
Israeli Documentary Poetry about Coming of Age in the Early Statehood Period

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Ilana Rosen,

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Abstract: This article introduces the genre of documentary poetry written by Israeli poets who came of age during the first two decades of the state (1950s-1960s) and who recount their experiences of that period. These poets were either immigrant children or native Israelis born to immigrants who had arrived in the new country from the four corners of the earth. The generic context of Israeli documentary poetry is the inclusive genre of documentary literature, referring to non-fictional writing whose authors or heroes wish to recount their experiences of major events that engulfed, affected and changed the lives of many. In the present article I present and analyze six poems written, respectively, by poets Malka Natanson, Lea Aini, Bracha Rosenfeld, Amira Hass, Peretz-Dror Banai and Vicki Shiran. These poems are organized into three pairs dealing with these themes: memories of the Holocaust as preserved and reshaped by two daughters of survivors; the life of displacement in Israeli *maabarot* or transit camps; and the contrast between diaspora life and life within multicultural Israel.

Ilana ROSEN

Israeli Documentary Poetry about Coming of Age During the Early Statehood Period

This article introduces the genre of documentary poetry written by Israeli poets who came of age during the first two decades of the state (1950s-1960s) and who recount their experiences of that period. These poets were either immigrant children or native Israelis born to immigrants who had arrived in the new country from the four corners of the earth. Earlier Israeli social and cultural research tended to examine Israeli society in terms of central dual divisions, such as veterans and newcomers (although most of the so-called veterans of that time were themselves refugees who had escaped anti-Semitism and Nazism in the mid-1930s). Another such sweeping distinction was European as opposed to Asian and North-African Jews—also termed Ashkenazim as opposed to Mizrahim (or Oriental)—which was prevalently seen as a dichotomy between those who were secular, modern, educated and affluent, and those who were religious, traditional, uneducated and poor. Inevitably, these distinctions overlooked inner variations and intersections between and within these two large groups and—beyond all divisions and differences—their shared experiences as belonging to the same generation of immigrants forced to start from scratch in an altogether new setting (Kimmerling).

In more recent Israeli research, the concepts of generations and generational experiences as coined and developed by Karl Manneheim and his followers (Manneheim; Pilcher) are gathering force whether as a topic of study unto itself (as in Hanna Herzog's innovative sociological work), or as an approach to studying a specific period through the experiences and memories of age groups acting in it or formed by it. This latter approach is evident in historian Hanna Yablonka's powerful book *Yeladim beseder gamur* (Children by the Book), which focuses on the history of the first generation of native Israelis born between 1948 and 1955, as well as in my own analysis of documentary prose works of veterans of the Israeli south during the formation of the State of Israel in the mid twentieth-century (Rosen, *Halutsim*). In the present essay, I continue to transcend borders of ethnic origin (which in the Israeli case means country or region of origin such as Eastern Europe, North Africa, Arabian Peninsula) in favor of discovering meeting points and highlighting similarities among comparable formative experiences undergone by many immigrants of that time and their children.

The generic context of Israeli documentary poetry is the inclusive genre of documentary literature, referring to non-fictional writing whose authors or heroes wish to recount their experiences of central events that engulfed, affected and changed the lives of many. Consequently, both documentary literature and the scholarship about it can be said to exist in between history and literature. Two major genres of documentary literature are those of documentary prose and documentary poetry. Documentary prose includes a variety of genres: biographies; autobiographies encompassing the entire lives of the authors; memoirs focusing on distinct parts of the authors' lives; short works, such as notes or sketches; as well as letters, organizational protocols, and recipe books that include auto/biographic or ego materials. Somewhat less known is the genre of documentary poetry, which similarly focuses on the personal processing and reshaping of fateful historical and socio-cultural events. This poetic genre should be distinguished from two other genres of poetry that focus on such events and on their effect on the individual and the community. On the one hand, unlike political or protest poetry, which responds to such events while attempting to represent a collective consciousness or sensibility (for example, war poetry speaking in the name of bereaved parents), documentary poetry primarily expresses individual voices and only secondarily—and that also with varying degrees of explicitness and amplification—a collective voice (Des Pres; Oppenheimer; Orr; Warr; Yu). On the other hand, unlike autobiographical or confessional poetry, which often deals with private or nuclear-family spheres (Springfield; Glaser), documentary poetry focuses on larger groups such as the poet's extended family or ethnic or origin-country group, or on groups sharing a similar past like Holocaust survivors and their offspring.

