

# Towards a Hebrew Literature

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Hebrew literature has a character that is its own. There is a special way, a Hebrew one, of telling a story. A writer who writes this way writes Hebrew literature; one who does not, even if he is writing in Hebrew, cannot produce Hebrew literature. The novels and stories written in Israel over the last generation have abandoned this approach: With each passing decade, Israeli literature has grown more distant from its Hebrew literary roots, and today it is more estranged from this legacy than ever before.

In speaking of Hebrew literature, I do not mean to use this term as it is often used, to refer simply to works that have been composed in the Hebrew language. Likewise, I am not following those scholars who consider “Hebrew literature” to be essentially synonymous with “Jewish literature,” those who expand it to include anything written by Jews,<sup>1</sup> or those who use the term to refer to traditional Jewish religious literature. All of these definitions ignore the unique literary qualities that form the heart of the Hebrew literary tradition. Hebrew literature, for my purposes, refers to literature that employs a particular kind of poetics—that is, a certain artistic strategy for writing—of which the biblical narrative constitutes the first, but by no means only, example. The application of this strategy is not limited to

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works composed in Hebrew. The writings of Leo Tolstoy, for example, can be considered more “Hebrew” than those of Marcel Proust, because the former adopted a literary approach more in keeping with the Hebrew poetic tradition than did the latter.

The nature of Hebrew literature is not simply an academic matter, as its implications reach to the heart of Jewish cultural and national identity. For the essence of Jewish identity is not ethnic, religious or lingual—but literary.<sup>2</sup> The literature that we have created, beginning with the Bible, is the foundation of our common heritage, the essential inheritance which every generation of Jews must interpret and build upon before passing it on to the next. The claim that our Jewish national identity is founded on our textual tradition—rather than on ethnic or religious commonality—is not a new one, having been made quite compellingly during the past century by writers such as Ahad Ha’am, Haim Nahman Bialik and Gershom Scholem.<sup>3</sup> They were not specific enough, however, since they spoke of texts in general, not of literature. It is important, therefore, to clarify the point: The nucleus of our textual heritage is to be found in literary stories, rather than in the halachic, philosophical, lyrical or mystical writings that have also been part of the Jewish corpus.

What is Hebrew literature? In its essence, Hebrew literature is *historical, national, deed-based narrative prose*. In other words, it is narrative prose that is based on an understanding of time as the flow of history, of man as part of a nation, and of reality as a series of actions rather than a constellation of objects in space.

Narrative prose is the authentic form of Hebrew literature. Jews have always written philosophy, poetry and plays, but these literary genres were adopted from other cultures. Narrative prose, as a cultural preference, is the innovation of the Bible. This revolutionary decision was a critical element of the monotheistic revolution of Hebrew culture. Unlike the writings of the other cultures in antiquity, the Bible could only have been written in prose. Its message was, in no small measure, its narrative style; its form expressed its content.

Prior to the Bible, narrative prose was relegated to the margins of human culture. Literature consisted almost entirely of epic and lyric poetry, or of

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plays which were written as poetry. Although the Egyptians wrote some works of prose, their importance was negligible in a culture whose mythology was expressed primarily through monumental architecture and visual art. As far as we know, the Sumerians, Assyrians and Babylonians did not compose a single work of literary prose. The only literary prose left to us by the Greeks was written centuries after the Bible had been completed, after their culture had already declined, in the first centuries of the common era.<sup>4</sup> The Chinese, who wrote copious poetry beginning in the fourth century B.C.E., discovered prose only a thousand years later, during the period that was parallel to the European Middle Ages; they began to take it seriously as an art form only around the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> The Japanese, who likewise wrote poetry from the dawn of their civilization, discovered literary prose in the late tenth century C.E.<sup>6</sup> Islamic culture, which inherited the pagan poetry that had been widespread in the Arab world before Muhammad, and which was tied to poetry in all the phases of its development, encountered prose only in the Abasid period (between the eighth and thirteenth centuries), and even then as an inferior genre used merely for popular entertainment.<sup>7</sup> The ancient Indians wrote poetry and philosophy, if such a distinction can be made between the two genres in their writing; their early compositions are ritual religious psalms (the four *Vedas*); the premier creation of their classical culture, the *Mahabharata* (assumed to be contemporary with the Bible), is an epic poem, as is the other great exemplar of that period, the *Ramayana*. The Indians turned to narrative prose only in the first centuries of the common era, with the rise of Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> Their apathy with regard to history and its writing is consistent with their predilection for poetry rather than prose.<sup>9</sup>

Why was prose, which in contemporary culture is more closely identified with “literature” than any other genre, passed over by the ancient world? This was not a matter of “oversight,” or of the vagaries of taste. It was, rather, a cultural decision reflecting the worldview that was prevalent in the ancient world—a worldview that prose was simply ill-suited to express.

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## II

In ancient times, pagan societies understood the various phenomena of reality as deriving from a single supreme principle, a cosmic rule that dictated everything (the *ma'at* of the Egyptians, the *brahman* of the Indians, and the *moira* of the Greeks are examples). Their many gods were viewed not as independent powers, but as diverse embodiments of this eternal rule. Polytheism, contrary to popular belief, was based on a monistic conception that regarded natural phenomena as constituting the entirety of reality, in accordance with the absolute cosmic rule. And this, simply put, does not make for good narrative: There is no *story* to be found in the eternal, static “absolute.” It does not act, but simply is. Its essence cannot be linked to any plot. The literary genre best suited for expressing what is essentially a pantheistic worldview, which perceives time as eternal repetition and nature as the object of sensual worship, is not narrative prose, but poetry.

The pagan way of life is a never-ending cycle of poetry. Pagan civilization is a reflection of the laws of nature, an application on earth of the cosmic order. Life under the rule of nature is an endless repetition of day and night, of the seasons of the year, of the lunar cycle, and all that these entail: The high and low tides of the seas, the ebb and flow of the rivers, the migration of birds, the mating seasons of animals, the planting and harvesting of crops. Pagan cultures were totally dependent on the rivers: The Nile, the Euphrates and the Tigris, the Ganges and the Indus, upon whose banks they lived and flourished. Their indefatigable interest in the movement of heavenly bodies was no mere intellectual hobby, but part of their struggle for survival, which depended heavily on the effects of the sun and the moon. These were societies for which the earth was the object not only of agricultural labor, but also of religious worship. The perception of nature as an immutable set of rules, and of the universe as an all-encompassing order that governs not only the earth but the gods as well, gave birth in these cultures to a wellspring of

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scientific inquiry, in fields as diverse as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, astrology, logic, spatial and architectural engineering, and acoustics. Science, like poetry, is the fruit of paganism.

In its practical dimension, pagan science gave birth to technology. As a theoretical pursuit, it produced philosophy. The breathtaking physical achievements of the Egyptians, Babylonians, Mayans and Chinese included the construction of great temples and planetariums, the production of weapons and means of transport, sophisticated methods of irrigation, and the embalming of corpses. Their theoretical inclinations found expression in the abstract, logical and metaphysical discourse that developed in Greece and India. If all reality reflected a mysterious, eternal set of laws, then it was through conceptual abstraction that these cultures sought to understand it. The pagan philosopher, as Aristotle explained, was not interested in the question of why, in a certain year, rain suddenly fell in the summer in a place where the rains generally come only in winter, but rather of why it tends to rain in the winter. The philosopher was uninterested in the exceptional, the singular, the historical. He dealt with the eternal.

But it is precisely questions such as why it rained in a given summer that are dealt with in the biblical narrative. The pagans left such questions untouched, because pagan culture found meaning not in deviations from nature's norm, but in the norm itself. For the biblical narrative, however, *only* events such as these are worthy of mention, because only in singular, anomalous events—those which, taken together, we call “history”—is the will of God revealed. The Bible does not deny, of course, the regularities of nature. On the contrary: “The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims his handiwork.”<sup>10</sup> All of creation, from the biblical standpoint, arouses a sense of awe; but this amazement differs from the pagan view, which sees nature as supremely important. According to the biblical conception, the created universe is only one of the reasons to marvel at the omnipotence of God. While the heavens declare his glory through their manifest reality, this glory is manifest even more clearly in the rare moments when the natural course of events is disturbed: When God heeds a warrior's call, “Stand still, O sun, at Gibeon,

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O moon, in the valley of Ayalon”; when a baby is born to an elderly couple; when whole cities are destroyed by fire and brimstone from heaven; when a bush burns without being consumed; when the waters of a great river turn to blood; when the sea parts to allow refugees to walk through; when food descends from the heavens like rain; when city walls are felled by the blowing of rams’ horns; when a single man brings down a pagan temple with his bare hands; when a jet of fire descends upon an altar at the command of a prophet; and when a chariot drawn by a team of horses takes a man up to heaven.<sup>11</sup>

The biblical God is not something, as were the *ma’at*, *brahman* and *moira*—but someone; not a “Supreme Being” or the “Absolute,” not the “Unlimited” (*apeiron*) of Anaximander, or the “Idea of Ideas” of Plato, the “Unmoved Mover” of Aristotle, the “One” of Plotinus, or any other monist abstraction. God is not the law, but the lawmaker. He is the Master of the Universe, and his sovereignty is manifest in history.

### III

The biblical message that God is revealed in history cannot be “proven” by philosophical arguments. It is anti-philosophical: It focuses not on conceptual abstractions, but on the specific and unusual; not on the rule, but on the exception. In contrast to the metaphysical “absolute” of the Greeks and Indians, the Hebrew “historical” God is described only through the reports of those who have encountered him—through testament. Prose is the form of verbal expression that best suits a belief in him. God’s involvement in the world is a story; it is a series of his actions as sovereign of the world, both in their earthly, political form (“reward and punishment”) and in their miraculous, otherworldly form (“signs and wonders”). Time itself is directly affected by this perspective. The sense of time revealed in the biblical narrative is not the circular “eternity” of nature, but the linear, irreversible, historical time with which we, as products of Western culture, are so familiar that

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we are liable to forget how foreign this idea was to the pagan cultures of antiquity. History, too, has a history: It begins with the Bible.

And yet, the Bible is no history book. It is literature, a “historical” narrative: Artful prose, infused with a purposive conception of time that was completely absent from the pagan consciousness—even from that of pagan historians like Herodotus and Thucydides. Pagan time is rhythmic. The Greeks inherited the Babylonian division of the day and the night into twelve hours each, and of the circle into 360 degrees. This cyclical division of time into “hours” and of space into “degrees” reflects a worldview that is totally foreign to the Bible: “Day” and “night” are the smallest units of time appearing in Scripture. Hours, minutes and seconds are ideological in nature, reflecting a cyclical, rhythmic consciousness that differs markedly from the linear biblical conception. In a world of repetition, there is no meaningful difference between this summer and last summer. However, if the world was created at a certain moment, as the Bible asserts, then time is not repetition but direction. Pagan time is a circle; biblical time an arrow. No point in time is identical to any other. Every moment has a significance all its own.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of poetics, the difference between linear and circular time finds expression in the literary techniques known as *ab ovo* and *in medias res*. A story which is told *ab ovo* (literally, “from the egg”) begins from the perspective of the earliest moment in the plot, and the reader is carried forward with events; one which is written *in medias res*, however, starts the tale with events already in progress. There has never been a text so radically *ab ovo* as one that begins with the creation of the universe and moves forward over thousands of years of history until the Return to Zion in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. In contrast, works such as the *Odyssey* and *Oedipus Rex* are outstanding examples of *in medias res*. In both of them, the opening scene takes place two decades after the start of events. The reader encounters Odysseus about twenty years after the beginning of the Trojan War, and Oedipus a similar amount of time after he murdered his father and took his mother for a wife. The Greeks abjured the *ab ovo* technique because it expressed a linear, evolutionary perspective that did not fit their worldview. The *in medias res* technique, in contrast, better fit

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the Greek notion of time, which emphasized the intensity of the present moment.<sup>13</sup> The Greeks possessed an intense, ecstatic sense of the present, alien to the continuous, plodding, historical sense of the Hebrews. This contrast between the dense dramatics of *in medias res* and the chronological patience of *ab ovo* also explains the preference for theater in Greek culture, as opposed to the narrative prose chosen by the Hebrews.

The pagans did not have history; what they had instead was chronologies. A chronology is never an arrow, for it lacks direction and purpose. It is an account of events that do not form a significant whole; it is a string of unconnected facts. The walls of the temples and palaces discovered in Egypt and Mesopotamia are covered with dynastic chronicles, the tallies of victories and conquests, as well as bureaucratic records. These chronicles, in contrast to history, do not portray events as leading from one to the next, but as occurring one after another, as a procession of recurring elements. In the chronicle, time marches in place: The kings, military commanders and priests who lead one generation undertake the same types of action as did their predecessors. Only the names change.

The emphasis Herodotus and Thucydides place on single events (Herodotus writes entirely about the war between Greece and Persia, Thucydides about the war between Sparta and Athens) is simply another aspect—although a more sophisticated one—of the same non-linear perspective: There is no history for these “historians,” no attempt to grasp the greater significance of events or to describe them as part of a larger whole; these wars are points isolated in time. In the Bible, however, events of this type are only links in the chain of a causal historical description spanning generations and eras. This linear view of time, which today we identify with the work of historians, is missing in the Greek writings. For them, the study of the “past” means writing about the recent past—a craft that today is practiced by journalists.

