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Visit to Aunt Zlata: Reading a Scene from *Ve-hu ha-or* (And This Is the Light, 1946) by Leah Goldberg

In the summer of 1931, twenty-year-old Nora Krieger, who studies archaeology in Berlin, travels to Kaunas (Kovnah), then capital of Lithuania, to spend the semester break with her family. She stays with her mother Esther and her aunt Lisa, while her father, traumatized by his war experiences and mentally ill, lives separately and is looked after by a Russian family. Although her parents are divorced, the father is still a major source of heartache to Nora and her family; and so is the stigma of mental illness in the family. Early during Nora's vacation, an old friend of her parents, Albert Arin, comes to visit the family for the first time after having left for the United States twenty-five years ago. Nora befriends Arin, who is her father's age, and falls in love with him. After a few days that bring Arin and the family closer together, the man just disappears, all of a sudden, and never comes back. It remains unclear where he went, or what happened to him. After a while, the young woman receives a letter from his worried daughter, who lives in Los Angeles, and learns that Arin, as well, suffers from a mental illness. The novel explores Nora's feelings, thoughts, and doubts about her family, her affection for Arin, her Jewish European identity, her fear of having inherited her father's illness, and her plans for the future, all the way until the end of the holidays. She returns to Berlin, but not without seeing her father first.

This is the basic plot of *Ve-hu ha-or* (And This Is the Light, 1946) by Leah Goldberg (**fig. 1**). The novel can be read as a coming-of-age story, in which the protagonist must make some unusual existential decisions: on her use of language and a country to live in, but, most importantly, on a way to interpret and deal with the mental health issues in her family. Inspired by Goldberg's own family history, fear of mental illness is a central motif of the novel and discussed in the present paper as the decisive factor in a pivotal question, whether to fight an illness or a political system, determining Nora's and her entire generation's future.

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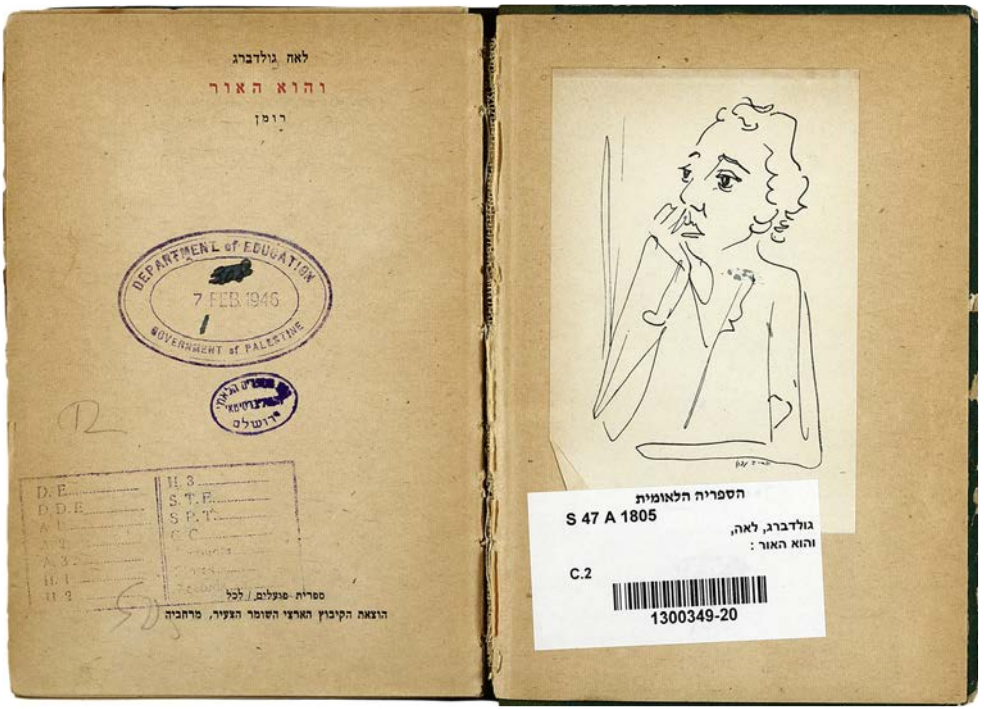

Fig. 1: Leah Goldberg's *Ve-hu ha-or*, published in the Sifriyat po'alim (The Workers' Library) in 1946, with a drawing of the writer by Arieh Navon.