Readers of poetry usually do not expect poetry to be documentary because they are accustomed to conceiving of poetry as a predominantly lyrical form transmitting the perceptions of the poet about nature, love, faith, philosophy; and when it does refer to real life experiences, they expect that these experiences be distilled from their strictly realistic and historical dimensions. This expectation is overturned when we confront poetry responding to war and strife, calamity and poverty, oppression and abuse. Accordingly, in the last three decades researchers worldwide have come to view poems responding to real life or historical events as a subgenre termed "poetry of witness." This poetry relates to both first-person experiences and onlookers' reports or impressions, written by both

renowned poets and anonymous or non-professional authors, and much of this poetry is presently available in several widely-known anthologies (Forché, *Against*; Forché and Wu; Herzog, A.; Majmudar; Seyhan).

My discussion of the Israeli case or branch of poetry of witness proposes instead the term "documentary poetry," which positions this corpus within the more expansive genre of documentary literature. In addition, for Israeli readers the term "witness" invariably connotes the Holocaust, whereas the present study attends to a whole range of personal experiences related to Israeli and Jewish history. To illustrate this wide range, in the late 1990s, two Israeli poets, Oded Peled and Sami Shalom Chetrit, each produced an anthology of poetry depicting the experiences and claims of two large Israeli groups within the generation of those who grew up during the state's first two decades: children of Holocaust survivors (mostly but not only Ashkenazim) and people from Oriental countries (Mizrahim). Taken together, these two groups comprise a significant and highly influential segment of contemporary Israeli society. What is more, their poetry depicts not only their family or ethnic-group impressions and memories, but also their views of themselves and of Israeli society at large in the light (or in the shadow) of their past and heritage (Peled; Chetrit).

Current international research on documentary poetry, for example Anthony Rowland in his *Poetry as Testimony*, sees it as both an act of bearing witness to historical events and a gesture of opposing "adequate historical narrative[s]" that hardly allow any expression to those touched by the history in question (Rowland 16). Moreover, Carolyn Forché—both a poet and a scholar of poetry—contends that poetry of witness turns its readers into witnesses as well (Forché, "Reading;" repr. in Forché and Wu 17-26). Dale Tracy, author of *With the Witness*, offers a slight yet meaningful change of the first syllable of the word "witness" to "withness" in order to stress the readers' contact with the poem, rather than their possible empathy with the poet (Tracy 17). Accordingly, in her book Tracy analyses poems by both known and unknown poets, as for her the poems are the actual transmitters of their messages, regardless of the poets' renown.

As a result of my own wide-ranging search through works of Israeli poets belonging to the generation under consideration, I have formulated the following five criteria for defining contemporary Israeli documentary poetry. First, it has to be moving and compelling poetry published by important presses. There are certainly collections of poetry whose value lies in the original, powerful experiences undergone by their authors rather than in the quality of the poems; such is the case of the poetry of many Holocaust survivors, for example in Shmuel Rafael Vivante's *Un Grito en el Silencio* (A Cry in the Silence). This article, however, focuses on works that are simultaneously both documentary and distinctly poetic. Second, notwithstanding its personal nature and poetic quality, documentary poetry alludes directly rather than symbolically to historical events, thus enabling the reader to understand its relation to history (as we do with prose documentary genres such as memoirs). An example of this is the very mention of *maabara* (pl. *maabarot*), a unique Hebrew word meaning pass/age, which relates to the Israeli immigrant transit-camps of the early-to-mid 1950s, in which some of the poets I surveyed lived as children. Third, in these poems the persona or poetic speaker is intentionally identical or easily identifiable with the actual poet, who accepts and even embraces such identification. This is in consequence of the poet's desire to bear witness no less than to exemplify artistry. The poets may even feature themselves in their poems by their real names, and so in documentary poetry the poet is often inseparable from the persona or poetic speaker. Fourth, Israeli documentary poetry is not only declaratively first-person but is also often communal or ethnic in the sense of country of origin or in that of a shared experience such as persecution or immigration. Fifth and last, when familial, this poetry might depict both nuclear and larger families, both present and past generations, sometimes even extending to the poet's forefathers and foremothers.

Having established these criteria for defining my project's poetic corpus, I have discerned five central and recurring themes in it. These are: memories of the Holocaust and portraits of Israeli Holocaust survivors; the journey from the old country to the newly-founded State of Israel, sometimes including life in transit locations; Diaspora Jewish existence contrasted with the poet's life in Israel; negotiations of ethnicity within multicultural Israel; and language issues such as translation and misrepresentation. In the present article I will present and analyze six poems (which I have translated from Hebrew into English), each written by an Israeli poet from a different background. These poems are organized into three pairs dealing with these themes: memories of the Holocaust as preserved and reshaped by two daughters of survivors; the life of displacement in Israeli *maabarot* or transit camps; and the contrast between Diaspora life and life within multicultural Israel.

