

Introduction

“Every Fear, Every Doubt, Every Protest”

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Ideological or political poetry in its broad context includes a large range of thematic interests, from straightforward political subjects to poems wherein the “I” itself is a political statement. In contrast, this anthology seeks to narrow the framework, and to track a twenty-year trajectory of Hebrew poetry in its relation to the Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people through the occupation of their lands in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the forty years of its duration, this occupation has penetrated and changed every aspect and realm of Israeli life—including, of course, the realm of poetry.

The previous significant wave of Hebrew protest poetry unfolded in the wake of Israel’s incursion into Lebanon in 1982,¹ and those poems were collected in two anthologies: *No End to Battles and Killing* (HaKibbutz HaMeuchad Press, 1983) and *Border Crossing* (Sifriat Poalim, 1983). In several aspects, the situation of those poets was different and, in a fashion, “simpler” than that of poets protesting the occupation: in those poems the poets focused their protest on one specific war, which had at its center a defining trauma—the massacre in the Lebanese refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in September 1982.² In contrast, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank is a multifaceted, multifront phenomenon that has spanned four decades, wherein trauma follows trauma with relentless speed, horror, and frequency. Despite the ever-increasing severity of the war crimes of the occupation, the violence and killing of innocents occur on both sides of the Green Line.³ The occupied Palestinians also murder innocent Israelis with suicide bombings in civilian centers. As a result, the poetic protest

against the occupation is more complicated than the decisive and straightforward poetic protest against the 1982 Lebanon War.

The protest of Hebrew poets is complicated also by the chasm between the message of these poems and the consensus held among the majority of the Jewish Israeli public. Indeed, in the last years a significant change has unfolded in the Israeli public discourse, a change characterized by right-wing extremism and entrenchment in nationalistic views on the one hand and despair and feelings of impotence in the peace camps on the other hand. The historic 400,000-strong Tel-Aviv demonstration against the Lebanon War in September 1982—a protest that took place in the immediate aftermath of the Sabra and Shatila massacre—disintegrated into a much narrower political force in the ensuing years. And even though the peace camp is alive and well in Israel—with the phenomenon of soldiers and reservists refusing to serve in the occupied territories expanding and multiple activist groups aggressively protesting the Separation Wall, the roadblocks and other mechanisms of the occupation—it has become almost commonplace to eulogize the Left and the Israeli peace camps. Of course the poets who wrote against the war in Lebanon did not believe their words would end the war or cause the army to retreat; however, since then, the very concept of ‘protest poetry’ in Israel has been seen more and more as an isolated and useless cry in the dark. If “high” culture in general, and poetry in particular, has diminished in status, importance, and impact over the last decades, it has seemed as though protest poetry specifically has lost its audience entirely. Even if we do not assume that poets have in their mind’s eye at the time of composition both their potential audience and the possibility of influencing that audience, political poetry is inextricably tied to its time and place, and to its readers as well. In certain instances, the addressees not only are implicitly present in the text but are even explicitly named. In his poem “Cry the Beloved Country,” for example, Rami Ditzanny cries out to his compatriots, “my people,” saying, “I’ve seen you in your ugliness debased in your arrogance”; so too Rami Saari states, “Brothers / I’m fed up with [you]” (in “The Only Democracy [in the Middle East]”), and Aharon Shabtai warns his reader, whom he addresses as “my friend,” that “tomorrow I’ll stand on the porch and see / you, too, crying from the cracks in the backyard pavement” (“Mice of the World, Unite!”).

Just when it seems as though there are no more “brothers,” “friends,” or compatriots to address, one may have expected protest poetry in Israel to fade, if not disappear altogether; yet the opposite has happened, as though the apathy and passivity that have spread through the general Israeli public halted on the threshold of poetry (and other art forms not examined here). Aside from a few exceptions, during the 1980s and into the 1990s, Hebrew poetry protesting the occupation was not prominent in Israeli culture, and, in fact, the majority of Hebrew poetry all but ignored the occupation; however, in the last decade, the necessary and long-awaited moral and literary awakening has occurred, and

