



CULTURES  
OF THE JEWS

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*Modern Encounters*

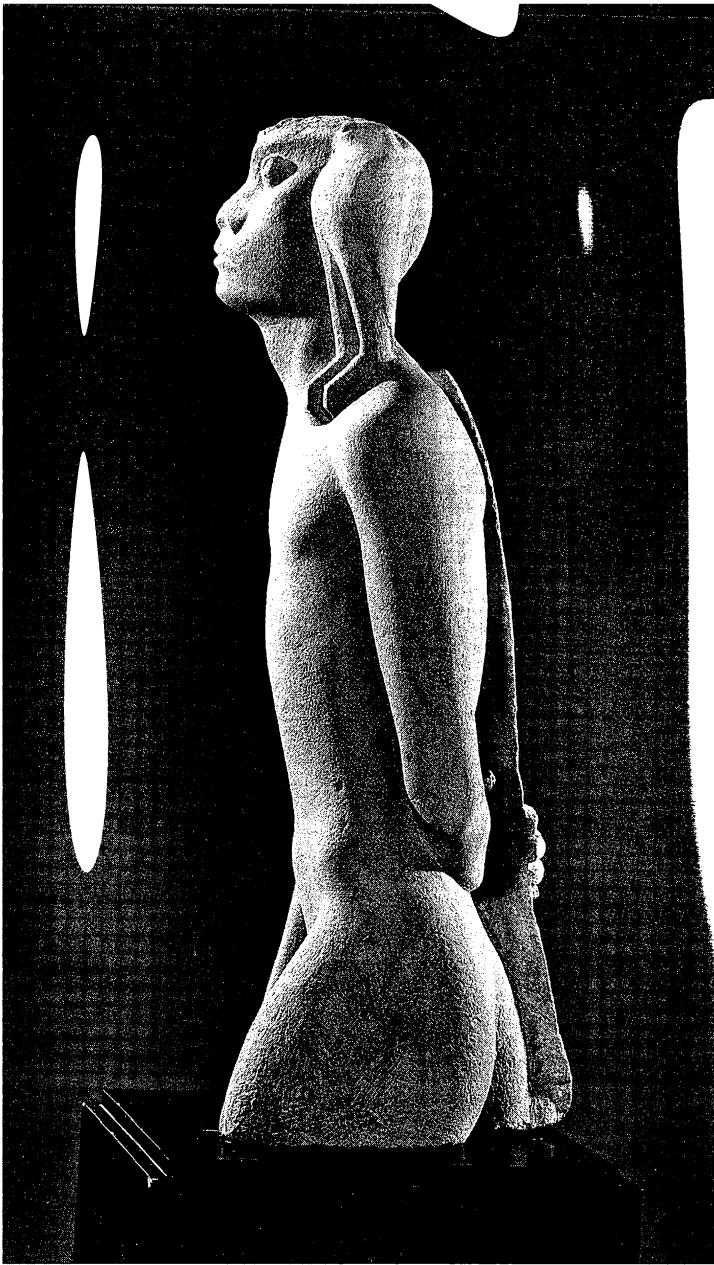
A NEW HISTORY

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Yitzhak Danziger, *Nimrod*, 1939. Nubian sandstone.  
(The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

# LOCUS AND LANGUAGE:

## *Hebrew Culture in Israel, 1890–1990*

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ARIEL HIRSCHFELD

*As long as deep in the heart  
The soul of a Jew yearns,  
And towards the East  
An eye looks to Zion,  
Our hope is not yet lost,  
The hope of two thousand years,  
To be a free people in our land,  
The Land of Zion and of Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>*

These lines from “Hatikvah” (1878), the poem by Naphtali Herz Imber that became Israel’s national anthem, mention *mizrah*, the East, and its Hebrew synonym *kadimah*, eastward. This simple word, *kadimah*, touches upon the deepest mythical roots of Hebrew culture. The word contains three distinct elements: it is derived from *kadim*, which means East (Ezekiel 48:1, “for these are his sides East [kadim] and West”), and from *kedem* in the sense of to proceed forward, to make progress (Job 23:8, “Behold I go forward [kedem] but He is not there”). But *kedem* also has a temporal sense of a primordial era, an *Urzeit*. It is in this third sense that it is analogous to *mizrah*—from the verb *zarah*, to shine—because the rising sun appears in *kedem* not as an action and vision but as a temporal concept: this is the primordial time, the basis of any historical thought. The word *kadimah* in *Hatikvah* contains not one movement but a cluster of movements, of vectors: the geographic movement eastward is also forward motion in the sense of progress and development—as opposed to regression and decline—as well as a movement back in time to a primordial reality, but to a time that is essentially new. The movement eastward is, then, at once historical and antihistorical, a paradoxical movement with time and against it.

The romantic tension this word projects eastward is not the heritage of European Romanticism; it is one of its sources. Not only does the Bible contain yearnings for a primordial purity, as in the verses “Renew our days as of old [*ke-*

*kedem*]" (Lamentations 5:21) and "Awaken as of old [*ki-yemei kedem*] eternal generations" (Isaiah 51:9), but it also expresses a sense of the distance and mystery that envelops the past, as in the verse "I will utter dark sayings [*hiddot*] concerning days of old [*kedem*]" (Psalms 78:2). Furthermore, the voice of God is heard from the East, from the "*kadim*": "An East wind shall come, the wind of the Lord coming up from the wilderness" (Hosea 13:15), and *kedem* is the site of the Garden of Eden: "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward [*mi-kedem*] in Eden" (Genesis 2:8).

There extends, then, from *Hatikvah*—composed on the brink of the twentieth century and borne by the Hebrew civilization that emerged in that century as its standard—an ancient umbilical cord that contains in its most archaic roots the Romantic movement toward mending the past (the *kadum*), which is mending the East (*kadim*), a movement that was reformulated throughout the history of Hebrew culture and became a definitive part of the eschatological end to the Jewish drama of exile. The concluding lines of the twelfth-century Spanish Jewish poet Judah Halevi's "Ode to Zion" present this motif in its purest, most distilled form:

*Happy is he who waits and lives to see  
Your light rising, your dawn breaking forth over him!  
He shall see your chosen people prospering, he shall rejoice in your joy  
When you regain the days of your youth [kadmat ne'urayikh].<sup>2</sup>*

## ZIONIST ORIENTALISM AND THE REVOLUTION AGAINST JUDAISM

The literary and plastic arts created by the first generation of the Zionist movement imported this ancient tension to the Land of Israel. This literary and visual expression, however, was drawn from sources that lay much closer to the cradle of the movement: from the nineteenth-century Europe, whose anxiety toward the East was a key element in its cultural identity. The chief formulators of the Romantic view of the Orient were Herder, Goethe, and Schiller, the leaders of the German neoclassicist revolution, who exercised a decisive—albeit, at times, indirect—influence on the artists and the writers of the Zionist "renaissance." Many important Romantic concepts found their way into Zionist ideology under the influence of these thinkers: the people understood as *Volk*, signifying not merely a human collective but an archaic essence that involves character, language, and connection to a land; naïveté as an existential integrity, untainted by the corrupting presence of sophistication; the primordial, the "classic," as indicating a moral purity and vitality; and the association of the "sublime" with

the untamed forces of nature. These German “classicists” were the inventors of the new eastward gaze, which they combined with a yearning for a primordial era. Their primordial East was that of ancient Greece and the land of the Bible.

The contemporary Orient, however, was the Ottoman Empire, which had once been Europe’s traditional enemy. The empire became, in the nineteenth century, a threatening symbol of all that is base and corrupt in culture as such, though this was in fact a reflection of Europe’s own fears of itself. The Romantic gaze eastward was an attempt to bypass the present, to disregard the East in its present state and uncover its archaic form. The Orient became essentially bifurcated: a nearby civilization that was feared and derided (and yet mysterious and alluring), but was also the decrepit cover draped over the sublime body of Greek sculpture and biblical masterpieces. This conceptual structure mirrored, in a sense, the identity, the soul, of Europe: the East’s threatening present served as a counterpart to the repressed subconscious of the European ethos, a violent and amoral world of passions, whereas the sublime, exemplary Oriental past corresponded to the conscious aspirations of European culture.

This cluster of attitudes regarding the East was taken over *in toto* by Zionist Hebrew culture, including the low estimation of the Ottoman Empire and the special link (in stark opposition to the traditional Jewish view) between classical Greece and the Bible. Only against this backdrop, which added to the yearning for a primordial and naïve purity a fascination with paganism (the child of “Greece”), can we understand the revolutionary consciousness of Zionism at its outset. The soul of Zionism contained more than a desire for revival and rehabilitation; it also contained an outright rejection of Judaism and the traditional way of life. The Romantic symbolism of Greece was used by Zionist writers to counteract the perceived decay of Jewish culture by means of an explicitly Jewish dynamic. “Athens,” the traditional nemesis of “Jerusalem,” was called upon to join the Hebrew culture of the East, not to bring about a European renaissance in Hebrew culture but to begin it anew, to re-found it differently. Saul Tchernikhovsky (1875–1943) became the chief spokesman of this “Hellenic revolution” with his poem “In Front of a Statue of Apollo” (1899):

*I come to you, forgotten god of the ages,  
god of ancient times and other days,  
ruling the tempests of vigorous men,  
the breakers of their strength in youth’s plenty!*

. . . . .

*I come to you—do you know me still?  
I am the Jew: your adversary of old!*

. . . . .

*I bow to all precious things—robbed now  
by human corpses and the rotten seed of man,  
who rebel against the life bestowed by God, the Almighty—  
the God of mysterious wildernesses,  
the God of men who conquered Canaan in a whirlwind—  
then bound Him with the straps of their tefillin [phylacteries].<sup>3</sup>*

The opening lines of the poem could have been written by Schiller or Hölderlin, but, as it continues, it presents a conflict that is no longer European but specifically Jewish. The poem is not spoken only from within a culture that has grown old and conflicted with the passing of the centuries; it is spoken at once from within a culture and *in opposition* to it. The poem situates the “renaissance” of Hebrew culture within a full awareness of its cultural singularity, seeking to replace the traditional Jewish dynamic in its entirety with another dynamic. “I am the first among those who return to you,” says Tchernikhovsky, placing himself at the forefront of a movement that turns not against old age or “history” but against an ancient theology. Tchernikhovsky’s poem reveals the radical revision that occurs when the Romantic view of the Orient is applied to Hebrew culture. From this point on, Hebrew culture must come to learn the elements of its own renaissance from outside sources.

The Zionist renaissance rejected the ancient theology of abstract monotheism, which must be destroyed, says Tchernikhovsky, by throwing off the tefillin that have bound the God of nature and vitality. If this culture is to be yoked to a place, a particular locus, where it is to construct for itself a concept of “the beautiful,” this “beautiful” demands the constitution of an adequate concept of physical beauty—human and divine. Tchernikhovsky understood the far-reaching ramifications of the concepts “the folk” and “the beautiful”—both instrumental in the Romantic understanding of national renaissance—and revealed the conflict between the new Hebrew culture and the Jewish tradition, a conflict that led not only to abandoning tradition but also to actual abhorrence toward it.

“In Front of a Statue of Apollo” contains the origins of a dynamic that recurs in Israeli culture throughout the twentieth century: the imagery of renaissance is drawn from foreign sources that were—and still are—the traditional enemies of classical Jewish identity. Without this dynamic, we cannot understand the passionate interest of modern Hebrew culture in the cultures of Greece, Mesopotamia, and Arabia. The Oriental antiquities, the pagan force of “the God of men who conquered Canaan in a whirlwind,” could only be learned anew through the non-Jewish East.

The tools with which modern Hebrew culture set out to “study” the East and

to construct for itself a new-ancient Eastern identity were not forged in empirical experience but lifted, ready-made, from European culture. Even where the authors and painters, such as those of Boris Shatz's Bezalel School, sought to portray the "local" reality of the Land of Israel, it is evident that for many years they saw Palestine and its inhabitants through a thick, gaudy prism, produced by centuries of European culture and specifically by Orientalism, with its manifold expressions in the visual arts, literature, and music.

The myth of a "return to origins" was responsible for the dominance of the biblical Song of Songs and the Book of Ruth in holiday ceremonies and in dozens of songs written in Palestine between the 1920s and the 1940s. This myth further explains the dominance of the *pastoral* genre in poetry, prose, painting, and music, representing the golden age of humanity that was soon to be renewed.