Holocaust Memory Passed on to Two Daughters of Survivors

Malka Natanson was born in Munich in 1946 to Holocaust survivors from Poland on their way to Israel/Palestine (I/P). She died in Israel in 2015 at age sixty nine. During War World II, her parents lost five of their children and barely survived themselves. In Israel Natanson lost her cousin Alex in the Six-Day War (1967) and later, in the War of Attrition (1967-1970), her husband Amnon suffered PTSD. All these events burden Natanson's poetry with the suffering inflicted on both the generation of the Holocaust and that of Israel's early years and crises. Natanson has published several volumes of poetry, one of them in a parallel Yiddish-Hebrew edition, as well as a fictionalized memoir about her husband's chronic condition entitled *Lalev yesh higayon mishelo* (The Mindful Heart). Her poetry has been translated into several languages, as well as become recommended reading for Israeli high school students (Galron Goldschlager; Stavi and Schwartz 641-642).

In many of her poems Natanson addresses the suffering of her parents and the fate of her late siblings who perished in the Holocaust through direct, bare or minimal language, as happens in the following untitled poem:

My feet are sunk in the black mud
Like my father's feet in the Ukrainian snow
I have Israeli boots and rubber shoes
He has the skin of his feet
And frostbite.

His dead children
Hang on his chest. (Natanson, *Ukhmaniyot* 20)

In this short poem the persona creates a close comparison between her situation—in the sense of actual standing or position/ing on the ground—as a young girl in Israel of the 1950s and that of her father as a victim of genocide in Europe of the 1940s. The feet of both of them are sunk in the wet ground of winter, but whereas the persona is wearing the widely-used rubber boots of her time and place (the Hebrew poem cites the Israeli rubber-factory's name, *Hamegaper*, a manufacturer of industrial products and footwear that no longer exists and which has become an object of nostalgia), her father is situated as standing "in the Ukrainian snow," barefoot and frostbitten.

The two lines of the second stanza portray the perpetual mourning of the persona's father for his murdered family. Not knowing the actual situation to which these lines allude, one might assume that the father could be carrying on him the pictures of his dead children or some other significant object/s symbolizing them. Alternatively, "hang on his chest" could mean that the memory of this father's dead children is figuratively burdening his life. But in the same volume, the next short poem, entitled "Ketonet hadam" (The Shirt of Blood), elucidates the meaning of these two obscure lines as it depicts the father wearing a torn shirt covered with the blood of his murdered children following a shooting raid of which he was the sole survivor.

My father wears the shirt of blood
Piece by piece
Did my father tear his soul
An eternal tearing (Natanson, *Ukhmaniyot* 21)

In this poem the poet relates the image of the torn shirt to the customs of Jewish mourning, in which the mourners tear their clothing as a sign of grief. Only in the poem the tearing is not part of a ritual that lasts seven days, after which the mourner gradually returns to normal life. Instead, in this instance the tearing and the grief over the loss of this father's murdered children last throughout his entire postwar life, and even afterward, in his daughter's poetry.

Under this poem, Natanson recounts, in the form of a personal-documentary entry or note, the horrifying event to which the poem responds:

My father was hiding in a bunker in the ghetto with my brothers, his own brother and their children and wives. But their hiding place was discovered and they were all dragged out and shot. My father, the sole survivor of the shooting, remained lying underneath his dead loved ones. Then, under the cover of darkness, he found shelter in a nearby closet, where he stayed for three days without food or drink. He later escaped to the woods and became a partisan. For many months after the shooting he would not take off the shirt he was wearing then, which was soaked with his children's blood, until finally it crumbled on his body.

Learning that the poet's father actually wore or carried on his body for months after the shooting the blood of his dead children, we realize the real meaning of the otherwise obscure phrase "His dead

children / Hang on his chest" in the first, untitled poem. These two lines could also refer to the first minutes or hours after the shooting, during which this father remained lying where they were all shot, shocked, terrified, and covered by the bodies of his dead children. In addition, inevitably, the phrase "shirt of blood" cannot but call to mind the biblical story of Joseph, wherein Joseph's older brothers sold him into slavery and later showed their father Jacob Joseph's blood-stained striped shirt as evidence that their brother had been devoured by a beast (Genesis 37:33). Unlike the biblical Jacob, however, the father in this poem has witnessed the death of his children, and this makes his blood-stained shirt a mute "witness" rather than fake evidence as in Genesis. Because he lived through such horrendous cruelties, this father's mourning lasts not seven days or thirty days or even a year, as is customary, but rather the rest of his life. Moreover, it is not his shirt that he tears as a sign of his grief, and not only because his shirt falls apart of itself; nor is it his body, but his soul, his very being in this world, including the legacy that he passes on to the daughter born to him soon after the Holocaust, the poet writing this poem.

