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A Poetics of Haunting: From Yizhar's Hirbeh to Yehoshua's Ruins to Koren's Crypts

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the "poetics of haunting" that runs through the pages of modern Israeli Hebrew literature. Specifically, the essay looks at the manner in which the historical violence associated with the forced Palestinian exile of 1948, though seemingly finding little direct expression in the Israeli literary canon, nevertheless finds its way into these texts under the sign of a growing visible invisibility. The essay traces this haunting legacy from its moment of birth in S. Yizhar's renowned novella "Hirbet Hiz'ah" to its later manifestations in two other prominent Hebrew Israeli works: A. B. Yehoshua's "Mul ha-ye'arot" and Yeshayahu Koren's Levayah ba-tsohorayim. At the centers of these three texts, the "ruins" of destroyed Arab villages mark the unresolved and haunting history of violence.

Keywords: haunting, memory, visibility, Nakba, S. Yizhar, A. B. Yehoshua, Yeshayahu Koren

The ghost," Avery Gordon tells us, "is seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes."¹ But the ghost is not simply that which is hard to see. It is a certain presence known to us and *felt* in its invisibility: "The Specter, as its name indicates, is the frequency of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible."² Phrased differently, the specter is the (visible) sign that alludes to the limits of that which can become visible.

I open with these brief remarks on ghosts and their relationship to (in)visibility as the background against which to explore a "poetics of

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haunting” that runs through the pages of modern Israeli Hebrew literature. Specifically, I am interested in the manner in which the unresolved and ongoing historical violence associated with the Palestinian forced exile (*hajib*) of 1948 (more commonly known as the Nakba), though seemingly finding little direct expression in the Israeli Hebrew literary canon, nevertheless finds its way into these texts as a growing *visible invisibility*—the haunting mark of the muted ghost.³ I trace this haunting legacy from its moment of birth, which I identify in S. Yizhar’s renowned novella “Hirbet Hiz’ah” (1949), to its later manifestation in A. B. Yehoshua’s novella “Mul ha-ye’arot” (Facing the Forests, 1963) and finally to Yeshayahu Koren’s novel *Levayah ba-tsohorayim* (Funeral at Noon, 1974). At the center of these three texts one finds ruins of destroyed Arab villages as a marker of an unresolved history of violence. In Yizhar’s novella, we encounter the *hirbeh*—the deserted village on its way to becoming ruins. In Yehoshua’s text, we meet the hidden ruins of an Arab village located in the midst of a newly planted Israeli national forest. Finally, in Koren’s novel, similar ruins have already become a crypt, a burial site where past trauma and the failure to face it are sealed and kept out of sight.⁴ My goal in tracing this genealogy is not to identify a literary “trend” or follow concrete literary influences from one text to another. More modestly, my goal is to unearth the ghostly presence of the Palestinian tragedy at the heart of the Jewish Israeli Zionist narrative, as seen through the pages of Israeli Hebrew literature. I am interested in the way a certain failure to appear translates into a growing *presence of absence*, a growing visible invisibility, calling attention to, framing, and rendering visible this very failure.⁵

“Hirbet Hiz’ah”: The Promise of a Haunting Yet to Come

“Hirbet Hiz’ah” was published in 1949 under the pen name S. Yizhar (Yizhar Smilansky); Yizhar was born in Palestine in 1916 and became one of Israel’s most renowned writers before passing away in 2006.⁶ The title of the story uses the Arabic word *hirbeh* (the Hebrew word is *hurviah*) in reference to an evacuated Arab village attacked by Jewish soldiers during the 1948 war. The story, which narrates the expulsion of Palestinian villagers from their homes and the destruction of their village, was published just a few months after the end of the 1948 war and the establishment of the State of Israel.