The Hebrew Bible is more historical than its Greek counterparts, but, as noted above, writing historical narrative is not the same as writing history. The Bible is not history but literature, because it is concerned not with facts but

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with values. A history book is meant to make the reader more knowledgeable; the Bible, more wise. The former is intended to reconstruct the past; the latter, to fashion the future in light of the past. This does not mean that the Bible “invents the past”; the flood in the time of Noah, the binding of Isaac, the exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai may have happened, or they may not have; if they did, there is no way of telling whether they happened exactly as the Bible portrays them. But such doubts, which would be intolerable in a history book, take nothing away from the value of the biblical narrative.

The fact that the Bible begins with a series of mythic “events” that do not allow for empirical confirmation (Creation, the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, the flood), and that these “events” are woven seamlessly into a story line that also includes realistic historical accounts (the division of Israel into northern and southern kingdoms, the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, the proclamation of Cyrus), demonstrates that the factual, documentary aspect is not what is most important to the narrative. The many stories may well reflect what actually happened to the people of Israel. But the narrative itself, the historical whole in which these scenes are inlaid, is not “historical truth,” just as it is not falsehood. It is literature, and its purpose—like the purpose of any work of art—is not informative but spiritual, relating to values, esthetics and emotions. Even if we choose to read the Bible as a historical document, it is not its “facts” that give us the sense of history, but rather the linear unfolding of its narrative.

#### IV

There is another way in which the “truth” of the Bible differs from that of the historian. The historian’s account is always based on partial information. If he witnessed the event himself, as did Thucydides, Xenophon and Josephus, he can usually see only one side of the picture. If, on the other hand, his own understanding is derived from the testimony of those who

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were there, of their descendants, or of documents they left behind, he will never be able to piece together the entire puzzle. At some point, every historian discovers that not only do the findings not square perfectly; they contradict one another, complicate the picture and raise unanswerable questions. The honest historian is precisely one who appreciates the limits of his work—how restricted he truly is in approaching the past, and how unreliable are the documents, rumors, traditions and other materials that accumulate on his desk. Not only does the fair-minded historian know his own limitations, he acknowledges them in his writing, shares them with the reader, and spells out exactly where the borders lie between fact and speculation.<sup>14</sup>

The biblical narrator, on the other hand, is omniscient. He knows how the world was created, and who created it. He has knowledge of how and why human beings, right and wrong, sex and shame, came into being; how and why languages developed; how and why the flood took place, and how life on earth was saved from extinction at that time. When the narrator relates events as grand as war and politics, or as small as familial and personal rivalry, he knows not only what all the heroes did or said, but also what they thought and felt. When he tells of events that took place simultaneously in different places, he knows, to the same degree of detail, what took place in each. And he presents all of this not as “hypothesis,” “conjecture” or “logical inference,” as does Thucydides, but as plain fact.

It may even be that the term “omniscient” is not strong enough to describe the kind of knowledge possessed by the biblical narrator. This term is generally used to characterize the narrator in realistic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as opposed to the deliberately limited narrator typical of twentieth-century literature. The nineteenth-century “omniscient” narrator, however, “knows” much less than does the biblical narrator. The realistic worldview, and the poetics that reflects it, still restrict the former to what any normal person could know.<sup>15</sup> The biblical narrative, on the other hand, constantly exceeds the bounds of knowledge characteristic of literary realism. Along with its more “historical” tales, the Bible contains enough miracles, angels and violations of the natural order for the book to

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be called fantasy. The biblical narrator, however, intertwines these supernatural events into the narrative without losing his credibility. He tells of the normal and the paranormal in the same matter-of-fact, reportorial manner, and in so doing impresses upon the reader that the text before him, wonders and all, is no fairy tale but rather a “true” story.

How is the effect of “historical truth” achieved in a text so “unrealistic”? In order to understand this, it is worth imagining what the Bible would be like were it written in the first person—“In the beginning, I created the heavens and the earth,” and so on. Would anyone believe it? Would we relate to it seriously? Clearly not. For if the narrator is also the Creator, then he is not only omniscient, but also omnipotent: “I, who created the world, also created this text.” An omnipotent narrator adds nothing to the credibility of the narrative, but rather weakens or even ruins it completely, for an omnipotent narrator can also invent history at will. The text itself would appear to be an invention, and as such could make no claim to truth.<sup>16</sup>

Even historians must assume, on occasion, some degree of literary freedom. Without it, they could never fill the many gaps that are the inevitable result of their limited sources. Even when there is no shortage of historical data, the very effort to interpret and judge it involves a great deal of guesswork, conjecture and inference. In other words, when a historian does not invent data, he at least invents its meaning. The biblical narrator, on the other hand, presents both fact and meaning as historically true, without reservations or disclaimers. The biblical narrator is thus the most authoritative narrator in literary history: Omniscient to a degree never attained before or since, a narrator who claims knowledge beyond any human limitation, but nonetheless insists upon the absolute credibility of every word.<sup>17</sup>

A narrator so authoritative cannot be a private voice. A private voice is a limited one, and as we have seen, even God cannot function as a biblical narrator in the first person without undermining his credibility. Wondrous, far-flung “data” such as are presented throughout the Bible can be taken seriously by the reader only if they are related by an impersonal narrator, who is not bound by any single perspective.

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The “omniscient” narrator of the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century European novel is a very personal storyteller when compared to the narrator of the Bible. There are two reasons for this: First, the interpretive intervention of the modern narrator throughout the story; and second, the personal style that the author fashions for him. This is a narrator who expresses his opinion at every turn, explains to us the significance of events, offers lengthy descriptions of the characters and their motives, and exploits his podium to offer his own prognoses, thoughts and impressions as a “citizen of the world.”<sup>18</sup> This tendency of the author to project himself into the text is completely absent in the Bible. The biblical narrator neither describes nor explains, and he never philosophizes. He presents the events and the actions of the characters, lets us hear the dialogues, and makes it clear that the events are meaningful and interconnected—but leaves us to figure out the meanings and connections for ourselves.

As for literary style, the prose of the nineteenth century, mainly since Gustave Flaubert, is marked by the need to give the narrator a private, unique voice—so much so, that uniqueness of voice became a primary measure of a work’s quality.<sup>19</sup> The biblical narrator, in contrast, has no personal “voice.” Obviously, the Bible employs distinctive norms of the sort necessary for proper, functional writing. But the biblical text was, in all probability, assembled from any number of textual sources and underwent an extended process of compilation from among fragments of myths, genealogies, songs, descriptions of battles, and the like.<sup>20</sup> The result is a kind of stylistic collage: The voice of all Israel of many generations, and of no one in particular, incorporating syntactic, idiomatic and figurative elements that span centuries. Even if Flaubert, Gogol or James had forgone their individual styles and adopted the detached style of the journalism of their day, they could not have approached the impersonality of the biblical text.

The Bible’s stylistic impersonality exceeds even that of the historian. The latter, like the narrator of the nineteenth-century novel, is forever making his presence felt within the text, by assessing probabilities, noting his uncertainty, interpreting data and offering hypotheses. It is precisely through his

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presence in the text that he attempts to unite his data into a coherent pattern without deceiving his reader. Moreover, the successful historian does not write unprocessed “content,” but is extremely careful—no less so than the novelist—in polishing his style, for he knows that no historical tale, no matter how important, will be read if not told in a masterful way.<sup>21</sup> The biblical narrative, on the other hand, with its popular, multi-generational “voice,” achieves the opposite of the “self-expression” which stands at the pinnacle of Western artistic values.<sup>22</sup>

This biblical impersonality is strengthened, moreover, by the anonymity of the author of the Bible’s narrative passages, an anonymity that should not be mistaken for a simple convention of literary antiquity. This was, rather, a cultural choice. Among the Greeks, for whom writing was the way in which intellectual giants sought to immortalize their names, there is no trace of such anonymous authorship.<sup>23</sup> Western culture inherited from Greece the desire for everlasting personal fame. The anonymity of medieval art, as an expression of Christianity, is derived from the Hebrew tradition. Since the Renaissance, however, the anonymous, impersonal, Judeo-Christian esthetic has been abandoned, and Greco-Roman individualism has once again become the foundation of Western art and literature.<sup>24</sup>

## V

Who wrote the Bible? The people of Israel—such is the impression that the biblical narrative succeeds in creating. Regardless of how the text arrived at its present form, the final product presents itself as a popular work, “of the people, by the people and for the people.” Of the people, because almost the entire biblical corpus, from the tales of the Patriarchs to the Return to Zion, is concerned with the formation, wars, successes and failures of the entire Hebrew nation; by the people, because the impersonal style and author’s anonymity create the effect of a public undertaking, or at least an

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undertaking of the professional writers from among the citizens; and for the people, because most of the biblical text, especially the Tora and the prophetic writings, is addressed expressly to the people of Israel.

The Bible's appeal to the people stands in sharp contrast to Western literature, which is directed at the private "reader"—an individual, detaching himself from the world in order to peruse a book in an intimate setting. The Bible was intended to be read aloud in a public setting. "And all the nation saw the thunder and lightning"—the depiction of the revelation at Sinai is reflective of the kind of communication that the entire text is striving to achieve.<sup>25</sup> If there is anything in the Bible that is alien to the spirit of Western literature, it is the public nature of its narrative.<sup>26</sup> Judaism as a whole is characterized by such a public nature, to a degree that has few parallels in other religions and cultures. It is sufficient to mention, for example, the obligation to pray and read the Tora in a *minyan* of ten men, an injunction which, like many other obligations, expresses the communal, public nature of Judaism. The Christian idea of "salvation," the redemption of the individual soul, is far removed from the Jewish concept of "redemption," which Gershom Scholem described as "the liberation of a nation from exile, the restoration of freedom and a vision of a just society."<sup>27</sup>

The national content of the Bible also differs sharply from the individualistic content which Western literature inherited from Greece. The Homeric epics, followed by the Athenian dramas, are not concerned with "the people," but with heroes whose splendid individualism is the essence of their "greatness." The individualistic, anthropocentric worldview of the Greeks—as famously expressed by Protagoras' dictum that "man is the measure of all things"—is diametrically opposed to the call of Isaiah: "Stop glorifying man, who has only breath in his nostrils. For why should he matter?"<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the entire story of the Tower of Babel is a thinly veiled attack on anthropocentrism.

The use of characters' names in the titles of biblical and pagan texts offers a striking illustration of the point. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is concerned solely with the exploits of Gilgamesh; the *Odyssey* tells of an individual named Odysseus; *Antigone* deals with Antigone; *Oedipus Rex* with King Oedipus; *Electra* with Electra. (This theme continues into modern Western literature

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as well,<sup>29</sup> which in the twentieth century focused on the “self” more intently than ever before.<sup>30</sup>) The book of Samuel, in contrast, is not devoted to the prophet Samuel, who is only one of the characters in it, and not even the most central (David is by far the book’s dominant figure); the book of Joshua is scarcely about Joshua son of Nun, but deals primarily with the conquest of the land by the people of Israel; and the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is not concerned with the personality and individual fate of Ezra and Nehemiah, but with the return from the Babylonian exile and the spiritual and material restoration of the Jewish polity in the land of Israel.

Every character in the Bible, no matter how unique and impressive, is but a link in the long national chain. The biography that is set before the reader throughout Scripture is not of any one person, but of a people.<sup>31</sup> We are first told of the circumstances that led to the birth of the nation, in the “pre-historic” chapters of the beginning of Genesis, and afterwards of the adolescence of the people, from Abraham to the descent of the sons of Jacob into Egypt, followed by the nation’s coming of age in the exodus from Egypt, the revelation at Sinai and the conquest of Canaan, and then its political maturation in the transition from a tribal confederation to a centralized kingdom. The individual stories of the binding of Isaac, the political success of Joseph, the survival of Yotam, the madness of Saul, the purges of Yehu and the tactical genius of Mordechai are merely chapters in a larger story. The placement of these independent stories in the broader narrative, and the careful timing with which each is introduced, impart to each of them its own significance.<sup>32</sup>

The Bible’s consciousness is collective, but not collectivist. Individuals have an important role to play. Collectivism, which has appeared throughout history in the form of despotic regimes from Egypt and Mesopotamia to the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, has no room for individuals. Collectivist systems perceive individuals living under them as part of abstract, monolithic “people”; there is no significance to differences in character, talent or opinions among the components of this faceless “proletariat.” The Bible, on the other hand, portrays a series of individual characters, each of whom is a unique human phenomenon. The striking differences among the three Patriarchs,

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among the four Matriarchs, among the twelve sons of Jacob, or among Saul, David and Solomon, are a salient feature of the biblical narrative.

At the same time, these individuals are not individualists. They are, rather, fully and heroically devoted to the national collective. The aspiration to fulfill the needs of the nation is what justifies their ambition as individuals. Their consistent, purposeful and intense dedication of resources to this end reflects not egoistic ambition, but a profound sense of duty. The Bible shows us how the individual is supposed to excel in his own way, and to make his unique contribution on behalf of the community: Joseph as a politician, Moses as a lawgiver, Joshua as a commander, Solomon as a monarch.<sup>33</sup> The communal goal of “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” cannot be realized by repressing the individual’s personality, but by fulfilling it through the placement of unique demands upon his unique character. It is the sense of duty, not an isolated “sense of self,” that enables the individual to realize his hidden capacities, to build and to be built in return.

Duty is expressed in doing, in volitional action. The historical-national message of the Bible, which features a set of characters infused with a sense of obligation, may be delivered only by reporting the deeds of these characters. As a result, the prose of the Bible is the prose of deeds.