Zionism revived another, much more complex myth: the Exodus from Egypt. As Richard I. Cohen discusses in his chapter in this volume, E. M. Lilien's graphic works—his illustrations of the Bible and the Passover Haggadah, which were very well known in the early twentieth century—portrayed Theodor Herzl as Moses, thus suggesting that the departure from the Diaspora was an Exodus from slavery to freedom. The myth of the Exodus became a powerful tool of propaganda in the first Zionist congresses but was also discussed in a very serious and complex manner by the Hebrew writers of the day. Their works often revealed another, nonpropagandistic aspect of the myth of national renaissance by confronting the very real tensions and traumatic breaks that are part of emigration. Most important, this literature called for practical criticism of the project of renewal.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik, the dominant literary figure of the first-generation Zionists, wrote not only some of the most famous and most influential poems of the day but also the most problematic poem concerning the Zionist exodus, "The Dead of the Desert" (*Matei Midbar*, 1902). The poem tells the story of giants who crossed the boundaries fixed in the biblical Exodus and became desert rocks that arise from their frozen state after many years and begin to rebel. The rebellion fails, God forces them into another frozen state that lasts forever, and they become a legend told by a Bedouin nomad. In this work Bialik outlines a struggle between conflicting forces. The giants call out:

*We are the brave!*  
*Last of the Enslaved!*  
*First to be free!*  
*With our own strong hand,*

Our hand alone,  
We tore from our neck  
The heavy yoke.  
Raised our heads to the skies,  
Narrowed them with our eyes.  
Renegades of the waste,  
We called barrenness mother.<sup>4</sup>

They are rebelling against God, seeking to set human bravery against the divine power. Moreover, the bravery is defined through the suffering and tragic struggle it entails: its connection to the desert that in turn becomes a “mother,” an alternative to God. The pessimism of the work can be seen in its conclusion: “Here, as before, in the desert lie the six hundred thousand cadavers,”<sup>5</sup> which also marks it as part of the Exodus myth, six hundred thousand being the traditional midrashic number of Israelites who left Egypt. The victory of God and of the inhibiting forces allied to God is viewed as a tragic downfall and not as an alternative mode of existence.

This troubling picture of stagnation that takes hold of the people precisely at the time of their heroic passage to political independence was, it seems, the first major appearance of a voice that responded to the power of the “exilic” or “divine” past in Jewish culture. This voice grew stronger still in the works of the great prose masters of modern Hebrew literature, J. H. Brenner (1881–1921) and S. Y. Agnon (1888–1970). For Brenner, who immigrated to Palestine in 1909, it can be heard in his important novel *From Here and There* (*Mikan u-Mikan*, 1910), in the story “Nerves” (*Atzabim*, 1911),<sup>6</sup> and particularly in his last novel, *Breakdown and Bereavement* (*Shkhol ve-Khishalon*, 1918).<sup>7</sup> In *From Here and There*, Brenner reduces the forces at work in the Hebrew nation to three symbolically named figures: David Diasporin, who visits Palestine but returns to the United States; Aryeh Lapidot (a heroic name, literally “Lion Torches”), a learned Jew with his own private synthesis between Judaism and personal experience, who loses his son in the Land of Israel and struggles to inculcate in his followers an ethos of Jewish labor; and Oved Etzot (Hebrew for “Clueless”), the narrator, who unites the different forces. The final scene of the novel is a martyrological icon: Aryeh Lapidot and his little grandson arise from their mourning and gather thorns with which to bake bread. As they stand in a temporary clearing between thunderstorms, the narrator says, “the reality was one of thorns.” Brenner counters the Zionist pastorate with the tense image of an eternal *via dolorosa*, without, however, denying the sanctity he attributes to his hero, whose life in the Land of Israel represents a successful struggle against the forces



of exile. Brenner saw the reality of exile as more than a world of faith and tradition—it was a state of economic parasitism and indolence that had become the “anomaly of Judaism.” Jerusalem is depicted not as the center of “Zion” but as the “holy butcher shop,” the center of decrepitude that epitomizes exilic existence and resists change.

Agnon, the greatest modern Hebrew novelist, presents in *Only Yesterday* (*Tmol Shilshom*, 1945) a comprehensive reckoning of the first era of Zionism. Like Brenner, he deals with the second wave of Zionist immigration (during which time he was in Palestine). His hero, Yitzhak Kummer, the grandson of Rabbi Yudil the Hasid, a man of tradition and steadfast faith, immigrates to the Land of Israel in order to raise it up from its state of destruction and be himself raised up by it. He tries to find work as a laborer in the Jewish agricultural settlements, but the farmers prefer cheap Arab labor. He becomes a painter and moves to Jerusalem, settling in the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood Me’ah She’arim, where he marries the daughter of Rabbi Feisch, a pillar of the community. The city itself is plagued with famine, drought, and disease. A “mad” dog bites Kummer, who dies, and his death precipitates the hoped-for rains. The grotesque resolution of the novel—the terrible death of the Zionist antihero—is a dark and enigmatic emblem that has challenged Agnon’s interpreters for years. What is clear is that the author contrasts the Zionist space, exemplified in Tel Aviv and the agricultural settlements, with the powerful alternative space of Me’ah She’arim and of an ultra-Orthodox Judaism that is completely blind to the challenges and ideals of Zionism. This place “swallows” the protagonist, who is himself very different from the Zionist ideals of renewal. His name is an oxymoron: laughter (the Hebrew “Yitzhak”) and distress (Yiddish “Kummer”). To this one must add the other Yiddish meaning of “Kummer”—“the arriver”—and the symbolic dimension of “Yitzhak” (Isaac) who exists, according to the midrash, in an eternal state of being bound (see the story in Genesis 22 of God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son).

“Like all our brethren of the Second Aliyah, the bearers of our salvation, Isaac Kummer left his country and his homeland and his city and ascended to the Land of Israel to build it from its destruction and to be rebuilt by it.”<sup>8</sup> Thus Agnon reworks the myths of the divine promise and of the journey to political realization (the Exodus) in a bitter, grotesque fashion. The pastoral myth of Zionism is pushed to the margins of *Only Yesterday*. At the very end of the novel, after Kummer’s death, Agnon mentions the blooming of Judah and the Galilee—“And the Earth was like God’s garden”—but excludes this imagery from the world he has constructed.

The Israeli literary critic Gershon Shaked speaks of “the Zionist meta-

doxical formulation—the juxtaposition of a “role” to a deed that has “no goal” and “no purpose”—sets his views apart from the standard patronizing discourse of Zionist Orientalism. The “role” is coexistence that will be enriched by Western experience and thought, without establishing in advance its desired result.

Brenner’s was a rare, solitary voice in Hebrew culture in two respects: first, in the total absence of sentimentality and complaisance toward elements of Arabic culture that appeared to Western eyes to be base and flawed; and second in his deep tolerance for the otherness of the stranger. Second, Brenner’s position is one of the first statements of the conflict between Eastern and Western civilization that informs post-Orientalist Israeli culture to this day. Zionist Orientalism was bound up with the notion of a Jewish renaissance—the rebirth of the Jew into history—and of a return to a primordial past, which led to the emulation of Eastern images. The end result was nothing less than a surreal synthesis of a self-renewing Judaism and the Eastern experience, but the tension between the Jews and the Arabs excluded the possibility of an authentic assimilation between their two cultures. The life experience of the Palestinian populace, as well as that of Jewish immigrants from Arab lands, was not to be copied. The new, Zionist Jew was to be modern, urban, and urbane, an agent of progress; the Easterner was an innocent, naïve villager, still part of the natural world. The Old Yishuv uncovered a discordance between East and West that was deeper and more fundamental than that which existed in the “Orientalist” era of Zionism, whose surreal fantasies obscured the real problems. The break was precipitated by World War I and, more forcefully, by the Arab “riots” of the 1920s and 1930s. Equally, though, it was the product of the cultural makeup of the Third and Fourth Aliyot, the urban aliyot par excellence. These immigrants brought with them a vibrant European modernism that effectively did away with the shallow idealism of Zionist Orientalism.

The process, then, was twofold. The Arab was stripped of the aura of pristine originality and expelled from view altogether. Yet the landscape, the sky, and the air continued to bear the Arab’s Eastern characteristics *even in his absence*. Abraham Shlonsky (1900–1973), perhaps the leading poet of the post-Bialik generation, demonstrated this cultural rift and the violence that flares up within it. Shlonsky’s vision of the landscape is informed by his profound sense of its Eastern nature. In “Jezra’el,” he repeatedly likens the landscape to camels:

*Like a caravan of nursing camels with humps in the sky—  
God made the hills of Gilboa kneel,  
And the field of Jezrael like young she-camels  
Cling to the nipples of those breasts.*<sup>10</sup>

In “To This Point” (*Ad Halom*), the poet, who is well aware of his own foreignness, seeks to blend into this landscape:

*Cause me to kneel, my God, like a camel disburdened.  
I will pause briefly here at your feet.*<sup>11</sup>

But in “Facing the Wasteland” (*Mul ha-Yeshimon*), when Shlonsky describes the work of the Jewish immigrants, the landscape loses its placid, pastoral qualities as well as its erotic dimension and becomes a scene of emptiness, desolation, and failure. When confronted with the Zionist enterprise, the East becomes *meaningless*.

*Many, many, many generations  
The sands lay still like ivories,  
Latent, their rebellion quelled:  
None approach  
To disrupt them.*

. . . . .  
*Suddenly the all-conquering shovel glimmered  
And the sand herds bleat*

. . . . .  
*I have vanquished you on this day  
Languishing camel:  
It is you who shall bring the mortar  
For the cement*

. . . . .  
*Thus a road to a road—oh, bridle straps!  
Houses upon houses—like fists in the void!*

The same landscape metaphors—the camel and the herd—are used, but here they represent a hostility to be overcome, harnessed, domesticated, and placed in the service of the builders.

Shlonsky is quite aware of how intrusive this construction is, but he interprets it, reversing the pastoral scene above, as the intrusion of life into death:

*With a psalm of victory I desecrated  
Your seed-hating desolation.*

Awaiting the revenge of the Eastern desert, he makes explicit its ethnic identity:

*Now I know: the wasteland  
Howls by night a prayer of vengeance.  
And from afar,  
Above the high domed roof of the mosque:  
A crescent moon moves,  
Like a scimitar.<sup>12</sup>*

The terminology most suited to describe this conflict from a Western perspective is Schiller's distinction between the "naïve" and the "sentimental." The naïve individual opposes and "shames" culture, revealing it to be artificial and forced; he is blameless and unsullied, living in harmony and unconscious identification with nature. The sentimental person, by contrast, is an urbane sophisticate who has been exiled from the kingdom of the naïve but yearns to return and cleave to nature once again. Schiller's categories provide a fascinating key for understanding the cultural dialogue and dynamics between the two nations inhabiting Palestine and between the different Jewish ethnic groups. It is undoubtedly a dialogue between deaf interlocutors in which what is left unsaid undermines and even contradicts the explicit communications.

Both the Arabs and the Eastern Jews were perceived by the Zionists as "naïve"—at peace with their natural being, attentive to the cycles of nature and to the local landscape, driven by passions, oblivious to the "meaning" Western culture attributed to them. This naïveté, visible to the Western eye, is, of course, a Western notion that has nothing to do with how the East viewed itself. Primitivist Israeli painting that abstracted the landscape to brown arcs and turned the Arabs into simple, monumental, round-bodied feminine figures was, then, a sentimental gesture. But within Israeli culture the visual arts themselves acted as a sort of naïve voice opposed to the sentimental awareness of Hebrew literature.

One of the most penetrating instances of literary awareness of the gap between these cultures is S. Yizhar's description of a razed village in a story set during Israel's War of Independence:

The beds are still made, and the fire between the cooking stones still fuming, and chickens one minute peck through the rubbish as if nothing [is wrong] and the next flee squawking, slaughtered. . . . And the vessels in the yard are still in the very midst of their living concerns. . . . In one yard there stood a donkey with colorful linens and blankets heaped on its back, rolling off and fluttering to the ground . . . in the next yard were two sheep pressed, startled, into the corner, utterly bewildered (I later saw them bleating on our truck) and the large water jug was overturned on the threshold, dripping, astounded, the last of its waters into a puddle, half within the room, half without.<sup>13</sup>



Anna Ticho, *Jericho*, 1940. Brown chalk on paper.  
(The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

The precision and detail, the intimacy of Yizhar's description of the destruction of an Arab village, distinguish it from Orientalism: it is a faithful account, saturated with experience and empathy, not an idealized generalization but a sliver of reality, without a hint of biblical pastorality. Nonetheless, in situating the destructive encounter between two civilizations in a village, Yizhar is making a symbolic choice. The village, the center of Arab existence, is contrasted with the ravaging power of the Western Israeli, with his jeeps and hubris and derision. The water jug that is upset on the threshold of the household becomes a powerful symbol of trampled naïveté.

