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Upon a Certain Place: On the Dialectics of Transmitting Tradition in the Work of Haim Be'er

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Abstract

Haim Be'er is recognized by Hebrew literary criticism as a writer who conducts a profound dialogue between ancient Jewish texts and modern Jewish-Israeli culture. This article offers a critical appraisal of this view. Through a reading of Be'er's novel *Lifnei ha-makom* (*Upon a Certain Place*, 2007), the article offers a new way of looking at how Be'er sees the relation between old and new. Instead of mediating between tradition and modernity and translating the old for a generation that has partly severed ties with it, *Lifnei ha-makom* undermines the very mediation that is so much identified with Be'er's work. Be'er's novel boldly examines what it means to live a Jewish life almost devoid of books. The role of tradition, in this scheme, is to be present in the world of the new generation without undergoing interpretation. The article links between this attitude and deep processes in contemporary Israeli culture.

Keywords

Haim Be'er – Hebrew literature – tradition

Haim Be'er, one of the most important novelists writing in Hebrew today, has in recent years assumed a special position in Israeli culture. One might call it his second coming, for after enjoying popularity among readers, he has now, for the first time, begun to attract serious scholarly interest.[1] As always with an

1 In their Introduction to a collection of essays devoted to Be'er's work, Hanna Soker-Schwager and Haim Weiss write of the process by which Be'er gained this position, which in and of itself serves as an important milestone in that process. See H. Soker-Schwager and H. Weiss, 'Divrei petihah,' in H. Soker-Schwager and H. Weiss, *Melekhet he-hayyim: 'iyunim be-yetzirato*

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author's acceptance by the academy, it is difficult to pinpoint the confluence of circumstances and causes that brought it about. Nevertheless, as Hanna Soker-Schwager and Haim Weiss have already pointed out,[2] the principal factor must certainly be the role Be'er plays as a mediator between the language and culture of Israel today and the traditional Jewish canon. More than any other Hebrew writer of his generation, 'the extensive use of [Jewish] sources, and the astounding ability of all his characters ... to quote [from those sources], are the notable hallmarks of his work.'[3] This is the case even though Be'er is not necessarily seen to be a 'religious' writer, in the narrowest sociological sense of the word. In the following close reading of one of Be'er's late novels, *Upon a Certain Place* (*Lifnei ha-makom*, 2007), I consider Be'er's role as a mediator of language and culture. *Upon a Certain Place* offers a platform for reassessing the status of quotes from traditional sources and the role of the writer as quoter. In this work, the writer is no longer perceived as an authoritative commentator, but rather as an agent whose role is to weave 'old' language into 'new' language. Such an examination reveals not just sometimes contradictory aspects of Be'er's work, but also new territories on the map of modern Hebrew literature's relations with the ancient sources from which it derives.[4]

But first, a bit of background.[5] Haim Be'er was born in Jerusalem in 1945 to a family that lived in the then much more salient gray area between the Haredi community, known as the Old Yishuv, and the religious Zionists of the New Yishuv. He took his first steps into the literary world during his military service

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shel Haim Be'er (Tel Aviv 2014) 7–20. I have the pleasure of thanking them and Yigal Schwartz for their excellent comments on earlier drafts of this article, which engages directly with the explicit and implicit fundamental assumptions of most of the articles included in their book.

2 *Ibid.*, 13–17.

3 *Ibid.*, 10.

4 The literature devoted to modern Jewish writings' relationship with ancient Jewish literature is, of course, huge, and cannot be cited here even in brief. In the specific context of this article, I limit myself to referring to two works, one relatively forgotten work that deserves new attention: R. Alter, *After the Tradition: Essays on Modern Jewish Writing* (New York 1971), and a later and more updated article: S. Pinsker, 'Intertextuality, Rabbinic Literature, and the Making of Hebrew Modernism,' in A. Norich and Y.Z. Eliav, eds, *Jewish Literatures and Cultures* (Providence, RI 2008) 201–228.

