

Hebrew Gender and Zionist Ideology: The Palmach Trilogy of Netiva Ben Yehuda

Y A E L S . F E L D M A N

I was never ever a suffragette. But as I was anyway stuck deep in this business [the Palmach]—I was ambitious, very ambitious, to prove my worth; especially since I knew that from that particular aspect that pre-occupied us at the time—the war—I was surrounded by many males who were much worse than me. Much more “feminine” than me. I used to call such a male a *feminus*.

— NETIVA BEN YEHUDA, 1948—*Between Calendars*

THE LANGUAGE OF NETIVA BEN YEHUDA (b. 1928), no less than her ideas and convictions, poses a great challenge to the translator and interpreter. She is unique among the writers of her generation not only because of her late entry into the Israeli writing scene (1981), but also because of her lifelong devotion to the cause of spoken Hebrew. Her uniqueness does not stem from these factors alone, however. Though she has become somewhat of a media figure since the 1980s, she had hardly been recognized before as a professional writer. Rather, Netiva Ben Yehuda, “Tiva” to her many friends, had long been identified as a living emblem of the myth of the Palmach, those legendary elite units that spearheaded the struggle

for Israel's independence in 1947–48. Indeed, Ben Yehuda had for many years embodied precisely that heroic voluntarism and utter loyalty to the Jewish national rebirth in the Jewish homeland that had been the hallmark of the Palmach since the 1940s. She was also known for her sharp tongue and scathing humor—qualities that stood her in good stead when she finally came into her own as a writer.

Simultaneously, however, Ben Yehuda was ahead of her time: her bold sexual permissiveness stood out in a period marked by sexual puritanism. She brazenly carried out her own private sexual revolution, living (rather than writing) through the body¹ in an age that locked up both body and emotions “in the cellar,” to use Shulamith Hareven's useful metaphor in her 1972 novel, *City of Many Days*; we may even conjecture that Ben Yehuda's sexual freedom might have served as the model for Hareven's characterization of Sara in that novel.

Less familiar, but crucial to her story, is the fact that the nickname by which she had become known early on, “the yellow devil,” was given to her by the neighboring Arabs. This nickname came along with the high price that had been put on her head after she single-handedly commandeered the first successful Jewish ambush of an Arab bus early in 1948. That ambush was meant to retaliate for the growing frequency of Arab attacks on civilian transportation in the Galilee, following the November 1947 United Nations vote for the division of Palestine. It turned out to be, as will be seen below, the first step in Ben Yehuda's “voyage in.”²

Even less known is her pre-military history: this model sabra, the daughter of a leading pioneer and educator (Baruch Ben Yehuda, later the director general of the first Israeli ministry of education), was an outstanding athlete. Her achievements as a discus thrower had made her a serious candidate for the Olympics—a projected career that was cut short in 1948 by a bullet that damaged her arm muscles.

Fearlessness, physical prowess, and total devotion were some of the features that distinguished this young officer, whose military specialties included topography, reconnaissance, and demolition. Yet for later generations, it was mainly Ben Yehuda's fearlessness that captured the imagination, expressed now not in military pursuits but in the battle for the soul of the Hebrew language. A few years past independence, after studying at home and abroad (art, language, and philosophy), Ben Yehuda became a freelance editor, openly fighting the chasm between the spoken Hebrew developed in the Palmach, marked by playful and humorous slang

and linguistic inventiveness, and the elevated, highly stylized standards required then by Hebrew belles lettres. Her devotion to this matter resulted in the publication in 1972 of *The World Dictionary of Hebrew Slang*.³ Indeed, this hilariously irreverent book, coauthored with another palmachnik, the writer and satirist Dahn Ben Amotz (1924–90), added another layer to the cultural idiosyncrasy of that legendary generation.

Still, that did not prepare the Israeli public for Ben Yehuda's dramatic entry into the scene of Hebrew writing between 1981 and 1991.⁴ True, the title of her first book, 1948—*Bein hasfirot*, should have alerted her readers that this was not one more “recollection in tranquillity,” to use William Wordsworth's phrase. Rather, despite the intervening three decades, Ben Yehuda's title signaled that she still experienced 1948 as a momentous breach in history, a transition of tremendous magnitude. Unfortunately, the English translation of the title, *Between the Calendars*, fails to convey this sense; for the Hebrew *sfirot* (*sfirot*, pl.) does not really mean “calendar” (*luah* in Hebrew), but rather, “counting” or “era.” It is used to denote the distinction in the Gregorian calendar between B.C. (*lifnei hasfirot*, “before the counting”) and A.D. (*aharei hasfirot*, “after the counting”). The title then invests 1948, or, more exactly, “the months between 29 November 1947 to March 1948,” as stated in the preface, with a potential to transform contemporary Jewish history, which is analogous to the Christian transformation of Western (and Jewish) history two thousand years ago. Unwittingly, it also resonates with the Hebrew title of Virginia Woolf's last novel, written under the threat of Nazi invasion, *Between the Acts* (1940). The analogy between *Bein hasfirot* and the Hebrew title of Woolf's last will and testament, *Bein hama'arakhot* (1981), may shed light on Ben Yehuda's intention. At least one commentator characterized *Between the Acts* as implying “the time between history as we have known it and the future,” a future that will be “a violent break from history.”⁵

