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Jewish Social Studies, Volume 18, Number 3, Spring/Summer 2012,
pp. 27-37 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



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ABSTRACT

S. Yizhar's 1949 "Hirbet Hiz'ah" contains a puzzling narrative frame, which is not closed at the novella's ending. This article analyzes Yizhar's interest in this device in light of a recently discovered, previously unpublished introduction to the novella written by Yizhar himself. I argue that Yizhar's incomplete framing device should be viewed as integral to his story. Read against his introduction, I claim that "Hirbet Hiz'ah" is first and foremost about the rending of a harmonious ethical and Zionist identity in 1948, whereas the actual expulsion is a secondary concern. A translation of this introduction is included at the article's end.

Keywords: S. Yizhar, 1948, Hirbet Hiz'ah, introduction

S Yizhar's 1949 novella "Hirbet Hiz'ah," which details the planned conquest of a Palestinian village and the permanent expulsion of its residents during the first Arab-Israeli war, is widely considered to be a troubling text. Indeed, as historian Anita Shapira has documented in her study on the dynamics of collective memory, "Hirbet Hiz'ah" has only become more troubling over time.¹ Though the intensification of this novella's disturbing qualities may at first seem counter-intuitive, Israeli society's ongoing inability to fully integrate this text into the larger national narrative should not surprise us. As Ernest Renan remarked over a hundred years ago in his famous lecture on the concept of the nation, "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation."² Yizhar's

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novella documents in detail an event from Israel's founding war that Israelis would like to forget, a collective urge amply demonstrated by the furor over the appearance of Benny Morris's research on the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem almost four decades later, in 1987. Overall, because the issue of Palestinian refugees remains both unresolved and central to the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict, "Hirbet Hiz'ah" remains a work of fiction about the past but inseparable from today's very real political impasse.

I believe that "Hirbet Hiz'ah" is a troubled text as well, as a result of the decidedly vexing qualities of the novella's frame narrative. The conquest of the fictional village and the expulsion of its residents are first introduced in three paragraphs, which constitute the narrative's opening frame. Here the narrator describes his decision to narrate "all of this" and reflects on possible ways to approach his coming narration.³ I have no illusions about the ultimate source of the lasting importance of "Hirbet Hiz'ah." I know that the body of the narrative is the reason this piece operates—to borrow from New Historicism—as event and not just representation.⁴ Nevertheless, I firmly believe, and have argued elsewhere,⁵ that "Hirbet Hiz'ah" is, narratologically speaking, a more complicated work of literature than is commonly noted. In particular, I am convinced that the full meaning of Yizhar's bold narrative can only be uncovered by accounting for its perplexing opening. Thankfully, a long-unknown and unpublished introduction to "Hirbet Hiz'ah" by Yizhar himself has recently been discovered, an introduction that sheds new light on the novella as a whole and on Yizhar's attraction to the framing technique in particular. Before discussing the salience of this introduction, it is necessary first to analyze Yizhar's opening frame to establish its troubling qualities.

The first paragraph of "Hirbet Hiz'ah" establishes that a "long time" has passed between the time of the original events themselves and the narrator's present decision to tell his story.⁶ Here the narrator details how these events have not "lost their grip on him," despite his various efforts to overcome them.⁷ The narrator next distinguishes between himself and "the great general mass of liars"—an immoral collective he at times hoped to join.⁸ The paragraph ends as the narrator explains that he has finally chosen to confront what happened by telling it. But as crucial as this decision may appear, the narrator presents his choice in language riddled with equivocation: "Although I hadn't yet made up my mind where the way out here is, it seems to me that, in any case, instead of staying silent, I should, apparently, start telling the story."⁹ In addition to his circumlocutions—"seems to me," "in any case," "apparently"—which betray a lack of confidence, the narrator also reveals the

still-inchoate nature of his narrating strategy. In other words, the narrator has a story to tell, but he is uncertain, even after finally deciding to tell it, of where this story will take him and, in particular, if it will provide him with a “way out” (*motsa*) from his debilitating dilemma.

