

## The Hope of Salman Masalha: Re-Territorializing Hebrew

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**Volume 22 Issue 1 (March 2020) Article 10****Yael Dekel and Eran Tzelgov,****"The Hope of Salman Masalha: Re-territorializing Hebrew"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss1/10>>Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.1 (2020)***Special Issue ***Poetry in Israel: Forging Identity***. Ed. Chanita Goodblatt<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss1/>>

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**Abstract:** Israeli poetry can be depicted as a triangle composed of three elements: territory (the State of Israel); language (Hebrew); and identity (Jewish). In his Hebrew collection of poetry *Ehad Mikan* (in place, 2004), Salman Masalha—a bilingual author publishing in both Arabic and Hebrew—challenges this interrelation of territory, language and identity. The debate between the literary scholars Hannan Hever and Reuven Snir explore the central expressions of this challenge. For it points, on the one hand, to the subversive potential of such work towards the Israeli canon while, on the other hand, to its connection to Arabic literature. Writing in the language of the other often invokes the seminal essay by Deleuze and Guattay *Kafka: Toward Minor Literature* (1986). In that context, it was assumed that Hebrew works by Arab authors de-territorialize the Hebrew language, detaching it from its natural users. In the present essay, however, we point to the ways in which Masalha's Hebrew poetry in fact re-territorializes the Hebrew language; that is, it turns Hebrew from the language of the Jewish people to the language of the region, to the language of "Someone from Here" (as the Hebrew title of the book implies). We will present close readings of the poems, as well as of the para-textual features of the collection, in order to demonstrate how Masalha's work not only comments on his identity as an Arab living in Israel, but on the identity of Hebrew poetry as well. Our reading therefore perceives Masalha's collection as a milestone in the evolution of Hebrew poetry; while in 1948 Hebrew poetry was transformed into Israeli poetry, in the 21st century, it is being transformed into poetry "written from here."

**Yael DEKEL and Eran TZELGOV**

### **The Hope of Salman Masalha: Re-territorializing Hebrew**

Israeli literature can be depicted as a triangle, composed of three elements: territory (the State of Israel); language (Hebrew); and identity (Jewish). From its revival in the eighteenth century, Hebrew literature—poetry as well as prose—played a major role in the process of Jewish national and cultural revival. Put differently, Jewish identity is intertwined with Hebrew literature; the latter becoming the voice of the Jewish people in their various diasporas. As we have suggested in our essay "From State Poetry to Street Poetry," since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 Hebrew literature has become Israeli literature: it developed from a language-based literature (written in Hebrew) into a national and territorial literature written mostly within the state of Israel (171). Taking this into account, Israeli literature therefore often predominantly overlaps with Hebrew literature, suggesting that this is a literature written in the Hebrew language, in Israel, by Jews.

Until 1986, what we identify here as an essentialist perspective (in which the identity of the author is seen as a part of the literary piece) was dominant in the understanding of Israeli literature. For in that year, with the publication of Anton Shammas's novel *Arabesques*, a sea change occurred in the definition of both "Hebrew literature" and "Israeli literature." Although Shammas was not the first Palestinian to write and publish literature in Hebrew ('Atallah Mansour had preceded him), and although *Arabesques* was not his first Hebrew work, Shammas's novel received wide public as well as scholarly attention. The domestic and international reception of *Arabesques* was enthusiastic. It became a turning point in the history of modern Hebrew literature. This was predominantly due to several factors: its use of different Hebrew registers; its complex, multi-layered narrative style; and its explicit engagements with Israeli and Palestinian cultures and identities. What is more, the fact that the book was published by Am 'Oved, a major publishing house in Israel, clearly contributed to its impact on the Israeli literary sphere. Following the novel's publication, author and critic Aharon Amir wrote that "in his novel Shammas retrieves the long-lost honor of Hebrew writing" (9; our translation). Translator and author Hillel Halkin embraced the novel and praised its "rich, lyrical, sinuous prose [...] it's 'Jewishness', it's allusive sounding of biblical and rabbinic texts to make complex unstated statements in a manner typical of Hebrew literary tradition" (28).

Shammas's novel retained its major position within the Israeli literary sphere many years after its first publication. In his 1996 newspaper article, the literary scholar Dan Miron, deplored the state of modern-day Hebrew literature while lauding the range of resonance in Shammas's Hebrew as the prime, and only, example of a noteworthy Hebrew style in contemporary Israeli literature (17). The book also ignited long scholarly debates by scholars such as Yael Feldman, Michael Gluzman and Rachel Feldhay-Brenner, as well as by Hannan Hever and Reuven Snir—a heated debate that we will turn to discuss momentarily. What is more, in an often-quoted English-language interview from 1986, the well-known Israeli novelist Amos Oz was asked whether he considers "the presence of this novel, written by an Israeli Arab in Hebrew, to be a turning point in Israeli Society" (Twersky 26). Oz answered as follows: "I think of this as a triumph, not necessarily for Israeli society but for the Hebrew language. If the Hebrew language is becoming attractive enough for a non-Jewish Israeli to write in it, then we have arrived" (26).

