

THE PLACE COULD NOT BEAR ME: EXPULSION AND EXILE IN *KHIRBET KHIZEH*

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When *Khirbet Khizeh* by S. Yizhar was published in 1949, the story was criticized for its lack of historical consciousness. At the time, the text's failure to acknowledge the expulsion of Palestinians as a necessity gave rise to widespread objections. Ironically enough, the same story has been criticized in recent Israeli post-colonial writings as effacing the Other through exclusion, as overt identification, or as imagining the Other only in terms of the national subject.

Through close reading, this essay re-examines the relation between expulsion and exile in *Khirbet Khizeh*, thus reassessing the relation between self and Other. Informed by the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, the essay explores the Palestinian expulsion as triggering another exile, the self-exile of Jewish settlers. Anticipating Levinas, Yizhar portrays his narrator's ethical responsibility through the metaphor of listening to an Other's cry. It is the soldiers' deafness and the narrator's failure to respond that turn the expulsion into an unheard cry inducing trauma for both nations, trauma which will erupt again in violent repetition. The tragedy of this ending can be mitigated by tracing Yizhar's ethical economy, calculating human voices in the place of territories.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the publication of S. Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizeh* and *Hashavoi* (*The Prisoner*) in September 1949 in the newly founded state of Israel, these two war stories have come to occupy an exceptional, almost mythical place in the Israeli literary canon. At the same time, between these two stories, it was *Khirbet Khizeh*, which received the most polarized critical acceptance due to its underlining of the violent expulsion of Palestinian villagers by Israeli soldiers, in the last days of the 1948 war. The story's treatment of highly controversial issues such as Zionism's historical justifications, Israel's moral foundation, and the explosive question of the Palestinian expulsion resulted in two major public controversies, as Anita Shapira documented in her brilliant essay "*Khirbet Khizeh: Between Remembrance and Forgetting*."¹ The first public discussion erupted in the early 1950s with the story's publication and the second one in the 1970s due to the story's

¹ A. Shapira, "*Khirbet Khizeh: Between Remembrance and Forgetting*," *Jewish Social Studies* 7.1 (2000): 1-62.

film adaptation for television, which was deemed by many to be an anti-Zionistic act, leading different political parties to demand the cancellation of the future broadcast. Until this day, *Khirbet Khizeh* keeps generating both public and critical attention as one can observe from its ongoing inclusion in Israel's education programs, and from recent essays, articles, and books dealing with Yizhar's poetics in general and in *Khirbet Khizeh* in particular, published by scholars such as Yitzhak Laor, Hannan Hever, Nitza Ben-Ari, Yochai Oppenheimer, and Gil Anijar.

Though *Khirbet Khizeh* holds a prominent position in Israeli culture, its position remains ambivalent. For Anita Shapira, the acceptance of "*Khirbet Khizah* into collective memory (or its exclusion) illuminates a still broader topic: the linkage between morality and the right of the Jewish state to exist."² Shapira adds that although the expulsion of Palestinians was not kept secret in Israeli society, still

On a more subliminal level, however, collective memory did not "assimilate" the messages conveyed by *Khirbet Khizeh*. The remembrance of the expulsion continues to hover in the twilight zone between the conscious and unconscious.... *Khirbet Khizeh* has remained just such a lingering "unpleasant memory."³

In this reading, I wish to return to *Khirbet Khizeh*, to invoke this "unpleasant memory" in order to rethink the relations between self and other as they unfold through the act of the Palestinian expulsion by Israeli soldiers. In a now famous paragraph appearing near *Khirbet Khizeh*'s ending, the protagonist, an Israeli soldier, and a "Sabra" sees the long line of Palestinian refugees forced to leave their village and flee to the border. Only then, he claims to understand for the first time in his life the meaning of the word exile:

Something struck me like lightning. [Everything] at once seemed to mean something different. More precisely: exile. This was exile. This was what exile was like. This was what exile looked like. I couldn't stay where I was. The place could not bear me.⁴

For Hannan Hever, the narrator's statement entails the effacement of the other by the Jewish subject who is only capable of identifying and imagining the other through his own story, his own past and collective memory, that of

² A. Shapira, "*Khirbet Khizeh*," p. 53.

³ A. Shapira, "*Khirbet Khizeh*," p. 55.

