



PROJECT MUSE®

Abba Kovner: The Ritual Function of His Battle Missives

Michal Arbell

Jewish Social Studies, Volume 18, Number 3, Spring/Summer 2012,
pp. 99-119 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

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

Abba Kovner: The Ritual Function of His Battle Missives

Michal Arbell

ABSTRACT

During the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, Abba Kovner—Holocaust survivor, Jewish partisan and poet—served as an educational officer in the Givati Brigade, writing more than 30 battle missives between June 1948 and May 1949. These missives, which were distributed among the soldiers, were a novelty that Kovner introduced to the IDF, and their poetic register, expressionist style, high pathos, and blunt and extremely violent rhetoric put them in stark contrast to all other IDF propaganda of the time. The missives were immensely popular among Givati Brigade soldiers but were met with harsh criticism from other quarters in the IDF and from prominent political leaders. Kovner, I argue, persisted in writing his missives in the face of this opposition because in his eyes they served a necessary and important function. Through his gory battle missives, Kovner sought to cleanse the fighters of the guilt and shame of bloodshed and to give words to an unspoken trauma.

Keywords: Abba Kovner, battle missives, Givati Brigade, guilt, trauma

In the early hours of June 9, 1948, two days after the surrender of Kibbutz Nitsanim and just before the harsh battles at Gezer and Hill 69, which also ended in the defeat of Israeli forces, the Givati Brigade's newly arrived educational officer, a Holocaust survivor, Jewish partisan, and poet named Abba Kovner, wrote his first *daf kravi*, or battle missive, entitled "Failure." It comprised a harsh indictment of the defenders of Nitsanim, denouncing them for not fighting to their last drop of blood and for not defending every inch of territory with their lives. By failing to do so, Kovner claimed, the surrendering fighters demonstrated to the Egyptian enemy that it

Michal Arbell, "Abba Kovner: The Ritual Function of His Battle Missives," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 18, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2012): 99–119



was possible to vanquish the defenses of a Jewish settlement within a matter of hours and undermined the conviction, essential to the morale of every Israeli fighter, that the few are capable of defeating the many. Toward the conclusion of the missive, Kovner vehemently called out, “Better to fall in the trenches of home than to surrender to a murderous invader. To surrender—so long as the body still lives and the last remaining bullet continues to breathe in its magazine—’tis a disgrace! To emerge to the invader’s captivity—’tis a disgrace and a death!”¹

The missive caused an immediate outrage. It was, in fact, released with the approval of Brigade Commander Shimon Avidan and his battalion commanders. The only issue discussed before its publication was the title: should it be “Failure” or, more harshly, “Treason”?² It is important to remember that the missive was written in a time of crisis; the defense lines on the southern front were crumbling, the invading Egyptian forces were advancing on Tel Aviv, and the Givati Brigade suffered horrific losses in fierce battles.³ Nevertheless, the missive elicited poignant criticism from the affronted defenders of Nitsanim. On their return from captivity in Egypt, they complained that they were being scapegoated in an effort to cover up the brigade’s own blunders. Members of the Zionist leadership and the commanding ranks of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) also expressed misgivings about the missive’s message and tone. In May 1949, the military committee that had investigated the affair released its conclusions, both vindicating the Nitsanim fighters and denying any wrongdoing on the part of the Givati Brigade’s commanders.⁴ The committee’s conclusions did not, however, put an end to the debate surrounding the missive. The emotionally charged issues of failure, betrayal, blame, and guilt, which framed the Nitsanim affair, left an indelible mark on Israeli society, and the affair is in fact still publicly mentioned from time to time.⁵

The Nitsanim battle missive has been widely discussed in both academic studies and the popular media, and it will not be addressed any further here. Instead, I would like to shift the focus of attention to the 30 missives that followed it. They were written in four batches, in close proximity to the dates of the battles themselves, the first batch in June 1948, before the first ceasefire; the second batch between July 9 and 20, between the first and the second ceasefires; the third during the battles in October and November 1948; and the fourth between January and May 1949, when the brigade had moved from the Negev to the Sharon region and was charged with halting the Iraqi invasion. These battle missives were no longer concerned with denouncing surrendering Jewish fighters; their rhetorical force was now directed mainly at the

enemy. The distinctive features of the first missive, however, recurred in the ones that followed. These later missives also displayed an extremist, blunt, and violent rhetoric, rich in pathos, and used a high-flown poetic register. They, too, proved to exert great influence on the soldiers; and they, too, were met with reservation, criticism, and even scorn both within the IDF and in the wider public.

The battle missives were a novelty that Kovner introduced to the IDF. He was the IDF's first educational officer, and his activity in this capacity was intensive and wide ranging and had a remarkable effect on the brigade. Kovner regularly addressed the fighters just before they left for battle. And despite his oddness, his use of high-flown poetic language (some of which immigrant soldiers must surely have found difficult to understand), and the oversized helmet that hung awkwardly from his head, his words clearly left an impression. Uri Avneri, a fighter in the Givati Brigade's Shu'alei Shimshon,⁶ relates in a 1953 article that Kovner's words not only sketched a clear outline of the ensuing battle and eased soldiers' anxieties but also instilled in their hearts a sense of the battle's great significance: "In your hands," Kovner told the soldiers, "you hold the fate of Tel Aviv, of the entire country."⁷ More than 40 years after the war, Avneri still had vivid memories of how Kovner's words helped motivate the soldiers to go out night after night to fight in harsh and bloody battles, drawing on the staying power and determination that Kovner inspired in them.⁸

Kovner talked to the soldiers on the eve of battles and at swearing-in ceremonies and rushed to lift the spirits of companies that had suffered terrible losses. But his duties did not end there. He devoted himself to the education of immigrant soldiers, finding them adoptive families in nearby settlements, and was attentive to their special needs. Kovner also provided the soldiers with cultural events, concerts and lectures, and entertainment. He founded the Hishatron, effectively the first military entertainment ensemble in the IDF, which was headed by the famous singer Yaffa Yarkoni. The effect on the soldiers was remarkable. Eliyahu Eshel, the brigade's adjutant, who at first objected to the establishment of the Hishatron, later came to recognize its benefits: "the soldiers listened to Kovner and wept, listened to Yaffa and wept. It was like a prayer, a catharsis. We always knew many of them would shortly be killed."⁹

During the second ceasefire, Kovner organized a parade of the Givati Brigade in Rehovot. It was the first military parade held in Israel, and it was promptly criticized for its "Bolshevik" and even "Fascist" militarism.¹⁰ But Kovner was not deterred. The parade strengthened the powerful fraternity of fighting men and provided them with public

[101]

Abba Kovner



Michal Arbell



recognition of their contribution and sacrifice. Kovner's empathy for the fighters was deep, and his actions were guided by an understanding of their emotional needs. His devoted and unceasing work on their behalf had a crucial impact on the morale of the brigade. His activities—education, welfare, entertainment, indoctrination, ceremonies, and more—served above all to instill in each soldier a strong sense of solidarity.