## VI

**T**he Bible does not describe; it narrates. It does not perceive reality as a constellation of objects in space, but of deeds in time. Witness, for example, the torrent of activity that begins the narrative of Judah and Tamar in the book of Genesis:

At about that time, Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adulamite whose name was Hira. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and went in unto

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her. She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. Once again she bore a son, and named him Shela; he was at Keziv when she bore him. Judah got a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the eyes of the Eternal, and the Eternal killed him. Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in unto your brother's wife, and perform your levirate duty to her, and provide offspring for your brother." But Onan knew that the seed would not count as his own, and when he went in unto his brother's wife, he let it go to waste on the ground, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. What he did was evil in the eyes of the Eternal, so he killed him as well.<sup>34</sup>

Judah "left," "camped," "saw," "married her," "went in unto her"; his wife "conceived and bore" a son, and Judah "named him": The prevalence of verbs throughout the passage is striking. The location, Adulam, is not described at all, nor are the tents among which the story takes place. We do not know whether these events happen during the day or at night, in summer or winter. There is no physical description of the characters, nor are their personalities depicted. The only intrusion by the narrator into the thoughts of a character ("But Onan knew") is not meant to describe his nature, but rather is a comment necessary for the plot. And when the narrator switches from reporting the action to reporting speech ("Then Judah said to Onan, 'Go in unto your brother's wife...'"), the speech itself is simply a command to perform an action: When a biblical character speaks, he does so in a way that advances the plot.

Moreover, the focus on the deed as the most significant component of reality means that even deeds in the Bible are not described in depth, but are related in the most concise manner possible. In the example above, the tight economy of the biblical Hebrew enables the narrator to compress into a single Hebrew word (e.g., "and he married her"—*vayikabeha*) entire complex sets of action which, if adapted to film, would occupy many minutes on screen. Years upon years, entire lifetimes of some of the characters, are distilled into ten terse verses. There is sufficient dramatic material here to fill

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a series of tragedies in the style of Aeschylus' *Orestia*, or a thick socio-psychological novel. The biblical narrator, however, transmits only what he sees as most important: What happened, and what happened as a result of what happened.

There is no major character in Homer—and, following him, in all of Western literature—whose physical or psychological qualities are not at least minimally described, regardless of whether the description is pertinent to the plot or merely fulfills the author's sense of obligation to the norms of his craft. In the Bible, on the other hand, there is almost no direct description of the leading figures. The actions of a biblical figure *are* his description; the character and his deeds are one and the same.<sup>35</sup>

Even what little description the Bible supplies is presented as a function of the plot, explaining the actions that are undertaken. If we are told that Esau is hairy, that Goliath is a giant, that Samson has long hair or that Bathsheba is beautiful, this is not description for its own sake, but rather gives the reader the minimum information needed to understand the course of events—Esau's hairiness is a critical element in Rebecca's deception of Isaac, Goliath's stature puts David's cunning and bravery in context, Samson's hair is central to Delilah's mischief and his own downfall, and Bathsheba's beauty arouses David's passion. These minimal descriptions say little and suggest much, providing not just mood but meaning to the story. The narrator bothers to mention them only insofar as they contribute to the flow of events.<sup>36</sup>

The Hebrew poetics of action as presented in the Bible is, therefore, anti-naturalist in essence. Naturalism is pagan. As the term implies, naturalism conceives of reality as "nature," not as history. If reality is "nature," then it is something to be described, not narrated. "The nature of things" merits a plastic description in naturalist writing; "human nature" is similarly portrayed in psychological terms.<sup>37</sup> The presentation of naturalistic reality, the "mimesis" to which Western fiction aspires, translates into a superficial, sensual presentation of reality, with its sights, sounds, tastes, smells and texture. This type of writing is absent from the Bible.

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Even Aristotle, who defines the narrative-dramatic mimesis as the representation of action, and not of static objects or character, ultimately adopts a naturalistic perspective; in his view, the purpose of the narrative mimesis is “to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, the final object of mimesis, for Aristotle, is not some event, but the law of nature that dictates “what is possible as being probable or necessary.” The author of a tragedy is not expected to imitate the details of nature, but, according to Aristotle, he is expected to imitate the principles inherent in nature. Although this relates primarily to the essence rather than to details, its motive is no different from that of the naturalist: Representation of nature as it is. “Hence, poetry [that is, tragedy],” Aristotle writes, “is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.”<sup>39</sup>

The Bible, according to this definition, contains only such “singulars,” unique subjects and events from which no general rule may be derived. On the contrary, many of the events depicted in the Bible not only are not “necessary” in terms of the laws of nature, they are improbable in the extreme. The difference between the Greek ethos, which is philosophical, scientific and naturalistic, and the Hebrew ethos, which is narrative, historical and moral, is acutely evident in the dictum of Aristotle. The anti-naturalist poetics of the Bible cannot, therefore, be seen merely as an artistic limitation in comparison to the descriptive freedom adopted by Western literature beginning with Homer—but rather as an artistic decision that expresses the Hebrew worldview.<sup>40</sup>

This unique worldview, whose poetics is realized first and foremost in the biblical narrative, continued to set the tone of Hebrew literature for centuries after the Bible was sealed.

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## VII

The Bible is not a “book.” It is an anthology, a collection of thirty-five different books that were edited and canonized.<sup>41</sup> The questions as to which books were to be included and how they would be organized were answered at a certain point in history, in accordance with ideological, political and institutional considerations. The Bible does not contain an exhaustive collection of all the early Hebrew literature, nor even of that which was available when the Bible was canonized. The Bible is a collection of the works that were considered the very best. By force of its being an anthology, the Bible encourages the continuation of Hebrew literary creativity in light of the poetics that is realized in it. While its very canonization necessarily draws to a close a certain literary era, it does so in a way that does not bring Hebrew literary creativity to an end, but, on the contrary, encourages the Jewish people to continue producing Hebrew literature in accordance with its underlying worldview.

Precisely for this reason, it is impossible to accept the “neo-biblical” tendency to dismiss everything that was written after the Bible as “exilic” and therefore irrelevant.<sup>42</sup> This position does an injustice not only to post-biblical Hebrew literature, but also to the Bible itself, since it misses the point of the canon as a guide for subsequent authors. Scripture is the point of departure for the development of the Hebrew prose that followed it. For thousands of years, Judaism expressed the main elements of its life and belief in narrative prose. It did so in the Talmud, in popular folktales and in Kabbalistic and Hasidic stories. From the Bible on, Judaism held fast to its underlying poetic principles, which set it apart from the world’s other dominant literary genres and set the tone for its own development.

I have defined Hebrew literature as historical, national, deed-based narrative prose, and we have seen the realization of its poetic foundations in the Bible. While the poetics employed in later rabbinic legends, or *agadot*,

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differs markedly from that of the Bible, the former nonetheless employ the same basic approach. An example from the Talmud suffices to make the point:

It was told of Nahum of Gamzu that he was blind in both his eyes, his two hands and his two legs were amputated, his entire body was covered with boils, and he would lie in a rickety house, with the legs of his bed standing in bowls of water to prevent ants from crawling on him. It happened that his students decided to remove the bed [i.e., with him on it] and then clear the belongings out of the house. He said to them, "My children, first clear out the belongings, and then take my bed, for you can be sure that so long as I am in the house, it will not collapse." They cleared out the belongings and then removed his bed, and the house collapsed. His students said to him, "Master, since you are perfectly righteous, why has all this befallen you?" He replied to them, "My children, I have brought all this upon myself. Once I was journeying on the road, to the house of my father-in-law, and I had with me three asses, one laden with food, another with drink, and a third with all manner of delicacies. A poor man came, stopped me on the road, and said to me: 'Master, give me something to eat.' I said to him: 'Wait until I have unloaded something from this ass.' Before I had managed to unload anything from the ass, he died. I went and fell upon him and said: 'May my eyes that had no pity on your eyes become blind; may my hands that had no pity upon your hands be cut off; may my legs that had no pity upon your legs be amputated.' My mind was not put to rest until I added, 'May my entire body be covered with boils.'" They said to him: "Woe unto us to see you in such a state." He answered them: "Woe unto me if you did *not* see me in such a state."<sup>43</sup>

Instead of expressing their views in a theoretical or conceptual fashion, the rabbis spoke through stories. The story of the curse that Nahum of Gamzu inflicted on himself does not present an "argument," for why teach by means of a story that which can be presented as an explicit thesis? Moreover, even within the story, when Nahum's pupils pose a question that invites a theoretical answer, the master responds with another story, without theoretical explanations. Not that the story does not possess meaningful content. One can, of

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course, learn many “lessons” from it, about sympathy for others, coping with suffering, respect for teachers or the magical power of a curse; but we would search in vain in this tale, or in the many talmudic legends like it, for the direct, methodical formulation of the beliefs and opinions of the Sages. They left philosophy for the Greeks, and for Hellenists such as Philo. Instead of systematic doctrine, we find only stories.

The rabbinic legends remain true to the fundamentals of Hebrew narrative. Once again, we have a prose of action, always moving forward with concentrated economy. Like the Bible, the terse dialogues and descriptions amount to simply another type of deed, advancing the plot rather than delaying its development. And again, this is a “public” tale, told by a narrator whose own personality is completely invisible (“It was told of Nahum of Gamzu”). Moreover, like the biblical stories, the rabbinic representation is devoid of vivid naturalistic descriptions of people, places or things. The Sages, like the biblical narrator, focused their stories entirely on deeds, while dramatizing the decisions that led to them, as well as their consequences.

Just as the authors of the Bible did not disregard the pagan world, but borrowed its myths and transformed them, so too the Sages did not ignore the Hellenistic world, but instead incorporated many of its elements in their stories, while drastically altering their meaning. The rabbinic practice of describing God through use of the metaphor of the Greek or Roman “flesh and blood king” (and, similarly, to compare the ministering angels to the king’s commanders, governors and advisors<sup>44</sup>) exemplifies the polemical dimension of this literary form. The *agadot*, like the Bible, were not composed in a cultural vacuum. They reveal an awareness of what neighboring cultures had to offer, a familiarity necessary for anyone attuned to both the risks and rewards inherent in the mingling of these cultures with his own.

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## VIII

The path of Hebrew literature leads from the talmudic *agadot* to the popular Jewish folktales of the early medieval period. The following story, from the community of Salonika in Greece, offers a good example of Hebrew narrative prose as it was passed down through the centuries:

It once happened that a wealthy man abandoned his old father. The young son of the wealthy man found his grandfather shivering from the cold, and he went and told his father. The rich man said to him: "My son, take the torn and worn cloak that is lying in the corner, and give it to the old man, so that he may cover himself with it." The child took the cloak, brought it out to his father's courtyard, spread it out on the ground, and before all the members of the family and the guests, he took a pair of scissors and began to cut the cloak into two. The wealthy man was surprised by this, and he asked him: "What are you doing, my son?" The son replied: "I want to give half of the cloak to your father, and the second half I will keep for you, my dear father, for when you grow old."<sup>45</sup>

At first glance, this appears to be a simple fable, aimed at teaching the importance of honoring one's parents. A second look, however, reveals the story to be more sophisticated. In its few brief sentences, it delivers a complex, ironic message which defies expression through direct moral teaching of the sort that is expressed in the biblical commandment, "Honor your father and mother, that you may live a long life." First, it is not the father who educates his son here, but the son who teaches the father by cutting up the cloak—a fact that turns the commandment of honoring one's parents on its head. Second, the sarcasm in the son's reply ("and the second half I will keep for you, my dear father, for when you grow old") transforms the reward promised by the biblical command ("that you may live a long life") into something of a punishment—of what value is longevity if old age is so

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miserable? Third, the son does not come out of the story blameless, either: Instead of running to his grandfather, who is shivering from cold, and bringing him the cloak he urgently needs, the boy remains in the house in order to teach his father a lesson. It is therefore not so easy for the reader to relate to him—or to the story as a whole—in an unequivocal manner. The subject of the story is clear, but it presents a “message” that is uncertain and troubling—a type of message that stories, unlike the claims of philosophy, are so well-suited to expressing.

