Forever Engaged, Never Married, to the Land of Israel

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Zionism was not a marriage with the land of Israel. Marriage is the enemy of yearning, and the success of Zionism depended on keeping that yearning alive.

A wedding ceremony is bound up with loss. Loss not only of a bachelor's freedom, but of his beloved, as well, in a ritual that transforms her into his wife. The glass smashed under the wedding canopy is not the only thing shattered at a wedding; the wedding itself marks a shattering of sorts. Desire, having swelled for months or even years, inevitably crashes, wavelike, against the safe shores of family life. That is the joy. That is the sorrow. A man and a woman once aflame with desire now lie down together to rest.

To marry a lover is to separate from her. As it is written in Genesis, "And it came to pass in the morning, behold, it was Leah." Jacob's palpable disappointment in the replacement of his lover is experienced by most not as a contradiction between two women, but as the sudden, depressing metamorphosis of the woman who has been so desired until the wedding night into Leah—that is, into a wife—in the morning.

She did not suddenly grow ugly or old; hers is the same body that appeared in hundreds of his dreams. But now she is his, and one can hardly long for what one already possesses.

Two thousand years of exile enabled the Jewish people to labor for Rachel, but never wake up in the morning with Leah. "Next year in Jerusalem!" cried the Jews, their longing for the land of Israel a perpetually deferred engagement. Each year was next year. Like Beethoven's passionate letter to his "Immortal Beloved," Jewish prayer forever reinforced the distance so essential to keeping the thirst for Zion alive.

Every beloved is distant; it is thus that she is beloved. She is "there," not here, "then," not now. Tristan and Isolde did their utmost to forestall their union; only they, in the end, disallowed it. The medieval troubadours of Spain and France chose a life of eternal craving: Unilateral devotion to the wives of lords and counts, who were, from the outset and forever, unattainable. Romeo and Juliet desired unto their death, and yet in their death escaped desire's fulfillment. While Shakespeare provides a plausible justification, plot-wise, for their double suicide, is it not possible that he in truth serves up this melodramatic ending to release them from what really frightened him, and them—the "happy ending" of marriage?

This is the essential structure of Western desire: Yearning on one hand, and marriage on the other. One must marry, since procreation is the way of all flesh. Yet, it is not via marriage that a man finds relief from the humiliating prison of his biological urges. Perhaps a physical, base form of "happiness" was indeed the whole story in the ancient world; in the new, Western narrative, however, "this world" was pitted against "the world to come," and man, in turn, divided into a "body" and a "soul." The pagan notion of immanence is, in fact, precisely what the fathers of Western thought sought to overturn. Plato defied this notion in his Theory of Forms, which holds that our sensory world is but a paltry shadow of an ideal realm; the Gnostics challenged it through their belief that an evil god, whom they called the demiurge, created the physical world, including the vile flesh of the humans who populate it.

It is the soul's task, the Gnostics argued, to free itself from the prison of the flesh, and return from earthly exile to its source in the one, true God. The early Christians balked at immanence when they conceived of life as death, and death (the "Kingdom of Heaven") as life in the world to come.

In Athens, in the secret caves of mystics in Iran and Judea, and in Nazareth, Western culture was born as a culture of yearning, of alienation from nature, of utter contempt for the relief of bodily urges. And when Constantine converted to Christianity in the fourth century, establishing that faith as the dominant religion of the West, the rift between longing and marriage, "Nature" and "Grace," only deepened.

It was then that "happiness" came to mean something different—and with it, the concept of love. If "this world" was no longer understood to be the whole world, but merely the corrupt one, marred by human existence, then succumbing to one's desires is not happiness, but suffering; if flesh is not man in his entirety, but merely his unholy shell, attachments of the flesh (via the socially sanctioned institution of marriage) are not love, but the slavish satisfaction of man's basest desires.

True, Christianity—monks and nuns notwithstanding—never criticized the institution of marriage outright. Yet the Church's most pronounced legacy to the culture of the West—the division of "body" and "soul," needs and yearning—condemned marriage to the lesser, earthly axis, as opposed to the higher, spiritual one. "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's," said Jesus, "and unto God what are God's"; give Nature what it demands of your worldly body through the acts of marriage and childbearing, and give God your *soul*.

Judaism was born amidst this same cultural revolution. True, Judaism's biblical, monotheistic forebears, such as Moses and the prophets, had already rejected immanence in favor of transcendence. Yet the Hebrew Bible viewed "this world" as the realm of redemption. Nowhere does the Bible speak of a "Kingdom of Heaven" beyond the world man inhabits. Reward and punishment for earthly deeds are doled out during one's lifetime, since

earthly life is the only one acknowledged. "For dust you are, and to dust you will return": There is neither paradise nor hell for the souls of the righteous and the sinners. Biblical man has no transcendent "soul," trapped in an unclean body.