This was not a small task. In 1948–49 there were as many as 9,500 soldiers in the Givati Brigade, and it was by far the largest brigade in the IDF and demographically the most diverse. The soldiers came from kibbutsim (collectives) and *moshavim* (cooperative villages), as well as from cities. Some were born or brought up in pre-state Israel, and some were new immigrants from Europe, America, North Africa, and Arab countries. Some were refugees from Europe, recently released from British detention camps in Cyprus; others were volunteers, Jews and non-Jews, who came to fight the war. Some of the soldiers were veteran fighters from the British army; some were former members of the Haganah and Etsel paramilitary organizations, but many others were youngsters with no former military training.¹¹ For all that, Zvi Zur, the second commander of the Givati Brigade's 54th Battalion and later the IDF chief of staff, had stated that the Givati Brigade, its heterogeneous demography notwithstanding, was the most cohesive and unified brigade that he had ever encountered in all his years of service.¹²

Solidarity between Israeli fighters who had grown up in neighboring settlements and trained together in the elite units of the Palmah was expected, as were the bonds between these fighters and their own families and communities in the surrounding kibbutsim and villages. Yaa-kov Prolov (Perry), the commander of the Givati Brigade's 52nd Battalion, described the "outstanding ties" between the brigade and the neighboring settlements that it defended. At night, civilian volunteers came to dig trenches so that the soldiers could get some sleep, and in the morning fathers met with their sons, who then went out to fight. Volunteers also buried the dead, looked after the wounded, consoled bereaved relatives, and arranged financial aid for families that had lost their sole providers.¹³ The Givati Brigade's unique achievement was not in cultivating those preexisting social ties but rather in ensuring that the new immigrants, as well as the youth from the poor southern neighborhood of Tel Aviv, would not be shunned by this tight social group and could fully partake of the solidarity within the brigade. The (largely) successful (at least to a certain extent) integration of soldiers from very different social backgrounds into the brigade was attributed

to Shimon Avidan's personal charisma and great devotion, which certainly influenced the brigade's senior and junior commanders. Kovner's activity as an educational officer, however, was equally important. It was Kovner who assured the soldiers that each one of them was an essential part of the "fighting collective"¹⁴ and that their commanders, and the brigade as a whole, cared for them, looked after them, and relied on them. This sense of confidence and comradeship enhanced the fighters' loyalty and strengthened their readiness to risk their lives repeatedly in battle. As Porat notes, this task of uniting Jewish fighters struck a chord with Kovner: "Kovner's Vilna ideas about Jews joining forces and cooperating regardless of origin, language, or political opinions, were transformed into 'the fighting collective,' a term he coined in the forest."¹⁵

Kovner could not, of course, reach every unit just before it departed for battle. And so, in order to widen the dissemination of his exhortations, he began to compose battle missives. The missives became immensely popular among the soldiers, and, to answer increasing demand, he translated some of them into Yiddish and several other languages. The missives were always written at night, both because Kovner would stay up waiting to hear the news from the front and because he was unable to sleep soundly, for years keeping bunkmates awake as he screamed in Yiddish in his sleep. Indeed, these missives carry a sense of urgency that infected the soldiers. As Porat puts it,

The battle pages were dramatic and rhetorical. They exhorted and encouraged the soldiers to victory in battle, promised that devotion, patience, courage, and brotherhood in battle would, in the end, bear fruit, praised the commanders and fostered trust in their judgment despite the first defeats, and reminded them that the key to victory was not the official estimate of the relative strengths of the forces but rather the spirit of the individual fighter.¹⁶

The missives compared the Egyptian army to the biblical Egyptian oppressor and the Israeli fighters to the biblical David, who defeated Goliath, a stronger and bigger enemy than himself, and to Samson, who did not hesitate to sacrifice his own life fighting the Philistines on the very same land on and for which the Givati Brigade was fighting its own bitter battles. These comparisons between the 1948 war and biblical events, as well as the call for vengeance in the name of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, put the Givati Brigade, in Porat's words, "into the perspective of Jewish history": they "created a continuum of greatness and heroism; they were part of a war between good and evil."¹⁷

[103]

Abba Kovner

●
Michal Arbell

Nothing similar appeared in the IDF's propaganda of the time. The literary character of Kovner's battle missives, and their excited tone and high-flown rhetoric, stood in stark contrast to the matter-of-fact prose of special daily commands and other military publications during the war. Even the most flowery "special commands of the day," such as the command that named the Moriah Battalion and assigned it the task of protecting Jerusalem in March 1948,¹⁸ lack the dramatic power and high literary style of Kovner's missives; they are more pompous and less direct and have little in common with the missives' startling and violent content.