5 The following details are based on the above-cited Introduction by Soker-Schwager and Weiss, on the bibliography of Be'er's writings prepared by G. Tikotzky (Soker-Schwager and Weiss, *Malekhet he-hayyim*, 401–483), and on an article by Y. Shenkar, '"Ein lanu yotzrim": kehilah datit le'umit mekhonenot et yotzreihah—bein zehut kehilatit le-sifrut datit be-reshit shenot ha-shemonim,' in A. Cohen, ed., *Ha-tziyonut ha-datit: 'edan ha-temoruot: asufat mehkarim le-zekher Zevulun Hammer* (Jerusalem 2004) 283–322.

as a writer for the magazine put out by the Israel Defense Forces Rabbinate, *Mahanayim*. During this period he had his first poem published, in the literary supplement to the daily newspaper *Davar*. At the age of 25 a book of his poetry came out, and at the age of 30 his first novel, *Feathers* (*Notzot*, 1975, English translation in 2004). Since then, and up to the writing of this article, he has produced five more novels (some translated into foreign languages), hundreds of pieces of journalistic literary criticism, and academic research.

His work attracted considerable attention from the start, in part thanks to a readership of observant Jews who were delighted to discover a literary sensibility that reflected something of the world and language of traditional Jewish sources. In this sense he was seen, in some respects, to be the heir of Shmuel Yosef Agnon. His books sold well and won important prizes, but had difficulty making their way into the canon addressed by literary scholars. They wrote about Be'er's work almost solely in non-academic settings, and not always with sympathy. But that has changed in the last decade. Be'er's works have become the subject of academic research and are taught in university literature courses. They are perceived, much more than in the past, as works that cross and blur the sectorial boundaries characteristic of Israeli society.

The most notable of his later works, in my opinion, is *Lifnei ha-makom*. Its story takes place in Berlin in the winter of 2005. A millionaire from Jerusalem, Zusman, whose daughter has died, invites four learned men to a mansion on the shore of Lake Wannsee. He wants them to serve as a 'steering committee' that will choose a subject for an annual discussion that Zusman has organized since losing his daughter. The stated purpose of the discussion is not to memorialize his daughter but rather to seek a more profound understanding of the meaning of life. A convoluted network of relations grows between the four scholars. The first three are the elderly Judaica dealer Shlomo Rappaport, Professor Bilker-Bulker from Vienna, and Katrina Siegel, a young German PhD candidate. The fourth is no other than an Israeli author named Haim Be'er, who is also the narrator. The novel traces out these relations and uses them to investigate post-Holocaust Germany, the significance of modern Jewish life, books, and the concept of the library; The library's role as a repository of culture, a display of the glories of the past, and a symbol of intellectual life is a central theme of the book. It is no coincidence that the cover of Be'er's book displays a photograph of Micha Ullman's sculpture 'The Library,' in Bebelplatz, which also plays a central role in the book—no less than do its human characters.

The beginning of *Upon a Certain Place* reports a telephone conversation between the narrator and Zusman, who will later be revealed to be a man with few scruples. 'I will come to you with my staff and my money, to any location, at whatever hour you say,' the wealthy man says (p. 10). The narrator replies: 'You would do well to come with your money . . . so long as it happens on Yom

Kippur as it falls according to your computation.' At this point the narrator speaks to the reader to explain that this is an allusion to a well-known story from the Mishnah's Rosh Hashanah tractate:[6]

> Any reader for whom the Talmud is his book of secret codes [will grasp that]—from the moment of that cursory phone call I realized with certainty that Zusman had spent his youth, as I did, between the walls of the house of study. The phrase 'with my staff and with my money' is not simply an idiom meant to enrich the speaker's language . . . (10–11).

