Natan Zach's Poetics of Erasure

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Abstract: Natan Zach has often been described as the most influential Hebrew poet in the second half of the 20th century. Indeed, the scholar Dan Miron described him as a poet who had "reached the deepest part within us," and as a "cultural leader" and "cultural hero." Yet when Miron went on to detail Zach's immense influence on other poets, he described his poetic legacy in exceedingly limiting formal terms such as "the use of enjambment" or "the magic of the unexpected rhyme, seemingly out of place." Miron's reading is symptomatic in the way it uses, indeed echoes, Zach's own critical idiom. In this essay I will read Zach's early volume *Shirim shonim* (Other poems) (1960) by focusing instead on what I term his "poetics of erasure." For in these poems, Zach has left no evident traces of his own biography: his arrival as a young child in Palestine; his parents' emotional breakdown following their immigration; and his own sense of homelessness in a Zionist culture that immersed itself in the "Negation of Exile." In this manner, Zach's "escape from personality," to use Eliot's famous dictum, ultimately provided Israeli culture with a new modality of mourning. For in a national culture that repressed exilic languages and inhibited expressions of social suffering, Zach provided a new form of elegiac writing that had no explicit content, expressing a melancholic sense of loss thorough the breakage of poetic form.

Michael GLUZMAN

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The Drama of the Proper Name

Following the Israeli Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, president of the National Council, published an appeal to the citizens of the newly established state, calling for the Hebraization of diasporic surnames:

> There cannot be a Hebrew state whose citizens present themselves, both in public and private domains, with foreign names, as is the custom today, when foreign names constitute over ninety percent of all names among us. This requires a radical change. […] It is the hour for shaping our lives in a Hebrew form, and for shedding the diasporic cloak, even though the latter has been sanctified over several generations (Ben-Zvi 2; my translation).

Ben-Zvi's plea emblematizes the Negation of Exile, a foundational tenet of Zionism, which at this historical moment gained traction as state ideology. This plea, however, represents a culmination of a long process by which Jewish immigrants to Palestine were expected to abandon their diasporic past and become New Jews in a budding national culture.

For example, when Noble laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon published his first story after arriving in Palestine in 1908, he chose the Hebrew pen-name Agnon over the diasporic Czaczkes. Thus, it is no coincidence that many of the young poets who started publishing after the War of Independence, a group loosely termed "Statehood-generation poets," already had Hebraized names when Ben-Zvi issued his plea: David Moritz (1934-1995), Ludwig Pfeuffer (1924-2000) and Harry Seitelbach (b.1930) had already become respectively David Avidan, Yehuda Amichai and Natan Zach. This change in nomenclature was part of a larger, cataclysmic shift that Benjamin Harshav called "the modern Jewish revolution" (9). Yet adopting a new name, and thus a new identity, is by no means a painless process.

Natan Zach, considered the most influential poet of the Statehood generation, gave succinct yet tacit expression to the difficulty inherent in immigration and its aftermath. While it is well documented that Zach's previous name was Seitelbach, his struggle with the orthography of his name is still largely overlooked. Born in Germany in 1930, Seitelbach immigrated to Palestine at the age of six when his parents—his father a German officer and his mother an Italian Catholic—fled Europe following the rise of the Nazi regime. As a child, he disposed of his first name, Harry, and became Natan Seitelbach. By 1951, when he started publishing in the first volumes of the literary magazine *Liḵrat*, he had already begun using his new name, Zach, constructed from the first and last letters of his German name. The two letters formed a Hebrew word meaning pure and clear. In a striking decision, however, he separated the two letters with a hyphen (ז-ך), signifying the omission and erasure at the heart of his new name. This hyphenated variation lasted a very short time, and upon publishing his cycle of poetry "My Chocolate Rooster" in *Liḵrat* in 1953, he had already shed the hyphen, becoming Natan Zach. Connecting the first and last letters of the original name, yet marking the absence of the letters in between, the hyphen encapsulates the drama of immigration and identity, which otherwise found little to no expression in Zach's early writing (Dor 19-31). While there is a short mention of the pain of immigration in "My Chocolate Rooster," Zach gradually uprooted his poems from concrete Israeli reality; by 1960, with the publication of his celebrated volume *Shirim shonim* (Other poems), he had already erased all local particularities, setting his poems against an abstract backdrop (Calderon 9-26).

