



## Introduction: Poetry in Israel: Forging Identity

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**Chanita Goodblatt,**

**"Introduction: Poetry in Israel: Forging Identity"**

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**Abstract:** The focus of this special issue is poetry—written in Israel during (and somewhat preceding) its Statehood—perceived as reflecting the worlds of poets in their personal, communal, ideological and poetic dimensions. This issue will focus on the ways in which poetry in Israel relates the stories, and expresses the positions, of individuals and groups who arrived from different countries (Europe, North Africa, Asia), lived through different experiences (the Holocaust, war, resettlement), and who express different cultures and religions (Jewish, Muslim).

## Chanita GOODBLATT

### Introduction: Poetry in Israel: Forging Identity

For the seven decades of its existence, and indeed from the beginning of the waves of settlement at the end of the 19th century, the developing society in the State of Israel has not ceased to be multi-cultural and heterogeneous. In consequence, Israeli society has generated a literary oeuvre that expresses this great diversity of identities. For many poets living in Israel this consciousness of identity—be it personal, communal or national—is an integral part of life and of complex intergroup relationships. Questions of identity are not abstract issues in Israel, but rather concrete, daily, and certainly controversial. Moreover, when we come to consider this concept of identity in Israel, this cannot be accomplished in disjunction from events, processes and aspects that are historical, national and religious.

The focus of this special issue is poetry—written in Israel during (and somewhat preceding) its Statehood—perceived as reflecting the worlds of poets in their personal, communal, ideological and poetic dimensions. This issue will focus on the ways in which poetry in Israel relates the stories, and expresses the positions, of individuals and groups who arrived from different countries (Europe, North Africa, Asia), lived through different experiences (the Holocaust, war, resettlement), and who express different cultures and religions (Jewish, Muslim).

The first three articles center on the issue of identity in relation to the Land and the State of Israel. In "A Generation of Wonderful Jews Will Grow from the Land: The Desire for Nativeness in Hebrew Israeli Poetry," Hamutal Tsamir studies the development of the concept of nativeness—a desire to belong to the land—as a constitutive desire of Zionism. This is evident originally in H.N. Bialik's 1896 poem "Ba-Šadeh" (In the field), in which nativeness is the desire of a beloved son of mother-earth, realized paradoxically in the form of *ownership* of the land. Subsequently, in the 1920s, the poets as pioneers/immigrants to the Land of Israel—in contrast to the "nativist" poet Esther Raab—imagine nativeness as a masculine desire of the land as woman. Lastly, for the Statehood Generation poets of the 1950s, nativeness emerges as a poetry of men as sons of the land, who are nostalgic about their native position as a lost privilege. Ilana Rosen looks particularly at this final period, in "Israeli Documentary Poetry about Coming of Age during the Early Statehood Period." Concentrating on the first two decades of the state (1950s-1960s), she considers the poets as immigrants, recounting their experiences in documentary poetry. This refers to non-fictional writing, whose authors or heroes wish to recount their experiences of major events that engulfed, affected and changed many lives. Rosen studies six poems written, respectively, by Malka Natanson, Lea Aini, Bracha Rosenfeld, Amira Hass, Peretz-Dror Banai, and Vicki Shiran. These poems are organized into three pairs dealing with various 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 Israel. These varied acknowledgements of the issues of land and state are also at the center of Tamar Wolf-Monzon's study, "Poetry in Response to the 'Disengagement Plan': Identity, Poetics and Politics." She examines the corpus of poems written in the years 2004-2005, in response to the Israeli government's evacuation of Israeli communities from the southern Gaza Strip. Wolf-Monzon explores this poetry as comprising a political speech act, whose purpose is to effect an extra-linguistic, pragmatic outcome: to impact upon the feelings and thoughts of the addressees, as well as to influence them in relation to issues of identity and social affiliation. She proposes, however, that this corpus was not political poetry, but rather a type of poetry that sought instead *to confront and to process* the implications of the anticipated political reality on an Israeli citizen's identity and consciousness.

The next two articles turn their attention to two notable Israeli Modernist poets, Natan Zach and Dan Pagis. In Natan Zach's "Poetics of Erasure," Michael Gluzman examines Zach's early volume *Shirim Shonim* (Other poems 1960), employing what he terms the poet's "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, Gluzman proposes, Zach's "escape from personality"—to use Eliot's dictum—ultimately provides Israeli culture with a new modality of mourning. For in a national culture that repressed exilic languages and inhibited expressions of social suffering, Zach provides a new form of elegiac writing that had no explicit content, expressing a melancholic sense of loss thorough the breakage of poetic form. In her article "Life is a Story: Narrative and Identity in the War Poetry of Dan Pagis and Charles Simic," Chanita Goodblatt employs the conceptual metaphor of "life is a story" to discuss how these two poets shape their identities as storytellers. Positioning the poems within two sections—visual narrative and fictional narrative—Goodblatt provides the opportunity to see how poetic identity coalesces in the face of displacement and

war. What is more, she develops the concept of narrativity within the poetic text, thereby discovering the ways in which Pagis and Simic embed photographic, cinematographic and literary images within such a narrative. Finally, the use of the fable by these two poets illuminates a connection among various genres (poetry, interview, memoir, book review), as well as among various literary cultures (German, Hebrew, Graeco-Latin, English).