Yet even with this warning, many readers were not really ready for *Bein hasfirot*. Some rejected Ben Yehuda's idiosyncratic language, colloquially repetitious and associative, at times preserving the slang and idiomatic Hebrew of days gone by. Others felt uneasy with her generic hybridity: this book is not history, she says in the brief preface, not fiction, not even memoirs—and some readers believed her.⁶ The rhetorical disclaimer (it is “just me talking” about “what was stuck in my head since

‘then’; always, all the time, everywhere . . . living with me; growing old with me”) grew stronger in her next book, *Miba‘ad la‘avotot* (Through the binding ropes, 1985), where she defended her kind of writing by denying any literary aspirations. Like its predecessor, she says, this book is “a report from the field, a ‘worm’s eye view’ of a low-ranking soldier. And I *speak* this report. . . . Perhaps it can be best named *divrut* [= ‘speaking,’ coined to sound like *sifrut*, ‘literature’], if such name existed.” It exists now, perfectly capturing Ben Yehuda’s special genre.

Those readers who were willing to ignore the author’s disclaimers (and many other masks woven into the narration itself) found themselves not only in the presence of a garrulous but consummate storyteller, but in the current of a gripping narrative, one that has moved this reader, at least, to both laughter and tears as few other narratives have ever done. Moreover, those readers would slowly realize that this was a subversive telling of a major chapter in the Israeli national narrative—the collective memory of the 1948 War of Independence.⁷ In fact, the Palmach trilogy as a whole, published between 1981 and 1991, contributed to the process of demythologization of the past that has been taking place in Israel since the early 1980s. Recognition of this contribution intensified with the publication of the second volume of the trilogy, which directly challenged—as its title transparently implied—the Israeli public conversation over the Akedah.⁸ Ben Yehuda’s unique contribution to this discourse was the foregrounding, perhaps for the first time in Israeli culture, of the *Titsḥaks*, in her language, the female Isaacs of Israel’s wars.⁹ Apparently it was no accident that Ben Yehuda’s confessional memoirs coincided with the revisionist feminist research that gained momentum in the 1980s, as well as with the work of the Israeli “new historians.” Her books functioned as a courageous corrective by a first-hand witness, reducing the myth of a glorious past to human, and at times petty, proportions. In the words of one young contemporary (a high school teacher who had been wounded in the 1973 Yom Kippur War): “My God, how the myth has been shattered. I have thought that with you [pl.] everything was so beautiful, so spotless, with no problems, and only now the truth has come out.”¹⁰

Whether the trilogy has also somewhat discolored the gender binoculars of its readers is one of the questions I address below; how it fits into the history of the literary representation of the “New Hebrew Woman” and her conflict with the national narrative is another. First, however, a different question is in order: Why

had Netiva Ben Yehuda waited so long—over three decades—before publishing her story? And why did she qualify and hedge each of its installments, apologetically masking and disclaiming her meticulously structured autobiographic narration?

Ben Yehuda has addressed this question in an extensive interview, conducted after the publication of the third volume (1991), which coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Palmach.¹¹ As she tells it, she had not meant to wait at all, but had already begun to write her memoirs in 1949. But those early chapters, actually commissioned by Ma'arakhot (the publishing house of the Israeli Defense Forces) as part of its planned official history of the 1948 war, were rejected because of their style—and no wonder. Even today, her Hebrew style stands out in its striking colloquial immediacy and vivid plasticity. Five decades ago, such “speakature” was unthinkable on the printed page. In those days, the gap between the refined literary style of her male comrades (from Moshe Shamir to S. Yizhar and everyone in between) and her own audacious street Hebrew was utterly unbridgeable. If this gap has been narrowed since then, it is in no small measure because of the efforts of Ben Yehuda herself.

Since Ben Yehuda had been widely known as a champion of spoken Hebrew, the reading public readily accepted the stylistic explanation for her belated breakthrough. Much ink has been spilled on this issue in the critical reviews of her work, but supporters and objectors both accepted it as a legitimate factor. Add to this another of the author's explanations, that she started to write again when her daughter's classmates began returning “burned and dead” from the Yom Kippur War (1973), and the question seems to be satisfactorily settled: “My daughter drew at the time a certain painting, which later became the cover of *1948—Between Calendars*, so I looked the painting in the eye, and talked into the tape,” as she tells it in that interview.¹² Yet I would argue that a closer look at the process of reception of her trilogy reveals that other, perhaps darker, factors were at work as well.

