

# “The Two Gaze Directly into One Another’s Face”: Avot Yeshurun between the Nakba and the Shoah—An Israeli Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper is written from an Israeli point of view, a point of view of dual responsibility resulting from belonging to the state that both caused the Palestinian Nakba and took in and rehabilitated survivors and refugees of the Shoah. This position is marked by Jacques Derrida as the state of the *aporia* of taking responsibility. Avot Yeshurun’s poetry about the Nakba and the Shoah struggles with assuming responsibility as an Israeli for the consequences of both. In his poem “Passover on Caves” especially, Yeshurun develops a discourse of heterogeneous identities enabling the Jewish Israeli to assume both responsibilities by developing “multidirectional memory” of both traumas without constituting one identity at the expense of the supposedly opposed other.*

*Keywords: multidirectional memory, Nakba, trauma, Shoah, Israel, Palestine, Avot Yeshurun*

**A**s an Israeli Jew my perspective on the Nakba is fundamentally a dual one. On the one hand, it is the perspective of the perpetrator. Whether I like it or not, as an Israeli I am part of the Zionist project of establishing a Jewish national state, and thus I must assume responsibility for the events of the Nakba that were brought about by the State of Israel. On the other hand, the Holocaust forms an integral part of the Zionist narrative within which I am implicated.

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The Holocaust is a lens that I cannot circumvent when I reflect on how I can assume responsibility vis-à-vis the Nakba. In the effort to establish a Jewish state after the Holocaust in Europe, and as a reaction to it, a substantial part of the Jewish people perpetrated atrocities against the Palestinian people, especially to the extent that the Palestinians were prevented from returning to their homes after the end of the 1948 war. For many Jews who immigrated to Israel after the Holocaust, the State of Israel functioned as a haven and as a place of recuperation. That is to say, among other reasons, in order to implement the terrible lesson of the Holocaust, in order to remedy that Jewish helplessness in Europe that had brought about their destruction, part of the Jewish people established the State of Israel at the expense of the Palestinians.

Responsibility is the capacity to respond—*response* plus *ability*—to the state of the other, to her suffering, to his vulnerability. Responsibility is the awareness that one has a debt toward the victim, a debt that obtains without one's being able, as the responsible party, to divest oneself of one's highly specific subject position<sup>1</sup>—in my case as a Jewish Israeli national—which calls for a response to the state of the other. Responsibility exists, according to Giorgio Agamben, outside ethics and inside the law, so that in addition to legislating the Israeli “Law of Return” there should also be Israeli legal approval of the Palestinian “Right of Return.”<sup>2</sup>

But this assumption of responsibility binds one to an aporia—it binds me, as a Jewish Israeli who takes responsibility for the Nakba, on the one hand, and for the lessons of the Holocaust inscribed in the act of establishing the State of Israel as a haven for the survivors on the other, to an unrelenting aporia. This aporia exists as a rule at the very foundation of the act of assuming responsibility, as Jacques Derrida so painstakingly showed. Responsibility cannot be subject to reduction, whether to pre-given norms or their inverse. As Derrida argues in *The Gift of Death*, the paradoxical meaning of the promise of determining one's responsibility is that any decision that is based on stable rules and norms constitutes an abrogation of responsibility toward the other, whose singularity is also authorized by means of alternative rules and norms.<sup>3</sup> The contradiction lies in that the act of taking responsibility is authorized both by the self and by the other to whom one responds, but when we engage responsibly, we seldom consider sufficiently that this very other is constructed by the self. This is why rules constitute a kind of safety railing in the face of the need to determine one's responsibility, a support strut whose mobilization is contradictory—both with respect to its underpinning in the self and with respect to its foundation

in the other. Thus Derrida can claim that the decision to take responsibility—its determination—is always prey to a state of indecision or indetermination and is therefore dangerous.<sup>4</sup> This argument enables Derrida to posit the singularity of the event of assuming responsibility as implicated in its impossible possibility.<sup>5</sup>

Precisely such an aporia arises in the case at hand from the very fact of the contradiction between the recognition of the Jewish Holocaust as trauma, on the one hand, and the recognition of the Palestinian Nakba as trauma, on the other. Both peoples demand rights and historical justice in the name of their trauma. Both societies are posttraumatic ones, and they exchange traumatic discourse. To take responsibility in this context is to take responsibility for the implementation of historical justice based on the recognition of trauma. That is to say, we deserve what we deserve because of what was done to us; the other side is called upon to recognize the justice of the traumatically grounded claim. Thus the Palestinians are called upon to recognize the justice of the establishment of the State of the Jews, on the basis of what was done to the Jews. But it should also be remembered that the Jews demand of the Palestinians to recognize a trauma for which the Palestinians were not responsible, whereas the complementary demand from the Palestinian side is for the Jews to recognize the trauma that resulted from their actions.

