

The Sycamore Garden

The Myth of Urbanism in Modern Hebrew Literature

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One terrible lesson can be learned from history. Anyone who has studied the history of Rome will know about "the Punic War". [...] How Roman mediocrity overcame the genius that was Carthage. Carthage was a state of cities while Rome was a rural state, and in the desperate battle between this state of cities and the rural state the latter was triumphant. [...]. And we, once again, are building a state of cities, thereby becoming an urban-nation, while all around are peoples rooted in the land – and not just here in Palestine, but throughout the neighbouring countries. [...]. We have the power to build a strong city-state in Tel Aviv and in Haifa, with millions of residents and more, but it will end up like Carthage [...] The same disconnected culture, the same rootlessness, the same dependence upon a hostile rural environment, the same illusory sense of independence. Should we also expect such an end?¹

In 1935, Ben-Gurion used this “terrible lesson” to highlight the challenges faced by Zionism. It appeared that in addition to representing a competition to the village, the city posed a strategic threat to the Jewish “Yishuv” and to the young state. The threat stemmed from two main sources and perspectives: one, a strategic perspective, according to which settlement on the border is needed in order to be able to declare those borders as existing de facto; and two, an ideological perspective, according to which a return to Zion is a return to the body. By returning to the empty, virginal land, the diasporic Galuti Jew would be cast aside, and the Hebrew Biblical man will be rediscovered.²

¹ My translation - as cited in:

צבי אפרת "ישראל כמגלופוליס", בתוך העיר הישראלית, העיר העברית האחרונה? (עודד היילברונר ומיכאל לוין עורכים, תל אביב: רסלינג, 2006), 72-73.

² Ibid.

The city was therefore not merely a symbol of *Galut* malaise, but also represented a direct threat to Zionism.³ As architectural historical research has shown, Zionism was well known for its anti-urbanist approach to regional planning. Unlike rural areas, which were well organized and efficiently planned, there was no clear plan for urban spaces.⁴ After Israel's establishment, this rural approach, combined with the need to absorb large numbers of immigrants, dictated a policy according to which the country would seek to establish medium-sized towns – less urban and cosmopolitan than metropolises. The goal of this town-planning was to create independent, self-sufficient neighborhoods rather than crowding the population in urban centers. These towns thus became kind of “kibbutz-cities”.⁵

What may come as a surprise is that the rural narrative was, in fact, a myth. From the first wave of immigration until the end of the period of the British Mandate, the Jewish population in Palestine was mostly urban. At its peak in the 1940s, the rural population was around 30 percent of the overall Jewish population.⁶ Today, Israel's population is one of the most urban in the Western world, with 92 percent living in urban centers.⁷

How would a young culture deal with the tension between rural ideals and urban realities? In this paper, which is part of a larger project dedicated to an examination of the urban experience in modern Hebrew literature, I will argue that urban nature plays a vital role in this process, and suggest that the plants and gardens in the city have turned Israeli urban space into something more “rural”. In other words, the literary representation of urban green areas can be viewed as a cultural mechanism allowing Israeli culture to bridge the gap between the rural ideal and a reality that is starkly urban.

The city and nature have a complicated relationship. This is true in general but it is particularly true in the case of the history of Zionism. Modern cities, which emerged from the industrial revolution and the urbanization of the 18th and 19th centuries, are evidence of western

³ An alternative vision was Herzl's urban vision. Herzl envisioned the Jewish state as a liberal European state with cities as its cultural and trade centers. Two competing ideologies led to two different types of settlement in the 1930s: the Zionist mainstream focused on agricultural settlements mostly in Jezreel Valley whereas liberal Zionists established Tel-Aviv.

צבי אפרת "ישראל כמגלופוליס", 74; מעוז עזריהו, תל-אביב העיר ה/א/מיתות: מיתוגרפיה היסטורית (שדה-בוקר: מכון בן-גוריון, 2005), 34-40.

⁴ מרדכי זיסמן, השלטון והעיר בארץ ישראל ובמדינת ישראל (תל אביב: טליגרף, 2001), 176.

⁵ אלישע אפרת, "פרולוג: היכן העיר הישראלית?" בתוך עיר ישראלית או עיר בישראל? שאלות של זהות, משמעות ויחסי כוחות (טובי ופנסטר וחיים יעקובי עורכים, תל אביב: מכון ון ליר והקיבוץ המאוחד, 2006), 23-24.

⁶ מרדכי זיסמן, השלטון והעיר בארץ ישראל ובמדינת ישראל, 212.

