

## EPHRAIM E. LISITZKY

We know more about the life of Ephraim E. Lisitzky, or at least parts of it, than we do about the lives of any of the other American Hebrew poets because he alone of them wrote an autobiography. This volume, called *Eleh toldot adam* [These are the generations of Adam, 1949; published in English translation as *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, 1959], is one of the best prose works in American Hebrew literature and a jewel in the canon of Hebrew autobiography.<sup>1</sup> It begins with Lisitsky's birth in Minsk in 1888 and the death of his mother seven years later. His father remarried and moved the family to Slutzk before emigrating on his own to the United States. The boy was a prized Talmud student in the yeshivot of a city that prided itself in its Lithuanian traditions of learning. After a separation of over eight years, he joined his father in Boston, Massachusetts and was dispatched to study for rabbinic ordination at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Yeshiva in New York. He left after a brief period with certification as a shohet (ritual slaughterer) and took a job as a teacher and shohet for a small rural Jewish community in upstate New York. Lisitzky had encountered the new Hebrew literature for the first time when he arrived in Boston, and, recapitulating a process that had already been undergone by many yeshiva students before him, he became enthusiastic about Hebrew literature at the same time as his religious worldview lost coherence and collapsed. Back in Boston, he failed to find a simple trade from which to make a living and accepted a position as a private teacher for a Jewish family in a remote village in northern Ontario called Ahmic Harbor. There he meets many delightful and idiosyncratic people, falls in love with a gentile girl, encounters the awesome beauty of the forests and rivers, writes his first Hebrew poems, and, after several years,

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<sup>1</sup> *Eleh toldot adam* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1949); *In the Grip of Cross-Currents*, trans. Moshe Kohn and Jacob Sloan and revised by the author (New York: Block Publishing Company, 1959).

makes the fateful decision to return to civilization and devote himself to the vocation of Hebrew teaching.

The metamorphosis of the tempest-tossed immigrant into an impassioned exemplar of Hebraism in the New World should have made a rousing and revealing conclusion to Lisitzky's autobiography. But, alas, it does not come off. The inner emotional logic that allows the young man to seize his new vocation is declared rather than dramatized. In the concluding sections of the volume the author makes the argument that teaching Hebrew in the inhospitable climate of the New World partakes of the same ethos of backbreaking pioneering (*halutziyut*) enacted at the same period by the pioneer settlers (*halutsim*) of the Land of Israel. The claim, as Gershon Shaked has pointed out, serves an apologia directed at the work's primary audience, Hebrew readers in Israel who, although they may be delighted by the exotic landscapes Lisitzky has painted for them, remain perplexed as to why a Hebrew writer would choose to remain so isolated from his readers.<sup>2</sup> The author is twenty years old when *Eleh toldot adam* concludes, yet Lisitzky did not publish it until he was sixty-one. The impetus to write it may indeed have come from the fact that in these years the state of Israel was being established and several of the key figures in American Hebrew literature—among them Shimon Halkin, Israel Efros and Avraham Regelson—were “abandoning” the struggle for Hebrew in America and taking up new careers in the new state. Lisitzky may have meant his autobiography to serve not only as a self-justification but also as a compensation. Lisitzky strives—successfully, to my mind—to persuade the Israeli reader of the fascination of America, its vistas and personalities, Jewish and gentile. He has transformed America into Hebrew. As he had already done with Indian legends and Negro spirituals, Lisitzky is widening the thematic bounds of Hebrew literature, bringing America

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<sup>2</sup> *Hasiport ha'ivrit 1880-1988*, Vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Keter and Kibbut Me'uhad, 1988), pp. 135-38. Shaked also points out the work's affiliation with the tradition of Hebrew autobiography, especially Solomon Maimon and Moshe Leib Lilienblum, as well as with the immigrant novel. See my *Banished From Their Father's Table*, ch. one and conclusion.



within its reach, and, in a sense, capturing it for Hebrew. This accomplishment represents both a service and a self-sacrifice, and it could only be undertaken by remaining behind.

Aside from occasional critical essays, the autobiography is Lisitzky's only sustained work of prose in a long career that was devoted to poetry. Unsurprisingly, there is something in the artistic achievement of the autobiography that reflects back on Lisitzky's relative strengths as a poet. He was, in the end, more successful as a storyteller whether in prose or verse than he was as a lyric poet. He published his first poems around 1907 and produce lyric poetry in great profusion for two decades until he hit on a new mode of writing. *Medurot do 'akhot* [? Campfires], Lisitzky's great American Indian epic that appeared in 1937, displayed an unexpected gift for verse narrative on a large scale. Summoned to tell the larger-than-life story of others, Lisitzky managed to extricate himself from the toils of lyric self-involvement. He extended this new direction in *Be'ohalei kush* [In the Tents of Cush, 1953], which endeavors to capture within Hebrew poetry the cadences and rhythms of jazz, Negro spirituals, and the sermons of the great Black preachers.<sup>3</sup> The breakthrough to the Indian epic was hard won and was not the first time that Lisitzky had attempted to write big. In 1934 he published a 500-page allegorical-philosophical verse drama called *Naftulei elohim* [The Struggles of the Lord], which was ostensibly set against the background of the pogroms of World War One but soon took off into the ether of avenging angels and murky explorations of the sources of good and evil. Truth be told, Lisitzky wrote too much, and the daunting task of winnowing this imposing oeuvre to arrive at a slimmer but vital canon of his work is a task that remains to be undertaken.

