

Yaron Peleg

## A New Hebrew Literary Diaspora? Israeli Literature Abroad

**Abstract:** Although the modern stage in the development of Hebrew began in Europe about two hundred years ago, after 1948 the language and its literature became confined for the most part to the state of Israel. The tumultuous course of Jewish history in the past two centuries has by and large emptied the Jewish Diaspora of Hebrew. And yet in the past few decades we are witnessing a growing number of Hebrew writers who are no longer confined by geography. Although they still publish their works in Israel, they write them elsewhere, mainly in the United States and Europe. Increasingly, too, their works reflect their habitat as well as the peoples and cultures of their countries of residence. Are we witnessing the birth of what can perhaps be termed a “post-national Hebrew” era, an era in which Israel remains an inspiring cultural center, but no longer the only location for the creation of original works in Hebrew? This article looks at various Hebrew novels that were written outside of Israel in the last few decades and examines the contours of what may perhaps be a new chapter in the history of modern Hebrew.

**Keywords:** Hebrew literature, Diaspora, contemporary Hebrew novel, Rachel Eytan, Ariella Deem, Reuven (Ruby) Namdar.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that modern Hebrew culture as we know it today began on paper in Europe, and that it germinated and for a while even flourished in the Hebrew writings of the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> In his book, *The Invention of a Nation*, historian Alain Dieckhoff demonstrates

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘modern Hebrew’ is used here very expansively to denote the modern, secular stage in the development of the language, which began in Germany late in the eighteenth century. The various linguistic and ideological debates over the nature of that language are not germane for the discussion here.

how the various modern uses of Hebrew by enlightened Jews, or *maskilim*, constituted what he termed “the cradle of the nation,” that is, the origins of a sovereign Jewish nation.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a distinct arc can be drawn from those early beginnings to the eventual establishment of a Hebrew-speaking Jewish state a hundred and fifty years later. While a great variety of historical and other causes led to the establishment of Israel, it was nevertheless the textual world of modern Hebrew poetry and literature a century earlier that suggested the possibility for it.

Since the aim of this article is to add another chapter to this history, a contemporary one, it is worth summarizing very briefly this otherwise well-known and often-repeated story. Literary historians generally speak of four major periods in the development of modern Hebrew literature, divided roughly into the following years: Haskalah (1780–1880), Tehiya (1880–1920), 1948 Generation (1930–1948) and State Generation (1960–1990). This literary map was solidified by Gershon Shaked in his monumental five-volume *Modern Hebrew Fiction, 1880–1980*.<sup>3</sup> I have already shown elsewhere, how Shaked’s own life and his personal belief in Zionism as a reflection of it shaped this literary map.<sup>4</sup> Shaked’s very analytical premise is neatly expressed in what he termed the “Zionist meta-narrative.” Regarding the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 as the birth of modern Jewish time, a year zero from which all counting begins, Shaked examined the literary century in his opus from that perspective. The works that came before it laid the foundations for it, even if they did so inadvertently, and the works that came after it reflected on it critically. The establishment of the State, however, always remains the key event for Shaked’s readings and informs them throughout.<sup>5</sup> Other literary critics, mainly Dan Miron, have suggested other ways to understand the development and nature of modern Hebrew literature, ways that are not as

<sup>2</sup> Alain Dieckhoff, *The Invention of a Nation: Zionist Thought and the Making of Modern Israel* (London, 2003), 98–127.

<sup>3</sup> For an abbreviated English version of the Hebrew work see Gershon Shaked, *Modern Hebrew Fiction* (New Milford, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Yaron Peleg, “The Critic as a Dialectical Zionist: Gershon Shaked’s Hebrew Fiction 1880–1980,” *Prooftexts* 3 (2003), 382–396.

<sup>5</sup> One is reminded here of author Amalia Kahana-Carmon’s well-known quip about the inner switch that is flipped every time a reader of a Hebrew story opens a Hebrew book, referring to the conditioning Israelis undergo regarding it. See Amalia Kahana-Carmon, “The Song of the Bats in Flight,” in Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner, Anita Norich (eds.), *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* (New York–Cambridge, 1992), 239.

neat and as linear.<sup>6</sup> Yet Shaked's basic division has remained regnant, as its fairly recent formulation by modern Jewish historian Alain Dieckhoff demonstrates, and as my own opening of this article conveys.

One can argue about the validity of Shaked's premise and offer plausible alternatives to his particular take on the history of modern Hebrew literature. But what cannot be disputed is this: the more the Hebrew-speaking community in Palestine and later Israel grew, the more Hebrew outside of it disappeared. From the perspective of Zionist historiography this was of course predictable and desirable. The vision of Zionism was precisely this, to establish a sovereign Jewish state that would make Jewish life outside of it redundant. The fact that Zionism was never adopted by a majority of Jews—not during the great migrations from Eastern Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century, not just before the Holocaust or even after it, and not after the establishment of the State either—never stopped Zionists from adhering to this quasi-biblical vision.<sup>7</sup>

But if many of the achievements of Zionism have been challenged in the past decades, including the movement's very premise, its success in securing and perpetuating the life of Hebrew as a modern, living language is beyond doubt. In this one specific respect, the establishment of Israel as a Hebrew-speaking Jewish state revolutionized Jewish history by creating a Hebrew cultural powerhouse that for all intents and purposes has emptied the rest of the world of Hebrew. A majority of Jews may not have chosen to live in Israel, but for those Jews who are not religiously orthodox, Hebrew is but a cultural ornament, tenuously maintained by various religious rituals they perform with varying degrees of involvement. To the extent that Jews outside of Israel today engage with Hebrew seriously, it is modern Israeli Hebrew, inspired by the Israeli vernacular and disseminated mostly by Israeli teachers.

