

I LIVE NOW IN AN OLD BOOK: HEBREW POETRY AFTER OCTOBER 7

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This essay examines Hebrew poetry written and/or reread in the aftermath of the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023. Using Haim Gouri's poem "I Live Now in an Old Book" as a central metaphor, and the interpretive frameworks of Alan Mintz and David Roskies, I argue that contemporary Hebrew poets respond to catastrophe through an ongoing dialogue with earlier Jewish texts, biblical narratives and modern Hebrew literary traditions. Special attention is given to poems by Israeli women poets, whose works reframe inherited literary models through gender-conscious perspectives that exemplify continuity, innovation and critique, providing language and interpretive frameworks through which contemporary women's trauma can be expressed and understood.

I am a rabbi and a professor of Modern Jewish Literature and Feminist Studies at a rabbinical school. My academic career has been dedicated to teaching modern Hebrew and Jewish literature to future rabbis, cantors and educators, and so much of my work has entailed arguing for the relevance of modern Jewish literary texts to Jewish life and learning, that is, to finding ways for new books to live alongside or inside old ones.

Rabbinical studies have always placed greater emphasis on and derived homiletical meaning from classical, canonized texts from the distant past. My teaching and scholarship have thus often focused on the ways in which modern Hebrew (and Jewish) literature translates, reinterprets and adapts these classical materials. Relatedly, my scholarship has entailed translating and interpreting modern Hebrew literature from a feminist and gender

studies standpoint, focusing, albeit not exclusively, on Hebrew women poets and prose writers, on how they have rewritten and translated the traditional script in light of women's experience.

Seven years ago, after my father was tragically killed by a distracted truck driver, I adopted a spiritual/pedagogical discipline in conjunction with my recitation of the mourner's *kaddish*, which extended for two consecutive years, since my mother passed away five days before the end of the *kaddish* period for my father. I titled this initiative "Shir Haddash shel Yom" ("a new poem for the day"), playing on the "psalm (*shir*) for the day" that concludes the traditional daily morning prayers. In this most recent iteration of a life-long scholarly and spiritual project, I embarked upon a practice of translating and presenting works of modern Hebrew poetry and song in the context of my community's morning *minyan*, and then in written form to an extended e-list. The first literary fruit of the "Shir Haddash" initiative was my memoir *Going Out with Knots: My Two Kaddish Years with Hebrew Poetry* (JPS/UNP Press, 2025). Using modern Hebrew poetry to track and process that period, which included the Covid pandemic and other concurrent events, the book was an effort to connect creatively with tradition in the face of rupture, loss and feminist crises that threaten to sunder such ties.

The "Shir Haddash" project did not conclude with the end of my *kaddish* period. I continued the weekly translation, teaching and related writing. I had just published an essay on the songs composed by renowned Israeli songwriter Naomi Shemer in response to the Yom Kippur War, in a special issue of the journal *Tradition* dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of that terrible surprise attack in October 1973,¹ when the shocking Hamas attack against the communities of the "Gaza envelope" took place on October 7, 2023. My weekly regimen immediately shifted to translating and teaching poetry or songs newly created or taking on reinvigorated meaning in the wake of the Hamas attack and the consequent hostage crisis and war. In large measure, I devoted my analysis to investigating how these literary representations comported with or departed from prior Jewish texts and/or traditional patterns of response to catastrophe, focusing on the ways in which this new calamity re-cited, reactivated or retooled prior canonical texts.

Hebrew poetry and culture reworking prior sources, most notably the Bible, is a longstanding feature of Jewish/Hebrew literature. This phenomenon, in its modern guise, has been illustrated and discussed in several anthologies

and literary histories.² Most recent is Ruth Tsoffar's *Life in Citations: Biblical Narratives and Contemporary Hebrew Culture*,³ where Tsoffar observes:

That textuality inhabits Jewish being, and that Jewish being inhabits Jewish textuality is indisputable. Throughout Jewish history, the Bible [in particular] has provided a strong foothold, strength of spirit, to individuals and collectives, and a servile immunity from the future. The twentieth-century discourse of Israeli modernity has consistently relied on Jewish intertextuality as a site of legitimacy and legitimization, an unfathomable source of knowledge and power that has played a crucial role in the interpretation of Jewish (diasporic) history, collective memory, calendars and life cycles. (p. 5)

Tsoffar acknowledges that the ongoing habit of citing prior (religious) books is a rich cultural resource. As the term “servile immunity” indicates, however, she also views it as a form of social pathology, even delusion, as indicated by her choice to label it with the term *tsatetet*, in the *pa'elet* noun form, following “the patterns of diseases, disorders, or syndromes, such as *baheret* (bright spots), a skin disorder, or *tsara'at* (Leviticus 14) [. . .] *kalevet*, for rabies, *tsahevet*, for hepatitis, *sakeret*, for diabetes, or *gazezet*, for ringworm” (p. 11). For Tsoffar, the practice of citing the Bible and, by extension, other prior works, especially in purportedly secular literature, creates an unhealthy “illusion of secularism” and “a misleading sense of autonomy and individuality, assumed to be free of coercion and ideology” (p. 17). In the post-October 7 moment, other critics and literary historians have sounded similar alarms over the dangerous mobilization of such ancient texts as the biblical call to blot out Amalek and the story of Samson's exploits in Gaza (Judges 13–16).⁴

While I share the concern over such hyper-literal and militant adoptions of prior “holy” texts as behavioral or political pretext, my own analysis focuses on the salutary function of such literary moves. As pastoral educators Rabbis Kim Geringer and Nancy Wiener note, the habit of making meaning by mobilizing or situating oneself within old texts

is what Jews have always done through the process of creating midrash. Like narrative medicine, midrash is the art of working with a person's story to make meaning, promote healing, and effect change. Since humans organize their individual “worlds” through the stories they tell

about themselves and others, working with a [prior] story is a powerful tool in “remaking” worlds that have become broken.⁵

My “Shir Hādash” teaching built on such insights, focusing on how the remaking of worlds has taken shape in the specific form of contemporary Israeli poetry.

My immersion in this poetry reflected not just my own idiosyncratic interests, but a broader cultural phenomenon. In response to that fateful Saturday in October, 2023, Israel witnessed a veritable outpouring of poetry, reflected in such publications as the collection *Shiva: Poems of October 7*; several holiday-related anthologies published in the online Hebrew magazine *Gluya*; the poems on this theme collected on the Israeli poetry website *Otzar hashirah*; and the anthology *Hineini*.⁶ The significance of this poetry as an activity of communal meaning-making in response to October 7 was underscored by participation in community learning events, gatherings and missions to Israel, where Hebrew poetry occupied a distinctly powerful place. During a solidarity visit to Israel with a Hebrew Union College delegation in January 2024, every event or presentation I attended either began or ended with someone reciting and/or analyzing a new poem or an old one found to be newly relevant to the contemporary moment. This article aims to provide a sampling of this post-October 7 experience of Jewish living in the old-new book of Hebrew poetry.

There is no way, in the context of a journal article, and while conflict still rages on several fronts—in Iran, Lebanon, Gaza, and in the court of world-wide opinion—to treat this ever-increasing material in any comprehensive or exhaustive fashion. Since October 7, I have taught hundreds of poems in the forum of “Shir Hādash” alone, not to mention public lectures, in person and online.⁷ This essay thus aims merely to venture some observations from personal experience and to point out a few trends or paradigms that continue to develop in real time.

Why Poetry?

Some understanding of the heightened importance and salience of poetry in the post-October 7th moment can be gleaned, I would argue, from Donald Capps, in his book *The Poet's Gift*.⁸ Capp points to those features of poetry that make it an apt vehicle for pastoral care and, by extension, for meaning-making in the wake of personal and national loss. He highlights the brief,

distilled nature and open-endedness of poetry, its avoidance of telling a complete story, as well as its tentative, elliptical quality, making it a particularly appropriate medium for processing incomprehensible experiences or ongoing, still unresolved situations. He calls attention to poetry's use of metaphor, a bringing together of unlike elements in a novel comparison, which helps defamiliarize or challenge "our usual and routine ways of perceiving and construing our life experiences" (p. 2), a technique that seems especially apt for times and events that defy our prior assumptions and expectations. Capps also identifies the tentative, exploratory, questioning, even radical nature of poetry as fitting with "the kinds of experiences that have been of greatest concern to pastoral care" (p. 3). At the same time, Capps underscores the "experience-near" (pp. 3–4) language of poetry, its distillation of the poet's struggle to find the right, concrete, specific words to depict the experience at hand, as speaking to a specific emotional and communal need for the right words at the right time. Finally, Capps notes how poetry at times strikes a unifying, communal / pastoral chord: "Occasionally, especially when the nation is at war or undergoing some major catastrophe, our poets will speak as a community of voices, each adding his or her voice to a chorus of common concern for human suffering and a common longing for peace on earth" (p. 4).

This latter point resonates with the statement by Ophir Levios, Chief Education Officer of the Israel Defense Forces, that prefaces the poems collected in *Hineini*:

During wartimes, poetry has frequently served as a beacon of light in the darkness, offering comfort, inspiration, and reflecting the resilience of the human spirit. In the aftermath of the recent events that befell us on Simchat Torah 5784 (7/10/23), we found ourselves needing to seek consolidation and strength from the eternal verses of poetry [. . .] Over the course of the State's 75-year existence, Hebrew poetry [. . .] has given voice not only to our pains and hopes, but it has also served as a guiding light and frequently accompanied our warriors to victory. [. . .] As you delve into these poems, the hope is that you will feel inspiration, consolation and deep connection to the resilience of the human spirit. Together, through the art of poetry, we renew our commitment to a brighter future in which unity and hope will continue to guide our path.⁹

Reading this manifesto on the need for and importance of poetry post-October 7, not just as an outlet for national sorrow but also as "a guiding light

accompanying our warriors to victory,” one cannot help but be struck by its liturgical, we-centered, definitive tone, a throwback to much earlier eras in the history of Israeli poetry, exemplified in the collectivist, battle-enlisted poems of such 1948-era poets as Natan Alterman (1910–1970)¹⁰ and Haim Gouri (1923–2018). Indeed, the *Hineini* collection opens with a reprint of one of Gouri’s most famous poems, “Tefillah” (Prayer), a mainstay of Israeli Yom Hazikaron (Memorial Day) ceremonies, which Gouri first published to commemorate the “Lamed-Heh” (Thirty-five), a convoy of Haganah and Palmach soldiers ambushed by Arab irregulars on their way to resupply the kibbutzim of the Etzion Bloc in January 1948. Gouri’s “Tefillah” reads as a deadly earnest, secular elegy and prayer; no mention of God is made the poem, though it repeats versions of the verb *b.r.k* (bless) nine times, the use of this liturgically resonant verb reaching a kind of crescendo in the third stanza:

בְּרַכְּם, בְּרַךְ יוֹצְאֵי לַמִּלְחָמָה.
בְּרַךְ נֶשְׁקָם לִבְל יִחְטִיֵּא, בְּרַךְ בֵּיתָם.
בְּרַךְ אֶת זֶה הָעָם, אֶת נַעֲרָיו וְלִוְחָמָיו,
עַד קֶרֶב יָמָם.

