

# Introduction

*War insinuates itself in every pore.*

—Maya Bejerano, “States of War”

*... the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectivity itself.*

—Fredric Jameson<sup>1</sup>

*There goes Shmaryahu again to bring the Jews of the world to Israel, and here comes Shmaryahu again, still without the Jews of the world. Ada can no longer bear the awfulness of hope.*

—Shulamith Hareven, “Two Hours on the Road”

The idea of producing a new collection of fiction and poetry in translation that would articulate the end-of-the-century literary sensibility of Israeli women writers was kindled in my conversations with writers during the tumultuous month of July 1992. Thanks to both the Jerusalem Foundation and my own University, I was spending that summer as a visiting scholar in the evocative setting of Jerusalem’s *Mishkenot*

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1. In “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” quoted by Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation,” *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 292.

*Sha'ananim*—the “Tranquil Dwellings” near the old windmill of Yemin Moshe, in what before the Six Day War of 1967 had been an impoverished neighborhood of nineteenth-century stone houses on the edge of the Jordanian border. As we talked of the active engagement today of Israeli women writers with the profoundly changed Israeli cultural scene, outside my room, in the distance, was the parched Judean wilderness veiled by its perennial haze; the room itself faced Mount Zion, traditionally the site at once of King David’s tomb, the hall of the Last Supper, and the spot in which *Dormition Sanctae Mariae*: the Virgin Mary fell into eternal sleep.

But for a host of reasons this backgrounding of our conversation by the aura of hushed eternity at *Mishkenot Sha'ananim* was anomalous amidst the rest of Israel. For one, the country was bursting with noisy creative exuberance from the Galilee to the Negev. Two hundred thousand people flocked to the small town of Karmiel, near Haifa, for a Dance Festival. Another one hundred thousand—among them Lubavicher Hasidim driving “Mitzvah Tanks,” teenage soldiers with Uzis, and Ethiopian Jews who set up booths to braid hair into corn-rows—were attending the Music Festival in the southern desert town of Arad. Thousands more from all over the world were participating in the international film festival in Jerusalem. The festivals, too, though, seemed anomalous, for that same month had witnessed a major political upheaval. The Likud government of Yitzhak Shamir had been overthrown and, in what seemed then to herald a significant reversal in Israeli politics, Labor had returned to power. In an odd concatenation of contexts, in his opening speech to the *Knesset*, the Parliament, on July 13, newly elected Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (z”l) signalled a radical shift in Israel’s official self-apprehension and stance toward the world by drawing on the biblically resonant words of the pre-State poet Rachel. “*A concerted, stubborn, and eternal effort of a thousand hands: Will it succeed in rolling the stone off the mouth of the well?*” The answer is within us,” said Rabin, “the answer is us, ourselves”:

No longer are we “a people who dwells alone,” and no longer it is true that “the whole world is against us.” We must overcome the sense of isolation that has held us in its thrall for almost half a century.

And even as the country was sorely split between those who celebrated, and those who bitterly bewailed, Labor’s victory, just over the

“Green Line” the fifty-sixth month of the Palestinian uprising, the *Intifada*, was raging. That July, in Gaza, Bethlehem, Hebron, and in villages and refugee camps throughout the West Bank, there were molotov cocktails, tear gas and rubber bullets, full curfews and partial curfews, closures, arrests, barrages of stones, injuries, raids, deaths. By the fifty-sixth month of the *Intifada*, more than one thousand Palestinians had already been killed.