To identify these factors, we need some historical perspective. An interesting insight is suggested by an anthology that was published about a decade ago, apparently in celebration of Israel's fortieth anniversary: *Written in 1948: Poetry and Prose Written during Israel's War of Independence*¹³ includes works by about fifty

writers, all published between 1947 and 1951 in the Israeli press, literary journals, and various anthologies. Of the fifty authors, only six are women. Of the six, four belong to the Palmach generation; three of them participated actively in the war, and one fell while on duty (Bat-Sheva Altshuler, 1928–48). Of the four, three write poetry, and only one writes fiction. Of the three who survived the war, two have entered the Israeli canon—Shulamith Hareven and Yehudit Hendel—but they are hardly identified with the literature of the Palmach. (The third is Zafira Ger [Gerber], b. 1926).¹⁴

These statistics are doubly surprising, since women accounted for about half of the members of the Palmach. Still, despite their numbers, they had hardly left their mark on the literary legacy of their generation. Nor has the situation changed since. As is well known, a critical change of taste has greatly eroded the artistic status of the literary corpus of the Palmach. By the 1960s, it had already fallen into disrepute. Thus Amalia Kahana-Carmon and Shulamith Hareven—each a Palmach fighter in her own right—distanced themselves from this experience as soon as their early literary apprenticeships were over. There is hardly a trace of this momentous experience in their later work. Nor is this reticence ever addressed, except indirectly, in Kahana-Carmon's condemnation of the national double standard that—secularization and modernization notwithstanding—has continued to enclose women in the “women's gallery” (*ezrat hanashim*).¹⁵

We should not forget, however, that Kahana-Carmon voiced this charge for the first time in the mid-1980s, that is, a few years after Ben Yehuda's first book had already shaken up the Israeli readership. Ben Yehuda may be considered, then, one of the pioneers of the belated literary debut of the New Hebrew Woman. Surprisingly, she was hardly given credit for this breakthrough. Most of her reviewers (the women as well) have ignored what is central to her writing—her analysis of the ideological roots of what she perceived as the Palmach's betrayal of its promise for sexual equality, which had been “inscribed on its flag.” Since these roots were anchored in the Zionist national narrative to which she enthusiastically subscribed, her discovery resulted in a conflict that was not easy to settle. It was this conflict—between her Zionist ideological commitment and her sexual equality disillusionment—that had silenced her for three decades. In the Israel of the 1950s through the 1970s, sexual equality was not a topic of discussion—to say the least.

By the late seventies, things began to change. Ben Yehuda's impediment turned into the motivating power behind her writing; her private trauma became the hidden center around which her dramatic narrative was structured and in which it would culminate.

This trauma is nevertheless well camouflaged by what may seem to be narrative and rhetorical repetition. Paradoxically, however, it is this apparent redundancy that directly reflects the trauma, albeit by way of denial. In fact, we may have here a different version of the masked autobiography, which is typical, as I have shown elsewhere, of Israeli women's fiction of the 1980s.¹⁶ This time, however, the mask is not in the form of a historical displacement, but rather in the shape of the most straightforward tell-it-all autobiographic narration, one that manages to bury its most painful moment under mountains of relevant and less relevant details, circuitous argumentation, and tangential evidence.

Time and again, to almost comic effect, Ben Yehuda repeats her disclaimer of any commitment to "suffragism." Speaking in the name of her female comrades as well, she keeps protesting and denying:

It was not me who invented the suffragism that is inscribed on the flag of the Palmach, and [on the flag] of its shitty Russian socialism. (1981, p. 271)

We were not suffragettes. I said this a thousand times, and I will say this another thousand times. The Palmach was suffragist—self-declared suffragist. The Palmach inscribed on its flag "sexual equality," along with other issues, while we, the girls, were expected to realize this principle. So we accepted this, and ate shit. (p. 296)

And since I was not a suffragette, and am not one even now, and since my private social status did not interest me, I was very miserable. (p. 297)

Paradoxically, between the last two vehement denials of suffragism is sandwiched a pertinent feminist analysis of typical Palmach songs, showing that the new Hebrew female fighter, Tiva and her like, was nowhere to be seen. In songs (and in paintings

as well), Shoshana, or Dunia, or Tzipp, is always waiting (often at the window), saying good-bye, or happens to be in the kitchen. “I don’t think that there has ever been any other underground movement in the world in which male chauvinism triumphed so powerfully; and so proudly,” charges Ben Yehuda, with justified grievance.¹⁷ The rhetorical contradiction speaks for itself, raising questions about the narrator’s reliability. For how are we to understand the constant denial of suffragism, which comes paired with a heavy condemnation of an all-powerful male chauvinism? And why should this fearless fighter be afraid to acknowledge suffragism, whereas she “has undertaken to realize its principles” (p. 296) by doing her best to excel among the small group of elite fighters of both sexes? Doth the lady protest too much?

