Russia, when his life was undergoing many transitions. He had rented a dark and gloomy room that allowed in very little of Odessa's summer sunlight. According to Lachower, his first biographer, this was the reason for Bialik's composition of a number of poems on the subject of light.⁸ "Tsafririm" appeared some months after the Yiddish "Af dem hoykhn barg" ("On the Tall Mountain") and "Shirati" ("My Poetry"), at the time of Bialik's immersion in autobiographical poetry. Most scholars agree that "Tsafririm" is primarily a poem about childhood, a means of tranquil recollection of a childhood spent in the forests and grasslands of the Ukraine, a view emphasized by Lachower.⁹ In the last decade of the nineteenth century the Hebrew poet was at some disadvantage if he or she wanted to create personal, individual expression of which autobiography

⁶ Aharon Mazya, *Bialik ha'ehad: basovkhei parshanut umehqar* (Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1978), 20. The place of eros in Bialik's work has been debated at length by Mazya in response to Eddy Zemah, *Halavi hamistater* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1976).

⁷ Adar, *Bialik beshirato*, 18.

⁸ Y. F. Lachower, *Bialik: hayyav vytsirotav* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1950), 308.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 309. See also Bakon, *Bialik bein ivrit leyiddish*, 214: "The reader will receive the immediate impression that on the overt level the creatures are a dream-metaphoric embodiment of the poet's childhood."

was the most potent. Hebrew poets had to pit themselves against Jewish cultural tradition that frowned upon the expression of individual life. Bialik's autobiographical poetry stood at the center of his output of 1900–1901. It appeared as part of his own artistic and personal evolution and also signaled a stage in the evolution of Jewish literary culture. This poetry, with "Shirati" as its nucleus, became a model for a genre of writing in Hebrew in which the poets speak about their childhood and youth for the purpose of examining the source of their inspiration. Wordsworth's "The Prelude" had its origin in the philosophical thought of the romantic period in which art and ideas were breaking free from subordination to an inherited theological tradition. In the spirit of "The Prelude," the Hebrew poetic autobiography signified a romantic awareness of the individual personality, rather than national or collective history, as a source of poetry.¹⁰ "Tsafririm" travels into the past to describe a specific and individual experience of a young boy. It has no markers pointing to the identity of the speaker unless it is seen as the expression of one crucial moment in the poet's own creative development, a moment in the process of artistic creation. This is the viewpoint I wish to propose in this paper.

In the context of Zionism, Lachower comments that Berdyczewski used light as a symbol of regeneration, the breaching of ancient dark walls, and a call for change in the values of Judaism and Jewish life.¹¹ Bialik was later to harness the current imagery of light in one of his most celebrated poems, "Levadi" ("By Myself," 1902), on the subject of the Jewish response to the Haskalah. It is unlikely that he intends the symbol of light to be understood in this way in "Tsafririm," which is not a comparably ideological work. However, Ziva Shamir places the poem in a broadly ideological setting: "[Bialik] sensed, it seems, that the reading public did not expect [poems of mockery and criticism] at this time of crisis, in which the soul longed for a fresh spirit [or wind] and a ray of revival [*tehiyyah*]."¹² She sees "Tsafririm" as an allegory of the Jew, child of an ancient nation that is returning to its childhood and the morning of its life. In the context of the poem she alludes to other poetry in which Bialik "throws off the yoke of Torah and commandments and the shackles of tradition" to move into "the Hellenistic and idolatrous world of impulse" beyond Judaism.¹³ Adar similarly takes the creatures

¹⁰ See Miron, *Haperedah min ha'ani he'ani*, 32ff.

¹¹ Lachower, *Bialik: hayyav vytsirotav*, 309.

¹² Shamir, *Hashirah me'ayin timatsei*, 62.

¹³ *Ibid*, 129.

to represent the unrestrained, chaotic world of the senses, so threatening to Bialik's need for containment and order.

Yet his "world of impulse" often triumphed, and in "Tsafririm" it is unrestrained. Nonetheless, the apparent homoeroticism in this and other poems is not taken as anything but a trope. Little is known about Bialik's sexual life, since the fashion of investigating authors' proclivities has not yet engaged Hebrew literary scholarship. "Tsafririm" is of little use if the reader is seeking hints about Bialik's own sexuality. While the medieval Iberian Jewish poets often wrote graphic love poetry to boys, it is not assumed that they were themselves homosexual. Dan Pagis comments, with reason, that if the image of the lover in this poetry were real we would have to assume that Ibn Gabirol, Ha-Nagid, and scores of other poets of the time were all homosexual or rather, bisexual, while no poet appeared to be so in the later period. Such an assumption, Pagis concludes, would, at the very least, be a statistical curiosity.¹⁴ On the other hand, Norman Roth claims that we may, "with real confidence," conclude that the poetry is a significant source for understanding the culture and daily lives of the medieval Iberian Jews. In fact, he argues, it provides us with a "mirror held up to nature," one that reflects the emotions and lives of the golden age of Spanish Jewry.¹⁵

There are some slight echoes of medieval Hebrew love poetry in Bialik's "Tsafririm," but in this poem at least, the male objects of his speaker's affection appear to be nothing more than symbols. His conventional love poetry frequently describes scenes of parting from a woman, often an idealized woman, sexually out of reach, and the sadness that follows. For his lyric "I," love is never satisfying or satisfied. Bialik's narrator's need for love, or aspiration toward it, is often displaced onto his love of nature in poems of combined mystic romanticism and sensuousness. In "Holekhet at me'imi" ("You Go from Me"), for example, he pours himself into a description of nature as fulsome and profuse as that of any beautiful woman. The fusion of human love and nature is not a unique phenomenon; in fact, in romantic poetry the passion for nature is often the displaced expression of sexual desire. It is possible that like Wordsworth's, Bialik's nature poetry is a sublimation of desire and a symbolic means of expressing it.

More problematical are the poems that, like "Tsafririm," are not obviously about romantic or sexual love, or which do not even use the

¹⁴ Dan Pagis, *Hebrew Poetry of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 66.

¹⁵ Norman Roth, "'Deal Gently with the Young Man': Love of Boys in Medieval Hebrew Poetry of Spain," *Speculum* 57 (1) (1982): 51.

repeated motifs of medieval Iberian Hebrew love poetry and its "limited repertoire of familiar themes and images,"¹⁶ which seemed to have been masking devices. On the contrary, the sexual joy of "Tsafririm" is explicit and overt, and directly linked to nature. Yet it is not as much about nature as are "Zohar" ("Splendor") or "Haberekhah" ("The Pool"). In fact, it subverts the readers' anticipation of a nature poem, even though its speaker appears to glory in a natural phenomenon. The "brimming joy" of accord with the metaphorical sprites has less to do with the sun and the morning sunshine than with the boy himself.



In the third stanza of the poem the morning creatures wordlessly indicate the nature of their game: scattering rays of light on the natural world, the human world, and on certain verses of poetry. The list of objects upon which the sunlight will fall reads like a taxonomy of the commonplace. Miron considers these lines to be "the [poem's] most awful section."¹⁷ Another list of objects appears in Avot Yeshurun's "Ha'osef," which describes the disparate things found and kept by the "collector":

I bring in everything I find.
All that glisters is not gold.
But I pick up
everything that glisters.

In my drawer is a collection of bits and pieces,
bits of chrome. A key without teeth.
A many-toothed nail...

Bits of nickel, chrome, iron,
I don't know what this comes from.
Remains of bones. Leg hairs. From whom? ...
... Each one says its piece....¹⁸

Yeshurun's speaker gathers not only material objects but abstractions, thoughts, and sensations. There is nothing in the list of objects, as Ruth

¹⁶ Raymond P. Scheindlin, *Wine, Women and Death: Medieval Poems on the Good Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1986), 78.

¹⁷ Miron, *Haperedah min ha'ani he'ani*, 339.

¹⁸ See Ruth Kartun-Blum, *Shirah bere'i atsmah* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1986), 14.

Kartun-Blum notes, that allows the establishment of a metaphorical code for the poem. It appears, from Yeshurun's own comments, that the objects bear a specific symbolic meaning to him alone. He is a collector of unrelated "objects" that he has woven together as a metaphorical collage in a system peculiar to him.¹⁹ Generally, a poet is the crucible into which all kinds of diverse elements are thrust. As in Leah Goldberg's apostrophe to a simple honeybee,²⁰ the poet must "crown with song" items and activities that are often the most mundane and unpoetical and make something transcendent of the raw material of life, in a wholly mysterious creative process.

Bialik's slightly less disparate objects constitute the matrix of "Tsafririm," signifying the moment of its temporal shift and providing a metafictional clue to the creative process.

And wherever we find shreds of light we'll sprinkle them
 On the heads of corn, on braided curls,
 On the smooth water, between the rushing waves,
 On the laughter of a sleeping child, on a mother's kind heart,
 On the last of the morning dew, on a beautiful woman's cheeks,
 On children's tears, a bird's wing,
 On a glass's splinters, on a bubble,
 On a brass button, on the verses of poetry—

All but the last of these items are the sentimental synecdoches of an idyllic childhood that could be imagined by romantic poets. The schematic adjectives—"braided," "smooth," "sleeping," "kind," "beautiful"—themselves create an almost kitschy picture of a child's perfect world, which "button," "splinter," and "bubble" reinforce. The only intimation of maleness in the passage is the brass button; the rest is soft, downy, fluid, feminine, and ephemeral. Nothing on this list is fixed, whole, or attached, but loose and often in flux.

The "verses of poetry" included at the end of the list of objects upon which the light will fall do not belong in the catalogue of natural and utilitarian elements. Verse is an artifice, the creative product of the mind, the only such notion on the list, and it is significant that the mystical creatures include it as something to shine upon. When Dryden, for example, wrote of "a confus'd Mass of Thoughts, tumbling over one another in the Dark:

¹⁹ See also Yehudah Amichai's "Hayi shalom," in *Shirim 1948–1962* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1967), 155.

²⁰ "Histaklut badevorah," in T. Carmi, ed., *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 554.

when the Fancy was yet in its first work, moving the Sleeping Images of Things Towards the Light," he intended "light" to be a symbol of artistic endeavor.²¹ By shining on the lines of poetry, the *tsafiririm*—together with the boy—will illuminate them and see beyond their surface.

The task of the poet and his or her verse is to penetrate beyond the surface to the hidden, inner substance of the universe. This is the "illumination" of things and people: the need to see them, into their "soul," just as the speaker in "Tsafririm" requests the light creatures to reach into his own soul, to infuse the illumination into him. This reaching out for knowledge beyond the mundane or the aspiration toward meaning is a fundamental element of creative writing and the underlying motif of much of Bialik's nature poetry. It is the imagination alone that makes this possible: the understanding of identities outside immediate human experience by empathetic participation in the existence not only of other people, but of objects. Keats, who termed this process "negative capability," could, for example, conceive of a billiard ball "that it may have a sense of delight in its own roundness, smoothness, volubility and the rapidity of its motion,"²² or a lion whose roar the poet can experience. Through their minute observation of the world, artists fuse their identities with the things they see or perceive, transformed by the imagination, to create what Keats termed "a life of allegory."²³ The fusion consists of absolute reciprocity, an eternal merging of identities. Ultimately the objects of the poet's perception, like the creatures of light, become allegories of the poets themselves.²⁴

The word *fusion* is used when speaking both about mystical and aesthetic experiences, and it is characterized by some mystics as a nuptial union. The poet's psyche absorbs objects and human elements in a process that has clear sexual overtones. According to Freud—a view that has been much disputed—creativity is a substitute for a satisfied sexual life.²⁵ In "Tsafririm," it seems, creativity and sexual passion are one and

²¹ Helen Gardiner, *In Defence of the Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 31.

²² *The Letters of John Keats* (ed. H. E. Rollins; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press: 1958), 1:389.

²³ Anthony Leavy, "Keats and the Creative Imagination," in Edith Kurzweil, ed., *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 209, 213.

²⁴ See Anthony Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 237: "To be carried away, to lose one's identity . . . even to die, and thus be reunited with the stuff of the universe from which one sprang are universal . . . longings and they have often been the motive force of art."

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (London: Hogarth, 1963), 16:376.

the same thing. Bialik's boy is invited to fuse his identity with the sunlight and perform its function in the world, in an act not only of sex but of love. In this way he will gain understanding beyond the ordinary and render it in art.

The process of artistic creation reflects the deeper truth of the spirit. This truth in "Tsafririm" is a moment of transcendence that becomes art. That moment is the responsive joy experienced by Bialik's spokesman as a sense of bliss so intense that it approaches sexual climax. Ludwig Meidner, the great Expressionist painter, described a similar experience with great clarity:

Quite suddenly while I was painting one evening I noticed that nothing was going right. I couldn't paint. Then all at once things began to happen so quickly that I simply began to watch myself paint. My arm was moving of its own accord and I was astounded. Then something came over me: it was the Holy Spirit. What was really surprising—I did not believe in God! I can't describe the presence of the Holy Spirit. It was extraordinarily eruptive. It lasted only two or three minutes, but it left an after-effect. I observed that the feeling was what could be called "ecstasy."²⁶

Meidner translates his moments of ecstasy into imaginary apocalyptic urban landscapes. Bialik's similarly Dionysiac instant of perception has imaginatively transformed even the most mundane objects into symbols that now stand for something different from and beyond themselves, making them fitting subjects for art, to be represented in the gloriously illuminated lines of verse.

In "Tsafririm," therefore, Bialik may be indicating either the courtship, conquest, or seduction by a creative idea or by the sublime moment of creation itself. The careful evocation of lovemaking through the verse's varying tempo and its specific vocabulary create a poignancy of desire that is rendered more effective by the utilization of an abstraction as its object. In his quest for illumination the speaker waits to be subsumed by something external, some force that will take possession of him. He bids the light—in addition to falling on water and the other elements on the list, as it promises to do—to touch "On my curls, lashes, lips, / On the dimples in my cheeks, the depths of my eyes." The suggestiveness of the vocabulary, which is reminiscent of that of some medieval love poetry, is intended for a young boy in the

²⁶ Thomas Grochowiak, *Ludwig Meidner* (Recklinghausen: Aurel Bongers, 1966), 119.

poem, but it could be applied to a woman. Throughout "Tsafririm" the physical description seems more appropriate to a woman's body than to that of a boy, and an extension or implication of the sexual imagery may be the birth of a work of art. This would justify the ambiguous nature of the speaker's gender since, according to Keats, the "conception" of poetry is a bisexual process and he exhorts poets to "open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive."²⁷ Passivity and receptivity define Bialik's "I" in "Tsafririm," the kind of active passivity experienced when the unconscious mind is engaged in the process of artistic creation. Many creative artists refer to their productions as "children" and compare the creative process to that of conception, gestation, and birth.²⁸

For Plato the object of desire is the expression and creation of "the beautiful," which is itself the character of a certain kind of creation. The courtier rabbis of the golden age used poetry to articulate their love of beauty as a cardinal value of the spiritual life. This is not primarily an experience of sexual love since the core of courtly Hebrew love poetry is not physical love but beauty. "Love, whether consummated or chaste, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is spiritual when it is understood by its practitioners as the enabling service of beauty itself."²⁹ In "Tsafririm," the conjunction of love, desire, the mysterious quality of beauty, and the implication of lovemaking are intimately involved with the process of artistic creation.



By including verses of poetry on his list, Bialik, in addition to expressing his sudden creative perception, may also be hinting that all is not as it seems, that "all that 'glisters' is not gold." The verses of poetry endow the light itself with an idiomatic meaning: "to throw light upon" (in Hebrew: *lehafits or al*). The creatures' shedding light on them

²⁷ Leavy, "Keats and the Creative Imagination," 209.

²⁸ Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation*, 242. In the nineteenth-century metaphors of "male motherhood"—the male artist's conceiving, laboring, and bringing forth—were well known. The passivity of the creator was stressed, but so was the "labor" necessary to the birth of a work of art. One of the most celebrated instances of this metaphor is to be found in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. While destroying the manuscript that represents her former lover's life's work, she silently addresses his new muse: "Now I am burning your child, Thea!—Burning it, curly-locks! ... Your child and Eilert Lövborg's ... I am burning—I am burning your child" (End of act 3).

²⁹ Scheindlin, *Wine, Women and Death*, 88.

may be a hint to us to read the poem differently through the magical ability of the transformed boy (the poet) to illuminate the language of the verses.

The boy speaks of the purity and innocence of the morning creatures: "Their pure [*zakkot*] bright limbs touch / Oh, come to me pure [*zakkim*] ones! Innocent creatures / creatures of innocence [*hatom*]/ Beneath my pure [*hatsah*] white sheet / Purify me [*hazikkuni*]." However, the language of "Tsafririm" contradicts the insistence of innocence or purity (*zakkut*) of the boy, the morning creatures, and the objects on their list. It is concealed rather than revealed, to use Bialik's own terminology. The poem begins with the kiss of the speaker's mother (the kiss of the "mother's mouth"), which awakens the child from a dream of sweetness. Mention of the mother indicates one of the poem's ambiguities: it is a poem of childhood with the sophisticated gloss of the remembering adult. Careful examination of the vocabulary, placed in an allusive biblical context, reveals other extraordinary ambiguities that create almost a shadow text. The poem proposes the process of purification by suffusion or immersion in the sunlight. But at the same time there is more than a notion of incongruity between perfect abstract innocence and the boy's warm, living flesh: the purity of the creatures and their childlike teasing juxtaposed with the seductiveness of the boy's hair, lashes, cheeks, and lips; the desire to be purified by an inviolate element of nature, and the words whose biblical antecedents suggest "wriggle" (*nittappal*)³⁰ and "roll about" (*nitpallash*).³¹

In "Tsafririm" the words exert a figurative power, shaping the world for the reader, not as the child perceives it but as the adult knows it. The poem's vocabulary bristles with double meanings. Its surface text indicates magical sprites of brilliant virtue, the unblemished light of childhood itself. But the vocabulary suggests that they are deceitful (*mesaqrim* and *meshaqrim* [beckon and lie]; *qortsim/romzim* [wink]).³² All this indicates that the adult speaker seems to know that his nostalgia for this imagined childhood innocence of bubbles, buttons, and braided curls represents a wish that can never be fulfilled once adulthood has been gained. This wish has inspired innumerable artists who are able to achieve a closer approach to the imagined perfection of childhood

³⁰ See 2 Samuel 22:27.

³¹ See Micah 1:10; Jeremiah 25:34; Ezekiel 27:30.

³² In his commentary to Leviticus 19:17, Rashi declares, "It is the way of all slanderers to wink [*liqrots*] with their eyes." The many instances of "winking" from *q-r-ts* and *r-m-z* in the Bible and Talmud appear in the context of mockery or guile. In Psalm 35:19 both *sh-q-r* (lie) and *q-r-ts* (wink) appear in the same verse in conjunction with dishonesty and unjustified hatred.

through the symbols and tropes of art than is ever possible in reality. The “ostensible voluptuary” of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, for example, expressed nostalgia for the innocence of childhood: “How far away you are, perfumed Paradise ... green paradise of infantile loves.”³³ Using the same terminology of romanticism, Klausner speaks of Bialik’s “fall from childhood paradise.”³⁴ The language of “Tsafririm” reinforces this “fall” by implying the awareness of responsive possibilities existing not only in the boy’s soul but also in his body. It is the language of the poem that signifies the end of childhood and of virtue, the dawning apprehension of the world’s deviousness, and the realization that certain pleasure is not at all innocent and that knowledge and experience are bought with pain. Merriment can develop into wantonness (*paḥazut*);³⁵ playful high spirits can lead to apostasy (*meshuvah*).³⁶ The boy’s moment of creative insight is unbearably sweet, but the allusions proclaim that the experience of the sublime may be brief and presage the “fall from paradise.” Ultimately, the price for the experience of artistic creation must be loss of innocence.

³³ Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation*, 271.

³⁴ Joseph Klausner, *H. N. Bialik: pirqei hayyim* (Jerusalem: n.p., 1904).

³⁵ See Jeremiah 23:32; Judges 9:4; Zephaniah 3:4; Genesis 49:4.

³⁶ See Jeremiah 8:5; 14:7; Proverbs 1:32; Hosea 11:7; 14:5.

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DEATH IN A FURNISHED ROOM: REREADING ISAAC ROSENFELD'S OBITUARIES

Steven J. Zipperstein

Everyone knows the great Dr. Johnson, and the scholars seem to know him in the minutest detail; almost no one knows anything definite about the obscure, minor poet Richard Savage. But Johnson and Savage were friends—intimate friends—in London for about two years in the 1730s. In those dark days in the city, dark for both of them in many senses, the position was almost exactly reversed. Johnson was then unknown, and Savage was notorious. Thereby hangs a small, but haunting mystery of biography.¹

Isaac Rosenfeld's death—he died of a heart attack at the age of thirty-eight in July 1956—fascinated, even obsessed his contemporaries in the circle known as the New York intellectuals. The novel *To an Early Grave* (later made into the film, *Bye Bye Braverman*) was based on the day of his funeral. Saul Bellow has admitted that the tragic hero put to death, King Dahfu of *Henderson, the Rain King*, was based on his lifelong friend. Early drafts of Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*, in which a character modeled after Rosenfeld was called Konig, were inspired as much by Rosenfeld as by Delmore Schwartz, and the novel's title recalls the expansive neighborhood park where Rosenfeld and Bellow spent so much time together as teenagers. *Humboldt's Gift*, of course, is a tale of promise, of intellectual waste, dissipation, and premature death. Bellow also wrote an unpublished, full-length novel about Rosenfeld, which he tentatively called "Charm and Death."²

¹ Richard Holmes, *Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage* (London: Flamingo, 1994), 1.

² For biographical information on Rosenfeld, see Steven J. Zipperstein, "The First Loves of Isaac Rosenfeld," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, and Society* 5 (1–2) (Fall 1998–Winter 1999): 3–24; Theodore Solotaroff's introduction to Isaac Rosenfeld, *An Age of Enormity: Life and Writing in the Forties and Fifties* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1962); and Mark Shechner's introduction to

Isaac Rosenfeld, a writer of great promise and stature, was the author of the novel *Passage from Home* (1946) and a large number of superb essays and short stories. At the height of his career, in the early 1940s, he was seen—as Irving Howe puts it in his memoir, *A Margin of Hope*—as the golden boy of New York’s fiercely ambitious literary intelligentsia. Some went so far as to predict that he might well be the future Tolstoy or Kafka in the *Partisan Review*’s literary stable. According to the *Partisan Review*’s savvy editor, Philip Rahv, Rosenfeld was a more expansive writer than Delmore Schwartz and more erudite than Bellow. “There was,” writes Howe, “an air of yeshiva purity about Isaac that made one hope wildly for his future.” Rosenfeld, not Bellow, won the first *Partisan Review* literary contest, he was selected as an assistant literary editor of the *New Republic*, and, almost immediately after arriving in New York as a philosophy graduate student at NYU in 1941, he started publishing in the best national intellectual magazines. Bellow, still in Chicago, remembers thinking at the time that Rosenfeld had left him behind in the dust.³

Much of the fictional work he produced even in his best, most fertile years was built around lonely men living in rooming houses. Indeed, in the last short story he wrote before his death, he described King Solomon contemplating his demise in a place that looked much like a grim boarding house. The king here is disarmingly sloppy. He lives in a city that is something of an unholy cross between Jerusalem and the Lower East Side, and he is unmoved by the Queen of Sheba, herself portrayed as resembling a middle-aged widow in the Catskills. Here is the story’s end:

The counselors vouch for it, they swear they have seen the proof. That King Solomon now takes to bed, not with a virgin, as his father, David, did in old age, or even a dancing girl, but with a hot water bottle. . . . [I]f there were any rewards, he’d settle for a good night’s sleep. But sleep does not come. He hears strange noises in the apartment, scratching. . . . Mice? He must remember to speak to the caretakers . . . at last he drowns off, to sleep

Preserving the Hunger: An Isaac Rosenfeld Reader (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988). Wallace Markfield published his novel in 1964. On Rosenfeld’s impact on Bellow during the writing of *Henderson, the Rain King*, see Daniel Fuchs, *Saul Bellow: Vision and Revision* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1984), 115, 257–64. The drafts of *Humboldt’s Gift* are in the Saul Bellow papers, Special Collections, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago; they reveal that in its early versions the still mostly unpublished manuscript “Charm and Death,” which is built around the life of Isaac Rosenfeld, was part of that novel.

³ Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 132–35; James Atlas, “Starting Out in Chicago,” *Granta* 41 (Autumn 1992): 39–68.

a while. . . . Meanwhile, the bottle has grown cold. Shall he ring for another? He shifts the bottle, kneads it between his knees. "And thou like a young hart upon the mountains of spices." Look forward, look back to darkness, at the light, both ways blind. He raises the bottle to his breast; it does not warm him. He gropes for the cord, and while his hand reaches, he thinks, as he has thought so many times, there is a time and a season for everything, a time to be born and a time to die. Is it time now? They will lay him out, washed, anointed, shrouded. They will fold his arms across his chest, with the palms turned in, completing the figure. Now his own hands will lie pressed to his breast, and he will sleep with his fathers.⁴

Writer's block stymied Rosenfeld. Nevertheless, at the time of his death he left no fewer than five unpublished novels. He published only one book, *Passage from Home*, a subtle, quiet tale of the coming of age of a Jewish adolescent in Chicago. The chasm between promise and execution is what is typically remembered. As Alfred Kazin writes in *New York Jew*, "As even the [Greenwich] village desperadoes noticed, Isaac was a 'failure.' Precocious in everything and understandably worn out. . . . Even his death would be a kind of failure."⁵

How the massive heart attack that felled him so young was itself a sign of failure Kazin did not explain. But similar signs were detected in the many depictions of him after he died. The most authoritative such text was Saul Bellow's frequently reprinted essay on Rosenfeld. It was, itself, a revised version of his obituary in the October 1956 issue of the *Partisan Review*, the magazine where the two—dubbed the "Chicago Dostoyevskiyans"—vied most visibly for primacy. Bellow admits that theirs was sometimes an uneasy relationship: "I loved him, but we were rivals, and I was peculiarly touchy, vulnerable, hard to deal with—at times, as I now can see, insufferable." The document is touching and vivid. Its chilling conclusion is what is most often cited:

He was perfectly aware that in this America of ours he appeared to be doing something very odd. To appear odd did not bother him at all. Nor did he ever pursue eccentricity for its own sake, for its color. He followed an inner necessity which led him into difficulty and solitude. During the last years of his life he was solitary, and on Walton Place in one of his furnished rooms, he died alone.⁶

⁴ See "King Solomon," in Isaac Rosenfeld, *Alpha and Omega* (New York: Viking, 1966), 278–79.

⁵ Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 52.

⁶ Bellow's obituary appeared in *Partisan Review* 23 (4) (Fall 1956). There the reference to Rosenfeld's room is somewhat different from the version quoted

Much the same appraisal is repeated often in descriptions of Rosenfeld and his death. For example, James Atlas's poem, "Isaac Rosenfeld Thinks about His Life," published in the Chicago journal *Poetry*, begins:

I'm living in the single room again.
 Always it's the same: a cellar crammed
 with papers, ashtrays, books. Even if I
 chose to survive without these means, why
 is it that I return to this, a way
 of life I would remember as my own?⁷

Similarly, John Berryman, who taught both Bellow and Rosenfeld at the University of Minnesota in the early 1950s, wrote the following poem soon after Rosenfeld's death:

"He ought to be a father, not a child"—
 his own child too said so. I had to glare
 into a room where, half-through, he cramp'd dead,
 where all his lovers, seeking his cry, drown,
 and the solo I reel in a word dispelled.⁸

This identification of Rosenfeld with a sordid, anonymous room proved so resilient that in Brian Morton's remarkable recent novel of New York literary life, *Starting Out in the Evening*, mention of Rosenfeld's name immediately inspires reference to such a room. The book's protagonist, an erudite, out-of-print novelist named Schiller, explains to his young, eager, would-be biographer his ambivalent relationship in the 1940s and 1950s with the work of D. H. Lawrence. He tells her that what particularly upset him about Lawrence at the time was his impact on the likes of Norman Mailer and Isaac Rosenfeld—

here: "He died in a seedy furnished room on Walton Street, alone—a bitter death to his children, his wife, his lovers, his father" (567). The version cited in this article has appeared as the foreword for both collections of Isaac Rosenfeld's writings—edited, respectively, by Solotaroff, and Shechner. It was reprinted in *Saul Bellow, It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to the Uncertain Future* (New York: Viking, 1994), where it is credited, incorrectly, as Bellow's obituary in *Partisan Review*.

⁷ James Atlas, "Isaac Rosenfeld Thinks about His Life," *Poetry* (July 1971): 213.

⁸ A typed copy of the poem, signed "To George Rosenfeld for his father, John Berryman," dated "24 October 56" may be found in the Isaac Rosenfeld collection, Special Collections, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, box 5, file 18.

Jewish intellectuals like himself, he adds, whose attraction to the “wisdom of the blood” he deplored:

She wasn't happy about this answer. She had never heard of Isaac Rosenfeld, and Mailer had never meant much to her. . . . But it wasn't that she wasn't interested in these people. It unsettled her to hear Schiller putting himself in this context. When she thought of Schiller as a writer, she liked to imagine him in the “one big room” that E. M. Forster speaks of in *Aspects of the Novel*—the room in which all novelists, past and present, are writing side by side. In her mind Schiller's place was somewhere in eternity, next to Lawrence or Melville, not in the 1950s, next to Isaac Rosenfeld.⁹

So, on the one hand, there is Forster's room, a place of grand achievement, even immortality. Many floors below—in truth, in the basement—there is Rosenfeld's room, a grim place, a mid-twentieth century metaphor for Grub Street, where the unread (like Rosenfeld) or the over-rated (like Mailer) go to die.

In concentrating attention on the room where Rosenfeld died, I'm reminded of John Updike's challenge in a recent essay in the *New York Review of Books*, “One Cheer for Literary Biography”: “The main question concerning literary biography is, surely, why do we need it at all?” Updike explains how such books aren't, as he sees it, utterly dispensable, but they're not altogether essential either. He tends to tuck away most of them in his barn, not on the more accessible shelves of his house.¹⁰

I offer as a reply to Updike this small item that, like most data, is without intrinsic significance of its own. It seems to me, however, that it supports the argument that such biographical knowledge is significant not only in what it tells us about the making of literature in the strictest sense of the term but also, and more generally, about the construction of the cultural past.

This data that I offer is, simply, that Isaac Rosenfeld did not die in the room on Walton Place. His new, airy, two-room apartment, to which he moved a few months before his death, was then on Huron, near Chicago's Loop, where he was teaching at an evening-school branch of the University of Chicago. Bellow had, indeed, last seen him at the Walton flat. And many of Rosenfeld's previous apartments had been dreadful. The one in which he died, it seems, was not. Without access to

⁹ Brian Morton, *Starting Out in the Evening* (New York: Crown, 1998), 61.

¹⁰ John Updike, “One Cheer for Literary Biography,” *New York Review of Books* (February 4, 1999): 3.

the primary sources used by biographers—letters, journal, interviews, and the like—this would not be known.

This information was culled from the standard fare of biographical data—above all, interviews and letters. In one letter, written a couple of months before his death, Rosenfeld tells Freda Davis, the friend who discovered his dead body, about the apartment. He relates here a conversation he had with his son, George, still living with Rosenfeld's ex-wife in New York: "[George] knew I was sad. I assured him my life was much better now. 'I'm no longer in that basement. I have a nice room, new clothes, a car. I have lots of friends.'"¹¹

Freda Davis, his lover, spent much time in the flat. As she described it to me, it had a bright kitchen, a desk in the living room piled high with manuscripts, the bathroom was in the hall, the bedroom was tiny and somewhat dingy, but the main room was large and filled with books. Isaac bought himself a convertible that same year. Interestingly, nowhere in the description of his sudden, sordid death is this sporty car ever mentioned. What we have instead are the same, repetitive references to dinginess and abandon, to places of waste, or worse. Yet, in this same place, in Davis's account, Rosenfeld enjoyed cooking for her, an apron tied around his waist, a flashy car waiting for them outside the window. In letters to friends, he speculated that he might soon break off their relationship. He also suggested that he might well marry her.¹²

Rosenfeld completed several of his very best essays and stories in the last months of his life. He was at work at the time on a book on the Chicago fire and a literary study of Tolstoy. He was writing sketches for Chicago's Compass Players, the precursor to the comedy group Second City; one sketch, *The Liars*, was performed in Chicago by Mike Nichols, Elaine May, and Shelly Berman. Mike Nichols later optioned it for television. "King Solomon" appeared in *Harpers* soon after his death. A lengthy essay he wrote in the last weeks of his life about Chicago, published posthumously in *Commentary*, is often regarded as his finest piece of nonfiction.¹³ Perhaps

¹¹ Freda Davis (Segel) interview with the author, March 19, 1998. Rosenfeld wrote Freda Davis about his new apartment in an (undated) letter, on Hotel Drake, New York City stationery. The author has copies of Rosenfeld's letters to Davis, dating back to their friendship at Tuley High School in Chicago.

¹² See the last of the journals he kept (the first entry is November 11, 1955), Issac Rosenfeld Collection, box 4, file 6.

¹³ On Rosenfeld's skit, see Jeffrey Sweet, *Something Wonderful Right Away* (New York: Avon, 1978). I am grateful to Jeffrey Sweet for providing me with both the text and a sound recording of *The Liars*. "Life in Chicago" appeared in *Commentary* (June 1957); it is reprinted in Rosenfeld, *An Age of Enormity*, 323–47.

Rosenfeld was on the verge of a breakthrough near the end of his life. There is, however, no reference to such a development in the writings of his friends. "Wunderkind grown to tubby sage," is how Irving Howe summed him up at the time of his death.¹⁴

A passage in Richard Holmes's recent biography of Coleridge may help us understand better his friends' reactions. With reference to Coleridge's turbulent, sometimes dreadful, final decade, Holmes writes of the responses of his friends once the now-puffy, opium-addicted, but still brilliant writer returned to England after his extended stay in the Mediterranean. Significantly, Coleridge still had many superb works ahead of him:

He was living out what many people experience, in the dark disorder of their hidden lives, but living it on the surface with astonishing, even alarming candor that many of his friends found unendurable, or simply ludicrous. Moreover, he continued to write about it, to witness it, in a way that makes him irreplaceable among the great Romantic visionaries. His greatness lies in the understanding of these struggles not (like Wordsworth, perhaps) in their solution.¹⁵

Rosenfeld, too, seemed to have lavishly and all-too-visibly squandered an extraordinary opportunity. Years went by without a new novel. His first book, written at a time when he was lauded as a new Kafka, was, or so it seemed to many, a slim, predictable tale of a Jewish adolescent's struggle with his father. Rosenfeld's marriage fell apart for reasons that remained obscure, it seems, to Rosenfeld himself. He wandered between New York, Minnesota, and Chicago. He gave up the job at the *New Republic* to work on a barge. He experimented, often with mixed results, with many different forms of writing. He threw himself into the teachings of William Reich, the errant, controversial disciple of Freud. He devoted himself, somberly, to free love. He benefited little from his Reichian work, and, judging from his journals, he gained little palpable pleasure from his sexual experimentation.

Friends watched perplexed and, perhaps at times, fearful that they, too, might similarly stumble—that the various, sundry, messy details of their everyday lives might also come crashing in. Many of them did fail, in one way or another. William Phillips, a *Partisan Review* editor, admitted late in life that he had "pissed his time away in talk." Rahv, Phillips's

¹⁴ Howe, *A Margin of Hope*, 133.

¹⁵ Richard Homes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804–1834* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 65.

fierce colleague, fell into terrible, prolonged depressions, and he never managed, despite his much-lauded brilliance, to complete a single full-length work. Alfred Kazin, too, never produced a book of comparable stature to *On Native Grounds*, which he published in his twenties. He would revisit this singular moment, time and time again, in memoir after memoir, throughout the remainder of his life.¹⁶

These were, on the whole, self-made men, essentially self-taught, with their learning picked up in prodigious fits of reading at the local library (as in the case of Philip Rahv) or during long, dull stints in the army. (Howe claims to have started reading seriously only as a soldier.) They had little to fall back upon, except for their willfulness and their ambition. William Phillips writes in his memoirs: "I now feel . . . that our little world was deficient in friendship and loyalty and that objectivity often has been a mask for competitiveness, malice, and polemical zeal—for banal evils."¹⁷ Rosenfeld may well have been a victim of this, in terms of his posthumous reputation, that is. He was among the first of this circle to die. He had many visible meanderings about which he talked far more openly than most of the others in this milieu, and his faltering steps as a writer were all too well known. Many near him may well have lived with the fear that they, too, might fall prey to similar demons.

No one has captured such demons better than Bellow. Near the beginning of his second novel, *The Victim*, his narrator muses:

He said occasionally to Mary, revealing his deepest feelings, "I was lucky. I got away with it." He meant that his bad start, his mistakes, the things that might have wrecked him, had somehow combined to establish him. He had almost fallen in with that part of humanity of which he was frequently mindful (he had never forgot that hotel on lower Broadway), the part that did not get away with it—the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined.¹⁸

This is uncannily similar to how Rosenfeld himself came to be seen. Attached to him were many of the more discordant, embarrassing moments of the collective life of those writers best equipped to remember

¹⁶ William Barrett, *The Truants: Adventures among the Intellectuals* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1982), is, to date, arguably, the most insightful account of New York intellectual life in the 1940s. For a portrait of an intellectual coming of age in this milieu, see Clement Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928–1943* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), especially 181–291.

¹⁷ William Phillips, *A Partisan View: Five Decades of the Literary Life* (New York: Stein & Day, 1983), 110.

¹⁸ Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (New York: Viking, 1947), 16.

him. Many, including Bellow, for example, had been devotees of William Reich. Bellow writes extensively about this influence in *Seize the Day* and *Henderson, the Rain King*. Still, in the memoirs of their friends—Kazin, Howe, and others—one is left with the distinct impression that this, too, was a singularly mad enthusiasm of Rosenfeld. Kazin goes so far as to assert that Rosenfeld's Reichianism contributed, somehow, to his early demise: "And everything came back to the Isaac the prisoner in his cell the orgone box. He never broke out."¹⁹ Whether the symbols are a grim, awful room or that small, silly box, Isaac in such accounts locks himself in and suffocates his talent, his potential, and his life.

Brandishing, once again, the nuts and bolts of a biographer's work bench, it seems germane to add that Rosenfeld abandoned his orgone box, too, a couple of years before his death, and not long after Bellow did. Both had their orgone boxes built for them—in both instances by childhood friends from the Humboldt Park neighborhood. Rosenfeld brought his box along with him to the Chicago apartment where he died. It was folded up in a corner of the room. In his last years, he poked much fun at the Reichian movement; one of his unpublished novels is a grim, anti-utopia set in a Reichian sex colony, a place that rivals in its totalitarianism another unpublished novel set in Soviet Russia.²⁰

In the end, it seems to me, Rosenfeld was made, and arguably undone too, by the same intellectual circle in which he lived much of his life: left-wing, post-Trotskyist, Jewish, and competitive in almost epic terms. This circle nurtured him, advertised him, mythologized him, and, eventually, played a role in marginalizing him. His story can only be told as part of that story, too. He would be used as both clown and object lesson, as an unsettling but also reassuring example of what they, so they hoped, had managed to avoid.

Some of these men—Kazin, Lionel Abel, Irving Howe, Philip Rahv—knew Rosenfeld only briefly; others, especially Saul Bellow, had a lifelong, intense friendship with him. Bellow's was, arguably, much akin to the relationship of a brother—close, keenly competitive, a relationship of sincere, sustained love. Rosenfeld remained very much alive in his imagination. Most of the others knew him rather more casually, and they dispensed with him far more easily. They knew him first as an unusually gifted, promising intellectual, then as a stunted, blocked writer, and eventually as a blocked writer who died prematurely. His life story

¹⁹ Kazin, *New York Jew*, 51.

²⁰ Sid Passin interview with the author, October 27, 1997; Freda Davis (Segel) interview with the author, March 19, 1998. The text of "Halberline" may be found in the Isaac Rosenfeld Collection, box 2, file 42.

emerged, soon enough, as a potent, unsettling metaphor, a reminder of what to avoid.

The room, then, in which Rosenfeld did not die might, like the orgone box that almost certainly did not trap him, teach us something essential about this milieu. It shaped him, it helped launch him, and eventually it also played its role in consolidating his oblivion. When recalling in *New York Jew* Rosenfeld's stunning ability to play the flute ("[Isaac's] style would make me gasp"), Kazin capped off the depiction by adding: "Isaac expressed himself in perfection at last, [writing] his signature on the air."²¹ In the world where Kazin lived, to write one's signature on the air was to disappear. The depiction sounds, superficially, like an elegy, but it is, in fact, a stark, harsh dismissal.

²¹ Kazin, *New York Jew*, 52.



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**PHILIP ROTH, JEWISH IDENTITY, AND THE
SATIRE OF MODERN SUCCESS**

Murray Baumgarten

Philip Roth's brilliant tales often provoke readers, like many of his reviewers, into a search for deep meanings. I propose instead that we pay attention to the surface of his writing, to what the novels say and complicate and recomplicate as the reader follows their complex and surprising plots. I suggest that we learn to pay attention to the satirical edge of his writing, in which characters not only get everything they desire but more, and that more turns their desire inside out, revealing its dark underside. For Roth works by what I call narrative entrapment: over and over again he writes in the first person, making us think that we are reading an autobiography and thus a more-or-less truthful account of his life rather than a fictional, made-up tale.¹ The result of this first-person telling, which often features a writer about the age of Roth himself at the time of the writing of the particular book, is to fool us into reading it as if we were going to learn the real truth about Philip Roth, the man. And the mischief his tales make is the result of our own projection: we read these novels to revel in gossip, only to discover we have been digging up the dirt not about others but about our own deepest, darkest desires.

Perhaps for this reason Philip Roth has become, as he himself puts it in *Operation Shylock*, "the writer Jews love to hate." Since 1960 each one of his books has become a public event, each one a site of cultural argument and contention. For he has chosen not simply to entertain his readers and not only to enlighten them but to bring his exploration of the meanings of their lives as modern Americans and ethnic Jews to a place where they will participate with him in the satire. As Alan Cooper notes, for Roth, "Jewishness is the perfect condition for exploring the American promise

¹ Alan Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 254–55.

of freedom."² Roth carries his premise to the point where he not only writes about stereotypical characters but leads his readers to acknowledge the ways in which they are implicated in these characters' experience, limited understanding, and ultimate destiny. In terms of literary tradition, his is the satire not of Aristophanes, the Greek playwright, but of Juvenal, the Roman; it is not a satire about others but a pulling-out-of-the-rug from under the speaker, the narrator, the reader. It wreaks havoc with the assumptions by which we run our lives; the comedy catches our attention with its laughter, leading to the jeremiad that demands we face the difficult meanings of the lives we have made for ourselves.

Consider the following passage that introduces the protagonist of *American Pastoral*,³ whom Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of the novel, had taken as his role model in their high-school years.

The Jewishness that he wore so lightly as one of the tall, blond athletic winners must have spoken to us too—in our idolizing the Swede and his unconscious oneness with America, I suppose there was a tinge of shame and self-rejection. Conflicting Jewish desires awakened by the sight of him were simultaneously becalmed by him; the contradiction in Jews who want to fit in and want to stand out, who insist they are different and insist they are no different resolved itself in the triumphant spectacle of this Swede who was actually only another of our neighborhood Seymours whose forebears had been Solomons and Sauls and who would themselves beget Stephens who would in turn beget Shawns. Where was the Jew in him? You couldn't find it and yet you knew it was there. Where was the irrationality in him? Where was the crybaby in him? Where were the wayward temptations? No guile. No artifice. No mischief. All that he had eliminated to achieve his perfection. No striving, no ambivalence, no doubleness—just the style, the natural physical refinement of a star. (20)

Seymour Levov's life is an American success story. The greatest athlete in the history of Newark's Weequahic high school, he enlists in the Marines at the end of World War II, despite the anti-Semitic reputation of the Corps at that time. The war ends with the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Levov becomes a Marine drill instructor and a star athlete in its postwar baseball and basketball teams. At the end of his tour of duty, he is invited by the New York Giants to play for them, with an excellent chance of reaching the major leagues. Despite his love for baseball, Levov opts instead to enter the family glove manufacturing business. He joins his father in the factory and learns the business from

² Ibid, 2.

³ Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (New York: Random House, 1997).

the bottom up, working in the tannery, the cutting room, the sewing and assembly line, and eventually bringing it extraordinary success.

He marries an Irish girl from nearby Elizabeth, New Jersey, who, like him, is blessed with incredible physical grace. And her good looks have catapulted her to the role of Miss New Jersey and almost led her to the prize of Miss America. They live not in the closely built development of Newstead (nicknamed, a New Jersey developer friend of mine told me recently, Jewstead), but in rural Morris County, near the village of Old Rimrock, on a country estate. He commutes to downtown Newark as Brenda's father did before him; his wife, however, raises prize cattle. And they name their daughter Merry for her bright eyes.

This brilliant beginning, an American success story if we ever saw one, becomes the desperate tale of the good man with the best of intentions that produce terrible results. It highlights the Jewish American tragedy of his generation and the one preceding, which will leave the taste of dust and ashes in Seymour's mouth. Throughout this reflexive fiction, the reader engages the difficult quandary faced by Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of the tale: How is he to tell the tale of Seymour Levov and honor its contradictions?

Nathan Zuckerman meets Seymour Levov at their high-school reunion and is shocked when the star athlete and successful businessman who had been just ahead of him in high school makes a point of talking to him and making an appointment for a future meeting. Levov, it turns out, wants Nathan, now a well-known author, to write his father's biography. While Nathan is thinking the offer over, Levov dies and Nathan despite himself is thrust into the biographer's role.

In reconstructing the story of father and son, Nathan confronts the complexities of his own American and Jewish experience. Nathan in this novel writes not the story of one man but of three American Jewish generations: a sad spiral of immigrant achievement by the father, second-generation success and ascent to the inner heart of American life by the son, and third-generation repudiation of their values by the daughter. It is not inconsequential that Seymour Levov is in everything Nathan's antithesis. Even at their last meeting, Levov is the picture of strength and American vigor, while Nathan is physically weak and, as a result of medication, incontinent. Levov is decisive in his actions, while Nathan is obsessive and neurotically self-conscious. Everything Levov does defines him as American, down to his nickname of the Swede, so different from the Yiddish-inflected name of Nathan.

Levov lives in the country, and his wife raises cattle while he commutes to his Newark factory, a mechanized extension of his dexterity and physical skill. Merry, his daughter, ran away when she planted a bomb that killed the local doctor during a Vietnam war protest by the

Weathermen, which she had joined in high school. In one of the bravura passages of the novel Levov takes a young woman on a tour of the factory in exchange for what he hopes will be information about his daughter's whereabouts. As they talk, Levov creates a beautiful pair of gloves for her, demonstrating the craft he and his father have built into their factory. When this young woman puts on this perfectly fitted pair of gloves, Levov's pride in his workmanship is justified. It is the moment when he is the Hemingway hero of American culture, the man of skill and knowledge; and the gloves serve also as a metaphor for the sexual power of this athletic personality.

Zuckerman admires Levov; in his eyes Levov can do no wrong. By contrast, Zuckerman, the writer, is marked by the understanding that writing and his life are all about getting it wrong and wrong again. The art of the writer is trumped by the skill of this consummate, deft worker of fine leather, the self-made, independent individualist who has managed to keep his factory going in the heart of Newark through thick and thin, riots, and the fires that engulfed the inner city.

Levov's creation—the fine pair of gloves he has made on the privileged tour he gives this young woman—is the golden bowl of the novel, that Jamesian moment of perfection. It is also the shattering of identity. The proffered gloves become not the moment of exchange that yields information of Merry's whereabouts and the hoped-for meeting and reconciliation. Instead, they become the occasion for a set of vicious responses that skewer Levov on the accusations of war-mongering, while simultaneously seducing him into further encounters in the hope of finding his beloved daughter.

"Nothing gives me greater pleasure ... than giving you these lovely gloves. Here," he said, "with our compliments," and, smiling, he presented the gloves to the girl, who excitedly pulled them onto her little hands—"Slowly, slowly ... always draw on a pair of gloves by the fingers," he told her, "afterward the thumb, then draw the wrist down in place ... always the first time draw them on slowly"—and she looked up and, smiling back at him with the pleasure that any child takes in receiving a gift, showed him with her hands in the air how beautiful the gloves looked, how beautifully they fit. "Close your hand, make a fist," the Swede said. "Feel how the glove expands where your hand expands and nicely adjusts to your size? That's what the cutter does when he does his job right—no stretch left in the length, he's pulled that all out at the table because you don't want the fingers to stretch, but an exactly measured amount of hidden stretch left in the width. That stretch in the width is a precise calculation."

"Yes, yes, it's wonderful, absolutely perfect," she told him, opening and closing her hands in turn. "God bless the precise calculators of this world," she said, laughing, "who leave stretch hidden in the width." (131-32)

And then at their next meeting, Rita confronts the Swede.

"She hates you."

"Does she?" he asked lightly.

"She thinks you ought to be shot."

"Yes, that too?"

"What do you pay the workers in your factory in Ponce, Puerto Rico? What do you pay the workers who stitch gloves for you in Hong Kong and Taiwan? What do you pay the women going blind in the Philippines hand-stitching designs to satisfy the ladies shopping at Bonwit's? You're nothing but a shitty little capitalist who exploits the brown and yellow people of the world and lives in luxury behind the nigger-proof security gates of his mansion." (132-33)

Something Nathan sees in Levov's eyes, a shadow perhaps, expresses their deeper affinity. They are, we discover as the novel unfolds, each other's double. Nathan has those street-smarts that Levov has lost. Nathan is the Jewish intellectual with the Hebrew-Yiddish *sekhel* (good sense) that knows Levov's suburban life is but a glossy version of exile. Through Nathan's eyes we observe Levov building an American life and embracing the values of success—hard work, skill, devotion to the task at hand—in the belief that Eden will come again in this New Jersey garden.

What Levov has willed into forgetfulness through the insistent force of his body and will and desire is the central insight of Nathan's understanding. He helps us comprehend and acknowledge the terrible cost of Levov's success. *American Pastoral* charts the underside, the canker, the worm at the heart of the dream. Nathan's description of Seymour Levov as the mythical American Jewish hero drives us into the contradictory intersections at the center of his character.

The plot of the novel leads Nathan, and with him the reader, to want Levov to succeed. But we discover in dismay that "there was a tinge of shame and self-rejection" that leads to his daughter's repudiation of all he stands for. By the end of the novel, Levov's ability to calm the "conflicting Jewish desires" he awakens has been undermined by his personal experience and the social history of Newark; their contradictions have led not to a triumphant spectacle but to a tragic life.

Nathan believes that Seymour Levov has escaped their common Jewish fate:

Where was the Jew in him? You couldn't find it and yet you knew it was there. Where was the irrationality in him? Where was the crybaby in him? Where were the wayward temptations? No guile. No artifice. No mischief. All that he had eliminated to achieve his perfection. No

striving, no ambivalence, no doubleness—just the style, the natural physical refinement of a star. (20)

Levov, the celebrity, is by definition larger than life and therefore, in this American tale, absolved even of the taint of being the ultimate outsider, the different Other, the Jew. Nathan's schoolboy adulation turns Seymour into a heroic role model, with the status endowed by the sports pages of our newspapers, and thus an American Jewish icon.

Roth's prose articulates the identity politics of three American Jewish generations: "Conflicting Jewish desires awakened by the sight of him were simultaneously becalmed by him; the contradiction in Jews who want to fit in and want to stand out, who insist they are different and insist they are no different resolved itself in the triumphant spectacle of this Swede." The unfolding events of *American Pastoral*, however, reveal the tragic dimensions of the bargain Seymour has implicitly negotiated with American culture. Its ironic dimensions are revealed as Nathan, the hero-worshipping narrator of this tale, who calls to mind Nick Caraway, the narrator of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, is led to a series of observations. In the course of the novel, Swede Levov, the heroic athlete with majestic control, has his power stripped from him as he searches for his beloved daughter in a modern version of an inverted Shakespearean tale, part *King Lear*, part *Pericles*.

Roth has taken his exploration of the politics of American Jewish success farther than any other writer, for he has imagined it as a central conundrum of the modern situation. The universality of the experience is not a matter of abstraction but, instead, of the fullness of imagined experience in all its particularity, drawing on Jewish history, from the waves of immigration to the Holocaust and modern Israel. It is no accident, then, that several of his novels take us to the Jewish State and engage the politics of the American understanding of and participation in its success. Marx, the American Jewish soldier or the "Defender of the Faith," is succeeded by Alexander Portnoy, Assistant Commissioner of Human Rights of the City of New York in *Portnoy's Complaint*, who has great difficulty believing he has any rights as a human being at all and who, for all his sexual virtuosity, discovers that in Israel he is impotent. In addition, Roth's fiction is populated by a gallery of sympathetically drawn, complex Israeli figures who encounter their American Jewish counterparts.

Perhaps the most revealing encounter of Israeli and American characters comes in *Operation Shylock*,⁴ whose implicit Shakespearean theme Roth leaves the reader to decipher in a brilliant bit of fictional legerdemain

⁴ Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

that focuses on the question of agency. In the process, Roth also highlights the relation of word and deed, soldier and artist, not only in terms of the Western tradition of action versus meditation, but also in terms of a Jewish articulation of their interrelationship.

For this is the book of the writer and literary critic caught in the middle, ensnared as American and Jew and modern thinker. Its protagonist is not the young, callow prize-winning writer Nathan Zuckerman of *The Ghost Writer* or *The Facts*, not forever-adolescent Ralph Baumgarten the beat poet, nor boychik Alex Portnoy, living in the middle of a Jewish joke. This is the story of the responsible middle-aged just-about-sixty-year-old intellectual-cum-public-figure, the writer, cultural critic, and now central character of a confessional narrative, Philip Roth, who finds himself in the middle of the tragicomic absurdity of modern Jewish life. Up for grabs in this novel is not the circumcised Jewish phallus, though to be sure it gets its comic comeuppance, but the condition of its near relative, the Jewish conscience. And the measure of this book is that along with Philip Roth we join in asking what its role should be in our "real world."

