
Playing with Time: Writing History in Neo-Zionist Hebrew Literature

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Volume 25 Issue 2 (September 2023) Article 3**Huiruo Li,****"Playing with Time: Writing History in Neo-Zionist Hebrew Literature"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol25/iss2/3>>

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Abstract: The term neo-Zionism can be used to group ideologically much of contemporary Hebrew literature. However, since neo-Zionism shares similar critical tools with post-Zionism, while also sharing a common political vision with Zionism, it has been difficult to find the definitive signifiers of neo-Zionist writing. This paper offers a way to determine the nuanced ideological inclination of Hebrew literature: the presentation of time. First, this paper recognizes the metamorphosis of time in Israeli literary history that reflects the writers' historical view of the Zionist agenda. Zionist Hebrew literature was engaged in re-establishing Jewish historical time by emphasizing the relationship between time and events. Post-Zionist writers fragmented, subverted, or eliminated historical time in their works to loosen the commitment to historical specificity. In the neo-Zionist literary generation, timelines are reassembled as the writers try to reinterpret the Zionist ideology that shapes the person, the nation, and the relationship between the two. Erich Auerbach's observation that the Old Testament introduced realist writing to Western literature suggests two benchmarks to read neo-Zionist literature as realist writing: the first one is the writers' moral duty and sense of responsibility to write reality; the second is the restoration of the omniscient narrator. This article uses these two parameters to further interpret the neo-Zionist historical narrative.

Huiruo LI

Playing with Time: Writing History in Neo-Zionist Hebrew Literature

The renewal of the founding nationalist ideology in Israel in recent years has been loosely labeled as "neo-Zionism." Current descriptions of neo-Zionism vary from right-wing religious nationalism to a secular program that seeks the renewal of nationality while integrating critiques of nationalism. The consensus in current Hebrew literature is that neo-Zionism receives its critical tools from post-Zionism, yet aims to end the post-Zionist dichotomy on the legitimacy of the Zionist program and reconstruct the nation-state's historical agenda. But the way neo-Zionism deals with the legacy of the Zionist historical narrative is ambiguous. Since we are lacking critical parameters to define neo-Zionist ideology, literature may hold insights into its definition. The spontaneous presentation of time in contemporary writing could suggest the connotation of a neo-Zionist historical view.

A central feature of modernity is the belief that people exist at a certain point, or within part of a linear-time process, and they also have the subjective initiative to "make" history. Historians and other intellectuals have noted that the change from cyclical to linear time is the vital distinction between antiquity and modernity (Leonard 58). These scholars widely mark the French Revolution as the turning point of this transition, with the invention of a new calendar by the French revolutionaries standing metonymically for a transformation in time (Leonard). Hannah Arendt expounded on the inextricable connection between revolution and history: "the modern concept of revolution... bound[s] [sic] up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story never known or told before, is about to unfold" (19). The philosophy behind the introduction of the new calendar, or new time, casts us all as actors in and spectators of the drama that ensues (Leonard 58).

The Haskalah as a synthesis of Jewish national renewal and modernization introduced historicism and allowed Jewish history to break free from its self-isolated status and become equivalent to other nations in the modern world. Since then, in Y.H. Yerushalemi's words, "for the first time it is not history that must prove its utility to Judaism, but Judaism that must prove its validity to history, by revealing and justifying itself historically" (82). This change in relationship between Judaism and history also changed the relationship between Jewry and all the other nations who were adjusting to modernity. The influence of historicism made Jews sense the need to normalize their national status in world history, later one of the driving ideological motives of Zionism. Hence, Hebrew literature restored the emphasis on history, the concept of which was invented by the ancient Israelites. Yet, the new concept of history reserves agency for humankind, instead of dominating them as in the biblical context. Zionist history describes an era when Jews become subjects, people who make their own history. The remaking of the Jewish nation features a synthesis between man and time. Permeated with national revolutionary enthusiasm, Zionist Hebrew literature explicitly articulates conceptions such as a "new era" and "time." Hebrew literature historian Gershon Shaked marked 1948, the year of Israel's establishment, as a point of historical renewal at which modern Hebrew literature achieved the literary revolution.¹ In this framework, Zionist literature's interaction with the Biblical/Jewish time is profound but ambiguous. On the one hand, the analogy between biblical time and Zionist time is a popular literary device used to accentuate the historical meaning of the Jewish national revival; making (or remaking) *history* has been a central theme around which Zionist literature has revolved. On the other hand, the revolutionary nature of the Zionist movement is fundamentally a secular one, and the negation of the thousands of years of the Jewish diaspora (*galut*) and the religious life results in the Zionist reference to the Old Testament being confined only to a rhetorical sense. Therefore, reading neo-Zionist literature requires a re-examination of Hebrew writing's original literary traits.

Contemporary Hebrew literature's return to Zionist time not only means acknowledging the Zionist time frame, but also reviving realist writing. In Erich Auerbach's work, the Old Testament is the origin of realist writing in Western literature (Auerbach 14). Compared to Odysseus in the Greek epic, he notes that the biblical narrator was obliged to write exactly what his belief in the truth of the tradition demanded of him. The Homeric poetry devises an ideal, unattached to time and space for the legend to take place, while the Old Testament must unfold in line with the omnipresence of history, with people's struggle with their destiny being subject to the power of history. It was through a reliance on the law of time and the irreversibility of history that Hebrew realism sought truth. Realist writing thus becomes a convenient form to promote the presence of history, as a renaissance of ancient Hebrew literature, modern Hebrew literature also adheres to the connection between realist writing and history. This article uses Auerbach's parameters to rethink the Shakedian periodization of the changing historical narrative.

¹ See Shaked, Gershon. *Modern Hebrew Fiction*. New Milford, CT, 2008, chapter 10.