The centrality of this narrative of violence and loss within a text that became a founding Hebrew literary work very early on, marking

a new generation of Israeli state writers (rather than Jewish exilic writers), has in itself invited numerous explanations and interpretations over the years.⁷ Some critics, attempting to reconcile the violence described in the novella with their own support for Zionist nationalism and their belief in its liberal humanism, have turned to Yizhar's stated political views as "proof" of the text's loyalty to Zionism.⁸ Others have proposed various explanations for the sadism associated with the soldiers' behavior toward the Palestinian villagers they expel. For Baruch Kurzweil, for example, this sadism stems not from cruelty or the shortsightedness of national ideology but from the specific cultural and emotional vacuum of the young Israeli warriors who have grown alienated from Jewish tradition and history.⁹ All in all, the novella has long been read as a testimonial text dealing primarily with the moral dilemmas and internal conflicts of a soldier of conscience (the protagonist) rather than with the historical and political question of forced Palestinian exile and loss. It is within this limited framework that critics have continued to debate the ethical and political implications of the text.¹⁰ In their rush to determine the message of the text and assess its ethical implications, however, critics have generally overlooked one of the most fascinating stylistic features of Yizhar's text, namely, the fact that its "time is out of joint" (*Hamlet*, 1.5.186–90). Written in the days following the end of the 1948 war and published soon after, "Hirbet Hiz'ah," I suggest, is not simply a testimonial text recounting the experiences of a young Jewish soldier involved in the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and villages on the eve of the establishment of the State of Israel. Perhaps more important, it is also a prophetic text predicting the impact of this expulsion on future Israeli generations.

The story opens with the narrator's recollection: "[T]rue, all this happened a long time ago, but it has haunted me ever since. I tried to bury the memory away in the rush of everyday life; to underplay it and make it less sharp by passing time. Sometimes I was even successful."¹¹ Yizhar, who published the story just weeks after the end of the war, situates his narrator in a far-distant future ("it all happened a long time ago"), and the act of narration itself thus unfolds through an anticipated haunting yet to come. Furthermore, the Arab village ordered for destruction is itself caught in limbo: at times referred to as a "village" (Hebrew *kefar*) and at times a "ruin site" (Arabic *hirbeh*), it is an already-destroyed village on the way to becoming ruins.

Following the opening paragraph, the narrator, committed to no longer "fighting" his memories, decides to tell his previously untold story about the destruction of a village and the violence involved in the

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expulsion of its inhabitants. The event took place, we are told, in one of the very last days of the war, when Israeli forces were clearly “winning” the fight: “to us it was clear, we moved on lighthearted: this will not be a war day for us . . . for us this was a field trip [*tiyul*]. . . [I]f anyone had to worry, it wasn’t us.”¹² Indeed, Yizhar’s story is not about the heat of the battlefield, as some critics have suggested. It is not a war story but, more precisely, a story about the immediate reality of evacuations following the 1948 war. In short, it is a text—one of a kind in Hebrew literature—about the Nakba, the forced exile, deportation, and expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and the strategic destruction of their villages during and immediately after the 1948 war.

Arriving at a hill overlooking an almost-empty village, most of whose inhabitants have already fled, the narrator and his fellow soldiers await an order to attack the village, which in their eyes, even before the attack, already amounts to little more than some old, deserted ruins. Within this transformative moment when the village is to become ruins and the living be replaced with the dead, Yizhar implants his warning of a haunting yet to come:

These empty villages. A day arrives and they begin to scream. You walk through them and suddenly in front of you, without you knowing where it comes from, you are met with hidden eyes of walls, yards, and alleys that accompany you silently. . . . And there are cases where suddenly in the middle of the day or the early evening, when the village, which was until then simply a bunch of empty houses engraved in their silence, bursts with the sound of the objects that have lost their soul: the song of human deeds that returns to their core in distortion; the song of an announced sudden catastrophe that froze and remains like a curse . . . and fear, and horror, and a flitting sign of revenge cries out from there . . . from these empty villages. . . . Big shadows of things whose death is still unconceivable, circling around, harassing.¹³

Yizhar’s language is stamped with the sign of the ghost. He names the ghost the “unburied dead”¹⁴ and warns us of its unavoidable return, since, truthfully speaking, the dead have never left: “the air is still filled with their sounds, voices and gazes.”¹⁵

