

Perhaps by the Power of Memory

Gershon Shaked

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus posits one central question: In the face of an absurd, meaningless world, why not commit suicide? In answering, he attempts to imbue the affirmation of life with social relevance and moral content.¹ One might say, in a similar manner and on a daily basis, that the Zionist Jew both in Israel and outside of it is forced to answer existential questions such as: Why not remain in the diaspora? What is the purpose of making *aliya*? Or, for those who have made Israel their home, why stay, considering the hardship of doing so? Time was, the answers given by that Jew to these questions proved his commitment to the Jewish national project; so, too, did the answers invariably require him to engage in the *hagshama* (fulfillment) of the Zionist dream. Those who did not engage in it, for one reason or another, consequently lived with a sense of sin. These Jews felt the need to justify—to themselves and others—their failure to obey the imperative to which the entire Jewish people was obligated. In the diaspora, fulfilling this imperative was interpreted as a call to make *aliya* to the “land of our forefathers”; in Israel, on the other hand, it was

interpreted as the need to encourage de-urbanization and agriculture, in order to transform the Jews from a nation of middlemen into one of laborers and farmers. This latter interpretation ultimately became the banner of the Zionist youth movements.

For today's Zionist Jew, the situation is very different.

Indeed, the questions that troubled past generations are no longer applicable to today's Zionists. Instead, Zionism has been transformed into simple *ahavat Zion*, "love of Zion." Jews living abroad need only feel affection for the people living in Israel in order to be called "Zionists"—a title, it should be noted, that no longer bestows honor on its bearer. Today's Zionism does not require a person to fulfill the Zionist dream *in Israel*. Rather, all he has to do is develop a sentimental affinity for his poor brethren in the Middle East. Ever since the Yom Kippur War—which was perceived more as a defeat than a triumph, or certainly a grand victory like the Six Day War—"love of Zion" seems to be more about pity than a sense of pride. This is a new, very different kind of love.

To be sure, Israelis do not have it easy. They do not live in peace and tranquillity. They endure economic hardship and face constant threats to their security. By contrast, their brothers and sisters in the diaspora (especially in the United States) avail themselves of the good life. A donation to a Jewish federation has therefore become a kind of indulgence paid by sinners—albeit sinners who have long forgotten the sin. All that is left of their Zionism—and their Judaism—is membership in a Jewish community center. These centers have replaced the Zionist clubs of old, and even the synagogues (in fact, many synagogues have turned into de facto "community centers"). Moreover, special status is reserved for Israelis who have left Israel (known as *yordim*, literally "those who have come down"), preferring a comfortable exile to life in a frustrating (or depressing, as they like to call it) homeland. These emigrants prefer to fulfill themselves and their dreams elsewhere, where they are easier to pursue. They have lost faith in all the ideals that demand a Jewish sovereign presence in the Middle East. In their view, those who live in the diaspora yet read the Hebrew newspaper *Yediot*

Aharonot and are active in Jewish and Zionist organizations out of some sentimental affection for their country of origin coupled with a hint of guilt, are all doing their part for the State of Israel. And if they also happen to sell Israel Bonds or teach Hebrew, thus making an honorable living off Zion, then—so the thinking goes—they should be doubly appreciated.

These yordim, whose children will soon forget where they came from, are considered model “lovers of Zion.” Nevertheless, they remain for the most part emigrants, merely ones who have preserved their ties to the Old Country in various ways. They are great fans of the Maccabi Tel Aviv basketball team, for example, or take pride in the bravery of Israeli soldiers. As I see it, however, they are less Zionist than those American Jews—most of whom are Orthodox—who feel a far deeper, spiritual connection to the Land of Israel. The best among the yordim are still sadly mulling over the question first asked by the hero of Ory Bernstein’s novel *Safek Haim* (“A Dubious Life”):

All that is left from that dream, from those old yearnings, is the doubt eating away at me: Should I return to my homeland?... Or, having succeeded in escaping from that place, is it better never to return, better that I remain a nomad, going back and forth outside the country, its borders, its fields, on land where people’s lives, including mine, are not set on fire every day as were the idolatrous prophets on the hills beside me, and on earth that does not eternally emit the scent of olden fires?²

Most Israeli emigrants’ response to the question posed above is that their lives and those of their children are more important to them than nostalgic cravings for the “land of our forefathers” and their particular bit of mother earth. Many of them who have made a spiritual accounting of their choice either deny Zionist ideology and the Zionist narrative, or simply do not consider them obstacles to their decision to seek out happiness elsewhere.³ Anyone looking objectively at this situation cannot but ask himself: Is there any constructive response to those who have chosen the diaspora over Israel?