⁷ United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision* (2019), 39.

civilization's transformation from agrarian to industrial technology, and of rationality's triumph over nature's mystery. But in romanticism, which influenced the Zionist perception of nature, nature itself is depicted as being filled with a kind of childish naivety, full of desires suppressed by urban existence.⁸ While the Enlightenment sought to control nature, Romanticism believed in the psychological identification with it.⁹

Hence, nature in Zionism symbolizes the purity and authenticity of the reborn Hebrew man, who receives a piece of land to “cultivate and preserve”, as all nations do.¹⁰ However, nature in Zionist romanticism is not *only* a sublime object, but also a *wilderness* to be conquered and domesticated according to the needs of the new population. Tel-Aviv, for example, is the city that “arose from the dunes”, that conquered the sand in the same manner as the swamps were defeated in the Jezreel Valley.¹¹ As a result, a tension arises between wild nature and cultivated nature, between the need to dominate nature and the desire to assimilate into it.

But what about the city's own nature? What is its role in urban environments? How does it relate to other types of nature? To begin answering these substantial questions, I will examine an initial case study with specific characteristics: two stories that are set in big cities, Tel-Aviv and Haifa, and narrated by a child character; as nature in Zionism and Romanticism is associated with childhood and rebirth, the voices of children –who are naturally more drawn to green areas than to built-up areas – could become particularly meaningful.

Before reading these stories, we can see an example of the combination between nature, childhood and Zionism in Shlomo Shva's prologue to the famous children's book, *A Little City and a Few Men Within it*, by the Tel-Aviv artist Nahum Gutman. The prologue is titled, not surprisingly, “childhood paradise”:

Achuzat Bait, which is Tel-Aviv – was more than a neighbourhood. It was a Zionist utopia, an example of what the Hebrew-Jewish entity would look like when established in the land. And for the child the new neighbourhood –with its white stone houses rising from out of

⁸ See for example: Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁹ The literary representations of London in the late 19th and early 20th centuries can illustrate this tension: London in Peter Pan (James Matthew Barrie, 1902) is a grey and depressing world for adults, while “Neverland” is a magical and colorful world for children. On the contrary, London of Sherlock Holmes (Arthur Conan Doyle, 1892) is a surface for adventure. The allegedly supernatural mystery is refuted by Holmes using rationality to find clues in urban space.

¹⁰ בעז נוימן, *תשוקת החלוצים* (תל אביב: עם עובד, 2009), 98.

¹¹ מעוז עזריהו, תל-אביב העיר ה[א]מיתית: מיתוגרפיה היסטורית, 59.

the hills, its clean streets, and the small shrubs suddenly appearing along its boulevards – was a kind of childhood dream.¹²

The seedlings appearing along the boulevards help us to imagine the small Tel-Aviv, clean and white, so different from the image of the hectic dusty European city. “A little city and few men within it”. And here is a paragraph by Gutman himself:

The woman [...] takes out from somewhere a pot with a geranium. She takes it in her hands out to the balcony and places it on the railing. It was at this point that the plant, which had some twenty leaves and an inflorescence of red flowers, became a centre. A centre to all the sand dunes around. Suddenly colours appeared: the green and the red in the plant, the yellow of the sand, the blue of the sky and the purple of the shadow. The world became more beautiful and promising of a bright future.¹³

The paradise was created by the harmonious merging of conquered nature – the sand dunes – with domesticated nature – the geranium – creating a new heaven designed by men. Thus, the first Hebrew city is a childhood paradise, a new urban model that derives from the rural ideal. This urban-rural ideal was described in a famous Hebrew song by Yitzhak Yitzhaki and Yohanan Zarai: “The Sycamore Garden” (*Gan ha-shikmim*). Throughout the song, the narrator describes a small Tel-Aviv, surrounded by dunes and sycamores, and mourns its destruction that caused by urban development and growth.¹⁴

This, obviously, is a naïve viewpoint. In contrast to Gutman’s almost perfectly idealized portrayal of urban nature, Nissim Aloni’s 1958 story “Owl” (*Yanshuf*) presents a more complex case. It follows the life of a teenage boy, called “Adrina” by his friends, who lives in mandatory Tel-Aviv, while the Second World War battles are raging in Egypt and Libya in 1941-1942. The story is set in Aloni’s childhood neighbourhood, Wolfson (today Florentin). Aloni, who grew up in Tel-Aviv’s margins, isn’t known for nostalgic writing, lauding the myth of the white and small