⁴ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2008), pp. 104.

the Jewish exile and Diaspora.⁵ In other words, Hever reads this paragraph as constructing a relation of analogy, the Palestinian expulsion as a mirror of the Jewish exile from Israel in the past. I would like to argue that one could read in this paragraph, in this story, a different relation, one of causality. The Palestinian expulsion by the Israeli-Jewish soldiers triggers the narrator's own sense of exile, an exile in the homeland, the self-exile of the expeller, haunted by his own violence. For what is interesting in the paragraph cited above is that the term "exile" does not necessarily refer to the Palestinian villagers, rather this "exile" can also be read as marking the narrator's own sense of loss, as is actually revealed by the progression of this paragraph:

I had never been in the Diaspora—I said to myself—I had never known what it was like...but people have spoken to me, told me, taught me and repeatedly recited to me...exile. They had played on all my nerves...there was nowhere to wander or to distance myself...I went down and mingled with them like someone looking for something.⁶

What is exposed here is a twofold narrative of conquest and exile. Through the eyes of the Yizharian protagonist,⁷ *Khirbet Khizeh* constructs the Jewish territorial conquest of Palestine/Israel, accomplished violently by expelling Palestinians, as paradoxically leading to the sense of the narrator's self-exile. Ironically then, the territory is gained only to be lost and the expulsion of the other by the subject leads to the subject's own ethical and psychological exile in his homeland.

Before we continue in this reading, it is important to clarify one thing. My reading of *Khirbet Khizeh*'s narrative as linking together Palestinian expulsion and a new Jewish exile is not meant to equate in anyway these two "exiles" or to minimize the gravity of the Palestinian situation by shifting the focus to the suffering of the Jewish expellers. However, reading *Khirbet Khizeh* as a twofold narrative, one of expulsion and of self-exile enables us to view this story as pointing to the 1948 war—called the Independence war

⁵ H. Hever, "Mapa Shel Hol: Mesifrut Ivrit Lesifrut Israelit," *Teoria Vebikuret* 20 (Spring 2002): 165–199.

⁶ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 104.

⁷ In *Arba Panim Basifrut Ha'Ivrit* (Four faces of Hebrew literature), Dan Miron describes the Yizharian protagonist as a person who experiences reality as a spectator. This external spectatorship has a dual relationship with his surrounding society. He feels at the same time inferior to a brave, heroic, masculine fraternity, but he also feels an intellectual superiority to his comrades. In other words, Miron points out to us that one of the most obvious features of this hero is a sense of an inner and external conflict. This conflict between the individual and society, between his ethical convictions and the crimes he is required to commit in the name of the burgeoning state are manifested not only in historical events, but also in an inner psychic split, as I will show later in this paper. See D. Miron. *Arba Panim Basifrut Ha'Ivrit* (Shoken: Jerusalem, 1961), pp. 260–263.

by Israelis and Nakba (cataclysm) by Palestinians—as a political-collective and a psychical-personal trauma for both Palestinians and Jews alike. Through the narrator, the act of expulsion is constructed as generating a trauma that can be effaced neither by the aggressor nor by its victim, who are both banished from their territory. Consequently, *Khirbet Khizeh* tells us of conquest's impossibility, how in its violent success already lies its even more violent failure.

2. OVER AND DONE WITH

In his *Al Hamakom* (Of the place),⁸ sociologist Zeli Gourevitch claims that Judaism, from biblical times until modern times, has been characterized by a conflicted relation to the land. Thus, according to Gourevitch, neither in Zionism nor in Israeli culture was there ever a transparent and unmediated experience of Nativism, of feeling and being “in place.” For Gourevitch, the Bible, emphasizing first the importance of the text, of the Torah, and only then of territory, has created the idea of the land as double, both as an actual territory, and even more importantly as a moral and a religious ideal. The biblical myth is the myth of a place that is always already signified and contextualized. According to him, this double, incompatible view of Israel, at the same time an actual place and an Ideal yet to be fulfilled, exists also for Yizhar's generation. As a result, even the Sabra, the New Jewish native, was always “in” and “out” of place. While Gourevitch roots the discord between the Jewish subject and his homeland in the biblical myth, *Khirbet Khizeh* offers us another reason for the Jewish subject's sense of exile in his homeland. This phenomenon of the “exile-in-place” stems for Yizhar from a concrete historical situation: the 1948 war.

