

Between Here, Now, and Then: Yosef Hayyim Brenner

In Amos Oz's early short story *Derekh ha-ruah* (The Way of the Wind), Yolek, the mythical forefather of an Israeli kibbutz, says to his son, a schlimazel ironically named Gideon, "Why don't you read a page in Brenner, he will tell you of fate, and of despair and fate." In these short lines, Oz demonstrates the way in which the figure of Yosef Hayyim Brenner's writing was perceived among the socialist blue-collar elite of Zionist settlers. Not only was Brenner the one to turn to for advice and truth about the human soul, but his work was seen as canonical. In order to emphasize Brenner's religious significance to this elite, Oz uses the word *daf* (page), a term associated with Jewish religious texts such as the Mishnah and the Talmud. In many respects, Brenner was a secular rebbe.

Indeed, among the intellectual circles of the Zionist movement, Brenner was considered a holy man and his writings sacred scriptures. This is reflected in the covers of the different editions of his collected writings as printed from the 1920s, following Brenner's death, until 1978, when the last edition was published, not long after the historic defeat of the Israeli Labor Party.

Generally speaking, Brenner was the great architect of modern Hebrew culture. His novellas and novels set narrative landmarks. His critical essays defined aesthetic criteria. But more than that, his writings documented the "nerves" (*azabim*), to use the title of one of his best-known prose works, the pathos, and the absurd. Brenner's writings thus serve as a sort of "black box" of the spirit of Zionism and modern Hebrew literature. Ever since his death in the riots of 1921, scholars of many fields keep decoding his dense body of work.

Brenner was born in 1881, in a small town in the Pale of Settlement, the rural areas in the western part of Tsarist Russia where Jews were allowed to settle, mostly today's Belarus and Ukraine (fig. 1). Brenner's childhood and youth paint the classic biography of a young Jewish intellectual: Brought up and educated traditionally, he left for the city to study at some of the renowned yeshivas, in Gomel and Pochep, where he was also introduced to secular thought and literature. Brenner was strongly influenced

by the new ideas of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement that laid the foundation of modern Zionism. In 1901, Brenner was drafted into the Tsarist army but defected after two years of service. Yet, even during his military years, he was very much committed to his literary work.

In 1903 and 1904, Brenner published his first two novels, the semi-autobiographical *Ba-horef* (In Winter) and *Mi-saviv la-nekudah* (Around the Point), in parts in the Hebrew monthly *Ha-Shiloah* (The Sending) in Odessa. Hayyim Nahman Bialik, then the journal's literary editor and the leading Hebrew poet and thinker of his time, commented in a letter to the ambitious young writer on the frag-

mented nature of his works. In many respects, generations of scholars saw Bialik's comments as a key to understanding the structure of Brenner's prose.

After escaping Tsarist Russia with the help from his Bundist friends in 1904, Brenner settled in the poor immigrant quarter Whitechapel in London. Although he suffered a severe depression, Brenner's London years were crucial to his career. With the publication of his literary journal *Ha-Me'orer* (The Awakener), he led the way of a whole generation of young Hebrew writers and Zionist thinkers. Steering a course between the pundits of Zionism, such as Bialik, Aḥad Ha-Am, and Joseph Klausner, who were still living in their familiar surroundings of Odessa, Brenner developed a non-romantic, pessimistic, and even neurotic vision of national Jewish life. At the same time, he was the first major Zionist writer and thinker who sailed from the port of Trieste in Italy to Haifa, as his Socialist Zionist comrades of the second wave of Jewish immigration, *Ha-aliyah ha-shniyah*, had done before him.

Some of Brenner's biographers argue that his immigration to Palestine in 1909 was followed by a deep depression that echoed in his writings, while others describe his psychological state at that time as manic. One way or another, his first years in Jaffa and Jerusalem were the peak of his career as a writer (fig. 2). These were also formative years for Hebrew literature.