But, again, the concentration of Hebrew in one geographic location is a relatively recent phenomenon. Until not so long ago, the development of modern Hebrew and the growing body of literature and poetry it produced were not exclusive to Israel. Until the Holocaust, Hebrew poets and writers continued to write in Europe, and the North American Hebraist community was active well into the 1950s. That is, for the

<sup>6</sup> Miron has written about this more than once over the years. For a recent example, see Dan Miron, *Negi'ah le-tsorekh harpaya* (Tel Aviv, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> The fact that in 2015 Israel is home to the largest Jewish community in the world, with about seven million Jews, is due to natural growth more than to immigration.

first one-hundred and fifty years of its two-hundred year history, various works in modern Hebrew were written all over the Jewish world. It was only after the middle of the twentieth century and for a variety of fairly well-known reasons that Israel emerged as almost the sole source of modern Hebrew language and literature.

Is this reality beginning to change now? Are we witnessing the emergence of a new Hebrew Diaspora? In the last few decades, with the growth of Israeli communities outside of Israel, primarily in the US, increasing numbers of writers and poets compose original Hebrew works outside of Israel. A trickle that began several decades ago is becoming thicker by the year. From writers like Rachel Eytan and Ariella Deem, whose American Hebrew works from the 1970s and 1980s seem accidental and owing to the vicissitudes of their lives, to the winner of the Sapir Prize for 2014, Reuven (Ruby) Namdar, an Israeli resident of New York City, whose novel, *Ha-bayit asher neherav* [The Ruined House], is an American novel in Hebrew. Stretching between these two points is a list of Hebrew authors whose numbers go up by the decade. Aside from Eytan and Deem, who published in the 1970s together with Lev Hakak, the 1990s saw Dorit Abusch emerge as an American Hebrew writer, while the 2000s are already more crowded, with novelists Maya Arad, Ola Groisman, Ari Lieberman and Ruby Namdar.

I would like to briefly look at the various works of these authors in order to try and paint a picture of this new literary trend, focusing in particular on Namdar's unusual novel. This survey shall not only attempt to draw a map of an emerging Hebrew literary Diaspora, but also try to determine its character and its relationship to its Israeli source, which is bound to exert tremendous force on the world of modern Hebrew language and letters outside of it for the foreseeable future. In fact, at this early stage in the development of this inchoate trend, it is possible to speak of Hebrew works written outside of Israel only in relationship to the sovereign Hebrew state. Most of the works written in Hebrew today outside of Israel are not only published exclusively in it; a majority of them also take place in Israel. This is no doubt an expression of the writers' ambivalence about their immigration as much as a processing of their formative years in a country they grew up in. In this respect, Ruby Namdar's American Hebrew novel is truly unique.

Rachel Eytan presents perhaps the simplest case of an exiled author, an author whose promising literary career was reduced after the

appearance of her brilliant debut novel, *Ba-raki'ah ha-hamishi* [1962; *The Fifth Heaven*, 1985], most probably owing to her migration to the US, where she remained until her untimely death at the age of fifty-five. The story of her life exemplifies the pattern that most Israeli authors outside of Israel were to follow in the next few decades: migration, often an academic job abroad related to the study of Israel, its literature and its culture, and a literary career focused for the most part on the lost world that was left behind in Israel.

Eytan left Israel after her divorce from her first husband and her subsequent marriage to an American. She settled in New York, where she became professor of Hebrew and Yiddish studies at Hofstra University. In 1974, she published her second novel, *Shidah ve-shidot* [Pleasures of Man<sup>8</sup>], and she was working on a third novel that takes place in Israel in the 1950s when she died of a stroke, caused by a brain tumor, in 1987. It is impossible to know whether Eytan's literary career would have unfolded otherwise had she remained in Israel. Her first novel, published before she immigrated, was a resounding success and won her the prestigious Brenner Prize. Based on her own life as an abandoned child, who grew up in various institutions, the novel describes the unflattering side of the pioneering generation, whose selfishness is disguised as Zionist zeal that crushes the weak, mainly their own children. The novel's enthusiastic reception, despite the harsh critique it leveled at a generation that was still very much in power, is a testament to its exceptional quality.<sup>9</sup>

Her second novel, which was published after she had already settled abroad, met with a different fate. Continuing her first novel, it looks at the children of the founding generation, who have grown up now and substitute their parents' harsh pioneering vigor with an equally disturbing

<sup>8</sup> The title is taken from an obscure phrase in Ecclesiastes 2:8. Most commonly understood as chariot or wagon, *shidah* can also mean a woman taken as captive, a lover, and *shidah ve-shidot* perhaps an arena for wrestling women. Eytan translated it herself as "Pleasures of Man" because of the earlier part of the verse. See Ehud Ben-Ezer, "Shidah ve-shidot," *Al Hamishmar* (6 Dec. 1974). Hedonism being central to the novel, which centers on a love triangle between a woman and two men, the title seems fitting. Ben-Ezer goes on to commend Eytan for writing about the more trivial aspects of Israeli society: "this is first of all a novel about the life of a Tel-Avivian woman (*ishah Tel-Avivit*)," he writes. My point is that Eytan wrote about the minutiae of Tel Aviv's high society from abroad as if she were still an integral part of it. For more on the meaning of the title, see Yafa Berlowitz, "Shidah – Mi Yode'ah" [Shida – Who Knows], *Davar* (10 Jan. 1974).

