



JRB | ISRAEL

JEWISH REVIEW of BOOKS

History, Politics, Religion & Culture

Edited by **Allan Arkush & Abraham Socher**

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Introduction

Here at the *Jewish Review of Books* our job is to read books, not make them, but we've been looking back at the last 18 issues and looking forward—as always, whatever “the *matzav*”—to celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut, and we find, to our delight, that we have, more or less (or rather more *and* less), a book. It turns out that the wise old preacher is still right about the making of books even, or especially, in this digital age, and though we do not promise (or threaten) books without end, this will not be our last e-book.

In collecting some of the best essays we've published on Israeli politics, religion, literature, and culture, we aim to bring them the new readers they deserve. However, even those who read these pieces when they appeared will, we are confident, savor them again and likely read them now in a new light, both on account of their new setting (including new links, bells, and whistles) and on account of the passage of at least a little bit of time.

In our Summer 2012 issue, Shlomo Avineri, one of Israel's leading political scientists and the author of a recent biography of Theodor Herzl, reconsidered Herzl's novel *Old-New Land*, which is, as he shows, not a dated piece of utopian fiction but an almost prophetic anticipation of many of the intractable problems Israel has faced throughout its existence. In an earlier issue (our second, in fact) Anita Shapira, one of the leading historians of Zionism and Israel, chronicled the rise and near-fall of the kibbutz, but also forecasted its possible revival. Another of Israel's most important historians, Benny Morris, forcefully demonstrated how a recent “insider” account of Israel's military leadership misrepresents the country as a modern Sparta, overlooking its many Athenian characteristics and distorting its history (this led to a spirited exchange, which we've linked).

In an essay that many readers have described as their favorite, Ruth R. Wisse, the outstanding scholar of Jewish literature in many languages, recalled her travels through Israel many years ago with the recently deceased Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever, whom she movingly described as “one of Israel's modern psalmists.” In our Winter 2012 issue, journalist and critic Stuart Schoffman walked us through Jerusalem, pausing to take note of the nondescript building that used to be the headquarters of the notorious Mufti but now houses, among other things, a kosher pizzeria, and concludes with a frank and anti-elitist appreciation of the new Mamilla Mall. Meanwhile our own Allan Arkush ruminated over the fact that this same city of Jerusalem has no street in it named after the author of the modern classic of Jewish Enlightenment thought, *Jerusalem*, Moses Mendelssohn.

In our very first issue, Israeli journalist Shmuel Rosner drew on his own experiences and a variety of recent works, including fiction, history, and political polemic, to look at the lives that the religious settlers on the West Bank “are really living.” Last fall, Yehudah Mirsky looked back on the recently concluded election of two new Israeli chief rabbis, a “curious process” that provided, in his opinion, too much evidence of “Judaism's susceptibility to the corruptions of power.” Peter Berkowitz's tough, disappointed review of Palestinian philosopher-politician Sari Nusseibeh's recent book is a frank look at the political contours of the Israeli-Palestinian dynamic.

The preeminent literary critic Robert Alter graced our Summer 2011 issue with an eye-opening reading of poet Yehuda Amichai “at play in the fields of verse.” Alan Mintz, another American author of indispensable works on modern Hebrew literature, reminded us that you don't have to be Jewish to write in Hebrew. He portrays the Israeli Arab writer Sayed Kashua as someone whose voice “is the closest thing in Israeli literature to the quandaries of identity that absorb diaspora Jewish literature.” And Michael Weingrad, whose “Why There Is No Jewish Narnia” in our first issue remains one of our most widely read articles, recently gave us an overview of the surprisingly vigorous world of Israeli fantasy literature.

In our Summer 2011 issue, Noah Efron, a historian of science at Bar-Ilan and a sometime Israeli politician, wryly recalls the disillusionment he experienced as an immigrant to Israel and his later struggle during his

tenure on Tel Aviv's city council to establish "a network of fast, cheap busses with their own lanes" that would make it easier for, say, "a single mother in Jaffa to get to and from classes" at Tel Aviv University, at the other end of the city. He concludes that his cynicism was "a sucker's fancy." Hope, he says, is a better, indeed plausible, bet: in time "we'll even get our priority bus lanes."

It is encouraging to hear such confidence from a resident of the city named after Herzl's novel (Tel Aviv was the title given the Hebrew translation of *Old-New Land*). Herzl's novel isn't great but it is, as Shlomo Avineri shows in the piece that opens this collection, both important and prescient. The novel famously ends with the promise that "if you will it, it is no legend." As a conclusion, that's hard to top, but we do take great pleasure in publishing these brilliant, witty, learned, and morally serious essays on various aspects of the history, politics, religion, and culture of Israel in this new format.

The Editors
April 2014
Rosh Hodesh Iyyar 5774

Rereading Herzl's *Old-New Land*

READ THE BOOK

by Shlomo Avineri

from Summer 2012

Theodor Herzl's *Altneuland* (*Old-New Land*) is a bad novel, but an important and prescient book. It addresses three issues that are today at the core of Israel's politics and public discourse: the question of equal citizenship, the social and economic structure of the country, and the relations between state and religion.

When the novel was published exactly one hundred and ten years ago in 1902, Herzl was already the leader of the Zionist movement. But this movement, which he had more or less called into being at the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, was still a fledgling creature, criticized by both Orthodox and Reform rabbis as well as by secular Jewish liberals and socialists. According to its opponents, the idea of a Jewish political entity in the Land of Israel was either blasphemous, outlandish, outmoded, outrageously dangerous, if not outright crazy—or all of the above.

Despite his repeated failure to enlist any of the many statesmen he met to further the Zionist cause, he had made real institutional progress. By 1902, the permanent structures of the Zionist movement were already in place: an annual congress, elected by the organization's dues-paying members in more than two dozen countries; an executive committee, elected by the congress and accountable to it; a central newspaper (*Die Welt*), with many local and regional papers; and the rudiments of a financial structure, selling shares and bonds to sympathizers of the movement all over the world, mainly to buy land in Palestine. Together, these constituted the infrastructure of what would be later called in Zionist jargon *ha-medina ba-derekh*—"the state-in-the-making."

When Herzl published his novel he could rightly claim—as he did in his preface—that this was not a mere utopian dream, but a projection into the future of a historical enterprise that had already begun to be realized. Unlike other social utopias of the time such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* (which featured a similarly creaky Rip Van Winkle plot device), *Old-New Land* extended an existing reality.

Within a few years, the novel was translated into English, Russian, French, Polish, Hebrew, Yiddish, and, eventually, Ladino. Though its characters were flat and its dialogue mostly wooden, it was the most popular and widely circulated articulation of the Zionist vision. The Hebrew translation was the work of the Warsaw-based journalist Nahum Sokolov, later to become president of the Zionist Organization, who chose the inspired title *Tel Aviv* (Hill of Spring or, to Anglo-Americanize, Springhill). In 1909, the founders of a new garden suburb north of Jaffa adopted it as the name for their embryonic city. Vision and reality were thus intertwined in the very history of the novel's publication.

It is this interface between literary creativity and historical agency that continues to give the novel its topicality even today. Zionism is the rare national movement that produced not only manifestos, programs, and declarations about its cause, but a document describing in detail what its ultimate goal would look like.

Herzl was not a great, or even a good, novelist but he was a sophisticated and practical political thinker who had been a correspondent and editor of Vienna's *Neue Freie Presse*, one of Europe's leading newspapers. If one overcomes the novel's outmoded narrative, replete with lengthy speeches and framed within an incongruous, even kitschy, romantic plot, *Old-New Land* is a still-useful standard by which contemporary Israel can look at itself and judge its achievements—and failures.

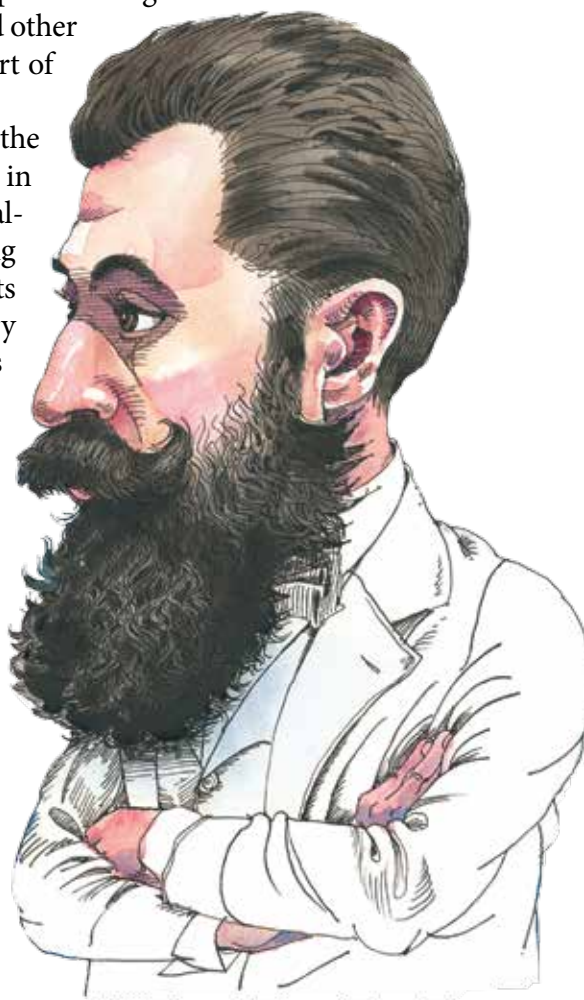
The Jewish commonwealth of *Old-New Land* is based on universal suffrage, which in Herzl's day did not exist in any Western democracy, save New Zealand. Yet despite what is sometimes claimed by critics of

Zionism, Herzl was well aware of the existence of a sizeable Arab population in the country and dreamed that they would possess not only political equality, but would also share fully in the new polity's social and economic achievements. Reshid Bey, an Arab engineer from Haifa, is one of the new country's leaders and a central figure in the novel. In fact, the issue of equal rights for the non-Jewish population is central to the novel's plot.

In 1923, the New Society of the Old-New Land is in the midst of a heated electoral campaign. A recently arrived immigrant has just established a new political party, which calls for the disenfranchisement of its non-Jewish inhabitants. The leader of this racist party is a certain Rabbi Dr. Geyer. (*Geyer* means vulture in German; Herzl was not subtle.) Geyer maintains that citizenship and voting rights should be restricted to Jews in a Jewish state. Arabs and other non-Jews should not be expelled, but they should not be part of the body politic either.

The campaign becomes a battle for the country's soul. At the core of the novel are dramatic accounts of election rallies, in which the country's liberal establishment fights the racist challenges of Geyer and his followers. Herzl's dramatic rendering of the speeches of both the liberal and the racist protagonists clearly reflect his journalistic experience as a parliamentary correspondent in France and elsewhere. Eventually, Geyer's party is beaten, the liberals win, and the defeated candidate is reported to be leaving the country in ignominy.

Anyone familiar with Herzl's biography and fin de siècle European history will immediately recognize that Rabbi Dr. Geyer is the mirror image of the Viennese politician Dr. Karl Lueger, who emerged in the 1890s as the leader of the anti-Semitic Christian Social Party and whose election as mayor of Vienna helped to convince Herzl of the necessity of Zionism. When he sat down to write the novel, Herzl put some of Lueger's anti-Semitic statements in Geyer's mouth, changing only the name of the vilified group. The liberals in *Old-New Land*, on the other hand, use two kinds of arguments: the universalistic affirmations of equal civil rights of the European tradition, and principles drawn from Judaism: "Remember that you have been a stranger in the land of Egypt" and "You should have one law for you and the stranger within your gates." The message of the Geyer episode in *Old-New Land* is plain and powerful: What failed in Europe—liberalism and equal rights—will triumph in Zion. In contemporary language, what Herzl advocated was that the Old-New Land should be both Jewish and democratic—a Jewish nation-state, but one that would preserve equal rights for its non-Jewish population, not half-heartedly, but as a major tenet of its political and moral credo.



Theodor Herzl. (Illustration by Mark Anderson.)

While Herzl envisaged equal rights for the Arab population and its participation in the political process, he did not foresee the emergence of a Palestinian national movement that would draw much of its ideological energy from opposing the Zionist project itself. While one might fault him for this, it is important to note that when he was writing, there was no Arab national movement in existence—neither in Palestine,

nor anywhere else. Arab nationalism's emergence as a political force dates to World War I, when the British fostered it in order to undermine Ottoman rule in the region. Herzl was, in this respect, far from being the only person who failed to transcend the limitations of his age. No liberal or socialist thinker in Europe thought about the possibility or legitimacy of national movements in their colonies. Nor, for that matter, did the French in Algeria or the British in India grant the local inhabitants equal citizenship or voting rights.

The Zionist movement and the emerging State of Israel followed the path marked out by Herzl, which was obviously neither self-evident nor easy, not least because of Arab opposition. The complex situation of Israel's Arab citizens today—determined to a large extent by the history of Arab-Israeli wars—is admittedly less than ideal. The fact remains, however, that upon declaring independence Israel granted citizenship and voting rights to those Palestinians who remained within its borders, maintained Arabic as its second official language, and allowed Arab citizens to send their children to state schools where the instruction was in Arabic and within a framework of a curriculum respecting—albeit perhaps insufficiently—Arab culture and history. One does not have to compare this with the way the United States treated its own citizens of Japanese ancestry after Pearl Harbor, or how Germany and France deal today with their mostly Muslim minorities, to realize that Israel measures up as far from the worst of democratic nations that have been confronted with serious minority problems. Herzl's legacy, and his novel, have been crucial in forging and maintaining this liberal approach.

Recent political developments in Israel have, however, cast a pall on this legacy. Some legislative proposals now coming from some of the right-wing parties in the Knesset are more reminiscent of the imaginary Rabbi Dr. Geyer than of Herzl. While most of these obnoxious and racist draft laws will not be passed by the Knesset or will be annulled by the Supreme Court, some have been adopted, and the very fact that the others were raised and debated has had a poisonous effect on the political and moral climate of the country. That they play into the hands of Israel's enemies is also obvious. These steps are not only anti-democratic; they are also anti-Zionist and undermine the vision of the Jewish nation-state as a member of the family of nations. The fact that Herzl himself was aware of such a racist potential reminds us both of his remarkable stature and the need for Israel to be true to his legacy.

Herzl was no socialist—he was a typical bourgeois liberal with a conservative bent, and he shied away from socialism, especially in its revolutionary variety, fearing its potential for violence and chaos. Yet his 1898 play *Das Neue Ghetto* (*The New Ghetto*) includes a scathing critique of the situation of miners in a stockbroker-owned mine, and *Old-New Land* reflects the same social awareness. Herzl presents the social and economic structure of the new Jewish society as a synthesis of capitalism and socialism. The society's imaginary founders have learned the lessons of European social history and instituted a system aimed at avoiding both the extremes of free market capitalism and the dangers of socialism. They embrace the virtues inherent in both systems—learning freedom and initiative from capitalism and equality and justice from socialism. This intermediate solution, which Herzl (following some utopian socialists) called “mutualism,” looks something like what would later come to be called a welfare state, “a third way” between capitalism and socialism.

In Herzl's New Society, the land is publicly owned, as are natural resources (especially electricity works, which play a central role in Herzl's futuristic vision); major industries are co-operatively owned by their employees, as are agricultural settlements, but retail trade is in private hands. Members of the society enjoy a wide range of social services: free universal education, free medical care, retirement pensions, and old-age homes—all revolutionary for 1902.

While Herzl did not envisage any need for military service—Old-New Land would be established through an international agreement, ratified by the Ottoman sovereign—there is national service. At age 18, all young men and women undertake two years of national service, in which they serve as teachers, instructors, sani-

tation workers, hospital nurses, and caregivers for seniors, thus giving back to society what it has already invested in their education, and reciprocating in advance for what they will receive when they themselves are sick, feeble, or old.

Interestingly, and in tune with his criticism of the stock market as an institution in which too many Jews found employment in late-19th-century Europe, there was to be no stock exchange in the New Zion. Herzl believed that a transformative project like the establishment of a Jewish polity in the Land of Israel could not be achieved through the competitive methods of an unbridled capitalist market economy, which would undermine social solidarity and mutual responsibility.

The Jewish community in Palestine, and later the State of Israel, in fact developed along the general lines of Herzl's vision. This was, admittedly, due far less to any attachment to a Herzlian master plan than to trial and error and the exigencies of the times. The need to buy land from local Arab landowners called for concentrated efforts on a large scale, rather than individual purchases. Likewise, the need for credit called for cooperative rather than individual efforts. The mixed, social-democratic economy of the pre-state Jewish community, with its emphasis on social solidarity and a more or less egalitarian wage system, was a consequence not only out of the ideology and infrastructure of "the state-in-the-making," but because a state could not be constructed from a small and weak Jewish enclave in Ottoman (and later British) Palestine on the basis of the profit motive.

This trial-and-error welfare state was the lodestar of Israel's early years, when the embattled country was faced with the mass immigration of destitute Holocaust survivors and equally impoverished refugees from the Middle East. It also made Israel into something of a model for many socially conscious movements in the West, inspiring Israelis and many Diaspora Jews with pride that the Jewish state was becoming "a light unto the nations."

Over the past two decades, much of this system of social solidarity has been dismantled and replaced by an uncritical adoration of a highly competitive market economy, characterized by an at times overheated stock exchange. Many publicly held industries (either state-owned or Histadrut-controlled) have been privatized, sometimes at rock-bottom prices; public land has been turned over to private entrepreneurs and speculators; much of the egalitarian medical insurance and public hospital system has been supplanted by private medicine; wage and salary differentials have grown to unheard-of dimensions. The Histadrut has ceased to represent the weaker sectors of the working population. Kibbutzim and moshavim have abandoned their collective structures and have ceased to be role models for society at large. Some of this has been due to neo-capitalist trends in a globalized economy; some is the outcome of local forces, reflected in the political structure of the country.

With the dismantling of much of its welfare state, Israel is today not only rather similar to Western capitalist market societies, but miles away from Herzl's vision of a "mutualist" society. Last summer's massive social protests expressed the frustrations of many young Israelis, regardless of political affiliation or ideology, with the way Israeli society has evolved. In calling for a more just distribution of the country's wealth, they were, consciously or unconsciously, reviving the Zionist vision of Herzl's *Old -New Land*.

In *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*), Herzl's first Zionist manifesto, he famously stated that, "while we respect our rabbis, we will keep them to their synagogues, just as the army will be kept to its barracks." Secular Israelis often cite this adage to reinforce the idea that Herzl advocated a clear separation of state and religion. In reality, his position on this question was more complex. When Herzl made arrangements for the convening of the First Zionist Congress in Basel, he directed his assistants to make sure there was a kosher restaurant in town. On the Saturday preceding the opening of the congress, Herzl—not exactly a regular synagogue-goer—visited the local synagogue, where he was honored with an *aliyah*. He admitted to his diary that he was more deeply moved on this occasion than by his opening speech the next day. Upon visit-

ing Palestine in 1898 with a Zionist delegation, Herzl made sure to demonstrate public respect for religious sensitivities. When their train from Jaffa was delayed and arrived in Jerusalem after the setting of the sun on Friday evening, he and his entourage proceeded on foot from the train station to their hotel near Jerusalem's Jaffa gate—a considerable distance. Although he was running a fever and had difficulty walking, Herzl found it unacceptable for a Zionist delegation to enter Jerusalem riding in carriages on the Sabbath. A few days later, visiting the Western Wall (where he found the atmosphere of neglect and the presence of beggars repugnant) he decided not to visit the mosques on the Temple Mount, “as there is a rabbinical interdict” against this. Although he had led a basically non-religious life, Herzl was clearly able to distinguish between personal devotion (or lack of it) and the symbolic meaning of respect for religion in the public sphere.

This is equally manifest in *Old-New Land*. Despite being a modern, highly technological, and basically secular project, the New Society is marked by many features that attest to a spiritual link to the Jewish religious tradition. Indeed the very idea of Zionism is first introduced in *Old-New Land* by “Dr. Weiss, a simple rabbi from Moravia”—to the derision of the fin de siècle Jewish sophisticates amongst whom he finds himself. One of the central events described in the novel is a Passover Seder, held in Tiberias, presided over by the president of the New Society, at which non-Jewish dignitaries, residents, and tourists, are present. The traditional Hagaddah is read, but it is followed by a detailed rendition of what is called the New Exodus—the story of the mass immigration of Jews from all over the world to the Old New Land.

This same two-tiered approach is reflected in the description of the New Jerusalem. While Haifa is the commercial hub, Jerusalem is the capital, the seat of the country's legislature, its academy, and other institutions. Herzl describes how the bustling, now modern city, slowly prepares for the Sabbath—shops close, people rush home for family meals or to synagogue: “the Sabbath is evidently dwelling in people's hearts.”

Not only that: The Temple is being built, though not on the site of the mosques, whose silhouette continues to characterize Jerusalem's skyline. Yet, Herzl insists, the Temple is built “because the time has come.” Its entrance is adorned by the two columns, Yachin and Boaz, and in its vestibule, the “Sea of Copper” has been constructed “as in olden days, when King Solomon ruled the land.” Yet this is obviously a different, modern institution. There are no animal sacrifices and no priestly ceremonies. The Friday night prayer service is a modernized version of the traditional *Kabbalat Shabbat*.

This is a mixed message, whose basic wisdom the pre-state Jewish community and the nascent State of Israel tried more or less to uphold. Lacking a constitution, Israel possesses an implied social contract, with roots in the Mandate period, colloquially known as the *Status Quo*. This unsystematic hodgepodge tries to combine respect for religion in the public sphere—with the preservation of individual freedom not only of religion but also from religion. Hence, there is no public transportation on Saturday, while at the same time hundreds of thousands of Israelis flock to beaches and picnic areas in their private cars. There is no civil marriage, but there is an acceptance by state authorities and the courts of cohabitation and a form of common law marriage as well as of pre-nuptial agreements. It is an uneasy balance, which keeps both the Orthodox and the secularists unhappy.

It is also a dynamic social contract, open to the vagaries of democratic electoral politics, coalition haggling, political blackmail, and sometimes unsavory horse-trading. The process is obviously unpleasant, but it has given the country a *modus vivendi* based on compromise. Despite all its internal contradictions, this approach has guaranteed relative political stability based on minimal solidarity. It sounds perhaps flippant, but it is a fact that because Israel does not have a constitution, it has never experienced a constitutional crisis; coalition crises—yes, but a fundamental structural, constitutional crisis—no. Yeshayahu Leibowitz once lambasted Israel for being “a secular state living in concubinage with religion” (*medina chilonit ha-yedu'a ba-tzibbur ke-datit*). I take that as a compliment, as would Herzl.

In recent years, this delicate balance that was in tune with Herzl's vision appears to be unraveling. Because the religious parties are now much stronger than in the first decades after 1948, religious demands on the

state are increasing; because of demographic changes, central spheres of Israeli life, including the army, are now under pressure to follow religious precepts much more thoroughly than ever before. Within the religious community itself, the more radical elements are feeling stronger and more empowered, and have made unprecedented radical demands—like separation between men and women on public transport.

This *haredization* of the religious community has contributed to a radical, extremely secularist reaction on the part of certain segments of the non-religious population. Some groups have lately moved from a tolerant liberalism to a sometimes violent anti-clericalism that appears to be totally alienated from Judaism as such. Both developments, by undermining the wishy-washy historical compromises that enabled the Zionist project to thrive, are fundamentally destructive. They bring into the Jewish state the historical cleavages of the Diaspora, where there was no Jewish public sphere, no single authority speaking on behalf of the Jewish people. It was precisely this lack of a Jewish central authority and public sphere that led to Haredi self-ghettoization on the one hand, and radical anti-clericalism and atheism on the other. When there is a Jewish public authority, it can only survive on compromises and halfway measures, which cannot possibly satisfy either side. Here, too, it would be helpful to take a leaf out of Herzl's *Old-New Land*.

The idea of writing a futuristic novel first occurred to Herzl in Paris in 1895, when he was as yet unsure how to convey his Zionist ideas to the general public. One of his acquaintances, the French author Alphonse Daudet, urged that he write a novel, arguing that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did more for abolition than did many learned tomes. At first, Herzl considered but chose not to follow this path and instead approached Jewish magnates like Baron Hirsch and the Rothschilds, with his plans instead. When this failed, he opted for publishing his programmatic *The Jewish State*, which led to the convening of the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897. But the idea of a novel never left him.

He returned to the idea in 1901, by which time his Zionist ideas had already been embodied in institutions and activities emerging from the annual Zionist congresses. So when he claimed, in his preface, that *Old-New Land* was not a mere utopian novel, but an ideal extension of an already existing reality, he was not being completely unrealistic.

The famous motto Herzl chose for his novel—"If you will it, it is no dream"—has a clear implication. No historical determinism decides the fate of nations. The crucial ingredient is human agency, not "objective" conditions. Ask any schoolchild in Israel who said *im tirzu ein zo agadda*, and they will immediately recognize it as Herzl's saying. This insistence on the creative and transformative power of human will is as relevant today relevant as it was one hundred and ten years ago, when it was inscribed by Herzl on the front page of his great non-utopian novel.

Shlomo Avineri teaches political science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the author of Herzl: An Intellectual Biography (Shazar). He also wrote the historical introduction to the Hebrew edition of Herzl's diaries Inyan Ha-Yehudim: Sifrei Yoman (Histadrut).

MORE BY THIS AUTHOR

The Kibbutz and the State

by Anita Shapira

translated from the Hebrew by Evelyn Abel

from Summer 2010

Just as today's VIP visitors to Israel are taken to see the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, so in the first decades of statehood were they ushered off to a kibbutz, especially if they were situated on the left side of the political spectrum. In 1972, for instance, at a time when many New Leftists had come to regard Israel as a present-day Sparta constantly brandishing its sword, the crowned prophet of the student revolution, Herbert Marcuse, visited Israel for the first time. His hosts took him to Kibbutz Hulda, where he was shown around by Amos Oz, who later gratefully quoted him as saying: "Yours is the only socialist experiment that has not spilt blood and so far has not turned bourgeois."

Overseas visitors lent the kibbutz movement the endorsement it so desperately craved. Nobody else on the Israeli scene seems to have been quite so much in need of constant confirmation from society at large or quite so sensitive to criticism. This vulnerability stemmed from the fact that kibbutz members, even in the 1960s and 1970s, were not content to live a life of pleasant, everyday routine. Since the first decade of the century, they had struggled to bring into existence an altogether new type of society, one that would both establish real equality and imbue ordinary life with special significance. At a time when the descent of the Soviet experiment into the worst sort of tyranny had made the utopian idea appear bankrupt, their achievements continued to hold out the hope that a radical social transformation was within the realm of possibility. But while the kibbutz managed for a long time to present an alternative lifestyle to idealistic young people, it did so with increasing difficulty and growing self-doubt. Indeed, from the day the State of Israel was born in 1948, a sense of crisis was the kibbutz's constant companion.

A century after the creation of the first kibbutz, more than sixty years since the establishment of the State of Israel, and nearly forty years since Marcuse's visit to Hulda, the kibbutz movement still has question marks hanging over it. To what extent has its heroic attempt to create a small-scale utopia through education and socialization stood the test of reality? Can one still say of the kibbutz, as Martin Buber once did, that it is an "experiment that didn't fail"? To address these questions, one must first take a close look at the impact of larger political and social developments on the kibbutz from 1948 to the present.

The War of Independence took a heavy toll on the kibbutz movement: the destruction of settlements, the loss of hundreds of its sons, the hundreds of fresh widows. In the words of Kadish Luz, a member of Kibbutz Deganya Bet and a leader of the Histadrut labor federation, children were "broken up into two categories: those with fathers and those without." There was, as he put it, a sense of "mission fatigue." The strain of mobilizing to establish a state, a luminous ideal that had justified so many hardships, had been relieved. A state now existed—and not every day could be as thrilling as November 29, 1947, when the UN had voted in favor of partition. The disappointments that followed were, perhaps, inevitable.

During the period of the British Mandate, the kibbutz had always been the standard-bearer, ready to establish "tower and stockade" footholds in dangerously exposed territory or to volunteer for whatever else needed to be done. After the attainment of independence in 1948, however, the pioneering tasks it had performed in

the past were now assumed by the state. Settlement of the land was managed by the government and implemented not by self-sacrificing kibbutz youth groups, but by new immigrants summarily dispatched to frontier regions. Many new kibbutzim were still being set up along the borders, but they were no longer alone. Immigration ceased to be a clandestine operation conducted by kibbutz volunteers and became one of the state's responsibilities. Instead of volunteering for the underground, there was now conscription into the IDF. Kibbutz members, more than other citizens, volunteered for elite units, flight squads, and the commandos—a price tag of blood held up by members or outside supporters in the face of any criticism flung at the kibbutz. But the army too was, of course, run by the state.

Fully aware of what was happening, David Ben-Gurion, despite his statist orientation, strove to lift the kibbutz movement out of its doldrums: “There is no more harmful or dangerous assumption than that with the establishment of the state, the hour for pioneering has passed,” he declared. “Without a robust pioneering drive to match the needs and possibilities that have increased and intensified with statehood—we will not manage the three great tasks of our generation: ingathering the exiles, making the desert bloom, and security.” But this was reassuring rhetoric: the tasks were on a scale far beyond the means of the kibbutz movement, which could do little but watch as the state usurped its historical role.

The deepest cause for despondency was the fact that despite the massive flow of immigrants into the Jewish state during its first four years, the kibbutz suffered from dwindling numbers: some members left, no new ones came. The Holocaust had destroyed the human reservoirs that might have replenished the kibbutzim. On the whole, the post-Independence immigrants lacked the ideological education dispensed by kibbutz youth groups, whose graduates themselves had only rarely remained on the kibbutz. What is more, most of the newcomers were older and hailed from traditional societies in Muslim countries. They wished to preserve their family framework and had no inclination to adopt a communal lifestyle.

The new immigrants did not understand socialist aspirations; their Zionist consciousness did not em-



Women farming on Kibbutz Deganya, May 18, 1948. (Photo by Bettmann/CORBIS.)

brace such concepts as enlisting for national endeavors, subordinating individual interests to those of the public, or other keystones of a voluntarist and public-spirited worldview. The kibbutz's culture of direct democracy was alien to most of them, to say nothing of voluntary self-subordination to communal life.

They regarded the kibbutz as a bastion of uncompromising secularism hostile to tradition, an institution that dissolved the traditional family, and an ideology that opposed the principle of private property. In addition to everything else, they found it degrading that they were expected to work as manual laborers. It is difficult to imagine how this wave of immigrants could have been integrated into the kibbutz, even if much more energy had been invested in doing so.