“*Oh the miraculous holy land/ Oh the land of hardship, of gallows,*” writes the poet Maya Bejerano in her “Hymns of Job.” For the kind of wrenching and conflictual disparities so inescapably vivid that summer were no aberrations for Israel. From its earliest days to the moment of this very writing today, the country has been a bevy of contradictions, controversies, paradoxes. Disjunctions and disparities have flowed through the nation’s arteries; they seem to exist in its very heart. A former military hero tries to inspire a revisioning of his country’s self-perception by drawing on words of a woman poet who for decades had been depicted by (mostly male) critics as producing only “personal lyrics”—and is assassinated moments after publicly singing, for the first time in his life, a song celebrating peace. “Operation Solomon” heroically rescues thousands of Ethiopian Jews from starvation, suffering, and discrimination, only to have hundreds discover, upon their arrival in Israel, that hegemonic religious authorities are unwilling to consider them “Jews.” Jerusalem *shel l’matah*, Jerusalem of the earth, is simultaneously the site of a serene transtemporal spirituality, bitter intra- and inter-religious squabbles, displaced neighborhoods, and violently contested heaps of stones: a capital city self-enclosed in its own volatile subcultures remote from the tenors of Haifa, Tel Aviv, or Beersheva, and all four from those of the villages in the Galilee, the scattered agricultural settlements, or the dusty forlorn towns of the Negev.

One of the most multilingual and culturally heterogeneous countries in the world, Israel, in the words of one observer, defies all “standard categorizations.” It is at once “First World” in its dominant ideologies and economic ranking and “Third World” in the preponderance of its peoples’ ethnicities; it partakes at one and the same time of the “East” and the “West.”<sup>2</sup> A Mediterranean country the size of Rhode

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2. See the cogent analysis of Ella Shohat, “Antinomies of Exile: Said at the Frontier of National Narrations,” in Michael Sprinker, ed. *Edward Said: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 124–125.

Island, with a population smaller than that of Los Angeles County, that repeatedly garners world headlines; a vividly robust country of artistic sophistication, technological brilliance, and military might; of serious poverty and great wealth; spiritual questing, fierce secularism, alongside religious and political fanaticisms; brutality; ethnic, religious, and racial discrimination; suicide bombs; despair, closures, arrests. And alongside its immense vitality, deaths, constantly—in too many and too frequent traffic accidents, in “exchanges” on the Lebanese border, in bus explosions, and in suicide bombings in the open air market and shopping promenade in downtown Jerusalem, in a major mall and popular cafe in Tel Aviv. *War insinuates itself in every pore*, wrote Maya Bejerano, as Israelis huddled behind gas masks and, unimpeded by “secure borders,” Iraqi missiles exploded on the city streets. In Israel, even the century one lives in is slippery: though for most of its population that summer was “July 1992” on the calendar, for thousands of the country’s devout inhabitants it was existentially and actually either the Hebrew month of Tammuz in the year 5752, or the Muslim Moharram, 1413.

For some time now, postmodern theorists have taught us to be wary of structuring differences in terms of binary oppositions, and to become aware both of what such constructions mask as well as what they reveal. They have shown us that to construct a binary is to occlude the complex diversities, the multifoliate meanings, the heterogeneities within each term. As critics have come to see, binaries veil distinctions even as they claim to be identifying them and create discursive oppositions where instead there are striking if uneasy and unacknowledged similarities. In this sense, Israel is a quintessentially appropriate cultural landscape for a postmodernist to unravel, for it is so profoundly and pervasively a site where imagined binaries implode and conflictual diversities are the order—and disorder—of the day. Such diversities have always been the pulsebeat of Israel, but whereas once they were muffled, today they are inescapable.

To grasp the change between the Israel that once was and the Israel that is today, dissolve, for a moment, to a scene in Talbieh, Jerusalem, where I was living in the 1970s. Growing restless watching the 8:00 news on my black-and-white TV, I stepped out onto my living room balcony and looked across the street at the balconies of my neighbors. Everyone beneath their vine and fig tree: seen through the open shutters of *their* living rooms, all my neighbors (Ashkenazim, Sephardim, ex-Palmach heroes, Holocaust survivors, “secularists,” or “religious”) were glued to the same news program on the sole and state-sponsored channel of their identically placed TVs.