There is no life after death. Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the dry bones—bones that return to life—is not a messianic "resuscitation of the dead," as it was often interpreted; it is in fact a mere allegory. "Thus said the Eternal," Ezekiel prophesied: "Behold, I am opening your graves and raising you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to the soil of Israel." The "graves" of which Ezekiel speaks are the lands of the exile, and the "raising up" of the dead the return of the nation of Israel to their homeland. Indeed, even if we were to read this passage, as does Maimonides, as a literal resurrection, what the text describes is a physical return to life, not the rebirth of a "soul" independent of a body. Like the rest of his biblical contemporaries, Ezekiel was not familiar with the concept of the "immortal soul."

In the Bible, it is here, in the flesh and among nature, that man must choose between good and evil (for not all that is earthly is evil, as Christianity maintained). The land of the Bible—the land of Israel—is the scene of an endless contest between various moral, cultural, and religious alternatives. In this land, for instance, walked the believer Abraham, but also the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah; this is the world of the sensitive, merciful Saul of Benjamin, as well as of the brutal rapists of Giv'a (Benjaminites like him). In this land dwelled Jacob, a loving, doting father; so, too, dwelled Jephthah, who sacrificed his own daughter, and the countless others who surrendered their children to Molech. This land also produced the righteous Naomi, and the murderess Jezebel, and contained both a temple to God and several to Baal, Ashtoreth, and Dagon. This land was the site of them all, and it was here, and here alone, that biblical man was forced to shape the outcome of his life. There was no recompense to be had on the other side of the grave.

But it was during the first Babylonian exile, following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, that the nation of Israel was transformed from what Friedrich Schiller describes as a "naïve" culture, based in physical matter, to a "sentimental" one, which yearns for the past and seeks spiritual escape from the present. Ezekiel's dry-bones vision marks this transformation's conclusion.

During the Second Temple period, the nation of Israel absorbed four hundred years of Hellenism, under the influence of which it became the "Jewish" people. The biblical nation state was now a national religion that did not require a state. It did not, it must be noted, become a cosmopolitan religion (that was Christianity's innovation, later adopted by Muhammad). But Judaism, even while still centered in the land of Israel, nonetheless turned into a religion that was fundamentally extra-territorial.

Years before the destruction of the Second Temple, Jewish life prospered in Babylon and Alexandria, and the land of Israel, no longer the Jewish nation's exclusive land, could not even claim to be its principal one, either. That distinction had already been conceded to cultural and halachic communities in the diaspora. This development can be seen as merely a continuation of the "exile in the land": The transfer of Jewish scholarship and intellectual life from Jerusalem to Yavneh following the Second Temple's destruction. Soon, all Jews—those who accepted the authority of the Pharisees, as well as that small minority that crafted a new religion from the teachings of the rabbi from Nazareth—ceased to experience "this world" as a redemptive realm. Instead, they began to attend to the redemption of the soul.

And thus the wife turned back into a lover. The Jews recaptured a feeling of distance from their land, along with the desire that distance invariably brings. *And it came to pass in the morning, behold, it was Rachel*: Idealized, undemanding, free of all responsibility toward her.

In Babylon, in Sana'a, in Lublin, the Jewish people was a bachelor writing love letters to the woman of its dreams. "Zion, my innocent, Zion, my beloved, for you my soul yearns from afar," wrote Menahem Mendel Dolitzki.

Jewish life in exile was harsh; in Europe, it was beset with violence. Still, the Jewish people preferred to wander the earth, persecuted and pursued by all, than to settle down in the land of Israel. In this way, the exile was at once both cruel and comfortable, torturous and tempting. How else to explain the fact that, despite countless opportunities during the two-thousand-year exile to return to the land of Israel, all of them were "missed"? True, notable individuals such as Maimonides, R. Judah Halevi, Nahmanides, Rabbi Nahman of Breslav, and R. Alkalai came to the land of Israel during various periods in history. Yet the fact of these individuals' return to the land only serves to emphasize how possible—indeed, how relatively *easy*—the return to Zion was, should the Jewish people have sought to do so. Either way, these individuals were the exception. Moreover, even these figures' journeys resembled brief pilgrimages more than permanent emigrations.

Even those Jews who lived in the land of Israel were not particularly concerned with the ingathering of exiles. The community that developed around R. Luria in Safed in the sixteenth century, for example, busied itself foremost with the Kabbala, choosing mystical matters over practical ones. What's more, R. Luria's Kabbalistic interpretation of historical events attributed a spiritual meaning to the exile, thereby excusing it, even helping to prolong it. Kabbala maintained that when the world was created, matter, unable to withstand the force of light, shattered into billions of pieces. Since that time, shards of light have remained hidden or trapped in chunks of matter (shells), and it is the mission of the Jewish people to free them. It is for this reason that the Jewish people was scattered among the nations; the exile, according to this thinking, was not a punishment, but a mission in

tikun olam, repairing the world. And, since there were countless shards still in need of liberation, the end of the exile—if it indeed had an end—was not discernible to the Kabbalists.

