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Author(s): Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi
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Fiction and Memory: *Zakhor* Revisited

SIDRA DEKOVEN EZRAHI

IT IS HARD TO OVERSTATE the influence of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Zakhor* on contemporary academic and popular constructions of Jewish history and memory; it is hard to imagine a scholarly endeavor or university syllabus in any area of Jewish studies that has not been affected by the book that started its life as the Stroum Lectures more than twenty-five years ago. Like Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, or Mikhail Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination*, such a book changes forever the way we think about ourselves and our culture. Unlike these writers, however, all of whom address a large corpus of Western literature—and, indeed, redefine what is "Western" or "novel" in literary representations of "reality"—Yerushalmi limits himself to a specific ethnic canon and a longitudinal exploration of an essentialist premise. Even the Hebrew title, which belies the language of the volume itself, delimits the subject matter and the discourse.

The large theory set forth in this small volume has been debated, refined, and reconfirmed over and over again. And yet, as the library of theoretical material on collective memory has expanded, with recovered work by Maurice Halbwachs and Henri Bergson, augmented by the general contributions of Pierre Nora, Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Natalie Davis, and the more particularly Jewish focus of Amos Funkenstein, Yael Zerubavel, and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, one aspect of Yerushalmi's thesis that to the best of my knowledge has not been explored relates to the nature and place of the literary imagination.

The challenge is located in the fourth chapter, "Modern Dilemmas." Although Yerushalmi traces his theme with great authority from the classical biblical and postbiblical texts through his own area of expertise, medieval and early modern Jewish culture, he presents himself in the final chapter as the reincarnation of the historian who has reclaimed pride of place after two thousand years; his own greatest existential stake would presumably be, then, in the claims made in these pages. It is there-

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fore all the more curious that the chapter concludes with a strange meditation on the role of literature in the contemporary struggle between history and memory. Quoting extensively from Haim Hazaz's story "The Sermon" (*Ha-derashah*), Yerushalmi argues that Jews today have chosen "myth over history" (*Zakhor*, p. 99[1]). In the monologue that takes up most of the story, the protagonist Yudke indeed insists that he is "opposed to Jewish history." Seizing the occasion of a public meeting to speak his mind to the central committee of his kibbutz (or *moshav*), this usually reticent, awkward, and rather inarticulate young man takes on, as he speaks, the rhetorical force of a Zionist ideologue arguing for an activist form of Jewish agency free of the shameful story of exile: "Class dismissed," he concludes his disquisition on the woeful chronicle of Jewish persecution and powerlessness. "Go out and play football" (p. 97).

What Yudke calls history—what Yerushalmi's teacher Salo Baron disparagingly called the "lachrymose" conception of Jewish history (p. 144, n. 31)—is actually closer to what Yerushalmi defines throughout *Zakhor* as collective *memory*. Yudke doesn't engage in such fine distinctions; making up in passion what he lacks in critical thinking, he refers to some consensual, self-congratulatory, and disempowered version of our "ancestors' shame," to use Yudke's words (p. 97)—history made by others and embraced in an ecstasy of martyrdom. Although Yerushalmi has taken great pains to describe historiography as a dispassionate, scientific, pragmatic, and critical endeavor, he takes Yudke's nomenclature at face value. This young man comes to represent for Yerushalmi Everyman in Hebrew literature and his harangue, Every Story. From his discussion of this slim piece of tendentious fiction, which was originally published in Hebrew in 1942, Yerushalmi generalizes that modern Israeli literature is indeed ahistorical, that "many Jews today are in search of a past, but they patently do not want the past that is offered by the historian" (p. 97). He goes on to claim that the image of the Holocaust, arguably the most significant historical event of our time, is being shaped not "at the historian's anvil, but in the novelist's crucible." As in the sixteenth century, following the upheavals of the previous century, even "where the Jews do not reject history out of hand, they are not prepared to confront it directly, but seem to await a new, metahistorical myth, for which the novel provides at least a temporary modern surrogate" (pp. 97–98).

1. All quotes in this essay are taken from the second edition of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, foreword by Harold Bloom with a new preface and postscript by the author (New York, 1989).

I do not wish to engage here in a detailed debate over the interpretation of "The Sermon," which for many readers became a poster-child for pre-state Hebrew prose—even though it is not one of Hazaz's best stories and, as a monologic exercise, is generically closer to the essay than to fiction. Hazaz, as Dan Miron has pointed out, was obsessed with the promise and the dangers of redemption; in that same story in which he dismisses "Jewish history," Yudke agonizes over the thought that in its break with religion and traditional forms of consciousness, Zionism itself could bring about the apocalypse: "What if Palestine should be the ultimate shipwreck, the final end of the line?"[2] This concern with Zionism as a secularized form of Jewish messianism has become a major focus of contemporary critical debate.