Yet Ben-Gurion demanded that the kibbutzim throw open their gates. "What have the pioneers done for three hundred thousand new immigrants?" he railed in the Knesset in January 1950. "During the past two years I have been humiliated and shamed by the pioneering movement's failure: the greatest thing that has ever happened in its history has taken place, the exodus from Egypt has begun, the ingathering of the exiles has begun, and what have our pioneers done? Have the kibbutzim put themselves to the task?" Ben-Gurion argued that the principle of self-labor (no hired hands) had once been an appropriate barrier against employing Arab workers at a time when it was necessary to get "Hebrew labor" off the ground. But the new realities of the state required that immigrants be absorbed into the productive organs of the kibbutz and given jobs. This, in his eyes, was now the true pioneering. The kibbutz movement, including members of his own party who supported his immigration policy, rejected his demand because it militated against two basic tenets of kibbutz doctrine: equality and communality. "Hired labor in the kibbutz economy," insisted Shlomo Rozen, the secretary-general of the Kibbutz Artzi Federation, "means the destruction of the kibbutz economy, with its social and its Zionist-class values." The kibbutz could not have absorbed thousands of hired hands and still remained a kibbutz.

The establishment of the state exposed the duality of socialist and Zionist components that had defined the kibbutz movement from its inception. The kibbutz was to have been the model of the society of the future, a just and egalitarian society even as it shouldered its special responsibilities and missions in the realization of Zionism. But while "national and pioneering tasks were the chief substance of kibbutz life in the period preceding the state's establishment," as Haim Gvati, one of the founders of Kibbutz Gvat in the 1920s, put it, they were not always of equal significance. Shlomo Ne'eman, another veteran kibbutznik, distinguished between a "national matter" and "social goals" in terms of the energy people were prepared to invest in each of them: "There is no limit to the efforts people devote to a *national matter*. Nowhere does one find such dedication to *social goals*." In the pre-state period, the Zionist deed was performed by kibbutzim. In fact, Ne'eman claimed, the history of the kibbutz "as a way of life and the kernel of the society of the future" began only after the establishment of the state. Having been displaced from the vanguard of Zionism, and having seen its national functions greatly diminished, the kibbutz had to shift its main focus to the mission of social reconstruction. But there was a problem: what was to fuel the shift? As Ne'eman observed, it is easier to mobilize people for dramatic national tasks than for mundane social ones. A few idealistic youths plunged into the development towns to live with and assist the new immigrants, but they constituted a distinct minority. The vast majority of kibbutz youth was not fired by the idea. Just as Ben-Gurion's call to embark on pioneering tasks, such as settling the Negev, evoked little response, so too did the attempt to have the kibbutz negotiate a 180-degree turn to focus on being a model of a utopian, egalitarian society. The prospect did not stir the imagination or generate enthusiasm. As if to convince themselves that they had not lost the luster earned by carrying the Jewish people on their shoulders, movement leaders kept enumerating the kibbutz's accomplishments: settling on the country's borders; making the desert bloom; developing modern, viable, and advanced agriculture; and the volunteer service of their young people in elite IDF units. The anxiety that the kibbutz movement was losing its central place in Israeli society gnawed away at her devoted members and supporters in the 1950s and 1960s.

The centrality of the kibbutz in the pre-state period and the subsequent decline in its status were reflected in Hebrew culture. When Hannah Senesh composed her poem “[My God, May it Never End](#)” not long before she parachuted to her death in 1944 in a doomed rescue mission behind Nazi lines in Hungary, she was evoking memories of the Mediterranean coast near Kibbutz Sdot Yam, where she lived. S. Yizhar’s first story, “Ephraim Returns to the Alfalfa,” is set on a kibbutz. The first novels of the most important post-Independence writers are also set on kibbutzim. Naomi Shemer, who famously wrote the lyrics for “Jerusalem of Gold” in 1967, had, in her early years, sung of the eucalyptus grove at Kibbutz Kinneret, her birthplace. Moshe Dayan’s eulogy for Ro’i Rothberg, a victim of terrorism at Kibbutz Nachal Oz on the edge of the Gaza Strip, symbolized the central place of farmer-soldier units and frontier kibbutzim in the public consciousness of the 1950s.

But this was not to last. Since the 1960s, city life has replaced the kibbutz as the main scene of action in Hebrew literature. When the kibbutz features in a work such as Yehoshua Knaz’s novel [Infiltration](#) (1986), it is meant to represent the domination—unto death—of the individual by society. This had been an important theme of kibbutz literature since David Maletz’s pioneering novel, *Circles*, which appeared in the early 1940s, but by the 1980s, it dominated the scene. The kibbutz became the symbol of the misery that Zionism inflicted on those who had followed it to the utopian wilderness. Thus, for example, the institution of children’s dormitories became a topic of incessant discussion in Israeli culture, as if an unhappy childhood were the sole preserve of kibbutz society. It is difficult to find novels in which the kibbutz plays a major role in the past few decades. Asaf Inbari’s recent book, *Homeward*, about the history of Kibbutz Afikim, where he was born in 1968, reads like a requiem.

In this bygone world, people had often asked whether the kibbutz ought to serve as an *avant-garde*, charged with guiding Israeli society towards social revolution, or as a prototype for that society. In both cases, the relationship between the kibbutz and its surroundings vitally informed every vision: whether the kibbutz advanced revolution or set an example, there was a symbiosis between the kibbutz and the larger society. But by the late 1950s, Kadish Luz, by then Minister of Agriculture and a symbol of integrity and modesty, could protest that “our main difficulty today is that the very way of life and the need for it in the eyes of the broad public outside the kibbutz is problematic, and this attitude has filtered down to kibbutz members themselves.” New definitions of the state’s needs, tasks, and aims replaced the tasks traditionally undertaken by the kibbutz. Careers in science, the military, or service in the top tiers of the state apparatus were now considered no less important than being a kibbutz member. The kibbutz still enjoyed symbolic prestige; it was still a destination of foreign VIPs. But the milieu was changing. Minister of Education and kibbutz member Aharon Yadlin observed that the kibbutz had lost its supremacy in Israeli public consciousness and that people now saw “the kibbutz member as strange and eccentric, and his creation [the kibbutz] as anachronistic.”

The kibbutz was never meant to be a sect. Its connection to the broader Zionist movement was vital to its self-image. But how could it avoid being marginalized when Israeli society as a whole relinquished the pioneering ideals of the early days and came to resemble the western bourgeois world? The process was stealthy: slowly, almost imperceptibly, Israeli society changed colors. The evaporation of social idealism in the general society caused the kibbutz to regard itself, in the best case, as an oasis and, in the worst, as an anachronism. In this atmosphere, the kibbutz was destined to shrink: there would always be drop-outs, but it was doubtful that there would be newcomers.

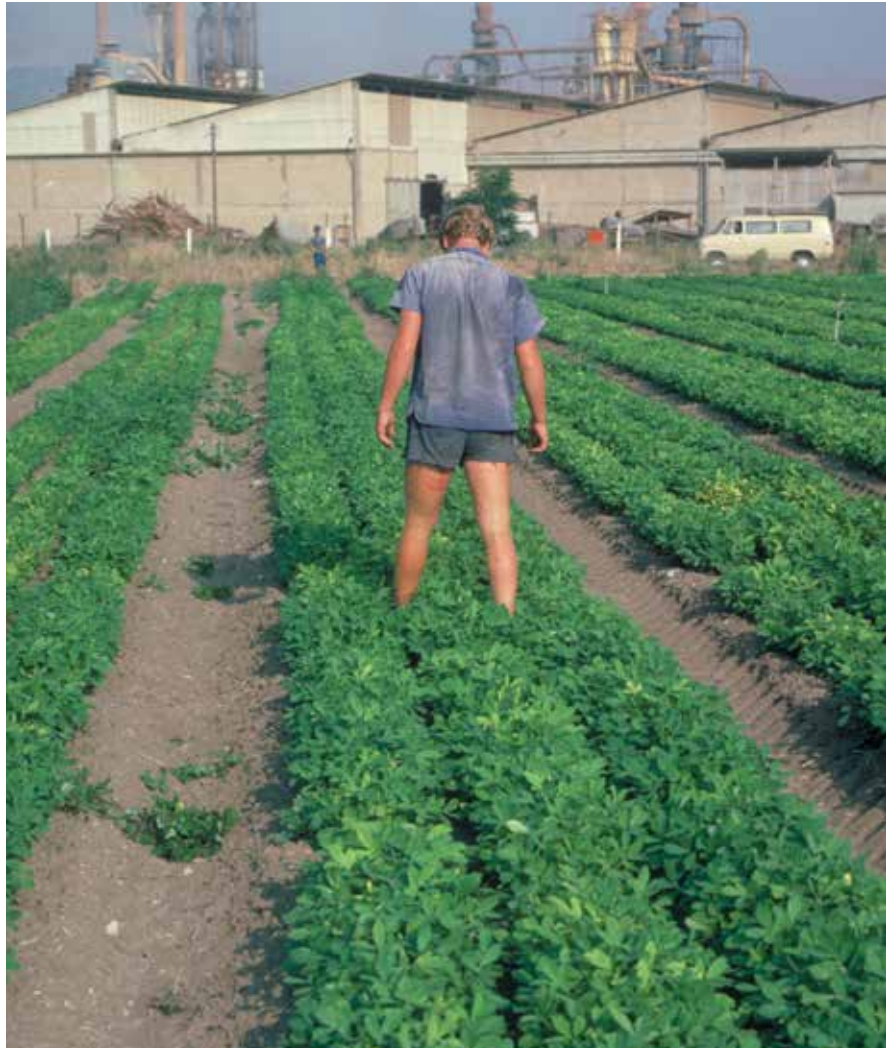
After the War of Independence, kibbutz members had sought to improve their standard of living, not with luxuries (heaven forbid) but with simple commodities: reasonable living quarters with indoor bathrooms so as to dispense with communal showers and sprinting to WCs in the rain; some furniture for the private living quarters; and more freedom in spending the personal funds allotted to them. As families grew larger, mem-

bers sought housing that would enable them to host their dormitory-dwelling children in the afternoon. The demands were modest, not exceeding the accommodations of a worker's family in town. This particular comparative measure was critical both existentially and ideologically. Too large a gap would have caused people to leave the kibbutz and move to town. And the kibbutz had always contended that communal life was not only more just and equitable, but also more efficient economically. In 1949, Joseph Sprinzak, a veteran labor-Zionist politician and the first speaker of the Knesset, but himself a city-dweller, sought to define sympathetically the outlook of the kibbutz's new standard-bearers: they are "capable of supreme self-sacrifice at any moment but not prepared for the ascetic self-denial of monks or hermits."

"Is it inevitable that the accumulation of property will lower the temperature of the vision?" demanded a kibbutz member. "Can only people without means and without professions create a communal society?" That is, can a commune be sustained only at a low standard of living? And is it destined to pass from the world with the onset of economic prosperity? Sixty years later, this question sounds prophetic.

The rise in living standards was accompanied by a shift in the balance between the individual and the kibbutz. More and more, members sought some privacy within the communal framework. Electric kettles showed up first in family apartments, then record players, radios, and refrigerators. The kibbutz's common domain also grew steadily weaker: with the advent of television, participation in kibbutz assemblies fell. The children's dormitories fought a losing battle. As a result, family members gathered together to eat in private homes instead of in the communal dining room. The home became a focus of identity. The bond to the kibbutz was no longer preserved by ideology, which had collapsed, but by inertia and a sense of belonging to place and family.

The kibbutz had to respond to its members' intellectual ambitions and cultural aspirations as well. Young people's paths to the university could no longer be blocked and they had to be allowed to study whatever they wanted. The slogan of "self-realization" (through living on the kibbutz) was replaced by "personal growth." Individualism eroded group commitment. Old-timers felt the kibbutz slipping away from them. "We are witness to a shift in emphasis," complained one veteran in 1970, "from kibbutz to economy, from vision to interests,



Kibbutz member works in the fields as industry encroaches. (Courtesy of Israel Ministry of Tourism.)

from all-embracing moral standards to criteria of efficiency.” Members of the kibbutz’s third generation did not accept their parents’ doctrines, and demanded the freedom to shape their own lives. “We see nothing wrong with the development of kibbutz careerism,” a younger member declared. So as not to lag behind the rest of the country, the kibbutz industrialized. This facilitated a higher standard of living and, just as importantly, provided an entire stratum of young people with challenging, interesting work in industrial plants where instead of picking oranges they could design and develop new plastic products or precision metal parts. Agriculture lost its primacy as the main branch of the kibbutz movement. A whole way of rural community life, bound up with the celebration of nature holidays and the education of youth towards manual labor, lost its bearings.

In November and December of 1971, the journalist Ya’ir Kotler published a series of articles entitled “The Kibbutz in the Era of Affluence” in *Ha’aretz*. He portrayed the kibbutz as wealthy, not truly egalitarian, petty bourgeois, disappointing to young and old, frustrating to those working for the members’ general good, imprisoned in the rhetoric of the past, and devoid of new horizons. The letters-to-the-editor columns of *Ha’aretz* and other newspapers were soon full of complaints and protestations: “Let’s see if you come close to living by the criteria you demand of the kibbutz.” “Look how much we give to the state, and the esteem in which the world holds us.” But there were also more balanced responses. One kibbutz member wrote that, contrary to what some people may think, “the kibbutz is not a ‘nature reserve’, but an integral part of Israeli society” despite all of its problems. “Three and a half percent of the population cannot long withstand the general current of society.” No less than Kotler’s original articles, this statement pointed to an inherent paradox: to the extent that the kibbutz strove to reflect innovative trends in the economy and society, and sought to satisfy the third generation’s more individualistic ambitions, it moved away from its idealistic-pioneering image and lost its standing in Israeli society. The pioneering-national message melted away with the attainment of statehood.

The growth and consolidation of the kibbutz movement took place in the 1920s when the Jewish community in Palestine was pervaded by an almost messianic pathos, by hopes of revamping the world here and now. These hopes were connected with events in Russia—the country of origin of many kibbutz members and the guiding light of socialist actualization to which all lifted their eyes. This was of course an illusion, ending in one of the greatest disappointments in human history. But as long as the USSR sun still seemed to shine, the kibbutz in Palestine had a model against which to measure itself.

Even those who were repelled by Soviet brutality were, to some extent, reassured by the very existence of that huge state where a large-scale experiment was under way to put socialism into practice. They were fascinated by what they saw as a movement from exploitation to justice, a bold endeavor to refashion man and society. Different parts of the kibbutz movement lost their “Red fascination” at different times. The last ones sobered up after the USSR’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, but in the following decades, too, the USSR continued to serve as a yardstick for comparison. By the end of the 1980s, however, it was finally clear to everyone that the Russian experiment had failed in human, social, and political terms.

Even earlier, however, toward the end of 1960s, some young kibbutzniks had begun to look in an entirely different direction for inspiration. Members of the second and third generations of kibbutzniks began to explore traditional Jewish sources. At the center of this phenomenon was the journal *Shdemot*, which served as a platform for young people disillusioned with socialism, fed up with the spiritual emptiness of the kibbutz’s affluent society, and searching for God. Yearning for spiritual content and elevation, these people called for traditional holiday celebrations instead of the new rituals invented by earlier generations of kibbutzniks. They and others like them spurned the kibbutz *Haggadah*, which reflected contemporary culture and sometimes current events, in favor of a *Haggadah* to which God had been restored and which became increasingly similar to the traditional one. All of the wonderful quasi-biblical ceremonies devised by creative artists and teachers in the heyday of the kibbutz to express the new experience of a village culture were now judged in terms of their fidelity to Jewish tradition. The ushering in of the Sabbath, includ-

ing candle lighting, gathered momentum. The long-neglected holiday of Yom Kippur came back into the picture. The socialist bookshelf made way for the Jewish one. Kibbutz members took to studying Judaism at yeshivas or universities. All of this was a reaction to the exile of the Divine Presence from the kibbutz, as the poet Abba Kovner put it, an attempt to compensate for the death of the socialist utopia.

This new approach to Judaism was a component of kibbutz culture that radiated outwardly to secular Israeli society. It awakened an interest in Judaism among many young people seeking an escape from the cold, modern world. Ironically enough, however, within the kibbutz itself it was a different story. Most people were not interested in such things. The intelligentsia, the spiritual elite who had established the Eyal Seminar, Oranim College, and the Kibbutzim College of Education, and who had studied “impractical” subjects such as history and Jewish philosophy, felt uneasy and frustrated with the ideological atrophy of the kibbutz. The economic managers, the active group that ran the industries supporting the kibbutz, were hardly thrilled by the steady growth of expenditure on education and higher studies not geared to kibbutz needs. Very likely, they felt that they were financing “idlers.” Most kibbutz members sat on the sidelines, preferring to stay home and watch television rather than participate in discussions on the meaning of life on the kibbutz.

The kibbutz’s status as a leading actor in Israeli society continued to decline through the early 1980s. It still played an important part in settlement and the IDF, and it still exhibited impressive economic viability. But gone were the days when kibbutz members featured prominently in the Knesset or the government. They did not find their place in the leadership of the Labor movement, much less act as catalysts in Israeli politics. The earthshaking victory of the Right in 1977 had turned their world upside down. But apart from bestirring themselves to campaign for the Labor Party in the following elections, they did not shake off their lethargy. It was as if the flame that had once burned in the hearts of their fathers had completely died out with the changing of the generational guard.

The kibbutz’s supposed “Garden of Eden” had for some years harbored a snake: the metal-working, wood-working, electronics, and plastics industries established in the 1970s had revitalized the kibbutzim economically, but they rested on hired labor. The workers hailed from development towns, the managers from kibbutzim. This meant that there were now two opposing classes: employers, who devoutly upheld equality at home, but whose factories did not promote workers to management positions; and the children of those same Eastern Jews, who had been uninterested in joining the kibbutzim and grew up in development towns, like Kiryat Shmona, Yerucham, and Beit Shemesh, on the bitterness, insult, and pain of societal rejection. The egalitarian standard-bearers found themselves at the center of a class and ethnic confrontation.

Several months after the 1981 elections, Israeli television broadcast a program including a segment in which a member of Kibbutz Manara on the Lebanon border was seen swimming to his heart’s content in the kibbutz pool. Menachem Begin, in an interview on Israel Radio on the eve of Rosh ha-Shanah, referred to this by then notorious kibbutznik and the pool as an arrogant expression of a culture of excess: “That man on a kibbutz, lounging in the pool as if [you were watching] . . . some American millionaire and talking with a good deal of condescension? Did I sit at that swimming pool? I have no such luxury.” Begin’s crude and demagogic use of the “ethnic card” reflected his awareness that the kibbutz, for all its faults and weaknesses, still posed an alternative to his new regime. Moreover, it still symbolized an idealistic society, the best of the Israeli nation. If Begin wished to rewrite the history of Israel and give voice to groups like his own Irgun, which had been excluded from the Zionist narrative, he had to undermine the symbolic keystone of the Labor movement—the kibbutz—by depicting its members as people living off the fat of the land while they exploited hired workers and denied these workers’ children admission into kibbutz schools.

The [prime minister’s words](#) created a media storm. The kibbutzim had some passionate defenders. “You obliterate the kibbutzim, you obliterate Israeli identity,” wrote the journalist and novelist Amos Keinan. “The kibbutz does not belong only to the kibbutz, only to the Labor movement, but is an asset to all Israel, to the

Jewish people as a whole, and one of the wonderful expressions of Jewish genius.” Other leading journalists and writers rushed to the kibbutz’s rescue and Begin was quick to apologize, though he termed the torrent of retorts condemning him “hysteria.” Nonetheless, the damage had been done. In vain did kibbutz economists pull out numbers to show that they did not enjoy economic privileges. In vain did they list all the things kibbutz members had done on behalf of development towns. In vain did they explain that it was every kibbutz, not every kibbutz member, that had a swimming pool. The image of the rich, patronizing Ashkenazi kibbutznik was fixed in Israel’s internal discourse on Eastern Jews.

Kibbutz members were deeply pained by this campaign of delegitimization. Where had they erred, they asked themselves. Could things have been done differently? If so, how? Martin Buber’s famous definition of the kibbutz as an experiment that had not failed was repeated again and again, as if it were a magical formula with restorative powers. Certainly, the kibbutz did not quite fail—as a way of life it continued to be a symbol and an example to emulate. But neither did the excitement of the pre-state period return, except perhaps in wartime or on kibbutzim facing security dangers. In normal times and on calm kibbutzim, it was life in town that appeared interesting, innovative, and challenging.

Ironically enough, it was the economic collapse of considerable parts of the kibbutz movement in the late 1980s that disrupted this drab state of affairs. Affluence proved to have been temporary, perhaps even illusory. Yet a return to austerity and “making do with little” was not an option in late 20th-century Israel. The principles of egalitarianism and communalism were sacrificed on the altar of economic efficiency. The collapse of the USSR resonated powerfully: economics had defeated ideology, and the expert in social organization replaced the charismatic leader. The aspiration to reshape the world was replaced by a far more modest concern: to ensure a dignified old age, at least, for the generation that had given its all for the kibbutz.

Was the collapse of the kibbutz the result of poor management or did it point to the system’s essential failings? Socialist ideologue Yitzhak Ben-Aharon believed to the end of his century-long life that in Israel, as in the USSR, the failure had not been inevitable, but rather the result of the incorrect application of correct principles. Since a large part of the kibbutz movement still believes in communal life and egalitarianism, and even succeeds economically, this assumption cannot be dismissed out of hand. At the same time, the inherent contradictions of raising a managerial class on the kibbutz were not merely accidental. The kibbutz spurned the idea of a socialism of poverty, holding up its economic success as proof of the success of its way of life and in order to ensure the loyalty of its next generation. But to society at large, the elevation of its standard of living made it seem that the kibbutz was shedding its pioneering spirit and, internally, it made the intellectual discourse sterile and created a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle. The result was an impoverished socialism. If Marcuse was right in 1972 that the kibbutz had “so far not turned bourgeois,” he was not right for long.

All of this raises the question of the character of the third kibbutz generation. Its spokesmen have claimed that they are not prepared to accept the truths and norms of their parents, that they are entitled to choose their own way of life just as their parents once did. Does this attest to the success of kibbutz education or its failure? A great deal of creative thinking, as well as financial and intellectual investment, went into educating kibbutz children. Ultimately, communal education produced kibbutz members who take naturally to physical labor, excel at team-work, and are prepared to work hard. But it did not create a “new man” in the socialist sense, free of possessiveness, jealousy, and personal ambition. Education and ideology proved powerless against the influence of the surrounding society and, perhaps, against human nature, which turned out to be resistant to all attempts to redesign it. If the utopian project failed in the coercive world of the USSR, it could hardly succeed in the open, democratic society of Israel.

In the end, the fate of the kibbutz reminds us that idealistic projects are always shaped by the great events and movements of history. There are indeed moments when it seems as if the human will can change the

course of history. But it is important to remember that Zionism was realized not only through the will of its champions and their sacrifices, but as the result of historical processes beyond its control: two world wars, colonialism and decolonization, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Holocaust, the Cold War, and other defining world events without which it is doubtful that any demonstration of Zionist “will” or kibbutz idealism would ever have prevailed. It was realized in an era in which states fought for their very existence and nations stood on the brink of the abyss. In this turbulent era, there was room for worldviews that regarded the community and the nation as the bases of human existence, and private life, comforts, and personal growth as secondary to the needs of the group. However, individual and general interests intersected only in times of massive emergency. In the absence of any such emergency over the past sixty years, new winds have blown away old ideas and fashions. If the Zionist idea had been born today, it would not have caught on. Herzl’s “If you will it, it is no legend” has symbolically evolved into current Tel Aviv graffiti featuring a picture of the founding father and the words: “No will, no way.”

The same is true of the kibbutz. To be sure, the economic collapse of the 1980s could have been avoided. But it was impossible to prevent the decline in the kibbutz’s stature, both in the state and in the eyes of the kibbutznik. The disappearance of national-pioneering tasks had slowly dissolved any sense of urgency; constant attrition and the inability to attract new members had undermined self-confidence; and processes beyond the kibbutz movement’s control had produced enormous changes in the public and social climate.

But the story of the kibbutz has not necessarily reached its end. Although the movement has declined over the past sixty years, it has by no means disappeared. Nor has its intellectual legacy been forgotten or rendered obsolete. One can readily imagine that Israel might, in the future, face the sort of emergency that could revivify the kibbutz movement, or perhaps stimulate the creation of something new and different that will nevertheless draw upon its heritage.

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Athens or Sparta?

by Benny Morris
from Summer 2013

Back in 1988, I refused to do a stint of reserve duty in the Israel Defense Forces and was sentenced to a twenty-one-day prison term. It was at the height of the First Intifada and my unit was to serve thirty-five days in the casbah—the old town—of Nablus, in the heart of Samaria. I refused because I thought that Israeli rule in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip was oppressive and that Israel should make peace with the Palestinians based on a two-states-for-two-peoples solution. The First Intifada, from 1987 until 1991, was a popular uprising, largely consisting of strikes, boycotts, street demonstrations, and riots, in which the rioters almost invariably employed non-lethal means. (By contrast, in the Second Intifada, from 2000 to 2004, the Palestinians employed highly lethal means—suicide bombings in buses and restaurants—and their target, in my view, was not so much the occupation as Israel itself.)

The judge at my trial was our division's deputy commander, a lieutenant colonel who was obviously uncomfortable with the situation. He said something like "not all of us in the military are happy with what's happening" and coaxed me to relent. But the following Sunday I went off to Prison No. 4, in Sarafand, where I served out a relatively pleasant seventeen days (I arrived two days late, and two days were taken off for good behavior). A year or two later, I was again called up for reserve duty (not in the territories), and a while later I was honorably discharged from the IDF at the age of 44, in line with the custom at the time for combat soldiers.

I was reminded of this personal episode while reading Patrick Tyler's *Fortress Israel: The Inside Story of the Military Elite Who Run the Country—and Why They Can't Make Peace*. As the title makes clear, Tyler charges Israel with being a modern "Sparta." How were conscientious objectors punished in Sparta? I don't know if Leonidas suffered conscientious objectors before the Hot Gates, but I do know how they were treated in Wilhelmine Germany, the classic modern "militarist" society. And I know how they fared in the United States, France, and Great Britain when these countries were at war and had conscription and reserve duty. The norm in each case was either a few years behind bars or some form of internal exile.

Tyler's book is a gossipy overlong pseudo-history of Israel, which is noteworthy mainly for what it indicates about the standing of Israel among the chattering classes. For Patrick Tyler is the former chief correspondent of *The New York Times* and the former Middle East bureau chief of *The Washington Post*, and his book comes festooned with blurbs from former *Times* executive editor Howell Raines, CNN's national security analyst Peter L. Bergen, and others lauding its scholarship as "meticulous" and describing it as "the definitive historical and analytical account" of the role of the military in Israel. Incidentally, Tyler does not know Hebrew or Arabic, and the only archive he appears to have visited is the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in his home state of Texas.

For decades Zionists and their supporters have described Israel as a latter-day Athens, and Tyler seems to take it personally, insisting instead on describing Israel as "a modern Sparta in a region of weak states."

Fortress Israel: The Inside Story of the Military Elite Who Run the Country—and Why They Can't Make Peace

by Patrick Tyler

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 576 pp., \$35

Indeed, at one point Tyler seems preposterously to liken Nasser's Egypt to Athens:

Thucydides had written of the Peloponnesian War: "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta." But in this case there was no growth of Athenian power. Nasser's strength was declining ... It was Israel—Sparta—whose power had grown ...

I will return to Tyler's perverse and implausible account of the lead-up to the Six-Day War. For now, let us ask: Is Israel Sparta? Well, let's see. It is true that Israel has a powerful army and spends a large part of its annual budget (say twenty to twenty-five percent) on defense; true, too, that generals and security chiefs, past and present, have a major say in shaping defense and foreign policy and have had substantial representation in successive cabinets, though only

three—Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, and Ariel Sharon—out of Israel's twelve prime ministers were former generals. All the others, David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Sharett, Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir, Menachem Begin, Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Shamir, Binyamin Netanyahu, and Ehud Olmert, were civilians. It could be argued that Begin and Shamir, as former commanders of guerrilla organizations in the pre-state period, also had "security" backgrounds. (Shamir also served for a while in the Mossad.) But then Israel has been under siege from without and terrorist threat from within

since its establishment. So security, personal as well as collective, is understandably a paramount consideration in the minds of Israelis. This is hardly surprising. American ex-generals have often risen to political prominence during or after wars: Washington in the 18th century, Jackson and Grant in the 19th, Eisenhower, George C. Marshall, and Colin Powell in the 20th, to name just a few.

In his Prologue, Tyler asserts that "militarism" is the ruling spirit in Israeli society:

Once in the military system, Israelis never fully exit. They carry the military identity for life ... through lifelong expectations of loyalty and secrecy. Many Israeli officers carry their "top secret" clearances after retirement, reporting back to superiors or intelligence officers items of interest gleaned from their involvement in business, finance, and interactions with foreigners.

On the next page, he writes, "the specter of the security state remains a dominant aspect of life," and a little later, "The military is the country to a great extent." This is all nonsense. Had Tyler been writing about Israel during the late 1940s and 1950s, perhaps he would have had a point. Perhaps. But the Israel of the past several decades, Israel today, is another animal altogether. For most Israelis, individual achievement and interests trump the old



Young Palestinian demonstrators throw rocks and bottles at Israeli soldiers during the First Intifada, December 1987. (Photo by Esaias Baitel/AFP/Getty Images.)

collectivist Zionist ethic. Indeed, fewer and fewer Israelis actually serve in the army or do reserve duty (as the few who carry the burden are constantly complaining). It is true that among eleventh and twelfth graders, there is still great competitiveness to get a slot, once inducted, in one of the IDF's elite units or in pilot training, but this has more to do with adolescent competition and machismo than militaristic ideology. Indeed, a good argument can be made for depicting the Israeli army as one of the world's least "military." Since its inception in 1948, the IDF has abjured saluting (the practice exists only in formal parades), and the men, after completing basic training, generally address their non-coms and officers on a first-name basis. The dress code in the army ranges from informal to sloppy and always has (except in the Armored Corps), and breaches of discipline tend to be punished lightly. While females are still kept out of combat units, women non-coms and officers are playing a major role in training combat troops (in armor and artillery, for example), and there are growing numbers of women pilots and navigators, also flying combat aircraft. All of this points to a liberal rather than "militarist" military.

As with poker players, books have tells. At one point in *Fortress Israel* Tyler writes that Israel's paratroopers wear black berets. Had he interviewed any Israeli, even a child (even an Israeli Arab child), he would have known that, as in Britain and France, paratroopers wear red berets. Sadly, Tyler knows nothing about the nuts and bolts of Israel or its military.

Israel is, in sober fact, a small, flawed, and embattled democracy, with a strong and unusually egalitarian military that has produced an extraordinary stream of writers, academics, and artists, supported by world-class academic and artistic institutions. In short, it is more Athenian than Spartan.

Tyler is as weak on the history of Israel as he is on its sociology, though he is chock-full of opinions and judgments, all of them anti-Zionist. Let's return to the causes of the Six-Day War. The history of the countdown to this conflagration is clear, generally agreed upon, and pretty well documented. The opening of the relevant Israeli military and cabinet papers—closed for another four years by Israel's fifty-year rule—is unlikely to offer much added enlightenment. And the Arab archives, which might shed new light, remain closed, as they are for every period of the Israeli-Arab conflict (dictatorships do not open state archives). The slide to war began with Syria's sponsorship of Palestinian operations against Israel across the Lebanese and Jordanian borders and Syria's own efforts at diverting the headwaters of the Jordan River. Syria's leaders spoke frequently and publicly of a coming "war of liberation" for Palestine. Israel warned Syria that it was playing with fire and might even provoke an Israeli assault.