Kovner's missives make liberal use of literary elements. One of the most conspicuous features is their dense intertextuality. Reuven Shoham points out the numerous allusions to the Bible, to the Hebrew poetry of Hayim Nahman Bialik and Natan Alterman, to the novels of the Soviet writers Nikolai Ostrovsky and Alexander Beck, and to the prose of Ernest Hemingway. Shoham explores further the influence of the Hebrew poets Shaul Tchernichovsky and Uri Zvi Grinberg on the missives.¹⁹ But the missives' literary nature does not begin or end with these cases of intertextuality. They oscillate between sober accounts of the military situation in mundane, matter-of-fact prose, and extravagant, often poetic rhetoric. Kovner even includes the opening of one of the missives (dated October 23, 1948), with minor modifications, in his long poem "Farewell to the South," published in 1949.²⁰ Another missive, dated October 12, 1948, is a poem constructed of a long quote from Psalm 18:34–43. Other missives include short poetic passages. Some of the titles could easily have been used as titles for poems, such as "Let Not the Tired Heart Betray" (July 19, 1948) or the biblical "Pitched Between Socoh and Azekah in Ephes-dammim" (October 23, 1948).²¹ Most of the missives use the kind of expressionist poetics also found in Kovner's first long poem, "While Still There is Night," published in 1947, which focuses on the experience of a Jewish partisan in the woods near Vilna.²² Prominent poetic features of the poem—tense rhythm, created by repeated, distraught outcries that end with exclamation marks; short, almost severed, sentences; paratactic syntax and anaphoric repetitions; the use of spread letters for emphasis; nightmarish images of personified body parts, weapons, vehicles, buildings, plants, and forces of nature that operate as independent beings, in which the partisan appears as a beast's claw and the enemy as a menacing tooth—all of these expressionist elements resurface in the battle missives. The world that Kovner creates in the missives, like the world he creates in "While Still There is Night" and in his later long poem, "Farewell to the South," is constructed and measured by the "enormous

yardstick of his emotions,” to borrow a phrase from Kasimir Edschmid’s seminal expressionist manifesto, published in 1919. “This outburst from inside,” writes Edschmid about the expressionist poet, “relates him to everything.”²³ In the missives, the stark shifts between unadorned reports of battles and “outburst from inside” generate the turbulent, expressionist quality of the text.

The battle missives were set apart from all other IDF propaganda communications not only by their literary style but also by their extreme content and violent rhetoric. They are saturated with blood: the blood of the defenders, the blood of the enemy soldiers, the blood that must be avenged, the blood that fertilizes the land, and the biblical plague of blood that struck the ancient Egyptians. All the missives, from the second up until the last batch (except the last few missives, which were written in 1949, after the fighting had ended) open with the heading “Death to the Invaders!” printed in bold font. Calls for the enemy’s death also appear in the missives’ text. For example, the missive “The Plague of Stench” (July 17, 1948) ends with the call: “With a curse, with a prayer, with love—pull the trigger: Slaughter. Slaughter. Slaughter. And to the invaders there shall be no hope.”²⁴

The missives refer to Egyptian soldiers in dehumanizing metaphors: they are called “dogs,” “Nile dogs,” “snakes,” “vipers,” “shredded snake,” and “dangerous wounded animals” to be slaughtered. The dead bodies of enemy soldiers are denied the respect conventionally accorded human corpses, being referred to instead as beastly carrion. They become filth, dead meat for vultures to clean off the earth (October 21, 1948); or the “waste of the invaders’ corpses” that will “yet fertilize our blooming fields” (July 12, 1948); or reeking, repellent, and contaminated feces (July 17, 1948). Kovner ridicules a bulletin from Radio Cairo announcing that King Farouk had visited wounded Egyptian soldiers and was pleased by the high spirits of his noble warriors. Referring to the stench that came from the unburied corpses of Egyptian soldiers, Kovner calls out to the king:

King Farouk, King Farouk, could you be kind enough to take off your draping majestic gown, come to the fields of Negba and pick up the stinking leftovers of those high spirits? They make our lives very difficult—because by now we are used to breathe the clean, fresh, pure air of our homeland.

Kovner concludes: “King Farouk—he won’t come to pick up his feces.”²⁵

Although today such words would likely be condemned as abhorrent, in Israel in 1948—not many years after World War II, when some

[105]

Abba Kovner



Michal Arbell

Soviet propaganda took similar lines—they were less obviously outrageous. Some of the Givati Brigade’s commanders had mixed feelings about the missives, regarding them as stimulating but problematic and pompous. But other commanders had nothing but high praise for them.²⁶ Nine years after the war, Avidan celebrated Kovner’s capacity to discern precisely the psychological needs of the warriors, as well as his outstanding writing skills. According to Avidan, Kovner’s much-criticized slogan “Death to the Invaders” was as effective as a whole battalion.²⁷ The brigade’s soldiers, at least the large majority of them, eagerly anticipated the missives, and the missives’ reputation traveled beyond the brigade and the IDF.²⁸ Kovner’s rhetoric even had an impact—albeit limited—on other IDF publications. After the second ceasefire, the IDF headquarters’ Cultural Department supplemented the matter-of-fact prose of their updates with the concluding exclamation “Death to the invaders!”²⁹ A more complex example of the missives’ influence can be found in the “command for the day” (*pekudat yom*) issued by General Moshe Carmel, the commander of the north front, on October 31, 1948, celebrating the triumph over Fawzi al-Kaukji’s Arab Liberation Army in the Galilee. Unlike the IDF’s usual propaganda, Carmel uses lofty language, rhythmic repetitions, and excited rhetoric, referring to the enemy as “the savages from the desert” and concluding with a recognizably “Kovnerian” exclamation: “Death for those who wished us dead!! Freedom for the people of Israel and the land!”³⁰ Nevertheless, Carmel’s text, though certainly flowery and triumphant in its rhetoric, avoids entirely the more disturbing contents of Kovner’s missives.

Nonetheless, it remains the case that the positive reception of Kovner’s themes, style, and rhetoric within the IDF was limited and that, by and large, his battle missives met with scathing criticism. Kovner’s propaganda dominated an entire meeting of education officers on August 1, 1948. Kovner was not present and his name was not mentioned in the meeting’s minutes. The general view was that, although it was necessary to use propaganda in order to invigorate the fighters’ spirits, and although the battle against the invading forces demanded harsher tones, the Givati missives had crossed the line. One officer remarked that the missives bordered on sadism and that the Jewish people, who had felt the blade of slaughter on their own flesh, should not be advocating such slaughter. Others were concerned with the missives’ potential to render soldiers uncivilized wild beasts; in the future, those soldiers might become civilians who would permit themselves to commit rape.³¹ Some officers criticized the missives’ shrill tone and inappropriate use of slogans coined by the Soviet army in World War II; the soldiers, they claimed, found the missives’ turns of phrase laughable.³²

