Hebrew Culture: A World of Words and Journeys

Nitza Ben-Dov

In the beginning of the history of Hebrew culture was the word. According to the Book of Genesis, the world was created by the words of God, His verbal commands, and from then on, Hebrew culture has been characterized by words,[1] accompanied by movement and wandering, and by roaming from place to place.

I. The First Wandering Hebrew

"Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father's house to the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1)[2]—is God's command that marks the beginning of the history of Hebrew. The first of the Hebrews, Abraham, was ordered to embark on a nomadic life. And he obeyed: "And Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him" (Genesis 12:4).

This man, the first member of the Hebrew nation, was forced to abandon three things when he decided to follow the Word of God: his land, his homeland, and his father's home, all in exchange for an unknown territory that would be revealed to him at a time and place undisclosed and indeterminate. He accepted all of this in return for the vague and distant promise of becoming a great nation.

The first command that the first Hebrew received from God, to leave his home, foreshadowed a second command, which would be forced upon him only several years after his arrival in the Promised Land. Although Abraham had been told that in that land his obedience and loyalty would be rewarded, as his offspring would multiply and turn into a powerful nation, now, suddenly, without warning, God was sending him on a much more difficult journey. While it required only three days of travel—upon reaching God's chosen destination, Abraham would have to sacrifice his only son, the son who was to deliver Abraham's reward for fulfilling God's first command.

The wording of this second command is reminiscent of the first: "Take, pray, your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go forth to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall say to you" (Genesis 22:2). If the first command entailed three concessions, so too did the second. In the former, Abraham had to forsake land, homeland and family; in the second, he had to sacrifice his only son, his beloved son, the son who

was gifted to Sarah after she could no longer bear children; an announcement that she received with a dismissive laugh.

The two instances are similar not only in commanding Abraham to take leave of his loved ones, but also in the naming of an unknown destination: “To a land that I will show you”, in the first case; and to “one of the mountains of which I shall say to you”, in the second.

Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son who was nearly sacrificed, never had to leave the Land of Israel; instead, he would wander through it. In contrast, Isaac’s son Jacob did leave for Egypt with his twelve sons, who indeed multiplied and became a nation, but a nation of slaves, who were forced to build Pharaoh’s store cities, and were subjugated by the Egyptians.

We can only speculate on what language Moses spoke to Pharaoh when he announced the Ten Plagues. Was it in the brusque and terse language typical of Biblical Hebrew that he demanded “Let My People Go!”? It appears that despite the fact that Moses grew up in Pharaoh’s house and that the Hebrew people remained in Egypt for 400 years, the Hebrew used in the Book of Exodus bears only few traces of the Egyptian language, found mostly in personal names and in several figures of speech.

After leaving Egypt, the Hebrew people, the Israelites, were destined to roam the endless desert for another forty years, during which they would develop their distinct identity as a nation. Much like the first Hebrew who left his country, home, and family to go to a place unknown, so too his descendants had to leave behind a country where—from their nostalgic perspective in the desert—they had been able to “eat bread to the full” in order to embark on a quest for Utopia. However, this Promised Land of Milk and Honey, which would remain beyond the reach of the desert generation, seemed destined to become yet another never-fully-realized promise.

The period of settling in the new land proved to be marked by hardships and war, but adversity did not end there. Indeed, the entire chronicle of this nation in the Promised Land was an ongoing sequence of coping with enemies, both foreign and domestic, as well as with the unrelenting, uncompromising, harsh and demanding monotheistic God. There was a brief golden era, during the reign of kings David and Solomon. In their time Israel became a well-established local power, and the First Temple was built. However, its destruction in the year 586 B.C.E. signaled the beginning of the Diaspora, when the Jewish people, deprived of a homeland, were forced to remain in constant motion, again moving from place to place.

The Babylonians, destroyers of the First Temple, exiled the Jewish elite to Babylon, while some of the residents of the fallen kingdom fled to Egypt and the surrounding areas. From this point onwards, Jewish communities would develop mostly in the Diaspora. Babylonian Diaspora is

marked in the Jewish collective consciousness as a period of intense longing for the Land of Israel, for Zion: "By Babylon's streams, there we sat, oh we wept, when we recalled Zion" (Psalm 137).