Indeed, she does. For it is not suffragism per se that she rejects, but rather the ambivalence it engenders. The truth is that by the end of 1948—*Between Calendars*, this skillful, brave officer, who has already proven the success of her training as demolition specialist on the front line, experiences first-hand a familiar conflict. This is the conflict that neither *A Room of One’s Own* nor *The Second Sex* (let alone contemporary gender theories on both sides of the Atlantic) had managed to settle satisfactorily: the wish to overstep boundaries of any kind, including sexual (as epitomized by Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*),¹⁸ vis-à-vis the fear of losing one’s personal identity as a result of such overstepping; or alternatively, the need to define subjectivity on its own merits, as separate from the other sex, and, at the same time, the fear of the essentialist limitation of that very subjectivity.

This familiar conflict is doubly poignant here, because it takes place in an arena most identified with masculinity—military aggression. If we recall that it was precisely the aggressive instinct that was the object of Woolf’s critique of masculinism in *Three Guineas* (the Hebrew translation of which appeared in 1985), we should not be surprised at Ben Yehuda’s impasse. The sexual equality that she tries to achieve pertains to a sphere about which Woolf had not even dreamed—the battlefield. In Woolf’s earlier script, military experience was part only of Orlando’s past, practiced by the ancestors of her early (should we say primitive?) masculine self. A decade later, on the brink of World War II, she saw aggression and militarism as the unavoidable exception to her dream of androgyny, as the one area from which she wished to exclude women.¹⁹ The Palmach fighter, on the other hand, has

unwittingly tried to transpose Woolf's androgynous vision from the field of artistic creation to the field of military prowess—with dire results.

This difference notwithstanding, Ben Yehuda's "Orlando" asks questions about gender that are not so different from those asked by Woolf about half a century ago (and that gender theorists have been asking ever since): By what is our sexual identity determined? By biology ("Who has or has not balls," in the slang of the Palmach)? By our clothes, gait, body language? Or by the other's gaze, by the role imposed on us by society, culture, the system into which we are born and in which we have to function? In other words, Is sex destiny, our inescapable essentialist portion on this earth, or is it a cultural construct, a performance that varies with time and place and is therefore given to change and modification?

The theoretical solution to this problem is well known by now—the modern reinvention of *gender*, which has been used since the mid-1970s in opposition to the term *sex*, by way of demonstrating the distinction between culture and nature in the construction of the human gender/sex.²⁰ Despite the popularity of the term, however, there is one aspect of its meaning that is rarely articulated, perhaps because its linguistic implications may be lost on the average English-speaker.

In most European languages, nouns (any noun, including those that have no biological/sexual function) are gendered (masculine, feminine, or neuter). As these gender attributions differ from one language to another (e.g., *la table* [Fr.]—feminine; *der Tisch* [Ger.]—masculine), the grammatical origin of the concept is a reminder of the arbitrary and relative—and therefore not fixed in any metaphysical essence—nature of the linguistic classification into masculine and feminine. As such, gender is unessentialist, by definition, and helpful in constructing a dichotomy between nature (*sex*) and culture (*gender*).²¹

In Hebrew, such a dichotomy does not exist. There is no equivalent of "gender" in Hebrew grammar books; there is only "sex." The word *min* covers both "sex" and "gender," with the result that Hebrew-speakers are not necessarily aware of the difference. When the reinvestment of "gender" with its contemporary feminist sense did reach Israel, a few years ago, a frantic search for a new word began. *Minaniyut* soon gave way to *migdar*, which has been accepted in the last year or two as a translation of "gender." The problem is that the root base of this neologism, *g-d-r* (fence, boundary, definition), covers just one aspect of the newly invented

“gender”—its description of the division of gender roles between the sexes. This meaning, often used by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists, paradoxically makes *migdar* sound almost as if it were the opposite of “gender” in the grammatical sense: it tends to convey the meaning of a division of roles that is defined and fenced in by sex, losing in the process the cultural relativity implied by grammatical gender classifications.

The solution? Here is where Ben Yehuda’s linguistic acumen comes to our aid. Let us listen again to one of her disclaimers, especially the one quoted in our epigraph: “I was surrounded by many males [*zekharim*] who were much worse than me. Much more “feminine” [*nekevot*] than me. I used to call them *hanekevim ha’eleh*.”

However, in the epigraph, I have translated the final noun of this passage, *nekevim*, by an equally made-up word, *feminus*, attempting to convey, even partially, the poignancy of Ben Yehuda’s Hebrew neologism. The original word is an untranslatable play on two gender-related issues that are specific to Hebrew vocabulary and grammar: on the one hand, a lack of lexical distinction between “female” and “feminine,” which are both represented by the word *nekevah* (whereas both “male” and “masculine” are represented by *zakhar*); on the other hand, the consistent morphological distinction between the sexes by means of a transparent marking, especially in the plural cases.

