



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## **Citizenship and Sacrifice: The Tragic Scheme of Moshe Shamir's He Walked through the Fields**

Mikhal Dekel

Jewish Social Studies, Volume 18, Number 3, Spring/Summer 2012,  
pp. 197-211 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jss/summary/v018/18.3.dekel.html>

# Citizenship and Sacrifice: The Tragic Scheme of Moshe Shamir's *He Walked through the Fields*

Mikhal Dekel

## ABSTRACT

*This article interrogates how citizenship and sacrifice are portrayed in Moshe Shamir's novel-turned-play He Walked through the Fields (1947). Arguing that the underlying aesthetic, emotional, and political sensibility of the play is "tragic" in the classical sense, the article demonstrates how this tragic sensibility served to both portray and mask the fundamental contradictions of citizenship in the immediate post-statehood era. As a tragedy, He Walked through the Fields derives its dramatic effect precisely from the tension between the hero's seemingly self-willed actions and his casting as a scapegoat for the community. In denying his male protagonist autonomous thought and subjectivity and portraying his "destiny" within the framework of the tragic, Shamir is able to resolve the conflict between national sovereignty and political heteronomy.*

*Keywords: tragedy, citizenship, Moshe Shamir*

**M**oshe Shamir's novel *He Walked through the Fields* was by far the most popular work of its time and to date remains the most powerful representation of early post-statehood society.<sup>1</sup> It was published in January 1948 and was reprinted in numerous editions, eight of them between 1948 and 1951 alone. Since its initial publication, the novel has been the subject of extensive critical analysis.<sup>2</sup> Prior to its publication, however, Shamir adapted the novel into a stage play: the first original play to be performed in the independent State of Israel.<sup>3</sup> Following the Six Day War of 1967, the play was turned

---

Mikhal Dekel, "Citizenship and Sacrifice: The Tragic Scheme of Moshe Shamir's *He Walked through the Fields*," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 18, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2012): 197–211

---

[198]

*Jewish  
Social  
Studies*

●  
Vol. 18  
No. 3

into a film starring Assi Dayan, the handsome son of then–Defense Minister Moshe Dayan. This paper will focus on the theatrical version of *He Walked through the Fields*.<sup>4</sup>

The play, which was seen by no less than a third of Israel’s Jewish population at the time, was an instant success. It was performed around the country, often before soldiers, and became known as the Israel Defense Forces’ “secret weapon” and a morale booster among combatants.<sup>5</sup> The play touches on many themes: the hardship and drama of kibbutz life, relations between Sabras and immigrants, gender arrangements in the new state, and the Yishuv’s take on the Holocaust. But in this article I am concerned with only one matter: the contribution of *He Walked through the Fields* to crystallizing an image of male citizenship in the new state. In what follows I argue, first, that *He Walked through the Fields* should be read as a tragedy and, second, that the play’s tragic elements, particularly as they pertain to the portrayal of a tragic hero, play a crucial part in shaping the image of male citizenship in the early statehood period. I use “tragic” in the classical sense to refer to the issues of fate, fall, and tragic responsibility that were written into the novel but that were particularly emphasized in the bare-bones play. Because of the centrality of these features, *He Walked through the Fields*, I will argue, should be read and judged not for its realistic depiction of the 1948 generation but as both the product and the source of its complex mythology.

### **Akedah or Tragic Myth?**

*He Walked through the Fields* is centered on the death of a young soldier, Uri Kahane, whose large portrait, framed in black, hangs at the back of the stage from the first scene on. All subsequent stage action is thus understood by the audience through the sign of Uri’s death, rather than building up to it.

The play begins with a generic display of the humdrum of daily kibbutz life: a man shaving, children being read a bedtime story in their shared room, sporadic talk of the corruption of today’s youth. Behind this routine action on the stage, the portrait of the handsome Uri Kahane looms. Someone mentions a memorial service for the “youth” (*na’ar*) scheduled for that evening, but there are no visible signs of shock, pain, or mourning on stage. The dominant imagery is of the land and the seasons, the lives of elders and children, men and beasts. Within this context, Uri’s memorial service is presented as an additional ritual. “He was twenty when he fell,”<sup>6</sup> a kibbutz member announces laconically;

such interludes by anonymous kibbutz members—an intermittent Greek chorus—periodically interrupt the play, expressing common knowledge and the normative voice of kibbutz society.