Yet the return to Zion and the building of the Second Temple did not bring the entire Jewish people back to the Land of Israel, and the centers of Jewish communities in the Diaspora continued to exist. Unlike the Exodus from Egypt which was total and which left the Hebrew language virtually untainted, the exodus from Babylon was not complete and the period that the Jewish people spent in Babylonian exile left a crucial impact on their culture. Beginning with the extensive use of Aramaic in the later Biblical books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel, composed after the Babylonian exile, as well as in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, and the *Zohar*, the cornerstone of Jewish mystical thought, the Hebrew language was pushed aside by the *lingua franca* (the language common among speakers of various languages) of the Persian kingdom.

As I have shown, the history of the Hebrew people, who evolved into the Jewish nation, was characterized by constant wandering, a peripatetic existence; however, from this point onward, it acquired an additional characteristic, namely, bilingualism—and even multilingualism. In most cases, Hebrew continued to function as a written language, the "Holy Tongue", the language of ritual and sweet memories. But as their spoken language the Jews used another one.

II. 'Am 'Olam — The Wandering Nation

In the first centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the year 70 C.E., Aramaic was still the Jews' second language; but henceforth, as they scattered to the four corners of the earth, Jews began to adopt the language of the local people, wherever they came. At the same time, they also developed their own Jewish dialects: Jewish Arabic, Ladino, which is Jewish Spanish, and Yiddish, which is Jewish German. The daily use of Hebrew gradually decreased and eventually ceased completely. This *World Nation* (in Hebrew: *'Am 'Olam*)—a term introduced by the prominent historian Shimon Dubnow to describe the Jewish people as ever-present; that is to say, both ubiquitous and eternal (in Hebrew, the word *'olam* means both "world" and "eternal")[3]—had lost the ability to speak the language of its forefathers, the language with which, according to the Bible, God had created the world.

The Second Temple period was characterized by an ongoing dialogue between two major Jewish centers, one located in the Land of Israel and the other in Babylon. In the Middle Ages, two alternative centers emerged: Sepharad (Spain) and Ashkenaz (Germany).

The geographic relocation of the core communities of the Jewish nation serves, of course, as

another example for the continual movement of a people without a homeland. The languages spoken in these two new centers also changed. Bilingual Jews in Spain spoke and wrote in Arabic and Hebrew, while the Jews in Germany spoke and wrote in German and Hebrew. As time went on, the Jews in Spain developed a dialect, Jewish-Arabic, which combined their two languages, just as the Jews in Ashkenaz developed Yiddish, a language that became progressively detached from its German origin as it helped Ashkenazi Jews bridge the gap between their Hebrew-Aramaic religious traditions and their new linguistic environment. Both Jewish dialects that emerged in these new centers used the Hebrew alphabet, a reminder of sorts of the one language that was supposed to unite all Jews, regardless of their particular location.

Most of the philosophical treatises authored by the Jewish sages of medieval Spain were composed in Jewish Arabic, as were some of the books of Biblical exegesis and tradition. This was in contrast to the medieval poetry of the Jews of Spain, which consisted of liturgical and secular poetry written almost exclusively in Hebrew. Indeed, the Hebrew poetry that flourished in Spain from the 10th through the 15th centuries, which was based on Arabic poetic forms adapted to the Hebrew language, is hailed by many as the loftiest achievement of Jewish poetry of all times; hence this period is known in Jewish history as the "Golden Age".