How does Shaked's Zionist-time analysis correspond to Auerbach's understanding of Jewish/Biblical time? Can we say that Shaked is going back to a pre-biblical time frame by focusing on 1948 as a point of departure, or does Shaked maintain Auerbach's Jewish-time concept, in which 1948 is simply a significant event on the Jewish historical continuum that proves the existence of YAHWEH from a Zionist perspective? The reading of contemporary Hebrew novels in this article reveals that some aspects of Jewish time are accentuated in the emergence of neo-Zionist writing, which may indicate some new tensions or themes that charge neo-Zionist historical thinking with new meanings, rather than being a mere extension or critique of Zionism or post-Zionism.

1.1 The New Jewish Calendar: Yizhar's Zionist writing

S. Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizeh* (חרבת חזעה) is a "good example of how Hebrew literature marks a new calendar."² At the beginning of the novel, the narrator points out that there is something special about the time of the story, and reveals a hint of hesitation in the way he starts his narration: "True, it all happened a long time ago, but it has haunted me ever since..." (Yizhar, *Khirbet* 1). The very first sentence foretells that whatever is to be told in the following chapters has profound influence over the following story, and that the time of the event was the beginning of a lasting period, a decisive moment in the present continuous tense that the narrator still lives in.

How would one grasp a point in time, given its fleeting quality? As a Zionist writer, Yizhar is aware that historical time is as ephemeral as any other time. His writing endows 1948's historical significance with meanings that last beyond physical time, even beyond the military events' memories. The writer uses the soldiers' bodies and actions to emphasize the flow of time. As the plot unfolds, broken military jargon, rapid succession of verbs, and the commander's orders create a pressing sense of urgency. These quickly spoken words become the ticking sounds of an invisible clock in the plot that amplify the silent nature of time. The characters' short conversations are primarily made up of orders to move and to act. "'Get'em,' said Shmulik. 'A little to the right'" (Yizhar, *Khirbet* 34). "'Imshi—Go'" (48). The novel could conveniently be rewritten as an action film. Yizhar constantly uses the characters' gestures and bodily movements to make connections between scenes throughout the story (words to describe actions are emphasized in italics):

Even *carrying* the "mission-case." which *cut* into your hand, might be transformed now and resemble nothing more than something or other that belonged to a group of people *walking*... (*Khirbet Khizeh* 10)

...then we *set off* down the slimy grey furrows, which they hadn't had time to sow; we *pushed open* a big wooden gate set in a mud wall, and *walked up* a narrow path, between hedges of prickly pears spread with dung and chilly dampness... (*Khirbet Khizeh* 11)

The soldiers' bodily movements become references of the temporality of their mission, the military operation that has haunted the narrator ever since, and the unique memories of 1948. According to Walter Benjamin, "history is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now (*Jetztzeit*)" (Benjamin). The grand Zionist project of renewing Jewish history or remaking Jewish history not only requires ancient stories as a prologue, it also needs active and eventful stories of the here and now to launch the new calendar. The day that the calendar started functioning as a time-lapse camera that functions to record history is the same day which always returns in the shape of holidays and memorials. Therefore, "the calendar becomes moments of a historical awareness, of which there has not seemed to be the slightest trace for a hundred years" (Benjamin). Launching the new calendar, 1948 renewed the idea of Hebrew literature as a journal in which Israelis record and make sense of a time they call history.

1.2 Rebel against the Israeli calendar: Keret's post-Zionism

The 1948 calendar serves as a coordinate for analyzing a literary work's historical stances. Postmodernists suggest that the Western domination of history tends to forge linear, causal chains of time, and that the modern concept of history is totalitarian. They see the linearity of time as harmful and prone to explode time's continuity into small, unmemorable fragments of "now" (Vukanović and Grmuša 129). Correspondingly, post-Zionist writers fragment, twist, or break the time order in their writing to challenge the legitimacy of the Zionist historical narrative. *Tsinorot* (Pipelines) epitomizes Etgar Keret's alienation from Zionist chronology. Keret uses a broken and illogical narrative rhythm to deliver a sense of urgency, like a great gasp to avoid suffocation, as the postscript to the collection

² These are Amos Oz's words, quoted from the cover of the 1989 edition of S. Yizhar's *Days of Tzikkag*, p.1.

epitomizes: "When you have an asthma attack you have no breath. When you do not have breath, it's hard to talk. Your attempt is blocked by the amount of air you can get out of the lungs. It's not much, something between three and six words. It gives you respect for the word. You go through the piles of words that come to mind."

As Yigal Schwartz suggest, the central strategy in Keret's body of work is the combination and confrontation of two poetic moves: the looping repetition of narrative scenes, which seems mechanical, and the sudden appearance of an unusual event, which disrupts the mechanism of repetition. The looping repetition is a "narrative epidemic" that is hostile to any individual human behavior (Schwartz 435). The appearance of the unusual event, which is seen as a "narrative mutation," creates a caesura in which a humanistic existential space, whose realization is a task imposed on the "right readers," exists for an instant (425). Keret's stories are illogical, and the characters are nihilists and escapists. The stories' brevity, limiting well-rounded images or detailed characterization. The brief depiction of the protagonists' characteristics, background, and environment creates the enigmatic character and the temporality of the magic-realist stories. This temporality stands in stark contrast to that of early Zionist writing, which celebrated the moments of the nation's new historical period; Keret's haste and brevity are his way of presenting an outburst of struggles, the impatience to break out of the nihilism of mundane life.

