

CONTEMPORARY HEBREW LITERATURE

How Is This a Course in Contemporary Hebrew Literature?

How contemporary?

17 authors, only 5 of whom are still alive:

Amichai, Appelfeld, Amos Oz, Amalia Kahana-Carmon, and Sutzkever
everything on the syllabus written before you were born!

How Hebrew?

5 Yiddish, 12 Hebrew

A: 7 of them I knew or know personally (and I'm not so old!)

Amichai, Appelfeld, Manger, Glatstein, Sutzkever, and Singer

A: Their work bridges / lays bare the abyss that lies

present / past

Old World (=EE) / New (Yishuv, Israel, America)

Exile / Home

natural / urban landscape

Faith / radical skepticism

individual/ collective

the Jewish / universal

Leshon hakodesh / Ivrit

כתוב בעפרון בקרון החתום

[2 columns on the blackboard]

KEY WORDS

A. BIBLICISMS provide primary context, the matrix:

Eve,

Abel,

Cain son of Adam

B. MODERN TERMS:

PENCIL, RAILWAY CAR = modern technology

עפרון

quickly erased, made of lead

introduces a "metal" into the poem

קרון

code word from the Holocaust = cattle car

mechanized death, sudden departure, movement

A + B = blatant anachronism, time out of kilter

C. AMBIGUOUS TERMS

משלוח = code word for "transport"

but also a biblicalism

Deut. 22:6, שילוח הקן

(Nazi Deutsch)

(כי, אצל)

* Normally one doesn't pick up on this; but the startling presence of Eve, Abel invites other echoes.

If, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. Let the mother go [שלח תשלח את האם], and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life.

Q: what does this add?

A: reversal of moral order; mother taken along with her young

Language + sentence structure

extremely spare: 23 words, including the title

very simple, short words; no more than 2 stresses each

a "poem" made up of words + expressions that don't add up to a single full

sentence

exc. for the title, which is perfectly balanced

syntactically and in every other way extraneous to the body of the poem

verbal REPETITION:

בני @2 + בן = 3

Q: What does this signify?

A: these clearly define the parent-child relationship

אני @ 2

Q: Why the 1st-person statement

A: the "I" under seige, in state of crisis, doubt

= underscore the question of IDENTITY

Countercommentary: Preying upon Scripture & Liturgy

אני חוה = mother of mankind vs. mother of all the dead

First Mother; Original Sin; 1st murder

return to primal state (social, familial)

when the Family of Man was made up of only 4 individuals

Eve as folk symbol of protector

cyclicity:

the end of the human race circles right back to its beginning

Apoclaypse / Genesis

Speaking in 1st person: 'ANI

Who else is present in the poem?

Abel, the victim-son is with her

while Adam, Cain without

What is it she wants to tell him?

Worried about Cain, her other son?

Simply trying to inform him of her whearabouts?

What about Adam?

Does she know something about him?

why not:
חַוָּה / אֵדָם
אֵדָם / חַוָּה
אֵדָם / חַוָּה
אֵדָם / חַוָּה

Does he even care about her?

Why קִין בֶּן אָדָם? Isn't this redundant?

Son of Man = only Ezekiel, Vision of the Dry Bones

The saving remnant after the Destruction

Here turned on its head

Who is the victim? who is guilty?

the evil prosper, the righteous perish

TITLE

poem imbalance between the relatively long and self-enclosed title / short, open-ended

internal rhyme -- KATUV:HATUM; IPARON:KARON

chiastic structure creates its own meaning

the cattle car is closed; their life is sealed

while the message is neither closed nor sealed

כתוב וחתום = intertext

ונתנה תוקף = most awesome liturgical text; the sealing of one's fate

climaxed by ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רועה הגזירה

here: negative, antiredemptive

Poetic closure

lack of closure = most subversive part of the poem

turns it into a MODERNIST work

// Q: Why is the message torn?

1. has someone erased the rest of it?
2. did the transport arrive at its destination before it could be finished
3. is the message inherently dead-ended? What more IS there to say?