The Jewish Holocaust necessitated finding a solution for the Jewish people, whose proper form, according to Zionism, lies in statehood and sovereignty. The fact that the recognition of the Jewish Holocaust constituted the justification for the establishment of a Jewish nation-state at the expense of the Palestinians, who are not responsible for the Jewish trauma but who are called upon by the Jews to pay the price for the concrete realization of responsibility, has created an aporia within the very structure of Israeli responsibility.

The aporia here derives from the fact that taking responsibility for the lesson of the Jewish Holocaust—which results in the establishment of a nation-state, which in turn brings about the Nakba—does not allow for the assumption of responsibility precisely toward the Palestinian Nakba. When the equation is reversed, it is also the case that those Israeli Jews who do assume responsibility for the Palestinian Nakba do so at the price of disavowing responsibility toward the Jewish past, which includes the fact that the State of Israel functioned as a haven for the survivors.

With respect to the corpus of Hebrew poetry published immediately after the Nakba and during the decade that followed it, traces of the event sedimented within this body of writing as a result of the violence

[155]

*Yeshurun  
between Nakba  
and Shoah*



Hannan Hever

directed at the Palestinians show that few Hebrew poets were able to display human and moral sensitivity regarding this violence, or even to protest it, claiming that the Nakba was the result of a moral atrocity that was also a war crime. A survey of Hebrew poetry published between 1948 and 1958, the results of which were compiled in the anthology *Tell It Not in Gath*, provides relatively few instances of Hebrew poetry that reflects directly on the Nakba; and those exceptions generally sought to render the trauma manifest through its hasty rehabilitation at the price of repressing the injustices themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike other Hebrew poets who wrote about the Nakba, Avot Yeshurun assumes the problem of bearing Jewish responsibility for the Nakba while juxtaposing it to the Holocaust. He confronts this aporia with unusual depth and courage. Yeshurun has earned the reputation in Hebrew literature as the poet who spoke out about the Nakba a short time after the 1948 war. His most well-known poem in this respect is “Passover on Caves,” which was published in the newspaper *Haaretz* on May 23, 1952, provoking a literary and a political storm.

The poem demonstrates Avot Yeshurun’s impressive ability to use his poetry to invoke the Palestinian trauma and to provide a poetic representation of it. He was able to do this by means of a dissociated and post-traumatic writing that moves between Arabic, Yiddish, and Hebrew and blurs the distinction between the Jewish and Palestinian narratives.

The poem describes the fate of the Palestinian refugees in the aftermath of the Nakba and is based on the notion of a common Palestinian-Jewish fate. The land is common to both and hides itself from those who seek power and mastery:

One day to the land,  
To the deep one, from *Phalasteen* [Palestine],  
From “Palestina, *hoch, hoch* [hurray, hurray]!”  
From Canaan of the fellaheen

One day to the land,  
Chock-full of jugs,  
And she is hard and red,  
Hot she is and sinewy.

She does not tell her private parts  
To those who ride over genitals,  
And she does not speak to those  
Who ride white she-asses.<sup>7</sup>

The parallel between the chorus of the Jewish pioneers (“hoch, hoch”)<sup>8</sup> and “Canaan of the fellaheen” equates Palestinian and Jewish

history. The history of the Jewish presence in Erets Yisrael is also linked to the existence of the Palestinians in Palestine:

Which brought us to the shore with Gianicolo

And an Arab sailor stood us on our feet,  
His arms—like tables, and his voice singed,  
And the hands—from my father's home.

And we arrived, and to a land with no relative,  
And the land here has no mother, search as you may.  
So Fatma said, be quick my lad,  
And call her Mamma.