In *Operation Shylock* Roth's strategy is at the heart of first-person narrative. He begins by seducing us into listening to his difficulties. Halcion taken to ease the pain of a botched knee operation has led to the edge of a nervous breakdown. Now, mostly recovered and off the insidious drug, freed from its mind-altering power, he is on his way to Israel to interview his friend and literary colleague, the Holocaust writer, Aharon Appelfeld, when he discovers someone in Jerusalem is impersonating him.

A professional journey turns out to be a personal one in which Roth must protect his fragile identity as a writer, an American, and a Jew. With him we must confront not only the double in person but the message he is spreading under the imprimatur of the famous writer, namely, that the answer to the problems of the Jews and the Israelis in the era of nuclear proliferation is Diasporism. This Philip Roth impersonator, eerily similar to the original, believes Israelis should return to the Europe where they developed their liberal habits and settle once more into that interrupted history. What about the continuing anti-Semitism of those Europeans, you ask, as does Roth. The answer, we discover with him, when we meet the luscious consort of the imposter Philip Roth, is simple: sign them all up for ASA, the twelve-step treatment program of Anti-Semites Anonymous. After all, it's already brought Wanda Jane "Jinx" Possesski to the brink of recovery, as evident by her love for this Jewish man.

Once in Jerusalem our Philip Roth observes the trial of John Demjanjuk, accused of crimes against the Jewish people. This is another case of identity politics: the judges must decide if he is, in fact, Ivan the Terrible, the guard who drove the Jews into the gas chambers of Treblinka

with sadistic glee, or only an Ivan look-alike, nothing more than a retired Ukrainian-born auto worker from Cleveland.

What counts as evidence for identity, Roth wonders as he wanders through a haunting and dreamlike city. It is a place stuffed not only with Holocaust memories but the panoramic history of Western culture, so much so that it induces some visitors to imagine themselves as famous historical personages in what is called, according to a distinguished psychiatrist, the Jerusalem syndrome. Is it only his sanity that is at stake? The reader is caught up in these questions just as much as the embattled and bedeviled narrator who has no time to eat or sleep once caught in this world of mirrors. Roth deploys the conventions of the detective novel for the purposes of his satiric fiction.

Outside the courtroom our Philip Roth encounters not his haunting double but his college roommate from the University of Chicago. Once suave and debonair, George Ziad, the exotic American intellectual is now a harried and paranoid Palestinian patriot, convinced the Israeli secret service is out to destroy him. After the glad embrace in the street, George tells Philip he must come with him to Ramallah, his hometown, to learn the grim truth of the Israeli occupation. Our Philip cannot decide if George's evident agitation, and his return to the land of his father which he had forsworn, is the result of a political or psychological malfunction. Then George tells him to go to Athens, where a meeting with important people awaits him. We guess, with Roth, that Arafat will make his entrance there. If it is not Roth who is crazy, then what kind of a crazy world are we living in? Is this all a relapse into the Halcion-induced nightmare? Are we caught with Roth in a spy story orchestrated by the PLO or the Mossad, the Israeli secret service, as we careen through mirroring conflicts, personal and political? Amplifying their claims and driving them to the edge of absurdity, the narrative destabilizes them all.

Take the moment when Roth is returning from Ramallah and the visit with his friend, George Ziad, to Jerusalem. It is late at night, and Roth has no way of knowing whether the old Arab taxi driver is just making conversation when he keeps asking him, "Are you a Zionist," or testing him to decide if Roth should be liquidated by PLO agents. Suddenly the driver pulls over and jumps out of his car. Roth is panicked. Minutes later he discovers his driver has a stomach problem and has jumped out to satisfy an urgent call of nature. They resume their journey through the back roads till the driver gets another message. This time as Roth is standing outside the car in the dark, the driver signals that he is all right by turning his flashlight on and off several times. Suddenly jeep-loads of Israeli soldiers and a helicopter with a blinding spotlight descend on Roth, who as he is pinned against the car and then knocked tumbling along the highway keeps yelling, "English. I speak English. Don't hit me, God

damn it, I'm a Jew!" When things get sorted out, the young lieutenant hands his wallet back to him and tells him that, incredibly enough, he has just finished reading one of his novels that day. The Israeli fills in the story as he drives Roth to Jerusalem:

Gal told me that in six months he would be finishing four years as an army officer. Could he continue to maintain his sanity that long? He didn't know. That's why he was devouring two and three books a day—to remove himself every minute that he possibly could from the madness of this life. At night, he said, every night, he dreamed about leaving Israel after his time was up and going to NYU to study film. Did I know the film school at NYU? He mentioned the names of some teachers there. Did I know these people? "How long," I asked him, "will you stay in America?" "I don't know. If Sharon comes to power . . . I don't know. Now I go home on leave, and my mother tiptoes around me as though I'm somebody just released from the hospital, as though I'm crippled or an invalid. I can stand only so much of it. Then I start shouting at her. 'Look, you want to know if I personally beat anyone? I didn't. But I had to do an awful lot of maneuvering to avoid it!'" (168–69)

Gal's acknowledgment of the difficulties of his situation makes his mother cry:

"She cries and it makes her feel better. But then my father starts shouting at the two of us. 'Breaking hands? It happens in New York City every night. The victims are black. Will you go running from America because they break hands in America?' my father says. . . . A state does not act out of moral ideology, a state acts out of self-interest. A state acts to preserve its existence. 'Then maybe I prefer to be stateless,' I tell him. He laughs at me. 'We tried it,' he tells me. 'It didn't work out.' As if I need his stupid sarcasm—as if half of me doesn't believe exactly what he believes! Still I have to deal with women and children who look me in the eyes and scream. They look at me ordering my troops to take their brothers and their sons, and what they see is an Israeli monster in sunglasses and boots. My father is disgusted with me when I say such things. He throws his dishes on the floor in the middle of the meal." (169)

In its desire to be accurate, this story pulls no punches:

"My mother starts crying, I start crying. I cry! And I never cry. But I love my father, Mr. Roth, so I cry. Everything I've done in my life, I've done to make my father proud of me. That was why I became an officer. My father survived Auschwitz when he was ten years younger than I am now. I am humiliated that I can't survive this. I know what reality is." (169)

Character and reader are entrapped by this narrative in their overlapping, overdetermined, Oedipal, familial, communal, national, and transnational histories, brilliant turn after turn making us doubt our own reality, as we hear in Gal's account many aspects of George Ziad's struggle with his Palestinian father. And, like the *dayyenu* of Pesach, just when we think we've heard it all, the story gives the irony another turn of the screw. It is 1988 and Gal continues his confession:

"I'm not a fool who believes that he is pure or that life is simple. It is Israel's fate to live in an Arab sea. Jews accepted this fate rather than have nothing and no fate. Jews accepted partition and the Arabs did not. If they'd said yes, my father reminds me, they would be celebrating forty years of statehood too. But every political decision with which they have been confronted, invariably they have made the wrong choice. I know all this. Nine tenths of their misery they owe to the idiocy of their own political leaders. I know that. But still I look at my own government and I want to vomit. Would you write a recommendation for me to NYU?" (169-70)

The mixture of high and low comedy is characteristic of Roth. The legerdemain of these sentences leads out into the present and future of the action yet circles back into the past. The smells and sights of Europe meet the world of modern Israel, evoked by the writer born in Newark. This satire leaves no one untouched, as it defines the confusions of the situation in which all are enmeshed.

Mistaken identities take the satire into side-splitting farce. Such laughter, however, that echoes the vaudevillian roots of Roth's comedic imagination, does not overwhelm the probing of identity-politics in this novel. Rather, it brings the questions of identity to a more serious level. Take the second meeting with Smilesburger, the American Jew now settled in Israel who, thinking he was the Diasporist Roth, handed him a check for a million dollars just as he was finishing his lunch with Aharon Appelfeld, the writer most his opposite. Like everyone else in this novel, Smilesburger is not what he seems, not just the retired jewelry store owner he claims to be. The God of the Jews who commanded us not to take the evidence of our senses as final and believe what we see, but to probe and question, presides over this fiction. So when Smilesburger, double agent like everyone else in the book, launches into a discussion of the campaign of the Chafetz Chaim against *lashon hara*, that terrible Jewish habit of character assassination plaguing the Jews for centuries, we sit back and listen, as does Roth himself. But what is it we are hearing? More disinformation? Or sincere preaching? Can the pyrotechnics and fireworks of these words be another way of seeking not to defame, by insulting everyone, author and audience included?

The testing of identity continues as the novel shifts location. When Roth and Smilesburger meet for the third time in a New York deli on the Upper West Side, the subject of *lashon hara* comes up again, this time with a new twist. We recall the scandals that made Philip Roth the writer Jews love to hate. Then he was accused of telling the secrets of the tribe to the goyim. Now he has spilled all the beans about Jewish mischief which “subverts all the strategies that the Jewish predicament imposes, affords immeasurable if transitory relief” but is “indifferent to threat, to enemies, to all the defenses.” Roth’s comment points to *Operation Shylock* as “a crisis I was living rather than writing.” It “embodied a form of self-denunciation that I could not sanction, a satirizing of me so bizarre and unrealistic as to exceed by far the boundaries of amusing mischief I may myself have playfully perpetrated on my own existence in fiction.”⁵ The explosion of comedic situations in this novel is thus a political clearing of the field through a personal dramatization of questions of identity.


This is not a narcissistic fiction but, by means of its comedic mode, an exploration of the hallucinatory identity-politics of modern life at the point where it meets abiding Jewish concerns. *Operation Shylock* gathers the prooftexts of modern Jewish life into a bundle of desperate queries. Kafka’s catechism—“what have I in common with the Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself”—is at the unspoken center of the idea of this book, balanced and amplified by the biblical passage Roth encounters two-thirds of the way through his pilgrimage. Despite his years of after-school Hebrew lessons Roth cannot decipher the sentence—of Jacob wrestling with the angel—written on the blackboard. Feeling its significance, all Roth can do is to deploy his rote-learned Hebrew and copy the sentence into his notebook, to stand there as another assessment of his ignorance and of modern American Jewish illiteracy in general: *Vayivvater Ya’aqov levaddo vaye’aveq ish immo ad alot hashahar*. What Philip Roth the character in this book does not know, Philip Roth, its writer, does, mirroring the rite of knowledge and self-discovery central to Jews and Judaism. Wrestling with the angel, *Operation Shylock* echoes the biblical account of how Jacob’s name was changed, articulating the founding and traumatic event that made the Jews into the people Israel. (Was the antagonist the messenger of history? the beginning of the ongoing Jewish argument with God?)

For the reader, unlike the protagonist, this is a second encounter mirroring the doubling of Roth versus Roth. This Hebrew phrase takes pride of place in *Operation Shylock*, standing as its epigraph, followed by the English translation that adds its location in Genesis 32:24, and then

⁵ Philip Roth, *New York Times Book Review* (March 7, 1993).

is amplified by a quote from Kierkegaard that concludes: "Existence is surely a debate." Saul Bellow might have imagined a parallel situation as social comedy; Isaac Bashevis Singer would have made it a scene of psychological and erotic tension. What Roth has done is to articulate its uncanny dialectic through gleeful comedy that turns a reflexive, Aristophanic satire into Juvenalian manic terror. The instability of identity in this world leads to the insistent ambiguities at the heart of modern culture.

Caught in the interpretive acts into which he has been plunged by the action of this fiction, Roth, the character, is an ignorant critic riding the brilliant sweep of Roth, the writer's, paradoxical modern irony. It is Roth's revenge on those who, having left the urban world of immigrant culture (himself included) symbolized by Jewish Newark, think they have thereby escaped the destiny of their Jewishness.



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PART IV

**ZIONISM, HOLOCAUST,
AND ISRAEL**

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**RACHEL AND THE FEMALE VOICE:
LABOR, GENDER, AND THE ZIONIST PIONEER VISION¹**

Yael Zerubavel

אֶל אֶרֶץ

לא שרתי לך, ארצי,
ולא פארתי שמך
בעלילות גבורה,
בשלל קרבות;
רק עץ — ידי נטעו
חופי ירדן שוקטים.
רק שביל — כבשו רגלי
על פני שדות.

אכן דלה מאד —
ידעתי זאת, האם,
אכן דלה מאד
מנחת בתך;
רק קול תרועת הגיל
ביום יגה האור,
רק בכי במסתרים
עלי צניך.

To My Country
Rachel

I have not sung to you, my country.
I have not gloried your name
with great heroic deeds,
or loot from the battlefield.

¹ I would like to thank Naama Rokem for her assistance in the bibliographical research for this article.

My hands have simply planted a tree
 on Jordan's calm shores.
 My feet have simply formed a path
 through the fields.

Indeed, a humble gift it is,
 I know this, Mother.
 Indeed, your daughter's offering makes
 a very humble gift:
 Only the thrilling cry of joy,
 on the day the light will break through,
 only my secret tears for you,
 for your present misery.²

INTRODUCTION

The image of the *haluts*, the Zionist pioneer, is essentially a male representation. Even though women took part in the Zionist revival of Jewish life in Palestine, the collective memory of this period tends to focus on male figures and activities. The *halutsah*, the female pioneer, was relegated to the periphery of the pioneer past. While the socialist brand of Zionism, professed by many of the Jews who immigrated to Palestine during the first decades of the twentieth century as part of the Second and Third Aliyot, embraced a belief in gender equality, recent studies reveal that most women continued to fulfill traditional female roles and relatively few women played a public role in the life of the emerging Jewish society in Palestine.³ In the literary field too, the

² The translation is mine.

³ The gap between the myth and reality of the women pioneers has been the subject of recent studies on their social, political, and economic status during that period. See, for example, Deborah S. Bernstein, ed., *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish Women in the Pre-State Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Yossi Ben-Artzi, "Between Farmer and Laborer: Women in Early Jewish Settlements in Palestine, 1882–1914," in Yael Azmon, ed., *A View into the Lives of Women in Jewish Societies* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1995), 309–24; Dafna Izraeli and Deborah Bernstein, "Women Workers in the Second Aliyah," in Israel Bartal, ed., *The Second Aliyah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1996), 1:194–306; Eyal Kafkafi, "The Psycho-Intellectual Aspect of Gender Inequality in Israel's Labor Movement," *Israel Studies* 4 (Spring 1999): 188–211. Interestingly, women's descriptions of their experiences as pioneers and the discrimination they faced from their male colleagues and companions are included in Bracha H̄abas, ed., *The Book of the Second*

female voice was largely silenced during the first decades of the twentieth century. Hebrew literature was almost exclusively dominated by male writers and allowed room for only a handful of women writers, mostly poets. Since women's poetry was examined within the predominantly male literary framework, its unique voice and qualities often went unappreciated or ignored. The early female writers' work was therefore considered a minor contribution to the construction of Hebrew culture, and it has only recently begun to attract more scholarly attention.⁴

It is within this context that the present essay focuses on a distinctly female voice portraying the experience of the Zionist pioneers (*halutsim*). The poem selected for this discussion addresses a central theme in the Zionist pioneer ideology, namely, the importance of working and settling the land. A close reading of this poem suggests that a female interpretation of the pioneering ideals can vary significantly from that of the male *haluts*. The discussion of this particular female labor poem will therefore include a comparison with a poem written by a male pioneer on the same theme around the same time. The comparative perspective will allow us to explore the particular intersection of gender, ideology, and literature in this historical context.

The poem on which this essay focuses, "To My Country" ("El artsi"), was written in 1926 by the *halutsah* and Hebrew poet Rachel Bluwstein. Known by her first name, Rachel was one of the few female poets who

Aliyah [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1947), 487–582, perhaps owing to the fact that the editor herself belonged to that group. The limited place assigned to women pioneers is still evident in recent studies of the Second and Third Aliyot. In one publication, only seven out of a total of eighty-three biographies are allotted to women: Zeev Tzahor, ed., *The Second Aliyah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1996), vol. 3. Women are not at all represented in a study devoted to the examination of gaps between myth and reality of the Third Aliyah: Baruch Ben-Avram and Henry Near, *Studies in the Third Aliyah (1919–1924)* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1995).

⁴ See, for example, Dan Miron, *Founding Mothers, Stepsisters* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1991); Yaffah Berlovitz, *Inventing a Land, Inventing a People* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1996); Michael Gluzman, "The Exclusion of Women from Hebrew Literary History," *Prooftexts* 11 (1991): 59–78; Tova Cohen, "From within and without the Culture: The Appropriation of Father Tongue As a Means of Shaping Intellectually the Feminine Self" [Hebrew], *Sadan: Studies in Hebrew Literature* 2 (1996): 69–110; Hamutal Bar-Yosef, "In the Trap of Equations: Woman = Nature, Man = Culture, and Esther Raab's Poem, (Holy Grandmothers of Jerusalem)," in Azmon, *A View into the Lives of Women in Jewish Societies*, 337–47.

achieved prominence during the Yishuv era (i.e., the Zionist settlement period prior to the foundation of the State of Israel). Born in Russia in 1890, she arrived in Palestine in 1909 at the time of the Second Aliyah and subscribed to the labor Zionist ideology. After working in an agricultural farm near the Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee), she returned to Europe to study agronomy. The outbreak of World War I interrupted her studies and forced her back to Russia. In 1919, she joined members of the Third Aliyah and returned to the pioneer commune she had left. Afflicted with tuberculosis, she was soon forced to leave the commune and her farming work and move to the city. She encountered an early death in 1931 at the age of forty-one.⁵

Rachel embarked on her literary career as a Hebrew poet in 1920 with the publication of her first Hebrew poem. She continued to publish her poetry in the literary section of the main socialist daily *Davar* and became close to leading figures of the Labor movement. "To My Country" is among her best known poems. It became part of the literary canon of the pioneer period as well as one of the most popular "songs of the Land of Israel."⁶ The poem has also been taught as part of the Hebrew curriculum in the Israeli public school system.⁷

LABOR AND PATRIOTIC OFFERING IN RACHEL'S "TO MY COUNTRY"

The tribute to the Land of Israel suggested in the title of "To My Country" can be understood on two levels. On one level, the poem focuses

⁵ Uri Milstein, ed., *Rachel* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1985), 9–51; Rachel is also one of the few women whose bibliography is included in Tzahor, *The Second Aliyah*, 3:336–43.

⁶ "To My Country" ("El artsi"), first published in 1926, was reprinted in Milstein, *Rachel*, 156. Milstein remarks that this poem is probably the most popular of Rachel's works (315n25). On its status as a song, see Natan Shaḥar, "The Eretz Israeli Song, 1882–48," in Zohar Shavit, ed., *The Construction of Hebrew Culture in Eretz Israel* (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy for Sciences and Humanities and Bialik Institute, 1999), 525. Shaḥar notes that out of thirty of Rachel's poems that were turned into songs, ten are often included in song anthologies or performed by singers. The melody for "To My Country" was composed by Yehuda Schertok [later, Sharet] and was first published in Jacob Schoenberg, ed., *Songs of Eretz Israel* (Berlin: Yudisher Ferlag, 1935), 154. I would like to thank Natan Shaḥar for this additional information.

⁷ See, for example, the discussion of the educational value of Rachel's poetry in a brochure on the instruction of Hebrew and general literature designed for high school, published by the Department for Training High School Teachers, The School of Education of the Hebrew University, and the Ministry of Education in 1962 and 1966.

on the female pioneer's reflections on the significance of her contribution to the homeland. On another level, the poem itself can be seen as the poet's gift to her land. The female speaker uses familial terms to define the relationship between her and the country, alluding to the homeland as a mother and to herself as the daughter. The female bond adds another important dimension to their relationship and introduces an air of intimacy. The feeling of closeness is reinforced by the use of direct speech and the possessive pronoun ("my country"), as well as the speaker's conversational tone and confessional style. Indeed, readers might feel as if they were eavesdropping on the daughter's private confession meant only for her mother's ears. The poem displays consistency in form (the *halutsah's* direct speech addressing the country) and substance (her offering to the homeland). The country, the silent addressee throughout the poem, is cast in the role of the recipient, the object of the speaker's action and affection. This asymmetry violates our expectations that within a parent-child relationship, the mother would be the one to play the nurturing role. The poem thus creates a role reversal that would fit a relationship between a mature daughter and an aging parent, thereby reflecting the Zionist view that the ancient Jewish homeland has been waiting for the return of its children to be rescued from its desolation. The analogy is therefore of an elderly mother who depends on her children's help and support, and it is within this framework that we should understand the significance of the female pioneer's offering.

In describing her gifts to the country, the speaker begins by qualifying what they are not: they are neither heroic songs nor loot brought from the battlefield. This opening is designed to accentuate the modesty of her contribution, but it also suggests that the female pioneer feels compelled to measure her activities by male standards of patriotic offering. In the historical context of the Second and Third Aliyot, whose members regarded the organization of Jewish self-defense as one of their major achievements, armed struggle was clearly marked as a male domain. The *haluts's* mythical image portrayed a man holding the plow and the gun, the symbols of his dual commitment to work and defense. Yosef Trumpeldor, the *haluts* who was said to have uttered the famous words "It is good to die for our country" before he died, provided a concrete model for the pioneer ethos of heroism and self-sacrifice.⁸

⁸ The *haluts* was also portrayed as toiling the land during the day and guarding at night. For further discussion of this image and of Yosef Trumpeldor as its symbolic representation, see Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 91–93, 148–57. On the relatively small participation by women in the early defense organizations, see also Ben-Artzi, "Between Farmer and Laborer."

Within this context of patriotic offering, the female *halutsah* continues to evaluate her gifts through the lens of her otherness. In contrast to men's heroic deeds, the speaker's activities are marked by their simple, mundane nature: she plants a tree and forms a pathway in the fields, and she performs these acts by using her own hands and feet. Her contact with the land is physical and direct. Her body leaves its imprint on the country's body, thereby transforming its landscape. The two bodies remain distinct but maintain an intimate bond.⁹

The physical closeness is further reinforced by her emotional attachment. The speaker identifies with the country as a daughter would identify with her ailing mother: she weeps for the land's current state of misery, and she will rejoice with the country when it is redeemed. The centrality of this view of the relationship between the pioneer and the land is clearly manifest in Rachel's writing. In another poem she wrote in the same year, the speaker refers again to the land as her symbolic mother and testifies to her capacity "to be saddened by its sadness, to rejoice in her humble joy."¹⁰ The close physical contact and the intensity of the emotional bond thus indicate that the female pioneer sees herself connected to the land in both her body and soul.¹¹

⁹ It is interesting to note that in a later poem entitled "Change" ("Temurah," Milstein, *Rachel*, 163), originally published in 1927, Rachel addresses her imminent death and describes how her disintegrating body would eventually become part of the soil of the land. Death would thus dissolve the distinction between the pioneer and the land. This female version of ultimate giving resembles the ultimate sacrificial act typical of the male pioneer whose blood merges with the soil as he dies in the defense of the country.

¹⁰ See Rachel's poem "Here on the Face of Earth" ("Kan al penei ha'adamah"), written in 1926 (Milstein, *Rachel*, 160).

¹¹ It is interesting to compare this description of individual grief for a mother figure with Bialik's poem "Alone" ("Levadi," 1902), reprinted in his *Collected Poems* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1966), 181–82. In the latter, a male speaker expresses his empathy for the mother *shekhnah*, representing the world of Jewish tradition, with whom he was left alone in *beit hamidrash*, the traditional house of religious learning. In both these poems, the speakers contrast their own relationship with the mother with those who chose other routes (heroic deeds or words in Rachel's poem, the outside world of the Enlightenment in Bialik's poem). The speakers who remain alone with the mother are huddled in dark or hidden corners; the others are associated with a dramatic movement, bold colors, or a bright light. There is a fundamental difference between the two poems that may be implied in their titles. While both address a state of transition, they point to a dramatically different trajectory. The male speaker acknowledges that the greater pull of the Enlightenment would eventually tear him away from the mother,

Although Rachel emphasizes the female pioneer's humble view of her own patriotic offering, the analysis of the broader semantic meaning of her offering challenges this perception. Tree planting appears as a mundane act, but trees are important icons of Zionist national revival and its success in "striking roots" in the ancient Jewish homeland.¹² Planting trees became a sacred ritual in national Hebrew culture, and Rachel's choice of the biblical term for sacrificial offering (*minḥah*) accentuates the sacred nature of her contribution.

Planting thus represents a deliberate action that has both practical and ritual significance. The creation of a path, on the other hand, is the unintended outcome of the even more mundane activity of walking that would hardly qualify as an offering. Yet here too, the seemingly humble gift is imbued with major symbolic significance. Secular national Hebrew culture has elevated walking and hiking in the country as a ritual enactment of ownership over the Land of Israel and as a means of reconnecting with ancient Hebrew identity. "Knowing the land" (*yedi'at ha'arets*) was one of the most important subjects in Hebrew education, and youth trips were considered an expression of patriotic devotion.¹³ The path created by the speaker's repeated walks through the fields represents her fulfillment of an important patriotic ritual and her ability to become part of the native landscape.

whereas the female speaker conveys her confidence in her continuing support for and identification with her mother country.

¹² The view of planting as a sacred ritual was promoted by the Jewish National Fund and developed by the educational system especially around the celebration of the Tu Bishvat festival. See Tsili Doleve-Gandelman, "The Symbolic Inscription of Zionist Ideology in the Space of Eretz Yisrael: Why the Native Israeli Is Called Tsabar?" in Harvey E. Goldberg, ed., *Judaism Viewed from within and from Without* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 257–84; Yael Zerubavel, "The Forest As a National Icon: Literature, Politics, and the Archeology of Memory," *Israel Studies* 1 (1) (Spring 1996): 60–99; and Yoram Bargal, *An Agent of Zionist Propaganda: The Jewish National Fund 1924–1947* [Hebrew] (Haifa: Haifa University Press and Zmora Bitan, 1999).

¹³ On school trips as early as the 1880s, see Yaffah Berlovitz, "Let's Go Out to the Gardens in Dressed Up Zion" [Hebrew], *Etmol* 12 (73) (June 1987): 3–5; Yehuda Hershkovitch, "The Trip As an Educational Tool" [Hebrew], *Lamadrikh* 5 (1943): 3–32; Shaul Katz, "The Israeli Teacher-Guide: The Emergence and Perpetuation of a Role," *Annals of Tourism Research* 12 (1985): 49–72; Zali Gurevich and Gideon Aran, "On the Place" [Hebrew], *Alpayim* 4 (1991): 9–44; Orit Ben-David, "Tiyyul (Hike) As an Act of Consecration of Space," in Eyal Ben-Ari and Yoram Bilu, eds., *Grasping Land: Space and Place in Contemporary Israeli Discourse and Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 129–45.

The *halutsah's* humble acts of giving appear limited and circumscribed within her immediate reality, yet their symbolic meaning carries the promise of national redemption that far exceeds the boundaries of the present. This realization calls into question the speaker's initial reference to men's offering as the yardstick by which her gifts to the country should be measured. In the end, Rachel introduces the male heroic ethos in order to subvert it and question its prominence within the Zionist pioneers' culture. The reader realizes that for the female pioneer the fulfillment of the mission of rebuilding the nation and redeeming its land would not be achieved through the glory of heroic actions and their colorful materialistic gains. For the *halutsah*, the path to the future will be achieved through small, private acts of giving to the land that are performed out of love and commitment.¹⁴

SHLONSKY'S "TOIL" AND THE PROMISE OF REDEMPTION

Avraham Shlonsky first came from Russia to Palestine before World War I, spent the war years in Russia, and returned to Palestine as part of the Third Aliyah. He was both a *haluts* and a poet whose labor poetry emerged out of the pioneers' ideals and experiences. His poem "Toil" ("Amal") was published in 1927,¹⁵ a year after the publication of "To My Country." The two poems share a profound recognition of the significance of the ideal of working the land, and both entered the literary canon of the Hebrew national culture.

In both poems the speakers' gender corresponds with that of the poets. The speakers use a direct speech to address a mother figure with whom they share their own experience as *halutsim*. Shlonsky's poem begins with the speaker's call to his mother:

¹⁴ In fact, Rachel opposed the very idea of presenting the pioneers as making great sacrifices for the country. See her sharp criticism of Moshe Beilinson's 1929 article in *Davar*, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Second Aliyah. In this article, he glorified the sacrifices the pioneers made by going to the Land of Israel and living there. In her response, Rachel argues that working the land is an act of love and joy and should not be made into a sacrifice. Both texts are reprinted in Mordechai Naor, ed., *The Second Aliyah, 1903–1914* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1984), 71–75.

¹⁵ Shlonsky's poem "Toil" was published in the collection *Bagalgal* (1927), reprinted in Hebrew and English translation in T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 534 (a bilingual edition). The translation quoted here is Carmi's. I have followed his translation as is (except in one case, see n. 16 below), but chose to follow Shlonsky's original line breakup in Hebrew rather than follow Carmi's modified lines.

הַלְבִּישֵׁנִי, אִמָּא כְּשֶׁרָה, כְּתַנְתְּ פָּסִים לְתַפְאֶרֶת
וְעַם שְׁחֵרִית הוֹבִילֵנִי אֵלַי עָמַל.

Dress me, my pious mother,¹⁶ in a glorious robe of many colors
And at dawn lead me to [my] toil.

Whereas Rachel's speaker refers to the country as a mother, Shlonsky's speaker addresses an actual mother, perhaps a generalized figure of the Jewish mother whose roots are still attached to the world of tradition.¹⁷ The country is introduced in the following stanzas in which the speaker describes its transformed landscape:

עוֹטְפָה אֶרְצִי אוֹר כְּטָלִית.
בְּתִים נֹצְבוּ כְּטוֹטְפוֹת.
וְכַרְצוּעוֹת־תְּפִלִּין גּוֹלְשִׁים כְּבִישִׁים, סָלְלוּ כְּפַיִם.
תְּפִלַּת־שְׁחֵרִית כֹּה תִתְפַּלֵּל קְרִיָה נֹאָה אֵלַי בּוֹרְאָה.
וּכְבוֹרָאִים
בְּנֵי אֲבָרָהִם,
פִּיטָן סוֹלֵל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל.

My land is wrapped in light as in a prayer shawl.
The houses stand forth like frontlets,
And the roads paved by hand, stream down like phylactery straps.

Here the lovely city says the morning prayer to its Creator.
And among the creators is your son Abraham,
A road-building bard of Israel.

Shlonsky's speaker, the "road-building bard of Israel," presents his labor as a process of colonization and focuses on the results that it has produced. The city appears as the centerpiece of the pioneer's work, an urban environment that stands in opposition to the natural landscape as the marker of modernization and change.¹⁸

¹⁶ Note that Carmi's translation refers to *imma kesherah* as "my good mother." I prefer the translation "my pious mother," which preserves the religious connotations of the original Hebrew.

¹⁷ On this meaning of the mother figure, see also Lea Goldberg, "Four Poems by Shlonsky" [Hebrew], *Moznayim* 37 (1974): 275–85.

¹⁸ As Dan Miron remarks, Shlonsky returns to the city as a symbol of Zionist success in overcoming the desert in "Facing the Desert" ("Mul hayeshimon"), where he

In contrast to the female speaker's deliberate attempt to play down her own importance, the male speaker places himself at the center of the poem and celebrates the achievements of the pioneers' labor.¹⁹ The speaker asks the mother to take him to perform his labor duties at dawn, the time when traditional men go to the synagogue for their morning prayer and children are taken to the religious school (*heder*) to study Torah.²⁰ His request reflects a child's trust that his mother shares his conviction about the importance of working the land and, like him, sees it as analogous to sacred rituals, such as praying or learning. He enjoys the confidence of a favorite child who is loved and supported by both parents who dress him in a robe of many colors and provide him with blessings:²¹

וּבְעֶרְבַּי בֵּין הַשְּׁמֵשׁוֹת יָשׁוּב אָבָא מִסְכְּלוֹתַי
 וְכִתְפֵלָה יִלְחֹשׁ נַחַת:
 הֵבֵן יָקִיר לִי אֲבֵרְהֶם,
 עוֹר וְגִידִים וְעֵצְמוֹת.
 הַלְלוּיָהּ.

הַלְבִּישֵׁנִי, אִמָּא כְּשֶׁרָה, כְּתַנְתְּ-פָסִים לְתַפְאֶרֶת
 וְעַם שְׁחֵרִית הוֹבִילֵנִי
 אֵלַי עֲמַל.

And in the evening twilight, father will return from his travails
 And like a prayer, will whisper joyfully:
 My dear son Abraham, skin, sinews and bones
 Hallelujah.

emphasizes the hostile relations between the two. The poem was originally published in *In These Days, 1928–30*, reprinted in his *Collected Poems* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1965), 1:311–17. See also Miron, *Founding Mothers, Stepsisters*, 210.

¹⁹ On Shlonsky's tendency to magnify the image of the speaker and the impact of the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky on his work in this regard, see Dan Laor, "The Gilboa Poems and the Third Aliyah Ethos" [Hebrew], *Moznayim* 49 (1989): 138–39.

²⁰ See Lea Goldberg's interesting analysis of Shlonsky's use of traditional Jewish figures and symbols. Goldberg points out the association with Isaac as the chosen son led by his father at dawn to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah (Goldberg, "Four Poems by Shlonsky").

²¹ The obvious analogy here is to Joseph, whose status as his father's favorite son was indicated by the robe of many colors (Genesis 37:3). Similarly, the father's use of the phrase *haven yaqqir li Avraham* ("my dear son Abraham") draws on Jeremiah's verse (31:20) referring to Ephraim as the beloved son: *haven yaqqir li Efrayim*.

Dress me, my pious mother, in a glorious robe of many colors
 And at dawn lead me
 To [my] toil.

In drawing upon traditional texts, figures, and rituals, Shlonsky makes his boldest claim for the sanctity of labor. The father's use of key words from Ezekiel's prophecy of the resurrection of the dry bones (37:1–14), his depiction of the city as a Jew in prayer, and his reference to the pioneer as Creator modify their traditional interpretation to fit them into the Zionist pioneers' vision. While this sacrilegious attitude produces a shocking response, it also achieves the effect of establishing continuity between the worlds of Jewish tradition and that of the Zionist pioneers.

Shlonsky's poem conveys constructive optimism and confidence in the power of labor. In his work, the country is full of light, and the new settlement is associated with prayer and hope. The poem is charged with positive energy and emotions, and the choice of dawn as a temporal framework highlights the sense of a new beginning. The allusion to creation reinforces the theme of mythical rebirth, and the image of Abraham the patriarch resonates with the promise of national redemption.

THE FEMALE AND THE MALE VERSIONS OF WORKING THE LAND

The emergence of "labor poetry" in the first decades of the twentieth century reflects the importance of labor Zionism and the acceptance of its values as representing the new Hebrew culture in the Land of Israel. Both Rachel and Shlonsky participated in that early wave of ideological poetry of the 1920s that preceded, as Hannan Hever points out, the politicized poetry of the following decades.²² Rachel, who passed away a few years after the publication of "To My Country," has remained associated primarily with that early literary wave. In contrast, Shlonsky's poetry continued to evolve in other directions, and he eventually became the spokesman of modernism in Hebrew poetry.

In spite of their shared ideology, these poems demonstrate the diversity within labor poetry in which female and male versions offer different

²² Hannan Hever, *Poets and Zealots: The Rise of Hebrew Political Poetry in Eretz Israel* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), 44–59. See also Uzi Shavit, "The Wild Poem: Notes on the Style and Literary Climate of Hebrew Poetry in the 1920s" [Hebrew], in Reuven Tsur and Uzi Shavit, eds., *Te'udah: Studies in Hebrew Literature; A Memorial Book for Uri Shoham* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1985), 165–83.

interpretations of the pioneer vision of settlement and work. The female *ḥalutsah* enjoys the direct, physical contact with the open landscape and a harmonious relationship with land and nature, while feeling alienated from the city.²³ The male *ḥaluts* focuses on the city, the roads, and the houses, the markers of civilization that the pioneers' labor has produced. He ignores the native landscape and the forces of nature and associates the newly created urban environment with the promise of redemption.

The juxtaposition of "path" and "road," used by Rachel and Shlonsky respectively as symbolic outcomes of the pioneers' labor, is quite telling. Both terms imply an established route that can also be used as a metaphor for a future direction. There is, however, a major difference between them. "Path" is a narrow dirt road that is formed by repeated movement along the same route; a paved road requires a plan, the use of tools, and the imposition of foreign materials on the ground. The association of paved roads with the use of force over the landscape is apparent in Hebrew, where the terms for "road" (*keviṣh*) and "conquest" (*kibbush*) derive from the same linguistic root. Paths are formed in natural settings by both people and animals, and they are essentially narrow and unimposing, hidden in the fields. In contrast, the paved roads are imposed on the country's landscape, like the phylactery straps that bind the arm.

The female version of working the land places the country at center stage and emphasizes the *process* of giving (i.e., planting, walking, crying) and plays down the outcome (a tree, a path, a cry). The *ḥalutsah* minimizes her own significance, and her attention is entirely directed at the country: she is important only as far as her offering to the country is concerned. In contrast, the male version revolves around and magnifies the pioneer as well as the outcome of his labor. The male pioneer is the focus of love and attention and even worship. The city thus establishes his symbolic role as the master of the land, praying to him as a man would pray to the Master of the Universe. The male pioneer appears at one and the same time as a child in relation to his parent whose blessings he seeks and as an aggressive and domineering male in relation to the feminized land.

In relating to the country as an object to be conquered and transformed, the male speaker conforms to Zionist pioneer rhetoric that often

²³ In the poem "Rachel" (1926), the poet attributes her love of the desert to her identification with her biblical namesake, Rachel, who was a desert person: "Therefore is my house narrow / and the city strange / because her scarf once fluttered / in the desert wind" (reprinted in Hebrew and English translation by Robert Friend in Shirley Kaufman, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and Tamar S. Hess, eds., *The Defiant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poems from Antiquity to the Present, A Bilingual Anthology* [New York: Feminist Press, 1999], 85).

refers to the process of colonization as a war and a struggle and to the pioneers' success as "conquest." This view is clearly reflected in the idiomatic Hebrew expressions of that period, such as "the conquest of the wilderness" (*kibbush hashemamah*), "the conquest of labor" (*kibbush ha'avodah*), or "the conquest of education" (*kibbush ha'hinukh*).²⁴ The collective representation of the pioneer as a conquering male figure in relation to the "virgin land" is deeply ingrained in the pioneers' culture and literature. This framework suppressed the role of the female pioneer and the possibility that she may relate differently to the land.

Rachel's portrayal of the female pioneer is embedded within a relationship of harmony and support, and although the reference to the country as "mother" has the potential of introducing issues of power and control, the mother's current state of misery and dependence reduces this possibility. The devotion and concern that permeate the relationship between the two female figures stand in dramatic contrast to the power relations between the male pioneer and the feminine representations of the country (earth/land/city).

Rachel's poem is written in a minor key and is characterized by its restrained style and tone. The pioneers' achievements are limited, and the country still suffers from impoverishment. The *halutsah* does not doubt that the promise of light lies ahead, but this will occur at some vague point in the future. Shlonsky's work, on the other hand, celebrates the pioneer's achievements and attributes the light to the present ("my land is wrapped in light"). The *haluts's* use of the biblical term "hallelujah," which appears at the conclusion of several psalms, suggests a sense of accomplishment and completion, and its bravado provides a clear contrast to the silent tears of sorrow and pain shed by the *halutsah*.

Shlonsky's poem describes the pioneer as acting within the framework of community, history, and tradition from which he derives strength and support. The sacred character of his labor is thus enhanced by his reference to collective male prayers and rituals.²⁵ Unlike the male

²⁴ For the common use of the concept of "conquest" during the pioneer period and the early State period, see, for example, the titles of two chapters in Habas, *The Book of the Second Aliyah*; Z. Yoeli and A. S. Stein, eds., *Conquerors and Builders* [Hebrew] (Petach Tikvah: Union of Petach Tikvah's Workers, 1955). See also Gurevich and Aran, "On the Place"; and Yael Zerubavel, "The Desert As a Mythical Space and Site of Memory in Hebrew Culture," in Moshe Idel and Itamar Grunwald, eds., *Myths in Jewish Culture* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for the Study of Jewish History, forthcoming).

²⁵ Shavit points out that Shlonsky, Lamdan, and Uri Zvi Greenberg saw themselves as the true heirs of Bialik in writing grand poetry that draws on mythical

poets, most notably the Hebrew national poet, Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Rachel shies away from major historical schemes, national epics, and collective frameworks. Her work is embedded in the immediate present, her close environment, and her mundane tasks. Rachel's minimalist approach, conversational tone, and plain vocabulary contribute to the female pioneer's simple, down-to-earth presence. Indeed, she herself states somewhat ironically in another poem that the circumscribed character of her poetry is the outcome of her limited view of the world, which is "as narrow as that of an ant."²⁶

Rachel's personal style and her focus on the immediate reality of the pioneer experience were often seen as a function of her lack of familiarity with traditional Jewish sources or of her limited ability as a poet.²⁷ More recently, however, feminist critics have challenged this view, arguing that Rachel's style stems from a deliberate artistic choice. This interpretation is supported by her declaration that although she knows many fancy words and flowery expressions, she prefers words "that are as innocent as a baby and as humble as soil."²⁸ Furthermore, feminist critics have pointed out that Rachel's poetry represents women's writing and sensibilities that do not conform to the predominant male poets' emphasis on the Zionist mission of conquering the land and reshaping it and their hostile attitude toward its nature and landscape. Feminist readings of women's writing disclose an emphasis on an organic bond with the country, love for its native landscape and nature, and a desire to focus on everyday experience.²⁹ "To My Country" can therefore be seen as an

figures and events yet does not recognize the boundaries between the individual and the collective (Shavit, "The Wild Poem," 175–78).

²⁶ "I Can Only Tell about Myself" ("Raq al atsmi lesapper yadati," 1930), reprinted in Milstein, *Rachel*, 223.

²⁷ Dan Miron addresses the difficulties that the female poets faced at that period, yet in discussing Rachel's rise to relative prominence he attributes it to politics of the literary world: the new challenges by younger poets in the 1920s and the controversies that divided the Hebrew literary scene. According to Miron, Rachel's poetry was hailed as an expression of antimodernism and as a poetic representation of labor ideology during the Socialist-Revisionist conflict. Miron's discussion of her work indicates that he continues the earlier view that devalues the literary merit of her work (Miron, *Founding Mothers, Stepsisters*, 114–26, 161–77).

²⁸ The poem "Expression" ("Niv"), originally published in 1926, is reprinted in Milstein, *Rachel*, 150.

²⁹ See, for example, Gluzman, "The Exclusion of Women from Hebrew Literary History"; Cohen, "From within and without the Culture"; Bar-Yosef, "In the Trap

example of what has been identified as the female poetic preference "to withdraw from the historical moment and from matters of contemporary relevance, to the sphere of the feminine self."³⁰

Interestingly, the feminine qualities of Rachel's writing are also the main source of its continuing appeal. The widespread aversion of Jewish youths to the high pathos and verbosity of patriotic rhetoric has been a characteristic feature of Israeli society since its early days.³¹ Rachel's refusal to dress up patriotic values with imposing language or pedagogical overtones, her move away from the national and the heroic, and her emphasis on the individual experience have preserved the freshness of her perspective. For a society that has grown more individualistic and is relatively more open to a diversity of views, Rachel's poems remain both accessible and meaningful. Furthermore, a growing nostalgic yearning for the vanishing pioneer culture has contributed to the lasting appeal of Rachel's poems and songs that represent a simple yet intense bond with the land for contemporary Israelis.

of Equations"; Barbara Mann, "Framing the Native: Esther Raab's Visual Poetics," *Israel Studies* 4 (Spring 1999): 234–57. Another example of a later female writer who deliberately chose to use a low register of speech in her Hebrew prose in defiance of accepted literary norms is Netiva Ben-Yehuda, who, echoing Rachel's analogy of herself to an ant, compared herself to writing from a worm's perspective. On the case of Ben-Yehuda's writing and the earlier rejection of her style, see Yael Feldman, *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nationalism in Israeli Women's Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 179–80.

³⁰ Neḥama Ashkenazi, *Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 27. See also Ḥamutal Tsamir, "The Love of the Homeland and a Deaf's Dialogue: A Raab's Poem and Its Reception by Men" [Hebrew], *Te'oria Uvoiqoret* 7 (1995): 125–45.

³¹ Rachel Elboim-Dror, "Here He Comes amongst Us, the New Hebrew: On the Youth Culture of the First Aliot" [Hebrew], *Alpayim* (1996): 125–27, 133.

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**REVISING THE PAST:
THE IMAGE OF THE IDYLIC "VILLAGE"**

Gabriella Moscati Steindler

The favor with which his compatriots and many foreign audiences received Joshua Sobol's play *Kfar (Village)*¹—characterized by the press and the critics as "an enchanted dream," "an idyllic pastoral picture," and "a nostalgic return to a lost childhood"²—may seem unusual and even strange. Sobol, one of Israel's most renowned playwrights, gained fame and popularity with a politically conscious repertory of provocative and iconoclastic plays such as *Ghetto*, *The Palestinian Woman*, and *The Jerusalem Syndrome*. These plays shook the collective consciousness, and undermined his position as Artistic Director of the Haifa Municipal Theater as well, forcing him into a period of temporary exile.

In *Village*, Sobol looks back at his childhood, drawing on the images and characters of his native village of Tel Mond, among the orange orchards of the plain of Sharon. The idyllic atmosphere of the village is evoked by the hero of the play, a narrator with a very naïve attitude, through whom the other characters come back to life and past events are relived. The action is

¹ *Kfar (Village)* was first performed in Tel Aviv in February 1996 by the Gesher Theatre Company, an extraordinary troupe of Russian immigrant actors who came to Israel in 1991 and performed under the inspired direction of Yevgeny Arye. *Village* is the first play commissioned by the company from an Israeli playwright. It is still staged today in Jaffa, where it has met with great success, and it has toured many important theaters in England (Brighton Festival, London, etc.), Australia, Italy, and elsewhere. I wish to thank Mrs. M. Sav'el of Gesher Theatre for all the reviews and materials concerning the performance that she sent me. Unless otherwise noted, the quotations from the play in this article are from a typewritten English text sent to me by the author. I wish to thank Joshua Sobol for his great kindness

² Sarit Fuchs, "Hayyeha hakefulim shel ha'ez Dizza," *Maariv* (February 16, 1996), 11; Mikhael Ohed, "Halom qasum shemistayyem beveit qevarot," *Tiqshoret Vetarbut* (February 9, 1996), 7.

set in the context of the crucial years, drenched with blood and tears, of World War II, and more precisely the years from 1942 to 1947. The advance of Rommel and his Afrika Corps, evoked in the dialogues between the protagonists, looms threateningly throughout the play. The imminent battle of El-Alamein, on whose outcome the survival of the small, defenseless Jewish population of the Yishuv depends, suggests heroic actions, intended to emulate the sacrifice of Masada to the minds of the adult characters who are active exponents of the Haganah. The play closes with the resolution of the United Nations of November 1947 decreeing the division of British Palestine and the long-awaited creation of the State of Israel. In the village, persons who are antithetical in origin and especially political creed coexist peacefully. Among the villagers there are some emblematic exponents of the Yishuv, the farmers, ardent followers of the Socialist Zionist movement, including the remarkable figure of a grandmother who, as she plucks a hen or eviscerates a fish, has somebody read Lenin to her. The other characters seem patterned after the stereotypes of the time. Thus, the doctor, of German origin, is the typical *yekke*, wholly devoted to his work, to the point of neglecting his wife. She, in turn, finds consolation in the arms of a British officer, a perfect gentleman who is in love not only with the woman but also with the biblical history of the people of Israel. There is also a cosmopolitan touch, with characters such as the good Arab neighbor, the Italian war prisoners, and a female survivor of the Holocaust.

This almost nostalgic evocation of the past is explained by the author himself:

I tried as much as possible to create a moment of innocence in my own biography and in the history of the country. It wasn't coincidental that I wrote in 1995, at the beginning of the peace process with the Palestinians. It was a moment of wishful thinking. I feel that our existence here is poisoned with too much history, too much politics, too much drama in the bad sense of the word. For me, it was a need to go back to a time when there was more air to breathe.³

A few lines later, Sobol makes his approach clear:

The *Village* starts as an idyllic play but becomes a tragedy. But one which has nothing to do with character or vice, but with history. It invites people to go back to a pre-political moment in their own life, where human relations counted for more than political positions. I knew I was writing a Utopian play.⁴

³ Andy Lavender, "Wishful Non-political Thinking," *The Times* (May 1, 1997), 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*

This radical reaction to the situation in Israel in the first decade of the 1990s, this need to escape from it and ignore it, seeking refuge in the sheltered and picturesque world of childhood, reflects not only the difficulties of the peace process but also the crisis of the founding values of the State of Israel. It was that crisis that eventually led to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995 by a young religious fundamentalist. Sobol, who had an in-depth knowledge of his country, perceived the decline of the Socialist and Zionist ideal and feared the outbreak of a fratricidal war, which he had almost anticipated in *Jerusalem Syndrome*.⁵ In this political context, one should pay attention to some of the stages in the existential journey of the author and of the nation itself, since in both of them a turning point had been reached. Sobol was past his fifties and hence, if we adjust Dante's calculations to contemporary life expectancy, *nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita* (in the midway of the journey of our life). The State of Israel was itself nearing the fiftieth anniversary of its proclamation. The collapse of the dominating ideology and hegemonic culture, of the convictions on which the State had been built, called for a quest for one's roots, for a reconsideration of one's identity in the light of the matter-of-factness of the past.⁶

This phase of reflection, made all the more dramatic by the trauma of Rabin's assassination, called for analyses and investigations and spawned a vast literature characterized by two trends. On the one hand, there were attempts to analyze the present, focusing on the political and social conditions of contemporary Israel, as in an essay by the young sociologist Gadi Taub,⁷ portraying a society where individuals are only concerned with their own personal problems and are reluctant to take part in public life. On the other hand, this complex situation induced scholars to reconsider the "infancy of the nation" with its myths and its utopias,⁸ or to reconstruct the history of the nation with special emphasis

⁵ Following the staging of this play, Sobol was forced to resign from his position as Artistic Director of the Haifa Municipal Theatre (1987).

⁶ On the complex problem of Jewish identity in history and in the Zionist movement in particular, see E. Schweid, *Zionism in a Post-Modern Era* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1996).

⁷ G. Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion: Essays on Contemporary Israeli Culture* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997). In the first chapter, the author, a successful young writer, analyzes Israeli culture. He stresses that literature had been lately concentrating on the private sphere, whereas after the assassination of Rabin there was a new opening of Israeli consciousness to the public dimension.

⁸ See Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

on the ideals of the national movement. A recent study by Anita Shapira, structured as a series of different essays,⁹ provides insight into the social and cultural reality of the utopian world evoked by Sobol's play *Village*. Using the vast and tortuous notion of identity as a common thread, Shapira traces backwards the stages of the ideological apprenticeship of the "New Jew" in a renewed, independent, and sovereign Jewish nation. Shapira defines identity as follows: "An elusive, somewhat hazy concept, hard to define precisely, which lends itself to different interpretations and nuances."¹⁰ In her essay "The Myth of the New Jew,"¹¹ Shapira brings to the surface the aggregate of "contradictory messages: universalism and national particularism, love for humanity and hate for the enemy"¹² that constituted the creed of the young *sabra*. In one of the last chapters, she also analyzes the trend to critically evaluate the present in light of the past.¹³

The events of the 1990s drew the interest of writers, as well as that of historians and sociologists. Several writers used the historical context of Palestine at the time of the British Mandate as an autobiographical key to verify the ideals and expectations of the great national project underway. The following series of examples lays no claim to being exhaustive, but is meant to provide a better defined context for *Village* and its characters by comparing and contrasting it with other works. This synthetic review of works showing analogies with *Village* in their poetic use of fragments of the past will help to outline the features of this yet-to-be codified genre.

According to Hanan Hever,¹⁴ an autobiographical trend emerges in the narrative literature of the 1990s, characterized by works in which the authors reconsider the stages of their spiritual journey and their acquiring of an identity. S. Yizhar is one of these authors. After a thirty-year silence he wrote *Miqdamot* (1992) and *Tsalhavam* (1993), both set in British Palestine. Hever also associates with this trend Yoel Hoffmann's postmodernist writing, defining the latter's novel *Sefer Yoseph* (1988) as a *curriculum vitae* in a parodistic key, reflecting the heavy influence of the Socialist Zionist context.¹⁵ The medium of choice for these writers is a child's voice speak-

⁹ Anita Shapira, *New Jews Old Jews* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155–74.

¹² *Ibid.*, 173.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹⁴ Hanan Hever, *Sifrut shenikhtevah miqan: qitsur hasifrut haYisre'elit* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot Books, 1999), 152–65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

ing in the first person, evoking the past and conjuring a naïve and disarming image of history. The Yishuv, stripped of the emblematic heroic connotations of the Palmach generation, is seen through the innocent eyes of a fragile and defenseless being.¹⁶

Remarkable examples of this trend can be found even in literature for youths, such as the novel *Panther in the Basement* by Amos Oz, who was born in 1939, the same year as Sobol.¹⁷ The story is set in the last years of British domination in Palestine. The momentous events preceding the proclamation of the State and the struggle against the British are seen from the viewpoint of the narrator, a child of urban Jerusalem, full of the typical expectations and inconsistencies of a teenager. We certainly do not breathe here the idyllic and pastoral atmosphere of *Village*; Oz's young protagonist perceives the momentous nature of the events taking place around him from all the signals he picks up in his environment, at home, at school, and even reading the newspaper. The story—which, according to Gilead Morahg,¹⁸ is replete with stereotyped images and clichés—features, like *Village*, the character of a kindly English policeman with an interest in biblical history, who sees biblical heroes in a completely new light, as human beings often agitated by contrasting and upsetting feelings. This "good" Englishman foresees, not without sympathy and pity, the suffering and hardship awaiting the Arabs as the victory of the Jews in the conflict accompanying the end of the British Mandate and the division of Palestine becomes increasingly certain.¹⁹ As Morahg shows, the main purpose of the book is to offer a new perspective on past historical experiences. Oz evokes the national stereotypes of the past, focusing on a period that is especially dear to his heart. According to Morahg, the strength of this "small volume" lies in the fact that it warns the reader against the imaginative paradoxes characterizing the culture of national stereotypes.²⁰

The same historical context—Palestine at the time of the Mandate and the conflict with its rulers—provides the setting for another novel for

¹⁶ The modern secular Jewish and Hebrew literature, which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, has often turned to childhood as a privileged theme. Israeli writers A. Appelfeld and D. Grossman, in their works dealing with the Holocaust, employ children as narrators; see Naomi B. Sokoloff, *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Amos Oz, *Panther bamartef* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995)

¹⁸ Gilead Morahg, "Kohan shel qelisha'ot. Al *Panther bamartef* shel Amos Oz," *Itton* 77 (41) (June 1998): 27–29.