In the same month, Kovner was summoned to the administrative officer of the southern front, Ornan Azaryahu (nicknamed Sinai), who was shocked by the missives. He attributed the teaching of hate that the missives spread to the influence of Soviet World War II propaganda and told Kovner that the Egyptians were not Nazis. Kovner retorted that Azaryahu, who was never a warrior, understood nothing about fighting—that it is impossible to fight without hate—and declared that he intended to keep writing the missives unless ordered otherwise by Shimon Avidan. Another meeting between Alon, Azaryahu, Avidan, and Kovner took place in August 1948. Tensions between the Palmah and the Givati Brigade had risen, and it was evident that Alon saw eye to eye on this matter with David Ben-Gurion, Israel's prime minister and minister of defense. Nevertheless, Avidan, the much-admired and willful commander of the Givati Brigade, supported Kovner and rejected the views of Alon—his own commander—disregarding the ensuing political fallout.³³ The officers decided that future missives would be approved by Alon before publication, but this decision was never implemented.³⁴

A more consequential rebuke, however, came from Kovner's own Ha-shomer Ha-tsa'ir movement. Kovner knew that members of Ha-shomer Ha-tsa'ir condemned his missives as "Fascist horror propaganda," and after receiving a letter of rebuke from Meir Ya'ari, the leader of Ha-shomer Ha-tsa'ir, Ha-kibbutz Ha-artsi, and Mapam, Kovner demanded a meeting in order to resolve the matter. In January 1949, Kovner met with prominent leaders of Ha-shomer Ha-tsa'ir, who strongly advised him to stop writing his controversial texts. Kovner was deeply offended and felt betrayed by his own people.³⁵ This meeting, however, left a mark on Kovner, and his last missives were indeed written in a comparatively restrained tone. Calls to "cut off the enemy's claws" remain,³⁶ but all in all his 1949 missives are less gory and demeaning, and some of them emphasize the importance of treating the Arab villagers and captive Arab soldiers humanely and discourage looting. It should be noted, though, that nearly all heavy fighting had ended on January 7, 1949. At this point, the Givati Brigade was stationed in the Sharon region, and the military situation was entirely different than it had been in the days of Kovner's more vitriolic missives. Perhaps Kovner, for all his stubbornness, saw no serious harm in trying to placate the leaders of his movement, the primary threat having passed and the motivation for teaching hatred significantly lessened.

But why was teaching hatred so important to Kovner in the first place? What drove him to such extreme rhetoric, no matter the opposition or the fallout? In the years before the 1948 war, Kovner

[107]

Abba Kovner

●
Michal Arbell

suffered acutely from the schism between himself and the leadership of both the Zionist movement and Ha-shomer Ha-tsa'ir, as a result of his plan for vengeance after World War II. Keeping that in mind, Kovner's readiness to alienate himself again from the country's leaders, as well as from his movement, seems puzzling. There is no doubt that in his view the missives served an important purpose. But what was that purpose?

Kovner's fellow officers, and later researchers such as Shalom Lurie,³⁷ offered two explanations for the missives' hate-mongering. One explanation is that Kovner was utterly captivated by Soviet World War II propaganda. As Lurie notes, Kovner gave one of his missives (July 13, 1948) the title "Negbagrad," referring to Stalingrad; another title, "Invaders, for whom did the bells toll?" (November 11, 1948), alludes to Hemingway's antifascist novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; and he kept repeating the famous Spanish Civil War slogan *non passarán*—"they shall not pass." According to Dina Porat, however, Kovner expressly distanced himself from the Soviet *politruks'* (political commissars') style as soon as he arrived in pre-state Israel.³⁸ An alternate explanation for his extreme rhetoric is that Kovner channeled vengeful feelings, originally directed at the Nazis, toward the Arabs. Following World War II, Kovner founded a group whose express aim was to kill six million Germans by poisoning the water supplies of large German cities. Kovner had arrived in pre-state Israel in order to rally support for the group and to procure a potent poison for a more restricted revenge plan, the target of which was detained SS soldiers. Although he encountered quite a bit of resistance from Zionist leaders of the Yishuv, including Ha-shomer Ha-tsa'ir leaders, Kovner did not abort his mission and was in fact able to get hold of some poison. He was, however, caught by British authorities while trying to sneak out of the country on board a navy ship, disguised as a British soldier, and had to throw the poison into the sea.³⁹ Are the battle missives, then, the product of Kovner's frustrated revenge plans? As Lurie points out, Kovner calls the Egyptian soldiers *kal-gasim* (cruel enemy soldiers), a derogatory word commonly used in reference to the Nazis. In a missive signed by Avidan, Kovner urges the citizens of Israel, the defenders of the settlements, and the soldiers of Givati to avenge the death of six million Jews in the Holocaust by fighting the Egyptian soldiers:

With love. With hate. / For our homes, for the lives of our children, /
and the eyes of eighty generations which are raised towards us, / and
the souls of six million—the souls that did not get to see the day—call

us from the ground: let the great revenge come—let the people of Israel be free, forever!⁴⁰

[109]

Porat rejects this explanation, too. She claims that although Kovner equates the Egyptians with the Nazis at various junctures, he also takes care to distinguish between the two. Nor does he call for indiscriminate massacre. He beseeches the soldiers in one missive not to harm captive enemy combatants and in another to avoid looting enemy property (July 9 and December 5, 1948). His vehement anti-Egyptian rhetoric notwithstanding, Kovner sees the common Egyptian soldier as a victim of exploitation by the high command and politicians, members of the Egyptian upper classes. In the beginning of 1949, as the Givati Brigade was fighting Iraqi forces in the Arab Triangle region, Kovner took pains to distinguish the invading army from the local Arab population, instructing soldiers to treat the Arab villagers decently, as they were to share the same country in the future.⁴¹

Abba Kovner

●
Michal Arbell

Indeed, according to the testimonies of Givati Brigade commanders, Abba Kovner tried to teach the soldiers to avoid war crimes:

From the first days of war Givati was characterized by its high standards of behavior. I don't claim that no one of our men ever looted, but it was rare. I don't claim that we never expelled [villagers] and that we always treated the captives as we should have done, but it seems to me that we were better than others, and that because of the great efforts taken by the leading group—Shimon [Avidan], Me'irke [Davidson] and Abba Kovner—who had high moral values and emphasized the importance of all that, making sure that the message would be delivered to the troops.⁴²