Zach was widely viewed as a poet expressing his individual selfhood—as opposed to pre-Statehood poets, whose writings were perceived as representing the collective aspirations of a nation coming into being. Indeed, while this perception remained steadfast for decades, a few critics did question the validity of this critical commonplace. First among them was Meir Wieseltier, a major poet in his own right, who wrote in 1980 a polemical essay that challenged the importance of Zach's poetic legacy. He argued that Zach, unlike his contemporaries, understood that "the biological-biographical 'I' cannot be the foundation of a new poetics" (Wieseltier 411). Wieseltier consequently defines Zach's poetic "I" as "elusive, inhibited and camouflaged" (417), underscoring the lack of emotional exposure and intimate confession in *Shirim shonim* (421). While these astute observations are of great importance, it seems

that they were lost in the barrage of confrontational arguments that seemed to have stemmed from Wieseltier's anxiety of influence and his attempt to create a poetic space for himself.

In 2006, Hamutal Tsamir's study *In the Name of the Landscape* offered a powerful rereading of Zach's "individuality." Unlike previous readers, she contends that in Zach's poetry the "personal" is not diametrically opposed to the "national." Consequently, she argues that the "Israeli national subject, as it emerges from Statehood generation poetry, defines himself as if he is opposed to, and detached from, the Israeli collective in an attempt to produce universal individualism, which is founded on an unproblematized sense of belonging to a national collective and its territory" (12; my translation). That same year saw the publication of Haviva Pedaya's essay, in which she calls for new, alternative ways to say "I" in Hebrew poetry, pointing to Zach's ossifying impact on poets who strived to write personal-cum-political poetry. Acknowledging the importance of Zach's *Shirim shonim* (Other Poems), she nonetheless laments the political ramifications of Zach's poetry for future generations. Despite its elusive and impalpable nature, Zach's universal "I" has become hegemonic, according to Pedaya, thereby obscuring all other modalities of poetic subjectivity.

In the present essay I focus on the process by which Zach produced "universal individualism," beginning with the foundational moment in which Harry Seitelbach became Natan Zach. This moment emblematizes Zach's poetics of erasure, which allowed him to refrain from revealing anything about his biography. His individuality, much like the space between the two letters of his hyphenated surname, is constructed around a lacuna, which becomes the unspoken content of his poetry.

Form, or the Missing Content

In 1982, Zach was awarded the highly prestigious Bialik Prize for literature. In the wake of this accolade, the literary scholar Dan Miron wrote an impassioned essay in the daily newspaper *Yediot Aharonot*, in which he authoritatively summarized Zach's achievements, describing him as a poet who had "reached the deepest part within us" and as someone who had already become by the 1960s a "cultural leader" and "cultural hero." Miron portrays *Shirim shonim* (Other poems) as one of the seminal volumes of poetry in modern Hebrew literature:

> The Bialik Prize has been a long time coming to Natan Zach. As a matter of fact, it should have been given to him more than twenty years ago, after the publication of *Shirim Shonim* in 1960. A sharp eye could have discerned even then that this book, the poet's second collection, was the fundamental text of new Israeli literature, the heart of its canon and the key to its world. […] [In this book] these new sensitivities – ethical, linguistic, and artistic – engendered by Israeli culture reached their fullest and most profound expression. […] With this book, Natan Zach did all a poet can do for his language, his culture and his generation (my translation).

Strangely, when Miron turns to describing Zach's immense influence on other poets, he delineates his poetic legacy in exceedingly limited terms:

> […] Zach was the source that generated all the new strength of Israeli literature. Hardly any of the poets who followed him failed to take something from him: the rhythmic organization of the line; the use of enjambment; the magic of the unexpected rhyme, seemingly out of place; the revelation of the poetic potential of the day-to-day spoken lexicon; the poetic use of quotation, whether from the Bible or from childhood storybooks (my translation).