Following this line of reasoning, one can hardly have any quarrel with Yerushalmi's contention that to a large extent mythical thinking has replaced historical inquiry for many post-Holocaust Israelis—as perhaps it did for Hazaz himself while the fires were consuming Europe's Jews. I would even embrace—though not without some shift in emphasis—Yerushalmi's claim that although Jews in the Diaspora and in Israel have "fully re-entered the mainstream of history . . . their perception of how they got there and where they are is most often more mythical than real" (p. 99). In fact I think that observation is truer today than it was when Yerushalmi first articulated it. The post–1967 rise of messianic impulses in religious circles, accompanied by the dystopic-apocalyptic impulses in the secular community, have largely replaced the pragmatic, empirical, realist reflexes in civil discourse and popular culture; this process has only been accelerated in the early years of the new millennium, with potentially terrifying consequences that have become easier and easier to imagine. The nightmare that Gershom Scholem shared with Franz Rosenzweig in 1926—that the repressed messianism, the "apocalyptic thorn," in the secular Zionist project would find its ultimate revenge through the Hebrew language itself—is becoming a reality before our eyes.[3]

2. Haim Hazaz, *The Sermon and Other Stories*, various translators, introduction by D. Miron (New Milford, Conn., 2005), 245.

3. Gershom Scholem, "Confession on the Subject of Our Language [Bekenntnis über unsere Sprache]: A Letter to Franz Rosenzweig," December 26, 1926, appended to Jacques Derrida, "The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano," in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. G. Anidjar (NewYork, 2002), 226–27. This extraordinary letter, and other precious and overlooked texts by S. Y. Agnon and others, came to light again when *Die Gabe*, the gift-text presented to Rosenzweig on his fortieth birthday, was published in 1986 in facsimile by the Leo Baeck Institute to mark Rosenzweig's hundredth birthday.

What is ungrounded is Yerushalmi's claim that it is in the province of the *novel* that the reversion to consensual forms of memory is located. If there is any place where the static, insular "myths" of Jewish consciousness and the master narratives of the Zionist century are mercilessly examined and challenged, it is in the province of the novel. What exactly the Hebrew novel is and what its affinities are to its Western cousins are beyond the purview of this essay; suffice it to embrace Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the novel in its most literal etymological sense as that which is radically *new* in a given cultural moment. In those eras when "the novel becomes the dominant genre," Bakhtin taught us, "all literature is then caught up in the process of becoming . . . [The effect of the novel is to make all literary endeavors] more free and flexible, their language renews itself by [becoming] dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into . . . other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary realty (the openended present)."[4]

One need not look far for examples of Bakhtin's theory at work in the fictive imagination of Hebrew writers from the late nineteenth century on. What is particularly curious, and "new," in the earliest phases of the Hebrew novel is that the mimetic function, which comes closest to the historian's task, had to give way to a more primordial act of creation. As Robert Alter has pointed out, those writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who invented the modern Hebrew story were "thinking novelistically" while located in Galicia or Odessa, Vilna or even Vienna when there was as yet no Hebrew street to emulate; in a reversal of the mimetic process as understood from Aristotle through Auerbach, the Hebrew writer had first to imagine the world he was meant to imitate.[5]

This quirk of Hebrew letters only gives local emphasis to the fact that novelists have never claimed to be historians in disguise, no matter how realistic their prose or how true their portrait of the world. Aristotle's observation in the *Poetics* about the quintessential difference between the

4. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, Tx., 1981), 5, 7. Late twentieth-century redefinitions of the nature and the fate of "the novel" were also enriched by the very different position of Walter Benjamin; see, for example, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt (New York, 1968), 83–110.

5. Robert Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* (Bloomington: Ind., 1994), 73; and *The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism* (Seattle, Wash., 1988).

historian and the poet is no less relevant today than it was when he directed it to the poets and playwrights of ancient Greece. This is not just about generic distinctions or professional provenance but about a deeper engagement between creative artists and their societies. Rather than reflecting the reigning myths, what artists have done since time immemorial is to engage those myths and expose their fault lines. When Aristophanes produced *Lysistrata* in Athens in the fifth century B.C.E., he was speaking truth to power, no less than Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* some twenty-three hundred years later. That the politicians don't listen to the poets is nothing new; many Athenians engaged in the bloody Peloponnesian wars were presumably in the audience at the Lenaia Festival of 411 B.C.E. when Lysistrata and her female cohorts on both sides of the Athenian-Spartan divide made peace between themselves and then sued for peace with their men by withholding their sexual favors. There is evidence that Hitler actually watched *The Great Dictator* in 1940 as Chaplin replaced the Fuehrer's genocidal threats with a vision of brotherhood and peace.[6] By 404 B.C.E. Athens was in ruins; by 1945, Germany was in ruins. The historians then came to pick up the pieces and tell the tale.