But Yizhar's was a singular voice, and much of Israeli culture continued to understand the East in terms of its naïveté. The Arab is attentive to nature and its rhythms; he is a beautiful, virile object of yearning; but he is also an innocent savage, a child in relation to culture and civilization. He possesses the simplicity of Eros and passions but lacks intellect and consciousness. In this, the conflict between the "naïve" and the "sentimental" involves an erasure of the Arab's otherness. He becomes an "emptiness" of sorts, against which Shlonsky waves his fist; the Arab is a vacuum into which the Westerner projects a part of his own personality. Israeli culture created through this conflict a powerful psychological

symbiosis in which the East was transformed into the hidden, repressed aspect of its soul. The Arab twins who appear repeatedly in Chana Gonen's torrid dreams in Amos Oz's novel *My Michael*, exuding savagery and incest that are at once attractive and repulsive, are the other side of the sleeping Arabs in Nahum Gutman's "Afternoon Rest" (*Menuhat Tsohorayyim*). Oz's position is more critical and self-aware because he exposes the mindset that grasps the Arab as naïve, though he himself does not present them as such.

The visual artists who remained in the landscape tradition continued, up to the 1960s, to produce paintings of the "Arab village"—a detached, oblivious art, blind to the yawning chasm opening all around them. The establishment of Ein Hod, an artists' colony built in 1953 on the ruins of an Arab village, speaks for itself: the "naïveté" of Israeli painting led an entire community of artists to settle within the *subject* of the painting. They settled inside the "beautiful" of Israeli art, but here we are dealing with an instance of the beautiful that manifests in its actual history—unlike Safed and Jerusalem, two other cities that attracted these painters—the vacuity and destruction upon which this ideal is based.

Similarly, the paved roads of Judea and Samaria that "crisscross" and "bypass" the landscape harness it from without (much like Shlonsky's camel), leading the Jewish settlers to the mountaintops (their preferred site of settlement) where their mastery and dominance can be buttressed. From there they look down on the *pastoral landscape*, consuming it as "beautiful" and "innocent." In essence, they have turned the land into a painting.

Yehoshua Kenaz's first major work, *After the Holidays* (*Aḥarei ha-Hagim*, 1964) revealed a horrifying aspect of the psychological symbiosis with which the Jews characterized the Arabs: during the British Mandate, a Jewish man toils in the garden of a family in a settlement. One of the daughters watches him as he hoes, arousing his desire. He tries to channel his passion into the work, but it is too great, and he flees the settlement for the fields:

It was still twilight. On the horizon red and green flames burned above the distant mountains. A little Arab girl stood in the middle of the field gathering her herd of black and brown goats together to take them home to her village. She spoke to them, scolded them, and hit them with a stick to goad them. There was no one in sight. The only sound was the melancholy chugging of the well engine in the distance.

Baruch set upon her in the field and did a terrible thing to her.

When he came to his senses he found himself lying in the field among the thorns and the dung, the panic-stricken goats running to and fro around him, bleating deafeningly. His eyes saw only death and blood and rags and black stains.<sup>14</sup>

Here we find the psychological-cultural paradigm in its purest form: civilization (the settlement), what lies beyond it, its “naïve” opposite—the fields and the herds—and the intractable anxiety of civilization that finds relief in the fields. However, the race to the fields, to the “naïve,” is no longer the result of yearning but a flight, and the relief is not fecund; it is rape. The allusion to the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:8, “And Cain set upon Abel in the field”) reveals the complexity and the symbolic significance of the enmity: we are dealing with sibling rivalry, sibling hatred. The psychological structure is the same: the revenge of a person expelled from nature against a sibling whose sacrifice is lovingly accepted; the revenge of the farmer against the shepherd. That the Arab attacked is a young girl is no coincidence: the naïve is feminine and childlike, and she is ravaged and plundered by a man whose path to the feminine and the childlike has been blocked. The pastoral fantasy of Zionist Orientalism dissolves in the face of incestuous violence.

#### THE CREATION OF MODERN HEBREW

Modern Israelis speak Hebrew and write in Hebrew. Second-graders can open the Book of Genesis and read “*bereshit bar’a Elohim et ha-shamayim ve-et ha’aretz*”—in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth—without translation or explanations. Ancient words are heard around the breakfast table and on the playground. Hebrew is the mother tongue. This phenomenon lies at the very heart of Israel’s identity both as a culture and as a locus of Jewish political existence.

The revival of Hebrew was the most radical event of the Zionist revolution. It preceded the geographic movement toward Palestine and was essentially different from it. That movement, *aliyah*, involved a profound transvaluation of the notion of the individual Jew and of the Jewish people tantamount to a rejection of traditional Judaism and its fate in the Diaspora. The revival of Hebrew, however, created a very different dynamic, one that does not contradict the traditional definition of the Jews as a people and as a nation. On the contrary, the Hebrew revival wished to create an organic connection between the Zionist revolution and the ahistoric and nonterritorial loci of Jewish identity. The language of the Bible, the Mishnah, and Jewish liturgy, Hebrew was also for two millennia the medium of communication between Jewish communities. When the sages of Babylon wrote to those of Italy or the Rhineland, they did so in Hebrew. The language became a *place*, a locus, for a dispersed people, the earthly manifestation of Jewish faith. The revival of Hebrew constitutes, then, a connection both to the remains of ancient Jewish civilization and to the discourse of Diaspora Judaism.

The transformation of Hebrew into the language of daily speech, scientific inquiry, and literary production was not the result of alchemy. It was contingent, first and foremost, upon the unique place of Hebrew within Western culture. The “renaissance” metaphor is misleading, for Hebrew was never a dead language; it existed in an intermediate condition of “static life.” In a 1913 essay titled “Language Pangs,” Bialik characterized the condition of Hebrew as follows:

A truly living language is produced by life and life’s literature. It does not detain its offspring in the womb, rather is fruitful and multiplies constantly and of itself, releasing its creative power in its due season. . . . A truly dead language has nothing but the writing on the tombstones, work done by the stonemason at a time of dire need. Not so our language, a “pseudo-living” language, that gives birth to very little and leaves much tucked in her womb; and it is our role to induce the birth.<sup>15</sup>

The “pseudo-living” language becomes a metaphor for the Jewish people, existing in a state of delayed fecundity, enduring a gestation period of eons. In this essay, as elsewhere, Bialik conceptualized language as the feminine manifestation of the spirit of the nation (he explicitly identified Hebrew as one of the manifestations of the *Shekhinah*, the feminine aspect of God), an eternal mother figure who requires the aid of her sons to return to her nurturing role. Clearly, the revival of Hebrew is not driven by revolutionary zeal but by Eros: a renewed bond with the maternal figure. It is an act of love.

The unique condition of Hebrew, which survived as a *written* language throughout the centuries of Jewish existence, illuminates the fascinating dynamic of its revival. The process began “from above,” from literary and intellectual circles, and it took years for Hebrew to become the spoken language of the Jews in Palestine. The literature produced in Eastern Europe in the 1880s created a locus of living Hebrew long before there was a spoken, lived language. Bialik considered the Russian-Jewish writer Mendele Mokher Sforim (the pseudonym of Sh. Y. Abramowitsch [ca. 1836–1917]) as the starting point of this revival:

Mendele is the first national artist of Hebrew literature. . . . He is the first to create a full, realistic Hebrew style. Up until Mendele we had language diversions, or language delusions, language gyrations and language patches; Mendele gave us a single, whole language, “human language.” . . . He is almost the first in modern Hebrew literature who ceased mimicking books and began mimicking nature and life. He doesn’t imitate the Bible or the Mishnah or the Midrash, rather [he] creates in the image and the likeness, according to the internal nature and the intrinsic spirit of Hebrew.<sup>16</sup>



The conclusion is critical: beyond the fact that Mendele was the first literary realist of the new Hebrew—his model is “nature and life”—he created a style that neither imitated earlier texts nor translated foreign ones. Mendele tapped forces that lay dormant within Hebrew.

In Bialik’s terminology, a “national artist” is not one who deals with the concerns of the nation or writes of nationalist themes, but rather one who produces a literary corpus whose style and substance, whose very essence, is drawn from the linguistic reservoirs of the nation. His use of the phrase marks the heart of the process of revival. The national artist is able to renew the ancient language through the sheer force of his creative intuition while remaining *within* “the internal nature and the intrinsic spirit” of that language, drawing upon its existing grammar and vocabulary. The revival of Hebrew cannot be understood, and probably would not have been as effective, without the impressive literary corpus of Mendele, Bialik, Tchernikhovsky, Berdichevsky, Feierberg, Brenner, and Genessin, all of whom wrote in a cultural context that did not speak—and barely read—Hebrew. These authors founded a Hebrew “literary republic” that developed in the last decades of the nineteenth century and whose population never numbered more than a few thousand, but its influence was nonetheless profound (see David Biale’s chapter in this volume).

Bialik was undoubtedly the father figure of modern Hebrew culture as a whole. This statement does not refer to his formal status as the “national poet,” an epithet he acquired in his lifetime and that was further developed by the Israeli educational establishment; nor does it refer to his actual artistic accomplishments. It refers, rather, to the paradigm he established for the Hebrew artist. There was, of course, Hebrew literature prior to the works of Mendele and Bialik. But what is the difference between the poetry of Rabbi Moses Ḥayyim Luzzatto or Judah Leib Gordon and that of Bialik? It lies in something subtle, almost invisible—namely, the *myth of the poet*. Every culture has its own such myth. For Christian Europe it is the Orpheus story: a martyrological myth of one who enters into the divine realm (Hades) and pays for the journey with his life and love. The implicit perspective of European poetry is that of a chosen individual, blessed by the gods (the gift of the muses) but also cursed by them (the loss of love). This myth is erotic in its representation of poetry as a sublimation of carnal Eros. The poem, the “beautiful,” is the divine substitute for the absent beloved. Bialik was well aware that the Hebrew poets who preceded him never considered either the myth of the poet or the origins of poetry; nor did they perceive the need to understand the European poetic model and replace it with a Hebrew model. A poet writing in Hebrew *without* breaking out of the European model is little more than a translator, working within a conceptual framework based on a pagan myth later adopted by Christians. Bialik knew, then, that with-

out a new myth of poetic creation Hebrew culture would never become independent but would remain forever on the margins of the dominant Western culture.

Bialik set out to establish a poetic myth on parallel tracks: he created a “national persona” or a “national self” whose life-experience personifies the nation as a whole, and he yoked this national self to the figure of the biblical prophet. The first poem in which he makes this connection is “On the Threshold of the House of Study” (*Al Saf Beit ha-Midrash*, 1894). This poem is a manifesto of sorts of the new poetic myth: the opening lines announce that the personal experience of the speaker and the fate of the nation as a whole are identical:

*Temple of my youth, my ancient house of study!  
Once again I come across your threshold that is now decayed,  
I see again your walls that are fading like smoke,  
The filth of your floor, the soot of your ceiling.*

Gradually, as the poem progresses, the voice of the speaker becomes increasingly forceful, alluding repeatedly to the language of biblical prophecy. The poem culminates in an explicitly prophetic statement as the poet, in the mode of classical biblical poetry, addresses the future:

*You will not collapse in ruin, O tent of Shem!  
I will yet build you and myself be built.  
From your dust I will revive the walls;  
You will yet outlast palaces, as you outlasted  
On the day of great destruction, when fortified towers fell,  
And when I repair the destroyed temple of God—  
I will throw open the tent fly and tear open a window,  
And the light will push back its shadowy darkness,  
And with the ascent of the cloud will God’s glory abide below;  
All creatures great and small will then know,  
Though the grass dries and the flower wilts—God endures forever!<sup>17</sup>*

What this early poem states in a blunt, perhaps even ponderous manner finds a more subtle and profound expression in Bialik’s mature works. The poem “Alone” (*Levadi*, 1902) can serve as a model for his complex synthesis between personal fate, expressed in very intimate terms, and the national dimension of the speaker:

*The wind carried all of them away,  
The light swept all of them away.  
A new song made the morning of their lives exult with song;  
And I, a soft fledgling, was completely forgotten  
Under the wings of the Shekhinah.*

*Solitary, solitary I remained, and the Shekhinah, too;  
She fluttered her broken right wing over my head.  
My heart knew her heart; she trembled with anxiety over me  
Over her son, over her only son.*

*She has already been driven from every corner, only  
One hidden nook, desolate and small, remained—  
The House of Study—and she covered herself with the shadow, and I was  
Together with her in her distress.*

*And when my heart yearned for the window, for the light,  
And when the place under her wing was too narrow for me  
She hid her head in my shoulder, and her tear dropped on my Talmud page.*

*Silently she wept over me and enfolded me  
As though shielding me with her broken wing:  
“The wind carried them all away, they have all flown off  
And I was left alone, alone. . . .”*

*And something akin to the ending of a very ancient lamentation  
And something akin to a prayer, a supplication-and-trembling:  
My ear heard in that silent weeping  
And in that tear, boiling—<sup>18</sup>*

“Alone” clearly demonstrates Bialik’s approach to the root symbols of traditional Judaism: the Shekhinah, the ancient personification of the nation’s spirit, heir to the mourning *Ur*-mother in Jeremiah’s vision, “Rachel weeping for her children, she refuses to be comforted” (Jeremiah 31:15); the bird in Psalm 84; and the dove in the liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) that descends from the symbolic heights and becomes a living creature, a close, even intimate presence. Under Bialik’s guidance, the symbolic figure undergoes a transformation and takes on a psychological dimension. The Shekhinah is first depicted as an anxious mother hovering protectively over her son, but, by the poem’s end, she is a dependent

motherly figure, hindering her son from flying away and growing up. In Bialik's depiction of the relationship between mother and son, there is no abstract sense of awe. The relationship is a complex web of anxiety, compassion, grief, and subtle irony: the speaker is aware that his mother is repeating his own statement when she says, "The wind carried them all away."

