

“Yad va-Shem” (The Name) by A. Megged

Moshe Pelli

University of Central Florida, Orlando

Megged's short story is often included in anthologies of contemporary Israeli prose. The availability of the story in English translation made it even more attractive to many university instructors of contemporary Hebrew literature (especially in a general literature course for non-majors) because of its simplicity, and its direct portrayal of a pressing social and psychological problem prevalent in Israel. Of course, the problem is not unique to Israel; it is rather universal. However, Megged gave it a contemporary “Jewish” touch.

The universal element of a clash between and among the various generations is ever present in our life, and it is often selected as a topic of literature. It is not the classical “fathers and sons” conflict, which is a popular theme, but a clash of three generations; and perhaps even a fourth generation is involved.

The issues are very serious: it is not whether to remember the past or not, but *how* to remember it. Is it relevant to relive the past, as demanded by grandfather Ziskind, or is Yehuda right in saying that in Israel a new nation had been born, a new breed, which has completely severed its ties to its past.

Megged depicts the issues very cleverly, enhancing the problem, and making it very difficult to side with either one. We sympathize with Ziskind, but we know that he is wrong in demanding that the present should be a replica of the past. We understand *why* he desires it; we know that that's what he wants, but we also know that he cannot help it. Aside from living in the past and constantly reliving it, the grandfather is portrayed as someone who has not adjusted to the climate or the mentality of Israel. No one can be called Mendele in Israel and face reality and contemporary society without creating some incongruity. Ziskind is indeed one such incongruity by his presence, his existence and his demands. He wants to multiply this incongruity by forcing it on his family.

Yet, to remember the past by just naming a child after the past is quite superficial. Ziskind will be very happy with the token reference to the past because his general inclination, as much as could be portrayed in a short story, is superficial. We are not given to understand that Ziskind has got any profound concept of Judaism and the Jews. He does not demand that Yehuda continue the golden chain of Judaism.

Neither is he portrayed as representing traditional Judaism by and in himself.

But neither does Yehuda.

When compared to the old lady in Hazaz's "The Ring and the Canopy," Ziskind comes out rather pale and two dimensional.

"The Name" is a story of decline and loss. All represented generations in the story manifest this trend. Rachel, too, experiences the decline when her 'home' had disintegrated upon the death of her husband. It is not the destruction in the heels of the Holocaust, but the decline of Judaism in the modern times. Ossip still knew Hebrew and was attached to the Judaic sources. Mendele was indeed a genius, but what was he Jewish-wise? We are not told. Nevertheless, Ziskind sees in him the epitome of the Jewish people.

Indeed, Ra'aya's baby seems to be an orphan. . . .