Even though the narrator is at first repelled by Zusman, he quickly softens. He attributes this to the deep meaning of the rabbinic tale that Zusman alluded to, in which a stern Rabban Gamliel demands that Rabbi Yehoshua recognize his institutional authority as head of the Sanhedrin, while at the same time acknowledging R. Yehoshua's spiritual superiority. The analogy is clear: Zusman is Rabban Gamliel, and the narrator—Reb Haim, as he calls himself here with unconcealed relish—is R. Yehoshua. More important for our purposes, the two of them communicate via a *codebook*. That is, they are capable of conducting a dialogue on two levels simultaneously, in which their explicit statements subsume a hidden level that can easily be decoded—if one knows the code.

The novel thus begins with a declaration symptomatic of Beʾer's poetics, and to the place in which it functions—Reb Haim designates himself as a student of the 'old' house of study, the *beit midrash* or traditional Jewish seminary, and as a bridge between it and the new world, which is no longer fit to comprehend intimations from the past and thus requires a guide, an *interpreter*. The interpretive act defines his literary mode as an intertextual one laden with meanings, and this, in turn, shapes his critics in the literary republic. The paradigmatic metaphor used by critics is, not at all coincidentally, 'manifest and hidden.'[7] The prototype and standard for evaluating the nature of the manifest is, of course, Agnon.[8] The scholars entrusted with the study of past culture expend intellectual effort to, among other things, make the hidden manifest.[9]

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6 Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 8:9. See also D. Stein, '"Be-makli uve-maʿotai": emet, samkhut, ve-aluziyot be-*Lifnei ha-makom*,' in Soker-Schwager and Weiss, *Malekhet he-hayyim*, 262–277.

7 A. Holtzman, 'Me-"ʿIr shel zahav" ʿad *Lifnei ha-makom*: Haim Beʾer bein gilui le-kisui,' in Soker-Schwager and Weiss, *Malekhet he-hayyim*, 21–36.

8 Y. Schwartz, 'Ha-sefer ʿal ha-sefer ʿal ha-sefer (shelo nikhtav),' *Haʾaretz*, *Sefarim*, Sept. 2007. Among the range of connections between Beʾer's *Lifnei ha-makom* and Agnon's *Oreah natah lalun* (*A Guest for the Night*), of special note is the role of the 'narrator as author,' as described in G. Shaked, *Omanut ha-sipur shel Agnon* (Tel Aviv 1973) 228–278.

9 H. Weiss, '"Niti sefer ve-nehzi": kanunihyit ve-shuliyut be-roman '*Et ha-zamir*,' in Soker-Schwager and Weiss, *Malekhet he-hayyim*, 245–261; Stein, '"Be-makli uve-maʿotai"'; D. Assaf,

But this scholarly approach, very fertile in and of itself, is by nature constricted. It reads Be'er in an obvious way—one might also say, as he asks to be read. As such, it is not sufficiently sensitive to the fundamental alternative that his work presents, an alternative that subverts criticism's attempt to 'control' the act of mediation and to enclose it within clear boundaries. I suggest that this alternative can be identified by reading his works—even if only provisionally—in the opposite direction. That is, instead of explicating the sources Be'er quotes in order to illuminate their precise contribution to the texture of the Be'erian text, I propose to examine, cautiously, their meanings from the point of view of current literature itself, while (partially) placing in abeyance the instinct to conduct an intertextual analysis. In doing so, I will argue that following the various manifestations of mediation involving the language of classic texts in *Upon a Certain Place* will suggest that interpretation in fact makes little difference. If there is redemption in this novel—and, in my view, it is a novel that clearly ranges between exile and redemption, even if its versions of these mythic concepts are necessarily softer and partial—it is not to be found in making *exegesis* the vital paradigm for Jewish identity in our time. Instead, the paradigm is the opposite of exegesis, or at least a distance from it.[10]

To demonstrate the innovation contained within *Upon a Certain Place*, first consider three characteristic patterns of mediation of the language of ancient texts in Be'er's work. Two of these are found in his entire oeuvre, while the third is, notably, to be found only in the novel under discussion. These patterns, as I will show, are not hermetically sealed off from each other. They overlap with and respond to one another.