As the "personal" and the "national" aspects are joined ever more daringly, so too the biblical-prophetic mode must pass through a new, personal prism. In his great poems "My Poetry" (*Shirati*, 1901) and "Splendor" (*Zohar*, 1901), Bialik transforms his childhood experiences into divine visions, presenting them as the anointing of a prophet. "My Poetry" addresses two questions: "Do you know whence I inherited my poetry?" and "Know you whence comes my sigh?" The "poetry" and the "sigh" are the two sides of Jewish poetry. The poetry comes from the father's domain, from the meager Sabbath feast, whereas the sigh is from the mother's, the financial difficulties and the shame of her widowhood, ultimately distilled in the image of the tear that falls into the dough she kneads for her children's bread. The poem's conclusion completes the connection to the image of the biblical prophet:

*My heart knew well that tears fell in the dough;  
And when she gave her children warm new bread,  
Bread of her baking, bread of her pain, her woe,  
I swallowed sighs that seeped into my bones.<sup>19</sup>*

The mother's tears "seeped into" the bones of the speaker like the divine scroll the prophet Ezekiel consumes. This passage also indicates that the connection to the biblical source is not a one-way street. Not only does the human experience resemble the biblical paradigm but the opposite is true as well: the ancient figures of God, the *Shekhinah*, and the prophets resemble a father, a mother, and a son-poet. God, too, in all his vast glory undergoes psychologization in this poem. Bialik radicalizes the midrashic tradition in that he undermines the traditional textual hierarchy within Hebrew literature: the new text draws its religious authority and theological structure from the ancient work but also changes its meaning. For Bialik, this move has a chronological aspect as well, in which the late is no longer inferior to the early.

In this revolutionary move, Bialik draws daringly upon European Romantic philosophy—the idea that childhood is an era of purity and divine revelation—but he transforms these ideas, converting them, as it were, to Judaism, and associates them with the myth of Hebrew poetry, now understood as prophecy. The poet is anointed by God and maintains direct contact with the divine. This is not

the hubris of the Greek hero who enters into the world of the divine (a motif later transformed in Christian martyrology) but a continuous *kabbalah* in the original sense of the word: tradition. The phrase “I inherited my poetry” is critical: the Hebrew poet continues an ancient genealogy of those chosen to receive God’s word. The divine speech is found, through various metamorphoses, throughout the Jewish people and thus passes to the poet from Jewish daily life, from his parents’ home.

Bialik’s poetic language resonates richly (in a way that is inevitably lost in translation) throughout the different strata of Hebrew literature: his descriptions of personal, even mundane experiences recall a wealth of ancient texts—the Bible, midrash, the Hekhalot poetry, ancient piyyutim, and liturgy. The reference is not always a quote or explicit allusion—sometimes it is the morphological structure of the words, other times a matter of phonetic similarity. He always engages the ancient texts anew, endowing them with a different meaning, completely lyrical and psychological. Bialik himself says as much in “Should an Angel Ask” (*V-Im Yishal Malakh*, 1905):

*From dead letters songs of life gushed forth,  
Shocking the famous dead upon the shelves.  
For they were different songs: of small bright clouds,  
Of golden beams of sun and shining tears.<sup>20</sup>*

It was the myth of the Hebrew poet that doubtless conferred upon Bialik’s poetry its unprecedented authority. Bialik was the first of the moderns to deal with the meta-poetic issues that arise from the writing of specifically Hebrew poetry. From this point on, Hebrew literature had its own center; it was no longer dependent upon other literary corpora and could absorb outside influences with a clear sense of its particular identity, and not as passive imitation.

Bialik’s influence extended far beyond the immediate circle of followers that formed around him in his lifetime. His use of the linguistic stores of Hebrew created a sense of freedom that is evident in Hebrew poetry to this day. His myth of the Hebrew poet continued after his death and was developed in the poetry of Shlonsky, Natan Alterman, Natan Zach, Meir Wieseltier, Yitzhak Laor, and Hezi Laskaly, and particularly in the writings of S. Y. Agnon and Uri Zvi Greenberg.

Not all the Zionists believed that Hebrew could function as the daily language of the Jewish state. Herzl, for one, imagined it would be German. Aḥad Ha-Am did not think that Hebrew was suited for subjects outside the confines of “Judaism”; he intended it to be the language of Jewish scholarship but nothing more. Even literature appeared to him beyond the reach of Hebrew, because

only a spoken language (such as Yiddish) could produce a Jewish literature. But the members of the Second Aliyah thought otherwise. Most came from the Jewish intelligentsia of Eastern Europe at the peak of their adolescent revolt and saw their immigration to Palestine as an act of rebellion against the world of their fathers, a world that prayed in Hebrew but spoke Yiddish. Hebrew became the language of the new Jewish locus in Israel. Eliezer Ben-Yehudah's great historical dictionary (composed by him in the first two decades of the twentieth century but not completed until 1957, thirty-seven years after his death) came to symbolize the renaissance of spoken Hebrew. And, indeed, Hebrew became a versatile modern language, well suited for scientific, literary, and daily life.

It was the shift of Hebrew literary activity from Eastern Europe during the Second Aliyah that established Palestine as the center of modern Hebrew culture, and the arrival of Brenner in 1909 symbolized this transition. From that point on Palestine, the new Jewish space, became the central and decisive subject of Hebrew literature; it became the Jewish *topos* both in the Greek sense of "place, region" and in the literary sense. That literature created its own historic dynamic, unlike the Hebrew literature prior to Mendele and Bialik, which developed through imitation of the ideas and styles of the surrounding Arab or European culture. Only after these ideas were recognized as exemplary by the host culture did Hebrew writers adopt them—usually after a generation or two (or more) had passed. This was still true of Bialik and Tchernikhovsky, who responded to European Romantic poetry written 60 and 70 years earlier. But once a firm stylistic center was established in Palestine—again, primarily through the work of Bialik and Mendele—an intra-Hebrew dynamic began to develop. Though doubtless still influenced by Western literature, the writers were driven by powerful internal arguments with each other, between the generations, and between them and the long history of the language and its literature.

Hebrew literature created for itself a sort of telescoped time, clearly apart from the European dynamic, not parallel to it and certainly not lagging behind it. From a European perspective (typical, perhaps, of the 1950s) it could be argued that in certain cases Hebrew prose was more avant-garde and "progressive" than European. (Genessin's "stream of consciousness" writing precedes Marcel Proust or Virginia Woolf, and so forth.) The "telescoping of time" had various causes: this was a distinctly new literature; that is, it found itself dealing with issues that had never been addressed in its culture. The novelty was thematic, first and foremost. Prior to Mendele, Bialik, and Tchernikhovsky, Hebrew writers had produced no detailed and realistic description of a forest or a field or a sunset. The fate of the individual, the human body, actual life circumstances, human relations and emotions—none of these had ever been described in Hebrew, and

there were no terms for many of the key concepts. For Hebrew culture, the physical world was terra incognita. The problem was not simply one of vocabulary (the absence of words for flora, fauna, most human anatomy, and so on). The primary difficulty lay in the perception of reality: sensation, understanding, associations, the structure of human consciousness. The Hebrew idea of the “soul” was unchanged since the Middle Ages. Modern Hebrew needed, then, to constitute an entire *epistemology*, the goals of which were not philosophic but existential.

When Tchernikhovsky, on the threshold of the twentieth century, wrote his nature poems—“Facing the Sea” (*Le-Nokkah ha-Yam*), “From Within the Cloud” (*Mitokh Av he-Anan*, 1902), and particularly “Charms of the Forest” (*Kismei Ya’ar*, 1890)—he was quite aware that these descriptions (that is, these acts of perception, of seeing, and their translation into poetry) were almost without precedent in Hebrew. Unlike the poems of Wordsworth and Byron, who had the support of a rich poetic tradition involving observation of the world, Tchernikhovsky’s poems are suffused with the awareness that these were the first such observations in Hebrew; an awareness that he, the poet, was a lantern lighting the way down an unfamiliar path. Thus the typical Romantic position so noticeable in his poetry—the sense of alienation and exile from nature and consequent yearning for nature’s mysteries—is in fact unlike European Romanticism, and it arises from different sources. He writes in “Charms of the Forest”:

*And I, a mute person, will stand and listen: What is for me? Who is for me?  
A foreigner, a stranger in their world, a foreigner, only narrowly plotting my  
path.*<sup>21</sup>

Here he is writing *as a Jew* whose culture has a very well developed angelology but no names for trees or mushrooms. The deep romanticism that resonates throughout Hebrew literature until the beginning of the twentieth century is not a nostalgic yearning for a bygone aesthetic age but an attempt to deal with the natural world within the context of what, for the West, was a unique cultural consciousness. What had transpired in European culture since the Renaissance was for Hebrew literature compressed into a few generations.

The same sense of discovery, of a first formulation, that resonates in the works of Bialik and Tchernikhovsky fills the pages of Yizhar’s masterpiece *Days of Ziklag* (*Yemei Ziklag*, 1957). The novel unfolds over the course of a few battle-filled days during Israel’s War of Independence, but it deals primarily with the landscape, offering a detailed description of its space, light, soil, flora, and fauna. Yizhar, who constructed this grand narrative in a collective stream-of-

consciousness, also analyzed the full spectrum of mental disturbances at work when the Jewish-Hebrew mind encounters expanses of nature. *Days of Ziklag* forms a direct link to Tchernikhovsky's questions in the poem cited above, or to Bialik's question in "In the Field" (*Ba-Sadeh*, 1894):

*Tell me my mother, my earth, broad, plentiful, and great—  
Why do you not pull out your breast for me, a poor yearning soul?*

Let us conclude this discussion of the creation of modern Hebrew with Zach's poem "A Moment" (*Rega Ehad*, 1962), which opens his collection *Different Poems* (*Shirim Shonim*) and demonstrates at once the newness of the language and its archaic resonances:

*Quiet for a moment. Please. I'd like to  
say something. He went away and  
passed in front of me. I could have  
touched the hem of his cloak. I didn't.  
Who could have known what I didn't  
know.*

*There was sand stuck to his clothes.  
Sprigs were tangled in his beard. He  
must have slept on straw the night  
before. Who could have known that in  
another night he would be hollow as a  
bird, hard as stone.*

*I could not have known. I don't blame  
him. Sometimes I feel him getting up  
in his sleep, moonstruck like the sea,  
flitting by me, saying to me my son.  
My son. I didn't know that you are, to  
such an extent, with me.<sup>22</sup>*

The language of the poem is colloquial Israeli Hebrew. Not a single word is foreign to the active vocabulary of a modern Hebrew speaker. The tone is far from the declamatory style of ancient poetry. Still, the opening line—"ana ani ba"—is a pun in which the reader hears Reuven's words to his brothers in Genesis 37. Hebrew acts like a giant organ, producing echoes and the echoes of echoes at the slightest touch.



What is it that the narrator wishes to say? This is the tale of a missed contact: "I could have touched the hem of his cloak." And the Hebrew phrase "*shulei adarto*" (the hem of his cloak) evokes the Bible itself, though it never appears therein. Zach evokes all those who stand in the presence of God (or of God's messengers). The reader does not know the identity of the "he." Is it a father? Is it God? Undoubtedly both, but more than that: it is the absolute "other," the sublime. And yet this "other" is inextricably tied in the vocabulary and the living memory of ancient Hebrew to two words, "*shulei adarto*." Hebrew is felt as an immanent revelation, a medium of sorts for the sublime, transcendent presence. The "he" is, in a sense, language itself.