From this point on, the events leading to Uri's death unfold on stage. Uri returns to the kibbutz after a long absence (having attended Kaduri, a prestigious agricultural school) and is greeted admiringly ("we sent a child and he returned a man"<sup>7</sup>). He searches for his parents, whom he has not seen for some months. Someone tells him that his father, Willy Kahane, barely back from a mission to rescue refugees in Tehran, has enlisted himself in the British army and is due to leave the next day. Uri finds Willy in the cornfield, sharpening a large knife; angry that his father is leaving the kibbutz just as he himself has returned, he lashes out: "Have you forgotten my name?" Willy urges Uri to "be a man" and speaks of the duty to save European Jews.<sup>8</sup>

The looming picture of the dead Uri, juxtaposed so early in the play with the image of the father slowly sharpening a knife, ready to abandon him, suggests that the underlying myth of the play is a secularized version of the biblical story of the binding of Isaac in which God has been replaced by the state. Yet as the plot reveals, the mythical backbone of *He Walked through the Fields* is rooted much more prominently in classical tragedy than in the biblical story: its hero—noble, beautiful, and blind—is more a tragic Oedipus than a muted Isaac, his death more an ambiguous fate of his own making than the direct decree of an all-powerful force, and the effect of the play on its audience more an emotional elevation than a direct moral lesson.

Like Oedipus, Uri is nobly born, the kibbutz's first male child.<sup>9</sup> Like Oedipus, he is an insider-outsider, one who has returned from afar into a degraded reality of ancestral sin and sexual drama. The play as a whole smacks of the kind of "sensationalist subtext" that often haunts tragedy,<sup>10</sup> for no sooner does Uri meet his father than he encounters his mother and her lover, a stranger to the kibbutz. The mother, Rutkeh, now lives with the newcomer in a shack adorned with "luxuries" unheard of in the sparse kibbutz ("an electric kettle, cups, coffee, sugar, even a private radio"<sup>11</sup>). Though she attempts to explain this new situation, Uri, in what will become his *modus operandi* throughout the play, says that he "does not want to know more"<sup>12</sup> and flees the scene. Throughout the play, Uri will remain adamantly blind and deaf to the particulars of the reality around him, including the details and precise justification for a deadly military assignment on which his Palmah unit is about to embark. Like Oedipus, Uri refuses to know his own circumstances.

Feeling thrust out of his family of origin ("I have no one: mother, father, friends"<sup>13</sup>), Uri turns to the flirtatious Mika, a recent arrival at

[199]

*Citizenship and  
Sacrifice*

●  
Mikhal Dekel

[200]

*Jewish  
Social  
Studies*



Vol. 18  
No. 3

the kibbutz and a refugee from Poland and a Holocaust survivor, who also harbors secrets of the sexual kind. Perhaps the mistress of a Polish doctor, perhaps an orphaned child prostitute in Tehran (from which she was brought by Uri's father), Mika with her alleged promiscuous past (*hayim mufkarim*) provokes rumors that circulate through the kibbutz ("What she has seen Uri will never see"). Uri ignores these rumors, indifferent altogether to Mika's traumatic past. When Mika accuses him of not "knowing what went on *there*"—apparently in the lives of child refugees in Tehran or Tashkent, though the novel never specifies—Uri simply answers "I don't have to know."<sup>14</sup>

When Rutkeh, Uri's mother, warns him that it is a doomed match, Uri again claims willful ignorance:

RUTKEH: [Mika] needs a mature man, who'll be able to slowly release her from her past.