I illustrated the first pattern with the phone call between Zusman and the narrator. The call establishes the 'rules of the game', not only between these two characters, but also between the writer and the readers. A critical acceptance of these rules—that is, proper treatment of the quotations that pervade the book—is to be based, from this point onward, on a careful examination of their sources. But the writer knows better than his readers that revealing these sources throughout the book, as he did in providing an account of the Talmudic background to the phone call, will quickly bring about the novel's collapse and the dissipation of its plot. Awareness of this danger is stated explicitly following a long explication of the incarnations of Miriam's Well in Jewish literature and tradition. The narrator admits there, with characteristic evasiveness.

'Ha-tzadik sheba el ha-har: Historiya ve-sifrut be-*El makom sheha-ruah holekh*,' in Soker-Schwager and Weiss, *Malekhet he-hayyim*, 304–323.

10 A somewhat similar direction is proposed in Hannah Soker-Schwager's article, 'Ha-libah ha-hasera: yetzirat Be'er 'al pi tehom ha-sifrut ha-'Ivrit,' in Soker-Schwager and Weiss, *Malekhet he-hayyim*, 83–115.

'that in the course of editing the book I will likely be compelled to cut this brutally, because it is liable to bore readers' (p. 211). He acknowledges this, but of course no cuts are made. Rather, he exhausts all the postmodern novel's possibilities for periodically casting doubt on the author's authoritative status.[11]

Yet, in general, he makes do with subtler hints, which I will address below. Here and there, however, the exegetical voice again rises to the surface. Notably, the tone is consistent. I do not mean just diminutive examples, such as when Rappaport, the charming and colorful book collector, says in Yiddish, 'Children, go wash,' and the narrator offers a trivial explanation: 'which, in Jewish homes, is the sign of the beginning of the meal' (139). There are also more central situations. In one of these, Holgar, the son of a Nazi officer, has accompanied the narrator to the old Jewish cemetery of Worms. He asks the narrator the meaning of the Jewish custom of placing stones on graves. The narrator responds:

> 'The dead do not care if we remember them or not, they don't know anything and are not interested in anything, not even in what we, the living, take the trouble to do, as it were, for them,' I happily *instructed*[12] the German refrigeration engineer. . . . 'On the contrary,' I said, 'this custom expresses abhorrence of them. Heaps of stones or headstones were not meant to memorialize the dead but rather to serve as warning signs for the living. Just as red triangles are hung around a mine field, so the ancients piled heaps of stones over graves, back in the times when they did not put up monuments. . . . It was done solely out of concern for the living.' (77–78)

Reb Haim is, of course, delighted to stand up for a time-honored tradition before his European interlocutor, and ostensibly to purge it of irrational dross. Similar, if reversed, is an account of an act of interpretation he adhered to in the past. The incident begins when Prof. Bilker-Bulker, who formerly wrote bombastic poetry in the spirit of the Canaanite movement under the name Nimrod-Nimrod (or maybe: Nimrod-Namrud?), reminds him with painful defiance how he, Be'er, had on a summer night in 1966, in his youth, spoken before the Hebrew Thought Club. Be'er acknowledges that on this occasion

> I slandered Judaism so as to please the members of the club. . . . [Bilker-Bulker] counts, one by one, the fragments of sentences and passages from the Talmud that I sprayed over the heads of the audience *in order*

11 On the status of the author in postmodern literature, see, for example, L. Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York 1988).

12 The emphasis is mine—here and throughout the article.

> *to prove* that Judaism seeks to entrench consciousness of the exile in the hearts of its adherents.... In his eyes, I still dance there, in the steamy rooms of the Am ha-Sefer publishing house, a *Mah Yafit* dance before a throng of Canaanites and their henchmen, and amuse them with fine words.... 'You intended to slander your forefathers and found yourself praising them,' Nimrod Bilker-Bulker said. 'What happened to you was what happened to Balaam son of Be'or.' (165–167)

Time after time, the narrator places himself in the position of speaker, emissary, explainer. Whoever his listeners are—a guilt-ridden refrigeration engineer, Canaanite ideologues from Israel of the 1970s, a young German investigator of poetry who evinces a strange attraction to older Jews (to be addressed below)—Be'er, who entirely blurs the boundaries between his biographical and literary personas, likes to explicate (that is, *leva'er*, from the same root as his name), and does so with great charm.