the phenomenon of protest poetry in Israel has spread. Every year more and more Hebrew poets are writing protest poetry, and this genre of poetry no longer belongs to the so-called "political poets" alone. Alongside poets who have devoted entire books or poem series to protest against the occupation (for example Aharon Shabtai, Ramy Ditzanny, Maxim Gilan, Rami Saari), and alongside poets such as Yitzhak Laor and Meir Wieseltier, for whom political protest has been a primary focus of their poetic oeuvres, there now stand more and more poets who are not necessarily considered "political" but who are producing work addressing the political events of this region in general and the injustice of the occupation specifically. This anthology includes works by forty-two poets, ranging from octogenarian Tuvia Ruebner, who is traditionally identified as a Holocaust generation poet, to Gil Engelstein, a high school student (at the time the anthology was first published); from recipients of the illustrious Israel Prize for Poetry (Dahlia Ravikovitch, Meir Wieseltier, the aforementioned Ruebner) to young poets who have yet to publish their first books; from Salman Masalha, an Israeli-Arab poet who writes in both Hebrew and Arabic, to Yosef Ozer and Dotan Arad who are identified with the Jewish religious poetry journal *Meishiv HaRuach*. The extended silence has at last been broken, and protest against the occupation has become an important, central, and generative subject of contemporary Hebrew poetry.

In a seemingly paradoxical fashion, the poets of this anthology have utilized the obstacles set before them to create a new repertory of techniques, tones, and devices to represent the situation. Thus, the sense of being a minority and impotent before the omnipotent nature of the occupying structure expresses itself in a wide range of tones: sorrow ("a kind of sigh left over from things collapsing in on themselves," Arik A.); lament ("No, no, this is not what we wanted, not this," "Oh, let the darkness cover our eyes!" Tuvia Ruebner); doubt ("my protest lines were all seen as the act of a leftist masturbator / ... why bother," Ramy Ditzanny); loathing ("with what cement have they filled your heads," Aharon Shabtai); weariness ("the land lies on me / heavy and weary as I am / weary to the bone," Asher Reich); despair ("To where can we still flee from ourselves?" Tuvia Ruebner; "How horrible is this place, our home," Liat Kaplan); and pessimism ("In any case there'll be another war," Dahlia Falah; "And no one will be left all the corpses to tend," David Avidan).

But even when poetry declares its weariness and considers silence an option, the poetic declaration *itself* is a refusal to surrender to fatigue and is a rejection of silence. The ongoing conflict between deep despair and activism expresses itself also in a bitter clarity: Zvi Atzmon dryly declares, at the end of reserve duty in the territories, that "a soldier is a soldier." Against the backdrop of the violence of the occupation, Liat Kaplan expresses disillusion and an awakening from the Zionist dream: "we'll pass by, another anecdote in history's books of forgetting. // From creation's endless circles, existence fleeting // and gone—

I see only bereavement and destruction." The normalization of the occupation's violent methods leads to expressions of alienation and antagonism in many of the poems: "From enemy territory I am writing / . . . Like a hostage held / in a sombre city" (Maxim Gilan); "How good it is that I am rid of you, homeland" (Natan Zach); "She's not one of us" (Dahlia Ravikovitch); "My homeland has become for me like a foreign land" (Ramy Ditzanny). But even as several poets separate themselves from the collective identity, primarily by distinguishing between the "I" and the "you" (plural), others continue to speak in the voice of "we": "Do we have time enough for a moral / accounting?" (Moshe Dor); "we still wonder why we insisted on keeping / the human image we've lost" (Rami Saari). And in still other poems the "we" itself is the object of the ironic censure: "That's us, and that's the Tel-Aviv Subway / we dreamed of, united for, dedicated ourselves to" (Meir Wieseltier); "We have a wild need to cause pain / and torture. / For what are we without your agony?" (Dahlia Ravikovitch).

Skeptical protest—protest that is spoken even as it casts profound doubt on its own efficacy—expresses itself most forcefully in the poetry of Meir Wieseltier, as apparent in his poem "Pro & Con." With a severity that is also self-reflexive, Wieseltier lambastes the three stances from which, according to him, one writes political poetry: the civil, the prophetic, and the ironic. But even after the repeated reproach, "Let there be quiet here," the political poet overcomes the nihilist and returns to his task (however self-critically): "But sometimes I can't control myself, and like a pervert. . . ." In a different text, Wieseltier breaks again the silence he demanded earlier and insists, in a manner free of skepticism, that "with necessary wryness I must say that also in times of pain one must sharpen the truth."