Oz epitomizes the perception of modern Hebrew literature for readers and critics alike (Schwartz 9). Hence, his answer is a key for understanding the ongoing debates not only about *Arabesques* but also about other literary works in Hebrew written by a Palestinian. For Oz describes the novel as a triumph, a celebrated victory, thus implying a war or a conflict. Implicitly, he also suggests a defeat, a loss, hence also pain and casualties. Yet those defeated remain unseen and un-named. If, as Oz suggests, the victorious side is indeed the Hebrew language, the language of Zionism, then his answer (in a violent swipe of the pen) entirely omits those defeated from the equation. This quotation by Oz is thus a part of the Zionist discourse, which does not dare to go beyond its confines to show awareness and to see the other, that is, the Palestinian.

Moreover, in this quotation, Oz inadvertently cuts the seemingly natural connection between "Hebrew language" and "Israeli society." Thus in a post-national sense, Oz suggests that the Hebrew language can be freed and detached from its "natural-born" users (what Deleuze and Guattari identify as "deterritorialization"). This process occurs in the case of "Minor Literature," defined by Deleuze and Guattari as the literature written in the language of the majority by a writer from minority position (16). These concepts—deterritorialization and Minor Literature—very often resonate in the proceeding discussions and debates on Palestinians writers choosing to write in Hebrew. Indeed, when an Arab author writes in Hebrew, the triangle of territory-language-identity is destabilized. Though two sides of

the triangle—language (Hebrew) and territory (the State of Israel)—remain the same, the third, identity, is clearly different; it is no longer necessarily a Jewish identity. The triangle, therefore, is changed, and the seemingly natural (or geometric) connection among its three sides is questioned.

Yet, in addition to this, there are other observations to be made pertaining to Hebrew literature written by Palestinians. One important, and recent, example can be found when reading the poetry of Salman Masalha. In his volume of Hebrew poetry, *Eḥad Mikan* (In place, 2004), Masalha—a bilingual author publishing in both Arabic and Hebrew—challenges this interrelation of territory, language and identity. In the present essay, we will therefore delineate the ways in which Masalha's Hebrew poetry in fact re-territorializes the Hebrew language; that is, it turns Hebrew from the language of the Jewish people to the language of the region, to the language of "Someone from Here," as the literal translation of the book's title implies.

### "Final Answer to the Question: How Do You Define Yourself?"

Salman Masalha was born in 1953 in al-Maghar, a Druze-majority town in northern Galilee in Israel. In 1972 he moved to Jerusalem, where he received his Ph.D. from the Hebrew University in pre-Islamic Arab poetry. Masalha is an author, poet and translator, writing and publishing in Arabic and Hebrew, as well as a publicist in the daily newspaper *Ha'aretz*. Following the publication of five poetry collections in Arabic, he published his Hebrew collection of poems, *Eḥad Mikan* (In Place) for which he was awarded the Israel's President Prize for Literature (2006). Explaining its decision, the prize committee wrote: "Masalha is a powerful poet, writing on the border line between Hebrew and Arabic cultures" (Yudilevitch; our translation). It is worthy to note that "border line" is a metaphorical expression, which uses space and geography to explain culture and identity. This conceptual metaphor—to use the terminology of Lakoff and Johnson—is rooted in our minds, effecting the ways in which we think about culture, literature, identity (4-5). Accordingly, one may ask: Does identity have borders? Can an identity—a spiritual, non-physical concept—possess defining lines that one needs a passport in order to cross? Moreover, prior to the rise of the nation-state, could one think in such concepts to explain culture and identity? This essay challenges this conceptual metaphor, through a close reading of Masalha's *Eḥad Mikan*, its poems as well as its paratextual features.