We might initially think that Yizhar is simply speaking about the troubled consciences of the soldiers or that he is warning those who are involved in the violence of the price they will pay for their deeds. But it soon becomes clear that for Yizhar, haunting is a social space rather than a personal, psychic space, and as such, it is located not in individual psyches but in the intersubjective and transgenerational social sphere. Haunting is stamped on places, sites, houses, stones,

and walls. It is the outcome of unresolved historical traumas that do not and cannot simply “go away.” Yizhar’s narrator predicts what has indeed become a state-led strategy—the past will be “erased” and forcibly forgotten: “New Jewish immigrants would be settled in this ‘whatever its name is’ village. Who would even imagine that there was once some kind of an Arab hirbeh here?”¹⁶ But he accompanies this prediction of a state-governed politics of memory with a warning about its inevitable failure: “But those who would end up living here, in this village, would the walls not scream in their ears? And all these images and cries, those that were voiced and those that were not . . . would the air not be filled with all these sounds, voices and gazes?”¹⁷ With these words Yizhar predicts the success of the Zionist resettlement enterprise. But he also foresees and warns his readers about the inevitable failure of an imposed forgetting: the walls themselves, he tells us, will continue to hold and pass on the memory of violence and historical injustice until they are fully accounted for.

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“Mul ha-ye‘arot”: The Remains of Shady Things

Fourteen years separate “Hirbet Hiz‘ah” from A. B. Yehoshua’s “Mul ha-ye‘arot.”¹⁸ During those years, the Jewish National Fund (JNF), the international Zionist organization in charge of purchasing land and encouraging Jewish settlement in Palestine, embarked on a massive project of forestation, particularly around Jerusalem and throughout the Galilee.¹⁹ Planting trees (and uprooting others) has long functioned as part of the Zionist mechanism of reshaping the land, turning “the desert” back into the mythically blooming landscape it was said to be prior to the Jewish exile. The official narrative promoted by the JNF has always been that the forests are meant to help dry the swamps, make the desert bloom, provide work for the numerous new Jewish immigrants, and reinforce the ties between Jews and the “promised” land; yet the massive planting has clearly also served to radically change the landscape of historical Palestine by literally “covering up” the past.²⁰

Yehoshua’s text addresses this historical masking most explicitly. The protagonist—an older graduate student struggling to complete his thesis—decides to take a job as a forest-fire watcher in one of the newly created Israeli national parks, where he hopes to be able to write in peace. The novella is largely uneventful: bored with his studies and overwhelmed by the loneliness, the protagonist spends hours dazed, going in and out of sleep or simply staring out of the window at the forest through his binoculars, waiting for “action” in the form of a fire that

would erupt and justify his position. Several months pass before he finds out that the forest covers the remains of a destroyed Arab village. Obsessed with the desire to find and expose the ruins, the student encourages the old, mute Arab groundskeeper, his sole companion, to burn down the forest. Following the event, the police arrest the old Arab and the student heads back to the city, where he resumes his life as an aging, unproductive graduate student.

The protagonist's dazed state of mind contributes greatly to the enigmatic, even uncanny character of Yehoshua's text. Specifically, the protagonist's visual deficiency blurs reality and fantasy, waking and dreaming, the familiar and the eerie. Indeed, the protagonist's ability to "see straight" is cast into doubt early on. We are told that his "compromised vision makes many things appear doubtful" and the supervisor who hires him explicitly questions his vision: "[P]erhaps he doesn't see clearly after all? Maybe he needs stronger glasses? Should he take another pair with him?"²¹ Armed with his binoculars, the protagonist gazes at the forest, "which approaches him, seeming all blurry." At other times, the student wakes up blinded by a "red burning color in his glasses" or "foggy shades." Struggling to see clearly, relying on glasses and binoculars, the student either sees things that are not there ("[A]t noon he is distracted by the sight of a flame burning in the trees. He follows it for hours only to discover at evening that it is only the red dress of the little Arab girl who is running among the trees."²²) or he fails to see things that are ("[A]n Arab village? He looks at them with his tired eyes, no. There is no Arab village here, the map must be wrong."²³).

Moving back and forth between "seeing clearly" and "failing to see," the protagonist struggles to distinguish between optical illusions and obscured realities: "[T]he trees look like a group of soldiers awaiting their commander. . . . Flickering light and shadows" bring life into the quiet forest, which otherwise resembles "a graveyard."²⁴ Growing more and more obsessed with what are no longer simply illusions of fire but rather a deep yearning to finally "see" the forest on fire, the protagonist "sees" the forest covered by smoke. Realizing there is no fire, he concludes that "the spectacles are to blame."²⁵ Even after the forest is finally burned, visions overcome reality as the "green forests continue to grow in front of his angry eyes."²⁶