In early May 1967 Damascus and Moscow, Syria's chief international backer, passed on intelligence to Egypt that Israel was massing troops on the Syrian frontier. The implication was that Israel was about to launch a massive attack and that Egypt, with whom Syria had a defense pact, would have to come to Syria's aid. Moscow spoke of ten to twelve Israeli brigades and of May 17 as D-Day. This "intelligence" was untrue. The UN armistice supervision organization, UNTSO, checked the border areas and dismissed the reports. Indeed, Nasser sent his



Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin, center, with Haim Bar-Lev, left, and Ezer Weizman at the General Headquarters in Tel Aviv during the Six-Day War, June 1967. (Photo courtesy of Government Press Office, Israel.)

army chief, Muhammad Fawzi, to Damascus to find out what was happening. In his memoirs, Fawzi later wrote, “I did not find any concrete evidence to support the information received. On the contrary, aerial photographs taken by Syrian reconnaissance on May 12 and 13 showed no change in normal [Israeli] military positions.”

Tyler fails to tell his readers any of this. Instead, he slyly implies that there was something to the Syrian and Russian reports: “The Soviet information was mostly disinformation”—note the carefully placed modifier “mostly.” “It was clear,” Tyler goes on, “that the Israeli army was in a heightened state of alert along the northern frontier.” Again, the implication is that an attack was being prepared. It wasn’t.

Tyler then proceeds to justify Nasser’s subsequent actions, which directly provoked the Six-Day War:

Still, it was impossible for Nasser to ignore the [Soviet-Syrian] intelligence reports . . . For Nasser, it didn’t matter whether the intelligence reports were false . . . What mattered was that Nasser was in an untenable spot as the putative leader of the Arab world.

So, on May 13 he ordered his armored divisions to cross the Suez Canal into Sinai, which had been demilitarized after the 1956 War, threatening southern Israel. Nasser then compounded this with two steps that, in the absence of international intervention, made war inevitable. On May 16, he ordered the UN peacekeep-



Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and Israel Navy Commander Shlomo Harel on patrol in the Straits of Tiran during the Six-Day War, June 1967. (Photo by Ilan Bruner, courtesy of Government Press Office, Israel.)

ing force in Sinai (UNEF), which physically separated the Egyptians and Israelis, to leave, and on May 22 he announced the closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping and aircraft, blocking the port of Eilat, which was Israel’s port of access to Africa and southern Asia, and its air-link to South Africa. All of this was in violation of international law. At the end of the month, Nasser signed a defense pact with his old enemy King Hussein, and battalions of Egyptian troops were flown to Jordan; Iraq made ready to send armored divisions to bolster Hussein’s defenses. Israel felt a pan-Arab noose tightening around its neck.

Tyler describes these Egyptian moves, each of which was a clear *casus belli*, but then blames Israel for the war’s outbreak. He writes that Prime Minister Levi Eshkol tried but failed “to restrain the generals and quell the surge of enthusiasm for war that was becoming more and more pro-

nounced in the officer corps.” Meanwhile, the Americans failed to put together an international flotilla that would force open the straits—Tyler writes as if this idea was still in play when Israel struck on the morning of June 5, but it wasn’t—or to send in their own ships, which is why Washington in the end gave Israel a “yellow light” (the phrase is William Quandt’s) to attack.

One other Six-Day War matter that Tyler elides and distorts is the Israeli conquest of the West Bank, an area that Jordan had ruled since conquering it in 1948. Early on the morning of June 5, Israel told King Hussein—through the UN and U.S. channels—that if Jordan held its fire, no harm would come to it. The Jordanians none-



An Israeli soldier looks across the Suez Canal during the War of Attrition, August 1970. (Photo by Moshe Milner, courtesy of Government Press Office, Israel.)

theless opened fire, including artillery fire, on Israeli West Jerusalem and the coastal plain. Israel re-contacted the Jordanians, promising not to open fire if they immediately ceased. But the Jordanians continued firing, and around noon, Israeli troops began to push into the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Within three days, the territory down to the Jordan River was in Israeli hands.

Tyler omits any mention of these June 5 warnings and assurances to Jordan, and instead writes:

After Jordanian artillery batteries had opened fire on Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem, Yigal Allon and Menachem Begin joined in proposing . . . that the shelling gave Israel the pretext it needed to liberate Arab East Jerusalem, including the Old City and the Western Wall.

One wonders if Tyler would describe the American response to a comparable attack (say the shelling of Washington, D.C. and New York) as a “pretext.”

In the aftermath of the war, on June 19, the Israeli cabinet resolved, in secret session, that Israel would agree to withdraw from all of the Sinai Peninsula in exchange for peace with Egypt and the peninsula’s demilitarization and from all of the Golan Heights in exchange for peace with Syria and the Heights’ demilitarization. (The cabinet could not agree on the fate of the West Bank, so nothing was offered to Jordan.) Tyler, as usual when trying to downplay Israeli peace-mindedness, puts it vaguely: “Eshkol, Meir, and Dayan convinced [the ministers] . . . that they should at least offer to return some of the Arab territories if they could do so on favorable terms.” Which is not quite the same thing.

It is worth adding that there are historians who are convinced that this cabinet decision never reached Cairo and Damascus, though the truth, on this score, will only be definitively known if and when the Egyptian and Syrian archives are opened. What is certain is that in September 1967, in response to the Israeli victory and perhaps to these peace proposals, the Arab governments unanimously resolved never to negotiate with Israel, never to recognize it, and never to make peace—the famous “three nos” of Khartoum.

One other point Tyler makes about the war’s aftermath is worth quoting because it is so blatantly un-



Prime Minister Golda Meir with Israeli troops in the Golan Heights during the Yom Kippur War, November 1973. (Photo by Ron Frenkel, courtesy of Government Press Office, Israel.)

true: “It seemed that with few exceptions, everyone in Israel had embraced a creed that envisioned a Greater Israel, from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. There were differences [only] about how to achieve it.” It is true that a semi-messianic euphoria took hold, but post-1967 Israel was nonetheless a deeply divided society and remains so down to the present. Many opposed, or were uncomfortable with, retention of the Palestinian-populated territories. Tyler forgets to tell his readers that Ben-Gurion, whom he repeatedly brands an arch-expansionist and warmonger, immediately advised Eshkol to withdraw from the whole of the West Bank except East Jerusalem, nor does he mention that Labor Party minister Yigal Allon

quickly formulated a plan which called for withdrawal from the bulk of the West Bank in exchange for peace with Jordan. The “Allon Plan” was never formally adopted as the Labor Party’s platform or Israeli government policy, but it guided Labor’s policies for a decade. (Settlements were not established in the areas earmarked for transfer to Arab sovereignty.) In the immediate post-1967 years, Israel’s leaders, in secret meetings, repeatedly proposed the plan to King Hussein as a basis for a bilateral peace settlement to no avail.

Following the Six-Day War, Egypt’s president, Nasser, launched a “war of attrition” against Israel’s forces in the Sinai Peninsula, hoping to wear down Israeli resolve to remain in occupation of Egyptian territory. This consisted of artillery strikes against the Israeli forts built along the Suez Canal’s eastern bank (the so-called Bar-Lev Line) and of commando raids against the forts and the roads through which they were supplied. The Egyptians enjoyed overwhelming superiority in artillery, which caused serious Israeli casualties on an almost daily basis. (I was wounded by a shell splinter in one of the forts, codenamed Zahava Darom, on the southern edge of Small Bitter Lake.) To offset this Egyptian advantage, in the summer of 1969 the Israelis sent in the Israel Air Force (IAF) to hit the Egyptian artillery and frontline trench system on the west bank of the Canal. By the end of the year the Egyptian artillery had not been silenced, so in January 1970 the Israelis sent the IAF and commandos to attack army bases and anti-aircraft missile emplacements deep inside Egypt. Thousands of Egyptian soldiers and military construction workers were killed and injured during the half-year air campaign. On two occasions, bombs went astray or the targeting was mistaken and an Egyptian factory and an elementary school, which was situated inside a military compound, were destroyed, causing dozens of civilian deaths. Tyler summarizes the Israeli air assault as follows: “The air force . . . [dropped] an estimated eight thousand tons of bombs on military and civilian targets over these months . . . U.S.-made F-4 Phantoms terrorized Egyptian cities.” In effect, Tyler tells his readers that Israel indiscriminately killed Egyptians, deliberately targeting civilians. In fact, during these months life went on as normal in Egypt’s cities, since its government and citizenry knew full well that they were not being targeted.

The War of Attrition came to an end after the Soviets sent in thousands of their own personnel to man anti-aircraft missile batteries and fighter squadrons to counter the IAF. In one incident, Israeli Phantoms shot down five Soviet-piloted MiG-21s. At this point, both sides called it quits. The Egyptians were now thoroughly exhausted, and the Israelis feared an open-ended clash with the Russians. Tyler, as usual, has the story all wrong. He tells us that Soviet pilots “shot down half a dozen Israeli Phantoms.” This never happened.

Tyler replays the same atrocity card when describing Israel’s First Lebanon War, against the PLO and Syrians in Lebanon in 1982, when he writes of “the saturation bombing of the city [of Beirut].” Of course, there was never any “saturation” bombing. Tyler himself writes of six hundred civilians killed; in Dresden on February 13-15, 1945 Allied bombers killed an estimated twenty-five thousand civilians—older estimates put the number at around one hundred thousand or even higher. That’s saturation bombing. In 1982, the IAF very carefully targeted PLO buildings and camps in and around Beirut, and while hundreds of civilians no doubt died collaterally, some of them Lebanese rather than Palestinian, this was not the result of deliberation or intention. That’s what happens during wars in built-up areas—even when the more powerful side is careful. Tyler’s description is agitprop, not history.

The subtitle of Tyler’s book carries a clear message: Bloodthirsty Spartan generals “run” Israel and that is why it has not achieved peace with its neighbors. The actual history of the various post-1967 Israeli-Arab peace processes gives the lie to this argument. IDF generals and ex-generals have actually loomed large in these peace processes, both those which succeeded and those which didn’t.

Israel so far has signed two peace treaties with Arab states, with Egypt in 1979 and with Jordan in 1994, both of which are still in force (though how they will fare in the coming years, with fiercely anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic Islamists on the ascent in Arab politics, is anyone’s guess). Negotiations with Egypt were led by Menachem Begin, a civilian who had headed the pre-state right-wing Irgun Zvai Leumi (IZL). But the two men who pressed and persuaded him to make the requisite concessions, including handing over to Egypt the whole of Sinai, were his foreign minister Moshe Dayan and his defense minister Ezer Weizman, both of whom had spent most of their lifetimes in the IDF. Dayan was a former chief of general staff, and Weizman was a past commander of the Israel Air Force. The peace treaty with Jordan, in which Israel ceded several hundred square kilometers of territory in the south, was negotiated and signed by Yitzhak Rabin, also a former IDF chief of general staff.

In the late 1970s, the public drive to pressure Begin to make peace with Egypt was spearheaded by the Peace Now movement. Tyler says, almost correctly, that its importance “was that it arose in great measure from the military establishment.” Most of the original signatories of the letter that launched the movement were, in fact, IDF reserve officers. But of course this contradicts Tyler’s own thesis that the Israeli military “can’t make peace.” He seems not to notice.

After the Sadat-Begin treaty, the Israeli public, which according to Tyler had by then been tutored to “militarism” and expansionism by its leaders and generals for decades, immediately endorsed the government’s conciliatory posture, and some eighty percent of Israelis supported giving back all of Sinai to Egypt in exchange for peace. How does Tyler explain this? It was, he writes, “a strong affirmation that the martial impulse could be overpowered by a strategy based on accommodation with the Arabs.” What this fluff means is anyone’s guess. But what a more honest and plain-spoken commentator would have written would have been something like this: The Israeli public, when persuaded that there was a sincere, genuine Arab partner ready to make peace, would overcome its security-driven hesitations and rush headlong to sign on.

The basic problem with *Fortress Israel* is that Tyler dismisses, or is simply unaware of, the pan-Arab desire to rid the Middle East of the Jewish state and its periodic efforts to do so. According to Tyler, Israel alone is to blame for the wars, for the absence of peace, for the hopelessness. Thus, he fails completely to deal with the 1948 War, about which all acknowledge that the Arabs—first the Palestinians and then the neighboring Arab

states—were the aggressors; thus, he fails to come to grips with the very real Arab threats to Israel in 1956 and 1967 and, indeed, ever since. He pooh-poohs Saddam Hussein's effort to achieve nuclear weaponry in the early 1980s and writes off Israel's destruction of the Osirak nuclear reactor outside Baghdad in 1981 as merely "a new phase of [Israeli] militarism."

Indeed, Tyler kicks off the book with a description of how, in 2011-2012, Israeli agents "murdered" two top Iranian nuclear scientists on the streets of Tehran. "The astonishing thing," Tyler writes, "was that Iran might not have been engaged in clandestine nuclear weapons development at all." Rather, Israel's "highly provocative" killing of the scientists pushed Iran into pursuing, or resuming the pursuit of, nuclear weaponry. All of this flies in the face of what almost all the world's intelligence agencies believe, which is that Iran aims to build nuclear weapons and has been trying to do so for more than two decades. A few years ago, the American intelligence community suggested that the Iranians might have halted their nuclear weapons program in 2003, but it has since concluded that Iran is still pursuing nuclear weapons. Israeli intelligence has never believed that there was a real halt and continues to believe that Iran's theocratic, brutal government is bent on building nuclear weapons as soon as possible. Israeli intelligence also takes the Iranian leaders at their public word and believes that the Iranian regime seeks to destroy Israel. A division of opinion exists among the Israeli intelligence assessors about whether the Iranians, once they build an arsenal of such weapons, will unleash them on Israel or whether they will use them to strategically overawe and defeat Israel in some more subtle and staggered manner. In any event, returning to Tyler and his thesis, according to press reports, it is the IDF general staff and the heads of the security services who held back and are currently holding back Netanyahu from launching a strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, which, once again, upends the author's thesis.

Along the way, Tyler also makes another argument: that the warmongering generals have traditionally controlled their peace-prone civilian superiors. But here, too, history ill-serves him. During the 1948 War, which Tyler generally avoids, Ben-Gurion repeatedly overruled the army. In May 1948 he forced the generals repeatedly to launch assaults on the Latrun Police Fort, against their better judgment. Later in 1948 and again in March 1949 the army (meaning OC Southern Front, General Yigal Allon) pleaded with Ben-Gurion to order the conquest of the West Bank. Ben-Gurion turned Allon down flatly, though the IDF could easily have managed the conquest, militarily speaking.

During the early and mid-1950s, some IDF generals, including then-head of operations and, from 1953, chief of general staff Dayan pressed prime ministers Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett (1953-1955) to launch a war against Jordan to conquer the West Bank in order to give Israel a more secure, natural frontier or to launch wars of pre-emption and conquest against Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. Ben-Gurion occasionally toyed with these expansionist ideas, but he and Sharett always held back, checking Dayan's annexationist proposals. Only in 1956, after Nasser acquired large amounts of advanced Soviet weaponry and launched massive fedayeen attacks on the Israeli heartland did Ben-Gurion agree to launch a pre-emptive war against Egypt.

A decade later, in the summer of 1967, with Nasser provoking war, the IDF General Staff, to a man, pushed and pressed their civilian master, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, to launch a pre-emptive strike against Egypt. But it took him three long, nail-biting weeks to decide that international diplomacy had failed and would continue to fail. In other words, from May 15 until June 4 Eshkol held off his generals and the dogs of war. If Tyler's thesis were right, Eshkol would have crumpled before the military elite who have "always run the country" in mid-May.

In the early 1970s then-Prime Minister Golda Meir scuppered peace or interim peace initiatives by Moshe Dayan, her defense minister, and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat that might well have resulted in averting the October War. Dayan at the time was supported by two of the IDF's top generals, Ariel Sharon and Israel Tal, but opposed by chief of general staff Haim Bar-Lev. In 1981, when Begin pressed the motion for the IAF attack on the Osirak reactor, he was opposed by the head of IDF intelligence, the head of

the Mossad, and the head of the opposition, Labor Party chief Shimon Peres, who for years had headed the country's defense establishment (though he was no general). A decade later, in 1991, when Iraq's Saddam Hussein launched 39 Scud missiles against Israel's cities, it was the hardline prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, who faced down much of the defense establishment and checked the IDF.

In other words, the picture that emerges from the actual history is clearly one in which there is complete subordination of the military to the Israeli civilian authorities. Sometimes, the generals are the ones pushing for action and war and the civilians are successfully putting on the brakes; at other times it is the civilians who are gung ho, while the generals persuade their bosses to exercise restraint. At all times, it is the prime minister and the cabinet who have the final say.

Tyler's purpose in writing this book was not to offer his readers an honest history, it was to blacken Israel's image. *Fortress Israel* is just the latest in a spate of venomous perversions of the record that have appeared in the past few years in the United States and Britain, all clearly designed to subvert Israel's standing in the world. Deliberately or not, such books and articles are paving the way for a future abandonment of the Jewish state.

I am reminded of the spate of books and articles that appeared in Western Europe in 1936 through 1938 repudiating the legitimacy of the newly formed Czechoslovakia before its sacrifice to the Nazi wolves. In 1934, the Conservative weekly *Truth* hailed Czechoslovakia as "the sole successful experiment in liberal democracy that has emerged from the post-War settlement." By the end of 1936, *The Observer* was writing it off as "a diplomatic creation with no sufficient national basis either in geography or race." By March 1938 *The New Statesman*, in the past a great friend to central Europe's only democracy, was writing: "We should urge the Czechs to cede the German-speaking part of their territory to Hitler without more ado." Of course, as all understood, this meant leaving Czechoslovakia defenseless. Hitler conquered the rump of the country a few months later without a shot. The appeasement of the Arab-Islamist world at Israel's expense is in the air and Tyler is one of its (very, very) minor harbingers.

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Editors' Note: Read Patrick Tyler's [response](#) and a [rejoinder](#) from Benny Morris.

The Poet from Vilna

by Ruth R. Wisse

from *Summer 2010*

On the 6th of June, 1959, I arranged a rendezvous for the Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever, who was then on his maiden visit to North America. Unable to get a visa for the United States, he had come on a speaking tour of several Canadian cities, spending most of his time in Montreal, where I was living at the time. Quite a number of his friends who had known him before the war and writers who wanted to meet him for the first time made the trip across the border, swelling the audiences for his public lectures and readings. But the meeting I set up for him was to be secret and private. On the agreed morning, my husband Len and I drove Sutzkever to the Montreal airport where we picked up his visitor and then took them both to a cottage we had booked at La Chaumière, a secluded lodge in the foothills of the Laurentian Mountains. Once we saw them settled, we drove back to the city, returning the following afternoon to execute the plan in reverse.

Sutzkever's clandestine visitor was Max Weinreich, linguist and historian of the Yiddish language, who had been his mentor in Vilna before 1939. The two men had not seen one another in twenty years. When the Germans invaded Poland, Weinreich happened to be attending a conference in Denmark with his elder son, Uriel. Father and son left for the United States, where Max took time off from his Yiddish scholarship to write *Hitler's Professors*, documenting the participation of some of Germany's most distinguished thinkers in the Final Solution. Meanwhile, Sutzkever and his new bride Freydke had been incarcerated with some 80,000 fellow Jews in the double ghetto that the Germans set up soon after they occupied Vilna in the summer of 1941. They were among the few who survived the massacres and deportations, reaching Moscow in March 1944, Paris (via Vilna and Lodz) in 1946, and Tel Aviv in 1947.

"It is true that we deal in words, each of us in his fashion," Weinreich wrote to Sutzkever when they established a correspondence after the war, "but it doesn't require words to express what we feel for one another." It was Weinreich who had asked that their meeting be private so that they could spend their short time together without fanfare or interruption.

Len and I had met Sutzkever two years earlier, during our honeymoon in Israel, and I was now shepherding him around Montreal, but I had not met Max Weinreich before. The three of us waited in the reception area, and when Weinreich emerged from the swinging doors, Len and I hung back as the two men greeted each other.

Their reunion was the most dramatic I was ever to witness. No more than a long hug betrayed their nervous joy, but I knew from the eagerness of some of the letters and phone calls leading up to this moment how badly they wanted to be face to face. Lithuanian Jews—as compared with their reputedly more warm-blooded and earthier Ukrainian, Galician, and Polish kinfolk—are known for their passionate reserve. Weinreich and Sutzkever never switched from the formal to the intimate second-person form of address. As Weinreich wrote in one of his letters, they would always have "weightier subjects" to talk about than their feelings.

Weinreich, nineteen years the elder, had founded in Vilna the Jewish scouting movement *Bin* (Bee), in whose magazine the nineteen-year-old Abrashe—as he was then known to his intimates—published his first poem, in 1932. Weinreich was also co-founding director of Vilna's Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research), where Sutzkever came in the late 1930s to pursue his interest in Old Yiddish literature. When they had last seen one another, Sutzkever was transposing the early epic, *Bove Bukh*, into modern Yiddish, and Weinreich was touting Vilna's talented emerging poet as one of the YIVO's best fellowship students.

Now, the seniority appeared to be reversed. For one thing, Sutzkever had *been there*. Among my parents'

friends I had noticed how those who had survived the war in Europe were treated as valued messengers from the beyond. “I saw Nadushka right before the February roundup.” “Berl was still alive the day the SS came to pick up Wittenberg.” “The child was already skin and bones.” “Their farmer betrayed them.” In general, refugees occupy a lower social status than settled immigrants, but in this case the testimony of those who came to be known as *survivors* often lent them authority that far exceeded that of earlier arrivals. And Sutzkever was more than such a witness. The young poet, who had continued writing and reading his poems in the Vilna ghetto, had become a symbol of its creative resistance.

On the strength of his reputation, he and his wife had been airlifted from occupied Poland to Moscow, where he wrote *In vilner geto*, an itemized account of the horrors of the Final Solution in Vilna. The Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg convinced the Kremlin to have Sutzkever testify on behalf of Russian Jewry at the Nuremberg Trials. A clip of him refusing the court’s invitation to be seated is available on YouTube. He delivers his testimony standing at attention like the soldier he could not be during the massacres he is describing. Of the aftermath of one roundup he says, “It looked as if a red rain had fallen.”

As part of his work in the ghetto, Sutzkever had organized the concealment of the most precious materials in the YIVO archives. After the war, he defied Soviet prohibitions and arranged for their transfer to Weinreich in New York. The student was now more experienced than his instructor in what the world had to teach.

I was twenty-three at the time of their meeting, two years married, two years out of college, working as Press Officer for the Canadian Jewish Congress, under whose auspices I had arranged Sutzkever’s Canadian visit. I had no idea what I “wanted to do with my life,” though that weekend I wished for nothing more than to act as go-between for these two men. *Vilne* was my ancestry no less than theirs. My maternal grandmother, Fradl Matz Welczer, had run a publishing house in Vilna when it was still part of the Tsarist empire. My mother was raised in Vilna’s modern Yiddish and Hebrew culture when the city was Polish between the World Wars, and my father was class of 1929 in chemical engineering from Vilna’s Stefan Batory University. When my grandmother



Avrom Sutzkever and Ruth R. Wisse in Montreal, 1959. (Photo by Hertz Grossbard, courtesy of Ruth R. Wisse.)

contracted tuberculosis, her doctor was Tsemakh Szabad, about to become Max Weinreich's father-in-law. On one of his last visits, the doctor said, "You can't patch up silk." This intended compliment to my grandmother's refinement my then-fifteen-year-old mother correctly heard as a death sentence. She never forgave the good doctor his diagnosis. I myself had never been to Vilna, yet thanks to stories I had been hearing since childhood, I felt I knew the "green bridge" across the River Viliye as well as I did the one across the St. Lawrence seaway.

Shortly after that day spent ferrying my betters, Sutzkever asked me what I was planning to do in the future, implying that my job at the Canadian Jewish Congress was not commensurate with my abilities. Flattered by an assessment I fully shared, I said I would probably pursue a graduate degree in English literature. "Why don't you study Yiddish literature?" he asked. I laughed, "And what would I do? Teach Sholem Aleichem?" Those words were no sooner blurted out than I realized how I had insulted Sutzkever and the culture in which I had been raised. I had been making arrangements with a local impresario, Sam Gesser, for a Folkways recording of Sutzkever reading his poems: why, then, should I have questioned the status of Yiddish literature? I had been reading Sholem Aleichem since I was in grade school, so why doubt that he could be taught—or taught by me? When I tried to explain to Sutzkever that universities did not include Yiddish in their curricula, he informed me that Max Weinreich was in fact teaching Yiddish at City College and that his son, Uriel, ran a graduate program in Yiddish at Columbia University where one could study both literature and linguistics.

The next day, I called Columbia to see how soon I could begin. Uriel arranged for my admission to the doctoral program in English and Comparative Literature, with Yiddish as my main secondary field. My husband supported my decision, and for pocket money I got a job teaching Jewish Sunday school in a suburban synagogue. I fancied myself independent, like those young men in 19th-century novels who go to the big city to seek their fortunes. It never occurred to me that during the two men's time together, Weinreich might have shared his concerns about the lack of students, or that Sutzkever might have been serving as his recruiter.

As it turned out, Uriel was on leave in Israel the semester I came to Columbia, so he arranged for his father to conduct a private weekly tutorial for me, his only graduate student in Yiddish literature. "Ruth Wisse has arrived," Max Weinreich wrote to Sutzkever in January 1960; "we will be devoting a semester to Mendele (the Yiddish and Hebrew writer, Mendele Mocher Sforim). "She is the kind of student *vos 'bagert'* and she has a feeling for literature and good common sense." *Bagern*, like the German *begehren*—a word Weinreich placed in quotation marks—means to desire, to crave. Students are sometimes said to crave learning, but used as it is here, without an object, the verb suggests that I must have seemed hungry for more than literature.

He was probably right. There was more erotic adventurism in my decision than the common sense for which he gave me credit. These two men were tested in a way that my coddled cohort of friends could never be. Giving not a thought to the practical outcome of my decision, I wanted to prove myself at least as daring as they were.

Weinreich and Sutzkever exuded potency—the quality that I had always associated with Yiddish. It was maddening in the years that followed to hear people say, upon learning what I studied, something like, "Oh, I spoke it with my grandmother," or, "Isn't Yiddish a dead language?" I never took the trouble to explain that I was attracted by the virility of Yiddish, whose exemplars were so much grittier than Shelley, a writer I was studying simultaneously, and livelier even than Samuel Johnson, then my favorite British author. It was the *youthfulness* of Yiddish that appealed to me. At Columbia, I worked on the literary group *Yung Vilne*, of which Sutzkever had been a member, and my first book on Yiddish literature was on the group's New York counterpart, *Di Yunge*.

Reading about the Second World War, I concentrated not on Jews who were led "like sheep to the slaughter" but on the songs of Leah Rudnitski, the heroic feats of Abba Kovner, the soup kitchen Rochel Auerbach ran in the Warsaw ghetto, and Yitzhak "Antek" Zuckerman's exploits on the Aryan side. These people had all been under the age of thirty.

Grittier than Shelley: When speaking of the war, Weinreich insisted we say not *Nazis*, but *Germans*. "One does not refer to international conflicts by political parties, but by the countries that fought them: This war was prosecuted by *Germany*." As a graduate of the University of Marburg, Weinreich was some-

times consulted by post-war German scholars. He told me he never entered into correspondence with anyone from Germany without first asking for a full account of the person's actions during the war.

We would have these conversations after our weekly tutorial over dinner at a Chinese restaurant on Broadway near 125th Street, where he and the waiter discussed distinctions between dumplings and *kreplakh*. After dinner, in the late wintry hours, I accompanied him to his subway stop at Lenox Avenue; we were usually the only white people on the bustling street. Only later did I realize that my teacher was blind in one eye, courtesy of anti-Semitic students who had attacked him in Vilna—and that this builder of institutions and author of the 1937 social science study, *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt* (The Way to Our Youth), was undertaking this weekly effort for the sake of a single student.

As for Sutzkever's own nerve, the first book of his poems he gave me, *Ode to the Dove*, contained this "Song of the Lepers," from a cycle inspired by a visit he had made to South Africa:

Warrior, dip your arrows in our blood,
The enemy will lose his feet.

Our blood is not from father-mother
But God's spit in crippled limbs.

When we die, the earth will boil like sulfur
Our blood can set water afire.

Warrior, dip your arrows in our blood
Whoever is struck—will not live.

Merely touched by its shadow—he will not live. If the arrow misses its target—the fire endures.

Lightning birds in high nests of thunder
Singing, fall dead into the abyss.

We ourselves, we have no fingers,
We cannot rush the enemy—

Warrior, dip your arrows in our blood.

The leper-pariahs who turn their disfiguration into the deadliest of weapons are taking aim at an enemy otherwise beyond their reach. Accursed, they curse. Condemned, they condemn. Despised and feared, they deliver their sentence of death. The song reminded me of the closing lines of the 137th psalm, where the captive Jews of Babylonia charge others to wreak the vengeance they cannot exact on their own. The leper colony Sutzkever visited in Africa had obviously reminded him of the ghetto, but where was the poet in relation to this poem? Was he the avenging warrior whom the lepers urge to dip his arrows in their blood, or was he one of the powerless, inciting others to wreak vengeance on their behalf?

Because both Weinreich and Sutzkever godfathered my Yiddish studies, I became aware of how differently they assessed the future of our common project. Weinreich's confidence waned over the next decade, or more precisely, until his death in 1969, as Sutzkever's grew. This was certainly not due to any competition between them. In fact, what drew my attention to the asymmetry of their expectations was the intensity of their

mutual regard. One often spoke to me of the other with the same ardor they had displayed in Montreal. Nor did the difference in age seem decisive. In many respects, Weinreich was exceptionally youthful; I might have said about him, *er bagert*. He headed an apparently thriving institution in opulent America and was engaged in the culmination of his life's work—the definitive history of Yiddish from its origins in Western Europe, a subject independent of the fate that befell the speakers of the language. By contrast, Sutzkever occupied a small office in a Tel Aviv government building, working under a daily burden of grief—as one of his poems puts it—to keep the dead from dying.

During my years at Columbia, the YIVO in New York appeared to be the thriving successor of its destroyed Vilna branch. My favorite haunt was the reading room on the second floor of its building at 1048 Fifth Avenue (now the Neue Galerie, which I have never had the heart to visit). I enjoyed the heavy traffic inside the building, the permanently harried state of Dina Abramowitz who oversaw the library, and the steady rise and fall of its dumb waiter bringing documents to and from the archives below. In 1960-61, the annual conferences drew standing-room-only crowds. But Sutzkever saw things differently, or perhaps Weinreich took him into his confidence. He regretted that Max had not accepted the chair in Yiddish that the Hebrew University of Jerusalem offered him in 1952. When I asked Weinreich about this, he said that not having contributed to the building of Israel, he was not entitled to accept its bounty, but he may also have preferred to head his own institution in New York, where his wife and sons had already been resettled and where he now belonged as he had once belonged in Vilna.

