

Zionism's Neglected Existentialist

Avi Sagi

**To Be a Jew: Brenner as
an Existential Jew**

Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2007,

286 pages, Hebrew.

Reviewed by Arik Glasner

What makes a literary work “classic?” The answer to this question lies in the possibility of perennially returning to a book or poem—or for that matter, any work of art—in order to derive pleasure, aesthetic exhilaration, psychological insight, and moral inspiration. The qualities contained within classic works are revealed to be timeless by the very process of time. Their merit is rediscovered in each successive age.

The works of Yosef Haim Brenner are classics of a singular kind. It cannot be denied that they are not especially well known to the current generation of Israeli readers, let alone to non-Israelis. It is not uncommon to

meet educated and intelligent people who have not read a single line of his writings. In fact, most Israelis barely know anything about him at all. Among those who do, many believe that Brenner is a relic of early Zionist literature and that his works are of limited relevance to life in modern Israel. The austere-looking blue cover of the last edition of Brenner's complete works, published in 1985, only reinforces this impression.

Indeed, Brenner's works are not Israeli classics in the sense that the works of Dickens are British classics, Flaubert's writings are French classics, and Hemingway's novels are American classics. Brenner's status in the eyes of Israeli readers does not even begin to compare to that of other writers of his generation, such as Haim Nahman Bialik or Shmuel Yosef Agnon. The minor role Brenner plays in the cultural life of our generation is connected to the general phenomenon of cultural discontinuity characteristic

of post-modern reality: This rupture, while hardly confined to Israel, is exemplified by the contemporary Israeli reader's loss of connection to a variety of "classic" works: Texts that were once integral parts of the Hebrew canon have lost prominence. This discontinuity, which merits its own discussion, stems from (among other things) the development of the Hebrew language and the often frantic changes it has undergone.

The case of Brenner, however, is unusual in at least one respect: It departs from the general rule of cultural amnesia—and this partly explains the interest it excites. Despite being mostly ignored by the general Israeli readership, Brenner is one of the most studied and appreciated authors among academic researchers of Hebrew literature. Eighty-seven years after Brenner's murder during the Arab riots of 1921, he and his works continue to fascinate the Israeli intelligentsia. Professor Avner Holtzman, who has charted the extensive literary research dealing with Brenner (following a previous study conducted in the early seventies by Professor Itzhak Bacon), has estimated that "in the field of monographic research of individual authors, only the study of Bialik and Agnon has surpassed in scope the research done on Brenner."

The extensive academic study of Brenner is noteworthy because it is

both more passionate and more intense than the typical controversies characteristic of literary scholarship. While most literary works that attract the attention of academics are also of some enduring or at least persistent popularity, the study of Brenner is not contingent upon or a response to widespread interest in his writings. This speaks to the passionate reactions Brenner elicits in debating scholars, evoking emotions that force them constantly to return to his works, though they are not widely read by others.

This fascination with Brenner—bordering on obsession—is not entirely limited to academia. Some of Brenner's works, such as *Out of Distress* (*Min Hametzar*), *Breakdown and Bereavement* (*Shechol Vekishalon*), and *Around the Point* (*Misaviv Lanekuda*), have been re-published in recent years. Young authors such as Amir Gutfreund and Maya Arad have prefaced their own books with epigraphs taken from Brenner's writings, and the writer Dror Burstein intentionally gave one of his literary characters the family name "Brenner." Other writers, of which Gabriela Avigur-Rotem is the most noteworthy, have made him a supporting character in their novels. The Israeli band "Habiluim" named its last album *Breakdown and Bereavement*. And the historian Anita Shapira is planning to publish a

comprehensive biography of the author. It is clear that for a small but culturally dominant group of artists and intellectuals, Brenner continues to be an inexhaustible source of interest and inspiration. While few people know his novels and short stories, they form a committed core of readers, and the discussion of his works continues to be characterized by a passion and interpretive creativity which attest to his relevance—both intellectually and emotionally.