A century later, the Sabbatean movement, employing R. Luria's model as a literal action plan for redemption, caused through its failure a severe backlash toward the very idea of Jews playing an active role in ending the exile. This backlash, in turn, was the source of the Hasidic movement, which replaced the figure of the messiah with that of the *tzadik*, or righteous Jew, and believed that national redemption would be achieved through the performance of *gemilut hasadim*, good deeds—and not, significantly, through the en masse movement of the Jewish people to the Promised Land. To the hundreds of halachic, midrashic, and mystical reasons the Jews had accrued over the years to excuse their entrenchment in the diaspora, then, the Hasidim had added another nail in the coffin of the notion of the return to Zion. The Jews had come to terms with the exile.

Indeed, it was in the diaspora that the Jews wished to remain eternally, quite content to repair the world from Sadigora, Plonsk, and Kotzk. In fact, if not for the infiltration of secular thought into the Jewish ghettos of Europe, the people of Israel would likely have never left. After all, the Zionist impetus was European, not Jewish. The ingredients of Zionism—higher education, secularization, nationalism, and socialism, not to mention anti-Semitism—were all products of nineteenth-century European culture, and did not spring from the wells of Judaism. The Jews who created the modern Zionist movement did so in the wake of Garibaldi, Bismarck, and the other European visionaries and leaders who established the concept of the modern nation state. Those among them who perceived Zionism as a means toward the creation of a utopian society did so in the wake of European socialism, and not so much as a result of their reading of the prophets or the rabbinic literature.

The nineteenth century, with all its "isms"—romanticism, industrialism (and its result, socialism), progressivism, particularistic nationalism (which replaced universalism as the enlightened ideal), colonialism (which

oppressed nations, and thereby expedited their unification)—was, for the Jews, a howling wind of change from which the stifling, bleak culture of exile could provide no shelter.

Ideologically speaking, it must be noted, Zionism was actually two distinct movements. "Rational (or political)" Zionism, identified with Theodor Herzl, sought to solve the "Jewish problem." Ben-Gurion's brand of Zionism, by contrast, sought to solve the problem of Judaism. If we concede that the Jews' real problem was the former—that is, the state of being homeless, helpless, and hunted—then self-determination in the land of Israel is not an identity-change operation, but rather a life-saving surgery, the alternative being the extinction of the Jewish people. If, however, the problem was in fact the latter, then the purpose of Zionism is not only a return to the land of Israel, but to a pre-Jewish, land-based national identity.

Herzl's colonialist vision, as set forth in *Altneuland*, described a kind of European utopia almost touching in how utterly removed it was from an awareness of the local realities or symbolic freight of the actual land of Israel. Ben-Gurion's neo-biblical view, on the other hand, yielded various, nearly Canaanite pronouncements on the Jews' identity as "Children of the Land," the most famous (and dubious) of which is the now-legendary opening line of Israel's Declaration of Independence: "The land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people."

Were Zionism to have exclusively followed Herzl's quixotic, Viennese model, the return to Zion would have been nothing more than exile deluxe; the Jewish state, had it been built along the lines of *Altneuland,* would have been a foreign transplant in the body of the land. Similarly, had the Zionist settlement movement been modeled entirely on Ben-Gurion's native-roots notion, the return to Zion would not have redeemed Judaism, but rather extinguished it in favor of what the state's first prime minister conceived of as "Hebrewism."

Fortunately, despite crowning Herzl the visionary and Ben-Gurion the unquestioned leader, neither of their approaches won out in the end. Most Zionist pioneers realized something both men did not: That it was

impossible to settle in the land of Israel without falling deeply in love with it once more, and that the Jews' love affair with that land would never—indeed, must never—lead to marriage.

The Zionist choice was neither Rachel nor Leah, neither bachelorhood nor marriage, but something in between. It was a relationship defined by the tension between yearning and its fulfillment in matrimony. It was an eternal engagement to the land of Israel, with no wedding date in sight.

No other nation has chosen this kind of relationship to its homeland, or to experience its country in this manner. This is the secret of the Zionist enterprise: A status vis-à-vis the land that speaks to one's level of commitment and responsibility, while at the same time allows—even insists upon—intense desire. Notably, while this relationship may not have been formulated consciously, and was in all likelihood more the result of hardship and fear than ideological clarity, it was nonetheless one that reflected the biblical approach to the land of Israel.

And what was that approach? The land of Israel, as established in the Bible (and contrary to Ben-Gurion's pronouncements), is not the birthplace of the Jewish people. If anything, that distinction goes to Ur of the Chaldeans, where the Jewish patriarch Abraham was born. Nor is the land of Israel ever described in the Bible as the "mother" or "father" of the Jewish people, or as its wife (it is not for the Jewish, or any other, people to "possess" the land of Israel—that honor goes to the Master of the Universe alone). Rather, the Jewish people's relationship to the land is formulated in the Bible as a covenant, and not as an automatic, organic kind of belonging.