How considerably less uniform and more untidy the media landscape is today. A hotly debated commercial Channel Two was established in the 1990s, and Israeli homes opened to cable and the international STAR TV. On its own, of course, this new flood of programming from Turkey, Morocco, Russia, and western Europe—the soap operas from Spain, films from Egypt, Jerry Seinfeld, and CNN—did not erode the imagined cohesion of Israeli culture, nor was that culture ever really cohesive. But the medium is the message. So long as only a single state-sponsored if officially “independent” channel was all that was available on Israeli television (unless one was among the fortunate few whose receiver occasionally picked up Amman), night after night the illusion was quietly reinforced that Israelis were a people sealed off from the rest of the world: a people, as some ideologues insisted, stubbornly and dourly fated to “dwell alone.” Watching the same lone broadcasts at the same moment, the television viewers of the country could suspend their workaday awareness of the quarrelsome diversity of their own social, cultural, religious, and political affiliations and imagine themselves instead a homogeneous society, a virtually real “us.” With the news delivered nightly by a suited-and-tied Ashkenazi male with an air of authority and no *kippah*—a signal that he was not a religiously observant Jew—the television audience was beckoned to identify with a national vision that was likewise male-centered, secular, Ashkenazi, and clothed, like the newscaster himself, in the costume of the “West.” That vision also served as the gauge for identifying the errancy of any dissenting eye, occluding any differently constituted collective, whether Levantine, female, religious, or Arab.

The once-dominant and media-reinforced “virtually real” experience of unity had significant implications for the reception of writers and works who did not share it. Thus, for example, as Ammiel Alcalay has brilliantly demonstrated, in the process of Israeli cultural formation, the experience and narratives of Sephardic, Levantine, Arab, and Persian Jews, as well as that of Christian or Muslim Arab-Israelis, were eliminated from consideration as participant voices in the “collective.”<sup>3</sup> And so, in general, were women’s. In a series of articles published in the Hebrew literary journal *Moznayim* in 1989, for example, writer Amalia Kahana-Carmon addressed the refusal to hear the voices of women within the

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3. Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). See especially chapter four, pp. 220–284.

“collective” on the Israeli literary scene, suggesting that that refusal was a legacy of Jewish religious tradition. Jewish prayer stresses the welfare and destiny of *ahm yisrael*, the nation and people of Israel, rather than the singular “I”; but in Orthodox synagogues, men alone are seated in the central arena and bidden to pray aloud as the voice of the people. Consigned to a separate gallery, women pray only *sotto voce*. In such synagogues, then, says Kahana-Carmon:

Someone else, acting in the name of all Israel, speaks also on [women’s] behalf. And so, anything that is likely to happen to the woman seated in the women’s gallery will be defined ahead of time as peripheral, a hindrance, and a deviant incident. Likewise, it will not be a regular part of the shared course of events; it will be subordinate to the main events conducted in the central arena. . . .

Though modern Hebrew literature has been primarily secular, it has become for both the writer and the reading public a similarly constructed “national synagogue of the mind”:

In fact, for [secularists] there may be no other synagogue today. [No matter who the protagonist is in a literary work by an Israeli male, his] story will be an expression of the collective situation, of the average Israeli in light of past tradition, and so of general interest. As for the female, if she does not act the role of his partner but is a character in her own right, her tale will always be the “true life story” of a woman and her destiny, and the attitude of readers will be: come let us see if she knows how to write a story. . . .<sup>4</sup>

This exclusion of women’s experience from notions of the “collective” was also noted in a different vein at the end of the 1980s by scholar Esther Fuchs. Mapping the evolution of Israeli literary criticism, Fuchs pointed out that only in the previous decade, and possibly as a result of the debacle of the Yom Kippur War (1973), did critics’ “fastidious insis-

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4. Published in English as “The Song of the Bats in Flight,” in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, eds. Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner, and Anita Norich (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), pp. 237–240.

tence on separating politics from poetics” begin to give way to a “new recognition of the inseparability of life and art.” Even so, their perspective remained entirely male-centered:

“Experience” in the new theories means male experience, “politics” refers to the procedures of male ruled governments and male dominated parties. A quick glance at recent theories about contemporary Israeli fiction reveals that most of them tend to marginalize or altogether ignore female experience and female writing.<sup>5</sup>