During her time back home, Nora reluctantly visits her other aunt, Zlata, a widow and seriously ill. For Nora, it is a difficult but necessary visit to a woman nearing her end. Aunt Zlata's world is very different not only from that of her cosmopolitan guest, an ambitious young woman who pays for her own studies in Western Europe to become a researcher, possibly in Israel, but also from the world of her mother Esther and aunt Lisa, and their secular Jewish friends in Kaunas. Aunt Zlata, once a modern woman just like them, surrenders in her sickness to the old Jewish ways, which leads to her growing isolation from the rest of the family and society. With disgust, Nora describes her impressions of the building, in which the widow lives:

> "That smell on the stairs! That mixture of smells of dying fish, rot, dust, and rags that hadn't been aired in months; that smell of Jewish corridors, of pale Jewish children, who didn't know soap and water; that stench of unwashed dishes and leftovers of Sabbath dinners, and the choking air of sealed apartments whose windows were shut both summer and winter."[1]

1 Lea Goldberg, And This Is the Light, transl. by Barbara Harshav, with an introduction and afterword by Nili Scharf Gold, New Milford, Conn., 2011, 105.

On her way to Aunt Zlata's apartment, Nora meets two neighbors, a "masculine woman,"[2] who, as the reader finds out later, is among the "unpleasant witches" surrounding Aunt Zlata since her bereavement, as well as her son. Nora rushes past them, depicting them as follows:

> "There was a strange beauty in those eyes, in the coarse red face. An upsetting, misleading beauty that was somehow depressing and shameful. The dead uncle used to call that neighbor by some strange Sholem Aleichem name. 'Chemeritsa'—Nora remembered and lowered her head at the heavy look. And behind her, the woman's voice rang out as she explained to her stupid son the purpose of Nora's visit in that house, 'To visit a sick woman she's going, the sick woman on the second floor!'"[3]

The neighbor's disparaging nickname, *chemeritsa*, comes from a toxic plant (veratrum) that is, indeed, mentioned by Sholem Aleichem in *Motl Peysi dem khazns* (Motl, Peysi the Cantor's Son) as one of the ingredients of the mouse poison that Motl's older brother produces. When the poison business fails, his friend shoves the book with all his business ideas into a fire, and *chemeritsa* is the only word that is still readable amid the flames. But the word is not only a reference to Sholem Aleichem and his shtetl stories, but to the whole world of misery, failure, and toxicity of fire, and the resistance to it. Moreover, there is Nora's perception of Chemeritsa's beauty as "depressing and shameful," and shame is a recurring theme throughout the book. With these connotations in mind, the neighbor's loud exclamation, "To visit a sick woman she's going, the sick woman on the second floor!", appears to hold a dark prophecy. Nora hesitates, as if not in a residential building but a haunted castle full of ghosts, bats, and vampires—Jewish vampires, feeding on the life and energy of anyone under their sway.

Chemeritsa and all the other "miserable creatures who surrounded Aunt Zlata after she was widowed,"[4] combined with the bad smells and the lack of fresh air in the building, create the atmosphere of an old shtetl in Poland or Galicia, with its conservative and rather simple way of life, as often depicted in Jewish literature. It feels, however, out of place in the city of Kaunas of the 1930s. Even Nora's mentally ill father, who lives in a pleasant house with a garden and is well taken care of, fits into the modern world better than Aunt Zlata. Nora is suddenly overcome by the irrational fear that this place is capable of undoing not only her own achievements in life,

2 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 106.
3 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 106.
4 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 107.

but those of her entire community: "At that stench, its force and violence, everything was null and void. Her liberation, her year of escape, her life in a foreign country."[5] At the root of this perceived danger is Aunt Zlata's sickness, which seems like a warning that no matter how free and educated you are, nature may just throw you back to your shameless, ignorant, and filthy origins. A disease is surrender to nature, or to God, and therefore a kind of disconnect from civilization. Nora has a growing awareness of her place in the Jewish world, of the existential decisions she has to make, and of her share of responsibility in advancing that world—and humanity as a whole—as a woman of her generation. In this sense, efforts to find remedies for diseases are part of the same project as the drive to learn from history or to build a better society. It is therefore no coincidence that, right after visiting Aunt Zlata, Nora meets up with her friends, medical student Hannah, philology student Lucy, law student Giltman, and soon-to-be-bride Nehama, to discuss their career choices. Concluding that, "in these days of permanent crisis, all professions are equally impractical,"[6] they realize that the roles they have chosen are thus also equally important in bringing about that huge social change they desire. It is only Nehama, who, with her marriage, appears to have chosen tradition over progress. As if to emphasize this link between the world of humanities and physical health that determines Nora's behavior, she falls ill after this meeting, although not severely, and after her recovery, spends time with a group of medical students, with whom she feels at home.

Nora's own discipline is archaeology, a science that, theoretically, deals with the past, but in this case reflects her desire for a future in the Land of Israel. It is the soil of Israel, so full of history and answers to all her questions, both Jewish and universal, into which she seeks to sink her spade. All halutzim dream of growing their own food in this soil; but Nora Krieger wants to dig into the same soil to grow her own philosophy. Just like Leah Goldberg, her protagonist chooses the Hebrew language as instrument to address the future, a fact that is revealed toward the end of the novel.

