

Contesting God's Compassion and Choosing Humanism over Divine Mercy – Yehuda Amichai's God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children

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Although he repeatedly rejected the appellation, by general agreement, Yehuda Amichai was recognized as Israel's poet laureate and one of the half-dozen leading poets in the world, as Mark Rudman of the *Nation* opined. (Rudman 1986: 646). Accorded international acclaim unprecedented for a contemporary Israeli poet, he was called the most widely translated Hebrew poet since King David, and Israel's Citizen No 1. Commentator Jonathan Wilson wrote in 2000 that Amichai "should have won the Nobel Prize in any of the last twenty years." (Wilson 2000: 7). In the many eulogies that followed his passing in 2001, he was feted by the speaker of the Israeli Parliament as the foundation stone of Israeliness and by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak as one of the greatest artists of Israel and the Jewish world. A master craftsman, whose elegant poetic style was always accessible and most widely read, Amichai's mosaic explored the possibility of coexistence in antipodal relationships, in the union of tradition and modernity, beauty, and bloodshed that punctuated Israel's history.¹

Critic Edward Hirsch appositely noted: "Mr. Amichai is an essentially autobiographical poet with the rare ability to characterize the complex fate of the modern Israeli, the private individual invariably affected by the public realm of war, politics and religion" (Hirsch 1986: 14). And following the release of the collection *Me-adama ata ve-el adama tashuv* (*Of Man Thou Art, and Unto Man Shalt Thou Return*), scholar Dov Vardi nicely summed up Amichai's stature: "Few recent works of poetry have elicited such a broad response in the Israeli press. The older Amichai by now is a classic, and his language is the miracle of vernacular Hebrew poured

into poems that speak to everyone” (Vardi 1987: 150). An oft-repeated anecdote about Amichai’s popularity and accessibility among the young is that during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israeli students who were mobilized for the war effort packed a book of Amichai’s poems along with their military gear and rifle.

An artist who expressed the emotions others would articulate if they were poets, Amichai’s first collection *Achshav u-beyamim acherim* (*Now and in Other Days*, 1955) transformed Israeli poetry with its shunning of the formalism of the pre-state poets and its employment of slang and modern vernacular. Small wonder, then, that when he died, scholars reminded readers that with this and subsequent collections, Amichai liberated Hebrew literature from its deep stupor, rigidity, and immersion in biblical phraseology, making it more concordant with modern realities: “Mr. Amichai’s work is remarkably accessible, imaginative, unburdened by artificiality and often almost conversational,” noted author Mel Gussow (Gussow 2000: 14).

Still, for all his iconoclasm, Amichai borrowed heavily from the scriptures, overlaying the archaic with a contemporary patina, as in a sequence describing a man under a fig tree calling another standing under a vine. The early poems also deal with his father’s death and their complex relationship. His second collection, *Be-merhak shtei tikvot* (*Two Hopes Away*, 1958), inaugurated the seminal themes that would characterize his corpus, such as war, memory, displacement, the figure of the father, the nature of Jewish identity, the disillusionment of the post-war generation, and love. The poems mirrored the central concerns and preoccupations of a whole generation of Israelis, yet, as he proved with his later work, Amichai’s exploration of humanity and its problems touched the core of any modern society.

As stated earlier, despite all the modernism that shimmers through his poems, Amichai possessed a multivalent Jewish sensibility that braids the very personal with the mythic. Since he saw himself as a conduit between the old and new, the Jewish past is often alluded to, both in theological meditations and in its reverberations through the life of Israeli society. For instance, one of his longest poems, the epic fifty-seven stanzas “Masot Binyamin haacharon miTudelah” (“Travels of the Last Benjamin of Tudela,” 1968) about the great medieval Jewish traveler of the second half of the twelfth century was penned while Amichai was living on Benjamin of Tudela Street in Jerusalem and is brimful with self-referential elements and the autobiographical.