In the anthology's eponymous story, a boy who is diagnosed with a psychological condition is sent to a factory to make pipes. He puts marbles into the curved pipes he makes and the marbles disappear; he then makes a giant pipe and crawls into it, and disappears too. The pipe, as a vehicle of the protagonist's escape, is a strong intimation of a portal or wormhole. It is a speculative physical structure linking disparate points in space-time, that can be visualized as a tunnel with two ends at separate points or locations, or different points in time, or both. Here Keret challenges the supremacy of historical narrative by suggesting that there is another parallel time-space. Considering this literary presentation from a socio-economic angle, Zygmunt Bauman notices the tendency towards a "stratification of time" and finds that some global actors are empowered to navigate outside of the constraints of discrete spaces and times, while others are localized to spaces and times that have been emptied of meaning and value (Bauman 88-89). The correlative effect of capitalism and globalization stratifies socio-economic class and reorganizes the perception of time and space in living experiences as well as the discourse in literary works of Keret's era.

1.3 Return to the Jewish Calendar: Albalach's neo-Zionism

While post-Zionists rebelled against the linear, collectivist history and expressed their disagreement with the "totalitarian alignment of history" (Taub 13), contemporary Hebrew literature seeks reconciliation between Zionism's linear grand history and the post-Zionist representation of history as broken, fragmented, or convoluted. In contrast to the defying attitude and destructive approaches of the post-Zionist age, neo-Zionist writers find ways to invite pre-Zionist "Jewish time", back to their similarly cosmopolitan (globalized and capitalized) stories.

Noga Albalach's collection of short stories, *Sponga ve Sipurim Acherim* (Mopping floors and short stories), published in 2013, is very similar to Etgar Keret's stories in terms of thematic focus: the emptiness of life, the crisis of faith, selfishness, and love. Her stories also resemble Keret's stories in their denial of grand discourses concerning history, class struggle, or social justice. The anthology is comprised of one long story, "Mopping Floors," and ten short stories, most of which present secular Israelis' daily lives and often deal with work-life balance, gender equality, romance, and challenges posed by capitalism. The time-space elements, especially in the ten short stories, are often obscure and irrelevant to each other—an unidentified year, an endless vacation, locations remote from Israel (India, the Gobi Desert, Scotland). Albalach's stories are situated in more foreign, less national locations to explore the relationship between a person and the environment. In some stories, such as "I Got to Know One Person," there is no reference to the narrator's identity or background as Israeli or Jewish, except for the fact that the whole story is written in Hebrew. Nevertheless, inserted throughout the book, there are abrupt, fleeting references to Jewishness or Israel, reconnecting the dispersing identities back to the national realm of memory.

Timothy Reiss expounds on the motif of the voyage: "as potential material of discourse the image of a difficult... voyage... sometimes interpreted as the search for knowledge or as the descent into the unconscious [or more], is often associated with the loss and rediscovery of discourse" (153). In "Gobi Desert," the narrator, a stand-in for the writer, meets a young cyclist named Scott, which is not a Hebrew or Israeli name, on a cycling expedition from China to Scotland. During the long and tedious trip, while Scott and his friends traverse the Gobi Desert of China, one of them starts to learn Yiddish in order to overcome the nerve-racking emptiness, the most challenging part of the excursion. "There was

a rider with a beginner's book on his bicycle. He was learning— " child: *kind*, chair: *shtul*, home, *heym*, I go to work: *Ich geyn tsu arbetn*, the child goes to school: *das kind geyt in shule*" (Albalach 70). Scott and his cycling teammates' voyage is typical of those taken by young Israelis, who travel to remote places overseas after their military service, and can be understood as a common act of temporarily forgetting of their national identity, which has been over-emphasized by the military experience. In the long voyage, the rider experiences sensory deprivation, a dangerous mental state that may cause hallucination or a mental disorder (Sireteanu). Intuitively, he decides to have his mind occupied with esoteric knowledge that is remote from real life. As the excursion extends to the most desolate area in the world, where there is absolutely no reference to human society, politics, or cultural memories, the teammate began to learn Yiddish, which reminds him of the history of the Holocaust: "... and it seems that the things are reminding him of the world that was destroyed, as if there is a last survivor in the massive destruction and only the words remained a mute state" (70).

A few beginner-level Yiddish words conjure the horror of destruction and the survivors' nightmare out of thin air in the remote desert. No Israeli can escape from the fear and anxiety in the Zionism-related memory, about the shtetl, the Holocaust, or the founding of Israel. The travelers find their self-exile reaches the mental shtetl, the very "camp" of modern Jewish issues from where the whole history of national memories and struggles originated. Oftentimes the reminder of a deeply sealed memory can be a simplest item. Geoffrey Batchen suggests that the insertion of bodily "relics," such as a sample of hair into photographic locket, opens up a temporal tension between the photograph, which evokes "a memory of the past," and the hair "stolidly occupies the eternal horizon of the present" (41). In the story, Yiddish words are the "sample of hair," and the Gobi Desert is the eternal horizon of the present; the abrupt, unexpected emergence of the memory about the past creates an unavoidable tension between the character's escape and their inescapable identity.

Albalach also uses a time-space that is unattached to Israel's reality; yet, it should be emphasized that the neo-Zionist writers' "escape" from Israeli time and space is different from that of the magic-realist writers before them, such as Asaf Schur and Etgar Keret. The latter sometimes scramble the spatial or chronological elements in order to expose the unreasonableness or deficiency of reality (Keret being an example). In the other time-space, the Gobi Desert, where the characters intend to forget time and their identities, Albalach does not try to engineer futuristic or surreal plots or environments. The time in which her stories take place is the universal time in which the rest of the world also lives. Only by choosing a foreign place that has little trace of human culture (at least in imagination), Albalach manages to detach the characters' experience from this world, the real time-space. This is how Scott explains crossing the Gobi Desert as the most difficult challenge in the trip:

The major difficulty in traversing the Gobi Desert was actually not the monotony of time; it was the monotony of space—monotonous, repetitious, and unchanging. These qualities of the space can extract the rider's consciousness from his body, so he would just ride and ride, day after day; and the view is the same view, the heat is the same heat, and the silence—is the same silence. (Albalach 70)

More palpable than the monotony of time is the monotony of space; space becomes the reference of the slow and tiring passing of time. Though the narrator stresses her feelings about space, readers can easily empathize with the riders and feel the stillness of time, as if the arduous riding through the desert is forgotten by the social world, and the time of their journey does not elapse regularly as measured by the standard clock. It is part of human nature to gain one's sense of existence from the more dominant sense of time based on the environment vis-à-vis a subjective perception of time.³ This makes an individual's detachment from the sense of belonging to a grand history very difficult or impossible; as one looks for a reference in time, one looks at the environment, which is actually the reference, or witness, for a collective history. In the story "Gobi Desert," the environment fails to provide the more dominant time framework, like the desolate Gobi Desert, where no signifier of time and space in human world's context exists. Therefore, the travelers, forgotten by time and lost in the space of endless riding, need to find a sense of time from other references: Yiddish, Judaism, or something else.