In her essay "Not My Mother Tongue," Adriana X. Jacobs writes that Masalha "invites the Hebrew reader to think critically about the relation between language, place and identity in the current era" (161). Later in this essay, Jacobs engages with the definition of the term "Hebrew writer." Thus she notes that "what is at stake is how the term [...] is defined, categorized and located which then raises the question: what is the place of and for Hebrew literature? Who is a Hebrew writer?" (163). Similar questions are at the heart of the heated and oft-quoted debate between the literary scholars Hannan Hever and Reuven Snir, which followed the publication of the aforementioned novel *Arabesques*. This lengthy debate, which took place over four issues of the literary magazine *Alpayim* (1989-1991), set the main trajectory of the discussion regarding the phenomenon of Arabs choosing to write in Hebrew. Hever, for his part, identifies an affinity between the works of Arabs writing in Hebrew and the works of Kafka (a Czech Jew) written in German. Following Deleuze and Guattari in "Towards Minor Literature," Hever identifies such works as having a subversive potential and labels them as "minor literature." On the other hand, as maintained by Snir, such works belong to Arab literature rather than to the Hebrew literary canon. Therefore, argues Snir, they should be viewed as Palestinian literature, as an integral part of Arab literature, rather than as minority discourse in the language of the majority. Nonetheless, Hever's line of thinking, with all of its rhetorical rigor, shaped the discourse on the subject; its traces can be found in the scholarship of (among others) Hamutal Gouri and Lital Levy.

Hever opens the discussion regarding Arabs writing in Hebrew with an essay titled "Lehakot be'akevo shel Achilles" (Striking the Achilles Heel), and elaborated on it with a response to Snir titled "Lashuv ulehakot be'akevo shel achilles" (Striking the Achilles Heel, Once More). In 2004, nearly twenty years after he had written on *Arabesques* concerning power relations, vulnerability and violence, his approach to Masalha's collection is similar. This essay entitled "Lashon Mitpatzelet" (Speaking in Double Tongues), suggests, once again, that poetry written by Arabs in Hebrew has the potential, like a snake, to strike, to sting and to harm the canon, the majority, i.e., the Hebrew literary canon as well as the State of Israel. Hever writes, commenting on Masalha's poem "Scorpio":

The writing of poetry is like the snake's reaction to the danger it encounters [...] The snake sheds its skin—and the response is a tongue that bifurcates, like a snake's tongue. Masalha creates an inner split in the language of his poetry, which enables him to address the Hebrew audience through a mask. The writing of his poetry, then, is a survival mechanism in a violent and impossible situation. This act of poetry enables him

to survive nonetheless between two split organs while adopting a post-colonialist perspective, which is an intermediate stage of oppression that operates in indirect ways. (1-2)

Our close reading of Masalha's works, continuing our awareness of the power-relations in which these poems are written, suggests that the speaker in Masalha's poems in effect attempts to go beyond the post-colonial paradigm (presented above in Hever's review). The poet does not ignore these power relations, nor the necessity to address and to challenge them.

Masalha's choice to write and publish in Hebrew (which is not, as he writes in his poem "I write Hebrew" his "mother tongue") while continuing to write and publish in Arabic is noteworthy. It stresses on his deliberate attempt to address the Hebrew readership directly. Masalha addresses this audience in order to challenge their perception of Hebrew literature; he does so in the Hebrew language, which they understand as their "natural language." As we will show by and by, Masalha visions Hebrew as the language of the place, rather than the language of Jews in the place.

Writing after Shammas, Masalha clearly knows of the reception, as well as the theoretical implications and the discourse, of an Arab author writing in Hebrew. We argue that Masalha takes all of the above into an account and writes poetry that directly addresses these issues, explicitly expressing the intention to create his own poetic space within the confinements of theoretical concepts (post-colonialism and minor literature) and life (his identity as an Arab in the State of Israel).

In Masalha's poem "Final Answer to The Question: How Do You Define Yourself?" the speaker maneuvers among slippery definitions and identities, defining himself variously as an Arab poet before Islam, a Jew before Jesus, a Muslim in the land of Jesus and a Catholic in the desert (*Ehad* 56-7). His final answer, however, appears in the poem's epilogue: "Paganism is the wonder/within the poet's soul./ he has fire and water/ earth and air/ but more than these/ he has a song." These words suggest a fixed core within the speaker's interchanging identity, which is a paganism that preceded, and was condemned, by the three monotheistic religions.

Additionally, as the speaker-poet rejects national and religious identifications and reaffirms paganism, yet again he endorses locality. Unlike monotheistic religions, that pertain to an all-encompassing global belief (e.g., even in its etymological sense, καθολικός, that is Catholic, stands for "universal" in ancient Greek) paganism is associated with locality. Thus, the local aspect (present also in the title of Masalha's collection) is an important factor in his self-definition.

The poem encapsulates—from its title to its epilogue—the speaker's understanding of the meaning of identity: art (in this case poetry), soul and inspiration are not made possible by religion, nation or power relations; on the contrary, they live within the individual in spite of these systems, and they stem for this individual's locality.

