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FROM WE TO ME: CHANGING VALUES IN ISRAELI POETRY AND SONG

A Comparative Study of the Works of the Modern Israeli Poets Nathan Alterman and Yehuda Amichai

Background

The Israel of today is not that of yesterday. Our society has changed (Almog 2003; 2004). It has moved from one of shared goals and collective responsibility to one which is closer to Western models – more individualistic, self-centered, and striving for self-fulfillment. And yet there is a complex sense in which "we" is "me" and "me" remains "we" (Zabar Ben-Yehoshua 2002; Maslovanti/Iram 2002).

This dichotomy is represented in the poetry of two of Israel's greatest masters of the Modern Hebrew language – Nathan Alterman (1910–1970) and Yehuda Amichai (1924–2000) – as well as music. Often it is the melody, rhythm, harmony, texture – in a word, the style of the music to which the lyrics have been set that projects the ambiance of the poem. The varied styles of music reflect in a non-verbal way the changing tonal inflections of values addressed with a deep, immediate, almost subconscious directness (Yaoz 1994; Eliram 2000).

We – Nathan Alterman

Nathan Alterman's "Shir Ha'Emek" is considered one of the cornerstones of Israeli popular song. It seems to have been born on the kibbutz. It is a lullaby to the land.

Rest comes to the weary
Relaxation to the fatigued.
A pale night descends
On the fields of Emek Yizrael.
Dew from below and moonlight from above
From Beth Alfa to Nahalal.

The lyrics were set to music by a newcomer, Daniel Sambursky (1909–1977), a composer and teacher who was born in Danzig (Gdańsk), Poland, and arrived in Israel in 1933. He led group singing at the Brener House and over the radio during the formative period before statehood, from 1935 to 1950. Two elements made this tune a sing-a-long favorite and an Israeli original. One is the subtle use of syncopated "hora" rhythm (` - ` - -), which made the subconscious statement "this is a song made for a group." A second element is the Dorian modality, neither major nor minor, that said "this is a song from Eretz Israel" (Eliram 2000).

Hora – a dance

While Shir Ha'Emek is not a hora per se, it draws upon it. The most popular and characteristic circle dance of the Yishuv became a symbol of the pioneer spirit – the renewal of Jewish life in Palestine. Its origins are many: Hassidic dance, Romania, even ancient Greek. In all cultures from primitive times, circle dances endow the individual with the strength which derives from group unity. The circular motion with neither beginning nor end represents eternity. Whenever the syncopated, quadruple rhythm of the hora is introduced into a song the connotation of shared experience is clear (Eliram 2001).

Shir Boker – a march

Another collaboration between Alterman and Sambursky yielded "Shir Boker," a march written on the eve of World War II. Besides hora, the march is a characteristic musical style of the period, implying "we are marching towards our goal together." While marches have been known since ancient times, in the military they were meant to coordinate the movement of large numbers of soldiers. Since Napoleon the march has come to have heroic, sacrificial, and nationalistic connotations. The dotted-note rhythm in "Shir Boker" is found in the "Marseillaise" as well as the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." In Palestine it was less military than goal-oriented – marching together to plow the fields, dry the swamps, and defend the land (http://www.songs.co.il/artist.asp).

The sun is burning on the mountains
While in the valley the dew glistens.
We love you our homeland,
In joy, in song, in work.
From the slopes of Lebanon to the Dead Sea
We will cross you with the plow.
We will yet plant you and build you.
We will greatly beautify you…
If the way is hard and treacherous
If more than one falls by the way
Forever we love you our homeland
We are yours in battle and in work.

From where does this confident optimism spring? In this song we find over and over again that the phrases begin with the first person plural "we" – an expression of the collective. With the shared efforts of the group we bore through rock, we dry the swamps, we work, we plant, we beautify and make the land flower (Eliram 1995; 2001). Such phrases express the love, joy and satisfaction in doing something for the homeland. More than this they express the **faith**, **confidence** and **resolve** in their **own ability** to achieve this goal (Almog 2004). It is a desire for a new future for the new Jew, willing to pay the price individually for its fulfillment. "This is the way, there is no other!" (Eliram 1995; 2000; 2001)

Also expressed is the harmonious relationship between man, nature and the land. The sun shines, the dew sparkles. It is an atmosphere of renewal. A new dawn is breaking; the fields will be redeemed by a new man who has returned to the soil. Not since the biblical Song of Songs has nature imagery returned to Hebrew poetry. (Zion is likened to a woman in love, ready to give without asking in return.)