The uncertainty of Yizhar’s protagonist-narrator causes him to postpone his actual narration for another two paragraphs, each of them weighing a different method for telling his story. The first of these two paragraphs employs Yizhar’s classic narrative style, with minute descriptions of the external, natural scene—the dirt path, the cactus hedges, the dark-green nettles. The second and, according to the narrator, “possibly better option” employs an entirely different style, one unprecedented for Yizhar.¹⁰ Here the narrator locates a bitterly sardonic voice, emphasizing the brutality hidden just below the authoritatively smooth surface of military jargon and state rhetoric. The narrator repeats and reworks the words “burn-blow-up-imprison-load-convey,” reaching a climax at the paragraph’s end:

it was now obvious how many good and honest hopes were being invested in those who were being sent out to implement all this “burn-blow-up-imprison-load-convey,” who would burn blow up imprison load and convey with such courtesy and with a restraint born of true culture, and this would be a sign of a wind of change, of decent upbringing, and, perhaps, even of the Jewish soul, the great Jewish soul.¹¹

Because the following paragraph—in which the narrator finally arrives at the story proper—begins with “And so it happened,” the reader is led to believe that the narrator has in fact settled on this second mode of narration.¹² But as “Hirbet Hiz’ah” continues, it becomes quite clear that this is not the case at all. If anything, the narrator regularly hovers, through his frequent rich descriptions of the external scene, quite close to the first model. Even more troubling, the temporal distance between the time narrated and the time of narration is ignored throughout the remainder of the piece. Indeed, the opening frame is never explicitly returned to, is never closed. “Hirbet Hiz’ah” ends in the story’s past, as the present time of telling—and with it the narrator’s concern over his ongoing inability to come to terms with his past—is never taken up again.

It therefore becomes clear that the narrator of “Hirbet Hiz’ah” is unreliable, and an unusual type of unreliable narrator at that. Most unreliable narrators are fabricators of one sort or another, regardless of whether the limits of witnessing, the nature of memory, or some idiosyncratic psychological factor is the cause of their fabrication.

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Yizhar's narrator is not making anything up. His problem is not his ability to reconstruct, as the reader is left with a perfectly coherent picture of what happened during that day in the past, a picture whose veracity the reader is not expected to doubt in any way. Instead, the narrator's problem, and one that remains even after the reader reaches the end of the story, is his inability to forge a satisfying or even meaningful link between the past and the present, between what happened and what might be achieved by recounting it. Yizhar's narrator is, in this sense, not so much unreliable as he is frustrated, perplexed, and ultimately impotent. His inability to come to terms with his impotence finds him calling on storytelling techniques that only highlight this helplessness. All this explains, at least in part, why the narrator's overall approach to his framing device seems to be so muddled, self-contradictory, and incomplete.

Though I made the above argument in a previous publication,¹³ I was never entirely satisfied by it, because I was convinced that the problems listed above ought to be pinned on Yizhar as well. In other words, I believed that storytelling impotence and possible incompetence were not just characteristics of the fictional protagonist-narrator deliberately fashioned by—and thus distinct from—Yizhar himself. Rather, I suspected that Yizhar was not in control of this aspect of "Hirbet Hiz'ah." But there simply was no way for me to expand my criticism of Yizhar's narrator to include Yizhar as well. Though the latter gave many interviews that touched on "Hirbet Hiz'ah" during the course of his lifetime, these interviews never mentioned the novella's structure.¹⁴ The long-established and well-founded convention in literary studies that forbids conflating narrator, implied author, and author effectively protected Yizhar from what had to remain a hunch.

But the recent discovery of an unpublished introduction to "Hirbet Hiz'ah" written by Yizhar himself provides an opportunity to rethink the novella as a whole, including its puzzling structure.¹⁵ If nothing else, the very existence of an introduction shows again how strongly Yizhar felt that the half-framed story itself—that is, the narration of these events from the war—should not stand in isolation, and thus it encourages us to consider the opening frame of "Hirbet Hiz'ah" as an integral part of the text. In general, this impulse distinguishes "Hirbet Hiz'ah" from Yizhar's previous works, including "The Captive," the other piece of fiction most often mentioned alongside "Hirbet Hiz'ah," as in his early works Yizhar tends to present the story as a free-standing entity without any additional layers of narrative.