The skepticism of "Pro & Con" is absent from other poems, which adopt an unapologetic, even prophetic, tone. In several poems by Ramy Ditzanny, for example, the tone and lexis are indubitably prophetic. Ditzanny's poem "Cry the Beloved Country" recreates the biblical prophecies of destruction, leaving no room for satire or parody. The pathos of this poem climaxes in the final lines: "Therefore, behold—/ the days are coming"—a biblical verse repeated in the Old Testament books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos, a verse that is here fragmented and aborted, as though the speaker's voice has broken at the climactic moment and cannot go on. Thus, ironically, the poem of prophecy offers no prophecy at all. For those familiar with the biblical texts, what resounds in the silence are the prophets' dire predictions of exile and destruction: "Therefore, behold, the days are coming when everything in your palace . . . will be carried off to Babylon; nothing will be left behind" (Isaiah 39:6), and, "Assuredly the day is coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no longer be called Topheth or Valley of Ben-Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter" (Jeremiah 19:6). One may see in the aborted ending Ditzanny's self-reproach over the pointless effort of speaking to the conscience of "fellow men" whose "ears are closed to the outcry of the

oppressed"; however, an alternative and darker reading of this truncated ending may see it as an implicit statement that those prophesized days of destruction and despair have, in fact, already arrived.

Aharon Shabtai also writes in this ancient tone of chastisement, free of hesitancy and postmodern ambivalence. In "Toy Soldiers," for example, sentence after sentence ends in an accusatory question mark addressed toward the clearly defined "you," the "Idiotic soldiers of lead." If there is sarcasm or mockery here, it is not directed at the speaker or at his naiveté in moralizing in a cynical age, but rather at the eponymous subject whose brains, apparently, contain not "even an ounce of imagination." Shabtai's unstinting commitment to this poetic protest expresses itself also in his willingness to use the aforementioned aggressive punctuation that exposes not only the rhetorical mechanism of the poem but also its highly emotional and ethical stand and leaves the text—and its author—vulnerable to the danger of ridicule and disregard.

Another type of rigorous poetic protest, which may be defined as the poetics of empathy, expresses itself in this collection in poems of mourning and rage over the Palestinian victims of the occupation—victims who are invisible and nameless to the military forces, the governing structures, and a large part of the public and the media. This stance is dominant in the work of Dahlia Ravikovitch, one of the first Israeli poets who refused the national monopoly on bereavement, resisted any hierarchy of suffering or distinction between victims, and consistently and vigorously protested both the usage of "our" (as in, Israeli) dead as a justification for war and the glorification of death as holy and heroic. One cannot overstate the degree of resistance apparent in this type of poetry, which goes beyond compassion and identification with the victims. The oppression of another people necessitates a denial of their humanity; thus, empathy toward that same people is dangerous and forbidden, for it might undermine the certainty of the finger on the trigger or the foot on the bulldozer's pedal. Indeed, the subversiveness of these poems expresses itself in their insistence on foregrounding the humanity and humanness of "the enemy." These texts of poetic empathy focus fiercely on the individual, the face and name behind a statistic quickly forgotten from the collective memory: not "a minor" or a "terrorist" (at ten years of age) or just an anonymous "Palestinian" who "met his death," but Nur Ismail, Ali Joarish, Hilmi Shusha. In protest against the cynical phrase "details of the event are unknown" regularly utilized in official announcements, these poems insist on investigating and knowing those details.

These poets who deal in "current events" must contend with an additional obstacle: the dense and relentless "routine" of the occupation. Like a disease whose symptoms are many and varied, the pathological reality of the occupation strikes daily. An event, followed by a response-to-the-event, followed by retribution-for-the-response, followed by revenge-for-the-retribution, is the implacable and unforgiving formula: in Tuvia Ruebner's words, "A victim begets

a victimizer, victimizer begets a knife / a knife begets fear, fear / begets hatred, hatred—wickedness . . .” Every time it seems as though the horror has reached its peak, has played itself out, another “incident” happens, proving that greater extremes are still to come. The poetry, however, does not relent as it struggles to represent this wild, unwieldy, and rapidly changing reality. In fact in many cases the poetic response comes in tandem with the events themselves, as they occur (the Separation Wall and the poetic response to it, even as it is being constructed, being a case in point).

One of the strategies for dealing with the intensity of the situation is by addressing and “attacking” it indirectly, through other texts. Of course, intertextuality is hardly the creation of Hebrew protest poets; still, a unique and multifaceted use of this technique is apparent in this collection. Several poems open a dialogue with other texts. For example, in “From the Songs of Tu B’Shevat,” Avner Treinin transforms a popular children’s folk song for the Israeli festival of tree planting into a poem about burying bodies (in holes dug for the saplings). In “We’ll Build Our Homeland, for This Land Is Ours,” Ramy Ditzanny uses the refrain from a Zionist folk song as the ironic title for his poem describing the dispossessed and disempowered Palestinians who are, in fact, the ones building “our Greater Land of Israel.”