The second pattern is not restricted to a well-defined episode, but rather imbues this novel, like all of Be'er's writings, from its beginning to end. I mean the huge wealth of quotes from traditional literature, which serve as an echo chamber of huge dimensions. Everyone quotes, from all possible sources, in every situation. Zusman, Bilker-Bulker, Katrina, Be'er, and even Nikolai the driver never stop stringing their speech with pearls from the Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash, not to mention Hasidic kabbalah, halakhah, and other books of piety. The pervasive mode is irony, which the author uses to season the depiction slowly embroidered before the reader's eyes. One of many examples comes in an encounter between the characters:

> 'Today you will strengthen us, today you will increase us, today you will sustain us with the right hand of your righteousness,' Rappaport sang, saying that rather than wasting my time on the gibberish of the Gaon of Vienna [*Viner Gaon*]... (188)

By excising a single letter—*Viner Gaon* rather than *Vilner Gaon*, the Gaon of Vilna—Rappaport here ridicules the Viennese Professor Bilker-Bulker, depicted as a fairly ridiculous academic who is about as far as one could get from the great eighteenth Torah scholar, Eliyahu of Vilna. He continues:

> I'd be better off if I snuck into the kitchen for an exchange of views with the chef. Reb Avraham ben Avraham, may he live, known better by his previous name Jean Baptista Schweitzer, was a convert to Judaism who showered his listeners with Hasidic tales in Yiddish, as if his cradle had

> been in the Carpathian Mountains. At the beginning of the 1990s Gault et Millau had still granted his restaurant in Paris two toques, but now that he had become a member of the covenant, he prepared *se'udah shlishit* [the 'third meal' eaten on Sabbath afternoon] for the worshipers at the Vizhnitz *beit midrash* in Antwerp. That is on the Sabbath,[13] and on weekdays he is the owner of a restaurant and catering company that feeds pious diamond merchants and real estate agents to whom God has been beneficent. (*ibid.*)

The irony is obvious—not only with regard to Bilker-Bulker, but also to the 'pious diamond merchants and real estate agents,' not to mention Jean Baptista Schweitzer himself. But that does not exhaust the paragraph's possibilities. The dizzying linguistic excess,[14] jumping rapidly from the *musaf* service of the High Holidays to the blessing of the new month recited on the Sabbath preceding the new moon, offers a very real sensuous pleasure to those familiar with the language, and perfectly fits the subject of the conversation. Refined French gastronomy magically links up with a Hasidic Sabbath meal, and language blends completely, from a symbolic point of view, with the food. Symptomatic of this is the fact that the French chef provides not only food but also texts—Hasidic tales in Yiddish.

In both the patterns addressed here, traditional culture, in its broad sense, is indeed *mediated*. It does not stand on its own; rather, it is explained to the target audience. By that I mean—and this is an important conceptual clarification—it is *translated* (in the first type) or, as in the second type, it serves a *particular purpose* in that it creates a linguistic-literary world shaped not by a mimetic but rather by a textual principle. To put it another way, it creates a text-*centric* world, with a deliberate emphasis on *centric*. In this form it is not unique to *Upon a Certain Place*. It could be illustrated, almost as readily, by most of Be'er's works. In the case of the third pattern, in contrast, something different happens that is much more meaningful than the other two. Its foundation lies at a different point in Be'er's work, but I want to focus on its most explicit appearance, not long before the end of *Upon a Certain Place*.

13 The spoken rhythm of the words 'That is on the Sabbath,' '*zeh be-shabbat*,' mark the transition between the point of view of the author and that of Rappaport himself, as part of the free indirect speech characteristic of the entire paragraph. Rhythmic changes in the body of free indirect speech are, in my view, one of the most obvious features of Haim Be'er's poetics, and still await systematic and comprehensive description.

14 I here borrow, with some differences, the term 'excess' from J.-L. Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York 2002).