In 1910 and 1911, Brenner published three landmark literary pieces: the novella *Azabim* (Nerves), the novel *Mi-kan ve-mi-kan* (From Here and There), and the essay *Ha-z'aner ha-Erez Isra'eli ve-avizarehu* (The Eretz-Israeli Genre and Its Properties). In these three works, Brenner not only examined and documented so clearly this critical era in Zionist history, but he also crystallized the aesthetics and human condition of his time. His first works written in Palestine were a psychological account and an analysis best described as meditations on his own biography. Brenner, as was noted by the late poet Nathan Zach, was highly self-centered and sensitive to his own needs and feelings. The resemblance of his fictional plots to his own life is hence evident. For example, a reading of Shin Shalom's memoir of his travels alongside Brenner from Europe to the ports of Palestine shows that Brenner drew on very specific details of his own journeys to depict those of his protagonist.

Azabim is told as the confession of a sinner, in the style of Lev Tolstoy's *Kreytserova sonata* (The Kreutzer Sonata), or of the more contemporary *A mentsh fun Buenos-Ayres* (A Man from Buenos Aires) by Yiddish writer

Fig. 2: Postcard of the Hebrew theater lovers in honor of Yosef Hayyim Brenner, 1913/14.

Sholem Aleichem, for whom Brenner worked as a secretary for a short time in 1905 in London. Only here, the sin is not a murder like in Tolstoy's novella, nor is it human trafficking, as in Sholem Aleichem's. Although not explicitly mentioned, it is clear that the sin to which the protagonist confesses is Zionism. *Azabim* is undoubtedly a Zionist tale, even ultra-Zionist, as Hannan Hever asserts.¹ But this is where Brenner outlines his secular theology: He veils the Zionist tale in a cloud of doubt, an equation in which Zionism is an eternal internal conflict.

This is the poetic and historic agenda Brenner pursues throughout *Mi-kan ve-mi-kan*, the first of two major novels that he wrote in Palestine, about life in the countryside. In *Azabim*, Brenner displays this doubt openly by having the protagonist, the confessor, repeatedly use the word *azabim*, meaning nerves or a psychiatric state of depression or even delusion. In *Mi-kan ve-mi-kan*, he uses a different technique that works on a similar principle. The novel consists of the fictional notebooks of a great wanderer and sufferer of the Jewish exile. It is a tale of aliyah, of a Zionist migration, albeit a failed one, as the protagonist ultimately turns his back on Zionism and returns to a life in exile.

In one of his most significant essays, *Ha-zhaner ha-Erez Israeli ve-avizareyhu*, which was composed in the same period, Brenner elaborates what he sees as the proper aesthetics of Zionist immigration. He denounces the images of Palestine evoked by Zionist writers of the previous generation, such as Joshua Barzilay and Perez Smolenskin, as kitsch. In many respects, Brenner provides an interpretation or a set of keys for the reading of his prose works himself.

In the following years, Brenner wrote little if any prose. He grew closer to the Zionist socialist movement and was actively involved in its newspaper, *Ha-Po'el Ha-Za'ir* (The Young Worker). He published many influential essays on the history of modern Hebrew literature: *Ha-arakhat azmenu ba-shloshet ha-krakhim* (Our Self-Assessment in the Three Volumes [of Mendele's *Collected Works*]), *Azkarah le-Y. L. G.* (In Memory of Y. L. G[ordon]), and *Mikhah Yosef Berdychevski* on the evolution of modern prose. These papers, as well as his heartbreaking elegy for Uri Nissan Gnessin, still constitute milestones in the critique of, and scholarly engagement with, Hebrew literature.

In 1920, Brenner published his last major novel, *Shkhol ve-kishalon* (Breakdown and Bereavement), a sinister view of life in Palestine during World War I. His pessimistic outlook on the future of Zionism was inter-

¹ Hannan Hever, *Ha-sipur ve-ha-le'om. Kri'ot bikortiyot be-kanon ha-siporet ha-ivrit* [The Narrative and the Nation. Critical Readings in the Canon of Hebrew Fiction], Tel Aviv 2007.

twined with personal depression. He was murdered during the riots of 1921, in Abu Kabir on the outskirts of Tel Aviv-Jaffa (**fig. 3**). Although a very detailed record of the last day of his life exists, the circumstances of his death remain a mystery and, just like his life and work in general, invite different interpretations.

Fig. 3: Drawing of Yosef Hayyim Brenner's death by Shaul Raskin, ca. 1921.

Literature

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