Keret's and Albalach's two works demonstrate that, although all Hebrew literary works published after 1948 must deal with the struggles of a globalized, capitalist Israeli life, recent neo-Zionist writers

³ The traditional cognitive approach to connect time and natural space can be traced back to antiquity. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (19-35) concluded that the Greek notion of *physis* (nature) strongly implied a subjection of consciousness to nature. No conception of time as produced or generated by human consciousness could, given this view, account for a sense of time as a power governing processes of growth and decay that lie outside human control (See Dowling 19-35).

express a constructive, or rather consolidative, attitude towards Israeli national identity. Both post-Zionist and neo-Zionist works using fragments of Jewish time, yet post-Zionist works, like Keret's, accentuate the process of disconnection and fragmentation of the once linear, hegemonic historical narrative; while neo-Zionist works shows the reunion with those scattered time pieces as reminders of the Jewish identity, just as Albalach's characters encounters Zionist time in their voyage of rediscovery.

2.1 Writing Reality: Hebrew realism in Zionist and neo-Zionist writing

Auerbach recognizes that pain plays a central role in connecting the ancient Israelite to the concept of history: For they are bearers of the divine will, and yet they are fallible, subject to misfortune and humiliation and in the midst of misfortune and in their humiliation their acts and words reveal the transcendent majesty of God" (18). It was the enduring suffering that bonded the Israelite to history and to God. Similarly, for Zionists, creating the new historical calendar came with a painful cost. The Zionist work *Khirbet Khizeh* represents an account of moral suffering, in which a Jewish soldier, who inflicts harm on Palestinians, deals with the trauma of becoming a perpetrator. The ethical controversy and moral depth in *Khirbet Khizeh* endowed the "1948 onwards" calendar with a sense of national responsibility. Such an endowment is delivered through Yizhar's realistic writing and the honest review of the moral burden that comes with the establishment of the nation-state. The very immediate consequence of the realization of Zionist redemption is the destruction of the Palestinians, and the aftermath of the Palestinian Nakba irreversibly redefined the founding of the Jewish state as a deed of deportation and colonization. The very need to prioritize suffering is the central tragedy in *Khirbet Khizeh*. Hence, Yizhar focuses his attention on the honest, nuanced depiction of pain to decide whether Jews or Arabs suffered more.

Yizhar's use of time in *Khirbet Khizeh* reflects an attitude of openness that prepares Hebrew literature for upcoming social and ideological changes. Many have observed that in *Khirbet Khizeh*, Yizhar devises his storytelling with an open chronological frame. In the story, when the narrator complains, "it's really not right," one of the story's more callous characters asks him: "So then what's your proposal?" His reply: "I don't know yet." "Well if you don't know, then keep your mouth shut," his comrade retorts (84). He leaves unanswered the question of whether it might have been possible to act differently and, if so, how.

In his study of Yizhar's oeuvre, Saul Setter observes that Yizhar fashions a special mode of temporality, not crossing over into the post-1948 years of Israel's statehood, even when the present moment of his own writing is situated there, and constantly—and vigorously—negating the present time of action (Setter 40). Therefore, as much as Yizhar values the story's temporality, he avoids being trapped in that period; that is, Yizhar's narration is not imprisoned by absolute historicism, although most writers of the first literary generation of native-born writers who published during the 1930s, 40s and 50s (the Palmach generation) were greatly inspired or motivated by the romance of it. The historicist syllogism suggests that humanity is realized by history, and that nationalism is the way that humanity realizes its meaning in history. In a way, historicism extended the meaning of the Jewish return to Palestine from a passive reaction to the rise of nationalism to a self-driven course of national liberation. Yet historicism itself has limitations; in particular, it may bring about the abuse national power or an obsession with religious redemption. To use Walter Benjamin's memorable phrase, texts that refuse "once upon a time" do not "give themselves to the whore called 'once upon a time' in the bordello of historicism" (Benjamin). *Khirbet Khizeh* does not fall into the trap of historicism, starting as it does with "True, it all happened a long time ago, but it haunted me ever since." The recalling of the past, from the opening of the novel, is "controlled" by the present as the writer writes, or as the readers read. The past does not dominate, it submits to the reality and reflection of the present. The open time frame expresses the historical view that Zionism is an autonomous, sustainable political ideology that should be responsible for its past and deficits. In the words of Derrida, "there is no responsibility without a dissident and inventive rupture with respect to tradition, authority, orthodoxy, rule or doctrine" (27). Without exception, revolution incurs responsibilities. Yizhar's novel conveys an attempt to justify the absolute necessity or the significance of 1948, but Israel's responsibilities for 1948 as a state that foresees its future.