<sup>9</sup> Dan Miron was one of the few critics who did not like the novel, which was otherwise widely commended. See Dan Miron, "Ba-raki'ah ha-hamishi le-Rahel Eytan" [*The Fifth Heaven* by Rachel Eytan], *Ha'aretz. Tarbut vesifrut* (7 June 1972).

eagerness for enjoying the fruits of their parents' labor. Smug and full of themselves, they squander their inheritance in a bacchanalian dance that adumbrates Ya'acov Shabtai's 1977 *Past Continuous*. But few readers at the time noted it. *Shidah ve-shidot* was read as a scandalous *roman à clef* of 1960s Tel Aviv bohemian society and was soon forgotten together with its author, who has faded from public memory.<sup>10</sup> Both of Eytan's novels are animated by a strong feminist agenda that was quite revolutionary at the time, especially in Israel. But in the small and parochial Hebrew literary world of the 1960s and 1970s, the more universal aspects of Eytan's work were not especially appreciated.<sup>11</sup>

One is reminded here of a much earlier predecessor of Eytan, the author L. A. Arieli, who left Palestine for America in the 1920s after a short and promising literary career there—Yosef Hayim Brenner compared him to Agnon—never to be heard of again. During his sojourn in Palestine, Arieli published cutting edge fiction that examined Zionist ideology and praxis with candor and flare. Both his novella *Yeshimon* [Wilderness] and his play *Allah karim* [Allah the Generous] handle the problematic colonial and orientalist elements of the Second Aliya directly and soberly, confronting the meaning and nature of the Zionist cultural and political revolution head on.<sup>12</sup> The literature Arieli wrote in the USA, after moving there and working as a Hebrew teacher, pales in comparison to the sophisticated and socially and ideologically engaged works he wrote in the Yishuv. Most of it is comprised of insignificant short stories that bemoan the pathos of the American Jewry scrambling to get rich. The socialist criticism that animates these stories was lost on the Jewish

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Tamar Avidar, "Ha-hevrah ha-notsetset mitbonenet ba-mar'ah" [High Society Looking at Its Own Reflection], *Ma'ariv* (3 Dec. 1974), 22. But there were readers who regarded the novel more seriously, like Yosef Oren, who wrote that "Rachel Eytan describes the 1960s as a time when the differences between the old values and the new ones were made sharper. A new social class was created then in Israel, even if it was small and exclusive: senior public servants, top military brass, *nouveau riche*, models and an assortment of artists . . . The old values of the Labor movement, like settling the land and asceticism, made way for the symbols of the new order." See Yosef Oren, "Ha-begidah shel shenot ha-60" [The Betrayal of the 1960s], *Yedi'ot Aharonot* (6 Dec. 1974). All translations from Hebrew are mine, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>11</sup> The strong feminist critique that animates *Shidah ve-shidot* is among the novel's few enduring values, and I agree with Miron's evaluation of it—see above. The detailed sexual escapades of the Israeli upper echelons in the 1960s, which comprise most of the book, are a damning indictment of its extreme chauvinism and sexism, but the novel is otherwise flimsy, a kind of literary gossip column.

<sup>12</sup> See Yaron Peleg, "A Jewish Novel Savage? The Limits of Cultural Innovation," in id., *Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination* (Ithaca-London, 2005), 100–125.

communities in Palestine and America alike, albeit for different reasons. While the first did not care about the subject of the critique, the latter was not only impervious to it, but could not read Hebrew either.

Unlike Arieli, Eytan's literary genius did not diminish when she left Israel to settle elsewhere. Yet the reputation of both authors seems to have suffered because of their distance from Israel and their retreat from the center of the Hebrew literary republic. While the changed focus of Arieli's American works may explain the apathy with which they were received in Israel, the amnesia about Eytan is less clear. Few people in post-independence Israel were interested in a Jewish community that was not only Diasporic, but without significant ties yet to the Jewish state. The initial interest in Eytan's second novel may have been keen, but it did not last long and both the novel and the author eventually met with the oblivion Arieli had met with.<sup>13</sup>

But if the trajectory of Eytan's life was typical of other Diasporic Israeli writers, her actual books were less so, for they remained rooted in an Israeli environment and milieu the writer had long left behind her. Little of Eytan's immigration experience found expression in her novels. Even the third incomplete one, which she wrote in New York, goes back to people and events from Eytan's former life in Israel.<sup>14</sup>

Ariella Deem, who began publishing shortly afterwards, is already much more expressive of the "pain of two homelands," as poet Leah Goldberg once put it, referring to her native Lithuania and her adopted Israel. Deem left Israel to study for her doctorate in Bible Studies at Brandeis University and settled in Boston where she lived with her family until her untimely

<sup>13</sup> The neglect was sometimes protested. See Dalya Ravikowitz, "Rahel Eytan sherirah ve-kayemet" [Rachel Eytan Is Very Much with Us], *Tikshoret Tarbut* 98 (17 Nov. 1995), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Although Eytan's novels make this observation unnecessary, she herself admitted to it in several interviews. "The 1950s were frozen in me and they are not disturbed by new events," she confessed in a 1977 interview, while working on her third novel. "On the other hand, I have problems writing authentic Hebrew dialogue. But since my next novel [her third, YP] is going to be about the fifties as well, the dialogues will freeze together with the picture I will draw." Yehudit Oryan, "Al nashim ke-sofrot ve-al yisra'elit ba-Artsot ha-Brit" [On Women as Writers and on a Hebrew Woman Writer in the USA], *Yedi'ot Aharonot* (28 Oct. 1977). In other interviews, however, Eytan mused that this might change in future: "Since I live in New York, I expect that my writing will eventually reflect it. It's only natural. I fully expect readers in Israel to criticize me for it. . . . I miss the landscapes, the flora, the sky, the smells, even the harshness in interpersonal relations. Coming back to Israel is returning to my homeland." Rachel Shoval, "Ani lo tseriha pas" [I don't Need Permission], *La'isha* (22 Aug. 1977). For a definitive, retrospective interview, see Sarit Yishai, "Ani haya be-Nyu York im Jerry ve-zehu ze" [I Live in New York with Jerry, and That's It], *Monitin* (Oct. 1981).



death in 1985 of a terminal illness. She was not a prolific writer, but the few thin volumes she published in her life exude a great longing for the culture she had left behind her. Verging on the poetic, they juxtapose the lost Israeli world against the American present of the narrator's world, superimposing then and now to create a rich textual memorial.