But just as black-and-white images and a single channel have given way to full-living-color and the choice of programming from all over the world, so in today’s Israel the illusion has dissolved that only one kind of voice—secular, Ashkenazi, male (and middle-class)—can render into words the pulsebeat of the nation. In that sense, Rabin’s 1992 call to the nation to overcome the “sense of isolation that has held us in thrall,” was actually a translation into political terms of what was already happening both technologically and culturally, as images from all over the world were being telecast daily into my once-neighbors’ homes. With a population freely switching channels among a multiplicity of electronically transmitted alternative narratives, the past illusion of a collectively unifiable

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5. In *Israeli Mythologies: Women in Contemporary Hebrew Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 3. Fuchs’s book is a cogent analysis of the masculinist biases of both Israeli fiction and the criticism of modern Hebrew literature. See also Yael Feldman, “Gender/Indifference in Contemporary Hebrew Fictional Autobiography,” *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 11, 3:189–209.

As Michael Gluzman has amply demonstrated, as late as 1990 the marginalization by many critics of women’s poetry in Israel, and their relegation to “silence and invisibility,” were reflected in critical descriptions of the development of Hebrew poetic modernism, which fail to consider the contributions of the early poets Rachel, Esther Raab, Yocheved Bat Miriam, and Leah Goldberg. See Michael Gluzman, “The Exclusion of Women from Hebrew Literary History,” *Prooftexts* 11 (1991): 259–278.

The marginalization of women poets as *women* poets could become almost parodic. After the death of Yona Volach, one of Israel’s more avant garde poets David Avidan opposed the assessments of Volach as one of the greatest Hebrew poets of the century, arguing that as a *woman* poet she was on a separate “woman’s track” on which there was little competition because of the dearth of women’s poetry. For a discussion of her response to Avidan and his subsequent reaction, see Fuchs, pp. 7–8. Having lived in poverty for many years, Avidan himself died in desperate circumstances in 1994, provoking national discussion about government support for writers.

sensibility has faded, and the often cacophonous differences of ideology, ethnicity, gender, religious stance, and class, exposed. That exposure has intensified the destabilizing rumpus that is Israeli politics. But it has also meant an exciting new polyphony in Israeli literature, inspiring a more insistent challenging of what Alcalay has called “the covenant of consensus represented by officialdom’s sanctioned versions of the past” (p. 231). If, as Hebrew University sociologist Erik Cohen has argued, the Six Day War of 1967, in which all of Western Mandatory Palestine came under Israeli control, paradoxically initiated the conditions “for an existential and ideological crisis in Israeli society,”<sup>6</sup> in the twenty-first century, Israel has tumbled head-first into a postmodern and post-Zionist age.

As an anthologist of Israeli women’s literature born and raised in America, centered in both Israeli and Jewish American culture and women’s literature for the last two decades, who also—thanks to long residence in Israel—holds the passports of both countries and journeys often between them, I feel like a nomad. To prepare this anthology has meant becoming a “Hebrew” in its originary meaning of *ivriya*, a boundary crosser, laying out the wares I’ve carried from one of my worlds before another, aware of the myriad ways those wares can be ordered in their new American context—and at the same time of how their valence has altered now that they are rent from their Israeli cultural matrix and their own discursive world. More than their valence: for the wares, of course, are words. Shaped into stories and poems, those words have undergone what translation theorists Jose Lambert and Clem Robyns have called a “migration-through-transformation,” for literary translation involves a recontextualization to suit a different linguistic and cultural code.<sup>7</sup> But the reverse, a “transformation through migration,” has also occurred, for translated, edited, organized, and published in an American anthology, the works are cast in a new light and themselves seem to change. That is partly because written at different times and by different authors, the stories and poems that comprise the body of *Dreaming the Actual* (like any anthology of literature) are now relocated in apposition with one another, situated where they never intended to be. They are like a group of expatriates from the cities, towns, and villages of one

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6. “Israel as a Post-Zionist Society,” in *The Shaping of Israeli Identity: Myth, Memory, and Trauma*, eds. Robert Wistrich and David Ohana (London: Frank Cass, 1995), pp. 203, 208.