Bless them, bless those going out to war.
Bless their weapons that they not fail, bless their home.
Bless this people, its fighters and youth,
Until battle is done.¹¹

Gouri’s “Tefillah” also expresses a form of collective liturgical innocence, underscored through his repeated reference to the soldiers as *ne’arim* (youth or youngsters). This sense or performance of innocence is further articulated in the prayer that their weapons not misfire (*leval yaḥti’*), an expression that plays on the notion of avoiding *het’* (sin), as well as in the rhyming of the word *beitam* (their home) with the verb *yitam* (is or will be done), which shares a root with *tam* (innocent, blameless, whole).

Gouri’s New-Old Book

But not all Gouri’s poems demonstrate this first-person-plural, liturgical naivete. Because Gouri lived and wrote for so long, publishing well into his 90s, his work straddled eras and modes.¹² The two later poems by Gouri that I taught in the early winter of 2024, following my solidarity visit to Israel, assume a more mixed, exploratory voice, combining the personal and the

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collective, the faithful and the skeptical, a sense of continuity as well as discontinuity with the experiences and modes of the past. It is this hybrid quality, and not just that nostalgically collectivist stance, I would contend, that made his poetry newly relevant and resonant in the aftermath of October 7.

I chose the following poem because of its role in furnishing a means of everyday response to the attack and the ensuing hostage crisis and war. In a WhatsApp exchange with my childhood best friend Debbie, who lives in Israel and has a son and a son-in-law who were immediately called up for reserve military service, I asked her how she was holding up. “Shlomi kishlom ‘ami,” she answered—“I am as my people are,” or perhaps, “My peace is like that of my people”—an expression that had become widespread among Israelis searching for a way to respond to inquiries of the “how-are-you” sort. The origin of this idiom is Gouri’s posthumously published poem “Bo ketsat sheket” (Come, Bit of Quiet):

בוא קצת שקט

חיים גורי

בוא קצת שקט, בוא קצת שעמום

מגיע לך

הכל כל כך צועק פה, לא גמור.

מה שלומך?!

שואלים אותי ברחוב

אנשים למיניהם

שלומי בשלום עמי,

אני משיב להם

ואז פולטים הם אנחה קצרה

בשתפים לעת צרה.

יהיה טוב! אני מבטיח

כאיש סודו של המשיח!

Come, Bit of Quiet

Haim Gouri

Come, bit of quiet, come, bit of boredom

You deserve it

Everything is so screaming here, unendingly.

How are you?!
They ask me on the street.
I am as my people are,
I answer them,
And then they let out a short sigh
As partners in troubled times.
It'll be good! I promise
Like a confidant of the Messiah!¹³

At the center of this expression and poem is a linguistic feature and predicament unique to Hebrew and Israeli culture. In English, we ask after people's wellbeing by saying "How are you?," similar to Spanish, where the formula is "¿Cómo estás?" Other languages construct the question using the more active verb 'to go,' as in German, where one says, "Wie geht's?"—"how's it going?" Or, in French, where the question is, "Comment ça va?" Akin to the English expression "How are you doing" is the Yiddish way of posing the question: "Vus machst du?"—"what/how are you doing?" Or "Vus machst a Yid,"—"What/how is the Jew doing?"

Hebrew, however, employs an entirely different linguistic mechanism, built around the noun *shalom*, which connotes "wellbeing" or "peace." *Mah shlomkha* thus might be rendered "what/how is your peace?"¹⁴ How does one answer such a question in a time of (ongoing) war? Gouri's "Shlomi kishlom ami" represents an effort to answer the question in as honest and succinct a way as possible, or perhaps to deflect it and invite the absent quiet that the poet speaker so craves at the poem's opening.

Because "Shlomi kishlom ami" also serves as an expression of national solidarity, it evokes a collective sigh on the part of those who ask after his wellbeing, as if to say nobody's *shalom* in Israel is particularly *shalem* (whole). Which forces the speaker, in turn, to offer the (perhaps disingenuous) reassurance: "Yihiyeh tov" (It'll be good), reminiscent of the 1978 Yonatan Geffen / David Broza song by that title, written in the aftermath of the Camp David Accords, with its wistful, skeptical, quasi-messianic hopes for peace with Egypt and Israel's other neighbors.

Gouri's poem is remarkable for its combination of solidarity and irony, its concern for collective reassurance and its simultaneous desire to depart from convention and perhaps not speak at all, given the lack of proper words or concrete knowledge of what will be. The real, honest conversation seems

to take place in the mind of the poet, who admits to himself at the outset that what he really wants is a little bit of quiet in an atmosphere that offers no hint of such. Gouri's poem, written against the backdrop of the previous Gaza conflicts in 2008–2009, 2012 and 2014, reflected the chronic state of “noise” echoed in “quest for silence” poems by other poets as well, such as Natan Zach and Yona Wollach.¹⁵ All of this, along with a hope for something different, took on a renewed urgency and poignancy in the post-October 7 moment.

The second Gouri poem I taught, “Ani gar ka'eit besefer yashan” (I Live Now in an Old Book, 1975), builds on this mixed mode, but with explicit reference to a dual or mixed sense of time, environment and text. As the war and hostage crisis unfolded, and campus protests erupted all over the United States, it seemed to me and to many of those I was teaching that time was folding back on itself, with the antisemitism of earlier generations taking on a terrifyingly resurgent new life. How could it be, we wondered, that all this time had passed, and yet there we were, back in tragic, insecure circumstances, not just in Israel, but in America, too? Gouri's poem seemed to capture the sense of frustration and familiarity of living in an old Jewish book:

אני גר כעת בספר ישן
חיים גורי

אני גר כעת בספר ישן.
אני גר כעת בסביבה הנכונה
המציאות תפוזים ואנחות
למחצית העולם.

אני גר כעת בעיר לבנה
ומלאות תלומות שחרים.
אני גר בין השערות נדירות
ומשפטי תנאי בלתי-משערים.

אני נע כצל עובר
ברחוב שאין דומה לו ברחובות,
בין לבבות המחשבים להשבר
אל המלכות העתיקה תמיד לבוא.

אני נע בין אנשים קדושים
וחולי אהבה.
אני רואה נשים ואנשים
השבים מן העולם הבא.

I Live Now in an Old Book

Haim Gouri

I live now in an old book.
I live now in the right environ
That exports oranges and sighs
To half the world.

I live now in a white city
Filled with black dreams.
I live amid rare predictions
And unexpected conditional sentences.

I move like a passing shadow
On a street unlike any other street,
Amid hearts on the verge of breaking
On their way to the kingdom always yet to come.

I move between holy
Lovesick people.
I see women and men
Returning from the world to come.¹⁶

“I Live Now in an Old Book” is a text shot through with a (paradoxical) mix of pride and frustration, continuity and disjuncture. The conceit of living in an old book speaks to the poet-speaker’s location in the “right” and well-established (*nekhonah*) environment of Israel, where every experience and event is endowed with layers of historical significance and resonance. Insofar as our classical sources have recorded and continue to inform the significance of this Israeli environment, the entire country and its contemporary inhabitants live “in an old book,” rendering the people and the land old and new simultaneously.

What the specific image of “living in a book” brought to mind when I taught the poem in early 2024 was such (Diaspora-based) Jewish Tom Thumb stories as S.Y. Agnon’s “Ma’aseh Rabbi Gadiel Hatinok” (Little Rabbi Gadiel, 1920)¹⁷ and Sadie Weilerstein’s *Ktonton* (1935), with their depictions of the dangers of being small in an environment of large, looming threats, a metaphor for Jewish minority status (in the Diaspora) and ongoing vulnerability. The illustration appearing at the top of the Agnon story in its original 1920 printing, in the New York-based journal *Miklat*, shows an image of a tiny homunculus standing—or living!—inside a volume of his father’s Talmud (Figure 1).¹⁸ It would be perilous indeed to be such a small creature perched on the page or in the fold of such a massive book. In Agnon’s story, itself a reworking, as Gershom Scholem argues, of earlier kabbalistic tales,¹⁹ R. Gadiel’s father repeatedly nods off and, upon waking and failing to notice his son standing there on the page, shuts him up in the book. Agnon’s narrator presents this as an almost felicitous experience, allowing R. Gadiel simply to continue studying. But the harrowing nature of R. Gadiel’s Diasporic life, with him playing a martyr’s role in thwarting a blood libel accusation against



Figure 1. S.Y. Agnon, “Ma’aseh Rabbi Gadiel Hatinok,” illustration by Saul Raskin, *Miklat* (1920). Photo Credit: Wendy Zierler.

his community, endows this otherwise playful, childish narrative with a dark strain that resonates with the mixed tone of Gouri's poem.

The shock underlying Gouri's poem (and the October 7 attack) was the sense that such vulnerability might also characterize life in the Zionist state, meant to be a Jewish refuge: Gouri's speaker lives in an old book/land of Jewish history, constantly threatened and yet continuing, against all odds, to dream of redemption.