But as the time approached for publication of the *History of the Yiddish Language*, I began to share Sutzkever's doubts about whether Weinreich had truly succeeded in grafting a strong branch of Jewish Vilna in New York, and about his own assessment of what he had achieved. The complete *History* came to four volumes—two of text and two of footnotes. When the YIVO's Board of Directors tried to persuade the author to publish only the text, as a cost-saving measure, Weinreich was as bitter as I ever heard him. He said that in any case his work would have only ten readers—who would, however, be precisely the ones to want the notes.

Sutzkever happened to be in New York during the negotiations. Infuriated by this snub to the world's leading Yiddish scholar, he accompanied Weinreich to the board meeting, ostensibly as a guest, and berated the members for basking in the glory of their office while nickel-and-diming the man who earned it for them. I had no way of knowing if Sutzkever was reporting on how things really happened at the meeting, but both men credited *him* with securing the funding for all four volumes. Weinreich thenceforth spoke of his champion as a *mentshniker*, someone more adept than he was at dealing with people.

I don't think that Sutzkever understood people any better than Weinreich did. Any attentive reader of Sutzkever will recognize how little insight he even *attempts* to offer into any soul but his own. He seemed rather to know his own strength, certain that he could set wrongs right. The preeminence he ascribed to poetry persuaded him that he had supernatural powers, and no doubt this confidence gave him more than ordinary influence over others.

He, Freydke, and their infant daughter, Rina, arrived in Tel Aviv in 1947, shortly before Israel's independence. Food was rationed, Arab armies were poised to invade, the provisional Jewish government had its hands full, dealing with the British blockade of arriving refugees on one and resettling those who made it through on the other. Exigencies of absorption and defense ratcheted up the importance of consolidating Hebrew as the common language of incoming Jews from east and west. Sutzkever, however, was bent on founding a Yiddish literary journal. He was warned that the odds against getting financial support were greater than they had been against his survival in the ghetto, but took that as proof that he would prevail. With the help of Zalman Shazar, who would later become the third President of Israel, he secured the financing he needed from the Histadrut, the Federation of Labor, and in 1949 started up the journal *Di goldene keyt*, named for the golden—unbroken—chain of Jewish tradition.

For the next fifty years, Sutzkever's Yiddish quarterly was the central meeting point for a dispersed and de-

pleted literary community. Around him there gathered a new group of poets and writers, *Yung Yisroel*—Young Israel. The American modernist Yiddish poet I.L. (Judd) Teller, who had stopped writing verse at the start of the Second World War, credited Sutzkever for his return to it. *Di goldene keyt* helped to defuse the conflict between two Jewish languages, enticing some Hebrew writers into Yiddish and raising the profile of Israeli culture in Yiddish. With the help of the Tel Aviv municipality, Sutzkever established a prize for Yiddish named for the poet Itzik Manger, who settled in Israel before his death.

Sutzkever liked to tell the story (which has been claimed by others) of being stopped on a stroll through the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Meah Shearim by a small boy who asked him why he wasn't wearing a hat. "The sky is my hat," he answered smartly. "Too small a head for such a large hat," the child replied. Actually, Sutzkever shared the child's sense of proportion in national as well as metaphysical terms. From the moment he arrived in the country, Sutzkever drew inspiration from the land, by which I mean not only its people, and not only the idea of "a third Jewish commonwealth," but also its wadis and animals and stones.

I had come to know something of this first-hand, before the rendezvous in Montreal, back in the summer of 1957, which Len and I spent in Israel. We had married in March of our graduating year—I from McGill University, he from the Université de Montréal Law School—and decided to go to Israel for what Yiddish calls the "kissing weeks." We were mostly in Tel Aviv, rooming (on Sholem Aleichem Street!) with a family my parents had known in Europe, but we explored as much of the country as we could. The poet Melekh Ravitch, with whom I had read Yiddish literature in Montreal, had provided an introduction to the well-known Avrom Sutzkever.

I dutifully called him shortly after we arrived. He was correcting proofs, and suggested we join him at the publishing house. Emerging to greet us, he looked just like the person in the photograph Ravitch had shown me, a trim man with a neat moustache, in white short-sleeves, wearing a cap against the sun. From behind glasses, the blue eyes gripped us, seeing and taking note. Apparently satisfied, he invited us to attend a wedding with him and his wife the next night. Len and I were incredulous. We had spent anxious weeks before our wedding paring down lists of relatives and friends, yet here was an almost-stranger inviting us on the spot to a wedding of children of friends who were "certain," he assured us, to welcome us. His wishes, it seemed, were everyone's command, and soon became ours as well.

Shortly afterward, on a visit to the Sutzkevers' apartment, Len and I described what we had already seen of the country and mentioned a planned road trip to Eilat. Sutzkever proposed a slightly different route: Why not drive to Ein Gedi—the oasis near the Dead Sea where David had hidden from an irate King Saul? He and his daughter Rina, by now a teenager, were eager to see the area and could join us on our expedition. Before we knew it, we were discussing dates for the upcoming trip. When we later ran this by Didi, the son of the family with whom we were staying and our companion-guide on these travels, he was less enthusiastic. Having been through the army, he knew the terrain and was worreid. The secondary roads past Beersheva were poorer than the highway to Eilat. One needed military permission to drive to Sodom. Civilian vehicles were probably not allowed near Ein Gedi, which was virtually at the border with Jordan. Five people in a car (this was before air conditioning) might not be comfortable driving through the desert in the middle of summer. Where would we stay in Beersheva or in Sodom or in Ein Gedi? There were no hotels.

But if Didi had served in the army, [Sutzkever had survived the Vilna ghetto](#). All obstacles swept away by his enthusiasm, we rented a car and set out, with Len driving, Sutzkever riding shotgun, Rina and Didi in back with me in the middle. There being no hotel rooms in Beersheva, the five of us shared a huge room in a sheikh's house with beds along the walls, dormitory style. Long after the others were asleep or pretended to be, Sutzkever asked me to go on telling him all I knew about the Yiddish writers of Montreal. The next morning, we consulted the police about the route before ignoring their warning not to proceed without military escort. The sight of Sodom when we reached it at midday called to mind the punishment heaped upon it in Genesis 19. A soft-drink and sandwich stand squatted at what looked like the end of the earth.

In sum, all of Didi's qualms had proved justified. But, thankfully, Sutzkever's nerve prevailed. At the solitary gas pump a young man introduced himself as a member of the kibbutz at Ein Gedi, offering to act as our guide in exchange for a lift. The road? No problem. Accommodations? The kibbutz would be glad to have us. We could swim in the fabled oasis pool and visit King David's cave. Long before we reached our destination, our guide confessed his deceit. The "road" was only a jeep path over rough terrain. He had missed yesterday's scheduled transportation and had we not come along, he would have had to wait another two days for the next van. But he did know the route, and once we reached our destination we were indeed given a short tour of the kibbutz, including a swim in the fabled pool and visit to the cave, supper in the common dining hall, and five outdoor cots for the night. As we lay down under the stars our hitchhiker came to advise us that it would be best for the tires if we started out before sunrise the next morning.

I have not been back to Ein Gedi since then, except in Sutzkever's poems recalling the trip. Naturally, he had felt a kinship with the psalmist "behind the waterfall in David's cave," inspired to write his own song, "A Mizmer in Ein Gedi," about the place where

I walk inside your veins.
My heart beats in yours.
I am a prayer dressed in wounds
Like a tree
arrayed with birds in a storm.

But the best of that trip was yet to come. Though we missed breakfast, we were rewarded by wondrous sights—clusters of cranes at the edge of the water and young deer prancing across a still and empty landscape. There was nothing manmade on the horizon. We drove as slowly as we could, so as to be less intrusive than we already were, and because we knew ourselves uncommonly blessed.

When I began studying Sutzkever's poetry, I realized that he had actually already visited the shore of the Dead Sea once before. One of my favorite poems, "Deer at the Red Sea," was composed in 1949. It also dawned on me that since he did not drive, Sutzkever always had to arrange such trips more or less like the kibbutz member who needed a ride. He could not see the land without transport, and it was imperative that he grow intimate with the land.

Sutzkever's translators, even Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, who have supplied what is so far the largest selection of Sutzkever in English, and his biographers, even the incomparable Abraham Novershtern, who has produced the most reliable overview of Sutzkever's life and writing—indeed, all who have written about the poet to date—inadvertently slight his poems of Israel. This is understandable given the more obvious drama of his pre-Israel life and the greater rhetorical force of his earlier verse. But Sutzkever started out as a poet by finding the signature of the Eternal in nature, and the discovery of nature in Israel was the corollary of that intuition. When he accompanied the army into the Sinai in 1956, he was also getting to know the landscape. He even navigated the cafés of Tel Aviv like an explorer of suns and shades. He drew much strength from the land—in this sense most differently from Max Weinreich who had been imbued in his Vilna youth a love of his physical surroundings but formed no similar attachment to New York. Sutzkever is one of Israel's modern psalmists. Were I choosing a thesis topic today, I would start with the Dead Sea poems and trace his discovery of the land.

For my Master's thesis at Columbia in 1961, I translated and wrote a commentary on a series of Sutzkever's prose poems, *Green Aquarium*, that recalled the final days of the ghetto and the kinds of courage that Jews manifested in its aftermath: A partisan and Polish Catholic nun bring a dead boy to burial in the middle of a rain-soaked night; a partisan and his lover are separated and reunited in the swampy forest; two lovers conduct a romance from neigh-

boring chimneys. These works are all about beating back death. Several years before I was to hear Theodor Adorno's pronouncement that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," or to read the essay in which he contends that our whole world is becoming "an open-air prison," I was persuaded by [Sutzkever's contrary definition of poetry](#) as the only credible alternative to barbarism. Governed by an autonomous standard, impervious to the Germans' depravity or any corruption, poetry was for Sutzkever not another casualty, but rather the *antidote* to Auschwitz.

Teaching Yiddish literature over a lifetime, I have Sutzkever and Weinreich to thank for my profession, though nothing thereafter ever went quite as smoothly as my admission to Columbia. For a number of reasons, I returned to Montreal without completing a doctorate, and eventually began graduate work afresh in McGill's fledgling program in English Literature. Meanwhile, I stayed in touch with Max Weinreich and visited New York periodically to be guided by him on the Yiddish study that I was pursuing on my own. His death on January 29, 1969 hit me much harder than his son Uriel's even less timely death had two years earlier.

When I learned the news, I took the night train to get to New York for the funeral. I was in a rage, as though Weinreich had died to spite me. Our next meeting had been scheduled—I had his postcard in my purse—but he had followed his son to the grave instead of remaining my tutor and friend. And the funeral *was* spiteful: Max had given orders that there was to be no prayer, no Yiddish *hesped* or English eulogy, no words or music. We mourners sat in the silence to which the deceased had condemned us. I suddenly understood something I had read in a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer. The expression *opshrayen a mes* is used to describe a woman who screams a corpse back to life. This expression had made no sense to me when I read it, but leaning over the casket I said aloud, "*Ikh vel aykh opshrayen fun toyt!*"—I will scream you back from death! For a moment I was convinced that my fury could overpower his too great willingness to die. Yet as he did not rise from his coffin, I joined one of the buses taking us to the cemetery and even shoveled some obligatory earth into his grave.

Sutzkever fought his despair to a better end. A recurring highlight of my visits to Israel was the prospect of one or more rendezvous with him at one of his favorite hangouts. When he could no longer navigate even the short distance from his apartment building to the nearest café, we would be served tea in his living room by a part-time housekeeper. Our last visits were at Beit Shalom, a supervised residence just a few blocks from a café on Dizengoff that we once frequented. At the home he joked with attendants as he once had with the waitresses who used to reserve his favorite table. The staff respected and helped him maintain the fastidiousness of his dress. He suffered the indignities of a failing body with dignity, but he had not wanted to age, and did not reconcile himself to the process.

No official representatives of Israel's government attended Sutzkever's funeral on January 24 of this year. The poet would have been hurt by the slight. But President Shimon Peres was among dozens of notables at a large public commemoration held at the end of the month of mourning, and Dan Miron, a professor of Hebrew literature who has written splendidly about Sutzkever, informs me that the mayor of Tel Aviv intends to name a street after him. In one of his early poems, Sutzkever asks to be permanently "enfaced" in the radiance of Sirius, the morning star. I am sure he has been, but he may also soon be wryly pleased by his humbler enfacement in Tel Aviv.

I doubt that New York will name a street for Max Weinreich. Is it too much to hope that their two names might grace intersecting streets in their beloved Vilna, a city whose fame they will carry into history? Neither of them would have sought the honor, but should it come about, the city's fame will grow on their account.

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MORE BY THIS AUTHOR

Walkers in the City

by Stuart Schoffman

from Winter 2012

On my first trip to Jerusalem, during a summer vacation from college, I stayed with relatives in Shikkun Nayot, a planned community for “Anglo-Saxon” immigrants not far from Hebrew University’s Givat Ram campus. It was one year after the Six-Day War, and I was enchanted by the Western Wall. To reach the Old City, I would walk up Gaza Road on the southern edge of the Rehavia neighborhood, stronghold of the Ashkenazi intelligentsia. At the top of the road, at the corner of Keren Hayesod Street, was the monumental, neo-Renaissance Terra Sancta College built in 1926, crowned by a statue of the Madonna. After Israeli independence, it was rented to the Hebrew University and, for a time, housed its library. For the walker in Jerusalem, it became a landmark: “To get to downtown, turn left at Terra Sancta and go up King George, till you hit Richie’s Pizza.”

Herman Melville came to Jerusalem in 1857, when there was no downtown—the Old City was all there was. He was in a dark winter of the soul, following a string of literary failures, and was not enthralled: “In the emptiness of the lifeless antiquity of Jerusalem,” he scrawled in his journal, “the emigrant Jews are like flies that have taken up their abode in a skull.” I like to imagine that his contemporary Thoreau would have liked it better, had he ever stood on a green hilltop of Terra Sancta, in the course of a country ramble, savoring the view of Suleiman’s magnificent walls. As he wrote in the 1850s in his essay, “Walking”:

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*; which word is beautifully derived “from idle people who roved about the country, in the middle ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going *à la sainte terre*”—to the holy land, till the children exclaimed, “There goes a *sainte-terror*,” a saunterer—a holy-lander. They who never go to the holy land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds, but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from *sans terre*, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere . . . But I prefer the first, which indeed is the most probable derivation. For every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this holy land from the hands of the Infidels.

For some holy-landers, Thoreau’s last sentence may conjure the memory of pogroms in 11th-century Ashkenaz or the specter of imminent jihad. But the dedicated saunterer seizes the transcendental metaphor, laces up his or her Reeboks, and seeks to redeem the contemplative spirit from the infidelities of modern life.

Ha-meshulash Ha-Yerushalmi—Biographia Urbanit (The Jerusalem Triangle: An Urban Biography)

by David Kroyanker

Keter Books, 456 pp., 178 NIS

Yerushalayim—Mamilla: Ge’ut, Shefel, ve-Hithadshut (Jerusalem—Mamilla: Prosperity, Decay, and Renewal)

by David Kroyanker

Keter Books, 419 pp., 160 NIS

David Kroyanker is a native of Jerusalem, born into a German-Jewish émigré family in 1939. He is also a London-trained Israeli architect, urban planner, and author of some twenty books in Hebrew about the city. His two latest volumes, like most of their predecessors, are verbal and visual compendia of architectural and social history. *The Jerusalem Triangle* takes as its subject the central business district defined by Ben-Yehuda, King George, and Jaffa Road. Yet the title may also be construed as metaphor. These three streets—named for the Zionist pioneer, the British monarch, and the historically Arab city by the sea—represent the triangular tangle of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, all calling Jerusalem holy and going about their business nonetheless. The creative intersection of these cultures forms the ongoing subtext of Kroyanker’s magisterial project.

Between 1983 and 1993, he published *Architecture in Jerusalem*, six authoritative studies, rich in diagrams and drawings, organized by style and period, beginning with the Islamic conquest in 638 C.E. For example, *European-Christian Buildings Outside the Old City Walls*, published in 1987, traverses the city from the German Colony to the Russian Compound (where the British hanged Zionist fighters) to the 11th-century Eastern Orthodox monastery in the valley below the Knesset and Israel Museum where stood the tree, believers say, whose wood became the True Cross. (A hefty one-volume version for English readers was published in 2003 as *Jerusalem Architecture*.)

In 2000, Kroyanker began a handsome new series, describing Jewish neighborhoods in the western part of the city, street by street, building by building, showing and telling how things used to look and how they look today. These are aimed at the general reader, and most of them, like *The Jerusalem Triangle*, offer de-

tailed walking tours. But this is not a book to carry in your purse or even backpack: It’s a bulky art book. You set it on a table, turn the pages, admire the many pictures, read the text, and saunter in your mind, to the Jaffa Gate, or Richie’s Pizza, or wherever. Then you take to the streets and practice the art of attentive walking.

The “Triangle” book is sixth in the series, following the volume on Mamilla, the old road to the Old City that has recently been turned into a fancy pedestrian mall. The other books have covered the Street of the Prophets, Old Katamon and Talbieh, Jaffa Road, and the German Colony, where I have lived since 1988. From Kroyanker I have learned much about the Templers, the peaceable, pious German Christians—not to be confused with the Knights Templar of the Crusades—who settled here in the 1870s. Today, original Templer homes are jewels of Jerusalem’s real-estate market. I was surprised to discover that the nondescript Mandate-era building at the end of my street, currently housing a fruit-shake bar, electrical shop, and kosher pizzeria, was once the headquarters of the Higher Arab Committee, the political organization established in 1936 by the Mufti of Jerusalem, Muhammad Amin al-Husseini. Here too are the Dajanis and other prosperous Arab families who built fine homes



Jaffa Gate, early 1900s. (Courtesy of the Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.)

in the neighborhood before 1948. As I walk along Emek Refaim Street, to shop for vegetables or meet a colleague for coffee, I am able to remind myself that there was a different sort of life inside these picturesque old buildings, long before Caffit and Burgers Bar.

Overall, Kroyanker steers away from politics. For example, in *The Jerusalem Triangle* he quotes from *Ori-entations*, the memoirs of Sir Ronald Storrs, who served as British governor of Jerusalem from 1917 to 1926: “There was not, when I took over, one single private car or telephone in Jerusalem.” He brings the same quote in his book on Jaffa Road, but in neither volume does he note Storrs’ about-face on Zionism, which he initially supported, then staunchly opposed. In the entry about the Ottoman-era house (on Shimon ben Shetach Street) where Vladimir Jabotinsky was arrested by British police in 1920, mention is made of Arab rioting and Jewish defense, but in Kroyanker’s project such matters are of secondary importance.

Kroyanker prefers to paint the British Mandate period in rosy tones, as an era of stylish architecture and European sophistication. He writes of the “Golden Age” of a bygone Jerusalem that outlasted the Mandate for decades, until the late 1960s. “In those days the ‘Triangle’ functioned as the beating heart of the little Jerusalem,” he writes, one-third the size of today’s in both area and population. His account, as he describes it, “attempts to awaken memories that have dimmed over the years.”

[This] naturally arouses—among many of its veteran residents as well as those who have left the city for other places—nostalgic memories of what once was; of a lively mix of cafés and cozy restaurants, elegant shops with high-quality goods, and many movie theatres, all gathered in a limited urban space. The nostalgia consists of a longing that is free of illusion, for a “Triangle” with a cosmopolitan aura and European character: without bazaars, fast food, *pitzuchiyot* [emporia of roasted nuts and seeds], moneychangers and shops of cheap clothing and gifts.

In other words, a Jerusalem redolent of Berlin and Vienna, an Ashkenazi preserve that flourished even after the city was divided in 1949 and dwindled when the city expanded after 1967. Kroyanker wistfully revisits the old cafés, nearly all of them gone, such as the legendary Atara on Ben-Yehuda that is today a Burger

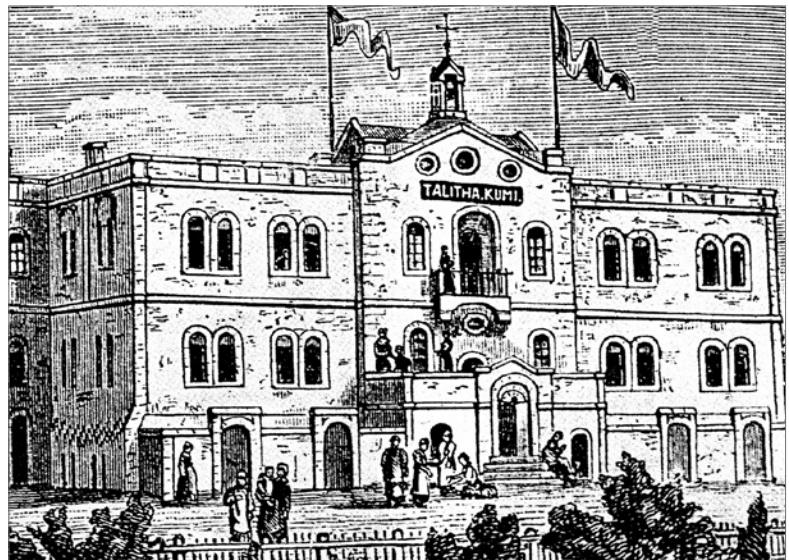


Atara Café, 1950s. (Photo by Ted Brauner, courtesy of the Government Press Office, Jerusalem.)

King. The Orion theatre on Shammai Street, now McDonald's, was one of fifteen vanished movie houses (the author provides a map) that brought world culture to Jerusalem. It may have been at the Orion (or perhaps the Ron or the Zion) that in 1968 I saw *The Day the Fish Came Out*, an eccentric comedy about a nuclear accident by the director of *Zorba the Greek*. I remember fondly how the locals would signal their boredom by rolling empty bottles of grapefruit drink down the aisles.

Kroyanker's "Golden Age" began in 1922, when the Greek Orthodox patriarchate, strapped for cash, sold large tracts of land to the Zionist Organization, enabling the development of Rehavia, Mamilla, and the area stretching from the Bezalel art school into the "Triangle." King George V Avenue was ceremonially opened in December 1924 by the British High Commissioner for Palestine, Herbert Samuel, along with Governor Ronald Storrs and Ragheb Bey el Nashashibi, who served as mayor of Jerusalem from 1920 to 1934. Elegant apartment buildings, designed in the International or Bauhaus style by émigré Jewish architects, sprang up along King George. The Yeshurun Synagogue, also in the International style, was completed in 1936 on a plot of land purchased from the adjacent Ratisbonne Monastery, built in the late 19th century by a French convert from Judaism. Kroyanker's tour of King George includes the "neo-Bauhaus" Beit Avi Chai cultural center, inaugurated in 2007, its design and dimensions in harmony with Yeshurun next door. Just south of these is the Jewish Agency building, completed in 1936. There were those at the time, reports Kroyanker, who regretted its modest proportions in comparison with the nearby Terra Sancta College and the gorgeous Palace Hotel, built in 1929 by the Higher Muslim Council across from the Mamilla Cemetery.

The Palace went out of business after a few years, unable to compete with the King David Hotel, which opened in 1931. The building later housed Israel's Ministry of Industry and Trade and is currently being rebuilt as a luxury hotel, a project that has incurred the displeasure of architectural preservationists, Kroyanker included. The author was also among the city planners who opposed the destruction in 1980 of Talitha Kumi, a Christian orphanage established in 1868. Kroyanker devotes four full pages to illustrations of this splendid structure, in which the German architect and biblical archaeologist Conrad Schick com-



Drawing of the Christian orphanage, Talitha Kumi, established in 1868. (Courtesy of the author.)



The remains of the orphanage today.

bined Western and Middle Eastern motifs. (Schick's striking home on the Street of the Prophets, now the Swedish Theological Institute, is a magnet for walkers in the city.) Today, what remains of Talitha Kumi is a fragment of its original entrance, including its clock, which stands by the bus stop near the Mashbir department store on King George—a "surrealistic composition," in the author's words, and "a warning signal for future generations, against the repetition of similar mistakes."

Just prior to the book's conclusion, in another long entry, Kroyanker addresses the Museum of Tolerance, originally designed by Frank Gehry, whose construction by the Simon Wiesenthal Center at the edge of Independence Park, on the site of a Muslim cemetery, has been delayed by a series of squabbles and budgetary problems. (Gehry quit in 2010.) Kroyanker offers an even-handed, apolitical account, noting that in 1927 the Mufti deconsecrated the site to permit the building of an Islamic university, including a medical school, intended to rival the newly founded Hebrew University. That grandiose project failed for lack of money. Opponents of the museum, writes Kroyanker, have argued that it is "inappropriate" for ethical reasons that a Jewish institution devoted to tolerance should be built on a site so fraught with inter-communal controversy. The demolition of Talitha Kumi and the continuing museum saga stand in unmistakable contrast to the general tenor of Kroyanker's book, its amalgam of pragmatism and nostalgia that subtly constitutes a political ideal of its own: Jerusalem as a triangular city, to be shared by all.

In 1968, on my walks to the Western Wall, I would go down Agron Street alongside Independence Park and then reach the Old City's Jaffa Gate via Mamilla Street. From the 1948 War until 1967, in the divided city, that street was truncated at the edge of no-man's land by a concrete wall. Previously a bustling commercial area, it became a neighborhood of poor immigrant families. By 1968, the barrier was gone, but the street remained rundown. A few buildings stood out. On the left was the imposing Hospice St. Vincent de Paul, a convent and orphanage completed in 1911. Past that was a large house with impressive Arabesque windows and grillwork. It was built in 1898 by Herbert Clark, a diplomat and travel agent, who was one of the few



Theodor Herzl, right, visiting the Mamilla neighborhood, Jerusalem, 1898. (Courtesy of the Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.)

members of the short-lived American Colony in Jaffa to stay in Palestine. (Most fled home in 1867 on the *Quaker City*, the ship made famous by Mark Twain in *The Innocents Abroad*.)

These buildings I barely remember from 1968, but the scores of photographs in Kroyanker's Mamilla book are a prod to memory and a corrective to its tricks. There is a color picture of a faded stone wall, with graffiti that I do recall vividly: *Makom kadosh/asur l'hashtin po* ("a holy place/urinating here is forbidden"). The caption places the wall in the alley beside a Moroccan synagogue called Brit Shalom. Yet in my mind, the "holy place" graffiti was conflated with the adjacent Marx-Stern House, where Theodor Herzl stayed in 1898 during his one brief trip to Palestine, when he tried and failed to sell his Zionist plan to the visiting Kaiser Wilhelm II. For me, at age 20, the house was second in sanctity only to the Kotel.

It was built in the 1870s, explains Kroyanker, by the German Jewish Marx family, and was among the first homes in the Mamilla area. Herzl, upon arriving in Jerusalem, stayed for one night in the Kamenitz Hotel on the Street of the Prophets. It was filled with Ottoman officials who made him nervous; moving to the Marx house afforded greater privacy. Eventually the property was handed down to the Stern family, relatives of the Marxes. In 1950, in an official ceremony, a plaque was affixed that designated the house as an historic landmark. In 1970, it was expropriated by the city, and in 1990, following years of protest and litigation, the Israeli Supreme Court allowed the dismantling of the house as part of the massive overhaul of Mamilla. Its stones were numbered and stacked in a nearby lot. In 2007, the building was reassembled, and today, in the Alrov Mamilla pedestrian mall, it houses a café, a Steimatzky bookstore, and a meat restaurant simply called Herzl—in effect, the Herzl Bar and Grill.

Kroyanker does not elaborate on Herzl's stay in Jerusalem; it's not that kind of book. Interested readers may consult the standard biographies, or better yet, Herzl's famous diaries, pages of which were penned in the Marx house. Consider these entries from October 31, 1898:

Yesterday the Sephardic Rabbi Meir was among the visitors who have been calling on me at the Marx house. He explained the attitude of the local Grand Rabbis to me: They don't want to incur the displeasure of the Turkish government. Amused, I said: "In order not to cause the gentlemen any embarrassment, I shall also omit paying them a visit." . . . We have been to the Wailing Wall. A deeper emotion refuses to come, because that place is pervaded by a hideous, wretched, scrambling beggary. . . . Yesterday evening we visited the Tower of David. At the entrance I said to my friends: "It would be a good idea on the Sultan's part if he had me arrested here."

Whether or not his friends got the hint, it seems clear that Herzl had in mind Shabbtai Zevi, who on the eve of Passover in 1666 was locked up in the fortress of Gallipoli by the Turkish Sultan Mehmet IV. Many rabbis, in Jerusalem and elsewhere, rejected Herzl as a dangerous false messiah who dared to hasten the Redemption. Yet Herzl relished the connection and understood its enduring power.

In Mamilla's heyday, under the British, Arabs and Jews turned the area into a thriving business district. Eliyahu Shama'a, from Aleppo via South America, opened a commercial center situated just south of Mamilla Road, near the present site of Hebrew Union College; a side street today bears his name. Shama'a advertised his clothing and textiles in Hebrew under the Herzlian slogan *Im tirtzu ein zo aggada* ("If you will it, it is no fairy tale"). Shmuel Havilio manufactured candy, specializing in halvah. The Tannous Brothers were "Chevrolet Distributors for Palestine"; Sukri Deeb & Sons Ltd. sold Buicks and Oldsmobiles. A photo from 1935 shows Arab villagers walking down Julian's Way—later renamed King David Street—with a flock of unsuspecting turkeys, headed for the poultry market in the Old City.

Soon after Jerusalem was unified in 1967, planning to redevelop the area began in earnest, but the planners were anything but united in their goals and intentions. The master plan submitted in 1975 by architects Moshe Safdie and Gilbert Weil called for the destruction of nearly every building in the area—including the

Marx-Stern house—and the construction of underground roadways and more than 150,000 square meters of commercial and residential space. Jerusalem's mayor, Teddy Kollek, enthusiastically embraced the plan, but was challenged by his deputy, Meron Benvenisti.

Benvenisti did not believe that Jerusalem needed urban solutions of “megalomaniacal” mega-structures, and was not prepared to risk turning a sensitive historic area into a laboratory for urban architectural experiments whose success had not been established in other parts of the world. Benvenisti therefore turned to the staff of the city's urban planning department . . . which was headed by the author.

Benvenisti, Kroyanker writes, wanted a way to develop the area that was “more modest, conservative, and simple.” The author and his team produced an alternative proposal that would have preserved most buildings on Mamilla Road but also called for the construction of hotels, apartments, and public spaces. Kollek called the plan “a stab in the back” and dismissed it outright. Benvenisti, in response, quit his post in 1978. In a section labeled “The Return to Reality,” Kroyanker gives his version of how Safdie agreed to tone down his ambitious plan and develop a compromise solution, which included the preservation of historic buildings on Mamilla Road and its conversion into a pedestrian mall linking King David Street with the Old City. For his part, Safdie later groused that Trafalgar Square, Rome's Piazza Navona, and even Central Park would not have

come about had their creators been similarly constrained by bureaucrats and committees.