Another instance of a father passing onto his daughter his legacy of horror from the Holocaust is apparent in Lea Aini's poem "Survivor." Aini, a writer of both prose and poetry, was born in 1962 in Tel Aviv to a family in which the father was a Holocaust survivor from Salonika, Greece (Galron Goldschlager; Stavi and Schwartz 61-63). As did Greek Jews in other places, the Jews of Salonika, a prominent community of close to 60,000 people, experienced tremendous suffering in the years of the Nazi (or Italian pro-Nazi) occupation of their country. In the spring of 1943 the majority of the Jews of Salonika were transported to Auschwitz, where most of them perished and only a few survived (Rivlin). Aini dedicates several poems in her first volume of poetry, entitled *Dyokan - shirim* (A Portrait - Poems) to her father and other members of his family who survived yet remained forever traumatized and crippled in body and soul.

In the poem at hand, "Nitsol" (Survivor), the persona minutely describes the daily, or rather nightmare-stricken, life of her father as a Holocaust survivor and—at the poem's end—her own lamenting response to her father's past and present suffering. Twenty years after publishing this volume of poetry, in her acclaimed 2009 novel, *Vered halevanon* (Rose of Lebanon), Aini enlarges on her father's recurring litanies about his Auschwitz experiences, as well as on his urging her to note and learn all he has experienced. In her earlier poetic work, however, she chooses a more minimal and obscure form of expression regarding both her father's Holocaust experiences and his wish to pass his memory of these experiences to her.

My father calls the number crucified on his arm
And listens-listens as if alert
In the left ear he does not listen
A reminder of the slap from the hand of an S.S.
In this ear he hears
Hears as a silent person
But the healthy ear he turns into an earpiece
For the nightmares that come to him
From Dora, from Buna, from Auschwitz
In train carriages
My father screams once a week as if saying –
I am well
And then he turns his head on the wet pillow
And falls asleep on his right side
Giving over his dead ear to my crying
My crying that walks on tiptoes. (Aini, *Dyokan* 16)

In this poem the physical deafness of the persona's father is turned into a mental state of perpetual communication with his nightmares. The father is deaf in his left ear, having been beaten by an S.S. man, the blow probably tearing his eardrum. Interestingly, the persona does not say "he cannot hear" or "he does not hear" but rather "he does not listen." Usually, hearing is a non-optional capacity whereas listening is optional, so that loss of the capacity to listen or refusal to use it causes inability to absorb the things heard. But here the persona switches between the meanings of the two abilities to say that even though her father cannot listen to anything in his deaf ear, he still has no choice but to phantom hear with it, over and over again, the sounds of his suffering in the Holocaust.

In addition to his virtual hearing in his deaf left ear, the father is permanently alert or prone, with his healthy right ear "turn[ed] into an earpiece," to the nightmares coming to him in his sleep "from Dora, from Buna, from Auschwitz." It is from within one of these nightmares that he would shout, call

out as it were, "saying – I am well." His startled cry is the one sign of his agitation (besides his pillow becoming wet with tears and saliva that testify each morning to his nightly battles with his past demons) that his family members can notice in real time through their own senses, as all the rest of his nightmarish experiences remain locked within him, at least until morning. And even then he can probably only hardly share his nightmares with his family because of his limited communication abilities. Or, to judge by the poem's very end, where the father "giv[es] over his dead ear to [the persona's silenced] crying," it may be that this father is both physically and mentally deaf to the crying of his family members about his fate and, possibly, about their lives besides him. Alternatively, he may have seen the crying of his daughter, the persona, and possibly of others in his family so many times that it has made him immune to their sorrow. And if so, then his "giving over" his deaf ear to their crying is an in-between channel of hearing and deafness that he turns on and off according to need to alleviate his own eternal pain.

Looking Back on the *Maabarot* (Transit Camps) of the Early Statehood Period

Quite a few of the dozens of documentary poems I gathered deal with transit locations *en route* to Israel or in the early months and years of the state. In its first five years, between 1948 and 1953, the country's pre-state population of 600,000 Jewish people absorbed 700,000 newcomers (Bernstein; Hacoheh), and in most cases it took the newcomers between months to years until they finally settled in proper conditions. In this section I analyze two poems, written respectively by Amira Hass and Bracha Rosenfeld, about the experiences and childhood memories of living in the Israeli transit camps, or *maabarot*. Poet, artist and actress Amira Hass was born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1943 and came to Israel with her family at the age of eight, in 1951. The family was brought to the Beer Yaacov *maabara* near Ramla, in the center of the country, and then moved to another *maabara* near Yokneam, in the north. Eventually, Hass moved to Jerusalem, where she resides to this day. Although literary critics such as Almog Behar and Kzia Alon have written about Hass's work as speaking in the name of Mizrahim, Hass herself is reserved about her being viewed as a speaker of any sector or political view, as she states in a 2015 *Haaretz* newspaper interview (Limona; Behar; Alon, *Edut*; Galron Goldschlager; Stavi and Schwartz 360-361).

The memory of life in the *maabara* is prominent in Hass's poetry and recurs throughout her collections. The following poem, entitled "*Narkisim*" (Daffodils), is one powerful instance of Hass's *maabara* poetry.