The most influential work of the Kabala, the *Zohar*, continued in its own way down the same literary path that began with the Bible and continued with the talmudic legends and popular folktales. Like the Sages of an earlier day, the author of the *Zohar*<sup>46</sup> presents his claims not in the systematic fashion of the philosophers, with whom he was certainly familiar, but in that of the rabbinic storytellers. Using a midrashic style, he incorporates biblical verses and infuses them with new meaning, usually without regard for their original context, and in a manner that makes sense only within the new framework. To study the *Zohar* is to enter the world of the mystical journeys of R. Shimon bar Yohai and his nine disciples. The terms that recur throughout the *Zohar*—the “cave,” the “sanctuaries,” the “sparks” and the “masks”—have no “philosophical” standing; they cannot be exchanged for other, “clearer” terms. They are figurative symbols, metaphorical images drawn from a vision. To read them is to read literature. The *Zohar* does not lecture us regarding mystical enlightenment, but rather tells us of the personal, concrete experience of this illumination and the quest for it, as it was perceived by the heroes of its story:

As they were walking, night fell. They said: “What shall we do? How can we walk in the darkness of night?”... They turned away from the road and sat under a tree. They were sitting and speaking words of Tora, and they did not fall asleep. At midnight they saw under the tree a doe, which passed before them and was crying out and raising its voice. R. Hiya and R. Yose heard and were shocked. They heard a voice, proclaiming, “Students, arise. Sleepers, awaken. Worlds, appear before your master. This voice that went

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forth was painful to the heavenly doe and to the earthly doe....” R. Hiya said: “Now it is really the middle of the night. And this voice is the voice that goes forth and pains the heavenly doe and the earthly doe. As it is written, “The voice of the Eternal causes hinds to calve.”<sup>47</sup> Happy is our lot that we have merited hearing it.”<sup>48</sup>

The “doe” discussed here can mean many things—including, most probably, a reference to either the Divine Presence (*shechina*) awaiting its beloved, or the community of Israel (*knesset yisrael*) awaiting redemption. Both the mystic-erotic meaning and the messianic-national meaning are represented in the “doe,” without taking away from its literal meaning as an animal which “passed before them and was crying out and raising its voice.” This is also the case for the other elements that feature in the narrative: The road, the tree, and the voice that awakens the sleepers are each symbols charged with mystical meaning, each one recurring frequently throughout the *Zohar*. The text, however, never exchanges these narrative “details” for general conceptual terms intended to explain them.<sup>49</sup>

The prose of the *Zohar* does not contain the kind of historical account presented in the earlier Hebrew texts, instead taking the reader to imaginary realms, devoid of any discernible historical context.<sup>50</sup> And yet, the *Zohar* possesses its own kind of historical dimension, which it achieves through constant reference to earlier characters and sources. Many of the narratives of the *Zohar* are adaptations of rabbinic legends, and even its more original stories are by no means completely new. It is their meaning that is new, not the characters and events. R. Shimon bar Yohai of the *Zohar* is not really based on the actual historical figure by this name, but rather on the talmudic legend that relates how he hid from the Romans in a cave with his son Elazar.<sup>51</sup> Thus, although the *Zohar* does not depict any chapter in the actual history of the Jewish people, it presents itself as part of the people’s textual history. Accordingly, the author decided to employ pre-existing legendary figures, rather than inventing a hero of his own.

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## IX

From the *Zohar*, the Hebrew literary tradition leads to the Kabbalistic texts of R. Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century, and the Hasidic texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The teachings of Luria take the form of a story, which was committed to writing by his pupils, R. Haim Vital and R. Joseph ibn Tabul. Luria's story depicts the creation of the world as the result of a great catastrophe, and history as a series of efforts to correct it. The terms it employs, such as "withdrawal" (*tzimtzum*), "smashing" (*shvira*), "the descent of the holy sparks (*nitzotzot*) into the realm of the outer skins (*kelipot*)," "the sin of Adam," "the sin of Noah" and "the sin of the golden calf," are all part of its dramatic story line. There is no theological doctrine here, but a mystical narrative, a mythical interpretation of cosmic and human history.

Much the same can be said of the two hundred collections of Hasidic tales by and about the masters of that movement. These present a wide range of narratives about the good deeds of the pious, which are referred to as *tikunim*, or "repairs" to the flawed cosmic order. What differentiates these stories from one another is the unique character of each of the main characters—the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Magid of Mezrich, the Rebbe of Kotsk and others. The close connection between plot lines and personae has to do with the fact that Hasidism, like the biblical and talmudic worldviews which preceded it, is in its essence narrative: Not a conceptual system interested in abstract, general truths, but the transmission of testimonies, whether fact or fantasy, about the specific deeds of specific figures.<sup>52</sup>

The Hasidic tales borrowed from whatever materials were available: From the talmudic and midrashic legends, from the *Zohar*, from the Lurianic writings and from Jewish and non-Jewish folktales. No story was so profane (not even a pornographic one from the *Decameron* by Boccaccio) that it could not be transformed into a Hasidic tale. Indeed, the Hasidic idea of "sanctification of the story" encouraged the followers of that movement to

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take stories that were as “impure” as possible and redeem them by turning them into legends of the Hasidic masters. The greater the impurity, the greater the *tikun* effected by its Hasidic rewriting. Stories were seen by these authors not merely as entertainment, nor even solely for their didactic value, but as tools for “sifting out the holy sparks from the shells,” for restoring the cosmos to its primal wholeness.<sup>53</sup> “We heard from the Ba’al Shem Tov that the great one of the generation is capable of elevating all the talk and the stories of the people of his generation, and thereby connecting the material with the spiritual,” relates one report, which appears in a collection of discourses attributed to the Ba’al Shem Tov.<sup>54</sup> And in the introduction to the book of stories of R. Nahman of Bratslav, his disciple, R. Natan of Nemirov, writes:

In the books of tales that the world tells are many hidden things, and very lofty things, but the stories were ruined, because they lacked much, and they also were confused.... But in truth, the stories that are told by the world contain hidden within them very great matters. The Ba’al Shem Tov was capable, by means of stories, of effecting divine unions. When he saw that the upper channels had become ruined, and they could not be corrected by prayer, he would correct and unify them by telling a story.

In the history of Judaism, the telling of stories has never occupied so important a position as it did for the Hasidim. In the Bible, the Talmud, the *Zohar* and the Lurianic Kabala, the choice of narrative prose implied a certain worldview; in Hasidism this connection was made explicit. Thus it would be wrong to judge Hasidic storytelling as a weak link in the chain of Hebrew literature. To conceive of the Hebrew literary form as having started at its peak, with the tremendous achievement of the Bible, and then gradually declining to the nadir of unpolished Hasidic tales carelessly lifted from external sources, would be to ignore the literary dynamic that reached its climax in Hasidic literature. What began with the Bible’s strategic choice of one medium over another for the expression of its worldview would, by the time of Hasidism, turn the medium itself into part of the message, elevating it to the point that the act of creating it became a kind of religious fulfillment in its own right.

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The definition of Jewish identity and the fulfillment of the Jewish “mission” in the world, by means of literary narratives, would reach their full maturation in Hasidism. This point is illustrated by the following story about the Ba’al Shem Tov, from the famous anthology *Shivbei Habesht*:

I heard the following from R. Shimshon, the rabbi of the holy community of Raszkow, the son of the rabbi of the holy community of Polonnoye. Once there was a man who was called R. Adam. He was the one from whom the Ba’al Shem Tov received the manuscripts. R. Adam had found these manuscripts containing hidden secrets of the Tora in a cave....

R. Adam prepared a dream-question: To whom should he hand down his manuscripts? He was told to hand them down to R. Israel ben Eliezer of the city of Okopy. Before his death he commanded his only son: “I have manuscripts here which hold the secrets of the Tora.... Search for the city called Okopy and there you will find a man whose name is Israel ben Eliezer [i.e., the Ba’al Shem Tov]. He is about fourteen years old. You will hand him the manuscripts for they belong to the root of his soul. If you will be fortunate enough to study with him, then so much the better....”

After his wedding he [the son of the rabbi] began to search for the man that he was seeking. But he found only Israel, who was an attendant in the *beit hamidrash* [in the city of Okopy].... Once, at night, when everyone was asleep, R. Adam’s son pretended that he also was asleep. He watched the Ba’al Shem Tov rise and study and pray at his customary place. He observed this happening once and then again. During the third night, while standing and studying, the Ba’al Shem Tov fell asleep. The son of R. Adam got up and took one folio of the manuscripts, put it before the Ba’al Shem Tov, and then again pretended to be asleep. When the Ba’al Shem Tov woke up and saw the folio in front of him, he was deeply stirred. He studied it and then concealed it in the inner fold of his garment.

The son of R. Adam did the same thing again during the following night, until he had made certain that this was the man to whom his father had commanded him to hand over the manuscripts.<sup>55</sup>

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In terms of poetics, this is Hebrew literature as we have come to know it: Compressed action, without sensual description or lengthy dialogue, related by an impersonal narrator (“I heard the following from R. Shimshon,” he informs us at the beginning, freeing himself from personal involvement in the story), and containing motifs drawn from the Bible (the selection of a spiritual successor rather than a hereditary one), from the Talmud (the adoration of the written text) and from the *Zohar* (the cave motif). Once again, as is the pattern in Hebrew narrative from the Bible to the *Zohar*, we are presented with a story that is merely a reworking of an existing narrative—in this instance, a popular folktale.<sup>56</sup>

More than two thousand years passed from the sealing of the biblical canon to the advent of Hasidism, and yet during this entire period, Hebrew literature remained faithful to its poetic principles. Despite all the differences between the biblical narrative and the Hasidic story, the basic elements of Hebrew literature continued to thrive in disparate lands and throughout entire eras of Jewish history. Until the twentieth century.

## X

Almost none of the literature written in the Hebrew language in the twentieth century retained the Hebrew poetics. Modern Hebrew-language literature does not meet any of the criteria of historical, national, deed-based narrative prose: It is not historical, but perceives time as immersed in the present; it is not national, but individualistic in content; and it is not active, but descriptive and analytical. The impersonal, authoritative and omniscient narrator has been abandoned in favor of an individual, limited and generally confused one; and the multi-generational language, with all its resonance from the past, has been abandoned in favor of language that represents the immediate experience of the present.

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The only significant exception is S.Y. Agnon. Agnon was the only author writing in the Hebrew language in the twentieth century who produced anything that can properly be called “Hebrew” literature. To be sure, a distinction must be drawn between Agnon’s early, exploratory works and his mature writings. His early stories (“Miriam’s Well,” 1909; “Tishrei,” 1911; “Nights,” 1913) were intimate, psychological and impressionistic love stories that were influenced by the lyric, sorrowful, decadent Viennese and Scandinavian style that was in vogue at the beginning of the twentieth century. The prose of the young Agnon was not fundamentally different from the delicate, “alienated” writing of Uri Nissan Gnessin and Gershon Shofman, or of Jacob Steinberg and David Vogel, who made their contribution to literature in the 1920s and 1930s. Agnon realized the possibilities latent in this type of writing to an impressive degree, but less than three years were to pass from the time he began publishing before he apparently came to feel that he had exhausted the possibilities inherent in this style. The novella *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* (1912) was a turning point from fashionable impressionistic poetics to a distinctly Hebrew style. From then on, Agnon would return only rarely to writing stories of the type with which he inaugurated his literary career (“Other Faces,” 1932; “The Doctor’s Divorce,” 1941; “Fernheim,” 1949; “Betrothed,” 1943), while the bulk of his literary energies would be devoted to developing his distinctly Hebrew poetics.

When it first appeared, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* was so Hebraic in its poetics that many readers thought it was not Agnon’s own creation at all, but a popular folktale. They were not entirely wrong: Agnon did employ elements that had already appeared in various folk stories, as well as in several collections of Hasidic legends. He did not invent the story from scratch, although he did adapt it heavily. But this adaptation was accomplished without detaching the story from its popular roots. Rather, Agnon retained the popular version’s linguistic style, its simple, anonymous narrator, and its incessant reference to early Jewish sources. The tale opens as follows:

It happened that a man named Menashe Haim, a resident of the holy community of Butchatch, may his city be built, amen, became impoverished,

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and his destitution, heaven forbid, led him astray. He criticized other Jews and was reprimanded and pursued, though he harmed no one. He earned himself a name and a legacy, as is explained in this book at length. Regarding him and those like him it is written: "And they shall atone for their iniquity"; which Rashi, of blessed memory, interprets: "And they shall atone for their iniquity through their sufferings."<sup>57</sup>

This opening, which offers a summary of the story that follows, imitates the popular Hebrew poetic voice as it was known to most Hebrew-language readers. In the original version, many of the expressions are written in the traditional Hebrew shorthand, relying on acronyms that establish the identity of the narrator as a Tora scholar addressing learned readers such as himself. The very use of such a code, even without reference to the content of the story, is indicative of a closed, "communal" and particularist style, which stands in marked contrast to the universal communicativeness to which the artistic, individualistic Western narrative aspires. The reference to the Jewish sources that concludes the above passage further intensifies the popular, impersonal impression that gives the reader a clear signal to the effect that this is not a personal, original work, but the recycling of a set of known texts.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, Agnon makes use of the travels of the book's hero, Menashe Haim, among the towns of Galicia, to interpose references to Hasidic stories and aphorisms. Much of the book is dedicated to such references, fostering the impression that the author merely pieced together bits of traditional lore.

Menashe Haim stayed at the home of a simple man, and talked with him about the words of the righteous, such as what was told by the holy rabbi of Neshchiz, that in Berditchev there was a respectable man named R. Liber, of blessed memory. One winter night, after the fair, someone came to his house, seeing that the candle was still lit. R. Liber received him in a hospitable manner, and he himself made the bed for him to sleep in. The guest asked him: "Why does his honor so trouble himself to make the bed for me?" R. Liber replied to him: "Do you think it is I who makes the bed? It is not I who does so." The point was that he makes his bed and prepares himself for the World to Come. And in the book *Imrei Kodesh* by the Seraph of

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Strelisk, he cautioned that a man should have a guest at his table at every meal; even if he stuffs his face like a complete Gentile, it counts as though he has had in mind all the mystical intentions of the holy Ari [i.e., R. Isaac Luria], of blessed memory. It happened that R. Eliezer, the father of the holy Ba'al Shem Tov, was extremely hospitable, and it is known to many that because of his hospitality he merited to have the Ba'al Shem Tov born to him.<sup>59</sup>

This effect of a quasi-folktale, a kind of “Hasidic story,” likewise accompanied dozens of other stories that Agnon later wrote.<sup>60</sup> His most extreme writings of this sort, in which Agnon does not appear as author but as the compiler and editor of existing popular material, were the monumental compilations *Days of Awe* (1938), a collection of customs and legends for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur; *Book, Writer and Story* (1938), legends concerning the culture of the book and the history of manuscripts from the period of the Sages and afterwards; *Present at Sinai: The Giving of the Law* (1959), midrashim and legends regarding the giving of the Tora at Sinai; as well as more modest “collections,” such as *Agnon's Alef Bet* (1984) and *The Ba'al Shem Tov Stories* (1986).<sup>61</sup> Agnon, of course, did not limit himself to Hebrew poetics. He tried his hand at a number of other techniques, including a more surrealistic, Kafkaesque approach which found expression in *The Book of Deeds* (1941), *Thus Far* (1952), “Edo and Enam” (1950) and “Forevermore” (1954). However, these forays by Agnon, as brilliant in their own way as they were, are secondary to his central literary enterprise. The backbone of Agnon's writings, consisting of his three major novels, *The Bridal Canopy* (1931), *A Guest for the Night* (1938), and *Only Yesterday* (1945), and most of his short stories, clearly belongs, in terms of poetics, to the Hebrew side of his work.