URI: I don't understand what you're talking about and have no desire to understand. In any case, you should not bother. She is already my wife.<sup>15</sup>

### The Inarticulacy of the Tragic Hero

Thus, Uri is constructed in the play as a character with limited consciousness and largely without language. As such he is contrasted with generic kibbutz members, who are associated with constant chatter, and with his wife and his mother, who demand conversation and clarity. This limited speech, what Walter Benjamin in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* calls "the inarticulacy of the tragic hero," is central to Uri's tragic essence. "The tragic hero," Benjamin writes,

has only one language that is completely proper to him: silence. . . . [I]n his silence the hero burns the bridges connecting him to God and the world, elevates himself above the realm of personality, which is speech, defines himself against others and individualizes himself, and so enters the icy loneliness of the self. The self knows nothing other than itself; its loneliness is absolute. How else can it activate this loneliness, this rigid and defiant self-sufficiency, except in silence.<sup>16</sup>

Uri does not, of course, betray the kind of grandiose glamour of the classical tragic hero that informs Benjamin's thought. He is not a fallen ruler (as the influential early Zionist writer Yosef Hayim Brenner had put it 30 years earlier: "We are not aristocrats!"<sup>17</sup>); the play's sensibility is essentially modern, focusing on the normative individual and his daily life. Nonetheless, elements of tragedy and a

tragic vision color Shamir's portrayal of Uri, characterized by his inarticulacy, his sin, his blindness, his fall, and his final sacrifice.

[201]

### Early Zionist Tragedies

*Citizenship and  
Sacrifice*

●  
Mikhal Dekel

In my book *The Universal Jew: Masculinity, Modernity and the Zionist Moment* (2010), I argued that through its engagement with late nineteenth-century German works—Nietzsche's and Schopenhauer's in particular—and alongside its nationalist turn, fin-de-siècle Hebrew literature came to be dominated and infused by *tragedy* not in its vernacular sense but as an aesthetic as well as a political-emotional category. This turn to tragedy by early Zionist writers was motivated by more than a desire to expand the national canon and incorporate new forms into the budding national culture; tragedy offered a sensibility that touched the early national community's deepest reaches, elevating its mood and providing an artistic and political vision that could transcend the difficulties as well as the controversies and indeterminacies of the nation-building period.

A primary example I use in the book is Hayim Nahman Bialik's epic poem "In the City of Killing," written in response to the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 and widely considered the formative work of early Zionist culture. In the poem, Bialik constructs the image of a poet-witness who is directed by God to "rise and go to the city of killing" and serve as both witness and possible avenger of the hapless victims. This poet-witness is presented as bound to the victims by the decree of God—the speaker in the poem—but also as a free agent called upon to help a weakened God; as such, I argue, Bialik molded the poet-witness as a tragic hero in the making—silent, heroic, elevated above the pogrom victims yet poised to be sacrificed ("like an ox to the altar") on their behalf.<sup>18</sup> In creating this early image of a hero who bears tragic responsibility for his people and recasting "ordinary" Jewish suffering as tragedy, Bialik offered a new sensibility to his readers; or, as the literary critic Yosef Klausner put it, "through the poem came a thorough and major change in the Jewish people's mood: the slouching Israel had become erect, as if iron had been cast into the veins of the elderly nation."<sup>19</sup>

Tragedy, of course, is an imprecise and highly debated term, its definition ranging from Aristotle's stress on the "fear and pity" it arouses in audiences to Dorothea Krook-Gilead's paradigm of a story that centers on a flawed hero who reveals through his suffering the power of gods and destiny.<sup>20</sup> In the modern age, it is Schopenhauer's philosophy and, most profoundly, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie, Oder:*



*Griechentum und Pessimismus* that alongside the emergence of the political Zionist movement in the 1880s signaled tragedy's rebirth and renewed prestige in European culture. "Tragedy returns as an everyday experience," Terry Eagleton writes, "at exactly the point when a democratic age has grown wary of it as ritual, mystery, heroism, fatalism, and absolute truth";<sup>21</sup> it returns therefore as a feature of modernism, in its postrationalistic search for modes of vitality, beauty, and feeling. For Nietzsche, whose impact on early Zionists was monumental, classical Greek tragedy embodies the supreme libidinal energies of pre-Christian culture; by witnessing the depth of human suffering as it is played out on stage, he argued, Athenian spectators could surpass their atomistic, petty lives and feel an elevated, collective, Dionysian existence passionately affirmed. It is in this sense that fin-de-siècle Hebrew writers, most notably Micha Yosef Berdyczewski and Yosef Hayim Brenner, evoked the tragic in their works as well, portraying images of extreme suffering and tragic fates alongside their critique of a bloodless rabbinical culture.