The new book *To Be a Jew: Brenner as an Existential Jew* by the philosopher Avi Sagi, head of the department of hermeneutics at Bar-Ilan University and the author of many works on general and Jewish philosophy, demonstrates well the singularity of the Brenner phenomenon. Sagi explains that he chose his subject because “Brenner’s rousing and challenging work has generated a surge in writing, which is tempestuous but not always critical.” The result is that “one of the most essential and relevant options for a meaningful Jewish existence in modern times has gradually dissipated.” Sagi, it seems, attempts to accomplish two aims with his book: The first and more “academic” aim is to elucidate Brenner’s works and to uncover their riches. The second aim, which is in my opinion more important, is to re-introduce a forgotten type of Jewish existence, one which is

as relevant today as it was when Brenner introduced it in his writings.

Avi Sagi weaves Brenner’s work into the philosophical tradition of Western existentialism, and this is his main contribution to the study of the author’s corpus. The existentialist tradition did not place reason, history, nation, class, or God at the center of its analysis; instead it emphasized the private and concrete individual. The hero of existential philosophy asks himself about the meaning of the world into which he was involuntarily born and which he must inevitably leave. As Sagi says:

My interpretive perspective on Brenner’s literary-philosophical work will be the following: I seek to identify in Brenner’s extensive work—literature, literary reviews, and journalism—the existential characteristics of human existence, and to examine their compatibility with the characteristics presented in the existentialist tradition.

As Sagi himself notes, his book on Brenner follows on his studies of other existentialist philosophers, including Søren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus. In his introduction, as well as intermittently throughout the book, Sagi labors over a brief, necessary, and for the most part convincing theoretical exposition intended to defend his decision to read Brenner through a philosophical lens.

Students of Brenner have already pointed out the existential elements in his work, but Sagi does a more exhaustive job: He collates various intuitions, isolated remarks, decisive yet unsupported assertions, philosophical insights of quintessential literary scholars, as well as partial and schematic studies, melding them into a detailed, systematic, and convincing philosophical presentation of Brenner's existentialism.

In order to show that Brenner's views unquestionably belong to the existentialist tradition, Sagi begins with a comparison of Brenner's thought to existentialist philosophy. Sagi's Brenner is an existentialist by virtue of his being a philosopher whose thinking revolves around his own individual and concrete existence. According to Sagi, Brenner's existentialism is expressed through his view that man is "thrown" into the world. In this regard, he anticipates a concept later formulated by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. The subjective self-reflection of the individual, according to Brenner—as well as other thinkers in the existentialist tradition—is committed to a daring and merciless recognition of the givens of reality. At the same time, it grants man the freedom to shape the meaning of the existence which has been forced upon him.

Sagi's Brenner is what Isaiah Berlin called a "hedgehog," meaning that it is possible to identify a single element at the core of his entire literary, philosophical, and critical project. Sagi refutes previous attempts to explain the essence of Brenner's thought as the individual's experience of social alienation (Gershon Shaked), religious detachment (Baruch Kurzweil), and nihilistic aestheticism (S.Y. Pnueli). Instead, Sagi argues that the crux of Brenner's work is the metaphysical experience of the absurd, of the loss of meaning, which touches a deeper level of existence than the feeling of socio-cultural detachment. The experience of the absurd combines the desire to resolve the riddle of life with the sober recognition of the impossibility of doing so. It crystallizes out of the consciousness of death, which dissolves the possibility of a rational or metaphysical response to the questions of existence. According to existentialists (such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Rosenzweig, Sartre, Camus, and Brenner himself), the problem of death belongs not to the future but to the present—the inevitability and absolute finality of death threatens to deny human existence any meaning.

The Brennerian experience of the absurd has two aspects: negative

and positive. The negative aspect is the recognition that existence is irrational. The positive aspect is a yearning for clarity and meaning. In Brenner's words, this is a longing for "the enigma" and "the secret." This longing feeds on the dissatisfaction we feel following the immanence of our lives in a world that is revealed to the senses. In his conception of the dual nature of the absurd, Brenner is more akin to Camus than to Sartre, who emphasized only the negative aspect of experience—the meaninglessness of existence. Like Camus, whom he preceded by a generation, Brenner also denies the possibility of breaking through to "the other side," i.e., to man's longed-for transcendence. Brenner's rejection of mysticism is not simply theological or epistemological. He does not claim that God is dead or that otherworldly reality is inaccessible to human understanding. His refutation is principled and existentialist: According to Brenner, mysticism, which aims to transcend the human condition, alienates man from himself and from his actual bodily life. Yet, unlike Nietzsche, Brenner does not celebrate immanence and the death of gods. Man, in his view, is sentenced to live in the space between the reality of this world and that which lies beyond it.