That both of the above examples are taken from the comic realm is not coincidental. Many theories of the comic stress the subversive nature of the genre; "whereas tragedy and lamentations affirm the authority of existence, . . . laughter revolts," writes Terrence Des Pres.[7] Among the most subversive engagements in Israeli prose with the reigning myth of *shoah ve-tekuma* (Holocaust and Rebirth) are Yoram Kaniuk's *Adam Resurrected* (1969) and David Grossman's *See Under: Love* (1986). Both novels feature elements of the comic and the carnivalesque, which, in the case of Grossman, become a counterhistorical fantasy of lives lived against the laws of nature and history. The role of the writer, which is not to relate but to interrogate the myths of the culture, can also become, in the comic mode, a license to repair the mistakes of history.

But even in its tragic or epic mode, the Hebrew novel has long interrogated the stories of origin and destination that the community constructed out of its more immediate past. There is a fascinating amalgamation in Hebrew prose between "representation" as the legacy of Western literature and "interpretation" as the legacy of talmudic discourse. In his foreword to the 1989 edition of *Zakhor*, Harold Bloom does not relate

6. See the archival material and interviews in the special DVD edition of *The Great Dictator*, Warner Bros. Entertainment, Roy Export Company Establishment, 2003.

7. Terrence Des Pres, "Holocaust *Laughter*?" in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. B. Lang (New York, 1988), 220.

explicitly to Yerushalmi's conflation of fiction with myth, but he does slide into a discussion of the fictive imagination and concludes that Jewish writers are primary interpreters of the world.[8] S. Y. Agnon, the laureate of modern Hebrew letters and father of every subsequent practitioner of Israeli fiction,[9] was also the chief architect of this synthesis of representation, interpretation, and interrogation. At times he does seem to be the repository of the reigning myths of the culture; one can locate in certain of his stories or novellas something close to the "master narrative" of the Zionist century. Perhaps the best example of this is *Bilvav yamim* (1934), a narrative of the ingathering of Jews and their texts, and their transport—by both natural and supernatural means—to the Land of Israel. But this tale of redemption can also be seen as the interpretive map against which other narratives, such as "Kisui ha-dam" (Covering the Blood) and *Tmol Shilshom* (Only Yesterday, 1945) construct their own dark journeys. "Kisui ha-dam," a story that was published posthumously (1975), is one of the most relentless reckonings with the myths of Jewish victimhood and Jewish innocence, of Israeli self-justification and redemptive desire, in all of Hebrew literature.[10]

At a time when the historians themselves were largely responsible for fashioning the "myths" by which the Israeli collective came to understand its recent and its ancient past—largely, as exemplified in Yudke's "sermon," by ignoring everything in between—writers of fiction like Agnon and his younger contemporaries S. Yizhar, A. B. Yehoshua, Shulamith Hareven, Yoram Kaniuk, and playwrights like Ḥanokh Levin were engaged in radical revelations of the hidden caverns and corpses beneath these myths. Imagine how it might have changed Yerushalmi's argument in *Zakhor* to have set beside his discussion of "The Sermon" a reading of Yizhar's "The Prisoner" or "Ḥirbet Ḥizʿah," two stories published just four years after Hazaz's story—when the smoke from the 1948 war had hardly cleared and the refugees from the death camps were still arriving. These narratives from the battlefront dramatized, in language that seared deep into the souls of war-weary, newly minted Israelis, the price of blind loyalty to the collective ethos. "The Prisoner" is cast in such an enigmatic

8. Foreword to *Zakhor*, xxiii–xxv.

9. For a recent assessment of Agnon's influence on younger writers such as Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua, see Nitza Ben-Dov, *Ve-hi tehilatekha* (New York, 2006).