With this focus on visual deficiency, Yehoshua prepares to ask what I believe is the novella's main question: What kind of seeing (or compromised seeing) is required in order to see that which remains invisible, or that which remains visible only in its invisibility? It is in light of this framing question that the novella unfolds a puzzling narrative

full of gaps and ruptures. For one, the novella lacks a cohesive structure to bind together the psychological narrative about the student's inability to focus on his studies (or do anything else for that matter) and the more apparent political narrative about the buried history of the destroyed Palestinian village. Thus, if the discovery of the ruins first appears vital to the plot, it eventually plays little if any role in the protagonist's psychological drama, leading to the anticlimactic end of the story, in which the protagonist returns to the place where he began.²⁷

Addressing this tension and the many evident gaps within Yehoshua's peculiar text, several critics have concluded that the story of the Arab village is marginal, even coincidental, to our understanding of the novella.²⁸ Gershon Shaked has thus suggested that the novella centers on the tension between the alienated writer (and narrator) and the culture of the (Israeli) masses. Shaked further argues that the clash between the removed individual/intellectual and the sentimental national collective that he observes from afar (a culture symbolized, according to Shaked, by the forest that "must be burned down"), has little if anything to do with the specific historical circumstances that may be associated with the Arab ruins: "Yehoshua recognizes the paradox that is immanent to *any national existence* [independent of] any concrete social condition. . . . [H]e does not deal with the actual relationships between Jews and Arabs, but with the *fundamental myth* that paradoxically explains the Jewish presence in Israel."²⁹

Other critics, who acknowledge the significance of the specific sociopolitical and historical context of the story, nevertheless insist on assigning the discovery and exposure of "the Arab ruins" a marginal role, reading them as a mere symbol or allegory for an altogether different narrative of loss. Most noticeable among such readings is Mordechai Shalev's interpretation of the novella, published in 1970. For Shalev, the conflicts addressed within the novella must be analyzed in terms of an Oedipal conflict between the protagonist and his father (both the biological father and the symbolic paternal figure of the older forest ranger, who hires the student) and between generations of fathers and sons. Accordingly, Shalev describes the protagonist as a dark prophetic figure (*navi za'am*) who fights against the generation of his fathers—the founders of the state. The latter rejected Jewish tradition and history in favor of a secular national ideology and replaced meaningful customs with "empty state rituals." But it is the protagonist, like the rest of his generation, who had to pay the price of living a life devoid of meaningful (Jewish, traditional, historical, or cultural) values. Shalev accordingly reads the act of burning the forest as the protagonist's rebellion

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against the national consensus, symbolized by the forest and guarded by the supervisor.³⁰ Within this frame of interpretation, the discovery of the ruins of the Arab village functions as a mere poetic device used in order to advance the psychological drama between (Jewish) sons and fathers. It is, in other words, a pretext to another, deeper, and more haunting psychic drama articulated in terms of an Oedipal rivalry between two generations, the founders of the state and their sons. The narrative about the exposure of the ruins, Shalev concludes,

stands for a destiny left behind which now returns [to haunt] in the *displaced figure of the Arab village*. The [student's] guilt for living an empty, meaningless life similarly finds expression in the displaced manifestation of [his] guilty feelings for the wrong that was done to the Arab. This is the true meaning of the return of the repressed.³¹

Shalev's modern psychoanalytic reading *relocates* the text's haunting to the sphere of the classic Freudian paradigm, the Oedipal complex. Like Freud himself in his essay "The Uncanny," Shalev thus effectively minimizes the political implications of this narrative of haunting by removing it from its broader social sphere and resituating it in the realm of the personal psychic sphere, accounting for it in terms of a libidinal struggle between fathers and sons.

The somewhat perverse outcome of this reading is that under Shalev's pen, Yehoshua's narrative is no longer a story about Palestinian loss at all but rather a story about *Jewish loss*: that is, it becomes a story about the protagonist's crisis of identity, which has nothing to do with the ruins and the historical violence to which they attest but only with the negation between his own empty, "lifeless life" and the vitality of his father's generation. In short, Shalev manages to (un)read Yehoshua's narrative of transgenerational traumatic redistribution of shame and guilt by projecting it onto a narrative of lack, envy, and displacement. In the most astonishing manner, he further concludes that within the novella, the Arab "represents the power of true vitality and primal meaning" lost upon the Jewish protagonist.³²