Therefore Brenner does not contrast religiosity with the absurd and does not dismiss religious feeling. As Sagi explains:

In Brenner's eyes, the experience of wonder and amazement leads to mysticism and genuine religiosity which does not transcend this world and seek transcendental being yet also avoids becoming caught up in the web of immanence. In the midst of immanence, man experiences his incompleteness, and this is the essence of the Brennerian experience of wonder. It does not strive to realize itself through a metaphysical answer or by rejecting the longing for it.

Brenner knows that the absurd, the loss of the meaning of existence, may push men toward despair or even suicide. Nonetheless, he does not claim that one can escape the burden of angst and the dread of death. These experiences cannot be forgone, but they can be reconciled. Brenner, like Kierkegaard, recognized that despair can have a positive role in man's life, that it can serve as a liberating and purifying force, diverting the consciousness away from its anticipation of metaphysical insight and toward the alteration of reality itself.

This analysis of Brenner's philosophy and its place within existentialism leads to the second part

of Sagi's project, which deals with the possibilities of Jewish existence. In this section Sagi explains Brenner's position on the issue of Jewish identity, but also shows its significance in light of the difficulties we face today.

Clearly, both parts of the discussion are intertwined: "The requirement of a Jewish existence, in Brenner's account, is a conclusion stemming from his general existentialist outlook," says Sagi. This connection is necessitated by the fact that the existentialist individual is not an abstract character: He lives in specific circumstances and conditions. In Brenner's case, he is a Jew. Jewish identity is part of the "thrownness" and the "givenness" acknowledged by existentialist philosophy; it is part of the concrete reality of the private man. The denial of Jewishness leads to self-alienation: A person is a Jew not because his Jewishness is an abstract idea, metaphysics, or theology which can be either chosen or rejected, but rather because it constitutes "a basic given of his factual existence."

In Brenner's view, the affirmation of Jewish existence is accomplished in two stages: a courageous recognition of what man is born or "thrown" into—i.e., his Jewishness—and a "reflexive" choice to accept this fact. According to Sagi, the free decision to choose what was given (or forced)

upon us is what makes a Jewish existence authentic. In Brenner's words:

If we are to be Jewish, it is not because there exists some Judaism which beseeches specific questioners to seek its existence, but rather because we and our children are necessarily placed in thousands of situations which are unique, special, physical and spiritual, economic and cultural, and which form a unique imprint upon us.

Here, Jewish identity is not defined by organized Judaism. From an existentialist standpoint, religion is contingent, not necessary. It is not part of "thrownness," nor is it among the undeniable circumstances into which man is born. Therefore, renouncing it does not involve alienation and inauthenticity. What establishes Jewish identity is something else, something more profound and prior, which Brenner terms "forms of life:"

The primary forms of life of the individual and the nation are *not* nourished and kept alive by religion. Religion itself, with all its rituals and vanities, is only part of the forms of life that people have created voluntarily/involuntarily in the circumstances of their economic-psychological and human-national reality. Religion dons a form, sheds a form, is born, approaches death. (Emphasis mine.)

Brenner continues from this viewpoint and rejects the pretentiousness of the “culture” embodied in Jewish texts written throughout the generations to define national affiliation. Even culture, he holds, is not necessary for a person to be Jewish. By way of existentialist self-reflection—an outlook which has fallen victim to misunderstanding due to the blunt way it was phrased—Brenner points to himself as someone who has been freed from the “hypnosis” of the Bible and its influence. He initiates self-examination precisely because he wishes to show how the Jewishness of a person is not contingent upon a unique relationship to the founding texts of Jewish “culture.” Rather, it is anchored in more primary causes which precede culture and religion: necessity and will. Necessity is part of Jewishness because of man’s “thrownness” into the world, while will is manifested in the free choice of Jewish identity. This point, Sagi asserts, is the most significant contribution of Brenner’s thought:

In my estimation, this is the essence of Brenner’s contribution to the discourse on Jewish existence: a rejection of the theological or ideal options for understanding Jewish existence, and examining it from a new perspective; a concrete-realistic-existentialist perspective. The tormented acceptance of the Jewish given as a fundamental

fact of givenness... to be a Jew means to carry out the fact of givenness and to re-affirm it practically.