In his poem “Language,” Natan Zach confronts not another poem but rather the fashion in which the occupation has bastardized language itself. He exposes the injustices, cruelties, and lies hiding behind the dangerous euphemisms of military-speak and political spinning. Similarly, Zvi Atzmon attacks the insidious acronyms of military language in his poem “The Letters’ Rebellion”: “N.S.B. stands for Non-Standard Baton— / any handle of a shovel—efficient, don’t worry.” But even in the context of the seemingly neutral and intentionally emotionless military terminology, words such as *burning* and *terror* proclaim themselves and jump to the foreground.

While many texts are alluded to in these poems, the single text that is most often present, in some form or another, is, of course, the Old Testament. Thus, Tuvia Ruebner’s desperate cry that “it was our hands that spilt our blood!” is taken almost word for word from Deuteronomy (21:7), but the assertion of innocence in the biblical verse (“It was *not* our hands that shed this blood”) becomes an admission of guilt in Ruebner’s text, through the change of a single letter. The phrase itself is taken from a ritual of repentance and cleansing necessary when one finds a murdered body and the murderer is unknown. In Ruebner’s text, however, the murderer is known: it is “us.” Moreover, the blood being spilled is *also* our own. Thus Ruebner links the sin to its punishment.

Yitzhak Laor’s poem “Order of the Day” illustrates how the phrase “Remember what Amalek has done unto you” (Deuteronomy 25:17) has been transformed into the Jewish justification for any and all its deeds: the memory of Amalek’s cruelty serves to perpetrate the Jewish people’s eternal victimhood

and makes oppression of another people—anywhere and at any time—just and necessary. The message is refined to its essence in Laor's poem, which states: "If you can't find yourself / an Amalek, call / Amalek whomever / you want to do / to him what / Amalek did, / to you of course." Similarly, in her poem "At the Edges of the East," Oreet Meital addresses the self-righteousness of the eternal victim—a foundational principle of Israeli policy and identity—by inverting biblical terms. Thus, the "garrisoned cities" of Exodus are no longer the cities the enslaved Israelites built for the pharaohs in Egypt but rather the Israeli cities of contemporary Israel being built by Palestinian laborers.

Many of this collection's poems change biblical figures into Palestinian ones: Aryeh Sivan transforms the biblical boy Joseph who went to Shechem (the modern-day Palestinian city of Nablus) to tend his sheep into "a different beautiful boy / from Shechem," a murdered Palestinian boy with a hole in his chest "not from the teeth of a wild beast" but from a bullet. Yosef Ozer compares Ali Joarish, who was fatally wounded by a rubber bullet, to Ishmael expelled into the desert, but it is not an angel of God who appears before Ali Joarish, as appeared once before Ishmael, but rather the Angel of Death.

Variations on biblical verses expose also the gap between the divine promise regarding the Promised Land, and the defective reality, proving the falseness of the promise itself. Asher Reich transforms the "the land flowing with milk and honey" into "a land flowing with darkness and deceit," and Rami Saari quotes a verse about a beloved son who won God's mercy—"Truly, Ephraim is a darling son to Me, a child that is dandled" (Jeremiah 31:20)—in order to protest this son's contemporary, merciless, and violent version: "And my darling son, with a club and rubber bullets."

Biblical metamorphoses that measure the distance between the vision and its harsh reality are embedded also in Aharon Shabtai's "The Fence" where biblical sources evolve into the dark and terrible details from the daily reality of the occupation. Thus, the speaker lifts his eyes to the hills (Psalms 121:1), but instead of asking, "From whence comes my help?" he asks simply, "And what do I see?" The answer "Cube after cube of evil"—alluding to the concrete slabs of the Separation Wall—replaces the belief that "my help cometh from the Lord, who made Heaven and Earth" (Psalms 121:2). This same "heaven"—or sky—appears at the end of the poem, offering no protection as it is itself cursed ("rooftops curse the sky"), and the name of God himself is replaced in this poem with the explicit and various names of evil: iniquity, dispossession, oppression, thievery, and malice.

Like a map of 1:1 scale, the most extreme use of biblical texts is apparent in the poems that integrate the biblical into the texts, without addition or commentary and almost without adaptation. Thus, in "Now Is the Time," Liat Kaplan weaves fragments of biblical verses on revenge (from Exodus 21) through her poem, adapting the verses only by changing their order, transforming a singular

first-person voice into a plural first-person and adding a title. Zvi Atzmon goes even further and composes a poem, "With the Steel Point of a Thorn," entirely from biblical descriptions of destruction taken from the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, adding no interpretation aside from the new juxtaposition of these phrases. In both cases, the poets minimize their role to directing our gaze at the ancient words, with the power of the statement emanating from this poetic asceticism.