Blindness, passivity, and inarticulacy of male characters figured prominently in these early Zionist works. In his reading of Berdyczewski's "Between Two Camps," Dan Miron points to what he calls the protagonist's "lack of consciousness," which Miron attributes to the character's blind belief in individual will and Enlightenment rationality. Such blindness leads the hero to commit symbolic incest, bringing about "a psychological holocaust that befalls [him] abruptly and all at once."<sup>22</sup> Brenner's early stories "In Winter" and "Around the Point" display a similar plot: the protagonist ends up in ruins, largely of his own doing; from such tragic endings, it is implied, there is nowhere to go but beyond the limits of individual liberal aspirations and in a collectivist direction.

Yet even after the nation-state has been erected and Hebrew literature's first Sabra heroes emerge, they too *continue to be characterized by blindness and lack of consciousness*, which lead them to disaster. Uri in this sense is not a deviation or a correction to prenatal masculinity but its direct continuation: if Bialik's silent poet-witness is only poised to be sacrificed on behalf of the community, Uri's inarticulacy and blindness is presented as propelling his actual sacrifice.

### Tragedy and Sacrifice

Paired with his mismatched bride, Uri sets out to secure a "family shack" in the kibbutz; yet no sooner is one made available, after much haggling, than he receives notice about a "friend" who is

coming to fetch him to the battalion. “Stay,” says Mika, “postpone your departure”:

MIKA: I want a home that I will never have to leave. . . . I want to be happy. I want peace for me and my guy and my children. And that’s it. That’s it, and it’s very little—because I used to want more.

URI: In short—you want me not to enlist. You want the guys my age to be in the brigade and in prisons and in whatnot—and me in some shitty shack with pictures on the walls and curtains—and some gal from Youth Aliyah.

CHORUS: And the friend who was coming to get Uri was already on his way, and his power was stronger than the power of one love. Yes, the days that tore Willy’s life to pieces, the days that tossed Rutkeh into the storm, the days that left Mika lonely and alone under the skies—these days did not stop at the entrance to Uri’s tent. Early in the morning the friend came.<sup>23</sup>

The play’s second half, set at Uri’s military post, begins once more against the backdrop of his memorial portrait. In the forefront of the stage, Uri and his military unit are now stationed not far from the kibbutz. Two months have passed, the audience is told, and the soldiers appear tense and tired. They are heading out on a mission; on the way, Uri passes through a new settlement, where he discovers both Mika and his mother are now living. He is informed that Mika is pregnant and scared—an earlier abortion “back there” is alluded to vaguely<sup>24</sup>—yet he refuses to see her. In a brief encounter with Mika he tells her that a group of clandestine refugees is due to arrive that night in British-controlled Palestine and that he must leave immediately. His unit’s mission is to distract the British occupier at a central port so that the refugees can land safely elsewhere. The soldiers argue about who will carry out the mission, and Uri declares that he will blow up a bridge. He leaves the stage. Immediately after, a hurried messenger searches the kibbutz for Uri’s parents, bearing news of his fatal wound.

**Heroism or Escape?**

*He Walked through the Fields* had for years been read by critics as the most stereotypical and powerful representation of an early Zionist masculinist ethos of heroism and sacrifice and an unabashed celebration of the Sabra.<sup>25</sup> Against these interpretations, more recent readings have exposed the plot’s ambivalence, pointing not only to the

[203]  
*Citizenship and  
Sacrifice*  
●  
Mikhal Dekel





problematic and unresolved question of Uri's death (heroic or suicidal?) but also to Uri's "weak" and irresolute character.<sup>26</sup> The supposed embodiment of stalwart Zionist masculinity, Michael Gluzman writes, Uri appears on a closer reading to be "a 'soft,' confused, flustered youth, with emotional and sexual difficulties, who cannot develop a distinct identity of his own." More than heroic sacrifice, Gluzman argues, Shamir presents Uri's death as the escapist suicide of an immature boy or the mimetic act of a son who has not properly individuated from a demanding, towering father. "How is it possible," Gluzman asks, "that so many generations of readers ignored the subversive aspect of Shamir's text? How could it be that this novel, which radically disrupts the validity of the heroic sacrificial ritual, was viewed as a direct expression of the dominant ideology?"<sup>27</sup>