This covenant may best be understood as a type of rental agreement, with the requisite stipulations determined by every landlord in order to protect his property. "If you heed my laws and my commandments and practice no abominations," says subsection 'c,' "the land will not eject you as it did the nation which came before you." The nation of Israel was clearly not of the land's flesh and blood, like the seven nations who were its true natives.

Nor did the land of Israel and the nation of Israel belong to one another in some fatalistic fashion. The nation was to live there, always mindful of its status as renter.

Most nations do enjoy ownership rights to their lands; this ownership is pagan. A nation's view of itself as master of its own domain justifies, even encourages, the exploitation of that land for the fulfillment of the nation's desires. This view—arguably the natural one—is quite the reverse of the biblical rental contract, which sought to create in the land of Israel a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation"—that is, one that runs counter to nature, and contrary to the tendency to take things for granted.

In initiating an eternal engagement, the biblical covenant required a sense of commitment on the part of the Jewish people akin to that felt by a fiancé toward his lover. Thus it is not coincidental that this pledge of loyalty on the part of the Jews was exacted in the no man's land between the exile and the land of Israel: The desert. For the desert is not a place in itself, but rather a corridor from one place to another. In this, the desert is the very embodiment of an engagement, with the Tabernacle serving as a type of portable wedding canopy.

Nor, for that matter, was it by chance that the journey was one of extended stops and stays, spanning years and even generations, or that the children of Israel were named for the ultimate fiancé, Jacob, whose longing for Rachel made his many years of servitude seem "like mere days." The national story begs comparison with that of Jacob and Rachel: Both are narratives of an extended engagement, defined by intense longing and forced separation.

This analogy between personal betrothal and the national story is expressly written in the book of Hosea: "And I will betroth you to me forever. Yes, I will betroth you to me in righteousness, in justice, in loving-kindness, and in compassion, and I will be faithful to you, and you will know the Eternal." And I will betroth you to me forever: This engagement was never intended to end in a marriage, but instead to remain an engagement for all eternity. For the engagement, and not the wedding—the commitment

without ownership, the desire without its fulfillment—is the pact that prevents stagnation. A husband's lot is the routine of possession; that of the fiancé, of Eros.

This approach, again, is far from bachelorhood; Eros here is not carefree. On the contrary, an engagement to the land of Israel was an expression of solemn responsibility, one that the nation of Israel took upon itself when it settled there. No previous nation had taken this responsibility upon itself, having (mistakenly or sinfully) viewed itself as the owner of the land. Just as the single life is devoid of responsibility, so, too, is that of the owner, who sees himself as accountable to no one else. This arrogance of possession was characteristic of pagan civilization from Sumer to Ramses, and in our day, as Heidegger noted in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology," of modern industrial culture, as well, which shows little regard for nature and its non-renewable resources.

The Bible loathes this approach. From its very first chapters, the story of Adam rejects the idea of ownership over nature: God designates man a gardener in Eden, whose job is "to work it and to keep it." Indeed, he is forbidden from eating of certain of the garden's fruits, emphasizing the fact of his limited rights to the land in which he resides. Here the focus is on man's responsibilities, as opposed to his desires, a distinction the Bible makes time and again, from the story of Adam through that of Abraham.

God prefers the gift of Abel the shepherd to that of Cain the farmer, because a shepherd's life is defined by responsibility, not exploitation. The shepherd gives to his flock—by caring for it, protecting it from harm, and guiding it to grazing land—and the flock, in turn, provides him with milk and wool. It is a humble life of give and take, of subordinating one's desires to one's duties. The farmer, on the other hand, treats the land as his own, as available for his use. He does not show kindness to the land, but rather plunders it. It is no surprise, then, that throughout the Bible, shepherds and tent-dwellers are presented as beloved by God, while those engaged in agriculture, such as the Canaanites, are presented as defilers of the land on account of their belief in their ownership of it.

The story of the flood is yet another case of responsibility. Noah was saved because he was needed as a savior. The building of the ark was not his own, selfish idea, but rather God's command. In contrast to Noah's ark, the tower of Babel manifests the vain approach of technology-oriented civilizations such as that of Abraham's homeland.

If an artist draws a sketch and thinks it substandard, he may rip it up and throw it away; it was his—who would dare reprimand him? Driving your car, you may leave trash on the floor, fill the air with cigarette smoke, or shout into your cell phone: Your car is your castle. However, if you are an art gallery owner, the sketches on the wall are not yours; they are entrusted to your care, and even if you detest them, you must guard them vigilantly.

Abraham—like the entire nation of Israel, later on—entered the land of Israel as if it were a gallery or a bus. He viewed the land as a subject entrusted to his care, and not an object for his possession. Thus did he sanctify the land, transforming it into his betrothed.