Post-Zionist critiques of Zionism stress the importance of recognizing that using the pogroms to justify establishing a Jewish nation-state comes at the expense of the Palestinians, who were in no way responsible for the Jewish trauma, thus producing a conflict in Israeli Jewish responsibility. For example, Hannan Hever argues that, for Israeli Jews, taking responsibility for the historical lessons of the Holocaust does not allow many to take responsibility for the Nakba (Hever 155). Hever goes further to argue that Israeli Jews claim that they deserve what they deserve because of what was done to them in the Holocaust; this means that Israeli Jews demand that Palestinians take responsibility for what they

should (according to the Jews) perceive and experience as the lesson taught to Israeli Jews by the Holocaust (Hever). Hever also uses Derrida's reasoning, which notes that as a rule, whenever responsibility is taken, there exists an *aporia*. Responsibility cannot be reduced to particular norms or their opposites (*Aporias* 19). According to Derrida, the paradoxical meaning of the promise of a resolution (due to the prior certainty of rules and norms) is also an evasion of responsibility (19).

But *Khirbet Khizeh* shows exactly this pain. In a response to Hever's critique of Yizhar's novella,⁴ Dan Miron reassesses Yizhar's moral stances. While Hever suggests that Yizhar's interrogation of the deportation is an attempt to escape the moral burden, Miron argues that Yizhar wrote his stories of 1948 precisely to emphasize the burdens its heroes carry. Miron contends that Yizhar wanted to express through the burdens a state of confusion and embarrassment, questions that have no clear answers, and the psychodynamic truth of the soldiers who were involved in the situation. Miron also notices the use of time in the novel: "In the precise sense of the term," he observes, "*Khirbet Khizeh* is a story of memory that forced itself on the narrator and demanded that it be widely circulated, rather than a free and associative 'stream of consciousness'" (Miron). The device of time discloses the uneasy recalling of memory, but also the necessity to face those memories through realistic writing. These sentiments are expressed through an uneasy yet earnest attitude to the memories of 1948, which is delivered by an internal monologue, and the candid, chronological unfolding of the events. The confessional chronology, without any zigzag movement between past and present that is typical of a stream of consciousness, expresses precision and clarity about the history and honesty about the moral dilemma. The writer's honesty in time shows that he is loosening his control over the subjective shaping of the memory; instead of interfering with the memory for a subjective narrative, he submits the storytelling to the facts. The more the remembrance is painfully loaded with struggles, the more the writer should refrain from easing the pain through correcting or re-editing the memory.

Yerushalemi's remark about "giving historiography an active role" and Auerbach's analysis of history in the Old Testament tell us that the most valuable legacy of Jewish history is that it suggested a pattern in which history dynamically interacts with the people. History and people, in this sense, are mutually responsible for each other. By taking responsibility for their history, people can derive meaning from national life and identities, since imagining a community as a nation relies on the causality of history. Yizhar's writing about 1948 takes on a similar role, reminding us not about the absolute legitimacy of 1948, but rather, about Israel's continuing responsibility for 1948. As long as Israel still looks back to its original founding ideals, and as long as Hebrew literature revisits 1948 as the starting point of a new Jewish calendar, Israel is under the influence of the Zionist legacy, despite inner criticisms or doubts.

"Interpretation in a determined direction becomes a general method of comprehending reality," said Auerbach (16). Current neo-Zionist realist writing also endows itself with the responsibility of writing reality, but its view of reality, or the aspect of reality that it focuses on, is influenced by post-Zionist criticism and, hence, is different from Zionist realism. Assaf Inbari's 2018 novel, *Hatank* (the tank), is an exemplary revisiting of the 1948 reality. The novel assembles five versions of the same famous, foundational story about how one man in Kibbutz Degania, in the north of Israel, stopped a Syrian tank during the Syrians' invasion of Israel in the 1948 war. The story of Degania's tank has become a symbol in Israel of an act of heroism in the defensive battle of the few against the many, of human power versus that of heavy weaponry, and of the determination of the Zionist settlers to defend their home. However, more than one person claimed credit for having stopped the enemy tank. The question of who stopped the tank remains a myth, casting a shadow on the heroic saga. As readers try to figure out the actual course of events, the novel is deliberately confusing, suggesting five historical possibilities. The narrators' subjective memories stand in the way of casting political meanings onto the history, and instead, restore the importance of the personal narrative.

Part of the literary conceit in Inbari's fiction is that the five fictional accounts revolve around one common historical episode. Inspired by real events, the author utilizes the ambiguity of the history and adapts it into five different stories. In some stories, the tank is stopped by one man with a Molotov cocktail, while others remember that the driver of the tank was shot by a sniper. The irony in the novel is clear: "the tank of Degania" has been considered one of the most inspiring legends for the kibbutz's morale and militant pride, yet the novel presents multiple and sometimes contradictory versions of it, amplifying the myth and ridiculing the legend. Nevertheless, the intention of the novel is beyond merely undermining Zionist heroism. Instead of simply deconstructing a Zionist myth, the novel boosts the

⁴ Hever argued that Yizhar protested in his stories against the deportation of Palestinian villagers in the story of *Khirbet Khizeh*, in which he portrayed deportation as a torment of Jewish history and a test to its moral values. That is, the writer revels in the reflection and power of critique instead of criticizing the perpetrator directly. Dan Miron acutely criticized this view in his article (Miron),

legend through personal memories that enrich the single narrative. The writer patiently recounts each narrators' memories and assembles the timelines of the five versions for the readers to deduce and restore the truth; it seems the writer does not intend to present one truth to the readers. In this historical event that lacks collective witnessing, timing is the key to deduce the true historical facts. However, the more one tries to complete the full picture of the events, the more the concept of history is deconstructed: when the conceptualized "David versus Goliath" story is enriched with detailed narration by individual storytellers, heroism and miracle disappear. In their place are stories of personal struggles, father-and-son bonding, and a Holocaust survivor's memories.

Revisiting 1948 is not new in contemporary Hebrew literature. Post-Zionist critics focused on the memories of the Palestinians, criticized their expulsion during the 1948 war, and accused Zionism of colonialism. Assaf Inbari's revisiting of 1948 does not fit into this category. He neo-Zionist review probes into memories at the levels of the family and the individual, and observes the connection between 1948 and the present, rather than holding the Zionist narrative about 1948 as a tenet.