Although Agnon was universally respected, even revered, it is hard to escape the fact that of all the later Israeli writers who claimed him as their mentor, none adopted his Hebrew poetics. The tradition of narrative prose to which Agnon was devoted, and with which he achieved so much, did not speak to them. The authors upon whom Agnon had an effect were influenced

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by the non-Hebraic aspects of his writing. A.B. Yehoshua, Yitzhak Orpaz, Gabriel Moked, David Shahar and other writers who published surrealist, allegorical, existentialist stories in the 1960s, borrowed from the Agnon of *The Book of Deeds*, “Edo and Enam,” and the surrealist chapter on the dog Balak in *Only Yesterday*.<sup>62</sup> The more Hebrew the poetics of a given work by Agnon, the less it was absorbed into Israeli literature. *The Bridal Canopy*, his most Hebrew work, is thus today the most neglected of all his writings.<sup>63</sup>

It is not Agnon, but Yosef Haim Brenner, who is the most widely emulated of Israeli authors. Brenner’s poetics can be understood as the precise opposite of those of the Hebrew narrative tradition. Unlike the restrained Agnon, Brenner writes in an intemperate, impatient and at times frenzied fashion. As opposed to the epic panorama that characterizes Hebrew literature, Brenner concentrates on a limited human circle that is at once “up-rooted” from its past and claustrophobic. Unlike the historical perspective of Hebrew poetics, Brenner offers “notebooks” from the immediate present. Instead of employing an impersonal narrator, Brenner’s narrator offers up personal confessions. Unlike Agnon’s language, which is infused with tradition, Brenner’s language is choppy, detached and chaotic. Unlike the esoteric message of the biblical, talmudic, Hasidic or Agnonian narrator, who reveals little and leaves the reader to surmise the rest, Brenner exposes virtually everything in his portrayal of the internal struggles of his characters. And unlike the dynamic, vigorous flow of action that propels traditional Hebrew prose, Brenner presents us with static “situations” that contain almost no action, but are rife with emotional agitation instead.

When Agnon sets out to write the story of a character who moved to Palestine in the years prior to World War I, he opens his work with a sentence embodying all the main elements of Hebrew poetics:

Like our other brethren, the people of our redemption, those of the Second Aliya, Yitzhak Komer left his land, his homeland and his city and went up to the land of Israel, to build it from its ruins and to be built from it.<sup>64</sup>

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When Brenner writes about the same period, he begins with the following sentences, which represent everything that Hebrew poetics is not:

A publisher that I know seduced me—and I was seduced—to publish with his help and by his publishing house the following writings, which I took out of the bag of someone who was wandering and in pain in Exile. I knew for certain that I could not withstand the pressure from those readers and critics who would claim that I am too soft—if only they would be so kind as to speak softly—to include additional writings, that is to say, fragmentary and unordered notes, in our poor literature, which is in any case full of fragmentary notes and disorder, while what it is really missing, as is known, is complete things, that are polished and finished. In order, however, to give myself some small amount of credit, I should mention that I, too, had a problem—and not only this!—with this publisher when he came to me with his proposal. I complained to him: “What difference does it make if the author of a book is, according to you, a professional writer? Please, what *artistic* value is there to these crazy writings of his, which contain no poetic pathos, nor broad-mindedness, nor a finely tuned style, nor any architecture, and not even any world-embracing expression of the soul, as one critic demands when he speaks of the purpose of art, nor any other sublime purpose—the eternal purpose of art—to elevate the spirit and cause esthetic pleasure?... You tell me, what is there here? Some accounts, confessions, letters, some sort of disconnected lines, without any unusual subject matter, and without even piquant symbolism!... Please—poor, weak, lean lines, with none of the milk or fat of art!”<sup>65</sup>

Some may consider writing of this sort—Brenner goes on in this manner for a few pages before getting to the story itself—to be good literature, and others may not. But the essential point here is that Brenner’s approach, and not Agnon’s, is what became the standard for contemporary Hebrew-language prose.

Brenner’s imprint is visible everywhere: In the work of S. Yizhar, who covers 1,156 pages with introspective monologues in *Days of Ziklag* (1958); in the heroes of Amalia Kahana-Carmon, who spend entire novellas looking out the

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window, absorbed in an endless stream of consciousness; and in the passive Hanna Gonen, the narrator crafted by Amos Oz in *My Michael* (1968), most of which is devoted to mystical and sexual fantasies. Brenner is present in the tortured monologues of A.B. Yehoshua (“The Continuing Silence of a Poet,” 1970; *A Late Divorce*, 1982; *Mr. Mani*, 1990) and of Yoram Kaniuk (*Rockinghorse*, 1974; *His Daughter*, 1987), in the confessional literature of Pinhas Sadeh, Josef Mundy and Yotam Reuveni, in the unbridled writing of Yitzhak Orpaz (*The Eternal Bride*, 1988) and of Amnon Navot (*Instrument Flight*, 1988), in the verbal inflation of Yisrael Berama (*Torn Days*, 1991) and of Judith Katzir (*Closing the Sea*, 1990), in the stylistic rococo of David Grossman (*See Under: Love*, 1986) and Avram Heffner (*Tout Compris*, 1987), in the self-analysis of Heffner and of Yitzhak La’or (*The People, Food for Kings*, 1993), and in the fragmentedness of Yoel Hoffmann. If Israeli prose generally tends to ramble instead of telling a story, if it is focused on the consciousness of the detached “self” and not on the external world, and if it contains neither action nor any sort of historical-national perspective—this is because it is built on the foundations laid by Brenner, not Agnon.<sup>66</sup>

## XI

The typical hero of twentieth-century Israeli prose is a lonely and detached youth, a self-doubting individualist, who is alienated and in search of himself in a disintegrating world. The “uprooted” individual was the stock hero of Micha Josef Berdyczewski, Uri Nissan Gnessin, Yosef Haim Brenner and Gershon Shofman in the early twentieth century,<sup>67</sup> and he has continued to play the leading role in Israeli literature ever since. Two key works published in 1958, *Days of Ziklag* by S. Yizhar and *Life as a Parable* by Pinhas Sadeh, focus (albeit from different angles) on doubt-ridden young men, rootless and lacking a sense of history, who attempt to “find themselves” *ex nihilo*. The prominent writers of the 1960s, such as A.B. Yehoshua,

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Amos Oz, Amalia Kahana-Carmon, Aharon Appelfeld and Yitzhak Orpaz, concentrated in their works on the figure of the detached outsider who is driven by destructive impulses, mystical longings and erotic desires to act in ways that are incomprehensible to him, and who feels no connection to his family, community, people or country.<sup>68</sup>

To take one of any number of examples, Yitzhak Orpaz's 1962 *Skin for Skin* presented a figure whose "entire life hung from him like some plucked, worn, superfluous rag. He finds himself nowhere. He himself does not live anywhere. Nowhere does he realize himself."<sup>69</sup> The following year, Amos Kenan wrote *At the Station* (1963), a short novel in the form of a dialogue, which proceeds along the following lines:

"What will be?"

"It'll be all right."

"Of course it'll be all right. We only have to hang on in the meantime."

"Sure."

"In life, you have to hang on."

"Yes."

"And afterwards, you die."

"Of course."

"And after that, there's nothing left."

"Only the memories."

"Ha, ha, ha."

"Another one?"

"Another one."

"Where were we?"

"We were hanging on."<sup>70</sup>

And so forth. The hero of Israeli prose is, for the most part, a marginal figure, a misfit, living outside the mainstream of society. He is an unabsorbed refugee, uprooted, the eternal exile<sup>71</sup>; he is an "accursed" outcast<sup>72</sup>; he comes from a socio-ethnic "minority," living the experience of the peripheral and under-privileged neighborhoods, irrelevant to the "national agenda"<sup>73</sup>; at times, he is simply insane.<sup>74</sup> Yehoshua Kenaz, for example, offers us alienated antiheroes in

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all his books,<sup>75</sup> and Hanoah Levin is even more extreme in his incessant depiction of ludicrous, wretched characters.<sup>76</sup>

In 1977, sixty years after Brenner wrote his most important work, *Breakdown and Bereavement*, two books appeared presenting the Israeli experience as a recurring pattern of loss and failure: *The Lover* by A.B. Yehoshua, and *Past Continuous* by Ya'akov Shabtai. The family depicted in *The Lover* is assaulted by invaders from without, and the protagonist cooperates out of an uncontrollable, self-destructive impulse. Shabtai likewise portrays the degeneration and decay of Israeli society as part of “the terrible process of disintegration and decomposition... [which] embodied the very essence of life and its sadness, because it was very hard to accept the fact that what was once one and whole disintegrated and fell apart and receded into the distance and was irretrievably lost, like the galaxies moving farther and farther away from each other in space until they were lost forever somewhere in the infinite darkness beyond all horizons and forgotten.”<sup>77</sup> As one of Shabtai’s heroes declares: “Life [is] nothing but a journey toward death,... and not only that but also death [is] actually the very essence of life, growing inside it hour by hour until it enclosed and embodied it completely....”<sup>78</sup>

If life is only “a journey toward death,” then there is no meaning to history. For what difference does it make if one lives in one place in the year 500 B.C.E., or in a different place in the year 1977? Either way, life is cast from the same fatalistic mold. Indeed, both Shabtai and Yehoshua—in contrast to the linear, historical plot characteristic of Hebrew poetics from the Bible to Agnon—spin a story that is a kind of matrix, a thicket of personal, encoded thoughts and symbols. In such a world, there is scarcely any sense of before and after, but only a crowded, subjective “present” into which the past occasionally erupts as fragments of turbulent memories, associations and dreams.

One could argue that alienation is the fundamental ethos of all of modern Western literature, and that Israeli writing is simply an expression of what has become a universal mood. Yet the West of the twentieth century

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did not only produce works like *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre, *Journey to the End of the Night* by Louis-Ferdinand Celine, *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* by John Barth, and *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut. It also produced works far more "Hebrew" in their poetics than almost anything written in the Hebrew language during this same period. Works such as *The Sleepwalkers* by Hermann Broch, *U.S.A.* by John Dos Passos, *The First Circle* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Ragtime* by E.L. Doctorow and *The Stone Raft* by Jose Saramago represent the epic, historic, national, impersonal stream, a path that could have been taken by those who wrote in Hebrew as well.

There was one brief period, from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, when Israeli prose looked as though it might return to the fundamentals of Hebrew poetics. The literature of the "Palmah Generation," of which Moshe Shamir is the best-known example, harbored a collective, Zionist ethos and was aimed at a wider public, as opposed to the refined elitism of Uri Nissan Gnessin or David Vogel. Yet the differences between the Palmah Generation's poetics and that of the Hebrew literary tradition far outweighed the similarities. Authors such as Shamir wrote of an invented "Israeli"—rather than Jewish—nation, without historical roots. Their Zionism was that of the self-made "sabras," natives of the land of Israel, whose Israeli identity was a substitute for, not a continuation of, their Judaism. "Elik was born from the sea"—this phrase, which opens Shamir's *With His Own Hands* (1951), captures the essence of the Palmah Generation, both in terms of what it lacks and what it contains: It lacks any sense of history, and it contains a complete dependence on territory. The protagonist is "born from the sea"—born here, on this strip of coast, in the land of Israel; and his identity is derived from this connection. The sea is a pure, virgin, natural, meta-cultural, meta-historical, meta-national space, a blank page, a new beginning. The land of Israel, and not the people of Israel, is what establishes the sense of identity and commitment in the prose of Shamir and his contemporaries. Conquest of territory, "knowledge of the land" along its length and breadth, laying down roots in it

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and exalting the young people who fought for it—these, and not the chain of Jewish being, are the themes of the Palmah prose. It was, in a sense, wholly patriotic. But patriotism is not historical consciousness, and for the authors of the Palmah Generation, the first came at the expense of the second. They saw themselves as part of the land and the state which was built upon it, not of the people who built it. They wrote stories that were born from the sea.<sup>79</sup>

## XII

Israeli prose of the 1980s, and even more so of the 1990s, brought to fruition the decades-long process of alienation from the Hebrew poetic tradition. As one of Avram Heffner's protagonists proclaims:

I believe that there is no God. One. I believe that history has no meaning. No meaning. Two. I believe that there is no sublime purpose that mankind must attempt to fulfill.<sup>80</sup>

