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# Tributes

Alan Mintz:

A Prophet in His City

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**M**y friend and colleague, Alan Mintz, lived his personal drama inside the literary text. It was Alan's search for community that brought him to the study of Hebrew literature and his study of Hebrew literature that brought him the community he sought. To advance a conception of the unity and continuity of all Jewish literature from Tanakh to Zach, he joined me in founding *Prooftexts*, and, with the English literary essay as his medium of choice, he engaged in an uphill struggle to preserve the particularist meanings of Jewish texts. Turning to pedagogy, he addressed the issue of Hebrew literacy and sought the root cause of the problem in *Tarbut 'Ivrit*, the Hebrew culture movement in America. Hebrew in America was the vehicle of Alan's homecoming and tracked his route to self-acceptance.

Drawn to the tragedies and traumas of the modern Jewish experience—so historically removed and yet so intimately familiar—Alan went in search of the ultimate literary response to the Holocaust and found his way back to S. Y. Agnon. His profound insight about Agnon's *A City in Its Fullness* was that this was the ultimate literary response to the Holocaust, a reconstruction *in toto* of the world destroyed and lost through the power of the literary imagination. Agnon's Buczacz became the spiritual home, the sanctuary, Alan had been looking for and the greatest test of his calling.

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## ELDAD AND MEDAD

It was during the lengthy sojourn of the Israelites in the desert that Eldad and Medad began to prophesy in the camp, or, as the New JPS translation would have it, “to speak in ecstasy,” which more accurately describes what happened to Alan and me sometime in 1980.<sup>1</sup> There were perhaps as many as seventy elders out there professing Jewish studies, but the existing journals in the field were either too venerable or too stodgy to serve as a platform for Jewish literary studies of a new kind. When I raised this issue with our teacher and mentor, Dan Miron, he said: “Why not start your own journal?” As it is written, “But Moses said, ‘Would that all of the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD put His spirit upon them!’” (Numbers 11: 29). And so Eldad recruited Medad that they might prophesy together in the Israelite camp.

The elective affinity between Alan and me was obvious. As children, we had both spent our summer vacations in bungalows on Cape Cod. Both of us were overachievers, who had challenged the authority of our families and communities by taking the values they advocated more seriously than they intended. While still in our teens, we had both started Jewish student magazines. *Yugntruf: Alveltekher yidisher yugnt-zburnal* (*International Yiddish Journal for Youth*) was my creation in 1965 and *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review*, a year later, was his. Yet for all thechutzpah of doing it alone, it was clear to the two of us that we had come late to the party. The great culture wars had already happened; the rival groups of Yiddish poets no longer sat at separate tables in Café Royale, and, a stone’s throw away in Greenwich Village, the Trotskyists were no longer battling the Communists. What little remained of the recent past was insufficient to feed our hunger for serious engagement. What, then, was the historical significance of our youth rebellion? Surely it lay in the attempt of small intentional communities to reinvent a more intense and spiritually authentic Judaism. In university, both Alan and I had led a double life as we tried to combine our academic pursuits with a commitment to Havurah Judaism, and, more recently, Alan had recruited *me* to join a group of Jewish countercultural refugees on the Upper West Side in weekly prayer and study. Jointly and severally, we had undergone a gradual shift from Jewish cosmopolitanism to Jewish nationalism. Alan’s shift was far more dramatic than mine.

After completing a doctorate in English at Columbia on George Eliot (which would become his first book, *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation*), where one of his dissertation advisers was, of all people, Edward Said, he switched careers and ultimately chose to specialize in modern Hebrew literature. The decision to throw ourselves into Jewish literary studies was driven in part by the desire to foster the cultural renewal of the Jewish people. The Soviet Jewry movement was one sign that miracles were still being wrought in Israel. The State of Israel, which was to play an ever more central role in our lives, was another. Because we were both now teaching in Morningside Heights, I at JTS and he at Columbia, all I had to do was pick up the phone to arrange for us to meet. This time, Alan did not urge me to curb my enthusiasm. He allowed me to speak in ecstasy.

That their names rhymed, as if Eldad and Medad were joined at the hip, belied their differences. Their personal biographies, their very parentage, are among the many gaps in Scripture that cry out for elucidation. Alan's summer camp experience, for example, was much more positive than mine. I was not the product of a viable movement, was never elected national president of United Synagogue Youth, and the wannabe international youth movement of which I was a part did not have a leadership training fellowship. Unlike Alan, I had not separated from my parents and in some respects never would, for to do so would be to cut myself off from the source of my personal identity. I had received precisely the kind of day school education that Alan so envied: a total immersion in not one but two Jewish languages. And the Montreal Jewish community that had nurtured me was socially stratified, ideologically heterodox, linguistically diverse, and ethnically cohesive, at the farthest possible remove from the east coast urban landscape in which Alan had grown up.