Nevertheless Yizhar, in two brief letters to his editor, David Hanegbi, prior to the original publication of "Hirbet Hiz'ah" in September 1949,

sounds far from certain that this introduction ought to be published: “If it appears to you superfluous, send it silently to the garbage. . . . What’s your opinion on the ‘introduction’? Don’t be afraid to get the hell rid of it if you think it doesn’t add to the crux of the matter.”¹⁶ Despite his wavering as to the merits of his introduction, at the end of this second, brief correspondence—written in July 1949—Yizhar expresses a lucid awareness of what he may be getting himself into with this novella, as he quotes from the book of Esther: “If I perish, I perish.”¹⁷

The introduction itself is, like the opening frame of “Hirbet Hiz’ah,” only three paragraphs long. Most of it finds Yizhar imagining a reader hostile to the writing and publishing of this story, followed by Yizhar’s enigmatic defense. This two-sided structure vaguely parallels a technique found in both “Hirbet Hiz’ah” and “The Captive,” where Yizhar’s narrator-protagonists conduct lengthy, anguished internal dialogues with themselves in an attempt to reconcile clashing national and ethical imperatives. Here in his introduction, Yizhar acknowledges his adversary’s reproach and admits he does not quite know how to respond except to say, in a sentence packed with negatives, “I don’t know if I regret it or not, I couldn’t tell it otherwise, couldn’t be silent otherwise, and also couldn’t start other than how I started, for better or for worse.”¹⁸ Yizhar’s explanation here is no explanation at all; it merely describes his decision to write this story as something he somehow had to do, as if he does not quite understand it himself.

But as his introduction reaches its last third, Yizhar does provide an indirect rationale for the strange fact that he is at once determined to narrate these events and unable to detail in any way the precise source of this determination. Here Yizhar twice stresses his persistent disorientation from the war, “the feeling that we are still somewhat stunned from all that happened” and that “there’s nothing left but to sober up little by little.”¹⁹ Yizhar’s interest in this disorientation—which he attributes not just to himself but to the larger collective as well—emphasizes what is easily forgotten over 60 years later: that “Hirbet Hiz’ah” was only an initial gesture of sorts. In other words, though today we read this novella as a concrete act of bearing witness to the creation of Palestinian refugees in the final months of the first Arab-Israeli war, it might be instructive to think of the writing of “Hirbet Hiz’ah” as an effort to articulate what did not yet have a name from within the stubborn daze of that still very recent war.

Today “Hirbet Hiz’ah” stands as a crucial reference point in the dense, contested, and multilayered discourse surrounding the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem—a discourse through and against which both Israeli and Palestinian identities are regularly

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defined and debated. But in May 1949, when Yizhar wrote it, those identities and that discourse were still very much in their infancy. As Shapira notes, this explains in large part why the story was much less controversial in 1949 than we might expect from today's perspective.²⁰ The precise contours of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a discourse did not yet exist. More specifically, it would be years, and in some senses decades, before the Palestinian refugee issue fully became the problem it is today for Israeli governments and even Israeli collective memory. In this regard, the ongoing, ever-evolving reception of "Hirbet Hiz'ah" offers a fascinating window not just on the fluidity of collective memory but also on the inherently elastic nature of literary meaning as well.

Of course, this only explains Yizhar's overall urge to narrate his experiences in the war, not his decision to begin with this particular aspect of it. Indeed, much of the introduction finds Yizhar attacking himself for electing to start—in his words—with trifles or in remote regions, to "rummage through the garbage," to focus on shadows when there was so much light as well.²¹ So why this order or why this episode first? The end of Yizhar's introduction addresses this explicitly, if not simply. The final, difficult phrase of Yizhar's last lengthy sentence reads, "ve-atah poteah ve-seder ha-devarim lefi seder tserivatam lifnei ve-lifnim."²² In my translation of this introduction I settled on "and you open up to tell and the order of things is according to the order of their burning inside the holy of holies." But this is an unsatisfying translation, as the full meaning of this phrase requires some additional explanation.