¹⁹ See Oz, *Panther bamartef*, 91; and Morahg "Kohan shel qelisha'ot," 27.

²⁰ See Gilead Morahg and Yoseph Oron, "Alegoryah politit lemevugarim," *Dimui* 12 (21) (1996): 56–61.

youths written by Nava Semel: *Bride on Paper*.²¹ Here, too, the main character is a child, who in this case is dyslexic. The plot is based on true events. The child's older brother contracts fake marriages in Poland to augment the Jewish population in Palestine in spite of the heavy limitations imposed on immigration by the English government. The writer focuses on the rural world, the pride and symbol of the Zionist ideal and of the Yishuv. The characters of course could not but include an Arab, a worker in the employ of the aunt of the young protagonist. He is the child's friend and confidant and is shown in a typically Western romantic and somewhat conventional light, causing the protagonist, the child narrator, to question himself concerning the unsolved problem of a possible peaceful coexistence.²²

Thus, Joshua Sobol's *Village* has a strong connection with the contemporary historical and cultural context.²³ Sobol writes: "It was a microcosm of a multilingual and international society coexisting very peacefully. For me, it is a parable about the possibility of a different way of life in Israel."²⁴ On the one hand, in his evocation of this utopian society Sobol reconstructs the past, idealizing the golden age of the founding fathers. On the other hand, by showing this world through the eyes of a naïve and fragile character, he imbues it with fantastic, often unreal connotations.

The protagonist, Yossi, is characterized by the author as "the eternal child," and his function is to determine the scenic action and the role of the other characters who revolve around him, thereby evoking the historical context. Sobol strongly identifies with the character of Yossi:

I am Yossi. When in my dreams I return to my childhood, I see myself thus and perceive myself thus. My memories have served as materials for me. I grew up with the characters of my play. What I lacked was a distance from them. I had to become an adult to write this play.²⁵

²¹ Nava Semel, *Ishah al haniyar* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996).

²² See Ela Komer, "Od be'Europa . . .," *Kolbo* 29 (3) (1996): 153.

²³ The device of featuring a child as the main character to probe the collective unconscious when dealing with especially delicate matters has distinguished predecessors in theater too. I shall limit myself to mentioning *Gan Riki* (*Riki's Childhood Garden*, 1988) by David Grossman—a rather fierce satire of society in general and Israeli society in particular—and *Hayeled holem* (*The Child Dreams*, 1993) by Hanoach Levin, a new reflection on the Holocaust.

²⁴ David Nathan, "Playwright Joshua Sobol Tells David Nathan How His Decision to Leave Behind the Political Constraints of Israeli Theatre in Favor of Self-Imposed Exile Enabled Him to Produce Some of His Best Work," *Jewish Chronicle* (December 1996), 32.

²⁵ Ohed, "Halom qasum," 7. The translation from the Hebrew text is mine.

Sobol, having achieved a distance allowing him to contemplate himself from an external viewpoint, sets out to rebuild the world of his childhood, or at least its imaginary projection. On the artistic plane, the author's purpose is not autobiographical; rather, he strives to reconstruct the ideal, cosmopolitan, and pacific society in which his hero grew up. In his romantic attempt to revisit the past and bring that world back to life, his interest is focused on the idea. Accordingly, his hero must embody this romantic archetype around which the key characters of that period can revolve and take shape: the good-natured and friendly Arab, the kindly Englishman—not an arrogant dominator and an enemy of the Yishuv—and the Socialist Zionists, who complete the picture. This recreated landscape reflects the author's intentions and wishes.

As a romantic hero in whom the idea prevails, Yossi, the eternal child, loses his autonomy. He is a passive being, shaped by his environment. Hence, the secondary characters have a fundamental role in the drama, imparting strength and credibility to the society illustrated by Sobol.²⁶ The rural world, symbolizing the ideals of the time, is represented with its everyday problems and chores, such as the fertilizing of the fields. It is a haven of pastoral peace, yet threatened by historical reality, epitomized by the continuing advance of Rommel and his troops. The idyllic atmosphere of the village is accentuated by the personification of domestic animals such as the grumbling turkey, who ends up in the pot, and the nanny goat Dizza. The latter, after its death, talks to Yossi and is always near him, especially in his sleep (scene 21)—an image that recalls paintings by Chagall—thus adding to the play's fantastic atmosphere. Yossi's father and mother, and especially his grandmother, embody the ideals of that period, the Socialist Zionist ideals on which Sobol was reared.

This landscape and these theoretical propositions had already been featured in the author's abundant artistic production, as he himself recalls: "The eternal child has a spiritual father in A. D. Gordon in my play *Aḥaron hapo'alim* [*Last of the Workers*]."²⁷ It is in this perspective that the figure of Sa'id, the Arab manure merchant, acquires its meaning. The character is also based on the childhood memories of the author, who remembers him as a frequent guest at the table of his family and a man of noble demeanor.²⁸

Sobol shows this character in a very favorable light, contributing to the general aura of peace and friendship pervading the play. This is

²⁶ On the relationship between the author and the hero, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *L'autore e l'eroe* (Torino: G. Einaudi Editore, 1988), 156–68.

²⁷ Ohed, "Ḥalom qasum," 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

especially evident in “This Year the Manure Is Pure Honey” (scene 4), a comical scene not devoid of irony in which the wily Arab sells manure to the Jewish farmer, Hayyim, Yossi’s father. Behind the laughter and good-natured bickering, however, lurks the protagonist’s dread of the German advance upon Palestine. In this context, the Arab is perceived in two ways: he is both a neighbor and friend and, in a wider historical framework, a representative of a well-defined national current:²⁹

LEAH: It’s got nothing to do with your manure. Today everybody is nervous. There is bad news from the front. If the Germans win the day in El-Alamein, they will invade Eretz Israel.

SA’ID: Never mind. There were Turks, there were Englishmen, there’ll be Germans, Inshallah.

LEAH: No, Hawadja Sa’id, Germans—it’s the end. They’ll kill us all.

SA’ID: No, no! Our people say: the Germans are better than the English.

LEAH: Who says it?

SA’ID: That’s what our wise [people] say, those who understand politics. (12)

The clichés of the good Arab and that of the English gentleman and refined connoisseur of biblical history are also present in Oz’s and Semel’s novels. Their heroes oscillate between two planes, that of imagination and that of crude reality. Sobol has chosen some clichés, some stereotyped images, to make them into a symbol of the utopian and pacific society he is striving to represent.³⁰ On the other hand, the characters of this fantastic world belong to a well-defined historical reality and live under the threat of war and death. An exchange between Ammi, Yossi’s brother, and Dassi, his girlfriend, make this contrast explicit:

AMMI: Dassi, we’re training illegally with illegal weapons. The entire course is illegal. All we need is for the English to get a thread.

DASSI: If you’re [referring] to Captain Drury, then in the first place he doesn’t know any Hebrew. And then my mum says that he adores the Bible, and that supports the Jewish Defense.

AMMI: Hush! . . . Don’t speak about it loudly. (act 2, scene 19)

This scene is a prelude to the Israeli War of Independence and especially to Ammi’s tragic death, which concludes the play. Here, too, the author is staging his personal experience, the tragedy of Tel

²⁹ See Shapira, *New Jews Old Jews*.

³⁰ See the interviews quoted above; Lavender, “Wishful Non-political Thinking.”

Mond, his home village. Sobol specifies in an interview that while he had no elder brother, he did know many youths born in 1929–1930 who lost their lives during the conflict of 1948.³¹ This detail shows how Sobol's autobiographic narration is filtered through many perceptions and events. In this context, he often has recourse to emblematic characters to give life to a well-defined image of the Yishuv. Thus, in his *Village* there is also a German immigrant, a typical *yekke*, Mrs. Dankeschoen, a former opera singer, now a peddler. The connection of the text with its historical context is assured by the appearance of a survivor of the Holocaust who describes to a dumbstruck audience the massacre of her family by the Nazis (scene 20). The presence of two Italian prisoners of war in several scenes also serves as a reminder of the horrors of World War II looming beyond the fairy-tale atmosphere of the village microcosm.

Death seems to be ever present in the scenic action; indeed, it seems almost to regulate its rhythm. The curtain rises on a graveyard where the characters take shape and become animated one by one, thanks to Yossi, who by naming them and describing them calls them back to life. The final death of the she-goat Dizza and of his brother brings the hero back to his initial task of burying the dead in the cemetery of his village. Thus, the play has a cyclical structure, resembling that of *Ghetto*.³²

Beyond this multiplicity of messages, in which the real merges with the fantastic and autobiography is blended with the experience of an entire community, one can perceive that the purpose of the author is to stress a presumed autobiographical element, as many of his interviews, including some cited here, bear out. Thus, the core of the meaning of the play can be found in scene 9, entitled "Yossi's Adventures," in the final monologue. The scene revolves around the meeting of Yossi and Berman, identified as a "teacher and writer" in the list of characters, a chronicler of sorts who narrates the stories of the "true heroes" of the Yishuv. After a talk with him, Yossi confides to his uncle Yitzhak that one day Berman will publish a book about Yossi. The uncle retorts that Berman will never write a book about him, because Yossi will never become a hero. An emblematic definition of Yossi's figure follows:

³¹ Ohed, "Halom qasum."

³² The play *Ghetto*, staged in 1984, begins with the narration of a puppeteer who was present at the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto and ends with the reappearance of the same character. On the influence of Pirandello on this play, see my article "The Play in the Play: The Pirandello Trilogy and Sobol's Last Plays," *Itton* 77 (94–95) (November–December 1987): 12–14.

YITZHAK: Because you are what you are: Yossi. And will always be Yossi. Even if people go to the moon, you're going to stay Yossi. That's why Berman will never be able to write anything about you. You understand? (scene 9)

Uncle Yitzhak imagines this writer, Berman, writing the book *Yossi's Adventures* and falling asleep on the page after having written down just the title. Then comes an imaginative paradox:

... as he sleeps, the wind opens the window and sweeps away the sheet of paper, up in the sky, above the clouds and beyond the sea to a far-away land. The wind carries the sheet and blows it through an open window onto a table in front of which a man is sitting. This man picks up the sheet and reads *Yossi's Adventures*, and says: "Yes, of course, why didn't I think of this before!" He takes a pen and writes the adventures of Yossi.

YOSSI: What does he write?

YITZHAK: Do you want to know?

YOSSI: Yes.

YITZHAK: So do I. So let's wait.³³

Sobol feels the need to set this evocation of his childhood in the context of the dawn of Israel. His purpose is to give life to a past peopled with characters having strong spiritual and material ties to the land and the ideals of the nation, an image that he contrasts with the dullness of the present. The adventures of Yossi, the antihero *par excellence*, offer the public a different, renovated image of an over-exalted and now criticized past. A joking expression recurs often in *Village*: "where is it easier to get to: tomorrow or yesterday?" (scene 8: "Tomorrow or Yesterday," 64). This expression epitomizes the playwright's message: you can get to the future by reconsidering the past.

³³ This passage is missing in the English translation sent to me by Sobol. I translated it from the Hebrew text of Joshua Sobol's *Kfar* (Israel: Or Am, 1996), 37.



◆

**WHY DID THE RIVER TURN RED?
ON THE STORY "ORSHA" BY GERSHON SCHOFMANN**

Avner Holtzman

Gershon Schofmann, a prominent Hebrew prose writer of the first half of the twentieth century, was a master of the concise, well-shaped, miniature short story. The Schofmann story at its peak is a condensed aesthetic structure, and its thick fabric consists of a web of motifs and narrative patterns. Symbolic objects are masterfully interwoven into his fictional world, accompanied by witty conceptual observations and culminating in sharp, surprising endings that bring the narrative sequence to a remarkable closure.

This structural density does not blur the basic simplicity of the stories, since the plot and figures are sketched in clear, discernible contours. The lucid, "thin" language of Schofmann's prose, devoid of literary embellishment or a heavy allusive burden, makes it quite accessible for readers nowadays despite the dramatic transformation that the Hebrew language has undergone since he wrote his first stories a hundred years ago.

Yet, if there is a chance of reviving Schofmann's work for Hebrew readers today, it does not necessarily lie in its structural sophistication or linguistic qualities.¹ In my opinion, such a chance lies mostly in Schofmann's overall outlook on the world. This ironic, provocative, and merciless outlook exposes the naked selfish lusts underlying most forms of human behavior. The implied author of Schofmann's stories creates a fictional world governed by harsh jungle laws, its inhabitants struggling for survival or power. In this world people are typically related as hunter and prey. Schofmann does not pretend to commit himself to accepted human morality. On the contrary, his fictional characters are hypnotized by power and despise weakness. They

¹ The most recent attempt to revive Schofmann's fiction for contemporary readers was made by the writer Haim Be'er, who edited and published the book *Shalekhet (Fall of Leaves)* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1994), a selection of stories from Schofmann's Austrian period.

admire masculine and feminine beauty and are swept by erotic obsessions that override any consideration of loyalty, morality, or simple human compassion.

The Schofmann protagonist is mostly a weak, failing personality, full of existential anxiety, who generally achieves merely second-rate satisfaction. He fulfills his yearning for power by clinging to strong, authoritative figures (a boxer, a hangman, a court officer, a well-rooted farmer, a post office manager). He derives erotic energy from observing other people's torments and death or by watching the flourishing beauty of girls destined for others. Thus, through a cold, alienated perspective, Schofmann strips his figures of their moralistic masks, exposing the egotistical motives that drive them unconsciously or half-consciously.

Schofmann's narrative world is not as detached and isolated as it may initially seem. He develops features inherited from his literary ancestors, such as Mendele Mokher Seforim's cruel, satirical portrayal of Jewish society or the admiration of earthly physical powers typically found in the stories of M. Y. Berdyczewski. His own style has been indirectly echoed by major Israeli writers. Essential views and sensibilities of Schofmann are found, for example, in the dramatic world of Hanoach Levin, founded on power relations between dominant, humiliating figures and their subordinate counterparts, eager to please and to serve. We may also link Schofmann's protagonists with the figures portrayed in A. B. Yehoshua's early work: the obsessive but weak creatures who rejoice in destruction and catastrophe and dedicate themselves to the service of meaningless totalitarian structures. Consequently, Schofmann's stories are not a sealed chapter in the history of Hebrew literature. The original set of values they contain and the cruel, penetrating light they shed on certain aspects of human nature may continue to interest readers and writers in the future.

The principal worldview described above may be found in every corner of the rich narrative world Schofmann created in seventy years of literary activity. At the same time each of his works is rooted in a certain historical context and connected to specific autobiographical circumstances. The deep interrelations between his stories and their time were illuminated by Nurit Govrin in her thorough monograph of Schofmann's life and work:

Every stage of his life, from horizon to horizon, from Eastern Europe through Western Europe to the concluding biographical stage in Eretz Israel, is also a piece of Jewish history and a reflection of the changing national fate. His very personal point of view represents the collective destiny and binds the various events together through

the life of this writer who expressed them directly and indirectly in his work.²



Indeed, a full understanding of any of Schofmann's stories depends on a combined scrutiny of all three factors described above: the aesthetic aspects of its composition, the way it relates to the overall concepts of the writer, and the way it is connected to the general and personal historical reality from which it emerges. This triple combination is the basis for the following discussion of the story.

אורשה

אמש ראיתי בחלומי את עיר מולדתי. הרחובות, המשעולים, הפרכרים—
 כמו שהיו בימי ילדותי. דממה ותוגה; אותה התוגה האיומה, שאנו
 טועמים לעתים אך בחלום.
 הכל מסביב כמו אז. דבר לא נשתנה. ורק הדניפר החוצה את העיר—
 אדום.

Orsha

Last night I saw my hometown in my dream. The streets, the lanes, the suburbs—just as they were in my childhood. Stillness and grief; the same dreadful grief we sometimes taste only in a dream. Everything around is like *then*. Nothing has changed. Only the Dnepr crossing the town—is *red*.³

"Orsha" is the shortest story included in Schofmann's collected writings—only thirty-six words in the Hebrew original. It is divided into two short paragraphs, each containing three sentences. It consists of a simple vocabulary, and its syntactic arrangement is remarkably clear.

What can such a minimalist text contain? Not much, seemingly. Only a short, simple report of a dream, in which the dreamer envisions a few sights of his hometown. Nevertheless, even in the first reading one can feel the rhythmic and musical qualities of the linguistic sequence, relating

² Nurit Govrin, *Me'ofeq el ofeq: G. Schofmann hayyav vytsirato* (Tel Aviv: Yahdav; Tel Aviv University, 1982), 1:11. For an introductory essay in English, see Nurit Govrin, *Alienation and Regeneration* (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1989), 52–62.

³ "Orsha," *Kol kitvei G. Schofmann* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, Am Oved, 1960), 3:172. The emphasized words are in the original.

it to the realm of poetry. A rhythmic tension is discernible between short and long sentences and in the subdivision of the longer sentences into shorter and longer segments. The punctuation indicates carefully planned short pauses of silence between the sentences and within them. There is also a clear tendency for internal rhyming: *hamisholim-haparvarim; moladeti-yalduti; demamah-ayumah; halom-adom*.

A deeper observation reveals that like many other Schofmann stories, this composition consists of an antithetical construction, namely, the arrangement of thematic materials in patterns of binary oppositions.⁴ Despite the brevity of the story, it contains at least four overt oppositions that systematize the narrated world, in addition to some hidden, implied ones.

Ontological opposition between reality and dream. The real world includes the dreamer's childhood reminiscences. Yet, they are transformed by the typical surrealist logic of the dream. This logic allows the river to change color and turn red. The whole fictional world exists in the interim between reality and fantasy.

Temporal opposition between present and past. The starting point of the story is a situation in the present, from which the narrator reports of his dream, but the contents of the dream draws on past memories. The dreamer is evidently a mature man, trying to visualize an image of his hometown as it is in the present, after many years, in comparison with the sights he remembers from the past.

Spatial opposition between here and there. The narrating technique and the manner of remembrance imply that the dreamer is now far away from his hometown. His point of view shapes the narrated space between two poles. He is now *here*, dreaming of another place being *there*. Otherwise there would have been no need for the remembrance process aimed at reconstructing a visual portrait of that place.

Narrative opposition between change and stagnation. Most of the story strives to emphasize the unchangeability of the town, despite the deep agony encompassing it. This impression is overturned in the last sentence, practically in the last word of the story, marking the astonishing, unexplained metamorphosis of the river waters. The change of color, the narrator hints, conceals a major vicissitude in the town's life and fate. The narrative opposition is constructed by the sudden surprising ending (a

⁴ See Reuven Kritz, *Taoniyot hasippur* (Qiryat Motzkin: Purah, 1976), 157–229.

favorite Schofmann technique) shedding new light on the entire fictional reality. The surprising word "red" is not only the last word of the story but the most outstanding semantically, distinguishing itself like a strong stain of paint against the gloomy, blurry, grayish atmosphere characterizing the whole fictional space.

Following the identification of the oppositional construction, we are now ready to sum up our impressions and assumptions. Supposedly, the narrator is now far away from his hometown, which he left many years ago. Now he is flooded with anxiety and sorrow. This atmosphere is explicitly marked by the description of "dreadful grief" prevailing in the dream, as well as by the threatening metamorphosis of the river.

But why did the river turn red, and why is there such a gloomy silence in the streets, lanes, and suburbs of the town? At this point the reader may pay attention to the strange fact that the dream contains only inanimate objects. No human beings are seen anywhere. The town in the dream is empty and deserted, a ghost town. Therefore, no sound is heard, and the space is full of "grief," a recurring word in the very short text, the second time with the strong epithet "dreadful." The sentences "Everything around is like then" and "Nothing has changed" thus take on an essential ironic quality, bearing in mind that only the setting remained as it was. But a town consists, above all, of its people, not merely streets and buildings, especially in childhood memories. In this respect, everything has changed because all the people are gone.

Is there a connection between the absence of the people and the red color of the river? In its minimalistic, restrained way the story invites the reader to fill the gap and to arrive at independent conclusions. For the Jewish reader a river turned red evokes one association, the first of the ten biblical plagues (Exodus 7:14–25), and there can be no doubt that Schofmann meant to lead the reader to that specific context. The water turned to blood accounts for the disappearance of the people. The blood then might be theirs due to a great catastrophe that was cast upon them.



At this stage the reader may feel that a close reading of the story, sensitive as it is, cannot suffice for tracing its exact intentions. Too much information is missing, and it has to be sought elsewhere. The title "Orsha," the name of the Belorussian town where Gershon Schofmann was born in 1880, implies that the story should be read and interpreted in a specific historical, autobiographical context. Its decoding therefore depends on identifying the exact circumstances in which it was written. Schofmann did not make it easy for his readers: when he published his collected stories he did not accompany them with original publication

dates. Yet, the detailed bibliographical appendix in Nurit Govrin's monograph indicates that the story was first printed in the Hebrew daily *Davar* on August 29, 1941. A year later it was included in Schofmann's book *Beterem arga'ah (Before Pacifying)*.⁵

This publication date illuminates the story like a strong projector, immediately clearing the fog around it. Not only does it situate "Orsha" in the context of World War II and the Holocaust, a context the reader may have already figured out, but it also places it in a very specific time slot within that duration. In August 1941 the German invasion into the Soviet Union was in its full momentum. This move, starting on June 22, 1941, marks the beginning of the second stage of World War II, together with the first massive murders of East European Jews. The town of Orsha that lies on the banks of the Dnepr in the Vitebsk district of White Russia was occupied in mid-July 1941, only three weeks after the German invasion started.⁶ Schofmann's story was written six weeks after the town was taken over, while the Germans were establishing their reign of terror there, exactly as they did in thousands of other towns.

Schofmann himself had left his hometown forty years before, at the age of twenty-one. In 1904 he left Russia, and until the end of the 1930s he lived in Galicia, Vienna, and in a small Austrian village where he settled in 1921. All those years he maintained his contacts with his relatives in Orsha through correspondence. The story "Orsha" was written in Tel Aviv, where he had settled with his family in July 1938 after fleeing from Nazi-governed Austria almost at the last moment. From Tel Aviv Schofmann followed the dreadful events occurring in his East European childhood environment. The story was presumably printed a few days after it had been written, because Schofmann always aimed his writing for immediate publication.

From the current reports of the military scene in Russia, Schofmann could have known that Orsha was already under German occupation, probably guessing the terrible distress of its Jewish inhabitants, including his close family. In this respect he resembled most of the Jewish community in Eretz Israel (the Yishuv) who had left parents and families in Eastern Europe, whose fate they could have imagined even without solid information.

This historical situation may clarify the state of mind from which the story "Orsha" emerged: deep anxiety, suppression, and denial, fearing the worst without any clear knowledge of the actual situation "there." Indeed,

⁵ G. Schofmann, "Orsha," *Beterem arga'ah* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1942), 130.

⁶ See Yehuda Slutsky, "Orsha," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 12:1479–80.

a story like this, which sways between horrifying guesses and refusal to believe the bitter truth, could have been written only during that period of uncertainty, before the determined revelation of the massive, methodical extermination of European Jewry. Thus, it is not surprising that Schofmann chose to shape his vision of Orsha in the framework of a dream, or more precisely, a nightmare. One may even dare to assume that the story is based on a real dream the author had during that period, in which he saw Orsha as a ghost town whose people had mysteriously disappeared.

When Schofmann published his story, the Jewish community of Orsha still existed. It was only at the end of 1941 that thousands of Jews were assembled in the town cemetery, where they were shot and buried. This sequence of events gives the story a prophetic-like quality, as a dark vision of future events. The implied and restrained nature of the narration reflects the inability of Jews in Eretz Israel at the time to grasp the magnitude of the German premeditated scheme later known as the Final Solution. The actual awareness of this plan was explicitly expressed as late as November 1942, when the executive of the Jewish Agency issued an official statement concerning the overall methodical plan to liquidate European Jewry.

Placing the story in its historical context exposes additional dimensions of the biblical allusion mentioned above. Schofmann constructed an ironic confrontation between the situation he described and the story of Exodus, the plague of blood being one of its components. The river of the biblical story is turned into blood as a first warning sign for the Egyptians who refused to free their Israelite slaves. The tenth plague again involves blood, which is daubed on the doorposts and lintels of the Israelite homes. It thus serves as a discriminating mark that grants them immunity against the slaughter of the firstborn. In both plagues the blood is not human, and its appearance is part of a divine scheme destined to save the Jews from their oppressors. In Schofmann's story, however, the blood metonymically represents the slaughtered Jews, deprived of any suggestion of heavenly redemption. The reversed figurative use of blood is, no doubt, a protest against the God who did not come to save His people this time. Schofmann reacts here like other Hebrew writers. Some of the most prominent Hebrew poems on the Holocaust derive their power from the same ironic, contradictory use of biblical redemption stories, thus exposing the collapse of faith in a God who withheld His powers and abandoned His believers.⁷

⁷ For example, "Yitshaq" ("Isaac"), by Amir Gilboa; "Mikol ha'amim" ("Of All the Nations"), by Natan Alterman; "Avi" ("My Father"), by Tuvia Ruebner; "Ketonet ish hamahanot" ("The Camp-Man's Robe"), by Avner Treinin; "Edut" ("Testimony"), by Dan Pagis. Most of these poems were included in Natan

Today, some sixty years after the story's first publication, it can assume a new context. For reasons much too complex to discuss here, the beginning of the 1980s saw the advent of a new awareness of the Holocaust in the Israeli public arena. One of the highly sensitive issues of this public, scholarly, and literary discourse was the problematic attitude of the Jews in Palestine toward the Holocaust during its occurrence and shortly afterwards. Did the organized institutions of the Yishuv do everything in their power to save as many Jews as possible? Did the commitment to Zionist causes contradict the dedication to rescue attempts? What was the position of David Ben-Gurion and other Zionist leaders, and how did it affect the steps taken (or not taken) in this matter? Did the atmosphere of Yishuv life during the years of World War II reflect full awareness of the tragedy of the Jewish people, or did the Jews of Eretz Israel choose to suppress and deny it? How did the Hebrew press deal with the horrifying news from Europe? To what extent was the voice of the intellectuals heard? How were survivors of the Holocaust received in Eretz Israel immediately after the war?

These questions lay at the core of an ongoing, intensive discussion in Israeli public and academic spheres.⁸ Broadly speaking, the participants of the debate can be divided into two rival camps. On the one hand stands a blunt critical approach that tends to blame the Yishuv and its leadership for concentrating entirely on Zionist interests, thus reducing its commitment for Jewish solidarity. On the other hand is a more complex approach that attempts to reconstruct the conditions and limitations within which the Zionist leadership operated and to examine the practical possibilities open to them at the time.

Several Israeli writers have participated intensively in this discussion. Some of them have even transferred it to the artistic sphere, dedicating fictional works to the immediate imprint of the Holocaust on Eretz Israel. Shulamit Hareven, for example, wrote a story condemning the alienating and disbelieving attitude toward a young boy, the only survivor of his family, who arrives in Eretz Israel before the war has ended.⁹ Hanoch

Gross, Itamar Yaoz-Kest, and Rina Klinov, eds., *Hasho'ah bashirah ha'ivrit: mi'vhar* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1974).

⁸ See, for example, Anita Shapira, "The History of the Mythology: Outlines for the Historiography on Ben-Gurion and the Holocaust" [Hebrew], *Alpayim* 18 (1999): 24–53. Beyond its proclaimed subject this essay reflects the entire historiographical debate on the issue of the Yishuv and the Holocaust.

⁹ Shulamit Hareven, "The Witness" [Hebrew], in *Bedidut* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1981), 97–127.

Bartov composed a comprehensive autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, taking place between 1939 and 1943, that includes bitter self-criticism against the hero, a thirteen- to seventeen-year-old youngster. This hero is so absorbed by the delightful experiences of his flourishing youth that he is completely unaware of the horrors other Jewish youngsters are experiencing elsewhere at the same time, although the relevant information is easily accessible.¹⁰

Schofmann's story belongs to another group of literary works, composed in Eretz Israel during the war by writers of Eastern European origin. These writers were intimately acquainted with the Holocaust territories in which they had all left relatives and friends.¹¹ In this respect Schofmann resembles dozens of other Hebrew writers who had no intention of alienating themselves from the harsh realities, striving, instead, to express their views and feelings toward the horrible events. Each sought to overcome the mental, moral, and aesthetic barriers surrounding this unique subject, shaping a personal formula for that purpose.¹²

Schofmann's solution in "Orsha" is more complex than it may initially seem, due to the hidden paradoxes underlying it. On the one hand, the writer fulfills his moral duty and expresses a deep empathy toward his townspeople. On the other hand, he plants significant spaces of silence within the short text, thus forcing the reader to realize that a genuine expression lies beyond the power of words. He emphasizes his deep sense of belonging to his hometown, where he is intimately related to every corner. At the same time, he recognizes the ultimate barrier currently separating him from his townspeople. He has already arrived at the safe shore while they are helplessly awaiting an awful destiny. Perhaps shaping the story as a dream implies his inability to grasp what they are going through from his comfortable bed in Tel Aviv, despite his genuine feelings of empathy toward them. The story thus contains a definite element of self irony and self condemnation.

Yet, beyond the empathy, the irony, and the paradoxes, "Orsha" essentially expresses total helplessness, reflected first and foremost in the narrative situation. Lying in bed at night, tormented by a bitter nightmare,


¹⁰ Hanoach Bartov, *Regel ahat bahuts (Halfway Out)* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1994). See also his collection of essays: *Ani lo hatsabar hamitologi (I Am Not the Mythological Sabra)* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1995).

¹¹ See Hana Yaoz, *Hanigun vehatse'aqah: mehqar beshirat hasho'ah shel meshorerei shenot ha'arba'im* (Tel Aviv: Eked, 1985).

¹² See Nurit Govrin, "From Their Own Flesh and Blood from Afar: Responses to the Holocaust by Hebrew Writers Who Were Not 'There'" [Hebrew], *Zafon* 4 (1996): 209–30. The article includes a short discussion of Schofmann's "Orsha."

the narrator exposes his ultimate passivity, knowing that even his loudest outcry will make no difference, let alone reduce the agony of his tormented brothers and sisters. This, in my opinion, is the real message conveyed in the story and the essence of the bitter truth it reflects. As many historians admit, even if the Yishuv had totally committed itself and invested all its resources in rescue efforts, it is doubtful whether anything could really have been done. Yet the outcry had to be heard.

As for Schofmann, he managed to choose thirty-six simple words and shape them in a condensed aesthetic structure, consisting of numerous oppositions, ironies, and paradoxes, biblical and autobiographical allusions, patterns of sound and rhythm, tensions between overt and covert meanings, and interplay between words and silence. The complexity of this tiny composition enabled him to reflect and express in sharp precision and penetrating understanding the exact essence of his time and place: Eretz Israel in August 1941, gazing with fear and rage and, above all, a profound sense of powerlessness, at the coming apocalypse.



◆

A PRAYER OF HOMECOMING
BY ABRAHAM SUTZKEVER

Ruth R. Wisse

שהחיינו

ווען כ'וואָלט ניט זײַן מיט דיר בײַנאַנד,
ניט אָטעמען דאָס גליק און וויי דאָ, —
ווען כ'וואָלט ניט ברענען מיטן לאַנד,
וואַלקאַניש לאַנד אין חבֿלי-לידה;
ווען כ'וואָלט אַצינד, נאָך מײַן עקדה,
ניט מיטגעבוירן מיטן לאַנד,
ווי יעדער שטיינדל איז מײַן זיידע —
געזעטיקט וואָלט מיך ניט דאָס ברויט,
דאָס וואַסער ניט געשטילט מײַן גומען.
ביז אויסגעאַנגען כ'וואָלט פֿאַרגויט,
און בלויז מײַן בענקשאַפֿט וואָלט געקומען ...

Shehekiyonu

*ven kh'volt nit zayn mit dir baynand,
nit otemen dos glik un vey do,—
ven kh'volt nit brenen mitn land,
vulkanish land in khevley-leyde;
ven kh'volt atsind, nokh mayn akeyde,
nit mitgeboyrn mitn land,
vu yeder shteyndl iz mayn zeyde—
gezetikt volt mikh nit dos broyt,
dos vaser nit geshtilt mayn gumen,
biz oysgegangen kh'volt fargoy't,
un bloyz mayn benkshaft volt gekumen ...*

Were I not at one with you
here, breathing joy and woe,

were I not ablaze with the Land,
 volcanic Land in its birth-throes,
 after being sacrificed, there,
 were I not reborn with the Land
 whose every pebble is my ancestor—
 no bread would nourish me,
 no water cool my gums,
 till I would perish, turned gentile,
 and my longing would come on its own...¹

The opening poem of Abraham Sutzkever's "In fayervogn" ("In the Chariot of Fire," 1952) and of volume 2 of his *Collected Poems* is an untitled lyric of eleven lines that stands out, even from among Sutzkever's remarkable opus, for its compressed thought and feeling.² First published in 1948, it appears in his books dated 1947, the year the Sutzkevers and their infant daughter arrived in the Land of Israel aboard the *Patria*, the ship carrying refugees who had survived the war. The dating of a work, whether historically accurate or not, is a way of demonstrating intentionality. Sutzkever had dated this work not on the precise day of its composition, as in the case of some of his ghetto poems, but to mark the year of his *aliyah*.³

From his beginnings as a poet in Vilna in the mid-1930s, Sutzkever had thought of himself in legendary terms. In 1915, two years after his birth, his parents had fled with him from their native Smorgon to Omsk in Western Siberia, and there they lived for almost seven years until his mother, by then a widow, took the family to live in Vilna, the city nearest her former home. Sutzkever's maiden poems cast Siberia as a snowbound birthplace of poetry as though the child of imagination had been formed by nature itself; the powers of poetry had harnessed some

¹ I am grateful to Billy Wisse for his help in composing this literal translation.

² Abraham Sutzkever, "In fayervogn," *Di goldene keyt* (1952): 9; *Collected Poems* (Tel Aviv: Tribute Committee, 1963), 2:7. History of publication (item 448) in Abraham Nowersztern (Novershtern), *Abraham Sutzkever Bibliography* (Tel Aviv: Israel Books, 1976), 77.

³ For bio-bibliography, see Abraham Novershtern, *Abraham Sutzkever on His Seventieth Birthday: Exhibition Catalogue* (Jerusalem: The Jewish National and University Library, November 1983); *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Yiddish Literature* [Yiddish] (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1965), 6:355–67; Benjamin Harshav, "Introduction" to *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose*, trans. Barbara and Benjamin Harshav (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 3–23. Anecdotal information may be found in Joseph Leftwich, *Abraham Sutzkever: Partisan Poet* (New York, South Brunswick, London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1971).

greater force within the universe that, in turn, protected the poet who could do justice to the natural world. Sutzkever retained this knowledge of himself through the 1930s and into the ghetto, where his poetry withstood the leveling humiliation of Nazi rule. In the ghetto, he and his wife Freydko were both members of the FPO, the United Partisan Organization, and before the liquidation of the ghetto they escaped through the sewers to join the Soviet partisans in the forests. When some of Sutzkever's verse reached the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee through a partisan courier, a small plane was sent to bring him and his wife to Moscow. Ilya Ehrenburg's article welcoming the Jewish survivor in *Pravda* of March 1944 was the Soviet Union's first public disclosure about the Final Solution, and it turned the poet into a living symbol of Jewish resistance. Thus, Sutzkever's experience of poetry as saving grace could only have been strengthened by the war that left him alive to speak for the voiceless. He was chosen to testify for Russian Jewry at the Nuremberg Trials. As repatriated Poles, the Sutzkevers were allowed to leave the Soviet Union in 1946, and having made their way via Vilna and Lodz to Paris, came to the Land of Israel the following year.

One of the first things Sutzkever did upon his arrival was to convince the *Histadrut* (Israel's Trade Union Federation) to sponsor a quarterly of Yiddish literature called *Di goldene keyt* (*The Golden Chain* [of Jewish continuity]). The poem before us was published just prior to this in a Munich weekly of the Displaced Person Camps, *Af der vakh*, an organ of *Hashomer Hatsa'ir*, that was trying to inspire immigration to Palestine and affiliation with its kibbutz movement.⁴ The poem appeared as one of a trio of short lyrics on the same theme of arriving in the Land of Israel and was designated "specially for" the paper, although it was republished shortly after in other literary journals. Sutzkever was exceptionally prolific after the war, publishing in Yiddish papers and periodicals of various political and apolitical hues, sometimes sending the same work to different publications in different countries. This same lyric appeared, still untitled, in the Tel Aviv *Undzers* (1949) as part of the cycle, "Erets Yisroel erd" ("Soil of the Land of Israel"). When Sutzkever published it, slightly altered, in book form, he placed it under the section heading, "*Shehekhiyonu*."⁵

⁴ This poem first appeared in *Af der vakh* (*On Guard*) 50 (November 25, 1948). Ayelet Kuper Margoloth provides background for the topic in "Yiddish Periodicals Published by Displaced Persons 1946-1949" (Ph.D. diss., Magdalen College, Oxford, 1997).

⁵ In *Af der vakh* 50 (November 25, 1948): 13; in *Undzers* (1949): 8.

Although Jewish law prescribes no benediction for the occasion, Jews had adopted the custom of offering up the *Shehekhionu* prayer of thanksgiving upon first reaching the Land of Israel. The prayer turns on three verbs of sustenance: Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has kept us in life (*shehekhionu*), and has preserved us (*vekiymonu*), and has enabled us to reach this season (*vehigiyonu lazman haze*). The tripled verbs make this benediction that much more emphatic, while leaving open the occasion on which it is uttered. Sutzkever's poem, in the first-person singular rather than plural, maintains the tripled structure of the *Shehekhionu* in three parallel clauses but renders its verbs negatively, in the conditional tense. The adverb *nit* (not) appears once in each of the first three lines, twice at the start of a line, and six times in all, turning each expression of relief into a qualifying clause and lending improbability to the whole experience of survival that the poet extols. Three times the supplicant says "If I were not...", and each time the registered intensity of breathing, blazing, and being reborn are placed in jeopardy and the odds tipped so sharply to the side of what-might-not-have-been that we are made to feel the precariousness rather than the certainty of this moment of resurrection. To be sure, the newcomer has arrived. He is there with the Land; he is sated and restored and able to give praise. But nothing is left of the simple declarative experience of the *Shehekhionu* Jew who thanks his God and counts his blessings. The grammatical structure of this poem informs us that its author is engaged in a double reckoning of being simultaneously where he is and where he is not, of having—yet not having—survived. The poem is written from the perspective of someone for whom the conditional tense has become the condition of existence, who cannot take for granted what he has come to bless.

To whom is this poem addressed? In its original version, the poet is clearly speaking as one of a group of newly landed immigrants: "*Ven khvult nit zayn mit aykh baynand, / nit filn zelbn glik un vey do* (Were I not here with you [plural], not feeling the same joy and pain)."⁶ The shift to a singular "thou" and deletion of *zelbn* (the same) constitute the most significant changes Sutzkever made to the poem, substituting an intimate and perhaps even divine partnership for the original social cohort. The unnamed addressee is precious and familiar to the poet in only one capacity, for its presence there with him in the Land, as a cohabitant, a co-celebrant, and for no other known

⁶ Though technically, *aykh* could be the formal second-person singular, it would make no sense in this context.

faculty or power.⁷ In fact, the final version veers away from the second-person singular to the objectified subject the way a husband sings the praises of the *eyshe khayil* (Woman of Valor) indirectly, referring to her in the third person, although the object of his adoration is right there before him. This reading of the poem as an address to the Land of Israel is borne out by the rhyme of *baynand* with *land* in lines three and six, each time following the identical conjunction “with you,” “with (you) the Land,” “with (you) the Land.” The Land here occupies the lexical position usually held by the beloved human or divine presence. Yiddish has no capital letters: I have capitalized the Land to indicate that it stands throughout for the Land of Israel.

The firm yet irregular rhyming pattern of the first seven lines conveys both the ecstasy of being at one with the Land, *baynand/mitn land*, and the complications of this arrangement. The rhyme turns irregular (not *ababab* but *ababbab*), and the rhythm and phrasing also change after the first quatrain. While the *a* rhyme makes its point through repetition, the *b* rhyme is dazzlingly intricate, demonstrating the rich heritage of language and reference that the poet offers up in thanks. Yet the understated simplicity of the opening rhyme anchors all the rest. While all the clauses that build to the climax of the final lines are conditional, everything else in this poem is subordinate to the fateful pairing of *baynand* with the Land that is never called by its name. The complexity of the rest of the poem sets off the plain necessity and wondrous mystery of having been reunited with the beloved, complementary object.

It was the brilliant *b* rhyme that first drew critical attention to this lyric. In his pioneering study of Yiddish rhyme, Uriel Weinreich singled out the four linked end rhymes—*dos glik un vey do* (the happiness and pain here), *kheve-leyde* (birth pangs), *akeyde* (reference to the binding of Isaac), and *zeyde* (grandfather)—as an example of the “unprecedented subtlety” of Yiddish verse. Commenting on the way the composite rhyme *ey do* brings out the “Hebrewness” of the following two rhyme words, which in Ashkenazic Hebrew likewise end in *eydo* (pronounced *eyde* in Yiddish), Weinreich writes:

This “Hebrewness” which would not be apparent in a phonetically exact rime scheme, is kept from going out of control by the incontrovertible

⁷ I will use the term “the poet” rather than “the speaker” to represent the voice of the poem. By “the poet” I do not mean the person Abraham Sutzkever—though the biographical details dovetail with the facts of his life—but rather “the poet” as one might say “the *paytan*,” as he appears in the poem: the speaker in the poem is clearly a poet.

Yiddish *e* of the last rime word, *zeyde*. But once the two middle rime words are viewed, under the pressure of the rime, as genetically Hebrew, the *-e* note of the same rime scheme in turn underscores their Yiddishness; more generally, it suggests the “mergedness” of the Hebrew component in Yiddish and, symbolically, of the Zion theme in Diaspora culture. Now this unity of Zion and the Diaspora is precisely the burden of Sutzkever’s book! To render it so completely by a single rime chord of the overture is a stroke of genius.⁸

Weinreich notes how the etymology of Yiddish thickens the historical weight of the theme. To the same end, he might also have pointed out that the link of *vey do*, from the Germanic source *weh da*, with *zeyde*, from the Slavic word for grandfather, *dziadek*, further demonstrates the creative amalgamation that constitutes the Yiddish language. Playing off the componental features of a language, which is many a great poet’s stock in trade, Sutzkever reinforces the thematic substance of the poem itself. These rhymes are part of the process through which the poem is transformed from private into national utterance, reintegrating the whole geographic and developmental reach of Yiddish into this poem about national homecoming.

The semantic trail of these rhymed words is equally rewarding. The destruction of the First and Second Temples, *khurbn bayis rishon* and *khurbn bayis sheyni*, drove the Jews into exile, but the poet in 1947 had been driven by the *khurbn* of European Jewry *back* to the homeland. How in any morally tenable scheme could an individual survivor express thanksgiving for having been restored to Zion under such circumstances? How could the greatest of all Jewish catastrophes be interpreted in the light of God’s unfulfilled but still potent promise to Abraham? Already in the Vilna Ghetto (February 14, 1943), Sutzkever had asked how and with what a man might fill his cup on the day of liberation. “Are you prepared, in your joy, to endure / The dark keening you have heard / Where skulls of days glitter / In a bottomless pit?”⁹ The ghetto poet knows in advance that should he outlive the others, he will keep burrowing, like a mole, into the “ancient buried town” of his memory. In the lyric before us Sutzkever bridges the distance between the buried European town and the Land being reclaimed from the rubble. The phrase *glik un vey do* links

⁸ Uriel Weinreich, “On the Cultural History of Yiddish Rime,” in Joseph L. Blau et al., eds., *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo Wittmayer Baron* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 441.

⁹ Abraham Sutzkever, “Vi azoy?” translated as “How?” by Chana Bloch in Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk, eds., *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 676.

joy and woe to being *here* in a way that remained characteristic of Sutzkever thereafter. It accompanies the *khevle-leyde*, a term that applies equally to the natural process of giving birth and to the birth pangs of the Messiah. Poet and Land are joined in the bloody ecstasy of renaissance. The contrarities are further pursued through the continuing rhyme with *akeyde*, the occasion that almost deprives the father of his son, the son of his life, and with *zeyde*, intimate ancestor. The *aqedah* of Isaac in Genesis 22:9 became in Jewish thought the primary symbol of martyrdom and of self-sacrifice in obedience to God's will.¹⁰ The subject of this poem is not merely, as Weinreich suggested, the unity of Diaspora with Zion, but the impossible tension between the Jews' metaphysical promise of redemption and the enormity of destruction they have undergone. Sutzkever's tender rhyme reestablishes the connection between the steely biblical Abraham at the moment of his testing and the Diaspora *zeydes* who wouldn't hurt a fly.

Poetry accustoms us to figurative language. The poet breaks with reality when he speaks of being reborn after his own martyrdom and even leaves ambiguous whether he is sacrificer or victim in that image. But the Nazi genocide of the Jews shifted the boundaries between realism and surrealism by actualizing what few had ever dared to imagine, so that we have to beware our normal assumptions about what is figurative and what is real. Sutzkever alluded to the strain that his life had placed on figurative language when he later wrote, "Inside me, rivers of blood are not a metaphor."¹¹ In biographical fact, the poet had survived his own *akeyde*: the son born to the Sutzkevers in the ghetto hospital of Vilna was put to death in obedience to Nazi orders.¹² God did not intervene to prevent this horror, so it is quite precise to speak of "my *akeyde*" as a completed rather than an interrupted process; the Jewish poet endured

¹⁰ See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter; New York: Macmillan, 1971), 2:480.

¹¹ Benjamin Harshav quotes this poem in his introduction to *A. Sutzkever, Selected Poetry and Prose*, 3.

¹² In the poem "Tsum kind," dated Vilna Ghetto, January 18, 1943, the poet writes,

I wanted to swallow you, my child,
to feel the taste
of my anticipated future.
Perhaps in my blood
You will blossom as before.

See "For My Child," in Abraham Sutzkever, *Burnt Pearls: Ghetto Poems*, trans. Seymour Mayne (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1981), 33.

what the biblical patriarch was spared, both in his capacity of father and as a child of his people.

This biographical background, though by no means essential to the poem, points to the pressure of literal truth against the expectations of poetry. On the redemptive side of the poem, the metaphor of the pebble-grandfather (*vu yeder shteyndl iz mayn zeyde*) asks to be taken literally as well, the "land of our fathers" having become concretized as the most reliable part of the biblical promise: the bones of Joseph had been brought back to the Land of Israel and were now part of the soil. Not the living God, nor the mighty stones of the Western Wall where the Jews have prayed through millennia, but the rocky pebbles underfoot are invoked here as the progenitor of Jewish faith. This is the source to which the returning Jews trace their roots, making possible their restoration to human form.

The eleven lines of this poem form a single sentence, or what would have been a single sentence had it not been interrupted, in defiance of grammatical rules, by a full stop before the final two lines. Opening with the three conditional clauses that constitute the first seven lines, the poem turns at the start of line eight to the hypothetical consequences of *not* being at one with the Land. The natural division of the poem into these two parts is reinforced by a *volte* as firm as that of a sonnet, with the rhyme scheme following the thought into a concluding *cdcd* quatrain, and the style growing suddenly more terse and compressed. But because the whole poem is set in the conditional tense, the dire consequence also remains conditional, within the realm of negative possibility.

Sutzkever's mastery of rhyme acquired ever greater depth through the years, as if through the matching and the reshaping of words the poet were not so much inventing but rather uncovering harmonies and discords in the universe. To cite only one of the many critics who have made this point, the Yiddish essayist Shlomo Bickel speaks of Sutzkever's rhymes as verbal pairings whose rhyme was proclaimed (according to Midrash, in the manner of preordained brides and grooms) "forty days before their birth." Bickel remarks that in addition to delight, this virtuosity sometimes inspires a discomfiting awe, as before flawless perfection in nature.¹³ The climactic rhyme of the poem before us exceeds mere aesthetic gratification in just the way that Bickel describes. Simultaneously a neologism and the last masculine rhyme of the poem, it strikes at the end of the penultimate line, leaving one last surprise for the coda.

The poet's emblems of freedom are bread and water, the staples of the biblical Exodus and of life itself. The poem never moves beyond these

¹³ Shlomo Bickel, *Di brokhe fun sheynkayt* (*The Blessing of Beauty: Essays about Abraham Sutzkever*) (Tel Aviv: Hamenora, 1969), 17.

elemental requirements into fancier expectations of milk and honey. Bread is also one of the staple rhymes of Yiddish verse. Poets from David Edelshtat through I. L. Peretz have drawn attention to the essential pairing of *broyt*, *noyt*, and *toyt* (bread, want, and death). The expectations aroused here by the word *broyt* in the rhyming position are almost certainly of *toyt*, since the alternative to lacking bread is dying of hunger, and the poem has been warning of some dubious outcome from its opening words, "Were I not..." Sutzkever both satisfies and explodes this expectation by his invention of the verb "to expire-into-the-condition-of-gentile," which he renders through the past participle *fargoyt*. Grammatically, the word follows the pattern of such past participles as *farshklast* (enslaved) and *farmatert* (fatigued). Acoustically, it evokes *fargeyn*, as in *di zun fargeyt* (the sun sets), or *di tsayt fargeyt* (time passes). Through the merest change of a diphthong, there is now a term for passing away into gentleness, a form of Jewish dying that is philologically exclusive to Yiddish, but applicable to all Jews alike, and experientially dependent on the Land of Israel. The whole Zionist discourse on assimilation has been compressed into a single ominous term.

Rhymed with bread, the term *fargoyt* is utterly concrete, as obvious and defined as living or dying. As opposed to vaguer cultural or anthropological considerations of what it means for Jews to disappear among the nations, this description conveys the sense of a material fate, like that of Lot's wife who is turned into a pillar of salt. The poem creates the illusion of substantiveness for the notoriously imprecise condition of passing into the majority. The word conveys the full emotive weight of such a death, without its cognitive content. Although the term "goy" is morally neutral and refers to other peoples without any necessarily pejorative connotation, here it carries the menace of expiration. The instrumentality of death is unclear, suggesting that the alternative to Zion is disappearance into the embrace of gentiles rather than murder at their hands.

Although this is not the place for a full discussion of the translation of Jewish literature, this lyric brings us up against some of its thorniest problems. Citing aesthetic considerations or other cultural constraints, anthologists who serve up Yiddish in English translation tend to omit from their collections poems like Chaim Grade's curse on the pogrom-city Kielce (dated Lodz, 1946) that pleads: "Do not forgive, if God Himself on His knees / Entreats you in the grave to grant forgiveness to the world."¹⁴ They do not like to bring into other languages the hostility of the Jewish author. While the Polish scholar Monika Garbowska

¹⁴ Chaim Grade, "Kielce," in *Shayn fun farloshene shtern* (*Glow of Extinguished Stars*) (Buenos Aires: Farband of Polish Jews in Argentina, 1950), 74.

suggests that such accommodation to gentile readers may be simply good manners, the self-imposed censorship distorts the record of Yiddish writing. Translators may also excise what seems to them uncomfortably Jewish, as, for example, in Grade's best-known story, "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynner," the extreme point of view of a student who has absolutely no tolerance for secular Jews.¹⁵ Cosmopolitan translators serve up the well-tempered Jew of their own preference. Hence, Benjamin and Barbara Harshav omitted from their selection of Sutzkever's work his most overtly "national" utterances, including the poet who proudly followed the victorious Israel Defense Forces into Sinai in 1956. But as this poem forges a new term to convey the disaster of becoming gentiled, it challenges translation by definition. There is no way of translating this poem without offending the gentiles, since its purpose, after the *khurbn*, is to warn against this second form of death. The poet has built in the difficulty of rendering this verse in another language through a term created expressly for that purpose.

But however dramatic and forceful the weight of *fargoyt* in the penultimate line, it is subordinate to the ending, which trails off in a manner that is wholly at odds with the earlier firmness. The survivor avers that even had he not reached the Land, his yearning would have come on its own. God is not alone in having metaphysical powers. The Jew's longing for his promised Land has equally become a metaphysical force, recognizing no earthly impediments to its will. The psalmist's cry by the rivers of Babylon, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem," outlived over a hundred generations of Jews who voiced it; the modern Yiddish poet who joins that invincible intention knows that this confidence rests on no idle vow. One could say that yearning, being the domain of the wordsmith, trumps the existential arrival of the person of action. But I believe that the final emphasis of the poem on transcendence over immanence derives from the contingency with which it began.

This prayer of homecoming is as much a testimony for those who did not reach the Land as for those who did. It reminds us that the likelihood of not having arrived was ever so much greater than the fact of having arrived. The poet's *Shehekhayonu* concretizes his absolute need for a substantial land, yet he cannot accept a personal redemption that abandons the dead Jews to their fate. He might easily have lain with them in

¹⁵ See Herbert H. Paper's translation of the complete story, "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynner," with acknowledgment to Milton Himmelfarb. Private publication, February 1982. Himmelfarb had translated an edited version in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (New York: Viking, 1954), 579-606.

perpetual exile. Thus, the release of yearning as a separate force introduces in the poem's final moment a vehicle through which the missing part of the Jewish people may keep reaching for what is beyond its grasp. Without invoking the language of God and the *shekhinah*, the poet empowers the spirit to carry on independently of its human vessel. The alliterative softness of the final line, with its emphasis on *benkshaft* (yearning) in place of the original *baynand*, admits both the historical energy that impelled Jews to return to Israel and the poet's ongoing faith in that metaphysical force. The poem that comes to bless the moment of reunion readmits the breakage that cannot be repaired.

Composed as one of a cycle, this lyric was given pride of place in Sutzkever's opus as a benediction for homecoming. Paradoxically, it was by eliminating from the poem the traces of its historical occasion—arrival as part of cohort—that Sutzkever extended its national resonance. One can hardly do this poem justice without considering it in the tradition of liturgy, and it is hard to imagine a modern Jewish liturgy that would not include this poem.



