A Legacy of Defeat:
Ya'acov Bitton against Poetic Currency

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ABSTRACT: My essay sheds light on current Israeli poetry that seeks to negate, resist, and avoid the currency of "poetic currency," in three main senses: a poetry that refuses to serve as a valuable element of exchange, resists the current streams of Israeli culture, and avoids being a valid representative of the national economy. I focus on the work of Ya'acov Bitton, one of the leading voices in the new generation of Israeli poets. His statement, in one of his early poems, that he strives to "despise the birthright", suggests a unique economy of the poetic stance. Bitton's first book of poetry, *Ina Dada* (The great mother, 2007), rejects the oedipal heritage of hegemonic Hebrew poetry in favor of a legacy of an "other," a marginal tradition represented by the disparaged body of a demented old grandmother in a wheelchair, a legacy "with no teeth." Accompanying the process of his grandmother's deterioration, dying, and burial becomes a total rejection of the values of the nation-state and the secular tradition of its poetry. Bitton's poetry is a fierce indictment against the violence perpetrated by capital and the humiliation of man and exposes "the horror of being human" as the underpinnings of the enlightened face of a developed, technological, and militaristic Israeli society. His next collection of poems, *Mahbarot ha-tvusa* (Notebooks of defeat, 2013), locates his poetic position in a void, "outside the camp," where the poet's voice serves as a soundbox for the forgotten and the far-flung. Bitton's poetry, I argue, rejects concepts of ownership, paternal mastery, and economic force and creates a "legacy of defeat," a state in which "all yesterday's inheritances are vandalized / fallen."

"Currency" suggests a few lexical definitions: circulation as a means of exchange; general use, acceptance, or prevalence; the quality of being current or accurate; and a common article (such as coins or bills) for bartering. Given these different definitions, we can say that the chronotope of currency, its juncture of the temporal and the spatial, merges circularity with actuality and charges both with economic value. Currency is a meeting point between the general and the particular. A national currency of a certain state is an exchange object representing the economic language that is customary in that state and can be translated into trade relations and international exchange.

Shifting this chronotope of currency to the field of poetics, with its sense of exchange and actuality, might lead us to consider the place of the poet in our time. One might recall the recent decision of the Bank of Israel to print portraits of some of the leading Hebrew poets on the national banknotes (Leah Goldberg, Rachel [Bluwstein], Shaul Tchernichovsky, and Nathan Alterman; a banknote with H. N. Bialik's portrait was printed and circulated in the 1960s and 1970s). This decision may hint that in the cultural imagination of Jewish-Israeli society ("the people of the book"), a poet is not only an artist of language but also a kind of currency.

Indeed, a poet may function as currency for his or her community. Language being his exclusive material to work with, he is in any case already part of an exchange system. He "coins" phrases to be "traded" within the discourse of his community and interpreted in ways he has no control over. Sometimes, his poetry is looked upon as a medium to reflect and transmit the zeitgeist of his culture and society. Like financial currency, he stands on the border between the general and the particular: between self-expression and national expression; between his approval of—or objection to—local values and his subjection to them, even against his will; between being a national asset of the society in which his poetry was created and being translated, thereby traded in foreign currencies, into foreign languages. Moreover, his poetry has a semi-economical value (and, sometimes, real economic value), and his cultural status may rise or drop accordingly. Yehuda Amichai's poetry, for example, has been translated into forty languages and has won worldwide acclaim, his archive has been sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars to an Ivy League university library, and he is considered to be "Israel's national poet,"[1] and thus we can confidently assert that Amichai has become a kind of national asset and his poetry serves as a kind of "poetic currency."

I will try to shed light on current Israeli poetry that seeks to negate, resist, and avoid the currency of "poetic currency," in three main senses: a poetry that refuses to serve as a valuable element of exchange; resists the current trends of Israeli culture; and avoids being a valid representative of the national economy. I will focus on the work of Ya'acov Bitton, one of the leading voices in the new generation of Israeli poets whose work suggests, in my view, a unique economy of the poetic stance. Bitton's poetry rejects concepts of ownership, paternal mastery, and economic force. It presents a reality of material poverty and social marginality without seeking routes of extrication but instead making these positions the very ground of its poetic voice. While the main legacy of Israeli culture values precedence and overcoming as basic aspects in Israeli national narratives (e.g., "from Holocaust to revival"; "the few against the many"; "making the desert bloom"; "start-up nation"; etc.), Bitton's poetry negates these values and narratives and creates a "legacy of defeat."

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[1] See, e.g., Nili Scharf Gold, *Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008).

Bitton (born in 1974, to a family of Jewish-Moroccan immigrants) first emerged as a poet in the literary journal *Mita'am* in 2007 and shortly thereafter published his first book of poems, *Ina Dada* (The great mother, 2007); his second book, *Notebooks of Defeat* (Mahbarot ha-tvusa) appeared in 2013. His third book, *Zohar Sister* (Akhoti BaZohar), is forthcoming. The extent of Bitton's positive reception among critics and readers alike was exceptional, and his poetry won immediate appreciation and praise for its originality and strength. His first book opens with a poem that highlights these traits:

בכורות

אִמָּא

אַבָּא

אֲנִי מוֹכֵר אֶת הַבְּכוֹרָה

כְּאַחֲרוֹן הַצַּיָּדִים,

אֶשָּׁאֵר מֻרְעָב

חוֹפֵר

קוֹדֵחַ

בְּאֵין קְדֵשָׁה

בְּאֵין שְׂפַת מָוֶת.

אֲנִי עָיֵף

וְחָזַרְתִּי גַם אֲנִי מֵהַשָּׂדֶה,

מֵת הַיַּעֲקֹב

כֻּלָּנוּ אֲדֻמִּים הַיּוֹם—

לֹא עוֹד קַדִּישׁ

הוֹרִים.