**Who Sings *Shirei Moledet*?** Our reading of Masalha's volume of poetry integrates the following three components: paratext (elements added to the book, e.g. cover, design, the order of the poems); intertext (allusions made within the poems sending the readers to other texts written by other writers); and intratext (allusion or connections among different works within the writer's oeuvre). To begin with paratextual features: can we avoid judging a book by its cover? Should we avoid doing so? We would like to suggest that the cover of Masalha's Hebrew volume of poetry is an integral part of the contents of the book. The cover is white, framed in blue, with only Hebrew text written on it. This use of the (Zionist) national colors with the Hebrew lettering certainly affects the reader, as it suggests that the book belongs to the Zionist bookshelf and is a part of the Zionist discourse. The name of the poet that appears, however above the title on the top of the front cover is an Arab name. Thus, the previous assumption is not only challenged, but even turned on its head by what Foucault defines as the "author function" (304-5). This book, bearing an Arab name, might not be a Zionist book after all. How, then, can the reader bridge the gap between the name of the poet and the design of the book's cover?

Perhaps the book's title can provide the reader with some certainty. Yet the title, Hebrew for "Someone from here" adds even more to the reader's confusion. For it obscures the speaker's identity as well as the place to which he refers. Who is the "one"? What is this "here"? The cover, design and title therefore oscillate between opposite answers, leaving the reader restless. The pendulum movement between these answers, the two conflicting identities, can be seen as comprising an evasive maneuver on the part of the speaker, as a representation of the impossibility of deciding on a concrete identity and thereby favoring one identity over the other. This restlessness may very well resemble the title of Shammas's 1979 Hebrew collection of poems, *Shetach hefker* (No Man's Land), which implies an empty signifier that is devoid of identities. Shammas's title (as well as the title of his Hebrew novel, *Arabesques*) indeed points to the evasive manner in which his speaker perceives his own life and identity, playing

with the multiplicity as well as with the absence of place, as this is no man's land. As we will presently demonstrate, this is not the case of Masalha's *Eḥad Mikan* (In Place).

Masalha's speaker is explicit and confident in his self-definition as "someone from here." The place from which these poems emerge is not a no-man's-land, it is his place. He is the local, he is the native: he is the one-from-here. The reader, entrapped within a certain discourse—constructed by national symbols and colors—might feel disoriented, confused, or out of place. Not the poetic speaker, however, who is very close to the poet of *In Place*. Identity is neither blurred in the title of Masalha's collection, nor in the poems themselves. Quite the contrary. For Masalha explicitly reaffirms his speaker's identity as someone from here or, as is the English title of the book "In Place" in its both meanings: "in the right place" and also "in order." Masalha's speaker, knowing he could be seen as having contested identities, chooses to emphasize precisely his stability, his being in place rather than out of order.

Like its cover, the order of the poems in the book is calculated and deliberate. The poems are often organized—side by side—through a common theme that is reflected upon in each pair of poems. For example, the poem "I am an Arab Poet" faces the poem "I Write Hebrew." This juxtaposition places the two seemingly-opposing identities side by side, yet the Ani, the "I am," locks them in place as two-sides of one coin.

Another example, which points to the significance of the order of the poems, is found in these following two poems, appearing side by side in Masalha's book: "On Artistic Freedom in the National Era" and "On the Belief in Amulets as a Means of Making Peace in the Middle East." The declarative tone of both titles, as well as the seemingly contradictory concepts they use, point to the cohesiveness of this collection. Similarly, the eponymous poem "Someone from Here" is juxtaposed to the poem "Homeland Song," (or more precisely "Patriotic Song"). Both titles deal with a place, with the sense of belonging as a birthright. Yet the two titles facing each other create a tension. The use of the lexical shifter "here" in the title "Someone from Here" allows the interpretation more degrees of freedom, an interpretation that is not rooted in any specific place carrying specific (political, geographical or other) meanings. On the other hand, "Homeland Song" is perceived as explicitly Zionist, echoing (in the ears of the ideal reader, i.e., the Jewish-Israeli) the well-known genre of Hebrew-Zionist national or patriotic songs. By juxtaposing these poems, each title charges the other with more layers of understanding. Thus the neutral "here" becomes the land of Hebrew, while the homeland gains the "neutrality" of the "here"—as if a place called *Moledet*, homeland, can ever be neutral.

These oppositions live side by side in Masalha's book. Such a juxtaposition creates a new space for the speaker-poet, a place that benefits from the seemingly binary oppositions. It is one place, a sum that is bigger (and more complex) than its parts. Put differently, the title "Homeland Song," written in the pen of an Arab, uproots the word *moledet* or homeland from its "natural users" (Jewish Hebrew speakers). This is what Hever, following Deleuze and Guattari, identifies as deterritorialization. Nonetheless, placing the poem next to "Someone from Here" accomplishes precisely the reverse. For to employ the terminology of Roland Barthes, *moledet* or *homeland* is a part of a myth or metalanguage, that is a part of a "second order semiological system" (113). Masalha's choice therefore peels the mythological layer off of the sign *moledet* (homeland), and re-plants it in the soil of the literal meaning, retrieving the denotation of *moledet*: a person's home country or native land; the land of one's ancestors. In this sense, what can be understood as deterritorialization is, in fact, re-territorialization.