These optimistic, confident songs from the pre-State period look forward to a nation in the process of becoming with a good morale. They draw upon an idealistic Zionist orientation of solidarity.

We – Nathan Alterman

Nathan Alterman came to Israel with his family in 1925 at the age of 15. He had spent his childhood in Warsaw, where his father managed a kindergarten for Jewish children. Undoubtedly, he was influenced by the Hebrew rhymes his father would make up for the children. He spent some of the years of World War I and the Revolution in Russia. His youth was spent in Tel Aviv in the late 1920s and 1930s. He returned to Europe, though, to study agriculture in France, until his hobby became a profession. His songs often deal with basic Eretz Yisrael values: the survival of the individual, and survival of the people. Some term him a visionary poet with an independent faith in what life ought to be, and values which are more than life itself (Zilberstein/Zabar-Ben Yehoshua 1999).

A well-known colleague, Moshe Shamir, wrote in the article "The Poet as Leader:"

> The popularity of Alterman had many sides, as did his writing and personality. It is doubtful if there is another in the history of Hebrew letters akin to him. He expressed the feeling of the masses. He was accepted by the youth for his song lyrics which extended over many years. Alterman was one of the few poets who influenced society, the nation, and the State.

The "Seventh Column" was a title of his own creation, which gave him a platform as a national poet for the founding generation of the State, in the actual sense of the word. His poems served as testimony to the generation of fighters in the period of the British Mandate and the War of Independence. For 33 years, from 1934 to 1967, the poet Nathan Alterman wrote over 1000 columns of current events, most of them rhyming, for two newspapers: *Davar*, in the aforementioned "Seventh Column," and *Ha'aretz*, in the leisure section. One of his best-known poems was "The Silver Platter," which was printed in *Davar* on Friday, December 19, 1947, only three weeks after November 29th 1947, the date of the UN decision to establish the State – casualties from the Independence War that broke out were heavy. Alterman's column was based on current events and remarks from the speeches of political leaders.

Song – "The Silver Platter"

The name of the poem "The Silver Platter" is based on a phrase made by the President of the World Zionist Federation, Professor Chaim Weitzman: "A State is not handed to a people on a silver platter" (Alterman 1998).

The Earth grows still
The lurid sky slowly pales…
A girl and boy step forward
And slowly walk before the waiting nation…
Silently the two approach
And stand
Are they of the quick or of the dead?
Through wondering tears the people stare.
"Who are you, the silent two?"
And they reply: "We are the silver platter
Upon which the Jewish State was served to you."

The poem became a cultural symbol. Alterman creates a powerful dialogue between the nation and the individual. It is the image of a boy and girl who **walk slowly** with a single resolve to protect the homeland. It is not clear if they are alive or dead. The nation stands by unable to utter a sound. With mixed emotions the people ask "Who are you?" The youths reply "We are the silver platter on which is given the Jewish State."

The musical setting to the poem is in triple time and resembles a slow waltz, but it is not a waltz. It is a march in triple time (``` ``` ```). Such marches were prevalent in France before the revolution. One stately step was taken to a bar of three beats.

Perhaps the composer Nahum Heimann (born in Riga, 1934) had the image of "walking slowly" in mind when he chose this kind of pace, for he had spent some time in Paris during his journeyman days. Heimann came to Israel on the eve of World War II in 1939. He grew up in Tel Aviv, but after high school chose to live on a kibbutz. Later he spent a number of years abroad as a film composer in Paris, London and the US before returning to Israel. Ten years younger than Alterman, he set "The Silver Patter" in his twenties.

Some say three-quarter time is never dangerous. Perhaps instinctively he utilized this meter to express the innocence of youth against the awesome price of Statehood. The accompaniment, while an Israeli mix of elements, confirms the character of the slow march idea by introducing a military snare drum triplet rhythm and trumpet calls in the background of the final verse of the poem (Hirshberg 2005; Eliram 2006).