But Sagi is not content with applying Brenner’s existentialist outlook to the question of Jewish identity: He also convincingly refutes the various criticisms of Brenner’s stances on Judaism. Brenner’s critics have maintained that he denied the existence of a Jewish people and held that only Jewish individuals exist (Yehezkel Kaufman); that he was motivated by an “ocean of self-hatred and a hatred of Judaism” (Baruch Kurzweil); that he thought that Jewish identity was a fluid and non-rigid matter and that a Jew is anyone who chooses to be Jewish (Nurit Govrin); it was even argued that Brenner suggests a reductive Jewish identity based on the familial-ethnic model (Menahem Brinker).

Contrary to these positions, Sagi’s view is that Brenner’s outlook is not only consistent and systematic but also positivist. It does not grasp Jewish identity as a dismal consequence of necessity or as the product of a whim, but at the same time, it does not reject the nation only for the sake of distinct individuals. Brenner’s outlook does not bind the individual to a forced ethnic affiliation. According to Sagi, Brenner’s approach offers firm grounds for Jewish identity and anchors it in a justified

existentialist position, one which consists not of “solely negation but also, perhaps primarily, of much affirmation.”

By placing Brenner within the existentialist tradition as well as by presenting his conception of Jewish identity based on this tradition, Sagi’s book undoubtedly offers a noteworthy contribution to the study of this author. However, Sagi does not offer a satisfactory response to the question of what brings an unequivocal existentialist to deal with the problem of national identity in the first place. Why didn’t this issue equally trouble other existentialist thinkers, such as Camus and Sartre? To answer this question, one must set aside the general human existentialist problem and turn to the local historical circumstances of Jewish existence, in which Brenner’s thought is rooted. Perhaps it is appropriate here to consider the insights of the critic Baruch Kurzweil, one of the objects of Sagi’s criticisms, who well understood the unique historical and theological conditions which caused the reviving Jewish and Hebrew literature to precede European existentialist literature by a generation.

Although Sagi’s description of Brenner’s national outlook as individualist-existentialist is comprehensive and thorough, it seems to be lacking.

After all, according to Brenner, an individual’s choice to exist as a Jew does not take place in a vacuum. Jewishness is something one is “thrown” into: As Sagi emphasizes, it is a given fact. It follows that the discussion of Brenner’s nationalism can not avoid a definition based on family, community, and ethnicity. This definition, which has unmistakable historical and sociological aspects, broadens the spectrum of Brenner’s worldview beyond the narrow boundaries of individualism that are the substance of Sagi’s study.

Needless to say, any exhaustive, theoretical analysis of Brenner’s thought cannot overlook the influence of other philosophical schools of thought on his work—such as Marxism. Brenner’s stance that “culture” and “religion” are secondary and contingent outcomes of fundamental conditions of society may stem from his existentialist worldview—but it contains Marxist undertones as well.

Of course, Sagi is aware of the risk involved in analyzing Brenner’s literary work with philosophical tools. He understands all too well just how problematic it is to transform a body of work which is intricate, dialectical, and full of internal contradictions into one that is well-arranged, cohesive, and monolithic. He seems, however, to be more aware of the disadvantages of a systematic and coherent reading

of Brenner's writings than of the disadvantages of an ahistorical reading, on which he largely relies. Overlooking the historical aspect causes Sagi to attach great significance to the Brennerian texts which express sympathy for the cultural Jewish tradition, especially those written during the years Brenner spent in London editing the periodical *Hame'orer* (1906-1907). The weight given to the *Hame'orer* period leads Sagi to read the entirety of the author's thought through a fraction of his work. There is certainly good reason to think, along with the author and publicist Hillel Zeitlin, that Brenner's thought regarding the Jewish tradition radicalized after his immigration to Israel. An equally important factor, in Zeitlin's opinion, was Brenner's attachment to socialist Zionism. A historical interpretation of Brenner's work might hold that the texts from the *Hame'orer* period—which relate to Judaism more positively—are not of a piece with the critical texts written in Palestine, such as the article "*Al Hizayon Hashmad*" ("On the Aspect of Conversion"). A historical approach to Brenner's work certainly does not agree with the ambitious synthesis which Sagi suggests, and though it cannot single-handedly undermine the impressive philosophical structure proposed by the book, it certainly presents a serious challenge to it.