The second stanza describes the descent of the divine "he." He grows entangled in the lower reality. The Hebrew ear picks up the word play of *ḥol* (sand) and *ḥol* (profane). He descends from the heavens to the earth, touching the earth and the *ḥol*. His descent signals his end, his death. But the third stanza marks a reversal. The "I" feels him "getting up." This is not a miraculous resurrection, for "he" exists within the "I." The "I" senses him. The "he" (father, God, Hebrew) is part of the personality of the living person. Within the poet, within his soul, begins a new, different contact between the sublime "he" and himself. And the other says to the poet: "My son. My son. I did not know that you are, to such an extent, with me."

Again the Hebrew ear clearly discerns that the repetition of "My son" recalls David's lament on the death of Absalom. But the situation constructed in the poem is very different from the biblical father's mourning. Here it is the father who dies, and the speaker is his living son. The father figure (God, Hebrew) addresses the living son after its death, revealing the tragically missed opportunity that occurred in the individual and national past as well as the mutual obliviousness and rupture that characterize their covert relationship. But the very existence of this internalized other, the father-God, and the ability to communicate with him within one's own soul, creates a new sort of contact. The sublime presence of God, the Other, of language as a whole, becomes a living internal part of the poet.

The connection to Bialik's "Alone" is readily apparent. The mother figure, the Shekhinah, has been replaced with a sublime, divine father figure. The dependence, however, is much the same. More important, Zach repeats the psychological shift in which the impersonal God and tradition become an intimate, dear presence, equally dependent upon the living person. The poem contains in its narrative and its inherent power the tragic immanence of Hebrew speech. The living speaker of Hebrew is bound through it to the fallen God that is implicit in the language, and through God to the biography of God's nation. We recall the ancient source of the Hebrew word *davar* in the first line "Please, I'd like

to say something [*davar*].” *Davar* is also the word of God, the logos, a principle that is enacted in each succeeding generation, secular and religious alike.

### HEBREW MODERNISM AND THE CREATION OF THE NEW JEW

Modernism in Israel, which began with the generation after Bialik and Tchernikhovsky and of which Zach is a late representative, was unlike that of the West. The movement never actually broke with neo-Romanticism; only in the Israeli context does it become apparent that this was “modernism.” It did not aim its arrows against an older world, nor was it interested in urban poetry with a tendency toward the abstract. It consisted, rather, in the search for an authentic Hebrew voice. The modernist movement in Israel focused on the spoken language and sought to reveal the “poetic” quality of the very mechanisms of speech. It was also bound up with the possibility of creating a new kind of Jew.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Moshe Smilansky published a series of stories that extol handsome, virile, and eminently moral Eastern heroes. These figures, all constructed in the best Orientalist tradition, were intended as role models for Jewish readers. In his best-known story, “Hawaja Nazar” (1910), Smilansky’s hero is a Russian-born convert to Judaism who immigrates to Palestine and becomes a powerful farmer with a heartfelt interest in the “Biblia.” His handsome features and virility earn him the admiration of the local Arabs, who ask him to be a judge over them. The ultimate mark of his successful metamorphosis is the willingness of the Arab women to take him as a husband. Yet the story’s conclusion points to a profound flaw in his *Weltanschauung*: wishing to see the Jordan, he sets out on a journey toward the river, but when he reaches it he is shocked by its modest dimensions. The pioneer, who swam in the great Volga as a child, leaps into the Jordan and drowns. The Jewish burial council refuses to bury him in the Land of Israel, because he is uncircumcised.

This conclusion reveals the full complexity of the notion of a “new person” or “new Jew”: his beauty and virility stem from his gentile mother and mark him as an outsider to traditional Judaism. He is uncircumcised, which is to be understood by the reader as a physiological indication that he has not been “castrated” by Judaism (the symbolism is similar to the phylacteries at the end of Tchernikhovsky’s poem “In Front of a Statue of Apollo”). However, his death in the Jordan reveals that he does not understand the local landscape: he becomes tangled in the shallow brush and cannot break free. In judging the Jordan, he makes use of foreign images (the Volga), but he runs up against the intractable local reality that proves too powerful for him. Finally, it should be noted that the Jor-

dan symbolizes the entrance into the Land of Israel (in the Exodus narrative) and is the “holy river,” a symbol of the sanctity of the land. In light of this, the pioneer’s death may be an expression of the land’s resistance to this bifurcated man, who is neither a native nor of the Jewish religion and nation. It is striking that Smilansky, the impassioned spokesman of early Hebrew literature in Palestine, rejects the one-dimensional ideal of the new man, revealing the European foreignness of this imagery of man and space. Smilansky is the first to demand of the Jew that he “know” the land in sexual terms as well, to consummate his love for it and take it for his bride.

The writers and artists of the Third Aliyah (beginning in 1919) sought to create precisely the same linkage between the Jewish religious tradition and both a new physiognomy and agricultural labor in Palestine. Shlonsky begins his poem “Toil” (*Amal*, 1927) as follows:

*We have a small hand with five fingers,  
Wax fingers thin to breaking.  
The pulse beats at their beginning and at their end—fingernails.  
Oh, what shall we do to the fingers on the day we labor with them?*<sup>23</sup>

The hand, like the sister in the Song of Songs 8:8 (“We have a little sister and she has no breasts”), is immature. Its fingers are waxen, like those of scholars and merchants, and though it has a pulse and nails it is not yet ready for “the day we labor with them.” Shlonsky’s brilliant allusion to the Song of Songs hints that the laborer’s day is analogous to the nuptial night when the sister will cease to be a girl and become a woman; the passage to the Land of Israel and to agricultural labor is a passage of maturation. He reveals the force that must drive the new Jew: “Pound mightily, human pulse! Grow wild, fingernails! We are going to toil!”<sup>24</sup>

The next poem in the cycle is an ode to sweat: “Oh, Sweat! Oh drops of blessing falling from my high forehead like dew from pure skies.”<sup>25</sup> These poems create a broad network of concepts around the body—the hair, the skin, the physical power, and the sexuality that were to characterize the new Jew, the sensual, “wild” person who plows and nurses the land simultaneously. But the connection to Jewish tradition is not severed. In “Toil,” Shlonsky links the imagery of the body and physical labor to the ceremonial reading of the Torah:

*Dress me, good mother, in a splendid coat of many colors  
And with dawn lead me to toil.  
My land wraps in light like a prayer shawl,*

*Houses stand like phylacteries.  
And like bands of phylacteries glide hand-laid asphalt roads.*

*Thus a beautiful city offers her morning prayer to her creator.  
And among the creators, your son Abraham,  
Poet-roadbuilder in Israel.<sup>26</sup>*

Once again, a poet evokes the tefillin, but now in a thoroughly secular context. The “good mother” is none other than Judaism personified, called upon to crown her son as he sets off for the religious ceremony of physical labor.

Uri Zvi Greenberg, the greatest modern Hebrew poet, presents in “Ascending Virility” (*Ha-Gavrut ha-Olah*, 1926)—his wonderful poem devoted to agricultural work in Israel—a complex synthesis between the ideal of labor and the prophetic-biblical image of the poet. The journey toward the Land of Israel is understood as an approach toward a “holiday of revelation,” and the poet is God’s chosen: “This is the body cast by God from a lodestone. Drawing to itself from a distance, it draws the one fleeing in the dead of night.”<sup>27</sup> The sunrise, the stock symbol of the Zionist movement (heir to the Haskalah symbolism of light and dawn) is transformed in Greenberg’s poetry and takes on a mystical quality; it becomes a divine fire that flows from man’s body following circumcision. In the prose poem “Incision and Command” (*Hitukh ve-Tzivuyi*), he writes: “There is an inner sunrise that gnaws between the bones, wishing to break out as in the wide heavens and ignite upon me the fire stored in the soul. Its sunrise cries out from within to be revealed in my life.”<sup>28</sup>

Greenberg’s poetry further emphasizes the tendency—already visible in Shlonsky’s poems—to link Aliyah and agricultural labor to the religious commandments. Greenberg describes immigration as compliance with a commandment spoken by previous generations:

*Generations sunk in their pained flesh and blood in several soils throughout the  
world*

*Command the grandson:*

*Ascend to the Land of Israel and express us, living man!*

*Do not sing from the glory of the heavens, speak from the man who lives upon the  
soils:*

*The flesh, the blood, the nerves, the cartilage, the skin.*

*The garment, the bread, the water, the house, the vessels.*

*The woman, the cradle, the good baby in his infancy.*

*The soil, the iron, the lamp, the machine, the steering wheel.*

*Day and night: yearnings, distances, walkings.  
The dream and waking reality are twins, there is almost no difference:  
Each nourishes the other and each embraces the other  
And both have rays in the midst of the days.*<sup>29</sup>

The conclusion of this excerpt—"in the midst of the days"—situates the historic event in cosmic time, understood here as the conjunction of the midlife of the poet and the midlife of the nation. The modernist character of the poem, which draws on German expressionism and on Walt Whitman, connects it to twentieth-century events, including the rejection of the "old world" of declining empires and World War I. Within the dynamics of Israeli culture this modernist sensibility also rejects the poetics of the previous generation—the generation of Bialik. This ecstatic poetry, wild and unbridled by form, was modern Hebrew culture's Oedipal revolt against its founding fathers. Its significance is inextricably linked to the *place* the poetry dealt with; it was viewed as poetry of the Land of Israel.

The ecstatic sensuality of the 1920s was in no way limited to the poetry of Greenberg and Shlonsky. At this time visual art in Israel experienced its first "modernist" period, turning against the propagandist Orientalism of the first Bezalel School. Artists such as Reuven Rubin, Naḥum Gutman, Joseph Zaritzky, and Tziona Tajar created a stylistic language that joined the new person—muscular and tan—to the local landscape, the mountains, and the sky. In Ru-



Reuven Rubin, *First Fruits*, 1922–23. Triptych: oil on canvas.  
(Rubin Museum Collection, Tel Aviv)

bin's great triptych "First Fruits" (*Bikurim*, 1923), a group of men and women, intermixed with donkeys, sheep, and fruit, are painted in earthen hues and arranged like saints in a Christian altarpiece.

This was the heroic period of Israeli culture. From the 1920s to the 1940s, Palestine was the center and dominant site of Hebrew artistic and literary creation. In the 1920s, the culture generated its own creative dynamic and began to establish a market for its works, in Europe and America as well as at home. (For its impact on Poland, see David Biale's chapter in this volume.) The leading writers of prose included Agnon, Ḥayyim Hazaz, Yizhar, Yehudah Burla, and Moshe Shamir; the preeminent poets included—in addition to Shlonsky and Greenberg—Alterman, Leah Goldberg, and Amir Gilboa. This was also the foundational period for Israeli music: classical by Isaac Edelman, Alexander Boskowitz, Paul Ben-Ḥayyim, Oedoen Partos, and Mordechai Seter; popular or folk songs by David Zahavi, Mordechai Zeira, Daniel Sambursky, and Nahum Nardi.

#### THE GENERATION OF 1948 AND THE IMAGE OF THE SABRA

Wars are the clock ticking off the time of Israeli history: World War I; the "riots" of 1929 and 1936; World War II; the War of Independence, 1948; the Sinai Campaign, 1956; the Six Day War, 1967; the War of Attrition, 1969–71; the Yom Kippur War, 1973; the Lebanon War, 1982; the Gulf War, 1991. Not all these conflicts were equally significant in their cultural impact, and surely not in the same way, but together they create a ghastly rhythm in which every calm period is seen in Israel as a pause before future violence.

The War of Independence and the founding of the state were the most decisive cultural moments in Israeli culture. The Yishuv was certain that these were events of almost mythical proportions. The war was seen as the test of the new Jew. An entire generation was named for that war, "the generation of 1948," a designation that stood for a complete way of life and established a fixed image of bravery in Israeli culture. The absolute commitment of the Yishuv to the War of Independence left clear literary and artistic marks, particularly in the view that the individual is always a part of the "us," the collective. The war was, in the critic Dan Miron's phrase, "the anvil upon which Israeli culture was hammered out." It established a new center of identity and identification: whoever was not suited to the mores of the Sabras (the native-born Israelis), such as their Hebrew pronunciation, their rites of passage, and their existential challenges, found himself

or herself excluded (see Eli Yassif's chapter in this volume). This new ideology became the basis for the most profound conflict in the post-1948 culture, between those who viewed themselves as heirs to the ideology and those who did not—the Jews of the East, the European survivors of the Holocaust, and the Orthodox community.