The word "lost" is actually a misnomer, because Deem's works seem like poetic musings that allow the writer to go back and again to a beloved world, though not necessarily to its country of origin. Yet this is not the kind of contemporary Israeli culture Rachel Eytan handles, and which often figures in the works of other Diasporic Israeli writers as well. Perhaps because Ariella Deem was a Biblical scholar, her books are saturated with ancient historical sensibilities, some of which, like the Masada myth, were also typical of early and mid twentieth century Zionist culture.<sup>15</sup> Her first novel, *Yerushalayim mesaheket mahbo'im* [Jerusalem Playing Hide and Seek, 1976], literally imposes the past on the present: a set of old glass transparencies of Jerusalem from the nineteenth century, which she finds in an antique shop in Boston, triggers a set of meditations on Jewish history, particularly connected to Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup> In her second novel, *Aharehah, Binyamin* [After You, Benjamin, 1981], she also ruminates expansively about ancient Jewish history as she moves about the contemporary world outside of Israel, mostly Boston.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the differences between them, both writers show remarkable similarities that characterize Israeli Diasporic writing. Both of them cannot let go off the Israel they left and express a strong wish to resurrect it and remember it. Eytan does so by writing as if she never left it, conjuring up the Israeli world she knew before she left the country. Deem achieves

<sup>15</sup> On some of these myths, see Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> "The most important aspect of the story is the atmosphere, which is fed by childhood memories, and an assortment of characters. The landscapes of the various locations are mentioned in passing, but their presence is real and palpable." Y. Paldi, "Giluy Yerushalayim le-Ariella Deem" [Jerusalem Revealed by Ariella Deem], *Moznayim* 5 (1978), 351. "The warmth that bursts out of the trees in the streets [of Boston] is an external trigger for the awakening of warm longings for the Jerusalem landscape. The concrete streetscape of Boston and the internal and experiential landscape of Jerusalem that is reflected in memories are combined." Yehuda Friedlander, "Kisufim ve-shekuftiyot" [Longings and Transparencies], *Ma'ariv* (29 Apr. 1977).

<sup>17</sup> "Ariella Deem succeeds in walking a tight rope between mediums; she exists in two worlds simultaneously. It is the manner in which she breaks stereotypes, penetrating the present from the direction of the past and vice versa, meandering between her own sensibilities and the spirit of historical legend, expanding both." Nurit Zarchi, "Masa beyn habavu'ot" [A Journey through Reflections], *Ha'aretz* (4 Sept. 1981).



essentially the same effect, but instead of faithfully creating a concrete social world, she charts a mental map enlivened by the intellectual and emotional life she has absorbed growing up in Israel. The physical world through which the narrator moves outside of Israel is used as a contrast, which heightens the allurements of the far away and longed for world, not just across the ocean, but across time as well.<sup>18</sup>

The actual immigration experience, which figures very little in the works of Eytan and Deem, is much more pronounced in the works of some of the writers who came after them, like Lev Hakak and Dorit Abusch. Both writers began publishing before they migrated from Israel to the US—Lev Hakak left to study for his M.A. and Doctorate in Hebrew literature and later joined the Department of Jewish Studies at UCLA; Dorit Abusch left to study for her Doctorate in philosophy and later became a professor of linguistics at Cornell University—and continued to do so also after their migration. Unlike Eytan, however, their “American” works are much more expressive of their own immigration experiences, articulating a new kind of Jewish uprootedness reminiscent of the Hebrew Revival, the *Tehiyah*, almost a hundred years earlier.

Lev Hakak is perhaps the most uprooted of the Israeli Diasporic writers mentioned here, although even a cursory comparison between the works he wrote in Israel and those he wrote in the USA will reveal obvious similarities. Both his Israeli collection of short stories, *Ha-asufim* [The Abandoned, 1977], as well as his much later American novel, *Bayit al giv'ah* [A House on a Hill, 1993], express a fundamental state of *tlishut*, uprootedness.<sup>19</sup> In his Israeli collection, Hakak writes about his alienation as a young immigrant from Iraq who cannot find his place in Israel. In his American novel, Hakak is expressing a similar alienation, this time from the perspective of Israelis abroad.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> “After reading the book, I wanted very much to meet its author, but I was told that Ariella Deem lives in far away Boston, something I could not fathom. How can a woman who writes about Jerusalem so well, penetrating its very essence, live elsewhere?” Yeho’ash Bieber, *Ma’ariv* (8 Feb. 1985).

“A person is born in the sunny land of Israel and his skin becomes sensitive to its light. Where shall such a person go for the light? The solutions Ariella devised for this dilemma may not suit everyone.” Avraham Hagorny, “Ha-hayim ke-mishak” [Life as Game], *Davar* (8 Feb. 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Emanuel Bar Kedma, “Lo mafsik lehitga’age’ah” [The Longings Never Stop], *Yedi’ot Aharonot. Musaf Leshabat, Tarbut Sifrut Amanut* (22 Sept. 1996), 26.