An eternal engagement to the land of Israel, and not the bachelor's life in exile—this was the biblical alternative to the pagan notion of ownership. This way of thinking was reflected in the private sphere, in the way men and women were betrothed and married during biblical and, more notably, talmudic times. The oral tradition not only established a ceremony for the institution of engagement, which was completely distinct from that of matrimony; it also made the former institution the more important of the two. The sophistication of the ancient dowry, to the extent that it entailed the drawing up of a detailed marriage contract (*ketuba*) and the establishment of a waiting period until its implementation, made betrothal and not marriage the primary expression of commitment. The wedding was viewed as merely a final seal of approval.

What the synagogue is to the Tora, the wedding canopy was to the marriage contract: A place in which to read it aloud, in public, and confirm its contents. At the betrothal feast, held a year prior, the women of the community would announce the bride's engagement, and during the course of

the following year, her fiancé would send her gifts. Thus was she considered a "bride on hold," enjoined to revel in her betrothed status for an extended period before the wedding itself.

"When God brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like dreamers," it is written in Psalms. "Then our mouths will be filled with laughter, and our tongues with singing." In other words, the return to Zion is a dreamed-of, longed-for event, not a realistic one in the here and now. In the present reality, we find joy not in the marriage itself, but rather in its anticipation.

"Those who sow in tears," Psalm 126 continues, "will reap with songs of joy." Tears, joy—both have their place, and their time, in the narrative of the Jewish nation, just as both have their place and their time at the Jewish marriage ceremony. In talmudic times, the Jewish bride and groom were considered royalty for a day. They wore crowns, gold if they were wealthy, and laurels or roses if not. The tradition of making the bride and groom happy at their wedding achieved the status of a *mitzva*, or commandment, the details of which were debated by the schools of Hillel and Shamai ("How should one dance before a bride?").

There were, however, those among the sages who wished to restrain displays of unbridled joy at weddings. R. Ashi was enraged by the extreme delight expressed by the guests at his son's wedding, and pointedly shattered a glass before them. The adoption of this strange act into the Jewish wedding tradition should give us pause.

R. Ashi understood that in joy, there is also sorrow, and that joy itself is a type of sorrow. It is little wonder, then, that his insight was incorporated into the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony, and that it acquired national significance: The remembrance of the destroyed Temple. "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem," as it is written. The Jewish wedding, then, is a ceremony predicated on opposites. Shattering a glass takes on two meanings at once: A couple is formed, and also broken, as in the creation myth of the Kabbalists.

It is this moment of shattering that the Zionist pioneers sought to avoid.

The Zionist slogan, "A people without a land for a land without a people," was, needless to say, callous in its disregard for the country's Arab inhabitants. And yet, despite a goodly portion of self-absorbed, nationalistic myopia, the catch phrase expressed, in a fairly straightforward manner, what the pioneers of the early twentieth century saw upon their arrival: Not a land empty of people, but a land devoid of love—a neglected, mostly unsettled and unworked land, a land that—especially when compared to the landscapes of Europe—was quite simply a wilderness.

And it was precisely this wilderness that so moved them. It was not the beauty of the land that stirred their imaginations, but quite the opposite: Its sun-bleached nakedness, its rash of rocky fields, its deserts of thorns and shrubs and bramble. The romantics among them fell to their knees, besotted, at the feet of this primeval nude; the modernists attempted to dress her in a cloak of cement. Either way, the land's suitors were inflamed as a lover at the first sight of his beloved's body—not as a husband, whose wife's body is familiar territory.

In the 1920s, poets as disparate in their political outlook as Abraham Shlonsky and Uri Tzvi Greenberg wrote ecstatic poetry praising the bare and sweltering landscape they discovered between the Jordan Valley and Beit She'an, in the tents of the "Labor Corps." Ardent Zionists from the philosopher A.D. Gordon to the painter Mordechai Ardon were also stricken upon their arrival with "a harsh clarity that stabs you in the eye," as Gordon described in his "Letter from the land of Israel": An almost unbearable amount of light, for which Europeans such as they—Europeans who had longed for Zion from within the dark, cold landscapes of home—were wholly unprepared.

It was under cover of night, not by the light of Kibbutz Degania's scalding sun, that Gordon's pen bore its best fruit. Ardon, who upon his arrival was entranced by the glare of scorched earth and baking desert, dropped the subject matter soon after in favor of the mystical, symbolic forest, rendered

in a dark palate of deep blues, hunter greens, and burgundy, from which emanated, as if through darkened glass, a hidden, supernatural light. The Jew in Ardon prevailed over the Zionist in him. If there were no actual trees in the parched, arid land, he would simply paint imaginary trees, as they might appear in mystical, Kabbalistic spheres. Instead of painting the land of Israel as it was, Ardon gathered his vision back into the safe, dimly lit folds of its exilic imagination.

"Bird on my window perching / Returned from the land of the sun," wrote the eighteen-year-old Haim Nahman Bialik. When he authored "Land of the Sun," he had no idea what Israeli heat was. "In the sun-land," he wrote, "spring never dies."

Spring, not summer. The warm caress of May on the boulevards of Odessa: That's what young Bialik knew of heat. When he moved to Palestine thirty-three years later, it quickly became clear that combining the adjectives "lovely" and "hot" needed qualification. "That is no country for old men," wrote William Butler Yeats of another fantasy land, and there was many a young Zionist pioneer who wondered the same about his own.