I said: My mother gave me a dinar, to give to the poor of my hometown,  
But I am hungry, for I am poor . . . I said . . .  
And she lowered her jug: Drink my boy.  
Keep the dinar . . .<sup>9</sup>

Michael Gluzman has shown that “Passover on Caves” is an initiation (*Bildung*) poem bound up with the speaker’s migration to Erets Yisrael and his first contact with the Arabs. According to Gluzman, the poem extends an intertextual network by means of a series of negations of liturgical texts such as the Jewish Haggadah recited at Passover and the biblical Song of Songs, in addition to the Hebrew poet Natan Alterman’s *Songs of the Ten Plagues*. The text undermines the canonical Jewish narrative with its representation of relations between Jews and non-Jews. Yeshurun uses his intertexts to oppose any relational definition of identity. Through his subversive use of intertextuality, he is able to criticize the notion that the concept of “the Jew” is bound up with the absolute negation of the concept of “the non-Jew.” In order to establish closeness with the Palestinian other, Gluzman continues, the dislocation—a literal stepping over (as in the etymological root of Passover)—that Yeshurun describes in the poem relates not to the caves but to those who reside within them. Thus Yeshurun rewrites the story of Pesach while criticizing the opacity of the biblical story toward the other and Zionism’s blindness toward its victims.<sup>10</sup>

But beyond the initiation of the Jewish immigrant in an effort to build a different set of relations between Jew and gentile, the central question that preoccupies Yeshurun in this poem is the question of responsibility for the Nakba. He asks, in the voice of the Palestinians, how is it possible to welcome the Jews when the Palestinians are in hiding? Using precisely the syntax of the classic Zionist poem “Zion Will You Not Ask?” penned by the medieval Spanish Jewish poet

[157]

*Yeshurun  
between Nakba  
and Shoah*



Hannan Hever

[158]

*Jewish  
Social  
Studies*

●  
Vol. 18  
No. 3

Yehuda Halevi, Yeshurun asks how we can inquire about the fate of the Palestinian when he has retreated into his cave, has gone “to the Pelethite” (*hu halakh poh el kukho, el ha-pelati*)—a play on the Hebrew word *palit*, “refugee”—a place of refuge which the Jews have passed over without seeing, as the title of the poem suggests.

Our father’s face was here . . .  
Then we still were sons . . .  
Now our father is nowhere to be seen . . .  
How shall we face him when he comes?

Don’t you inquire, angel, about your people—  
But he is the wretched from Phalasteen.  
He went here to his cave  
Among the refugees . . .

his caves—

Won’t you inquire, Jacob’s rose?  
Ask the thorns!<sup>11</sup>

It is on this basis that Yeshurun is able to conclude that the Jews (“Jacob’s rose”) are responsible for posing the question of moral responsibility for the fate of the Palestinians: a question they must pose of their “thorns”—that is to say, their violent emissaries. Yeshurun speaks of the Palestinian as a member of his own (Jewish) nation who heads toward the cave or the habitation of the refugees. But, Yeshurun insists, if the State of Israel (personified as the female “you”) wants to testify concerning the actions and fate of the Palestinians in their caves—indeed, to testify *as* the “Rose of Jacob,” which symbolizes the people of Israel, at a time of national celebration of victory over the gentiles that is alluded to here in an intertextual reference to the book of Esther and the Purim festival—this can only be done by interrogating the sharp thorns concerning their violent conduct toward the Palestinians.

Yeshurun’s poem is testimony to the trauma of the other. It suggests a way of taking responsibility for the suffering of the other without discounting the Derridean aporia, which holds that if one takes responsibility for one side—the Palestinian Nakba—one immediately divests oneself of responsibility for the other side—the lesson of the Jewish Holocaust—and vice versa. On the contrary: Yeshurun suggests a manner in which both sides can take responsibility for each other, whether on the Jewish or the Palestinian side of the equation. But this dual form of responsibility exists crucially for Yeshurun as a demand within the Jewish discourse; for it is only from his subject

position as a Jew that Yeshurun can respond, that is to say, assume responsibility for the trauma of the other. The empathy toward the Palestinian's fate and suffering is expressed by Yeshurun from a Jewish standpoint, which does not create an identification between him and the Palestinian and therefore does not dissolve the Palestinian into Jewishness nor annihilate his otherness. Instead, he creates in his poem a transitional poetic space that, as Gluzman noted, criticizes the notion that the concept of "the Jew" is bound up with the absolute negation of the concept of "the non-Jew."

Yeshurun's relinquishing of the closed representation of trauma allows for what Dominik LaCapra calls "empathetic unsettlement": "I would in general argue," La Capra writes, "that in history there is a crucial role for emphatic unsettlement as an aspect of understanding, which stylistically upsets the narrative voice and counteracts harmonizing narration or unqualified objectification, yet allows for a tense interplay between critical, necessarily objectifying reconstruction and affective response to the voice of the victims."<sup>12</sup> This oscillation does not frame the trauma of the victim while freezing it and thus does not redeem this trauma to create a basis for the consolidation of a clear identity; but it accommodates it as an "acting out," without silencing the trauma through a form of recognition that risks reifying it.