¹² שלמה שבא, “גן-עדן של ילדות” בתוך עיר קטנה ואנשים בה מעט (תל אביב: דביר, 1999), 4. (My Translation)

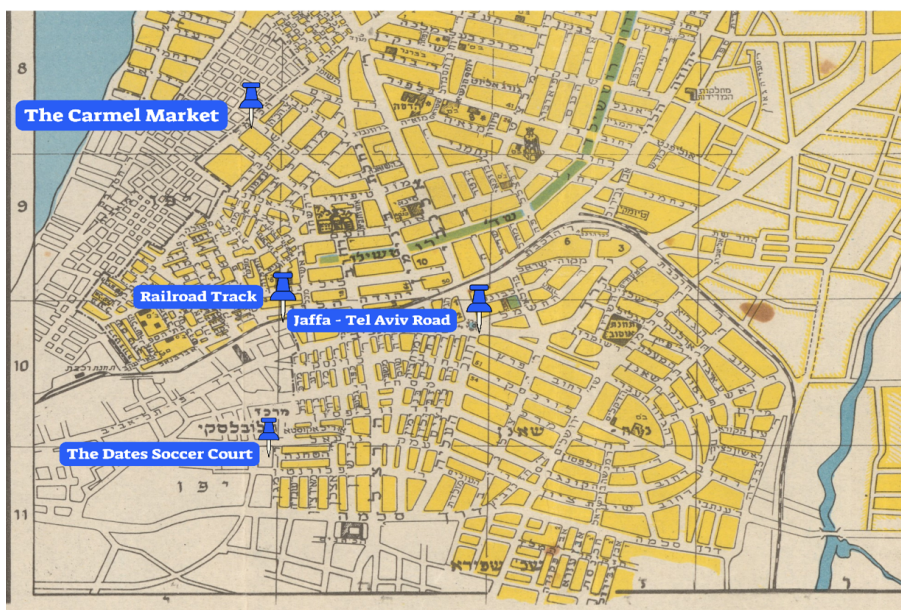
¹³ נחום גוטמן, עיר קטנה ואנשים בה מעט, 10-11. (My Translation)

¹⁴ According to Maoz Azaryahu, the song is a lament about the urban nature of the city when the tree is the dominant symbol of Zionism. Aside from mourning, the poem describes conquering the dunes, a wilderness that should be domesticated.

מעוז עזריהו, תל-אביב העיר ה/א/מיתית: מיתוגרפיה היסטורית, 113.

Tel-Aviv. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see if the representation of the city's nature is somewhat idealized or is presenting something else.

According to Yitzchak Ben-Mordechai, and in accordance with the literary map emerging from the text, the boy divides the world into the familiar and the unfamiliar. The neighborhood and its well-defined boundaries are his habitat.¹⁵ We can see in map no.1 the four places mentioned in the text, the Dates Soccer Court (Migrash Tmarim, an old football stadium in Tel Aviv whose location is debatable) is a potential playground for imaginations and play, but it is not described as heaven since Adrina's friends bullied him there.¹⁶



Map no.1: Owl's literary map

¹⁵ Yitzchak Ben-Mordechai argues that Aloni's writing challenges Walter Benjamin's idea of the flâneur. Benjamin's flâneur strolls through the city streets while experiencing fragmented realities of the modern city. If Benjamin sees the city as a monolithic unit, Aloni's writing distinguishes between different areas of the city, and how walking changes around them.

יצחק בן-מרדכי, "ערים, כמו חלומות, עשויות תשוקות ופחדים" תל-אביב של נסים אלוני (והפלגות קצרות לגורי ושבתיא), מכאן: כתב-עת לחקר הספרות והתרבות היהודית והישראלית, 15 (2015), 55-43.

¹⁶ This map was published in 1948 by Goldschmidt Press. It was taken from the Eran Laor map collection in the National Library of Israel (public domain).

Heaven will be discovered later, during Adrina's wandering outside his neighborhood to explore the other Tel-Aviv, the "unfamiliar", which he does on Saturday, of all days.¹⁷ He walks to the market, which is supposed to be the most hectic and urban place of the city. He observes what happens when people are absent, and the empty market is filled with bees, flies, and cats eating left-over fruits and vegetables. When he doesn't see anyone looking for him, the boy feels left behind, just like those animals. He feels alone again during his second encounter with the unfamiliar, when stumbling upon the crowd returning from a soccer game:

I stood like a thin reed in the water [...] Everything moved around me, above me, behind me, in front of me. Everyone pushed and shoved, knocking me over. [...]