There is a notable disparity here between the portrayal of *Shirim shonim* (Other poems) as "the heart of [the Israeli] canon and the key to its world" and the depiction of its poetic legacy in such narrowly-defined formal terms, such as "the use of enjambment; the magic of the unexpected rhyme." Tempting as it may be to fault Miron for this constricted reading, this disparity, symptomatic of Zach's readers at large, is rooted in Zach's own critical idiom. A strong critic in his own right, Zach published a series of influential essays and manifestos in the 1950s and 1960s, in which he introduced the poetic sensibilities of Anglo-American New Criticism into the discourse of Hebrew literary criticism. Consequently, these essays—which accentuated the poem's formal features—shaped the way in which Zach's own poetry would be read for generations to come. Miron's description of Zach's formal innovation is accurate, but he is nonetheless unable to extricate himself from Zach's own critical vocabulary. The magnetism of Zach's own discourse continued to shape the way he is read beyond the 1980s, remaining uncannily steadfast despite the changing poetic sensibilities and academic modes of reading. As late as 2012, over half a century after the publication of *Shirim shonim*, Zach continued to propagate this strictly formal mode of reading, rejecting any biographical or mimetic interpretation, and claiming to draw upon the tradition of Anglo-American Imagism. In an interview, he asserted:

Imagism is maximum energy with minimum words. And of course: the avoidance of all sentimentality (patriotic, personal, everything) and all verisimilitude. It's energy; not nostalgia, not family, not landscapes, unless those are turned into an expression of power instead of remaining as realism in its simplest form, as a copy of reality. An Imagist wouldn't write something about his family or some specific woman. A woman in an Imagist poem is never a specific woman. The Imagist wants to ground himself on the power of words – and after that, at least with Ezra Pound, on the hieroglyph – and those don't symbolize the thing itself, only the power the thing has ("Maḵsimum" 9; my translation).

Zach's interest in Imagism began in the 1950s, as is evident in his 1959 polemic essay "Hirhurim al short Alterman" (reflections on Alterman's poetry), in which he attacked Natan Alterman's Symbolist-inspired use of regularized iambic meter (46). Zach was clearly influenced by Ezra Pound's manifesto "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," which advises the poet not to "chop your stuff into separate *iambs*" (204). Zach's own prosody was evidently shaped by Pound's assertion that a poet should not "make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin every next line with a heave" (204). In 1966, when Zach left Israel for his doctoral studies in England, he carefully chose the modernist poet and critic Donald Davie, author of *Articulate Energy*: *An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (1955), as his advisor (Zach, *Mishana* 94).

After receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Essex in the mid-1970s, Zach wrote the essay "Imagism and Vorticism" for Bradbury and McFarlane's volume *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (1976). In that essay, Zach mentions T.S. Eliot's preface to his own translation from the French of Saint-John Perse's *Anabasis: A Poem*. In this preface Eliot defends the seemingly arbitrary concatenation of images in Perse's poem: "The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced. Such selection of a sequence of images and ideas has nothing chaotic about it. There is a logic of the imagination as well as a logic of concepts" (132).

Zach's pronounced interest both in Eliot's defense of the seemingly unreasonable sequence of images in Perse's poetry and in his claim that there is "nothing chaotic about it" clearly reflects Zach's own poetic preferences. Zach seems to invoke Eliot's stance in his essay as an implicit explanation of the inexplicability of his own poetry. Furthermore, Zach's fascination with Imagism's preoccupation with the poem's formal aspects served another tacit purpose. It allowed him to circumvent, indeed ignore, his haunting family story in favor of pure formalism. In T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Zach found justification for this anti-biographical stance, which in turn engendered the anonymity of his poetic subject. As Eliot writes, "[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" ("Tradition" 111). As late as 2012, Zach still insists on the power of Imagism, but in describing the Imagist credos he gives succinct expression to his own poetic preferences: "An Imagist wouldn't write something about his family or some specific woman" ("Maximum" 91). This poetic imperative applies to Zach as much as it applies to any Imagist poet.

While the importance of tracing the High Modernist ideology that informed Zach's own writing has long been recognized (Sandbank), it is essential to go beyond discussions of poetic influence and to underscore the poetic agency involved in "the processes of recycling and recasting precursor texts" (Kronfeld 119). Eliot's presence looms large in Zach's critical and poetic writing, but exploring this intertextual affiliation, however meaningful and productive, would be to walk the path that Zach has cunningly paved for his readership. To read Zach against the grain is to refrain from satiating the poet's own desire for an "escape from personality." Instead, I will read the erasure of his biographical past as that which becomes, by dint of absence, the tacit "expression of personality." The erasure of identity thus becomes the quiescent content of Zach's poetry.