Since I have repeatedly returned to the connection between Hebrew culture and the innate Jewish immigrant instinct, it is only fit that I mention Yehuda Halevi, who lived in Spain at the turn of the 12th century (ca. 1075–1141). Yehuda Halevi, the greatest of Jewish medieval poets, described his longings for Zion in verse: "My heart is in the East, and I am at the edge of the West." Yet he did not think of Zion as a distant dream or a poetic entity; rather, his verse served as an impetus for realizing the poetic dream: he traveled first to Egypt and from there set off for the Land of Israel. Unlike the typical Wandering Jew whose instinct was to leave his homeland and continue yearning for the country he had left, Yehuda Halevi attempted to realize the Zionist vision hundreds of years before the historical Zionist movement was first established. He headed for the Land of Israel, motivated by a deep conviction in the need to create a new reality with his own actions. Unfortunately, his voyage to the Holy Land ended in his death. No one knows how he died, and numerous stories have been spun around his death, giving mythic proportions to the tragic ending of the master poet's unrealized dream.

Late medieval and Renaissance Hebrew literary activity took place in centers other than Spain, such as Italy, Byzantium, North Africa, southern France, and central Germany. Immanuel the Roman, a prominent officer in Rome, was one of the famous poets of the era. In addition to writing comical-satirical texts, he was also the first to introduce the sonnet form to Hebrew poetry, much in the fashion practiced by his Italian contemporaries. He did not escape the fate of the Wandering Jew

either. Following an economic crisis, in old age he was forced to drift about in Italy. After three long years of a homeless, nomadic life, he did find refuge and a patron in a city 210 km northeast of Rome. There, he devoted the last years of his life to composing Hebrew verse.

The Hebrew poetry composed in Italy had a direct influence on the poetry of the Hebrew Enlightenment, which began in Germany towards the end of the 18th century, reaching the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires in the early 19th century, the birthplace of Modern Hebrew Literature.

In its infancy, Modern Hebrew Literature, the product of an unprecedented and spirited Hebrew-Jewish renaissance, was characterized by the use of a language that for centuries had been anchored in text. In this sense, the literature continued to preserve the legacy that had begun with the destruction of the Second Temple and life in the Diaspora: it kept the Hebrew language alive only in texts and on paper, without permeating the daily lives of its practitioners. Just as in the creative outburst that spanned Muslim Spain, Christian Spain and Italy, during which Hebrew poets expressed themselves using an ornate, neo-Biblical idiom, the Jews of the early-modern era, including poets and scholars, spoke in their respective vernaculars, as poetic Hebrew continued to rest on its laurels in the safe haven of the written text.

According to cultural critic Benjamin Harshav, it was by virtue of this "dead" language, that is, the Hebrew that existed only in textual form, that the Jews were able to survive as "World People." Despite being scattered around the globe, thanks to its pure and untainted language, the Jewish nation was able to maintain a mystical, mental and spiritual unity, without parallel in the history of nations. In his *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (2007), Harshav writes:

> The Jews did not disappear in History, largely because they kept their holy language Hebrew for written communication, unharmed by the spoken, external and changeable vehicles. This split of communicational vehicles according to media contributed to the preservation of the "Holy Tongue" (Hebrew and Aramaic) throughout the ages. It was founded on a complex and detailed network of religious beliefs and behavior, based on the Book of Books and a library of texts and commentaries, studied in mandatory education. The spoken vehicle, however, absorbed cultural elements from the surrounding languages, folklore and verbal behavior. This was not an accidental but essential multilingualism which enabled the functioning of the Jews in a bifurcated existential situation.[4)]

III. The Jewish National-Cultural Revolution in Transit

Throughout the Middle Ages, Latin and Hebrew were "dead" or strictly textual languages, but a crucial difference between the two emerged when the so-called dead Hebrew was suddenly revived

in the modern era. Hebrew almost literally jumped off the pages and into the mouths of its speakers. This development did not take place in a void; it followed a bitter war of words between the malleable, ironic and idiomatic Yiddish, which had been spoken by European Jews for over 500 years, and Hebrew, which was perceived as rigid and dormant, a sleeping beauty that would have to undergo vigorous resuscitation if it were to meet the urgent needs of modern life.