It is possible, I think, precisely because the sacrificial plot in the play is structured as tragedy, which is neither ideological nor counter-ideological. It is possible because in veering between Uri's agency and his being driven by forces beyond his control, the play follows a model of "tragic responsibility" with which audiences were familiar from early Zionist works and with which they could deeply identify. Indeed Uri is not an Isaac. For to the extent that he follows a model of masculinity and male sacrifice created by turn-of-the-century Zionist works, that model is *not* of direct and explicit sacrifice of a hapless young man to a biblical God or to the new state. Nor is he portrayed as acting through free will. Rather, Uri operates from the liminal space between will and coercion, choice and fate, a space that Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet have associated precisely with the rise of classical tragedy.<sup>28</sup> "Oh, suffering dreadful to behold . . . what madness has struck you . . . what daimon has crowned your destiny that was the work of an evil daimon?" the chorus laments as a blinded Oedipus enters the stage; Oedipus, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet claim, may have chosen to mutilate his own eyes, but this self-sacrifice, like all the events that led to it, was understood by the Greeks to be dictated from above. From this "twilight zone between politics and myth," where the hero's actions are both his and not his, "a tragic sense of responsibility" first emerges: a vision of an autonomous individual who nevertheless is bound to a collective and its mythic past.<sup>29</sup> Such, I believe, is the structure of sacrifice and responsibility presented in *He Walked through the Fields*.<sup>30</sup>

## Tragedy and Political Subjectivity

Indeed, whereas fin-de-siècle European Zionist works like “In the City of Killing” and “Between Two Camps” enabled the “theoretical” passage into a new “national” political subjectivity, *He Walked through the Fields*, the first original play of the new state, symbolizes the pivotal transformation of protonational subjectivity into actual citizenship. In this sense, we would expect post-statehood Israeli art to represent a rupture, a new political subjectivity associated with independence and autonomy. Etienne Balibar, for example, located such a break in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which he calls “an epistemic rupture in the psycho-political sphere where the citizen comes to occupy the position of the [sovereign] subject.”<sup>31</sup> Yet to the extent that Uri represents the new “citizen,” *He Walked through the Fields* does not offer a vision of male citizenship as autonomy or sovereignty. Rather, it is Uri’s tragic essence—his lack of consciousness, his instinctual actions unmarred by introspection, the flaw of his *radical ignorance* as contrasted with the knowledge of others (his parents, Mika), his adherence to his “destiny”—that makes him a citizen ideal and an object of identification and pity.

The fundamental question of 1948 was, of course, how the revolutionary quality of citizenship, the elevation of man, of Jewish man, to the status of sovereign, autonomous subject was to be reconciled with the nation’s demand for absolute submission: in essence, the demand that Uri die for the sake of the nation and that his death be read by audiences as justified. This is at the heart of the problem of national sovereignty as *heteronomy*: the political subjection of the state, the opposite of autonomy. “At first glance,” Stathis Gourgouris writes, “it would seem that the elevation of the people to the position of the sovereign (which is what warrants the new designation: citizen) grants them the space of unharnessed subjective action (autonomy);”<sup>32</sup> yet Uri must also become a *governed* subject, an obedient citizen, the executor of political power. This contradiction is solved by early post-statehood writers like Shamir by denying the male subject thought and subjectivity and portraying his “destiny” within the framework of the tragic. Like Oedipus, Uri is not a clean slate of innocence sacrificed to a demanding God but a flawed tragic hero who is both innocent and guilty. Like Oedipus, Uri is ruined because of his “sin”—the refusal to join the patriarchal order (by becoming a father)—but also because of his very identity. And as in the Oedipal myth, Uri is fashioned as a *scapegoat* for his people, yet the fact of his violent sacrifice is obscured in the thickness of the sexual drama of the Oedipal plot.