From its starting point, *Khirbet Khizeh* is marked by a traumatic event. Freud's definition of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principal*⁹ is of an event too violent and abrupt to be “weaved” into the subject's consciousness and narrative, yet it keeps haunting the subject through dreams and repetitive uncontrolled acts. Following Freud's formulation, the story's narration is construed as a nearly impossible attempt to recollect a violent break in the past. On the one hand, the narrator cannot “drown it out in the passing of time, to diminish its value, to blunt its edge with the daily rush of life,” nor can he

⁸ Z. Gourevitch, *Al Hamakom* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2007), pp 8–74.

⁹ S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principal* (New York: Bantam Books, 1959), pp. 47–78.

join the “great general mass of liars,”¹⁰ yet this violence also resists any “organized” form of telling.¹¹

Khirbet Khizeh's construction of the expulsion as a traumatic moment (for expeller and exiled) in the story brings the reader into a time conceptualization that differs from a linear, progressive, chronological time, for trauma commands repetition. Therefore, from the beginning, the story implies that in fact, the war was never won and the expulsion is not “over, done, finished.”¹² If *Khirbet Khizeh*—as a story, or as history—begins with

the “operational order” number such and such...to assemble the inhabitants... load them to transports and convey them across our lines; blow up the stone houses, and burn the huts; detain the youths and the suspects; and clear the area of hostile forces,¹³

it is obvious that this order cannot have a clear ending. As the narrator informs us that “anyone who had forgotten how all this was bound to end knew again what was before him,”¹⁴ we start to understand that *Khirbet Khizeh* opens up the site of a circular and endless violence, an open wound that will not be healed. This is why at the ending of the story, after the refugees have crossed the newly founded borders, a dark prophecy tells us about the heart of a banished Palestinian child: “we could see how something was happening in the heart of the boy, something, that when he grew up, could only become a viper inside him that same thing that was now the weeping of a helpless child.”¹⁵

Ironically enough, in the same way that the violent future summoned by the trauma is portrayed through the heart of a child who becomes a viper, the origin of this trauma is also to be found in a child's play. In Yizhar's story *Lefnai Yezia* (Before departure),¹⁶ the soldier Elijahu, who functions both as the opposite and as an ego-ideal of the narrator, is described with an attractive mixture of masculine and childish features; the narrator even wonders

¹⁰ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, pp. 7.

¹¹ In the beginning, the narrator tells us of different options of telling the story, each incomplete and indecisive in its own way: “One option is to tell the story in order...another option and possibly even better option, however would be to begin differently.” See S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 37.

¹² S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 7.

¹³ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 9.

¹⁴ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 77.

¹⁵ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 104.

¹⁶ Along with *Khirbet Khizeh*, Yizhar wrote three war stories between 1948–1949: *Lifnei Yezia* (Before departure), *The Prisoner*, and *Shayara Shel Hazot* (A midnight convoy). All four were published together under the collection *Arba Sipurim* (Four stories; Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1959). These four stories exhibit similarities in their stylistic and thematic traits, as Dan Miron already commented in *Arba Panim Basifrut Ha'Ivrit*, p. 261.

when his mother scrubbed his back. In *The Prisoner*, the soldiers' behavior before the capturing of the Palestinian shepherd is filled with laughter and fun, a "mischievous" play of tying his hands and making him lead his herd, while in the later torture scene, they are described as one happy circle.

These random "child's play" metaphors are developed in *Khirbet Khizeh* to create a full sized framing of the entire text. When the platoon heads out for its future expedition of "We came, we shot, we burned, we blew up, expelled, drove out, and sent into exile,"¹⁷ they are described as "a flock of sparrow like urchins. There we were sloshing, talking and chattering, joking and singing...today we are going on an outing."¹⁸ In their times of boredom, the soldiers wait for "other children to come and continue the game."¹⁹ The imagery of child's play serves as a double analogy for the soldiers' actions. On the one hand, this metaphor advances an ironic and critical look on the soldiers' abasement of the Palestinian villagers, which stands in contrast to nostalgic views of a child's innocent play. On the other hand, the soldiers' actions—such as bragging about killing harmless donkeys and camels, and shooting at defenseless Palestinians in open fields—echo acts of cruel children who do not grasp how their actions affect others. Merdechie Shalev commented on this apathy stemming from infantile alienation in one of the earliest reviews of Yizhar's story, in which he claimed that the soldiers kill Palestinians only for their own sadistic pleasure.²⁰

This infantile sadism becomes possible on the basis of a collective consciousness which perceives the Palestinian as an animal, an organic fixture of the landscape, as an object, or as an incomprehensible, opaque figure.²¹ These Palestinians "are not even human," their movements are like "the worthless twisting of a worm."²² Yet throughout the story, a more disturbing perspective is exposed: the Palestinians are even less than animals. When the Israeli soldiers discover a deserted horse tied to a tree, they set him free, but when they discover two deserted old women in the fields "horribly withered

¹⁷ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 86.