וְהַדִּיסָה הַיְחִידָה שֶׁאֲנִי רוֹקֵחַ

הִיא חַיַּי,

מֵאַבְקַת הָרַחַיִם

שֶׁנִּפְתְּחָה טְרִיָּה בְּיַלְדוּתִי

יֵשׁ רַק גּוּף עָבֵשׁ,

טַחַב עֲצָמוֹת.

אֹכַל וְאֶשְׁתֶּה בְּעַצְמִי,

לָקוּם, לָלֶכֶת

וּלְבַזּוֹת

בְּעִקָּר לְבַזּוֹת

אֶת

הַבְּכוֹרָה

הַזֹּאת.

Birthrights

Mother
Father
I sell the birthright
Like the last hunter,
I will remain starved

Digging
Drilling
With no sanctity
With no language for death.
I am tired
And I, too, came back from the field,
The Ya'acov is dead
We are all red today—
No more parents'
Kaddish.
And the only gruel I prepare
Is my life,
The millstone's powder
That opened fresh in my childhood
Is now only a body of mold,
A moss of bones.
I will eat and drink by myself,
Get up, go
And despise
Really despise
This
Birthright.[2]

As a first poem in a first book of poetry, the title "Birthrights" alludes not only to the biographical fact of the poet being a firstborn child but also to his being the author of a first book, which is handed over as a gift to the communities in which it was created: the immediate, original community (the poet's family), the literary community, and the national one. Just like many other opening poems of eminent poetry collections, especially authors' first collections (e.g., "Od Chozer Hanigun" by Nathan Alterman; "One Moment" by Nathan Zach; and "Yonatan" by Yona Wallach), it seeks to announce, to define, or at least to suggest his position as a poet. It is a poem that portrays for us the figure of the poet as well as the enterprise of his writing, while providing a key to its reading. As such, the stance of Bitton's first poem offers up many surprises to its readers. Most of all, I see in it a deep refusal to serve as the "poetic currency" of his own collective, the currency that is supposed to represent that collective's values, dreams, and culture.

Bitton turns the "first fruits" of his poetry into "firstborns," echoing the Mishnah tractate "Bekhorot," which deals with laws regarding the firstborn offspring of animals and the deficiencies that exclude them from sacrifice. It also brings to mind the plague of the firstborn, the last of the ten biblical plagues of Egypt, which killed all the firstborn children of the Egyptians. Both the references and the direct content of the poem testify to the negation of the very essence of birthright and present the giving of the first fruits as a faulty act that rescinds its own value and significance from the outset. However, the rhetorical mode of the poem, with its powerful announcements, works against its content. The paradox thus created solidifies the familial relation

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2 Ya'acov Bitton, *Ina Dada* [The great mother] (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), 9–10. All translations of Bitton's poems throughout this essay are mine. I thank Adriana Jacobs for editing the translations.

by addressing it while unraveling it at the same time, announces birthright while renouncing it, expresses commitment to a mission while lamenting its futility and nullity.

Using the identity between his own given name and that of the biblical Jacob, Bitton plays with the story of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob:

> **27** And the boys grew: and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents.
>
> **28** And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob.
>
> **29** And Jacob sod pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint:
>
> **30** And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage; for I am faint: therefore was his name called Edom.
>
> **31** And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright.
>
> **32** And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?
>
> **33** And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he sware unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.
>
> **34** Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright.[3]

In Jewish tradition, the figure of Jacob is the customary symbol for the nation of Israel while Esau is the symbol for the nations of the world. Buying Esau's birthright for a pottage of lentils and cunningly stealing his father's blessing both signify the priority of Jacob over Esau, his ability to lead, to win precedence and superiority despite his inferiority in physical, familial, and economic terms.

In Bitton's poem, the speaker shifts between the two identities of Jacob and Esau: he returns, tired, from the field, sells his birthright, and disgraces it just as Esau did, but unlike Esau, he does not win the stew. If Esau, the hunter, sold the birthright to satisfy his bodily needs and to satiate his hunger, here the speaker sells his birthright precisely to stay hungry and feverish. And if Jacob wore goat skins and his brother's clothes to win the birthright blessing (Genesis 27), here the speaker wears the figure of Esau to disgrace the birthright and reject it. The choice of the defeated side of the Edomite is understood as part of an act of separation and renouncement of the familial legacy and the patrilineal dynasty of Jacob, the one blessed to rule and master. The rejection of the stew is gradually understood as a rejection of any gift that the familial relation might grant: "And the only gruel I prepare / Is my life, / . . . / I will eat and drink by myself, / Get up, go / And despise" (the sequence of the lines restores the sequence of verbs in the biblical verse in Genesis 25:34: "and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright"). It is a willful renunciation of birthright, of control, of belonging, of assets and prosperity that are won by deception and violence. "The Ya'acov is dead," announces the speaker,

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3 Genesis 25:27–34 (King James Version).

the definite article suggesting that this is no private death but a general, collective death, related to the national aspect of the figure of Jacob—Israel.

The desertion into the figure of the unprivileged son reflects the violence and bloodshed involved in the life of ruling. It is Jacob's dynasty, the one that won the birthright, that was drenched in blood: "We are all red today." This leads the speaker to sever himself from the legacy of the parents—even in death ("No more parents' / Kaddish")—and to embark on a path of denouncing and despising it, a path that sanctifies failure, defeat, and the extinction of physical force. In economic terms, we can say that identifying with Esau's debasement of birthright means rejecting the blessing of abundance that Isaac gave Jacob and refusing the financial value of governing and ruling. This refusal is also manifested in the rejection of the economic "growth" promised in the passage from childhood to adulthood. Growth is not realized in the poem; instead, there is impoverishment and decomposition: "The millstone's powder / That opened fresh in my childhood / Is now only a body of mold, / A moss of bones." In temporal terms, he replaces the "positive," motivated trend toward the future with an undeveloping time, which moves, as if in circles, onto oneself ("digging," "drilling"), with no future prospects or reward.