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THE KERNEL*

Aharon Appelfeld

When years ago I first read S. Y Agnon's novel *A Guest for the Night*, I felt as if it were revealing some of my most intimate secrets. I was born not far from Agnon's hometown. My late father knew Agnon's hometown, whose name he used to pronounce "Biczacz," rather than Buczacz, as I heard it pronounced in Israel. The region in which it was located partook of some of the charm of the Hapsburgs, years after the collapse of the Empire.

During the long summer vacations we would travel to rural towns. Already then I was able to see, from a child's point of view of course, the signs of decay scattered on the surface of the tranquil declining life of these small villages. It was the 1930s. Who imagined then that this life was already doomed? Agnon's novel revealed to me something of the fading light of my childhood, of the smells of large houses abandoned by sons to the sorrow of their elderly parents. I still remember the elderly people staring blankly upon the thresholds of empty study houses. It was a slow, penetrating decay.

As I read Agnon's novel, I recoiled at the premature decree to which he condemned his hometown. It seemed to me that if he had known what would be its fate he would not have written that way. I was alarmed at the thought that occurred to me that, in point of fact, the Holocaust actually completed an internal process that would have inevitably led to complete destruction. I did not comprehend then the dialectical connection between internal and external forces. I recoiled at the thought that the disintegration from within induced the violence from without. Even the yearnings for the distant Land of Israel did not seem to me to be equal to the disaster.

Years passed, and my relationship to Agnon underwent many changes. But that is not what I wish to speak about now. I wish to speak

* The original Hebrew version of this essay, "Hagarin," may be found in Aharon Appelfeld, *Masot beguf rishon* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1979), 101-7. It is translated by David C. Jacobson.

about the Holocaust as an experience with deep roots in time and about the individuals for whom the Holocaust arrived at the height of the process of assimilation. I will not get into a statistical discussion of how many Jews were in this situation. To my estimation, the majority of the Jewish intelligentsia, even in Eastern Europe, was engaged to some degree in a process of slowly but consistently cutting themselves off from their Jewish roots. I do not exempt the great Jewish movements that were active between the world wars. Even for those members of the intelligentsia who never left the Jewish collective, the relationship to Jewish sources was at least ambivalent if not negative. Hebrew writers, including Yosef Hayyim Brenner, Uri Nisan Gnessin, David Fogel, and even Agnon, extensively portrayed this intelligentsia. I intentionally cite these writers because they penetrated to the depths of the soul and precisely analyzed the complex attraction and repulsion, love and hate that permeated every contact the intelligentsia had with its cultural inheritance, and the more profound the analysis was the more it pointed to a gaping abyss between each sensitive, life-affirming individual and his dying cultural inheritance. And again, this form of assimilation was not capricious, it was not a momentary idea, a mere passing fad; it constituted a gaping abyss.

One increasingly gets the feeling that from the beginning of the twentieth century, and you could say even before that, the destruction was crouching at the door not only because of the threatening external conditions, but because the internal relationship of the individual to his cultural inheritance was being undermined. I am not referring to the explicit declarations that spoke of this in a confident manner, but rather to the literary testimony of Agnon, Brenner, Gnessin, and Fogel, and in point of fact almost every Hebrew writer, which revealed the bitter feeling that the destruction was inevitable.

We can state with certainty: Hebrew literature in general and Hebrew writers in particular foresaw the destruction, warned of it, and portrayed it in many different ways years before the Holocaust. You could say that once it became aware of it, all of Hebrew literature ceaselessly warned of the coming end. And as with every dissenting vision it did not lack irritating, account-reckoning, and insolent expressions. Even the Jewish intellectual who with all the fibers of his soul was tied to the Jewish collective and to its cultural inheritance, sometimes even more than those who consciously separated themselves, knew no mercy when he undertook to reveal the abyss and proclaim the arrival of the inevitable fate.

Writers like Agnon, Brenner, Gnessin, and Fogel, who could certainly not be suspected of superficial Zionism, repeatedly noted that in a hidden alchemic process the subtle, invisible ties of the Jewish intellectual to

the collective and its cultural inheritance had been damaged. Something in the kernel, or you could say in the underlying meaning of the kernel, was harmed. I am not speaking of those who took strong positions about the relationship of "Judaism and humanity" or about arriving at "a historical crossroad," who spoke in the language of ideology, but rather those who sought the underlying meaning of their identity. Certainly no one better than Agnon, Fogel, Gnessin, and Brenner, each one in his own style, whether in a more understanding or more directly critical way, noted that the kernel that had the potential to develop, that vital kernel, was damaged beyond repair.

You cannot say that Hebrew literature did not envision the Holocaust. On the contrary, the vision emerged early, earlier than one might have expected. But, one might ask, why was not only Brenner but even Agnon skeptical of the possibility of a Zionist national revival? This skepticism derived, in my opinion, from their lack of faith in the power of an external change to bring about healing, for the kernel, the hidden kernel, was sick. Furthermore, he who depended on the improvement of external conditions to bring about the remedy was not revealing the true weakness and was only deluding himself.

Not a few observers have noted the tension between the Zionist movement as an ideological expression and a practical program on the one hand and Hebrew literature on the other, even though both seem to have had a common origin. Zionism was impelled by the pursuit of its goals, but Hebrew literature, to the extent that it removed the outer layer and observed the individual Jew, revealed that the hidden kernel within him had been damaged. Thus, in point of fact, the basis for Agnon's ironic view of Zionism was in the gap between the depths of the national sickness and the methods put forth to heal it. Zionism in all of its practical, dedicated, and beautiful manifestations was in the final analysis only a well-meaning illusion. Hebrew literature envisioned this in a profound and clear manner. And what does this clarity tell us? Difficult external circumstances and self-destructive impulses went hand in hand as fateful forces that could no longer be separated.

This is a literature whose prophecies were fulfilled. And as is true of all fulfilled prophecies, despair, if not a curse, has plagued it. The bitter vision came about, but it came about to an extent that not even the fiercest prophets had imagined.

We try to understand the Holocaust using sociological, political, and sometimes theological terminology. But it seems to me that the depths of the tragedy were not limited to the confrontation between the victim and the murderer, but extended as well to the bitter fact that the majority of the Jewish intelligentsia no longer saw itself in covenant with the Jewish cultural inheritance. Satan himself, as in a metaphysical

drama, came down to force them unceremoniously to return to the Jewish collective.

I still remember the amazed faces of Jews of German and Austrian origin, mostly assimilated for generations, when they were exiled to the ghettos. There, to their amazement, they met ghetto Jews, Yiddish-speaking Jews, whom they had tried to ignore for years. The hand of Satan did what only the hand of Satan can do: it brought you to the place from where you wanted to flee. This confrontation with yourself, with all that only recently seemed to you to be anachronistic, passed its prime, outdated, and meaningless, this confrontation induced the beginning of a stock taking that to this day has not been completed.

It is difficult to say this, but it must be said. A hidden process of self-destruction accompanied by manifestations of self-hatred operated openly in the years before the Holocaust. This was true first and foremost among the Jewish intelligentsia. And even while you were on the way to fulfilling your enchanting vision, the hand of Satan returned you to a fundamental tribal existence and commanded you to experience it fully in all of its glories and humiliations, not as an individual, and not because it was in accordance with your worldview, but only because you were a member of the Jewish people.

The prophecies of Hebrew literature were fulfilled. When I refer to prophecy I do not mean social observations that were loudly proclaimed in public discussions. I refer rather to those hidden processes of the destruction of cells, of loathing and self-loathing, or you could say of a death wish. The Holocaust arrived when we were not only unprepared from a sociological point of view, but also surprised by the argument for Jewish existence that was no longer taken seriously by the Jewish intelligentsia.

One could say that it would appear that art fulfilled its obligation. It did not hide anything or beautify it; it expressed the most concealed fears; and if its prophecies were not heeded, at least it did what it was supposed to do. Nevertheless, this does not provide any relief. Take, for example, Agnon's great novel *A Guest for the Night*, a pre-Holocaust Holocaust novel, and compare it to the Holocaust memorial book for the community of Buczacz, in which it is recounted in detail how this community was actually destroyed. All arguments, including the religious ones, and of course expressions of rebuke, suddenly seem naïve. The volcano that erupted in the Holocaust dissociated life, and even more so artistic criteria, from any relationship to accepted norms. Even some of the eternal truth of a great work like *A Guest for the Night* was damaged.

The theological justification of sin and punishment is alien to me. No less alien to me is the Zionist justification that sees the rejection of the Land of Israel as the mother of all sin. To me, Hebrew literature was

accurate when it spoke of the pain of destroyed cells, of a fatal disease that spread through vulnerable bodies, of senses that were dulled, of the burden of past generations that was suddenly too heavy to bear, of a kind of yearning from the depths.

Art did not hide anything. It expressed the most concealed fears. All that it feared, to its great misfortune, came about. It is no wonder that mourning pervades all of its prophecies, a kind of eternal mourning that pervades a bereaved father for whom all that he feared and warned against came about, but even so he would never say, "I was right."



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WHO IS A JEW? DAN BEN AMOTZ'S NOVEL *TO REMEMBER, TO FORGET*

Nurith Gertz

PREFACE

Dan Ben Amotz's novel *To Remember, To Forget* should be discussed against the background of literature that deals with the encounter between Holocaust survivors and Israeli reality. Some works in this category (for example, Abba Kovner's novel *Face to Face*,¹ Shlomo Kalo's novel *Crypts in Jaffa*,² and Dan Ben Amotz's short story "One Who Arrived" [1948–1949]) preserved the Zionist narrative homogeneously and built the survivors' identity on the model of the male *sabra*, the native-born Hebrew who fights for his land, controls it with his movements and gaze, and integrates into its historical continuum. Other texts in the Israeli culture of the time—films, plays, children's stories, and the like—also followed this line.³ In other literary works of the 1940s and 1950s, the Zionist narrative continued to function as a skeleton, but the other narrative, that of the Holocaust-survivor Jew, was stationed alongside it as an alternative.⁴ In certain works, such as Shlomo Nitsan's *Tsevat betsevat*,⁵ it is a side

¹ Abba Kovner, *Face to Face* [Hebrew] (Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1953).

² Shlomo Kalo, *Crypts in Jaffa* [Hebrew] (Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1954).

³ See Nurith Gertz, "The Others in Israeli Cinema of the 1940s and 1950s: Holocaust Survivors, Women, and Arabs" in Kamel Abdel Malek and David C. Jacobson, eds., *Israeli and Palestinian Identities in History and Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 35–63.

⁴ See Gershon Shaked, "Between the Western Wall and Masada: The Holocaust and the Self-Awareness of Israeli Society," in Yisrael Gutman, ed., *Major Changes within the Jewish People in the Wake of the Holocaust* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1993).

⁵ Shlomo Nitsan, *Tsevat betsevat* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1956).

narrative. In other works, such as Hanoch Bartov's novels *Each Had Six Wings*⁶ and *Growing Wounds*,⁷ Uri Orlev's *By Tomorrow*,⁸ and Yehudit Hendel's short story "They Are Others,"⁹ it dictates, to a greater or lesser extent, the ambivalence of the heroes who oscillate between their Diaspora-Jewish and Israeli identities and between the Zionist discourse and that steeped in the traditions of Diaspora Jewry. Ben Amotz's novel *To Remember, To Forget*¹⁰ is one such work. In this novel, as in the others in this category, the Zionist discourse dominates and ultimately determines the structure of the plot and the characters. However, other discourses are present from beginning to end, in the form of other points of view, concrete details that shatter the national generalizations, and alternative interpretations, repetitions, and other elements¹¹ that enfeeble the generality of the hegemonic narrative and portray Israeli culture as a collection of identities and cultures in motion.

In all these works the shattering of the narrative corresponds to the shattering of the boundaries of the heroes' identities and, with them, the boundaries of space and time. To understand this phenomenon, it is useful to consult postmodern theories that dismantle identity and treat it as a performative process, an entity repeatedly re-created by the praxis of discourse.¹² This point of view allows us to examine how early Zionist propaganda texts constructed Hebrew identity by subjecting other identities to various degrees of rejection, obliteration, and silencing¹³ and to

⁶ Hanoch Bartov, *Each Had Six Wings* [Hebrew] (Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1954).

⁷ Hanoch Bartov, *Growing Wounds* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1965).

⁸ Uri Orlev, *By Tomorrow* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1958).

⁹ Yehudit Hendel, "They Are Others," in *They Are Others* [Hebrew] (Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1950).

¹⁰ Dan Ben Amotz, *To Remember, To Forget*, trans. Zeva Shapiro (Tel Aviv: Metzriuth, 1979); idem, *To Remember, To Forget* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Amikam, 1968). All page references are to the original Hebrew version.

¹¹ See Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); and Saul Friedlander, "Trauma, Memory, and Transference," in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Holocaust Remembrance, the Shapes of Memory* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 261. Friedlander speaks about the "imperative of rendering as truthful an account as document and testimonials will allow, without giving in to the temptation of closure. Closure in this case would represent an obvious avoidance of what remains indeterminate, elusive and opaque."

¹² See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹³ See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

observe how literary works show this identity to be a mere imitation and transform it into one component of a broader multicultural identity that includes what has been previously rejected. This multicultural identity is based on broken geographical and historical boundaries that now include both Israel and the Diaspora, the present and various past continua, that is, the Holocaust and what preceded it.

In these literary works, the breaching of boundaries of identity, time, and space is closely associated with the breaching of gender boundaries. Masculine identity, so strong and safe in propaganda works expressing the Zionist narrative, is broken here, and behind it Jewish feminine identity is revealed. This process ruptures the boundaries of time when, repeatedly, it returns the protagonist to the pre-Oedipal past, which, in the historical context, corresponds to the past that precedes the Zionist Israeli order,¹⁴ and it ruptures the boundaries of masculine identity when it returns the protagonist to the mother figure.

Thus, the literary works that deal with these fantasies¹⁵ destabilize gender identity and breach the borders of the symbolic social and Zionist order. In all of these cases the search for the mother shatters the protagonists' confident masculinity and stresses the feminine components of their identities. As Anne Golomb Hoffman explains, "We tend to associate masculinity with a more bounded sense of self and femininity with more flexible or permeable ego boundaries."¹⁶ The retrogression to relations with the fluid, borderless, pre-Oedipal mother blurs the limits of masculine identity and shatters the male national image that

¹⁴ Freud draws a connection between the pre-Oedipal phase and early stages in history, e.g., the Minoan-Mican civilization that preceded that of Greece. See Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality," in vol. 21 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1974 [1931]). Julia Kristeva develops this theme in a different direction in her account of the displacement by monotheism not only of paganism but also of part of its agrarian civilization of women and mothers (see Julia Kristeva, "About Chinese Women," in Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1986], 145). In the survivors' literature, the early past of the protagonist, at the mother's bosom, occurs in Europe, in the culture of the Diaspora. Thus, the reconstruction of the son-mother relationship is connected with the reconstruction of this culture.

¹⁵ David Schitz, *White Rose, Red Rose* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad and Keter, 1988); Aharon Appelfeld, *Searing Light* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1980); Uri Orlev, *By Tomorrow* [Hebrew].

¹⁶ Anne Golomb Hoffman, "Bodies and Borders: The Politics of Gender in Contemporary Israeli Novelists," in Alan Mintz, ed., *The Boom in Contemporary Israeli Fiction* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 1997), 45.

dominated the early Zionist texts. It returns the protagonist to the feminine Jewish identity that masculine Hebrew identity had shunted aside.¹⁷ Even in cases where protagonists seek a relationship with a father figure, as in *By Tomorrow* or *White Rose, Red Rose*, the relationship is overshadowed by relations with the mother.

The shattering of identities in the survivor literature is part of a broader phenomenon of the undermining of identities in Hebrew literature prompted, according to Band, by the collapse of the Zionist narrative.¹⁸ It has made a substantive contribution to the dismantling of the images and spatial and temporal settings of male Zionist nationalism, as reflected in early Zionist texts, because its heroes attempt to repair their dissociation from another identity, another geography, and another time, and reveal the Jewish feminine traits behind the masculine Zionist ones. Their return to their prior identity, time, and space ruptures the borders of Zionist culture and identity. Their wish to reconstruct the symbiosis with the mother makes all borders fluid and permeable. This literature has helped undermine the Israeli nationhood that was based on clear boundaries between masculine and feminine, Israel and Diaspora, and "Israeli time" and "Jewish time." Ben Amotz's novel *To Remember, To Forget* is a pronounced example of such literature.

OSCILLATING BETWEEN IDENTITIES

Ben Amotz was brought to Israel as a child survivor of the Holocaust. His early short stories give no evidence of this experience. Israeli culture in those years was not inclined to deal with the personal reminiscences of Holocaust survivors, and Ben Amotz, like many others, repressed his memories. Like his hero in *To Remember, To Forget*, he adopted a *sabra* identity, even changing his name and place of birth in his identification card for this purpose. In the 1960s, after the trial of Adolf Eichmann, as the survivors' personal recollections increasingly became a part of public cultural memory in Israel, Ben Amotz also told the story that he had repressed until then. In his novel *To Remember, To Forget*, he confronts his past by means of the portrayal of his main protagonist. In so doing, he not only examines the *sabra* Israeli identity in which his hero has draped

¹⁷ See Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

¹⁸ See Arnold J. Band, "Adumbration of the Israeli 'Identity Crisis' in Hebrew Literature of the 1960s," in Malek and Jacobson, eds., *Israeli and Palestinian Identities*, 123–33.

himself but also “reincarnates” it in a series of changing and shattering identities: the warrior Israeli, raised and schooled in Israel; the Israeli who has become bourgeois in the 1960s; the random cosmopolitan tourist; the Jew raised in Frankfurt; the German who has become wealthy in the 1960s; and the German Nazi. In this fashion, Israeli identity is dismantled and exposed to a phalanx of other identities, fluid and changing, some familiar and mainstream, others rejected and marginal, some tempting and others (such as Nazi identity) threatening. The flow of events, encounters, and happenings in the novel subjects each to thorough examination.

The hero and narrator of the novel—an Israeli who reached the country as a child refugee, was integrated into Israel, and became a full-fledged native—returns to Germany to accept reparations. He lands in Europe as a tourist and hopes to enjoy the pleasures of the universal culture that the continent offers him. The first chapter of the book, analyzed here, deals with this first encounter with Europe.

The main question one asks upon reading this chapter is: Who is the narrator-hero? We seem to know everything about him because he is articulate, almost loquacious, but in fact he is largely a mystery to us, and the little we know changes with each paragraph and page. At first glance, the narrator-hero is absolutely sure of his identity. At the beginning of the book, after his ship has anchored in Genoa and he is about to head for town, he looks into a mirror and smiles at himself in self-satisfaction: “Catching sight of myself in a mirror set in one of the columns, I could not repress a smile” (4). At whom, however, is he smiling? Who is peering back at him in the mirror? The answer is not clear. “Here I was, a young man in a black raincoat with turned-up collar, set for adventure, this young man about to conquer Europe was me” (4). He is mistaken. The man in the mirror is not him; it is an image that he has seen in the movies, about to stroll through Italian scenes that he has seen in paintings. (“I already wanted to stand in the vestibule of the train as I often had seen in films, in a black raincoat with turned-up collar” [9].) This is the universal tourist who feels at home in Western capitals, a self-styled man of the world who discards his national identity, be it Israeli or Diaspora-Jewish. However, this cosmopolitan image is but a fiction, a cinematic reflection of artistic scenes.

Thus, the hero stares in the mirror and sees in it, as in the mirror phase of childhood, a complete and cohesive image. This image, however, masks a fissured, shattered ego. The mask is exposed later on, and so, with it, is the distance between the image and the subject:

I longed to walk through the streets of Rome, guarding my secret jealously: the gentleman in the black raincoat, addressing himself in

Hebrew, a tongue foreign to this region—this gentleman is me, anonymous, known to no one. I longed to leave the port, to knock on Aunt Anna's door in San Castello, and shout, "it's me." (4)

At first glance, the hero's national identity, that of a Hebrew-speaking Israeli, lurks behind the cinematic image of the universal man. However, even this identity is problematic and intermingles with his identity as a Diaspora Jew, a Holocaust survivor. In the Hebrew original of this segment, the narrator proclaims his identity three times—"It's me." However, it is a different "me" each time: first the tourist in the black raincoat with the turned-up collar, then the Hebrew-speaking Israeli ("This gentleman is me, anonymous, known to no one, and not just any Italian like everyone" [10]), and finally the survivor who, years later, returns to his Aunt Anna who concealed him in her home during the Holocaust, and tells her, "It's me."

These identities commingle and dismantle each other throughout the novel. This characteristic of the plot becomes clear early on, in the continuation of the first chapter, when customs guards arrest the hero on suspicion of smuggling. At that moment he stares at the mirror again to search for the cohesive image that he saw there before ("I glanced at the elongated mirror. No, I didn't look suspicious" [11]). Now he expects the mirror to confirm his innocence, but at this phase even his fantasies confirm his guilt; until then, these fantasies, set in parentheses, dealt with masculine conquest; now they focus on accusing voices. Furthermore, even he finds suspicious the dissimilarity between his passport photograph and his actual features. He now undergoes an acute, insulting experience of exchange of identities; his own identity is replaced by that of a fugitive smuggler. The identity now attached to him, however, is not only that of a criminal but also that of a Holocaust-era Jew. Now, as in the Holocaust, he is separated, displaced, excluded, and isolated from the crowd. He himself regards the entire incident as evidence of anti-Semitism on the part of the customs people. Thus, his identity as a tourist gives way to that of a criminal, and the Jewish identity of the Diaspora and the Holocaust is exposed as well.

To counter this, the hero stresses the very identity that he attempts to silence and repress throughout the plot, that of the proud Israeli. To his mind, the customs people are fascists, collaborators, and "lowly boot-lickers" (15); in contrast to them, he emphasizes his pride and indomitability, values that Zionist ideology posited as contrasts to the passivity and submissiveness of Diaspora Jewry. These values are displayed in a comic fashion when the hero "let[s] out a splendid fart—rich and mellow with sentiments of national pride and independence" (9). However, they also dictate his attitude at this occasion, the very opposite of the Diaspora-Jewish attitude, with which he also identifies throughout the chapter.

This ambiguous identity extends to the hero's maleness. When he fantasizes about being a tourist in Italy, he imagines himself surrounded by women who are entranced by his personality and his cosmopolitan affectations. However, just as his imaginary character is mere fiction, so are his masculine conquests, which consist of imaginary conversations with imaginary women. Now that he has been identified as a smuggler, his masculinity also withers. Women vanish from his fantasies, and he makes a homosexual allusion of sorts when he asks the clerk to examine his rectum:

"That will be all," [the clerk] mumbled, turning to go.

"What about the rectum?" I said, posing myself between him and the door. "You forgot to check my rectum." (9)

At this moment, when he is instructed to undress, the mirror, which might reveal him in a complete and cohesive form, has vanished. He steps into the dressing room and is surprised by the absence of a "large wall mirror" (15). Now he is torn between three pairs of identities: universal and national, Israeli and Diaspora-Jewish, and masculine and nonmasculine.

These dichotomies reflect dichotomies of geography and history. The Europe that the hero has reached is a cultural center, but it reminds him of the other Europe, the one he had left after the Holocaust and the one he had inhabited before it (10). These three continents erase and obliterate each other throughout the plot: the Europe of the past is banished from memory and succumbs to the Europe of the present, which, in turn, is purged of some of its immanence by memories of the erstwhile Europe. Although all these continents are portrayed as distant from Israel, they are also connected with this country, which seems like both a dream and a reality:

We boarded the boat and set off for a warm, distant land, a land of golden beaches, palm trees, orange groves, whitewashed houses—far from the black pitch roofs of home. (5)

Thus, the hero's split identity is set within a fissured space in which he has no real home. Every location in which he finds himself is threatened by other places, his confidence in each particular time is challenged by other times, and the identity that he carries at any given moment is repeatedly fissured by other identities.

The manifestations of split identity analyzed thus far on the basis of the first chapter recur throughout the novel. Two of the main identities between which the hero continues to oscillate are the Jewish and the Israeli identities. Ostensibly, the hero considers himself part of the Western cultural world and disdains the national narrative on which he

was raised. The plot portrays this narrative as a parody on events of war and heroism, a collection of Holocaust-and-redemption clichés, a myth that has come unraveled and that provides justification for a bourgeois life of hedonism and permissiveness. Nevertheless, the hero immediately translates every clash with his surroundings into national terms that guide his thoughts and actions. When customs officials search his belongings at the airport, as stated, he considers this an anti-Semitic act, and when his German lover and future wife, Barbara, insults him in one of their quarrels, he blames this on her German nationality:

Just what does she have in mind? Does she think I'll take it from her, bow my head like ... a poor submissive Jew? She does not know me very well. I don't take that sort of thing lying down. I am an Israeli and nobody, especially not a Germ... —nobody can tell me what to do. The nerve! (337)

Here the hero's national identity is defined by the national narrative, the one manufactured as a counterweight to the Diaspora-Jewish identity that it has repressed. Indeed, the hero admits that he is always proud when people praise the bold, beautiful, audacious, honest, complex-free Israelis. He is insulted when Barbara tells him that, for her, he is a Jew; in response, he tells her that he is not a Jew but an Israeli and that the two are not synonymous. During the first part of his visit to Germany he masks his Jewishness, conceals the fact that he was born and raised in Germany and can speak German, and depicts himself as a native-born Israeli.

The progression of the plot is actually a progression of exposure, in which the Diaspora-Jewish identity concealed behind the Israeli one is revealed. This Israeli identity is shown to be an imitation and a masquerade from the outset, when the hero invents an autobiography in which he was born in Tel Aviv. As his stay in Germany lengthens and the eruptive force of his memories mounts, he slowly learns to acknowledge and accept the Jewish identity that he has concealed thus far. This process reaches its climax when the hero learns to identify with the Jews of the Holocaust era, those in Dachau and those in the ghetto. As the novel draws to a close, he goes to a masquerade ball in the costume of a Jew with a yellow star and, to the fury of all those in attendance, asks someone to write a number on his arm. The act of donning a costume, positioned near the end of the plot, is the final phase in the hero's return to his childhood memories and his parents' home—the final phase in the expansion of the focus of his identity: identification with the Jewish victim of the Holocaust.

As stated, the novel not only reveals Israeli identity to be a fiction but also questions the authenticity of other identities. Its episodic structure—a chain of episodes, most of which have a comic punchline related to

change of identity—contributes to this. For example, the hero notices Germans on the train, identifies them as Nazis, and eventually discovers that they are Jews. He befriends a young German, deems him to be a Nazi soldier, and finds out that he is a homosexual and a sworn anti-Nazi. He heads into the street drunk and bellows, “Nazis ... Damned Nazis ... Gestapo” (89, 90). Three Germans pounce on him and release him only when he tells them he is Jewish. He goes into the street as an Israeli national who has come to avenge the Jews and turns out to be a Jewish victim of German violence. In such a chain of episodes no identity is safe. A widow whom the hero encounters at a cemetery proves to be a prostitute whose widow’s attire is meant to help her attract clients, and a German woman he encounters in an elevator turns out to have human, non-national characteristics.

Indeed, the main identities between which the hero oscillates—the Diaspora-Jewish and the Israeli identities—are packaged with additional identities: the universal identity of the tourist who has distanced himself from his national origins and considers Europe a non-national space, and the identity of a member of the bourgeoisie who disdains the bourgeois way of life and institutions, even though he benefits from them. He feels guilty about the reparations he is about to receive from Germany; nevertheless, he goes there to receive them. He wishes to return to Israel but is tantalized by the possibility of staying in Germany, finding a job there, and making a lot of money. The identities that define the hero include the possibility of a Nazi identity that threatens him: he repeatedly asks himself what he would have done during the war and compares his behavior with that of the Germans during the Holocaust. To distance himself from this threatening identity, he escapes to his other identities—the Jewish and the Israeli, the cosmopolitan, and the bourgeois—and migrates among them. These migrations are also migrations among various times and places that commingle in the course of random conversations, dreams, fantasies, and associations: the distant past in Europe, the past in the camps, the past in Palestine, the past of Israel’s War of Independence, and so on.

The fluidity of national identities, as stated, corresponds to the fluidity of gender identities. This phenomenon, described in the first chapter, recurs throughout the plot. If we associate masculinity with a more limited, better defined sense of identity, and femininity with fluid, permeable, and flexible borders of the ego, as Hoffman does,¹⁹ we may say that not only does the hero’s national identity become more elastic in the course of the plot but so does his gender identity. Indeed, he slowly abandons the masculine conquest pretensions that motivated him and displays traits that are

¹⁹ Hoffman, “Bodies and Borders.”

not known to be pronouncedly masculine and Israeli. His masculinity is compromised first when the widow, with whom he spends a night in Italy, turns out to be a prostitute, steals his money, and (so he believes later on) infects him with venereal disease. The dual insult, against his wallet and his body, is perceived as an assault on his masculinity and is linked with an offense to his nationhood. After he discovers he has symptoms of venereal disease, he is gripped with self-disgust and invokes a package of anti-Semitic stereotypes, including a lying Jew, a cheater, and a carrier and spreader of diseases, to define himself.

His entire relationship with Barbara, the German woman whom he meets in the elevator, begins as a masculine and national conquest. He introduces himself to her as an Israeli, does not inform her that he speaks German, and attempts to seduce her as quickly as possible. He even defines relations with German women as acts of nationalism by saying:

Definitely. Screw them, all those Germans. Knock up their women, their wives and daughters. Make them all pregnant. Fill Germany with six million bastard Jews who will suck their blood and bring on them a holocaust from which they will never recover. (131)

In the end, when he has sexual relations with Barbara, he finds himself unable to perform at the climactic moment. Thus, damage is inflicted not only on his masculinity but also on his proud, vengeful Israeli identity.

Later on, his relationship with Barbara allows him to reveal the feminine aspects of his personality. He had been displaced from his parents and surroundings at an early age and had fashioned in Israel a new identity that was threatened by his old memories, including an unconscious recollection of his symbiotic relationship with his mother, who did not survive. Thus, the novel links the shattering of the masculine Israeli identity and its exposure to other identities with the phenomena of homecoming and return to the mother. This return is reconstructed in relationship with Barbara, whom the hero defines as a mother, a home, and a hometown that has adopted and embraced him. He has returned to the familiar and the beloved, something that became alien and threatening (*unheimlich*) upon the advent of the Holocaust. He has returned to recollections of the pre-Oedipal phase, to the stage at which the boundaries of his masculine identity had not yet solidified. Barbara is well suited for the role of the borderless pre-Oedipal mother since she contains both the self and the other, the German identity and its opposite, and because she can place herself in the field of the hero's gaze, see through his eyes, and see him through hers. In his relationship with Barbara, the limits of his own identity are also breached.

CONCLUSION

Oscillation between preserving and shattering the Zionist narrative is a major motive in a number of works dealing with Holocaust survivors that were published in the 1950s and 1960s, at a time when the culture still validated this narrative. Gershon Shaked²⁰ and Dan Laor²¹ have sketched a taxonomy of literary works concerning Israel's mass immigration that distinguishes between two models: that of the hosts and that of those hosted, that is, between literature written by the native-born, reflecting the basic ideological assumptions of the host establishment, and that written by newly arrived immigrants. Avner Holtzman takes issue with this dichotomy by attempting to point to the sympathy that the Israeli-born authors bestowed on the survivors.²² A comparison of *To Remember, To Forget* and other works, including some by Holocaust survivors (e.g., Uri Orlev's *By Tomorrow*) and others written by Israel-born authors (e.g., Hanoch Bartov's *Growing Wounds*), shows that despite the different points of view of immigrant survivors and native Israelis, all these works oscillate similarly between Zionist identity and Diaspora-Jewish identity, between the space and time of the Land of Israel and other spaces and times. They also oscillate between the masculine and feminine images of their protagonists. Thus, they challenge the limits of the male Zionist identity that was generated by the propaganda texts of the early Zionist era and, to some extent, by books written in the 1940s and 1950s, thereby exposing this identity to other possibilities.

²⁰ Gershon Shaked, *Wave after Wave in Hebrew Literature* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1985).

²¹ Dan Laor, "Between Reality and Vision: Mass Immigration As Reflected in the Israeli Novel," in Mordecai Naor, ed., *Immigrants and Transit Camps, 1948–1952* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitshak Ben-Tsevi, 1987), 205–20.

²² Avner Holtzman, "'They Are Others': The Portrayal of Holocaust Survivors in the Palmah Generation Literature," in *The Jewish People at the End of the Second World War, Proceedings of the Tenth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: forthcoming).

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REREADING DAN PAGIS'S "ABBA"¹

Robert K. Baruch

When Dan Pagis's collected works appeared in 1991, the poet's readers discovered a rich trove of literary treasure in the concluding work, titled "Abba."² Though "Abba" does not fall neatly into any genre, one may, I think, justify calling the work a prose poem. Pagis deploys many of the poetic strategies characteristic of him throughout his collections published after the appearance of *Shehut me'uheret* (1964). These strategies include many of those techniques common to Pagis's poetic generation: irony, subtly mutating refrains, mischievously plastic word play, and so forth. Because of his uncanny erudition, savage curiosity, and mordant wit, Pagis stamps these techniques with his own unmistakable mark. As he writes in "Po'etiqah qetanaḥ," "You should check, of course, / [to see] if the voice belongs to you, / and if the hands are yours" (228). This personal voice serves mightily in "Abba," because the work comprises an intimate memoir, which chronicles not only Pagis's relationship with his father (*abba*), but also some of the poet's most indelible biographical events.

The appearance of Ada Pagis's *Lev pitomi*³ in 1995 renewed interest in her late husband's unusual belated memoir. Ada Pagis's complex book about her husband, described by her as "me'eyn biografiyah" ("a sort of biography"), contains an extended description of "Abba," together with her emphasis on the memoir's importance to her own narrative. Her description reads:

Another source which helped me were the chapters of "Abba," a sort of autobiography [*ke'eyn otobiografiyah*] upon which Dan concentrated

¹ Parts of this article are included in my "Return and Repression: Defensive Gestures in the Poetic Language of Dan Pagis" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1994), 5–20.

² Dan Pagis, *Kol hashirim*, ed., Hanan Hever and T. Carmi (Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Mosad Bialik, 1991). All page references are to this edition. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

³ Ada Pagis, *Lev pitomi* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1995).

during his last years, and which were published after his death. These prose chapters, which he did not manage completely to fashion, constitute his most personal creation.⁴

Ada Pagis's repetition of the phrase "a sort of" serves perhaps as an indicator of the lines of connection that obtain between *Lev pitomi* and her husband's memoir. In any case, *Lev pitomi* clearly merits its own critical analysis.

Pagis's preoccupation with his own elusive self-identification⁵ led him on an intensive search for his prewar identity and specifically to the father who left him in Bukovina when he was about four years old. Pagis's reunion with his father in Palestine in 1948, after years of hiding, fleeing, and forced labor in Nazi-occupied Transnistria, was, according to the reports of some of his friends and by his own account in "Abba," highly problematical. Hanan Hever and T. Carmi characterize the unfinished composition in words similar to those of Ada Pagis:

In Dan Pagis's posthumous works was found a prose composition by the name of "Abba." In his last years he [Pagis] labored diligently [*shaqqad*] on the writing of this complex work, the theme of which is his relationship with his father (who had passed away in 1982). He succeeded in completing most of it. (379)

One notices that Hever and Carmi consider "Abba" to be virtually complete, whereas Ada Pagis opines that it remains inchoate. What is clear is that Dan Pagis was intensively preoccupied by memories of his father during the last years before his untimely death on June 29, 1986. We can well imagine that the death of the elder Pagis—just four years before Dan Pagis's demise—had elicited searing memories and tumultuous thoughts. Since the death of a parent almost always precipitates a very strong reaction in surviving adult children, Jewish tradition considers the child of the deceased to be, in all cases, a *yatom* (orphan). Pagis plays on the theme of orphanhood in "Abba," as well as in many of the earlier poems.

Literary precedents to "Abba" abound in the form of "posthumous" letters of fathers to sons and of sons to their deceased fathers. One of the most famous of these, of course, is Kafka's "Letter to His Father."⁶ This

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ See, for example, Ariel Hirschfeld, "Al shirato shel Dan Pagis" ("On the Poetry of Dan Pagis"), in A. Pagis, *Lev pitomi*, 150–68.

⁶ Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, trans. Stanley Corngold (New York: Norton, 1988).

text, which constitutes an important backdrop to "The Metamorphosis," relates to Pagis's "Abba" in several ways. The prewar Dan Pagis, a Jewish boy from Bukovina, shared a cultural and linguistic self-identification with the Prague-based Kafka. Both of these Jewish writers spoke similar forms of German characteristic of the eastern extremity of the old Hapsburg realm and shared a Germanic literary and cultural frame of reference. Moreover, the writings of both authors reflect the destruction of that peculiar German-Jewish *Kulturkreis* from the opposite vantage points of before and after.⁷ In his letter, Kafka imagines his father saying:

What you are, in fact, set upon is living entirely on me. I admit that we fight with each other, but there are two kinds of fighting. There is chivalrous fighting, in which the forces of independent opponents are measured against each other. . . . And there is the fighting of vermin, which not only sting but at the same time sting, too, to sustain their own life.⁸

Kafka's "Letter to His Father" and Pagis's "Abba" share the impulse to reenact a complex and destructive Oedipal struggle, a battle that results, ultimately, in the vitiation of the son's strength. Whereas Kafka re-creates his struggle by deploying an extended metaphor, Pagis's memoir avoids, for the most part, the production of tropes.

"Abba," as arranged by Carmi and Hever in *Kol hashirim*, commences with remembered or imagined comments uttered by the elder Pagis upon being informed that he would be the subject of a published composition by his son:⁹

"אז מה, דנלה, אתה מתכוון לרשום את כל זה, ולהפסיק? כתוב, כתוב,
אל תתבייש. אם במקרה יקרא מישהו, הרי לא יאמין. העיקר שאתה בעצמך
באמת מאמין בזה."

⁷ For an interesting third instance of a Jewish author residing at the margins of the German-speaking world at the brink of the Shoah, compare Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*, trans. Celina Wieniewska (New York: Penguin, 1977). The book provides a manic view of a highly charged father-son relationship. Even though Schulz wrote in Polish, his literary frame of reference features Rilke, Mann, and other German-language authors.

⁸ Kafka, *Metamorphosis*, 111.

⁹ Concerning the placement of this text and the next cited (a monologue of the father's partner at cards), the editors state, "These two passages were included in a file identified as 'Various Sketches.'" From these comments one recognizes that Dan Pagis had not decided where or, indeed, if to insert them.

So, what, Daneleh,¹⁰ if you intend to record all of this, and to publish [it]? Write, write, don't be ashamed. If someone happens to read, look, he won't believe [it]. The main thing is that you yourself believe this. (341)

In a first reading, this passage may seem to represent mere reportage of an interaction. We may not immediately note its nuanced literary and, indeed, philosophical dimension. Yet, in the broader context of Pagis's canon, and of "Abba" itself, the reader is prepared to foreground the vexed concepts of "truth" and of "belief." Moreover, the ostensibly paternal words "don't be ashamed," actually *induce* shame, a shame that cannot be forestalled, comprehended, or contained. In fact, the passage calls into question the subject's capacity to believe the recalled facts of his very own life narrative. The (fictionalized) father's words cagily succeed in undermining the son's ability to relate his own tale, by putting into question the integrity or even the reality of his self-identity and memory.

If this first prefatory passage casts doubt on the subject's ability to situate himself within the parameters of recollected life events, the second brief text, now in the form of statement plus response, undermines the groundwork of the subject's very existence:

„לא הבנת את אבא שלך," אומר לי האיש המגושם. חבר לקלפים של אבא, „בכלל לא הבנת אותו. אתה דומה לו אבל רק מבחוץ, אם תסלח לי על גילוי הלב." אני מתעצבן: „ובכן מה? הוא צריך לחזור לחיים כדי שאבין אותו?" „לא לא," אומר החבר לקלפים. „זה אתה שצריך לחזור לחיים. אבל אם תסלח לי על גילוי הלב, אין לך הרבה סיכויים לזה."

"You didn't understand your dad," the heavy-set man says to me, Daddy's card partner. "You didn't understand him at all. You resemble him, but only on the outside, if you'll forgive me for my candor [*gilui halev*]." I become enervated: "So, what? Does he need to return to life so

¹⁰ A section in "Abba" titled "Hashem shelkha" creates a tone of sarcasm in the passage under consideration. In the later passage—a similar kind of dialogue—Pagis's father registers disapproval of the common name "Dan" his son had chosen for himself after arriving in the Land of Israel: "Your name? Which of them, if you don't mind? The name I gave you (well, in fact, not I, Aunt Zili suggested it), this resonant, Latin name [Severus] you obliterated when you arrived in Palestine. You chose the most conventional of all: Dan. I didn't argue at all. I understood that you want to disappear here [*ba'arets*], simply to be absorbed like water in sand. How does one say, you change your name, you change your luck, right? But I thank you that you didn't change our family name. Do you understand me?" "No, Abba" (366).

that I can understand him?" "No, no," says his partner at cards, "it's you who needs to return to life. But, if you'll forgive me for my candor, you haven't many prospects for that." (341)

The card partner's second statement perhaps represents an artistic reworking of what may have been an actual interchange following the death of Pagis's father. What comprises the indicator of fictionalization is the familiar *topos* of the survivor's failed attempt to return to the land of the living. This indicative *topos* recurs insistently throughout the corpus of Pagis's work and serves as both an important literary device and as a quite personal biographical signal.¹¹ Moreover, the rueful comment, "you haven't many prospects for that," sounds like vintage Pagis, since the poet repeatedly denied the substantiality of his post-Shoah existence or his ability to reclaim a sense of fully animate human existence. In any case, one senses that it is improbable that the father's card partner would judge the son so harshly and pointedly. Rather, these words apparently comprise a judgment the poet imposes upon himself.

After these prefatory texts, Hever and Carmi place as the first extended entry in the collection a passage titled "Cherry-Heering." This complex, vivid, and uncommonly self-revelatory passage causes a reenactment within the reader of an anxious and excruciating moment, namely, the precise instant when Pagis and his son Yonatan learn of the death of Pagis's father. Concomitantly with the revelation of the father's demise, a bottle of a liqueur purchased as a gift for the father at a duty-free shop shatters in the poet's favorite piece of hand luggage at the arrival room at Lod (presently Ben Gurion) airport. The passage concludes:

איש זקן עובר לידנו ואומר: "מה קורה לכם? משהו נשבר." ובאמת, אנחנו בתוך שלולית אדומה-כהה. המזוודה הקטנה שותתת צ'רי-ברנדי דביק, מתוק-מריר, מבחיל, המכסה את המרצפות. אני מסלק את שברי הבקבוק, רץ לברז ומנסה להציל את הניירות והחולצות שנספגו, לשטוף את המזוודה, — כמובן, לשווא. הליקר המשובח, הדביק, אינו מוותר. זכר ממנו עוד דבק במזוודה עד היום. בנסיעה אחרת — כבר לא איכפת איזו — הקפדתי לקנות בקבוק של צ'רי-הרינג ולהביא אותו בתוך המזוודה הקטנה הזאת. הוא הגיע שלם.

An old man passes by us and remarks: "What's happening to you? Something has broken." And, indeed, we are situated in the midst of a

¹¹ Two vivid examples of personae returning from the land of the dead to the Land are two relatively early poems from *Shahut me'uheret* (1964), "Epilog leRobinson Crusoe" (73) and "Honi" (74).

dark red puddle. The little suitcase bleeds sticky Cherry-Heering, bitter-sweet, covering the tiles. I remove the broken pieces of the bottle, run to a faucet and try to save the saturated papers and shirts—in vain, of course. The choice, sticky liqueur does not relent. To this day, a reminder of it still adheres to the suitcase. On another trip—it hardly matters which—I made a point of buying a bottle of Cherry-Heering and to transport it in this little suitcase. It arrived intact. (344)

This admittedly overdetermined text, which serves so aptly to introduce the scene of the troubled father-son relationship, seems to have given Pagis anxious moments during its composition. The editors provide Pagis's German marginal notes surrounding the passage, which include the question, "to omit?" The notes continue, "If this remains, it could be less symbolic, even if everything is true" (380). What precisely does Pagis intend by the term "symbolic"? Perhaps he worries that even a precise and faithful reconstruction of the event would yield a narrative that would be critically received as deliberately contrived. In "Abba," evidently, Pagis hoped to strip away self-conscious rhetorical aestheticizing. The "real" incidents of lived experience, Pagis seems here to assert, often bring events that the mind interprets as purposefully symbolic or uncanny. Pagis was surely aware, however, that when readers encounter these incidents in literary garb, they may feel that the narrative has been unduly contrived.

This having been said, "Cherry-Heering" has special resonance, because it recounts the precise moment in which Pagis learned about the death of his father. The message came by phone from the poet's wife Ada. The passage, further, reflects Dan Pagis's relationship with his own son Yonatan. This relationship, in contrast to the one that serves as the driving engine of *Abba*, appears here to be marked by mutual respect, especially by Dan Pagis's admiration for his Israeli-born son, who always has a ready *asimon* (telephone token). In addition, Pagis ostensibly identifies himself with modes of Israeli behavior ("I steel myself in a certain Israeli way") (343). The cautious way he frames these remarks, however, indicates the difference he must have felt between his son's integrated identity and his own complex, ambivalent self-identification. The lines also reveal details about the poet's personal habits, which may have a relationship to his Shoah experiences, such as a great attachment to small possessions and an insistence on replaying crucial scenarios within belated contexts.

Many of the factors comprising Pagis's extended effort to bring together sometimes incompatible fragments of his self-identity surface vigorously in a pivotal section of "Abba" provocatively named "Me'abba lo tsohaqim" ("One Does Not Laugh at Daddy"). In this section, the narrator—here, as elsewhere, Dan Pagis speaking in a simulacrum of his own voice—relates a particularly alienating interaction with his father:

What do I want from him? The most severe words he said to me in the thirty-five years since I immigrated to the Land [of Israel] were [spoken] in the first week after I arrived. We sat with his second wife at breakfast and he asked me (still in German with a Russian accent, for I knew no Hebrew), if I still had family pictures [*im nisharu temunot min hamish-pahah*] after they stole all of my personal effects on the way to Palestine. I laughed. "Did I still need these pictures? Only with the greatest difficulty did I myself survive [*beqoshi nisharti be'atsmi*]." And then he said quietly, "One doesn't laugh at Daddy [*abba*]"—I was shocked that he spoke of himself in the third person, for apparently he wanted to emphasize his [parental] status and to make reference to the general context [*ha'inyan hakelali*]. One oughtn't to make fun of Daddy [*abba*]. I immediately retreated into myself [*hitkanasti*]. And since then he has said nothing—and, indeed, I've given him no cause for it. (349)

The passage reads almost like one of Pagis's tightly constructed short poems, for it enunciates the theme of "mere" survival found in many of the poems of the middle and later collections¹² and is replete with purposeful ambiguity. In fact, the opening question initiates the play of ambiguities: "What do I want from him?" The simple verb "want" [*rotseh*] introduces an unfocused and perhaps unrealizable desire. One can speculate that such desire typifies an adolescent son's relation to his father under "normal" circumstances. How much the more would the truncated and tortured relationship of a boy separated by war from his father since earliest childhood produce diffuse and conflicted yearnings. This passage echoes the immediately preceding "Na'alayim" ("Shoes"), in which Pagis tells his father that a Jew whom he had known in his hometown of Radautz, had stolen his knapsack while he was on his way to the Land of Israel. There the reader perceives the ongoing missed communications marking the conversation of father and son. The father tires of hearing this tale—in the course of which Dan reveals his fundamental distrust of all human beings (347).¹³ But even there the tale is fragmentarily related, and we gain few particulars about what actually had occurred. In fact, Pagis's writings relate few details about his early adolescence, during which he

¹² See, for example, the frequently anthologized "Aḥim" (163–64), the first poem in *Mo'ah* (1975).

¹³ Here Pagis reveals one of the rare points of meeting between father and son: "You yelled, and then I felt some sense of intimacy [*qirvah*]." This intimacy quickly dissipates when Dan tries to please his father by shining his boots, and receives a demeaning response: "... don't make a big drama, Danaleh. I always liked to shine things."

experienced enslavement, flight, and survival ("With difficulty did I myself survive").

The Hebrew phrase "*od temunot hayiti tsarikh*" can be translated variously as, "Did I still need pictures?" or "Did I need more pictures?" What is more significant here, however, is the remark, "I was stunned that he spoke of himself in the third person." By expressing his shock and injured feelings in linguistically analytic terms, Pagis distances himself from the source of the wound by a subtle defensive gesture. At the same time, he indicates the severity of the harm inflicted by the father's reaction. The very subject of language, then, becomes the poet's indispensable coat of mail, at once protecting and concealing, even as it allows movement and personal recollection.

Even this brief exploration of "Abba" must include some remarks about the "Mikhtavim" ("Letters"), which are located at the very heart of Pagis's memoir. In their bleak ellipticality, the letters mask incalculable dimensions of conflict, pathos, and distress. These documents serve as testimonies to memory and forgetting, to vengeance and forgiveness, and most of all, to irretrievable loss. In his prefatory "letter" to his dead father, Pagis-as-narrator relates the arresting tale of how in 1963 or 1964 he discovered highly significant correspondence from 1934, sent by his mother to his father and by his maternal grandmother to his father. The subject of the letters is principally the illness, surgery, and subsequent death of Juli (Pagis's mother) near the end of September 1934. These letters should have resolved many of the tensions that characterized the father-son relationship, since they prove that the father (Zho) clearly intended to bring his family to join him in Palestine, despite Dan Pagis's suspicions to the contrary. Still, the letters do not resolve the tensions. Pagis ends the prefatory letter—ostensibly framed to voice apologies for unwarranted suspicions—with a stark accusation: "It didn't occur to you to show me the letters all these years, simply because you forgot about them. I'll remind you. I'll read them in your presence. This is my vengeance" (358). In a later section of "Abba," subsequent to the letters, the text describes a scene in which the father implicates both himself and his son: "But Danaleh, why didn't you ask me? I would have immediately told you that there's nothing there [in the letters]" (363). The father's stunning misevaluation of the letters' importance—a miscalculation that Pagis has imagined—provides the final unhappy word regarding the troubled father-son relationship. Sadly, the overall impression the reader receives is that, despite the powerful bond between them, both father and son consistently depreciated and disavowed one another. No resolution or reconciliation ensues in "Abba." One surmises that this lack of resolution reflects the actual state of affairs between father and son at the end of the elder Pagis's life.

Yet the letters are not devoid of positive notes, and these tones are sounded in the register of language. Pagis's mother had written the following words to her husband September 2, 1934, just a short time before her untimely death in December 1934:

And what are you to do in regard to languages? Are you studying Hebrew and English? I'm not yet doing so, because the teachers haven't yet returned from summer vacation, and at the end of autumn, I'll no longer be here. Imagine, your Russian and my German, and in addition we'll add two languages! But of course the main thing is Hebrew. (359)

These lines must have oddly returned Dan Pagis to his place of origin in the linguistically mixed Bukovina and to his mother's liveliness and creativity. His keenly ironic sense finds expression in Juli's comment, that by autumn's end she would no longer be "here" (i.e., in Chernowitz). In the context of 1963–1964, however, the poet would have heard the words as meaning that she would no longer be alive. Perhaps the final irony rings out in his mother's assertion "But of course the main thing is Hebrew." These words and this sentiment uncannily prefigured and prescribed the career of a great scholar and poet.



◆

WHAT LEARNING IS MOST WORTH?¹

— Walter Ackerman —

Statements about the purposes of schooling and the aims of education are “stories” that societies tell about themselves. Even though often considered little more than empty rhetoric, they can help us understand how a society envisions its future and treats the accumulated traditions of its past. Certain themes are common to all such pronouncements—economic prosperity and military security are two examples. Other items reflect the ideology that shapes social policy.

A textbook approved by the Soviet Ministry of Education in 1950 declares that “the most important task of the school is to educate a young generation which is devoted to the motherland, the Communist party, the government of the USSR and Stalin, the great leader of the world proletariat.”² Schools in the People’s Republic of China are charged with the responsibility of “meeting the needs of revolutionary work and national reconstruction.” A one-time commissioner of education thought that schools in the United States ought to be committed to the “well-being of the individual pupil and student, his capabilities for a productive and happy life in which he can pursue an interesting and satisfying vocation in which his potentialities as a person are enlarged and fulfilled.”

In what follows I will compare two statements regarding the goals of Israel’s public schools. The first is embodied in the State Education Act of 1953; the second is a proposal drafted in 1995 intended to amend the original legislation.

¹ My friendship with Arnold Band is an uninterrupted conversation of over half a century that began in Boston (Dorchester) and then moved to Los Angeles, Jerusalem, and Beer Sheva. There is hardly a time in our talking that has not included schools and all that goes with them. Because he has never forgotten that he is primarily a teacher (even a *melamed*), his insights and observations have always been important to me. For that and much else, *today*.

² As quoted in *Divrei hakeneset* (June 22, 1953): 1678.



The creation of a modern school system was one of the most significant achievements of the pre-state Yishuv in Palestine. On the eve of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, over 125,000 children were enrolled in a countrywide network of elementary schools. These pupils represented 80 percent of the eligible cohort, and this without the support or coercive power of a compulsory education act or any of the other means used by modern states to guarantee that children begin school at a certain age and remain in attendance until they reach a specified age or complete a designated number of grades.

During the period between the two world wars, the legal authority for the conduct of Jewish schools in Palestine was vested first in the Zionist Council, then the Jewish Agency, and finally in the *va'ad hale'umi* (General Council of the Jewish Community in Palestine) and its Department of Education. The central organs were far less influential than might be inferred from the details of the structure.

The idea of a single school system that served all the Jewish children in the country, mainly favored by the liberal-democratic General Zionists and right-wing Revisionists, was thwarted by the "Trend System." Most of the Jewish schools belonged to one of three trends—General, Labor, and Mizrahi; schools sponsored by Agudat Israel constituted a fourth framework. Each trend was identified with a political party that provided the ideological underpinning for the work of the schools. Each of them developed the machinery necessary for designing curricula, creating material, training and hiring staff, and maintaining control. Each trend was represented in the Department of Education by its Chief Inspector. The direct involvement of political parties in the day-to-day workings of schools was of a piece with their embracive character at that time; political parties created employment agencies for members as well as health services, construction companies, social services, and publishing houses that produced daily newspapers, magazines, and books. The right of each of the parties to conduct schools guided by its beliefs had been secured over the years by agreements negotiated with authoritative Zionist agencies.