Lisitzky was known as the Hebrew sage of New Orleans, and it was his symbolic location within the small international republic of Hebrew letters, rather than any individual literary accomplishment, that gave uniqueness to his role. After leaving Canada and after sojourns in Milwaukee and Buffalo, Lisitzky settled in New Orleans in 1918 and worked there as a Hebrew

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<sup>3</sup> Lisitzky became something of a master of the *poema*, a medium-length narrative verse genre, which he began writing in the 1930s. These are collected in *Adam 'al adamot: Po'emot* [Man on Earth: Poemot] (New York, Ogen/Histadruth Ivrit, 1947).

educator until his death in 1962. From his post in New Orleans, Lisitzky participated in print in all the periodicals, miscellanies, and projects of his New York-based colleagues. Although he traveled often and made long journeys by boat to visit his friends Hillel Bavli and Shimon Halkin, his enduring identification with the most colorful city of the Deep South marked an outer boundary point on the map of Hebrew literature. As that map took shape between the two world wars and after the suppression of Hebrew culture in the Soviet Union, the centrality of Eretz Yisrael became indisputable. But the productive margins of the map were far-flung. In the East, there were the Hebrew writers of Warsaw, Vilna, Vienna and Pareis; and in the West, the Americans whom we have been describing. And in the farthest verges of America was Lisitzky of New Orleans, that staunch beacon unflaggingly sending out his poetic signals to the far-away center.

More than any other American Hebrew poet, the arc of Lisitzky's career illustrates the artistic gains realized by engaging American themes and the American landscape. The first collection of his poetry, which covers the years 1907 to 1927, reveals a poet who would use the lyric as a vehicle for expressing his rage and insult.<sup>4</sup> In an early manifesto poem ("Shirati," [My poetry/song], signed <sup>u</sup>Milwaukee, 1909<sup>n</sup>), Lisitzky sounds very much like Bialik wearing his prophetic mask in his poems of wrath, except for the fact that in Lisitzky's case there is no public political context.<sup>5</sup> The speaker of that poem declares that his poetry has nothing to do with the standard repertoire of romantic topoi: the murmuring of brooks, the screeching of eagles, the roar of the ocean, and so forth. His inspiration will be drawn instead from sources of revolt and *resentiment*. Making an extremely compact and erudite play on words, the speaker of the poem states baldly: *ukeshoreri shirati*. *Shorer* is a rare word for enemy (see Psalms 54:7) that contains all the sounds of the word for poetry (*shirah*) but none of its conventional connotation. The line

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<sup>4</sup> *Shirim* (America and Eretz Yisrael: Haverim and Devir, 1928).

<sup>5</sup> *Shirim*, pp. 9-10.



thus translates something like: "As is my enemy so shall be my poetry." Lisitzky, then, serves notice to his readers early on that poesy will not be his stock in trade.

The rage, as it turns out, is turned back upon himself more than it is hurled at others. The ultimately self-reflexive nature of the lyric as a genre is hardly unrelated to this boomerang effect. Feelings of unworthiness, self-loathing, weariness and doom suffuse these poems. Silkiner, too, wrote from a place of pain; but Lisitzky's pain has nothing about of the older poet's high sense of resignation, nor does he believe that anguish can be transubstantiated into beauty.<sup>6</sup> What are the sources of this pain beyond the vulnerability of all humanity to which some temperaments are more mercilessly exposed than others? The autobiography, written decades later, helps us here, although we must use it with the awareness that the contemporary readers of the poem could not so avail themselves. During the phase of his life before he came to America, the young Lisitzky was deeply scarred by the early death of his mother, by the long separation from his father, and by the grinding poverty of his family. These are losses from which he never recovered. Layered on top of this personal ordeal is a collective narrative of injury. Like the heroes of Berdichevsky's and Brenner's fiction, Lisitzky is a Talmud prodigy who looses his ontological moorings in the world when he looses his faith. Deprived of the coherence of belief and at the same time refusing to become a typical immigrant striver, the young man is thrown upon a self that is impoverished, insulted and self-lacerating. Finally, the vocation of secular Hebrew poet, which provides something of a way out of this dilemma, carries with it a redoubled exile when that craft is practiced in America. In a 1913 poem based on Hibbat Zion topos that goes back to Judah Halevi, the speaker undertakes an imaginary tour of the Land of Israel only to conclude that he, like Moses on Nebo, will see but never arrive. Playing on the concluding verses of the synagogue hymn Adon Olam, the unreconciled speaker faces the truth: *Beyad el zar et ruhi afkid/*

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<sup>6</sup> See the moving sonnet sequence Lisitzky dedicates "with love" to Silkiner, titled "Mima'maqim" [De profundis], *Shirim*, pp. 219-224.