Reuven Shoham claims that in Kovner's long poem on the 1948 war, "Farewell to the South"—in contrast to the battle missives—there is a distinct theme of empathy for the Arab villagers and guilt for the ruin of their villages.⁴³

Porat offers a different explanation for the missives' extreme rhetoric. It stems, she argues, from Kovner's nationalistic views and from his mental state of acute anxiety during those stressful months:

The War of Independence only helped to distance Kovner from official Hashomer Hatzair leftist ideology. At the center of his worldview stood his unequivocal fear and unshakable concern for the continued existence of the Jewish people and the need to defend it. To his general fear, born during the Holocaust, was added the information, in 1948, that only a hair's breadth separated victory from defeat during the War of

Independence and that at the end of May and the beginning of June the state of Israel was very close to being a brief historical episode.⁴⁴

[110]

*Jewish
Social
Studies*

•

Vol. 18
No. 3

Although Kovner was disappointed with Soviet Bolshevism and regarded the regime as antisemitic, murderous, and oppressive, it seems likely that he was influenced by the Soviet propaganda of World War II, especially Ilya Ehrenburg's articles and columns. Although he did not confuse the Egyptian soldiers with the Nazis, he did construct in the missives a coherent narrative connecting the biblical Pharaoh, the Nazis, and the modern Egyptian army. It is also probable that Kovner's agitated state of mind during the heavy battles in the summer and fall of 1948 had an impact on the tone of his writing. Nevertheless, none of those influences, political views, and anxieties completely *dictated* his choices with regard to the missives' style and contents. Kovner's writing was guided to a significant extent by a deliberate and particular choice: he was writing for a certain purpose, and the striking style and rhetoric of the missives are best explained in light of that purpose.

Kovner was a prolific writer of pamphlets and educational texts from very early in his career, when he was a group leader—and later the head—of the Ha-shomer Ha-tsa'ir youth movement in Vilna.⁴⁵ This activity continued when he was a leader of a Jewish underground group in the Vilna ghetto. The unique style of Kovner's battle missives is evident in his famous manifesto from January 1, 1942, originally written in Yiddish and later translated by Kovner into Hebrew. He states—for the first time in occupied Europe, and three weeks before the “final solution to the Jewish question” was presented in the Wannsee Conference in Berlin—that the killing of the Jews by the Germans is not sporadic but part of a concerted and systematic plan to annihilate all the Jews in Europe, starting in Lithuania. Kovner concludes by calling on youth “not to go like lambs to slaughter” and to resist the Nazis.

Many of the characteristics of Kovner's battle missives are already evident in this early text, including the unique style of Hebrew, the literary qualities (for example, the *ubi sunt* [“where are they”] formula),⁴⁶ the excessive use of repetitions, questions and exclamations, and the admixture of information and agitated prescriptions. Moreover, Kovner imports, with some modifications, the penultimate line of the ghetto manifesto—“Brothers! Better to fall as free fighters than live at our murderers' mercy!”—into his first battle missive. As noted before, the controversial Nitsanim missive builds up to the exclamation: “better to fall in the trenches of home than surrender to a murderous invader.” Nevertheless, there is a substantial point of

difference between the ghetto manifesto and the later battle missives: the former text is not saturated with blood, nor does it render the Nazis inhuman; surprisingly enough, it does not teach hatred.

It was Soviet propaganda that introduced Kovner to the rhetoric of hatred that he would use later. In June 1941, immediately after the invasion of Russia by the Nazis, Ilya Ehrenburg started to write his famous war articles in Russian newspapers. In a time of crisis, during which three million Soviet soldiers were killed and four million captured, with the German army advancing toward Moscow, Ehrenburg took it upon himself to prepare the soldiers for battle mentally. Driven by a sense of great urgency, Ehrenburg wrote approximately two thousand articles over four years of fighting. In his eyes, the problem was that Soviet soldiers did not hate their enemy enough. He had to uproot the soldiers' misplaced respect for the Germans' "higher culture" and their misplaced sense of solidarity with the simple German soldiers, who were themselves workers or peasants. As Joshua Rubinstein writes, "It was Ehrenburg's self-appointed task to shatter these myths and teach the Red Army how to hate."⁴⁷ In the beginning of 1942, with the Germans in control of nearly half of Soviet territory, the desperate Ehrenburg quoted in an article entitled "Kill!" three letters that had been found on dead German soldiers and that described the enslavement, systematic starvation, and physical abuse to which captive Russian soldiers were subjected. Ehrenburg concluded his article with the declaration that the Germans were not human beings and repeated his command: "Kill!" Ehrenburg made use of bloody imagery and of references to historical events and to European literature, to the Bible, and to Greek mythology, although it was clear to him that many of the soldiers were not familiar with those literary and religious texts: "We will liberate Kiev. The enemy's blood will wash the enemy's footprints. Like the ancient Phoenix, Kiev will rise from the ashes, young and beautiful. Sorrow feeds hatred. Hatred strengthens hope."⁴⁸ Ehrenburg's popularity and prestige among Soviet fighters, and among the socialist partisans near Vilna, was enormous, and Kovner's later battle missives undoubtedly show the marks of Ehrenburg's influence, not only in their hate-mongering but also in their evocation of history and culture and in their gory rhetoric.

It may be the case that Kovner saw himself as following in the footsteps of Ehrenburg, whom he met in Vilna in a new historical context after World War II. Nevertheless, although Kovner was influenced by Ehrenburg's writing, he was certainly not copying the style and content of his articles in an indiscriminate manner. Far from it, Kovner was always his own man, opinionated and stubborn. He appropriated from

[111]

Abba Kovner



Michal Arbell

Soviet propaganda what he found useful and constructed his own distinctive brand of rhetoric, fit for its own historical context and purpose.