Scripture reveals nothing about the content of Eldad's and Medad's prophecies. Ours, by contrast, are well documented. Despite being children of the Promised Land, our life in Jewish letters—our visionary activity, if you will—was lived within a state of exile. The first great theme that drew Alan to the study of modern Hebrew literature was the *ḥurban beit hamidrash*, the destruction of traditional faith once centered in the house of study. Young men who graduated to independent study in the *beit midrash* (in Hebrew) or *besmedresh* (in Yiddish) had already mastered the nuances of Jewish learning, otherwise they wouldn't be there, for, at least when

it came to learning, traditional Ashkenaz was a meritocracy. Entering that world through the prose of Feierberg, Brenner, Berdyczewski, and the poetry of Bialik, Alan immediately experienced it as a world alien to his lived experience. “But it was also a world,” he wrote,

tinged by my romantic longing for a connection to the true matrix of Judaic knowledge. The loss of this world, the sudden collapse of its plausibility, was often presented as the tearing away of a veil of obscurantism, but what I saw behind the ostensible liberation was a vertiginous fall, a loss of something precious and nurturing. The brutal, existential truth of their situation was luminous to me. Reading these authors, I felt something that I was to experience later on when I wrote about Holocaust writing: a vicarious connection to conditions of moral and spiritual extremity from which I had been shielded by the accident of being born in my time and my place.<sup>2</sup>

Alan’s deliberate, appositional style is so seductive and poetically charged that we are hardly prepared for the candor, precision, and critical self-awareness delivered by the punchline. The style says one thing, the content another. Alan admits to his vicarious attraction “to conditions of moral and spiritual extremity” in the lives of young men “banished from their father’s table,” the title of his second book, which in turn were comparable to experiences of “vertiginous fall” in Jewish lives cut short by the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> Alive to both the agony and ecstasy of the modern Jewish experience, Alan created this synapse and used it to critical and moral advantage. He modelled a way of reading Jewish literature, its tragedies and traumas so historically removed and yet so intimately familiar.

This passage, taken from an unpublished autobiographical essay called “Stalking Agnon,” which Alan circulated privately and ultimately decided to shelve, was by no means the only occasion when he admitted the reader into the personal drama of living inside the literary text. Most illuminating was his essay “In the Seas of Youth,” written for the “Rereadings” issue of *Prooftexts* (21, no. 1, published in the winter of 2001). The title already alluded to its double focus: a witty, self-deprecating account of the adolescent rebellion that led a young American to tackle such a

richly allusive Hebrew text as Agnon's novella *In the Heart of the Seas*, and the manifold readings, both latent and manifest, that might be uncovered in Agnon's story. Nearing the end of the essay, Alan waxed lyrical:

I have no certain way of knowing what attracted me to his stories then, but my recent return to *Bilvav yamim* has opened up what feels like a direct channel to those early promptings. As best I can tell the motive was this: the desire to experience the poetry of religion[...]. Because of the great good fortune of my having had a Hebraist education, I was able to read a novella like *Bilvav yamim* in Hebrew and feel I was peering directly into the inner romance of faith and hearing its music in its original tones.<sup>4</sup>

Who wouldn't want to join with Alan Mintz in a "reverie of reading" that yielded such rich and variegated fruit?

In short, it was not a hard sell to convince an intoxicated Hebraist like Alan of the need to establish a journal of Jewish literary history. If English departments could set the bar from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, then we could do one better. Our venture would go *mehatanakh ve'ad hapalmah* (from the Hebrew Bible to the literature of Israel's War of Independence), or further still, *'ad Natan Zach*. This was no mere lip service to three millennia of Jewish literary creativity. Both Alan and I had been inspired by our teachers, the last generation of Eastern European *maskilim*, for whom Hebrew culture was the ultimate expression of humanism. "Nothing Jewish is foreign to me" might have been their motto. With this big-tent approach, moreover, we would never feel like johnny-come-latelies to the humanities. If anything, we were johnny-come-earlies. From the outset, *Prooftexts* took on Big Jewish Topics that represented Jewish culture as continuous, cumulative, and renewable: Jewish responses to catastrophe, medieval Jewish literature, the image of women in Jewish literature, the theory and practice of translation, the role of periodicals in the formation of modern Jewish identity, reading through the lens of gender, and, most capaciously, the Jewish anthological imagination. Within each issue and especially within each thematic issue, the order of presentation was chronological, granting primacy wherever possible to the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinnics. For something else

that Alan and I had in common was a love of midrash, which we saw as the true font of the Jewish literary imagination. My first publication was *Night Words: A Midrash on the Holocaust* (1971). Alan published both original midrash scholarship in the pages of *Prooftexts* and keenly followed developments in the field.<sup>5</sup> This explains why the next phone call we made was to David Stern, who had made a literary approach to midrash the focus of his academic work; why the name we finally adopted for our journal was *Prooftexts*, the *asmakhta*, or prooftext, being the main lever of rabbinic hermeneutics, the most venerable way of deriving new, and oftentimes radically new, meanings from Scripture; and why we would insist upon Judaic literacy as the *sine qua non* of Jewish literary study. (Other names that were considered for the journal included *Momentary*, suggested by Stern.) Jewish culture proceeded from the mastery of a Jewish language—the more, the better. Whoever wrote for *Prooftexts* would have to demonstrate a passion for Jewish literatures across time and space.

If Jewish literature was our eschatology, English was our prophetic idiom. Someone before us (Judah Goldin, perhaps, or Shalom Spiegel) had coined the felicitous English term “prooftext.” The pluralized form was our way of signifying a concern for the text, textuality and intertextuality. Our first item of editorial business, therefore, was to establish a stylesheet for the romanization of Hebrew and Yiddish, which aimed to achieve a sleek, modern look as unobtrusive as possible. We chose to de-hyphenate Hebrew (not *me-ba-Tanakh* as catalogers do, but *mehatanakh*, as Hebrew does) and to de-italicize those culturally specific terms that were indispensable for Judaic discourse. “There were many Hebrew terms that were often translated awkwardly,” as Alan would later note when he explained the method adopted by his team of translators for the great Agnon project that he spearheaded (of which more anon).