The Return of the Biographically Repressed
The poetics of erasure, which reached its fullest expression in *Shirim shonim*, began to fracture at the end of the 1970s with the publication of *Tsfonit mizrahit* (Northeasterly), the book that Zach published after his return from his decade-long stay in England (Naor Perlman). This process reached its culmination in 1997 with the publication of a memoir titled *Mot 'imi* (My mother's death), in which Zach offers a relatively candid description of his family history—though it is by no means a full-scale autobiographical narrative. In the introduction he comes as close as he is able to sketching out the traumatic nature of his past, opening with a description of the book's "avant-texte" (Deppman), the draft from which this final version emerged:

> I returned home after the funeral of Emile Habibi in the Anglican cemetery on the outskirts of Haifa.
> Summer had just begun but there was already an oppressive heat in the room. Scatterbrained, I suddenly
> remembered that I still hadn't found the translations I wanted to publish in a poetry booklet that was about
> to be released. I'd already looked everywhere. There remained only one place I hadn't searched, a three-
> drawer plastic filing cabinet on my writing desk. I opened drawer after drawer and absentmindedly leafed
> through the disorganized pages.
> In the third drawer I found a sheaf of forgotten notes in my own handwriting. I sat down and began to read.
> It quickly became clear to me that I'd written them many years ago, immediately after my mother's death.
> As I kept reading, things got harder and harder. Had I not found them, by chance, those pages would have
> remained hidden away in the plastic drawer.
> Strange, I thought, that a man returns from a funeral and finds, only then, pages he'd written, without
> remembering he'd written them, fifteen years ago, about the death of his mother (5; my translation).

This text perhaps provides one of the most interesting keys to the repressed structure and the traumatic nature of Zach's writing. Even though Zach seemingly only deals here with "a sheaf of forgotten notes" he had written after the death of his mother in 1982, it is possible to read his words in a broader context that sheds light on the entirety of his writing. A man returns home from a funeral only to find a forgotten and discarded text he had written long ago following a different funeral. This text uncovers the immigration story of the Seitelbach family, a tangled and agonizing biographical narrative that can only be told belatedly, half a century after it had transpired and almost against Zach's own volition.

Mot 'imi (My mother's death) is written as a series of journal fragments documenting the son's observation of the crumbling mind of his demented mother. The choice of employing a fragmentary poetics gives formal expression to the mother's decaying mental state, recounting the family history in an anecdotal and disjointed fashion. This narrative choice, however, serves yet another purpose, allowing Zach to refrain from telling the story in a linear and comprehensive manner. The short poetic lines uncover only selected parts of the story: his father's past as a Prussian officer, forced to resign from the German army in 1933; as well as his mother's Italian-Catholic origins. As the book progresses, it becomes apparent that the uprooted parents lived in a state of foreignness and alienation from one another, as well as from their Israeli surroundings. Thus, Zach writes: "When they met, she didn't speak German, and her future husband didn't speak Italian. They spoke to one another mainly through gestures and the bit of French my father could muster" (Zach, *Mot* 17; my translation). Their relationship with their only child is equally marked by incomprehensibility and a mutual lack of empathy: "She never expressed any interest in my poems. I never bothered telling her, and she never responded to any rumors she heard from friends or neighbors. She unequivocally accepted my father's judgement that one cannot make an honest living writing poems, and thus they are worthless, a waste of time" (57; my translation).

Even in his most autobiographical book, Zach remains tightlipped about his family's story. At the time of the book's publication, Zach agreed to appear in the film *Pgishot 'im Natan Zach* (Meetings with Natan Zach), directed by his close friend, the renowned filmmaker David Perlov. In the film Zach conveyed more openly, if not with complete candor, his family history:

> It was forbidden, of course, to turn on the radio. Because the radio meant music, and music was relief, and
> my father wanted no part of that. More than that, music reminded him of my mother's Italian origins, which
> was unpleasant for him, since he'd taken her away from her country, her homeland, her culture, her family,
> brought her to a place where she didn't speak—until the end of her days—a single word of Hebrew. She
> lived here for fifty years, and my father also barely spoke it. My father could speak a few sentences. They
> were foreign, really, until their final day. They were foreign here (qtd. in Kartun-Blum 18; my translation).