However jarring Yizhar's choice of *tserivatam* (their searing or burning) may be, the real challenge of making sense of this sentence stems from its final two words, *lifnei ve-lifnim*. In contemporary Hebrew, this adverbial phrase means "thoroughly" or "in all its particulars." But this phrase has its origins in talmudic Hebrew, where it means "the inner sanctum" or "the holy of holies," and I believe—in keeping with Uri Cohen's interpretation²³—that Yizhar intended this meaning as well, leaving us with a sentence that signifies in two different ways at once. If this were not enough, Yizhar employs *lifnei ve-lifnim* as a spatial idiom to describe a temporal sequence. For these reasons, a single translation in English is impossible. A translation unpacking all its meanings, however, might read as follows: "And you open up to tell and the order of things is according to the order of their burning, and they were burned through and through, starting in the inner sanctum." If this awkward interpretation is correct, then we have a partial answer for why Yizhar elected to tell this story first: this episode touches on the complete burning of the thing that

matters most. What remains unclear is the exact referent of this holy of holies, this inner sanctum, in Yizhar's secular Zionist world. In his article, Uri Cohen calls this the "heart of Israeliness,"²⁴ and I believe he is right, but that raises the question, what is—or was then—at the heart of Israeliness?

One thing Yizhar does not do anywhere in his short introduction is make any specific reference to the actual contents of "Hirbet Hiz'ah." The introduction is frustratingly vague in this regard. Nevertheless, the introduction tells us, at its ending, that this is a story about a type of devastating violence done to something at the core of Yizhar's being. If we reread "Hirbet Hiz'ah" in order to identify the thing that is both crucial and violated, we find, I argue, only two potential candidates: the perfect harmony of national and ethical codes and the coexistence of Arabs and Jews in the land. And I think Yizhar's holy of holies is both of them or, more specifically, what they have in common: coexistence or unity.

Yizhar starts with the expulsion of Palestinian Arabs out of a shockingly ironic self-interest, because this event was qualitatively more agonizing for him than any conventional Israeli war fatalities could ever be, as he explained in a 2005 interview: "I looked at the landscape, the landscape was a central part of my personality, and that's why I saw the Arabs. The landscape was the paper on which everything was written, and afterward it gets torn and nobody looks at the paper."²⁵ Here Yizhar describes a nearly tautological pre-1948 wholeness: the landscape is his personality is the Arabs is the paper where everything is written. From this perspective, "Hirbet Hiz'ah" is less a story about the creation of Palestinian refugees than it is about the rending of a unified, harmonious Zionist identity precisely in the moment when Zionist transforms into Israeli, when Mandate Palestine becomes Israel through the subtraction of most of its Palestinians. As Yizhar himself said about the story almost 30 years later, in 1978, "I wrote it as someone who'd been hurt. Hurt because something happened there that I was completely unable to reconcile myself with."²⁶

All this may explain why Yizhar was drawn to both an introduction and an opening frame but was unable to write a successful version of the former or find a satisfying way to close the latter. Yizhar felt compelled to draw explicit attention to the deep ambivalence and pain that informed his telling of the story itself, and yet beyond this I can detect no place where Yizhar believes anything is achieved in the telling. In other words, you cannot unburn or untear something. Some may extol "Hirbet Hiz'ah" as a courageous act of bearing witness, and it can certainly be read in this way, but in the new light of

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this introduction I now believe that this was a secondary impulse behind its writing. This may explain in part the puzzling fact that Yizhar, despite writing this story, remained very much inside the Israeli political mainstream (for years as a Knesset member) and repeatedly refused to use “Hirbet Hiz’ah” as a tool with which to draw attention to the Palestinian refugee problem.