Each of the four scholars is attracted to Katrina Siegel, the beautiful German expert on the poetry of Else Lasker-Schüler; all four of them buzz about her like bees around a flower. The mirror image of the lady in Agnon's story 'The Mistress and the Peddler,'[15] she appears before Reb Haim, the narrator, in his room, and the erotic tension that has been deliberately built up from the beginning of the book reaches its climax. It is not the first time she has visited his room, but this time she comes unannounced. The narrator says that he sees 'a pounding heart and a flush of daring.' She tells him: 'I have come to you.' The narrator then relates that

> [S]he embraced me with her two bare arms, which wrap around my neck, from which waft the freshness of cosmetic soap mixed with a slight tang of excited perspiration. All the days that had gone by since we parted intensified her longing and in the end she decided to come to me. . . . They had not let her be since we parted, until she with no difficulty swept away what remained of her bashfulness and came and knocked on my door like a naïve young girl. She tossed her head back and softly shook her curls. (294)

Just a minute or two later her voice breaks in to the free indirect speech of the narrator in an explosively ambiguous way:

> But I have not come to you today to talk to you about your book. . . . There are things many times more important than books in this world. . . . Life is more important than them, my dear. . . .
>
> Our Solomon [Shlomo Rappaport] has missed the most important thing by spending all his time with books. He put all his strength into them and them alone. And now they sit derelict in a storehouse in Spandau. You can come see them. They lie there in heaps like the dead frogs of Egypt. You, too, I can see it in my imagination, line the walls of your studio from floor to ceiling with thousands of books, *tens of thousands of books that multiply and block the windows and prevent daylight from entering*. Maybe it's time to say enough. When will you finally understand that, when it comes down to it, it's sublimation. . . . Free yourself of the bonds that you have tied yourself in of your own volition. Do it before it is too late. Open up the window and finally let love come in. Katarina rose, came close to me, and whispered 'My love' . . . (296–297)

15 S.Y. Agnon, 'Ha-adonit veha-rokhel,' in *Samukh ve-nir'eh* (new edition, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv 1998) 75–83.

The narrator here seems to be conforming to the most worn of conventions. Anyone who has read two or three books and watched two or three movies knows precisely what will happen next. But more sensitive readers and watchers know, just as certainly, that what is supposed to happen next *will not*—not now, and never. It is too late. The high tension is so laden with symbolic meanings that it can find no release in an act of physical love, no matter how tempestuous. Instead, Reb Haim recounts:

> The young woman simply pointed to the manuscript and asked me to read to her the account of our first meeting in Berlin.... 'You, of course, will read the Hebrew text... and I will sit and listen to the sentences slowly woven *even without understanding a thing*. After a pause she added that I could not imagine how passionately she wished to follow *what was woven, warp and woof, between the lines of my story, so equally foreign and closed to her*. (297)

It is worth pausing a moment to consider this extraordinary moment, so close to the end of the novel. The sexual encounter we expect does not take place, but rather undergoes metamorphosis and is replaced by a *verbal ritual*. Katrina asks to hear the words 'without understanding a thing.' Here, in other words, the act of mediation is stripped of referential content. All that remains is the Hebrew text itself, unelaborated, unexplained, without apologies, devoid of those mountains of 'tens of thousands of books that reproduce and block the windows and prevent daylight from entering.' This, of course, is the polar opposite of the daylight that flows into the empty library of Micha Ullman's chilling sculpture, a photograph of which is displayed on the cover of Be'er's book and which serves as one of the axes running from one end of the book to another.[16] *Lifnei ha-makom* boldly considers the option of living without books, of

16 For a comprehensive analysis of *Upon a Certain Place*'s links to Ullman's work as a whole, and how the latter served as inspiration for the former, see Y. Zalmona, *Sha'on-Holocaust: 'avodato shel Micha Ullman* (Jerusalem 2001) 407–418. According to Zalmona, 'The principal message of the monument lies in its claim that ideas are stronger than fire, that while books are no longer present in this vacant underground room, but in the final analysis they have survived, while all the authors that the Nazis sought to expunge continue to enrich human culture' (*ibid*., 411). I differ from Zalmona in that Be'er's reading of the monument fully exhausts, perhaps despite itself, the paradoxical possibility of the positive aspects of a world devoid of books.