7. See Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 186.



country, belonging to different social classes and ethnic groups, who now discover themselves dwelling together in the same neighborhood in a foreign land. As diverse as they seemed to be back in their homeland, they realize now that compared to the locals, they have more in common with one another than they would ever have imagined if they had never left home.

An expatriate community does not “represent” its members’ native land—nor should *Dreaming the Actual* be seen as “representing” contemporary Israeli women’s literature. Rather, by its very nature, the anthology constitutes that literature differently, offers it anew. It seeks to offer short stories and poems that in their original are both beautifully written and revelatory: significant in themselves and in the role each plays in each author’s work, as well as in the compelling, illuminating, thought-provoking, and even disorienting vision that they can convey to English-language readers. For my intention in compiling this collection has been more than to expose English-language readers to recent literature by Israeli women writers. As an inveterate boundary crosser myself, what has interested me is the kindling of an intricately nuanced conversation between the two cultures in both of which, in such different ways, I, too, belong. Ideally, that conversation will inspire readers in the States to reflect back upon American culture even as they more deeply apprehend Israeli. For at their best, translations of powerful literary works can stretch the boundaries of one’s own cultural and aesthetic assumptions, one’s own linguistic associations, in the process of pondering the seemingly strange, even occasionally awkward, twists and turns the works-in-translation have required of one’s language. To read a literary translation can mean awakening to the richness of English and the possibilities of one’s own life in a new way.

In any anthology, the order in which the literary works are offered is also as vital a player as the works themselves. *How* literary works are set in the new neighborhood of an anthology colors both the way they are seen as well as, potentially, the perspectives of the seers. For example, literary anthologies often arrange the works they include in the order in which those works were originally published, in the order in which the writers were born, or perhaps in alphabetical order, according to author; quainter anthologies rather tendentiously order them according to “theme.” Though we often assume that such chronological or alphabetical arrangements are simply “objective,” ideologically neutral, in reality they are not so at all. Structuring the ways in which we view, “place,” and comprehend individual works and discern their web of connectedness with one another, such arrangements have hermeneutic implications; that is,

they influence how we interpret what we have read. In certain ways, too, a chronological arrangement according to the authors' dates of birth or the works' date of publication alone ducks the problem of interpretation. For such an arrangement can serve as a kind of refuge. Erecting a framework exterior to and independent of the content of the works, a chronological arrangement creates and shelters an often unadmitted narrative of its own. It is as if there were an absentee landlord other than the anthologist who, having predetermined where all the residents should live, moved away, taking no responsibility for the relationships that ensue.

Still, there is a kind of chronological order unfolding in *Dreaming the Actual*. For though most of the literary works here were written in the 1990s, many of them reach beyond their era. Their settings range from ancient times to the present moment, engaging the conflicts of contemporary life even as they wrestle with the burdens of history. The difference is that, just as the opening story, Nurit Zarchi's "And She Is Joseph," responds to traditional midrashic commentaries by spotlighting issues of gender and imagining the biblical Joseph as a woman, so in *Dreaming the Actual* as a whole the literary imagination of women writers is gathered together in the "central arena" instead of occupying the peripheral "gallery." As the stories and poems travel the spectrum of twentieth-century history, they inscribe and portray the many perspectives of women: poor, working-class, affluent; religiously observant and thoroughly secular; living in sophisticated city centers, crowded slums, small towns, or rural villages. The voices heard in this book are those of schoolgirls, young women on the verge of puberty, adolescents, twenty- or thirty-somethings, the middle-aged, and old. And their countries of origin, reflecting those of the writers themselves, cross the too often embedded and volatile Ashkenazi-Sephardic divide, ranging from North Africa, Poland, Hungary, Russia, Germany, English-speaking countries, and the Levant, to Palestine/Israel itself.