Only in 2014, in what he declared to be his last interview, Zach chose to convey more details about his father: "My father lost his world in Germany, because he was German through and through. He was an officer in the Prussian army. His loyalty to Germany [was unwavering]. […] all of his life's work crumbled" (*Hotse*, my translation). Zach proceeded to describe his father's fate in his new homeland, revealing that the once-esteemed officer ended up in an utterly humiliating position, selling "rotten eggs" in the Carmel Market.

In Zach's magnum opus *Shirim shonim*, none of these biographical details are given any direct expression. His poetics of erasure excise his family history, the mortifying effects of immigration, the difficulties of assimilation and his inability to shed his German accent. All of these biographical facts are removed in order to create an individual voice, yet this individual is a man without qualities, a Nobody. These omissions generate poems studded with ambiguities and discontinuities, which bring them to the verge of unreadability. Despite the simplicity of Zach's poetic diction that leans toward

everyday language, these poems often seem incomprehensible or hermetic, raising the question of their own legibility. Surprisingly, these difficult poems, inhabited by an anonymous self and devoid of biography, enchanted a generation of Israeli readers and came to represent a nascent Israeli subjectivity in the newly established state.

Between Nonsense and Hermeticism
If Zach's poems were merely hermetic and recalcitrant to analysis, they would not have captivated so many readers. It seems that the power of Zach's poetry, exerted upon sympathetic readers at the outset of the 1960s, stemmed from the alluring, Siren-like language of the poems. Contrary to the difficult Symbolist poetics of Alterman, the most conspicuous and influential Hebrew poet of the late 1930s and 1940s, Zach's poetry spoke to its readers in a vernacular that appeared to embody values of clarity and communicability. "A moment of silence, Please. I'd / like to say something," pleads the speaker in the opening poem of *Shirim shonim* (23; my translation), signaling both the importance attributed to "hearing a person's voice" (Zach, "Le'akliman " 167; my translation) and the centrality of the addressee. Zach invites his readers into a conversation, and indeed many of the collection's poems are constructed as conversations or as dialogues.

By drawing attention to dialogue, the poems in this volume seem to emanate a sense of intimacy, strengthened by the speaker's confessional tone. Yet as the collection progresses, it becomes clear that the act of communication in *Shirim shonim* is repeatedly thwarted, staging a breakdown in the communicative act. The incomprehensibility dramatized in these communicative situations is nearly always embodied by the poetic structure itself, which is interrupted, disconnected and disrupted. In almost every poem, the reader is struck by the arbitrariness of the shift from one stanza to another or even from one line to another. In accordance with Eliot's explication of Perse's disparate composition in *Anabasis*, to which Zach would allude years later in his essay "Imagism and Vorticism," the reader of Zach's Shirim shonim also "has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment" (Eliot, "Preface" 132). Faced with situational discontinuities and narrative aporias, the reader experiences, transferentially, the dialogic failure embedded in the text. Perhaps the most notable example of this dynamic is "From Year to Year It":

> From year to year it grows only more subtle,
> It will be so subtle in the end, –
> she said, and meant it.
>
> But at times I feel I am drowning in time,
> I have the feeling that all this time I have been drowning,
> he hesitated.
>
> It is only because you are sinking, she replied.
> It is only because you are sinking, you know.
>
> I do not know. Sometimes I think that once again I have no more strength.
> Subtle, you know, is the other side of negative.
>
> I know, and I congratulate you on your discovery,
> I congratulate you on the color of your eyes,
> You do not leave anything after you.
>
> And that is exactly what troubles me,
> And that is exactly who mourns me,
> That is what I feel.
>
> You are wrong again: you feel fine and fineness surrounds you.
> It is already around, and it carries you on its shoulders,
> If you are patient, it will soon embrace you,
> In the end it must kiss you.
> You know how these things happen. (*Shirim shonim* 28; my translation)

While the poem does stage a dialogue, the reader remains unaware of the speakers' identities and of the circumstances and concrete topic of their conversation. Since in Hebrew gender is morphologically marked, the reader identifies the interlocutors as a man and a woman. Aside from their genders, however, the two figures remain anonymous to the degree that one cannot even discern the nature of their relationship—be they lovers, friends or family members. What is even more

striking is the tension between the tenderness and intimacy embedded in their speech, and between their complete inability to communicate as they continually talk past one another. At the heart of this opacity lies the deictic word "it." Though appearing throughout the poem, this word remains unexplicated and uncontextualized to the extent that it remains unclear if both interlocutors even refer to the same thing. What seems like a dialogue gradually splinters into two soliloquies.