The rejection of growth and economic strength is also well represented in the next poem in the collection, "My Brother" (Ahi), which portrays the figures of the speaker and his brother as two drugged up guys nursing their senile, wheelchair-bound grandmother. Here Bitton invents a compound word, *metapilim* (from *tapilim*, "parasites," and *metaplim*, "nursing"; I translate the neologism as "nurse"), suggesting a lack of hierarchy between caregivers and the needy old woman, an interdependence of degenerate beings.

אֲנַחְנוּ מְסֻמָּמִים שְׁנָתַיִם,
דּוֹגֶן לֹא הִתְגַּיֵּס—
אֲנִי גָּדוֹל מִמֶּנּוּ בְּעֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים,
הוּא מְדַלֵּג עַל הַפְּשָׁעִים שֶׁלִּי,
. . . .
אֲנַחְנוּ לֹא עוֹבְדִים, מְטַפִּילִים בְּסַבְתָּא
שֶׁמְּקַבֶּלֶת קִצְבָּה גְּדוֹלָה מִמִּשְׂרַד הַבִּטָּחוֹן—
שִׁלּוּמִים,
עַל שֶׁהִתְעַקְּשׁוּ לַהֲרֹג לָהּ אֶת הַבֵּן הַצָּעִיר—
בְּמִלְחָמָה קְטַנָּה שֶׁל שִׁשָּׁה יָמִים
. . . .
אֲנִי מַכִּיר סַבְתָּא טוּנִיסָאִית אַחַת
שֶׁסֵּרְבָה לְקַבֵּל אֶת הַקִּצְבָּה הַזֹּאת,
מֵהַמֶּמְשָׁלָה
בְּדִיּוּק כְּמוֹ מֵהַנָּאצִים.

אֲנַחְנוּ קוֹנִים מִזֶּה אֹכֶל וְחַשִׁישׁ,
עֲלוּבִים וּמְנֻוָּלִים כָּאֵלֶּה...

We're stoned for two years,
Dogan didn't enlist—
I'm ten years older than him
He skips my crimes
. . . .
We don't work, nurse Grandma
Who receives a great allowance from the Ministry of Defense—
Reparations,
For their insistence on killing her boy—
In a little war of six days
. . . .
I know one Tunisian grandma
Who refused to receive this allowance
From the government
Just like from the Nazis.
We use it to buy food and hashish,
So rotten and worthless…[4]

What is further emphasized is that the refusal of economic well-being is essentially a refusal of the national system, which demands the blood of young men to become stronger and organizes around this demand a whole array of reparations and compensations to create the appearance of a paid debt. The brothers who nurse their grandmother do not work. The speaker, the firstborn, defines military service as "a crime," and his younger brother does not enlist. They live on their grandmother's pension, determined to waste the "national currency" on perishable goods that keep them distanced from daily life. These two insist on refusing to join the economic game of expectations and their fulfillment. The contempt for the birthright of the first poem is doubled here in a continuous debasement of social and national norms, of the rules that demand that young men realize their masculine identity in military service, in productive work, in continuation of a paternal ancestry, and in the maintenance of the blood and money economy. Instead of this masculine legacy, the two are busy with nursing—conceived to be "feminine" work—and are subject to the laws of an alternative legacy, the one inherited from the grandmother, "Ina Dada," the great mother. In a way that refutes common expectations, this is no imagining of a great merciful mother who endows wisdom and inspiration to her grandsons but is an encounter with a tiny figure of a grandmother, shriveled and dying, who suffers memory loss and "commands for us a life of ghosts."[5]

In her book *Return of the Lost Voice*, about Mizrahi (Sephardic Jewish) identity in Israel and the experience of immigration, Haviva Pedaya writes that the third generation of Mizrahi poets returns to the figures of the grandfather and grandmother—"as in Ya'acov Bitton's astonishing poems"—as opposed to second-generation poets (like Erez Bitton and Amira Hess), who were influenced by the paradigmatic Zionist oedipal rebellion and looked for a father figure to support the establishment of their identity:

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4 Bitton, *Ina Dada*, 11–12.

5 Ibid.

This bypassing of "the father," namely "the name of the father" (the law), is more symbolic and spiritual, and it allows the self a greater freedom to shape its identity; that is due to the nature of the relations between grandfather and grandson: one has not yet entered the middle of his life and the other has already left it. In such relations, the mind is less encumbered by the systems that put pressure on the self to shape its identity. In terms of immigration, the return to the grandmother or grandfather skips the middle generation—the mute generation—and goes back to the living moment of "the long memory," the moment before the Mizrahi subject was assembled and placed as a piece in the jigsaw puzzle of the Israeli melting pot.[6]

In my view, Pedaya's description illustrates just how far Bitton is from using the return to the grandmother to shape one's identity and rehabilitate an original and alternative memory. Contrary to Pedaya's restorative description, Bitton chooses to go back to the grandmother at the moments of her collapse, death, and burial. Her figure does not represent giving and handing down a legacy of memory. It is a legacy "with no teeth," that of a demented figure, whose presence in the poems is almost entirely corporeal, slowly rotting and dying. Contact with her does not serve to found any identity, but rather the opposite—it is a collapse of the very possibility of establishing an identity.

Earlier in her book Pedaya writes that the mother figure is in charge of the systems of oral memory, which has a critical role in cultures of immigration. The mother's legacy is "dialogic, talking, and stimulating to talk" and becomes a source of strength and a representation of the abandoned homeland:

With the immigration from the great mother—which can be defined as a rift from the original territory—comes the rift from the mother tongue.... The son is the one to cope with the question of the referentiality of the absent, and he begins his journey of personal identity, which often includes this aspect of the return, territorialization, which is always experienced as the return of the mother—the mother tongue, the motherland, the mother's memories. The mother is the default that continually holds the imaginary and the symbolic, the territories of the real lost mother.[7]

The uniqueness of Bitton's poetic stance is sharpened by Pedaya's emphasis on the search for a lost territory in Mizrahi poetry. Bitton simply does not fit in this picture: in his poetry, the great mother represents no territorial option and no continuity of memory—she appears in her dementia, muteness, and disintegration.[8] In *Notebooks of Defeat* he writes about her:

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[6] Haviva Pedaya, *Shivato shel ha-qol ha-gole* [Return of the lost voice] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2016), 128. All translations from Pedaya's book are mine.