*uveheik adamah zarah—et geviyati* [In the hand of an alien god I commend my soul/ in the bosom of alien soil my body].<sup>7</sup>

An untitled poem from 1916 (signed “Milwaukee, Tishrei, 5677”) affords us an opportunity to examine this self-myth of heroic suffering bound in tightly controlled rhetorical integuments.

#### HEBREW TEXT

[Like a soldier returning from the battle field, his quiver emptied of arrows  
and his knees trembling, I stand on your shores, Oh Michigan, white haired  
like you, who grow white with agitated waves, cast about in the fall storm.

From wandering in distant lands and foreign climes—God has diverted my  
path from your shores—my soul is carried back to you sick with longing  
and listens in the tempest and the silence as the breakers call to it from the  
far shore.

As my life sets, I sat, spent by misery, in a rude tent I have planted on your  
shore; oh dredge up from your depth my deposit: the dreams and melodies  
I long ago sowed in you on wave after wave - - -]

This is a poem of return to the shores of Lake Michigan, and it indeed hangs on an autobiographical peg. Lisitzky had studied pharmacy in Milwaukee from 1909 to 1912 before changing his vocation to Hebrew teaching and moving to Buffalo; this poem marks his return at

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<sup>7</sup> “Banekhar,” *Shirim*, pp. 48-50.



the beginning of the new school year to Milwaukee, where he spent two more years before settling in New Orleans. (The previous poem in the volume is a poem of leave taking from Hillel Bavli, his fellow Hebrew poet in Buffalo.)

The poem opens with an epic martial simile of a soldier returning from battle, and the decorum of that image finds an equivalent in the classical formal organization of the poem. The rhyme scheme for this poem of three six-line stanzas is ABACCB. The two proximate rhymed lines (CC=lines 4 and 5 of each stanza) are also half the length of the other lines; this couplet has a song-like quality within the rigor of the poem and provides a momentary reprieve from the onrushing rigors of destiny.

The first stanza is based on a two-part comparison. In lines 1-3 the speaker compares himself to a warrior exhausted from battle who is returning to his home grounds on the shores of Lake Michigan; in lines 4-6 the speaker compares himself to the lake itself, whose storm-tossed white caps correspond to his own prematurely whitened locks. The epic register of the first comparison is curious. Not only is he a returning warrior but an antique figure wielding a bow and arrow who might have walked off the pages of the Illiad or the Book of Judges, and this at the exact time when warfare of a very different kind was raging on the plains of France. The nature and purpose of the good fight he has been fighting, moreover, remain elusive.<sup>8</sup> We are left with a figure of self-importance, which is augmented in the second half of the stanza when speaker compares himself to the great lake. The whiteness of the frothing waves, whipped up by an autumn storm, is yoked to the whiteness of the speaker's curls. The phrase *leven taltalim* (with white curls [literally, white of curls], line 6) is a striking usage. Curls are associated with youth and sensuality, and the <sup>single</sup>one time the word *taltalim* is used in the Bible (Song of Songs 5:11) the color

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<sup>8</sup> Might the autobiographical notation of the poem gives us leave to conjecture that the battle the speaker has been waging has taken place inside a Hebrew school classroom, a battle on behalf of Hebrew for the hearts and minds of resistant and ungrateful children of Jewish immigrants? The reference will seem silly only to those who have not been so tested.

is unmistakable: “His [= my beloved’s] locks are curled and black as a raven.” The speaker’s hair, we must conclude, has been shocked into whiteness by early turmoil and suffering.

Whiteness, the speaker asserts, is his commonality with the lake, and the enjambement of *kamokha* [like you] at the beginning of line 5 forcefully, or perhaps forcibly, makes that point. The comparison underscores our awareness that in genre the poem is an ode, an address to an inanimate object. The two parties in the world of the poem occupy two different ontological realms: One is a human speaking subject and the other is both a place and a force of nature. It is the conceit of the poem—perhaps of all odes—that the two are conjoined at some essential level. This presumed communality, that shared whiteness, serves as a point of departure that is progressively undermined in the course of the poem. Here, at the outset of Lisitzky’s poem, man and lake share the same storm-battered toughness; but the resilience and profundity that will attach to one will fall far beyond the lot of the other.<sup>9</sup>

