

## YEHUDA AMICHAI (1924–2000)

Yehuda Amichai was born into an orthodox family in Würzburg, Germany, and arrived in Israel in 1936. He studied at Hebrew University and later taught at various schools and colleges, including the Greenberg Institute, the University of California at Berkeley, and New York University. He published fifteen volumes of poetry, two novels, short stories and plays, and his work has been translated into thirty-three languages. His many awards include the Shlonsky Award, the Brenner Award, the Bialik Award, the Würzburg's Award for Culture, the Israel Award, the Agnon Award, the French Malraux Award, the Literary Lion Award, Macedonia's Golden Wreath Award, the Norwegian Bjornson Poetry Award, and an Honor Citation from Assiut University, Egypt. The poems appearing here are from his 1998 collection *Open Shut Open*.

I Was Not One of the Six Million.  
And What Is the Span of My Life?  
Open Shut Open

1.

I was not one of the six million  
who died in the Holocaust, not even  
one of those who survived, and I was not one  
of the six hundred thousand who came out of Egypt,  
I, for one, reached the Promised Land from the sea.

I was not among all those others but the smoke and fire  
did linger in me, and columns of fire and columns of smoke<sup>1</sup>  
still show me the way night and day, and the frantic search  
for emergency exits and soft spots still lingers as well.  
After the stripped earth, to flee into weakness  
and into hope, and there lingered in me the lust to search  
for spring water, to speak softly to the rock and to smite it.<sup>2</sup>  
Later a silence of no questions, no answers.  
Like millstones Jewish history and world history  
grind me between them, at times down to dust,  
and a solar year and a lunar year precede  
one another or follow one another and leap  
and provide constant motion to my life  
and I at times fall in the gap between them  
to hide in or to sink.

2.

I was not in the places where I was not  
and will not be. I have no part in the infinite  
of light years and dark years but the darkness is mine  
and the light is mine and my time is mine.  
The sand on the shore, the infinite grains,  
is the sand upon which I loved in Achziv and in Caesarea.  
The years of my life I broke down into hours  
and the hours into minutes and into seconds  
and milliseconds. They are the stars above  
that cannot be numbered.

3.

And what is the span of my life. I am like one  
who has come out of Egypt and the Red Sea parted and I walked  
on dry land, on my left and on my right two walls of water,  
behind me Pharaoh and his army and horsemen,

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1. Alludes to Exodus 13, verse 21. The biblical Hebrew "amud" is traditionally translated as "pillar," but here, in the context of the Holocaust, I chose "column," alluding to the columns of human beings, reduced to numbers, and who were the fodder of the smoke and fire.

2. Alludes to Moses striking the rock for water (Ex. 17, 6).

before me the desert, perhaps the Promised Land.  
This is the span of my life.

4.  
Open shut open. Before a man is born  
all in the universe is open without him.  
While he lives, all is shut within him.  
And when he dies, all is open again.  
Open shut open. This is what man is.

5.  
And what is the span of my life, as in a self-portrait,  
I set the camera at a distance on solid ground  
(the only solid place on earth),  
decide on a spot where to stand, near a tree,  
and run back to the camera and press the button  
and run back to my place near the tree,  
listen to the ticking of time, its hum like a distant prayer,  
and the popping sound, like an execution.  
This is the span of my life. God develops the picture  
in His great darkroom. Here's the picture:  
white hair on my head, the eyes heavy and weary,  
and the brows above my eyes black, like sooty  
window-frames of a burned-down house.  
The years of my life have passed.

6.  
My life is the gardener of my body. The brain  
a well-secured hothouse, replete with flowers and strange  
exotic plants of great sensitivity and extinction fears.  
The face a French garden laid out in exact planes  
with marble-tiled squares and statues and places to rest,  
and places to touch and sniff and gaze, to get lost  
in a green maze and paths, not to trample, not to pluck.  
The torso above the navel an English park displaying freedom  
with no angles, no tiles, a facsimile of nature and man,  
in our image,<sup>3</sup> our likeness,

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3. Alludes to "Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness" (Gen. 1, 26).

its arms joining the great night all around.  
And my lower body below the navel at times a feral,  
striking, wondrous nature preserve, preserved and not preserved,  
at times a compact Japanese garden, mapped out in advance.  
The genitals honed and smooth stones with dark tufts  
between them and distinct lanes full of meaning  
and calm contemplation. And my father's precepts  
and my mother's commandments are the chirp and song of birds.  
And the woman I love is the seasons and the weathers  
and the children playing are my children.  
And the life is my life.

7.

I wholly believe that right at this moment  
millions of people are standing at crossroads,  
at street corners, in deserts and jungles,  
and direct one another as to where to turn,  
and which is the road, the path,  
and explain again where to turn, which way,  
and how to get there taking the fastest route,  
and where to stop and ask someone else.  
There, there. No, at the second corner,  
then make a left, or a right, near the white house,  
at the oak tree, and they elaborate, with excited voices,  
waving their hands, shaking their heads,  
there, there, no, not this there, that there,  
as if taking part in a primal ritual. This, too, is a new religion.  
I wholly believe that right at this moment.