- A.
Memories of the *maabara* that bordered Yokneam
There I drowned in true love within every daffodil
In the morning I was a soul going out to the fields
My father had bought before the State's founding
- B.
Evening shines within the smell of daffodils
Their petals are a white innocence like a crown of beauty
Garland after garland the evening descends into my face
And from afar the tin shack burns in the darkness
From within the sorrowful blackness of daffodils and their whiteness
- C.
The oil lamp burned
The beds were prepared
My mother as usual wanders around like a spirit threatening to die
Burns pass through her fire in her soul such an inferno
And once we brought her a Druze from Daliat el-Carmel
He beats her hands her calves feeds her goat milk and royal honey
So the evil spirit will leave her. (Hass 18)

Hass's poem describes her family's life in a typical Israeli *maabara* throughout an entire day, from morning to morning, with its luring landscapes and sorrowful family dramas. Accordingly, the poem is composed of three stanzas depicting, respectively, the times of morning, evening and night in this family's life. Morning and evening seem bearable, and even pleasant, with the persona of a young girl enjoying nature and especially the daffodils growing all around her in the lush northern Israeli coast.

The Daffodil, also called Narcissus, which derives from the Greek Narkissos (*ναρκισσος*), is an exotic opiate spreading an intoxicating odor. This flower is named after Narcissus, the handsome youth from Greek Mythology, who fell in love and could not part with his own beautiful image as reflected to him in the water. Eventually he turned into the pretty, fragrant flower growing near rivers

and ever since then named after him. In Western culture, therefore, the figure of Narcissus stands for self-love and indulgence, as well as for conceit and inability to connect with others (Hamilton 87-88). In Hass's poem the daffodils, with their power to engage several senses at once, are the persona's secret room or alternative world. It is only in the field of daffodils that she can find daily relief from the reality of the hot, humid and hectic immigrant camp, as well as from her own troubled family (on the recurrence and meaning of flowers and vegetation in Hass's poetry see: Alon).

The only time the persona cannot escape into the world of daffodils is at night, a time when her mother suffers from fits of agitation and habitually "wanders around like a spirit threatening to die." At such times the daffodils, with all their suggestive, sensuous and soothing powers, do not have the power to calm this woman's anxiety. In their distress, the family turns to a neighboring Druze folk-healer for help. The healer's methods are much more rigorous and penetrative than the daffodils' beauty and odor: he beats and thus loosens the mother's stiff, contracted limbs. The healer also feeds the mother milk and honey—nature's tranquilizers, the biblical Promised Land's blessings (Exodus 3:8; Numbers 13:26-27; Deuteronomy 11: 9 and others)—which are also simple nomadic foods. Only this combination of restless motion and restfulness, home and homelessness, nativeness and foreignness, night and day, inside and outside, flowers and inferno, the senses of taste and touch, Jewish wisdom and Druze folk-medicine can somehow calm down the stormy body and soul of this helpless immigrant woman, wife, and mother; until, probably, the next seizure.

Bracha Rosenfeld was born in 1946 to Polish-Jewish parents, in a displaced-persons camp near Munich, Germany. Her family later returned to Poland and in 1958 they left Poland (perhaps following the 1957 Gomulka Expulsion of the country's Jews) and came to Israel. They arrived in the town of Bat Yam, south of Tel Aviv, a locale of many newcomers of the 1950s. Rosenfeld started her poetry writing in Polish, later turning to both writing in Hebrew and translating Polish poetry into Hebrew (Galron Goldschlager; Stavi and Schwartz 853). Officially Bat Yam was not a *maabara* when teenager Bracha came to live there. Nevertheless, her experiences and memories of that time and place, in a poorly built, mass-produced apartment house, resemble those of other Israeli authors writing about *maabarot*. Moreover, the very word *maabara* has, with time, become an umbrella term for the poor living conditions of immigrants in the first decades of statehood whether in actual *maabarot* or in poor neighborhoods. Finally, it is important to mention Rosenfeld's infancy in a displaced-persons camp in Germany, of which she may have no first-hand recollections but possibly only second-hand memories that her parents could have later shared with her.

Rosenfeld devotes four successive poems to her *maabara* experiences, of which the following poem, "Bamaabara" (In the *maabara*), is the first:

In the summer
The sun beat down upon me,
My mother plaited me a black braid
And was burned—

I was a girl of fire.

In the winter
Rain poured down upon me
And hail froze the tips
Of my fingers

I was a girl of water.

And a wind separates them like a screen.

And I ascended, airy
Because I became very light,
I grew wings.