The speaker's experience, like that of many in Israel, is a study in opposites. He is in the "right environ" for a Zionist—a center for exporting not just (Jaffa) oranges but also sighs and woes. He lives in the white (new, Zionist) city of Tel Aviv,²⁰ yet it remains clouded by dark, black dreams. Echoing Ps. 144:4 and the "Unetaneh Tokef" prayer recited at the height of the Yom Kippur service, the speaker describes himself as a *tsel* 'over (a mere passing shadow), wandering along peerless streets, among hearts on the verge of breaking (*hamehashvim lehishaver*), an allusion to the condition of the boat on which Jonah attempts to escape, upon which God unleashes a deadly storm (Jonah 1:4).

Living in this old book, at one but also at odds with his environs, Gouri's speaker betrays a constant awareness of old, textually resonant modes of living. He wanders among "holy" or saintly people (*kedoshim*), as the people of Israel are enjoined to be in Lev. 19:2, who are also *holei ahavah* (love-sick), like the Shulamite in Song of Songs 2:5 and 5:8, whose union with her beloved remains ever deferred. In referring to men and women "who have returned from "the World to Come" (*'olam haba*) Gouri conveys a sense of living in a world inhabited by the ghosts of these old texts and of the Hebrew writers of the past. At the same time, given the post-Yom Kippur War dating of the poem, Gouri seems to be hinting at the soldiers who somehow managed to return from the mortal dangers of the battlefield. Reading and teaching this poem in the spring of 2024 evoked thoughts of our yet-to-be realized hopes for the return of the hostages from the netherworld of their captivity, a notion that seemed at the time as quixotic and unlikely as a departed soul returning to this world from "the world to come."

The Usability of the Old Book

Gouri's image of "living in an old book" furnished a ready way to frame the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, of citation and revision, that seemed to characterize much of the old and new poetry that was being

reread or newly published in the wake of the Hamas attack and the Israeli invasion of Gaza.

In reading the poem this way, I took direction from the work of Alan Mintz z”l and David Roskies and their twin studies of the history of Jewish literary responses to catastrophe, from the Bible through the twentieth century. In the journal *Prooftexts*, which they founded (and which I currently co-edit), Mintz and Roskies helped create a Jewish literary learning community committed to studying the various periods of Jewish literature as a continuum, from the Bible to the contemporary moment. In devising their own respective studies of Jewish literary responses to the Holocaust, they chose, in this vein, to write not just about the Shoah, but about the long history of Jewish literary response to national catastrophes. from the Book of Lamentations through the late twentieth century, revealing pressure points, paradigm shifts, coping mechanisms and strategies of creative survival over time.

Reflecting on some of the literary responses he studied, which appeared on the surface to repudiate biblical, rabbinic and liturgical tradition, Roskies wrote: “[a] book that on the surface deals with finality, endings, disruption and desecration is really a study in continuities and internal transformations,”²¹ insofar as these very disruptions have their own textual precedents. In adopting this approach, Roskies and Mintz were writing against the grain of Holocaust writers, historians and literary interpreters who viewed the Holocaust as a singular rupture in history, memory and representation, entirely incomparable to other instances of atrocity.²² As Mintz states outright, in the Preface to his book *Hurban*:

The impetus for this study was a dissatisfaction with the conception in literary studies of Holocaust literature as a distinct genre or body of works existing in several languages and characterized by a common set of techniques and concerns. Imaginative literature in Hebrew and Yiddish did not seem well illuminated by this autonomous, horizontal classification; as works of art, they owed more to a vertical axis of literary tradition, which extended back to the Middle Ages and the Bible. [. . .] I therefore endeavored to take the Holocaust literature of one interpretive community, Israeli culture and Hebrew literature, and read it against the background of its traditions: the goal was to investigate the interplay of catastrophic contemporary events upon longstanding literary traditions. [. . .] In choosing what to include and exclude from a vast body of literature ranging over many periods I have been governed by a principle of discontinuity. I have

concentrated on the points of pressure in the tradition. These moments of paradigm shift are embodied in texts which cannot easily accommodate the received explanations and must mobilize new means to recover meaning.²³

Ever wary of inappropriate comparisons to the Holocaust, I was nevertheless struck, in real time, by the repeated description of October 7, by world leaders, journalists and Jewish community members alike, as “the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust,”²⁴ situating these new events on what Roskies and Mintz had shown to be a literary-historical continuum. Following Mintz’s and Roskies’ approach to Holocaust literature as inhabiting an “old book”—a time-tested, multifarious tradition of novel (and not-so-novel) uses, abuses, parodies and creative reinterpretations of the past—I kept on discovering texts that responded to previous such texts, examples of creative continuity and tradition amidst the rupture, disruption and protest. Of particular interest were a handful of Hebrew poems by Israeli women that seemed in their processing of these recent shocking events to respond directly to earlier modern Hebrew poems or to catastrophic stories featuring biblical women, and to the linguistically-grounded or gender-inflected points of pressure these old stories imposed on the tradition.

An Empty (but Full) Old Book

The very first poem I taught after the attack was “I Want to Weep, but Then I Remember,” written and shared by email in the immediate aftermath by my Jerusalem-based colleague Ruhama Weiss.

אני רוצה לבכות אבל זוכרת

רוחמה וייס

אני רוצה לבכות אבל זוכרת
שש עכשיו תור ארוך לבכי
(ובצדק ולמזל) אני מחויז לרשימות
של מי שמתר לה
דמעות.

רגעים פאלה קשהסחיים מתרוקנים מפל
תוכן
יש משמעות רק למילה אחת
ריק

סבתות נלקחות בשבי. מינוקות נטבחים
משום מה אני נזכרת בביאליק
אין לי זכות
לבכות.

I Want to Weep, But Then I Remember (October 8, 2023)

Ruhama Weiss

I want to weep, but then I remember
That there's a long line now for weeping
(In fairness and to my great fortune) I'm off the list
Of those allowed
Tears.

At moments like this, when life empties itself out of all
Content
Only one word has meaning:
Empty.

Grandmothers taken prisoner. Babies slaughtered.
For some reason I'm reminded of Bialik
I have no right
To weep.

Weiss is a poet, novelist and Talmudist. I taught several of her talmudically and liturgically resonant poems as part of the “Shir Hadash” project during the summer and fall of 2022.²⁵ Like Donald Capps, she is also a teacher of pastoral counseling; unsurprisingly, “I Want to Weep, but Then I Remember” is a deeply pastoral poem, one that proceeds tentatively and provisionally, acknowledging (like Gouri’s “Come, Bit of Quiet”) that there are times when the best response is quiet. The attack perpetrated by Hamas the previous day had emptied out our holiday, our expectations, our sense of security and meaning, in the same way it emptied out the Nova music festival of its happy revelers. The only appropriate word for such occasions, Weiss insisted in “I Want to Weep,” was “empty.”

But times like this also bring to the fore other, contradictory emotions. Even as Weiss opts for saying less rather than more, each stanza of her poem narrowing at its close to one word—*dema'ot* (tears), *reik* (empty), *livkot* (weep)—she admits to being reminded of the foundational work of classic

modern Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934). Weiss confirmed to me in an email that she was referring to “Be’ir haharegah” (In the City of Slaughter), Bialik’s epic poetic response to the horrific Kishinev pogrom of April 1903, itself a sacrilegious parody of God’s monologue to a prophetic “Ben-Adam” (Son of Man) in the biblical book of Ezekiel:

קום לך לך אל עיר ההרגה ובאת אל-החצרות,
ובעיניך תראה ובגדך תמשש על-הגגרות
ועל העצים ועל האבנים ועל-גבי טיח הפתלים
את-הדם הקרוש ואת-המח הנקשה של-החללים.
ובאת משם אל-החרבות ופסחת על-הפרצים
ועברת על-הפתלים הקובים ועל התנורים הנחצים,
במקום העמיק קרקר המפץ, הרחיב הגדיל החורים,
מחשף האבן השחרה וערות הלבנה השרופה,
והם נראים כפיות פתוחים של-פצעים אנושים ושחורים
אשר אין להם תקנה עוד ולא-תהי להם תרופה,
וטבעו רגליך בנוצות והתנגפו על תלי-תלים
של-שברי שברים ורסיסי רסיסים ותבוסת ספרים וגוילים,
פליון עמל לא-אנוש ופרי משנה עבודת פרך;
ולא-תעמד על-ההרס ועברת משם הדרך—
ולבלבו השטים לנגדך ולפיו באפה בשמים,
וצציהו חצים נוצות וריחן קריח דמים;
ועל-אפה ועל-חמתו תביא קטרות הנרה
את-עדנת האביב בלבבך—ולא-תהי לך לנרא;
וברבבות חצי זקב יפלח השמש בברך
ושבע קרנים מכל-רסיס זכוכית תשמחנה לאידך,
כי-קרא אדני לאביב ולטבח גם-יחד:
השמש ורחה, השטה פרחיה והשוחט שחט.

ARISE and go now to the city of slaughter;
Into its courtyard wind your way;
There with your own hand touch, and with the eyes of your head,
Behold on tree, on stone, on fence, on mural clay,
The spattered blood and dried brains of the dead.
Proceed thence to the ruins, the split walls reach,
Where wider grows the hollow, and greater grows the breach;
Pass over the shattered hearth, attain the broken wall
Whose burnt and barren brick, whose charred stones reveal

The open mouths of such wounds, that no mending
Shall ever mend, nor healing ever heal.
There will your feet in feathers sink, and stumble
On wreckage doubly wrecked, scroll heaped on manuscript,
Fragments again fragmented—
Pause not upon this havoc; go your way.
The perfumes will be wafted from the acacia bud
And half its blossoms will be feathers, whose smell is the smell of blood!
And, spiting you, strange incense they will bring—
Banish your loathing—all the beauty of the spring,
The thousand golden arrows of the sun, will pierce your liver²⁶
The sevenfold rays of broken glass will rejoice over your sorrow
For God called up the slaughter and the spring together,—
The slayer slew, the blossom burst, and the slaughterer slaughtered.