The revival of the Hebrew language was an important feature of the abrupt transition, essentially a Jewish national-cultural revolution. Beginning in the 18th century, the Dark Ages of the past gradually made way for the Jewish Enlightenment, which is called in Hebrew the *Haskalah*, or the period of intellectual and educational renaissance. This revolution essentially rejected the former way of life, the rules of conduct and thought patterns that had characterized for centuries the Jewish people in general, and their small Eastern European communities (*shtetls*, in Yiddish) in particular. In their place, the Jews of the *Haskalah* adopted the values and lifestyle of secular Europe. Like their non-Jewish countrymen, European Jews wanted to develop a secular, rationalist identity, without giving up their uniqueness. This led many of them to move out of their small provincial communities to the metropolitan cultural centers of their day. And so, this revolution is yet another chapter in the dynamic-nomadic history of the Jewish nation.

The modern era witnessed Jews from all walks of life on the move; in mass migration either from small towns to the cities or from one country to another. The majority of young Jews were swept by a trend that left no family without migrants. Within this diasporic mentality, Jews had no attachment to any particular soil, country or language, as the image of the Wandering Jew came to life once again.

Lacking any attachment to land, country, or local language, with Yiddish as their popular, yet undignified hybrid vernacular, and driven by a fresh desire to be like other secular, cultured nations undergoing social upheaval, Jewish scholars, leaders of the *Haskalah* revolution, turned to their ancient language to express themselves in writing. Hebrew was thus perceived as a classical language, rooted in a 3000-year-old history. It was associated with the attachment to a particular land, to sovereignty, independence and depth; only such a language could give true expression to the Jews of the modern era, conveying a sense of dignity and national pride.

Yet, writing a novel in Hebrew, giving the clearest indication that the language had once again been mastered, entailed creating an entire world in a tongue not actually spoken in real life, while the novelist had to use the language as if it were indeed spoken. The author's task was therefore to conjure a persuasive illusion of a reality of a living language with a tongue of pure literary existence.

Who were the authors of the modern era who managed to create the illusion of a rich and mimetic reality, using a language that was not spoken in their time? How did they motivate their characters to speak a language that sounded alive and reliable while they themselves were not sure of its pronunciations?

Here is a partial answer to this wonder: most of them were students of Talmudic academies who had devoted their youth to the study of the Talmud, a text produced through a collective and cumulative process, beginning with the rabbinical sages who had populated the Talmudic academies in Babylon and in the Land of Israel during the 3rd through the 5th centuries. From then onwards, generations of Talmudic scholars have been trying to decipher and follow those brilliant and incisive oral argumentations committed to paper. This vast corpus, comprised of discussions and debates between the sages on matters of Jewish law and religious ritual, used a language that mixed Hebrew and Aramaic. Each participant in this voluminous enterprise appeared to have had a unique register and style of speaking. Thus, it was from this magnum opus of the Jewish nation that the 19th century Hebrew novelists drew the inspiration to carve out a notion of what spoken Hebrew might sound like; it was the echo of the distant voices of ancient Talmudic scholars (the rabbinical sages) that inspired the authors of the modern era to imagine this language rolling off their characters' tongues. They listened to its sounds, not with their ears, but with their hearts; for this was a language that existed in written texts, offering an account of oral discussions. Thus, the Hebrew of the *Haskalah* was paradoxically a language "spoken" only in texts rather than in the marketplace, on the streets, at communal gatherings or in interpersonal exchanges. Ironically, this quasi-vernacular rendition of rabbinical Hebrew was employed by those who rejected religious studies and were drawn instead to create literary secular works in Hebrew, works that would eventually constitute Modern Hebrew Literature.[5)]

The first novel of this new era, titled *'Ahavat Tsiyon* (*The Love of Zion*) and published in 1853 by Abraham Mapu, is a pastiche of Biblical fragments. The challenge of using an ancient language to describe modern life was sidestepped in this case, given that it was a historical novel set in the era of the Prophet Isaiah. Biblical Hebrew was therefore sufficient to meet the needs of a novelist who escaped his living present.