Compared to Zionist literature in which time plays the dominating role in the unfolding of history, neo-Zionist writing also emphasized the integrity and continuity of time. But the completion of a general time starts from microscopic, individual level, rather than from a macro-narrative. In *The Tank*, the timeline is restored with the meaning of personal memories and stories, rather than the stories themselves, as interpretations of the ideology. Which character spotted the tank first, who pulled the trigger, who came to the battlefield first, and who left, is essential for completing the story. The emphasis on this information also accentuates the importance of timing, similar to time's role in *Khirbet Khizeh*. But the meaning of time is reformed and enriched with emotions and sentiments, since the stories emphasize humanness, family, and community. After post-Zionists deconstructed the quasi-historicist notion that humans *belongs* to Zionist history, neo-Zionist literature rebuilds people's connection with history, but implies that people *makes* Zionist history, and that history only comes to being after the restoration of the subject.

The neo-Zionist literature's nod to Zionism is that it transforms the Zionist legend into real history; although Inbari did not write *The Tank* as a historical study, the key message of the novel is that the transformation from legend to historical fact is possible. As Auerbach writes in *Mimesis*:

It is easy to separate the historical from the legendary in general... It runs far too smoothly. All cross-currents, all friction, all that is casual, secondary to the main events and themes, everything unresolved, truncated, and uncertain, which confuses the clear progress of the action and the simple orientation of the actors, has disappeared. The historical event which we witness, or learn from the testimony of those who witnessed it, runs much more variously, contradictorily, and confusedly; not until it has produced results in a definite domain are we able, with their help, to classify it to a certain extent; and how often the order to which we think we have attained becomes doubtful again, how often we ask ourselves if the data before us have not led us to a far too simple classification of the original events! (19)

In this sense, what neo-Zionist writers do is reverse the process in which legend-tellers smoothed out the unideal, humane, and imperfect contents of history. Realism is re-introduced to Hebrew literature by neo-Zionism and these writers re-historize Hebrew literature.

In the second story of the collection *The Tank*, "The Sniper," more than one person claims that they fired the critical shot. In the story, over the years, there have been inquiries about when exactly the bullet was shot, or if it was instead a Molotov cocktail, and which shot hit the tank first. In a conversation, one of the soldiers utters his confusion and discontent: "What's the message here – that nothing is serious? Are these the stories we tell about the War of Independence, that some amateur, not even a soldier, scared the Syrians with a makeshift Molotov cocktail? Is that the lesson? Is that the message? David and Goliath?" (Inbari 146). The David-and-Goliath metaphor has been long favored in the Zionist narrative. Retold in a neo-Zionist story, the soldier's protestation in the above quotation expresses their discontent with the simplification and romanticism of the war in the grand nationalist narrative. The war was fought by flesh-and-blood people, not idealized legendary figures, and the victory was achieved at the expense of lives and broken families, not because of a miracle throw of a Molotov cocktail. The soldier's critical moment of realization can be read as the writer's own statement:

Inconceivably there was another Piatist [a grenade operator] there, and you didn't see him? There are people who look at Nablus and see a Canaanite city in the land of Ephraim. Samaria is empty, and they come to redeem the wilderness. Everyone sees only himself. Everyone is trapped in a story. There was another Piatist there. There was. You just didn't see. ...

The question, he understands now, is not who stopped the tank. The question is what decided the battle, what caused the Syrians to abandon the village.

It was not the shell that hit the tank – and it doesn't matter which one of them shot it – that decided the battle. Finally, he understood this: it was not the third shell, which hit the tank, but rather the two previous shells, the two he fired and missed, those were the ones that decided the battle. They overshot the tank, killing the soldiers who marched behind it, sowing panic among the Syrians. That fear made them escape. (Inbari 150)

The tank was not defeated by one Molotov cocktail or bullet, it was stopped by the group that defended the kibbutz's gate. A few bullets could prove that there were actually multiple soldiers who ambushed them; one miracle shot could be sign that many vigilant kibbutz members were defending the kibbutz, ready for a battle. The message the stories offer is not intended to dethrone a war hero or to defy heroism. On the contrary, Inbari reminds us that not only was there a hero, there were many heroes. Fighting the tank was not the only act of heroism; heroism included laboring on the kibbutz, enduring economic hardships, surviving the hostile environment, and forging the new community and culture. *The Tank* provides a more realistic examination of Israel's founding moment, a period of Israel's history that used to be idealized and legendary, to be related to Israelis as a people. Inbari uses the key element—time—to orchestrate the voices of witnesses of and participants in the historical event. Each one is captured in his/her own story and sees only one perspective, yet the story of Israel should be told by many. The grand narrative is derived from the abstraction of multiple voices and memories, and only by restoring meaning to each single voice can the national narrative have a life. Neo-Zionism incorporates the Zionists' conception of Zionist identity and the post-Zionists' critique of the repression of people's sublime subjectivity in the ideological narrative. The change in the conception of collective identity is one from "I belong, therefore I am" to "I am, therefore I belong."

The Tank is very different from *Khirbet Khizeh* in terms of the writers' grasp of time. While Inbari implies the replicability and fluidity of history, Yizhar would never suggest five versions of 1948 in parallel. But they commonly denote a shared responsibility that comes with using the 1948 calendar. The two works share responsible, prudent attitude towards reality, but use different lenses. While *Khirbet Khizeh* carries the burden of Zionism's moral shadow, *The Tank* focuses on demystifying the saga and deflating the Zionist ego. By restructuring the constructed kibbutz heroism, the neo-Zionist writing deflects the Zionist ego and restores people's prime role back into history. The reverse of the status between the Zionist hero identity and the real Zionist life is delivered with the writer's distribution of narratives. In *Hatank*, multiple timelines of ever more detailed narratives empower all characters who lived in that time to tell it. Eventually, the stories of these people—memories of the Holocaust, father-son disconnection, the struggles on kibbutz—become the essence of that period of history. On this account, the neo-Zionist writer seeks to reform the Labor-Zionist's dominance and monopoly of history-telling, which was long criticized by post-Zionists. Meanwhile, neo-Zionist literature tries to repair the breach between the diverse societal voices and the unified national agenda.