"My hearth and home, poor land of beauty—the queen has no home, the king no crown, seven days in the year, Spring, and all the rest, rain and storm," wrote the poet Leah Goldberg in an ode to her beloved land. But if it is indeed the land of Israel to which she addresses her love song, then the land of Israel bears a striking resemblance to Lithuania: The spring "never dies." Like in Bialik's fantasy, Goldberg's spring merely scatters the clouds for one measly week a year; the rest is an endless rainy season. Clearly, Goldberg longed for rainstorms. The encounter with the light and the heat of the land of Israel was, for her, an experience much like jumping into a frying pan. The Zionists of Europe dreamed of the hot, lovely land of Israel—then stumbled into a summer meant only for the likes of snakes, goats, and scorpions.

In this beloved land of hers, there is no house, and no crown, for crowns are for brides and grooms, and a house is for a man and his wife. There is only a betrothed couple, whose marriage has not yet been consummated.

It is a couple on paper alone—the paper of the marriage contract, and the paper of the poem, in which stanzas, not houses, are built.

"In my beloved land, the almond tree blossoms, in my beloved land, a guest is awaited, seven maidens, seven mothers, seven brides at the gate." Goldberg's almond tree blossoms in winter, first among the flowers. It is for this, its wintriness, that she chose it: The act of blooming, for her, always occurred against a blustery backdrop. And who is the guest in her poem? Not Elijah, not the messiah, or some ambiguous, abstract national savior; rather, the young women, the mothers, and the brides (in groups of seven, like the seven days of warmth in the previous poem) await a young man, a groom.

But do they really want the groom to arrive? Are they ready for a wedding? The poem closes with a quote from Song of Songs: "I was asleep, but my heart was awake, the guest passes by my house. In the light of morning, in the courtyard, a single stone rolls." In the Song of Songs, the young woman tells of her lover come to see her:

> I was asleep, but my heart was awake. It is the voice of my beloved who knocks: "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled; for my head is filled with dew, and my hair with the dampness of the night."

And how does she answer? "I have taken off my robe. Indeed, must I put it on? I have washed my feet. Indeed, must I soil them?" In other words, sorry, dear, but I'm too tired to get out of bed, get dressed, put on my shoes, and open the door for you. Our young suitor must no doubt be praised for trying again: "My beloved thrust his hand in through the latch opening. My heart pounded for him." Finally, then, he succeeds in arousing her desire: "I rose up to open for my beloved. My hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the lock. I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had turned away, and was gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer." When he wanted her, she rejected him with frivolous excuses; now she yearns for him, and it is his turn to be evasive. Is this not exactly as she preferred? Lovesickness to love, longing to marriage?

If there is one basic fact regarding the return to Zion that must be borne in mind before and after any metaphysical, poetic, or ideological-nationalistic discussion of the matter, it is this: The return to Zion occurred prior to the invention of air conditioning.

The air conditioner, which marks its seventy-fifth birthday this year, arrived in the Israeli household only forty years later, and even then, and for some time, was still very much a luxury. Yet summer in Israel without air conditioning is hell. And so it was in this hell that Metulla and Gadera, Afula and Hadera, Tel Aviv and Tel Yosef were all founded. The true heroism of the builders of the state is not to be found in the events showcased in history books, but rather in the day-to-day, year-to-year existence in a subtropical climate radically different than any they had experienced before. We, the heirs to their legacy, cannot possibly fathom the hardships of such an existence, as we've never had to experience a summer without air conditioning.

Natan Alterman, like Leah Goldberg, built air conditioning from words. He wrote of forests, lightning, mountain inns—the elements of the landscapes of his childhood in Warsaw, his youth in Kiev, and his manhood in Nancy. And his Israeli audience, desperate for even the slightest breeze, the smallest hint of shade, devoured his wooded, nocturnal, and wintry words, steeped in their melancholy Gothic ballads.

"Since you took me by storm, forever I shall sing for you." Alterman chose to play the troubadour, to devote himself eternally to an unrequited love: "My prayer asks for nothing, my prayer says only: Oh, you."

I ask nothing of you (except, perhaps, permission to sing for you.) And you, in turn, ask nothing of me. Who is the "you" of the poem, to whom this desire is directed? Perhaps a woman, perhaps a muse. Or perhaps, if we catch the allusion in the poem's fourth stanza, the land of Israel: "To the bounds of sadness, to the wellsprings of the night, down the long and empty iron streets, My God commanded me, majesty to your babes, from my great poverty, nuts and raisins."

Almonds and raisins are like Yiddish to Hebrew: They are the diaspora perception of the land of Israel. In the cities of Europe, "The moon is on fire," and "the moist firmament thunders its cough," but in the land of Israel, it is the sun, not the moon, which is fiery, and the skies are wet from the sweltering heat, not from the cold of winter.