Consequently, the foremost inventor of Modern Hebrew prose was Shalom Jacob Abramowitz (1836–1917), who found—albeit in his later works—a solution for Biblical Hebrew's inadequate resources for satisfying the linguistic needs of modernity. What Abramowitz did was to combine the two key registers that existed in the Hebrew language, namely, ornate Biblical Hebrew, noted for its brevity and conciseness, which typically focused on all matters spiritual and ignored all else, and the

more flexible rabbinical Hebrew, which frequently dwelled on the minutiae of everyday life. Abramowitz's pen name was *Mendele Mokher Sforim* (literally, Mendele the Bookseller), named after one of his protagonists, a peddler selling religious books in Eastern European villages, who in the process observes and describes all that he sees. The author's pen name ultimately usurped his given name; of the two, only the former was popularized and is widely recognized to this day.

The quintessence of this blending of protagonist and author—the former a Wandering Jew sharing his observations, the latter documenting tales on Wandering Jews— is parodically captured in the novel *Shem veyefet ba'agalah* (*Shem and Japheth on the Wagon*), written in 1890. Though the novel describes a train ride, the Hebrew word for *train* did not yet exist when Mendele first rode trains, and was only later introduced by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, best known as the driving force behind the revival of the Hebrew language. Seated in a crowded train-car, mainly occupied by Jews driven out of their homes by the sovereign's latest decrees, Mendele cum Abramovitch, more accustomed to a shabby horse and carriage than to this new mode of transport, finds himself at once confused and fascinated. To him, this new vehicle was the perfect solution to both his practical and literary needs: it offered a quicker and more convenient mode of travel as well as a most suitable setting for describing the members of an ever-wandering nation.

Since the invention of the Hebrew word for "train" (*rakevet*), the vehicle so befitting of a nation in constant motion, transitioning as they do from one geographic site to another, Hebrew literature has been populated with trains, tracks, and stations. In literature, as in reality, those sites function as a place of encounters and departures, both incidental and personal, between one's new and former selves, between the traveler and the constantly changing landscape that passes before his eyes.

One of the most important novels of Modern Hebrew Literature, titled *Only Yesterday*,[6] was written by S.Y. Agnon, the greatest Modern Hebrew novelist and the 1966 Nobel Prize in Literature laureate. Its protagonist, Isaac Kumer, much like the Biblical Abraham, leaves his country, his birthplace and his father's home to go to the Land of Israel. However, unlike the first Hebrew, who departed thousands of years ago obediently to go wherever God would tell him, in 1908, Agnon's hero leaves for Israel, the Promised Land, voluntarily.

The train ride from his Eastern European hometown to the port city of Trieste in Italy, where he would board the ship that would take him to "The Land," is an emotional, heart-rending scene, describing his departure from the hedonistic and vibrant life in early 20th century Europe, still untouched by two world wars that would wreak havoc and horror.

Migration is not circular: it does not entail setting out from home to a temporary location (an inn, a hostel, hotel, tent, or even less than that—merely the road), to end with a return to the point of

departure, which is home. Migration means leaving one home forever in the hope of setting up another, permanent and final abode.[7)]

The archetypal sojourning narrative of the People of Israel is one of countless setbacks and failures. Beginning with Abraham's departure for the Chosen Land in the wake of the command to "Go forth," the story continues with the Patriarch's travels through that Land in order to study it and find his dwelling place. It then follows the migration of his descendants to Egypt, in whose wake, a few centuries later, the Exodus and decades of wandering through the desert ensued, ending with their arrival in the Land of Canaan. This became in Modern Hebrew literature the model for a story of migration that ended with the establishment of a new home. Hebrew literature brims to the full with stories of migration, to the New World—America—and to the Promised Land—the Land of Israel. *Only Yesterday* is a classical migration story, perhaps the most intricate in Modern Hebrew literature, since Isaac Kumer's road to the longed-for home begins with hope and ends in tragedy. The protagonist's name, Isaac, implies his becoming a burnt offering like his Biblical namesake, the symbol of an entire generation of immigrants who came to the Promised Land.

Some 30 years after Isaac Kumer's trip by train and ship, from Europe to the Near East, to the land of his yearnings – a journey described in words evoking the archetypal departure of the nation's Patriarch to the exact same land—the infamous death trains began traveling across Europe. Yet even before the train was to become a symbol of the Holocaust, when it was used to transport millions of Jews in sealed cattle cars to their deaths, S.Y. Agnon's description of the trains in Germany of World War I seemed to prefigure the monstrosities to come.