We have yet to delve deeper into why many rational young Israelis leave their homeland. The principal reason is that Zionist ideology has created historical absurdities. The land that was meant to serve as a shelter for the oppressed has turned into a place where Jews are simultaneously persecuted and persecutors, on account of their ongoing struggle with the land's other residents. It has become clear that Herzl's Zionism did not provide a satisfactory solution to the Jewish problem that became all the more acute after the Russian pogroms of 1881-1882, the Dreyfus affair in France in the 1890s, and the Kishinev riots in Bessarabia in 1903. It has become clear to Zionists that the land they chose for historical reasons was not empty of people, but rather already settled. Ironically, those who wished to realize the national dream in their historic homeland catalyzed an Arab nationalist movement that was their own mirror image. Those who wished to settle the land of their forefathers became—in the eyes of the world and, at times, in their own—colonists. They conquered a foreign territory and a foreign people who, far from greeting them with open arms, rejected them out of hand.

Jews have been dreaming for a long time of developing their own culture in their own homeland. The great Zionist thinker Ahad Ha'am, for example, viewed the development of a secular Jewish society in the Land of Israel as the principal mission of world Jewry. He believed that the goal of a renewed Jewish "spiritual center" should be not the establishment of a state, but rather the creation of a new Jewish culture, one that would provide content and meaning for the diaspora. And indeed, the shoots of such a culture were soon sprouting all over the land. Hebrew became the residents' official language, leading, through all manner of lowbrow and highbrow publications, to the development of both popular and elite culture. Music, the visual arts, etc., all blossomed, along with institutes of education and research (schools, colleges, and universities).

Despite this Jewish cultural efflorescence, the best and brightest of today's Israeli society prefer a Western lifestyle to that of their culture of

origin—which is already highly Westernized as it is. The elite of Israeli youth inevitably find their way overseas, where they excel in all imaginable fields: technology, sports, medicine, science, and even Jewish studies and Jewish literature.

To be sure, every one of these emigrants has good reason to feel disappointed in Israel. Despite these good reasons, the question remains: Do Jews have any values that can withstand the temptations of money, fame, and ease of life, which are so appealing to the young? What values can help prevent the abandonment of the Land of Israel in favor of greener pastures elsewhere?

Many of the arguments in favor of Zionist ideology are no longer universally valid. Israel is not, for instance, a safe haven for the Jewish people, and the sense of historical belonging to that “land of our forefathers” now resonates mainly within the national-religious minority. The majority of Israelis can accept living within the boundaries of the “Green Line,” and feel no qualms about forgoing the option of visiting the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. They are more than happy to do without placing notes on Rachel’s or Abraham’s tomb. Even the connection they feel to the Western Wall is nationalist-sentimental at best.

This is not surprising: Zionist education sought to replace the Western Wall, which signified the fall of the Jewish people as a national entity and its condemnation to exile, with a new collective symbol, that of Masada. This last vestige of the Zealots’ war for freedom, of their readiness to fight until the bitter end and their refusal to accept the alternative of slavery in a foreign land, aroused fervent identification in Zionist thought. The semiotic meaning of the ruins at Masada turned the site into a symbol for various youth movements, the ultimate expression of a nation fighting for its freedom. It became a place of ritual and pilgrimage, where Hagana units were sworn in prior to the War of Independence and IDF units afterward.