[205]

*Citizenship and  
Sacrifice*



Mikhal Dekel

## Scapegoat

[206]

*Jewish  
Social  
Studies*



Vol. 18  
No. 3

Most prominently, *He Walked through the Fields* derives its dramatic effect from the tension between Uri's seemingly self-willed actions and his casting from the very beginning of the play as a scapegoat for the community. The scapegoat, as René Girard defines him, is a priori a victim, an outsider bearing the physical sign of his difference: Oedipus's limp, or, in Uri's case, his extreme youth, inarticulacy, and beauty.<sup>33</sup> Uri's muscular, self-assured, exposed body is contrasted, as Gluzman has noted,<sup>34</sup> with Mika's plump, unkempt, introverted, diasporic body. Yet it is also contrasted with and open to the gaze of other kibbutz members, as well as the audience. Such pairing of beauty and sacrifice is not unique in post-statehood literature. Uri is one such figure; the title character of Yigal Mossinsohn's "Matityahu Schatz" is another.<sup>35</sup> Like Uri, Matityahu Schatz is an inherently vague character; like Uri, his life will end at its prime and under murky circumstances; and like him, Schatz will have been doomed by his physical beauty: "Tall, exquisitely built, a man's man, who went and stuck a bullet in his head."<sup>36</sup> The more weakened, identityless, beautiful, and eroticized these images are, the more these protagonists are elevated above the rest, the more they become associated with violent tragedy and a sacrificial plot that further heightens their magnetic appeal for the sentimental gaze and psychic investment of audiences.

Uri, it should be added, is marked as a sacrificial figure even before the events of his death are revealed. He is marked because though he is the representative Sabra and ultimate insider, he symbolizes difference from the rest of the "kibbutzniks": his beauty and ignorance, his youth and muscular body, his lack of experience and the untaintedness ("cleanliness," as Mika puts it<sup>37</sup>) of his life, all these designate him as an otherworldly presence for the world-weary kibbutz community, as for the majority of audiences (including the Czech-born director, Yosef Millo) made up of largely foreign-born Jews. He is marked, most dramatically, because he appears from the play's very first scene as a dead icon.

Indeed, as Gluzman notes, Uri is constructed as a "soft," unformed youth; yet his character and the motivations and agency behind his actions are deliberately weakened in relation to other characters so that the structure of sacrifice can be seen and felt. With his character intentionally weakened, it is the chain of events presented in the first part of the play—the parents' betrayal, Mika's demands, his lack of place—that railroads Uri toward his death. For by the time he is summoned to the Palmah, we read him as having given up everything: a desire for

family (either old *or* new) and even a desire for heroism. And by the time of his death, we read Uri as an instrument whose fate was sealed by destiny, but one that he himself has acted out. That his death is not explicitly presented as a consequence of his military duty does not interfere with the audience's acceptance of it. Such explicit representation of military sacrifice would in fact have been too direct a display of the state's unequivocal power, tarnishing the play's classical harmony and tempering its dramatic effect. It is precisely those elements in the play that weaken Uri's character and occlude the exact reasons for his death that account, I think, for the play's effect on spectators and readers: the story of the highborn yet blind hero (amply echoed in the film version by the real-life "royal" lineage of Assi Dayan) who comes to a tragic end.

Uri, in fact, is portrayed as participating in his own sacrifice. "There is only one person who is superfluous here," he declares already in scene 1, as he stands before the photo of his dead self. Raymond Williams notes the importance of such consent by the victim to be an integral part of the sacrificial plot: "It is not to the heroic will of the martyr that our response is directed, but to his subjugation of himself to his part of the pattern, and then to the fertilizing effect of his blood."<sup>38</sup> By leaving the definitive reasons and the question of the legitimacy of Uri's self-sacrifice unanswered, Shamir not only emphasizes the tragic but also gives ample expression to audiences' modern ambivalence toward self-sacrifice. It is not that audiences "ignored" the subversive message of his work; it is that the play gave expression to their own conflicts. Audience guilt was triggered by Uri's death, but only to a degree; in its tragic outlook, the play did not demand that audiences bear total responsibility for Uri's violent death, and thus it evoked a general acceptance of Uri's blood.

### **The Scapegoat as Unifier**

In linking Uri's memorial service to the mundane rituals of kibbutz life and particularly to the image of the bustling children's room with which the play begins, Uri's death, moreover, is linked in the play to the renewal of life. Whether the play begins with Uri's first or tenth memorial service, we do not know. What we do know is that as the events leading to Uri's death take place, the early national community, represented by the kibbutz and particularly by Uri's divided parents, is portrayed as fragile and fractured: a group of hardened individuals weighted by weariness. Against this portrayal, Uri's sacrifice is read not merely as the family's and the kibbutz's redemption

[207]

*Citizenship and  
Sacrifice*



Mikhal Dekel

but also its conversion, when, in the final scene, Uri's parents are united under the sign of grief, Mika decides to keep her child, and a reenergized kibbutz readies for the latest wave of refugees from Europe. It is at the moment of its firstborn's ruin that the essence and value of both the kibbutz and the nation are revealed.

