

aloud by the Rav haChassid to stimulate and inspire the silent meditation of the *Mechavenim*" (Bension, *Zohar*, p. 245). Given that Giller doesn't discuss this special meditative singing, one can only presume that it is no longer practiced in the contemporary Beit El circles.

In conclusion, Giller's study fills an important lacuna in the history and development of the Jewish mystical tradition. Simultaneously engaging and informative, his discussion of Shar'abi, a seminal, yet virtually ignored figure is worthwhile on its own. What enlivens the presentation even more is Giller's introduction of his own observations and those of other contemporary scholars of such as Yonatan Garb and Boaz Huss, who likewise are interested in exploring popular expressions of kabbalistic practice. Not only does Sharabi's influence continue to resonate within esoteric circles, but now there is an admirable scholarly exploration of his innovative approach to Jewish prayer.

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**Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet**, by Nili Scharf Gold. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England / Brandeis University Press, 2008. 445 pp. \$35.00.

Nili Sharf Gold's book is important because it contains a report on the life of the poet and his writing until 1948. The report is supported by the author's visits to Würzburg, Germany, Amichai's childhood town, and is based on the author's interviews with Amichai's friends and contemporaries, on letters that Amichai wrote during the months between September 1947 and April 1948 to Ruth Z., a lover who moved to the U.S. and there married someone else, and on documents from Amichai's literary estate in the Beinecke Library at Yale University. At the same time, this is a wasted book because of its excited, exaggerated, speculative, and baseless conclusions and because of the invalid use of them (see, for example, what Robert Alter has written in the December 22, 2008 issue of the *New Republic*). It seems that the author forgot the lesson Amichai teaches in his poem "And we shall not get excited."

The description of Amichai's childhood in Würzburg and his life in Eretz Israel, a land he was brought to by his parents when he was twelve years old, and his love affair with a woman who moved to the U.S. before the eruption of 1948 Independence War are a real contribution to a full biography of the poet, a biography that has not yet been written. The survey of the contents of Amichai's letters to the woman and of documents from the estate is impor-

tant and new. Nili Gold does not provide direct contact with the documents themselves; the information about the documents is provided indirectly by the interpretation of texts which are not present in the book (probably their publication rights were not granted). The author's central factual claims are, as stated, interesting and draw attention to aspects of Amichai's life and poetry that have not been seriously discussed until now. Some of them are biographical: details about his childhood and his family in Würzburg, the circumstances of the family's immigration to Eretz Israel, the story about "little Ruth," a classmate, his enlistment in the British Army, and the story of his love for Ruth Z. Some of them relate to his poetry: his affinity to the his childhood language, German, continued to accompany him also in adulthood, among other things as a background to his Hebrew writing (according to Gold the archive includes German versions of drafts of poems and even of complete poems that were later translated into Hebrew), information on earlier and different versions of known poems, and a fledgling work that can explain his early poetry and representation of his early poetic thought (despite its problematic presentation in the book).

But Nili Gold is not satisfied with these findings. She argues for a complete change in the interpretation of Amichai poetry from now on. For this claim there is no real foundation. The attempt to interpret Amichai's poems on the basis of "German" or biographical hidden strata—to which many tiresome pages are dedicated—is neither convincing nor interesting. The greatness of Amichai as a Hebrew poet is not predicated on a German unconscious and translation work. Amichai was not by any interpretation "a German poet in Hebrew mask," although it is possible to identify remnants of German vocabulary and syntax in his language games (the same as remnants of Yiddish and Russian in the Hebrew of earlier poets). The biographical interpretation of poems in which there appear words such as 'train', 'translator', or 'snow' is imperfect, does not payoff poetically, and lacks the power to compete with existential interpretations of the same poems. The identification of components of the story of his relations with Ruth Z. in his later poems does not make her the heroine of these poems and cannot subordinate the variety of details in a poem to that story. "We loved here" interweaves perhaps the British mandate curfew with a trip in the Jordan valley of the period, but its ending hints significantly at the days after the Independence War, while he constructs a compound picture of a couple that opens with falling in love and terminates in the routines of life together, that cannot relate to Ruth Z. ("We loved"), with the here and now of changes and wars in a world that envelope this two-some ("here"). Amichai routinely conflates biographical details from different times into one poetic framework, and exploits drafts and poetic ideas that