liberation from that all-so-Jewish tradition of commentaries on commentaries on commentaries.[17]

Be'er here subverts his role as an authoritative mediator or commentator. Almost unintentionally, he places himself in the role of *shaliah tzibur*, that Hebrew term for the leader of a prayer service that literally means 'emissary of the public.' He does not do this in the major mode, as a 'prophet' or a 'watchman for the House of Israel,' or other such romantic-national depictions that are so common in criticism of new Hebrew literature,[18] but in a minor, and perhaps traditional, mode: *his role is to recite the words, voice them before his audience, without necessarily taking responsibility for their meaning*. God will in any case not be dumfounded by language that has been used thousands upon thousands of times to exhort him to return to our lives, as Gershom Scholem said in his well-known letter to Franz Rosenzweig.[19]

My argument at this point is simple, but fundamental—the literary mode chosen this time by the middleman who stands before us with one foot in traditional culture and the other in modern culture, is that of the *shaliah tzibur*. It is the mode of the communal emissary, of the prayer leader, a paradigm far distant from the one we opened with. In this mode the text is not interpreted, and needs no commentary. It is not something 'covered' waiting to be 'uncovered,' and is certainly far from being ironic. *It simply is*. In Hannah Soker-Schwager's words, Be'er 'does not offer us a systematic account. All he can do is to add one quote and then another.'[20] Reb Haim thus no longer functions as a teacher in the study hall, or as a preacher who envelops his message in fine and portentous verbiage. Rather, he sends ancient words out into the prayer space, into the space of his readers' world, without adding anything of his own.

Be'er indeed stands here naked, stripped of needless books that blur the core of his voice, the simple, clean questions. Be'er stands before *the Place*—

17 This same idea is developed in different and even opposing ways in Be'er's two subsequent novels: *El makom sheha-ru'ah holekh* (2010; the English title, not a translation of the Hebrew, is *Back from Heavenly Lack*), and *Halomoteihem ha-hadashim* (2014; *Their New Dreams*). It also appears in an interesting and innovative way in Reuven Namdar's novel *Ha-bayit asher nehrav* (2013; *The House That Was Destroyed*), which deserves separate treatment.

18 For a critical discussion of the concept of the 'watchman for the House of Israel,' see A. Benbaji and H. Hever, 'Mavo: Historiyah sifrutit u-vikoret ha-sifrut,' in A. Benbaji and H. Hever, eds, *Sifrut u-ma'amad: likrat historiografiyah politit shel ha-sifrut ha-'Ivrit ha-hadasah* (Jerusalem 2014) 12–101.

19 The letter has recently been reprinted with two side-by-side Hebrew translations, one by Ephraim Broide and the other by Avraham Huss, in *Mikan* 14, 327–329.

20 Soker-Schweiger, 'Ha-libah ha-hasera,' 115.

the place that appears in the novel's title, and which, in Hebrew, is an appellation of the divine. His interlocutor is not only his readers but, as Haim Weiss notes, 'the place of the world,'[21] God himself, who is represented also in the blue, cloud-specked sky reflected in the window of the library at Bebelplatz. He also stands before the Place as an emissary of the public in the private funeral service he arranges for Rappaport at track 17 of the Bergenwald train station, casting wheat kernels to the wind instead of the dead man's ashes, which were scattered there the year before (276–277). In fact, it is not only the narrator who plays the role of *shaliah tzibur*. The other characters do as well, the members of that eccentric group that gathers in Berlin, the Steering Committee which is itself not meant to discuss—that is, *not to interpret*—but rather to *propose a subject* for discussion in a larger forum. In the end, the larger forum, called the 'Chosen Group' (*Segel Havurah*) also fulfils this function very well, since the source of its name is a *reshut*, a medieval Ashkenazi liturgical poem by Rabbi Shimon bar Yitzhak, recited during the Rosh Hashannah prayer service. There, in accordance with the conventions of the genre, the poet depicts his relations with the public that has sent him to do its work:

> I have been for the task by the chosen group
> The preservers of your faith, who in awe declare your unity
> I spill my words to make a plea
> God, hear my voice and I will call.[22]

Given my account above of the third pattern, one could say that the appearance of this novel in the first decade of the current century in Israel integrates characteristic aspects of its time and place. One of these is the popular *piyyut* revival in modern Israel,[23] in which this poetry and its traditional language

21 H. Weiss, 'Mi sheyivakesh ʿelbonah shel sefer Torah hu yivakesh ʿelboni,' *Makor rishon, musaf sefarim*, September 26, 2007.

22 The version translated here is taken from D. Goldschmidt, ed., *Mahzor le-Yamim Nora'im, Vol. I: Rosh Hashanah* (Jerusalem 5730/1970) 92.

23 The 21st century revival of *piyyut* has hardly been studied. An exception is a collection of articles edited by H. Pedaya, *Ha-piyyut ke-tzohar tarbuti: kivunim hadashim le-havanat ha-piyyut ule-havayato ha-tarbutit* (Jerusalem 2013). The brief summary here is but a preliminary to a possible discussion of the phenomenon. Among its central phenomena are the internet site *Hazmanah le-piyyut* (*An Invitation to Piyyut*, http://www.piyut.org.il, accessed January 2015); the organization *Kehilot Sharot* (*Singing Communities*); the use of *piyyut* by popular singers and songwriters, such as Ehud Banai and Berry Sakharof; and the Piyyut and Oud Festivals. One important aspect of it, fundamental to my claims in this article, is the fact that it is a stage of metamorphosis in a much broader process

appear in a context in which it is not interpreted or mediated. It turns the *shaliah tzibur* mode into an identity-constituting paradigm. The Jewish text is made manifest, but is not necessarily explained or glossed. Religious culture, and I use that term with all due caution, is no longer made known to its public through secularized intellectual prisms, just as it is no longer tied to religion in its traditional sense.

This insight casts new light on Katrina's role in the novel, and indirectly perhaps also on the role of other foreign women in Be'er's novels. In the final analysis, what is the meaning of the necessarily charged relationship between Reb Haim and the gentile woman? How does the textual metamorphosis salvage the mythical sexual cliché, which can be traced back to the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39)? And why does she listen to him when he settles his account with the Creator? Is she a Jewish woman in a spiritual sense, 'a proper and genial daughter of Israel,' as Rappaport puts it? Imaginings of a Jewish-German renaissance may seem foreign to this writer and his work, which never stops pointing out the conflict inherent in such a rebirth. The answer to this question should be sought, in my view, precisely in Katrina's ability to represent, paradoxically, Be'er's Jewish-Israeli readers, speakers of modern Hebrew. They are no longer put off by hearing a different Hebrew, one partially incomprehensible to them, without any need for mediation, equally strange and close, in which their name—that is, their story—is intertwined.

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of the growth of non-religious study halls in Israel that preceded it by a decade, following the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Neither have these study halls received the scholarly attention they are due. For the present, a wealth of material can be found on the website of the aggregator website of Panim (http://www.panim.org.il/, accessed January 2105), an umbrella group for all these 'renewal' projects in Israel. In brief, if these study halls focused on a return to what was called the 'Jewish bookshelf' and the scholarly-exegetical activity traditionally associated with it, the *piyyut* revival stressed the return to the ritual act, the power of which sometimes derives from the very fact that it is not explained. Another context for this phenomenon, one with a surprising link to the *shaliah tzibur* mode, can be found in a more universal process of setting aside deep explication of texts, not for popular anti-intellectual reasons, but rather as an ideology emerging out of the heart of the academy, see S. Best and S. Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction,' *Representation* 108:1 (2009) 1–21.