<sup>20</sup> Most of the reviews of Hakak’s prose works are similar in nature, emphasizing the genuine and heartfelt prose of an author who feels almost existentially uprooted, both as an Iraqi immigrant to Israel and later on as an Israeli in the USA. A review of his first novel stated that “Lev Hakak’s novel [The Abandoned, YP] will one day become

Dorit Abusch is harder to define or categorize as a Diasporic writer. While the first novel she wrote after leaving Israel, *Kol sheni* [*Second Voice*, 1990], takes place completely outside of Israel and involves characters who have nothing to do with the country, her two subsequent novels, *Ha-yored* [*The Immigrant*, 1996] and *Lev meshuga* [*Crazy Heart*, 2007], can be defined more easily as Diasporic, since their unsettled protagonists wonder about the world, poised between locations and identities.<sup>21</sup> When *Kol sheni* came out, hardly anyone thought of it as immigrant literature but rather as an innovative, postmodern text. The novel made quite a splash at the time and garnered a lot of attention. Readers declared Abusch one of the country's most promising young writers and almost everyone noted the freshness of her unusual voice.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps because Abusch was fairly well-known in Israel before she left the country, and perhaps because she was not yet abroad for more than a decade when *Kol sheni* came out, she was not seen or labeled as an immigrant writer right away. It may also be, that the foreign content of the novel was welcomed by an Israeli culture that began to open up just then to the outside world in unprecedented ways.<sup>23</sup>

At any rate, Abusch's subsequent novels so far can more easily be defined as "Diasporic." *Ha-yored*, as the title suggests, is most obviously such a novel as it follows an Israeli who leaves the country to settle in the USA.<sup>24</sup> *Lev meshuga* already uses immigration, or rather *tlishut*, as an

an important achievement in Israel's literature of rage that is based on life's truths." At the same time, the reviewer continues to write that, "it's hard to get away from the feeling that Lev Hakak's emotional burden sometimes undermines the literary and artistic truth." Yitzhak Bar Moshe, "Moshe Ma'atuk demut hayah ha-melakeket ad ha-yom et petsa'ehah" [Moshe Ma'atuk as a Living Character Who's Still Licking His Wounds], *Bama'araha* 200 (1977), 28–29.

<sup>21</sup> Abusch was a well-known literary figure in the 1970s and 1980s in Israel and was featured prominently in the prestigious literary journal, *Ahshav*. She published two volumes of poetry and prose in 1979 and 1983. As a *protégée* of the journal's editor, Gavriel Moked, she was touted as a promise together with poet Maya Bejerano. See Menachem Ben, "Elementari, Dr. Abusch" [Elementary, Dr. Abusch], *Ha'ir Sifrut* (4 Oct. 1996), 96.

<sup>22</sup> In the course of 1990–1991 the novel was reviewed more than twenty times in various venues. For a representative reference, see Avi Lan, "Omrim she-hi ha-taglit ha-ba'ah" [They Say She's the Next Big Thing], *Yedi'ot Aharonot. 7 Yamim* (31 Aug. 1990), 44–46.

<sup>23</sup> Alon Alters estimates just that in his interview with Abusch—see Alon Alters, "Ovedet ba-lashon" [Working in the Language], *Kolbo Haifa* (31 Aug. 1990), 48. See also the introduction to my book that reviews the 1990s, Yaron Peleg, *Israeli Culture between Two Intifadas: A Brief Romance* (Austin, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> The Hebrew title, *Ha-yored*, literally means the-one-who-goes-down, a reference to the negative view Israeli Zionist culture had of Israelis who left the country and a counterphrase to *עולה*, the-one-who-goes-up, which is what Jewish immigrants to Israel are called.

existential state of being which is keenly explored in the intricate novel.<sup>25</sup> Do these works focus on immigration and wondering as an expression of the author's lengthening years abroad? Does Dorit Abusch seek to reconnect through these works with the culture she had left behind? Probably. In most interviews with her Abusch openly admits it. Her unsettled protagonists wonder about the world, tethered only to the Israeli Hebrew of the novel, the single constant in their peripatetic life.

Abusch has actually commented fairly openly about her craft as a Diasporic writer. In a 2010 article she penned, she spoke directly about writing Hebrew outside of Israel:

I am not anxious about the style of my Hebrew. The fate of the fictitious world in my books worries me more. Geographic distance disconnects me from daily life in Israel, from the small, blissful details, the foot soldiers of every good writer. . . . Most of the plots of writers who live in Israel take place within the country's borders, even if they sometimes go outside of it. Most of the heroes in those stories are also born in Israel; some of them immigrated to it, a small minority moved away. Why is the fiction rooted in Israel? Because that's the place most of the authors who write here [in Israel] know and experience and that is also what readers expect to read when they buy original Hebrew works.<sup>26</sup>

If Rachel Eytan, and to some extent Ariella Deem, were curiosities frequently interviewed about the very anomaly they constituted as Diasporic Israeli writers, Dorit Abusch hardly attracts this kind of attention anymore, nor does she require mediation. She speaks for herself and what she says is telling. While her wish to continue writing in Hebrew and be read in Israel is natural, as a phenomenon she has been normalized, she no longer stands out as a peculiar literary specimen.<sup>27</sup>

I will come back to the notion of normalcy later, but what I wanted to go back again to is the striking sense of uprootedness in the works of

<sup>25</sup> Michal Ne'eman, "Leydat rosh o sipura shel ayin" [Head Birth or the Story of an Eye], *Ha'aretz*, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1449177> [retrieved: 10 Oct. 2007]. Ne'eman's reading of the novel presents it as almost a philosophical treatise on uprootedness.

<sup>26</sup> Dorit Abusch, "Mimeyleh eyn dialogim" [There Are No Dialogues, Anyway], *Ha'aretz Sfarim* (28 May 2010), <http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1203975> [retrieved: 2 Jan. 2016].

<sup>27</sup> Such interviews did not disappear completely, but they are rare. See, e.g., an interview with Rika Lichtman that was conducted after the publication of *Crazy Heart* in 2007. Some of the questions, which Eytan and Deem were asked decades earlier, are repeated here too. The answers are the same, among them is that the Hebrew language remains the supreme constant in the unfixed world of the immigrant: "My stubborn clinging to writing in Hebrew must have some deep explanation. I am a captive of it, for good or ill." See Rika Lichtman, "Hayim be-gevulot ha-safah" [Life inside the Limits [Borders] of Language], <http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000276486> [retrieved: 19 Nov. 2007].