Yizhar’s ultimate sense of impotence informs the novella’s ending, as he elects to ignore the time of telling and keeps the narrative in the traumatic past. Here it should be noted that we do have a one-word allusion to the opening of “Hirbet Hiz’ah.” Just before the final paragraph, on a line of its own, the text reads: “And the way out?” (*veha-motsa*).²⁷ This one-word allusion is, I argue, not just to Yizhar’s own opening frame (“Although I hadn’t yet made up my mind where the way out here is”) but also to Y. H. Brenner’s 1919 short story “The Way Out,” a story about collective ethical failure and the overall impotence of the well-intentioned individual, and a story in which the word “way out” (*motsa*) has meaning only ironically or in its negation. Brenner was also a writer deeply preoccupied with couching and justifying his narratives in and through elaborate devices: found journals, apologies from fictional editors, and, of course, frame narratives.²⁸ Though Yizhar is more often associated with Brenner’s contemporary U. N. Gnessin, it seems plausible that in this instance he looked to Brenner as a model for motivating and narrating his difficult story. It is also possible that with this gesture Yizhar, having become isolated from the larger national collective, sought to establish a literary affiliation with one of his predecessors.

In an instructive essay on endings in fiction, the contemporary American writer George Saunders analyzes Donald Barthelme’s short story “The School.” Saunders makes the argument that narrative fiction tends to create its own momentum out of a series of related escalations: a number of increasingly curious deaths, for instance. The challenge of ending a piece of fiction, Saunders claims, is that the writer cannot simply continue escalating along the same axis. Rather, the writer must jump to another axis, or, as Saunders puts it, “the next order of escalation has to be *escalating* escalation.”²⁹ Yizhar seems to sense this as well in “Hirbet Hiz’ah.” The narrative has been continuously escalating through both the systematic execution of the day’s order and the steadily widening gap between the narrator’s ethical and national selves. The village has been emptied, the residents rounded up, the trucks loaded, and the narrator has been alienated and exposed as unable or unwilling to prevent any of this. In a moment the narrator will watch the trucks filled with new refugees drive off, leaving only silence.

This is an ending of sorts, but not a satisfying one literarily, especially for a narrative that encourages its reader, in the opening frame, to expect that something may well be achieved through its telling. Unfortunately, there is no point in returning to the opening frame, because as the reader now knows, the telling of this story has neither assuaged the narrator's profound anguish nor undone the expulsion itself. In other words, further reflections on this act of narrating would be pointless. And so, as he does at the very ending of his unpublished introduction, Yizhar concludes by activating a past layer of Hebrew in order to establish an unusually potent closure, in order to escalate his escalation: "And when silence had closed in on everything and no man disturbed the stillness, which yearned noiselessly for what was beyond silence—then God would come forth and descend to roam the valley, and see whether all was according to the cry that had reached him."³⁰ The final word of "Hirbet Hiz'ah," *hake-tsa'akatah* (according to the cry of it), is an explicit allusion to Genesis 18:21 and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. As a final response to his impotence—his inability to undo the violence at the center of both his narrative and himself as well—Yizhar's narrator elects to condemn in the harshest possible language the new Israeli collective, of which he is nevertheless an integral member. And so ends perhaps the most unsettling and unsettled work in modern Hebrew fiction, a story that will remain an open wound until extraliterary events somehow mend what was torn over 60 years ago.

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Appendix: Introduction to "Hirbet Hiz'ah," translation by Todd Hasak-Lowy³¹

When a man returns from the battles of the past year with the similarities of these two stories in his hand,³² why it's as if he already made up his mind about this same war and what occurred in it. Immediately his comrade takes issue with him, and justifiably, saying this is nothing but a distorted view of things, not only because there were other sides to this war but also because this war in its entirety, its history and meaning, have been twisted away from their essence, and in quite an infuriating way. Not only by what your stories describe—he argues some more—but even more so by what isn't mentioned in them—great and important things. One side, another side, is absent, and it is precisely this other side that gives everything a reason and light of its own. This side is first and foremost, and it's an injustice to abandon it to pick on trifles, to, of all things, nitpick in remote regions, to, of all things, rummage through the garbage, and to view a



shadow as if it were the very thing itself, this is simple minded. At the least—this same comrade will argue—you should have pointed out that another side exists, the side of light. Not only this, you should have started immediately with the light, and get to, afterwards, among other things, different sides, where you also might not ignore the shadows that were visible here and there.