However, within the context of this extensive use of intertextuality, one must emphasize that the texts alluded to—whether an earlier poem, a lexical term, or a biblical verse—are never the objective or focus of the poem but rather serve as a doorway to the real subject, the occupation. The poems are relentless in their gaze on this reality: the oppression and cruelty, the refugee camps, the killing of children, the daily abuse of people with roadblocks and curfews, the terror, and the danger of complete destruction that is intrinsic to the continuing occupation.

Indeed, the awareness that within the occupation resides, also, the seed of the destruction of the State of Israel itself is declared in many poems: "on the land of my people / briars will rise up" (Zvi Atzmon); "From the hill / where we stood, you can see / the secrets of destruction" (Rami Saari); "the tanks murdering / in my name are digging a grave for my people as well" (Aharon Shabtai), and more. Of course, the repeated references to the prophecies of destruction are hardly arbitrary. The tragedy in these poems, as in the biblical prophecies, emanates from the fact that awareness of the destruction that undoubtedly lies in wait is inextricably bound up in the knowledge of one's impotence to prevent it from coming: "I've wasted words / . . . this ugly madness can not be stopped" (Ramy Ditzanny).

Certainly, "paper fighter planes" cannot penetrate "steel and bulletproof glass" (Meir Wieseltier), and words cannot "send a shiver through a sniper's finger" (Aharon Shabtai, nor halt the violence, transform the hatred, or bring about peace. Then what is the purpose—the *raison d'être*—of the poems collected here? What reason is there to write these words if the march of oppression, based on blindness, arrogance, and callousness continues to reign supreme? Part of the answer to the question is found in the poems themselves: "I have no choice / but to resist," writes Yitzhak Laor. As such, the question why or what for has no relevance here. Literary opposition exists even in places where the price for it is higher than disregard or slander. Besides its literary and documentary value, protest poetry grants its reader a foothold for resistance in a time and place where resistance is rare, pushed to the margins, deemed unacceptable. Before a ruling authority whose "horrible self-righteous scream" increases the more it tramples every hope for peace "with a steel leg" (in Natan Zach's words), before official propaganda that whitewashes catastrophic, destructive, and immoral policies, a conformist media that, by and large, omits from its reports "every fear, every

doubt, every protest” (in Aharon Shabtai’s phrase), poetry becomes a rebellious act that unsettles axioms, generates question marks, and asserts the right of readers and writers as one to doubt, protest, and rise up.

Therefore, the importance of protest poetry in general, and this collection of Hebrew protest poetry specifically, cannot be measured in quantitative or practical terms. The impression that this poetry imprints in the minds and hearts of the public can be seen mostly only from the distance of time. The ethical stand taken by the poets and poems of this anthology represents today the minority position—a minority that is seen by the majority of the Jewish Israeli public as “self-hating” and as desecrators of sacred ideals. And still, throughout history, literary creations have expressed the forbidden and the revolutionary and have preceded—in fact, precipitated—changes in attitudes and societal norms. The day will come when the poems collected in *With an Iron Pen* will be read as the voice of reason and of honest hearts in dark times.

(Translated from the Hebrew by Rachel Tzvia Back)

Notes

1. In the summer of 1982, Israel launched a massive attack to destroy all military bases of the PLO in southern Lebanon and, after a ten-week siege on the Muslim sector of West Beirut and the PLO stronghold there, forced the Palestinians to accept a U.S.-sponsored plan whereby the PLO guerrillas would evacuate Beirut and go to several Arab countries that had agreed to accept them. Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 1985 but continued to maintain a Lebanese-Christian policed buffer zone north of its border, until its final withdrawal from all territories in southern Lebanon in 2000.

2. On September 16, 1982, in a region occupied by the Israeli army, Lebanese Christian militiamen entered Beirut’s Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, bent on revenge for the assassination of their leader, Bashir Gemayel. There followed a three-day massacre during which hundreds of innocent civilians were killed.

3. The “Green Line” refers to the demarcation between the 1967 borders of Israel and the West Bank territories captured in the Six-Day War. Although usually referred to as the “1967 border,” it is actually the 1949 armistice line, as there was no internationally recognized border at the time. The Green Line reference came about because someone used a green pen on the map of the armistice agreement with Jordan to draw the border. Most of the peace talks between Israeli and Palestinian authorities have been based on the premise that Israel must retreat to the Green Line in order to allow the Palestinians to establish their own nation east of this border.