The differences between the schools of the various trends were most marked in the amount of time allotted to Jewish studies, the manner of interpretation of classical Jewish texts,³ and the general atmosphere of the institution. Schools in the General trend were hardly different in structure

³ Walter Ackerman, "Making Jews: An Enduring Challenge in Israeli Education," *Israel Studies*, 2 (2) (Fall 1997): 1–20. See also Walter Ackerman, "Varieties of Jewishness," *Journal of Israeli History* 18 (1) (1997): 47–56.

and style from their European counterparts; they emphasized the development of a nonreligious national Hebrew culture. Labor schools, particularly those of the kibbutzim, were influenced by the ideas of "progressive" European and American educators; Hebrew language and literature and Bible were the key "Jewish" subjects.

As in the schools of the General trend, schools of the Labor trend emphasized the literary and historical aspects of the canonical texts. Mizrahi schools reflected the values and ideals of religious Zionism; despite the space allotted to Hebrew and Bible, Talmud still maintained primacy of importance in Jewish studies. All the schools shared a commitment to the creation of a "new" society and the nurturing of a "New Jew."⁴

In the years immediately preceding the establishment of the State, the General trend on all its levels enrolled more pupils than the Labor and Mizrahi trends combined. The following table provides a picture of the distribution of pupils on all levels among the three trends.⁵

Number of pupils and schools, kindergarten through teacher-training college, in the Jewish education system, by trend: 1944-1945⁶

Trend	Total* all levels pupils/ schools		Kinder- garten pupils/ schools		Elementary pupils/ schools		Secondary pupils/ schools		Vocational pupils/ schools		Teacher- training pupils/ schools	
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Total	79,441	651	12,490	339	55,471	269	9,527 [†]	28	1,067	9	886	6
General	42,311	231	5,632	116	27,252	86	8,306	20	564	6	557	3
Labor	17,696	267	4,574	161	12,382	100	297	4	443	2	0	0
Mizrahi	18,772	150	2,284	62	15,175	80	924	4	60	1	329	3
Unclassified	662	3	0	0	662	3	0	0	0	0	0	0

* An enrollment of 832 in continuation classes had the following trend distribution: General: 30; Labor: 703; Mizrahi: 22; and Unclassified: 77.

[†] Of the 9,527 pupils in secondary schools, 4,205 were in elementary grades and 5,322 in secondary grades.

⁴ Mark Rosenstein, "The New Jew: The Approach to Jewish Tradition in High Schools of the General Trend from Its Inception to the Establishment of the State" [Hebrew] (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1985).

⁵ Randolph Braham, *Israel: A Modern Education System* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Education, U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, 1966), 32.

⁶ Colonial Office, *The System of Education of the Jewish Community in Palestine, Report of the Commission of Enquiry Appointed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1945* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1946), 103.

The State Education Act of 1953 was the second law pertaining to education passed in Parliament. The first, the Compulsory Education Act in 1949, stipulated that

Compulsory education includes all children between the ages of 5–13 inclusive of any youngster who has not completed elementary school [eight grades]. . . . Parents are required to register a 5 year old child in the local educational authority within whose jurisdiction the child resides by the date and in the manner prescribed by regulations. . . . At the time of registration, parents complying with the law may declare their wish to enroll their child in a school of one of the recognized trends.⁷

By 1953, five years after the establishment of the State, the Labor trend, now the school system of the party in power and its charismatic leader, Ben-Gurion, enrolled almost twice as many pupils as the General and Mizrahi trends combined.

Enrollment by Trend (percent)⁸

	1948	1953
Agudat Israel	—	8.3
General	50.1	27.1
Labor	24.8	43.4
Mizrahi	25.0	19.1
Other	0.1	2.1

The State Education Act is best understood conceptually as an aspect of the principle of *mamlakhtiyyut*, the sovereignty of the State. The purpose of the act was to transfer the authority for the conduct of schools from political parties and other agencies to the State. During the debate in Parliament, the then Minister of Education, Prof. Ben Zion Dinur, declared that with the passage of the bill "the State would assume full, undivided and unquestioned responsibility for education. . . . the responsibility for preserving the spiritual inheritance of the nation would

⁷ Ruth Stanner, *Dinei hinukh* (Jerusalem: n.p., 1966), 64, 90.

⁸ Aharon Kleinberger, "Haqiqah, politiqaq vehakhvanah betehum haḥinukh," in Chaim Ormian, ed., *Haḥinukh beyisra'el* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1953), 54.

henceforth be vested in the State."⁹ The timing of the bill was connected to the scandalous excesses of the trends, particularly Labor, in efforts to enroll children of newly arrived immigrants still living in tent camps in their schools and a series of government crises that ensued; the idea of an "informed choice" which was at the heart of the trend system had no meaning in the circumstances of those times. (It is worth noting that in the United States opponents of "parental choice" and "voucher programs" claim that poor families who are purportedly the major beneficiaries of the approach have neither the means nor the abilities required to acquire the information essential to an informed choice.¹⁰)

State education as defined by the law is that

which is provided by the state in accordance with the curriculum without any connection to an agency of a party, any particular group or any organization excepting the government under the supervision of the minister or someone who has been authorized by the minister.¹¹

Its purpose is

להשתית את החינוך היסודי במדינה על ערכי תרבות ישראל והישגי המדע, על אהבת המולדת ונאמנות למדינה ולעם ישראל, על אימון בעבודה חקלאית ובמלאכה, על הכשרה חלוצית, ועל שאיפה לחברה בנויה על חרות, שוויון, סובלנות, עזרה הדדית ואהבת הבריות.

to base elementary education in the State on the values of the culture of Israel and the achievements of science; on the love of the homeland and loyalty to the state and the Jewish people, training in agriculture and manual labor, preparation for *halutsiyyut* and an aspiration for a society built on freedom, equality, tolerance, mutual aid, and a love of humanity.¹²

According to the minister, education in the spirit of the law—apolitical and without distinction of class—would unite the citizens of the country and contribute to the creation of a free society in which individuals may live as they like.¹³

⁹ *Divrei hakeneset* (June 22, 1953): 1659.

¹⁰ Zvi Zameret, *Al geshet tsar* (Sede Boker: Ben-Gurion Research Center, Ben-Gurion University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Stanner, *Dinei hinukh*, 100.

¹² *Ibid.*, 102.

¹³ *Divrei hakeneset* (June 22, 1953): 1669.

Yizhar Smilanski, the distinguished author who was at that time one of the representatives of Labor in the Knesset, was not quite as neutral in his defense of the law. In his view, the measure of the state school would be "not in what pupils learned in history, Bible, and arithmetic" but rather in the number of graduates who "choose to turn their back on Tel Aviv and [dedicate themselves] to the dictates of *halutsiyyut*.... The intent of the law is to turn every school in the State into an institution which nurtures a nation of workers."¹⁴

The language of the law, as of many others that turn on interests and ideology, is clearly a compromise between the religious and the secular—"Torat Israel" becomes "culture of Israel"; the "achievements of science" rather than the "spirit of science"; and "freedom, equality, tolerance" are substitutes for "socialism."¹⁵

The provisions of the law are important also for what they do not say. There is no attention to Arab citizens and their particular needs, religious and national; the variety of cultures brought to the country by the massive influx of new immigrants and their impact on its life are not mentioned; there is no reference to the Holocaust; the need of individuals to pursue their inclinations are clearly secondary to the demands of the collective; the influence of an ideology appropriate to a nationalist movement seems to outweigh the requirements of a modern, industrial state. This law is very much a product of the worldview of those who had played a leading role in the establishment of the State and controlled the machinery of government at the time of its passage.



The official Gazette (*Reshumot*) of the State of Israel for February 27, 1996, carried notice of a proposal to amend the State Education Act of 1953. The proposal, a product of extended discussion between representatives of the Ministry of Education, academicians, legislators, and others, is intended to create a closer fit between the goals of the state education system and the changed reality of Israeli society and the system itself than is expressed in the original legislation. According to those who drafted the proposal, "The goals of state education are phrased in general terms, and are applicable to all the various elements which comprise the system." In order to emphasize the uniqueness of state religious education, "education for a life of learning and observance" has been added to

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Zvi Lamm, "Metaḥim ide'ologiyyim beḥinukh," *Emda* (May 1978); see also Esther Raziel, *Divrei hakeneset* (June 22, 1953): 1666.

its definition. As noted in the official Gazette, the amendment states that the goals of state education are:

(1) לחנך אדם להיות אוהב אדם, אוהב עמו ואוהב ארצו, אזרח נאמן למדינת ישראל, המכבד את הוריו ואת משפחתו, את מורשתו, את זהותו התרבותית ואת לשונו.

(1) To educate a person who loves humanity, his people and his land, a citizen who is loyal to the State of Israel, who honors his parents and his family, his heritage, cultural identity, and language.

(2) להנחיל את ערכי ההכרזה על מדינת ישראל ולפתח יחס של כבוד לזכויות האדם, לחירויות היסוד, לערכים דמוקרטיים, לשמירת החוק, לתרבותו ולהשקפותיו של הזולת, לחתירה לשלום, ולסובלנות ביחסים בין בני אדם ובין עמים.

(2) To impart the values of the Declaration of Independence, to develop respect for the rights of human beings, basic freedoms, democratic values, observance of the law, the culture and views of others, and for tolerance in the relations between human beings and nations.

(3) לפתח את אישיות הילד, את יצירתיותו ואת כשרונותיו השונים למיצוי מלוא יכולתו כאדם החי חיים של איכות ושל משמעות.

(3) To develop the child's personality, his creativity and his different abilities for the full realization of its capacity as a person to live a life of quality and meaning.

(4) לבסס את ידיעותיו של התלמיד בתחומי הדעת והמדע השונים, ביצירה האנושית לסוגיה ולדורותיה, ובמיומנויות היסוד שיידרשו לו בחייו כאדם בוגר בחברה חופשית, ולעודד פעילות גופנית ותרבות פנאי.

(4) To ground the pupil's knowledge in the various disciplines and sciences in the creativity of humankind in all its forms and over the generations and in the basic skills necessary to life as an adult in a free society and to encourage physical and leisure time activities.

(5) לחזק את כוח השיפוט והביקורת, לטפח סקרנות אינטלקטואלית, מחשבה עצמאית ויוזמה, ולפתח מודעות וערנות לתמורות ולחידושים.

(5) To enhance abilities of judgment and critical thinking, to nurture intellectual curiosity, independent thinking and initiative, and to cultivate awareness and alertness to changes and innovations.

(6) להעניק שוויון הזדמנויות לכל ילד, לאפשר לו להתפתח על-פי דרכו וליצור אווירה המעודדת את השונה ותומכת בו.

(6) To provide equal opportunities for every child, to permit them to grow in their own ways and to create a climate which encourages and supports difference.

(7) לטפח מעורבות בחיי החברה הישראלית, נכונות לקבל תפקידים ולמלאם מתוך מסירות ואחריות, רצון לעזרה הדדית וחתירה לצדק חברתי במדינת ישראל.

(7) To foster involvement in Israel's civic life, a readiness to assume tasks and to fulfill them with responsibility and dedication, a desire for mutual aid and efforts for social justice in the State of Israel.

(8) לפתח יחס של כבוד ואחריות לסביבה הטבעית וזיקה לנופי הארץ, לחי ולצומח.

(8) To develop an attitude of respect for and responsibility to the natural environment and an attachment to the country's landscape and to plants and animals.

(9) ללמד את תולדות ארץ ישראל ומדינת ישראל.

(9) To teach the history of the Land of Israel and the State of Israel.

(10) ללמד את תולדות העם היהודי, מורשת ישראל והמסורת היהודית ולהנחיל את תודעת זכר השואה והגבורה.

(10) To teach the history of the Jewish people, the heritage of Israel and the Jewish tradition and to impart a consciousness of remembering the Shoah and the deeds of bravery.

(11) להכיר את השפה, התרבות, המורשת והמסורת הייחודית של קבוצות האוכלוסיה השונות במדינת ישראל ולהכיר בזכויות השוות של כל אזרחי ישראל.

(11) To become acquainted with the language, culture, and unique heritage of the different groups in the population of the State of Israel and to acknowledge the equal rights of all citizens of the country.

The amendment, as understood by those responsible for its spirit and language, differs from the original legislation on several counts: specific

reference to the Declaration of Independence, which had recently acquired a legal status in a Basic Law; clear consideration of learning and education, the major business of schools, which advance pupils' knowledge and contribute to their development; recognition of the non-Jewish population in the country and its equal rights together with the general obligation of becoming acquainted with the history of the Jewish people and the State of Israel as well as the memory of the Shoah; the addition of a section dealing with the environment, a subject of increasing importance all over the world.¹⁶

It is not our purpose here to comment on the way in which the changes in the law, if adopted, would affect life in school in all its complexity. The comparison between the pertinent section of the original legislation and the proposal for a revision is intended rather to illustrate the contention that statements of the goals of education embody developments in the societies that consider schools an important agency of socialization. The proposal of 1996, composed almost fifty years after the establishment of the State of Israel, differs from the State Education Act of 1953 in much the same way as life in Israel today is different from what it was half a century ago. A narrow ideological base has been broadened, if not altogether eliminated, by an expansive spirit that mirrors the transition from a tiny, beleaguered, newly established state to one that is relatively safe and prosperous. The inclusion of the Holocaust mirrors the move from the embarrassed reticence of an earlier age to the central place those tragic events occupy today in the country's civil religion. The "end of ideology," hardly restricted to Israel alone, has brought with it a view of education that affords the individual and his or her development much more "space" than was available in the time of the supremacy of the collective. The obeisance to individualism, however, dulls the patterns of identity. The intensity of national purpose and the call for self-sacrifice that inform the original statement are almost completely absent from the new version; indeed, many of the provisions of the latter are identical to what one can find in similar documents in any modern, liberal, democratic society.

The amendment was passed by Parliament on its first reading. The final readings necessary to the enactment of a law never took place because of the change of government and the appointment of a new minister of education following the general election of 1996. Considering the convolutions that the Israeli political system can spawn, it is difficult to predict what would happen if the bill were brought to a vote today. Whatever its legislative fate, the amendment deserves attention not only

¹⁶ *Reshumot* (February 27, 1996).

as a statement of educational policy, as important as that is, but also as an example of some of the issues that are central to the charged debate, spurred in part by the work of the "new" historians and the "new" sociologists who seek to define the nature of the Israeli polity. For some, its broader universalistic attention to "the language, culture and unique heritage of the different groups in the State of Israel" together with acknowledgment of the "equal rights of all the citizens of the country" is a long overdue step in the direction of the formation of a state of all its citizens. For others it is a particularly telling instance of a "wholesale assault on every aspect of government policy that might remind one that Israel was to have been a Jewish state" and gives support to those who believe that "the idea of a Jewish state ... is destructive, undesirable and certainly passé."¹⁷

¹⁷ Yoram Hazony, "The Zionist State and Its Enemies," *Commentary* (May 1996): 30–38. See also the exchange between Hazony and Amnon Rubenstein, who as Minister of Education sponsored the amendment, in *Commentary* (October 1996): 14–16.



◆

AHARON MEGGED'S "BURDEN" IN HIS PORTRAYALS OF THE EFFECTS OF ISRAEL'S WARS

Stanley Nash

Aharon Megged's short story of 1949, "Hamesibbah,"¹ and his play *El hatsippor*,² staged in 1974, both feature protagonists who have had one leg amputated due to their combat wounds. Megged's starkly realistic style reflects his empathy with the pained cynicism of such protagonists. Naftali of "Hamesibbah" jokes that he had made a hasty decision "on one foot" (*al regel aḥat*) to come to the party, of course reflecting his sense of diminished manhood.³ Twenty-five years later in *El hatsippor*, the maimed character, Amikam, flaunts equally bitter humor, but by 1974, after the Yom Kippur War, such remarks, as we shall see, call into question the very viability of the Zionist enterprise.

These differences noted, Megged's empathy with the crippled protagonist in each case calls to mind his statement in a recent interview. In 1947–1948 Megged was in Chicago, where he served as a Zionist *shaliaḥ* and also worked in a meat plant to support himself. He was unable to return to fight in the War of Independence because his wife was in a precarious stage of pregnancy. This absence from Israel during the 1948 war, Megged told the interviewer, produced in him a lifelong sense of being crippled (*nekhut*) on an emotional level.⁴ The reader can discern an echo of this in Megged's most important war-related work, his novel *Massa be'av*,⁵ which will be the focus of the present article. There a grieving

¹ Aharon Megged, "Hamesibbah," in *Ru'ah yammim* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1949), 257–82. See the English translation by S. Katz, "The Party," in S. Kahn, ed., *A Whole Loaf* (New York: Grosset & Dunlop, 1963), 103–23.

² *El hatsippor* is available in mimeographed form only.

³ Megged, "Hamesibbah," 263; English translation, 108.

⁴ See Megged's interview with Yonah Hadari-Ramaj, *Yediot Aḥaronot* (April 19, 1991): "ani margish nekheh 'im zeh." Megged has also confirmed this statement in a personal letter to me.

⁵ Aharon Megged, *Massa be'av* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1984).

father revisits the trauma of the Yom Kippur War in the wake of Israel's decision to dismantle Jewish settlements in the Sinai. The father, Daniel Levin, states that he used to have an "obsession, need, compulsion" to get up early in the morning with his son, Amnon, and drive him all the way back to his base in the Sinai. The reason was that by so doing he achieved a certain *kofer nefesh* (atonement or absolution from guilt) "for the fact that [he himself] had not served in a military corps" (186; 170). This sense of *nekhut* is an expression of Megged's "survivor guilt" and responsibility. It deserves emphasis because of Megged's comic and satirical bent, a bent that might tend to obscure these deeper feelings.

Megged's readers are familiar with an altogether different type of refraction of Megged's burden of memory of Israel's wars—a literary response that is satirical, antiheroic, surrealistic, grotesque, or any combination of the above. In Megged's interesting story "Hamiqreh he'atsuv shel Mikhah Shtoq,"⁶ for example, we have what started out as a comical newspaper series⁷ and crystallized into a modernistic story that approaches magic realism. Mikhah Shtoq has suffered a brain injury during the 1948 war that renders him incapable of forgetting anything. He thus relives daily his wartime experiences under fire and thereby brings this unrelenting perspective into his encounters with an Israel now inundated with petty bourgeois concerns and complacency. The same contempt expressed by Naftali in "Hamesibbah" for certain slick "public relations" types, who have avoided military service or shirked their duty and who continue to manipulate and exploit others, reaches a grotesque denouement in "Mikhah Shtoq." In an ending reminiscent of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Mikhah confronts the "traitor" and with his unnatural strength inadvertently kills him. In so doing Mikhah destroys the embodiment of everything phony, everything that defiles the memory and sacrifice of 1948.

A full treatment of this theme would necessitate a thorough study of Megged's depiction of antiheroes in response to war, or more correctly, to interregnum situations.⁸ One can, however, venture the following observation. Megged's immediate response to wars that were unequivocally traumatic for Israel, namely, the 1948 and 1973 wars, does not have

⁶ In Aharon Megged, *Ma'aseh megunneh* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1986), 107–65.

⁷ Nine columns under the title "Mikhah Shtoq" appeared in *Davar* (November 6, 13, 20, 27 and December 4, 1981; January 8 and 29 and February 5, 1982).

⁸ Megged's most important works in this genre are *Miqreh hakesil* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1959), translated by Aubrey Hodes as *Fortunes of a Fool* (London: Gollancz, 1962); and *Haḥai al hamet* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1965), translated by Misha Louvish as *Living on the Dead* (New York: McCall, 1965).

recourse to antiheroes. The figures in "Hamesibbah," *El hatsippor*, and *Massa be'av*—the realistic works I want to concentrate on here—are conspicuously, painfully realistic. They are markedly non-antiheroic. Megged's antiheroes, by contrast, address ambiguous situations already at a remove from the immediate horrors of war: they portray a twilight zone of uncertainty following a questionable war—such as the "fool" in Megged's *Miqreh hakesil*, following the Sinai Campaign; or they portray a period of societal and/or ideological deterioration—such as Mikhah Shtoq's commentary on Israel's inflationary spending and its decision to return the entire Sinai to Egypt. Overall, Megged's antiheroes symbolize his critique of social malaise in the wake of war, rather than his response to war per se, with its battle scars, casualties, and bereavement.

The Yom Kippur War was, not surprisingly, the occasion for Megged's most serious soul-searching. It evoked in Megged an intense burden of guilt and feelings of empathy that had already been expressed briefly in the 1949 story "Hamesibbah." The play *El hatsippor*, although it does not reach the level of artistry of *Massa be'av*, has the virtue of being a most spontaneous response to the trauma of the war. The fact that it was never published also lends significance to the extended treatment we give it here.

EL HATSIPPOR

El hatsippor had the dubious distinction of being the first play produced in response to the Yom Kippur War. I say "dubious" because the critics faulted Megged for not attaining enough distance from the events. In both *El hatsippor* and *Massa be'av* the protagonist is away in America absorbed in an esoteric and isolating discipline of study. In *El hatsippor* (*To the Bird*), Zvi, an ornithologist—hence the title—learns of the sneak attack only several days later because he has been tracking an exotic bird species in the state of Maine, "removed from history," as Zvi says.

The isolated bird-watcher, Zvi, for all his obliviousness to ongoing events, is hawkish on political matters. Oddly enough, Zvi is not in a rush to return to Israel due to his ivory-tower proclivities. His wife, the socially activist intellectual, Rachel, convinces him to return home. Rachel, a one-time concentration-camp internee, has drawn moral resolve from that ordeal, and she emerges as the foremost positive hero in the play. While Zvi used to be something of a military hero in pre-statehood Palestine, he is an alienated type on several counts: first, his professional activity enforces isolation, and secondly, he may well have been cheating on his wife with his youthful admirer, Ada. Only when they all return to Israel does Zvi seem required to break off the relationship.

The metaphor of birds establishes several motifs: (1) Zvi's isolating research into birds establishes him as an ivory-tower *luftmensch* who is

therefore all the more traumatized by the outbreak of the war. (2) The title's allusion to Bialik's poem "El hatsippor"⁹ poses an ironic challenge to the naïve foundation of a good part of the Zionist dream. *El hatsippor* also suggests the notion of *tsippor hanefesh* (the quick of the soul) as having been laid bare by the traumatic events of the October war. (3) Megged himself refers to another literary source, a poem by a Soviet poet, K. Davidov, about the mystical influence birds exert upon a man "to be a free-flying bird, to follow his heart."¹⁰ (4) The particular bird species Zvi is researching broadcasts an anticollectivist sociobiological message.

The role of caustic social conscience is played in the first act of the play by Ella, one of the three young women in Zvi and Rachel's circle in Boston. In the second act, the gadfly is Amikam, the wounded son-in-law of Zvi and Rachel. Ella has mellowed; she has been transformed through the devastating impact on her of the news conveyed by Amikam that her husband committed suicide under the pressure of battle. Amikam, at first, is determined not to tell Ella; he wants to spare her, but then suddenly he hurls the news at her in an act of bitter gratuitous cruelty. This disclosure intensifies Ella's guilt at having been away from her husband in America, where she was pursuing an acting career—and a love interest on the side as well.

Ella's biting wit is attractive in its sarcastic irreverence, its literary allusions, and in her reading from the script of a play she has been rehearsing. In the play a man verbally abuses a woman for half an hour, telling her, "You're shit, you're nothing, you get up in the morning ... you comb your hair for an hour ... you go to Greenwich Village and look at your ass in all the mirrors of the homos, while at that very same time, at precisely that time, four hundred and twenty people are being killed in the jungles of Vietnam." Ella draws the negative association to herself in the context of Israel's difficult war situation and asks, "What am I living for?"—presumably because she is not with her husband, family, and friends during this crisis. Much of the play, in fact, reflects the "wake-up call" for alienated Israelis symbolized by the Yom Kippur War, a summons to return to meaningful causes, especially to a life of purpose in Israel.

In the second act, upon returning to Israel, Ella shows a total reversal of character, a metamorphosis so radical as not to be entirely credible. She now performs for the troops and speaks with a conspicuous lack of

⁹ This poem by the youthful Bialik was a sentimental favorite for generations of Hebraists, but its tone bespeaks naïveté and utopianism.

¹⁰ Megged sheds light on his choice of themes in *El hatsippor* in his interview with Moshe Dor in *Ma'ariv* (November 22, 1974).

cynicism. Taking over the gadfly role, Amikam constantly vents his bitter anger at Zvi and Rachel as representatives of the now morally bankrupt founding fathers generation. While Zvi pontificates about how earlier generations coped better with challenges, Amikam sings an Amir Gilboa poem, accompanying himself with the tapping of his crutches on the floor: "Suddenly a man wakes up in the morning and feels that he is a nation and begins to walk" (*pitom qam adam baboqer umargish ki hu am umathil lalekhet*).¹¹

Rachel, the former concentration-camp internee, appears to be the character with whom Megged most identifies. Her experiences during the Holocaust have not left her so dispirited as to flee from conflicts. Rachel says: "During the first half of my life I fled from wars; in the second half I have fled to wars." Both things she did "in order to survive" and to grow. After the war, Rachel is a volunteer, counseling parents whose sons are dead or missing.

In the play's most dramatic encounter the crippled Amikam demands that Rachel and Zvi help him to obtain a medical statement that would make it impossible for Amikam's son to serve in a military unit. Rachel answers that, although she understands Amikam's distress, they cannot do this. Amikam then retorts, "You cannot understand because you were never a mother." At this callous reference to his wife's childlessness, Zvi screams "Shut up!" and slaps Amikam in the face. Amikam retaliates with sarcasm and then alludes to his experiences in the Sinai killing fields where vultures were flying overhead "like MIG 29s." He taunts Zvi: "Or maybe they were other kinds of birds of prey. Zvi, as an ornithologist you should really set up observation posts, or maybe you would rather wait until the next round [i.e., the next war]."

Notwithstanding Amikam's outburst at Rachel, he respects her deeply, and she is the only one who can deflate his raging bombast. Amikam says there could be another Shoah . . . in Israel. Rachel responds emotionally, recalling how powerless she felt in Europe hiding in a stable and thinking of only one thing: "If I only had a pistol! . . . You, at least, can protect . . . your house, shoot, simply to shoot . . . what are you talking about altogether? . . . This is Maidanek here? Tell me! You tell me!" After Rachel's remarks Amikam gets up, kisses her on the forehead, and exits in silent affirmation of her towering moral stature.

Another affecting appearance in the play is that of Fred, a Hebrew-literate American journalist who witnessed the gruesome tank battles

¹¹ Amikam's choice of this equally sentimental Zionist poem/song and his demonstrative use of his crutches enforces the sense of ironic distance created by the devastating Yom Kippur War.

and who now advocates compromise with the Arabs. Fred's politically realistic remarks come in tandem with Ella's. Ella rails against "the orgy of heroism," of bravado, that she thought had already ceased by now several years after the Six Day War, but lo and behold, this showing-off of military prowess was starting up all over again. The usually phlegmatic Zvi comes to life in this scene as he passionately argues his militant and uncompromising position.

What ruins the play and vitiates its many powerful scenes is the fact that the relationship between Zvi and Ada is poorly presented.¹² The reader never receives a sufficient explanation as to why Ada becomes so infatuated with Zvi, whose charisma as a member of the founders' generation is perhaps assumed too readily. There is virtually no dramatic tension when Zvi and Ada are on the stage. Intellectually, however, it is quaint for the Megged aficionado who reads the play to note the solution to Zvi's ornithological enigma: Why do flocks of this bird species leave one member to lag behind or stay outside of the group? The *nimshal*, or allusive symbolism, of this bird story—that tolerating and even institutionalizing a modicum of nonconformity can actually strengthen the collective—reaches Zvi from a Soviet colleague who is afraid to publish the data in Russia, where it may be viewed as subversive to Communism.

MASSA BE'AV

Although *Massa be'av* was published only in 1980, it, too, emerges from Megged's encounter with the trauma of the Yom Kippur War. *Massa be'av* takes place five years after the war when debate was raging over the prospective return of the Sinai to Egypt. The aftershock of the Yom Kippur War is constantly evoked through the hallucinatory recollections by the protagonist, Daniel Levin, and his wife, Anat, of the death of their son, Amnon, in a Sinai tank battle. The "ignition point" for the novel, Megged told an interviewer, was his solo trip by car to Arad shortly after his return from a year at Oxford. Throughout this drive Megged felt as if "the entire land was crying out from pain."¹³ Of course, the novel also contains the returning Megged's frequently expressed annoyance at Israel's lack of civility, its "brutal light" that "exposes" and intrudes on one's privacy (14–15), but the predominant tone is one of empathy.

¹² One can readily understand why the play's critics were terribly bored by the long dialogues featuring these two—and not only because of the poor acting.

¹³ See Megged's interview with Hayyim Nagid in *Ma'ariv* (November 7, 1980).

Megged has been accused of expecting literature to be "engagé," that is, supportive of the national effort. A novel such as *Massa be'av* belies that charge, however, because of its dialogical nature (its incorporation, for example, of some characters who decry Israel's policies in the occupied territories and some who support these policies). As Megged put it: "The process of writing is always two-sided: both identification and alienation [*gam hizdahut vegam hizdarut*]."¹⁴ There is little doubt that Megged's writing is engaged, not "engagé." In a powerful article from March 1974, Megged cites Bialik's comment of 1907 that Jews had come to the *ne'ilah* of a two-thousand-year-long Yom Kippur. Bialik said that the time had come for the national poetry to "fold up its *tallit* and pray *ma'ariv* at home alone." Megged cites the story of a fighter in the Sinai who, by waving a *tallit*, had contacted reinforcements and thereby saved himself and his men. Megged writes: "When such a *tallit* is spread out it cannot be time for the national poetry to be folded up and retired from use." "Bialik," says Megged, "saw dew on the Hermon; he did not see blood on the Hermon; he saw clear waters of the Jordan; he did not see fire on the Jordan."¹⁵ Megged, in *El hatsippor* and continuing in *Massa be'av*, rushed in bravely to confront the Yom Kippur tragedy where other authors feared to tread. What is also remarkable, as I have said, is that Megged confronts the topic head-on, without his usual recourse to irony.

Massa be'av is unquestionably one of Megged's most eloquently written novels. This is the story of an alienated Israeli professor of astrophysics, Daniel Levin, who, during the Six Day War loses his favored son, the brilliant and patriotic Amnon, or Noni. Noni's lack of fitness for combat duty may have led, at least in Daniel's guilt-ridden mind, to Noni's death. Daniel has vowed never to set foot in the "occupied territories." Perhaps out of a sense of protest or anger at Israel, he welcomes academic opportunities in the U.S., even at the cost of neglecting his surviving son, Gidi. Gidi has just become eligible for military service. When Gidi fails to show up for his army induction and vanishes, Daniel and his wife, Anat, are summoned back to Israel from America. Daniel's "journey" in *Massa be'av* is ostensibly one of searching for Gidi, but it is more Daniel's own odyssey of soul-searching, atonement, and renewal of connectedness with Israel. Daniel's decision midway into the novel to abandon the search for Gidi and to travel down to the site of the Sinai tank battle where Noni was killed is a positive turning point in Daniel's life. As Hillel Weiss put it succinctly, this scene of a father communing

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Hamum hayafeh," *Ma'ariv* (March 29, 1974): 41.

with his slain son in the meager shade of a rusty tank evokes a complex of sentiments ranging from the harmonious acceptance of death to a feverish belief in the possibility of resurrection.¹⁶

As for Daniel's forgetting about Gidi, there are indications that this, too, is for the good. Megged himself provides just such a positive interpretation.¹⁷ Daniel realizes that Gidi will find his own way after this delinquency and respite from the pressures of Israeli life, that he will ultimately return to the army, accept any disciplinary measures, and fulfill his military service. By the same token, Daniel realizes that he must come to terms with his own unresolved problems, and that is why he veers from the search for Gidi to travel into the Sinai Desert.

One vehicle for Megged's evocative tour de force is his utilization of the desert as a leitmotif. Weiss has already pointed to the "dialectical" nature of Megged's allusions to Bialik's "Metei midbar": on the one hand, the desert as a redemptive medium for union with the Infinite, on the other, the desert as the territory of sin, the ghastly punishment of Korah's insurgents, and the apocalyptic vista of Hiroshima.¹⁸ Another critic, Michael Wilf, has highlighted the fact that the densely emotive descriptions of scenery on the very first page of the novel signal Levin's renewal of attachment to Israel. The descriptions of a land "strewn with altars upon altars and desolation between the pieces" (*bein habetarim*) are evocations of God's fearful covenant with Abraham. As Wilf writes perceptively, it is "a land reconsecrated by the blood of Daniel Levin's slain son."¹⁹

There are a host of literary allusions. Augmenting the rich imagery of the desert is Megged's reference to the British travel writer A. W. Kinglake's 1904 expressionistic description of the desert sun as "the solitary ruler of the universe, a cruel God lashing the earth mercilessly with the fiery ever-turning sword."²⁰ Early in the novel Megged effectively cites Whitman's elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Courtyard Bloom'd" (12), as he interpolates lines of the poem into Levin's consciousness. Megged purposely omits the single line that makes explicit mention of death and mourning: "I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring." This omission reflects Levin's suppression of the memory. Also, in the spirit of the folk culture of the 1970s, Megged cites passages from the

¹⁶ Hillel Weiss, "Di'aleqtiqah mafrah," *Moznayim* (June 1981): 54-56; and Hillel Weiss, *Alilah: sifrut hakillayon hayisra'elit* (Bet-El: Sifriyat Bet-El, 1992), 109-13.

¹⁷ Interview with Hayyim Nagid.

¹⁸ Megged, "Hamum hayafeh."

¹⁹ Michael Wilf, "Sinai kevet qevarot shel banim," *Ha'umah* (May 1981).

²⁰ A. W. Kinglake, *Eothen or Traces of Travel Brought Home from the East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 185; see Genesis 3:24.

songs of Paul Simon (21), Bob Dylan (130), and especially from Leonard Cohen's well-known poem "The Story of Isaac" (187).²¹ Finally, as we shall see, Megged makes effective use of the popular children's song "Al hayeled Elifelet," which he uses to symbolize Noni's "sacrificial" death.²²

THE LEITMOTIF OF TIME

The very name of the protagonist, Daniel, evokes the apocalyptic sense of dread, as evoked in the famous "writing on the wall" in the biblical book of Daniel: *mene mene tekel ufarsin* (45, 94), that permeates the novel. It interweaves with the Time motif that Megged pursues relentlessly—from an opening reference to Thomas Pynchon's *V* to Heidegger's *Being and Time* to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

The literary and scientific allusions are remarkably well interwoven. Daniel has been plagued during the six years following Noni's death by the recurrent mental image in "slow motion" of Noni jumping from the burning tank and running toward a ditch that might have provided him cover from the hail of fire (9; see appendix, text 1). The first time Daniel has this hallucination is during his visit as a bereaved parent immediately after the 1973 war to the site of the fatal tank battle. As Daniel stands in the Sinai listening to the drone of an army lieutenant's explanation, Daniel expresses his sense of disgust and futility through the use of a gruesome pun that is vintage Megged style. Daniel believes he can smell the odor of some dead body lying buried in the sand or decomposing in the sun, "a kind of faint breath of eternity" (*ke'eyn neshimat netsah qelushah*), and, as Daniel quips bitterly, "a stinking eternity" (*netsah matshin*, 22).

As he recalls that moment of deep grief, Daniel, an astrophysicist, becomes preoccupied with various theories of physics that make him oscillate between despair and hope. First he entertains the notion that the sun will consume itself in twenty billion years, a vision of total death. He then fights against this by hallucinating about altering the present reality through manipulation of the laws of physics. He fantasizes about exceeding the speed of light and accomplishing the *Back to the Future* feat of reentering the flow of time and warning someone about an impending disaster (23; see appendix, text 2). Impossible, yes, but Daniel, as a theoretical physicist, and even more, as an obsessively bereaved father, keeps

²¹ See Leonard Cohen, *Stranger Music* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 139–40.

²² One critic finds herself fatigued by the abundance of literary allusions from Bialik to Kierkegaard to folk music, but that is part of the charm of Megged's writing. See Anat Feinberg, "Fathers and Sons: Aharon Megged's Journey in the Month of Av," *Modern Hebrew Literature* 7 (1–2) (Winter 1981/1982): 20.

thinking about it. Still more compulsively, he dwells on the theoretical possibility of reversing the entropy, or breakdown, of atoms in "the absolute future" (89–91; see appendix, text 3). It might then be possible to revive the dead—this in a kind of science-fiction version of Ezekiel's vision of the dried bones. Specifics aside, Megged's utilization of physics on such a grand scale assumes a poetic grandeur, symbolizing the struggle of this father not to accept the finality of death.

Daniel's thoughts about theories of subjective versus objective time are also quite interesting. He remembers such discussions with Noni about the psychological perspective in *The Magic Mountain*. "It is ingenious," Noni says, "how little by little [Thomas Mann] infuses in you the concept that death is, sort of, a part of life, not something separate" (57–58). Noni achieved as a young person the kind of mature perspective that his father, Daniel Levin, was lacking. As an empirical scientist, Daniel has resisted all psychological factors and uncertainty. When he was younger he "arrogantly" tried to disprove Heidegger's view of Time as deriving from human *Sorge* or "concerned-ness" (41).²³ Now, after the shock of losing his son, Daniel sees that without psychological involvement (*Dasein*, which Megged renders as *hinnenut*) there is no Being, no existence at all. Psychology used to frighten Levin because it leads to probabilities, and probabilities, in turn, lead to the famous "uncertainty principle" in physics that unnerves him. Daniel, like Einstein who made the famous retort, cannot tolerate the idea that "God plays dice ... with the universe" (146–47, 175). Nevertheless, more and more, the scientist Daniel Levin is forced to abandon his youthful scientific certainty that everything can be empirically proven.

Following this last reflection about the "uncertainty principle," Daniel is beset by a sense of terror when he recalls a dream about Gidi, his difficult and wayward surviving son. The dream encapsulates Daniel's impatience over the years with Gidi and Daniel's readiness to flare up in a rage over the boy's emotional neediness and unconventional behavior. While it is true that the critique of Daniel's world comes from Noni's quiet philosophical demeanor and uncomplicated patriotism, Daniel is much more challenged and unnerved by Gidi's unarticulated assault on Daniel's rigid work ethic and his self-centered intellectualized distance from people (Gidi says: "My Dad lives in a spaceship," 148) and by Gidi's maverick brilliance. Gidi shows profound and original sensibilities that are completely unexpected in this beatnik flower-child transplant from the American anti-Vietnam youth culture.

²³ The translation is that of George Steiner in his *Martin Heidegger* (London: Harvester, 1978), 50, 53, 96–97.

In Gidi's new "paradise" where he is hiding out with a German girlfriend, swimming and fishing, he says: "Here Time stands still like in the Garden of Eden" (138). In an imaginary letter to his parents Gidi writes: "Whoever lives only toward something is like a participant in a long distance race.... God exists only for someone who does not race in time!" (140). According to Gidi's thinking, since Auschwitz and Hiroshima, historical Time has been dying; it has been becoming anti-Time or the "end of days" (141). The debacles of science at Auschwitz and Hiroshima point toward the need to abandon scientific rigidity—all rigidity, even religious rigidity—for the sake of the human, the humane, and the transcendent—what Gidi calls God.

Contrary to what Gidi's social-worker mother, Anat, believes to be his problem, Gidi's malaise does not stem from disorder in his life but rather from a suffocating excess of order. Gidi's "fateful" encounter with the book by William James on mystical experiences only reinforces his experimentation with that other, nonscientific, dimension of life (107–8, 134–35).

The problem of Time also has a very down-to-earth component in Gidi's relationship with his father. Gidi recalls his childhood science project in which he attempted to capture a single ray of light in a cardboard "smoke box." This was also to be a surprise gift from the nine-year-old Gidi to his father. The project caught fire, and Daniel, instead of showing sympathy to Gidi and affirming his conscientious and highly intelligent effort, scolds Gidi and crushes the project with his foot to extinguish the small blaze (142–43).

Critics have noted the "atonement" processes that Daniel undergoes in the course of his long drive. When he decides to veer from his route toward Nuweiba not far from Eilat and to give a hitchhiker named Andy a ride into the Sinai (near Rephidim), this is an act of "penance." Equally, when Daniel weighs in his mind whether he should lecture Andy that he owes it to his father to return to the *moshav*, Daniel decides not to preach, and this is a pivotal turning point in the book. In fact, Daniel is tempted to say to Andy: "Yes, your life is your own... be a sailor! Be a pilot! Be a sportsman! A horseman!" At this point Daniel empathizes with these young people because of the pressure under which they live. He is now ready to indulge Gidi's fling (157).

During Daniel's long ride of penance he also reflects on his own emotional deficit of not being able to feel empathy—especially the way he felt, or did not feel, when his mother was dying. Daniel began to believe that he would receive a punishment for his lack of sympathy (168–70). He now sees the pain he is enduring from his two sons as just such a punishment. That Daniel's penance is real we see when Daniel says good-bye to Andy. Their eyes meet in a moment of true emotion. Daniel asks:

"What does your Dad have to say about your future plans [that are none too practical or focused]?" Andy answers: "Dad is a problem. But, all the Dads are a problem, isn't that so?" Andy laughs, but then he immediately halts when he remembers that Daniel has lost a twenty-year-old son. This is a moment of true emotional connection on Daniel's part (184).

DANIEL LEVIN'S POLITICAL VIEWS IN RELATION TO MEGGED'S

Anat had once chided Daniel that she suspected that even his ultra-liberal politics stemmed from his misanthropy. It was not so much that he loved the Arabs, Anat charged, but that he hated the State of Israel, his father, and the whole generation of the founders. All of this, Daniel now reflects, was before the "earthquake," the Yom Kippur War, "that split life asunder and left destruction in its wake" (171–72). Daniel is the prototypical deracinated Jewish intellectual, very much unlike Megged's earlier intellectual protagonist, Zvi in *El hatsippor*, who is and remains an unwavering defender of Israel's most militant and chauvinistic stance. By contrast Daniel is, from the outset, the very antithesis of nationalism, and only in the course of the novel does he undergo a metamorphosis. Megged portrays Daniel as a teenager who had the nerve to defy Ben-Gurion in public and to insist that Israel's true character was to be a non-nationalistic country (26–27). In real life, in 1940, when Megged was a member of the *Maḥanot Ha'olim* youth movement, and a strict Marxist, he publicly disagreed with Ben-Gurion on whether the youth group should merge with the non-Marxist *Gordoniah*.²⁴ This real-life defense of "orthodox" Marxism in 1940 is quite different from the fictional Daniel Levin's implausible chutzpah in publicly voicing the heresy of cosmopolitanism.

With Megged one cannot be sure if a character or incident that seems to verge on caricature is written in full seriousness or if it is presented with at least some degree of irony. The incident of Daniel Levin's affair with his young student Alina is a case in point. Their four-month affair results in her becoming pregnant, and Levin gruffly forces her to have an abortion. All of this is thoroughly believable, but it is far-fetched or satirical when Levin relates that he has "a double sense of treachery" because he slept with Alina in the Intercontinental Hotel in East Jerusalem and thereby violated his oath "not to step foot in the conquered territories" (174–78).

Daniel "atones" for the abortion by driving a Bedouin woman in labor to the hospital. He also establishes a "male bonding" relationship

²⁴ Yitzhak Kafkafi, ed., *Shenot maḥanot ha'olim* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1975), 2:352.

with Andy. However, there is also a major change in Daniel's intractable thinking with regard to the occupied territories. From the moment that he conceptualizes the burning bush as "a huge radioactive field of God" (159), he experiences a renewed sense of national consciousness centered around the Sinai: "For the first time since he heard about the packing up and leaving [*hahitqapplut*] of the Sinai, he felt sorry about it."²⁵ The reasons Daniel gives are an unusual blend of ideas that prefigure almost verbatim the journalistic remarks penned by Megged in *Davar* two years later. Daniel, the erstwhile universalist, laments the withdrawal as an unsalutary contraction of the scope of Israel to its provincial boundaries and traits of national character. He sees in the withdrawal a

retreat from Exodus and Numbers to Judges and Kings. From the universalism of "I will be that I will be," the ten commandments—to nationalistic narrow-mindedness, to . . . tribal quarreling, military strategizing. (159).²⁶

Paradoxically, Megged, through the eyes of this Noam Chomsky-like protagonist, sees the abandonment of the Sinai as a diminution of Israel's mystical-universal dimension. Levin ironically, incredibly, becomes an advocate for Israel's holding on to the Sinai territory—or at least of Israel's insisting that some Jews be allowed to keep their homes in the Sinai after the return to Egyptian control. It is hard to believe such a transformation in this deracinated Israeli intellectual.

Megged himself could very well espouse such contradictory positions: an intense craving for peace and compromise on the one hand, and a mystical clinging to the areas of conquest of 1967 on the other. Megged's own idiosyncratic political views, therefore, help to make the political positions of his fictional protagonist more believable. One has only to survey Megged's published articles and opinions. In 1968, for example, Megged wrote: "Even if we return to other boundary lines—I believe with all my heart that the vision of *ha'arets hashelemah* (the whole land) will yet have its day, not as a result of a 'military presence,' but when there will be a large *aliyah*."²⁷ Ten years later Megged wrote that even after Camp David he will always dream of *Erets Yisra'el hashelemah* (the whole Land of Israel), but there is no choice in the pursuit of peace.

²⁵ The word *hitqapplut* also suggests a "folding" or "capitulation."

²⁶ See Megged's expressed views in a symposium, "Hayeridah: meni'otehah vetotsotehah," *Davar* (April 2, 1982): 14.

²⁷ Aharon Megged, "Ani sonei lihiyot kovesh," *Yediot Aḥaronot* (April 12, 1968).

He does not accept Yeshayahu Leibowitz's ridicule of those who "worship trees and stones"—for Megged "land is mystical."²⁸

Finally, in a long expressionistic article, "Yetsi'at Sinai," written on April 7, 1982, Megged waxes mystical as he laments the complete "folding up" (*hitqapplut*) of Israel's presence in the Sinai. Megged also calls the Sinai "an expanse without guilt" (*merhav lelo ashmah*), saying, "we did not rule, we did not oppress, we did not exploit"—which is to say, the Sinai is not as complicated politically as Judah and Samaria, so why does Israel have to just "fold up" and leave?²⁹

During Daniel's long ride, his thoughts suddenly turn to the *yeridah*, the large increase in emigration, after the peace agreements in 1977. This was a topic widely discussed by Megged and others in the press.³⁰ Herein lies the explanation for what appears to be a long digression by Levin dealing with a visit he and his wife paid to their Israeli anthropologist friend in Columbus, Ohio. The friend researches the war myths of the Shawnee Indians. He and his wife have given their children distinctively Israeli names, Alon and Tirtsah. They behave in a totally Israeli manner, and yet they are fully acclimated to America. This digression to Ohio makes no sense unless one realizes that Megged is dealing with ultimate issues of allegiance. In the U.S. Levin had inclined to the view of his anthropologist friend that "science does not recognize either 'homeland' or boundaries," and that one must "gravitate to the place of optimal professional opportunities" (164-65). Noni's death initially aggravated his feelings of alienation vis-à-vis Israel. Only after Gidi's defection was Levin impelled to revisit many of the issues of his life.

CONCLUDING PAGES

The concluding pages of *Massa be'av* are a brilliant intensification of established motifs. Exhausted, sensing tightness in his chest, and half-hallucinating, Levin wills to have Time stop and reverse itself. Simultaneously, he conjures up the science of Ernst Mach, the theoretician who unified physics and psychology, and the biblical reference to Joshua's *shemesh beGivon dom*, the famous image of time stopping in the midst of a battle (185). This quotation assumes heart-breaking import in the context of Levin's bereavement. For Levin's "Joshua," for his son Noni, the sun did not stand still. "Joshua's clock kept on ticking, the hands

²⁸ Aharon Megged, "Hevlei shalom," *Davar* (September 22, 1978): 15.

²⁹ Aharon Megged, "Yetsi'at Sinai," *Davar* (April 7, 1982).

³⁰ "Hayeridah: meni'ehav vetots'otehah—symposiyyon behishtattfut Aharon Megged, Yizhar Smilansky, Yoram Kaniuk," *Davar* (April 7, 1982): 16, 20.

kept on moving." Levin's reverie concludes with the highly affecting mythological reference: "Chronos. A cruel god who devours his children" (185; see appendix, text 4).

Daniel remembers every detail of his last conversation with Noni. It was about the notion in Camus's *The Stranger* that some people lack the ability to identify with another person. Such was the case, Noni said, with the Nazis. As Noni said goodbye to Daniel, Noni spoke apologetically about the fact that here he had been fantasizing about a laser death-ray gun that Daniel might invent, without realizing that in killing the enemy Noni would be killing human beings (189–93). In retrospect, Daniel now wonders whether Noni did not carry his identification with the enemy to an extreme. This may be an adumbration of Megged's (by now) well-known political views. Daniel fears that just as "non-identification leads to brutality, so might absolute 'identification' lead to self-destruction" (193).³¹ Noni was a decent humanistic soul, like the introspective *sabra* prototype of the 1952 classic dear to Megged's heart, *Haverim mesapprim al Jimmy*.³² Noni was like "an overgrown child," like the naïve, good-hearted, and brave Elifelet in the children's poem that Megged cites as a haunting refrain. He was honest and self-scrutinizing to a fault, a person "without antibodies," without the immune response, the necessary toughness to survive in this world (193).

Daniel remembers the problem in physics that he was working on at the very moment that Noni was killed. It was the possible use of x rays in locating black holes. Whatever "falls" into a black hole transmits x rays "like a final scream before falling into a pit" (194). At this point he imagines Noni's final scream, that fatal moment when he failed to move quickly enough over the distance of thirty meters to find cover, as his two comrades did, in a ditch. This scientific image of the black hole alternates with the mental image of the earth consuming Korah and his group, here applied to the image of Noni's tank being hit by missile fire and burning (198).³³

As noted, there are intimations of renewal, of a restored connectedness amidst this bleak desert topography. Megged utilizes the biblical images of Moses at the burning bush and of Elijah reconsecrated by God at Mount Horeb out of the *qol demamah daqqah* ("the still soft voice,"

³¹ One example among many of Megged's arguments against the Israeli penchant for self-deprecation is his article "Yetser hahitabddut hayisra'eli," *Musaf Haaretz* (June 10, 1994): 27–28, 92.

³² Menaḥem Shemi, ed., *Haverim mesapprim al Jimmy*, 6th ed. (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1961).

³³ See Numbers 16:32 ("and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up").

199–200; see appendix, text 5). The latter reference appears at the very end of the novel, spliced together with Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the dry bones. After conjuring up visions of the cataclysms of Hiroshima and the Yom Kippur War, Daniel projects a hallucinatory optimism. Humankind is able to extract a message of prophecy from cataclysmic events. A religious soldier at one of Levin's Sinai Desert lectures speaks of Hiroshima as the punishment for modern science's sin of unleashing the power of the atom. If one could control atomic power, the religious soldier says, "this would already be a *tiqqun*," a way of correcting or atoning for the sin (182). It is possible, even likely, that Megged presents this view with sarcasm, but perhaps not. Essentially, it does not matter. Daniel Levin, in his ultimate despair, grasps at these fragments of memory. The novel concludes with unforgettable eloquence culminating in the words *ki lo bara'ash Adonai* ("for God is not in the cataclysm"), *lo ba'esh* ("not in the fire," 200). This is a novel that will be acclaimed in the fullness of time as a very important mirror of the era it portrays. In the context of the theme of *nekhut* (being crippled) with which we began, *Massa be'av* represents Megged's most candid and soul-baring encounter with the horrors of war and loss. This novel is the epitome of Megged's lifelong burden of irredeemable guilt, expressed as obligation and commitment.

APPENDIX: *MASSA BE'AV*³⁴

Text 1 (pp. 9–10)

והמראה המבעת, הפוקד בפתאום, בשעות של לילה, ביקיצה מחלום
 זועה, בשעות של יום, באמצע קריאת ספר-מחקר, כל שש השנים הללו,
 ועכשיו שוב, במטוס הזה, המרחף בחלל האתר, בדרכו מזרחה, מזרחה:
 הטנק העולה בצהרי המדבר והשלושה הקופצים ממנו ונסים על
 נפשם תחת האש אל השוחה בחולות —
 והוא צועק בתוכו: "יותר מהר, נוני! יותר מהר!"
 כי מרחק שלושים המטר בין הטנק והשוחה הוא המרחק בין
 ההישרדות והמות —
 ורואה את אמנון ב"סלאו-מושן" כמו בתחרות של אלופי ריצה על
 מסך הטלביזיה, שט באויר, רגל ועוד רגל, מתכופות ונמתחות קדימה,
 כמו במים —
 אלוהים אדירים!

And the terrifying sight that comes suddenly during nighttime hours,
 waking up from a chilling dream, during daytime hours, midst reading

³⁴ All translations are my own.

a research book, in the course of these six past years, and now again, in this plane hovering in the ether, wending its way easward, eastward;

The tank ascending in the desert noon with the three [member crew] leaping from it and fleeing for their lives under gunfire to the ditch in the dunes—

And he screams inside of himself: "Faster, Noni! Faster!"

For the thirty-meter distance between the tank and the ditch is the distance between survival and death—

And he sees Amnon in "slow motion"—as in a competition of champion runners on television—gliding in the air, one foot and then another, bending and extending forward, like in the water—

Almighty God!

Text 2 (p. 23)

היות שלא תיתכן תנועה שהיא מעבר למהירות האור, הפיכת עברו של מישוהו הנמצא במרחק רב מאתנו לעתיד ... היא השג מוגבל מאוד, אף כי עבר ועתיד הם יחסיים למקום; כי שום איתות לא יכול להספיק להגיע אל הנמצא בריחוק מאתנו, שיש בו כדי להועיל. איננו יכולים, למשל, להציץ אל עתידו — של אדם אהוב עלינו, למשל — לקפוץ לתוך תנועה, לאותת לו לפני שעתיד זה יתרחש, ולהזהירו מפני מאורע צפוי.