¹⁸ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 10.

¹⁹ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 16.

²⁰ M. Shalev, "Mevuch and Sadism," in *Mivhar Mamerei Bikoret on S. Yizhar's Prose* (ed. H. Nagid; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1972), pp. 45–57.

²¹ For a detailed and fascinating research of the Arab figure in Yizhar's poetics and in Hebrew literature in general, see Y. Oppenheimer, *Me'ever la-gader: Yitsug ha-'Aravim ba-siporet ha-'Ivrit veha-Yisre'elit (1906–2005)* (Beyond the fence: The representation of Arabs in Hebrew and Israeli literature; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008).

²² S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, pp. 25, 50.

monsters that emitted the stench of newly dug graves,”²³ they leave them behind to an almost certain death.

In the midst of this child’s play, the narrator’s voice starts to break from an indifferent, callous collective consciousness; he starts to suddenly use “I” and not only “we” to describe, to report, and more importantly to observe and think. This contrast appears initially in *Khirbet Khizeh*’s opening frame, which is told after the expulsion, when the narrator situates himself as opposing collective consciousness. Yet when the narrator enters into his recollections of the past, the plot is told in a plural first person. It is only with the story’s progress and the gradual progression of violence that the split in the narrator’s telling starts to emerge, and the narrator’s voice shifts repeatedly back and forth between “I” and “we.” What becomes urgent in this text is the question of the trigger: What led to the narrator’s inner split and to the emergence of a different voice, a different self?

3. LISTENING TO AN(OTHER’S) CRY

In *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Emmanuel Levinas explains the encounter between the self and the Other through the metaphor of the Face to Face encounter.²⁴ For Levinas, the meeting of the face to face is an ethical encounter that awakens the ethical responsibility of the self to the Other. Subjectivity is created through and by the free choice to encounter the Other without appropriating or reducing the Other to the degree of sameness. Moreover, Levinas claims that the Other cannot be grasped or explained. It is the Other, in his absolute otherness, who awakens the subject’s ethical responsibility. This ethical structure was critiqued by Derrida in *Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas*.²⁵ According to Derrida, if the other is absolutely Other, how can the self even recognize him? For Derrida, the Other can be constituted as wholly other from the self only if he is in fact also the same as the self, in the sense that the self and the Other both constitute ego. Accepting this critique, in his later book *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*,²⁶ Levinas moves on to a different structure of Self and Other. While the call for ethical responsibility still

²³ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 52.

²⁴ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969). [page or chapter?]

²⁵ J. Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 79–154.

²⁶ E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence* (London: Kluwer Academic, 1991).

stems from the Other, the Other is no longer “outside” the subject. The self and Other are no longer closed, complete entities in their own right, rather they are intertwined: “The approach of the neighbor is the fission of the subject beyond lungs, in the resistant nucleus of the ego...it is a fission of self, or the self as fissibility.”²⁷ This philosophical movement and dialogue is anticipated in Yizhar’s *Khirbet Khizeh*, written in 1948, in which the narrator’s ethical recognition and responsibility is awakened by an Other’s cry.

When first approaching the deserted Palestinian village, the narrator suddenly hears a shout and a song:

These empty, godforsaken villages...gaping emptiness screaming out with silence that was at once evil and sad...the day was coming when they would begin to cry out...this large, sullen village burst into a song of things whose soul has left them.²⁸

While the narrator hears this shout, his comrades shun it. But this silent shout and cry coming from an other is also transformed into an inner shout, and suddenly, while the narrator is still helping his comrades “with drunken excitement” to shoot runaway villagers, he feels that “somebody was shouting something else inside me, like a wounded bird and while I was still feeling startled from these *two* voices [emphasis added].”²⁹ This inner split increases with the progression of the Israeli soldiers into the Palestinian villages, and with the repeated eruption of violence. At this point, in this break, the narrator starts his own journey of exile from his friends and from the collective consciousness promoting these violent acts. Though he “hated starting to feel differently,” the narrator cannot stop listening to the other’s cry once it has reemerged as his own inner cry: “The tiniest crack attracted attention, turning into a gaping hole and started to shout.”³⁰

With the platoon’s advance in the pastoral landscape and in the silent-screaming villages, the narrator’s inner/outer shout develops into a mental conflict and a sense of guilt. Trying to remind himself of the Palestinians’ violent crimes, he still cannot find any comfort or justification for his com-

²⁷ E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 180.