I've shared here the opening of Bialik's long poem, with a translation adapted from that of Hebrew poet and academic Israel Efros (1891–1981), who was born in what is now Ukraine and emigrated to the U.S. in 1905.²⁷ The poem is anything but empty; on the contrary, it is overstuffed with devastation, chock-and shock-full of appalling, emotional, poetic details of the attack: rape, destruction, murder, guts, gore. Bialik had been sent to Kishinev to write a journalistic report about the pogrom. Instead, he wrote this poem, which adopts the tone of prophetic rage and the tack of maximalism rather than minimalism. The lines are long, with parallelisms, repetitions, wordplays, extended tactile, horrifying descriptions, biblical and talmudic allusions—the *lekh lekha* (“go now”) of Genesis 12; the *tilei tilim* (heaps upon heaps [of *halakhot* interpretively derived by R. Akiva from the crowns affixed to the letters of the Torah]) of BT *Menahot* 29b (here rendered “wreckage doubly wrecked”)—all meant to provoke outrage and to stir Diaspora Jews out of their exilic passivity, to infuriate them into Zionism.

Some criticized Bialik for the way “Be’ir haharegah” lied about the facts, blaming the victims for their victimization and underplaying their efforts at self-defense. As Mintz notes,

Diligent investigator that he was, Bialik had taken everything down, including descriptions of the attempts to fend off the attacks. Yet the claims of historicity were apparently secondary to the higher imaginative prerogatives Bialik wished to take. [. . .] Bialik wished to make Kishinev

stand for something massive and millennial, and the “higher truth” superseded the contingent truth of the notebooks.²⁸

Yet, no one could deny the poem’s galvanizing effect. As Michael Gluzman observes, Bialik’s poem “jolted the Jewish intelligentsia in Russia into action: almost immediately, calls were made for a radical transformation of Jewish cultural values.”²⁹

Weiss’s invocation of Bialik in this, her first poem after the attack, constructs a direct analogy between Kishinev, 1903, and the Gaza envelope, 2023. It also underscores the enduring influence of Bialik’s poem and the extent to which all post-1903 Hebrew poems in response to catastrophe live perforce inside or in dialogue with it. In contrast with Bialik’s epic work, however, which culminates with a call for wailing and tears, Weiss reserves the tears and rage for those directly impacted by the attack. And yet the very reference to Bialik suggests a desire for someone to take on his mantle and give prophetic / poetic expression to the rage and tears.

Challenging the Old Misogynist Book

In another poem written shortly after the attack, entitled “Here Lies a Look-out,” Weiss herself assumed that voice. If, among other outrages, Bialik’s poem railed (perhaps unfairly) against the failure of the men of Kishinev to protect their women from gang rape and murder,³⁰ Weiss’s “Here Lies a Look-out” inveighs against the failure of the government and the IDF to heed the warnings of the female lookouts stationed in the Gaza envelope. In her analysis of Bialik’s Kishinev poems, Mikhal Dekel writes of Bialik’s construction of a male tragic figure “who in silence is made to comprehend the depth of the calamity, assume tragic responsibility for the nation, and prepare for a heroic sacrifice,” while the women lie “outside the definition” of that universal Jewish tragic subject.”³¹ Weiss’s poem upends this model, invoking Bialik but exposing the failure of masculine responsibility, and highlighting, without any poeticized hyperbole, the specifically female nature of this national tragedy.

פה נטמנה תצפיתנית

רוחמה וייס

יש ימים (למשל היום) בהם אני
רוצה שמישגי תאסוף את כל מה שהרעל
והקשל על ידי שנים ארוכות מדי

שֶׁל הַתְּנַשּׂאוֹת זְכֵרִית, גְּבֵרִית, מְתַגַּבֶּרֶת
 אוֹן וְחֶלְצִים
 שְׂבוּעַת יָדָךְ תַּסֵּת יִרְכִי
 מִשְׁקָפִי שְׁמֶשׁ רִי-בֵן
 "מִיִּדְלֵעַ, תִּזְכִּירִי לִי מָה עָשִׂיתָ בְּצָבָא?"
 חֵיוֹף נְחוּם מוֹל נָשִׁים דַּעְתָּן קָלָה
 כָּל מָה שְׁמַתְחָרוּ עִם הִסְטֶרְיָה. הִסְטֶרְיָה.
 הִסְטֶרְיָה. אֶת בְּהִיסְטֶרְיָה. בַּק הִסְטֶרְיָה. הִסְטֶרְיָה.
 נָשִׁים דַּעְתָּן מְצוּיָה
 וְכו' וְכו'
 תִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם לְחַפְשָׁה אֲרוּכָה
 רָכָה, רָכָה, רָכָה
 לְהַסְגֵּר בְּבֵית מְרָגוּעַ.

 עַל תְּלוּלִית הָאֲדָמָה הַטְרִיָה
 אֶכְתֵּב בְּדַמְעוֹת:
 כֹּה נִטְמְנָה אִשָּׁה צְעִירָה
 שְׁנֹלֶשֶׁה בְּתַבְנִיתָהּ שֶׁל אִמָּא אֲדָמָה
 אִישָׁה שֶׁיִּדְעָה לְהַבִּיא חַיִּים לְעוֹלָם
 שֶׁלֹּא הִקְשִׁיב לָהּ.
 כֹּה נִטְמְנָה
 תַּצְפִּיתִנִּית.

Here Lies a Lookout

Ruhama Weiss

There are days (today, for example), when
 I want some woman to gather up all that's been fouled
 And failed by so many years
 Of ever-more masculine, male arrogance
 Virile strength and loins
 "Place your hand under my thigh and swear"
 Ray-Bans
 "Remind me, honey—what did you do in the army?"
 Insolent smirks at featherbrained females³²
 Anything that rhymes with hysteria. Hysteria.
 Hysteria. You're being hysterical. Mere hysteria.
 Hysteria.
 Women cry at the drop of a hat³³

And so on and so forth
Send them off to relax
Lax, lax, lax³⁴
Shut away in a rest home.

Upon the fresh mound of earth
I'll write in tears:
Here lies a young woman
Molded with the wisdom of Mother Earth
A woman who knew how to bring new life into a world
That would not heed her.
Here lies
A Lookout.³⁵

Translated by Rahel Jaskow and Wendy Zierler

On November 30, 2023, *The New York Times* reported that over a year before the October 7 attack, Israeli officials had been shown a report by a female intelligence officer outlining a Hamas plan for a future attack, but these officials viewed the plan as “too aspirational, considering it too difficult for Hamas to carry out.”³⁶ According to lesser-known but deeply disturbing reports published in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* and elsewhere, IDF look-outs or spotters along the Gaza border—an exclusively female, unarmed force in the IDF—had been warning “that something unusual was happening” but were repeatedly ignored and dismissed as “hysterical” by their male superiors. On October 7, several of these *tatzpitaniyot*, as they are called in Hebrew, were either killed by Hamas or taken captive to Gaza. “Those who survived the October 7 massacre,” the *Haaretz* article reported, were “convinced that if it had been men sounding the alarm, things would look different today.”³⁷ Ruhama Weiss’s poem directly responded to this tragic and unconscionable adherence to an old, misogynist book of disregard for female soldiers and their service.

The task of the IDF lookout is to observe everything that is happening on the border and warn of any irregularities or evidence of potential enemy incursion. Only women are employed in this role. Traditionally, they have been stationed on the border without being given weapons to defend themselves. It is grueling work, staring at screens for nine hours a day. The result of all these hours of vigilance, however, is unparalleled knowledge of their

sector. Within two or three months, the spotter comes to comprehend their “spot” better than anyone else in the IDF: “every stone, every vehicle, shepherd, Hamas training camp, laborers, birdwatchers, trails and outposts.” In the leadup to October 7, therefore, the disregard for these spotters’ warnings was nothing short of shocking. And yet, this was hardly a new phenomenon. Already in 2022, *Haaretz* had published a report focusing on the difficulty of the spotters’ jobs, the disrespectful attitude shown them by many commanders, and the high rates of suicide among their ranks.³⁸

Weiss’s poem offered a raw expression of fury and exhaustion over the contents of an old cultural book, one replete with macho sexism, sexual innuendo, an entire *history* of men in power greeting the observations and concerns of their female “inferiors” as nothing but *hysteria*, a word that literally links the female mindset or psyche with disturbances in the womb/uterus (*hustero* in ancient Greek). This traditional notion, represented in the rabbinic adage “*nashim da’atan kalah*”—women are congenitally light-headed or feather-brained, and thus constitutionally incapable of rational observation or emotional forbearance³⁹—is explicitly lamented and decried in Weiss’s poem.

As the title and the last stanza make clear, however, Weiss’s goal in this poem is not merely to rant against inherited Jewish cultural norms and military misogyny, but also to offer tribute to those *tatzpitaniyot*, whose lives were lost despite their having done their jobs. One cannot help but think of Cassandra, the ancient Trojan priestess, devoted to the god Apollo but fated by that same (masculine) deity to speak true prophecies that no one would heed. Weiss does not invoke Cassandra directly but rather recasts her in the image of the first woman of the Hebrew Bible and her many female descendants, whom she describes, contra Gen. 2:21, not as created from Adam’s rib, but as “molded with the wisdom of Mother Earth.” Like the Bible’s first woman, whom Adam comes to call Eve “because she was the mother of all living” (Gen. 3:21), these young women reached for knowledge and sought to safeguard life; they “knew” how to bring life into the world (from the very wombs implicated in the misogynist charge of hysteria), and yet they were disrespected and ignored. The poem ends on this note of bitter irony: despite having borne the intelligence that could have saved many lives, including their own, these once-future “mothers of all living” were now being buried, either in the earth or in Hamas tunnels, returned tragically and against their will to their earthly origins.⁴⁰

If Weiss's "Here Lies a Lookout" employs the image of Eve, often blamed in Judeo-Christian tradition for the fall of mankind, as a way of surfacing the sin perpetrated against these heroic and innocent female lookouts, Tsipi Sorek's "The Survivors of Be'eri were Evacuated to the Dead Sea," printed in *Hineini*,⁴¹ foregrounds and refashions another oft-criticized woman from our oldest book: Lot's (unnamed) wife:

ניצולי בארי פונו לים המלח
ציפי שורק

ניצולי בארי שוהים כעת בים המות.
באפן זמני הם שם, לא ברור עד מתי.
אבל המות שפשוה בהם הוא אל-זמני

המקום הנמוך ביותר בעולם הוא הגיהנום
שהיה בביתם.
ואם יביטו אחור
אולי יתפכו גם הם
לנציב מלח
תקפאו ברגע הזה
אוקטובר עשירים ושלוש
שמות תורה שהפכה
ליגון
רגעי האימה
לוחות הברית נשברו שנית
ברית הופרה והפכה לנטישה
השמים ריקים
לא עמוד, לא ענן
רק האש והאפר שנותר

The Survivors of Be'eri Were Evacuated to the Dead Sea Tsipi Sorek

The survivors of Be'eri are staying right now in the sea of death.
They're there temporarily, unclear until when.
But the death that spread over them is timeless

And the lowest place in the world is the hell
That was inside their home.