2.2 Restoring the Omniscient: Shabtai's blasphemy and Schurr's recreation of God

Ever since the Old Testament "invented" God, a universal religio-historical awareness began to play a key role in the connection between history and realism. The omniscient narrator gives individual stories their general meaning and purpose. Erich Auerbach's discovery of the Old Testament's invention of Western realism was made through a comparison with the Greek epic, *Odysseus*. Auerbach noted that the biblical narrator was obliged to write exactly what his belief in the truth of the tradition demanded of him. In either case, his freedom in creative or representative imagination was severely limited; his activity was perforce reduced to composing an effective version of the pious tradition (Auerbach 14). As a composition, the Old Testament is incomparably less unified than the Homeric poems, it is more obviously pieced together—but the various components all belong to one concept of universal history and its interpretation. If certain elements survived which did not immediately fit in, interpretation took care of them; and so, the reader is at every moment aware of the universal religio-historical perspective which gives the individual stories their general meaning and purpose. The greater the separateness and horizontal disconnectedness of the stories and groups of stories in relation to one another, the stronger their vertical connection is, which holds them all together (Auerbach 17). The omniscient narrator presents a universal history, and everything that touches upon that history (at least the history of the Jews), must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan. It is through a reliance on the law of time and the irreversibility of history that Hebrew realism seeks truth.

It was popular among writers of Zionist literature to re-install biblical writing at the center of their work, as a source of confidence in their cultural pre-eminence. Whether or not the omniscient narrator was a conscious choice by Zionist writers, post-Zionist writers defy such narration. Yaakov Shabtai's

Past Continuous a pinnacle of the critical work of post-Zionists, epitomizes the conventional chronology that emphasizes the significance of Zionism in history.

The novel involves stories about three generations, nearly a hundred characters, and half a century in one single paragraph.⁵ Sentences span pages with clauses shifting from one tense to another, transferring the narration from the present to the past, and the further past distinguished from the recent past. The intensely complex and confused timeline is intertwined into a cocoon of interconnected plots. The closed-loop time frame in *Past Continuous* starkly contrasts with the open time frame in *Khirbet Khizeh*, which exemplifies the forward-looking feature of the Zionist calendar. In this eternal recurrence, time becomes a closed loop with no beginning or end, the present is disconnected from the past and the future. The very transforming role of time is deactivated. The base point of time shifts from one event to another, the zero point on which all time is based, disappears. 1948 disappears, the God that oversees history disappears. *Past Continuous* suggests the possibility of writing Israeli fiction without specifying the stories' time vis-à-vis the grand Israeli history. The prolonged sentences replicate the interconnectedness of events and memories that take place in Israel and become a closed small world that is independent from the world outside of it. Crammed in the pages-long sentences, loaded with numerous subordinate clauses, are names of people and places that the author does not explain or footnote. The narrator's stream of memory conveniently (or maybe inconveniently for readers) drifts as one anecdote connects to another episode through extended sentences that create a boundaryless mini-world that Israeli society locates itself in.

Despite the condensed timeline, the rich plots include not only the histories of three extended families, but also the inner consciousness of the three heroes. Seemingly, the story is presented through the objective eye of a third-person narrator, but this narrator is very different from the omniscient narrator in Hebrew realism that denotes a vertical connection to a universal, linear history above the present reality. *Past Continuous* manages to construct a complete world of a convoluted time circle, without a calendar that bespeaks the subjective memory's submission to the public recording of history. The long, clause-upon-clause sentences infuse the narrative with a dense droning, and the breathless rhythm does not merely lead readers into a reconstructed past, it also compels them never to dwell on a single moment. Ignoring God, crumbling linear history, post-Zionist "blasphemy" shows that Zionist ideological motivation is exhausted.

While post-Zionism blatantly negates the historical narrative with its literary tool of time, neo-Zionist writing, as found in the novels of the recent decade, seeks to restore the all-encompassing, omnipotent existence that validates connection with Israel's nationalist origin. Asaf Schurr published *Ko Amar Vicent, Hahatul Hatipesh* (Thus Spoke Vincent, the Stupid Cat) in 2011. Like *Past Continuous*, it is also an urban story, slightly depressive, but the omniscient narrator returns. The story unfolds in the Jerusalem home of a family of four—father, mother, son, and daughter—each of whom, irrespective of their age or place in the family, is struggling with maturity and self-control. The parents live on the top floor. Amikam, the father, is a psychologist who seeks a recapture of the erotic energy of his youth. Neta, the mother, attempts to maintain the nuclear family and its emotional and physical space intact, renewing the connections between the residents on the different floors. On the ground floor is the kitchen and dining room, and the daughter, Netanela, nicknamed Mati, a high school student dealing with an eating disorder, loneliness, and her first sexual attraction. Uriah, the oldest child, in his twenties, lives in the basement, hiding himself away from the world, and locking himself away from his family, becoming more religious and saving abandoned kittens and baby birds—and along the way, himself. One of the abandoned cats, Vincent, dies despite Uriah's attempts to save it. Soon after he dies, Vincent is resurrected and becomes an omniscient existence beside Uriah. Speaking a mysterious, prophetic and majestic language, the cat knows everyone's secrets, and it curses people and irritates them in a manipulative manner. Uriah, encouraged by Vincent's foul mouth, offends his sister after her first menstruation and is evicted from the house by his mother on a rainy night because of it. On the same night, Amikam, makes his way to a dance club in the hope of meeting a female patient whom he thinks is flirting with him.