Abusch and Hakak, certainly from the perspective of Shaked's historical map and his Zionist meta-narrative argument. The *talush*, the uprooted young Hebrew author at the turn of the nineteenth century, gained his moniker because he was literally uprooted, torn from the traditional Jewish society of his parents and grandparents. Unable to strike roots yet in the alien urban environments he moved to across Europe, we find him in the works of writers like Uri Nissan Gnessin and Micha Yosef Berdichevsky wondering about, literally and mentally lost.

Gnessin's unique literary style, the stream of consciousness-like prose he developed, with other contemporary greats like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, captured stylistically the mental and existential state of that generation. But in hindsight and in the context of the history of modern Hebrew letters, it came to be seen as an interim evolutionary stage in the development of a young literature that was headed toward a cultural sufficiency in its own country. Do the works of Deem, Abusch, Hakak and other Hebrew writers outside of Israel today constitute an ironic return to that period? Does the nostalgia for Israel they exude constitute an early eulogy of a culture that has come and shall one day be gone?

Probably not, even though similar elements comprise the works of most of the more recent authors who joined this group, like Maya Arad, Ola Groisman and Ari Lieberman. The works of Arad, who has had the longest and most prolific literary career so far out of these writers, are very dynamic. While her first two novels, which are long poems in prose, are literal odes to the Hebrew language, her subsequent five novels move with ease between Israel and California, where Arad lives. Groisman, who immigrated to Israel from Russia and now lives in the UK, has written two novels so far that focus on the Russian community in Israel, evincing its own peculiar pain of two homelands. Lieberman, who was born in Mexico, moved to Israel at the age of eight and now lives in the USA, where he teaches comparative literature. His first novel, *Alufei ha-temimot* [Out of the Blue, 2014]<sup>28</sup>, is a picaresque work that takes readers on a madcap quixotic journey through a war-fatigued and racist Israel that is addicted to reality TV.

Beyond some of the aspects that were mentioned before, these novels also share a strong bond to the Hebrew language, which remains one of their most noteworthy features. Maya Arad's first two poetic novels need

<sup>28</sup> On the inside cover of the Hebrew novel, the title is translated literally as *The Champions of Innocence*. On the website of the Deborah Harris Agency, which handles the future translation of the book into English, the title is given as *Out of the Blue*.

little elaboration in this regard, as their unusual form would have made them obvious candidates for such considerations even if Arad did not live outside Israel. Using a form that rarely if ever existed in Hebrew outside of translations from other languages, most notably Avraham's Shlonsky's monumental translation of Pushkin's epic poem, *Yevgeny Onegin*, Arad's novels stand out as unique indeed.<sup>29</sup> One wonders at the connection between the works' linguistic virtuosity and the fact that they were written in the so-called Diaspora, as well as the obvious homage they pay to the "artificial," translational Hebrew of Shlonsky.<sup>30</sup>

Some of Arad's other novels follow the more familiar paths of Israeli immigrant literature and focus on family relations that are strained by life abroad (*Temunot mishpahah* [Family Pictures], 2008; *Hashad le-shitayon* [Suspected Dementia], 2011), others comment from afar on aspects of contemporary Israeli culture (*Oman ha-sipur ha-katsar* [Short Story Master], 2009). But what is perhaps more interesting for this survey, is the influence of non-Hebrew literary traditions on Arad's work. If her first two novels were inspired by Russian literature, several of her other novels seem influenced by the English novelistic tradition in particular, which they adapt and correspond with. Her second novel, *Sheva midot ra'ot* [Seven Moral Failings, 2006], is a moral comedy in the best European tradition, as Hannah Herzig writes, adapted and updated to unfold the drama of an academic job search in a contemporary American university and in which only one of the candidates is Israeli.<sup>31</sup> Her latest novel, *Ha-almah mi-Kazan* [The Girl from Kazan, 2015], adapts the conventions of the English romantic novel into contemporary Israel and the vicissitudes of single motherhood in its particular setting.

<sup>29</sup> In an amusing review of Arad's first prose novel, "Makom aher ve-ir zarah" [Another Place, A Foreign City, 2003], critic Rubic Rosenthal praised the book by composing a rhymed critique that emphasized precisely the old quality of the novel's Hebrew, redolent of the rich, poetic Hebrew of a bygone era and penned by some of Israel's great poets, like Avraham Shlonsky and Leah Goldberg. See <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/archive/ART/647/726.html> [retrieved: 13 Apr. 2004].

<sup>30</sup> Translations into Hebrew of various *belles lettres* works were an important part of the revival and modernization of Hebrew since the Haskalah. After the 1930s, with the growth of a sizable Hebrew-speaking community in Palestine, many publishing houses made special efforts to increase the numbers of works translated into Hebrew. These translations were often made by accomplished poets, writers and essayists, who hoped to also expand and enrich the vocabulary of readers of a still developing vernacular. Yet the Hebrew language of many of these translations was artificial in many ways as the translators themselves were not native speakers.

<sup>31</sup> Hannah Herzig, "Ha-komedyah shel ha-akademiyah" [The Comedy of the Academy], *Ha'aretz* online, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1134569> [retrieved: 4 Sept. 2006].

Similar questions arise about Lieberman's literary work. Prior to *Alufei ha-temimot*, Ari Lieberman published a short novel, *Sefer Zilpa* [*The Book of Zilpa*], composed entirely in biblical verse.<sup>32</sup> *Alufei ha-temimot* also employs biblical register at times, used by and in textual proximity to one of the characters in particular, an ex-IDF officer, named Tom. Meaning *innocence* in Hebrew, the character's name marks him as an ironic relic of a bygone Israel, the so-called good old Israel of yore. The farcical image of the quixotic ex-general is rendered brilliantly through the mixture of biblical register and contemporary Hebrew slang that distinguish this surprising novel. Indeed, in an illuminating review article of the novel, Tamar Marin suggests that Israeli literature that was written outside of the country in the past fifty years is exceptionally bold and experimental.<sup>33</sup> While *Alufei ha-temimot* is stylistically exceptional, I doubt whether this claim has much validity. Anyone who has read the novels of Lilach Netan'el or Asaf Schurr, to name but two of the most innovative contemporary writers in Israel, will be disabused of such sweeping claims.