A shamash, for example, is a community employee who assists the rabbi and sees to the needs of the synagogue. Rather than translating the term as ‘sexton’ or ‘beadle,’ we kept it simply as shamash, and we further insisted that it appear on the page in roman rather than italics. We wanted to naturalize a small group of recurrent Hebrew terms for which there were no sensible English equivalents.<sup>6</sup>

Judaic literacy demanded a common Judaic lexicon. But English demanded a certain decorum—and universal clarity. We rejected the in-your-face hermeticism of Judeo-English, or Yeshivish.

We would not speak in tongues. To guard against gobbledygook, we held up as model the essay, “which took seriously the idea of an essay as an *essai*,” in Alan’s elegant formulation, “an attempt to say something finished within the limitations of a short piece of discursive writing. At its best, this kind of essay strove to seem like effortless but brilliant conversation and wore its learning lightly, hoping to garner the reader’s assent by lapidary insights rather than by systematic demonstrations.”<sup>7</sup> (“Lapidary,” like “sanguine,” was one of those words that just came tripping off Alan’s tongue.) “We wanted the scholarly substance of the one and the elegant clarity of the other,” he went on to explain. “In addition, these were the years of the most ferocious assaults of oracular literary theory upon plain writing. We saw ourselves as gatekeepers and mediators, opening the door just wide enough to let in the truly valuable elements of the new theoretical discourse and keep obfuscation out.”

As chief gatekeeper, Alan assumed responsibility for taking on what seemed to him then to be the main competitor on the scene: the Tel Aviv school of poetics.<sup>8</sup> First, he situated the Tel Aviv school within the intellectual legacy of Russian formalism, then went on to describe and evaluate its major trends, both “as a corporate phenomenon” and serially, each major figure at a time. “Even-Zohar and Toury station their constructs at so high an altitude,” he wrote with great panache, “that they produce a kind of Star Wars effect, as we gaze on gigantic systems ‘invading,’ ‘infiltrating,’ or otherwise interfering with each other (all these are technical terms in their lexicon).”<sup>9</sup> The business of this essay, however, was no less prescriptive than descriptive. “What can be left of Jewish literature,” he asked rhetorically, “once history and experience have been drained to expose the fundamental structures of literature?”<sup>10</sup> The problem with poetics is that it devalues the Jewish content of Jewish literature. There was a choice to be made when approaching a work of art between poetics and interpretation, and Alan urged us to choose the latter, “in which the productions of theory and poetics are used in the better understanding of specific texts, and in which theoretical insights are welcomed but unintended byproducts.”<sup>10</sup>

Essentially, each member of the editorial board was charged with becoming the gatekeeper in his or her respective field—Edward Greenstein, Janet Hadda, James



Kugel, Raymond Scheindlin, David Stern, and Hana Wirth-Nesher—and each opened the door to the new theoretical discourse with greater or lesser latitude. Greenstein took the bull by the horns in 1989 with “Deconstruction and Biblical Narrative,” *Prooftexts* 9 (1989): 43–71, probably the first exercise of its kind, while Kugel and Stern launched the counterattack, Kugel in “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 217–36 and Stern in “Moses-side: Midrash and Contemporary Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts* 4 (1984): 193–213. It was the latter that inaugurated a rubric called “Controversy.” When it came to medieval Jewish literature, there was much work to be done, beginning with Stern’s review essay on “New Directions in Medieval Hebrew Poetry,” *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 104–15 to Scheindlin’s “A Miniature Anthology of Medieval Hebrew Love Poems,” *Prooftexts* 5 (1985): 105–35, to his own studies of Ibn Gabirol and Yehuda Halevi, and culminating in the special issue on medieval Jewish literature (*Prooftexts* 23, no. 1 published in 2003).<sup>11</sup> The most difficult area to get a handle on was Jewish writing in non-Jewish languages, and especially the one closest to home. Wirth-Nesher managed this in several ways. She and Hadda produced two issues of *Prooftexts* (18:2–3, published in 1998) dedicated to Jewish-American autobiography, which included English and Yiddish, Ashkenazic and Sephardic within their purview, and, drawing largely from the pages of *Prooftexts*, produced a new critical canon, *What Is Jewish Literature?* (1994). But the major turn in her career came in the spring of 1990, with the publication in *Prooftexts* of “Between Mother Tongue and Native Language: Multilingualism and Multiculturalism in Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*.” Alan’s enthusiasm for this essay, carefully edited by him, was ultimately shared by Roth himself, who asked Hana’s permission to place it as the afterword to the new paperback edition of the novel. Henceforth, multilingualism was to occupy the front and center both of Hana’s scholarly work and of the critical discourse in the field of Jewish-American literature as a whole.

By allowing two unappointed prophets to run loose inside the camp, Moses was taking a calculated risk. What if Eldad and Medad did not rest their case until they had created a camp within the camp? “It was not only to advance the body of knowledge that *Prooftexts* was founded,” Alan wrote in his valedictory address, when the two of us stepped down after twenty-five years as editors-in-chief, “but also to create an invisible intellectual community.”<sup>12</sup> Invisible or not, community was the armature of Alan’s life, from first to last.

## COMMUNITY

It was Alan's search for community that brought him to the study of Hebrew literature and his study of Hebrew literature that brought him the community he sought.