Because the stories have been organized to the extent possible in the *chronological order of the era in which they are set*, to read through the first section of book is like embarking on a journey through Israeli history, from the Bible to pre-State Palestine, the days of the British Mandate, the early years of the State, the post-Six-Day-War and then much more troubled post-Yom-Kippur-War period, to the still more radically different contemporary moment. With the poetry following as a kind of polyphonic accompaniment, it is a journey that lingers in corners and on paths often overlooked by the more generally familiar Israeli story. For, gathered together, juxtaposed with one another, and seen in one another's

light, the literary works of Israeli women writers vividly articulate “the Other Side of the Story,”<sup>8</sup> a multivoiced “alternarrative” to the once male-dominated Israeli narrative. *There are as many faiths as there are people*, says poet Maya Bejerano. Richly varied in tone, content, and style, the alternarrative by women writers voices both a highly charged and newly constituted collective story.

Like the literature by women of many countries, the works here portray the travails of young women’s coming-of-age, the unease of sexuality, the complexities of consciousness, the webs of connectedness between people, spiritual conflict, the deprivations of poverty, the anxieties of memory, the pain of loss, the enmeshments of family, the intimacies of marriage, as well as creative triumph, and, ultimately, the power and challenges of writing itself. One source of the uniqueness of the alternarrative of Israeli women writers lies in the specific ways these portrayals are wrought. But another source of uniqueness lies in the manner in which the writers probe the singular reality of Israel itself, the “story behind the story” of Israeli ideologies, Jewish religious beliefs, public political dramas, and collective traumas. Over and over again, sometimes overtly, sometimes more subtly, the writers explore the resonance for women’s and men’s lives of the country’s profoundly rooted self-image as the Jewish homeland. At the heart of many of the works, too, is a troubled exploration of the aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual consequences of living generation after generation, and year after year, within the shadows cast by war. And, finally, whether or not they are religiously observant in their personal lives, living in a *Jewish* state and writing in a multilayered, allusive, Hebrew, many of the writers draw upon the deep well of the traditions, theologies, and ancient texts of Judaism to enrich their work.

That so many of the stories and poems are entwined in the drama of Israel as “homeland” should come as no surprise. Since its formal establishment in the late nineteenth century, one of the most passionate obsessions and values of the Zionist movement, and therefore, subsequently, of the State, has been putting an end to the ancient exile of the

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8. I am indebted here to the insights of Molly Hite in *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). My departure from Hite’s work lies in the importance I see in acknowledging that while Israeli women writers are presenting the “Other’s” side of the collective story, there is no unanimity in the versions of “the story” that they tell. There is no *single* “Other side.” Rather, the *diversity* of these “Othered” voices is one of its most salient features.

Jewish people in the global diaspora and launching their ingathering and return to their destined “home.” More so perhaps than any other country, Israel since 1948 therefore has been and is a nation of immigrants. The very language embeds the value of immigration: a Jew immigrating to Israel makes “an ascent” (*aliyah*); one who leaves the country was (at least until the less passionately Zionist present) pejoratively called a “descender” (*yored, yoredet*).

But the women writers trouble these traditional notions of the Zionist cause. In their narrative reconstructions of the lives of women, the writers force us to grapple with the gendered differences experienced both in “exile” and “at home.” From Israeli-born Nurit Zarchi’s story “Madame Bovary in Neve Tsedek,” based on the life of the pre-State writer Devora Baron, to the stories set in contemporary Israel by recent Russian immigrants Dina Rubin and Elena Makarova, the narrative gaze focuses on the wrenching emotional, cultural, social, and aesthetic displacements that the “return” to the “homeland” has also meant. Similarly, but from a different perspective, Shulamith Hareven’s “Two Hours on the Road” suggests that the national obsession with immigration has been lived very differently by Israeli men and women. While the husband of the story has long been a Zionist emissary charged with bringing “the Jews of the world to Israel,” only to return home, trip after trip, “still without the Jews of the world,” the wife has been leading her own life at home and has grown more accustomed to his absence than his presence. Indeed, the story hints of the fruitlessness of imagining that the Jews of the world will *ever* come to Israel. In the process, it provokes the disturbing question whether the most significant consequence of maintaining that fantasy isn’t in its providing a rationalization for the failures in intimacy for public men.