Wendy Zierler

And if they look back
Perhaps they, too, will turn into
Pillars of salt
And will petrify right there in that moment
Of October 2023
“Torah Joy” turned
Into Sorrow
The moments of terror,
The Ten Commandment Tablets shattered a second time
A broken covenant turned into abandonment

And the heavens are empty
No pillar, no cloud
Only fire and the leftover ash.

If Brigadier General Levios prefaced the *Hineini* collection with a traditional, “old-book” description of poetry in a time of war as “a guiding light in the darkness, offering comfort, inspiration, and reflecting the resilience of the human spirit,” Sorek’s poem offers neither comfort nor light. Instead, it voices dire lament and double sacrilege—against the divinely ordained, biblical system of reward and punishment and against the Israeli government and the IDF. It does so, in part, by linking (and contrasting) the story of the communities in the Gaza envelope with that of Sodom and Gomorrah, the biblical cities that deserved their destruction, according to Gen. 18:20–33 and 19, because of their rank sinfulness. Be’eri and the other communities in the Gaza envelope did nothing to merit such a cruel, unspeakable fate.

Sorek’s poem builds on the irony that the Be’eri survivors, after the death and destruction that befell their kibbutz, were temporarily relocated to an area referred to in English and other languages as the Dead Sea, known as the lowest point on earth, the same region where the story of the overturning of Sodom and Gomorrah purportedly took place. Before arriving there, however, these survivors had already been infected with death; the verb Sorek uses to describe this infection is *pasah*, used repeatedly in Leviticus 13–15 in reference to *tzara’at*, a skin eruption that made the sufferer ritually impure. No matter that they were now at the physically lowest place on earth; they had already reached the lowest point in their lives.

Sorek then harnesses the image of Lot's wife, who, as she fled the ruins of Sodom, defied the directives of God's messengers not to look back (Gen.19:17) and consequently metamorphosed into a pillar of salt (19:26; see Figure 2). Rashi, quoting a midrash in *Genesis Rabbah* 50:4, reads this verse as describing measure-for-measure punishment: "By salt had she sinned and by salt was she punished. He (Lot) said to her once: 'Give a little salt to these strangers,' and she answered him, 'Do you mean to introduce this bad custom, also, into our city?'" If Rashi and other rabbinic commentators view her looking back as symptomatic of her corrupt, unwelcoming character, Sorek reframes it as an immersion in the experience of catastrophe and loss. No providential angels need to tell the relocated members of Be'eri not to look back; they simply cannot bring themselves to do so, or they will be petrified by the salt of their sorrow and tears.⁴²

Sorek builds on the motif of Sodom and Gemorrah to indicate an overturning of the entire Jewish liturgical and theological order. We have no mention of the holiday of Simchat Torah in the Bible; the closest we have to a description of such a day of celebration comes in *Esther* 9:22, which



Figure 2. Road sign pointing to the site of "Lot's Wife" in the Dead Sea Region. Wikimedia Commons.

speaks of the “days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes; and the same month, which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy (*nehepakh lahem miyagon lesimhah*).” Sorek undermines the liturgical and covenantal expectation of this verse by describing a holiday of Torah Joy (over)turned into sorrow (*simhat torah shehafekhah leyagon*).

Not just that: Sorek “breaks the book,” as it were, by depicting a second shattering of the covenantal tablets, suggesting that, as when Moses shattered the tablets in response to the sin of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:19), a major sin had been perpetrated, not just by the Hamas terrorists, but by God, who somehow let it all happen, thereby reneging on the covenant. Sorek’s use of the word *netishah* (abandonment) refers at once to the absence of Divine Providence—evident in the absence of the protective pillar and cloud that accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness (Ex. 13:22, 14:19, 33:9–10)—and to the failure of the government and the IDF to come to the timely aid of the residents of Be’eri. The absence of pillar and cloud also calls to mind “Operation Pillar of Defense,” or, literally, “Operation Pillar of Cloud” (*Mivtza’ ‘amud ‘anan*), the name of the 2012 IDF operation in Gaza. The concluding reference to “the leftover ash” (*ha’efer shenotar*) after the fires ignited by the terrorists evokes the ash of sacrifice and mourning, as well as of the crematoria, again recalling the Holocaust. All told, the poem’s biblical and liturgical references position the survivors’ experience within a historical continuum even as they highlight the failure of ancient as well as contemporary protective covenants.

Language Crisis: Using and Dismantling the Language of the Old Book

Sorek mines the resources of the Bible and the traditional liturgy to undermine the reassurance of an enduring covenant. Other poems turn to old books and words as a way of encapsulating the sense of language crisis occasioned by the attack.

One such poem is “Dinah,” by poet and literature professor Smadar Falk-Peretz, published early in 2024 in *Gluya*. Like the other texts we have seen so far, “Dinah” turns us back once more to our “oldest book,” responding to the horrors of October 7 by way of the story of the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34. As Reut Ben Yaakov notes in a recent study, most modern Hebrew poetic revisions of that chapter have been written from the point of view

of Dinah's militant brothers.⁴³ Falk Peretz's poem, by contrast, adopts a staunchly female, Dinah-centered perspective.

דינה

סמדר פלק-פרץ

לָשֶׁם—לְשֹׁדֵה הַפְּתוּחַ,
בוֹ הָיִיתְּ חֲשׂוּפָה לְכָל רוּחַ,
שֶׁת יָצָאת לְחֹלֶל וּפְרָחִים בְּשָׁעֲרֶךָ
לְמָקוֹם בוֹ נָחַתָּם דִּינָה.
בְּיָדֵיהֶם חֻמְלוֹת
לְאַסֹּף אֶת גּוֹפֶךְ הַמַּחְלָל
שֶׁהָיָה לְשֹׁדֵה קָרֵב
לְתֵת לוֹ קוֹל
בְּמַרְחָב—
צִעְרוּ נֶשֶׁל עוֹלָם נָחַתָּם
שׁוֹב וְשׁוֹב בְּדָם
וּשְׁבָרִים—
בְּמַקוֹמוֹת בָּהֶם אֲנִיחָנוּ לֹא מִדְּבָרִים.⁴⁴

Dinah

Smadar Falk-Peretz

Over there—the open field
Where you were exposed to every wind
When you went out to frolic with flowers in your hair,
That place where your judgment was sealed.
With merciful hands
To gather your desecrated body
That became a battlefield
To give it voice
In the wide-open space –
The world's pain is sealed
Over and over again with blood
And brokenness—
In those places where we do not speak.

The biblical account in Genesis 34 begins by informing the reader that Dinah, the daughter whom Leah bore to Jacob, “went out (*yatz’ah*) to visit the daughters of the land” and consequently was raped. According to the

Ha'amek Davar commentary authored by R. Naphtali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (known as the Netziv, 1816–1893), the phrase “went out” suggests that Dinah ventured beyond “the guidelines of proper behavior, by going to watch the locals dance and make merry.” Falk-Peretz’s poem brings this quest for merriment to the present moment, likening Dinah’s “going out” to the experiences of the free-spirited young men and women attacked at the Nova music festival in Re’im. “Over there,” a Dinah-like woman “went out” to dance and frolic with flowers in her hair, the phrase “you went out to dance” (*yatz’at leholel*) calling to mind the description of women of Jerusalem “going out to dance” (*yotz’ot veholot*) in the vineyards in the summer festivities of Tu be’Av described in Mishnah *Ta’anit* 4:8. But rather than being chosen as a bride, as in the mishnaic Tu be’Av rite, this woman was raped and killed. The biblical story speaks of Dinah in the third person, but Falk-Peretz’s poem addresses the festivalgoer in the intimate second person, as “you.” In contrast to the criticism leveled against the biblical Dinah by the Rabbis for being a “roamer” (see Genesis Rabbah 18:2 and 45:5), Falk-Peretz projects a sense of connection and devastated empathy with this modern-day festivalgoer.

The mood in the poem quickly moves from revelry to foreboding, with the description of Dinah the reveler as “exposed to every wind,” and of the festival field as the site where “your judgment (*dinekh*) was sealed (*nehtam*),” drawing attention to the literal meaning of the name Dinah, “her judgment.” According to Jewish tradition, the season of repentance ends on Hoshanah Rabbah, the last day of Sukkot, just before the holiday of Shemini Atzeret, when the October 7 attack occurred.