Since the 1970s, however, even Masada's mythological significance has decreased. It has been damaged by a trend of demystification and a depletion of national values, as have other iconic Zionist figures and sites (such as the tomb of Yosef Trumpeldor at Tel Hai). This shift has been reflected in modern Hebrew literature, which attempted to subvert the image and stature of the "new Jew," ready and willing to sacrifice himself on the altar of his homeland. We find its expression in various literary parodies,⁴ such as this satirical description of the myth of Masada in Yoram Kaniuk's 1981 novel *The Last Jew*:

Henkin investigated the history of the Falashas. The story of Joseph de la Rayna, Masada, and Yavneh. Survival versus the fever of revolt. He wrote about the greatest heroic speech written in the history of Judaism, the patriotic speech every Israeli student learns by heart, the speech of Eleazar ben Yair atop Masada, written by Josephus Flavius—that is, Yohanan the Traitor, who commanded the siege of Yodfat, surrendered, joined the Romans, and... with his own hand wrote the speech of great hope, the dying speech of Eleazar ben Yair. Only if you steal the victory from the Romans will you be remembered, and that is how the Jewish memory was born. The Last Jew is its last product, or perhaps not the last....⁵

This new narrative presents the patriotic final words of Eleazar ben Yair, the hero of Masada canonized in Zionist myth, as an imaginary speech invented by Josephus Flavius and attributed to the Zealot leader in an effort to "steal" victory from the Romans, thus glorifying the Jews. Clearly, this modification of the traditional narrative diminishes its symbolic value in the eyes of the reader. Such has been the fate of most other sacred national myths nurtured by Zionism but depreciated by Israeli life and literature.

Yet the identification of the majority of those born in Israel with their homeland does not depend on the Zionist narrative, or on any symbols of the past. The "new Jew" has, we are led to believe, broken free of

the marks and dilemmas of the “old Jew” who immigrated here. Therefore, native Israelis adopted symbols largely associated with the land itself, some ancient (the Old Testament, Masada, etc.) and some modern (the Jezreel Valley, the pioneers’ “tower and stockade” settlements, and so on). They did not feel like those who came to the country in order to build it and fulfill the Zionist dream, but rather like natives, for whom Israel is their natural home in the world. Their self-identification with local society and the Land of Israel was born of a physical connection to their environment.

Israeli authors have expressed, some humorously and some seriously, the relationship between *sabras*, or native-born Israelis, and the *hevre*—their circle of friends, the “guys”—and their land. This phenomenon is mockingly depicted by Amos Keinan, who describes young Dani as a youth who “learned to do everything with everyone together: sing, dance, travel, think, speak, write, etc.,”⁶ and by S. Yizhar, who defines the sabra as “one who hates to be left alone. Who cannot be left without the group. With everyone, he is someone too. And that, no matter the price to pay, cannot be questioned. Anything else can be. That cannot. All sorts of values are here today, gone tomorrow. Doctrines and ideologies are like clouds drifting in the eye of a storm. But the team, the *hevre*, is there forever.”⁷

The poet Haim Gouri’s self-identification with the Israeli landscape also stands apart from the original Zionist narrative in terms of history and collective memory. Gouri’s hero, the first-person narrator, is a “new Jew,” a product of the land itself:

To whom did you belong?

I belonged to the dunes, to the sycamore trees, to the sea. I loved the sea the most toward evening, when the sky is crimson-gold and the waters are tainted the color of ink. When it is somber and magnificent. I loved the fishermen on the mossy rock. I loved the sailboats, traveling off toward the horizon or moving southward toward Jaffa; the quiet hour, settling into tranquillity. I loved the salty smell of our sea, the scent of seaweed, the vast, open spaces. I belonged to the shadowy orchards past the sycamore lanes, the well houses of Jaffa, the clanging pump, the sandy lane cooling off as

the burning sun's summer reign ends. To the donkeys and the camels, to them did I belong; to the shadowy women, adorned in nose rings; to the bells of the flocks and the flutes of the shepherds. I belonged to the early rising builders who wash their faces outside, under the faucet, in a loud din, dragging their feet and sighing; to these sturdy men, emigrants from Russia. I belonged to the rising moon, the blossoms of the evening primrose, the sleepless' balconies.⁸