[7] Ibid., 101.

[8] We can recall, in this context, Sigal Naor Perelman's essay on Ya'acov Bitton's's first poems, where she criticized Pedaya's call for a revolution of the self-expressed in Hebrew poetry. Pedaya argued for rejecting the so-called universal, abstract, displaced "I" of Nathan Zach's poetry and for creating an "I" based on continuous time, language, and memory, which would express spiritual depth and a sense of being. See Haviva Pedaya, "Higi'a ha-zman lomar ani aheret ba-shira ha-'ivrit" [It is time to say "I" differently in Hebrew poetry], *Haaretz*, May 3, 2006, May 10, 2006, reprinted in Pedaya, *Shivato shel ha-qol ha-gole*, 104–21. Naor Perelman claimed that Bitton's poetry does not allow a journey to the past and memory and always locates itself in the horrific present. See Sigal Naor Perelman, "Yoter mishkal shel hove ladvarim" [More weight of the present], *Mita'am* 10 (June 2007): 52–60.

זָכַרְתִּי רַק כְּתָמִים
שֶׁטָּבְעָה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ מֶשֶׁךְ מֵאָה שָׁנִים
בִּבְשַׂר אִשָּׁה אַחַת זְקֵנָה
כָּל הַיְּקוּם הֶעָצוּם הַזֶּה חָג
סְבִיב זְקֵנָה אַחַת
וּכְשֶׁהִיא תָּמוּת
טֶפַח אָבָק מֵעַרְפִּלִּית אַחַת לֹא יָנוּעַ מִמַּסְלוּלוֹ
לִתְמֹךְ בְּרֹאשׁ הָאָבֵל.

I only remembered stains
The sun coined for a hundred years
In the flesh of one old woman
All of this mighty universe circles
Around one old woman
And when she is dead
Not a single speck of dust from a nebula will move off course
To support the grieving head.[9]

The stains are the memory of the body, of the flesh that registers time and events but will perish, and with it everything dissipates. Stains are also what erases or hides things from view. The address to the universe testifies not only to the hyperbolic stance of the great mother in Bitton's world but, more than that, to the absence of any actual geographic or territorial reference point. Later in the book he declares: "all of yesterday's inheritances are vandalized / fallen."[10] The vandalized inheritance is another face of the renunciation of birthright and belonging discussed earlier, a rejection of the prosperity promised by a patrilineal heritage, initiating a legacy of hunger and defeat.

In *Ina Dada*, the economy the speaker portrays is one of loss and refers to the disruption of continuity, to downfall and extinction:

אֲנִי מַחֲזִיק בַּיָּד אֶת הַגַּרְעִינִים
וְחוֹשֵׁב לִשְׂרֹף אוֹתָם
שֶׁתָּמוּת הַהֶמְשֵׁכִיּוּת שֶׁל הַצְּמָחִים
הַבִּיוֹלוֹגְיָה וְהַמַּיִם.
הֵיכָן הֶהָדָר שֶׁבְּכָל זֶה?

I hold the seeds in the palms of my hands,
And think of burning them
Death to the continuity of plants
Biology and water.
Where is the glory of it all?[11]

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9 Ya'acov Bitton, *Mahbarot ha-tvusa* [Notebooks of defeat] (Tel Aviv: Helicon, 2013), 29.
10 Ibid., 59.
11 Bitton, *Ina Dada*, 13.

Nursing the grandmother on her deathbed, feeding her, washing her feet with lemon, and witnessing her gradual withdrawal into death compel the speaker to choose "unremaining." In a poem named "Underwear" (Tahtonim) after the grandmother's death the two brothers wear her underwear, which serves as a grotesque parody of "inheritance" (as if she had nothing to bequeath but her underwear). Asked about this poem in an interview, Bitton said: "The underwear is a small thing. It's my materialism. I am 33 years old. I have nothing. I've got this. There was a person and she is no longer here. Truly, I have nothing."[12] The reality portrayed in Bitton's poetry reflects and confronts material poverty, both personal and social. Bitton, who speaks openly about his economic hardships, deliberately presents a political stance that refuses to participate in the economic cycle: "I am trying to write a little bit about the horror here. I don't earn twenty thousand shekels a month. It is a political decision, in a state whose economy relies on American weapons and money. Economy is a closed system: if I earn twenty thousand, someone else lacks it."[13]

Wearing the grandmother's undergarments is also an instance of recycling, which violates the economic logic of consumption, growth, and prosperity.[14] At the same time, it is an act that fuses a deliberate regression with a heartrending identification with the lost body of the great mother, expressing a wish to replace her, to be her, and to fill the space left by her death. Wearing her clothes is a conscious concession of masculinity, whose characteristics are recognized throughout the collection as criminal and worthy of contempt:

<div dir="rtl">

לֹא אִכְפַּת לִי סַבְתָּא
לִשְׂרוֹף אֶת הָאִשּׁוּר הַמִּדַלְדָּל וְאֶת הַשַּׂק
שֶׁהִצְנַעְתִּי בּוֹ פְּשָׁעִים שֶׁלִּי

</div>

I don't mind, Grandma,
Burning the meager certificate and the sack
Where I've hidden my crimes[15]

This cross-dressing performs a symbolic castration, where the criminal masculine "sack" becomes a "pocket of empty air":

<div dir="rtl">

אֲנַחְנוּ לוֹבְשִׁים אֶת הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים שֶׁלָּךְ
סַבְתָּא
וְכָכָה עִם כִּיס הָאֲוִיר הָרֵיק גַּם נִשָׁאֵר

</div>

We wear your underwear,
Grandma,
And so with this pocket of empty air we'll remain[16]

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12 Daliah Karpel, "Shirei savta" [Grandma's poems], *Haaretz*, August 8, 2007.