Half-joking, Schurr re-introduces the omniscient narrator into his work; Vincent, the cat, parodies the role that God plays in the Old Testament. In his very first words, Vincent tells Uriah, "I am the hidden crack in the axis of the world, the silenced shout of the uprooted" (Schurr 102). The cat may be a narcissistic sublimation on the part of Uriah, or a messenger from the dead. Such mischievous attitude shows that Schurr may have been influenced by post-Zionist writer that often play with the image of God, such as Keret, and thus affirms their postmodern writing aesthetic. But Schurr's invocation of God

⁵ Technically, the novel is written in two paragraphs separated by a long quotation about the "Bullworker" on page 153.

suggestively re-recognizes the omniscient power behind the unfolding of the story. In the novel, the cat is proof of Uriah's emotional distance from the family, but also a vital factor in rehabilitating the home and its inhabitants. The cat, or whatever animal or creature that Schurr uses, is a narrative tool that reframes an all-encompassing historical narrative framework to oversee the destiny of the people living in this time.

Another "crack" in the family is the physical damage to their house, which Amikam intentionally causes. It is those dangerous, inharmonious cracks in the family structure that eventually break down the harmonious façade of a group of uncommunicative individuals. Amikam, as the head of the family, is surprised that "... in an instant, like a disaster, the house appeared: he failed to pay attention for just a moment and it placed itself around him: walls and rooms and an entry door, a dining room table, a television, chairs, family members" (Schurr 47).

The house is an anchor and a symbolic and physical support, but it also serves as a warning of disaster and the impending destruction to come—the disaster characteristic of the end of prophecy, and of the actualization of the threats of freedom, detachment, and denial. Amikam's unfulfilled affair is an outlet in his middle age, but it is also an opportunity to realize the crisis in his family from the outside world. Discovery of the boundary of the house through crisis is the way to establish the family identity.

Yaron Peleg's review of Asaf Schurr's collection of five novels (published between 2007 and 2014) looks beyond postmodernism to suggest how contemporary Israeli works are overcoming the debates and the deconstructive efforts of post-Zionism. Peleg notes how Schurr's first three novels seem to parody postmodernism, while the last two novels, including *Vincent, the Stupid Cat*, expand their social scope and express a greater realism (Peleg 229). The whole series demonstrates the crisis of representation in the postmodern age, as Peleg calls it, while at the same time suggests the possibility of coexistence of the divergent ideologies in Israel after post-Zionism. Family in *Vincent, the Stupid Cat* is one of Schurr's solutions. The cover illustration of the book is a drawing of a house, where some rooms are segregated from others, and some are connected to other rooms and floors. Each family member is in their own room, separated, but assembled as one household, while the cat strolls between the "bubbles" of family members who do not communicate with each other. It is because of the cat that the son talks with his father. The cat is the stimulator that forces the family members to interact and reconnect.

The family's coming together is expressed through an interconnected timeline. The writer uses a segmented narration; the story is divided into forty short chapters, each focusing on one family member. The literary structural blocks gradually merge with each other as the tensions rise and the family members have to interact towards the end of the story. For example, the first sentence in Chapter 25, "[s]o, how is she?" is spoken in the house by the daughter's friend, but the reader can easily mistake the sentence as spoken in the clinic to the father (Schurr 120). The narrator plays with the possible simultaneity to seamlessly transition between scenes, and meanwhile, creates a metaphoric connection between the family members' daily lives. The same transition can be found also in the first sentence of Chapter 39, "[a]nd he must have dozed off" (Schurr 193). This is a description of Uriah, who is considered to have died in a deserted shelter on a rainy night, but the same thing might have happened to his father, who almost had a heart attack while dancing in the nightclub. This poetic coincidence chronicles the father's and son's concurrent rebellions, which are respectively triggered by personal, random, and even absurd factors, but are unavoidably connected with the fate of their family. The story weaves wild and secret personal desires together, and reconnects each family member's own imaginations about the family.

The novel has a narrative structure similar to that of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the destinies of human characters are in the custody of God, the supervisor of history (time); in the novel, God is substituted with Vincent, the stupid cat. The irony of the allusion between the cat and God amplifies the witty connection between the neo-Zionist, "post-ideological" work and the grand Hebrew narrative. Thematically, the family's reunion is coincidentally prompted by Vincent the cat's offensive outburst (instigated by the cat, Uriah offends his sister and gets kicked out of the house, which leads to the outbreak of tensions as well as the eventual reconciliation). Structurally, reconciliation is presented by the eventual joining of the family members' four parallel timelines. The neo-Zionist work probes the social fissures in Israeli society and seeks to heal, like the truths told by Vincent the cat. In Schurr's novel, the family constitutes the small patches of fabric that are able to be sewn back together to form a society, and time is the needle and thread that connect individuals to families, families to society. Like the cover illustration, the cat becomes the omniscient supervisor in search of a common time, or an answer to the family's functional crisis. Particularly, the cat in relation to the family is like the Old Testament's God to the Jews: he is omnipotent and omnipresent, with a bad temper, and always shows

up when people find themselves lost. The presence of a "God" means the presence of a common history and a purpose for the family, community, and the nation.

Conclusion

The current literary age in which Israeli novels converse with nationalism in new ways, is suggestively called the "neo-Zionist age" because writers revisit national myths and interrogate them with post-formalist, post-structuralist queries more directly. Neo-Zionist writers, like Albalach, Inbari, and Schurr, described in this paper, all intend to point out the possibility of pursuing subjective freedom *and* at the same time being actively engaged in Jewish memory. Through innovations with time in their writing, they allegorize the Jewish God and rediscover family and societal connections, or demonstrate the possibility for secular, urban Israelis, to internalize their Jewish traditions and identity. The renewal of Hebrew realism in neo-Zionist literature suggests there are new historical meanings to be gleaned in the old literary form, and that new history can be made in Israel's national story.

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