To what, then, is the woman referring in the opening stanza, that which "grows only more subtle" from year to year? The man's response in the second stanza seems to ignore the woman's statement entirely, turning instead to describe his own despair and his sense of "drowning in time." In response, the woman then echoes this description, but with a slight variation, only to find him disagreeing with her, as if she has missed the point entirely. She says, in response to his feeling of "drowning in time," that the cause for this feeling is the fact the he is indeed drowning ("It is only because you are sinking, you know"). He immediately responds by negating her ("I do not know"), despite the fact that what he is negating is his own sentiment echoed back to him. In the fourth stanza, after repeating his sense of powerlessness, the man alludes to her initial statement about subtlety, claiming that it "is the other side of negative." To his "I do not know" she replies with "I know," only to change the subject yet again. Here the dialogue touches upon the grotesque, for while he bemoans his deep sense of loss, she applauds his realization of his situation as well as the color of his eyes, a pair of incompatible statements, rendering one another inconsequential. When the man finally agrees ("That is what I feel"), she immediately chastises him ("You are wrong again"), suggesting that despite his pessimism, he will be embraced by "fineness." The dialogue thus presents itself as continuous and contingent, even intimate. The two speakers use words such as "but" or "because," giving the dialogue a seemingly cohesive form. Moreover, by echoing each other's words (such as "subtle," "drowning," "know") the speakers seem to obey the logic of the natural back and forth that characterizes a conventional dialogue. What is more, as a consequence of Zach's objection to regularized rhythm and rhyme, the poem attains a uniquely mellifluous musicality by way of repetition. Each speaker continuously doubles certain words, such as: "From *year* to *year*," "only more *subtle*. / It will be so *subtle*," "*drowning* in *time* / I have the feeling that all this *time* I have been *drowning*."

Yet while this enchanting musicality contributes to the poem's sense of unity, turning the readers' attention to sound patterns, the dialogue itself remains highly illogical. The nonsensical concatenation of utterances, images and figures, which typifies Zach's poetics, has yielded an array of close readings that approach the poetic text as a logic puzzle in need of deciphering. While some of these well-wrought interpretations that attempted to extract the text's meaning have become canonical (Ben-Porat; Perry), seeking to solve the text's riddles may have been the wrong interpretive path. Thus, instead of ironing out the text's difficulties, I would like to focus on its affect, taking a cue from Avot Yeshurun (1904-1992) and Daliah Ravikovitch (1936-2005), two of Israel's most famous poets, who reminisced about the particular affective allure of Zach's poem "From Year to Year It." In 1980, following the death of the poet Yocheved Bat-Miriam, Avot Yeshurun described her poetry as a "crystal," and spoke of her image and her personality. Yeshurun described the spiritual affinity he felt to Bat-Miriam, whom he revered: "her poems are whole and wonderful." By way of association, Yeshurun contrasts the familiarity he felt towards Bat-Miriam's poetry with the shock he felt upon encountering Zach's poem:

> The novelty of the first encounter with [Bat-Miriam's] poetry has worn off for me. I know her poems too well. I was never shocked by them. They didn't contain shocking descriptions. Not even one. […] When Natan Zach wrote "From Year to Year It," it shocked me. I had never seen a thing like that: it expressed it all. This "it" of Zach's. All those troubles, no way out – no one had ever said it like that before. But with Bat-Miriam it's different: there's a frame that holds back shock. (18; my translation).

While pointing to the "emptiness" embedded in the deictic word "it," Yeshurun nonetheless insists on its semantic weight, claiming that this word "expressed it all." This reading, which paradoxically interprets an empty word as depicting the "troubles, no way out" of the Israeli condition, is immensely useful. It points to the unsaid, to the void within the text, which resides at its core. By reading that which is not said as the poem's content, Yeshurun follows Zach, who similarly assigned meaning to an empty sign, a hyphen, by placing it between the first and last letters of his original name, thereby signifying the erased content of the Zach family's diasporic past.