In the late 1940s, a prominent school of thought emerged that served as a catalyst in the development of the image of the Sabra, namely the Canaanite ideology, whose main spokesmen were the poet Yonatan Ratosh, the author and sculptor Binyamin Tammuz, and the important sculptor Yitzhak Danziger. The secularism that led the visual arts (from the 1930s on) toward abstract modernism had distanced itself from both Judaism and the East, electing instead a universalistic perspective in which Israeli art was seen as a branch of Western art. The "Canaanites," in contrast, loathed Judaism but embraced the East, though not the actual East—be it Jewish or Arab—but the one that preceded the monotheistic religions. They searched for national particularity in the soil itself—in its sand and stones, in the bowels of the earth, the deepest archaeological strata of Israeli space. In effect, they sought to bypass history, driven by a yearning for a lost state of archaic perfection.

Danziger's statue "Nimrod" (1939), though completed before the Canaanite group became active, was its harbinger and is to this day honored in the brief cultural memory of Israel as a masterpiece (see p. 1010). Nimrod is mentioned in Genesis 10:8 as a relative of the forefather of the Canaanites: "Cush also begot Nimrod, who was the first man of might on the earth." The statue is made of Nubian sandstone, which imparts a weighty symbolism: this is the desert stone representing the pure expanse, natural and untamed; it was taken from the red rock of Petra, a mysterious oracle of the ancient past. The statue is a curious, uncanny combination of a raised, pseudo-archaic head and a thin, sensual, and very realistic boyish body. Nimrod holds a bow in his left hand, part of it concealed behind his back; a bird is perched on his shoulder. The statue has been the subject of many interpretations and is one of the most famous subjects in the discourse of Israeli identity. Some see in it a rare, primordial beauty, others ravaging power, and others, in the 1990s, exilic weakness and sensual femininity. "Nimrod" remains an enigmatic emblem, tied to the feel of the local space, to the sandstone, to a primordial reality, and to the East; it is a work whose differing interpretations reveal the internal contradictions beneath the idealized façade of the Sabra.

The literary corpus of the generation of 1948 dealt primarily with the pre-state youth movements and the War of Independence, thus concentrating on the native hero and drawing away from any earlier Jewish context. The famous

opening line of Shamir's novel *Stories of Eliq* (*Pirke Eliq*, 1951)—“Eliq was born of the sea”—locates the hero within nature itself, emerging like Aphrodite from the open space, resistant to any concrete genealogy. The Sabra, as he was portrayed in the works of Yizhar, Shamir, and Tammuz, was not only isolated from “Diaspora Jewry” but was forever frozen in a state of youth. The Hebrew words for young men, *ne'arim* and *baḥurim*, appear repeatedly in these contexts. It bears emphasizing—particularly against the backdrop of the Holocaust—that the physiognomy of the Sabra is blatantly Nordic: he is always tall, blue-eyed, and blond. The Sabra, the subject and the bearer of Israeli ideology, was built largely on hatred for the “old Jew” who was characterized using the imagery of European antisemitism. This literary representation evokes to no small degree the psychological markings of the “hostage syndrome,” in which the captive begins to identify with his captors. Here, the Jew adopts the form of his tormentor. His eternal youth, meanwhile, keeps him from any serious moral conflict. The young soldiers of the War of Independence were killed before they could reach sexual or moral maturity, and they were likened by the poets to Adonis, who dies in the prime of his youth and is replaced by red flowers.

Ḥayyim Guri (b. 1923) was the outstanding poet of the generation of 1948 and one of the greatest Hebrew poets in the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1960, he published one of his best-known works, “Heritage” (*Yerushah*):

*The ram came last of all. And Abraham  
did not know that it came to answer the  
boy's question—first of his strength  
when his day was on the wane.*

*The old man raised his head. Seeing  
that it was no dream and that the angel  
stood there—the knife slipped from his  
hand.*

*The boy, released from his bonds, saw  
his father's back.*

*Isaac, as the story goes, was not  
sacrificed. He lived for many years, saw  
what pleasure had to offer, until his  
eyesight dimmed.*



*But he bequeathed that hour to his  
offspring. They are born with a knife in  
their hearts.*<sup>30</sup>

This poem, which deals with the fate of the Jews through the ages, is understood by most Israeli readers as an elegy for those who die to defend the Land of Israel. It is often read at memorial services, along with Guri's equally famous war poem of 1949, "Behold, Our Bodies Are Laid Out" (*Hinei Mutalot Gufotenu*).<sup>31</sup> It is not political or religious leaders who link the binding of Isaac to fallen Israeli warriors, but parents, students, and soldiers. Clearly the poem serves a human need to make sense of death in battle by relating it to the sacrificial offering, construing death in the wars of Israel as a direct continuation of Jewish fate throughout history. However, on a less conscious level, this poem is a song of protest. The last stanza—often quoted by people who do not know its source—is the silent cry of a people whose very identity forces death upon them; for whom belonging to the nation that inhabits the Land of Israel is like a knife in their hearts. The heroic Sabra is also the victim Isaac.

The binding of Isaac is perhaps the most vigorous myth in Israeli culture, having seized the place of the Exodus myth, which, as we have seen, was the clear favorite in the early days of Zionism. It is recalled in innumerable texts besides Guri's, most significantly in Agnon's *Only Yesterday*, discussed above, in which a Zionist migrates to Israel and is "swallowed up" in Jerusalem, where he dies a horrible death; and in Wieseltier's 1968 poem "Yitzhak's Story" (*Ma'aseh Yitzhak*), about an Israeli child who is sexually abused by the Zionist municipal authority of Tel Aviv.<sup>32</sup> Wieseltier's Tel Aviv is like the shop of a corrupt and rapacious Jewish bourgeois. Agnon and Wieseltier use the binding of Isaac in their harsh critiques of Orthodox Judaism and the new secular materialism, respectively. Clearly, then, this myth is in no way limited only to war and death; it bears on other aspects of Israeli life, as well.<sup>33</sup>

### THE HOLOCAUST IN ISRAELI CULTURE

The image of Isaac bound for slaughter also conjures up the Holocaust, especially in the poem "Isaac" by Amir Gilboa (1917–1984), in which it is Abraham and not his son who dies in the forests of Europe. The terrible destruction of the Jewish civilization in Europe, the Shoah in modern Hebrew discourse, did not become part of Israeli culture until a generation later. Except for Gilboa's poems and Greenberg's great poem "The Breadths of the River" (*Rehovot ha-Nahar*, 1946), Israel did not produce a major work of art dealing with the Holo-

caust until the 1960s. Gilboa and Greenberg, the latter having literally prophesied the destruction of European Jewry in the 1930s, remained solitary—albeit powerful—voices. Otherwise, the Holocaust was repressed, relegated to the margins of Israel's cultural consciousness.

The Holocaust survivors who came to Israel found themselves in a society with which they could not communicate. In its early years, Israel's attitude contained more than an element of accusation: the victims of the Holocaust bore the responsibility for their tragedy because they had chosen to remain "exilic" Jews, that is, they were not Zionists and had not embraced the ethos of the new Jew. "Like lambs to the slaughter" was a phrase often used to describe the destruction of European Jewry. The physical appearance of the survivors ("so pallid, not the least bit tan") and their scarred, traumatized psyches set them apart from the Israelis, who viewed them with derision and condescension. They were known as *sabonim*, bars of soap, a slang reference to the cosmetic products the Nazis allegedly extracted from the bodies of dead Jews. For many years the term *sabon* designated a person who obeys unquestioningly. The survivors themselves said nothing; the callousness of the surrounding culture conspired, as it were, with their desperate need to repress their tragedy so as to continue living.

This began to change in the early 1950s with the reparations agreement between Germany and Israel. The subsequent public outcry provoked a furious debate in the Knesset, the press, and in the literary world. But the watershed event was the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961, when the State of Israel positioned itself, symbolically, as the prosecutor of the German nation. The trial was broadcast on the radio (television was not introduced in Israel until the late 1960s) and followed by the entire population. The court proceedings provided, for the first time, details of the Nazis' systematic extermination of the Jews. Only then did the enormity of the tragedy enter into the consciousness of the nation as a whole. From that point on, the Holocaust became one of the most important subjects of Israeli memory: survivors began to recount their stories, and their presence became a powerful, dominant voice in the collective self.

Aharon Appelfeld now began to publish a literary portrait of East European Jewry on the eve of World War II. He did not describe the horrors of the extermination, providing instead an anatomy of its genesis and development. His stories are sensitive and highly realistic portrayals of the Jewish bourgeoisie in progressively more hostile surroundings, up to the final collapse of that civilization.

Dan Pagis, who began publishing poetry in the late 1950s, did not address the Holocaust until the early 1970s. His poems, unquestionably among the most important artistic statements on the Holocaust, are treasures of modern Hebrew

literature. They are included in school curricula and serve as an entrée to a broad and nuanced discussion of the theological and existential significance of the Shoah. His best-known poem, "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Freight Car," became an emblem of sorts for the Holocaust as a whole. Pagis's approach is daring and subversive. The relationship between the executioner and the victim is seen as a modern version of Cain and Abel:

*Here, in this freight car,  
I, Eve,  
with my son Abel.  
If you see my older boy,<sup>34</sup>  
Cain, the son of Adam,  
tell him that I*

The sudden break that concludes the poem, a silence that announced an awful absence, is a profound poetic commentary on the philosopher Theodor Adorno's statement that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz.

#### THE CRISIS OF HEBREW CULTURE AFTER THE SIX DAY WAR

The Six Day War of 1967 marked the end of an era that spanned nearly 20 years in which Israel was governed by Socialist Zionism under the leadership of David Ben-Gurion and the Labor Party. This was the time of the "melting pot," when great waves of immigrants were absorbed into Israeli society, and also a period that witnessed the inchoate beginnings of a peace culture not committed to any political party. The Six Day War turned the little State of Israel into a much larger state of occupation. The victory aroused a sense of euphoria. The messianic forces in Israeli culture grew stronger, and the country became more like the "Promised Land" than ever. The Revisionist political groups were greatly strengthened, and the national consensus that had seemed to exist in the years following 1948 was shattered. The culture was divided, and the "doves," who produced most of the art, positioned themselves in opposition to the Occupation.

In 1973, the Yom Kippur War brought about the deepest crisis in Israel's self-image. The sense of security and power inculcated by the Six Day War was revealed as nothing more than hubris. For many, the shocking failure and the terrible toll of the war joined with its symbolic starting date to take on the appearance of a biblical plague. Israeli soldiers were exposed, for the first time, to the horrors of an extended modern war. The Arab enemy no longer seemed infe-

rior. The very existence of the state was felt to be under constant threat. As a result, the image of the state as a large, protective mother hovering over the nation was utterly undermined, and the complete trust Zionism had previously enjoyed was replaced with a sober skepticism. The war set off, in a chain reaction of sorts, a series of cultural and political events: for the first time (1977) the leadership of the state moved from the socialist bloc to the political right (and it has been moving back and forth ever since), and the fabric of Israel's population—and its culture—began to disintegrate into ever smaller factions and fragments. The Lebanon War of the early 1980s further undermined the trust of the populace toward its political leaders, and it pushed the political and cultural schisms to the point of enmity.

The literary reflection of this crisis is exemplified in the poetry of Yonah Wallach (1944–85) and the novels of Yitzhak Laor (1948–). Almost 100 years after Tchernikhovsky's use of the tefillin as a symbol of Orthodox Judaism's imprisonment of the God of nature, Wallach returned to the symbol and gave it perhaps its most provocative expression in her famous poem "Tefillin" (1983):

*Come to me  
 don't let me do anything  
 you do it for me  
 do everything for me  
 what I even start doing  
 you do instead of me  
 I'll put on tefillin  
 I'll pray  
 you put on the tefillin for me too  
 bind them on my hands  
 play them on me  
 move them with delight on my body  
 rub them hard against me  
 stimulate me everywhere  
 make me swoon with sensation  
 move them over my clitoris  
 tie my waist with them  
 so I'll come quickly  
 play them in me  
 tie my hands and feet  
 do things to me  
 against my will*

*turn me over on my belly  
 and put the tefillin in my mouth  
 bridle reins  
 ride me I'm a mare  
 pull my head back  
 till I scream with pain  
 and you're pleased  
 then I'll move them onto your body  
 with unconcealed intention  
 oh how cruel my face will be  
 I'll move them slowly over your body  
 slowly slowly slowly  
 around your neck I'll move them  
 I'll wind them several times around your neck, on one side  
 and on the other I'll tie them to something solid  
 especially heavy maybe twisting  
 I'll pull and I'll pull  
 till your soul leaves you  
 till I choke you  
 completely with the tefillin  
 that stretch the length of the stage  
 and into the stunned crowd.<sup>35</sup>*

Only against the backdrop of the “virginity” of Hebrew literature can this poem—and the provocative nature of Wallach’s poetry of the 1960s and 1970s in general—be understood. The sexual ethos of Hebrew literature, at least up to the time of Wallach, Oz, and David Grossman, was similar to that of nineteenth-century European literature. Not only was it unable to credibly describe sexual relations, but it was equally inhibited in its expression of a wide array of feelings and actions that involve the body and the passions, such as desire, the naked body, or sexual behavior that does not fit the standard romantic notion, such as homosexuality. The narrow confines within which the human soul was treated, which excluded madness and violence as well, were breached only after the 1950s, after the second great modernist revolt of Hebrew literature (the first having been Shlonsky and Greenberg’s against Bialik’s generation in the 1920s). But even here there was a clear sense of restraint relative to European modernist writers of the 1920s and 1930s, and to their American counterparts in the 1950s and 1960s.