By accident of being born in his time and his place, Alan came of age during the great youth rebellion of the 1960s. And from the moment in 1966 that he and a number of friends he had met as counselors at Camp Ramah each put in a hundred dollars to pay for the printing of the first issue of *Response*, he never lacked a forum to express his passions and share his latest critical insights. From then on, with the English-American essay as his genre of choice, Alan appeared both as public intellectual and literary critic—sometimes in one and the same forum. Thus, the inaugural issue of *Response* featured both his critique of the youth movement in whose ranks he had so recently risen and his contemporary reading of *In the Heart of the Seas*, provocatively titled “Agnon on the Individual and the Community.”<sup>13</sup> “I made this story about the ascent to Zion and its tribulations into an allegory about the relationship of my generation to the established Jewish community,” he wrote retrospectively. “Using the Nobel Prize as a pretext, the real occasion for the article [wa]s the current crisis in American Jewish life: the disaffection of creative young people from the Jewish community.”<sup>14</sup> If today we can say that the historical significance of that youth rebellion lay in the attempt of small intentional communities to reinvent a more intense and spiritually authentic Judaism, it is because, as early as 1971, Alan emerged as its most articulate spokesperson. *The New Jews*, a mass-market paperback anthology that he coedited along with James A. Sleeper, was the first attempt to collect, explicate, and disseminate the voices of the Jewish counterculture. “I am a religious communitarian,” began his programmatic essay on seeking the path to religious community. “I am interested in small fellowships of Jews who study, worship, and act together in a setting of interpersonal understanding. I am a member of the *Havurah* in New York City.”<sup>15</sup> This was followed by a six-point indictment of the organized American Jewish community and a three-point program for inner-Jewish renewal. Yet, in closing out the volume, Alan cautioned his Jewish readers and fellow Americans that “It is important for the radical to have a deep awareness of his location in history and a sensitive knowledge of the past as composed both of moments with which he can resonate and others he must

reject.”<sup>16</sup> Allowing for the fact that hardly any female Jewish voices had yet been heard and that even progressive people still used gendered language, the call for radical conservatism and historical self-awareness was equally a call for communal responsibility. Alan’s particular charge to the New Jew was to reinvent the future with a heightened awareness of the past.

By the time Alan made his second career move, from the University of Maryland to Brandeis University, his sense of crisis and urgency had shifted from prayer and politics to pedagogy. The issue was Hebrew literacy, and the root cause of the problem, he believed, had to be sought in *Tarbut* ‘*Ivrit*, the Hebrew culture movement in America. Alan had never studied a movement before and didn’t quite know how to go about it. Then again, he knew exactly what to do because he had lived it. And so his wider focus would be the function and influence of cultural elites in American Jewish life, and his narrower focus a highly successful periodical publication of one such elite grouping. In “A Sanctuary in the Wilderness: The Beginnings of the Hebrew Movement in America in the Pages of *Hatoreh*,” he set out to tell the largely untold story of “how a small group of immigrants formulated a radical critique of American Zionism and American Jewish life and constituted themselves into a self-appointed elite dedicated to revamping Jewish culture in America.”<sup>17</sup> If that wasn’t ownership enough, Alan had an even more compelling argument to make about the generational and ideological significance of his chosen topic:

For the younger Hebraists, however, Hebrew served as the very existential medium through which the anguish and excitement of the nation’s rebirth were taking place. Hebrew was certainly more than a national ornament and a sacred treasure for them; it was also more than a means by which the national revival was being effected or one of the planks in that program. Hebrew, in its catholic embrace, was the ground itself of the new national reality, the essence of the revolution.<sup>18</sup>

Hebrew culture, this essay sought to demonstrate, had once been an essential expression of Jewish revival in America proper and, as such, could serve the present generation as a usable past. More than that, he argued cogently at the annual conference of the NAPH (National Association of Professors of Hebrew) in June 1990,

the cultural legacy of the *Tarbut 'Ivrit* ideology is precisely what was lacking in the teaching of Hebrew in the American university.<sup>19</sup> With the same fervor as he had once laid out the manifest failings of the American Jewish community, he now put forward three principles to supplement, if not to supplant, the regnant pedagogical paradigm in which Hebrew was synonymous with the State of Israel and its secular forms of self-expression.

The first principle is the conception of Hebrew as the central manifestation of the Jewish people throughout the generations and therefore Hebrew as the key to Jewish civilization[...]. The second principle [...] is that Hebrew is the language of the Jewish people in all its dispersions and not that of the state of Israel alone [...]. The third principle is the most pragmatic, and it bears on the selection of cultural materials for our more advanced courses.<sup>20</sup>

A Hebrew curriculum in an American university, he went on to suggest, should include the fruits of the American Hebrew culture movement.

*Sanctuary in the Wilderness* was to become the title of his critical introduction to American Hebrew poetry (2012). By this time, Alan had emerged as the go-to explicator and critic of contemporary Hebrew writing from Israel, thanks to such books as *The Boom in Contemporary Israeli Fiction* (1997) and *Translating Israel: Contemporary Hebrew Literature and Its Reception in America* (2001), not to speak of his elegant book reviews appearing regularly in the periodical press. By this time he had also joined the faculty at JTS, where, from my vantage point next door, I marveled at his fortitude as he ploughed through the oeuvre of another American Hebrew poet, then another, and another. "From the beginning," he wrote of this monumental project, "I had viewed these Hebrew creators in America as forgotten heroes, prophets unacknowledged in their own home."<sup>21</sup> By the time all thirteen poets were accounted for, their ultimate failure to raise the fortunes of Hebrew in America, let alone their own, was taking its toll. Alan began to wonder whether his own efforts might not meet a similar fate and began to doubt whether his Israeli colleagues would so much as acknowledge the importance of the Hebrew literary center that once existed here, thus allotting at

least a chapter to America in the still-to-be-written history of modern Hebrew literature.