13 Ibid.

14 I thank Adriana Jacobs for this notion.

15 Bitton, *Ina Dada*, 17.

16 Ibid.

In this manner, wearing the grandmother's clothes only emphasizes the gap that no longer can be crossed. The space remains, knowingly, an empty sack. The Hebrew word for "underwear" (תחתונים) also means "lower," "underworldly" (vs. upper or heavenly). The choice of this item as the inheritance is therefore also a willful renunciation of any spiritual pretension, another rejection of the consolation or significance that might be granted by tradition and heritage.

Within this bankruptcy of all values, writing too becomes a worthless act. In the poem "Ina Dada," tracking the death of his grandmother at the hospital, the speaker utterly cancels the value of his poetry:

דַּף הַמָּסָךְ רֵיק—נוּ הָעֵט הֶעָלוּב
שֶׁטִּפַּחְתִּי שָׁנִים
תְּנוּ לִי אוֹתוֹ, מָה תּוּכַל לְהוֹסִיף?
אֵיזוֹ גְּאֻלַּת דְּיוֹ הִבְטַחְתָּ בַּפִּתּוּלִים?
תִּמָּחֶה כָּל הַשִּׁירָה, כָּרֵת לַמָּשִׁיחַ, לִמְשִׁיכַת הָאוֹתִיּוֹת הַמִּתְחַזּוֹת
חָשַׁדְתִּי תָּמִיד שֶׁהֵן הֵן הַתּוֹלָעִים הָאֲמִתִּיּוֹת

The screen page is empty—well, this worthless pen
That I nourished for years
Give it to me, what can you add?
What redemption of ink did you promise in your convulsions?
May all poetry be obliterated, *Careth* to the messiah, to the lure of the deceptive letters,
I've always suspected that they are the real worms[17]

Nevertheless, we cannot forget that this cancellation of poetry occurs within the poetic mode itself. Thus, Bitton paradoxically declares the end of poetry within a poem: expresses its cancellation while canceling its expression. These poetic statements create a unique temporality that is "stuck" in time, retreating and progressing all the while. It is a temporality that rejects the concepts of growth and prosperity and that denies the value of poetry and expression. In a certain sense, it recalls how Franco Moretti describes poetry as the temporal opposite of prose,[18] or how Joshua Clover, following Moretti, describes it: "Smoke always leads to fire, and not vice versa. Poetry denaturalizes this motion, reveals the operation concealed beneath. It equilibrates reading's forward with its reverse."[19]

This, however, does not prevent the poet from echoing the horrors and crimes of his time. The process of his grandmother's deterioration, dying, and burial becomes a total denunciation of the values of the nation-state and the secular tradition of its poetry. *Ina Dada* is a fierce indictment against the violence perpetrated by capital and the humiliation of man and exposes "the horror of being human" (the closing line of the poem "My Brother") as the underpinnings of the enlightened face of a developed, technological, and militaristic Israeli society.

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[17] Ibid., 14.

[18] "Verse, versus: there is a pattern that turns around and comes back: there is a symmetry, and symmetry always suggests permanence, that's why monuments are symmetrical. But prose is not symmetrical, and this immediately creates a sense of impermanence and irreversibility.... The text has an orientation, it leans forwards." See Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 162.

[19] Joshua Clover, "Retcon: Value and Temporality in Poetics," in "Financialization and the Culture Industry," special issue, *Representations* 126, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 20.

Behind the choice to despise all assets lies the brutality of capital, which Bitton insists on exposing. In the poem "Leibowitz Is Dead" (Leibovits met), the dark predictions of the proph-et-like professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–94) are realized after his death:

מוּלִי
הָעֵגֶל קָם
הַזָּהָב שֶׁל יְרוּשָׁלַיִם
מֻקָּז מֵאַפְרִיקָה וְעוֹלֶה מְעֻבָּד מִנָּיוּ יוֹרְק

Before me
The calf erected
The gold of Jerusalem
Venesected in Africa and ascends, processed, from New York[20]

Bitton writes about the "Barbaric north of America" (that, in another poem, "hides electricity inside chairs" in order to kill men):

זוֹ תַּרְבּוּת הַתַּעֲשִׂיָּה הָרֶכֶב וְהַבֶּנְזִין
בּוֹעֲלֵי נִדָּה מְנֻמָּסִים.
הָאֵל קַפּוֹנֶה נוֹלַד בִּבְּרוּקְלִין
הַסּוֹכְנוּת הַיְּהוּדִית יָרְשָׁה אֶת כָּל הַסִּיצִילְיָאנִים שֶׁלּוֹ
וּפָתְחָה גַּם כָּאן סְנִיפִים לְהַלְבָּנָה
מְהִירָה,
כֻּלָּם מְכַבְּסִים, כֻּלָּם.

This is the culture of industry, cars, and oil
Polite Niddah fuckers.
Capone the God was born in Brooklyn
The Jewish Agency inherited all of his Sicilians
And opened branches here for a quick
Laundering,
Everybody launders, everyone.[21]

In this poem, along with others like "Caracas," industrialized capital is portrayed as a kind of modern Sodom, a celebration of progress and filth, violence and entrepreneurship, where men walk like erased shadows:

נְצִיבֵי מֶלַח בִּסְדוֹם חַיִּים יוֹתֵר מֵאִתָּנוּ בְּעָרֵי
הַמְּשִׁתָּנוֹת וְהַמִּסְכְּנוֹת שֶׁלָּנוּ
תֵּל אָבִיב, חֵיפָה וִירוּשָׁלַיִם.