Shalev's interpretation, perhaps even more violently than Shaked's, then, turns a narrative about the barely visible yet undeniably haunting impact of Palestinian loss on Israeli reality into a story about Jewish loss, "the ethos of a forgotten, neglected [Jewish] past" in which the Palestinian narrative plays no significant role but functions merely as a "poetic device" and a displacement.³³ I cannot help but consider this a symptomatic reading, a clear attempt to escape at all costs (by means of "deep reading" or what Umberto Eco calls "over-interpretation") the

ethical and political implications of Yehoshua's text. Indeed, what reason, if any, do we have for reading the ruins of the Arab village in the novella as a stand-in ("a monstrous reflection") of an earlier and more profound hidden loss? And why are we to assume that the student's loss ("his problem") can in any way be separated from the story of the Palestinian loss ("the Arab problem"), to borrow Shalev's terms? Is the psychoanalytic story Shalev tells us, of generational conflict and the return of the repressed masked and displaced in the figure of the Arab ruins, not itself a mark of a somewhat hysterical displacement: an attempt to hide, yet again and at all costs, a tangible historical narrative of (Palestinian) trauma and loss, under an elaborate allegorical mode of interpretation?³⁴

Against this far-fetched allegorical reading, I suggest that the haunting we sense in Yehoshua's text is none other than the one Yizhar "promised" us in his prediction of a haunting to come upon future generations of Israelis. That Yehoshua's protagonist fails to "welcome the ghosts," as it were, or that he turns his back on the old Arab and returns to his meaningless life in the city, only means that this haunting (as both Yizhar and Yehoshua know well) is bound to continue. Like Yizhar's text, I argue, Yehoshua's novella includes within it not only a story about haunting and being haunted but also a story about the failure to face the ghosts of the past, a failure that assures ghostly returns. To read "Mul ha-ye'arot" as a narrative about haunting and the failure to welcome the ghost is to read it as a warning passed on to us, as readers, a warning not unlike the one Yizhar presented more than a decade earlier.

Social haunting takes place, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok argue, as long as an individual or a collective continues to fail to come to terms with "the lacunas imprinted on it by the secrets of others": the secrets of previous generations.³⁵ The ruins in Yehoshua's story, I suggest, stand for the hidden secrets of the founding generations, hidden then abruptly exposed, only to be hidden yet again. "What happened here?" the protagonist wonders when he first encounters the ruins. "Probably the women were killed too, when the houses were destroyed; without doubt, a shady thing."³⁶ Within the framework of the novella, this haunting finds no resolution. On the contrary, with the student returning to his old routine, we get a clear sense that shady things continue to take place. But that which in the story remains an unresolved pathological and ongoing "shady thing" yields a productive force in reminding us that the past does not simply "go away" and that no matter how well hidden or how forcefully forgotten, "it's going to always be there waiting for [us]."³⁷

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Levayah ba-tsohorayim: From Ruins to Crypts

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There is perhaps no other Hebrew text that renders the ghostly haunt of the destroyed Arab villages of 1948 so effectively visible in its invisibility as does Yeshayahu Koren's 1974 novel, *Levayah ba-tsohorayim*. Here the entire plot, if one could call it that, takes place in the vicinity of and in relation to the ruins of a deserted Arab village, which remains nameless and foreign to all the characters.

Koren's text is somewhat perplexing and for the most part is resistant to common modes of interpretation, whether allegorical, symbolic, historical, or psychological. Although the narrative is composed of the endless details characteristic of hyperrealistic writing, those hardly conjure up or provide a clear picture of events or an explanation for the evident gaps and divergences characteristic of the novel's structure. The characters themselves barely speak, and we have no access to their motivations. The characters act in silence and their actions are for the most part repetitive, mundane, but also clearly uncanny: roaming, gazing, picking, hiding, keeping secrets. They remain forever remote and inaccessible, much like the ruins of the nameless, destroyed Arab village that keep appearing in the text yet provide no insight into the mysterious unfolding of the plot.