The power of retelling Israel’s story through the perspective of women is also evident in the many ways in which the writers portray living with war: World War II and the still palpable emotional devastation of the *Shoah*, the 1948 Independence War, the 1956 Sinai War, the Six Day War of 1967, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the Lebanon War, the *Intifada*. “Most of my childhood was spent in the shadow of war,” says writer Esther Ettinger, in words that echo the experience of thousands of others. “My parents named me ‘Esther’ after my late grandmother, not knowing if anyone else in my family was alive or dead.” The legacy of the *Shoah* lurks in many of these works, haunting one generation after another. In Nava Semel’s “Hunger,” for example, that legacy is passed from an aged mother to her adult daughter through the obsessive stockpiling of food. In Leah Aini’s poem “Shower,” even the simple act of

combing one's hair conjures up images of a grandmother whom the Nazis gassed to death. In Aini's story "Rest," the ghosts of the *Shoah* pierce the air as a woman survivor screams in the night. In Esther Ettinger's poetry, they appear between the lines of old manuscripts. In Yehudit Katzir's powerfully evocative "Schlafstunde," images of Anne Frank and her attic, and of Adolf Hitler, flow through a young woman's remembrance of the erotically charged games she played as a girl, almost three decades after the end of World War II.

In the poems and stories of Israel's women writers, the anguish of the country's recent wars also enacts itself: not on battlefields, but deep in the psyche. That anguish beats like a ceaseless drum in "Apples in Honey," which takes place in a dream-like military cemetery where year after year a widow returns to mourn the loss of her eternally young husband. It is felt on city streets, as a lone woman obsesses over buying a walkie-talkie. It is in a son's bedroom, empty because he will never come home; in an apartment where a mother tapes the windows in case of bombings; in a woman photographer's secret crossing of a forbidden border to face the death of her country's "enemy," a woman who was the photographer's friend. As the writers reveal, war is not an "event" that has closure; it is lodged in the soul and in the abyss of the psyche. It seeps into the most intimate moments of sexuality. It permanently scars the heart.

Finally, for those who write in Hebrew, the language has to be purposively "thin" *not* to at all resonate with Judaic history; echoes from the Bible, the Talmud, the Midrash, and the liturgy thus also suffuse many of these works. But in the alter/narrative of *Dreaming the Actual*, allusions to traditional religious texts metamorphosize into a language that "*women who live in this land know but men born here do not speak*," in the words of poet Chava Pinchas-Cohen. Judaism comes alive in these texts in profoundly female ways: through the awakening of spiritual vision between mother and daughter; through women's celebration of the Sabbath; in the act of giving birth. Drawing on the book of Job, Maya Bejerano envisions harsh angels as a harassed mother awakens and feeds her children in super charged Tel Aviv. The experience of the covenant at Sinai is seen through the eyes of a woman hanging out the family laundry. Spiritual vision arises as a young woman witnesses an aged one feeling desperately useless, and as poets and authors describe mourning the dead or facing the violence of the *Intifada*.

In radically diverse ways as well, the writers fasten on the relationship of Judaism to female sexuality. The late iconoclastic and often gender-bending poet Yona Volach erotically challenges the presumed remote, masculine, power of the Jewish God. In "Tefillin," for example, Volach

conflates the (traditionally exclusively male) ritual of “binding oneself” tightly to God through the wearing of black leather phylacteries with a violent, sadistic\masochistic sexuality. In Ruth Almog’s complexly textured “Invisible Mending,” the artistic consciousness of a young girl on the verge of puberty is forced to angrily engrave the words of the prophet Jeremiah even as she wrestles with her own father’s death. Mira Magen’s “Gerbera Daisies at Half Price,” a far different story, compares the paradoxical differences in the ways women experience their body in the sophisticated urban secular world, on the one hand, and the more crowded, more claustrophobic, religiously Orthodox one, on the other. If Jewish tradition is central to many of these stories and inscribed in the very language of the poetry, it is a Judaism infused with engendered experience, with the spiritual, emotional, and sexual sensibilities of women.