Elsewhere, Heffner writes: "We were cast headlong into a cosmos lacking meaning, lacking order and method."<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Yoel Hoffmann writes: "The days are interconnected like cogwheels. One day rolls into the next. And in Bernhard's body there are bones, and he carries these bones around, every day of his life, by his own strength alone.... In Palestine the air is transparent most of the time. No one gives a thought about Bernhard's bones."<sup>82</sup>

No one gives a thought about Bernhard's bones—but does anyone in Israeli literature give a thought about anything other than the immediate, arbitrary, sensual present in which "one day rolls into the next"? The banal existence depicted in Israeli prose from the mid-1980s onward reflects an outlook that contrasts more sharply with the Hebrew worldview than did either the pagan approach in the time of the Bible or the Hellenistic approach at the time of the Talmud. The clash, this time, is total: Nothing remotely resembling

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Hebrew narrative prose can ever be written by those who believe that “history [and, therefore, national identity] has no meaning,” and that “we were cast headlong into a cosmos lacking meaning, lacking order and method.”<sup>83</sup>

What content can a contemporary Israeli author offer, if history has no meaning for him? What kind of language will he use, if the rich historical resonance of language says nothing to him? What can the narrator “know” about reality (and about the people who take part in it) if the author himself knows of nothing beyond his own experiences as an alienated individual—unmarried, wandering around in Tel Aviv, depressed? The following three passages written in the past ten years (the first by Uzi Weill, the second by Yosef El-Dror, the third by Etgar Keret) typify the sort of answers currently being offered up:

She finished her studies and began getting jobs in all sorts of places. When I saw her, I wouldn't mention the word love. I couldn't believe how long she lived without it. I couldn't believe that anyone could, not to mention her. But somehow she didn't become a nun, or a desert. Sadness taught her to look deeper than what she was accustomed. Since she didn't have anything else to do, she spent all her time looking.<sup>84</sup>

She turns over onto her back and looks at the ceiling, shifting a detached gaze between the two of us. I move from my knees to lean against the wall. He lowers his gaze to her and looks at her, bemused.... She caresses her left breast, the one closer to me, relatively, and lets out a sort of short “ah.” He looks at me in despair.<sup>85</sup>

So now she wants us to part, because she decided that I don't love her. What can I tell her? If I were to shout at her that she is stupid and that she should stop talking nonsense, this would only be proof for her. “Do something that proves to me that you love me,” she says. What does she want me to do? What? She should just tell me. But she doesn't. Because if I really love her, then I should know on my own. What is true is that she is willing either to hint, or to tell me what she doesn't want. Either way, I can choose. So I told her that she should say what she doesn't want, and at least we would know something. From her hints, I certainly can understand nothing.<sup>86</sup>

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The stylistic uniformity that causes these passages to read as if they were written by the same hand is not limited to the work of these three writers. It is typical of most of their contemporaries, who share the same impoverished language (their Hebrew is readily understood by any Israeli schoolchild or new immigrant), and whose narrative voice is always a narrow and pathetic “self.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, if there exists a passage which captures the essence of today’s Hebrew-language literature, and which demonstrates the degree to which this literature has broken away from the classic Hebrew poetics, it is the following, from Orly Castel-Bloom’s *Dolly City* (1992):

Dolly City—a city without a base, without a past, without an infrastructure. The most demented city in the world. All the people in Dolly City are usually on the run. Since they’re always running, there’s always someone chasing them, and since there’s someone chasing them, they catch them, execute them and throw them in the river.... All the babies in the city are adopted (the little bastards).... There are two big parties: Bureaucracy and Procedure. The parties have gangs of street boys who take the law into their own hands. The soldiers of the Bureaucracy party are the Trashers—revolting unhygienic types who spend their time picking pockets, coughing, wiping their noses on their sleeves and relieving themselves in their trousers.

A Trasher never says “hello”; he only does things, especially scribble graffiti on walls where there’s a strong smell of urine.... There are other people in Dolly City too, like the Apostrophes. Whose slogan is as dumb as their faces. They sing a reggae beat: “The state is me, go on and decapitate me.” And there are the Cowards, the Archetypes, and the Bonbons.... Luckily for me, I managed to avoid falling into the traps of any of these groups and I learned to keep a low profile. I learned that the trick is to pretend to be asleep—and undermine.<sup>88</sup>

Never has there been a literature called “Hebrew” that was so removed from Hebrew poetics as today’s Israeli prose. One can, of course, blame post-modernism for current esthetic fashions—just as the melancholy that has dominated Israeli literature since 1967 can and should be understood not

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only as a response to the occupation of the territories, but also to everything that has accompanied the rise of the “New Left” in Europe and the United States: The student revolts, the sexual revolution and the wave of protests against the Vietnam War. Israeli culture is not impervious to the currents of world culture, nor can it be. The question, however, is whether Israeli literature, in responding to the currents of Western culture, should fashion itself as a shallow reflection of these trends—or see them as an opportunity to formulate an original, Hebrew response.

Post-modernism is not the first challenge to face Hebrew culture in the long history of the Jewish people. The Bible was written as a response to paganism, and the Talmud, in great measure, as a rejoinder to Hellenism. Exposure to alien cultures allows us to sharpen our own identity as Jews: As we come to understand these cultures, we may not only learn what they have to offer us, but also come to appreciate how and why we differ. Yet if our encounter with the West yields nothing more than assimilation, we have consigned ourselves to self-destruction.<sup>89</sup> Many, of course, rejoice at the prospect,<sup>90</sup> but those who hold Jewish cultural identity dear should understand to what extent its future depends upon the question: Will the literature that is written by Jews in the coming century renew its link with the Hebrew literary heritage? Jewish civilization looks to the authors of the current generation as both its heirs and as a guiding light for the next generation. The unfinished canon of Hebrew literature calls upon us to add to it new works, works that will impart to the past a relevance for the present—and to the present, a future.

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## Notes

1. This is the way “Hebrew literature” was perceived in practice by four prominent Israeli literary critics over the past fifty years: Dov Sadan, Baruch Kurzweil, Dan Miron and Gershon Shaked, along with the poet-ideologue Yonatan Ratosh. Despite the pronounced differences in outlook between them, they all shared the perception of “Hebrew literature” as Jewish literature; that is to say, they share an ethnic, and not artistic, definition of Hebrew literature. See Yonatan Ratosh, *Jewish Literature in Hebrew* (Tel Aviv: Hadar, 1982), p. 39 [Hebrew]; Dov Sadan, *Introductory Essay: On Our Literature* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hame’uhad, 1962), p. 9 [Hebrew]; Baruch Kurzweil, *Bialik and Tchernichowsky* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1972), pp. 168-169 [Hebrew]; Dan Miron, *Le Medecin Imaginaire: Studies in Classical Jewish Fiction* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hame’uhad, 1995) [Hebrew]; Gershon Shaked, *Works of Art and Their Audience: Four Chapters of the Theory of Acceptance* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1987), p. 17. [Hebrew]

2. The ethnic or racial definition of the Jewish heritage is unacceptable, because the Jewish people, from its very beginning, has been a mixture of Semitic peoples: The four Matriarchs were Arameans; Osnat, the wife of Joseph, was an Egyptian; Tzipora, the wife of Moses, was a Midianite; the Davidic line was descended from Ruth the Moabite; tribes from the Israelite kingdom married Canaanite women; and King Solomon took numerous non-Jewish wives.

The religious definition of our heritage is not suitable either, since the Jews have never agreed among themselves regarding the meaning of the Tora. The Judaism of the First Temple period is not that of the talmudic Sages (and among the Sages themselves there are endless disagreements); the Judaism of Philo is not the Essene version of Judaism; the Judaism of Maimonides is not the Judaism of R. Judah Halevi; the Judaism of the Ba’al Shem Tov is not like that of Hermann Cohen. As a religion, Judaism is a multiplicity of controversial interpretations (and every such interpretation, from the perspective of the others, seems wildly deviant); the difference between “religious” and “secular” Israeli Jews in our time may not be as great as the chasms that have always separated the different streams of diaspora Judaism.

The lingual definition of our heritage is similarly intolerable, because the fundamental works of this heritage were written in many different languages. Some of them (beginning with portions of the Bible, such as part of the books of Ezra and Daniel) were written in Aramaic, others in Arabic, others in Yiddish and some in German or English. And Hebrew itself, it should be recalled, always contained elements of other languages.

3. See, for example, Gershom Scholem, *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992), vol. 2, pp. 105-123. [Hebrew]

4. Only five such prose works are known, the most famous of which is *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus.

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5. See Odile Kaltenmark, *Chinese Literature* (New York: Walker, 1964), pp. 105-106.

6. See Ben-Ami Shiloni, *Traditional Japan: Culture and History* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1995), p. 77. [Hebrew] The most famous of the works that initiated Japanese prose is *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu.

7. See Yitzhak Y. Goldtziher, *History of Arabic Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1952), p. 76. [Hebrew] The most famous literary work from this period is obviously *The Arabian Nights*.

8. The Buddhists, who borrowed from popular folktales in order to adapt them to stories about the life of Buddha, used prose as an alternative to the ritual, philosophical, and epic poem, which was representative of the spiritual and cultural domination of the Hindu priesthood. In other words, prose is not a product of the original Indian culture, but, on the contrary, an internal reaction against this ancient culture, whose literature was demonstratively poetic.

9. Probably the only case is that of thirteenth-century Iceland—a fascinating, relatively late phenomenon which drew heavily upon the Hebrew monotheism that had been bestowed upon Europe by Christianity. The fact that an originally pagan culture like that of Iceland chose to express itself in prose may seem to run against my argument concerning the necessary connection between paganism and poetry (and, in contrast, between monotheism and prose). Yet by the time they began to write prose, the Icelanders had long abandoned their paganism in favor of Christianity. Christianity was accepted as the official religion of Iceland around the year 1000, while the sagas were written in the thirteenth century.

10. Psalms 19:2.

11. Joshua 10:12; Genesis 21:1, 2; Genesis 19:24-25; Exodus 3:2; Exodus 7:20; Exodus 14:21-22; Exodus 16:13-14; Joshua 6:20; Judges 16:29-30; I Kings 18:38; II Kings 2:11.

12. The contrast between the Hebrew and pagan conceptions of time is illustrated by the Bible in the narrative of Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams in the book of Genesis 41:25-34. One may wonder what is so great about Joseph's interpretations: They are, after all, rather straightforward readings. Joseph interprets the combination of cows, sheaves and the river in a most banal way, as representing the abundance and lack of food. The striking element in the narrative is not Joseph's interpretive abilities, but rather the inability of the sorcerers to come up with the same interpretation. How were all the king's magicians and diviners, undoubtedly men of high intellectual rank, rendered helpless by such a simple metaphor? The answer, perhaps, is that as pagans, the magicians could not conceive of the possibility of change and innovation. From their perspective, the Nile could not suddenly go dry for seven years, since this had never happened. Only

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someone who does not perceive reality with the cyclical eyes of a pagan could imagine the change over time—the violation of the rhythms. The key word in Joseph's response to Pharaoh is, therefore, the word "behold." "Behold, there come seven years..."; "behold," that is, in contrast to the routine. Pagans cannot imagine a disturbance of the routine, consequently, "none could interpret them for Pharaoh." Genesis 41:34.

13. The same "effective moment" of which Gotthold E. Lessing speaks in his book *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1962), p. 19. Consequently, it is not surprising that Lessing draws the examples with which he illustrates this point from Greek literature and art.

14. As does Thucydides, who explains the fictitious nature of the speeches that are incorporated in his book both by the partial nature of his sources and by the limitations of his memory and that of his interviewees. See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin, 1954), pp. 24-25.

15. Accordingly, the emergence of the realistic novel in the nineteenth century was paralleled by the flourishing of the nonrealistic genres of ghost stories, vampire tales, fairy tales, and other types of Gothic fiction that have occupied a large portion of European literature since the rise of the romantic movement. At that time there was a clear distinction between "realism" and "fantasy." The meaning of this separation, from a cognitive perspective, was that what a narrator was allowed to "know" in a work of fantasy exceeded the limits of "knowledge" (and reality) in the realistic novel.

16. See, for example, the following passage from a novel by Diderot: "This is the demonstrative joy of the freedom of invention, in which effort to attain the narrator sacrifices any trace of a claim to truth." Denis Diderot, *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master* (Oxford: Oxford, 1999), p. 4.

17. Meir Sternberg writes that the biblical narrator "establishes himself in the strongest position conceivable, one unrivaled in the annals of literature since, again, it uniquely combines the sources of authority attaching to otherwise incompatible models of narration. For he wields the authority of supernatural knowledge and of empiric evidence, of inspiration (or convention) and tradition, of the divine performer and of the human observer, of the mentor and of the 'son' meeting other sons on their common ground." Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1985), p. 117.

18. For example, the narrator characteristic of the novels of Lawrence Sterne, Henry Fielding, Honore de Balzac or William Makepeace Thackeray.

19. For the Sisyphean attempt by Flaubert to formulate his personal style, see Henri Troyat, *Flaubert* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1996), pp. 96-99. [Hebrew]

20. The earliest of which is, apparently, the Song of Deborah in Judges 5.

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21. History, in the words of Hayden White, “is always written as part of a contest between contending poetic figurations of what the past *might* consist of.” “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *Clio*, June 1974, p. 300. The degree of self-presence of the scholarly historian (Plutarch, Gibbon, Tuchman) is even less than that of the experiential historian, who gives us personal testimony regarding events that he witnessed or even in which he participated (Thucydides, Xenophon, Julius Caesar, Albert Speer).