After the rape of the biblical Dinah by Shechem, son of Hamor, her brothers devise a plot to trick the Shechemites into believing that Jacob’s clan had agreed to the pair’s marriage and, more broadly, to an alliance between their clans. The Shechemites assent to be circumcised, and just as they are in the throes of recovery, Dinah’s brothers, with Shimon and Levi at the helm, slaughter them and lay waste to the city. There is good reason to decry the immorality of this duplicitous and brutally vengeful attack; Jacob himself excoriates his sons, charging them with having made him “odious among the inhabitants of the land” (Gen. 34:30), a sentiment to which he returns to at the end of his life, in his deathbed message to/about them: “Simeon and Levi are a pair; Their weapons are tools of violence (*hamas*)” (Gen. 49:5). Ben Yaakov observes that several modern Hebrew poets, going back to Saul Tchernichowsky in his 1936 poem “Parashat Dinah” and including some

more recent post-October 7 voices, choose to celebrate the actions of Shimon and Levi rather than denigrating them, raising concerns about a rising culture of vengeance and indiscriminate violence.⁴⁵

If “the sons of Jacob came upon the slain (*haḥalalim*) and plundered the town, because their sister had been defiled” (Gen. 34:27), the speaker of Falk-Peretz’s poem seeks, in ll. 5 to 9, merely “to gather” the “desecrated/slain (*meḥullal*) body” of her Dinah, who wanted nothing more than to dance (*leḥollel*), and to give voice to her suffering. The poem’s publication date in early 2024 registers the poet’s desire to raise a voice of conscience on behalf of the victims, when so many around the world were refusing to admit that Hamas militants had perpetrated acts of sexual violence as part of their October 7 attack.⁴⁶

In my email correspondence with Falk-Peretz, she emphasized the centrality in her poem of the Hebrew root *h.l.l*, which carries so many different, seemingly antithetical meanings, including to dance, to create or initiate a productive activity, and to profane. The noun *ḥalal* connotes a slain victim, as well as an empty space or vacuum. This root, as Falk-Peretz emphasized to me, serves “to unite opposites: the holy vs. the profane (*hol*), dance and vitality vs. death, health vs. annihilation, and suggests a longing for healing.”

The regular couplet rhymes at the ends of the first two and the last four lines of the poem suggest a desire to impose some order on this story of violence and moral chaos. The rhyme scheme breaks down, however in ll. 5–9, which constitute the heart of the poem. The only rhyming words there are *merḥav* (open space, semantically related to *ḥalal*) and *kerav* (battlefield), pointing to a widening of the battlefield and the carnage with the Israeli incursion into Gaza.

Returning to the earlier motif of sealing (*neḥtam*), the poem ends with the ways pain and suffering have repeatedly been stamped and “sealed” into human history through bloodshed and brokenness (*shevarim*), bringing to mind the broken, threefold *shevarim* blast of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, often compared to the sound of weeping. All this, the poet says, occurs in those places where people don’t talk (*lo medabberim*), pointing to the biblical Dinah, who never gets a chance to speak for herself and her own needs; to the moments of silence observed in memory of the slain; to those who refused to talk about or acknowledge sexual assault and its victims; and to the unwillingness on the part of so many on both sides of the conflict to give voice to the suffering of the other. The one source of solace and hope in this

portrait of devastation is the poet's commitment to give voice to the story and the reader's willingness, one hopes, to listen.

The following poem by social worker and writer Lital Kaplan broadens the text and language crisis beyond any one given figure or sector to the arena of everyday prosaic personal life and conversation—*sihot hullin*, a sphere not often depicted in classical Jewish sources. In contrast to some of the other poems, which invoked a shared traditional “book” to be mined or undermined, this poem highlights elements of the post-October 7 experience that those of us not living on the “home front” simply did not share.

הנחיות פקוד הערף החדשות לשיחות חולין
ליטל קפלן

"מה נשמע" בטל, ובמקומו נשאל:
"מה נשמט?"
"מה נשבר?"
"מה נשאר?"

"מה קורה" נאסר ובמקומו נתהה:
"מה קורס?"
"מה נקבר?"

במקום "מה שלומך?" התצופ
נקדיר פנים מול חברנו ונשאל –
"מה מלחמתך?"

ובמקום התשובה השגורה בשגרה,
עליה הטל גטו חמור שבחמורים:
"אצלי הכל בסדר",

יש להשיב –
"הכל בסדר",

והמקפידים בדברי אמת יענו –
"הכל בשבר",
הכל בשקר".⁴⁷

Homefront Command Instructions for Small Talk

Lital Kaplan

“What’s up?” has been dropped. Instead ask:

“What slipped up?”

“What’s busted up?”

“What’s not used up?”
“What’s happening?” has been banned. Alternatively:
“What’s collapsing?”
“What’s passed away?”
Instead of the rude “How are you?”
We’ll put on a grim face and ask—“How’s your war?”

And instead of the routine response,
“Everything’s fine, thanks,”
Now strictly vetoed—

One should reply—
“Everything’s fractured,”
And those who are strict about saying the truth will answer—
“Everything’s shattered,
Everything’s shattered.”

Ever since the Hamas attack and the ensuing wars, the IDF Home Front Command (*Pikud ha'Oref*) has played an especially prominent role in Israeli society, directing the civilian population in the event of missile attacks from the enemy, issuing real-time alerts via sirens, apps and text messages—becoming, in effect, a new civic Bible or code of conduct. “Homefront Command Instructions for Small Talk” fancifully expands the purview of the Home Front Command by imagining a series of instructions about how (or how not) to engage in small talk in the post-October 7 moment. Recall for a moment the central linguistic quandary of Gouri’s “Come, Bit of Quiet,” where Gouri’s speaker, yearning for a bit of quiet, nevertheless keeps up the pretense of everyday small talk. Gouri’s solution to the problem of “Mah shlomkha?” is to invent the communitarian, unifying response “Shlomi kishlom ‘ami,” which then forces him into a reassuring “it’ll be good” role for his interlocutor, however disingenuous and quasi-messianic these reassurances may sound.

Kaplan’s alternative “Homefront Command,” indicative of a certain outsider sensibility that I see as emblematic of the female-authored poems I have been surveying, refuses to play such a role, doubling down instead on truthfulness, even in everyday communication. The poem’s sardonic, half-rhyming word plays convey a sense of linguistic and social brokenness: “Mah nishma’?” (What’s up) becomes “Mah nishmat” (literally, what has

been dropped or left out). Likewise, “Mah shlomkha” becomes the brutally honest “Mah milḥamtekha”—what / how is your war?—reflecting the insufferability of a peace-based idiom in a time of war. The reply “Hakol beseder” (Everything’s fine), becomes “Hakol besedek” (Everything is shattered or in pieces), an inversion of the English expression “copacetic.” Language folds back on itself so as to depart from regular practice, hearkening back to some primordial “old book” of conversation. The suggested and repeated truthful answer, “hakol beshever,” captures the multivalence of the Hebrew root *sh.v.r.*, which refers to tragedy and brokenness, but also, in Judg. 7:15, to the interpretation or unraveling of a dream or riddle (*hahalom veshivro*, taken by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda as the title of his autobiography, *Haḥalom veshivro*—The dream and its realization, or: The dream and how it played out).⁴⁸ The repetition of this phrase indicates an overall sense of Zionist brokenness as a consequence of the attack and the subsequent war, the unraveling, it would seem, of a dream.

Even as the poem ends on this dire, twice-repeated note of brokenness, the issuing of these new language directives through the collective voice of the Homefront Command suggests a sense of mutual understanding and shared trauma, and thus a reconstituted liturgical/communal script. The invocation of “those who are strict about saying the truth (lit. ‘words of truth,’ *divrei ‘emet*)” brings to mind the wisdom project of Kohelet, summed up in Eccles. 12:10: “Koheleth sought to find apt words and wrote honestly words of truth (*divrei ‘emet*),” a text that had been read in synagogues just a few days before the October 7 attack. This ventriloquizing of the often nihilistic and occasionally misogynistic voice of Kohelet by a woman poet encapsulates the ways in which poems like those examined herein are disassembling and reassembling the old book, forcing it to speak in the new-old, anguish-ridden language of our time. Sidra Ezrahi, in her study of literary responses to the Holocaust, draws a distinction between “collective” and “existential literature”—the former placing the individual “within the historical and valuational continuum of the community,” while the latter sets the writer “adrift [. . .] from the sources of his life’s continuity.”⁴⁹ The poems sampled here, however, mix both modes, helping to restore these sources and to patch up the continuum precisely by challenging them at every turn on the level of gender and language.

Postscript: A Shared Woman's Book?

Our discussion has repeatedly invoked Haim Gouri's "Come, Bit of Quiet," not just because of the poem's power, but because "shlomi kishlom 'ami" has become part of Israel's linguistic currency post-October 7, as evidenced by its emblazoning on a solidarity banner hung by the Pelech Girls' School in Jerusalem in the wake of the attack (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Banner hung at the Pelech Girls' School in Jerusalem, showing the poem "Come, Bit of Quiet," by Haim Gouri. Banner: Rinat Gilboa. Photo: Sophie Pfeffer, Principal of Pelech School.

Wendy Zierler

Notably, the school also hung another banner, citing the opening line of the 1967 poem “Shlomi” (“My peace”) by the religious woman poet Zelda (Schneerson Mishkovsky, 1914–1984), which I also taught as part of the “Shir Hadash” project.

שלומי

זלדה

שלומי קשור בחוט
אל שלומיך.
והחגים האהובים
ותקופות השנה הנפלאות
עם אוצר הריחות, הפרחים,
הפר, העלים והרוחות,
ועם הערפל והמטר,
השילג הפתאמי
והטל
תלויים על חוט הבמיהה.
אני ואתה והשבת.
אני ואתה וסמינו
בגלגול הקודם.
אני ואתה
והשקט.
והפחד.
והקרעים.
אני ואתה
ויבורא השמים שאין להם
חוף.
אני ואתה
והחינה.
אני ואתה
והמנות.⁵⁰

My Peace

Zelda

My peace is tied by a thread
to your peace.
And beloved holidays

and wondrous seasons
and their treasury of fragrances, the flowers,
The fruit, the leaves and the wind,
And, with fog and rain,
The sudden snow,
and dew
Hanging from a thread of longing.
You and I and Shabbat.
You and I and our lives
in the previous incarnation.
You and I
and lying.
And fear
And the tears.
You and I
and the Creator of the heavens that have no
shore.
You and I
and enigma.
You and I
and death.