"What was the score?" I shouted over and over, but no one replied.¹⁸

It seems that the "familiar" and the "unfamiliar" are two distinct urban areas: the familiar is the neighborhood which, like a small village, creates a stranglehold from which one must escape if one wants to be different. It might be expected that the unfamiliar would represent the antithesis of that, a place bursting with different opportunities. However, it appears that the unfamiliar is also not urban, as it is entirely empty or filled with a large crowd that prevents Adrina from integrating. Where does the boy find a cure? In the unexpected form of the city's nature; a sort of additional layer to the matrix; an unfamiliar zone, yet one that functions as a miniature paradise, which Adrina discovers after he leaves the market:

A home surrounded by hedges. I picked up a green leaf and put it in my pocket. I walked into the yard and found a water faucet that was dripping drops into a puddle. When I opened the faucet, water sprayed onto my leg and wet my sandals. Bending over, I felt the water's jetstream hit my cheeks and bounce into my eyes. I drank, and while I did so, I noticed a blue sky shining onto the drops that were glittering in the sun.

¹⁷ In the view of Yitzchak Ben-Mordechai, Yakov Shabtai is the classic Tel-Aviv flâneur, while Aloni is not, despite his dominant Tel-Aviv identity. Adrina in "Owl" is also not a flâneur, because he mostly stays among his neighborhood and doesn't explore the unfamiliar. The only time Adrina crossed the border to the unfamiliar, it was a well-planned excursion unlike the spontaneous wandering of the flâneur. Furthermore, while flâneurs are interested in human encounters, Adrina avoids crowds, which is why he leaves on Saturday. The quiet streets intimidate him but also allow him to be aware of his feelings toward the surrounding sights.

¹⁸ נסים אלוני, *הינשוף* (תל אביב: עם עובד, 1996 [1975]), 40-41. (My translation). 43-58, "יצחק בן-מרדכי, 'ערים, כמו חלומות, עשויות תשוקות ופחדים' תל-אביב של נסים אלוני (והפלגות קצרות לגורי ושבתיא)", 43-58.

As I dried my mouth with my hand, I tasted the salty flavour of my flesh. The wind touched my lips and cheeks. “Greenery!” I said. And in a flash the leaf was there in my hand, green, clean, and smooth. It had a dark and bright lamina and a trimmed petiole. I lifted it up to the sun and its fibers resembled green glass fissures in a magic roll.¹⁹

In this coincidental paradise, the city is absent for a moment, and magic happens: Nature, the divine, is revealed in this seemingly simple object, a leaf plucked from the hedge. All senses are active and there is a moment of child omnipotence – saying the word “greenery”, and the leaf appeared. But unlike Gutman’s Tel-Aviv, this is like a sealed capsule in the “no-city” zone, located in “no-place” – there is no way to re-create its entrance and exit, no details that allow us to identify it. It should be noted: this is not a city’s nature in terms of a green space, or a park; it is a leaf, a puddle, a sky, and the sun. As quickly as it appears, the capsule disappears and becomes a divider between the lonely wandering in the absent crowd (in the market) and the lonely wandering in the crowd (after the game).

Although Aloni’s Tel-Aviv is not “the sycamore garden” and is not filled with descriptions of nature, it still contains the idea that nature is the absolute good and the city is emasculating; Adrina’s accidental discovery of paradise is neither the “familiar” space nor the “unfamiliar” space, as it allows him to escape urban existence for a short moment of grace. The maybe not “urban” nature offers some redemption.

A similar perception can also be found in a story by Yehudit Kazir, “Schlafstunde” from 1990. It depicts a forbidden love affair between cousins who spend the summer at their holocaust survivor grandparents’ home in the Carmel Centre neighborhood.

Clearly, Haifa and Tel Aviv are different urban spaces, for a number of reasons. I will mention two important ones: first, unlike Tel-Aviv, Haifa was not established by Zionism. Indeed, it has been transformed by Zionism, but its long history prevents it from being part of the Zionist narrative of building the state from nothing (or, in Hebrew, *יש מאין*). Second, its topography is very different from that of Tel-Aviv. While both are coastal cities, Haifa’s nature is less domesticated due to its mountain and forest landscape.