And I did not
Have a land
Not even a grain of dust. (Rosenfeld 8)

In Rosenfeld's poem the period of life in the *maabara* is a full year encompassing summer and winter, as opposed to a full day in Hass's poem. As is evident also in other *maabara* poems within the inclusive corpus of documentary poetry that I have collected, summer is experienced and later

remembered as one long, infinite and merciless heat spell (*hamsin*). During this season of heat, the tenants of the *maabara* could find no shelter, whether inside their hot and humid shacks, or apartment buildings, or outside them. In such heat, even daily acts between mother and daughter become unbearable, flammable, so the mother suffers severe sunburn while tending to her daughter's hair. Yet, the daughter's being a "girl of fire" could mean not only fervor and danger but also vibrancy and energy. The summer is then succeeded by winter, which freezes the daughter's fingers. Winter causes the daughter to become or feel like "a girl of water," meaning soaked and lacking in stamina, yet also flowing and fertile. What the persona lacks, then, is a balance between these two opposing parts, because the wind (*ruah*, רוּחַ), which in Hebrew also means spirit or ghost, separates them. This phrase—"a wind separates between them like a screen"—evokes the biblical description of "the spirit of God hovering over the surface of the waters" in Genesis 1:2, which connotes chaos and darkness as well as potency for creation. Following all these oscillations and fluctuations between extremes, at the poem's end the persona ascends, rising above her life's hardships and—in the words of the poem—she "grew wings."

As happens throughout Rosenfeld's *maabara* poem, its end is ambiguous about the persona's having no land, which could mean both freedom from earthly existence (especially in a dreary poor immigrant neighborhood), as well as alienation from the Land of Israel with all its ideals and hardships. It is important to note that as of 2002, Rosenfeld is a founder and member of the Poets' Movement to the Right of Israel (*Tnuat Meshorerim Liymin Israel*), whose declared aim is to restore the legitimacy of writing Zionist or patriotic poetry, as opposed to the more widely-known, self-critical contemporary Israeli poetry. We might therefore assume that for Rosenfeld, landlessness means a weakness that should be overcome and remain but a memory, like the poor *maabarot* and neighborhoods of the early statehood period.

Diaspora Life Contrasted with Israeli Life and Multiculture

In this section I will analyze two poems, written respectively by Peretz-Dror Banai and Vicki Shiran, that deal with residues of shame and alienation toward the poets' parents and their legacies from the old country. Banai was born in 1947 in Qamishli in northern Syria, close to the border triangle of Syria, Turkey and Iraq. He was raised in poverty and adversity, which are strongly present in his poetry. In 1962, at the age of fifteen, he immigrated to Israel with his family and settled in the town of Kfar Sava, north of Tel Aviv, where he later worked as librarian. He published several collections of Hebrew poetry, a collection in Arabic under a pen name, and Hebrew translations of Arabic poetry (Galron Goldschlager; Stavi and Schwartz 184-185).

Banai's poem "Viduy" (A Confession) appeared in his book *Yifat velo masheu aher* (Splendor and Nothing Else) in the early 1980s:

There is no point in you asking Mother
She will certainly deny
The journey by foot in the plowing season
Accompanied by a lonely and cold star
Dusty with dirt with baskets in hand
Silently surging to the destination
That is shining in autumn orange
And let us not ignore young quinces
Whose fruit was later concocted into delicacies
To quiet the hunger of babes with stolen sweetness
And to spend the rest of the night in quiet muffled sobs

Bitter lonely insulted and ashamed
She will wait for Father's return from the third shift
Drunk from iron echoes and cylinders noise
He will neither look nor ask, deadly tired
And drugged by the burden disappear into the secrecy of sheets
As if lost until the next shift. (Banai 19-21)

Banai's poem depicts the hard, endless work of the persona's parents, and it is accordingly divided into two stanzas marking the distinct occupations and nocturnal workplaces of each of the parents. The mother is probably accompanied by her children, possibly including the persona, a fact hinted at by the usage of the Hebrew plural form of the adjective "dusty" (*meubakim*, מְעֻבְּקִים), the adverb "silently" (*shketim*, שְׁקֵטִים), and the progressive verb "surging" (*noharim*, נוֹהָרִים), all three of which grammatically include their respective plural pronouns that are always the same miserable workers.

The mother and her children (and maybe others as well) work together in the field through the night, and on their way home they somehow obtain (perhaps steal as hinted by the phrase "stolen sweetness") some quinces to ease their hunger.

At the same time, at least according to the sequence of events and situations in the poem, the father of the family works the night shift in a metal factory, whence he returns "drunk" (meaning dizzy), "deadly tired" and "lost," to sleep the entire day until his following night shift. When interviewed by poets Gilad Meiri and Noa Shkarjy for *Maqom Ieshira* (Meiri and Shkarjy) literary magazine, Banai mentioned his father's work in an Aluminium factory in Israel, probably around the mid-late 1960s. His mother's work in the fields with her children, however, reads more like the family's earlier experience, while they were still living in Syria. The poem may therefore be combining or conflating these discrete episodes of the family's life of strife in both the old country and the new, thus depicting their entire life as an on-going, endless struggle.