The final poem in a collection is significant, determining the tone that remains with the reader long after the book closes; its impression and aftertaste last beyond the poem itself, often altering the understanding of the collection as a whole. Interestingly, Masalha's collection ends with a poem titled *Hatikva* ("The Hope," *Eḥad Mikan* 68). The intertextuality here is clear: to the Israeli reader the title is an obvious allusion, since *Hatikva* is the title of the Israeli anthem (written in 1878 by Naftali Hertz Imber as *Tikvatenu* and becoming the anthem of the Jewish national movement, i.e., Zionism, and of the State of Israel). Hertz Imber's *Hatikva* is the epitome of Jewish-Hebrew patriotic songs. The choice to conclude the book *Hatikva* with echoes national ceremonies, which usually end with the singing of the anthem. The Hebrew collection of an Arab poet, which, as demonstrated above, constantly refutes the hypotheses of the reader, continues with this tendency as it ends with a poem entitled *Hatikva*. The identity of the poet, as well as the identity of the ideal reader, is destabilized once again, with this provocative allusion to a song written from a Jewish perspective, directed solely to a Jewish audience, while entirely excluding the Arabs:

*The Hope*  
On the one-way street  
leading to a wide-open field,  
a corpse sprawled out to its soul. On its sides,

fragments of metal that fell from the heavens  
of the spirit that fell silent. And the Spirit of God  
hovers not over water;  
over the blood.

The trees, which suckled their mothers' milk,  
have already grown—false teeth  
of the elderly city.

How wonderful is the mulberry tree  
Its roots—patriotic songs.  
Soon fall  
will awaken.  
Ha-tikva, the hope—  
falling

leaves. (68)

Lital Levy maintains in her book, *Poetic Trespass*, that "Masalha's placement of the definite article before *tikva*, "hope," is a sure indication that he wants us to think of the anthem and not just of hope in the abstract" (288). Indeed, Masalha's cryptic poem challenges the Israeli national anthem. Simultaneously, it shatters any noble idea regarding hope. The opening stanza depicts hope in a way that opposes this term's common understanding. Hope is not seen here as having an optimistic character, rather it is seen as violent or leading to violence (e.g., the metal fragments and the corpse sprawled along the road). The third and final stanza of the poem seems to suggest a higher, optimistic spirit (beginning with the uplifting line "How wonderful is the mulberry tree"). These lines, however, stand in sharp contrast to the two previous stanzas. This drastic change of tone, as well as the line "Its roots—patriotic songs" (which points to the unnatural source of this seemingly wonderful tree)—suggest that these lines are ironic. This is a mixed metaphor, evoking different emotions: first of all, a tree often symbolizes roots and the connection to the land, being a pleasant, and an idyllic image. In this poem, however, the tree is not a real tree, for it feeds on patriotic songs. This image turns the usual understanding of the interrelations of nature and human creation on its head. Nature (the tree) no longer inspires (or gives power to) human creation (patriotic songs) but rather it gains its power from human creation. Furthermore, the trees in the poem are monstrous— they suckle and they grow teeth, specifically false teeth. This, by itself, contradicts the image of a tree that grows naturally. The idyllic image becomes surreal and grotesque, there is no sense of hope, rather, there is fear. Thus, *hatikva*, or hope, becomes something to question and to fear. The patriotic song changes the correct order of things and breeds monsters.

This is not the first nor the last time Masalha has challenged the Israeli anthem. In an essay published following the assassination of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin (1995), and later in an English translation on his website, Masalha maintains "it is not by chance that in the national anthem there is no hint of 'Israeli-ness'. On the contrary, the emphasis in '*Hatikva*' (The Hope) is on the deepest religious facet connected to time (history) and place (the Land of Zion) [...] The Israeli national anthem is a Jewish religious prayer—and not Israeli." Ten years later, Masalha published a poem entitled "Song of the Land", with the subtitle "an alternative anthem," in his column in the *Haaretz* Daily newspaper. His alternative anthem, which we have translated and included in the concluding remarks of this essay, begins with noting war and blood, continues with certainty regarding the peaceful present, and concludes with the words "safeguarding our souls/ our homeland forever" – thereby stressing the homeland as a place of life and not as a place that constantly demands sacrifices and deaths. Unlike the Israeli anthem, Masalha's alternative focuses on the present (contrary to the past as well as future tenses, which prevail in the Israeli anthem).