In an autobiographical novel titled *Thus Far*,[8)] Agnon depicts the travails and travels of the narrator-protagonist in World War I Germany, in which his description of the German trains plays an important part. On the one hand it serves to demonstrate the physical and psychological situation of the homeless hero, namely Agnon; while on the other hand, it portrays the mental state in Germany at the height of the war.

One day, the destitute hero of *Thus Far* leaves his small rented room in Berlin and takes a train to Leipzig in search of his fortune. The Leipzig railway station strikes him as a wartime microcosm of Germany, a steel edifice with smoke overhead and iron rails in which all individuality is dissolved, making it difficult to discern one single face in the human mass occupying the station's space.

After all his romantic and material aspirations have faded into thin air, the narrator-protagonist of *Thus Far* returns to the Leipzig train station in order to board a train that will take him back to Berlin. At the station, sexually frustrated and physically hungry, he grumbles that because of the war all of the station's employees are incompetent women. When the train enters the station but stops

short of the platform and the passengers are forced to walk with their heavy luggage in order to board it, the narrator jocularly likens the train to a merciless woman with "a heart of steel." This harsh metaphor is clearly a projection of his erotic and general frustrations.[9)]

Trains, which, as mentioned, are associated with the transport of millions of Jews to their death, are also popular in the works of Aharon Appelfeld, one of the few Israeli authors to deal with the Holocaust consistently throughout his literary career. After the founding of the state in 1948, many Israeli authors were daunted by the attempt to write about a topic that no words could describe. The "People of the Book," a people of words and texts, was rendered speechless.

Thus, the Israeli authors of the 1948 generation, much like the authors of the Biblical books of Joshua and Judges, wrote about the anxious voyage to the Promised Land and the bitter fight for sovereignty over it, its settlement, the physical and emotional attachment to it, and about the experience of establishing a family and a society in the Old-New Land. Appelfeld himself, it should be noted, treated the Holocaust gently and indirectly. His characters wander by train and on foot through the forests and fallen cities of World War II Europe, until their journey ends as they reach their desired destination: their ancestral homeland.

IV. Current Israeli Literature in Travel

Just when the train as a symbol for a people on a constant journey could appear to have been exhausted—that nothing more could possibly be said about the millions of Jews who immigrated from all corners of the globe to settle in their ancient homeland, about the birth of a new nation, an adventurous people speaking a new-yet-ancient language, intending to inhabit this land forever—at that precise moment, a new, strange and unique train appears on the tracks of Hebrew literature. A.B Yehoshua, who in the 1960s was a young and subversive author, wrote a short story that eventually came to be regarded as the epitome of the generation of *Sabra* writers, the native Israeli writers who took the existence of the Jewish state and the vitality of its language for granted.

In this allegorical and surreal story, titled "The Evening Journey of Yatir," or in another English translation "The Yatir Evening Express,"[10)] the main protagonists are not travelers; rather, they remain stuck in one place, isolated and surrounded by high mountains. Instead, it is the modern and shiny train that features as the traveler, whooshing past the protagonists every evening, leaving them yearning for journeys to faraway destinations. Perhaps it is this train of A.B. Yehoshua that signals that the New Israelis, descendants of the Wandering Jews, would find it challenging to stay in one place, and that they too would sojourn from place to place.

Indeed, Israeli literature is full of stories about journeys, as demonstrated in A.B. Yehoshua's later realistic novels, which describe the travels of Israelis, young and old, to India, Spain, and Germany, to familiar places and to exotic destinations. In this context, one novel that is a journey not only in space but also in time, is notable. A.B. Yehoshua's *The Journey to the End of the Millennium* (1997)[11] is a historical novel about medieval North African Jews who set sail to meet their Ashkenazi brethren in France. And yet, it may be considered one of the most current and relevant novels in Hebrew literature, as it observes the encounter between oriental Jews, whose descendants came to Israel from Arab countries, and Ashkenazi Jews, who immigrated to Israel from Europe. Thus, it tells of a long and arduous journey, one that still continues to this very day, in which the two parts of the Jewish nation strive to create a single, common and unified Israeli identity.