In the second and final stanza of Banai's poem, the family's permanent state of backbreaking work, hunger and poverty is rendered from the point of view of the mother, who despite all her efforts is unable to properly feed her family. The mother feels "Bitter lonely insulted and ashamed," all listed without any punctuation marks, thus expressing her gushing, anguished cry. The first of these adjectives clearly alludes to the misery of the biblical Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth, from the Book of Ruth. This book opens with the two women returning to Israel widowed and bereft after a lifetime in Moab, east of the Jordan River. Naomi's Israelite (women) acquaintances can hardly recognize her as the noble woman they once knew, probably because her looks have deteriorated. Naomi then tells her past neighbors: "Do not call me *Naomi* (Hebrew: pleasant). Call me *Mara* (Hebrew: bitter) because the Almighty has made my life very bitter" (Ruth 1:20). Three adjectives then follow in Banai's poem—"lonely," "insulted" and "ashamed"—to clearly render how this mother must have felt throughout all those miserable years. This is why, as the persona declared at the poem's outset, the mother would forever "deny," meaning repudiate and abolish the past hard times, turning them into an obscure, repressed memory of her family.

Shame is a prevailing feeling also in Vicki Shiran's poem "Zikaron matshik" (A Funny Memory). In this poem, however, shame is transformed into an embarrassed giggle of a teenager girl, a girl who will later become the poem's grown-up persona who is reminded of her impoverished family of immigrants from Egypt living in Tel Aviv of the 1950s and 1960s. Shiran was born in Alexandria in 1947 and died in Israel in 2004 at age fifty-seven. In 1951 her family of parents and three daughters came to Israel and settled in Hatikva neighborhood in southern Tel Aviv, which to this day is mostly a poverty-stricken area. In Israel a son, Uzi, was born to them. The family's financial situation in those years went from bad to worse, with the father losing his job and Vicki forced to quit school and find a job to help support her family. Later she completed her high-school studies and went on to study at Tel Aviv University, where she majored in criminology. She subsequently received a Ph.D. from the City University of New York and returned to Israel to teach at Tel Aviv University and Beit Berl College. Shiran was a committed social and political activist for disadvantaged sectors, such as Mizrahim and women, opposing as well the particular Levantine patriarchal subordination of women (Galron Goldschlager; Stavi and Schwartz 936).

Shoveret kir (Breaking a Wall) is Shiran's sole book of poetry, published posthumously, in which "Zikaron matshik" appears:

This memory is so very funny
Simply a joke
A small man, bent over, with a tiny transistor
And plastic earphones in his ears
He was always so funny
Because the shopkeeper who sold the transistor
Gave him earphones with a short nylon wire
That strangled his neck
He definitely deserved it
Because he wanted to hear songs in Arabic, yuck
And news in Arabic, ugh, he so irritated
Us, saying that he could read and write
Literary Arabic. A funny man, since when do Arabs
Have literary except *Ya habibi eei-eei-eei*
Half an hour *Ya habibi* in the throat.
This memory, in all seriousness, is
My father.

It is not my fault that I mocked him together with my friends
Of the sixth-grade, placing a finger on my temple
Rotating it and laughing *tralala*, what a *tralala*.
In their homes it was such fun, they drank tea with lots of sugar
And not bitter coffee, spoke Yiddish, heard the Voice of Israel in Hebrew
Wore short khaki pants with the shirt outside
And not long bell-bottom pants and shirt tucked in.
I was really part of the family at my friends' and my father did not understand
Why I was happy when his hair turned gray and I asked
The teacher how long after that did old people die.
No one in fact is to blame, neither me, nor them
My father should have understood that it is not nice to persist
He has daughters as my mother said, they have
Friends as my mother said, all that was there is dead
She said and he insisted on being *tralala*.

Once when they yelled at each other (I was so ashamed)
He told her in the end, quietly quietly, I cannot be
An empty person. She yelled at him something in French
(meaning it's your problem)
And he fell silent. A veil of sadness covered his eyes.
Since then he would sit in the corner of the balcony, a mute point
With a short nylon wire strangling his neck
Sometimes crying sometimes laughing
Not saying which channels he had in his head.
This is how I remember him sitting in the corner
Cramped by himself, with his problem.