Pillars of salt have more life in them than we do, in our
Urinals and treasure cities
Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem.[22]

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20 Bitton, *Ina Dada*, 29.
21 Ibid., 30.
22 Ibid., 36.

Despite the modes of self-effacement and self-impoverishment that Bitton applies throughout his poems, one cannot mistake the voice that emerges from these poems of condemnation and lamentation—a voice that echoes the apocalyptic prophecies of the biblical prophets and therefore stands in a position of prominence, as the one who sees things clearly and warns his community, even judges it severely. However, as in "Birthrights," prominence is never a simple matter in Bitton's poetry.

Seemingly, in these poems Bitton firmly joins the established tradition of "the watchman unto the house of Israel," or what Dan Miron calls "the pseudoprophetic poem" in modern Hebrew poetry from the late nineteenth century onward (e.g., the work of H. N. Bialik, Zalman Shneur, Uri Tzvi Greenberg, and other canonical poets).[23] In Bitton's poetry, too, we can locate the personae of a preacher and a messenger, a similar sense of prophetic grandiosity, in a rich figurative style that expresses enormous rage, frustration, and rebuke.

Miron ties the emergence of the prophetic mode to the replacement of Enlightenment ideology with that of Zionism, "channeling the overflowing emotionalism and cumulative hyperbole prescribed by sentimentalist poetics towards Zionist and socialist issues."[24] But with the establishment of the State of Israel, when Zionism had achieved its declared goal, Miron argues, Israeli poetry abandoned the tradition. The new poets of the fifties signaled the impossibility of the prophetic position. Thus, Yehuda Amichai presented himself as "a penniless prophet," "as a definition of a new poetic agenda, which left no room for grandiloquence and visionarism."[25]

Hamutal Tsamir argues that the prophetic mode did not vanish entirely from the poetry of the Statehood Generation (Dor ha-medina) but persisted as a kind of "living dead": rejecting and resisting the prophetic stance seem to have been a way of maintaining it through a repeated negation of it, making it present while marking its absence. "More than disappearing, dying or becoming unnecessary, the prophet is needed now as the one against whom the new Israeli subject defines himself."[26] Tsamir shows that the prophetic vision of the poetry of the Statehood Generation engages with the general public, relinquishes the quest for a view from "above and beyond," negates the prophetic vision, and loses the unique position granted by prophecy. The poets of the fifties move from the doubly prophetic position of poets like Bialik, who stood both "outside" and "above" the nation while expressing its inner essence. The new stance is located within society, a position from which the poets may gaze horizontally at the life of "simple" people. But from within this crowd, these poets construct their personal but semi-universal stance, which seeks to remain aloof from the collective and to hide their active part in it.

However, in my view, Bitton's pseudoprophetic mode does not strive to express the "inner essence" of the nation, no more than his emphatic aloofness from the collective denies his being part of it. Bitton, whose poetry wishes to distance itself from the national order and its economic mechanisms, creates a stance that moves further away both from the prophetic mode of the

23 See Dan Miron, *H. N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

24 Ibid., 19.

25 Ibid., 45.

26 Hamutal Tsamir, "Ha-meshorer ha-navi ke-met-hai be-shirat dor ha-medina" [The poet-prophet as a living dead in the poetry of the Statehood Generation], in *Itot shel shinuy: Sifruyot yehudiot ba-tkufa ha-modernit—Kovets ma'amarim likhvodo shel Dan Miron* [Times of change: Jewish literature in the modern era—Essays in honor of Dan Miron], ed. Gidi Nevo, Michal Arbell, and Michael Gluzman (Be'er Sheva: Ben-Gurion Institute and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2008), 284.

poetry of the Hebrew revival and from the secularized ironic mode of Statehood Generation poetry. Instead, he projects the double and paradoxical position of the prophet, "the watchman unto the house of Israel," onto a new figure that he inserts into the poetic arena: the priest.

In a panel about art and periphery at the conference "Thoughts from the South" held at Sapir College (May 18, 2016), Bitton introduced his unique concept of the poet as priest:

> I stand up because I want to talk about faith, not about art. Nothing is more peripheral (or Southern, no matter how you call it) than the Jew. The state of the believing Jew—most of the people sitting here belong to this small, forgotten, elitist, and misunderstood religion—is calibrated by one state, which is the state of defeat. I do not wish to say anything about Israeli art, which is a reproduction, poor, mostly embarrassing reproductions, of what we call center. . . . So we can talk about art, or we can talk about faith. This certain Jewish state, which has been given to the people, is highly intensified when it comes to the priests: the priests, its most prestigious persons. These are the people who receive the strangest commandment ever written, and, of course, not written by man. And the commandment is "You shall have no inheritance among them." "Them" means the people of Israel. "You shall have no inheritance among them; I am your inheritance." When the Lord gives this commandment, we know that there is no inheritance. There is nothing. So this calibration of defeat that is presented to the Jew, and intensively presented to the most excellent of them all, those who can bear being defeated, like those in love, that delicate, always vulnerable state, this state is the only one we can call peripheral. And in Hebrew literature as a whole, such states are only isolated, tiny, almost nonexistent.[27]

In these words, Bitton turns a divine order regarding the priesthood class into an interpretive key of the state of defeat he presents in his books (Numbers 18:20: "And the LORD said to Aaron, You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel"). It is a deterritorialized state, with no inheritance outside the spiritual one. Notably, defeat is understood, not as a weakness, but as a burden that demands special traits and a capacity to endure; only the chosen few, the priests, possess those qualities. Bitton's words, of course, have a clear political implication as well, for "no inheritance" (אין נחלה) refers to the settlements (התנחלויות) as part of the horrific vision depicted in his poetry. More than that, it is a characteristic of the poet, who is portrayed as one who has no wish for an estate, a heritage, or any material assets. He has no property, no territory, and fixes his conscious and transient place in the periphery, on the borderline between communal life and willful solitude. Such a position has a lot in common with the concept of the Jew as "pariah" suggested by Hannah Arendt (following Bernard Lazare), or as "conscious pariahs," especially as the opposite of the rich and achieving "parvenus." Arendt recognizes the essential kinship of the pariah to the poet—both excluded from society and never quite at home in the world. Their self-expulsion is always politically charged:

> No one fares worse . . . than those bold spirits who tried to make of the emancipation of the Jews that which it really should have been—an admission of Jews *as Jews* to the ranks of humanity, rather than a permit to ape the gentiles or an opportunity to play the parvenu. . . . These men yet achieved liberty and popularity by the sheer force of imagination. As individuals they started an emancipation of their own, of their own hearts and brains.[28]

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27 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pn6tG5Rr0n0.