What, then, was the purpose of Kovner's calls for slaughter? Unlike Ehrenburg, Kovner was concerned neither with the Israeli soldiers' respect for the Egyptians nor with their feelings of comradeship toward the enemy's working-class soldiers. What end does the portrayal of enemy soldiers as animals and of their corpses as carrion serve? What drove Kovner to describe the night of fighting, in a missive entitled "The Anglo-Farouk Dogs Are under Our Wheels!" (July 14, 1948), as "the plague of blood"? Why did he conclude the missive with the words: "And suddenly—the earth grew supple—dead bodies! *Dozens of bodies under their wheels!* / The driver recoiled: human beings under our wheels! Wait. He remembered Negba, Beit-Dars—and *ran over!* / Do not recoil, boys: murderous dogs—*blood be their lot!*"⁴⁹

I suggest that the fundamental purpose of this shocking text, and the purpose of many other of Kovner's battle missives, was to free the soldiers of guilt, to *purify* them, in a ritual manner, from the killing and the death. In the battle missives, Kovner undertakes a sort of shamanic role. One of the main activities of shamanism is the exorcism of evil spirits;⁵⁰ Kovner became the soldiers' magician-priest, purging them of the contamination of bloodshed. The ritual character of the missives is evident in the stimulating rhetoric, in the hypnotic rhythm, constructed through repetition and rhyme, and in the language of oath, which carries an almost bewitching power.

The attribution of a shamanic self-construction to an ardent socialist might not be as far-fetched as it seems. In 1956 Kovner traveled for four months in South America as an emissary for Ha-shomer Hatzair. According to him, the most impressive event in the whole visit was his participation in a Candomblé religious ritual in a rural area in northern Brazil. Kovner put this experience into words in his fourth long poem, "Earth of Sand," published in 1961. During the ritual, amidst people with whom he was unable to converse, Kovner felt a spiritual elation that he had never felt before. The hypnotic, repetitive roar of drums and the stomp of many dancing feet, without a word, for long hours, drew Kovner forcefully to the performed "pantomime of the soul."⁵¹ Through the collective ecstasy he sensed the presence of a powerful, intangible entity; and when it was all over, as he was waking up, his long-dead mother was speaking to him as he held her in his arms.⁵²

Kovner addressed his task as a purifier of guilt, first and foremost, by meeting the horror head-on. The battle missives articulate this horror and set it at the forefront of the stage. In stark contrast to all the other

educational officers of his time, and to the IDF's propaganda department, he does not ignore the horrible things that the soldier does, the horrible things that are done to him, the sights that he sees and the stench that he smells. Kovner pointedly does not construct a wall of sanitized speech between the soldiers' traumatic experiences and the arena of public discourse. If, during hand-to-hand fighting, a soldier must insert a bayonet into the body of the man in front of him, each man clearly seeing the eyes of the other, Kovner writes about it (October 19, 1948); if the enemy tries to choke him or to bite his throat, Kovner writes about it (October 21, 1948); if the soldier wades in enemy blood or if the wheels of his jeep run over enemy corpses, Kovner writes about it (July 14, 1948); if the brains of his comrade spill on the ground, Kovner writes about it (November 10, 1948); and if the stench of enemy corpses is carried through the air, Kovner does not ignore the horrible stink but writes about it (July 17, 1948).

Following his work with shell-shocked veterans of World War I, Sigmund Freud realized that the trauma lying at the heart of these soldiers' war experiences is unspeakable; it can only be accessed through repetition.⁵³ Kovner's first long poem, "While Still There is Night," portrays one night in the life of a Jewish partisan in the woods. No horrors are presented in the poem, and not one death is described.⁵⁴ In the introduction to the poem, Kovner writes:

And I have told myself: let me try to write all this in a book. Let the story of the woods rise.

Strange. When I began pondering it—a picture floated, of many visions, and was fixed before my eyes with no order, devoid of the development of a story. In the absence of *progress* in walking, paths crisscrossed each other. The sequence of time was blurred, the strands of the plot were unwoven—and from the memory of anguish I could extract nothing but blotch after blotch.⁵⁵

This passage may plausibly be interpreted as a reflection on the expressionist character of "While Still There is Night"; but it is primarily a testimony to the difficulty of putting trauma into words. For Kovner, then, the trauma of the battles in the Negev in 1948 is a recurring one, and he can—partially, imperfectly, with difficulty—give words to it as well as to the horrors of the past;⁵⁶ and it is his expressionist poetics that allows him to echo the cry of war. By speaking the unspeakable, Kovner releases the soldier from his isolated prison of shameful horror that cannot be spoken of, that must not be spoken of, that has no place in the outside world. For Kovner, those horrors of the battlefield are not the abject, the unspeakable residue that

[113]

Abba Kovner

●
Michal Arbell

should be quietly separated from the heroic and so-called respectable aspects of war.

[114]

*Jewish
Social
Studies*



Vol. 18
No. 3

Through the battle missives, Uri Avneri says, “that man with the sad eyes became a receptacle which absorbed the spirit of the entire brigade, which listened to its heartbeat and expressed its unspoken feelings in wonderful words, flying and echoing in space.”⁵⁷ According to Avneri, Kovner’s missives unified the soldiers into a collective. As Emil Durkheim argued, creating, preserving, and reflecting the community as a cohesive collective is the essential function of ritual activity.⁵⁸

Kovner cleanses the guilt of blood with blood—and lots of it. This is a practice mentioned as early as Heraclitus.⁵⁹ And, indeed, the battle missives are flooded with blood: “And yet another week. Another week of momentous efforts. Two days of desperate attempts by the enemy to tilt the balance in his favor—and in blood, in blood he was submerged. Instead of occupation, loss upon loss. Instead of a parade, a platform of carcasses” (July 15, 1948).⁶⁰ “Captives fell into our hands, some officers among them. Their commander fell. The deputy fell. And his officer—taken captive. The enemy will try to realign itself. Please, Pharaoh’s great-grandsons, please: only in puddles of blood!” And, “After the attack, the canyon leading to Gal-On was red with blood.” And yet again: “And if the enemy rises again, the canyon too will rise and gush with blood” (July 16, 1948).⁶¹ Kovner renames the newly taken Iraq-Suidan police fortress Yoav Tower, after “Yitzhak ‘Yoav’ Dubno, Negba’s commander, whose brain nourished a defended land in Israel, his blood quenching the thirst of the homeland’s soil. And the children of Negba will plant flowers in the mountain” (November 10, 1948).⁶²