Who would believe, my Mother, that today
It would be so much my problem. (Shiran 27-28)

Throughout this poem the persona-daughter (who constantly shifts between the young schoolgirl of the past and the grown-up activist at the time of the poem's writing) criticizes her father's Arabic culture. The persona remembers the sight of her father bent over in a corner and listening to Arab-language programs on a transistor radio as "funny," meaning laughable, pathetic. Moreover, this sight of her father infuriates her, not because of the content of the Arabic programs (as she cannot hear or understand them), but because of how he appears to her: with the earphones wire seemingly strangling him and with him looking dwarfishly short, weakened and unmanly. The earphones wire might remind us of an oxygen tube attached to the nose of sick person—an association that suits the death wish that the persona begins to entertain in connection with her father once she notices that his hair has turned gray. She wants him to disappear from her life because his very presence bothers and bars her from wholeheartedly belonging to what she perceives as the country's dominant society.

This young girl, the persona, yearns to belong to the Israeli—as opposed to Diasporic and Jewish—society of the 1950s and 1960s, as perhaps also to what she sees as a monolithic Ashkenazi culture. Ironically, however, in her description of the homes and families of her Ashkenazi schoolmates she fails to distinguish between two very different kinds of ethos: the Diasporic ethos, which clings to Yiddish language and culture and is degraded by dominant Hebrew culture (Chaver), just like her Arabic-speaking father; and the prestigious Eretz-Israeli *halutz* or pioneer ethos, symbolized by khaki uniform-like clothes. In this poem, the mother, somewhat like her daughter, criticizes the father's Arabic culture, but she does so because she prefers belonging to the French culture that was widespread among higher middle-class Egyptian Jews of the early to mid-twentieth-century (Laskier 2; Beinín 123). These language and culture hierarchies among Alexandrian Jews, and by-and-large the majority of Egyptian Jews, are lively illustrated in the work of Alexandria-born Israeli writer Itzhak Gormezano Goren, e.g., in his *kayits aleksandroni* (Alexandrian Summer) that was recently translated to English.

As previously explained, the persona tends to identify Israeli hegemonic society with an Ashkenazi identity and vice versa. Yet in truth, various Ashkenazi poets of the same generation have also written poems expressing a similar desire to belong to the hegemonic society. Two poems, written respectively by Itamar Yazo-Kest and Agi Mishol, incidentally both of Hungarian origin, particularly exemplify this desire. In both texts, the persona is torn between his or her identity as an immigrant with a distinctly foreign-sounding name and their new Hebrew name (see my discussion of Yazo-Kest's "Hashem Hayashan" (The Old Name) and Mishol's "Bikur Bayit" (Home Call): Rosen, "The Poetry" 53-

56; see also Naor's article on the imposition, in the early statehood period, to change one's last name for those serving in security forces or holding governmental positions or representing the country abroad).

In Shiran's poem the persona's embarrassment and disdain regarding her father's foreign identity is expressed through the use of the language of young girls. The Hebrew words *ikhsha* (yuck, אייךשא) and *fikhsha* (ugh, פייךשא) are clearly onomatopoeic and probably meant to describe feelings of physical disgust. The same is true of the word *tralala*, which can mean either non-verbal singing or humming or a derogatory word referring to stupid or insane people, sometimes accompanied by a gesture of rotating one's finger on one's temple. Similarly, the phrase "Half an hour *ya habibi* in the throat" (*hatsi shaa ya habibi bagaron*, חצי שעה יא חביבי בגרון) discloses the persona's misunderstanding and derisive dismissal of Oriental musical traditions that are comprised of lengthy, repetitive songs. To unfamiliar ears, such songs could sound monotonous and boring, while their recurring guttural sounds might sound unpleasant or even repulsive.

Despite all the critical references to hegemonic Ashkenazi culture, this is not the first and foremost object of the persona's anger in Shiran's "Funny Memory" poem, but rather her Francophone mother. The disagreement between mother and daughter is revealed, however, only at the poem's final two lines, where the daughter states that what her mother saw as the father's "problem" has ultimately become their daughter's life mission rather than a cause for shame. Yet as an immigrant teenager growing up with these two very different parents, she cannot but constantly be aware of the tension between them and, so it seems, in real time she tended to side with her mother. Somewhat less explicitly, the persona also expresses anger toward her father's passivity, exemplified by her presentation of his talk, posture and entire portrayal in this poem (for an analysis of another poem by Shiran about her past conflictive relations with her father, see: Sorek).

To conclude, this article has served two purposes. The first was to illuminate the newly-defined genre of documentary poetry (or poetry of witness) by introducing a case study of Israeli poetry. The second purpose was to illuminate contemporary Israeli poetry by focusing on the poetic corpus depicting the early statehood period. I have proposed that we usually do not conceive of poetry as historical and collective, but rather as lyrical and personal. Yet, as demonstrated throughout this article, poetic texts can be analyzed within relevant comparative frames and socio-historical contexts like those of persecution, mass immigration and multiculturalism. Such an analysis enables the individual claim or cry to be amplified, thereby acquiring additional meanings, shades, and echoes that simultaneously enrich each voice (even if some of these voices sometimes clash with one another) and the inclusive generation to which they all belong.

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