Yeshurun's subject position allows for an assumption of responsibility that permits infinite negotiation with the opposite poles of the aporia without relinquishing responsibility for either one of them. He achieves this through literary means, as Michal Ben Naftali, referring to Derrida, suggests; despite the fact that "it is impossible to determine literature's responsibility a priori, but only complete responsibility here and its lack there," Ben Naftali says, it is still possible to point to Derrida as someone who grapples with the chance to "give voice to this tension concretely with regard to specific works."<sup>13</sup>

For Yeshurun, it is possible to make the trauma present, to manifest it without denial, only if one occupies the place of trauma. For this reason it is necessary not to be detached from the Jewish collective—that is to say, not to separate oneself from the Jewish narrative of migration to Palestine but to try to achieve the nearly impossible in representing the Palestinian trauma of the Nakba through the lens of the Jewish Holocaust without reducing the one to the other. Cathy Caruth describes it thus:

But we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the

[159]

*Yeshurun  
between Nakba  
and Shoah*



Hannan Hever



way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility of surprise of listening to another's wound.<sup>14</sup>

What we are confronted with is, in fact, a phenomenon that Michael Rothberg terms "multidirectional memory." Instead of a model of competitive collective memory caught in a zero-sum game, that is to say, in competition over the question of whose trauma is the more severe, Rothberg suggests that it is possible to conceive of the coexistence of traumas that meet one another in public space where they are made manifest and negotiate one another, all the while liberating themselves from the political role of collective memory to constitute the basis for an exclusive national identity in the present.<sup>15</sup>

Along these lines I would like to suggest an alternative view of the aporia of responsibility, one that is not grounded in stable and coherent identities but rather stems from a model of identity that is more shifting than stable, based on the difference that inheres in identity and the identity within difference—in other words, an identity that constitutes itself as heterogeneous and is capable of recognizing the trauma of the other without representing it within the confines of simple or closed categories. Only such an identity, which has not been reified to the extent of becoming passive, can take action and respond to the other's suffering—can take responsibility.

This nonreified identity blurs the binary opposition between Jews and Arabs and brings Yeshurun, who feels the pain of Palestinian fate as a result of the 1948 war, to refrain from reifying trauma as the foundation for a political framework based upon an exclusive national identity. In addition, he refrains from equating Palestinian identity with a national movement possessing a fixed identity but articulates in his texts a posttraumatic conception of dynamic and unstable identity. The story that Yeshurun tells is not wholly faithful to either of the two rival narratives that it presents, Jewish and Palestinian, and thus it is able to be loyal to both together. Yeshurun does not frame either narrative in terms of the opposing narrative but deconstructs each by refusing the oppositional constitution of a Jewish identity that can be set against a Palestinian identity. Instead he uses traumatic utterance to fuse the two together.

The assumption of responsibility for Yeshurun is achieved by means of the Yiddish word *Yahndes*, or Jewish conscience, a boundless legacy of unconditional Jewish compassion that extends beyond the boundaries of the state and that Yeshurun proposes as the basis for his stance vis-à-vis both the Holocaust and the Nakba. This compassion



occupies a position like that of heritage in Derrida's view, that which subsumes responsibility, as Derrida argues when he claims the term "responsibility" to be meaningless without the experience of heritage or tradition.<sup>16</sup> Heritage is that from which the individual can deviate: it is always the repository of a secret that cannot be calculated or classified.<sup>17</sup> In Yeshurun's words,

And father-mother, from wherever they were taken to  
From the horrendous fire of fires—  
Ordered us not to forget Yahndes,  
And Poylin also not to forget.<sup>18</sup>

In "Passover on Caves" Yeshurun laments the fellaheen's disappearance from the State of Israel after the Nakba.<sup>19</sup> Consequently it is imperative for Yeshurun not to take Palestinian property, whose loss is parallel to the Jewish Holocaust, a massive conflagration ("esh el ravraba") that consumed the Jews.<sup>20</sup> The central metaphor organizing this poem, which so resists our efforts to interpret it, is that of the family, the source of compassion, as is clearly articulated in two stanzas of the poem "Wind in the Locusts," which Yeshurun wrote after being harshly attacked for "Passover on Caves."

What is Yahndes, Yahndes?  
Compassion for the property of the dislocated.  
Compassion for the wall coverings  
And for the gentile corner of the fields.

