

## New Meanings of a Chosen Landscape: Reuven Ben-Yosef's **Noon in Jerusalem**

by Dov Vardi

I wonder whether there is another city in the world which continues to inspire as many poets as Jerusalem. One could easily present an anthology of Jerusalem poems from Yehuda Karni to Amichai and to the more recent poets to demonstrate what is an axiom. Most of these poets were not born in the city and did not grow up with it. But the nature of the city is such, that any meeting with it, even temporarily, is such that the imagination is aroused and words may soon become poems. Ben-Yosef has made his home in Jerusalem, and that has made a difference.

The title, "Noon in Jerusalem" — a phrase which closes a poem about a visit to a ceremonial collection in a museum — may seem random at first. True, there are many poems about Jerusalem, but why the "Noon"? Viewing the work in its entirety, one is struck by the deeper meaning of the title.

Noon in Jerusalem, as described in another poem, "This World", is the hour which brings out detail in the landscape as if it were engraved by a "shining bright blade of sun". One of the qualities of these poems is clarity, an intentional avoidance of the diffuse. Jerusalem is a set of concrete, unmistakable images: Wall, Desert, Sharav (hamsin), Rock, High Point, and is further particularized in lines like, "The mountains of Judea and Hebron/ The Dead Sea at the tip of Kidron", or in a localization like, "My daughter goes to school in the Valley/ Of Rephaim."

This, then, is the more obvious aspect of the Noon theme. A further aspect seems to refer to a second of the three central motifs which the poems explore. Ben-Yosef writes that he is nearing the age of "understanding" — the Hebrew "bina", forty according to the Sayings of the Fathers. And this age is certainly "noontime", the middle of life when one looks backward in time to the world of Memory (a recurring concept) and forward to certain personal hopes and especially to the well-being and future of one's offspring. It is at this period that submerged experiences of the past take on new meanings. Disconnected events like playing with an electric toy train in childhood may now in the present suddenly become associated reflectively with other cars, such as at the time were bearing Jews to their deaths far away. Noon also gives permanence to "this world", the world of now, and removes (for a while) the feeling of transitoriness.

If on the one hand the Jerusalem poems are 'present' and plea-

santly domestic, focusing fondly upon his family, the more unified group of poems which compose the "Letters to America" section have more of the past and are autobiographical. Of the thirteen poems, ten are addressed to the immediate members of the family abroad, and in a sense, they too continue the "Noon" theme. They bring to full light the longing and pain in the heart of the poet. He analyzes himself and his relationships with each member of the family almost as if he were "on the couch". What emerges is also a sociological portrait of Jews in America, the land of "six million Jews less one/ Six million Jews alive, more or less/ The number of Jews cremated when I was a child/ Far away in the old country."

We note here that Ben-Yosef, after T. Carmi, is probably the outstanding American Jewish poet writing in Hebrew now in Israel. After initially writing and publishing in English, he switched over to Hebrew and this is his fifth volume of poetry — no small vintage. Ben-Yosef is not a successor to the school of American Jewish poets writing in Hebrew like S. Halkin during his earlier period, or Gabriel Preil who still lives in America. Their Hebrew roots lie in Eastern Europe and in Jewish immigrant America, while he belongs to the third generation of Jewish Americans, to those whose parents after a lifetime of working in business or profession in the East go down to Florida, the "warm region", or to the West Coast, to retire, as their offspring scatter across the continent:

My brother remained in the north, my sister in the west

Myself across the ocean and sea on my mountains in the sky.

These are ideological poems. He who was once a dreaming child with open eyes waiting to be fondled, now sees the city in which he grew up, New York, as a Zion of smoke, as steel and glass and streets without names, only numbers on posts "dusted with snow". He writes his first letter to his brother forgivingly "in simple language", because he doesn't know Hebrew. The second letter, however, is ironical. He has sent his brother his books of verse, but the brother has "brought him to rest" — the Hebrew euphemism for "burying" — to gather dust in his air-conditioned apartment. This is the brother with whom he once lived: "In the same room and we would talk away/ Mornings about school." In contrast Ben-Yosef himself has chosen to go up:

To a land America's poet

Called "Syrian"; to a people England's

Poet endowed with a cruel heart,

He then goes on to throw back his insult at the English language itself:

I am the Man whom the poet of your Wasteland

Language compared to a rat.

The bitterest poems are those to his sister — “a captive among gentiles”. She is like the sea, stretching out her hands for a moment, then returning to the abyss. Her children have been baptized and her bearded husband has “a dog barking outside”. (Is there anything more apt for a “goy”?) The poem culminates with Ben-Yosef calling upon his nieces and nephews to join him: “Forego the mother/ Who is no mother to you.”

Ben-Yosef, on the other hand, has no quarrel with his parents. To his mother he confesses, “Until now, until this Land, mother, I never cried out Mama.” The father went from mountain to mountain “in the desert of freedom” hoping the son would go higher. Of course, he did not think of Jerusalem. The mountains American Jewish parents envisage for their children are material ones of success.

The Letters close with a touching image of the family going out to sea in a borrowed boat following the death of the father:

So we didn't sail out far, but all of us  
Mumbled something, and sister sang. I repeated  
What the father of our tribes had uttered about his short  
And bitter life, and mother cried Joseph  
Scattering his parcels to the waves, Good bye Joseph,  
Then strew the ashes of his body, until we reached  
Dry land which already did not know his name.

Other works on similar themes come to mind with the reading, like Shlonsky's early “To Mama and Papa”, or Kovner's “My Little Sister”. The differences are obvious because each poet has his own world to express, and we should not compare. The question is not the feeling, but the quality of the language. There are still many traces in Ben-Yosef of the efforts to naturalize his language and achieve a free flow such as he probably commands in his mother tongue. The rimes — much of the poetry strives for some formal structure and resorts to rime — are often superficial, weakening the tension.

If some of these poems in summary do impress one as a bit naive and as lacking in a minimum of sophistication, still they do reflect an interesting process of absorption into the Land and language. They are important too as an expression of an American Jew who has found himself here. At noon and forty, we can only hope that as he continues to experiment and grow with language and form, he will further refine his instrument. Yet even so, the Letters in their sincerity, and several other pieces, particularly the opening poems which do have a certain purity of expression and beauty, give a hint of what Ben-Yosef does reach.