Taking these publications into an account from an intra-textual perspective, it is clear that Masalha repeatedly engages with the Israeli anthem: he confronts it, writes about it, and suggests alternatives while promoting a local identity over the Jewishness of the State of Israel—an inclusive identity embracing all those who are "from here." His poem *Hatikva*, though enigmatic, ultimately makes clear that the Israeli anthem, as it is, bears no hope; rather, its negativity is evident in almost every line of the poem. The three elements discussed here (paratext, intertext and intratext) therefore stress that this collection of poetry attempts to be explicit, to communicate its message straightforwardly, and to harness its different dimensions to fulfill this task.

### The Language of the Place

Masalha's poem "On Artistic Freedom in the National Era"—from its title to its closing lines—contrasts the individual artist to the collectives to which he does not care to belong (42). Throughout the poem, the speaker defines himself through the consistent use of litotes, thus constantly making the reader complete the line by actively making assumptions regarding the speaker's actual identity. In this manner, by rhetorically emphasizing that a positive identity cannot be confined, the speaker affirms his own identity and creates his own space and place—an actual, literal place, as well as a metaphorical place within the Hebrew language.

#### On Artistic Freedom in the National Era

Because I am not a state, I have no  
secure borders, or an army guarding  
its soldiers' lives night and day. And  
there is no colored line drawn by a dusty  
general in the margins of his victory.  
As I am not a legislative council,  
a dubious parliament, wrongly called  
a house of representatives. As I am not  
a son of the chosen people, nor am I  
an Arab mukhtar. No one will falsely  
accuse me of being, supposedly,  
a fatherless anarchist who spits into the  
well around which the people feast  
on their holidays. Rejoicing at their  
patriarchs' tombs. Because I am not  
a fatalist, or a member of an underground  
that builds churches, mosques and synagogues  
in the hearts of children. Who will no doubt die  
for the sake of the Holy Name in Heaven.  
Because I am no excavation contractor or earth  
merchant, not a sculptor of tombstones polishing  
memorials for the greater glory of the dead.  
Because I have no government, with or  
without a head, and there is no chairman  
sitting on my head. I can, under such  
extenuating circumstances, sometimes  
allow myself to be human,  
a bit free. (42)

We propose that throughout the poem the speaker-poet pushes aside collective attributes, stripping his identity of any national or ethnic characteristic. In so doing, he gains his own place, a place to be oneself, becoming in his words a "human/ a bit free."

The poem begins by stating the obvious: "Because I am not a state/ [and] I have no secure borders," thereby setting an ironic tone that characterizes the entire poem. The second half of the sentence ridicules the situation of political security in Israel, which is often called in Israeli-Hebrew *hamatsav* ("the situation") – an abbreviated term for *hamatsav habithoni* ("the security situation") that lies at the core of the Israeli ethos, defining Israel's position in the Middle East and in the world as "a small country surrounded by enemies." In these lines the army guards its own soldiers, rather than securing the safety of the citizens. Put differently, this is a tautology, a redundant statement: the army safeguards its own existence, and thus exists solely for its own sake. Thus, according to the speaker of Masalha's poem, the *matsav* or situation is not real (it exists for its own reasons and ends); the core of the Israeli ethos, which constantly stresses a sense of national urgency, is emptied therefore of its contents.

Subsequently, the speaker differentiates himself from the Jews as well as from the Arabs, using the following words: "As I am not/ a son of the chosen people, nor am I/ an Arab mukhtar." Clearly, the speaker wishes to stress his individuality. The choice of words is worthy of attention, since it has a dramatic effect on Hebrew readers, similar to the one created by the incongruence discussed earlier between the book's cover (in the Zionist colors, blue and white) and the (Arab) name of the poet. There seems to be an inner contradiction when these words—"I am not/ a son of the chosen people"—are uttered in the Hebrew language. How can the speaker within a text in Hebrew (the language of the Jews, who call themselves "the chosen people") utter such words? The naive readers might think that this poem was translated into Hebrew. The answer to this confusion lies, however, in the book's title:

this is not a translation, but rather an original Hebrew work, written by "someone from here." Put differently, Masalha's wording de-automizes the reading process; it raises questions regarding the seemingly natural connection between language and national identity, while favoring the connection between language and place.

Similarly, in the following lines the speaker mentions "the people" and "their patriarchs." These words, when written in Hebrew, automatically send the readers to the Jewish-Hebrew domain of *'avot* (forefathers) and *'am* (people), thereby simultaneously evoking and subverting national-religious connotations. As the poem progresses, the speaker negates a religious-based identity (represented here by churches, mosques, synagogues), arguing that religions educate children toward martyrdom. Following this, the speaker turns to criticize what is known in Hebrew as *tarbut hashkhol* (the culture of bereavement), which glorifies national victims, seeing them as sacrifices for the national cause. This is yet another layer of the Israeli militaristic ethos that Masalha's poem challenges.