The protagonist of the novel is a woman by the name of Hagar. We know very little about her. She is married to a man named Tuvia Erlikh, about whom we know even less. The other character we meet is the neighbor's ten-year-old son Yiftah, whom Hagar befriends and with whom she spends most of her time roaming the nearby ruins. During one such excursion, Hagar finds an army-issue water bottle and sets herself the task of returning the bottle to its original owner. Hagar eventually meets a young soldier, with whom she later has sex among the ruins. Why does Hagar become obsessed with finding the owner of the water bottle? How does she meet the soldier, who denies ever owning the bottle? And how or why does Yiftah, who secretly follows Hagar to her meeting with the soldier, die after seeing the two making love? All these questions and several more remain unanswered. At the end of the novel we still know nothing about Hagar's marriage, about Yiftah's mysterious death, about the owner of the water bottle, or about the soldier. Above all, we learn nothing about the relationship between the various disjointed and fragmented *told* stories and the *untold* story of the Arab village and its ruins.

The novel opens with the ruins: "Hagar Erlikh sat down on the balcony facing the deserted Arab village. . . . [S]he looked around. Among the ruins of the village she suddenly saw a group of soldiers."³⁸

But we never learn anything about these ruins or about the significance they carry for Hagar, who visits them regularly. Yet the very repetition of the words “the deserted Arab village” (*ha-kefar ha-‘azuw*) function, I suggest, as “phantom words,” to borrow Abraham and Torok’s term: an attempt to capture in language a secret otherwise unattainable and to “force the ghosts of a violent history into the open” through words that function as a burial site for what is simultaneously hidden and revealed.³⁹ In other words, the figure of the empty, abandoned, and ruined Arab village mentioned time and again in the novel, without ever becoming an integral part of the plot, functions as a crypt, “a psychic tomb” that harbors the undead ghosts and hides them “in language.” The ruins are also, literally, the grave where the body of the young Yiftah is eventually found.

The silences, displaced transitions, and missing information that make the novel so enigmatic draw attention to the haunting presence of phantom words. The traumatic past encrypted in the words “the deserted Arab village” or the “ruined village” (*ha-kefar ha-harev*) hover over the novel as a haunting phantom, disrupting and unsettling. As Palestinian-Israeli writer and literary critic Ayman Siksek notes,

Empty, nameless, destroyed, the remains of the village stand there in an unbearable proximity to the town where Tuvia and Hagar live. It is an astonishingly passive body: the past inhabitants of its destroyed houses are none other than ghosts about whom we know nothing; did they escape, did they fight back, and were they killed?⁴⁰

What should we make of this silencing? Because of his enigmatic style, Koren may be accused of failing to articulate a clear moral condemnation or effective political response to the historical violence indirectly yet repeatedly alluded to. Indeed, the figure of the nameless, empty, and destroyed Arab village in the text could even be called a fetish, a stand-in for unresolved anxiety and repression, which the characters and perhaps even Koren himself have failed to come to terms with. And yet, it is also significant that from the very first line of the novel, this enigmatic, nameless, destroyed village (whose “past is expelled out of the text,” to borrow Siksek’s words) frames the entire narrative. It is without doubt a ghostly presence that mobilizes Hagar, leading her time and again to leave her house and roam the village. We never learn what motivates Hagar; the destroyed village simply *acts on her* like a cast spell.

Within the novel, the ruins of the Arab village mark a liminal space—the “non-place” to which Hagar escapes when she leaves her



nearby home in the Jewish settlement. Narratologically speaking, the force of the ruins is in their negativity: their appearance marks a void that calls attention to itself.⁴¹ The “deserted Arab village”—the words punctuate the narrative, not by infusing it with details of past memories or accounts of violence and loss but by drawing attention to the absence of any such account. This ghostly absence, made visible through the negativity of the ruins (not just within the narrative but also as words repeated in print) haunts Koren’s novel and its characters, offering no resolution. To cite Siksek again,

Levayah ba-tsohorayim leaves us readers, like the characters it portrays, speechless. . . . [W]e are left with the disturbing feeling that something unidentified remains hidden behind the “visible” parts of the story, something that seeks to be exposed, but which as such remains beyond our reach.