But can Kroyanker's narrative be trusted? Not only was he a player in the drama, but Alfred Akirov, who developed the Alrov Mamilla Mall which now sits atop the street in question, was a sponsor of his book's publication. Indeed the final chunk of the book, packed with snazzy photos of the new mall, teeters on the brink of ad copy. Yet, the fact remains that the shopping arcade that connects west Jerusalem with the Old City, which many Jerusalemites thought was a crass idea, and whose construction was held up for years by convoluted snafus chronicled by Kroyanker, has turned out to be a big hit, even among the initial doubters. Insofar as the author helped bring it about, he has a right to be proud.

Moreover, all books about Jerusalem, from the Bible onward, have an agenda. This has never impeded—and has often enhanced—their capacity to stir emotions, provoke fantasies, and inspire constructive commentary. The Mamilla book, taken as a whole, is a caution against hubris and grandiosity; indeed it challenges the messianic temptations inherent in the Zionist project. After the Six-Day War, writes Kroyanker in his conclusion, Israelis were “intoxicated.” There was a “sense that anything was possible,” in the



Mamilla Road with concrete barrier, ca. 1967. (Courtesy of Zev Radovan.)

field of urban planning as well as the field of battle. In the end, however, it's all about compromise.

At the bottom of King David Street, you enter the Mamilla Mall at Rolex. En route to the Jaffa Gate, you saunter through a globalized *mélange* of Ralph Lauren and St. Vincent de Paul, Tommy Hilfiger and the Herzl restaurant, North Face and Habanos cigars, Crocs and Gali shoes and Adidas, crowded cafés with postcard views of the Old City, sprightly muzak from unseen speakers. On the left is the Clark House, its splendid façade restored, now sporting upscale shops—indirect descendants of the sort that once filled the Triangle. Few saunterers will realize that this is where the concrete divider stood before 1967, though keen-eyed shoppers may notice that from now on the structures are low and conventional, an arcade plain and simple, adorned with swooping arches. At the end, walking past the international jeweler H. Stern, you arrive at steps, more than twenty. You climb them, like a pilgrim, and the muzak fades away and your inner Psalmist hums *shir hama'alot*, the Song of Ascent, as the Old City walls materialize before you. Throughout the mall, on the steps, and on the great bridging plaza that stretches to the Jaffa Gate, swells a mixed multitude of tourists and locals, Arabs and Jews. No-man's land has become Everyman's land. *Saint-terre* becomes *sans terre*, which “in the good sense,” as Thoreau says, means “equally at home everywhere.”

Finally, you enter the Jaffa Gate, perhaps noting the *mezuza* that has been affixed to Suleiman's massive portal. Across from David's Tower is Christ Church, built in the 1840s and the first Protestant church in the Middle East. Now enter the *shuk* or *suq*, the Arab market, narrow medieval streets with arches, spices, souvenirs—a continuum, it suddenly seems, of the Mamilla arcade, a futuristic fusion. As Walter Benjamin observed in his monumental, unfinished *Arcades Project*: “It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past: rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.” For the walker in the city, the journey is a jolt of oxygen, a starry-eyed antidote, if you will it, to Yehuda Amichai's poetic verdict: “The air over Jerusalem is saturated with prayers and dreams/ like the air over industrial cities./ It's hard to breathe.”



Mamilla today, looking in the opposite direction toward the Old City.

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MORE BY THIS AUTHOR

Moses Mendelssohn Street

by Allan Arkush
from Summer 2010

Eliezer Ben Yehuda's lifelong efforts to refit the classical language of Jewish literature for everyday use helped to create a Hebrew-speaking society in which the memory of his own extraordinary labors would grow dim. Suspecting that the ordinary Israeli in the street could no longer identify the hero of his recent book, *Resurrecting Hebrew*, Ilan Stavans asked a Tel Aviv shop clerk who Ben Yehuda was.

She was an artificial blonde, wearing an Adidas tracksuit that emphasized her hips and protruding belly. Her initial response was a smile, followed by a silence, behind which I detected hesitation. "Ben Yehuda? It's a street," she replied.

"But who is it named after?"

"How should I know? Am I an encyclopedia?"

This did not lead Stavans to any sweeping conclusions, but it did make me wonder. Has Ben Yehuda really been forgotten after only a century? And what about other more or less famous Jews who also have streets named after them in Israel? Sa'adia Gaon or Yehuda Halevi, for instance, or Leon Pinsker, or Menachem Ussishkin? Have Israelis walking down Moses Mendelssohn Street in, say, Jerusalem, forgotten who Moses Mendelssohn was?

I asked myself this because I have spent a lot of time translating and studying the works of this 18th-century German-Jewish philosopher, who was a pioneer of modern Jewish thought as well as one of the first battlers for Jewish emancipation. But I have just learned that it's not a good question. For, as the historian Michael Brenner has recently observed, "not even the smallest street is named today after Mendelssohn in the capital of the Jewish state." There is, actually, a tiny Mendelssohn Street on the outskirts of Jerusalem, but it honors the influential architect Erich Mendelssohn. In fact, it bears less of a relationship to the Jewish philosopher than a street in Binghamton, New York, where I have taught for many years. This one is named after Moses' Christian grandson, the composer Felix Mendelssohn, and intersects with Schubert and Beethoven. It is also missing an "s."

If there is no such street in Jerusalem today, not even one mangling Moses Mendelssohn's name, most of the blame can be placed on the shoulders of one person: Peretz Smolenskin. Smolenskin was a Russian-born novelist and jour-



Intersection of Mendelsohn and Beethoven Streets in Binghamton, NY. (Photo by Randy L. Friedman.)

nalist who debuted as a Jewish nationalist in the 1870s with a ferocious attack on Mendelssohn as the originator of a craven sort of assimilationism. This charge stuck, as the historian Christian Schulte has shown, prejudicing later generations of Zionists against the philosopher. Smolenskin himself, I should note, has a street in Jerusalem named after him. Just to round out the picture, I should also note that Smolenskin was not only one of Eliezer Ben Yehuda's inspirations but also one of his targets. Just before he marched off to Palestine, Ben Yehuda chastised Smolenskin for failing to recognize that the resurrection of the Jewish nation could only take place in the Jews' ancestral land.

Smolenskin, to be sure, was much more unkind to Mendelssohn than Ben Yehuda was to Smolenskin. And it was not only Mendelssohn that Smolenskin raked over the coals. What had triggered his attack in the first place was the great historian Heinrich Graetz's far too laudatory treatment of Mendelssohn in the eleventh volume of his *History of the Jews*, for which he upbraided the author. Nothing that Smolenskin went on to say against Graetz, however, could prevent him from having a street named after him in Jerusalem. For no one could plausibly accuse Graetz of having too little Jewish national sentiment. In fact, the German historian Heinrich von Treitschke famously charged him with Jewish chauvinism and too little willingness to assimilate.

Something like these old accusations against Graetz have just resurfaced in a new setting, in a book by an anti-Zionist Israeli writer. In his *The Invention of the Jewish People*, Shlomo Sand of Tel Aviv University has branded Graetz's *History* as the root of much evil, "the first work that strove, with consistency and feeling, to invent the Jewish people." Sand's book is a factual mess, but his characterization of the tenor of Graetz's work is not too far from the truth. Graetz didn't "invent" the Jewish people, but he did denounce Reform and other Jews' dilution of the old idea of Jewish peoplehood.

So why did Peretz Smolenskin give Graetz such a hard time? And why did Graetz write such a glowing description of Mendelssohn, a man whose outlook differed so much from his own? And to get to the bottom of the matter, was Mendelssohn really guilty of the things of which Smolenskin accused him?

Smolenskin railed against Graetz even before he began to tear into Mendelssohn. How, he asked, could such a great nationalist historian credit a mediocre, withdrawn, and quickly forgotten philosopher with resuscitating the Jewish people? How could he fail to recognize the degree to which Mendelssohn was responsible for promoting the pernicious idea that the Jews were not a nation at all but merely a religious group? Mendelssohn was not the father of this idea, Smolenskin admitted, but by personal example, he taught it to his children and disciples. He adhered rigorously to Jewish law at a time when he must have seen how necessary it was to distinguish between the essential and the inessential and discard outmoded practices. If he had seen his people for what it really was, "a nation among the nations," he would have done more to nurse it back to health.

This was not a fair indictment. On the basis of Graetz's work alone, one could mount a powerful defense against it. Graetz showed how Mendelssohn's translation of the Bible into German had initiated the "inner liberation" of thousands of young Jews by opening up to them the road to Western culture. He likewise showed how Mendelssohn had furthered their "external liberation" by making the case for their acquisition of full and equal citizenship. Graetz commends him, in fact, for having done so without losing any of his "Jewish-patriotic feeling."

In an earlier essay entitled "The Structure of Jewish History," Graetz gave Mendelssohn even more credit for Jewish patriotism. Paraphrasing a passage from Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, Graetz summarized one aspect of his philosophy of Judaism as follows:

In Judaism, state and religion are rooted in the same soil, or more correctly, they are one. God, the Creator of the world, is likewise the Lawgiver and King of the nation: the civil component is at the same time religious and holy, while the religious is also a civil obligation. Serving the state is serving God.

On the strength of this evidence, he proclaimed Mendelssohn's conception of Judaism to be far superior to that of the medieval philosopher Sa'adia Gaon because of "its historical, national point of departure." But he then went on to say that at the end of the 18th-century the Jews were not yet ready for such a thing. What Mendelssohn could do in his own day to advance this national definition of Judaism was quite limited due to the fact that "Judaism had first to recover from the state of exhaustion to which it had been subjected for seventeen hundred years." Before it could progress any further "it needed to be retaught the Bible." And it had to regain its self-esteem.

In this early essay, Graetz did not acclaim Moses Mendelssohn for actively steering Judaism toward these two goals, but he did so a quarter of a century later, in his *History*. However, he did not argue on this occasion that Mendelssohn thereby helped to advance the Jewish nationalist idea. Perhaps he did not wish to upset German-Jewish readers for whom Mendelssohn had become a symbol of their successful integration. If so, this is unfortunate. If Graetz had been more forthright, Smolenskin might not have gone on the warpath, and we might have a Moses Mendelssohn Street in Jerusalem that we could all walk down today.

But does Mendelssohn really deserve such an honor? I certainly don't begrudge it to him, but I don't think he does. Graetz's proto-nationalist Mendelssohn is just not the real one. The very book that he praises and, indeed, the very passages in *Jerusalem* to which he refers, provide evidence not of an effort to revive the national definition of Judaism but of an attempt to dilute it. Graetz was correct to point out that Mendelssohn's philosophy of Judaism proceeded from a "national point of departure." But rather than reaffirm it, Mendelssohn left it behind. In *Jerusalem*, he strove to uphold the ideas of liberty of conscience and the separation of religion and state. Judaism, he acknowledged, has not known such a separation in the past, but now, after the Jews' loss of their independence, it has come to terms with it, and is therefore completely in accordance with his own, liberal principles.

Mendelssohn, to be sure, did not, like Reform leaders in Germany a little bit later, explicitly repudiate peoplehood and abandon the hope for the Jews' restoration to the Land of Israel. But he did reiterate rather vigorously the old rabbinic notion that the Jews were forbidden even to think about returning to their land without direct divine assistance. He reassured suspicious gentiles that the Jews' messianic hopes in no way interfered with their ability to be good citizens of non-Jewish states. And it is very hard to believe that he truly yearned to see them become anything else. His *Jerusalem* betrays no trace of a longing to return to the earthly Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, if I were sitting on Jerusalem's city council and I had to vote on the matter, I wouldn't be opposed to according special recognition to the man once known as the Socrates of Berlin. If the German capital where he spent most of his life now contains a street named after him, why shouldn't the very city after which he named his most enduring work on Judaism? Mendelssohn's role in Jewish history was surely as great or greater than that of any number of Diaspora worthies who have made the grade in the Holy City. And it might even be helpful to have a street in Jerusalem named after a religiously observant opponent of religious coercion. But, given Stavans' experience with the shop clerk in Tel Aviv, would this really do any good? Perhaps, in the end, Moses Mendelssohn's reputation will be no worse off if his name is kept off the streets of Jerusalem and confined to books and even, as far as most people are concerned, to the encyclopedia.

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MORE BY THIS AUTHOR

Walking the Green Line

by Shmuel Rosner

from Spring 2010

In the mid-1990s, my wife signed a deal with an Israeli publishing house to write a book about the settlers. The idea was for us to reside for a year in the distant settlement of Elon Moreh, a hard-core *hitnachalut*, in which some of Gush Emunim's founding fathers live. Elon Moreh is located on top of the impressive Har Kabir (Great Mountain), overlooking the site of the biblical city of Shechem, not far from today's Nablus. Our plan was to drive back and forth to our workplaces in Tel Aviv along the treacherous but beautiful roads of Samaria.

We never tried to deceive the people of Elon Moreh. They knew we were coming because of the book, and also knew that we weren't exactly sympathizers. But we were trying not to be biased either. We told the committee processing our application for residency that we weren't coming because we wanted proof that settlers were evil or deranged—and it was true. We had long talks with the man who was then secretary general of the settlement and his elegant, French-born wife, a woman who later became my wife's friend. We ate at their dinner table, and learned their children's names and habits. It was a long process, and at the end, after much deliberation, the reception committee decided to let us live in the settlement.

It was not an easy decision for them, I am sure, and not just because of our political differences. I come from an Orthodox family and am quite familiar with traditional Jewish practices, but my wife has a secular background and has never been a strictly observant Jew. Elon Moreh is a very religious place, so allowing her to observe and write about their lives required a level of trust and acceptance that settlers of this kind don't always seem to possess. Nevertheless, they were convinced, and we were allocated a small townhouse. We got a local phone number and reserved the truck that would carry our belongings from our apartment in Tel Aviv to the mountainous tranquility of Elon Moreh.

Just three days before the planned move, an early morning phone call notified us that there was trouble. Apparently, not all the residents of Elon Moreh were at peace with the committee's decision. A couple of them demanded a general assembly of all the settlement's residents to review it. We were invited to come and make our case. When we got to the settlement it was clear to us that the battle had been lost even before it started. The assembly was not gathering to hear our case. It was putting us on trial for all the sins, real or imagined, of "the press," "hedonistic Tel Avivians," "peaceniks," and the "hostile elites." They would not trust us, "media people," nor would they allow a "fifth column" into their safe, isolated hermitage.

Their suspicions were not utterly unwarranted. Over the years, the settlers have received a lot of bad press. But there are also writers who are their friends and admirers, who describe them not as obscurantist enemies of the peace process but as potential saviors of Israel. Indeed, conflicting narratives mar all discussion of the

Tris (*The Settler*) by Emily Amrousi
Kinneret-Zmora-Bitan-Dvir, 333 pp., 89 NIS

Hebron Jews by Jerold S. Auerbach
Rowman & Littlefield, 240 pp., \$34.95

Ha-Mitnachalim (*The Settlers*) by Gadi Taub
Yediot, 190 pp., 88 NIS

Lords of the Land by Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar,
Translated by Vivian Eden,
Nation Books, 576 pp., \$19.95

The Accidental Empire by Gershon Gorenberg
Times Press, 480 pp., \$18

Hitpakhut (*Disillusionment*) by Dan Margalit
Kinneret-Zmora-Bitan-Dvir, 318 pp., 89 NIS

settler movement, impeding dispassionate understanding of its origin and destination. All writers are either “with us” or “against us.” All take sides, including those whose books are under review here.

In *The Accidental Empire*, Gershom Gorenberg subtly mocks the way in which previous writers on the subject of the settlements have tendentiously oversimplified matters. “On one side are the secular pragmatists of the left; on the other, the religious fanatics of the right. Or—in another telling that changes the labels without drastically changing the script—on one side are uninspired defeatists; on the other, the truest patriots.” But Gorenberg, though a gifted writer, suffers from the very malady that he has diagnosed. The reader of his book can have no doubt as to which narrative he accepts. And more troubling: one gets the sense that he embarked on his investigations with his mind already made up. Whatever he actually discovered—many new details but few new insights—Gorenberg wasn’t going to write positively about the settler movement. He embarked on his journey in order to understand how the rogues got the upper hand. An American-born Israeli, writing in English for a primarily American readership, his main contribution is to impose a prefabricated Americanized vocabulary on this highly specific Middle Eastern story, relying on concepts such as “colonialism” and “empire,” which are of dubious use.

Gorenberg’s treatment of the subject is relatively calm and even-handed compared to that of Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar—a scholar and a journalist, respectively, of the Israeli Left. Gorenberg, to his credit, concentrates on history, retelling in detail how the settlers started their conquest of the West Bank (his story ends more than thirty years ago). You can find little sympathy or admiration in his narrative, but the tone is generally composed. This is not the case with Eldar and Zertal, who pretend to write history while engaging in raw politics in their *Lords of the Land*.

Where Gorenberg seems not to like the idea of the settlement movement, Zertal and Eldar seem to dislike (dare I say hate?) the settlers themselves. What they are really most angry about is Israel’s complicity with the settlers’ advances. They accuse the settlers of “stealing” the land. They make sure to use the word “radical” when referring to activists of the right (there’s no “radical” left in their political vocabulary). They say of the settlers that “their camp” was “guilty” and is “responsible” for the assassination of the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. A mere glance at the titles of the book’s chapters gives one a sufficient sense of what’s inside: “blindness,” “bad faith,” “a moveable death,” “complicity,” “the pace of apocalypse.” This is an angry book.

Gadi Taub’s *The Settlers* is hardly any less impassioned, but it is couched in much more temperate terms and makes an honest attempt to dive deeper into Israel’s ideological battles. One of the more intriguing aspects of Taub’s book is his elucidation of the way settlers have used language to rationalize their actions, employing different strategies and combinations of arguments to convince the public that the journey on which they have embarked must continue. Settlers, as Taub meticulously demonstrates, have used religious arguments (this land is a God-given land), historical arguments (this is our fathers’ land), strategic arguments (if we abandon the mountainous Judea and Samaria we will be at a strategic disadvantage), and even lawyerly arguments (what about our human rights? why can’t we live here?). All of these arguments Taub describes as evolving justifications aimed at answering skeptics at different points in time. He regards them as tactical moves more than anything else, tricks the settlers repeatedly use to masquerade the religious-messianic motives of the movement’s hard-core leadership. And his conclusion (to cite language he has used elsewhere) is based on words he cites from someone within “the camp”:

In all public transactions outside the circle of believers the rhetoric of redemption proved ineffective ... “I don’t think that it’s possible to take a public and raise it all at once to higher stages. *Nekuda*, which is our broadcasting channel, has to do it in a continuous process. We [the religious core of the settlers] need to project that we are a sober, realistic, rational public, in order to tie wider publics to us. Only after we tie the public to us, could we raise it to higher stages. I don’t know if the time has yet come for that...

Taub makes a convincing case. He is right to point out that the settlers continually revise what they have to say for public consumption, and that with every twist and turn in their rationales they end up bumping into another wall. If settlements are there because of religion, then they will not be acceptable to secular people. If they're there for security's sake, that's not convincing either, since "in security matters, the state is far more responsible, better informed, and better equipped to plan and consider matters than settlers are." What settlers really believe in and hope for, according to Taub, is a miracle: "that redemption would come if only they held fast to the land," but "did not cut themselves loose from the hawkish right, on whom they relied for a political solution." Of course, Taub finds this unacceptable. A state can't pursue policies based on the hope for divine intervention. Zionism itself is based on the assumption that the only miracles are the ones that are man-made and that Jews should take matters into their own hands.

While Taub does a fine job of exposing messianic thinking among settlers, he fails to see what we might call the "settlerism of practice," the settlerism that is far from being "radical" or "messianic" and is very close in nature and performance to early Zionism. It is the achievement of a settler movement that sets impractical goals, and then settles for those it can get; a settler movement that dreams unrealistically, but is very realistic and pragmatic in its policies. And the proof is on the hills of Judea and the mountains of Samaria. A lively, dynamic, vibrant Jewish community now inhabits those areas, one that builds houses, establishes schools, manipulates governments to get more funds, playing the game dangerously but also carefully, handling its affairs in a shrewd, pragmatic way.

Surely there is reason to be disappointed with the settlers' less than complete readiness to condemn the violent shenanigans of the "Jewish Underground" of the 1980s; surely there is reason to be angry with settlers' behavior prior to the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin; and surely there is a lot to be said against settlers' cursing of soldiers and policemen during the Disengagement from Gaza. All that said, the settler "movement" never went as far as to lose touch with Israeli society. Even in the aftermath of the Israeli government's recent decision to freeze settlement construction for a period of ten months, they have still been careful not to go too far in their protests and active opposition. Thus, what Taub describes as the worrying signs of settlers' lying to Israelis about the "real" motives for settling the land could also be viewed as grounds for reassurance: they feel the need to revise their self-justifications because they want Israelis to be convinced. They want Israelis to be convinced, because they themselves are "Israelis" and would like to be part of Israel's society. They have to change their story in order to be "acceptable."



West Bank settlement of Amona, north of Ramallah. (Photo by Orel Cohen/AFP/Getty Images.)

In the eyes of Jerold S. Auerbach, they are already much more than acceptable. His *Hebron Jews* is a sympathetic book—sympathetic to settlers and settlements—but no less angry than Zertal and Eldar’s *Lords of the Land*. While they are angry with the settlers, Auerbach is angry with all those who oppose the settlers’ grandiose project. “By now,” he writes accusingly, “the rhetoric of settler illegitimacy is deeply embedded in Israeli secular culture.” In Auerbach’s world, as in the parallel world of Zertal-Eldar, there is no such thing as gray. Everything is black or white.

Rabbi Moshe Levinger, for instance, the incendiary, fanatical leader of Hebron’s settlers and a figure of some notoriety, shows up in Auerbach’s narrative as a man who has “proven to be a formidable, indeed, irrepressible, leader—and provocateur.” Although he might occasionally be “histrionic, even hysterical, his charismatic power was indisputable. Combining asceticism, stubbornness, and courage, he led by bold example...” Levinger, Auerbach notes, “was unafraid to roam, at night and unarmed, through the forbidding Arab casbah. There, oblivious to danger, he might sit on the ground, lead prayers, and conduct a Torah lesson...” To such heroes as Levinger, Auerbach contrasts “secular Israelis,” who “scornfully dismissive of biblical land promises, emancipated from Jewish memory, and avidly embracing modern Western values—have all but forgotten what Hebron Jews remain fiercely determined to remember.”

However, Auerbach is wrong both factually and ideologically. Secular Israelis aren’t “scornfully dismissive” of biblical promises. The head of Israel’s opposition, former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, in a speech marking the November 29, 1947 UN resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, talked about “the connection of thousands of years between the Jewish people and the land of Israel.” And this comes from Livni, who favors a two state solution and evacuation of settlements. She supported the Gaza pullout and the “convergence” plan that never materialized. (Ehud Olmert promised Israelis that he would evacuate most of the West Bank within four years if reelected Prime Minister.) Other such comments by secular leaders, authors, military men, politicians, and citizens of Israel can be easily found. Secular Israelis didn’t “forget” what Hebron Jews “remember.” They just choose not to make remembrance the one and only consideration in public life. It is arguably the case that it is they who better “remember” the lessons of pragmatic Zionism, and it is Auerbach’s settlers who sometimes “scornfully forget” to prioritize their values and desires in a reasonable manner.

Far from regarding secular Israel with boundless scorn, like Auerbach, Emily Amrousi is one of those nice, presentable settlers, who want a dialogue promoting the message of friendly otherness to the many readers, radio listeners, and media personalities still charmed by the fact that a settler—a settler!—can speak their language. A professional in the world of public relations, she has written a novel that is more of an anthropological achievement than a noteworthy piece of literature. Her protagonist, Na’ama, is a “settler” no doubt, but also a human being interested in topics familiar to all readers of young mothers’ chick-lit:

a familiar tingle in my breasts. Sure sign that they are filled with milk right on time for breast-feeding and this draws me back to the mother station. A breast-feeding mother: the line connecting me to the baby is the time between feedings. My life circles in three-hour intervals, between breast-feeding and self-feeding...

This is a political book, but its messages are wrapped in the human story of settlers’ daily apolitical struggles. These include coping with gossip (mostly concerning pregnancy, or, more accurately, the whisper-drawing non-pregnancy), relationships among neighbors, domestic struggles, even—delicately—the settlers’ sex lives. The book contains more self-conscious mockery than people might expect from stern-looking zealots, and thus enables Amrousi to achieve two goals: disarming the settlers’ foes, and criticizing settler mores without alienating herself from her own community. What we hear is the criticism of a lover and the self-mockery of

a member. Unlike my wife, she might even acquire the trust of some (though probably not all) of the ultra-zealots of Elon Moreh.

To such a reader the message is hard to miss: “look, we are just like everyone else. We talk about men, more about relationships, less about sex ... we love this land but we also want to walk along its roads with decent shoes on our feet.” Amrousi makes her case convincingly, if sometimes breathlessly. In her novel, real human beings, with their many shortcomings, both political and emotional, and their few virtues, replace the villain-caricatures of Zertal and Eldar and the super-heroes of Auerbach. There are settlers here with whom even the more suspicious reader can identify. To such a reader, there are moments in which the settlers will seem kind and moving, and also moments in which they seem extreme and detached from the realities of modern life.

At the root of Amrousi’s novel lies a call for acceptance. She wants to be seen as a human being, craving, worrying, loving, struggling, not as one of the one-dimensional figures peopling both Taub’s and Auerbach’s books. Ironically, she is “the settler” who is trying to be pleasant and communicative, while these two are constantly pushing her to the margins. Taub portrays her compatriots as the settler-freaks breaking away from Israel’s secular-rational-pragmatic society; Auerbach portrays them as the settler-icons breaking away from Israel’s secular, hedonistic, and valueless society.

One of the things that Amrousi’s book captures nicely is the way that other Israelis, who have no ideological axes to grind, maintain their relations with the settlers and their movement. Unlike the world of cultural and political polemics, in which arguments are made and defended, and in which definitive—and for commercial reasons, preferably controversial—conclusions are drawn, in the world of real people there can be gray areas and unlikely alliances, even friendship. Thus, it is not hard to have days on which one loves the settlers and admires their sacrifices and hardships, and days on which one loathes their dismissive treatment of law and order and their condescending manners toward fellow citizens; days on which their patriotism seems fresh and exciting and days on which they seem weird and out of touch.

Taub’s book catches such moments of distaste, even hate, when he describes how the entire settler community was widely if unjustly accused of incitement leading to murder during the months following Rabin’s assassination. But Taub is not as good at catching the other moments, those of admiration for the settlers and of identification with their struggle and many sacrifices. In September 2009, Dan Margalit, one of Israel’s most well-known columnists and TV personalities—a hawkish centrist and never a “supporter” of settlements—published *Hitpakhut* (Disillusionment) in which he describes the sorrow he felt upon witnessing the evacuation of Neve Dekalim, one of the many Gaza Strip settlements wiped off the map by Ariel Sharon’s “disengagement” plan of 2005:

I was sitting at home, watching the scenes of clashes in another settlement and tears were pouring down my cheeks. My wife asked me what’s happening—after all, I’ve witnessed worse scenes in the past, for example in the Yom Kippur War, or in the evacuation of Pitchat Rafiach. Nevertheless, this time was different. I promised myself that I will never again support the eviction of a Jew by a fellow Jew from his legal home.

Both Taub and Margalit succeed in conveying the way in which anger or compassion toward the settlers can, on occasion, capture the public mood, but there are also many other moments that defy any such descriptions.

Sadly enough, apocalyptic prophecies accord better with sober analysis of the Middle East than other, more hopeful, predictions. Those laying out scenarios of doom tend to be right more often than those who optimistically claim that better, more peaceful times lie ahead. Strangely, this overwhelming pessimism clouds not just discussions of relations between Israel and its Arab (or Persian) enemies, but also discussions about the future of Israel’s society. Every major event in the life of the country stirs memories of

the Second Temple and fears of another Jewish civil war, like in the old days. Every dispute tends to ignite apprehensive discussions of possible fissures and battles.

A pessimistic spirit also hovers over most books dealing with the settlers. Taub, while confident that “most religious Zionist settlers will in the crunch put the state above the settlements,” goes on to say that most Israelis are inclined to conclude that “one will have to force a solution on the settlers, not to persuade them or hope that they will propose a solution to the problem that they themselves have created. And, indeed it looks as if it will be necessary to force a solution on them.” Auerbach, for his part, predicts that “Hebron Jews are likely to remain under siege, the pariahs of the Jewish people.” Such analyses of current events, solemn and annoyingly humorless, prevent both men from looking into the future with a sufficient degree of humility.

“Once Jews relinquish their right to live in Hebron”, writes Auerbach:

They implicitly undermine their claim to live anywhere in their biblical homeland. To abandon Hebron is to surrender the claims of memory that bind Jews to each other, to their ancient homeland, and to their shared past and future.

Taub’s conclusions are more cautious and conciliatory in tone. He urges “secular Zionists” to try to win the hearts and minds of the settlers, and he seems to believe that the settlers are either closet realists who will eventually come around to accepting his worldview or extremist zealots doomed to fail. Their most ardent ideologues and activists, he predicts, will turn themselves into a marginal sect, one that will have difficulty convincing the majority, even the majority of believers, that it is in fact the true representative of the spirit and tradition of Judaism. He who clings to settlement at any price—at the expense of the unity of the people or the Jewishness of the state—will condemn himself to marginality. He will turn, in the eyes of many, in the eyes of the majority, into a kind of territorial Sabbatean who abandoned the ethical, spiritual, and religious world of Judaism to hold fast to a single theological tenet: settling the land.

Curiously, all of the books on this subject treat the debate over settlerism as if it were exclusively a debate among Jewish Israelis, secular vs. religious, Zionists vs. post-Zionists, idealistic vs. hedonistic. The outside world is mentioned mostly in passing, as if Israelis themselves will determine the course of events by force of argument, or ferocity, or even violence. Everyone acts as if settlements were just an internal problem. Palestinians, those living in and desirous of inheriting “the land of the settlers,” are merely bystanders in these books. The watchful world, the critical “international community” that is united and vehement on the “settlement issue,” is no more than a tool in the hands of debating, warring Jews.

This might be the world in which some people would prefer to live, but it can hardly be regarded as a realistic portrayal of the current circumstances. Whether the settlers are right or wrong, whether Israelis will be convinced by their idealistic brethren or outraged and betrayed by their arrogant condescension has less significance than one might wish. As can be easily demonstrated by past events, it is the outside world who will ultimately determine the fate of the settlements. It will be the Palestinians, and their ability to overcome their shortcomings, who will decide whether or not the West Bank remains under Israeli control. And it will be the level of international pressure that will determine the degree to which Israelis will be willing to make sacrifices to hold onto all, part, or none of the settlements.