Wallach, who was deeply influenced by Allen Ginsberg, shook up the emo-

tional and sexual concepts that had been acceptable in Hebrew poetry, and she undermined the idea of the typical poet. Instead of the wise poet, heir to a cultural and linguistic tradition (such as Zach and Yehuda Amichai), Wallach presents a fragile, tortured consciousness that can change sexual identity over the course of a single poem. She uncovers flashes of psychological trauma bordering on psychosis and constructs an active, frank, sexual persona. For Wallach as for Tchernikhovsky, the tefillin symbolize the body bound by the bridle of religious tradition. But Wallach breaks a number of taboos—the male monopoly on the ritual, the ritual context of the prayer—and turns the tefillin into a sex toy in a sadomasochistic encounter. It was no wonder that, shortly after its publication, the poem was quoted in the Knesset by a female representative of the National Religious Party who urged that it be denounced and censored. The conflict between free sexuality and Judaism is embedded in the poem, and through it Wallach exposes the great secular-religious tension that exists throughout Hebrew culture.

*The People, Food Fit for a King* (*Am Ma'akhal Melakhim*, 1993), a novel by Yitzhak Laor, is the most significant attempt yet to deal with the “bridle of tefillin.” Laor presents a sweeping analysis of Israeli culture as based on the “silencing of the ugly.” He charts something akin to an alternative history of the Six Day War in which a unit of neglected and marginal soldiers in the quartermaster corps finds a secret document that they conceal, and, as a result, the war and all its consequences are averted. It is as though this novel actualizes that which is implicit in Wallach’s poetry and endows it with a moral and political force: the elevated Jewish tendency to glorify man while denying human passions and authentic feelings leads directly to Israel’s militaristic war ethos. This impressive work is a sequel of sorts to Yizhar’s *Days of Ziklag* in that, in each, a great writer offers his own penetrating analysis of Israeli culture at a time of crisis. Laor also continues Yizhar’s complex discussion of the Jewish-Israeli body in the context of a particular locus, the landscape of Israel. At the same time, Laor reveals the profound break in Israel’s consciousness in the post-1967 era. The sense of rebirth that accompanied Yizhar’s rediscovery of the body and natural expanses, and which was tied to the sense of unity that characterized the War of Independence, was replaced with keen doubt as to the justness of the war and a dreadful realization that a Jew can be no less violent, cruel, and belligerent than other people.

*The People, Food Fit for a King* opposes Israeli reality to the traditional Jewish corpus: it contains many allusions to the Bible, ancient piyyutim, and modern Hebrew poetry, including some that borders on political propaganda. As against the “Apollonian” ethos of the tefillin, the sublimating Jewish ethos of restraint,

Laor introduces the ethos of martyrdom in the person of the medieval Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, whose famous piyyut "The Day of Judgment" (*Unetanne Tokef*) ends the novel: "Man comes from dust and to dust returns; he gets his food at the peril of his life; he is like broken earthenware; like withering grass and fading flowers; like a fleeting shadow and a driven cloud; like a puff of wind, like vanishing dust, like a dream that flies away."<sup>36</sup>

### THE MIZRAḤI JEWS IN HEBREW CULTURE

Like the survivors of the Shoah who came to the new State of Israel, so, too, the Jews from the Middle East and North Africa (the Mizraḥim) did not fit into the image and ideology of the Sabra. It was not until the period of crisis after the Six Day War that they began to find their literary voice. Let us consider a highly pregnant passage from Yehoshua Kenaz's *Infiltration* (*Hitganvut Yehidim*, 1986):

Raḥamim Ben-Ḥamo leapt from his bed, extending his arms to either side as though stretching after sleep. But he remained where he stood, swinging his arms up and down, and it was not yet clear what he intended to do. But the singers understood and Sammy called out to him:

"Come on, cutie!"

And Raḥamim stepped toward them swaggering and mincing as he went, a teasing smile on his lips. For a moment he stood motionless, staring at the floor as though looking for the precise point on which to stand, then he closed his eyes and his face turned somber. . . . Raḥamim opened his eyes and smiled and shook his plump body like a caricature of a belly dancer. His torso was bare and he wore only work pants with frayed hems that covered almost his entire feet, like the feet of a child.

Slowly the singers gathered round him and the circle grew thicker until no one remained sitting on his bed. Everyone came to see the spectacle. Some clapped their hand to the rhythm of the song, encouraging the dancer, others shouted insulting catcalls, and still others recoiled in stark revulsion. But everyone was drawn into the circle, as he shook his body and wiggled his neck and shoulders in a pampered, coquettish manner. He stood on his tip-toes, first opening his arms and shaking them in an inviting gesture, then pressing them to his chest as though in fear and protection, again and again daring and frightened, stepping forth and drawing back, charging into danger and immediately retreating into himself, startled, stroking his hips and thighs and winking to those standing in front of him, then recoiling and covering his face with his hands as though ashamed of his behavior, as though he surmised what

awaited him. He began to circle the crowd, skipping daintily, his hand outstretched to the audience as though pleading for his life, his head thrown back as if willing to accept the verdict, any verdict. . . .

He danced ceaselessly, and absent the Arabic song, all that could be heard were the drumming on the tin can and Raḥamim's labored breathing; he was covered with sweat—even his pants were wet at the waist and from time to time he would blow on his upper lip to clear a bead of sweat that had fallen from his nose. Suddenly he let out a stifled cry. A scream of pain or pleasure, then another, and his expression grew excited, and while his body was writhing in all directions he reached out his hand as though crying for help, as if the force of the pleasure or pain that caused the repeated moans was greater than he could bear. The ugliness of his bestial squirming and the groans accompanying it to the rhythm of the tin drumming—it was powerful, dark and fascinating, so much so that it almost ceased being ugly.<sup>37</sup>

I have cited this long passage because it contains, in a highly distilled form, what would otherwise require many volumes of documentation. *Infiltration*, like Pension Vauquer in Balzac's *Père Goriot*, gathers in one place—a basic-training army barrack in the mid-1950s—representatives of nearly all the sectors of Israeli society (except ultra-Orthodox Jews, who do not serve in the army). One soldier (the narrator) grew up on an established agricultural settlement, another comes from a Sephardic family that has been in Israel for many generations; among the others are a Holocaust survivor, a *kibbutznik*, a city dweller, and so forth. Raḥamim Ben-Ḥamo is “the Moroccan,” and, like the others, Kenaz views him as a personification of the Mizraḥi populace. His dance is the Moroccan's “creation” in the wonderful symposium Kenaz depicts throughout the novel. The scene can be read as an allegorical representation of Israeli culture's approach to the Middle Eastern and North African immigrants who undertook the great aliyot of the 1950s. That a Moroccan fills this role is no accident: it is the choice made by Israeli culture itself. Kenaz here responds to a selection process that eludes numeric explanation, because the Moroccans have been designated the Mizraḥi Jews in the drama that pits East against West in Israeli culture.

The first key to understanding this passage lies in the choice of the belly dance as the Moroccan's “creation.” This quintessentially Eastern dance form is an Orientalist choice par excellence from the perspective of the Ashkenazic narrator, but it is by no means unrealistic: music and dance, along with cuisine, are the aspects of Mizraḥi culture that remained most intact in the move to Israel. The material culture was severely damaged, and the literary tradition, mostly religious in nature, was terminated altogether. At the outset, Raḥamim Ben-Ḥamo's belly dance looks somewhat ridiculous, a grotesque image that Kenaz creates



through the very harsh juxtaposition of masculine and feminine elements. The “ugliness” and “bestial quality” that Kenaz attributes to the dancer in the eyes of the spectators are not balanced, initially, by Ben-Hamo’s delicate charm and childishness. The Mizrahi is ridiculous and repulsive, primitive in both his artistic language and his artistic medium (drumming on the empty can). Culturally, he is associated with Arab music and the “idea” of Arabness as embodied in the dance. In the novel, Arab music conflicts with the music of Telemann, Elizabethan poetry, and the songs of the Land of Israel, which represent a Western tradition: “We don’t want Arab songs in the army!” cried Kippod, “we don’t want to hear that crap!”—“We don’t like your Ashkenazi songs either,” said Sammy.<sup>38</sup>

It is fascinating to see how Kenaz shapes the dancer’s behavior and its interpretation in the “Israeli” consciousness: it is unclear whether or not the dancer has himself internalized the gaze of the spectators and accepts their “verdict.” Only his physical gestures are unambiguous, a universal language of body and expression. The ambiguous medium by which he reveals his particularity may ultimately be based on a grand misunderstanding, but a misunderstanding that concludes at a different point from where it started. Here lies the message encoded in the scene: the emotion and human force of the dancer ultimately break down the barrier of the “beautiful” and are accepted by the other spectators as beautiful (“almost ceased being ugly”), and thus as comprehensible and fascinating.

The process that unfolds in this scene is, in this reading, the extended one that has occurred within Israeli society over the past 50 years. Only in the past decade has the barrier between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi been broken. Although the relationship between the two communities can be conceptualized in terms of the “naïve” vs. “sentimental” division that characterizes the conflict with the Arab East, the events and dynamics of this drama are very different. The Israeli concepts of “the ingathering of exiles” and “the melting pot” were much more violent and destructive for the culture of the Mizrahi Jews than for that of the Arab populace, who, despite the political and social trauma of becoming a minority, nevertheless retained most of their culture. The concepts were predicated on the Mizrahi communities breaking with their traditional way of life when they came to Israel. They encountered a more mature Israeli culture and thus were not the object of the love for the archaic East that so moved the early Zionists. (Only the first Yemenite immigrants had the “fortune” to be integrated into the Orientalist forefather-imagery.) The yearning anachronistically preserved in the portraits of the Arab village were absent from Israeli culture in the 1950s and the 1960s. The particularity and otherness of the Mizrahi Jews elicited scorn and alienation, but nothing more.

The idea of the “melting pot” was a poetic fiction. The integration of Mizrahi

story must not be understood as poetic obfuscation; it lies at the very heart of classical Zionism.

### THE ISRAELI SONG

It is necessary to go beyond Agnon and emphasize the current cultural vitality of the Mizraḥi communities in Israel. Despite the terrible blow they suffered, they managed to rise from the ashes and initiate an insistent dialogue concerning their rightful place in contemporary culture. Note that the medium Agnon chose to represent the naïve—sung music—is in fact the very medium by which the Mizraḥi communities are establishing themselves at the forefront of contemporary Israeli culture, from the popular to the artistically sophisticated and sublime. (This development follows a by-now-complete victory in the kitchen.) The infusion of Mizraḥi music into culture is not a continuation of the Orientalist tradition but represents the slow development of a double connection: an external one between Israel and its neighbors—the Arab countries, Turkey, and Greece—and an internal one to the Jewish communities of Yemen, Kurdistan, Persia, and North Africa. This is a self-developing connection, not influenced by outside hands. Contemporary music contains Western elements (shows, concerts, records, instruments, amplification), Eastern ones (harmony, melody, instruments), and some that constitute a synthesis between the two, such as vocal technique, the tenor of the voice, and, most notably, lyrics. The creative tension that has been sparked between these two musical cultures is reminiscent of that which resonated in Egyptian music in the beginning of the twentieth century, when it encountered Western music.

The recent phenomenon of Mizraḥi music is the latest chapter in the saga of an indigenous element of modern Hebrew culture, the “Israeli song.” This form of composition consists of melodic tunes sung by groups to the accompaniment of a guitar or an accordion; it is very different from Israeli artistic music. The outstanding Israeli composers—Mark Lavry, Paul Ben-Hayyim, Mordekhai Seter, and Oedoen Partos—synthesized the European modernist tradition and the musical symbols of the “East” (biblical tropes, the piyyut, and the Oriental *maqāmat* [harmony] tradition). Not so the Hebrew songwriters of twentieth-century Israel. Their songs were not “folk” songs, given that their intellectual intentions were equal to those of the classical composers. Nonetheless, they had a completely different approach to both European and non-European musical traditions. Most important, their songs preserved ties to Hebrew poetry and, through it, to the living language.