Shamir, who while writing *He Walked through the Fields* was a member of the kibbutz Mishmar Ha-emek and a self-declared Marxist, fuses in Uri the Christian idea of redemption and the Marxist idea of history: a portrait of sacrifice for the sake of social change. In doing so he indicates, I think, that Uri and his actions are not meant to be separated out (as Gluzman does) for ethical approval or disapproval; they are the actions of a generation, not an individual. It is the effect of Uri's death on the national community that is the central feature of the play and the key to its success. Tragedy, Karl Jaspers writes, "cleans[es] us of all that in our everyday experience is petty, bewildering and trivial."<sup>39</sup> It is in this sense that Uri, the sacrificial youth, becomes a "redeemer"<sup>40</sup> both within the context of the play and for audiences in the new state, propelling them to rise above narrow desire and to cohere and unite under the sign of grief.

The play, which was performed during and after the War of Independence and as large waves of new citizens were being absorbed into the country, undoubtedly contributed to shaping the role of male sacrifice in the new state. And yet it is important to note that the sacrificial demands of national independence are never explicitly revealed. Nor does the play portray directly the violence at the base of the national project: Uri's death is not acted out on stage, and to the extent that it is attributed to violent conflict, it is not in the context of Arab-Israeli strife but rather in the now-dated context of the struggle against the British. By fashioning Uri's death as tragic destiny, rooted in part in personal and ancestral sin and partaking in a pattern of sacrifice, the play conceals not only the violence at the heart of national origins in general but the deep, unresolved, and violent struggle between Jews and Palestinian Arabs, which is barely mentioned in the work.

Thus, rather than viewing *He Walked through the Fields* as a realistic portrayal of post-statehood society, we should look at the function that staging Uri's death as tragedy performed for this still-insecure and embattled national community: both emboldening audiences and ritualizing and routinizing death. As consumers of tragedy, Williams writes, "We fear, but are not inspired to run away, shaken but not stirred."<sup>41</sup> Likewise, *He Walked through the Fields*, a tragic play performed in the early nation period, owed much of its success to its cathartic effect, feeding audiences controlled doses of fear, pity, and guilt around the

dead soldier's figure, while obscuring the gruesome violence at the heart of the national project.<sup>42</sup>

[209]

*Citizenship and  
Sacrifice*



Mikhal Dekel

## Notes

Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

- 1 For a summary of its commercial success and critical history see Yigal Schwartz, *Ha-yada'uta et ha-arets sham ha-limon poreah* (Or Yehudah, 2007), 239–48.
- 2 For an analysis of differences between the novel, the play, and the film, see Stephen Elliot Wilmer, *Writing and Rewriting National Theatre Histories* (Iowa City, 2004), 180–84.
- 3 Opening night was at the Mugrabi Hall in Tel Aviv on May 31, 1948, two weeks after Israel's declaration of independence (Schwartz, *Ha-yada'uta*, 240).
- 4 For details of the screenplay adaptation, see Ezra Spicehandler, "The Fiction of 'The Generation in the Land,'" in *Israel: The First Decade of Independence*, ed. Selwyn Ilan Troen and Noah Lucas (Albany, N.Y., 1995), 313–29.
- 5 Schwartz, *Ha-yada'uta*, 244, 343.
- 6 Moshe Shamir, *Hu halakh ba-sadot: Mahazeh bi-shnei halakim* (Tel Aviv, 1989), 15.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 9 According to George Steiner, the elevated social status of the protagonist is not a peripheral but a central feature of the form; see George Steiner, "Tragedy Reconsidered," *New Literary History* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 1–15.
- 10 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden, Mass., 2003), 10.
- 11 Shamir, *Hu halakh ba-sadot*, 24.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 16 Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, vol. 1 of *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), 108.
- 17 Yosef Hayim Brenner, "Self-Criticism," in *The Zionist Idea*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (New York, 1975), 307–12.