There is an obvious link between the Hebrew language, its homeland, and archaeology as a means to build a better future. However, the questions posed by Nora—and by Goldberg—are too complex to find answers in the Zionist discourse (**fig. 2**), as a return to Aunt Zlata's stuffy apartment demonstrates. In her sickness, Aunt Zlata is a mere caricature of her younger, healthier self, reduced to some of her basic and most annoying characteristics. Nora remembers those obligatory Friday evenings at the aunt's house, a "prison of depressing and stifling family warmth," watching

5 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 105.
6 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 106.

Fig. 2: Leah Goldberg in 1946.

"that dumpy, broad, flat woman, taking the pots out of the oven" to serve "gefilte fish [stuffed fish] you had to praise to the sky."[7]

On the one hand, Nora loves her close relatives and has warm feelings for Aunt Zlata. On the other, she perceives family as a prison as long as people like Zlata value the idea and ideal of family more than its individual members. This is reflected in Nora's perception of the old woman's apartment: "No one was in the big dining room. But nonetheless there was something of a sense of crowdedness, as always, as on those Friday evenings in her childhood."[8] What follows is one of the most important dialogues in the novel (**fig. 3**).

The conversation between Nora and her aunt starts slowly. In the beginning, every exchange of two sentences is followed by a whole paragraph

7 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 106.
8 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 107.

Fig. 3: Poster invitation to a celebration of Leah Goldberg's *Ve-hu ha-or* on 15 March 1946.

on Nora's thoughts. She observes "the sick woman. Her round head, flat as a pancake, was attached to awkward shoulders without passing through a neck. That rheumatic poisoning, which the doctors still hadn't determined, poured a heavy black onto her wrinkled skin."[9] She thinks of Aunt Zlata's impending death, a graceless death that is so at odds with the poetic image she has created in her mind as a reaction to her intimate knowledge of "the other boundary of the forces of mind and consciousness of the person—the madness."[10] Nora, a child of World War I and very much aware of the ongoing crisis and developments in Europe, probably knows that a person dying from natural causes at old age and in their own bed is fortunate. Yet, Zlata's fate scares her, which is likely due to her fear of mental illness rather than death itself. It is worth mentioning that mental illness has metaphorically replaced death in the destiny of her father—he becomes ill "instead of" being lethally shot (in the beginning of the novel, Nora performs the opposite replacement, when she lies to her neighbors about her father's death).

As if picking up on Nora's thoughts, Aunt Zlata begins a conversation that slowly gains in intensity and confronts the young woman with her own fears:

9 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 108.
10 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 109.

"'מה שלום אבא?' […]
'תודה. טוב יותר.'
החולה הניעה את ראשה:
'לא, לא. אלי תוכלי לדבר בגילוי־לב, הלוא יודעת אני כמוך שאין לו תקנה. טוב יותר! מה הטוב שבכל העניין! לי אין את צריכה לספר דברים כאלה. אבל היודעת את, מוטב שתשמרי היטב על בריאותך שלך.'
'אבל אני … כלומר … אני חשה את עצמי בטוב, בהחלט', אמרה נורה אובדת־עצות ומיד נתחרטה על דבריה.
'כך!' אמרה החולה בלעג, וקולה נעשה בהיר יותר, ומשהו כעין השראה היה בו: 'בטוב! לפי דעתך הנך חשה עצמך בטוב. אמרה לי אמא שפגשת שם בברלין אותו בן־דוד מוורשה. אמרה לי אמך כי חולה־עצבים הוא — כי, איך אתם קוראים לזאת? כלומר, אנחנו, האנשים הפשוטים, היינו אומרים כי דעתו נטרפה עליו. הוא חולה מאוד, מה?'
'כן', אמרה נורה בקול חנוק. 'אבל הוא, אולי הוא הבריא כבר', סיימה מתוך התגוננות נואשת.
'כך את סבורה?' לעגה החולה, 'נערה בגילך, חביבתי, שוב איננה תינוקת. דומה הדבר שמותר לך לדעת ולהכיר את האמת. הנה האיש הזה ממשפחת אביך הוא, ואביך וגם …'"[11]

"'How's Papa?' […]
'Better, thank you.'
The sick woman shook her head.
'No, no. You can talk frankly to me. I know as well as you do that he's incurable. Better! What's better in this matter! You don't have to tell me things like that. But you know, you had better take good care of your own health.'
'But I … that is … I feel fine, really,' said Nora helplessly, and immediately regretted her words.
'So!' said the sick woman mockingly, and her voice became clearer, and something like inspiration was in it. 'Fine! According to you, you feel fine. Mama told me that, in Berlin, you met that cousin from Warsaw. Your mother told me he's got a nervous disease—that, how do you call that? That is, we simple people, we'd say he went crazy. He's very sick, eh?'
'Yes,' said Nora in a choked voice. 'But he, maybe he'll get better,' she concluded with a desperate self-defense.
'You think so?' mocked the sick woman. 'A girl your age, my darling, isn't a baby anymore. You should know and recognize the truth. That man is from your father's family and your father and also …'"[12]

11 Leah Goldberg, Ve-hu ha-or [And This Is the Light], Bnei Brak 2005, 123f.
12 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 110.