The things to which the author responds almost viscerally, and which he perceives as extensions of his own identity, reflect his deep attachment to the typical Israeli scenery. The sands, the sycamores, the acacias, the sea, the dark orchards, the donkey, and the camels are synecdochal representations of the space around him.⁹ This space, however, is not the old landscape inhabited by the pioneers. In truth, it is closer to the setting described by S. Yizhar in *Plain Stories* (1963) and Benjamin Tamuz in *The Golden Sands*, or the "Semitic space" for which the Canaanite movement yearned. What is more interesting are the characters and sounds that Gouri's hero recalls: the dark women with piercings, the bells of the herd, the shepherds' flutes, and "those strong men born in Russia." He creates an instinctual linkage between Arab women and the heroic Russian pioneers, who are perceived as powerful Gentile characters instead of weak Jewish ones. This idealized connection between the mysterious Middle East and Eastern Europe echoes the Berdichevsky-Canaanite idea of the "new Hebrew" while expressing, to a greater or lesser extent, the ideal self-image of the mythical sabra.

The myth of the Canaanite-Semitic space and the loyalty to one's hevre were of great significance to the so-called 1948 generation. The narrative of this generation cherished the biblical site of Tziklag—where the intense fighting described in S. Yizhar's magnum opus takes place—much more than it related to Dreyfus and Basel. While this narrative was for a time very powerful, and influenced a large part of Israel's social elite, it, too, lost some of its appeal from the 1970s on.

Many of this generation's offspring can now be found in New York, Los Angeles, and Toronto; the children of some of its leaders are sitting on the banks of the Hudson, feeling a pang, perhaps, when Maccabi Tel Aviv loses the European Basketball Cup. The skyscrapers, the Grand Canyon, and Lake Michigan are dearer to them than the sand, the sea, the orchards, the donkeys, and the camels. The landscape and its inhabitants have lost their sense of magic and their attraction. The space and those who inhabit it no longer inspire either the newcomers to Israel or the native Israelis who choose to emigrate to the land of milk and money. Most Israelis who live in the United States do not feel trapped there, nor do they fear a new Holocaust. Our brothers across the sea and our sons and daughters who have joined them say that they have never had it so good. Indeed, the Jews have never experienced a better exile.

American Jews have become the leaven of the American Wonder bread, with Israeli immigrants competing for the title of better-assimilated. Many Israelis who have managed to become an important part of the American economic and intellectual establishment "made it" in much the same way as did Jewish emigrants from Europe from the nineteenth century onwards. They came to that fabled land where life is safe, and all is possible: They can buy an apartment in Manhattan, own a home in the suburbs, go on vacation in Europe, and perhaps stop by the Old Country once in a while, to visit their cousins back home.

The United States has been transformed from a source of *olim* (immigrants to Israel, literally "those who move up"), or at the very least Zionist inspiration, into the pure and simple antithesis of both Herzl's and Ahad Ha'am's vision. It has become the main shelter for Middle Eastern and Eastern European Jews, attesting to the failure of the Zionist narrative.

Only religious Zionists, whose nationality is inextricably tied to their religion, have a firm ideological grip on the Land of Israel. They consider residence in Israel a commandment of the Torah. Their narrative does not depend on the misfortunes of the Jews throughout history, or on the dangers of assimilation today. Their story begins, rather, with the covenant of Abraham, and they believe that the Land of Israel was promised to the Jewish people by God himself. Unlike most Orthodox Jews, they do not consider redemption the exclusive domain of the messiah. They make aliya with the aim of redeeming and being redeemed through the land, without waiting for the savior to deliver them at the end of days.

National-religious Jews, however, do not constitute a majority of Orthodox Jewry. The silent majority of Orthodox or Haredi Jews prefer living in Brooklyn to Meah Shearim. They would rather live in Babylon or on the banks of the Hudson and wait for the messiah. This kind of Judaism does not need the Zionist narrative, which fundamentally disagrees with its view of history. It rejects auto-emancipation, Jewish self-rule, or any “state” that discards help from above. The verses from Bialik’s poem “The Dead of the Desert,” “Since God denies us, / his ark refused us, / we will ascend alone,” are a complete heresy in the eyes of those who consider Jewish destiny to be wholly dependent on the mercy of God.¹⁰ Thus did the Lubavitcher Rebbe and his followers advocate the idea of Greater Israel while residing in their Babylon, postponing their aliya until the coming of the messiah—or, for some, to that time when *their* messiah, the Rebbe himself, would be resurrected and lead them to their Promised Land.