Amichai’s canvas is characterized by colloquial language, self-deprecating humor, irony, and the autobiographical, showcasing a

depth of emotion that was raw and introspective. With a few words and images, he could deliver special insight and evocative association on a breadth of such weighty issues as the Holocaust, God, loss, idealism, war and national destiny, unlocking a world leavened with allusions from the Hebrew Bible, and the quotidian. Typically, he probed, at times with a prophetic voice, the nexus between polar tropes—natural forgetting and the burden of memory, faith and doubt, personal and public history—tropes that acutely govern life in Israel. Though his poems were scented with metaphor (he once noted that the metaphor was equal to the invention of the wheel), they were never elusive and always astonishingly concrete and personal. His translator and friend Ted Hughes described the personal impact he felt reading Amichai: “The effect his poetry has on me is to give me my own life— to open it somehow, to make it all available to me afresh, to uncover all kinds of riches in every moment of it, and to free me from my mental prisons” (Hughes as cited in Wilson 2000: 7).

A substantial portion of Amichai’s writing zeroed in on Jerusalem’s political and religious undercurrents, reflecting his profound admiration for and exasperation with the city as an epicenter of history and conflict that transcends the imagination. The magisterial cycle of poems “Yerushalayim 1967” (“Jerusalem 1967”) embodies the special interconnectedness he felt existed between the capital and the Jewish people. In one poem, he wryly comments on the gravity of living in Jerusalem, warning embracing lovers to be careful since every display of love can turn into a new religion. As a result, he was labelled the Walt Whitman of Jerusalem. Amichai wrote that the Jews, rather than being a historical people, were a geological nation, tied to their land by vows and oaths.

When the late Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995, he asked Yehuda Amichai, as the man often described by the Israeli press as the spokesperson for his fellow citizens, to join the official Israeli delegation and read one of his poems, “Pirhei Bar” (“Wildpeace,” 1971), which includes these telling lines: “Let it come / Like wildflowers / Suddenly, because the field must have it: wildpeace.” Upon acceptance, Rabin quoted from “Elohim merachem al yaldey hagan” (“God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children”)—Amichai’s signature verse. Rabin then added his own words: “Let’s hope that now there will be pity for us all.” Chana Bloch notes that “Amichai’s lines seem chillingly apt in the light of the Rabin assassination at a peace rally less than a year later” (Bloch 1996: xiv).

“Elohim merachem al yaldey hagan” (hereinafter “God Has Pity

on Kindergarten Children”) has become one of Yehuda Amichai’s most quoted and anthologized poems. Appearing in his first volume of verse *Achshav u-beyamim acherim* (*Now and in Other Days*, 1955), it operates on multiple levels, but given its historical proximity to Israel’s War of Independence of 1948, one is hard-pressed not to view its surface theme as that of the savagery and price of war as well the sacrifice of its young soldiers. In various ways, it reiterates Amichai’s engagement with the vulnerability and the inherent weakness of the adult man and underscores his fascination with the emotional trauma felt by war-fatigued Israelis.

However, the poem also typifies Amichai’s penchant, especially in his early poetry, to challenge and transform in an acutely ironic fashion the traditional perception of God as merciful. Having been a student in religious schools in Germany and Israel, Amichai had a very complex relationship with Orthodox Judaism. Through his texts, he conducted a grand theological argument with the almighty, rejecting any submissive reverence and the certainties of an exclusive faith. For example, the companion piece to “God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children” is “El male rachamim” (“A God Full of Mercy,” 1960) which limns similar terrain, featuring a speaker who relates a life redolent with pain and misery, angry at a God who has kept all lenity to Himself with the result that the world is empty of mercy. Amichai differed from his contemporaries in that he integrated God into the texture of his poetry not only as a central factor but also as a dominant part of his individual development.

The title “God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children” positions the reader to expect a poem praising God’s benevolence, but the poem quickly develops into a searing tract about a universe devoid of higher kindness, ruled by a deficient, indifferent, and capricious God. The title is clearly ironic, for as the reader gradually discovers, the God that is described here dispenses mercy in an arbitrary and cruel manner. The first two lines foreground one of the poem’s key themes—that childhood and youth provide a type of protection and shelter denied to the adults: “God has pity on kindergarten children, / He has less pity on school children” (Amichai). At first, we are told that God does show mercy, but it is allocated in a discriminatory manner, only to those who are regarded as totally pure—kindergarten children and, to a lesser extent, schoolchildren.