One novel that became a bestseller in recent years attests that journeys and endless yearning to visit new places burgeon in the hearts of Israelis. The travels described in this novel are not migratory, but are rather quests. Native Israelis, whose parents or grandparents came from elsewhere, and who carry a genetic and cultural baggage mixed during a long itinerant history of shifting locations and ideological, linguistic and cultural settings, set out to find their roots, identity and heritage elsewhere. A journey that is also ideal for the fulfillment of forbidden love.

In Judith Katzir's *Mattise Has the Sun in His Belly* (1995),[12] a young woman falls in love with a married man, the father of a child, who is many years her senior. Their amorous travel destinations include Paris, Cairo, Barcelona and Grenada. Each of those places offers a unique setting for the paramours to examine themselves, their love, jealousy and mutual commitment. The transitory state of travel reflects their relationship, and the train, the means of transportation that Hebrew literature transformed and is now becoming adapted to the current transformations undergone by Jewish and Israeli societies, goes back to serve in the novel as a metaphor for the undulating, unstable state of its love-drunk protagonists. The passengers of this train sway along with it:

And this is another one of those moments that she will painfully miss; the Cairo-Luxor night train, which she imagined to be the Orient Express, sizeable and exuding old-fashioned grandeur; wooden walls and copper lamps, with lampshades of smoked-green glass […] They got up, staggering because of the train and because of the vodka, and started shaking their bodies against one another along with its rhythm.[13]

The novel depicts not only trains, but also hotel rooms, the temporary abode that Israelis love to examine before returning to their permanent home. Out of the myriad insights and observations in support of journeys that Judith Katzir's novel offers, the following is particularly worth quoting: "Journeys slow down time and extend life."[14] It is also worth mentioning that the heroine's mother

runs a travel agency that she inherited from her father.

V. Modern Hebrew Literature and its Global Context

Hebrew language, its history and its literature, which since its revival 150 years ago has acquired a plethora of new words and expressions, becoming one of the world's most fascinating and complex languages, is now the subject of study in respectable universities throughout Europe and the United States.

In the summer of 2012, I was invited to the University of Heidelberg, Germany. I was surprised to find among the students of the highly regarded Department of Hebraic Studies not only Jews, but also non-Jewish Germans, who considered Hebrew culture to be both classical and modern. The same is true of students at the University of Warsaw, Poland, and in universities in France and Italy.

Over that summer, I was visited by a Polish Catholic woman who is writing her dissertation on twenty Hebrew journals published in Poland between the two World Wars. The refined Hebrew that this young, 24-year-old woman spoke, made me happy and sad all at once: happy, because it meant that Hebrew has become a language that one can study professionally, just like French, German, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese; sad, because the same young Polish Catholic woman spoke better and more sophisticated Hebrew than my Israeli students. What is more, this young woman has launched, at her own initiative, a journal for Hebrew culture, in which researchers can publish studies in Hebrew literature and culture in three different languages: Hebrew, English, and Polish.

I was also visited this summer by a young Italian Catholic woman who teaches Hebrew in Rome and is currently writing a book about Hebrew theater in Israel. She introduced me to surprising statistics on the scope of Hebrew studies at major Italian universities in Naples, Venice, Milan, and Rome. By the way, completely by chance, these two young women, the Polish and the Italian, have the same name, Magdalena, a Christian name, which I took as yet another sign that Hebrew culture is being studied and revived not only by Jewish students.

The extent to which Hebrew is studied at American universities is simply enormous, as nowadays any self-respecting university offers a Hebrew studies program. This is true of West Coast universities, for example, in all five campuses of the University of California, including Berkeley and Los Angeles, as well as of the East Coast Ivy League universities, such as Harvard and Princeton. Hebrew is taught also in universities and colleges in the Midwest: in Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin. The subject of Hebraic studies has become so popular in universities in the U.S. and Europe that hundreds of Israelis can be found there and not only students, but professors as well, who have left

their country in order to teach its language and culture elsewhere. This is not only the outcome of Jewish wanderings, but is also due to Israel's small size, which cannot accommodate all those who wish to pursue their interest in Hebraic culture as professional scholars.