Hebrew in America was the vehicle of Alan's homecoming and tracked his route to self-acceptance. For many years, the personal had become professional. Now the time had come to do the reverse, to render the professional deeply personal. Perhaps it was the dry run of writing a lengthy autobiographical piece for what was supposed to become his American biography of Agnon. But even that piece, "Stalking Agnon," was not as self-defining as the exquisitely personal essay "My Life with Hebrew," the last to appear in his lifetime.<sup>22</sup> Here Alan revealed for the first time the anxieties he experienced as an American Hebrew speaker and to some degree still experienced as a long-time professor of Hebrew literature. It was a feeling of never measuring up to his Israeli counterparts. "I know full well that I'll never shake my American accent," he admitted openly. Writing in Hebrew was harder still, for how could he achieve "humor, irony, nuance, and understatement[...], not to mention the deft idiom, the apt colloquialism, the *mot juste*" in an acquired tongue? And most chastening of all was the awareness of how many echoes his ear would never be able to pick up when interpreting literary texts, which is what he did for a living.

It was by measuring up to the past, to the proud legacy of American Hebraists, from the founders of *Hatoren* to the JTS theologian Mordecai Kaplan, that Alan made peace with himself. ("I think of Mordecai Kaplan, working out in the Hebrew gym, as a kindred spirit.") It was by trying on the various gradations of "fluency," "proficiency," and "near-native," that he arrived at this declaration: "I'm therefore pleased to declare myself a Hebrew near native, and one who belongs to a small but (mostly) happy band of other near natives." It must have been a liberating moment for Alan, as it was for many of the younger, American-born colleagues in the field, who deeply identified with Alan's predicament.

But even that was not his greatest contribution to fostering an intellectual community. No. His singular contribution was to invent a radically new format, designed to supplant the tired—and utterly exhausting—model of the academic conference. In June 1999, I was invited to be one of eighteen participants in a colloquium held at Brandeis on "Reading Hebrew Literature." Deeply dissatisfied with the usual format of the twenty- to thirty-minute paper, which is "too short

for the adequate presentation of a coherent argument and too long for an audience to give sustained attention to an oral presentation,” and with academic exchanges that “have come to resemble a kind of contest in which the scholar’s performance contributes more to the enhancement or erosion of his or her reputation than to the enlarging of the body of knowledge,” Alan proposed “to place the text at the center and to let a community of discourse grow up around it.”<sup>23</sup> How exactly the time was apportioned Alan explained in the introduction to the volume that was eventually produced. Here is Alan waxing eloquent over the colloquium’s common purpose: “The possibility of community arises because the illuminating of the text is the common purpose of the participants in the discourse and also because the inherent value of the text as a source of illumination is the common point of departure[...]. It is not special pleading, I think, to see in this notion of text-centeredness the hovering spirit of classical Jewish learning.”<sup>24</sup>

So there you have it: the *beit midrash* restored through the creation of a visible, although temporary, community of readers—comprised of men and women, Israelis and Americans—who bonded around the vigorous and open-ended interpretation of Jewish texts. “The putative boundary lines between the American interpreters and the Israeli interpreters turned out to be blurred,” Alan was forced to admit, which is another way of saying that one of the basic premises of the colloquium turned out to be false.<sup>25</sup> What the eighteen of us sitting around the table for two days had in common proved much greater than what divided us. We shared a sense of discovery, when what each of us had prepared—whether poetic or prosaic, of European or Israeli provenance—and energetically interpreted using our best interpretive methods, coalesced into a Hebrew literary canon that was larger than the sum of its parts. What’s more, so long as we sat at the same table, the sources of revelation flowed every which way. *Eilu ve’eilu divrei elohim hayyim*.

## THE GREAT CATASTROPHE

Meanwhile, the Jewish bookcase was bursting at the seams. One could barely keep up with the latest novels coming out of Israel, even with the help of a study group of nonprofessional Hebrew readers that met on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The fastest growing shelf was the one dedicated to Holocaust literature and survivor memoirs, augmented by critical studies that made competing claims about whether the Holocaust could be represented at all. This is where Alan and I were to make our most lasting contributions.

How did we both end up writing a Big Book on the same subject? And how did our friendship survive it? In 1977, Neil Gillman, the dean of the rabbinical school at JTS, invited me to offer a synthesis course on Jewish responses to catastrophe, a topic that had been taught several years before by Neal Kozodoy and that obviously played to the strengths of the seminary faculty. The roster of guest lecturers I mobilized for this year-long course was extraordinary, including Gershon Bacon, Gerson D. Cohen, Stephen Geller, Robert Gordis, Jules Harlow, Mortimer Ostow, Raymond Scheindlin, and David Weiss-Halivni, and two of the guest lectures, by Shaye Cohen and Ivan Marcus, would eventually appear in a thematic issue of *Prooftexts* dedicated to this very subject (2, no. 1, published in January 1982). Paul Fussell's *The Great War in Modern Memory* had appeared in 1975, and I decided early on that in order to be worthy of the JTS legacy, I needed to combine Fussell with what the course had taught me, the aim being to encompass the full expanse of Jewish literary responses. Alan audited the course and came to a similar decision.