For the American Jew who is not Orthodox, the situation is far more complex, because all that remains of his heritage are vestiges of a religious tradition. This kind of Jew needs an autonomous space in order to preserve his culture, and there are American Jews who attempt to provide him with one. The American writer and essayist Cynthia Ozick, for example, once declared that English was the new Yiddish of American Jews.¹¹ However, the English of this Dubnovian autonomy that American Jews are trying

to create is becoming far more anglicized than Jewish. Their Yiddish cannot replace the need to preserve their heritage in secular form. The non-Orthodox movements (Conservative and Reform), which have changed the language of ritual from Hebrew to English, are attempting something similar: These movements are trying to save the remnants of Jewish religious ritual through English, interspersed here and there with a few Hebrew verses (more so in Conservative than in Reform Judaism). They also teach the majority of Jewish texts, from the Talmud to modern Hebrew literature, in English translation.

American Jewish community leaders believe, often correctly, that it is better to pray in English and study Jewish culture in English translation than to be bereft of Judaism and fall prey to utter assimilation. Yet while these leaders and rabbis believe they are the heirs of the legendary Babylonian yeshivas of Sura and Pumbedita, and imagine that they have established a utopian Arcady for Jewish culture, what they have done is merely add another spice to the multicultural stew that is America. The culture of Jewish Americans, and with them the Israeli immigrants who seek to integrate into their new surroundings, is as far from the Zionist narrative as New York is from the Galilee. Indeed, in a way, Ozick's remarks are the cultural battle cry of this new type of Judaism. "It seems to me we are ready to rethink ourselves in America now," she wrote, "to preserve ourselves by a new culture-making."¹²

There are Israelis who believe that their Israeliness is asserted through secular reincarnations of Jewish tradition, along with new traditions created within the parameters of Israeli culture. They imbue religious rituals with secular-Zionist meanings, for example by turning Hanukka into a national holiday, Tu Bishvat into an agricultural celebration, and Passover into a day of family togetherness. Some Israelis express their identity through the highbrow culture of literature, music, painting, and dance, or, conversely, through popular songs, folklore, folk dancing, and local theater. They read

the works of Haim Nahman Bialik, S.Y. Agnon, Yehuda Amichai, Haim Gouri, A.B. Yehoshua, Aharon Appelfeld, and Amos Oz; watch the plays of Nissim Aloni and Hanoach Levin; and listen to the songs of Naomi Shemer and the sketches of Hagashash Hahiver (“The Pale Tracker,” a legendary Israeli comedy troupe). Through these cultural markers, they consider themselves authentic Israelis, saturated in Israeli culture—a culture that, up until a few years ago, was intimately linked to the Bible. These elements of Israeli existence have become, in their view, a cultural passport, which many bring along with them when emigrating from Israel.

Some consider Israeli culture in America a kind of fulfillment of Ahad Ha’am’s vision, emphasizing the spiritual connection between the “center” and its orbiting moons. But while the parents back home preserve their Hebrew, their children try to forget it, and to integrate into their new linguistic and spiritual homeland as quickly as possible. Some remnants of Hebrew, a few folk songs, and a love of soccer are all that remain of the cultural roots of these emigrants—of the taxi drivers, the movers, the clothing-store owners on Manhattan’s 14th Street.

The expectation that the immigrant Israeli intelligentsia—the doctors, engineers, scientists, and artists—would choose a different path has also been proven false: Their spiritual life is quite detached from highbrow Jewish or Israeli culture as well. The majority of them prefer the works of James Joyce, William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, and even Jewish American authors such as Henry Roth, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth; they adore the music of Mozart, Beethoven, George Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, and The Beatles. In the visual arts, they profess admiration for Picasso, Modigliani, Munch, and Kandinsky over Nahum Gutman and Reuven Rubin, Yaakov Agam, and Mordechai Ardon. And they certainly choose American cinema and television over that of their homeland, which, for the most part, is already heavily influenced by American trends. Thus, even when Israelis in the United States try to maintain a connection to secular Israeli culture, which they have brought with them into the diaspora, they are deceiving themselves. They get carried away by Western cultural plenitude, and as

the years go by, the Jewish-Israeli aspect of their identity gets weaker and weaker. When Israelis dissociate themselves from their place of origin, they lose the vitality derived from national roots. Indeed, after a few years, they are stripped bare of their Israeliness.