In a sense, God offers his concern and protection to the innocent and powerless, and as Amichai argues, age becomes the primary determinant for whether one is to be guarded from harm or exposed.

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Or as Glenda Abramson asserts, it is not only age that is a factor: "It also implies a connection between God's mercy and human purity for only kindergarten children are entitled to mercy, the rest of humanity, presumably, to justice alone" (Abramson 1997: 114).

In an interview with National Public Radio, Amichai said that the poem is also about war and about the order of life: "We all have pity on a small child. And the bigger they grow, the less we need to have pity. But certainly, a grown-up man, a soldier at his full power, his full strength, he needs more help than all the babies together" (Siegel 1995).

On the other hand, Amichai's frighteningly distant God deprives the vulnerable grown-ups (embodied here as soldiers) of His sanctuary, even though soldiers are customarily more in peril than small children. As Joseph Cohen notes, "Adult soldiers in combat are ordinarily far more exposed to destruction than are small children, but for them God provides no watchfulness" (Cohen 1990:110). Amichai marshals the image of soldiers, crawling on all fours in the hot sands toward the first-aid station, bloodied and wounded, to underline the idea that combatants, in this instance during the 1948 War of Liberation, were not the objects of God's vigilance. More broadly, this "last station" could symbolize the final destination for all men. To be sure, this particular image struck a chord with Israelis, all too well acquainted with the high cost of successive wars. The soldiers, left entirely alone, have reverted to their infant state, dragging themselves as children, their wounds both physical and mental. In a way, the crawling could be deciphered as pleas for help by the soldiers, groveling before God, on their hands and knees, fuelled by the desire to survive. Yair Mazor adds the following comment:

The narrator's blatant accusation against God, who wrongly and stingingly distributes His mercy, takes on a singular meaning as the castigated adults are portrayed as wounded soldiers...The phrase "crawling on all fours" also likens the adults to helpless infants and consequently emphasizes their miserable condition. (Mazor 1986: 15)

In the second stanza, the soldiers of the opening lines have been replaced with true lovers, and life has displaced mayhem and bloodshed. Amichai likens God to a tree, and His creations are allegorized as lovers and as a homeless person sleeping on a public bench. The poem stresses that among the band of grown-ups—those who were refused protection in the first stanza— "true lovers" may be

deserving of God's love ("But perhaps he will watch over true lovers and have mercy on them and shelter them like a tree over the old man sleeping on a public bench"). Still, the tree that supposedly will shelter the young lovers can only affect a limited form of safety. It will not insulate the lovers from the rain, from the cold, or from physical injury. Coupled with the second opening word of the second stanza ("Perhaps"), it is evident that God's sanctuary is incomplete or in doubt. Moreover, the true lovers are depicted as lonely helpless figures that are metaphorically "homeless," their only refuge a "public bench." Concurrently interleaved is the lovers' plea for only a modicum of compassion, strongly alluded to by the image of the tree that can only accord partial protection.

One could argue that by hinting that God may be unable to furnish man with the necessary salvation he seeks, Amichai is diluting the divine's supposedly unlimited power. Moreover, those who truly love can be likened to children in their naiveté and righteousness and thus more worthy, if only fractionally, of protection. The notion that only love can afford redemption, that only love will drive away pain and cruelty, was a recurring subject in Amichai's oeuvre.

The last section of the poem suggests that generosity and empathy will only be handed down by the all-purpose metaphor of the mother, in the form of coins of compassion, and that it is human benevolence that will generate happiness for the adults shunned by a selective God. The coins, though physical objects, represent here a spiritual dimension, amplifying the idea of a mother who showers her children with affection that is pure and not related to any expectation of reciprocity. In turn, this act of charity, Amichai says, will lead to our protection. The poet urges us to engage in acts of kindness on a daily basis, in the same manner that we make use of coins. This further underlies the notion that it is not material wealth that infuses our life with joy but individual acts of goodness. Such dispensation of mercy and caring will ultimately benefit humanity, for as the poem states, "Their own happiness will protect us / Now and in other days." Glenda Abramson contends that a whole coin often emblemized completeness in Amichai's poetry, observing that the soldiers, hurt and incomplete, can also parabolically signify people stuck in the mechanical drudgery of urban life, with its attendant isolation, estrangement, disjunction (Abramson: 54).