As a rule, plural feminine nouns end with the suffix *ot*, while plural masculine nouns end with the suffix *im*. Since every Hebrew noun is gendered as m. or f. (there is no neuter in Hebrew, a “sex maniac” language, as poet Yona Wallach labeled it), this morphological sexual difference is ingrained in the mind of the native Hebrew-speaker. The subversiveness of Ben Yehuda’s neologism, *nekevim*, is therefore in evidence. By appending the opposite-sex suffix to the noun that means female/feminine, she signals a disjunction between one’s biological sex (in this case masculine, as implied by the ending *im*) and one’s “feminine”—that is, weak—performance in military matters, namely, in “that particular aspect that preoccupied us at the time—the war.”

That this linguistic analysis may open up, rather than seal, an essentialist can of worms, is clear. Yet before we get into this complex problem, a word about my translation choices is in order: As the reader of this study is probably aware, English

does not offer any morphological equivalent to Hebrew gendered suffixes. Hence, I have no choice but to fall back on Latin suffixes, which I append to Latin root bases common in English (*femina* and *homo*). To reproduce the neologist effect of the original, I criss-cross the respective Latin suffixes of these words. Since in Latin, the singular suffix is much more manifest than the plural (*a* for feminine and *us* for masculine), I have substituted a hybrid formation of the singular for Ben Yehuda's plural forms. Hence, her *nekevim* is represented by *feminus*, while her *zekbarot* (which we encounter below) is represented by the singular *homina*.

With this technical difficulty behind us, we may now turn to the larger picture. In her Palmach trilogy, Ben Yehuda has made a curious lexical choice, one that made many readers wince: of all the pairs of nouns applicable to humans (men/women; guys/dolls; boys/girls; *hayalim/hayalot* [m. soldiers/f. soldiers]; etc.), she has chosen by and large to refer to her fellow Palmachniks by the pair of terms *zakhar/nekevah*. For the English-speaker, this pair is the equivalent of both male/female and masculine/feminine. But for the Hebrew-reader, the immediate association of this pair is that of the grammar book or the dictionary (that is, masculine/feminine), often in the abbreviated form *z/n* (= m./f.). As such, the use of this grammatical terminology may be seen as the least humane and most sexist way to relate to one's fellow comrades, essentially reducing their identity to sexual difference. This possible connotation is exacerbated by the derogatory use of *nekeva* in Yiddish (*nekeve*)—a usage that may be alive for many contemporary readers, but was apparently less so for the young members of the Palmach. Bracketing this last objection, I suggest another interpretation of Ben Yehuda's use of *z/n*: this is, of course, the only pair of terms that can be applied to any noun, including nouns with no biological sex. In other words, *z/n* is the closest that Hebrew can come to the connotations of arbitrariness and relativity implied by grammatical gender.

Add to this the androgynous resonance of the first biblical human pair (*zakhar unkevah bara otam*, Gen 1:27), and the further use to which Ben Yehuda puts her Hebrew gender is quite clear. By manipulating its form, she throws a monkey wrench into the sex/gender unity of the Hebrew lexicon. Moreover, she inadvertently deconstructs the sexual dichotomy, exposing the lack of fit between the linguistic sign and its sexual signifieds, between the connotation of a given appellation and the functioning of its bearer in the real world. If, in her first book,

she undermined the masculinity of her male peers, creating the neologism *nekevim* (s. *feminus*), in her second book, *Through the Binding Ropes*, she took a further step: she counted the many ways by which female fighters, the *zekharot* (s. *homina*), mimicked the soldierly trimmings of their male peers, sporting a man-like (L. *homo*) gender performance.²²

This process of emptying out the gender content of linguistic signs reaches its climax when the narrator of *Through the Binding Ropes*, now serving in headquarters rather than on the front line, is asked to organize—“the first time in the history of the Palmach”—the registry of its membership:

Suddenly, we found ourselves in a bind, the first time in the history of the Palmach: we needed to go over name by name and decide: Is he a fighter or not. Is he “girls” or not. . . . This was how we discovered that [the category] “fighters” has some girls in it; that [the category] “girls” (services) has too many [persons] in general; and, most important, that many of [the “girls”] are boys. (1985, p. 89)

The irony speaks for itself, as does the author’s intuitive use of quotation marks as a signal of disjunction between the linguistic sign and reality: “girls” (*banot*), which—in a blatant sexist manner—stands for “services” (the explanatory parentheses around “services” appear in the original), turns out to have too many “boys.” The final implication of this discovery is troublesome and deals a blow to the Palmach myth: “In general, it turned out that “fighters” had the fewest people, and they were much too few in the face of the challenges that lay ahead of us” (ibid.).