The beginning of the second stanza stresses the speaker’s wanderings. In contrast to the lake, which is a quintessentially unmovable spirit of place, the speaker has roamed far afield, and his travels have not been guided by some purposeful quest but by the hand of God or Fate working to keep him far from these shores. Now he is home. The intimate, even passionate, address to the lake as Thou is stressed by the word order to line 9, which reads, in a literal rendering: “To you, sick with longing, my soul is carried.” Is this longing reciprocated? The speaker imagines it is. The second half of the stanza, with those two foreshortened lines (10 and 11) and their hypnotically sonorous feminine rhymes, describes a stance of intent listening that discerns, whether in tempest or stillness, the call of the breaking waves to his soul. He has been forced to wander far, but now the waves have called him back.

The final stanza finds him encamped on the shore, where he mounts a desperate plea to the great lake. The battle fatigue of the first stanza has turned into a more permanent decline;

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<sup>9</sup> The model for this aspect of the poem, I would argue, is Bialik 1911 poem “Tsanakh lo zalzal” [A twig fell], in which the speaker’s decline is compared to the barrenness of a tree in winter. When spring comes, however, the tree will bloom again whereas the speaker depletion will never be renewed.



exhausted by deprivation, his day is done and his life is turning to evening. The poor tent that is now his final dwelling is a sign that he has renounced all else except for the lake and the mercies it might show him. The desperation behind the voiced appeal to the lake that concludes the poem is not immediately apparent. The speaker is ostensibly asking for the return of something that is rightfully his; this is something that has been “deposited” in the lake’s depths. (*Piqadon* at the end of line 15 is the term in Jewish law for the property that an owner places with another person for temporary safekeeping.) What the speaker wants returned to him are the dreams and joyful songs of his youth; he once sowed (or scattered) them upon the waves, and they descended into the watery depths to be stored for him in this watery depository. In his reduced state, the speaker is very much in need of the renewal that contact with his earlier aspirations might give him, and he has now come to make his withdrawal.

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The fact that this is a doomed transaction is indicated in any one of a number of ways. The rhyme scheme takes the hopeful term *piqdoni* [deposit, line 15] and rhymes it with ‘*oni* [affliction, line 13], and then rhymes *gal* [wav, line 18] with *dal* [rude, poor, line 14]. The three dashes that conclude the poem—in the orthographic conventions of the period this has the same function as the use of three dots in our own—indicates that his appeal peters out unanswered. The most significant signal is the dramatic situation of the poem itself. From the outset, the speaker has addressed Lake Michigan as if it were a sentient being. He posited a shared storm-battered strength in the first stanza and presented himself as being beckoned home by the waves in the second. The desperate and unanswered plea of the final stanza, which appeals to the lake to do something it cannot, reveals the truth of the disbelief that has been “suspended” so far: The lake is a lake, an inanimate body of nature, and the human wishes projected onto it can never be anything more than that. Does the poem’s speaker own up to this truth? Beyond his growing desperation, there is no sign that he does. But Lisitzky, the poet behind the poem, brings us, the readers, to this conclusion. That is why it is crucial to observe the distinction between the poet, the author of the poem, and the speaker, the dramatized voice speaking the poem, even if the

continual reference to “the speaker” sometimes seems tedious. For the success of the poem turns on the gap between the pathos of this constructed lyric “I,” with its needs and illusions, and the ironic awareness of the poet/author, who knows, and brings us to know, that nature is indifferent to our fate and serves as a screen upon which we project our wishes.

There is much in this poem that is of a piece with Lisitzky’s lyric poetry as a whole. The speakers of Lisitzky’s poems generally complain about the pain of existence and burden on their ? sorrow; they struggle to deal with the hand fate has unfairly dealt them; they experience their ordeal isolated from the consolations of community with nature as their only companion; and though still young in biological terms, they feel that that their vital life has already effectively ended. Indeed, as Avraham Epstein has point out, it is most often very difficult for Lisitzky’s poetic craft to master the stormy emotions and rankling *resentiment* that seethe in his verse.<sup>10</sup> I’ve chosen “Kehayal shenitroqnah. . .” [“Like a soldier. . .”] for analysis because I think it succeeds in holding those forces in check. Lisitzky achieves some distance from complaint and self-pity by focusing on an externalized dramatic situation: a battle-weary soldier who returns to the lake that nurtured his youthful dreams. The “narrative” of the poem concerns the intimacy of this encounter—as it is construed in the imagination of the speaker—as it progresses from rough equality to despairing prostration. By insisting on the distinction between the poet and his speaker, we can see the poem as a kind of deconstruction of the swagger inherent in grand address to the great lake. It is an ironic perspective that defends the poem against romantic bathos.

Finally, there is august matter of the great lake itself.

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<sup>10</sup> *Sofrim 'ivri'im be'ameriqah* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1952), p. 46.