10. For a detailed discussion of "Kisui ha-dam," see Ezrahi, "Agnon Before and After," *Prooftexts* 2.1 (1982): 78–94; on *Bilvav yamim*, see Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000), 81–102.

way as to pose an existential challenge to every subsequent reader; "Ḥirbet Ḥiz'ah" remains the open wound of the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Indeed, in the nearly sixty years since their appearance, these stories have never lost their sting, as reflected in their changing status in official cultural precincts. When they first appeared together in 1949, they generated much controversy but became instant best-sellers; in 1964, "Ḥirbet Ḥiz'ah" became part of the official school curriculum; shortly after Menahem Begin came to power, however, the scheduled screening of a televised film version of "Ḥirbet Ḥiz'ah" was heatedly debated in the Knesset and a number of screenings were scheduled and cancelled, until the film was finally aired over Israeli television in February, 1978. Yerushalmi need not have worried that the Hebrew writer was shirking some historical mandate which, one might say, was born with the state itself; in a lengthy and revealing essay on the public vicissitudes of "Ḥirbet Ḥiz'ah," the Israeli historian Anita Shapira confesses that historians remained silent during the controversies that periodically erupted around this story. The one issue that received bold treatment in the story is the expulsion of Arabs from their village in the context of the '48 war—yet the subsequent debates hardly mentioned that issue, which is what made Benny Morris's "revelations" in the late 1980s so shocking. "In this sense," Shapira admits candidly, "imaginative literature had one up on professional historians."[11] Yizhar actually exemplifies a new mimetic code that engages vigorously in mapping the surfaces of the old/new land with as much self-scrutiny as love and loyalty. In an essay he published during the storm that erupted in the late 1970s, Yizhar explained the paradoxical power of his craft. "'Fiction is not a mirror of reality, not a document about some real life events,'" he wrote in "Be-terem aḥrish" (Before I Fall Silent). And yet "everything I wrote about in a story that's recently been the subject of much negative discussion, a work more unread than read, is, sad to say, reality, black on white, true to life."[12]

The changing public fortunes of "The Prisoner" and "Ḥirbet Ḥiz'ah" reveal not only the perennial impact of Yizhar's genius and courage but the power of the fictive imagination to shake up the pieties of any society that remains long in the grips of hermetic myths of creation or destiny. Nonetheless, as the years turn into decades and the basic terms of Israel's identity and shape remain unresolved, as one takes out the dog-eared stories of Yizhar and dusts them off for the next crisis of conscience in

11. Anita Shapira, "'Hirbet Hizah': Between Remembrance and Forgetting," *Jewish Social Studies* 7.1 (2000): 47.

12. Quoted in ibid., 10.

yet one more battle, one can also detect a kind of fatigue in the best of our writers, and a desire to turn away from the public or collective realm to find some solace in the private. That move, surely, was established long ago as the novelist's terrain, redefined in every era, as the nineteenth-century social and then psychological novels of Eliot, Stendhal, Flaubert, and Tolstoy yielded to another sort of interiority in the modernist novels of Proust or Joyce. But in Israel, when our most engaged writers dare to enter the recesses of the private soul, granting their characters temporary immunity from the determining force of state politics and collective destiny, readers rebel. David Grossman may be the best example of this. Having written such novels as *See Under: Love* and *The Smile of the Lamb* (1983), which expose their characters relentlessly to Israeli or Jewish fate—as well as nonfiction that insisted on taking the Jewish conscience to places it would prefer not to go—Grossman in his most recent fiction has seemed to go underground, providing a kind of shelter for his characters—many of them children or adolescents—from an overdetermined life. For many of his loyal readers, this move has felt like a kind of betrayal; the battles for a just society, freed from the grip of fear and self-congratulation that the "master narratives" or myths have fostered, are surely far from over. Yet I see Grossman's turn inward not as the problem but as a vision of the solution. His fictions of young people navigating through the dangerous recesses of their own souls (*The Zigzag Kid, The Book of Intimate Grammar, Someone to Run With*, etc.) are telling us that we will know what to do with peace when (if!) it comes. The danger to our life and to our fiction, as I see it, is not that the writer will "escape" into the private realm but that s/he will relinquish that realm altogether out of weariness and despair. Milan Kundera defines the question that drives Kafka's work: "What possibilities remain for man in a world where the external determinants have become so overpowering that internal impulses no longer carry weight?" In this situation, as Kundera himself wrote in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the novel becomes "'an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become.'"[13] We may not be there yet—but the signs are everywhere; a country in a prolonged state of unresolved conflict and occupation endangers its imagination as much as it endangers everything else in civil society.

Yerushalmi understood that the novel may indeed be the place to watch for signs of Israel's encounter with its present in light of its past. But it is

13. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. L. Asher (New York, 1986), 26.

more of a stronghold for (lowercase) "truth" than Yerushalmi was willing to concede. Fiction challenges the very dualistic scheme that divides the world of human—and specifically Jewish—imagination into "history" and "memory." The novel—and for that matter, the literary imagination in general—open up all binaries to the messiness and the ironies of "life."