To call this “a woman’s charge sheet” (*ktav ashmah nashi*), as did one reviewer (apparently, with the best of intentions),²³ is to miss the mark. This is a sweeping revision, a deconstruction of a generational myth that is shown to be more rhetoric than fact.

In truth, this is just the beginning of the revision, the tip of the iceberg. The linguistic games that capture our imagination (or threaten us) only camouflage Ben Yehuda’s deeper revisionism. This revisionism is located elsewhere—in her exceptional ability to observe and articulate the changes that took place in her own mind while the fighting was still going on. It was this gift, or curse, that turned her early

on into an observer, even as she was fully participating in the notorious collectivity, the first-person plural of her peer group.

The first step in this process takes place immediately after the success of the ambush we described in this essay's opening paragraphs. The target of this ambush was "the bus of the *najjada*—the Arab Defense Forces, which used to go every morning from their base in the Hula Valley . . . to their bases up in the Galilee" (1981, p. 144). To her surprise,

It became clear to me that I do not at all feel like taking pride in this business. All my life, I was confident that I would be very proud, but I am not. Never mind what took place. Human beings died—so I do not want to be proud of this. The whole story is totally different. It is totally different when someone really gets killed. (p. 161)

It is this sober correction of the romantic myth of military heroism that was applauded by Dan Miron, a first-rate commentator on Israeli culture who has devoted some of his scholarly attention to the literature of the Palmach.²⁴ His approval of Ben Yehuda's revisionist view of what has become an integral part of the Israeli national narrative was hedged by a qualification, however: "Had It Been Written Then [*bizmano*]" is the title of a 1983 essay in which he justly questions the three decades of silence that Ben Yehuda had imposed upon herself. He rightly points out how much more effective her story would have been then.

Ben Yehuda's narrative had countered this charge, however, even before it was made. As she clearly describes it, her dissension was promptly suppressed:

I decided one thing: not to get it out of my mouth. This is no time for critical discussions [*yemei 'iyun*]. I need to swallow them. I can't erase them, but at least I can put them aside, so that they don't interrupt. . . . When everything is over, I can come back to them; can deal with them then. (p. 163)

On first blush, we may think of this process of repression as a universal reaction, typical during any time of pressure; as a necessary defense under duress

that is in no way related to the tip of the iceberg, to the entertaining deconstruction of the Hebrew gender signifiers proffered above. But this is not the case. The narrator's decision to suppress her feelings does not come naturally. It is the result of a Zionist "sermon" delivered to her by one of her father figures, a friend of her parents, who happens to be around at her moment of weakness. His rebuke, as she relates it, is rather extreme. It recapitulates the familiar Zionist dogma, structuring the image of a New Hebrew Man around the dichotomy of a strong, liberated, healthy, "normal" man (*adam* = human being?), vis-à-vis the weak, cowardly, dependent Diaspora Jew (pp. 162–63). It tiresomely invokes the long history of Jewish passivity, of the Diasporic inability to use weapons effectively, as the anathema of the new Zionist man.

In Hebrew, the gender of the subjects of his sermon, the good Jew as well as the bad Jew, is masculine, of course. It is the generalized masculine, the one that is said to cover both genders (e.g., *adam*). His final censure, however, falls back on gender distinction, thereby exposing one of the oldest antisemitic slurs that is no doubt hiding behind its better-known cousin, the Zionist dichotomy outlined above: "If you cannot be like [the New Hebrew Man], either you are a woman, or you are a Diaspora-kike [f.]" (p. 162).²⁵

Who in her right mind would want to be a woman under such heavy accusations? Who would want to express feelings? To tell anything? "I need to be strong. And stronger. But strong people do not talk. Strong people keep silent," is the immediate conclusion.

So Netiva Ben Yehuda continued to keep her silence, keeping her strength intact for more than thirty years—or so she thought. She really needed to be much stronger to relate her full story, the end of which we have not yet reached. We still have not touched its hidden trauma.

In the middle of this very talky book, there are two pages with three drawings, delicate pencil sketches of the topographic variety (pp. 220–21). The first two represent the event of the bus (ambush); the third, double in size (p. 221), tells the story of the event that immediately followed, an event that seems not to want to be told. When finally pieced together, it tells about a young training commander who did not have the courage of her convictions in the face of her superiors, and thus took her trainees to an area that in her judgment was topographically indefensible.

She was right. They were soon surrounded on all sides. With great difficulty, she managed to get her unit out—but one of her braver soldiers paid with his life.

Back in headquarters her commander refused to acknowledge any responsibility. She was censured for her actions—and promptly suffered an emotional breakdown. After ten days in a stupor and with no medical help, she fled the scene, vowing never to return to the line of fire again. The rest of the narrative, spanning three books and hundreds of pages, painstakingly describes not only how she coped with her “shell shock” (Miron), but how she violated her vow—once again risking her life in activities that were barely distinguishable from what is narrowly defined as the front line.