²⁸ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, pp. 26–27. It is interesting to note how this shout is a song, a cry without words, reminiscent of Levinas’ own description of the saying of the other to the self as a saying, prior to anything actually being said. See E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 43.

²⁹ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 35.

³⁰ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 40.

plicity in the violence. As the expulsion progresses, the narrator's inner split deepens and is projected back to create fragmented and mutilated scenery:

A first glance and the land stretched before you...hunched and hollowed with drenched lushness...a breath of beauty of enjoyment...and suddenly upon all these an orphaned longing descended, a shadowy veil...the plantations that would never be irrigated, paths that would become desolate. A sense of destruction and worthlessness.³¹

It is this paragraph which marks the moment of conquest as the moment of loss. What Yizhar suggests here is that the unavoidable course of violence is a two-way street. The same psychic split as materialized in a broken, mutilated scenery also occurs in *The Prisoner*. Once the soldiers ambush the shepherd, they become themselves invaders and foreigners to the terrain, which in turn loses its beauty and unity and is described as divided and limited.³² Thus, both *The Prisoner* and *Khirbet Khizeh* construct the mastery of the terrain also as the moment in which the terrain "slips" away from any control. The land also belonged to an Other who was expelled, yet ironically it is this expulsion which situates the Other for perpetual return. This possible, violent return of the Other is rooted in the soldiers' deafness to the Other's cry: An old Palestinian villager tries to speak, but he is yelled at and pushed to the side, a woman's cry remains unheard and a child's cry is lost, yet it is exactly this deafness that lies at the origin of trauma. The soldiers' deafness and the narrator's failure to act are what will lead to the circular and repetitive violence as foreshadowed by the ending of *Khirbet Khizeh*:

So long as the tears of a weeping child still glistened...on his way into exile, bearing with him such a roar of injustice and such a scream that it was impossible that someone in the world would not gather that scream in when the moment came.³³

This is why the moment of expulsion is also the moment of self-exile for the expellers. The narrator's failure to respond to the Other's cry results in his inner split, leading to a new exile, an exile-in-place. This cry, which has never been truly heard, threatens to materialize in the repetition of violence and trauma. The pinnacle of this realization, of expulsion leading to exile, is embodied through the emergence of the narrator's self as the exiled subject in the midst of the Palestinian expulsion:

³¹ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, pp 88–89.

³² D. Miron, *Arba Panim Basifrut Ha'Ivrit*, pp. 268–275.

³³ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 110.

Something struck me like lightning. All at once everything seemed to mean something different, more precisely: exile. This was exile. This was what exile was like...I couldn't stay where I was. The place itself couldn't bear me.³⁴

4. AN ETHICAL ECONOMY

Reading *Khirbet Khizeh* as a history of expulsion resulting in the ethical exile of the expellers leads to a view of Zionism as an endless, incomplete movement, the success of which assured its failure even as its failure guaranteed its success. Zionism, as a movement aimed at establishing a Jewish state in the land of Israel was supposed to have already finished its historical role by the end of the 1948 war. Still, by achieving this goal through the violent expulsion of Palestinians, situating them for perpetual return, Zionism never truly "secured" its accomplishment. The land belongs at the same time to the Jewish nation and also to an(Other) nation. In *Khirbet Khizeh*, through the inheritance not only of land but also of trauma, which will be repeated in violence, one sees how Zionism assured its own existence. The founding of the nation is never wholly completed. Ironically, it is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that does not allow Zionism to fully realize its goal, while the same conflict ensures the existence of Zionism as a movement until this day.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is informed by what is generally called the zero-sum game, in which any side's loss is the other side's gain. This tragic "game" perception of us versus them is what stood at the root of the objections raised against *Khirbet Khizeh* when it was first published. Most of Yizhar's early critics—belonging to different political sections—attacked the author for his so-called liberal criticism, which ignored the expulsion's necessity. Many critics spoke about the Palestinian violence leading up to the expulsion and stated that as a nation, Jews were forced to choose between us and them.³⁵ As a result, the most common objection to Yizhar's writing was based on its lack of historical consciousness.