Me – Yehuda Amichai

Yehuda Amichai (1924–2000) was born in Germany and arrived in Israel with his family in 1935. During World War II he served in the British Army's Jewish Legion. During the War of Independence he served in the Palmach, the elite fighting force of the Yishuv, and participated in brutal battles and skirmishes. These experiences found expression in his poetry. Amichai studied literature and Bible at the Hebrew University. He taught in public schools, and in higher academic frameworks abroad. In 1982 he received the Israel Prize for his writing. His style is deceptively simple. It is phrased in everyday language, yet it surprises with its sensitivity to nuance and precision. His poems are considered among the best of Modern Hebrew and are translated into 33 languages.

Amichai's relationship to the national experience is existential. He rejects the role of prophet and visionary. "The poet is a person, just like anyone else expressing the individual thought of every one of us", he writes (Bloch/Mitchell 1986; 1996).

Song – Sabbath Eve

His poem "Sabbath Eve" is characteristic of his sense of individual perspective on overwhelming reality. It is a love song in time of war. It is voiced in the feminine, a personal reflection, an inner desire for warmth in a world dominated by work, duty and obligation. It addresses intimate human needs and concerns.

Will you come to me tonight?
The clothes are already on the line.
The endless war that never ceases
Is now in another place.

"Sabbath Eve" was set as a ballad by Moshe Wilensky (1910–1997), one of Israel's veteran song writers and theater composers and arrangers. He arrived in Palestine in 1933 after graduating from the Warsaw Conservatory as a composer-conductor. A solo songstress, Nurit Galron, sings to a single guitar in this intimate interpretation. The atmosphere is laden with melancholy and personal feelings. The hopes and ambitions of the nation are somewhere outside. We are in the world of a woman longing for her man, who is either preoccupied with work or off to war. The sense of longing is highlighted by Wilensky in the frequent twists of melody, shifting bitter sweetly between major and minor, as expressions of wishes fulfilled and dreams deferred (http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs).

A comparison

The differences between Alterman's Hebrew "Modernism" and Amihai's "Post Modernism" may be seen as a comparison between the collective and the individual. These attitudes may be seen as a crisis of values: faith verses cynicism, confidence (which enabled nation-building) in contrast to the (endless questioning and) doubt (which seems to lead to national disintegration).

While both the songs cited above deal with national issues (i.e. war, nation, responsibility), "Shir Boker" is an expression of optimism, whereas "Sabbath Eve" touches on melancholy. "The Silver Platter" depicts a boy and a girl as symbols of self-sacrifice, while "Sabbath Eve" portrays men and women longing for indulgence.

Irony and traditional Jewish sources

The traditional "El Maleh Rachamim" is a prayer for the dead. A prayer of deep devotion, it is chanted at burial services and at public memorial commemoration ceremonies, for victims of the Holocaust as well as terrorist attacks. It originated in the

Jewish communities of Western and Eastern Europe, where it was recited for the martyrs of the Crusades and the Chmielnicki massacres. Because the prayer is considered holy and is included in the liturgy, there is an element of sacrilege and Israeli "chutzpah" involved in drawing upon it as a subject for poetry.

Amichai's is a prayer for the living. It plays with the assonance of the Hebrew language and creates a completely different, personal, existential – perhaps agnostic expression which seems to tear at the poet's soul. While the original is eternal, timeless, the perspective of Amichai is contemporary, timely, now. He is reacting to Israel's wars with the Arabs and terrorist attacks. He sees God in his own particular frame and asks "Why don't you give mercy here to those of us on earth, so that we may be spared the horror and tragedy of constantly living as a society in mourning, from one memorial ceremony to the next?"