Since there is no possibility of motion beyond the speed of light, the transformation of past into future of a person located at a great distance from us is a very limited achievement, especially since past and future are relative to place; for there is no warning signal that can manage to reach a person located at a distance from us, that can do any good. We cannot manage, for example, to peer into the future of a person beloved to us, jump into the stream of events, signal to him before this future transpires, and warn him about a foreseen event.

Text 3 (p. 90)

ואם כך אפשרית גם תחיית המתים ... אפשרית חזרה מן ההתפוררות והרקבון של הגוף במחילות, אל השלם, ומדממת-הלב אל פעימתו הקצובה. הבעיה היא התארגנות-מחדש של המולקולות וחזרתן לתנועה במסלול שנעו בו מתחילה; היפוך כיוונה של האנתרופיה, כלומר, היפוך עתיד יחסי לעבר יחסי; ואם-כי הסבירות היא בערך של 10 בחזקת מינוס מיליון, היא בכל זאת קיימת, היפותטית.

And if so, there is also the possibility of resurrection of the dead ... the possibility of return to wholeness from the body's disintegration and decay underground, and from the heart's stillness to its rhythmic beating. The problem is the reorganization of the molecules and the

renewal of their original orbital motion; reversal of direction of the entropy, namely, the reversal of relative future to relative past; and although the probability is approximately 10 to the minus millionth power, it nevertheless exists, hypothetically.

Text 4 (p. 185)

אם נאמר שהזמן הוא פונקציה, הרי אין הוא קיים כשעולם החומר "קופא". היפותטית. כי "זמן קופא" הוא דבר-והיפוכו. אבל המושג של "קפיאת הזמן" הוא עצמו נובע אך ורק מתוך הנסיון האנושי של תנועת הזמן! אם נקבל את העקרון של מאך, הכופר בהבדלה שבין הפיסיקה והפסיכולוגיה, ושלפיו אנו רשאים לעסוק בתופעות רק כפי שאנו יודעים אותן מתוך נסיוננו החושי. הרי "אי-זמן" עשוי להיות פן מסוים של הזמן, כשם שתנוחת עצם היא פן מסוים של תנועתו.
 כשהמרחב המדברי הזה בין ביר-תמדה לרפידים "קופא" תחת שמש-הצהריים הלוהטת, הזמן נעצר, עומד.
 "שמש בגבעון דם". "עצירת זמן" כזאת, באמצע המלחמה. אבל שעונו של יהושע הרי המשיך לתקתק, והמחוגים הוסיפו ללכת! כרונוס. אל אכזר האוכל את ילדיו.

If we say that Time is a function, then behold it does not exist when the material world "freezes." Hypothetically. For "frozen time" is a paradox. But the concept of "Time Freeze" itself stems only out of the human experience of the movement of time! If we accept the principle of Mach, who denies the separation between physics and psychology, and according to whom we are allowed to deal with phenomena only in the manner that we know them from our sensory experience. So, "non-Time" is likely to be a certain aspect of Time, just as the rest of an object is one aspect of its motion.

As this desert expanse between Bir Tamada and Refidim "freezes" beneath the burning afternoon sun, Time is stopped, stands still.

"Sun, stand ye still in Giv'on." Such a "stopping of Time," in the middle of the war. But behold Joshua's clock continued to tick, and the hands continued to move!

Chronos. A cruel god who devours his children.

Text 5 (p. 200)

ואולי כן, אולי באמת, אפשרית חזרת הזמן לאחור. שהרי כל מה שנחרר הוא רק זה, ששוב יימתח קפיץ העולם, כמו קפיץ של שעון, וכששתחרר וילך מעצמו — הכול יחזור לאחור. ועץ שנפל אפשר שיקום, וכד שנשבר על המכוע אפשר יהיה לשלם. והאבן תשוב מן הבור, ועצם תקרב אל עצם, והרוח תבוא וכל הנשמה —
 כי לא ברעש אדוני.
 לא באש.

And perhaps yes, perhaps really, the reversal of time backwards is possible. For behold all you need is just this, that the spring of the world be wound up once again, like the spring of a clock, and when it is released and moving on its own, everything will go backwards. And a tree that has fallen perhaps will stand up, and a pitcher broken over the mouth of a well perhaps will become whole. And the stone will come back from the pit, and bone will come close to bone, and the spirit will come and living souls—

For God is not in the earthquake.

Not in the fire.



◆

**SHADING THE TRUTH:
A. B. YEHOSHUA'S "FACING THE FORESTS"**

Gilead Morahg

Avraham B. Yehoshua's novella, "Facing the Forests," has become one of the best-known and widely discussed stories in modern Israeli literature.¹ It tells of an Israeli forest watchman who discovers that the ruins of an Arab village are buried under the trees of the forest he is charged with protecting. He encourages the mute old Arab who lives there to set the forest on fire and rejoices when the trees burn down and the contours of the buried village reemerge. Not surprisingly, "Facing the Forests" has customarily been read as an early narrative effort to expose the deep sense of guilt underlying the refusal of Israelis to recognize their complicity in decimating the previous Arab presence in the land. In his monumental study of Hebrew narrative fiction, Gershon Shaked writes that "the publication of this story in 1963 had a shocking effect on its intended readers because the materials of the story cohere into a message that its readers had repressed. They now see that, according to Yehoshua, the mute Arabs inhabit the subconscious of Israeli society and are subverting it from within; that its intellectuals are consumed with guilt and anxiety."²

Ehud Ben-Ezer, Nurith Gertz, Bernard Horn, and Yochai Oppenheimer offer similar readings, all of which are based on the fact that the burning of the forest is preceded by the protagonist's discovery that it had been planted over the ruins of an Arab village that had been captured by the Israelis during their War of Independence and later demolished and covered over with new plantings.³ Until this moment of

¹ See Hannan Hever, "Minority Discourse of a National Majority: Israeli Fiction of the Early Sixties," *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 126, 131; Bernard Horn, *Facing the Fires: Conversations with A. B. Yehoshua* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 47–48.

² Gershon Shaked, *Hebrew Narrative Fiction 1880–1980* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998), 5:166.

³ Ehud Ben-Ezer, "Portsim unetsurim" ("Besieged Conquerors"), *Keshet* 4 (Summer 1968): 149; Nurith Gertz, *Hirbet hiz'ah vehaboqer shelemoharat* (Generation

discovery, the old Arab had maintained a deliberate distance from the watchman and was sullenly impervious to his efforts to communicate. But all this changes when the watchman comes down from his post and attempts to verify his discovery with the Arab. He wakes him up and repeats the name of the village over and over again:

The Arab hears and immediately understands. A faint expression of surprise, of wonder, and of affinity flows in the creases of his face. He jumps up . . . extends a heavy arm toward the window and points enthusiastically, desperately, at the forest. (113–14; 220)⁴

The watchman's recognition of the existence of his village diminishes the Arab's hostility and draws the two of them more closely together. When the watchman's aging lover comes down from Jerusalem to visit him in the forest, which he has come to regard as his "green domain," it quickly becomes evident that he no longer has much in common with the world that she represents. When he accompanies her back to the road and she departs, the Arab suddenly appears at his side and "together, in silence, they return to the forest, which is their domain alone" (120; 227). At this moment of quiet kinship and sense of shared domain, the watchman reveals that he had discovered the Arab's secret hoard of kerosene. He leads him there and, to the Arab's great amazement, lights a small fire and pours some of the kerosene on it. A strong flame bursts forth. "The Arab watches him, his eyes flashing madness and hope" (120; 227). For a moment, the watchman is tempted to walk away and let the fire spread. But he does not. He lets the fire burn low and, to the Arab's great disappointment, carefully stamps it out. "This was only a lesson," he says to himself. But after that the watchman starts neglecting his duties. The old

Shift in Literary History: Hebrew Narrative Fiction in the Sixties (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1983), 102; Horn, *Facing the Fires*, 48; Yochai Oppenheimer, "The Arab in the Mirror: The Image of the Arab in Israeli Fiction," *Prooftexts* 19 (1999): 210, 212.

⁴ A. B. Yehoshua, "Facing the Forests," *Keshet* 5 (19) (1963), was included in Yehoshua's second collection of short stories, *Mul haye'arot* (*Facing the Forests*) (1968). For this study, I used the more readily available edition of Yehoshua's collected stories, *Kol hasippurim* (*All the Stories*) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1993). Parenthetical page references in the text will be to this volume, followed by a reference to its English translation by Miriam Arad in A. B. Yehoshua, *The Continuing Silence of a Poet: Collected Stories* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998). For purposes of greater accuracy I found it necessary to provide my own translations. Consequently, the quotes given in this article will differ from the text of the published English translation.

Arab becomes more attached to him and often ties his young daughter to the watchman's chair so she can keep watch instead. Their relationship becomes almost familial:

From now on, the Arab doesn't let go of him. The three of them sit together—one family—in the upper room. The watchman stretched out on the bed, the girl tied to the chair, and the Arab squatting on the floor. Waiting together for the missing fire. (122; 230)

The fire eventually comes and gives rise to the readings I have cited. But almost all of these readings, as well as other readings offered by Hannan Hever, Menachem Perry, Gila Ramras-Rauch, and Mordechai Shalev,⁵ overlook the crucial fact that after his painstaking recovery of the memory of the destroyed village and his celebratory collaboration with the Arab in burning the forest, the protagonist, who represents the intellectual elite to which the critics themselves belong, ends up betraying the Arab he had befriended.⁶ And all of them overlook the fact that this protagonist ultimately ends up denying any knowledge of the existence of the village he had discovered.

As the story approaches closure, the watchman suddenly "pretends not to understand. There was a village here? He can see nothing but trees" (121; 229). And later, as the watchman prepares to leave the forest and the Arab, who has become convinced that only he can understand him, desperately tries to tell him what so urgently needs to be told, the watchman persists in his refusal to acknowledge what is being said:

[The Arab] grabs him with his strong hands ... places him on the edge of the observation post and explains everything that can be explained with a missing tongue.... He believes that only the watchman can understand him. His eyes blaze. But the watchman is calm, indifferent, shading his forehead with his hand, shrugging his shoulders, smiling vaguely. (122; 230)

This sudden reversal at the conclusion of the novella is a narrative move that clearly has significance. Yet this move has been consistently overlooked by the story's most sophisticated readers. Such collective oversight invites speculation on the discursive constraints of the critical community

⁵ Hever, "Minority Discourse," 129–47; Gila Ramras-Rauch, *The Arab in Israeli Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 129–40; Mordechai Shalev, "Ha'aravim kepitaron sifrut" ["The Arabs As a Literary Solution"], *Haaretz Literary Supplement* (September 30, 1970).

⁶ Hever, "Minority Discourse," 143, is the single exception to this.

that has engaged "Facing the Forests," especially since this community may actually be one of the subjects of this work.

There is an almost complete critical consensus that "Facing the Forests" constitutes an assault on the dominant national narrative in Israel. And this is true. However, an examination of the signifying function of the overlooked events that I mentioned will show that, in challenging the validity of the conventional Zionist narrative, "Facing the Forests" also uncovers the risks inherent in mounting such a challenge. Abandoning convention in the quest for truth may yield discoveries that are unpalatable. Acknowledging the implications of such discoveries requires a level of integrity and courage that the discoverers do not always have. In the story, the watchman gradually comes to acknowledge the facts of Arab dispossession by his fellow Israelis and to despise those who would deny these facts. But his own moral courage is put to the test when these discoveries encroach on closely guarded cultural taboos and compromise his most cherished communal convictions. The manner in which the watchman fails this test may be read as a reflection of the manner in which an emergent cultural narrative that invalidates the dominant discourse may replace it with a new story that is equally flawed.

The story's nameless protagonist is an enervated young man on the fringes of the Jerusalem academic community who has long completed all his course work but seems incapable of the discipline needed to write the final thesis that will enable him to graduate and catch up with his friends who are already pursuing respectable careers. His friends arrange a job for him as a forest watchman, believing that the solitude of the forest and the undemanding task of watching for fires will enable him to write his thesis. They even choose a topic for him: the Crusades. The topic appeals to him primarily because he is convinced that hidden within it is a "dark matter" (*inyan afel*) that will astound him and with which he will astound others (106; 211). It is important to remember this reference to an astounding "dark matter" because it will recur at a critical narrative juncture.

"Facing the Forests" is a symbolic story that actually concludes with a specific invitation to thematic interpretation. As he emerges from the burned forest, the watchman is subjected to a police interrogation that can be read as a sly satire on the sad state of academic research:

They sit him down on a rock and cross-examine him for hours. This surprises him: the persistence, the deliberateness, the diligence. Pages piling on top of pages. A real research project taking shape before his eyes... The investigators push their subject against the rock, repeating questions that had been asked. The burned forest exudes a foul smell, as

if a giant carcass was putrefying around them. The interrogation intensifies. How boring. What did he see? What did he hear? What did he do? It's insulting, this utter dependence on the senses. As if they were what is important. As if there was no idea hidden here. (126; 234–35)

This admonition to go beyond the story's surface details of action and perception and seek out the idea they embody gains additional significance when we recall that the protagonist is sent out into the forest by his academic friends with the expectation that he will come up with some stunning new idea. And the critique of the intellectual community that controls the currency of ideas is amplified by the fact that he is told that this new idea does not necessarily need to be true, as long as it is sufficiently impressive: "What is important," he is told, "is that he bring back from the forests some astounding scientific idea. His friends will find a way to justify it" (102; 207).

The tension between the kind of self-serving idea that his friends expect him to construct and the kind of idea he actually moves toward discovering drives much of the story's narrative and serves to bind the various components of its signifying structure. "Facing the Forests" is not an allegorical story where all the parts fit into a preconceived ideological schema, but a symbolic exploration of the contradictory impulses and elusive moves of a psyche that is impelled to confront truths that it is determined to deny. This accounts for the elusiveness of many of the story's passages and for the ambiguities that constantly threaten to destabilize the narrative. But these uncertainties and contradictions are more thematic than they are structural, and the structure of the novella actually works to shape them into an experience from which a new idea may indeed emerge.

As Hillel Barzel wisely observed many years ago, "It is not the burning forests that are important but rather what is symbolized by them."⁷ There is ample textual and structural evidence in "Facing the Forests" to indicate that the novella's central trope, the forest, does not represent the physical Land of Israel or the political State of Israel, but rather it symbolizes the story of the State on the Land. In other words, the forest is a metaphoric embodiment of Israel's national narrative, of its history. And history, as we now all know, is the story that a culture tells itself about itself and struggles to preserve and defend against competing stories. It is the culturally sanctioned version of national memory. And one of the striking things about "Facing the Forests" is the manner in which it

⁷ Hillel Barzel, *Meta-Realistic Hebrew Prose* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Massada, 1974), 149–50.

anticipates what postcolonial critics were later to demonstrate: that every national memory entails national forgetting.⁸

The story's protagonist is a member of the intellectual elite that is expected to expound the national narrative and maintain it intact. He is training to be a historian, but he cannot pursue his discipline because the words available to him have lost their ability to convey authentic meaning. "Words fatigue him; even his own words, let alone those of others" (99; 203). The discursive means at his disposal cannot serve his intellectual and spiritual needs. And this may well be the cause of his intellectual paralysis and spiritual malaise.

On one important level "Facing the Forests" is a story about the emotional and psychological struggle involved in the effort to go beyond the confines of the dominant discourse and get to the true essence of things. The protagonist seeks solitude in the hope of gaining a new perspective on language and thus alleviating his perpetual state of mental fatigue. Once in the forest, his ultimate desire is to "skip the words and get to the essence" (113; 219). He is a person who aspires to truth but whose world of discourse prohibits him from pursuing it. In this respect he is both related and juxtaposed to the old Arab who lives and works in the forest. This Arab knows forbidden truths but cannot express them because he has no tongue.

Upon encountering the Arab for the first time, the protagonist says: "The old Arab turned out to be mute. His tongue was cut out in the war. By them or by us. Does it matter?" (105; 210). This is one of the most peculiar and most telling passages in the story. How can it not matter? In terms of the concerns that are thematized in "Facing the Forests" it should matter greatly who committed this atrocity. If it was them, this would validate the national narrative of Arab savagery and inherent immorality. But if it was us, this would refute the narrative of moral conquest and purity of arms. The encounter with the tongueless Arab is a perfect opportunity for incisive historical inquiry. The fact that the watchman dismisses the moral implications of the Arab's condition and chooses to ignore it is relevant to subsequent narrative developments. Central to these developments is his discovery that, contrary to what he was taught to believe, a destroyed Arab village is buried beneath the forest he has been assigned to protect.

The discovery of the buried village solidifies the watchman's sense that the official version of national memory he has been charged with preserving is fabricated and false. Consequently, he becomes less

⁸ Laurence J. Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 147.

interested in the forest than in what it has been covering up. He deviates from his original scholarly project on the distant past and attempts to recover more recent occurrences that have had an impact on the present. He often leaves his high observation post and wanders about the forest to see whether he can recover traces of the life that was destroyed and buried beneath the trees. This new focus endows him with a capacity for clearer vision, for seeing things that were always there but that he had never noticed before: "Chunks of masonry are strewn among the trees, shadows of houses, remnants of ruins. He looks for traces of people" (117; 224). He also works on a new map of the area, which will include the erased village.

The distance the watchman has traveled and the transformation that occurred within him are accentuated by the visit of his lover from the city. An emissary from the world of thought from which he is becoming increasingly alienated, the woman tells him that she has been sent to bring him back because her husband and his friends are becoming concerned. They are "afraid that he is hoarding a secret over here, some astounding idea. That he will jump ahead of them with his new research," to which he responds: "A new idea? Perhaps. But not like they think... Not exactly scientific... More human..." (119; 226). The watchman's stay in the forest has resulted in the discovery of an astounding new idea, but of a totally unexpected kind. Not an ingenious contribution to the prevailing discursive formations, but a moral perception of the humanity that is shared with those whose existence and value have been denied by these formations. This is intimated when the watchman's bewildered lover takes her abrupt leave and the Arab, ever vigilant, suddenly appears with the hat she left behind. He and the watchman share a playful moment on the side of the road, and then, "together, in silence, they return to the forest, which is their domain alone" (120, 227).

The growing intimacy and increased capacity for communication between the watchman and the Arab culminate at the point in which the Arab accompanies the watchman to the house where he now lives:

Here the Arab explains something with hurried and confused gestures, mumbling with his amputated tongue, rolling his head, wanting to say that this is his house and that there used to be a village here, and they just hid everything, buried it all in the big forest. (121; 229)

It is at this point that Yehoshua makes his startling narrative move. After coming all this way toward recognizing the failings of his national narrative and accepting the alternative perspective of the Arab, the watchman suddenly denies what he has learned and reverts back to the official view: "He pretends not to understand. There was a village here? He can

see nothing but trees" (121; 229). And later, as we have seen, when the Arab desperately tries to reiterate his story, the watchman persists in his refusal to acknowledge what is being said:

[The Arab] grabs him with his strong hands . . . places him on the edge of the observation post and explains everything that can be explained with a missing tongue. . . . He believes that only the watchman can understand him. His eyes blaze. But the watchman is calm, disinterested; shading his forehead with his hand, shrugging his shoulders, smiling vaguely. What else can he do after such loss? (122; 230)

In quoting this passage again, I have included an additional short sentence, both because it contains a kernel of explanation for the watchman's conduct and because it demonstrates the technique of contiguous signification that is used throughout this work. This is a narrative strategy in which the adjacent positioning of seemingly disparate tropes illuminates the causes or meanings of critical narrative moves. Here the discordant trope is, "What else can he do after such loss?" which is the best I could do with the difficult-to-translate Hebrew original, "*mah notar lo be'onyo*" ("What does he have left in his impoverishment?"). How does this phrase fit in? Clearly it is offered as an explanation for the watchman's refusal to acknowledge the truth he has learned. But what has impoverished the watchman, and why has it caused him to deny all he has attained? To understand this, we need to go back to the original turning point, examine it in its entirety, and see how contiguity creates signification:

Here the Arab explains something with rapid and confused hand gestures, mumbling with his amputated tongue, rolling his head, wanting to say that this is his house and that there used to be a village here, and they just hid everything, buried it all in the big forest.

The watchman watches the display of gestures, and his heart fills with joy. What is it that is exciting the Arab so much? Apparently his wives were also murdered here. Evidently a dark matter. He walks forward slowly, pretends not to understand. There was a village here? He can see nothing but trees. (121–22; 229)

Having gained the trust of the Arab and established the capacity to communicate with him, the story that he learns confirms the truths that the watchman has already been able to confront: that he is living in the Arab's house, that there had been an Arab settlement here, and that the forest constitutes a deliberate effort to hide these truths. Confirming all this fills the watchman with the joy of affirmation and vindication: "The watchman watches the display of gestures, and his heart fills with joy."

But there is more. Something else is stirring the Arab. Another revelation emerges: not only was his house confiscated, his village destroyed, and the record of all this obliterated; there were atrocities too—his wives were murdered. “The watchman watches the display of gestures, and his heart fills with joy. What is it that is exciting the Arab so much? Apparently his wives were also murdered here. Evidently a dark matter.”

Up to this point there was nothing particularly new in what the watchman had discovered. Destruction and dispossession were truths that lay in the consciousness of Israelis, even though they may have tried to suppress and ignore them. But the possibility of atrocity is an encroachment on a powerful taboo that protects the belief in the absolute purity of Israeli arms and in the absolute moral superiority of the Israelis over their Arab foes. Breaching this taboo is intolerable to the watchman, who, as we recall, actually set out to discover some “dark matter.” But when he finally makes his discovery, he realizes that it has nothing to do with the Crusaders, but with his own people. And he cannot accept what he has found. His quest for truth has gone farther than he was prepared to travel and taken him to a heart of darkness he cannot confront. And this is what causes his absolute retreat, even from what he had already acknowledged:

The watchman watches the display of gestures, and his heart fills with joy. What is it that is exciting the Arab so much? Apparently his wives were also murdered here. Evidently a dark matter. He walks forward slowly, pretends not to understand. There was a village here? He can see nothing but trees. (121–22; 229)

Ultimately, I think, this story is an exploration of how much reality we are willing to accept and a delineation of the cultural limits to the ability to confront the full dimensions of truth. It also intimates the *consequences* of these cultural constraints. It is only after the watchman refuses to acknowledge his story that the Arab burns the forest and forces the truth that it had been hiding to emerge:

The watchman looks toward the five smoking hills, narrows his eyes, and then, out of the smoke, . . . the little village emerges; resurrected in outline as in an abstract painting, like every other buried past. (124; 233)

But the Israeli authorities who arrive on the scene appear oblivious to what has been revealed, just as they seem to be incapable of understanding the meaning of what the watchman is trying to tell them. This is where he loses patience with the investigation:

The interrogation intensifies. How boring. What did he see? What did he hear? What did he do? It's insulting, this utter dependence on the senses.


As if they were what is important. As if there was no idea hidden here.
(126; 234–35)

We are not told what the watchman has been saying to the investigators. But it appears that, much like the author of this story, he has been trying to convey an aspect of truth that his audience is unable to accept. So the relentless interrogation continues until finally, furious, frustrated, and fatigued, he breaks down, changes his story, and tells them what they want to hear: a version of the story that they already know and can readily accept:

He begins to contradict himself. At three o'clock he breaks in their hands like a twig. He is prepared to offer the Arab as a possible solution. This, of course, is the hint they had been waiting for. They had suspected the Arab from the start. They immediately handcuff him. Suddenly everything ends in a hurry. The police cars come to life. They quickly load the Arab into one of the cars. But there is joy in his eyes and a sense of valor. (126; 235)

The Arab's regained dignity and pride is very different from the deep sense of guilt, futility, and shame with which the watchman returns to the city, haunted by a knowledge he cannot convey and shunned by his friends who are afraid of what he may have learned and might ultimately say.

Having reached this point in my reading, I found myself wondering whether this richly imagined and intricately crafted work is also a courageous one. Because, much like its protagonist, "Facing the Forests" breaches a formidable cultural taboo but does little to communicate what lies behind it. Still trapped in the discursive confines of the world they live in, both the author and his protagonist seem unable to give their discoveries full voice. The dark truth is buried as deeply in the subtext of the story as it is in the subconscious of its protagonist and of the community he has come to represent. This may help explain why numerous studies by critics who are part of this community have glossed over this critical point. But it is also important to remember that this work was written some three decades before Israel's "new historians" legitimated such interrogations of the national narrative and arrived at very similar conclusions. And I, myself, am among the critics who did not see these things the first time I studied this story and in several subsequent readings. I am sure that the reading that I am offering now would not have been possible without what I have learned from the teachings of postmodernism and the varieties of cultural criticism. The true wonder is that this work could be written long before these lessons were around.



◆

POLITICAL MOTHERS: WOMEN'S VOICE AND THE BINDING OF ISAAC IN ISRAELI POETRY*

Ruth Kartun-Blum

Bellaque matribus detestata (Battle by the mother's soul abhorred)
—Horace, *Odes* 1.1.24

It's hard for me to separate being a mother from being a human being. I only know that when there is a problem you can't delay solving it, and to solve it through sacrifice is not the only way. Does this view stem from being one who gives life and wants to preserve and protect it, or from a general human outlook of view I can't tell.

—Rachel Ben-Dor, an Israeli political mother, 1998

The Israeli term “political mother” is a unique oxymoron that combines the mythical private realm with the ultimate public realm. In Israel, “Mother's Voice” is not best known as the title of theoretical articles on gender issues, but as a moving—and by now almost mythical—radio program, in which mothers can send messages to their soldier-sons, somewhere far away, on various “Mount Moriahs.”

This essay focuses on women's poetry and the binding of Isaac (*aqedah*). It is a part of a study that seeks to examine the history of Hebrew poetry, and of Hebrew literariness, in the twentieth century by following the trail of a single theme—the rereading of the narrative of the binding of Isaac.¹ The research sprung out of my growing awareness that understanding the dynamics of this metaphor is important not only for a historical study of Israeli culture but also for an assessment of the deep ideological and poetical structures and traumas that influence and shape Jewish and Israeli sociocultural behaviors to this day.

* This essay is based on a lecture delivered in honor of Arnold Band's seventieth birthday (at UCLA, October 2000).

¹ See Ruth Kartun-Blum, *Profane Scriptures: Reflections on the Dialogue with the Bible in Modern Hebrew Literature* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1999).

One surprising fact leaps to the eye even of the casual historian, namely, that the use of this charged myth is rare in the poetry of women, whilst almost ubiquitous in the work of their male contemporaries. Up until the 1970s it seems the *aqedah* remained an almost exclusively male topos. Even Sarah's conspicuous absence from the original biblical story—an absence felt keenly by the sages and Rashi, who spun alternative midrashim around it, shifting the textual viewpoint to the roaringly silent mother—has not triggered any interesting subversive readings in women's poetry until recent decades.²

From the 1970s onward the poetic rewriting of the *aqedah* grows more dominant in various sections of women's poetry, both secular and religious, and affords rich pickings, in kinds of approach as well as in poetic achievement. Some women poets use the story to engage in gender issues; for others it is a historical mine of fear, anxiety, and repression: "The fetus Isaac commits suicide in his mother's womb / Better to be unborn than born bound to the altar of fear" (Esther Ettinger). As an existential paradigm the story is sometimes taken as a symbol of the child's inevitable break from and final farewell to the parent. In such cases it is inverted, so that it is the parent who is bound, awaiting death. At other times the new version is a mirror image of the fundamental Western paradigm of a father-son relationship in the image of a mother-daughter relationship. Lastly, one finds bold psychoanalytic interpretations that are not necessarily bound to any feminist stance and are devoid of any sociohistorical context (as, for example, in the poetry of Rivka Miriam). In recent years two plays have been staged in Jerusalem based on the various midrashim on Sarah's life.³

Women's poetry on the binding of Isaac proves how the most apolitical activity of all, that of birth and motherhood, is destined, in Israeli

² Surprisingly, it was Binyamin Gallai, a poet of the generation of the War of Independence, who wrote a subversive modern feminine version of the story:

All these years her coffin was made
of a remembrance of chopped wood
on a different mountain, in the land of Moriah.

In a sophisticated play among linguistic registers—biblical, midrashic, modern military slang—Gallai plucks Sarah out of her historical narrative and re-creates her as an everywoman who, at the mere knowledge of her son's ordeal, has turned into the "living dead." Every mother is thus a Sarah.

³ I intend to stick to poetry even though the deconstruction of the topos is central to several contemporary novels written by women (*Dolly City*, by Orly Kastel-Blum; *I Danced, I Stood*, by Tzruya Shalev). Prose, especially postmodern, presents different issues, which open up altogether different questions.

circumstances, to become politicized, in the spirit of the 1960s slogan "the personal is political"—a revolutionary stance, if one stops to consider the links between motherhood and martyrology in Jewish tradition. Familiar visions come to mind. First among them is the memorable story of Hannah and her seven sons or, in other versions, Miriam Bat-Tanhum, one of the better-known stories of martyrdom in rabbinic literature: "It was told of Miriam Bat-Tanhum, who was captured with her seven sons. What did the authorities do to her? Imprisoned each of them on his own." Each son is pulled out to bow to an idol, boldly refuses, and is taken to die. At last they come to the youngest, a child of six, who conducts an amazingly precocious theological debate with the emperor in which the child quotes from the scriptures.

Said his mother to the Emperor: "Upon your life, Emperor, give me my son, to kiss him and hold him." And they gave him to her, and she took out her breasts and gave him milk. . . . And she said to the Emperor "Upon your head, Emperor, let the sword fall on both our necks together."

The Emperor refuses her wish, sarcastically saying that it is her Book of Laws that forbids killing the parent and the child together. Her reaction, in which she compares her situation with that of Abraham on Mount Moriah, has accorded her a pride of place in Jewish tradition through the centuries:

And the mother said to her youngest son: "My son, do not be soft of heart and do not fear. You are going to your brothers, and to the bosom of Abraham. And say to him from me 'you have built one altar and did not sacrifice your son, and I have built seven altars and sacrificed my sons on them.'" (Eikhah Rabbah, 1, Buber ed., pp. 84–95)

Galit Hazan-Rokem, in her book on Eikhah Rabbah,⁴ comments on the "direct physical orality" of breast-feeding, which replaces the "orality inherited from culture in the form of speech-making and verse quoting" and which is "a pre-condition for a living dialogue to take place, as opposed to the static quoting of verses." I would stress, furthermore, that even within this midrashic scene of ultimate closeness

⁴ Galit Hazan-Rokem, *The Web of Life: Folklore and Rabbinic Literature, the Palestinian Aggadic Midrash Eikhah Rabbah* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996), 128–35. In her book *The Newly Born Woman* (trans. Betsy Wing; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), Helen Cixous develops a metaphor of writing in white ink, which symbolizes the breast milk.

between mother and son on the brink of death, male and female expression is distinct rather than unified—however unified in purpose. Even when Miriam (or Hannah) speaks of Abraham, she doesn't quote the scriptures, as her son does, but speaks to them, or with them; she domesticates religion.⁵ She is conscious, as it were, that in killing her sons she enters the story. In fact, her consciousness of the story and of her future place in it is what enables her—and presses her—to kill them. The voice of the mother is legitimate only when her son is placed upon the altar.

The story of Hannah and her seven sons was quickly adopted by the Zionist ethos and education system and incorporated in the cultural repertoire in the shape of a popular school play.⁶ In some later midrashic versions, Hannah jumps off the roof to become “the happy mother of sons.”⁷ The salient point is what remained uppermost in the Zionist consciousness as representing the normative voice. That is to say, these narratives represent the infiltration of women into the myth and the canon by the radicalization of the hegemonic discourse.

Even in Jewish medieval chronicles female martyrology transcends male martyrology. Yisrael Yuval quotes a few blood-curdling examples of martyrological feminine stories within chronicles of the First Crusade of 1096.⁸ Writing about Jewish life in Germany, Shlomo Ben-Shimshon tells how one mother urges her kindly neighbors, “I have four children. Don't spare them either.” Another has two fair virgin daughters who “took the knife and sharpened it lest it be blunt, and stretched out their necks, and their mother slaughtered them in the name of God the Lord of Hosts.”⁹

⁵ Susan Starr-Sered illuminates this point of domestic religion, in terms of the different voice that women have as part of their liminal social position, in her “Ritual, Morality and Gender: The Religious Lives of Oriental Jewish Women in Jerusalem” in Y. Azmon and D. N. Izraeli, eds., *Women in Israel: Studies in Israeli Society* (New Brunswick, N.J. and London: Transaction, 1993), 225–34.

⁶ I remember what fun it was to play Hannah in school and be brave and reckless with my “sons,” as was the order of the day. Then, I began to experience a few sneaking heretical doubts, which I was loath to voice aloud to my teacher—perhaps a moment that should be titled “How I Became a Literary Critic.”

⁷ Though not, significantly, in the Zionist version I played in school.

⁸ “Vengeance and Defamation: From Jewish Martyrdom to Blood Libel Accusation” [Hebrew], *Tsion* 58 (1) (1993).

⁹ Quoted in Abraham Habermann, ed., *Gezerot ashkenaz vetsorfat: divrei zikhronot mibenei hadorot shebitequfot masei hatselav umiohar piyyutehem* (Jerusalem: Tarshish, 1945), 34.

Some historians, notably the convert Victor von Karben, explain the radical feminine martyrology as an answer to women's inferiority in everyday religious life that made them all the more eager to prove their zealotry.¹⁰ However, the reliability of such stories seems forever clouded in doubt. Jewish women on the whole did not express themselves in writing even on religious issues. How much truth is there, then, in the stories of these enthusiastic women? Were they, in fact, kinds of Antigones, Medeas, or Lady Macbeths—male fictions perpetuating icons of radicalism for their authors' own political or artistic ends? The voice of Lady Macbeth is too tempting a comparison to avoid:

I have given suck, and know
 How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,
 Have plucke'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
 And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
 As you have done to this. (act 1, scene 7, lines 54–59)

The harassed husband gives in. The point here is not the purpose of the deed (which in this case has nothing to do with the Lord of Hosts), but that it takes an "unsexed" woman to help a man rid himself of pity and tender feelings and act. If such women are not available, they must be invented (and in that sense, Lady Macbeth is even fictional to Macbeth). While the question of fact or fiction regarding the Jewish chronicles remains tantalizing, and perhaps unanswerable, one thing is certain: it is no mere chance that Sarah is absent from the biblical story in which her son is brought to sacrifice.



While the 1920s and 1930s saw a great flowering of feminine poetry in Hebrew, women still made little use of a motif that seemed to hypnotize their male contemporaries.¹¹ Even during the War of

¹⁰ In *Yuden Buchlein*, 1550; quoted by Yisrael Yuval in *ibid.*, 89. Ada Rapoport-Albert, in her forthcoming book *Women and Jewish Mysticism: Female Bodies—Male Souls* claims that the prominent place accorded to women in Jewish martyrology in contrast to the marginality of women in the religious and spiritual arena of Judaism stems from the inherent liminality of the martyrological movement—the transition from life to death. In life after death or indeed in the messianic future, women are credited with the power to achieve spiritual and even religious equality with men.

¹¹ See especially Yitzhak Lamdan, David Shimoni, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and Abraham Shlonsky.

Independence, while some women poets did relate to the experience of war, they seemed to join in the preponderant discourse that tended to regard the destiny of sacrificing sons as a kind of DNA of the Jewish people ("They are born with a knife in their hearts," to quote Hayyim Gouri), without turning the paradigm to any subversive ends as mothers or daughters. A striking exception, however, is Yoheved Bat-Miriam, one of the founding mothers of Hebrew women's poetry. When Bat-Miriam lost her son, Zuzik Hazaz, in the battle for Jerusalem in 1948, she quit writing and scarcely ever wrote a line of verse again. But in one short piece of writing (as well as in things she told me in our many conversations) she admitted the great extent to which she identified her poetic life with her maternal life:

Mothers, mothers of the world. Stand like a wall to protect your children, for without them there is nothing—without them death walks in your cold, dumb bodies. . . . From far, far away, from beyond, from behind my son's body, your face floats—the bread, the water in the mouth, are like the taste of dust from his grave. A grave? A grave of Zuzik's? And if I am the grave, my son is inside me—inside me, and therefore I walk slowly and sedately, as bringing my own body to burial.¹²

In her overwhelming grief Bat-Miriam appeared to her generation as both eccentric and Orphic.¹³

The sudden eruption of the binding of Isaac as a major topos in women's poetry during the 1970s after such prolonged absence is therefore startling enough to capture one's attention. Only after the Six Day War and the War of Attrition did women's poetry become saturated with expressions of this narrative. The common denominator

¹² Quoted in an anthology of poems and stories written during the War of Independence: A. B. Yaffe, ed., *Nikhtav betashah* (Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1998), 28, 30–32.

¹³ "You are as fond of grief as of your child," says a callous cardinal to a grieving mother in Shakespeare's *King John*. "He talks to me that never had a son," she answers.

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,

Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form. (act 3, scene 4, lines 93–97)

Constance makes love to a grisly figure of death till she herself becomes that figure—a body bearing a body, as in a postmortum pregnancy.

of the various readings, and the most striking one, is a challenge to the masculine character of the narrative: after all, the biblical interpretation of the name "Abraham" is that he is the father of numerous nations (*av hamon goyim*). I offer here a few short readings of such writers' poetry that form different paradigms and wish to draw special attention to publication dates, which are, in themselves an important clue.

CATEGORIES OF FEMININE DISCOURSE WITH THE *AQEDAH*

The first paradigm is that of rebellion—an outright negation of the myth and an attempt to replace it with a feminine alternative fit for life. Ra'aya Harnick wrote the cycle "Poems of Attrition" ("Shirei hatashah") in 1970, at the height of the War of Attrition (three years after the Six Day War), but published them only in 1983, after her son Guni was killed in Lebanon. (It is indeed chilling to think of them as prophetic and also of the kind of price "paid" for legitimacy.)

שירי התשה 1970

א

אני לא אקריב
בכורי לעולה.
לא אני.

בלילות אלהים ואני
עורכים חשבונות
מה מגיע למי.

אני יודעת ומכירה
תודה.
אכל לא את בני
ולא
לעולה.

ב

לא עוד שנת ארבעים ושנים
לא עוד טרבלינגה.
לא כצאן לטבחיה.
עכשו בגאון
עכשו כמצדה
עכשו כצאן לעולה.

ג
 אֱלֹהִים
 בּוֹנֵה בְרַחְמֵי
 יְרוּשָׁלַיִם.
 (כָּל יוֹם אַחַר הָאָרוֹחָה)
 וְכָל אֶבֶן שֶׁבָנָה
 בְּרַחְמֵי
 בִירוּשָׁלַיִם
 סְפוּגָה בְדָם וּדְמָעָה.
 אֲתָן לֵאלֹהִים
 בְּרַחְמֵי
 אֶת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם
 וְאֶקַּח אֶת
 בְּנֵי
 בְתֻמוֹרָה.

Poems of Attrition 1970

A.
 I will not bring
 my first-born to sacrifice.
 Not I.

At night God and I
 reckon
 who deserves what.

I know and am
 beholden.
 But not my son
 and not
 to sacrifice.

B.
 No longer 1942
 No longer Treblinka.
 No longer sheep for slaughter.
 Now proudly
 Now like Masada
 Now sheep for sacrifice.

C.
 God
 in His mercy builds

Jerusalem.
 (Every day after the meal)
 And every stone He built
 in His mercy
 in Jerusalem
 is sodden
 with blood and tears.
 I'll give to God
 In His mercy
 Jerusalem
 And take
 my son
 in return.¹⁴

Harnick's attrition comes in a double sense: the contemporary, political meaning, but also the attrition of myths and the values they generate. Actually, they come in a triple sense: attrition of myth, of writer, and of reader. This new stance lets the woman into the hegemonic discourse with no apologetic note in her voice. The mother wages open war on the myth, and to do that she performs what Alicia Ostriker calls "stealing the language." She uses the original texts to deconstruct the myth from its insides. She applies the very repetitive triple rhythm, which characterized the original obedience of the binder, for her own purposes of defiance. Abraham's story marches to these repetitions: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love," or "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him." The poet now keeps the music, but replaces the contents: "I will not bring my firstborn to sacrifice, not I, and not to sacrifice." Harnick "corrects" the hypogram "your son, your only son" with "my firstborn" and so wedges herself in between the two parents, Abraham and Sarah, and shows them to have a clearly unequal emotional relation toward their son: for Sarah, Isaac is her firstborn, unlike Abraham, whose firstborn is actually Ishmael.

Linguistic mechanisms are similarly taken up and dismantled. For example, the well-worn coin "as sheep to slaughter" (*katson latevah*) is concretized by placing it within the context of the *aqedah*, in which there was a sacrificial animal. In this way the new text deconstructs the master narrative of Zionism: Zionism is supposed to give shelter, to be the opposite of "as sheep for slaughter," but actually it amounts to the same kind of martyrology.

¹⁴ Ra'aya Harnick, *Shirim leGuni* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1983), 9–11. Translated by Ruth Kartun-Blum and Sonya Grubber.

The poet wishes the biblical pattern of exchange to go her way ("I shall give God in His mercy / Jerusalem / and take my son in return"). Abraham is a great barterer, the first great Jewish merchant, and his story is full of deals—with his brother, with God, with Ephron the Hittite.¹⁵ But Abraham's deals are gracious and righteous and, when dealing with God, even whimsical. Nothing of that survives in Harnick's version. She exposes God as a dishonest dealer. In the wake of Yehudah Amichai's poetry she deconstructs the traditional Jewish Grace after Meals: "God / in His mercy builds / Jerusalem. / (Every day after the meal) / And every stone He built / ... is sodden / with blood and tears."

In another poem Harnick says "And we know all too well / That we go to the mountain with no ram in the thicket / And no ram in the world / And we are very lonely." Moshe Shamir makes a fine distinction between the stories of Oedipus and Abraham.¹⁶ Unlike the Oedipus story, which happens unwittingly—at least from the son's point of view—the binding of Isaac is, throughout, a conscious act. The problems that occur on a conscious level are far more complicated than problems presented as the product of the unconscious. The verb "to know," which relates originally to Abraham, "the "knight of faith," relates in Harnick's poem to an individual, private foreknowledge of the tragic outcome of the plot. Unlike the biblical Sarah, who is "not knowing," the modern mother not only knows but also expresses her knowledge in writing.

A poem describes what something is not in order to distance itself from another form of poetic discourse.¹⁷ What Jonathan Culler terms "negative presupposition" is a technique much used in Israeli political poetry and should not be seen merely as a rhetorical, ornamental device but as a psychological perspective charged with anger and emotion. Moreover, it is a yardstick for defining cultural space. When the poet mother says "I will not sacrifice my firstborn," she places herself in opposition not only to the war in Lebanon but to historical continuity as a fatalistic decree.

Harnick is consistent in her antimartyrological stance. Three years ago she published a polemic article in the literary journal *Dimui* following the

¹⁵ According to the talmudic sages (Pesikta Rabbati 40), even the name of the sacrificial mountain—Moriah—was thought to emanate from the Hebrew noun *temurah* (payment, exchange). See Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac As a Sacrifice*, trans. Judah Goldin (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 69.

¹⁶ Moshe Shamir, "Oedipus and Abraham" [Hebrew], in *Bekulmos mahir* (Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1960), 330.

¹⁷ Jonathan Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality," in *The Pursuit of Signs—Semiotic, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).

kidnapping of the soldier Nahshon Vacksman, which she titled "The Sanctification of the Victim or a Return to the Diaspora."¹⁸ In this article she challenges the popular media's tendency to focus on the kidnapped, "the victim," and so to overlook the heroic soldier who was killed in trying to save Vacksman. This year she stood in solitary protest against the placing of a monument for victims of terrorism on Mount Herzl, the site of a military cemetery.

THE DIALOGICAL RECIPROCITY

In contrast to the aggressive antisacrificial mood taken up by Harnick, the other feminine stance in relation to the myth is less transparent and more dialogical. Nevertheless, it also challenges the male perspective of the narrative. Here a dialogue is formed between the female voice and the myth. The very existence of a dialogue reduces the normative prowess of myth; when it ceases to be normative, it becomes discursive. The works of several women poets, both secular and religious, belong to this category. Here there is no attempt to reconcile conflicting elements; instead, there is an attempt to continue living with a profound awareness of them. Compared with the aggressive antisacrificial poetry of the 1980s and 1990s by poets such as Meir Weiseltier and Yitzhak Laor, this seems a more complex perspective. Hava Pinhas-Cohen, a religious woman, editor of the journal *Dimui*, does not isolate the *aqedah* as a point of reference but treats it as part of an entire historical sequence. She breaks down the barrier of a woman's inability to read herself in a male narrative; it is as if she says that because she is Jewish, she has an equal share in this myth. She does not stand where tradition has put her, that is, alongside Abraham, in the slot of Sarah and Hagar, but actually in his place, which also puts her in a special position from which to question issues of gender.¹⁹

Pinhas-Cohen takes up an attitude long neglected by Hebrew poetry, which has concentrated on the sorry self. She creates a special intimacy with history by domesticating great moments or combining monumental time (to use Kristeva's definition) with intimate personal time, as illustrated in the poem "Entreaty" ("Baqashah").

¹⁸ *Dimui* (September 10, 1996).

¹⁹ As for the relations between women and nation in Israel, see N. Yuval Davis, "Gender and Nation," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16 (4) (1993).

בקשה

כְּאִשֶּׁר תִּינוּק בְּיָדִי
וְחֶלֶב אֲנוּשֵׁי רוּקִם אֶת חֵיָו,
בָּאִים בְּלִילוֹת פְּעִימוֹת וְקוֹלוֹת קְצוּבִים
— רַכְבוֹת —

בְּתַחֲנָה מְסִימֶת עַל הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת,
בְּרַגְלִים יַחְפוֹת בְּקַצְרֵי־יָד
פֶּשֶׁטִּי זְרוּעוֹת
כְּמוֹ קַרְנֵי אֵיל מִתּוֹךְ סִבְךְ
לְחִישַׁת הָאָרֶץ לְשָׁמַיִם
שָׁמַע, וַעֲשֵׂה סֶכֶת רַחֲמֶיךָ
כְּמוֹ צֶל הַגֶּפֶן וְהַתְּאֵנָה
אֵל תִּנְסַנִּי, נָא.

יֵשׁ עֲצִים וְיֵשׁ סִבְךְ, רֵיחַ שֶׁל אֵשׁ
וּמְרֵאָה עֶשֶׂן. עִם אֲמָהוֹת לֹא מְשַׁחֲקִים
מִחְבוּאִים —
בְּקַצֵּר יָדֵי מְכֶסֶה עַל עֵינַי
קוֹלִי אוֹבֵד בְּצַעֲקָה
אֶל־קוֹלִית

אִיכָּה

Entreaty

With my babe in arms
And human milk lacing his life,
At night come beats and measured noises
Trains—

At some station on this earth,
Barefoot and powerless
I stretched out my arms
A ram's horns caught in the thicket
The whisper of earth to heaven
Hear, and weave your mercy overhead
Like the shade of vine and fig
Pray, do not try me.

There is wood and a thicket, a smell of fire
and the sight of smoke. You don't play hide

and seek
 with mothers—
 With my hand out I cover my eyes
 My voice lost in a voiceless
 scream

Where art thou?²⁰

“Entreaty” draws on traditional prayers of supplication offered by women (*tehinot*) and on the prayer for forgiveness recited by men (*tahanun*). The woman speaking here, however, quarrels with God and calls Him to account, thereby revising the image of the suppliant woman that is prevalent in the *tehinot*.

During the most intimate and physical experience of motherhood—that “physical orality,” or breast-feeding—associations of the most traumatic historical kind surface in the mother’s mind. The mother suckling her child recalls hellish images of the Holocaust. She claims for herself the kind of biblical rhetoric originally used by God to Adam or Abraham. “Don’t play hide and seek with mothers,” she says. For her, “hide and seek” is a man’s game; a man has time on his hands, since he isn’t concerned with the daily occupation of nurturing life. Game rhetoric—defining the rules of the game—is male-oriented. One can look through a sociological prism and claim that this is a male practice. Out of the calm domestic scene a daring interpretation of monumental historic experience is suggested as a kind of game God played with Abraham: God as a male figure hides the victim only to reveal it in the last minute. Now God is hiding from mothers holding their children. The mother and child are the substitute for the ram; they are the real victims; no games now. “Where are you?” (*ayyekka*), God’s cry to Adam who has sinned and has shamefully hidden himself, is therefore turned towards God and remains hanging in the air as an accusation. The cry becomes the prerogative of a mother who could not save her child.²¹

Pinhas-Cohen’s Abraham, here and elsewhere in her poetry, is a one-time hero. He has done a single act of heroism, if it could be called that. The mother’s heroism, on the other hand, is a daily one, rising from her ethics of care. Julia Kristeva defines male time as “linear

²⁰ From Hava Pinhas-Cohen, *The Passage of the Doe* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1994), 30. Translated by Ruth Kartun-Blum and Sonya Grubber.

²¹ A latent paronomasia is evoked in Hebrew in the association between *ayyekka* (where are you?) and *Eikhah* (Lamentations), thereby linking admonition and lamentation.

equals historical."²² A woman's time, on the other hand, is cyclical and repetitive. Abraham rises *one* morning, while she gropes her children's bodies *every* morning to check for unusual signs.

The woman poet places herself in a complicated position from which to sort out a medley of feeling—in the very thicket of the *aqedah*. But by doing so she daringly claims a place for herself at the very heart of the myth, rather than as a traditional spectator. It is as if she says: "I am the one who wakes up to my children each morning, connecting with my body and my deeds past, present, and future, and therefore it is my right to read this myth with feminine eyes, while with no intention to profane it." In this way she suggests a kind of feminine hubris that poses the woman's role as possibly the more valuable of the two.



The most impressive link between moral discourse and the voice of motherhood was created by Daliah Rabikovich in two of her latest volumes, *Genuine Love* and *Mother with Child*, in which the voice of motherhood is also identified with the voice of the Palestinian mother. *Mother with Child* is not a tautological title, because there is also such a thing as a mother with no child. Furthermore, there is also a pregnancy with a dead child (a poem about a Palestinian mother written during the Intifada). The practice, or practicality, of motherhood has radically changed Rabikovich's poetic voice. From her passive stance as a mere spectator in the window, she now moves on to assume a new responsibility, expressing itself mainly in her political poetry:

אבל היה לה בן

לרחל מלמד-איתן

הכרות שהתחילה באמצע החורף
הבשילה בסוף האביב.
אשה חיקנית, פיסנית.
היה לה בן
שנפל.
היא אופה ומבשלת.

²² Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," in Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

חצי משנה בעירייה.
צהרים תמיד מוכנים על השלחן.
וכל זאת תוך סרוב משלם
להסתגל.

על פי דרכה, כאלו בשלוח
היא תעצר את העולם פתאם.
קשה לדעת מה היא יכולה.
מבלי לומר ממש דברים,
היא באה בדרישה.
הרי לקחו לה בן.
היא לא תצדיק בשום פנים
את הלקיחה הזאת.
מי יעז לומר לה:
עכשו הזמן שתרחצי פניך
ותתחזקי
מה שהיה היה.

היא יוצאת למסע מפרך מאד.
המסע סבובי הלוך ושוב.
במו ידיה היא חותה תחיתה גחלים
שופכת רמץ על גופה בכונה.
היא רחל. איזו רחל?
שהיה לה בן,
והיא אומרת לו לילה יום
קיץ וחורף, מועדים וחגים,
אני רחל אמא שלך,
מתוך הכרה שלמה ורצון חפשי
אין לי מנחם.

But She Had a Son
For Rachel Melamed Eitan

An acquaintance begun in mid-winter
Ripened by the end of spring.
A smiling, peaceful woman.
She had a son
Who was killed.
She bakes and cooks,
Part-time in the municipality.
Lunch always ready on the table.

And all in utter refusal
To adjust.

In her own way, as if peacefully,
She will arrest the world all of a sudden.
Difficult to know what she can.
Without really saying things,
She is demanding.
After all they took her son.
She will in no way justify
This taking.
Who dares tell her:
Now it is time for you to wash your face
And get better.
What's passed has passed.

She sets on a backbreaking journey.
A journey circuitous back and forth.
With her own hands, she heaps coals beneath her
Pouring cinder over her body.
She is Rachel. Which Rachel?
Who had a son,
And she says to him night and day
Summer and winter, holidays and feasts,
I am Rachel your mother,
Out of informed consent and free will
I have no comforter.²³

Intertextuality, rather than figurative language, produces the literariness of Rabikovitch's political text. "But She Had a Son" is one of the most powerful lamentations in Hebrew poetry. Here the intertext of the *aqedah* creates a link between the guilt feelings of a bereaved mother and self-punishment. The link is conjured up in the image of inward-turning feminine aggression, intended to perpetuate the pain and suffering of a mother who does not want to separate from her grief. Here, too, the *aqedah* is not isolated but interwoven with other canonical literary texts of theodicy, which the poet uses subversively. The two biblical texts that are deconstructed pertain to two bereaved fathers: David and Job. Unlike Job, David accepts the bereavement more lightly: he gets up, washes his face, and eats. By way of contrast, Rachel becomes the archetypal mother, who forever refuses to

²³ Dalia Rabikovitch, *Kol hashirim ad koh* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 281–82. Translated by Ruth Kartun-Blum.

console herself. As always, Rabikovich's great achievement is in her fusion of biblical and colloquial language and in her syntax, which is extremely suggestive.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Carol Gilligan, in her book *In a Different Voice*,²⁴ links feminine consciousness with a moral code. Feminine consciousness, she argues, has to do with the ability to think in terms of the needs of others rather than in abstract terms of "rights." That is, what separates the male from the female code is the ethics of care and the consciousness of a need of greater and more active responsibility toward others that may mend the potential indifference of "noninterference" morality.

Through the revisionary reading of the myth, Israeli women poets present new definitions of social, political, and moral values. They revise the myth to represent a world of feminine values. For the first time in Jewish history, the mother represents herself in a strong stance of opposition: she is the protester, while appropriating the public political voice. The ethics of care generates for her a different moral code. The women poets remove the numinous element from the story, debating with the Bible, with God, with the "knight of faith," and with themselves as to their place in the story.

The appropriation of this central myth was made possible by historical circumstances. After the Yom Kippur War, political rhetoric changed. While the Six Day War was followed by great bereavement and mourning for the dead, these were wrapped in the overall sense of achievement. But once social consciousness was turned to the issue of price, it was the mother who took up the banner of protest: the legitimization of feminine representation was brought about by the growing awareness of the fact that the victims were too high a price to pay in war.