Yet it is my claim that what is perceived as the lack of historical consciousness is in fact a choice not to justify violence. *Khirbet Khizeh*'s repre-

³⁴ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 104. The last sentence is a reference to Gen 13:6 in which it is said that the land could not bear both Lot's and Abram's families and herds. In the biblical story, the land cannot bear (materially support) both people, so the two men divide the land by means of peace. In Yizhar's story, we have a different connotation for the verb "bear": It is because of the Israeli side's expulsion of the Palestinians that the land itself can no longer morally support the narrator. Metaphorically, it is the land which expels the expeller.

³⁵ For a historical and detailed scheme of these reviews, see A. Shapira, "*Khirbet Khizeh*," pp. 10–21.

sentation of the expulsion as a traumatic event, devoid of any historical justification, can be seen as a conscious ethical choice. If national allegories efface violence by justifying it through historical, moral, and social reasoning,³⁶ then *Khirbet Khizeh* chooses a different path. As demonstrated by its beginning and ending, the story moves in a circular and repetitive pattern, originating from a traumatic event that will keep haunting its subject and the land. Moreover, this trauma is a shared trauma of self and Other, whose ethical responsibility and bond to each other was betrayed through the act of expulsion. While the Palestinians who were exiled will return in demand of retribution—a child’s heart turned into a viper—the expellers, Israeli soldiers who were deaf to this child’s cry, will be faced with the repetition of this violence as it threatens their control over the land. In Yizhar’s story, even expellers who cried out but did not act out, such as the narrator, are themselves exiled from the land, which turns from a beloved, comforting entity into a constant manifestation of guilt: “From those fields accusing eyes peered out at you, that silent accusatory look as of a reproachful animal, staring and following you so there was no refuge.”³⁷

Though at the end of *Khirbet Khizeh*, the narrator fails to act and the expulsion does take place, there is still an important difference between the narrator and the other soldiers. What mobilizes the expulsion is the soldiers’ belief that a clear line can be drawn between self and Other, us and them, between two nations and most of all, between past and present. Only the Yizharian protagonist/narrator of *Khirbet Khizeh* (also in *The Prisoner* and in *Midnight Convoy*) understands that such effacement and separation are not truly possible. This constant shift between the “we” as a closed off entity and the realization of the “I” who understands being in Levinas’ terms as openness to an Other is beautifully captured in a short paragraph near the story’s end:

A single day of discomfort and *our* people would strike root here for many years...and soon they’d be nothing more than a page that had been finished and turned.... Was not this *our* right.... Hadn’t we conquered it today...I felt that I was on the verge of slipping.... The people who would live in this village—Wouldn’t the walls cry out in their ears?³⁸

A few moments before the expulsion takes place, the narrator tries to comfort himself by recuperating the strong, collective “we” and repressing

³⁶ H. Hever, “Mapa Shel Hol,” pp. 165–174.

³⁷ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 89.

³⁸ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 108.

his emerging sense of guilt. A moment later, however, this nagging “I” returns and the reader is once again presented with Yizhar’s construction of the ethical relation between self and Other through the sense of hearing. If listening to the Other’s cry opens the self to the other, it is deafness and forgetting which expel him. The other remains inhuman and cannot be imagined as an “I,” as occupying the same place as my own place, an ego. Therefore, after the platoon chooses not to kill an old Palestinian villager, one of the soldiers says: “Imagine if he’d been a Jew and we were Arabs!... No way! They’d have slaughtered him just like that.”³⁹

In addition to listening to the Other as an ethical imperative, implying then that the Other can address us, Yizhar is careful to not completely understand the Other in the self’s own terms. Though the narrator ends up identifying with the exiled Palestinians and walking among them, one can still trace a distance which is maintained in the story through the relativity of organization and order. In trying to imagine the deserted villages in past life, when still inhabited by Palestinians, the narrator thinks:

an order intelligible to someone and a disorder in which somebody at his convenience had found his ways, remnants of pots and pans that have been collected in a haphazard fashion, touched by very private joys and woes that a stranger could not understand.⁴⁰

What is suggested here is an access to the Other through listening on the one hand, but also through understanding his irreducible otherness. This is conceived by imagining the self as a stranger and a stranger as the self. It is the ethical recognition of the Other, even of an enemy, as a human being. Two enemies stand in mutual recognition. The humanity of the self is created by listening to the Other, yet also through the estrangement of the self. While the narrator’s comrades construct their being through the effacement of the Palestinians, the narrator’s being emerges on the basis of recognizing the Other as ego, as human.