In light of this new reality, can Zionism survive in the twenty-first century? As noted above, it is clear that Zionism no longer means the fulfillment of the Zionist dream, nor, for that matter, does it provide existential security. At most, it enables living in the Land of Israel. Can such a situation compel diaspora Jews and former Israelis alike to give up an exile that appears to provide both better security and more comfortable living conditions? The answer I hereby propose will not appeal to everyone, but it may signal a way out of this dead end.

My answer echoes some of the basic ideas that shaped the Zionist narrative and influenced the cultural model many Jewish authors have adopted, whether they regarded themselves as Zionists or not. Its basic assumption is that every person is a product or a victim of his memories. According to Carl Jung, a person's relationship to a group of people is a result of shared memories, or the "collective unconscious."¹³ Whether or not we adopt Jung's terminology, we must admit that a commonality of memories does create a certain closeness between those who share them.

Both Israeli and diaspora Jews are a historical product of circumstances in which a group of people with a specific origin were persecuted because of their identity, and who at times tried to dispose of or hide this identity when they were rejected by their society. The reasons for this rejection may have been valid or invalid, but one must admit that, as Nahum Sokolow put it, "the eternal hatred of the eternal people" has always existed.

From the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem, the story of Haman and Esther in Persia, and the anti-Jewish riots in Alexandria to the Inquisition in Spain, the Khmelnytsky uprising in the Ukraine, and the pogroms of Eastern Europe, Jews have always been persecuted by various national entities.

The Dreyfus affair, at the end of the nineteenth century, was just the tip of the antisemitic iceberg. That affair, along with the Kishinev riots and other violent antisemitic events that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, would have been bad enough on its own, even had it not served as a dress rehearsal for what took place in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. The view that regards the Holocaust as an exceptional occurrence, the likes of which had never been seen before, attempts to disconnect it from the chain of historical memory and to make us forget the enduring persecution of the Jews. Likewise, the various memorials to the Holocaust, such as Yad Vashem in Jerusalem or the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., try to exorcise the antisemitic demons that have tormented us for hundreds of years.

Historically, the Jews have often had to justify their right to exist to those who controlled their surroundings. In other words, their existence as a people with a specific identity was not self-evident; it was, rather, considered a gesture of kindness granted to them by the powers that be. Nazi racism completely denied the Jews' right to exist, bringing about their near-annihilation, but it was not unique in that regard. The very legitimacy of a Jewish presence in the world was questioned throughout Europe. Indeed, it was not only the Germans who conspired against the Jews in the 1940s, but the majority of European nations. There was no significant difference between those who incited and led the extermination of the Jews, and their French, Belgian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian collaborators. A large number of those so-called civilized nations even hinted that the Jews got what they deserved; it was only that most of them did not possess the audacity, the cruelty, and the methodical disposition necessary to carry out the extermination themselves.

Many Jews, both before and after the Holocaust, also perceived their Jewish identity as something distasteful and sought to conceal it from others. Religious Jews, to be sure, as well as the early Zionists, did not try to hide it; among secular Jews, however, who comprised the large majority of European Jewry, only those who managed to hide their Jewishness had any chance of survival. Those who failed to do so were killed. Some of the

most terrible stories to come out of the Holocaust are of Jews who survived because they did not “look Jewish.”

And here I arrive at the answer to the problem I presented at the beginning of this essay: What is the role of the Land of Israel in this narrative of persecution? What part does it play in the lives of those whose narrative begins with the fall of the First and Second Temples, and who from then until the middle of the twentieth century were the “others,” the outcasts, the scapegoats in every country around the world?