28 Hannah Arendt, "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition," in *Reflections on Literature and Culture: Hannah Arendt*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 275–76.

Bitton's stance of displacement and lack of geographical inheritance does not imply remoteness or marginality. The poet is a priest, from the select, thin layer of the class of god worshipers, ministers of ritual, the mediating link between the people and their god, those who dedicate themselves to the strict demands of holy service. It is striking though that of all these functions and traits, which certainly bear on his concept of the role of the poet, Bitton chooses to emphasize the poverty of the priest: his lack of any assets or inheritance, more so than any other feature, is what separates him from the crowd. The poet-as-priest analogy is a prominent feature of *Notebooks of Defeat*. The book repeatedly transforms the speaker into the figure of the priest in the desert, like Aaron, and sometimes the priest-prophet, like Moses. It depicts the urban, daily, contemporary family unit as a modern incarnation of the ritual orders in the Tent of Congregation, with its Tabernacle's instruments and the altar for the rituals of sacrifice.[29] But like Moses, he pitches his tent "outside the camp" (Exodus 33:7):

מֵעוֹלָם לֹא הִצְלַחְתִּי לִשְׁרוֹת בֵּין אֲנָשִׁים
לֹא מָצָאתִי חַיִּים בְּקַטְנוּנִיּוּתָם הַקַּפְּדָנִית
אַךְ גַּם לֹא לָקַחְתִּי חֵלֶק בְּיָפְיָם (רַגְלַי יְחֵפוֹת)
הִתְבַּצַּרְתִּי בְּשֶׁטַח הֶפְקֵר מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה—לָכוּד בַּלָּשׁוֹן
הַמְפֹרֶזֶת
מְיַחֵל לְאוֹתָהּ לַחְלוּחִית וּמְתַעֵב אֶת שְׁרִיקָתָהּ הָרְווּיָה,
חִפַּשְׂתִּי מְקוֹם קְבוּרָה....

I could never exist among people
I could not find life in their meticulous pettiness
But I also did not share in their beauty (my feet are bare)
I entrenched myself in a no-man's-land outside the camp—trapped in this demilitarized language
Longing for that moisture but abhorring its saturated whistle,
I looked for a burial place....[30]

The figure of Moses pitching the Tent of Congregation outside the camp merges the functions of the prophet and the priest. The tent was the site for the priests' ritual holy worship, but it was also the place of revelation, of an encounter between God and his prophet. Bitton portrays the position of the priest vis-à-vis the double function of Moses as both a prophet and a priest and ignores the profound confrontation between the two figures in Jewish thought, as two opposing aspects of leadership: the spiritual one of the prophet and the practical and procedural one of the priest.[31]

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29 *Notebooks of Defeat* opens with presenting the speaker as a late incarnation of Aaron, the priest in the Tabernacle: "Early in the morning when I tend the lamps / and the altar is founded upon me" (8; and see Exodus 30:7: "Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps"). The book is full of allusions to the instruments of the Tabernacle (candles, incense, curtain, copper sink, altar of offering, etc.), to the ritual of sacrifice, and to the binding (*aqedah*). The significance of sacrifice and binding in Bitton's poetry demands a separate and profound study.

30 Bitton, *Mahbarot ha-tvusa*, 58.

31 The confrontation derives from the basic difference between these two functions: while the role of the priest is to perform the holy worship strictly, accurately, and diligently, the role of the prophet is regarded as the opposite, to bring new messages from God, to destabilize, and to make a change. The prophet's charismatic and

Grafting the image of the prophet onto the image of the priest presents the state of poverty, of "no inheritance," and the location "outside the camp" as inherent and essential features of the poetic and the prophetic position. This position subverts not only the traditional figure of "the watchman unto the house of Israel" but also the self-denigrating stance of the poets of the Statehood Generation. Amichai, despite claiming to be a "penniless prophet," "comes home at noon / to eat and rest and, in the evening, sleep." He gets "an annual vacation and sabbatical years / and soul insurance and a pension for old age" and finds himself "with everyday people / who have children and jobs and family cares / and household chores."[32] But Bitton, the priest-prophet-poet, "could never exist among people" and removes himself not only from the wealth and prosperity of the master class but also from the territory of the mundane household of modest fees, pension, vacations, and insurance.

Again, the movement of Bitton's poetry is a back-and-forth motion, between his position as the senior, or chosen, son—delegate of his family and of his community, the one with a social or spiritual mission—and his forfeiture and debasement of the very stance of the emissary/seer/chosen/firstborn. It is a constant motion of foiling oneself, stressing not only the poet's priesthood but also his unsuitability for the role, his incompetence at being the currency of his community. While Amichai emphasizes the limitations of the prophetic mode of the poet, he presents himself as a true representative of "everyday people." Bitton, in stark contrast, highlights the very falsehood of such a stance. This occurs at the linguistic level as well: *Notebooks of Defeat* accentuates dense, sometimes hermetic language, which hinders circulation and precise translation, and it prefers misunderstanding, and refuses to serve as a representative agent of its culture and its community. In the poem "The Writer's Salvations" (Ge'ulot ha-kotev) he declares himself to be a false messiah:

<div dir="rtl">

אֵין שְׁאֵלָה בְּדָבָר הֱיוֹתִי מְשִׁיחַ שֶׁקֶר

הַשְּׁאֵלָה—מַהִי הָאֱמֶת שֶׁנִּמְסְרָה—

גַּם הִיא נִסָּיוֹן סְרָק

. . . .