What may be suggested instead is that the Diasporic context of the works makes their living, bold and sometimes experimental Hebrew noteworthy and surprising. That is, rather than preserve the Hebrew of their youth, before their migration from Israel, authors like Arad and especially Lieberman juggle the Hebrew language naturally as if they had never left the country. Even in the global age, with its easy jet travel and Internet culture, there is little substitute for daily and direct interaction with the living language. So far, both these writers seem to defy this axiom and overcome the distance and disconnection from Israeli Hebrew. Moreover, unlike innovative nineteenth-century writers like Gnessin or Mendele Mokher Sforim, who could stretch the Hebrew language without the risk of sounding awkward or inauthentic because modern Hebrew was fairly limited at the time, contemporary Hebrew authors who operate outside Israel do not have such freedom. While the linguistic toolkit at the disposal of Arad et al. is far bigger than that which was available to older writers, they are always measured against contemporary Israeli Hebrew.

<sup>32</sup> The work was published under the pseudonym, Ari Stophenes, and can be found online in Lieberman's blog, uprightdown.com at <http://www.uprightdown.com/issue2/bookofzilpah.html> [retrieved: 2 Jan. 2016].

<sup>33</sup> Tamar Marin, "Hay be-Artsot ha-Brit, kotev al ha-yisre'eliot" [Lives in the US, Writes about Israeliness], *Ha'aretz* online, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/prose/.premium-1.2264727> [retrieved: 13 Mar. 2014].

It is at this juncture that Ruby Namdar stands out among his Israeli Diasporic contemporaries. Both the subject of his latest novel, *Ha-bayit asher neherav* [The Ruined House], as well as its unique Hebrew style mark it as an Israeli Diasporic work in distinct and fascinating ways. *Ha-bayit asher neherav* is the story of Andrew Cohen, a successful Jewish American university professor of contemporary culture, who lives in Manhattan, the *Caput Mundi* of the Western world and in many ways the Jewish world as well. As a successful and popular university professor, Cohen serves as a high priest at the shrine of his culture, representing its epitome. The fact that he is divorced and only nominally Jewish, despite his suggestive last name—‘Cohen’ literally means *priest* in Hebrew—marks him at the beginning of the novel as sophisticated and urbane. It allows him to have an attractive young lover and to host fabulous and renowned dinners, where like a priest in his temple he serves choice cuts of meat, expertly paired with (read: sanctified by) appropriate wines:

Andrew’s famous roasts were peppered with a droll theatricality that has become part of the experience. The guests were already seated at the table, the third wine bottle already opened, the appetizers being nibbled and the conversation flowing—yet the host was away, alone in the kitchen with the meat. The big chunk was lying on the gray granite surface, specially installed for that purpose. Andrew was standing above it, looking at it with concentration . . . and then, suddenly, he would put down his wine glass and attack the meat. With wide gestures he cut and stabbed it, sprinkling it with pepper and salt, beating the spices into it and caressing it with love.<sup>34</sup>

But Andrew’s life soon begins to unravel when it is disrupted by strange visions that visit him with increasing frequency and force and which progressively unhinge him. At first completely obscure and inexplicable to him, these visions are glimpses from the rites performed by the high priest in the ancient Jerusalem temple during Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish religious calendar: priestly processions, gigantic sacrificial animals, heavenly voices, the sound of trumpets. During a meeting Andrew has with the president of his university one morning, as the two men are walking through Washington Square Park, Andrew suddenly begins to hear and see these strange sights:

His ears rang suddenly with a strange and unnerving sound, which took over his entire being and made him lose all grasp of reality. A far off sound, completely

<sup>34</sup> Rubi Namdar, *Ha-bayit asher neherav* [The Ruined House] (Or Yehudah, 2013), 24.



strange yet somehow inexplicably familiar, surrounded him from all sides, a deep sound, animalistic, resembling the roar or the groan of a gigantic, primordial creature. . . . The beam of light that emanated from around the corner became brighter and stronger, drawing upon the gray stony façade of the street a perfect circle that radiated a heavenly light. What on earth can this be? . . . An enormous bull, as white as snow, appeared from around the corner, striding steadily and majestically into the heart of the lit circle.<sup>35</sup>

Although obscure to Andrew, the visions are clearer to readers because they are accompanied by graphic inserts that look like old rabbinic texts in which actual and fictitious customs and laws pertaining to the ancient temple rites are presented in old Hebrew font. Andrew, who has made his name by providing brilliant interpretations to modern Western culture and prides himself on it, is devastated by the enigmatic visions, which haunt him and make him go mad. By the end of the novel, which proceeds inexorably toward 11 September 2001 and the fall of the Twin Towers, his house is almost literally ruined.

Yet which house is it?

*Ha-bayit asher neherav* takes place completely outside of Israel. Moreover, its main character is Jewish only barely. Andrew Cohen attends synagogue during high holidays as a social custom. He is not a member of a Jewish community and he is most certainly not an observant man. His is not the figurative House of Israel, nor the symbolic temple in Jerusalem as an ancient icon. His alienation from all things Jewish and from the Hebrew language is so great that he has difficulties identifying an Israeli neighbor, who appears to him odd.<sup>36</sup> Very few people if any are strange or out of place in cosmopolitan Manhattan. Yet Andrew is so out of touch with his Jewishness that an Israeli man, rather a common site in the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where he lives, seems peculiar and vaguely repugnant to him, despite the fact that Andrew had visited Israel as a young man.