### The Precision of Pain and the Blurring of Bliss A Touch of Yearning in Everything<sup>4</sup>

In my garden I saw jasmine blossoms swept  
in an autumnal wind and clinging to a bougainvillea bush.  
Oh, what a blunder, what a waste, what a senseless loss.

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4. This is one section (third) of a twenty-one-section poem.

I saw a sun dip in the sea, I saw God.  
What blunder, what hope!  
I saw two birds trapped in the domed terminal in the airport,  
flying desperately above the commotion below.  
Oh, what a blunder, what a flight, what desperate love,  
what an out without an out, what a vision of hallowed wings!  
A plane circled above it all, calling:  
I'm trying, I'm trying again.  
Try, they tell him from the control tower.  
Try again, try again.

## My Parents' Motel

1.

I went past the cemetery where my parents are buried.  
In his poem Ibn Ezra called it: My Parents' Motel.  
I didn't go in, I just went down the road outside the wall.  
I wave to them as I pass, my soul made into a hand,  
my soul changing forms, sometimes as my hair in the wind,  
sometimes as my aching feet while they walk  
or happily hop, and sometimes as my eyes, sometimes as my lids,  
and sometimes even my lashes are my soul.  
Greetings to my parents, greetings to their dust,  
greetings to their motel in Jerusalem!

2.

With much love my parents spared me aches disappointments  
and sorrows. Now all of these are deposited in me  
as in any savings account to which is added the pain  
I wish to spare my children.  
What a great savings account collects in me.  
Even they always said to me: "I'll show you yet,"  
at times in a threatening voice,  
at times in a voice of sweet love.  
I'll show you yet. Wait, I'll show you.  
"You'll see," in anger, "You'll see,"

in a soothing, promising voice.  
“Do whatever you like,” shouting,  
and “Do whatever you like, you’re a free person,”  
as in a chant of benevolent angels.  
You yourself don’t know what you want,  
you yourself don’t know what you want.

3.

My mother was a prophet and didn’t know it.  
Not like Miriam the Prophetess who danced with drums and chimes,  
not like Deborah who sat under a palm tree and judged the people,  
not like Hulda the Prophetess who told the future,  
but my own private prophet, quiet and stubborn,  
and I must do as she commanded and the time of my life is passing.  
My mother was a prophet when she told me the everyday things,  
verses for one-time use: You’ll be sorry;  
It will make you tired; It will make you feel good;  
You’ll feel like new; You’ll like it; You won’t be able to;  
You won’t like it; You can’t close it;  
I knew you wouldn’t remember; Don’t forget;  
Give; Take; Rest; You can, you cannot.<sup>5</sup>

When my mother died all the little prophecies combined into  
a great one to last till the end of days.

4.

My father was God and didn’t know it. He gave me  
the Ten Commandments not in thunder and rage,  
not in fire or cloud, but with softness and love.  
And he added gestures and good words,  
added, Please and Welcome and intoned Remember and Keep  
in one incantation, and pleaded and wept  
between one commandment and the next.

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5. In the original manuscript pages Amichai had given me, before the book appeared in Hebrew, the line read, “You can, you cannot.” In the book, the line reads, “You can, you can.” It is possible that Amichai revised the line; it also is possible that it is a misprint, and the same for the stanza break after this line: in the ms. pages, there is a stanza break; in the final book, there is no stanza break.

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain,  
Thou shalt not take, in vain, please,  
Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.  
And he held me tight and whispered in my ear,  
Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not commit adultery,  
Thou shalt not kill. And he placed his open palms on my head  
in the Yom Kippur benediction, Honor,<sup>6</sup> love,  
so that thy days may be long upon the land.  
And my father's voice is as white as his hair.  
Then he turned his face to me for the last time  
as he did on the day he died in my arms and said:  
I want to add two to the Ten Commandments:  
The eleventh commandment, "You will not change"  
and the twelfth commandment, "Change, you will change."  
So said my father and turned from me and went  
and vanished into his mysterious distances.

## The Jewish Time Bomb

On my desk stands a stone the word *amen* engraved in it,  
one fragment, a survivor of thousands of fragments of broken  
tombstones in Jewish cemeteries. And I know that all these fragments  
now cram the great Jewish time bomb, together with other  
fragments and shards, fragments of the Covenant Tablets,  
fragments of altars and crosses, rusty crucifixion nails  
with household fragments and holy fragments and bone fragments,  
and shoes and glasses and artificial limbs and false teeth  
and empty tin cans of Exterminator poison. All of these  
charge the Jewish time bomb until the end of days,  
and even though I'm aware of this and of the end of days  
this stone on my desk calms me,  
a stone of truth that no one would want,  
a stone wiser than a philosopher's stone,  
a stone of a broken tombstone,

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6. In full, "Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land"  
(Exodus 20, 26).

more whole than any perfection,  
a testimonial stone of all that ever was,  
of all that ever will be, a stone of amen and love.  
Amen, amen, and may it be Thy will.