All merciful God
Were it not that you were so full of mercy
Perhaps there would be mercy in the world
And not just with you.
I who have picked flowers in the mountains
And looked into the valleys,
I who dragged corpses from hills,
I know to tell that the world is devoid of mercy

Israeli singer-composer Shlomo Gronich (1949) intones the modern prayer, not in the solemn, dignified atmosphere of the synagogue, but in the easy-listening style of the nightclub. His rendition combines a speaking-singing style with Romanian gypsy melisma. Gronich accompanies himself, punctuating his cries with jazz chords at the piano. It is the setting and the thought of the philosophical fatalist, not the ceremonial rendition of Tradition, which speaks to us: "One glimpse of It within the Tavern caught, Better than in the Temple lost outright" (*The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, LVI).

Is this the modern secular Israeli, a disenfranchised individual no longer tied to Tradition but still arguing with God? Or perhaps it is a salon singer's version of Hassidic Rabbi Levi from Berdichev. Here is an expression of a sense of tragic fatality unredeemed by the hopes of Messianic visions that hover over contemporary Israeli society.

Contrasts and comparisons

What distinguishes Amichai's prosaic vision from Alterman's idealistic one is not the content of the poetry, but rather its attitude, the direction of the thought, the way he views reality. Amichai seeks existence and quiet over sacrifice and heroism. He justifies the everyday. It contains a little of everything (i.e. community, giving, death). But he is ready to trade identity for comfort. He carries on an ironic dialogue with Tradition. His work is popular with the generation of sabras born since the 1950s.

One of the symbols of the Palmach generation is sacrifice. In Judaism death is not a value. It has a meaning, though, if it is for a purpose. Many of the founding generation find truth in Alterman's heroic vision and transform sacrifice itself into

something elevated. Amichai protests in the name of life, in the name of the normal, regular flow of everyday happenings. Every war is murder. There is no meaning to war. He accepts only natural death, not elevated, heroic sacrifice (Arend 2000).

The exception proves the rule – "Here ends the day of battle"

If we thought Amichai's desire for the common place of reality had won the day, and that the time for heroism had past, the recent Lebanon War proved us wrong. The heroes and the brave of yesteryear still dwell amongst us. One of them was a recent graduate at the College of Judea and Samaria, Major Roy Klein, who fell in the line of duty by throwing himself on a grenade that had been lobbed toward his soldiers. He absorbed the impact with his body and saved the lives of many around him. Leaping to certain death he was heard to cry out "Sh'ma Yisrael!"

"Here Ends the Day of Battle" is a dirge on the noble death, the death of Saul, the first King of Israel. Alterman wrote it over half a century ago. One of the founders of the Zemer Ivri, Mordecai Zeira (1909, Kiev, aliyah 1924, 1986, Israel) set it as a funeral march. It is the reverse side of "The Silver Platter." It expresses not the **resolve for**, but the **price of** freedom and identity.

The day of battle and its eve ends.
A day full of cries of escape.
The King fell on his sword this day.
And Giboa wore defeat.
And in the land, until dawn
The gallop of the fleeing was heard.
And the reins of the fastest horse were covered with blood.
The messengers relayed that the battle was lost.
The day of battle and its eve ends.
The King fell on his sword.

The song is a heroic elegy of Biblical and Classical proportions (i.e. Bible, *Iliad*). It is a metaphor for all those who gave the last measure of devotion in battle and failed. Zeira clothes the poem in a minor tonality. The solemn awesome quality of defeat is marked by the deep tones of the trombone and field drums. We hear long drawn-out dactyl rhythms, and elongated dotted-not values.

Conclusion

"Zemer Ivri" is for many the Talmud of our time, a kind of supra-legal repertoire and behavioral code. It mirrors popular attitudes and social values, and confirms shared feelings and experiences for generations of Israelis. Among the subjects addressed are: relationship to the homeland, willingness to act, to sacrifice, to fight if need be for her. This readiness is expressed in the collective voice "We."

Israel's modern popular folk song (*zemer ivri*) is unique in the folk traditions of the world in that it is not the creation of an anonymous collective, nor of an illiterate peasantry. Rather it is the creation of urban, cosmopolitan, and educated individuals who have lived the Israeli experience. What makes their work popular-folk music, then? If there is an answer, it is in the quality of their identification with the people, as a collective and as individuals. This song has become both an expression and a framer of popular consciousness, capturing fleeting ideas, emotions, and moods prevalent in the various periods, trials and tribulations. The story of Modern Israel is written in song (Eliram 2006).

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