What is missing from this brief outline of the story is the reason for that tragic experience. Why didn't the young officer, fully trained and ready to fight, have the courage to fight for her own opinions? The painful answer, which the author recognizes retrospectively, is that her gender was in the way of reasonable argumentation. It was the (justified) fear that her commanders would not distinguish between her opinions and her genitals that prevented her from airing her objections—the fear that she would be perceived as weak, feminine, like a Diaspora Jew. In other words, despite the almost caricatured presentation of the Zionist sermon she describes, Ben Yehuda admits that she had internalized its very terms (p. 236 et passim). We can only imagine how—throughout all those silent years—this self-destructive internalization was eating away not only at her gender identity, but at her Zionist conscience as well.²⁶

Could Netiva Ben Yehuda have told her version of the New Hebrew Woman “then,” as suggested by Dan Miron? She no doubt could not. Even when she did tell it, three decades later, very few were willing to listen. Perhaps today, after two more decades of feminist-political consciousness-raising, Israeli culture is ready to reevaluate her subversive *divrut* (“speakature”).

NOTES

- This essay constitutes a chapter in my study *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nation in Israeli Women's Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, Gender and Culture series).
- 1 The reference is to the slogans of the new French feminism, especially the early Hélène Cixous; see "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1975): 875–93.
 - 2 The reference is to *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Developments*, ed. E. Abel, M. Hirsch and E. Langland (Hanover, N.H., and London: New England University Press, 1983).
 - 3 D. Ben Amotz and N. Ben Yehuda, *Milon le'ivrit meduberet* (Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1972; part 2, 1982), p. 141.
 - 4 Netiva Ben Yehuda, *1948—Bein hasfirot* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1981); *Miba'ad la'avotot* [Through the binding ropes] (Jerusalem: Domino Press, 1985); *Keshepartsab hamedinah* [When the state broke out] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1991).
 - 5 See Roger Poole, in Mark Hussey, *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality and Myth* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), p. 93.
 - 6 Naomi Margalit, "The Palmach According to Netiva," *Ma'ariv* (29 March 1981), for example, rejects the immediacy of the narrative, claiming that in spite of its effectiveness, it lacks the enriched reevaluation expected after thirty five years; she totally accepts Ben Yehuda's own "judgment," concluding that *Between Calendars* is neither history nor literature. Amela Einat, "The Portrait of an Israeli Macho," *Ha'arets* (30 April 1981), goes even further: it is impossible, she charges, to weave a broad canvas of internal and external impressions on the basis of an elementary language like the one used by Ben Yehuda.
 - 7 Shulamit Or, "Between the Sheaves and the Sword," *Na'amat* (May 1981), calls the book "a literary bombshell," "literature without quotation marks"; Yaron Golan, "The Last Palmachnik," *Davar* (5 June 1981), although critical of the monotony of the narrator's slang, properly evaluates the rhetorical contradictions and the major motifs, and labels the book "a social historical novel," part of the Palmach literature; the title of Miriam Oren's review, "Nevertheless: Real Literature," *Moznayim* (Dec. 1981): 53–55, speaks for itself: she points out correctly the suspense quality of the ostensible associative narration, believing that the author is unaware that "there is method in her madness"; I beg to differ, as I argue below.

More extensive (and fully appreciative) analyses, to which we will return, were offered later by Dan Miron, "Had It Been Written Then," *Siman kri'ah* 16–17 (1983): 519–21; Adah Tzemah, "Three Who Wrote," *ibid.*: 522–29.

- 8 In some reviews of *Miba'ad la'avotot*, attention is given to both the literariness and the “gender trouble” of Ben Yehuda’s project. See especially Hamutal Bar-Yosef, “Several Things At Once—Literature, Too,” *Yedi'ot aḥaronot* (21 April 1985); Yona Bahur, “The Myth-Breaking Slang,” *Ha'aretz* (2 August 1985); Dalia Shehori, “The Youthful and the Not So Beautiful,” *Al hamishmar* (28 June 1985). Less enthusiastic, but still sympathetic to the experiential intensity of the book are Heda Boshes, “An Argument with History,” *Ha'aretz* (20 May 1985); and Shlomo Nitzan, “A Long Accounting with the War,” *Al hamishmar* (29 September 1985).
- 9 See, on this issue, my “Isaac or Oedipus? Jewish Tradition and the Israeli Aqedah,” *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies*, ed. Cheryl Exum and Stephen Moore (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 159–89; and Ruth Kartun-Blum, “Don’t Play Hide and Seek with Mothers: Mother’s Voice and the Binding of Isaac,” *Jerusalem Review* 4, forthcoming.
- 10 Quoted in Avirama Golan, *Al 'atsman* (Women about themselves), thirteen interviews with Israeli women (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1988), p. 17. This response is narrated by the first interviewee, Rahel Barda, who—under the pseudonym MIRKA—is one of the major female protagonists in Ben Yehuda’s narratives, a courageous fighter, “the second woman demolition officer of the Palmach” (Ben Yehuda being the first), who was severely wounded in the war, almost losing her leg.
- 11 See Gil Hovav, “Netiva Ben Yehuda,” an interview, *Kol ha'ir* (26 April 1991): 39–41.
- 12 *Ibid.* We can add to this the personal testimony of a young colleague, Doron Lamm, who responded to my first essay on Ben Yehuda (in Hebrew) with a very vivid and telling anecdote:

In 1978, as an education officer, I called Netiva and asked her to lecture to *kurs ktsinot* [female officers in training] about her 1947–48 experiences, after reading about her in a small book that I once found at a friend’s house. . . . She was totally surprised, and for fifteen minutes was convinced that I was an old friend from the Palmach who was trying to pull her leg. Then she objected, saying that it is too personal and that she never talked about it, “not even to my own daughter.” . . . Finally, I persuaded her to come. When she arrived at the base, she was very agitated. She swore to the Cadets that it was her first (and last) talk on the subject. . . . One of the Cadets had to pour the water into her glass because her hands shook so violently (she is also a highly theatrical figure). She gave a magnificent talk, though it was not as personal as she became later in her books.

At times, I like to flatter myself thinking that this talk served as a catalyst to her willingness to articulate and publish her memories (personal communication, 4 November 1998).

- 13 *Nikhtav betashah*, ed. A. B. Yoffe (Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1989).
- 14 The short list of women includes also the veteran poet Yokheved Bat-Miriam (1902–80), who lost her only son in that war, and Edna Kornfeld, the only writer about whom no biographical information is given, except for the fact that “her poem ‘Pogrom’ is a response to the murder of her husband, Beni Rosenberg” (by an Arab mob, who besieged his car in 1947) and “was reprinted in her book *Eyes at Night* (1954).”
- 15 She adumbrated this charge in a series of programmatic essays, published since the mid-1980s. For a sample English translation, see *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, ed. Naomi Sokoloff et al. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), pp. 235–45.
- 16 See my essay “Feminism under Siege: The Vicarious Selves of Israeli Women Novelists,” *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 493–514.
- 17 Cf. her later anthology, *Autobiography through Songs and Lyrics* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1990). And see Esther Fuchs, “Gender and Characterization in the Palmach Narrative Fiction,” *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 9, C (1986): 179–84.
- 18 In *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), Woolf practiced the cross-gender, androgynous vision that she theorized a year later in *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929). For further discussion, see my study *No Room*, chap. 4.
- 19 See Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1939).
- 20 Although this distinction has already come under attack, I find it useful for the analysis of Ben Yehuda’s dilemma.

For the encouragement to “go beyond gender,” because gender has been found “guilty” of binarism no less than its precursor, sex, see, among the rest, Selya Benabib and Drucilla Cornell, eds., *Feminism as Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

- 21 Cf. de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, pp. 3–5.

- 22 See *Miba'ad la'avotot*, chap. 5, pp. 20–33.
- 23 See Golan, “The Last Palmachnikit.”
- 24 Dan Miron, *Mul ha'aḥ hashotek* (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: The Open University and Keter, 1992).
- 25 Although the identification of the male Jew as feminine goes back to medieval times, it reached new heights in the nineteenth century, when it was “scientifically” rationalized; see on this issue studies by Sander Gilman; Nancy Harrowitz, *Anti-semitism, Misogyny, and the Logic of Cultural Difference* (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). Zionism has no doubt internalized this identification even as it attempted to eradicate its ostensible causes. A case in point is the presence of Otto Weininger’s sexual racism in the works of the proponents of Zionism early in this century (Brenner, Agnon, etc.), as well as in contemporary Israeli fiction. See on this point my “Back to Genesis: Toward the Repressed and Beyond in Israeli Identity,” in *Bakivun hanegdi*, ed. Nitza Ben Dov (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), pp. 204–22; Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Anne Golomb Hoffman, “Bodies and Borders: The Politics of Gender in Contemporary Israeli Fiction,” in *The Boom in Contemporary Israeli Fiction*, ed. Alan Mintz, ed. (Hanover, N.H., and London: University Press of New England and Brandeis University Press, 1997), pp. 35–70.

On the biblical roots of this psychological complex, see my “‘And Rebecca Loved Jacob,’ but Freud Did Not,” in *Freud and Forbidden Knowledge*, ed. Peter Rudnytsky and Ellen Spitz (New York: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 7–35.

- 26 A major theme in the third sequel, *When the State Broke Out*, is the ridicule felt and expressed by the young Palmachniks toward the new immigrant soldiers, who embodied all the negative qualities of the Diaspora Other propagated by the meta-Zionist narrative. Again, Ben Yehuda anticipated here one of the main preoccupations of Israeli scholarship of the last decade.