What is Yahndes, Yahndes?  
The truth with the poesis  
And according to the homily your exegesis is correct—  
The truth adorned with tapestries.<sup>21</sup>

Compassion is the source of the injunction against looting Palestinian property, for instance, the wall coverings or tapestries that adorn Palestinian houses. The family metaphor may also be discerned in many of the stanzas of "Passover on Caves." The Palestinian sailor who helps Avot Yeshurun disembark from the deck of the *Gianicolo*, which brought him to Erets Yisrael, speaks an Arabic that sounds to him *ve-kintsei lo*, that is to say, it is a strange voice<sup>22</sup> or, tracing the etymology of the word *kintsei* to the Arabic *kanasa* (hunting), it is the violent voice of a hunter. But it also alludes to the blessing of Isaac, where the voice is the voice of Jacob but the hands are the hands of Esau (Genesis 27:22). This in fact allows Yeshurun to determine that

[161]

*Yeshurun  
between Nakba  
and Shoah*

●  
Hannan Hever

[162]

*Jewish  
Social  
Studies*

●  
Vol. 18  
No. 3

the meeting with the Arab sailor is a family gathering that occurs in a guise that disrupts meeting. A further development of the family metaphor appears in the Arab woman's welcoming of the solitary immigrant: he terms this woman "Mother."

The representation of trauma in Hebrew texts referring to the 1940s cannot evade the Jewish trauma of the twentieth century—the Holocaust. But instead of the familiar Israeli reckoning of the relative severity of the two traumas, Jewish and Palestinian, Yeshurun proposes a Jewish stance of compassion as conveyed by the Yiddish word *Yahndes*. This Jewish compassion, directed at the Nakba, releases the Nakba from standing in a competitive binary vis-à-vis the Holocaust and allows the Jew, enmeshed in the trauma of the Holocaust, to recognize the trauma of the Nakba. The fusion of localities is simultaneously the fusion of the two peoples and the interlinking of their cruel fate through a process of heterogeneous national identity formation, which might eventually encompass the production of a binational consciousness. Yeshurun demands that we recognize the other and the alterity of the other, exhorting us to look him "straight in the face" in the Levinasian sense, whereby the face of the other constitutes an appeal for recognition, or in Yeshurun's words:

I requested permission from my father to take leave, which he gave and took his leave. An Arab sailor in Haifa lifted me up onto the land and it allowed him to take his leave.

The Holocaust of the Jews of Europe and the Holocaust of the Arabs of Erets Yisrael are one Holocaust of the Jewish people. The two gaze directly into one another's face.

It is of this that I speak.  
1958<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

1 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York, 1999), 21.

2 *Ibid.*, 22.

3 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, 1996).

4 Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, 1993), 19.

5 Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Michael Nass and Pascale-Anne Brault (Bloomington, Ind., 1992), 41.

6 Hannan Hever et al., eds., *Al tagidu be-Gat* (Tel Aviv, 2010).

- 7 Avot Yeshurun, *Kol ha-shirim*, ed. Benjamin Harshav and Hilit Yeshurun, 3 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1995), 1: 81. Translations by Dan Miron.
- 8 Commentary by Benjamin Harshav and Hilit Yeshurun in Yeshurun, *Kol ha-shirim*, 1: n.p.
- 9 Yeshurun, *Kol ha-shirim*, 83.
- 10 Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford, 2003), 157–59.
- 11 Yeshurun, *Kol ha-shirim*, 84.
- 12 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, 2001), 109.
- 13 Michal Ben Naftali, afterword to *Matat Mavet*, by Jacques Derrida, trans. Michal Ben Naftali (Tel Aviv, 2008), 178.
- 14 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, 1996), 8.
- 15 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, 2009), 5.
- 16 Jacques Derrida and Elizabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow . . .*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford, 2004), 5.
- 17 Rodolphe Gasche, “European Memories: Jan Patocčka and Jacques Derrida on Responsibility,” in *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Suzan Guerlac (Durham, N.C., 2009), 151–52.
- 18 Yeshurun, *Kol ha-shirim*, 85.
- 19 Aharon Amir, “Erets lo noda‘at,” *Haaretz*, June 13, 1952, p. 5.
- 20 Dan Miron, “Be-mivhan mabatam shel ha-avot,” *Zemanim*, Sept. 24, 1954.
- 21 Yeshurun, *Kol ha-shirim*, 88.
- 22 Harshav, Commentary to Yeshurun, *Kol ha-shirim*.
- 23 Yeshurun, *Kol ha-shirim*, 104.

[163]

*Yeshurun  
between Nakba  
and Shoah*



Hannan Hever