Alterman's *Stars Outside* (1938) is the most popular and canonical book of poetry in Israel, and "Never-Ending Meeting" its most famous poem. Yet, the language is not *of* the land of Israel. Indeed, it is precisely the most "Israeli" poem because it was written *to* the land of Israel, not *from* it (although it was, in fact, written *in* it). It is the most Israeli poem because it is the song of a stranger, an immigrant; to be an Israeli is to be one who walks (*holech*) the land, and not one who rules it (*molech*). This poem is a *ketuba*, defining the relationship of Jews to their land.

In the same year that Alterman offered us almonds and the raisins, the literary journal *Turim* published its opposite, negative image. The poet Yonatan Ratosh sent it by mail from Paris, where he lived at the time, hard at work on his first compilation, *Black Canopy*. When it was published three years later, it had more resonance than influence: It caused a stir among some, although for the general reader, it was no "Never-Ending Meeting."

Ratosh proposed a marriage with the land of Canaan. Not a *ketuba*, but a full-fledged canopy. True, readers at the time were excited by, even enamored of, his ancient, hypnotic Hebrew. But only a few, then and since, have identified with its contents. The Semitic, Ratoshian option remained the mirage of those few Jewish Israelis who became estranged from Judaism, and thus never succeeded in becoming Israelis. *Black Canopy* can be read as Canaanite substitutes for the traditional seven benedictions of the Jewish wedding ceremony. "Remorse" ("*Al Het,*" literally, "On Sin") is the only poem in this collection that contains a speck of Jewish content, albeit one with overtones of subversion. The first stanza ends with the words "the tune of *Lecha Dodi*," a reference to the well-known, erotic-mystical hymn of Jewish liturgist Shlomo Alkabetz, colleague and companion of R. Luria: "Let us go, my beloved, to greet the bride." As in "Never-Ending Meeting,"

"Remorse" speaks to someone who is absent, though it does not inform us who this someone is. Unlike Alterman's poem, however, which pines for the unattainable from afar, "Remorse" describes carnal love in a sweltering, baking land, as imagined from the cold, austere streets of Paris. Ratosh, in his exile, yearned for a heat wave, much as Alterman, in Tel Aviv, longed for air conditioning.

The beauty of Ratosh's poem lies in the sin of sexual pleasure for pleasure's sake, and of the pagan-like worship of the physical: Of the body, and of the land. But it was Alterman, not Ratosh, who won the hearts of the Zionist enterprise in Israel, for it was Alterman who recognized that this enterprise could be one not of total symbiosis with the land, but rather of longing for it while longing for an air-conditioned refuge from its heat. The return to Zion, he knew, was no wedding.

Alterman and Ratosh were both Romantics. The difference between them was the disparity between Romanticism's two opposing attitudes, which were presented in a collection of poems that defined the entire movement: William Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Wordsworth, in the tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was overwhelmed by nature's beauty, and wrote of his communion with it; Coleridge felt uneasy with nature, writing of its awesome, often frightening, power. Wordsworth saw nature as an ethereal, feminine entity, an all-embracing Mother Earth; Coleridge experienced it as a monstrous stranger, an omnipresent reminder of man's insignificance and sheer vulnerability.

The legacy of Romanticism, in this respect, is the choice between Wordsworth's model and Coleridge's; between John Constable's pastoral landscapes and J.M.W. Turner's disturbed ones; between the sunny music of Felix Mendelssohn and the heartbreaking compositions of Chopin; between the jaunty prose of Alexander Pushkin and the lurid writings of E.T.A. Hoffman; between William Blake's euphoric communion with everyone and everything, and the broken, melancholic, longing poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe, Sergei Yesenin, Bialik, and David Vogel.

Ratosh was a Wordsworthian Romantic; Alterman, a Coleridgean. Wordsworth's English countryside (lakes, fields, muddy paths) was replaced by Ratosh's Canaanite desert landscapes, but wild nature is wild nature, and communion is communion. In this, Ratosh was the most extreme proponent of the "one with the land" approach, but he certainly wasn't the only one. There was also the work of the artists of the Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem and of Neve Tzedek in Tel Aviv, not to mention the celebrated posters of the Jewish Agency and Jewish National Fund.

Whatever the differences between Ephraim Moshe Lilien and Nahum Gutman, between Reuven Rubin and the stamp designers for the JNF, the common denominator among all the artists of the period was their naïve, Orientalist view of the land. This Orientalism, in fact, was also characteristic of the musicians of the time, among them Paul Ben-Haim, Ödön Pártos, Alexander Uriah Boskovitch (the composer of the "Semitic Suite"), and their peers in the "Mediterranean School" of music. Of course, their music doesn't sound Mediterranean at all; rather, it sounds like Béla Bartók diluted by Claude Debussy. This same Orientalism also spawned the Israeli dance movement, led by Rivka Sturman, Sara Levi-Tanai, and Gurit Kadman (all three kibbutz members), priestesses of the debka and the tambourine.