So Medad arranged to meet Eldad for lunch at the JTS cafeteria and opened the conversation by saying how much he was enjoying the course and how inexhaustibly rich was its subject. What would Eldad think about Medad carving out a discrete part of it, as pertained exclusively to Hebrew? Medad at that moment displayed his usual tact, his exquisite sensitivity, which Eldad, thin-skinned and conflict averse, completely misconstrued. Eldad replied disingenuously that the prophetic calling was best pursued severally, not jointly, so each should proceed without revealing its contents to the other. Moses, eavesdropping on their conversation, proclaimed, "Nothing spreads my Torah more effectively than creative competition. The day will yet come when my two impetuous prophets will do great things together."

And so it was. Inspired by Fussell, I was chiefly concerned with the role of Jewish literature in fashioning memory out of historical catastrophe. My first task was to understand the grammar of remembrance—both its *langue*, which I called

“sacred parody,” the invocation of myth and tradition through inversion and subversion, and its *parole*, the genres employed and adapted by Jewish writers. Some, like the war memoir, matched what I had found in Fussell. Most, however, were homegrown and had to be teased out of Jewish writings, both popular and high-brow, primarily in Yiddish and Hebrew.

Alan took a completely different approach. He went in an (Eric) Auerbachian *Mimesis*-like direction, moving chapter by chapter from *Eikhab* (Lamentations) to Appelfeld to demonstrate the unfolding of the Hebraic tradition, work by work. Both of our books were congruent with what was to become the philosophy behind *Prooftexts*, which was a conception of the unity and continuity of all Jewish literature from Tanakh to Zach.<sup>26</sup>

Both of us, of course, were working in reverse chronological order. Our real point of departure was the Great Destruction, the *Hurban*, the Shoah. What each of us demonstrated, each in his own way, is that the literature written by Jews that witnessed and came out of the Holocaust was part of a genuine, developing Jewish tradition that could be traced back to the Bible. Because this approach was completely at odds with the dominant thinking (and teaching) in the burgeoning field of Holocaust studies, each of us had a long way to go before we could lay this awesome subject to rest.

In 1989 came *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, my 652-page, annotated companion volume, upon which the Jewish Publication Society lavished the same care it did with Scripture. It is my pride and joy. Then, working with an NEH grant over several summers, Alan began teaching Holocaust literature to college instructors, which resulted in his most densely argued work of practical criticism: “Two Models in the Study of Holocaust Literature.”<sup>27</sup> With an academic reader in mind, Alan attached a rather off-putting multisyllabic label to each. The “exceptionalist” model, in his terse definition, “discovers in the Holocaust a dark truth that inheres in the event.”<sup>28</sup> Just as the Holocaust was incomparable, unique, *sui generis*, so too its literature and language; to keep faith with its “authentic but difficult truth,” one was enjoined “to eschew relativism, false consciousness, and opportunism” when they threatened to compromise that truth.<sup>29</sup> As much as Alan admitted to being moved by this rhetoric, he refused to be seduced by its



quasitheological allure and “prophetic” appeal, especially by the notion, shared by critics and readers alike, that the prototypical site of Holocaust literature were the death camps, “because of their ultimacy.”<sup>30</sup> The “constructivist” model, by contrast, proceeded from the Holocaust’s first interpreters, the victims themselves. In this approach to Holocaust representation, one attempted to reconstruct the cultural resources, strategies, and hermeneutic frameworks that the victims availed themselves of as they grappled with their situation and the collapse of social and cultural structures, institutions, and meanings. What made this approach so morally compelling was the preservation and rescue of writings from within the Holocaust proper, primarily from the Nazi ghettos, but also from labor camps, death camps, and myriad places of hiding. As exemplars of each of these models, Alan presented Lawrence Langer’s *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology* (1995) and my *The Literature of Destruction*.

The search for the heart of darkness, Alan concluded, had led readers like Langer to deny the particularity of the Jewish victims. All was not reducible to a depersonalized and predictable symptomatology of trauma. Just so, the search for structural verities had led readers like Even-Zohar and Toury to deny the particular meanings of Jewish texts. Without regard for the victims in the fullness of their being, what was the point of studying Holocaust literature? Without regard for the fullness of time, what was the point of studying the recent, severed past?<sup>31</sup> Impelled to answer these questions, Alan went in search of the ultimate literary response to the Holocaust—and found his way back to Agnon.

Should anyone do a comparative study of memory maps that were appended to some of the thousand or so *yizkor* books written in commemoration of the martyred Jewish communities of central and Eastern Europe, they would be astonished to discover the one of Buczacz that Alan commissioned for his superb edition of Agnon’s *The City in Its Fullness*, a collection of original translations of Agnon’s “late work” (as Alan called it), which he initiated and edited.



Figure 1: Buczacz as depicted in *A City in Its Fullness*, copyright and courtesy of The Toby Press.