Zelda's poem, which opens with the words, "My peace (*shlomi*) is tied by a thread to your peace," builds, like Gouri's "Come, Bit of Quiet," on the idiomatic use in Hebrew of the word *shalom* as a means of greeting someone and inquiring into their wellbeing. To the question "Mah shlomkha"—What is your peace?—Gouri supplies the collectivized reply "*shlomi kishlom 'ami*"—I am as my people are, or my peace is my people's peace. By contrast, as the first-person possessive title "*Shlomi*" (my peace) signals, Zelda's poem, addressed to her beloved, chronically ill husband, to whom she saw her fate bound, strikes a distinctly personal and intimate note. The second Pelech school banner, however, intended as a collective expression of solidarity with the families of the hostages still in Gaza, pluralized and communalized the opening line of Zelda's poem, recasting it as "*Shlomeinu kashur beħut el shlomkhem*"—Our peace is tied by a thread to your (plural) peace" (Figure 4).⁵¹

In becoming part of the "old-new book" of canonically cited texts in a time of war, Zelda's "*Shlomi*" was recast on this banner as a collective liturgical utterance. But, as all the poems discussed here show, citation often gives



Figure 4. Banner hung at Pelech Girls' School, quoting the poem "My Peace," by Zelda. Banner: Rinat Gilboa. Photo: Sophie Pfeffer, Principal of Pelech School.

rise to re-citation and, by extension, reformation. Here I refer to yet another poem, by contemporary Israeli woman poet and psychologist Yael Statman, which directly borrows its title and thematics from Zelda's "Shlomi" but takes them in a different direction, combining personal, national and even universal concerns:

שלומי קשור בחוט
יעל סטטמן

שלומי קשור בחוט
אל שלומכם

בְּחֶבֶל
בְּדָם
אֶבֶל
שְׁלוֹמִי מְסֻעָה, וְהַחוּט קָצֵר
וְנִקְיָקִים שֶׁאֵפְלוּ אֲנִי
לֹא יוֹדַעַת מָה שְׁמֵם
גּוֹאִים בְּרִגְעִים מְוֹרִים
לְמִשְׁלַל
בְּלִילוֹת שְׁלוֹמִי מִתְהַפֵּךְ
וְהַיְלָדִים יִשְׁנִים יָפָה
מָה חֶסֶר כְּשֶׁהַכֵּל מָלֵא?⁵²

My peace is tied by a thread

Yael Statman

My peace is tied by a thread
to their peace—
by a cord,
by blood.
But my peace is many-branched, and the thread is short,
and crevices whose names
I do not know
surge up at strange moments
For example:
at night my peace turns over from side to side
while the children sleep so well
What is missing when everything is full?

Statman begins her poem exactly like Zelda, with reference to a thread (*hut*), but she then broadens the intertextual reach of this image by linking it with the words “cord” (*hevel*) and “blood” (*dam*). On a personal, embodied level, cord and blood connect the mother-speaker with her children and the physical experience of childbirth, suggesting that a mother’s peace is entirely tied up with and determined by the wellbeing of her children. On a collective level, though this poem was first published before the attack, it resonates with the post-October 7 moment, suggesting that despite the speaker’s own ostensible safety, her peace cannot be separated out from the fate of those who were taken hostage and continue to be harmed by the conflict. On yet another intertextual, old-book level, the conjunction of cord/rope and blood

call to mind the story of Rahab the prostitute in Chapter 2 of the Book of Joshua. After hiding the Israelite spies sent out in advance of the conquest of Jericho, Rahab lets them down from her window by a rope (*hevel*); in return, the spies guarantee her family's safety on the condition that she hang a length of crimson (blood-colored) thread (*tikvat hut hashani*) from her window, linking the word *hut* (thread) with *tikvah*, which also means "hope," albeit set against the bloody backdrop of war.

Given these associations, Statman's poem seems to speak in several voices at once: that of a personal as well as a collective mother figure, whose consciousness is burdened with worries over the wellbeing and future of (all) her children in a time of war; that of other mothers, perhaps on the other side of the conflict; or that of a woman like Rahab, whose ("branched") psyche straddles groups and allegiances, and who knows that her own peace is necessarily bound up with the peace (*shlomam*) of national / ethnic others. The final line and question of the poem, "What is missing when everything is full?" seems to highlight what goes missing when one reads or responds to the traumas of battle from a single exclusive, totalizing or unbroken perspective.

I began this essay with a reflection on my career-long effort to connect the disparate parts and fields of my career—religious and academic, ancient and modern—and how personal loss and grief led me to an ongoing weekly project of translating, teaching and writing about modern and contemporary Hebrew poetry. In the same way that the Covid epidemic subsumed part of that grief and teaching journey into a larger communal narrative, so, too, the events and aftermath of October 7 spurred me to consider how the disruption of so many communal certainties, both in Israel and the Diaspora, was expressing itself in the newly reconstituted poetic soundtrack of the day. What I discovered and have endeavored to demonstrate is a process of making meaning specifically through "breaking and remaking"⁵³ the words of prior holy or canonical texts and books. As Geringer and Wiener observe, "Jewish tradition has always understood that one's ability to survive and thrive depends on nurturing the parts of oneself that are intact while simultaneously honoring and carrying those parts that are broken."⁵⁴ In highlighting the voices of Israeli women poets, I have attempted to show how their gendered, outsider perspectives model new understandings of and forms of reconnection to old texts, serving at once the causes of solidarity, protest, empathy, reconsideration and, perhaps, healing. In so doing, I have

also attempted to stretch out a cord of mutual understanding across time, text, territory and tribe, wherein my peace is tied to “their peace,” in all possible senses of the term.

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Notes:

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1. Wendy Zierler, “Hebrew Poetry, Prayer, and Translation: Naomi Shemer’s Songs of the Yom Kippur War,” *Tradition*, 55/3 (Summer 2023), pp. 69–79.
2. See, e.g., David C. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth-Century Hebrew Writers* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987); and Malka Shaked’s two-volume anthology and discussion of modern Hebrew poems on biblical themes, *Lanetsah anagnek: Hamikra bashirah ha’Ivrit haḥadashah* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth / Sifrei Hemed, 2005).
3. Ruth Tsoffar, *Life in Citations: Biblical Narratives and Contemporary Hebrew Culture* (Routledge, 2020).
4. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s speech to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on October 28, 2023, included the call “Remember what Amalek did to you” (Deut. 25:17): website of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at: <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/statement-by-pm-netanyahu-28-oct-2023>; see also lawyer Shlomit Ravitzky Tur-Paz’s brief in response to the South African charge against Israel of committing genocide, based on such citations: website of the Israel Democracy Institute, at: <https://www.idi.org.il/knesset-committees/52329> (Hebrew). For a critique of the “Amalekization of the Palestinians,” see Atalia Omer, “Turning Palestine into a Terra Nullius: On Amalek and ‘Miracles,’” *Journal of Genocide Research*, 28/26, pp. 272–292, at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14623528.2025.2504737#d1e128>. Yosefa Raz offers a provocative consideration of these issues in a yet-to-be published paper, “The Amalek Moment and Other Chapters in the Contemporary Israeli Bible,” delivered at the Herbert D. Katz Center, February 25, 2026. For a discussion of contemporary poetry that re-engages the image of

- the biblical Samson and his exploits in Gaza, see Aryeh Dubnow, “Sha‘arei ‘Azah” *Hazman hazeh* (January 2024) (Hebrew), at: https://hazmanhazeh.org.il/the_gates_of_gazza/.
5. Rabbi Kim S. Geringer and Rabbi Nancy H. Wiener, “Responding to Moral Injury: The Healing Power of Jewish Texts, Teaching and Practices,” *CCAR Journal* (Fall 2024), p. 152. The midrashic quality is not unique or exclusive to this particular poetry of response to catastrophe, or even to Jewish Israeli poetry. Lital Levy, for example, writes provocatively and persuasively about midrashic forms of Palestinian Hebrew poetry. See Lital Levy, “Palestinian Midrash: Toward a Postnational Poetics of Hebrew Verse,” in: eadem, *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 141–188.
 6. Rachel Korazim, Michael Bohnen and Heather Silverman (eds. and transl.), *Shiva: Poems of October 7* (Cambridge, MA: Institute of Jewish Research and Publications, 2024); *Gluya* magazine, edited by Rabbanit Sarah Segal-Katz, at: <https://gluya.org>; *Otzar hashirah*, curated by the Poetry Place organization, at: https://poetrytreasure.com/?page_id=8662; Eliaz Cohen (ed.), *Hineini: Asupat shirim, milhemet “Harvot barzel”* (Jerusalem: Mashiv Haruah, 2024), accessible online at: https://online.fliphtml5.com/onptm/ccdj/#google_vignette.
 7. Among others, in the context of a day of learning at the Shalom Hartman Institute commemorating the *shloshim* for murdered hostages Hersh Goldberg-Polin z”l, Ori Danino z”l, Eden Yerushalmi z”l, Almog Sarusi z”l, Alex Lobanov z”l and Carmel Gat z”l; for the sources taught there, see the web page at: <https://www.hartman.org.il/program/day-of-learning/> (accessed June 7, 2026). For more, see, e.g., the website of international educator and poetry teacher Rachel Korazim, at www.korazim.com; and the sites listed in note 6 above.
 8. Donald Capps, “Introduction,” *The Poet’s Gift: Toward the Renewal of Pastoral Care* (Louisville, KY: Westminster–John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 1–6.
 9. *Hineini* (above, note 6), p. 3. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the Hebrew in this article are my own.
 10. Alterman is also known for major criticism of IDF conduct in the 1948 War. Most famous was his poem, “Al zot” (*Davar*, November 19, 1948), a poetic condemnation of a war crime committed by an IDF soldier. For an extended discussion of this poem in the context of the IDF doctrine of *tohar haneshek* (“purity of arms”), see Menahem Finkelstein, “Hatur hashevi’i vetohar haneshek: Natan Alterman, ‘al bitaḥon, musar umishpat,” *Mishpat vetzava*, 20/1 (Sivan/June 2009), pp. 141–158. See also, Dan Laor, *Alterman* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2013), pp. 366–373. For a discussion of little-known pacifist writings by Alterman and his mentor, Avraham Shlonsky, see Arie M. Dubnov, “A Poet in Search of His Voice: Natan Alterman before ‘The Seventh Column,’” review essay, *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, 22/2 (2022), at: DOI:10.48248/issn.2037-741X/13693.