The extent to which the Yom Kippur War and the war in Lebanon have changed the national narrative may be seen in Netivah Ben-Yehuda's influential book *Miba'ad la'avotot* (*Through the Binding Ropes*, 1985), which is a critical reading of the mythical War of Independence, in which Ben-Yehuda herself took part. Significantly, Ben-Yehuda only published her book after the Lebanon War, the only nonconsensus war in the history of Israel. (Similarly, it was only after this war that Harnick could publish her poetry.) Ben-Yehuda writes:

²⁴ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982).

If one uses the binding of Isaac as a parable of Zionism, one can't overlook the fact that the whole story since this day is told by the Abrahams—and rightly so. After all, they were the mighty fathers, the founders, the thinkers, the prophets, who had a direct line to God. After all, they were the ones who put themselves to the test for the readiness to pay the heaviest price in the world. But even though according to the Abrahams' story Isaac was only an extra, only the "son of," it's clear that he, too, paid a heavy price. Though he climbed the altar willingly, agreed in everything with Daddy Abraham, it was he who was left alone face to face with death. Not Abraham. Furthermore, in the binding of Isaac of Zionism there wasn't always a ram in the thicket. Not for every Isaac. So this is a story of one of the Isaacs, a detailed on-the-level report on what it was like, there on the altar, what it all looked like from there, through the binding ropes of the *aqedah* in 1948.²⁵

Were such feelings never present before in the history of Zionism, or were they present but silenced? And if so, how were they silenced? A political movement called "Four Mothers," which aimed "not to let our sons be killed in Lebanon," adopted the poem "In the Beginnings" by Yehudit Kafri, which challenges the silence of Sarah:

And where was Sarah? ...
 Why didn't she block
 the road
 And whispered pursed lips:
 You will not pass this way
 As long as I live!

In many ways, "Four Mothers" resembles the movement "Parents Against Silence," which emerged during the Lebanon War and also demanded a unilateral withdrawal of all the Israeli forces from Lebanon. The media called that movement "Mothers Against Silence" because most of its activists were women. The new movement, "Four Mothers," draws its strength and authority from its identity as "the mother's voice." This voice, say the members, accords them the right not to give up what they hold most dear, which belongs to them rather than to the nation. It seems that their choice to be named "Four Mothers" evoked a deep Jewish resonance and endowed the movement with a symbolic meaning that contributed to its legitimacy. The mother's

²⁵ On the revisionist reading of the War of Independence in Ben-Yehuda's book, see Yael Feldman, "Gender and Zionist Ideology: Netivah Ben-Yehuda," in *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nation in Israeli Women's Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

voice was translated into political and media discourses and thereby made its impact.

The legitimization of the effort of the members of "Four Mothers" to make their voices heard in protest stemmed from the fact that they were inhabitants of the northern part of the country and mothers of combat soldiers. In the same way, Harnick's publication of her poems resulted from the fact that her son was killed in Lebanon. As I have noted in the context of Hannah, a mother's voice is heard only when her son is placed on the altar. In contrast to the conquest of the West Bank, the Lebanon War produced an extremist critical discourse that transgressed the boundaries of myth. Residing near the northern border enabled one to challenge the assumptions of this political mode—to sit, so to speak, in a binary liminal position on the borderline of this discourse.

Another woman's peace organization was established after the opening of the tunnel under the Western Wall in September 1997 with the purpose of focusing on a different angle of the public agenda. A movement by religious women was formed, calling itself the "Movement for the Sanctity of Life." The issues it addresses intertwine with the debate over the features of contemporary Judaism and the hierarchy of values in the religious sector. Their argument draws its strength not from a political stance but from a moral one: the sanctification of life is superior to the sanctification of blood or soil. This stand brings them to negate the Israeli occupation of the territories. Thus, fifteen years after Harnick's and Kafri's poems were first published, political organizations of women have sought to replace the all-pervading topos of male camaraderie, so central to the heroic myth of war.²⁶ It appears, therefore, that poetry is not just "the inversion of saying" as Weiseltier calls it, but in many cases, predates the saying and the events that follow. In many ways poetry is "the writing on the wall."

In a passage of a recent book, *The Gift of Death*, in which he compares Melville's story "Bartleby the Scrivener" and the binding of Isaac, Jacques Derrida observes:

It is difficult not to be struck by the absence of woman in these two monstrous yet banal stories. It is a story of father and son, of masculine figures, of hierarchies among men (God the Father, Abraham, Isaac; the woman Sarah is she to whom nothing is said...). Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law, of its law, be altered, inflected, attenuated or displaced, if a woman

²⁶ As illustrated in George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

were to intervene in some consequential manner? Does the system of this sacrificial responsibility . . . imply at its very basis an exclusion or sacrifice of woman?²⁷

According to contemporary Israeli poetry, motherhood as a concept aims to deconstruct the binary categories of gender, suggesting a more sublime entity—an alternative component of mythology. If only mothers were able, to quote Rabikovitch, “peacefully as it were, to stop the world at once.”

EPILOGUE

A few months ago the I.D.F. withdrew from Lebanon. There is no doubt that the voice raised by the Four Mothers Movement and others like it was a catalyst for this decision. Perhaps it also made it possible for men to raise their voices against the occupation of the security zone where it was not possible to do so before.

The *aqedah*—the binding of Isaac—was the mythological locus in which such a movement could develop, without stopping the world, only diverting its course a little.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 76.



◆

ZIONIST DREAMS AND SAVYON LIEBRECHT'S "A COW NAMED VIRGINIA"

Naomi Sokoloff

Savyon Liebrecht's story "A Cow Named Virginia"¹ opens with a dream. Ruhama Gurevitz, who has devoted her life to Zionist pioneering ideals, is on her way to visit her son in America. She is getting on in years, and she hopes to persuade him to return to Israel to help with the cows she takes such pride in raising. On the airplane she dozes off and dreams that she is giving birth to herself.

This dream provides the reader an effective entrée into the story as it introduces a number of elements of Ruhama's inner life, preoccupations, and values. In addition, it presages the outcome of the story as well. Through this dream the author begins to construct the main character. Later, the insights offered here will aid the reader in understanding Ruhama's own construction of her identity, as her Zionist dreams and love of Israel collide with her son's decision to remain in America.

ואז חלמה וראתה איך, פשוקת רגליים, כיושבת על שרפרף, גהרה מעל סדין הסאטן הרקום כוכביות לבנות, סדין שקיבלה לכלולותיה מדודתה העירונית ועכשיו היה פרוש על אדמת הרפת הישנה וגרגרי חול מצטרפים על פניו לקווים דקים לאורך קווי הגיהוץ. הפרות נדחקו סביבה, סקרניות, ומתחת להר בטנה המתנועע התגלו ונעלמו חליפות הכוכביות הנוצצות. היא העבירה את שתי כפות ידיה על כדור כרסה וכיוונה את נשימותיה, לחייה מתקמרות כשני מפוחים תאומים, כפי שעשתה כמעט חצי מאה קודם לכן בחדר היולדות בעפולה, החשה בפליאה את המלאות שאין בה כאב של התינוק השואף לפרוץ. כך המתינה שלוה ונושמת עמוקות עד שנכנע השריר הנועל את שער הרחם והניח לראש להבקיע. ומיד אחריו נתגלו כתפיים מתעגלות זו לעומת זו ועצמה התינוקת החליקה

¹ The story, "Parah al shem Virginia," is included in Savyon Liebrecht, *Tsarikh sof lesippur ahavah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995), 9–29. All translations are mine.

מבין ירכיה, גופה רחוף וטהור מפגמים ודם ושתי רגליה כלילות-שלמות. מים צלולים כמי-מעין זרמו מתוך רחמה אל תעלת ההשקיה ונשאו עמם פרחים זעירים, עלי תבלין, ניירות קונפטי צבעוניים ומפתח ברזל זעיר של יומן ששלח לה אביה העושה בשליחות באירופה, מתנה לבת-המצווה. ואחר-כך שכבה שעה ארוכה על גבה, פניה אל גג הרעפים המבוקעים, ואימצה אל לבה את התינוקת וראתה את העגלים הרוכנים לשתות מן המים הזורמים, ויותר מכול שמחה על שנמצא לה המפתח ליומן שבראש כל דף מדפיו נכתב: שלום רב לך, יומני היקר.

Then she dreamt and saw herself, with legs spread, as if sitting on a low stool. She was crouching over a satin sheet embroidered with small, white, star-shaped buds, a sheet that she had gotten as a wedding present from her aunt in the city and which was now spread on the ground of the old cow shed with grains of sand gathering along the lines where it had been ironed and folded. The cows pressed around her, curious, and under the mound of her moving belly those twinkling flowers appeared and disappeared by turns. She rubbed her palms on the orb of her belly and directed her breathing, her cheeks swelling like twin bellows, just as she had done almost half a century earlier in the birthing room in Afula. She felt with wonder the fullness, without pain, of the baby striving to burst out. She waited calmly, breathing deeply, until the muscle that locked the opening of her womb gave way and allowed the head to break through. Then, immediately, there appeared the rounded shoulders and her infant self slipped between her thighs, pure and unblemished, cleansed of blood, with two perfect little legs. Clear water, as from a fountain, flowed from her womb to a watering trough, carrying small flowers, fragrant herbs, colorful bits of confetti, and a small iron key—a key to the diary that her father had sent her as a bat mitzvah gift, while he was away in Europe on *shelilhut*. Afterward she lay for a long time on her back, her face to the torn roof tiles, clasping the baby to her heart. She saw the calves leaning over to drink from the flowing water, and more than anything, rejoiced that she had found the key to the diary on whose every page she had written, Hello Dear Diary! (9–10)

The images of birth here are a harbinger of things to come. As one reviewer aptly put the case, the dream is prophetic, for upon her arrival in the U.S. Ruhama “is faced with a reality which requires a far-reaching ideological, cultural, and emotional transformation.”² Her son confronts her with a number of surprises. He has never liked the cows and is not going into business with her; what’s more, he is not coming back to Israel at all. In addition, unbeknownst to her, he is contemplating marriage. He

² Rachel Brenner, “Life Story,” *Modern Hebrew Literature* 20–21 (1998): 21.

is living with a woman who is not Israeli, though she is Jewish; she has been married twice before, and she has three children—one of whom is a son by her African American second husband. Ruhama reacts to all this with bitter, fretful indignation. Eventually, though, the strenuous work of adjusting to a new reality brings special rewards. It turns out that the little boy loves cows as much as she does, and so, in a place and time and way she never expected, she finds a kindred spirit. In fact, the meeting with this child in Virginia lets loose a flood of emotions, a warmth and vitality that Ruhama has not known for many years. The story thus ends on a note of joy, even though the journey has brought a series of heart-rending rifts for Ruhama, tearing her away from her old expectations, hopes, and values. The opening dream, which pictures birth as rupture, letting go, and then flowing happiness, has helped prepare the reader for this moment. Ruhama is single-minded and set in her ways; but the dream has hinted that she is also capable of great changes and can face both rift and new possibility.

Looking more closely at the text, we may note that the Hebrew emphasizes tearing, rift, and new possibility as it repeats the root *bet-quf-ayin*—the child is about to burst forth (*maḥqiya*), and the roof consists of torn tiles (*re'afim mevuaqa'im*), which, presumably, give a glimpse beyond the roof, perhaps a glimpse of the heavens. The semantic range of this root allows for connotations of severing or splitting, but also breaking through. In keeping with these meanings, Ruhama's experience in America will also be one both of rupture and of emotional breakthrough. Moving past shock and outrage, she will arrive at a measure of acceptance that brings her closer to her son and rejuvenates her. Many details from the dream, indeed, suggest a labor that is well worth the effort. The profusion of flowers, the confetti, and the gifts signify joy, celebration, and love. These elements help to weave into the scene memories of other joyous occasions and life-cycle events (Ruhama's wedding, a previous experience of childbirth, her bat mitzvah). Not surprisingly, cows are an inseparable part of this vision, both as observers and participants. They have been a large part of Ruhama's happiness in life, so it is fitting that her rebirth takes place in a cow shed. Furthermore, in this dream the waters that flow from her sustain and give life to the cows. In this regard the Hebrew is more resonant than the English translation: *te'alat hahashqayah* (watering trough) calls to mind the phrase *te'alat ledah* (birth canal), aligning Ruhama's self-fulfillment with her care of her animals.

As the flow of flowers, herbs, confetti, and water hints at the flood of emotions that Ruhama feels at the conclusion of the story, one striking oddity of the dreamscape emerges. This is a birth free of messiness, blood, and pain. The emphasis on purity makes sense, however, as it recalls a discussion that the old-timers in the valley once had regarding

one of Ruhama's cows, called Virginia in honor of her son in the States. The farmers had balked at the foreignness of the name. A Zionist cow, they felt, should have a fitting Hebrew name, and so they urged her to find an equivalent to Virginia, such as Tehurah (purity) or Tsehurah (whiteness or purity). That conversation, reinforced by the dream imagery, anticipates the later encounter with the little boy that will be marked by an exceptional innocence of feeling; eventually, as it turns out, Virginia will become for Ruhama a scene of pure and unexpected tenderness, untainted by manipulative self-interest.

It is significant that in the dream the greatest happiness is associated with the key to the diary, a bat mitzvah present. A diary, of course, is an instrument of self-expression and self-discovery. Diaries traditionally help young adolescents construct for themselves an emerging identity. Accordingly, the diary here reinforces the paramount emphasis of the text on construction of self. It is in the nature of dreaming to gather pieces of the past and synthesize them or recombine them into new self-understanding. Certainly, Ruhama's dream functions that way. In addition, this particular dream pointedly presents Ruhama as someone capable of remaking herself and constructing herself anew. Mention of a diary therefore adds a metanarrative element, a recognition that self-articulation and self-renewal are important components of the psychic business at hand. These aspects of the dream find correlatives in Ruhama's waking life, of course. She eventually proves to be a character who, despite her prickliness, embraces the opportunity to make new choices and to adapt herself to new values.

Those adjustments entail a shift toward the personal arena. Ruhama's past was oriented to Zionist labor, with its collective, ideological emphasis. Her labor in the dream, however, is a private matter, one that focuses attention intensely—doubly—on the self. Further highlighting the tensions between personal and collective is mention in the dream of her father's *sheliḥut*: he was absent on the occasion of her becoming a bat mitzvah because he was away in Europe on an ideological mission. The dream foretells that Ruhama's trip to America will have a different quality. Originally intended as a kind of mission undertaken to return her son to Israel, her trip is a failed *sheliḥut*. Ultimately, Ruhama will have to accept that defeat, and only then will she find unanticipated compensations in a more personal arena.

This emphasis on the personal also represents a departure from Ruhama's previous sense of herself and brings her a new understanding of her own motivations. All her life she has seen herself as self-sacrificing. She remembers how, many mornings, she rose at dawn to take care of the cows, covering them with cool canvas on hot days, bringing them fresh water on cold days when the water in the trough had turned to ice. In her

eyes, her life has been a labor of love undertaken for the sake of her family, so that they could build a dream—the Zionist dream—together. What she finds in America, to her distress, is that her son Yair doesn't want what she wanted for him. That which she had read as self-sacrifice, he reads as self-centered, as determination to mold him to her dreams. She must face the harsh truth that he has fled to America to escape her influence. The trip, consequently, dismantles the opposition selfless/selfish. Along with this deconstruction the text also disaggregates components of identity that have long given her life meaning: homeland, cows, children. In her old age she can have homeland and cows, but not children; or she can have children and cows, but not homeland. Early in the text she explicitly articulates the thought that her home is one in which "the children and the cow shed are the two things that are sacred" (*hayeladim veharefet hem shenei devarim mequdashim* [12]). Yet those things she had once viewed as inseparable phenomena are now disjunct and discontinuous.

The text further dismantles her certainties by turning the tables on her. This woman, known in the valley as a "living legend" (11), has been a formidable figure in her own community, a pioneer of renowned accomplishment whose cows have won awards for many years. But travel to a foreign country infantilizes and makes Ruhama feel helpless. She dislikes being herded about in the airport by a flight attendant, as if she were "a child" (11) or "a calf" (12). Whether this character realizes the implications or not, the reader can see that this is very much a story concerned with who is constructing whom. Ruhama clearly dislikes being powerless in someone else's construction of reality.

Yet, as she slowly makes a transition into her son's world, an important shift in Ruhama's assumptions begins. She realizes that his assumptions may not be the same as hers. A telling scene takes place on the highway. On the way to his house from the airport, Yair stops to show her a dogwood and tells her about this kind of tree in considerable detail. The scene invites commentary in terms of both "roots" and "routes," James Clifford's felicitous formulation of issues at the heart of Diaspora studies.³ Trees and rootedness have been very important to Ruhama. Now, en route to a new, alien address, she reacts with alarm when she finds her son affected by a dogwood. Not only has he disrupted her life with his dislocations, but he may, she realizes suddenly, feel rooted rather than displaced in this distant place.

³ James Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 108.

זהו, אמרה בלבה כאילו ברגע הזה ובמקום הזה נחרץ הדבר: הוא לא יחזור הביתה. אנשים באים והולכים בחיי אנשים, אבל מי שמתאהב בעץ — היא זכרה איך, כאשר באו לראות את הבית בפעם הראשונה, עומדים מול השעה, נמשכה אל עץ התות שבחצר וברכרגע קשרה את גורלה אל המקום ואמרה לבעלה: "זה הבית שלנו."

That's that, she said in her heart, as if in this very time and place the matter was settled. He won't come home. People come and go in your life, but whoever falls in love with a tree, well—she remembered when they first saw their house, standing opposite the gate, how she was drawn to the mulberry tree in the courtyard and at that moment her fate was bound to that place and she said to her husband, "This will be our home." (24)

Hers is a very Israeli reading of his experience. The return to the Land, with its passionate attachment to the geography of Israel, is a central component of Zionist pioneering thought. Here, although in a non-Zionist locale, Ruhama presumes that a tree will have the same importance for her son as it might for her. In this way the text shows the cultural assumptions through which she filters information, while at the same time revealing that she is beginning to accept the authenticity of Yair's own experience. She has begun to comprehend that he is truly not coming back and will not conform to her dream of the future.

This initial resignation of hers is tinged with despair, but she develops a fuller acceptance of Yair's new life at the end of the story. Increasingly cantankerous, upset by all the shocks she has had to absorb, she demands that Yair put her on the first flight back to Israel. However, when she meets the little boy, eight-year-old Jonathan, she is disarmed by his sweet smile. He has learned a few words of Hebrew to greet her, and best of all, he has prepared a surprise, a *hafta'ah*; in the context of a child's world, the word *hafta'ah* carries the very positive connotation of "a treat." When the boy shows her his room filled with cows—a cow lampshade, a cow bedspread, a green carpet like a pasture on which graze all manner of toy cows—she is overcome with emotion. "How the tears burst from her, how the child was pulled, drawn to her arms, she didn't recall. As in a dream she found herself cradling him in her bosom" (29). This moment of flowing warmth and hopefulness, as it recalls the opening dream sequence, avoids mawkish sentimentality, for the ending acknowledges the disjunction and ruptures with which Ruhama must contend. Touching ironies abound as Jonathan shows his cows to her, naming them one by one: Edna, Dafna, Yisraela, Virginia, and more. It is clear he has been aware of her and her world long before she knew of his, and he has honored her by naming his cows after hers. Although Ruhama has lost the opportunity to share what she loves with her son, she has gained

a new opportunity to share what she loves, in a different way, with the next generation.

The story concludes as she barks at her son to get her photos from the car: "I want to show you my Virginia," she announces. In her surliness she tries to cover vulnerable sentiments, while also celebrating what she, Yair, and Jonathan have in common. In this way she both reveals and attempts to bridge the angry distance between herself and her son. Significantly, she also establishes ownership; emphasis falls on the word "my" in the phrase "my Virginia." She refers, of course, to her cow, but the reader can understand that statement to encompass also the experience of the U.S. that at that very moment is occurring. *Her Virginia* is a scene of both reconciliation and bitter disappointment. Her emphatic "my Virginia" contrasts starkly with the earlier talk of Hebraizing Virginia to Tehurah or Tsehurah. At this juncture foreignness is undeniably something she must now negotiate and bear on intimate terms.

It is noteworthy that this culminating moment seems to her as if "in a dream." The dreamlike feeling at the end of the story is in some ways a fulfillment of her initial dream, yet it also forms instructive contrasts with other dreams in the story. In contrast with the opening dream, here she has moved definitively from her past to her future. Similarly, this concluding moment provides a favorable contrast with the dreams she once had for her son, dreams that were realizable only in her imagination and in her world, not in his. The ending dream also differs from her sense that, from the airplane, the broad fields of Virginia had looked like a dream—beautiful but remote, unreal. Now her inner feelings come in contact with much more tangible external circumstance. Virginia is no longer beautiful and distant, but beautiful, upsetting, ironic, and close at hand.

In the course of these events, not only Virginia but other names become highly meaningful too—for example, Israel, the name of Ruhama's eldest who was killed in a war. That this son might well have carried on her interests and taken over the family dairy adds to her sorrow and grief over his loss. It is not coincidental that this character is called Israel; the loss of Ruhama's cherished personal dreams and ambitions means that the Zionist dream, itself, has slipped away from her. Other names, too, are apt. While highly believable, natural-sounding names, they subtly add symbolic dimensions to the story. Ruhama, from *resh-het-mem* (a root related to "womb" and to "compassion"), is a character first construed as giving birth; and, ultimately, she is a woman capable of an abundance of maternal/grandmotherly love despite profound hurt and confusion. The little boy, Jonathan, as his name suggests, is a gift—an unexpected treat at the end of the story. As he brings Ruhama joy, his presence recalls the motif of gifts in the opening dream

(the embroidered sheet and the diary). Ruth and Naomi, Jonathan's sisters, bear names that highlight issues of continuity and loyalty in Jewish life. Yair (from the root for "light") is also appropriately named, for his face beams with happiness when he sees his mother reconciling herself to the new situation (or *qoren mitokh eynav hayeraqraqot* [29]). Radiance was an element of the initial dream, in the twinkling of the star-shaped flowers, and here at the end of the story light joins other elements of the opening (gifts, maternal love, reconnection with family), reappearing in novel combinations and new guises in Ruhama's life. Naming as an act of constructing reality and infusing the world with meaning was, of course, an integral part of the Zionist project. In Liebrecht's story the act of naming is of high importance, both as Ruhama, the staunch Zionist, takes great care in naming her cows, and also as Jonathan names his cows after hers in an act of identification that de-territorializes. The author herself artfully chooses names for her characters, bringing into play meanings that resonate in new ways within the shifting territories of Ruhama's life.

This moving and well-crafted story deserves close scrutiny on its own merits, for its psychological insights and for its deft deployment of imagery and plot. It is also a text that invites examination in the context of several recent literary developments. First, Savyon Liebrecht is not alone in her fictional treatment of *yeridah*. Rather, her story is indicative of a growing interest in this topic among Hebrew writers.⁴ Increasingly, since the 1980s, Israeli literature has grappled with the issue of Israelis who go abroad and of those who stay abroad.⁵ However, when this theme began to gain visibility, wandering Israelis most often met with strong disapproval or at least with unhappy fates.⁶ In the 1990s less opprobrium is attached to *yeridah*. Some characters who are *yordim* even claim to be no different from any other immigrants in a postmodern world. This is the case, for example, in Dorit Abusch's 1996 novel, *Hayored*. At the same time, tensions and debate continue. In Yoram Kolerstein's "Idolatry," for

⁴ Naomi Sokoloff, ed., "Israel and America: Cross-Cultural Encounters and the Literary Imagination" *Shofar* [Special Issue] (1998).

⁵ See Yael Zerubavel, "The 'Wandering Israeli' in Contemporary Israeli Literature," *Contemporary Jewry* 7 (1994): 127–40; Risa Domb, *Home Thoughts from Abroad: Distant Visions of Israel in Contemporary Hebrew Fiction* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1995); Naomi Sokoloff, "Israel and America Imagining the Other," in Lawrence Silberstein, ed., *The Other in Jewish History and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 326–52.

⁶ Zerubavel, "The 'Wandering Israeli.'"

instance, the protagonist embraces a secular American life wholeheartedly but eventually finds himself caught comically in limbo between two worlds, unable to relinquish the vestiges of his emotional attachments to Judaism and the Jewish State.⁷ "A Cow Named Virginia," published in 1995, is thus part of a growing body of fiction that can help gauge shifting Israeli attitudes regarding Zion and Diaspora in an era of post-Zionism.

Beyond the realm of Israeli literature, Liebrecht's story raises interesting questions in connection with the growth of Diaspora studies. In the past decade the literary domain has witnessed an intense rise of interest in cultural dispersions, immigrant writing, and migrant populations. "A Cow Named Virginia" may serve to interrogate some of the salient trends in that discourse as it provokes the question, Can the new vocabulary of contemporary Diaspora studies be applied usefully to the study of *yeridah*?

Arnold Band raised this issue astutely in an essay that appeared in 1996, "The New Diasporism and the Old Diaspora."⁸ Noting the long history Hebrew literature has had in dealing with issues of Diaspora, exile, and homeland, Band cautions theorists not to overgeneralize the term "diaspora." He urges readers not to lose distinctions among varied phenomena (immigrants, expatriates, refugees, guest-workers, exile-communities, overseas communities, and more), and not to overlook the specificity of Jewish experience.⁹

Jewish literature that deals with exile can never be dissociated entirely from traditional Jewish assumptions. Integral to Judaism is the notion of exile as a divine punishment. Diaspora residence entails "a sense of guilt, of betrayal of a cherished ideal—or commandment—requiring residence in the homeland."¹⁰ Yet contemporary circumstances

⁷ Yoram Kolerstein, "Idolatry," in Naomi Seidman and Michael Gluzman, eds., *Israel: A Traveler's Literary Companion* (San Francisco: Whereabouts, 1996).

⁸ Arnold J. Band, "The New Diasporism and the Old Diaspora," *Israel Studies* 1 (1996): 323–31.

⁹ The ambitious scope of the term "diaspora" in contemporary cultural studies is evident in the following remarks from the introduction to Elazar Barkan and Marie-Denise Shelton, eds., *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), a wide-ranging collection of essays on fascinating but highly disparate phenomena: "The importance of the concept of 'diaspora' as an explanatory paradigm stems from its malleable qualities given that it can apply to diverse communities. Dissociated from the historical experiences of a defined group of people, it becomes a universal nomenclature applicable to displaced groups of people" (5).

¹⁰ Band, "The New Diasporism," 326. For further discussion of Diaspora in modern Jewish thought, see Arnold Eisen, *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflections on*

do raise novel perplexities. Importantly, Band queries, do Israelis outside of Israel comprise a new type of transnational community, and how should they be designated?

Are they similar to the Jewish communities in the same countries in which they settle or do we define them differently? Do they define themselves differently? Are they part of the traditional diaspora, or are they a totally new phenomenon, coming as they do from a sovereign Jewish nation-state...? ¹¹

Current Diaspora studies do provide a helpful set of coordinates to measure some thematic elements of Liebrecht's fiction. Strands of this critical discourse often highlight ways in which fixed identities are unsettled by border crossings. Calling attention to the blurring of national boundaries and loyalties, this line of debate often opposes nationality (as a basis for stable identity) and transnational contexts (typified by multiple subject positions and hybrid selves and communities). In "A Cow Named Virginia" Ruhama's newfound openness, the element of fluidity that enters into her sense of identity, does indeed unsettle or disrupt a hierarchy of values she has long held. New movement and freedom challenge ideological certainty and stasis.

Still, we must not forget the specificity of her border crossing and the heritage of Jewish obligation that Band notes. The story would have much less impact if it were read as somehow separate from Jewish historical background. For Ruhama, Zionism is a substitute for religious obligation. To build a new home and a future for the next generation, through a return to the Land and a commitment to farming, is for her a supreme value. (Remember her statement in the story that the children and the cow shed were sacrosanct—*shenei devarim mequdashim*.) To leave the Land is not to emigrate but to lose a sacred dream. Her devotion to a tree, a cow, a piece of land is depicted with sincere respect. Even more importantly, we should note that in connection with this text such notions as fluidity, hybridity, and dislocation are useful primarily as a point of departure; they are not the main point. Postmodern dislocation and disjunction are part of the textual landscape, but what Liebrecht seems to be driving at, primarily, is the love that bound

Homelessness and Homecoming (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); for further comparisons of Jewish concepts and other, competing concepts of Diaspora, see Jon Stratton, "(Dis)placing the Jews: Historicizing the Idea of Diaspora," *Diaspora* 6 (3) (1997): 301–27.

¹¹ Band, "The New Diasporism," 331.

Ruhama to her old world and that emerges in Ruhama anew, allowing her to cope with the fragmentation of her world. Consequently, it would be misguided to read this story as a celebration of Diaspora. The point is significant, for a prominent strain of recent cultural studies has in fact valorized de-territorialization. Furthermore, critiquing nation-states and deconstructing notions of stable identity, this line of thinking has quite specifically featured vehement attacks on Israel and/or found extensive fault with Zionism.¹² Liebrecht, in contrast, is not set on discrediting Zionism. Rather, she portrays with humor, irony, and respect the inner world of a Zionist who must cope with a post-Zionist world. Post-Zionism has set for itself the goal of revising and sometimes undermining the foundations of Israeli collective memory. In this story Yair challenges the family memory. Insisting that he was never interested in cows, that his father was never interested in cows, that the dream of a dairy was never for the sake of his future, he topples long-standing assumptions and forces Ruhama to face a world in flux. As circumstances undermine her feelings of wholeness, the story invites the reader's empathy for her. In "A Cow Named Virginia" Liebrecht places less emphasis on ideological stances than on compassion for the individuals who experience the forces of transnational dispersion.

This is not to say that the text overlooks Ruhama's shortcomings or the limitations of the positions she espouses—it doesn't. Her initial resistance to meeting Jonathan is indisputably racist. Similarly, her stance toward her son is overbearing. Her single-mindedness borders on rigidity. Her protestations of martyrdom condemn her to stereotypical gestures and behaviors. Yet, the story places those behaviors in conjunction with depictions of inner life that show Ruhama to be capable of great dreams—imaginative, perceptive, humorous, creative, highly individual,

¹² See, for example, Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993): 693–725; Clifford, "Traveling Cultures"; Sidra Ezrahi, "Israel and Jewish Writing: The Next Fifty Years," *Religion and Literature* 30 (3) (1998): 9–22; Ranen Omer, ed., *Religion and Literature* 30 (3) (1998). Maeera Shreiber discusses the trope of exile as it is celebrated in contemporary Jewish art and thought and in cultural studies. See Maeera Shreiber, "The End of Exile: Jewish Identity and Its Diaspora Poetics," *PMLA* 113 (2) (1998): 237–87. She notes in particular valorizations of Diaspora by Irena Klepfisz, George Steiner, and Alain Finkielkraut, among others. In a similar vein, Todd Herzog provides clear illustrations of ways in which contemporary German literature valorizes de-territorialized and hybrid Jewish identity; Todd Herzog, "Hybrids and Mischlinge: Translating Anglo-American Cultural Theory into German," *German Quarterly* 70 (1) (1997): 1–17.

and, above all, loving. She has devoted herself to her family and her life's dreams with vigor, and in her old age finds herself, surprisingly, capable of new dreams.



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**BETWEEN GENESIS AND SOPHOCLES: BIBLICAL
PSYCHOPOLITICS IN A. B. YEHOSHUA'S *MR. MANI****

Yael S. Feldman

—משה חיים קראתי אותו, בבחינת פתיחה חדשה.
—לא, לא על שם אביו. די לי מן השם שמכתר אותי מלפנים ומאחור
—כקללה. עייפתי משמות האבות המתים נושאי זכר התבוסה והמפלה, מאסתי
בספר בראשית והלכתי קדימה, אצל ספר שמות, ונטלתי את השם משה
כמות שהוא, בפשטותו.

—I named him Moshe Hayyim in the hope of a fresh start.
—No, he was not named after his father. It is enough that I am accursedly boxed in by the same name before and after me. I am weary of the names of the dead patriarchs commemorating downfalls and defeats; I had my fill of Genesis and went on to Exodus, from which I took the name of Moshe in all its simplicity. (292; 306)¹

כלומר, שלא יכלה מאני מן העולם.

The world would have its Manis after all. (337; 357).

The speaker of the above lines is Avraham Mani, the progenitor of several generations of a family whose Mediterranean saga in the last two centuries is at the center of A. B. Yehoshua's masterful yet controversial novel, *Mr. Mani*. As may be recalled, this is "a novel of conversations," each of its five chapters constituting a monologue (or, more accurately, a one-sided dialogue) in which a major juncture in the Manis' saga is exposed via a reconstruction of the life and loves of one of its members.

* For Arnold Band, for your friendship and support, and for our mutual interests in the classics—both Hebraic and Greek.

¹ A. B. Yehoshua, *Mar Mani* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1990); *Mr. Mani*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: Doubleday, 1992). Page references are to the Hebrew and English editions, respectively.

Another structural peculiarity that is essential for a better understanding of this novel is its counterhistorical movement: we are introduced to the five generations in a reverse order, from the Israeli present (the early 1980s) to the past, almost two centuries earlier. Consequently, it is only in the fifth conversation that we are fully introduced to the life story of Avraham Mani, the patriarch whose "sin" is to be retrospectively understood as the "primal scene" that motivates—at least psychologically—all the (textually) preceding chapters.

Indeed, Avraham's patriarchal stature is immediately implied by his eponymous name, which highlights also the central place the book of Genesis holds in this narrative. Less clear, however, is the meaning of his "revolt," so to speak, as expressed in our epigraph, *against* this very centrality. For there is much authorial irony in Avraham Mani's explanation of his choice to leave Genesis behind and move to the book of Exodus in search of a name for the recently born young Mani who is the subject of his vehement argument. Part of the irony derives from the surprising turns of plot in this last conversation. Moshe Hayyim, Avraham's "grandson" whose birth and naming are reported here, is in fact his biological son, sired by him with his daughter-in-law Tamar after his own son dies childless. Avraham's own rationalization for this act, cited above, "the world would have its Manis after all," is obviously quite problematic, as discussed below. For now, however, let me point to a deeper irony, one that derives its power from the late textual position of Avraham's protest against "the names of the dead patriarchs commemorating downfalls and defeats." By the fifth conversation, the attentive reader already knows that the "new" name, culled from Exodus, will not spare Moshe Hayyim from the "downfalls and defeats" ostensibly associated with the recycled names of Genesis. Despite Avraham Mani's determination, Moshe Mani is also "boxed in"—precisely as was his father/grandfather—by all the troublesome connotations evoked by his Genesis-inspired relatives "before and after him." At the same time it is also clear that Avraham Mani's complaint about the presence of Genesis in the names of his lineage is a gross exaggeration: himself the grandson of Eliyahu Mani (a non-Genesis eponym) and the son of the first Yosef Mani of the story (1776–1820), his descendants include his own son Yosef (1826–1848) plus a third Yosef, Moshe Hayyim's son (1887–1941), and then two Efrayims (1914–1944 and 1958 to the present)—but no Yitzhak or Ya'akov.

This careful selection from the line of biblical patriarchs is indeed intriguing. It is all the more curious when we realize that despite this selection, the book of Genesis clearly functions as the indispensable psychological subtext of the Mani saga. This choice is doubly challenging in view of the well-publicized perception of *Mr. Mani* as a

“counternovel,” which flows against the current or in the contrary direction (*bakivvun hanegdi*, a Hebrew collocation that inspired the title of a collection of essays about this novel).² The question that comes to mind is therefore the following: Does the choice of Genesis partake in this contrary direction? And if so, contrary to what does Yehoshua turn to the book of Genesis? And what does he find in it, beyond the transparent use of archetypal names and the reliance upon a network of well-known relationships (Abraham and Hagar, Judah and Tamar, Isaac and Ishmael)?

It is my contention that Yehoshua turns to the tales of the patriarchs because they offer him a psychological model that stands in opposition to the ubiquitous “positive” Oedipal model that has become, in our post-Freudian century, a symbol of the romantic-modern challenge to authority. The nature of this opposite model and its function in the author’s complex psychopolitical agenda is the subject of the following pages.³

THE POSITIVE OEDIPAL COMPLEX

The “positive Oedipus” is, in psychoanalytic parlance, that psychological dynamic in which the son is compelled to experience rivalry and competitiveness against his father. While in Freud’s original scheme this attitude was sexually motivated (the son’s wish to replace his father in his mother’s favors), in its popular circulation the mother has often dropped out of the equation, leaving us with Oedipal rivalry as the major modus of any intergenerational male relationship in which authority is challenged. I call this a romantic-modern trope because the Romantics made such a challenge the center of their political platform (recall the French Revolution), while the moderns internalized this stance with the help of Freud, making it the focal point of human psychology.

In its literary manifestation, this model is familiar as a dominant topos of modern Hebrew literature—the motif of the generation gap, about which a lot of ink has been spilled. It is therefore no coincidence that, of late, ideological criticisms have focused precisely on the subversion of this very motif. Thus the generation gap is turned “on its head” in

² Nitza Ben Dov, ed., *Bakivvun hanegdi: Essays on Mar Mani* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995).

³ I introduced the term *psychopolitics* in my recent study, *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nation in Israeli Women’s Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). I attribute its invention to Virginia Woolf, whose *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth, 1938) was the first attempt to analyze politics psychoanalytically; see esp. my *Lelo heder mishelahan* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2002), ch. 6.

major novels such as Yaakov Shabtai's *Past Continuous* and Amos Oz's *A Perfect Peace*.⁴ In these novels the extreme ideological aggression of the fathers is presented as a cause of psychological castration that results in sons (Goldman and Yoni, respectively) who refuse to take part in the Oedipal struggle, simply giving up on the battle beforehand.

Yehoshua already went beyond Shabtai and Oz in his first novel, *The Lover*,⁵ where he etched a parody of the Oedipal triangle: The "prodigal son" of this novel, Gabriel, returning from afar, does not need to struggle at all for his right to "the mother" (in this case, the mother substitute). As depicted by Yehoshua, Adam, the only father figure in the story, had already lost his will and his libidinal role in the family triangle, apparently as the result of the loss of his own son in an accident; he now seeks out a son/lover through whom he hopes to revive his alienated wife. The generation gap is completely emptied of meaning here because paternal aggression has disappeared, thereby eliminating any conflict. The two generations are portrayed as empty vessels, despite the artificial attempt to breathe life into the Oedipal dynamic. Moreover, failure of the attempt to revive the Oedipal tension sheds a grotesque light not only on the positive Oedipus model itself but also on the Zionist rhetoric that relies on that model as an archetypal metaphor. This metaphor, let us recall, was wholeheartedly embraced by Yehoshua in his essays on Zionism. Collected in 1980 under the title *Bizkhut hanormaliyyut* (literally, *On Behalf of Normalcy*, but published in English as *Between Right and Right*), these essays openly interpreted Zionism as the return of the sons/lovers to their mother/homeland in order "to build and be rebuilt."⁶

There is then a certain contradiction between Yehoshua's mainstream Zionist stance in his essays and the skepticism that mocks this very stance in his fiction of the same years. This tension reaches a climax in *Mr. Mani*. The veiled criticism of the Oedipal/Zionist narrative began

⁴ Ya'akov Shabtai, *Zikhron devarim* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1977); *Past Continuous*, trans. Dalya Bilu (New York: Schocken, 1985). Amos Oz, *Menuḥah nekhonah* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982); *A Perfect Peace*, trans. Hillel Halkin (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1985). For a detailed discussion, see Yael S. Feldman, "Back to Vienna: Zionism on the Literary Couch," in Ruth Kozodoy et al., eds., *Vision Confronts Reality: Historical Perspectives on the Contemporary Jewish Agenda* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), 310–35.

⁵ A. B. Yehoshua, *Hame'avev* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1977); *The Lover*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: Doubleday, 1978).

⁶ A. B. Yehoshua, "The Violated Balance between the Father and Mother" [Hebrew], in *Bizkhut hanormaliyyut* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1980), 55–62. For further analysis, see Feldman, "Back to Vienna," 320.

in *The Lover* and worked itself in various ways into the novels that followed. But only in *Mr. Mani* did the writer succeed in integrating (narratively, if not ideologically) the “pros” and “cons,” the “right direction” and the “contrary direction.” What allowed him to do this was his readiness (achieved through his work on the novel *Molkho*⁷) to remove the lid of repression, personal and collective, from a different psychological model, one closer to what the psychoanalytic literature terms “the negative Oedipus.”

THE NEGATIVE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

The dynamic that this term describes is the reverse of the one familiar to us: here the son, rather than “conquering” the mother, prefers to identify with her role in order to win the father’s love as a sexual object. Interestingly, Freud “discovered” the universal validity of this dynamic some twenty years after the discovery of the original Oedipus complex (which he had described already by 1900 in *The Interpretation of Dreams*⁸). Apparently, it was not easy for Freud to acknowledge the fact that the son is liable to identify not only with the active male position in the Oedipal triangle—a natural step in the construction of his masculinity—but also with the passive female position. In *The Ego and the Id* he admits for the first time that the classic Oedipus complex does not exhaust “the complete Oedipus,” since “at the same time [the boy] also behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate feminine attitude towards his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility toward his mother.”⁹

The fact that the second part (“the negative”) of the complete Oedipus complex has not been widely disseminated and is virtually unknown to the general public is not surprising. In this dual system Freud saw “proof” of the bisexual nature of human psychology—and of its potential for homosexuality as well. The yearning to take the place of the mother in the Oedipal triangle, because of an unconscious need to win the father’s love, results in feminization on the one hand and the development of homoerotic libidinal attraction on the other. In Freud’s opinion (and nowadays many would take issue with him), one of the conditions that allows for realization of homoerotic fantasies, as sexual

⁷ A. B. Yehoshua, *Molkho* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1987); *Five Seasons*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: Dutton, 1989).

⁸ Sigmund Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: Hogarth, 1953–1974), vols. 3 and 4.

⁹ Quoted from Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Freud on Women* (New York: Norton, 1990), 279.

development continues, is a weak (or absent) father figure; this weakness renders him incapable of activating the threat of castration, or, in Lacan's famous words, of "saying No in the name of the father" ("le nom/n du père").¹⁰ Such a weak father figure does not assist in the development of the "super-ego," which would compel the son to repress Oedipal fantasies and transform them into accepted, normative sexual behavior. Moreover, if we remember that the absence of the threat of (paternal) castration is the cornerstone, from the Freudian point of view, of feminine psychology, the connection between the dynamic of the negative Oedipus and the development of characteristics thought in our culture to be feminine or homosexual (passivity, tolerance, submissiveness, empathy, lack of competitiveness) becomes clear. It also becomes clear, however, that the common denominator of this psychological cluster can be readily identified as the main complex that characterizes the males of the Mani line, whose pathologies range from blurred ego boundaries and a weak self-image to incestual and suicidal urges, and from narcissistic projection and exaggerated self-definition to frigidity and latent homosexuality.¹¹

The frequency of the negative Oedipus in *Mr. Mani* begins with the fact that the main characters are fatherless—the fathers being physically or emotionally absent, as the discussion of "the psychology of orphans" in the first conversation demonstrates (32, 75–76; 24, 67–68)—and ends in the failure of these men to take an interest in the female sex (outside of their mothers or mother-substitutes). As a rule, the Manis exhibit patience and tolerance toward the insoluble conflicts that the writer lays at their feet. In this they resemble Molkho, the passive hero of the novel to which Yehoshua "escaped" during the process of writing *Mr. Mani*.¹²

THE NEGATIVE OEDIPUS IN YEHOSHUA'S LATER FICTION

Yehoshua has at times attributed to *Molkho* an "ideological message" that, according to him, was expressed by hesitation, by the elemental

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968 [1956]), 41.

¹¹ For a detailed analysis, see Yael S. Feldman, "Back to Genesis" [Hebrew], in *Bakivoun hanegdi*, 204–22. It is worth pointing out that post-Freudian criticism (feminist and others) often critiqued the essentialist polarization of the sexes flowing from the Oedipal drama, a polarization with which Freud too battled during his last days, especially in his essay "Femininity," in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 22:112–25.

¹² The creative genealogy of the two novels has been described often, most elaborately in Avraham Balaban, *Mar Molkho* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1992).

meeekness and patient voice of "the old Sephardim, elders of the Yishuv."¹³ According to this interpretation, Molkho's inability to act is an expression of "patience and tolerance," the proper way to overcome "the impatience that seeks immediate and superficial solutions to our conflicts." A completion of the unexpressed equation comes readily to mind: the impatient activity, the inheritance of the Oedipal Zionist (Ashkenazi) narrative, in which Yehoshua himself participated, yielded disappointing results; the time has arrived to search for another model "in order to produce a better result."

It is easy to be swept away by the ideological rhetoric of the author, particularly after his direct confrontation with what seemed to him the erroneous tactics that he had persisted in pursuing for two decades ("this impatience that seized me since the Six-Day War"). However, the implied narrator is more ironic and ambivalent than is the biographical author himself: *Mr. Mani*, as much as it places at center stage Sephardi ethnicity as the emblem of a psychopolitical counterdirection, also undermines the notion of that very identification.

Yehoshua achieves this, on the one hand, by constructing various parallels to the model among characters in the novel who are not Sephardi (Efrayim Shapiro and Hagar Shiloh), or who are not even Jewish (Egon Bruner and the British consul). On the other hand, he anchors the counterdirection in the biblical legacy itself, and through it in Jewish psychology in general. The result of this inclusiveness is itself double-faced. First, it deprives the model of its specific ethnic identity and in so doing compels a metonymic reading that grants it universal validity.¹⁴ Second, and this is my major point, it undermines the stability of the "classic" polarity of Zionist historiography: two thousand years of Diaspora at one extreme and a new Judaism in the spirit of the Bible at the other.

The novel's selection of biblical material compellingly illustrates not only the ideological ambivalence of the writer but also the paradox inherent in the Bible's status as a Zionist symbol. The biblical texts that function here do not advance the Zionist-Hebraic-biblical narrative. This

¹³ Interview with Shmuel Huppert, *Hadoar* (March 6 and 13, 1987).

¹⁴ Much ink has been spilled on the metonymic meaning of the representation of Sephardi identity in this novel, especially in the essays collected in *Bakivoun hanegdi*. In addition to seeing in it a statement "about the Jewish condition and the human condition in general" (Dan Miron, 41), "a paradigm" of human self-deception (Arnold Band, 182), or "another attempt to understand and depict the depths of human nature" (Balaban, *Mar Molkho*, 11), I see in it, at one and the same time, an attempt to interrogate received psychopolitical dichotomies.

is no Zionist return to the historical model of the books of Joshua and Judges (a typical positive Oedipus model), but rather movement toward the repressed—toward names and stories that the Zionist revolution rejected. In the stories of the patriarchs of his choice Yehoshua found—perhaps unknowingly—a fitting psychological correlative to the contrary psychopolitical direction of *Mr. Mani*.

THE REPRESSED BIBLICAL NARRATIVE—THE JACOB COMPLEX

As I have previously shown,¹⁵ the psychological dynamic of monotheistic narrative is, perversely, much closer to the *negative* Oedipus complex. Without reviewing here all the details that support my claim, I will mention only the fact that while the biblical matriarchs are characterized as strong presences, we do not find even one among the patriarchs who is threatening and arouses Oedipal conflict. Isaac, blind and dependent on the favors of Esau, is the most striking example of the weak father. However, Abraham who does Sarah's bidding and who carries out the Aqedah without complaint, or Jacob who is silent in the face of the deeds of Simeon and Levi, differ from him only in degree but not in kind. To a different but still significant degree, most of the sons avoid conflict, at least in the stories of Genesis: Isaac goes off to be sacrificed almost in silence, Jacob is as evasive as possible (until he wrestles with the "angel"), and even Joseph, the pampered son of old age, lives in harmony with all of his father figures—exactly like Yosef Mani the second, whose father retrospectively ponders the effect that his indulging alter parents had on his life (334; 353–54). In contrast to Freud's hypotheses in "Totem and Taboo,"¹⁶ there is not a hint of patricide (the "original sin") in the stories of the patriarchs, not even with regard to Moses (as Freud argued in "Moses and Monotheism").¹⁷ And if we want to take these writings at face value, without considering either ancient or recent midrashic interpretations, there is no killing of a son either. There is fratricide (Cain and Abel), the first and only instance in which family aggression is acted out. Yet it is expressed—let me recapitulate—by *brotherly*, rather than intergenerational, antagonism.

Thus, in contradistinction to Greek myth (and its Freudian interpretation), the dominant conflict in Hebrew myth is not between father and

¹⁵ Yael S. Feldman, "'And Rebecca Loved Jacob' but Freud Did Not," in Peter Rudnytsky and Ellen Handler Spitz, eds., *Freud and Forbidden Knowledge* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 7–25.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo," in *The Standard Edition*, 13:1–161.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Moses and Monotheism," in *The Standard Edition*, 23:7–127.

son but between brothers (in the wider sense, as in the relationship between Abraham and Lot). And it is important to note that the difference is not in the direction of aggression *within* the Oedipal triangle (from son to father, as Freud emphasized, or from father to son, as claim some of his followers, in what is called “the Laius complex”—Laius being Oedipus’s biological father who, following an oracle’s prophecy, tried to get rid of him), but rather in channeling aggression *outside* of the Oedipal triangle, into fraternal conflict.¹⁸

I name this biblical psychological complex after Jacob, whose rivalry with his twin brother Esau got most of the press. Yet I see the significance of this model as reaching far beyond the biblical story. To my mind, it has important implications for Jewish psychology as it has become known to us throughout history. The stories of Genesis may have created a behavioral model that is not necessarily based on “masculine” competitive aggression, thereby liberating the family system from the essentialist perspective on sexual roles assumed by the Oedipal triangle. One may posit a connection between the fact that it is difficult to find support in Genesis (and all the more so in Judges) for the cultural convention that identifies the dichotomy of masculine/feminine with the traits of activity/passivity (and similar binary oppositions), and the so-called “aggressive” (“phallic,” if you will) Jewish mother. And in turn, there may be a connection between the passivity, tolerance, and lack of aggression of the patriarchs (“the Jacob complex,” in my formulation) and the submissiveness, resignation, and avoidance of conflict historically enacted by the Jewish male.

As is well known, it was this “Jacob complex” that aroused the wrath of the Zionist revolution. Indeed, Zionist ideology, in its protest against the patterns of passive behavior of two thousand years of Diaspora, may have adopted, with varying degrees of consciousness, the popular Oedipal model, the positive one, while mandating the repression of the model of the negative Oedipus, that of Genesis and the Diaspora.¹⁹ As noted above, Yehoshua too had approved of this repression. *Mr. Mani’s* movement in the contrary direction is therefore movement toward the repressed, a new attempt to reintegrate the psychopolitical dynamic that

¹⁸ For a detailed comparison, see Yael S. Feldman, “Isaac or Oedipus? Jewish Tradition and the Israeli *Aqedah*,” in J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Biblical Studies, Cultural Studies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 159–89. Hebrew version in *Alpayim* 22 (2001): 53–77.

¹⁹ In so doing, it gave up some valuable aspects of the model, but this is a matter for another discussion. See Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

was shunned by the prevailing ideology, to which, at one time, Yehoshua was party also.

FROM THE JACOB COMPLEX TO THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

But this reintegration comes coupled with its opposite. As every stance, value, and conceptual definition in this novel leads eventually to its reversal, so too the contrary model evolves into its opposite. Apparently, *Mr. Mani* is a story of disappointment with the very model that it develops—a typical instance of a self-consuming postmodern text.

The “contrary” psychological dynamic of the Mani tribe does not secure them from the danger of self-destruction, the source of which—according to the logic of the narrative—is the difficulty involved in any self-definition, be it individual or collective. The question is only how the writer succeeds in arranging the elements of the plot so that the “harmonious” dynamic (called such for lack of a better term) of the negative Oedipus (the biblical-Sephardi-Diasporic model of “the Jacob complex”) will also include the “seeds of its destruction” (*zera mere'im, banim mashhitim*, 328; 348)—the aggressive energy of the positive (Zionist) Oedipus. In other words: What turns the family story of Genesis, the obvious subtext of *Mr. Mani*, into a Jewish variation of the myth of the house of Labdacus (Oedipus’s grandfather), in which an ancient decree hovers over the head for generations, dictating a bloody chain of patricides and filicides (from Laius and Oedipus to Creon and Haemon-Antigone)?

The answer to this question lies in the artistic freedom that the author allowed himself in refashioning the biblical narrative. We can, for example, begin with names. As observed at the opening of this essay, of the ten fathers of the house of Mani, whose genealogy appears at the end of the book, half are known by the names of the younger sons, Joseph and Ephraim, who in Genesis represent (each in his own generation) the son who is especially beloved and pampered by the father (“Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me,” Jeremiah 31:20). If we add to this the absence of the names Isaac and Jacob, who tend to represent—at least in potential, if not in reality—the family conflicts of Genesis (intergenerational and fraternal, respectively), it can be argued that Yehoshua “corrected,” as it were, the source to bring it closer to the negative Oedipus complex. There is a similar effect in the transfer of the fault of infertility from the matriarchs of Genesis to the patriarchs of *Mr. Mani*. The Manis’ failure to propagate further weakens their libidinal position and aggravates their existential fear and weak self-image. The most far-ranging reconstruction, however, pertains to the figure of Avraham, father of the tribe.

In the story of Avraham (who commits the act of Judah with his daughter-in law Tamar [!]) the Mani narrative encapsulates two cardinal sins, murder and incest. Together, they bring Avraham closer not only to Freud's positive Oedipus, but also to Greek mythology. Indeed, the differences between the Hebrew and the Greek material are clear: breaking the Greek taboo (incest with the mother) is much more serious than is its biblical parallel (incest with the young bride). It is not by coincidence that the first activates a chain of tragedies resulting in destruction of the family, whereas the second renders Judah patriarch of a line leading to David.²⁰ Yet Yehoshua, while writing a story technically faithful to the biblical plot, attributes to it a typically Oedipal meaning and in so doing distances it to the greatest extent possible from its sources. In contrast to the Bible, which places the story of Judah and Tamar, as well as the story of Lot's daughters (Genesis 38 and 19, respectively) in the context of female struggle for survival (and then returns to its primary concerns), Sophocles makes the results of Oedipus's incest a test case for the definition of identity, for the difficulty of the one in containing the many. Oedipus bends under the burden of his multiple identities. He is, according to Tiresias, both father and brother of his sons; both son and husband of his mother; and also the son, sexual rival, and murderer of his father.