22. In order to prove this, mention should be made of the text that competes with the Bible for the title of the “father of Western literature”: The Homeric epic. The epic appears before us as presented by a popular narrator whose consciousness, like that of his biblical counterpart, is merely the sum total of all the cultural, military, agricultural and ritual assets that his forefathers accumulated, and his memory does not contain a personal biography, but rather the archives of the civilization in which he is immersed. Already, however, in the opening verse of the *Iliad*, and likewise in the opening of the *Odyssey*, the narrator makes his presence known by the use of the first person singular, and reveals his identity as a professional poet who needs the aid of the muses in order to fulfill his literary task. He also makes his presence known every time he links a subjective evaluatory adjective to his characters (“Aegisthus the fair,” “Telemachos the wise,” “Tironos the wondrous,” “Ergaipontes the mighty”). Homer reaches the height of personalization when he attributes the central story line of the *Odyssey* (Odysseus’ wanderings over the course of a decade among the islands of the Aegean Sea) not to an external narrator, but to the hero himself, who recounts his memoirs (or, perhaps, invents them) to the hospitable Phaeacians who saved him (*Odyssey*, books ix-xii). The main literary unit of the epic is, therefore, a private “memoir.”

23. The individualism of Greek literature is embodied in the institutionalization of the competition among the playwrights (and among the poets in general): Literature, like athletics, was perceived by them as the venue of competition between gifted individuals; a tragedy by Euripides is a personal victory by Euripides in the present, and everlasting glory in the future, for the work and the credit are inseparable. For competitions by poets, see, for example, the beginning of the dialogue of *Ion*. *Dialogs of Plato* (London: Oxford, 1924), vol. 1, p. 497. Herodotus’ statement at the beginning of his book: “What Herodotus the Halicarnassian has learnt by inquiry is here set forth: In order that so the memory of the past may not be blotted out from among men by time, and that great and marvellous deeds done by Greeks and foreigners,” attests that Herodotus, like every other Greek author, hoped that his name also would not be forgotten, and that by “preserving the memory of the past” that was replete with “amazing achievements,” his memory also would be preserved, by merit of the achievement of his book. *Herodotus*, trans. A.D. Godley (Cambridge: Harvard, 1975), book i, p. 3.

24. The clearest example of this phenomenon is provided by the poem of Horace, “Exegi Monumentum,” in which the poet extols himself and proclaims his

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immortality. Horace, *The Odes of Horace* (Hamondsworth: Penguin, 1964), book iii, p. 207. Nineteen centuries after Horace, Pushkin writes his version of the same poem, with the same title, in order to reserve for himself the literary immortality that, in his opinion, he deserves: Alexander Pushkin, "Onto Myself I Reared a Monument," in *The Poems, Prose and Plays of Alexander Pushkin* (New York: Random House, 1936), p. 88.

25. Exodus 20:15. Cf. the scene of the reading of the Tora depicted in Nehemiah 8:1-8.

26. Gershom Scholem, Opening Address at The Study-Conference, Jerusalem, July 14-19, 1968, in R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and C. Jouco Bleeker, eds., *Types of Redemption: Contributions to the Theme of Study-Conference Held at Jerusalem, July 14-19, 1968* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), pp. 1-12.

27. Scholem, Opening Address, p. 12.

28. Isaiah 2:22.

29. For example: *Hamlet, Don Quixote, Tartuffe, Candide, Tom Jones, Faust, Emma, Père Goriot, David Copperfield, Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

30. In works such as *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* by Rainer Maria Rilke (1910), *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust (1927), *Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller (1934), *The Fall* by Albert Camus (1956), *Something Happened* by Joseph Heller (1966), *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath (1963), *My Life as a Man* by Philip Roth (1970), or *The Invention of Solitude* by Paul Auster (1982).

31. It therefore is not coincidental that the only biblical narrative that is an exception to this rule tells of a person who is not an Israelite: "There was a man in the land of Utz named Job" (Job 1:1).

32. This narrative technique, of a gradually accumulated meaning generated through the intertwining of anecdotes, has no parallel in the literature of the ancient East. See Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 47.

33. Precisely for this reason, the Bible tells us not only of the successes of individuals, but also of their failures. "Private" matters such as the episodes of Samson and Delilah, of Saul and the medium (I Samuel 28), of David and Bathsheba, or of Ahab and Navot (I Kings 21) always go beyond the realm of the individual and leave their mark on history. The Bible shows us how any man, in any action that he does, is likely to influence reality, for better or worse. There is no exemption from responsibility.

34. Genesis 38:1-10.

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35. For more about the technique of indirect characterization adopted by the Bible (that is, the characterization of figures by means of their actions), see Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 119.

36. Erich Auerbach shows the contrast between the Homeric practice of linking to each character an evaluative adjective, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the abstention of the Bible from doing so, as can be seen, for example, in the Binding of Isaac. Isaac “may be handsome or ugly, intelligent or stupid, tall or short, pleasant or unpleasant—we are not told. Only what we need to know about him as a personage in the action, here and now, is illuminated, so that it may become apparent how terrible Abraham’s temptation is....” Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton, 1974), pp. 10-11.

37. Scholarly literary research commonly attributes the term “naturalism” to the style of writing that was prevalent in France in the second half of the nineteenth century (Flaubert, Zola, the Goncourt brothers), which was characterized by more detailed descriptions than those typical of European prose until then. Naturalism, however, did not begin in 1857 with *Madame Bovary*, and did not end in 1890 with *The Human Beast* by Emile Zola. As an artistic ideal, it is found in the basic texts of Western literature from Homer and Hesiod to the present, and in fact the development of Western literature may be defined (if we think about the development of prose from Boccaccio and Cervantes, continuing with Fielding and Sterne, to the realistic novel of the nineteenth century, and from it to Flaubert and onward) as a constant rise in the level of naturalism, until its radical realization in the twentieth century in works such as *Ulysses* by James Joyce, *Jealousy* by Alain Robbe-Grillet, or *The Shadow of the Coachman’s Body* by Peter Weiss, in which, in place of a narrative plot, the text is devoted to segments of a precise, visual and aural description that mirrors experienced reality. If naturalism was once relegated to observable reality, the stream of consciousness technique of Joyce (and of Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Alfred Döblin and others) resulted in a naturalism that now penetrated the consciousness of the characters, and made them an object of description no less accessible than objects or bodies.

38. Aristotle, *Poetics*, chapter 7, in *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. I. Bywater (New York: Modern Library, 1947), p. 635.

39. Aristotle, *Poetics*, chapter 9, p. 636.

40. The Marxist literary scholar Georg Lukacs was a vigorous opponent of the naturalism that had dominated European prose since Flaubert and Zola, and he called for a return to the social realism of Balzac, Dickens and Tolstoy. Naturalism, according to Lukacs, killed the story for the description; in place of concern for the actions of people and the moral significance of such deeds, naturalism diverted the focus of literature to morally neutral, passive observation. Georg Lukacs, “Narrate or Describe?” in Georg Lukacs’ *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin, 1978), p. 116. Lukacs is correct in his argument regarding

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naturalism, but errs in his perception of early nineteenth-century “realism” as the opposite of naturalism. French “naturalism” is nothing if not a product of this “realism”; it is an extreme version of “realism,” and not a revolution against it. Lukacs, whose discussion is confined to the nineteenth century, does not have the historical perspective necessary to identify the literary tradition truly and directly opposed to naturalism: The Hebrew tradition.

41. And therefore the Greek name of the Bible, *Biblia* (“books,” in the plural), is a fitting appellation. Jewish tradition divides the Hebrew Bible into thirty-five books, each of which is considered a separate text. They include the five Books of Moses, the seven “major” and twelve “minor” prophetic books, and the eleven Writings. Samuel, Kings, Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles are each considered to be a single text, even though Western tradition has dealt with each as two separate books.

42. Micha Josef Berdyczewski, for example, makes much of the biblical men of valor, expressing a quasi-Nietzschean nostalgia for the physical and mental courage that, according to his worldview, was lost by Judaism when it went into Exile. This neo-biblical approach was continued by David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan, who perceived the rebirth of Israel as the revival of the heroic life in the pattern of the First Temple period, accompanied by a sweeping denial of two thousand years of *galut* (exilic) Judaism. See Moshe Dayan, *Living with the Bible* (New York: Morrow, 1978). For Ratosh and his fellow “Canaanites,” the denial of the *galut* mentality went so far as the rejection of Judaism itself, in favor of the revival of a “Hebrewism” that not only preceded Judaism, but in practice even preceded the Bible: A Mesopotamian, pagan “Hebrewism” that was rooted in the “Semitic expanse” between the Nile and the Tigris. The prose of S. Yizhar and Moshe Shamir is a softer version of this Canaanism; they did not see themselves as Canaanites, but the indigenous “sabra” myth they fostered was not fundamentally different from the more explicit (and more refutable) Canaanite ethos.

43. Ta’anit 21a.

44. See David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1991), pp. 19-20.

45. Pinhas Sadeh, ed., *An Anthology of Jewish Folktales* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1983), p. 280. [Hebrew]

46. Probably R. Moshe de Leon, who lived in Spain in the thirteenth century.

47. Psalms 29:9.

48. *Zohar* (New York: Beit Hasefer, 1975), vol. 4, p. 219. [Hebrew and Aramaic]

49. For the poetics of the *Zohar*, see Matti Megged, *A Darkened Light: Esthetic Values in the Book of Splendor (Zohar)* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Hapo’alim, 1980). [Hebrew] Megged writes: “The author of the *Zohar* ascribes decisive importance to a situation that makes possible the revealing of sublime secrets. Conclusions may be drawn from

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this regarding the central role of the narrative in the *Zohar* as a whole, and the reason for the need by the author of the book for a narrative framework” (p. 26).

50. The stories of the *Zohar* do not occur in “nowhere,” but in various locations in the land of Israel (Tiberias, Sepphoris, Usha, Caesarea, Lod); this “land of Israel” is not the actual, historical land, but a mythical place that contains the hills, caves, fields and forests through which the narrative’s main characters undertake their mystical journey.

51. Shabat 33b.

52. Attempts were made to formulate Hasidism in a methodical fashion (the best-known of which is the *Tanya* by R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, 1797), just as efforts had previously been undertaken to systematize the Kabala (the outstanding example of which is *Pardes Rimmonim* by R. Moshe Cordovero, 1548). Yet it was not through these theoretical compositions, but rather via the works of narrative prose, that Kabbalistic-Hasidic mysticism was absorbed into the public consciousness and engendered a broad popular movement. If Hasidism had not adopted the communicative strategy that characterized the Hebrew culture from the time of the Bible and the Talmud—that is, the presentation of a story, and not doctrine—its teachings would have remained esoteric and without influence.

53. For the “sanctification of the story” in Hasidism, see Yoseph Dan, *The Hasidic Novella* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1966), pp. 11-12. [Hebrew]

54. *Keter Shem Tov* (New York: Kehos, 1987), p. 3. [Hebrew]

55. Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, trans. and eds., *In Praise of the Ba’al Shem Tov: The Earliest Collection of Legends about the Founder of Hasidism* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1970), pp. 15-17.

56. As H. Shmeruk has shown in his article, “Tales about R. Adam Ba’al Shem in the Versions of *Shivhei Habeshit*” in *Zion: A Quarterly for Research in Jewish History* 28, 1963, pp. 86-105. [Hebrew]

57. S.Y. Agnon, “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight,” in *Collected Stories of Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1959), vol. 2, p. 57. [Hebrew]

58. In addition to this reference to the biblical verse “and they shall atone for their iniquity” (Leviticus 26:41), and the commentary by Rashi on this verse, it should be recalled that the title itself of the story, “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight,” is also drawn from the Bible (Isaiah 40:4).

59. Agnon, “And the Crooked,” pp. 89-90.

60. Such as *The Legend of the Scribe, Two Torah Scholars Who Were in Our City*, and the cycle of stories: *Eternal Generations, The Book of Deeds, The Ba’al Shem Tov Stories, Sabbath Stories, Stories of Poland* and *Stories of The Land of Israel*.

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61. For the importance of these anthologies for Agnon and his total devotion to their editing at the expense of many years of personal creativity, and for his rejection of protests by friends and literati who were angry at his wasting his time and energy on such “minor matters,” see Dan Laor, *S.Y. Agnon: A Biography* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), p. 282. [Hebrew]

62. A.B. Yehoshua attested in different interviews that his early stories were written under the influence of *The Book of Deeds*. He defined his first published story, “The Death of the Old Man” (1957), as “a clearly surrealist Agnon story.” A.B. Yehoshua, “Country Generation’s Literature,” in *Kesbet*, 1998, p. 21. [Hebrew] In the same year in which “The Death of the Old Man” was published, Gabriel Moked published the essay “In Praise of Adi’el Amza,” which provides an existential interpretation of Agnon’s “Edo and Enam” and “Forevermore.” The intensive, one-sided occupation with the surrealist, Kafkaesque Agnon gave birth to a multitude of interpretations in this spirit such as *Agnon and Kafka: A Comparative Study* by Hillel Barzel (Ramat Gan: Bar Uriyan, 1972) [Hebrew], which culminated in a book by S. Yizhar, *To Read a Story* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982) [Hebrew], that is primarily devoted to an analysis of the story “The Candles” from *The Book of Deeds* by Agnon.