הַתְּשׁוּקָה יוֹצֶרֶת חֲדַר מַרְאוֹת

שֶׁגַּם בַּאֲשֶׁר תִּשָּׁבֵרְנָה כֻּלָּן

יִהְיֶה זֶה עֲדַיִן פְּסֵיפָס עַצְמִי

וְכָל חֵלֶק לוֹכֵד רַק אֶת גָּלוּתְךָ וּבְשָׂרֶךָ.

. . . .

נִשְׁלַחְתָּ אֶל הַמַּרְתֵּף לְהָבִיא גְּזִיר עֵשֶׁן

בְּדַל אַחֲרוֹן וְקָרוֹשׁ

אַךְ יָדְךָ רַכָּה

מָסְרָה חָלָב לַתִּינוֹק

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stirring personality contrasts with the conservative, pragmatic personality of the priest. Ahad Ha''am (Asher Zvi Ginsberg), for example, compared the two characters' attitudes toward reality: while the priest represents reality, the prophet resists and fights it. Ahad Ha'am, "Priest and Prophet" (1893), in *Selected Essays*, trans. Leon Simon (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society in America, 1912), 125–38. See also Aviezer Ravitzky's essay on the figure of the prophet in Jewish thought: "Navi mul hevrato ba-mahshava ha-yehudit ha-hadasha: Idea u-metzi'ut ba-hagutam shel Ahad Ha'am, Buber ve-Harav Kook" [A prophet against his society in modern Hebrew thought: Idea and human reality in the writings of Ahad Ha'am, Buber, and HaRav Kook], *BiTfutsot ha-gola* [Jewish diaspora] 81–82 (1976): 69–80.

32 Translated by Robert Alter. Yehuda Amichai, *The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, ed. Robert Alter (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 383.

וְנִסְפְּגָה בְּרֵיחוֹ
חָזַרְתָּ
בְּיָדַיִם רֵיקוֹת.
חָזַרְתָּ בְּיָדֶיךָ.

There's no question, I am a false messiah
The question—which truth was delivered—
Is also a futile attempt
. . . .
Desire creates a room full of mirrors
And even if they were all to break
It would remain a mosaic of the self
Where every piece captures only your exile and your flesh.
. . . .
You were sent to the basement to bring a smoky shred
A last congealed piece
But your soft hand
Handed milk to the baby
And absorbed his odor
You came back
Empty-handed.
You came back in your own hands.[33]

In an interview with Eli Eliyahu, Bitton said: "Regarding literature, I always feel like a swindler, because you write with splendor about things, but eventually I feel that you have no strength to live this way. The seed is there but you feel feeble, luring others to something it is doubtful you fully maintain."[34] Bitton emphasizes that poetry is a "bad check" that cannot cover its own costs. This is another rejection of the function of poetry as currency. He denies not only his ability to represent his community or himself but also the very status of language and poetry as signifiers with adequate referents.

The poet's stance is therefore one of a foretold defeat. His mission is paradoxical—he comes to document the sinking of his world and to warn against it, to echo the voices dying around him, to reflect their dreams as if in a room full of mirrors, and to shatter this very room, for all the images it shows are false. But from the beginning, the poet cannot function as currency and be the representative coin of his community because his language is bound to express himself alone, and even then an insurmountable gap remains between language and the experience of the world. Rather than carry a torch and lead the people of the camp, he is sent away to the basement to get a smoky shred, a last congealed piece, but his hands are soft and empty, melting in the face of the softness of existence and the weakness of a tiny baby. His hands cannot carry anyone but himself, and in the end, he is sentenced to idiosyncrasy, to the onetime-ness that isolates him, removing him further from the economic practices of exchange, transformation, and circularity in language.

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33 Bitton, *Mahbarot ha-tvusa*, 77, 84.

34 Eli Eliyahu, "Ha-meshorer Ya'acov Bitton masbir lama hu meshiah sheker" [The poet Ya'acov Bitton explains why he is a false messiah], *Haaretz*, July 7, 2013.

Nevertheless, the poet does not mourn his defeat or the economy of loss in which he lives. For him, this is the delicate and continuous condition of life. He does not beautify it in any way— it is dark, decaying, and spasmodic—and yet, it is the only condition in which he can exist and write and find light and hope:

לְהַגִּיעַ אֶל הַבַּיִת עוֹד אֶפְשָׁר

מִכִּבְשַׁן הַחֲזִית שָׁם הָעֵץ הַשָּׁחוֹר בּוֹקֵעַ
וּמֵצֵל עַל פָּנֵינוּ עֲוִית

גַּם מֵהֶחָצֵר אֶפְשָׁר לָבוֹא
בַּבֹּקֶר בַּבֹּקֶר
בְּהָטִיבְךָ
אֶת הַנֵּרוֹת
לִנְהֹר אֶל הַמַּפָּלָה הַזֹּאת

Reaching home is still possible

From the front furnace, where the black tree spurts
And casts a spasm on our faces

You can also come from the yard
Early in the morning
When you tend to the lamps
To light up this collapse[35]

And in a poem dedicated to Paul Celan:

שָׁעָה נְטוּלַת זְמַן, שׁוּבִי
אֶל סַד הָרוּחַ הַמְאַכֵּל, הַדּוֹחֵק, שֶׁל לִבֵּנוּ
לֹא מְאַחָר הָאָדָם
בְּאוֹתָהּ מַפָּלָה נִזְרַע   הָאֹפֶק

Timeless hour, come back
To the corrosive, pressing wind splint of our heart
Man is not too late
Sown in that very defeat   the horizon.[36]

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35 Bitton, *Mahbarot ha-tvusa*, 21.
36 Ibid., 22.