MURDER thus becomes the symbol of human activity par excellence

In the beginning was: Not creation, birth, love but...MURDER

Anti-logical ordering of things,

Lack of causality (one thing leads to another in a logical sequencing culminating in a clear and predictable outcome)

Structure and meaning

when there is no order in the described universe

the structure too is a reflection thereof

[REREAD IT BY STARTING IT ALL OVER]

=Cyclical

This time around: you feel the emphasis of the opening line

IM / KAN...HAZEH

HERE, in THIS transport...something has happened that eclipses everything that happened before

Not "just" a brother-killing-his brother
but: a mother-and-son being shipped off to their death
"Thou shalt not cook the goat in its mother's milk!"
A child being killed in the very presence of its mother

An open message in a sealed car

Terribly ironic: The ephemeral message remains while the eternal is obliterated
The pencilled message was not erased while Man -- was

Metapoetic

Who found this message? Who provided the title? Who published it?
Does the "poet" play a part in the depicted universe of the poem?
Or is Cain the only one left to find it?
Is every reader of this poem a member of the Cain-anite race, carrying the curse of perpetual wandering and murder?
Is every survivor = Cain and is Cain = every survivor?
Was this poem, then, "published" out of a guilt?
Your brother's blood cries out to ME from the earth
Hence Cain's responsibility from which there is no escape
the obligation of one brother to another

Levels of Time

1. Subjective Time: personal: Eve and Abel's
the penultimate moment of their lives
2. Historical Time: the Holocaust: public-collective-Jewish
3. Universal Time, which is tied to the prehistory of humankind;
the Ur-time, the dawn of civilization as we know it
4. Future Time: when the message will be found and read = the present
THEREFORE: What happened then is what will happen again
There is nothing new under the sun
There is only an **aggravation** of the past due to advances in technology
5. Space Becomes Time

Interpretation

1. Mimetic
Train, Mother/Son, 2nd son missing; written message, someone finds
2. Mythic
Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel,
Ezekiel's Vision, שילוח הקן
the writing on the wall

it

→ 3. Feminist

Man vs. Woman

Who is active? passive?

4. Psychological / Reader-response

Focus on the addressee, the one who finds these lines
the evolving response of the finder

5. Ideational

murder will always beget murder
there is no solution or end to this

6. Biographical

Pagis, the Holocaust, his career

7. Theological

God = notable in His absence
no hint whatsoever of "fate" or of any guiding hand
does this make this a "secular" poem?

8. Metaphysical

The essential human activity = act of **WRITING**
that is why the TITLE is so important; foregrounded

What distinguishes Eve from Adam: language, speech
murder, the prerogative of man;
speech, the prerogative of woman

Proof: What remains? That which is inscribed!

Were it not for this writing, there would be no memory of her life

The poem underscores the importance of bearing witness, of recording

and commemorating

For better or worse, this is what distinguishes the homo sapiens
Humanistic-Jewish outlook

Zelikovitch: א'חכ < א'חכ = displacement of Scripture
as opp to א'חכ

Pegis, Den

8 poems in TSE = entire H oeuvre in 2 sections
Loose narrative line (Yaub's 223)

- 1) complicity of victims to be on verge of catastrophe
- 2) the catastrophe as it happened or witnessed
- 3) debate on reparations

Based on handful of symbolic world-items
Smoke, Loots

prose supposed to be more reliable than poetry 213
his prolonged silence; even his wife knew nothing 214
tells nothing about his survival

Fictionalizing devices, dramatization of silence

After 20 yrs. (221)

Transformation = fiction → otherworldly
Metamorphosis

variations on 2 theme

overt dialogue between fictive speaker/ addressee

God-created world alluded to in the 12th

(228) A witness is cross-examined; witness for the defense of humanity

- 1) metonymic mélange ↗
- 2) scriptural scribble ↖

Reparations - terrible parody of Exodus's vision of the dry bones

you bit

which is a little