[210]

Jewish  
Social  
Studies



Vol. 18  
No. 3

- 18 For a detailed reading of the poem as tragedy, see Mikhal Dekel, *The Universal Jew: Masculinity, Modernity and the Zionist Moment* (Evanston, Ill., 2010), 139–68.
- 19 Quoted in Hannan Hever, “Korbanot ha-tsiyonut,” in *Be-‘ir ha-haregah, bikur meuchar: Bi-melot meah shanah la-poemah shel Biyalik*, ed. Dan Miron (Tel Aviv, 2005), 37.
- 20 Dorothea Krook-Gilead, *Elements of Tragedy* (New Haven, Conn., 1969), 17. For broader definitions, see also Arthur Miller, *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York, 1996 [1978]), 3–7, and Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (New York, 2006 [1966]).
- 21 Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 96.
- 22 Dan Miron, *Boah, laylah: Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit bein higayon le-i-gayon be- mifneh ha-meah ha-esrim: ‘Yunim bi-yetsirot H. N. Biyalik u-M. Y. Berdyczewski* (Tel Aviv, 1987), 203.
- 23 Shamir, *Hu halakh ba-sadot*, 57.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 25 Schwartz, *Ha-yada‘ta*, 240–45.
- 26 Michael Gluzman, *Ha-guf ha-tsiyoni* (Tel Aviv, 2007); Schwartz, *Ha-yada‘ta*.
- 27 Gluzman, *Ha-guf ha-tsiyoni*, 207.
- 28 Jean Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York, 1988), 78–79.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 30 In his reading of *He Walked through the Fields*, Schwartz also notes the space that is opened up in the discrepancy between Uri as ideal and Uri’s act of suicide, yet his conclusions are very different from mine. As Schwartz writes, “Uri’s act of suicide is an admission that the ‘Sabra project’ has failed; the project of engineering the Zionist man, whose fulfillment would have been a testimony to the success of the Zionist enterprise. And yet, paradoxically, it is the admission in failure that enables the continuation of the Zionist project” (*Ha-yada‘ta*, 280). In other words, according to Schwartz, Uri’s failure to fulfill the Zionist ideal will provoke the striving of the next generation, in a perpetual cycle. I do not think that Shamir consciously represents Uri as the embodiment of the failed Sabra. Rather, I view Uri as a disembodied phenomenon, a representative force within the scheme of tragedy whose own will and success or failure are not of much importance. In this sense my interpretation is closer to Dan Miron’s interpretation of Uri as an “essence, not an individual . . . a force, movement, action”; see Dan Miron, *Arba‘ panim ba-sifrut ha-ivrit bat yameinu* (Jerusalem, 1975), 447.
- 31 Quoted in Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Palo Alto, Calif., 1996), 21.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 33 René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, Md., 1986).
- 34 Gluzman, *Ha-guf ha-tsiyoni*.

- 35 For example, S. Yizhar, "Laylah beli yeriyot," in *Ha-horsh ba-giv'ah* (Merhaviah, 1947); Yigal Mossinsohn, "Matityahu Schatz," in *Shenaton davar* (Tel Aviv, 1946).
- 36 From Yigal Mossinsohn, *Aforim ka-sak* (Jerusalem, 1989 [1946]).
- 37 Shamir, *Hu halakh ba-sadot*, 39.
- 38 Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 191.
- 39 Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit* (Munich, 1947), 943.
- 40 Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 195.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 153.
- 42 This effect is demonstrated in a description Millo gives of a performance at the Tsrifin military base during the War of Independence: "An hour before the play began soldiers came into the hall and took out the chairs. Afterwards soldiers walked in with their knapsacks and rifles and sat on their knapsacks. Immediately after the play they were hauled into wagons and sent to the battle at Sha'ar Ha-guy. And it was a terrible feeling. We saw them leave for battle, but we didn't know how many would return" (Schwartz, *Ha-yada'ta*, 245). This recollection reveals both the impact of the play at the time—even on the crew and the actors—and the enigmatic quality of self-sacrifice, which is perpetuated in Millo's words and sensibility.

[211]

*Citizenship and  
Sacrifice*



Mikhal Dekel