Additionally, I suggest that Koren’s novel joins Yizhar’s and Yehoshua’s earlier efforts to underscore the afterlives of ruins. The ruins of the deserted Arab village that host Hagar’s secret love affair and later serve as the tomb for Yiftah’s dead body remind us that “haunting is real.”⁴²

Not Quite Out of Sight: Ruins, Traces, Haunting

The emptied Arab villages, to which Yizhar’s early novella introduces us, reappear in Yehoshua’s text as hidden ruins and later in Koren’s novel as crypts that unfold a semantics of ambiguity located between presence and absence, the visible and the invisible. The ruins feature prominently in all three texts, signifying the material evidence of historical violence. These ruins, however, are not sealed fragments of the past. They are animated and haunting: voices and gazes escape their walls; they solicit attention and lure visitors. Located in liminal spaces, hidden in a forest or marking the outer boundary of a thriving settlement, these ruins come to us not only as images of a violent past arrested and hidden but also as a reminder of “a space that is still in becoming.”⁴³

The spectral quality of these texts suggests that Hebrew literature is by no means immune to the ghosts of the past, even if we have yet to welcome a text that is more openly hospitable to them. Indeed, we are still awaiting a full-fledged Hebrew “ghostly narrative” in which a Palestinian ghost emerges out of the ruins, laying open his or her accusations. We can only hope that with the appearance of such an animated

Palestinian ghost, we would also find an alternative to the dysfunctional, guilt-ridden, and suffocated Jewish Israeli character as the model of a literary protagonist.

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Notes

- 1 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1997), 8.
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, 1994), 100.
- 3 It is safe to say, I believe, that there are few *if any* outright Palestinian ghosts roaming the pages of modern Hebrew literature. The lack of (Palestinian) ghosts, however, does not mean that haunting does not take place. What we find in the Hebrew texts I engage in this article are not full-fledged figures of ghosts that return to haunt, but ruins (destroyed, hidden, revealed, or revisited) as sites that host the mute and invisible ghosts that are yet to appear.
- 4 Torok and Abraham suggest, departing from Freud, that haunting occurs not as a result of the actual “return of the repressed” but rather as an outcome of an ongoing failure or inability to face the repressed, resulting in the creation of secrets and the cryptic burial of the repressed trauma within the self. The legacy of such encryption, they suggest, is found in the transmission of transgenerational trauma as the work of the ghost in the unconscious, buried and sealed with shame. The crypt is therefore where the violent past is kept, as it is simultaneously revealed and hidden. See Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel* (Chicago, Ill., 1994).
- 5 A related phenomenon appears in post-1948 Israeli Hebrew poetry. The figure of the “deserted village” (*ha-kefar ha-natush*) appears in quite a few poems, often representing the narrator’s sense of being haunted by memories of his own involvement in the violence practiced against Palestinian villages in 1948. See, for example, Hayim Gouri, “Ha-boker shele-maharat,” in *Shirei hotam* (Tel Aviv, 1954), and Yehuda Amichai, “Elegyah ‘al kefar natush,” in *Shirei Yehudah Amichai* (Jerusalem, 2002), in addition to earlier poems by Avot Yeshurun. For more, see Hannan Hever, ed., *Al tagidu be-Gath: Ha-Nakbah ha-falastinit ba-shirah ha-ivrit 1948–1958* (Tel Aviv, 2010).
- 6 S. Yizhar, *Sipur Hirbet Hiz’ah ve-‘od sheloshah sipurei milhamah* (Tel Aviv, 2006 [1959]). The novella was recently published in English translation: S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, trans. Nicholas de Lange and Yacob Dweck (Jerusalem, 2008). All references from the novella refer to the Hebrew original.