While no one should be so deluded as to think that ending the settlements will be the key to lasting peace in the region, there is also no reason to believe that keeping the settlements is such a necessity that Israel cannot thrive without them. Most Israelis understand this, whether they support the settlements or not, whether they are settlers themselves, or were, or will be, or once considered it, or have cousins living there (as I have), or will never cross the “green line” for ideological reasons, or for fear of Palestinian terrorism, or for lack of interest. Real Israelis, like the fictional settlers of Amrousi’s book, are all-too human: they have views that can

change and loyalties to things other than ideology. Unlike the writers of polemical tracts, they don't see things in black and white.

Many of them can easily slip into the familiar role of passionately arguing for and against the settlements. But most are weary of this by now. All has been said, and it's all much too tiresome to repeat. Yes—it is our ancestors' land. Yes—there's no reason to prevent Jews from living there. Yes—it is also a political matter, and politics sometime means compromise. Yes—compromise is hard, and will be fervently debated. Yes—if a decision to evacuate will be made, settlers will be evacuated.

Until then, more books about settlers will be written, and the more human they are, the more they deal with the lives that people are really living, the more interesting they will be. “We talk about our lives on the mountain,” says Amrousi's settler-protagonist, when she is asked to describe her conversations with a secular, liberal, city-dwelling friend. “We talk about the little that he knows. The effort to break down the stigmas in which he is stuck wears me out.”

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MORE BY THIS AUTHOR

One State?

by Peter Berkowitz

from Winter 2011

On June 14, 2009, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a [historic speech](#) at Bar-Ilan University, in which he declared his support for the creation of a Palestinian state living side by side in peace with the Jewish state. Netanyahu was not the first Israeli prime minister to make such a statement—that honor belongs to Ehud Barak. But he was the first right-wing prime minister to do so, and his speech marked the consolidation of a consensus that has emerged in Israel over the past decade that a two-state solution is, for the long term, the only viable and just outcome to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Unmoved, however, by the Obama administration's determination to quickly wrap up a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians to bring a Palestinian state into existence, a majority of Israelis doubt that what is necessary and right for the long term can safely be implemented in the short term. Their doubts are rooted in a sober assessment of the security challenges that confront Israel. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad lack popular support in the West Bank, where they are currently in charge. How, Israelis wonder, can one entrust such insecure leaders with sovereignty over a territory from which Iran-sponsored Hamas and other terrorist groups could launch rocket attacks and more against the heart of their country—the greater Tel Aviv area, Ben Gurion International Airport, and Jerusalem? The majority is convinced that Israel cannot afford to have an independent neighboring state that might be even more menacing than the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, where an unremittingly hostile regime already possesses missiles that can reach Tel Aviv. While Fayyad has made real progress in the past several years in expanding the West Bank economy and forming a Palestinian Authority Security force, it has not persuaded most Israelis to let down their guard.

In *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* the estimable Sari Nusseibeh, a professor of philosophy, the president of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, and the author of the political memoir, *Once Upon a Country*, also comes to the conclusion that prospects are dim for achieving a separate and independent Palestinian state any time soon. Yet contrary to Netanyahu, the Israeli consensus, the Obama administration, and indeed the weight of international opinion, Nusseibeh contends that a separate and independent state, desirable as it may be in theory, is probably the wrong answer. Owing to Israeli settlements and (though here he is less explicit) a Palestinian Authority that “has managed to rob the people of their wills,” Nusseibeh thinks that the time has passed in which a viable Palestinian state could be established in the West Bank. Instead, the political logic of the current contours of the conflict and philosophical reflection on justice point to a one-state solution.

This is not an altogether new position for Nusseibeh, long considered a leading Palestinian moderate. Already in the 1970s he was attracted to the idea that Palestinians beyond the Green Line should be made citizens with fully equal rights in Israel. In 1987, he called publicly for the creation of a binational state out of Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. But in the aftermath of the first Intifada, in which he played a prominent role, he changed his mind. In 1991, he and the Israeli political scientist Mark Heller co-authored *No Trumpets, No Drums*, which argued for a two-state solution. Twelve years later, in June

What Is a Palestinian State Worth?

by Sari Nusseibeh

Harvard University Press, 256 pp., \$19.95

2003, with retired colonel and former Shin Bet head Ami Ayalon, he launched “The People’s Voice” to mobilize support for a two-state solution among both Israelis and Palestinians.

If Nusseibeh has now returned to the idea that he abandoned more than twenty years ago, he has nonetheless given it a surprising new twist. Instead of calling for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza to be incorporated into Israel as full-fledged citizens, he proposes an arrangement whereby Israel would protect their civil rights and confer upon them healthcare and other benefits, but would not provide the political rights to vote, hold elective office, and serve as ministers in the government.

Nusseibeh describes this as “a mutually agreed upon conferral by Israel of a form of ‘second-class citizenship’ on all Palestinians who wish to accept it.” Under this proposal, he rather nonchalantly assures his readers, Israel would be able to retain its Jewish character, and “the only negative side” for reasonable Israelis “would be having to put up with the Arab population living among them.” At the same time, it would be for Palestinians “a far more bitter pill to swallow” because it would involve “giving up the dream of having a Palestinian state and having to make do, psychologically, with being subjects rather than citizens in their own country.”

This is where the apparent skepticism embodied in Nusseibeh’s title *What is a Palestinian State Worth?* emerges. As he recently explained in an interview in *Le Monde*:

They can keep their government, and keep it Jewish if that’s what they want, as long as we enjoy all our human rights. Personally, I don’t want a state. If they want to be in charge of everything, and they offer me the services a state offers, that suits me. What I want, what the Palestinians want, is to live a decent life.



Sari Nusseibeh. (Photo courtesy of Harvard University Press.)

Here it sounds as if Nusseibeh might be calling upon his fellow Palestinians to relinquish forever any dream of attaining a state of their own. But in his book, he more tentatively describes his innovative idea as merely “a thought experiment,” a temporary “halfway measure . . . ‘without prejudice’ to any later negotiated outcome,” or as a solution that ought to appeal to the Israeli right-wing who “covet” the West Bank and Gaza. At other times, however, he indicates that what he is proposing is merely a “transitional phase” leading to a future in which the Jewish state will become obsolete. What he does not do in any serious way is explain his proposal’s crucial assumptions or work out its practical implications.

Nusseibeh has been politically engaged for several decades. But he was educated at Oxford and Harvard, built a career as a philosophy professor, and his new book reads more like a set of loosely structured (and loosely philosophical) common room monologues than it does a policy proposal. It is still surprising that he does not address the obvious and all but insurmountable obstacles to the implementation of his proposal.

Since the Palestinian Authority would be dismantled (how he doesn’t say), the proposal would create two categories of Arab Israelis: those already living inside the Green Line, who will presumably continue to enjoy full civil and political rights, and those living beyond the Green Line with merely civil rights. Or, perhaps, three categories, since some number, and perhaps a significant number, of Palestinians who support the PA

and its leaders and those who support Hamas and its leaders will reject such a deal.

Beyond the intra-Palestinian conflict that Nusseibeh's proposal would generate, it would also create an Israel that for the first time was not a fully democratic polity promising equal rights to all its citizens. This might be the point. Perhaps Nusseibeh, who believes that the first Intifada was a lost opportunity for Gandhian tactics, would like Israel to become an apartheid state not merely in the incendiary rhetoric of its critics but in reality. He seems to appreciate that given Israel's commitment to freedom and democracy, maintaining actual apartheid conditions would be unbearable for most Israelis, and so what he on occasion acknowledges to be a "halfway measure" and a "transitional phase" would in reasonably short time generate an irresistible pressure in Israel to grant full political rights to the new Arab citizens from the West Bank and Gaza. Once enfranchised, these people would, as Nusseibeh knows, very soon constitute a formidable minority or even slender majority of the voters in the enlarged State of Israel, and would no doubt attempt to do away with any semblance of a Jewish state, in accordance with Nusseibeh's own argument that Israel's Jewish and democratic character are simply and entirely incompatible with one another.

In short, Nusseibeh's one-state solution hardly seems the way toward his professed goal of freedom, equality and "a decent life" for Palestinians, or for Israelis. A far more likely outcome would be violent conflict and probably civil war, not only between Arabs and Jews, but also within each camp.

It might seem unjustifiable, from Nusseibeh's point of view at any rate, for the Jews of Israel to put up a fight to hold onto a state of their own. For states, in his opinion, are not of value in themselves but are merely instruments for securing individual freedom and the satisfaction of private lives. But this is not a position that he maintains consistently. He is also capable of contending, "the question of what states are for is ultimately about what it is to feel at home, about our inner emotions and aspirations, about who we are as human beings and how we can best live together." It was precisely this aspiration that inspired the creation of a Jewish state, a state that was understood since its founding also to be dedicated to the protection of the rights of all its citizens. And according to a powerful consensus that has formed in Israel, the United States, and throughout the international community, it is again to fulfill this aspiration that a Palestinian state should be created, by Israel's side, a state that would likewise protect the rights of all its citizens.

It is ominous that Nusseibeh employs contradictory conceptions of the state in his book to simultaneously undermine Israel's claims to be both Jewish and democratic and to set the stage for a single state in which Palestinians would feel at home and Jews would not. It suggests that despite his apparent evenhandedness, Nusseibeh is drawn to the same destructive all-or-nothing logic of his intransigent colleagues: there can only be one state between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. Apparently, he, like them, believes that dissolution of Israel as a Jewish state is historically inevitable and morally and politically just.

In the final pages of his book, Nusseibeh, who has dedicated his professional life to higher education, offers reflections on what "education is meant to do, and on what it can do for the next generation of Palestinians." It is a fitting final topic for a work that draws upon political philosophy, since if there is one point on which political philosophers ancient and modern tend to agree it is that true political reform depends on educational reform. But Nusseibeh's conclusion is disappointing. It does not go much beyond the trite assertion that "what our students need most is faith in themselves—and faith that they have it within themselves to shape history."

Surely that faith must be built on solid knowledge, the capacity for independent thought, and an understanding of the political implications of liberty and democracy. But as things stand, the curricula of many Palestinian schools still foster hatred of Jews and Israel. Despite UN Resolution 181, which in 1947 gave international authorization for the creation of a Jewish state in the land of Israel (and, at the same time, the creation of an Arab state), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) continues to promote the idea of Israel's illegitimacy in the West Bank and Gaza. In a recent poll by the re-

spected American firm of Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner, two-thirds of Palestinians affirmed that “over time Palestinians must work to get back all the land for a Palestinian state” and 60 percent agreed that “the real goal should be to start with two states but then move it to all being one Palestinian state.”

A truly liberal education, one that educates Palestinians for freedom, would cease to cultivate seething resentment of Israel as a Jewish state. It would also teach that a state can protect the rights of all of its citizens, including those who belong to national minorities, while maintaining its distinctive national character. Such an education would both strengthen Palestinians’ respect for Israel’s achievements, and enhance their own ability to build a stable and prosperous liberal democracy in the West Bank and Gaza, one which would in the end offer a positive answer to the timely question of what a Palestinian state is worth.

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Fathers & Sons

by Yehudah Mirsky

from Fall 2013

On Wednesday, July 24, Israel's new chief rabbis were chosen. It's a curious process, held every ten years, in which a board of 150 electors composed of Orthodox rabbis and lay people (mainly elected officials and functionaries), including a few (very few) women, horse-trade their way to the election of two men who are, at least in theory, the spiritual leaders of the nation. In practice, the office of chief rabbi has become the grand prize in a corrupt system of political spoils. Indeed, as his successor and that of his Sephardi colleague were being chosen, incumbent Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger was already under house arrest on charges of bribery and corruption.

The competition this time was more bitter than it had been in years, and the scandals, unlikely alliances, and backroom deals made for great, if unedifying, political theater. When it was all over, the winners were both very familiar and fairly unknown: Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef is the son of former Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, a towering figure in Israeli religious life who held the office from 1973 until 1983 and, as founder and leader of the powerful Shas Party, has been the *de facto* Sephardi chief rabbi ever since; Rabbi David Lau is the son of former Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, a decidedly lesser but nonetheless distinguished figure who held the office from 1993 until 2003. Both sons are men of some accomplishment, respected in their own political and religious circles, but neither one has been a key player in Israeli religious life, and, as I write, new revelations, allegations, and miscues (to which I shall return) are being reported about the younger Lau every day.

The biggest winners were the ultra-Orthodox *haredim*, who solidified their hold on an institution that, at least in the Ashkenazi case, they formally disdain even as they milk it for all it's worth as a source of patronage and a vehicle for religious coercion. The obvious losers were the Religious Zionists, who, of all Israelis, most deeply believe in the rabbinate—so much so that they tore themselves apart over it, losing the best chance they have had in decades to regain control of the institution.

And how did the Israeli public do, and for that matter, Judaism? The election was held, after all, precisely at a moment when questions of religion and state have returned to the center of Israeli public discourse, from the issue of *haredi* participation in the military to the rabbinate's monopoly on marriage, divorce, and conversion to the question of how much ultra-Orthodox sensibilities should be accommodated with regard to women in the public sphere (or even public transportation).

So many candidates went up and down, came and went, that at times this summer it seemed like anything could happen—until it finally became clear that nothing, or rather the same thing, is exactly what would, in fact, happen.

On the Sephardi side, after a few months of electoral machinations, it became clear that as far as the Shas Party was concerned, the only question was which one of Rav Ovadia Yosef's sons would inherit the seat their father had vacated nearly thirty years ago. One after another, however, they fell out of the running. Yaacov, the eldest, who was the most politically right-wing and the most remote from his father, passed away earlier this year. David, a close friend of Aryeh Deri, the chairman and chief demiurge of the Shas Party, blotted his copy-book when, a year and a half ago, he penned an anonymous letter to a leading member of the Knesset decrying borderline-illegal attempts by the Shas Party to seize control of the country's rabbinical administration city by city. This was done not out of civic duty, but apparently in order to keep his brother Yitzhak from becom-

ing chief rabbi of Jerusalem, a job he himself coveted. Avraham Yosef, rabbi of Holon, emerged as a candidate, until journalists brought to light his questionable use of his office to promote a kashrut supervision organization headed by his brother Moshe. It was only a few days before the election that the family turned, reluctantly, to Yitzhak, who, as editor of his father's voluminous halakhic writings, actually has the scholarly credentials that entitle him to claim the office. Against the last scion of the Yosef family who remained in the ring, the other Sephardi candidates didn't stand a chance.

One caused a stir, though. Shmuel Eliyahu, rabbi of Safed, son of another former Sephardi chief rabbi, Mordechai Eliyahu (1983-1993) and, like his father, a hard-right nationalist, was the candidate of Religious Zionism's new Jewish Home Party (Bayit Yehudi), headed by Naftali Bennett. Eliyahu is a controversial figure. In 2005 he suggested that the appropriate way to punish secular Israelis for the Gaza disengagement of 2005 was "to make their children religious... [and] drive them crazy." More recently, he has said that Jewish landlords ought not rent to Arabs,

leading the attorney general to consider invalidating his candidacy on the grounds that he had violated the country's incitement laws. Eliyahu's near disqualification was far from the most surprising thing about his candidacy: that would have been his being on the same Religious Zionist slate as the Ashkenazi David Stav, chairman of a moderate rabbinic organization called Tzohar (literally, skylight), whose platform was as conciliatory as Eliyahu's was divisive.

This was actually just the beginning of the divisiveness within the Religious Zionist camp. The "*chardal*" wing of the party, which combines fervent Zionism with something like the anti-modernist worldview of the *haredim*, put forward yet another son of a former chief rabbi. In this case, it was Yaakov Shapira, the son of former Chief Rabbi Avraham Shapira (1983-1993) and the head of Mercaz Ha-Rav, the flagship yeshiva of Religious Zionism founded in the 1920s by Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook. On election day, Rabbis Shapira, Stav, and Eliyahu split the Religious Zionist vote and were trounced by their *haredi* rivals.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. The chief rabbinate was established in 1921, in the early days of the British Mandate. For the British, it was a continuation of the Ottomans' practice of appointing local clerics to keep religion friendly and manageable and to run things like marriage, divorce, and inheritance. For the Zionists, it would be yet another new institution of the nascent state. For Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi, whose



Newly elected chief rabbis, David Lau and Yitzhak Yosef, with Rabbi Israel Meir Lau and Benjamin Netanyahu. (Photo by Amos Ben Gershon, courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel.)

spirit still hovers over today's debates, it was to be a means of modernizing Jewish law and leading the spiritual revolution that would be the ultimate fruit of the Jews' secular nationalist revival. Rav Kook was a deep but ethereal thinker and lacked the political smarts and administrative acumen to enliven the institution. But after his death in 1935, a number of distinguished successors put the chief rabbinate on its feet.

For decades, the rabbinate served as the religious arm of the state, supervising kashrut, marriage, and divorce, and running a system of rabbinical courts, parallel to the state judicial system, which ruled according to Jewish law. It worked alongside other arms of the state charged with maintaining religious identity and practice—the Ministry of Religion, the Interior Ministry, and the local religious councils—through which state



Rabbi David Stav. (Courtesy of Tzohar.)

funds are distributed for synagogues, ritual baths, and the like. The *haredim*, who did not recognize the ultimate legitimacy of the state and regarded its rabbinate as a theological monstrosity, had parallel institutions of their own.

Yet, in recent decades a curious dynamic took hold. The rabbinate steadily passed into the hands of the *haredim*, who, while formally disdaining Zionism, came to relish the rabbinate's opportunities for patronage, profits, and power. Meanwhile, the Religious Zionists focused their energies on the settlement of the West Bank and Gaza. By the mid-1990s it had become clear that the rabbinate had lost much of whatever touch it had ever had with the Israeli public.

In response, in 1995, a group of Religious Zionist rabbis created Tzohar. Their first major innovation was simply to insist upon meeting with and actually becoming acquainted with couples before marrying them (while refusing the customary bribes). In the ensuing years, Tzohar has continued to stake out the classic territory of Religious Zionism, promoting a moderate, modern traditionalism. They have urged the rabbinate to serve its constituency and represent

the state rather than seeking to undermine it or simply milk it. In response, the rabbinate effectively shut down the marriage program, which was deemed ideologically deviant (and bad for business).

Beyond weddings, Tzohar has run user-friendly prayer services and sponsored public education programs. It has also urged openness to converts. In 2008, in a decision that still resonates, a State rabbinic court led by *haredi* Judge Rabbi Avraham Sherman annulled thousands of conversions. They had been presided over by Religious Zionist rabbis as part of an effort to integrate Russian immigrants into Israeli society. (Israel's High Court of Justice affirmed the validity of the conversions in 2012.) In the face of such socially destructive, halakhically infamous, and deliberately provocative acts, Tzohar has continued to argue for moderate, piecemeal reform.

For decades the *haredim* have benefited from the fact that their singular priority—funding for the network of institutions that enable their self-enclosed lifestyle—was so narrow that they could negotiate their way into almost any government coalition. The installation of Yona Metzger as Ashkenazi chief rabbi in 2003 was a perfect expression of their cynicism and contempt for the institutions of the state: He was a rabbinic nonentity with questionable ethics, but he was an entirely reliable cutout. (Earlier in his career, Metzger had agreed to be disqualified from serving as a municipal rabbi in order to forestall disciplinary charges; when he was put up for chief rabbi, he argued that he'd never been disqualified from serving the whole country, which showed *chutzpah* even by Israeli standards.)

But after the Israeli general elections of 2013, the political covenant between Bayit Yehudi's Naftali Bennett and the secular centrist Yair Lapid effectively excluded the *haredi* parties from power. It also put their young men in the sights of the army and their budgets on the chopping block. If they had lost the chief rabbinate too, it would have spelled big, big trouble. Luckily for them, the Religious Zionists were their own worst enemies.

Rabbi Stav and his colleagues in Tzohar see themselves as continuing Rav Kook's teachings on tolerance and cooperation with secularists in their push for a more responsive and supple (if still firmly Orthodox) rabbinate. Stav and his cohort are by no means religious liberals, but they do understand the popular alienation from the rabbinate and seek to ameliorate it as best they can. But they are not the only ones who claim Kook's mantle. Rabbi Zvi Tau, the *éminence grise* of the *chardalim* whose disdain for Stav goes back decades, has argued that while responsiveness and flexibility may be good for camp counselors or neighborhood rabbis, the chief rabbinate must hold the line against the encroachments of Western culture. In Tau's dark and unsubtle interpretation of Rav Kook's acutely dialectical worldview, religionists can work with secular Zionists because the latter do not understand their own place in the unfolding messianic drama. "Secularists," Tau has said, "have no future. All of their future reality will explode when the kingdom of Israel will arise." Tau and others went to work, badmouthing Stav to anyone who would listen, above all Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and his retinue in the Shas Party.

Rabbi Yosef, in turn, issued scathing attacks on Stav, at one point calling him "wicked." This was the latest in a series of sad moments in the career of Rav Ovadia (as he is known), who is now ninety-two. Had he never entered politics he would have gone down in history as a staggeringly erudite, intellectually nimble, and compassionate halakhist. His refusal to ascribe redemptive significance to the State of Israel while at the same time declining to join his Ashkenazi *haredi* counterparts in condemning it as the devil's handiwork also seemed to hold out the possibility of societal compromise. But this is not how things turned out.

In founding Shas, which is a Sephardi social movement and network of institutions as well as a political party, Rav Ovadia may have become the most powerful rabbi in Jewish history. He has also become the leader of a party with a well-deserved reputation for corruption. The emblematic figure here is Aryeh Deri, who recently returned to politics after serving twenty-two months in prison on bribery charges a decade ago. When asked about Rav Ovadia's description of Stav, Deri helpfully explained that it wasn't defamatory, it was just that Stav's actions fit the halakhic criteria of "wickedness." He should know. Machiavellian though he may be, nobody ever said Deri was dumb. And on election day, he proved his skill.

On the Ashkenazi side, the *haredim* were unified behind Rabbi David Lau. He had been successful as the rabbi of the mixed secular-religious town of Modi'in; he had the blessing of Rabbi Aharon Yehuda Leib Shteinman, a venerable *rosh yeshiva* (he is somewhere between ninety-nine and one hundred and one years old) who, since



Shas party election poster, 2009. (Photo by Amos Ben Gershom, courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel.)

the passing last year of Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, has emerged as the leader of the relatively moderate *haredim* (Lau also took care to solicit the blessing of even more hard-line *haredi* rabbinic figures such as Rav Chaim Kanievsky); and his father had been almost as reliable a proxy as Metzger while maintaining his dignity and the stature of the office.

As the election drew near, Prime Minister Netanyahu had close associates make calls to electors conveying the PM's wishes to them: elect Yosef and Lau. Netanyahu favors the pliant, reliable *haredim* (whom he'd be glad to see back in the government) and seems to despise his former aide Bennett for empowering Lapid and outflanking him on the right. When the votes were in, the two *haredi* candidates had each received an identical number of votes, sixty-eight.

What happens next? The Religion Ministry remains a part of Naftali Bennett's portfolio, and how a right-wing Religious Zionist (who backed the reform-minded Stav) and the *haredim* will manage to work together is anyone's guess. Bennett and Tzipi Livni have together put forward new legislation that would restructure the rabbinate, with one chief rabbi instead of two, and separate the post of chief rabbi from chief rabbinical judge. This streamlining would probably eliminate some of the institution's corruption, but the odds of its passing are slim.

Meanwhile, Rabbi David Lau has called, with a gingerly diffidence reminiscent of his father, for the integration of *haredim* into the army and the work force, while cautioning that "a coercive process is not the way." But this was quickly overshadowed by a one-week trifecta of scandals following his election. First he was caught using the Israeli equivalent of the "N-word" while admonishing the young men of Modi'in to study Torah rather than watch basketball on television. Next, it was revealed that he had brought in illegal crib sheets the first time he tried to pass the State Rabbinic exam in 1993. (He was disqualified and passed the next year.) And then the real scandal hit.

The newspaper *Ma'ariv* has reported that in secret meetings with *haredi* decision-makers before the vote, Rabbi Lau agreed to submit all of his decisions regarding conversion to Rabbi Avraham Sherman, the same *haredi* rabbinic judge who had annulled thousands of conversions in 2008. Whether Lau turns out to be more like his predecessor Metzger or more like his father, any hopes that he would be the one who could effectively institute at least some of the reforms proposed by Stav and Tzohar are now dead.

Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef will likely try to maintain the status quo on most issues, while being willing to explore limited forms of *haredi* national service. Both will continue to oppose liberal religion in Israel, as well as the introduction of civil marriage and divorce, though they may try to make the religious court system more humane when it comes to *agunot*, wives whose husbands have abandoned them without giving them a *get* (halakhic divorce), which would allow them to remarry. Indeed, Rav Ovadia, in a reminder of his past glories, spoke movingly about the plight of *agunot* at the first gathering celebrating his son's election.

Some are urging Rabbi Stav, Tzohar, and allied religious bodies to create their own alternative institutions. Other rabbinic moderates have urged friendly cooperation with the new chief rabbis, though that may be less likely now that Lau's secret deal on conversion has been revealed. In truth, it's a hard call. Stav's very public campaign, while electorally unsuccessful, may have succeeded in getting many Israelis to consider the possibility that the rabbinate could be something other than the ecclesiastical version of the DMV (or Tammany Hall). On the other hand, more people than ever before, including figures in the Religious Zionist camp, are publicly musing about whether the country needs a chief rabbinate at all. Some have suggested the tactic of letting things go from bad to worse until the system implodes. Yet, as much as one might want to abolish the rabbinate outright—and then take a good shower—the institution still wields real power over people's lives, and many of them, women and converts above all, are terribly vulnerable in the meantime.

Israeli society has only barely begun to have a serious conversation over what, if anything, the contemporary rabbinate is for. The rich church-state discourse with which Americans are familiar has no analog here.

Roger Williams' classic theological argument that the establishment of religion inevitably damages religion itself has, for all of Israel's vaunted attachments to America, little purchase in Israel. And the American trade-off, by which religious intensity is lowered for the sake of civic peace, doesn't sit well with Israeli intensities and primal identities. There is, as of yet, simply no civic language for arguing about the rabbinate, let alone a menu of policy options. What's more, the country's secular elites are still happy to consign the country's religious life to the rabbinate, which conveniently excuses them from reckoning with the inescapably religious freight of Zionism.

Championed by one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of all times, the chief rabbinate began as a noble dream. In the end, Rav Kook and his intellectual heirs were tragically naïve about Judaism's susceptibility to the corruptions of power. And that is a reality that only courage and a different kind of faith can undo.

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MORE BY THIS AUTHOR

Yehuda Amichai: At Play in the Fields of Verse

by Robert Alter
from Summer 2011

Yehuda Amichai was an exuberant person with a lively, impish sense of humor. He was, at the same time, a melancholy man. Perhaps the note of melancholy, accompanied by a certain hint of fatigue, became more pronounced in his later years, but Amichai's sense of fun never entirely left him. Both traits of his personality are present in his poetry in shifting combinations and permutations, with the playfulness actually feeding into the darker brooding of his poems.

Amichai's playfulness is most spectacularly evident in his use of figurative language. He did not, as far as I can tell, have a fixed aesthetic program for using a particular kind of imagery. Rather, his imagination reveled in seizing possibilities for metaphor from unlikely directions (he was similarly inventive in conversation). Amichai's characteristic move was to light on some familiar object and, in a quick gesture, usually not felt as a conceit, use it to focus an emotion or even serve as a gateway for vision: "Longing is shut up inside me like air bubbles / in a loaf of bread." "My girl left her love on the sidewalk / like a bicycle. All night long outside and in the dew." "For my heart has lifted weights of pain / in the terrible competitions." "I see you taking something from the fridge, / lit up from within it in the light from another world." Ordinary material objects sometimes take on a wild life of their own: "All night long your empty shoes screamed / by the side of your bed." There are constant crisscrossings between emotion or abstraction and materiality, as in "A will like the fingers of a cast-off glove." This frequently leads to a flamboyant syntactic bracketing together of terms from disparate semantic realms. This device is nowhere more insistently and extravagantly used than in the brilliant long autobiographical poem, "The Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tudela." Here is a brief representative instance:

Echoing and hollowing Rosh Hashanah halls
and Yom Kippur machines of bright metal,
prayer-gears, an assembly line of bowing and prostration
in a melancholy mumble.

As this quick sampling suggests, the athletic play of Amichai's figurative imagination is evident even in translation. But the idea sometimes voiced that he is an easily translatable poet, perhaps almost as good in English as in Hebrew, is profoundly misconceived. He had an acutely sensitive ear to the distinctive resonances of the Hebrew words he used, the deep backgrounds of allusion they evoked, and the significant shifts of register they enabled.

In the serious play of Amichai's poetry sound begets like sound, leading to surprising and meaningful matches between words one might have thought were unrelated and creating startling new perceptions of things. Sound-play of one sort or another is of course an intrinsic feature of most poetry, but its spectacular centrality in Amichai is noteworthy. Let me illustrate from "The Visit of the Queen of Sheba," a poem in eight parts from his second volume of verse that is one of his most inventively exuberant creations. Here are the first

five and a half lines of the sixth poem, in which Solomon and the Queen of Sheba are brought together in his spectacular palace. I will first offer a transliteration of the Hebrew in order to be able to refer to the sounds of the original. Then I will quote Stephen Mitchell's heroically resourceful translation that nevertheless encounters a barrier of untranslatability.

*Vered 'ervatah ha-iveret
mukhpelet beritspat hare'i. Meyuteret*

*kol ha-zehirut, bah nakat,
'et yashav ve-od shafat*

acharonei ravim

The dewy rose of her dark pudenda
was doubled in the mirrored floor. His agenda
seemed superfluous now, and all the provisions
he had made for her, the decrees and the decisions
he had worked out while judging the last
of the litigants...

Mitchell's lines are noticeably longer than Amichai's, but that is probably unavoidable because the structure of literary Hebrew makes possible a concision ordinarily unavailable in English. The provocative rhyme of "pudenda" and "agenda" is certainly in the spirit of the Hebrew original, and the alliteration of d's and r's in the first two lines here is a decent gesture toward ap-

proximating the abundant sound-play of the Hebrew. Nevertheless, the acrobatic virtuosity with which Amichai somersaults from word to word through likeness of sound is scarcely perceptible in the English.