Clearly, as their stories and poems draw on and portray Jewish tradition and their country’s past, Israeli women writers are writing women’s experience in, revising and revisioning the national understanding of the *collective* story. Yet while many commentators on the Israeli scene readily concede that the old “covenant of consensus” has been lost, they often also fail to see that these newer works have generated new interpretations of shared national experience, a different sense of “nation.” Instead, the new abundance of women writers has been interpreted as evidence of the culture’s “openness” to the “personal,” as if, despite the subject matter of their work, women writers still cannot be considered contributing voices in what Kahana-Carmon called “the national synagogue of the mind.” But just as the pre-State poet Rachel, so long regarded as writing only personal lyrics, was recognized by the late Prime Minister Rabin as eloquently articulating an urgent national imperative, so the voices of Israel’s women writers should be heard today as both dismantling the illusory opposition between “personal” and “collective” entirely and, crucially, speaking to the fallacy of the opposition to begin with. The more the alter/narrative of this collection unfolds, the more evident it becomes that in contemporary Israel any notion of a “secure border” between individual selves and society is a chimera. The stories and poems reveal that all aspects of collective life—whether historical, social, cultural, political, or religious—permeate even the most intimate, most minute, corners of the private self: one’s sexuality, memories, capacity to love, one’s dreams. In American culture, where the value of the “personal” has so long taken precedence over acknowledgment of the intimate impact of the collective, what Israel’s women writers most eloquently and insistently ask us to do as readers is to reconsider how we all perceive the contours and contents of our own lives.

# Part I

## Short Stories





## Introduction to Nurit Zarchi's "And She Is Joseph"

A poet and much-heralded author of more than forty children's books for which she has won Israel's most prestigious awards, Nurit Zarchi published *The Mask Maker*, her first collection of stories for adults, in 1993. Many of the stories in the collection involve disguises, metamorphoses, and changing sexual identities and draw on a rich well of spiritual, religious, mythological, and narrative lore. "And She Is Joseph," centered on the evocative character of the biblical Joseph, is among them.

According to ancient commentators and spinners of midrash, Joseph, son of Jacob and his beloved wife Rachel, was a "paragon of beauty" who "dressed his hair" and "touched up his eyes so that he would appear good-looking."<sup>9</sup> "Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than all his children because he was the son of his old age," says the Bible, "and he made him a coat of many colors" (Gen. 37:3). Joseph is a dreamer, hated by his brothers not only for their father's favoritism toward him but also for telling them his dreams—among them that "the sun and moon and the eleven stars made obeisance" to him (Gen. 37:9). Seizing an opportunity,

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9. See, for example, the commentary of the medieval Rashi [Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac], 1040–1105, in *Chumash with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary*, ed. Rabbi A.M. Silbermann. Trans. Rabbi A. M. Silbermann and Rev. M. Rosenbaum. Vol. I. Bereshith [Genesis] (Jerusalem: Silbermann Family, 1934), p. 180.

they cast him into a pit and sell him for “twenty pieces of silver” to passing Ishmaelites who in turn take him to Egypt and sell him to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh. Joseph refuses the advances of Potiphar’s wife and is consequently betrayed by her and cast into prison. Only his gift for dream interpretation saves him; his former cell-mate, the chief butler, remembers the young Hebrew when Pharaoh finds himself now troubled by indecipherable dreams. Only years later and after much suffering are Joseph and his brothers reconciled. For the moving scene to which Zarchi alludes at the end of her story, in which Joseph cries out, “Cause every man to go out from me,” see Genesis 45:1. For a fuller sense of the sources from which Zarchi weaves her own gender-bending midrash, readers might want to consult all of Genesis 37 and 39–48.

“Most people associate fantasy with things that are impossible: people who fly, seas that talk, trees that walk,” Zarchi has written. But in literature, she goes on, the use of fantasy is a way of conveying an otherwise elusive reality: fantasy, writes Zarchi, “tries to achieve in prose what metaphor does in poetry.”<sup>10</sup>

Nurit Zarchi was born in Jerusalem in 1941 and grew up on Kibbutz Geva. She lives in Tel Aviv.

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10. In “Three Impossible Things Before Breakfast,” *Modern Hebrew Literature* 16 (Spring/Summer 1996): pp. 7–9.