Some twenty years ago, I visited the Israeli Academic Center in Cairo, and spoke in Hebrew before an audience of Egyptian students. In fact, a young Egyptian man accompanied us to the banks of the Nile, to see the Sphinx in Giza, and to the pyramids. Throughout the tour, he talked to us about the wonders of Egypt—in perfect Hebrew! For me, none of the Egyptian marvels equaled the miracle of a young Arab Egyptian, who, despite never having been to Israel, spoke a rich and impeccable Hebrew. It made me think of the Israelites, who had left Egypt after 400 years of slavery, and yet the language they spoke was not Egyptian—but Hebrew.

The story of the Tower of Babel in the Hebrew Bible begins with the words: "And all the earth was one language and one set of words" (Genesis 11:1). It can be assumed that the language common to all the people of the world—prior to the human attempt to reach Heaven—was Hebrew. The name of this tower, Babel, comes from the Hebrew word *balbel*, which means to mix or confuse.

When God tries to undermine the human ambition to climb up to the sky, He makes the following utterance in Hebrew: "As one people with one language for all, if this is what they have begun to do, nothing they plot will elude them. Come, let us go down and baffle (*balbel*) their language there so that they will not understand each other's language" (Genesis 11:6–8). God appreciated the enormous power of a single language and decided to confound humanity by giving it numerous languages and a multitude of dialects. Thus, if God hadn't feared the power of an organized human race, all of humanity would have continued to speak the world's earliest language; indeed, all of us here now would be speaking and understanding—Hebrew.

Notes

1) The famous opening verse of the Gospel According to John in the New Testament, "In the beginning was the Word," have served to distinguish Christianity, "the religion of spirit," from Judaism, "the religion of the flesh." It is, of course, a paraphrase on Genesis 1:1 in the Hebrew Bible.
2) Biblical citations are from Robert Alter's *The Five Books of Moses: Translation with Commentary* (New York and London: Norton & Company, 2004).
3) The titles of the English and German translations of Dubnow's Russian original read "world history of the Jews." The Hebrew phrase *'Am 'Olam*, chosen for the title of the Hebrew translation, has a long history reaching back as far as the 5th–6th centuries C.E.; it was adopted by early Zionists such as poet Mordechai Zvi Manne, who entitled a poem on the aspirations of Jewish national revival – *'Am 'Olam*.

4) Benjamin Harshav, *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p.35.
5) On that and other related issues see Robert Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).
6) S.Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday* [Heb. *Tmol shilshom*, 1945], translated by Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
7) Hanna Naveh, *Men and Women Travelers: Travel Narratives in Modern Hebrew Literature* [Heb. *Nos'im venos'ot: Sipurei masa' basifrut haiverit hachadasha*], (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence Publishing House, 2002), pp. 42-43.
8) The short novel *Thus Far* [Heb. *'Ad Henna*, 1950] is not available in English translation. All citations from the original Hebrew are in my translation (N.B-D).
9) In my book *Agnon's Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), I devoted three chapters to *Thus Far*.
10) In the volume *The Continuing Silence of a Poet*: *The Collected Stories of A.B. Yehoshua*, translated by Miriam Arad, Pauline Schrier and Marsha Pomerantz, London: Peter Halban (1988); original Hebrew title: *masa' ha'erev shel yatir*.
11) A.B. Yehoshua, *The Journey to the End of the Millennium* [Heb. *Masa' 'el sof ha'elef*, 1997], translated by Nicholas de Lange, Doubleday (1999).
12) Judith Katzir, *Matisse has the Sun in his Belly*, [Heb. *Lematis yesh et hashemesh babeten*], (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad Publishing, 1995). The novel is not available in English translation. The translation from the original Hebrew is by Orr Scharf.
13) ibid. p. 109.
14) ibid. p. 108.