11. *Hineini* (above, note 6), p. 11. Gouri first published “Tefillah” in *‘Al hamishmar* (February 18, 1948), p. 2, commemorating the thirtieth day after the soldiers’ fall. It was later republished in his collection *Pirhei esh: Shirim* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1952). For an analysis of various versions of this poem, including the later 1949 version published in *Mishmar leyeladim*, which makes repeated reference to God (*Eli*), as well as various translations of the poem, see Dr. Eli Eshed, “Barekh nishkam leval yahti: ‘Tefilah’ leHayim Guri bamakor uvekhamah targumim,” *Yekum tarbut* (February 2, 2018), at: <https://www.yekum.org/2018/02/%D7%91%D6%BC%D6%B8%D7%A8%D6%B5%D7%9A-%D7%A0%D6%B4%D7%A9%D7%81%D6%B0%D7%A7%D6%B8%D7%9D-%D7%9C%D6%B0%D7%91%D6%B7%D7%9C-%D7%99%D6%B7%D7%97%D6%B2%D7%98%D6%B4%D7%99%D7%90-%D7%AA%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%94/>.
12. A final book of Gouri’s poetry was published posthumously under the title *El hamakom ha’aḥer: Shirim aḥaronim* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2020).
13. Hayim Gouri, “Bo ketsat sheqet,” *El hamakom ha’aḥer* (above, note 12), p. 38.
14. This greeting idiom originates, biblically, in a conversation between Jacob and a group of shepherds, shortly after Jacob, fleeing his brother Esau’s wrath, arrives in Haran, the home of his mother’s people: “Jacob said to them, [. . .] ‘Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?’ And they said, ‘Yes, we do.’ He continued, ‘Is he well (*hashalom lo*)?’ They answered, ‘Yes, he is (*shalom*)’” (Gen. 29:4–6). Jacob’s “peace” here seems to depend on that of his Uncle Laban.
15. Natan Zach, “Rega’ eḥad [sheket bevakashah],” in: idem, *Shirim shonim* (Tel Aviv, 1960); Yona Wollach, “Tishlah li sheqet,” in: eadem *Or pere* (Jerusalem: Eikhut, 1983).
16. Hayim Gouri, *Hashirim*, II (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998), p. 44.
17. S.Y. Agnon, “Ma’aseh Rabbi Gadiel Hatinok,” *Miklat*, 4/11–13 (Tammuz / Elul, 1920), pp. 406–409. Reprinted in *Kol sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, II: *Elu ve’elu* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1974), pp. 417–420.
18. “Ma’aseh Rabbi Gadiel Hatinok” (1920), p. 406.
19. Gershom Scholem, “Mekorotav shel Ma’aseh R. Gadiel hatinok besifrut haKabbalah,” in: *Le’Agnon shai* (Jerusalem: Hava’ad hatsiburi leYovel ha-70 shel Agnon, 1959), pp. 289–305.
20. Tel Aviv was nicknamed the “White City” on account of its large collection of white-plastered Bauhaus-style buildings, designed in the 1930s by German-born Jewish architects who had emigrated to Palestine on account of the rise of the Nazis in Germany.
21. David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 9.
22. See, e.g., Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews: 1933–1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975); Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

- 1980); Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); and Steven Katz, "The Uniqueness of the Holocaust: The Historical Dimension," in: Alan S. Rosenbaum (ed.), *Is the Holocaust Unique?: Perspectives on Comparative Genocide* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2008), pp. 88–112.
23. Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. ix.
24. See e.g., Matthew Lee and Aamer Madhani, "Biden Calls Hamas Attacks the Deadliest Day for Jews Since the Holocaust," *AP World* (October 11, 2023), at: <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-us-biden-blinken-99eb4063edabc80fa1fa198fb0bb020e>. See also "Message from the President: Then and Now," statement issued by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany (October 2023), at: <https://www.claimscon.org/2023/10/message-from-the-president/>; and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's "Statement on the Anniversary of Hamas's October 7 Attack on Israel" (October 6, 2024), at: <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/museum-statement-on-the-anniversary-of-hamass-october-7-attack-on-israel>.
25. For more translations of the poetry of Ruhama Weiss, see Wendy Zierler, *Going Out with Knots* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2025), pp. 189–212.
26. Cf. Prov. 7:23.
27. H.N. Bialik, "The City of Slaughter" in: *Complete Poetic Works of Hayyim Nahman Bialik* (ed. and transl. Israel Efros; New York, 1948), I, pp. 129–143; accessible online at: <https://faculty.history.umd.edu/BCooperman/NewCity/Slaughter.html> (accessed June 8, 2026). The Hebrew text may be found on the Project Ben-Yehuda website, at: <https://benyehuda.org/read/1784>.
28. Mintz, *Hurban* (above, note 23), p. 131.
29. Michael Gluzman, "Pogrom and Gender," *Prooftexts*, 25/1–2 (Winter / Spring 2005), p. 39. For more on the poem and the Kishinev pogrom, see Steven Zipperstein, *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History* (New York–London: Liveright, 2018); and Mikhal Dekel, *The Universal Jew: Masculinity, Modernity and the Zionist Moment* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), pp. 139–168.
30. "Descend then, to the cellars of the town,
There where the virginal daughters of thy folk were fouled,
Where seven heathens flung a woman down,
The daughter in the presence of her mother,
The mother in the presence of her daughter,
Before slaughter, during slaughter, and after slaughter!"
Bialik, "The City of Slaughter" (above, note 27).
31. Dekel, *The Universal Jew* (above, note 29), pp. 162, 226.
32. "Nashim da'atan kalah" (women are light-headed); see note 40, below.

33. “Nashim dim‘amtam metzuyah,” (women’s tears are [omni] present), is a Talmudic expression in BT *Bava metzia* 59, teaching that women cry easily.
34. Lit., Send them on an extended leave (*arukah*) / Soft, soft, soft (*rakah*).
35. Shared by email by Ruhama Weiss, November 29, 2023.
36. Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman, “Israel Knew Hamas’s Attack Plan More Than a Year Ago,” *New York Times* (December 1, 2023), at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-attack-intelligence.html>.
37. Yaniv Kuvovich, “The Women Soldiers Who Warned of a Pending Hamas Attack—and Were Ignored,” *Haaretz* (November 20, 2023), at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-20/ty-article-magazine/premium/the-women-soldiers-who-warned-of-a-pending-hamas-attack-and-were-ignored/0000018b-ed76-d4f0-affb-eff740150000>; and at: <https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/article/israeli-women-soldiers-warnings-were-ignored/>.
38. Idem, “The Female-only Israeli Army Role Leading Too Many to Suicide,” *Haaretz* (December 7, 2022), at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-12-07/ty-article-magazine/highlight/the-female-only-israeli-army-role-leading-too-many-to-suicide/00000184-ec31-d9f1-a9e6-edf39bb60000>.
39. See, e.g., BT *Shabbat* 33b, Midrash Tanḥuma, *Vayera* 22:6, and Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 98.2.
40. Fifteen unarmed female lookouts were killed in the October 7 attack, and seven others were taken hostage. One of these hostages, Pvt. Ori Megidish, was rescued by Israeli forces three weeks later. Corporal Noa Marciano was killed in captivity; her body was later recovered and brought back to Israel. Four more lookouts—Naama Levy, Karina Arie, Daniella Gilboa and Liri Albag—were released as part of a ceasefire agreement in early 2025, after more than fifteen months in captivity. Agam Berger was released a little later.
41. *Hineini* (above, note 6), p. 18.
42. Sorek is hardly the first Hebrew woman poet to look empathetically at the story of Lot’s Wife and her insistence on looking back. See, e.g., Anda Pinkerfeld Amir, “Eshet Lot,” in: eadem, *Gadish* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1952), pp. 17–19; and Galit Hasan Rokem, “Kemo Eshet Lot,” in: eadem, *Eshet Lot: Shirim* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1989), p. 13.
43. Reut Ben-Yaakov, “Aḥoteinu Dinah,” *Hazman hazeh* (May 2025) (Hebrew), at: <https://hazmanhazeh.org.il/dinah/>.
44. Smadar Falk-Peretz, “Dinah,” *Gluya* (February 1, 2024), at: <https://gluya.org/dinah-and-din/>.
45. Ben-Yaakov, “Aḥoteinu Dinah” (above, note 43).
46. A senior United Nations official reported that there were “reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence” only on March 11, 2024, some five months into the conflict: “Reasonable Grounds to Believe Conflict-Related

Sexual Violence Occurred in Israel During 7 October Attacks,” website of the United Nations, at: <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15621.doc.htm>. Even then, some have tried to downplay or deny these facts.

47. Lital Kaplan, “Homefront Command Instructions for Small Talk,” in: eadem, *Hashanim hatov’ot* (in the series *Hut hakesef*; Jerusalem: Mashiv Haruah, 2026). First published in *Gluya* (November 26, 2023), at: <https://gluya.org/the-new-directives-for-small-talks/>; first printed (with a different English translation) in Korazim et al., *Shiva* (above, note 6), pp. 58–59.
48. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, “Haḥalom veshivro,” on the Ben-Yehuda website, at: <https://benyehuda.org/read/5692>.
49. Sidra Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 13.
50. Zelda, “Shlomi,” in: eadem, *Shirei Zelda* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985), p. 52.
51. Thanks to *Nashim* Academic Editor Renée Levine Melammed for getting me these two pictures.
52. Yael Statman, “Shlomi,” in: eadem, *Bahuts sheket* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2023), p. 21.
53. Steven Weitzman uses this (rhyming) phrase in the post-October 7 conclusion to his study of adaptations and retellings of the biblical story of the ten plagues, *Disasters of Biblical Proportions: The Ten Plagues Then, Now, and at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2026), p. 283.
54. Geringer and Wiener, “Responding to Moral Injury” (above, note 5), p. 48.