Until the 1970s, the Israeli songwriters belonged, musically speaking, to the

nineteenth century; they were completely oblivious to later developments in “light” or popular music. The finest of these composers—Naḥum Nardi, David Zahavi, Mordekhai Zeira, Emanuel Zamir, Alexander Argov, Naomi Shemer, and Yoni Rechter—employed the musical language of Brahms and Tchaikovsky, and it is in this context that their works must be understood.

Their type of song is the “Israeli” art form par excellence and the only artistic medium that can be said to be uniquely Israeli. Again, it is neither a folksong nor an art song, nor, for that matter, a product of the mass entertainment industry. In its heroic era, the 1930s to the 1960s, it developed into a medium that combined musical, literary, and artistic creation, sometimes of very high quality, performed in a popular setting that is defined by a sense of community. This communality is distinct from the familial or tribal collectiveness of the traditional piyyutim and *zemirot* (holiday songs) as well as from the ensemble of the choir, typical of church music, that calls for obedience to musical rules that resemble (and at times are explicitly identified with) religious commandments. The Israeli song expresses a sense of belonging to the Zionist political structure, even before the founding of the State of Israel, and its central definition is not musical but political. As such, it knows no explicit aesthetic requirements. Unlike the traditional folksinger, the individual singer is not called upon to obey and preserve a tradition. The song expresses, rather, a particular type of interdependence. On the one hand, it depends upon singers in order to exist. On the other, as singers the individuals yield to the community, joining it rather than obeying it, emphasizing all the while their hoarseness and inability to sing on key—that is, the nonmusicality of their life. The individuals, then, are dependent upon the song that serves as a gathering point where they can be counted as members of the community, and in this manner they acquire an identity through the song.

The sense of community that permeates the Israeli song, and the identity of this community with the Zionist enterprise, is implicit in all aspects of this medium: language, lyrics, the manner in which it is sung, and the perspectives it represents. Sometimes it is a simple visual reference (“There lie the Golan mountains”) or a formulaic shared biography (“When Mother arrived here, young and pretty”), but other songs introduce a complex expression of either a shared trauma or a traumatic disparity between the individual and the community or between the individual and life in Israel. This is the case with “Elifelet,” Alterman’s great dirge set to Argov’s music, a fixture of Memorial Day services for more than half a century.

Through the unique combination of an artistic work and popular performance, the Israeli song creates a singular situation in which the singers do not

“consume” a work as does the audience for a *chanson* or a musical play; rather, they perform it while they are themselves signified by it. This is an artistically open and dynamic state that is filled and closed only when the work is actualized in song. The establishment’s support for the song composers, an outgrowth of the ideology of a revival of the “people,” cannot explain the public’s love of their music. Its broad acceptance is based on trust and a more primordial need. The song implicitly undermines the official Zionist position by providing a connection to the “exilic” mother figure, as Fania Bergstein wrote in her famous lyrics set to Zahavi’s music, “thus I shall listen to my distant lullaby.”

The archaic quality of the Israeli song is not so much a nostalgic retreat from the present as a vital and valid return to the musical past that provides a firm basis for the present ideal of musical beauty. Unlike twentieth-century art music, whose home could be either Vienna or New York, the Israeli song is committed to a particular place and to the lived experience within that place. The song is encountered empirically: it must be sung and heard and, as a result, has to accommodate itself to the spiritual world of its singers, a world firmly rooted in the nineteenth century. Therein lies its vitality. This is not the usual case of popular art marching two steps behind high art (another rule that came undone over the course of the twentieth century); it is, rather, the “time-capsule” that *is* the time of Israeli culture. The Israeli song is not an appendage to artistic music but an independent medium that admirably created for itself a tradition which is both stylistic and functional.

The Israeli song managed to link itself to the landscape, to the place of Israel. Its stylistic mixture—European classical, Russian popular, Hasidic, and, more recently, Mediterranean and Arabic—do not undermine this statement, because these styles were uprooted and replanted within the unique context of Israeli time and space. The music of the song, lacking even the thin tradition of Hebrew literature, reveals the true force of the bifurcation and foreignness that characterize Israel’s cultural sources.

Another fascinating example of this time-capsule effect is Israeli rock music, precisely because it can be compared to the music of the Western youth culture that served as a model. Rock and roll has produced a number of impressive figures since the 1960s, among them Arik Einstein, Shalom Hānokh, Matti Caspi, Rami Fortis, and Yehudah Poliker. Nonetheless, this genre never “translated” to Hebrew. True, the composers adopted Anglo-American rhythms, harmonies, and orchestration, but the lyrics demonstrate that the Hebrew language never let them break free from the Israeli context. They simply could not embrace the rebellion and nihilism of Western youth. The person they portray is wholly committed to the common fate of Israeli youth, and when he does express anger it is

never aimed at his parents or the establishment. Musically, Israeli rock is sad and melancholic; its lyrics are reminiscent of the classical Israeli song, often dealing with war and the experience of soldiers. Many rock songs are, in fact, songs of mourning and lamentation. They are the primary medium through which the young voice the trauma of their military baptism by fire, which has become the rite of passage of the Israeli adolescent.

The uniqueness of contemporary Israeli song is the heritage of the century-old cultural development that we have been tracing. As a final example of the singular dynamics of this culture, let us return to where we began, to perhaps the quintessential Israeli song, "Hatikvah." The melody of what was to become first the Zionist and then the Israeli national anthem was adapted to the lyrics of Naphtali Herz Imber by Shmuel Cohen, a native of Serbia, prior to his immigration to Palestine in 1888. Imber had written the lyrics in Romania, whence they wandered across Eastern Europe until they finally "stuck" to the melody Cohen knew as the Moldavian farm song "Carul cu Boi" (The Cart and the Oxen). From Serbia, the setting came to Rishon Le-Zion, one of the first Jewish settlements on the coast of Palestine, where it was given its final form. The melody was so widely accepted that all subsequent attempts to set the lyrics to other tunes were rejected. Abraham Isaac Kook, the chief rabbi of Palestine until his death in 1935, was both a mystic and a poet, and he wrote a poem, "Shir Ha-Emunah" (Song of Faith) and set it to the same melody, but it was rejected by the public. Imber's "Hatikvah" attained the status of an anthem long before it was declared the official song of the State of Israel and thereafter withstood all ideological attacks on it.

The words of "Hatikvah" have been criticized as too "exilic," foreign, and melancholy to serve as the hymn of the Zionist revolution. The Moldavian melody, known also from Bedrich Smetana's famous tone poem *Ma Vlast* (My Country), is, of course, foreign. In 1932, Y. Tzipin composed another melody, an optimistic march in a major key, a composition that is viewed as an original Jewish, Israeli work merely because its composer lived in Jerusalem. No one noticed, however, that Tzipin's composition was also foreign: a Viennese march, in the best Straussian tradition.

"Hatikvah" 's resilience is due precisely to its foreignness: it was its resistance to Zionism's optimism that made it attractive. The song is deeply subversive: we have not arrived at Zion and have never been a free nation in its own land. It expresses the *Tikvah*, the hope, in an ancient melody (which some claim is Spanish, not Moldavian). Its selection as the national anthem was not an ideological gesture so much as a response to the hosts of singers that identified so deeply with it and valued it so dearly. To this day, even in the most vacuous official

ceremonies (and more so in ceremonies that are not pompous and empty), “Hatikvah” maintains an air of ambiguity: it is an official symbol that represents identification with the state, but its lyrics and melody bespeak suffering and wandering. In this it is unique among national anthems.

The story of “Hatikvah” reveals something about the forces at work not only in Israeli music but in modern Hebrew culture as a whole. The texts convey an impassioned commitment to the challenges and imagery of the Zionist movement, but emotionally, musically, they resist this ideology, preserving the “exilic” origins of the singers (including the Sabras) and giving voice to a powerful longing for a pre-Zionist—European or Mizrahi—reality. To be sure, this ambiguity is rarely as plainly visible as in the case of “Hatikvah,” the lyrics of which, as we have seen, speak of a movement forward and Eastward (kadimah) while the melody expresses a nostalgic gaze backward (kedem). Many other songs, particularly the more popular ones, contain a much more complex interplay between the music, the lyrics, and the contextual structures they create. But the rule holds true: the music resists the party’s instructions, maintaining its ties to the past and deconstructing what the text seeks to join together. So, too, Israeli culture remains at once native and foreign, still in search of a home, even as it is firmly rooted in the new-old soil of that land of the East, the Land of Israel.

## NOTES

1. Translated by Chaya Galai in *Remembrance Day, Independence Day* (Ramat Gan, Israel, 1999), 96.
2. T. Carmi, ed. and trans., *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (New York, 1981), 349.
3. Translated by Eisig Silberschlag in *Saul Tschernichowky: Poet of Revolt* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968), 97–98.
4. Translated by Ruth Nevo in *Chaim Nachman Bialik: Selected Poems* (Jerusalem, 1981).
5. Nevo, *Bialik*, 114 (translation slightly altered).
6. Translated into English by Hillel Halkin in Alan Lelchuk and Gershon Shaked, eds., *Eight Great Hebrew Short Novels* (New York, 1983), 29–58.
7. Y. H. Brenner, *Breakdown and Bereavement*, trans. Hillel Halkin (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971).
8. S. Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, N.J., 2000), 3.
9. An entry from Brenner’s notebook, dated Spring 1921. This quotation and the encounter is discussed in Ariel Hirschfeld, “‘My Peace Unto You, My Friend’: On Reading a Text by Yosef Haim Brenner Concerning His Contacts with the Arabs,” *Palestine Israel Journal* 2 (1992): 112–18.
10. Abraham Shlonsky, “Jezra’el,” in Ruth Finer Mintz, ed. and trans., *Modern Hebrew Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Berkeley, 1966), 170.

11. Shlonsky, "Ad Halom" in his *Shirim* (Tel Aviv, 1965), 196–98.
12. Shlonsky, "Mul ha-Yeshimon," *ibid.*, 311–17.
13. S. Yizhar, "Hirbet Hiz'ah," in his *Arba'ah Sippurim* (Tel Aviv, 1959). The story was written in May 1949.
14. Yehoshua Kenaz, *After the Holidays*, trans. Dalya Bilu (New York, 1987).
15. H. N. Bialik, "Language Pains" (Hebrew), in *Kol Kitve H. N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv, 1971), 197–201.
16. Bialik, "Mendele and the Three Volumes" (Hebrew) in *ibid.*, 242–45.
17. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
18. Burnshaw, T. Carmi, and E. Spiceland, eds., *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 25–27.
19. Nevo, *Bialik*, 20.
20. *Ibid.*, 54.
21. *Isol Shirei Sha'ul Tchernichovsky* (Jerusalem, 1937), 75.
22. In Carmi, *Hebrew Verse*, 576.
23. In Finer Mintz, ed., *Modern Hebrew Poetry*, 179.
24. *Ibid.*, 180.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, 185–86.
27. Uri Zvi Greenberg, *Kol Ketavav* (Jerusalem, 1990), 1:77.
28. *Ibid.*, 78.
29. *Ibid.*
30. In Carmi, *Hebrew Verse*, 565.
31. The poem appears in Esther Raizen, ed. and trans., *No Rattling of Sabers: An Anthology of Israeli War Poetry* (Austin, Tex., 1995), 4–6.
32. Translated by Shirley Kaufman in *Modern Poetry in Translation* 14 (Winter 1998): 190–92.
33. See Ruth Kartun-Blum, "A Double Bind: The Sacrifice of Isaac as a Paradigm in Modern Hebrew Poetry," in her *Profane Scriptures* (Cincinnati, 1999), 15–62.
34. Carmi, *Hebrew Verse*, 575; I have slightly modified the translation. Two points should be clarified: the Hebrew "son of Adam" (*ben Adam*) also means "person" or "human being"; and the whole line "Cain, the son of Adam" (*Kayin ben Adam*) is a homonym to the Yiddish *keyn ben Adom* (not a person).
35. In *Wild Light: Selected Poems of Yona Wallach*, trans. Linda Zisquit (Riverdale-on-Hudson, N.Y., 1997).
36. Carmi, *Hebrew Verse*, 207–9.
37. Yehoshua Kenaz, *Hitganvut Yehidim* (Tel Aviv, 1986), 98.
38. *Ibid.*, 93.
39. "Edo and Enam" appeared in English in *Two Tales* by S. Y. Agnon, trans. Walter Lever (New York, 1966), 141–233.

40. *Ibid.*, 176. I have slightly altered the translation.  
 41. *Ibid.*, 202.  
 42. *Ibid.*, 175.

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