- 7 According to Anita Shapira, the novella, published in September 1949, had sold a total of 4,354 copies by April 1951—an undeniably impressive number considering the small number of Hebrew readers in the State of Israel at that time; see Anita Shapira, “Hirbet Hizah: Between Remembrance and Forgetting,” *Jewish Social Studies* n.s. 7, no. 1 (2000): 1–62, esp. 10. Since 1964, the novella has been incorporated into the Israeli national high-school curriculum as a required text, joining other texts that were meant to function as a corpus for producing “a national consciousness in high school pupils” (*ibid.*, 25).
- 8 See Shapira, “Hirbet Hizah,” esp. 5–10.
- 9 Baruch Kurzweil, *Bein hazon le-vein ha-absurdi* (Jerusalem, 1973).
- 10 A few key scholars of Hebrew literature have suggested that the novella (and Yizhar’s writing in general) ought to be read allegorically rather than as a political commentary on any particular sociohistorical or political reality. Along these lines, Dan Miron has significantly underplayed the importance of the historical context of the novella, arguing that it be read as a universal allegory about the struggle between the individual and the collective. See Dan Miron, “S. Yizhar: Some General Observations,” in *Midnight Convoy and Other Stories*, by S. Yizhar (Jerusalem, 1969), 257–73. Gershon Shaked has similarly argued that Yizhar’s work is preoccupied with the universal struggle between the force of nature and the mission of civilization imposed on nature by man and that as such it does not deal with this or that particular historical circumstance. See Gershon Shaked, *Sifrut az, kan ve-’akhshav* (Tel Aviv, 1993), 181–203.
- 11 Yizhar, *Sipur Hirbet Hiz’ah*, 33.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 18 A. B. Yehoshua, “Mul ha-ye’arot,” in *Kol ha-sipurim* (Tel Aviv, 2005 [1993]), 99–127.
- 19 The organization’s Hebrew website includes a detailed account of the JNF’s activities, divided by decade. For details, see http://www.kkl.org.il/kkl/hebrew/nosim_ikaryim/al_kakal/history/asorkkl/asorim.x.
- 20 For more on the central role of forest planting within the making of the Israeli national collective memory, see Carol Bardenstein, “Threads of Memory and Discourses of Rootedness: Of Trees, Oranges and the Prickly-Pear Cactus in Israel/Palestine,” *Edebiyat* 8 (1998): 1–36.
- 21 Yehoshua, “Mul ha-ye’arot,” 99, 102.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 106–7.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 116.

26 Ibid., 127.

27 Yael Zerubavel makes a related observation, noting that “the linear temporal ordering of the plot is subverted by a full return to an aimless circularity.” She describes the novella’s temporality as a “circular motion, locked within the constraints of the present.” See Yael Zerubavel, “The Forest as a National Icon: Literature, Politics, and the Archeology of Memory,” *Israel Studies* 1, no. 1 (1996): 80.

28 For an excellent overview of these responses, see Amir Banbaji, “Yehoshua’ be-rei ha-sifrut ha-‘ivrit,” in *Mabatim mitstalvim: ‘Iyunim bi-yetsirat A. B. Yehoshua’*, ed. Amir Banbaji, Nitsah Ben-Dov, and Zivah Shamir (Tel Aviv, 2010), 14–29.

29 Gershon Shaked, *Gal hadash ba-sifrut ha-‘ivrit: Masot ‘al sipuret yisraelit tse’irah* (Tel Aviv, 1974), 120.

30 Mordechai Shalev, “Ha-‘Aravim ke-pitaron sifrut,” *Haaretz*, Sept. 30, 1970, pp. 50–51. Reprinted in Banjab, Ben-Dov, and Shamir, *Mabatim mitstalvim*, 63.

31 Ibid., 67; emphasis added.

32 One must infer that Shalev has forgotten that the old Arab man in the story has his tongue cut out and that his village is burned down—not exactly true signs of vitality.

33 Shalev, “Ha-‘Aravim,” 67.

34 For a different (and redeeming) interpretation of Shalev’s reading, see Hannan Hever, *Ha-sipur veva-leom: Keriot bikortiyot be-kanon ha-siporet ha-‘ivrit* (Tel Aviv, 2007), esp. 240; Engl., *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse* (New York, 2002), 141.

35 Abraham and Torok, *Shell and the Kernel*, 427.

36 Yehoshua, “Mul ha-ye‘arot,” 121–22.

37 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, 1988), 35–36.

38 Yeshayahu Koren, *Levayah ba-tsohorayim* (Tel Aviv, 2008), 7.

39 Abraham and Torok, *Shell and the Kernel*, 174.

40 Ayman Siksek, “Ta’ato’ai ke-elu,” *Haaretz*, May 8, 2008, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1341183>.

41 Describing ruins caused by human violence as sites haunted by a traumatic past, Dylan Trigg writes that “the formal features of the ruin are situated in an ambiguous zone, whereby what remains is defined by what is absent”; see Dylan Trigg, “The Place of Trauma: Memory, Haunting and the Temporality of Ruins,” *Memory Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 95.

42 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 53, 190, 205.

43 Amir Eshel, “Layered Time: Ruins as Shattered Past, Ruins as Hope in Israeli and German Landscapes and Literature,” in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham, N.C., 2010), 133–50, esp. 147.

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*A Poetics of
Haunting*

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Gil Hochberg