I don't know what I'd say in response to this vast reproach, other than that this same, warm-hearted objector should go and do that important work himself, and that it's worthwhile in every way to encourage him to do this. As for myself, I don't know if I regret this or not, I couldn't tell it otherwise, couldn't be silent otherwise, and also couldn't start other than how I started, for better or for worse. And it's not because I didn't see other things during those great days, I too saw. Their light shines, at times to the point of blinding brilliance. Rather it seems today that it's because all of us will yet be bothered with these same things, and discover, in this way or that, a great many new sides, expected and unexpected, lighter and darker, and also, of course, those things that are neither very light nor very dark, when the time comes and the feeling that we are still somewhat stunned from all that happened dissipates a bit.

There's nothing left but to sober up little by little, to reflect, to look back and see more and more all that happened, and the things are gathered, some still unreal and some already clear, and here and there the sprouting begins, and you open up to tell and the order of things is according to the order of their burning inside the holy of holies.

Notes

- 1 Anita Shapira, "Hirbet Hizah: Between Remembrance and Forgetting," *Jewish Social Studies* n.s. 7, no. 1 (Fall 2000): 1–63, esp. 31–50.
- 2 Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York, 1990), 11.
- 3 S. Yizhar, *Sipur Hirbet Hiz'ah ve-od sheloshah sipurei milhamah* (Tel Aviv, 1989), 33. All translations mine except where noted.
- 4 Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago, 2000), 15.
- 5 Todd Hasak-Lowy, *Here and Now: History, Nationalism, and Realism in Modern Hebrew Fiction* (New York, 2008), 129–37.
- 6 Yizhar, *Hirbet Hiz'ah*, 33.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.

- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, trans. Nicolas de Lange and Yaacob Dweck (Jerusalem, 2008), 9. For Hebrew original, see Yizhar, *Hirbet Hiz'ah*, 34.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Hasak-Lowy, *Here and Now*, 131–36.
- 14 See, for instance, Hillel Halkin, “Bare Ground and Nothing above It: An Interview with S. Yizhar,” *Modern Hebrew Literature* 12 (1994): 4–6, and Meron Rapoport, “Ha-sefer tsiyoni, ha-seret lo,” *Haaretz*, Mar. 23, 2005, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1513268>.
- 15 This introduction was discovered by the Hebrew scholar Uri Cohen in the archives of Sifriat Po'alim in Yad Ya'ari. For the full Hebrew text, see S. Yizhar, “Lo ukhal le-hahrish aheret,” *Haaretz*, Sept. 18, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1281324>. For Cohen's interpretation of this introduction, see Uri S. Cohen, “Al hitnatseluto ha-mashimah shel S. Yizhar,” *Haaretz*, Sept. 18, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1281363>. I would like to thank Nitsa Ben-Ari, Yizhar's daughter-in-law, for informing me of this introduction's existence. I am similarly grateful to Uri Cohen, who shared his work with me—including his own translation—and assisted with my early efforts to translate Yizhar's introduction myself.
- 16 Yizhar, “Lo ukhal.”
- 17 Ibid. See Esther 4:16.
- 18 Ibid. A translation of the entire introduction appears as an appendix to this article.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Shapira, “Between Remembrance and Forgetting,” 11–31.
- 21 Yizhar, “Lo ukhal.”
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Cohen, “Al hitnatseluto.”
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Rapoport, “Ya'alah, aba.”
- 26 Quoted in Shapira, “Between Remembrance and Forgetting,” 9.
- 27 Yizhar, *Hirbet Hiz'ah*, 78.
- 28 For an example of the first two, see Y. H. Brenner, *Me-kan u-mekan*, in *Ketavim*, 4 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1978), 2: 1265–68. For an example of the third, see Y. H. Brenner, “Atsabim,” in *Ketavim*, 2: 1229–61.
- 29 George Saunders, *The Braindead Megaphone* (New York, 2007), 181.
- 30 Yizhar, *Hirbet Hiz'ah*, 78; Eng. trans., *Khirbet Khizeh*, 112–13.
- 31 My thanks to Maya Savir and Asaf Schurr for their comments on this translation.
- 32 “These two stories” refers to “Hirbet Hiz'ah” and “The Captive.” The latter, often linked to the former, was written in November 1948 and narrates the pointless abduction, brutal interrogation, and likely imprisonment of an innocent Bedouin shepherd during the war.

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