The placement of Brenner within a specific historical context inadvertently leads us to examine the relevance of his teaching in our day. He is indeed "relevant" in many ways, as great artists always are. There is, for instance, his unique struggle against nihilism: He demonstrated in both his life and his work that ethical and humanist conduct is possible—even as he experienced and expressed the depths of his era's extreme moral crisis.

More surprising is the relevance of Brenner's thoughts on literature, to which Sagi dedicates an entire chapter. Brenner's writings on this topic, which are anchored in his existentialist outlook, may contribute significantly to the current discussion of literature and its role. His assertion that "writing is an existential necessity" because it "emerges from the depths of the individual's being, which crosses into the world," emphasizes the crucial role of the self in the creative process and stands in stark contrast to the theoretical approach, so popular today, which denies the import of the subject as an autonomous creative force and expounds, following Roland Barthes, "the death of the author." Needless to say, Brenner's claim entirely contradicts the conception of literature as a "commodity" meant for the widest possible audience.

Sagi's main objective, however, is to establish Brenner's relevance as a

thinker who offers a viable option for Jewish existence. In my opinion, this option is just as valid today as it was in Brenner's time. The experience of "thrownness" characterizes the world of many Jews today; they constantly ponder the meaning of the identity they were born into and what they should derive from it. These people feel Jewish existence has been forced on them, yet they feel that "deliverance" from it may result in their self-alienation. The circumstances of their birth and upbringing have bound them to Jewish national culture. It is no coincidence that the fascination with Brenner occupies very distinct segments of the Israeli intelligentsia, especially those which are interested in the continuation of national categories and even of distinct academic disciplines such as "Hebrew literature" or "Jewish history." They may feel that Brenner's thought confirms the importance and value of these particular categories and disciplines. The fact that this position pertains to a relatively limited number of people does not diminish the importance of Brenner, who repeatedly emphasized that his writing was meant for a select few, for those caught in between, for those who feel they do not entirely belong yet cannot disengage.

To comprehend the full significance of Sagi's book, one needs to

understand it in the context of the developing research on Brenner's work. This can be divided into roughly three periods. From Brenner's murder in 1921 until the 1950s, the bulk of writing on Brenner portrayed him as an exemplary socialist-Zionist role model. He "became the martyr of the Land of Israel which was then being established," according to Itzhak Bacon. As well, it can be said that later studies by Kurzweil belong to this stage due to their historical-national perspective, although they diverge from socialist-Zionist hagiography.

The 1950s marked the beginning of the "Brennerian renaissance," to use a term coined by Bacon, as exemplified in the important studies of Dan Miron and Gershon Shaked as well as those of Menahem Brinker and Boaz Arpaly. Their studies portray Brenner as a modernist and a ground-breaking author—no longer an ideologue but rather a tormented artist. This discussion was motivated largely by these scholars' cultural agenda. The discourse on Brenner as an aesthetic master and great author, one of the celebrated artists who embellish the culture of the finest nations, served the desire to find a blessed normalcy in Israeli life. This is why some of the scholars who studied Brenner's thought tended to

emphasize its negating aspect (anti-ideology and even anti-Jewish) out of the belief that “normal” Israeli existence would render or should render the obsession with Jewish identity unnecessary. This is how Brenner became *the* icon of secular modernist culture in Israel.

Sagi’s book, in my opinion, marks the beginning of a new era in the study of Brenner. Looming in the background of *To Be a Jew* are the post-ideological and post-nationalist trends that define today’s culture: the dominance of an individualist ethos in private and public life; the shattering of the dream of “normalcy” following the second Intifada; the increased feeling of existential uncertainty in an Israeli society confronted by the Iranian nuclear threat. In addition, Sagi’s study

testifies to the changes taking place in the field of literary criticism. “New Criticism” and the structuralist paradigm—which relate to texts as autonomous phenomena—have lost currency, and scholars are returning to the interpretive approach, which emphasizes a profound link between literature and the outside world. From this turbulent scene Sagi’s Brenner emerges: an independent thinker who rejected the authority of ideologies yet affirmed—from his specifically individualist stance—both nationality and the responsibility of the individual Jew for the collective existence of his nation.

Arik Glasner is an author and literary critic.