The poem concludes with the speaker's statement, in a quiet tone that stands in contrast to the declarative title. As the final lines suggest, the speaker can now allow himself to be "human/ a bit free." Masalha's preoccupation with the Israeli anthem is evident here as well. For without a doubt the Hebrew lines deliberately allude to the ending of this anthem. Yet it is important to note the distinct differences between the words of Masalha and those of Hertz Imber: while the latter expresses the wish of the people as a nation (*lihiyot 'am hofshi*), the speaker in Masalha's poem gives voice to the individual who is a *ben-'adam* (a human being). Moreover, while the anthem expresses hope for freedom, the speaker of the poem does not express a wish nor a hope. Rather, the speaker cautiously expresses a certainty, an ability. He is doing so by saying "I can [...] allow myself [...]." The confidence of the speaker in his ability to be an individual is indeed noteworthy.

All through the poem, therefore, the speaker-poet can be seen to set himself in opposition to the Israeli (militaristic) ethos, as well as to religions and identities. By the poem's end, the speaker gains his place and his identity, favoring his individuality at the expense of the collective. An additional example of this burden of being part of the collective is evident in the poem "Forgetfulness," especially in the following lines: "too much memory/ until you forget who you are" (11). Moreover, in this poem "On Artistic Freedom in the National Era," one can perceive that it demystifies the link between the Hebrew language and the Jewish people. Ultimately and most importantly, this poem challenges what is seen as an integral aspect of the Hebrew language: its "ownership" by the Jewish people. Does the poem expropriate the Hebrew language? Does it deterritorialize it, as argued by scholars such as Hever? From the standpoint of the majority (national as well as cultural) the short answer is yes: Masalha indeed expropriates Hebrew (and together with it he expropriates the national anthem as well as Hebrew and Jewish idioms). From the speaker's point of view, however, Hebrew is the language of a place, the place in which he lives. Thus, the speaker-poet does not merely deterritorialize the language (uprooting it from its historical users), but rather he re-territorializes it in order to transform it into a language of a place.

But what is this place? What is the place in which one speaks in the Hebrew language of Masalha? Is it the State of Israel? Is it Palestine? Does it have a name? While the book includes names of cities (Jerusalem, Nazareth) and mentions places such as "village" and "homeland," the names "Israel" and/or "Palestine" are not included in the collection, not even once. The place in Masalha's poems is geographical and physical. It is a place that precedes the nation-state and reaches beyond the political or military domain since "there is no colored line drawn by a dusty/ general in the margins of his victory" as declared by the speaker-poet in this poem.

Such an understanding of a primal, nativist, almost naïve understanding of locality and place is also present in the poem titled "Father, too":

Father, too

My father,  
who was born on the slope of the mountain,  
and gazed down on the lake, never  
had a passport. Or even  
a laissez passer.  
He crossed the mountains when  
the borders did not flow in the river.

My father  
never had a passport.  
Not because he did not have a land,

or a seal. Just because the land  
always dwelt calmly  
in the palms of his hands.  
And just as the land  
never slipped from his hands to travel  
overseas,  
Father—too. (25)

The poem begins almost as a nursery-rhyme, as the speaker calls the father *'aba sheli*, i.e., "my daddy" rather than the more formal *'avi* (my father). This opening echoes Talma Alyagon-Rose's classic Israeli children's song "My Daddy has a Ladder," which glorifies the speaker's father, seeing him as omnipotent. This seemingly childish tone suggests a "naive" understanding of locality depicted throughout the poem. Through the image of his father, the speaker-poet presents a native sense of place and belonging, according to which one does not need papers in order to have a place to call one's own. This notion is opposed to the modern understanding of belonging to a place, which is based on certificates and on the bureaucracy of the nation-state.

The poem concludes with the father as autochthonous figure (from ancient Greek: *auto*, "self" and *khton* "soil"). For his identity is the land, he is literally synonymous with the land itself. The speaker in Masalha's poem ultimately maintains that he does not need (and does not have) either the papers to mediate between himself and a place, or the certificates that vouch for the locality of his birthright—and that his very existence, evident as the land itself, proves this point. In this poem, therefore, Masalha poses a distinction between the land (in which one is local) and the state (the apparatus that argues for one's locality). As we argue, Masalha promotes the land, with neither flags nor banners, and without giving a specific name that declares political ownership. This place is called—as if naively—"here." Clearly, though, this is not a naive statement, but rather a radical and subversive one. Naming a place is a symbolic act of power, domination and ownership. As Paul Carter maintains: "[B]y the act of place-naming, space is transformed symbolically into a place [...] and by the same token, the namer inscribes his passage permanently on the world, making a metaphorical word-place which others may one day inhabit and by which, in the meantime, he asserts his own place in history [XXIV]."