Transforming into a "witch," an evil clairvoyant, Aunt Zlata escalates her rhetoric, predicting Nora's seemingly inevitable fate of mental disorder based on all previous cases in the Krieger family: Nora's father; his brother, who has died in a "lunatic asylum,"[13] as Zlata calls it, albeit of tuberculosis; and that distant cousin from Warsaw. Nora tries to explain her father's illness with war trauma, having been imprisoned, taken to execution, and sent back to his cell repeatedly over the course of many days (the true story of Leah Goldberg's father). But Aunt Zlata refuses to accept this. In her opinion, "if you don't have madness in your blood, you won't have any shock!"[14] Then she becomes more direct in her prophecy: "It's in your blood. In the blood of the whole family. All the Kriegers. I'm telling you this for your own good."[15] This is an attempt of the irrational and oppressive family system of the old world, reawakened by Aunt Zlata's own physical decline, to win back Nora's soul.

It is interesting to note that the two most dominant irrational forces of the old Jewish world, religion and tradition, which are so significant in the literature of male Jewish authors, play no role at all in this novel, not even in Aunt Zlata's reasoning. Goldberg's characters go to the opera, rather than the synagogue, which is typical for the author, who received her education at an excellent Hebrew gymnasium and then a German university, and, unlike most male early-twentieth-century Hebrew writers, had no religious background (**fig. 4**); the same is true for Nora's family. In fact, the only person seen praying in the novel—"in a loud and silly voice"[16]—is the "stupid son" of Zlata's neighbor. Another character who derives meaning from religion is Tekla, the maid, whose brother comes back from Brazil only to die of tuberculosis in his homeland—a lower-class parallel to the return of Arin. But Tekla is Catholic and illiterate, not Jewish. Aunt Zlata, for her part, speaks of heredity, not in the scientific but in the popular sense, as if to say: You cannot escape family.

The role of mental illness in this story is indeed a fascinating aspect to explore. At one point, Nora quotes a female German doctor, who argues that mental health patients should be shown the same respect as patients with physical conditions—a position that really was ahead of its time. It is evident from the rest of the novel that Aunt Zlata is neither evil nor driven by blind religious zeal; she loves Nora and truly wishes her well. This raises the questions of why, in moments like the above, she says those terrible things. Is it a hint at her earlier rejection of her sister-in-law's (Esther's) marriage to a Krieger? Is it her odd way of alerting Nora to the dangerous

13 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 111.
14 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 111.
15 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 111.
16 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 112.

Fig. 4: Celebration in honor of Shmuel Yosef Agnon (on Leah Goldberg's right) after his being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964 [illegible] Hotel Eden [illegible]rusalem.

side of her family—the Kriegers' side—and urging her to stick to her mother, who may give her better gifts for life?

A more radical take on this scene is that it constitutes a warning to Nora not to lose herself in the same old irrational world as her sick aunt, but to abandon the outdated concept of family and to love herself and her relatives as the individuals they are. A person like Aunt Zlata would, of course, never express this radical idea directly, but she might send a coded message to her young niece, an epiphany of the last days of her li[illegible] story. Indeed, it appears to succeed in strengthening [illegible] her final reply remains unspoken: "I won't go crazy!" [illegible] is supported by a later scene, when Aunt Zlata, just before she passes away, speaks her last words to Nora: "Your uncle loved you very much, Nora. This is no place to spend your vacation […]. Your uncle's dead. And so am I […] and you go, go into the fresh air."[18] In her final moments, Aunt Zlata sends Nora a message of true love, a message of freedom and self-determination.

17 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 112.

In a sense, this is what happened to the whole old Jewish world, which at some point released the younger generations from its grip to liberate themselves. The paths of liberation were manifold, some more dangerous than others, some robbed of their meaning in the fire of the looming catastro-

17 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 112.
18 Goldberg, And This Is the Light, 146.

phe—which Goldberg was aware of while working on the novel—some leading to outcomes far worse than any young Jew of the previous century would have dared to imagine. Not even the Land of Israel could ensure true freedom and adherence to humanist principles. No external circumstances can ensure them, or prevent them, for that matter. Ultimately, Aunt Zlata's lesson for Nora is that absolutely nothing can replace personal responsibility and the power of one's own decisions.

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