The most important accomplishment of the missives, then, is the articulation of the horrors of war. It is through that very articulation that the cleansing ritual takes place. But Kovner does not stop there; he further redeems the soldiers from the stain of bloodshed by stressing the justice of their deeds. A strain of ethical reasoning recurs in the missives—as if to say, “We did not want this war; the enemy rose against us to annihilate us, *foreign* forces invaded *our* territory, and we had no choice.” A day after the first battle in which Givati Brigade soldiers had to use their bayonets to fend off Egyptian forces, Kovner spoke of the horror of the physical struggle, incorporating an altered segment of a poem by Hayim Nahman Bialik: “You must have hated us to no end / to turn us into beasts of prey / and the entire nation shall rise/ and call: revenge!” (October 19, 1948).⁶³ According to this passage, the Egyptians, in their hate, forced on the Israeli soldiers beastly behavior: hand-to-hand fighting, stabbing, and biting. For

this offense the fighters shall rightly seek revenge. The guilt incurred by stabbing a human being to death thus becomes an indictment of the enemy. In the battle missive of the following day, Kovner—adapting a poem by Natan Alterman and thereby inverting its meaning—repeats what he takes to be the moral justification for bayonet fighting: “For righteous is the bayonet. And the blood has been let. Because the vision of reprisal says: Avenge! Avenge!” (October 21, 1948).⁶⁴ To this ethical justification Kovner adds a metaphorical one, perhaps more powerful than the former. If the enemy is considered to be not human but a lowly animal—a dog—or a dangerous one—a snake—then killing him is not tantamount to taking a *human* life. To step in the blood of the snake, to run over the snake’s corpse, to seek to rid oneself of the putridity of the snake’s flesh—these are not the sorts of actions and feelings that transgress the appropriate attitude of a civilized human being toward the body of the deceased.

The last cleansing ritual concerns the death of comrades. The Givati Brigade’s fighters went out to battle after battle, always returning without some of their closest friends, bearing the guilt of survival and, at the same time, fearing that they too might soon fail to return. Kovner adopted the Soviet—and partisan—custom of naming weapons looted from the enemy after fallen members of the brigade. The missives named the dead of the previous day, described their valor, and announced which weapons would from then on bear their names. Thus, the soldier who only the day before saw his friend die now went out to battle holding the mortar that bore his friend’s name, reassured that no one was forgotten.

Dan Miron argues that “Farewell to the South,” Kovner’s long poem on the 1948 war, stresses the danger of blurring the distinction between life and death. After the Holocaust and the death of six thousand young soldiers in the 1948 war, the sense of grief and guilt oriented toward the dead must be acknowledged, so that the living may be properly separated from the dead and the young country embrace life. In the poem, Kovner uses—and defies—the potent image of *ha-met ha-hay*, the walking dead (son, lover, comrade, soldier), molded by Natan Alterman and much used by the poets and writers of the 1948 generation. Renouncing the ethos of worshiping the dead, Kovner concludes his long poem with the dead hero—Dambam—telling his beloved Shlomit not to “touch” his death and not to cling to his dead body on a “nightly road.”⁶⁵ In this work, written in the wake of the war, Kovner the poet addresses the complex need to acknowledge guilt and grief and to leave the dead on their nightly roads. In the missives, however, written during the crucial and uncertain days of heavy

[115]

Abba Kovner



Michal Arbell

fighting, Kovner the politruk-shaman takes it upon himself to cleanse the soldiers from their burden of guilt and grief and *summons* the dead, reincarnated as firearms and machines of war, to accompany them on their way to battle.

Notes

All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

- 1 IDF Archive, 7–1147–2002, 17, Tel ha-shomer Compound, Kiryat Ono. I would like to thank the IDF Archive and especially Mr. Doron Aviad for their generous help.
- 2 See Zvika Dror, *Nitsanim: Kibbutz she-nivnah pa'amayim* (Tel Aviv, 1990), 117–23, and Dina Porat, *The Fall of a Sparrow: The Life and Times of Abba Kovner*, trans. Elizabeth Yuval (Stanford, 2000), 253.
- 3 See Avraham Eilon, *Hativat Giv'ati mul ha-polesh ha-mitsri* (Tel Aviv, 1963), 219–42, 293–332, and Shaul Dagan and Eliyahu Yakir, *Shimon Avidan*—“Giv'ati”: *Ha-ish she-hayah la-hativah* (Givat Haviva, 1995), 21.
- 4 IDF Archive, 17–6–1147–2002.
- 5 See Porat, *Fall of a Sparrow*, 254. The Nitsanim affair was last mentioned in an interview of Yizhak Pundak by Avihai Beker in *Haaretz*, May 20, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1228461.html>.
- 6 Kovner named Givati's motorized commando unit Shu'alei Shimshon (Samson's Foxes). According to the biblical story (see Judges 15:1–5), Samson, in order to avenge himself upon the Philistines, attached torches to the tails of three hundred foxes and let them run through the fields of his enemies, burning down their crops.
- 7 Uri Avineri, *Ha-olam Ha-zeh*, Sept. 3, 1953.
- 8 See Porat, *Fall of a Sparrow*, 243–44.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 24 and 240–41. Also see Dagan and Yakir, *Shimon Avidan*, 23.
- 10 See Porat, *Fall of a Sparrow*, 241–43.
- 11 See Dagan and Yakir, *Shimon Avidan*, 12–16.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 13 See Dagan and Yakir, *Shimon Avidan*, 21–23. Also see Avidan's 1958 lecture, cited on pp. 245–46.
- 14 See Meir Davidson's article cited in Dagan and Yakir, *Shimon Avidan*, 250.
- 15 Porat, *Fall of a Sparrow*, 239.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 245.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 IDF Archive, 189–959–1949, 35.