Conversely, in "Father, too" Masalha is not participating in the game of naming: he does not make such a declarative act in order to belong. The speaker-poet is clearly aware of these kinds of ownership-statements, and yet he avoids making them. Thereby, he offers a far more radical notion: the speaker in this poem introduces an alternative position, outside the matrix of the never-ending circle of occupation, claiming and renaming, releasing himself—and perhaps the readers as well—from the shackles of national discourse.

### **A-National Anthem**

We would like to conclude this essay with a reading of Masalha's alternative anthem mentioned above.

*Land Song: An Alternative Anthem*  
From sea to sea  
The earth sheds blood.

And hatred seeps  
To man from mud.

The ebb and flow  
of vengeance war.

The legend tells  
of wise men's lore

Who picked the shovel  
to plant and toil

Love and spirit  
kept in soil.

And now, serenity again,  
Their voices sing and roll

The sons of Arab and of Nazareth

Sons of Abraham, they all

From east to west  
From Galilee to desert

Safeguarding our souls  
Our homeland forever.

"Land Song," similar to the poems of *In Place*, does not mention the names Israel and Palestine at all. The geographical area of the land, however, is clear, stretching from sea (the Mediterranean) to sea (the Kinneret) and including the Galilee in the north and the desert of the south. Masalha's alternative anthem, though never naming the land, indeed defines its territory. As to the language of the land, it is clearly the language of the anthem: Hebrew, which is the language of the land's inhabitants. These inhabitants are explicitly mentioned in the eighth couplet of the poem. They are: "The sons of Arab and of Nazareth/Sons of Abraham," hence they are specifically Muslims (sons of Arab) and Christians (sons of Nazareth). Interestingly, though the Jews are included implicitly in the second line of this couple—"Sons of Abraham"—they are never mentioned explicitly. Nevertheless, the anthem is written in Hebrew, thereby assuming Israeli-Jews as its addressees.

Masalha's alternative anthem therefore suggests that Hebrew, the language that was seen until this point in history as the language of the Jews, is in fact the language of "the land" (as the title of the anthem suggests) and of its (three) peoples: Muslims, Christians and Jews. The poem "Land Song" should be seen as the culmination point of Masalha's project, as shown in our reading of Masalha's Hebrew collection *Ehad Mikan* (In Place). Following the reading suggested here, *In Place* is a milestone in the evolution of Hebrew literature. As mentioned earlier, following the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, Hebrew literature (thriving in its multiple centers) merged into one major center in the State of Israel. This was a turning point: Hebrew literature became the literature of the state of Israel often synonymous (though not always overlapping) with Israeli literature. Twenty-five years after Shamma's exposed Israeli literature as essentially Jewish, Masalha's work perceptively problematizes the fundamental definitions of this literature. For reading the poems of *In Place* unveils the national essence of the title "Israeli literature": though the State of Israel is a place, its literature is not a literature of a place; rather it is a literature of the nation-state. Masalha questions the seemingly natural sides of the triangle with which we began our discussion: identity, territory and language. As Shamma before him, Masalha in this volume of poetry suggests that the Hebrew-language writer is not necessarily Jewish. What is more, he challenges the concept of territory as it is defined by the apparatus of the State. According to Masalha, territory is rather a place defined by the people living in it; it is a land (geographical, devoid of political power and national ownership), and not a state. Consequently, language is not of a people (*populus*) but of the people (*populi*) using it in their native place. Masalha explicitly points to Hebrew as a language of the inhabitants of a place, of people living and writing from a place they label as "here,"—or in Hebrew, *mikan*. In consequence, in his work Masalha promotes an understanding of Hebrew as a language of a place, while rejecting the idea of a language of the people. Thus, deterritorialization as the uprooting of Hebrew from the Jewish people who are considered its "natural" users ultimately allows Hebrew to become a language of the place, the language of a territory. Hence, it becomes in effect, a process of re-territorialization of the Hebrew in a place, in a land. The alternative anthem titled "Land Song" stresses precisely the main thrust of *In Place*: on re-connecting between the language and the inhabitants of the land. The triangle of identity-territory-language is still at the heart of Hebrew literature, it still has its three sides and three angles. The territory, however, is unnamed and is labeled as "Kan" or as "Eretz"; identity is congruent with the territory; and, finally, language is the base of the triangle, holding it together.

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