Daliah Ravikovitch, Zach's contemporary, similarly portrayed the impact of this poem on readers in the late 1950s. Speaking at an event celebrating Zach's 70th birthday at the University of Haifa, she says:

During that period, there was a scrap of paper circulating around, and on it was a poem called "From Year to Year It," which appears in *Shirim shonim*. […] Like I said, this poem would get around, and we would copy it by hand […] We all agreed; this poem shocked us, gave us pleasure. I think it was something akin to MDMA but without the harm. Even today, after forty years, I'm not sure that I understand every single line here, but what remains intact is the magnitude of its magic. I feel like there's a dialogue here, that someone is speaking, I feel the words clinging to me, I feel that I'm in accord with them, I'm not sure I understand. I'm not sure that I need to understand. […] It was truly a cult poem at the time. (qtd. in Huppert; my translation).

Both Yeshurun and Ravikovitch see "From Year to Year It" as a poetic landmark, expressing something indescribable, something that cannot be paraphrased. Yeshurun describes it as a poem expressing "everything," while Ravikovitch underscores its opacity. They both, however, proclaim great admiration for the poem and for the affect it produces. The word "it," referring to something that remains unknown, gives succinct expression to the lacuna, or void, which lies at the heart of Zach's poetry.

The Paradoxes of Negation
One of the chief characteristics of *Shirim shonim* is its recurring use of the word "no." The volume is studded with negations, most conspicuously in poems such as "No," in which the word appears twenty-six times within twelve short lines of verse (*Shirim shonim* 79), or "Dantes, No!" in which there are twenty-four instances of "no" within twenty-five lines of verse (82). While this insistent repetition did not attract critical attention, it is in fact a key for understanding the structure of repression, the relationship between the said and the unsaid, in Zach's poetry. The poem "Sorrow Does Not Leave Tracks," which consists of a sequence of negations, may seem like an experiment in poetic form. Yet under the guise of playful repetition it teases out the fundamental question that haunts Zach. It is hardly surprising that Zach evokes the most haunting questions by using an agentless voice, thereby underscoring the anonymity of the subject:

Sorrow does not leave tracks.
It is not true what they say,
Sorrow does not leave tracks,

Sadness does not come just like that.
It is not true what they say,
Sadness does not come just like that,

A man does not live forever.
It is not true what they say,
A man does not live forever. (*Shirim shonim* 96; my translation)

In the middle line of each stanza, the speaker repeatedly negates majority opinion or accepted wisdom. In fact, the poem is constructed as a chain of negations, and its meaning remains conspicuously ambiguous. The first line, "Sorrow does not leave tracks," is based on a negation, but it is unclear whether the anonymous speaker is asserting their own view, or rather echoing a common wisdom in order to negate it in the following line. Is it the opinion of the speaker, who was told that sorrow does leave tracks? Or conversely, they were told that sorrow does not leave tracks, and they negate this point of view with a statement hinting that in fact it does? The structure repeats itself in the second stanza: is the speaker saying that sadness comes "just like that," or are they instead negating this claim asserted by others? If so, the speaker concludes that sadness does indeed come suddenly and even unexpectedly. But when all three stanzas are considered together, the speaker's point of view remains highly murky, and despite the apparently logical language, the poem spins dizzily through its negations. These questions are not simply language games, even though Zach may have given the poem such a form. The repetitions, which seem playful, cloak charged questions that haunt Zach, to whom the question of whether sorrow leaves tracks or not is of grave importance. Yet these questions are repeatedly rendered moot by the playful form with its chain of negations.

Sigmund Freud's 1925 essay "Negation" may be useful in understanding the meaning of Zach's recurring use of the word "no." Freud attempts to illustrate the function of his patients' use of negation in statements such as the following: "Now you'll think I mean to say something insulting, but really I've no such intention" (666), or "you ask who this person in the dream can be. It's *not* my

mother" (667). Such statements, Freud claims, are common in the psychoanalytic process and they elucidate the complex relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. He then argues:

> Thus the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is negated. Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed it is already a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed. We can see how in this the intellectual function is separated from the affective process. With the help of negation only one consequence of the process of repression is undone – the fact, namely, of the ideational content of what is repressed not reaching consciousness. The outcome of this is a kind of intellectual acceptance of the repressed, while at the same time what is essential to the repression persists (667).

Freud's theorization sheds light on the function of the "no" in Zach's poetry, explaining the split between the speaker's rational tone and the poem's affective force. In "Sorrow Does Not Leave Tracks," the speaker employs what seems like logical modalities—sorrow leaves tracks/sorrow does not leave tracks—ignoring altogether the actual sorrow, its origins and its consequences.