63. This is attested by the title of the book by Dan Miron that is devoted to this novel: *Under the Motley Canopy: A Study of S.Y. Agnon’s Narrative Art in “The Bridal Canopy”* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hame’uhad, 1979). [Hebrew] (The Hebrew title of the work is a pun which translates, roughly, as “Reading a Worst-Seller.”) Miron had already argued about twenty years earlier that in all its central manifestations, “prose was advancing in directions distant from and foreign to the world of Agnon,” and “Agnon’s work is pushed aside and finally is relegated to the shelf of sterile classics—material for boring study in school and for seminar exercises in colleges.” Miron, *Motley Canopy*, pp. 98-99.

64. S.Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1945), p. 7. [Hebrew] The reference to land, homeland and city is a loose paraphrase of Genesis 12:1.

65. Y.H. Brenner, *From Here and There: Writings* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hame’uhad, 1978), vol. 2, p. 1265. [Hebrew]

66. An example of identification with Brenner, along with rejection of Agnon, can be found in an editorial opening the inaugural issue of the literary journal *Siman Kri’a* (September 1972). The title of the editorial, “Around the Point,” is the title of one of Brenner’s novels; the article’s lead-off quotation is that of Brenner, from the journal *Ham’orer*, which Brenner himself edited; and in the issue there is a translation by Brenner of *Tevey the Dairyman* by Sholom Aleichem. The editors, Menahem Peri and Meir Wieseltier, apparently felt that the latter was the most important piece in the issue, as it was the only article that they mentioned in the editorial. Immediately after singing the praises of this translation by Brenner, Peri and Wieseltier inform us that the young writers contributing to the issue (Yehoshua Kenaz, Hanoch Levin) are “free from the Agnon torture rack and are distant from its idiosyncrasies.

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Their stories are not a crossword puzzle of meanings, they do not contain the crude, ironic winks, and they do not possess a heavily burdened system of allusions. They contain observation of the objects of existence....” and their language was not “fried in its own oil.” Brenner, therefore, is the model to be followed; Agnon is the “torture rack” from which one must liberate oneself (twenty-five years later, in the autumn of 1997, Devir Intrentur and Erez Schweitzer founded a new literary magazine, also called *Ham’orer*). In 1966, when Agnon won the Nobel Prize for Literature, Nathan Zach said that Brenner was more deserving of this prize than Agnon; Nissim Kalderon, who quotes this statement by Zach, maintains this opinion to the present. “Within a Snail Shell,” *Ma’ariv*, June 5, 1998.

67. See Yitzhak Bacon, *The Solitary Youth in Hebrew Fiction (1899-1908)* (Ramat Gan: Tel Aviv University, 1978). [Hebrew]

68. Gershon Shaked defines the literary course of the 1960s as a “return to the detached.” “From the 1960s to the 1980s,” he writes, “there occurred a decline from a high level of imitation to a low level of imitation to the ironic, from hero to anti-hero and to subhero.” Gershon Shaked, *Hebrew Narrative Fiction (1880-1980)* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hame’uhad, 1998), vol. 5, pp. 72-73. [Hebrew] The detached, alienated figure, writes Nurit Govrin, “not only did not vanish, but rather was strengthened, and appears, in various forms, in Hebrew literature to the present.... Generations of writers... to our time have continued, against the clear backdrop of the land of Israel and against the backdrop of the State of Israel, to describe the figure of the alienated, rootless hero, who wonders about his identity and finds no anchor in any world.” Nurit Govrin, *Alienation and Regeneration: Hebrew Fiction in the Diaspora and the Land of Israel in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1985), p. 22. [Hebrew]

69. Yitzhak Orpaz, *Skin for Skin* (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1962), p. 247. [Hebrew]

70. Amos Kenan, *At the Station* (Tel Aviv: Ledori, 1963), p. 32. [Hebrew]

71. In the writings of Aharon Appelfeld, Yehudit Hendel, Yossi Birstein, Dan Zalka, David Schutz and Yoel Hoffmann.

72. The one who has lost his religion and has been cast out by the religious society in which he grew up, for Yehoshua Bar-Yosef; the homosexual, for Yotam Reuveni; the eccentric in a rural settlement, for Yitzhak Ben-Ner and Yeshayahu Koren; the Palestinian, for Yoram Kaniuk and David Grossman.

73. In the stories by Nissim Aloni, Dan Benaya Seri, Amnon Navot, Albert Suissa and Ronit Matalon.

74. “We have turned this country into the largest insane asylum on earth,” Yoram Kaniuk writes in a novel that describes Israel as the “cuckoo’s nest of nightmare-ridden refugees.” Yoram Kaniuk, *Adam Resurrected* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 52. The hero of the novel *Late Love* (1971) by Amos Oz is a lunatic whose brain is

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held by a single obsessive thought: Russia must be destroyed. The novel *A Late Divorce* by A.B. Yehoshua (1982) describes a family almost all of whose children are deranged. The characters that populate the books of Yeshayahu Koren's *Letter in the Sands* (1967), *Funeral at Noon* (1974) and *Those Who Stand at Night* (1992) suffer from mental distress, an inability to communicate, muddled consciousness, and frequently, actual madness (see, for example, the story "Boats of Matches," or the novella *Shot*). Orly Castel-Bloom invariably presents the Israeli experience as completely demented, and the narrator who speaks to us is no more sane than the reality she depicts; her characters are, intentionally and consistently, disturbed, hysterical, sadistic and sickly. The novel *Barbarossa* by Eyal Megged (1993) draws an analogy between the relationship of a contemporary Israeli couple and the people who carried out the insane campaigns of conquest of Frederick Barbarossa and Adolf Hitler, and thereby creates an equality of value between these "pathologies." Several works were published in the second half of the 1990s that are concerned with nervous breakdown and psychiatric hospitalization. See *I, Anastasia* by Alona Kimchi (1996), *Sixty Milligrams of Prozac* by Idan Rabi (1995), *April Season* by Sh'va Salhuv (1996).

75. Beginning with *After the Holidays* (1964), continuing with the wretches of *The Great Woman of the Dreams* (1973), the confused adolescents in *Musical Moment* (1980), the failing and intimidated boot-camp trainees in *Infiltration* (1986), the nursing-care elderly in *On the Way to the Cats* (1991), and concluding with the despairing figures of *Returning Lost Loves* (1997).

76. *The Eternal Invalid and His Beloved*, 1986; *A Man Stands Behind a Seated Woman*, 1992.

77. Ya'akov Shabtai, *Past Continuous*, trans. Dalya Bilu (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 214.

78. Shabtai, *Past Continuous*, pp. 351-352.

79. Additionally, the socialist orientation of the Palmah Generation authors, who were raised in the Labor movement, found expression in their adoption of the principles of socialist realism prevalent in the 1940s in the Soviet Union (and to a certain degree in the United States as well, among authors such as Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair and John Steinbeck). Socialist realism is opposed to Hebrew poetics in several respects. First, socialist realism does not perceive of man as part of a nationality, but as part of "society" or a "social class," and is therefore suitable to describe a given situation (of a sector or community), and not for the portrayal of a larger historical process (that is necessary for a national narrative). The stories of the Palmah Generation are concerned with isolated events (the description of a battle, the establishment of a new settlement, the conflict among members of a kibbutz, and the like) and not with a process extending over several years. Second, socialist realism is characterized by a concern for current events that at times borders on journalistic writing; it has no perspective of an extended period of time,

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which is a prerequisite for Hebrew, historical writing. Third, socialist realism is not epic by nature (as is the Hebrew poetics), but rather dramatic (as is the practice in the art of the Western popular novel); it is fundamentally based on scenes, not on narrative continuity. Fourth, the “reality” portrayed by socialist realism is an empirical, materialistic, worldly reality, lacking in mystery; the Hebrew poetics, by way of contrast, as we have seen, is not limited to the empirical, but ranges between the revealed and the concealed, between the familiar and the wondrous.

80. Avram Heffner, *Tout Compris* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1987), p. 103. [Hebrew]

81. Avram Heffner, *Alleles* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1993), p. 269. [Hebrew]

82. Yoel Hoffmann, *Bernhard*, trans. Alan Treister (New York: New Directions, 1998), p. 15.

83. The heroes of present-day Israeli prose, writes Avraham Balaban, “no longer seek meaning for their lives, since they do not believe in the existence of meaning.” Avraham Balaban, *A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction: Postmodernist Israeli Fiction* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995), p. 33. [Hebrew] “Tangibility itself,” writes Hanna Hertzog, “has almost vanished” in current Israeli prose, and is “presented as a collection of linguistic metaphors and clichés.” Hanna Hertzog, *The Voice Saying ‘I’: Trends in Israeli Prose Fiction of the 1980s* (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1998), pp. 26-27. [Hebrew] “This is prose,” Hertzog continues, which is characterized by “a lack of selectivity and ‘everything goes,’ dilution, fragmentation, superficiality. The belief in the possibility of coherent literary molds that fashion coherent meaning no longer exists here.” Hertzog, *The Voice*, p. 29.

84. Uzi Weill, “Almost Sweet Life,” in *The Day They Shot the President Down* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1991), p. 249. [Hebrew]

85. Yosef El-Dror, “Hunger,” in *Yedi’ot Aharonot*, September 19, 1999.

86. Etgar Keret, *Missing Kissinger* (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1994), pp. 13-14. [Hebrew]

87. Note should be taken of the limited knowledge of the narrator in the cited passage by Weill (“somehow”) and the overtly limited knowledge of Keret (“From her hints, I certainly can understand nothing”). Balaban notes that even in those contemporary works that are related in the third person, the perspective of the narrator is no broader than that of his characters; current prose, he concludes, “restricts to a minimum the authority of the narrators.” Balaban, *A Different Wave*, pp. 49-50.

A lucid, insider’s formulation of the assumptions of today’s prose can be found in a collection of essays by Gadi Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion*: “The language that served the craft [of writing] in the past has lost its meaning,” Taub writes. “The past has been closed off to us.” Gadi Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion: Essays on Contemporary Israeli Culture* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hame’uhad, 1997), pp. 59-60. [Hebrew] “A certain new

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vagueness envelops everything,” “banality and lack of purpose” that give birth to “a tendency towards the instinctive, towards the immediate.” Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion*, pp. 69, 70, 77. Taub maintains that we live with “emotional torpor, a sense of insipidity, lack of meaning, in which only strong colors, mighty blows, fierce stimuli, have sufficient power to cause us to forget for a moment the dust of despair that weighs down on all and empties everything of content” (p. 78). This is the “distress of a sense of floating in a vacuum” (p. 82), “a lack of orientation, the inability to distinguish between good and evil” (p. 84). “The narrator himself [in current prose] does not know, because he is not capable of knowing why what happens does so” (p. 92). Taub links the limitations of the narrator with those of the language: “The splendid, elegant language articulated by the narrator of the previous generation simply is not a comfortable vehicle for the transmission of an experience that begins with disintegration” (p. 154).

88. Orly Castel-Bloom, *Dolly City*, trans. Dalya Bilu (London: Loki Books, 1997), pp. 88-90.

89. It should be obvious to the reader that I am not claiming that all Hebrew literature is inherently superior to that which employs other poetics. Nor is the writing of prose intrinsically more worthwhile than the composition of poetry, plays or philosophy. Historical, national, action-based narrative prose is not always preferable to other kinds of narrative writing. When I noted that poetry—like philosophy, science and technology—is a product of the pagan culture, I did not thereby say anything detrimental regarding it; on the contrary, pagan culture is deserving of our full respect and gratitude for what it produced. And when I stated that Brenner’s prose is not “Hebrew” in its poetics as is the prose of Agnon, I did not mean that the prose of the former is necessarily inferior to that of the latter. It is entirely possible that new authors will arise, dedicated to the spirit of Hebrew poetics, and will in so doing produce substandard work. Hebrew prose, like any other, can be enthralling or enervating, profound or superficial, original or hackneyed. The criticism that I leveled here has little to do with taste, and everything to do with ideas. My point is not to show how *bad* the prose written in Israel in recent decades has been, but how distant it is from the Hebrew heritage.

90. For examples of those offering their blessings, see: Yigal Schwartz, “Hebrew Prose—The Era After,” *Yedi’ot Aharonot* literary supplement, October 14, 1994; Hanan Haver, *Literature Written Here* (Tel Aviv: Yedi’ot Aharonot, 1999), pp. 7-10. [Hebrew] An especially vivid example of just how much pleasure may be derived from the demolition of Hebrew literature can be found in Haim Deu’el Lusky, who praises *Dolly City* with the following words: “Hebrew literature, which is still in its romantic diapers, sunken in glorifying and aggrandizement, in sanctimonious self-examination or in preoccupation with ‘great’ questions, such as the attitude toward the state, the nation, the subject and history, is saved by Castel-Bloom, who casts it down toward the total disintegration of values, desires and appearances, and transforms the private non-language into the language of the

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masses. Like a skilled alchemist, she breaks down the vertical gaze into particles, softens the closed categories of accepted terms and meanings, and they are transformed from a solid to a thick liquid, and from a liquid to a gas that soars to the realms of unlimited imagination, to time that has no temporality.” *Fifty to Forty-Eight: Critical Moments in the History of the State of Israel*, a special issue of *Theory and Criticism* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hame’uhad, 1999), p. 359. [Hebrew] Although I confess I find some of Lusky’s expressions inscrutable (what does it mean to “break down the vertical gaze into particles”?), his ecstatic gyrations over that “total disintegration of values” are clear enough.