Alan was enormously proud of this full color, two-dimensional map. Just as once upon a time he had commissioned the cover art for every volume of *Prooftexts*, each one based on another Hebrew numeral, so he delighted in this collage of architectural landmarks, topography, local lore, and Hebrew lettering. It sooner resembled a Hebrew scroll than an urban geographic. Like other memory maps of the shtetl, it wasn't drawn to scale. Who knew from maps in the shtetl? Yizkor books specifically were written by and for the survivor community, so it was important for Alan to include the point of deportation to the Belżec death camp (unfortunately misspelled) and the two killing fields. Normally, however, Jewish memory maps were very sparing when it came to acknowledging the temporal and ecclesiastical rulers. As in shtetl fiction, so too in most maps, the shtetl was virtually *goyim-rein*. Not so Alan's rendering of Agnon's Buczacz. The castle ruins, the town hall built in rococo style in 1751, the three-storied gymnasium, the train station (the pride

of every Austro-Hungarian city), as well as the Basilian monastery and massive Greek Catholic church and bell tower were so prominent that the Jewish sites—the Great Synagogue, the Old Beit Midrash, and the Jewish cemetery—were dwarfed by comparison. Yet Jewish memory traces were preserved on the map as if they were coterminous with the landmarks that have survived until this very day. Alan's map, like Agnon's Buczacz, was a palimpsest with the older layers demanding their due.

Some of those layers were as fantastical as they were real. Why else immortalize the figure of a Judaized Icarus hovering over the great town hall if not to commemorate the tragic fate of Theodor, *aka* Fedor, its Jewish architect, who died with his wings on in a vain attempt to escape the wrath of Count Mikołaj Potocki? And why else draw the Strypa River with paper boats floating on it carrying lit candles? Whereas Hananya's miraculous journey to the Holy Land on his kerchief in *In the Heart of the Seas* was never explained, "A Parable and Its Lesson," which Alan published separately, told of a journey into the netherworld taken by a Buczacz rabbi and his assistant to save a young bride from abandonment.<sup>32</sup> Really the map should have been three-dimensional, since a number of key narratives were situated subterraneously. "The Holy Community of Buczacz" existed in time more than it did in on a topographical grid, and Jewish time had both a tragic and miraculous dimension.

It was the memorial imperative that drew Alan to this extraordinarily dense and elusive work. The love affair began with "The Sign," Agnon's most immediate and elegiac response to the destruction of his native town in the Holocaust, as masterfully translated by Arthur Green in *Response Magazine* in 1973 and as later anthologized in *The Literature of Destruction*. Alan decided to present "The Sign" under a separate heading as "The Consecration Story." His profound insight about *A City in Its Fullness* was that this was the ultimate literary response to the Holocaust, a reconstruction *in toto* of the world destroyed and lost through the power of the literary imagination.

"This is the chronicle of the city of Buczacz," read Agnon's dedication page,

which I have written in my pain and anguish so that our descendants should know that our city was full of Torah, piety, life, grace, kindness and charity from the time of its founding until the arrival of the blighted abomination and their befouled and deranged accomplices who wrought

destruction upon it. May God avenge the blood of His servants and visit vengeance upon His enemies and deliver Israel from it sorrows.

Agnon's Buczacz epitomized the Covenantal Community, the *kehillah kedoshah*.

Agnon has had some very strong readers: Baruch Kurzweil, Amos Oz, Gershon Shaked, Dan Miron. The problem is they could be too strong, certainly too strong to be attracted to a seemingly pietistic work like *A City in Its Fullness* or to fully appreciate its restorative modernism. "Both Agnon the author and the narrator he created to tell these stories," wrote Alan in his foreword,

held the study of Torah and the worship of God in the synagogue service to be supremely important values in Jewish society. The difference between the world depicted in *A City in Its Fullness* and East European Jewish life in the period of modernity hinges on the force and plausibility of these values.

Without for a moment forgetting the unavoidable gap between the desire of a community to live by a divine mandate and its ability to do so, Agnon insisted "on viewing that fullness through a normative grid."<sup>33</sup> What Alan understood, in other words, is why and precisely how Agnon had turned back the clock in order to conjure up a normative life that was as complex as it was plausible. This was precisely the theme of Alan's last monograph, *Ancestral Tales*, in which he explicated masterfully and elegantly the stories collected in *A City in its Fullness*. Alan himself considered this book the finest he had written.<sup>34</sup>

Buczacz became the spiritual home, the sanctuary Alan had been looking for and the greatest test of his calling. Here is how he rose to the challenge:

Agnon took historical actualities seriously, even though he played with them incessantly, and it was crucial to know how to prise apart fiction from fact. I found these challenges and the rigor they demanded to be bracing, and as I pushed through with the work of interpretation, I had the distinct sense that my vocation as a critic was finally being fulfilled. I was taking a supremely important body of Jewish writing—writing that

mattered a great deal to the enterprise of Jewish self-understanding in the present moment—and, through the intervention of my efforts as a critic, making it available for readers to enjoy and appreciate.<sup>35</sup>

The Great Catastrophe was the *ḥurban beit hamidrash*, but not as a metaphor for the crisis of faith of a generation of highly articulate young men. It signified the destruction of thousands of temples of Torah and prayer, which had stood for centuries, and for the entire congregation of Israel—the meek and the bold, the men, the women, and the children, the beggars and philanthropists, the water carriers and tax collectors, the rabbanim, ḥazzanim, and shamashim—from the aftermath of the Khmel'nitsky massacres in 1648 to the bloodbath on Fedor Hill in 1943.<sup>36</sup> If there was one book that deserved a place of honor in the modern Jewish bookcase, therefore, it was *A City in Its Fullness*, and if there was one interpreter, one shamash, who would serve as its everlasting companion, it was Alan Mintz. Of Alan's Buczacz project one can truly say: *tam venishlam*.

As for the two of us, if I had it to do over again, I would have made a pact to speak only in Hebrew with Alan. Prophecies tend to last longer if they are in Hebrew.