Thus, Zach's language conjures the said and the unsaid, the conscious and the unconscious, giving voice to an unidentified sorrow without giving it any emotional traction. This rift between intellectual and affective understanding is repeatedly staged in Zach's poems, whose speaker evokes the subjects of loss, bereavement and disappointment while repressing both their causes and effects. To use Freud's language, Zach's speaker exhibits an "intellectual acceptance of the repressed," hence introducing the question of sorrow and its origin. Nonetheless, what is "essential to repression persists" (Freud 667) and can thus be expressed only through negation and the nonverbal.

One of Zach's most famous self-reflexive poems, "The Painter Paints," serves as an example of Zach's refusal to define poetry in any positive way, placing the poetic subject under erasure:

> The painter paints, the writer writes, the sculptor sculpts
> But the poet does not sing,
> He is a roadside mountain,
> Or a tree, or a smell,
> Something in the wind,
> Or not anymore, what was
> And will not return, like the seasons,
> The heat, the cold, the ice and the laughter
> Of the heart, when it loves,
> Or water, something wide, inexplicable
> Like the wind, or a ship, or a poem,
> Something that leaves
> Something. (*Shirim shonim* 6; my translation)

Unlike the painter, the writer and the sculptor, whose work yields concrete objects or artifacts, the poet is defined by what he does not do. At first, it appears that Zach highlights the meaninglessness and immateriality of language. But what the poem ultimately underscores through deferral and negation is that the poem's inexplicability still exerts an affective force, leaving a "something" that is hard to define. Zach's poem is uncharacteristically constructed as one long sentence, thereby underscoring the unattainable meaning which escapes signification.

The entire poem is a series of signifiers in search of a signified. The poet is equated to a mountain, a tree, a smell, water, wind, the seasons, a ship, laughter and even a poem. The word "or," which the speaker repeats, attests to the failure of language. Some of the comparisons, especially those that liken the poet to an object, seem to suggest that the comparison itself is feasible, that the two objects are identifiable and comparable. Yet when the speaker compares the poet to a smell or to something "inexplicable / like the wind," the speaker suggests that the very act of comparing as a means of definition is flawed, if not futile. Thus, ultimately, the poet is a poem. If the opening lines imply the poet's inferiority in that he does not produce an object like the painter, the writer and the sculptor, by the end the poet is an artifact, a poem, suggesting a more intimate relationship between the poet and his art than that of the other artists and their creations.

In the concluding couplet, however, Zach nearly reaches a tautology—"something that leaves / something"—in which he compares two equally unidentifiable things. The mellifluous musicality of the poem conceals the centrality of negation and the speaker's series of comparisons, which are continuously replaced by definitions that are increasingly abstract. Here too, the poem seems like a logical progression, which obfuscates the emotional abyss that cannot be represented. This poem can be read as an allegory of the machinations of Zach's poetry in *Shirim shonim*, turning the poem itself

into a lost object. As a result, the poetic subject himself becomes unidentifiable, absent, staging his self-erasure: "Something that leaves / something."

In all three of the poems discussed here, the speakers voice an elegiac tone. Zach undercuts this elegiac tone with language games, intellectual façades and denials. Thus, the intellectual and the affective remain unbridgeable. It is this irresolute tension that explains the immense power Zach's poetry exerted over its readers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as attested to by Yeshurun and Ravikovitch.

Why was this form of poetic address so impactful? Why did this elegiac tone, undercut by irony, become the dominant poetic voice of a generation? And why was an erased subject the emblem of Israeli identity? These are large-scale questions that merit further discussion. However, it should be noted that Israeli society after 1948 was immersed in a state of sorrow whose extent could not be fully grasped. Triggered by historical catastrophes such as the Holocaust, the Naqba, the War of Independence and mass immigration, emotional hardship and trauma festered in the collective imagination but could not be discussed openly for various reasons (Shapira). Zach allowed Israeli culture to lament the unlamentable, creating an elegy without an apparent content. He provided the Israeli readership the textual apparatus to mourn without defying the boundaries of acceptable speech. The breakdown of language, the repeated negation and the collapse of the communicative situation all expressed an immense sorrow without grounding it in any historical specificity. Zach's elegiac tone suited a national culture immersed in sorrow and bereavement that refused to acknowledge its painful past and its lasting impact on the present.

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