What are we to make of these accumulating signs—Andrew's last name, his initial status, his interpretive powers that are suddenly blocked, his visions, his pathetic and unsuccessful attempts to seek rabbinic council about his deteriorating mental condition, the final destruction of the towers of Manhattan-Babylon and above all the Hebrew of the novel, which straddles older linguistic strata and contemporary forms that incorporate

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>36</sup> "The man giggled and said something [to his dogs – YP] in some strange and vaguely familiar language. Greek? Egyptian? Perhaps Iranian? Andrew thought to himself, looking over the man's wide, brownish face," *ibid.*, 74.

English in original ways that may truly suggest a new kind of Diasporic Hebrew?<sup>37</sup> For Namdar's sweeping Hebrew style constitutes perhaps one of the novel's most significant and meaningful innovations, which also marks its so-called Diasporism. By resurrecting, as it were, the Hebrew style of midrash, the novel adopts one of the most distinct literary styles of post-exilic, pre-Israeli Hebrew, a homiletic style that stands in contrast to the terse Biblicism of the national Hebrew of Israel.

*Ha-bayit asher neherav* criticizes Jewish life in the Diaspora boldly and aggressively.<sup>38</sup> Yet this is not necessarily a kind of Zionist "negation of exile," *shelilit ha-golah*, the patronizing attitude toward Jewish life outside Israel, especially in Eastern Europe, which characterized the Yishuv in the years prior to and after the establishment of Israel. The novel may be tinged with it in the devastating critique of Andrew's successful but empty life, described *ad nauseam* with a self-importance whose pathos is highlighted by the juxtaposed pseudo-midrashic inserts, that hark back to the glorious days of ancient Israel, even as they too accumulate to a distasteful excess of their own. The novel may also suggest it by the symbolic destruction of the World Trade Center, a punishment for the Babylonian-like hubris of the Andrews of Manhattan, self-appointed masters of the so-called civilized universe.

But in the last analysis, the novel does not negate Jewish life in the Diaspora because that life is not lived in Israel. It negates the specific life Andrew Cohen lives, a life devoid of any real connection to Jewish ritual, Jewish heritage or a Jewish community. Andrew may not worship Mammon, as his Jewish American forebears may have, scrambling to make a living in the New World after leaving the Old. But his service at the altar of sensual pleasures, which wealth affords the leisure to cultivate, is just as problematic in *Ha-bayit asher neherav*. The priestly imagery is so important because Andrew's potential to worship and serve is misplaced, directed at the wrong gods and performed in a wrong temple.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> These include simple calques, like "white Christmas" translated literally into Hebrew without any comment (*ibid.*, 127) to renditions of Americana in flowing Hebrew that naturalizes it and seamlessly migrates it into Hebrew, like the vivid description of Thanksgiving Day with Andrew's family in Chapter 14.

<sup>38</sup> The description of the gaudy bar mitzvah party of one of Andrew's distant relatives reverberates with Israeli dismissive perceptions of American Jewry as excessive and gauche, vulgar shtetl dwellers, who acquired wealth in America but not the sophistication that ought to accompany it. My guess is that Namdar channels his own view through Andrew's aesthetic sensibilities, which are offended by the cheap display. See Chapter 12.

<sup>39</sup> For an illuminating review of the book, especially its midrashic parts, pseudo and real, see Shmuel Faust, "Ish kohen al ha-Hudson" [A Priest on the Hudson], *Makor Rishon*

The real innovation of Namdar's Hebrew novel, then, is that it extends the traditional position of the modern Hebrew author as a prophet—an idea developed during the Haskalah and cultivated in Israel, primarily by Shaked again<sup>40</sup>—to the United States as well. The prophesying in *Ha-bayit asher neherav* is not directed at the Israeli House of Israel anymore, but at the American House of Israel. In doing so, Namdar extends the moral authority of Hebrew beyond the Israeli Jewish world into the Jewish world outside it. Does this mean that the novel continues the post-Holocaust dynamic that positioned Israel at the head of the Jewish world and intensifies it even more, presuming to tell American Jews how to organize their communal life and order their religious affiliation? I doubt it. It rather seems to me that the novel tries to practice what it preaches, to engage Jewish life in America with Jewish heritage through the Hebrew language, one of Jewish civilization's most powerful tools, and one which seems endangered in Jewish America today.

I ended this survey with Ruby Namdar's novel because it appears to revive the American Hebraic tradition, which died in the 1950s after a brief life that lasted only a few decades. In hindsight, Hebrew never had a chance of becoming truly relevant for American Jews. Financial, political and social success proved too alluring to preserve it as a meaningful identifying element. But now that complete acculturation has been achieved and secured, Hebrew might actually get a second chance, imbuing the material success of American Jewry with enduring meaning. The existence of Israel will always ensure a fresh supply of native Hebrew writers, who will no doubt continue to write about their longings for the country they left. But is Diasporic Hebrew literature bound to remain in this loop forever, fed for eternity by a stream of fresh immigrants? Can it develop independently in the Diaspora even by a second generation? Ruby Namdar suggests it might.

*Yaron Peleg*

University of Cambridge  
yp240@cam.ac.uk

*Weekend Supplement*, [http://musaf-shabbat.com/2013/09/13/על-כהן-איש/](http://musaf-shabbat.com/2013/09/13/על-כהן-איש/2013/09/13/על-כהן-איש/) [retrieved: 2 Jan. 2016].

<sup>40</sup> The Hebrew phrase, *ha-tsofeh le-veyt Yisra'el*, the prophet of the house of Israel, was the name given to the collected works of Itzhak Erter (1791–1851), a Galician maskil whose satires especially had a distinct corrective agenda. The phrase was popularized by Gershon Shaked in reference to the social role of Hebrew authors, who were understood to perform that role in Israel.

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