were recorded in different periods for a poem that would be written years later (incidentally, “We read Ulenspiegel” in “We loved here” is not related to the reading of German folklore as Nili Gold writes, but rather to the book *Thyl Ulenspiegel* by the Belgian author Charles De Coster that appeared in Hebrew translation by Shlonsky in 1949). Also “In the public garden” is not a poem on the love of Ruth and Yehuda, despite the details that Gold identifies as biographical. Such details serves the poem and not the other way. It is not difficult to identify the deserted village in the “Elegy on a deserted village,” the railway line that passes next to it, and the snow that was left afar (this is the snow of the Hermon mountain that is already used in “We loved here”). If we interpret the “Elegy on the lost child” as a poem on Amichai’s lost German childhood, we miss most of its meaning and its unique poetic structure. In summary, the identification of verbal or biographical signs in a poem is not identical with, or even similar to, its interpretation.

Literary criticism made the determination long ago that despite the autobiographical character of Amichai’s poetry, the individual depicted in it is the typical Israeli everyman, and even in a wider sense, the individual as an individual of the twentieth century (a poetics that interweaves the private with the typically generic). Nili Gold suggests seeing his poetry as a poetry of camouflage, because he did not mention in it his German childhood, little Ruth, or his links to the German language, and did not include in it early poems, etc. All this, in her opinion, in order to build a mythical story of a national Israeli poet. The presumption that the poet ought to tell (everything!) of his childhood in his poems is without foundation, and lovers (in general) appear nameless with essential changes, as part of integrated character, or do not appear at all. The omission of such facts in poetry is ever present and does not prove anything. In his poetry, Amichai did not hide being an immigrant, a son of immigrants. But he chose to tell the story of his childhood in his hometown in the novel, *Not of This Time, Not of This Place*. Like every artist, he determined what parts of his life would be material for his poetry, which would stay latent, and which remain in the margins.

Did Amichai tried to facilitate his acceptance as a national poet? The man who declared that he is not a national poet and wrote the poem “National thoughts,” all of which parodies nationalism as is commonly understood, who placed the life of the individual before anything else, whose poetry constituted a quiet but penetrating revolution against the social and political mechanisms that subjugate for its own needs the life of the individual and his happiness, did this man try so hard to construct for himself a mythology of a national poet? Everything that in Gold’s opinion he tried to hide is not in contradiction to the special “nationalism” that is included in his poetry. I have not found an

explanation of the concept of national poet, a concept she imputes to Amichai. But in the first place where this phrase appears in her book she refers the reader, without explanation, to my paper (1997) in which this is written: "Of all the poets that started writing with Amichai or later, one can say that since Alterman, there was no one more popular than Amichai. By this attribute there is nothing comparable. Amichai is perhaps the only canonical poet that is read by many, even by those not truly belonging to the literary community. In this matter he does not have any competitors. By this term one can see in him a 'national poet,' **an attribute that does not fit his poetry in any other way**" (the emphasis added here). If I am the one, without intended injustice, who is responsible for this term, let me mark its limits. It is possible, perhaps, to extend its boundaries to include Amichai, but Nili Gold does not do it, and her use of the attribute is unclear and irresponsible. Some real issues she raises remain unanswered.

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**A Life (Un)Worthy of Living: Reproductive Genetics in Israel and Germany**, by Yael Hashiloni-Dolev. Series: International Library of Ethics, Law and the New Medicine, Vol. 34. Dordrecht, the Netherlands, Springer, 2007. 195 pp. €94.95.

This is a very interesting and useful book. It exemplifies how two modern societies, Israel and Germany, employ scientific, legal, and ethical reasoning differently. Beyond the specific findings relevant to both countries, namely that Israeli geneticists are shown to be extremely enthusiastic about the personal and social uses of reproductive genetics while their German colleagues are found to be extremely cautious, its contribution lies in the more general argument that acceptance and application of modern technology are not automatic but preconditioned by national, cultural, historical, religious, and moral forces and the interaction between them. The author shows how the research findings are explained not only by the German history of the Holocaust with its feelings of guilt and shame but also more generally by German attitudes towards science and progress and towards children and fertility, Catholic influences, and Kantian philosophy. Likewise, she explains the selectivity characteristic of Israeli society by means other than collective body ideals and anti-disability sentiments, specifically by addressing the more immediate meanings of the practices of reproductive genetics in Israel.