Alterman, as a "negative," anti-pastoral Romantic, scorned these efforts to "fall in love" with the "enchanted Levant," believing them to be nothing more than a contrivance, or a sleight of the painter's hand, or a European foot attempting vainly to dance a Yemenite step. In 1961, he wrote a smirking elegy of a play about the founding generation of Kibbutz Degania, and placed in the mouth of one of the characters his own opinions on "the Zionist romance with pinkish sunrises and with date palms, with a plow and furrow and with a marmalade worker, with certificates of his contribution and with cans in heaven," and on the kibbutz posters in which "pseudo-romantic camels tread on a pseudo-classic background." Another character in the same play describes the land of Israel thusly: "A flame, at the sight of which fled the forests, the water, the fields, the men and the women, loves

and laughter, and weeping, leaving the bare stones with their thin and sparkling veils of dust, and the strong sun, that never ends, pouring onto this courtyard, on the duty, on the laws revealed in the stone, on the alien and heavy tools, on the endless weariness."

There was no air conditioning in Kibbutz Degania. Nor, clearly, was there any in Alterman's apartment when he wrote this play.

Yitzhak Lamdan, in his poem, "Masada," named one of its chapters "Desert Storm"; Agnon's Jerusalem, in "Ido and Inam," is one of balmy desert nights; Yonat and Alexander Sened named their novel *Land Without Shade*; O. Hillel penned a collection of poems called *The Noon Country*, and a memoir with the title *Blue and Thorns*; Amos Oz's first book was called *Where the Jackals Howl*, and his collection of essays *Under This Blazing Light*; Daniel Waxman's feature film was called "Hamsin" ("Heat Wave"); a late work by S. Yizhar was entitled *Tzalhavim* (the title combines the Hebrew terms for 'yellow' and 'inflamed with love'); the most talked-about novel of 2001 bore the title *Heat Wave and Crazy Birds*. The full list of Israeli works named for the country's climate would fill several pages.

These and other Israeli writers, poets, and artists sought refuge from the land's heat and glaring light within a private world of illusions (a world very much like Ardon's). We see this in the work of Oz again and again, through adventures in arctic tundras and forests, and crusades in the snow—anything to bring winter onto the scene. Authors such as Pinhas Sadeh, Dahlia Ravikovitch, Yonah Wallach, and Yair Hurvitz also preferred the wintry climate of the land of Oz to the blinding heat of Tel Aviv, and the dusty howling sandstorms of Israel's deserts. The struggle in Israeli art and literature, then, is the struggle between the desire to acclimate to the land of Israel, and the refusal to accept the place, or ourselves as permanent dwellers here. This tension is an essential ingredient of Israelis' engagement to their land, and of their view of what it means to be Israeli.

This tension may also prevent the adoption of any permanent, definitive perspective on the land of Israel. In over a century of Zionism, Jewish Israelis still cannot agree on Israel's borders. This is the logic of our courtship with the land, the irreplaceable eroticism of engagement: It is endless not only in time, but also in space; that is, in the dimensions of a lover's body. A wife's body has predictable proportions; a lover's takes on a scope that contradicts the laws of perspective, growing larger the farther away it moves. It also, however, grows less clear, and this lack of clarity is equally essential to its apprehension by her lover. The lover, after all, does not want to see the mole on his beloved's chin, or her fillings when she laughs. He does not know exactly how tall she is, or how much she weighs; she is both massive and petite all at once, because she is everything.

For this reason, perhaps, Zionism has refused to establish Israel's permanent, fixed borders, so that its leaders can, disgracefully, forever draw and redraw the contours of her body, maintaining an image of the land as elusive, amorphous, and eternally surprising. From war to war, from agreement to agreement, the land has alternately swelled and shrunk. The continuing discussions over the fate of Judea, Samaria, and the Golan Heights have produced more possible maps than there are rifts in the nation. Jerusalem, too, is both "divided" and "united," depending on your point of view; its size becomes smaller or larger, depending on the political or religious issue at stake. And it contains the Holy of Holies, the most elusive location on earth. Is the Temple Mount in our hands? In their hands? What is to become of it? Will it be nationalized, or internationalized, or will it remain, always and forever, a focal point of endless strife, all because we have avoided defining our lover?

The land's navel, identified by three major religions as the birthplace of the world, is an absence masquerading as a presence. It is not so much an object as a desire for one. It is a mountain that is, in fact, a pit.

Zionism is an ache for the Land of Zion, for the City of Zion, and, at its core, for the Temple Mount and the Temple itself, a Temple that has

not stood there for two thousand years. This is Israel, a home made entirely from a longing for a home.

In truth, the yearned-for Third Temple was actually built long ago. There it stands, on the Temple Mount. It is not the Muslim structure, whose very weakness is in its possessive materialism, ruining desire. It is invisible, formless, eternal, hence more beautiful than its two predecessors. We will never relinquish it: It is our wedding canopy. Yet we will never stand under it. We will marry privately, build a private home, and fill it with children.

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