Let us look at the first line of the Hebrew, consisting of just three words and surely one of the most untranslatable lines in all of Amichai's poetry. The literal sense is "the rose of her blind sex." (The term for the woman's sexual part, *'ervah*, has been translated elsewhere by some of Amichai's translators with a much blunter Anglo-Saxon term, but it is not an obscenity. It is the decorous biblical word for the "nakedness" one is forbidden to uncover, so it is an indication of sexual anatomy fraught with a sense of secretness or taboo.) But what has happened here is that the sound of one word has led to another, and then another, each one a little surprise: *vered* (rose) produces *'ervatah* (her sex), which then engenders *'iveret* (blind). The alliteration of r-sounds and the replication of the phonetic pattern e-consonant-e-consonant ("e" as in "egg," with the first "e" accented) continues in the next line, but that is a secondary effect. The Queen of Sheba's lovely sex, mirrored in King Solomon's marvelously reflective floor because she has nothing on under her robe, is a *vered* because of the traditional poetic association of the rose with the beloved woman's body, and also because of the petal-like delicacy of the female anatomy. So, *vered* becomes *'ervatah*, which then is *'iveret*, the last two syllables of this word sounding like a virtual homonym of *vered*. And there is a discovery in this association of sound: The Queen's sexual part is blind because it is an orifice, unlike the eye, without the capacity of perception, but also because desire is blind, impelling one where it, not the reasoning mind, wants to go. Toying with the possibilities of an English equivalent for this amazing line, I came up with nothing better than "The sunflower of her sightless sex," which has a certain alliterative momentum but entirely lacks the sense in the Hebrew of



Yehuda Amichai, Jerusalem, April 16, 1986. (© Hulton Archive/Getty Images.)

word generating word through phonetic resemblance.

One should add that in these lines Amichai expands a medieval midrash on the biblical account of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10). There is a vigorous interplay here between pondered texts and the imagined lived context that goes beyond allusion.

Before we move on to more somber uses of playfulness in Amichai's poetry, I would like to consider one more extended passage from "The Visit of the Queen of Sheba" in order to observe a fuller range of its linguistic inventiveness. Here is the fourth poem in the sequence, entitled "The Journey on the Red Sea":

Fish blew through the sea and through
the long anticipation. Captains
plotted their course by the map
of her longings. Her nipples preceded her like scouts,
her hairs whispered to one another
like conspirators. In the dark corners between sea and ship
the counting started, quietly.
A solitary bird sang
in the permanent trill of her blood. Rules fell
from biology textbooks, clouds were torn like contracts,
at noon she dreamt about
making love naked in the snow, egg yolks dripping
down her leg, the thrill of yellow beeswax. All the air
rushed to be breathed inside her. The sailors cried out
in the foreign language of fish.

But underneath the world, underneath the sea,
there were cantillations as if on the Sabbath:
everything sang each other.

Mitchell's translation here is on the whole a faithful and resourceful rendering of the Hebrew, at least until the erotic high-point of the poem where the sound-play in the original becomes spectacular. One small lapse before then occurs in the fourth line (the third in the Hebrew), which should read "her longing and the rings of her belly." The deletion of the second phrase was perhaps done in the interest of efficient statement, but the omission is unfortunate. The joining of emotion and concrete object is a characteristic Amichai move, extending the high-spirited verbal circus of the poem. The captains navigate both by the map of the queen's longing and the rings of her belly, just as the fish, perhaps performing as instrumentalists, blow through the sea itself and through the queen's long anticipations. Less significantly, the "sea and ship" at the end of the sixth line in the English are actually "sea and hull"—the Hebrew *dofen* suggests, in fact, the inside of the hull, which makes a better match with "dark corners." In any case, much of the wild inventiveness of figurative language is evident: the Queen of Sheba's "nipples preceded her like scouts" both because she is headed into unknown territory and because she is aroused.

In a yoking of concrete and abstract combined with a strategy of breaking open idioms that the young Amichai may have picked up from Dylan Thomas, "Rules fell / from biology textbooks, clouds were torn like contracts," a whole world is pulled apart by the rapture of desire. Instructively, the sexiest moment in the poem is also the point at which the play of language is most intense: "she dreamt about / making love in the naked snow, egg yolks dripping / down her leg, the thrill of yellow beeswax" sounds like this in the Hebrew:

chalmah 'al / mishgal be-sheleg lavan va-chalomot chelmon / ve-oneg donag tzahov. A literal, and unfortunately nonsensical, rendering of these ten Hebrew words would be: “she dreamt of making love in white snow and dreams of egg-yolk and the pleasure of yellow beeswax.” What makes this sequence work wonderfully in the original is the way, yet again, one word tumbles headlong into the next through similarities of sound. Every one of the first seven words has an l-sound. The word for “she dreamt,” *chalmah*, is picked up in its cognate noun *chalomot* (dreams), which then magically engenders *chelmon* (egg-yolk), a word that shares all three consonants of the trilateral root but no etymological or logical connection. This combination is followed by the rich alliteration and assonance of *oneg donag*, which sounds like a near-rhyme in the Hebrew. One gets a sense that the words are copulating through sound, that in the fantastic imagery an orgy of language has been initiated, in keeping with the storm of desire of the African queen.

Finally, at the end of the poem, the Hebrew poses a different challenge to the translator that is equally characteristic of Amichai’s poetry—an image taken from the apparatus of Jewish tradition, boldly displaced



Solomon and the Queen of Sheba by Tintoretto/Jacopo Robusti (1518-1594). (© Scala/Art Resource, NY.)

from its original context and scarcely intelligible in English without a cumbersome footnote. The mysterious “cantillations” underneath the world and the sea are *ta’amei neginah*, the indications of musical tropes that guide a person chanting a *haftarah*, the passage from the Prophets recited in synagogue on the Sabbath after the reading of the Torah. The *ta’amei neginah* are little musical notations, squiggles and dots above and below the letters in the Hebrew text. As the Queen of Sheba sails through the Red Sea on her way to meet the fabled Solomon, the world and the aqueous realm around her are, like the Hebrew biblical texts, underscored with markings of song: “everything sang each other.”

The exuberance of invention that is exercised so spectacularly in “The Visit of the Queen of Sheba” remains a driving force of Amichai’s poetic imagination even when the mood of his poetry is somber. Consider a poem from the volume *Even the Fist Was Once an Open Hand with Fingers*, written more than three decades later in 1989. Here is “Summer Evening by a Window with Psalms,” in my translation:

Close scrutiny of the past.
How my soul yearns within me like those souls
in the 19th century before the great wars,
like curtains that want to pull free
of the open window and fly.

We console ourselves with short breaths,
 as after running, we always recover.
 We want to reach death hale and hearty,
 like a murderer sentenced to death,
 wounded when he was caught,
 whose judges want him to heal before
 he's brought to the gallows.
 I think, how many still waters
 can yield a single night of stillness
 and how many green pastures, wide as deserts,
 can yield the quiet of a single hour
 and how many valleys of the shadow of death do we need
 to be a compassionate shade in the pitiless sun.

I look out the window: a hundred and fifty
 psalms pass through the twilight,
 a hundred and fifty psalms, great and small.
 What a grand and glorious and transient fleet!

I say: the window is God
 and the door is his prophet.

The first line is ordinary modern Hebrew with perhaps even a hint of the bureaucratic. The expression at the beginning of the second line is a Biblicism, *mah tehemeh nafshi*, “How my soul yearns,” and carries the literate Hebrew reader directly back to Psalm 42:5, which in King James reads, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and *why* art thou disquieted [*tehem*, the verb I have rendered as “yearns”] in me?” I would guess that Amichai’s 19th-century souls might be ones he knew from the great novels of the period—*Madame Bovary*, *Middlemarch*, *Anna Karenina*—souls that could at least dream of grand shimmering horizons of fulfillment. The quiet segue from souls to curtains tugged by the wind at the open window and wanting to fly is another one of those characteristic splicings of the spirit and the material quotidian that we observed before.

The poem then moves into a meditation on mortality in the second stanza. The short breaths are a figure for all the countless ways in which life takes the wind out of us, though they may also be an ironic glance at our culture’s preoccupation with physical fitness. The simile of the murderer is a vivid instance of how Amichai uses surprising figurative equations to shock us into recognition. Perhaps we are not all guilty of some terrible crime, but existence treats us as though we were, sentencing each one of us to death, and at best indulging the desire for the condemned person to come to the gallows hale and hearty.

The Book of Psalms, announced in the title and alluded to in the second line, comes front and center in the third stanza. Of course, one can describe the still waters and the green pastures and the Valley of the Shadow as allusions to the twenty-third psalm, but I think something is happening here, and in the rest of the poem, that goes beyond allusion. The speaker is contemplating the biblical text—he is, as he sits at the window on a summer evening, “with” Psalms—in the light of his own existential knowledge of the world. The ancient Hebrew words stand before him, and their message of comfort and reassurance does not match what he sees in the world. The soaring hopes of the 19th-century souls proved to be delusions, and after the great wars, delusion itself is scarcely feasible. “Shade” and “shadow” are the same word in the Hebrew, and “shade” in Psalms is a recurring term for protection, but no such protection is forthcoming in a world where deserts stretch wide around, unavailing small patches of green pastures.

The poem's penultimate stanza takes this move a step beyond allusion. The psalms on which the speaker has been brooding become, through metaphor, physical objects that meet his eye, like the window and the curtains. A miniature armada of the hundred and fifty canonical psalms passes before him in the fading light. These psalms make a grand array, for they are moving poems he knows and loves, but they are also something passing by, transient (*cholef*). The poet can admire their splendid display but he cannot reconcile their promises and consolations with his own sense of the human condition.

This perception of an unbridgeable gap between the speaker and the remembered text leads to the starkly simple language of the assertion of the poem's last two lines: "I say: the window is God / and the door is his prophet," which are obviously framed on the model of "Allah is God and Mohammed is his prophet." Such an appropriation of theological language to express a secular sense of reality occurs often in Amichai's poetry. The poem began with a man sitting at a window, looking out into the twilight. It concludes, having woven in and out of Psalms, with the declaration that, after all, we have only the here-and-now: there are no beckoning horizons of aspiration, as in the 19th century, and the Lord is not our shepherd; there is only the full revelatory presence of what we can see and touch.

In Amichai's last book of poems, *Open Closed Open*, published in 1998, this idea of biblical texts as objects that are part of the reality of the speaker is more pronounced than ever before, and a good many of the poems are exegetical or midrashic. The mood of melancholy is still deeper in this volume, which abounds in meditations on transience, loss, and death, including the mass deaths of European Jews at the hands of the Nazis. Yet the manifestations of poetic playfulness—punning and sound-play and wildly inventive metaphor—are almost as abundant here as in "The Visit of the Queen of Sheba," as can be seen in "Gods Change, Prayers Are Here to Stay," which I shall quote in the admirable translation by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld.

A collection of ritual objects in the museum: spice boxes with little flags on top like festive troops
and many fragrant generations of sacrifice,
and the memory of many Sabbath nights that did not end in death.
And happy menorahs and weepy menorahs and oil lamps
with the pouting beaks of chicks like children singing,
their mouths open in desire and love.
And long metal hands to point out everything
that is no more. The human hands that held them—
long since underground, severed from the bodies.
Seder plates that rotate at the speed of time
so it seems they are standing still, and kiddush cups
in a row on the shelf like soccer trophies
or victory cups from the track and field of generations.
All is gold of grief, silver of longing,
copper of calamity. A collection of ritual objects
like the gaudy toys of a baby god, the gift
of an aged nation, like the strange instruments
of a ghost orchestra, like some odd motionless
bottom fish deep in the waters of time.
A collection of ritual objects donated by Dr. Feuchtwanger,
Jerusalem dentist. And whoever hears this will assume
a delicate smile on his lips, like well-wrought filigree.

This contemplation of ritual objects—presumably under glass—becomes a moving elegy for the vanished Jews of Europe. The poem quickly moves from the spice boxes, used in the *havdala* ritual that marks the end of the Sabbath through “fragrant generations of sacrifice”—*dorot nikhoach* is literally “generations of fragrance” but *nikhoach* is a term for fragrance associated with sacrifice in the Bible—to the generations of Jews who held those spice boxes and chanted the words of the ritual. A series of poignant puns is initiated in the fourth line. “Sabbath nights,” that is, Saturday nights, in Hebrew is *motzaei shabbat*, literally the exit or going-out of the Sabbath. This innocent idiom indicating the end of the holy day is transformed by word-play into a grim image of extinction, from the exit of the Sabbath to the exit into death. Three lines down, “in desire and love,” is an intensifying rich rhyme, *be-ta'avah ve-ahavah*, which is immediately followed by the “long metal hands,” which are actually finger-shaped pointers, usually made of silver, used for reading the Torah. The metal hands pointing to what is gone then lead, in a macabre pun, to human hands severed from their bodies.

“Seder plates that rotate at the speed of time,” is a nice translation of a line that provides a concentrated thematic focus for the entire poem. The conventional phrase is, of course, “the speed of light,” that ultimate limit of velocity, but here, it is time itself that is imagined traveling at 186,000 miles per second, in its horrific rush sweeping away all that was once cherished. If something could travel at the speed of time, it would seem to be standing still, and that is the odd and gloomy reflection that occurs to the speaker as he looks upon the seder plates and kiddush cups from an era that with all its human population is forever gone.

At this point, Amichai’s partiality for sports imagery comes to the fore, reinforcing a sense of deeply gloomy playfulness. The cups for the kiddush ritual celebrated at innumerable Sabbath and festival dinners become “trophies . . . victory cups”—also often kept under glass—“from the track and field of the generations.” The generations of fragrance at the beginning of the poem are now human generations that once strove, attained their triumphs, and in the end, were wiped out. Amichai’s fondness for metaphors drawn from athletics reflects not only his own interests—he was an avid soccer fan—but also a sense that this realm of play regulated by complicated rules is an apt analogue for poetry.

Amichai’s predilection for the yoking of heterogeneous elements through metaphor plays a key role here in the superimposition of sports imagery on ritual objects, the joining of the sacred with the profane. A related move, in which playfulness leads to melancholy, is the pointed reversal of the traditional idea of God as father and Israel as his children, in which the ritual objects are imagined as toys of a baby god given him by his aged people.

The summarizing image of the ritual objects involves an intricate play of sound similar to what we observed in the sexual imagery of “The Visit of the Queen of Sheba”: “All is gold of grief, silver of longing, / copper of calamity.” The use of alliteration in the Bloch-Kronfeld translation is remarkably resourceful, but the clustering of related sounds in the Hebrew is still more intricate and intense: *ve-hakol zehav 'akhzavah ve-khesef kisufim / u-nechoshet ha-choshekh*. The first of the three phrases, *zehav 'akhzavah* (literally, “gold of disappointment”) repeats so many phonemes that it creates a sense, like the examples we looked at from Amichai’s early erotic poem, that the second word is somehow generated by the one that precedes it. The same dynamic is even more pronounced in the next two phrases. *Kesef kisufim* (silver of longing), suggests an intrinsic link between the two terms, which display the same three-letter root, *k-s-f*, and may conceivably have an etymological connection (the face turned silver-pale through longing). The final phrase, *nechoshet hachoshekh* (literally, “copper of darkness”) combines a replication of consonants with strong assonance, so that the last two syllables of each word, *choshekh / choshet*, each with a penultimate accent, almost perfectly echo each other, only the consonant at the end changing. The result of all this interfusion of sound is that the precious metals out of which the ritual objects were fashioned are transmuted into mythological tokens of an eternally irremediable sadness: the gold, silver, and copper used to glorify God’s commandments are now witnesses of an unending bleakness to which they are wedded by their very sounds.

In the last three lines of the poem, the speaker emerges from his darkly meditative immersion in a vanished

world to the surface of the Jerusalem museum and the quotidian reality of a dentist named Feuchtwanger who collected ritual objects. The injunction to smile at the end of the poem is an enforced substitute for tears: we have no choice but to go on, after all that has been irrevocably destroyed, but the smile on the lips is mere artifact, ironically mimicking the artifacts on display that are the sole sad remnants of the Jews who once used them in joy and devotion.

Play is something we generally associate with pleasure, and there are abundant illustrations of that nexus in Amichai's poetry, especially, though by no means exclusively, in his erotic poems. But language is, after all, an instrument of meaning, and so the play with language also becomes a vehicle for the discovery of unanticipated meanings, some delightful, others somber. Amichai was a zestfully inventive poet who reveled in the linking of words through intricate combinations of sounds and in the joining of the most disparate concepts through the force of metaphor. He exercised this faculty with equal vigor whether he was imagining the allure of the sensual world or peering into the abyss.

Play on the soccer fields or the running track is a competition bound by rules in which someone ends up taking home the championship cup. Play in the fields of verse when it is done as skillfully as in Amichai's poetry has no losers: the reader, through the gift of the poet's virtuosity, is offered the prize of repeated new recognitions.

Robert Alter's most recent book is [The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary](#) (Norton).

MORE BY THIS AUTHOR

Israel's Arab Sholem Aleichem

by Alan Mintz

from Summer 2012

For some years now the 37-year-old Arab Israeli Hebrew writer Sayed Kashua has been contributing a column to the weekend magazine of *Ha'aretz* that is a miniature marvel of self-presentation. Kashua writes first-person vignettes in an easy, every-guy voice as if he were just another working stiff, married with kids, who is trying to make his way in the world. If that were all, his little tales would still have a lot going for them. But that is not all. He is an Israeli Arab who writes in Hebrew and has made it within the world of Israeli Jewish journalism and popular culture while remaining proud of his Arab identity and illusionless about the civil disabilities of Israel's Arab citizens. Prized by Hebrew readers for the uniqueness of his voice, Kashua has been vilified in the Arab press for being a cultural collaborator. Kashua has turned the dilemmas of living entangled in these two identities into an opportunity for antic observation rather than portentous agonizing. He has a gift for taking the small absurdities of everyday existence and the comic humiliations of family life, themselves served up with self-effacing deadpan humor, and making them comment on the bigger, and often darker, contradictions of his life and the two cultures in which he lives.

Take, for example, the confusions in a column from March 2012 entitled "A Clean Getaway." (Happily, Kashua's columns can be read online in the English edition of *Ha'aretz*.) In this sketch, Kashua, or someone very much like him, works among Israeli Jews on a TV series in an office building in West Jerusalem, whose cleaning staff, unsurprisingly, is comprised of Arabs. Kashua is embarrassed by sitting in an office with an air conditioner and a computer while other Arabs are lugging around mops and pails. His improvised solution is to lock his office and, without explanation, refuse to have it cleaned; when the grime gets too much for him, he does it himself. He can't start up a chatty conversation in Arabic with the cleaners because he is self-conscious about how they will view his mixing equally among the Jewish writers and producers. So he contrives to get up before dawn, bring a raft of cleaning equipment from home to work, scour his office, and hide the equipment behind the couch. Hoping to make his getaway after dark, Kashua is importuned by a cleaner, who addresses him in Hebrew because he does not realize that Kashua is an Arab. The column concludes with this exchange:

"Why" he asked in Hebrew. "Why do you have this?"

"What do you mean?" I answered in Hebrew. There was absolutely no chance I could hide the mop and the bucket.

"Because of people like you they said they would fire me, sir," he said.

"What?" I sputtered. "Why? I'm not even . . ."

"But why are you doing this to us?" he persisted, still speaking in Hebrew. Now all I wanted to do was flee, run away and never come back to this place. "Is it because we are Arabs?"

Kashua (or his persona) gulps down a cocktail made of equal parts of self-importance, scruple, and em-

Second Person Singular

by Sayed Kashua, translated by Mitch Ginsburg
Grove Press, 352 pp., \$25

barrassment. He is clearly satisfied with himself for working on an equal footing with his Jewish coworkers; but his pleasure is undercut by his awareness that he is doing so in the presence of Arabs performing “Arab labor”—the name of the successful TV show he writes—even though they have no clue he is one of them. And his efforts to remain morally spotless end up endangering the livelihood of these real Arab laborers.

These smart little performances, so ingenuously economical in their telling, depend for their success on the garrulous persona of a speaker, a kind of Arab schlemiel, who is always inadvertently revealing more about his foibles than he intends. It is all so chatty and home-cooked that it seems to resist literariness; but the fact is that Kashua’s writing in these columns is the lineal descendent of the Russian *skaz* and the European feuilleton, as well as the monologues of Yiddish literature. It is a nice irony to consider that the Hebrew writer today whose way with the monologue is closest to that of Sholem Aleichem’s is an Arab.

But it is a long way from the syncopated precision of a weekly column to the expansive polyphony of a novel. One opens Kashua’s new *Second Person Singular* wondering whether he can shift gears and adapt his gifts to a very different genre. The good news is that, although he may not be a novelist of elegance and depth, Kashua has a solid grasp of three key opportunities afforded by the novel that cannot be realized in his weekly performances. The first is the chance to present a systematic and sustained account of the Arab Israeli professional elite to which he belongs. The second is the availability of plot as a means of tracing the conflict and entanglement among different versions of Israeli Arab identity. Finally, the novel offers Kashua relief from the burden of continually having to write in the *first person singular*.

The novel contains two separate narratives told in alternating sections. The protagonist of one is a successful criminal lawyer living in East Jerusalem and practicing in the West. The protagonist of the other narrative, also an Israeli Arab, is an introverted former social worker who works as caretaker for a young Israeli Jewish man his age who is severely ill. The two are ignorant of each other’s existence until the final pages of the novel, although the reader is privy to the slight but consequential connection between them.

The lawyer has plenty of his own tics, but remains nameless, apparently because he is meant to represent a whole class of Israeli Arabs who have graduated from Israeli universities and make their living representing the interests of Arabs in Israeli courts and elsewhere. The lawyer grew up the son of uneducated parents in one of the Arab villages in the Triangle (along the eastern Sharon Plain among the Samaritan foothills), excelled in school, took a law degree at the Hebrew University, and then made the crucial decision to stay in Jerusalem rather than return to his village. In doing so, the lawyer joined a colony of well-to-do and high-achieving professionals (accountants, doctors, and other lawyers) who occupy a self-ascribed social status superior to the villagers they left behind, as well as the locals among whom they live in East Jerusalem.

Kashua is at his mordant best in describing the obsession with status that rules the lawyer’s life. For example, the lawyer envies his Jewish friends their fuel-efficient Japanese cars they can keep for years on end. He, alas, can do no such thing. “He knew that if he did not upgrade his car to a model that surpassed what the competition was driving, it would be seen as a retreat . . . If one of his competitors bought a BMW with a V6 and three hundred



Sayed Kashua. (Photo by Dan Porges, courtesy of Grove Press.)

horsepower, then he had to get the Benz with the V8 and a few hundred more horses under the hood.” In dress, he has to know the difference between Ralph Lauren and Versace because his respect as an Arab depends on his appearance and will make the difference in whether or not he is stopped at a crossing by the Border Police. He married early because he knew his Arab clients would not trust a bachelor. His wife is beautiful, educated, and a good mother, but he demeans her work as a therapist-social worker because of its insignificant income compared to his, and he has in fact never truly fallen in love with her.

What he most envies in his Jewish friends is their easy familiarity with Western culture, the fruit of several generations of adaption to modernity. He compulsively puts together lists of the books recommended in *Ha'aretz* and makes a weekly visit to a bookstore to load up on works in hopes of remediating his cultural deficit. And it is one of these visits that turns out to be his downfall. From the pages of a second-hand volume of Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*—itself a story about jealous rage—falls a note in his wife's Arabic hand that hints at the existence of a romantic liaison. The lawyer becomes unhinged as he wildly—and of course, mistakenly—imagines the most flagrant sorts of marital betrayal or, even worse, the possibility that his wife slept with another man before marriage. In one stroke, the entire complex of professional achievement and social ascendance and enlightened attitudes the lawyer has labored so hard to erect begins to unravel. The distance he has endeavored to place between himself and the tribal codes that legitimate honor killings is swept away by homicidal rage against his wife.

The investigations the lawyer undertakes to probe his wife's supposed infidelities eventually bring him in contact with the young Israeli Arab, a *doppelgänger* of sorts, who is the protagonist of the contrapuntal sections of the novel. (His sections are told in the first person, the lawyer's in the third.) Amir Lahab is the son of an Arab who was murdered after working with the Israelis; he grows up as an outsider in a village not his own and uses his good grades to escape to Jerusalem and obtain a university degree. He is shy and uncouth and shares little with other young Israeli Arab men in Jerusalem who chain smoke, are obsessed with girls, and are marking time in their bureaucratic jobs until they can return with their degrees to their home villages. He becomes fascinated instead with the cultural world of Yonatan, the young man in a vegetative state for whom he cares in the evenings. Yonatan had been a precocious student in the elite circles of professors' children, and it is among his books and CDs during the long nights of caring for him that Amir discovers an engrossing new cultural universe. Availing himself of Yonatan's sophisticated camera, he discovers a passion for photography and, with the approval of Yonatan's mother, he applies and is accepted to the Bezalel Academy using Yonatan's name rather than his own. (Ironically, Bezalel rolls out the red carpet for Arab applicants, but Amir does not want to be taken on the basis of affirmative action.) Upon the young man's death, his caretaker assumes his identity in name and in spirit. Amir Lahab becomes Yonatan Forschmidt and continues to pass as an Israeli Jew who is embarking on a promising career as a photographic artist.

Why does Kashua divide *Second Person Singular* into two narratives with two protagonists? What connects the two, beyond the note that indicates that Amir and the lawyer's wife once met? Kashua appears to have taken the bumbling but grounded persona of his newspaper columns and split it into its two more extreme and unstable components. The grandiose lawyer is a send-up of the Israeli Arab who is obsessed with status and the accoutrements of Western culture and defines himself in contrast to his more “primitive” brethren. The withdrawn and reticent Amir/Yonatan grows up in an atmosphere of emotional and cultural deprivation and sees little in the new or the old Arab culture worth emulating. The fact that both figures lack a core sense of self explains why their characterization is superficial. Because he is writing a novel about the construction and performance of identity, Kashua's characters by definition cannot be deep or given to self-reflection. This is probably not, in any case, Kashua's temperament as a novelist. He has a sharper eye for the absurdities of self-presentation and intra-group discrimination than he does for what goes on inside the soul. This absence at the center suggests a provocative skepticism about whether

the Palestinian narrative possesses enough cultural substance to nurture the roots of Israeli Arab identity.

There is a lot in Kashua's novel that reminds one of the early Philip Roth, the Roth who scandalized the American Jewish community by exposing the unruly appetites and ambitions behind the decorous march of acculturation. One imagines Israeli Arab readers being discomforted in the same way, and like American Jews, one hopes, becoming less anxious over time about such fictional acts of truth telling. Not so oddly perhaps, Kashua's voice is the closest thing in Israeli literature to the quandaries of identity that absorb diaspora Jewish literature. His writing, both in his columns and his novels, probes a common question about assimilation: not whether it is good or bad but whether it is possible.

Alan Mintz is the Chana Kekst Professor of Hebrew Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the author, most recently, of [Sanctuary in the Wilderness: A Critical Introduction to American Hebrew Poetry](#) (Stanford University Press).

MORE BY THIS AUTHOR

Riding Leviathan: A New Wave of Israeli Genre Fiction

by Michael Weingrad

from *Winter 2014*

Rabbinic conspiracies, Leviathan-riding heroines, a top-secret Israel Defense Forces demon-hunting unit, ghosts and amnesiacs, a gay messiah—all these can be found in the half-dozen books short-listed for this year's Geffen Prize for best Israeli fantasy or science fiction novel, awarded in late September by the Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy.

It wasn't so long ago that one could justifiably lament that fantasy literature was a weak strain in Israel, science fiction only somewhat less marginal, and that Hebrew literary culture was generally suspicious of the fantastical and speculative. (Ironic, since Zionism's founder, Theodor Herzl, spun quite a yarn in his utopian novel *Altneuland*.) As novelist Hagar Yanai put it in a 2002 essay in *Ha'aretz*:

Faeries do not dance underneath our swaying palm trees, there are no fire-breathing dragons in the cave of Machpelah, and Harry Potter doesn't live in Kfar Saba. But why? Why couldn't Harry Potter have been written in Israel? Why is local fantasy literature so weak, so that it almost seems that a book like that couldn't be published in the state of the Jews?

Since Yanai wrote these words, there has been something of an efflorescence of fantasy literature in the Hebrew language, and she herself is responsible for no small part of it. Her 2006 and 2008 novels, *Ha-livyatan mi-bavel* (The Leviathan of Babylon) and *Ha-mayim she-bein ha-olamot* (The Water Between the Worlds), comprise the first two installments of a promised fantasy trilogy (the conclusion seems to have gotten stalled), the first such in Hebrew literature, involving a couple of Israeli teenagers who travel from Tel Aviv to a magical version of the Babylonian Empire. As I wrote in my 2010 essay "[Why There Is No Jewish Narnia](#)," those novels are not my cup of tea, but they were part of what I referred to at that time as "a very short shelf" of Israeli fantasy literature.

That shelf is no longer so short. The Geffen Prize is itself a gauge of the recent growth of fantastical writing

***Eshtonot* (The Book of Disorder)**

by Ofir Touché Gafla

Keter, 316 pp., 98 NIS

***Etsba'ot shel pesantran* (Piano Fingers)**

by Yali Sobol

Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 224 pp., 92 NIS

The World of the End

by Ofir Touché Gafla

Tor, 368 pp., \$24.99

***Shedim be-rachov Agripas* (Demons in Agripas Street)**

by Hagai Dagan

Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 496 pp., 96 NIS

Alma

by Roni Eshkol

Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 463 pp., 96 NIS

***Kesheha-meitim hazru* (When the Dead Returned)**

by Ilan Sheinfeld

Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 638 pp., 128 NIS

***Arim shel mata* (De Urbibus Inferis)**

by Shimon Adaf

Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 333 pp., 94 NIS

in Israel. The prize was first awarded in 1999, but only for science fiction and fantasy novels translated into Hebrew and for short stories. Four years later, a prize category was created for original book-length works by Israeli authors and was awarded in alternating years until 2007, when Yanai's *Ha-livyatan mi-bavel* received the prize. Since then, the award for an original Hebrew book-length work has been given each year. (The genres of science fiction and fantasy are combined for purposes of the award, just as in the case of the better-known Hugo and Nebula awards.) The prizes are announced at ICon, an annual convention in Tel Aviv that draws around 3,000 aficionados of fantasy, science fiction, and role-playing games.

A look at the six novels nominated for this year's Geffen shows the current ferment and possibilities in the new Israeli science fiction and fantasy. These books reflect international trends in fantastic literature, especially the collapse of clear distinctions between fantasy, science fiction, and other genres. (Gary K. Wolfe, in his superb [collection of essays](#) on fantastic literature in England and America, calls these "evaporating genres," and shows how the instability of these genres was built into their peculiar historical and commercial origins.) While some of these novels adhere to genre conventions, most draw promiscuously and in highly self-aware fashion from fantasy, science fiction, horror, detective fiction, and other genres. They also reflect the influence of film as much as literature, whether high or low.

What is most striking in considering this year's crop of finalists, however, is how concerned they are with Judaism. Two of them, Ofir Touché Gafla's *Eshtonot* (The Book of Disorder) and Yali Sobol's *Etsba'ot shel pesantran* (Piano Fingers), are in different ways redolent of the Israeli scene, whether the actual Israel or a dystopian, near-future Israel, but do not deal with Judaism per se. Yet the other four, including this year's winner, all make aspects of Jewish belief central to their fantasies. These books both confirm and challenge my speculations from a few years ago, which gave rise to [considerable discussion and debate](#), and in which I claimed that normative Jewish theology, in contrast to Christianity, was not well-suited for dramatization in fantasy literature, or at least not in classic high fantasy.