Zionism may not have created a safe haven for the persecuted, but it *has* provided a “backbone” for the humiliated. The State of Israel is the only place where a Jew is judged by his successes and failures, not by his origins. It is the only place where a Jew may be hated for not being religious enough, for not being patriotic enough, or for not being left-wing enough—or simply because of his personality—but *not* for being born into a family tainted by Jewish origins.

Some will respond that no one cares about the identity of Jews in the United States or Europe, either. But most self-aware Jews will have trouble accepting this claim. They will admit, rather, that diaspora Jews have always dealt, and will continue to deal, with questions regarding who and what they are. The State of Israel is the only country in which not only are Jews unashamed of being Jews, but, perhaps after a process of adaptation, they may live as citizens unconditionally and without fear. In defending themselves and their country, Israelis might kill or be killed, but they will never be exterminated for being born to this mother instead of that one. They will be killed only because they are the enemy of another people with a claim to the same territory.

One can say, of course, that the reasons Jews are killed are irrelevant: The only thing that matters is that the *threat* of annihilation hangs over their heads, even in the place where they have built a Jewish state. The answer to this claim is that death is not the measure of a human being’s life. Rather, it is the quality of life preceding one’s death that counts. It is, perhaps, the one and only thing that might explain the willingness of freedom fighters to

sacrifice themselves for a higher cause. Freedom for Jews means the ability of a person who was born Jewish to wear his identity proudly and never to think of it as a mark of disgrace. This answer, of course, is nothing less than a reincarnation of the old Zionist response. It is the source of a people's desire to live on its own territory.

In searching for any answers to the new Zionist question of why a Jew should tie his fate to that of a state in which he is not a minority, we must go back and look at the last hundred years of Jewish history. A century passed between the Russian pogroms of 1881 and the riots of the 1987 Intifada. What an extraordinary hundred years! No one would have put his money on this sick horse in the 1880s, and no one would have guessed sixty years later that this nation would yet persevere, even after most of its members had been wiped off the map. After all, not only was a large part of the Jewish people destroyed, but a no-less-significant part assimilated, and continues to do so. It is hard to believe that after the majority of the Jewish people disappeared or was made to disappear, it arose like a phoenix from the sands of Palestine to create the State of Israel. There is no rhyme or reason to these historical processes. Contrary to historical logic, and against the expectations of the original Zionists, who believed they had fulfilled the hopes of past generations, the Jews who today come to Israel of their own free will have become fewer and fewer, while many others have left it of their own accord. On the other hand, many have made *aliya* in spite of themselves. Jews, and mainly Israeli Jews, simply do not understand the historical opportunity made possible in this time and place. Sometimes it seems as if the dark prophecy of Haim Hazaz is coming true:

The efforts are all for naught... either way the Jews will leave this land and go their way... no end is more set than this. It is as clear as daylight... I can see it. In fifty years, in one hundred years... I see how we will have already become a majority in this land, and how this land will have already been built up, everything that your heart desires, but they will get up and leave

behind everything—all of it—and they will disperse themselves throughout the world... not at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar or Titus—just like that, on their own and of their own volition.¹⁴

Hazaz predicted that those living in Zion would miss the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that history had granted them. Today, seventy years after he uttered those prophetic words, it seems to me that he foresaw the future all too well. And how utterly tragic, since it cannot be denied that what was built here is the last chance for a people with a troubled past to secure a future for themselves.

Surprisingly, the Jews have yet to be wiped off the map. If in the past, Jews and other people complained about Jewish weakness, at present Jews and Gentiles alike (and here we should perhaps say, “thank God”) complain about Jewish strength. I will permit myself to say that it is better this way. Today, when Jews reflect on their present condition, they should remember how far they’ve come in the last hundred years, and recall Herzl’s adage that if they will it, it will be no dream.

It seems to me that the two answers to the question posed at the start of this essay are always present in the background of Jewish and Israeli culture. Even in radical post-Zionist texts that rail against the tenets of Israeli and/or Jewish existence, we find traces of historical memory and hints of that stubborn pride—the sense that despite everything, the people that was supposed to be wiped out still exists.