## NOTES

- 1 This essay could not have been written without the help of the indefatigable Menachem Butler, who compiled a comprehensive bibliography of Alan Mintz and made all 133 items available to me online. My thanks also go to David Stern for being the first reader.
- 2 Alan Mintz, "Stalking Agnon" (unpublished manuscript), 15.
- 3 Alan Mintz, *Banished From Their Father's Table: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- 4 Mintz, "In the Seas of Youth," *Prooftexts* 21 (2001): 69.
- 5 Alan Mintz, "The Song at the Sea and the Question of Doubling in Midrash," *Prooftexts* 1, no. 2 (1981): 185–92; Mintz, "Review of David Stern, 'Parables in

- Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature', *Jewish Studies* 33 (1986): 75–80; and Mintz, "Review of 'Midrash and Literature', eds. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick," *Shofar* 4, no. 4 (1986): 46–47.
- 6 Mintz, "Stalking Agnon," 27.
- 7 Alan Mintz, "Editing as Intellectual Community: A Retrospective Manifesto," *Prooftexts* 24, no. 3 (2004): 273–76.
- 8 Alan Mintz, "On the Tel Aviv School of Poetics," *Prooftexts* 4, no. 3 (1984): 215–35.
- 9 Mintz, "On the Tel Aviv School," 228.
- 10 Mintz, "On the Tel Aviv School," 232.
- 11 In his review of the contribution of *Prooftexts* to the study of Hebrew poetry, Aminadav Dykman, "Twenty Years of Poetry in *Prooftexts*," *Prooftexts* 21 (2001): 121 credits Raymond Scheindlin with creating "a climate of interest" for medieval Hebrew poetry. That's not the half of it. Most of the contributions in the field were commissioned and curated by Scheindlin.
- 12 Mintz, "Editing," 273.
- 13 Alan Mintz, "Fear and Trembling: A Retrospective Critique of United Synagogue Youth," *Response Magazine: A Contemporary Jewish Review* 1, no. 1 (1967): 16–20 and Mintz, "Review: Agnon on the Individual and the Community," *Response Magazine: A Contemporary Jewish Review* 1, no. 1 (1967): 28–31.
- 14 Mintz, "Stalking Agnon," 5, echoing what he wrote in Mintz, "In the Seas," 59.
- 15 Alan L. Mintz, "Along the Path to Religious Community," in *The New Jews*, ed. James A. Sleeper and Alan L. Mintz (New York: Vintage, 1971), 168.
- 16 Alan L. Mintz, epilogue to *The New Jews*, ed. James A. Sleeper and Alan L. Mintz (New York: Vintage, 1971), 245.
- 17 Alan Mintz, "A Sanctuary in the Wilderness: The Beginnings of the Hebrew Movement in America in the Pages of Hatoren," *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 389. This essay was reprinted in Alan Mintz, ed., *Hebrew in America: Perspective and Prospects* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 29–67, but citations here are to the original *Prooftexts* publication. To fully appreciate the importance he attached to this essay, one should keep in mind that Alan wrote it to mark our tenth anniversary.
- 18 Mintz, "Sanctuary," 392.
- 19 Alan Mintz, "The Erosion of the *Tarbut Ivrut* Ideology in America and the Consequences for the Teaching of Hebrew in the University," *Shofar* 9, no. 3 (1991): 50–54.

- 20 Mintz, "Erosion," 54.
- 21 Mintz, "Stalking Agnon," 20.
- 22 Alan Mintz, "My Life with Hebrew," *Mosaic*, April 13, 2017, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/2017/04/my-life-with-hebrew/>.
- 23 Alan Mintz, introduction to *Reading Hebrew Literature: Critical Discussions of Six Modern Texts*, ed. Alan Mintz (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 7.
- 24 Mintz, introduction to *Reading Hebrew Literature*, 7.
- 25 Mintz, introduction to *Reading Hebrew Literature*, 10.
- 26 Here we are, sharing the same footnote and date of publication: David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) and Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). Since then, both our names appear together in Jewish literary studies as often as Marx and Engels in other branches of knowledge.
- 27 Alan Mintz, "Two Models in the Study of Holocaust Literature," in *Humanity at the Limit: The Impact of the Holocaust Experience on Jews and Christians*, ed. Michael A. Signer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 400–428 and adapted for Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 36–84. Citations here are to the earlier publication.
- 28 Mintz, "Two Models," 402.
- 29 Mintz, "Two Models," 403.
- 30 Mintz, "Two Models," 418.
- 31 For a brilliant application of Alan's constructivist model, see Sven-Erik Rose, "Writing Hunger in a Modernist Key in the Warsaw Ghetto: Leyb Goldin's 'Chronicle of a Single Day,'" *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 23 (2017): 29–63.
- 32 S. Y. Agnon, *A Parable and Its Lesson* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), with a critical essay "HaMashal VeHaNimshal" by Alan on 79–158.
- 33 Alan Mintz, "I Am Building a City': On Agnon's Buczacz Tales," in *A City in Its Fullness*, by S. Y. Agnon, ed. Alan Mintz and Jeffrey Saks (New Milford, CT: Toby, 2014), xvii.

- 34 Alan Mintz, *Ancestral Tales: Reading the Buczacz Stories of S. Y. Agnon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).
- 35 Mintz, "Stalking Agnon," 26.
- 36 The aftermath of the destruction is the major theme of Agnon's *A Guest for the Night* (1939). This novel, however, is situated not in Buczacz but in Szybusz (which means "trifle" in Yiddish), the satiric place name that signifies the disenchanted shtetl in all of Agnon's work.