More importantly, these books show that this new wave of Israeli science fiction and fantasy not only reflects global currents and popular culture, but also grapples with issues of Jewish belief and identity that continue to trouble and inspire Israelis, both religious and secular. These may not be Israeli Narnias, but they pound on the wardrobe, rattling the scrolls inside.

The only writer among this year's finalists currently accessible in English is the wonderfully named Ofir Touché Gafla, whose delicious first novel, *The World of the End*, won the Geffen Prize in 2005 and was published this summer in an excellent English translation. *The World of the End* tells the story of Ben and Marian Mendelssohn, a married couple who seem to have the perfect relationship until Marian dies in a Ferris wheel accident. Although Ben works as an "epilogist," a ghost-writer who specializes in devising endings for books and screenplays, he finds himself unable to accept the ending of Marian's life and so follows her into the afterlife. In the course of Ben's journey—which could be described as Orpheus and Eurydice meets Alice in Wonderland, with Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* and Etgar Keret's "Kneller's Happy Campers" thrown in—he be-



Ofir Touché Gafla. (Courtesy of Yanai Yechiel.)

friends a private investigator, visits a store where one can obtain videos of every moment of one's previous life, drops in on deceased Jewish relatives, and learns about the "charlatans" (temporary residents of the afterlife, who will wake from their various comas and near-death states) and the "aliases" (denizens of the

afterlife who never lived in the first place). The world beyond is filled with surprises, casting light and shadows not only upon Ben's quest to locate his dead wife but upon what he thought he knew about their prior life together.

The book is a meditation on the deeply human need for, and defiance of, endings. Gafla probes the agonizing necessity, in grief over a beloved's death or in the wake of a failed romance, of moving beyond the experience of finality in order to see life as continuing. He also shows, by contrast, that in love the dangerous temptation is to imagine that one has reached an ending and can live happily ever after, ignoring the ways in which all such endings are in some manner illusory. Gafla tells his story ingeniously, with a touch and timing as surely executed in the novel's many moments of dark humor as in its moments of poignant heartache. The plot is at times overly intricate and defiantly improbable, with one too many secondary stories grafted onto the main trunk, but most every page is a dizzying delight. The novel should find as devoted a readership in America as it has in Israel.

Gafla's latest novel and Geffen award nominee, *Eshtonot* (The Book of Disorder), also shuttles back and forth between the world of the living and other, more ambiguous states of existence. Creepy and complex, it draws together a series of uncanny threads. A man wakes up by the side of a road. He can't remember anything except for his name, and on the back of his head is a small protrusion that feels like a switch. Another man is a prisoner in a placid and pastoral landscape surrounded by a wall. He and his fellow inhabitants are all murderers. Every night in a Parisian café, the romantic overtures of a breathtakingly handsome man are rebuffed by a homely woman. A boy fills notebooks with obsessively detailed lists of tragedies and disasters. What unites these strands is the novel's fascination with epistemology: how we know that we know something, especially how we know whether or not we are real. Touché Gafla teaches writing at the Sam Spiegel Film and Television School in Jerusalem, and the twists and turns of the book recall various movies from the last decade or so that play upon this kind of uncertainty—*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Inception*, *The Sixth Sense*, etc. *Eshtonot* is populated by a host of people severed from their memories, or from their pasts, or from the external world. While not as powerful as Gafla's first novel, *Eshtonot* explores this panorama of dissociation with often spine-tingling results.

In contrast to the metaphysical chills provided by Gafla, Yali Sobol deals with political fears. If Israel ever becomes a fascist police state, don't say that Sobol didn't warn you. His slim dystopian novel, *Etsba'ot shel pesantran* (Piano Fingers), is set a few years from now in an Israel that has, in the wake of an elliptically described next war, implemented martial law and a tightening stranglehold on freedom of speech and expression. Like many a political fable about the danger of acquiescence to a repressive regime, the main character is an artist—here a classical concert pianist—who prefers to remain apolitical in an environment that will not allow such moral cowardice. (Sobol's own musical background is rock—he was the lead singer of the band Monica Sex, which some American readers may recall for its infectious theme song to the 1990s hit Israeli television show *Florentin*—and he is the son of the playwright Yehoshua Sobol.) Sobol's fable is directed against the Israeli right: Those persecuted by the government thought police are leftist poets, post-Zionists, kibbutzniks, and the like. The novel will therefore not resonate much beyond *Ha'aretz* readers, but it is deftly written and a grim barometer of the anxieties of the Israeli left.

The winner of this year's Geffen Prize is Hagai Dagan's *Shedim be-rachov Agripas* (Demons in Agripas Street) about a group of paranormal investigators who work loosely with the IDF to manage unruly demons, sort of like an Israeli *Ghostbusters* or *Men in Black*. The protagonist is Shabi, a sex-obsessed slob of a Jerusalem cab driver who is made a member of the group after he evinces a mysterious talent for handling these supernatural beings. Shabi soon discovers that a cosmic crisis is at hand: a plot by a powerful group of evil angels to unleash permanently upon the universe the dark and violent side of God, what the kabbalists called *Din* (Judgment) as opposed to *Chesed* (Mercy). To triumph, these angels need to execute a group of imprisoned pagan deities, especially the Egyptian Isis and the Roman Fortuna, and so Shabi

and his colleagues—a feminist academic, an ex-yeshiva student, a renegade physicist, and a Muslim Sudanese woman—find themselves in a race against time to save the goddesses and avert the end of days.

For his material, Dagan draws from his own 2003 Hebrew compendium of Jewish myths and countertraditions, *Ha-mitologyah ha-yehudit* (Jewish Mythology), and even quotes from it in *Shedim be-rachov Agripas* (Demons in Agripas Street), where it is presented, amusingly, as a passage from a demonic text known as “the Bible of Hell.” Dagan has given his readers an Israeli version of the kind of novel that, like Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods*, brings mere mortals in proximity to powerful ancient deities. Dagan likes playing these encounters for laughs, with an emphasis on slapstick and sex jokes.

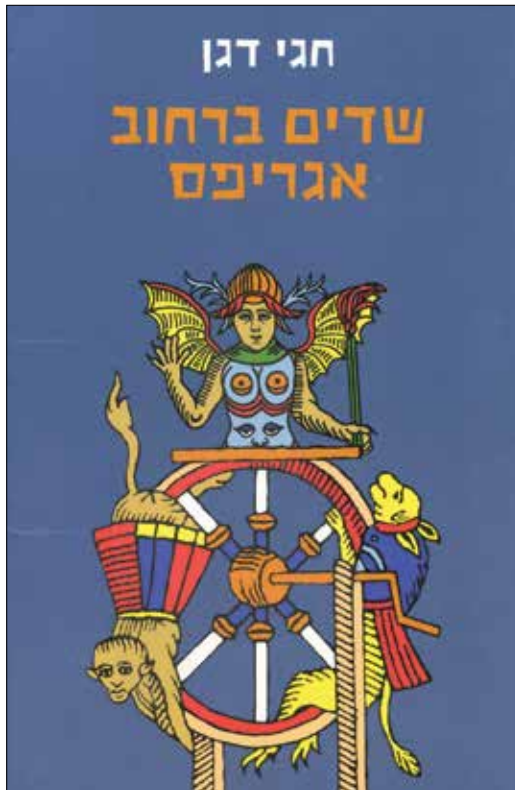
Yet for all the humor that Dagan attempts to instill in the novel, there are very serious assertions, theological and political, being made. The battle between the evil angels and the pagan gods is just one of several ways Dagan, in this novel, attacks traditional Judaism. Judaism, the novel argues, banished the life-affirming feminine

and natural dimensions found in paganism and so became sterile and oppressive. Rabbi Eliezer, the apparent loser of the famous talmudic “oven of Akhnai” story, in which he appeals successfully to God to support his interpretation of the law but is overruled by the other rabbis on a technicality, was in Dagan’s novel actually a valiant if unsuccessful hero trying to bring the Jewish and pagan deities together in a harmonious fusion. Eliezer wanted to unite the God of the Hebrews and the pagan goddesses in a sex-positive cult that would affirm femininity and the natural world rather than the stifling and patriarchal rigidity of Jewish law. One of his latter-day disciples expresses the need “to turn Judaism into something alive. Something connected to the world of those goddesses and gods who were here before God decided he wanted to rule alone.”

This is somewhat reminiscent of the Canaanite movement, a group of writers and artists who came onto the scene in the 1940s and argued that Israeli culture needed to shed its connections with Judaism and instead embrace a pre-biblical and pan-Middle Eastern culture of their imagination. Dagan’s closer ideological cousins, though, are the varieties of feminist spirituality that have, since the 1970s, attacked Judaism for supposedly inventing patriarchy and repressing the more feminine world of paganism—a view that often reprises Christianity’s early condemnation of Judaism

as a dry and spirit-killing legalism, as well as its charge of deicide, in this case the elimination of goddesses rather than God.

Dagan’s religious critique is wedded to a palpable animus against ultra-Orthodox Jews and what many secular Israelis complain is the haredization of Jerusalem. The novel contains many venomous comments about *haredi* Jews (one of the characters asks semi-jokingly if they’re human), and, in case there were some ambiguity about Dagan’s feelings on the matter, he has the main evil angel disguise itself as an ultra-Orthodox rabbi who heads a yeshiva across the Green Line in the Arab neighborhood of Silwan. Moreover, while all the Orthodox Jews in the novel are sinister—or demons in disguise—all the Arab characters are kindly and



Cover of *Shedim be-rachov Agripas* by Hagai Dagan. (Courtesy of Michael Weingrad and Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan.)

well-intentioned despite their oppression by Orthodox Jews. The novel implies that if Judaism would open itself up to the pagan and feminine as Rabbi Eliezer had wanted it to do 2,000 years ago, there would be peace between Jews and Arabs today.

As if in response to comments I made in my Jewish Narnia essay about rabbinic Judaism's deflation of the mythical element in Judaism, both Dagan's *Shedim ba-rachov Agripas* and Roni Eshkol's debut novel, *Alma*, feature warrior princesses riding on Leviathan, that primordial sea monster which God boasts of catching with a hook in the Book of Job, and which the rabbis of the Talmud claimed would provide a buffet dinner for the righteous in the world to come. While for Dagan this represents a hoped-for revenge of pagan, feminine myth against Judaism, Eshkol seeks a synthesis of Judaism and other thought systems, and her Leviathan is understood as part of a shattered unity that the characters in her quest fantasy seek to restore.



Left: Cover of *Alma* by Roni Eshkol. Above: *Alma's* map of the world. (Courtesy of Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan.)

Alma is a young goatherd who lives in a squalid village in the land of Anlazya by the poisoned Northern Sea. When her curiosity leads her beyond the confines of her village, she encounters the Leviathan, whose frightening call wracks those who hear it with memories from their past. Alma discovers a map of the world on the skin shed from the Leviathan's eye and uses it in a desperate war against a tyrant who has turned the southern hemisphere of the world into a hellish wasteland and now has designs on the north. Of the novels reviewed here, *Alma* is on the one hand the most bound up with the familiar conventions of fantasy literature. We have a young outsider who goes on a journey to save the world from a powerful evil and a mostly medieval technological level leavened by elements that seem magical.

On the other hand, Eshkol's novel offers a unique and highly personal mythology, infused with Jewish elements both classical and modern. She gives her world a pungently ancient feel with Aramaic place names and Hebrew archaisms. The novel at times recalls Hasidic parables with their exiled kings and vanished princesses. There are festivals of remembrance that resemble the shofar service of the Jewish New Year. The Sauron of this

world even bears the name of the devil in Jewish folklore, spelled backwards.

Modern Jewish experience is just as much an influence on the novel. The shattered south, with its tortured slave population and landscape of ash, filth, and skulls, is described in ways that go beyond Tolkien's Mordor into the territory of Auschwitz. A Zionist sensibility animates the characters who rebel against the ancient dispersion of their tribe and seek to recover their homeland. "I cannot judge the decision of my forefathers" to go into exile, says one of the characters. "It was their choice and I respect it. But now the south is trampled while we enjoy the exile we took upon ourselves. As a son of the Wandering People I cannot return to the south," he declares, "yet I can at least cease wandering."

What most animates the novel is the theme of unity. The world of *Alma* is a sundered world, which the protagonists seek to reunite. Alma and her companions are deeply concerned with the nature of unity, of God ("the One"), and the question of how there can be evil and strife, or desire, or sexual duality in a creation that is supposed to be whole. These explorations are syncretic: partly Jewish and partly inspired by eastern sources (the main fount of wisdom in the novel is a being named Satoria—satori is a Zen term for enlightenment). Eshkol fails to create compellingly vivid correlations to these explorations in her characters and narrative action; one feels that Alma and her companions would be truer to their principles if they just sat on mountaintops and meditated instead of riding around doing things, and their quest feels accordingly arbitrary. Yet the broken world through which they move has genuine atmosphere.

In contrast to the fantastical realms of *Alma*, Ilan Sheinfeld's *Kesheha-meitim hazru* (When the Dead Returned) is, for the most part, decidedly this-worldly. The first half of the novel is a sprawling family epic drawn from Sheinfeld's own family history, and reminiscent of the novels of Isaac Bashevis and Israel Joshua Singer. It begins in the Bessarabian shtetl of Novoselic in the years leading up to the Holocaust and moves from Eastern Europe to the jungles of the Amazon as members of the family immigrate to South America. Apart from a few brief magical realist touches there is nothing supernatural in the book's first half, although Sheinfeld's realistic recounting of the family's experience of the Holocaust—a universe of horror, a world of walking corpses—seems as much like science fiction or horror as any work of fantastical literature.

The theme of messianism is foreshadowed from the start. Early on, a mysterious stranger shows up in the village and gives one of the characters a Seder plate decorated with symbols of Shabbtai Zevi, while another character heads off to Palestine to purchase land in the Galilee near the reputed grave of Moses' daughter, who figures prominently in Sabbatean myth. The family patriarch, a furrier named Shlomo Feldman, is infused with messianic yearning, though a bitter foe of the Sabbatean sympathizers he runs across.

The second half of the book focuses on Salomon Feldman, the grandson of Shlomo and the son of Michael, Shlomo's son who is separated from the family early on when he is struck in the head and loses his memory, spending the war years in the home of a Christian farmer. After the war, Michael makes his way to South America and settles in Iquitos, a town in the Amazonian rainforest that is home to a large number of Jews who have intermarried for generations with the local Indian population. (This may also seem somewhat fantastical but is the typically improbable reality of Jewish history.) Michael marries an Indian woman who claims to be partly of Jewish descent and who dies after giving birth to Salomon. Salomon grows up, attends university in Lima, becomes a historian, and wrestles with his homosexuality. Through his searches for the key to his own identity he makes his way to Israel.

In the final third of Sheinfeld's book, Salomon is revealed as the messiah, probably the first gay messiah in a novel since Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. When Salomon, as yet unaware of his redemptive powers, begins inadvertently to raise the dead, it is the occasion for macabre Jewish comedy, as the extended Feldman family descends upon the sleepy little town in Northern Israel in which Salomon resides. It turns out that having one's deceased aunts, uncles, and cousins resurrected also means the resurrection of family feuds and pettiness.

As more and more dead Jews are brought to life, Sheinfeld spins out a clever and audacious social comedy

dealing with the Zionist project itself: how the State of Israel has, metaphorically speaking, accomplished the messianic feat of bringing wildly different Jews and Judaisms back to life under one national roof and is dealing with the consequences. Can medieval and modern Judaisms coexist? Who gets to decide, “Who is a Jew?” Are the formerly dead eligible for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return?

Ultimately, the novel is about Salomon’s attempt to reconcile his sexual identity as a gay man with his religious and national identity as a Jew. Unfortunately, this is also where the novel fails, as Salomon circles around and around the same struggles to come out of the closet, never finding a resolution, but never advancing the novel either. Losing control of the satirical elements, the novel turns shrill and repetitive. The rabbis from the ancient Sanhedrin return to life and organize mass killings of gays, there is civil war in Israel, and Salomon is cruising in Tel Aviv bars and complaining about his family. It could be argued that Sheinfeld’s novel does not really belong in the category of science fiction or fantasy. Not because there is little that is fantastical in the first two-thirds of the novel, and not because the supernatural elements in the novel are drawn directly from Jewish tradition (if given a gay, modern Israeli spin) and do not stand on their own imaginatively, but rather because the messianic fantasy here is mainly an allegory of the author’s own search for identity, a family record, and a personal confession, rather than the construction of a counterreality that carries its own aesthetic weight.

Finally, we come to Shimon Adaf’s *Arim shel mata* (De Urbibus Inferis). Poet, critic, editor, rock musician, novelist, Shimon Adaf has already gained considerable recognition for his brilliant writing, winning Israel’s prestigious Sapir Prize for his last novel and various prizes for his collections of poetry. His current novel is part detective novel, part science fiction, part Bildungsroman, part philosophical reflection on language, and certainly the most challenging and unsummarizable of the books here at hand.

The novel deals with the siblings Tiveria and Akko Asido, who, like the Sderot-born Adaf, are of Moroccan background, and who spend their childhood in the shadow of their father, a recluse who hides in a shack researching Jewish mysticism. Tiveria (she and her brother are named after the Israeli cities of Tiberias and Acre) eventually moves to Tel Aviv, studies classics, and becomes a poet, while Akko, a mathematical genius, heads to MIT and works on artificial intelligence. The third main character in the novel is the narrator, who encounters a mysterious symbol carved into the frame of a mirror in a Berlin club, which leads him to uncover a secret organization, hinted at in various rare editions of Jewish mystical texts. Like Dagan does in *Shedim ba-rachov Agripas*, Adaf also traces his underground organization to the esoteric teachings of a 2nd-century Jewish sage. In this case, it is Shimon ben Zoma, of whom the Talmud records that he went insane when he entered the divine garden which caused Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya to renounce Judaism and from which only Rabbi Akiva returned spiritually and physically unharmed.

Rich material—with arson and amnesia and angels, as well—yet this novel, while engrossing and beautifully written, isn’t driven by a plot in any conventional sense. The narrator’s investigations bring him into contact with the Asido siblings, but the characters remain mostly separate from one another, and the knowledge they acquire in the course of the novel does not ultimately change much in their lives. What unites and propels disparate strands of the novel is instead a concern with language itself. Adaf, through the different incarnations of language dealt with in the book—poetry, mathematics, scripture, computer code, gravestones, Moroccan dialect, tattoos, Christian iconography, instant messaging, music—gestures yearningly at the horizon of language, seeking, as does Jewish mysticism, to find words for what is beyond words. This might sound like a recipe for post-modern navel-gazing, but Adaf is so lyrically gifted and so humanly focused on the characters that the novel never threatens to become an academic exercise.

What for Adaf lies most aching beyond his own ample poetic abilities is his bottomless grief over the death of his sister Aviva, which he has grappled with in earlier books. *Arim shel mata* is ultimately a work of mourning, in a sense akin to what Walter Benjamin, one of Adaf’s tutelary spirits, meant by the German term for tragedy, *Trauerspiel*. “I will not finish, I think, the work of mourning,” we read at the novel’s end. “But

perhaps with the conclusion of this book I will be able to stop writing it.”

That Adaf has found science fiction and fantasy to be such responsive vehicles for his philosophical and personal searches (his previous novels are also major contributions to fantastical literature in Israel) is indication of the talent these genres are attracting in Israel and the attention Israeli contributions to these genres should and will merit, with the help of translators, in years to come.

Meanwhile, more and more classic and contemporary fantasy and science fiction is making its way into Hebrew. For instance, Adaf recently translated Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle*, an alternate history in which the Axis powers win the Second World War, while this year’s Geffen award for best translation of a work of fantasy went to Tzafrir Grossman’s Hebrew rendering of *A Dance with Dragons*, the fifth novel in George R. R. Martin’s *Game of Thrones* series.

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MORE BY THIS AUTHOR

Hope, Beauty, and Bus Lanes in Tel Aviv

by Noah Efron
from Summer 2011

I'm standing behind a Brazilian oak dais in the Einav Cultural Center rotunda, where the Tel Aviv-Jaffa City Council meets monthly, speechifying for priority bus lanes. The council chairwoman, Yael Dayan, sits to my right, admonishing me, in her harsh smoker's growl, to shut up and sit down. The mayor, Ron Huldai, sits to my left, scolding in a stage whisper: "You are a disgrace. I expected integrity from a university professor but you have none. You bring shame to your profession, your family, your city. You have no honesty; you are a populist, a demagogue." I keep my eyes pinned to the text of my speech, but stumble on the words. My tongue is fat and my mouth dry. I am frantic and exhausted, and running through my mind is, "I'm being trash-talked by the mayor of Tel Aviv . . ." and then, with self-pity, "How did I ever get here?"

This wasn't the first time I asked myself that question. Twenty-six years ago, fresh out of Swarthmore College, I enlisted in the Israeli infantry and three months later found myself trudging through Sidon, Lebanon at dusk, carrying a gun I could barely shoot, following orders in a language I could scarcely speak, in a war I could hardly understand for a cause I could hardly remember. All at once nothing around me, nothing in the life I had only just then chosen for myself, made any sense to me anymore. "How did I ever get here?" I said on that first night over the border, my breath fogging the frigid December air.

These two stories bracket my adult life. What brought me to Israel in 1983 was politics, or some fancy notion of it that I'd gotten in college. I was desperate to wrench myself from the predictable path I was on—another American Jew destined to be professor of something somewhere—and I knew that to remake myself I needed to be elsewhere. People make their societies, I figured, and societies make their people. Athenians made Athens, Aristotle had written, and Athens made Athenians. Israel was a place that I could mold, and it was a place I reckoned I wouldn't mind being molded by. The earliest Jewish pioneers to Palestine had a slogan for this: *Anu banu Artza li-vnot u-lehibanot bah* ("We've come to the Land to build and be built by it"). I joined a group moving to Israel from the United States that described its aims in a pamphlet mimeographed onto card stock:

Moving away from the fragmentation of western urban society, we hope to weave our lives into an integrated whole . . . Of course, socialism is basic to us . . . We want to be actively involved in our region of Israel. From the day we arrive we want to be in contact with our neighbors—other settlements, development towns, Arab villages, cities—we do not want to be islands unto ourselves . . . We will become different people. Our children will grow up differently.

The sweet and earnest cluelessness of this pricks my heart, as when my daughter, at the age of 3, declared her intention to marry my wife and live with us forever. It is easy to see now that I took myself too seriously, misunderstood how things work, and overestimated my talents and the plasticity of my character. Still, in 1982 there were reasons for me to believe I could leave an imprint on Israel in a way that I could not in America.

Israel then seemed less than fully formed. Only sixteen years had passed since the Six-Day War, nine since the Yom Kippur War, and four since the Camp David Accords brought peace with Egypt and the evacuation of Sinai. Settlements in the West Bank and Gaza were still new and small; so too was “Peace Now.” Like Greenwich Village in the 1930s, the country seemed small. In my first six months in Israel, I met the famous philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz, the famous novelist Chaim Gouri, the famous politician Luba Eliav, and the famous kibbutz historian Muki Tzur. I studied Midrash with Ari Elon, whose father was a justice on the Supreme Court. It seemed that everyone in the whole country was just an *Egged*-bus ride away.

What’s more, the atmosphere was improvisational. If other armies are regimented, Israel’s had a seat-of-the-pants ad hocness to it. Ehud Barak’s early fame was owed to a stunt in which he cruised through Beirut in the front seat of a Mercedes wearing a woman’s wig, arriving safely to assassinate a thug behind the 1972 Munich Olympic murders in his home. On Tel Aviv’s streets, one still saw horse-drawn carts, Czech motorcycles with sidecars, boxy three-wheeled cars made out of fiberglass, motorized bikes, and homemade hybrids that teased the imagination. Television had only come to the country in 1966, and color television not until 1980. Just after I arrived, Jonathan Miller, a kid I’d known growing up, new to the country like me, made it as a musician, appearing on television and filling big halls. His band came to perform for my unit in basic training. In Israel of the early 1980s, everything from sedans to sitcoms to celebrities was provisional and open to redefinition. So, at least, it seemed to me. And then it didn’t.



From left: Yael Dayan, Noah Efron, and Ron Huldai at the Einav Cultural Center. (Illustration by Mark Anderson.)

Soon after I arrived I stopped believing that I could much change the country, or that the country could much change me. I retreated from all that had brought me here, including the hope of being a different person than I would have been in America. I quit the kibbutz to which I'd moved, and enrolled in a Ph.D. program in hopes of becoming a professor of something somewhere. I became as cynical and alienated and self-righteous about politics as any grad student in John Lennon glasses reading Chomsky in the Hungarian Pastry Shop in Morningside Heights. This, I now can see, was my true acculturation, as there is nothing so Israeli as withering pessimism about Israel itself, and lacerating self-criticism. I perfected my Tel Aviv sigh, a *prêt-à-porter* reply to each new political outrage, equal parts exasperation, desperation, and resignation.

As all this was going on, disillusionment with politics and politicians has flourished. For the past three elections, a popular bumper sticker has read "*Mushchatim, nimastem!*"—roughly an amalgam of "You Crooks Disgust Us!" and "Throw the bums out!"—and it captures a prevailing mood. In the past decade alone, two Presidents (Ezer Weizman and Moshe Katsav) and one Prime Minister (Ehud Olmert) have resigned under criminal investigation. The son and campaign manager of a Prime Minister (Omri Sharon) has gone to prison, as have a Finance Minister (Avraham Hirschson) and a Labor and Welfare Minister (Shlomo Benizri). Today's Foreign Minister (Avigdor Lieberman) stands accused of bribe-taking, fraud, and money laundering. Political office has come to be seen by many as a sinecure for the debauched and debased.

Recently, though, I've lost my talent for anguish about Israel, and for despair. Perhaps this is the result of some perverse mid-life crisis, in which my decades of fashionable ennui suddenly seem like time poorly spent. Maybe it has something to do with seeing my kids grow up unmistakably Israeli and unmistakably beautiful. Part of it, certainly, is the dawning realization that in truth we are not a nation in decline. While some things have gotten worse since I arrived here almost thirty years ago, others have gotten better, and sometimes the retreat and advance are linked. Israeli politicians are indicted these days at a rate without precedent, yes, but this fact owes more to rapidly rising standards of accountability for public servants than it does to rapidly declining moral standards among politicians themselves.

Once one is willing to see them, there are, in fact, many indications that in politics here there are more possibilities and opportunities than conventional wisdom allows, and reasons for hope that, in time, problems that now seem intractable will find resolution. Some are large and some are small, little more than anecdotes. In May 2003, for example, three hundred Israeli Arabs and Jews traveled together to Auschwitz-Birkenau where they tearfully intoned a long list of names of Jews murdered on that spot by Nazis. The organizers, a priest named Emil Shufani and a journalist named Nazir Magally, both of Nazereth, explained that their purpose was to expand their own spirits by coming to understand firsthand the depths of Jewish suffering and the source of many Jewish fears. What is most remarkable about this trip is that, by conventional wisdom, it could not have taken place at all. It finds no place in the standard story, rehearsed in most mornings' newspaper, in which the ability of Jews and Palestinians to regard one another with empathy is vanishing. Much else also belies the dystopic tale of Israeli decline. When my wife first sought an OB/GYN residency in Tel Aviv in the 1980s, she was turned down on the grounds that it was unwise for women to treat women, as they lacked the natural objectivity needed to do so. (She completed her residency in Boston.) Now, most OB/GYNs in Israel are women, a small fact that reflects a grand improvement in the lives of women here. In stark contrast to its portrayal abroad, Israel has become a gentler, more decent place for almost everyone within its borders. No matter what bad things are noisily happening here, alongside them are quiet things, easily overlooked and surely good.

This is also what I have seen in local politics. Running for City Council, I spent two months doing what aspiring local politicians do: trudging door to door, shaking hands, speaking and listening to city residents. By election night, I'd sat in 1,500 living rooms, balancing a glass of water on my knees, discussing politics. People told me with feeling how their schools could be improved; how neighborhood bomb shelters could be rehabbed into art centers for kids; how Arab kids from Jaffa and Jewish kids from Tel Aviv could be encour-

aged to know and trust one another; how medical care could be extended to refugees from Eritrea and Sudan; how composting could be promoted; how bus lines could be improved; how food could be supplied to the poor discreetly, so as not to embarrass; how free performances of Molière in the park could improve literacy. The high voltage goodness and generosity of spirit in those living rooms finally jolted me out of thirty years of fashionable pessimism about Israel and its possibilities.

Running for the Tel Aviv-Jaffa City Council was an act of hope, and serving has been a source of hope. It reminds me that the obdurate issues of the settlements and Hamas and the rest, though they are matters of life and death, produce a distorted image of Israel and of our politics when considered in isolation. For most of the past year, I've been agitating to get the mayor to build a network of fast, cheap busses with their own lanes, high-tech ticketing, and GPS that changes the traffic signals as they approach. Thousands have joined the campaign, and lobbying has won us the support of the Ministry of Transportation. If it now takes an hour and a quarter for a single mother in Jaffa to get to and from classes at the university, once we've got our bus system in place, it'll take her twenty minutes.

In crusading for these busses, I am finally planting my olive tree in this soil. I am saying, along with many others, that I believe in the future of this place, that I believe that one day will lead to the next, and that we can make this city, this country, better. Amidst the *sturm und drang* of geopolitics, quotidian life continues and, in its way, it is beautiful.

It is easy to forget how little time has passed since Israel was established, how new this place is, how recent the vintage of its successes and its failures. It is easy to forget that the father of Yael Dayan, the woman who reproached me at the dais, was Moshe Dayan, a general who executed wars and negotiated an historic peace with Egypt, and that his parents Shmuel and Devorah Dayan were founders of Nahalal, the first collectivist *moshav* in Palestine. It is easy to forget that the parents of Mayor Ron Huldai, who talked trash as I stuttered about my busses, were Ozer and Henke Huldai, who helped establish Kibbutz Hulda after moving to Palestine from Lodz. Millions have lived and died in a century and a quarter of Zionist history, and many have suffered in many ways. But equally, many have awakened to the suffering of others as well as our own. Golda Meir's casual dismissal of Palestinian aspirations was shared by almost all Israelis only forty years ago, yet it finds little echo in today's Israel, not on the right or the left. As I write, young Israelis who could be working in high-tech are tutoring kids in the run-down part of town, living in cheap apartments furnished from the street. Israel's history is a blip, and though too many of us complain that it is static, in fact, it has never stopped moving. Rather than suggesting fixed and irrevocable decline, the arc of this short history suggests that there remain many possibilities still unrealized.

When I think of Israeli Muslims, Christians, and Jews weeping together on the railroad platform of Auschwitz, or when I remember the woman two blocks from my apartment gathering canned goods from her neighbors to deliver to poor families in Jaffa, I conclude that my old cynicism was a sucker's fancy. Hope is a better bet. I find myself believing that, with time, in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, we'll even get our priority bus lanes.

Noah Efron serves on the Tel Aviv City Council and is the author of [Real Jews: Secular, Ultra-Orthodox and the Struggle for Jewish Identity in Israel](#) (Basic Books) and, most recently, of [Judaism & Science: A Historical Introduction](#) (Greenwood).

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