Chen Bar-Yitzchak argues that Haifa’s natural surroundings serve two distinct functions: first, a harmony between its built-up areas and natural surroundings. Second, nature creates liminal

¹⁹ נסים אלוני, *הינשוך*, 39-40. (My translation)

areas inside the city, allowing marginal behavior.²⁰ Bar-Yitzchak explains how in another Kazir work, nature allows a forbidden lesbian love affair between a student and her female teacher.²¹ Similarly, in "Schlafstunde" the pine woods behind the grandparents' home are used for normal childhood games, as well as for sexual encounters between the cousins.

Yet nature appears not only to be a refuge for forbidden sexual fantasies, but also a critical factor in contrasting Haifa as a city of a Zionist childhood paradise. The importance of the pine woods is emphasized at the heart of the novella, when the narrator and her cousin conduct an oath ceremony where they declare their eternal love:

We closed the shutter on the day and on the cemetery and we made it absolutely dark, and we lit the Yahrzeit candles [...] and we put one hand on the Bible [...] and I looked straight into your eyes [...] and repeated after you, slowly, solemnly:

I swear by God and by the black grave of Hitler [...] I will never marry another woman [/man].. and I will love only you forever.

[...] When it was all ready, you wrapped the glass in the handkerchief, put it on the floor and stamped on it hard with your bare foot. The glass broke and a big spot of blood spread over the cloth. You dipped your finger in it and signed your name under the oath. Now you, you said. I [...] picked up a piece of glass and scratched my big toe hard [...] squeezed a drop of blood onto my finger and signed a shaky signature next to your name. then we wrote the date [...] and the exact address, the Presidents' Boulevard, Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel, Middle East, Continent of Asia, Earth, Solar System, Galaxy, Cosmos.²²

Thus, the pine woods are sacred as the center of the world, of creation. Moreover, the oath on Hitler's grave is an unconscious act of Zionist redemption: the Holocaust's third generation can make the ghost of the past funny and absurd. The sense of security in the place, unlike the past vulnerable "Wandering Jew", combined with the sexual contact, the blood, and the oath's letters, celebrate the place as eternal.

²⁰ חן בר-יצחק, מרחב מעורב: חיפה בספרות העברית (שדה בוקר: מכון בן-גוריון, בדפוס), 108-109.
²¹ שם, 113.

²² Yehudit Katzir, "Schlafstunde" in *Closing the Sea* (Barbara Harshav trans., New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2006), 19-20.

Understanding the pine wood's symbolic place in the story requires an understanding of the entire text's literary map.²³



Map no.2: "Schlafstunde"'s literary map

We can discern in map no.2 five main areas: first, the grandfather's house and the woods behind it. Three of the other areas are: the Hadar neighborhood, the train station and the Bat Galim neighborhood. I will examine the fifth area soon, but for now, it seems that this spread on the map has a significance; despite mainly taking place in the pine wood, and only briefly passing through the other areas, their presence makes the story dominate the entire city, and form the basis for the childhood story. The Holy of Holies is therefore not an abstract space but a well-defined area in

²³ This map was published in 1959 by Haifa's mapping department. It was taken from the Eran Laor map collection in the National Library of Israel (public domain).

the Israeli, Haifa context. The pine woods become a model of an Israeli, secular and Zionist new Jerusalem that combines the ground and the skies, when the woods are the holy of holies and stand at Haifa's highest peak. To put it simply, though Haifa wasn't built by Zionism, according to this story, what shaped it into a Zionist urban model was its dominant nature. (It is noteworthy that Haifa's Arab population is never mentioned in the story.)

The fifth area of the map is Hof Carmel's old cemetery, where the cousins and their families gather for their grandfather's funeral. Interestingly, the cemetery is second in size to the woods in the plot. Thus, Haifa exists only in childhood and in death. The funeral also reflects the death of Haifa's childhood paradise: the narrator meets her cousin's pregnant wife, and then discovers that the city plans to build a fancy tower on the site of the grandparents' house and the woods. The narrator thinks in a Freudian manner: "the ground, which can't still be holding all we buried there. It will split open and the high-rise will crack and collapse."²⁴ In fact, by domesticating the holy place and making it urban, suppressed sexual and religious desires emerge.

There is a complex relationship between place, nature, and city in both stories presented here. A little urbanity is allowed in Aloni's story, whereas almost none is in Kazir's. While Aloni's reveals urban nature for a moment, Kazir's gives it the status of a Zionist paradise where one can merge with the divine. This is the Zionist anti-urban approach. It seems that at least based on these two stories, Ben Gurion can rest in peace, since we are definitely characterized as a rural nation, even in our cities.

²⁴ Yehudit Katzir, "Schlafstunde" (trans. Barbara Harshav; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich publisher, 1992), 29.