Although the poem concludes with a note of optimism, it is seasoned with a dash of caution and doubt since the last stanza again opens with the word "Perhaps," and the coins of compassion

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bequeathed to this generation are only a handful, are scarce, and are the last of this inheritance.

In effect, the world depicted in the third stanza is one that has been emptied of contemporary empathy and kindness—the adults have nothing to give and must rely on the last coins bequeathed by the previous generation. The point here is that the present generation, afflicted with a crisis of values and faith, is clearly a long way from the humanistic universe of its predecessors, so much so that the only remnants from the glorious, blissful past are “the last rare coins” that will save the human race from its current malaise. In a way, there is a sense of synchronicity between the first and third stanzas. The last coins of the mother evoke a sense of yearning by the grown-ups to return once again to the familiar and comforting time of childhood when they were shielded by the kindly mother, a world away from the burning sands of battle.

The referencing of the mother evokes the association of “motherly love” with its accompanying warmth and affection remembered from childhood. This is not surprising. Time and again, reminiscences from childhood overhang Amichai’s canvas, operating as nostalgic glimpses into a world of peace and innocence. Ultimately, it is the unjust God who is cast as the designer of such afflictions. The poem avers that human beings should not rely on God for refuge or mercy but must be responsible for their own safety. As Joseph Cohen maintains, “In Amichai’s poem, pity carries with it no omnipotent obligation, no guarantee of protection. Ultimately, living beings are responsible for themselves . . .” (Cohen:11). Abramson provides a similar reading, arguing that “it is left to people themselves to put it right—and in Amichai’s world, the redeemer is love—with God’s kingdom attributed to the lover” (Abramson: 54).

Amichai is asserting, contra Jewish religious dogma, that human goodness, kindness, and love are far superior and can function as a worthy substitute for the lack of God’s concern, with allusion to the ambiguity of that concern. Compassion is to be reclaimed here on Earth, rather than in the heavens impoverished of kindness. Gershom Gorenberg sums up the poem’s underlying theme: “God has gone missing, and his orphans can only put their faith in love—however tenuous” (Gorenberg 1994: 44). In other words, regeneration and renewal will emerge from a secular, not a religious, philosophy. Yair Mazor, on the other hand, furnishes a contrary interpretation for the concluding lines of the poem. In his view, the coins of grace inherited from the mother betray human beings’ dark side:

The speaker's magnanimity is nothing but a selfish investment: he aspires to support the castigated adults because it may be beneficial. Consequently, the ironic accusation leveled at God boomerangs and hits the speaker himself. Furthermore, to his allegations of divine indifference toward human misfortune, he adds the charges of selfishness and hypocrisy, thereby only widening the abyss between his pretentious self-portrait and his true nature (Mazor: 16).

All in all, the message conveyed in the poem is that omnipotence does not encase in its midst a duty to provide protection against danger or death. In the end, it is only love that acts as a buffer for the suffering adults. Interestingly, the two final stanzas open with the anaphoric "perhaps," seducing readers to assume that that the following passages will contain hope in stark contrast to the harsh tone of the poem's first lines. But hope turns into disappointment as the figure of the pitiless God is fully revealed.

"God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children" can be classified as a modern opus, an existential meditation by a secular humanist on the relationship between man and his creator. It confirms God's presence in human affairs but demonstrates a loss of faith and profound disappointment that leads to a plea for human compassion, which may fill the void left by divine indifference and uncertainty.

Endnotes

1. A recent addition to the body of critical work about Yehuda Amichai is: Scharf Gold, Nili. *Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet*. 2008. Hanover: Brandeis University Press University Press of New England.
2. I am using the English translation to be found in Amichai, Yehuda. 1996. *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*. edited and translated from the Hebrew by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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