The contrast between these two perceptions—“us versus them” and “us and them”—is manifested through the opposition between seeing and participating. When shooting at villagers to hasten their expulsion, the soldiers are described as watching a play: “We were lying on our stomachs watching the scene with enjoyment.”⁴¹ With the day’s progression and the continua-

³⁹ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 48.

⁴⁰ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 41.

⁴¹ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 41.

tion of the expulsion of the villagers, an argument erupts between the narrator and his comrades. In trying to support the narrator's position against the expulsion, one of the soldiers, named Shlomo, says:

When you go to a place where you might die that's one thing, but when you go to a place where other people are liable to die and you just stand and watch them, that's something quite different.⁴²

A line is drawn here between watching the Other's possible death as a spectacle and experiencing it as a shared fate. The self and the Other are perceived here as having mutual responsibility because both share the same fate, mortality.

And still, at the end, the narrator fails to act and the expulsion takes place. If in the past Yizhar was accused of being a bleeding heart liberal, from a post-colonial perspective he is now perceived as an author relegating the power of critique to the world of thought, while his protagonists' actions are ultimately in service of the nation.⁴³ Still it is my claim that it is this failure of the narrator which endows the story with a sense of the tragic and with a sense of a moral bankruptcy and ethical urgency, even more forcefully than a "positive" ending would.

It is exactly the narrator's failure to act that precipitates the sudden entrance of none other than God into the story.

And when silence has 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.⁴⁴

While the story ends with the soldiers' deafness and the narrator's failure to respond to the Other's cries, God appears in *Khirbet Khizeh* as a substitution for the ability to listen. God becomes a code for the ethical recognition and responsibility to the Other. Summoned here in reference to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, God is the compensation, the hearing aid if you will, for tragic human deafness. In Derrida's words, "God is in me. He is the absolute 'me' or 'self,' he is that structure of invisible interiority that is called, in Kierkegaard's sense, subjectivity."⁴⁵ Following in the

⁴² S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 94.

⁴³ See, for an example, Y. Laor, "Anhano h-12 Shebeafar Hashochot," in *Anu Kotvim Otach Moledet* (We write you homeland; Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1995).

⁴⁴ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 104.

⁴⁵ J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 109.

footsteps of Yizhar, Levinas, and Derrida, if God is the nucleus of the “I”—of being as listening the Other’s cry, as openness to the other—then to expel the Other would also mean to expel your own ethical responsibility, to become expelled and dissociated from your own self. In contrast to human silence and deafness in this story, God’s descent is a forceful reminder of the reader’s own ethical responsibility.

The introduction of the divine component into *Khirbet Khizeh*’s ending can also be read mathematically. Already in the village, the narrator describes the platoon’s calculation of the new-conquered lands. While the soldiers discuss the re-organization of the land, the cost of plants, aggregation, and soil, the narrator tells us of “the one calculation that they failed to make, and that was the one stalking around, here and now, descending into their spacious fields in order to dispossess them.”⁴⁶ What he identifies here is a faulty economy. The soldiers do not know their math. In their calculation, the conquest of the terrain is a clean profit, of lands, territories, resources, and wealth. Reaching the bottom line too quickly, there is a figure left out of the equation that will soon turn the possession of land into a dis-possession. This remainder—the ethical responsibility to the Other, the Other’s cry, or the demand of God residing in the self and in the Other—will turn the gain into a loss. The possession of the land will become the possession of trauma. The inheritance of territory will become an inheritance of violence.

Re-calculating the remainder by putting the figure of God back into the equation, Yizhar offers us a different economy, an ethical economy, one that includes not only land, but also human lives. By calculating the “I” as combined with the Other, Yizhar suggests that maybe we will be able to correct this tragic miscalculation. Only through objecting to the sacrifice of others for land and by listening intently to an Other’s cry can we adequately respond, turning loss back into gain and healing the open wound.

⁴⁶ S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, p. 92.