The two articles by Yochai Oppenheimer and Yael Segalovitz bring Mizrahi (Oriental/literally, Eastern) poets to the forefront. In "Arab Music and Mizrahi Poetry" Oppenheimer highlights how extrication from the boundaries of Zionist culture (which has historically rejected the diasporic past and its cultures, especially the Arab-Jewish past) manifests itself, for many Mizrahim, as a reconnection with their Arab musical identity. For this music suggests possibilities of remembering and "re-presenting" this partially-repressed identity. He looks at the way in which Mizrahi poetry frequently addresses music as a way of establishing an Arab-Jewish identity in Israel, which can create connections between the present and the historical-cultural past. Oppenheimer discusses the first generation of Mizrahi poets (Erez Biton), as well as the second generation (in the work of Roni Somek, Sami Shalom Chetrit, and Vicki Shiran). Their poetry is a protest against the erasing of the Mizrahi cultural inheritance, in which Arabic music played an integral part. In "Queering Identity Politics in Shimon Adaf's *Aviva-Lo* (Aviva-no)," Yael Segalovitz offers a queer reading of this volume of poetry, analyzing it in conjunction with Adaf's recent collection of essays on identity formation, *Ani Aherim* (I am others 2018). Segalovitz argues that *Aviva-Lo*, which is a lamentation for the poet's sister, destabilizes the boundaries between the mourning brother and the absent sister. Moreover, through the mobilization of gender identity, Adaf queers contemporary identity politics in Israel. This discourse, the poet maintains, forces the subject to narrow down her self-understanding to a set of predetermined attitudes and values, which results in the perpetuation of hostility between reified versions of self and others in Israeli society. *Aviva-Lo* counters the project of solidifying identity by demonstrating the extent to which even sex, which points to bodily materiality, is a category that is not "one."

These articles dealing with the interface between Arab and Jewish cultures are followed by two articles on Palestinian poetry. In "The Poem Is What Lies Between a Between': Mahmoud Darwish and the Prosody of Displacement," Ayelet Even-Nur discusses Darwish's volume "Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?" She highlights how this poetry is delineated by forms of reiterating sound that displace the original source and create a domain of generative resonance between source and its modified repetition. Even-Nur argues that these auditory effects of betweenness function as a means of disrupting the idea of a set and bounded identity with its displacement. Ultimately, she claims that the aural possibilities of displacement showcased in Darwish's work assume the task of writing a non-sovereign form of identity, wherein unified norms of selfhood are continually dismantled through a repeated and willing submission to others and otherness. Yael Dekel and Eran Tzelgov, in "The Hope of Salman Masalha: Re-territorializing Hebrew," discuss Masalha as a bilingual author publishing in both Arabic and Hebrew. They point to the ways in which Masalha's Hebrew collection of poetry *Ehad Mi-Kan* (One from here) 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." Dekel and Tzelgov 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. They perceive 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."

The two essays that conclude this special issue are written by the poets Avraham Balaban and Karen Alkalay-Gut, who illuminate their respective identities in memoirs about lives experienced as a movement amongst languages. In "A Hebrew Poet Writes in English about the Holocaust," Balaban depicts his life as the child of Zionist "pioneers" who rebelled against their parents and the identity of the Diaspora Jew—particularly as Yiddish speakers. Growing up in the Zionist, collective Kibbutz farm of the 1940s and 1950s, Hebrew was thus his native tongue—in his words—"burnt on us like a mark branded on a cow's hide." Yet for Balaban, it is "the foreignness and the sterility of the English language" that, surprisingly, became the instrument of his writing about his family's experience of the Holocaust. This struggle of languages as identity is also evident in Alkalay-Gut's essay "Why I Write in Yiddish." As an English poet living in Israel, her choice to write in Yiddish comes not only from "a need to explore a long-gone personal past." Rather, it reflects the fact that she spent her life living in three languages: her parents' Yiddish; the English of her youth and young adulthood; and the Hebrew of her life in Israel. In answer to the question of her title, Alkalay-Gut explains that Yiddish serves not only to preserve history and memories, but also, to bring to the fore, in her words, the "brothers and sisters / who were never born." These two memoirs provide a fitting conclusion to this special issue, which gives voice to

poets in Israel attempting to establish their identities within a distinctly multi-cultural and multi-linguistic society.

In editing these articles and essays, I have had the wonderful opportunity to work with colleagues and friends from universities in Israel and the United States, as well as becoming acquainted with additional scholars. I would like to express my gratitude to the two editors of *CLCWeb*—the former editor Ari Ofengarden and the present editor Oded Nir. Ari first conceived of this special issue, inviting me to be its editor. Together, we compiled a list of scholars to whom I could write. Stepping in as editor after Ari, Oded continued his support for this new and exciting focus on "Poetry in Israel." Editing this issue has indeed been a fascinating journey for me.

**Author's profile:** Chanita Goodblatt is a Professor of English and Comparative Literatures at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. She has published widely on the traditions of Metaphysical and Modernist poetry written in English and Hebrew (including the poets John Donne, Dylan Thomas, William Carlos Williams, Avraham Ben-Yitzhak and Dan Pagis). In addition she and her colleague Joseph Glicksohn, a cognitive psychologist, have developed the *Gestalt-Interaction Theory of Metaphor* and are presently working on a book manuscript entitled *The Gestalts of Mind and Text: Metaphysical and Modernist*. Goodblatt has previously edited special issues of *Poetics Today* and the *John Donne Journal*. Email: <[chanita@bgu.ac.il](mailto:chanita@bgu.ac.il)>