- 19 Reuven Shoham, "Yahasim bein-tekstualim u-mashma'utam ha-retorit be-'daf kravi' le-Abba Kovner," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 17 (1999): 99–120.
- 20 On the significance of incorporating the battle missive into the poem, see Benjamin Hrushovski, "Abba Kovner veva-poemah ha-'ivrit ha-hadashah," in *Abba Kovner: Mivhar maamre bikoret 'al yetsirato*, ed. Shalom Lurie (Tel Aviv, 1988), 77; Reuven Shoham, *Ha-mareh veva-kolot: Keriah kashuvah bi-"feridah meha-darom" le-Abba Kovner* (Tel Aviv, 1994), 85–86; Ofra Yeglin, "Ha-shir asher hushar ba-kevish," *Sadan* 5 (2002): 162–64.
- 21 See 1 Samuel 17:1.
- 22 On the anthropomorphism of central entities in the poem (the wood, the swamp, the bridge, and the wind), see Hrushovski, "Abba Kovner," 55.
- 23 Kasimir Edschmid, *Über den Expressionismus in der Literatur und die neue Dichtung* (Berlin, 1919 [1917]), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/32450/32450-h/32450-h.htm>.
- 24 IDF Archive, 118–6127–1949, 94.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 26 See Dagan and Yakir, *Shimon Avidan*, 23–24, and Dina Porat, *Me-'ever la-gashmi: Parashat hayav shel Aba Kovner* (Tel Aviv, 2000), 266–68.
- 27 Dagan and Yakir, *Shimon Avidan*, 245. Also see Shalom Lurie, "Abba Kovner: Ha-ish u-mehozot shirato," in Lurie, *Abba Kovner*, 214–15, and Porat, *Fall of a Sparrow*, 246–47.
- 28 See Porat, *Me-'ever la-gashmi*, 267, and *idem*, *Fall of a Sparrow*, 247.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 248.
- 30 IDF Archive, 3–715–1949, 109.
- 31 At no point in the missives does Kovner call for rape; on the contrary, some of the missives emphasize the importance of a humane attitude toward the Arab villagers.
- 32 IDF Archive, 75–913–2004, 18–19.
- 33 Although Avidan was regarded as one of the most able and brilliant commanders in the IDF, his military career was impeded by Ben-Gurion, presumably both because he was a member of Ha-shomer Hatzair and because of his uncompromising independence. See Dagan and Yakir, *Shimon Avidan*, 155–68.
- 34 See Porat, *Me-'ever la-gashmi*, 268–69.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 269–71.
- 36 IDF Archive, 35–45–2008, 50.
- 37 Lurie, "Abba Kovner," 215–16.
- 38 See Porat, *Me-'ever la-gashmi*, 265.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 Lurie, "Abba Kovner," 214, 216. The missive signed by Avidan and written by Kovner was published in July 1948 (IDF Archive, 7–1147–2002, 8).
- 41 See Porat, *Me-'ever la-gashmi*, 265.
- 42 Zvi Zur, quoted in Dagan and Yakir, *Shimon Avidan*, 131.

[117]

Abba Kovner



Michal Arbell

- 43 Reuven Shoham, *Ha-mareh veba-kolot*, 22–25, 50, 60–73. Also see Hagai Rogani, *Mul ha-kefar she-harav: Ha-shirah ha-ivrit veba-sikhsukh ha-yehudi-arvi 1929–1967* (Haifa, 2006).
- 44 See Porat, *Fall of a Sparrow*, 250.
- 45 Kovner was active in the Ha-shomer Ha-tsa'ir youth movement in Vilna from the age of 16 to 20 (1934–38) as a group leader and later as the head leader. See Porat, *Me'ever la-gashmi*, 34–36.
- 46 “Where are the men, hundreds of whom were kidnapped by the Lithuanian “Chapunes”? / Where are the naked women, and the children, driven away on the horrible Provocation night? / Where are the Day of Atonement Jews? / Where are our brothers from the second ghetto?” (translation from Porat, *Fall of a Sparrow*, 71). Avidan refers to the manifesto as Kovner’s first battle missive, in “Ha-megabesh, ha-metsaref veba-meahed,” in *Abba Kovner—mishelo ve-alav: Shivi'im shanah le-huladto*, ed. Ruzkah Korchak-Marla and Yehudah Tubin (Merhavia, 1988), 118–19.
- 47 Joshua Rubinstein, *Tangled Loyalties: The Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg* (New York, 1996), 190.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 191.
- 49 IDF Archive, 118–6127–1949, 94.
- 50 See Margaret Stutley, *Shamanism: An Introduction* (London, 2003), 88.
- 51 Abba Kovner, *Admat ha-hol* (Merhavia, 1961), 25.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 57, 75.
- 53 Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London, 1961), 18: 7–64.
- 54 Hrushovsky writes that the only death described in the poem is caused by the forces of nature—a partisan was hit by a falling tree (Hrushovsky, “Abba Kovner,” 57), but according to Ruzka Korczak’s book of testimony, the partisan injured in this incident had in fact recovered from his injuries. See Ruzka Korczak, *Lehavot ba-efer* (Merhavia, 1965), 259.
- 55 Abba Kovner, *Ad-lo-or: Poemah partizanit* (Merhavia, 1947), 8.
- 56 In 1950 Kovner published his third long poem, “Ha-mafteah tsalal,” which depicts the days of horror in the Vilna ghetto; Abba Kovner, *Ha-mafteah tsalal* (Tel Aviv, 1950).
- 57 Uri Avneri, *Bi-sedot Peleshet: Yoman kravi* (Tel Aviv, 1949), 151–52.
- 58 See Emil Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York, 1995), 216–18.
- 59 Heraclitus, frag. 5 (Diels-Kranz): “They are purified in vain with blood, those polluted with blood, as if someone who stepped in mud should try to wash himself with mud”; for translation and commentary on the fragment, see Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge, Engl., 1979), 81, 266–67.
- 60 IDF Archive, 7–1147–2002, 11.
- 61 IDF Archive, 7–1147–2002, 12.
- 62 IDF Archive, 6–1147–2002, 28.

- 63 IDF Archive, 6–1147–2002, 12. Kovner refers to Hayim Nahman Bialik’s poem “Ein zot, ki rabat tsarartunu: Mi-shirei Bar-Kokhba,” in *Hayim Nahman Bialik: Ha-shirim*, ed. Avner Holtzman (Or Yehudah, 2004), 247.
- 64 IDF Archive, 6–1147–2002, 18. Kovner refers to Natan Alterman’s poem “Be-derekh No-Amon” in “Shirei makot Mitsrayim,” in *Shirim shemi-kevar* (Tel Aviv, 1972), 231.
- 65 Dan Miron, *Mul ha-ah ha-shotek: ‘Iyunim be-shirat milhemet ha-‘atsmaut* (Jerusalem, 1992), 320–25.

[119]

Abba Kovner



Michal Arbell