We find abundant echoes of this dilemma in *Mr. Mani*: in the allusion to "Minos, son-grandson of Zeus" in the second conversation; in the games of identities among the novel's characters (Tamar is the look-alike of her aunt, who in her turn had "indulged" the young Yosef Mani as a substitute for her husband; the Shapiro siblings are mistakenly thought to be a married couple; Moshe, the son/grandson of Avraham, bequeaths his double-role to his descendants); and in the problem of ego boundaries that are either bursting open or too confining. In the construction of the Mani incest, the two perspectives are therefore mixed: on the one hand, a biblical battle for "feminine" survival ("the world would have its Manis after all," 337; 357), and on the other, inspired by Sophocles' Thebean Trilogy, disorder in identity formation with which future generations are unable to cope.

Sophocles' version does not end merely with incest, however. In order to create a Hebrew version of the tragedy of the House of Labdacus, patricide is required as well. Yet this option stands in direct

²⁰ The genealogical ending of the book of Ruth ("and these are the generations of Peretz") presents Peretz, one of the twin sons of Tamar and Judah, as the progenitor of David's line. Even if we accept the claims of scholars who see this ending as a late addition, it is difficult to overlook the equanimity with which the biblical narrator accepts Judah and Tamar's "incest."

contrast to the psychology of the biblical model developed here. So all that is left is to compromise by enacting the reverse aggression, the Aqedah, which the Bible introduces only in order to reject and repress.

Enactment of the Aqedah thus turns on its head the contrary psychopolitical model developed throughout the plot. It is not for nothing that Yehoshua hesitated so in giving this enactment artistic expression, that readers and critics argued over Avraham Mani's role in the death of his son, and that Yehoshua had "to explain" his intention in the last conversation in an essay entitled "Undoing the Aqedah by Acting It Out."²¹ All this arises from a sense of discomfort caused by the meshing of two options, two directions, two models. In the end, the contrary direction of this novel springs from exactly the same trauma of aggression (the aqedah) that Yehoshua and his generation have critiqued in Zionist history. When all is said and done, the biblical (and the Mani) attempt to evade the conflict (both intergenerational and fraternal) that has compulsively dictated large segments of Western history and culture²² has unfortunately failed.

What is left, then?

BIBLICAL POETICS AS THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

What remains is the promise of the reading method here. Again, it is in the contrary direction, and again, it is inspired by Genesis.

It has been noted that repetition is one of the cornerstones of the novel, and this is true at all levels of the narrative. When the elements repeated are trivial, the repetition contributes to the playful-comic effect of the novel. But the weight of the significance of this principle is located in compulsive repetition of a psychological dynamic, of pathological deviations that become a familiar family trait. Freud, we may recall, attributed a negative effect to any repetition compulsion, even where the repetition does not rise to the level of extreme pathology. He interpreted

²¹ A. B. Yehoshua, "Undoing the Aqedah by Acting It Out," in *Bakivvun hanegdi*, 395–98.

²² Freud's indecision on the subject of aggression is famous, especially his pessimistic transition from the single instinct model (the libido) of his early work to the double instinct model (eros and thanatos) of the 1920s ("Beyond the Pleasure Principle"). No less pessimistic is the work of René Girard, the cornerstone of whose books is fraternal violence (the Cain complex) and the social need for a scapegoat. See his *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977 [1972]); and *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986 [1982]).

the human need to return and to reexperience the same events as an expression of opposition to change, to progress, and to life, in short, the urge toward thanatos.²³ In the therapeutic situation as well, repetition is considered negative. In contrast to common-sense wisdom, Freud argues that repetition serves as a defense *against memory*, without which there is no catharsis, no therapeutic process. The therapist's function is therefore to put an end to the closed circle in which patients find themselves and to help them recover those painful traumas whose memory they flee.²⁴

A similar mood seems to prevail in the reading of *Mr. Mani*. Its constant reiteration of certain motifs may be compared to a patient's compulsive repetition of his defenses, while refusing to approach his deep trauma. Yet contrary to Freud's expectations, there is no liberation or relief when—in the final pages of the novel—the trauma out of which the entire plot flows is exposed. Rather, the revelations of the last chapter may engender a sense of disorientation and entrapment.

However, if we persevere and reread the novel in the contrary direction, from end to beginning, as instructed by its author, we may discover another aspect of the repetition principle, one inspired by biblical poetics rather than by Freudian theory. In contrast to the closed circular repetition that underlies ancient myth, scholars have defined biblical repetition as "theme and variations." Moreover, one can show that certain variations in the repeated stories are not incidental but rather "progressive."²⁵ Each version advances the claim a bit until we end at a point totally different from that at which we began. The stories of fraternal competition in Genesis are a good example of this spiral, progressive movement. From the harshest enactment of conflict, the murder of Abel, antagonism between siblings recurs and reappears in refined and altered forms, and is resolved by geographic separation or other compromises until the grandiose finale of reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers.

The chronological plot of *Mr. Mani* moves, as well, from severe, manifest deviations in the fifth and the fourth conversations to more moderate or elusive representations of those same deviations in the earlier conversations. Consequently, the characters of the first conversation are perhaps less compelling and interesting than were their forebears, but they carry with them a promise, if only hinted at, of escaping from the compulsive repetition of the sins of the past.

²³ Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition*, 18:7–64.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through," in *The Standard Edition*, 12:145–56.

²⁵ For details, see Feldman, "And Rebecca Loved Jacob."

And thus, what Yehoshua did not achieve through biblical *psychology* (compelled as he is to “subvert” his own subversion by reverting to the Aqedah, the major biblical/Israeli model of filicidal aggression), he accomplished through biblical *poetics*. Whereas the (biblical) negative Oedipal model lost its singularity by giving in to the pressures of the positive Oedipal (Greek/Freudian) aggression that the author brought to bear, the Genesis poetics of spiral repetition are firmly entrenched here. In the final analysis, the contrary biblical direction surfaces as the correct direction, since it transforms compulsive, circular repetition into liberating, spiral “progressive” repetition. In the end, Yehoshua leads the reader toward the repressed (the “sin”/tragedy submerged in the “ancient history” of the Manis/Hebrews as revealed in the last conversation), in order to reach beyond it. His final destination is the provinces of “sane reality,” the almost cathartic normalcy of the present (the first conversation), where his characters’ inherited mania loses its mythical, larger-than-life proportions and emerges as a manageable (and forgivable) human frailty.²⁶

²⁶ This essay is a segment of one chapter in my work in progress, *Shrinking Zionism*.



◆

AMICHAÏ'S OPEN CLOSED OPEN¹ AND NOW AND IN
OTHER DAYS²: A POETIC DIALOGUE

Nili Rachel Scharf Gold

2

בְּנֵי אָדָם שֶׁמְחַכִּים לְמִישֶׁהוּ מִתְחִילִים לְהִיּוֹת
דּוֹמִים לְאֵלֶּה שֶׁלֹּא מְחַכִּים עוֹד, הַשְּׁקֵט
מְכַסֶּה אֶת כָּלֶם. הַיְאוּשׁ הוּא שִׁיר עָרֶשׁ.
וּבְלִילָה כְּשֶׁהֵם יֹשְׁנִים, אֱלֹהִים מְפָר
אֶת הַחֶרֶם שֶׁל רַבִּי גֵרְשׁוֹם וּפּוֹתֵחַ
אֶת נַפְשׁוֹתֵיהֶם לְקַרֵּא אֶת הַכְּתוּב עֲלֵיהֶן
כְּמוֹ מַכְתָּב. וּבְבִקְרֵי יַחְזִיר אֶת הַמַּכְתָּב
וַיְדַבֵּק אֶת הַמַּעֲטָפָה
וְהֵם לֹא יָדְעוּ שְׂאֵלֵהֶם קָרָא אֶת הַכֹּל
כִּי סָגַר אֶת הַמַּעֲטָפָה בְּאֲמֵנוֹת רַבָּה
כְּמוֹ צְנוּר שֶׁל מַכְתָּבִים.

Literary translation:

2

People waiting for someone begin to resemble
those who are not waiting anymore. Silence
covers them all. Despair is a lullaby.
And while they are sleeping at night, God violates
the ban of Rabbi Gershom and opens

¹ Yehuda Amichai, *Patuah sagur patuah (Open Closed Open)* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998).

² Yehuda Amichai, *Akhshav uvayamim ha'aherim (Now and in Other Days)* (Tel Aviv: Likrat, 1955). The book appeared in its entirety in the collection Yehuda Amichai, *Shirim 1948–1962 (Poems 1948–1962)* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1963). Quotations in this essay are from the 1977 edition.

their souls to read what is written there,
 like a letter. In the morning God tucks the letter back in
 and licks the envelope shut.
 They will never know He has read every word because
 He seals the envelope with an artist's hand,
 like the military censor.

Literal translation:

2

People who are waiting for someone begin to
 resemble those who aren't waiting anymore, silence
 covers them all. Despair is a lullaby.
 And at night when they are sleeping, God violates
 the ban of Rabbi Gershom and opens
 their souls to read what is written on them
 like a letter. And in the morning He returns the letter
 and seals the envelope
 and they will not know that God has read it all
 for He closed the envelope with great artistry
 like a censor of letters.³

"People who are waiting for someone begin to / resemble those who aren't waiting anymore," Amichai's familiar voice is speaking in pseudo-axioms again, this time from the pages of his last volume of poetry published in his lifetime, *Open Closed Open*. This is the second of six numbered poems, which together form a cycle titled "A Nightly Promenade in Emeq Refa'im." The statement quoted attempts to equate, perhaps, those who hope with those who do not hope. This equation sounds ominous when "Emeq Refa'im" in the cycle's title is read not only as a locus marker—the name of a Jerusalem street—but also as a sign pointing to the literal meaning and ancient echoes of this name.⁴

³ Amichai, *Patuah sagur patuah*, 77. The literary translation is from Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open*, trans. Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 77. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Wandering in Emeq Refa'im Street is the subject of an earlier cycle of Amichai's poems, titled "Four Resurrections in Emeq Refa'im Street." The focus of that cycle is different, but the preoccupation with the meaning of the street's name is prevalent. See Yehuda Amichai, *Gam ha'egrof hayah pa'am yad petuhah ve'etsba'ot* (*The Fist Used to Also Be an Open Hand and Fingers*) (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1989), 51–58.

The words *emeq refa'im* evoke the underworld, the valley (*emeq*) of ghosts, or spirits of the dead (*refa'im*). The title's nocturnal stroll, then, is not a mere walk (perhaps from the speaker's, or Amichai's, actual dwelling, Mishqenot Sha'ananim) to the neighboring German Colony, but rather a visit in *she'ol*, the land of the dead.

This reading of the entire cycle of poems draws upon its frame—title and closure—as well as upon its plot. In the second poem and in others in the cycle, phantoms inhabit every site in the journey through the streets of the neighborhood. A once-upon-a-time home of a once-upon-a-time friend, scraps of paper turned tombstones, reverberations of music and dance from bygone parties all haunt the speaker as he wanders through the past. The sixth and last poem of "A Nightly Promenade in Emeq Refa'im" closes with "a train passing like a spirit who is rising from the dead." *Olah me'ov* (rising from the dead) literally means "ascends by necromancy." It is a clear allusion to the only biblical séance of necromancy, where the spirit of Samuel was brought up from the dead for King Saul the night before his last battle (1 Samuel 28). Emeq Refa'im, in this cycle of poems, is the underworld and a main street's name in Jerusalem, simultaneously.

Although the second poem is an integral part of the cycle, it seems to deviate from the other five poems in terms of its relationship to the specific neighborhood and the almost macabre hold it has on the speaker/visitor. The impersonal assertion which opens it determines that human beings who wait resemble those who do not wait. The statement carries in its axiomatic formulation the air of universalistic truisms, independent of time and place. Humanity is divided in two: people who wait and those who do not wait. This division implies that the more similar these groups become, the harder it is to differentiate between them.

Although the statement sounds authoritative, its content is ambiguous if not illogical. How are the opposites (waiting/not waiting) similar? At what point does hope resemble despair? Is it when those who wait, or hope, begin to realize that the object of their anticipation will never materialize? Or is it when they understand that even if their desire is granted, it is only for a fleeting moment? Do the "people who are waiting for someone" look like "those who aren't waiting anymore" because they are all asleep during the speaker's nightly stroll? Are they similar because dreams of people of all categories share the same hopes and fears? Are the people "who don't wait" the bereaved living-dead who stopped waiting or feeling because their loved ones had died or were killed in the war? Are the "nonwaiting" dead themselves? If so, "not waiting anymore" may be a euphemism for eternal slumber, and the living, at night, resemble the dead. "Sleep is one sixtieth of death," states the Talmud (Berakhot

57). The poem's speaker seems to be a modern Ecclesiasties who knows the eroding power of time, the falsehood of boundaries between sleep and death, truth and lie, joy and sorrow, hope and despair.

The poem provides its own pseudo-rational explanation to its opening statement: "Silence covers them all. Despair is a lullaby." In other words, people (those who wait and those who do not) are similar because, like children at bedtime, they are covered and lulled. Alas, not loving parents stand at their bedside, but silence (which covers them all) and despair (which sings them a lullaby). The cynical equation makes some sense: those who wait and those who do not look alike because, at night, they are under a spell. The omnipotent equalizers—silence and despair—have dominion over them all.

Amichai's fascination with equalizers and quasi-axioms is evident throughout his poetry. Those may be real or imaginary, and they often form deceptive similarities and rules.⁵ The poem at hand is unique in that it contains equalizing forces as well as a quasi-axiomatic formulation whose experiential and formal roots go back to a specific poem written five decades earlier.⁶ It is my contention that the second poem in "A Nightly Promenade in Emeq Refa'im," published in 1998, carries a multilayered intratextual⁷ relationship with the poem "Rain on a

⁵ One example of Amichai's fascination with pseudo-equations is as follows: "And there is a tree that holds onto the earth with its roots / as if with despairing fingers, / so the earth won't sink down, / and beside it a tree pulled down by the same earth, / and both are one height, you can't tell the difference." See "Orchard," in *Me'adam attah ve'el adam tashuv* (From Man Thou Art and unto Man Thou Shalt Return, 1985) in Yehudah Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehudah Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 162. Quasi-mathematical equations can also be found frequently in Amichai's poetry. An example can be noted in "Derekh shetei nequdot over raq kav yashar ehad," in Amichai, *Shirim: 1948–1962*, 90.

⁶ About the thematic closeness between Amichai's early poetry and the experience of the War of Independence, see Dan Miron, *Mul ha'ah hashoteq* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1992), 273–78.

⁷ By "intratext" I mean another text from the same author's corpus to which the text at hand relates. In other words, any text in Amichai's corpus may serve as intratext in the reading of another text he wrote. This is different from "intertext," used later in this paper. By "intertext" I mean, following Riffaterre: "A perception of a tradition in the text, of an allusion to another author." See Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978), 85. Also: "A text remembered by the reader [which] warns him in advance of what he will find in the text that he is deciphering. When his expectations are confirmed,

Battlefield," the monumental poem from Amichai's poetic debut of 1955, *Now and in Other Days*. Only by reading the poems side by side will the later poem reveal its matrix. The fine line between sleep and death and the portrayal of the vulnerable adult as a child are at play in both texts. Universal powers serve as false equalizers in both. Yet, the most significant common trait of the poems is the restrained expression of deep sorrow through a specific structural scheme: syntax, prepositions, and adverbs. This well-wrought construction, although barely visible to the naked eye, may be unveiled through a close reading. A comparative analysis of the texts contributes not only to a better understanding of both poems but also to a deeper appreciation of Amichai's art of understatement.

גֶּשֶׁם בְּשֵׂדֵה קָרָב

Geshem bisdei qerav

גֶּשֶׁם יוֹרֵד עַל פְּנֵי רֵעִי;
עַל פְּנֵי רֵעֵי הַחַיִּים, אֲשֶׁר
מְכַסִּים רָאשֵׁיהֶם בְּשִׂמְכָה—
וְעַל פְּנֵי רֵעֵי הַמֵּתִים, אֲשֶׁר
אֵינָם מְכַסִּים עוֹד.

*Geshem yored al penei re'ay;
al penei re'ay haḥayyim, asher
mekhassim rashehem basemikhah—
ve'al penei re'ay hametim, asher
einam mekhassim od.*

Literary translation

Literal translation

Rain on a Battlefield

Rain on a Battlefield

It rains on my friends' faces,
on my live friends' faces,
those who cover their heads
with a blanket.

Rain falls on my comrades' faces;
on faces of my live comrades, who
cover their heads with the blanket—

And it rains on my dead
friends' faces,
those who are covered by nothing.

and on faces of my dead comrades,
who

are not covering anymore.⁸

The three opening lines of the second poem in the cycle "A Nightly Promenade in Emeq Refa'im" undoubtedly lend themselves to the structure of "Rain on a Battlefield." For the falling rain, as well as for the soldier who is facing his comrades, the dead and the living are equal; that

he feels . . . harmony." See Michael Riffaterre, *Text Production*, trans. Terese Lyons (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 251.

⁸ Amichai, *Shirim 1948–1962*, 21. The literary translation is from Yehudah Amichai, *Poems*, trans. Assia Guttman (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 53. The poem is dedicated by Amichai "to the memory of Dicky" (*lezeikher Dicky*).

is, rain keeps falling on them all and the feeling of friendship does not cease with death. Rain and friendship are, therefore, the equalizing forces in the early poem. Silence and despair, the equalizers in the late poem, also do not discriminate between waiting and nonwaiting people. The overarching forces, or equalizers—rain and friendship in the one poem, and silence and despair in the other—have a similar role in both poems. They are placed either as an introduction to or as a summary of the symmetrical formulations that define human categories. (“It rains on my friends’ faces” *precedes* the division between the dead and the living, while “Silence / covers them all. Despair is a lullaby” *follows* the division between people who are waiting and those who are not waiting.)

The body of each of the statements employs the relative pronoun “who” (*asher* or *she-*) as a structural device—a creator of symmetry. “Who” is also a precursor of a quintessential characteristic of a group, as well as a precursor of the absence of that characteristic. Thus, with the power of the pronoun, the world is divided into categories: people *who* wait for someone / *who* do not wait, in the 1998 poem; or comrades *who* cover their heads / *who* do not cover, in the earlier counterpart. The “wanting category” (those who *do not* cover, or those who *do not* wait) is depicted in each of the poems in a “wanting” phrase. The living, therefore, “cover their heads with a blanket” while the dead “do not cover anymore”; the object of “not covering” is missing. Likewise, the “people who are waiting for someone” are described in full, while the others “aren’t waiting anymore.” The object of “not waiting” is, again, missing. The deficient phrases are syntactically correct and logically sound, yet through their deficient structure they subtly underscore the awareness of the deeper-than-formal asymmetry—that of loss and longing.

The schematic structure that I outlined here may be reduced to the following formula, which is true for both texts:

When the equalizers (E) are present:

subject/noun (Xa) + relative pronoun (R) + verb (Y) + object/noun (Xb)
 = subject/noun (Xa) + relative pronoun (R) + negation (N) + verb (Y)
 + adverb (A); i.e., if: “E,” then: $Xa+R+Y+Xb = Xa+R+N+Y+A$

Following is a schematic presentation that highlights the closeness between the original formula from “Rain on a Battlefield” (I) and its 1998 development (II).

I: if “E” then:

$Xa + R$ (*asher*) + Y (*mekhassim*) + Xb
 = $Xa + R$ (*asher*) + N (*einam*) + Y (*mekhassim*) + A (*od*)

II: if "E" then:

$Xa + R (she) + Y (meḥakkim) + Xb = Xa + R (she) + N (lo) + Y (meḥakkim) + A(od)^9$

In each of the poems, the second, deficient, part of the quasi-schematic formulation depicts an essential human activity that became obsolete ("do not cover anymore" and "aren't waiting anymore"). The Hebrew expression *kevar lo* would often be employed in this context because it is the common literary, as well as spoken, way to convey the concept of "anymore" (for example: *hu kevar lo gar po* [he does not live here anymore])¹⁰. This is not the case in this pair of poems. Instead of the expected *kevar lo*, a much rarer form is used: negation + verb + *od*. The deference to the rare form is especially peculiar in the semicolloquial context of the later poem. A close reading, however, reveals that the partiality to *od* fits several purposes. Unlike the word *kevar*, the monosyllabic adverb *od* when it carries the meaning of "anymore" is always placed at the end, not at the middle, of a phrase. It is, therefore, more appropriate when the purpose is to convey irreversibility or to lament a being who was and will never return. As opposed to *kevar*'s three consonant sounds, the single consonant sound in *od* emphasizes in its economy the nature of the decree. The curt pronunciation of that single consonant sound *d* aids in relating the idea of finality—unlike *r* (or *l, m, n* for that matter), the *d* does not continue reverberating.

Od plays the same role in both poems and is placed in a similar position in both: it seals the irreversible division to categories as it closes the second leg of the quasi-equation. However, in the earlier war poem, *od* is the final word, while in the later poem it closes the phrase but not the poetic line nor the poem. The later poem lacks, intentionally I believe, the ominous effect of tragic closure magnified by the position of *od* in the early "Rain on a Battlefield."

By following the differences in the manipulations of *od*, a greater phenomenon is unveiled, namely, the transformation in Amichai's poetics. *Od* is but one manifestation of one turn in Amichai's writing of the last two decades—the move from declarative language toward understated,

⁹ In the contemporary Israeli Hebrew of speakers of European origin, the pronunciation of the letters *het* (represented in the transliteration as *ḥ*) and *khaf* (represented as *kh*) is identical. Thus, the words *mekḥassim* (cover) in the earlier poem and *meḥakkim* (wait) in the later poem are very similar in sound.

¹⁰ *Kevar* may also appear at the end of a phrase (*hu lo gar po kevar*). However, this form is less common, and its existence does not contradict the other qualities of *od* in this context.

nuanced expression. Additional testimonies to the shift in Amichai's poetic stand are revealed through comparing other aspects of the texts.

The underlying schematic structure common to both texts is readily visible only in the earlier poem. The existence and position of two equalizing forces, the division to categories by means of the pronoun "who," the deficient phrase depicting the "wanting" category, and the use of *od* as closure are all camouflaged in the later poem, while in the earlier poem they are blatantly clear. This may be due, in part, to the theme (the highly structured war poem reflects the order and discipline of a soldier's world). But mostly, the masking of the organizing principles in the later poem is a reflection of how Amichai's writing evolved. The shift in poetics is also responsible, at least to some extent, for the consistent low-key and refined choices in tone, vocabulary, syntax, and line divisions in the later poem.¹¹

The tragic implications of the formulation created by Amichai in the earlier poem are defused in the opening segment of the later poem, which I see as a later variation of the same formulation. This three-line segment of the later poem overlaps the earlier poem in its entirety, but it lacks the dramatic impact of the early text. Not fallen soldiers but waiting people are in the foreground in the later poem. In addition, the power of the later equalizers is diminished. The rain that falls on all the comrades, living and dead, ignores the extreme polarity between them. Silence, the nocturnal equalizer, covers people in the midst of metamorphosis, when the contrast has already begun to fade. Furthermore, the existence of eight continuing lines beyond the quasi-axiom, and the seemingly peaceful content of these lines, aid in the repression of the trauma. In other words, the notion of death that dominates the battlefield in the rain is only implied in the promenade in Jerusalem's German Colony.

The vocabulary is another testimony to the shift in poetics: while the poem from *Now and in Other Days* refers to its central figures as "comrades," not "friends" (the rare synonym *re'ay*, not *haveray*), the poem from *Open Closed Open* employs the common expression for "people," *benei adam*. True, *re'ay* is a linguistic staple of the period (the War of Independence, 1948),¹² yet it is also a marker of the higher diction typi-

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of the shift in Amichai's later poetics, see Nili Scharf Gold, *Lo kaberosh (Not Like a Cypress: The Transformation of Images and Structures in the Poetry of Yehuda Amichai)* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1994), 69–71, 117–75. The issue of camouflage is further discussed in Nili Scharf Gold, "And the Vows Are Not Vows" [Hebrew], *Siman Qeri'ah* 22 (July 1991): 361–78; and in idem, "A Burning Bush or a Fire of Thorns," *Prooftexts* 14 (1) (1994): 49–69.

¹² The centrality of the concept *re'ut* (camaraderie, friendship) in that period is reflected in its frequent appearance, in all its inflections, in *Pirhei esh (Flowers of Fire)*,

cal of Amichai's early collections. The negation form and the relative pronoun follow the same path of lowering the language. The literary pronoun *asher* turns into the spoken *she*, while the inflection of the high present-tense negative *ein* (*einam*) is replaced by the colloquial use of *lo*.

It is against the background of these significant stylistic differences that the insistence on the use of the word *od* gains meaning. As a matter of fact, *od* is the only word that appears in exactly the same form and acts in a similar manner in both texts. Its ungrammatical nature in the context of the later poem demands the readers' attention and directs them towards the five-decades-old intratext, "Rain on a Battlefield."

Apart from the similarity in structure and the reemergence of *od*, there is a verb root common to both texts: *k-s-h* (*kaf-samekh-hei*; "to cover"). While its form varies in each of the poems, the very existence of this root attests to the tone of compassion underlying the texts. The early poem's living soldiers "cover (*mekhassim*) their heads with the blanket"; the dead "do not cover anymore." The covering blanket protects the living from rain but, in the same battlefield, may also cover the dead. Yet, the most common association that a covering blanket may evoke is a bed at nighttime. In the later poem, silence covers (*mekhasseh*) the people of slumbering Jerusalem. The soldiers in 1948, like the waiting people in 1998, resemble vulnerable children who need to be covered before sleeping.

The blanket of yesteryear is transformed in the later poem into another, even more child-oriented marker of sleep—a lullaby. The irony lies in the poem's use of quintessential markers of sleep—the covering blanket and the lullaby—to cross the thin line between sleep and eternal rest. Like the blanket, the lullaby is a carrier of both life and death. It usually recalls baby and cradle, peace and calmness, but here it merely qualifies despair. In the metaphor "despair is a lullaby," despair is the subject, and the lullaby only the vehicle. Although not explicitly mentioned, mourning and bereavement accompany this simply constructed but densely packed metaphor. But this is not all. The form of the verb root *k-s-h* (*kaf-samekh-hei*; "to cover") appears in the later poem in the singular: *sheqet mekhasseh* (silence covers). In "Rain on a Battlefield" the same verb comes only in the masculine-plural form: *mekhassim*. Yet, this early word,

which became the quintessential poetry collection of the War of Independence. See Hayyim Guri, *Pirḥei esh* (Merhavia: Sifriyat Hapo'alim, 1949). *Re'ut* (camaraderie) is a revered entity also in popular songs of that period, such as "Ha-Re'ut" by Hayyim Guri and "Dudu" by Hayyim Hefer. The literary periodical of that generation was called *Yalqut hare'im* (*The Comrades' Collection*) (Israel: Bialik Institute, 1943–1946).

mekhassim, echoes in the late poem, in the phonetically similar verb “to wait” (*mehakkim*). The sounds *mekhassim/mehakkim* (cover/wait) reverberate in the readers’ minds and remind them of the hold that the past has on the present.

It is through these hidden linguistic fragments and the disguised scheme that Amichai signals to the reader familiar with his early verse that his 1998 “nightly promenade” in the German Colony traverses a war zone, perhaps that of the War of Independence. It is as though the spirit of the poem “Rain on a Battlefield” rose from the dead to join the ghosts (*refa'im*) who haunt him in Emeq Refa'im Street.

And yet, as mentioned before, the second poem of the cycle “A Nightly Promenade in Emeq Refa'im” is the only poem of the six that completely lacks a reference to the neighborhood or to the man who roams its streets at night. Instead, a very irreverent and intrusive God enters the scene. When everything is covered by silence and despair, this God invades the souls of those who are waiting for someone as well as the souls of those who are no longer waiting.

God’s appearance serves as a thematic turning point that affirms the syntactical division, the poem’s only device of formal structure. The first part of the poem is one long sentence, followed by a very short one. This is the three-line segment that parallels “Rain on a Battlefield.” The second part starts in the fourth line and is comprised of two four-line sentences, each of which begins with the conjunctive *vav* (and), as if to undo the syntactical and thematic separation: “And at night, when they are sleeping, God violates”; “And in the morning He returns the letter.” The third sentence—“Despair is a lullaby”—connects the two longer units. “Despair” recalls the opening’s people “who aren’t waiting anymore,” while “lullaby” is a precursor to the night scene that follows.

The poetic cycle’s speaker is replaced by God, who is not an observer, but rather an actor. His initial action is a violation of a well-ingrained prohibition. The ban (*herem*) to which the fifth line refers forbids the unauthorized reading of private letters. It is ascribed to Rabbi Gershom, the great eleventh-century talmudic scholar and molder of German Jewry.¹³ Amichai’s poetry often resorts to ancient writings—it wrestles with liturgical texts, medieval poets, biblical personalities, words, and ideas. However, the reference to a medieval rabbinic figure and to his legal reform is a novelty, or at least a great rarity. It may be that German roots, common to the poet and the rabbi, are at play. Perhaps it is a re-emergence of the German-born child who was

¹³ See the entry “Gershom ben Yehudah Me’or Hagolah” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

raised to follow rules but wishes to break them.¹⁴ Here it is not a child, or even an adult, but God Himself who disobeys. He does so in the capacity of a substitute to the poem's speaker/visitor. God's defiance might be a fulfillment of wishes for the-child-that-was, but it might also be a tempered reappearance of Amichai's personified and criticized God of earlier collections.

"God ... / opens / their souls to read what is written on them / like a letter." The word *nafshotehem* (their souls), the true object of God's reading, appears in the text once. The unauthorized reading of letters, then, is a simile, yet it occupies the remainder of this text, thus reducing or disguising the severity of God's deed. The image of the soul as a letter stems from ancient beliefs. According to the Zohar, the soul writes a nightly report of its daily deeds. Sleeping on the Sabbath, therefore, is a true pleasure (*ta'anug*) because no writing is required or even allowed.¹⁵ The poem's introduction to the divine reading of souls as a violation of a ban ignores the folk tradition and highlights the sense of forced penetration. God breaks into the most private, intimate domain and reads people's inner lives. At night He opens up souls like letters. In the morning He returns and restores those letters.

The departure of souls during sleep, only to be returned by God in the morning, recalls a text that Amichai probably memorized in childhood. Now, decades later, he suggests his own interpretation of it. In this poetic commentary, unlike in many of his well-known readings of liturgy, the verbal tracks of this intertext are carefully covered. The text is a short morning prayer, the first prayer many Jewish children learn to recite: "*Modeh ani lefanekha melekh hay veqayyam shehehezarta bi nishmati behemlah, rabbah emunatekha,*" which is traditionally translated as: "I am grateful to You, living, enduring King, for restoring my soul to me, in compassion. You are faithful beyond measure." In addition to the poem's premise of the soul leaving at night and then returning, traces of the *modeh ani* prayer are sparingly scattered and scrambled through it.¹⁶ Such is the explicit mention of morning as the time for the letters' recovery, or

¹⁴ Example: "My mother told me once / Not to sleep with flowers in the room." See "Immi amrah li pa'am," in *Akshav bara'ash: shirim 1963–1968 (Now in the Storm: Poems 1963–1968)* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1975), 70.

¹⁵ I learned about this belief and issues related to sleep as death from Rabbi Professor David Weiss-Halivni and Rabbi Thomas Klein. See Zohar, Bereshit 83 and Zohar Ḥadash, Bereshit 28.

¹⁶ Following Riffaterre, scrambling occurs when a text contains words found in a segment of the intertext, but with the order changed. See Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*; Riffaterre, *Text Production*.

the presence in the poem of the prayer's key verb root *h-z-r* (*het-zayin-resh*; "to return/restore").

Toward the end of the poem the words *ba'omanut rabbah* render the "great artistry" of God in resealing the envelopes. *Omanut*, in Hebrew, means *art*, but its sound evokes another Hebrew word: *emunah*, or *emunatekha* (faith, or your faith). The pun is not coincidental, for the morning prayer concludes with *rabbah emunatekha*, meaning that God's faithfulness is vast, great. The word *rabbah* (great, much) appears in both the poem and the prayer. Amichai reverses the position of *rabbah* and converts faith into art: *rabbah emunatekha* into *omanut rabbah*. The work of God, it seems, is done by the artist. Amichai's protest is no longer as blunt as when he proclaimed in an early poem that if God were not so full of mercy there would be more mercy in the world.¹⁷ The 1998 Amichai almost identifies himself with the God who roams the streets of Jerusalem, breaks the rules, and later erases the evidence. Furthermore, God, who disguises, camouflages, and conceals his actions with great artistry, is like the poet. Camouflage is one of the deeper poetic principles guiding Amichai's writing, and in his late verse it is even an openly discussed topic.¹⁸

Yet the illusion of restoring matters to their original state is destroyed in the poem's conclusion. God "seals the envelope / and they will not know that God has read it all ... like a censor of letters." But a censor leaves clear traces of violation; portions of letters are sometimes cut and envelopes carry the censor's stamp. What motivates God to hide His nocturnal activities? There are at least three explanations for why God has to conceal the fact that He read people's souls. The first possibility is that the returned souls are damaged. The second possibility is that after reading their souls He did not fulfill their desires. The third and more likely possibility is that upon his reading of the souls God did not bring back the dead loved ones for whom people stopped waiting. All souls are equal in His eyes, those who wait and those who do not; He is the greatest equalizer but, like the rain, He is indifferent to people's fates.

The vocabulary, despite its colloquial nature, is somewhat uncharacteristically devoid of words stemming from foreign roots. The ban of Rabbi Gershom, the souls, and the echoes of the morning prayer render the poem a halo of antiquity. The word "censor" stands out in this almost religious-sounding poem. "Censor," when it appears in the last line of the poem, creates a "linguistic scandal" of sorts, requiring the

¹⁷ "A Merciful God" and "This Is Your Glory," in Amichai, *Shirim 1948-1962*, 69, 71.

¹⁸ See note 11.

reader's attention. However, if one considers this poem's relationship to "Rain on a Battlefield," the ungrammatical nature of "censor" is resolved. It is through this word and its association with military censorship that the world of 1948, with its army, battles, and fallen comrades, reveals itself in the poem. The people who are waiting and those who are no longer waiting exist, like their visitor, in the valley of ghosts, even if now they are the quiet dwellers of Jerusalem. The passing train, which rises from the dead and closes the cycle "A Nightly Promenade in Emeq Refa'im," recalls King Saul, not only for the fact that he resorted to necromancy, but also because on that night he was facing his last battle. The formula that opens the second poem of the cycle, although disguised, is not merely a structure but rather a confession made by the poet of his own "death" in 1948. It is a statement similar to that made by Amichai in 1980: "I fell in the battle in Ashdod / in the War of Independence."¹⁹ At the same time, the presence of God may also be read as some source of consolation, even faith or hope to retrieve what has been lost: perhaps the poet can restore souls, revive the spirits of the dead, through his art.

¹⁹ Yehuda Amichai, "Since Then," in *Shalvah gedolah: she'elot uteshuvot* (*Great Tranquillity: Questions and Answers*) (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1980), 90.

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THE FRIGID OPTION: A PSYCHOCULTURAL STUDY OF THE NOVEL *LOVE LIFE* BY ZERUYA SHALEV¹

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Why some books receive a warm and long-lasting embrace by readers while others get a cool reception is one of the mysteries of the literary world. The answer to this fascinating question varies from case to case. However, one can say with some caution that a book that is widely and enthusiastically received usually responds to a central psychocultural need of its time with an original, surprising, and accessible rendition of a familiar story. *Love Life*, by Zeruya Shalev, is an outstanding example of this psychocultural phenomenon, in that it examines anew two familiar stories. The first story is of a young woman who meets an older man who, in turn, becomes a father substitute while pulling her out of emotional distress. The second is of a young woman who tries to reenact and repair an old love affair of her mother's. She becomes involved with her mother's former lover and tries to realize the story of their love in a better way. The young woman in both of these stories is Ya'ara Karmon, and the older man is Aryeh Even.

The novel opens with a chance encounter between Aryeh and Ya'ara in her parents' house in Jerusalem that turns into an obsessive relationship between the two. The two underlying narratives intertwined in *Love Life* are the backbone of hundreds of works, as well as prominent literary foci in the mythologization of the Western woman. In modern Hebrew literature there are several representations of these basic narratives (among them, "In the Prime of Her Life," by S. Y. Agnon, *And That Is the Light*, by Leah Goldberg, and much of the work of Amalia Kahana-Carmon and Ruth Almog). There are also psycholiterary works dealing with the themes of these two narratives and the connection between them. First

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the English translation, *Love Life* (trans. Dalya Bilu; New York: Grove Press, 2000).

and foremost, there is Freud's case study of Dora, which documents the story of a "hysterical" girl and her relationship with her parents, with an older man who tries to seduce her, and with Freud himself. In addition, there is the body of literature which was created, and is still being created, around this famous case study.

Two famous psycholiterary works dealing with stories centering on a girl and her relationship with her parents and a man who tries to sleep with her are Bruno Bettelheim's studies of the fairy tales "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White" in his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*.² According to Bettelheim, these fairy tales focus on the phase adolescents enter after their first sexual awakening. There is, he claims, a period of latent convergence and emotional maturing—the "latency period." The latency period is marked by the prolonged sleep of Sleeping Beauty, who is imprisoned in a castle covered with dense vegetation, and in the deep sleep of Snow White, on display, as it were, in a glass case. The two girls awake when their time comes, that is, when they mature emotionally. The sexual awakening in "Sleeping Beauty" is marked by the sting of the spindle, and in "Snow White" by her biting into the poisoned apple. It is only at this stage that the prince-men arrive and mature sexual encounters occur.

Shalev, similar to and perhaps influenced by Bettelheim, examines the emotional entanglement of a young woman via interpretations of the stories of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White. Despite the similarity between Ya'ara's story and these fairy tales, Shalev offers a very different interpretation, reflecting the difference between hers and Bettelheim's perceptions of the "female condition." Bettelheim claims that both fairy tales have psychological validity for male and female adolescents. By contrast, the reader of *Love Life* cannot help but think that it is not coincidental that the main protagonists in both of these fairy tales are female adolescents. In these fairy tales, the heroines are thrown into a deep sleep after their first sexual awakening. These events are perceived as a castrating mechanism of the male establishment whose goal is to prevent women from reaching an independent sexual identity that could undermine male dominance. The attempts of Bettelheim and other commentators to present "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty" as stories of universal maturation are perceived as adding insult to injury by expropriating the exclusive right of the woman/victim to her story.

Bettelheim adheres to the events of the two fairy tales in order and in their entirety. His commentary is developmental, and the stages parallel

² Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

the main stages of the plots in the fairy tales. His exegetical story occurs in the fairy tales themselves only once. Namely, there is a one-way, one-time developmental emotional course that reaches its successful conclusion and reckoning. Shalev takes a different track: she realizes and develops what is perceived, at least after the fact, as the core of the subversive female story in the fairy tales by an extreme rewriting of the plots from two directions. For one, the maturation story of Ya'ara recurs several times. She is stung, wakes up sexually, falls asleep, again is stung, and so on. This cyclical pattern shatters the optimism that Bettelheim identifies in these fairy tales. *Love Life* surprisingly concludes, at least from a superficial reading, with Ya'ara, the embodiment of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, not choosing a mature identity—the precondition for a healthy and fertile pairing—but sleep.

This astonishing choice is laden with socially relevant implications. This is because Shalev exposes the nature of the assumptions underlying the normative male commentaries on these two fairy tales, to which one can add the case study of Dora and the story of *Pygmalion* and their traditional male commentaries (Freud, Lacan; Bernard Shaw, for example). These are male chauvinist assumptions whose main principle is that the woman is a “slumbering creature” or, in coarser language, “frigid.” She is described at her most beautiful when she is asleep, and the man/knight who falls in love with her when she is asleep, in what seems to be her death, must awaken her, warm her, and revive her.

Shalev creates the connection between the two plot lines of the novel and the two Grimm fairy tales in several ways. First, she develops a wide figurative constellation based on the double connection between Ya'ara and the semantic field of cold, sleep, and death and Aryeh, Yoni (Ya'ara's husband), and Ya'ara's father and the semantic field of warmth, vitality, and flexibility. At certain strategic points in the flow of the plot the “permanent” characteristics of Ya'ara, Aryeh, Yoni, and the father alternate. Ya'ara is described as warm, vital, burning. Aryeh, Yoni, and the father are described as cold, stonelike statues. However, these are, not coincidentally, only short-term permutations.

The first sexual encounter between Ya'ara and Aryeh is without any real feeling or human touch. For Aryeh it is coldly technical.

He circles me, my back is to him, my face is to the door, hands holding the hangers on the door, lifted as though I had been taken captive, my pants locking my knees, and his erect member nailing me to the door, without him touching me, even with a pinkie, and the whole time, his coarse, crude voice asking me indifferently, without a question mark, informing me, it is good for you, not even informing me, but announcing

in a loud voice, so that it would be registered in some hidden protocol, it is good for you, it is good for you, it is good for you.

Ya'ara is not willing to be satisfied with this degrading experience and decides to erase it with another, better sexual encounter. She walks to Aryeh's apartment and on the way the whole world looks different to her:

I had never seen the grocery shops like this before, full of meaning and power, mystery and passion, the pedestrian crossings painted in phosphorescent stripes, the traffic lights spitting fire, and my steps, I had never known what it was to step with feet pursuing each other like beasts of prey, and I felt a great wonder, almost a miracle, as if I were a statue beginning to move. (29)

However, when the fantasy is put to the test in a sexual encounter involving the two and Aryeh's friend, Shaul, it becomes apparent that the statue remains a statue or, at the very best, turns into a mechanical doll who does what is expected of her.

... and then he stood me up, and pulled me to my feet, the panty hose stretched tight around my knees, and said, come to bed, you'll be more comfortable in bed, and I said, but what about Shaul, and Aryeh said, it won't bother Shaul, right, Shaul? [and he] ... pulled down his trousers ... and he lay down on his back and waited for me to kick off my boots and panty hose and sit on top of him, it was clear that this was what he wanted, and I tried to sit with my back straight and to move gracefully, like an actress, because I could sense Shaul's eyes on me all the time, I had never had an audience before and I knew that it imposed an obligation. (54-55)

The mechanistic behavior that characterizes this sexual encounter, evocative of a pornographic film, is characteristic of Ya'ara's sexual attachment to Aryeh in general. Returning to Bettelheim's metaphor, Ya'ara is stung, falls asleep/enters into a frozen state, is stung, falls asleep, and, the cycle repeats itself as a pseudo-automatic circular movement with no way out. Is Ya'ara depicted as a frigid woman? If so, this is in principle a legitimate topic despite and because of the sexist insinuation that arises. In any case, a more interesting topic is the attitude of the men in the novel to Ya'ara's frigidity and the attitude of the female heroine, Ya'ara, and her creator, Zeruya Shalev, to the men's attitude. Yoni

³ *Love Life* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1977), 34. This paragraph was omitted from the English translation.

and Aryeh Even (who apparently represent two different types of masculinity) exhibit the same behavior regarding Ya'ara's frigidity. They both prefer her sleeping. They both extinguish the fire the moment it is ignited—Yoni, in a sort of awkward-refined manner and Aryeh with sexual aggression.

The climax of the first meeting between Yoni and Ya'ara has two parts: first, the budding awakening of Ya'ara and then the cool response of Yoni: "and I tried to fan my fire. [And then,] he was in the middle of telling me that his mother had died a few weeks before and that he was still in mourning." The tension wanes, but Ya'ara tries again and Yoni dampens it again. "And then I said, let's go to your place and not leave the house for a week. And Yoni smiled his gentle smile and said, but I have to go to work" (107). The parallel scene, in which Aryeh takes Yoni's place, opens with an unusual situation: Ya'ara is not the statue; Aryeh is. The scene is built on a paradoxical inversion of the plot that is at the base of all the fairy tales, stories, and case studies in which a man arouses and heals a young frigid woman.

All of a sudden I was filled with strength, I felt I had the strength to lick his dark, fragrant skin from top to toe and this is what I did, and it seemed to me that in this way I was sticking his broken parts together, that he was some rare archaeological find and I had collected all the pieces and now I was sticking them together with my spit, and only when I was finished would I know what it was and I was curious to see what would emerge, but I wasn't allowed to open my eyes while I was doing it, only at the end.

He lay like a statue smoking in silence, from time to time I heard him laughing, but it didn't bother me, I was even happy for him, that he had found something to laugh about, and thus little by little I stuck his long slender legs together and between his thighs his beautiful penis that stretched as if after a long sleep, and I went on moving upwards and I nearly ran out of spit but I kept on trying, because I didn't want to leave him without his head or shoulders. When I had finished I looked at him proudly, it had come out so well, a human being constructed from nothing with everything in the right place and I wondered if God had felt like this after creating Adam, it excited me to think that we had an experience in common, God and I, and all the time I felt something burning between my legs, so I took his hand and said, see how hot it is, like an oven. (163-64)

Aryeh (whose name means "lion" in Hebrew) is not willing to switch roles. He is made of stone (his last name, Even, means "stone" in Hebrew) and is sterile. There is a limit to how much warmth and vitality he is willing to allow a woman to feel. His masculine response is immediate: "And he began to undress me and said in pretended concern, we have to bring

down the temperature, it's dangerous, and he took a cube from his drink and sucked it and laid it at the threshold and slowly pushed it in."

However, Ya'ara does not give up easily. She throws herself into her goals to relieve herself of her "frigidity" and to thaw Aryeh's "frigidity" in order to correct the past. Only at the end of the novel in the last sex scene does she understand what a mess she has made. She stares at the nude body of her lover, the lion made of stone, who was, as she knows, the lover of her mother, whom she nursed during the war after he was wounded and became sterile. She reflects: "In fear and pity I saw before me his big, beautiful body, hollow of sperm and eternally sad. And I was overcome with dread like a prophet whose mission had become clear to him, I had been chosen to fill the void in his body, to penetrate the smooth, dark, beloved skin and be swallowed up in the dark void as in an ancient cave, never to see the sunlight again" (228).

Ya'ara realizes then that she is in a dead-end situation. Her every move is destined to fail. Her mission is impossible and self-castrating, both sexually and in terms of her identity. More than that, this mission is clearly suicidal. She must "fill the void" of Aryeh's body, "penetrating" his "smooth skin" and "be swallowed up in the dark void." This "void" is described as a "cave"; whoever is swallowed up in it will "never . . . see the sunlight again." This situation is hopeless, especially because the patient, Aryeh, is not willing to allow Ya'ara entry into the active male role, the role of the doctor. Every time Ya'ara shows a sign of selfhood and independence, expressed here in sexual awakening and initiative, Aryeh extinguishes her with lightning speed. This suppression, and that by other men in Ya'ara's life, always occurs through the activation of the cooling mechanism, the freeze, thereby suggesting that all the men in her life want Ya'ara frigid.

The cultural social situation that the heroine of *Love Life* is in against her will is not new. Similar situations have been portrayed in the writings of other women in Israel and abroad, albeit usually less harshly. What is new here is the heroine's response to the male expectations of her fate. Ya'ara, as well as the author of the book, presents an original provocative stand. Instead of going against fate, rebelling against male authority and the male social political establishment, she takes upon herself, as though in a voluntary manner, the "frigid option." This option is a declaration of renunciation: You men prefer us frigid so that you can once again arouse and conquer us and show off with your performance to yourselves and to your friends. Our awakening as women threatens you and you hurry to suppress it. A beauty in your eyes is Snow White, whom you succeed in melting for a second and then refreezing, or a beauty whom you succeed in waking up for a moment and then putting to sleep in a glass case. If this is the truth, we accept the results of this endless experiment. If this is what

awaits us in any event, why should we bother, doubt, agonize in the manner of the hysterical female personality? Instead, let us preserve our warmth for ourselves, remain frigid forever, sleep, and never wake up.

This gloomy conclusion clearly arises from tracing the way in which Shalev adds and develops, in the concluding section of the novel, the connection between the two central fairy tales of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty on the one hand, and the legends of the destruction of the Temple on the other. Ya'ara reflects on her last visit with Aryeh as follows:

He got undressed slowly, with somber movements, and went into the bathroom to take a shower, and I heard the water running and thought about the snowman in the story my mother used to read me, the beloved snowman who was dried with mud, and when the children tried to wash off the mud the water melted him and nothing was left. I always protested against the iron logic of the story, I would say, why do they have to wash him, and my mother would answer, because he got dirty with mud, and I would shout, trying to change the harsh sentence, it's better for him to be dirty than not to be there at all, and she would say, they want him clean. But that's impossible, I would shout, they want something impossible. (233)

Ya'ara is forced to realize that the ultimate combination she wanted is not possible. The connection between a clean snow woman (Snow White, the actualization of a male fantasy) and a dirty, mature woman full of female vitality is against the iron logic of the story. Representing the major turning point in the story, in this situation she makes an amazing decision to relinquish the world of reality that binds her into a dead-end situation and to become entrenched in the world of fairy tale, story, legend, which does not require difficult and painful choices.

Ya'ara realizes this decision first with her husband Yoni and then with her father. After separating from Yoni, she plans to surprise him at the airport upon his return from a trip abroad. Upon meeting him at the airport she intends to enact a sort of second wedding ceremony: "I make my face up discreetly, the way he likes it, not too much, and I put on a white dress, even though it is a little ridiculous to wear such a festive dress on an ordinary day, but it's my wedding day, in the arrivals hall at the airport my real wedding will take place" (279). But at the last moment she avoids the meeting. A fateful decision, "because for me love life ends today" (280), which is determined according to her by her decision "not to dirty my white dress, my wedding dress" (280). The decision parallels the endless loneliness of the snowman, the sinking of Sleeping Beauty into eternal sleep, and the freezing of Snow White forever.

The concluding scene of Ya'ara's renunciation occurs on the last page of the book. The main players are Ya'ara and her father, or rather, the father she didn't have and who didn't give her warmth, and an anonymous father and daughter from what is presented here as a legend of the destruction of the Temple. This scene occurs on a location that was especially designed for the heroine's departure from the world of the living and her transition to the world of fairy tale.

Ya'ara, in her wedding dress, returns from the airport and goes directly to the Hebrew University campus on Mount Scopus. She enters the library, asks the librarian for the book of legends of the destruction of the Temple, holds it "like a mother holding a baby ... examining its perfect limbs" (280). As in the past, she licks the perfect limbs of her lover. Afterwards, when the librarian announces that she is closing the library, Ya'ara hides in one of the corners of the large hall and declares to herself "that no cruel rule will separate us." She declares a covenant between herself and the book of legends of the destruction, a covenant between the beauty wrapped in white and a being outside the world of life.

In this very weird situation, Ya'ara announces that "for the first time since it all began, I breathe a sigh of relief." The reason for this surprising response is inherent in her words—she has finally found what she was looking for. "And I know that I've found exactly what I need." This "what" she claims is a legend. "The legend about the daughter of the priest who abandoned her faith on the eve of the destruction of the Temple, and her father mourned her as if she were dead, and on the third day, she came and stood before him and said to him, my father, I only did it to save your life, but he refused to rise from his mourning, his eyes streamed with tears until she died, and then he rose and changed his clothes and asked for bread to eat" (286).

What is it about this legend that makes it just the thing that Ya'ara searched for her whole life? What in this dramatic situation causes her to feel relieved? The answer to these questions is clarified in terms of the connection between the plot of the novel with its two main axes and this legend. It is a complex connection that complements the parallel connections between this plot, the mock wedding ceremony, and the fairy tale of the snowman. The girl in the legend and Ya'ara both sin. Ya'ara betrays her husband and the girl in the legend converts. They do so in order to save their parents' generation. However, in both cases the sacrificial act is not accepted, because the two fathers, the father of Ya'ara and the father in the legend, as well as the other men in Ya'ara's life, preserve law and order.

In accordance with this social law and order, the woman faces two possibilities that are presented as the law of nature. One possibility is to preserve her natural status as a passive, frozen creature and then to con-

tinue without harm and remain like the snowman before mud stuck to him, like the girl in her wedding dress that is not stained, and like the daughter of the priest in her period of innocence. The other possibility is to break the barriers, to be a vital, creative woman, and then to confront the law and to bear the consequences. In the context before us this second possibility would be represented by the snowman who became dirty and melted when water was poured over him, in accordance with the law of nature. It also would be represented by the priest's daughter who converted to save her father and, because of the social law, he pours tears over her until she dies.

The option that Ya'ara chooses, in light of what finally becomes clear to her from the legend of the priest's daughter who converts, is a total surrender of the attempt to rebel, that is to say, to give up on the attempt to restore the First Temple (the lost love affair of Ya'ara's mother and Aryeh) by means of building improved temples.

This total surrender of the attempt to rebel is presented ironically by Shalev as the heroine's voluntary choice of sleep, freezing, and death. One should pay attention in this context to the tense, complex battle between life, vitality, and death in the novel. Ya'ara announces that for the first time she breathes a sigh of relief. And this happens strangely in the scene laden with signs of death: the empty halls, the pale lights, the book in her hand that is all about destruction and ruin and the heroine of the selected legend—the dead daughter of the priest.

The ironic tone of this section is intensified because of the parallelism that the author creates at the end of the novel between the situations in which Ya'ara and the daughter of the priest find themselves: "And I know I've heard this legend before, many years ago, that my mother read it to me one night when there was a power outage and the three of us were sitting round a single candle and my father said why are you telling her that story, can't you see that it's too sad?" (286). This pseudo-intimate situation is full of fear. The mother tells her daughter her story that will also be the story of the daughter and her daughter, and so forth, and the father scolds her. He does so ostensibly because he worries about the sensitive soul of the daughter. In actuality, however, he is not prepared to allow the mother to tell the story—to shape events, to give life a structure of meaning by means of storytelling. When artistic creativity or mature sexuality are in women's possession it is a danger to men, and therefore the men seek to stifle it before it begins to develop.

And yet there is a spark of optimism in the novel. One cannot ignore the fact that the legend of the daughter of the priest who converted is a legend that Shalev invented especially for the story before us. All the other legends of destruction that appear in the story are collected from

the canonic male culture. This legend, which is, one must remember, also a legend of destruction, is written by Ya'ara/Zeruya Shalev herself with impressive intensity.



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