Many Zionist conventions are no longer acceptable to a significant number of Israelis and diaspora Jews. There are those among the post-Zionists who do not adhere to the national model, and wish to erase it in favor of a foreign, specifically Arab, narrative. But we still preserve a residue of Jewish historical memory, though it may be somewhat blurry and prone to growing aphasia. Nonetheless, this residue is the only basis for sustaining the continued existence of Jewish identity. One must wonder

whether the generations that still remember the past can bequeath their memories—the source of and primary reason for the Zionist venture in the Land of Israel—to the generations to come. A realist cannot hide from himself and from others his fear that this hope is nothing but a pipe dream. If the presumption that collective memory, conscious and unconscious, is more powerful than all countervailing forces proves to be false, then all that has been said here is no more than the idle talk of an aging immigrant trying to justify his aliya (which was forced on him) and his continued hold on this land, which, though not the country of his birth, has become and will always be his homeland.

Gershon Shaked (1929-2006) was a renowned Israeli literary critic. This essay was originally published in Hebrew in his A Group Portrayal: Aspects of Israeli Literature and Culture, eds. Giddon Ticotsky and Malka Shaked (Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2009).

Notes

1. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1955), pp. 3-10.
2. Ory Bernstein, *Safek Haim* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2002), p. 146.
3. For a more detailed analysis of Jews and *yordim* in America, see Gershon Shaked, *No Other Place: Essays on Literature and Society*, 2nd ed. (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1998), pp. 138-184 [Hebrew], particularly the chapter titled "Alexandria (On Jews and Judaism in America)."
4. See Nurit Gertz, "The Place of Parody in the Change of Generations," *Siman Kriya* 12-13 (February 1981), pp. 272-273 [Hebrew].
5. Yoram Kaniuk, *The Last Jew*, trans. Barbara Harshav (New York: Grove, 2006), pp. 84-85.

6. See Keinan's column "Dani (In Memoriam)": "From the bloom of youth, Dani was cheerful, social and a collectivist.... When he entered first grade he still loved his fellows. Every recess he would be seated with them and they would all sing together: 'Comrades, comrades, what would we do without work?'"

In fourth grade he joined the Youth Movement, where he served for ten years. There, he received a basic collectivist education and learned to do everything with everybody together: sing, dance, take nature walks, think, talk, write, etc. He even became an expert at writing collectivist poems, which did not excessively bring out the petty selfishness of individuals, but instead pointed to social processes.

When everyone joined the struggle, he joined the struggle. When everyone joined the 'Aliya Bet' organization, he joined the 'Aliya Bet' organization.

After leaving the kibbutz (following a social crisis), he would meet up with his friends every evening and ask: Guys, what are our plans for today? Guys, what are our plans for tomorrow? Guys, how is everyone? In general, wherever his fellows might be, he would not be absent.

Once a tragedy occurred: the whole group went out of town for the wedding of one of the guys, and Dani remained alone. He spent the entire night wandering about the streets without meeting anyone. This caused him to enter a state of emotional depression. For this reason he took his own life, and to this day no one can understand how he could have done this, on his own." Amos Keinan, *With Whips and Scorpions* (Tel Aviv: Israel Publishing, 1952), p. 197 [Hebrew].

7. S. Yizhar, *Days of Tzikklag* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1958), pp. 793-794 [Hebrew].

8. Haim Gouri, *The Interrogation: The Story of Reuel* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1980), pp. 23-24 [Hebrew].

9. See Baruch Kurtzweil, "The Essence and the Sources of the 'Young Hebrews' Movement ('Canaanites')," *Our New Literature: Continuation or Revolution?* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1959), pp. 270-300 [Hebrew].

10. Chaim Nachman Bialik, *Selected Poems: Bilingual Edition*, trans. Ruth Nevo (Tel Aviv: Dvir & The Jerusalem Post, 1981), p. 115.

11. Cynthia Ozick, "Toward a New Yiddish," *Art and Ardor* (New York: Knopf, 1983), pp. 154-177.

12. See Ozick, "Toward a New Yiddish," p. 174.

13. Carl G. Jung, "The Development of Personality," in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung* vol. 17 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

14. See Haim Hazaz, "Darebkin," in *Seething Stones* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1970), pp. 183-184 [Hebrew].